

Chapter 1

EITHER HIS WIFE had been delusional, or he was lost.

Jon Washington stared out his truck window at the dilapidated gray house. There was not the slightest resemblance between this monstrosity and the vivid pictures Angela had painted in his mind of her beloved uncle's home where she'd spent summers as a child. He compared the address on the GPS to the one on the deed he held in his hand. The deed that stated the property now belonged to him.

Jon dropped the paper on the seat and stepped out of his truck. When he slammed the door, an answering echo bounced back from the bluffs that rose behind him in a towering wall.

The house, its back to the hill, faced the river valley below. Like an aging dowager unaware that her beauty is gone, it still wore the architectural details of a grand Victorian mansion. But the once-white siding had faded to the color of early morning fog. The roof was crumbling, shingles and trim torn and missing. The entire front porch leaned slightly like a misplaced appendage.

When Uncle Bruce died, Angie became the sole beneficiary of his estate. She described the place to Jon in glowing terms, determined to convince him to quit his job as an insurance adjuster and move to Missouri to remodel the home and open a restaurant. They both enjoyed cooking and serving their friends and family, and Angie thought owning a trailside café would be perfect. Finally, Jon gave notice at Phelps Insurance Agency. Two weeks later, on an icy morning in Minnesota, he lost Angie under the wheels of a runaway semi. Now Uncle Bruce's home belonged to him.

Jon waded through waist-high weeds and brush and stepped over a fallen portion of picket fence. A faint pathway led

through the unmown grass and weeds. From the porch, the yard sloped gently down toward the river. A wild tangle of bushes and trees grew unfettered to the paved edge of the bike trail.

The state-owned recreational path ran between the towns of Maple Grove and Benson, Missouri, on an abandoned railroad bed, a ribbon of asphalt threading through the timber along the edge of the Cadence River. River's Edge Farm. Jon gave a snort. That was the grand name Bruce had given this ramshackle property.

The lawyer who served as executor of the estate after Uncle Bruce died had mentioned the house was *a little run down*. An understatement. Jon fingered the key in his pocket. Might as well take a tour.

He followed the path and stepped onto the porch. The floor groaned in protest. In years past, families undoubtedly gathered here to catch the cool breezes from the river. A single length of rusty chain dangled from the ceiling. He pictured his wife as a child, bare feet dangling as she rocked on the porch swing. Now strips of peeling paint, broken railings and the sagging roof offered a bleak welcome. A tattered screen door hung by one hinge, creaking slowly back and forth in the breeze.

He unlocked the heavy wooden door and stepped inside. Layers of thick dust covered everything. Uncle Bruce's furniture, tall, dark, and imposing, stood like wooden sentinels as Jon stepped through a parlor and into the spacious dining room. Dishes were still stacked on the round oak table. At one of the tall narrow windows, Jon pushed aside heavy drapes, coughing in the cloud of dust that ensued. Sunlight spilled into the room, lighting up the dust in the air, but doing little to dispel the chill.

He stepped around a broken chair and into the kitchen. Signs of varmints were everywhere. They must have moved in like a furry army after Uncle Bruce's death. A box of crackers lay on the counter, one end chewed open and a string of crumbs trailing out. The floor was sticky with remnants of meals long past. A strong foul odor permeated the air. Jon covered his nose and stepped through the other kitchen doorway into the hall. A few steps later, he stood back in the entryway at the foot of the wide stairway. What disasters would

he find upstairs?

As he put his hand on the massive banister, it wobbled dangerously. Missing spindles gave it the appearance of a gap-toothed dinosaur. Jon dropped his hand and moved to the center of the steps.

Upstairs he found five large bedrooms and an antiquated bathroom with an original claw-footed tub. He opened closets and surveyed boxes with unknown contents. He gagged at the musty odors. Two of the bedrooms had water-spotted ceilings, and beneath one large stain sat a faded blue plastic bucket. Jon trudged back down the stairs.

He turned in a slow circle in the main hall. Everywhere there were signs of disrepair. Nothing appeared to have been fixed or changed or updated since his wife had stayed here nearly thirty years ago.

Jon pushed back his hair and groaned aloud. "This place needs a complete overhaul. What am I supposed to do now?" His words echoed in the house, bouncing back to mock him. How, in all their conversations about this place, had Angie never managed to mention the fact that it was falling apart?

After her aunt died, the year she was eight, her summer visits had ended. But Angie remained kind and caring to Bruce, taking on the role of the daughter he'd never had. And he had rewarded her by willing her River's Edge Farm. Some reward.

He started a mental list. The small amount of money from the life insurance policy Angie received from Wells Fargo would scarcely repair one corner of the house. Even with his limited construction knowledge, he knew the house needed a new roof, siding, windows, paint, and flooring. To fulfill his wife's dream of a restaurant in River's Edge he'd need to knock out walls, install a cooler, purchase commercial stoves, fryers ... the list seemed endless. It would be months before all that could happen. How could he make a living in the meantime?

Jon trudged out to the porch and sat gingerly on the top step. He watched the people pass by on the trail, some biking, some walking. The afternoon slipped into evening. Shadows deepened in the timber beyond the yard. A chorus of frogs chirruped from the direction of the river. Overhead, without city lights to dull them, stars glittered thick and brilliant. Still, Jon sat, reclining against a solid, faded pillar.

The trail disappeared into the night. The bicycle and

pedestrian traffic ceased. There were no onlookers to see the tears on Jon's cheeks. There were no ears to hear as he whispered. "How can I do this without her?"

When he'd packed everything and come to Missouri, he had thought pursuing Angie's dream would bring peace and healing. But the first view of this money pit was salt, not salve, on the wounds of his soul.

Chapter 2

KIRSTEN DANIELSON FUMBLED with the key pad that unlocked the back door of the Furry Friends Animal Clinic. She'd been up for two hours, but she was nearly late again. Trying to get eleven-year-old Josiah moving in the morning was a monumental task. And then, when she dropped him off at her dad's house for breakfast, there was another delay. Dad loved to visit.

A chorus of barks, whines, and mews met her when she stepped inside. The overnight boarders and post-surgical patients demanded breakfast. She dropped her bag on the desk in her miniscule office originally designed as a closet and stored her lunch in the shared refrigerator in the hall. Then she stepped over to the sink to wash her hands before she greeted the wiggling bodies pushing against the wire cages.

Kirsten's dream was to own a clinic, but when the chance to work with Dr. Jennings in Maple Grove had arisen, it seemed like the perfect opportunity. Her dad was thrilled to have her and Josiah close, the church she'd attended growing up was welcoming, and her hometown seemed like a great place for healing from her failed marriage. But, even with Dad's help, juggling single motherhood and work hadn't been easy. Josiah's diagnosis of Asperger's meant additional challenges. And sometimes the loneliness was overwhelming.

She poured food into a stainless steel pan, and a sleek brown boxer wiggled with delight. "Good morning, Bobby." She gave him a quick pat before she closed the cage. She could wait for the assistant to feed the animals, but the pleading eyes and plaintive voices got to her every time.

A tiger-striped cat and an overweight, stand-offish

dachshund were next in line for breakfast. In the last cage, a dirty ball of fur cowered in the corner, pressing against the far side as if it thought she would grab it and give it to the boxer for a second course.

"Hello, ragamuffin. Where did you come from?"

Dr. Jennings stepped out of his office, shrugging into a white lab coat. "Our little orphan pup? Darrel Stevens brought her in this morning. They went to clean up their rental property and found her abandoned in the house. If he hadn't started cleaning this morning, they wouldn't have found her until it was too late."

Kirsten opened the door slowly and laid a hand on the floor of the cage. The half-grown pup thumped a hesitant tail against the wire and wiggled forward to sniff her. "She's a girl? Have you given her any food?"

"No. Just popped her in a cage. Go ahead and check her over, give her a first round of inoculations, and start her on some puppy chow. When Elizabeth gets here, she can give her a bath. And we'll post her picture this week. We should be able to find a home for this one right away."

Space was limited at the city-owned pound, and they regularly euthanized strays. So Furry Friends often ended up with unwanted animals. Dr. Jennings rarely turned a refugee away. What the town needed was a no-kill shelter.

The pup evidently decided Kirsten was not a threat. Her whole body wagged, and she reached for Kirsten's face with a wet tongue. Gently, Kirsten wrapped her hands around the dog's midsection and lifted her from the cage. "Come on, girl, let's see if you're healthy."

She checked the pup's temperature, eyes, ears, and teeth and listened to her heart and lungs. No sign of fleas. Underweight. Ears in need of cleaning. A few cuts and abrasions on her legs. She made notations on the chart as carefully as if the dog belonged to a paying customer. Underneath the filth, the fur was a soft yellow, and her triangular ears and blocky body showed classic signs of Labrador retriever breeding. Why had she just been thrown away?

The pup blinked when the needle poked through her skin, but a minute later she placed her paws on Kirsten's chest and licked her chin. Josiah would love this dog, but she didn't need

a pet to add to the chaos of her home. She'd better keep him away from the clinic until they found a home for the pup. She lifted the dog off the exam table and returned her to the cage. When she set a bowl of puppy chow in front of her, the pup began to crunch it down, her tail waving in pleasure.

Kirsten moved to the cages of the animals that had undergone surgeries, checking their vitals and incision sites. Most would be picked up by owners and taken home today. They were the lucky ones. She glanced at the cage with the little yellow Lab. Maybe she'd have a home soon too.

In the next hour, Furry Friends Clinic became busier. They opened for business at nine. Yvonne, the receptionist, and Jessica, the veterinary assistant, took preliminary information while Kirsten and Dr. Jennings met with patients and their owners in the exam rooms. Elizabeth, an older, part-time employee arrived, and Kirsten filled her in on the abandoned puppy. Next time she went by the cage, the pup had obviously been given a bath. Wet fur stood up in every direction, and when Kirsten stopped, the puppy shook, wet drops flying from the flopping ears.

"Hey, I had my shower before I came this morning." Kirsten laughed and hurried on to her office to fill out a chart.

At lunchtime, Kirsten pulled out the wrap she'd packed for herself when she fixed Josiah's lunch. Even when he spent the day at her dad's house, he took his lunch. It was easier for her dad than dealing with Josiah's finicky eating habits.

She nibbled on the wrap while reading information on a new flea-control medication. She rarely had time to just sit and eat, as clients used their own lunchtimes to bring their pets in.

"Kirsten?" Elizabeth stood at her office door. It must be important, or she wouldn't interrupt. Gifted in nurturing the two-footed creatures in the office as well as the four, Elizabeth frequently advised her to take care of herself.

"Umm-hmm." Kirsten wiped her mouth with a paper towel from the lab. She always forgot to pack napkins. "What's up?"

"There's a man up front who wants to know if we have any cats he can adopt. He's the new owner of the old River's Edge Farm out on the bike trail. And he's looking for help catching mice."

"Oh, good. Maybe Tiger will get a home." Kirsten tucked the wrap back into the plastic Ziploc bag she'd brought it in. It

didn't look like she'd get to finish it any time soon. Then she followed Elizabeth up front.

For some reason she was expecting an older man, perhaps a sort of reincarnation of Bruce Rickert. She still missed the friendly, white-haired man. Every few months he would show up at the clinic with a stray cat or dog. Once it was a dog with a whole litter of pups.

But this was not an old man. He wore jeans and a pale blue pullover shirt, but he would look good in any clothes. Tall, with brown hair that curled at his neckline. And the warm chocolate-colored eyes he turned on her could melt more than candy.

What was she doing? Ogling a man in the clinic? She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, gave him what she hoped was a businesslike smile, and offered her hand. "Hello. I'm Dr. Danielson. I understand you're interested in adopting a cat."

His handshake was firm and brief. "I'm Jon Washington. I just moved, and I have a mouse infestation on my new property. I like animals and thought a cat would help. It'd be a pet, too."

"We have a lovely tiger-striped female. I don't know if she's a good mouser, but she's a sweetheart. Follow me, we keep the animals for adoption back here." Kirsten was acutely aware of Jon as he followed her down the narrow hall and through the swinging doors. She stopped in front of the row of cages. The tan and black cat looked up at them, blinked sleepy amber eyes, and curled up again.

Kirsten moved to the side so Jon could see the cat. "This is Tiger. Would you like me to get her out of the cage?"

Jon squatted in front and spoke softly. "Hi, pretty girl. Are you inclined to catch mice? I have more than a few I'd love for you to take care of for me. I can't promise posh accommodations, and you'll have to put up with lots of construction in the future, but you would be compensated fairly." The cat stood, stretched, and pressed her head against the cage where Jon's hand gripped it.

A sudden yip startled all of them. Across the room, the Lab puppy tried to get them to notice her. She stretched up full length on the wire mesh with her tail moving in frenzied circles. Her sharp baby teeth bit at the wire, then she yipped and bit it

again. When Jon moved to stand in front of her cage, she shot around in a circle like a wind-up toy just released. She made a lap around the perimeter, stood up to lick at his hand, then dashed around again.

"Is this little guy up for adoption, too?" Jon poked a finger through the wire at the frantic tongue.

"She's a girl, but, yes, she's available. An abandoned puppy. But puppies take a lot of work." Kirsten still stood by the cat's cage.

"Could I take both of them? I mean, I need a cat to take care of the mice, but this little girl needs a home too. A place she can get out and run. I'd take good care of her."

The man looked like a taller version of Josiah when he was begging for something. She wasn't at all sure the man knew what the responsibilities of pet ownership entailed, but the clinic didn't have time for extensive screening of adoptive owners. Any home offered was better than life in a cage.

She smiled up at him. "I don't see why not. Our job is finding homes for them. And Tiger doesn't seem to be bothered by the dogs. Why don't we step into an open exam room? There's some paperwork to fill out, and I'll give you a copy of their immunization record."

Fifteen minutes later, Jon left his two new family members and went to purchase the necessary equipment for them from the local hardware store. When he returned, he looked as excited as a ten-year-old boy as he carried first the cat, then the Lab puppy out to their crates in his truck.

Later, as Kirsten swept and cleaned out the empty cages, her thoughts drifted to the tall, good-looking man. She'd noticed he didn't wear a wedding ring and wondered why he wasn't married. She stopped scrubbing the floor of the cage and scolded herself. When David confessed to his latest in a string of infidelities and then asked for a divorce, she'd made the decision to focus on her son and her career. She didn't have the time or the strength for anything or anyone else. That was God's plan for her, and she needed to stick to it.