

## Chapter One

Charlimae Watson sat in the second row at the Red Oaks Christian Fellowship tent revival clapping her hands and singing her heart out. Several other choir members sat on folding chairs close by, filling the tent with music so bursting with spirit that it made her eyes water. In the front row, Mother Maybelle Carmichael sat in a white silk suit with pearl buttons, clutching an exquisite lace handkerchief and smiling through her tears. Looking distinguished in a tan summer suit, Charli's father Chuck, sat next to Mother Maybelle, solicitously patting her hand. Some people stood, testifying and thanking the Lord.

A bead of sweat dripped down Charli's neck. Her white cotton dress was already damp in a few spots. Lifting her fan, she waved it back and forth to create a cool breeze. It was a hot Georgia night. The electric fans moving the air and fluttering the flaps of the white tent could only do so much. Still, several people crowded the area, enjoying the revival.

As the song ended, she checked her program. Reverend Avery had already delivered a stirring sermon. Reverend Danforth was scheduled next. The organ's inspirational

music occupied the audience while Danforth stepped to the podium and prepared to speak.

Charli glanced at the entrance to the tent. Should she step outside for an ice-cold bottle of water? The tent flaps opened. Like the answer to a prayer a familiar chocolate brown figure stood in the opening. Her breath caught in her throat as a mix of strong emotions gripped her.

Starving for the sight of him, she let her hungry eyes drink in the vision of deep brown eyes, a straight nose, full mouth, and square chin. Her gaze fell to note the drape of the white golf shirt over his wide shoulders and trim waist. His runner's legs were encased in a tan pair of slacks. He looked better than anything she'd imagined. *Hers. Her husband. Would she ever get used to it? Better still, would they ever get things right between them?*

Charli wanted to run to him but pride, self respect and a sense of decorum pressured her to turn back to face the podium and pretend she hadn't seen him. *Let him come to you.* Rooted to her position in the seat she could only watch, trapped by emotion as he scanned the crowd, looking for her. His eyes brightened, a look of such naked longing changing his face that she blinked fast in an effort to stop the tears forming behind her lids. He'd found her.

Her head tilted up like a flower seeking the vital rays of the sun as he strode up the narrow aisle between the folding chairs.

*A man who runs off is worse than no man at all.*

Ignoring the voice at the back of her thoughts, she felt faint. He was the other half of her soul. The tent, Reverend Danforth speaking in the background, and the rapt faces in the crowd faded with an air of unreality. This was like something out of her dreams. She forced her throat to work as he neared, her hands twisting in her lap.

"Charli", he whispered, ending his journey at her seat. He eased past her knees to the miraculously empty seat beside her.

"Sam," she whispered back, glad that she couldn't say more. She felt much too vulnerable. *Sam, my friend, my love, my lover, I was afraid you didn't love me anymore.*

His big, warm hand engulfed hers. She tightened the grip, intent on proving that this was real. A current of electricity went through her. She tried to listen to Reverend's Danforth's message, but there was a roaring sound in her ears. Charli couldn't think. Abruptly she realized that she was trembling. With a conscious effort, she made it stop.

They sat through the reverend's sermon, sneaking glances at one another and respecting the silence of audience. When Reverend Danforth ended his sermon Charli stood on shaky legs.

Briefly she noticed that her father had turned in his seat and was frowning at them. He'd been certain that Sam had left her for good and would be sending divorce papers any day. That's why he'd been urging her to hurry and divorce Sam first. Now it looked as if he didn't want her to talk to Sam. She didn't need the additional conflict and she wasn't going to let her father into their reunion.

Her gaze found Sam's. Their love and the sight of him filled her so she could think of little else but him. Still anger, hurt, and resentment at what he'd done simmered at the back of her thoughts, gathering heat. That he could do this to her without a word meant things that had been haunting her thoughts for months.

Sam didn't look away from her the entire time they traversed down the crowded aisle of legs, knees, purses, and walking sticks.

"Well would you look at that?" Someone whispered under her breath. "The nerve!"

"I wasn't expecting him to come back," another remarked.

"Shhhhhh!" A third person interjected mercifully.

Charli felt herself blushing. She kept her head up and pretended not to hear the rude comments. Sam's hand tightened on hers. She could have sworn they shaking. Was she imagining the note of pleading in his eyes? The urge to kiss him warred with the urge to slap his face as they left the tent.

Sam walked her to her car, standing close to her.

She turned to face him, unable to hold things in any longer. "Where have you been? Why haven't I heard from you? I've been worried sick," she managed, finding her voice and pushing against the solid bulk of him. She'd been depressed too, but it wasn't the time to go into that.

"Shhh, we can't talk here. Let's keep this private." Sam put his hands on her shoulders. "I'll tell you everything when we're *home* alone. No sense giving them any more to talk about. Can you drive? I can't leave my hoopty here."

*Home*. The word had a new meaning now that Sam would be there. "I can drive." Her voice sounded a lot stronger than she felt. He opened her door and saw her settled in the seat. Then he closed the door and went to get into the truck.

Automatically placing her key in the ignition, she started the car. *People argued all the time, she reasoned, but love kept them together.* The sooner she got home, the sooner she could hear why he'd gone and stayed away so long.

Turning out of the lot, she checked the rear view mirror to see that he was following in old Ford truck. He was.

The drive seemed to take longer than usual. She was a nervous wreck and glad to be alone in the car with all her doubts, fears, and insecurities. Finally she pulled into the narrow dirt drive of their little house and parked close to the house. Opening the car door she stood on fluid legs, the squeaky sound of crickets filling her ears. A warm breeze moved her dress and soothed her skin, but her thoughts were bits of paper scattering with the wind.

As his truck turned into the drive, she let her glance stray to the house. She'd left the porch light on, but other lights were on too. It meant that Sam had come here first, looking for her.

Turning back, she watched him get out of the truck. He was a tall, tightly built man who walked with the confident air of one who could handle himself in any situation. She'd been sneaking glances at him since junior

high, but he'd never seemed to notice or have an interest in her until her last year of high school. Then he'd come on strong with a fierce passionate interest that fascinated her. As her daddy often pointed out, he'd come from the worst section of Red Oaks, but he'd always been like a prince to Charli.

"Let's go inside," he murmured, putting a gentle arm around her shoulders and letting it drop to her waist.

She stared straight into his brown eyes and swallowed. Why hadn't she summoned the nerve to divorce him? She still loved him, but trust was another issue.

"Charli," he said, a plea in his voice.

She went along with him, going up the stairs and waiting while he opened the door.

"New steps," he remarked, glancing back at the cement stairs.

"They had to be replaced," she answered.

Stepping inside she placed her purse on the rectangular table and held on to the edge for support. "So tell me now. Where have you been?" she said, her voice growing sharp and ugly with demand.

"I've been working at the automotive plant in Silver City, what did you think?" he asked. His tone sounded much

too calm and reasonable for a man who had been gone for so many months.

She shook her head. "But you didn't call or write. You didn't even leave a return address on the envelope of those checks you sent."

With an impatient sigh, he shifted his feet. "I was angry and frustrated when I left. I felt like a loser. You know how much we were fighting. I couldn't handle any of it. I loved you, but I had to go."

"Loved?" she repeated, her eyes going wide at hearing the past tense.

"Charli I love you. Always will."

"You left me..." The words came out on a sob. Mortified, she drew in a deep breath and continued. "I thought it might be for good."

"No. It'll never be over between us. Never," he declared, pulling her into his arms to cover her face with warm kisses and promises of forever.

A tear ran down one cheek. She put her hands on his chest and pushed him away. "This isn't the answer," she cried, choking back another sob. "How can you say you love me and expect me to believe you after this?"

"Because it's true," he declared coming back to stroke her face and cup her chin.

She twisted away and stepped back. "Is it? I could never voluntarily leave you for so long. I couldn't bear it. Sam, you *abandoned* me."

"No," he insisted stubbornly, "Didn't Reverend Avery come and tell you I was all right? He let me know how you were doing and told me when you needed anything."

"I'm not married to Reverend Avery," she argued, raising her voice, "Why couldn't you tell me that you were all right?"

Guilt, frustration, and righteous anger warred in his expression. "At first I too depressed to do anything but work. Then I realized that I'm weak when it comes to you," he said finally. "You would have convinced me to come back to Red Oaks."

Charli swallowed hard. "You're damned right, I would have. You belong here with me."

Sam shook his head and came at her with his hands spread. "Not when I can't find enough work to take care of you. Not when we're in danger of losing our home."

Her voice rose sharply. "Your home is with me. What's the use of being married if we can't be together?"

He wiped the moisture from her face with a fingertip. "Charli," his voice dipped low with a note of aching sadness, "I know what it's like to lose my home. When my

father died it was all over. I wandered from foster home to foster home and nothing was mine. This is our home and I'm not going to lose it. I never want you to have to go through that."

Reminding herself that she was the wronged party Charli bit her lip and squashed the flash of sympathy running through her. She knew how deeply he'd been affected by his father's death and the loss of their home. He sometimes drove by the old place, over and over again, looking at it with a sadness that never seemed to ease. Still, she was no shrinking violet, wanting to sit at home and wait to be taken care of. She was an equal partner in this marriage. "I thought we were partners," she explained. "Don't I have a say in this?" she asked, trying to penetrate his determined expression. "Don't I get to say whether I want to be left here all alone?"

"A man takes care of his family. You know that. It's the way I was raised and so were you," he insisted. "I did what I thought was best for us."

"Sa-am," she began, drawing out the syllables, "we should be taking care of each other! You know how much I want to be a doctor. I'll get there some day. Right now I know that we're more important than that. Why else would I quit school to work two jobs?"

"I hate that you quit school. Being with me shouldn't be the end of your dreams..."

"It's not the end of my dreams," she protested. "I'll start back as soon as we're caught up on the bills."

"Isn't it? There will always be bills. That's life. That's why I made a sacrifice for us, for our future."

"What about my sacrifice? What happened to getting married you so we could work together and build our dreams?"

He drew a frustrated hand through his hair. "I'm doing the best I can."

"Are you?" she screamed back. "Because you haven't talked to me. What about your promise to me? For richer, for poorer, for better or worse?"

He blinked, his jaw tightening. "Charli, I'm doing everything I can to keep us from losing everything. Can't you understand that?"

"No, I can't." She wiped away fresh tears and lowered her voice. "Can you understand that without you this marriage doesn't exist?"

He stared at her, dumbfounded. "Charli..."

"I'm so mad at you Sam Watson I just want to shake you. I can barely speak, let alone look at you!"

With a quick maneuver she went around him and ran into the bedroom. Slamming the door behind her, she quickly turned the lock.

She heard him on the other side of the door.

"Charli, I'm sorry..."

Stretching out on the bed breathing hard, she was suddenly dry-eyed. She couldn't remember having such a hard time communicating with him. The man she'd fallen in love with had all but disappeared. Sam had finally come home and she was still alone. Had she romanticized their relationship and their love?