

LAST CHANCE FAMILY

CHAPTER 1

The kid should have been named Stormy not Rainbow.

She didn't wear pink or have girly cartoon characters on her shirt. She didn't have cute pigtails or a precious smile. No. Rainbow wore faded Goodwill clothing that didn't fit her. Her hair stuck out in all directions in a big, nappy mess that thwarted all efforts to brush it. The five-year-old sat in the rented Hyundai's backseat with silent tears running down her cheeks. She had an equally bedraggled tiger-striped cat clutched in her arms. The cat was also weeping but only out of its left eye. Occasionally it would sneeze.

Mike Taggart, Rainbow's reluctant uncle, figured the kid had plenty of reasons for crying. Ten days ago her mother had been killed in another case of senseless gun violence on the streets of Chicago. A few hours ago, Rainbow had lost her grubby stuffed elephant, probably in the men's room at the Atlanta-Hartsfield Airport, where they'd made a pit stop before boarding their connecting flight to Columbia, South Carolina. And then the final blow fell at the baggage claim, when the cat arrived sneezing.

Mike swallowed down the acid churning in his stomach. He should have done more to rescue Angie, his half-sister, from the life she'd been living. But Angie hadn't wanted to be rescued. And her five-year-old daughter had paid the price.

He needed to make amends for his failure. Which explained why he'd brought his niece here to the middle of nowhere, determined to find her the kind of family that he'd always dreamed of as a little boy. Reverend Timothy Lake, Mike's half-brother and Rainbow's other uncle, was exactly the kind of upstanding citizen Mike wanted for Rainbow's new father.

The cat sneezed again, and the kid clutched it to her chest in a death grip that the animal tolerated with amazing patience. Clearly the cat played favorites, because it had pretty much shredded Mike's right hand when he'd battled it into the cat carrier in Chicago this morning. But it seemed to love the kid, and vice versa.

He didn't understand cats. Or little girls.

"Don't worry," he found himself saying. "We're going to find a vet right now."

This announcement did nothing to stop the silent flow of Rainbow's tears.

It would have been so much better if the kid had wailed or made even the smallest of sounds. But no. Rainbow had been silent from the moment she'd witnessed her mother's murder ten days ago.

He hoped he hadn't promised something he couldn't deliver. They had to have vets out here in the boonies of South Carolina, didn't they? They needed them to look after the cows. Not that Mike had seen a lot of cows during his drive south to Allenberg County. But he'd sure seen a lot of fields planted in various crops. There had to be cows someplace around here.

He touched the screen of his smartphone and keyed in a search for veterinarians. Lady luck smiled on him. He had a bar and a half of service and managed to activate his GPS and set a course for Creature Comforts Animal Hospital, only ten miles away, just south of the little town of Last Chance.

It didn't take him more than two minutes to motor through the town, which was still swagged out in yards of red-white-and-blue bunting from yesterday's Memorial Day celebration. They probably had a parade or something down Main Street, which, in Mike's estimation, made Last Chance perfect in every way.

The vet's, a building of tan-colored cinder blocks with a green roof, stood about half a mile past the retail district. It could have been a medical building in any small town or suburban location, except for the collection of animal statues in its front yard.

A life-sized cement German shepherd, collie, and boxer guarded the front door. Half a dozen cats in a variety of colors frolicked on either side of the walkway. A squirrel and a raccoon peeked out from the bushes planted along the front of the building, and a collection of plastic birds hung on strings tied to the eaves. The tacky menagerie didn't inspire confidence.

Mike helped the little girl out of her booster seat, enduring the cat's hisses and dodging its claws. The cat refused to go back into its carrier, which was a moot point because Rainbow refused to let the animal go. She carried the cat right below its front shoulders, with the bulk of its body dangling over her little arms. Why the cat tolerated this was one of life's greatest mysteries.

In any case, Rainbow had control of the cat, which was more than Mike could say about himself. They made their way to the air-conditioned waiting room, where his luck ran out.

A fifty-something woman with obviously dyed, red hair sat at the reception area guarding the inner sanctum like a bulldog. "We're about ready to close. Y'all will have to make an appointment for tomorrow. We don't have late hours on Tuesdays," she said in a drawl so thick Mike could practically slice it.

"This is an emergency. We just got into town. The cat is wheezing."

The woman arched her eyebrows and gave the cat a quick look. The cat fixed the woman with its strange, green-amber eyes and sneezed. “Hmm, upper respiratory infection,” she said.

“You know, if you didn’t let your cat outside he wouldn’t get sick.”

Mike put on his poker face and gave the infuriating woman a smile. “We’ll try to do better in the future, but for now, the cat is sick.”

“It’s a kind of herpes virus that causes this, you know. Once your cat gets it he’ll have it for life.”

Great. Rainbow’s cat had herpes. It figured. It had lived in one of the poorest and meanest neighborhoods in Chicago. Mike remained calm and continued to give the receptionist the blank, emotionless stare that he used in poker games. “I’m happy to pay for emergency services. Are you the vet?”

The cat sneezed again, and the woman peered over the side of the reception desk at Rainbow, who seemed to know exactly what was required of her. She stood there looking pitiful with tears running down her cheeks.

“Oh, you poor thing,” the woman said. “I’ll just buzz Dr. Polk and see if she can see y’all. She’s got a meeting she needs to get to, but I know she’ll make time. In the meantime, fill in this paperwork.” The receptionist handed Mike a clipboard with a patient form.

It didn’t take Mike more than a few seconds to realize that he couldn’t fill in most of the blanks on the form. He only knew the animal’s name because the cat had a collar with a name tag and rabies vaccination date. On the opposite side of the name tag was a phone number that didn’t belong to anyone. He had no idea about Tigger’s age or whether the cat had been fixed. And since Rainbow refused to talk, Mike was in the dark.

He couldn't even fill out an address because he didn't know where the cat would ultimately end up. The cat should have been sent to the animal shelter. But Rainbow had pitched a fit, and Rachel Sanger, her caseworker in the Chicago Department of Social Services, was a cat lover. Ms. Sanger had broken all the rules and found a way for Rainbow to take the cat with her to the foster home where she'd stayed for a week before they were able to locate Mike.

And really, now that she'd lost her stuffed elephant, the cat represented an important link to Rainbow's former life. Not that living in the slums with Angie had been all that idyllic.

Hopefully Timmy could take both the kid and her cat. The management of the hotel where Mike hung his hat didn't allow cats. And besides, a man who made his living as a professional poker player and part-time day trader didn't need a cat.

Or, for that matter, an unhappy little girl named Rainbow.

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Cindy, the receptionist, had said something about a sick cat. But when Dr. Charlene Polk walked into examination room two, all she found was a tall, redheaded, blue-eyed man with a square jaw, cleft chin, and oh-so-carefully groomed stubble.

He looked like a fashion plate standing there with his Ralph Lauren polo shirt open at the neck and his hands jammed into his AX jean pockets. He didn't look like your typical cat owner.

But then the missing animal spoke, giving forth an anxious *meeeeooowwww*.

Charlene blinked and turned to find a little girl standing at the opposite side of the room. She bore no resemblance to the man with her. The child was maybe five and had brown skin and dark, frizzy hair. Unlike the logo-wrapped guy, the child wore a grubby-looking blue T-shirt and a pair of jeans with holes in both knees. The only clue to the child's gender was her long, delicate hands.

Her mixed-race looks grabbed Charlene right where she lived. This could have been Derrick's child. Except that she was about ten years too young.

Tears trickled down the girl's cheeks. She hugged her tiger-striped cat as if the animal were a toy. People who carried their cats into the office were one of Charlene's pet peeves. A cat should always be transported in a carrier. But in this case, Charlene decided to forgo her usual lecture.

She squatted down to be on the same level. "What's the matter?"

The child said nothing. But the cat let out another, slightly squeaky meow.

"She doesn't talk," the man said.

Charlene looked up. "Oh, I don't know. By the shape of her face and pointy ears, I think she has a bit of Siamese in her, or maybe Abyssinian. They are notoriously talkative."

"No." The man shook his head, his blue eyes looking oddly animated in his otherwise expressionless face. "I mean Rainbow. She doesn't talk."

"Rainbow? That's a nice name for a cat."

"No." The man gestured toward the little girl. "Tigger is the cat's name. Rainbow is Tigger's owner. And Rainbow doesn't speak. I mean, she hasn't spoken for about ten days."

Charlene's disquiet grew. Something wasn't right. "Ten days?"

"Yeah, ten days. Since her mother died."

"Oh." Just a four-word sentence but it sure packed a wallop. The little girl had lost her mother. Charlene's heart turned in her chest. Rainbow's tears seemed endless. They left long tracks across her brown skin.

Charlene held her hands out toward the girl. "May I take Tigger?" she asked.

The girl sniffled once and then reluctantly allowed Charlene to take the cat, who promptly sneezed. Charlene stood and put the animal on the examination table and turned her attention back to the man. “I’m Charlene Polk, the assistant vet here. And you are?”

“Mike Taggart. We just arrived in town. I’m Timothy Lake’s brother. Do you know him?”

She didn’t see a resemblance, except that both men were tall. Pastor Tim had blond hair and a classically handsome face. This guy looked way more rugged, like he spent a lot of time out in the sun surfing or mountain climbing. “I’m acquainted with Pastor Tim,” Charlene said. “But I don’t know him well. I’m not a Methodist.”

Mr. Taggart’s face remained utterly impassive. The lack of emotion crept Charlene out.

She began a routine examination of the cat while Mr. Taggart folded his arms and observed in an intense and unsettling manner. Rainbow watched, too. She stood on tiptoes, looking up at Charlene out of a pair of amber green eyes that were almost the same shade as Tigger’s.

“Uh, Mr. Taggart, Tigger is not a male cat,” Charlene said as she checked the paperwork where the cat’s sex was marked as male. Besides the cat’s name and incorrect sex, the patient information sheet was entirely blank. What was going on here?

“Uh, its name is Tigger. Who names a girl cat Tigger?” he asked.

Who indeed? “Has Tigger been eating?”

“The cat was eating just fine before we put it on the airplane. *She* wasn’t sneezing until we picked her up at the baggage claim,” Mr. Taggart said.

“The cat was transported recently?” Charlene asked.

“Yeah, today, from Chicago to Columbia by way of Atlanta. We were transported the same way.”

The poor cat. She’d obviously been stressed. Her placid demeanor might also be a warning of more serious conditions.

“How old is Tigger?”

The child remained silent. The man let go of a long breath. “I have no idea. Up until a few days ago, I wasn’t even acquainted with the cat.”

Charlene gave him a stare. He stared back, giving nothing away. Alarms went off. Maybe she should stall this guy and give Sheriff Rhodes a call. Things were not adding up. The man seemed not to care very much about the cat or the child.

Their gazes remained locked for a long moment before he eventually looked away. “Look,” he said stabbing his hand through his fiery hair. “I know what you’re thinking, but here’s the situation. Rainbow’s mother died about ten days ago. I’m her uncle, and Timmy is my half-brother. I am not parent material. But Timmy’s a minister. So I’m here to leave Rainbow with her uncle. The cat got sick along the way, so you can call this an emergency fly-by-night visit. If you can fix it up, that would be great. But don’t ask me any questions about it. I don’t know anything, except that it has sharp claws.” He ran his finger along a nasty scratch on the back of his hand.

“You should put some antiseptic ointment on that,” she said.

“I will when I get to a stopping place. The animal didn’t want to go into the cat carrier this morning.” Mr. Taggart had the temerity to glare at the cat. The cat glared right back at him, obviously unimpressed and unperturbed.

Wow. The gossip mill in Last Chance would be running overtime once the members of the Methodist Altar Guild got wind of this. Those busybodies had been trying to find a wife for their minister since he arrived last winter. Even Charlene's aunt Millie, who wasn't a Methodist, had broadly suggested that a single woman of any faith would be crazy not to set her cap for the young, handsome pastor. If Pastor Tim agreed to adopt a child, the Altar Guild would have to go into hyperdrive or something.

“Does Reverend Lake know you're coming?” she asked.

“No.”

“No?”

“No. I doubt that he remembers me at all. The last time I saw him I was five and he was three. But he turned out okay. And that's why we're here.”

Charlene shifted her gaze to the child. Rainbow stood with slumped shoulders. Her body language tragic. In that moment, she looked like the personification of every unwanted child who had ever lived.

Mike Taggart was a jerk. He seemed to have no idea how his words hurt Rainbow. And even worse, he didn't seem to care.

Familiar guilt tugged at her. She wanted to fold the little girl up in her arms and tell her that everything would work out fine. But she couldn't do that because Charlene knew that things might not work out for Rainbow.

Charlene quickly finished the exam and handed Tigger back to Rainbow. “She's going to be fine. I'm going to give your uncle Mike some medicine for her.”

The child took the cat, hugging the animal as if she were a stuffed toy. Tigger allowed this indignity as if the cat knew how much Rainbow needed her.

“Now, I need you and Tigger to go sit quietly in the room outside. There are some yummy oatmeal cookies out there and a few cat treats. I’ll be right here with Uncle Mike. I need to tell him what he needs to do for Tigger.”

She ushered Rainbow into the outer office and handed her one of the cookies the receptionist baked for staff and pet owners. She also gave Rainbow a treat for Tigger. When they were settled, Charlene returned to the examination room and shut the door behind her.

“Tigger’s lungs are clear, so this is not an upper respiratory infection. It’s probably a herpes virus outbreak brought on by stress. My guess is that the sneezing is probably a reaction to the lack of humidity in the airplane. The cat may be dehydrated, so make sure she has plenty of water. If the sneezing continues, you’ll need to bring her back for a follow-up.

“In the meantime you’ll need to put some drops in Tigger’s eyes twice a day, and I’ve got some antiviral meds for her to take by mouth. The meds are disguised as cat treats so you probably won’t get scratched trying to dose her.”

She paused for a moment, wondering if she should go on. Every instinct told her that she should. But who was she to give parenting advice? She didn’t know the first thing about kids—by choice.

Still she couldn’t let her concerns go unvoiced. She already had enough guilt to haul around. So she squared her shoulders and looked him right in the eye. “I’m equally concerned about Rainbow, who is probably one of the sources of the cat’s stress. Have you any idea how frightening it is for a child to hear that you’re planning to drop her off with someone she doesn’t know and who doesn’t even know that you’re coming?”

That got a reaction. The mask he’d been wearing slipped, and anger flared in his eyes. “Look, lady, I came in here for vet services. I know precisely how sad Rainbow feels. And I’ll

bet you a thousand dollars that you have no clue. I'm sure you had a nice, middle-class upbringing and never once worried about whether you'd go hungry. I'm sure you didn't have a parent with a drug problem. I'm sure you got your clothes new, instead of from the Salvation Army. But Rainbow and I have both known that kind of thing. And I'm here precisely because I want her to have a better life. So butt out, okay? Just give us what we need for the damn cat and we'll be out of here."