



## CHAPTER ONE

Savannah is my name. It's also my world, my home. I didn't cherish it until I left. And when I returned, it was because I had something to prove.

My mother, Victoria, was born and reared in Savannah. My name is explained by her love for this city—that and my belief that she had a craving to spend the rest of her life announcing her daughter to every living creature as “Savannah from Savannah.” For a time I thought she was just being cute. Then I realized that this was really how she intended to introduce me for the rest of my natural existence.

“Savannah,” she said when I confronted her, “one day you will thank me. When you are famous and the whole world knows you as ‘Savannah from Savannah,’ children will envy you and long to be named after you. And me, well, I will be your mother.”

By the age of thirteen, having no desire to be any child's envy, I went around my eighth-grade class and had all my friends sign a petition requesting my name be legally changed. Afterward, I walked straight up to the courthouse and into the office of Judge Hoddicks, one of my father's best friends. I withdrew my two

## SAVANNAH FROM SAVANNAH

sheets of moderately legible names from the pages of *The Hobbit*, where I'd stashed them for safety, spread them on Judge Hoddicks's desk, and informed him I would like to change my name to Betty.

"Why Betty?"

"Because my mom doesn't like any name that ends in a *y*. Just try calling her Vicky and see what happens to that southern charm of hers. It will fade like a vapor."

He directed me to a chair in his stunning office, with its rich mahogany bookcases and coffered ceiling. I passed the time reading my well-worn copy of Tolkien's classic until the glass-paned door opened and my mother made her entrance. I thought maybe he wanted to witness the meltdown of a southern woman in high heels and Mary Kay. But her arrival proved it was all about her ability to command any room as well as this city's inhabitants.

She looked fabulous—perturbed, but fabulous. Vicky always looks fabulous. She has never appeared in public in anything lower than a two-inch heel. She doesn't own a pair of jeans, and she wouldn't be caught dead with curlers in her hair, without makeup on her face, or without being fully accessorized by seven a.m.

Ten minutes later, as we left the office, I vowed that even if I called her Victoria to the world, she would always be Vicky in my mind. I took one last look back and asked Judge Hoddicks to give me a call if there was anything he could do. He assured me he would.

Today, eleven years later, my legal name is still Savannah Grace Phillips. To Judge Hoddicks, however, I will forever be Betty.

I have spent a considerable amount of my life trying to convince people that Vicky isn't my real mother. I mean how could I come from a woman I don't understand, a woman no one understands? Anyone with half a pea-pickin' ounce of perception can tell that Vicky and I are nothing alike. We don't talk alike, act alike, or do anything else alike.

## DENISE HILDRETH

And you wouldn't know I was hers by my looks, either. I have two inches on her five-foot-four frame. And I don't think our hair is the same color, although no one really knows what her original hair color was. My hair has always been golden brown and straight as a stick. Vicky has been blond, frosted, and redheaded. The best color of all was when she wanted to be platinum blonde, and woke up the morning of the annual Savannah Chamber of Commerce Ball with the majority of her hair lying broken off on her pillow. But we don't talk about that much.

The only remote proof that Vicky could actually be my mother is that I do, on rare, necessary occasions, feel the need to freely express myself in, shall we say, clear tones. My father, Jake Phillips, has the amazing ability to sit back and breathe before responding. I, however, like Vicky, tend to speak before thought has had a chance to register. This is a most exhilarating, dangerous trait that we share. Vicky has managed to envelop hers in charm. I have only managed to envelop mine in something begging to be refined.

I have tried to channel this intense need to freely express myself into the written word. Every Big Star notebook I've saved from school contains either words to songs, short stories, or entire movie scripts. In high school, I ran for student-body president just so I could write a speech. The speech was so good I didn't even have to campaign to win. I appealed to the students' deepest cravings: food, exemption from finals, and football. Tie those three things together and then close with a poem called "The Man Who Thinks He Can," and, well . . . my fellow students were mush. The poor girl who lost had her own campaign manager and spent so much money on pencils and posters that I almost felt bad for beating her.

That moment allowed me to catch a glimpse of how words can impact the human spirit. A few months later, a short story about an eighty-year-old named Lula who wore purple hats and sang show tunes at area nursing homes, à la a Victoria biography, secured me a scholarship to the School of Journalism at the

## SAVANNAH FROM SAVANNAH

University of Georgia. College taught me how to craft my gift, a gift that would propel me into the highbrow world of publishing. I envisioned my books in the window of Barnes & Noble and day-dreamed of people rushing in to catch the latest novel by Savannah Phillips—or “Savannah from Savannah,” as people back home would forever require me to be identified. And that probably would have been my life, had it not been for some intervening circumstances and a newspaper.

For four years of college and two years of graduate school, Vicky sent me a subscription to our local paper, the *Savannah Chronicle*. She never acknowledged it, but when there is a half-page ad on page 3 that reads “To our Savannah from Savannah, wishing you all the best in your new passage, Love, Mom and Dad,” you just kind of know. My first week of college, feeling somewhat liberated yet homesick, I picked up my mail and headed to a McDonald’s right off-campus to grab a Coke. Then I would take my Coke over to a small café across from my apartment and get a chef’s salad with Thousand Island and blue-cheese dressing on the side. There, along with caffeine and fat grams, I consumed every article and ad in the paper.

For years, I considered Savannah a town of the near-dead and dying, a place frequented by people who’d come to pick out retirement facilities. I had never realized that it was so vibrant, alive. The main reason for this newfound impression appeared every Wednesday and Friday at the bottom of the front page of section B. Beside her column in the local section was a picture of a distinguished-looking lady with frosted hair, probably in her mid-fifties. Gloria Richardson. Her smile looked genuine, and her human-interest stories made me believe that unexpected kindness and prevailing strength just might exist in Savannah after all. So twice a week for six years, I spent lunchtime rediscovering the place I thought I knew and had longed to leave.

## DENISE HILDRETH

One Wednesday in the last weeks of the final semester of my master's work, I picked up my mail and my *Chronicle* and headed to McDonald's, and then the café. With Coke and salad at the ready, I flipped through the envelopes first and paused at a return address labeled "Fiction Achievement Award." I couldn't believe the results were already in.

Over the past six years, I had dedicated myself to consuming other writers' work and sharpening my own. For my thesis, I turned in a 450-page novel about four female college dropouts who left home to discover the world. It was a delightful tale of searching and survival, crafted over an agonizing two years. My dean entered the novel in a fiction contest for unpublished writers. A portion of the winning story would be published in a leading literary magazine, and leading fiction houses would consider the manuscript for publication.

Surely I held in my hands a rejection letter, sent out first to the really bad entries. Not only was I not picked to win, but my book was so bad they wanted me to know two weeks early how truly pathetic I am!

I sat up straighter in my booth and tore the letter open. "Let the guillotine fall quickly," I said.

Dear Ms. Phillips,

After careful consideration, we are pleased to inform you that your novel, *Road to Anywhere*, has been selected for the Fiction Achievement Award. An excerpt from your novel will appear in a future edition of the *National Literary Review*. We look forward to meeting you in person on May 15 with Taylor House Publishing in New York. All pertinent information has been sent to Dean Hillwood at the University of Georgia. The awards ceremony will be held on May 16 at the Waldorf Astoria. We have reserved a table for you and nine of your guests.

SAVANNAH FROM SAVANNAH

Congratulations. We are pleased to help you pursue your dreams of becoming a successful author.

Sincerely,  
Jeff Peterson  
Chairman, Awards Committee

“Oh my stars! Oh my stars!” I said, throwing the letter into the air and jumping out of my booth. I caught my Coke before it traveled south and smiled at a surprised couple at the closest table. This was a moment to savor. I had finally achieved what I’d spent years working for.

I have no idea who I passed or who passed me on the dance back to my apartment. I’m not even sure what route I took, but I made it back, walked upstairs to my room, and sat down on the edge of my bed. I opened the letter and read the words again and again. I walked over to the phone and laid the envelope and letter down on the desk. For the first time, the addressee information on the envelope registered with me. Though the letter itself was addressed to me, the envelope read, “Victoria Phillips.”

At first I laughed, thinking how funny that they had mistakenly used my mother’s name instead of mine. Then reality surfaced. There was no way in the world they would know my mother’s name unless they knew my mother. A weight drove me into my chair. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t breathe.

What had she done? Why in the world would she get involved? I had worked so hard, trying to make this novel good enough to win on its own merits. Two hours passed, as did two classes. Around three that afternoon my eyes turned from the window to the phone. I picked it up and dialed.

A thick New York accent greeted me. “Taylor House Publishing.”

“Jeff Peterson, please.”

“May I tell him who’s calling?”

“Yes, yes you can. Would you tell him it is Victoria Phillips

DENISE HILDRETH

from Savannah, Georgia,” I spread the southern belle accent so thick the receptionist would be talking about it for the rest of the day.

“One moment, Ms. Phillips,” and with the press of a button, I was dumped into the land of Muzak.

“Well, Mrs. Phillips. So, good to hear from you,” said a lackey’s voice. Disgusting. “So your daughter has received the results of the contest. I trust she’s happy.”

After all the years of mimicking Vicky, I could have auditioned for *Saturday Night Live*. “Oh, she is, Jeff, she is. She got the letter today, as a matter of fact, and she was thrilled.”

“It turned out to be a really fabulous piece of work.” Was that a smirk in his voice?

“Well, I just wanted to thank you again for your help and discretion in this matter.”

“Don’t mention it. I look forward to meeting you and your daughter next month.”

“Oh, you don’t know how much I look forward to meeting you. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye, Mrs. Phillips.”

And with that, my dream ended and my mission began.