



CHAPTER ONE

The racket coming from behind the black painted wooden doors declared mayhem had stopped by. But me and mayhem had become friends years ago. Why not? I had two options: become permanently addicted to a drug of choice, or just open the door for mayhem when he arrived and pat him on the back as he left. I chose the latter. Well, okay. The former and the latter. Why make choices? While mayhem was around, I'd sit on the front steps, drink a Coca-Cola, and hope he didn't hang around too long. And truth be told, mayhem always provided me with a great story by the time he left. The only unfortunate part was, my mother usually found a way to insert me inside his story.

I opened the large door and peered inside cautiously. "What's that yapping?"

Dad was standing by the wrought-iron console, laying down his morning paper. "It's your mother's new friend," Dad informed me while Duke, our golden retriever, sat whimpering at his feet.

My eyes narrowed in on the recently purchased creature as it rounded the corner of the foyer at full throttle and came to a halt on the Persian rug, way too close to my feet. It looked like a white

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rat but barked up at me like a Rottweiler seeking lunch. “How in the world did you let that happen?”

Dad talked as he headed to the kitchen. We all followed. “You moved out. She moved in. Plus, your mother’s a grown woman, and this is her house as well as mine. I wasn’t going to tell her she couldn’t have a dog.”

“That’s not a dog, that’s a . . . a . . . a . . .” I lifted my heels so it couldn’t take a bite out of my ankle. Duke barked his own thoughts. “Yeah, like Duke said, that’s a”—I cocked my head—“well, it looks more like a disheveled bag of packing peanuts.” I hopped on top of a stool.

The white ball of fur looked up at me, a pristine pink ribbon holding back its scraggly puppy bangs. Its toenails matched the color of its ribbon. If I hadn’t known better, I would have sworn Amber Topaz Childers, the recent first runner-up (again) to Miss Georgia United States of America, had just been reincarnated as a Maltese dog. Duke leaned against me while the little white mongrel yapped at me like a broken car alarm.

I plugged my ears. “How long will she do that?” I hollered.

“Until Duke helps her realize he’s the alpha male.” Dad eyed him curiously. “At the rate he’s going, it could take a while.”

I laid my hand atop Duke’s sinfully beautiful honey-blond mane. “Buck up!”

He hacked in my direction.

“Ooh, hairball.”

The hacking noise, however, stopped the little white yapper. Her head cocked.

“*Hack!*” Duke offered again in her direction with a slight glint in his eye.

Her tail tucked between her legs, and she started backing into the foyer.

Duke let one paw extend beyond the others in her direction. “*Hack!*”

“Did you know he’s a genius?” I offered my father.

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He raised his eyebrow with the upturn of his lips. "I knew he'd realize his power eventually. So, sure you don't want to come with us?"

The heels clicking on the foyer hall reinforced my original decision. "Jake!" my mother hollered.

"I'm certain," I said

Mother rounded the corner in full vacation regalia, her linen dress flowing behind her as her hand patted down her pearls. "What's my boo-boo-baby-sweetie-pea-pickin' little pooh bear up to?"

"Mother, please, I'm way too old to be talked to in—"

"Savannah darling, I didn't hear you come in," she said through muffled tones with her lips pressed against the top knot of her latest acquisition.

"I'm not surprised." I could see only the right eye of the yap-peeking from behind Mother's red lipstick.

"Are you sure you can't make the trip with us?" Mother asked, echoing Dad's question regarding our yearly vacation to Seaside, Florida.

I stood and pushed the stool back under the black soapstone countertop. "I know it's hard to believe that I have a real job, but I do. I can't just take a week off from the paper."

"You've been there for ten months, Savannah," Mother said, as if the time frame of my job was somehow lost on me.

"I know, but I don't get vacation time until I've been there a year. Plus, this is a really busy season for me."

"Those two articles a week are killing you, aren't they?" Dad said with a chuckle.

"Those *two* articles a week take time and energy to produce. And I take great pride in what I do, so with my work ethic, it is very important that I make sure my commitment to my employer and to my craft is unquestionably clear."

They both cocked their heads at me.

You would have thought I was speaking Greek. "What?"

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“Well, that’s okay. Amber’s going with us anyway,” Mother said nonchalantly. “She can take your bedroom.”

Duke and I looked at them simultaneously. “Amber’s what?”

Mother turned to pull down her picnic basket from the top shelf of her pantry. “Didn’t I tell you?”

“I think you forgot that little detail.”

“Well, it’s no big deal. Your father and I just thought it would be good for her. Eating at Criolla’s.” The woman was vicious. She knew that was my favorite restaurant. The lump crab meat over saffron rice in the flaky phyllo shell, drowned in butter.

“You might want to . . .” Dad wiped his lip to insinuate the need to wipe my own.

“We’ll take her to the beach and let her enjoy your father’s wonderful grilled specialties and my phenomenal chicken salad.” She was a sadist. “Amber’s just had such a rough time, you know, with her loss and all . . .” You’d have thought Amber’s grandmother had just been laid to rest.

“It was a pageant.”

Mother’s eyes darted in my direction. “It was a dream.”

I looked at Dad for sanity. “You agreed to this?”

He walked over and patted me on the hand. “We’ll miss you. We’ll really miss you.” He turned to leave the kitchen.

“Well, you know, there is this story that the paper really needs to address. I’ve been pondering it for . . . well . . . a while now.” Two minutes *was* a while longer than one. “With all the hurricanes last year, it might be . . . no, in fact I think it really *is* vital to hear some of the stories of revitalization and restoration on the Gulf.”

Dad stopped and turned around. “We’re going to the panhandle. They came through okay.”

“But, they were . . . well . . . they were close, yeah, really close, to all of the devastation. The psychological effects alone are just unfathomable. And I think we’ve neglected their story. In fact, we don’t need to neglect it a day longer. I slapped the counter for effect. I’m letting Mr. Hicks know today that we have wasted

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entirely too much time neglecting these people and their trauma. I'll be back in thirty minutes. Let me grab my stuff, stop and see Mr. Hicks, and I'll be ready to head out with you."

Mother and her new canine friend glanced at my father, then back to me. "Are you sure, darling? It's very sudden." I ignored the glint in her eye.

"Of course. It's essential. Give me just a few minutes."

I headed through the garage with Dad. "My, my, my, how quickly a *while* can alter a morning."

"This city would want to know," I said, continuing my gait toward my car.

"I have no doubt." He chuckled. "I have no doubt."

The vibration startled me. I reached over to grab my bouncing cell phone, which I had left on the seat of Old Betsy.

It was Thomas.

"Where are you?" I asked. "Our parents are leaving in about an hour. I thought you and your new *friend* were going with them."

"Are you alone?"

"Incessantly."

"Can they hear you?"

"Dad, no. Mother, I've never completely ruled out telepathy. But I am in my car, almost two blocks away, so I'd say your chances are good."

"I'm not leaving today."

"What?! Mother will freak!"

"Me and Mary Francis broke up." I could hear him pacing. A pitiful habit he had learned from me. Thankfully that was the worst one.

"Mother will freak again! She thinks that girl is the cream of the College of Charleston. She hated Charleston until Mary Francis. She has your children named."

"Yeah, well, so did Mary Francis, and we've dated all of three months. But she's not coming."

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I jerked Old Betsy to dodge a tourist. However, with that attire, a quick jaunt to the ER might have resulted in something more fashionable. "So, you're like broken up, broken up?"

"Like, there's a box in front of my door with all of our pictures cut in half. She sent me my half."

That made me laugh. "I guess she thought she looked too good just to give all the pictures to you."

"Well, she is a fine specimen of a woman."

I could see his face. "Don't succumb. She was crazy."

He was faltering. "She was beautiful."

"Your son was going to be named Jethro Seville."

"You think that's bad, you ought to have heard what she was going to name our daughter."

"You know you will have to tell Mother."

He adamantly protested. "No way. Not until our vacation is over. I'm not ruining a perfectly good vacation because Mother has no self-control."

I glanced up at my rearview mirror. "You can't lie about it."

"I don't have to lie, I just don't have to reveal everything I know."

"You'll regret it. It never works. You should know from me."

"You're just not good at it."

"Oh my word!" I yelled into the phone.

"You don't have to take it so personal."

"I'm not talking to you. Amber just passed me in her little Mercedes doing close to 45 around the square. Ooh, here comes the cops. Sick 'em, tiger!"

"You're pitiful."

I hollered again. "You have got to be kidding me!"

"Well, you are pitiful."

"Not you! I'm getting pulled over! Can you believe this?" I slowed up so I could get close to the curb and out of the sight of the entire Lafayette Square.

"You better get out of this one, Vanni. Dad will not pay your ticket."

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"I don't need money from my father, thank you very much." I looked out of my side mirror and saw Sergeant Millings get out of his patrol car. He hiked his pants up, obviously failing to realize that they already exceeded the floodwater stage.

Thomas continued, "Well, you still owe Paige two hundred dollars, so you won't get it from her anyway."

"How do you know . . . oh, never mind. I've got to go. And I will not, and I do mean *will not*, tell Mother why you are not coming today. Do I make myself clear?"

"Hello . . . hello . . . I can't . . . you're breaking up . . ." The line went dead.

"Chicken!" I hollered into the phone before tossing it back into the seat.

"Well, well, well . . . who do we have here?" Sergeant Millings asked in his annoying way, flicking what looked to be a three-day-old toothpick through his teeth as he came in line with my open window.

"I do believe you have the wrong car." I pointed in the direction of the blue blur. "That is the young woman you should be tormenting."

"You think so, Miss Phillips? Well, you'll be lucky to know I clocked you at twenty-two in a twenty."

"Well, let's just change my name to Lucky!"

"Okay, Lucky! If you'll give me your license and registration, please."

"Sergeant Millings, you have got to be kidding me! You are going to give me a ticket for doing—"

"License and registration, Miss Phillips." He sucked air through his teeth. They should have used *him* in the *Dukes of Hazzard* movie. It would have gotten better ratings, I'm certain.

"Would you like blood with that? I'm sure I could draw some for you." Especially had the steering wheel been my arms, because my nails were now embedded in it.

"Don't be smart. Now, hand them over, missy."

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“It’s Lucky, remember!” I said, wanting to toss them across the street.

He took the paperwork from my hand, and the sun bounced off of a gold wedding band. In all these years I had never met Mrs. Sergeant Millings. Poor woman had probably taken to hiding. If she was smart, she had hidden from him as well. Amazing to me how a man like that can find love while I’m relegated to the companionship of crazy people.

“Well, Miss Phillips.” His voice called my mind back from its thoughts of vehicular homicide. “Here you go. You can send your check by mail, or you can see me in court.”

“Are you serious?” I jerked the ticket from his hand. My eyes got to what mattered most. “A hundred and fifteen dollars? For two miles over the speed limit?”

“No, forty dollars for two miles over the speed limit, and seventy-five dollars for verbally assaulting a police officer.”

“You are being absurd!” I could cover my rent and have just enough money left over for food. This would sure put a dent in that achievement.

He flapped his little black notebook in my face. “I have more tickets.”

“Well, do tell me, Sergeant Millings, what orifice would you like to pull this money out of? Huh? Because I’ve already exhausted all resources of my behind!” With that, I tossed the ticket in the passenger’s seat and rolled up my window. Old Betsy gave him a sputter of her thoughts as well as the black smoke choked him.

A week away just might be exactly what I needed. Granted, I was going with a crazed mongrel and a morbidly depressed beauty-queen reject, but it was Seaside. What could happen in Seaside?