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## Chapter 1

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September

**T**he bold thudding knock upon the front door dispelled the silence. The sound echoed in the barren halls of the manor house like a sword piercing through flesh. Phoebe jerked in her seat; glanced around the ancient kitchen as if the boogeyman were going to jump out. She was sitting with a cup of coffee and her spiral-bound notebook chock full of her plans to turn Riverland into her dream. But her knee-jerk response to the knocking stripped away her confidence for a moment.

*Dammit.*

Phoebe cursed at her involuntary startled jump and the automatic lodging of her heart in her throat at the sound. She pressed a hand over her stomach to quell the rioting madness.

*I am safe. No one will ever harm me again. I've taken all the necessary precautions.*

She exhaled a shaky breath and then another, trying to compose herself before answering the door. Every day, her ability to wrench herself from the edge of panic grew a little easier and more difficult at the same time. Every act of creation, of stepping

forward and molding her life into what she wanted it to be, made the past that much more razor sharp. Just when she thought it was done, that she was making headway, she relapsed and startled like a rabbit caught in the garden.

She steeled her courage and inhaled a few calming breaths. All she needed to project was the confidence that came with being an independent business owner and professional. It was a persona she had worked damn hard to transform herself into over these last few years.

Phoebe hoped like hell that the contractor—Layton Construction, with Mister G.C. Layton at the helm—would be the proper fit for her renovation project. Out in her little house beyond the concrete patio and generous-sized pool at the rear of the mansion, she had freshly brewed coffee and flaky, buttery croissants with a homemade strawberry jam at the ready. Not that she had to feed the contractor or invite him into her home. For all she knew, he might take one look around the place she hoped was her future and try to overcharge her. Although she doubted Dante, her boss at Bayou Sin, would have steered toward her a company with a shady reputation.

Food was part and parcel of southern hospitality. Phoebe's momma, rest her soul, had raised her that way. Phoebe hoped it might be a way to soften the contractor up a bit and, who knew, perhaps lower his bid on the project. It was probably wishful thinking on her part.

At the sound of the knock, Daisy, her two-year-old German Shephard, rose to her paws, her midnight lip curled with menace at the intruder to their morning.

"It's all right, girl." She patted her head, the soft, inky fur smooth as silk. "Let's go meet the contractor, shall we?"

Daisy had been her constant companion since Phoebe had adopted her. She'd had Daisy trained as a guard dog when she was six months old. Living alone, with her nearest neighbor a good half mile away, Phoebe was overly cautious when it came to safety—as any self-respecting single woman should be.

She was on the cusp of turning Riverland Plantation into Riverland Bed and Breakfast, a dream she'd held in her heart for most of her life.

Riverland Plantation rested atop a crested abutment that overlooked the wide, rolling dark waters of the Mississippi River. The plantation had stood for close to a hundred and fifty years, and had been built during the reconstruction period of the South following the Civil War. On a clear day, a person could sit comfortably on the veranda and view the water as it meandered south on its journey to the Gulf of Mexico. It was one of the few plantations along the river roads of the Louisiana delta that was not at risk of being flooded out. In the event of a flood, the hill the manor sat upon would be surrounded by a moat of water. The house would be cut off from civilization, but would live to see another day.

The rubber soles of Phoebe's taupe-colored work boots squeaked against the golden cinnamon hardwood floor. Daisy's paws clicked as she trotted beside her. Phoebe would have to trim Daisy's nails again. The plantation itself was in sad disarray after decades of neglect. In some ways, the plantation was strangely like her life—or at least the way it had been, until she made the commitment to fix it. For the last thirty years, this place had stood vacant and unloved. The previous owners had been unable to sell the property and unable to invest in her upkeep. This grand old lady had become a dilapidated ruin of a bygone era.

Phoebe hoped to fix this place up, just like she had her life. She believed, with a bit of elbow grease, she would be able to turn the plantation back into a showpiece—one for which people would pay for the experience of staying there. New Orleans and the surrounding area was a pre-eminent tourist destination that Phoebe planned to capitalize on.

She eventually wanted her own airport shuttle for guests. But that was getting ahead of herself. The first step was a complete renovation.

It was only recently that Phoebe had been able to actualize

her dream of owning Riverland to renovate it into a fully operational bed and breakfast. She'd used the inheritance her late grandpa, Ralph Mackenzie, had bequeathed her in his will a year ago. The tidy sum he'd left her had been enough to buy this place outright, along with the small acreage surrounding the old plantation, with money left over for the needed renovations.

Financially, it would be tight at first until she started having paying guests. That was why she waited tables at the strip joint Bayou Sin on Bourbon Street in the meantime. Not because she loved wearing skintight clothes with men trying to grope her, but it helped supplement her income.

This plantation was infused with all her hope for the future, one that belonged to her and her alone.

As she reached what had once been a grand entrance, with its heavy, double oak doors the same warm cinnamon as the floors, she drew the right-side door open, a greeting on her lips as she spread them in a fake smile like the one she wore serving drinks. Daisy's whole body vibrated, her attention directed at the man on the opposite side of the door. The initial punch of fear disintegrated as she studied him and memories dulled by time and distance surfaced.

He was tall, a good six two, and built like a professional baseball player with broad shoulders and a head full of dark chestnut hair that was a few weeks past needing a trim. His button-down ivory dress shirt was rolled up to his elbows, leaving his tanned, brawny forearms bare. The shirt was tucked into a pair of well-worn blue jeans with a brown leather tool belt slung around his lean waist.

But it was the man's eyes, arctic blue, making her think of frost and snow, in the tan, slightly weathered face that caused a bell of recognition to sound through her and made her lips curl into a genuine smile.

"Graham? Graham Layton, is that really you? You're the contractor Dante recommended?" Joy filtered into her voice as she stared at the blast from her past. It had been almost nineteen

years since the night of the winter formal in high school. The night she had always considered one of the best of her life.

Surprise filtered over his handsome features. A grin split his face wide and his thick, dark chestnut brows rose to nearly beneath his hairline, almost touching the Rayban sunglasses shoved on top of his head. There were tiny laugh lines around his eyes that crinkled.

“Phoebe, as I live and breathe. Well, aren’t you a sight?” Graham dismissed all formalities, stepped through the doorway, and surrounded her with an effusive hug. She stiffened at the impromptu embrace, but only for a moment, because the delight of seeing him overrode her internal panic button.

She caught a whiff of him, a sinful mixture of man with traces of his soap, a spicy, exotic fragrance that made her want to bury her face in his chest and just inhale him. The boy she’d known on the cusp of manhood in the intervening years had grown into a powerfully built man. A very hot man, with a killer smile and a body that made her dead hormones rise from their early grave and pay attention before he released her. It left her dumbstruck: the sudden onslaught of disappointment that rose in her chest when he released her.

Wasn’t that just the oddest thing?

“It’s great to see you. If I’d known it was you...”

Graham gave a manly half-shrug as he stepped back. “It is a surprise—a nice one, to boot.”

Then he knelt, resting his elbows on his knees so that he was at eye level with Daisy, and held his hand out for her to sniff. “And who is this?”

“Daisy, this is Graham. He’s a friend.” Daisy glanced up at her for the okay, her golden eyes searching Phoebe’s face. When Phoebe nodded in the affirmative, Daisy’s stance relaxed, and she turned into a normal, goofy dog. She snuffled Graham’s hand, and then lavished his face with a few swipes of her pink tongue against his cheek before falling at his rather large feet as he stroked her fur and gave her a belly rub. Euphoria emanated

from Daisy. And, for a split second, Phoebe wondered what it would feel like to have Graham rub her belly—and further south.

“Beautiful dog.” Graham rose with Daisy following him up into a sitting position from which she stared at him with adoration. “I cannot believe you’re the one who bought Riverland Plantation. When Dante gave me your name, it didn’t ring any bells.”

“Same. I didn’t realize you were G.C. Layton of Layton Construction. For me, it’s the last name that’s different. Probably why my name didn’t sound familiar to you.” Quite a few other things had changed as well, like that she no longer believed in love or happily ever after, or that she could depend on anyone but herself. “Come on in and we can get started. I’ve had my eye on this place for a while.”

For the entire bulk of her life, Phoebe had yearned for Riverland. When things were at their darkest and she’d not known how she might carry on, she would think of the plantation—and, strangely, the man before her—and she would find the strength to carry on. Both were from back before her world went dark and scary, and her dreams had turned to ash. It was from those ashes that she had forged a new dream: a new life, where she was beholden to no one.

“I thought you moved away after high school,” Graham said as she shut the door behind them. This close to the river, even at their elevation, she still had to watch out for critters with the swamp and marshes nearby. The last thing she wanted was a gator or snake meandering inside to make themselves at home.

“I did. I moved back six months ago. You did, too, if I recall correctly. Yet here we are, near our old stomping grounds in Thibodaux,” she said.

His energy filled the foyer and beyond. Before he’d arrived, the entryway had been an empty hall but now, it was suffused to the brim with life because he was standing there, an injection of potent vitality. There were some people who had a magnetism they exuded, who commanded a room the moment they entered,

whom people wanted to follow as they led. That was Graham. He'd been that way in high school, and age, wisdom, and experience had only solidified his presence. He exuded testosterone and confidence the way other men breathed.

"That we are," he replied after giving her a similar head to toe assessment. Then he turned his enigmatic gaze from her to study the grand entryway, and whistled. She wondered whether he could see it: the possibility of what it could be once more, not just how it was in sore need of repair.

"It has a lot of potential. I will give you that." Graham walked over to the wall and flicked on the switch for the grand chandelier—the one that had likely quit being grand twenty years ago. Half the crystals were cracked or askew, hanging in a pitiful fashion, while the rest had simply vanished altogether. The light flickered to life, but with some of the bulbs and crystals missing, it looked rather pathetic dangling above them. It was one of the many items on Phoebe's list to replace or repair. Some of the antique shops along Royal in the French Quarter had a few chandeliers that might look good in its stead.

"But?" She knew this place needed a mountain of repairs to get it into working order.

"To do the renovations right will be an investment. I don't want to frighten you over the sheer volume of repairs this place will need, but I took a walk around the perimeter already, and it's going to take quite a bit to refashion this grand old lady back into dancing shape. The new roof that this place needs will set you back some."

She winced. A new roof on this beast? He wasn't kidding about the investment. It had passed the inspection, but she had a feeling the bank had just wanted to be rid of the property after taking it in a foreclosure settlement. "I had a feeling the inspectors let a few things slide for me to get this place so cheaply, and figured that was a possibility. I have the budget for it." She would just have to squirrel away every extra penny she made at Bayou

Sin until she opened the house. “Whatever can’t be done by you or anyone else, if it’s out of my budget, I will do myself.”

She wasn’t going to dip into the marketing or operations budgets she had set aside. She was going all in on making her bed and breakfast a success.

“You?” She’d startled a surprised laugh out of him.

“I can paint as well as the next man,” she affirmed with a nod toward the walls, which at one time might have been canary yellow in color but which age and grime had turned into a dark mustard. Phoebe had already done minor repairs on her little house out back. She’d painted the interior walls and cabinets, giving the aging place new life.

“Well, before we get to that stage, why don’t you show me around and give me your vision for the place? You mentioned in your email that you want to open by Christmas.”

“If it’s possible, yes. A soft launch for the people who like to travel in the sweet spot between Christmas and New Year’s would be a great time to work out any last-minute kinks. Let’s start on the second and third floors first. I think those are going to be the most intensive when it comes to the renovations.”

“Lead the way.” Graham gestured toward the staircase.

“Some of the boards are going to need to be replaced,” she said as they creaked their way up to the second floor.

“We will probably need to check the whole thing for rot. High humidity can play hell with wood, especially wood that’s left untreated. The last thing you want to do is have a guest take a spill on your staircase because a rotted board broke.”

*Eek!* She hadn’t thought of that. Thoughts of guests who didn’t like the food, or who became ill, or who ended up with a rash of mosquito or bedbug bites were what kept her up at night. But to have a guest fall and injure themselves over possible negligence? Phoebe could already envision the lawsuit and decided to add getting extra insurance coverage to her list. Her insurance rep had mentioned policies to cover injuries before, but she had brushed that idea aside in favor of what she needed to pay for



today. Faulty thinking on her part—she would need to consider the ramifications of a guest being injured. “Yeah, if I can avoid any pitfalls like that, I would appreciate it. I also want to make sure that I have entrances and guest rooms that are up to code for handicapped visitors. I want to add a ramp to the front and back entrances, plus there is a room on the first floor I want converted into two handicapped bedrooms.”

“Excellent. We can certainly work that into the overall plans. And one of the things I will help with is getting all the proper permits submitted to the parish, and inspections set up once we are done.”

They proceeded through the third and second floors, room by room, with Graham taking rough measurements of each room. There was something inherently sexy about watching him work with his tape measure and jotting numbers down on his hand-sketched floorplans. It gave Phoebe time to study the man with his back turned, without his magnetic, penetrating stare on her. She appreciated the way his white linen dress shirt rippled with movement across his broad shoulders, and how his jeans drew taut across a rather delectable tight end. The man was a powerful beast in his prime, and sent pulse waves thumping through her veins.

After taking measurements of one of the rear bedrooms that overlooked the gardens, Graham stated, “Adding plumbing to each room shouldn’t be a problem. It’s the state of the current pipes that we need to worry about. I will check them over, see if there are any that need replacing, and develop a new grid for the piping. We might also want to check the status of the current water heater. For a place this size, with upwards of forty guests, my guess is that you will need an extra water heater, if not two or more to meet requirements.”

“I already have that included in the budget I’ve set aside for this place. I worked at a few hotels and understand the need for a constant stream of hot water.”

“Good. I have a guy I do subcontract work with, who installs

water heaters at a very reasonable price and won't gouge you. I've worked with him enough that I can include an estimate for the costs with my overall bid."

"I would appreciate that." She bit back the ensuing panic attempting to wriggle into her psyche. Phoebe had these moments where the enormity of what she was doing, the number of tasks before her to accomplish her goal, overwhelmed her.

They descended the smaller back stairwell. "If there's a way to lighten this stairwell up—perhaps add some extra lighting—I'd like to use it for personnel, housekeeping, room service, and the like. Keep it off limits to guests except in the event of an emergency."

"And what about the closet we passed by the stairs?" Graham gestured, pointing his thumb over his shoulder.

"Oh, that. I almost forgot. It's not a closet but a tiny elevator that will fit maybe three people with a small suitcase apiece. I intend to keep it for handicapped guests, room service delivery, and housekeeping."

"I'll add it to my list to inspect for any wear and tear on parts that might need replacing." Graham scribbled on his notepad when they stepped inside the next room on her agenda.

"Appreciate that. This is the room I would like to turn into two handicapped guestrooms with walk-in showers that also sport a ledge for those who need to sit." The room had previously likely been used as either a small ballroom or an overly large dining room. To utilize the space to work for her, making it two rooms that would be available for guests with disabilities, just made sense. It needed as much work as the rest. The wooden panel walls would need to go. She wanted the rooms to have an open and airy feel to them, and the dark wood made even this large room seem cloying.

Graham toured the room in question. He withdrew his measuring tape from his toolbelt, ran his fingers over the wood paneling like he was testing its sturdiness and durability. He checked inside the fireplace and glanced out the windows. "Well,

the space is large enough to make it maneuverable for two rooms and accommodate wheelchairs.”

“And they will have a nice view of the grounds overlooking the Mississippi too.”

“It’s doable. How do you feel about the paneling?” he asked and canted a dark brow.

“That it needs to go. I’m sure in its glory, it looked great, but it’s not the aesthetic I’m going for.”

Graham nodded with a smile. “That’s what I thought from everything you’ve told me about this place, but I wanted to be sure we were on the same page.”

They walked through the rest of the first floor. She showed Graham the library room where she wanted to redo the shelves, perhaps add some couches and comfy chairs, and fill those empty shelves with books for guests to check out and read. Then there was the sitting room she wanted to turn into a screen room with a large flat screen television, plenty of couches and places to sit. She planned to play family friendly movies for interested guests in the evenings. Then there was the ballroom that she wanted to convert into a grand dining room. They could use it for formal occasions like weddings and baby showers in addition to daily breakfasts. Just because she no longer believed in love didn’t mean other people were of the same opinion. And if she benefited from the wedding industry, hosted a few getaway weddings, it would be another feather in her cap.

They headed into the basement where Graham examined the heating unit, the water heater, and electrical boxes.

“I want to wall that section off and create a laundry room with multiple washers and dryers for the sheer volume of laundry we will do each day, and also create storage rooms for things like toilet paper, waste bags, toiletries, and the like.”

“Those are some easy additions. I don’t see that being an issue. I just need to know the number of washing machines you want installed, for the plumbing and electric. I’m sure they’re going to be the industrial sized ones.”

“Yeah, I was thinking eight of each, to start with, and then have fixtures available to add two more of each in the future.”

It would be a constant rotation. Phoebe would want to have additional multiple clean sheet sets for each room, along with duvets on the comforters. Which reminded her she still needed to find a local dry cleaner where she could possibly take soiled comforters to get cleaned. Plus, she wanted to find a local vendor for fancy soaps, shampoos, conditioners, and lotions. She intended to work with area vendors to display art for sale, and planned on having a small gift shop selling items displaying the logo she was designing for the bed and breakfast.

The last spot they went through was the kitchen. This room, much like the rest of them, needed a lot of work too.

“How much of the original do you want to keep in here?” Graham asked, noting measurements on the clipboard in his hand.

“Honestly, this room is going to need a lot of work. I need the kitchen to be top of the line. Especially if I want to host weddings, showers, family reunions, and the like, here. Professional grade refrigerators, stainless steel sinks, a prep area, and then the butler’s pantry for storage needs to be redone to make it more efficient.”

Graham nodded. “And what about the room next to this one in front?”

“That’s where I would like to put the reception desk, with a small, tasteful gift shop beside it, and then my office with an on-site safe.”

“You have a terrific vision for this place. Why don’t we have a seat on the porch, and we can go over numbers.” He cast her a friendly smile that melted her insides down to her toes.

“I’ve got one better, follow me,” she said and led him out through the kitchen side door around the back.

“The garden needs work as well. Do you have anyone in mind to help you with the landscaping?”

She sighed. “Don’t I know it. There’s always a catch with

buying a deeply discounted, foreclosed property. I'll get to it. I've already been scoping out the lawn and garden section at the hardware store. I have some experience with designing gardens. Not a lot, mind you, but I don't mind getting my hands dirty."

She opened the door to the small groundskeeper's house, which was really nothing more than a glorified pool house. It was four hundred square feet, little more than a studio apartment in size. The only thing enclosed was the tiny bathroom. But she had spruced her home up as best she could, painting the walls a fresh, light powder blue and had put her bed near the window to catch the early morning sunlight.

There was room enough for her couch and a small television, plus the eat in kitchen with her small, pine dinette set. She'd painted the walnut cabinets an eggshell white, giving the place a farmhouse look. Daisy made a beeline toward her water bowl and dog bed up against the far wall.

"This is where you're living?" Graham studied her place without judgement, his gaze assessing the space.

It might not be much, but it was home and, best of all, hers. "Yep. I don't need a lot of space or things. Most days I will be over at the main house from sunup until sundown, at least until I can afford to hire help."

If things worked the way she hoped, she would have a hostess and servers for the dining room. Phoebe already had her eye on a waitress at the nightclub to entice to come work for her. While she was confident in her abilities, it would be a juggling act to cook and serve meals in the dining room at the same time. At first, there was no way around it and she would be forced to manage it somehow. But she hoped this place would be successful enough that a few months after opening, she would have the available budget to hire help.

"Have a seat. Would you like a cup of coffee? And I have some croissants on the table there, just baked them fresh this morning," she said, rather thrilled to be playing hostess. Phoebe enjoyed cooking and had found early in life that she had a knack

for it. But this was a new croissant recipe she was testing out, and she was interested to see Graham's reaction.

"It's barely ten." He smiled as he sat, facing her and the kitchen.

"I tend to be an early riser. Always have been."

"I'm the same."

Using one of her good mugs, she served him a steaming cup of coffee, then brought over all the accoutrements on a wooden tray: sugar, cream, and sugar substitute. She noted that he took his coffee black as night, but he slathered the croissant with her homemade jam.

"Mmm, oh my god." He groaned, and the sound pinged low in her belly. "You made this?" Graham asked, looking at her and then back at the pastry as if he had died and gone to heaven.

"Yep." She expelled a breath. The new recipe appeared to be a hit. Graham ate the croissant with relish. Pinpricks of satisfaction flowed through Phoebe. She slid into the seat across from him as he put a thumb covered in jam into his mouth and sucked it off.

Her girly bits throbbed at an unexpected blast of desire that struck her system like a thunder bolt. It had been an unconsciously sexy move on his part. It wasn't like he was attempting to get into her pants. He was here to earn a potential payday, and work. Yet when he glanced her way with sublime satisfaction in his eyes, across the small expanse of her pine dinette table, her insides quivered—and not with fear.

She needed to shut the gate closed and seal it tight. Phoebe didn't do relationships anymore. That wasn't in her plans for her life any longer.

No matter how sinful the packaging happened to be.