

Chapter One

They prepared for battle.

Mark, dressed in a faded Steelers football jersey and paint-splattered jeans, stood firmly at the bottom of the stairs. He wore a white surgical mask strapped over his nose and mouth and plastic protective glasses over his eyes. He gripped a huge bust-it-up-mallet to smash up, tear up, and rip up anything in his way.

“What do ya think?” he asked in a muffled voice from behind his surgical mask.

Danielle, dressed in a blue tank top, pink shorts, and white flip-flops, balanced a 24x24x24 cardboard box on her right hip and smiled sweetly at her husband. “I think we should forget about this and go sailing.”

“Naw, come on...we gotta do this.”

“Do we? Why?”

“It’s time to start renovations on the two upstairs

rooms. It's been two years since we bought this place, and we've procrastinated enough. We need to modernize those rooms."

"Yeah, babe. You're right. But it's such a mess up there and it isn't even our mess. It's just left over junk from the previous owners. We should've had the junk removed before we signed the papers." She wrinkled her nose at the thought of the stinky, dusty clutter at the top of the stairs.

"Yeah, well, what's done is done, so now we gotta do what we gotta do," he announced boldly.

"Yeah, babe. You're right. You go on up there and do your thing."

"What about you?"

She shook her cardboard box with false enthusiasm. "Right behind ya," she assured him.

He looked at her doubtfully but decided he would trust her to follow him up the stairs. She was, after all, his wife, and there must've been something in the wedding vows to include her helping him haul out unwanted junk.

"Let's do it!" He bounded up the stairs with gusto, blind commitment, and complete stupidity.

She took one step up and then jumped back as Mark sprinted quickly down the steps with the mallet raised over his head. "They're alive! They're on the attack!" He practically flew through the kitchen, shot out the back door, bounded down the porch steps, and dashed across the backyard to the garage.

"Mark! Mark—where are you going?" Danielle

called after him, but he was far out of hearing distance. She peered cautiously up the staircase, wondering what had frightened him. And then she heard the angry buzz of disturbed insects. "Oh, this isn't good."

Mark ran up the porch steps, swung open the door, hurried through the kitchen, and returned to his battle position at the bottom of the stairs. He stood ready to destroy the enemy with his mallet in one hand and a can of ant spray in the other. "I'm gonna kill them all!" The angry look on his face expressed his single-minded intent: to exterminate, maim, massacre, and defeat.

Danielle pointed to the spray can. "Babe, that's a can of ant spray. It sounds more like hornets or wasps up there."

"You're right. There's a big wasp's nest in the corner ceiling next to the window. They've been coming in and out of a small crack in the window frame for years, and they've built a nest as big as the Taj Mahal."

"Do you think ant spray is going to kill wasps?"

Mark looked at the can, read a bit of the label, and then said, "Bug killer is bug killer. It's all toxic stuff. It'll work."

She was doubtful but supportive. "Go get 'em, killer." She patted him on the back and gave him a

gentle shove to send him on his way.

Mark, for the second time, started boldly up the steps. He hesitated for a moment and then asked hopefully, "Ya com'n?"

"Right behind ya, babe." She was certain there was nothing in their wedding vows to include until-death-do-you-part by nasty insects, but she would help the man she loved fight off any evil that came into their lives.

They reached the top of the stairs. The vicious wasps zipped around the huge nest in a wild frenzy. They climbed the walls, swarmed on the floor, and flew carelessly into the window glass. At least fifty disturbed insects were perched on the paper-thin grey nest to protect it from harm. The gigantic Taj Mahal structure was a hum of seething, buzzing, frantic activity.

The wasp stronghold was a hostile and threatening place. To approach it was downright dangerous and completely stupid.

Danielle had second thoughts. "I don't think the ant spray is going to do much. I think it might just upset them."

"You might be right, but it's all we have, so we'll give it a try. Let's open the window, and maybe they'll just fly out to escape the toxic spray."

Mark and Danielle struggled to open the old wooden window. The aggravated wasps dive-bombed them from all sides, coming at them like the World War I flying ace, the Red Barron. But none of the

enraged creatures landed for a sting.

With the window finally open, Mark held the can in his hand and told Danielle, "Get ready!"

Danielle got ready. She picked up her cardboard box and got as far away from the wasp's nest as possible. She slipped into the room to the left of the stairs, closed the door, and squeezed her eyes shut.

She heard the 'ppppsssstt' of the spray can, followed by loud, incensed buzzing. And then she heard Mark's loud, troubled, perturbed yell, "It didn't work! They're real mad now." She heard the pounding footfalls of his feet as he rushed down the steps. "Stay up there with the door closed. I'll be back. I'm going to the Handyman Depot for a can of some real good wasp killing stuff."

"Okay, babe. I'll be up here. Don't worry, I'm not going out there!" Danielle called, but she knew Mark didn't hear her because she could hear him outside, starting up the car.

With the Battle of The Wasps completely lost, she turned her attention to the Battle of The Clutter. The room looked as intimidating as the insect Taj Mahal on the other side of the door.

The 'pink room,' as they called it, had dreary, frayed, pink flowered curtains hung on a rusted rod over the single window. A delicate antique glass

chandler hung beneath the crooked, yellowed ceiling fan. Faded pink shapes of where a bed, a high dresser, and a possible vanity had been placed against the walls were subtle reminders of what the Georgia sun could do to wall paint.

On the opposite side from the window was a narrow closet. The closet door looked like everything else in the room: grimy, dirty, and unattractive.

At one time, the bedroom must've been a delightful place for a teenage girl, but now, it was a hot, disgusting, musty collection of left-behind junk. Everything—boxes, broken furniture, bags of who-knows-what, and piles of papers and magazines—was crowded into the small soon-to-be-demolished space.

Danielle needed to do something about the mess.

She kicked her cardboard box towards the closet and decided to start there. She had no idea what she'd find behind door number two, but she knew a Taj Mahal wasp's nest waited behind door number one, and nothing could be worse than that. Or could it?

She turned the knob, opened the closet door, and was pleasantly surprised to find everything inside dusty but neatly arranged on shelves or stacked on the floor. It was a time capsule from long ago. It came from a time when people worked hard for their possessions and valuables were labeled and stored safely away for future use.

She reached for the first box labeled 'Julie's Shoes' and did not bother to open it because she knew what she'd find inside—a pair of stinky old worn-out shoes.

She tossed the shoe box into her cardboard box and reached for another box to add with 'Julie's Shoes' to be thrown away.

Chapter Two

Danielle dipped her hands into the soapy sink water. Her left hand—the hand with her engagement ring and wedding band—disappeared beneath the bubbles. She cleaned off the grease, gunk, and grime from the casserole dish and put it in the dishwasher.

Next to her on the kitchen counter sat a glass of imported French red wine. She enjoyed tasting new wines, but this particular vintage was a disappointment. She would not buy it again.

She gazed out the window and thought of her mother. How had she become her mother? Here she stood, washing dishes, looking out the kitchen window at the small backyard while in the living room, her husband watched football on TV.

The Pittsburgh Steelers were playing against the Cleveland Browns. If the Steelers won, Mark would be happy. If they lost he'd pout like a three-year-old and she would have to console him for the rest of the night. Danielle wondered if all Steelers fans behaved like him.

She took a sip of disappointing wine and then

washed the pot they'd used to make mashed sweet potatoes.

From the back window, she could see their dogs—Frank, Lloyd, and Wright—lying together on the lawn. They were mutts with absolutely no good breeding, but they were nice dogs and that's what mattered most.

In the backyard, to the left, under the shade of a moss-covered live oak tree, stood an old wooden garage packed full of Mark's machine equipment. He worked as an architect for a firm in Savannah. He liked to build things. She wished he'd build a new garage.

Danielle heard Mark walk down the stairs. As each foot landed on a step, his shoes made a sharp tap-tap, tap-tap, tap-tap. He reached the bottom of the stairs.

Danielle waited for his arms to reach around her. She waited for his kiss upon her cheek. She waited, but nothing happened.

Tap-tap, tap-tap, tap-tap, came the footsteps. The sound went toward the living room and stopped.

Tap-tap, tap-tap, tap-tap, the footsteps started again across the kitchen.

The back door opened quietly and then the door closed.

Tap-tap, tap-tap, tap-tap, the footsteps went across the porch and then fell silent.

In the backyard, Frank, Lloyd and Wright jerked up and quickly turned their heads toward the porch. Together, their eyes moved to watch as if someone walked across the lawn.

A breeze must've blown down the alley because the back gate slowly opened, and then gently closed.

Frank, Lloyd and Wright exchanged bewildered looks. Lloyd whined. He was such a baby.

Danielle reached for the glass of disappointing wine and quickly drank it down to the very last drop.

The Browns made a touchdown.

"Oh, give me a break!" Mark jumped up, threw his arms in the air, and stomped out of the living room.

Danielle poured Mark a glass of disappointing French wine and poured herself another glass. She wondered what had caused the odd footstep noise.

She carried Mark's glass in her right hand and a glass for herself in her left hand. She wore fuzzy white slippers. Her steps made no sound as she crossed the kitchen floor.

She stopped at the base of the stairs and looked up into the cool, strange darkness of the second floor. She shook away her unsettled feelings. There wasn't anything up there, only empty rooms and empty closets.

After they'd demolished the wasp's Taj Mahal, they spent the entire day throwing out the junk left behind from the previous homeowner. Mark's SUV was packed with items for The Reclaim Store on Victory Drive or for the Wilmington Island dump.

Danielle's car was full of items for the thrift stores, Goodwill, and Gentleman Jim's Junk Shop.

The house had been a mess when they'd bought it, and after two years of repairs, the downstairs looked modern, clean, and stylishly decorated. Mark's theory on home renovations was to tear everything out, leaving only the wood frame. He wanted new. He wanted contemporary. He wanted the Steelers to win, but sometimes, you didn't always get what you wanted.

"Is that wine for me?" Mark moaned from their bedroom.

"Yes, babe, wine for the whiner." She laughed and entered their tastefully decorated bedroom. She sat on the bed beside Mark, handed him the glass, and watched him drink. She knew what he would say next, and she was right.

"This wine is horrible."

"Yes. It's a bit of a disappointment."

"Why did we buy it?"

"We liked the label on the bottle, I think."

"Well, let's not buy it again."

"Okay."

They sat in comfortable silence and sipped their drinks.

They had dated for a year, lived together for a

year, and were now married for a year. It had poured buckets of rain on their wedding day, but after they exchanged their vows, the clouds parted and a double rainbow appeared in the sky. It was as if the heavens above had sanctioned their union.

But Danielle and Mark didn't need any message from above to endorse their marriage. They loved each other. They would grow old together. They knew how to share their joys and their disappointments.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" she asked and took a sip of wine.

He chuckled, gave her a boyish grin, leaned back on the stack of plush pillows, and said, "I'm from West Virginia. Of course I believe in ghosts."

She looked into her glass of disappointment.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" he asked.

"No. No. Not really."

"What do you mean, not really? You either do or you don't believe in ghosts."

Danielle remained silent.

He set his wine glass down on a handcrafted wooden coaster on their sophisticated nightstand. He placed a gentle hand on her knee and asked, "What's wrong?"

"I heard something really weird. I was washing the dishes and I heard footsteps come down the stairs. I thought it was you, but you were watching the game. I heard footsteps cross the kitchen floor, go into the living room, stop, and then cross the kitchen floor again. And then, all by itself the back door opened and

then closed. The footsteps went down the porch steps, across the lawn, I think, and then the back gate to the alley opened and closed."

Mark said nothing.

Danielle expanded on her thoughts, "It was really weird. Not creepy weird, but...you know, just interestingly weird. That's all. Maybe it's a ghost. What do you think?"

"Maybe it was a strong gust of wind that opened the doors."

"Maybe so, but what about the footsteps?"

"The house is just settling down. Old houses do that sometimes. A bit of creaking might sound like the tap of a shoe."

"No. The steps had a rhythm to them. I know this sounds silly, but it was a quick footstep. It sounded like someone wearing heels and in a hurry to go out on the town for some fun."

Mark laughed and said, "Ah yes! A true Savannah ghost for sure. Always ready to party." He picked up his wine glass, took a quick gulp, and made a face. "This wine is really bad."

"Yes. The wine is a bit of a disappointment." Danielle sighed.

"The last quarter of the football game was a disappointment, too. Do you think the Steelers will

make a come-back?"

"Oh most definitely!" she assured him, and then asked, "Do you think the ghost will come back tonight after a night out on the town?"

"Most definitely." He laughed.

And he most definitely would be right about that!

Chapter Three

Bradley and Melinda Davenport sped down 37th Street to get to their seven-thirty dinner reservation at Elizabeth on 37th Street.

Melinda Davenport liked nice things. She enjoyed riding around Savannah in her husband's sleek black BMW. She appreciated the good things money could buy, and she especially liked the feel of quality clothing on her skin.

As Bradley drove, she fumbled with her four-hundred-dollar designer shoes. They didn't quite fit right, but anybody with half a brain would know, just by looking at the shoes, they were expensive.

They were high-platform, white, sparkly shoes designed for a rock star. They were clunky, flashy, and way over the top. But they cost four hundred dollars and they were *designer shoes*.

Bradley turned sharply into the parking lot. He

whipped into a space, turned off the engine, looked to his lovely wife, and smiled. "We're here. Did you figure out those shoes yet?"

"I almost have them on," she said and opened the car door. She thought it might be easier to put the shoes on the pavement and then step into them from above. If she could get a direct angle, maybe she could get them on. Funny, the sales girl had no trouble putting them on her feet at the store.

Melinda put her white designer shoes on the ground outside the car.

"Why did you buy those shoes if they don't fit?" Bradley asked, but he knew why she'd bought them—they were from her favorite Fashion Designer-of-the-Month. He didn't even bother to remember who the Fashion Designer-of-the-Month was because next month, the designer would be passé and there would be a new brilliant Designer-of-the-Month.

"The shoes fit perfect in the store," Melinda said and turned her head for only a moment, but it was long enough for a gust of wind to mess up her hair, sprinkle dust on Bradley's BMW, and whisk away her four-hundred-dollar shoes.

She stared down at the pavement in surprise. "Where'd they go?" she gasped.

"What?"

"My shoes are gone! They we're here a second ago. I put them right there, and now they're gone! Bradley, somebody stole my shoes!"

"What?"

"Bradley, my shoes have been stolen!"

Bradley thought it ridiculously funny but kept a straight face. He knew Savannah's crime reports didn't include an over-abundance of shoe thieves, but he would check things out anyway, just to appease his wife.

He got out of the car and searched here and there. He checked out her side of the car, peeked under the car, and looked all around the car. He even walked about the cars parked near them. Nothing.

"Why would somebody steal my shoes? Or a better question would be, how did somebody steal my shoes so fast? I didn't see a thing. Did you see anyone?" Melinda asked.

"No. I didn't see anyone. Do you want me to call the police?"

"Our dinner reservation is for seven-thirty. We're already late. I've wanted to try Elizabeth's for months. I hear the menu is excellent. If we call the police, it'll take forever to fill out the report. We won't be able to eat here tonight."

"Maybe we should try this restaurant another time. You can't go into the restaurant barefoot," he said and pointed to her toes.

Melinda scrunched up her face. She hated it when things messed up her plans. "Take off your shoes

Bradley," she demanded.

"No way! You're not wearing my shoes!"

"No, but give me your socks. I can wear them as if they're baggy leggings hiding my shoes. I'll walk on my tippy-toes so it will look like I am wearing heels. No one will notice."

Bradley kicked off his shoes and gave her his socks. She was a pure fashion genius! With her creative thinking and off-the-wall ideas, she might one day be the next Designer-of-the-Month.

Bradley and Melinda Davenport walked arm in arm into Elizabeth's. They enjoyed a delicious meal that was made even better because Melinda could play footsies under the table with Bradley without having to kick off her four-hundred-dollar, white, sparkly, platform designer shoes.