

# Chapter One



Darrel placed his hands on his hips and looked at the front porch of the old house on Jones Street with the critical eye of an experienced house painter. He estimated how much he would charge—\$500 for the porch, which included a fresh coat of haint blue on the ceiling. Should be an easy three-day job stretched into a week. No one would expect a person to paint a house in Savannah, Georgia in mid-July in a less amount of time, except maybe someone from the north. He hoped the client was local, but by the sound of her voice on the phone, there could be trouble.

A beige Lexus hesitated at the stop sign and then slipped into the open parking place in front of the house. The engine cut, the car door opened, and a lady stepped out. She slammed the car door and studied the porch, also with a critical eye, but from that of a realtor.

Her high heels clicked on ancient cobblestones as she marched to Darrel.

“Are you the painter?” Miss Realtor asked.

“Yep. *Anything Painted*,” he answered and handed her a business card that read:

### ANYTHING PAINTED

He was proud of his card, proud of his business, and proud of his name printed in fancy type.

“Cute,” she said and shoved the card into her skirt pocket (keeping it in case she needed to sue him for shoddy workmanship). “How much to paint the porch?”

“Six hundred,” Darrel said. His price went up on account of the Lexus.



She hid her smile and remained stone faced. He was more than cheap, he was dirt cheap. She was used to dealing with service people on Hilton Head Island and their prices were way out of reasonable. She was going to enjoy handling rental properties in Savannah. "How much to paint the *back* porch?" she asked.

"I didn't look at the back porch."

"Come take a look," she said, stomping up the steps. Her heels clicked across the heart pine boards to the entrance. She shoved the key into the lock, turned it quick, and pushed the door open. Stepping inside, she seemed to disappear into the golden afternoon sun that poured through the parlor windows.

Darrel peeked in. It was a wonderfully bright home, vacant of furnishings, but filled with warmth and happiness. He envisioned laughing children playing on the parlor floor, while the mother of the house baked a pie in the kitchen, and somewhere, in a distant room, the father read *The Savannah Morning News*.

"Well come in," she said from the kitchen.

"Yes ma'am." Darrel wiped his shoes on the doormat and stepped into the three-bedroom house on Jones Street. He walked down the narrow hallway, past the parlor on the right, and the downstairs closet renovated into a bathroom on the left. He entered the modern kitchen as she unlocked the back door.

Darrel wanted to slow down to admire the new white cabinets, imported granite counters, stainless steel appliances, Art-deco lighting fixtures and faucets, but the realtor held open the back door to hurry him along.

Stepping onto the back porch, instead of looking at what needed to be painted, he was mesmerized by the beauty of the backyard. There was nothing as lovely as a secluded garden in an old Savannah home. Ivy had been winding its way up the brick



walls for over a hundred years. The flowers were in bloom and the air was sweet with their fragrance. In a corner there was a stone bench beneath a large, live oak. Spanish moss on the tree's huge knurled branches added to the garden's enchanting, mysterious appearance.

She jingled the house keys and asked, "So how much?"

Darrel walked the length of the porch. He looked over the railing, studied the boards under his feet and when he looked up at the ceiling he saw the familiar color of haint blue. "Five hundred for the back porch."

"Does that price include paint?"

"Nope. Paint is extra."

"How much for the paint?"

"Depends on what you want."

"I want white."

"White?"

"Yes. Do you have a problem with that?"

"No ma'am; I'll paint it any color you want."

"How much for the paint?"

Darrel did some quick math in his head. "Two hundred for the paint."

"That's ridiculous. What kind of paint are you using?"

"The good stuff," Darrel said with a smile.

"Fine. I don't care what paint you use, but I don't want to see any other color coming through. Do you hear me?"

"You want me to paint over the haint blue on the ceilings?" Darrel asked in surprise.

"Of course I do. I said I want everything white."

"I will have to put at least two, maybe three coats to cover up the haint blue. You sure you want me to do that?"



“So you’re telling me it will cost more for paint than what you just told me?” Her voice indicated annoyance.

Darrel leaned against the porch post and looked up at the vast expanse of light blue over their heads. He thought it looked like a wide river of brilliant peaceful water. If a person looked long enough and hard enough, it might appear the water was moving, flowing over their heads.

She jingled the house keys again and tapped her pointed heels on the heart pine floorboards.

“I’m just saying maybe you don’t want to paint over the haint blue. That’s all.”

“Why not?”

Darrel wanted a cigarette. He was no longer in the mood to educate the ignorant. She might be from Hilton Head, South Carolina, and some people up that way *knew* about the low country, but some people did not. She must have moved down from the north to take advantage of the real estate boom in the early nineties. Houses were bought, flipped, and sold at alarming rates. Money came fast and easy. Work was plentiful, and a good painter had more than enough to keep busy.

That was then. This was now.

Now Miss Realtor was scrambling to make money by renting homes owned by those who could no longer sell them for a decent profit. She was a bottom feeder. Darrel called people like her *mud minnows*. They stole your fishing bait.

“Some people around here think haint blue keeps the evil spirits out. Don’t they use that color on Hilton Head?” Darrel asked.

“Most people in Hilton Head are wealthy and educated. They don’t believe in low country superstitions.”



Darrel *really* wanted a cigarette. There was a time when he would have refused to paint over haint blue because he, like many others, understood the reason for the homeowner having painted the porch ceilings haint blue in the first place. There was an unwanted spirit lurking somewhere nearby who wanted to get into the house.

Times were different now, though. Jobs were hard to come by. The payment on his trailer was past due.

She tapped her foot on the heart pineboards, unaware of the value and importance of antique heart pine. It took 500 years for heart pine to mature enough to be used for construction. The trees once dominated the southern coast of Georgia. Now there were only 10,000 acres left.

“You interested in the job or not?” she asked.

“Yes ma’am. Not a problem. I’ll paint both porches white, if that’s what you want.”

“That’s what I want. Write me up an estimate.”

“Yes ma’am, I’ll get the paperwork out of my truck.” He walked through the house without looking into the pleasant rooms. He knew the house would not be a happy place much longer and he did not want to acknowledge his part in the deal.

