

## Chapter One

*Saturday morning, May 14*

Paulette, exhausted from her fourth consecutive night shift at the trauma center, used her hand to shield her eyes from the sun's beaming rays after exiting the emergency room's side door. To ease her throbbing head she paused and madly searched her backpack for a pair of shades and Excedrin Migraine. The intensity of the last four hours—as she stabilized three combative male patients with multiple stab wounds transported by ambulance from a late-night bar brawl—wasn't out of the ordinary. She sighed in relief, popped the bottle cap, shook two pills into her hand and held them while removing bottled water from a side pocket on her backpack. Before continuing a slow pace toward the parking area she tilted her head back, placed the pills on the center of her tongue and swallowed them with a large sip of water.

Within a few feet of her red two-seater convertible BMW she disabled the car alarm with the keyless remote, opened the door and tossed her backpack on the passenger's seat before getting in. With her head bowed and a tight grip on both sides of the steering wheel, she took a deep breath and started the ignition, all the while resenting driving to the place she referred to as home. Even though seven years had passed since her father's death, Paulette had never forgiven Carmen, her mother, for remarrying within the first year.

Thanksgiving Day, only six months after her father Carlston's death, Mr. Russell Byron Taylor III, of Taylor, Johnson, and Lockwood Law Firm, was introduced to Paulette. During the evening he demanded Carmen's attention, boasted about his law firm, his clients with multimillion-dollar advertisement contracts, his land and his assets. No one seemed impressed with his accomplishments so he

mentioned several unannounced appearances at Carmen's out-of-town photo sessions, ranking himself as her number-one fan. Thinking he sounded obsessed Paulette cringed at his comments.

Oblivious of his annoying behavior Russell insisted Carmen escort him to the front door, barely kissed her on the cheek, then briefly mentioned an early-morning appointment before suddenly leaving. Anxious to get Paulette's opinion, Carmen questioned her before Russell backed out of the driveway and turned onto the street.

"What do you think about Russell?"

Outraged her mother was dating so soon after her father's death, Paulette hurried down the hallway into her bedroom and slammed the door.

With a look of disappointment Paulette faced forward in the dresser mirror, unzipped her dress, let it fall to the floor, stepped out of it and laid it across her bed. She turned suddenly and put her hands over her bare chest when Carmen opened the bedroom door and walked in. Still gloating from her "lovely evening," she apologized, moved Paulette's dress, then gracefully sat on the edge of her bed. Sorry she didn't lock her door Paulette shook her head as she opened the lingerie drawer and removed a nightgown.

Before Paulette completely dressed and turned around Carmen said, "You didn't answer my question."

Paulette frowned and shrugged her shoulders.

Carmen was persistent and asked again, "Well, what do you think about Russell?"

Unable to take it any longer Paulette looked Carmen in the eyes and blurted out her honest opinion. "Mother, he's an egotistical jerk who has issues with himself and anyone in his space. Weren't you the least bit embarrassed by his behavior? He's nothing like my father."

In disbelief Carmen stood, jerked her head back, placed her hand over her mouth, then left the bedroom.

Three months later they were married.

"Goodness, my resentment toward my mother for marrying Russell never reincarnated my father. What's done is done. I have to let it go," she mumbled thirty-five minutes later as she veered onto the secluded road nestled by aged pine and oak trees. Two miles later she turned into the main entrance and followed the winding driveway to the garage. Russell's densely wooded twenty-five-acre estate provided the scenic backdrop for a 10,000-square-foot French Tudor-styled mansion, indoor/outdoor pool, miniature golfing range and tennis court. Paulette pressed the button on her remote and rolled her eyes at Russell's automobile collection as the far left door lifted. The temperature-controlled shrine housed his black Mercedes-Benz, blue Aston Martin, black Ferrari Enzo, wine Jaguar and his red Lotus Elise Type 72. She never understood why one man needed so many cars, she thought as she drove inside, parked her car and grabbed her backpack before getting out.

"Good morning, Paulette," Carmen said after meeting her in the doorway.

"Hi, Mother." Emotionally detached, Paulette barely spoke, then went into the kitchen. Since Carlston's death Carmen had made every attempt to mend the void in their relationship. Because of her resentment toward Russell, Paulette was stubborn and remained distant.

"How was work last night?" Carmen asked enthusiastically, anticipating a response as she closed the kitchen door leading from the garage, locked it, then followed her.

"It was hectic as usual."

Russell was seated at the kitchen table and never lowered the daily paper to acknowledge her presence. Paulette glanced at him, rolled her eyes, then removed a glass from the extra place setting.

"Ms. Sanchez will have your breakfast prepared in a few minutes."

Ms. Sanchez, five-feet-two inches tall, chubby, with shoulder-length curly brown hair, was Russell's full-time maid and cook. Her outspokenness with Russell impressed Paulette the first time they met.

"No thank you. I think I'll skip breakfast this morning," Paulette said while opening the refrigerator door and moving items around.

"Are you sure? Did you stop and eat out?" With her arms folded across her chest Carmen leaned against the counter and watched Paulette fill her glass with orange juice then close the refrigerator door.

"No, mother, I didn't. I'm not hungry," Paulette responded without making eye contact.

"I requested your favorite breakfast foods: blueberry pancakes, scrambled eggs and fresh strawberries."

"Hmmm, sounds good but no thanks. I'll eat later, if that's okay with you?" Knowing Russell would comment eventually Paulette made an effort to avoid confrontation by ending the conversation.

"If you insist, but skipping meals isn't good for your health. It would make me feel better if you would sit down and eat something," Carmen said as she walked to the table, pulled out a chair and motioned with her hand for Paulette to sit down.

"Mother, I'm not hungry," Paulette said firmly before taking a few sips of juice then placing her half-empty glass on the countertop. Three years ago she finally convinced herself to join a gym and hire a

personal trainer. She'd successfully lost fifty pounds and maintained it with diet and exercise.

As a child Paulette was slender and had features like Carmen. The most obvious were her well-defined cheekbones, slender nose and large brown eyes. Carmen bragged, thinking Paulette would follow in her footsteps and model. She competed in a few childhood beauty pageants but never had the same love for modeling as Carmen had. As a matter of fact, she resented being dressed up and forced to walk and pose in front of hundreds of strangers. At the onset of puberty she developed a compulsive eating disorder.

She expressed her competition woes to Carmen, who wouldn't hear it. "You're beautiful and a million other girls would love to have your opportunities," Carmen would say constantly.

Instead of debating with Carmen she consoled herself with junk food and soon exceeded the weight limitations to compete. Other than surgery Carmen did everything to help—personal trainers, nutritionists and even prescription diet pills. Nothing could stop Paulette from eating. Before the age of fourteen she weighed 175 pounds.

"Okay, I'll have Ms. Sanchez put everything away. You can eat when you get ready."

"Thanks. I really appreciate it," Paulette responded, relieved Carmen finally got the point.

"No problem," Carmen said.

"Paulette, your mother requested your favorite foods for breakfast this morning." Russell lowered his daily newspaper, leaned back in his chair, then looked over the top of his glasses.

"Oh, good morning to you too, Russell," Paulette said sarcastically while readjusting her backpack on her shoulder and turning to leave the room.

"As I was saying, Paulette ..." Russell cleared his throat to get her attention as she walked away.

Carmen, hoping he would leave the topic alone, turned toward Russell. She knew his persistence would irritate Paulette and cause an argument. "It's okay. She can eat later when she gets hungry."

"Her disrespect isn't acceptable!" Russell stated sternly as he removed his wire-rimmed glasses and looked in Carmen's direction.

"Russell, she's been at the hospital twelve hours. I'm sure she's tired and needs her space," Carmen said, forcing a smile on her face.

"How's your residency?" Russell asked Paulette, obviously ignoring Carmen's request and completely changing the topic.

Paulette stopped before leaving the room, turned toward Russell and responded with a quizzical look on her face. "Fine." Russell never failed to prove himself as a true Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. For no other reason than asset evaluation he'd never shown genuine interest in her career.

"Have you decided where you'll practice medicine yet? Paulette, you do understand self-preservation is the key?" Russell sat erect, neatly folded his paper and placed it on the table.

"I'm highly considering the free clinic downtown," Paulette stated with conviction, knowing Russell would consider employment at the free clinic demeaning. Like her father she had a passion for medicine and wasn't pursuing it for monetary gain.

"Carmen, how dare you allow your daughter to mock me? I've provided her with the best education money can buy and she's considering loaning her time to a free clinic. She'll be lucky if she grosses sixty thousand dollars a year. Those state-funded insurance plans never pay and she'll be working for free."

Paulette wasn't surprised when he suddenly directed his comments to Carmen.

"Russell, calm down. She still has several months to decide." Concerned with calming Russell's temper instead of discussing Paulette's career, Carmen sat in the chair she pulled out for Paulette.

"I will not support your daughter working at a free clinic. She needs to consider private practice or a reputable hospital." Expecting Carmen's support he smacked the newspaper with his hand.

While they continued their debate about the future of her career Paulette eased out of the kitchen, back first, stood against the wall adjoining the kitchen and hallway, then leaned her head back. Russell's harsh tone made Paulette think about her father, whose life, in her opinion, was claimed prematurely, at the age of forty-five by a massive heart attack. She blamed her mother's demanding modeling career, and no one could convince her otherwise. If his heart condition was preexisting the resources for treatment had been at his fingertips. He was an RN.

"Russell, working at the clinic will give her valuable experience," Carmen said, still supporting Paulette's decision.

"She needs a substantial income, not valuable experience," he stated clearly to make his point.

"It's not always about money," Carmen said on Paulette's behalf.

"Are you listening to yourself? Do you realize how foolish you sound? We're talking about the money I invested toward her medical degree. The multimillion-dollar fortune of Russell Byron Taylor III isn't a joking matter. My expenditures will not be taken lightly."

Vividly remembering her father's funeral Paulette closed her eyes. An assortment of live and artificial funeral sprays spanned the width of the church. Mourning family members, friends and coworkers

held back tears while the minister spoke words of comfort. Following the benediction and closing prayer six pallbearers militantly walked to the front of the church, evenly divided themselves on both sides of the casket, then escorted Carlston's remains down the aisle and through the door.

"Shhh, Russell, please. I don't want Ms. Sanchez to hear us fighting again."

"Fighting again? Carmen, I promise you this isn't a fight. There would be no doubt in your simple mind if this were a fight. And to think you're so pretty."

"Russell, please lower your voice."

"Who are you to tell me what volume and tone of voice is permissible in my house? Need I remind you who signs the checks? You haven't worked in years."

Paulette opened her eyes and looked down the long hallway toward the sky-lit foyer. Six years ago Russell welcomed Paulette with a grand tour of his home, then shared his vision of the perfect family media room and future aspirations to expand the indoor/outdoor pool area to accommodate his "new" family. The bedroom chosen for Paulette was elegantly decorated and stood apart from the other seven guest suites on that floor. The walls were painted forest green with glossy white crown moldings and trim. There was a fireplace on the outside wall between two floor-to-ceiling windows. A king-sized whitewashed ornate sleigh bed with a nightstand on each side dominated an entire wall. Two chairs and a table made a sitting area to the right. The adjacent bathroom had a double sink and vanity, whirlpool tub and separate shower. The walk-in closet-a female's dream come true. Only two weeks after they moved in Paulette was bombarded with rules and regulations.

"Russell, I'm not trying to tell you what to do. It's ..."

"What, Carmen? What do you have to say? If you are capable of formulating a thought in your mind, say it."

"It's not appropriate for Paulette to hear us argue either." Argue was all they had done for the past two years, Paulette thought as she rocked her head from side to side in disgust, then went upstairs.

"So now you're concerned with appropriateness? Very well, then. She won't hear us. Don't expect me back home before bedtime."

"Russell, please for once can we have a civil conversation?" she asked, then grabbed the sleeve of his shirt as he stood to leave.

"Let go of my shirt. I've provided you and your daughter with the best and you don't appreciate anything I've done for you. Your deceased husband was a nurse, for heaven's sake. Even in addition to your working income he could never provide for you the way I do."

"Russell, yes, I do appreciate you and everything you've done."

"How do you show it? Paulette isn't my biological daughter. It isn't my responsibility to do anything for her. Because of my love for you I gave her the best my life had to offer. What do I get in return? Nothing." Russell slammed the door leading from the kitchen to the garage, fired up his Ferrari Enzo's ignition, then squealed out of the garage.

Even though Paulette was exhausted, a hot shower and four hours of sleep would rejuvenate her before a long-anticipated shopping spree at the bookstore. Having two scheduled off days without being on the weekend call list was rare. She opened her bedroom door, tossed her backpack on the floor and turned on the television. After scanning a few channels she decided to watch a reality show that investigated plastic surgery disasters. Even as a medical practitioner all she could tolerate was a few minutes. Watching an

unlicensed individual perform breast implantations with improperly sterilized tools was unbearable. Stunned, she quickly turned off the television, chose a jazz cassette from her father's music collection, then prepared to take her shower.

Paulette stepped out of the shower, dried off, then slipped on an oversized T-shirt and panties. Desiring total darkness she closed the blinds, pulled the curtains, fell backward onto her bed and stared at the ceiling until she drifted into a deep sleep.