



Chapter 1

Friday, 5:00 P.M.

Life is never perfect, but that doesn't stop me from trying. I shift my purse into its spot on the center console and smooth my keys so they're aligned, then accelerate under the green light.

"Stay there!" I shout as a hunter green Lexus swerves, the driver's phone absorbing all his concentration. Somehow, we avoid a collision in the heavy Raleigh traffic. My purse is out of place. I grip the wheel knowing it shouldn't bother me. *It's useless to resist.* I nudge it back, hating myself for it as I take a deep breath. But picking up my goldendoodle from doggy daycare is my favorite time of day, and an honest smile forms as I bump into the lot.

"They really should fix that," I mutter, the first drops of rain hitting my business suit as I hurry toward the door. I can't wait to get into some pajama pants and put a few drops of lavender into the diffuser.

Behind the glass door, there's a blur of fur. I pull it open, escaping the thickening rain. "Bugle!"

I bend low, knees pinched by the classy skirt, and hug my fur baby. She's my entire world and the only part of my life where I'm okay with chaos.

"Thanks, Jerome," I say, taking her leash. He seems to like her better than the other dogs. Can't say I blame him.

"Sure thing. Hey, watch this." He holds up a fist, and Bugle drops to the floor and rolls over.

"Oh, good girl!" I cry, ruffling her fur. I turn to Jerome; his mocha skin is smooth against Bugle's bright-copper coat. "You're amazing. Where did you learn dog training?"

He shrugs. "Oh, I just like learning new things."

Rain lashes the glass behind me, but the sky is dark. "It doesn't look like it'll lighten up; see you tomorrow."

Bugle makes a mad dash for the car, squinting. We both hate rain. I almost go down, shuffling in my heels as she tugs me along. What a perfect ending to a rough day *that* would be.

With traffic, it takes forty-five minutes to reach my apartment five miles away. I look over at Bugle. For a shed-less dog, she's left an impression on the seat. I'll have to vacuum that tonight. "Ready?"

She sneezes.

I shiver, resisting the breeze cutting through my sheer pantyhose. Blowing a cold raindrop off the tip of my nose, I wish I could wipe off my day at work too. Harry is getting more demanding every day. Just thinking about work makes a shudder run up my spine. I push it down, hurrying toward the building when Bugle's ready.

Normally, we'd take a walk at this time of day, so to make up for the lack of exercise, we take the three flights of stairs instead of the elevator. My stiletto heel catches in the metal mesh of the third one. Bugle wasn't expecting my sudden halt, and she continues bounding up the stairs.

"Ahh!" But her hard yank on the leash is just what I need to pry my shoe free.

Bugle shakes the rain from her curly coat, and rainwater splats across my face. Sucking in a breath, I force everything away. *Just make it to the door, that's all, lavender oil will make everything better.* Rounding the corner to the next flight, I shift forward so my heels won't get stuck again, hampered by the skirt. Bugle stops in front of me. Her ever-wagging tail stills.

"What's up, girl? Let's go."

She answers with a low growl that sends shivers across my skin, and her strange behavior makes my heart beat faster. Off-balance with my classy shoes, I edge around her before noticing a boot sticking out at the next landing. I come to a standstill as I consider the possibilities. *Could be a drunk, hiding from the weather, passed out on the floor.* The morning news flashes across my mind: another gang-related shooting in Raleigh. Bugle's sharp bark makes me jump, but the boot doesn't move.

Maybe it's empty. Maybe one of my neighbors dropped it on their way down to work.

That's ridiculous, since no empty footwear could stick out at that angle without a leg holding it up. I consider backing down, taking the elevator, and calling security. But the stillness draws me forward; I can't leave if someone needs help. Dragging Bugle, I creep forward.

"Aren't you supposed to protect me?" I whisper. She growls again, prompting me to adjust my keys so three of them are sticking out between my fingers right near my knuckles. I could totally take somebody out. *Right, Stephanie, sure you could.* Two more steps, then I gasp as I peer around the corner.

"Richard!" The apartment manager's face, normally a pleasant ebony, has a pale gray tinge, and his glassy eyes stare up at the ceiling.

"Richard! Can you hear me?" I release Bugle's leash to as long as it will go as I kneel by my friend's side. Lifeguard training from high school surfaces, and I lift his limp arm, searching for a pulse. My stomach twists as the cold stillness confirms what my heart knew the instant I'd seen him. He's dead. Fighting nausea, I stand, retreating toward Bugle and digging for my phone. My thumb trembles as I dial.

"9-1-1, what's your emergency?" The calm female voice is a polar opposite of mine.

"I . . . there's a . . . um . . . Richard's dead." Tears start to flow, twisting my voice. "I need . . . he needs help." I shake my head; my words won't go together correctly.

"Ma'am, what's your location?"

I draw a blank. "Um . . . I'm at my apartment. In the staircase."

"All right, ma'am, can you get me the address?"

Come on, Stephanie, get it together. "Yes."

Still, it takes me a moment to think of it, but then I rattle off the apartment's address without stuttering.

"Excellent. An officer is ten minutes out, ma'am. Can I get your name?" I wish her self-control would rub off on me.

"My name is Stephanie Pierce. I was just coming home from work." My voice rises, threatening to break on the last word. *Ten minutes?* Every second is like sludge. I can't bear this stairwell that long.

"Yes, ma'am. You said the man's first name is Richard?"

I clear my throat. "Yes, Richard. Richard Hubbler. He's the apartment manager. He is— was—a wonderful man. I've lived here for three years, and he's been great to deal with. So helpful."

"And you said he's dead? Are you certain... Stephanie?"

I nod. "My first job was as a lifeguard. I checked his pulse; there's nothing. He's cold." My hand presses against my throat as Bugle leans on my legs, trembling. *We are a mess.* I sniff and wipe my eyes.

"All right, ma'am. Hold on." The line falls silent, and I grip the phone, white knuckled. "Okay, I've got a detective who is closer. Should be two minutes until he arrives. Just hang tight. Is there anyone else present?"

Her question makes me press back against the wall. I glance up and down the hall, hating that my voice sinks to a whisper.

"I don't think so." Bugle whines, staring up at me through her blonde bangs. "Shhhh," I say as I stroke her head.

"Who are you talking to, Stephanie?" the operator questions.

"Oh, my dog. She's really upset. She knew he was there way before I did."

"Okay, an officer is on the way." My stomach clenches. With rush hour it could take an hour. "What end of the building are you on?"

"Drive all the way around to the left. It's the rear staircase, near the grass," I say.

"Got it. Thank you, Stephanie." The line clicks, and I clench the phone. My skirt's twisted by Bugle straining at the leash. I'm frozen in place, incapable of even reaching for it. The phone clicks again. "Ma'am, I have an off-duty detective about thirty seconds from your building. You should see him in just a moment."

I hold my breath, my mind hearing things that don't exist, like Richard breathing. I flinch; those footsteps are real.

"Yes, I hear him," I respond, my voice hushed but still too loud in the stairwell. Bugle's tail thumps my thigh. She sure likes live people better than dead ones. My stomach heaves at the thought.

"Excellent. He will help you from here, Stephanie."

"Oh," I reply. No part of me wants to be doing this.

"I'm going to hang up now."

I wish I had taken the elevator.

"Um." I don't want to make the switch. I like my super-calm phone operator.

"Goodbye."

Click.

And just like that, I'm cut off.

A shadow precedes a wide-shouldered man up the staircase, and Bugle's entire body wags. I feel limp, like a wet rag, and find my mouth hanging open as he clips up the stairs as if they're flat ground. Couldn't be more opposite than me, with my high heels sticking. I snap my mouth shut.

I lean back farther as Bugle strains toward him. His dark, close-cropped hair still tries to curl near his neck, and his brooding blue eyes give me a swift scan. *What does he see?* A mess, I'm sure. Still, his hand reaches down to ruffle Bugle's still-wet fur. *No ring on his left hand.*

"Ma'am, I'm Detective Wellborn. You've got a body here?"

I open my mouth to reply, but the words jumble, so I point up the stairwell.

He springs up the steps. As he squeezes past, I can't help noticing how his short sleeves stretch taut with muscle. His faint, masculine cologne lingers as he disappears around the landing. A few seconds pass in silence, then his radio crackles. The noise of more footsteps pounding up the stairs drowns his deep voice out.

Three EMTs huff up the stairs. I point at the landing, struggling to hold Bugle back, feeling as if I've been standing in a pounding black-flag surf at Atlantic Beach. I suck in a breath, trying to pull myself together before Detective Wellborn reappears.

"You're Stephanie, right?" He's so tall, two stairs above me. I try not to shrink back as I meet his blue eyes.

"Yes, sir," I manage.

"Let's get out of this stairwell; I'll need to take a statement from you. Can we head down, then take the elevator?"

"Mm-hmm." I nod, staring down at the stairs that want to eat my shoes. An EMT rushes past, his love handles jiggling as he descends. Bugle yanks the leash hard; she's had enough of this tight space. *Me too.* Her exuberance plus my rubbery legs force me to reach for the railing.

Detective Wellborn squeezes past and starts down. Did he just go ahead of me to be sure I won't fall headlong? My grandfather always did that when Grandma would go down stairs. The sweet memories bring me back to myself. Maybe someday, I'll find that kind of love too. Course, with my track record, I'd better not hold my breath. I try bending my knees so my heels won't jam into the millions of evil holes.

On the next landing, the EMT almost knocks me in the head with the stretcher as he navigates back up the stairs. Officer Wellborn's hand shoots out just in time, saving me from a nasty bruise. "Slow down, man."

The chubby EMT's face flushes red, then he's gone. Three more officers climb the stairs, and we wait on the tight landing for them to pass.

"Brandon, Casey, construct a timeline, and get this crime scene cordoned off."

One of them turns to him with a grin. “Thought you were off duty—you only pulled, what? Eighty-five hours this week?”

One corner of Wellborn’s wide mouth turns up, and I can’t help noticing a small scar on his chin.

“Something like that. Tell Bobby I’ll start the witness statement. He can meet us...”

He turns to me, a question in his eyes. I blink at him, then Bugle barks, and I flinch. “Um, I’m on the third floor.”

Wellborn nods, then turns.

The others nod in unison and continue. *Crime scene?* The blood drains out of my face. I saw nothing that looked like a crime.

Wellborn starts down the staircase, but since I don’t follow, he turns back to look at me, now at eye level. “Ready?”

I stare into his handsome face with stubble starting to show and say nothing. *Can you look any more like a nincompoop, Steph?* I force a timid smile.

“Yes.” Following his broad shoulders, I try not to let the crime scene thing get to me. And then it happens.

Clunk.

Two steps from the bottom, my right heel sinks deep into the stair just as Bugle leaps the last step. She hits the end of the leash, but I’m anchored to the building by my traitorous shoe, so her motion forces my arm to thwack Detective Wellborn hard on the shoulder. He spins, lightning fast, his hand closing like a vise on my wrist before he sees I’m not attacking.

“I’m so sorry! Oh!”

Bugle sees the grass and yanks hard again. The officer lets me go, and his hands spread wide in front of him.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. Are you all right?”

“I’m . . . well.” I try to yank my heel loose, but it won’t budge. I bite my lip, then say, “I seem to be stuck.”

His brow furrows in confusion until I bend sideways and struggle with my shoe.

“Here, let me help you.” He leans down, breath tickling my ear as I stand up.

There’s not enough space for both of us. Not when just following him makes me feel like a schoolgirl with her first crush. He shoves a thick finger between the metal step and the sole of my shoe and yanks. Nothing.

“You do seem to be stuck. Uh, let me try...” Repositioning, he tries to help without touching my legs. Finally, he straightens.

“You’re going to have to take it off, ma’am.”

I nod. *Sure, why not? Where’s this Bobby guy?* He can’t be half as handsome. Maybe I’ll stop being a stammering fool then. After what feels like an eternity, the clasp on my shoe slips loose, and my foot slides out. I’m back on solid ground, with embarrassment creeping up my neck as I limp. One leg three inches shorter than the other. I adjust my skirt, but now my underwear is hitched up so high that heat flushes up my neck.

The detective wrestles with my super-cute stiletto, with one long leg propped on a higher step. With a grunt, he twists it free, and his mouth pulls sideways as he inspects the ruined leather.

"I think it's done for." He holds it up; it looks so small in his hand.

I reach out for it. "I never want to see these shoes again."

Unstrapping the other one, I find they make an incredibly satisfying clunk in the garbage can at the base of the stairs. He looks even taller and more imposing without my heels.

As we step into the elevator, he pulls out a notebook. "All right, full name, please."

"Stephanie Joy Pierce." He scribbles a lot longer than it could take to write those three words. I imagine his list—*Caucasian, 5'5" female; mid-length, damp, stringy brown hair; mascara running past teary blue eyes; prone to accidents; not very good at speaking.* The elevator doors swish open and, voilà, just like that, I have arrived on the third floor of Circle Court Apartments—with *no shoes, a wedgie, and a male escort.* Bugle pulls me toward our door to the right, wanting her treat.

"I'm going to need you to give me a bit more info before you go, ma'am."

I nod, longing for pajama pants.

"Where do you work, and what's your position?"

At least that's something I can talk about. "I'm an executive assistant to Harry Thorn at Blue Stone Enterprises."

He nods. "Down on Main Street?"

"Yes."

"Great. Do you get home about this time every day?" he questions.

"That's correct. I go pick up Bugle at daycare and then get home about now."

"Bugle?" The strange name confuses him, and I can see him wondering if I've left a kid in my car.

I reach down and stroke Bugle's ears. "When I got her as a pup, she had one big curl on the top of her head; it looked just like a Bugle chip. The curl stayed the same size as she grew."

I shrug my shoulders as I flatten all her other fluff, showcasing her namesake in the center of her forehead.

"I see it now."

This poor guy is just trying to investigate a "crime scene," and here I am showing off my dog's intense cuteness. I straighten. "What else do you need to know?"

"What kind of car do you drive, ma'am?" His pen is ready to record my answer.

"A silver Accord."

"License plate?"

I screw up one side of my nose; apparently, that's answer enough.

"It's all right. I'll find it later. How long have you known Richard?"

His question makes me think. Tears rise along with the image of Richard's ashen face. "Three years? He runs the apartment complex. I just can't say enough about him. He was a great guy." I press my fingers to my forehead. "Oh, I'll have to tell Bonita. They've been married thirty-five years." My throat tightens.

"We'll take care of it." His voice is quiet.

“Do you really think someone murdered him?” I question.

He softens a bit. “It’s procedure to treat all bodies as a homicide at first. But to be honest, I didn’t see any sign of struggle—could just be natural causes.” The elevator swishes open, and an officer steps out. Detective Wellborn shrugs. “Guess I’ve been doing this too long to trust anyone. Did he have people in the building that he didn’t get along with?”

“Well, no,” I answer before adding, as the officer approaches, “Maybe you could check the guy at the end of the hall.”

“Name?” He looks down the hall in the direction I point.

“Oh . . . um.” I roll my eyes up to the left. “Sam! His first name is Sam. That’s all I know. He’s been late on his rent a few times.” I look up to find his blue eyes studying my face.

“Call me Mark. This is Officer Bobby Orville.” His mouth gets tight as he takes a step back, handing the paperwork over.

“Looks like you got everything we need,” Orville says, studying the pages.

“Let me get your number, and I’ll be in contact.”

I nod, rattling off my number as Wellborn puts his phone to his ear, turning away.

“I will only be here for another ten days though,” I add, thinking of my schedule. I was right, Bobby doesn’t make me stammer.

“Vacation?” His pen is poised over the paper.

“No, I travel for work. I spend two weeks here and two weeks at my condo in Salt Lake City. That’s why Bugle goes to doggy daycare. She’s happy staying there when I’m out of state.”

He scribbles on the notepad. Bugle’s getting bored. She rushes for Mark, making me grunt. He turns, reaching down to pet her. “See you, Bugle. Miss Pierce.”

I nod with a tight smile, refusing to dare words.

“That should be all we need, Ms. Pierce,” Officer Orville says.

“Thanks,” I respond, fumbling with my keys. Bugle rushes in, happy as ever, and I turn, glimpsing Mark as the door clicks shut. Was that a grimace he covered as he watched me?