

## CIRCLED (Excerpt)

### Chapter 1

#### *The Thump*

Macy LeGrange never saw the back of her own head. If she had, she'd have noticed long strands of honey-colored hair with an unexpected wave in the middle and a mild curl at the ends. A hat maker would have deemed it a wide head while a modeling agency would regard it as round, but none of that mattered to the driver about to hit her.

His eyes were not on Macy's head, nor were they on her rusty blue bike with the new horn and the old chain, and they most definitely were not on the road. The driver saw the fourteen-year-old softball star from neither the back nor the front. If he had, he'd have spied a smiling face that lit up Beulah, South Carolina, wherever it went. He'd have noticed the sneaky glint in the wide-set eyes that broadcasted a future in better places than a sleepy town on a murky swamp sourced by a raging river. He would have swerved his four thousand pounds of metal and parts because he'd have appreciated how others rose up in the morning with the sole intention of making Macy LeGrange smile and, if lucky, laugh. For hers was not a reticent childhood laugh, bashful in its insecurity. No, this girl with the heart-shaped lips and ever-pink cheeks possessed a laugh worthy of a jolly, self-assured woman, one with the confidence to decide what she found funny and what she did not. And she backed that laugh up with bright, jovial eyes that danced like blue fairies against the darkness of the swamp's hungry waters.

One thing the driver would have known for sure: Macy was bound for beauty, inside and out, because this—her innocent, hopeful stage of life—was her awkward stage, leaving others unable to fathom what adulthood might hold.

They'd never find out, of course.

There were those who, after the thump, nodded knowingly at the way Macy moved on to the next dimension. She flew gracefully, almost contemplatively, through the air—the tap of the car's front bumper sending her from seated-and-coasting to airborne-and-feathery in the course of a millisecond—but in her final moment, her eyes alighted upon love. And she knew it would never leave her alone. She let it cradle her like a cocoon, and she sensed that it would follow her wherever she traveled next. As she reached the descendant portion of her trajectory toward death, she knew that it would never let her down.



## Chapter 2

### *Twelve Years Later*

My tattoo burned. I'd swear a ghost was dragging a snuffed match along the underside of my forearm. Not as bad as the days it scorched me, but still annoying. I scratched at it after shifting my reluctant Subaru into third, but the sensation of fiery phosphorous on skin only multiplied. Maybe it was something besides my usual tattoo premonitions. I glanced down to make sure a family of fleas hadn't taken residence on my flesh. Nope, nothing but the design I'd sketched for the Inks & Kinks manager years ago. I'd slapped down a fake ID and a folded hundred-dollar bill with only one request: *no questions*. Five minutes later, the biker with the shabby beard and wonky eye had pierced and tinted my skin, elbow to wrist—a series of 8-shaped links in the pattern of a long, thin oval. A strand of DNA? A tribute to infinity? Who knew? It meant different things on different days. But if I stared at it long enough, it began to move. Which is usually when I put the vodka away.

I glanced up and nearly clipped a Ford parked on the side of the road. Jerking my wheel to the left in response, I almost swiped Chad Ryker's Blazer as it whizzed by me doing seventy. High times on desolate Old Pleasant Road today.

Despite the forty mile-per-hour difference in our speeds, Chad managed to wave as he passed, proving once again what a genial ex-boyfriend he was. Chad and I had ended on good terms because in Beulah, South Carolina, home of Black Swamp and its assorted wetlands, you either ended on good terms or you moved. Plus, he was the deputy sheriff; I'd no doubt need him as a source for future stories. We'd broken up eleven months ago, but I still missed the sex. Best of my life. Honest, raw, and pissed off. What could I say? We both had issues. But there was something about a guy who never believed he could be the best at anything that made him try that much harder—and he'd tried us both into ecstasy more times than I could count.

Chad flew past the stand of cabbage palmettos that fronted Boyd's General Store, and then banged a hard right, skidding into the dusty parking lot. That was when I noticed thick strands of smoke performing a slow hula dance above the treetops.

I followed his car into Boyd's lot. I'd have followed him simply because I got paid to be nosy, but I was headed there anyway for my morning caffeine fix. I had a long day ahead at The Herald as I prepped for my big retrospective article: *The Week*. With its ups and downs, and emotions ranging from mad grief

to ecstasy to uncompromising sorrow, *The Week* was the cruel scalpel that had redefined my childhood—the way tragedies always realigned the landscape of youth.

Whoa. Unless I liked my coffee served at 450 degrees, I wouldn't be sipping an extra-large-with-cream-and-sugar any time soon. Random SUV's, along with Beulah's two fire trucks and Sheriff Ryker's black-and-white, occupied all eight parking spaces of Boyd's General in a haphazard manner. Flames, now extinguished, had left the smoking remnants of the store ugly and plain—much like the owner.

*Dang!* Boyd could be dead in there, as crisp and lifeless as the brisket he served on Sundays, and I'd just gone and lost today's round of *Dammit, Be Nice, Chloe*. Wasn't even 8:00 a.m. yet.

But being nice would prove difficult without my morning cup of joe. Boyd Sexton, Jr., despite being an all-around sleazeball, brewed the best coffee in town. My morning had just grown worse, which was hard to believe given how it had started . . .

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A little over an hour ago, I'd returned from my regular run, sprinting the last hundred yards along the river's edge as I envisioned a wild pig pursuing me for motivation. Sucking wind, I'd rounded the final turn on the dirt path that served as my driveway and spotted a parked pickup truck. *Carver Brothers Foundations and Roofs* was painted on the side in a girly, yellow font. Might seem odd that I needed help with my foundation since I lived in a house on stilts, but those tall piles held up everything I owned, along with my view of Black Swamp, and lately, they'd grown worse for wear.

My house sat where the Nuckatawny River met Black Swamp. Came complete with gators, the aforementioned wild pigs, beavers, turtles, otters, bald eagles, and countless bugs, plants, and trees. The stilts kept my house at the height I liked, with plenty of distance from critters.

Not fond of strangers, I sidled up to the truck. No Carver brothers in sight. I climbed the fourteen steps to my back deck and found the door wide open. I sure hadn't left it that way. Through the window, I spotted a guy in a brown cap leaning against my kitchen counter. He was smoking a cigarette and staring at my fridge. Apparently inspired by the promotional magnets dotting my freezer door, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a bright red one of his own, and stuck it on there. I could just make out the words: *Carver Brothers. We Do Foundations.*

Guess they also did breaking and entering, but maybe that wouldn't fit on the magnet.

I slinked in through the open door and heard my toilet flush. A second man, taller than the first, exited the bathroom, not even pretending to leave enough time to wash his hands. A bare memory of a hand-rolled cigarette dangled from his chapped lips. His hunched shoulders extended no wider than his hips, and his gangly arms were all sorts of apish. He looked about 40, but if he was the Carver brother I'd heard about, his skin was prematurely puckered from copious drug use.

"No smoking in my place," I said by way of introduction.

Instead of being startled or apologetic, Carver-Brother-the-shorter slowly craned his head in my direction, flicked his ashes into my open trash can, and cocked a brow. “Why not?”

“Stop me if you’ve heard this one before. Because I said so.”

He grinned. “Yeah, I heard that one before.” He glanced at the tall one. “Never worked for Mom, did it, Zeke?”

Zeke sucked on the last bits of his ciggy, then pinched it between thumb and forefinger as he popped it out of his mouth and exhaled. The smoke spewed through my kitchen via a mouth gap where one would normally expect a tooth. “It sure didn’t, Levi. Not even once.”

I stepped toward them. “Do I look like your mom?”

Levi ran his eyes up and down the length of my five-foot-nine-inch body, clad as it was in a bright, clingy shirt and black running shorts. The shorts boasted an enhanced waistband that I’d jiggered six months earlier with limited sewing skills. Levi took his time, and I let him. I wasn’t much in the boob department, but I didn’t sport a lot of jiggle, either, and I’d been told by some that my face wasn’t half-bad—not bad at all if I put on make-up or curled my poker-straight brown hair. Though I rarely did.

“Nope,” Levi said with a grotesque glint in his eye. “You definitely do not look like dear ol’ Mom.”

Zeke guffawed on cue.

“Johnny sent us over to work on your foundation,” Levi continued, “and Zeke here needed to use the bathroom. Figgered you wouldn’t mind.”

“Door was open,” Zeke added by way of explanation for stinking up my entire kitchen.

“Foundation work is usually performed outside,” I said. “And I told Johnny not to send smokers.”

“Why?” Levi asked.

“I find them gross and dirty, and they invariably litter.”

Levi blew a plume of smoke toward my ceiling. “That so?”

“You guys armed?” I said, taking two more steps in their direction.

The geniuses exchanged a look of surprise. “Armed? No.” Levi smirked. “Should we be?”

I reached around to my waistband and pulled out a pea shooter—hadn’t dragged that sewing machine out for nothing. I grabbed a rag from the kitchen table and rubbed it up and down the abbreviated shaft of the cute .22, drying it off after a sweat-inducing run. “No,” I said. “Just thought you might want to know that I am.” I held my piece casually, with confidence, as if I could shoot the stink off a skunk, which in this case might prove useful. And then their eyes saw something, in my expression or stance, and they knew: it would be nothing for me to remove those cigarettes from their cold-sore-infected mouths with a nice set of matching bullets.

Zeke's mouth fell open and I was surprised a family of flies didn't make an escape. He snuffed out his cigarette in my trash can, but Levi didn't prove quite as cooperative. "What are you planning to do with that, little lady?"

"Nothing, yet. But just so you know, I'm more than capable of disarming you."

"Told you, we ain't armed."

"Wrong arms. Ever try holding a cigarette with your foot? Need real flexible toes, not to mention hips. And lighting the match is a bitch. "

Levi's eyes narrowed. I'd made an enemy for life, but he'd hardly be the first. He jammed his cigarette back into his mouth and raised both hands. "All right, all right. We're going." He gestured for Zeke to follow, and the two of them skittered past. I moved back just enough to let them by and heard Zeke mumbling some vague threat about a *wench* and *gator chowder*, but he kept moving.

Levi, on the other hand, turned back after passing through the door. "I heard about you," he said, tossing his cigarette butt onto my deck. "You're that reporter chick. Chloe something. The one who keeps a ten-foot gator for a pet."

Never one to dispel a good rumor, I glanced at my kitchen clock, then back at Levi. "Feeding time, as a matter of fact. Now you tell Johnny to send over a new crew or he's going to find himself on the front page of The Herald with a none-too-flattering headline."

Levi's body tightened as he realized I was indeed the Chloe he'd heard about. I kept polishing and glanced at his discarded cigarette butt. "I told you, Levi. I don't like litterbugs."

He bent down and scooped up the butt. "All right, now, let's stay calm."

As he scraped the ashes with his fingernail, desperate to erase all traces of himself from the premises, I stepped onto the deck. "Do me a favor, would you?"

He swallowed hard and stood up. "What's that, ma'am?"

"Tell your brother to wash his hands after using the facilities. Nobody likes a pig."

"I sure will. You can count on that." He scampered across the deck, his bottom tucked forward as if anticipating a bullet. Then he dashed down the stairs, joined Zeke in the truck, and the two of them peeled out. Their back tires spit up mud before finding traction and they left a divot in my driveway, but Johnny would fix that. In fact, Johnny would be fixing my foundation for free.

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I parked my Subaru behind Chad's Blazer, blocking him in, and then I glanced at Boyd's General Store. If it hadn't been for the five minutes I'd spent cleaning my bathroom after Zeke's malodorous visit, I might well have been inside Boyd's when the fire started. Maybe I owed those Carver Brothers a debt of gratitude.

Nah.

I gazed at the remnants of the store and felt a jolt of emptiness. While Boyd's had never enjoyed a heyday, it had stood as a Beulah landmark—a wooden, one-story building with a grey, wood-slat porch and a rickety wheelchair ramp added for Boyd Senior before he died. Multiple, slipshod additions—made of whatever material was on sale at the time—had added to its questionable character over the years. Allegedly, a substantial basement existed below, but Boyd Junior never let anyone down there. The place had always struck me as an ugly, misshapen box that had blown off a garbage truck and landed in the middle of a field. Alone and isolated, it sat against the backdrop of a cleared patch of forest—one of Richie Quail's abandoned development projects. But the clearing had served as the perfect field for baseball and soccer games for every kid who'd come up in Beulah. Scored more than a few home runs there myself.

Now, the bare metal frame of Boyd's waved at me from behind a curtain of rising steam, the beams surely mimicking the dance of the earlier flames as they flagellated like charmed snakes. I grabbed my camera, stepped out of the car, and snapped some pictures. My editor would love me for it.

The metal sign reading BOYD'S GENERAL STORE & SUNDRIES lay on the ground, folded over on itself, half-melted. It was a wonder it hadn't shaken the whole town when it landed. Behind the sign, every fireman, deputy, and volunteer in Beulah milled about, fighting to be useful so they'd have a good story to tell tonight.

I crept up to where I wasn't allowed, but as the town's crime and features reporter, I eschewed boundaries daily; no one seemed to notice anymore. Besides, I had a way of acting like I belonged. People usually fell for it.

Some firemen lumbered by, minus their heavy gear, meaning it must be safe to enter. I waved to a few of them, then ventured in through the former front door. I'd been in and out that door so many times, it felt strange not to pull its handle. I sniffed. Definitely no coffee, but the odors ran the gamut: charred wood, burnt chemicals, wet paper, and devastation. What remained of the endcap displays looked like the cypress knees that dotted the swamp, water dripping onto them from the few remaining beams that were still wet from the hoses' onslaught.

I stepped over the hot metal of the register that lay sideways on the floor. Oddly, it showed a balance of \$0.33 due. I snapped a picture since I'd need it for my retrospective article, anyway. The article included profiles of the Lucky Four lottery winners who represented the *up* part of *The Week*. They'd purchased their winning Power Pot ticket right here at Boyd's, twelve long years ago. I glanced at the depressing image on my camera. Hardly the photo I'd been hoping for. I'd envisioned one where the four winners would reunite at the checkout counter, jointly holding a replica of the winning ticket: 03-08-10-28-31-41. I knew the sequence by heart because those six numbers had been my only note on the article

for weeks. While I'd jumped at the chance to cover the story, I hadn't been nearly as eager to tackle the nitty-gritty. Too many wounds—still open.

I cruised down the *Staples* aisle that had confounded me as a kid: no staples, no staplers. My friend, Hoop, had explained what it really meant when we were about nine. Then he'd mocked me for it until the day he vanished, six years later.

Rory McShane, Beulah's bluest-eyed fireman, raced up from the basement with an unexpected grin. He'd moved to Beulah from Ireland when he was seven. Poor guy had carried the reputation of the tough-guy-bad-student through early childhood, but as it turned out, he'd suffered from undiagnosed dyslexia. Through it all, he never lost his Irish brogue or his requisite twinkle, and people couldn't help but find him adorable.

"Hey, Rory," I said. "Everyone all right? Any word on Boyd?"

"Hey there, Chloe. There's a word, all right. Try *felon*."

I gasped. "Arson?"

"Not sure about that one yet, but quite a sight in the basement." He tilted his head and spoke softly in my ear. "Full-on drug operation. Marijuana—lots of it—and meth ingredients everywhere, along with a safe full of cash. Luckily, we got the flames out before they engulfed the lower level."

I looked toward the wooden steps leading to the basement. Now I understood why Boyd had restricted entry to employees only—he'd been the only one.

Rory's right eyebrow shot up when he saw me eyeing the stairs. "Better not go down, Chloe. Sheriff Ryker's in a foul mood, gathering evidence and whatnot."

I gave him a conspiratorial smirk. "Tell you what, Rory. You ever catch Strike Ryker in a good mood, you let me know. We'll put it on the front page—above the fold."

He winked and headed outside where a barrier was being erected to keep the gawkers at bay. I realized I was well inside the barrier; felt like *carte blanche* to me. With a quick glance in the fire chief's direction, I hurried down the stairs.

Hubbub abounded. A dozen people, most in uniforms or suits, crowded the small space. Sheriff Strike Ryker barked out orders while one underling took pictures and another dusted for fingerprints. Two young deputies-in-training scratched and sniffed the healthy-looking cannabis plants—twice—before the sheriff stopped them with a glower. Not a surprise. Strike Ryker often substituted facial contortions for words.

Since it was only a matter of seconds before I got booted out, I used my smartphone to snap discreet pictures of the plants, bleach, battery acid, drain cleaner, and NyQuil. I reluctantly gave Boyd credit. A general store specializing in *sundries* was the perfect place to stock up on ingredients for Grandma's favorite meth recipe.

The sheriff consulted with his son, Chad—the one who doubled as my good-in-bed ex. Chad had been adopted by Strike and Jacqueline Ryker after the sheriff became one of the Lucky Four lottery winners. Despite being a thirteen-time loser in the foster care system, Chad had found a home one year before aging out of the system. He'd stayed with the Rykers for only a short time before heading to college, and then he'd returned to Beulah to work as Strike's second-in-command. Some said he looked like Superman, but only if Superman had near-transparent, glassy cobalt eyes, and lips that begged for a ChapStick sponsorship. Well, I guess he kind of did. But Chad's looks came with a personality engineered by Pessimists Anonymous—a group that never met because it just wasn't worth it. Still, he'd been the more optimistic one when we dated.

Both Ryker men, the sheriff and the deputy, stepped in my direction, so I pressed myself against a solid, thick door, hoping to disappear. A rotten, slightly metallic odor seeped out from whatever disgusting crawlspace lay behind the door. When a firefighter squeezed by me, I flattened my head against the door to give him room.

And that's when I heard it. Ticking. Constant. Threatening. Counting down?

I pressed my ear flush against the door, trying to block out the ambient noise.

“Chloe!” bellowed the sheriff, making me jump. “What are you doing down here?”

Strong, stout Strike Ryker rotated his head to me, his green eyes gleaming beneath bushy brows, his too-thick shoulders hunched forward in angry bulldog mode. Blessed with a handsome face, the sheriff had downplayed his good looks with a permanent frown, leaving furrows so deep that now, halfway through his fifties, weeds could sprout from them. “Don't you know this is an active—”

Something in my expression—or maybe the severity of my outstretched palm—cut him off. His gaze narrowed as I pointed to the door and whispered, “Bomb.”





## Chapter 3

The room blew up. Not literally. But it did explode with a panicked bustle. Apparently, even the subtle mention of a bomb in a room filled with flammable chemicals, sent otherwise professional adults into a frenzy.

Firefighters and officers rushed the stairway, looking cartoonish as they fought for space. Chad was the last to go, heading upstairs to manage the crowd, which left the sheriff and me alone with the tick-tock-tick of fate. The sheriff no doubt remained out of a stoic sense of responsibility, while I, the sharp-eared reporter, felt a warped ownership of the situation.

“Boom?” I said with a grin.

He scowled and pressed his cauliflower ear against the door—he’d been a state-champion wrestler before making it big on the amateur boxing circuit. He confirmed my suspicions with a nod and a sigh, and then we both jumped as the stairway burst to life beneath rapid footfalls. It was Rory, his blue eyes beaming against the pink flush of his pale Irish skin. “Sheriff,” he said, “I hear we got a bomb.”

“Could be, Rory,” the sheriff whispered, as if the bomb might hear him. “It’s possible some sicko drew us all down here to get blown up.”

“Or maybe Boyd rigged something up,” Rory suggested, not quite picking up on the whispering tone. “In case his little side business ever got discovered.”

The sheriff grunted one of his fifty grunts, this time an agreeable one.

“If you don’t object, Sheriff,” Rory said, “I’d like to suggest that you and Chloe exit the room and leave it to the experts.”

The sheriff huffed, his rounded shoulders swinging toward Rory. “Who we got that knows anything about bombs?”

Rory’s grin lit up the shadowy room. “You’re looking at him, sir. My great uncle Danny in Derry County, Ireland, taught me all I needed to know—and then some.”

After a bit of back-and-forth, during which Rory cited his family’s long, scarred history in Northern Ireland, the sheriff stepped back and gestured toward the door with a flourish. “All yours then, Rory. Have at it.”

Another firefighter rushed down the stairs, jittery as a jackhammer. “Found the key in the register,” he said, thrusting the small piece of metal at Rory with a shaky hand. Then he raced back up and shouted over his shoulder, “Good luck, Rory!”

Sheriff Ryker and I wished Rory the best and made ourselves scarce. We waited outside with what seemed like the entire town. Word spread faster than flames in Beulah, as confirmed when another deputy edged up to me and mumbled, “Heard you gave those Carver brothers some trouble this morning, Chloe.”

I fixed him with a sly side-eye. “Gave ’em what they deserved, Joey.”

He nudged me, then stepped away as he responded to his ringing phone.

The sheriff busied himself calling in bomb experts from neighboring towns, but before any of them could fathom something exciting happening in Beulah, a delighted Rory McShane emerged from the remains of the building. A round of applause and cheers greeted him as he victoriously raised his palm, which held a five-inch tall, silver skull.

“Rory, what in tarnation is that?” shouted the sheriff.

“It’s a skull, sir.”

“I can see that. But why is it ticking?”

Rory grabbed the top half of the skull, above the brow bone, and yanked it.

The crowd jumped back en masse, throwing arms in front of faces and pushing children from harm’s way as they braced for the BOOM.

Instead, they heard Rory’s peal of laughter as he showed them a clock’s face. “No bomb, folks. It’s just a pocket watch.”

“A skull pocket watch?” the fire chief said, disgusted. “Of all the . . .”

Chad and I stepped forward with the sheriff to have a closer look. No one seemed to object to my privileged presence. I’d kept them safe, after all—from a watch.

“I’m familiar with these,” Rory said, indicating the shiny skull. “My grandpap collected them. Quite valuable in some circles. It’s called a Vanitas, like our word for vanity. Grandpap referred to it as a *memento mori*. Forget what that stands for, though.”

Having studied my share of root words for spelling bees, I spoke up. “It’s a reminder of mortality, of time always ticking toward the inevitable *mori* . . . death. With this one”—I gestured to the skull—“the designer merged two symbols that mark the passage of time.”

The sheriff, never one for drama, interrupted the crowd’s oohing reverence. “So it’s nothing. Probably been down there for years.”

“I don’t think so,” Rory said. “Needs to be wound, see?” He showed the sheriff the winding mechanism near the clock face’s Roman numeral three. “I’d say someone put it there, or at least wound it, within the last few days. Plus, this Vanitas looks clean, not like the rest of the room.”

The sheriff cocked his head. “What was behind that door, anyway? A crawl space?”

“Definitely not,” Rory said, enjoying his moment in the spotlight. “Come see.”

He led us through the building's skeletal remains and back down the stairs with the palm-mounted skull leading the way. As I descended, my tattoo scorched me and a sudden rush of nausea filled my stomach. The dual sensation had happened only a few times before; it was my body's way of telling me to turn around, to not set another foot in Boyd's basement. But my feet kept finding the next step, one force pulling me down, another tugging me back. The conflict was dizzying.

I took the final staggering step into the basement.

"See?" Rory said, gesturing to the now-open door. "It's some sort of cold-hearted space, that's for sure." I took a deep breath and followed Chad over, smelling his peppery deodorant, wanting to lose myself in his tailored jacket or do anything but look inside the room where the Vanitas had been ticking. I did it anyway.

Rory was right. The small, ten-by-ten-foot room was chilling. A solitary-confinement sort of place, cinder-blocked in on all sides—a makeshift cell that had suffered no ill effects from the fire. Impenetrable, except for the door. For anyone trapped inside, a single lightbulb overhead would have been their only source of illumination or hope, but even that was shattered. Its scattered fragments dotted the hard, dirt floor. But the prisoner, had there been one, couldn't have reached the short string to turn on the light because he or she would have been attached to the pole in the center of the room—by the rusty handcuffs attached to it.

I switched my phone to flashlight mode, unable to speak, barely able to breathe. Claustrophobia pressed in on me, not from the walls that stood only a few yards from each other or from the corrosive smell coating my nostrils, but from a presence in the room that sheathed me like a deathly embrace.

I aimed my light toward the rear of the room where the cinder blocks had been painted a crusty gray. A hushed silence fell over the room when the flashlight's beam landed on a stain.

"Is that...?" I said as I fought hard not to be sick.

"Sure looks like it," the sheriff said. "Gonna have to get Sherilyn over here pronto."