
SURVIVING SAVANNAH

A Strong Man's Hand - Book Three

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Chapter 1

A sleek black limo pulled up to the curb outside of The Artful Oven and GG's Gems. The driver hustled around to open the door for his passenger, who extended a long, shapely leg out of the limo, taking her time. He extended his hand, helping her make her graceful way out of the limousine. The tall, beautiful woman held a shielding hand over her eyes, looking down the dusty little main street in both directions. She sighed and told her driver to relax in the limo.

Savannah Beauchamp walked up the steps of the building and went into the gift shop. When she walked into the shop, her grandmother was busy wrapping a fanciful wooden sculpture for a customer. As she finished and placed it into a bag, her eyes travelled up to Savannah's face. Going absolutely still, she paused then broke into a huge smile, hurrying around the counter to embrace Savannah.

"Savannah! You're finally here!"

"Gran, I told you I would be." Savannah had an unguarded, delighted smile on her face for just a moment.

"I know; it's just been so long. I was afraid it would never happen. Your sister will be so happy to see you, and Carter too."

GG's customer was smiling broadly as she took her bag and

left the two of them to their reunion. GG took her granddaughter by the hand and pulled her toward the door.

"Come and see Maggie. She's going to be so happy to meet you!"

The two of them walked next door, where Maggie was putting cookies on a tray for her display case. She looked up with a smile when they walked into her shop, then she stilled, her mouth a little bit agape at the sight of Savannah.

"Oh, my Lord, you must be Savannah! You are the image of your sister!"

Maggie bustled around the counter to hug Savannah.

The taller woman embraced her smoothly and said, "Actually, I was born two minutes before Shelby, so she's the image of me. So you're my brother's wife. I'm pleased to finally meet you, Maggie. It seems that you've made my brother really happy."

Maggie smiled and said, "I sure hope so; he's made me so happy."

After a few minutes of chit chat, Savannah said, "Gran, I should go check into the inn."

GG said, "Absolutely not! You're staying with me. I have a ton of room, and it's all been renovated by Carter and Sam."

"That sounds so strange. I just can't picture Carter hammering and sawing and putting up new windows. He's always been such a cosmopolitan creature."

"He enjoys it, and he's good at it," GG said.

"It still seems weird," Savannah said. "But I'm really looking forward to seeing the house he built for you, Maggie."

GG said, "Why don't we go get you settled at my house, Savannah, then we'll go to Carter and Maggie's a littler later."

Savannah said agreeably, "Okay, Gran, that sounds good. Are you finished for the day?"

"It's a little early, but that's okay. I just need to lock up."

Maggie and Savannah exchanged another hug, and then they went on their way. Maggie hurried around the bakery, finishing up and doing a quick cleanup in her kitchen. She couldn't wait to

see her husband and his sister together. Maggie had heard so much about Savannah, and yet she remained a mystery. The whole family was thrilled that she had come to Boone for her identical twin's wedding. Savannah's sister, Shelby, was a first grade teacher at the Boone Elementary School and her fiancé, Sam, was Carter's business partner. The year before had been quite eventful, but Sam and Shelby were going to tie the knot in a couple of weeks.

Savannah tried to get GG to ride with her in the limo, but her grandmother insisted on driving her car home. When they arrived at GG's house, the driver took several trips in to bring Savannah's luggage inside. When he was finished, Savannah tipped him well and told him to take a room at the Boone Inn.

"I don't know if I'll need you or not, so just check in there and relax. I'll call them and tell them to expect you. And I'll take care of your room, of course."

The driver tipped his hat and said, "Thank you, Miss Beauchamp. Just let me know when you need me."

"I will. Just charge your expenses to the room."

GG shook her head at her granddaughter. "Savannah, why would you need a limo in Boone? You can use my car any time you want."

Savannah smiled smoothly. "It's my escape route, Gran. You just never know when you might need to make a quick exit."

"Well, you'd better not be making any quick exits on this trip, darling. We've waited entirely too long to see you."

Savannah laughed. "No worries, Gran. I'm not leaving before Shelby marries her Prince Charming. I thought she was going to get married a long time ago, but it never happened."

GG shot her granddaughter a level look. "No, and a good thing she didn't. Of course, you know that."

"I know, Gran. I'm just teasing. I know that bum went to jail where he belonged. And it sounds like Sam is really a nice guy."

"He is. I'm happy to welcome him to the family."

"So show me around the renovations that he and Carter did here."

GG tucked her arm through Savannah's and took her for a tour.

"This is really nice work, Gran." Savannah was impressed.

"Yes, it is. Carter and Sam do a wonderful job of any project they take on. Carter had to talk long and hard to convince me to do this, but now I'm so pleased that I agreed."

Savannah wandered into the library and looked at the family pictures that were arranged throughout the room. She stopped for a long moment at an old picture of her grandfather with both the twins perched on his lap. When she turned away, she had to blink rapidly to clear the emotion from her eyes. GG picked up a picture of Carter in his basketball uniform from high school.

"Your mom sent me this during Carter's junior year in high school," GG said, changing Savannah's focus to lighter subject matter.

Savannah laughed at the picture. "Carter, the sports star. I'm sure glad those uniforms have changed over the years!"

"It wasn't the best look for him," GG admitted with a chuckle. "So tell me what you've been up to lately. I'll pour us a glass of wine. Would you like to freshen up first?"

"Yes, I'd like to change clothes and get out of these shoes. I absolutely love them, but I've had them on for entirely too long today."

Savannah had decided to settle in Carter's wing of the upstairs. He had renovated it completely and it was equipped with a luxurious, roomy bathroom with a tiled walk-in shower. He had done the decor with the knowledge that it would eventually be a guest suite, so Savannah found it appealing and comfortable. She explored the space and tried out the big bed, finding that Carter had spared no expense for comfort. She had kicked off her gorgeous, red heels as soon as she entered the room and fished through her bags for a pair of slacks and a cashmere sweater that displayed her curves and cleavage to

perfection. She inspected herself critically in the mirror and ran a comb through her silky mane of dark hair. Touching up her lipstick, she gave a nod of satisfaction and headed for the door.

Savannah stopped suddenly and turned to the windows. She drew back a curtain and looked out at the familiar neighborhood. It was quiet, as always, with older homes and tall trees, providing lots of shade in the summer months. For a moment, she envisioned her happy times there, before her grandfather had died. Irritated with herself, she gave her head a toss and walked out of the room.

GG was in the kitchen setting out a little platter of cheese and crackers along with a bowl full of fresh grapes.

"You look much more comfortable, love."

"I feel much more comfortable," Savannah replied, accepting the glass of wine her grandmother handed her.

"Tell me about your adventures. Did you stay long in Switzerland?"

"Just a few weeks. The skiing was wonderful, and the hot tub time was even better." Savannah arched one perfectly shaped eyebrow.

GG chuckled. "It sounds great. I think I'd go directly to the hot tub at this point in my life."

"They also had an excellent spa. You should go with me sometime—facials, massages, the full treatment."

"Oh, Savannah, I can just picture you there. You must have had a wonderful time."

Savannah said brightly, "I did! And when it starts to get boring, I move on."

GG sighed. "Somehow I can't imagine how it gets boring."

"Well, it does. It's amazing how much time people can spend talking about themselves. I reach a point when I have to bite my tongue a little too often and I know it's time to leave."

"That's another thing I can't imagine. You biting your tongue and not speaking your mind."

"Oh, the tongue biting comes after I've pushed the speaking my mind as far as I can." Savannah gave a merry laugh.

"I called your brother and sister while you were freshening up and asked them to stop over after work. I didn't tell them you were here. I can't wait to see their faces."

Savannah felt a sudden, deep pang. Huskily, she said, "I can't, either. Suddenly, it seems that it's been way too long."

GG patted her hand. "Well, you're here now."

"Of course, I'm not going to tell them that. I have an image to uphold. It's my job to drive them crazy. I've already been working on Shelby."

GG laughed. "Yes, I know; she's been sharing your emails with me. She was completely speechless when you sent her the picture of the dress you said you were choosing."

Shelby had sent her sister a swatch of fabric and asked her to choose a dress that she liked in the color of the fabric swatch. Savannah was her maid of honor, naturally, and Shelby wanted her to wear a dress that suited her.

Savannah was laughing. "When I saw that dress in the perfect shade of blue, I couldn't resist it. I figured Shelby would be too nice to say she hated it, but she surprised me. She told me that she was not going to allow me to be in her wedding wearing a street hooker's dress. I nearly fell off my chair laughing."

"She was so fired up when she brought me the picture, she was almost yelling. I can't believe she didn't realize you were messing with her."

"Now, Gran, you know I can pull it off. And women get a little irrational about their weddings too."

"That's true. I managed to calm her down a little before she responded to you, or she probably would have had a lot more to say."

Savannah smiled smugly. "It was great. Shelby's developed a backbone since she came back here. It must have been good for her to stand up to Tanner and send him off to prison."

"It certainly was. I was so proud of her."

"Now I have to figure out how to get Carter going."

"That shouldn't be a problem for you; he's not difficult to get stirred up," GG said.

Savannah grinned. "And it's so much fun."

The two women heard the front door open, and Savannah slipped out of sight when she heard Shelby call out.

"I'm in the kitchen," GG called.

"Hi, Gran." Shelby bustled in and gave her grandmother a hug. "What's up?"

"She just thought you might like a surprise." Savannah stepped into sight.

Shelby's face was stunned. "Savannah! Oh, my God, you're here!"

The two of them rushed together in a fierce hug. Shelby was tearful, and her sister wiped a tear away too. They both started to talk at the same time. Laughing and chattering, the sisters hugged again.

"Savannah, it's so good to have you here. I feel like I haven't seen you in forever." Shelby was beaming.

"I didn't realize until I saw your face, how long it's really been," Savannah said. "I'm so glad to see you, face to face."

"Wait till Carter sees you! And Sam; you have to meet Sam. And Maggie!"

"I met Maggie today when I first got here; just for a minute, but you kind of like her right away, don't you?"

"Yes, you really do. And she and Carter are so happy together."

"I hope she's not *too* sweet to him; he needs to be harassed a little bit."

GG spoke up. "I'm pretty sure she keeps him hopping."

"Oh, good. I'd hate to see him get too spoiled." Savannah laughed.

Just then, Carter and Maggie walked into the kitchen, Sam trailing behind them. Carter's mouth fell open when he saw his sister.

"Holy shit!" Carter crossed the kitchen in three steps and swept Savannah off her feet, swinging her around in a huge bear hug.

Sam's mouth was hanging open in amazement. Shelby threw her arms around him and then drew him closer to her sister.

"Sam, this is my sister, Savannah." Shelby took Savannah by the hand and drew her closer.

Sam looked stunned as Savannah ignored his hand and gave him a warm hug. Shelby laughed at him.

"I just... I'm happy to meet you. You're just... you're really identical!"

Both sisters laughed at him.

"You have always known this, honey," Shelby said.

"I know, but seeing you both in person is a shock. I never dreamed you'd really look this much alike. Did you play tricks on people when you were kids?"

Savannah gave him a wicked smile. "That's between us, now, isn't it, Shelby?"

Shelby snickered, and Sam looked alarmed.

Carter said, "Buddy, you're in for an education if these two get going."

"I think I need a beer," Sam said weakly.

Carter got a couple of beers from the refrigerator. "Anybody else?"

Shelby said, "I'll have one."

"Well, then, I will too," Savannah said with a grin.

"Might as well give me one too," Maggie said.

"Beers all around," Carter said, playing bartender. "Gran?"

"No, I've got wine," GG answered. She thoroughly enjoyed seeing her grandchildren all together.

Sam still looked a little shell-shocked whenever he looked at the two sisters. Savannah looked at him speculatively; she touched the tip of her tongue to her lush upper lip, tilting her head provocatively as she gazed at him with her full attention.

Shelby looked at the two of them, noting the stunned expression on her fiancé's face and spoke sharply to her sister.

"Savannah! Come with me. I'll show you my wedding dress." She took her sister's elbow and tugged her firmly along beside her.

Savannah laughed and said, "Aw, Shelby, I was just playing with him."

Shelby answered drily, "Yes, I know. Knock it off right now; Sam is off limits."

Savannah pouted prettily. "What am I supposed to do for fun around here? It looks like this place hasn't changed a bit since I was a fifth grader!"

"You'll survive. Now promise."

Savannah heaved a huge sigh and said, "All right, I promise. No playing with Sam, no matter how bored I am."

"Thank you. Now, look at this." Shelby pulled her dress out of the closet with a flourish. The sisters spent a few minutes oohing and aahing over the dress. Shelby asked, "Where's yours? Let's see it."

Savannah said, "The designer is shipping it directly here. I had a final fitting right before I left France, and they promised to have it here before the end of the week."

"Ooh, the designer, huh? You'll probably look better than I will. Let's go back downstairs before they start looking for us." Shelby tucked her arm through her sister's as they went back to the others, talking all the way.

Savannah entertained the little group with a story of her trip to Budapest the year before and kept them laughing at her descriptions of the people she had met. Maggie was in awe of the places where Savannah had travelled, and Carter smiled, watching her. He knew that in spite of her fascination with Savannah's travels, Maggie had no desire to explore the world herself. He had offered her a honeymoon trip to the location of her choice, and her choice had been their newly finished house right there in Boone, Indiana.

When GG noticed the time, she spoke up. "Hey, children, it's getting late. What are your plans for tonight? Should I order pizzas?"

Savannah said, "Well, I was planning to go see Carter and Maggie's house, but maybe I should wait until tomorrow."

Carter answered, "Tomorrow would be fine; we'll both be home by five."

Maggie smiled. "I'll make dinner; you're all welcome."

GG ordered pizzas, and they all had a second drink. By the time they had finished eating, they were all beginning to yawn. Even Savannah stifled one, though she told herself it was more out of boredom than fatigue. As GG locked the front door, the two women sighed in unison. Savannah gave her grandmother a hug.

"It was good to see everyone and meet everyone. And now I'm ready to try out that big, beautiful bed Carter bought. Good night, Gran, I love you."

"I love you too, darling. If you need anything, help yourself. This is your home as long as you want to stay."

Savannah went upstairs and closed herself into Carter's suite with another sigh. She stripped off her clothes and got ready for bed, switching on the TV set while she pampered her face and brushed her teeth. She looked out the window at the dark street and shook her head.

I've been here six hours, and it feels like six weeks. I'm never going to make it until this wedding is over. This place hasn't changed one bit since I was twelve! Shelby, if you weren't my twin, I would never do this; not in a million years!

Savannah flopped down on the bed, wishing for the hundredth time that day that she was boarding a plane to pretty much anywhere. She flipped through the channels without finding anything of interest and glanced at the time, laughing out loud when she realized that it was only a few minutes after ten. Finally, she opened her laptop and read some emails, only to realize that they were boring too. She turned everything off and

settled down in bed among a pile of pillows and vowed to herself that she would find something to make her stay interesting if it was the last thing she ever did. When she finally drifted off to sleep, she dreamed of a tall, lean cowboy with hard, calloused hands.