

10TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

MICHELE G. MILLER

LAST CALL



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LAST CALL SYNOPSIS

When college senior Savannah Guthry receives an invitation to her cousin's wedding back home in Charleston, South Carolina, her first thoughts aren't of flowers and dresses. Instead, she's reminded of the groom: her first love.

Determined to show up and dazzle not only her ex but her spoiled cousin too, Savannah allows her friends to set her up on a series of humorous blind dates looking for Mr. Right.

Enter Gage, an Australian bartender with a front row seat to Savannah's dating woes. As the wedding draws near and prospects run low, Savannah realizes that sometimes you find love in unexpected places. And sometimes you find more than you bargained for.

Last Call: 10th Anniversary Edition
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ALSO BY MICHELE G. MILLER

[Last Call](#) - NA RomCom w/suspense (17+)

From The Wreckage Series - YA to NA Romance

[From The Wreckage](#)

[Out of Ruins](#)

[All That Remains](#)

Standalone FTW spinoffs

[West: A male POV Novel](#)

[Into the Fire](#) - Dani's story

[After The Fall](#) - Austin's story (17+)

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Havenwood Falls Series - PNR/Fantasy

1- [Awaken the Soul, Havenwood Falls High](#)

2- [Avenge the Heart, Havenwood Falls High](#)

Co-written with R.K. Ryals:

[Dark Seduction, Havenwood Falls Sin & Silk](#) (17+)

WRITING AS MINDY MICHELE

IN BEST READING ORDER*

[Nothing Compares To You, a 90s novella](#)

Paper Planes Series

[Paper Planes and Other Things We Lost](#)

[Subway Stops and the Places We Meet](#)

[Chasing Cars and the Lessons We Learned](#)

The Backroads Duet

[Love in C Minor, Vol one](#)

[Loss in A Major, Vol two](#)

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Standalone Novels

[The Archer and His Rosebud](#)

[The Map of Nova and Dev](#)

The Backroads Novels, standalone spin-offs

[Hate Me Like You Care](#)

*We like having our characters crossover. To prevent running into someone before you've read their story this is the optimal (but not required) reading order.

CONTENT NOTE

Note: If you are not concerned with content warnings (triggers) you can skip this note as the details below give slight plot spoilers.

Hello readers,

If you aren't familiar with my writing, I like to write angsty fiction with real-life themes that sometimes take darker turns.

Please know *LAST CALL* contains a scene depicting a graphic physical assault while alluding to sexual assault (not rape).

The actions committed against our heroine are NOT perpetrated by our hero.

YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED

“You are cordially invited...”

Four words which spark the fear of God into any gently bred, single southern woman.

Along with ‘Diet’, ‘What dress size do you need?’, and ‘We need to cancel your cut and color today’, there is nothing—and I mean NOTHING—a single woman wants to hear less than *You are cordially invited*.

Unless, of course, you are the one doing the inviting.

Otherwise, those four little words are a vivid reminder that some other lucky girl has snared her Prince Charming and you haven’t.”

ERIKA GUTHRY, JULY 24, 1998

ONE

THE INVITATION

FRIDAY—APRIL 12, 2013

A 6x9 cream envelope with swirling calligraphy set everything in motion.

Entering the craftsman bungalow Candace, Sara and I shared, the offending mail leaped out like those neon signs on Broadway from where the envelope was propped against a water-stained vase on our dining room table. Next to the envelope was a bright yellow sticky note with Sara's chicken scratch:

Wine is chilling, and dinner is on us <3

Indicator one, the envelope was terrible news.

Indicator two? The three missed calls and voicemails from Momma stored on my phone. She never called during my school hours, yet today she'd tried and failed to reach me three times. When she didn't catch me by voice, she resorted to text:

Momma: Darling, call me on your way home. Everything is fine here. I have wonderful news from Mary Anne to share.

Momma considered texting beneath her. Contrary to her use of 'wonderful,' the text was bad news indicator number three in the form of one name, three syllables: Mary Anne.

And finally, flipping the skillfully hand-addressed envelope made out to Ms. Savannah R. Guthry, indicator number four was proudly displayed as the return address stamped along the sealed envelope's flap. That address was a dead giveaway as to whom this invite was for. As if the dots hadn't already

been connected.

First thing first, I dropped the envelope on the table, strolled down the hallway to my room, and stripped out of my clothes. My mood improved after slipping into my favorite comfies and piling my dark hair into a messy bun. Phone charger in tow, I returned to the front of the house, plugged in my phone, grabbed a glass of the aforementioned wine, and plopped into a chair with the offending envelope.

For twenty minutes, my teeth tore at my upper lip while sipping wine. Then, curling my legs beneath me, I opened the mail.

A gold wax “G” sealed the heavy stationery. I huffed a laugh. The Guthry family certainly spared no expense when it came to a wedding for one of their own. Yes, this was a wedding invitation. I’d bet my life on it, and I hadn’t seen inside the envelope yet. Slowly, as though a snake, or Mary Anne herself, might jump out, I extracted the card stock. I indulged in one long sip of wine before reading the script.

*MR. AND MRS. GRANTHAM E. GUTHRY
REQUEST THE HONOR OF YOUR PRESENCE
AT THE MARRIAGE OF THEIR DAUGHTER*

*MARY ANNE GUTHRY
TO
MR. DANIEL EDWARD LIVINGSTON, III*

*ON SATURDAY THE FIFTEENTH OF JUNE
TWO THOUSAND AND THIRTEEN*

*COUNTRY CLUB OF CHARLESTON
CHARLESTON, SC*

Daniel Edward Livingston, III—the boy with crystal blue eyes and windblown blond hair. My chest tightened at the image my memories conjured. Old memories that were nothing like the man he became.

My gorgeous, southern, spoiled cousin was marrying my first love.

No big deal. It was bound to happen. I could be happy for them, couldn’t I? After all, it was four years ago. Four years since Daniel sat down and told

me he wanted to “explore his options.” Little did I know his options included my cousin Mary Anne.

The cell phone's vibration under my thigh pulled me to the present. *Momma*. A grand debate took place in my mind. Should I let her fourth call of the day roll to voicemail? Avoiding Erika Guthry when she wanted to speak with you was pointless. She was relentless, and it was best to deal with her like ripping off a bandage—grit your teeth and face the pain.

“Hello, Momma.”

“Savannah Rose Guthry, I have been trying and trying to reach you today. I almost had Daddy contact the authorities. You’ve given me quite the scare, darling.”

Add hysterics and exaggeration to the list of qualities Momma possessed.

“Momma, I’m fine. You know I have classes all day. I walked in the door a few minutes ago.”

“Well, you should have called me back.” Irritation laced her heavily accented voice. Shame on me for inconveniencing her. “I called to tell you about Mary Anne and Daniel. Have you heard yet?”

“I’m staring at the announcement as we speak.”

“Oh, I so hoped I would be able to warn you. Are you all right?” Her irritation gave way to misplaced sorrow. The speed at which her emotions changed gave me whiplash.

“Momma, it’s been four years. I’m fine.”

“Losing someone like Daniel Livingston does not simply go away, Savannah. I can’t believe we let him slip through your fingers into Mary Anne’s. Charlene is prancing like a peacock at the match.”

“I’m sure she is, Momma. I need to run—”

“Honey, you know Mary Anne barely graduated, don’t you? Daniel would have done so much better with you. But here we are; they’re getting married in June, and you’re in Tennessee still in school.” Her mournful voice rose an octave as she complained.

“I need to run, Momma.” *Before you whine more.*

“What? Oh, darling, your father is calling. We’re supposed to have dinner with the Alexanders this evening. Oh”—she gasped—“the most fantastic idea has popped into my head! Spencer played golf with your daddy and Neal today—”

“Oh, Momma, don’t go there. Leave poor Spencer Alexander alone.” My plea was pointless; the deafening squeal of her matchmaking wheels spun

from two states away.

“Savannah, Spencer was a doll all those years ago. Escorting you to your coming-out party after Daniel broke your heart. Don’t you worry about a thing. I’ll handle everything. I’ll call you in a few days to discuss the details of the pre-wedding events. Love you.”

“All right, love you—” The phone beeped, and she was gone.

With a hefty sigh, I lifted my wine to my lips and found the glass empty. Sara and Candace would be home with dinner any minute. Drinking over your ex’s wedding invitation while alone was sad. A second glass could wait.

As I carefully slipped the invitation back into its envelope, my mind wandered to Spencer Alexander. Our history was more complicated than Momma knew. He didn’t deserve her snooping into his personal life when all he’d done was play golf with Daddy.

Mind made up, I dialed Daddy’s cell phone, hopeful of catching him before he picked Momma up for dinner.

“Bradford Guthry,” he answered with his brusque business tone.

“Hi, Daddy.”

“Hi, baby. Sorry, I didn’t see it was you calling. Everything all right?”

“I’m great, Daddy. I talked to Momma a moment ago about Mary Anne’s wedding.”

“Oh? I’m sorry, baby. I should have warned you about that.”

The funny thing was that Daddy wished he’d warned me about Momma calling. Whereas Momma had thought I needed warning of the event itself—as though I would have an emotional meltdown and toss myself over the railing of the RMS Titanic. Daddy knew Momma’s overreacting, melodramatic phone calls were what put me over the edge.

“It’s all right; I survived. However, Spencer Alexander may not.”

“Spence? What does he have to do with anything?”

“What, indeed?” I laughed, filling him in on Momma’s *‘fantastic idea.’*

Daddy exhaled. “Leave your mother to me. Will you be home before the wedding, or are you set on staying in Nashville this summer?”

“You know I’m staying here, Daddy.”

“All right, sweetie. I promised not to complain. Don’t worry about your mother. I’ll keep her off your case. You have finals in the next few weeks, don’t you?”

“Yep.”

“Okay then, study hard and let us know how you do. Let me run before

your mother yells at me for being late again.”

“Have fun. Love you.” Our call ended, and my mood significantly improved.

Momma and Daddy were opposites in how they handled me. Sure, they wanted what was best for me, but Daddy listened to my wants, whereas Momma assumed she knew them better than I did. She’d never had a problem making decisions without my input.

Muffled shenanigans outside the front door warned me of the roomies' arrival, and I moved to help them as the key rattled in the lock.

Sara cursed when the door opened, and she stumbled across the threshold. “We’ve got to get a locksmith to look at this. It sticks.”

“Surprise,” Candace sang, nudging Sara inside and holding up two carryout bags from my favorite local Italian restaurant.

“And ice cream.” Sara pulled out pints of Ben and Jerry’s. “Want dessert first?”

Lord, did I ever.

TWO

GET YOUR FREAK ON

FRIDAY—APRIL 12, 2013

NINE WEEKS UNTIL “THE WEDDING”

“Do you have to go to the wedding?” Candace asked.

Stuffed with ice cream and chicken parmigiana, we lounged in the living room. With my consent, they peeked at the invitation when they arrived home, but neither spoke about it until now—an hour later.

“Hell yes, she has to go. What would Mary Anne and the rest of those little debutante brats think if she didn’t?” Anger flashed in Sara’s eyes when she sneered debutante.

“You forget, I was one of those debutantes.”

Derisive laughter bubbled from Sara’s lips as she shifted in her chair and sat on her feet. Yoga really did her body good. “Savannah, you are no more a debutante than I am. I know you did all that stuff back in the day, but it was solely at the urging of Mommy dearest. You’re so not the only-wear-white-after-Memorial Day-clutch-my-pearls-and-never-leave-home-without-makeup type anymore.”

“Valid point.” My girlfriends were the best medicine.

“So, you’re going then?” Candace’s brow furrowed.

“I have to. Could you imagine Momma’s reaction if I skipped out?” My shudder was dramatic. “Besides, I don’t want Daniel or Mary Anne thinking they’ve hurt me. If I don’t go, everyone will assume I’m not done nursing my broken heart.”

“Over that pretty boy? Whatever.”

I refused to jump at Sara’s bait. My girl liked her men edgy. The more James Dean-like they were, the better. I’m positive the real reason she ended

up in school in Nashville was for the music scene and rockabilly hunks. Mainly the hunks.

Rolling my eyes at my eccentric roommate, I poured the last white wine into my glass. “I forgot to mention Momma is already trying to wrangle me a date for the happy event.”

Candace choked. “Oh, good Lord, who?”

Sara butted in first. “You need to find some hot, tattooed bad boy to walk in on your arm.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I need. My poor momma would die of a heart attack.”

“Wait a minute.” Candace popped up, her baby blues bright. “Lord help me, I’m going to say it,” she paused, “Sara may be on to something.”

Sara squealed. “Yes! Hot bad boy to the rescue.”

I fought burying my face in a pillow. “Nooo, thank you. I’m not interested in a bad boy toy.”

Evil intentions wafted from Sara as she rubbed her hands together. “Boooy toooy. Even better.”

“Shhh. Would you two quiet down? I’m not talking about a bad boy or a toy. However, we could find you an amazing date for the wedding.” Candace flashed her teeth. “One that will dote on you all weekend and show those Charleston socialites you’re doing perfectly fine. Thankyouverymuch.”

Sara hissed an enthusiastic “Yesss” while exchanging high fives with Candace across our end table. Their eagerness was touching but misplaced. I didn’t need a date for this wedding.

“Put your little black books away, ladies. I’ll be perfectly fine attending the wedding by myself. I couldn’t invite some random guy to a family event anyhow.”

“Like hell, you can’t,” Sara said. “Girl, this is the wedding of the couple who humiliated you your senior year of high school. They are the reason you don’t go home for the holidays. You damn well can and will show up for that wedding with a jaw-dropping dress and a gorgeous male accessory on your arm.”

Candace nudged the arm of Sara’s chair with her foot.

I hadn’t given it much thought in a long time, but Sara was right. Mary Anne and Daniel being together had kept me away from Charleston for two years. During my freshman year, I went home for every holiday and was disappointed when the happy couple showed up for family meals. What

would typically be a joyous visit with family ended up an uncomfortable mess as Mary Anne draped over Daniel's arm, her Guthry eyes twinkling triumphantly each time she glanced my way. On the other hand, Daniel always had the good manners to feign guilt when he caught my eye. Or he did at first.

My mind flew back to two years ago when Daniel cornered me in my bedroom during Easter supper...

Mary Anne's high-pitched voice detailing her and Daniel's exciting spring break trip with his parents droned on for over an hour. Unable to suffer another moment, I excused myself from the meal. The damn broke the second I lowered to the edge of my bed. Damn, the weakness my tears revealed. What was wrong with me? I didn't miss Daniel, not really.

A light knock sounded on my door, and Daniel slipped inside my bedroom without waiting for permission. The door closed behind him with a soft click. With his bright white polo stretched taut across his thick chest and usually floppy blond curls meticulously parted at the side, he was the epitome of a J.Crew model. Add the seersucker pinstripe pants and boat shoes, and he was the cover of Country Club 101.

"Savannah?" He stopped short of my bed when I lifted my tear-stained face.

"What are you doing in here, Daniel? Go back to Mary Anne."

I sneered like a jealous ex. I didn't want to be jealous, yet containing the anger was impossible.

"I'm sorry I hurt you. I could tell you were upset and wanted to see if you were okay."

Swiping my knuckles beneath my eyes, I frowned. "Gee, thanks for the long-overdue apology. Over a year ago, you hurt me, but I'm fine now. I have a headache, that's all."

His amused tone caught me off guard. "Sweetie, I know it was hard for you when I broke things off. It wasn't an easy decision for me either, you know. I honestly thought we should both try to enjoy our lives. You were a senior in high school, and I'd just started college. We'd been together for so long. I still love you, Savannah. I want to see you happy."

He held out his hand, and to my never-ending horror, I took it and stood, allowing his arms to embrace me. What was I thinking? Perhaps the pain of his betrayal had finally sunk in, and this was closure. I don't know.

The only thing I did know was that I wasn't ready for how his arms snaked around my back, rubbing up and down my spine slowly and seductively. I wasn't prepared for how his mouth brushed my temple as he whispered, "You keep getting more and more beautiful, you know that?"

I was putty in his hands as he pressed kisses to my temple and murmured how much he missed me. My traitorous hands circled his waist, clasping him to my body like I never wanted to let go. I buried my face in the crook of his neck and inhaled the familiar tang of his cologne. His hand crept lower and lower until his palm cupped my ass, and still, I stood transfixed in his arms.

"Do you miss me?" His lips trailed soft kisses over my cheek and neck as his hand caressed my backside.

My head swam. Did I nod? His following words made me believe I had. "Show me how much you miss me," he urged, dragging his lips toward mine.

As though possessed, my hand stole up his chest when our lips met, and I offered Daniel ownership of my mouth. It was like he'd never stopped kissing me all those months ago.

Heat ran through my veins as fingers teased my lower back. His warm hand delved beneath my skirt's waistband, his fingers once again cupping my ass, now without the barrier of clothing. A moan escaped my lips as his palm shifted down my thigh and drew my leg to wrap around his. His fingertips dug into my skin, and his lips ate at mine as his body pressed forward.

We fell to the bed, and he was between my thighs instantly. Instinct had me wrapped around him. Why not? Daniel was mine first. He hummed with satisfaction and tugged at my lace panties. Was he still mine? His fingers twisted under the thin fabric at my hips.

Something penetrated my senses as Daniel's fingers explored my inner thigh. Perhaps it was the hard proof of his desire, or maybe it was Mary Anne's shrill voice calling his name from downstairs. Whatever broke the spell, I pushed him away, my head swimming.

"Daniel?" Mary Anne's voice grew louder like it came from down the hall.

Our eyes met, and Daniel leaped and straightened his skewed clothing. Reaching out, he helped me to a sitting position and tugged at my skirt.

"I—"

"Shhh," he kissed my lips, "Can you meet me tonight? At our old spot?"

Surely, the heat pooling between my thighs compelled me to agree as I stared into those bright blue eyes I'd once loved so much.

A sharp knock came at the bedroom door. "Savannah? Daniel?"

Daniel inched forward, pressing his finger to his lips like I needed reminding. After a moment, he opened the door and revealed my irritated cousin. Her eyes raked over me sitting on my bed before she glanced at Daniel.

Her cheeks stained an angry shade of red. "What's going on here?"

Like flipping the switch to a light, Daniel turned on the charm. He angled toward Mary Anne and took her fingers, gallantly kissing the back of her hand. Plain ole' distraction. *You recognized that Savannah, but you couldn't see through his act?* Oh, my gullibility.

"Nothing." Daniel lied as easily as an oily salesman. "I could tell Savannah looked unwell when she left the table, and I wanted to check if she was all right. All your stories about our trip upset her, and I felt bad. We shouldn't rub our relationship in her face, Mary Anne."

Bile burned my throat at his buttery explanation. Clueless Mary Anne shot me a sympathetic pout before she placed her hand on Daniel's forearm. "Oh, Savannah, I thought you'd be glad for me by now. I'm truly sorry you can't find someone like Daniel to make you happy."

Fury tightened my chest.

She spun on Daniel with a pink glossy pout. "You know, I don't see why I shouldn't be able to share my joy with my family. It's not my fault she continues harboring feelings for you. That was puppy love, Danny. She should be over it by now."

Every nerve in my body urged me to walk across the room and slap her across her bitchy face, but twenty years of good breeding held me back. I waited as Daniel whispered in her ear, placating her enough to leave the room without a backward glance. He remained at the door after she left, his eyes taking me in from the top of my head to the tips of my toes before he spoke.

"Meet me at eleven at our spot. We have so much to talk about."

"You two are right." My voice was unnaturally loud as I shook out of the past.

"Tattooed boy toy?"

"No." I threw a pillow at Sara. "God, you're a pain. I don't need a boy toy, but I do need a wedding date. A good one."

"Well, it shouldn't be too hard to find you the perfect date. You're smart, sweet, sexy, and stacked." Sara waggled her brows, holding her hands before

her chest like I was Dolly Parton.

“Good Lord, Sara. How much have you drank tonight?” Candace rolled from her chair to the floor in a fit of laughter.

Sara giggled. “Not enough.”

Shaking my head at my best friends, I tugged at a stray lock of hair. “Okay, so I need a date, girls. The problem is, I haven’t dated. Ever.”

“We know.” Their simultaneous replies grated.

It’s not like I didn’t want to date, but after nursing my heart through the drama that was Daniel and Mary Anne, then weathering the aftermath of Spencer Alexander, opening up to another guy was the last thing on my mind. I left for college determined to distance myself from the people and scene I’d grown up with. I wanted to make new friends. Once I arrived in Nashville, I immersed myself in classes and school clubs but never made time to party or go out.

Sara called me a homebody. Candace said I was picky.

The truth: I was scared.

“What about Riley?” Candace always turned to Riley when we needed a guy around.

A deejay at The Garage, a dive close to campus, and the one and only bar the girls could get me to, Riley was a bioscience major with a thing for music. He was intelligent, sweet, funny, and uninterested in getting into my pants.

“No way, not Riley.” Sara shot my hopes down before the plane left the runway. “We need to impress the Guthry family, and a surefire way of doing that is with one of their own.” She stuck her finger down her throat and gagged. “As much as I hate to say it, we’ll have to go old school.”

“Like an old man?” Candace’s nose scrunched like she’d smelled something rank.

“No, you half-wit. Old school! Frat boy, old money. We need to find someone who rivals Daniel. We need a Jack or Bobby.”

My stomach lurched. “Now, wait a minute—”

“Jack or Bobby?” Candace’s eyes went round.

Sara blew out a deep breath. “Yes. As in Kennedy. A good ‘ole boy, but without the womanizing and drinking habits, of course.” She winked.

“Ohhh.” Ding, ding, ding, Candace figured it out, ladies and gentlemen. “Perfect. So how do we do this?”

“Wait a minute.” My voice raised.

The girls shook their heads. “No way, Savannah. You’re gonna leave this to us. Give us a few days, and we’ll come up with someone perfect for you.”

Sweet baby Jesus. My friends have turned into Momma.

“You guys.” My plea was ignored as they huddled together and plotted. When Candace snatched a notebook off the table, desperation sunk in. “Seriously, I’m sure I can find someone from my classes. Scott Tipton, maybe.”

“No.” I hated how in sync they were.

Sara smirked. “We’ve got this. Besides, you have finals to study for next week. Girlfriend, we’re gonna have you a handsome future senator for a date by the time your classes are officially over.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” My mumble remained ignored. Sara and Candace were too busy plotting my love life like a mathematician devised stats.

THREE

CELEBRATE

FRIDAY—APRIL 19, 2013

EIGHT WEEKS UNTIL “THE WEDDING”

“Ladies and Gentlemen, a toast to junior year being in the books.” The sentiment was shouted loud for all to hear.

“Amen!”

Shot glasses clinked around my circle of friends at The Garage to celebrate the end of exams. Riley downed his shooter from behind the bar, saluting me as P!nk’s “Get the Party Started” blared through the speakers. Candace grabbed my hand with a whoop and yanked me onto the relatively empty dance floor. Sara was fast on our heels, towing a few friends in her wake.

“It’s our last year.” Candace bounced around the floor. Having been raised by a prim and proper southern momma, the bar scene wasn’t my thing. Abandoning myself to alcohol and music was sometimes difficult, but I threw my arms in the air and awkwardly blended in with my hyper friends. “We’re so gonna make this one the best.”

On the building’s second floor was a quaint restaurant with fantastic food whose waiting space continuously overflowed down the stairs, making The Garage a perfect place for cocktails while waiting for a table. Early evenings, the bar was low-key—popular with the music majors at school since they catered to Indie musicians and hosted open mic nights throughout the week. I’d dropped by in support of friends from time to time but generally made my exit before the club set arrived around ten-thirty Thursday through Sunday night.

Not tonight, though. The girls and I promised we would stop by and

celebrate the end of another semester with Riley and a few friends after our roomies-only dinner. So here we were. I'd tried to beg off after the first toast, but Sara and Candace insisted I stay. Something told me the tall and handsome Jax was to blame for their adavance.

Sara had purred Jax's accomplishments off like a checklist when we first walked into the bar while the poor guy stood there looking uncomfortable at her praise. He was cute, more than attractive, with his dark curling waves flopping around as he danced with Sara.

"He's not bad," Candace shouted over the dance mix Riley spun. Could she read my mind?

"Yeah." I knocked my shoulder into hers. "Amazing he should happen to show up, huh?"

She motioned toward the bar with a wink, making the universal sign for thirsty. Beyond ready to escape the dance floor, I moved to join her, but she blocked me with a raised hand. Like a perfectly choreographed number, Candace tapped Sara's shoulder and waved for her to follow. Sara, in turn, pointed Jax in my direction.

Smiling ensued as Jax replaced Candace at my side. Could awkward be any more awkward? Riley switched the music to "Get Lucky" by Daft Punk as if on cue, and the area morphed into a sea of giddy co-eds.

"Hey," Jax shouted, his hips moving in that typical guy-dancing way.

"Hi." I faced him as bodies crowded against my back. Unable to converse above the blaring music, we shimmied and shared smiles throughout the song. I craned my neck in search of my friends—irritated but not surprised when I spotted them standing by the bar spying on us.

Dang matchmakers.

"Can I..." Jax's mouth opened and closed, but I couldn't hear as the girls beside us erupted in laughter.

"What?" I leaned closer. He spoke again, and I scowled, still unable to hear over the noise.

With a rueful shake of his head, he cupped my shoulder and shouted near my ear, "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Sure." I mouthed. With an accelerating heart rate, I followed him toward the bar, taking in his broad shoulders.

Covering the expanse of the building, the massive bar was packed with customers. Since the barstools were taken, we stood back and waited our turn. I scowled at Candace and Sara as they conveniently weaved their way

across the room to the couches in the far corner where several friends from school sat chatting.

Horrendous at this dating thing, I shuffled from foot to foot, covertly eyeing Jax and trying to get a take on him. He wore brown leather casual shoes with dark jeans and a blue polo. Nothing flashy. He certainly fits the preppy mold Sara thought I needed. Visually speaking, he was the type of guy I dated growing up. Not a bad trait, but possibly not the best idea.

A group of ladies making their way through the crowd caught my eye. They possessed a definite predatory-like capacity as they passed, their thick cloud of perfume itching my nose. They were on the hunt—with their skin-tight outfits, breasts pushed up, and eyes gleaming as they searched the bar for prey. I should know. Sara has headed out of the house dressed just the same when searching for a hookup. The Garage was a popular college student hangout, so a group of meticulously made-up women in their mid-forties screamed cougar. It was a bitchy thing to think, and I wasn't judging, or maybe I was, but they stood out like a sore thumb.

“Hey.” Jax touched my side. “You want to grab an empty table while I get the drinks?” He motioned to the bar-height tables scattered around, and

I pulled my thoughts from the women. “Oh, sorry, yeah. Can you order me a Coke?” His brows drew at my request, but he agreed.

I wandered among the tables until finding a recently vacated one, judging by the empty bottles, at the far end of the mahogany bar. I took a seat while Jax stood patiently, chatting with another patron while waiting his turn to order. There were two male bartenders, both wearing all black and extremely busy, while the female employees walked around the seating area in tight jeans and cropped tops and offered up shooters or took cash for bottles of beer.

Cackle-like laughter drew my attention from people watching. Craning my neck, I spotted one of the cougars draped over the bar flirting with a bartender. Even from my viewpoint, it was easy to see her boobs were in immediate danger of toppling out of the neckline of her skin-tight crimson dress. She was a pretty woman with chin-length black hair, expensive gold earrings dangling from her lobes, and a gaudy gold necklace trapped between her very full and very exposed cleavage. My gaze dropped to my modest outfit. Is that what I'm doing wrong in the dating game?

“Hey, Savannah, what can I get you?” I jumped as a girl from one of my study groups placed a cocktail napkin before me.

“Hi, Noelle. Um, my friend is waiting at the bar.”

Noelle spared the crowded bar a glance and chuckled. “Girl, it’s gonna be a while. What do you want, and I’ll grab it?”

Jax looked my way as if by design, his chin giving a dip, and I waved him over, pointing at Noelle. Relief transformed his face, and he turned, snaking through the crowd. The closer his tall frame came, the more my nerves got the best of me. Swallowing hard, I sat taller.

“Wow. He’s a hottie, girl.” Noelle cooed, her eyes on Jax. “You two on a date?”

Damn, my cheeks burned. “Simma down, girl. We just met.” I joked, unsure if I was talking more to my inner dating loser or Noelle.

“Hey there, I’m Noelle. What can I get you?” She purred with confidence when he arrived.

Of course, she was confident. She had on the requisite low-slung black jeans and second-skin tank top required of the female staff here. She was a sexy girl, and she knew it, same as the women at the bar knew their appeal. I had dressed for dinner with my girlfriends, not seduction. Maybe Momma’s country club chic rubbed off on me?

“Rum n’ Coke for me.” Jax’s eyes dipped to the creamy flesh swelling above Noelle’s v-neck tank. “And a plain Coke for her.” His gaze shifted to Noelle’s face as quickly as it fell to her chest. I couldn’t fault the guy for peaking at what was freely offered in front of his face. Hell, I’d noticed.

“Actually, that sounds good.” I piped up before Noelle could leave. “Add rum to mine, too.” Maybe the alcohol would calm my nerves.

“Sure thing.” With another glance at Jax, she scooted off.

More revelry from the bar floated our way, and I gawked in fascination at the spectacle the women made of themselves. They were so confident. Was I ever that girl? The bar was clearly understaffed, yet they had no compunction about monopolizing the dark-haired bartender with their flirting. They reminded me of Momma. Not the flirtation, but the monopolizing someone until she got her way. I’m the girl who apologizes for bothering an employee when I have a question.

“Sara tells me you’re an art major.”

Throwing the women out of my head, I focused on impressing Jax. “Art History, yes.”

“Art History? What do you plan to do with that?”

“The goal was to work in a museum.”

“Was?”

“Well, *is*,” I fumbled, not wanting to delve into the complicated state of my future career choice. “Wow, that was fast.” I nod at Noelle, coming up behind Jax with our drinks.

Jax leaned over the table. “Sorry, I didn’t mean for my questions to sound rude.”

I waved his apology off and thanked Noelle as Jax paid. Taking a sip of my drink, I waited until she walked away before replying.

“You’re not the first to be confused by my major.” I stir my Rum and Coke. “What about you? What’s your plan? You’re a senior now, too, right?”

“Actually, I’ve been a senior. One more semester, then I’m done.” He raised his glass.

“I’ll drink to that.” Our glasses clinked.

“But to answer your question, I’ll be finishing up my degree in Economics after this fall. I’m actually heading to New York tomorrow for an internship for the summer. My dad has an old frat buddy who runs a financial think tank there. He offered me a chance to sharpen my skills.”

Tomorrow? Well, shoot. I sipped some more and wallowed in a second of disappointment at being unable to get to know Jax better before he left. “Wow. That’ll be a great experience, I’m sure.”

"Looks like Sara’s trying to land a plane to draw your attention.” He motioned toward the crowd. “Are you ready to get back out there in the celebration?”

I visually located my boisterous roommate shaking her groove thang up against some guy as she waved her hands like an air traffic controller. Chuckling, I wiggled my fingers to let her know I saw her, then glanced longingly at my drink.

Jax stood and held out his hand. “Take it with you.”

That is the best advice all night. We joined our friends on the floor for dancing, drinking, and fun as Riley pumped out more techno-crap than I’d heard in my entire life.

“Holy hell. Candace, did you catch a glimpse of the new bartender?” Sara shouted over a stall in the ladies’ room.

“Did I ever. Hubba hubba. I want a piece of that.”

“Oh geez, you little hussies.” I grinned.

With a wink, Candace slicked coral lipstick over her lips. “Did you see

him? No wonder the bar is packed with desperate housewives. He is easy peasy, sexy squeezy.”

Emerging from the stall, fixing her skirt, Sara edged me out of the way. “Our girl has been too busy checking out Jax to pay attention to a hot bartender. Right, Savannah?” She wagged her brows.

“He’s nice.” That was all my nosy roomies would get tonight. Though, I could admit he was better than nice. My nerves had calmed considerably, likely due to the two drinks he’d bought me while we danced. His hands lingered on my back or hips a few times as we swayed with the music, but he never overstepped. A true gentleman.

“Girl,” Sara grabbed my arms, “He’s more than nice. He’s like you, with a different set of tools. Jump on this one. I think you’re perfect for each other.”

We exploded into laughter as we exited the restroom. “Don’t get too ahead of yourself, Sara. She just met the guy—” Candace yelped and stopped abruptly.

Jax stood not five feet away, hands in his pockets as he scanned the bar—the perfect stance of a man casually waiting on someone.

“Um, hey.” My neck burned as I stepped around my giggling friends.

“Hi. Sorry, I’m stalking you outside the ladies’ room.” He rubbed the back of his neck, speaking over the crowd noise.

“Eh, happens all the time.”

Muffled giggles erupted from Candace and Sara, and I shoed them away.

“You want to get out of here?”

FOUR

BREAKFAST

EARLY SATURDAY—APRIL 20, 2013

STILL EIGHT WEEKS UNTIL
“THE WEDDING”

Hand stilled, my jaw dropped as I met Candace’s and Sara’s stares. Sara practically answered for me, jumping forward and kissing my cheek. “Go, he’s a nice guy. You’ll be safe.” She pulled back, giving me a pointed look, before grabbing Candace’s hand.

“You kids have fun. See you later, Jax,” she called in their wake.

I gaped at my best friends’ backs.

“How about some breakfast?” Jax stepped closer, his face wreathed with overconfidence.

We’d danced and shared small talk but couldn’t hold a meaningful discussion over the music and crowd. He was nice, cute, and driven. Oh, what the hell. “Sure, I could go for something.”

Thirty minutes later, we sat across from one another at the nearest breakfast joint. I hadn’t been on a date since I first moved to Nashville, and that date was a disaster. Daniel had turned me off guys and dating, and until that date, I hadn’t realized how much his deception hurt. My jaw clenched at how I’d allowed his treachery to ruin me over the last few years.

Jax and I exchanged pleasantries while waiting for our pancakes.

Favorite movies—his: the Bourne trilogy. Mine: Pitch Perfect.

Favorite food—BBQ and Mexican.

Books—he didn’t read (a slight downgrade in his date-ability). I read too

much.

When it came to our favorite vacation spots, he poked at mine. “Disney World?”

I threw my wadded straw wrapper at his confused face. “Yeah. What’s wrong with Disney?”

“It’s for families and kids. I would’ve thought you’d be a tropics girl.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Nah, I’m a total kid at heart. I love roller coasters, greasy food, and feeling like a little girl again.”

“Cute.” He pursed his lips like he was humoring me.

When our food arrived, we ate in companionable silence. What was he thinking? What should I talk about? I should have dated more. This was confusing.

“Damn.” I flinched at his muttered curse coming out of nowhere. I’d finished up my food moments earlier and told him my plans for the summer, minus the wedding from hell. He set his silverware across his empty plate.

“Sorry, I was... Hell, I’m pissed I have to leave tomorrow.” With our ticket in hand, he slipped out of the booth and stalked toward the cashier.

Ummm, hello?

Gulping down one last sip of water, I grabbed my purse and hurried after him. When I caught up, he held the glass doors open and we stepped into the muggy early morning.

His red coupe was parked directly in front, and I stopped on the curb by the passenger door. “I thought you were looking forward to your internship?”

“I was.” He stepped into the parking lot and opened the passenger door.

Walking around his body, I placed a hand on the open door. “So, what’s wrong?”

“I met you tonight.” His focus did not move from my face.

My feet stumbled back a step before I dropped into the seat with a barely audible “Oh.” Unlike earlier, when he’d walked around the car after opening the door, he remained there, waiting. Perhaps he waited for a reply containing more than one syllable? I didn’t have one. Not yet.

I drew my legs into the vehicle and focused enormous attention on buckling my seatbelt. After a moment of silence, Jax shut the door and walked to the driver’s side. Slowly. He slid in and cranked the ignition before he faced me.

“Was that too much?”

Was it? “I don’t think so,” I answered both our questions. “Well, no, it’s

unexpected, that's all."

"You were unexpected." The pad of his thumb grazed my arm, and a delicious shiver danced along my skin. He dropped his hand as quickly as he raised it and shifted into Drive.

As I directed Jax to my house, my starving body begged for more of those shivers. Curse the fates that introduced us on his last night in Nashville for the next three months. *Just my luck*. When we made it to my house, he met me at the hood of the car and took my hand as we walked up the sidewalk.

My dormant for way too long, brazen half wanted to invite the man in. My cautious side warned it was a bad idea, yet considered it anyway. Neither side made the final decision. Instead, it was Jax who took matters into his own hands, bending down and kissing my cheek before edging back.

He cleared his throat. "I'm going to do the gentlemanly thing here and step away. I'm glad we met, and I hope you'll give me your number so we can stay in touch while I'm in New York."

Gentlemanly thing? Say what now? My insides argued as I held out my palm. "Where's your phone?"

Jax dug his cell from his pocket.

"Thanks for a great night." I entered my number in his contacts and gave the phone back. "Have a safe trip tomorrow."

He wasn't smiling. Was he fighting himself, too? With a step back, he dipped his head. "Okay. I'll call you. Goodnight."

Flabbergasted that a man in this day and age could drop a girl off without a proper kiss, I lifted my hand in a wave. "Goodnight."

I leaned in the doorway and watched until his car disappeared.

"Details." Sara popped out of the dark hallway the second I stepped inside.

My head slammed against the door as I jumped. "Ow. Dammit, Sara. What the hell are you doing?"

"You mean, what are we doing?" Candace's eyes peeked over Sara's shoulder. "We were sitting here waiting up for you so we could get all the dirty details."

"It's after two in the morning. You couldn't wait until tomorrow?"

"Hell to the no, my dear." Sara pulled me into the living room. "Soooo?"

I looked between my crazy roommates' rapt faces. "It was fun. He was a gentleman."

"Ahh, too bad," Sara muttered under her breath.

I shot her the evil eye and added, “He’s leaving for New York in the morning. *For the summer.*”

“He’s what?” Candace’s screech could break glass. She turned on Sara. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“Shit, I didn’t know,” Sara hollered back. “Savannah, I’m so sorry. I wouldn’t have bothered if I’d known.”

Holding my hand to quiet them, I leaned back and kicked off my shoes. “It’s all right. We had a good time, and he’s going to call. Who knows, Sara? You may have made a love connection.”

“But a whole summer gone? What about the wedding?”

“What about it? I don’t need a date. I already told you two that.” My heavy sigh was less than convincing.

“Yes, you do. You’re not going alone, and neither of us can go with you.”

“Wait. You can’t?” Our plan for the wedding was a man first, best friend second.

“Nope, my mom finally sent the dates for that family reunion they’ve been planning for the grandparents’ golden anniversary.” Candace tucked her platinum blonde hair behind her ear with a frown.

“Let me guess, same weekend?” Disappointed at her grimace, I turned to Sara. “And why can’t you come?”

Sara’s demeanor was completely different. Her eyes were wide with secrets as she produced an envelope from behind her back and waved it while bouncing.

Oh. My...

“You got in?” I lunged for the letter. The recognizable logo confirmed my suspicion. “Oh my God, you got the internship?” I smothered Sara in a hug, no longer worried about my problems.

The walls shook with girly screams as we celebrated. She’d applied with radio stations and producers all over the country. Her dream was to market and develop musicians for a label someday, but she needed some experience for now.

Sara’s joy dimmed. “It’s local, but you know I won’t have any free time once I start.”

I slapped her arm. “Oh, I don’t care, Sara. I’m so happy for you. I’ll figure something out for the wedding. Maybe I won’t go.”

Bald-faced lie.

There was no way Momma would let me skip this event. The Guthry

family image was everything to her.

My purse vibrated. Pulling out my phone, I clicked on the text message.

Unknown: i shouldn't have been so gentlemanly

Sara's eyes grew round. "Is it Jax?"

"Ask him to the wedding now." Candace prodded.

Choking my poor phone, I paced the floor. "No, I can't ask him now. We just met."

Their identical looks were deadly. *Really?* They spoke without words.

"Just let me talk to him alone."

I rushed to my room and threw my body across the bed.

Why is that?

Unknown: I really wanted to kiss you

Warmth spread through my veins. Why didn't you, you idiot? I groaned but responded diplomatically.

I would have let you

Unknown: Yeah?

Yep

Unknown: Dammit

((laughing emoji))

Unknown: I think it might be worth the wait tho

You think?

I typed a second smiley face. This guy had me reverting back to my teens.

Unknown: Well, don't go kissing anyone else until we can see how ours goes??

My fingers hovered, unsure of what to type. The phone buzzed again.

Unknown: Ok, that was bold. i can't ask you not to date. BUT save a spot for me.

Without second-guessing, I took a leap.

I need a wedding date for June 15, you free?

The silence was deafening.

Crap, what if I was asking too much too soon? I groaned. *You deserve a kick in the head for opening your big mouth, Savannah Guthry.*

Unknown: i would be honored

Really?

Unknown: yeah, really. I'll call you tomorrow for details. Well, and to talk?

Okay!

Unknown: 'night

Goodnight!

FIVE

THE PLAN

TUESDAY—APRIL 23, 2013

Over the next few days, I became the girl who wandered her house waiting for a guy to call each evening when he got home from work. Thankfully, the calls came like clockwork. We'd already ironed out the wedding details and talked every evening. I was cautiously optimistic about our budding relationship and looking forward to June fifteenth so we could test what was between us.

Until our phone call four days after our first date.

Candace and Sara had the impeccable timing of coming home immediately after we'd said goodbye. Pulling my bummed ass from where I lay on the couch, I greeted them halfheartedly when they walked into the living room.

"Uh oh, who died?" Sara eyed my oversized tee and yoga pants. It was scary how well she knew me.

"I was on the phone with Jax." I flopped back on the sofa, hugging a pillow. "He can't go to the wedding."

Sara kicked off her shoes. "Why the hell not?"

"He has to work. Apparently, there are conferences for him to attend all summer. He can't confirm his schedule, so he didn't want me to rely on him."

Sara tutted. "Well, that sounds like a weak reason if you ask me."

Candace shoved a frowning Sara from the room. "Sorry, hun. I know you were looking forward to the date."

Yes, I had been excited. "You know what, though? Sara's not wrong. It is a weak excuse. Maybe he wanted to back out?"

"I doubt that. He seemed pretty into you." Candace wrinkled her forehead as she sank into the chair by the couch and stared up at the ceiling.

Ugh, maybe Candace is right, and I'm being overly harsh. The man had a job, and I was nothing but a girl he'd recently met.

"Well, I'm not going to sit here all summer and do nothing but pine over some guy I barely know." The words came from nowhere. Jax disappointed me, but anger at the larger situation made me throw the pillow across the couch and stand. Frustration propelled me toward the picture windows covering the expanse of our living room that offered a view of the front yard.

"Sara, get out here." I turned on a stunned Candace. "I'm no longer the meek little southern belle I used to be. It's time for me to get my freak on."

"Did I hear you correctly? Did you say, 'Get your *freak* on'?" Sara's voice echoed down the hallway.

"You heard me. What happened to Operation: Get Savannah a Hot Date? It's time to put that sucker into full effect, ladies."

"Oh my. Girlfriend, what are you smoking?" A horrified Candace grabbed me, placing her hand on my forehead.

As usual, Sara behaved in the opposite manner as Candace. She tackle hugged me from behind. "Now we're talking. I've already got you a lineup, chica. I was just waiting on the word."

"A lineup? What'd you do, take out an ad?"

My roommates crept back, guilt flashing between them.

"Please tell me you didn't."

"Okay, we didn't." Candace heckled as she rushed from the room.

A knot formed in my chest.

"Hey," Sara rubbed my biceps, "Relax. We have this all figured out. Trust us. I've got a list of gorgeous guys begging to go out with you."

"Sara." I grit my teeth. "Where exactly did this list come from?"

"Guys from school, the station, the bar. You know, the normal places you meet guys."

Yes, she could read my face, but hers was a book as well. And right now, she was withholding information. "Where else, Sara?"

"Stop worrying. You wanted to get your freak on, right?" She evaded, walking into the kitchen.

Left in the living room, I inhaled deeply to keep my cool.

Attempt failed. "Sara!"

"All right, all right, Mom, don't get your panties in a bunch. Yes, we put an ad on the campus site. Big deal. I've used it before."

"Not exactly a glowing recommendation, Sara." Candace sang from

wherever she'd slinked off to.

Last year Sara used the campus dating site to assist in getting over her latest flavor-of-the-month. She'd shown up at a local restaurant all dressed up and ready for a hot date with Joe, except Joe was Jo. A woman who was into women. After finding humor in the mix-up, they went on to have dinner and drinks and lament their recent breakups. They still hung out on occasion. Not a horror story, but not what I need.

Sara pursed her lips. "I promise to check and double-check all the facts before setting you up with anyone. Loosen up for once. What's the harm, huh? You go out with a few guys and have fun? Who knows, you might meet your future husband."

"That's doubtful." Less than confident, I gave in. "I'll do this, but I'm meeting for drinks and drinks alone. At The Garage between six-thirty and seven. I'm not going anywhere else with strange men on a first date, and I don't want to be stuck with some crazy loser for hours on end, either."

"Babe, please have a little faith in my skills." Sara grabbed her phone and fiddled with the screen.

"What about Jax?" Candace made her way into the living room again.

"What about him?" Sara shrugged. "She's not a nun."

Jax had potential, but he was in New York for two months. "We'll still get to know each other by phone, but I can't continue sitting around waiting for him to call every night."

"Agreed." Sara and Candace chimed in. "This is our last summer together. We're gonna have some fun."

SIX

SHE DROPPED A BOMB

WEDNESDAY—APRIL 24, 2013

"What is this madness? What was I thinking?" I wore a path in the carpet, pacing the living room like a madwoman.

"What's your damage, Heather?" Sara stepped out of the hallway dressed for her first day at the station.

"Resorting to cult movie quotes? I really am losing my sanity." I tossed my cell on the couch. "I just got off the phone with Erika."

"Well, of course, it's either your mother or *The Vampire Diaries* was canceled. Those are the only two things horrible enough to cause irrational anger in you. What'd she do this time?"

"She dropped a bomb on me." My steps were heavy as I went for a coffee refill. "Apparently, the wedding of the century is a weekend-long extravaganza, and I'm expected to be present for every minute detail."

My mug hit the counter so forcefully that the porcelain should have groaned. "There will be a special cocktail event for out-of-town guests and family on Thursday night and an afternoon tea on Friday, followed by the rehearsal dinner later that evening. Oh, and the ladies are having an early morning spa day at the club Saturday with brunch before the big event." A mimic of Momma's thick southern accent fell from my lips as I drawled every detail. "I'm so mad I could spit nails."

Flashing sympathy, Sara dug her keys out of her bag. "Do you have to go to all of it? Can't you show up late?"

"Ha! No, my mother made it perfectly clear that everyone is "so looking forward to seeing me" since I haven't been home in a while. It wouldn't reflect well on the family name for me not to be there."

Sara groaned. "How do you deal with that?"

Her question was honest, and I didn't fault her for the tinge of disgust in her tone. Sometimes, I didn't know how I dealt with the pomp and circumstance around my family either.

"Look, I gotta run." Sara checked her watch. "Don't let it get to you. We'll figure it all out."

Shutting the door behind her, I took my coffee to the couch and considered my upbringing. It was a wonder Momma's uptight and privileged demeanor never rubbed off on me.

Daddy's family was the one with the money. A few generations back in the family line, my great, great, great grandfather perfected whiskey and became a household name.

Daddy assumed control of Guthry Whiskey straight out of college when his father suffered a fatal heart attack. And two years later, my uncle—Mary Anne's father—graduated college and joined him. Although they grew up with all the comforts money provided, it was a testament to the Guthry name that everyone was required to work hard for their share of the family company.

Daddy made me proud. He jumped into the business at a young age and was integral to helping the company prosper and grow to where it is today. Sometimes, I felt for Daddy and Uncle Grant because they'd been blessed or cursed, depending on one's point of view, with only daughters and very demanding wives.

Aunt Charlene came from old money herself. She grew up with Daddy and Uncle Grant, attending the same private schools and functions. While Uncle Grant was relaxed and playful, Charlene was rigid and self-absorbed. During my childhood, her calendar revolved around being pampered. She was obsessed with maintaining her girlish figure and an even more girlish face. Thank goodness for money because you got what you paid for; in her case, she was buying some good stuff.

Momma's upbringing was more of a mystery. Her parents passed away before my birth, and she never talked about her childhood. But she'd always been a stickler for propriety. My earliest memories were of being taught to sit at a table in a frilly dress, with legs crossed at the ankles and a napkin draped over my lap. She groomed me to perfection.

Momma teased, "You never know when the Prince will come looking for his Princess, my darling."

I was allowed to play tennis because it was a country club sport for ladies.

I took voice lessons, piano, and art—because a refined young woman did those things. In hindsight, my early years resembled a stifled character depicted in a Jane Austen novel. Momma was the cloying Mrs. Bennett who couldn't wait for me to meet the perfect eligible gentleman so I could secure my own posh and proper life.

College was an important endeavor to complete, but she fully expected me to utilize my degree for philanthropy. I was expected to come home and marry a well-known Charleston society gentleman who could take over Guthry Whiskey when Daddy and Uncle Grant stepped down.

I yanked a stray thread from the cuff of my pants.

Guthry Whiskey had been passed between fathers and sons following the grand tradition of misogynists since its founding. Now, Mary Anne and I were the sole heirs to the company, and my future weighed on me.

An international whiskey company. Mary Anne cared nothing about the business except for the money it brought in. Her future spouse would likely run her portion. That would be Daniel.

Disgust turned my stomach sour. Someone outside the family's bloodline making decisions for Guthry made me queasy. For Daniel to be that someone was downright unthinkable. What could I do? I was an Art History major with a mother who'd prepared me to be the perfect, happy little wife.

Or had she?

I'd come into my own since leaving Charleston. During freshman year, I sank deeper and deeper into self-regret over my foolish actions the summer before I left and over my defunct relationship with Daniel. Only after my trip home for Easter and hitting rock bottom could I break free from the depression that held me back.

I was a timid little southern belle who wouldn't speak for herself, and I hadn't really ever noticed.

Immediately, I stopped allowing Momma to dictate my life from afar and started making my own decisions. Unbeknownst to Momma and Daddy, I enrolled in business courses along with my art classes so I could secure a double major. Art was my love and passion, but I would need more than that. I wanted to be qualified enough to secure a spot at Guthry Whiskey on my own accord. I wasn't about to let a man walk into my life and make decisions for me—husband or not.

At some point this summer, I planned on talking with Daddy about my business major. I was excited to tell him I could come to work for him if he

wanted.

Although, I hoped to travel after graduation and see the art and museums I'd learned about. I wanted—no, I needed— one solitary summer of freedom before heading home to Charleston to convince Momma I could be a perfect society woman while single and working. Was I crazy for wanting to return home to settle down? Possibly, but I'd be damned before I let Daddy and Guthry Whiskey down. If returning to Charleston meant dealing with the skeletons in my closet, then so be it.

SEVEN
MARK
THURSDAY—APRIL 25, 2013

DATE #1

I entered The Garage and scanned the crowd, scoping out the fellas. The place was relatively busy for a Thursday night, but no men seemed to be standing to the side “looking single.” As if that was a thing.

Walking to the far end of the mahogany bar, I grabbed one of the last vacant seats, which, conveniently, had an unimpeded view of the entrance so I could see my date when he arrived. Mentally reciting the night's fifth pep talk, I set my clutch in front of me, crossed my legs, and pretended to belong.

The nearest bartender flashed a polite smile. “I’ll be right with you.”

Nodding, I glanced around while waiting. The dance floor was empty this early, but the small stage up front was set for open mic night, which started at 7 p.m. and drew a larger crowd.

A notorious people watcher, I checked out the other patrons sitting along the bartop. As my gaze drifted over faces, I backtracked, surprised to see the black-haired cougar from last Friday night. She was dressed in a black spaghetti-strapped number, nonchalantly sipping a martini. Her predatory gaze, and I do mean predatory, set upon the other bartender waiting on customers. At present, he was turned toward the liquor bottles along the rear wall, keeping me from seeing what she found so interesting, but Ms. Cougar definitely had him in her sights.

“Good evening. What can I get for you tonight?” Bartender one placed a cocktail napkin by my clutch.

“A Tom Collins, please.”

“Sure thing. I’ll need to see your ID.”

I complied, pulling out my license. "It was a bad hair day," I murmured.

Grinning, he returned my ID after a cursory glance and prepared my drink.

My nosey gaze returned to bartender two and his adoring fan while I waited. The barstools around the woman were occupied by other fabulously dressed women "of a certain age," same as Friday. I shouldn't care, so the women weren't much younger than my mother. They had the right to date whomever they wanted. It just felt so foreign. Too much country club etiquette. I frowned, irritated with myself as mysterious bartender two leaned over the bar, his upper half obscured by a blonde who seemed to be speaking into his ear. Loud guffaws floated my way.

I couldn't help but stare at how these assertive women monopolized the man with flirting. No matter that, men could be brazen and bold, and no one cared. I was raised to bat my eyes coyly for attention. No wonder I hadn't dated in forever.

Pushing aside insecurities, I breathed a sigh of relief when my bartender placed my cocktail in front of me. *The alcohol was much needed.* Making sure I knew to holler if I needed anything, he stepped away as I thanked him.

Lifting the Tom Collins to my lips, a shiver ran through me at the initial contact of vodka to the tongue. Dang, should have clarified gin. The tartness was sharper than preferred but drinkable. I took a second sip, praying for liquid courage.

It was 6:55 p.m. Five more minutes. Mark and I agreed we would meet at 7 p.m., so technically, he wasn't late, but he clearly didn't believe in being early. After a few more minutes of sipping, my attention was drawn to the door where a handsome, dark-haired man stood alone, his body language all but announced he was searching for someone.

Mark?

His gaze explored the area, then zeroed in on me. I drew my shoulders back, and he started my way, a grin appearing as he neared.

That must be him.

I sat taller, studying him. His hair was on the longer side, and he had a bit of the helmet-head haircut thing going on. Deduct a point. However, his face was pleasant enough. His good looks were accentuated by striking dark eyebrows and a straight nose. Add a point. His crisply ironed white Oxford dress shirt and tan slacks added more points.

"Savannah?" His brows rose as he stopped by my chair, showing off

perfectly straight teeth.

“Mark, I assume?”

“Wow. You’re prettier than your profile picture.” He held my outstretched hand longer than necessary. “Do you want to sit here at the bar, or would you rather grab a table?”

“Why don’t we stay here for now? Maybe we can round you up a stool.”

Excusing himself, Mark grabbed an unoccupied stool from a nearby bar table and slid it over. His knee touching my thigh was a bit crowded, but we could make it work.

Mark glanced around the bar, a bit preoccupied. “So, tell me about yourself.”

Really? Tell me about yourself? How original. I swallowed another sip of my sour Tom Collins.

“Well, I’m starting my senior year, majoring in Art History—” I dug into my story when Mark waved his hand for the bartender’s attention.

“Hold on,” he interrupted when bartender one arrived. “What do you have on tap?”

Swallowing back the rest of my life story, I listened patiently as the bartender rattled off their beer choices. While they chatted about the latest brew the restaurant was serving for the season, I studied my surroundings again. The bar had quieted, no more cougars. They’d been dressed for an evening out. They could have headed to dinner upstairs. Shaking my head at my preoccupation, my gaze flicked to the other bartender, finally free of his girl squad, and I caught him checking me out.

He was wiping the bartop, but his eyes were fixed on me. Heat crept up my neck as I pried my gaze away.

Holy wow. One stolen glimpse of Mr. Sexy and I was flustered. This had to be the new hot bartender the girls mentioned the other night. I had the urge to hold my condensation-dripping drink glass against my neck.

“So, you were saying?”

I jerked at Mark’s voice. *Oh, I’m on a date. Right.* Guilt at my wandering eye made my stomach ache, and I focused on my blind date, once again diving into a shortened life biography.

“Are you an artist yourself, or do you just study art?”

I considered that. “I like to sketch, but I’m not much of an artist. I wish I were as talented as Seurat or Van Gogh, but paint is not particularly a medium I excel at.”

“I don’t think I’ve drawn anything since elementary school art class. I was never very good at making a symmetrical circle.” Mark chuckled at his joke.

“Art is a stress reliever for me, honestly. I don’t plan to make a career out of it or anything.” I swirled my drink. “What about you? What are your plans?”

“I took a job as a staff accountant at the start of this year to get some experience. I plan to go into corporate finance eventually. I’ll likely move to Atlanta or Charlotte after graduation and look for a good finance job.”

“Oh? Do you have family there?” I prodded, searching for his backstory.

Dark strands fell over his eyes. “No, my family is all here. That’s part of the appeal of the East Coast.” He lifted his beer in a mock toast.

Not a family guy. Noted.

“My goal is to work somewhere I can do financial planning and analysis for a Fortune 500 company. I’m especially adept at forecasting and projecting for the future...” He babbled on and on.

So far, this is a basic first date. Nothing unusual, but no sparks. We hadn’t talked much about our interests, but the girls recommended I let him run the conversation. His control evidently meant many awkward minutes of silence and talking about senior year and his accounting job. Riveting.

Twenty minutes later, the conversation stalled again. Mark ordered a second beer while telling me about his love for working out. With wide eyes, I listened as he rambled about lifting weights and how he was thinking about entering an all-natural lifter contest.

“You look like you spend some time at the gym yourself. You don’t have a lot of muscle, but I can see some good tone.” He observed when he stopped talking about himself long enough to scan my body.

Oh, creepastic. That was a backhanded compliment. He spared me the need to reply when he stood. “Would you excuse me for a moment?”

Forcing my agreement, I watched as he headed toward the restrooms.

This was torture. What am I supposed to talk about with someone I don’t know? I took my last sip and glanced up to ask for a glass of ice water. My original bartender was nowhere to be seen. However, bartender two was staring again. One dark eyebrow lifted in a silent question, and I mouthed my request. Nodding, he pulled a glass, filled it with water, and garnished it with a slice of lemon. I admired his grace behind the bar. On his way to deliver my glass, he grabbed two beer bottles with one hand and popped the tops,

handing them over to the men a few seats down.

“Water?” He confirmed when he stepped before me. His voice held a slight accent I couldn’t place. “Can I get you another drink?”

“I’m good. Thanks, though.”

“Let me know if you need anything at all,” he drawled as he straightened, and his gaze landed on something behind me.

A hand touched my shoulder not a moment later, causing me to jump. The smell of overpowering cologne gave Mark away. Even so, I kept my sights on the bartender with the becoming accent and thanked him for his offer.

“Another beer, mate?” Bartender two asked Mark, though his focus remained on me. There was something compelling about his warm brown eyes, not to mention his seductive *Australian*—I could now place it— accent.

Mark gave my shoulder a not-so-gentle squeeze and maintained his position at my back. Curious, I checked over my shoulder and discovered Mark glaring. A jealous streak might impress me if I’d known the man for more than an hour, but after the less-than-stimulating conversation we’d carried on, I wasn’t going to get weak in the knees over the pissing contest he seemed to be having with Mr. Aussie.

Mr. Aussie’s eyes narrowed on my shoulder and Mark’s solid grip there, then he rolled his head from side to side and stepped back. “John will take care of you if you need anything else.”

As it turned out, John was our original bartender and was returning as Mr. Aussie walked away.

My gut told me this date was over before Mark pulled up his chair.

“You know what? I forgot about an early appointment I have for tomorrow. I should be going.” I fished a few dollars from my purse for my drink.

“Are you sure? It’s not even 8 p.m. yet.”

“Yeah, I’m really sorry. It was nice to meet you, though.” I set my cash on the bar and offered my hand for a friendly shake. His grip tightened, and he pulled me forward. I feigned a cough. No way was he touching these lips.

A low chuckle followed as I walked toward the exit, but when I glanced at the bar, Mr. Aussie was busy conversing with two new patrons in skin-tight minis and plunging necklines.



The house was vacant when I walked in. Part of me felt bad for ending the night so quickly, but if the chemistry wasn't there, it wasn't there. After washing up and climbing into bed with a new book, I sent a group text to Sara and Candace so they knew I made it home all right.

Mark = caveman dud. in other news i'm pretty sure i saw that new bartender you two were raving over last week. yes, please with a side of butter. ((Wink)) Love you two (even if my first date sucked!)

Sara: The fun is just beginning! jack is tomorrow

EIGHT
JACK
FRIDAY—APRIL 26, 2013

**SEVEN WEEKS UNTIL “THE WEDDING”
DATE #2**

Here goes date number two. I strolled into The Garage with a sigh, rocking my little black dress and kick-ass red high heels. It was seven on Friday night, and the bar was slammed.

“Savannah!” A whistle followed my name.

I scanned the crowd and found Riley behind the DJ booth giving me an emphatic thumbs-up. *Okay, confidence booster.* I shot him a jaunty wink he probably couldn’t see through the throng of people. Riley’s friendly face tempted me to walk over and chat until I spotted a casually dressed cutie fitting Jack’s description sitting at the bar, talking to one of the female bartenders and nursing a beer.

Mouthing to Riley that I had a date, I blew him a kiss. In typical Riley style, he snagged my air kiss, ate it, and dramatically clutched his heart before making an hourglass shape with his hands. Blushing fifteen shades of red, I yanked on my ultra-tight skirt. My friend went back to setting up his equipment, and I took stabilizing breathes as I slowly worked my way to the bar,

“Jack?” The poofy-haired blonde bartender he was talking to pulled back, nodding my way when he didn’t seem to hear me.

“Jack?” I repeated.

“Yeah, that’s me.” He swiveled on his stool. “Shit.” His jaw fell to the floor like a cartoon character’s. I didn’t profess to be all that and a bag of chips, but I *did* keep in shape. I looked pretty dang good in my skin-tight

dress—that's why I wore it, but this dude eyed me like I was his next meal. His lack of external control was slightly unnerving.

"You're Savannah?"

"Hi." I offered him my hand. "You seem surprised."

"Well, you know, I've learned not to trust those pictures people put on dating sites. Photoshop can do wonders for some girls." He grimaced with a fake shudder, maintaining a firm hold on my hand.

Fingers tugged free from his grip, I waited for him to suggest we sit at a table. Unfortunately, he simply remained seated, his eyes roaming lasciviously over my figure. When he made no move to seat me or suggest a table, I took the initiative and pulled an empty stool out.

"So, are you a student?"

Jack smirked. "No, actually, I run promotions at Shooters on Broadway. Are you a clubbing type of girl?"

"I'm sorry?" Did I hear him correctly?

"Clubbing. This place is pretty tame. Shooters is more of a party club with a local DJ, contests, and black lighting."

Shooters? Oh, joy. "Sorry, I don't spend much time over on Broadway. It's so crowded with tourists and—"

"Tourists make the club scene more entertaining. You either watch a bunch of dumb, middle-aged people get drunk and act like idiots, or you find a group of bachelorette party girls looking for a 'love it and leave it' type of night."

"Mmm-hmmm." I threw up a little in my mouth. Did he seriously imply he regularly hit up the girls on Broadway for one-night stands?

"You know, Savannah, we do a lot of contests at my bar for hot chicks like you. You could win some pretty good cash doing a wet T-shirt or bikini contest. You know what?" he blurted like he'd suddenly had a brilliant idea. "Can you dance? We're always in need of new go-go girls."

"Oh, wow. Um, yeah, wow, Jack." I was at a loss for words. "Thanks for the offer, but um, no. I mean, I'm not much of a dancer, you know?" I dug deep, looking for those middle school acting skills I once had, and feigned disappointment. Turning in my seat, I scanned past Jack's shoulder and landed on the Aussie bartender, his shoulders shaking at our conversation. My gaze swung from his as I tried to keep from joining his laughter.

This "date" was ludicrous since it was pretty obvious Jack used the dating site to pick up "hot chicks" for his club. And, thanks to how he leered, I had

the overwhelming urge to bathe in hand sanitizer.

Jack angled his body my way. "I've got to head over to Shooters and check on things. You know, with it being Friday night, business is always slammed. You want to ride over with me and check the place out?" He made the offer with a straight face as if he believed I would consider the invitation. "Drinks on me." He threw in for good measure.

"Gee, thanks for the offer, but I have to say no. I appreciate it, though." I slid off my stool to usher his speedy exit.

The man had the audacity to pull a card from his wallet "just in case." A shiver ran up my spine as he left.

"Smart girl." A low voice spoke from behind.

I spun, startled to find the Aussie removing Jack's empty beer from the bar. He cradled several empty cups in his large hand.

"Eavesdrop much?" I surreptitiously checked him out since he was no longer behind the counter. He was built like a fitness model. The song "Country Girl (Shake It For Me)" came to mind as I eyed his snug black jeans and black tee so tight it was obscene. Man, what I wouldn't tip for this man to shake it.

Every muscle in his arms and chest bulged and flexed as he turned to one of the tables and grabbed two more empty bottles. "Sorry, I was ensuring you didn't end up on a milk carton. That guy was scum personified."

"Yeah, don't worry, I figured him out pretty quickly," I affirmed, though his protective vibe was appreciated. "Thank you for looking out."

"Anytime," he murmured, and I walked away with a smirk and the certainty that Mr. Aussie's eyes were firmly tractor-beamed on my ass. His heat followed me across the dance floor to Riley's booth.

He pulled his headphones off with a grin. "Run him off already, gorgeous?"

"It was bad, Riles." I went into all the slimy details as Riley bit back his laughter.

"Oh, Savannah, only you, baby, only you."

"Hey! What's that supposed to mean?" I swiped at his shoulder and missed.

Finished with whatever he'd been doing in his booth, he came around the wall and deftly pulled me into his arms. I yelped as he swung me about on the edge of the dance floor as the cover band strummed some slow song I'd never heard.

His lips brushed my ear. “Sara and Candace told me about your quest to find a date for a wedding back home. You sure you’re up to the task?”

“Why the hell wouldn’t I be?” I shoved him back, offended he thought otherwise. Was the word ‘fragile’ tattooed across my forehead?

“You *do* know the male species is ninety percent horn dog and ten percent man you can bring home to Momma, right?”

I giggled, and he dipped me low. “It’s a damn shame I don’t know anyone in the ten percent bracket, Riles. Good thing I’ve got all these dates set up.”

“Bite your tongue. I am one hundred percent all beef patty, special sauce, and charm for your momma right here.” He waggled his eyebrows and flung me out before twisting me back in.

Barely able to keep up with his fancy footwork, I stumbled and fell against his chest, still laughing at his bawdy humor. Riley could always lift my mood.

NINE
CARTER
SATURDAY—APRIL 27, 2013

DATE #3

Date number three in as many days. All I really wanted to do tonight was veg out in front of the television and read a good book. Two bad dates in a row were enough for one week. To make matters worse, we said 6:30 p.m., but it was 7:15 p.m. before my date showed. Forty-five minutes late, and when he arrived he waved and pointed to the restroom. *What the hell?* Contemplating walking out of the bar, I slid off the stool when a husky voice stopped me.

“Tom Collins?”

The air whooshed from my lungs. His accent alone could melt the panties off a woman. It had probably happened many times. I met his warm brown eyes. “You know my drink?”

“It’s my job to know what the regulars prefer.”

I shook my head. “Oh, I’m not a regular.”

He chuckled the same deep chuckle I heard the night I left Mark at the bar. “My apologies, three nights in a row. I mistakenly assumed you made this a habit.”

“Whoa, what do you mean this?” My cheeks burned. Did he think I was trolling for men? I suppose it seemed like that to the casual observer. I didn’t want to come off as desperate.

“This?” He waved his arm about the bar. “Picking losers for dates. That’s what I meant.” He turned and grabbed a glass, moving around the bar, effortlessly pouring gin—without my having to specify—lemon, and simple syrup into the glass.

“On the house.” He winked and walked away.

What? So he wasn't trying to insult me personally, just the losers I'd been with. Oh, wait a minute.

"Hey," I shouted, not caring about the women he'd started talking with a few stools down. He raised his head, his forehead crinkling.

"What makes you think they're losers?" I had no shame anymore. Hollering down the length of a bar. Momma would be mortified.

The corner of his mouth pulled up, and holy hell, a deliciously lick-able dimple appeared on his cheek. The girls at the bar gawked while I held his gaze and waited for an answer. Rather than respond, he returned to the other patrons, taking their order and leaving me feeling like an unruly toddler who had spoken out at an inopportune moment. He made a big show of pouring a glass of wine for one and shaking up some colorful drink for the other. All the while, his eyes met mine for quick checks as he maintained a slight grin.

He took their credit cards before slowly migrating my way, those brown eyes boring holes through me.

"Did you yell at me from across the bar, sweetheart?"

A man I barely knew calling me sweetheart would usually bait me, but coming from his mouth, I turned to goo. *Not good*. This man possessed some secret kryptonite in that voice of his.

"Yes, *sweetheart*, I did." My snotty reply oozed with self-importance. "What makes you think my dates are losers?" Though, speaking of, what in the world is taking this one so long?

"You can't be serious," his palms rested on the bartop, "Love, anyone could have placed a bet on the outcome of those dates."

Oh my word, he was full of himself, wasn't he? Laughing off his remark, I took a long swig of my drink as I formulated a witty comeback. *My damn perfect drink*. Did this man have any faults besides an oversized ego? The impatient crowd lured him away before I came up with a worthy retort.

"Hey, gorgeous." Strong hands gripped my upper arms, and a pair of lips smacked my cheek.

"Geez, Riley!" I yelped. "Scare a girl much?"

I twisted on my stool. Riley was tall and skinny—the type of guy people would assume was into Bioscience if they judged a book by its cover. He was a quirky urban hipster, though. What he was doing playing music at a semi-country bar in Nashville was beyond me.

"Where's Sara and Candace? Or are you on another date?" Riley reached over my shoulder, acknowledging whoever handed him the large water with a

“Thanks, man.”

My vague “Well, kinda,” furrowed Riley's brow as behind me, Mr. Kryptonite spoke a smooth, “Sure thing.”

“Kinda? What’s that supposed to mean?” Riley asked as across the bar, by the hallway to the restrooms, my time-challenged date flirted with another woman. Snorting inelegantly, I excused myself.

It's time to nip this one in the bud. Deliberately walking as sexily as possible, I sauntered toward Carter and stood behind the petite brunette he chatted up.

“Hey.” The brunette halted her chipper laughter and swung around with open curiosity. “So, is this a double date tonight, Carter?” I eyed the girl like I was sizing her up.

Carter’s jaw went slack, but the brunette leaned into me. “I’m not against that.” She pulled away with a wink, and I lost it. Was I being punked? There aren't any hidden cameras around.

“I tell you what, sweetie, he’s all yours tonight,” I conceded, patting her arm. Ignoring Carter's incredulous stare, I walked away, provocatively swinging my hips. Had to show him what he was missing out on.

Riley’s eyes were about to jump out of their sockets. “Was that your date?” he sputtered, his water cup arrested halfway to his mouth.

I edged onto the bar stool, carefully keeping my skirt from rising. “Well, like I said before, kinda. Apparently, he decided to check out the other dishes on the long trip to the restroom.”

“What an idiot.” Riley huffed, a little too forcefully. “What did you say to them?”

“I suggested a threesome.” The Aussie—it had to be him because every inch of my body lit up at the sound—choked behind me. I paid him no heed and finished, “Hilariously enough, she was into it. So I did what any smart girl would and gracefully handed him over.”

“It’s his loss, Savannah. You look extremely doable tonight, baby.” I slapped his chest when the nearby guys murmured in agreement.

“Nice job, Riley.” I shrank into myself. “Now they’re all going to be panting after me.”

“Pretty sure they already were.” He checked his watch. “Stick around for a while?”

It was 8 p.m. on a Saturday night, and I had no desire to head home this early after dolling myself up. Crossing my legs and leaning on the bar at my

back, I hunkered down.

“Try not to distract the bartenders sitting there pretty like that.” Riley pressed another friendly kiss to my cheek.

“Hey, Gage,” he called over my head, “Keep an eye out for my girl here.” I grinned until the accented “Sure thing” hit me.

Head meet desk. If only there were a desk. Gage was Mr. Aussie. After a few minutes of my back to the bar, ice clinked into a glass behind me.

I glimpsed over my shoulder as Gage set another Tom Collins on a napkin. “Trying to get me drunk?”

He winked, his gaze running the length of me.

“We’re friends, Riley and I.” I threw that out there like the obligatory Presidential first pitch at an MLB game. It was awkward and clumsy, and Gage merely raised his brows and went back to work.

Dang, that was infuriating. What did I care what he thought of me or my sketchy dating habits?

“Who’s here for some music?” Riley called from the DJ booth. The crowd cheered and clapped as Riley egged them on. “It’s open mic night, and I’ve got one pretty little lady here to start us off...”

Twisting in my seat and reaching for the drink Gage left, I met the bartender's intense stare as he stood on the other end of the bar, popping bottle tops for a group of guys clustered around.

I turned away, because two could play that game, and tasted my drink. Dammit, had to give it to him. He had mad bartending skills.

“You go to VU, right?” The most cliché opening line ever interrupted my tastebud’s orgasm.

Didn’t half the patrons inhabiting The Garage?

“Yeah, I do,” I responded politely.

“I knew I’d seen you around campus.” He introduced himself as Brandon.

“Savannah.”

“So, Savannah, what are you doing here all alone?”

I tried and failed to stop my eye roll. Is this how guys pick girls up these days? No wonder I didn’t do this bar thing more often.

“I’m not alone.”

“Brand?” A petite blonde weaved through the tables. She spared me two seconds before wrapping her lithe body around Brandon and kissing him. “Come dance with me.” She tugged at his arm.

“I guess you’re not alone either.” I pointed out as cliché Brandon was led

to the dance floor, his stare lingering on every inch of my body as he went.

“Hmph, tossed aside for Malibu Barbie.” I raised my glass while the limber gal did her version of a pole dance around Brandon’s waist. The current performer was singing Toby Keith, for goodness sake, not exactly a grind on your partner type of song.

“You can’t sit there like that and not expect these puppies to hit on you.” The kryptonite tone chuckled. Man, I was beginning to crave that voice.

“Puppies?” I glanced over my left shoulder, genuinely confused by his slang.

His head jerked in the general direction of the dance floor. “Puppies. I’d call them dogs, but they’re boys, and you’ve got them sniffing around like you’re in heat.”

"I'm just a girl sitting at a bar," I defended, looking down at my body. Sure, I'd angled against the bar with one elbow propped back, boosting my cleavage. And yes, my dress had hiked up a good mile when I crossed my legs and began swinging my strappy heeled foot to and fro. But, again, I'm just a girl sitting at a bar. I'm not asking for attention.

As though he read my mind, he leaned across the bar and whispered close to my ear, “Riley was right, by the way. You *do* look very doable lounging there.”

The hair stood on the back of my neck.

"It's in men's nature to hunt when they see something they like. I know it's disgusting, but that's how it is."

“Gage, they need you in the back.” Someone called, and I sat straight and spun my back to the crowd, facing the bar again.

Gage remained close, a thoughtful stare roaming my face before he leaned in like confessing a secret. “For the record, Malibu Barbie’s got nothing on you.”

With that little piece of panty-dropping magic, he slid around the end of the bar and disappeared around the corner.

“I’ve got a sweet girl in the crowd tonight who needs to get her ass on the dance floor as these boys play a little “Country Girl” for you guys.” Riley’s voice broke through the Aussie haze covering me while I processed Gage’s compliments.

The opening melody called to me as Riley’s request sank in. Pulling my shit together, I peered through the crowd. Riley crooked his finger and beckoned me to the dance floor.

Damn his adorable self. Abandoning my stool, I waded through the sea of country girls shaking their things. When I reached his booth, I gave him my best glare before being bombarded by Sara and Candace.

“What are y’all doing here?” Relief washed away tonight’s tension.

“A little birdie told us you were lonely.” Sara squeezed my arm.

“You messaged them?”

“Guilty,” his hands arms raised in surrender, “Couldn’t stand watching you get ogled by the masses any longer. I needed reinforcements to keep you safe.”

My excitement bubbled over. “I could kiss you guys right now.”

Riley leaned over the booth wall. “I’ll take that kiss.”

“Tease.” I stretched to my toes to kiss his cheek, but our lips met instead. The graze was quick and unexpected. Certainly something new for us. “Thank you for looking out for me. Seriously.” I patted his chest.

“Okay, let’s dance.” Candace dragged me from the booth and twirled me under her arm as the band segued into another song. We danced between the band and Riley’s tunes for another hour before my sexy little heels staged a revolt. Sara had taken up with one of her many friends-with-benefits partakers and left after the band’s last set.

“I’m beat. Do you need a ride home?” I was ready to soak my poor little piggies. Candace agreed, and we waved to Riley, letting him know we were off.

Making our way to the exit, I motioned for Candace to hold up. Gage leaned against the bar, talking animatedly to a few ladies while pouring them wine. I limped closer.

“Hey!” The redhead in front of Gage turned, her hand rested on the forearm he’d draped over the bartop. “Sorry,” I apologized, internally groaning for yelling yet again. “I wanted to thank you for the drinks.”

Gage’s mouth opened, and I steeled my weak knees for that accent. He inclined his head instead. I shuffled from heel to heel, expecting something and getting nothing.

What are you doing, Savannah? He corked the wine, leaving his free hand resting around the neck as the redhead stroked his forearm, and gave me a severe evil eye.

Flushed with embarrassment, I cleared my throat. “Well, okay then. See ya.”

Spinning, I hustled into the humid Tennessee air with Candace on my

heels. Rushing for my car, I clicked the doors unlocked, eager to get out of dodge before I did something stupid like run inside and fling myself at a possessive redhead.

"Hey."

My mind took longer to register what my eyes saw—Gage jogging out of the bar.

Pulse leaping, I circled to the driver's side and opened the door, waiting as Gage stopped with two cars between us.

Head cocked, he stuck his hands in his pockets. "I didn't get your name."

"Answer him," Candace hissed from inside the car. I froze.

Gage glanced back at the bar. How much trouble could he get in for following a patron—a female patron to boot—outside while on shift? It's highly doubtful he's allowed to do that. Why did he want to know my name? Why was he so freaking hot? Why was I a crazy woman who couldn't answer the sexy Australian bartender?

"Sorry," Gage shook his head, "I didn't mean to bother you. Have a good night."

"No. Wait." My stage fright evaporated. "Savannah."

His lips curved, raising my temperature by ten degrees.

"My name is Savannah."

"Savannah." He repeated like he was tasting each syllable. The confident superpower sexiness from earlier this evening had returned. "Will you be making it four nights in a row?"

"Four nights? You mean, will I be here tomorrow?" I was reluctant to answer. "Contrary to what you think, I'm not a regular here. I've got a da—an appointment next Thursday upstairs, though." I threw that tidbit in to see if he would tell me to stop by.

"Then I'm sure I'll see you around." He walked backward. "Drive safe, sweetheart."

"Okay, you too. Thanks."

My words echoed as I slipped into the driver's seat. "Okay, you too? Did I seriously say that?" Lord, I made absolutely no sense.

"Lucy, you've got some 'splaining to do," Candace murmured.

Yes, yes, I did.

TEN

DREAMING OF SUPERMAN

SUNDAY—APRIL 28, 2013

Bzzzz Bzzzz Bzzzz

Amidst a *very* tantalizing dream with a *very* buff Australian Superman, the annoying vibrations kicked in.

Bzzzz Bzzzz Bzzzz

I pulled my pillow over my head and tried to sink back into the dream. Please, for all that's decent in this world, come back to me. He was about to reveal his superpowers. Can't a girl get a break!

Bzzzz Bzzzz Bzzzz

I reached out from under my blanket cocoon and grabbed the phone. "What?!"

"Savannah?"

Damn.

"Hi, Momma." Worst. Timing. Ever.

"Darling, it's very rude to yell at people when you answer your phone," she chastised. "Is everything all right?"

Yes, Momma. It's also very rude to interrupt dreams involving a sexy Australian Superman and his X-ray vision, but you don't hear me whining, do you?

Stretching from under the covers, I peeked at the phone for the time. "Momma." I took a deep breath. "It is nine in the morning. On a Sunday. Seriously?"

"Don't take a tone with me. I wanted to catch you before church. You know I have a bridal shower for Mary Anne this afternoon. I bought a present from you."

I shot up. "You WHAT?"

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake, drop the drama,” she snapped. “Mary Anne is like a sister to you, and it’s about time you got over the past. It’s bad enough you’re not coming home for any of the pre-wedding events. Honestly, what do I say when people wonder why you’re not here?”

Her voice rose an octave with each sentence. “And Daniel’s family loves you. You know, his mother asks about you all the time. I think they expected you two to work things out eventually.”

Kill me now.

“Momma,” I blurted, trying to halt her rant.

“It isn’t right how, after all this time, you can’t bring yourself to let bygones be bygones. Our circles are small, Savannah, and you’ll be the talk of the club.”

“Momma!”

“There’s no need to screech, darling. I’m not hard of hearing.”

Inhale, exhale. “Thank you for buying a gift, and please convey my apologies for not being there. I need to go now, okay? I love you.”

“Well, all right then, if you must rush off. I’ll call you later and tell you all about the event. Did I mention it’s at the botanical—”

“Goodbye, Momma.”

“All right, all right. Get some rest. You sound awful. Goodbye,” she sang in my ear.

I tossed my phone aside and buried my head under my pillow.

I stood in the kitchen debating breakfast an hour later when the front door lock jiggled. Sara tiptoed in and closed the door softly behind her.

Busted. She wore the same tank top and bubble skirt from the night before.

“Don’t try to sneak past me, hussy. Embrace your walk of shame.” I stuck my head out of the kitchen.

She dropped her black boots with a yelp. “Jesus, you scared me.”

“I bet.” I returned to the pantry and my fruitless search for something amazing to fill my stomach. Unless I wanted Pop-Tarts or Lucky Charms, there was nothing. While a fan of both, I longed for real food after that call with Momma. I craved bacon.

Sara propped herself against the doorway. “There’s no shame in this walk, babe.”

“Really? You were with Chris, right?”

“Mmm-hmmm, and I’m deliciously exhausted.”

Groaning, I shut the cabinet. “I don’t want to hear about your sexcapades.”

Her fingers swiped over her mouth, zipping her lips as she disappeared. “Your loss.”

She hummed all the way down the hallway to her bedroom.

“What’s this about your loss?” Candace asked when she walked into the kitchen a few minutes later, freshly showered and dressed for the day.

“I wouldn’t let Sara brag about her torrid night of passion with Chris.”

“She spent the whole night out? The little ho.” She chuckled and moved behind me, searching the kitchen like I had.

“I need sustenance.” She rubbed her stomach. “Brunch?”

“You read my mind. Be right back.” I raced to my room and tossed on a simple sundress and tennis shoes. I’d showered before bed, so I threw my still-damp hair into a high ponytail and slicked on some lip gloss.

“Let’s go,” I said less than two minutes later.



Sitting over brunch, Candace shoved a bite of sausage into her mouth. "What went down between you and the bartender?"

“Nothing.” My voice cracked.

“Nothing,” she mimicked. “Sweetie, he chased you outside to get your name. Obviously, you made quite the impression.”

"Fine." I sipped my orange juice and told her about yelling at Mr. Aussie when he called my dates losers.

“I got the impression he hoped you’d be back tonight.”

“C’mon, Cand, that’s Sara’s department. Did you see all the women hanging on him? I bet he scores more than Peyton Manning.”

“Harsh.” She broke into laughter. “Probably true, but still harsh.”

“He’s super hot, though. I’ll give him that.”

“Oh, I’d give him more than that.” She grinned, earning a peg in the face from one of my home fries.

“All right then,” she said a few moments later. “Let’s talk about Riley.”

“You’re full of questions this morning, aren’t you, Lois Lane?” *Lois Lane*. My brain detoured to this morning’s abbreviated dream with my Aussie Superman. I shifted in my seat.

“Why yes, yes I am,” she teased. “Inquiring minds want to know. What was up with that kiss?”

“That question is somewhat harder to answer than the one about Gage. Riley was in full-on flirt mode last night. He called me doable.” I choked on a laugh. “I mean, hell’s bells, it was random.”

“Not random. I’m pretty sure he’s been scoping you out for a long time. You know how he and Sara had that brief fling freshman year?” I nodded. “Well, maybe he’s biding his time with you because of what happened with her.”

“No way. We’ve been friends for over two years. He knows I’m not dating anyone, yet he’s never tried to put a move on me.”

“Don’t be such a Dawson.”

“Dawson? Good Lord, you need to stop hanging out with Sara. What’s that supposed to mean?”

Candace snorted and rolled her eyes like the answer was obvious. “Duh. Dawson’s Creek. Don’t you remember how Dawson was oblivious to everything around him? Seriously, he didn’t know Joey was in love with him? How could he miss that? You’re just like him.”

“Oh my God, Sara has rubbed off on you. And no, I’m not being a Dawson because it is *not* so obvious. Seriously, Riley and I have always had a fun friendship.” Does he want more? That’s crazy, we’re friends. But, his behavior last night.

“I don’t know how to handle his kiss.” Worry stacked up. “Give a girl a hand. What do I do?”

“Don’t spaz. It was a quick kiss. Has he called you yet?”

I pushed my plate to the side and shook my head.

“You’re right. It might be nothing. There have been plenty of opportunities to hit on you, and he never has,” she reasoned. “Of course, maybe he’s jealous now that he sees you finally wading into the dating pool.”

“Jealous? What’s he got to be jealous about? He knows I’m looking for a

wedding date.”

Candace finished her juice. "Riley's behavior is as much a mystery to me as it is to you."

“Speaking of dates,” I said while we waited for our check. “This week’s weren’t so great. I hope you’ve got better prospects planned for next week.”

“Oh, I do.” She rubbed her hands devilishly. “You’re meeting a special someone Tuesday night for dinner—”

“Whoa, I said drinks only,” I warned.

“I know, but I promise you this one is different. It’s just dinner, trust me, would you?”

After this week, that might be hard.

“Sara picked out your Friday night guy, and believe it or not, we agreed on Mr. Saturday night.”

“This is crazy.” I tossed my head and stared at the fluorescent ceiling lights. "Am I truly this desperate to find a date for Mary Anne's wedding?"

“Yes.”

“Hey, c’mon now.”

Candace grabbed the bill from our server and stood. “Fine. No, you’re not desperate for a date. You desperately need to get back in the saddle, though.” Her face became thoughtful. “What happened the last time you went back home? I’ve known you for three years, and you’ve never opened up about it.”

I slung my purse across my chest and walked to the cashier, where we split the check and paid. I didn’t fault Candace for asking. We’d been roommates since freshman year. When we first met, she didn’t delve into my personal life. She knew about Daniel dumping me senior year of high school right before my coming-out ball, and she sympathized, but she never pried. She spent countless nights studying with me in our dorm instead of trying to convince me to party.

It wasn’t until I returned from that disastrous Easter trip that I finally opened up about him dating Mary Anne. Candace had been so angry on my behalf that I couldn’t find the courage to confess his propositioning me to meet him. Or my subsequent weakness and shame over that night.

“Cand, you have to promise that what I tell you will stay between us.”

“Of course, it will.” She crossed her heart.

We left the diner and walked down the sidewalk on a street full of trendy shops. A wooded park was up ahead, and we silently headed for a picnic table.

“I’m going to tell you a story I’m not proud of, but you have to understand how broken I was.” Like I could qualify my actions.

“Savannah, I know how broken you were. You were a vacant shell our entire freshman year. You had no idea how to live and let your mother rule your every move. I half expected you to drop out once the year was over.”

Her perception of my first year surprised and hurt. She was right. I had come to college as half a person. The summer before proved to be way more than I could handle. Then, when I went home for the holidays, my past haunted me at every turn. I fell into a depression so deep I didn’t recognize myself.

“I almost decided to transfer to a school back home,” I confessed.

Climbing onto the picnic table, I sat and gazed across the park. “Daniel made a pass at me at Easter dinner.”

“Noooo.”

“Shhh,” I held my hand up, “Let me get through this.”

She leaned back, and I recounted the details of Daniel coming to my room and our seedy make-out session. “The thing is, I can’t explain why I did it. There was always something about him, something so mesmerizing. I fell right back into his hands that day. He asked me to meet him at our old spot that night.” The memories were revolting. Her lips formed a silent “oh.”

“I wish I could say I didn’t go. I wish I could tell you I immediately grabbed my keys and drove back to school. But I didn’t. You know what I did instead?” I pinched the bridge of my nose at the stupid girl I’d been. “I put on the sexiest outfit I found and drove to the park where we had our first kiss. I preened all the way there, thinking about Mary Anne and how Daniel would tell me he’d made a mistake and wanted me back. God,” I shook my head and buried my face into my hands, “I was such an idiot. He was already there when I arrived.”

“He had the gall to bring a blanket. He’d spread it out under a tree and was sitting there all self-importantly like he knew I would come. Like there was never any doubt in his mind, I would show. I should have run the other way, but I ran right into his arms instead.”

“What a lying cheat,” Candace fumed. “What happened?”

Shame crept through like storm clouds eating away the sunlight. I couldn’t justify it. I was dumb and blind and had been out of my mind.

With another breath of courage, I digressed. “I didn’t tell you how we never slept together as a couple. I’m pretty sure that’s why he dumped me.” It

was such a typical tale—girl loves boy. The boy wants sex. The girl says no. The boy dumps her. “He’d been pressuring me for a while, but I wouldn’t budge. I was blindsided when he told me he wanted us to have some freedom. He claimed I deserved to enjoy my senior year and wanted us to experience life before we settled down with each other.”

“What an ass.”

“The ironic part was, I was going to cash in my V-card the night of my coming out. Daniel just happened to end things before I could.”

She shook her head. “Well, I remember you coming back from that Easter break and being this completely different girl. You were *pissed*.”

I scoffed and stretched my legs, letting the sun warm them. “Yeah, that’ll happen when you’re deluded into sleeping with your cheating ex...”

ELEVEN

REMEMBERING DANIEL

EASTER, TWO YEARS AGO...

I lay there as Daniel slipped his pants up over himself. We hadn't even bothered to fully undress—talk about a hussy moment. When dressed, he stretched beside me and ran his finger along my collarbone, staring into my eyes. We hadn't spoken more than ten words, and most of those were throaty exclamations of passion. He hadn't confessed his love or his regret. All he'd said was how beautiful I was and how much I turned him on.

His finger dipped between my breasts. “We need to keep this a secret, okay?”

I blinked. Did I miss something?

“A secret?”

“Well, yeah. Mary Anne can't know about this, and if we're going to see each other again, we need to play it cool.”

“Whhhhaattt?” I knocked him over as I sat up. “Mary Anne? I just had sex with you, Daniel. I...I... Oh. My. God.” I jumped up, grabbed my shoes and keys, and ran toward my car, dangerously close to tears. Ignoring Daniels's shout, I fumbled with my keys and jerked the door open as he grabbed my arm.

“Savannah, what did you expect? That I would dump Mary Anne for you? Come on, I can't do that. I love her.”

“Love her?” I clutched my stomach. “What a funny way of showing her your love.”

“Baby, come on. Don't be that way. I love you, too. I'm confused. I didn't expect you to feel this good.” His puppy dog eyes leveled on me. “I saw you today, and I couldn't think straight. I needed to have you. We can work things out. See each other on the sly until I figure out what's best.”

Bile burned my throat. “What’s best for who, Daniel?”

“For all of us.” He pulled me against his chest. “We’re all grownups here. Who says we can’t still see each other?”

I yanked out of his grip and swung around to face him as my eyes filled with tears. “How about Mary Anne, for starters, and me? I’m not going to be your little sex toy.”

“Oh, you know you enjoyed it. What was between us in high school was great, but this. This moment,” he pointed toward the blanket, “was incredible. I didn’t expect it from you.”

“Am I supposed to take that as a compliment?” I gagged on my humiliation. “What? Was I a horrible kisser when we were together?”

“Come on, Savannah. You’ve always been so reserved, so proper and perfect. Tonight, you were a hell cat. Someone taught you well.”

And there it was. The moment when the horror at what I’d done morphed to anger. Red hot, fire-breathing anger. I stood before the person who’d just changed my life without knowing it. The person who’d ripped out my heart, threw it on the ground, then stomped on it when he’d walked into my party with Mary Anne on his arm nine months earlier. Now, he dared to compliment the guy he assumed taught me in bed.

I crooked my finger, luring Daniel to come near me, a deceptive smile on my lips. Hands on his shoulders, I pulled his ear to my mouth and whispered sweetly, “You will never touch me again, or Mary Anne will hear every last dirty detail of this day.” I raised my leg and gave him a swift knee to the balls. He went down with a wail, and I climbed into my car, slamming the door behind me.



Candace's face was pale when I finished the horrid explanation of that fateful Easter break.

“I went home, showered, and climbed into my bed cold and numb, but I never cried. Instead, I replayed Daniel’s words, and one thing stuck out. He’d complained about how proper I was, how much like Momma I behaved. That was the one point I couldn’t argue. I was tired of being the perfect little country club debutante belle she raised me to be.”

“When you came back, it was like you’d flipped a switch. You loosened up and started hanging out more.” Candace shifted as though seeing it all in her mind. “That’s when we met Sara, and bless her, she pulled you the rest of the way from that cocoon you were in.”

Pulled, dragged, same thing. “Yeah, she did. I wanted to be my own person, and I’ve tried very hard to be. I still have a ways to go to get what I want, but I’m working on it.”

“So why haven’t you dated? So many guys have asked you out over the past two years. Why did you never say yes?”

“I think I was scared of getting screwed over again. It’s not solely about Daniel.” I stopped, my brain working to explain the rest of my past. “There was another guy. It was the summer before our freshman year, while I was still nursing my broken heart from Daniel’s defection. It’s a story I’d rather not go into right now, but trust me when I say I was done with men after the two of them.”

“Was this guy an ass too?”

Twirling a strand of my ponytail, I sighed. “Hmmm, no. He was pretty amazing, but we weren’t meant to be. I promise I’ll tell you about him, just not today.”

“That’s one dreamy look in your eye, chica.” Her knee nudged mine.

“Oh, stop, it was a long time ago.” I shook out of the haze of my past. “Hey, enough about me. Don’t you think we should rush home and drill Sara about her all-nighter?”

“Yes!” Candace jumped from the table and pulled me up.

A weight had been lifted from my chest. Getting the truth out there was cathartic. Now I could finally move forward. Candace was right. It was high time I got back in the saddle. It was time to move on from Daniel, but also from the guy who’d picked up the shattered pieces of my heart after Daniel. The guy who’d repaired my heart, only to shatter it again before the glue had dried.

Spencer Alexander.

TWELVE

PAINT AND SURPRISES

MONDAY—APRIL 29, 2013

Spencer hadn't entered my thoughts in a long time, but after sharing my past with Candace, the summer we'd spent together before I left for college wouldn't exit my brain. He still haunted me as I got up for the first day of my summer art class.

What if Momma meddled in his personal life? Did Daddy diffuse the situation? Placing the call while grabbing a bagel on my way out the door, I waited while his voicemail picked up.

"Hi, Daddy. It's almost eight my time Monday morning, so you're probably on your way into the office and not answering the phone. I wanted to check up on your conversation with Momma about Spencer. Call me back. Love you."

Slipping my phone into my shoulder bag, I headed out. Although I was volunteering at the University's fine art gallery for the summer, it was this community college art class I looked forward to most. Sketching made me happy.

Graduation was a year away—the reality lodged in my chest. Life after school scared the hell out of me. My art history degree was something I'd chosen for Momma's benefit. With our lucrative family history, I was lucky not to worry about finances. She'd pushed me into a major I could use as part of the family philanthropy—something all the Guthry women did. I loved art, and my knowledge of the paintings and sculptures of the world had grown through the years. But did I love art because she wanted me to, or because *I* wanted to? I was ready to figure that out. To travel the world and sketch and see all those beautiful creations first-hand.

Unfortunately, Momma was stuck in her mentality that dictated I come

home, bat my eyelashes, and marry the first man with a Roman numeral behind his name.



After class, I was at the coffee shop sipping on a frappe when my phone rang.

Riley.

I grit my teeth. I hated that I felt awkward answering his call. “Hello?”

“Hey, Savannah, it’s Riley.”

“Hey, Riles, what’s up?”

“I was thinking we could grab lunch one day this week. I feel like we need to talk.” He was way better at sounding carefree than I was.

“Um, sure. I’ve got to work at the gallery each morning this week, though. I’m not sure what time I’ll get out yet or if I’ll even get lunch.”

“Okay,” he drawled. “How about today?”

Talking with Riley about anything right now sets off alarms in my head. He was a great friend, and I didn’t want anything to change. “Riley.” I considered my words carefully. “Is everything okay?”

A long pause ensued. “I was going to ask you the same thing. Should I apologize for kissing you the other night?”

The urge to brush the kiss off popped up, but telling him it was fine might be wrong. I don’t hate the idea of Riley, but he and I don’t feel right.

Leaning into my plan to live my life boldly, I leaped. “You know what, I’m free now. I’d love an early lunch if you don’t mind meeting up around eleven.”

After we agreed on a meeting place, I hung up and glanced at my watch. It was close to ten. More than enough time to check out the nearest art store for the supplies I needed for class.

Forty-five minutes later, I entered a local deli to find Riley waiting for me. He rose and pulled the earbuds from his ears when he spotted me.

“Hey.” I hugged him cheerfully, pushing down any awkwardness. “Did you order already?”

“Nah, I was waiting for you.”

“Well, I’m starving, so come on.” I pulled him to the counter, where we ordered our food and waited as they made it.

“You know we’d never work, right?” he said out of nowhere when we took a seat with our lunches.

“Whoa, careful where you’re shooting those words, Riles. Can you back up and explain yourself?” My back pressed into the leather booth.

“That’s what I keep telling myself. That we’d never work.” He bent away from my gaze and rubbed his chin with his palm.

“Riley, where is this coming from? We’re friends.”

“I know.” He groaned. “But I’ll be damned if I didn’t see you walk into the bar Saturday night, and it was like *BAM*. I couldn’t help myself.”

My eyes narrowed. “Sounds like you weren’t thinking with the right brain.”

“Baby, you’ve made *that* brain crazy for almost two years. This time it was the other one,” he tapped his temple, “I saw those guys looking at you, and I wondered why I hadn’t taken a swing. We get along great. You’re one of my best friends. Why haven’t we ever tried for more?”

“Oh gosh, Riley, I don’t know. Probably because you were with Sara when we met?”

“That was barely a blip on the radar. You know we were short, sweet, and much better as friends.”

“So are we.” I fixate on my soup like a coward. “Riley, you mean so much to me as a friend. We’re good that way, and I wouldn’t want to ruin things.”

His hand touched mine, and I timidly lifted my head to meet his eyes. “I know. Cheer up, sweetie. You’re not breaking my heart here.”

His revelation calmed my anxiety. “I’m not? Well, of course, I’m not, but I thought you were trying to get me to go out with you?”

“If you said ‘let’s go out,’ I wouldn’t say no. But like I said in the beginning, we wouldn’t work. I know that. Or, usually, I know that.”

“You’re an amazing guy, Riley.” My eyes burned, dangerously close to tears. “You know it’s not you, it’s me, right?”

“Wow, we’re being cliché now?” he choked the words out around a bite of his food.

“What I mean is, it’s ridiculous how smart, fun, and good-looking you are. You’re a catch, and I’m stupid, obviously.”

“Aww, shucks,” he teased, pumping his fist playfully. “Savannah, you are *not* stupid. You’re smarter than *I* am, and if there was something here,” he motioned between us, “you would’ve felt it. No worries.”

Thankful for his graciousness, I smiled.

We ate in silence for a few minutes before he held his hand. “You know, you could do me a favor and stop showing up at the bar looking so damn foxy. As your *friend*, I have to admit it’s getting hard to watch all the guys drooling after you like you’re a piece of meat. It’s disgusting.”

“Oh, whatever.” I throw him a disgruntled look. “You’re usually one of those guys drooling after the girls.”

“That’s different.”

“Oh really? How so?”

“Well, it’s me, for one.” Seeing I wasn’t buying into his macho explanation, he added, “And I don’t care about any of those girls the way I care about you.”

“That’s sweet, but no can do, sir. I’ve got more dates to go on, and I’m not sure they’d be impressed with me in sweats and tees.”

“Now that’s some sexy shit right there.”

“Only on the morning after would you call that sexy, my friend.”

He waggled his eyebrows with a wicked laugh.

“I love you, Riles,” I reminded, getting up to discard my trash.

Coming up behind me, Riley dumped his trash and bear-hugged me. “I love you too, and that’s why we would never work.” He kissed the top of my head.

Riley checked his watch as we exited the deli. “I have some time to kill before I need to go in. What are you up to now?”

I needed art supplies, but the store near the coffee shop didn’t have everything I wanted. “I was going to hit up The Painter’s Palette to buy some drawing supplies. You up for it?”

Twenty minutes and two drive-byes looking for a parking spot later, the dented bell at The Painter’s Palette rang, signaling our arrival to the store staff. This was my favorite art store in the Nashville area. Locally owned and operated, the staff was friendly, helpful, and always up to chat about techniques and tools.

“Hi, Ms. Camille.” I waved to the shop owner. In her early fifties,

Camille had salt and pepper hair with streaks of red that she always wore in a long braid. Somewhat of a hippie soul, her tie-dye tops and flowing skirts never failed to put a smile on my face.

“Hi there.” Her hands were covered in paint from whatever project she worked on at the back table by the paint supplies.

“You know the employees here by name?” Riley ran his fingers over the paintbrush tips as we walked by.

I slapped his hand away and dragged him to the charcoal pencils. “Yep. I’ve shopped here for three years. They’re all sweet people.”

“You finding everything okay?” uttered a low, almost bored voice.

Looking up from the shelves, I recognized the clerk standing over me. His little plastic name tag read Ryan. He always checked on me whenever I was in the store and even asked me out for coffee once. Like Camille's hands, his worn jeans were covered with paint specks.

“Oh, hi.” His voice perked up. “You here for some charcoal? I haven’t seen you in a while. Can I help you find anything?” The sentences rushed out as crimson stained his cheeks.

“Yeah, I’m taking a new sketching class. I see what I need.” His shoulders dropped. “Thanks, though.”

Rubbing his hands against his thighs, he side-eyed Riley. “Um, okay then. Ring the bell when you’re ready to check out if I’m not up front.”

Riley’s gaze tracked Ryan as he walked away. “He was giving you *the look*.” Riley snorted.

I picked up some new pencils and moved down the aisle stocked with sketching pads.

Huffing, Riley called out, “So, tell me about this whole dating thing.”

“Shhh, not so loud.” I waved him to follow me to the other aisle, filling him in on my foray into blind speed dating as we browsed.

“Let me get this straight.” His brows leaped. “You’re letting Barbie and her sister, Skipper, pick out your dates? From the campus dating site?” He spoke slowly, as though he needed to enunciate each word for me.

“Should I be concerned you know who Skipper is?”

“I have sisters.” He knocked my shoulder. “But seriously, what were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t,” I admitted, somewhat embarrassed. “They hounded me. I admit I thought it was a stupid idea, but I was vulnerable enough to let them follow through with their ridiculous plan.”

“How many dates are you going to go on?”

Finished picking out a few sketch pads, I turned the corner to check the aisle's end cap, usually stocked with clearance items. I rounded the end and bumped smack dab into Ryan, who stood there awkwardly.

My sketchpads hit the floor with a loud slap. “Oh my gosh! Sorry.”

“My bad,” he apologized, his voice quivering nervously. We bent down and picked up my scattered supplies.

“Thanks.” I smiled when he handed them to me.

He met my eyes and hustled off without another word.

“M’kay, I think I’ve got everything. Let’s go.” I walked to the checkout with Riley bugging me all the way there about my dates.

Ryan asked if we’d found everything as he scanned my purchases.

“Sure did,” I mumbled, turning back to Riley.

“Riles, would you lay off?”

“Well, you have to admit it’s kinda creepy. You’re meeting them all at The Garage, right? That’s what Sara said.”

“Yes,” I snapped tightly. “I’m not crazy. Stop worrying. It’s all for fun.”

“That’ll be \$27.89. Cash or credit?” Ryan interrupted.

I swiped my debit card, and he asked for my ID. “Wow, most people don’t bother asking anymore.” I dug my license out of my wallet.

“Sorry,” he shrugs a shoulder, “We like to keep our customers safe from fraud.”

“No, I appreciate it,” I admitted, as he studied my ID, comparing my name and signature to my debit card.

“Here you go, Ms. Guthry,” he handed both back, “Would you like the receipt in the bag?”

“Sure.” Stuffing the cards in my wallet, I grabbed the shopping bags when Ryan handed them over the counter. “Thanks.”

“My pleasure. Come again soon,” he called after Riley and me as we walked away.

“I’m sure I will.”



I was stepping out of the shower when my phone lit up on my bed. Wrapping my towel around my chest, I ran to catch the call. *Jax* brought a smile to my face.

“Hello?” I schooled my voice to remain even.

“Hey, it’s *Jax*.”

“So I saw. It’s been a few days. How are you?”

“Tired.” His voice missed its usual excitement from our other conversations. “They’ve got me working twelve-plus hour days, and I’m exhausted.”

“Aww, I guess this is a preview to life as a grown-up.”

Jax groaned. “If this is what being a grown-up means, then I want to go back.”

I laughed, understanding what he was saying. Graduation was a year away. Less than 365 days from saying goodbye to school life and my best friends. To endless nights of chatting and pigging out.

“Kinda scary, huh?” I shared my thoughts. “I’m ready in some ways, but I’m going to miss this.” My gaze roamed around the little cottage bedroom I loved so much.

“I was calling so you could cheer me up, but it sounds like I’m bringing you down with me.”

“No, you’re not.” *Well, maybe a little.* “How can I cheer you up?”

“I was hoping you’d pencil me in for a date Friday.” His tone pepped up.

“This Friday?”

“Yep. I’m flying into town for the day, and I’d love to see you.”

Sara had picked my date for Friday. I didn’t know who he was, but who cares, I would cancel.

“I’ll be free.”

A commotion rose up in the background on Jax's end. "Great. Listen, I'm at the office, and they're waiting for me to run some numbers. I'll call you Friday to confirm, but how about you plan on being ready for dinner around five?"

Agreeing, we promised to talk again in a day or two and ended the call.

I was lying in bed enjoying a new romance novel when an unknown number flashed on my phone at 10 p.m. Flipping a page, I let the call go to voicemail and waited to see if they would leave a message. After a few minutes, the double beep signaling a message sounded. Setting my book in my lap, I dialed into my voicemail and was greeted by a voice I hadn't heard in three years.

THIRTEEN
SPENCER
MONDAY—APRIL 29, 2013

“Savannah? It’s Spencer. I’ve been back in Charleston for a few weeks, and I’ve played golf with your dad twice and spoken to your mom. I can’t seem to get away from you. Can you give me a call when you have time?” There was a long pause, then a sigh. “We need to talk.”

I squeezed my eyes shut to keep the tears at bay and listened to his message again. His voice was low and dejected. He couldn’t get away from me? What did he mean by that? His return to Charleston was a surprise. He must have finished law school. I always expected he’d get a job in Atlanta, not return home.

When we ended things three years ago, it was with the decision that we would move on and have no regrets. I agreed simply because I wanted to seem wiser and older. It wrecked me, but I never tried to contact him after the end of that summer.

Unease coursed through me. Spencer said he’d spoken to Momma. Was he calling because she’d hounded him, and he was mad? No, his voice didn’t come off as angry. He sounded sad.

“Dammit.” My finger hovered over the call button, but I couldn’t press it.

Hearing Spencer’s voice cut deeply. He was the only part of my story I’d never shared. He’d been home from the University of Georgia on Christmas break when I had my debutante ball over the winter of my senior year. Somehow, our mothers roped him into escorting me to the event, and I didn’t hear from him again.

Until the night I discovered Daniel and Mary Anne were an item...

It was my high school graduation party. Mama and Daddy threw me an over-

the-top cocktail party at the country club, and there I was in Momma's required receiving line as friends and family arrived in their eighty-thousand dollar vehicles and greeted me in their fancy sequined party dresses and dashing tuxedos.

I shifted from one foot to the other, uncomfortable in heels half a size too large. My dress was a simple, plum-colored strapless sheath that flared at the hem in a little ruffle. It was pretty, except that the top kept slipping down because Momma wouldn't admit my chest had grown larger than hers. She'd picked the dress out without me when I refused to go shopping with her. I hadn't wanted this party and stood my ground for once, hoping to halt her plans. Wishful thinking.

Erika Guthry was not a woman who accepted defeat.

She'd proceeded without my input, planning this event and inviting all her society friends and their kids. The longer I stood robotically greeting them, the less I cared about any of it. I'd finally grown tired of upholding the precious Guthry family image, the social graces constantly drilled in my head, the debutante balls, and charity parties I was forced to attend wearing my plastered-on fake smile. That night was the last straw.

I stood talking to a man older than Daddy, who was, in turn, standing as close as he could get, his eyes greedily delving down my top. When I yanked the top up for the umpteenth time in an hour, I caught Daniel walking through the double glass doors of the club.

He wore a sleek black tux and tie, the crisp white of his shirt collar creating a sharp contrast with his tanned skin. His dark blond hair was combed back and gelled to perfection, and his one-hundred-watt smile was on full blast. He turned and held out his hand, and my heart skipped a beat, waiting for the person he'd reached for to materialize. Surely, it would be his mother or his sister. His family was invited, but I hadn't expected him to show.

False hope blossomed in my chest as I envisioned him crossing the floor to my side. He would apologize for making the worst mistake of his life by letting me go. Then he would pull me into his arms, drag me out of the building, and kiss me until I was weak in the knees.

Cue records scratching and daydreams crashing to a bloody halt.

My cousin walked through the door her hand in Daniel's. Not some distant cousin, oh no, Mary Anne was the cousin I'd spent more days with than without. We had been inseparable until she'd left for school the previous

year. For one hazy second, I questioned my vision. Maybe she'd happened to walk in behind Daniel. That second came and went in a flash when Daniel stole a quick kiss.

No, scratch that. Not a quick kiss, but a full-on, his-hands-on-her-ass kiss. My stomach plunged, and my vision blurred as Daniel wrapped his arm around her tiny little waist, and they walked toward my party. Their eyes were locked on each other as they took the first few steps. They exuded love. How was that possible?

"Is that Daniel?" Momma whispered. "With Mary Anne?" Her voice rose on my cousin's name, which caused Mary Anne's head to jerk. The happy couple obviously hadn't expected to be a mere twenty feet from me.

Daniel paled while Mary Anne held her composure and finished walking the length of the room without flinching.

"Aunt Erika," she exclaimed. "What a magnificent party. Savannah, congratulations on your graduation. Sorry, I missed the ceremony." Her deceitful eyes flicked between us.

"Daniel?" My voice croaked his name, but it was barely recognizable. "Wha—"

Momma's hand clamped firmly on my wrist, cutting me off.

"So glad you could make it, Mary Anne. You look lovely," she spoke evenly. "Daniel, it's been a few months. So good to see you. Your parents are here somewhere." She gave an imperious wave of her hand.

"Thank you, Mrs. Guthry. It has been a while. You look lovely as always," he drawled. The perfect politician. He turned, his eyes boldly sweeping over my body, lingering on my ripened curves. "You've changed." His attention was lascivious.

"Well, of course she has, Daniel. She's a woman now. Off to college in the fall. She has taken on so many duties lately."

"Momma," I stammered, interrupting her sales pitch. Did she have no shame? I recovered my wits long enough to formally welcome them to the party. "Oh, and thank you for bringing Daniel with you. It was so very kind of you." I spun on my heel and entered the ballroom, where my guests enjoyed drinks, food, and dance.

Determined not to cry, I found the first available guy I could latch onto—Spencer Alexander. Spencer had saved me five months earlier when he stepped up as a favor to Momma and escorted me to my debutante ball after Daniel dumped me. Three years older and handsome as sin, Spencer became

my savior for a second time. He danced with me, escorted me around the room, and ensured I spoke with all the ‘important people’ per Momma’s request. Most importantly, he teased me to distraction.

It wasn’t until he took me into his arms for a slow dance late in the evening that he brought up Daniel. “You know you deserve better than him?”

“I thought we were in love.” My vision blurred. “It hurts knowing he didn’t care about me enough to prevent him from coming here with my cousin.”

Spencer’s hold tightened on my hips as we swayed to the music, tenderness washing over his features.

As if the fates were striving to kill me, Daniel and Mary Anne ended up on the floor by us. Their bodies pressed close as her cheek touched his, and his hand settled on her lower back. His eyelids were half-closed as he whispered into her ear.

Twisting away from their flagrant display, I glanced at Spencer and wound my hands behind his neck, clasping my fingers tight. His gaze dipped, and mine followed. By raising my arms, I’d allowed my cleavage to put on a show for his private viewing. I didn’t care.

Spencer’s arms wound around my back, pulling me flush with his muscular frame. Heat flared in his eyes.

“Do you know what you’re doing, Savannah?” His words were ragged. “Or are you as naïve as I think you are?”

Shrugging, I tilted my chin and peered at him through lowered lids. Bedroom eyes, Cosmo called it, and I was putting the two-hundred-word lesson I’d read recently into full effect. I was damn naïve, but tonight I was hurt and wasn’t about to let Spencer know how inexperienced I was.

“I know exactly what I’m doing.” My fingers delved into the hair at his nape.

“You’re playing with fire.”

“Do you plan on burning me?”

One hand dug into the thin material of my gown while the other stroked up my spine to rest between my shoulder blades. “God help me, I don’t want to.”

“Can we get out of here?” I begged.

Indecision flickered before he took my hand. In a moment of weakness, I found my dirty ex and winked sweetly as he watched Spencer escort me off the dance floor.

Emboldened by Daniel's jealous stare, I grabbed a bottle of champagne from a bucket of ice in the back corner of the room. Spencer shook his head with a chuckle, taking the bottle and downing a swig before handing it back. We left the club through a back entrance closer to the parking lot and crossed through the lot hand in hand.

FOURTEEN

MAKE ME SMILE

MONDAY CONTINUED

When we reached his little black sports car, my frantic nerves had calmed thanks to a few long pulls of bubbly. Spencer stopped at the passenger door and took the bottle from me again. His forehead creased as he stared into it.

“Sorry,” I leaned against the sleek black car, “I didn’t leave you any.”

He grinned. “No drinking and driving allowed anyway. So, what about your parents? Won’t they be looking for you?”

“Psh, they were well on their way to being drunk an hour ago. I doubt they remember why they’re even at a party.”

“Okay. Then where to, party girl?” He swung the passenger door open and bowed.

“To the manor, Jeeves!” I slipped into the supple leather seat with a giggle.

Dashing around the front of the car, Spencer jumped in and cranked the engine. Music blared, and he quickly turned it down with a mumbled “Sorry.”

He slowed at the main road leading off the club’s property. “Savannah, I can take you home if you want.” He rubbed over the steering wheel, his eyes studying me.

“Do you want to take me home?”

Spencer was breathtakingly gorgeous, a man of twenty-two, whereas the boys I was around most often were still teenagers. Truthfully, the man put Daniel to shame. He was debating, his face scrunched, eyes closed, and as I moved to give him an out, he said, “No.”

It was a quiet but firm answer, and my quivering smirk curved into a full smile when Spencer opened his eyes and leveled them on mine. He reached

across the seat and plucked my hand from my lap. “You should smile more often. It’s dazzling.”

“So take me somewhere and make me smile, Spencer.” I intertwine our fingers. My words had a definite innuendo I don't correct. Yay for liquid courage.

Without replying, Spencer put his foot on the gas, and the club, Daniel, and Mary Anne became a dim reflection in the rearview mirror.

As he drove, Spencer’s thumb rubbed along my hand, caressing it. I spread my fingers, placing my palm face up so he could trace the outline. Every so often, my gaze dipped to watch his hand. He would run his fingers around and stop, his hand hesitating, before starting again.

After repeating this a few times, I caught on how each time he paused, his hand drifted, like he wanted to move to my thigh. Then, as if he thought better of it, he would return to my hand, and the cycle began again.

After watching this routine for the fourth time, I removed my hand from the equation by stretching across the seats, longing to stroke the back of his head. Centimeters from his silky hair, I chickened and placed my hand on the back of his headrest instead. It was not what I had planned, but it worked because his large, warm palm landed on my lower thigh without my hand to toy with.

That was when the real magic happened. Falling under a spell, I rested my head on the headrest and closed my eyes as he kneaded my muscles into relaxation. His fingers roamed up my thigh ever so slowly, working under the hem of my dress. My body sighed, and I slid deeper into the chair. Liquid heat flowed through my veins when his fingers curved my inner thigh. My heart pounded wildly in my chest. Could I die from his scorching touch?

My head rolled on the headrest, my eyes searching his profile in the glow of the blue dashboard lights. I wished I could see his face better, see what he was thinking. Maybe that was for the best. Darkness brought courage, and using that courage, I slipped my hand into his hair and played with the soft strands.

His fingertips dug into my thigh at my first touch, then crept up my thigh some more. When he brushed the silky edge of my panties, I flinched.

The low chuckle that rumbled through the car had my legs relaxing and opening for Spencer's fingers to tuck beneath the seam and tease.

The car stopped, and I pulled out of the foggy daze Spencer had drawn me into. We were parked outside a small house.

"The ball's in your court, Savannah," his voice was a low rasp. "I can take you home now. Or I can take you inside."

I opened my mouth, but his fingertip touched my lip, stopping me.

"I want to make sure there are no illusions about what will happen if we go inside. I want you, and I'm pretty sure you want me. But anything between us won't be about your damn ass of an ex. This will be about us and our mutual attraction. Understand?"

Words failed. Nodding my yes, my hand shook as I clicked the seatbelt undone and sat forward. The best way to let him know what I wanted was to ask for it. "Kiss me?"

Our mouths collided with the force of raging ocean waves against a cliffside. Hunger I'd never known existed in his kisses, and I fed it the best I could.

The rest was a blur. Somehow, we made it into the house and a bedroom.

We fell onto the bed, the room dark except for a light peeking in from outside. It never occurred to me to stop, to tell Spencer I was a virgin. The fire he'd ignited would not be contained. All the care I'd taken to hold out for marriage, to make a man wait, swirled down the drain at Spencer Alexander's touch.

We didn't even speak. We were all lust and desire. Spencer took his time kissing and handling parts of my body that had never been touched by another. He was careful as he slid between my legs, but when he pushed his body into mine, a sharp pain ripped through me, drawing my strangled gasp and Spencer's curse.

"Savannah?" He stilled, his voice full of regret. "You've never..."

I twisted my head to the side as a tear drifted down my cheek.

"Why?" he asked, still fully embedded inside me but unmoving. He leaned over me and gently directed my chin so he could meet my eyes.

"I'm sorry." I slapped my hands over my face.

My emotions roiled within. Grief at what I had allowed to happen was at war with the pleasure I'd felt. Then there was anger at Daniel for pushing me to do this. And there was fear. Fear that Spencer would think I was a child bent on seducing him. Fear that he would be angry I'd misled him.

"Oh my God." He pulled out of me, cradling me in his arms. "Don't apologize. I should have known." He cursed again, which only made my tears fall faster. "I'm sorry." He pulled a sheet over us and held me while I cried.

As my tears slowed, he stroked my hair. "Damn it, I was so selfish. It's

just that you looked so beautiful tonight, and you flirted with me so sweetly. I —”

“No,” I hiccuped. Pushing off his chest and clutching the sheet to my chest. “I knew what I was doing, and it’s my fault. I’m just a stupid girl.”

“You’re not stupid. I’ve known you for years, and while most of those years you *were* a girl, this past year you’ve grown into a beautiful, kind, and caring woman.”

“Oh, stop.”

“It’s true. I was drawn to you. Why else would I have escorted you to your coming out? When I saw you at all the Christmas events over the holidays, I was caught off guard by how you’ve changed. I could tell you were miserable, and I wanted to do anything I could to make you happy. The truth is, I overheard my mom talking to yours on the phone—that’s how I became your date.”

“What? My mother said she asked you.”

“Nope.” He smoothed my tear-dampened hair off from my cheek. “They didn’t have to ask. I overheard the conversation, and I waved down my mom’s attention to make sure she knew I was volunteering for the task.” I smiled a teary smile at how he acted out the moment. “Hell, I was practically playing charades with her, pointing at myself while dancing in place.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You were so sad. After that night, I knew you weren’t ready to consider another guy.” His fingers grazed the length of my upper arm. “I decided to bide my time.”

His revelations took me by surprise. “You did?”

“I don’t typically make a habit of going to parties thrown by my parent’s friends. Tonight’s was a must. I had to see you again.”

He seemed genuinely interested in me, and I... Embarrassment heated my skin. “I’m so sorry, Spencer. I hate myself for turning you on and then disappointing you this way. I swear I’m not a tease.”

“I know you’re not a tease, Savannah.” He tipped my chin. “If you were, we wouldn’t have stopped. I’m not upset with you. I’m angry with myself for not realizing... I’m sorry I hurt you. I would have been more careful if I’d known you were a virgin.”

“If you’d known, I doubt this would have ever happened.” He probably would have run for the hills if he’d known I was inexperienced.

“Hey,” Frustration sharpened his words, “What makes you say that?”

“Let’s not lie to each other. You asked if I knew what I was doing by flirting with you. If you’d known I’d never done this, you wouldn’t have wanted any part of it.”

“Oh, how wrong you are,” he said. “I already told you that I’ve been biding my time. I wanted you too badly to say no. I didn’t bring you to my house because I wanted a good time. I brought you here because I genuinely wanted to be with you. All that would’ve been different if I’d known how quickly I allowed things to progress. I would have preferred to wine and dine you first.”

“You would?” I kissed his mouth softly. “Thank you.”

He cupped my jaw and kissed me again. “No, thank you.”

“For what?”

“For trusting me with something so special. Will you stay the night?” I chewed on my lip, and Spencer amended the invitation. “I’m not expecting sex. I would like to hold you, though. If you leave now, I’m afraid you might just hide away from me.”

"Okay."

He showed me the bathroom, where I cleaned up before slipping on the oversized T-shirt he handed me to wear. When I was done freshening up, I climbed into his bed and let him wrap me protectively in his arms.

My mind refused to rest. “Spencer?”

“Yeah?”

“You don’t have to bide your time anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you’re still interested after all of this, I’d like," deep breath for courage, "well, I guess we could start to see each other.”

It was backward. He took my virginity. I was already sleeping in his bed and wearing his shirt, and I brought up dating now?

“I’m more than interested, Savannah.”

Pleased, I snuggled deeper against his frame. It was maybe five minutes later when he chuckled.

“What?”

“I wasn’t going to let you leave here until you agreed to go out with me anyway.”

FIFTEEN
BRIAN
TUESDAY—APRIL 30, 2013

DATE #4

Tuesday was a walking blur. I hadn't returned Spencer's call yet, and every time my phone rang, I leaped with fear, worried he was calling. Working at the art gallery that morning helped pass the time, but it didn't take away the edge.

An edge that remained when I arrived home later than planned and had to rush for my date with Candace's "special" pick. She was so excited about my date with Brian that she ignored my jumpy behavior.

"No clues?" I asked as she helped me prepare.

Turning over her shoulder as she dug through my jewelry box, looking for the right earrings, she frowned. "The whole point of a blind date is to go in blind."



I walked into The Garage feeling flirty and fresh in my white eyelet dress.

My confidence in my appearance didn't kill the nerves, though, as I rubbed my sweaty palms and searched around. There were a few suits sitting at tables with laptops or chatting over drinks, but for the most part, the place was empty.

Turning toward the bar, I approached the one guy sitting alone and talking to none other than my Aussie antagonist. A newly stubble jawed Aussie.

Fabulous.

Could this guy be my "special date" Brian? I walked a wider path, working for a better view of his profile. His head angled left as he left and, "What the—" Brian was Brian Stalling: student body President and all-around golden boy at VU. We were in a debate class together last semester.

"When Candace told me I was meeting a Brian, I never expected you."

Brian swiveled on his stool, his hazel eyes widening as he took me in. "Savannah?" Standing, he embraced me lightly. "Good God, you look amazing."

"Thank you. What are you doing here?" Brian Stalling would not have answered an ad for a blind date on the campus site. That was just plain madness. He can't need help finding dates.

"It's Debate all over again. You can't wait to cut to the chase." My laugh was nervous, my stare fighting for a peek at Gage, who stood behind the bar listening to everything.

"Let me pay, and we can go upstairs, okay?" Brian pulled out his wallet.

Upstairs? These dates were supposed to be drinks only, but Brian wasn't a stranger, and I was starving.

"Sure." I nodded, and Gage took his cash. They exchanged a few words, shook hands, and as Brian stepped away, Gage called out, "Enjoy your meal, Savannah."

I tossed a wave and was spared the chance to meet his stare by Brian ushering me to the restaurant using his hand on the small of my back.

Brian Stalling was the quintessential poster boy for Brooks Brothers. His dirty blond hair was neatly trimmed—not too long, not too short. His nose was straight and thin and tipped with a touch of pink. A thin tan line could be seen over the bridge of his nose.

"Have you been playing golf lately?"

He smirked. "How'd you guess?" He rubbed his sunglass tan lines.

"My dad taught me that the best deals are made on the golf course."

“He’s right.” We stepped into Watson’s waiting area.

Watson’s was unlike most establishments in that it was an exceptionally cozy, diminutive place above a bar, but it was popular for its fantastic food. It was six on a Tuesday night, so they weren’t yet busy, and we were seated immediately. The perfect gentleman, Brian, pulled my chair out before sitting across the bistro table.

“Have you recovered from the last time we were in a room together?” he asked with a twinkle as our waiter approached with a pitcher of water.

He asked for a few minutes to look over the menu, and once alone, I snarled playfully, “Not fair. My teammates were woefully unprepared at that debate.”

A full-bodied laugh escaped his mouth as he leaned back in his chair. “Keep telling yourself that, Guthry.”

“Okay, Stalling, I think it’s obvious we’re going to need a rematch. Just the two of us. What’s hot on the list of current events right now?”

“I’ve always been told talking politics on a first date is bad etiquette. However, if you insist.” He raised his brows as he sipped his water.

“Well,” I opened the menu, “Where do you stand on chicken? I’m quite a fan of chicken, although there are a few questionable ethics involved in many poultry factories.”

“We are not debating food processing ethics over dinner, Guthry.”

I harrumphed. “You’re scared you’ll lose the debate, aren’t you? It’s okay, Mr. President, let’s talk about something easier. How do you feel about the cheerleaders’ new uniforms for next year?”

“Now that is something I can get behind.” He winked. “Literally.”

“Pig.” I fought down the urge to throw something at his frat boy face.

Brian chuckled. “You started it.”

Our waiter returned and took our order, and we continued baiting each other with outlandish debate topics while we waited for our food. The first date tension released, I sat back and enjoyed Brian’s company.

“So, can you explain why you’ve resorted to a dating service?” he asked after our food arrived.

“Couldn’t I ask you the same thing?” I pointed my fork at him.

“Truth is, I ran into Candace the other day and asked about you.”

“You asked about me?” That was unexpected.

“Yeah, I heard something about your dating ad from a fraternity brother the other day. You’ve become very popular with them.”

“What?” I slapped my hand over my mouth when heads turned our way. I lowered my voice, “Tell me you're kidding.”

He canted his head. “Savannah, you do know who you are, right?”

And there it was.

Who I am. I'd tried to maintain a low profile on campus over the years, but there was never a shortage of students asking, “Guthry? Like Guthry Whiskey?” once they learned my last name.

“Yes, Brian, I know who I am.” Disappointment overrode my earlier happiness.

He leaned over the table and touched my hand, his face contrite. “I'm not saying that's why I asked Candace to set us up. I swear, it's not. I'm just saying some of the guys in the house knew who you were, so it became a hot topic when they saw you on the site.”

“Of course it did.”

“Then why are you doing it?” He sat back.

I poked at my chicken. “It was a joke, of sorts, that Sara and Candace decided to play on me. It was too late to do anything about it once I knew what they'd done. Can we change the subject? Please.”

Brian opened his mouth, then stopped. The rest of our meal was quiet as an uncomfortable stiffness settled over the table. Eventually, I told him about my volunteer work at the Fine Arts Center, and he discussed some of the campus changes being implemented next year.

“I'm sorry about what I said—about who you are. It was stupid.”

“Forget about it. I know you didn't mean it the way it sounded, but I get defensive. I went to a tailgating party last year, and a group of people jumped all over me to get free whiskey for the next one. It's annoying to be asked for things because of your name, you know?”

He frowned. “I'm sure you always get guys after you for that, but I promise I didn't want to go out with you because of your father's name. I enjoyed our debates in class last semester and wanted to get to know you better.”

His words were genuine. Brian was smart, cute, and had a lot of ideas for his future. Did we have anything solid in common? Not sure, but wasn't the whole purpose of dating to figure those things out?

“Okay,” I relaxed into my seat, “I'm game.”

His smile was all the encouragement I needed.

Over dessert, Brian explained he'd planned our dinner date so early

because he had a morning meeting with the Dean. From there, he was headed to a 'D.C. Young Leaders of America' event for the remainder of the week.

"I hate I'm heading out tomorrow, but I'll be back late Sunday night, and I'd like to see you again. Can we get together next week?"

"I don't know," I scraped the last of my chocolate mousse off the plate, "I think you'll need to convince me better than that."

He sat straighter. "Oh? Should I make a flip chart, madam? Do you need the pros and cons list?"

Tapping my chin thoughtfully, I paused. "Do you mean to tell me there are cons to your proposal?"

His eyes widened in mock indignation. "Well, of course not. A good debater would never admit to having any weaknesses. I can't think that a second date would be anything but a good idea."

A second date with Brian would be a good idea. "Well then, I look forward to seeing your presentation next week."

Fifteen minutes later, dessert was finished and the bill was paid. He offered to walk me to my car, but I declined. Maybe I'd stick around since it was so early. I could call Sara or Candace and have them meet me for a drink.

Turning for the bar rather than the exit, I refused to admit I had an unquenchable urge to see Gage. Nope, that little nugget was stomped back into the dark corners of my mind.

SIXTEEN

ROXANNE

TUESDAY—APRIL 30, 2013

Strolling into the bar, my hooded gaze easily found Gage. He stood in the center of the bar, a crate of glasses in his arms, staring. Rather than turning at being caught, he raised a brow and motioned me his way with a jerk of his head.

Silent invitation accepted, I weaved through a group and plopped unceremoniously onto the empty stool they'd been blocking. "What?" I asked, as his gaze remained locked on me while he stacked the crate out of sight behind the bar.

"Your usual?"

My eyes rolled at his bored tone. "You mean a date with a loser? Not this time." A cocky smile stretched my lips while he poured a tall beer and delivered it down the bar.

He chuffed a laugh. "I meant, do you want a Tom Collins?"

"Oh." *Head, meet bar.*

"I mean, I could tell your date wasn't a loser tonight. He was more of a world dominator."

Crossing my legs, I leaned my forearms on the bar's edge. "A what?"

"You know, Tears for Fears, "Everybody Wants to Rule the World." I see him being that guy. The future of America sat right here, people." He raised his voice, pointing at my seat and clapping.

"Hardy har har." I kept a poker face, but his assessment was accurate. "So what's the problem with an ambitious man?"

"Oh, nothing, sweetheart. Ambition is good as long as you don't use it to step on people as you claw your way to the top."

"Gage?" Someone called, and Gage's stare lingered before he moved to

where one of the waitresses stood at the far end of the bar. Watching their interaction, I grabbed my phone and texted Sara and Candace.

“Sounds like something you know from firsthand experience—being clawed on, that is,” I goaded when he was close enough to hear.

He swung around with two liquor bottles and measured shots into a shaker. “Oh, I’ve been clawed by many pretty ladies like yourself, sweetheart.”

Ignoring his innuendo—but not before a tantalizing vision entered my mind—I angled around for a view of tonight's performer strumming away at his guitar, singing about love and rain. Gage's shaker rattled behind me as my phone buzzed in my lap.

Sara: Have a drink for me! I’m stuck at the studio doing inventory

“So, tell me about your world leader.” I looked up. Gage had propped one arm on the bar, still for the first time since I sat. “Why did he leave you here all alone?”

Giving him my full attention, I set my phone face down. “First of all, he is not mine. We had dinner, that's all.”

“So, he struck out?” He pushed a drink I hadn't noticed closer. My usual.

“Thank you.” My fingers wrapped the Collins glass, butterflies teasing my belly. “Why would you assume he struck out, Mr. Know It All?”

“Angel, there’s no way in hell a guy would choose to leave you here for the vultures if he didn’t strike out.”

I didn’t have a witty reply to that.

“Or maybe he’s not as smart as I gave him credit for being. Should I change his song?”

Uh? “His song?”

“Keep up, would you?” His fist knocked the bar as his gaze lifted beyond my right shoulder. Back to work, he moved around, mixing a drink while his eyes were on me. “I told you your date was “Everybody Wants to Rule the World” by Tears for Fears. That’s his song. It’s a gift I have.” He raised his voice over the growing noise around us.

I choked on my drink at his boast. “A gift, huh? What, giving people song names?”

“Yep.” He exchanged a beer for cash with a guy to my left.

I toyed with the cherry he'd speared with a lemon wedge in my glass. “And how exactly does this gift work?”

“Take your date last week. The one who felt the need to stake a claim on you.”

“You noticed that?” Of course, he noticed that. “Um, his name was Mark.”

Gage mumbled the name with a curse before he continued, “Mark was definitely “Creep” by Radiohead.”

“Oh my God, no he wasn’t.” He was, but letting Gage call him one seemed unfair.

“Hey, no arguing with the song picker.”

Gage stepped away, and I worked to recall the song lyrics. All that came to mind was, “I’m a creep. I’m a loser.” I burst out laughing, and the woman walking by stopped and glared.

I swung back to the bar.

“You sang it to yourself, didn’t you?” Gage caught me laughing. He raised his brows as if to say, “Told you so,” before he was off again, walking back and forth fixing drinks and doing bar work.

“So, do you assign songs to everyone you meet?” I asked when he stopped in front of me a few minutes later.

“It’s a habit. When you spend as much time as I do talking with random people, you can’t help comparing them.”

Makes sense. I people watch when looking for artistic inspiration.

“All right, look around and give me a title for someone here tonight.” I threw down the gauntlet.

“A challenge, eh?” Mouth fighting a smile, his gaze wandered the increasingly crowded bar.

The red glass ceiling fixtures cast a sensual glow on his handsome face, and I stare openly, no longer fighting the pull. When his wicked grin spreads, I blink. He’s found a target.

Gage leaned forward and wiped the vacant space beside me. “See Little Red over there dancing?”

Casually twisting on my stool, I scanned the dance floor for this “Little Red.” It didn’t take long. Little Red wore skin-tight, low-riding jeans tucked into red cowboy boots and a tiny red top that strained to cover her not-so-small chest. Her bleached hair was teased into a high ponytail that she swung like a cowboy swung a lasso. She was pretty but flashy. Was that what he was into?

“Yeah, I think I see her—blonde with the red tube top?” What song was

she about to earn?

“She looks like a "Roxanne" to me.” The connection to the Police clicked immediately. “I don't judge a woman by what she does or doesn't wear, but I think she'd be prettier if she covered up. In the song, Sting sings about how Roxanne doesn't have to turn on the red light. I doubt Little Red there needs to do it either.”

“You're not a fan of the sex kitten style?” His saying she should cover up was admirable, and that admission made a question leap from my lips, “What about all of the cougars that hang around for you?”

Gage's eyes widened. “Wow. Where do I begin with that?”

“Please forget I said it. It was rude, and I apologize,” I stammered, mortified by my jealousy-fueled comment.

Lowering my head, I took a large sip of my drink to keep busy.

“No way. That remark was too good to pass up. Let's see,” he scratched his perfectly scruffy chin. “The cougars, as you called them. The slang differs where I'm from, but I assume you're referring to the older women you've seen hanging around the bar?”

Embarrassment told me to get up and run, and I stamped it down, too curious to hear Gage's answer to run away now.

“Yeah, I admit I've seen them hanging around you whenever I'm here.”

“It's the accent.”

He spoke so matter-of-factly that I broke into another fit of laughter. “Oh, I have no doubt your kryptonite voice lures them in.”

Gage's head snapped up, and realization struck at what I'd let slip out of my mouth. “Kryptonite voice, eh?”

“Shit,” I muttered beneath my breath, then again louder.

“I like it.” He dipped his head and held my gaze. “Let me refresh your drink.” His hand brushed over my fingers as he took the empty glass.

I pulled my hand into my lap as his touch lingered on my skin. “How about a Coke? I have to drive home tonight.”

“Got it.” He filled a large glass, setting it before me. “Now, to answer your questions. One,” he ticked off the number on his hand, his voice pitched low so it wouldn't carry past our immediate vicinity, “The cougars are good for business. I let them flirt and eye the goods, and they leave oversized tips. Like it or not, it's the job. Two, do I like the sex kitten look myself?” He glanced around the bar as if making sure we were alone. We weren't, but there was a lull in the noise. Gage crooked his finger, motioning me forward

as he stretched over the bar and met me halfway. Our faces inches apart, his breath shifted my hair. "Only on *my* girl, and *only* in private."

I melted back into my seat as he stayed where he was, brown gaze pinned on mine.

Oh, to be the lucky girl playing his private sex kitten. I released a steadying breath, and his attention dropped to my mouth.

Dammit, I turned my head like a little girl learning to flirt for the first time.

Gage pushed off the bar and spoke to a guy who, until now, I hadn't noticed was sitting beside me. How did this man make me lose my senses so quickly? My stare tracked his movements as he poured the new customer something from the beer tap and then moved to the register. I'm obsessed.

"Wanna dance with a friend?" Hands settled on my shoulders.

My hands covered Riley's as I craned my head back. "Hey, you."

"Whatcha say? They're playing our song." His head knocked toward the band belting "Friends in Low Places."

"Well, obviously." I jumped off the stool and took Riley's hand, but not without glancing back to check if the Aussie bartender was watching.

He was.

Shamelessly, my hips swayed a little more as I threw my body into dancing. We sang the chorus out loud, shouting and laughing with the crowd as we swung each other around. When the song ended, Riley returned me to the crowded bar, explaining he had business to take care of.

The business turned out to be making his way to one of the many girls flinging themselves in his direction. After our awkward lunch discussion, seeing him flirting with other girls eased my worry. Riley and I would be fine.

I checked out the lack of seating at the bar and called it a night. I was moving toward the exit when Gage shouted my name. In his hand was my clutch. Gage motioned me to the end of the bar where servers picked up drinks.

I twisted my sweat-dampened hair over my shoulder as we met. "Thanks, I can't believe forgot about it when I went to dance."

He handed me the purse with a twinkle in his eyes. "You're welcome. You looked like you were enjoying yourself out there. You leaving?"

Sitting there all night and talking to him would be easy, but I didn't need to play with fire, and Gage the Aussie Superman was definitely fire.

“Yeah, I have to work in the morning. I’ll see you later.”

SEVENTEEN

BAD IDEAS

WEDNESDAY—MAY 1, 2013

Between chick flicks and drinks, I filled Sara in on my “date” with Jack, the strip club hustler, during our pre-planned girls' night Wednesday. We'd barely seen each other the past few days, and she still hadn't heard the whole story. Her gales of laughter ringing through the room proved she had no sympathy for my predicament.

“This was a stupid idea. I'm not going to find some guy in the next four or five weeks that I will feel comfortable enough to ask to the wedding.” I whined while eating chicken and broccoli from a takeout container on the floor. “It's a weekend event. An entire weekend filled with my family. I can't put some poor guy through that. God, if we actually did like each other, by the end of the wedding, he'd run as fast as he could in the other direction.”

“Van, this has never been about you finding a wedding date,” Sara mumbled around the California roll she'd stuffed into her mouth.

“Um, yes, it has.” *Hasn't it?*

“No. This was about you finally allowing yourself to open up to men again,” she reiterated. “Go out on these meaningless dates, get some free drinks, and see what the guys of today have to offer. Stop putting so much pressure on them and on yourself.”

Candace nodded. “Sara is right for once. There are a million fish in the sea, and somewhere out there is the right one for you, but until then, there's no reason you can't chill with the little minnows and have some fun swimming in the waves.”

I snorted. “Really, Cand? The fish and sea analogy? You guys are desperate for me to date, huh?”

“Yes!” Sara sat up, her eyes taking on an excited gleam. “It's our senior

year. After graduation we're all off to different places to do different things. I want to know I'm sending you off well-prepared. I don't want to get calls at all hours of the night because you're lonely and bored sitting in your fabulous apartment full of cats. I plan on living and want to know you are, too."

I picked through my box for more chicken. "You guys are too much. I'm not going to be sitting around bored."

"That's because we're getting you out of your no-dating rut now."

They seriously thought I was hopeless. "Blind dates, though? What exactly am I accomplishing by doing this?"

Sara sighed. "Girl, you're meeting guys. Maybe one of them will be cool, and you'll decide to see them again."

"Jack was practically a pimp out trolling for his next go-go dancer. You seriously want to tell me these are the guys I have to look forward to?" I shoved my takeout away.

Sara coughed. "Fine, maybe they'll all be idiots. Either way, the point is you're going out. Plus, you're learning how to play the game."

Throwing my head back against the couch, I whined. "I don't *want* to play a game."

"Hey, you met Jax, didn't you? And what about Brian?" Candace kicked at my foot.

"See, two solid choices for future dates. I mean, really, Van. Live a little and stop worrying so much about it. Besides, every time you go for drinks, you get to lay eyes on Saucy McAussie."

"HMMMMM, I'd like some of that sauce."

"Sara!" Fire licks my cheeks at the image their words conjured.

Sara waved me off. "Don't worry, it's pretty clear he isn't interested in what I've got to give him."

"What? Did you hit on Gage?" A tinge of possessiveness stirred in my gut.

"Ooohhh, really? On a first-name basis, are you?" Sara sniffed. "Yeah, I hit on him to no avail. He must be made of stone."

Okay, more than a tinge of possessiveness.

Candace nudged my leg with her toes, smirking at Sara. "Just because he avoids you doesn't mean he's made of stone, Sara. I've seen him checking someone else out once or twice." She nudged me again.

"Nope." I shook my head. "We're friends, or, I don't know what you'd call it. He antagonizes me."

“Whatever. That bartender so has the hots for you.”

There go the butterflies.

“You should totally bring him to the wedding. Every female there would be envious of that jolly rancher.” Sara waggled her eyebrows.

“Is this what we’re looking for in our dates now? Eye candy?”

Sara tossed me a fortune cookie. “I don’t know about you, girlfriend, but I’ve always looked for eye candy.”

“Doesn't matter how hot he is, Sara. He’s a bartender. My family would eat him alive.”

“Don’t be such a snob.”

I froze. Did Sara actually mean that? Do my friends think I'm as shallow Momma? Am I as bad as Momma? Sara’s pinched face had me questioning everything. *No*. They can’t.

My heart racing, I defended my comment. “I hope you know better than that, Sara. I’m not a snob. They are. Gage would be out of his league dealing with them. *I* can barely deal with them, and I’m a Guthry.” Admitting my family was made up of snobs sucked, but there was no denying the truth. They wouldn’t purposefully be rude to Gage, but Momma didn’t know how to *not* be the wealthy socialite she was. She didn’t have the street smarts to talk to someone who wasn’t as cultured as her without sticking her foot in her mouth.

"We knew what you meant." Candace’s nervous gaze flicked between Sara and me, and I waited for Sara to agree, dread coiling the longer she remained quiet.

“Let’s not bother anymore with this conversation. It's not like you have the guts to ask Gage to the wedding anyway.” Sara tossed another sushi roll into her mouth.

I lifted my chin, brushing off her avoidance. “I barely know him.”

Giving me a knowing arch of her brow, Sara challenged. “That doesn't mean you're not interested.”

"How could I be? I'm a snob."

Sara paled. "You're not a snob, Van." My nose burned, and my eyes watered. "God, don't cry. I'm sorry I said it. I just hate that high society thing. It's more me than you."

"How in the world could I ask him to that wedding? He would think I'm crazy." My imagination gets lost in Gage—how his golden eyes cut through all the noise and haze of the crowded bar when our eyes met. The way his

voice reminded me of satin falling over my body. Heat flushed my chest. He was intoxicating, for sure.

"Mmm-hmmm." A knowing gleam played on Sara's face. "Four weeks, Savannah. Give him four weeks, and if he hasn't repulsed you, ask him."

"I concur."

"That's your input, Candace? You concur?"

"What else is there to say?" Candace cracked open her fortune cookie. "The quotes you do not understand are not meant for you," she read out loud. "Huh? What type of fortune is that?"

"I hate those kinds. The random junk that doesn't mean anything. What's yours, Sara?"

"Your future will be happy and productive. Well, duh." She flipped the fortune. "Oh, and apologize to your best friend because she's the sweetest person you know."

"Awww." I pouted my bottom lip when Sara gave my leg a squeeze. "It's a sore subject for me. I know you both mean well."

They waited for my fortune. Frozen, my eyes dwelled on the seemingly innocuous slip of paper some factory worker had stuffed into the cookies. It meant nothing. But the words hit hard.

"Someone close to you is waiting for you to call."

Spencer.

Was this a sign? For the love of baby bunnies, this couldn't be a sign.

EIGHTEEN

LAST MINUTE LEO

THURSDAY—MAY 2, 2013

DATE #5

“I decided you needed a pick-me-up date,” Sara sang, carrying an outfit from my closet into the living room where I was eating on the couch.

“You what?” I asked around my last bite of dinner.

“Pick-me-up date. You’re meeting Leo for drinks at eight.”

“DiCaprio?” I stretched my PJ-wearing body. “I’m serious. Unless he’s that Leo, I’m not interested tonight.”

“Oh, yes, you are.” She grabbed my arm in an attempt to yank me off the couch. “I realized after last night that you’re still not embracing the fun of this dating thing. I want you to have fun. Come on, for me?”

“Where’s Candace when I need her?” Grumbling, I rose and put my dinner plate in the kitchen sink.

“Don’t forget these.” Sara held out an expensive leather mini with my see-through black and white ruffled top.

Accepting the outfit from her, she ignored my stink eye and followed me down the hall. “Wear those kick-ass strappy black heels you have.”

“Where did you find this guy on such short notice?”

“Actually, he works at the studio with me. Something to do with marketing. He was totally open to meeting you for drinks on such short notice.” I struggled with my hair and finally stepped in, pushing me down on the seat. “Let me do it. I think you need to go rock star chic tonight.”



A few minutes after 8 p.m., I walked up to the bar and straight into a clean-shaven Gage's impressed stare.

"That's some outfit tonight."

"Hey," I called over the crowd. "Thanks. My roommate Sara picked it out."

"She trying to get rid of you for the night?" His eyes darkened as they scanned me. "You look good enough to eat, sweetheart. I'm tempted to jump this bar and take you to my place before someone else does."

My eyes rolled. "Oh, whatever, you would not."

"Is that a dare?" His stone-cold face cut my laughter. He's serious? Stamping down the desire to shout *Yes! Yes!* I turned to survey the crowd.

"Hey, Savannah," Noelle shouted from the other side of Gage. "You've got a date in green at the end there."

Gage visibly sighed and peeked down at the guy in green. "Enjoy." His voice was void of the earlier heat.

With an effort, I pushed Gage out of my mind, or at least as far out as I could, and made my way to Leo. Sara wasn't lying—he was h-o-t-t. The double T was warranted. Though he was leaner and softer than Gage, who was all broad shoulders and angular features, he had a striking face. It was almost too dazzling, very metrosexual. Not that I was comparing the two.

His light green button-up had small white polka dots, and he wore white suspenders. The outfit spoke of someone who liked to spend money on his clothing. Best of all, he wore the heck out of a fantastic pair of brown Clark Kent glasses on the bridge of his perfectly straight nose.

"You must be Leo." I took the stool beside him. "I'm Savannah."

"It's nice to meet you." He leaned over and hugged me. "Sara has told me so much about you. Wow, you're rocking those Dolce shoes."

“Oh, thanks.” Friendly and well-versed in fashion? It must be the marketing side of him.

“I can’t believe I haven’t been here before. It’s got a great vibe. The live music rocks.”

The band was playing a hybrid rock/country set. The bass and drums were heavy, but a twangy rhythm from the slide guitar brought a cool vibe to their songs.

“Agreed, kind of a Mumford and Sons thing going on, but heavier.”

Gage returned from out of the back—not that I was following his every delicious move—and stopped before us. “Who’s your friend, Savannah?” He began mixing a Tom Collins without asking.

Sending him mind waves to behave, I introduced them. “Gage, this is Leo. Leo, Gage. Leo works with Sara.” I added as if I had to justify being out with him. I don’t have to explain who my date is! I stewed.

“So, did she fill you in on her theory about kryptonite yet?” Gage cocked a brow and placed my cocktail in front of me. Clearly, he cannot read mind waves.

Mouth pulled, Leo leaned toward Gage like he was hanging on his every word. “Kryptonite?”

“Yeah, she thinks my accent is a special magic power.”

I snapped his name under my breath, cursing. The infuriating bartender merely winked.

“Well, I can see why she’d say that. Everyone likes a man with an accent,” Leo drawled smoothly.

Alcohol dribbled from my lips, and confusion marred Gage's brow before he excused himself.

Leo played that perfectly, then he faced me and shook his head. “Oh, pretty girl, don’t scrunch your forehead like that. It’ll cause wrinkles.”

“Oh, my God.” I coughed on alcohol for the second time as Leo gazed past me to where Gage had moved. My date tilted his head, gaze roaming my bartender's backside with enough intensity to clue me in. “You’re gay.” The observation came out louder than intended.

“Sara didn’t tell you?”

I was going to kill her. “No, she didn’t tell me. I thought this was a date.”

“It is a date,” he assured. “A platonic one for you to have some fun.”

“Okay, color me confused. What the hell is going on?”

“Call me your fairy godmother, Princess.” He winked and sipped the

water he must have ordered before I arrived. "Is this a problem for you?"

"Oh, god, no, not at all." I grabbed his arm and squeezed, hating to think I'd offended him. "But do you think you can answer the question on most straight girls' minds?"

Excitement lit behind those Clark Kent frames. "Ask anything."

"Why are all the good-looking ones always gay?" A laugh rolled from Leo's mouth. "I mean, you've got Neil Patrick Harris, Anderson Cooper, and OH MY LORD, freaking Wentworth Miller came out recently. I mean, do you recall how good those prison schematics looked on him?" I whined, fanning my face dramatically.

"Your bartender is definitely not playing for my team. How nice it would be if he was."

"He's not *my* bartender," I corrected, trying not to search for Gage. I hated how I knew he was to my right without looking. It was as though I could feel his presence behind the bar, his direct gaze on me.

"This is precisely why I'm here, gorgeous. That man is as much yours as a moth loves a flame."

Skepticism ruled my features. Leo shook his head. "In other words, you own him. Watch how his eyes track your every movement while he works."

I stole a peek. Gage was shaking a drink, but his eyes were fixed on us. Leo was right. Gage's eyes *were* always following me, much like mine followed him. Could I act on it, though? Did I have the guts to make a move?

Leo turned on his stool and grasped my knee, spinning me to face him. "This is Flirting 101. I don't think you need much help with that man, but let's have some fun, shall we?" He lifted his hand and fiddled with the ruffles along the top of my blouse. "I'm loving this tuxedo ruffle shirt-thing you've got on. A straight guy wouldn't compliment you that way, so let me try again."

His fingers came dangerously close to skimming my breast as he continued toying with the ruffle. "This shirt is sexy."

My lips twitched. Leo held a finger up. "Shhh. Don't laugh." His gaze flicked down the bar. "Give me a sexy look. Something to make the missing Hemsworth brother jealous."

I choked back a laugh at his outrageousness but nevertheless followed his lead. Too bad I couldn't see what I looked like, trying to make sexy faces at my gay date to make one sexy Superman jealous. This was quite a feat.

Picturing that movie where Sharon Stone flashed her lady garden to the

world, I crossed my legs slowly. My panties were firmly locked in place, so the action wasn't as tantalizing, but I moved my tan leg unhurriedly, running the tip of my Dolce heel up Leo's calf as I went.

"Damn," he admired in a hushed tone. "You've got this down."

With eyelids lowered, I leaned closer, resting my hand on Leo's shoulder and drawing him near to speak in his ear.

"Is he watching?" I swallowed my nervousness.

Leo's finger played with my hair. "Oh, he's watching, and I think he's envisioning my neck as the bottle in his hand."

Guilt for purposefully trying to make Gage jealous burned my throat, and I pulled back. Sensing my hesitation, Leo grabbed my hand and drew me to the dance floor.

"Explain your situation to me?" Leo asked once we were in the crowd of gyrating bodies.

"What situation?"

"Don't play coy, pretty girl. Your eyes follow that bartender's every move. Why are you hesitating?"

"What makes you think I'm hesitating?" His eyes pinned on mine, and the answer was right there. "Oh, Sara is so going to pay for this."

Leo's face confirmed my suspicion as he pulled in. "Spill it."

"I don't know why. Gage isn't like most guys I know."

"And this is a problem, why?"

"It shouldn't be. I'm insanely attracted to him, and I think he feels the same. I mean, he flirts with me."

"Stop," Leo interrupted. "It is as plain as the cute little nose on your face that Mr. Bartender has the hots for you, so let's get that straight right now. Sara mentioned he followed you to the parking lot to get your name one night."

"What did she not tell you?"

"Not much. You were born with a silver spoon, and she thinks his being a bartender keeps you from jumping in headfirst."

His words stirred up a torrent of emotion in me. "Sounds like Sara thinks I'm a snobby bitch." Angry tears prick my lids.

"Don't be mad at her. She swore you were nothing of the sort. I wouldn't be here if I thought you were." He lifted my chin and steadfastly held my gaze. "Sara thinks you're scared. She said you're so scared, in fact, that you haven't dated in three years." He shivered grimly.

“So what does she think I need to do about it?”

“Keeping in mind that we’re talking about Sara here,” he says, “Sara thinks you need to seduce that sexy man and have a night of unbridled Australian passion.”

My shoulders shook with muted laughter. Sara’s advice is never the best advice for my more sensible self.

“But,” Leo added, “that’s obviously not your style.”

“Obviously not.”

Our dance ended, and we went back to the bar. Our stools were still empty, my half-finished drink waiting as if we’d never left. My will slipped, and I sought Gage, finding him laughing with a few patrons. He was so handsome each time his little dimple showed.

“It’s there, Savannah. I can see how drawn you are to him. Don’t listen to Sara and her crazy schemes. When you’re ready, you *will* be able to act.”

Grateful for his sweet advice, I kissed his cheek as he helped me sit. “Thank you.”

“Now, let’s play with your boy.” He waved Gage over.

Like he’d been waiting for us the entire time we were gone, Gage immediately excused himself from the group he was chatting with. He grabbed a tab from one customer and a beer for another before coming to us.

“Can I get you another drink?” His tone was blunt. *Jealous, Mr. Aussie?*

“Get this hot thing another of your signature cocktails, and I’ll have a Cosmo.” Leo was much looser now. Like he was trying to sound gay if that was even a thing.

“Sure thing.”

I could hear the gears cranking like Gage’s brain was a machine. His forehead wrinkled with uncertainty as he studied Leo.

Leo played on the confusion, his bespectacled stare following Gage’s every move. Leo raised a less-than-subtle brow and an appreciative grunt when Gage turned his back. *Oh my gosh.* I lowered my head and fiddled, pulling lipstick from my purse to hide my trembling lips.

“A Tom Collins for the hottie and a Cosmo for...you.” Gage deadpanned. I mashed my freshly painted lips together.

With an appreciative sip of his drink, Leo relaxed. “Do you work out? You look like you work out. Your jeans fit spec-tac-u-lar-ly.”

“Really, mate?” Gage turned, obviously unsure of what to make of the situation. “Savannah, what the hell?”

“What?” I batted my lashes.

“I was just singing your praises, and Savannah here said she wasn’t sure if you’d be interested. I apologize if we made the wrong assumption.” Leo lifted his hands palms up, a little ‘My bad’ on his face.

“I don’t play for that team, sorry.” Gage scratched his neck. “You don’t think I’m gay, do you? You know damn well I’m not.”

“Actually, Mr. McAussie, could you blame the girl? Have you looked at yourself lately? Everyone knows all the hot guys are gay these days.”

Holy hell. I don’t hold my laughter back this time. Covering my mouth as girlish giggles spring forth, I angled from the bar.

“Very funny, sweetheart.” Gage chuckled, shaking his head ruefully.

Leo clucked his tongue. “Are you sure? That’s a damn shame because I could certainly get used to hearing that accent being whispered in my ear.”

As if perfectly timed to our conversation, a group of ladies waved, greeting Gage emphatically. I steeled my spine, studying the women with their sexy dresses and perfectly coiffed hair as Gage returned their greetings while they found stools a few seats down.

Leo eyed the group, then Gage, while I did my best to pretend indifference.

A moment later, Noelle, who’d checked in with the women first, walked over. “Sorry, Gage, but you know they want you.” She sounded as perturbed as I felt.

Not wanting him to see the strange emotions stirring in my mind, I kept my eyes on my drink as Gage excused himself.

Noelle huffed. “They stop by every damn week. That brunette, she is one persistent woman.”

Leo rose to the bait. “How so?”

“The other night, she came in close to closing time and hung out sipping on drinks and flirting with him the whole time. Got way tipsy and couldn’t drive herself home. It was obviously a ploy.”

“Really?” Leo prodded. My stomach dropped.

Noelle lowered her voice, “I assume he took care of her, if you know what I mean, since she’s back tonight.”

“Um, excuse me.” I rushed to the restroom. My gut burned with embarrassment.

What was going on? I had a date with Jax tomorrow night, yet I was letting some nameless woman get the best of me. Who was I to be jealous?

Gage hadn't asked me out. Sure, we flirted, and he made it known he was interested, but he'd never asked. Plus, he was the one who told me flirting was part of his job.

Leaving the restroom, I returned to Leo, relieved Gage was no longer with the ladies. In fact, Gage was nowhere to be seen. The urge to grab Leo and run was relentless.

"McAussie came back by and asked where you went." Leo finished off his Cosmo.

"Do I want to know what he said?" I held my breath.

"I think you do, but I'm not telling you."

"What? Why not?" My dread turned to hope.

"Sorry, Princess, I turned to the dark side. These lips are sealed." He zipped his lips with his finger.

"You traitor."

"What can I say? I find him much more appealing."

"I'm sure you do." And I couldn't blame him, but the shouts of laughter from Gage's fan club sobered me up. "You know what? I have an early morning, and I'm sure you do too. You ready to head out?" I eye my unfinished drink.

"You don't want to see your boy toy again?"

"Leo, he's not mine. Not even close. Besides, I'm seeing someone else tomorrow."

Leo babbled under his breath but played innocent when I asked him to repeat himself.

Pivoting, I bounced right into Gage's chest. Dammit—it was a fine chest—all hard abs and bulging pecs.

"You going somewhere?"

"Well, yeah." I blinked, and neither of us moved for space.

"No, I was talking to Leo. I've been reconsidering his proposal."

"You what?" My brain was too jarred by his muscles to concentrate on his words.

Unable to keep his face straight, Gage thrust his hand out to shake Leo's.

"Oh, whatever." I pushed him, stepping away from his heat. "I'll leave you two alone, then. See you around." I threw my hand up in a wave and walked around him.

"Why the rush?" Leo called when he caught up with me outside.

"No rush." I hurried to my car. "I'm tired, that's all." Irrational anger

rolled like water in a boiling pot.

Gage and his groupies filled my head all the way home, through a shower, and even after I threw myself into bed. I desperately willed my brain to find sleep, praying for harmless dreams like a zombie apocalypse or showing up to school naked. Instead, I got Gage.

An entire night of the sexy Superman, a bar, and many dirty positions.

NINETEEN

DIRTY JOKES

FRIDAY—MAY 3, 2013

SIX WEEKS UNTIL “THE WEDDING”

I woke up for work with pounding temples and lethargic muscles.

Though my position at the art gallery was tiring, it was fulfilling. Today, I was glad for the distraction. My brain was a mess with my need to return Spencer's call and my growing thoughts of Gage. We were cataloging a shipment set for exhibition later in the summer, and the deeper I went into planning the presentation, the more I liked the work. Maybe a museum or gallery job wasn't outside the realm of my future.

The gloomy disposition lingering, I spent the late afternoon at a local park sketching the scenery for my first art assignment. There solace and comfort overtook the shadows as I poured myself into art until it was time to head home and get ready for my date with Jax.

It's hard to believe I'm juggling multiple guys after so long with nothing. When Jax called Wednesday night, our conversation focused more on his internship than usual. He felt intense pressure to develop economic planning strategies for businesses that were mind-boggling. He seemed stressed, so I forgave his lack of interest in my life. I looked forward to having one-on-one time with him again. I was also looking forward to the kiss he'd promised. Warmth tingled at the anticipation of a long, hot kiss. It'd been too long since I'd had some affection. Could that be the cause of my confusion—hard up for some lovin'?

Brian called on his way to a banquet with other student diplomats that

afternoon. Our conversation was short but sweet. He was thinking of me and wanted to ensure I kept my calendar open for one day next week so we could get together. His staying in Nashville instead of going home for the summer like many students meant we could explore something.

More than Spencer, Brian, or Jax, Gage sat at the forefront of my mind. The bartender was a distracting presence as I prepared. His warm eyes, his dimpled smile, his compelling accent. I was in deep with that one.

The more I considered the men in my life, the more dating multiple guys seemed wrong. Especially when my thoughts of Gage were becoming obsessive.

“Cand? Do you ever feel guilty for dating more than one guy at a time?” I called into my bathroom, where she was working on her hair. As usual for a Friday night, she used my bathroom because Sara was showering in the second bath.

“Nah, that’s what dating is,” she yelled. “It’s not like you’re going to sleep with them. Though, that is your prerogative, too. You’re just checking out the options, you know?”

“I’m not shopping for a car.” I met her gaze in the mirror as she worked a flat iron through her blonde bob.

“Yes, you are, and you need to check out all the bells and whistles. See what perks each comes with.” She grinned. “Take ‘em for a test drive. Wink, wink.”

I couldn’t stop wisecracking. “See who has the smoothest ride?”

“Yes! Or who gets the most mileage on one tank of gas.”

We slumped against the wall, laughing so hard tears ran down our faces. Candace set her flat iron on the counter, shaking as we pulled out one dirty car joke after another.

“Oh, who goes from zero to sixty in three seconds flat, or who prefers to ease onto the gas.”

“You have to check the dipstick.”

“Oh, my gosh.” I sank to the floor, crossing my legs. “Stop, or I’m going to pee.”

“Have you two gone insane?” Sara peeked her head into the bathroom.

With shared looks, Candace and I broke into another round of giggles.

“Keep laughing it up, Miss I’m-So-Sexy, but Jax will be here in thirty minutes.” Sara eyed my comfy clothes, then disappeared.

“Oh crap, really?”

I jumped up and hurried to get dressed for my date while Candace's chuckles echoed through the bathroom.

Twenty minutes later, I applied a coat of plum lip gloss and ran my hands over my hair for the umpteenth time. Candace sat on my bed while I wore two different shoes for her inspection.

"That dress is killer, Van," she admired as I twisted around. The black flimsy skirt floated around my knees flirtatiously. It was perfect, but I was torn between strappy black heels or gold sandals. "I say sandal with your chunky gold bracelets."

"Gold it is then," I agreed, slipping on the other sandal and pulling on my bracelets.

"He's here."

I waited the appropriate amount of time, as designated by Candace, listening as Sara opened the door and greeted Jax before exiting my room.

Dressed casually in dark jeans with a light plaid dress shirt, our eyes met when I walked out of the shadow of the hallway. Admiration evident on his face, he kissed my cheek with a whispered, "You look gorgeous."

"Hi to you, too." I flushed as he took my hand.

"Where are you two kids headed tonight?" Sara teased in a parental tone.

"Wherever she'll let me take her."

"Have a good night. I'll see you two tomorrow morning," I added as Jax steered me out the door.

Sara and Candace had rather big nights with their own dates. It wasn't much of a surprise in Sara's case since she considered sex a recreational sport. However, Candace had surprised me with her declaration earlier in the day that she was planning on spending the night with Tony. They'd been seeing each other intermittently for several months, but I hadn't realized it had become more serious recently. Guilt gnawed on me for being so wrapped up in my junk that I hadn't made time to ask about my best friends.

TWENTY
JAX (AGAIN)
FRIDAY—MAY 3, 2013

DATE #6

Jax made reservations for an extravagant dinner at a local steakhouse. It was the type of restaurant where everything was à la carte, and it was much too nice for an official first date.

“You know you didn’t have to pull out the big guns tonight.” I took in the warm decor as we were seated.

His answering smile was sweet. “It’s no less than you deserve, and I wanted it to be special. It’ll probably be several weeks before we see each other again.”

He made up for his damaging news by entertaining me with hysterical stories about New York and work throughout the meal.

"So, are you cool if we meet some friends for drinks?" He asked once we finished dinner, and he was paying the bill.

Not the most romantic, but he hadn't seen his buddies in a few weeks either. "Sure. Where at?"

He took my hand and led me to his car. "The Garage."

Oh, no. My blood pressure rose in anticipation of seeing Gage. It was probably time I stopped going to the place my personal kryptonite inhabited.

I stopped beside the passenger door. “Do you think we could go to another bar instead?”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, the guys are already there. Besides, I thought you liked The Garage?”

Without a reasonable response, I gave up and sat quietly as Jax drove.



Finding his friends was easy. They were the large group sucking down shots and acting rowdy on the floor. Though Gage established eye contact when Jax and I entered the bar, I worked to ignore his presence as Jax and his buddies sank deeper and deeper into drunken debauchery. I failed. I couldn't stop pinning my gaze on the gorgeous bartender who haunted my dreams.

"Let's dance," Jax suggested after an hour of watching him throw back drinks and talk with his friends. He hauled me to the floor without my reply.

"Does the bartender have something you like?" I drew back, alarmed at the angry hitch in his tone. "You two have been making eyes at each other all night. Is there something going on?"

I failed to answer as he pulled me closer, his eyes aggressively fixed on mine. His warm hand snaked under the fabric of my opened-backed dress, his fingers curling around my ribcage gradually. The closer he pulled me in, the closer his fingers came to skimming the side of my breast. I shoved at his waist, searching for distance without making a scene, but he held tight.

"Tell me, are you slumming it with the help, Savannah?" His words slurred. "He looks like he wants to eat you alive."

"You're drunk, Jax," I hinted calmly. "Why don't I drive you home?"

"That's an excellent idea," his whiskey breath was hot on my cheek, "Right after this dance."

He clasped my back again, pressing me into his chest. It was easier to let him grope me than to try and get away without a scene, so I gritted my teeth and rested my chin on his shoulder, waiting for the interminable song to end.

When his fingers grazed the edge of my breast, I flinched. Rather than apologize, he incoherently whispered how I was supposed to like his touch.

Bile climbed in my throat as I glanced toward the bar and found myself

snared in Gage's deathly stare. He shot lasers with his golden eyes, and my gaze lowered in shame, sure he had a pretty low opinion of me.

My stomach dropped, followed by something more profound ripping through my heart. "Can we go, please?" My plea was bound to give him the wrong impression, but right now, my plan was solely to get him out of the bar. I'd deal with the rest once we were outside.

Jax's hand weaved into my hair and pulled my head so we were eye to eye. "I'm sorry. I've been rude, haven't I?"

"I think you drank too much, that's all. I'm not mad at you, but I think we should leave now," I said diplomatically.

"Dammit." He growled a little too loudly, his face twisted in anger, and I checked around, hoping no one heard. "I've been so stressed and overworked."

He was miserable working in the financial district. People burnt out left and right on Wall Street. Over dinner, Jax had told me about a breakdown one of the firm's partners went through recently. Jax seemed ready to snap himself.

"Why don't you quit? If you're so unhappy—"

His nails dug into my side. "What the hell? Quit? I wouldn't be able to show my face if I quit a job like this. It's our life, Savannah. It's what we're meant to do."

I winced. *Don't make a scene. Don't make a scene*, Momma's voice chanted in my mind. "We?"

"The privileged. I know you feel the pressure. You've told me you do." He'd laced the word privileged with disgust as his bloodshot gaze fell on my lips. "I want my kiss," he demanded, lowering his mouth. Before our lips touched, he whispered, "Let's give that bartender a show."

I gasped at his harshness as his lips claimed mine. *Don't make a scene*. His fingers knotted my hair and held my face as his other hand slid down the side of my chest and landed on my hip, squeezing. *Don't make a scene*. His mouth tasted of whiskey, and, oh, the irony of my family's liquor being the catalyst that put me in this position.

Screw not making a scene! I pushed hard against his chest in search of freedom. Our mouths parted, but his hand remained firmly in my hair, and I tugged my head, gasping at the sharp sting of hair being pulled.

"Let go, Jax," I warned, my voice a low hiss. "Let me go now, or I will make a scene."

His fingers released, and I lost my balance before fixing him with a furious stare and rushing from the dance floor. I cast my gaze on the floor as I made a beeline for the exit and slammed out the door. I was halfway across the parking lot before I'd cooled down enough to stop.

Don't make a scene? I was a stupid, stupid girl to allow Momma's words to dictate my behavior in that situation.

Footsteps echoed, and I swung around in the dim parking lot, anticipating Jax but finding Gage striding my way.

"Savannah?" My body flushed hot with embarrassment the closer he came. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I replied as Jax stumbled out the door behind him. "Just go back inside, okay?"

"Hey, man, I knew it! You got a hard-on for my girl?"

I stepped around Gage and moved forward, touching Jax's chest as he walked up. "Give me your keys, and I'll take you home, Jax," I coaxed, hellbent on keeping this situation from escalating.

He swung his arm hard enough to push me off as he thundered at Gage. "You think you can touch her? She wouldn't let you touch her with a ten-foot pole, dude. She's royalty, and you're some loser bartender."

"Jax!" I grabbed, only to be roughly pushed aside again. How was this the same guy who had been so endearingly sweet at dinner?

"Stay back, Savannah." Gage's tone was stern.

"Dude, don't even talk to her. Get your ass back inside," Jax snarled as he sauntered closer to Gage.

Should I run for help or intervene?

For his part, Gage remained calm. His dark eyes moved between us as he kept a safe distance. "All right, mate, we have a cab at the curb for you. Why don't you jump right in and head home for the night?"

"Are you telling me I have to leave? First, you eye my girl all night, then you have the balls to try and tell me to go home?" Jax snorted.

"Jax, please—" This time, I got too close.

Jax swung around in aggravation, and his elbow whacked me in the cheek directly under my eye socket, sending blinding pain through my face. Jax's rambling apology came immediately, but the torrent of curse words that flew from Gage's mouth drowned him out. The curses were followed by the unmistakable thud of a fist making contact with flesh.

I looked up through blurry, tear-filled eyes as Jax stumbled to the ground.

He was out cold.

Wrapping his arms around my hunched shoulders, Gage hustled me across the lot to the back of the building. Pushing inside a metal door, he cursed steadily as he escorted me to a small office.

Once inside, he ordered me to sit still. "I'm going to grab you some ice." His voice was angry, and I wanted nothing more than to crawl under the desk in my misery.

He returned with a cloth wrapped around ice and pulled up a chair. Sitting, Gage eased my hand from my cheek and smoothed my tangled hair off my face. Taking great care, he brought the ice to my injury and held it.

I hissed at the cold against my tender skin.

His anger was replaced by worry. "Are you all right? Are you dizzy?"

I moved to shake my head but couldn't with the ice there, so I spoke as clearly as I could as my adrenaline wore off. "I'm okay, it just stings. He didn't truly hit me all that hard. Is he okay?"

"Shit, why do you care?" He winced as he pulled the ice from my cheek. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. He'll be fine. The guys at the door will get him in a cab and make sure he gets home."

Probing my cheek lightly, he tempered his frown. "How does it feel?"

"Sore," I admitted, the urge to close my eyes as his fingers ran over my skin overwhelming. "He was just a date, Gage. He wasn't important to me."

"Then why did you let him treat you like that? I watched you dancing."

Shame had me chewing my lip. I'd been so determined not to make a scene. So determined, I let Jax treat me like crap. This was Daniel all over again.

Gage caught the shift in my demeanor and cursed again. He leaned in closer, his hand back on my cheek. "I'm an ass."

"Usually, yes," I agreed, "but tonight, not so much."

"Nah, I am. I shouldn't grill you about him. It's just... When I saw him pawing you, and I could see you pushing away, I thought..."

I inhaled, waiting expectantly for what he would say.

"I always thought of you as so damn spunky that surely you would kick him in the balls at any moment. Instead, you ran out of here, and well, you know the rest."

"Why did you follow me?" I leaned into the caress of his fingers.

"I wanted to know you were okay."

"Thank you."

“I need to return to the bar. They’re covering for me, but it’s packed.”

“Oh, yeah, of course.” I stood, but he shook his head.

“You can stay back here as long as you need. Do you have your car?”

“No, I don’t have my car. I can take a cab home.”

His face was thoughtful as his hands slipped into his pockets. Then he stepped back and stared like he was trying to read me.

“Stay here and hang with me for a while?” He asked. “I’ll give you a lift home.”

TWENTY-ONE

MY HERO

FRIDAY—MAY 3, 2013

It was hard to say no when the warmth of his accent curled my toes, making me feel like a torn-up rag doll. Still numb, I agreed to stay. His rigid stance relaxed as he walked me out from the back office, which opened up to the hallway by the restrooms.

My gaze flitted from the crowded dance floor to the Ladies' room. "I'm going to freshen up and be right there."

His head bobbed. "I'll wait for you."

His concern was touching. "Gage, I'm fine here. Go back before you get in trouble, and I'll be there in a minute."

Even so, he waited until I'd opened the restroom door before he left. I took a few minutes to use the restroom and straighten my hair, then I scrutinized my face in the mirror. There was a subtle red spot where Jax elbowed me, and I bent forward against the marble counter, dropping my head as what took place outside sank in. *Jax was drunk and jealous*, my mind rationalized. *My cheek doesn't look too horribly bad*, I convinced myself as my hands shook and tears fell. Nothing could excuse his behavior. *Real men don't hit women, Savannah Guthry!*

I stood taller and swiped at the tears. "To hell with this. He isn't worth the tears."

Eager to see Gage, I tried covering the redness with powder as best as possible, touched up my lip gloss, and left the restroom to return to the bar. Halfway there, I stopped, admiring the night's superhero from afar.

He was laughing at a customer while he took payment for some drinks. As usual, he wore his dark hair straight up with a messy, spiked look. Not something he styled with a bunch of sticky products, but rather like he'd

hung his head out the car window and let it dry in the wind. It suited him.

When Gage noticed me standing to the side, he stopped mid-stride, and the smile he bestowed on his customers was nothing like the one leveled on me. Butterflies clamored in my stomach. This smile completely transformed his face as his eyes crinkled at the corners, and his dimple dug into his cheek. He was sex on a stick, and I was hungry for a taste. I sighed at my wayward thoughts. *Jax and Brian, who?*

Gage beckoned me to the bar with a nod of his head. Chin up, I glanced around for a seat, hesitating at finding all the bar stools spoken for, and Gage waved me to the bar's edge, pulling a hidden chair from behind him.

“Impressive.”

“I try,” he smirked while I sat. “You okay?”

“Seriously, I’m fine. Embarrassed, but fine.”

He observed the customers at his end of the bar and held up his hand. “Hold that thought.”

I followed his movements while he served drinks to the crowd with a practiced flair. He was very secure in his bartending skills—flipping cups and streaming his pours from high above the glasses—putting on a little show with every cocktail he mixed.

A line grew behind the stools at the bar as groups of people hollered over one another to order their drinks. It was a packed Friday night, and guilt churned my stomach because I’d kept him away from the action and the tips for so long with my drama.

As busy as he was, Gage kept a watchful eye on me. It was comforting how much he seemed to care about my well-being. During the rush, he dropped off a glass of ice water. “Think of a song.”

“Any song?”

“Mmm-hmmm. I’ll be back for it.” He winked, and the flutters returned.

Contemplating songs, I people watched. When the cover band played a drinking song, the crowd went crazy. The carefree faces of my peers were like a slap in the face. It shouldn’t be this hard for me to have fun. Was I defective?

Gage’s face dipped into view. “You look moody. Got a song for me yet?”

“Umm, no.” All the songs about love gone wrong flying through my head, and not a single title came to mind. “I couldn’t think of any.”

Gage fished some bottles of beer out of the cooler. “Come on, Savannah. You’ve got to work with me here.” He reached past my head and handed the

bottles to someone over my shoulder. Cash was exchanged, and I stilled as he leaned into my personal space. “Name a song, now.”

“Taylor Swift.” I spat automatically.

He groaned, shaking his head. “Title?”

His loathing was evident, and I was wildly entertained by the prospect of irritating him. My spirits lifted. “Well, how about my favorite song?” Mock excitement oozed out of my posture.

He played along. “And what’s your favorite?”

“How about “We Are Never Getting Back Together”?”

His head canted. “How appropriate.”

He was referring to Jax, and while part of me bristled at his inserting himself into something that was clearly none of his business, another part agreed with him wholeheartedly.

With a smirk, Gage worked his way down the bar again. I waited earnestly to learn his plan for my song, sipping the water he handed me and checking my phone. On my Instagram feed was a picture of Sara kissing Chris’s cheek in some lit-up garden. My heart melted at the sweet pose and the happiness on my best friend’s face. *I want that.*

“You wanna dance?” I lowered my phone to find a broad-chested guy slightly behind me. He was super built and obviously very proud of those muscles beneath his form-fitting tee. His neck was the size of my thigh. My eyes met his, and he repeated his invitation.

“Sorry mate, she’s with me,” Gage shouted over the bar before I could respond to his request.

“Hey, man, my bad,” Mr. Muscles apologized.

I pursed my lips and scowled at Gage. “And how do you know I wasn’t interested in dancing with him?”

A bark of laughter was his reply as he shook a drink in front of me. “What, Mr. I’m Too Sexy? Sweetheart, you’d never survive with a guy like him.”

Picking up his challenge, I drawled, “Ohhh, really? Why do you think that?”

“I’m pretty sure he was checking out his reflection in the glass he was holding. I don’t think you could ever find a large enough room to fit you both.”

“You don’t even know him. How can you judge him like that?” I asked, not without laughter.

Gage set the drink in front of me and lowered his voice. “Just watch him. If he doesn’t look in a mirror in the next three minutes, I’ll buy you dinner.”

My breath caught. “What if he does?”

“I’ll buy you dinner anyway.” Then, dropping his husky voice, he added, “You pick dessert.”

Oh lord, there he went again, weakening my knees and spurring a fairy dance in my stomach.

“Game on,” I agreed, my voice barely a whisper. Gage stole my breath when he spoke like that. The outcome of the bet didn’t matter because if my wits were about me—and they rarely were where Mr. McAussie was concerned—I was walking away with a dinner date regardless.

“And BAM,” Gage hollered, calling attention to himself.

What! All ready? I searched for Muscle Man and spotted him checking himself out in one of the mirrors on the wall leading to the restrooms. Gage was rather pleased with himself.

Picking up my drink, I gracefully admitted defeat, extending a silent toast in his direction. A sly grin played on his lips before he was pulled away again. Stifling a yawn, I checked my phone. It wasn’t yet midnight, and I was exhausted. The thought of staying here for another two hours to wait for Gage to get off work wasn’t sitting well. Taking things into my own hands, I dialed for a cab.

Swallowing down the last of the perfect Tom Collins Gage had made me, I signaled for his attention. The crowd around the bar had died as more and more half-drunk people filtered to the dance floor.

“All right, I’ve finally found our “Never Getting Back Together” couple,” he crowed proudly, returning to my side. “Six o’clock, heated debate. Looks like someone is breaking up with someone.”

I focused on the couple he was talking about, and sure enough, a poor guy was begging some girl who looked like she’d had more than enough to stay. Her head shook, and she moved, but the guy flailed his arms wide and pointed to his chest. Guess I didn’t have the market cornered on romantic drama tonight.

“And it looks like they are never, ever, ever getting back together,” Gage drawled.

“You really enjoy that, don’t you?”

His brows snapped together. “Seeing two people fight? Of course not.”

“No, I mean your little song game. I’m impressed with how well you peg

people.”

“I told you it was a gift.” He leaned down on his elbows like he had all the time in the world.

“So what’s my song?”

“Oh, no way, can’t give you a song yet.”

“No? Why not? Can’t think of one?”

Bzzzz Bzzzz Bzzzz

A text from the cab company announcing they were outside lit up my screen. My face went from smiling to frowning in one point two seconds.

“Bad news?”

“What? No, it’s just... I called a cab.” Concern flickered across his face, and I reached into my purse for cash. “I’m just tired. Here, for the drink.”

He ignored the cash and fixed his eyes on me instead. “Are you sure everything is okay? I was serious about taking you home.”

“Yeah, really. I’m fine. I realized how long it was going to be before you could get out of here, and I’m exhausted. Take the money. You can’t keep giving me free alcohol.” I waved the bills between us.

“Sure I can. It’ll keep you coming back to see me.” He stepped back from the bar. “It’s all part of my master plan.”

I was so tempted to stay and talk to him that I wanted to kick rocks and cry. *Why had I called the cab? Boy, this guy has a hold on me.* I’m two seconds from pulling out my phone and telling the cabby to forget the call when the cougar from last week walked up and purred. “My usual, gorgeous.”

Acknowledging her presence, he turned from me and approached her. Her arrival hit me: women sit here every night, drooling over him. I wasn’t about to become one of those girls. Even if he was sexy as all get out.

As I slid from the barstool, he was writing on a small paper pad. Years of etiquette lessons from Momma wouldn’t let me leave without acknowledging him—even if that woman killed the butterfly party in my gut. “See ya, Gage,” I called over my shoulder.

“Hey, don’t forget your receipt.” He held a small scrap of paper in his hand. His brows lifted in encouragement as he thrust the note forward.

“Um, thanks.” I took the paper.

Walking toward the door, I unfolded the paper:

Your song, for now

Let It Be Me, Ray LaMontagne

P.S. – Here’s my number. Would you mind shooting me a text when you get in? I’d feel better knowing you arrived home safely. Please.

My stomach dropped, and I spun around. He was standing over his little cougar much the same way he stood over me. The difference was he wasn’t watching her as she chatted animatedly. As if he truly was the superhero from my dreams, he was using his laser vision to peer a hole straight through my soul. We maintained eye contact from across the bar for a moment too long before I pressed the note to my chest and mouthed, "Thank you."

When another employee diverted his attention, I reluctantly forced my legs to move.

“Let it Be Me.” I knew the song, but couldn’t remember the lyrics for the life of me. I gave the awaiting cabbie my address and brought the music up on my phone. Without my earbuds, I was forced to wait until I got home to listen.

Rushing into the house fifteen minutes later, I clicked play before I reached my bedroom. Eyes closed, I hung on every word while searching for hidden meanings. The lyrics... *Oh, my God.*

Did Gage mean the things Ray LaMontagne sang of? For me? What a gesture. This was a few notches above holding a boombox outside my window.

“Well, this changes things.” I sniffed on the precipice of tears. His note clenched tightly in my fist, I saved his number in my phone. For once, I didn’t obsess over the proper thing to say.

I’m home. I can’t thank you enough for tonight and for you saving me. You’re my hero ;)

His reply didn’t come right away. That was understandable. He was working at the bar and certainly couldn’t get to his phone. Double checking the front door was locked, I took a quick shower to kill time. Still no return text; I settled into bed a little after one and flipped off my lamp when my phone vibrated.

THE Aussie: Thank you for letting me know you made it home. I hope I’ll see you tomorrow...

Before I could reply, the phone buzzed again.

THE Aussie: preferably without a date.

I may drop by.

May. I remained vague because I did have a date. A date I didn't want to admit to. The constant temptation to stop by The Garage and see Gage had worn me down. After tonight and that song choice. I should give up on being indifferent. What was stopping me?

TWENTY-TWO
CANCELED
SATURDAY—MAY 4, 2013

DATE #7

I spent most of Saturday nursing a ridiculous headache from the night before. The scene with Jax didn't hit me until I'd made it into bed and realized how wrong I'd been about him. Why had I covered for his drunk ass in the bar? I should know better.

Headache or not, Sara and Candace would not let me talk my way out of tonight's date.

"You can't let one crappy night ruin the rest of these dates for you, Van." Candace insisted relentlessly as I served up excuse after excuse.

"I really don't know if I can go back, you guys. I feel so stupid. I don't know how to face Gage and with another date to boot. He'll think I'm such an idiot." I threw myself on the couch.

"The dude knocked a guy out cold." Sara stood over me, hands on her hips. "For you," she added.

The anger and concern on Gage's face last night sent heat licking over my skin. I spent half the afternoon listening to the song he assigned me on repeat, my imagination running wild with fantasies and notions of what he was thinking.

I would hold up my end of the bargain and go on my seventh date, but I could no longer pretend it wasn't Gage who I wanted to see more than a mystery guy.



It was close to 7 p.m. when I walked into The Garage. For once, I felt shy at seeing my handsome superhero. I was walking into *his* bar to meet another date, and here I was calling him *mine*. “You are so messed up,” I scolded, checking the place out.

“How’s the cheek?” Gage grazed my back as he came up from behind and circled to stand before me.

“Geez.” I clutched my chest, using the table on my left to steady myself as those butterflies lifted off, bouncing in my stomach.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you.” His eyes searched my face. No doubt looking for signs of last night’s dramatic smackdown.

“It was nothing a little makeup couldn’t fix.”

“How’s your fist, Ali? I assume you do know who Muhammad Ali is?”

“I’m from Australia, not Mars.” His jaw clenched like I’d had the audacity to question his manhood.

“Ah yes, I forgot.” I teased, relaxing enough to take him in from head to toe.

“You doing some grocery shopping?” His muscles twitched under the black tee that was his customary “uniform” as he held two bags.

He stood watching me momentarily before blinking out of whatever thoughts he’d been having. “Yeah, I needed to make a run for garnish. Couldn’t run out of limes in case my favorite Tom Collins-ordering gal came in tonight.” His flippant tone matched his adorable grin as he walked around and gently set the bags on the counter. Like a dog, I followed.

“Hey, girl,” Noelle called from behind the bar. “I heard there was a slight commotion in the parking lot last night.” She batted her thick lashes, ready to devour any gossip I would give her.

Sliding onto a bar stool, I channeled Erika Guthry, remaining easy-

breezy. “Just a small misunderstanding, that’s all.”

“That’s not what one of the bouncers said earlier.”

“Noelle,” Gage warned, his voice deep and authoritative. “I doubt she wants to talk about it right now. Take these limes to the back and start prepping them.”

Noelle grabbed the bag of fruit and stalked toward the back, throwing me a puzzled glance. Gage rolled his neck, an annoyed frown darkening his countenance.

“I asked the guys to keep their mouths shut about last night. Evidently, I’ll have to have a talk with them again.”

“It’s not a problem. I know Noelle from school, so she probably thought I would fill her in. You don’t have to protect me, you know. I’m a big girl.”

His annoyance slipped into a half grin. “You are, huh?”

I ignored his sarcasm.

Gage bent over the bar, leaning close, and I stretched to meet him halfway. His masculine scent—a tantalizing mix of tangy cologne and mints—tickled my nose as his breath fanned over my cheek.

His mouth brushed my ear. “I know you could have kicked his ass if you wanted to, but could you possibly let me believe what you said in your text?”

My eyes drooped in ecstasy at his soothing tone. “What are you talking about?” My hand gripped his upper arm to hold him close.

“You called me your hero last night.” He sighed, and the rush of his breath shot heat straight to the apex of my thighs. “I rather liked the thought of being your superhero. After all, you’re turning into my personal brand of kryptonite.”

He drew back and lingered inches from my face, then straightened, peeling my fingers from his arm as I sat mute. Utterly speechless as his fingers caressed mine before he set my hand on the bartop.

Bzzzz Bzzzz Bzzzz

The vibrations slammed my hazy senses back to reality. I licked my bottom lip and stared at Gage, unable to think clearly as his gaze flicked to the counter. “That’s your phone.”

“Hmmm?” A second wave of vibrations yanked me the rest of the way to reality. “Oh!” I gasped, shaking my head like an idiot.

Gage chucked my chin as he stepped away. “I’ll be back in a while.”

My stare followed his leave like a lovesick girl. The need to check for drool on my chin was overwhelming. Sliding my finger across the unlock

button, I checked my texts.

Sara: So, I forgot to tell you I canceled your date tonight. Stop fighting Gage and GO with it girl! <3 Sara

She has got to be kidding. Giving Sara twenty mental kicks in the head, I typed a reply.

I can't believe you two hounded me about how badly I needed to go on this date. I can't believe you canceled on the poor guy last minute!
Sara: Relax. I told him you were sick and would try to reschedule when you got better. AND you did need to get out. You need to admit you have it bad for the sexy crocodile hunter and jump his bones, mate ;)

The unsolicited image of Gage dressed as a crocodile hunter flashed through my mind, and I squeezed my eyes shut.

Something bumped my back, and I opened my eyes as Ryan, the art store sales clerk, squeezed beside me.

"Excuse me," he apologized, looking down at the floor. He shifted on his stool and lifted his head. "Well, hello again. We seem to keep bumping into each other." He barked an awkward laugh.

"Hey." I grinned. "Yeah, we do, don't we?"

I looked for Gage. What should I do now? My date wasn't showing, and Gage was busy with work. I should leave.

Then again, maybe I should stay. Gage's tantalizing words were the most amazing sentiment I'd heard in, like, ever. As I wavered, the bar filled, and the music got louder. I peeked over at a substitute deejay playing tracks. *Riley must have the weekend off.*

Beside me, Ryan cleared his throat and spoke.

His voice reached me, but I didn't catch his words. "Sorry?"

"Your pencils from the other day?" Ryan spoke louder. "Did the charcoals work?" His small eyes flicked from the bar to my face and then back. His nervousness was endearing.

"Oh, yes." I nodded, then shook my head. "Well, actually, I haven't played with them yet. I'm taking a new class on Mondays, and we haven't had an assignment using charcoal yet."

"You've been coming into the store for a while now. Are you an art major?" His voice remained faint, but he was gaining confidence. His eyes

were more direct as he added, "I don't mean to pry."

I waved my hand. "You're not prying. I'm an Art History major. The sketching is a passion of mine, but I don't expect my stuff to ever be in a gallery or anyone's home."

"Why not?"

"Ha, you've never seen my work. If you had, you'd know why not. I'm not bad, but I do it because I love drawing, not because I'm talented. It's a way to escape."

His mouth opened again when Gage appeared behind me. He was making a habit of coming up behind me. At least this time, I didn't jump when he touched my shoulder. No jumping, but I did feel the internal sparks of need his contact fired through my nerve endings.

"Hey, I almost hate to ask this, but are you here waiting on someone tonight?" I bit my tongue out of aggravation, and Gage surrendered. "I'm not trying to rag on you. It's kind of been, well—"

"Stop while you're ahead, bartender." Tilting away from Ryan, I leaned into Gage. "I'm not here waiting for a date, no. I understand why you needed to ask, and although it's somewhat embarrassing, I guess I'm not mad at you for it."

"You guess?" He ran his fingers over a loose strand of my hair as it draped beside my face. I stilled. "In that case, I was wondering if you'd eaten. I'm working in the office tonight and was going to grab a bite before the bar gets too busy."

I almost danced my happy little fanny out of the chair, mentally chanting, 'YES! YES! YES!' Instead, I maintained a modicum of dignity and gave a nod. I slid from my stool to follow after Gage when I remembered Ryan. Turning over my shoulder, I caught him staring. "It was nice chatting with you. I'm sure I'll see you at the store again soon." I tossed him a wave and caught up with Gage at the mouth of the hallway. The heat of his palm lingering near the small of my back, he escorted me to the same office he'd brought me to last night.

"Are you okay with something from Watson's upstairs?" He pulled out a chair for me before rounding the large desk and taking one of his own.

"Yeah, that'd be great. Their Southern Chicken Salad is fine."

I scoped out the office as he picked up the phone and called for a takeout order. The small room didn't hold any memorabilia or personal items you'd expect to find in a typical office. Drew was constantly flashing pictures of his

kids... Wait, I haven't seen Drew in a while. Had Riley mentioned an ownership change in the bar previously? I didn't recall it ever coming up.

"So, what do you have to do in the office? Are you filling in for Drew while he's out or something?" I inquired smoothly, shamelessly digging for information.

"No, Drew is no longer here. I'm helping manage the place until the new owner hires someone he trusts."

"Oh, so are you here temporarily, then?" My voice came off disappointed even to my own ears. Maybe he couldn't tell.

He shifted some files around. "It all depends on how things go. Let me go grab our food and check on the bar. I'll be right back."

Returning with our dinners ten minutes later, Gage pulled a chair from the corner to sit beside me.

"Thank you for dinner." I poured honey mustard over my fried chicken salad.

"Tell me about Riley," he asked unexpectedly as we ate.

"Riley? What about him?"

"You said you were just friends, and yet I get the distinct impression he wants to be more than friends when he looks at you."

"We *are* just friends. He and I get along so well that it's run through our minds that we should've hooked up by now." Gage pulled a tense smile. "We've agreed it's best to stay friends, though."

"He's not going to claim rights to you then?"

"Claim rights to me? When?"

He paused, fork midway to his mouth. "When you stop all the random loser dating and pick a real man."

"Ha!" Discussing my dating habits with Gage wasn't on my list, but I would be honest if he asked. Or, at least, somewhat honest. His jealous questions about Riley and query about claims on me brought something else to mind.

"Since we're talking about claims, what about *your* fan club?"

Gage threw his head back as a shout of laughter escaped.

"Hey, I'm serious," I slapped his arm, "I know it's part of the job, but is there ever a point where you would turn them down?"

Immediately, he set his boxed dinner on the desk and angled toward me, his face more somber than it was previously. "Let me set one thing straight. I don't sleep with any of those women, Savannah. Now, I'm not going to

pretend to be a saint and say I've never taken what's been offered, but not here—not in Nashville, I haven't."

"I wasn't talking about sex, though I'm relieved you're not playing boy toy to the cougars." I popped another bite of salad in my mouth with a wink.

He regarded me with lifted brows, so I wiped my mouth and answered his unasked question. "I meant, will the flirting always be part of the job? If there were a Mrs. Aussie Bartender, would you continue allowing those women to hang all over you?"

The dimpled side of his mouth curved. "Mrs. Aussie Bartender, huh? Is that what we'll be calling her?"

I clenched my thighs at the laziness in his tone, head tilting. "I don't even know your last name."

"It's Taylor."

"Taylor? Huh. Not as cool as 'Gage Aussie Bartender', but whatevs." I pushed my salad box aside as his knee bumped mine with a chuckle.

"Let's not talk about me. How about you tell me what you're doing with all of these dates?"

Bubble burst. It was bound to come up eventually. I fingered my lip. "What makes you think there's something 'up' with it? Can't a girl go out on some dates?"

"From what I've seen, you've been on *one* date, and that guy was dumb enough to leave you here early. The others were scum, late, overly touchy-feely, or drunk.

My jaw drops with my extended inhale. His list made this experiment sound like a failure. "Wow, taking notes, were we?" I bristled.

"Yes, I have been."

"Why?"

"First, tell me why you've been putting yourself through the wringer."

With a wave of my hand, I pushed back from the desk so I didn't feel so trapped. My brain worked better when we weren't so close together.

"It's ridiculous, really. My roommates signed me up on a campus dating site as a joke."

"What the fu—" Gage cleared his throat. His handsome face contrite. "Excuse me. What were they thinking? And might I add, why didn't you kill them?"

"They were thinking I spent too much time with my books and studying. I admit they were probably right. I'm not much of a dater." The entire situation

sounded foolish. I could spill the beans about the wedding, but that made me sound like a loser.

Once again, he studied me with a thoughtful stare. “So, did you have a date tonight?”

My neck burned. “I did, but it was canceled at the last minute.”

“Yet, you stayed anyway?” The burning traveled into my cheeks as his gaze nailed me to my chair. “Why?”

The question stole the air from my lungs. I couldn’t answer. I wasn’t bold enough to tell him he was *my* kryptonite and not the other way around. I couldn’t.

After an eternity—or one full minute—he pitched his head and narrowed his eyes. “Go out with me.”

Those four words coming from that mouth were precisely what this girl wanted to hear above all else. Even so, I fumbled the ball.

“Go out with you?” I echoed. “Why?”

His glowing appreciation bulldozed me. “Sweetheart, you keep going out with these guys, yet you end up with me every night. I know you feel it. Let’s get away from the bar and see where it leads.”

I swallowed in an attempt to wet my parched mouth. *Damn, this man.* “Okay.”

“Yeah?” His eyes sparkled.

“Yeah.” *Touchdown!*

We sat quietly, letting the moment sink in until a knock on the door interrupted us. A bouncer I recognized from the night before popped his head in. “Sorry to interrupt, but there’s a situation out here you’re needed for.”

Mildly confused, Gage excused himself. Two minutes later, he returned. “I’m sorry, Savannah. Something’s come up that I have to deal with. How about you give me your address, and I’ll pick you up tomorrow morning at ten?”

“Tomorrow?” I blurted, laughing at his enthusiasm. “It’s Sunday. Plus, it’s Cinco de Mayo. What could we possibly do at ten in the morning?”

“Do you already have plans for the morning?” he asked, ignoring my question.

“Well no, but—”

“No buts.” I glared. “Savannah, in the two weeks I’ve known you, you’ve been on dates with six different guys.”

“Geez, you really were keeping count, weren’t you?” I mumbled.

“Yes, angel, I was. Look, you’re free, I’m free. I’m taking you out while there’s an opening in your jam-packed social calendar.”

I would have snapped something snarky, except it was about the sweetest thing anyone had ever said. Plus, his damn smile was smoldering as he stepped closer, stealing all the air between us.

“If you can’t read between the lines, I will clarify. I’m taking my shot before some other big wig comes in and tries to steal you away. Is that all right with you?” His eyes were filled with purpose.

“It’s more than all right. Ten it is.”

Ushering me from the office and back to the bar, I considered hanging out until I saw how packed the place was. Gage needed to focus on his patrons. Telling him I would see him in the morning, I made my way to the door.

TWENTY-THREE

CINCO DE MAYO

SUNDAY—MAY 5, 2013

The three raps at the door accelerated my already wild heartbeat. A hummingbird had permanently taken up residence in my chest. With a deep inhale and long exhale, I opened the door and burst into laughter as I came face to face with a colorful bouquet, complete with a little Mexican flag and a beautifully painted maraca.

“Happy Cinco de Mayo,” came the voice behind the flowers, his sexy laugh joined.

“I didn't know Australia celebrated.”

“Of course we do.” Gage lowered the bouquet. “We celebrate any excuse for a party.”

“Well, thank you.” I took the flowers and stepped aside. “Come in while I'll put these in a vase.”

“This is a cute place you have. You girls rent it?” Gage asked from the living room.

My feet stumbled on the kitchen tile. “Uh, no, I own it. Sara and Candace pay me rent, though.”

Finding a vase beneath the sink, I arranged the flowers and returned to the living room as Gage skimmed the framed pictures on the built-in shelves. My chest tightened when he picked up one from high school of me and my parents wearing Guthry golf shifts at a Guthry Whiskey charity event.

I hadn't set out to keep my identity secret from Gage. I never discussed my family with anyone outside my inner circle. He returned the picture without comment and slid his hands into his pockets.

Relieved, I set the flowers on the mantel. “Ready?”

“Yes, let's go. You look beautiful, by the way.” He stopped in front of

me. "I should have mentioned that first thing."

A ridiculous amount of giddiness fluttered through my stomach. I was wearing a faded-out blue jean jacket over a flowered sundress with ballet flats. In the past two weeks, the man had seen me in every curve hugging, hot date dress I owned, yet he thought I was beautiful in a simple sundress and flats. *Swoon.*

"Did I leave you speechless?" His dimple peeked out.

"You leave me speechless quite often, actually." My gaze roamed his face, allowing him to see my admiration. "You look very nice yourself in a color other than black."

"You think? They say black is slimming, though."

"Well, you know, your butt does look a tad big in those jeans." I plunked my hands on my hips and gave him a thorough inspection. He wore an untucked white button-up with the sleeves rolled over loose and casual dark-washed jeans. "Thank God you're not wearing skinny jeans."

His face screwed in mock disgust. "C'mon funny girl, or we'll miss our date standing here complimenting each other."

"So, where are we going?" I asked once we were buckled into his SUV and pulling out of the driveway.

He shrugged noncommittally. "You'll see."

We slid into a parking spot at Centennial Park a few minutes later. Centennial was a few blocks from my house and a few blocks down from VU's campus.

Gage jumped out, waving for me to stay put while he walked around and opened my door like a gentleman. When he produced a picnic basket and folded blanket from the back seat, I nearly melted, masking my surprise. His hand took mine, prompting whole-body shivers as we strolled along the cool grass and found a seat under a large shade tree close to the famous replica of the Parthenon. I took the basket as he spread the blanket on the grass.

"This has always been a favorite place of mine." I scanned the open area as children ran in circles not far from us.

"After you." He waited for me to settle on the blanket before setting the basket down and taking the spot next to me. "Why is it your favorite?"

"It's close to my house, for one. It's safe and full of people all the time. Plus, I can people watch and draw or sit peacefully and study when I need to."

His eyes focused intently as I spoke. I had his full attention, and having

him interested in what I had to say was empowering. “Thank you for this.”

“I should be thanking you for saying yes.”

“No, really. For going through the trouble of packing a picnic and planning this. I know you have to work in a bit, so it was...”

He plucked my hand from my lap, and I trailed off. “This is the type of date you deserve, Savannah,” his thumb circled my palm, “Besides, don’t thank me yet. You haven’t seen what I packed.”

“Oh no.” I eyed the basket with a grimace, and a huffed laugh fell from his lips.

“All right, here’s the part of the date where we get to know each other. You ready?”

“I’m kinda scared,” I admitted with yet another smile. My cheeks ached from all the smiling I’d done since Gage walked into my house this morning.

“Don’t be scared. I’ll go easy on you.” He released my hand and stretched onto his side. As gorgeous as he was lying there propped on his elbow, losing his warm touch was disappointing. As if he could read my mind, he tapped the ground. “Get comfortable.”

Eagerly, I pulled off my jacket and shifted to my back beside him.

“So, you’re an Art History major, right?” he asked while I wiggled into an agreeable position.

The sun peeked through the leaves over our heads, allowing rays to warm my skin. “Yep.”

Once I settled, Gage retook my hand. His thumb and forefinger moved over my fingers, gently tracing them like touching me was second nature. My eyes closed with wonderment at the deliciousness of it all.

“Why art?”

“I guess I’ve always loved seeing how others viewed the world. Like how they can take something so normal and make it look extraordinary.” A low purr escaped my throat when he flipped my arm, and his fingers lightly ran up and down my forearm.

“Why bartending?” My breath hissed. I’d asked that like I was inferring he had a meaningless job. Not at all my intention.

Gage merely chuckled. “It’s what I do. I’m actually here on research.”

My eyes popped open. “You research bartending?”

“No, not exactly.” He hesitated, something flickering over his face before he sat up abruptly. “Let’s unpack this basket. I’m hungry.”

Famished, I pulled the lid off the basket and gaped at everything he’d

packed. There was fresh fruit, cheese, crackers, and slices of meat to eat, as well as two single-serving orange juices with champagne. I clapped when he uncovered two plastic wine flutes.

“What, no shrimp on the barbie?” I was only half joking. “Gage, honestly, this is amazing. How in the world did you have time for this?”

“This is my date kit.” He smugly settled on his forearms. “I keep it stocked every weekend in case a hottie like you needs a man.”

I plucked a grape from its stem and hurled it at his head. “You seriously did not just say that.”

“A man never reveals his secrets,” he chided, picking up the grape and pegging me in the nose.

From that point forward, we took turns tossing fruit at each other as we ate, sometimes as punctuation to a conversation. My bubbly giggles and Gage's baritone laughter mingled, creating a perfect melody. Several people walked by, staring as if they longed to switch places. I envisioned the picture we created from their point of view: a young couple enjoying a beautiful spring picnic, carefree and laughing like they were in love. It had turned into a halcyon day. I didn't want it to end.

“Can I ask you a question?” Gage checked over his shoulder while he packed our used dishes.

I handed him my wine cup. “Of course.”

“Is there a reason you don't tell anyone who your parents are?”

I stilled, my face going red. I pulled my jacket on as a cover.

“I'd already guessed after hearing different people talk about you at the bar, but it was confirmed when I saw the picture at your house.” He wasn't digging for dirt or favors like others did when they knew my family's business. He was curious and interested.

“It's not like it's a secret or anything, but I don't broadcast it. Being heir to one of the world's largest whiskey companies comes at a price. Especially when your peers are college-aged.”

Gage checked his watch and closed the lid to the basket. “I imagine the frat boys really love you, huh?”

“Oh, my gosh.” Memories of my first year at VU assaulted me. “It's honestly part of why I don't party much. I got so tired of people always hitting me up for free booze. It's not like I keep crates of whiskey stashed at my house.” I joke about it, but being used hurt, and it had happened too often.

“Does it matter to you?”

His brow furrowed. “Come again?”

“Never mind.” How could I word what I wanted to know? If I asked, “Does it matter if I come from money and you’re just a bartender?” I would offend him. On the other hand, what if my money was why he’d asked me out in the first place? He’d figured out who I was before seeing the picture. Did I want to know if his plans included using me?

Gage sighed. “It’s about time to go.”

“Is it?” Even with the issue of my family hanging over us, I was seriously bummed to end our date. “I guess this is the portion of the date where you turn into my friendly neighborhood bartender and tell me what you thought of my escort.” I tucked my knees under and waited.

Gage’s face was cloaked in heavy concentration. “He’s pretty cool. I definitely think you should go on a second date with him.”

I curbed a smile. “You do, do you?”

“Most definitely.” He stood and offered me a hand. “You need to give him a chance to impress you,” he explained, confidently pulling me to my feet. We were so close the spicy scent of his cologne tickled my nose. Fingers entangled and eyes locked, we stood with inches between us. I cataloged every part of him—the small dent in his cheek that deepened when he smiled, the dark strands of his spiked hair, the brown eyes warm with golden flecks. He was undeniably gorgeous.

“Would you let me draw you sometime? I have this class I’m taking, and well—” My cheeks burned ten flaming shades of red.

There goes that dimple, deepening. “You want to draw me?”

“Sure.” I bit my lip.

“Like Jack and Rose from Titanic?” His dark brows hiked. “That kind of drawing?”

“Um, yeah, Gage. I want to draw you in nothing but one of your shot glasses.” My eyes rolled.

“Sweetheart, we’re gonna need to find a bigger glass if that’s where you wanna go.”

Skin hot, I pulled away, starting across the grass to the parking lot before he could see my acute embarrassment. He jogged up beside me laughing.

“I’ve said it before, but it bears repeating that you are so full of yourself,” I grumbled, my annoyance feigned. *He’s sexy as hell, and it’s disconcerting how crazy he makes me feel!*

Gage stopped. I paused and turned as he tilted his head one way, then the

other. Scratching his jaw, he challenged, “You’ve said that about me? Out loud? When?”

It was all I could do to keep a straight face. “Well, I’ve certainly thought it. Maybe I didn’t say it to your face.”

“Aww, thanks, sweetheart.” He threw his arm over my shoulders. “Nice to know you were thinking of me.”

“Case in point.”

“Touché.” He chuckled. “Now get in the car before I’m tempted to say anything else stupid.”



“I know this bar that serves some pretty kick-ass drinks.” Gage nudged me as we walked toward the house. “The bartenders are easy on the eyes, too.”

“Yeah? How easy?”

“I have it on good authority there’s this one guy who is so perfectly made, he’ll soon be posing for a beautiful young artist. I mean, she begged him for the opportunity. He is that fabulous.”

“Oh,” I tapped my bottom lip, “That must be John. He is dreamy.”

Gage growled low. “Am I going to have to kick John’s ass?”

I fell against his chest, laughing at his serious tone. “You really are too much, but the girls and I are grabbing dinner tonight. It is Cinco de Mayo, after all.”

Ducking my head, I pulled away, swiftly hopping the two steps to my front door. My key pushed into the lock, and I groaned as it stuck. After jiggling, it finally turned. Note to self: *Get a new lock!* I checked over my shoulder. Gage had remained on the ground instead of following me onto the porch. He flashed a smile so wide the edges of his eyes crinkled.

“Maybe I’ll see you later?” There was a hint of hope in his voice. A touch of optimism on his face. He reminded me of a kid waiting to be handed a

beautifully wrapped Christmas present. The child in him hoped for the perfect gift, but reality kept him from getting too excited. Gage knew what he wanted me to say but wasn't so cocky or confident to presume I would give him what he hoped for.

I took a shaky breath, dumbfounded by how clearly I could read him after one picnic in the park. That realization made me long to jump from my porch and fling myself into his arms. My feelings shook me, and instead of indulging them, I smiled weakly and stepped into the house. Trembling at the pleasant vision of our limbs tangled together passionately and my lips pressed against his, I collapsed against the closed door.

I sighed and pressed my hand to my chest. My heart beat crazily. Giddiness filled my chest, then... Oh, no! Mortification washed away the sweetest of the day. I'd bolted inside like a coward without a goodbye or thank you. I flung the door open, but his vehicle was gone.

"Aww crap." I grabbed my phone and typed a text.

I forgot to thank you for the wonderful morning.

I hit send and anxiously awaited a reply. After ten minutes of silence, my mind leaped to the assumption that he'd either missed the message or ignored it completely. Refusing the negative thoughts, I settled into a chair with a book and waited some more. After staring at the cover for way too long, I was finally opening the novel to the first chapter when my phone chimed.

THE Aussie: Sorry, I was driving. You are MORE than welcome. It was a great morning. Almost perfect.

Driving. How stupid of me to forget that little detail.

Why almost?

THE Aussie: It ended.

Teenaged Savannah squealed. Where was Sara or Candace when I needed someone to walk me through what to say next? I racked my brain and typed,

For now... I'll see you tonight.

THE Aussie: Yeah?

Yeah, I'll be stopping by to see John ;)

THE Aussie: Can't wait!

TWENTY-FOUR

CALLING DIBS

SUNDAY—MAY 5, 2013

Sara and Candace were adamant we keep our Mexican dinner date before stopping by The Garage to visit Gage. Two margaritas and several hours later, the three of us wandered into a full-blown party at the bar. In complete Cinco de Mayo mode, red, green, and white banners hung from the ceiling, festive music pumped loud, and alcohol flowed.

Searching the mob for Gage, I waved at a few people from school. Sara, Candace, and I inched through the crowd and stood by the half-wall bordering the dance floor.

A presence stepped up behind me as a touch grazed my elbow. “I need to tell you something,” Gage whispered against my ear, his accent thicker when he spoke so low.

I turned. “Hi...” I frowned at the tight lines around his mouth. “What’s up?” What had made him so austere after being in such good spirits earlier in the day?

Candace moved around me and thrust her hand into Gage’s for forced introductions. “I’m Candace. You must be the fabulous bartender from down under.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Candace. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

She gave me a side-eye. “All lies, I’m sure.”

“I hope not.” He played along, but his smile wasn’t as brilliant as usual. “I need to steal Savannah for a moment if you don’t mind. Tell the guys at the bar your drinks are on me.”

That pulled Sara’s attention. “Drinks are on you? You can have her all night, sweetie.” She popped around me and looped her arm through Candace’s.

“That’s Sara.” I introduced.

With quick pleasantries exchanged, Gage led me down the hallway to his office. He called to John as we went, letting him know he would be back in a minute. His face darkened as soon as he shut the office door, and he ran a hand nervously across his neck.

"Is everything all right?" My voice wavered. I didn't recognize this side of Gage Taylor.

“I should have told you something this morning, but when I saw you, you looked so beautiful. It wasn’t how I wanted to spend our morning.” He motioned for me to take a seat. “Your date the other night, Jax?”

Unease slithered down my spine. “Yeah?”

“Well, apparently, he didn’t show up wherever he was supposed to be yesterday, and I guess some of his buddies alerted the police about the scuffle here with you.” *The police?* “They showed up last night to speak with me.”

I crossed my arms to ward off a chill. “They showed up here to speak with you? Why didn’t they call me?”

“I guess they were checking up on where he’d been. The guys and I filled them in on the facts. We told them I punched him and why and how we sent him home alone in a cab. Nobody’s in trouble, but I wanted you to hear about it from me.”

“So, they still don’t know where he is? He didn't go back to New York?” Jax was sweet until he was wasted. Despite our date, I didn't want anything to happen to him.

“I really don’t know. He was fine when he left here. The guys made sure he was awake and alert. At least as alert as he could be, as drunk as he was.” Gage stepped toe to toe with me. “I’m sure he felt like an ass and is somewhere safe sleeping away his misery and the massive black eye he most likely ended up with.”

“Sure. He’s probably hiding,” I agreed, although concern pricked the hairs on my neck.

Gage lifted my chin. “Hey, sweet thing, can I buy you a drink?”

I took a deep, calming breath and pushed Jax from my mind. He was fine, and I wanted to enjoy the evening with my friends.

Batting my lashes, I peered past him. “Actually, I’m here for John. I hear he’s a pretty hot catch and would be willing to pose for some drawings.”

Eyes flaring, Gage leaned in. *He's going to kiss me.* For one moment, my mind raced, but when we were so close that our breath mingled in the heated

air between us, instead of a kiss, he spoke low, “Is it going to be a nude portrait? Because I’m willing to sacrifice myself for your art if need be.”

A twitch of pure desire jolted through my abdomen as Gage turned to the door. “Shall we?” He opened the door, a teasing gleam in his eyes.

“You play dirty,” I grumbled as I walked past him and returned to the bar. I would get him back for his little scene.

Two hours and several margaritas later—five for the night at five, if I could count correctly—I bumped and ground with the girls on the dance floor. The place was packed with countless sweaty bodies swaying and dancing to the heavy beats vibrating through the building.

Although Gage stayed busy behind the bar, we made eye contact throughout the evening. As I rolled my hips and tossed my hair, I watched Gage from across the dance floor as he handed a guy in a backward baseball cap some beers. At the bar sat the same attentive cougar I’d seen before. She angled close as he leaned over, and I glowered when she lifted her hand to his chest like some good Samaritan trying to help him from toppling over the bar.

Jealousy seethed when she stroked her skinny fingers over his chest. Gage straightened and mouthed something to her. *Dammit*. I didn’t want to be jealous of his job, but I wished I could see her face and hear their conversation.

“Make him notice you, Van.” Sara yelled over the music, her hands motioning to her boobs and lifting them. The suggestion was clear—time to turn Mr. Aussie into a puddle of drool.

Releasing my inhibitions, I let the heavy bass beat reach into my chest and grab me. My arms rose of their own accord, and I twisted and dipped to the pulsing rhythm, dancing like no one was watching. I’d worn low-rise jeans, and air tickled my exposed skin as my shirt skimmed my upper abs. Curious, I glanced toward the bar to see if Gage had noticed.

He had.

Emboldened by the drinks, I cranked up my inner sex kitten. A smile curved my lips when I met his brown stare. He was motionless, watching as I did a little spin to the music and wiggled my fingers in a coy wave. The longer I danced, the more his eyes narrowed as we stared each other down. It was like we were the only people in the bar. A body pressed against my back, and I ignored the presence, assuming it was Candace or Sara, until Gage’s

face shifted from amused to irritated.

A check over my shoulder revealed an anonymous grinding male. *Of course*. Why did guys think dancing at a club meant they had free rein to grope unsuspecting females? He touched my hips, and I jumped, spinning around and bumping into his chest.

“I’m dancing here,” I shouted over the music.

“All by yourself, gorgeous?” He forced a sexy gaze he must think works on all the ladies as he moved closer and nudged his leg between mine. “Come on, I just wanna dance with you.”

Five margaritas had dulled my senses enough to make me sluggish at combating his moves. It wasn’t as if I’d never danced with a stranger at a club. There was no harm in a simple dance.

“You’re too sexy to be here alone,” he shouted when I relented. One of his hands slowly moved to rest on my upper thigh as he dipped low, gyrating against me.

I plucked his hand from my thigh. “Thank you, but I’m here with friends, actually.”

“Are you going home with your friends, too?” Did I hear him correctly?

“Was that a proposition?” I turned my head, searching for Gage.

“If you’re free, gorgeous, I’m free.”

My head dropped back as I was hit with a fit of laughter—and that’s when I saw him—my Aussie Superman. He was upside down. *No*. My head was upside down, and Gage was behind me, his super laser beam eyes set on mine.

“Hi,” I giggled.

The alcohol had officially worked its way into my system. My head righted, and I giggled at my dancing partner. “I’m not sure if I’m free.” I spun around so I could get an unobstructed view of my Superman. The new position didn’t bother Mr. Dirty Dancer, as my butt was now pressed firmly against his groin.

My head swam as Gage stood before me, wearing a frown. He crossed his arms over his broad chest and... Did his biceps flex? I bet he could crack a walnut with those arms. It was lovely the things alcohol made you think of. I giggled again. Gage arched a brow.

“Oh, hey, this is—” Wait, I’d never asked his name. “What’s your name?”

“Cory.”

“Cory,” I repeated, nodding to Gage. “This is Gage. Gage, Cory wants to know if I’m free.”

The heat at my back disappeared as Cory shifted. Did he see the same annoyance on Gage’s face that I did? Did he notice the tick in his cheek? As the beats merged into a slow song, Cory whispered, “Let’s grab a drink.”

I was too busy waiting for a reaction from Gage to pay attention to Cory. Fingers wrapped my elbow, but I lingered, hoping Gage would say something. *Anything.*

“Sorry, mate.” Gage finally spoke, his face granite. “She’s not free, and I’m pretty sure she’s had enough to drink tonight.”

“Sorry, man. Is she with you? We were just dancing. There’s a shit load of other hot chicks here. I don’t want any trouble.” Cory abandoned me without a backward glance. *Shows how much he cared.*

“You chased him away.” I pouted.

“Damn right, I did.” Gage looped his arms possessively around my back and tugged me into his lean, hard body. “What were you trying to do to me?”

My lashes batted innocently. “I was trying to get you to notice me.” Damn alcohol, it’s a truth serum.

“Christ, Savannah, if I notice you any more than I already have, I’m going to have a serious problem walking.” He applied pressure on my lower back, and the evidence brushed my hip. *There goes my panties.*

We swayed to the music, and my fingers walked up his abs and chest to wrap behind his neck.

“I’m calling dibs.” Gage shifted his warm hands to the skin exposed when I lifted my arms. Desire pooled in the pit of my stomach.

“You’re what?”

“Dibs.” His voice was gruff. He leaned his face down until our foreheads barely touched. “You’re not free anymore. I want you all to myself.”

Giddy, I chuckled at the barbarian growl in his tone.

He held my gaze. “Do you have a problem with that?”

“I don’t, but we may need to address the President. I mean, I don’t know how they do things in Australia, but in *America*, the constitution states we’re free.”

His chest vibrated with low laughter. “You’re fun when you’re drunk.”

Ignoring him, I continued. “And then when you say I’m not free, are we talking, like, slavery? Because that was abolished a long time ago here. However, if you’re talking *sex slave*, that has become way more acceptable

since those books came out several years ago.” I grappled with my drunken thoughts, searching my memory for the book titles. “Oh, what was it? Something about shades—”

“I could get behind that concept, gorgeous.” His eyes turned dark, and his lips skimmed my forehead.

“So could I.” I rested my cheek on his shoulder, closing my eyes. His hold tightened, and we danced to the slow rhythm for another moment before he stopped with a sigh.

“I need to get back to work. Where are your friends?”

Bubble burst, I glanced about. “Um, I don’t know.”

“Hey, Cand?” I shouted, my voice rising above the music. Curious glances turned our way, including my roommate, who danced nearby.

Gage relinquished me to Candace, ensuring she was the designated driver and verifying we would head out immediately. He promised to call me in the morning and walked off after hesitating for a few seconds.

“No kiss goodnight?” Candace wrapped her arm around me as we watched him stop and speak to some people at a table.

“No,” I whined, falling theatrically against her side.

“Let’s get you home. The clock is about to strike midnight, princess, and you’re gonna turn into a pumpkin.”

TWENTY-FIVE

BLAME GAME

MONDAY—MAY 6, 2013

Monday mornings were bad enough without raging hangovers to contend with. Add a morning art class to the mix and I wanted to die. The one thing keeping me going was the fuzzy reminder of my conversation with Gage last night.

After class, I stopped by a coffee shop for a much needed pick-me-up. It was close to 10:30 a.m., and I was eager to hear from Gage. My phone rang while I waited for the barista to make my mocha latte, and I dove into my bag.

I pulled my phone out and glared at the unknown number. “Hello?”

“Ms. Guthry? This is Officer Owens with the Nashville PD.”

My heartbeat skipped. “Yes, this is Savannah Guthry.”

“Ms. Guthry, I spoke with the owner of The Garage the other night regarding an altercation between you and Mr. Jax Rogers. Were you aware Mr. Rogers went missing after that evening, Ms. Guthry?”

“Yes, Officer, a friend at the bar told me you spoke with him. Has Jax been located?”

“Yes, he was located—”

“Oh, thank God,” I interrupted the officer, my racing pulse steady.

“However,” he said sternly, and I closed my mouth. “We would like for you to come down to the station today to fill out a statement on the event that occurred.”

His tone was confusing. “Officer? Is everything all right with Jax? I don’t know what information I can offer. The last I saw him, he was in the parking lot of The Garage.”

“You’re not a suspect, Ms. Guthry, but we do need your side of the story.

We've also asked the other witnesses at The Garage to come down."

"A suspect in what?"

"Mr. Rogers was accosted and severely beaten. He was admitted to a local hospital as a John Doe after being found on the side of the road early Saturday morning. If you could come in today, it would be appreciated."

My throat constricted. What in the world happened to him? "Of course, yes, I'm free now. I'll head that way."

Grabbing my latte off the counter, I walked out of the shop in a daze.

I called Sara on my way to my car. She and Jax were friends. Appropriately shocked, she offered to call mutual friends and see if anyone knew anything.

"He was fine when I left him, Sara." I should have ridden home with him. Made sure he was good.

"Whatever happened, it's not your fault, Van. Let me know what the police say."

I climbed into my car, shifting into *Drive* when my phone rang again. This time, it was Gage. My finger hesitated over the screen. Did I doubt Gage's story from that night? Did I suspect something more sinister happened?

Shaking the absurd thoughts away, I swiped. "Hello?"

"Hey. You sound clearer than you did last night. How's your head feeling?"

"I've been better."

His inhale was sharp. "I'm sorry. I just hung up with Officer Owens. He told me he'd spoken to you. I feel like this is all my fault."

My hands gripped the steering wheel. "Why would you say that?"

"Jax seemed pretty wasted, Savannah. Maybe I should've gotten some of his friends to get him home instead of sending him off in a cab. We don't know what happened, but I can't help but feel responsible."

Guilt for doubting him for even a second hit me. Gage was with me when the bouncers sent Jax off. The cab company verified their driver dropped off a drunk but functioning Jax outside his apartment building. Whatever happened next happened after he was left there.

"You aren't responsible for what happened to him—" *And neither are you, Savannah.* "Someone must have jumped him for his money. According to Officer Owens he was admitted as a John Doe, so he evidently didn't have his wallet. Don't blame yourself."

We argued about blame and what might have happened until I arrived at the police station. “Hey, I’m at the station. I need to go in and make a statement. I’ll call you afterward?”

“Sure, okay.”



My insides quivered at walking into a police station. Endless episodes of cop shows and angry convicts threatening to kill people hadn't given me the best opinion. Wiping my damp palms on my shorts, I took a cleansing breath and walked toward the front door. As I crossed the parking lot, I glanced around at the people in the vicinity. The teenager with his pants hanging to the ground leaning on an old car, the woman at the far end of the lot yelling into her cell phone, the guy dressed in a cheap suit, carrying a briefcase. A cop car raced by with its lights flashing and no siren, and I stopped, taking a deep breath. Reaching the sidewalk, I glanced at the building looming over me and spotted him.

“What are you doing here?” My heart rate picked up as I closed the distance between us.

“They wanted me to come in, too, and I figured you could use some support.”

Gage staggered as I walked directly into his arms, the force of my weight hitting him.

“Sorry.” I gripped the back of his shirt. “I’ve never even had a ticket. I’m supremely nervous.”

He rubbed over my back. “I thought that would be the case. When you mentioned you were on your way, I couldn’t stop myself. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Not at all.” I loosened my chokehold on his shirt while remaining in his embrace. “Why didn’t you tell me you needed to come down? I would have

picked you up.”

He shook his head, his dimple popping out. “I wanted to surprise you. Luckily, I live a few blocks closer than you, so I beat you here. Let’s go get this over with.”

With my hand clasped firmly in his, I walked into a police station for the first time.

TWENTY-SIX

SLOW DANCING

MONDAY—MAY 6, 2013

“Don’t smile too much,” I warned several hours later as we sat along the banks of the Cumberland River. After making statements at the station, we’d dropped off my car, had lunch, and were now lazily relaxing by the river at a local park. Gage leaned against a tree while I made good on my promise to sketch him.

“I can’t help it. You look so determined when you draw. It makes me smile.”

Lifting my gaze from the sketchpad, I scrutinized his face, trying to convey every detail. The tiny lines around his eyes, the slight crease of laugh lines around his mouth. His lips. Those lips were a girl’s dream. Full and soft, like he took great pains to take care of them. They curled into another crooked little smile, and I looked down at my pad, flushing.

“Stop it” I was ready to toss the paper aside and throw myself wantonly in his lap.

“Yes, ma’am.” He grinned again. “Did you know you get a little crease right here when thinking?” He pointed between his brows.

I glared at Gage as I lifted my hand to my forehead and rubbed. “Stop trying to distract me. Do you want to look like a third-grade art project?” I went back to sketching.

A slight breeze came off the river and tossed my hair about, and his eyes turned from their usual warm brown to molten gold. A sudden intensity cast over his face.

“Ooo, keep that look.” I bounced in place, bursting at finally finding the perfect inspiration. He choked back a smile, and then his gaze faltered. “Nooo. It was perfect.” I put on my best *pretty please* beggar face.

He met my eyes, staring before his gaze traveled down my neck to my chest, where he lingered. My cheeks burned as he visually fondled my body, and my fingers clenched around the charcoal as heat invaded my core. With a resounding sigh, Gage shut his eyes. I waited with bated breath to capture those sensual golden orbs again.

“Okay,” he murmured as they re-opened. ‘The Look’ firmly in place.

My fingers went to work, sketching. I ignored the curls of desire tickling my toes and running up my legs as charcoal stroked paper. Each time I glanced at Gage's face, another piece of my body awakened to the magnetic pull between us. *This was the best foreplay I'd ever had.* I sketched his mouth, and blood rushed to my face, my mind visualizing kissing him. Wishing I could kiss that, too, had me adding his sexy dimple to the portrait.

“You’re gorgeous.” I acknowledged, studying the picture of him as a whole.

A low-pitched growl escaped his lips before he grabbed my ankle and tugged me across the blanket. Once our legs were tangled together as we sat facing each other, he cupped either side of my face. Smoothing my hair back, he ran his hands through the windblown mess.

“You are gorgeous. If you’d made me keep that look one minute longer, my mind would have turned X-rated.”

I swallowed a moan at his gravely, hungry voice, sighing as his fingers tickled the skin at my nape. “Were you thinking dirty thoughts, Mr. Taylor?”

“Guilty as charged.” He traced the edge of my tank top.

My eyes closed as he lightly stroked the skin above my shirt before warm lips caressed my shoulder. They were as smooth as I’d expected. Every hair on my body rose as his lips trailed over my shoulder and up the curve of my neck. *Yes.* I bent my head to allow better access when the shouts of unbridled laughter from children playing around us jolted me back to reality. I pulled back marginally.

“Wow.”

Gage slid to the right and fell on his back with a breathless curse. Then he released a strained grunt and threw his arm over his face. Feeling his pain, I flipped around and lay on the blanket beside him.

“Where did you come from?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

“Charleston.”

“Are you sure you didn’t fall from Heaven?”

He was so serious it took a full five seconds before I broke into laughter.

“That is the worst pick-up line ever. Does it actually work in Australia?” I rolled to my side.

“For me? Yeah, it does.”

Making a fake gagging noise, I moved to lie on my back again when Gage reached over and pulled me toward him.

“Use me as a pillow. It’s softer.”

There was nothing ‘soft’ about him, but I happily snuggled into the crook between his arm and chest.

“That line obviously works,” I admit with a breathless sigh.

We lay on the blanket under the sweet breeze from the river as children played and white puffy clouds rolled by. Eventually, my eyes drifted closed as his fingers stroked my forearm, moving with each slow, rhythmic inhale and exhale he took. *I could get used to this.*



Moisture struck my cheek, and I stirred, pulled from a peaceful nap by another plop of water hitting my face. I rubbed my eyes and glanced at the dark clouds that had rolled in while I slept. *Slept?* I caught my bottom lip between my teeth and looked at Gage as fat raindrops startled him into wakefulness.

His dark eyes were blurry and confused. “We fell asleep, huh?” He gave me with a sheepish glance, the sleepy timbre of his voice an aphrodisiac.

A violent rumble of thunder clapped overhead as a sharp wind blew over the river, and then suddenly, the storm moved at warp speed.

“Quick, head to the car.” Gage tossed me his car keys.

Grabbing my sketchbook and the shoes I kicked off earlier, I sprinted toward his vehicle as rain fell in earnest. My feet slapped against the wet sidewalk as Gage caught up, blanket in tow. We were soaked through, wet dogs in a downpour. The hilarity took hold when we reached the car, and I

broke into full-bodied laughter, stopping short.

“Are you crazy? Jump in.” Gage pulled my door open and grabbed the sketchbook from my arms, tossing it and the picnic blanket into his back seat.

I stretched my arms toward him and dropped the shoes dangling from my fingertips. “Dance with me?”

It was a simple request.

He tilted his head, watching me. I fully expected him to call me crazy again and insist I get in the car, but Gage Taylor continued to surprise me like no other man had ever done. He closed the car door and walked to my side with a dimple-showcasing smile on his devastatingly handsome face.

My breathing stuttered when he grasped my right hand and twirled his wrist, pulling me toward his body. He spun me like a ballroom dancer would turn his partner, winding me up until I was wrapped tightly against his side.

“If that thunder gets closer, you’re getting in the car. Got it?” His lips grazed my ear.

Flicking his arm, I unwound and threw my arm out wide behind me. “It’s a deal.” I bowed.

A deliciously warm smile crossed his lips as he drew me to his chest and set his hands in the customary waltz position.

“You know how to waltz?”

“Surprised?” He eyed me sharply. “Just try and keep up.”

As rain splattered our faces, we danced circles around the sidewalk in a perfect waltz. The drops so heavy they stung my eyes each time Gage dipped me, forcing me to close them. Every so often, he lifted his hand and brushed away the strands of hair sticking to my face. His gentle touch brought goosebumps the rain hadn’t. A car drove by honking, and Gage spun me out again, dropping into a deep, flourishing bow—like we were performers in a show. In cue to his bow, I curtsied with a grin as the car honked again while it drove away.

“That was the perfect waltz.” My gaze flicked from the car in the distance to Gage. Hungry desire had returned to his stare, and I glanced down, finding my soaked shirt was see-through and my bra didn’t offer much coverage.

The need emanating from his eyes was a balm to my insecurities. Where in the past I would curl into myself at being in this position, Gage’s open admiration woke my body to a physical need I’d ignored for way too long.

“Dance with me?” He repeated my earlier request.

I nodded, and when he pulled me into his arms this time, my face met his

chest as we swayed. Gage hummed.

“What are we dancing to?”

Instead of answering, he sang. His voice was soft and deep. It's a little gravelly and a whole lot of beautiful. Eyes closed, I concentrated on the words.

“‘Hey, Pretty Girl’.” I glanced up as he hummed the country song by Kip Moore. The gentleness on his face was telling. “It’s the perfect song.”

Stares locked, gravity steered us toward one another, the attraction undeniable. Allowing need to lead us, I stretched onto my tiptoes as Gage cupped my head. Our faces neared, my lips parted, and the raindrops tickled as I stole a steadying breath.

This man. My kryptonite. I wanted him. Us.

His eyes confirmed he wanted the same.

His chilled nose brushed mine, my eyes fluttered, and then a clap of thunder shook the ground as a flash of light streaked the sky just overhead.

“Shit.” Gage covered my head and hurried me to the car. “Get in.”

Running around to the driver’s side, he jumped into the driver’s seat as another flash lit the ever-darkening sky.

“I think we almost got barbecued, sweetheart.” He laughed at my stunned face and reached for the blanket from the back seat. “Here.”

“Thanks.” I wrapped up as my teeth chattered.

Gage cranked the car and turned the heater full blast.

“We slept the day away.” I pointed out, looking at the clock on his dashboard. It was 7:30 p.m., and my stomach picked that moment to growl its discomfort. “I’m starving.”

Gage scrubbed his hands over his hair. “Me too. We aren’t really dressed to go in anywhere, though. How about a drive-thru meal? I know it’s not much of a date—”

“Are you kidding? This has been a perfect day, and a drive-thru sounds fabulous. Besides, look at me. I’m too much of a mess to go anywhere.” Vanity got the better of me, and I pulled down the visor and wiped smudged eyeliner from around my eyes.

He reached over and flipped the mirror closed when my fingers went to my hair. “You really did fall from Heaven, didn’t you?” he asked.

“You should be so lucky.”

“Sweetheart, I’m already that lucky.” His hand found mine, pulling it to his mouth and kissing my knuckles before he let go and shifted into *Reverse*.

We drove to a local fast food place where we ate and took turns asking ridiculous questions of each other. I learned he rarely drank, even though he was a bartender, and I admitted to hating whiskey, although it was my heritage. The local country station played softly in the background. He confessed to not liking country music before he moved to Nashville.

“I’ve been trying to get better acquainted with the songs and artists, though.”

When I asked how he knew the Kip Moore song, his face lit up. “That one reminded me of you the moment I heard it. I’ve been playing it a lot.”

It was close to 10 p.m. when he walked me to my front door. The rain had stopped, and the humidity was as thick as pea soup.

Standing under the front porch light, Gage read my face. His hand reached out and twisted my hair. “I know what you want, Savannah.” His accent thickened, as it seemed to whenever he was serious.

“You do, huh?”

“I do. And I want it too,” his brow furrowed, “But you’re not the type of girl one simply kisses goodnight. When I kiss you, I want it to mean something. I want you to want it so badly that when our lips collide, the earth stops spinning.” My breathing slowed as his fingers trailed my cheek and down the curve of my neck. “I want to linger over every inch of your lips one of these days.”

Well, hell. An earthquake of trembles rocked me. Every muscle tensed at the anticipation of a kiss with this Aussie bartender.

Fingers hooking the belt loops of his jeans, I yanked his hips until they were flush with mine. “And when will this day be?” I asked from beneath half-lidded eyes.

“I won’t have to tell you. You’ll know. I want our bodies to be so desperate for the release that we won’t be able to get from anyone but each other.” His smile belied the solemnity of his deep voice. He was confiding his innermost thoughts. “Savannah, I want to need you like an addict needs their vice. Like a baby needs its mother. You’re beginning to work your way into me.”

“I am?” My voice was so low it was barely a blip on the radar.

“Yeah. If I were smart, I would walk away. I want you too badly for this to end well for me. You’re like poison slowly sinking into my veins and spreading through my body. I can’t stop thinking about you.”

A satisfied smirk teased my mouth before I could stop it. Every inch of my skin begged for his touch as a wildfire of heat spread through me.

“This wait is going to be torture.” I stamped down the urge to pull his face to mine and rested my forehead on his chest.

Chuckling, he kissed the top of my head. “Good. It’ll be all the better when it happens then, won’t it?” Reaching for my wrists, he pulled my hands from his belt loops. “Goodnight,” he whispered faintly before he dropped my hands and backed off the porch.

As steady as he seemed in his mission to wait, he couldn't hide the uncertainty in those dark eyes.

Testing his resolve, I leaned against my front door and pouted, prettily batting my eyes.

He shook his head. “Don’t even try it. I’m unyielding when it comes to this.”

“Oh really?” I rose to the challenge, looking for a chink in his armor. “I bet I could find your weakness.”

Hissing a breath of air, Gage massaged his neck. “I know you could.” He moved toward the safety of his SUV. “Will you go inside already? I can’t leave until I know you’re safely locked up.”

Fine. I’ll surrender to his will tonight. Wiggling my finger, I entered the house and watched from the window until he pulled down my street and out of sight. Then, I headed straight for a long, cold shower.

TWENTY-SEVEN

SEEING THINGS

FRIDAY—MAY 10, 2013

FIVE WEEKS UNTIL “THE WEDDING”

The day after our rain dance, Gage received a call from his former bar in Vegas about a problem they needed him to take care of. He flew out Wednesday morning and wasn't due back until Sunday.

I missed him badly as the days dragged by. After a couple weeks of acquaintance, he was already a mainstay in my life. My heart warred with my head while I puzzled out how it happened. How did this man come into my life and make me want to do anything to be with him?

How had he begun to wipe away the misery my first love left on my heart after a couple dates? Those were the things I dwelled on while tossing and turning at night. They were the first thing on my mind when I woke.

No Gage gave Sara, Candace, and me more time together in the evenings. Our summer schedules were so crammed between work and dating that we barely saw each other.

By the time Friday rolled around, TGIF had never meant more. Excitement at having Gage home on Sunday woke me with the idea of planning a special date.

“Savannah?” Candace interrupted my dreamy thoughts, shouting through the house. “There’s an obnoxiously large bouquet of flowers on the doorstep for you.”

I opened my bedroom door and raced down the hall to find Candace with the front door open. Sitting on the mat was a massive bouquet of colorful wildflowers.

“Oh my gosh, they’re gorgeous.” I bounced with excitement.

“Wonder who those are from?” Sara walked up behind us.

A sappy smile grew as I pulled the beautiful blooms to my nose and inhaled the fragrance.

“There’s no card,” I acknowledged, a little concerned. “They have to be from Gage, right? Brian hasn’t called in days, and these are way too nice for him to send out of the blue. Right?” I questioned, looking for assurance.

They exchanged looks. “I can’t imagine they would be from Brian or anyone else.”

“Unless you’ve been holding out on us.” Sara poked my back.

Nudging her out of the doorway, Candace continued as we stepped back inside, “I would wait and see if Gage calls or texts. He’s bound to ask about them. Especially since there wasn’t a note.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” Sara called as I headed back down the hall. “Your date I canceled on—R.L. was his name—he keeps sending emails asking if you can reschedule.”

“Sara.” My gut plunged. “I thought you took my profile down. I told you I’m not interested in any more dates.”

After accepting my attraction to Gage, my blind dating adventure was over.

“I did take it down. This is coming to the email address I set up for the account. He’s a persistent little bugger, to say the least.”

The guilt that Sara had set up and then canceled a date on my behalf made my stomach tumble. It felt deceptive.

“I told him you were seeing someone and were sorry you didn’t get to meet him. I just wanted you to know. He said he still hoped things would work out in his favor.”

“Am I a terrible person to hope things never work out in his favor?” Gage was good enough for me.



My thoughts drifted to Gage constantly throughout the day while I worked. A student helping with the art showcase had an accent that reminded me of Gage's. His wasn't nearly as compelling, but the musical lilt shocked my senses whenever he walked into the room and started talking. My body tensed, waiting expectantly for the Aussie's touch.

That confirmed it. I was done for, for better or worse, and I needed to call Brian and cut all romantic ties.

Taking an early break, I stepped into the courtyard by the art gallery to call Brian in private.

"Hi, Savannah." Brian sounded pleased.

Trying to stay upbeat, I pitched my voice as bubbly as possible. "Hey, how was D.C. and the summit?"

Five minutes later, my ear was numb with the political nonsense he excitedly explained.

"Sorry, I can get carried away. Did you call for a reason, or are you missing me?"

I swallowed the lump his flirtation caused and forged ahead. "Actually, I wanted to let you know I can't see you now."

There was a brief silence before he asked, "Now—as in this week, or not at all?"

"At all." *I'm a truly horrible person.* I'd never dumped anyone before. While this wasn't exactly 'dumping' in the truest sense, I still felt like the worst person ever. "You're a great guy, and I hope we can stay friends, of course."

"Ouch. The 'can we be friends?' speech." He grimaced. "Don't feel bad, Savannah. You sound like you're about to cry. It's fine."

"Brian, I'm so sorry."

“Geez, Guthry. Don’t be sorry. I’d like to go out with you, but there’s always another time, right? If now isn’t good, maybe later will be. Besides, I will be super busy this summer with student government anyway.”

Relieved at closing that chapter, I sat under the tree in the courtyard, staring at my phone. Spencer popped into my head. Would I ever get up the nerve to call him and tell him I’d moved on? Thankfully, when Momma called earlier in the week, she didn’t bring him up. In fact, we didn’t talk about potential dates at all—a pretty clear signal Daddy had spoken with her. Surprisingly, She’d called to ask how the gallery setup was going and wanted to know what color I planned to wear to the wedding. It’d been a while since we’d had such a normal conversation. She seemed genuinely proud of my work on the art showcase.

As for my dress color, I pretended to write down the long list of dress colors I *couldn’t* wear, according to her. Agreeing with her suggestions merely so I could get off the phone.

If a call with Erika Guthry could go somewhat normal, maybe my call with Spencer could be the same. As I worked up the nerve to dial Spencer’s number, a movement across the courtyard caught my attention. Chills shuddered down my spine as someone slinked around the back corner of the Student Life Center.

Shaken with unease, I hustled inside the art gallery and peeked out the window, searching for any sign of someone hanging around. *This is a college campus. Of course, people will be hanging out.*

“Something wrong, Ms. Guthry?” Mr. Harrison asked, his arms laden with a large crate.

Finding nothing out of the ordinary, I offered my help. “Nah, I got the creeps all of a sudden. Like someone was watching me. I’m sure it was nothing but my overactive imagination.”

“Lock the door if it’ll make you feel better. It’s just us today. If someone wants in, they can ring.”

Holding one side of the crate to alleviate the weight, I assured him I was fine.

We worked into the early evening. We were finally getting to the fun part of the exhibit—pulling out the art, looking over the pieces, and placing them in the proper spots. The room flow had been set, and partial walls were placed throughout the large gallery to direct traffic and allow each piece its most advantageous showing.

At 6 p.m., Mr. Harrison shooed me out. “We’re on track for the open house, Ms. Guthry, and you’ve done a wonderful job pulling this all together. I’m very impressed.” He locked the door and walked with me toward the parking lot. “I’ll see you around nine in the morning. We should finish up most of the diagramming.”

“I’ll be here.” My chest puffed with pride from his praise.

I settled in my car and checked my phone, finding a crazy amount of missed calls and texts from Gage. On cloud nine, I pressed the return call button.

“I was worried you changed your mind,” his deep voice confessed when he answered.

“Not likely. You called dibs, remember?” I hinted. “Today has been ridiculously busy at the gallery. I barely had time to breathe.”

“Yeah? Tell me all about it.”

“About the gallery? What do you want to know? It’s pretty boring.” I inched to pull out of the parking lot, and braked when a tall figure darted out, crossing the street.

“What the—” My grumbling died as something familiar pricked my mind. Something about their gait reminded me of the movement I’d seen earlier in the day. I exhaled. “Wow, I must be tired because I think I’m getting paranoid.”

“Paranoid?” Gage’s tone went up a notch. “Savannah? What’s wrong?”

I turned onto the street. “Oh, it’s nothing. Just a crazy feeling I’m being watched. Like I said, I’m tired.”

“Where are you? Are you in your car? Are your doors locked?” Gage shot out rapid-fire questions.

“Hey, calm down, I’m fine. I’m heading off campus in my car, and my doors are locked.”

“You sure you’re okay?”

Verifying in my rearview mirror that no one was following me, I reassured Gage I was okay.

“All right then, humor me and tell me about your day.”

“You’re trying to keep me on the phone until I get home safely, aren’t you?”

Gage tutted. “Don’t change the subject.”

It had been a long time since a man, other than Daddy, had cared enough to worry about my safety. It was nice.

“Savannah?” I answered with a hum, and Gage chuckled. “Okay, yes, I want to make sure you arrive home in one piece. Now spill the beans.”

Adoring his interest, I explained the details of setting up the displays and picking spots for each work.

“We have over one hundred pieces to place to be ready for next Saturday. It’s a lot of work, but I’m loving it.”

“So what’s next Saturday?”

“Oh, it’s an open house viewing. It’s like a test opening for us to see what people think. We can change things afterward based on feedback.” I took a leap. “Would you like to come?”

“To the showing?”

“Yeah, it’s not open to the public. It’s a special invitation-only event; I can invite whomever I want. I know you usually have to work—”

“Savannah,” he jumped in, interrupting my rambling, “of course I’ll come.”

“Are you sure? Don’t feel obligated simply because I’m asking you.”

“I’m obligated because it’s important to you. Not because you asked. I would love to be there to support you.”

“You’re too good to be true, you know that?” I blurted, wearing my heart on my sleeve. “Thank you for wanting to be there.”

“Thank you for inviting me,” he returned, his voice soft, intimate.

His tenderness flipped my stomach once again. *Damn kryptonite voice.*

A commotion erupted in the background, and Gage muttered something away from his phone.

“Listen, I’m at the bar but don’t intend to stay much longer. What’s your plan for tonight?”

I yawned. “I really want to take a long bath, eat a bite, and snuggle in bed.”

“Are you home yet?”

“Oh, yeah.” I eyed the house. “Remember, I live three blocks from campus. I’m here sitting in my car.”

“Right. Go inside and get yourself all comfy, sweet thing. I’ll call you later when I get back to my hotel room. If you’re still awake, we can have a phone date.”

“I thought guys hated talking on the phone?”

Gage huffed. “I’m not like other guys, Savannah. You should remember that.”

“So, I’ve noticed.”

“Okay, I need to run for this meeting. Don’t wait up for my call if you’re too tired?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Talk to you soon.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

LONG CONVERSATIONS

FRIDAY—MAY 10, 2013

One chicken salad, a long bath, and a glass of white wine later, and I was snuggled in my bed, patiently waiting for Gage's phone call.

Candace poked her head in on her way out for the night. "You sure you're okay? You're not sick or anything, are you?"

Sitting propped against my headboard with my sketchpad, I assured her I was fine.

"I'll see you tomorrow night then. Love ya, babe."

"You too. Tell Tony hi," I called after her.

I settled in, sketching pictures of Gage and other random things that came to my mind. I'd barely filled a page when exhaustion hit like a freight train, and I closed my eyes momentarily.

Vibrations jolted me awake. Blurry-eyed and disoriented, I searched for my cell among my tangled blankets and managed a slightly distracted and somewhat sleepy, "Yeah?"

"Hi. Did I wake you?" Gage's low, sexy voice asked.

"Mmmm, I was napping a little. I'm awake now."

"Damn, your sleepy voice is sexy." His voice rumbled, and I giggled. "Seriously, I'll let you go back to sleep."

"No." I yelped, then sighed at my over eagerness. "I mean, I want to talk to you. Really."

"So you're in bed, huh?"

"Mmm-hmmm," I moaned purposefully. "I'm all alone at home in my big, soft bed."

His deep laugh vibrated through me. "Is that an invite, gorgeous?"

Oh, hell yes, it is! My head screamed. Or maybe it wasn't my head

talking. Instead of following my libido, I purposefully ignored his comment. “So, how was your night?”

“Longer than I thought it would be. I’m sorry it’s so late.”

“Gage, it’s barely—” I snorted at the clock on my bedside table. “Nine forty-five! Dang, I’m getting old if I’m falling asleep at nine forty-five on a Friday night.”

“You’ve been working hard. You’re tired. Besides, I’m in bed too.”

Now, that was worth perking up for. “You are, are you?”

“Yep. I figured if my girl was retiring early, I would too.”

“Awwww.” This man made my heart do cartwheels. “So what are you wearing, Mr. Bartender?”

“Wow, so forward on our first phone date, aren’t you? I’m wearing boxer briefs right now.”

“Right now? What does that mean?”

“Use your imagination.” His whisper was pure seduction, and I sank deeper into my covers as my body did some serious waking up.

“My turn. What are *you* wearing?”

I analyzed my comfy PJs. I could lie for sex appeal but why bother? “I’ve got on a white tank top and boxer short-type bottoms.”

A groan escaped Gage, and I grinned. This play-by-play was sexy as hell. I waited impatiently for the next question.

“Is there anyone else in the picture, Savannah?”

What the hell? Talk about putting on the brakes. Where did that come from?

“Hello?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” I rubbed my hand over my face, “and no. No, there’s no one else. I don’t have any more dates lined up, and I even informed one suitor I wasn’t interested.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.” Irritation stirred, but after all the dates he’d seen, could I blame him for asking? “What about you, Gage? How’s your picture looking?”

“My picture has been focused on you for weeks. I told you that Sunday night.”

“And *you’re* sure?” I mocked.

“I’m damn sure. Why would you feel the need to ask? I haven’t dated anyone since I came to Nashville.”

“What about your fan club at the bar?” I ground my molars. Why, oh why, did they bother me so much?

Gage blew out a deep breath. “Savannah, I told you that’s all for work. I haven’t touched a single one of those women. If it bothers you, I can pull back and not be so friendly, but I promise there isn’t another woman who has walked into the bar who’s caught my attention the way you have.”

“Okay.” It was all I could manage.

“Okay. Now, describe your room. What do you see when you’re lying in your bed?”

Lying on my back, I described my surroundings. The large dresser at the foot of my bed with the antique mirror hanging over it. The window to my left covered in a burlap curtain I’d stamped with aqua paint. The fluffy white comforter and my affinity for pillows.

“The walls are a light gray, and my closet and bathroom are on the right. Oh, and I have this huge bouquet of wildflowers someone sent me today sitting on my dresser,” I added, having forgotten to ask about them earlier.

“Someone sent you flowers?” I practically heard his blood pressure spike.

“You mean you didn’t send them?”

“I hate to tell you I didn’t. You don’t know where they came from?”

“No.” I sat up and studied the arrangement. “They were on our doorstep this morning. There wasn’t a note—only my name.”

“Is that a common occurrence for you? Receiving flowers from mysterious people?” I couldn’t decipher his tone.

“No, Gage, it’s not common,” I snapped, perhaps too snarky. “I swear I thought they were from you. I can’t imagine who else would send them to me.”

“Well damn, somebody sure beat me to the punch, huh? Glad I called dibs when I did,” he teased, easing my anger. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound like an animal.”

Mollified, I settled in again. “I imagine you feel about those flowers the way I do about the women at the bar. It’s fine.”

“Most probably.” His tone returned to flirtatious. “So, your room sounds very relaxing. I can picture it in my head from your details. I’m envisioning you there snuggled up under that fluffy blanket of yours with a pillow over your head.”

“I actually do pull a pillow over my head when I sleep.” His description was spot on. “Tell me about your day. Did things work out?”

“Yeah, things are good. The new manager here is efficient, and the place is packed. It’s a pretty cool club.”

“Is it like The Garage, or is it more of a Vegas club? Where is it?”

“It’s on the strip.” He cleared his throat. “You know what? I don’t want to talk about my work stuff, or yours, for that matter. Let’s talk about you.”

Nervous laughter bubbled up. “Okay, what do you want to know?”

“Tell me your favorite childhood memory.”

And so our conversation went; we took turns asking questions about random things, childhood likes and dislikes, movies, and our family. While I told him about being an only child and how exacting and critical Momma was, I left out details of my past and the upcoming wedding.

Even still, I tried to give him a realistic picture of my parents. If I was going to date this man, he needed to know what he was up against when it came to the Guthry family. Gage was rather vague about his family in Australia, but he did admit he was an only child as well. His mother was a housewife, and his father owned a few bars. Gage came to the U.S. two years ago, spending a little over a year in Vegas before deciding to check out the music scene in Nashville. He’d been here about six months.

Gathering information from what he’d told me previously and what little he alluded to tonight, he helped manage bars under transition. I equated his position to that of a takeover team in the corporate world. He came in and interviewed the staff, decided who could stay and who could go, and hired qualified management.

I didn’t push for more details. In truth, I was scared he might not be staying in Nashville. Scared I’d finally found this fantastic guy, and he was going to up and leave once the new owner of The Garage hired a permanent manager.

“It’s almost midnight your time,” he murmured with disappointment. “I should let you get some sleep.”

“Not yet.” I was a young girl again, spending hours on the phone with my crush.

“I don’t want to go either, but you have to get up early.”

“I wish you were here.” I hadn’t meant to say the words out loud.

One sharp inhale and silence.

“What would you do with me if I was there?” His thick accent cracked.

Covering my head, I dived into a cocoon of blankets like hiding would magically make me bolder. “I would kiss every inch of your lips,” I admitted,

echoing what he'd said about wanting to kiss me someday.

"Go on," he prompted, and my body heated as I visualized all the dirty things we did in my dreams.

"I want to feel your skin on mine. I want to feel your mouth cover mine. If you were here, I would take full advantage of you."

"You know what I want?"

"Hmmm?"

"I want to taste you. Every part. I want to run my mouth along the side of your neck, in the small of your back, and up your soft inner thigh."

I whimpered.

Daniel and I had had a few sexual conversations over the phone after he went off to school, but this was so much more than that. Back then, I didn't have a clue about my body and how to make it work. Tonight, lying in the dark as Gage talked about all the ways he would make me feel the things I so desperately wanted to feel, I had no trouble keeping up.

When he described in precise detail how and where he would run his tongue on my body, I couldn't stop my hand from wandering over my breasts, tugging my nipples until they're hard.

His groan when I told him I wanted him pressed tightly against my hips sent my hand between my legs, my fingers coming away wet.

Fulfillment couldn't wait. Unhurriedly, I slid a finger into my heat knuckle deep while rubbing another over the sensitive bud between my thighs. A low moan escaped my throat.

Gage heaved a breath. "Are you touching yourself?"

Unashamed, I hummed. "I can't help myself." The last word was a gasp as a wave of sensations tightened my lower abdomen.

"Damn, sweetheart, I want to hear you." He all but growled. "I'll get off with you."

That was all the encouragement necessary to lose all apprehension and pleasure myself with abandon. As rolling waves of desire built, I sucked in my breath, rubbing and teasing the sensitive heat between my legs while picturing Gage stroking himself. I placed the phone on speaker and set it next to my head so I could fully concentrate on what I was doing.

While somewhat awkward, it was still sexy as hell. I was about to have an epic orgasm.

It had been too long.

Gage muttered lusty encouragement as his breathing became harder and

faster.

It has been too long, but this was more than that.

I mumbled incoherently, reaching that moment when everything was about to burst.

“Pretend you’re with me and inside of me. Pump your body inside me, Gage,” I whispered, adding another finger. My body arched off the bed, rising to meet him in my head. “Oh, it feels so good!” I cried out, finding that place.

He groaned my name, rasping, “I want you so badly.”

This was more than that. This was about him. How he had captured my heart and burned my body.

Together, like we were making love in the same room, the earth exploded, and my body shook as waves of ecstasy shuddered through me while he grunted a satisfied “Yes.”

Then all went quiet as I floated back to earth.

When my brain could function again, I mumbled, “Wow,” and laughed despite myself.

“You’re laughing?” he asked, thick desire clinging to his voice.

“Oh, my word. Um, yeah.” Though, I was at a loss for words to explain why.

“Me too.”

I understood what he was saying by not saying anything.

“That was unexpected and amazing,” he admitted after another moment. “Hang on, I need to clean up.”

A satisfied smirk crossed my face. He’d reached his climax with nothing but phone sex. I shivered.

“I’m back. You okay?”

“I’m good. Tired.” I yawned.

“I’m going to let you get to sleep now.”

“M’kay.” I was totally spent.

“Hey, Savannah? Thank you.” Was he thanking me for the phone sex? What do I say to that? Was there etiquette for this? Somehow, I doubted even Mama would know the answer to that.

In typical Gage fashion, he read my mind. “Not for the amazingly sexy foreplay, although I do thank you for that, but for the conversation. For being you and for letting me call dibs.”

“You are welcome, Gage Taylor, Mr. Bartender, Sexy Aussie Superman.”

My thoughts were incoherent as my eyes became heavier and heavier.

“Sleep well.”

“Night.” I barely hit End on my phone before I was dreaming of more moments in bed with Gage. Except in my dreams, he was physically with me, and everything was ten times better than a phone call.

TWENTY-NINE
BEGGING
SATURDAY—MAY 11, 2013

I headed to The Garage late Saturday night. We may have talked throughout the week, but I hadn't seen my bartender since Monday. Aussie withdrawals were killer.

He'd called around six, saying he was catching a flight home a day early. Then, he left a voicemail while I was in the shower at ten-thirty, letting me know he'd landed and was heading to The Garage to check on things. The temptation to see him, especially after last night's sexy call, was overwhelming.

I made my way to John, who was working behind the bar with a female bartender I hadn't met yet. The bar was busy but not crazy. After my many visits over the last few weeks, The Garage had become a second home. I was comfortable now when I walked in and spotted other regulars. *Regulars*. One of my first conversations with Gage was when he'd assumed I made a habit of coming to the bar and going out with losers. I laughed. That "habit" had introduced us. How could we complain?

"Hey, Savannah." John paused his intense flirting with a couple co-eds and waved me back. "He's in the office. Go on back."

I waved in appreciation and found my way to the office. Gage's back was to the door as he rifled through a file cabinet on the back wall, and as always, I couldn't stop taking my fill.

Our dirty phone call played in my head, tempting me to flee, until this morning's wake-up call chased off the embarrassment.

"Good morning, beautiful," Gage whispered, his voice husky with sleep. "I wanted you to feel like I was really there with you this morning."

“Oh? Why is that?” Intense happiness expanded my chest.

“I didn’t want you to regret last night. I’m not the kind of guy who would walk out on you after sex.”

“Gage, we didn’t actually have sex, hun.”

I swear his happiness came through the phone line. “We didn’t?”

“Um, nope.”

“Well, it was pretty damn great what we did have. Your little whimpers and moans.” His tone hit switches I didn't know my body had.

I licked my lips. “Okay, stop before you get me all revved up again.”

“Could I do that?”

“Your voice can do a lot of things. I told you it was magical.”

“You’re magical.”

I sighed with longing as I stood in the office doorway and absorbed all that he was. Tonight, his usual black shirt was replaced by a crisp white button-down. His dark hair and tan skin were a stark contrast to the light color. Different shirt, but he still wore his perfectly fitted jeans that drew my attention to his tight backside every time I saw him. Especially when he bent down to open a lower drawer.

“Do you mind if I keep you company for a while?” I leaned against the door frame of the office.

Startled, he whipped around. “Hey, beautiful.”

With a sparkle in his eyes, he closed the drawer and came around his desk, pulling me into a bracing hug. He kissed my head, dragging in a slow, deep whiff. “Mmm, you smell so good after a week of Vegas.” He let me go with a gentle squeeze. “You came all the way here to see little ‘ole me, huh?”

“Yeah. I just happened to be in the neighborhood and thought I would stop in and say hi.” My arms crossed nonchalantly.

Gage checked his watch. “At midnight?”

I raised my brows. “It’s midnight? I had no idea.”

“Oh, likely story. I’m glad you’re here, though. I’ve missed your face.” He tugged me into the office by the arm. “Tell me about your day. How was work at the gallery?”

It might be Saturday, but work at the gallery doesn’t stop on weekends. Not when setting up a showcase. I plopped into a chair while he resumed going through files.

“It’s going great now. I finally convinced Harrison to let me set it up how

I wanted. There are a lot of beautiful pieces in there.”

“It’s a student showcase?”

“Actually, it’s an alumni showcase. It’s meant to inspire current students with what they can achieve. We’re setting up a ‘Best of’ showcase as well.”

“You love it, don’t you?” He turned toward me with a few files in his hands.

“Love what? The art?”

“The art, setting it up. All of it. Your voice has this tone to it I don’t usually hear.”

Huh? Does it? Sorting through all the paintings, drawings, and sculptures was fantastic. There was immense joy in setting the studio up to showcase each piece to the best of its ability.

“You’re right. I do love it. It’s been a surprise to me.”

“Why is that?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I loved art growing up. I used to go to exhibits and shows all the time. My mother does a lot of charity work with them—fundraisers, auctions, that type of thing. At some point, it lost its appeal to me.”

Gage stood, closing the file drawers. Rounding the desk, he held out his hand. “Want to get out of here?”

“Sure.”

We stopped by the bar so Gage could follow up on a few things with John, who was closing. Gage mentioned offhandedly that John might end up managing the bar, and I tried not to contemplate what that would mean for him. I was doing my best to keep our relationship light and carefree, and since we hadn’t kissed yet, he must be thinking the same thing.

Walking to my car, Gage toyed with my fingers. “How about I follow you to your place to drop your car off, and then I take you somewhere? Do you have to go into the gallery tomorrow?”

“No way. I wouldn’t have gone in today, but we want everything to be perfect for next weekend. I’m taking tomorrow off.”

“Soooo, I’ve got you all night if I want?” A lascivious smile played on his lips.

“Would you know what to do with me?” I clipped back playfully, and a mock horror crossed his face.

“After last night, do you seriously need to ask?” Flames licked my face. “Don’t tempt me, sweetheart.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and

backed away.

Please, for the love of God, get tempted. I clamped my mouth shut and slid behind the wheel.

I paused in cranking the engine when I caught Gage kicking the tire of his car. I opened my door. “Gage?”

His head jerked. “Get back in the car and lock your doors, Savannah.” He pulled his phone from his pocket.

Seeing no immediate threat, I ignored his warning and hurried to him, overhearing his asking for an officer to come to the bar when I noticed his car.

Keyed scratches streaked the side panels, and both tires were flat on the driver’s side. A white piece of paper glowed bright in the night against the window, and I inched closer, curious, but Gage pulled me to his side.

He ended his call. “You don’t listen, huh?” His arm wrapped my waist.

“I guess not. Somebody vandalized your car,” I whispered, stating the obvious. “Who?”

He was eerily calm for someone whose vehicle was defaced. Except for the hand massaging the back of his neck, he was as unflappable as always.

“I guess I’m going to be a while. You want to head on home?” He led me away from the scene.

Frowning, I took his hand. “I want to stay with you. Come on, we can sit in my car while we wait for the police.”

Once the police arrived, they checked the scene, wrote a report, and questioned us extensively. We’d discussed the possibility that the culprit could be Jax or one of his buddies while we waited, but we didn’t mention it to the cops. The note on the window stumped us. Stamped in smeared black ink were the words:

Consider this a warning. Guard the things you find precious before you lose them.

Clutching my stomach with unease, I waited by my car while Gage spoke privately with the officer, each looking back at me once.

An hour and a half later, I drove Gage home after the police impounded his vehicle due to the threatening nature of the message.

I parked in front of his building in a guest space. “Why did you need to talk to the cop in private? Is there something I should know about?”

“Why would you think that?” His voice was false to my ears like he was hiding something.

“This is going to sound so superficial, but I’m not used to dating bartenders. I’ve seen movies, so I know these things happen. Are you in some sort of trouble you don’t want me to know about?”

“God no, Savannah.” Gage laughed, his hand reaching over and sliding down my arm that gripped the steering wheel. “Is that what you’re afraid of? I’m a bartender, sweetheart, not a gang member.”

Logically, I *knew* I was being silly. “Then what was so secret?”

“I was asking about you. The note worried me, that’s all.” He flicked my hair away from my face and stretched closer, his hand massaging the back of my neck while he met my eyes. “It felt like the person was pointing a finger at you.”

“Why would you think it’s about me? Do you think it was Jax?” Guilt that I could be the cause of so much damage consumed me. First, the fight with Jax, then the mysterious circumstances surrounding him being beaten, and now Gage’s car.

He shook his head, soothing the stress from my neck with his fingers. “It wasn’t Jax. I asked about him, and the officer called it in. Jax is still in the hospital. I seriously doubt he’s that type of guy anyway. He was a lousy date when drunk, but I don’t think he’s a bad guy.”

I peered out the window at Gage's modern building. “You’re right. I don’t think this is something he would do. So why do you think it would have anything to do with me?”

“It’s not that I think it’s because of you, but I’m not taking any chances. Whoever it was threatened, “the things you find precious.” His hand stilled and I met his gaze. “You’re something precious to me. I want to be sure I protect you.”

Oxygen depleting, I sucked a breath as his words filled me. My heart leaped at his honesty. I wanted to jump over the console and kiss him—show him how much his words meant—but I held back. I’d made the first move with Spencer, and look where that got me. No, I’d wait. I’d hold out hope that Gage would finally make a move. His hand went to work kneading my skin again, and my eyes closed on a small yawn.

“The officer seemed to think it was a generic threat, but they’re going to

analyze the note and see if they can find anything since it *was* a threat.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing, Gage. Besides Candace, Sara, and a few of your staff, nobody knows about us. It was probably some kids playing pranks and trying to scare someone.”

He lifted his hand and combed it through my hair. “You’re pretty damn smart, you know that?”

“Why, thank you.”

He frowned slightly when I yawned again. “You need to get home. It’s late.”

He jumped out and walked around the car, his abruptness startling. The headlights illuminated his easy stride as he rounded to my window and tapped the glass. I lowered the window, and he knelt. “Thanks for surprising me at the bar tonight. I’m sorry the night didn’t go the way I intended.”

“Where were you planning on taking me before things went to hell in a hand basket?”

Gage leaned through the window just enough to place a chaste kiss on my forehead. “That’s my little secret. You’ll have to wait and see.” He gave me another peck. “Goodnight.”

I closed my eyes and relished the heat brushing across my face from his breath, even if it was too quick for my liking. “You’re killing me,” I mumbled as he walked away.

“I’m what?” He stopped and looked over his shoulder.

“‘Foolish Games,’” I called out.

His brows knitted. “What the hell are you talking about?”

My radio was set to a nineties station all week, and the song leaped into my mind without warning. I ran with it. “You love placing songs with people. Well then, ‘Foolish Games’ by Jewel.” He cocked his head.

Irrational anger hit me in a flash, and I yanked the key from the ignition and shoved my door open. “That’s my song for you—‘Foolish Games.’” The lyrics, Gage—these foolish games are tearing me apart. The push and pull we have going on. It’s killing me.”

It took him three strides to reach me, his face a mask of agitation. “Are you saying you think I’m playing games?” He moved so fast and close I pressed against the car door and dropped my keys.

“No.” I shook my head adamantly. “I don’t think you’re playing games with me. Damn,” I shoved my hands through my hair. “Evidently, I’m not as good at your song game as you are.”

His angry façade cracked. “Don’t be afraid to say what you’re thinking, Savannah.”

With a deep breath, I pinned my gaze on his and purposefully and clearly spoke the words he was waiting for. “I’m begging you now.”

His anger melted away. “Come with me.” I complied immediately as he leaned down, picked up my car keys, then pulled me in his wake.

“Where are we going?”

“Shhh.” His hand squeezed mine.

The setup of his building was like a hotel, and we entered into a lobby before stepping into an elevator. Gage pressed the button for the ninth floor and stood facing the doors the entire ride up. His thumb rubbed my palm as the elevator chimed on each floor we passed.

When the elevator opened on nine, we walked down the long hallway to the last door. Gage dug his keys from his pocket and unlocked the door. He swept his arm out imperiously, indicating I should step in.

I walked inside and took in the dimly lit space. It was a large studio condo with a king-sized bed in one corner and a sofa with a coffee table and entertainment area in the other. The place was simply decorated, which seemed right since he hadn’t lived here long. The clang of my keys hitting the glass table by the door spun me around.

“Okay,” he advanced, “Can you repeat those last four words?”

He was dead serious, and I grinned. “I’m begging you now.”

Before I could even think about blinking, my bartender closed the distance between us. His hands captured my face—his fingers splayed down my jaw and over my cheeks—as he drew me within an inch of his own.

“What is it you want?” he asked, his voice low, his accent thick.

Grasping the severity of the moment, I threw his words back. “I want the earth to stop spinning. I want you to ki—”

Lips crashed onto mine, stealing my words and senses as I tasted the beer on his lips. The world spun, and I clutched his shirt and held on for dear life. With our mouths mingling, every nerve in my body flared to life. Liquid heat spread as his lips played with mine. My body craved what Gage offered while my mind swam. This was merely one kiss, and I was already sinking.

Possessive hands ran over my back and down the curve of my spine, pinning my hips to his body as his mouth slanted over mine. He flicked his tongue across my bottom lip and traced the top, keeping his promise to linger over every inch.

He didn't deepen our connection, though. Just played, so I waited. I waited while he teased my lips with his tongue and teeth. Nipping and slipping through the small crack before retreating back. It took all the control I could muster to keep from giving him more access. He was taking his time, and I was delighted to let him linger.

"God, you taste like chocolate and mints," he murmured. "Do you know how difficult waiting for you has been?"

I followed my needs, doing what my body wanted because words would never do. I ran my fingers up his shoulders and into his hair. Applying pressure to his neck, I pulled him tighter to my mouth and flicked his lips with my tongue. He chuckled and kissed me back, allowing me full access. *Finally*.

Our tongues danced a delicious dance as we devoured each other. His fingers swept everywhere—they held me in place, they tangled in my hair. The more we kissed, the more I wanted *more*. In a daze, I led him toward his bed, where we fell, wrapped in a soul-devouring kiss.

THIRTY

SWEET NOTHINGS

SATURDAY—MAY 11, 2013

We lay side by side, kissing like teenagers on a first date. When Gage was done, there wasn't an inch of my mouth he hadn't explored. My lips were deliciously numb and swollen.

The air left my lungs in little pants as Gage raised over me. After kissing the tip of my nose, he pulled me up into a sitting position, allowing us to catch our breath.

The condo was dark except for the moon shining from the balcony doors into the room. Even though his face was wrapped in shadows, I felt his eyes searching me in the shadows. "Stay with me tonight?"

My desire ran rampant, but so did my fear of screwing things up. My hesitation must have shown because Gage leaned in and brushed a sweet kiss across my lips.

"No strings attached, Savannah. We can do nothing for the rest of the night if you don't want to. I simply want to kiss you and hold you close to me. I want to see your beautiful face when you wake in the morning, and I want to start my day with your smile instead of your voice."

A squeak escaped me, and I showered kisses over his jaw.

"That's a yes, then?" He chuckled as I kicked off my shoes and crawled backward to the middle of the bed. My stare followed as he bent and removed his shoes, too. When he turned and faced me, the primal need hardening his features threatened to send me running for the door.

The bed sank as Gage crawled to my side and propped his head in his hand. With his free hand, Gage traced my jaw, his fingertips a whispered touch, and I closed my eyes, working to control my breath.

I caught my bottom lip with my teeth when his mouth touched my cheek

and ran a slow trail over my jaw and chin until they found my lips again. With a quiet moan, my hand found its way around his back and tugged at his shirt before running over his back and shoulders. Gage pulled up, then rolled fully on me, pushing me into the mattress as he slid between my thighs. Kneeling with his hands on either side of my head, he nudged my chin with his nose. Then he kissed a soft, wet trail down my neck to the skin exposed by the vee of my shirt.

His tongue drew light swirls, and desire ripped through me like a wild child at a party. I wrapped my legs snugly around Gage's waist, using them to draw him back to his haunches so I could sit as well.

His eyes searched mine as I brought his face to mine and licked his lips, eliciting a half-growl half-laugh before I yanked my shirt over my head.

His fingertips dug into my hips. "Savannah—"

"Touch me." I wanted his hands and mouth on my skin. I needed it.

Leaning onto my elbows, I measured my breaths while Gage studied my exposed skin with hungry eyes. He caressed my cheek, his fingers running down my jaw to the base of my neck, where he splayed his fingers.

The heat from his touch was electric, shooting little jolts through me as he gently massaged my collarbone from one side to the other. He made his way down my sternum, his index finger gliding between my breasts, then tickling my stomach until he reached my belly button.

"This is way better in person." I sighed, my belly tensing. Gage chuckled as he continued exploring.

His fingers circled my stomach, then walked their way down until they reached the waistband of my shorts. For a moment, he stayed there, his hand hovering over my pants like he was deciding what to do. I took matters into my own hands and reached for his shirt.

Our eyes met in the shadows as I unfastened each pearly button on his dress shirt. As each one came free, a new level of yearning awakened. Peeling the material from his shoulders was sensual. His T-shirt underneath hid his skin, but my body did crazy things at undressing him.

My hands moved beneath his undershirt, and I pressed my palms to his sides, sliding the shirt off as I grazed his rippled abs and solid chest. Gage lifted his arms, and I gaped at the sexiest male chest ever seen in the history of sexy male chests.

His shoulders were broader and more muscular than I'd realized. His tantalizing abs were teasing me to take a taste. I wanted nothing more than to

have his soft, golden skin against mine. I wanted to map the entire terrain of his body. My head filled with all the dirty things I could do with him and *to* him.

“Remember when I told you I wanted to feel your skin on mine?” He gave the smallest of nods as I pulled him down to me. Our sighs mingled when our hot skin touched. Then we began again. Hands explored plains and valleys. Legs twined. Mouths kissed for an eternity.

When his mouth left mine, I felt abandoned and cried out for more. Then he journeyed down my neck and across my collarbone, and my brain ceased functioning. My head rolled, and I arched my back as his damp mouth kissed the top of one breast, then the other. I released a moan of frustration as he pulled up short of removing the protective barrier of my bra.

Rolling me on top, Gage guided my cheek to his bare chest and held me. I took a deep breath, inhaling his spicy scent as his heart beat frantically under my cheek.

“We should slow down.”

I kissed his chest and remained where I was—paralyzed with too much passion to agree to such a thing. My fingers did not want to stop circling his smooth skin. They had a mind of their own, cupping his face and stroking his rib cage.

“Savannah?” Gage’s rasp stilled my hand.

“Hmmm?”

His lips feathered the top of my head, like a lover, before he whispered, “There’s nothing I’d like more than to strip you down and kiss every inch of your body right now, but I don’t think it would be wise.”

His confession had me propping up on his chest. “Sounds like a plan to me.” I wagged my brows.

“I don’t want to rush things.” He tucked my hair behind my ear. “We could have sex right now, and I damn well know it would be amazing, but...”

“But what?” I prodded when he paused.

“But I’ve done that before. What we’re starting to have—what I feel when I’m with you—it’s too perfect to screw up.”

He held my stare, not flinching or looking away, and that, combined with his words, worked better than any aphrodisiac. If his goal was to cool us down, he’d made a tactical error.

I stretched and kissed him thoroughly.

“I guess you’re not mad then?” he asked when we pulled apart again.

“Gage, you are too perfect to be real. I don’t know how I got so lucky to have you enter my life, but I don’t want to screw this up either.”

“Good.” He bear-hugged me. “I would like to hear you whimper a little more, though.” He covered my mouth and our mouths and tongues moved suggestively together.



A shaft of mellow sunlight filtered into the room, warming my face. In a sleep-induced haze, I grabbed my pillow to pull it over my face, only to be met with resistance. Opening one eye, I met a gorgeous Australian, and the previous night flashed back.

“Morning,” he muttered sleepily as he tucked me against his warm side.

I wrapped my hand over his stomach and sighed, content. “Morning.”

“This is exactly what I wanted. Seeing your sleepy face and hearing you breathing next to me all night is way better than a morning call.”

“What time is it?” The light hitting my face forcefully declared it was morning, but my body protested after such a late night.

“It’s only eight-thirty, sweetheart. Go back to sleep for a few more hours.”

“Mmmm, okay.” I snuggled into him. Savoring the intimate connection of his skin against mine, I drifted to sleep with Gage playing with my hair.

I woke again, after what seemed like only minutes, an intense heat between my legs. My nerves twitched as Gage’s fingertips teased over my inner thigh like thin ice, seeing how far he could go without falling in.

Catching his wrist, I hissed, “Really. Can’t a person get some sleep around here?”

“Not on my watch.” Before I knew what hit me, I was thrown flat on my

back with Gage straddling me.

My hands imprisoned above my head, Gage eased up the T-shirt I'd thrown on last night. His smooth fingers skimmed my ribs, making me buck my hips as he tickled me. The dirty-boy-eyebrow-raise Gage threw told me he was pretty fond of my hip thrusts.

"I'd like to make a habit of this." He grinned.

"What?" I gritted through clenched teeth, bucking again. "Attacking me?"

"You wish." He swooped in for a kiss. "I like you in my bed. Stay again tonight?"

"Gage..." God, his boyish grin was too much.

Sobering, he released my arms and scooted off. "I'm sorry. I know I said no expectations. I shouldn't press you."

"No." I grabbed for him. "I... I think you were right last night. We need to slow down some. It would be so easy to get caught up in this physical attraction, but I don't want to move so fast that all we do is crash and burn."

Plus, I needed closure with Spencer and Daniel before I could truly move on. As much as I wanted to be with Gage, if I didn't close those doors thoroughly, the wounds of the past might rip open again. And if that happened, it could affect us.

A slower course of action was needed. I sat up and held out my hand. "You know how you said we needed to not have sex because of what you feel when we're together?" A muscle in his jaw flexed as he clenched it shut. *Be careful with him*, the voice on my shoulder whispered. The idea was absurd. If anything, I should pray *he* would be careful with me.

I examined our fingers tangled together. "I have those feelings, too. I want to explore and be mindful of them so whatever is between us can grow stronger. Can we take it slow? Take the time to date?"

The hard planes of his jaw softened. "Of course. I'll do whatever makes you most comfortable as long as I can kiss you when I want."

"Kiss me now?"



Gage took my hand, walking me to my car after cooking brunch. “What is it southern men do? Courting, right?”

“Sure, if we lived in the eighteen hundreds.”

“Well, you deserve to be courted.”

I arched a brow. “You do know that means supervision at all times.”

“To hell with courting then.” He grabbed my waist. “How about we have a quiet date night this week? Ladies choice.”

“Only one?” I forced my hands still on his chest; the urge to wrap around his neck and get lost in him—again—was a force.

He squeezed my hip and nudged me back, resuming our walk to my car. “I know how crazy the gallery showcase is going to be for you, and I don’t want to monopolize your time or energy. John’s on vacation for a few days, so I have to be at the bar to run it anyway.”

“Oh?” My mind whirled. “Are you thinking he’s going to be the new manager then?”

“I think so. He still needs an assistant, though. But don’t change the subject. How about Thursday night?”

“Sounds great. Why don’t you come to my house and let me cook for you? We’ll have a chill movie night—me, you, and the girls.”

“Sounds kinky.” He waggled his brows.

“Um, no.” My elbow connected with his ribs as he opened the driver's door. “Tell you what, if you don’t mind, I’ll have Sara and Candace invite dates. You know, to equalize the hormone level.”

“So, now it’s an orgy? Damn, I knew I liked you for a reason.”

“Gage.”

Bowing his head like an abashed toddler, he mumbled, “Sorry.” Then he ruined the choirboy act by raising those sexy brown eyes and flashing his

one-dimpled smile.

Butter.

He'd turned me into freaking butter, and I melted at the sight of his smile.

THIRTY-ONE

TRIPLE DATE NIGHT

THURSDAY—MAY 16, 2013

Sara and Candace were all in for a triple date night, and when Thursday evening came, I arrived home to Candace already preparing her special poppy seed chicken dish.

“Oh my word, you are a savior, Cand.” I carried two bags of wine and beer into the kitchen. This week was a blur.

“No biggie, I knew you’d most likely be running late. Sara should be here soon, too. She went to go grab some movies.” Candace, the official chef of the house, stirred the chopped chicken and ingredients for the casserole dish.

I set the grocery bags on the counter and dug out the salad mix. “You sent her to get movies? Good Lord, you know she’s going to come home with something crazy.”

“That’s half the fun.”

“Look who the cat dragged in,” Sara called as she walked through the front door fifteen minutes later.

Dread hit. I wasn't cleaned up. Gage can't be here already. A massive sigh of relief left me at the sight of Tony’s smiling face when I turned.

“Van, go change. We’ve got this,” Candace ordered. “Tony, get your ass in here and give me a kiss and a cutting board. Sara, come help.”

“Hey, Savannah.” Tony waved, following Candace’s directive.

“Tony.” I stepped to the side.

Sara pushed me toward the hall. “Let your ugly stepsisters handle this one for a change, Cinderella. Go get ready for Prince Charming.”

Gratitude wasn’t the right word for when it came to my roommates. “Thanks for being the best friends a girl could ever ask for.”

Cand gave a little “Awe,” and Sara pushed me again. “Go before this

becomes a sappy Hallmark commercial.”

Twenty minutes later, I was casually, yet cutely, dressed for a movie night with my Aussie Superman, two best friends, and their dates. Sara invited Chris, her on-again, off-again fling from the past. He was a good guy.

“Well, he’s punctual, that’s for sure,” Sara teased when the doorbell rang at precisely 6:30 p.m.

With a steadying breath, I wiped my hands on the apron tied around my waist and walked to the front door. I stole a glance in the mirror on the wall, making sure my hair wasn’t crazy and stopped. I had the goofiest grin plastered on my face. Happiness Gage had put there. *I was in deep with this guy.*

Two dozen roses greeted me as I opened the door.

“Wow, you’ve come ready to make a good impression.” I gaped.

Gage lowered the flowers. “These are to replace your secret admirer’s flowers.”

“They’re beautiful.” I leaned in, my lips brushing the edge of his mouth. “Come in.”



Dinner was delicious and filled with boisterous conversation and revelations. Gage had played in a band, as did Chris, so they swapped stories of assorted gigs they’d played throughout their college days. I’d never asked about college—did the oversight make me the snob I was sometimes accused of being. He was a bartender. I’d assumed he’d never gone to school. I should have shown more interest in his past. Admittedly, he was closed off about his personal life, but it was my fault for not asking.

Sara seemed to read my mind, asking questions I wished I had.

“So, Mr. Aussie, I haven’t yet grilled Savannah on all your dirt. You mentioned playing during college. Where did you go to school?”

“That's right. I went to the University of Melbourne for Business.”

“A business major, huh?” Sara tapped her chin thoughtfully.

Tony set his fork down. “How's the surfing in Australia? Is it as amazing as people say?”

Sara ignored Tony. “What brought you to the U.S., then? Wait, how old are you?”

Gage's dark gaze slid my way. “I'm twenty-five, and I came here because I wanted to check out some business opportunities.”

“Oh yes, America: the land of opportunities.”

I almost spit out my beer. “Sara, this is too much like twenty questions.”

Gage covered my hand resting on the table. “It's fine. It's like I'm meeting your family for the first time.”

“Ha, right.” Sara laughed and Candace hit her arm not so subtly. “Trust me when I say meeting us is like ninety-eight-point-eight-percent easier and safer than meeting Mrs. Guthry.”

“Ignore her, Gage.” Candace shot Sara an evil look. “We don't let her around civilized company very often. She's not passed her manners classes.”

Making our way to the living room, Gage and I sat on the couch. Candace took the floor between Tony's legs as he sat in our chair, and Chris chose the smaller loveseat. Sara grabbed the bag with the movies she'd rented.

“Okay, ladies and gentlemen. Chick flick or something manly?”

The fifty-fifty split could have been predicted by a two-year-old.

“I'm not watching some dumb movie where I have to hold your hand and watch you cry all night, Candace,” Tony teased. Chris chimed in his agreement. Gage remained silent—brilliant move—but slung his arm over my shoulder and pulled me against his side.

“Tell us what they are, and maybe we can pick from there?” I suggested as Sara teased us with the movies.

A pillow flew across the room, hitting Sara in the gut, and Candace faked innocence while we chanted, “Tell us. Tell us.”

“Wow, restless crowd tonight,” Sara complained. “Next, it'll be tomatoes.”

“Don't tempt us.”

Gage snickered and leaned into my ear. “Is she always like this?”

I smothered a laugh. “You mean an attention whore? Yes. Yes, she is.”

“Hey, I heard that.” She stuck out her tongue. “Okay. I'll give you some

hints. Our chick flick consists of a group of misfit girls, a will-they-or-won't-they-be-a-couple couple, and a competition.”

Candace and I exchanged a knowing glance—*Pitch Perfect*. The guys were clueless, and a touch revolted.

“Our boys’ choice consists of a bunch of men with big muscles doing manly things.”

“For the love of God, put in the manly film.” Chris rubbed his hands.

“Are you sure?” Sara glanced between Tony and Gage, awaiting their vote.

She was up to something. There wasn’t a manly movie in the bag. She was way too jacked up on making us choose for this not to be a trick.

Gage gave my upper arm a gentle squeeze. “I’m just here for the company.”

“I’m good with it. Let’s go,” Tony agreed.

“Just remember you asked for it. Drum roll, please.” With a little drum roll on our laps, I coughed out “Drama Queen,” and Sara withdrew the movies slowly.

“Gentlemen, you opted to not watch the marvelously funny *Pitch Perfect* and instead get...*Magic Mike*.”

The room filled with male ire as all three guys complained, and Sara jumped up and down, laughing maniacally.

“That’s bogus!”

“How is that manly?”

I broke into laughter as Chris jumped up to wrestle the offending movie from Sara’s kung-fu grip.

“No way am I watching a bunch of shaved men shaking their junk in my face!”

Sara tossed me the movie when Chris attacked, and I jumped off the couch before Gage could steal it from my hands. The room exploded into mayhem, with Candace and Tony playfully arguing and Sara under Chris, tickling her on the floor. Gage sank back on the couch, his shoulders shaking.

“Hold up!” I shouted over the chaos. “This is a democracy here, people, and you can’t change your vote. We’ll watch *Magic Mike*, and perhaps you boys can learn a few moves.”

I popped the disk into the player, and we settled down to watch the fine work, or more correctly, works of art.

Watching this film evolved into the most hilarious viewing party ever.

While the girls and I hooted and hollered over the sexy men, the guys groaned and began their “Oh, whatever, I’m way hotter than that” commentary.

Chris and Sara barely made it halfway through before they slinked from the room. Candace and Tony followed them thirty minutes later. I overheard, “Let me show you my moves,” as they left the room with Candace waving goodbye over her head.

“It’s you and me and the eye candy, huh?” Gage stretched his legs a little more.

“Told you this was a boy movie. You guys just didn’t consider how sexy we would find it. I imagine Chris and Tony are getting pretty lucky tonight.”

Gage gave a little bob of his head. “I already got lucky.”

“You did? How so?”

“I’m sitting here with you, aren’t I?”

I sucked in my lip. He was full of compliments that made me tingle from the top of my head to the tips of my toes tonight.

Gage reached for me, pulling me across his lap. “This was a great night.” He kissed the side of my neck.

“I agree. I’m so glad you could hang out with Sara and Candace.”

“Yeah, Sara scares me a bit, but I like them. I can see why you love them.”

I chuckled and kissed him full on the mouth. “Want to check out my room?”

“And see how the vision lives up to reality? Hell, yeah.”

I flicked off the television and led him down the hall. The candlestick lamp on my bedside table was on, giving the room a warm, soft glow. I let him enter and shut the door with a sigh as I leaned against the door. *Gage, the bartender, is in my room.* My pulse raced.

“What?” He faced me, his sexy grin crinkling his eyes.

“I have to admit seeing you in here is fulfilling a fantasy of mine.”

“Which one?”

“So you assume there’s more than one? Conceited much?”

Gage pinned me to the door, his hands skating down my arms to clasp my wrists and swing them over my head.

“Savy, if you tell me you don’t have more than one fantasy with me in it, I’ll be heartbroken.” His forehead touched mine. “You’ve been the feature star of my dreams for weeks, and I’m going mad.”

My knees weakened at his confession and use of the nickname Savy. The slight pressure of his hands forcing mine against the door shot tingles through my arms. My tongue darted out and trailed across the crease of his mouth.

“I can’t wait for the phone call to become a reality,” he muttered, letting me go and running his fingers down my sides, skimming my breasts and landing on my hips.

“There are other things we *can* do.”

“Hmmm, what kinds of things?” His voice had a mischievous lilt as his arm snaked around my waist and pinched my ass.

I giggled and popped the button from his jeans. “Well, there’s second base and third before you head home.”

“I have a feeling this is gonna kill me.” His grumbled huff reached my core.

“You know what they say. What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

He pulled me toward the bed as his lips claimed mine. Falling onto the mountain of pillows, we continued kissing. Then we kissed some more. Hands explored, and shirts came off as his touch seared my feverish skin.

His jeans were removed, shortly followed by my shorts, and finally, my bra went. “Perfect.” His palms cupped my breasts. He lingered at second base, taking great care to arouse me. My breasts were heavy with desire after he sucked, licked, and kissed every inch before drawing my taut nipple into his mouth and forcing a low moan from my throat. Each pull of the sensitive skin between his teeth, sent a wave of ecstasy down my abs and into my core.

I slid into the back of his underwear, my nails scraping over his firm ass. His erection prodded me as our hips moved together, the silk of my panties and the cotton of his boxer briefs all that kept us apart.

Gage rolled to his side, his hand splayed on my hip bone. His gaze pinned mine as if asking for permission to continue. My pulse raced, and my body throbbed, so I slid into the front of his boxers and led by example.

Keeping his stare, I wrapped his hard length, swiping the damp tip with my thumb.

“Shit,” Gage hissed, his hips rocking into my grip as my nails teased the base, just skimming his balls.

As my hand worked him in slow strokes and firm tugs, he slipped beneath my panties, cupping my mound like he owned it.

His hot mouth covered my ear. “What do you want, love? What feels good to you?”

“Anything.” My breath hitched when his hand inched lower, and his fingertips brushed my heat. “I trust you.”

“Damn, Savy, you’re already so wet.” Gage sucked my lobe between his lips. “Is this how you get yourself off, pretty girl? Do you sink those fingers inside your sweet pussy like this?”

He dipped a finger and swirled, and I all but choked his cock as my hips lifted, chasing more.

“More?” He hummed, his teeth grazing my neck as a second finger joined the first. I swallowed a needy mewl. His free hand wrapped my wrist, stopping me from jerking him off. “Let me make you feel good tonight. Just relax.”

He chuckled low when I grumbled, my need to touch him as strong as his for me. The desire dwindled when he eased me to my back and took my lips in a slow kiss, his tongue matching the delicate strokes of his fingers as they explored. The man was on a ceaseless mission to wreck me with euphoria, and it was better than I could have imagined. It was more than sexual cravings. It was the way my heart expanded when I was near him. The way my soul sang as he whispered sweet nothings in my ear.

“That’s it. Don’t be shy.” Gage grabbed my thigh, holding me open when my muscles shook and my legs strained to close around him. He kneaded my inner thigh into the crease and circled my hip, massaging while coaxing spine-tingling pulses in my core.

“Gage,” I begged, my hands fisting the sheets as he held me prisoner.

He murmured words of encouragement as he hovered over me and buried his face in my stomach, sucking the skin above my bikini line. So close, but so far away. “Listen to the mess you’re making all over my hand, love,” he inhaled deeply, “I could lap you up, Savannah Guthry. Feast on your pussy for days.”

Oh, oh, oh, ohhhh. A wave of heat traveled up my chest as my stomach twisted, and I exploded with the name of my Aussie Superman rolling off my tongue.

“Holy...” My breaths fought with my heart rate in a marathon to be the quickest as I floated down from my high with Gage kissing and caressing my thighs and stomach. I shivered.

Fisting his dark hair, I tugged. “Hey,” I chuckle when he nips at the crease between my thigh and groin. “Gage, come here.” I tugged again.

He dropped and crawled up my body until his forehead rested on mine.

“You are incredible.”

His murmur had my neck arching to kiss him. A kiss halted by another full-body shiver.

Rolling us to our sides, Gage leans away long enough to pull the sheet over our bodies before he's back, brushing my knotted hair from my face and his nose over mine.

“You are the incredible one, Mr. Taylor.” I cup his jaw, his end-of-the-day stubble tickling my palm.

“I want to be inside of you the next time I listen to your climax,” he breathed, so much caged passion in his voice.

Biting my tongue, I climbed out of bed and slipped on an oversized T-shirt before crawling back into his arms. My bottom tucked against his upper thighs, the evidence of his body's need against my lower back.

“I'm impressed by my iron will.” His fingers rubbed circles on the sensitive skin of my stomach just above my panty line.

“You're very strong. I would have caved if it weren't for you,” I mumbled sleepily.

A poke at my back told me what he thought of that. “Yes, I'm a man of steel.” His voice was proud.

“Just like Superman.”

“Mmmmm, yes,” he yawned, squeezing me. “I'm Superman, and you are absolutely my kryptonite, sweetheart. Rest assured, I won't be able to resist you one of these nights.”

My first dream of the Aussie Superman replayed, and I hummed with appreciation. “I can't wait.”

“Neither can I, Savy. Neither can I.”

THIRTY-TWO

ART SHOW AND TIME FLIES

SATURDAY - MAY 18, 2013

FOUR WEEKS UNTIL “THE WEDDING”

The art gallery open house was an overwhelming success. I spent the majority of the first hour welcoming alumni, professors, and local distinguished guests. Then, I answered questions about the exhibit and the different mediums used in various pieces.

Gage arrived as handsome as ever in dark slacks with a white shirt and royal blue tie. He carried a beautiful bundle of white lilies tied with a blue ribbon that matched his tie.

He stood to the side when I was busy working and never once seemed irritated at having to wait for my attention. I caught him studying the paintings and sculptures a few times, his face changing from admiration to perplexed, depending on the piece.

Halfway through the night, he asked me about a particular piece while we were close to my workroom. Taking the opportunity when nobody was looking, I pulled him through the door and attacked him hungrily.

“Wow,” he teased after a few minutes of hot and heavy making out. “If I’d known art galleries would get you so excited to see me, I would’ve taken you to one for a date.”

My neck turned hot.

“You look absolutely stunning, by the way. They need to hang you on the wall out there.” He lifted my arms to the sides and studied me with appreciation.

I shook my head. “You’re the piece of art. You should get dressed up more often, Mr. Taylor.” I flicked his tie and brought him back to my lips.

“So why all the kisses?”

“I wanted to thank you. Standing around while I’m stuck talking to people can’t be fun for you, yet I haven’t seen you yawn or roll your eyes once. You don’t have to stay.”

“Are you kidding? I wouldn’t miss your big day. Some of the stuff is really good, too. That sculpture thing with the ribbon things sticking up—”

I shook at his description. “That’s a girl in motion.”

“Girl in motion? The artist has you fooled. It’s totally trash thrown together.” Gage poked my side.

“Two seconds ago, you said you liked it.”

“I lied.” He kissed the tip of my nose and pulled me to the door. “Come on, you can’t hide in here with me all afternoon. The crowd needs your expertise to explain what they’re looking at.”



Later in the evening, after a romantic candlelit dinner and stroll along the river, we ended up back at his place slow dancing to "Hey Pretty Girl" with the lights low and my head on his chest.

“I love this song.”

“It’s your song,” he stroked my back, “This feels so right, Savy. Do you feel it?”

God, I loved the way Savy rolled off his lips. I swallowed a lump and listened to the words being sung. It was about building a future, about getting married and having children. It was about life. I stopped swaying and held his stare.

“I do,” I whispered, and his brows dipped low. A blush stained my cheeks.

“I do, too.” He bent to kiss me. It was a long, unhurried kiss filled with limitless possibilities of a future.

“Speaking of I do’s.” I gathered my courage when he pulled his lips from mine. “My cousin, Mary Anne, is getting married on June fifteenth back home, and I have to go.”

“You sound as if you’re being forced to go. I thought most women loved weddings?”

“This one is, shall we say, complicated.”

He frowned, his gaze searing like he was trying to read my mind. “How so?”

“Well, she’s marrying my ex.”

“Ohhh, that kind of complicated.”

“Mmm-hmmm.”

He ceased dancing. “Do you have lingering feelings for him?”

His question was soft, not accusatory, but my heart stopped anyway. The easy answer was no, but there was never an easy answer regarding matters of the heart.

“That’s complicated, too. I’m not in love with him, but there are lingering issues to resolve.”

Gage's heartbeat raced under his shirt, matching mine. If he was mad or disappointed, he didn't say. Still, I waited for when he would say he was done.

“Gage?” I whispered after a while. “I wanted to ask you to go to the wedding. I want you to meet my parents.”

His hands flexed on my back. “You do?”

“Yes, of course I do.” I pulled him to the couch. “I’m sorry I waited to tell you about this. Daniel, my ex, dumped me a long time ago and ended up with Mary Anne shortly afterward. It’s made for some messy situations, but I have to tell you, since we started seeing each other, I’ve gained clarity. I haven’t been in love with him for a long time. Honestly, I’m not sure if the relationship was real love in the first place. I just needed time to get over the betrayal, and I’m more than ready to do that now.”

I couldn’t read his thoughts. When he leaned forward onto his elbows, I touched his forearm. “It’s because of you, I’m ready.”

“All this time, I knew something was happening in your head. It’s what kept me from asking you out sooner.” Gage grabbed me and swung me over to straddle his lap. “It’s what stopped me from making love to you,” he said boldly, kissing my lips.

“It did? I figured you wanted us to go slow.” Since our triple date night,

our clothes remained firmly in place. It's been agonizing.

"Savannah, I don't care how strong a man is; taking it slow wouldn't be an option when they're in the positions we've been in. But I knew. I hung back because I could tell you were keeping something from me. You never talked about your past relationships. So, are you using the wedding for closure?"

"Yes, that's my plan."

"Then I'm in. I want to meet your parents, and I want to know about your past." His thumb stroked along my jaw. "I'm one hundred percent committed to this relationship. You've become that drug I told you I wanted to crave. I need you," he whispered, making me ache.

I breathed a sigh of relief, hugging him tightly. There were still skeletons in my closet and things he needed to share, but after Charleston, I could finally put the past behind me to focus on the future. A future that seemingly looked brighter and brighter because of the man holding me in his arms.



A week after Gage agreed to attend Mary Anne and Daniel's wedding, I broke down and called Momma and Daddy to tell them I had a date.

"Hi, Daddy," I sang when he picked up in his usual business tone.

"Hi, baby, how are you?"

"I'm good. Actually, I'm pretty great."

"I'm interested. What's got you so happy today?"

With a deep breath, I told him about Gage, explaining, "We've been seeing each other for about a month, but, Daddy, this guy is different. I honestly like him. I know it sounds rushed."

His throat cleared. "Are you calling your mother, Savannah, or making me do your dirty work?"

He caught me. He knew darn well breaking Momma in about a guy—a

guy I was bringing home, no less—was the last thing I wanted. “Weeeelll...”

“Mmm-hmmm, that’s what I thought. You’re going to owe me for this one, sweetie.”

“I know, Daddy, and I love you so much for it. Just tell her you know nothing about him, and I didn’t fill you in.”

“Does that mean you’ll avoid all her phone calls for the next few weeks?”

“That’s the brilliant plan.” A grunt suspiciously like a laugh came from his side of the phone. “I know it’s not the mature thing to do, but I don’t want her ruining this for me. Not yet.”

“Savannah, your mother only wants to see you happy. She isn’t going to try and ruin your relationship. If you two would *talk* more, maybe I wouldn’t have to be the go-between for you.”

“I know she means well, but it never comes out that way. Gage isn’t a country club by-product. In her mind, he won’t be good enough.”

He sighed heavily. “I know. Since Mary Anne announced her wedding, your mother has moaned about how it should be you or how you should come home and marry someone richer and better to show them up. She certainly forgets how Livingston tossed you aside and broke your heart.”

The last bit of his speech was spoken with enough anger to be deadly. It hurt Daddy when Daniel and I broke up. He’d been close to the Livingston’s before. Once we discovered Daniel and Mary Anne were together, my parents’ friendship with the Livingston’s was lukewarm, at best. My teenage relationship shouldn’t have put such a strain on a twenty-year-old friendship.

Before I could say anything else, the intercom on Daddy’s work phone went off, and his secretary, Marla, spoke through the line.

“I’ve got an appointment, Savannah. I’ll see you on the thirteenth, correct?”

“And Gage,” I reminded.

“Yes, and Gage. I look forward to meeting the new man in your life. I’ll tell your mother to expect company.”

“We’re driving over early in the morning, so we should be there by dinner. Love you.”



One issue down, leave it to life to toss in another a few days later. Sara was the first to notice the unfamiliar car parking around our street during the day. The gold sedan was parked in front of one house one day and another the next. Ordinarily, the vehicle wouldn't stand out if it didn't keep changing places.

Coupled with our coming home to broken street lights around our house and the unusual amount of blocked calls we'd received, we turned paranoid.

Tony stayed with us most nights to help calm our nerves, but we called the police after the feeling of being watched only increased between us.

The police chalked the lights up to kids playing and suggested the car was a door-to-door salesperson.

"This is a nice neighborhood. You ladies should be very safe here." Though they agreed to step up their nightly patrol for a few days "just in case."

After the incident with his car, Gage wasn't taking anything lightly. He worried someone was after him and, therefore, screwing with me, so he asked me to stop coming to the bar at night.

"Gage, I'm a big girl, and I'm not going to sit around my house every night with nothing to do!"

"Please, don't argue this with me. If there's someone out there watching you, the best time to hurt you would be at night when you're heading here. I can't protect you if I'm not there."

"Thank you for the concern. I truly adore it when you worry about me." I leaned forward and kissed him. "But I have no intentions of missing out on our bar nights."

"Dammit." He turned and placed his hands on his hips with a heavy sigh. "Do you have to be so stubborn about this?"

“Hey.” I walked around the bar's side and wrapped my arms around his waist. Resting my cheek on his back, I attempted to soothe him. “Tell you what, if you’re so worried, I’ll stop coming up here alone. I can usually convince Sara to come, or I can stop for a week or two and see what happens. I don’t want to fight with you, though.”

He twisted and hugged me tightly. “I don’t want to fight with you either, and I hate the idea of not seeing you as often as I can. Let’s keep an eye on things for the next week, okay?”

Maybe the cops were right, and we were paranoid because the car disappeared and everything settled within a few days of calling them out.



I headed into The Painter’s Palette the week before the wedding to grab what I needed for sketching my final summer art project over the weekend. The project was due Monday and I’d chosen to sketch Gage at work behind the bar.

Ryan, whom I’d seen several times at The Garage, called out, welcoming me to the store.

“Hi, Ryan.” I walked to the sketching supplies for a new charcoal block.

“Grabbing supplies for your final art project?” He asked, coming up behind me.

I peeked up at his eager face and grinned. “How’d you know?”

A faint flush covered his face, and he pushed his hands into his pockets.

“I guess you guys have students coming in this week for stuff beside me, huh?” I teased to put him at ease.

“Yep, that’s right,” he loosened up, “Can I help you get something specific? What do you plan on doing?”

It was my turn to flush. Telling Ryan I was sketching Gage seemed wrong. Perhaps it was the puppy dog eyes he always gave me or how I’d

once turned him down for coffee.

“Oh, I’m sketching a friend. I’m excited about it. I’ve enjoyed learning new tricks in this class for capturing live models,” I went on enthusiastically. “Hey, can you help me find a canvas large enough?”

“I’d be happy to help you. Let me show you everything we have. Oh,” he stopped abruptly, and I skidded to a stop, almost bumping into his chest when he turned. “We have some very cool new tools if you plan to draw charcoal. Right over here.”

That night, Spencer left a voicemail, asking me to call him to talk *before* we ran into each other at the wedding.

Putting on my big girl panties, I finally returned his call while Gage was working Saturday.

“Savannah?”

“Hi.” My greeting came out small and weak. I coughed and began again. “I’m sorry it took so long to get back to you. I’ve been...” I stopped because there was nothing I could rightfully say. Busy? Avoiding you? Scared?

“Let’s not start this conversation out with lies, okay?”

“Okay then, what did you want, Spencer?” Best not to beat around the bush.

“When I first called you a few weeks ago, I’d just played golf with your father. Your mother hit me up at dinner that night, asking about my plans and relationships.”

Mortified, I clutched my phone tighter as he continued, “I was under the impression that you’d been asking about me. And then I remembered your mother. No disrespect, of course.”

His light chuckle eased my nerves a touch. “Of course.”

“I suppose I should say I was *hoping* you’d been asking about me.”

For the life of me, I couldn’t speak. Damn Momma and her meddling. She would never have mentioned my name to him if she knew about our secret relationship. Or maybe she would have. To her, he might simply be another deep-pocketed fish who got away.

“I’m so sorry she bothered you. Look, I’m seeing someone. Actually, I’m bringing him to the wedding. My mother was being her usual self, and I guess she latched onto you.”

“Didn’t she know you were seeing someone?” His even-toned voice betrayed no emotion.

“No, I’ve tried to keep her out of the loop.” Lying was better than letting him know it was a newer relationship, which might translate into being easily torn apart. Or so I rationalized.

“You’re still playing that game, huh?” This time, his voice wasn’t so even, and his words were laced with bitterness. “Some things don’t change.”

“Spencer.”

“I miss you, Savannah. I told you in my message that Charleston is filled with memories of you. Memories I thought I’d washed away. I was hoping we could work things out.”

“I’m sorry, Spencer.” There was nothing else to say.

“Will you at least save me a dance at the wedding? Maybe we can talk. We’ve got history—you and me, kid.”

You and me, kid. That was something from our past, from our relationship.

“I gotta go, Spencer. I’m sorry. I’ll see you next week.” I hung up the phone, buried my head in my pillow, and let the tears fall. How was I going to face him?

THIRTY-THREE

MEET THE PARENTS

THURSDAY—JUNE 13, 2013

WEDDING WEEKEND

“Who was the crazy person who decided we should leave at six in the morning?” I handed my suitcase to Gage to load in the trunk with a yawn.

“That would be you. I suggested flying if you’ll remember.”

“Flying? And miss a road trip? I love road trips. It’s part of the fun of traveling.”

“Whatever you say, sleepy.” Gage popped his head out from behind the trunk. “Do you have everything?”

“Yep. Just let me grab the drink cooler and we can head out.” I walked up the steps to where I left the cooler, my purse, and a throw blanket. I locked the door and threw the keys at Gage as he met me on the front walkway.

“Coffee and doughnut stop first?”

“God bless you,” I mumbled gratefully.

The closer we got to South Carolina, the tighter my chest knotted. Gage made the long drive enjoyable, but no matter what we talked about, I couldn’t get past having to confront Daniel later.

“You want to talk about it?”

“Huh?” I muttered.

He reached over and wove his fingers through mine. “You’ve been staring out the window silently for almost an hour now. You look pensive. You want to talk about it?”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I don’t mean to be poor company.” I shifted in my seat and plastered on a big fake smile.

“You could never be poor company, Savy. This weekend won’t be easy

for you, and I want you to know I'm here as someone who cares and wants to help you through it. Let me be your friend here for right now."

I jolted. "You want to be friends?"

"We were friends first, were we not?"

"No, we weren't friends. You irritated me beyond reason with your snide dating remarks," I grumbled.

"Oh, so now the truth comes out. You know you loved me at first sight."

"I...um." Shit.

"Hey, don't freak out on me. I didn't mean it literally. I'm just playing with you."

God, I'm an idiot. I closed my eyes. The tears rolled down my cheeks before I realized I was crying.

"Damn, Sav?" The car slowed as he let off the gas. He curses, glancing between me and the interstate. "Don't cry when I can't hold you. What did I say? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"I feel so stupid." I shook my head. Did he not want me to love him? Did I love him? I didn't want to lose him, that was for sure. "Gage, after this weekend, we need to talk about us."

He glanced over out of the corner of his eye. "Yeah, I think you're right."

I swiped the tears from my cheeks and sucked in some air, releasing it slowly as I regained my composure.

"Ugh," I huffed a little too loudly. "Why are we being so damn serious right now anyway?"

Sitting forward, I scrolled through my presets, looking for road trip music. When I recognized Plain White T's cheerful music, I stopped and sang along. Gage joined in, and for a while, the tension eased.

It was closing in on 3 p.m. when we arrived on the outskirts of Charleston, and I offered to drive the rest of the way into the city.

"I've got this. The GPS and I are old friends now," Gage insisted.

I soaked in the scenery as we drove closer and closer. My heart skipped a beat when we crossed the Cooper River Bridge—*home*. My hungry gaze searched below until they spotted the Harbor Tours crisscrossing the busy shipping channel, the ferry approaching Fort Sumter, and the sailboats cluttering the water. All familiar sites to this Charleston girl on this beautiful late spring day.

"This city is fabulous," Gage said as he drove through the center of town. "Forgive my history lessons—I'm Australian, as you know—but obviously,

it's an old city. All of these buildings look like they're from the revolution."

I laughed at his "I'm Australian" excuse. It was a beautiful city, and I'd missed it.

"Do you want to return here after you graduate?"

The question caught me off guard. "Uh, I don't know. I mean, I've thought about it for sure. I miss the laid-back charm of Charleston."

The muscle in his jaw ticked, and he gave a short nod as the GPS wound us down some of the old historical streets.

"So, tell me about your house. You lived there all your life?"

"Yep. You're about to see it. It's designated as a National Historic Landmark. It's originally from seventeen-ninety, but my parents restored it and another neighboring property to make it what it is today."

When the GPS announced, "Your location is five hundred feet on the right," I sat straighter. Seeing what Gage thought of my parents' house was exciting and nerve-wracking. If he didn't understand how much money I came from, he would by the end of this weekend.

Pulling up in front of our Church Street home, Gage whistled as he tugged his sunglasses from his face. "Nice."

The black wrought iron gate swung open and out bounded Daddy, grinning ear to ear and waving. All the problems and stress this weekend would bring disappeared, and I yelped like a little girl.

I jumped from the car and ran headlong into Daddy's open arms. His familiar scent filled my nostrils as he wrapped me up tightly.

"I missed you, baby girl."

My face burrowed against his chest. "I missed you."

Behind us, the car door shut, and I pulled from his arms as Gage took his time walking around the car. This man knew to let us have our moment before he spoke. Another thing to love about him.

"Daddy." I pulled away and waved Gage over. "This is Gage Taylor. Gage, this is my father—"

"Bradford Guthry," Daddy interrupted, grasping Gage's outstretched hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Guthry."

"Oh, call me Brad, please. 'Bradford' is for when Savannah's mother is around."

"Yes, sir. Thank you for inviting me into your home. Savannah was telling me about its historical background. I can't wait to hear more."

“Bradford. Why didn’t you tell me she was here?” Momma sang, her heels clicked the cobblestones on the path that led to the street. “Darling.”

“Hi, Momma.” She hugged me quickly and kissed my cheek before turning to Gage. “So *this* is the young man your father told me about. Welcome to Charleston.” She held out her hand gracefully, and Gage clasped it. Before he shook it, I had a silly vision of him kissing her knuckles like some *Gone With the Wind* scene.

“Gage Taylor, Mrs. Guthry. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Yes, and you too, I’m sure. Come inside and get out of this heat. The men can handle the bags.” She wound her arm through mine and pulled me toward the house. “I certainly see the visual appeal. Tell me about your gentleman—did I detect an Australian accent?” she asked softly, turning her head for another look.

“Yes, he’s Australian. That’s all you’re getting right now, though. I want to show him to his room and take him to White Point before we get ready.”

“Honestly, dear, you only just arrived, and you already want to go gallivanting all over town?”

“It’s not gallivanting, Momma—”

Gage and Daddy’s voices cut off the rest of my reply, and I gratefully pulled away from Momma to give Gage a tour of the house. In truth, I simply didn’t want to deal with her. At some point, she would get the whole story of who Gage was and what he did for a living. Might as well try to put off her snarky comments for as long as possible.



It was close to six when Gage and I returned to the house after walking the three blocks to White Point Park. Momma was in an absolute frenzy because the cocktail party was at 7 p.m., and she was afraid we would arrive late. Apologizing somewhat falsely for her worry, I assured her we could get

ready quickly. After making sure everything Gage needed was in the guest house, I retired to my room and freshened up.

While in the shower, I rehearsed the conversation I wanted to have with Daniel. I tried being sorry as I smoothed my hair into a neat chignon. I tried being mad as I curled my lashes and lined my lips. I tried being hurt as I slipped on my dress.

I checked the clock. Five minutes until seven, and Momma hadn't yelled once. Hurrying down the staircase and into the sitting room, I discovered why. Gage stood there looking like the most beautiful man in the world while Momma chatted about Charleston society. His hair was damp, his face freshly shaven, and his crisp, spicy scent reached me as I crossed the room.

He wore perfectly pressed blue dress slacks, a light blue oxford shirt, and a checked tie. Slap my face and call me Sally—he was freaking gorgeous dressed up. His blazer was neatly folded over the chair in front of him, and he appeared incredibly relaxed in Momma's presence. Certainly more relaxed than me.

"Well, there you are," Momma's high-pitched yet perfectly appropriate Southern voice called. "I suppose it will be all right for us to make a late entrance."

I stepped farther into the room, and she frowned. "Is your lipstick red? Oh honey, you know red isn't your color."

Used to her nagging, I withheld an eye roll and turned to greet Gage as Daddy entered the room from the opposite entrance. Daddy slowed as Gage stepped forward, taking my hands and openly admiring me.

"You look beautiful." Gage leaned in and kissed my cheek.

"I was thinking the same thing about you when I came up from behind." The heat of embarrassment rose up my chest and neck. "Um, well, I meant when I saw you as I walked into the room."

Gage winked and squeezed my hands before letting them go.

"Anyone going to compliment me?" Daddy teased from the doorway.

"You're handsome as always, Daddy. Momma, you look very lovely. Aunt Charlene will be jealous." A smug smile crossed Momma's face.

"Why don't you two take your car, Savannah, in case you want to duck out early or do anything after the reception so we aren't stuck without a ride. Your keys are where they always are."

"Bradford, I thought we would be riding together," Momma pouted prettily.

“Thanks. We’ll see you there.” No need to wait for a reply. I grabbed Gage’s hand, picked up his blazer, and fled the room, thankful for Daddy’s reprieve.

We walked around to the back of the property, where the garage was next to the guest house.

“As you’ve probably noticed, most of these homes don’t have garages, but when my parents did the remodel, they built one onto the guest house.”

“I’m confused. I thought we’d already been driving your car?”

“Oh, we have. Um, my dad is something of a car lover, and he used to take me to classic car shows growing up, so I kind of followed suit with a love for classic cars. He bought me this for my sixteenth birthday, but I didn’t want to bring it to school and get looks, you know?”

I threw open the carriage doors, and the sensor lights flicked on, revealing my beautiful alabaster white Mercedes Benz. It sparkled like the day it was delivered.

“Nice. It looks brand new. How many miles?” He circled the pretty little convertible.

“I don’t know for sure, but less than fifty-thousand. I didn’t drive it much. You cool with driving a stick?”

Gage gave me an incredulous look as he walked to my side. I dangled the keys, and he wrapped my hand, keys and all, in his and invaded my personal space. “I’m a guy, aren’t I? Are you sure you trust me to drive your most prized possession?”

I’m trusting you with a lot of things more important than my car right now. Like my family, my body, and my heart. I tipped my head, kissing his chin.

THIRTY-FOUR

COCKTAILS

THURSDAY—JUNE 13, 2013

We arrived at the country club to find the cocktail party in the same ballroom as my graduation party three years earlier. The room was beautifully decked out in virginal whites and crystal. I'd expected something a little flashier from Mary Anne and Aunt Charlene and was duly impressed.

My palms were slick with sweat when we entered the room and saw all the guests. Family, old high school friends, club members—all people I hadn't seen in at least two years. I was so out of place, like I didn't belong with this group anymore, and it didn't bother me like it once would have.

Gage endured the unending introductions to family and acquaintances with a smooth charm I'd never seen him demonstrate. Where I was uncomfortable being reintroduced into this social scene, he appeared like someone who'd grown up in it.

"There she is," boomed Uncle Grant when I finally reached his side. "How's my favorite niece?"

"Your only niece," I teased, kissing his cheek and hugging him. Aunt Charlene was next to him, and we shared a quick hug.

"It's been far too long, Savannah. You barely reply to emails anymore. We've missed you at the bridal showers," Charlene whined. She had a voice that pitched, especially when she was unhappy. Mary Anne inherited the same voice, which never failed to grate on my nerves.

"Momma, Savannah is a busy student. Leave her alone," the bride-to-be interrupted as she gave me a stiff embrace. "It's about time you came home, Vannah."

Vannah. It was touching she would revert to the childhood nickname she'd preferred. The past needed to stay in the past, I repeated mentally as I

tightened our embrace. I drew Gage forward and introduced him. Charlene and Mary Anne did what any red-blooded human would—they stared. The man was beyond gorgeous.

Uncle Grant's eyes widened when Gage spoke. "You're from Australia? Gage Taylor, you said?"

I caught a slight frown cross Gage's features before he put on a smile. "Yes, sir, I am."

Whatever Uncle Grant meant to say next was drowned out by Daddy slapping Gage on the back.

"Grant, I see you found my daughter. I've been looking for her." His voice carried. How much he'd had to drink already? "Mary Anne, you look lovely tonight. Charlene," he crowed amiably, placing kisses on their cheeks. "I need to steal these two away from you. There are people here who want to meet you."

"By all means. We have people to greet anyway, and I simply must find where Daniel snuck off to." Mary Anne grabbed my hand. "Have you seen him yet, Vannah?"

I held my chin high. "Sorry, I haven't."

"Well, I'll be sure to bring him by to say hi when he reappears."

I flashed her a tight smile as Daddy pulled me away, already engrossed in a conversation with Gage. Without looking my way, Gage held his arm out, and I gratefully placed my hand on his forearm, gaining strength from his.

It didn't take long to spot Daniel in the crowd. He was standing close to one of the open bars with a group of guys from high school. They were laughing at a story a tall redhead was telling animatedly.

"Will you excuse me for a moment?" I asked Gage quietly as he stood listening to a few of Daddy's friends debate the merits of a particular golf club.

"Sure. You all right?"

I motioned toward the groom. "Closure."

His dark eyes narrowed as he took in the group of younger men where Daniel stood. Was he trying to determine which man could be the ex who'd hurt me so badly?

"I'll be right here waiting." He kissed my temple sweetly.

At that exact moment, several overly loud gentlemen standing in our circle burst out in what could only be called a chorus of guffaws. As I

stepped away from Gage, I found Daniel staring, his attention drawn by the noise.

Meeting his gaze, I lifted my head and purposefully crossed the room. His friends began to note my presence when Daniel stopped replying to them.

“Dude, is that Savannah Guthry I see coming our way?” blustered a slightly paunchy Blake Silver. He'd been on the soccer team with Daniel in high school and graduated the same year as me. “Holy shit, it is Savannah.” His jaw fell as his stare touched me from head to toe.

Blake met me with a giant bear hug. “I haven't seen you since...since that party we had before college started. You look amazing.”

“You too, Blake.” I hugged him back.

“Please tell me you're here without a date.” He eyed me suggestively.

I slipped from his embrace and met Daniel's gaze again. “Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm here with someone. I can't believe you're still single, though.”

As if that was his cue, Daniel stepped up, smirking. “Not Blake-the-date Silver. He's never single. Savannah, it's good to see you.”

We stood in that awkward place for a long minute before I could produce words. “It's good to see you, too.” He was as handsome as ever. His face was more mature, his messy blond hair shorter, neater. “Can we talk for a minute in private?” I asked.

Daniel glanced around the ballroom and whispered something to Blake before pointing me toward a French door set leading out to the balcony.

I stepped outside into the oppressive June heat and walked around the corner, away from the view of the doors and prying eyes.

Daniel followed a moment later, glancing around like a guilty teenager. “I asked Blake to keep an eye on Mary Anne.”

For one delicious breath, I envisioned how nice it would feel to slap him across the face for that mistake of a night we'd had sex. It was a brief fantasy filled with hurt and anger, and as quickly as it came, it was gone.

“You look great. Nashville obviously agrees with you.”

“Thank you. You look good, too, as does Mary Anne. I'm happy for you both.”

“You are?” He crept closer, the alcohol on his breath potent, and I inched back.

“Well, of course, why wouldn't I be?” His lips flattened, and I modified my statement. “I mean, I guess I can understand why you'd think I wouldn't

be, but that's why I wanted to talk to you. I wanted us to have some closure."

His fingertips skimmed my bare arm. "What type of closure are you talking about?"

The underlying meaning in his tone was suspect. "Daniel, you're marrying my cousin in two days," I pointed out.

"And?"

"And?" I gaped. "Are you serious? Why are you marrying her if it means nothing?"

"Grow up, Savannah." Self-importance turned his handsome features ugly. "You know who we are and where we come from. Our parents have been planning for an alignment between our families since we were in grade school. Besides, half this country club should have inverted pineapples hanging over their doors."

"You've got to be kidding me." His pineapple comment—an urban legend signifying swingers—made me ill. "When did you become this guy, Daniel?"

He shrugged. "Probably around the time I caught my dad screwing the maid." He was nonchalant, like he really couldn't have cared less.

"Does Mary Anne know about us?"

"Us? No, I wouldn't do that to your family. But don't think I don't know about the times she's screwed the tennis pro. She does her thing, and I do mine. We're both good with that."

"I can't believe you. You know what? Thank you. I've got my closure now. You're not half the man I thought you were, and I hope you're happy with each other."

"Go ahead and judge me, Savannah, but your holier-than-thou attitude isn't going to change how things work around here." He leaned closer, and my back hit the stone wall. "You know you still want me. I see it in your eyes. I'll be right here when you're ready."

My jaw dropped, and I slapped him across his cheek without thought. His head snapped to the side and Daniel cursed, his eyes narrowing to black beads of anger.

"I'm going to guess you deserved that and ask you to step away from her before I have to intervene." Gage's angry voice caused us both to jump.

"Do you even love her at all?" I pushed at Daniel's chest.

"Sure, I love her. I wouldn't be marrying her if I didn't. But love and sex are two different things, Savannah."

“Like hell they are. Don’t screw around on her, or I’ll make sure your life is a living hell,” I warned out of an intense loyalty to the Guthry name. The mere thought of Daniel weaseling into my family made me sick.

“Mary Anne certainly didn’t mind hurting you when she screwed me into breaking up with you. Why would you care about her?”

Tears of fury and embarrassment stung as the truth sunk in.

“Step back, mate.” Gage took a menacing step forward. “Get the hell out of here before I decide to have a little chat with the Guthry’s about you.”

“Hey, man, chill. The Guthry’s need me right now, *mate*. Tell him, Savannah. Who’s going to run GW in a few years, huh? There aren’t any sons in the family line, and you know damn well Mary Anne has no sense, and you’ve all but run away from it.”

My brows knit in confusion as Daniel continued, “Like I said, your family has been angling to add me to the family tree for years. I’m just not marrying the daughter they expected.”

“You won’t get your hands on GW, Daniel. I can promise you that right now. You can be sure of it.”

“Really? And how is that? You’re a country club debutante trained at doing nothing but looking pretty and satisfying your man in bed.”

I grabbed Gage’s arm when his fists clenched. Recognizing he’d gone too far, Daniel raised his arms and swept around us, keeping his gaze on Gage. “She’s all yours, man. Besides, I’ve been there, done that.” He slid through the country club doors before Gage could react.

“What the hell was that?” Gage turned to me, anger dripping off him as he clenched his jaw like he was trying to forcibly hold his tongue.

I sagged against the stone, utterly shocked at the tumultuous confrontation with Daniel.

“That was high society.” My sarcasm was thick. “I’m truly speechless right now. I just...” I trailed off. What do I do? How could I stand by idly and let him marry into the family? Why should I care? One thing was for sure: I would do anything to keep him out of Guthry Whiskey.

Straightening, I looked at Gage. “You want to get out of here?”

“I’d go anywhere with you, you know that.”

I took his hand and pulled him toward the outdoor staircase so we wouldn’t have to return to the party.

“I’ll take that as a yes, then.” Flashing him a grateful smile, we headed into the sultry Charleston night.



Sitting on a bench along Charleston Harbor thirty minutes later, I leaned against Gage's shoulder and sighed comfortably as his arm held me tight.

"Do you think sex and love are two different things?" I asked absentmindedly, glad for the cover of night so he couldn't see the pink stain on my face.

Gage tensed. "Savannah, he was trying to hurt you."

"Yeah, I know."

"Okay then, why ask me? It's not exactly a black-and-white answer."

I pulled out of his embrace. The moon and nearby light post provided some light, but for the most part, his face was cloaked in shadows.

"Come on, Savannah. You're asking if I think sex and love are the same thing. I can't tell you I haven't had sex without love."

I shook my head, contrite. "God, how stupid of me. I shouldn't have asked you that. Of course, people have sex all the time without love. It's the way he said it."

He placed his hand along my face, his thumb rubbing my jawline. "He was wrong, Savannah. A lot of people have it wrong in this world, and I can't speak for them. But I can tell you what I want and what I feel."

"What do you feel?" I breathed, allowing his hand to draw my face closer.

"The truth is I don't think he knows what love is. If he did and was madly in love, he'd be content. I would never marry someone if I didn't want them to be the one person for me for the rest of my life. I want love, and I want sex with one woman forever. The past—the meaningless sex—would never be enough for me again."

I turned into his palm, kissing it. "Good answer."

THIRTY-FIVE

LET'S SKIP IT

FRIDAY—JUNE 14, 2013

I woke Friday morning with a pounding headache. Seeing Momma in the kitchen when I finally made an appearance after a hot shower did not help.

“I was quite disappointed and embarrassed to find out you two had run off early last night, Savannah. How could you be so rude?”

“Oh, Momma. Nobody even cared I wasn't there.”

“Of course they did, dear. Would you believe Honey Jenson had the nerve to suggest you left because you were jealous? After all these years.”

“And you care what a woman who calls herself ‘Honey’ thinks, why?” I grabbed a mug and set it under the espresso machine.

“For heaven's sake, Savannah. Don't you even care what others think anymore? Where is the girl I raised?” She flipped her brown hair in agitation and stomped out of the kitchen. The *click-clack* of her heels echoed on the wooden floors as she went.

I sat at the kitchen bar and ran over the day to come. I was expected to have afternoon tea with family and the bridal party at one. Every nerve in my body screamed at the mere thought.

Daddy had invited Gage to the driving range for the morning and have lunch at the club afterward. Wonder how his day was going? Does he even know how to golf? Doesn't matter. When Daddy offered, Gage jumped right in, excited at the prospect.

As I sipped my steaming espresso, I wished wholeheartedly I could have gone golfing with the guys instead of being forced to attend this tea. Gage had talked me down from most of my anger with Mary Anne while we sat by the river last night. Daniel's insinuation that he and Mary Anne slept together while we were a couple hurt tremendously. Could I believe him? Gage made

me realize that whatever happened back then didn't matter anymore. I was done worrying about Daniel Livingston. Mary Anne would have to put up with him after tomorrow.

I checked the time and rushed back to my room before Momma had cause to complain. I would go to the tea, smile and make nice, and come home to Gage. Pulling my dark hair into a smooth ponytail, I slipped on a pastel pink and white striped sheath dress. I kept my makeup light and fresh and grabbed pastel aqua heels to complete the look. My outfit was soft, light, and, thankfully, approved by Momma when we met in the living room.

The attendance at the bridal tea was larger than I anticipated. Luckily, the bridal party was seated at a head table while the rest of the family and friends were scattered about the room. In a seating arrangement gift from the Heavens, I was placed at a table with a few girls from Mary Anne's sorority and Wendy, one of our mutual high school friends.

The sorority sisters chatted happily about their plans to find rich husbands now that they'd graduated college while Wendy and I caught up.

The clink of silverware against glass quieted the ladies as calls for a speech were made. Mary Anne stood in her beautiful cream and lavender lace dress and imperiously raised her hand to hush the room.

Mary Anne began her show by tilting her head and curling her lips demurely. "I can't believe a lifetime of dreaming about my perfect wedding day will become a reality tomorrow. Daniel and I met years ago through my sweet cousin Savannah. Where are you, Vannah?"

You've got to be kidding me. I froze as heads swiveled my way. Some displayed unease while others smiled, either sweetly because they didn't know the story or with malice because they did. Since I couldn't escape notice, I waved once.

"There she is. Thank you for letting me have him, Savannah."

Seething, I flashed my teeth politely while the crowd chuckled. Mary Anne droned on and on, but the blood rushing through my ears blocked the rest of her speech out. The happy clapping and "Cheers!" brought me out of my angry daze.

Friends and family took turns wishing Mary Anne well while I stewed about her catty comment. How could she be so cavalier about the past? In *public*.

A quiet moment saw me rise before I could think better of it. "A toast to

Mary Anne and Daniel,” I called out loudly, raising my glass. “From the moment you stole his heart, it was clear you two *truly* deserved each other.” I beamed sweetly, then drained my glass. Mary Anne’s face wilted, but when everyone toasted, she bucked up, and I sat.

Momma’s pinched face on the way home said all I needed to know. My anger bubbled. She hadn’t bothered to say anything in my defense about Mary Anne’s snotty comment. As we pulled up to the house, I slammed the car door violently and marched into the house.

“Savannah Rose Guthry. What is *wrong* with you today? Why are you slamming doors and stomping around like a five-year-old?”

“Do you find no fault in what she did, Momma?” I spun on her in the foyer.

“What *she* did? Shouldn’t we talk about what *you* did?”

“Give me a damn break,” I muttered. The front door shut, and Momma’s mouth pressed into an angry line.

“Young lady, you will speak respectably in my home.”

I threw my hands up. “Seriously? I’m almost twenty-three years old. Why do you still absolve her of everything, even after all this time?”

“Because I expect nothing more from her, Savannah. But I raised you to be a better woman than that.”

“So I’m expected to come here and allow them to make pointed jabs and nasty comments at me?”

“What do you mean ‘them’? Did Daniel say something to you?” Daddy’s booming voice startled me, and I turned to the sitting room off the foyer where Gage and Daddy sat unnoticed until now.

Glancing at Daddy, then back to Momma, I bit my tongue. “Never mind. It was nothing.”

“It doesn’t sound like nothing.” Daddy stood and walked toward us. Gage followed suit.

“Bradford, it’s nothing. Savannah and I had a small disagreement. Please excuse my behavior, Gage. It was unacceptable.”

“I’ve been the recipient of Savannah’s fiery temper before, so I can understand your behavior completely, Mrs. Guthry,” Gage teased, his charming dimple magically pulling Momma’s frown up.

“We aren’t going to the dinner tonight.” I informed them, my resolve firm.

Daddy and Momma eyed my defiant stance, and I braced for an argument.

“You know, I think that will be fine. You should take Gage about the town. Excuse me, please.” She turned and ambled up the stairs. After a glance at us, Daddy followed after her.

Once Daddy disappeared at the top of the staircase, Gage closed the distance between us. “Hi, beautiful.” He pulled me into his arms.

“Hi.” I groaned.

“Oh, sweetheart, that was pitiful,” he murmured. “I think you need some pampering. What do you think?”

I lifted sad puppy dog eyes to his gorgeous ones.

He tugged on my sleek ponytail. “Go put on something casual. I have an idea.”

“You do, do you? Can I have a hint?”

“Nope.” He cupped my rear and placed a kiss on my neck. “Meet me in the guest house in an hour?”

“Sounds good.” I backed up reluctantly, his warm eyes making my knees weak.

“Hey, Savannah?” he called when I finally turned my back.

“Yeah?”

“You’re stunning in that dress.”



After he surprised me with a private harbor tour at sunset and a romantic dinner, we returned to the guest house. I lay across his bed while he massaged my back, pampering me like he promised.

His hands slipped under my shirt as he kneaded my muscles, causing small grunts of appreciation to escape my mouth.

“You keep moaning like that, and we’re going to have some trouble,” he

said, his warm lips kissing my shoulder.

“Did you say keep moaning?” I moaned louder for good measure.

He pinched my sides, and I yelped at the sting. “Ohhh, I’m sorry. I’m going to need to kiss that and make it better.”

He placed his hands under my shoulders and pulled me away from the bed, slipping my shirt off.

“You are so damn beautiful.” His hand swept down my spine.

Gage flipped me and ran his tongue over the skin he’d pinched, one side, then the other. His hungry eyes roamed my exposed skin before he covered my body with his. I absorbed his weight for one excruciating moment before he rolled us to our sides, keeping his eyes focused on mine the entire time.

“Are you ready for tomorrow?” His fingers traced over my face like he was memorizing each feature.

“The wedding?” I verified, his change in topic confusing. From moaning to *the* wedding. Not fair.

“Yes, the wedding.” He smoothed my brow.

“I...yeah, I’m ready. You know what kills me, Gage?”

“What, Savy?”

“I love it when you call me that,” I admitted, sucking his fingertip into my mouth when he traced my lips.

He dragged a heavy breath into his lungs and pressed his hips into mine.

“What kills you?” he prodded, pulling my thigh to drape over his hip.

“How, while I now know the type of person Daniel has become, and it isn’t pretty, what happened between us still hurts.”

“Yes, that’s first love for you. It makes you stupid.”

Soft laughter escaped me. “That it does.”

“You know what kills me, Savannah Rose?”

I sobered at his seriousness. “Hmmm, what?”

“Your sexy half-naked ass lying in bed with me at your parents’ house.” He groaned. “I want you to stay here tonight, but I can’t do it. Not in good conscience.”

“You can’t do *it*?”

“No, dirty girl. I meant I can’t let you stay here. I promised your father I would respect you, especially under his roof.”

“So, there’s no doing *it*?” I frowned playfully.

“Nope, sorry love.”

“Then why did you tease me and pull my shirt off?”

Quick as lightning, he rolled on top of me, evidence of his desire plain as day as he straddled my hips. He removed his shirt and bent forward until his chest hovered over my satin-covered breasts. My heart skipped in anticipation of a skin-to-skin connection.

"Because I can't help myself."

"Oh," I hummed as his lips touched my collarbone.

Eyes closed, I rode the waves of lust his mouth and hands sent through me as he explored the hills and valleys of my torso. After a few minutes, he pulled me into a sitting position, my legs wrapping around his waist.

"Is this you pampering me?"

"Sure is." He massaged my back as his tongue drew circles along the top of my breasts.

I circled my center over his stiff cock, flirting with the friction of his rigidity against my clit. His hands dropped to my hips, tugging me back with a curse.

"Let me touch you," my hands toyed with his waistband, "I owe you one."

His fingertips bruised as his head jerked, and he met my gaze. "We aren't about owing each other things, Savannah. I don't play that game."

I scowled. "What if I *want* to touch you?"

His dimpled winked as he smiled. "You will. Just not in your parent's house." Licking my frown, Gage sucked my bottom lip between his teeth.

With a sigh, I settled for a blissfully tender kiss and the freedom of running my palms along his torso.

Slowly, our languid kisses turned frenzied, tongues plunging and fighting for dominance in a mimic of lovemaking. I whimpered as Gage shifted, lining his erection up to stroke me with every roll of my hips. His hands kneaded my breasts, squeezing and plucking through the lace. With a muted growl, he found the clasp of my bra.

"Gage," I warned, even while clinging to him like a monkey.

"Yes, love?" His ragged reply had my thighs clenching.

"If you undo that, we are so not going to be honoring my father's wishes."

"Hmm?" His hand worked at the clasp, and his hips moved with mine as his tongue traced the edge of my bra cup.

"We need to stop unless you're ready to make love to me because I don't have the willpower I did last time. I want you too badly."

He growled deeply, capturing my lips in a long, passionate kiss. His

hands left my bra intact and went to my hips instead, his fingers slipping beneath the waistband of my pants.

“Shit.” He moaned. “Sorry. I’m stopping.” He picked me off of him and set me upright on the bed beside him.

He stood and walked rather awkwardly as he grabbed my shirt from the floor, unraveling it and handing it to me. “You need to leave the room now.”

“You’re kicking me out?” I pulled my shirt over my head, panting but giggling at Gage’s grave expression.

“Yep. Get out, you wicked temptress,” he hissed, drawing me to stand and wrapping his arms around my waist. He picked me up and carried me to the guest house door.

“Oh my God. Seriously? You’re totally kicking me out. What are you going to do now?”

“Love, I’m about to do what I’ve been doing since I first met you,” he kissed my neck, “take a cold shower.”

I giggled as he opened the door and set me outside.

“Goodnight, gorgeous. Sleep tight.” He shut the door in my face, the click of the lock confirming he wasn’t playing around.

“Dammit.” I walked away. “Cold shower? I need an ice bath to stop the sizzle down there.”

THIRTY-SIX

THE RECEPTION

SATURDAY—JUNE 15, 2013

After the wedding ceremony, the party continued in a large tent out on the lawn of the country club. The beautiful white tents were air conditioned—a must in the south in June—and enormous. The large poles that held the ceiling up were wrapped in bouquets of fragrant flowers and bows. Huge, elaborate centerpieces decorated every round table, and crystals and candles sparkled everywhere. No expense was spared, and it was beautiful—if you liked extravagance.

The new couple was formally introduced to their guests, and I averted my gaze as Daniel and Mary Anne danced their first dance. Jealousy wasn't an issue, but being happy for them was difficult. Maybe someday, those feelings would go away.

My nose burned with unexpected tenderness when Uncle Grant joined Mary Anne for the father and daughter dance. Uncle Grant had always been good to me. When Daniel and Mary Anne made their relationship public, he told Daddy how sorry he was. I'd pretended it never bothered me, but everyone saw through my façade.

Was Uncle Grant's joy as he danced with his only daughter happiness for her or because he was unloading her into someone else's care?

When the floor opened to all guests, I was pleasantly surprised at Daddy tapping my shoulder. The sweet melody of an old Allison Krause song played as we joined a growing crowd on the floor.

"You dodged a bullet, baby," Daddy murmured, and we posed for the cameras as they kept clicking to catch those magical moments.

"How do you mean?"

"Daniel. He was never good enough for you." He whirled me around.

“Mark my words, the Livingston’s never made him work for anything, and he’ll crumble at the pressure and be begging your uncle and me for a job in a few years.”

“Shhh, Daddy,” I chastised.

“It shows your maturity that you came to this blasted wedding in the first place. I’m proud of you.”

Warmth tingled in my tummy at his praise. “I’m fine, Daddy.”

“Do you want to tell me more about Gage? I like the way he looks at you.”

Daddy had rarely said a nice thing about Daniel in all the years he’d known him. My heart grew at the compliment, and I looked past his shoulder to where Gage stood on the sidelines of the dance floor, watching us.

Reluctantly pulling my gaze from him, I pondered Daddy’s comment. “How does he look at me?”

“The way a man should look at my daughter. Like you’re precious. Which you are, by the way.” His voice was heavy with emotion, and he kissed my cheek as a deep voice interrupted us.

“Would you mind if I took over?”

Daddy’s brows lifted as if to say ‘I told you’ as he handed me over to Gage.

“Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?” Gage asked, bringing my right hand between our chests while his other hand settled between my shoulder blades. I fought the urge to lay my cheek on his shirt as we swayed to the beat.

“You have, actually.”

“Well, not enough.” He brought our entwined hands to his lips and kissed my fingers. “You are stunning. I’m sorry I interrupted your dance with your father, but I was watching you and couldn’t stop thinking about how gorgeous you looked, and...” he trailed off. His golden eyes shifted and scanned the crowd.

My hand slid up his jaw, drawing his attention back. “You’ve called me beautiful, stunning, and gorgeous in the span of one minute. Please, go on,” I urged.

His focus returned, and there was something new on his face. My heart leaped at the tenderness in the warm pools of his eyes.

“I thought you looked so gorgeous I wanted to get to you. I wanted to be the man dancing with you, Savannah. I wanted everyone to know I was lucky

enough to be the man you're with."

Dying. I'm dead. No words formed as this beautiful man spilled his soul.

His hand flattened on my spine as his head dipped. "I know there were some demons you needed to exorcise this weekend, and I hope you have."

"I'm sorry. I know I should have told you about everything from the past. It wasn't fair of me to bring you here without the background story." I gave in to the desire to press my cheek to his chest and wrapped my arms around his waist.

"No, you don't owe me anything, Savannah." He rested his cheek on my head. "I'm ready to move forward, though, and it seems you're ready, too. You said we needed to talk after the wedding, and you're right. I have things to tell you, and I'm sure you have more to tell me. So, we'll do all of that. But I can't keep doing this tentative thing with you. It's driving me crazy. I want so badly for you to be mine."

Wow. "I'm..." Floored. Shocked. Speechless. For him to lay everything out the way he had. Old insecurities roared to life under my skin. What if I say the wrong thing?

What did I want? My mind screamed. *Don't be an idiot, Savannah. Say something!* Gage had me feeling things I didn't think I would feel again. Actually, it was more than I'd ever felt.

What was preventing me from reaching out with both hands and saying yes? Overwhelmed, I pulled from his arms. "I'm sorry. I need a moment. Excuse me."

Gage dropped his arms, statue still as I walked away. He pretended not to care, but I witnessed the disbelief cross his features before he steeled them to nonchalance.

"Shoot." Fear crept in. Fear that I'd made a huge mistake by leaving him on the dance floor, but my thoughts wouldn't unscramble. Daniel had screwed me over, and with Spencer... My heart wasn't reliable. Love scared me. *Love?* Daddy's words, *He looks at you like you're precious*, rang through my head. Goodness, was Gage in love with me? Surely not. This couldn't be love. Not yet.

Leaving the tent, I headed for the building where the restrooms were located. The thick, muggy evening air stole my breath much as Gage's words had as I walked along the lantern-lit path deep in thought.

"Savannah?"

I stilled. "Spence?"

“Hi.” He came up beside me, uncertainty in his awkward body language. “Can we talk?” he asked softly.

“Spencer, we don’t have anything more to say. I told you I’ve moved on.”

“Savannah, I have regretted saying goodbye to you since I did it. Can’t you spare me a few minutes?”

“Why? It won’t change what happened.”

“Your mother has hounded me since I came back to Charleston. Everywhere I go I see the places we spent time. You haunt me here. I miss you.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t, Spencer. You don’t know how much it hurt me when we ended. It wrecked me, Spence, even worse than my relationship with Daniel.”

He winced. “God, I’m sorry. I was so stupid.” He pulled me into a hug, and I allowed it because I understood his feelings. His handsome face, conjured them in me, too. The memories of what we shared one long, hot summer three years ago. It was special, and until a few weeks ago, I might have jumped at the chance to renew our relationship.

“Spencer,” I pulled back, “I wish things could have ended differently, but they didn’t. It’s been three years.”

“You’re right. Three long years, yet I’m still not over you. Things can be different,” he insisted. He leaned in and I expected a quick peck, but his hands braced my back, and he put pressure on my lips, forcing my mouth to yield.

Old memories rushed in, and I forgot where I was. My hands crept up Spencer's chest of their own accord. I was lost.

“Savannah, Spencer is finished with law school and will take over his father’s practice in a few years. You would have the perfect life here at home where you belong,” Momma’s voice nagged. She murmured all the ideas she’d tried to force down my throat for years.

I gasped. We were standing in the middle of a walkway. “No.” I pushed Spencer away. “You can’t throw yourself at me... you can’t kiss me...”

He stepped back, his face flushed with desire and sorrow, and I spun on my heel and hurried up the steps into the restroom outbuilding. *Stupid. How could you allow such a moment of weakness?* My emotions were so twisted.

As confusion swept through me, I pushed into the ladies' restroom and fell onto a cushioned bench. My lips tingled from Spencer’s kiss, and I honed in on that. On being in his arms again. On how kissing him felt after so long.

But no matter how hard I focused on Spencer, an Aussie bartender remained front and center. Gage always pushed the others away from my vision.

The truth hit me like a bucket of cold ice.

I was over Spencer. I was over Daniel. I was ready to move forward with someone. And that someone was Gage. Making a mistake and screwing us up scared me, but falling again didn't. Hell, I'd had little choice. Gage was the one my heart wanted.

THIRTY-SEVEN
SAVY
SATURDAY—JUNE 15, 2013

Bouncing at the revelation, I blotted my face in the sitting room mirror and moved for the exit when Momma entered.

“There you are, darling. How are you taking it all in?”

Being forced to have this conversation again was exasperating. “I’m fine. It was a lovely wedding, and I’m happy for Mary Anne and Daniel.”

She looked to Heaven like I was crazy.

“What, Momma? Why is it so hard to believe, huh?” Her theatrics were tiresome.

“Savannah Rose. There is no need for you to be so short with me,” she huffed. She raised a hand and patted her hair as she spoke, “I know how hard it was for you to come here and take part in their happiness. I was worried about you.”

“I’m fine. I have Gage.” Saying it out loud was so right.

He’d been a rock throughout the entire wedding debacle. Before the ceremony, he’d sat beside me with his arm around my shoulders, his fingers lightly teasing my bare skin until chill bumps appeared. He’d leaned in and whispered funny little comments about one of the lady’s hats or another’s putrid purple dress. When I struggled to hold back tears as Mary Anne walked down the aisle, he stroked my fingers and whispered, “It’s very emotional watching someone give up their dating freedom, isn’t it?” I covered my mouth as a giggle replaced the lump in my throat. “Think of all the wonderful dates they’re losing out on. All of the songs that won’t get a name put with them.”

Holding tight to his hand, I turned with gratitude. “I’d take the song game over this any day.”

I meant I'd take him over Daniel, but I'm unsure he understood. Gage leaned over like he would kiss me right there as Mary Anne walked down the aisle. Maybe he would have if Daddy's cough to my right hadn't pulled us from our bubble.

I have Gage.

Needing to hurry back, I pulled open the door, but Momma stopped me before I could escape.

"Savannah, honey, I'm sure he's very nice, but what type of a future would you end up having with someone like him?"

"Someone like him?" At some point since arriving in Charleston, Daddy had warned me he'd filled Momma in on Gage's job, but she hadn't mentioned anything yet.

"Don't try to make me out to be the bad guy here, Savannah. Gage is gorgeous, and I can see why you brought him. He has certainly been turning heads the past few days. But he's no Daniel, no matter how handsome he is. You deserve something more, Savannah. You deserve the fairy tale, too, if not more, than Mary Anne."

"Yes," I rolled my eyes in defeat, "I brought Gage for the sole purpose of making all the country club cronies pant after him. So everyone who saw me get thrown to the side by Daniel Livingston could see I was licking my wounds with a sexy new boy toy."

"We only want you to be happy."

"I had my chance at happily ever after, remember? The upstanding young lawyer with the trust fund was in the bag until the beautiful bride came and stole him." The lies tasted bitter as they poured from my mouth. I owed Mary Anne thanks for taking Daniel off my hands all those years ago. It may have hurt back then, but I was much better off now.

The echo of footsteps, a slight commotion, and a male voice pardoning himself interrupted our conversation. We'd been speaking with the door open. *Oh God.* I stepped out. The glass door leading outside clicked closed, and a tall male descended the steps.

The woman he must have bumped into, a friend of Momma and Daddy's from the club, stepped around my rigid body. "Dear, that is some accent your guy has." She fanned herself over dramatically.

My stomach clenched.

I rushed outside—Gage had overheard our conversation. Ahead was the wedding reception tent, and to the left were paths leading to the tennis courts

and club pool, while the pathways to the right led around the club toward the golf course. Scanning the area, I searched for my handsome date in his dark suit. Spotting him to my right, I took off.

“Gage?” His silhouette took long strides across the country club lawn ahead while my heels dug into the turf, tripping me as I gave chase. “Gage!” Panic squeezed my chest.

The almost full moon was the only light this far from the clubhouse. I found him stopped under a sprawling oak with his hands stuffed into his pants pockets.

Panting from exertion, I tugged his arm to turn him to face me, but he stalwartly resisted. I scrambled for the right words and leaned into him, resting my cheek against his back.

He stiffened. “What was this, Savannah? Was I eye candy to you? A short trip home to show off the sexy Aussie to your vapid little cousin?” His voice was raw.

Regret slapped me. “No. Do you honestly think so little of me?” He didn’t reply. “I guess you overheard my mother and me just now?”

He moved forward abruptly, and I stumbled as he turned. Disgust was written on his face and anger flashed in his eyes. “Were you trying to show your ex you could forget him? Is that what all those dates were for? But when you couldn’t find a rich ass worth the time to bring home to momma, you went for the lowly bartender because of his sex appeal?”

“Gage, no. I swear, that’s—”

“You swear? That’s laughable. You swore you felt something real with me. Were you lying then, too?”

“No.” I blinked back tears.

“I saw you Savannah,” his head shook, “With that other guy. Spencer Alexander, isn’t it?”

“You what?” My heartbeat hammered at what that must have looked like in his eyes. How did he know who Spencer was?

“I’m not blind, sweetheart. I watch you, and I watch people watching you.”

“It’s not what it seems. I told him I’d moved on. What you saw was goodbye.”

“That kiss sure didn’t look like you were moving on.”

I raised my hands in a plea. “That kiss was nothing. It was me being confused. Nothing more.”

I might as well have slapped him, the way his head snapped back.

“He meant something to me a long time ago. He pushed me to talk, and I just... I didn’t know how to handle it.” My tears fell in earnest.

Gage drawled, “You could have simply walked away.”

“I did, and I’m sorry I didn’t do it sooner. I was surprised by him, that’s all.”

“What about what your mother said?” His jaw worked side to side.

“My mother knows nothing.” I stepped closer. “I’m sorry you heard her, but none of it’s true.”

“Yet, you didn’t set her straight.” His tone was flat, like he’d ceased to care.

“You don’t know my mother. It’s better to not engage. Not right now. Not here.”

“It occurred to me that you never once asked me about my future. About bartending or my job. You’ve ignored it. You didn’t bother to tell your mother. You planned to keep it a secret from everyone, didn’t you?”

“Gage.” I grasped the edge of his jacket. His shoulders tensed as he shook me off and retreated.

“You know what? It doesn’t matter. Go back to your family. I’ll get a flight out of town tonight. I’m not a toy, Savannah. I’m an adult, and I’m not playing your games. I’ve been there and done that, and I’m over it.”

“But it does matter. Let me explain why I never asked,” I begged as he took his first step away. “Gage.”

He spun then, getting in my face. “When are you going to realize you are your own person? Or at least I thought you were. Do you think I don’t know the pressure you get? Trust me, I get it, and I know how it feels to have people after you for who you are or what you’re worth. But I thought you were different—that you didn’t care about bank accounts and parties like your mother.”

I was utterly mystified. What did he mean he understood the pressure?

“You’re still trying to please the country club crowd and the silly socialites. But guess what?” He gripped my shoulders and pulled me close. My lips trembled while tears continued down my cheeks, and his head canted, his gaze scouring my face before he wiped a tear with his thumb. It was like he was trying to remember every last detail, and my breath hitched. Then, for one glorious breath, his head bent, and I tipped up for the kiss I prayed he would offer. Instead, he his warm lips touched my ear.

“You’re just a fool, love,” he whispered in a voice that chilled me to the core. “Talk to your dad about me. I wanted to give you everything, Savy, and you tossed it away like it was nothing.”

With those final words, he released me and turned to leave. My knees buckled as he walked away. My voice caught in my throat. He was done. Music inside the tent where the wedding party continued to celebrate filled the air. The band played something slow, something I would have danced to with Gage, his strong arms holding my body pressed to his. I could almost feel how his fingers would trail along my bare shoulder as I told him I was ready.

“Oh, my God.” I sank to my knees.

He’d called me Savy. *Savy*. My shoulders folded as a torrent of tears fell.



Daddy found me in the grass, crying.

He gathered me into his arms and crooned words of love. I was the little girl who’d fallen off her bike and skinned her knee in the second grade all over again.

“I don’t understand, Daddy. He walked away.” I sobbed into his shirt. “He wouldn’t let me explain.”

He smoothed my hair. “Come on, let’s get you home.”

When we pulled into the garage, I’d slipped off my heels and ran to the guest house, expecting Gage to be there, but he wasn’t. His scent lingered in the room, and his clothing and luggage were where he left them. I sat on the edge of the bed and pulled his pillow to my face, breathing him in.

“Savannah?” Daddy stood in the doorway, his face twisted harshly. A father watching his little girl suffer.

“I’m going to stay here. His stuff is here, surely he just went to vent, and he’ll be back. I want to be here to talk to him.”

“Baby, he was going to catch a flight—”

“How do you know?” My ruined makeup smeared Gage’s pillowcase.
“Did you talk to him?”

Stepping farther into the room, he pulled something from his pocket.
“One of the employees at the club delivered this to me.”

A note.

Unfolding the club stationary, I wiped the blurry haze from my eyes and stared at Gage’s bold handwriting.

Mr. Guthry,

I apologize for the contents of this letter, sir. Thank you for your hospitality this weekend and for welcoming me into your house and Savannah’s life.

Something happened this evening, something best left between your daughter and me, but I wanted you to know I’m heading home. I’m taking a cab to the airport now and will catch a flight when available. I would appreciate you not telling Savannah about this until I have left, as I do not wish to cause a scene with her.

When I left her moments ago, she was under a large tree off from the main building entrance. Please go to her.

Please feel free to tell Savannah what we discussed about my life. She has the right to know.

Sincerely,

Gage Taylor

I clutched the letter to my chest. Debating my options, I’d snapped.
“Maybe he’s still at the airport. Why didn’t you tell me right away?”

“Savannah, I honored his wishes, and so will you—”

“And what is it you two discussed?” What would Gage have discussed about his life with Daddy that he didn’t tell me?

Daddy’s sigh was ragged. “Come into the house, and we can talk.”

“No.” Jumping to my feet, I scanned the room, finding all the items Gage had left behind in his apparent haste to avoid me. “Daddy, I think I love him. Damn him for leaving. Why do guys do that, huh? They walk away without any thought to the pain they cause.”

He moved, and I waved him off. With a resigned sigh, he lifted his hands in surrender. “Let him cool down, and he’ll see things differently. Can you

tell me what happened?”

Spotting Gage’s open travel suitcase, I stared at the neatly folded T-shirt on top. I pulled the navy shirt out and held the soft cotton. Hidden beneath it was a square box wrapped in white with a tag. My breath caught.

“Can you give me some time? I’m going to stay here in case he comes back.” My voice was stiff as I stared at the box. “Please.”

I carried the box and T-shirt to the bed when the doors shut behind him, hesitating until I spotted my beaded clutch on the table next to the door. Daddy must have brought it into the room. Rushing for my bag, I fished out my cell and checked for messages.

Nothing.

Tapping the quick dial button assigned to Gage, I choked back tears as the call went straight to voicemail.

“Gage, it’s Savannah. Please come back. I’m so sorry. Can you please let me explain? I’m waiting in the guest house for you.”

I was pathetic. This was pathetic.

Still, I hung up and stripped off my dress, pulling on his T-shirt and sliding between the covers he slept between the night before. I stared numbly at the small package in my lap. The tag was made out to me with a small heart stamped onto it.

Unable to wait, I unwrapped the gift, taking deep breaths as I did. Shimmying the lid, I pulled the square piece of cotton from the top and found a thin, silver cuff bracelet. It was simple and sweet, and my bottom lip trembled as I removed it from the box.

And that’s when I saw it.

Seven words elegantly stamped along the cuff that ripped my heart from my body:

Hey pretty girl, let’s build some dreams

My chest tightened at the line we’d danced to many times. Our song.
A small note under the bracelet read:

Savy, I chose you. Are you ready to choose me?

A painful gasp burned my throat as anger raised its ugly head. I dialed

Gage, going straight to voicemail again.

“You want to build some dreams? You chose me? Is that why you walked away? Just like that, Gage, you walk away and leave me?” A sob broke my voice. “You didn’t choose me. You didn’t even give me a chance in the end. I did choose you, but you didn’t trust me enough to stay and find out. How dare you?” My cries came harder. “How dare you. I chose you—”

The voicemail cut off, and I collapsed on the bed with tears flooding my face as I cried myself into a fitful sleep.

THIRTY-EIGHT

SECRETS REVEALED

SUNDAY—JUNE 16, 2013

It was well past noon when I walked into Daddy's study in Gage's T-shirt and a pair of yoga pants Sunday. His tired gaze met mine as I dropped into the chair across his desk.

"He isn't returning my calls. Tell me what you discussed with him."

He stood. "Your mother wants to talk with you, Savannah." He circled his desk and placed his large hand on my shoulder.

"I'm not in the mood to speak with her right now. I want to know why Gage told me to talk to you. What is it you know that I don't?"

He called for Momma despite my protest and retook his seat. His face was swiped of all emotion.

"First, let me tell you Gage called me a week ago."

"He did what?"

Daddy's head snapped up at Momma's arrival. "He called me. Erika, come sit down. Both of you, let me speak first?" He glanced between us.

Momma avoided my eyes as she took the chair next to mine. She was impeccably put together, although her usually vibrant eyes were tired and maybe a little puffy. Our non-answer was agreement enough for Daddy to continue.

"Gage called to make sure his staying at our house for the wedding was acceptable to us. He was extremely polite, and I was very impressed."

My heart constricted at Gage being such a gentleman that he would call on Daddy without telling me.

"It wasn't until Friday at lunch that I knew who he was."

My brow furrowed. "What do you mean who he was?"

"Erika." He turned to her.

“Savannah, darling, can you please look at me?” Frown remaining, I crossed my arms before turning just enough to meet her gaze.

“I assume Gage overheard our conversation in the bathroom. You went tearing out of there so quickly, and I followed you to the steps where I saw you chasing after him.” I averted my eyes, irritated she saw even one moment between us last night.

“I’m sorry if I caused your argument, but I want you to understand my side.”

“Psh—your side of what, Momma? You put him down because he’s a freaking bartender. And you made him think he was less than us because of it.” My voice rose as I shot forward in my chair, pointing accusingly at her. “You are such a snob.”

“You’re right, Savannah; I am a snob. And I want what is best for my only child. I don’t want you to want for anything in this world.”

“Momma, I could marry a garbage man and not want for anything. This family has plenty of money. We’ve made our fortune on alcohol, for God’s sake, and you want to crucify the bartender I’m in love with? How damn ironic.”

“In love?” Momma squeaked.

I studied the floor, biting my bottom lip. From the corner of my eye, Momma’s pale hand reached over and patted my knee. When she flipped it palm up and held it open, I accepted the offering.

“Savannah, honey, you didn’t tell me you cared for him. You never called me to talk about him and didn’t tell Daddy. I assumed he was a good-looking guy you’d brought home to show off. You know how many of my friends walk their newest young playthings around the club after their husbands are caught cheating? I thought you were playing eye-for-an-eye.”

Daniel’s speech, “You know who we are and where we come from,” wasn’t a lie. Anger burned my gut—that the people I’d known all my life treated love so cavalierly.

“But why did it even matter, Momma? Why do you care what any guy I bring home does, especially if I’m happy?”

“I can answer that for your mother and for myself, Savannah. You already know part of the answer. It’s because of who you are.”

I sighed. It was because of our money, our legacy, what anyone who married me would be a part of. The more money you had, the more people wanted to walk in your shadow.

Sure enough, Daddy repeated my thoughts almost word for word, and Momma hummed in agreement.

“But that’s not all,” she added, getting up and walking toward the window. “Honey, I don’t talk about my family for a reason. I grew up very, very poor, Savannah.”

Never did I expect to hear that.

“I grew up in a trailer and often didn’t have enough money for food. My father was a drunk who sometimes hit my mother, and she was a housekeeper at the local motel.” Momma shuddered as she stared out the window.

“I met your father when I was barely eighteen. One day, he happened to come into a diner where I was lucky enough to get a job. He was lost on his way somewhere and had stopped to ask for directions.”

“But I stayed for the company.” Daddy grinned, and Momma returned his tender gaze over her shoulder.

“Yes, he stayed for the company. I gave him a piece of pie and some coffee, and we talked for hours. When he left, he asked for my number, but we didn’t even have a phone. So he came back the next day and the day after that.” She’d walked to his chair and set her hand on his shoulder.

“That’s how Gage and I met.” Tears pricked my eyes.

Daddy patted Momma’s hand. “I fell in love with her instantly, and we were getting married within a month.”

“Oh, my word. Why have you never told me this story?” I crossed the room and wrapped her in a hug.

“I’m ashamed. My family didn’t have a very good name in our town. When your father took me away from there, I swore I would never look back.” She pulled back, eyes searching my face. “I wanted to protect you. That’s why I pushed you so hard through the years. I think I’ve been on a quest to prove I belonged with these people.”

“Oh, Momma, you belong here as much as any of the people you know. Probably more than most of them. At least you’ve always done volunteer and humanitarian work with your money instead of frittering it away on nonsense like they do.”

“I love you so much, Savannah, and I want you to be happy. If you love this man, I know I’ll love him too.”

Wrapping my arms protectively around my waist, I shook my head. “It may be too late to worry about that.”

She smoothed my hair from my face. “Oh, nonsense. When you get home

to Nashville, you'll go and talk with him and make him understand how stupid your mother was. He'll forgive you."

Daddy chuckled, and Momma and I stared like he was crazy.

"You find my heartbreak humorous, Daddy?"

He inhaled sharply. "Of course, I don't, but I do need to tell you about our discussion Friday. You might want to sit down. It's quite a coincidence you met Gage, actually."

Momma and I returned to our chairs. "Why's that?"

"Gage isn't just a bartender."

Right. He managed bars for new owners.

Leaning back in his office chair, Daddy scratched the side of his neck. "Gage owns the bar you frequent in Nashville, and from what I understand, he also owns two in Vegas and is negotiating for another club in New York City."

My fingers dig into the chair's arms. "I'm sorry. He owns them?"

"There's more. Gage's family runs one of the largest entertainment companies around. Taylor Entertainment owns most of Australia's larger clubs, casinos, and bars. Gage is the sole heir to the company."

The blood rushed from my head as Daddy explained everything the bartender I'd fallen for hadn't. Gage told him who he was because Guthry Whiskey was the leading whiskey distributor for their bars. Gage knew there was a good chance Daddy or Uncle Grant would recognize who he was. Uncle Grant's reaction to Gage's name at the cocktail reception made sense now. He'd almost blown Gage's cover then.

"Two years ago, when Gage finished his Masters in business and marketing, he convinced his father to let him move to the U.S. to start looking at clubs to buy here," Daddy finished.

It was indeed an amazing coincidence we met at The Garage.

"Well, I'll be," Momma muttered, eyes wide.

"When we fought last night, he seemed particularly upset with the idea I was somehow after a rich man. That money mattered so much to me." Another thought struck me. "Is that why he kept it a secret? Was he testing me or something? Did he tell you?"

Daddy shook his head. "I asked why he was being secretive, and he said he didn't intend to be, but you'd never asked about his job. Perhaps if he was honest with himself, he would have to admit he was testing you in some way. He wanted to find someone who wanted him for himself—much like you

do.”

“His phone goes straight to voicemail.” I fingered the silver cuff. I shouldn’t be wearing it since he hadn’t technically given it to me, but I was compelled to have it, him, near my skin.

“Baby, that man has deep feelings for you. He made his intentions very clear when he was here. He was serious about you. He was waiting for you to get over some of the demons from your past—or that’s how he phrased it.”

I couldn’t explain those demons to them. “I want to go home today.”

He frowned. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Drive home tomorrow.”

“No, I don’t want to wait. I need to go home and talk with him. He’s never in the bar on Monday mornings, so I can go to his place and catch him.”

But there was one last thing to tell them before I could leave. Having things out in the open with Momma’s past and Gage’s family propelled me to share my secret.

Shocking Daddy speechless, I explained how I’d been taking classes to obtain a double major in Art History and Business.

“I want to run GW someday. It’s in my blood.”

They were taken aback but proud. I never should have kept my schooling choices from them for so long. Momma made me a late lunch before I got on the road, and we spent the meal reconnecting. It was good to be a family without all the obligations of the past smothering me.

Around 3 p.m., I left Charleston behind for Nashville. Prepared to shamelessly beg Gage to forgive me. As I listened to the radio and snuck glances at the bracelet on my wrist, I was optimistic that he would come around and we could build some dreams together.

THIRTY-NINE

UNEXPECTED COMPANY

SUNDAY—JUNE 16, 2013

It took every ounce of my concentration to drive home. I called Gage twice, leaving rambling voicemails about how sorry I was. It was 10 p.m. when I pulled up to the house, physically and mentally exhausted. I grabbed what luggage I could and half-dragged, half-carried the bags to the door.

God, I can't wait for a hot shower and a good night's sleep. Balancing my bags on my shoulders, I tugged the keychain from my pocket and slipped the house key into the deadbolt. The lock spun loosely, the tumblers not catching. *Fabulous. The damn thing finally broke.*

Calling a locksmith so I could get into my house after a long drive was the last thing I wanted to do. Dropping the toiletry bag from my shoulder, I cursed and kicked the bottom of the door to cathartically release my frustration.

I twisted the key and tried the handle again, and the door swung open. A man stood in the doorway, the bright light behind him obscuring his face. I caught dress clothes and flowers and, for a flash, saw Gage. Relief flooded me like the banks of a swollen river breaking through a dam. I nearly broke down right there.

“Welcome home, Savannah,” he said, his voice low like the first time I’d heard it.

My reflexes sent me backward, and I stumbled over the bag I’d dropped and grabbed at the porch post to keep from falling down the steps.

“What the—” I kicked to detangle my feet from the bag's straps.

“Don’t be frightened. I made you dinner since I knew you would be tired after such a long trip. Come on in.” Ryan from The Painter’s Palette grasped my wrist.

My lips parted to scream, and Ryan swept my legs from under me. His hand maintained an iron grip on my wrist as I twisted and fell to the porch. A searing pain ripped through my shoulder.

Before I could move, Ryan slapped a hand over my chin and mouth and yanked me roughly into the house. I fought to produce a scream, but his grip was relentless. The tang of salt and sweat met my tongue as I tried to use my teeth and bite his palm.

He dragged me over the flower bouquet he'd dropped on the threshold and kicked the door shut.

Terror surged as he tried to force me onto my stomach. Unwilling to go down without a fight, I revisited every self-defense move I could think of. I scissor-kicked but had no leverage in my position. This was the meek employee who barely met my eyes when I shopped in his store. How was he so powerful?

"Play nice." He twisted my arm up the center of my back and yanked so hard I feared my shoulder would snap. I screeched into his rough palm, clamped over my mouth.

Giving into the pain, my body quit fighting long enough for him to roll me over and shove my face into the floor. Ryan climbed across my upper thighs, his legs pinning mine together, preventing me from kicking out again.

Keeping my arm twisted, he hovered low over my back. "I'm moving my hand, but it will not be pleasant if you scream." His voice was low and gravelly against my ear.

I nodded.

When his hand peeled away, I gulped fresh air. "Please don't hurt me," I cried at the pain, "Please."

Huffing, Ryan wrenched my other arm behind my back, cuffing them together. His weight lightened as he leaned to the right, and I twisted my head. Laying by the door were multiple rolls of duct tape.

I went dizzy. *No. Oh, God, no.* The *scritch* of tape being unrolled sent me into action.

A scream tore from my chest as I bucked my hips, trying to throw him off my back. He barely flinched as I wriggled, kicked, and squirmed.

"No! Help!" I screamed as another strip of tape ripped, and he yanked my head back by my hair.

"Ow," fresh tears sprung to my eyes, "Stop. No!"

"I told you to keep quiet, Savannah," he snarled, slapping a strip of tape

on the side of my mouth. “I would close my mouth if I were you.”

I screamed again as he pressed the adhesive over my lips, and I closed my mouth before he sealed my mouth shut. A second strip followed the first.

Panic roared through my lungs. Breathe. In. Out. *You can do this, Savannah! Stay calm.* The tape unraveled again as he wrapped my wrists behind my back.

How do I get help? What do I do? I’d slipped my phone into my shorts’ side cargo pocket when I got out of the car. If I could reach it...

“Let me help you up.” Ryan’s weight left my body, and he pulled up on my arms. I fumbled to stand alone but couldn’t maneuver without his support. Flinching at his touch, I allowed him to help me to my knees. He didn’t stop me as I swung my legs around and scrambled back, cowering in the corner.

Ryan eyed me curiously like a wolf toying with a scared rabbit.

“I’m sorry if I hurt you, but it was necessary since you wouldn’t stay put,” he said politely. Too politely. His calm demeanor and tone sparked true terror. He wasn’t crazed or worried about what was happening. He seemed confident and all too aware of his surroundings.

I mumbled curse words, but it was like a gnat hurling itself at a Mac truck. No damage would be done with my pleas and grunts beneath this tape.

He knelt before me in the corner, and I drew my knees to my chest. I could kick out, but I’d never get anywhere with my hands behind my back. Ryan’s steely gray gaze fastened on me, the pupils so large they nearly overtook the gray. His hand smoothed my hair, and I winced at the vileness of his touch, pulling my legs closer.

“You are so beautiful,” he spoke in a hushed tone, fingers trailing across my cheek to a chunk of hair stuck in the tape over my mouth. Grasping the stands, he tugged them free and gently brushed them behind my ear.

“Up and at ‘em, now.” He stood and pulled me up. “Let’s go,” he ordered.

Ryan steered me around the corner into the living room, and sour bile stung my throat. The room was transformed—all the pictures of my family, Sara, Candace, and our other friends missing. The walls were now covered with my drawings and artwork. Some pieces had been stored in my room, and some I hadn’t seen in years. Jerking back, I shook my head.

“Yes, Savannah, I stayed home and made the house look better while you went off on your little weekend trip.”

Fear overrode everything. *Sara!*

Candace was at her family reunion this weekend, but Sara should have been home. Oh God, please let her be all right.

He'd moved two dining chairs into the room, along with a small table he'd set for a romantic date for two with china and candles. My stomach rolled, and my legs turned to jelly.

"Oh no, you don't." Ryan's arms wrapped around me, pulling my body close to his as I wobbled.

When his hard cock nudged my hip, I moaned a sob. His hands caressed my back and moved languorously over my body—one between my shoulders and over my neck, the other down until he cupped my rear and pulled me tighter against his erection. His hold was firm, much stronger than mine, and he pinched my neck and forced my head onto his shoulder. Then he began to sway.

My face pressed to his shirt as he forced me to dance; the sour scent of his sweat and heavy cologne filled my nostrils. I swallowed another bout of bile. *Breathe, Savannah. Stay calm.* His hand glided along my bottom and across my hip, edging along the waistband of my shorts. I condemned him, not that he could understand my mumbled shouts. When his sticky fingers crept under the edge of my shirt and the damp touch of his fingers connected with my skin.

The survival instinct kicked in.

He could not touch me. He would not molest me or rape me. He could kill me; he would not defile me. Planting my feet for power, I lifted a knee quickly, hitting Ryan square in the inner thigh. Though I missed my intended target, the hit was hard enough to loosen his grip, and I kicked furiously at his shin. He groaned, and I kicked again.

"Dammit." He let me go and grabbed his leg.

Taking advantage of his preoccupation, I turned for the front door to escape. *Get outside, get to a neighbor.*

Ryan's angry howls filled the room as he grasped my hands, still secured behind my back. He dove for my body, and I slammed into the floor, my right shoulder taking the brunt of the fall.

Black clouds rimmed my vision, and stars flashed behind my lids. Shaking them away, I kicked my legs aimlessly, aiming for anything. My shoe hit the leg of the table Ryan had set for our macabre date, toppling glasses and dishes.

“Stop it! You’re ruining our date.” Ryan’s voice was high-pitched and whiny. He was an impetuous eight-year-old throwing a temper tantrum.

Seizing my ankle, he tugged me toward him, and I twisted to remain on my side. With my left leg free, I waited until he'd drug me close enough, then struck, heel catching him in the jaw. A horrifying crunch filled my ears as he wailed in pain, flying back and knocking over the table behind him. He sprawled limply across the floor and moaned pitifully. He wasn't out cold, but he was disabled.

Shaking, I pulled my legs underneath me and stood using the couch as leverage. I shuffled to the front door and found a new deadbolt lock I couldn't undo without using my hands.

I jerked and twitched my wrists, working to free them. The tape loosened, but they were still wrapped too tightly for me to get free. Making a hasty decision, I headed to my bedroom, using the wall to stay upright. My door was open, and I closed it and fumbled for the little button lock, though it wouldn't hold him for long.

My phone. I needed to get the phone out of my pocket without using my hands. Searching the room frantically, I moved to my bedside table. *Please, please work.* I leaned against the table and tried to use the ledge to push my phone up and out of my pocket.

“Savannah!”

Adrenaline pumping, my gaze flew around the room for anything to use to free myself.

You idiot. I kicked my foot up on my bed and swept my pillows onto the floor before climbing onto the mattress awkwardly. Braced for the pain, I shimmed into position, leaning upside down over the bed's edge. Without arms to catch me, my head slammed into the floor and pillows I'd kicked down.

I jiggled my hips in a headstand, screaming into the tape as the phone shifted inside my pocket. The house was eerily quiet, considering Ryan was out there, and that forced me to work as quickly as I could, bucking and rotating my hips. When the movement stalled, I kicked my feet into the air, using my core to keep me from flipping my feet over head. Finally, I hung there, vertical enough to dislodge the phone. It fell to the floor by my head, and I folded my body to fall from the bed. My arms and shoulders screamed at the contortions.

Blinking back the tears as they kept obscuring my vision, I rolled onto my

knees. Now, how do I dial? I needed to get it into my hands. I turned with difficulty and stared over my shoulder as my arms and hands reached for the phone futilely.

An ominous thump against the hallway wall made me jump.

Please, please help me. Let me get this. God help me, I begged over and over.

When my hands grasped the phone, I groaned with relief. Grateful my heavy dresser was located horizontally from my door, I scooted as quickly as possible, leaning into it and bracing my legs against the door to hold Ryan out if he tried to break it down.

My tingling, numb fingers fumbled with the phone while I blindly figured out which end was up. Getting it to the correct position, I forced myself to breathe slowly and think. I had to go with muscle memory. With my thumb, I hit the side power switch and slid a finger across where I knew the unlock key was on the screen. Thank the Lord I didn't have an access code on my phone, or I'd be out of luck. A slight vibration let me know it was unlocked.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," Ryan sang maniacally. His voice was playful and high-pitched as he tapped menacingly on the wall.

With my shoulder blades braced on my dresser and my feet planted wide against the bedroom door, my eyes widened as the door knob twisted slowly. Then, it jiggled back and forth. Ryan pounded the door three times, then messed with the knob again. It was only a matter of time before he broke through.

He forcefully slammed against the door, and my legs trembled from the powerful hit, but the door didn't budge mercifully. Another heavy blow and he screamed, "Just wait until I get my hands on you!"

He cursed and screamed on the other side of the wall, banging into things as he ran down the hall. A moment later, he was back, and a solid object slammed into the wood, cracking the wood.

Hurry. Holding the phone awkwardly, I wracked my brain. How do I dial 9-1-1? How can I make sure I'm even hitting the right keys? I couldn't, so I went with plan B. The thing I could do from memory—I hit the shortcut icon at the top left corner. The fast dial for Gage.

As I tapped the button, Ryan yelled, "Open the door," while repeatedly slamming whatever object he'd found into the wood. Fearful he'd get in and discover the phone, I dropped it and used my fingertips to push the cell under the edge of my dresser, careful not to end the call.

Another slam and another crack splintered my door. There was nowhere to run. I scooted back as the lock gave way, and Ryan kicked his way into my bedroom, dropping the chair he'd used from the dining room.

"You bitch!" Pure hatred emanated from his sweat-covered, beet-red face. Blood trickled down the side of his discolored jaw.

"All I wanted was a date. I wanted you to get to know me." He clutched my shoulders and lifted me up. "Are you scared, Savannah?"

I held my fear as he shook my body, snapping my head back painfully before reaching across his chest and backhanding me. My ears rang from the force.

Like a rag-doll, he threw me onto the bed, never stopping his tirade. His voice alternated between chilling whines and manic screeching. "I was going to treat you special. But now I'll treat you the way you ought to be treated."

I closed my eyes and visualized Gage as this maniac climbed onto the bed. I returned to the day we danced in the rain while he hummed, "Hey Pretty Girl." When he'd held me, and all seemed right in my world.

There was no doubt that Ryan would kill me, and I prayed the call to Gage hadn't gone through. I didn't want him to walk into my house and find my body.

Heat spread across my cheek where Ryan had hit me, but nothing compared to the ice-cold terror sweeping my veins when he reached behind his back and withdrew a length of coiled rope.

FORTY

THE STUFF OF NIGHTMARES

SUNDAY—JUNE 16, 2013

The dregs of my energy rallied at the rope in his hands. I bucked my hips, but his free hand grabbed my waist, his fingers digging painfully into my side.

“It’ll hurt a lot less if you let me have my fun, sweetheart.”

The use of "sweetheart" coming from his tongue was vile, and I wailed and grunted under the bindings over my mouth.

Ryan dropped the rope next to me on the bed. Keeping his hand anchored into my side, he leaned over, reached into my nightstand drawer, and removed a syringe. I mewled as he bit off the needle's cap. This was a premeditated event. He’d set things up to drug me. There was no time to create a new plan before he jabbed the needle into my thigh and sank the plunger, emptying the entire contents into my bloodstream.

The drug burned as it spread through my veins like liquid fire. Numbness followed almost immediately. My muscles unclenched and relaxed. *I can't fight. I can't stop him.* Tears blinded me.

Slowly, as if in a dream, he climbed off me and tied the rope around my left ankle. It took my befuddled senses minutes to realize he held more than one piece of rope as he moved swiftly from one leg to the other, securing them to the bed frame.

I was trapped with arms painfully bound behind my back, a swath of unyielding tape across my mouth, and my legs tethered to the bottom corners of my bed. Whatever drug he injected had worked its way into my brain, for when Ryan climbed back on top and sat across my hips, his face blurred into two forms before it blended into one.

He twisted his fist into my shirt and balled the material, roughly pulling me into a sitting position. I flopped forward involuntarily. I was paralyzed.

My skin broke into goosebumps. No, not paralyzed—my fingers twitched with effort—but stalled, restricted.

Ryan placed a kiss on the tape where my lips were. “I wanted you to enjoy being with me, Savannah. I wanted to hear you scream out my name in ecstasy.” He murmured the words like he was speaking sweet nothings to his lover.

My head lolled forward, chin resting on my chest as he pulled me against his body and removed something from his back pocket. A flash of silver pulled my gaze to his hand, where he held a gleaming pocket knife.

This is the end. For one clarifying moment, I prepared for the cold steel to slice into my flesh. All I felt was the jerk of Ryan’s body as he leaned down and sawed the tape from my wrists. A slight pressure nagged my hand, but my mind was so far gone it barely registered.

Finished, he dropped me unceremoniously, and I fell back to the mattress, my arms lying to the sides like I was about to make a macabre snow angel.

I closed my eyes when he took his knife to the front of my shirt. The pulsing blood rushing through my ears overshadowed the ripping fibers of cotton. Something about my palm kept nagging, and using every ounce of energy I could muster, I tilted my head to the right.

My hand rested in a puddle of blood. My blood. I stared at the bright, thick liquid as it covered my palm and dripped from the fingertips hanging off the edge of the bed.

Helpless, I lay motionless as Ryan pulled my shirt away from my chest, revealing my bra. His eyes, all four of them, were large and full of unsated lust. Blood lust or sexual lust? I didn’t know.

His fingertips ran across the tops of my breasts, and he lowered his knife, running it across my skin. I observed him with detachment as though I were watching a movie. Something cold grazed my skin, but I didn’t think it was because of him. My brain knew he was there, and yet I didn’t *know* he was there.

A moan came from my throat when the sharp sting of his knife cut into the top of my chest. I forced my eyes to focus as red droplets appeared across the top of my breast. Ryan smeared the blood with his finger, an evil, crazed laughter springing out of him as he brought his hand to his face.

With a sinister urgency to his movements, he leaned down and licked the tops of my breasts. His knife slipped under the center of my bra, and I sensed pressure as he tugged up with the blade. The edge easily cut through the thin

material, and the lace fell to the sides, exposing me to a madman's nightmarish eyes.

His voice filled my head, and words swam noiselessly, but I could no longer discern what he was saying. It was like my soul had detached and left my body. The drug he'd injected me with never stopped its slow burn through my veins, and as my lids drooped, I begged God for mercy and release from this abhorrent nightmare.

Excruciating pain and pressure snapped like lightning across my face, forcing my eyes open.

"Open your eyes," Ryan thundered, slapping me.

His mouth crashed down onto mine, and I gathered from the searing pain along my cheeks and the wetness of his mouth invading mine that the tape was no longer there. He forced my jaw wider, his tongue exploring while his disgusting hands wandered over my bloodied chest.

Through hazy senses, I caught the squeal of tires outside. How many people were going about their mundane evenings while this horror occurred in my home?

Ryan moved from my lips, his mouth grazing my chin and working down my neck. No longer rendered speechless, I sobbed. A voice I barely recognized as my own whispered between powerful bursts of tears, "Please... no."

His dirty lips hovered over my skin as he crowed, "Yes, sweetheart. You're gonna beg me before we're through."

He lowered his head to my chest once again, and his hands moved over my stomach and ripped the button from my shorts. Banging on the front door interrupted my zipper lowering.

"Savannah?" yelled the achingly sweet voice I prayed I would hear again. "Savy!"

FORTY-ONE
HER CALL

GAGE POV—BONUS CHAPTER

SATURDAY 10 P.M.

There were no flights out of Charleston after 9 p.m. I should have known. South Carolina wasn't Vegas. There were car rentals, though. There is nothing like driving eight and a half hours after a woman breaks your heart.

"Fuck." I fist my hand to keep from punching the steering wheel. She used me. I figured I'd be safe with her name and the wealth attached to her family.

My cell rang—*Savy*. My foot pressed into the gas pedal as anger stirred. Itching to answer, I hit the radio and turned the first rock song I could find up until my ears buzzed.

When that sweet name reappeared on my screen, I dialed Kry's through Bluetooth for distraction. It was still early in Vegas.

"Hey, gorgeous," she answered in a near shout. The commotion of the club filled the line. "I thought you were playing wedding date this weekend."

"I was. The weekend is over."

"Oh?" Kry's shushed the rowdy group in the background. "It's 7 p.m. on Saturday, Gage. What happened?"

I clutched the wheel. "It's after 10 p.m. my time, and the country club happened."

"Yeah, I'm gonna need more than that."

“Savannah’s family is big money, Krys—“

“You’re big money, Mr. Taylor. What’s the problem?”

“I never told her who I am.”

“Uh, why the hell not?”

“You know why. I left Brisbane because I didn’t want to be a ticket to fame anymore. I’ve screwed enough faceless women, thanks to my name. I was done.” The captivating brunette who walked into The Garage two months ago flashes through my head. I cursed. “Sorry, you’ve got a set soon, I won’t bitch. I just called to check in.”

“Bull.” A door slammed where she was. “You know my set is at 8 p.m., and you know the club runs fine without you. Why did you call me Gage?”

“She fucking used me, Krys, and she didn’t even need to know about my money to do it. She flaunted me as a boy toy to her high society family, all to make her douchebag exes jealous.”

“And you liked her more than you let on when you were here last month?”

Krys and I grew up together. She knew every tell I had.

“When we first met, it was a flirtation. I didn’t expect this.” My molars ground as I fought emotions I couldn’t manage while behind the wheel. “It didn’t take long, Krys. She worked her way right in.”

“And used you. She showed up at your bar every night with a new guy, and you didn’t expect this?”

“That’s not what you think. Her dating was...” Screw it. How could I be sure what all those dates were about? Maybe she’d played me for a fool from day one. Blocking the little voice that wanted to argue, I cracked my neck and refocused. “I know. I was an idiot. I’ll be okay. So, tell me what’s going on there.”

SUNDAY

My stomach eating itself woke me. I rolled to the bed’s center, burying my face in the second pillow, when the lingering scent of vanilla hit me. *Nope*. I shoved the pillow Savannah had used off the bed and flipped back to my side. I lifted my head to see it was well after 8 p.m. When was the last time I’d slept twelve hours? Rubbing my temples, I staggered into the bathroom, took

a piss, splashed my face with water, and stared at the haggard man in the mirror.

Savannah Guthry had aged me five years. Christ, I looked like shit. Bracing one arm on the bathroom counter, my palm rubbed my chest absentmindedly. “Dammit, Savy.”

My tired eyes burned, and I pushed away from the pitying glare of my reflection and headed for the kitchen. One pour of Guthry Whiskey and an omelet later, I sat in the dark, staring at the city from my condo’s windows.

I listened to her first voicemail.

“Gage, it’s Savannah. Please come back. I’m so sorry. Can you please let me explain? I’m waiting in the guest house for you.”

Hell was having a memory that could place the woman I wanted in the bed I’d slept in, crying and waiting for me to return.

A second shot gave me the courage to listen to her second voicemail.

“You want to build some dreams?” Oh, fuck! She’d found the bracelet. “You chose me? Is that why you walked away? Just like that, Gage, you walk away and leave me?” Her voice broke, and her sob dragged one from my chest as she continued, “You didn’t choose me. You didn’t even give me a chance in the end. I did choose you, but you didn’t trust me enough to stay and find out. How dare you? How dare you. I chose you—”

My phone cut her off, and I was angry and relieved for it. I nearly throw the empty glass across the room before setting it down and slumping forward on the couch, head resting in my hands.

She sounded destroyed. A good actress or a misunderstanding? I’d known some mother-effing good actresses through the years. Krys was at the forefront of the list. Our history tied us together after all the shit we’d been through. Savannah didn’t have the luxury of a long acquaintance. We’d had six weeks since the night I’d saved her from Jax and taken her out for Cinco. Six weeks, and what I felt was more profound than any of the iterations of Krys and me.

Because it was real, asshole. My backseat relationship driver was relentless. Krys was sex and co-dependence, and the past. Savannah is a future.

A Future. Building dreams together.

I inscribed that bracelet because I *knew* my heart. Or, I thought I did.

Try as I might, nothing Mrs. Guthry said Saturday night when I was standing in that doorway to the outbuilding stood out, but Savannah’s words

would not quit.

“I brought Gage for the sole purpose of making all the country club cronies pant after him. So everyone who saw me get thrown to the side by Daniel Livingston could see I was licking my wounds with a sexy new boy toy.”

“I had my chance at happily ever after, remember? The upstanding young lawyer with the trust fund was in the bag until the beautiful bride came and stole him.”

If I’m honest with myself, the second hurts more than the first. If she’d asked me to be eye candy on her arm, I would have said yes the night we met. She’s a sexy, gorgeous woman. I would have been happy to spend that time with her.

The time we spent together, the conversations we’d had, and the emotions evoked with every touch made how she’d blown off the idea of being happy with someone other than Daniel feel like a knife to the back.

If she’d wanted me—the bartender she thought I was—she would have told her mother about me. She would have stood up to her ex. Both of them.

That brought another round of anguish. Watching the thief who had stolen my heart kiss another man. A man another guest had given me the name of after I’d noticed his fixation on my date. What in the hell was that with Spencer?

My cell rang in my lap. A picture I’d snapped the night we danced in the rain filled the screen. *Savy*.

Pride be damned. The way she screamed my name and begged me not to leave her last night propelled me to answer. “Sav?”

Muffled noise, like a cloth over the speaker, met me. Had she butt-dialed me?

“Savannah?” There was a thump and scratching again. “Are you there?” Now that I had her, I needed to hear her. I wanted her explanations and was willing to accept her apologies and extend my own.

Just like that, I didn’t care about the wedding, the exes, her mother, or lies. We could make this work.

“Sav—“

I jerked at a muted but sizable crash on the other end of the line. Indistinguishable shouting followed.

Surging to my feet, I pressed my phone hard to my ear. “Savannah?” I shouted, and my heart rate skyrocketed when what sounded like a tree split open.

“What the—“

“You bitch,” a man’s voice filled my head, and I was snatching the basketball shorts and T-shirt I’d left on the end of my bed before we left last week. “All I wanted was a date. I wanted you to get to know me.”

Fuck. Please tell me she’s watching a movie. This is some movie, right? I’m jerking the clothes on and sliding my feet into tennis shoes while grabbing my keys and opening the door when the voice gets louder as the unknown man says, “Are you scared, Savannah?”

This is real. Someone has my girl.

FORTY-TWO

THE STUFF OF NIGHTMARES SUNDAY CONTINUED

Ryan jolted. He didn't know I'd placed a call to Gage. He didn't know Gage was here to rescue me. He sat ready, tightly gripping the pocket knife in his hand.

Ryan scrambled for the window when a booming hit ricocheted against the front door. The exquisite roar of sirens in the distance sparked fresh tears of relief.

The sirens increased in intensity, and the slamming near the front of the house persisted, forcing Ryan to move. Loosening the knots at my ankles, he hauled me from the bed and dragged me into my walk-in closet, where he brutally dumped me on the floor in the dark.

After a few beats, he returned, and the click of the door shutting met my ears. Hands ran up my legs and ripped off my shorts. My thick tongue worked to form words, but all I managed were grunts and pleas. When the rustling of his own pants being removed filled the closet, I braced for the moment when this monster would rape me. I was half-naked on the floor of my dark closet with a man I knew hovering over me. A man I thought to be kind. My mind processed the fear as his knife's blade pushed threateningly to the pulse at my throat. As his thighs shoved their way between mine. As an impact echoed through the walls, and a hand violated my body. As shouts surrounded my home, and this man failed in his ultimate goal.

Ryan growled when there was a crash closer to my bedroom. He must have tried to block my door because it was at that moment it registered someone had entered my room. Pulling from a well, I never knew I existed, I screamed.

“Shut up!” he hissed.

Twisting around as the closet door flew wide, Ryan's knife sliced across my shoulder.

A furious roar filled my small closet as Ryan was yanked off my body, his knife hitting the floor with a metallic thud beside my head.

"You son of—" Gage was here. The solid contact of fists making their mark was music to my ears.

Blue lights swirled across my bedroom ceiling. *I'm okay. I'm going to be okay.* I willed my body to move, but my muscles wouldn't cooperate.

Then his beautiful face appeared as he threw himself on the floor, and I wanted nothing but him.

"Savy? I'm here, love." Gage's voice was ragged. "You're okay. I'm here."

He dragged me across his lap and into his arms, his voice filled with shattering anguish that gutted me as he wrapped something around me protectively.

"Medic!" he yelled. "I need a damn medic."

Amid the shouts of the people who had entered my house and bedroom, I floated away. The light in my closet was flicked on, and the blood and damage were there for everyone to see. Someone removed me from Gage's arms, and I blinked as Gage released me into their care. Fighting for consciousness, I forced my eyes open long enough to meet Gage's as my hand slipped through his fingers and fell to the side, blood dripping from the tips.

And I slipped into nothingness.

FORTY-THREE

RECOVERY

MONDAY—JUNE 17, 2013

The click of a door pulled me from a deep sleep, and I pried my eyes open slowly. I lay in a propped-up twin bed with cool sheets drawn to my chest. My eyes adjusted to the low lights, and I rolled my head to gain my bearings, spotting an IV machine and another monitor on my left. *Hospital. I'm in a hospital.* My eyes tracked the path of the IV tube from the machine down into my arm. Bandages wrapped my wrist and hand, and I wiggled my fingers experimentally.

Rolling my head to the right, I saw through the cracks in the blinds that the sky had yet to turn light. *What time is it?* Movement caught my attention at the edge of the bed, where a figure sat in the chair beside me. Their upper body was slumped across the mattress, and fear pricked before I recognized it was Gage.

His beautiful dark head rested on one arm while his other stretched across the sheets and held my hand. How had I missed the grip of my hand in his? Now that my eyes had confirmed his touch the reassuring warmth radiating up my fingers and into my arm was impossible to overlook.

The steady rhythm of his breaths, as they moved in and out of his lungs, testified to his being asleep. Drowsily, I watched his chest rise and fall, rise and fall... Then panic crashed down, and I gasped for air as flashes hit:

The medics pulling me out of Gage's arms as he cried my name over and over. His voice as hoarse and dry as a creek bed in the desert. The scratchy blanket they used to cover my exposed and battered body.

Before that, the sound of his voice whispering in my ear. Crazy and maddened. Telling me to beg, whining about how he'd only wanted a date. His depraved mouth on my lips, my skin...his cold fingers groping my body.

My limbs shook uncontrollably, and my shoulders crumbled inward as my head hung low to form a cocoon of protection. To hide. But I couldn't hide. I couldn't escape the things terrorizing my mind. Lifting my bandaged arm, the IV site stung as I covered my mouth to keep from waking Gage. Sobs strangled my throat, and I choked so loudly it was like a scream had ripped from my chest.

Gage startled, his hand clasping mine tighter. His eyes were vacant and lost as he scrubbed his free hand over his face and hair. "Savannah?" He spoke softly like he was trying to comfort a wild deer.

Wakefulness hit, and he leaned closer and crouched beside the bed. "Savannah? It's okay, love. Do you need the nurse?" he soothed, running his hand up and down my arm while my cry grew louder. "You're all right, Savy."

I couldn't speak. I couldn't stop the tears from streaming. *Hold me and make the pain go away*, my mind begged, but I couldn't force anything coherent enough out of my lips to ask.

He rose. "I'm going to get the nurse."

My arm pulled him back, and I shook my head. The faint night light in the room cast shadows over his face, but I must be in the dark because he leaned closer, searching my features.

"Savy, what can I do for you? Tell me, please?" He pleaded, his tone heartbreakingly deep and thick from sleep or emotion—I didn't know.

"Stay," I managed between bouts of tears. "Hold—" The words came out like a toddler begging for treats.

His dark eyes softened. "May I?" he motioned to the bed, and I nodded. With a shaky breath, Gage slipped onto the narrow bed and wrapped me in his arms, careful of the wires and tubes. I buried my face into his chest as he murmured gentle words of comfort.

I continued to wail—huge, unending torrents of tears streamed relentlessly down my face and soaked his shirt—but his hand never stopped running softly and reassuringly through my hair, stroking it off my wet face.

Beneath my cheek, he shook. The hand holding my face trembled as his fingers tenderly rubbed my tears away. My pain magnified tenfold at knowing he hurt too, and I closed my eyes to block the image of horror I'd glimpsed on his face when he found me in my closet. I cried until I fell into a blessedly dreamless sleep.



When next I awoke, I was still wrapped securely in Gage's arms. Sometime in the night, he'd twisted so he lay more on the bed, and I was angled over his chest. I opened my eyes carefully and peeked up at his somber face. He was awake. I studied his profile, unable to speak. He stared at the window, his jaw clenched tight and his eyes tired and puffy as moisture streaked his cheek. His cheek flinched as he swallowed and lifted his hand, rubbing his eyes before inhaling deeply.

"I didn't think I was going to make it in time," he offered quietly. His arms tensed around me. "I didn't think I would make it, Savy. I've never been so scared in my life." His voice caught.

"I'm okay." It was halfhearted because I wasn't sure how I was. I wasn't sure how I was, but I was sure of one thing. I cleared my parched throat. "Gage. You *did* make it. You made it, and you saved me." I spoke as clearly as I could, hoping to ease his pain.

"You saved me," I whispered as the tears returned.



The nurse who came in to check on me a little after 9 a.m. smiled at Gage and I huddled together on the narrow bed.

“Savannah, sweetie, I need to check your vitals, and then breakfast should be coming around.”

Nodding, I reluctantly allowed Gage to climb from the bed while she checked my blood pressure and read the other vitals. Gage wandered over to the window and cracked the blinds, looking out.

“I need to check your wounds now.”

There was a question in her voice I didn't understand until Gage responded, “I'll wait outside.” He moved to leave.

Patient privacy. That was the reason for her tone.

“No.” I held my hand out. “You can stay. He can stay. It's all right.”

With a nod, she took care as she unbuttoned the snaps on the front of my hospital gown. Clenching my eyes, I wiggled my right fingers, my anxiety lessening when Gage took hold.

She pulled the gown as far down as possible without exposing my breasts to Gage. It wasn't like he hadn't seen them before, but she didn't know that.

“The cut on your chest is a surface wound. There was one spot where it went a little deeper, but still small enough that a butterfly Band-Aid was all that was necessary.” Her voice was pleasant. Clinical. She probed the area around the bandage, then moved to my shoulder.

“This one was much deeper and *did* require stitches. It looks good, though—no excess bleeding. It was dislocated, so you'll be extra sore. Your wrist was the worst because it hit an artery. We managed to sew it up, and although you lost a lot of blood, we were able to keep from giving you a transfusion.”

“How do you feel? Any pain, dizziness?” She picked up my chart and jotted down notes.

“I was injected with something,” I whispered.

Gage released my hand and stalked back to the window. His spine rod straight as he massaged his neck.

The nurse's gaze followed him before she gave me a reassuring smile. “Yes, we believe it was most likely a pretty basic drug, common to what many call the ‘date rape’ drug, but you were in a slight state of paralysis for a while, so we aren't completely sure yet. We've been pumping you full of the IV to flush anything lingering out of your system. And, of course, we've also been administering painkillers there.”

I shook my head, numb. A few minutes later, she left the room, assuring me breakfast would arrive soon, as well as a doctor and the police to take my

statement.

Gage stood stiffly at the window, and the air in the small hospital room thickened with tension. My mind grappled with what had happened, replaying the list of the injuries the nurse mentioned. I brought my hand to my lap and stared at the gauze.

“He was about to rape you, Savannah.” Gage’s somber voice pulled me from my thoughts. “When I opened that closet door. Dammit, I will never rid that picture from my head.” He finished on a strangled cry, his hand balling into a fist.

We needed to discuss so much, but I wasn't strong enough for what he witnessed in the closet. Not yet. Instead, I broached another subject.

“Gage? Will you sit down and talk with me about Charleston? Please.”

He still hadn't turned to face me. “I can't talk about Charleston right now. It doesn't matter anymore.”

His words were a punch to my gut. “It matters to me—” A soft knock at the door cut me off.

Sara's head popped in, her face pale as she hurried into the room. “Hey, how are you feeling, Van?” Sara's eyes swam with unshed tears. “I'm sorry I wasn't there.” She propped her hip on the bed's side and reached across me to take my hand. “You're going to be all right, though.”

“I will be.” I agreed, letting her ramble her apologies and explain how she'd been staying with Chris at his place.

I didn't bother telling her she'd likely be dead if she'd been home.

After that, my hospital room became Grand Central Station as Candace, Riley, Tony, and Chris joined Sara. Gage sat silently in the corner of the room as my friends huddled around the bed, hugging me and talking.

When the officers arrived to take my statement, they booted everyone out and asked question after question, forcing me to relive the whole ordeal. Once finished, they called Gage into the room to share some information with us both.

First, there was the absurd possibility Ryan could press charges against Gage for the beating he'd given him, but they assured us it wouldn't stick in court.

Then, they described the real Ryan. The man I never would have expected before last night. Gage stood by my side, holding my hand as tears ran down my cheeks again. Ryan had previously been in trouble with the law

for bothering a young woman, but the girl moved away, and charges were never brought against him.

“It appears he’s been obsessed with you for a while, Ms. Guthry. We don’t yet know what made him snap, but after looking at everything that happened in the past few weeks with your house and Mr. Taylor’s vehicle, it’s evident he was behind the vandalism instances,” explained the young officer who’d worked with us after Gage’s car was vandalized.

I could process those things, but his next revelation was astounding. The police were checking DNA samples, as all signs pointed toward Ryan being Jax’s attacker. Jax, a man I’d gone on two dates with, had been nearly beaten to death because of me? What else might Ryan have done? We were lucky.

As the officer took his leave, the door flew open, and in rushed my parents.

“Momma, Daddy? How did you know?” I barely got the sentence out before I was crying again. Momma dropped her purse and hurried to my side, pulling me securely against her chest. Through my periphery, Gage pulled away. Near the door, Daddy introduced himself to the officer, and they exchanged information to talk later. The door closed once more, Daddy came to the opposite side of the bed, his face drawn and tired as he leaned over and kissed my head.

They spoke over my weeping, but I registered nothing. Gage's lonely, pained face was stuck in my head as he stood near the window and reticently watched as my parents doted over me. Through my tears, I spied him turn and wipe his eyes. My heart broke.

He stepped out of my vision then. “I’ll leave you three alone.”

Momma pulled away at Gage’s quiet voice and grabbed his arm. She spun him toward her. “Thank you, Gage, for saving my daughter,” she yanked him into a hug, “But don’t you dare leave this room.”

FORTY-FOUR
MAKING AMENDS

GAGE POV—BONUS CHAPTER

In the wake of tragedy, Brad and Erika Guthry were normal parents in leisure wear racing five hundred miles to their only child's side via private plane.

I stood at the foot of the bed as her parents smothered her, patting her head and holding her hand. I wasn't judging. The hour since the nurse stepped into her room until the Guthry's arrived has been torture. All I wanted was to climb into that hospital bed and hold Savannah until everything I'd seen last night was a distant memory.

"How did you even know I was here?"

Mr. Guthry touched her shoulder. "Gage called."

Her brown eyes shifting, Savannah's bottom lip quivered as she looked at me.

"Once you were settled into your room and asleep, I called your dad." I stopped my hand from waving her adoring look away. The knight in shining armor vibe was so wrong in this instance. I turned to Brad. "I'm sorry I didn't call sooner. I just..." I didn't have my wits about me. I was so damn frightened she wouldn't make it. All I saw was blood and a maniac assaulting a half-naked Savannah on the floor of her closet. Bile turned my stomach. "I'm sorry. Would you excuse me?" I rushed from the room and nearly crumpled two doors down.

Using the wall for support, I made it to a set of red plastic chairs at the end of the hallway and collapsed.

"Are you all right?" Erika Guthry's Dolce Vita sneakers—the same as her daughter's—appeared in my eyeline.

Lifting my stare from the floor, I met her concerned gaze. “She’s okay. So I will be, too.”

Mrs. Guthry clasped her hands in front of her. “May I?”

Her gaze flicked to the empty chair beside me, and I shifted back. “Of course.”

Taking the seat, she crossed her ankles and swiped her palms down her thighs like she was smoothing her pants then twined her hands in her lap. I stared at the white walls across from us.

“I owe you an apology,” she said after a moment. “I...” She angled in the chair, her knees bumping my thigh. “I am an overprotective, elitist, southern woman with too much money and time on her hands.”

Accurate. I chew the inside of my cheek to keep from saying it out loud.

“She’s my baby girl and...”

I exhaled when she paused. “And you want the best for her,” I conceded, “I have a mom, I get it.”

“I was dismissive and not very welcoming when you were in my home, Gage. That was pure bad manners. I’m sorry if my wrong opinions caused you pain.”

What caused me pain was hearing Savannah’s cries. Seeing the bruise on her cheekbone where Ryan hit her. Seeing the fingerprints where he manhandled her body. What caused me pain was the endless drive from my condo to her house, listening to an unknown assailant terrorize her.

“Your husband told you who I was, didn’t he? I asked him to tell Savannah. I can’t help but wonder, is your apology because you know my worth now?”

Her head snapped back, eyes wide. “I suppose I deserved that.”

“I’m not trying to be cruel.” I scratched at the second-day scruff covering my jaw. “But I wasn’t good enough two nights ago. Am I good enough now?”

Wetting her lips, her manicured hand covered my forearm. “Yes, you’re good enough. And no, it’s not because of your family name or wealth.” She searched and snagged my attention, holding my gaze. “Gage, I’m apologizing because I trust my daughter, and she defended you with every breath she took. I’m also admitting my faults. Status has nothing to do with happiness, but for me, I knew very little joy until Bradford swept me away from my old life into what you saw.”

I was born into privilege. I’m not immune from forming false opinions

based on wealth. The whole reason Kryss and I rekindled our relationship five too many times was because I trusted the poor little rich girl I grew up with. I trusted her wealth. I'm not much better than Erika Guthry. Girls used me for my money, so I always returned to someone who didn't need my money, even though we about killed each other.

"I didn't tell Savannah about Taylor Entertainment because I wasn't sure I could trust her to want me for me." Erika's head bobbed with understanding. "I was going to tell her after the wedding. Then I overheard her talking to you, and everything I *knew* about her was swept away because of my jealousy and pride."

"Nothing we've done can be undone, Gage." She covered took my hands and held them tight. "I'd like to get to know the amazing man my daughter says you are. If you'd let me."

With a weak smile, I agreed. "I'd like that."

If Savannah forgives me.

FORTY-FIVE

RECOVERY

MONDAY CONTINUED

I awoke to a muted conversation between Gage and Daddy. I listened intently as Gage explained what he'd seen when he arrived at my house and what transpired with getting my phone call before that.

"I can never repay you for rescuing her."

"Don't thank me." Gage's voice was laced with disgust. "If I'd stayed in Charleston with her, this wouldn't have happened. It's all my fault. My damn pride got the best of me. I was such an idiot."

Silence loomed, then a broken cry as Gage continued. "Sir, I don't want to hurt you, but I can't help but tell you that finding her in her closet—in that position with that damn maniac. God, I can't forgive myself for that, and I don't want you to, either."

"Like hell, it's your fault. You listen to me, son. That son of a bitch did this, and you had nothing to do with it. You will not blame yourself, and her mother and I will forever be indebted to you for saving Savannah."

Carefully, I rolled my head against my pillow and found Daddy sitting on the room's couch with an arm looped around a crying Gage. I pursed my lips to keep from speaking. Cursing, Gage leaned back and scrubbed his face with a deep sigh.

"Do you love her?"

Gage pulled farther from Daddy's embrace, and I closed my eyes. I longed to see him but couldn't stand the suspense. *Oh God, please say yes. Please say yes.*

"Sir, I'm madly in love with your daughter." I choked back a reply at his solemn declaration. "I've never been as confident about anything in my life as I am about Savannah. I don't know how it happened—she walked into my

bar, and I was done for.”

“Then that’s all that matters to me. What happened in Charleston doesn’t matter. You love her.”

“And I didn’t trust her,” Gage hinted angrily. “How can she forgive me for all this when I didn’t even trust her?”

He was talking nonsense. Shoving back the tears threatening to break through, I opened my eyes and made my voice as firm and strong as I could. “I forgive you because I love you.”

Gage’s head popped up. “Savannah?”

“I love you, Gage. I would forgive you of anything.”

He rushed over, sitting on the edge of the bed and taking my face in his hands.

“You love me? After how I walked away from you?”

“You don’t need forgiveness. You were hurt.” I covered his hand. “I’m the one who kept secrets and—”

“I lied about who I was, Savannah.”

“You didn’t tell me who your family was. That’s not the same. Plus, I did the same thing.”

Daddy stood and waved to the door. “I’ll go check on your mother and give you two a little privacy.”

“Gage, you heard what the officer said. Ryan was obsessed with me, and hated you. If not last night, he would have attacked another time. You can’t blame yourself.”

His forehead bumped mine. “I just found you, Savannah Guthry. I don’t know what I would have done if I’d lost you. I don’t know how you became this big in my life so fast.”

“The feeling is mutual.” I couldn’t stop my smile as the beginnings of a beard tickled my palms as I cupped his cheeks. “I didn’t think it was possible to find love this quickly and for it to be real. But I couldn’t get you off my mind from the moment I met you. I fell for your superpowers the first time you called me sweetheart.”

Tears brightened his eyes. “I love you too. I love you so damn much and nearly lost the chance to tell you.”

“But you are now, and Daddy’s right, our love is all that matters. I’m never letting you go again.”

“Don’t worry, love. I don’t plan on leaving your side again.”



After a long day that included Momma helping me shower for the first time since elementary school, a visit with a hospital psychiatrist, and another visit from the Nashville PD, Gage urged Daddy and Momma to go to a hotel for the night.

Alone for the first time, Gage squeezed next to me on my narrow cot of a hospital bed, and we turned on a home remodeling show after everything else proved to be too much drama.

Worrying my lip, I confessed what had been on my mind for hours. “I can't go back to that house.”

Lowering the volume, Gage rolled further on his side, eyes grazing my profile as I stared at the bubbly television couple talking paint colors. “Tony and Chris were taking care of everything this afternoon. Cleaning it up—”

“I can't go back.” I fisted his shirt, meeting his stare.

“Okay.” He pried my hand away. “Do you want to go back home with your parents?” He interlaced our fingers and kissed my knuckles. “Or, you could stay with me.”

“Yeah?”

His thumb swiped my cheekbone gingerly. His forehead furrowed, and I held my breath, my eyes closing, because I knew what he saw. I'd tried to avoid looking at my face when I showered. I didn't want to see the damage Ryan had inflicted, but the temptation was too strong. Besides a sullen skin tone and dark smudges under vacant eyes, my lips and the area around my mouth were chaffed from the masking tape, and purpling bruises decorated my cheekbone where he'd hit me.

“Sav?” I opened my eyes to find his golden brown orbs filled with such tenderness my heart doubled in size. “You're beautiful, love.” He pressed his forehead to my temple. “And yes, you can come stay with me. In fact, I'd

prefer it. I need to keep you in my sight for a while.”

I scratched over his jaw, feeling lighter. “I thought you would lose it when Daddy offered to stay with me so you could go home and get some rest.”

His exact words had been, “She's here, I'm here,” and I'd fallen deeper in love than I'd thought possible.

“He meant well.” He pulled away so he could meet my eyes. “Being anywhere you're not isn't going to work for me for a while. So, let me know if you want to go to Charleston, and I'll start setting John up to run The Garage.”

A weight on my chest eases. “As sweet as your offer is, I don't know that running away is best. I'd like to stay with you for a few days if you're sure.”

“You never even had to ask.”

FORTY-SIX

HOME COMING

TUESDAY—JUNE 18, 2013

GAGE POV—BONUS CHAPTER

“Here we are.” I pushed the condo's door wide so Savannah could enter first. Mr. and Mrs. Guthry—*Erika and Brad*, they'd corrected me over and over—followed. Uncertainty heated my neck as they looked around. “It's a rental since I was only here to get The Garage up and going...”

“It's lovely, Gage.” Erika sent me a warm smile as she moved toward the wall of windows. “And this view.”

Savannah remained near the door. Her brown eyes drooped with exhaustion. “Why don't you sit?” I touched her back, molars grinding when she flinched.

Her eyes flared as she looked at me like she'd thought I was someone else. “Sorry.” She pinned her arms around her waist.

“No apologies.” Adding easily startled to my mental checklist, I usher her forward. “Sara and Candace said they were going to bring more of your things over this afternoon. Apparently, they're also making us dinner.”

“Those are some good friends.” Erika moved to the couch and took over fluffing pillows and pulling a throw from the back to spread over Savannah's legs before she sat on the couch's edge. “Do you need anything?”

“I'm fine for now, Momma. Just worn out. Who knew a drive across town would be so taxing?” She huffed a weak laugh. “Daddy?”

My focus moved to the kitchen. Brad stood with his hands in his pockets, staring at the refrigerator. “You look happy, baby.”

Savannah's brows dipped with confusion.

“He's talking about the picture I have on the fridge. The one I took of you

by the river the night we went out to Broadway with everyone. I printed it.”

“You...” Her eyes brightened. “You mean the one where Cand, Sara, and I were half drunk and singing? Gage, I was a mess.”

“You were full drunk and beautiful.” I went to the kitchen and pulled the photograph for her.

Erika chuckled at the wind blown, tangled hair mess of a woman in the picture as she took it from my hand. “Savannah Rose, drunk and singing?” Her chiding was teasing, much less strict than anything I’d at the wedding.

“It’s that cheesy grin that gets me every time.” My stare fastened on her teeth-baring mouth. My chest ached. *I could have lost that.* The ache knotted tighter.

I blinked and caught Savannah watching. Straightening, I shot her a wink and walked to my makeshift bar in the kitchen. “Can I make you a drink, Brad? Erika?” There was no place to hide in this condo. It may be large, but it was still an open studio. And I needed something to do with myself.

Dinner was a simple affair—spaghetti, salad, bread—courtesy of Candace but delicious since none of us had eaten much in the last 48 hours.

“Anyone need anything from the kitchen?” Sara asked, pushing up from our makeshift dinner table.

“I’m really sorry about this,” I motioned to the floor and coffee table as Erika shifted on the couch, plate in her lap. “I’m living like a college student.”

“Hey!” The girls chorused, taking offense.

“Stop apologizing. This reminds me of some of our first dates.” Brad picked up his drink, something I could do right, and grinned at his wife. “We used to picnic in our living room all the time before Savannah was born.”

“Really?” Savannah’s head turned to her parents on the couch.

“After the way I was raised?” Erika nodded. “Trust me, it took a while to get used to fine china and four-course meals.”

A flash of awe seemed to flash behind Sav’s brown eyes, and the look lightened my mood.

With her head in my lap a few hours later, Savannah rolled to her back and looked up at me. “Are you okay?”

I sipped my bourbon and continued running my fingers through her hair. “I’m good, love. You okay?”

Her forehead wrinkled. “Gage?” She pushed to sit.

“I really like this change between you and your mother. It’s like a switch flipped, and she’s completely changed her tune.” I’m avoiding a conversation about myself, yes, but I wasn’t lying. Savannah and Erika were something I’d be thinking about.

Her tension lifted. “Momma actually likes you, so that’s good.”

“And surprising?” I chuckled.

She leaned in and kissed my cheek. “Not at all.”

Cupping her neck, I kept her close, murmuring, “Liar” into her hair.

Easing away, she folded her hands in her lap. “Do you mind if I take a shower? I’d like to use my soap and shampoo so I can feel like me again.”

Ignoring the way she folded in on herself, I nodded. “Of course, my place is yours.”

The shower had just turned on when a text vibrated my cell.

Krys: Fancy place you’ve got. Wanna let me in?

What the...

Krys: Surprise?!?

Fuck. Krys was here? Today of all days. Dammit, I hadn’t called her since I left Charleston.

You can’t be here, Krys.

Krys: Uhhh, newsflash, I am here.

Krys: Let me up, asshole.

I tossed back the last of my bourbon and stood. *Shit.* I can’t send her away. She flew from Vegas to be here, ostensibly to help ease my betrayed heart, after I called her Saturday night. Texting Krys the door code, I pressed my ear to the bathroom door, then stepped out into the hallway to wait.

The elevator arrived, and I checked over my shoulder at the cracked door before taking a few steps down the hallway.

Krys stepped into the hall, stared at the plaque, telling her which units were where, then turned my way, her head canting when she spotted me. Dressed in an oversized designer tee and yoga pants, she’s effortlessly beautiful with her slicked-back ponytail, gold bracelets, and necklaces flashing as she walks. Sophisticated, casual, luxury. That’s Krystal.

“Well, at least you meet me in the hallway.” Kryss snapped when she was close enough. “I have to say I’m a little hurt. Were those texts any way to treat your best friend?”

Torn between panic and laughter and something I cannot put a name to, my jaw tightened.

“Gage?” Kryss slowed, then dropped her bags and rushed me. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

I grabbed her, my arms a vise as I buried my face in her hair, nearly toppling us as we bumped into the wall. “He was going to kill her.” The fist forcing my emotions into the background opened, letting my anguish spill forth. “She called me...and I heard it all...and he had...”

“What in the world?” Kryss’s voice softened, her hands rubbing along my spine. “Who? Are you talking about Savannah?”

“She’s inside. She’s in the shower.” *Dammit.* I released her, my hands pulling at my hair. “You can’t be here. She can’t deal with you right now.”

“Gage,” Kryss grabbed my arms to keep me from ripping my hair out, “Geez, I’m gonna need you to fill me in here. You’re a mess, which I expected since I thought this woman had played you, but—”

“She did.” My head shook. “No, I mean, I thought she did. I called you. I came home and sulked and drank, and then...”

Looking back at toward my door, I lowered my voice. “This guy was stalking her. He’d broken in and attacked her when she came home Sunday night.” Kryss slapped a palm over her mouth. “He was going to kill her, Kryss. He drugged her and stripped her.” I shook that vision from my head. Stating facts. “She’d managed to get free and dial me, but then she hid her phone and...”

Pictures filled my head again. Ryan's words through the phone line. The drive from hell, listening to him hurt her. Unsure what I would find.

“Thank God, you answered. You saved her?”

My breathing shallowed. “I almost didn’t make it.”

“God, look at you shaking.” Kryss pulled me into another secure hug. “I’ve never seen you like this.”

“I can’t stop picturing this maniac terrorizing her, I can’t—”

“Gage?”

I jumped at Savannah’s soft lilt, shoving Kryss back like a viper. “Hey, sorry I left the door open.” I moved to the door, taking in her wet hair and flowery pajama set. Her toes peeked out beneath the pants, and the roiling

emotions struggled to be caged again.

I released a heavy exhale. "Sav, this is Krys. She just flew in from Vegas, and—"

"He wasn't expecting me," Krys stepped forward and held out her hand. "I work at the club in Vegas, and Gage made The Garage and Nashville sound so fun, I thought I'd check it out. I was on my way to the hotel, but I figured I'd drop in on him first."

"Oh." Savannah hugged herself after a brief handshake, forcing a smile. "You're Australian, too."

Krys spared me a glance. "Yeah, um, I grew up in Brisbane, too."

"It's nice to meet you. You should come in." Savannah backed into the door, then glanced down. "Excuse my appearance, I just... I wasn't feeling well and took a shower."

"Sav." I touched her hip, and her stare lasered to the connection, stinging.

"Krys, come in," Savannah called, already making a beeline for the kitchen. I followed after waving Krys in.

"Savannah—"

"Was she expecting you to be single?" She spun on me, her voice low. "Should I go?"

I reared back. "No. What the hell?" My hands resting lightly on her hips, I backed her into the corner where the kitchen cabinets would cover us from view. "Sweetheart, look at me," I lifted her chin, "Krys is my best friend from childhood. Our families were inseparable. She sings at the club in Vegas. I mentioned her before."

"The singer? The best friend you played in gigs with in college in your band?" I nodded as her jaw worked. "When you said Chris, I pictured someone less pretty, Gage. Someone not female."

"Yes, you're right. We both omitted things about our lives, didn't we?" After everything she'd been through the past few days, I hated throwing that at her, but it seemed the easiest way to get her to understand how tonight had come about.

Lips pursed, she exhaled through her nose.

"Sav, I called her on my drive home Saturday night. She came here because she thought I could use a friend." The lines around her tired eyes smoothed, and I explained further, "I was so torn up. Krys had never heard me like that. She didn't know about..." I couldn't say his name. "She didn't know and wouldn't have shown up like this if she had."

“Not true,” Krys said from behind my back. *Christ*. I glued my eyes to Savannah’s face as Krys opened her big mouth. “I’m notoriously bad about butting into things, as Gage will tell you. I would still be here if I’d known the woman he cared about was hurt. I care about few people more than that man begging for your understanding.”

“Then that makes two of us.” Savannah’s hand flattened upon my chest as her gaze held behind me.

I turned in time to see Krys grin. “It’s settled then. I would be here for you because you care about him.”

Savannah nodded.

FORTY-SEVEN

THE SHOWER

MONDAY—JULY 1, 2013

GAGE POV—BONUS CHAPTER

The elevator doors barely had time to open before I wedged through the opening. Rushing down the hall, I unlocked and threw open my door to find Kryz perched on the edge of the leather sofa, a glass of wine halfway to her lips.

Out of breath, I scanned the room. “What’s wrong? Where is she?”

“She locked herself in the bathroom. Your girlfriend is a drunk crier.”

“Not normally, Kryz. What did you do to her?” I snapped.

Not waiting for her answer, I dropped my keys by the door and sent her an irritated glance as I walked through the powder room to the bathroom door.

“Sav? Baby, you okay?” I knocked lightly.

The shower’s running water was my only reply. Since Savannah seemingly couldn’t hear me, I sought answers from Kryz, who attacked me before I returned to the living room.

“Why the hell do you assume I did something? I’m just the babysitter here.”

I snorted. The last two weeks, I’d kept a muzzle on Kryz’s blabbering mouth. I set her up to do gigs at The Garage, took over her hotel bill, and let her give Savannah little insights into my childhood only Kryz would know, but when I leave them alone once, this is what happens.

“Because it’s you. Trouble follows you wherever you go.”

“Screw you.”

Leading her away from the bathroom so Savannah wouldn’t hear, I

walked into the middle of the condo and looked around. Two bottles of wine sat on the coffee table, one empty, the other half full. Krys's bare feet padded across the tile floor to the kitchen, where she set her drink on the bar hard enough to make sure I knew she was mad. She plunked her hands on her hips, waiting.

"I run to the bar for a few hours..." I measured my voice as calmly as possible. "What happened?"

"We were drinking wine and chatting. Nothing monumental. We watched some television and ate the sandwiches I brought over. Eventually, she asked me to share stories about growing up together."

Krys shrugged with wide-eyed innocence, and my bullshit sensor went off. "What kind of stories did you share?"

"I don't know. We drank a lot and talked a lot. I told her about the time we got caught having sex at that park in the back of your car. Oh, and the inappropriate bus ride on that field trip our freshman year." She giggled, picking up her cell from the counter and checking it as if everything she'd said meant nothing.

My chest burned at her stupidity. Krys lifted her gaze, and her smirk disappeared. Pocketing her cell, she backpedaled. "*She* asked about us, Gage. I told her funny stories about the silly things we did, too: the sneaking out, skinny dipping, the pretend concerts I would make you join me in performing. One minute, she was sitting here calmly laughing, and the next, she went quiet and ran for the bathroom. I don't know why."

"Use common sense, Krys. She was attacked at knifepoint, drugged, and almost raped two weeks ago. You didn't think getting her drunk and talking about having sex with her boyfriend would spark a little emotion?"

"It was girl talk. I didn't think it was a big deal."

I threw my hands up, circling the room in frustration. "Shit, Krys. I don't want you talking about our former sex life with Savannah. Just because she knows nothing is happening between us now doesn't mean she wants to hear about it." Pinning my gaze on hers, I scratched at my thickening beard. "She's not some fly-by girlfriend you can talk trash and party with. She's the one. Don't you get that?"

"The one, really? I..." her face fell. Krys drained her wine glass, turning and swiping at her cheek, and I immediately felt contrite. Like an ass of an ex who forgot she had feelings too.

"I'm sorry."

“Ha, now I’m the drunk crier.” She stepped around the bar and carried her glass to the kitchen sink. “I like her, Gage. I’m happy for you. I’m gonna leave you two alone.”

“Krys?” The guilt I always felt where she was concerned rose to the surface.

“It’s fine. You’re right. I should have used more sense. I’m not used to you caring much about what I say or do to any other woman in your life. I’m gonna go.”

“I don’t want you to drive. Let me speak with Sav, and I’ll give you a ride.”

She picked up her purse from the counter. “It’s just a couple blocks. I can walk. You play knight in shining armor to your girl. I’ll be fine.” She pulled her keys from her purse, slid the one to her rental off, and left it on the table beside mine. “I fly out tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ll message you later. We can do lunch before your flight.”

“Hey,” I called as she opened the door, “Thanks for being here, Krys.”

“That’s what friends are for?”

The door clicked shut. I stood rooted to the floor, my gaze skimming the condo. Savannah’s possessions were stacked in boxes in what should have been the dining area if I’d ever bothered to buy a table and chairs. I stared at those boxes, then looked around the sparsely furnished unit. Why hadn’t she decided to unpack anything yet? She’d moved in straight from being discharged from the hospital and only unpacked a suitcase with clothes and toiletries. I wanted her to feel as if this were her home, too. We were going to have to discuss that soon.

But for now, I needed to see what was going on in her head. I slipped off my shoes and went to the bathroom again. The water was still running, so I knocked harder to get her attention.

Twisting the knob, I found the door unlocked and poked my head in. The tiled bathroom was filled with fog. All the lights were off except for the fancy sconce on the one empty bathroom wall over a slatted wooden bench. The light’s positioning cast a shadow over the glass shower enclosure. At first, I didn’t see her between the thick fog and low lighting, but what I saw tore my heart out when I did.

She was on the floor in the center of the large walk-in shower, her head resting on her knees, pulled to her chest. Her dark hair fanned out, covering

her legs and spreading over her back as the water streamed.

I knocked again, not wanting to startle her, calling, "Savy? You okay?"

Her shoulders stiffened, and her hand shot out, grabbing the loofah she loved using. She stretched her legs and scrubbed them roughly with the loofah, ignoring my question.

She wants time to herself. I sighed and went to turn when my gaze raked across her chest. Most of the steam had escaped through the crack in the bathroom door, permitting a clearer picture. As she bent at her waist to scrub her legs, the red streaks and scratches covering her breasts and arms stood out. What the hell was that? She lifted a hand, pushing her hair back, allowing me to see what appeared to be streaks of blood on her side. I rushed inside, no longer caring about her privacy.

"Savy? What happened to you, sweetheart?" Tapping on the glass, I swung the door open and reached for the knob.

"No!"

Her shout froze my arm.

"I need to shower. I need to get clean."

Leaving the water, I pulled the shower door wide and knelt, the spray hitting me each time she moved her arms. "Sav?"

"Leave me alone, I'm not clean."

There was something in the way she spoke. Her voice was almost robotic, void of emotion. Her head remained bent as she focused on her task and ignored my interruption like she didn't know I was there.

When my gaze caught her shoulders tremble, I cracked. Reaching for her, I pushed her hair back, tipping her face. Her bloodshot eyes were puffy, tears mixing with the water running down her face.

"Savy, love?" I whispered cautiously as I attempted to slide her toward me.

She blinked twice, the fear and hurt in those brown eyes agonizing to my soul. "Why are you home?"

"Krys called. What happened? Why are you in the shower?"

Her mouth opened, forming a word, yet no sound. She pulled her legs back to her chest and dropped her loofah, hugging her knees tightly with both arms.

"I feel so dirty." She mumbled. Her words were so small, so broken.

Had I heard correctly? "Dirty?"

"He touched me, and I'm dirty. I want to be what you need. I want to give

you what you need, but I'm disgusted with myself. How can you not be disgusted when you look at me?"

"Oh, Savannah, how can you ask me that? I love you. Kry's left. Come out here, and we can talk."

Her head shook. "Not yet."

She left me no choice. I stripped off my jeans and black shirt, my eyes never leaving her trembling form. The water was lukewarm, so I turned the dial further toward hot and stepped in, wearing only my boxers. I knelt down beside her.

"What are you doing?" Her eyes went straight to my boxers, a flash of something much like relief crossing her face.

"I can't not hold you when you're upset; you should know this by now." I maneuvered behind her, sitting and sliding my legs around either side of her. Slowly and carefully, I leaned over her back and ran my hands down her arms, hugging her like a second skin. "I hate it when you cry. Please let me fix this." I whispered into her hair as I leaned my head against hers. My fingers rubbed over hers, working their way between them until our hands were laced together.

"You can't fix this."

"Baby, we can fix anything together. Just tell me what you need from me. What do you want me to do?"

She cut off a sob. "Just love me."

"I do, Savannah. I love you." I reassured, my lips feathering over her shoulder. My hand moved to her bare stomach, and she flinched as I wrapped my arm around her tiny waist.

She'd lost too much weight since the attack. I hadn't noticed with the loose tees and baggy shorts she'd been wearing, but sitting in the shower, I could see her bones protruding.

"I love you too." Her arm covered mine around her waist. "I don't want to lose you."

"Never."

FORTY-EIGHT

BREAKDOWN

MONDAY—JULY 1, 2013

GAGE POV—BONUS CHAPTER

I held tight, trying to wrap my head around how this woman could think I'd walk away so easily. "I'm not going anywhere," I murmured against her hair.

Her shoulders rose and fell with a deep inhale, and she guided our arms to rest across her chest, switching them and placing mine on top. The position had me palming her right breast, and I stilled for her next move.

"Make love to me."

The water hit my face as I leaned around to see her face. Savannah's head turned just enough to kiss the side of my mouth. "Make love to me, please." Her low voice begged.

Caressing her breast, I traced the curve of her shoulder up her neck with my mouth. "Are you sure?" I sucked the water off her earlobe.

Rolling to her hip, she pivoted and stared. The shower stream, still pouring down our faces, she pressed her lips to mine, her hand coming up and anchoring us. Mouths collided—lips moved, tongues darted, teeth nipped—mimicking intercourse.

Savannah raised onto her knees between my legs, and I lowered my head, kissing over the healed spot where Ryan's knife had cut her chest before pushing her tits up to meet my mouth. Taking my time, I sucked the water pooling between her breasts, my thumbs gently circling her dark pink nipples until they peaked tightly and her breath hitched.

Savannah's fingers traced my ribs as I flicked her nipples with my tongue. Her hand delved beneath my boxers, her nails teasing the ticklish spot beneath my hip before running back up my chest. She was teasing the

hell out of my dick. I wanted her hand wrapped around it. I wanted her to pull me into her sweet mouth. I groaned.

Giving one last hard pull on her nipple, I ran my hands down her ass and cupped it tightly, lifting her higher and pressing my face into her stomach. She hugged me to her body, one holding my cheek against her skin, the other splayed across my back.

“This feels a bit like dancing in the rain.” I kissed her belly and pulled away, standing.

“I wish we could go back to that day.” She took my hand and stood, and I reached around and turned the water off.

“Nah.” My eyes stayed glued to hers as I tugged a thick towel off the hook outside the shower and wrapped it around her. “We don’t need to go back, Savy. We’ll make new memories.”

Kissing her nose, I grabbed another, running it over my chest, arms, and legs before dropping it to the floor.

My hand tugged hers, leading her towards the bed. Carefully, I pressed her shoulders down so she could sit on the edge of the bed as I pulled the towel away from her body. This was the closest I’d been to her naked form—sexually speaking—since before the wedding. My cock throbbed, and my heart raced with anticipation. *Go slow.*

Falling to my haunches with her towel, I lifted her foot to my face, kissing her damp ankle before drying her feet, ankles, and calves. My gaze returned to hers often as I moved up her legs, patting her dry and leaving kisses behind on every spot where she’d marked her skin in her effort to “get clean.”

I stopped when I reached her upper thighs. Lifting to my knees, I boxed her in on the bed, one hand on either side of her ass. Her eyes shined with unshed tears. Frowning, I pulled back, but her hands gripped my forearms. Grabbing the back of my neck, she hauled my lips to hers as her other hand started tugging my wet boxers.

Following her lead, I slid them off and crawled after her as she moved into the middle of the bed, her hand still locked on my neck, our lips never parting.

She whimpered a tiny hum in her throat as my body met hers. My thigh wedged between hers, rubbing the heat at her core as we kissed. Her legs tangled with mine, her hands wrapped around my back.

Ripping away from her mouth, I dropped my head and kissed my way

down her ribs, my tongue tracing circles around her belly button. Savannah's legs moved restlessly, and I touched her knees before sliding my hands up her smooth inner thighs with slow precision.

My hips ground into the bed to ease the pain when she whimpered again, and I lightly squeezed her thighs. My hands pressed against her thighs, easing them apart to see and taste her.

Her tiny gasps sent blood to my cock. I wanted her so badly. I dipped my head to the warmth between her legs.

"No!" She shot up, her hands and legs pushing me away. "Stop, we can't." She cried, trying to scramble out of the bed.

I surrendered like a thief: hands up, back straight. "Sav? Shit, what did I do?"

She rolled off the bed, landing in a sprawling heap on the floor. Her limbs tangled with the comforter as it went with her.

"Oh God!" She slapped her hand over her mouth. Staring with terror in her eyes, she pushed into a sitting position, kicking the covers from her legs. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!"

I scrambled onto the floor, ignoring the hard landing my knees took, and helped unwind the comforter away from her trapped foot. "Sav, baby? Stop being sorry, love."

Free, she hurled into my arms, her hands clinging around my neck. "I didn't mean to stop you. I'm sorry. I just... He grabbed me and your hands... and I can't...I don't know how. Oh God, Gage," her chin vibrated, "I want to be better. I want to feel clean."

The words tumbled from her lips, a disjointed explanation of what was happening in her head.

"We don't have to make love right now. It can wait until you're ready."

"I don't want to lose you." It was the second time she'd said that this afternoon.

"Why would you lose me?"

"We haven't had sex yet. Our first date was over two months ago, and we haven't done it yet."

I wanted to laugh at her saying, "done it," but she was serious. She thought I would leave her because I was too impatient for sex to wait.

"Again, Sav, why would you think that?"

"Krystal."

"Krys?" When I get my hands on her. I took a deep breath, "What did she

say?”

“We were talking. I probably shouldn’t have asked for stories about you, but I did, and she told me about a lot of things you two used to do. I know you have needs, and I haven’t been able to fulfill them.”

“God,” I growled in frustration. I could kill her for opening her big mouth. I tugged her arms loose to look her in the eyes. “Savy, that was a long time ago. We were young, and horny, and just stupid kids.”

“You were still sleeping with her in Vegas.”

Shit. “She did clarify that was when I lived there. Not last month. You know that, right?”

Her bloodshot eyes blinked. “Yeah, I know. She told me she followed you to Vegas so you could try to get back together.”

“Did she also tell you we crashed and burned? Like we always do?”

Her lips rubbed together, and I took that as a no. Standing, I pulled her up with me.

“Sit here,” I ordered, walking to the dresser and feeling her stare at my ass the entire way. When I peeked over my shoulder, Savannah looked away. Sporting a semi from her eyes alone, I pulled on some boxers, adjusting myself before grabbing a T-shirt for her. Better able to think with her delectable body covered, I sat beside her on the edge of the bed.

“Okay, I need to apologize to you.” I pulled a leg up and turned to her.

“For what?”

“For Krys. I should have been upfront about our recent past when she showed up. Not that what I told you about her—that she is my best friend and like a sister—isn’t true. She moved to Vegas hoping for more, but we were never in love. Not the type of feelings I have for you, Sav. Krys and I were about familiarity. That’s all.”

Savannah’s face scrunched.

“Feel free to ask her when you’re ready; she will tell you the same thing. She can get a little catty and territorial where I’m concerned, so she said stuff she shouldn’t have. The important thing for you to know is that you will not lose me because we haven’t had sex yet. Do you understand that?”

“But...”

“No buts, love. That is crazy talk. I’m not Daniel.” She flinched, but it had to be said. “I’m sorry, but I’m not. I’m not looking for an easy fuck. Baby, I fell in love with you. And I will wait for you as long as it takes. Got it?” I tipped her chin and forced her to meet my stare.

Her teeth released her bottom lip. “Okay.”

“Is that what made you upset earlier?”

“Sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“Yes. Kry’s stories got to me after a while. It was stupid. I drank too much, let my mind go, and when she kept talking about all the sex you two had, I kind of went crazy, I guess.”

“I should have sent her back to Vegas.”

“Don’t blame her, Gage. She loves you, and I get the feeling she’s lonely and sad. I don’t think she meant to upset me.”

“And the shower?” I prodded. I needed to navigate these waters carefully.

“I don’t know.” She stood. A flash of her ass teasing me as she walked across the room to the dresser. Picking up a hairband, she began fidgeting, keeping her gaze away from mine.

“You said you wanted to feel clean.” Her head fell more, her damp hair covering her face. “Sav, you rubbed your skin raw. Look at your legs; they’re scratched, but your chest and stomach, I saw the marks. You’ve been tearing your own skin.”

She stood still, her hair over her face, my T-shirt skimming her thighs. She reminded me of a scared little girl too afraid to tell the truth lest she get in trouble.

“We can’t get past this if you don’t tell me about it.” I rose and crossed the room, and I waited. I waited for her to have the courage to tell me what she felt. I waited for her to have the strength to decide she could trust me with her pain. I waited for her to have the faith to know I loved her, and because of that love—I would keep waiting.

“I want to go home.”

“To the house?” My stomach churned. Tony and Chris repaired the damage to the doors and removed all traces that anything terrible had happened, but I wasn’t sure I was ready to face it. Let alone bring Savannah there.

“No.” Relief washed over me as her stare lifted. “To Charleston.”

And an anvil slammed into my chest.

FORTY-NINE
THE END
SUNDAY—AUGUST, 4 2013

SAVANNAH POV—BONUS CHAPTER

A month in Charleston was what I had needed. A month of therapy, a month of Momma and Daddy, a month of space from all that had happened the weekend of Mary Anne and Daniel's wedding.

Now, I needed Gage.

He'd been a rock through it all. Flying home with me, staying in the guest house, supporting me, then returning to Nashville after the Fourth because that's what I asked of him.

He'd let me call when I needed to. He never forced contact. He never complained. He was perfect.

I'd missed the hell out of him. And every minute of the ride he had me taking in the back of a limo to some unknown destination was torture because I wasn't with him.

I opened the card he'd left on my seat once more.

My pretty girl,

A meddling but loving little bird told me you hated the beach but loved the views. I've been trying to give you what you love since I mixed that first drink. See you in an hour.

Yours,
Gage

One hour, what I love, and beach views. We were on Edisto Island, and it

clicked as we turned off SC-174 onto a dirt road—long after the way to Botany Bay and just before the state park—he'd rented a house. There was nothing else down here.

The meddling little bird was Momma. Figured that out the moment the limo showed up without Gage, not a happy surprise, and Momma stepped out of the house with my packed bag.

When the chauffeur—a female because, of course, Gage had considered my recent anxiety toward men—popped the trunk and took the bag, Momma took my hand.

Swallowing my disappointment, I eyed the house, then the limo. “What are you two up to?”

“All I did was pack your things. The rest was Gage.” She nudged me toward the open door.

Gage had won Momma over in the days he'd spent in Charleston over the Fourth and even before while I was in the hospital. It wasn't his money or connections but how he'd put me first.

She tugged me into a hug. “Darling, that man loves you beyond words.” She'd said those exact words the day I sent him back to Nashville last month, his dark eyes wounded but understanding.

I paused with one foot inside the limo. “He's the one, Momma.”

I'd needed the distance over the last four weeks to resolve my mixed emotions. After Daniel, after Spencer, even after Jax. I didn't want to be with Gage for the sake of being with someone. We had happened so fast, I had to be sure.

Our future was written on my heart: one day, week, month, or year. I couldn't deny him, and I didn't want to.

She sniffed, blinking rapidly. “Yes, I think he is.”

As my limo pulled down a short drive shaded with oak and palmetto trees, stopping before a beautiful mint-green home, the truth embedded deeper. *He's the one.*

Lydia opened the door before I'd finished gawking at the quintessential coastal home. “Mr. Taylor said he'd be waiting by the water, Ms. Guthry. I'll take care of your bag if you want to walk around back.”

“Thank you so much, Lydia.”

Heart racing, I rounded the three-story house, taking in the outdoor kitchen, the bricked firepit, and the tree swings. It's a perfect family vacation spot.

And that was before one looked to the horizon and was treated to breathtaking, never-ending views of the creek, marshes, and a hint of the ocean beyond. My pulse leaped at the perfection. But standing in front of all that, casually dressed in khaki shorts and a light blue T-shirt at the end of a dock on the edge of the property, was my favorite view: Gage. He turned and walked up the dock like he'd sensed my presence.

My legs picked up their pace, and my smile wouldn't curb the closer he came. The lush blues and greens highlighted by a brilliant August sky were nothing compared to this man's dark eyes gleaming with heat.

"You are a sight for sore...oomph." My body slammed into his without a pause. His arms tightened, a hand sinking beneath my hair as he buried his face. "Hi, love." Gage's lips ghosted the curve between my neck and shoulder.

My fingers curled into his dark waves. "Hi."

I breathed him in, the salty shore mixed with his tangy cologne. His beard tickled my skin into delicious goosebumps, and I tugged his head back by the hair. "You kept the beard." I lifted my hand to cup his rough jaw, dragging my nails over the trimmed beard that was little more than dark scruff last month.

Turning, he kissed my palm. "I got the distinct impression my girl was partial to it."

"You weren't wrong." I'd watched it grow video chat after video chat, wishing I could feel it against my skin. God, he was sexy as hell like this. I lifted on my toes and brushed a kiss over his lips. "I'll miss the dimple, though."

He anchored my head with his hand on my neck and met my gaze. "Let's see how much you miss it when you feel this against your skin," he drawled, and my nipples tightened at the mere thought before he brought our mouths together, his tongue sliding between the seam of my lips, and my thoughts ceased altogether.

Kissed senseless, Gage took my hand and walked me toward the house. "I hope you don't mind staying here rather than me going to your parents."

"Stay here?" Missing him, I'd broken down Thursday night and asked if he could spare time to visit. He had to push his arrival until today for staffing reasons, but he never suggested how long he would stay or that he didn't want to be in Charleston. "For how long?"

“We have the place for the month.”

I stumbled over the grass. “Wait. What?” My stare bounced between the seaside home and Gage.

Grasping my hands in his, Gage turned to face me fully. “Sav, I’ve thought of nothing besides being with you for four weeks. I’ve missed your smell, your smile, the warmth of your voice when it brushes over my ear.” Heat filled my veins. “Love, I want you to myself. I want us to have all those talks we’ve already had by phone in person.”

“Did you discuss this with my parents?”

“Do you think Erika Guthry would let me hide her daughter away without knowing where?” He squeezed my fingers. “They’re going to come to spend a few nights here when we’re ready for them.”

“Oh, I don’t want you to feel like you have—“

“I want to.” Gage dropped my hands and cupped my face. “I want to get to know them better, Savannah, under better circumstances than we had last time. We have three weeks until the fall semester. Do you want to spend them here in Edisto with me?”

“Yes.” I grabbed his hips and tugged him, but he resisted full contact with my body and kissed my nose instead.

Grinning at my frown, he took my hand once more. “Let me show you the house.”



After homemade pizzas on the grill, we cuddled on the double-person chaise on the second-story deck as the sky burned pink and orange with the setting sun.

Gage’s fingers stroked over my hip as he cradled my back against his chest. He’d been teasing me for fifteen minutes, his need growing at the base of my spine as his fingers slowed to languid circles, dipping lower onto my

thigh and higher up my ribs. “God, I missed this, Sav.” His breath was hot as he kissed my shoulder. “I missed you.”

“I pictured you.” My eyes closed at the way his cock twitched. “When I realized he was going to hurt me and I couldn’t stop him, it was you I saw—“

“I would never hurt you.” Gage stilled, inhaling deeply.

“No, I know that.” I flipped around, our legs tangling. “God, I make everything worse, don’t I?”

“No, you make everything better, love.” He tipped my chin when I couldn’t lift my gaze from his chin. “Just say what you’re thinking. I won’t be upset.”

“I love you.” I searched his face in the waning light. His forehead furrowed, and I smoothed a thumb over his brow. “I meant that when Ryan came at me, I pictured you and let my mind carry me back to dancing in the rain, to your arms where I knew I was safe.”

He wet his bottom lip, moisture pooling at the corners of his eyes. “I’m sorry about that day with Krys and the shower and pulling away from you...”

His hand slid to my lower back, drawing me tighter. “No apologies, sweetheart. You were struggling. I should have known better.”

“I know I’m safe with you.”

“Always.” He tucked my hair behind my ear. “I love you, too, my sweet kryptonite.”

Chuckling, I propped to one arm, hovering over him. “Will you take me to bed?”

His mouth arrested partway open, his stare penetrating mine. “It’s our first night. There’s no rush.”

My smile was slow as all my love for this man spread through my body. “No bartender, I certainly hope you won’t rush.” I ground my hips against him, feeling his cock press into my lower belly. “I want you, Gage Taylor. I think we’ve waited long enough.”

Gage lifted his head, his lips sealing to mine, his tongue sweeping into my mouth and swirling around mine with a groan.

Hand in hand, Gage led me through the house into the main bedroom suite, where he sat me on the bed’s edge.

“If you need me to stop for any reason, you’re going to tell me, yes?” His fingers were already unfastening his shorts.

My gaze fastened on the bulge beneath his zipper. “Yes.”

His shorts dropped, then his shirt. I licked my lips.

“Savannah? Eyes up here, love.”

Reluctantly, I looked up and glowered at his grin. “You’re in control here, Savy.” He cleared his throat, his voice thick. “Tell me what you want.”

Heat dampened my panties as I drew a shaky breath. “Can I show you?”

With a breathless curse, he stepped closer as I crooked my finger. “I’m all yours.”

There was no fear as I ran my hands over his torso and kissed the flat of Gage’s stomach as his hands tangled in my hair. No flashbacks to another man as I tugged his boxer briefs down his muscular thighs and wrapped my palm around the thick cock, begging for my body. There was no uncertainty as my lips closed over his head, his salty taste teasing my tongue.

There was only love. Something beautiful and honest, and ours.

Leaning forward, I pulled his length into my mouth, and Gage cursed.

“Christ, baby.” He peeled my arms from his waist and eased from my mouth. “If you do that, I will explode before I even touch you.” Hands beneath my arms, Gage picked me up and tossed me into the middle of the bed, climbing over me as my shoulders shook with laughter.

Propped on my elbows, I held my ground. “I thought I was in control.”

He stilled on all fours, hovering. His eyes closed with a pained sigh. “You’re right. You are, but—“

“You don’t want me to touch you?” I blinked innocently.

“Oh, no, touch me all over, love.” His body lowered over mine. His insistent erection lay thick against the cotton sundress between my thighs. “I just want to be inside you when you do. I need to be inside of you.”

His weight pressing me into the mattress was my undoing. “Then what are you waiting for, Mr. Bartender?”

I fell to my back, and within ten seconds, strong hands had shoved my dress up and pulled my thong down. Gage’s grip moved possessively up my thighs, his fingers brushing over my folds, then dipping into the damp heat and circling.

My back arched off the bed, my nails digging into his knee, where he knelt between my thighs.

“Already drenched for me, gorgeous?” His accent was thick when he whispered, his eyes glazed with hunger as he stared. My answer was a breathless curse as he probed a little deeper.

“Pull your dress off, Savy. Let me see those beautiful rosy nipples.”

Thighs wide, I sat forward enough to pull my dress over my head and unhook my strapless bra. His gaze slipped to the small scar Ryan had left, and he leaned close, his finger sinking further as he kissed the red imperfection with a deep inhale.

“I love you, Savannah.” His finger twisted and I gasped. “No more time apart, okay?”

“No. No more time apart.” I all but panted as he removed his digit and traced the circle of my entrance. “I’m ready for all of you, Gage. All of us.”

The double meaning was clear and the softening of his eyes told me he understood.

“Condom, baby.” His chin jutted toward my head while he continued to toy with my pussy and knead my breast.

Sure enough, there was a stack of condoms on the bedside table, and I blindly reached for one and brought the package to my teeth, ripping it open as I pet his chest with my free hand.

“May I?” I sat up and took his rigid cock in my fist when he nodded and unrolled the latex down his shaft.

I lifted my hips while laying back and steering him toward my opening. “No more waiting.”

Without another word, Gage slid an inch in, cursed, then plunged, stealing the breath from my lungs as he settled fully inside me with a nonsensical murmur.

Finally.

When he withdrew halfway and thrust forward a second time, I about screamed. It was so beautiful. So fulfilling and mind-blowing that we’d made it here.

His hips circled, and we shared the same low groans. “You okay, love?”

“Perfect.” My ankles locked around his waist, and his mouth covered mine as we rocked together in smooth motions as our hands explored. When his thrusts turned shallow, and his hand slipped between us to swirl my clit, my heels dug into the bed. I moaned his name as a shockwave twisted my stomach. He didn’t relent, his cock thickening as he pistons again and again, hitting the spot only reached by toys and my own hand.

“Ohhh, ohh.” I grabbed at the bedding, fisting the sheets like they could keep me from flying. “Gage...yes. There!” The scream broke in my throat. My thighs quivered, and my core shook as he milked my orgasm with every swirl of his fingertip over my folds. Then he lifted to his knees, pushed my

thighs up against his chest, and turned into a machine, barreling into me so fast and hard all I could hear was our wet skin slapping and the ringing in my ears that still hadn't faded. When he found his release, Gage's groan was primal enough to make me want to come again before he rolled our sweaty bodies to the side and attacked my mouth, tugging my bottom lip between his.

"Okay, love, that's something we're going to have to do again." He sucked the sweat from my neck.

My leg hooked over his hip. He'd get no complaints out of me. "And then again?"

"Most definitely." Taking my thigh and lifting it higher, he grinned. "But first, I'm gonna bury my face between your legs so you can feel this beard."

Gage Taylor was an Aussie Superman. He'd made love to me again and again, with his cock, his hands, his mouth. We'd fallen asleep, only to wake after two hours to do it all again. Then we took a long shower, where I took him into my mouth until he pulled out and spilled himself over the shower tiles.

It was nearing dawn when we climbed into bed, fully sated and exhausted.

"I meant what I said, Savy. I don't want to be apart anymore. Whatever it takes, I want this. I want us."

I rolled to my side so we faced each other. "After I graduate, I want to work for GW. I can't let Daniel run it."

Gage's hand found mine, covering it. "Then we move to Charleston."

My breath caught. "It's not something we have to figure out now. It's a year away..."

"We just figured it out." The mattress dipped as he scooted closer, his head moving to share my pillow, and I brushed over his cheek.

"I won't hold you to that. You're exhausted. We can talk about it over the next few weeks."

With a low chuckle, he cupped my ass and slid me closer. "Savannah Guthry, I'm telling you now, I am willing to go wherever you go so that you can fulfill your dreams." His forehead pressed to mine. "Just let me be a part of it all."

Remembering the song he assigned me what felt like a lifetime ago, I lay my hand on his chest. "It's you, Gage Taylor."

He found my mouth in the dark, kissing me tenderly.
It was a kiss that spoke of faith, resilience, and promises.
It was a kiss meant to build dreams.

THE END

THANK YOU

Thank you for spending time with Savannah and Gage!

Did this book help you in some way? Did Savy and Gage hit you in the feels? If so, I'd love to hear about it. Honest reviews help readers find the right book for their needs.

Please consider leaving an honest review at your place of purchase, on social media, and/or Goodreads.

PLAYLIST

Music plays a huge part in *Last Call*. Here is the playlist I listened to while writing and where the songs fit in...

Find the list on Spotify, search: Last Call Playlist - NA Rom/Susp

Celebrate

Get The Party Started by P!nk

Get Lucky by Daft Punk, Pharrell Williams

The Plan

I Don't Need A Man by The Pussycat Dolls

Jack

U = Ur Hand by P!nk

Carter

Country Girl by Luke Bryan

Daniel

All I Want by Staind

Spencer

Amazed by Lonestar

Brian

Everybody Wants To Rule The World by Tears for Fears

Creep by Radiohead

Roxanne by The Police

We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together by Taylor Swift

My Hero

I'm Too Sexy by Right Said Fred

Let It Be Me by Ray LaMontagne

Cinco de Mayo

Follow Through by Gavin DeGraw

Calling Dibs

Blurred Lines by Robin Thicke, T.I. Pharrell

Come & Get It by Selena Gomez

Slow Dancing

Hey Pretty Girl by Kip Moore

One of Those Nights by Tim McGraw

Long Conversations

If The Moon Fell Down by Chase Coy, Colbie Caillat

Begging & Sweet Nothings

Foolish Games by Jewel

Kiss Me by Ed Sheeran

Gravity by Sara Bareilles

In Your Eyes by Quietdrive

Meet The Parents

Should've Gone to Bed by Plain White T's

The Reception

When You Say Nothing At All by Alison Krauss

Recovery

I Choose You by Sara Bareilles

*Extra theme song - Kryptonite by 3 Doors Down

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

2023 ADDED ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

To my babies who are no longer babies! When I first wrote Last Call, you were 14, 9 and 7. Now you're a college grad, a college freshman, and a HS junior. So much has changed but the one thing that hasn't is the way you cheerlead me. Thank you for always having faith in me. I love you three beyond measure.

To my love, Jonathan. Two years away from 30 years of marriage. We should keep doing this for 30 more. xoxo

To my partner in crime, Mindy. You know my brain, and you still love me. Thanks for continuing to write with me. I hate Utah but I love (and miss) you.

To the readers, bloggers, fans, casual stalkers: Thank YOU for sticking around. There aren't words for how good you make me feel when you reach out to talk books.

2013 ORIGINAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I couldn't write a single word if it weren't for the following people. The Beatles sang "I get by with a little help from my friends" and I truly do. You are the wind beneath my wings and I thank you from the very depth of my soul. Yes, this is my sappy moment. ;)

God blessed me with an amazing support systems in my amazing husband and three kids. You guys allow, and encourage, me to follow my dreams every day. Thank you for putting up with my late nights at the computer, my haphazard house cleaning and *all* of the take-out meals. You were my first, and best, dream come true.

To my readers: When I wrote ‘Never Let You Fall’ I did so to fulfill a desire I’d nursed for many years. For it to have found the success it has is amazing and humbling and I owe it all to you. I can’t thank you enough for your feedback, comments, and reviews. I love hearing from you and want you to know how truly grateful I am. Hugs and chocolate for all!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michele writes novels with fairytale love for everyday life. Romance is central to her plots, where the genres range from Coming of Age Fantasy and Realistic Fiction to New Adult Romantic Suspense. Among other titles, she is the author of the bestselling *From The Wreckage* series, *The Prophecy of Tyalbrook* series, a Havenwood Falls author, and co-writes sweet romances with author Mindy Hayes under the pen Mindy Michele.

Michele is represented by Italia Gandolfo of Gandolfo Helin & Fountain Literary Management.

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