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Last Call

Michele G. Miller

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Last Call is edited by Stacy Sanford Cover Art by Kelsey Keeton of <u>K</u> <u>Keeton Designs</u>

Models: Mark Weaver and Cameo Yvette

"Once in awhile, right in the middle of an ordinary life, love gives us a fairytale."

 \sim Author Unknown

To my love, Jonathan You're my Prince Charming and this is our fairytale Thank You. "You are cordially invited...

Four words that 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

Friday - April 12, 2013 The Invitation

It all started with a 6x9-inch cream envelope and some swirling calligraphy.

I stepped into the small house I shared with my two roommates to find the offending envelope propped up against a glass vase on our dining table. Next to the envelope was a bright yellow sticky note with my roommate Sara's chicken scratch:

Wine is chilling and dinner is on us <3

Indication #1 that this envelope was bad news.

Indication #2? The three missed calls and voicemails from my mother sitting

on my phone. She never called me during my school hours, and yet today she had tried, and failed, to reach me three times. When she didn't catch me by voice, she finally sent a quick text:

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

My mother never texted me. Typically, she considered texting beneath her. This text was a warning sign.

Indication #3 was the name Mary Anne.

Then finally, as I walked towards the

envelope that was so beautifully addressed to Ms. Savannah R. Guthry and flipped it over, I found indication #4. The proudly displayed return address along the back of the sealed envelope. It was a dead giveaway as to whom this event was for. As if I hadn't connected the dots already.

First things first. I dropped the envelope back on the table, walked slowly down the long hall into my room, and stripped out of my clothes. My mood instantly improved as I slipped on my favorite comfy outfit and piled my dark hair into a messy bun on top of my head. Phone charger in tow, I walked back to the front of the house where I plugged in my phone, grabbed a glass of the

aforementioned wine, and plopped myself into a chair with the offending envelope.

For a good twenty minutes I just sat there chewing on my lip and sipping the white wine. Curling my legs under me, I finally decided to open it.

The heavy paper was sealed with a gold wax "G" stamped into it and I chuckled to myself. The Guthry family certainly spared no expense when it came to a wedding of one of their own. Without looking in the envelope, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that it contained a wedding invitation. Slowly I pulled the card out, indulging in one long sip of my wine before reading the words.

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 the crystal blue eyes and windblown blond hair. My heart clenched at the painful memory. Then, almost as quickly, I felt nothing as I thought of the man he had become. My gorgeous, Southern, spoiled cousin was marrying my first love. No big deal. I knew it would happen eventually. I could be happy for them, couldn't I? After all, it was four years ago. Four years since Daniel sat me down to tell me he wanted to "explore his options." Little did I know his option was my cousin Mary Anne.

The vibrations of my phone pulled me back to the present. The display glowed: *Mom.* I debated the wisdom of letting her fourth call of the day go to voicemail, and decided it was best to get it over with. Avoiding Erika Guthry when she wanted to speak with you was pointless. She could be relentless, and it was best to deal with her like ripping off a bandage...grit your teeth and get it over with quickly.

"Hello, Mother."

"Savannah Rose Guthry, I have been trying and trying to contact 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 my mother possessed.

"Momma, I'm fine. You know I have classes all day. I just walked in the door a few minutes ago."

"Well you should have called me back," she drawled, the irritation clear in her heavily accented voice. She'd been inconvenienced. "Sweetheart, I called to tell you about Mary Anne and Daniel. Have you heard yet?"

"I'm staring at the announcement as we speak."

"Oh darling, I'm sorry. I so hoped I would be able to warn you. Are you alright?" she asked; her voice heavy with misplaced sorrow. The speed at which her emotions changed could give you whiplash.

"Mother, 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 and right into Mary Anne's. Why, I bet Charlene is prancing like a peacock at the match."

"I'm sure she is, Momma. Look, 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 voice rose an octave or two as she mournfully complained.

"I've really got to run, Mother," I interjected before she could whine some more.

"What? Oh darling, your father is calling. We're supposed to have dinner with the Alexanders this evening. Oh..." she gasped. "The most amazing idea just popped into my head! Spencer played golf with your daddy and Neal today ... "

"Oh Momma, don't go there. Leave poor Spencer Alexander alone," I begged. You could practically hear the matchmaking wheels spinning from two states away.

"Sweetheart, 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, Savannah. I'll handle everything. I'll call you in a few days to discuss the details of the pre-wedding events. Love you."

"Alright, love you..." I heard a click and she was gone.

With a heavy sigh, I lifted my wine glass to my lips and was surprised to

find it empty. According to the clock on the wall, Sara and Candace should be back with dinner any minute. Another glass could wait for them to return. As I carefully took the wedding invitation from my lap and slipped it back into the envelope, I allowed my mind to wander back to Spencer Alexander. The history there was way more complicated than my mother knew, and he didn't deserve her snooping into his personal life when all he did was play golf with my father.

Mind made up, I quickly rang my father's cell phone, hoping to catch him before he picked my mother up for dinner.

"Bradford Guthry," his brusque business voice answered.

"Hi, Daddy." Yes, I was a daddy's girl.

"Hi, baby. Sorry, I didn't see it was you. Everything alright?"

"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."

Funny thing was, I knew immediately that my father was talking about warning me about my mother calling. Whereas my mother thought I needed warning of the event, as if I was going to have an emotional meltdown. My father knew it was my mother's overreacting, melodramatic phone calls that would put me over the edge. "It's alright, I survived. However, Spencer Alexander may not."

"Spence? What does he have to do with anything?"

"What, indeed," I laughed; filling him in on Mother's 'amazing idea'.

"Leave your mother to me, honey. Will you be home before the wedding, or are you set on staying in Nashville for the summer?"

"You know I'm staying here, Daddy."

"Alright, 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." I laughed as I hung up the phone, my mood significantly improved merely by speaking with him.

My mother and father were polar opposites when it came to me. Although I knew they both wanted what was best for me, it was my father who listened to me about my wants. My mother, on the other hand, assumed she knew what I wanted and never had a problem making decisions for me.

Muted laughter outside the front door alerted me to my roommates' arrival. Hearing the fumbling and rattling of a key in the lock, I got up to help them in.

Sara let out a curse as I pulled the door open and she stumbled in. "We've *got* to get a locksmith to look at this. It sticks."

"Surprise," sang Candace, nudging Sara in and holding up two carry out bags from my favorite local Italian restaurant.

"And ice cream," Sara chimed in, pulling out a tub of Ben and Jerry's. "Want dessert first?"

I so did, more than either of them knew.

Friday - April 12, 2013 Nine Weeks until "The Wedding" Get Your Freak On

An hour later, stuffed with ice cream and parmigiana chicken, the three of us were lounging in the living room when Candace finally got up the nerve to ask about the invitation. I'd allowed them to take a peek at it when they first came home, but neither of them had said anything about it until now.

"So, do you *have* to go to the wedding?"

"Hell yes she has to go! What would Mary Anne and the rest of those little debutante brats think if she didn't?" snarled Sara, her eyes flashing in anger at the mention of the word debutante.

"You forget - I was one of those debutantes."

Derisive laughter bubbled up from Sara as she pulled herself up in her chair; sitting on her feet. Yoga really did her body good. "Savannah, you are no more a debutante then I am. I know you did all that stuff back in the day, but it was solely at the urging of your mommy dearest. You're so not the 'only wear white after Memorial Day, clutch-mypearls, and never leave-home-withoutmakeup' type anymore."

"This is true," I agreed. My girlfriends really were the best medicine ever.

"So, you're going then?" Candace

asked again.

"I have to. Could you imagine my mother's reaction if I tried to skip out?" I shuddered in faux fear. "Besides, I don't want Daniel or Mary Anne to think 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," Sara protested.

I refused to jump at her bait. Sara liked her guys rockabilly, and the more James Dean-like they were, the better. I was pretty sure the only reason she ended up in school in Nashville was for the music scene and the rockabilly hunks.

I rolled my eyes at my eccentric

roommate and leaned forward to pour the last of the white wine in my glass.

"I forgot to tell y'all that my mother is already trying to wrangle me a date for the happy event."

"Oh good lord, who?" coughed Candace, clearly as amused with my mother's antics as I was.

Sara butted in, "You need to find some hot, tattooed bad boy to walk in on your arm, Savannah."

"Yes, that's exactly what I need, Sara. My poor mother would die of a heart attack."

"Wait a minute." Candace popped up, her eyes bright with excitement. "Lord help me, I'm going to say it." She paused for dramatic effect. "Sara may be on to something."

"Yes," Sara squealed with delight. "Hot bad boy to the rescue."

"Nooo, thank you. I'm not interested in a bad boy toy."

"Boy toy. Even better, Savannah," Sara teased; rubbing her hands together evilly.

"Shhh. Would you two be quiet? I'm not talking about a bad boy or a toy. However, we *could* find you an amazing date for the wedding." Candace smiled my way, adding, "One that will dote on you all weekend, and show those Charleston socialites that you are doing perfectly fine, thank you very much."

Sara hissed out a very enthusiastic "Yesssss" while exchanging high fives with Candace. Their eagerness to help me was touching, but misplaced. I didn't need a date for this wedding. I would be fine.

"Put your little black books down, 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," growled Sara. "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 slamming dress and a gorgeous accessory on your arm."

"Sara," chided Candace.

I hadn't given it much thought in a long time but Sara was right. Mary Anne and Daniel being a couple had kept me away from home for the past two years. During my freshman year of college I'd gone home for all of the holidays, only to find the happy couple showing up at family meals. What would normally be a joyous time to see my family ended up being an uncomfortable mess as Mary Anne draped herself on Daniel's arm; her eyes smiling triumphantly at me. Daniel, on the other hand, always had the good manners to look guilty when he caught my eye.

My mind flew back to Easter two years ago when he'd cornered me in my own room during Easter supper. I had sat, for the better part of an hour, through Mary Anne's high pitched voice detailing their exciting spring break trip with his parents. Not being able to stand it any longer, I quietly excused myself from the meal. Tears began to fall the second I sat on the edge of my bed.

I cursed myself for the weakness the tears were revealing. What was wrong with me? I didn't miss Daniel, not really. That was when a light knock sounded on my door. Without waiting for permission, Daniel stepped into the room and closed the door softly behind him. His clean white polo stretched tautly across his thick chest, and his normally floppy blond curls were meticulously combed to the side. He was the epitome of a J. Crew model, with his seersucker pinstripe pants and his Sperrys. Country club 101.

"Savannah." He stopped short of my bed when he saw the tears on my face.

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

Shoot. That sounded like a jealous ex, didn't it? I didn't want him to think I was jealous, yet I couldn't help being angry.

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

"Thanks for the long overdue

apology, Daniel. You did hurt me - over a year ago - but I'm fine now. I have a headache, that's all."

His amused smile caught me off guard before he spoke. "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 at the moment. You were a senior, and I'd just started college. We'd just been together for so long. I still love vou Savannah, and I want to see you happy."

He held his hand out to me and to my never-ending horror, I actually took it and stood up; allowing him to embrace me. I couldn't really say what I was thinking at the time. Perhaps the true pain of his betrayal was finally sinking in, and I wanted closure. I'm not really sure.

The one thing I did know was that I wasn't ready for the way his arms snaked around my back, rubbing up and down slowly, seductively. His mouth at my temple, he breathed in as he whispered, "You keep getting more and more beautiful, you know that?"

I was putty in his hands as he lightly pressed a kiss to my temple and murmured about how much he missed me. My hands were clutched around his waist, clasping him tightly to my body. I buried my face in the crook of his neck and took in the familiar tangy scent of his cologne. I felt his hand creep lower and lower until it cupped my rear, and yet I still stood there transfixed in his arms.

"Do you miss me?" he begged; his lips pressing soft kisses to my cheek and down my neck; his hand caressing my backside lightly.

I'm not sure if I actually nodded my head, but his words made me believe that I had. "Show me how much you miss me," he urged, dragging his lips to mine.

I allowed my hand to creep up his chest as our lips met. My body was possessed by another as our lips began to move together, and I allowed Daniel to own my mouth as if he'd never stopped kissing me all those months ago.

Heat began to run through my veins as his fingers teased my lower back at the waist of my skirt. His warm hand delved into the back of my skirt, his fingers once again cupping my rear, now without the clothing barrier. A small moan escaped my lips as he slowly moved his hand to the back of my thigh, lifting my leg to wrap around his. His fingers were digging into my skin, his lips crushing mine as he put a slight amount of pressure on me and we *fell to the bed.*

Almost instantly his body went between my legs and I wrapped my thighs around him. Using the hand that was still trapped under my skirt, he began to tug at the lacy panties I was wearing; his fingers twisting under the fabric at my hips.

Something penetrated my senses enough to make me push at Daniel as his fingers began to explore my inner thigh. Perhaps it was the hard proof of his desire pressing against me, or maybe it was Mary Anne's shrill voice calling his name from downstairs. Whatever it was I pushed him away, my head swimming in confusion.

"Daniel?" called Mary Anne again. Now her voice sounded like it was coming from somewhere down the hall.

Our eyes met and Daniel quickly jumped up to straighten his wrinkled

clothing. Reaching out his hand, he helped me to a sitting position and pulled my skirt down for me.

"I…"

"Shhh," he interrupted, placing one last kiss on my lips. "Can you meet me tonight? At our old spot?"

Surely it was the heat pooling in my thighs that caused me to shake my head yes as I stared into his bright blue eyes.

A sharp knock came at the door and Mary Anne called out, "Savannah? Daniel?"

Daniel stepped towards the door, holding his finger to his lips. After a moment he pulled the door open, revealing my obviously irritated cousin. She looked between me on my bed and Daniel standing before her, her cheeks turning an angry shade of red.

"What's going on here?" she snapped.

Daniel switched on the charm like flipping on a light switch. He turned to Mary Anne and took her hand in his, kissing it sweetly.

"Nothing," he lied like an oily used car salesman. "I could tell Savannah looked unwell when she left the table, and I wanted to see if she was alright. All of your stories about our trip upset her and I felt bad. We really shouldn't rub our relationship in her face, Mary Anne."

Bile rose in my throat as I listened

to his buttery explanation. Mary Anne, as clueless as ever, looked at me in sympathy and placed her arm on Daniel's.

"Oh Savannah, I really thought you'd be glad for me by now. I'm truly sorry that you can't find someone like Daniel to make you happy." She turned to Daniel, pouting, "You know, I really don't see why I shouldn't be able to share my joy with my own family. It's not my fault she continues to harbor feelings for you. That was puppy love, Danny. She should be over it by now."

Every last nerve in my body urged me to get up and slap my cousin across her bitchy face, but twenty years of good breeding held me back. I watched as Daniel whispered something into her ear, placating her enough to leave the room without a backward glance. He stood at the door for a moment, his eyes taking me in from the top of my head to the tips of my toes before he spoke quickly.

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

With that, he pulled the door closed with a sharp click.

I shook myself out of my memories until I was back in the present. "You two are right," I spoke, my voice unnaturally loud.

"Tattooed boy toy?"

"No," I grumbled, throwing a pillow

at Sara. "You're a pain. But I do need a date for the wedding. A *good* one."

"Well it shouldn't be *too* hard to find you a perfect date. You're smart, sweet, sexy and stacked," Sara teased; holding her hands to her chest like I was Dolly Parton.

"Good lord, Sara. How much did you drink tonight?" barked Candace, rolling on the floor in a fit of laughter.

"Not enough."

"Okay, so I need a date, girls. Problem is, I haven't dated. Ever."

"We know," chimed in my best friends.

It's not like I didn't *want* to date, but after nursing my heart through the drama that was Daniel and Mary Anne, and then weathering the aftermath of Spencer Alexander, I couldn't stand the thought of opening up to another guy. I'd left home for school to get away from all of the people I'd grown up with and to make new friends. However, once I got here I just ended up immersing myself in my classes and school clubs, and never made time to actually go out. Sara called me a homebody. Candace called me picky. I called myself scared.

"So what about Riley?" asked Candace. Her mind always went to Riley when we needed a guy around.

Riley was a local DJ who worked at the one and only bar the girls could get me to go to. Nashville's music scene was full of bars packed to the brim with musicians, freaks and tourists, but we tended to frequent a place close to campus called The Garage.

The one reason I bothered to go to The Garage at all was because it was more of a place for locals. They had amazing live music and a laid back atmosphere. Riley was a plus. Amazingly enough, he was also a bioscience major who liked to DJ. Go figure. He was smart, sweet and funny, and not at all interested in getting in my pants. Another plus.

"No way - not Riley," Sara disagreed, shooting that plan down. "We need to impress the Guthry family, and a surefire way of doing that is with a prep. As much as I hate to say it, we're going to have to go old school for her."

"Like an old man?" Candace grimaced, scrunching her face like she smelled something bad.

"No, you halfwit. Old school! Frat boy, old money. We need to find someone who can rival Daniel. We need a Jack or Bobby."

"Wait a minute," I spat out.

"Jack or Bobby?"

"Yes - as in Kennedy." Sara was clearly getting fed up with the questions. "A good 'ole boy. Like a Kennedy, but without the womanizing and drinking habits, of course." She winked at me.

"Ohhh." Ding, ding, ding, she figured it out, ladies and gentlemen. "Perfect. So how do we do this?" "Wait a minute," I yelped louder.

"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. I think my friends have become as bad as my mother.

"You guys..." I implored as they huddled next to each other, plotting. Candace picked up an empty notebook off the table to start making notes. "Seriously, I'm sure I can find someone from my classes. Scott Tipton, maybe."

"No," they barked. "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," I mumbled, but they weren't listening. They were plotting my love life like a mathematician plotted stats.

Friday - April 19, 2013 Eight weeks until "The Wedding" Celebrate

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

"Amen!"

Shot glasses clanked together as I stood with a small group of friends at The Garage in celebration of exams being over. Riley downed his shooter from across the bar, saluting us as 'Get the Party Started' by Pink began to blare through the speakers. Candace whooped, grabbed my hand and yanked me onto the relatively empty dance floor. Sara was fast on our heels, pulling a few of our friends in her wake.

"It's our last year, and we are *so* going to make this one the best." Candace laughed as she began to bounce around the floor.

The bar scene had never been my thing, and I awkwardly tried to blend in with my more hyper friends. Typically, The Garage was a great low key place that catered to Indie musicians from all walks of life. Located above the bar was a small restaurant that was always bursting at the seams because of their amazing food, which made The Garage a perfect place for drinks while you waited for your dinner table.

Open mic nights were pretty big with

many of the music students at school. I'd come to watch several friends play, but typically I was out of there by the time the club set started coming in around tenthirty Thursday through Sunday night.

Not tonight, though. Sara, Candace and I went to dinner and then promised Riley and a few other friends we would come by to celebrate the end of another year with them. I tried to beg off, but Sara and Candace insisted adamantly. I was pretty sure the tall and handsome Jax had something to do with that.

Sara purred all of Jax's accomplishments to me when we first walked into the bar, while he just stood there looking uncomfortable at her praises. He was cute - more than cute,

actually - with his curling thick waves flopping around all over his head as he danced with Sara.

"He's cute," Candace called over the dance mix Riley was playing. It was like she could read my mind.

"Yeah," I acknowledged, knocking her with my shoulder. "Amazing he should *happen* to show up, huh?" I teased over the loud music. She winked at me and motioned towards the bar, raising her hand to signal she was going to buy another drink.

More than ready to leave the floor I started to follow, but she held her hand up to stop me. Like a perfectly choreographed number, I watched as Candace tapped Sara on the shoulder to pull her away. Sara, in turn, waved Jax in my direction and nodded her head vigorously.

Awkward smiling ensued as Jax moved my way. As if on cue, Riley threw on 'Get Lucky' by Daft Punk and soon the floor all around us was full of giddy co-eds celebrating.

"Hey," he shouted over the crowd; his hips moving in that typical guy-dancing way. He didn't look bad on the floor, but he was obviously not a dancer.

"Hi." I smiled and turned towards him as bodies began pressing up against my back. We couldn't really talk above the loud music, so we shimmied to the music and shared smiles throughout the song. Craning my neck I searched for my friends and was irritated, but not surprised, to find them standing by the bar watching us.

Dang matchmakers.

"Can I...?" Jax's mouth opened and closed, but I couldn't hear him as a gaggle of girls beside us erupted in laughter.

"What?" I called back; leaning in closer. I shook my head as he tried to speak again. It was way too loud.

Finally he leaned in and shouted near my ear, "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Sure," I mouthed back at him and started towards the bar. What the heck, right?

Covering the entire expanse of the building, the massive bar was hopping

with customers. The barstools were all taken, so we stood behind a few patrons waiting for our turn to get served. I looked up to see Candace and Sara conveniently make their way back across the room to some couches placed in the corner, where several friends from school sat around and chatted.

As we stood there waiting, I eyed Jax covertly; trying to get a take on him. He wore brown leather casual shoes with dark jeans and a blue polo shirt. Nothing flashy.

While waiting for our turn to order, a group of ladies sidled their way through the crowd; a thick cloud of perfume gagging me as they pushed by. I eyed them as they passed and recognized the predatory-like capacity they possessed. Since the bar was known as a popular hangout for college students, a group of women who looked to be in their midforties with four inch heels and a pound of makeup screamed COUGARS.

"You want to grab an empty table while I go get the drinks?" Jax motioned to the bar height tables scattered around the bar area.

I pulled my thoughts away from the ladies on the prowl. "Oh sorry, yeah," I replied, telling him to order me a Coke. His brows pulled together in question at my drink request, but he smiled.

Finding one empty bar table at the far end of the mahogany bar, I took a seat. Jax stood patiently amongst the other patrons waiting for his turn to order. There were two male bartenders at the moment; both wearing all black and looking extremely busy. The girl employees were walking around the bar in their tight jeans and cropped tops, offering up shooters and taking cash for bottles of beer.

A loud cackle-like laugh pulled me from my people watching. I glanced up to find one of the cougars draped over the bar flirting unashamedly with a bartender. Said cougar was wearing a skin tight red dress, and her boobs looked to be in immediate danger of toppling out of it. She was a pretty woman, with chin length black hair that looked to have been meticulously shellacked into place. Expensive gold earrings dangled from her lobes, and a gaudy gold necklace was trapped between her very full, very exposed breasts.

"Hey Savannah, what can I get for you tonight?"

A voice I recognized stopped me from gawking at the scene down the bar. Noelle, a girl from a study group I'd been in, placed a cocktail napkin in front of me and waited expectantly for my order.

"Oh." I jumped, startled at the sudden interruption. "Hi Noelle. Um...my friend is waiting at the bar."

"Honey, it's gonna be a while by the looks of things." She laughed. "What do you want, and I'll go grab it?"

Thankfully, Jax looked over and saw us talking. I waved my hand, signaling him to come over as he wound his way to us. Suddenly my nerves started to get the best of me as I focused on his tall frame. This was starting to feel like a date. Crap.

"Wow. He's a hottie, girl," Noelle cooed as she watched Jax. "You two on a date?"

Damn, my cheeks were burning. "Simma down, girl. We just met."

"Hi there, I'm Noelle. What can I get you?" she purred when he finally arrived at the table.

Her voice and attitude were confident. Of course they were. She had

on the requisite skin tight, black, low slung jeans and second skin tank top that were required for all of the female staff here. She was a sexy girl and she knew it.

"Rum n' Coke for me please, and a plain Coke for her." His eyes dipped to the creamy flesh flashing above her vneck tank for a quick glance. I couldn't fault the guy for taking a peek at what was freely being offered in front of his face.

"Actually that sounds good - add rum to mine too," I interjected, wanting to calm my nerves a little.

"Sure thing."

With another quick glance at Jax, she scooted off to get our drinks. More

laughing at the bar caught my attention, and I looked up and watched in fascination at the garish spectacle the women were making of themselves. I couldn't help but notice the way the cougars were monopolizing the darker haired bartender with their flirting.

"So Sara tells me you're an art major."

Throwing the panting women out of my head, I tried to focus in on Jax. "Art History, yes."

"Art History? What do you plan to do with that?" he asked as our drinks were delivered to us. "Sorry, I didn't mean for that to sound rude."

"Thanks." I smiled at Noelle as Jax gave her cash. Taking a quick sip, I waited until she walked away before answering his question.

"The goal was to work in a museum."

"Was?"

"Well, *is*," I fumbled, not wanting to get into the complicated state that was my future career choice. "What about you? What's your plan? You're a senior now, right?"

"Actually, I've *been* a senior. One semester to go and then I'm done," he answered, raising his glass in a mock toast.

I laughed and clinked my glass with his. "I'll drink to that."

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

Tomorrow? Well, shoot. I allowed myself a second of disappointment at not being able to get to know him better before he left. "Wow, that'll be a great experience I'm sure."

"So are you ready to get back out there in the celebration? Looks like Sara's trying to land a plane to get your attention."

I laughed once I visually located my boisterous roommate shaking her groove thang up against some guy. She was waving her hands as if she was air traffic control. I wiggled my fingers in a small gesture to let her know I saw her, and then glanced longingly at my drink. I didn't want to leave it yet.

Eyeing me, Jax stood up, held out his hand and stated simply, "Take it with you."

Best advice all night. We joined our friends on the floor for a night of dancing, drinking and having fun, as Riley pumped out more techno-crap than I'd heard in my entire life.

"Holy hell. Did you catch the new bartender, Candace?" 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. Candace winked at me and slicked coral lipstick over her lips.

"Did you *see* him? No wonder the bar is so packed with desperate housewives. He is easy peasy, sexy squeezey."

Sara came out of the stall fixing her skirt and spoke before I could. "Our girl has been too busy checking out Jax to pay attention to a hot bartender." She wagged her brows suggestively at me. "Right, Savannah?"

"He's nice." That was all I was giving my nosy roomies for now. In all honesty, he was better than nice. We had danced the entire night, and he bought me two more drinks. His hands lingered on my back or hips lightly a few times as we swayed with the music, but he never overstepped his boundaries.

"Girl," cried Sara as she grabbed me by my upper 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 erupted into laughter as we opened the door to leave the restroom. "Don't get too ahead of yourself, Sara. She just met the guy..." Suddenly she yelped, stopping abruptly in front of us.

My face turned cherry red when I spotted Jax standing not five feet away waiting on us. His hands were in his pockets and he was scanning the bar with his eyes. The perfect look of a person casually waiting on someone.

"Hey," I called to him, stepping around my giggling friends when he looked our way.

"Hi. Sorry I'm stalking you outside the ladies room," he spoke over the crowd noise.

"Eh, happens all the time," I shrugged.

I turned to wave the girls off when he asked, "You want to get out of here?" My hand stilled and I'm pretty sure my jaw dropped as I looked over at Candace and Sara.

Sara practically answered for me, jumping forward and kissing my cheek. "Go, he's a nice guy. You'll be safe." She pulled back, looking pointedly in my eyes before grabbing Candace's hand to leave us. "You two have fun. See you later Jax," she called in their wake.

"How about some breakfast?" he asked; his face already wreathed in an overconfident smile.

We'd danced and shared a little small talk, but so far we hadn't been able to talk much over the loud music. He was nice, cute, driven... oh, what the hell. "Sure, I could go for something."

Thirty minutes later we were sitting across from one another at the local IHOP. I hadn't been on a date since freshman year, and *that* one was a disaster. Daniel had definitely turned me off to guys and dating.

We exchanged pleasantries while we

waited for our pancakes. Favorite movies - his, the Bourne trilogy, mine, Pitch Perfect; favorite food - BBQ and Mexican; books - he didn't read and I read too much. When it came to our favorite vacation spots, he laughed at me profusely.

"Disney World?"

I threw my wadded up straw wrapper at him playfully. "Yeah. What's wrong with Disney?"

"It's for families and kids. I would've thought you'd be a tropics girl."

"Nah, I'm a total kid at heart. I love roller coasters, greasy food, and feeling like a little girl again."

"Cute."

When our food arrived we ate in

relative silence. I couldn't tell what he was thinking, and I wished to God I'd dated more the past few years.

"Damn," he muttered. His curse coming out of nowhere caused me to flinch in surprise. I'd finished up my food a few moments earlier and was telling him about my plans for the summer - minus the wedding from hell.

"Sorry, I was..." He paused for a moment. "Hell, I'm pissed that I have to leave tomorrow." He got up with our ticket in hand and stalked off to pay the bill, leaving me to follow in his wake.

Ummm, hello?

Gulping down one last sip of water, I grabbed my purse and ran after him. By the time I caught up with him, he'd paid the cashier and was holding the glass doors open for me. His red car was parked right in front, so I stopped on the curb by the passenger door.

"I thought you were looking forward to your internship?" I asked.

"I was," he acknowledged, stepping into the parking lot and opening the door for me. Stepping down further from the curb, I walked around his body and then stopped; placing my hand on top of the open door.

"So what's wrong?"

"I met you tonight." He spoke those four words boldly, his focus not moving from my face.

I stumbled back a step and slid into the seat, mumbling a barely audible "Oh." For a moment he stood there holding the door for me. I slid my legs into the car and he shut it firmly behind me; walking slowly to the driver's side. He slid in and put the keys in the ignition before dropping his hand and turning his body to me.

"Too much?"

"What? Well no...it's unexpected, that's all."

"You were unexpected." He grazed my arm with his fingers, causing a delicious shiver to run down my spine. He dropped his hand as quickly as he raised it, and started the engine.

I gave Jax directions to my house, all while cursing the fates that would introduce us on his last night in town for almost three months. Just my luck. When we made it to my small house, he met me at the front of the car and held my hand as he walked me to the door.

The brazen side of me wanted to invite him in. The cautious side knew it was a bad idea, yet I considered it anyway. Neither side got to make the decision though, because Jax took it all into his own hands. Bending down slowly, he chastely kissed my cheek and stepped back.

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

Gentlemanly thing? What? my brain

shouted at him.

"Where's your phone?"

He handed me his phone and I entered in my number for him.

"Thanks for a great night. Have a safe trip tomorrow."

"Okay. I'll call you. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," I said; flabbergasted that a man in this day and age could drop off a girl without a proper good night kiss.

I leaned in the doorway until I heard the sound of his engine come to life, and then watched him drive away. Shutting the door behind me, I stepped into the house.

"Details?" crowed Sara as she popped out from the dark hallway.

"AHHHH!" I jumped, slamming my head against the door. "Ow. Damn it, Sara, what the *hell* are you doing?"

"You mean what are *we* doing," added Candace, peering 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 for details?"

"Hell to the no, my dear. Soooo?" Sara prodded as she grabbed my hand and pulled me into the living room.

"It was fun. He was a gentleman."

"Ahh, too bad," muttered Sara under her breath. I gave her the evil eye and continued. "He's leaving in the morning for New York for the summer."

"He's *what*?" screeched Candace as she turned on Sara. "You didn't tell me that."

"Shit, I didn't know," she hollered back, her voice as loud as mine. "Savannah, I'm so sorry. I wouldn't have bothered if I'd known."

Holding up my hand to quiet them both, I sighed and leaned back in the chair; kicking off my shoes.

"It's alright. I liked him, and he said he's going to call me. 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," I said less than convincingly.

"Yes you do. You're not going on your own, and neither one of us can go with you."

"Wait - you can't," I pouted, shooting them both questioning glares. Our plan for the wedding was date first, best friend second.

"Nope, my mom finally sent me the dates for the family reunion event that they've been planning for the grandparents' golden anniversary," Candace whined.

"Let me guess - same weekend?" She shook her head in confirmation and I turned to Sara. "Why can't you come?"

A huge smile wreathed Sara's face

and she pulled an envelope out from behind her back; waving it while she practically jumped up and down.

"You got in?" I screamed, lunging forward to grab the letter from her hands. I recognized the logo and hugged her. "Oh my God, that is so amazing."

The house filled with screaming and cheering as we celebrated. Sara had applied for internships with radio stations and producers all over the country. She wanted to market and develop musicians for a label someday, but for now she was looking for some experience.

"It's local, but you know I'm not gonna have any free time once I start."

"Oh, I don't care Sara. I'm so happy

for you. I'll figure something out for the wedding. Hell, maybe I won't go."

Bald-faced lie.

There was no way my mother was going to let me skip this event. Image was everything to her.

Bzzzz bzzzz bzzzz

The vibrations from my phone startled me. I pulled it from my purse and clicked on the text message symbol by an unknown number:

Unknown: i shouldn't have been so gentlemanly

A huge grin spread across my face before I could stop it. "Is that Jax?" "Ask him to the wedding now."

My roommates jumped in as I got up and paced the floor. "No, I can't ask him now. We just met. Let me talk to him."

I all but skipped to my room where I threw myself across the bed and responded:

Me: why is that? Unknown: i really wanted to kiss you

Oh boy. Warmth spread through my veins as I texted him back:

Me: i would have let you Unknown: yeah? Me: yep Unknown: damn it :(Me: LOL

Unknown: i think it might be worth the wait tho

Me: :) you think?

I was getting seriously girly here. Smiley faces?

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

And then it buzzed again.

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

Without thought I typed the first thing that came to mind:

Me: i need a wedding date for June 15, you free?

Pause. Crap, what if that was asking too much too soon? URGH, I growled, seriously wanting to kick myself in the head for opening my big mouth. My phone vibrated and I read his reply:

Unknown: i would be honored Me: :)

Unknown: call you tomorrow for details? well and to talk? Me: okay! Unknown: 'night Me: goodnight!

Tuesday - April 23, 2013 The Plan

I found myself wandering around the house waiting for Jax to call me each evening when he got home from work. We'd already ironed out the details of the wedding and had talked every evening since he left. Strangely enough, I was cautiously excited about our budding relationship. I didn't exactly know what was between us, but I was looking forward to June 15 and seeing what *this* was. That was, until I hung up the phone with him one night.

Candace and Sara walked into the house to find me lying on the couch after hanging up with Jax. Pulling my bummed ass into a sitting position, I greeted them both when they walked in the living room.

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

"I was on the phone with Jax, and we hung up a minute ago," I moaned. I flopped back on the sofa dramatically and hugged a pillow tightly to my chest. "He can't go to the wedding."

Sara kicked off her shoes and hissed, "Why the hell not?"

"He has to work. Apparently there are conferences for him to attend all summer, and he can't confirm his schedule so he didn't want me to rely on him." "That sounds like a weak ass reason if you ask me."

"Sara..." Candace slapped her on the arm, and Sara walked out of the room mumbling "Pushover" under her breath. Candace looked at me with sympathy. "Sorry hun, I know you were starting to look forward to the date."

I nodded. "You know what though? Sara's right. That *is* kind of a weak excuse. Maybe he wanted to back out?"

"I doubt that, Savannah. He seems pretty into you." Candace wrinkled her pretty little forehead as she spoke. She sunk down into the chair next to me and stared blankly at the ceiling.

"Well I'm not going to sit here all summer and do nothing because I'm pining over some guy I barely know!" I barked; the comment coming from out of the middle of nowhere. Throwing the pillow across the couch, I stood up; anger propelling me towards the large picture windows covering the front of the living room.

"Sara - get out here," I thundered, and turned towards a shocked 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 that correctly? Did you say 'Get your *freak* on?'" echoed Sara from the hallway.

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

"Oh my. Girl, what are you on?" Candace placed her hand on my forehead, her face a mask of mock horror.

"Now we're talking. I've already got you a line up, chica," Sara admitted as she wrapped me in a hug. "I was just waiting on the word."

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

A look flashed between Sara and Candace and they stepped back, looking mighty guilty.

"Oh, hell no. Please tell me you didn't"

"Ok, we didn't," heckled Candace as she rushed out of the room.

"Relax. We have this all figured out. Trust us. I've got you a list of gorgeous guys who are begging to go out with you."

"Sara." I gritted my teeth, trying not to lose my patience. "Where exactly did this list come from?"

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

In the same way she could read my face, I could read hers. And right now I knew she was holding something back. "Where else, Sara?"

"Stop worrying. Damn, girl. You wanted to get your freak on, right?" she evaded by walking into the kitchen. I was left standing in the living room trying to keep my cool.

"Sara!"

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

"Not a glowing recommendation, Sara," quipped Candace from her open room.

I thought back to last year when Sara had used the campus dating site to try and find a date to help her get over her latest flavor of the month. She'd shown up at a local restaurant all dressed up and ready for her hot date with Joe, except Joe was Jo. A girl who was into girls. Amazingly enough, after laughing at the mix-up, they went on to have dinner and drinks and both lamented on their recent break ups. They still hung out occasionally to this day.

"Look, I promise to check and double check all of the facts before I set you up with anyone. Loosen up for once. What's the harm, huh? Go out with a few guys and have some fun," she prodded. "You might meet your future husband."

"That's doubtful." Feeling less than confident, I gave in and warned them, "Okay, 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 these guys 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 blustered; rubbing her hands together as she grabbed her phone and started fiddling with it.

"What about Jax?" questioned Candace as she strayed into the living room again.

"What about him?" Sara answered for me. "She's not a nun, Cand."

"We'll still get to know each other by phone, but I can't continue to sit around and wait for him to call me every night."

"That's not an option, Savannah. You're right - this is our last summer together, and we're gonna have some fun."

Wednesday - April 24, 2013 She Dropped a Bomb

"What kind of madness is this? What was I *thinking*?" I stomped around the living room like a madwoman, tossing my phone on the couch.

"What's your damage, Heather?" called Sara, coming down the hallway ready for her first day of work. The phrase came from an eighties cult movie we all loved and it made me stop seething, even for a moment.

"I just got off the phone with *Erika*," I offered; sneering my mother's name.

"Well of course...it's either your mother or they canceled 'The Vampire Diaries'. Those are the only two things that could cause irrational anger in you. What'd she do this time?"

"She dropped a bomb on me." Fuming, I walked into the kitchen to get some coffee. "Apparently the wedding of the century will be a weekend-long extravaganza, and I am expected to be there for every minute detail."

Slamming a mug down on the counter, I recounted the entire, painful conversation with my mother to Sara. Mimicking my mother's thick southern accent, I drawled out every detail.

"There will be a special cocktail event for all out of town guests and family on Thursday night, as well as an afternoon tea on Friday, followed by the rehearsal dinner later that night. The ladies are having an early morning spa day at the club Saturday with brunch before the big event."

"Ugh," I groaned. "I'm so mad I could spit nails."

Sara sympathized with me as she absentmindedly dug her keys out of her bag. "Do you really have to go to all of it? Can't you just show up late?"

"HA! No, my mother made it *very* clear that everyone was *so looking forward* to seeing me since I haven't been home in a while. It wouldn't look good for the 'family name' for me not to be there."

"How do you deal with that?"

Sara asked the question honestly, and I didn't fault her for it. Sometimes even *I*

didn't know how I dealt with my mother.

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

Shutting the door behind Sara, I took my coffee and sat with my legs crossed on the couch, thinking about my upbringing. Somehow the uptight and privileged demeanor of my mother never really rubbed off on me.

My father's family was the one with all the money. Somewhere along the line with my great, great, great grandfather... old Grandpa Guthry had perfected whiskey and became a household name.

Dad took over the company almost right out of college when his father suffered a fatal heart attack. My uncle graduated two years after that, and went straight to work at Guthry Whiskey too. Although they grew up with all the comforts you could imagine, it was a testament to the Guthry name that everyone was required to work hard for their part of the family company.

I was proud of my father for jumping into the business at such a young age, and for being such an integral part of helping it prosper and grow to where it was today. Sometimes I felt bad for both my dad and uncle, because they'd both been blessed with daughters and very demanding wives.

My Aunt Charlene came from old money herself. She grew up with my dad and uncle and went to the same private schools and functions with them. Whereas Uncle Grant was fun and playful, Charlene was rigid and self absorbed. While I was growing up, her calendar revolved around being pampered, and 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, and in her case, she was getting some good stuff.

I knew relatively little of my mother's upbringing. Her parents both passed away before I was born, and she'd never talked about her life growing up much. But she'd always been a stickler for propriety. From my earliest days I could remember having to sit at a table in a frilly dress, crossing my legs at the ankles and draping a napkin over my lap. I was groomed to perfection.

My mother used to tease me, "You never know when the Prince will come looking for his Princess, my darling."

I was allowed to play tennis and tennis alone, because that was a country club sport. I took voice lessons, piano and art, all because that was what a refined young woman would do. I remembered feeling as if I was a stifled character in a Jane Austen novel half of my life.

My mother was the cloying Mrs. Bennett who couldn't wait for me to meet the perfect eligible gentleman so that I could secure my own perfect life.

School was an important endeavor to

complete, but she fully expected me to utilize my degree for philanthropy. I was absolutely expected to come home and marry someone well known in Charleston society; someone who could help take over and run Guthry Whiskey when my father was ready to step down.

Guthry Whiskey had been passed down between fathers and sons since it first began. Recently it had been weighing on me that Mary Anne and I would be the sole heirs to the company. I knew that Mary Anne didn't care about the business, except for the amount of money it brought in, so I assumed her future spouse would be the one to run her portion. That would be Daniel.

A wave of disgust ran through me at

the thought of someone outside my family being able to make decisions for Guthry someday, and for that person to be Daniel was downright unthinkable. But what could I do about it? I was just an Art History major with a mother who had groomed me to be the perfect, happy little wife.

Or had she?

Since leaving Charleston I'd come into my own. During my freshman year I'd sunk deeper and deeper into selfregret, over both my foolish actions the summer before I left, as well as my defunct relationship with Daniel. It was only after going home at Easter break and hitting rock bottom that I'd finally been able to break free from the depression that had been holding me back.

When I returned to school, I finally began to see myself for what I was: a timid little southern belle who wouldn't speak out for herself. I immediately stopped allowing my mother to dictate my life from afar, and started making my own decisions.

Unbeknownst to my parents, I also began taking business courses along with my art classes in order to secure a double major. Art was my love and passion, but it most likely wasn't going to get me very far on my own. I wanted to be qualified enough to secure myself a spot at Guthry Whiskey on my own someday, if needed. I wasn't about to let some man walk into my life and start making decisions for me - husband or not.

At some point this summer I planned on talking with my dad and letting him know about the major in business, and I was excited to tell him that I could come work for him if he wanted me to.

Although I did actually want some time after graduation to travel and see some of the art and museums that I'd learned about through the years. I just needed one solitary summer of freedom before I headed back home to Charleston and started trying to convince my mother that I could still be a perfect society woman while single and working. Sometimes I thought I was crazy for

wanting to go back home and settle down, but there was no way in hell I was going to let my father down. If it meant dealing with the skeletons in my closet, then so be it.

Thursday - April 25, 2013 Date #1 - Mark

When I entered The Garage I took a moment to scan the crowd and scope out the fellas. The bar area was crowded tonight, but there didn't seem to be any men standing to the side "looking single."

I took a seat at the one empty stool by the far end of the mahogany bar with an uninterrupted view of the entrance so I could see Mark walk in. I set my little clutch in front of me, crossed my legs and tried to look like I belonged. The bartender closest to me looked up and smiled politely, calling out, "I'll be right with you."

Nodding back, I decided to peruse the wine menu while I waited. The dance floor was empty at this early hour of the evening, and I noted that the small stage up front was set up for an open mic night, which I knew typically started around seven. Some of the tables set up on the edge of the floor were occupied, but it was the bar area that was full of people.

A notorious people watcher, I looked around to check out the other patrons. As my eyes drifted past the faces, I was surprised to see the black haired cougar from last Friday night. She was dressed in a spaghetti-strapped little black number, nonchalantly sipping a martini. Her predatory gaze, and I do mean predatory - I could see it from where I sat - was set upon the other bartender waiting on customers. I couldn't see him, as he was turned toward the liquor bottles along the back wall, but Ms. Cougar *definitely* had him in her sights.

"Good evening, what can I get for you tonight?" Pulling me from gawking at the scene down the bar, the bartender placed a cocktail napkin in front of me and waited expectantly for my order.

"Oh." I jumped, startled. "Sorry. A Tom Collins, please."

"Sure thing. I'll need to see your ID."

I complied, pulling out my license and offering it to him. He handed it back after a quick glance and set about preparing my drink.

My gaze returned to the other bartender and his adoring fan while I waited for my drink. At a glance, I noted that the seats immediately around the predator were all taken by other fabulously dressed women "of a certain age." The man in question was now leaning forward over the bar, allowing a blond to speak into his ear. Loud guffaws filled the bar after a moment.

What the hell? I thought, and couldn't help but watch the way the cougars were monopolizing bartender number two with their flirting. My own bartender placed my cocktail in front of me, and then stepped away after making sure I knew to holler at him if I needed anything. I thanked him and took a sip of the Tom Collins. A shiver ran through me. The drink was somewhat tart for my taste, but still drinkable.

A quick check of the time showed it was six fifty-five. Five minutes to go. I told Mark I would meet him at seven o'clock so technically he wasn't late, but I guess he didn't believe in early, either. After a few more minutes of sipping, my attention was drawn to the door where a handsome, dark haired gentleman was standing alone; turning his head and looking around.

Mark?

His eyes searched the area and then zeroed in on me. A smile crossed his face as he made his way over. *That must be him*, I thought, and I straightened up a bit to take him in.

His hair was worn long and he had a bit of the Justin Bieber helmet head-thing going on. Deduct a point. However, his face was nice enough. His good looks were accentuated by his striking dark eyebrows and straight nose. Add a point. He wore a crisply ironed white oxford dress shirt and tan slacks. More points for dressing up.

"Savannah?" he asked politely, as he came up to my chair; his smile showing off perfectly straight teeth.

"Yes. Mark, I assume?" I smiled back. He took my outstretched hand and held it for a moment longer than necessary.

"Wow. You're prettier than your

profile picture alluded to," he remarked. "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 empty stool from one of the nearby bar tables and pulled it over to sit beside me. With his knee touching my thigh it was a bit crowded, but I thought we could make it work.

"So tell me about yourself," Mark asked as he glanced around the bar, a bit preoccupied.

Really? Tell me about yourself? How original, I thought, swallowing another sip of my sour Tom Collins. I'd just started to dig into my story when Mark waved his hand up to get the bartender's attention.

"Well, I'm in my senior year, majoring in Art History..."

"Hold on," he interrupted when the bartender walked over to take his drink order. "What do you have on tap?" he asked. 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 took the opportunity to study my surroundings again. The bar had quieted down some, and I noted that the cougars were no longer there. They must have headed to dinner upstairs. My eyes flicked over to the other bartender, who

was finally free of his harem, and caught him checking me out.

He was wiping up the bar in front of him but his eyes were fixed on me, and I quickly pulled my gaze away; feeling a blush creeping up my face.

Holy wow. The thought raced through my head at the stolen glimpse I'd gotten of Mr. Sexy. Obviously this was the new hot bartender the girls were talking about the other night.

"So, you were saying?" Mark asked, after finally making a beer decision.

Feeling bad about my wandering eye, I focused back on my blind date and began to tell him about myself again.

"So are you an artist yourself, or do you just study it?"

I thought for a moment before I answered diplomatically, "I like to sketch, but no, I'm not really an artist myself. 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 smiled at his own joke.

"It's a stress reliever for me, really. I don't plan to make a career out of it or anything," I admitted.

"What about you?" I prodded. "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 be in corporate finance eventually. I think I'll most likely move to Atlanta or Charlotte after graduation and look for a good finance job."

"Oh? Do you have family there?" I asked, trying to get some back story on his life.

Shaking his head Mark answered, "No, my family is all here. That's part of the appeal of the East coast," he laughed. Not a family guy. Noted.

"My goal is to work somewhere where 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 and I found myself daydreaming. So far this is a pretty basic first date, I thought. Nothing unusual, but no sparks. We hadn't really talked much about our personal interests, but the girls had recommended that I let him run the conversation. That meant a lot of awkward silences and talk about senior year and his accounting job. Riveting.

Twenty minutes later the conversation stalled again. Mark ordered a second beer while he proceeded to tell me about his love for working out. I shook my head as he talked 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 while his eyes scanned my body.

Oh creeptastic, that was a backhanded compliment if I ever heard one. I was spared the need to answer when he stood up.

"Would you excuse me for a moment?" he asked politely. I agreed and smiled, watching as he headed for the restroom.

Ugh. This was torture. What were you supposed to talk about with someone you didn't know? I took the last sip of my drink and glanced up to ask for a glass of ice water. My original bartender was nowhere to be seen, however bartender #2 was looking at me again. His 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 the easy grace of his movements behind the bar. On his way to bring me my glass, he grabbed two beer bottles with one hand and popped the tops; handing them over to two men sitting a few seats down from me.

"Water," he confirmed when he was in front of me. His voice held a slight accent I couldn't place. "Can I get you another drink?"

"I'm good," I answered, a polite smile on my face. "Thanks, though."

"Let me know if you need anything at all," he drawled as he straightened up; his gaze switching to something behind me.

A moment later a hand touched my shoulder, causing me to jump at the contact. I knew it was Mark's by the smell of the overpowering cologne that suddenly wafted around me. Even so, I kept my sights on the bartender with the *extremely* becoming accent as I thanked him for the offer.

"Another beer, mate?" he asked Mark, keeping his eyes on mine. There was something compelling about his warm brown eyes, not to mention his seductive *Australian* accent.

Mark gave me a less than gentle squeeze on my shoulder and maintained his position behind me. Worried by the feeling, I glanced over my shoulder and was surprised to see Mark glaring at the bartender. A jealous streak might impress me if I'd known the man for more than an hour, but after the lessthan-stimulating conversation Mark and I had carried on, I wasn't going to get all weak in the knees over the less-thansubtle pissing contest he seemed to be having with Mr. Aussie.

Mr. Aussie's eyes squinted a bit as they rested on my shoulder and Mark's solid grip there, then he straightened up and stepped back. Turning, he called over his shoulder, "John will take care of you if you need anything else."

'John' as it turned out was our original bartender, and was returning to the bar as Mr. Aussie walked away. Mark started pulling up his chair again when I decided to end the date.

"You know what? I totally forgot about an early appointment I have for tomorrow. I should really be going," I fabricated as I pulled out a few dollars for my drink.

"Are you sure? It's not even eight o'clock, yet."

"Yeah, I'm really sorry. It was nice to meet you though." I set my cash down on the bar and offered my hand to Mark for a friendly shake. When his grip tightened on mine and he began to pull me forward, presumably for a kiss, I turned my head and feigned a cough.

As I walked past the bar, I could have *sworn* that I heard a low chuckle follow

me. However, when I turned my glance slightly towards the bar, Mr. Aussie was busy making conversation with two new patrons in skin tight minis and plunging necklines.

I found the house empty when I walked in from my abbreviated date with Mark. Part of me felt bad for ending it so quickly, but if the chemistry wasn't there, it wasn't there. I'd promised Candace I would shoot her a text when I was home so she would know I was alright. Washing up and climbing into bed with a new book, I quickly pulled out my phone and sent a group text to both Sara and Candace.

Me: 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 ;) <3 you two (even if my first date sucked!)

A quick reply from Sara read:

Sara: the fun is just beginning! jack is tomorrow ;)

Friday - April 26, 2013 Seven Weeks until "The Wedding" Date #2 - Jack

Here goes date number two, I sighed to myself as I strolled into The Garage, rocking my LBD and kick ass red high heels. It was Friday night, seven p.m. and the bar was hopping.

"Savannah!" a voice yelled out, followed by a whistle I totally recognized as Riley's. I looked towards his DJ booth and found him giving me an emphatic thumbs up. I returned his smile with a jaunty wink and he returned to setting up his equipment for the night. I was tempted to walk over and chat, until I spotted a casually dressed cutie fitting Jack's description sitting alone at the bar. He was talking to one of the female bartenders and nursing a beer.

Mouthing over to Riley that I had a date, I blew him a kiss instead. He made me crack up at his antics when he grabbed my air kiss, ate it and then dramatically clutched his heart. He then made an hour glass figure with his hands, which made me blush fifteen shades of red and yank down my ultratight skirt.

"Jack?" I asked after slowly making my way to his side. The poofy-haired blond female bartender he was talking to pulled back and nodded my way when he didn't seem to hear me at first. "Jack?"

"Yeah, that's me," he replied, swiveling around on his stool to check me out. "Shit," he muttered, eying me. His jaw fell open to the floor like a cartoon character's. Now - I don't try to profess to be 'all that and a bag of chips', but I did keep myself in shape, so I knew I looked pretty dang good in my skin tight dress; hence why I was wearing it. But this dude was looking at me like I was his next meal. It was slightly unnerving that he couldn't seem to control his thoughts.

"You're Savannah?

"Hi." I held out my hand. "You seem surprised."

"Well, you know, I've learned not to trust those pictures people put up on the dating sites. Photoshop can do wonders for some girls." He grimaced and pretended to shudder as he maintained his firm hold on my hand.

I tugged my fingers free from his grip and stood there waiting for him to suggest we take a seat 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 another table, I finally pulled an empty stool out and slid onto it.

"So, are you a student, Jack?"

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

"I'm sorry?" I questioned; unsure if

I'd heard him correctly.

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

Shooters? Oh joy, I thought as I answered him. "Nah, I don't spend a lot of time on Broadway. It's so crowded with tourists and-"

"Tourists make the club scene way 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."

"Mmmhmmm," I nodded. I was pretty sure I just threw up a little in my mouth. Did he seriously just imply that 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 possibly win some pretty good cash doing a wet t-shirt contest or the bikini contest. You know what?" he blurted out, as if he'd suddenly had a brilliant idea. "Can you dance? We're always in need of some new go-go girls."

"Oh, wow...um yeah, wow Jack," I blubbered, completely at a loss for words. "Thanks for the offer, but um, no. I mean, I'm really not a dancer, you know?" I feigned disappointment. My eyes scanned past Jack's shoulder to see the bartender from the night before silently laughing - at **our** conversation. I swung my face away quickly, trying not to burst into laughter myself.

This "date" was ludicrous. I was pretty sure at this point that Jack basically used the dating site to pick up "hot chicks" for his club. I also had the overwhelming need to use hand sanitizer all over every inch of my body because of the way he kept looking at me.

"I've actually 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 it out?" he asked, totally straight-faced like he actually thought I would say yes. "Drinks on me," he added for good measure. "Gee - thanks for the offer, but I'm gonna have to say no. I appreciate it, though," I lied as I slid out of my stool to help usher his speedy exit.

He had the audacity to pull a card out of his wallet and hand it to me "just in case". As he left, a shiver ran up my spine, causing goosebumps to cover my arms.

"Smart girl," a low voice spoke from behind me.

The Aussie bartender was removing Jack's glass from the bar, and there were several other empty cups cradled in his large hand. I took a moment to surreptitiously check him out now that he wasn't behind the bar. He looked like a fitness cover model. The song 'Country Girl (Shake It For Me)' by Luke Bryan came to mind as I looked at the seat of his very tight black jeans. I would *love* to see him shake it for me. His black tee was so tight it was *obscene*, and I saw every muscle in his arms and chest bulge and flex as he moved around.

"Eavesdrop much?" I shot out sarcastically.

"Sorry, I was making sure you didn't end up on a milk carton. That guy was scumbag personified."

"Yeah, don't worry, I figured that out pretty quickly," I affirmed. "Thanks, though."

I walked away from the bar with a smirk on my face and the certainty that Mr. Aussie's eyes were firmly tractor beamed onto my ass. I felt the heat of his gaze following me as I headed over to Riley's booth to fill him in on the fiasco that was Jack.

"Run him off already, gorgeous?"

"It was baaaad, Riles," I groaned; going into all the slimy details.

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

"Hey! What's that supposed to mean?"

Finished with whatever he'd been doing in his booth, he came around the wall. He grabbed my hand out of the blue and deftly pulled me into his arms. Riley swung me around on the edge of the dance floor as the cover band strummed some slow song I'd never heard of. "Sara and Candace told me about your new 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 was offended that Riley would even think otherwise. Was the word 'fragile' written across my forehead?

"You *do* know that the male species is like, ninety percent horn dog and ten percent 'man you can bring home to your momma', right?"

I giggled when he dipped me low. "It's a damn shame I don't know anyone in that 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 at me and spun 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 always did know how to make me smile.

Saturday - April 27, 2013 Date #3 - Carter

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 was enough for one week. To make matters worse, it was seven-fifteen before my date showed up. He was forty five minutes late. Then he waved at me and pointed to the restroom. What the hell? I seriously contemplated just walking out of the bar, and went as far as to slide off the stool, when a husky male voice stopped me in my tracks.

"Tom Collins?"

Sigh. That accent could melt the

panties off a girl. I was sure it had happened many times. Surprised, I met his warm brown eyes and asked, "You know my drink?"

"It's my job to know what the regulars prefer."

I shook my head immediately. "Oh, I'm not a regular."

He chuckled. That same deep chuckle I remembered hearing 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*?" I asked. I felt my cheeks begin to burn. He actually thought I was trolling for men! I suppose it did look like that to the casual observer. Oh, snap. I didn't want to look

easy.

"*This*? Picking losers for dates - that's what I meant," he stated smoothly, his arm waving about the bar. He turned his back and grabbed a glass and ice. I watched as he made his way around the bar and effortlessly poured the gin, 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. Wait a minute.

"Hey," I shouted after him, not caring that he was talking to some other girls a few stools down from me. He raised his head and looked my way; his forehead crinkling in surprise, or perhaps confusion, at me yelling at him.

"What makes you think they're losers?" I hollered down the bar. Obviously I had no shame anymore. My mother would be mortified.

The corner of his mouth pulled up slowly - and holy hell- a totally lickable dimple popped out in his cheek. The girls at the bar gawked at me while I held his gaze and waited for an answer. He turned back to the other patrons and suddenly I felt like an unruly toddler who had spoken out at an inopportune moment as I watched him take their order. He made a big show out of pouring a glass of wine for one and then shaking up some type of colorful drink for the other. All the while his eyes

continued to meet mine in quick glances, and he maintained a slight grin.

He took their credit cards and slowly migrated my way; his brown eyes boring a hole into mine.

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

The word 'sweetheart' would normally bait me, but coming from his mouth it caused me to turn to goo. Not good. This man had some secret kryptonite in that voice of his.

"Yes, *sweetheart*, I did," I answered snottily, oozing with self-importance. "What makes you think my dates are losers?"

"You can't be serious," he all but groaned. "Love, anyone could have placed a bet on the outcome of those dates."

Oh my God. He was full of himself, wasn't he? I laughed off his remark and took a long swig of my drink as I tried to develop a witty comeback. My damn perfect drink. Did this man have any faults besides an oversized ego? Unfortunately the busy crowd took him away from me before I could come up with anything worthy to spit back at him.

"Hey, gorgeous." Strong hands gripped my upper arms and a pair of lips pressed a quick kiss to my cheek. Riley.

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

I twisted in my seat to face him. Riley was tall and skinny - the type of guy you would assume was into Bioscience. He was totally an urban hipster, though. What he was doing playing music at a semi-country bar in Nashville was beyond me. He slapped the bar top twice and nodded his head.

"Where's Sara and Candace? Or are you on another date?" he asked, as he reached over my shoulder for a large glass and acknowledged whomever had handed it to him with a "Thanks, man."

"Sure thing." Kyptonite voice struck again as I answered Riley. "Well, kinda."

"Kinda? What's that supposed to mean?" he asked; his forehead crinkled in confusion. I looked across the bar towards the hallway to the restroom and spotted my time challenged date actually flirting with some big boobed chick. Snorting inelegantly, I excused myself from the bar stool.

Time to nip this one in the bud, I thought to myself. I deliberately walked as sexily as I could as I sauntered over to my supposed date, Carter, and stood behind the petite brunette he was chatting with.

I threw out a casual "Hey," interrupting their flirtatious banter. The brunette halted her chipper laughter and swung around to meet me, open curiosity showing in her face.

"So is this a double date tonight, Carter?" I asked, boldly eyeing the girl like I was sizing her up. Carter's jaw went slack as he assessed me. The brunette giggled and actually leaned into me and whispered, "I'm not against that, you know." She winked when she pulled back and I burst out laughing. The little brunette laughed too. I got the feeling I was being punked, and scanned the area looking for hidden cameras.

"I tell you what, sweetie - he's all yours tonight," I conceded, patting her arm. I shrugged at Carter as he pinned a look on me, and walked away swinging my hips as provocatively as I could.

Riley watched me as I wandered back to the bar. His water glass was arrested halfway to his mouth, and his eyes were about to jump out of their sockets. "Was that your date?" he sputtered, finally taking control of his senses and sipping from his glass again.

I edged myself back onto the bar stool, careful to keep my short skirt from riding up as I answered him. "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," he muttered a little too forcefully. "What did you say to them?"

"I suggested a threesome," I heard a choked laugh behind me but paid it no heed as I went on, "and hilariously enough, she was into that. So I did what any smart girl would do, and I gracefully handed him over to her." "It's his loss, Savannah. You look extremely do-able tonight, baby," he exclaimed, causing me to slap his chest when the few guys standing by us looked over and nodded in agreement.

"Nice job, Riley," I muttered. "Now they're *all* going to be panting after me."

"Pretty sure they already were," he ground out as he glanced at his watch. "Stick around for a while?"

It was eight o'clock and I had no desire to head home yet, so I agreed. Crossing my legs and leaning my elbows on the bar behind me, I hunkered down to wait.

"Try not to distract the bartenders sitting there all pretty like that." He leaned down and pressed another friendly kiss to my cheek.

"Hey Gage," he called over my head. "Watch out for my girl here."

I laughed when he called me 'his girl' until I looked to the left to see Gage, a.k.a. Mr. Aussie, shake his head in affirmation and reply back, "Sure thing, Riley."

If there'd been a desk in front of me, I would have been knocking my head into it. Gage, as I now knew his name to be, turned away the moment Riley did. After a few minutes of keeping my back to the bar, I heard ice clinking into a glass behind me. Slowly I looked over my shoulder to see Gage placing another Tom Collins on a napkin.

"Trying to get me drunk?" I flirted,

giving him an appreciative glance. He winked and looked me over for a moment.

"We're friends." I threw that out there like the obligatory Presidential first pitch at an MLB game. It was awkward and clumsy, and Gage did nothing but raise his brows and walk away.

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

"Who's here for some music?" called Riley 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..." I zoned out as he introduced the first singer. The bar was full of groups of people laughing and drinking. There were more tables set around the dance floor area tonight, which left less room to dance to the live music. They usually shifted the tables off the floor each night around ten o'clock when Riley started spinning tunes.

A soft voice began singing a Taylor Swift cover and I found my foot swinging to the tune. She actually sounded pretty good. I twisted around to the drink Gage had left for me and found myself the object of his intense scrutiny.

He stood on the other end of the bar, popping bottles open for a large group of guys who couldn't find any seats at the bar. They were shouting above the music and other crowd noise, holding up fingers and passing drinks around.

I averted my eyes and picked up my drink; taking a small sip. Mmmmm, he had mad skills at making drinks, that was for sure. With my head lowered I tried to steal a glance his way. Behind my lowered lids I strained my eyeballs and was able to make out his form, but not his face.

My visual stalking was interrupted by the most cliché opening line ever. "You go to VU, right?"

Obvious much? Pretty much everyone who inhabited The Garage went to VU. Well, everyone with the exception of the cougar crew that I kept seeing hanging around. Speaking of, I wondered where they were tonight.

"Hey, yeah I do," I answered politely, checking him out. He wore leather banded flip flops, cargo shorts and a simple pullover. His eyes looked to be light in color, but the strange lighting in the bar made it hard to see exactly what color. His hair was brown and a little long at the edges.

"I knew I'd seen you around campus." He smiled as he held his hand out to me and introduced himself as Brandon.

"Savannah."

"So, Savannah, what are you doing here all alone?"

I tried, and failed, to keep my eyes from rolling. Is this really how guys picked girls up these days? I'd forgotten how awkward it was trying to pick up strangers. No wonder I didn't do this bar thing more often. Brandon stepped a little closer to me and brushed his leg against mine.

"I'm not alone..." I replied.

"Brand?" interrupted a petite blond from across the floor. When she got to our sides, she surveyed me for all of two seconds before wrapping her lithe body around Brandon and kissing him full on the lips. "Come dance with me," she murmured; pulling him away.

He allowed her to lead him to the dance floor, but not before his eyes made intimate contact with every inch of my body one last time.

"Hmph, tossed aside for Malibu

Barbie," I muttered to myself, laughing at my own humor. I raised my glass for another long sip while I watched the limber gal do her personal version of a pole dance around poor Brandon's waist. The current performer was singing Toby Keith, for goodness sake. Not exactly a stripper song.

The kryptonite voice I was getting so used to chuckled and spoke. "You can't sit there like that and not expect these puppies to hit on you."

"Puppies?" I asked, genuinely confused at his slang.

"Puppies. I'd call them dogs, but they're boys, sweetheart...and you've got them sniffing around you like you're in heat." I was leaning against the bar with one elbow propped on it and my right leg crossed over the left. My black dress hiked up a good mile in my seated position, and I'd been swinging my strappy heeled leg to and fro for a while. I also came to the embarrassing conclusion that this position gave my cleavage quite a boost.

Seeing that I understood his meaning, he leaned over the bar and whispered close to my ear, "Riley was right, by the way. You *do* look very do-able lounging there."

Jaw dropped.

"Gage, they need you in the back," called one of the other bartenders.

Bringing myself back towards the bar,

I watched as he nodded. He stood there for a moment, his thoughtful eyes on me, before he leaned in like he was about to confess 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 that covered me while I tried to process Gage's compliments.

The strains of Luke Bryan's song called to me as Riley's request sank all

the way in. I pulled myself together and looked across the crowd at Riley, who was pointing straight at me. His finger was crooked and beckoning me to the dance floor.

What was he *doing*? Abandoning my stool, I waded through all of the country girls shaking their things on the floor. When I reached his booth I gave him my best glare, before being bombarded by Sara and Candace.

"What are y'all doing here?" I shouted. Relief flooded me at seeing them and knowing I wouldn't be alone for the rest of the night.

"A little birdy told us you were lonely," smiled Sara. "Riley?" "Guilty baby," he admitted. "Couldn't stand watching you get ogled by the masses any longer. I needed reinforcements to keep you safe."

"I could kiss you guys right now," I laughed; starting to let loose and dance in our private little circle.

Riley leaned over the booth. "*I'll* take that kiss."

I assumed he was kidding, but as I went to plant a friendly kiss on his cheek, he turned his head and allowed me to kiss his lips. It was a quick kiss, but it was unexpected and certainly something new for us.

"Meowww," teased Sara.

Candace pulled me back from the booth and raised my hand to twirl me

while the band played another song. We danced to the band for another hour before my cute little heels staged a revolt. Sara had taken up with one of her many "friends with benefits" partakers, and left once the band finished their last set.

"I'm beat. Do you need a ride home?" I asked Candace. I was ready to go home and soak my poor little piggies. When she agreed, we waved to Riley that we were off. His face flashed with disappointment but he smiled and signaled that he would call us.

Or me.

I really wasn't sure. I hadn't thought much more about his flirting from earlier. I was hoping I wouldn't have to. As we walked to the exit, I motioned to Candace to hold up. Gage was leaning against the bar and I limped my way over. He was talking animatedly to a few ladies and pouring them wine.

"Hey," I called out. The redhead directly in front of him turned around, and I noted her hand was resting on the forearm that he had draped over the bar top. "Sorry," I apologized. Inside I groaned at myself for yelling, yet again. "I wanted to thank you for the drinks."

His eyes met mine, his mouth opened slightly, and then it closed. He simply nodded instead, as he finished pouring wine and placed the bottle in front of him. I stood there for a moment expecting him to say something, but he didn't reply. He corked the wine bottle, leaving his free hand resting around the neck. His other arm was being stroked by the redhead, who was giving me a serious evil eye.

I coughed in embarrassment. "Well, okay then. See ya."

Spinning on my heels, I hustled over to Candace's side and ignored the questioning daggers her eyes were shooting at me. We quickly made our way to my car and I clicked the doors unlocked. I was fidgeting with my key chain and stopped short when I heard footsteps rushing out of the bar, coming our way. Jerking my gaze up, it took a moment for my mind to register what my eyes were seeing.

It was Gage hurrying towards us. Candace was already seated in the car and I was still making my way around to the driver's side. I pulled the door open and stood there mutely as Gage slowed down and stopped. I watched as he stuck one hand in his pocket, his face half in shadows.

There were two cars between us when he finally called out, "I didn't get your name."

I stood there. Candace hissed "Answer him" at me from within the car, but I froze.

He glanced behind him and I wondered how much trouble he would get in for following a patron, a female patron at that, outside while on shift. I was sure he probably wasn't supposed to do that. Why did he want to know my name? Why was he so freaking hot? Why was I a crazy freak who couldn't answer the hot Australian bartender?

Lord, say that ten times fast.

"Sorry," he faltered, adding, "I didn't mean to bother you," and he turned to go.

"No. Wait," I finally choked out, desperate for him not to leave. "It's Savannah."

The slow smile that crossed his face caused my body temperature to rise at least ten degrees.

"Savannah," he repeated, his voice taking on the confident super power sexiness from earlier in the evening. "Will you be making it four nights in a row?"

"Four nights? Oh, you mean will I be here tomorrow? No," I said almost reluctantly. "Contrary to what you may think, I'm really *not* a regular here. I've got a da...an appointment next Thursday upstairs, though." I added that little tidbit to see if he would tell me to stop by. No go.

"Then I'm sure I'll see you around," he called as he took a step backwards. "Drive safe...sweetheart."

"Okay, you too. Thanks," I called after him as he laughed and proceeded to walk back inside.

I slipped into the car with what I'd said echoing in my head; sitting there dumbly repeating it out loud. "'*Okay*,

you too?' Did I really just *say* that to him?" Lord, that made absolutely no sense.

"Lucy, you've got some 'splaining to do," Candace quipped in her best Ricky Ricardo voice.

Yes, yes I did.

Sunday - April 28, 2013 Remembering Daniel

Bzzzz Bzzzz Bzzzz

In the midst of a *very* tantalizing dream with a *very* buff Australian superman, the *very* 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 getting ready to show me some of his special superpowers....can't a girl get a break!

Bzzzz Bzzzz Bzzzz

I agitatedly reached out from under my blanket cocoon to answer the phone. "What?!"

"Savannah?"

Damn.

"Hi mother," I groaned. Worst. Timing. Ever. I sighed inwardly.

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

Yes, mother. You know, 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? I snapped mentally; stretching out from under the covers and peeking at the screen on the phone for the time. Nine thirty-six a.m.

Nine thirty-six! On a Sunday morning!

"Mother." I began taking in deep breaths. "It is nine in the morning. On a Sunday. Really?"

"Now, darling, don't take that tone with me. I wanted to catch you before church. You know I have that shower for Mary Anne this afternoon, and I bought her a present from you."

I shot up in horror and yelped, "You WHAT?"

"Oh really now, drop the drama Savannah," 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. I mean really, what am I supposed to say to everyone when they ask why you're not here?"

Her voice continued to go up an octave with each line she spoke. "And Daniel's family loves you. You know, his mother still asks about you all the time, and to be honest I really think they were expecting you two to work things out eventually. It isn't right that 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."

Kill me now.

"Mother..." I blurted out, trying to stop her rant. "Mother!" I shouted louder.

"There's no need to screech, darling. I'm not hard of hearing."

"Thank you for buying a gift. Please

convey my apologies for not being there. I need to go now. I love you."

"Well alright then, if you must rush off. I'll call you later and tell you all about the event. Did I mention that it's at the botanical...?"

"Goodbye, momma," I said; stopping her.

"Alright, alright darling. Get some rest. You sound horrible. Goodbye."

I tossed my phone to the side and buried my head back under my pillow.

An hour later I was standing in the kitchen trying to decide what to eat, when I heard the front door lock jiggle. Sara snuck in quietly, closing the door softly behind her.

Busted. She was wearing the same cute little tank top and bubble skirt she'd worn the night before.

"Don't try to sneak past me, Sara. Embrace your walk of shame," I teased, sticking my head out of the kitchen.

"AHHH," she yelped, dropping her black boots with a loud thump. "You scared me."

"I bet." I laughed and returned to the pantry and my fruitless search for something amazing to eat. There was nothing, unless I wanted Pop-tarts or Lucky Charms. While I was a fan of both, I was craving real food. Like bacon.

"Hardy har har," came Sara's voice as she propped herself against the doorway. "There's no shame in this walk, babe."

"Really? You were with Chris, right?"

"Mmmmhmmm, and I am deliciously exhausted."

Groaning, I shut the cabinet door and laughed at her. "Ugh, Sara. I don't want to hear about your sexcapades."

She made a sign as if she was zipping her lips and turned to head to her room, but not before calling out behind her, "Your loss." I heard her hum all the way down the hallway.

"What's your loss?" asked Candace a few minutes later, freshly showered and dressed for the day.

"Ha. I wouldn't let Sara brag about

her torrid night of passion with Chris."

Candace chuckled. "She spent the whole night out? The little ho," she teased. She went behind me and checked all around the kitchen for food, much as I just had.

"Hmmm, I need something substantial," she moaned, rubbing her stomach. "Brunch?"

"You read my mind," I agreed quickly. "Be right back." I raced to my room and threw on a simple sundress and some Keds. Thankfully I'd showered before bed, so I just threw my dark hair into a high ponytail and slicked on some lip gloss.

"Let's go."

Sitting over brunch, Candace shoved a bite of sausage into her mouth and requested information on what had gone on between me and Gage.

"Nothing," I squeaked, my voice all but cracking.

"Nothing," she mimicked. "Sweetie, he chased you outside the bar to get your name. Obviously you made quite an impression."

I took a sip of orange juice and told her about yelling at Mr. Aussie when he called my dates losers. Although she held her tongue, her wide eyes and silently shaking shoulders attested to her amusement.

"I got the impression he was hoping you'd be back again tonight," she hinted. "C'mon Cand, that's Sara's department. Did you *see* all the chicks hanging on him? He probably scores more than Peyton Manning."

"Dude, harsh." She broke out into hysterical laughter. "Probably true, but still harsh."

I joined wholeheartedly in her laughter. "He's super hot though – I'll give him that."

"Oh, I'd give him more than that," she chuckled, earning herself a peg in the face from one of my home fries.

"Alright then," she piped up after a few moments, "let's talk about Riley."

"You're full of questions this morning, aren't you Lois Lane?" Lois Lane. My thoughts immediately went to my abbreviated dream this morning with my Aussie superman and I shifted guiltily in my seat.

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

"Well *that* question is somewhat harder to answer than the one about Gage. He was in full-on-flirt mode last night. He called me 'doable'," I laughed. "I mean hell's bells, it was random."

"Not totally random. I'm pretty sure he's been scoping you out for a long time. You know about the brief fling back freshman year with Sara? Well maybe he's been biding his time with you because of her."

"No way. We've been friends for two

whole years. He knows I don't date, yet he's never tried to put a move on me."

"Don't be such a Dawson," she said without missing a beat.

"Dawson? Good Lord, you need to stop hanging out with Sara. What's that supposed to mean?"

Candace snorted; rolling her eyes like the answer was so obvious. "Duh. Dawson's Creek. Don't you remember how Dawson was so oblivious to everything that went on? Seriously, he didn't know Joey was in love with him? How could he miss that? You're being just like him."

"Oh my God, Sara is totally rubbing off on you. And no, I'm not being a Dawson, because it is NOT so obvious, Cand. Seriously, we've always had such a fun friendship. I really don't know what to do about that kiss." I begged, "Give a girl a hand - what do I do?"

"Don't spaz out, Savannah. It was just a quick kiss. Has he called you yet?"

I pushed my plate to the side and shook my head no.

"You're right, it might be nothing. I mean, there have been plenty of opportunities for him to hit on you and he never has," she reasoned. "Of course, maybe he's jealous now that he sees you finally wading out into the dating pool."

"Jealous? What's he got to be jealous about? He knows I'm looking for a wedding date!"

Candace shrugged. Riley's behavior

was as much a mystery to her as it was to me.

"Speaking of dates," I spoke up while we waited for our check, "this week's dates weren't so great. I hope you've got something better planned for next week."

"Oh yes I do," she sang, rubbing her hands together devilishly. "You're meeting a special someone Tuesday night for dinner..."

"Whoa, I said drinks only, Candace," I warned.

"I know. But Savannah, I *promise* you this one is different. It's dinner, trust me. Sara picked out your Friday night guy, and we actually agreed on Mr. Saturday night."

"This is crazy," I acknowledged. "Am

I really this desperate to find a date to Mary Anne's wedding?"

"Yes," Candace deadpanned.

"Hey, c'mon now."

Candace grabbed the bill from the table and stood. "No you're not desperate for a date. You *are* in desperate need of getting back in the saddle, though. Honey, what actually happened the last time you went back home? I've known you for three years and you've never opened up to me about it."

Slinging my purse across my chest, I followed Candace to the cashier's counter 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 feel the need to delve into my personal life. I'd told her all about Daniel dumping me my senior year of high school right before my coming-out ball, and she sympathized, but never pried. She spent countless nights studying in our dorm with me instead of trying to convince me to go out and party.

It wasn't until I came home from that disastrous Easter when Daniel had hit on me, that I finally opened up to her about him dating Mary Anne. She'd been so angry on my behalf that I couldn't find the courage to tell her about our kissing or his proposition to meet him. Or my subsequent weakness and shame over that night. It had been two years. It was time to tell her the truth so she could understand things better.

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

"Honey, of course it will," she promised, crossing her heart. We left the diner and walked down the sidewalk on a street full of trendy little shops. There was a wooded park up ahead, and we silently headed for a picnic table.

"I'm going to tell you a story that doesn't make me proud, but you have to understand how broken I was back then," I angled, trying to qualify my actions.

"Savannah," she all but snapped at me. "I know how broken you were. You were like a vacant shell our entire freshman year. You had no idea how to live, and you let your mother rule your every move that year. I half expected you to drop out once the year was over."

Her perception of me that first year both surprised and hurt me. She was right. I *had* come to school as half a person. The summer before school started proved to be way more than I could handle. Then as I went home for vacations, I found my past haunting me at every turn. I fell into a depression so deep I didn't recognize myself.

"You're right," I confessed. "I almost did make the decision to transfer to a school back home."

Climbing up onto the picnic table, I finally let my skeletons out of the closet.

"At Easter dinner, Daniel made a pass at me," I began.

"You're kidding."

"Shhh," I chided, holding up my hand. "Let me get through this."

She shook her head and listened as I told her the disturbing details of him coming to my room and our seedy makeout session. "The thing is, I can't explain why I did it. There was always something about him that was so mesmerizing. I fell right into his hands that day, Candace. He asked me to meet him at 'our' old spot that night."

Her mouth opened into a silent 'O', but she didn't speak. "I wish I could say I didn't go. I wish I could say I immediately grabbed my keys and came straight back to school. But no, I didn't. You know what I did instead?" I laughed at the stupid girl I had been.

"I put on the sexiest outfit I could find and drove to the park where we had our first kiss. Candace, I swear I smiled all the way there, thinking about Mary Anne and how Daniel was going to tell me he'd made a mistake and he wanted me back. God," I moaned; shaking my head and burying my face into my hands. "I was such an idiot. He was already there waiting for me when I arrived."

"He had the gall to bring a blanket. He 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 I would show. I should have run the other way, but instead I ran right into his arms."

"What a lying cheat," Candace finally fumed. "Did you two have sex?"

Shame crept through me when I admitted that we had. I couldn't justify it. I was dumb and blind and totally out of my mind.

"I didn't tell you that we never actually slept together when we were a couple. Actually, I'm pretty sure that was why he dumped me," I confessed. "He'd been pressuring me for a while, but I wouldn't budge. We even fought about it before he went off to school. When he broke up with me it was pretty funny, because we'd spent the entire time he was home doing some heavy duty making out. I was blindsided when he pulled up outside my house the day he was heading back to school and told me that he wanted us to both have some 'freedom'. Claimed I deserved to enjoy my last year, and that he wanted us to both experience life before we settled down with each other."

"What an ass."

"Funny part was, I was going to cash in my V-card the night of my coming-out. He just happened to end it before I could do it."

"Well I remember you coming back from Easter break and being this totally different girl. You were *pissed*."

I laughed and stretched out my legs, letting the sun warm them. "Yeah, Daniel

pissed me off something fierce that night I slept with him."

I recalled lying there as he slipped his pants back up over himself. We hadn't even bothered to get fully undressed. Talk about a hussy moment. He stretched out beside me and ran his finger along my collar bone, staring deeply into my eyes. We hadn't said more than ten words since I'd gotten there, and most of the words we did say were throaty exclamations of passion. He hadn't confessed his love for me, or his regret. He just told me how beautiful I was and how much I turned him on.

As his finger dipped between my breasts he took a deep breath and finally spoke. "We need to keep this a secret, okay?"

I remember blinking. The vision of a cartoon character shaking its head and trying to pound out something lodged in their ear because they couldn't hear came to mind. Did I miss something?

"A secret?"

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

"Whhhaattt?" I screeched, nearly knocking him over as I sat up. "Mary Anne? I just had *sex* with you, Daniel. I... I ...oh my God," I gasped.

I jumped up, grabbed my shoes and keys and ran towards my car, dangerously close to tears. Daniel yelled my name but I didn't stop. I fumbled with the keys and jerked the door open right 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 hissed in disgust. "What a funny way of showing her your love."

"Baby, come on. Don't be that way. I love you too. I'm just confused. I didn't expect you to feel this good." Daniel leveled his puppy dog eyes on me and whined, "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 can figure out what's best."

"What's best for *who*, Daniel?"

"For all of us," he murmured, pulling

me back against his chest. "We're all grownups here. Who says we can't still see each other?"

I yanked away from his grip and swung around to face him; tears glittering in my eyes. "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 when we were in high school was great, baby, but this - this moment," he pointed towards the blanket. "*That* was incredible. I didn't expect it from you."

"Am I supposed to take that as a compliment?" I almost 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 like a hell cat. Someone has really taught you well."

And there it was. The moment when the horror at what I'd done became anger. Red hot, fire breathing anger. I stood there in front of the person who had just changed my whole life without even knowing it. The person who'd ripped out my heart, threw it on the ground and then stomped on it when he'd walked into my party with Mary Anne on his arm nine months earlier. Now he had the *audacity* to compliment the person he assumed taught me in bed.

I leaned forward and crooked my finger at Daniel to get him to come near

me; a small smile playing on my lips. Placing my hands on his shoulders, I pulled him down to my mouth and whispered into his ear. "You will NEVER touch me again, or Mary Anne will hear every last, dirty detail of this day." I breathed sweetly into his ear. Then 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.

I hadn't been to a family event since.

Candace looked like she'd seen a ghost 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 over and over what he'd said, and noticed that there was one thing that kept sticking out in my mind. He'd complained about how proper I was, how much like my mother I behaved, and that was the one point I couldn't argue. I was tired of being the perfect little country club debutante belle that my mother raised me to be."

"I remember when you came back, and it was like you flipped a switch. You loosened up and started to hang out more," Candace remembered. Then she chuckled and pointed out, "That's when we met Sara and bless her, she pulled you the rest of the way from that cocoon you'd been in."

I laughed. "Yeah she did. I wanted to be my own person, Candace, and I've tried very hard to be. I still have a ways to go to finally get what I want, but I'm working on it."

"So why haven't you dated? I mean, girl - so many guys have asked you out over the past two years...why haven't you ever said yes?"

"I think I've just been scared of getting screwed over again. It's not solely about Daniel." I stopped myself and tried to figure out how to explain the rest of my story. "There was another guy. It was the summer before our freshman year, while I was still nursing my freshly broken heart from Daniel's defection. It's a long story that I'd rather not get into right now, but trust me when I say that between the two of them I was done."

"Was this guy an ass too?"

Twirling a strand of hair from my ponytail, I sighed. "Hmmm, no. He was actually really amazing, but we just weren't meant to be. I promise to tell you about him sometime soon."

"That's one dreamy look in your eye, chica."

"Oh stop, it was a long time ago. Hey - enough about me. Don't you think we should rush back home and drill Sara about her all-nighter?"

With a resounding "Yes" Candace jumped up from the table and pulled me with her. As we rushed back to the car to head home, I felt like a weight had been lifted from my chest. Getting the truth out there was cathartic. Maybe now I would finally be ready to move forward and make some sort of an effort with these dates the girls were setting me up on. Perhaps Candace was right. It was high time I got back in the saddle and moved on. Moved on from Daniel, as well as from the guy who'd first started to pick up the shattered pieces of my heart. Even though he was also the same guy to knock them back down again.

Spencer Alexander.

Monday - April 29, 2013 Paint and Surprises

I hadn't thought about Spencer in a long time, but after sharing my painful past with Candace, I couldn't help but recall the summer we'd spent together before I started school. Now, as I got up for my first day of a summer art class, he was all I could think about.

I was worried about my mother meddling into his personal life, so I decided to give my dad a quick call to see if he'd diffused the situation. Placing the call while I grabbed a bagel to eat on my way out the door, I waited while the phone rang. When his voicemail sounded, I left a quick message. "Hi daddy. It's Monday morning almost eight, 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 Alexander. Call me back. Love you."

Slipping the phone in the bag slung over my shoulder, I jumped in the car and headed off to class. I'd decided to sign up for a drawing class at the local community college to keep myself busy over the summer. I was volunteering at the University's fine art gallery for the summer too, but it was sketching that truly made me happy.

Graduation was only a year away, and the thought lodged in my chest.

Thinking about what I was going to do once school was over scared the hell out of me. My art history degree was something I'd chosen for my mother's benefit. With our lucrative family history I was very lucky to not have to worry about finances, so of course she pushed me to do something that I could use as part of the family philanthropy when I was done. Problem was, I wasn't sure if that was what I wanted. I really did love art, and my knowledge of the paintings and sculptures of the world had grown through the years. Now I was ready to go out and travel the world, sketch and see all of those beautiful things first-hand.

Unfortunately my mother was still stuck in her little southern belle

mentality that dictated I should come home, bat my eyelashes and marry the first man with a roman numeral after his name I could find.

After class I was sitting at a Starbucks sipping on a Frappe when my phone rang. I checked out the screen and saw the incoming call was from Riley. I grimaced and gritted my teeth before I even answered.

"Hello?"

"Hey Savannah, it's Riley."

"Hey Riles, what's up?" I asked, deliberately trying to keep my voice light.

"I was thinking we could grab lunch one day this week. I feel like we need to talk." "Um, sure. I've got to work at the gallery each morning this week, though. I'm not sure when I'll get out of there yet, or if I'll get a lunch or not."

"Okay," he drawled out. "How about today?"

The thought of talking with Riley about anything right now set off alarms in my head. He was a great friend, and I didn't want that to change. "Riley," I began, trying to be careful with my words, "is everything okay?"

There was a long pause on the line and a sigh before he spoke. "I was going to ask you the same thing, Savannah. I feel like I need to apologize for kissing you the other night."

I almost said it was okay before I

realized that it might not be the right thing to say. It wasn't that I hated the idea of Riley, but I knew it didn't feel right, either.

"Listen, I'm free right now for an early lunch. I'd love to meet you if you don't mind meeting up around eleven," I said.

After we agreed on a space to meet, I hung up and glanced at my watch to see that it was almost ten. That gave me more than enough time to check out the nearest art store for some of the supplies I needed for my class.

Forty-five minutes later I walked into a local deli to find Riley already waiting for me. He rose to meet me as he pulled the ear buds from his head. "Hey." I hugged him cheerfully and attempted to swallow down any awkwardness. "Did you order already?"

"Nah, I was waiting on 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 spat out of nowhere the moment we sat in a booth to eat.

"Whoa...careful where you're shooting those words, Riles. Can you back up and explain yourself?"

"That's what I keep telling myself. That we'd never work." He bent his head away from me for a moment and rubbed his scratchy chin with his palm. "Riley...where is this coming from? We're friends."

"I know, Savannah. But I'll be damned if I didn't see you walk into the bar Saturday night and suddenly it was like *BAM*. I just couldn't help myself."

"Sounds to me 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. I saw those guys at the bar looking at you and I let myself wonder why I hadn't taken a swing. We get along great, you're one of my best friends – so 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 even a blip on the radar. You have to know that we were short, sweet and much better as friends."

"So are we," I said softly, looking down at 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."

I timidly looked up to meet his eyes when his hand touched mine. He spoke in a matter of fact tone, "I know. Cheer up, sweetie. You're not breaking my heart here."

"I'm not? Well, I mean 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." I was dangerously close to tears when I added, "You know it's not you, it's me, right?"

"Wow, we're being cliché now?" he choked out.

Swallowing back the wave of tears that overwhelmed me for a moment, I tried to clarify my previous statement.

"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. Then more seriously he added, "Savannah, you are *not* stupid. You're smarter than *I* am and if there was something here," he said, motioning between both of us with his hand, "you would've felt it. No worries, babe."

Thankful for his graciousness, I smiled. We ate in silence for a few minutes before he spoke again.

"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 say it's getting hard to watch all the guys drooling after you like you're a piece of meat. It's disgusting."

"Oh, whatever Riles," I said, throwing him a disgruntled look. "You're usually one of those guys drooling after the girls." "Well that's different." "Oh really? How so?"

"Well it's *me*, for one." He laughed. Seeing that I wasn't buying into his flimsy explanation, he added, "And I don't care about any of those girls."

"Well no can do, sir. I've got some more dates to go on, and I'm not sure they'd be real impressed with me in sweats and tees."

"Now that's some sexy shit right there, girl."

"Only on the morning after would you call that sexy, Riley." He waggled his eyebrows and laughed wickedly.

"I love you Riles," I reminded him, smiling at his antics and getting up to discard my food.

Coming up behind me, Riley dumped

his food in the trash and gave me a bear hug. "I love you too babe, and that's why we would never work." He placed a quick kiss on the top of my head.

"Oh gosh, shut up already," I laughed, but let him squeeze me for a moment longer than necessary.

As we exited the building, Riley checked his watch. "I have some time to kill before I need to go in. What are you up to now?"

I needed to get some art supplies, but the store closest to the coffee shop didn't have what I wanted. Deciding it would be nice to have company I responded, "I need to go to The Painter's Palette to get some drawing supplies. You free?"

Twenty minutes and two drive-bys

looking for a parking spot later, the little bell at The Painter's Palette rang to signal our entrance to the staff. This art store was my favorite in the Nashville area. Locally owned and operated, the staff was always friendly, helpful, and up to chat about techniques and tools.

"Hi Ms. Camille," I called out; waving to the friendly shop owner. Camille was in her early fifties, with salt and pepper hair with streaks of red in the front that she always wore in a long braid. Somewhat of a hippie soul, she made me smile with her tie dye tops and long gypsy skirts.

"Hi there." She nodded to me, and I saw that her hands were covered in paint from some project she was working on at the back table by the paint supplies.

"You know the employees here by name?" Riley questioned; running his hand over the brush tips as we walked by them. I slapped his hand away and dragged him to the charcoal pencils.

"Yep. I've been shopping here for three years now. 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. Ryan was probably in his mid-thirties with brown, thinning hair and beady little eyes. He always checked on me whenever I was in the store, and had even asked me out for coffee once. His worn jeans were full of specks of paint, much like Camille's hands.

His voice perked up a bit. "Oh, hi. You here for some charcoal? I haven't seen you in a while. Can I help you find anything?" His sentences rushed out all at once, and crimson stained his cheeks.

"Yeah, I'm taking a new sketching class. I see what I need." Seeing his shoulders droop, I added, "Thanks, though."

Rubbing his hands against his jeans and throwing a look at Riley, Ryan mumbled, "Um, okay then. Ring the bell when you're ready to check out if I'm not up front."

Riley watched as the salesclerk

walked away before he snorted, "He was giving you *the look*."

I picked up some new pencils and ignored Riley, then moved to walk down the aisle that held sketching pads.

Riley called out behind me, "So tell me about this whole dating thing."

"Shhhh, Riley, not so loud," I warned him. Waving him to the other aisle with me, I filled him in on my foray into blind speed dating.

"Let me get this straight," he laughed. "You're letting Barbie and her sister Skipper pick out your dates? From the campus dating site?" He spoke slowly, as if he needed to enunciate each word for me.

Rolling my eyes towards the sky, I

tried to ignore his prodding. "Dude. Seriously - what were you *thinking*?"

"I wasn't," I admitted, somewhat embarrassed. "They hounded me about needing a date to my cousin's wedding, and then they said I should start going on some dates. I'll admit I thought it was a stupid idea at the time, 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 up the pads, I turned the corner to check the end cap of the aisle that usually held clearance items. As I rounded the end I bumped smack dab into Ryan, who was standing there awkwardly. "Oh my gosh! Sorry," I said, as my sketch pads hit the floor with a loud slap.

"My bad," he apologized; his voice quivering slightly like he was nervous. We both ended up bending down to pick up my dropped supplies and I smiled kindly when he handed them to me.

"Thanks."

He nodded his head and bustled off without another word.

"M'kay, I think I've got everything. Let's go." I walked to the checkout counter with Riley on my heels, bugging me all the way there about the dating thing. Ryan stood at the register and asked if we'd found everything alright.

"Sure did," I mumbled absentmindedly, turning back to Riley as the clerk rang me up.

"Riles, would you lay off?"

"Well Savannah, you have to admit it's kinda creepy. You're meeting them at The Garage, right? That's what Sara said."

"Yes," I snapped tightly. "I'm not crazy. It's all for fun, so stop your worrying."

The sales clerk Ryan coughed and interrupted, "That'll be twenty seven dollars and eighty-nine cents. Cash or credit?"

I swiped my debit card and he surprised me by asking to see my ID. I commented on the fact saying, "Wow, most people don't bother asking anymore." "Sorry," he spoke softly. "We like to keep our customers safe from fraud."

"No, I appreciate it actually," I admitted, as he scanned my ID and compared it to my card.

"Here you go, Ms. Guthry," he said; handing me back my ID and card. "Would you like the receipt in the bag?"

"Sure," I agreed. Stuffing the ID in my wallet, I grabbed the bags when Ryan handed them to me over the counter. "Thanks."

"My pleasure. Come back again soon," Ryan called out after Riley and me as we walked away.

"I'm sure I will."

Later that evening I received two

phone calls. The first was a surprise. The second threw me for a loop.

I was stepping out of the shower when I heard my phone ringing on my bed. Wrapping my towel around my chest, I ran to catch the caller. Seeing the name "Jax" on the screen brought a smile to my face.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's Jax."

"So I saw. How are you?"

"Tired." His voice was missing its usual excitement from our other conversations. "They've got me working twelve plus hour days and I'm exhausted, Savannah."

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

He groaned, "If this is what being a grown up will mean, then I want to go back." I laughed, but I knew what he was saying. I was only a year away from graduation. One more year and I'd be saying goodbye to school life and my best friends. To endless nights of chatting and pigging out.

"Kinda scary, huh Jax?" I asked; sharing my thoughts. "I'm ready in some ways, but I'm really gonna miss this." I looked around longingly at my little cottage bedroom as I said it.

"I was calling so you could cheer me up, but it sounds like I'm just bringing you down."

"Ha. No you're not. How can I cheer you up?"

"Well I was hoping you'd pencil me in for a date Friday."

"This Friday?" I all but squealed.

"Yep. I'm flying back into town for the day and I'd love to see you."

I didn't know what my date situation was for that day, but I didn't care. I would just have to cancel on whoever it was.

"I'll be free."

I heard some commotion in the background with Jax when he spoke again. "Great. Listen, I'm at the office and they're waiting on me to get some numbers. I'll call you Friday to confirm, but how about you plan on being ready for dinner around five?"

Agreeing that dinner would be great,

we hung up; making promises to talk again in a day or two.

I was lying in my bed enjoying a new romance novel when an unknown call flashed up on my screen. It was ten o'clock, so I let it go to voicemail, and then waited to see if the person would actually leave a message or not. After a few minutes, the double beep signaling a message sounded. I dialed into my voicemail curiously, and heard a voice I hadn't heard in three years.

"Savannah? Hi, 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 here. Can you give me a call when you have time to talk?" There was a long pause and then a sigh. "We need to talk, Savannah."

I squeezed my eyes shut tightly to keep the tears at bay and listened to the message again. His voice sounded dejected. He said he couldn't get away from me? What did he mean by that? I was surprised that he was back in Charleston. I'd assumed that by now he'd probably finished law school, and I always expected that he would get a job in Atlanta.

When things ended between us three years ago, they ended with the mutual decision that we would both move on and have no regrets. I agreed, simply because I wanted to seem wiser and older than I was. I kept my end of the deal and walked away at the end of that summer, but it wrecked me. I never once tried to contact him.

Fear coursed through me when I thought about him saying that he'd spoken to my mother. Was he calling because she'd hounded him about taking me out and now he was mad? No, thinking back, he didn't sound mad. He sounded...sad.

"Damn it," I muttered, my finger hovering over the call button. What a day. Between the conversation with Riley and now hearing Spencer's voice, I was emotionally strung out. Jax cheered me up some, but I'd gone from the pinnacle of highs to the deepest of lows in a matter of just a few hours. Setting my phone on my bedside table, I buried my head under my pillow and screamed into the bed. There may or may not have been kicking, too.

If this was the life of a grown-up, Jax was right. I wanted to go *back*.

Monday - April 29, 2013 Spencer

Hearing Spencer's voice cut me deeply. He was the one part of my story that I'd never shared with anyone. He'd been home on Christmas break from the University of Georgia 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 then I hadn't seen or heard from him again. That is, until the night I discovered that Daniel and Mary Anne were an item.

It was my graduation party. My parents threw me a huge cocktail party at the club - think MTV's My Sweet Sixteen-style - and there I was, standing awkwardly in my mother's required receiving line. As friends and family drove up in their eighty-thousand dollar vehicles and fancy sequined party dresses, I shifted from one foot to the other, totally uncomfortable in heels that were half a size too big.

My dress was a simple, strapless sheath in a plum color that flared at the hem in a short ruffle. The top kept slipping down because my mother refused to see that my chest was now larger than hers. She'd actually picked the dress out for me on her own when I refused to go shopping with her. I hadn't wanted the party, and decided to stand my ground for once and put a halt to her

plans - or so I thought.

Erika Guthry was not a woman who accepted defeat. Ever.

She proceeded without my input on planning the big event and invited all of her society friends and their kids. I didn't care anymore as I stood there robotically greeting them all. Most of the kids were friends of mine from school. Up until senior year, I had been a pretty socially outgoing student. When Daniel and I broke up, my mother hounded me for weeks about what transpired and how 'we' could get him back. I finally grew tired of upholding the precious Guthry family image; the social graces that were constantly drilled in my head, the debutante parties and charity parties I

was forced to attend wearing my plastered-on fake smile.

I was sick of it all, and that night was the proverbial icing on the cake. I was standing there talking to a man old enough to be my father who was, in turn, standing as closely as he possibly could to me; his eyes delving greedily down my top. As I vanked the top up for the umpteenth time that hour I watched, as if in a dream, as Daniel walked through the double glass doors of the club.

He was dressed in 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 turned to full blast. He turned to the side just as he reached the inside of the door and held out his hand expectantly. My heart skipped a beat as I waited for the person who he was reaching out for to materialize. Surely it would be his mother or his sister. I knew his parents were invited, but I hadn't really expected *him* to show.

I recalled how false hope blossomed in my chest as I envisioned him walking swiftly across the floor to reach 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 record scratching and daydream crashing to a bloody halt.

Through the door came none other than my cousin Mary Anne. But she wasn't some distant cousin - oh no. She was the cousin that I'd spent more days of my life with, than without. Up until she'd left for school the previous year we had been practically inseparable. For a second I thought that maybe she just happened to walk in behind Daniel, but that moment came and went in a flash when she grasped his hand and he stole a quick kiss.

No, scratch that. Not a quick kiss, but a full on, his-hands-on-her-ass kiss. My stomach dropped to the floor and my vision blurred when he wrapped his arm around her tiny little waist and they began to walk towards my party. Their eyes were locked on each other as they took the first few steps, and I recall thinking how in love they looked. How was that possible? Surely this was some elaborate joke. Someone was going to jump out of the planted palm tree at any moment, yell "Gotcha!" and pull me out of this surreal nightmare.

"Is that Daniel..." my mother whispered, " with *Mary Anne*?" Her voice had risen a couple of octaves when she said my cousin's name, which caused Mary Anne's head to jerk up. She and Daniel obviously hadn't expected to find themselves standing a mere twenty feet from me.

Daniel's face actually went pale for a

moment. Mary Anne, on the other hand, 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. Classes and all, you understand." She looked from my mother to me and then back to my mother again.

"Daniel?" It was my voice that croaked out his name. I barely recognized it, and opened my mouth to say more when my mother's hand clamped down firmly on my forearm.

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

"Thank you, Mrs. Guthry. It *has* been a long while. You look lovely as always," he drawled. The perfect politician. He turned to me, his eyes boldly sweeping over my body. He had the audacity to actually linger on my ripened curves. "You've changed," he smiled lasciviously.

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

"Mother," I stammered, interrupting her sales pitch. Did she have no shame?

I recovered my wits about me long enough to formally welcome them to the party. "Thank you for coming, Mary Anne," I commented. As an afterthought I added, "And thank you for bringing Daniel with you. It was so very kind of you," for good measure. I promptly spun on my heel and entered the ballroom where my guests were waiting, and found the first available guy I could latch onto.

It just so happened that the guy was Spencer Alexander. Spencer had been my savior five months earlier when he stepped up as a favor to my parents and escorted me to my debutante ball. He was three years older than me and handsome as homemade sin. He stepped up again that night and became my savior for a second time. He danced with me, escorted me around the room and made sure I spoke with all of the "important people" per my mother's request. Most importantly, he laughed and teased me to distraction.

As he took me into his arms for a slow dance late in the evening, he mentioned Daniel for the first time. "You know you deserve better than him, right?"

I remember how I gave him the look that so many stupid teenage girls have perfected. That 'Yeah right, I-have-lowself-esteem-and-never-deserved-him' look. I truly believed it as an irrefutable fact back then. "I just thought we were in love, you know?" I whispered. My eyes got misty as I spoke. "It hurts to know that evidently he didn't care enough about me to keep from coming here with my own cousin."

He tightened his grip on my hips and we swayed quietly to the music. The songs changed, and when 'Amazed' by Lonestar came on, his face took on a new look of tenderness. As if the fates were striving to kill me, Daniel and Mary Anne ended up on the floor by us; their bodies pressed closely together, her cheek pressed to his, his hand on her lower back and his eyelids half closed as I saw him whisper words into her ear. Twisting my head away from their flagrant PDA show, I glanced up at Spencer and wound my hands behind his neck, clasping my fingers tight. I noticed his eyes dip down to my chest and realized that by raising my hands, I had allowed my cleavage to put on a show for his private viewing. I didn't care. In fact, I actually shrugged my shoulders up and down a little - trying to push my top down some more. It worked.

Spencer's hands went from holding my hips to winding around my back and pulling me flush with his body. The heat in his eyes flared as he looked down at me.

"Do you actually know what you're doing, Savannah," he breathed raggedly, "or are you as naive as I think you are?" Shrugging, I tilted my chin up and looked at him through my lowered lids. 'Bedroom eyes', Cosmo called it, and I was putting the two hundred word lesson into full effect. I was *damn* naïve, but that night I was hurt and wasn't about to let Spencer know how inexperienced I really was.

"I know exactly what I'm doing," I purred, running my fingers into the hair at his nape.

"You're playing with fire."

"Do you plan on burning me?" I teased; biting my lip.

His hand clenched at my back, his fingers digging through the thin material of my gown, while the other slowly stroked up my spine to rest between my bare shoulder blades. "God help me, I don't want to, Savannah."

"Can we get out of here?" I begged.

Indecision flickered over his face for a moment before he nodded and took my hand. In a moment of weakness as he pulled me away from the dance floor, I looked over at Daniel and Mary Anne. Daniel was watching me with narrowed eyes, and I smiled sweetly at him before turning away.

As we walked toward the exit, I grabbed a bottle of champagne that was sitting in a bucket of ice in the corner of the room. Spencer shook his head and chuckled, taking the bottle from me and taking a quick swig before handing it back. We left the club through a back

entrance that came out closer to the parking lot. Spencer intertwined our fingers and we walked quietly to his little black sports car, hand in hand. After a few long pulls of bubbly from the bottle, my frantic nerves began to calm.

When we reached the passenger door, Spencer took the bottle from me again and stared into it. It was empty.

"Sorry I didn't leave you any," I admitted as I leaned against his sleek car.

"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, Spencer. I doubt they remember why they're even at a party."

"So where to, party girl?" he teased. He swung the passenger door open and bowed to me playfully.

"To the manor, Jeeves!" I giggled as I slipped down into the soft leather seat.

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

When we reached the main road leading out of the club property, he slowed and turned to me. "Savannah, I can take you home if you want." His eyes looked me over and he rubbed the back of his neck with one hand while we sat there.

My voice was barely a whisper when

I responded, "Do you *want* to take me home?"

Spencer was breathtakingly gorgeous, and his beautiful eyes closed for a moment while his face scrunched like he was in deep thought. I knew that he was debating what to do, and right when I was about to give him the out, he spoke. "No."

It was a quiet but firm 'No', and my lips pulled up into a smile when he opened his eyes and leveled them on me. He reached out and plucked my hand from my lap; intertwining our fingers. "You should smile more often - it's dazzling."

"So take me somewhere and make me smile, Spencer," I dared him. I knew there was a definite innuendo in my words, but I didn't bother to correct myself. The two glasses of champagne I'd drunk earlier at the party, along with the half a bottle we snuck out was going a long way towards loosening me up. Without a word he turned to the front and put his foot on the gas. The club and the disaster that was Daniel and Mary Anne became a dim reflection in the rear view mirror.

As he drove, Spencer's thumb rubbed along my hand; caressing it tenderly. I opened my fingers, holding my palm face up so he could continue to trace the outline of my hand. I kept my head facing forward, but my eyes kept dipping to watch his hand. He would run his fingers around and then stop, his hand hesitating and then starting again. After watching him do it a few times I realized that every time he stopped, his hand actually drifted a few inches away from my hand, almost like he wanted to place it on my thigh. Then, as if he thought better of it, he would return to my hand and the cycle would begin again.

After watching this pattern for the fourth time, I decided to take matters into my own hands. When he lifted his fingers away for a moment I removed my hand. Thinking and feeling all sorts of dirty girl thoughts, I stretched my arm across the seats. I was about to stroke the back of his head but chickened out at the last second; placing my hand on the back of his headrest instead. It worked though, because after a moment of hovering there his large, warm palm moved to my lower thigh.

It was then that the real magic began to happen. Spencer massaged my bare knee and thigh as he drove. I rested my head on the headrest and closed my eyes as his strong fingers kneaded my muscles into relaxation. His fingers slid up my thigh ever so slowly, working themselves under the short hem of my dress. My body sighed as I slid down deeper into the chair. Liquid heat was beginning to flow through my veins. When his hand began massaging my inner thigh, I thought I might actually die from his scorching touch.

It was dark in the car, with the only illumination coming from the glow of the blue dashboard lights. I wished I could see his face better; see what he was thinking. I couldn't, and then I decided that might be for the best. The lack of light brought courage, and after a moment I finally slipped my own hand into the hair at his nape and began to play with the soft strands.

His fingers dug into my thigh for a moment when I touched him, and then they began to creep up my leg some more. When his finger brushed the silky edge of my panties, my reflexes caused me to jump. A low chuckle rumbled through the car as he worked his finger up and down the elastic at my leg, tucking it under the seam as best as he could, considering the position I was in.

The car came to a stop and I pulled myself from the foggy daze that Spencer had drawn me into. I was surprised to find that we were parked at a small home. Spencer went to college out of state, so I just assumed that he lived at home when he came back for the summer. He turned the car off and I rolled my head on the headrest to look over at him. He stared at me; desire evident in his tightly drawn face.

His voice was low and raspy when he finally spoke. "The ball's in your court, Savannah. I can take you home now...or I can take you inside."

I started to open my mouth, but he put

his finger up to my lips to stop me.

"Wait," he interrupted. "I want to make sure there are no illusions about what will happen if we go inside. I want you Savannah, and I'm pretty sure you want me too. But this won't be about your damn ass of an ex. This will be about us and the mutual attraction we have for each other. Got it?"

I couldn't speak. Nodding my head yes, my hand was practically shaking as I clicked the seatbelt undone and sat forward. My hand had stilled on his neck when we'd stopped the car, and now I put pressure on it to pull him my way. The best way I knew how to let him know what I wanted was to ask for it.

"Kiss me," I asked boldly, and he *did*.

Our lips crashed together with the force of raging ocean waves against a cliffside. There was a hunger that I'd never known before in his kisses, and I tried to feed it the best I could. The rest was a blur. Somehow we made it into the small house and he pulled me to his bedroom.

We fell onto his bed, and I could see a dim light in the room peeking in from somewhere outside. It didn't occur to me to stop him, to tell him I was still a virgin. The fire he ignited in me would not be contained. All the care that I'd taken previously to hold out for marriage, to make my man wait, went swirling down the drain.

There were no words spoken between

us. It was all lust and desire. He took his time kissing and touching parts of my body that had never been touched by another. He was careful as he slid between my legs, but when he finally pushed his body into mine, a sharp pain like none other ripped through me; causing me to gasp.

"Savannah," he whispered, his voice full of regret. "You've never...?"

I twisted my head to the side and closed my eyes as a single tear slid out.

"Why?" he questioned me, still fully embedded inside of me but unmoving. He leaned down over me and gently moved my head so he could look at me.

I was overcome with roiling feelings. Grief at what I had allowed to happen was at war with the pleasure that I felt. Anger at Daniel for pushing me to want to do this. Fear that Spencer would think I was a child bent on seducing him.

"I'm sorry," I croaked, pulling my hands over my face.

"Oh my God," he breathed gently, pulling out of me and cradling me in his arms as he lay beside me. "I'm sorry, honey. I should have known." He cursed at himself, which only made me cry harder. He pulled a sheet over us and we lay there not speaking while I cried.

As my crying began to calm down, he spoke again. "Damn it - I was so selfish, Savannah. It's just that you looked so beautiful tonight, and you flirted with me so sweetly. I..." "No," I hiccuped. Pushing off of him and clutching the sheet to my body, I tried to explain. "Don't apologize, Spencer. I knew what I was doing and it's my fault. I'm just a stupid girl."

"You're not stupid, Savannah. I've known you for years, and while most of those years you *were* just a girl, this past year you've grown into a beautiful, kind and caring woman."

"Oh stop," I muttered, shaking my head.

"It's the truth. I was drawn to you this past winter. Why else do you think I would have escorted you to your coming-out? When I saw you over the holidays at all the Christmas events, I was caught off guard at how you've grown. I could tell that you were miserable, and I wanted to do anything I could to make you happy. You know, 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 grinned; smoothing tearstained hair away 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 the way he was acting 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, Savannah. I knew after that night that you weren't ready to think about another guy." He rubbed my upper arm softly as he added, "So I decided to bide my time."

I was taken aback at his revelations. "You did?"

"Yep," he boasted. "I don't typically make a habit of going to parties thrown by my parents' friends. However this one was a must. I wanted to see you again."

"I'm so sorry, Spencer. I hate myself for this - for turning you on and then disappointing you. I swear I'm not a tease." Embarrassment swept through me as I spoke. "Oh, Savannah, I know you're not. Obviously if you were, we wouldn't have stopped. I'm not mad at you, but I am sorry I hurt you. If I'd known you were a virgin I could have been more careful."

"If you'd known, I doubt this would have ever happened," I acknowledged; thinking he probably would have run for the hills if he'd known I was this inexperienced.

"Hey," he bit out almost angrily. "What makes you think that?"

"Let's not lie to each other, Spencer. You asked me 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 a part of it."

"Oh honey, you are so wrong," he admitted. "I already told you that I've been biding my time, Savannah. I wanted you too badly to say no. I didn't bring you to my house because I just wanted a good time. I brought you here because I genuinely wanted to be with you. All that would've been different is how quickly I would have allowed things to progress. I would have preferred to wine and dine vou first."

"You would?" I asked again incredulously. When he shook his head yes, I leaned forward and kissed his mouth softly. "Thank you."

He reached out and kissed me again before I could pull away, and then he spoke, "No, *thank you*." "For what?"

"For trusting me with something so special. Will you stay the night?" My face must have shown some of my fear because he quickly added, "Not for sex. I would like to hold you through the night, and I'm afraid that if you leave now you might just hide away from me."

When I agreed to stay he showed me the bathroom where I could clean myself up, and then he gave me a large t-shirt to wear. When I was done freshening up I climbed in bed next to him and let him wrap his arms protectively around me.

"Spencer?" I whispered in the dark after a while.

"Yeah?"

"You don't have to bide your time

anymore," I told him.

"What do you mean?"

"If you're still interested after all of this, I'd like to...um, well I guess we could start to see each other." I wanted to crawl into a hole even as I said it. There I was, already sleeping in his bed and wearing his shirt, and NOW I wanted to talk about dating?

"I'm more than interested, Savannah," he admitted, kissing the top of my head. After another moment he added with a chuckle, "Besides, I wasn't going to let you leave here until you agreed to go out with me anyway."

Tuesday - April 30, 2013 Date #4 - Brian

My Tuesday was a walking blur. I hadn't called Spencer yet, and every time my phone rang I leapt with fear that it was him. Working at the art gallery that morning helped pass time, but I couldn't help being on edge.

I kept Candace and Sara in the dark about Spencer calling me. Thankfully Sara wasn't there when I got home so that left me to only worry about deflecting Candace's curious glances, and she was easier to fool. She, however, was so excited about my date with Brian that night that she soon ignored my behavior.

Walking into The Garage, my nerves were heightened to a new level. Candace helped me get ready for the night, but still wouldn't let me in on who I was meeting for this "special" date. My new white eyelet dress helped me feel flirty and fresh. When I arrived, it was still early. The bar was littered with a few people sitting at tables with laptops or chatting, but was, for the most part, empty.

Turning towards the bar, I approached the one guy sitting there talking to none other than my Aussie antagonist, Gage.

Fabulous.

Wondering if this was my "special date" Brian, I tried to get a good look at

the profile of his face.

"What the...?" I muttered to myself. I recognized that it was indeed Brian, because I already knew him. Well, sort of. 'Brian' was Brian Stalling: student body President and all around golden boy. We had taken a debate course together last semester.

"Brian?" I questioned when I reached his side.

He swiveled on his stool, his hazel eyes widening as he took me in and smiled. "Savannah." Getting up from his stool, he stepped forward and embraced me lightly. "Good God, girl - you look amazing."

"Thanks. What are you doing here?" I couldn't manage to conceal the confusion

in my voice. Brian Stalling would *not* have answered an ad for a blind date on the campus site. That was just plain madness. I couldn't imagine that he would need any help whatsoever finding a date.

"Cut to the chase Guthry, why don't you?" he drawled. A smile wreathed across his face as he pulled out his wallet. "Let me pay real quick and we can go upstairs, okay?"

I nodded and watched as Gage took his cash. They exchanged a few words, shook hands, and as Brian stepped away Gage called out to me, "Enjoy your meal, Savannah."

I sent a smile of thanks his way as Brian placed his hand on the small of my back to lead me upstairs to dinner. Brian was the quintessential poster boy for Brooks Brothers; neatly trimmed dirty blond hair, not too long but not too short, with a nose that was straight and thin and a touch pink today. A slight 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 tan lines and laughed as he asked.

"My dad has made it very clear to me that the best deals - business or political - are made on the golf course."

"He's right," Brian agreed, and we walked up the stairs to Watson's.

The restaurant was an exceptionally

cozy, diminutive place located above the bar. When you entered The Garage, you had to turn immediately to the left to head up a staircase that led up to the restaurant. It was unlike most establishments in that regard, but it was still a great little place to eat and was especially popular. It was just turning six o'clock on a Tuesday, so they weren't busy yet and we were seated right away. Brian, the perfect gentlemen, held my chair out for me before he sat across from me at the small table.

"Have you recovered from the last time we were in a room together yet?" he teased, as our waiter came upon us.

I ordered water to begin with and snarled back at him playfully, "Hey, 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 Stallings, I think it's obvious that we're gonna need a rematch. Just the two of us. What's hot on the list of current events right now?"

"Well I've always been told that talking politics on a first date is bad etiquette. However, if you insist." He raised his brows at me as he took a sip of his water and I laughed.

"Well where do you stand on chicken?" I teased; opening the menu. "I'm quite a fan of chicken, although there are a few questionable ethics involved in many poultry factories."

"Oh no, we are *not* going to debate food processing ethics over dinner, Savannah."

"Hmph. You're just scared you'll lose the debate. It's okay, Mr. President, let's talk about something easier. How do you feel about the cheerleaders' new outfits for next year?"

"Now that *is* something I can get behind." He winked. "Literally."

"Pig," I shot out, fighting down the urge to throw something at him.

"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 that I felt began to release, and I allowed myself to sit back and simply enjoy his company. I listened to Brian talk about some of the actual hot topics coming up in his campus meetings with the Board.

Once our food arrived - chicken for me and steak for him - we lapsed into a comfortable silence as we ate.

"So can you explain to me why you're having to resort to a dating service for dates?" he asked. I instantly felt my face turn red, although he didn't say it in a particularly snotty way.

"Couldn't I ask you the same thing?"

"Well, actually I ran into Candace the other day and asked about you."

"You asked about me?" I wasn't

expecting that.

"Yeah, I heard something about your dating ad from a fraternity brother the other day. You've become very popular with them."

"What?" I yelped. I slapped my hand over my mouth once I realized how loud that was. "You're kidding, right?"

"Savannah, you 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 people who would ask, "Guthry? Like Guthry Whiskey?" once they found out my last name.

"Yes, Brian. I know who I am," I

commented; disgust starting to override the happiness from earlier.

"I'm not saying that's why I asked her to set us up, though," he quickly shot out. He leaned over the table to touch my hand. "Really Savannah, it's not. Obviously some of the guys in the house knew who you were, and when they saw you on the dating site it became a hot topic."

"Of course it did."

"So why are you doing it then?"

"It was a joke, of sorts, that Sara and Candace decided to play on me. By the time I knew what they'd done it was already too late to do anything about it. Can we just change the subject, please?" He opened his mouth to speak and then stopped. The rest of our meal was relatively quiet, and an uncomfortable stiffness settled over the table. I told him about my volunteer work at the fine arts center, and he discussed some of the changes being implemented for next year.

"I'm sorry about what I said...about who you are. That was stupid of me," he apologized, almost out of the blue.

"Forget about it. I know you didn't mean it the way it sounded, but I guess I get defensive over it. Last year I went to a tailgating party 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." "Look Savannah, I'm sure you get guys after you all the time for that, but I promise I didn't want to go out with you because of your father's name. I really enjoyed the debates we had in class last semester, and I wanted to get to know you better." He looked genuine, so I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"Ha - well I don't know if I can keep up with you and your mad debating skills, Brian."

"Well obviously not, but I'd still like to see you try."

With the exception of the uncomfortable conversation about the irrefutable power of my last name, the rest of the night went fairly well. Brian was smart, cute and definitely had a lot of ideas for his future. I wasn't really sure if there was anything solid in common between us yet, but that was the whole purpose of dating - to find those things out.

"Okay," I finally spoke. "I'm game." His smile was all the encouragement I needed.

Over dessert, Brian explained that he had planned our dinner so early because there was an early morning meeting with the Dean that he needed to go to. Then he was headed off to a 'D.C. Young Leaders of America' event for the remainder of the week.

"Sorry I'm heading out tomorrow, but I'll be back late Sunday night. Can we get together sometime next week?"

"I don't know," I waffled, as I took the last bite of my chocolate mousse. "I think you'll need to convince me better than that."

"Oh? Should I make a flip chart, madam? Do you need the pros and cons list?"

Tapping my chin thoughtfully I paused for a moment. "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 this date would be anything but a good idea."

"Well, I look forward to seeing the presentation you provide me next week."

Thirty minutes later the dessert was finished off and the bill was paid. He offered to walk me to my car, but I decided to stick around since it was so early; maybe call Sara or Candace and have a drink. I refused to admit that I had this unabating urge to see Gage, so I stomped that little nugget back into the dark corners of my mind instead.

Promising to give me a call when he returned home, Brian kissed me on the cheek and hugged me before leaving. I walked to the bar smiling, and spotted Gage eyeing me before he noticed I was looking. I expected him to turn his head when he knew he'd been caught, but instead he raised a brow and smiled.

"What?" I asked, wiggling my way in

between a group of people. I plopped myself unceremoniously onto the empty stool they'd been blocking.

"Your usual?" he asked blandly.

"You mean 'date with a loser'? Nope, not this time." I shook my head at him while he poured a large glass of beer and delivered it down the bar.

"I meant, do you want a Tom Collins?" He laughed as I nodded and mouthed 'Oh'. "I mean, I could tell your date wasn't a loser tonight. He was more of a world dominator."

"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 called out, pointing to me and laughing.

"Hardy har har," I deadpanned. Inside I was silently laughing at how eerily accurate his assessment actually was.

"So what's the problem with him being ambitious?"

"Oh nothing, sweetheart. Ambition is a good thing to have as long as you don't use it to step on people as you claw your way to the top."

"Gage?" called a waitress from the other end of the bar. He walked off and I pulled out my phone to shoot Sara and Candace a text letting them know I was up for drinks.

When he made his way back to me I couldn't help but prod. "Sounds like you know about that from firsthand

experience. Being clawed on, that is."

"Oh, I've been clawed all right sweetheart, by a good many pretty Sheilas just like you." He winked boldly.

Ignoring his innuendo, I turned to watch the performer who was strumming away at his guitar singing something about love and rain. My phone buzzed and I checked my messages. It was a reply from Sara:

Sara: have a drink for me! i'm stuck at the studio doing inventory

"So tell me about your world leader. Why did he leave you here all alone?" Gage asked me from behind. I turned back to find him leaning one arm on the bar in front of me. Judging by the crowd, Tuesday nights were obviously pretty slow. This was the first time Gage had been able to really stop and look relaxed while talking to me.

"First of all, he is not *mine*. It was a simple dinner date."

"Then he struck out?"

"Okay, Mr. Know It All." Sarcasm dripped out of my voice as I spoke. "Why would you say he struck out?"

"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 for that.

"Or maybe he's not as smart as I gave him credit for being. Should I change his song?"

Now I was confused. "His song?"

"Keep up, would you?" He smiled, nodding to someone on my right. He started to mix together another drink, but kept his eyes on me and spoke slightly louder so I could hear him over the din. "I told you he was 'Everybody Wants to Rule the World', by Tears for Fears. That's his song. It's a gift I have."

I almost spit out my drink at his boast. "A gift, huh? What, giving people song names?"

"Yep."

"How does this gift work, per se?"

"Take your date last week. The one who felt the need to stake a claim on you." "You noticed that?" I choked. "Um, his name was Mark."

He gave an irritated hmph sound as he continued, "Well Mark was definitely 'Creep' by Radiohead."

"Oh my God, no he isn't," I laughed.

"Hey, you can't argue with the song picker."

I sat there and tried to recall the lyrics in my head. All I could remember was the line 'I'm a creep, I'm a loser'. The girl walking by stared when I started to laugh out loud. There was no one around, so I was pretty sure I looked like a damn fool.

"You sang it to yourself, didn't you?" Gage asked, breaking through my hilarity. I shook my head yes and continued to laugh. He raised his brows in a knowing 'Told you so.'

Gage continued to walk back and forth fixing drinks and doing bar work. He stopped in front of me after a few minutes and I asked, "So, do you assign songs to everyone you meet?"

"It's a habit. When you spend as much time as I do talking with random people, you can't help comparing them."

I thought about the people watching I did when I was looking for art inspiration. I could understand exactly what he was saying.

"Alright - look around and give me a title for someone here tonight," I insisted, laying down the gauntlet.

"A challenge, eh?" Looking amused,

Gage's eyes wandered across the bar. The red glass light fixture hanging over his head cast a strange glow on his handsome face. A wicked grin spread over his face a moment later, and I knew before he spoke that his target had been found.

"See Little Red over there dancing?" he asked as he leaned toward me and pretended to wipe the bar next to me.

I casually twisted around on my stool and took a quick look around, scanning the dance floor for this "Little Red". It didn't take me long to locate her. She wore skin tight, low riding jeans paired with a *very* small red top that strained to cover her not-so-small chest. Her jeans were tucked into some red cowboy boots that reminded me of the female character in Footloose. Her bleach blond hair was teased up into a high ponytail, and she was swinging it around like a cowboy swinging a lasso.

"Oh my. Yeah, I think I see her blond with the red tube top?" I confirmed; more than a little curious to find out what song she was about to earn.

"She looks like a 'Roxanne' to me." I immediately got the connection to the Police song he was referring to as he added, "She looks like she could be pretty if she covered herself 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, then?" I allowed myself to ask curiously. I could've stopped there and it would have been fine, however I added, "What about all of the cougars that hang around for you?"

Understanding dawned on his features and I mentally kicked myself for my jealousy-fueled comment.

"Wow...where to begin with that?"

"Please forget I said it - it was rude and I apologize," I stammered, taking a large sip of my drink to keep myself busy.

"No way, sweetheart. That one is too good to pass up. Let's see," he drawled out, scratching his hand across his perfectly scruffy chin. "The cougars, as you call them. I assume you're talking about some of the older women you've seen hanging around the bar?"

I stamped down the embarrassment that wanted me to just get up and run. I was too curious to hear what he had to say to run away now.

"Yeah, I have to admit I've seen them hanging around you every time I'm here," I confessed.

"It's the accent."

He said it so matter of factly that I broke out into a random fit of laughter. "Oh, I have no doubt that your kryptonite voice lures them in."

Gage's head snapped around to look at me and I realized what I'd let slip out

of my mouth. "Kryptonite voice, eh?"

"Shit," I muttered, more to myself then out loud.

"I like it," he admitted, and his hand brushed softly over my fingers as he took my now empty glass from my hand. "Let me refresh your drink."

"How about a Coke? I have to drive home tonight." I didn't let myself linger on the tingling sensation that shot through my fingers. It was glaringly obvious that he'd touched me on purpose.

"Coke," he said politely as he handed me a large glass. "Now to answer your other questions. One," he ticked off the number on his hand as he talked; his voice pitched low so that 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 big tips. Like it or not, it's the job. Two, do I like the sex kitten look myself?" He stopped speaking and looked around the bar area as if he was making sure we were alone. We weren't, but it was pretty quiet at the moment. Crooking his finger, he motioned for me to lean forward as he reached over the bar himself; meeting me halfway. Our faces scant inches apart, he put his lips so close to my ear that I felt his warm breath shift my hair as he spoke. "Only on my girl, and only in private."

I melted back into my seat as he stayed where he was; his gaze pinned on mine.

Oh. My. Wow.

The phrase *I* volunteer! screamed through my head as I thought about the lucky girl who got to be his private sex kitten. When his eyes flicked down to my mouth, I belatedly realized that I'd been blowing out a steadying breath. Suddenly I was smiling and looking away like a young girl first learning how to flirt. I needed a note that said 'Do you like me? Check yes or no.'

Gage pushed away from the bar and spoke to a guy who, until now, I hadn't even noticed was sitting beside me. As he poured him something from the beer tap, I let my eyes admire the way he moved. *I'm becoming obsessed*, I silently chastised myself as he walked to the register to ring the guy up.

"Wanna dance with a friend?" a voice playfully questioned me, as hands settled on my shoulders lightly.

"Hey." I forced a smile as I looked over my shoulder at Riley. After spending the afternoon with him the day before, I still felt awkward after our conversation about dating.

"Whatcha say? They're playing our song," he teased. Once I realized the current performers were belting out 'Friends in Low Places' I laughed, giving him my hand and following him to the floor. I couldn't help but flip my head back to see if Gage was watching us.

He was.

I shamelessly swung my hips a little

more than usual as I threw myself into dancing with the rest of the crowd. Riley smiled and we both sang the chorus out loud. When our dance was over, Riley walked me back to the now packed bar and left me after explaining he had some business to take care of.

I watched him make his way back to the floor and over to one of the many girls who were shamelessly flinging themselves in his direction. Almost immediately, she inched towards him and they began to sway seductively to the music. I smiled to myself as I saw them talk to each other.

Checking out the situation at the bar and the current lack of seating, I decided it was time for me to head out. I went to move to the exit when Gage called over the bar at me.

"Savannah."

In his hand was my small clutch that I'd forgotten on the bar when I went to go dance. He motioned with his head to the end of the bar where servers usually picked up drinks and there wasn't a crowd.

"Thanks, I totally forgot I left it."

He cracked a small smile as he handed me the purse. "You're welcome. You looked like you were enjoying yourself out there. You leaving?"

For one moment I considered staying, but then decided against it. I didn't need to play with fire. Gage the Aussie superman was *fire*. "Yeah, I have to work in the morning. I'll see you later."

Wednesday - May 1, 2013 Bad Ideas

While enjoying a night in with the girls and between chick flicks, I filled Sara and Candace in on my "date" with Jack, the strip club hustler. We'd barely seen each other over the past few days, and they still hadn't heard the whole story. Their gales of laughter ringing through the room proved without a doubt that there was no sympathy for me.

"This was a stupid idea. I'm not gonna find some guy in the next four or five weeks that I'm going to feel comfortable enough to actually ask to the wedding," I griped as I ate 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."

"Honey, this has never really been about you finding a wedding date," Sara mumbled as she stuffed a California roll into her mouth.

"Um, yes it has been."

"No. This was about you finally allowing yourself to open up to men again," she reiterated. "Sweetie, 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 you." Candace chimed in. "Sara is right for once, Savannah. 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. "God, really Cand? The fish and sea analogy? You guys really *are* desperate for me to date, huh?"

"YES." Sara sat up, her eyes taking on an excited gleam. "It's our senior year, baby. After this year we're all off to different places to do different things, and I want to know that I'm sending you off well prepared. I don't want to be getting calls at all hours of the night because you're lonely and sitting in your fabulous apartment full of cats, bored. I plan on living life girl, and I want to know you are too."

Shaking my head at Sara, I picked through my box looking for some 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."

I rolled my eyes. They seriously thought I was hopeless, evidently. "Blind dates, though? What exactly am I accomplishing by doing this?"

"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 really want to tell me these are the guys I have to look forward to?" I gave her the 'Are you kidding me?' look.

Sara coughed. "Or maybe they'll all be idiots. Either way, the point is you're finally going out. Plus, you're learning how to play the game."

"I don't *want* to play a game," I all but whined.

"Hey - you met Jax, didn't you? And what about Brian?"

"Touché."

"See, two solid choices for future dates. I mean really, Savannah. Live a little and stop worrying so much about it. Besides, girl, every time you go for drinks you end up getting to see Saucy McAussie," Candace pointed out tactfully.

"Mmmhmmm, I'd like some of that sauce."

"Sara!" The sudden image of Gage made my cheeks redden.

Sara had no shame. "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?" I spit out without thinking.

"Ooohhhh, reeeallly? First name basis, are you? Yeah, I hit on him to no avail. He must be made of stone."

"Sara, just because he avoids *you* doesn't mean he's made of stone. I've seen him checking someone else out once or twice." Candace's eyes landed directly on my face.

"Nuh-uh. We're friends – or, I don't know what you'd call it. He antagonizes me."

"Whatever. He so has the hots for you, Savannah."

"You should totally bring him to the wedding. Every female there would be envious of that jolly rancher." Sara laughed and waggled her eyebrows suggestively.

"Is this what we're looking for in our dates now girls? Eye candy?"

Sara tossed a fortune cookie my way as she laughed. "I don't know about you, but I've *always* looked for eye candy."

"He's a bartender, Sara. My family would eat him alive."

"Don't be such a snob," she accused.

For a moment I took in her demeanor and was afraid she meant it. I'd always wondered if my friends thought I was as shallow as I thought my mother was. Was I really my mother? Sara's pinched face made me question myself.

"You know better than that. I'm not the snob, they are. He would be out of his league dealing with them. I can barely deal with them, and I'm one of them," I explained. I hated to admit that my family was made up of snobs, but they were. They wouldn't purposefully be rude to Gage, but my mother didn't know how to *not* be the rich little socialite she was. She typically didn't have the street smarts to talk to someone who wasn't as cultured as she was.

"Alright. Let's not bother any more with this conversation. Savannah wouldn't have the guts to ask Gage to the wedding anyway," Sara teased; tossing another roll into her mouth.

"Guys, I barely know him. Why in the *world* would I ask him to that wedding? He'd think I was loony."

Giving me that knowing look of hers, Sara challenged me. "Just admit that you're interested in him."

I allowed myself to think about Gage for a minute and felt my face turn beet red. The way his golden eyes cut through all the noise and haze of the crowded bar when he looked at me. The way his voice sounded like the caress of satin falling over my naked body. He was intoxicating, for sure.

"Four weeks, Savannah. Give him *four weeks*, and if he hasn't repulsed you by then, ask him." A knowing smile played on her face.

"I concur," Candace said quietly.

"That's your input, Candace? You concur?"

"What else is there to say?" she asked innocently; cracking open her fortune cookie. "The quotes that you do not understand, are not meant for you'," she read aloud. "Huh? What kind of fortune is that?"

"I hate those kind - the random junk that doesn't really mean anything," I told her, and asked Sara what hers was.

"'Your future will be happy and

productive'. Well, duh."

They both waited for me as I opened mine. Frozen, my eyes stayed on the seemingly innocuous slip of paper that some factory worker had stuffed into the cookies. It meant nothing. But the words hit me hard.

"'Someone close to you is waiting for you to call'," I mumbled when they nagged me for the fortune.

I thought about Spencer and the message he'd left for me. Was this a sign? For the love of baby bunnies, this *couldn't* be a sign.

Thursday - May 2, 2013 Date #5 - Last minute Leo

"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.

Taking the last bite of dinner, I raised my brows at her in question. "You what?"

"Pick-me-up date. You're meeting Leo for drinks at eight."

"DiCaprio?" I deadpanned, stretching my PJ-wearing body out. "I'm serious Sara, unless he's *that* Leo I'm not interested tonight."

"Oh yes you are," she chided, grabbing my arm to yank me from 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. Savannah, come on...for me?"

"Where's Candace when I need her?" I grumbled; slowly rising from the couch to put my dinner plate in the sink.

"Don't forget these," Sara cried out as I passed her. She was holding out a very expensive leather mini with my see through ruffled black and white top.

Taking the outfit from her hand I shot her the ultimate stink eye. She followed me down the hall as I went.

"Wear those kick ass strappy black heels you have," she called out from behind me.

I headed into the bathroom to figure

out what to do with myself. I'd taken a quick shower when I first got home, and was in no mood to get all dressed up again.

"Don't be mad. Leo is hawt, girl. Like, he could give Crocodile Dundee a run for his money." Sara followed me into my bathroom and sat on the toilet seat watching as I messed with my hair.

"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." She watched as 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 eight, I walked up to the bar and ran straight into Gage's impressed smile.

"That's some outfit tonight."

"Hey," I called over the crowd. "Thanks, Sara picked it out for me."

"She trying to get rid of you for the night?" he asked, his eyes scanning me lustily. I stared down at my outfit when he added, "You look good enough to eat, sweetheart. I'm tempted to jump this bar and take you to my place before someone else does."

Laughing heartily, I countered his joke. "Oh, whatever - you would not."

"Is that a dare?" His stone cold face

stopped my laughter, and I noted how serious he was. Stamping down the desire to say *YES*! *YES*! I smiled; turning to check out the bar patrons.

"Hey Savannah," Noelle shouted from the other side of Gage. "You've got a date in green at the end there," she provided helpfully. I watched as Gage visibly sighed, looking down at the guy in green as I waved to him.

"Enjoy," he mocked, his voice now void of the earlier playfulness.

I pushed Gage out of my mind, or at least as far out of my mind as I could these days, and made my way down to Leo. Sara wasn't kidding - he was hot with a double T. His brown hair was slicked back in that messy-on-purpose kind of way, and I noticed that he was leaner than Gage, who was all broad shoulders. Leo looked more like the "real" Leo, with a somewhat softer body but a very dazzling face. It was almost too dazzling; very metrosexual.

His light green button up had small white polka dots on it, and he wore white suspenders. The entire outfit spoke of someone who liked to spend money on his clothing. Best of all, he was rocking an awesome pair of brown Clark Kent glasses on the bridge of his perfectly straight nose.

"You must be Leo," I said as I took the seat beside him. "I'm Savannah."

"It's nice to meet you," he spoke, leaning to the side to hug me. "Sara has told me so much about you. Wow, you are really rocking those Dolce shoes."

I sputtered, "Oh, okay..." as I hugged him back. He was friendly AND well versed in fashion? 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 current band was playing a hybrid rock/country set. The bass and drums were heavy, but there was a twangy sound coming from the slide guitar that brought a cool vibe to their songs.

"Yeah - kind of a Mumford and Sonsthing going on, but heavier," I stated, agreeing with Leo. "Who's your friend, Savannah?" Gage's question surprised me. He'd come out of the back - not that I was following his every delicious move and walked straight over to us. Without bothering to ask, Gage began to mix a Tom Collins together for me.

I looked at him like he was crazy while I introduced the two of them. "Gage, this is Leo. Leo, Gage. Leo works with Sara." I threw that in as if I had to justify being out with him. I don't have to explain who my date is! I huffed to myself as Gage started talking to Leo.

"So, did she fill you in on her theory about kryptonite yet?" he asked as he placed the cocktail in front of me.

"Kryptonite?" Leo asked; his face

confused, but leaning in towards Gage like he was hanging on his every word. Strange.

"Yeah, apparently she thinks my accent is a special magic power."

"Gage," I snapped under my breath, which caused him to wink at us.

I looked over at Leo to see what he thought and noticed a subtle gleam in his eye as he answered back, "Well I can see why she'd say that. *Every* one likes a man with an accent."

I nearly spit my drink out and Gage frowned. He looked Leo over and excused himself swiftly. For a moment I thought Leo played that perfectly, until he looked over at me.

Shaking his head he spoke. "Oh,

honey, don't go scrunching your pretty little forehead like that. It'll cause wrinkles."

"Oh my God," I choked, as Leo looked past me to where Gage was. His head was tilted to the side, his eyes roaming up and down Gage's backside with just enough intensity to clue me in. "You're gay." The conspicuous observation came out louder than I meant for it to.

"Sara didn't tell you?"

"What? You mean Sara knows?" I spit out, flabbergasted. I was going to kill her. "No, she didn't tell me. I thought this was a date."

"It *is* a date," he assured me. "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 at me and took a sip of his drink.

His demeanor cracked me up. Somewhat serious, I asked him the question that peppered most straight girls' minds.

"So can you tell me why all the good looking ones are always gay? I mean, you've got Neil Patrick Harris, Anderson Cooper, and OH MY LORD, freaking Wentworth Miller just came out. I mean, really - do you *recall* how good those prison schematics looked on him?" I whined; pretending to hit my head dramatically on a wall. "Oh, honey, not *all* of them. Your bartender is definitely not playing for my team. How nice it would be if he was."

"He's not *my* bartender," I corrected him, trying hard not to look for Gage. I hated the way I knew he was to my right without even looking. It was like 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 the Kardashians are to the fifteen minutes of fame."

I gave him a skeptical look. "In other words, you *own* him, Savannah. Look at the way his eyes watch you while he continues to move about the bar."

I casually looked for Gage. He was

shaking up a drink, but his eyes were fixed on us. Leo was right. Gage's eyes *were* always following me, much like mine seemed to follow him. Could I act on it though? Did I actually have the guts to do something?

Leo turned sideways 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 one, but let's have some fun, shall we?"

Leo began to stare into my eyes intently. His hand came up to my shirt and he fiddled with the ruffles along the top as he spoke. "I'm loving this tuxedo ruffle shirt-thing you've got on. Obviously a straight guy wouldn't compliment you that way, so let me try again."

His hand came dangerously close to skimming my breast as he continued to toy with the ruffle and spoke again. "This shirt is sexy."

I felt laughter getting ready to bubble up out of my chest. Leo smiled and held his finger up. "Shhh. Don't laugh. Give me a sexy look. Something that makes the missing Hemsworth brother jealous."

Choking back a loud guffaw at his outrageous joke, I followed his lead. I wished I could see what I looked like. Trying to make sexy faces at a gay guy to make sexy superman jealous was quite a huge feat.

I crossed my legs slowly, picturing that movie with Sharon Stone where she

flashed her lady garden to the world. My panties were firmly locked in place so it wasn't as tantalizing, but I moved my tan leg slowly; playfully running the tip of my shoe down Leo's leg as I went.

"Damn honey," he admired, his voice hushed. "You've got this down."

I raised my brows as I leaned in closer to him; putting my hand on his shoulder and pulling him to me so I could speak in his ear.

"Is he watching?"

His finger played with my hair as he replied, "Oh he's watching, and I think he's envisioning my neck as the bottle in his hand."

I pulled back and started to feel guilty for purposefully trying to make Gage jealous. Leo must have seen the hesitation on my face, because he took my hand and pulled me to the floor to dance.

"Explain your situation to me?" he asked abruptly.

"What situation?"

"Don't play coy with me, sweetie. Your eyes follow that bartender's every move. Why are you hesitating?"

"What makes you think I'm hesitating?" Leo gave me a 'Give me a break' look, and I knew it was Sara.

"Sara is so going to pay for this," I fumed. Leo pulled me against his body so we could dance closely enough to talk over the crowd noise.

"I don't know why. He 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 way. I mean, he flirts with me."

"Stop right there," he interrupted. "It is as plain as the cute little nose on your face that he has the hots for you, Savannah, so let's get that straight right now. Sara told me about how he followed you to the parking lot to get your name."

"What did she *not* tell you?"

"Not much, doll. You were born with a silver spoon in your mouth, and she thinks the fact that he's a bartender is what's keeping you from jumping in headfirst." His words stirred up a torrent of emotion in me.

"Sounds like she thinks I'm a snobby bitch," I bit out; angry tears pricking my lids.

"Don't get mad at her. She swore to me that 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. "She thinks you're scared. She said that you're so scared, in fact, that you haven't dated in three years." He shivered grimly as he said that, and I rolled my eyes.

"So what does she think I need to do about it?"

"Well, it's Sara. She thinks you need to seduce that sexy man and have a night of unbridled Australian passion. But," he added as my shoulders began to shake with silent laughter, "that's obviously not your style."

I shook my head, agreeing with him. Our dance ended and we walked slowly back to the bar. Our stools were miraculously still empty, with our drinks sitting there as if we hadn't left. I saw Gage laughing with a few people, and his smile made me smile. He looked so handsome when his little dimple popped out.

"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

him on the cheek as he helped me sit. "Thank you."

"Now let's play with your boy." He winked and waved him over.

I watched as Gage excused himself from the group he was chatting with. He grabbed a tab from one customer and a beer for another before making his way to us.

"Can I get you another drink?" he asked, his voice harder than usual. Jealous?

"Get this hot thing another of your signature cocktails, and can I have a Cosmo?" Leo asked; his voice much looser now. Like he was *trying* to sound gay, if that was even a thing.

"Sure thing." I couldn't help thinking

that if his brain was a machine, I'd be able to clearly hear the gears cranking. Gage looked uncertain as he looked at Leo sitting there.

As if Leo could see the confusion, he watched Gage's every move. I saw a less than subtle brow raise and heard an appreciative grunt from Leo when Gage turned his back to us. I fiddled with pulling out my lipstick tube to keep from laughing.

"Tom Collins for the hottie, and a Cosmo for...you," Gage deadpanned.

"Do you work out? You look like you work out. Your jeans fit you spec-tacularly."

"Dude, really?" Gage glared, unsure of what to think. "Savannah, what the hell?"

"What?" I asked innocently.

"Well I was just singing your praises, and Savannah here said she wasn't sure if you'd be interested or not. I apologize if we made the wrong assumption." Leo held up his hands, giving Gage a 'My bad.'

"I don't play for that team, sorry." Gage looked at me, his face confused as he almost pleaded, "You don't think I'm gay, do you? Really? You know damn well I'm not."

"Well actually Mr. McAussie, could you blame the girl? Have you looked at yourself lately? We *all* know that all the hot guys are gay these days."

Holy hell. I couldn't stop myself from

laughing now. Waves of girlish giggles sprang forth and I covered my mouth as I turned away from the bar.

"Very funny, sweetheart," Gage chuckled at me.

"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 walked by us all; waving and saying hi to Gage. I bit my lip as I took in the sexy dresses and perfectly coiffed hair. It was his cougar fan club. Seriously - those women needed to find a new life. I might show up at the bar several times a week, but I was only 22 and they were probably all in their early to mid-forties.

Gage waved and said hi as they passed by and sat a few seats down from us. Leo eyed them and then Gage curiously. Noelle checked in with them, shook her head and then walked over to speak with Gage.

"Sorry Gage, but you know they only want you," she said, looking a bit perturbed.

Gage excused himself and walked over, smiling as he went. Noelle huffed and commented almost to herself, "Every damn week they stop by. That brunette, she is one persistent woman."

Rising to the bait, Leo zoned in on her comment. "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, not seeing my face as my stomach started to drop.

"I assume he took care of her, if you know what I mean, since she's already back tonight."

"Um, excuse me," I blurted out, quickly removing myself from the scene and rushing to the restroom. I felt like I was on fire from the waves of embarrassment running through me.

What was going on? I knew I had a date with Jax tomorrow night, yet there I was letting that *cougar* get the best of me. Who was I to be jealous? Gage

hadn't asked me out. Sure, we'd flirted, and he made it known he was interested, but he'd never asked. In fact, he told me that flirting was part of the job.

"Ugh," I groaned, not wanting to walk back out there. I didn't want confirmation that he was exactly what I had assumed he was from day one.

A gorgeous playboy.

No, that wasn't true. I never really thought that of him. He was too kind and too much fun for me to think of him as a playboy. Maybe his pretty face was screwing with my judgment.

Leaving the restroom, I walked back towards Leo and was relieved to see Gage was no longer talking with the ladies there. Skimming the long bar I didn't see him anywhere around, and the urge to grab Leo and run was relentless. Instead I said a quiet "Hey."

"He came back by and asked where you went," Leo declared, as he finished off his Cosmo.

"Do I want to know what he said?"

"I think you do, but I'm not telling you."

"What? Why not?" I demanded, the dread I was feeling now turning to excitement.

"Sorry sweetie, I turned to the dark side. These lips are sealed."

"You traitor."

"What can I say? I find him much more appealing."

"I'm sure you do," I grumbled. The

laughter of the group of women there to see Gage sobered me up quickly.

"You know what? I have an early morning and I'm sure you do too. You ready to head out?"

"You don't want to see your boy toy again?"

"Leo, he's not mine," I drawled. "Not close. Besides, I'm seeing someone else tomorrow."

He babbled something under his breath but shook his head when I asked him to repeat himself.

Pivoting to leave, I turned and bounced right into Gage's chest. Damn it - it was a fine chest - all hard abs and bulging pecs.

"You going somewhere?"

"Well...yeah," I stammered.

"No, I was talking to Leo. I've been reconsidering his proposal."

"You what?" I croaked, my brain too jarred by his hard muscles to concentrate on what he said. He was unable to keep his face straight though, and he laughed and thrust his hand out to shake Leo's.

"Oh, whatever." I pushed him lightly; stepping back from his heat. "I'll leave you two alone, then. See you around," I jested, throwing my hand up in a wave and walking around him.

Masculine laughter followed me to the door and I turned to see them both watching me. Gage leaned down to say something to Leo, which caused him to laugh again before they shook hands; Leo heading my way.

I waved one last time to Gage and walked out of the bar with Leo fast on my heels.

"Why the rush?" he called as he caught up with me.

"No rush," I lied, walking to my car. "I'm just tired, that's all. I..."

Anger rose up like water in a boiling pot and caught me off guard. "Damn it," I growled. "I just have to go, Leo. I'm sorry."

Worry crossed his face as he stood there watching me fumble with my keys. He held the door open and I slid into my car. Leaning his head in, he spoke. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. No," I waffled. "I will be. I

need to think things over. You're right - I need to figure out this hesitation. He's in my head, Leo." I confessed my confused feelings, my shoulders slumped in defeat.

"Well it was great to meet you, honey. You'll be okay, just follow your heart," he suggested; stepping back.

"Thanks. We'll get together again soon. But with Sara, so we can screw with *her* love life, okay?" I laughed.

"For sure, that girl is a mess."

"Agreed. Drive safe." I pulled the door shut, cranked the car and allowed the flirting glances and laughter from Gage and his groupies to fill my senses all the way home.

Throwing myself into bed without

speaking to my roommates, I desperately willed myself to sleep; praying for harmless thoughts of the zombie apocalypse, or even showing up to school naked. Instead I got Gage.

An entire night of the sexy superman, a bar and a lot of dirty positions.

Friday - May 3, 2013 Six Weeks until "The Wedding" Date #6 - Jax (again)

I awoke dreading the day and feeling guilty. Knowing that I had a date with Jax made the day fly by, but thinking of Gage was killing me. My work at the art gallery was tiring but fulfilling this week as we cataloged a shipment set for exhibition later in the summer. Today I was glad for the distraction.

The deeper I got into planning the exhibition, the more I found myself liking the work. It was a welcome surprise to think that maybe I *would* want a job in a museum or gallery after all.

I spent the early afternoon at a local park sketching the scenery for my first art assignment. I always found solace and comfort in the quiet that overtook me when I put myself into my art. My boy troubles began to melt away.

By the time I headed home to get ready for my date, the only thing that continued to plague me was Spencer. I was trying to throw him out of my head for now, and since he hadn't called back it was relatively easy. But I still felt somewhat childish and guilty for ignoring him. I simply didn't think I would be able to handle an adult conversation with him right now.

If I sat and really thought about the past two weeks, I was amazed to find

myself juggling dates. When Jax called me Wednesday night I found our conversation to be a little more focused on him and his internship than I would have liked. He was feeling intense pressure to come up with economic planning strategies for businesses that were mindboggling to me, so I forgave him for his lack of interest in my life. I was looking forward to having some one-on-one time with him again. I was also looking forward to getting that kiss he'd wanted to give me two weeks ago. Warmth tingled through me at the thought of a long, hot kiss. It'd been a long time, and evidently I was a little hard up for some affection. Perhaps that was the cause of all my confusion - hard up for

some lovin'.

Brian called that afternoon on his way to a banquet with some other student diplomats. Our conversation was short but sweet. He told me he was thinking of me and wanted to make sure I kept my calendar open for one day next week so we could get together. I was excited that he was going to be staying in Nashville for the summer instead of going home like so many fellow students were.

Gage also sat at the forefront of my mind; a constant, distracting presence as I went about my day. His warm eyes, his dimpled smile. That thick, compelling accent. I was in deep with that one, all right.

The more I thought about all of my

dates, the more I began to struggle with the thought of dating multiple guys. Especially when I admitted to myself that the thoughts I was having about Gage were becoming obsessive. Feeling stressed about dating more than one guy at a time, I asked Candace her thoughts while we were both dressing Friday night.

"Cand? Do you ever feel guilty for dating more than one guy at a time?" I called into the bathroom while she worked on her hair. As usual on a Friday night, she was using my bathroom because Sara was showering in theirs.

"Nah, that's what dating is," she yelled back. "I mean, it's not like you're going to *sleep* with them. You're just checking out the options, you know?"

"I'm not shopping for a car, Candace," I quipped, walking up behind her. She stared at me in the mirror while she worked a flat iron through her blond bob.

"Yes you are, and you need to check out all the bells and whistles. See what perks they each come with." She grinned. "Take 'em for a test drive. Wink, wink."

I couldn't stop the wisecrack that popped into my mind. "See who has the smoothest ride?"

"Yes! Or who can get the most mileage on one tank of gas."

"Oh, oh...who goes from zero to sixty in three seconds flat, and who likes to ease onto the gas."

We slumped against the wall, laughing so hard tears ran down our faces. Candace set the flat iron down on the counter; shaking in a fit of hilarity as we kept pulling out dirty car jokes.

"You just have to check the dip stick."

"Oh my lord, Candace," I gasped, sinking to the floor and crossing my legs. "Stop or I'm going to pee myself."

"Have you two gone insane?" asked Sara, walking into my room and peeking in the bathroom. Candace and I looked at each other and spontaneously broke out into another round of giggles.

Sara eyed my comfy clothes disdainfully. "Keep laughing it up Miss I'm-So-Sexy, but Jax will be here in thirty minutes," she nagged, walking away.

"Oh crap, really?"

I jumped up and hurried to get dressed and ready for my date, while Candace's roaring chuckles echoed through the bathroom as I went.

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 and watched me while I slipped on two shoes for her to help me pick which looked better.

"That dress is killer, girlfriend," she admired as I twisted around, poking out my shoes. The black flimsy skirt floated around my knees. I was torn between a strappy black heel and a gold strappy sandal. "I say sandal with your chunky gold bracelets."

"Gold it is then," I agreed, slipping on the sandal and pulling on my bracelets.

"He just pulled up," sang Sara from the front of the house.

I heard her open the door and greet him as I waited the appropriate amount of time, as designated by Candace, before walking out to meet him. I spotted Jax as I followed Candace down the hallway. He was laughing with Sara as he stood in the foyer. His curling dark hair looked slightly damp, as if he'd just gotten out of the shower. He was casually dressy in dark jeans with a light plaid dress shirt. The sleeves were rolled up on his forearms, and a large

diver's watch covered his wrist.

His eyes met mine as soon as I walked out of the shadow of the hallway, and he excused himself from Sara and walked straight to me. Admiration clear on his face, he leaned in and kissed my cheek with a whispered, "You look gorgeous."

"Hi to you too." I smiled back and allowed him to take my hand.

"Where are you two kids off to tonight?" teased Sara like a parent.

"Wherever she'll let me take her," Jax answered with a wink.

"I'll see you two tomorrow morning," I added as we walked out the door. Sara and Candace were both planning rather big nights with their own dates tonight. It wasn't much of a surprise in Sara's case since she tended to think of sex as a bit of a recreational sport. However, Candace 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 on and off for several months, but I didn't realize that it had turned more serious recently. Guilt ate at me for being so wrapped up in my own junk that I hadn't asked about the events of her life more.

Jax surprised me with an extravagant dinner at a local steakhouse. It was the kind of place where you ordered everything a la carte, and it was much too nice for a first date.

"You know you didn't have to pull out

the big guns tonight."

"It's no less than you deserve, and I wanted it to be special. I probably won't get to see you for several weeks again."

My face fell, but he made up for that damaging news later by treating me to all kinds of hysterical stories about New York and work.

Once we were finished with dinner, Jax insisted we meet up with a few friends. When he said they'd all be meeting at The Garage, my blood pressure rose in anticipation at seeing Gage. Not good. Thinking it might be time to stop going to the same place as my personal kryptonite, I tried to convince Jax to change locations.

"I'm sorry, but the guys are already

there. Besides, I thought you liked The Garage."

Without a reasonable response to give, I gave up and we made our way there. Finding his friends was pretty easy. There was a large group of them sucking down shots and acting rowdy on the floor. Gage smiled at me when we made eye contact as I made my way across the bar. I tried to ignore him as Jax and his buddies sank deeper and deeper into their drunken debauchery. Even so, I couldn't stop pinning my gaze on the gorgeous bartender who kept haunting my dreams.

"Let's dance," Jax suggested in my ear after almost an hour of sitting there watching him throw back drinks and talking with his friends. He pulled me to the floor for a dance without waiting for an answer.

"Does the bartender have something you like?" The question came out of nowhere, and I pulled back in alarm at the slightly angry tone he used. "You two have been making eyes at each other all night. Is there something going on?" he hissed. He pulled me in closer as we danced; his eyes aggressively fixed on mine.

There was an open back to my dress and his warm hand snaked its way under it; his fingers curling around my ribcage little by little. The closer he pulled me in, the closer his fingers came to skimming the side of my breast. I pushed off of him slightly, trying not to make a scene, but he held tight.

"Tell me, are you slumming it with the help, Savannah? He looks like he wants to eat you alive." His words slurred, and I knew he'd drunk way too much tonight.

"You're drunk, Jax," I hinted quietly. "Why don't I drive you home?"

"That's an excellent idea," he murmured. "Right after this dance."

He clutched at my back again and pressed me into his chest. It was easier to let him grope me then it was to get away, so I rested my chin on his shoulder and breathed deeply as I waited for the interminable song to end. His fingers began to graze the edge of my breast again and I jerked back.

Jax whispered rather incoherently in my ear, and from what I could gather I was supposed to like his touch. As I looked around towards the bar I found myself in Gage's deathly stare. He looked like he was shooting lasers at me with his golden eyes, and I quickly looked away in shame. I was pretty sure that he now had a pretty low opinion of me. My stomach dropped, followed by something more profound ripping through my heart.

"Can we go please?" I begged. I knew my soft plea was bound to give him the wrong impression, but right now my plan was solely to get him out of the bar. Jax's hand weaved into my hair and pulled my head back so he could look me in the eyes.

"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 do think we should leave now," I answered diplomatically.

"Damn it," he growled a little too loudly. His face was twisted in anger and I glanced around us to see if anyone had heard him. "I've just been so stressed and overworked."

He sounded miserable. I could see why so many men in the financial district burnt out easily at such a young age. Over dinner he'd told me about a breakdown that one of the owners of the firm had just gone through, and he seemed about ready to snap himself. "Jax, why don't you quit? If you're so unhappy..."

"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."

"We?"

"The privileged. I know you feel the pressure too. You've told me you do," he hissed as his eyes slid to my lips. "I want that kiss from you," he demanded, lowering his mouth to mine. Right before our lips touched, he edged his mouth to my ear and whispered, "Let's give that bartender a show."

His lips then claimed mine. His fingers sank into my hair and held my face as his other hand slid down the side

of my chest and landed on my hip; clasping me to him. I tasted the whiskey on his mouth and wanted to laugh at the sheer irony of my own family's liquor being the catalyst that put me in this position.

Not caring about making a scene anymore, I pushed as hard as I could to free myself from his grip. Our mouths parted, but his hand stayed firmly wound in my hair. When I tried to extract myself from his grip, I tugged my head and felt the sharp sting of hair being pulled.

"Let go, Jax," I warned hotly, my voice a quiet hiss. "Let go now or I *will* make a scene."

His fingers released and I lost my balance for a moment. I fixed him with a

furious stare and then turned to rush from the bar. As I made a beeline for the exit I kept my gaze cast down. I slammed out the door and walked halfway across the parking lot before I cooled down enough to stop.

The sound of footsteps echoed behind me and I swung around in the dark parking lot to see Gage swiftly striding my way. "Savannah?"

My entire body flushed hot with embarrassment when he came closer and called out, "Are you okay?"

Jax stumbled out of the door at the same moment Gage made it to my side.

"I'm fine. Just go back inside, okay?"

"Hey man," bellowed Jax. "I knew it! You gotta hard on for my girl." I placed myself in front of Gage and stepped forward to place my hands on Jax's chest as he walked up. "Give me your keys and I'll take you home, Jax," I coaxed, trying to stop the situation from escalating.

He swung his arm hard enough to push me off of him as he continued to thunder at Gage. "You think you can *touch* her, man? She wouldn't let you touch her with a ten foot pole, dude. She's royalty, and you're just some loser bartender."

"Jax!" I tried to grab at his arm but he roughly pushed me off again. I was in disbelief that *this* was the same guy who had been so endearingly sweet to me a few hours before. "Just stay back, Savannah," warned Gage; his tone stern as he watched Jax standing there.

"Dude, don't even talk to her. Get your ass back inside," he snarled, and stepped closer to Gage's proximity.

I stood ten feet away, not sure if I should run inside for help or intervene myself.

"Alright 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, and then you have the balls to try to tell me to go home?"

"Jax," I warned again, taking a small step forward. But this time I got too close, so when he swung his arm around he whacked me hard across the face. His elbow grazed my cheek directly under my eye socket, and immediate, blinding pain shot through my face; causing me to cry out. Jax started to apologize profusely. His words however, were drowned out by an enraged Gage rushing forward.

Although my face was covered, I heard a torrent of curse words fly out of Gage's mouth. The curses were followed by the unmistakable sound of a fist making contact with a face. I looked up through my blurry, tear-filled eyes to see Jax stumble to the ground. He was out cold.

Putting his arms around my hunched

shoulders, Gage hustled me around to the back of the building. He cursed steadily all the way across the lot as he escorted me to a small office.

Once inside, he ordered me to sit still. "I'm going to grab you some ice." I heard the anger in his voice and wanted nothing more than to crawl under the table in my misery.

Gage returned after a minute with a cloth wrapped around ice. He pulled a chair up in front of me and sat down. He lightly pulled my hand away from my cheek and smoothed the hair off of my face. Taking great care, he brought the ice gently to my injury and held it there.

The anger I thought I saw was replaced by worry as he began to question me. "Are you alright? Are you dizzy or anything?"

I started to shake my head no, but couldn't with the ice there so I spoke as clearly as I could. "I'm okay, it just stings. He didn't really hit me all that hard. Is he okay?"

"Shit, why do you care?" he asked and then 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."

Touching my cheek lightly he smiled kindly. "How does it feel?"

"Sore," I admitted, liking the feel of his fingers running over my skin. "He was just a date, Gage. He wasn't important to me."

"So why did you let him treat you like that? I watched you dancing."

Shame washed over me as I came to grips with how determined I had been not to make a scene. So determined, I was willing to let Jax treat me like crap. It was Daniel all over again. He must have seen something shift in my demeanor, because he cursed again and leaned in closer with his hand back on my cheek.

"I'm an ass."

"Usually yes," I agreed with a tight smile, and then added, "but tonight, not so much."

"Nah, I am. I shouldn't grill you about him. It's just that when I saw him pawing you and I could see you pushing away I thought..." He stopped talking and I sucked in my breath, 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 asked softly, leaning into the caress of his fingers on my cheek.

"I wanted to know you were okay."

"Thank you."

"I need to get back out to the bar. They're covering for me, but it's packed."

"Oh...yeah, of course." I stood to leave with him but he shook his head.

"Savannah, you can stay back here as long as you want to. Do you have your car?"

Shoot. "No, I don't have my car. I can take a cab home." He watched me silently for a moment. His hands went into his pockets and then he stepped back; staring at me like he was trying to read me.

"Stay here and hang with me for a while. I'll give you a lift home."

Friday - May 3, 2013 My Hero

It was hard to say no when he asked so softly. The warmth of his accent made my toes curl, making me feel like a torn up rag doll as I numbly agreed to stay. He walked me out from the back office area, which opened up to the hallway by the restrooms.

"I'm going to freshen up and I'll be right there."

"I'll wait for you."

His concern was touching, and I softened my voice when I insisted he go. "Gage, I'm fine here. Go back before you get in trouble, and I'll be there in just a minute."

He waited until I opened the restroom door before turning to leave. I took a few moments to use the restroom and straighten my hair, and then I scrutinized my face in the mirror. There was a slight red spot where Jax had hit me, but it didn't look too horribly bad. I tried to cover up the redness with some powder as best as I could, and then touched up my lip gloss and left the restroom to walk back to the bar. Halfway there I stopped and stood; admiring my superhero of the night from afar.

He was laughing at something a customer said while he took payment for some drinks. He wore his dark hair sticking straight up in a sort of messy spiked look that really suited him. It didn't look like it was sticky with product, but rather almost like he'd hung his head outside the car window and let it dry in the wind.

When he noticed me standing to the side, he stopped mid-stride and smiled. I discovered that the smile he bestowed on his customers was nothing like the one he leveled on me. This one completely transformed his face. His eves crinkled at the corners, and his dimple dug into his cheek. He was sex on a stick, and I was definitely hungry for a taste. He beckoned me over to the bar with a nod of his head.

I glanced around. It looked like all of the stools were spoken for as he signaled me down to the end. I met him at the edge of the bar and he grinned and pulled a hidden stool out from behind him.

"Impressive."

"I try," he smirked as I sat. "You okay?"

"Seriously Gage, 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 hungrily while he served drinks up to the crowd at the bar. He poured liquor from bottles with a practiced flair, and you could tell he was very secure in his bartending skills. There was a line behind the stools at the bar, and groups of people were hollering over one another to get their drinks. It was a packed night and suddenly I started to feel guilty about taking him away from the bar, and the tips, for so long with my personal drama.

He kept a watchful eye on me as he worked, and it was comforting to see how much he cared about my wellbeing. At one point during the rush, he dropped off a glass of ice water and said, "Think of a song."

"Any song?"

"Mmmhmm. I'll be back for it." He winked.

The cover band began to play a drinking song and the crowd went crazy. Seeing the carefree faces of my peers was like a slap in the face. It shouldn't

be this hard for me to have fun. I felt defective.

"You look moody. Got a song for me yet?"

"Umm, no," I admitted. I couldn't name any of the songs about love gone wrong that were flying through my head. "I couldn't think of any."

Gage laughed and bent down to pull some beer bottles out of the cooler in front of him. "Come on, Savannah. You've got to work with me here." He reached over the bar past my head and handed the bottles to someone over my shoulder. Cash was exchanged and I sat there as he leaned into my personal space. "Name a song, now."

"Taylor Swift," I spat out

automatically.

"Ugh," he groaned, shaking his head. "Title?"

The loathing in his voice was clear, and I found myself wildly entertained by the prospect of irritating him all of a sudden. "Well, how about my favorite song?" I lied playfully; the mock excitement oozing out of my posture.

Evidently getting a kick out of my antics, he played along. "And what's your favorite?"

"How about 'We are Never Getting Back Together'?"

His eyes leveled on me for a moment. "How appropriate." I knew he was referring to Jax, and while part of me felt like he was inserting himself into something that was clearly none of his business, another part agreed with him wholeheartedly.

He stepped away from me and worked his way down the bar again, and I waited earnestly to hear his plan for my song. I sipped the water he handed me and checked my phone while I sat there. On my Instagram feed was a picture of Sara kissing Chris' cheek outdoors somewhere. I smiled at the sweet pose and the happiness on my best friend's face.

"You wanna dance?"

The voice came from a guy to my left and I lowered my phone to find a very broad-chested guy standing slightly behind me. He was one of those guys whose neck looked like the size of my thigh. He was built and obviously very proud of those muscles in his form fitting t-shirt.

When I looked over at him, he repeated his invitation to dance. When I started to shake my head no, I was surprised to hear Gage shout over the bar, "Sorry mate, she's with me."

"Hey man, my bad," Mr. Muscles apologized.

I pursed my lips and gave Gage a questioning look. "And just how do you know I wasn't interested in dancing with him?"

A bark of laughter was his reply. He was mixing a drink in front of me as he added, "What, Mr. I'm Too Sexy?

Sweetheart, you'd never survive with a guy like him."

Picking up his challenge I drawled out, "Ohhh really? Why do you think that?"

"I'm pretty sure he was checking out his own reflection in the glass he was holding, honey. I don't think you could ever find a room large enough to fit you both into at the same time."

"You don't even know him. How can you judge him like that?" I laughed.

He placed the drink he made in front of me as he spoke again softly. "Just watch him. If he doesn't look in a mirror in the next three minutes, I'll buy you dinner."

"What if he does?"

"I'll buy you dinner anyway," he angled. Then dropping his husky voice he added, "You pick dessert."

Oh lawd, there he went again. Making my knees go weak and the butterflies flutter in my stomach.

"Game on," I agreed; my voice barely above a whisper. He always stole my breath away when he spoke like that. It didn't really matter what the outcome of the bet was, because if my wits were about me - and they rarely were where Gage was concerned - I was getting a dinner out of this bet, regardless.

"And BAM," he hollered, calling attention to himself. I searched the room for muscle man and found him checking himself out in one of the mirrors on the wall leading to the restrooms. Gage was quite pleased with himself.

Picking up my drink, I gracefully admitted defeat with a silent toast in his direction. A sly smile played on his lips for a moment before he was pulled away again. Checking my phone, I noted that it wasn't yet midnight and I was already exhausted. Thinking back to Gage's offer to give me a lift home, I inwardly cringed. The thought of staying here for another two hours to wait for him to get off work wasn't sitting well, so I decided to take things into my own hands and dialed for a cab.

Swallowing down the last of the perfect Tom Collins Gage made for me, I tried to signal for his attention. The crowd at the bar was starting to die down as more and more half-drunk people were filtering to the dance floor.

"Alright, I've finally found our 'Never Getting Back Together' couple," he crowed proudly. "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, there was a poor guy begging some girl who looked like she'd had more than enough, to stay. From my vantage point I saw her shake her head no and try to walk away as he flailed his arms out 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," he drawled out slowly.

"You really enjoy that, don't you?" The question popped out unexpectedly.

"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 reminded me; leaning down on his elbows now that he had a free moment.

"So what's my song?"

"Oh, no way...can't give you a song yet, sweetheart."

"No? Why not? Can't think of one?"

Bzzzz Bzzzz Bzzzz

I checked my phone to see a text from

the cab company announcing they were outside waiting for me. My face went from smiling to frowning in 1.2 seconds.

"Bad news?" he asked quickly.

"What? No, it's just...I called a cab," I said, seeing the flicker of concern cross his face. "I'm tired," I said, reaching into my purse for some cash. "Here."

He refused the cash. Instead, he fixed his eyes on me and said, "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 insisted. "Sure I can. It'll keep you coming back to see me." He winked and then stepped back from the bar, adding, "It's all a part of my master plan."

I was so tempted to stay and talk to him that I wanted to kick rocks and cry. What a crazy thought. I was almost ready to pull out my phone and tell the cabby to forget the call when the cougar from last week walked up and purred towards Gage.

"My usual, gorgeous."

Acknowledging her presence, he turned from me to make his way over to her. In that moment I was reminded of how many women sat there each night and drooled over him, and I wasn't about to become one of those girls. Even if he was sexy as all get out.

He was writing on a small pad of paper as I got up and started to leave. I called out over my shoulder, "See ya Gage."

"Hey, don't forget your receipt," he drawled, causing me to stop in my tracks. He held a small scrap of paper out for me to take; his brows raised in encouragement.

"Um, thanks," I mumbled and took the paper from his hand.

Walking slowly towards the door, I unfolded the paper and found the following:

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 got home alright. Please.

My stomach dropped and I spun around to see what he was doing. 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 with him. As if he really was the superhero of my dream, he was using his laser vision to peer a hole straight through my soul.

I knew the song, but for the life of me I couldn't remember the lyrics.

We maintained eye contact from across the bar for a moment and I pulled

the little note up to my chest and mouthed '*Thank you*'.

When another employee walked up to him and diverted his attention from me, I pulled myself reluctantly from the bar.

I rushed to the awaiting cab and quickly gave him my address. I brought the song up on my phone, but forced myself to wait until I got home to listen to it.

Rushing into the house fifteen minutes later, I clicked play on my phone and closed my eyes. I listened to the words and looked for hidden meaning. The lyrics...oh my God. Did he truly mean them for me? What a gesture. Seriously, this was just a few notches above holding a boom box outside of my window, a la 'Say Anything'. The thought caused tears to well up.

"Well this changes things," I sniffed, on the precipice of tears. The note he'd written was clenched tightly in my fist as I entered his number and typed him a text like he'd asked. For once in my life I didn't stop and obsess about what to say. I quickly sent him the message:

Me: i'm home. i can't thank you enough for tonight and for you saving me. you're my hero ;)

A reply didn't come right away, and I assumed he was working at the bar and couldn't get to his phone. Making sure the front door was locked, I made my way to my room where I jumped in the shower quickly. I settled into my bed a little after one and had just flipped off my light when my phone went off. I jumped about five feet in the air as I grabbed my phone to find a reply text.

THE Aussie: Thank you for letting me know you made it home. I hope I'll see you tomorrow...

I started to formulate a reply when my phone buzzed again.

THE Aussie: ...preferably without a date.

Me: i may drop by.

I remained vague because I *did* have a date, but hated to admit it. The constant temptation to stop by The Garage was wearing on me. After tonight and his song choice for me, I knew I should just give up. I really didn't know what was stopping me anymore.

Saturday - May 4, 2013 Date #7 - R.L. Canceled

I spent most of Saturday nursing a ridiculous headache from the tension of the night before. The entire scene with Jax didn't really hit me until I made it into my bed and realized how wrong I had been about him. I couldn't believe that I'd actually tried to cover for his drunk ass in the bar. I should have known better.

I tried to wrangle out of my date for the night, but neither Sara nor Candace were having any part of that.

Glancing at each other cryptically, they both kept making excuses for why I

needed to go out.

"You can't let one crappy night ruin the rest of these dates for you, Savannah." Candace emphatically shook her head at me as I tried to come up with excuses.

"I really don't know if I can go back there, you guys. I feel so stupid after last night. I really don't know how to face Gage, and with another date to boot. He'll think I'm such an idiot," I bemoaned, throwing myself on the couch.

"Savannah, the dude knocked a guy out cold." I opened one eye and looked at Sara standing over me. "For you," she added, her hands on her hips.

Remembering the look of anger and

concern on Gage's face the night before sent small waves of heat through my legs. I thought about the song he gave me. I listened to it on repeat half of the afternoon, my mind running wild with fantasies and ideas of what he was thinking when he picked that song.

It was close to seven o'clock when I timidly walked into The Garage. For once, I felt almost shy at seeing my handsome superhero. Suddenly I was nervous as hell. I had unconsciously called Gage my superhero. I was walking into his bar to meet another date, and there I was calling him mine. "You are so messed up," I scolded myself as I looked around.

"How's the cheek?" Gage startled me as he came up from behind and caused me to yelp.

"Geez," I swore. I clutched my chest with one hand and used the table to my left to steady myself. I looked at Gage and the butterflies began to pound through my stomach.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you." His eyes searched my face, looking for any signs from last night's dramatic smack down. When I'd awakened that morning there was a slight discoloration on my cheekbone, but thankfully, the painful bite of Jax's elbow didn't leave a big mark.

"Nothing a little makeup couldn't fix," I answered, watching as the intensity of his stare faded. "How's your fist, Ali? I assume you know who Muhammad Ali is?"

"Sweetheart I'm from Australia, not Mars." He looked offended, as if I had the audacity to question his manhood.

"Ah yes, I forgot," I teased, starting to feel more at ease. The crowd was somewhat thin for a Saturday night and I finally noticed the bags he held at his side. His muscles twitched under the black tee that was his customary "uniform".

"You doing some grocery shopping?"

He stood there watching me for a moment and then lifted the bags up. "Yeah, I needed to make a run for some garnish. Couldn't run out of limes in case my favorite Tom Collins-ordering gal came in tonight." His flippant tone matched the cute grin on his lips as he walked past me and gently placed the bags on the counter. Noelle was behind the bar tonight and waved at me when I followed behind Gage.

"Hey girl," she called out. "I heard there was a slight commotion in the parking lot last night." Her eyes were wide, and she looked eager to devour any and all gossip I could give her.

Sliding onto a bar stool, I tried to stay easy-breezy as I spoke. "Just a small misunderstanding, that's all."

"That's not what one of the bouncers said earlier."

"Noelle," Gage interrupted, before I

could respond; his voice deep, 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 to the back, quietly throwing a puzzled glance back at me. Gage rolled his neck from side to side, looking very annoyed before he returned his attention to me again.

"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."

He smiled, his voice filled with

sarcasm when he spoke. "You are, huh?"

I shook my head in affirmation and swallowed whatever I was about to say when Gage lowered his head close to mine and leaned into me. His masculine scent tickled my nose; a tantalizing mix of tangy cologne and mints. His warm breath fanned over my cheek as he placed his lips next to my ear and spoke faintly.

"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 began to droop closed at the ecstasy his soothing tone brought to me. Confused for a moment, I asked what he was referring to. My hand shot out of its own accord and gripped his upper arm. The heat radiating off of his skin instantly warmed my icy fingers.

"You called me your hero last night," he murmured into my ear. Then he sighed; his breath causing a shiver to run down my neck. "I rather liked the thought of being your personal superhero. After all, you're turning into my own personal brand of kryptonite."

He pulled back and lingered inches from my face for a moment before he straightened gently, prying my hand from his arm. His hand continued to hold mine for a few moments more, and he caressed my fingers gently before placing my hand on the bar top.

Bzzzz Bzzzz Bzzzz

The vibrations from my cell phone going off slammed my hazy senses back to reality. I looked up and stared at Gage, still not able to think clearly, before he nodded to the phone sitting on the counter with my small wristlet wallet.

"That's your phone, sweetheart."

"Hmmm," I muttered. The second wave of vibrations pulled me the rest of the way to reality. "Oh!" I gasped, shaking my head and feeling like an idiot.

Gage chucked my chin as he stepped away, calling behind him, "I'll be back in a while."

I watched him walk away like a lovesick girl. The need to check for

drool on my chin was overwhelming. Clicking the phone on and sliding my finger across the unlock button, I glanced at the text awaiting me.

Sara: so i forgot to tell you i cancelled your date tonight. stop fighting gage and GO with it girl! <3 Sara

You've got to be kidding me. I mentally kicked Sara in the head twenty times as I typed out a reply:

Me: i can't believe you two hounded me about how badly I needed to go on this date. i can't believe you cancelled 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 unbidden picture of Gage dressed as the crocodile hunter flashed through my head and I squeezed my eyes shut to get it out. A shoulder bumped into my back as someone took a seat next to me. Opening my eyes I was surprised to find the skinny figure of Ryan, the sales clerk from the art store, taking a seat.

"Excuse me..." he apologized, looking down. As he shifted in his seat he lifted his head and gaped at me. "Well hello again. We seem to keep bumping in to each other." He laughed an awkward laugh as he smiled at me.

"Yeah we do, don't we?"

I looked around for Gage absentmindedly while trying to decide what I should do at that point. My date wasn't showing, and Gage was obviously busy with work. I should leave.

Then again, maybe I should stay. Those last tantalizing words Gage whispered into my ear were the most amazing words I think I had ever heard. As I wavered in my decision, I watched as the bar began to build more of a crowd and the music got a little louder. *Riley must have the weekend off*, I thought to myself as I looked over at a substitute DJ playing tracks.

"Did the charcoals work for you?"

I heard the voice but didn't actually catch what it was saying. "Sorry?"

"Your pencils from the other day?" Ryan asked; his small eyes flicking up and down from the bar to my face and then quickly back. He was obviously very nervous talking to me.

"Oh, yes – 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," I informed him with a smile.

"You've been coming into the store for a while now. Are you an art major?" His voice was somewhat faint, but I could tell he was gaining confidence in talking with me. His eyes were more direct when he asked questions now. "I don't mean to pry."

I waved my hand, telling him not to worry about prying. "I'm an Art History major. The sketching is a passion of mine, but I don't really expect my stuff to ever be in a gallery or in anyone's home."

"Well why not?"

"Ha - you've never seen my work. If you had, you'd know why not. I'm not bad, but I really just do it because I love to draw. It's a way to escape."

He was about to ask me another question when Gage made an appearance behind me. He was making a habit of coming up behind me tonight, but this time I didn't jump.

He touched my shoulder lightly, causing internal sparks of need to shoot through my nerve endings. "Hey, I almost hate to ask, but are you here waiting on someone tonight?" I rolled my eyes out of irritation that he would think he had to ask that when he added, "I'm not trying to rag on you. It's kind of been, well..."

"Stop while you're ahead Gage," I teased, turning away from Ryan and toward Gage on my right side. "I'm not here waiting for a date, no. I totally know why you asked, and although it's somewhat embarrassing, I guess I'm not mad at you for it."

He brought his hand close and ran his

fingers languorously over a loose strand of my hair as it draped beside my face; causing me to freeze. "I was wondering if you'd eaten already. 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 right out of the chair as I mentally chanted 'YES! YES! YES!', but instead gave him a small affirmative nod. I started to follow Gage towards the back when I remembered Ryan. Turning over my shoulder, I caught him watching me and called out to him, "It was nice chatting with you. See you at the store again soon, I'm sure."

Gage was waiting at the mouth of the hallway for me to catch up with him.

Setting his hand on my shoulder, he escorted me to the same office he'd brought me to last night to calm down.

"Are you okay with something from Watson's upstairs?" he asked; pulling 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 waited as he picked up the phone and called for a takeout order. Looking around, I noticed the office didn't hold any sort of memorabilia or personal items you'd expect to see from the manager. It occurred to me then that I hadn't seen Drew in a while. I tried to remember if Riley had mentioned an ownership change in the bar previously, but I didn't recall that 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 trying to dig for information.

"No, Drew is no longer here, so I'm helping manage the place until the new owner can hire someone he trusts."

"Oh, so are you just here temporarily, then?" My voice sounded disappointed even to my own ears, but I hoped he couldn't tell.

"That 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 over

from the corner of the office so he could sit next to me.

"Thank you," I said while pouring honey mustard over my fried chicken salad.

"Tell me about Riley," he asked unexpectedly as we started eating.

"Riley? What about him?"

"You said you were just friends, and yet I get the distinct impression he wants more than that when I see him looking at you."

"We *are* just friends. I...I guess he and I get along so well that it's run through both our minds that we should've gotten together by now." Gage pulled a tense smile, but not before I noticed a dark frown flash across his face. "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?"

"When you decide to stop all the random loser dating and pick a real man."

I laughed somewhat nervously. I didn't really want to discuss my dating habits with Gage, but if he asked I would be honest with him. Or at least somewhat honest. His almost jealous questions about Riley and query about 'claims' on me suddenly brought something else to mind.

"Well since we're talking about claims, what about your fan club?" Gage

threw his head back as a shout of laughter escaped him. "Hey, I'm serious," I frowned, playfully slapping at his arm. "I know you said that it's just part of the job, but is there ever a point where you would turn them down?"

He immediately put his fork down and angled his body towards me; his face a lot 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 to me, but not here not in Nashville I haven't."

Relief washed over me at his explanation, although that wasn't what I really meant. "I wasn't talking about sex, though I'm relieved to know you're not playing boy toy to the cougars, Gage." I winked, popping another bite of salad in my mouth.

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 was a Mrs. Aussie Bartender, would you continue to allow those women to hang all over you?"

"Mrs. Aussie Bartender, huh? Is that what we'll be calling her?"

I bit my lip and found myself starting to laugh. Shrugging my shoulders, I realized that I didn't even know his last name, to which he replied, "It's Taylor."

"Taylor. Hmph. Not as cool as 'Gage

Aussie Bartender', but whatevs," I teased, pushing my salad box aside.

"Let's not talk about me, though. How about you tell me what you're doing with all of these dates?"

I nervously fingered my lip as I thought about an answer to his question. "What makes you think there's something 'up' with it? Can't a girl go out on some dates?"

"From what I've seen sweetheart, you've only been on *one* date, and that one was dumb enough to leave you here early. The others were scum, late, overly touchy feely and/or drunk.

"Wow, taking notes are we?"

"Yes, I have been."

"Why?"

"First, you tell *me* why you've been putting yourself through the ringer."

With a wave of my hand I pushed back from the desk so I didn't feel so trapped, and I knew I could think better if I wasn't so close to him. "It's ridiculous, really. My roommates signed me up on a campus dating site as a joke."

"What the f...?" He stopped abruptly and cleared his throat. "Excuse me. What were they *thinking*, and might I add, why didn't you kill them?"

"They were thinking that I spent too much time at home with my books and studying. And I have to admit that they were probably right, too. I'm really not much of a dater," I finished lamely. I felt like such an idiot all of a sudden. "So did you have a date tonight too?"

"I did, but it got canceled at the last minute."

"Yet you stayed here anyway?" I flushed as his gaze pinned me to my chair, while the next word took the breath from my lungs. "Why?"

I couldn't answer that. I wished I was bold enough to tell him he was *my* kryptonite and not the other way around. I sat there and stared at him mutely, sure that I looked like a fish out of water gasping for air. After what seemed like an eternity, he cocked his head slightly and narrowed his eyes.

"Go out with me." Those four words coming from *that* mouth were precisely the four words this girl wanted to hear more than anything. Well, most anything. Even so, I still fumbled the ball for a moment.

"Go out with you?" I echoed, sitting up straighter. "Why?"

"Sweetheart, you keep going out with these guys, but every night you still end up here with me. I know you feel it. Let's get away from the bar and see where it leads."

My mouth was dry as I decided to take a chance and replied softly, "Okay."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Touchdown!

We were sitting there quietly, letting the moment sink in, when a jarring knock on the door interrupted us. One of the bouncers I remembered from the night before stuck his head in, and after glancing at me commented, "Sorry to interrupt you, but there's a slight situation out here you're needed for."

Looking mildly confused, Gage excused himself and left me sitting in the office alone. Two minutes later he walked back in apologizing. "I'm sorry, Savannah. There's something that'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?"

"What?" I blurted, laughing at his enthusiasm. "Why tomorrow? 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, pointedly ignoring my questions.

"Well no, but..."

"No buts," he shushed me and I glared at him. "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 begrudgingly.

"Yes, angel I was. Look - you're free, I'm free, and I'm taking you out while there's an opening in your jam-packed social calendar."

I would have snapped something snarky back at him, except that it was about the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to me.

"If you can't read between the lines,

then I'm going to make it real clear. I'm taking my shot before some other big wig comes in and tries to steal you away. Is that alright with you?"

"It's more than alright. Ten it is."

Ushering me out of the office and back to the bar, I debated on hanging out for a while until I saw how packed the place was. Knowing that Gage needed to focus on his patrons, I told him I would see him in the morning and made my way to the door.

Sunday - May 5, 2013 Cinco de Mayo

The three quick raps at the door accelerated my already wild heartbeat. It was as if a hummingbird had permanently taken up residence in my chest. I opened the door and found myself face to face with a Mexican themed bouquet, complete with colorful flowers, a little Mexican flag and a beautifully painted maraca. I promptly burst into laughter.

"Happy Cinco de Mayo," came the voice hiding behind the flowers. His deep laughter joined mine as he lowered the bouquet.

"Thank you. Come in and I'll put these

in a vase," I invited; taking the flowers from him.

As I walked into the kitchen and fumbled with the flowers, Gage called from the living room. "This is a cute place you have. You girls rent it?"

"Uh, no I own it. Sara and Candace pay me rent, though," I admitted.

I carried the flowers into the living room and set them on the mantel, and then watched as Gage skimmed the framed pictures on the built-in shelves. Panic rose when he picked up one of me with my parents at a charity event for Guthry Whiskey. It was from my high school years, and we were all wearing Guthry shirts.

It wasn't like I was trying to keep who

I was a secret, but I just never talked about it. He set the picture down without a word, and then put his hands in his pockets and looked at a few more.

"Ready?" I finally asked.

"Yes, let's go. You look beautiful, by the way," he said as he stopped in front of me. "I should have said that first thing."

A ridiculous smile crossed my face as I looked down at my outfit. I was wearing a faded out blue jean jacket over a little flowered sundress with ballet flats. In the past two weeks he'd seen me in every curve hugging, hot date dress I owned, yet he thought I looked beautiful in a simple sundress and flats. Swoon. "Did I leave you speechless?" he mocked; his dimple peeking out with his smile.

"You leave me speechless quite often, actually," I flirted, cautiously looking up at him. "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 kidded, plunking my hands on my hips and giving him a very thorough look. He wore a casual white button up with the sleeves rolled up and the ends untucked. His jeans were a darker wash that made them look dressier, but the fit was casual and loose. "Thank God you're not wearing skinny jeans," I added with a giggle, and his face screwed up in mock disgust.

"C'mon comedian, or we'll miss our date standing here admiring each other." He pulled me out the door by the hand.

"So where are we going?" I questioned once we were buckled into his SUV and pulling out of the driveway. He shrugged noncommittally and said cryptically, "You'll see."

A few minutes later we pulled into a parking spot at Centennial Park. Centennial was a few blocks up from my house and a few blocks down from VU's campus.

Gage jumped out of the car and I waited patiently while he came around

and opened my door like a gentleman. When he pulled a picnic basket and folded blanket out of the back seat, I tried to mask my look of genuine surprise. We walked along the cool grass and found a seat under a large shade tree close to a replica of the Parthenon.

I took the basket from him and he spread the blanket on the grass.

"This has always been a favorite place of mine," I hesitantly offered as I looked around.

"After you." He waited for me to settle in on the blanket before setting the basket down and sitting next to me. "Why is it your favorite?"

"It's close to my house, for one thing.

It's safe and full of people all the time. And I can people watch and draw, or sit peacefully and study when I need to."

He watched me intently as I talked. His full attention was on me and it felt so good to know he truly wanted to hear what I said. "Thank you for this, Gage," I added seriously after a moment.

"I should be thanking you for saying yes, sweetheart."

"No, really - for going through the trouble of packing a picnic and planning this. I know you have to go into work in a bit so it was..."

His hand stretched out and grasped mine from my lap, causing me to trail off. "This is the type of date you deserve, Savannah," he said smoothly as he squeezed my hand. "Besides, don't thank me yet...you haven't seen what I packed."

"Oh no," I giggled.

"Alright sweetheart, here's the part of the date where we get to know each other. You ready?"

"Ha, I'm kinda scared," I admitted with a smile. My cheeks started to ache from all the smiling I'd been doing since Gage had walked into my house that morning.

"Don't be scared. I'll go easy on you." He let go of my hand and stretched his legs out before him to lie on his side; propping himself up on his elbow. I tried to keep my disappointment from my face at the loss of his warm touch. As if he could read my mind, he tapped the ground saying, "Get comfortable. So you're an Art History major, right?"

I pulled off my jacket and shifted to my back so I could lie down next to him. The sun peeked through the leaves over our heads, and I stared up at the tree as I answered him. "Yep."

Once I was settled, he reached out and took my hand again. His thumb and forefinger moved up and down over my fingers, gently tracing them almost like it was second nature to him. The soft touch made me close my eyes with the wonderment of how good it felt.

"Why art?"

"I guess I've always loved to see the way others saw the world. Like how they can take something so normal and make it look extraordinary," I answered with my eyes closed. A small purr actually escaped my throat when he flipped my arm over and his fingers began to lightly run up and down my forearm.

"Why bartending?" I asked. I mentally kicked myself for asking it in a way that sounded like it was a meaningless job.

He laughed low. "It's what I do. I'm actually here on research."

I opened my eyes rather reluctantly and tilted my head to the side so I could see his face. "You research bartending?"

"No, not exactly." He started to say more and then sat up abruptly. "Let's unpack this basket. I'm hungry." I sat up and pulled the lid off of the basket, practically gasping out loud when I saw all of the stuff he'd packed. There was fresh fruit and cheese, crackers, slices of meat, as well as single serving sized orange juice and champagne. I had to laugh when he pulled out two plastic wine flutes.

"What, no shrimp on the barbie?" I teased, and Gage broke out into laughter.

"Gage, honestly this is amazing. How in the world did you have time for all this?"

"This is my date kit," he answered with a very straight face. "I keep it stocked every weekend in case a hottie like you needs a man."

"You seriously did not just say that." I

picked up a grape and threw it at him.

"A man never reveals his secrets, Savannah," he chided. A grape pegged me in the nose and we both burst into laughter.

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 his baritone laughter mingled together, creating a perfect melody. I saw several people walk by and stare at us as if they longed to switch places. I tried to imagine what we must look like from their point of view: a young couple enjoying a beautiful spring picnic, carefree and laughing like they were in love. It had really turned into a halcyon day, and I didn't want it to end.

"Can I ask you a question?" he asked seriously as he began to pack up our empty dishes.

"Of course."

"Is there a reason you don't tell anyone who your parents are?"

I felt my face go red and started pulling on my jacket to cover up the feeling of awkwardness that suddenly washed over me.

"I mean, I'd already guessed it after hearing different people talk about you at the bar, but when I saw the picture of you with them at your house it was confirmed."

"It's not like it's a secret or anything, but I don't broadcast it. You know, being heir to one of the world's largest whiskey companies comes at a price. Especially when your peers are college kids," I confided.

He sighed when he checked his watch and closed the lid to the basket. "I imagine the frat boys really love you, huh?"

"Oh my gosh," I drawled, thinking back to my first year at school. "It's honestly part of why I don't party much. I got so tired of people hitting me up for free booze all the time. It's not like I keep crates of whiskey stashed at my house, people. Does it matter to you?"

"Come again?"

"Never mind." How could I ask him if he cared? If I asked '*Does it matter that* I come from money and you're just a bartender?' it would offend him. On the other hand, what if that was why he'd asked me out in the first place? He said he'd already figured it out before seeing the picture. I wasn't sure I really wanted to know if his plans included using me.

"It's about time to go," Gage sighed.

"Is it?" I asked. I was seriously bummed to end the morning. "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 me and waited expectantly for his reply.

Gage's face was cloaked in heavy concentration. "He's pretty cool. I definitely think you should go on a second date with him."

"You do, do you?"

"Most definitely," he murmured. He stood and offered me a hand. "You need to give him a chance to *really* impress you," he said; confidently pulling me right up, leaving mere inches between our bodies. I was so close that the spicy scent of his cologne tickled my nose.

We simply stood there with our hands entangled; staring at each other. I took in the small dent in his cheek that turned deeper when he smiled. The dark strands of his hair were spiked up, but not to cloying perfection. His eyes were a warm brown, with golden flecks that I hadn't noticed before. He was undeniably gorgeous. "Would you let me draw you sometime? I have this class I'm taking, and well..." I blurted out, proceeding to turn ten flaming shades of red.

"You want to draw me?"

"Sure."

"Like Jack and Rose from Titanic?" he asked. "*That* kind of drawing?"

"Um, yeah Gage - I want to draw you in nothing but one of your shot glasses," I teased saucily, rolling my eyes dramatically at him.

"Sweetheart, we're gonna need to find a bigger glass if *that's* where you wanna go."

My face began to warm and I pulled away, starting across the grass to the parking lot before he could see my acute embarrassment. He jogged a few steps and pulled up beside me laughing.

"I've said it before, but it bears repeating. You are so full of yourself," I grumbled in feigned annoyance.

He suddenly stopped walking, which made me pause as he tilted his head first one way and then the other. Scratching his jaw, he challenged, "You've said that about me? Out loud? *When*?"

"Well I've certainly thought it. Maybe I didn't say it to your face," I conceded, walking again.

"Aww, thanks sweetheart," he harassed me, throwing his arm over my shoulders. "Nice to know you were thinking of me."

"Case in point," I calmly pointed out

"Touché." He laughed. "Now get in the car before I'm tempted to say anything else stupid."

"You know, there's this bar I know that serves some pretty kick ass drinks. The bartenders there are easy on the eyes too," Gage commented as he walked me to my front steps a few minutes later.

"Yeah? How easy?"

"I have it on good authority that there's this one guy who is so perfectly made, he'll be posing soon for a beautiful young artist. I mean, she *begged* him for the opportunity. He is *that* fabulous."

"Oh," I quipped, putting my finger to

my lips. "That must be John. He is dreamy."

"Am I going to have to kick John's ass?"

Laughter burst out of me at his serious tone and I leaned against his chest lightly. "You really are too much. The girls and I are grabbing some Mexican tonight. It *is* Cinco de Mayo, after all."

Feeling somewhat shy I pulled back and swiftly hopped up the two steps to my front door. My key pushed into the lock and I grumbled as once again, it stuck. After jiggling it around to get it to turn, I made a mental note to self: *Get a new lock*. I turned, surprised to see that Gage had remained on the ground. His wide smile caused his eyes to crinkle at the edges.

"Maybe I'll see you later?" There was a hint of hope in his voice. A touch of optimism in his face. He looked like a kid waiting to be handed a beautifully wrapped Christmas present. The child in him was hoping for the perfect gift, but reality kept him from getting too excited. I could already read Gage that clearly. He knew what he wanted me to say, but wasn't cocky or confident that I would actually give him what he hoped for.

It was in that moment that I realized I wanted to jump down off of my porch and fling myself into his arms. The jolt of that vision took me by surprise and I smiled weakly and waved; stepping into the house before he could say anything else. Shaking my head of the pleasant vision of our limbs tangled together passionately and my lips pressed against his, I collapsed against the closed door.

I sighed, my hand pressed to my rapidly beating chest. Then sudden, painful mortification washed over me at the way I'd bolted into the house like a coward without saying goodbye...or even thank you.

"Aww crap," I cursed myself, grabbed my phone and quickly sent him a text.

Me: i forgot to say thank you for the wonderful morning

I pressed Send and anxiously awaited

a reply. After ten minutes of silence, I assumed that he either missed the message or ignored it completely. I chastised myself for thinking negatively and decided to settle into a chair with a good book. I was opening the book to the first chapter when my phone rang back with a text.

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. I smiled at his reply and feverishly typed back.

Me: why almost?

THE Aussie: it ended

Like a teenage girl I squealed. I instantly wished that Sara or Candace were around to walk me through what to say next. Instead, I racked my brain for the perfect reply.

Me: for now. i'll see you tonight. THE Aussie: yeah?

Me: yeah, i'll be stopping by to see john ;)

THE Aussie: can't wait!

Sunday - May 5, 2013 Calling Dibs

Sara and Candace were adamant that we grab a Mexican dinner before stopping by The Garage to visit Gage. Two margaritas and several hours later. the three of us wandered into a full blown party going on at the bar. In full Cinco de Mayo mode, there were red, green and white banners thrown up around the ceiling. The music was pumping loud and the alcohol was obviously flowing.

As my eyes searched the mob for Gage, I smiled and waved at a few people I knew from school. Sara, Candace and I inched our way past the crowd and stood by the half wall that bordered the dance floor.

Hands came up behind me and lightly touched my elbow as a voice spoke into my ear. "I need to tell you something."

It was Gage's whispered voice, his accent thicker when he spoke so low. I turned to say an excited 'Hi' when I saw the serious look on his face.

"What's up?" I asked, frowning. It worried me slightly to see him so austere after leaving him in such good spirits earlier in the day.

Candace came around me and thrust her hand into Gage's for forced introductions. "You must be the fabulous bartender from down under," she interjected playfully. "It's nice to meet you, Candace. I've heard a lot about you."

"All lies, I'm sure," she snickered.

"I hope not," he played along, but I could tell that his smile wasn't as brilliant as usual. "I need to steal Savannah for a moment though, if you don't mind. Tell the guys at the bar that I said drinks are on me."

"Drinks are on you? You can have her all night, sweetie."

"That's Sara," I informed him when she suddenly appeared and looped her arm through Candace's.

They exchanged quick pleasantries and then Gage led me to the office. He called over to John as we went, letting him know he would be back out in a minute.

Gage followed behind me and I stepped into the office. As soon as he shut the door, his face looked grim, and he ran his hand nervously over his neck.

My voice wavered when I asked him if everything was alright.

"I should have told you something this morning, but then I saw you and you just looked so beautiful. It wasn't how I wanted to spend our morning," he started, motioning for me to take a seat. "Your date the other night, Jax?"

"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."

I was shocked as he continued. "They showed up last night to speak with me."

"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 of me punching him and how they 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?" I thought about Jax and how sweet he was until he'd proceeded to get wasted. I hoped nothing bad had happened to him.

"I really don't know. Savannah, he was fine when he left here. The guys

made sure he was awake and alert. At least he was as alert as he *could* be, as wasted as he was." Gage stepped toe to toe with me and stared down into my eyes. "I'm sure he just 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 in hiding," I agreed, although I couldn't help the slight tremor of concern that ran through me.

Gage lifted my chin and smiled at me. "Hey, sweet thing - can I buy you a drink?"

I took in a deep, calming breath and tried to push Jax from my mind. I wanted to enjoy the evening with my friends.

"Actually, I'm here to see John. I hear

he's a pretty hot catch and would be willing to pose for some drawings."

Not missing a beat, Gage leaned in close, and for a moment my mind raced with the possibility that he was about to kiss me. But when our lips were so close that our breath mingled in the heated air between us, instead of the kiss I wanted he drawled out softly, "Is it gonna be a nude portrait, sweetheart? 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 and walked to the door.

"Shall we?" He opened the door with a teasing gleam in his eyes.

"You play dirty," I grumbled his way, as I walked past him and returned to the bar. I was determined to get him back for that.

Two hours and several more margaritas later (I think that put my total of the night at five!), I found myself bumping and grinding with Sara and Candace on the dance floor. The floor was absolutely packed with countless sweaty bodies swaying and dancing to the heavy beats vibrating through the building.

Although Gage stayed busy behind the bar, we continued to make eye contact throughout the night. As I swung my hips and tossed my hair I watched Gage from across the dance floor. He was reaching over the bar, and a crowd of people, to hand a guy in a backwards baseball cap some beers. In front of him sat the same attentive cougar I'd seen in there before. She was angling herself close to him as he leaned over, and I watched as she lifted her hand to his chest like she was some kind of a good Samaritan trying to help him from toppling over the bar.

Jealousy seethed through me when she stroked her skinny fingers over him. He leaned back with a smile and I saw him mouth something to her in response. Argh! I didn't *want* to be jealous over that, but I still wished I could see her face and hear their conversation. Luckily Sara grabbed my arm at the same moment I'd decided to head back to the bar and eavesdrop.

"Make him notice you, sweetie," she yelled at me with a wink. She motioned her hands to her boobs and playfully lifted them. I got what she was saying immediately, and decided GAME ON. Time to turn Mr. Aussie into a puddle of drool.

I let myself go as the heavy bass beat reached into my chest and grabbed me. My arms rose of their own accord and I twisted and dipped to the pulsing rhythm. I wore low riding jeans and could feel my shirt rise above the waistband of my pants and skim my upper abs. I glanced over at the bar casually to see if Gage was taking notice. He was.

Feeling emboldened by the drinks, I

turned on the sex kitten. A smile curved my lips and I met his brown eyes; biting my bottom lip. He stood motionless and watched me as I did a little spin to the music and wiggled my fingers in a slight wave. His eyes narrowed and we stared each other down as if there was no one else but us left in the room. A body rubbed up against my back and I ignored it for a moment, expecting it to be Candace or Sara, until I saw Gage's face turn from amused to irritated.

I glanced over my shoulder to see an anonymous grinding guy. Ugh. Why did guys think that dancing at a club meant they had free reign to grope unsuspecting females? As his hands moved to my hips, I jumped and spun around; bumping into his chest.

"I'm dancing here," I hissed.

"All by yourself, gorgeous?" he drawled, eying me and giving me that "I know you want me" sexy gaze that he must have thought worked on all the ladies. He pulled me closer and nudged his leg between mine, trying to pull me into some sort of 'Dirty Dancing' move. "Come on, I just wanna dance with you."

The margaritas dulled my senses enough so that I was sluggish to combat his moves. It wasn't as if I'd never danced with a stranger at a club before. There was no harm in just one dance.

"You're too sexy to be here alone," he shouted over the music. One of his hands slowly moved to rest on my upper thigh as he dipped low; grinding against me.

"Thank you, but I'm here with friends, actually."

"Are you going home with your friends too?" He winked. I frowned, not sure if I'd heard him correctly.

"Was that a proposition?" I asked; somewhat dumbfounded by his boldness. I took a moment to look for Gage to see what he thought of my new dancing partner, but he had mysteriously disappeared.

"If *you're* free, gorgeous, *I'm* free," he hinted, shouting above the music.

My head fell back as I was hit by a sudden fit of laughter, and that's when I saw him. My Aussie superman. He was currently upside down...no - my head was upside down. He was behind me, and his super laser beam eyes were set on me.

"Hi," I giggled. Giggle? I was pretty sure the alcohol had officially worked its way into my system. My head lifted back up and I smiled again at my unwelcome dancing partner. "I'm not sure if I'm free," I laughed and spun around. My butt was now being held firmly against Mr. Dirty Dancer.

Gage stood there for a moment, a slight frown on his face, while he took in the scene. His arms were crossed over his broad chest and I swear I saw his biceps flex. I bet he could crack a walnut with those arms. It really was lovely the kinds of things alcohol made you think of.

"Hey, this is..." I started, and then belatedly remembering I never got his name, I shouted at him, "What's your name?"

"Cory."

"Cory," I repeated, nodding to Gage. "This is Gage. Gage, Cory wants to know if I'm free," I explained.

Cory's body pulled away, and I wondered if he saw the same look in Gage's face that I did. As the beats started to mix and merge into a slow song, Cory stepped away and whispered into my ear.

"Let's grab a drink." I didn't see his expression because I was too busy watching Gage for a reaction. I stood there waiting hopefully for him to say something - *anything*.

"Sorry mate," he finally interceded. "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 in here, and I don't want any trouble." Cory shrugged and then stepped away from me without a backward glance. *Shows how much he cared*, I thought to myself.

"You chased him away," I grumbled prettily, but inside I was all smiles.

"Damn right I did, sweetheart." He pulled me against his lean, hard body and looped his arms possessively around my back. "What were you trying to do to me?"

I batted my eyes innocently, but my words gave my intentions away. "I was trying to get you to notice me."

"Christ, Savannah. If I notice you anymore than I already have, I'm going to have a serious problem walking." His hand pressed on my lower back and evidence of his 'noticing me' was pressed into my hip. We began to sway languorously to the music, and my hands crept their way up his abs and chest to wrap around his neck.

The movement brought my shirt up again, and desire began to pool in the pit of my stomach as Gage moved his warm hands to touch my bare skin.

"I'm calling dibs."

"You're what?"

"Dibs," he repeated gruffly; leaning his face down until our foreheads were barely touching. "You're not free anymore. I want you all to myself."

Amused, I coughed in amusement from the barbarian growl I heard in Gage's voice.

"Do you have a problem with that?"

"Well...I don't, but we may need to address the President on it. I mean, I don't know how they do things in Australia, but in *America* the constitution states that we're free."

A low chuckle rumbled through his chest as he looked at me. "You're sort of fun when you're drunk."

Ignoring his comment, 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, well that has become waaaaaay more acceptable since those books came out several years ago." I grappled with my thoughts for a moment, trying to remember the book names. "Oh, what was it? Something about shades..."

"I could get behind that concept, gorgeous," he teased, his eyes turning dark with desire. His warm lips touched my forehead briefly.

"So could I," I mumbled; resting my head on his chest and closing my eyes. I let him hold me close and we danced to the slow beat for another moment before he pulled back and sighed.

"I need to get back to work. Where are Candace and Sara?"

Disappointment filled me, but I knew he was right. "Um, I don't know." I looked around for my friends and managed to spot Candace dancing close by.

"Hey Cand," I shouted out, my voice rising above the music. All around, curious heads turned our way.

Gage relinquished me to Candace, making sure 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 ponderous seconds. "No kiss goodnight?" Candace blurted as she watched him stop to speak to some people at a table.

"No," I whined; falling theatrically against her side.

Candace chuckled at me, "Let's get you home. The clock is about to strike midnight, princess, and you're gonna turn into a pumpkin."

Monday - May 6, 2013 Slow Dancing

Monday mornings were bad enough without raging hangovers to contend with. Add my morning art class to that, and I wanted to kill myself. The only thing that kept me going was the fuzzy reminder of the conversation between Gage and me last night. Knowing that he wanted me all to himself was making me positively giddy.

After class, I stopped by a local coffee shop to grab a quick pick me up. It was almost ten-thirty and I found myself exceptionally eager to hear from Gage. He'd said he would call me this morning, and I couldn't help but get my

hopes up. My phone started going off while I waited for the barista to make my mocha latte, and I dove into my large bag in search of it.

The ringing got louder once I finally located the phone and pulled it out. I frowned at the unknown number and answered.

"Hello?"

"Ms. Guthry? This is Officer Owens with the Nashville PD."

"Yes, this is Savannah Guthry."

"Ms. Guthry, I spoke with the owner of The Garage the other night in reference to an altercation between you and Mr. Jax Rogers. Were you aware that Mr. Rogers went missing after that evening, Ms. Guthry?" "Yes, Officer, a friend at the bar told me you came to speak with him. Has he been located?"

"Yes, he was located..."

"Oh, thank God," I interrupted the officer.

"However, we would like for you to come down to the station sometime today to fill out a statement on the event that occurred," he finished; his voice stern.

"Officer, is everything alright with Jax? I don't understand what information I can offer you. 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 asked the other witnesses at The Garage to come down as well."

"A suspect in what, Officer?" I asked; confusion and disbelief starting to swim through my brain.

"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."

Incredulity hit me as I wondered what could have happened to him. I reassured the officer that I was free and would be on my way to the station shortly and hung up. By that point my latte was waiting for me, so I grabbed it and walked out of the shop in a daze.

Since Sara and Jax were friends, I

called her to tell her what had happened. She was at work but said she would try to call a few mutual friends and see if anyone knew anything. I was about to head to the station when my phone rang again. This time it was Gage. I hesitated for a moment before answering. Did I seriously have doubts about Gage's story from that night? Did I really suspect that something more sinister happened?

"Hello?"

"Hey. You sound clearer than you did last night. How's your head feeling?" His jab put a timid smile on my face, at least for the moment.

"I've been better," I replied tonelessly.

"I'm sorry. I just got off the phone

with Officer Owens, and he said he spoke with you. I feel like this is all my fault."

"Why would you say that?"

"He seemed pretty wasted, Savannah, and 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 to him, but I can't help but feel responsible for it."

Guilt washed over me that I would ever doubt him for a moment. He was with me when the bouncers had sent Jax off. The cab company verified their driver dropped off a relatively drunk, but functioning Jax at his apartment complex. Whatever happened to him had happened *after* he was left there. "Gage, you aren't responsible for what happened to him. Someone must have jumped him for his money. Officer Owen said he was admitted as a John Doe, so evidently he didn't have his wallet. Don't blame yourself," I implored.

We went around and around about blame and what might have happened until I pulled up to the station. "Hey, I need to go in and make a statement. I'll call you after and tell you what happens."

"Okay."

I hung up and searched for a parking spot. Taking a girl moment, I adjusted my hair and make-up before stepping out of my car. My stomach quivered at the thought of actually walking into a police station. I pictured endless episodes of cop shows and angry convicts threatening to kill people in my mind. Wiping my sweaty palms on my shorts, I took a deep breath and walked towards the front door. Crossing the parking lot, I glanced around as people milled about. There was a teenage kid with his pants hanging to the ground leaning on an old car, a woman at the far end of the lot yelling on her cell phone at someone, and then a cop car went racing by with its lights flashing and no siren.

When I reached the sidewalk to the door, I glanced up and spotted him.

"What are you doing here?" I questioned, as my heart rate picked up at

seeing him.

"They wanted me to come in too, and I figured you could use some support," he confessed as I walked straight into his arms. Gage staggered back slightly from the force of my weight hitting him.

"Sorry." I looked up at him sheepishly while clasping the back of his shirt and admitting, "I've never even had a ticket. I'm supremely nervous."

"I thought that would be the case. When you said you were on your way, I couldn't stop myself from coming down. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all." I pulled back a little while still allowing myself to remain in his embrace. "Why didn't you tell me you needed to come down? I would have picked you up."

"I wanted to surprise you. Luckily I live a few blocks closer than you do, 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.

"Don't smile too much," I warned Gage several hours later as we sat along the banks of the Cumberland River. After making statements at the station, we 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 eyes from the sketch pad I scrutinized his face closely, trying to get every detail right. The small 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 were curling into another crooked little smile as I stared at them. I felt my face get flushed and I quickly looked back down at my pad.

"Stop it," I groaned, wanting to throw the paper down and throw myself wantonly in his lap.

"Yes ma'am," he grinned again. "Did

you know you get a little crease between your brows when you're thinking?" He pointed between his own brows.

I shot Gage a glare as I lifted my hand to my forehead and rubbed the top. "Stop trying to distract me. Do you *want* to look like a 3rd grade art project?" I teased sternly; going back to sketching.

A slight breeze came off the river and tossed my hair about. I watched as Gage's eyes turned from his normal warm brown to a molten gold. His face clenched, and a sudden intensity cast itself over his features.

"Ooooo," I burst out, finding the perfect inspiration. "Keep that look."

He coughed slightly and the gaze faltered for a moment. I flicked my best

pretty please beggar face at him.

"Ok," he agreed. Slowly his eyes moved down from my face and began to check me out. I watched as his eyes seemed to stay on my chest, and was amazed to see him close his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, 'The Look' was back.

Finally getting the look I wanted in his face, I started to sketch again. I ignored the curls of desire that started to tickle my toes and run up my legs. Every time I glanced from my paper to his face, another part of my body awakened to his magnetic pull. When I lightly traced his mouth, I felt more blood rush to my face as I visualized kissing it. I decided to add his sexy dimple after a moment, and then stopped to admire the picture as a whole.

"You're gorgeous," I acknowledged, taking in my work.

I heard a low pitched growl and then a moment later he grabbed my ankle and pulled me across the blanket towards him. Once our legs were tangled up together as we sat across from one another, he placed his hands on either side of my face. Smoothing my hair back and running his hands through the windblown mess, he murmured to me in a voice best described as *hungry*.

"*You* are gorgeous. If you'd made me keep that look one minute longer my mind would have turned X-rated."

Nearly moaning aloud as his fingers

tickled the skin at my nape, I sighed. "Were you thinking dirty thoughts, Mr. Taylor?"

"Guilty as charged," he confessed. His fingers blazed a path from the back of my neck across my collar bone before tracing the edge of my tank top.

My eyes closed as he rubbed the skin above my shirt lightly. His body tilted forward and warm lips caressed my shoulder. They were as smooth as I'd expected them to be. A shudder ran through me when he trailed his lips over my shoulder and up the curve of my neck lightly.

I started to bend my neck back to allow him access to it when the shouts of unbridled laughter from children playing all around us reminded me where we were. The sound jolted me back to reality and I pulled back marginally.

"Wow." The words escaped me before I could stop them.

Gage slid to the right. Falling on his back, he threw his arm over his eyes. He cursed under his breath and then let out a strained grunt. My feet pulled to the side, I lay on the blanket beside him and rolled onto my back.

"Where did you *come* from?"

"Charleston," I jested, knowing he wasn't really asking a question.

"Are you sure you didn't fall from Heaven?"

His voice sounded so serious that it took me a full five seconds before I

broke into laughter. "That is the *worst* pick-up line EVER. Does that actually work in Australia?" I laughed; looking at him as I rolled to my side.

"For me? Yeah it does," he boasted, his face straight.

Making a fake gagging noise, I started to lie on my back again when he suddenly reached over; lightly grabbing my arm and pulling me towards 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. My head rested over his heart.

"That line obviously works too," I hinted jokingly.

We lay on the blanket under the sweet

breeze from the river and listened to the children playing as white puffy clouds rolled by. My eyes closed as his fingers rubbed up and down my forearm and my hand rested on his abs; feeling the slow, rhythmic inhale and exhale of each breath.

My body stirred when something wet struck my cheek. Suddenly I was pulled from a peaceful nap by another plop of water hitting my face. I glanced up at the sky and saw that dark clouds had rolled in while I was sleeping. Beside me, Gage was startled into wakefulness as more fat raindrops began to fall.

Looking confused for a moment he looked at me with a sheepish smile. His voice melted my insides. "We fell asleep, huh?"

A violent rumble of thunder clapped overhead, a sharp wind blew over the river and then suddenly the storm was moving at warp speed.

"Head to the car, quickly!" he shouted, tossing me his car keys. Grabbing the sketchbook and the shoes I kicked off earlier, I sprinted towards the car as rain began to fall in earnest.

My bare feet slapped against the wet sidewalk as Gage caught up with me, blanket in tow. He grabbed my hand to pull me with him and I laughed. My thin shirt was soaked and the cold rain streamed down my cheeks. Once we reached the car I stopped short and stood there laughing. Full bodied laughter. "Are you crazy? Jump in." He grabbed the sketch book, opened my door and threw it, along with the blanket into the back seat.

"Dance with me." It was a simple request. I stretched my arms out towards him and dropped my shoes. The rain fell on me freely.

He stood there watching me silently for a moment, and I fully expected him to call me crazy again and insist that I get in the car. But he continued to surprise me like no other man had ever done. He shut the car door and walked to my side with a broad smile showcased on his beautiful face.

He grasped one of my hands and twirled his wrist, pulling me in towards his body. He spun me around like a ballroom dancer would spin his partner. When I was wrapped tightly against his side, he whispered into my ear, "If I hear thunder again you're getting in, got it?"

Flicking his arm, I twirled back out; throwing my arm out wide behind me. I bowed playfully. "It's a deal."

Gage smiled as he pulled me back to his chest and placed his hands in the customary waltz position. His stance bespoke of someone who had clearly been taught the dance.

"You know how to waltz?" I heard the incredulous doubt in my question and he eyed me sharply as if I'd offended him.

"Just try and keep up."

We spun around and around in a

perfect waltz as the rain splattered our faces. When he dipped me, the fat drops pelted my eyes; forcing me to close them. My hair stuck to my face each time we would spin, and Gage lifted his hand to rub the strands away every so often. A car drove by and honked their horn at us. Gage dropped my hand and spun me out again, dropping into a deep, flourishing bow. In cue to his bow I curtsied, and the honk sounded again as the car got farther away from us.

"That was the perfect waltz," he said, looking me over. The hungry desire had returned to his eyes, and I looked down to see that my shirt was basically seethrough, and the bra I was wearing wasn't particularly offering much coverage.

I was astonished to find that I wasn't embarrassed by the exposed view he was obviously getting. The need emanating from his eyes was a balm to my insecurities. His open admiration was refreshing and not at all creepy.

"Dance with me," he smiled, as he repeated my inquiry from earlier.

This time he pulled me into his arms and I rested my face on his chest as we began to sway slowly.

The perfect question struck me when he began to hum lightly. "What are we dancing to?"

Instead of answering me, he began to sing. His voice was soft and deep, a little gravelly and totally beautiful. I listened to the words and recognized the song as a new one by Kip Moore.

"'Hey Pretty Girl'." I looked up at him as he hummed some more, and the look on his face said it all. "It's the perfect song."

We stared at each other and gravity began to pull us towards each other. I stretched up onto my tiptoes and his hand went behind my head; cupping it lightly. My lips parted; the raindrops tickling them as I took a steadying breath.

Just as my eyes began to close, a loud crash of thunder boomed and lightning streaked the sky right by us.

"Whoa!" Gage shouted, covering my head and pulling me to the car. "Get in," he said, laughing at the shocked look on my face.

Running around to the driver's side, he jumped in quickly as another flash lit the almost pitch black sky.

"I think we almost got barbecued, sweetheart," he laughed, and grabbed the blanket from the back seat. "Here."

I wrapped myself up as my teeth chattered and I laughed again. Gage cranked the car and turned the heater up full blast. I saw that the clock read seven-thirty, and my stomach picked that time to growl its discomfort. We'd napped the whole day away. I hadn't realized it was so late.

"I'm starving," I admitted as we sat there, the windows fogging up from the muggy heat in the car. It reminded me of the old days when Daniel and I would park and make-out. That vision made me uncomfortable so I shoved it away. Especially considering the aborted kiss Gage and I almost shared a moment ago.

"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 me? 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 to check my rain soaked hair and make-up. Gage stared at me as I wiped smudged eyeliner from around my eyes. His hand reached over and flipped the mirror closed.

"You really *did* fall from Heaven, didn't you?" he prodded.

"You should be so lucky."

"Sweetheart, I'm already that lucky," he insisted, sweeping his hand under the blanket to find mine. He pulled my hand to his mouth and kissed my knuckles before letting go and putting the car in reverse.

We drove to a local fast food restaurant where we ate and took turns asking ridiculous questions of each other. I learned that 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 admitted to not particularly liking country before, although since moving to Nashville he'd been trying to get better acquainted with the songs. I asked how he knew the Kip Moore song and he smiled boldly, admitting, "That one reminded me of you the moment I heard it. I've been playing it a lot."

It was nearly ten when he walked me to my front door. The rain had stopped and the humidity in the air was as thick as pea soup. I stood at the door and stared at him, waiting for him to finally make a move.

His eyes roved searchingly over my face, his hand reaching out while he spoke.

"I know what you want, Savannah."

His accent always made itself known when he was being serious. His hand twisted into my hair.

"You do, huh?" I flirted.

"I do, and I want it too." He frowned and closed his eyes briefly before adding, "But you're not the type of girl that one simply kisses goodnight. When I kiss you, I want it to mean something. I want you to want it so bad that when our lips collide, the earth stops spinning." His fingers trailed over my cheek and down the curve of my neck. "I want to linger over every inch of your lips one of these days."

A tremble rocked through me at his touch. I felt every muscle in my body begin to tense up at the expectation of a kiss with Gage. I hooked my fingers into the belt loops of his jeans, boldly pulling his hips forward until they were flush with mine.

"And when will this day be?" I asked seductively; looking up at him.

"Sweetheart, I won't have to tell you when it'll be...you'll just 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," he spoke confidently. The smile on his face belied the seriousness of his deep voice. He was confiding his innermost thoughts to me.

"Savannah, I want to need you like an addict needs his drugs; like a baby needs his mother. You're beginning to work your way into me."

My voice was barely a blip on the radar, it was so low, when I asked, "I am?"

"Yeah. If I were smart I would walk away. I want you too badly for this to end up 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 crossed my lips before I could stop it. Every inch of my skin begged for his touch as warmth spread through me like wildfire. I stamped down the urge to pull his face to mine, it was *that* overwhelming.

"This wait is going to be torture," I admitted, resting my forehead to his

chest.

Chuckling as he kissed the top of my head he said, "Good. It'll be all the better then, won't it?" Reaching for my wrists, he pulled my hands from his belt loops. "Goodnight," he whispered faintly. He dropped my hands and stepped away, and I saw the light from my porch reflecting the uncertainty in his eyes.

I pouted as I leaned against my front door, and he shook his head with a rueful grin. "Don't even try it, sweetheart. I'm unyielding when it comes to this."

"Oh really?" I drawled as I looked for a chink in his armor. "I bet I could find your weakness, *sweetheart*." He took a swift intake of breath at that and brought his hand up to rub the back of his neck. "I know you could," he allowed. He took a few more steps backwards towards the safety of his car, but kept me in his sight until he reached his door. "Will you go inside already? I can't leave until I know you're safely locked up."

I decided to surrender to his will tonight and lifted my hand, giving him a small wave goodbye. I entered the house and watched from the window until he pulled slowly down my street. Then I headed straight for a long, cold shower.

Friday - May 10, 2013 Five weeks until "The Wedding" Seeing Things

The day after our rain dance, Gage got a call from the last bar he worked at in Vegas telling him about some sort of problem they needed him to come back and take care of. He flew out Wednesday morning and wasn't due back until Sunday.

I found myself missing him badly as the days dragged by. In just a couple weeks of knowing each other, he was already someone who was extremely important to me. My heart warred with my head constantly while I tried to puzzle out how it happened. How did this man come into my life and make me want to do anything in my power to be with him?

How had he begun to wipe away the misery that my first love left on my heart after just a couple dates? Those were the things I dwelled on each night at bedtime while I tossed and turned, and the first thing I thought of in the morning when I woke.

I have to admit that while Gage was away, I was actually happy to have some time to spend with Sara and Candace in the evenings. Our summer schedules had been so crammed between all of our work or boys, that we'd barely spent any time together.

When Friday finally came, the term

'TGIF' had never meant more to me. I was excited to have Gage back on Sunday, and woke up with the idea of planning a special date for us. A shout outside my room from Candace interrupted my dreamy thoughts.

"Savannah? There's an obnoxiously large bouquet of flowers on the doorstep for you."

I threw my bedroom door open and raced down the hall to find Candace standing there with the front door open. Sitting on the front mat was a huge bouquet of colorful wildflowers.

"Oh my gosh, they're gorgeous," I exclaimed, nearly jumping up and down with excitement. I searched the top for a note and then looked at the vase, but

found nothing.

"Wonder who those are from?" Sara teased, coming up behind me.

I couldn't keep the sappy smile from my face 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? I mean, Brian hasn't called me in several days, and these are way too nice for him to send out of the blue. Right?"

Sara and Candace exchanged looks before Candace spoke up. "I can't imagine they would be from Brian or anyone else."

"Unless you've been holding out on us," inserted Sara.

Rolling her eyes, Candace went on, "I would wait and see if Gage calls or texts you. He's bound to ask about them. Especially since there wasn't a note."

"Oh, that reminds me," Sara called to me as I started back down the hall. "Your date that I canceled on - R.L. was his name. He keeps sending emails asking if you can reschedule."

"I thought you took my profile down, Sara. I told you I'm not interested in any more dates."

"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."

I sighed. I felt bad that Sara had set up and then canceled a date for me. I hated lying to someone.

"I told him you were seeing someone at the moment and were sorry you didn't get to meet him. I just wanted you to know. He said he was still hoping things would work out in his favor."

I certainly hoped that things *never* worked out in his favor. Gage was good enough for me.

I found my thoughts constantly drifting to Gage throughout the day while I worked. There was a student helping with the showcase who had an accent that always reminded me of Gage's. His wasn't nearly as compelling, but the musical lilt of it shocked my senses whenever he walked into the room and started to talk. My body tensed like it was waiting expectantly to hear Gage.

It was that moment when I knew I was totally in it, for better or worse, and I needed to call Brian and cut all romantic ties.

Taking an early break, I stepped out into the courtyard by the art gallery to call Brian in private.

"Hi Savannah." His voice sounded pleased as he answered the phone.

Trying to stay upbeat, I answered him 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 to me.

"Sorry, I can get carried away. Did

you call for a particular reason, or are you just missing me?"

I swallowed hard and forged ahead determinedly with my reason for calling. "Look Brian, I wanted to let you know that 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 admitted, feeling like a truly horrible person. I'd never dumped anyone before. While this wasn't exactly 'dumping' in the truest sense of the word, I still felt like the worst person ever. "You're a really great guy, and I hope we can stay friends, of course."

"Ouch. The 'Can we be friends' speech," he exclaimed, and then laughed.

"Don't feel bad, Savannah. You sound like you're about to cry. It's fine."

"Really? Brian, I'm so sorry."

"Geez, Guthry. Don't be sorry. I mean, I'd like to go out sometime, but there's always another time, right? If now isn't good, maybe later will be. Besides, I'm going to be really busy this summer anyway with student government."

I thanked him for being so understanding and told him I had a new relationship forming that I really wanted to concentrate on. He was so cool with it all, and it made me wish *all* relationships could be that easy.

Feeling relief at closing that chapter, I sat under the tree in the courtyard and stared silently at my phone. Spencer

popped into my mind suddenly, and I wondered if I would ever get up the nerve to call him and let him know I'd moved on. Thankfully when my mother had called earlier in the week, she didn't mention Spencer. In fact, we didn't talk about potential dates at all - a pretty clear signal that my father had spoken with her.

She'd actually called to ask how the gallery set up was going, and wanted to know what color I was planning on wearing to the wedding. It'd been a while since a conversation between us had been so...normal. She seemed genuinely proud of the work I was doing in the art showcase.

As for my dress color, I hung up with

her after hearing a long list of dress colors she said I *couldn't* wear. I pretended to write them all down and agreed with her so I could get off the phone.

Right when I thought I might have the guts to call Spencer, a shadow across the courtyard caught my attention. Chills ran down my spine when I saw someone slink around the back corner of the building.

Shaking my head, I returned back inside the art gallery quickly. Walking to the window and looking back over the courtyard, I searched for any sign of someone hanging around.

"Something wrong?" Mr. Harrison questioned, carrying a large crate with him.

Seeing nothing in the courtyard out of the ordinary, I offered to help him. "Nah, I just 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 anyway. If someone wants in, they can ring us."

Holding half of the crate to alleviate the weight, I assured him I was fine.

We worked all afternoon and into the early evening. We were finally getting to the fun part of the exhibit - pulling out the art and looking at the pieces, and then trying to decide where to hang each object. The room flow had been set and there were partial walls placed throughout the large gallery to direct traffic and give each piece its most advantageous showing.

At six o'clock Mr. Harrison finally shooed me out, telling me we would regroup in the morning and try to finish up most of the diagramming.

"We're on track for the open house, Ms. Guthry, and you've done a wonderful job getting this all together. I'm very impressed," Mr. Harrison declared; locking the door and walking with me towards the parking lot. "I'll see you around nine tomorrow."

"I'll be here," I assured him. I was absurdly proud from his praise.

It wasn't until I was settled in my car

that I saw all my missed calls and texts from Gage. Immediately on cloud nine, I pressed the return call button.

"I was worried you changed your mind," his voice confessed when he answered.

"No way. You called dibs, remember?" I hinted. "Today has been ridiculously crazy 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 admitted as I pulled out of the parking lot. A tall, solitary figure walked by, and something familiar pricked my mind. Something about the gait of his steps reminded me of the shadow I'd seen earlier in the day. "Wow, I must be tired because I think I'm getting paranoid," I mumbled.

"Paranoid?" The tone of his voice went up a notch as he spoke. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Just a crazy feeling I'm being watched. Like I said, I'm tired."

Not taking my feelings lightly, Gage started to shoot out rapid fire questions, "Where are you? Are you in your car? Are your doors locked?" Worry was evident in his tone.

"Hey - calm down, I'm fine. Yes, I'm heading off campus, in my car, and my doors are positively locked."

"You sure you're okay?"

I looked out my rearview mirror to be

sure no one was following me, and then went about reassuring Gage I was fine.

"Alright then, humor me. Tell me about your day."

"You're trying to keep me on the phone until I get home safely, aren't you?"

"Don't change the subject," he chided. When I didn't answer him he admitted, "Okay, yes. Now spill the beans."

Loving his interest, I began to explain the details of setting up the displays and picking spots for each piece.

"We have over one hundred pieces to place by this Friday in order to be ready for next Saturday. It's a lot of work but I'm loving it."

"So what's next Saturday?"

"Oh, that's an open house viewing. It's sort of like a test opening for us to see what people think. We can change things up afterward based on people's feedback."

I thought for just a moment and then 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 and I can invite anyone I want. But I know you usually have to work."

"Savannah," he jumped in; stopping my rambling. "Of course I'll come."

"Are you sure? I mean, don't feel obligated just because I'm asking you..."

"I'm obligated because it's important to you sweetheart, 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 as my heart melted at his words. "Thank you for wanting to be there."

"Thank you for inviting me," he returned, his voice soft; intimate.

The tenderness in his tone made my stomach flip. Damn kryptonite voice of his.

A commotion sounded in the background and I realized Gage must be at the bar. He muttered something away from his phone. "Listen, I'm at the bar but I'm not planning on staying much longer. What's your plan?"

I yawned loudly. "I really want to

take a long bath, eat a bite and snuggle down in my bed."

"Are you home yet?"

"Oh yeah. Remember I only live like, three blocks from campus. I'm just sitting in my car."

"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 date by phone."

"I thought guys hated talking on the phone?" I badgered playfully.

"I'm not like other guys, Savannah, remember that," he said seriously.

"I've noticed," I admitted. "Thankfully."

"Okay, I need to run for this meeting. Don't wait up for my call if you're too tired, okay?" "Yes sir."

"Talk to you soon."

I said goodbye and hung up. It wasn't until I saw the flowers on the dining table when I entered the house that I remembered about asking him if he'd sent them. He hadn't asked about them, which led me to believe that maybe he hadn't.

Friday - May 10, 2013 Long conversations and other things

One chicken salad, a long bath, and a glass of white wine later, and I was snuggled in my bed patiently waiting for Gage to call. I knew he'd told me not to wait up, but there was no *way* I was going to skip talking to him again.

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 a sketch pad in my hands, I assured her I was fine.

"I'll see you tomorrow night then.

Love ya babe."

"You too," I called after her. "Tell Tony I said hi."

I settled in after she left and started sketching pictures of Gage and other random things that came to my mind. Exhaustion hit me like a freight train and I closed my eyes for a brief moment; setting the pad to the side.

The vibrations from my phone jolted me awake. I searched for it among my tangled blankets and managed a slightly distracted, albeit somewhat sleepy, "Yeah?"

"Hi. Did I wake you?" It was Gage's low, sexy voice talking.

"Mmmm, I was napping a little. I'm awake now."

"Damn girl, you sound sexy," he moaned, and I giggled. "Seriously, I'll let you go back to sleep."

"No!" I shouted into the phone, and then sighed at my over eagerness. "I mean, I *want* to talk to you. Really."

"So you're in bed, huh?" he drawled. His smooth voice reeked of sexy.

"Mmmmhmmm," I moaned purposefully to tease him. "I'm all alone at home in my big, soft bed."

He half-laughed deeply. "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 laughed and decided to purposefully ignore his comment. "So how was your

night?"

"Longer than I thought it would be. I'm sorry it's so late."

"Gage, it's only nine forty-five." I almost snorted when I looked at the clock on my bedside table. "Dang, I'm getting old if I'm already asleep at nine forty-five on a Friday night."

He chuckled. "You've been working hard. You're tired. Besides, I'm in bed too."

BAM. Now *that* was a thought worth perking up for. "You are, are you?"

"Yep. I figured if my girl was retiring early, I would too."

"Awwww," I purred, my heart doing flips.

Smiling to myself, I giggled as I

asked, "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," he whispered seductively.

I sank deeper into my covers as my body started to do some serious waking up.

"My turn - what are *you* wearing?"

I looked at my comfy PJs and debated on lying for the sex appeal. "I've got on a white tank top and boxer short-type bottoms," I admitted.

A moan escaped Gage and I smiled to myself. This play-by-play was sexy as

hell, and 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?"

"I'm here," I answered. "No, there's no one else. I don't have any more dates, and I even informed one suitor that I wasn't interested."

"You're sure?"

"Yes I'm sure," I replied, a little irritated. "What about you, Gage? How's your picture looking?"

"*My* picture has been focused on you for weeks, baby. I told you that Sunday night."

"And you're sure?"

"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?" He sighed loudly. "Savannah, I told you that's all for work. I haven't touched a single one of those women. If it bothers you that much I can pull back and not be so friendly to them, but I promise you there isn't another woman that has walked into that bar who's caught my attention the way you have."

I was breathless at his words so I spoke a simple "Okay" to let him know I understood.

"Okay. Now - describe your room to me. What do you see when you're lying in your bed?"

Lying on my back, I described my surroundings for him. 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 that I stamped with aqua paint myself. I told him about my fluffy white comforter and my affinity for pillows.

"The walls are a light grey, and my closet and bathroom are on the right. Oh, and I have this huge bouquet of wildflowers that someone sent me today sitting on my dresser right now," I added; remembering that I still didn't know where they'd come from.

"Someone sent you flowers?" he asked, and I could practically hear his

blood pressure spike.

Honestly confused, I asked him right out, "You mean you didn't send them?"

"I hate to tell you that I didn't. You don't know where they came from?"

"No," I assured him, sitting up and looking at them from across the room. "They were on our doorstep this morning. There wasn't a note - just my name."

"Is that a common occurrence for you? Receiving flowers from mysterious people?"

"No Gage, it's not a common occurrence," I bit out, perhaps a bit too snarkily. "I swear I thought they were from you. I can't imagine who else would give them to me." "Well damn, somebody sure beat me to the punch, huh? Glad I called dibs when I did," he teased and apologized.

He changed the subject right back to my room. "So your room sounds very relaxing. I can picture it in my head from your details. I can just envision you laying there snuggled up under that fluffy blanket of yours with a pillow over your head."

"I actually pull a pillow over my head a lot when I sleep," I laughed, amazed at his perception. "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 was silent for a moment and then continued, "You know what? I don't want to talk about my work stuff or yours either, 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; each of us taking turns asking the other questions about random things; childhood likes and dislikes, movies, our family. I told him about being an only child and how exacting and critical my mother was. I left out details about my past and the upcoming wedding for now, but I did try to give him a realistic picture of my parents.

If I was going to date this man, I wanted him to know what he was up against when it came to the Guthry family. He was rather vague about his family in Australia, but I did get him to admit he was an only child. His mother was a housewife and his father owned a few bars. He came to the U.S. about two years ago, spending a little over a year in Vegas before deciding to check out the music scene in Nashville. He'd been there about six months.

Gathering information from what he'd told me previously and what little he was alluding to tonight, he seemed to help manage bars under transition. I sort of 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 decided not to push for more details right now. In truth, I was scared to death that he might not be staying. Scared that I'd finally found this amazing guy, and he was going to up and leave once the new owner of The Garage hired a permanent manager.

"It's almost midnight," he sighed; his voice disappointed. "I should let you get some sleep."

"Not yet," I whined, hating the thought of letting him go. I felt like a young girl again, spending hours on the phone with my crush.

"I don't want to go either, sweetheart, but you have to get up early."

"I wish you were here..."

He was silent. I heard his sharp intake of breath and then silence. Finally he whispered, "What would you do with me if I was there?" His thick accent cracked as he spoke.

I covered my head and sunk into a cocoon of blankets, like hiding would magically make me bolder. "I would kiss every inch of your lips," I said; echoing what he'd said about wanting to kiss me some day.

He prompted me to go on and my body heated as I recalled all of the dirty things we did in my dreams. "I want to feel your skin on mine, Gage. 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 asked, unable to use words as my body was slowly heating up.

"I want to taste you. Every part of you. 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 aloud at the visual picture he was creating. When I was still with Daniel he and I had a few sexual conversations over the phone, but this was so much more intense than that. Back then I didn't have a clue about my body yet or how to make it work. Tonight though, lying in the dark listening to Gage talk about all the ways he would make me feel the things I so desperately wanted to feel, I had no trouble keeping up with him.

When he began to describe in exact detail how and where he would like to run his tongue on my body, I couldn't stop my hand from wandering over my breasts.

He groaned softly when I told him how I would like to feel him pressed tightly against my hips. My hand skimmed the warmth between my legs and came away wet. I wanted fulfillment so badly I couldn't wait, so I slowly pushed one finger into my own body while rubbing another over the sensitive skin between my thighs; causing a low moan to escape my throat.

Through the phone, Gage drew a heavy breath and murmured, "Are you touching yourself?"

There was no shame when I answered him. "Mmmhmmm, I can't help myself." I gasped as a wave of new sensations tightened in my lower abdomen.

"Damn, baby, I want to hear you..." he growled softly and then added, "I'll get off with you."

That was all it took for me to lose all apprehension and pleasure myself with abandon.

I sucked in my breath as rolling

waves of desire began to build; continuing to rub the sensitive heat between my legs, all the while picturing Gage lying in his bed 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 and I knew I was about to have an epic orgasm. Gage muttered lusty encouragement to me as his breathing came in and out harder and faster, and I mumbled when I was about ready to burst.

"Pretend you're with me and inside of me. Pump your body inside of mine, Gage," I whispered and cried out, "Oh, it feels so good!" He groaned out my name, rasping, "I want you so badly."

Then together, as if we were in the same room making love, the earth exploded and my body began to shake as waves of ecstasy shuddered through me. He grunted a satisfied "Yes."

Then all went peacefully quiet as we both 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," I sputtered, feeling at a loss for words.

"Me too." I knew what he was saying by not saying anything.

"That was unexpected and amazing," he admitted after another moment. "Hang on...I, um, need to clean myself up."

A satisfied smirk crossed my face knowing that he'd truly reached his climax. It certainly wasn't the first time I'd taken matters into my own hands over the years, but I'd never had a shattering orgasm like that by myself.

"I'm back. You okay?"

"I'm good. I'm tired," I mumbled.

"I'm going to let you get to sleep now, sweetheart."

"M'kay." I yawned, suddenly feeling totally spent.

"Hey Savannah - thank you." For a moment I thought he was thanking me for the phone sex, and I didn't know what to say. Was there etiquette for phone sex? But 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 more than welcome Gage Taylor, Mr. Bartender, Sexy Aussie Superman," I teased almost incoherently as my eyes became heavier and heavier. "Sleep well."

"Night." I barely had time to hit the End button on my phone before I was sound asleep and dreaming of more moments in bed with Gage. Except this time he was physically with me, and it was ten times better than tonight.

Saturday - May 11, 2013 Begging

It was late when I decided to head to The Garage on Saturday night. Though we'd talked several times during the week, I hadn't seen Gage since our date Monday and I was suddenly having Aussie withdrawals. He called me around six to let me know he was getting a flight home a day early, and then left me a voicemail around ten-thirty while I was in the shower to let me know he was home and heading to The Garage to check on things. The temptation to see him was overwhelming, so there I was, walking into the bar unannounced.

I made my way over to John, who

was working behind the bar with one of the female bartenders I hadn't met yet. It was busy, but not crazy. That was one of my favorite things about the place. Being located so close to campus, there was always a steady stream of students patronizing the place, but it was still far enough from the strip that it wasn't crazy with tourists all the time. After making so many visits over the last few weeks, I was starting to feel comfortable here.

The sounds of people laughing and talking over drinks, the clicking of glasses, the beat of the music. I felt at home now walking in and spotting other regulars. *Regulars*. The word reminded me of one of my first conversations with Gage, when he'd assumed I made a habit out of coming to the bar and going out with losers. It made me laugh now when I thought about how that "habit" had introduced me to him.

"Hey Savannah," called John, looking up from the intense flirting he was doing with a couple of co-eds. "He's in the office. Go on back."

I smiled in appreciation and found my way to the office. His back was to the door as he rifled through a file cabinet on the back wall, and as always, I couldn't help but take in my fill of his beautiful body.

For a moment I flashed back to our dirty phone call from the night before and was tempted to flee from the room. But then his words from this morning when he called and woke me up started playing in my head.

"Good morning beautiful," he whispered, his voice husky with sleep. "I wanted so badly for you to feel like I was really there with you this morning."

"Oh? Why is that?" I was well aware of the ridiculous smile that stretched across my face from the intense happiness I felt at hearing him.

"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, sweetie," I reminded him playfully, "we didn't actually have sex, hun."

He laughed. "We didn't?"

"Um...nope."

"Well it was pretty damn great what we did have. Your little whimpers and moans. Mmmmm."

"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." He complimented me in a way I'd never heard before. Maybe I was finally learning to believe the words he said. More likely though, it was the way **he** made me feel when **he** said those two words. It made me feel invincible.

Now as I stood there and absorbed all

that he was, I sighed. Tonight his usual black shirt was replaced by a crisp white one, and his dark hair was a stark contrast to the light color. He was wearing his perfectly fitted jeans, and I couldn't help but stare at his tight backside when he bent down to open a lower drawer.

"Do you mind if I keep you company for a while?" I hinted; leaning up against the door frame of the office.

Startled, he whipped around with a huge smile on his face. "Hey beautiful." He smiled, quickly closing the drawer and coming around his desk to meet me. He pulled me into a bracing hug and kissed the top of my head; dragging in a slow, deep breath of appreciation. "Mmmm, you smell so good after a night full of alcohol." With another gentle squeeze, he reluctantly let me go. "You came all the way here to see little 'ole me, huh?"

"Yeah. Well you know, I just happened to be in the neighborhood, and just thought I would stop in and say hi." I shrugged nonchalantly.

Gage looked at the watch on his wrist. "At midnight?"

"It's midnight already? I had no idea."

"Oh, likely story. I'm glad you're here, though. I've missed your face." He pulled me by the arm into the office. "Tell me about your day. How was work at the gallery?"

I plopped myself into a chair while he

resumed going through some files, and filled him in on my busy week.

"It's going great now. Today I finally convinced Harrison to let me set it up the way I wanted. There really are a lot of beautiful pieces in there."

"It's a student showcase, correct?"

"Actually it's an alumni showcase. It's meant to inspire current students with what they can achieve. Then we're also setting up a 'Best of' showcase as well."

"You love it, don't you?" he asked as he turned back towards 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 that I don't usually get to hear."

I thought on that for a moment. Being able to sort through all of the paintings, drawings and sculptures had been an amazing job, and I found immense joy in setting the studio up in order to showcase each piece to the best of its ability.

"You're right, I *do* love it. It's kind of 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, because my mother does a lot of charity work with them. Fundraisers, auctions, that kind of thing. At some point it just lost its appeal to me." He stood, closing a few files as he did so. Rounding the desk, he held his hand out to me and suggested, "Want to get out of here?"

I placed my hand in his and stood. "Sure."

We stopped by the bar so Gage could follow up on a few things with John, who would be closing up. Gage mentioned offhandedly that John might end up managing the bar, and I tried not to think of what that would mean for him. I was trying to keep our relationship light and carefree, and the fact that we hadn't kissed vet made me think perhaps that's what he wanted too.

Stopping by my car in the parking lot, Gage turned to me. "How about if I follow you to your place to drop your car off, and then I take you somewhere? Wait - do you have to go in to the gallery tomorrow?"

"No way. Normally I wouldn't have even 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?" Gage teased, a lascivious smile playing on his lips.

"Would you know what to do with me?" I clipped back playfully, which caused a look of mock horror to cross his face.

"After last night do you seriously need to ask?" he mumbled. "Don't tempt me, sweetheart," he added as he pulled away and walked to his car.

I was two seconds from telling him to please for the love of God get tempted but I kept my mouth firmly shut and climbed into my car. I went to start my engine when I noticed Gage kick the tire of his car angrily.

I pulled the key out of the ignition and started to get out when he looked over at me and yelled over, "Get back in the car and lock your doors, Savannah." He pulled his phone out of his pocket and swiftly dialed a number.

After looking around the parking lot and not seeing any immediate threats, I ignored his warning and walked over to stand by his side. He was on the phone and I overheard him asking for an officer to come to the bar. Then I looked at his car and saw why.

The side panels were scratched up and both tires on the driver's side of the vehicle were slashed flat. There was a piece of paper stuck to the window and I wondered what it said. Gage pulled me to his side; wrapping his arm around my waist as he ended the call.

"You don't listen, huh?"

"I guess not. Somebody vandalized your car," I whispered, stating the obvious. "Who?"

He was eerily calm for someone whose car was totally messed up. With the exception of his hand rubbing the back of his neck, he looked as unflappable as always. He led me away, his voice calm as he spoke. "I guess I'm going to be a while. You want to head on home?"

I frowned, pausing to take his hand. "No. 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. Privately we discussed the possibility that it could have been Jax or one of his buddies, but we didn't mention that to the cops. The note on the window stumped us both. Stamped in smeared black ink were the words:

Consider this a warning. Guard the things you find precious before you

lose them.

Gage asked me to wait by my car while he spoke privately with the officer after he'd read the note aloud to us. I stood there and watched as they talked, each one looking back at me at least once. It made me uneasy, and I couldn't help but wonder if there was something Gage was keeping from me.

Finally, an hour and a half later I was pulling up to Gage's condo to drop him off. The police decided to impound his vehicle due to the threatening nature of the message.

As I parked in front of his unit, I discovered that I was still struggling with why he'd wanted to speak with the

officer in private. I decided to take a deep breath and ask.

"Why did you need to talk to the cop in private? Is there something I should know about?"

"Why would you think that?" he asked. His voice sounded almost false to my ears, like he *was* hiding something.

"This is going to sound so superficial, but I'm not used to dating a bartender. I've seen movies, so I know these things happen. Are you in some kind of trouble that you don't want me to know about?"

"God no, Savannah," he laughed; rubbing his hand down the arm that gripped the steering wheel. "Is that what you're afraid of? I'm a bartender honey, not a gang member." "Then what was so secret?"

"I was asking about you. I... the note worried me, that's all." He reached up and flicked my hair away from my face. Stretching, he rubbed the back of my neck while meeting 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.

"It wasn't Jax. I asked about him and the officer called it in. He's still in the hospital, and 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," he assured me, soothing the stress from my neck with his hand.

"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 on my neck as our gazes met, and he finished his thought. "*You're* something precious to me, and I want to be sure I protect you."

I pulled in a breath and allowed his words to fill me, and the honesty in his voice made my heart leap. I wanted to jump over the console and kiss him show him how much his words meant but I held back. His hand began to knead my skin again and I held out hope that he would finally make a move. My eyes closed as his hand rubbed my neck and I yawned 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. I mean, besides Candace, Sara, and a few of your staff, nobody knows about us. It was probably just some kids playing a prank and trying to scare someone."

He smiled at that and lifted his hand into my hair to comb it out. "You're pretty damn smart, you know that?"

"Why thank you."

"You need to get home, it's late." He frowned slightly when I yawned again. His abruptness startled me as he popped open his door and walked around to my side of the car. The headlights illuminated his easy stride as he came around to my window and tapped on the glass. I rolled the window down and he knelt beside the car. "Thanks for surprising me at the bar tonight. I'm sorry the night didn't go the way I intended."

That reminded me that he was going to take me someplace before we'd found his car vandalized. "So where were you planning on taking me before things went to hell in a hand basket?" He smiled and leaned into the window just enough to place a chaste kiss on my forehead. "That's my little secret. You'll just have to wait and see." He gave me another peck and added, "Goodnight."

I closed my eyes and relished the quick heat brushing across my face from his breath. "You're killing me," I mumbled when he started to walk away.

"I'm what?" he asked. Stopping and looking back at me, his eyes narrowed in on my face.

"'Foolish Games'," I called out.

Astonishment crossed his face and he retorted, "What the hell are you talking about?"

My radio had been set to a nineties

station all week, and the song leapt into my mind without warning so I decided to run with it. "You love placing songs with people, right? Well then, 'Foolish Games' by Jewel." He cocked his head like he was trying to understand me. A flash of irrational anger hit me abruptly and I yanked the key out of the ignition and kicked 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." Slamming the door, I turned to face him.

It took him three strides to reach me, his face a mask of agitation. "Are you saying you think I'm playing games?" he growled. He came so close to me that my back was pressed against the car door and I dropped my keys.

"No," I shook my head adamantly. "I don't think you're playing games with me. Damn," I barked, running my hands through my hair. "Evidently I'm not as good at your song game as you are."

A charming smile cracked his angry façade. "Don't be afraid to say what you really mean, Savannah."

I drew in a deep breath and pinned my gaze on his as I purposefully and clearly spoke the words I knew he was waiting for. "I'm begging you now."

Those words washed all anger from his features. He stepped back and held his hand out. "Come with me." I complied immediately and he leaned down, picked up my car keys and pulled me in his wake.

"Where are we going?"

"Shhh." He squeezed my hand and pulled his keys from his pocket. The setup of his building was like a hotel, and we entered into a lobby before then stepping into an elevator. Gage pressed the button for the ninth floor and stood holding my hand, but faced toward the doors the entire time. His thumb rubbed my palm as the elevator chimed each floor we passed.

When we came to his floor, we walked down the long hallway to the last door. Letting go of me for a moment, he slid his key in and pushed the door open. Then he swept his arm out imperiously, indicating I should step in.

I walked into the room and looked around 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. It was simply decorated, and I got the feeling he hadn't been living there very long. I heard him drop my keys onto the glass table by the door and turned to face him

"Okay," he finally spoke. "Can you repeat those last four words?"

His face was dead serious and I grinned when I repeated myself. "I'm begging you now."

He closed the distance between us before I could even think about blinking.

His hands captured my face and pulled me to within an inch of his own. His fingers splayed down my jaw and over my cheeks.

"What do you want?" he asked; his voice low, his accent thick.

Grasping the severity of the moment, I used his own words back at him. "I want the earth to stop spinning. I want you to ki...."

His lips crashing down onto mine interrupted me. My senses began to spin as I tasted the beer on his lips, and I clutched his shirt and held on for dear life. Our lips mingled together, causing every nerve ending in my body to flare to life. Warmth spread through me as his lips played with mine. My body craved what Gage was offering, while my mind swam with the knowledge that this was just a simple kiss and I was already sinking.

Gage ran his hands possessively over my back and down the curve of my spine, pinning my hips to his body while his mouth continued to slant over mine. He flicked his tongue across my bottom lip and then traced the top, keeping his promise to linger over every inch of my lips.

I waited while he teased and played with my lips with his tongue and then his teeth. It took all the control I could muster to keep from giving him more access to my mouth. 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 it's been to wait for you?"

Words refused to come so I did what my body wanted. I kissed him lightly, and then ran my fingers up his shoulders and into his hair. I put pressure on his neck; pulling him tighter to my mouth and flicking his lips with my tongue. He chuckled and kissed me back, allowing me full access to his mouth. *Finally*.

All thoughts left me as we continued to devour each other. His fingers held me firmly in place and tangled in my hair. The more he kissed me, the more I wanted *more*. Slowly I began to walk, leading him towards his bed where we fell together, wrapped up in the soul devouring kiss.

Saturday - May 11, 2013 Sweet Nothings

We lay side by side and kissed like teenagers on a first date. When Gage was done with me, there wasn't an inch of my mouth and lips he hadn't explored. He left them deliciously numb and swollen.

The air left my lungs in little pants. He lifted himself up and over me, allowing us both a moment to catch our breath as he kissed the tip of my nose and pulled me up into a sitting position.

His condo was dark with the exception of the moon shining into the room from the balcony doors. His face was wrapped in shadows but for one

sliver of moonlight. He looked into my face in the shadows and spoke tenderly, "Stay with me tonight?"

I hesitated for a moment. My desire was running rampant right then, but I didn't want to screw things up with Gage. The hesitation must have shown in my face, because he leaned in and kissed me softly before assuring me of his intentions.

"No strings attached, Savannah. We can do nothing for the rest of the night if you don't want to. I just 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 just your voice."

A squeak escaped me and I leaned

into his body and kissed him happily. I kicked off my shoes and crawled backwards to the middle of the bed where I waited for him. I watched as he leaned down and removed his shoes, and when he turned and faced me, the primal need in his face almost sent me running to the door.

The bed sank down as Gage crawled to my side. He lay beside me, facing me, and propped his head in his hand. Moving his free hand up to trace my jaw line, I closed my eyes and breathed deeply. He inched closer to me, my left side sinking into a crater from the weight of both our bodies.

His warm lips came down on my cheek and slowly moved over my jaw

and chin until he found my lips again. His body leaned over mine; his weight pressing into my chest. My hands found their way around his back and gently tugged at his shirt before running over his back and shoulders.

When our breathing became labored again, Gage pulled back. Taking a moment, he slowly rolled fully on top of me. His legs slid between mine and he pulled back, sitting up a little, between my legs. Leaning with his hands on either side of my head, he bent down, nudged my chin with his nose and lips, and then kissed a soft wet trail down my neck to the skin exposed by the vee in the neckline of my shirt.

I felt his tongue making light swirls

and desire ripped through me like a wild child at a party. I lifted my legs and wrapped them snugly around Gage's waist, using them to pull him back into a sitting position so I could sit up as well. His eyes searched my face silently for a moment in question.

Sitting up, I brought his face to mine and licked at his lips, eliciting a halfgrowl, half-laugh from him before I sat back and without thinking, swept my arms down and yanked my shirt over my head.

His fingertips dug into my hips. "Savannah..."

"Shhh," I whispered softly. "Touch me." I wanted to feel his hands and mouth on my skin. Leaning back onto my elbows, I held my breath while Gage stared down at me with hungry eyes. He leaned forward, his hand slowly coming up to caress my cheek. He then proceeded to run his fingers down to the base of my neck where he splayed his hand wide.

The heat from his skin was electric. As he gently massaged my collar bone from one side to the other, little jolts of desire shot through me. He made his way down my sternum, gliding between my breasts and then tickling my stomach until he reached my belly button.

"This is way better in person," I sighed. Gage laughed as he continued to touch me.

His fingers circled around my

stomach and then he walked his way playfully down until he 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 at his indecision and pulled back up; reaching for his shirt.

Our eyes met as I unfastened each little button on his dress shirt. As each one came free, a new level of yearning awakened. Peeling his shirt from his shoulders was sensual. His t-shirt underneath was still hiding his skin from me, but my body was doing crazy things at the thought of undressing him.

My hands went under his shirt and I pressed my palms to his sides, sliding

the shirt off as I moved up his abs and chest. Gage raised his arms, allowing me to slip the shirt off, and soon I was staring at the sexiest male chest ever seen in the history of sexy male chests.

His shoulders were broad and more muscular than I'd realized. His tantalizing abs sat there teasing me to take a taste. I wanted nothing more than to feel his soft, golden skin against mine. My head was beginning to fill with all of the dirty things I wanted to do with him and to him.

Suddenly I was mad with wanton feelings running through me.

"Remember when I told you I wanted to feel your skin on mine?" I groaned. I reached around his back and pulled him down to me, and we both sighed softly when our hot skin touched.

His body covering mine, his lips searched for and found mine. Our hands began to explore the plains and valleys of each other's body. Our legs twined together and we kissed for an eternity. When at last his mouth left mine I felt abandoned, and cried out for more. Then when his lips began their journey down my neck and across my collarbone. I ceased to think at all.

My neck rolled back and I arched my back as his hot mouth pressed a kiss to the top of one breast, followed by 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 of him, he pressed my cheek to his bare chest. I took a deep breath, concentrating my lungs on bringing in his spicy scent. We lay together, his heart beating frantically under my cheek.

"We should slow down," he finally rasped out.

I didn't answer. I moved my head slightly to kiss his chest and remained where I was. One of my hands was above my head cupping his face and neck, and the other was lightly stroking up and down his rib cage. My fingers couldn't seem to stop touching his smooth skin.

"Savannah?"

Almost reluctantly I answered. "Hmmm?" He pressed his hand to my lower back and kissed the top of my head while 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."

At his confession, I pressed up on his chest so we were face-to-face.

"That sounds like a plan to me," I teased with a seductive smile.

"I don't want to rush things," he chastised me, tucking my hair behind my ear. "Look, we could have sex right now and I damn well know it would be amazing, but..."

"But what?"

"But I've done that before. Savannah - what we're starting to have, what I feel

when I'm with you - it's too perfect to screw up."

Propped up on his chest, I stared intently into his eyes as he spoke. Those words worked better than any aphrodisiac ever could. If his goal was to cool us down, he'd made a huge tactical error.

I leaned up 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 into my life, but I don't want to screw this up either."

"Good," he agreed, hugging me tightly. "I would like to hear you

whimper a little more, though." He covered my mouth and began to kiss me; our mouths and tongues moving suggestively together for hours.

A shaft of mellow sunlight filtered into the room and warmed my face the following morning. In a sleep induced haze, I tried to pull a pillow over my face and met with resistance. Opening one eye slightly, I came face to face with a gorgeous Australian, and the previous night came flashing back to me.

"Morning," he muttered sleepily, and tucked me against his warm side.

I wrapped my hand over his stomach and sighed with contentment. "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?" I groaned. The light hitting my face forcefully declared it was morning, but my body protested getting up yet after such a late, and draining, night.

"It's only eight-thirty, sweetheart. Go back to sleep for a few more hours."

"Mmmm, okay." I snuggled into him. My shirt was hiked up around my waist and his hot skin touched my stomach as I got comfortable. Smiling at the intimate contact, I drifted back to sleep while Gage played with my hair.

I woke again, after what seemed like

minutes, feeling an intense warmth between my legs. My nerves twitched as Gage's fingers swirled over my inner thigh. It was like they were teasing thin ice; seeing how close he could go without falling in.

Catching his hand, I hissed, "Really. Can't a person get some sleep around here?"

"Not on my watch," he tossed back, and before I knew what hit me, I was thrown flat on my back with Gage straddling me.

He imprisoned my hands above my head with one hand, while his other began to ease my t-shirt up. His smooth fingers lightly skimmed my ribs, making me buck my hips as he tickled me. The dirty boy eyebrow raise Gage threw me told me he was quite fond of my hip thrusts.

"I'd like to make a habit of this."

"What? Attacking me?"

"You wish," he kidded, and swooped in for a quick kiss. "I like you in my bed. Stay again tonight?"

"Gage..." I waffled, looking at his boyish grin as he asked me to stay.

A flash of disappointment crossed his face and he released my arms and scooted off of me. "I'm sorry, Savannah, I know I said no expectations. I shouldn't press you."

"Nooo," I exclaimed, not wanting him to get the wrong idea. "Gage, I...listen, I think you were right last night. We need to slow down some. It would be so easy to get caught up in this...this physical attraction, but I don't want to move so fast that we just crash and burn."

I thought about Spencer and Daniel and how I still needed to get closure with both of them before I could really move on. As much as I wanted to be with Gage, if I didn't close those doors completely the wounds of the past might have a way of ripping open again, and I didn't want them to affect us.

Deciding on a slower course of action, I sat up and held out my hand for his. "You know how you said we needed to not have sex because of what you feel when we're together?"

He shook his head and his lips were

tight; a muscle in his jaw flexing as he clenched it shut. "Gage, I feel that too. I want to explore it and be careful with it, so that whatever this is between us can grow stronger. Can we take it slow? Take some time to date?"

"Of course. Savannah, I'll do whatever makes you most comfortable, as long as I get to kiss you when I want." "Kiss me now?"

Thursday - May 16, 2013 Triple Date Night

The following week was a blur.

Before leaving Gage's house Sunday after brunch, we decided to take things slower and not get too physical too quickly.

"What is it southern men do? 'Courting', right?"

"Sure, if we lived in the eighteen hundreds."

"Well sweetheart, you deserve to be courted."

"You do know that means supervision at all times..."

"To hell with courting then," he laughed; grabbing me and kissing me.

"How about we have a quiet date night this week? Ladies choice."

"Only one?"

"I know how crazy the gallery showcase is going to be for you, and I don't want to monopolize your time or energy. Plus John's on vacation for a few days, so I have to be at the bar to run it."

"Oh? Are you thinking he's going to be the new manager then?"

"I think so. He's still in need of 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 – just me, you and the girls." "Sounds kinky." He winked and waggled his brows suggestively.

"Um, no," I deadpanned, looking for something to toss at him. "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 choir boy look by raising those sexy brown eyes and smiling his one dimpled smile at me.

Butter.

He'd turned me into freaking butter and I melted at the sight of that smile. Sara and Candace were all up for a triple date night, and when Thursday evening finally came around I was shocked to find Candace already in the kitchen preparing her special poppy seed chicken dish.

"Oh my word, you are a savior, Cand," I offered, as I carried in two bags full of wine and beer. There was just one hour remaining to get ready and finish dinner.

"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 was the official chef of the house. Her cute little blond bob was currently being held back by a headband as she stirred the chopped up chicken and other ingredients to put into the casserole dish.

I placed the grocery bags onto the counter and pulled out the salad mix. "You sent *her* to get movies? Good Lord...you know she's gonna come home with something crazy."

"That's half the fun."

"Well look who the cat dragged in," Sara called as she walked in the front door fifteen minutes later.

For a moment, dread hit me. I hadn't cleaned myself up yet and Gage was already there? A huge sigh of relief left me at the sight of Tony's smiling face.

"Savannah, go change. We've got this," Candace ordered, nodding her head for me to leave the kitchen. "Tony, get your ass in here and give me a kiss and a cutting board. Sara, come help."

"Hey, Savannah." Tony smiled, following Candace's directive and going straight to her side.

"Tony." I nodded and then stepped to the side.

Sara stepped into the kitchen as well and pushed me towards the hall. "Let your ugly stepsisters handle this one for a change, Cinderella. Go get ready for Prince Charming."

Gratitude wasn't a good enough word for what I felt when I looked at my two roommates. "Thanks for being the best friends a girl could ever ask for."

Cand said a little "Awe" and Sara

shrugged and pushed at me again to leave. "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. I liked him, and thought he was a good guy.

The doorbell rang at exactly six-thirty to signal Gage's arrival.

"Well he's punctual, that's for sure," Sara laughed, and I wiped my hands on the apron tied around my waist to keep my clothes clean. As I walked to the door I stole a quick glance in the mirror hanging on the wall, and couldn't help but notice the smile plastered on my face.

I opened the door to find Gage with at least two dozen roses in his hand.

"Wow, you've come ready to make a good impression." I leaned in and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before inviting him into the house.

"These are to replace your secret admirer's flowers."

Introductions were made and the guys popped open some beers and began to talk boy talk while Sara and Candace put the finishing touches on dinner and I found a vase.

The meal was delicious and filled with boisterous conversation. I learned that Gage played in a band growing up, as did Chris, so they shared stories of assorted gigs they'd played through their college days.

I realized that I never asked Gage about college, and deep down I felt like the snob I was sometimes accused of being. Since he was a bartender I just assumed that he'd never gone to school, and I felt horrible for not showing more interest in his life. Admittedly he had been pretty closed off about his personal life when we did have deeper conversations, but it was my fault that I hadn't tried to dig deeper.

Sara must have seen my discomfort because she valiantly stepped in and started asking questions.

"So Gage, I haven't grilled Savannah

on all your dirt yet. You said you played in a band during college, so where did you go to school?"

"Um, I went to the University of Melbourne for Business."

"A business major, huh?" Sara said thoughtfully as Tony shot out, "How's the surfing in Australia? Is it as amazing as people say?"

"What brought you to the U.S., then? Wait - how old are you?"

"I'm twenty-five and I came here because I wanted to check out some business opportunities."

"Oh yes, America: the land of opportunities," Sara joked, and I almost spit out the sip of beer I'd taken.

"Sara, this is too much like twenty

questions," I warned.

"It's fine. It's like I'm meeting your family for the first time."

"Ha - right," Sara shouted, laughing. Candace hit her arm not so subtly. "Trust me when I say meeting us is like ninetyeight-point-eight-percent easier and safer than meeting Mrs. Guthry."

"Ignore her, Gage," Candace jumped in, giving Sara an evil look. "We don't let her around civilized company very often. She's not passed her manners classes."

Everyone at the table laughed and Sara grumbled a few choice words. As dinner wound down, discussions floated around to various topics and eventually the boys ganged up on us; asking for embarrassing stories about each other.

Making our way to the living room Gage and I sat on the couch together, Candace sat on the floor between Tony's legs as he sat behind her in a chair, and Chris chose the smaller love seat. Sara grabbed the bag with the movies she'd rented for the occasion.

"Ok, ladies and gentlemen...chick flick or something manly?"

The fifty/fifty split could have been easily 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 looked at me and remained silent, but slung his arm over my shoulder and pulled me up close to his side.

"Tell us what they are, and maybe we can pick from there?" I suggested.

A pillow flew across the room, hitting Sara in the gut as she stood there teasing us with movies.

Candace shrugged and looked around innocently while we all started chanting, "Tell us. Tell us."

"Wow, this is a restless crowd tonight," complained Sara. "Next it'll be tomatoes."

One of the boys mocked, "Don't tempt us." Gage snickered as he leaned into my ear. "Is she always like this?"

I smothered a laugh at his question. "You mean an attention whore? Yes... yes she is." "Hey, I heard that."

"Okay, okay people. I'll give you some hints...our chick flick tonight consists of a group of misfit girls, a will-they-or-won't-they-be-a-couple couple, and a competition."

Candace and I looked at each other immediately - 'Pitch Perfect'. The guys looked clueless and a little 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 laughed, rubbing his hands together.

"Are you sure?" she asked, glancing between Tony and Gage.

She was up to something. Candace

and I knew Sara well enough to know that there wasn't a *real* manly movie in that bag. She was way too jacked up on making us choose for this *not* to be some sort of trick.

"I'm just here for the company," Gage answered, lightly squeezing my upper arm.

"I'm good with it. Let's go," Tony agreed.

"Just remember you asked for it. Drum roll, please." We played a little drum roll on our laps, I coughed out "Drama queen," and she pulled out the movies slowly.

"Gentlemen, you opted to *not* watch the marvelously funny 'Pitch Perfect', and instead get...'*Magic Mike*'." She laughed maniacally; jumping up and down in a little dance.

The room was immediately filled with male ire as all three of the guys complained.

"That's bogus!"

"How is that manly?"

I broke into fits of 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 the movie my way when Chris attacked her. I caught it and jumped off the couch before Gage could get it from my hands. He just sat there and laughed at the mayhem. Candace and Tony were playfully arguing, and Sara had fallen to the floor with Chris tickling her.

"Hold up!" I shrieked. "This is a democracy here, people, and you can't change your vote once placed. We'll watch 'Magic Mike', and perhaps you boys can learn a few moves."

I popped the disk into the player and everyone settled down to watch the fine work, or should I say *works*, of art.

Trying to watch the film suddenly became the most hilarious viewing party ever. While the girls and I hooted and hollered over the sexy men, the guys groaned, laughed and then began their "Oh whatever, I'm way hotter than that" commentary. Chris and Sara barely made it halfway through the movie before they slinked out of the room. Candace and Tony laughed when they walked by, but followed them thirty minutes later. I overheard the phrase "Let me show you my moves, baby" as they left the room; Candace waving goodbye over her head.

"It's you and me and the eye candy, huh?" Gage asked, stretching his legs out a little more.

"Told you this was a boy movie. You guys just didn't take into account how sexy we would find it. I imagine Chris and Tony are getting pretty lucky tonight."

"I already got lucky," he admitted.

"You did? How so?"

"I'm sitting here with you, aren't I?"

I bit my lip and smiled at him shyly. He was full of compliments that made me tingle from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. He pulled me up onto his lap so that I was facing him. My legs stretched out to the side.

"This was a great night," he smiled, kissing my neck softly.

"I agree. I'm so glad you could hang out with Sara and Candace."

"Yeah, Sara scares me a bit, but I like them both. 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 yes."

I flicked off the TV and pulled him

down the hall to my room. The candlestick lamp on my bedside table was on and the room was glowing with a warm, soft light. I let him enter first and then shut the door behind us with a sigh as I leaned against the door.

"What?" he asked. He turned to face me and I saw how his sexy grin made his eyes crinkle.

"I have to admit that seeing you in here is fulfilling a fantasy of mine."

"Which one?"

"So you assume there's more than one?" I smirked. "Conceited much?"

He stepped up to my body and pinned me to the door. His hands slid down my arms and clasped my wrists; swinging them up over my head. "Savy, if you tell me you don't have more than one fantasy with me in it, I'll be heartbroken." He pressed his forehead to mine. "You've been the feature star of my dreams for weeks, and I'm going mad."

My knees went weak at his confession and at his use of the nickname *Savy*. The slight pressure of his hands forcing mine against the door caused tingles to run through my arms. My tongue darted out and I trailed it across the crease in his lips.

"I can't wait for the phone call to become a reality," he muttered; letting me go and running his fingers back down my sides, skimming my ribs and landing on my hips. "There are other things we *can* do, you know."

"Hmmm, what kinds of things?" His voice definitely had a mischievous lilt to it as his arm snaked around my waist and he pinched my ass.

I giggled as I 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," he grumbled with a throaty laugh.

"You know what they say...what doesn't kill you makes you stronger," I laughed. He pulled me towards the bed and began to kiss me deeply.

Falling onto the bed, we continued to kiss. And then we kissed some more. Hands explored skin and shirts came off as his hands seared into my feverish skin.

Slowly his jeans were removed, shortly followed by my shorts, and finally my bra went and I was very content while Gage lingered at second base taking great care to arouse me slowly. My breasts were heavy with desire after he sucked, licked and kissed their every inch. His hands kneaded them as he pushed my nipple up and into his mouth, forcing a low moan out of me. Each time he sucked it between his teeth, a wave of ecstasy shot down my abs and into my core.

I slid my hands down into the back of his boxers; my nails lightly scratching over his backside. His erection pressed against me as our hips slowly moved together. When Gage rolled back to his side and splayed his hand on my hip bone, he stopped and looked at me as if asking for permission to continue.

My pulse was racing, my body throbbing and ready to explode, so I reached over and gently slid my hand into the front of his boxers; leading by example.

Soon our phone sex was coming to life and it was better than I could have imagined. It was more than the sexual desires he brought out in me, it was also the way my heart felt. The way my soul sang as he whispered sweet nothings into my ear.

We stopped short of the ultimate

release I knew we both craved, and I contentedly snuggled up in his arms under the covers.

"I want to be inside of you the next time I have to listen to you climax," he breathed; his voice raging with passion.

I pulled out a large t-shirt and slipped it on. Lying there, his palm lay on my lower abdomen and his fingers slowly rubbed circles on my sensitive skin. My bottom was tucked against his upper thighs, and the evidence of his body's need for me was pressed insistently against my lower back.

"I'm impressed by my iron will," he muttered, a few minutes after we were all settled in.

"You're very strong. I would have

caved if it weren't for you," I mumbled sleepily.

A slight poke at my back told me what he thought of that. "Yes, I'm a man of steel." His voice was proud and I laughed.

"Just like Superman."

"Mmmm, yes," he yawned, squeezing me. "I'm Superman and you are totally my kryptonite, sweetheart. Rest assured that one of these nights I'm not going to be able to resist you."

"I can't wait," I admitted, a slight smile creeping up my face when I thought about the first dream I'd had of my Aussie Superman.

"Neither can I Savy. Neither can I."

Saturday - May 18, 2013 Four Weeks until "The Wedding" Art Show and Time Flies

The art gallery open house was an overwhelming success. I spent the majority of the first hour welcoming alumni, professors and local distinguished guests, and then answering questions about the exhibit and different mediums used in various pieces.

Gage showed up as handsome as ever in dark slacks, a white shirt and a royal blue tie. In his arms 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 a few paintings and sculptures, his face changing from admiration to perplexed, depending on the piece.

I grabbed a quick moment with him about halfway through the night when he asked me about a certain piece that was close to the doorway to my workroom. Taking the opportunity when nobody was looking, I pulled him through the door and attacked him hungrily with a kiss.

"Wow," he teased after a few minutes. "If I'd known that art galleries were going to get you so excited to see me, I would've taken you to one for a date."

I laughed, feeling my cheeks turn pink.

"You look absolutely stunning, by the way. They need to hang you on the wall out there." He pulled my arms out to the sides and stepped back to look at me with appreciation.

"*You're* the piece of art. You should get dressed up more often, Gage." I flicked his tie and pulled him back to my lips again.

"So why all the kisses?"

"I just wanted to thank you. This can't be fun for you - standing around while I'm stuck talking to people - and yet I haven't seen you yawn or roll your eyes once. You don't have to stay, you know."

"Are you kidding me? I wouldn't miss your big day. Some of the stuff here is really good, too. I mean, like that sculpture thing with the ribbon things sticking up..."

"That's a girl in motion." I laughed.

"Girl in motion? That artist has you fooled. That's just trash thrown together," Gage joked, poking me in the side playfully.

"I thought you just said you liked it?"

"I lied." He placed a kiss on the tip of my nose and pulled me to the door. "Come on, sweetheart. You can't hide in here with me all afternoon. The crowd needs your expertise to explain what they're looking at."

Later that evening after a romantic candlelit dinner and stroll along the river, Gage and I ended up back at his place slow dancing to "Hey Pretty Girl." The lights were down low, and my head rested contentedly on his chest.

"I love this song," I admitted, sighing.

"It's your song," he murmured, stroking my back. "This feels so right, Savy. Do you feel it?"

God I loved the way *Savy* sounded on his lips. I swallowed hard as I listened to the words being sung. It was all about how the singer wanted to build a life with the girl he was singing it to. It was about getting married and having children. It was about life. I stopped swaying and looked him in the eyes as I spoke.

"I do," I whispered and his eyebrow cocked slightly. A blush stained my cheeks as I realized what I said.

"I do too," he admitted, and bent his head slowly to kiss me. It was a long, slow kiss filled with limitless possibilities of a future.

"Speaking of I do's," I hinted when he finally pulled his lips from mine, "my cousin Mary Anne is getting married on June fifteenth back home, and I have to go."

"You say that like you're being forced to go. I thought most women loved weddings?"

"This one is...shall we say... complicated."

He frowned at me lightly; his eyes searing into mine like he was trying to read my mind. "How so?"

"Well, she's marrying my ex."

"Ohhh, that kind of complicated."

"Mmmhmmm," I agreed.

He stopped dancing and asked softly, "Do you have lingering feelings for him?"

My heart stopped. The easy answer was no, but there was never an easy answer when it came to matters of the heart.

"That's complicated too. I'm not in love with him anymore, but there are lingering issues that need to be resolved," I admitted somewhat reluctantly.

He pulled me back into his arms and held my cheek pressed to his chest. I felt his heartbeat racing under his shirt. If he was mad or disappointed in me he didn't say. I just let him hold me and waited for the moment when he would say he was done.

"Gage," I whispered after a while. Suddenly I was terrified that he might actually be mad. "I wanted to ask you to the wedding. I want you to meet my parents."

"You do?"

"Yes, of course I do." I pulled him to the couch and sat next to him. "I'm sorry I waited to tell you about this. Daniel that's my ex - dumped me a long time ago and ended up with Mary Anne shortly afterwards. It's made for some messy situations, but I have to tell you that ever since I met you...um, ever since we started seeing each other, I have truly started to see things clearly. 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 some time to get over the betrayal, and I'm more than ready to do that now."

I couldn't sense what he was thinking as he sat there listening to me. He ran his hand through his hair and leaned forward onto his elbows.

"It's because of you that I'm ready now," I added, touching his forearm lightly.

"All this time...I knew there was something going on in your head. It's what kept me from asking you out sooner." Grabbing me quickly and pulling me over to straddle his lap, he added, "It's what stopped me from making love to you," he said boldly; kissing my lips swiftly.

"It did? I thought you just wanted us to go slow."

"Savannah, I don't care how strong a man is - when they're in the positions we've been in, 'taking it slow' wouldn't be an option. But I *knew*. I hung back because I could tell you were keeping something from me. You never talked about your past relationships. So if we go to this wedding, are you going to get closure?"

I thought for a moment. "Yes, that's my plan."

"Then I'm in. I want to meet your

parents, Savannah, and I want to know all about your past. I'm one hundred percent committed to this relationship with you. You've become that drug I told you I wanted to crave. I need you," he whispered; causing my heart to stop.

I hugged him tightly and breathed a sigh of relief. I knew there were other things I still needed to tell him skeletons in the closet to reveal. After Charleston I was sure that I'd finally be able to put the past behind me and focus on a future. A future that seemingly looked brighter and brighter because of the man holding me in his arms.

After the showcase, the four weeks until Charleston and the wedding flew by. Now that the work on the gallery showcase was done, I was able to see Gage in the early afternoons before he had to go to the bar.

There were picnics in the park, bike riding on the greenways, and we went to the movies. Normal things couples did when they were dating. I visited him at the bar a few times late in the evening when he would have more time to chat, and every time I was there I enjoyed watching him more and more. Now that I wasn't playing coy, I enjoyed openly admiring the way he moved around behind the bar. It was as if he owned it. He threw drinks together with flair and kept engaged conversations with his customers.

Three things continued to dampen my spirits.

First was the must-have conversation that I kept putting off: letting my parents know I was bringing a date to the wedding. I finally broke down and called my father three weeks before the event.

"Hi dad," I chirped, when he picked up in his usual business tone.

"Hi honey, how are you?"

"I'm good, daddy. Actually, I'm pretty great."

"I'm interested. What's got you so happy today?"

I took a deep breath and began to tell him about Gage. "We've been seeing each other for about a month, but dad, this guy is different. I really like him. I know it sounds rushed."

"Are you calling your mother, Savannah, or are you making me do your dirty work?" he asked, somewhat stoic.

Of course he caught me. He knew darn well that breaking my mother in about a guy - a guy I was bringing home, no less - was the last thing I would want to do.

"Weeeelll..."

"Mmmhmmm, 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. Look, just tell her you don't know anything about him and that I didn't fill you in." "So are you going to be avoiding all her phone calls for the next few weeks, then?"

"That's the brilliant plan." A small grunt that sounded 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, honey. She isn't going to try and ruin your relationship. You know, if you two would just *talk* to each other more, maybe I wouldn't have to be the go-between guy for you."

"I know she means well dad, but it just never comes out that way. Gage isn't a country club by product, and therefore in her mind he won't be good enough."

He sighed heavily then. "I know. Since Mary Anne announced her wedding, your mother has moaned and groaned 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 said with enough anger to be deadly. Sometimes I forgot how much it hurt my father when Daniel and I broke up. He had been close to the Livingstons before Daniel called it quits with me. After, once we discovered he and Mary Anne were together, my parents' friendship with them was lukewarm at best. I hated that my little teenage relationship had put such a barrier into a twenty year old friendship.

Before I could say anything else, the intercom on my father's work phone went off. I heard his secretary Marla speaking through the phone.

"I've got an appointment, Savannah. I'll see you on the thirteenth, correct?"

"And Gage," I reminded him quickly.

"Yes, and Gage. 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."

The second problem was quite perplexing. Sara, Candace and I began to

get the eerie feeling we were being watched. It was Sara who initially noticed the strange car parked a few houses down from ours on a daily basis. The golden sedan was parked in front of one house one day, and another the next. Ordinarily it wouldn't have seemed like much, if only it didn't keep changing places.

Couple that with coming home to broken lights around our house and the odd amount of 'blocked calls' we were all getting on our cells, and we were starting to feel paranoid.

Candace started to let Tony, her nowofficial boyfriend, stay with us most nights to help calm our nerves. The police said that although it seemed strange to us, it was probably just kids playing around (the lights) and possibly a door to door salesperson that we hadn't seen (the car) and for us not to worry too much. The officer's exact words were, "This is a nice neighborhood, so you ladies should be very safe here." They did say they would step up their nightly patrol "just in case".

Regardless, Gage and I weren't taking anything lightly. After the incident with his car, he was beginning to think that someone truly was after him and was therefore screwing with me.

Three weeks before the wedding, he made me stop coming to the bar at night alone. That caused our first argument.

"Gage, I'm a big girl and I'm not going

to sit around my house every night with nothing to do!"

"Please Savannah, don't argue this with me. If there's someone out there watching you, the best time for them to hurt you would be at night when you're heading here to see me. I can't protect you if I'm not there."

"Thank you for the concern. I truly adore you when you worry about me." I leaned over and kissed him lightly before finishing my thought. "But I have no intentions of missing out on our bar nights."

"Damn it," he snapped, causing me to jump. He turned his back to me, placed his hands on his hips and sighed deeply. "Do you have to be so stubborn about this?"

"Hey, hey," I crooned. I stood and wrapped my arms around his waist. Resting my cheek on his back, I tried to soothe him. "Tell you what - if you're that worried, I'll stop coming up here by myself. I can usually convince Sara to come, or I can just stop for a week or two and see what happens. I don't want to fight with you about it, though."

He twisted around quickly 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 just keep an eye on things for the next week, okay?" I agreed reluctantly.

After we talked with the police, all the car sightings, broken lights, and eerie

feelings of someone following me stopped. Maybe the cops were right and we *were* just being paranoid.

The week before the wedding was my last art class for the summer. We were tasked with doing a final art project and I decided to sketch Gage behind the bar doing what he did best.

I headed into The Painter's Palette mid-week to grab what I needed for sketching over the weekend. The project was due Monday, the week of the wedding. Ryan, whom I'd seen several times at The Garage, called out to welcome me to the store.

"Hi Ryan," I called back; walking to the sketching supplies for a charcoal block. "Grabbing supplies for your final art project?" came Ryan's voice from close behind me.

I looked over at his eager face and grinned. "How'd you know?"

A slight flush covered his face and he pushed his hands deep into his pockets.

"I guess you guys have other students coming in this week for stuff."

"Yep, that's right," he agreed. "Can I help you get something specific? What do you plan on doing?"

It was my turn to flush. I didn't know why, but I didn't feel right telling him I was going to sketch Gage. Perhaps it was the puppy dog eyes he always gave me when he saw me, or the way he once asked me for coffee and I'd turned him down. I just didn't want to rub Gage in his face.

"Oh, I'm sketching a friend. I'm really excited about it. I've enjoyed learning some 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 crowed, stopping directly in front of me as I began to follow him. I almost bumped right into his chest when he turned around to face me. "We have some very cool new tools if you plan on doing a charcoal drawing. Right over here."

So I spent almost an hour walking

around The Painter's Palette letting Ryan show me *everything* they stocked, because of this irrational idea that I would hurt his feelings if I said no.

The third issue that came up was the voicemail I received from Spencer later that night, asking me to call him so we could talk *before* we ran into each other at the wedding.

Putting on my big girl panties, I finally returned his call while Gage was at work on the Saturday before the wedding.

"Savannah?" he answered; his voice excited and possibly a little shocked.

"Hi," I started, but it came out small and weak. I cleared my throat and began again. "Sorry it took me so long to get back to you. I've been..." I suddenly stopped speaking, because there was nothing I could rightfully say. Busy? Avoiding you? Scared?

"Let's not start this conversation out with lies Savannah, okay?" he hinted, and I clutched the phone tighter in my fist.

"Okay then, what did you want, Spencer?" I asked. I decided not to beat around the bush since it seemed he wanted to be so open about everything.

"Obviously 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 me all about my plans and relationships."

Mortified at my mother's behavior, I

listened as he continued. "I was under the impression that perhaps you'd been asking about me and then I remembered your mother. No disrespect, of course," he chuckled, and it made me smile.

"Of course," I grinned. After all this time I was glad that we could still agree on things. It was like a small flame that continued to burn between us.

"I suppose I should say I was *hoping* that you'd been asking about me."

For the life of me, I couldn't speak. Damn my mother and her meddling with Spencer. If she knew about the past and our secret relationship, she would *never* have mentioned my name to him. Or maybe she would have. To her, he might just be another big fish who got away. "Oh God, Spencer...I am so sorry she bothered you. Look - I'm seeing someone. Actually, I should tell you that I'm bringing him to the wedding. My mother was just flipping out about making sure I had a date for the wedding, and I guess she latched onto you."

"Didn't she know you were seeing someone?" he asked. His voice was even toned and betrayed no emotion.

"No, I've kind of kept her out of the loop," I lied. I figured lying was better than letting him know it was a newer relationship, which might translate into 'easily torn apart' in Spencer's mind.

"So you're still playing that game, huh?" This time his voice wasn't so even, and I heard the bitterness. "Some things don't change."

"Spencer..." I chided.

"I miss you, Savannah. I told you in my message that being back in Charleston is filled with memories of you that I thought I'd already washed away. I was hoping we could try to work things out."

"I'm sorry Spencer," I said, trying to think of something better 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, and tears sprang to my eyes at the mere mention of it.

"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 ever going to face him at the wedding?

Thursday - June 13, 2013 Wedding Weekend Meet the Parents

"Who was the crazy person who said we should leave at six o'clock in the morning?" I yawned and handed Gage my suitcase to load in the trunk.

"That would be you, sweetheart. 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 and asked, "Do you have everything?"

"Yep. Just let me grab the drink

cooler and we can head out." I walked to the door 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 at the front porch.

"Coffee and doughnut stop first?" he asked as we backed out of the driveway.

"God bless you," I mumbled gratefully.

The closer we got to South Carolina, the tighter my chest felt. Gage made the long drive enjoyable, but no matter what we talked about I couldn't get past the thought of having to see Daniel later that night.

"You want to talk about it?"

"Huh?" I muttered.

He reached for my hand and wove his

fingers through mine. "You've been staring out the window in silence for almost an hour now. You look pensive. You want to talk about it?"

"Oh Gage, I'm so sorry. I don't mean to be poor company." I turned to him and plastered on a big fake smile.

"You could never be poor company, Savy. I know this weekend won't be easy for you and I want you to know I'm here for you, as someone who cares about you and wants to help you get through it. Let me be your friend here for right now."

I snapped up at the word *friend*. "You want to be friends?" What the hell?

"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 girl. I didn't mean it literally. I'm just playing with you."

Feeling like an idiot, I closed my eyes. The tears were rolling down my cheeks before I even realized I was crying.

"Damn, Savy," Gage cursed, and the car slowed as he let off the gas. Glancing between me and the road, he spoke. "Don't cry when I can't hold you. What did I say? I'm sorry honey, I didn't mean to upset you."

"I feel so stupid," I admitted, shaking my head. Did he not *want* me to love him? *Did* I love him? I didn't want to lose him, I knew that for sure. "Gage, after this weekend we need to talk about us."

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye. I swiped the tears from my cheeks and sucked in some air; releasing it slowly and trying to control my emotions.

"Why are we being so damn serious right now anyway?" I finally snapped out a little too loudly.

Sitting forward, I turned the radio up and pressed my presets, looking for a song we could sing to. I stopped when I recognized the cheerful music of Plain White T's and began to sing along. Gage laughed and joined in, and for a while the tension was washed away.

It was close to three when we finally arrived on the outskirts of Charleston, and I offered to drive the rest of the way into the city.

"I got this. The GPS and I are old friends now," Gage insisted.

I watched the scenery as we drove closer and closer. We crossed the Cooper River Bridge and I watched down below as Harbor Tours crisscrossed the river. A ferry puttered towards Fort Sumter and sailboats cluttered the water on this beautiful late spring day. "This city is fabulous," Gage commented as he drove through the center of town. "Forgive my history lessons - I'm Australian, 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 come back here after you graduate?"

The question caught me off guard. "Uh, I really don't know. I mean, I've thought about it for sure. I miss the old, southern laid back charm of Charleston."

The GPS began to wind us down some of the old historical streets.

"So tell me about your house. You lived there all your life, right?"

"Yep. You're about to see it. It's actually 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 called out "Your location is five hundred feet on the right," I sat up straighter. I was both excited to see what Gage thought of my parents' house, as well as exceedingly nervous. If he didn't understand how much money I came from, I was pretty sure this weekend was about to show him.

Pulling up in front of our Church

Street home, Gage whistled as he pulled his sunglasses from his face.

"Nice."

The black wrought iron gate swung open and out bounded my father gracefully; smiling and waving. For a moment I forgot all of the problems and stress this weekend was going to bring, and I yelped like a little girl.

I jumped out of the car without a word to Gage and ran headlong into my father's open arms. His familiar scent filled my nostrils and he hugged me tightly.

"I missed you, baby girl."

"I missed you," I agreed. Behind us the car door shut lightly and I pulled from my father's arms to see Gage walking around the car slowly. He was letting us have our moment before he spoke, and I was thankful for that.

"Daddy," I said as I pulled away and waved at Gage to come over. "This is Gage Taylor. Gage, this is my father."

"Bradford Guthry," my father 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." He laughed.

"Yes sir. Thank you for inviting me into your home. Savannah was just telling me about its historical background. I can't wait to hear more." "Bradford. Why didn't you tell me she was here?" my mother sing-songed as her heels clicked the cobblestones on the path that led to the street. "Darling."

"Hi momma." She gave me a quick hug 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. For a moment I envisioned him kissing her hand like in a scene from 'Gone With the Wind', but instead he just shook it.

"Gage Taylor, Mrs. Guthry. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Yes and you too, I'm sure. Come inside sweetheart, and get out of this

heat. The men can get the bags." She wound her arm through mine and began to pull me inside the house. "So I certainly see the visual appeal. Tell me about your gentleman - did I detect an Australian accent?" she hinted softly; turning her head to get another look.

"Yes, he's Australian. That's all you're getting right now, though. I want to show him to his room and then take him up to White Point before we have to get ready."

"Really dear, you just got here and you already want to go gallivanting all over town?"

"It's not *gallivanting*, mother." Gage and my father's voices broke off the rest of my reply, and I gratefully pulled away from my mother to give Gage a tour of the house. In truth, I simply didn't want to deal with my mother right then. At some point I knew she was going to get the whole story on who Gage was and what he did for a living, and I wanted to put off her snarky comments as long as possible.

It was close to six when Gage and I got back to the house after walking the three blocks to White Point Park. My mother was in an absolute *frenzy*, because the cocktail party started at seven o'clock and she was afraid we were going to show up late. I apologized, somewhat falsely, for her worry and told her we could get ready

quickly. After making sure everything Gage needed was in the guest house, I retired to my room and quickly freshened up.

The entire time I was 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, but consenting, of the relationship as I curled my lashes and lined my lips. I tried being hurt and vulnerable as I slipped on my dress.

I looked at the clock to see it was five minutes until seven, and was surprised my mother hadn't come up to yell at me yet. But when I walked down the staircase and into the sitting room, I discovered why. Gage was standing there looking like the most beautiful man in the world while my mother chatted away about Charleston society. His hair looked damp, his face freshly shaven, and I smelled his crisp, spicy scent as I crossed the room.

He wore perfectly pressed blue dress slacks with a light blue oxford shirt and checked tie. Slap my face and call me Sally - he was freaking gorgeous all dressed up. His blazer was neatly folded over the chair in front of him, and he looked incredibly relaxed in my mother's presence. He certainly looked more relaxed than I ever had.

"Well *there* you are," my mother's high pitched, yet perfectly sweet southern voice called out. "I suppose it will be alright for us to make a late entrance." As I stepped further into the room she added, "Is that lipstick red? Oh honey, you know red isn't your color."

I was used to her nagging and silently rolled my eyes; turning to look at Gage as my father entered the room from the other entrance. Dad stopped as he watched Gage come forward and hold my hands gently, admiring me openly.

"You look beautiful," Gage said softly, and leaned in to kiss my cheek.

"I was thinking the same thing about you when I came up from behind," I murmured, and then felt the heat of embarrassment rise up my chest and neck once I realized what I'd said. "Um, well, I meant when I saw you as I walked into the room."

He winked at me and squeezed my hands before reluctantly letting them go.

"Anyone going to compliment me?" teased my father from the doorway.

"You're handsome as always, daddy. Momma, you look very lovely. Aunt Charlene will be jealous." A smug smile crossed my mother's face at that.

"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," pouted my mother prettily.

"Thanks. We'll see you there, then."

I didn't wait to hear a reply. I grabbed Gage's hand, picked up his blazer and fled the room as quickly as I could, thankful for the reprieve my father was offering us.

We walked around to the back of the property where the garage was located, 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 on to the guest house."

"So - 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 kinda 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. Sitting there was my beautiful alabaster white Mercedes Benz. It sparkled like the day it was delivered to me.

"Nice. It looks brand new. How many miles?" he asked as he walked around the pretty little convertible.

"I don't know for sure, but less than fifty-thousand. I didn't really drive it that much. You cool with driving a stick?"

Gage gave me an incredulous look as he walked to my side. I dangled the keys out to him. He wrapped my hand, keys and all, in his and invaded my personal space with his body.

"I'm a guy, aren't I? Are you sure you trust me to drive your most prized possession, though?"

I'm trusting you with a lot of things more important than that car right now. Like my family, my body and my heart. I thought the words, but didn't say them. Instead I plastered on a smile and tipped my head up; kissing his chin.

Thursday - June 13, 2013 Cocktails

We arrived at the country club to find the cocktail party being held in the same ballroom as my graduation party three years earlier. The room looked beautiful, all 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 walked into the room and saw all of the guests. Family, old high school friends, members of the club - all people I hadn't seen in at least two years. It didn't upset me to realize how out of place I was, like I didn't belong with this group anymore.

Gage endured the unending introductions to family and acquaintances with a smooth charm I'd never seen him demonstrate before. Where I felt awkward back in this social scene, he looked and sounded like *he* was the one who'd grown up in it.

"There she is," boomed my Uncle Grant when I finally made it to his side. "How's my favorite niece?"

"Your *only* niece," I teased; kissing his cheek and hugging him. My Aunt Charlene was next to him and we shared a quick hug as well.

"It's been far too long, Savannah. You barely even reply to emails anymore. We've missed you at the showers," Charlene's voice whined as she spoke. It was her typical voice, especially when she was unhappy. Mary Anne inherited the same voice, and it never failed to grate on my nerves.

"Momma, Savannah is a busy student. Leave her alone," interrupted the brideto-be as she gave me a stiff embrace. "It's about time you came home, Vannah."

Vannah was the childhood nickname she always used for me, and it was touching that she would revert back to it now. I reminded myself that the past needed to be in the past as I hugged her back and plastered on a smile for them. I quickly stepped back and introduced them to Gage. Charlene and Mary Anne did what any red blooded woman would do...they stared.

Uncle Grant's eyes actually widened at Gage's accent when Gage spoke to them. "You're from Australia? Gage Taylor, you said?"

I caught a slight frown cross Gage's features before he put on a smile and answered, "Yes sir, I am."

Whatever my Uncle meant to say next was drowned out by my father hurrying up to us and slapping him on the back.

"Grant, I see you found my daughter. I've been looking for her," he cried out, and I wondered 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. Have you seen him yet, Vannah?"

"Sorry, I haven't."

"Well I'll be sure to bring him by to say hi to you when he reappears."

I smiled tightly at her as my father pulled me away, already engrossed in a conversation with Gage. He held his arm out for me with a smile, and I gratefully placed my hand on his forearm; gaining strength from his.

It didn't take long for me to spot

Daniel in the crowd. He was standing close to one of the open bars with a group of guys I recognized from high school. They were laughing at a story a tall red head was telling animatedly.

"Will you excuse me for a moment?" I asked Gage quietly as he stood listening to a few of my father's friends debate the merits of a particular golf club.

"Sure. You alright?"

I nodded my head towards the groom. "Closure."

Gage's eyes narrowed as he took in the group of younger men where Daniel stood. Surely he was trying to determine which one could possibly be the ex that had hurt me so badly.

"I'll be right here waiting." He smiled

and leaned down to kiss my temple sweetly.

At that same moment, several of the overly loud gentlemen standing with us burst out in what could only be called a chorus of guffaws. As I stepped away from Gage I noted Daniel looking directly at me; his attention obviously drawn to the noise.

Meeting his eyes, I held my head up high and slowly but purposefully made my way across the room. Several of his friends took note of me making my way over when Daniel didn't reply to them.

"Dude, is that Savannah Guthry I see coming our way?" blustered a slightly paunchy Blake Silver. Blake had been on the soccer team with Daniel in high school, and graduated the same year as me. "Holy shit, it *is* Savannah." His jaw dropped as he took me in from head to toe.

He took a few steps forward and met me with a giant bear hug. "Girl, I haven't seen you since... that party we had before we started college. You look amazing."

"You too, Blake," I laughed, hugging him back.

"Please tell me you're here without a date."

I pulled 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 both stood there in that awkward place.

"It's good to see you too," I finally admitted; looking him over. He looked as handsome as ever. His face was more mature, and his normally messy blond hair was cut shorter, neater. "Can we talk for a minute, in private?"

Daniel glanced around the room and then whispered something to Blake before pointing me towards a set of French doors to the left that led out to the balcony.

I stepped out into the oppressive June heat and walked around the corner, away from the view of the doors and any prying eyes.

A moment later Daniel followed behind me, glancing around like a guilty teenager as he spoke. "I asked Blake to keep an eye on Mary Anne."

For one delicious moment I thought about how nice it would feel to slap him across the face for the mistake of a night we'd had sex. It was a brief moment filled with hurt and anger, and as quickly as it came it was gone.

Daniel's eyes looked me over as he spoke. "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 stepped closer, and I smelled the alcohol on his breath as I took a step back.

"Well of course. Why wouldn't I be?" He gave me an incredulous look and I modified my statement. "Well, I mean I guess I can understand why you'd think I wouldn't be, but that's actually why I wanted to talk to you. I wanted us to have some closure."

His hand reached out and skimmed my bare arm. "What kind of closure are you talking about?"

"Daniel, you're marrying my cousin in two days."

"And?"

"And?" I asked incredulously. "Are you serious? Why are you marrying her

if it means nothing?"

"Grow up, Savannah," he mocked; his face cynical. "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 pineapples hanging over their doors."

"You've *got* to be kidding me," I growled. His pineapple comment, the urban legend signifying swingers, made me want to throw up. "When did you become this guy, Daniel?"

He shrugged. "Probably around the time I caught my dad screwing the maid, honey." He said it so nonchalantly, 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 both happy with each other."

"Go ahead and judge me, Savannah. But your holier-than-thou attitude isn't going to change the way things go around here." He leaned in closer and my back hit the stone wall. "You know you still want me, Savannah. I see it in your eyes. I'll be right here when you're ready." My jaw dropped and I raised my hand quickly and without thought; slapping him across his cheek. His head snapped to the side and he cursed; his eyes black beads of anger.

"I'm going to guess that you deserved that, and ask that you 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 snapped, straightening and pushing his 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 Daniel, or I'll make sure your life is a living hell." I said it out of an intense loyalty to my family. Suddenly, the mere thought of having Daniel weasel himself into my family made me sick.

"Mary Anne certainly didn't mind hurting you when she screwed me into breaking up with you, so why would you care about *her*?"

Tears of fury and embarrassment sprang to my eyes as I absorbed what he said.

"Step back, mate," growled Gage under his breath, and he took a menacing step forward. "Get the hell out of here before I decide to have a little chat with the Guthrys about you."

"Hey man, chill. The Guthrys need me right now, dude. 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 that 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 charts for years. I'm just not marrying the daughter they expected me to."

"You won't get your hands in GW, Daniel - I can tell you that right now. You can be sure of it."

"Really? And how is that? You're a country club debutante who's trained at doing nothing but looking pretty and satisfying your man in bed."

I grabbed Gage's arm when I saw his

fists clench. Realizing that he'd gone too far, Daniel raised his arms and swept around us both; keeping his attention glued to Gage. "She's all yours, man. Besides, I've been there, done that." He slid swiftly back through the door before Gage could react.

"What the hell was that?" He turned to me and I could see the anger drip off of him as he clenched his jaw like he was trying to forcibly hold his tongue.

I leaned against the stone, my body in complete shock at the tumultuous confrontation with Daniel.

"That was *high society*," I said sarcastically. "I'm truly...speechless right now. I just..." I trailed off. I honestly didn't know what to do. How could I just stand by idly and let him marry into my family? Why should I care? The one thing I knew for sure was that I would do *anything* to keep him out of Guthry Whiskey.

Looking at Gage standing there, his hands now stuffed in his pockets, his face solemn, I made a decision. "You want to get out of here?"

"I'd go anywhere with you - you know that."

I held out my hand and pulled him towards the outdoor staircase so we wouldn't have to go back inside to the party.

"I'll take that as a yes, then." I flashed him a grateful smile and we headed off into the sultry Charleston night. Sitting on a bench along the water thirty minutes later, I leaned against Gage's shoulder and sighed in comfort 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.

He tensed at the question. "Savannah, he was only trying to hurt you."

"Yeah, I know."

"Okay then sweetheart, why ask me that? It's not exactly a black and white answer."

I pulled out of his arm and looked up at him. The moon and nearby light post provided some light, but for the most part his face was cloaked in shadows. I stared at him and tried to think of what to say.

"Come on, Savannah. You're asking if I think sex and love are the same thing. I can't tell you that I haven't had sex without love."

"God - that was really stupid of me. I'm sorry Gage, I shouldn't have asked you that. Of course people have sex all the time without love. It's just the way he said it, you know?"

He turned and 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's that?" I breathed, letting his hand pull my face closer to his.

"The truth is I don't think he *knows* what love is. If he did and he was really in love, then he would 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 smiled into his palm and kissed it. "Good answer."

Friday - June 14, 2013 Let's Skip It

I woke up Friday morning with a pounding headache. Seeing my mother in the kitchen when I finally made an appearance after a hot shower did not help it.

"I was quite disappointed and embarrassed to find that you two ran off early last night, Savannah. How could you be so rude?"

"Oh, mother. Nobody even cared that I wasn't there."

"Of course they did dear. Would you believe that 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 placed 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 agitatedly and stomped out of the kitchen; her heels echoing on the wooden floors as she walked away.

I sat at the kitchen bar and thought about the day to come. I was expected to have afternoon tea with family and the bridal party at one, and every last nerve in my body screamed *NO*! at the mere thought of it.

My father invited Gage to go to the

driving range for the morning and then have lunch at the club, and I wondered how his day was going. I didn't have a clue if he even knew how to golf, but when my dad asked, Gage said yes immediately and seemed excited at the prospect.

As I sat and sipped my steaming espresso, I wished wholeheartedly that I could have just 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 the night before while we sat by the river. I was extremely hurt by Daniel's insinuation that he and Mary Anne slept together while we were a couple. I wasn't even sure if I could believe him.

Gage made me realize that whatever happened back then didn't really matter anymore. I was done with worrying about Daniel Livingston, and after tomorrow Mary Anne would have to put up with him.

I checked the time and rushed to get ready before my mother had cause to complain. I would go to the tea, smile and make nice, and then come home to Gage. Pulling my dark hair into a fancy ponytail, I slipped on my pastel pink and white striped sheath dress. I kept my makeup light and fresh and grabbed some pastel aqua heels to complete the look. My outfit made me feel soft and light when I met my mother in the living room.

The tea ended up being a good deal larger than I expected. 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 amongst themselves 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 room 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.

Tilting her head slightly and putting on a demure smile, Mary Anne began her show. "I can't believe that a lifetime of dreaming about my perfect wedding day is about to become a reality. Daniel and I met years ago through my sweet cousin Savannah. Where are you, Vannah?"

You've got *to be kidding me*. I sat there frozen as heads turned my way and looked at me. Some looked at me uneasily while others smiled slightly. Since I obviously wasn't escaping notice, I smiled and waved my hand once.

"There she is. Thank you for letting me have him, Savannah." I smiled politely while the crowd chuckled at Mary Anne's comment. She continued to drone on and on, but the blood rushing through my ears blocked the rest of her speech out.

The happy clapping and "Cheers!" slowly brought me out of my angry daze. Several friends and family members took turns wishing Mary Anne well while I sat there just listening and stewing on her catty comment. I couldn't believe that she'd been so cavalier about the past. In *public*.

A moment of quiet saw me rise to my feet 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 that you two *truly* deserved each other." I smiled sweetly as I raised my glass. Mary Anne's smile wilted a bit, but when everyone toasted she smiled and I sat down.

My mother's pinched face told me she wasn't happy with my toast on the way home, but she said nothing. Suddenly I was very angry that she hadn't dared to say a word in my defense about the snotty comment Mary Anne had made. 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, mother?" I snapped.

"What *she* did? Shouldn't we talk about what *you* did?"

"Give me a damn break," I muttered. My mother's mouth snapped into an angry line, telling me she heard my remark.

"Young lady, you *will* speak respectably in my home."

I threw up my hands in exasperation. "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 better 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?" My father's booming voice startled me, and I turned to the sitting room off the foyer where Gage and my father were sitting.

Glancing at my father and then back to my mother, I bit my tongue and shook my head. "Nevermind. It was nothing."

"It doesn't sound like nothing, honey," dad spoke; angling for an answer. He stood and walked towards us; Gage following suit.

"Bradford, it's nothing. Savannah and I just had a small disagreement. Please excuse my behavior, Gage. That 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 dimpled smile magically pulling a smile from my mother.

"We aren't going to the dinner tonight," I stated suddenly, my resolve firm.

Both of my parents looked at me as I stood there defiantly, and I braced myself for an argument. My mother surprised me though when she agreed. "You know, I think that will be fine, darling. You should take Gage about the town. Excuse me, please." She turned and walked slowly up the stairs. After a small glance at us, my father followed after her.

Once my father disappeared at the top of the staircase, Gage stepped closer to me. "Hi, beautiful." Gage smiled and pulled me into his arms.

"Hi," I groaned.

"Oh baby, that was pitiful," he murmured in my ear. "I think you need some pampering, what do you think?"

I lifted my sad puppy dog eyes to his gorgeous ones and nodded yes.

"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 replied, backing up

reluctantly; his warm eyes making my knees weak.

"Hey Savannah?" he called when I finally turned.

"Yeah?"

"You look amazing in that dress."

After he surprised me with a private harbor tour at sunset and a romantic dinner, Gage and I returned to the guest house. I lay across his bed while he massaged my back to 'pamper' me like he promised he would.

His hands slipped under my shirt as he kneaded the muscles, causing small grunts of appreciation to escape my mouth.

"You keep moaning like that and

we're going to have some trouble," he hinted; his warm lips kissing my shoulder.

"Did you say keep moaning?" I asked playfully. Then I moaned louder in exaggeration.

His fingers pinched my sides lightly and I yelped at the sting. "Ohhh, I'm sorry, sweetheart. I'm going to need to kiss that and make it better."

He sat back on his haunches and placed his hands under my shoulders to pull my back into the air so he could slip my shirt off.

"You are so damn beautiful," he whispered, and then flipped me over; running his tongue over the side where he'd pinched me, and then doing the same to the other side.

His eyes looked hungrily at my exposed skin and then covered my body with his own. He lay on top of me for one excruciating moment, and then rolled us to our sides, keeping his eyes focused on mine the entire time.

"Are you ready for tomorrow?" he finally asked as his fingers traced over my facial features.

"The wedding?" I asked. His sudden change in topic from making me moan to the wedding ahead confused me.

"Yes sweetheart, the wedding."

"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 as he traced my lips.

Dragging a heavy breath into his lungs, he pressed his hips into mine.

"What kills you?" he reminded me softly.

"That 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."

A peal of laughter escaped me. "That it does."

"You know what kills me, Savannah?"

"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?" I asked.

"No, dirty girl. I meant I can't let you stay here. I promised your father I would respect you, especially while under his roof."

"So then there's no doing *it*, "I frowned playfully.

"Nope, sorry love."

"Then why did you tease me and pull my shirt off?"

Quick as lighting, he pushed me to my back and rolled on top of me. Sitting across my hips, evidence of his body's desire of me plain as day, he pulled off his shirt and then lowered his body down to mine until he was hovering over my breasts. My heart skipped in anticipation of his skin touching mine.

"Because I can't help myself," he replied.

"Oh," I hummed as his lips touched my collar bone.

I closed my eyes and rode the waves of desire as his mouth and hands began to explore my shirtless top. He pulled me into a sitting position after a few minutes, my legs straddling his.

"Is this you pampering me?"

"Sure is," he laughed; his hands rubbing my back as his tongue drew circles along the tops of my breasts.

"Gage," I breathed out when his

fingers went to the clasp of my bra.

"Yeah baby?" he said raggedly.

"If you undo that, we are *so* not going to be honoring my father's wishes."

"Hmm?" His hand was working at the clasp and his hips were moving 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 honestly, I don't have the same willpower from last time. I want you too badly."

He growled deeply, capturing my lips in a long, wet kiss. His hands left my bra intact and went to my hips instead, and then started to slip into the waist of my pants.

"Shit," he moaned. "Sorry. I'm

stopping," he said, suddenly picking me up off of him and setting me upright on the bed beside him.

I noticed that he was walking a bit awkwardly when he stood up and grabbed my shirt from the floor; unraveling it and then holding it up for me. "You need to leave the room *now*."

"You're kicking me out?" I pulled my shirt from his hands and back over my head.

A smile crossed my face when I saw Gage's very serious expression.

"Yep. Get out, you wicked temptress," he hissed, pulling me up to his chest. He wrapped his arms around my waist and picked me up to carry me to the door. "Oh my God...seriously? You're totally kicking me out? What are you going to do now?"

"Baby, I'm about to go take a cold, cold shower."

A giggle escaped me 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 letting me know he was serious.

"Damn it," I muttered as I walked away. "Cold shower...hell, I need an *ice* bath to stop the sizzle down there."

Saturday - June 15, 2013 The Reception

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 huge. The large poles that held up the ceiling 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 gaudy, that is.

The new couple was formally introduced to their guests, and I found a way to keep my eyes averted when Daniel and Mary Anne danced their first dance. I wasn't jealous anymore, but I still had a hard time being happy for them. I really hoped that someday I could get over those feelings.

An almost happy smile did cross my face as I watched my Uncle Grant dance with Mary Anne for the father and daughter dance. Uncle Grant had always been good to me through the years. I remembered when Daniel and Mary Anne first started dating, and he spoke to my father and told him how sorry he was. I tried to pretend like it never bothered me, but obviously even then, everyone could still see through my façade.

I couldn't help but wonder if his

joyous smile as he danced with his only daughter was because he was finally unloading her into someone else's care.

When the floor opened up to all dancers, I was surprised to find my father tapping my shoulder for a dance. The sweet melody of an old Allison Krause song began to play as my dad danced with me.

"You dodged a bullet, baby," he murmured as we smiled for the cameras that kept clicking to catch those 'magical' moments.

"How do you mean?"

"Daniel. He was never good enough for you," he informed me, spinning me around. "Mark my words - the Livingstons never made him work for anything, and he'll crumble at the pressure and be *begging* your uncle and I for a job in a few years."

"Shhh, dad," I chastised him.

"It shows your maturity that you came to this blasted wedding in the first place. I'm proud of you."

"I'm fine, Daddy."

"Do you want to tell me more about Gage? I like the way he looks at you."

My father had never once said a nice thing about Daniel in all the years he'd known him. The compliment caused my smile to grow wider and I looked past his shoulder to where I saw Gage standing on the sidelines of the floor watching us.

Pulling my reluctant gaze from him, I

looked at my father. "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 take over?" My father graciously handed me over to Gage as a new song began to play.

"Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?" he asked; taking my right hand in his and bringing it up and between our chests, while his other hand inched around my back. I fought the urge to place my head on his chest and we swayed gently to the beat.

"You have, actually," I teased him

softly.

"Well not enough," he insisted, bringing our entwined hands up to his lips and lightly kissing 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 looked up and scanned the crowd around us.

My hand was resting on his upper arm, but when he stopped speaking I slid it up over his shoulder and onto the side of his face, pulling him back to me. "You've just called me beautiful, stunning and gorgeous in the span of one minute. Please, go on," I urged.

When he focused back on me, I saw

something different in his face. My heart leapt at the tenderness I found in the warm pools of his eyes as he continued. "I thought you looked so gorgeous and I wanted to get to you. I wanted to be the man dancing with you, Savannah. I wanted everyone to know that *I* was lucky enough to be the man that you're with."

Dying. I'm dead. No words would form as I watched this beautiful man spill his guts to me.

"I know there were some demons you needed to exorcise this weekend, and I hope you have."

"I'm sorry, Gage. 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 admitted, and then gave in to the desire to press my cheek to his chest. I wrapped my arms around his waist and hugged him tightly.

"No, you don't owe me anything, Savannah. Not yet," he spoke into my hair and rested his cheek on my head. "I'm ready to move forward with you, though, and I feel like you're ready for it too. I have things I need to tell you and I'm sure you have more things to tell me, and 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. Rendered speechless. For him to lay it out for me the way he had, I was scared as hell that I would say the wrong thing. *What did I want?* my head screamed at me. *Don't be an idiot, Savannah. Say something!* Gage made me feel something I didn't think I would ever be able to feel again. When I thought about him, I knew it was *more* than I'd ever felt before.

What was wrong with me that would prevent me from reaching out with both hands and saying yes? I was suddenly overwhelmed, and pulled back slightly from his arms. "I'm sorry - you know what? I need a moment. Excuse me." He dropped his arms and stood there as I walked away. He was pretending not to care, but I saw the look of disbelief cross his features before he steeled them to show nonchalance.

"Shoot," I muttered to myself as I walked away; the same old fear creeping back up in me. Fear that I was making a huge mistake by leaving him on the dance floor. But I was having a hard time reading my own thoughts, and needed a moment of peace. My father's words *He looks at you like you're precious* rang through my head.

Was Gage in love with me? Surely not. This couldn't be love. Not yet, anyway. He wanted to be with me though, that much was clear. Was it lust or did he truly want something more?

Making my way to the building where the restrooms were located, I walked slowly along the lantern lit path; the thick muggy evening air stealing my breath much as Gage's words had.

"Savannah?"

I stilled at the familiar voice. "Spence?"

"Can we talk for a moment?" he asked softly. He walked up to stand next to me; uncertainty making itself known in his awkward body language.

"Spencer, we don't have anything more to say. I told you that I've moved on."

"Savannah, I have regretted the moment I said goodbye to you since the moment I did it. Can't we just talk?"

"Why? It won't change the fact that it happened."

"Your mother has hounded me since I came back to Charleston, and everywhere I go I see the places I spent time with you. 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 did."

A pained look crossed his face. "God, I'm sorry. I was so stupid." He pulled me into a hug, and I allowed him to touch me because I knew what he was feeling. When I looked at his handsome face, I felt it too. The memories of what we shared one long, hot summer three years ago. It *was* special to me, and until a few weeks ago, I'm pretty sure I would have jumped at the chance to renew our relationship.

"Spencer," I inserted, pulling back a little. "I'm sorry. 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 quickly leaned in and kissed my lips. For a moment I thought he was going to just give me a quick peck, but then his hands braced my back and he put pressure on my lips as he tried to force my mouth to yield to him.

The old memories of his lips on mine rushed in for a moment and I forgot where I was. I allowed my hands to move up his chest of their own accord. I was lost in the moment, yet a small voice was nagging in my ear.

"Savannah, Spencer is finished with law school and he's going to be taking over his father's practice in a few years. You would have the perfect life here at home <u>where you belong</u>." It was my mother's voice, and it was full of all of the ideas she'd been trying to force down my throat for years.

Remembering that we were standing in the middle of a walkway on the way to the club, I lightly pushed Spencer away. "No."

Stepping back, his face a mask of desire and sorrow, Spencer watched

silently as I spun on my heel and hurried into the building.

I cursed myself for allowing that moment of weakness to happen in the first place. It was like I was being tossed about in an angry sea of waves. Spencer's face entered my mind and immediate confusion swept through me when I touched my lips. They still tingled from his kiss, and I tried to focus on that feeling. The memory of being in his arms again. How it felt to kiss his lips after so long.

But no matter how hard I tried to focus on Spencer, it was Gage who kept coming back into my mind. Gage, with his dimpled smile, always pushed the others away from my vision...and then it hit me. I was over Spencer. I was over Daniel. I was ready to move forward with someone, and I was one hundred percent sure that someone was Gage. I was scared as hell that I would make a mistake and screw it up, but I had no choice. It was *Gage* that my heart wanted.

Excited at the revelation, I quickly freshened up my lipstick in the sitting room mirror. I was about to push my way out of the restroom when the door swung in and my mother entered.

"There you are, darling. How are you taking it all in?"

Being forced to have this conversation with my mother, *again*, exasperated me. "I'm fine, mother. It was

a lovely wedding and I'm happy for them."

She rolled her eyes like she thought I was crazy.

"What, mother? Why is that so hard to believe, huh?" I shot out, tired of her theatrics.

"Savannah Rose. There is no need for you to sound so short with me," she huffed. She raised a hand to pat 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."

"Mother, I'm fine. I have Gage." Saying it aloud was so *right*, and I smiled at the truth in the words.

He had been a rock for me throughout

the entire wedding debacle. He'd sat beside me with his hand around my shoulders; his fingers lightly teasing my bare shoulder and causing chill bumps to appear.

Several times he leaned in and whispered funny little comments about one of the ladies hats, or another's putrid purple dress. When I found myself struggling to hold back tears when Mary Anne walked into the room, Gage lightly stroked my fingers and whispered in my ear.

"It's very emotional watching someone give up their dating freedom, isn't it?" I slapped my hand over my mouth as a giggle welled up in my throat. "I mean, think of all of 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 towards him with gratitude. "I'd take the song game over this any day." I meant that I would take him over Daniel, but I don't think he understood that.

He leaned towards me like he was going to kiss me right there as Mary Anne walked down the aisle, and it was only the slight cough of my father to my right that pulled us out of our bubble.

Wanting to hurry back to him I pulled open the door to leave my mother, but she stopped me before I could escape.

"Savannah, honey - I'm sure that he's very nice, but what type of a future

would you actually have with someone like him?"

"Someone like him?" I asked, playing stupid. At some point since arriving in Charleston my father had filled my mother in on Gage's job, and I knew she wasn't happy that he was a bartender.

"Don't try to make me out to sound like the bad guy here, Savannah. I mean Gage is *gorgeous*, honey, 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, darling. You deserve the fairy tale too, if not more, than Mary Anne."

"Yes," I rolled my own eyes in defeat. "I brought him just so I could make all of the country club cronies pant after him. So that everyone who saw me get thrown to the side by Daniel could see that I was having a ball with my sexy new boy toy."

"We only want you to be happy, darling," my mother exclaimed.

"I had my chance at 'happily ever after', remember? The upstanding young lawyer with the trust fund was all in the bag until the beautiful bride came and stole him." My words tasted bitter as they poured from my mouth. In truth, I wanted to thank Mary Anne for taking Daniel off of my hands all those years ago. It may have hurt like hell back then, but I was so much better off for it now.

The sound of footsteps, a small

commotion and a male voice pardoning himself pulled me from my conversation with my mother. Realizing that we'd been speaking with the door open, I quickly stepped out and looked around. The glass door leading out of the building was slowly clicking closed, and I saw a tall figure swiftly making his way down the steps outside.

The lady that he must have bumped into stepped around me as I stood there in shock. I recognized her as a friend of my parents' from the club.

"Dear, that is some accent your guy has." She winked and then fanned herself over dramatically.

I rushed out of the building upon understanding that it was Gage who had overheard our conversation. Ahead of me was the large outdoor tent where the wedding reception was taking place, and to the left were lit paths that would bring guests to the tennis courts and pool area. To my right were pathways leading around the club and towards the golf course. Scanning the area frantically, I searched for my handsome date in his dark suit. I spotted him to my right and immediately took off after him.

"Gage?" I exclaimed after the silhouette began taking long strides across the lawn of the country club ahead of me. He was walking quickly away from the building and my heels dug into the grass; tripping me as I tried to catch up with him. "Gage!" I shouted louder, panic beginning to clutch at my chest.

The light of the almost-full moon provided all of the lighting this far from the clubhouse. I found him stopped under a large tree with his hands stuffed into his pants pockets, and I placed a hand on his bicep once I finally reached him. Panting from the exertion of racing to catch up to him, I tried to turn him around to face me by tugging on his arm, but he stalwartly resisted. I stood behind him for a moment trying to find the right words to say. When I leaned into him and placed my cheek against his back, he finally spoke.

His voice was raw when he said, "What was this, Savannah? Was I just eye candy to you? A short trip home to show off the sexy Aussie to your vapid little cousin?"

Regret slapped me in the face and I cried out, "No! Do you honestly think so little of me?" He didn't reply right away, so I stated the obvious. "You heard my mother and I just now, right?"

He stepped forward suddenly, which caused me to stumble back. He turned my way and I saw the disgust written in his face. The moon provided just enough light for me to see the anger flashing 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 saw you a few minutes ago with Spencer," he confessed.

"You what?" Fear washed over me at what that moment must have looked like to his eyes. "That's not what it looked like, Gage. I told him that 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 silent plea as tears started to stream down my face. "That kiss was nothing. It was just me being confused."

I might as well have slapped him, the way his head snapped back at the word "*confused*".

"He meant something to me a long time ago, and he pushed me to talk and I just... I didn't know how to handle it."

He didn't buy it. "You could have simply walked away."

"I did, and I'm sorry I didn't do it sooner, Gage. Honestly I was surprised by him, that's all."

Shaking his head, his jaw tensed and the muscle in his cheek jerked erratically. "What about what your mother said?"

"My mother knows nothing," I

pleaded, stepping closer to him. "I'm sorry you heard her, but none of that is true."

"Yet you didn't set her straight." His tone was flat now, as if he had ceased to care.

"You don't know my mother. It's better just to not engage. Not right now not here."

"You know, you've never asked me once about my future. About bartending or my job. You've just ignored it. You didn't bother to tell your mother. You planned to keep that a secret from everyone, didn't you?"

"Gage," I pleaded again, grasping the edge of his jacket. His shoulders tensed as he watched me and then stepped back another step.

"You know what? It doesn't matter. Go back to your family, *sweetheart*. 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, done that, and I'm over it."

"But it *does* matter. Let me explain to you why I never asked," I begged as he took his first step away from me. "Gage!"

"When are you going to realize that you are your own person? Or at least I thought you were. 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 completely mystified at what he seemed to be alluding to. What did he mean he understood the pressure?

"You haven't, though. You're still trying to please the country club crowd and the silly socialites. But guess what?" he breathed, pulling me close and staring into my eyes. My lip trembled while tears streamed down my cheeks, and he wiped a tear from my face gently with his thumb as his eyes pored over me. It was like he was trying to remember every last detail, and my breath hitched in fear. Then for one, glorious moment his head bent down towards me and I tilted back automatically for the kiss I

prayed he was going to give me. Instead, he placed his warm lips against my ear and whispered in a voice that chilled me to the core. "You're just a fool, love. 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 let me go and turned to leave. My knees begin to buckle as I watched him walk away. My voice caught in my throat at the realization that he was done. I heard the music coming from inside the tent where the wedding party was continuing to celebrate. The band was playing a slow song, and I pictured the dance I would have wanted to have with Gage; his strong arms holding my body pressed to his. The way his fingers would trail along my bare shoulder. Telling him I was ready to move forward with him.

"Oh my God," I choked; sinking to my knees right there in the grass. He'd called me Savy. *Savy*. My shoulders folded in on me as a torrent of tears fell from my eyes.

Sunday - June 16, 2013 Secrets Revealed

It was well past noon when I finally dragged myself out of the guest house and into my father's study. After Gage walked away from me the night before, I sat in the grass crying until my father found me. He pulled 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 just walked away," I sobbed into his shirt. "He wouldn't let me explain."

"Come on baby, let's get you home." When we pulled into the garage I slipped off my shoes and ran to the guest house expecting him to be there, but he wasn't. His scent still lingered in the room, and his clothing and luggage sat there. I sat on the edge of the bed and pulled the pillow to my face, breathing in his scent.

"Sweetheart?" My dad stood in the doorway and watched me; his face twisted in pain for me.

"I'm going to stay here. His stuff is here, so surely he just went to vent and he'll be back...and I want to be here to talk to him."

"Baby, he said he was going to catch a flight..."

"How do you know that? Did you talk to him?"

He stepped into the room and pulled something from his pocket. "One of the employees delivered this to me," he said, handing me a note.

Unfolding the note I wiped my eyes, trying to clear the blurry haze as I stared at the small note with Gage's bold handwriting.

Mr. Guthry,

I apologize for the contents of this letter, sir. I want to thank you for your hospitality this weekend and for welcoming me into your house and into Savannah's life.

Something happened this evening that I think is best left between your

daughter and I, but I wanted you to know that I am heading home. I am 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 for me.

PS. Please feel free to tell Savannah what we discussed about me. I think she has the right to know.

Sincerely,

Gage

I held the note to my chest. Debating my options, I snapped at my father, "Maybe he's still at the airport. Why didn't you tell me right away? And what is it that you two discussed?"

"Savannah, I honored his wishes and most likely he's already gone. Come inside and we can talk."

Jumping to my feet, I looked at the items Gage had left behind. "No. Dad, 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."

"Let him cool down, baby, and he'll see things differently. Can you tell me what happened?"

Spotting his open travel suitcase, I walked to it and looked at the neatly folded shirt on top. I pulled it out and held the soft cotton in my hands. Beneath it was a small square box wrapped in white with a tag.

"Daddy, can you give me some time, please? I'm going to stay here in case he comes back." My voice was stiff as I stared at the box. "Please..."

When the doors clicked shut behind him, I picked up the box and t-shirt and walked back to the bed. My purse was sitting on the table next to the door, and I assumed that my father had carried it into the room with him and left it. I quickly grabbed my purse and pulled out my cell phone; checking it for messages. Nothing.

I hit the quick dial button for Gage and listened as it went directly to voicemail.

"Gage - it's Savannah...please come back. I'm so sorry, Gage, just please let me explain. I'm waiting in the guest house for you."

I hung up and stripped off my dress, pulling on his t-shirt and sliding under the covers. The small package sat on my lap and I stared numbly at it. The tag was made out to me with a small heart stamped onto it.

Not able to wait, I unwrapped the gift; taking deep breaths as I did. Removing the lid, I picked up a square piece of cotton from the top to find a thin silver cuff bracelet. It was simple and sweet, and a smile came to my lips as I picked it up to inspect it.

And that's when I saw it.

Seven words elegantly hand stamped along the cuff that ripped my heart from my chest:

Hey pretty girl, let's build some dreams

My chest tightened as I stared at the line from the song we'd danced to several times. Our song.

There was a small note under the bracelet that said:

Savy, I chose you. Are you ready to choose me?

Suddenly anger reared its ugly head and I hit the redial button on my phone; 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 just 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 vou...?" I began to cry harder into the phone as I muttered, "How dare you. I chose you..."

The voicemail cut me off and I collapsed on the bed with a deluge of tears streaming down my face; crying myself into a fitful sleep.

Later when I walked into my father's study in Gage's t-shirt and a pair of yoga pants, I met my father's sad eyes and plopped into the chair across from his desk.

"He isn't returning my calls. Tell me what you discussed with him."

"Your mother wants to talk with you, Savannah," he said; rounding his desk and placing his large hand on my shoulder.

"I'm not really in the mood to speak

with her right now. I want to know why Gage told me to talk to you. What is it that *you* know that *I* don't?"

He called out for my mother despite my protest and then went back to his seat. His face was deathly serious as he started to speak.

"First, let me tell you that Gage called me a week ago."

"He did what?"

My dad's head snapped up and he looked over my head.

"He called me. Erika honey, come sit down. Both of you - let me speak first. Okay?" He looked from my mother to me and back.

My mother took the chair next to me and avoided my eyes. She was impeccably put together as always, although her eyes were tired and maybe a little puffy. We both shook our heads in pouty agreement and my father continued.

"Gage called to make sure that it was acceptable to us that he stay at our house for the wedding. He was extremely polite about it and I was very impressed. It wasn't until Friday at lunch that I knew who he was."

My heart constricted as I thought about Gage being such a gentlemen to call on my father without telling me.

"What do you mean 'who he was'?"

He ignored me and looked at my mother. "Erika."

"Savannah, darling, can you please

look at me?" I frowned and crossed my arms over my chest before turning my head just enough to level my eyes on my mother.

"I'm going to assume that 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. Darling, I'm sorry if what I said caused the argument, but I want you to understand my side."

"Psh - your side of *what*, mother? You put him down because he's a freaking bartender, and you made him think he was less than us because of that." My voice rose as I sat forward in my chair, now pointing accusingly at my mother. "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."

"Mother, 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?" my mother squeaked, and my father's intense gaze scrutinized me.

I looked down at the floor and bit my lip. From the corner of my eye I saw my mother's pale white hand reach over and pat my knee. She held it open and I allowed myself to take it. A single tear slid down my cheek.

"Savannah honey, you didn't tell me you cared for him. You never called me to talk about him, and you didn't tell daddy. I assumed he was just a good looking guy that you brought home to show off. Sweetheart, 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 eve-for-aneve."

I thought about Daniel and his 'You know who we are and where we come from speech' and it made me so angry... the fact 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. Actually, I know you already know part of the answer... it's because of who you are."

I sighed at this, because I *did* know what he was going to say. It was because of our money, our legacy, what anyone who married me would be a part of. I'd been introduced to this at school when people had first learned who I was. The more money you had, the more people wanted to walk in your shadow.

My father repeated my thoughts almost word for word, and my mother nodded in agreement.

"But that's not all," she added, getting

up and walking towards the window as she spoke. "Honey, I don't talk about my family for a reason. I grew up very, very poor, Savannah."

"You what?" I exclaimed, shocked at her revelation.

"I grew up in a trailer, and often times didn't have enough money for food. My father was a drunk who hit my mother sometimes, and my mother was the housekeeper at a local motel." She shuddered as she looked out the window and I snuck a glance at my father to see what he was thinking. He shook his head at me, and his eyes were sad.

"I met your father when I was barely eighteen. One day he happened to come into a diner that I was lucky enough to get a job at. He was lost on his way somewhere and had just stopped to ask for directions."

"But I stayed for the company." He smiled, and my mother turned and smiled back at him.

"Yes, he stayed for the company. I gave him a piece of pie and some coffee and we talked for hours. He asked for my number when he left, but we didn't even have a phone. So he came back the next day, and the day after that."

Tears pricked my eyes as I smiled at my parents. "That's how Gage and I met."

My mother's face was a mask of understanding, and my father sighed. "I fell in love with her instantly, Savannah, and within a month we were getting married."

"Oh my WORD - *why* did you never tell me this story? That's romantic and so sweet," I complained, getting up to hug my mother.

"I'm ashamed, honey. My family didn't have a very good name in our town. When your father took me away from that, I swore I would never look back. Sweetheart, I just 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 that I really did belong 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 just want you to be happy. If you love this man, then I know I'll love him too."

"It may be too late to worry about that."

"Oh, nonsense. When you get back home to Nashville, you'll go and talk with him and make him understand how stupid your mother was. He'll forgive you."

"I do have to tell you about our discussion Friday, and you both might want to sit down. It's quite a coincidence that you met Gage, actually." My father laughed, and my mother and I sat nervously.

"What's so funny?"

"Gage isn't just a bartender, honey."

Thinking of how he also managed bars for new owners, I nodded and waited for a better explanation.

"He owns the bar you frequent in Nashville, and from what I understand he also owns two in Vegas and is in negotiations for another club in New York City."

"He owns them?"

"There's more. His family runs one of the largest entertainment companies around. Taylor Entertainment owns most of the larger clubs, casinos and bars in Australia. Gage is the sole heir to the company."

I felt light headed as I listened to my father explain it all to me. Apparently Gage had decided to tell my father who he was because Guthry Whiskey was the main distributor of whiskey to their bars. He knew there was a good chance my dad or Uncle would know who he was. That was when I recalled my Uncle's odd reaction to Gage's name at the cocktail reception, and realized that he'd almost blown Gage's cover then.

Apparently, about two years ago once Gage finished his Masters in business and marketing, he convinced his father to let him come to the U.S. to start looking at clubs to buy here. It was indeed an amazing coincidence that we met at The Garage.

"Well I'll be," muttered my mother. She looked positively shell shocked.

"When we fought last night, he seemed particularly upset about the fact that he thought I was just after a rich man. That money mattered so much to me," I recalled, and then another thought struck me. "Is *that* why he kept it a secret from me? Was he just testing me or something? Did he tell you?"

Dad shook his head. "I asked him why he was being secretive and he said he really didn't intend to be, but that you'd never asked about his job. I think perhaps if he was honest with himself he would have to admit that 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 told them as I fingered the silver cuff from the little white box. I knew I shouldn't be wearing it since he hadn't technically given it to me, but I was compelled to wear it on my skin.

"Savannah honey, that man has deep feelings for you. He made his intentions very clear with me when he was here that he was serious about you. He was just waiting for you to get over some of the demons of your past - or at least that's what he said."

"I want to go home today."

"I don't think that's a good idea,

honey. Drive home tomorrow."

"No, I don't want to wait. Dad, I *need* to go home and talk to him. He's never in the bar on Monday mornings, so I can go to his place and catch him."

My parents begged me to wait to drive home and see him the next evening instead, but I disagreed and eventually they understood. But before I could leave, there was one last thing I wanted to tell them.

Now that things were out in the open with my mother's past and Gage's family, I decided that my own secret needed to be shared.

Shocking my father into tears, I explained how I had been taking classes to obtain a double major in Art History

and Business.

"I want to be able to run GW someday. It's in my blood."

They were both taken aback and proud, and I felt horrible that I'd kept my schooling choices from them for so long. As I packed mine and Gage's bags, my mother made a quick late lunch before I got on the road. We spent the meal reconnecting and talking, and I had to admit that it was good to be a family again without all of the obligations of the past smothering me.

Around three o'clock I headed home, prepared to shamelessly beg Gage to forgive me. As I listened to the radio and snuck glances at the bracelet on my wrist, my heart was full of optimism that he would eventually come around and we could finally start building some dreams together.

Sunday - June 17, 2013 Unexpected Company

It took every ounce of my concentration to drive myself home. I called Gage twice and left voicemails telling him I wanted to talk with him, and told him again how sorry I was. When I pulled up to my house at ten o'clock that night I was utterly exhausted. Popping my trunk, I grabbed what luggage I could handle and half-dragged, half-carried the bags to the door. I left the heavier of the two at the bottom of the stairs, knowing I would need both hands to carry them up the steps.

God, I can't wait for a hot shower and a good night's sleep, I thought to myself as I tugged the keys out of my pocket and balanced my bags on my shoulders. Slipping my key into the deadbolt, I noticed that it kept spinning around, but the tumblers weren't catching to unlock. The lock must have finally broken, and for a moment I was tempted to just sit on the step and cry. Calling a locksmith so I could get into my house after a long drive was the *last* thing I wanted to do at this time of night. Dropping my toiletry bag from my shoulder, I cursed and kicked the bottom of the door to cathartically release my pent up frustration.

I twisted the key once more and then tried the handle again, instantly feeling the door swing open. Standing in the doorway was a man, and the bright light behind him obscured his face so that all I could make out was his dress clothes and the flowers he held. For a quick flash I thought it was Gage, and relief flooded through me like the banks of a swollen river breaking through a dam. I almost broke down right there...until the man spoke.

"Welcome home, Savannah," he said; his voice low like the first time I'd heard it.

My reflexes sent me moving backwards once I realized it was Ryan from The Painter's Palette. In my home. I stumbled over the bag I'd dropped and grabbed the post before I fell down the steps. "What the...?" I spluttered, and tried to detangle my feet from the straps of the bag.

"Don't be frightened. I made you dinner since I knew you would be tired after such a long trip. Come on in." He reached out and grasped my wrist tightly.

A whimper worked its way up my throat as I tried to register what was happening. I opened my mouth to scream and readied my muscles for a fight when he did something unexpected. Kicking his foot out, he swept my legs out from under me and I collapsed to the floor. His hand maintained an iron grip on my arm, and as I twisted and fell, pain ripped through my shoulder; causing me

to shout out.

The next thing I knew he was bent over me with one hand wrapped around my chin and mouth and the other yanking me roughly by the arm into the house. I fought to open my mouth to produce a scream or bite his palm, but I couldn't even get it open. His hand tasted salty with sweat when I tried to move my mouth and use my teeth.

He pulled my body over the bouquet of flowers he evidently dropped when he attacked me, and kicked the door shut behind me.

Waves of terror rushed through my veins when he tried to twist me over onto my stomach. Not willing to go down without a fight, I went over every self-defense move I could think of. I scissor-kicked my legs, but had no leverage in the position I was in. Thinking of the few times I'd seen him, I never would have thought him to be as powerful as he was.

When I wouldn't roll over to my front, he twisted my arm to the center of my back and yanked on it until I thought it would snap. I mumbled for mercy and screeched under the palm that still covered my face. Giving into the pain, my body stopped fighting long enough for him to roll me over, and he brusquely shoved my face into the floor. He mounted me, sitting on my upper thighs, and his legs pinned mine together to prevent me from kicking out again.

He grunted while he struggled with me, but he hadn't spoken since he first welcomed me home. Ryan's body leaned over mine and my arm was twisted up and between us. His hand was rough as it clamped over my mouth and he spoke menacingly into my ear.

"I'm moving my hand, but if you scream it will *not* be pleasant." His voice was low, gravelly, and he forced his words out as if it pained him to speak each word. Perhaps he was winded?

I shook my head, letting him know I understood what he said. When his hand finally peeled back from my face I took a large gulp of fresh air and gasped, "Please don't hurt me." Crying at the pain in my shoulder and the horror of what he might do to me, I moaned, "Please."

He wrenched my other arm behind my back as soon as he let go of my mouth. Pulling them together, I felt his weight lighten for a moment as he leaned to the right. Curiously, I looked to where he'd reached. Laying there were several rolls of duct tape, and I immediately went into action once I heard the scratching sound of tape being unrolled.

A ragged scream tore from my chest and I tried to forcefully buck him off of my back. He barely flinched when I tried to wriggle my way out from underneath his body, and my ears again took in the sound of more tape ripping before he yanked my head back roughly. "Ow," I cried, hot tears springing to my eyes. "Stop. NO."

"I told you to keep quiet, Savannah," he snarled; placing a strip of tape on the side of my mouth. "I would close your mouth if I were you," he warned, and I screamed at him again. He slowly pressed the tape over my lips and I closed my mouth quickly. He secured another piece of tape over the first and then let go of my hair.

Defeated for the moment, I dropped my head to the carpet and squeezed my eyes shut. I lay there and tried to take steadying breaths though my nose. Breathe. In. Out. *You can do this Savannah!* I thought to myself; trying to keep calm as I heard the tape unravel again and he began to tape my wrists together behind my back.

I took a frantic moment to think. *How do I get help? What do I do?* I suddenly recalled slipping my phone into the side cargo pocket of my shorts when I'd gotten out of the car, and thought that maybe I would be able to get a hold of it at some point.

"Let me help you up," Ryan said politely. His weight left my body and he pulled up on my arms. Slowly I tried to stand, but unfortunately without his help I couldn't maneuver. I allowed him to help me get to my knees before falling back to sit on my feet. He didn't stop me, but instead allowed me to scoot towards the wall and then into the corner. "I'm sorry if I hurt you, but it was necessary since you wouldn't stay put," he spoke again politely. Too politely. His calm demeanor and seemingly normal voice sparked a true terror in me. He wasn't crazed or worried about what was happening. He seemed confident and all too aware of his surroundings.

I mumbled curse words at him but it was like a gnat trying to hurl itself onto a Mac truck. No real damage was going to be done with my silent pleas and grunts.

He kneeled down before me in the corner. I pulled my knees up to my chest and contemplated kicking out, but I knew I wouldn't be able to get anywhere with my hands tied behind me. At this close range, I saw that his eyes were a steely grey color; the pupils so large they almost overtook the grey. His eyes fastened on me as his hand came up to smooth the hair out of my face. I winced at his action and the vileness of his touch before pulling my legs closer to my body.

"You are so beautiful," he spoke in a hushed tone. His fingers trailed across my cheek to a piece of hair that was stuck to the tape over my mouth. Grasping the stands, he tugged them free of the tape and gently brushed them back behind my ear.

I shook my head furiously, knocking it painfully against the wall in the process. I blanched at the hit, which brought a smug upturn to his lips. Suddenly his eyes narrowed and his hand shot forward, grabbing my upper arm. "Up and at 'em, now," he sang; standing and pulling me up with him. "Let's go."

He pulled me around the corner and into the living room and I tasted sour bile on its way up my throat. The room had been completely transformed. All of the pictures of my family, Sara, Candace and all of our other friends were missing, and the walls were now covered with my own drawings and art work. Some of the items had been stored in my room, and some of them were ones I hadn't seen in years. Jerking back abruptly, I shook my head. My eyes were wide with fear as I glared at him. I longed to scream at him "What the hell

are you doing? What is this?" but all I could do was silently pray.

"Yes Savannah, I stayed home and made the place look better while you went off on your little weekend trip."

Sara! my head screamed. Candace was at her family reunion this weekend, but Sara should have been home. Oh God, please let her be alright.

He'd brought two chairs into the room, along with a small table that was set up with fine dishes and candles. It looked like a romantic date for two. My stomach rolled and my legs turned to jelly as I took in the sight in silent terror.

"Oh no you don't," he snapped, wrapping his arms around me and pulling my body into close contact with his.

Immediately feeling his manhood pressing into my hip I jerked back, but the pressure of his arms on my back was too strong. His hands began to caress my back and move languorously over my body. One moved up between my shoulders and over to my neck, while the other one traveled down until he cupped my rear and pulled me tighter against him. Pinching my neck, he forced my head down on his shoulder and began to sway with me.

I heard him humming under his breath and he began to dance with me. With my face pressed to his shirt I could smell the sour scent of his sweat mixed with a heavy cologne. His lower hand traveled along my bottom and across to my hip, then along the waistband of my shorts. When his sticky fingers crept under the hem of my shirt and the damp touch of his fingers connected with my skin, I went mad.

Instinctively I knew I couldn't let him touch me. I would *not* let him molest me or worse, rape me. I decided to act. Bracing myself, I lifted my knee quickly; hitting Ryan square in the inner thigh and barely missing my target. Luckily the hit was still hard enough to cause him to release me for a moment, and I kicked furiously at his shin.

"Hmph," he groaned, and I kicked at him again. "Damn it," he swore, letting me go as he grabbed his leg. Taking advantage of his preoccupation, I turned towards the front door to escape. Ryan's angry howls filled the room and he reached out and grasped the hands still secured behind my back. He dove for my body and I slammed forcefully onto the ground, my right shoulder taking the brunt of the fall.

For a moment my vision was rimmed in black clouds and stars flashed behind my lids. Shaking them away, I kicked my legs out randomly, aiming for anything in sight. My shoe hit the leg of the table that had been set up for our macabre date, and the sound of glasses and dishes rattling and falling over filled my ears.

"Stop it! You're ruining our date." Ryan's voice was now high pitched and whiny, and he reminded me of an impetuous eight year old throwing a temper tantrum.

Seizing my ankle, he pulled me towards him and I twisted to stay on my side. With my left leg free, I waited until I was close enough and struck out; catching Ryan directly in the jaw. A horrifying crunch sounded and 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 for the moment.

Shakily, I pulled my legs underneath me and leveraged myself up and against the couch to pull myself into a standing position. I shuffled quickly to the front door, only to find that he'd installed a new dead bolt lock that I wouldn't be able to undo without using my hands.

I jerked and twitched my wrists every which way, trying to free them. Although the tape loosened, they were still wrapped too tightly for me to get loose. Making a hasty decision, I ran back to my bedroom, using the wall to keep myself upright. My door was open so I quickly closed it and pressed the little button lock, even though I knew it wouldn't hold anyone for very long.

My phone. I needed to somehow get the phone out of my pocket without using hands. Searching the room frantically, I quickly moved to my bedside table. Praying that it would work, I leaned against the table and tried to use it to push my phone up and out of my pocket. The corner of the wood dug harshly into my thigh as I lowered myself and tried to get leverage under the phone. Fortunately my khaki shorts were pretty loose and the pockets were open. Panting as I tried to work both the pocket from my phone and my hands from their ties, I heard Ryan yell from the front room.

"SAVANNAH!"

Feeling the adrenaline starting to pump through my body faster and faster, my eyes flew around the room wildly, looking for anything to use to free myself - when finally it dawned on me. I kicked my foot up on my bed and pulled my pillows onto the floor before climbing onto the bed awkwardly; bracing myself for the pain as I leaned over the edge to make myself upside down. Without arms to catch myself, my head slammed into the floor and the pillows I'd kicked down.

I jiggled my hips and miraculously felt my phone as it started to move toward the outside of my pocket. The house sounded eerily quiet considering I knew Ryan was still out there, and the knowledge forced me to work as quickly as I could to get the phone to slip out. Finally, after kicking my feet into the air several times, I was vertical enough to dislodge the phone. It fell to the floor by my head and I folded my body down to

fall from the bed.

Blinking back the tears that keep obscuring my vision, I rolled onto my knees and tried to figure out how to dial my phone. There was only one way I could think of, and that meant I needed to somehow get it into my hands. I turned with difficulty and stared over my shoulder as my arms and hands tried to reach for the phone futilely.

An ominous thump on the wall sounded and my mind began to chant.

Please, please help me. Let me get this. God help me, I repeated over and over.

When my hands finally grasped the phone, I wanted to shout with joy. Thankful that my heavy dresser was located horizontally from my door, I quickly scooted to it and leaned against it; bracing my legs against the door to help hold Ryan out if he tried to break it down.

My tingling, numb fingers fumbled with the phone while I tried to blindly figure out which end was up. Getting it to the correct position, I forced myself to breathe slowly and think. I couldn't see the phone, so I needed to go from memory. I hit the side power switch with my thumb and then slid a finger across the unlock key. Thank the Lord I didn't have an access code on my phone, or I knew I would've been out of luck. The slight vibration of the phone silently let me know it was unlocked.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," sang Ryan maniacally. His voice was again playful and high pitched, and he tapped menacingly on the wall.

As I sat with my shoulder blades braced on my dresser and my feet planted wide apart against the door, I saw the knob twist slowly before it jiggled back and forth. Ryan rammed into the door three times and then messed with the knob again, and I knew it was only a matter of time before he got into the room.

Ryan forcefully slammed his body again and my legs trembled from the power - but mercifully the door didn't budge. Another heavy hit sounded and he screamed, "Just *wait* until I get my hands on you!"

Ryan was cursing and screaming on the other side of the wall and I heard him banging into things as he ran down the hall. A moment later he was back, and a solid object slammed into the wood; cracking it.

Holding the phone awkwardly, I tried to think of how I could dial nine-oneone...and then I realized I had no idea how to make sure I was even hitting the right keys. So I did the one thing I knew I could do from memory. I hit the shortcut icon on the top left corner - the fast dial for Gage.

As I tapped the button, Ryan yelled, "Open the door," while slamming whatever object he had into the door over and over.

Fear that he would get in and discover the phone fueled me to drop it, and I sat up; pushing it under my dresser and being careful not to touch the screen and end the call.

Another slam and suddenly another crack splintered across my door. Worried that I was about to be hit with the breaking debris, I scooted away as he slammed into it again and the lock gave way. Ryan kicked his way into my room, and seeing me cowering on the floor, immediately dropped the chair from the dining room and stared at me with a look of pure hatred.

"You *bitch!*" He was covered in sweat and his face was beet red. His

jaw was discolored and I saw blood trickling down the side of it. Somehow my shoe must have cut him pretty badly to cause that.

"All I wanted was a *date*. I just wanted you to get to know me," he wailed, and then he stepped in and clutched me by the shoulders to lift me up.

"Are you scared, Savannah?" he asked ghoulishly. He shook my shoulders; snapping my head back painfully before reaching across his chest and back-handing me.

Throwing me on the bed, he screeched, "I was going to treat you special. But now I'm going to treat you the way you *ought* to be treated."

As he climbed onto the bed beside me, I closed my eyes for a moment and visualized Gage. I went back to the moment when we'd danced in the rain and he had hummed the lyrics to 'Hey Pretty Girl'...when he held me and all seemed perfectly right in my world.

There was no doubt in my mind that Ryan was going to kill me now, and I prayed that the call to Gage hadn't gone through. I didn't want him to walk into my house and find me dead.

Fire was spreading though my cheek where Ryan hit me, but it didn't compare to the ice cold terror that ran through my veins when he reached behind his back and pulled out a coiled length of rope.

Sunday - June 17, 2013 The Stuff of Nightmares

Any energy left in me surged once I saw the rope in his hands. I tried to buck myself away from him, but his free hand grabbed a hold of my waist and his fingers dug painfully into my side.

"It'll hurt a lot less if you just let me have my fun, sweetheart."

The use of the endearment 'sweetheart' coming from his mouth sounded vile, and I screamed and grunted under the bindings of the tape over my mouth.

He dropped the rope next to me and for a moment I wondered if he changed his mind. Keeping his hand digging into my side, he leaned over and reached into my nightstand drawer to pull out a syringe.

I whimpered as I watched him bite the cap off the needle. Clearly this was a premeditated event. He had obviously set things up to drug me. Before I could create a new plan, he jabbed it into my thigh and sank the plunger; emptying the entire contents of the syringe into my body.

The drug burned as it spread through my veins like liquid fire. Numbness followed almost immediately afterwards, and I cringed when I started to feel my leg muscles unclench and relax.

Slowly, as if in a dream, he climbed

off of me and started to tie the rope around my ankles. It took me a few moments to realize he was actually holding more than one piece of rope. He moved swiftly from one leg to the other, tying them securely to the bed frame.

I lay there with my arms trapped painfully behind my back, a swath of unyielding tape across my mouth, and my legs tied down to the bottom corners of the bed. Whatever drug he injected me with was beginning to work its way into my brain, and when I looked at Ryan as he climbed back on top of the bed and sat across my hips, I saw two of him.

His face blurred into two forms and then blended back into one. He twisted his fist into the shirt across my chest and balled it up as he roughly pulled me into a sitting position.

I flopped forward involuntarily, like I was paralyzed. I couldn't move my arms anymore, either from the drugs or from the numbing pain of the constraints. Once my upper body was parallel to his, I tried to hold my head up as steadily as I could.

Leaning forward, he placed a kiss across 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 lovingly, like he was speaking sweet nothings to his lover.

My head flopped forward and my chin rested on my chest as he pulled me

against his body and pulled something from his back pocket. A flash of something silver pulled my gaze to his hand, where I saw a gleaming pocket knife.

For one clarifying moment, I thought this was all about to end and prepared myself to feel the cold steel slice into my flesh. However all I felt was the jerk of Ryan's body as he leaned down and began to saw the tape from my wrists. The tip of the knife sliced my hand, but my mind was so far gone it barely registered.

Done cutting the tape, he dropped me unceremoniously and I fell back to the mattress; my arms lying out to the sides like I was about to make a macabre snow angel.

I closed my eyes when he took the knife to the front of my shirt. The ripping sounds of the cotton were all I could hear as pulsing blood rushed through my ears. My palm was wet and sticky, and I slowly tilted my head to the right to see what I was touching.

My hand was lying in a puddle of blood. My blood. I saw the rich, thick blood as it covered my hand and dripped from the fingertips that were hanging over the edge of the bed.

I watched Ryan pull my shirt away from my chest to reveal my bra. His eyes, all four of them, were large and full of unsated lust.

Blood lust or sexual lust, I wasn't

even sure anymore.

His fingertips ran across the tops of my breasts, and he lowered his knife to run it across my skin. I observed him detachedly as if I was just watching a movie. I felt something grazing my skin, but I didn't think it was because of him. I knew he was there, and yet I *didn't* know he was there.

I heard a moan come from my own throat when the sudden, sharp sting of his knife cut into the top of my chest. Forcing my eyes to look, I watched as red droplets of blood appeared in a line 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.

Suddenly there was a sinister urgency to his movements, and he leaned down to lick the tops of my breasts. His knife went under the center of my bra and I felt pressure as he tugged it up with the blade. The sharp edge cut through the thin material quickly and the lace dropped to my sides, leaving me exposed to the madman's nightmarish eyes.

His voice filled my head and words swam around noiselessly, but I could no longer discern what he was saying. It was like my soul had been detached and was no longer in my own body. The drug he'd injected me with didn't stop its slow burn through my veins, and as my lids began to droop closed, I prayed to God for mercy and release from this abhorrent nightmare.

Excruciating pain and pressure snapped like lightening across my face; forcing my eyes open.

"Open your eyes," Ryan thundered; slapping my face again.

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.

Ryan's mouth forced mine to open, and as he explored with his tongue I felt his disgusting, clammy hands wandering over my bloodied chest.

Through my hazy senses I heard the squeal of tires on my street outside, and

couldn't help but wonder how many people were going about their mundane evenings while this horror was taking place in my simple little home.

Ryan moved from my lips; his mouth grazing my chin and then working their way down my neck. No longer rendered speechless, I began to sob. 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. The sound of my zipper being lowered was suddenly interrupted by banging on the front door.

"Savannah?" yelled the achingly sweet voice I prayed I would get to hear again. "*SAVY*!"

Ryan jerked up and listened for a moment. He didn't know that I'd been able to place a call to Gage. He didn't know that Gage was here to rescue me. He sat ready, tightly gripping the pocket knife in his hand.

When a loud noise sounded against the front entrance, he jumped off of me and looked out the window. To my relief I could hear the exquisite sound of sirens off in the distance.

The sirens increased in their intensity and the slamming at the entrance of my house continued, causing Ryan to become more crazed. Loosening the knots at my ankles, he pulled me from the bed and dragged me into my walk-in closet; brutally dumping me on the floor.

The closet was dark. In just a few seconds he was back and he quickly shut the door. His hands ran up my legs and ripped off my shorts before I heard the sound of his own pants being lowered. I braced myself for the moment when this monster would rape me. For a moment I lay there half naked on the floor, and then he was over me and his knife was pressed threateningly to the pulse at my throat

A loud, booming crash echoed through the house and I heard the shouts

of other people, although they sounded like they were *around* my home and not *in* it.

Ryan growled in anger when a crash sounded closer to my bedroom. He must have tried to block my door, because it was at that moment I could tell that someone had finally entered my room. Pulling whatever life was left in me, I *screamed*.

"No!" he hissed, and as the door to the closet jerked open, Ryan twisted and I felt the bite of his knife slice across my shoulder.

A growl like none other sounded and suddenly Ryan was pulled from the closet, his knife making a metallic thud next to my head where he'd dropped it. "You son of..." Gage was there, and I heard the solid thud of fists making their mark.

I saw blue lights swirling across the ceiling in my bedroom, and I was finally secure in the notion that I would be okay. I tried to pull myself up, but then realized that my muscles still weren't cooperating.

And then I saw his face. Gage threw himself down on the floor next to me, his voice ragged as he yelled, "Savy, baby? Oh my God, are you okay?"

Pulling me across his lap and into his arms, I heard the shattering anguish in his voice as he grabbed something and wrapped it protectively around me.

"MEDIC!" he yelled, while I

continued to lay there numbly in shock. "I need a damn medic."

Amid the shouts of the people who had entered my house and room, I began to calmly float away. Someone came and gently removed me from Gage's arms. The light in my closet was flicked on, and the blood and damage was there for everyone to see.

I slowly opened my eyes as Gage released me into someone else's care. Using every ounce of life left in me, I pinned my eyes on his as my hand slipped through his fingers and fell to the side; blood slowly dripping from the tips.

Then my eyes closed and I slipped away into nothingness.

Monday - June 17, 2013 Recovery

The click of a door pulled me from a deep sleep and I tried to pry my eyes open slowly. I could tell I was lying in a twin bed, propped up slightly, and the lights were turned down low. My head rolled to the left and I spotted an IV machine, along with some sort of monitor. My eyes followed the IV tube down and into my arm.

I noticed the bandages wrapping my wrist and hand for the first time, and wiggled my fingers experimentally. Rolling my head back to the right, I saw through the cracks in the blinds that the sky had yet to turn light. A slight movement caught my attention and pulled my gaze from the window to the edge of my bed, where I found a figure sitting in the chair beside me. His upper body was slumped across the mattress, and I had a moment of confusion before I realized who it was. Gage.

His beautiful dark head was resting on one arm, while his other arm was stretched out and holding my hand. I don't know how I'd initially missed the feel of his hand, because now that I saw it I could feel the reassuring warmth radiating up my fingers and into my arm.

The strong rhythm of his breath as it moved in and out testified that he was truly sound asleep. For a moment I just lay there quietly, drowsily watching his chest rise and fall, and then everything came crashing down on me and I gasped for air.

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 feel of the scratchy blanket they used to cover my exposed and battered body.

Before that, the sound of *his* voice whispering in my ear. Crazed and maddened. Telling me to beg, whining that he'd only wanted a date. The feel of his depraved mouth on my lips, on my skin...his cold fingers groping my body.

My limbs began to shake uncontrollably. My shoulders crumbled in and my head hung low until I was wrapped into a cocoon of my own making. I raised my arm with the bandages and IV up to cover my mouth to keep from waking Gage. Sobs racked my body, and in mere moments I choked on one so loudly that it sounded like a scream had been ripped from my chest.

Gage popped up immediately and his hand clasped mine tightly. His free arm scrubbed over his face and hair. "Savannah?" He spoke softly, like he was trying to comfort a wild deer.

It took just a moment for wakefulness to fully hit him and he leaned toward me; crouching beside the bed.

"It's okay, baby. Do you need the nurse, Savy? You're alright," he soothed, running his hand up and down my arm while I cried louder and louder.

I couldn't speak as I laid there with my eyes streaming with tears. I wanted him to hold me and make the pain go away, but I couldn't seem to force anything coherent out.

"I'm going to get the nurse."

I gripped his hand and shook my head slowly. The dim lighting from a night light in the room cast shadows over his face, and I couldn't imagine how dark my own face must look to him. He leaned in to get a closer look at me.

His voice pleaded with me, heartbreakingly deep and thick from sleep or maybe emotion, I couldn't tell. "Savy, what can I do for you? Tell me, please?" "Stay," I managed between bouts of tears, and then, "Hold." The words came out like a toddler begging for treats, but he still understood them.

Slipping onto the narrow bed beside me, he wrapped me up in his arms and pressed my cheek to his chest. I continued to wail huge, unending torrents of tears that streamed relentlessly down my face and soaked his shirt. His hand ran softly and reassuringly through my hair, stroking it away from my wet face.

Under my face I felt his own chest shaking, and the hand that held my face trembled as his fingers tenderly rubbed my tears away. I wanted to try and fix whatever was hurting him, but I didn't know how. My own pain was magnified tenfold at knowing he was hurting too, and I closed my eyes to block out the image of horror I'd seen on his face when he found me in that closet. I laid in his arms and cried until I exhausted myself; finally falling into a dreamless sleep.

When next I awoke, I found myself still wrapped securely in Gage's arms. Sometime in the night he had twisted his body so he was lying on the bed and I was angled over his chest. I opened my eyes carefully and looked up at his somber face as he lay there. He stared out the window as sunlight started to peek through. His jaw was clenched tight, and his muscles flinched as he

swallowed. I noted that his eyes looked tired and puffy. There was also a suspicious sheen on his cheek, and I watched as he lifted his hand to rub both of his eyes before taking a deep breath.

"I didn't think I was going to make it in time," he offered quietly. His arms tightened around me and his voice caught as he spoke again. "I didn't think I would make it, Savy. I was more scared than I've ever been in my life."

"I'm okay." I said it softly, halfheartedly, because I wasn't sure how I was at the moment, but then I thought of something else. Clearing my dry throat, I spoke as clearly as I could manage, trying to ease his pain. "Gage. You *did* make it. You made it, and you saved me," I finished on a whisper, and mumbled it again as the tears came back. "You saved me."

The nurse who came in to check on me a little after nine a.m. smiled at Gage and I when she walked in and saw us huddled together on the small bed.

"Savannah, honey, I need to check your vitals and then breakfast should be coming around."

I nodded in acquiescence and let Gage 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 slightly, looking out.

"I need to check your wounds now,"

she said. For a moment I wondered why she said it in that manner, but when Gage spoke up I understood.

"I'll wait outside." He nodded and then started to leave.

"No," I insisted, and held my hand out to him. "You can stay. He can stay - it's alright."

She smiled softly and began to unbutton the snaps on the front of the gown I was wearing. I closed my eyes and held my right hand out, sighing in relief when Gage took hold of it.

She pulled the gown as far down as she could without exposing me to Gage. It wasn't like he hadn't seen it before, but of course she didn't know that.

"The cut on your chest is just a

surface wound. There was one spot where it went in a little deeper, but it was so small that a butterfly Band-Aid was all that was needed for that." She spoke clinically now, with a soft pleasant voice. Her fingers probed the area around the bandage and then moved to my shoulder.

"This one was much deeper and *did* require stitches. It looks good, though - no excess bleeding. Your wrist was the worst one 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 asked as she picked up my chart and made a few notes.

"I was injected with something..." I whispered; trailing off.

Gage let go of my hand and stalked back over to the window. His back was stiff and his hand lifted to his neck; rubbing it.

The nurse watched him for a moment and then smiled reassuringly at me. "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 been administering some painkillers through there as well."

I shook my head numbly. A few minutes later she left the room, assuring me that breakfast would be there 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 was thick with tension as I tried to grapple with what had happened. I lifted my hand into my lap and stared down at the gauze wrapping it.

"He was about to rape you, Savannah." His somber voice pulled me from my thoughts. "When I opened that closet door...damn it. I will *never* get that picture out of my head," he finished with a strangled cry; his hand balling into a fist. There was so much we still needed to discuss, but that moment in the closet wasn't one I was strong enough for yet. Instead, I broached another subject that mattered to me.

"Sit down and talk with me about Charleston...please, Gage."

"I can't talk about that right now. It doesn't matter anymore."

"It matters to me..." I started to say, when there was a soft knock at the door.

Sara stuck her head in the room; her face pale as she hurried into the room.

"Hey, how are you feeling honey?" she sing-songed, her voice cracking a little as she spoke. Her eyes were swimming in unshed tears and I held out my uninjured hand to her. "I'm sorry I wasn't there," she apologized, propping on the side of the bed and reaching across me to hold my hand. "You're going to be alright, though."

"Yes, I will be," I agreed, letting her ramble on about how sorry she was.

I didn't tell her that if she'd actually been home, I was pretty sure she would be dead.

After that my room became Grand Central Station as my doctor, the police, Candace, Riley, Tony and Chris all stopped by. Gage silently sat in the corner of the room as my friends huddled around the bed hugging me and talking. When the officers came to take my statement, they kicked everyone out and asked question after question; making me relive the whole event over. Once I was finished, they called Gage back into the room to share some information with us both.

There was a possibility that Ryan could actually press charges against Gage for the beating he'd given him, but they assured us that it wouldn't stick in a court case.

As they sat there and described who Ryan really was, I was shocked. Gage stood by my side and held my hand as the tears started to run down my cheeks again. Apparently Ryan had been in trouble with the law once previously for bothering a young woman, but the girl moved away and charges were never brought against him.

"It appears that he's been obsessed with you for a while, Ms. Guthry. We don't know right now what made him snap, but after looking at all of the things that have happened in the past few weeks with your house and Mr. Taylor's vehicle, it's pretty clear that Ryan was behind everything," the young officer explained. He was the same officer who'd worked with us after Gage's car vandalism.

All of that was something I could process, but it was what he revealed next that was the most astounding. They were currently checking DNA samples, and all signs were pointing towards Ryan being Jax's attacker.

As the officer was about to leave, the door flew open and my parents raced into the room.

"Momma, Daddy? How did you know?" I barely got the sentence out before I broke down in tearful fits again. My mother dropped her purse and rushed to my side; pulling me securely against her chest. My head was turned towards Gage and I watched as he pulled away.

I heard my father introduce himself to the officer, and the officer gave him his information and said they would talk later. The door to the room clicked shut and my father came into view on the opposite side of the bed from my mother. He leaned over me and kissed the top of my head.

They were both speaking to me over my weeping, but I wasn't able to register a word. It was the lonely, pained face of Gage that was stuck in my head. He stood back from the bed by the window and reticently watched as my parents hugged and cried with me.

Through my tears I saw him turn and wipe his eyes, and that's when my heart broke.

He stepped out of my vision then, and I heard his voice speak quietly, "I'll leave you three alone."

My mother immediately pulled away from me and I watched helplessly as she grabbed his arm and turned him towards her. "Thank you Gage, for saving my daughter." She pulled him to her and hugged him tightly. "But don't you *dare* leave this room."

A few hours later I awoke to a muted conversation between Gage and my father. I listened intently as Gage explained to my father 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, Gage."

"Don't thank me," he said in a voice laced with disgust. "If I'd just 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*."

There was silence for a moment, and 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 that closet - in that position with that damn maniac...God, I just 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 I will forever be indebted to you for saving Savannah."

I slowly turned my head to see my father with his arms around a crying Gage. After a few moments, Gage sat back and scrubbed the tears from his eyes; sighing deeply.

"Do you love her?"

I closed my eyes when I saw Gage pulling back from my father's embrace, and in that moment I wished I could see him. *Oh God, please say yes. Please say yes,* I chanted in my head.

"Sir, I'm madly in love with your daughter," he said solemnly, and I choked back a reply. "I've never been surer of anything in my life than I am of what I feel for Savannah. I don't know how it happened - she walked into my bar and I was in love."

"Then that's all that matters to me. What happened in Charleston doesn't matter. You love her." "And I didn't trust her," he hinted angrily. "How can she forgive me for all of this when I didn't even *trust* her?"

Swallowing back the tears wanting to break through, I opened my eyes. As firmly and as strong as I could make my voice, I spoke. "I forgive you because I love you."

Gage looked up. "Savannah?"

"I love you, Gage. I would forgive you of anything."

He jumped from my father's side and threw himself at me, sitting on the edge of the bed and pulling me into his arms.

"You love me? After how I walked away from you?"

"You were hurt, Gage. I didn't think it was possible to find love so quickly, and for it to be *real*. But from the moment I met you, I couldn't get you off of my mind. I fell for your superpowers the first time you called me 'sweetheart'."

"Oh my God, baby - I love you too. I love you so damn much, and I almost didn't get the chance to tell you."

"But you are now, and that's all that matters...and I'm never letting you go again."

"Don't worry, sweetheart. I don't plan to ever leave your side again."

He pulled my face to his and kissed me tenderly. It was a kiss that tasted of salt from both of our tears. It was a kiss of forgiveness. It was a kiss from my Aussie superman that was full of forever.

It was a kiss that was meant to build dreams.

THE END - For Now

Coming in 2014, follow Gage from Australia, to Vegas, to Nashville and see not only his side of the story, but the rest of theirs as well.

* * *

Tired of indulging in the rich playboy life, Gage Taylor packed his bags and headed to Las Vegas, Nevada to expand his family's legacy.

A chance encounter in Vegas led him to a small college bar in Nashville, Tennessee where he unexpectedly met his match with Savannah Guthry. Join Gage and Savannah while they pick up the pieces after her horrifying attack, and work on building their happily ever after.

In Acknowledgment

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 the sappy moment. ;)

God blessed me with am amazing support system in my fabulous husband and three kids. You guys allow, and encourage, me to follow my dreams everyday. 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.

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I want to give one last special shout out to Janet Wallace, the founder of UTopYA Con. Janet, you invited me to moderate a panel at UTopYA 2013 and I was honored. You've invited me back for 2014, which means I did something right, and I'm still honored! Your vision to 'lift as you climb' is my motto this year and I am so grateful for your love and support of Indie writers. UTopYA gave me the opportunity to learn from so many amazing people and to meet, and fangirl, over even more. Last Call takes place in Nashville as a tribute to my first conference as an author. Thank you! As I'm sure you noticed as you read, music plays a huge part in Last Call. Here is the play list I listened to while writing and where the songs fit in... Find the list on Spotify, just search: Last Call Playlist - NA Rom/Susp or Michele Gano Miller

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 Word 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 and other things 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

About the Author

Having grown up in both the cold, quiet town of Topsham, Maine and the steamy, southern hospitality of Mobile, Alabama, Michele is something of a enigma. She is an avid Yankees fan, loves New England, being outdoors and misses snow. However she thinks southern boys are hotter, Alabama football is the only REAL football out there and sweet tea is the best thing this side of heaven and her children's laughter!

Her family, an amazing husband and three awesome kids, have planted their roots in the middle of Michele's two childhood homes in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Michele is the author of the Amazon bestselling Coming of Age Fantasy-Never Let You Fall, The Prophecy of Tyalbrook Series.

She is currently working on Never Let You Go, the second book in The Prophecy of Tyalbrook Series.

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Website: http://michelegmiller.blogspot.c

Email:

authormichelegmiller@gmail.com Facebook: <u>https://www.facebook.com/A</u> Twitter: <u>https://twitter.com/chelemybelle</u> Pinterest: <u>http://pinterest.com/chelemybe</u>