

**Your Book Title**

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Book Title

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This work of fiction resembles a fantasy world. All events taking place are a result of a roleplay amongst all parties and all parties are fully consenting adults.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Lovie, I know Facebook Slut is your thing, but I won't ever forget your words of encouragement and how you got me out of bad place when you said "Jae, I'm proud of you, I'm a fan." You have no idea how close I was to deleting the entire story and say, "Fuck it!"

To the Grand-Bay Secondary School class of 1993, You guys are the best. When I want to take a break our WhatsApp group is the first place I think of going.

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# Introduction



**T**he faint scent of sweet cherry blossoms swirls on the wind. My lungs expand as I deeply inhale. I appreciate the crisp, fresh air and a smile spreads across my lips with a single thought: Spring.

Vibrant purples and yellows sway in a blur around me. It takes effort to focus on the lovely flowers dancing in the cool breeze. Yet I am drawn to the man in the distance. I walk toward him anticipating—I don't know what. I keep my arms crossed firmly in front of my chest as if he'd be able to see how hard my heart is pounding otherwise.

I look straight ahead but still feel the need to avoid his piercing gaze. My eyes follow a puff of white floating above the ocean of blue before me. The fluffiness of the cloud reminds me of the neon cotton candy my dad always used to get my sister and I when our family would drive far out of the city to the marvelous, mysterious carnival. I was a kid then. Everything was so simple. It seems like a lifetime ago.

The same tiny cloud that brought on such nostalgia blots out the sun for an instant. It's quick, but just long enough for darkness to fall and cause me to stop. I'd take anything as a possible sign from the

universe not to do this. This cloud could be an omen. This could be a terrible mistake.

My body urges me to turn right around. My legs beg me to run back the other way, hop in my car, and drive away without looking back. But there's something else inside me, too. Something stronger that wills my feet to start moving again. Shakily, wearily they continue in the direction of the man who loves me.

Why am I even here? Why did I come? I'm not sure whether I know the answer or just don't want to admit that I do. Thoughts, fears, and worst-case scenarios race through my mind so quickly I can hardly separate them. One thought running over another. Chaotic pulling and pushing away. The closer I get, the heavier my limbs become and the faster each breath comes. I feel as though I'm dragging leaden limbs at this point—on the verge of spewing this morning's breakfast. Just when it seems like it's all going to be too much to handle, I finally catch the look in his eyes.

One look is all it takes. Instantly the weight lifts off my body. Each step comes much easier now, moving my body faster towards him. His chocolate stare melts me, and his charming, crooked smile turns all the fear dwelling in my stomach into pure giddiness. What had I been so afraid of in the first place? What was so wrong about seeing him? If he can make me feel so at peace without uttering a single word, what's the worst that could possibly happen?

He's just a few steps away now. The cologne I bought him for his birthday tickles my nostrils. Jubilant butterflies rise up inside of me. I



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see the hopeful look in his eyes and it hits me. This is why I was afraid. This is why it's a mistake.

He makes me feel more alive than I ever imagined possible. He makes me feel things that scare the hell out of me. Fear has always won out over love. But he thinks he can beat it. I just don't know if I really want him to.

“Marcus...”



# Chapter 1



““**Y**ou amaze me...” Marcus says just above a whisper in that breathy way he always speaks with when he wants me. With one big step, he’s closed the gap between us and we’re face to face. I inhale sharply— taking him in completely. The jet-black t-shirt hugs his muscles in a way that makes something inside my stomach flip. His hair blows in dark tousles that nearly match the color of his shirt perfectly. The dark blue jeans sit on his hips but fit too loosely to see the sculpted legs I know so well. It takes everything in me not to look at his face.

“I’m really glad you came,” he breathes in my ear, “I wasn’t sure that you would.” I force myself to take a step back from him, knowing I’d let myself fall into him otherwise. Not being able to avoid it any longer, our eyes meet. His stare is intense and soft at the same time— making my legs go numb beneath my body. I don’t know how I’m still standing. How does he do this to me?

My tongue sticks to the roof of my dry mouth, for a second, before I’m able to respond coolly, “You said it was urgent. Of course, I came.” I hope my flippant act holds up. It takes an incredible amount of effort

to keep my voice calm and even. I'd be helpless if he had any idea how flustered he makes me. "What's so urgent I had to come all the way out here, Marcus?"

He takes a second to study my face before responding—probably trying to figure out whether my nonchalant attitude is an act. I must be doing a good job because he shifts his weight and stands up straighter before responding, "I only said that because I know you too well, Savannah."

His words sound confident, but he continues to look for signs of emotion as he reads my face and body language. The way he speaks and the way his eyes look me up and down so longingly is almost too much to bear. Electrifying chills roll up my spine from my lower back to the base of my skull and I can't hold back the shudder. I count back the weeks since we've been alone together like this and it almost seems completely justifiable to let my body snuggle into his chiseled chest. Oh, how my body desperately yearns for his embrace. A mellow breeze wafts the intoxicating scent of the spiced wood cologne that drifts across my face. It's all I can do not to leap into his arms right here, right now.

"If I hadn't told you it was urgent, well... You probably wouldn't be here right now," Marcus continues to confess, his confidence clearly fading as he places a large, trembling hand on my arm. My insides are liquefied at his touch.

He's only half right. I'd have come regardless. But if he hadn't made it seem emergent, I might have made him wait a few days before giving in— knowing what I would feel at the sight of him.

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The warmth of his hand on my skin softens me and I whisper against the breeze, “You didn’t have to lie to get me here. I would have come either way.” If only he knew what so much time without seeing or touching him had done to my sanity. It was driving me crazy not being with him every minute of every day—not sleeping by him every night. Thinking about how hard these weeks have been, only reminds me how much I would be willing to give this man and it frightens me, right down to my very core.

Marcus can see that I’ve let my guard down a bit and moves in closer. His thick tongue traces his lower lip, a smirk following close behind. “I’d never lie to you without good reason,” he assures me sweetly.

This man, Marcus McKinney, has absolutely no idea the unbelievable effect he’s had on my heart, my soul. He’s oblivious to the countless laps he’s run through my mind. He doesn’t know how deeply my body longs to feel his. And there’s no way in hell I can ever let him know.

I take a piece of my bronze hair that’s fallen out of place and tuck it behind my ear. I’ve always thought my off-color hair was flat and totally incapable of doing what I want it to, but Marcus always adored it. He would always say it felt like satin when he’d lovingly stroke my head as we snuggled on the couch. Even now I can feel his delicate stare as he watches my failed attempt at keeping it together.

It’s clear Marcus is struggling to contain himself just as much as I am. He closes the remaining space between us and pulls me into him. I can’t catch my breath as he holds me firmly around the waist and

rests his forehead against mine. He can't hold his emotions any longer and floods me with words.

"I've missed you so much, Savannah. I need you to understand that...I love you. I'm so in love with you, baby. We can make it work. You just need to meet me halfway. That's all I need. Can you do that for me? Can we do this? Please...?" Marcus doesn't hold anything back. But I can't do the same.

I can feel every muscle contracting and expanding in my aching heart—every slow, slow beat. Chilly spring air fills my lungs and escapes my lips in long, shaky breaths. Beads of anxious sweat erupt across my palms despite the low temperature. Looking directly into his eyes, I can see that Marcus really means every word he says...and nothing has ever scared me more in my entire life.

Without my willing them to, my legs clumsily step back, and I mutter the only words I can muster, "I-I can't..."

Before I can even think twice about what I've just done, I'm sprinting as quickly as I can towards my car. My mind is blank as I shift the car into drive and press my foot on the gas pedal all the way to the floor. I have to get away. I need to get as far away as possible from this man who only wants to love me. I drive without really knowing where I'm going. I signal to switch lanes, I stop at the lights, and I keep my eyes glued to the road ahead of me. All the while, too afraid to let myself think.

Fiery oranges, deep purples, and bright pinks start to creep across the sky making me realize it's about time I figure out where the hell I'm going. With the decision to just head home comes the flood of

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thoughts I'd been so desperately trying to avoid. I think, "I love him. He loves me. We want to be together. So why have I spent at least two hours and nearly half a tank of gas driving around aimlessly when I could be in this man's arms? I know that's what I really want. I want this love and all this passion. I want to wake up seeing his rugged face that is so peaceful as he sleeps. I desperately want that every morning I have left in this world. I want it all. I'm just so afraid..."

Even with such a preoccupied mind, I find myself pulling into my driveway only to realize this is the last place I want to be—all alone. I ignore the hot, salty tears running down my face as I go around my cold, empty house packing up a bag. I jam a few sets of clothes, a toothbrush, and some makeup all together and jog right back out to my car in less than five minutes.

I don't care at all how lame it is, I'm going to my parents' house where I will not only be able to really clear my mind, but also get some TLC from the folks. If nothing else, a trip into the city would be an excellent distraction from my crumbling love life. Just when the thought of getting away from it all starts to sink in and relax me a bit, I realize Marcus isn't the only one I would be leaving behind.

I ask Siri to start a new group message with my two closest friends, Anna and Julie, "Headed to the city to visit my parents. Not sure how long I'll be. Will call when I get there. All my love to the kiddos!"

I've known both Anna and Julie since college, just like Marcus. Anna is more soft-spoken and gentle-mannered. Short, blonde hair frames her small, round face. Thin framed glasses sit on her long, slender nose. It almost gives her a bird-like appearance. Much like her

facial features, her body is tall and lean. Overall, she looks like she could be on the cover of *Vogue*—very “runway” as Julie likes to call her.

She graduated with her Master’s in Psychology and now has her own practice. She’s also currently separated from her football coach husband, Victor. Giving up their two kids every other weekend is not easy for her. She’s not crazy about his questionable apartment. We can all see the toll it’s taking on her, but she’s trying too hard to be strong to let anyone help.

Julie, on the other hand, is a spunky public relations specialist currently on maternity leave. Only about a month ago, she had her first baby, a little girl named Grace. She insists it’s not going to slow her down or her career. Thankfully, her husband, Travis, is fully supportive of whatever path she wants to take—even offering to take time off from his job as an architect to care for Grace if need be.

Although you might not guess it from looking at her, Julie is a force to be reckoned with. She’s never let her small stature give anyone the impression that she’s demure. She’s got strong, striking features and smooth olive skin with vivacious waves of raven hair I’ve always envied. Her eyes are dark and can be incredibly intimidating. Despite all that, she’s the most fun-loving person I’ve ever known.

Both women have always supported me through my ups and downs with Marcus. They might not always agree with me or my actions, but their love and backing have never wavered. Plus, since they’ve known Marcus as long as I have, they’ve gotten to be good



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friends with him, too. If anyone knows us as individuals as well as a couple, it's these two.

I hope my message sounds as nonchalant as I intended despite the astounding amount of tension creeping up between my shoulder blades. I know the girls won't hound me about taking off or anything, but it's very much like them to stop by unannounced and I wouldn't want them to worry about my absence.

Before I can put down my new iPhone, a reply pops up on my screen. It's from Julie. I ask Siri to read it to me as I keep an eye out for the correct exit and it reads, "Okay, but is everything alright? Your twenty-eighth birthday is coming up! We have to make plans!"

I let them both know that all is fine, and I just want to spend some time with my parents because it's been awhile since I last saw them. I assure them I will definitely be back before my birthday. There's still almost a whole two months before my birthday, but Julie is big on those things and likes to hash out all the plans super far in advance. Either way, it's not a complete lie. It really would do me some good to get some family time in with my parents and younger sister, Lucy. Regardless of how things are really going, I miss them all like crazy. We've always been a pretty tight knit family and I would really like to keep it that way.

Ever since Lucy and I were itty bitty, little things, our mom and dad always made sure we were honest with them. We've always been a very open, sharing family but I doubt it'd make me feel any better to tell my family about my apparent inability to love a man whose been nothing but good to me despite my constant rejection. Nonetheless,

all four of us under one roof for more than a few days over the holidays has become a little too rare.

I merge onto the freeway and let out a long, slow breath. It should take about four hours before I'm pulling up in front of my parent's house, but with everything going on in my messed-up head, I'm sure it'll go by in no time at all. The rush of pavement in front of me looks like it's being devoured by the front of my forest green Jeep Liberty. The school bus yellow rectangles on either side of my vehicle almost appear to be floating—soaring just above the road. Highway hypnosis sets in after about twenty minutes and I can't keep my mind from wandering into dangerous territory.

Marcus and I have been playing this cat and mouse game with an on again, off again relationship for two years now, but we've known each other since way back in college. I find myself in awe sometimes at the amount of resilience this man has. He's adored me since we were eighteen years old, even after not being in touch for two years, and I only just started to see him that way a couple years ago.

It's not that he wasn't attractive or interesting or anything else like that—quite the opposite. He's always had this super sexy, rugged lumber jack meets savvy business man thing going on and I wouldn't have hesitated to hop in the sack with him since freshman year. But he wasn't that kind of guy. He has always been so kind and considerate, a real sweetheart as corny as even I find that to be. Never in a sappy, rom-com type of way, though. Just a real, genuine kindhearted man. Plus, he's funny. God, he really is the perfect man. What's wrong with me?

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It took eight years before I finally saw more than a potentially mind-blowing roll in the hay. Thankfully, he was still as interested as ever. The transition was a smooth one. An innocent night of old college buddies catching up over a few drinks ended with a kiss that made me tingle in places I didn't think I could tingle anymore. That was all it took. We didn't sleep together that night, although, looking back, that was probably totally his call. Instead, we took things slow. We'd been close friends for over half a decade, but we got to get to know each other in a whole new way. Slowly, gently it allowed me to fall madly in love.

For reasons I either really don't know or just won't let myself admit, I always manage to run for the hills whenever I feel things between Marcus and me getting too serious. My brain just seems to have some sort of alarm that goes off any time it suspects the big question is gearing up to be popped. That alarm lets me know it's time to do something cruel and selfish to the man who loves me.

Something feels different about this one, though. It's the same old song and dance, sure. But there was just a new-found determination in Marcus that I saw today. But instead of making me want to stay, it only scared me more than ever before. Besides my own self-centered fears, I know I can't keep doing this to such a great man. He was just filled with so much hope. Hope that I know damn well is false. I don't want to let him go, but I really don't think I can give him the kind of commitment he's looking for—not any time soon, at least. Maybe not ever. Such a sweet man deserves better than a fickle girl who can never make up her mind.

I taste salt and realize the tears are streaming again as it becomes clear what I must do. No mini vacation at my parents' place or big birthday celebration will suddenly make me ready to settle down, even if it is with the most incredible man I've ever known. It's not that I think I can do any better. No, even I know that I would never be able to do better than Marcus McKinney. But even knowing that, I simply cannot give my life over so completely to another person by becoming their wife and letting myself love that hard.

I need to stop being so selfish. I need to let him go for good. He could have the life and love he wants so badly with any other woman his heart desires. Plus, with all his billions, he could go anywhere in the world and start all over. It's time.

## Chapter 2



**H**ighway gives way to city streets that give way to residential roads and I'm finally pulling up in front of my childhood home. I see mom first. She's leaning over her beloved rose bushes, water trickling from a shiny, tin watering can in her delicate hand. An endearing smirk spreads across my lips as I recall watching her tend to those red, romantic flowers every night. She used to tell me that taking care of the buds by the magic of moonlight would make them grow faster and bigger. I was always enchanted by this and would sit in awe by the window when they'd finally bloom, truly believing in magic. Later, I found out watering roses in the cool of night helped them absorb it better and more efficiently—no magic. Sitting in my car, a single almost-twenty-eight-year-old woman petrified of commitment, I want to believe in that magic again now more than ever.

The sound of my running car snaps her out of her gardening trance and my mom jogs over. I cut the engine and climb out of my lonely car into my mother's warm embrace. My arms wrap easily around her. She seems more petite than ever. "Savannah! What a wonderful

surprise!” she gushes. “Reggie! Lucy! Come look who’s here!” she calls for my dad and sister to come out and greet me in the driveway as her arms drop from around my shoulders to rest on my waist. I could see she just did not want to let me go and I have to admit, it felt good.

I can hear my father grumbling in the living room. He’s probably upset about having to get up from his LA-Z-BOY. The light in Lucy’s upstairs bedroom switches on and my sister’s eyes peer through the blinds to check out who the visitor is that’s got Mom so excited. “Are you okay, sweetie?” my mom asks—a worried expression on her face, probably from studying mine.

I force a smile and respond, “I’m fine, Mom.” I really hope my voice doesn’t sound as strained as I feel. My sweet mother’s genuine concern and caring make me well up with emotion all over again. “I just decided to take some time off and come up for a visit,” I reassure her.

My father finally makes his way through the front door, my sister all caught up and on his heels. I wave sheepishly, still in my mother’s arms, and the rest of my family rushes to join us.

“Savvy, my baby!” my dad plants a firm kiss on my forehead and wraps a heavy arm around my shoulders. “How’s life been treating you, huh?”

“Hi, daddy,” I nuzzle into his thick neck. “It’s been fair enough. I just wanted to come and check up on you guys but, by the looks of it, it seems Lucy already has that covered,” I tease my younger sister and get an eye roll in response.

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“Nice to see you, too, sis,” I continue to tease, my words drenched in sarcasm. “Still mooching off the folks, are we?”

“Yeah, something like that,” she responds curtly, glaring at me. “Still running away from Marcus?”

Her words feel like a slap in the face and a kick to the gut. Of course, she doesn't know that's exactly what I'm doing, but it's probably obvious enough by now. My cheeks burn in a flare of humiliation at the fact that even my own family can see there's something wrong with me and my inability to settle down with a kind, good-looking billionaire who loves me unconditionally.

“Lucy, you leave your sister alone now,” our mother scolds, giving Lucy the same evil eye, she'd lay on us when we misbehaved as kids. It's Lucy's turn to have her face turn a shade of scarlet as she shifts her gaze toward the ground. My father looks uncomfortable at the mention of Marcus. Now a lovely family reunion has turned into an awkward huddle in the driveway all because of my failed relationship.

“No sense in standing out here in the cold,” my mom breaks the tension. Fixing her attention back on me she continues, “Your father made enough food to feed a small country. Let's get in there and wash up for a nice family dinner. I'm sure you're starving from your drive.”

We all walk towards the house together, all laughs and smiles again. I'm grateful for my mother's sensitivity to the situation. Like always, she knows exactly what to say and when to say it. Her kindness and the soft hand on my back leading me towards the house melt away some of the sorrow that'd been weighing heavy on my heart all evening. But not all of it...

Warm pots and pans sit still full on the stove. A dish full of steaming meatloaf topped with barbeque sauce catches my eye first. Loaded baked potatoes dripping with butter make my mouth water. Fresh corn-on-the-cob gleaming with grains of sea salt make my stomach growl and I finally realize how hungry I really am. Creamy green bean casserole and biscuits made from scratch are also present and I can't wait another minute. My father spent most of his life behind a desk crunching numbers as an accountant, but I've always believed he should have been a chef.

Lucy sets plates down as my father brings the food in from the kitchen and my mother pours white wine into four glasses. We all sit down at the dining room table together – something we hadn't done since the previous Thanksgiving, and it feels good to be home.

Everyone digs into their food, eating in silence for all of two minutes before Lucy breaks the silence with more of her sisterly love. "So, Savvy," she chirps, "How's Marcus doing these days? Haven't seen him around in a while."

I can see the gleam in her eye. The embarrassment I felt before blazes into rage. "How am I supposed to know, huh? Do I look like his keeper?" I snap back.

"Girls!" my mother scolds. "We never get to do this anymore. Don't ruin it. We can talk about anything else."

"He called here looking for you yesterday," Lucy continues, completely ignoring my mother, "I told him you hadn't been by in a while but that you had the day off today. Did you see him?"



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I'd give anything to reach across the table and smack the smirk right off her smug face. "You stay out of my personal life, loser," I spit the insult at her since I know what really pushes her buttons.

"Enough!" Mom raises her voice just enough for her to know she's serious. Lucy averts her gaze toward her plate, I whisper a half-assed apology, and my father continues with his meal undisturbed. Despite the tension and discomfort, I have with the subject, not even my mother can help herself. "Savannah, honey," she probes, "your sister does have a point. That sweet young man seems to love you very much. What seems to be the problem?"

Lucy jumps on the opportunity and chimes in, "Yeah, Savannah, what seems to be the problem?"

Finally deciding to be a part of the conversation, my father reprimands Lucy himself, "Lucy, quit teasing your sister. You're still single yourself, you know."

"There's a difference, Dad," Lucy snaps while I try to stifle a laugh and our mother nods in agreement. "I'm single by choice. And dating, I might add. Savvy landed this super-hot, super-rich guy and still can't stop being a flake."

"Another excellent point..." my mother says not-so-under her breath.

Feeling the dread of the entire day all over again and beginning to lose my appetite, I drop my fork onto my plate with a clank and respond through my teeth, "Mom, please don't encourage her. I'm fine."

Lucy isn't even trying to hide her self-righteousness—putting food in her mouth through her ridiculous sneer. We've always had a good relationship, but sometimes my kid sister can really drive me up a wall. She's not lying, though. I've earned myself a reputation as a flake when it comes to Marcus and Lucy is certainly is quite the active dater.

My twenty-two-year-old sister stands at an impressive five feet, eight inches tall. She's not the curviest and has always been envious of me in that department, but still, I'd die for a model-esque frame like hers—any woman would. Besides attracting the attention and affection of men, her slim, tight figure also made her a star volleyball athlete all through high school and college until a major knee injury ended her stellar run. Sure, she never planned to go pro or anything like that, but it was a bitter pill she's still trying to swallow.

Even with an attitude like hers, she's maintained some semi-serious relationships over the years. Her latest beau was too much of the jealous kind and couldn't quite handle all the attention she received from other men. It made him needier than a lost puppy. Not one to put up with any form of clinginess that might hinder her flirtatious ways, Lucy broke off nearly a year long relationship without a second thought. She's not flaky but she can be brutal and even a little narcissistic.

Regardless of the duration of the relationship or how the poor guy might have felt about her, Lucy insisted he was just a rental. A term for her lovers that's always made my mother grimace. Even dating around like she is now, Lucy is very focused on her studies. Her priority has always been earning her degree. It always came first, above

volleyball and men both. She plans to earn a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice early so she can take a year off before continuing with her Master's. Lucy, being the more studious one and choosing a career in the justice field, is making both our lawyer mother and accountant father incredibly proud. Which is probably why they tend to overlook her crudeness and promiscuity.

“Earth to Savvy,” Dad whips me back to reality with a snap of his fingers. I understand that they only want what's best for me, but the way they pick apart my love life is almost too much.

After taking a deep, calming breath, I decide to be completely honest with my ever so nosy family, “Look, I get that you all love Marcus. Of course, I wouldn't expect anything else. The man made his billions by the age of twenty-five and now only four years later he's retired. He does volunteer work, all over the world, like some sort of saint. But what I do is important to me, too. I'm afraid that if we were to really give it a go, I'd have to give up too much of myself. The last big fight we had was over kids. He's ready for that. I'm not sure if I ever want kids at all.”

“Oh, sweetie,” mom takes my hand tenderly in her own, “you're still young. No one expects you to up and marry the man or be a baby factory. You're a gorgeous woman with a sharp mind and her own business. We all respect that, Marcus included. I just hate to see you so stressed and consumed by work. Promise me you'll get out more, with or without Marcus. You know that saying about all work and no play.”

A single, salty drop forms in the corner of my eye, but I wipe it away before it falls. “I promise, Mom,” I reply and squeeze her small

childlike hand. To lighten the mood, I add, “Besides, Lucy is always begging me to go man hunting with her.” My sister sticks her tongue out at me and some color rises in her face at the truth of my comment as mom and dad chuckle.

The rest of dinner goes on uneventfully.

Small talk about the weather and current events mostly. With all the Marcus talk over and done with, I can finally relax and simply enjoy my family’s company. Since I was a child, we’ve always knew how have a great time together. Somewhere along the way we learned not to argue frivolously. I’ve always known how fortunate I am to have a family like the one I do, and I am truly grateful – especially on a night like tonight.

Once we’re all finished eating, Lucy and I take our spots side by side in front of the sink to do the dishes while Mom digs through the hall closet for board games and Dad looks for a decent movie playing on television to have on in the background. The warm water and soft suds splashing over my hands makes me feel so peaceful – something I would have figured impossible after a day like the one I had. Standing here now, feeling like a kid again back at home, what happened with Marcus in that field seems like ages ago.

With all the leftovers packed up, the dishes washed, and the living room all set up for a game of Pictionary and a Star Wars marathon on cable, we all take our seats around the coffee table. Ice cold wine coolers in Lucy’s, Mom’s, and my hand. We play and joke and laugh. My mother and I beat Lucy and my father terribly, but it doesn’t matter

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because we're all having a blast. It reminds me of the last time I had Marcus over.

It was a night very like this one. The five of us played all sorts of silly games and watched old classics all evening long. It was the most fun I'd had in so many years. It seemed that way for everyone else as well. I could see my family bonding with Marcus on so many levels and in such a genuine way. I had watched the tiny lines dance around the corners of his mouth as he laughed and laughed. I imagined what it would be like to watch those tiny dancing lines for the rest of my life. I wondered about kissing them until the end of time. Just about a week and a half later I was kicking him out of my apartment one morning after he made me breakfast in bed but made the terrible error of saying he'd like to do it every morning. Then he added, "maybe someday with the help of our children."

It was a stupid fight and I regret it, especially now that I'm wishing he were here trying to decipher my sister's half-assed drawings. I'm not sure if it's the nostalgia or the alcohol – maybe a combination of both – but I struggle to suppress a strong urge to send Marcus a long, long text. Instead, I throw an arm around my mom's neck and rest my head on her shoulder like I did as a girl. I notice that her drink is practically untouched. Maybe that's why we've done so well. "Let's break out the Scrabble now so Mom and I can keep kicking your butts!"



# Chapter 3



I'm running. Hot blood is pumping through my veins. My feet slap the ground so hard it feels like they might explode. I've been running so hard for so long now that it feels as though my legs aren't even there anymore. I'm running because someone – or something – is chasing me.

The faster I sprint the closer my pursuer gets. It becomes clear that running is of absolutely no use. I muster up all the courage I possibly can and spin around to face whatever it is that's chasing me. The dark figure catches up to me and we're face to face. It's Marcus.

I open my mouth to speak but no sound comes out. He reaches out to touch me, but his fingers pass right through me. What the hell? He can't seem to grasp me and I'm not sure I want him to. Confused and frightened, I start to run again. I will my exhausted legs to carry me as quickly as they possibly can. I run for several minutes before I realize I'm not running from anything anymore. Marcus isn't chasing me this time.

I'm all alone.

~ . ~ . ~

Warm rays of sunlight peak through the thin curtains of my childhood bedroom, coaxing my eyelids to flutter open. My hair is stuck to the back of my neck in damp, heavy strands. It takes a few seconds before I can shake the nightmare from my head and fully come to. With a long stretch, I roll out of a sweaty bed that didn't provide much rest. When my bare feet hit the cool, tile floor goosebumps erupt across my flesh, making a disturbing combination with all the sweat.

It was a stupid nightmare and it probably didn't even mean anything. Probably just too many years of society conditioning me to believe my sole purpose in life is to marry a man and bear his children. Either way, I don't want to think about it. I'm here to get away from Marcus and the decisions I don't want to make. If only my subconscious would get the memo and keep him from running around in my dreams.

I would have thought five days away would have been enough by now, but I don't really feel much better about what I know I should do. I sit by the bay window – the same one that provided me with spectacular views my entire life. It does bring me some calm, but it not much. I've thoroughly enjoyed staring out this old second story window, it truly is a captivating view of the city skyline in the distance, but looking out again this morning after that dream, it's only reminding me that this isn't my home anymore. I don't belong here—not permanently.

So then where do I belong, exactly? In my own apartment all by myself? With Marcus...? I really don't know. And the truth is I don't



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know any more than I did when I first came here. If anything, I'm only more confused than ever. All being here has made me realize is how truly happy I was with Marcus. I knew that, on some level, it made me downright giddy to hear the words he spoke that day in the field.

Not a single moment has gone by since I've been here that I haven't wished Marcus was right here with me. The more I enjoy the time I've gotten to spend with my family, the more I realize I want him to be a part of it. I snort at the incredible selfishness of the thought. This man wants a family with me more than anything in the world, and what do I do? I run away from him only to long for him more than ever.

Besides the unmistakable confidence and determination Marcus had the last time I saw him, there was that shining glimmer of hope in his eye that I haven't been able to stop thinking about. Sure, it frightened the life out of me, but it also made me tingle like I know only he can make me tingle. I truly believed walking away from him the way that I did was the right thing to do at the time, but looking back now, it's all the walking away that's kept me from being happy.

I'm so entranced by my own thoughts and the view by my window, I don't hear my mother come into my room. She rests a hand tentatively on my shoulder, causing me to jump and snap back to reality. I can see the worry on her face as she looks down into mine, so I force a weak smile and say, "Good morning, Mom."

"Good morning, sweetie," she says back, just as half-heartedly as I did. She takes her hand off my shoulder and runs it smoothly over my hair. I can see she's been worrying about me more and more every day

that I've stayed here. The concern is evident in her dark green eyes – eyes identical to my own. I know she doesn't mind my staying – she enjoys it, really – but she also knows I'm running.

Not wanting her to question me about it, I ask, “What's for breakfast?”

This makes her smile. “Well,” she responds, “your father had something going with bacon and potatoes and lots of cheese when I checked on him in the kitchen before heading up here.”

Now it's my turn to smile. I wouldn't be surprised if I've gained five pounds eating my dad's delectable cooking all day, every day. “What are we waiting for then?” I playfully tease my mom and head for the door. I can see it in her face that she wants to talk, but I know it won't help me. She doesn't push, always able to exhibit more self-control than anyone else I know. Instead, she follows me out of the room and down the stairs. While I should probably be heading back to reality soon, I am taking advantage of as many home cooked meals as possible.

After enjoying a filling breakfast scramble that I could never have possibly even began to make myself, I follow my mom out into her garden behind the house. I hear Lucy finally coming down from her room as we head out the door, my dad, knowing her ways, is preparing a plate of food for her.

Shaking my head, I point out, “That girl hasn't changed a bit since we were teenagers. She's still staying out and sleeping in.”

My mother leads me into the section of her garden where she's growing some wonderfully red tomatoes. “That's true,” she agrees,

“But then again, neither have you.” I’m not totally sure what she’s referring to, but I can guess it’s my avoiding pressing matters and hiding away from the world. A moment of tension passes before she speaks again, not wanting to pick a fight, “Maybe you could take some of these beauties with you and find a way to incorporate them into your recipes.”

She’s talking about my dog food. My ever-thriving business of homemade dog food and treats, Doggie Delights, has always been a point of pride with my mother. I started researching making fresh, healthy recipes for dogs since way back in high school when our family dog, Rufus, passed away. It was cancer that ultimately took him, but it turned out there were certain toxins in the brand of dog food we served him that were linked to causing all sorts of cancer in the first place. I only found out after the fact but was still determined to make a difference – if not for poor Rufus, then for other beloved pets.

Our family never did get another dog after that; we’d had Rufus for ten years. But we were definitely a bunch of animal lovers at heart. It meant a lot to my mom, and still does, that I cared so much about something and had passion enough to pursue a career in it. Being a dog lover herself, it didn’t hurt that it had to do with making a difference in dogs’ lives.

By the time I graduated high school, I had a vision of how I would run my business. I set long term goals for breaking into the dog food market. All through college, while I earned my MBA, I learned exactly what it would take to make my vision a reality. Now, four years later, I’ve practically cornered the market on homemade, preservative-free

food and treats for dogs in the tri-state area. And I did it all from my own little place.

“Sure, maybe,” I agree. I appreciate the thought and the offer of free tomatoes, but I know that’s not what’s on her mind. “I’ll take off for home tomorrow, Mom,” I inform her. “It’ll be Friday already and that way I’ll have the weekend to settle back in before going back to work.”

My mom stops tending to the tomatoes and looks up at me. All she says is, “Sounds good, dear.” But I know there’s a lot more between the lines that she’d like me to understand. As much as she loves having me around, she didn’t raise me to be a coward. She knows just as much as I do that something must be done, and soon. Whether I break it off for good or take the plunge is beside the point, I just need to hurry up and get a move on making up my mind. It’s the right thing to do for my own sake and Marcus’s as well.

I can only hope that Marcus hasn’t changed his mind by now. Or is that exactly what I want to happen? I still have no idea, but I was obviously wrong about time away providing any sort of clarity. Maybe Marcus had it right before with the face-to-face meeting. At least that could hopefully get us somewhere. I just have to make sure I don’t run away again.

Damn, that was rough. I literally turned on my heel and ran away from him. I left him standing there in the middle of an empty field with his heart on his sleeve. I may as well have ripped it to pieces with the way I treated him that day. Thinking about it now, there might not be

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any decision to make at all anymore. Maybe by now he's made it for me.

I help my mom with her blooming fruits and vegetables – soaking up every minute of quality time I can spend with her. Together, we choose the biggest, ripest tomatoes for me to take home with me. Even if I can't use them in my dog food, they'd go great in a salad. With the garden all watered, trimmed, and harvested, we head back into the house where Lucy and Dad seem to be arguing about something.

“I'm not a little kid, Dad!” Lucy yells at dad in that high-pitched squeal she resorts to when she's really frustrated. Sounds a lot like the child she's claiming *not* to be.

My mother and I walk in through the side door into the kitchen and set our baskets full of goods from the garden on the counter. It's impossible for us not to hear the heated conversation taking place in the living room. I scan the kitchen and notice the dishes from breakfast are still sitting in the sink and Lucy's plate is still at the table where she ate. She hadn't even bothered to clear it.

“Well, you could've fooled me,” dad retorts. My mother shakes her head and I fail to stifle a giggle.

“You think that's funny?” Lucy questions me as she charges into the kitchen, Dad right behind her.

I roll my eyes at her dramatics and respond, “Kind of. I feel like I just traveled ten years back in time.”

My comment makes mom chuckle. Dad's too engaged with Lucy to laugh. She does not have the same reaction to say the least. Enraged she growls, “Screw you, Savannah.”

Now I'm on the defensive. "What's your problem?" I ask her. I can see the fire blaze in her eyes, but it's too late to back down now. "As if mooching off Mom and Dad isn't enough as it is, you've got to keep them up late worrying and you have them cleaning up after you. It's ridiculous. Grow up, Lucy."

She snorts and crosses her arms tightly over her chest. "You're one to talk," she lays into me, "You're the one hiding out with Mommy and Daddy because some rich guy wants to marry you. Boo-freakin'-hoo!" I start to walk away, not wanting to get into this over-discussed subject, but she continues. "He called, you know." I stop walking so abruptly I nearly fall forward. I turn back around to face my sister. "Yeah," she goes on, "a lot, actually. Every single day since you've been here."

"You spoke to him?" I ask, completely in shock.

"Of course, I did," she answers. "I mean, it'd be pretty rude not to, don't you think?"

"Girls..." our mother tries to interrupt us but we both ignore her.

"What did you say?" I aim my question at Lucy. It's taking all I have not to snatch her by the messy bun sitting atop her air-filled head.

"Oh, nothing," she grins. "Just that you've been staying here in an utterly pathetic attempt to avoid him and everything he's so generously trying to offer you. I told him he should just give it up already, but he keeps trying. I mean, I don't get it. But whatever. He hasn't called to check in yet today. What should I tell him when he does?"

"Tell him I'm on my way home," I reply with clenched teeth and hot tears of anger welling up in the corners of my eyes.

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My dad tries to block my way and my mom calls after me, but I get passed them both and run up to my old room. I tear the place apart, trying to pack the few things I brought with me as quickly as possible. I thought I couldn't get away fast enough from Marcus, but I've never wanted to leave a place more than in this very moment. Not just because I'm furious with my sister, but because now I know there's still hope.

I felt such relief when Lucy said he's been calling to check in. I hadn't fully realized how worried I was about Marcus changing his mind until I found out that he hadn't at all. I couldn't quite put my thumb on what I'd been feeling these last few days, but now I know it was regret. I regret not at least having a conversation with Marcus before taking off. I might not have gotten some real insight into my feelings until a few minutes ago, but the distance did give me a chance to unwind and really appreciate this man's incredible patience.

My chest feels hollow – a sensation I don't recognize. I don't know what it is, but I do know it makes me want to get back home and in Marcus's arms as soon as possible. I'm not going to fight the feeling this time. I'm not going hold myself back from something that has the potential to be the greatest love of my life. Maybe I've been wrong this entire time. Maybe being with Marcus doesn't have to mean a lifetime commitment or giving up too much of myself or my work. There's only one way to find out.

I double-check that I've got everything packed up—I don't want any reason to have to come back to this house anytime soon. Especially while Lucy is still living here. I zip back down the stairs, give my dad a

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peck on the cheek and my mom a quick hug, ignoring both their protests for me to stay. Lucy must have holed up in her room because she's nowhere to be seen. My car is loaded, started, and backing out of the driveway in no time. I never even see my mom trying to wave me down from the front porch – a basket full of ripe tomatoes in her hand.



# Chapter 4



The sun is setting as I finally pull into my own driveway. I almost laugh at the irony. It's the same kind of stunningly romantic sunset that sent me packing to my parents' house that greets me as I return. I feel badly about the way that I left, but it was time that I got back.

My key turns easily in the lock and I walk into my empty apartment. I make a mental note to think about getting a dog so I'm not always so lonely here. It'd really be nice to have someone to greet me when I walk through the door. I lazily toss my bags on my bedroom floor, deciding I'll unpack them tomorrow, and throw my tired body across my king-sized bed. A nice upgrade from the twin-size one still in my old bedroom back home.

Sleep starts to creep up on me, so I get up before it takes me completely. I call my mom to let her know I got home okay. She's upset about the tomatoes and really wants me to speak to Lucy. I apologize about the forgotten gifts but refuse to call my sister. While most of my anger towards her subsided during the drive, I'm in no

mood to discuss what happened with that immature, meddling little brat.

We say good night, she asks if I've eaten dinner, reminds me not to stress too much, tells me about my dad's latest faux pas, says good night again, and then we finally hang up. The silent glass screen of my iPhone stares at me, mocking me. My thumb lingers over the messages app, pressing it slowly after a few seconds that feel like slow-motion minutes. I start a new message, having to type out Marcus's whole phone number from memory since I deleted his contact the last time we broke up. I write a short, simple message, "Can I see you tomorrow?"

Two minutes later, a reply appears on my screen, "Yes. Come by anytime. I'll be home."

I let out a shaky breath and nearly begin to bawl. All the stress worry and emotion that had built up over the last few hours leave my body and leaves me lighter than I've been in days. I let Marcus know I'll go by in the morning and set my phone down for the night. A permanent smile becomes plastered across my face as I get ready for bed. But even with my silky PJ's on and the sheets pulled all the way up under my chin, I'm much too excited to fall asleep. I'm not sure what to expect when I see Marcus tomorrow, but just the idea of being in the same room with him is enough to make me dizzy with eagerness.

For once, I'm hoping to see Marcus in my dreams.

~ . ~ . ~

After a nearly sleepless night, I leap out of bed with more energy than I usually have even after a full night's sleep. I turn a pop station

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with some internet radio app on my phone and practically skip into my bathroom. I do my usual hygiene routine and take extra care while washing my face. All the extra decadent food my dad stuffed me with is really taking a toll on my skin. I tousle my hair a bit in hopes of giving it some volume, but to no avail. Good thing Marcus always loves my hair no matter how much it refuses to cooperate. I stick to some light makeup, knowing the more natural look has always suited me best. I smoothly glide some dark mascara over my long, curved lashes – my favorite part of my face – and quickly apply a shimmering shade of pink lipstick.

As confident as I may be in my makeup skills, I've never been the best at dressing myself. According to my fashionista friend, Julie who lovingly reminds me from time to time. I try not to hear her spewing words like peplum and empire-waist at me while I browse the limited selection in my closet. I settle on a simple sundress. It's a white cotton, halter, cut right above the knee. I might not know what season it's from, but I know it makes my breasts look impressive and it accentuates my slender waist. Just sayin.

I'm almost out the door when I remember I forgot to put on some perfume. I head back into the bathroom and spritz myself with a couple pumps of a coconut and almond scented fragrance. It's one I happen to know Marcus can't resist. I start to head out again when a glimmer in the mirror catches my eye.

It's the pair of earrings Marcus got me for our last anniversary. I hadn't worn them in months, but there's not time like the present, right? I slide the cool metal hooks through the soft, pierced flesh of

my lobes. The earrings dangle on either side of my face, the blue sapphires sparkling as they catch the sunlight peeking through the window. I give myself a final once over in the mirror. Can't help it. I really wanting to look nice for this reunion.

Just fifteen minutes later, I'm turning onto Lest Lane, the street Marcus lives on. It's a little way out into the country, the nearest neighbor is nearly a mile away, and I would always jokingly call it Lust Lane instead – the isolation providing plenty of privacy. Each pump of my heart comes more quickly as my car skulks up on Marcus's home. He was so nonchalant about me coming over last night. I wonder if he's upset?

Of course, he'd have every right in the world to be. I probably wouldn't give someone the time of day after pulling something like I pulled on Marcus. I've bailed on him so many times and he's always welcomed me back with open arms, but I'm sure there's only so much a man can take – even a saint like this one. I fear he may think I take him and the million times he's taken me back for granted. And honestly, I might have from time to time. Maybe part of the reason it's so easy to walk away in the heat of the moment is because part of me is overly confident that he'll always be there if I choose to turn back around. But what if it's different the next time? Or this time...?

I pull up to the wrought iron gates at the front of the estate. They're open, but I still hesitate, my foot resting tentatively on the brake. In front of me sits all that could possibly be mine. I'd never agree to marry Marcus for the money or things. I would have married him ages ago if

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that were the case. But it's still surreal to imagine being able to call a place like this home.

A quarter mile paved road runs from where I'm sitting in my car all the way up to the round-about directly in front of Marcus's house. On either side are towering azalea trees in full bloom - thousands of blossoms in varying shades of pink and purple sit delicately on the branches. Brilliantly green blades of fluffy grass cover the ground in lovely sheets. It's simple, but oh so beautiful.

I shift the car back into gear and start slowly rolling down the final stretch. While the acres it sits on are many, the house I approach is modest – for a billionaire at least. It's a two story, four-bedroom, two-bathroom ranch house with a gorgeous wraparound porch. As a kid who grew up in the hustle and bustle of the city, it's exactly the kind of house I would want for myself. Part of me likes to believe that I had something to do with why Marcus built it this way in the first place.

Of course, for that to be true, it'd have to mean Marcus has believed we'd end up together for quite a few years – even before he made it big. People like to talk, and I know what they say. It's easy for everyone to believe I didn't give Marcus a second thought until after he built his fortune. I'd probably assume the same thing if it were anyone else, but I know Marcus knows me better than that.

We struggled through dreary English courses and complicated Biology labs during freshman year of college, making us instant friends, almost a decade ago now. I always believed he'd do something big with his life, but I never really imagined he'd be ultra-rich. Then when he was, it would have been easy to hop on board. I could have retired at

twenty-four when Marcus's savvy investments paid out like crazy and spent my days sunbathing on a yacht somewhere. But I wasn't anymore ready to commit then as I am now. And it has nothing to do with his net worth. People can think however they'd like or say whatever they want, but Marcus and I both know it's never been about the money.

Finally, I'm in front of the house of my dreams. I put the car in park, take a deep, shaky breath before unbuckling my seatbelt and climbing out of the car. I smooth out the front of my dress as I walk towards the door. A gust of wind blows my hair across my face. In a panic I run back to my car, pull an old scrunchie out of a cup holder, and tie my tastefully highlighted auburn mop into a ponytail. Hair: 1, Savannah: 0.

I walk up to the door for the second time, almost twice as nervous as the first. Should I have called when I was on my way? When I got to the gate? He said I could stop by anytime. I told him I'd come in the morning. I muster up all the courage I can and press a hesitant finger against the doorbell. I listen to the perky, chiming sound echo inside the house as I wait for Marcus.

Not being able to stand still, I restlessly smooth my dress and aimlessly attempt to fix my stubborn hair – the shorter, more unruly pieces falling out of the scrunchie's loose hold and into my face. I know Marcus really couldn't care less about what I wear or how I do my makeup or whether my hair is all over the place. He's made me more comfortable and confident in my own skin over the last two years we've been together than I've ever felt in my entire life. But, hey, a girl can still be a feminist and want to look good for her man. After what

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feels like more than enough time for someone to come to their front door, I finally hear footsteps coming from within the house.

Before I know it, Marcus is swinging the door open so effortlessly it startles me – it hadn't even been locked. As if that weren't enough, the breath is sucked right out my lungs at the first sight of the man standing half naked before me.

“Sorry,” he apologizes, “I was on the treadmill.” Marcus leans against the door frame wearing nothing but grey sweatpants with a small towel in his hand. Glistening beads of sweat trickle down from his sculpted neck to his chiseled abdomen. The leisurely bottoms rest low on his hips – so low that I can see his defined V-cut. It takes serious effort not to hop up and wrap my legs around his waist.

“No biggie,” I respond. Who even says that? He's got me so flustered within the first thirty seconds with him that I'm like a blundering teenager. “I hope that it's okay I just came by like this.”

I can see by the look in his wandering eyes that I'm not the only one impressed by what they see. I catch his gaze traveling from the cleavage created by the halter top to the curve of my hips beneath my thin dress. “Of course, it is,” he reassures me. “I'm so glad you did.” He smirks mischievously as he wipes the soft towel across his sopping brow – clearing most of the sweat from his unshaven face.

The heat rises in my face and I can only imagine what shade of red my cheeks are turning. God, how does this man do this to me? “I'm glad I came, too,” I admit, not able to keep the smile from spreading across my lips. Sure, I was excited to see him, but before I got here, I was mostly nervous. I was worried about how he'd react to seeing me

again after the way I treated him. But now, standing here in front of him, I only feel all kinds of excited.

“Please,” he can’t stop smiling either, “come in. Have a seat.” He gestures towards the large sectional in the living room. It’d been a pretty long time since I’d stepped foot inside this house. After having a stupid fight about raising a family together and making this our home together, I’d made a big stink about coming here. It wasn’t so much what he said, it was a nice idea, it was the fact that he made me want it, too. I could totally picture myself baking cookies while our baby girl toddling around in her Minnie Mouse walker and Marcus playing catch outside with our son. It was a pretty picture, but I just couldn’t bring myself to go for it—back then.

I sit comfortably on the plush couch and start looking around as Marcus heads into the kitchen to fix us some drinks. Nothing has changed around here as far as I can tell. I’m sitting on the same burgundy sofa with the same 4K 75-inch television in front of me and the same white walls all around. It’s all very modern, but with a simple elegance that always makes me feel like royalty.

Marcus returns to the living room with two lemonades in hand. He sits by me, not too close, and holds out one of the glasses towards me. “My favorite,” I flirt. I really can’t help myself around this guy. I want to be respectful of how I must have hurt him the last time I saw him, but he makes me feel like a teenage girl madly in love for the very first time.



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“Oh, I know,” he replies confidently. I watch as he leans back and crosses one leg nonchalantly over the other. He brings his glass to his lips and takes a drink. “So,” he continues, “to what do I owe this visit?”

My mind is occupied with some pretty dirty thoughts of the things I'd rather be doing with Marcus on this couch right now, but I force them aside. I owe him the truth. I straighten up and set my drink down on the glass coffee table in front of us. “Well,” I begin, “firstly, I wanted to apologize. I'm sorry for the way that I left things the last time we saw each other. I shouldn't have stormed off it like that. It was rude and... -”

“Savannah, it's -” Marcus interrupts me. He moves a little closer to me on the couch and places a gentle hand on my thigh.

His touch makes me hot all over, but I swallow hard and interrupt him back, “Don't say it's okay. It's not. It wasn't. You were so open and sweet and I, well, I wasn't. After what I did, you deserve at least that in return.”

Marcus remains silent but begins to softly stroke my knee. The motion feels so sensual and my body responds accordingly. I want desperately to give into my desires, but I want to make things right even more. I go on, “I heard what you said. Every word. Every sweet, loving word...” I begin to tear up and my voice wavers. “I know I didn't say anything back and I ran away, but all those things you said you wanted...I want them, too.”

A small tear escapes my eye and before I can react, Marcus closes the remaining gap between us and wipes it away. His thumb against my cheek feels so tender. His face is only inches from mine. I study it

closely, trying to read it and figure out how he's feeling about what I've just said.

Marcus looks as emotional as I feel. He takes my face in both his strong hands and looks me dead in the eye. "You want this? You want me?" he asks, his voice shaking.

"Yes," I respond, running my hands up the length of his bare arms and resting them on his bulging shoulders. "All of it. I want it."

The second the words leave my lips a river of emotions washes over me. It feels incredible to finally let it out. The fear is still there, of course, but I don't want to let it overpower all the other feelings I have, too. I feel so much love and happiness and things I don't even know how to describe. It's time I let them out and suppress the fear instead of the other way around. It's finally time.

Marcus presses his forehead against mine and lets out a sigh of relief through an ear to ear grin. "Savannah Kelly," he breathes, "you continue to amaze me. It's all I can do not to take you right here, right now..."

"So, do it..." I whisper.