



## **Courting Savannah**

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## Chapter One

Savannah shuffled through listing after listing of houses on the market, trying to pick out the one that would move fast and drop a good amount of money in her lap in the process. If she had any sense, she would just work like an animal, showing dozens to move one or two quickly. But she didn't have that kind of time.

"He's back," her friend Dawn announced.

Savannah muffled a yawn and stretched without looking up from her paperwork. "Who's back?"

"You know who."

"Dawn, sweetie, give me a break with the cryptic remarks. I need to get a sale soon or I'm out of my own house. The money I moved back to Georgia with isn't going to last forever."

Her friend rolled her eyes. "Child, please. If I know you, you have backup money under your mattress or something. You've got at least three months' worth of mortgage payments in the bank. I'd bet my last dollar you're not hurting in the least, Savannah Glory."

Savannah stood up from her desk and shoved the listings away. She was done for the time being. Maybe after lunch when her stomach wasn't distracting her with growling, she'd get back to it. "That would be a dollar you'd lose, my friend. Now stop beating around the bush and tell me who is back. Back from where?"

Dawn's clear brown eyes bore into hers, making a phantom chill pass over her back. "Your ex, Tyler."

All at once, Savannah's legs gave out, and she crashed down on the chair behind her, grateful that it was there to catch her fall. "Him," was all she said. She closed her eyes, fighting the pain that reared its ugly head just hearing his name. It had been seven years. One would think she wouldn't have this reaction, and yet, she had prepared herself for the possibility of seeing him when she decided to move back home. "How do you know he's back from Iraq?"

Dawn had kept her updated on Tyler's movements over the years, whether she wanted to know or not. Most of the news had been about him going on a tour of duty.

This had been his third time to that horrible desert with all the atrocities the news reported.

“I saw his mamma at Winn-Dixie when I went to pick up a few things. She said he and his guys came back yesterday, said they were having a welcome home breakfast down at the armory this morning.”

Savannah tried for a casual air, like none of this mattered to her. “That was fast, the breakfast.”

Dawn waved her hand, swatting a fly. “You know us southern folks. We don’t need an excuse to throw a get-together, and all those wives and mothers seem to have food just waiting on the table to serve an army.”

“Literally,” Savannah said with bitterness. She had no love for the army and wished she had none for a particular soldier. She stood up again, pausing to be sure she had her strength back and wouldn’t make a fool of herself in front of Dawn—like Dawn hadn’t seen her do that and more, especially how she screamed and cried for hours when Tyler left her. “What he does no longer interests me. I can’t seem to get that through your head. Come on, how about you buy me lunch at our favorite restaurant?”

Dawn smirked. “When I believe that, I’ll stop telling you about him. I still think you two have a future. Tyler just needs to figure out that you’re the woman of his dreams, and he won’t find anyone to take your place.”

Savannah grabbed her purse and strolled to the door while tamping down all emotion. “The army keeps him warm at night. Maybe he can marry his CO or something.”

“Ew, the guy’s a beast in size. Shoot, Tyler’s big. That’s gross, them together, and you know that boy’s one hundred percent hetero.” Dawn led the way to her car, and the two of them hopped in before pulling out of Savannah’s driveway. They waved and smiled to the neighbor a few doors down, the man who had been after Savannah since she moved in. Savannah slipped her sunglasses on her nose and turned away from his hopeful expression. Beside her, Dawn shivered. “Oh, icy Girl, you are so cold to that man, to every man for that matter. Tyler did a number on you.”

“Can we dispense with talk of him, Dawn? You’re my best friend, and I never got why you wouldn’t stop bringing him up. Even if you do believe we’ll get back together some day, are you trying to hurt me?”

Without regard to the traffic behind her, Dawn arrowed the vehicle to the side of the road and threw it in park. Honking horns punctuated her next words. “Are you nuts! I love you, Savannah. We’ve been through thick and thin, haven’t we? You held my hand when John was killed three years ago. I have no love of the army either, because they’re the ones that sent him over to that godforsaken place, but I found Will, and he helped me heal too. If I came across any man I thought would be good with you, I’d be the first one to push you in his direction.”

She gathered Savannah’s hand in hers and squeezed it. What her friend had been saying was true, Dawn had been devastated when her husband was killed in the war, and Savannah had done all she could to help Dawn through it. Savannah had known Dawn since they were both in elementary school and hated each other on sight. So no one had been more surprised than she when Dawn met Will just under a year after she lost her husband, and they had been going strong ever since. It would have made more sense to Savannah for Dawn to advise her to get back out there and meet someone else, but Dawn hadn’t given up on Tyler, and she didn’t want Savannah to either.

“He was young and stupid. He thought he should choose to make something of himself instead of pursuing what he felt for you, but then he’s a man, a soldier. I don’t know why it didn’t occur to him to build a career *and* marry you. People do it all the time. Whatever the case, he’s not a bad guy, and no one’s ever been serious in his life when he was back in Georgia.”

Dawn pulled her into a hug and kissed her cheek. “But no matter what, don’t you ever think I would want to hurt you. I love you, Savannah. We’re like sisters, closer than sisters. I’d give you a kidney.”

Savannah burst out laughing. “Thanks, but that won’t be necessary. I’m the picture of health.”

Dawn frowned. “Don’t I know it. If I could drop twenty pounds, I’d have the guys running after me like they run after you.”

“You have Will, remember?”

Dawn shrugged and pulled back into traffic. “I have to keep him on his toes, or else he’ll get lazy. Trust me, I’m into him, but he doesn’t need to be convinced of that twenty-four seven.”

Savannah shook her head. She didn't doubt for a minute that Dawn did keep Will on his toes. Dawn was full of life and kept it moving all the time. Her vitality had kept Savannah from losing her mind, but that very fact was why she would never allow herself to accept Tyler back. Yes, she still loved him, with all her heart, but he had made the wrong choice all those years ago. Even though they had both matured, there was no telling what challenges would come along in life that might make him want to run again, or if what happened to John would happen to him. No way would she put herself through that. She couldn't.

Within twenty minutes, they pulled up to the restaurant and parked. Savannah was glad to see several outdoor tables available. Most residents and even tourists frequented the nicer places more in the historic district or near shopping areas, but she and Dawn preferred this out of the way place, run by an older couple. The service was still excellent, the food better, and the crowd was not a problem.

Savannah had just placed her purse on the table and sank into one of the white folding chairs when a black sports car rolled into the small parking lot several spots down from Dawn. Savannah's stomach knotted. It couldn't be. Not here. She clenched her hands in her lap waiting for the door to open. When it did, a thickly-muscled arm came into view. She swallowed.

Dawn peered over her glasses at Savannah. "What's got you so stiff? You look like you need my mamma's movin' juice?"

Despite herself, Savannah smiled. "Your mamma's movin' juice is dangerous. Between the pain of that and the discomfort of being constipated, I think I choose to be plugged."

"You're avoiding the question," Dawn reminded her.

Savannah said no more. She couldn't move a muscle. Tyler, all six foot three, maybe two hundred thirty pounds of him, strolled her way. Her fleeting hope that he hadn't seen her had been dashed when he got out of the car and glanced around as if he was looking for someone. When he spotted her, a grin softened the hard lines of his handsome face. As if someone had put the world on slow motion to tantalize her, he raised a hand to his forehead and shoved back the dark lock of hair tumbling there. He wore a close fitting army green T-shirt, showing off his arms and accentuating the tight muscles in his chest.

His camouflage pants covered solid legs that had fueled many a fantasy of hers over the years. Seven years ago, he'd been fine as hell. Today he was a fine wine. Even the faint crinkles at the corners of his eyes and the silver at his temples, put there she guessed from his hardships overseas, looked amazing on him. What was he, thirty-two or thirty-three? She tried not to give a damn one way or another.

"Ladies," he said when he drew up to the table. His intense gaze had never left her face. The deep timbre of his voice, which had always brought her to the verge of wetness, dropped even lower. "It's good to see you again."

Savannah picked up her menu and scanned it although she usually ordered the same one or two different dishes each time she came to this restaurant. "Shouldn't you be swapping war stories with your buddies at the armory?"

He stooped down to bring his face level with hers and leaned his elbow on the table. Gleaming white teeth made up a tempting smile to greet her. She hated him. "So you're keeping tabs on me, huh? Did you miss me, Savannah?"

"Not especially." She looked across to Dawn. "What are you having? I think I'm going to get fish this time."

Tyler cut across Dawn's comment. "You hate fish."

"I love it!" She snapped her menu closed and gave the waitress who appeared an order for a grilled salmon club. "And I'll have a small house salad with that. No! Make that potato salad, please."

Dawn frowned, shaking her head. "We haven't even given our drink orders yet."

Tyler stared into Savannah's face, probably noting every nuance of her embarrassment. She hated him even more for making her act like an idiot to prove he meant nothing. All she ended up showing him was that he still meant more than she cared to admit. The hurt rising in her throat made her stare down at the table, saying nothing. It had been seven years, for Pete's sake. One would think she wouldn't hurt over him anymore.

After a minute, Tyler rose and pulled his wallet from his back pocket. He handed the card to the waitress. "Please put whatever they want on this. And cancel that last order. She doesn't like fish, and she's allergic to mayonnaise. Bring her an ice tea with extra ice and the lemon on the side, not in the glass. She'll have a spinach salad, but hold the

raisins.” *Proud of his arrogant self*, Savannah thought with disgust. He turned to Dawn. “What are you having, Dawn?”

Her traitorous friend clapped her hands. “Impressive, Tyler. It’s good to see you. I hope Mamma Gardene told you I asked about you.”

He nodded. “She did. Thanks.”

“I’ll have the same, except toss that lemon in there and heap on the raisins! Thanks, sugar, for the treat.”

He gave a slight bow. “Any time.”

When Savannah didn’t say anything to dispute Tyler’s order, the waitress zipped away to fulfill his request. Savannah hoped now that he had made her look like a fool and proved he knew a few facts about her that hadn’t changed over the years, he would take himself elsewhere. Her hope died a quick death.

He reached out and grasped Savannah’s hand from the table. His was warm and so big, she felt small and delicate in his hold. A chill raced up her spine, and she tried to pull away. He held on. “I’ve missed you so much, Savannah. I want to tell you now that we’re both back in Georgia, I’m going to do what I have to, to win you back.”

She gasped. “What?”

“I said, I’m going to win you back.” He moved in closer. “I’ve never stopped loving you, and I know you still care about me. I will do what I can to bring what you felt for me back to life, and when I am done, I plan to make you my wife.”

She scraped her chair away from the table and stood up. “Oh and I guess I have no say in the matter, just like you didn’t give me a say in ordering my own lunch?” Slapping her hands on her hips, she shook her head. “You’re still the same Sergeant Wright making all the decisions on your own and deciding what’s best for me. Just like you decided we were better off breaking up so you could pursue your damn career in the army. I don’t want anything to do with you, Tyler, so why don’t you go bother some other woman and leave me alone.”

Before she could walk away, he caught her arm and pulled her back to the table. When she looked into his dark eyes, she expected to see anger in his expression, but found a smile—and determination. “I will win you, sweetheart. With all the charm my daddy raised me with, I’ll win you back.”



He strolled around behind Savannah's chair, held it for her, and gently guided her into it. When she was seated, he raised her hand to his lips, kissed her fingers. After he retrieved his credit card from the waitress, and then walked away. Savannah and Dawn didn't say a word until his sports car roared out of the parking lot.

Dawn flashed her a knowing grin. "Let the games begin."

## Chapter Two

Savannah did all she could to dismiss Tyler from her thoughts for the rest of the day, and woke the next morning with hope that he had come to his senses. She brushed her teeth, showered, and threw on a robe and slippers to toddle into her kitchen and put a pot of coffee on. Today, she was determined to jump into the real estate pool with both feet and come out with a house sold. “Hopefully, it won’t be mine,” she muttered as she measured out her favorite exotic blend.

Just when she had poured herself an oversized mug of coffee, her doorbell rang. Sure Dawn told her she had to stop acting like a woman of leisure and go back to work, Savannah wondered who it could be.

When she swung the door open, she was presented with a teddy bear the size of the entire door, maybe bigger. Savannah blinked. “What in the world?” she exclaimed. She pushed the pink fluff to the side a little to see if someone was behind it. On the street sat a pickup truck with a sign painted on the side that read Teddies N More. A delivery man stood behind the giant stuffed animal with a clip board in his hand.

“Ma’am, can you sign for this?” he asked.

She frowned. “Who is it for?”

He read his paperwork. “Ms. Savannah Glory.” He squinted. “From Sergeant Tyler Wright. There’s a note.” He indicated the teddy’s left ear which had a folded card hanging from it.

Hesitant, but curious to know what it said, Savannah reached up and opened the card. *“To the love of my life. I was a fool to let you go. I won’t make the same mistake twice. This bear is a tiny token of what I feel for you. With all my heart, Tyler.”*

“Tiny?” Savannah said, choking on her emotions. “I can’t...I can’t accept this.” She blinked back tears and squared her shoulders. “I won’t accept this. I’m sorry. I’m not going to sign for it. You’ll have to haul it back to your company. If you’ll wait I’ll give you a tip.”

The man shook his head. “That won’t be necessary.” She couldn’t figure out if the pity in his eyes was for her or for Tyler, but she didn’t dwell on it. As if his strength had

been used up dragging the thing to her door, the delivery guy did his best to lift the bear and take it back to the truck.

Savannah watched him go and was annoyed that she didn't duck into her house sooner when she spotted her neighbor. He strolled up to the house, and her upbringing kept her from slamming the door in his face. Not that the man wasn't a good person or was unattractive, but from Tyler's first hello, so long ago, she had been spoiled to other men. Now, she didn't trust any of them—also because of Tyler.

"Wow," Michael said. "Someone's nuts about you, Savannah, but you don't feel the same, huh?"

She waved her hand, looking away. "My house is small. It could never fit inside."

"I'll bet. So"—he leaned against the doorframe, crowding her and making her step back a pace—"how about you and I take in dinner and go dancing. I promise I'll do all to make it fun for you."

Savannah sighed. There was that southern charm all the men around here exuded without effort. For the few years she had lived farther up north, the men she attracted had been a welcome change from Georgia men. Oh, each man had his way of coming on to a woman. Savannah couldn't miss it if she was blind, but there was something extra special of the men where she was born and raised. They laid it on thick and heavy, and usually they were sincere about making an effort to please a woman. That's what set them apart. That is, until they didn't give a fu—

"How about it, Savannah?" Michael asked again, interrupting her thoughts.

"I don't know, Michael. As you know, I've just moved back into town, and there's so much going on, so much I haven't settled yet. A relationship now just doesn't feel like good timing. You know what I mean?"

He was all set to push his argument when her phone rang. She tried to excuse herself, but he insisted he would wait. Savannah didn't have the excuse that she would need to go back in the house because she had left her cell phone on the table near the door. All she needed to do was lean over and grab it. With a sigh, she answered.

"Hello?"

"Hey, sweetheart, did you get my gift?" Tyler asked.

Savannah's chest tightened. Why did his voice have to still do things to her body after all this time? "No," she snapped, irritated with her physical response to him. She closed her eyes and tried to pull herself together, aware that Michael watched every move she made. Savannah opened her eyes and checked to be sure she was well-covered under her robe. "I mean, I got it, but I don't feel it's appropriate to accept such a...personal gift when I'm seeing someone else."

"Who?" he demanded.

She scoured her mind for a name. Michael in front of her wiggled his brows with suggestion. Finding the man she had no feelings for the lesser of two evils, she chose Michael. "His name is Michael. You don't know him. In fact, we're going out tonight, dinner and a movie." Why in the world did she add that? She could have straightened things out with Michael after her conversation with Tyler. Now the man looked triumphant.

"Savannah, I think we need to talk," Tyler told her. "Tell him you can't make it."

"No, I won't." In an instant, she made up her mind. She'd go out with Michael and keep it casual, just friends. She'd let him know there would never be anything between them. "I have to go. I have to finalize my plans for tonight. Good-bye, Tyler." She ended the call before he could say anymore.

Michael grinned. "So tonight? A little short notice, but I can do that." He pinched a few hairs on his slight beard. Savannah didn't like hair on a man. Tyler knew that and had stayed clean-shaven even before he joined the army.

She had done things he preferred back then as well, like grow her hair out long the way it seemed most men liked women to have. A couple years ago she'd been tempted to hack it all off and go natural, but changed her mind. She refused to believe it was in thinking about him.

Without much enthusiasm, she made the final plans with Michael and then somehow got rid of him. Michael wasn't bad to look at. He was not as tall as Tyler, maybe four or five inches shorter, which put him at just over Savannah's height. She considered herself average in the looks department. When she shared this view once with Dawn, her friend had laughed and pointed at Savannah's rear.

“Child, with all that back there, those men don’t care if you are average or homely. They get visions of doing things, I’m telling you.”

Savannah had laughed. “Dawn, why don’t you stop. They do not.”

“They do,” her friend insisted. “Watch the next time we’re out walking. You have a magnet in your butt. I’m telling you. That’s why men hound you.”

Savannah rolled her eyes and shook her head. It wasn’t that she didn’t know her butt was way too large. Her ill-fitting clothes with the waistline too big if the hips and thighs fit, told her that truth. But Dawn acted like men gawked at her, and they didn’t.

“Even so,” Dawn continued. “You’re a beautiful black woman, Savannah. Don’t you ever forget it, and don’t you let any man make you feel like you’re less than what you are.”

That sentiment had made her tear up and make excuses to hide her face until she calmed down. Dawn knew her better than anyone, even better than she knew herself, she sometimes thought. She hadn’t discussed with Dawn about how low she had come as far as self-esteem when Tyler had broken it off with her. Dawn must have picked up on it even though Savannah carried herself with confidence at all times. She had to with her line of work. That blow to her pride, to her worth, had cost her. It pushed her to grow stronger over the years, and she’d be damned if she let Tyler come back and snatch it away all over again.

\* \* \* \*

Michael came around to Savannah’s side of the car and opened the door for her. He held his hand out to help her to stand, and she hesitated before placing hers in his. She paused to search her feelings, but no, she felt nothing. No quickening of her heart beat, no tremor, nothing that happened every time Tyler touched her. She’d hoped it had dulled or died out, but the day before when he touched her hand, all the same sensations raced over her body, making her want to jump in his arms and kiss him until both their lips were numb.

No, she wouldn’t think of Tyler tonight. She had vowed she would enjoy herself. That decision had come right after she realized how stupid it would be to wear something

less flattering to her figure just because she wasn't interested in the man she was with. Shoot, a woman liked to be sexy no matter what.

Michael's hand settled at her lower back, and although she didn't look at him as they stepped onto the sidewalk to enter the restaurant, she felt his eyes on her. "You look incredible tonight, Savannah. That dress is meant for you."

She smirked. "Thanks."

She had to admit she was pleased with the compliment since she'd decided to closet for the night, the chip she carried on her shoulder toward men. So her clothing selection for the night had been an excellent choice. She'd gone with a form-fitting black and grey dress that could be worn off one or both shoulders, depending on how daring she was feeling, which extended down to mid-thigh. Her black pumps with spiky silver heels completed the look to her satisfaction. She just hoped she wasn't giving Michael any ideas that he would get lucky tonight.

When they settled at the table and had placed their orders, Savannah sipped a Dublin Mascato while watching Michael over the rim of her glass.

"So, Savannah, named after our fair city, I guess?" Michael asked.

She smiled. "You'd think so, wouldn't you? I'm actually named after my grandmother. I was never told, but I assume she was named after the city. My sister and I were both named after her."

He reached out to touch the hand she'd rested on the table. She drew it back while glancing around the restaurant. Somehow, she felt like she was being watched, but that was ridiculous. Most of the time, Savannah stuck to a routine, which probably wasn't safe for a single woman, but Michael'd had a craving for Italian.

"You have a sister then?" he asked.

She took a moment to focus on him and what they had been saying. Ashamed of her rudeness, she tried to give him extra attention, leaning forward and not allowing her gaze to wander. "Yes, but Savannah was my grandmother's first name. My sister didn't appreciate being stuck with Millicent."

Michael shouted with laughter, although she didn't think the name called for it. "You're kidding?"

She raised her eyebrows and shrugged. Of course she was lying. The tease had entertained him, but she was sure Rose wouldn't appreciate being called Millicent. That is if her younger sister were in Georgia rather than jetting around the world with her rich boyfriend.

Turning the conversation from herself, she asked Michael, "What about you? Any siblings? Born and raised here?"

He shook his head. "Nope, I was born in California, but I travel all around with my job. If I meet the right woman, I guess I'll settle down eventually. The house I'm in right now is a rental for the year. After that, this project is up, and I'm chomping at the bit, trying to find the next place." He paused for the waiter to set their food down. When he had scoffed down a few bites, he continued. "I don't have any siblings. I'm an only child, and both my parents are only children. I'm okay with that. Too much family can be suffocating."

Giving the lie to him wanting to settle down, she thought. Whatever, she wasn't interviewing him for a potential husband that was for sure. Savannah took a few moments to bless her food and then ate more leisurely. What she suspected was that Michael liked to move around so he could meet new women in new places. He had set his sights on her right away. She didn't date often, but when she did—admittedly it was sometimes to meet physical needs—it was with white guys only. That was her preference and had seemed to be from the start, when she first starting liking boys. She felt no need to justify it with anyone. Dawn, the closest person to her, and even her flighty sister, didn't care one way or another. Michael fit the bill with his fair skin and baby blues, but he did nothing for her.

"So you promised me dancing after this, right?" she teased.

The anticipation in his gaze was comical. He laid his napkin down and rubbed his hands together. "Beautiful woman, I wouldn't miss dancing with you for anything, especially on the slower songs."

She smirked. "Of course." It all went back to her behind, she thought with amusement. He was so going to be disappointed because booty-grabbing wasn't on the night's activities. When she laughed, Michael joined her and then pushed his chair back. She cast him a questioning look since she hadn't taken more than a few bites of her steak

toscano, and wanted to savor it because the Tuscan potatoes and bell peppers alone made her want to eat like Michael had. She restrained herself with effort. “You’re not ready to go yet?”

“Oh no.” He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “I need to visit the restroom. I’ll be back in a sec.”

Savannah watched him rush off and then looked around the restaurant again. The feeling she had earlier of being watched was gone. She went back to enjoying her meal, and didn’t look up until she had finished and Michael came back. He dropped into his chair, sweat beading his forehead, and fingers clutching his napkin. “Are you okay, Michael? You look pale. Are you not feeling well?”

“I’m fine,” he muttered.

Worried, she reached across the table to touch his hand, but he drew back like she had a deadly disease. She blinked in surprise at him.

“Uh, can we cut this night short?” he suggested. “I think it’s just not going to work out between us.”

“What the hell?” She was in the act of wiping her mouth, while he fumbled to get his wallet out of his back pocket. He peeled off several bills, tossed them on the table, and stood up.

“That should cover it. I have to go. I’m sure you can get a ride home.” And he fled the restaurant.

Savannah could not believe what just happened. She’d had dates where there was no chemistry on either side, and they had parted on good terms, but Michael went to the bathroom eager to spend more time with her and came back—the only word she could think of to describe how he behaved was terrified out of his mind.

Shaking her head, she settled the bill and got ready to leave when she glanced toward the back of the restaurant. To her shock, there was Tyler and a couple well-muscled guys with him, all chuckling like they were proud of themselves. Now she understood what happened, and Tyler was going to get a piece of her mind for interfering with her life!



### Chapter Three

Tyler spotted her heading toward him. Damn, she looked amazing in that dress and heels. Her heavy breasts stretched the material in just the right way to make him hard as a rock within seconds. The scowl however, and the puckered lips told him he and his guys were caught. Savannah was about to light into him, and he didn't need his cohorts to hear it.

He looked over his shoulder. "Hey, guys, thanks for your help. I've got it from here. I'll see you later."

Years of training had taught them to spot danger a mile off. One slapped the other across the chest with the back of his. "Oh shit, Murphy, we better get our asses out of here. Looks like Big Sarge is about to get taken down."

"Yeah," said his partner. "Don't want to get hit in the crossfire. Later, sarge."

They hurried away, leaving Tyler grumbling about men who had found no trouble having his back in the hot desert but being punks when it came to tiny little women. He turned back to face Savannah as she drew level with him. *Beautiful, hot women, who make a man want to lick them from head to toe right here.* He sighed, knowing she'd never let him lick her here or elsewhere. Not yet anyway.

"Hello, Savannah. How's your evening going?" He offered an apologetic smile although he didn't mean it.

"Don't hand me that, Tyler." She pointed toward the exit. "Outside. I'm not making a spectacle of myself in here."

"Yes, ma'am." He fell into step behind her, enjoying the view. She cast an angry glare back at him, but he didn't pretend not to look where she knew he was. Sexy, spicy, a temper, smart, perfect—all of those adjectives described the woman he loved more than anyone. He had missed her so much and had called out her sweet name while he suffered on three tours in Iraq. He'd lost a couple men, had a few minor injuries of his own, but what got him through it was the belief that somehow he would win Savannah back and make her his wife.

He'd made the biggest mistake of his life years ago, deciding she and he were better off pursuing their careers and then later finding out if they were right for one another. He

knew now that was arrogance on his part, deciding for the two of them, but Savannah hadn't forgiven him for it. What kept him going was the belief that some day she would.

Once out on the sidewalk a few steps down from the restaurant so they were out of sight of the patrons there, Savannah whirled to face him, hands on her curvy hips. "Just who the hell do you think you are, Tyler? What did you do to Michael? What did you say to him?" She waved a hand to cut him off when he would have spoken. "You know what, it doesn't matter. You need to realize we are through, over! I'm not coming back to you. I don't love you anymore."

When she said things like that, it felt like she'd ripped his heart straight through his chest and stomped it, but he knew it was her own anger and pain speaking. At least he hoped so. He decided not to address her words and continue with his plan.

Tyler lessened the space between them and crowded Savannah. With his nearness, she seemed to lose the thread of her rant and stuttered in the cutest way. He grinned down at her. "Smell that?" he asked.

Her gaze clouded. "Smell what? Back up, Tyler. You don't need to stand so close."

Beneath the trees lining the street, lights twinkling in the branches, they stood. Tyler indicated with a point of his chin to the blossoming white flowers above their heads. The fragrance punctuated the air, and Tyler remembered Savannah telling him years ago that the scent put her in mind of a Victoria's Secret perfume. Trying to impress her with his memory of what she said, he mentioned it, but she remained stoic.

Okay, so he scared off her date. Was that so bad? The idiot had it coming, and he was a fool to think he would get Tyler's woman. She might not know she was his, but she was. And he'd be damned if he sat by while some guy lusted over her every move. If Tyler had let that date go on without a warning, who knew what would happen. It had been a lucky break when the man went to the bathroom because Tyler had been trying to determine the best time to snatch him.

He thought back to the scene in the restaurant's rest room and had to stifle a chuckle. Michael had come in, proud of himself for landing a woman as perfect as Savannah. Michael was the nerdy type, Tyler thought, college educated from the looks of him, with advanced degrees. Not that Tyler thought all those who went to college looked like nerds. He'd just come across a lot of guys like Michael who thought they had to

prove how superior they were to soldiers, on an intellectual level. Tyler wasn't ashamed of the fact that he and his closest friends had opted for the army instead college. Many soldiers he knew had used that opportunity to attend college for free. It wasn't for him.

So, when he spotted Michael, maybe he was stereotyping the guy, but he looked too damn happy. Tyler could figure out what he had on his mind, and he had no qualms about disabusing him of his ideas.

Michael stood at the sink washing his hands when Tyler sidled up next to him and leaned on the wall, arms crossed over his chest. His buddies kept their distance for the time being, pretending they were chitchatting a few feet away. "So," Tyler began, "I saw that sweet lady you were with. Bet you're going to enjoy yourself later, huh?"

Michael whistled. "If you didn't see her when we came in, man, you missed that ass. I'm going to get in that tonight if it kills me."

Tyler flared his nostrils and narrowed his eyes, but Michael wasn't looking at him. He primped before the mirror. Tyler glanced over at his friends, but they signaled that he should keep his cool a bit longer.

"I don't know." Tyler shrugged. "Caramel beauty like her might not be into white guys. Maybe she was feeling sorry for you when she decided to go out with you." He'd honestly tried to make Michael lose confidence rather than threaten him. At first he did anyway.

Michael laughed and turned to Tyler, slapping him on the shoulder and using him as a towel in the process. He didn't know who he was messing with.

"Listen, bud," Michael said. "I'm an old pro at getting women to spread their legs for me. I've had them in almost every state in this country, and I knew as soon as I saw Savannah with her big, brown eyes screaming loneliness that it wouldn't be too long before I got her. And tonight's the night."

All Tyler's plans to keep his cool went straight out the door. He put up a hand and grasped two of Michael's fingers, forcing them back while twisting his arm. In a blink, the idiot was on his knees crying out. Tyler nodded to his friend to watch the door. "Listen to me, you piece of garbage," Tyler told Michael, "you so much as lay a hand on Savannah, I will break both your fucking arms off and shove them down your throat. And

then after I've beat you senseless, I'll hand you to my buddies here to finish the job. Got it?"

Disbelief mingled with pain on Michael's face. He wasn't convinced. Murphy stooped down on Michael's level and studied his nails. "I don't think he gets it, sarge. Let me put my fist down his throat to soften it up for you." Murphy was the biggest of his guys, sheer muscle from head to toe and topping Tyler's height of six two by a few more inches. No one in their right mind came against him.

At Murphy's words, Michael swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing comically. "You wouldn't do that. You could get arrested."

"Us?" Murphy laughed. "Don't you know we're respected around here? We're heroes, man, fresh back from the desert. Matter of fact"—he smirked at Tyler—"we had to play diplomat and got a few of our guys' asses blown up and killed. Why not come home and take our anger out on some pansy who don't know what it is to be a real man? You want to give Big Sarge an excuse to make *you* the target?"

Upon learning they were soldiers, Michael's face reddened, and he looked like he was about to pee his pants. Tyler figured from all the news reports of violent soldiers, many thought they were all one step from zapping out. It pissed him off that the media didn't show a lot more of the good they did, like giving gifts and toys to the Iraqi children, and sharing food when they had it. If nothing else, they should emphasize all they had to deal with over there, all the horrors rather than downplaying it.

"Don't kill me, okay?" Michael begged. "I don't know what she is to you, but I didn't know. Is she trying to make you jealous or something? I didn't know, I tell you."

Tyler released Michael's hand and grabbed him in the collar. He yanked him to his feet and slammed him against the wall high enough so he was on his tiptoes. "You end this date now. You don't talk to her. You don't even breathe the same air she breathes. If I find out you came near her, I'll end you. Oh, and don't say a word about our conversation. Understand?"

"Yeah, yeah, I got it, man. I got it," Michael said, almost sniveling.

"Let me hit him once, sarge," Murphy pleaded.

Tyler nodded, and Murphy wound up. Michael cried out, bracing himself for the punch. The three of them burst out laughing, and Tyler threw Michael toward the exit. “Wrap it up, and get the fuck out of here.”

Michael jettied, stumbling and fixing his clothes as he left. Murphy sucked his teeth. “Man, now I need to hit the gym or something. Got me all worked up with no action.”

“Save that for your girl,” Linwood, Tyler’s other buddy told him.

They laughed and after a few more jokes at Murphy’s expense, they left the bathroom. That’s when she had caught him. He’d been too pumped after roughing up that loser to think about making sure she didn’t see them. Now he stood looking down into lovely brown eyes that had haunted him for the last few years, ever since that day he’d broken her heart.

“Do you know how beautiful you look tonight, sweetheart?” he asked her.

She rolled her eyes. “Give me a break, Tyler. Okay, the dress is short and tight, but I’m more than a body.”

He grinned and caught her beneath the chin to make her look at him. “Not the dress, you. I’m convinced that even if you were average, ordinary, I’d still have lost my heart to you. There’s something about you that makes me forget the horrors I’ve seen, something that soothes me and brings me peace. What is that, Savannah? What power do you have over me?”

“Don’t!” She tried to pull away, but he wrapped a hand around her waist and hauled her closer. Her breasts flattened against his chest, sending lightning rods of desire to his groin. She wriggled against him, making it much worse. His shaft thickened and grew, taking too much room in his pants, and causing Savannah to shriek. “Get off me. All that sweet talk was for one thing. You men are all the same.”

Rather than back off and pretend he didn’t long to make love to her right now, he decided to prove to her that she wanted the same thing. Tyler squeezed her closer and lowered his head toward hers. She turned her head, but he turned it back and nibbled her bottom lip. The soft, delicious feel of her beneath him, sent his senses into overdrive, but he battled for restraint.

He stuck out his tongue and ran the tip along her lips, dipped into the honeyed mouth he’d missed, and took her fully. At first Savannah withstood the desire he knew was

rising to a boiling point within her, and then she clung to him, gave as much as she got. She curved her body to his and folded her arms around his waist. The tiny moan that escaped her lips brought him to the edge of insanity. They would have gone on half the night, he was sure, if the catcalls didn't interrupt them, bringing Savannah out of the cloud of yearning he'd awakened in them both.

Savannah broke free from his hold and backed up. She ran back of a hand over her mouth while looking to see who had yelled out encouragement for their kiss. Tyler already knew it was Murphy and Linwood. He'd sent them home earlier, and they should have left. He'd kick their asses tomorrow.

"I will not be attacked on the street like this, Tyler," Savannah told him.

He snickered. "Oh is that what it was, an attack? Looked like you wanted that kiss as much as I did, maybe more."

She turned to walk away, but he caught her arm. "Let me take you home."

"I'll catch a taxi."

"No, you won't." His firm tone let her know she would not win this particular argument.

"Yeah, you never would let a woman go home alone, would you?" she spat. "Even—"

"Don't go there, Savannah," he warned. "Our problems have never been about me being unfaithful, and you know that."

She looked away but waited until he led her to where he had parked, around the corner where she wouldn't spot his car. She'd been about to mention a woman that had pursued him the same time he had gone after Savannah. Had Karen only known she had been wasting her time and energy. From the moment he laid eyes on Savannah, he was lost. That was part of the reason he broke it off back then.

All around him, the guys were tearing through women, one after another. Not that he desired to be a womanizer then, but it just didn't seem like reality to love Savannah so completely. Yet he did. On the day he broke it off, he'd ripped his soul apart as well, and the few women he'd been with since could not come close. If he didn't win Savannah back...No, he had to believe he'd succeed. He *had* to.

When they pulled up in front of her house, he shut the engine off and caught her hand before she could get out. The annoyance in her glare bit at him, but he ignored it. “I’m sorry, okay? For being overbearing tonight. I didn’t see interest in you for that guy, but it still irked me that he thought...” He let his words trail away.

“Don’t you think I know what he thought?” She pulled her hand free from his. “I can take care of myself, Tyler. I don’t need you or your buddies, and I don’t appreciate how you three ruined my night and made my date look like a fool. He didn’t deserve that.”

Tyler gripped the steering wheel and bit his tongue to keep from telling her just what that asshole had said about her in the bathroom. She, looking like she did, would know that men desired her, but he was pretty sure she didn’t know how depraved some of their thoughts about her could be. As long as he was around, none of them would get to make those fantasies real.

“Whatever he deserved, it’s not you, and he’s not going to approach you again.”

“I’ve had it up to here with your macho stuff, Tyler. I’m not going to stand for it. Do you hear me?”

“I hear you, ma’am, and I’m telling you that I’m not going to give up on you and me. Period.”

She let out a small scream. “Don’t call me ma’am.”

He opened his mouth to respond, but she held up a hand. “Forget it. Good night. Thanks for bringing me home. I won’t need a ride from you ever again. She surged out of the car and slammed the door, making him wince. This ’69 Chevy was his baby, and he’d put a lot into rebuilding it. What could he do? He’d pissed her off, but he wasn’t giving up yet.

While the love of his life marched up to her front door and searched for her house key, he watched her to be sure she was safely inside, and he planned his next move.

## Chapter Four

Savannah sat at the vanity in her room staring at the tear streaming down her cheek. She rested her face in her hands. She should have known better than to let him get too close. She should have realized one touch, one kiss, could make her lose the control she had fought for all these years. Right there for all the world to see, and as evidence to him that she still cared, she'd kissed him. No, not just kissed him. She'd been all over him, pressing her body into his, loving the feel of his hard-on and knowing she'd caused it. Like a slut, she had stuck her tongue in his mouth and greedily tasted him. Damn it, she'd been a starving woman!

She sniffled and looked up to wipe her face. While she ran a brush through her hair, she considered where all that had gotten her. Nowhere, except stuck thinking about him, longing for him, all over again. She'd been free, or virtually free. There had been nights over the last years that she didn't dream about him and days when she didn't pine for him, wondering what he was doing and if he was safe where he was.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," she chastised herself.

And worse, he had gotten away with scaring Michael off. For a moment, she considered calling Michael and telling him she would make sure Tyler and his guys didn't lay a hand on him, but she doubted he'd believe or that Tyler would comply. Men like Tyler—soldiers—were trained warriors, fought for dominance, whether it was to clear out insurgents overseas from a town they occupied, or if it was a man horning in on the woman they considered theirs. She imagined Tyler was worse because he was a sergeant. He would expect Michael to obey him when he commanded the man to leave Savannah alone, and he would deal out punishment if for some insane reason Michael decided to ignore the order.

She breathed a sigh conceding defeat for this round with Tyler. He played hardball, and it was obvious she still had heavy feelings for him, feelings she didn't want and had tried to drive out all this time—first with determination, and then with other men. The fact that she didn't trust men kept that method from working. She was too scared to fall for someone else who would shatter her poor heart even more. "If I could ever stop loving Tyler, loving someone else would be a possibility," she told her reflection.



When Savannah finished putting her hair up for the night, she stood, and took her robe off, preparing for bed. With the light out and her snuggled beneath the covers, her mind filled with thoughts of Tyler and what it had been like the first time they made love. Just as most men liked the curviness of her rear, Tyler loved it, but he had always respected her, and back then she didn't doubt she was more than a body to him.

Even so, their nights together had been nothing short of powerful. That first time they were intimate, Tyler had surprised her at her apartment. He'd made sure Dawn would be out with her latest boyfriend, and she had let him hold her key to their place. While Savannah laid on her bed, flipping through a magazine, bored and lonely because she thought Tyler was too busy to see her, he had been planning.

She laid her head on her hands, yawning and thinking she'd take a short nap before finding a movie to suffer through. *I'm an idiot*, she thought at the time. *For falling for him when he's not crazy about me. If he were crazy about me, he'd be here instead of being out with his boys.*

In their tiny apartment, one could hear a key in the front door from Savannah's bedroom, so she heard when Tyler used the key and came in. "Hey," Savannah called. "You forget something, Dawn?"

No answer. She frowned and called again, but when her friend didn't answer, she shrugged and went back to her magazine. She was almost dozing when her door creaked open. Savannah jumped and turned around to be presented with a huge bunch of balloons. All of them said *I love you*. Big ones with pink and red swirls, small ones with cute little teddy bears, and plain red with pink ribbons spiraling from them.

Savannah had been twenty-two at the time, and Tyler was twenty-five. Shaking all over and amazed beyond belief, she sat up and crossed the room to find him among all the ribbons and balloons. He stood holding up the door frame, a casual grin spread over his handsome face. He shrugged. "I felt like getting you a little something."

"A little something," she exclaimed. "Tyler, wherever you got all this, they must have kissed your toes in gratitude for emptying the store."

He chuckled. "So you're saying you don't want it, too much?"

A sense of shyness descended on her, making her tongue tied. She swallowed and gathered her courage. “Do you mean what’s written on those balloons, or is it just what guys do?”

The whole time she spoke, she hadn’t been looking at him, too shaky to stare into his eyes, and too afraid about what she would see there. She knew she loved him, lived for him. She’d seen what appeared to be devotion in his eyes while they were on countless dates or when they had stayed at home to watch a movie and eat popcorn. However, did that mean he loved her, truly loved her?

Tyler shoved his way through the floating gifts and stopped in front of her. He reached up and lifted her chin so she was forced to look into his eyes. The tenderness reflected in his made her knees weak. She would have tumbled to the floor if he didn’t catch her and pull her into his rock hard chest.

“Sweetheart, you are my world. I love you so much it hurts sometimes, and I don’t know what I’d do without you.” He rested his cheek alongside hers and squeezed her around her waist. “Savannah, Savannah, I cry out your name just to bring you closer to me, no matter where you are. Is that crazy?”

She burst out crying. No one had ever said something like that to her. “Tyler,” she sniffled. “I love you too. No other man will do for me. I want to be with you always and forever.”

He drew back and captured her lips in a searing kiss that left her hot and wet. Up until then, she’d resisted going all the way with him. The two or three relationships she’d had previous to meeting Tyler hadn’t been that good in the sex department, and the guys had dumped her soon after she’d given them her body. She had wanted Tyler to be different and held him off.

Was now the time? Would he leave her if she slept with him? She was still scared, but her body was on fire to have him, to feel him deep inside of her. So, tense with nerves, she made room between them and ran her hand down the front of his pant to cup his shaft. She squeezed it and almost fainted at the girth and length.

Tyler broke their kiss. “Oh sweetheart, I beg you. Don’t do that unless you mean it. You’re driving me insane.”

In answer, she stroked him harder, eliciting a groan from him. She took it a step further by pinching his jeans button open and lowering his zipper. Before she could venture inside, he stopped her, laying a hand over hers.

“Easy, sweetness. Let’s take this to the bed where we can be comfortable.”

Savannah looked up at him, and he stroked her cheek. His gaze softened, and she knew in that moment that Tyler had been listening to her when she told him how limited her experience was, how she hadn’t enjoyed it as much as she thought she could. Most men would have bragged that they could make her scream, while never producing those results or even trying to. Tyler guided her to the bed and sat her down before dropping beside her.

“I want to let you know that I will do whatever it takes to please you tonight, to make you feel like our first time together was the most amazing night of your life,” he told her. “If I don’t do something right, or I’m touching you here and you want me there, tell me, or guide my hand. I’m yours, Savannah. All yours.”

Tears had wet her eyes at his words. “And I’m yours, Tyler. I’ll always be yours. You’ve got to know that.”

He nodded. “We’re meant to be, no matter where we are.”

Tyler laid her back on the bed and began to remove her clothing. Every woman was self-conscious about her body, and Savannah felt even more so because Tyler’s body before he joined the army was muscled perfection. But when he unbuttoned her blouse and revealed her red lace bra, which she was glad now that she had tossed on for a whim earlier that night when she was feeling lonely for him, his eyes had widened, and he looked like he was ready to drool.

“Damn, sweetheart, how could you keep these from me? They’re so...heavy.” He grasped each of her breasts in his palms and ran a thumb over the soft skin revealed above the bra. “Perfect size, you make me hungry.”

She blushed, pleased he liked what he saw so far, but what would he say when he caught sight of her naked hips. They were too wide in her opinion and only accentuated the fact that her butt was huge. When he had tugged the shorts she wore down over her hips, he drew back and closed his eyes.

Savannah sat up. “What’s wrong? Am I hideous? I’m sorry. I’ll lose weight—”

“Don’t you dare,” he shouted and then lowered his voice. He shook his head. “Sweetheart, don’t do a thing. Truth is when I saw all of you, I almost came too soon. That would be humiliating, but how could I not lose it when you’re so sexy, so hot. You make me want to be inside you right now, but I’m determined to take it slow. I want to make you feel good.”

Savannah reached out to touch him, but he pushed her back.

“I’m serious, woman. Give me a minute.”

She blinked in surprise at how he paused to take in her form, his gaze lingering at the patch of hair between her legs. With his knee, he nudged her legs open. Savannah dug her nails into her palms to keep from covering herself. She believed him when he said he was attracted to her. The men she’d been previously involved with hadn’t drawn back at seeing her naked, but Tyler mattered most. He held her heart.

“Relax,” he told her as he ran his hand up her thigh. When his thumb connected with her bud, she tensed, bit her lip, and moaned. He messaged it with gentle strokes, pinched it between two fingers and tugged just a little. Savannah catapulted toward an orgasm that fast, but she held on to make what Tyler was doing to her last.

Finding her wet when he parted her folds, he pushed in a single finger. Savannah gripped the covers under her and began to buck against Tyler’s movements. He pushed in deeper and then added another finger.

“Do you like that, sweetheart?” he asked.

She whimpered, her eyes closed and head back. “Yes, oh yes, Tyler. Don’t stop, I beg you.”

“Never beg me, Savannah. I’ll give you anything you want. I promise you that.”

He increased his pace, pushed deeper, bumping her button with his knuckles and sending her over the top. Savannah felt for his wrist, wound her hands around his, and guided his movements. She drew his fingers to the hilt then pulled them back. She rode his hand with the expertise of having pleased herself for years, and Tyler caught on to the rhythm she needed. When she let go, he had it down, and drove her to the brink of an orgasm.

She cried out. “I’m going to come.”

“Come, by love. Come now,” he encouraged her, climbing up over her so he hovered above her body while she writhed beneath him. Savannah shouted through her release and then pulled Tyler down for a kiss. She murmured her love for him on his lips, and he echoed the same. “Are you ready?”

She nodded.

He climbed to the side of the bed and quickly threw off his clothing, and Savannah removed the rest of hers and tossed them on the floor next to Tyler’s. In seconds he was poised above her again. Savannah swallowed, staring down at his length between them. He was rock solid and angling down to her like he was ready to impale her small tunnel. She gripped his shoulders, shaking.

“Don’t be afraid. I’ll take it slow and easy.” He pressed the tip of his shaft into her, and instead of pain, pure pleasure radiated out from her core. Just the feel of Tyler gliding into her until he was buried, was unbelievable. Savannah’s fears fled. She curved her legs over his thighs as he braced himself on his knuckles at her sides. Tyler grunted. “Oh man, you feel good, sweetheart. Easy, I have to be careful. I’m ready to explode.”

Savannah ran her hands up his arms, held onto him and began to match his thrusts. She arched her back, pushing her breasts forward. Each time Tyler settled himself inside her, he bumped her body, causing her breasts to bounce. Watching seemed to take him to the verge of his climax as well, and Savannah enjoyed the power she had over him in that moment. She could drive him to release whether he wanted to let go or not.

With a wicked grin for him, she began to play with her nipples, pinching them and stroking around the puckered tips. Tyler gritted his teeth. She stuck a finger into her mouth, sucked on it and brought it out wet. When she used the same digit to tease her nipple, Tyler shouted. His hot seed burst forth inside her, and Savannah picked up the speed of their grinding.

Tyler reached down to pull her up to his chest. Together they rocked their hips, kissing each other with greedy hunger, unable to get enough. Savannah dipped her head back, and Tyler followed her with his tongue along her throat. He moaned her name over and over, telling her how beautiful she was, how much he needed her.

And when Savannah thought the pleasure would end because Tyler softened somewhat and withdrew from her body, she was happy to find she was wrong. Tyler

teased her softness again, this time using the palm of his hand flat on her bud. He squeezed and stroked with precise rhythm until she came, and then he gently turned her over to her belly.

“Tyler, what are you doing?” Nervous that he was going in the back way, which she’d never allowed any guy to do, although plenty asked her for it, even some she wasn’t dating at the time, she tensed.

“Relax, sweetheart. Haven’t I promised not to hurt you? To take it slow for you?” He stroked her skin for a long while, massaged her shoulders, down her back, to her butt, and last her thighs. The tension in her eased. Tyler bent toward her, and she felt his erection brush her butt. She was just about to pull away, but he laid a hand on her butt. “I’m not going to put it there. Open your legs for me, Savannah. Trust me.”

She did, without a doubt, and spread her legs for him. Tyler grasped her hips and hoisted them to slip a pillow beneath her. She pushed her butt higher. “Shouldn’t I be on my knees?”

“No, just lie still.”

When he entered her from behind, she gasped. This was tighter, maybe because of how her body was angled, but Savannah couldn’t believe how good it was. She sobbed her pleasure into her second pillow and clenched her fists beside her head. Tyler, pumped into her, bumping her rear over and over, until she thought she couldn’t take the powerful sensations.

Their bodies merged and drew apart then merged. Savannah pushed into her lover, wanting him to fill her always, to almost become a part of each other. She reached behind her to stroke his hip, squeeze his ass, and encourage him to go faster.

“Harder, Tyler.”

“Are you sure, sweetheart? Tell me you’re sure.”

“I’m sure! It’s so good. I can’t get enough of you. Tyler, make me come like this, please!”

He flattened his body on hers, pressing her into the mattress, and then he reached under her to stroke her button. The combination of his shaft invading her and his fingers teasing sent her into immediate climax. She came screaming his name. Seconds later, Tyler followed and then collapsed on top of her.

“Wow. Oh, wow,” was all he kept saying when he rolled to her side.

She grinned over at him, brushing her hair out of her eyes. “So do you think you might want to do that again sometime?” she asked him.

He flicked an eyebrow up. “Woman, are you nuts? Nothing can keep me from coming after that on a regular basis.”

*Yeah, nothing*, she thought so many years later. Nothing except him when he decided she wasn’t what he wanted, that he didn’t want her more than his career in the army. And now he was back to make her life a living hell. No, she wouldn’t go back, no matter how good it had been with him.

## Chapter Five

“So if you don’t feel you can forgive him, why are you going out on a date with him?” Dawn asked Savannah. Savannah seemed always to be standing before her mirror, checking her hair. This time, she was running short of time in preparing for her date with Tyler of all people. What had she been thinking to agree? Maybe it was to keep her sanity after he’d been phoning all week and caught her while she was out of the house. From Winn-Dixie to the place where she got the oil changed on her car, he was there. If she had any sense she would have reported him to the police as a stalker instead of agreeing to a date. Yet, how could she do that when he came either with gifts or with sweet words designed to melt her heart. It had taken Herculean strength to resist his charm each time.

She met Dawn’s reflected gaze in the mirror and then let her own skitter away. Instead, she examined her too clingy dress. The one she’d worn with Michael had given him and Tyler ideas. She did not want a repeat of that adventure. “I want one thing only, to get my heart to stop beating for him. If I can accomplish that, then I can live a normal and happy life, and after all this time, I can find the *right* man and maybe have some kids before my biological clock rusts.”

Dawn laughed. “You’re not even thirty yet, you nut. Your clock’s got a few more years in the gears. And what makes you think Tyler isn’t the right man?”

Savannah set her perfume bottle down with too much force. Shoot, she hadn’t meant to put on any, not with Tyler. “We’ve been over this a million and one times, Dawn. If he truly was the right one, he wouldn’t have left me in the first place. And, before you give me that crap about everyone makes mistakes, I’ll add that if he loved me like he should have, he would have come back to me right away, owned up for his mistake.”

“Remind me not to cross you, girlfriend. You’re hardcore.”

Savannah considered whether she had the energy to get angry with her friend. Dawn should have been on her side, but she’d been rooting for Tyler all along. No, she didn’t have the energy. All she had in reserve was to keep him at bay while she convinced her stupid heart to let him go. This date was to show herself once and for all that not only would it not have worked out, it still wouldn’t. All those sexy memories she’d been suffering since the night he kissed her, were just that, memories. And she knew as much



as anyone that memories could be distorted over time. Anyway, a great relationship was not all about the physical.

“Besides,” Savannah began.

“Besides what?”

Savannah turned from the mirror as ready as she’d ever be. Tonight, her dress was coral-colored, the tiny sleeves hanging off the shoulder, while the beaded V-neck wouldn’t show off too much of her cleavage. Still with its cling and short length, Savannah didn’t doubt where Tyler’s eyes would linger. He could look all he wanted, but he wasn’t going to touch. She’d keep her distance in order to avoid a repeat of the incident beneath the trees.

“Besides, she continued. “I could never be sure he wouldn’t leave me again, and you and I both know what that was like. I won’t go back to that, Dawn. Never.”

Dawn stood up and pulled her into a brief hug. “Aw, baby, I would skin him if he even used a single brain cell on it.”

Savannah laughed. “You’re psychic now?”

Dawn rolled her eyes. “Men don’t keep their mouths shut when they should. They blurt out stupid things that make a woman mad at them, and then they say, ‘what did I say?’”

Savannah wrinkled her nose. “Please don’t tell me Will did that. I thought he was perfect, and you two were inseparable.”

Her friend preceded her out of her bedroom but cut her eyes to Savannah over her shoulder. “Don’t be fooled. Men are men, even the best ones. It takes a skilled and determined woman to train him. That’s why I’m spending the evening in front of your TV eating popcorn.”

“Huh?”

“I told Will you were going out on a date tonight, and I would be having my own fun out. Let him wonder with whom. Since I have you covered, he won’t be calling here to check to see if I’m here. And if he drives by, I already have my car out of sight. He’ll suffer until he learns to watch his mouth.”

Savannah shook her head. “Do I want to know what he said?”

“No, otherwise, I’ll be pissed off all over again, and have to think up more punishments for him. Ones that keep me out of the house, and I’m not in the mood for it this week. I’m dealing with inventory at work, and when I get home, all I want to do is sleep. But a woman’s got to do what a woman’s got to do.”

Savannah squared her shoulders when the bell rang. “Don’t I know it. Wish me luck.”

“Good luck,” Dawn told her and spun away to the kitchen to make popcorn.

Heading to the door, Savannah coached herself under her breath about staying in control, reminding herself of what Tyler had done and that things were not different. Her life was on target, and she’d even gotten some great bites for not one but three houses. She opened the door, and whatever she had been saying to herself took flight.

Tyler was dressed in a light silk champagne-colored shirt un-tucked and dark slacks. His shirt was unbuttoned at the throat, giving her a peek at his bronzed skin beneath. He took her breath away and made her resolve waver in the worse way. She tried steeling her spine, but she feared what would happen tonight. The thought of canceling at this late juncture crossed her mind.

Tyler narrowed his eyes and turned his head somewhat to the side. “I think I recognize that expression. You’re having second thoughts, thinking about canceling.”

She hated that he knew her so well after so long. Must be because she was stuck in a rut and needed to make some changes.

“Not on your life, ma’am,” he told her in all seriousness. “We’re going out, and we’re going to have a great time. Are you ready?”

“I feel like I don’t have a choice.”

“You don’t.” He took her hand and would have threaded his fingers between hers, but Savannah resisted and snaked her arm around his instead. He patted her hand, sending chills throughout her body.

“Where are you taking me?” Would he want to go where she would like to eat, or had he decided already based on what he was in the mood for? She wanted to believe he would be selfish about the decision.

“River Street Oyster Bar?” he suggested. She stopped walking, and he laughed. “I’m kidding. Come on.” He tugged her forward.

“Seriously, Tyler, if you take me to some horrible place...”

He grinned. She wanted to reach up and brush his hair off his forehead and let her fingers linger on his warm skin. He gave her a knowing look before she looked away in disgust at herself.

He bumped her shoulder to get her attention. "I won't. We're going to Vic's."

Her eyes widened. "Vic's on the River?"

He laughed. "Is there any other? Remember we went practically every night for a month and ordered the same thing every time?"

She grinned. "Chicken and waffles. We pretended we were tourists and even shopped at Sona's Salon there, buying souvenirs and T-shirts with *Savannah* emblazoned across the back." She shook her head remembering. Vic's was the only restaurant popular with tourists she had frequented, and only because of Tyler. That must be why she stuck with the out of the way place she and Dawn ate lunch at two or three times a week. No painful memories.

Looking up to find Tyler's eyes shining with joy at the fact that she remembered their time spent at Vic's, she frowned and shrugged. "Your mentioning it sparked the memory. I'd forgotten. I never go there."

The disappointment on his face made her feel guilty. She didn't want to feel bad for him. He should be the one feeling bad. He should still be apologizing to her and crying because she had cried for so long. Yet here he was so happy he almost radiated with it. She refused to believe his mood was so light because she'd given in and gone out with him.

When they arrived at the restaurant, Tyler parked at the only available space on Drayton. Anything closer had been full. He came around to open Savannah's door for her, and she waited, not wanting to antagonize him at the moment, and enjoying the chivalrous treatment. She stepped out, and Tyler took her hand and tucked it beneath his arm.

With the weather being cool, a balmy sixty-five, they were able to stroll down to the main entrance of the restaurant on East Bay Street. Savannah remembered as they crossed Factor's Walk that the restaurant, located in Savannah's historic district had been an old cotton warehouse and had five floors. She absolutely loved her city, and had missed it while she was away.

In fact, seeing her favorite haunt with Tyler was almost like seeing it anew, as the tourists must view it. Vic's was known for its fantastic view of the river, and she anticipated the atmosphere of the place. Why had she stopped visiting there? Oh yeah, Tyler.

When they were seated and the waiter had arrived, Savannah tried to assert her independence of Tyler to break with anything that would encourage old feelings to arise by placing her order for herself. Before she could open her mouth to say a word, Tyler got the drop on her by knowing what he wanted without looking at the menu.

"We'll just take care of everything now, okay?" he told the waiter. At the man's nod and kind smile, he said, "To drink, we'll have Martini & Rossi Asti. For an appetizer, let's go with fried green tomatoes with goat cheese and tomato chutney. Next, let's make it pan seared jumbo scallops for me, and the lady will have brown sugar cured double cut pork chop."

"Very good, sir," the waiter said. "Your sides?"

Steaming and ready to kick him or slap him, or both, Savannah knew he was trying to recreate the past. They'd had Martini & Rossi Asti on their first date. She was amazed he looked to her to choose what she wanted for sides. She gave her order, and he relayed it to the waiter as if the man hadn't heard her say what she wanted in the first place.

When the waiter left, Savannah snapped, "I'm surprised you didn't order chicken and waffles."

He winked. "Next time."

She grumbled. "You didn't have to go all macho and order for me, Tyler. I can do it myself."

"You used to like when I ordered for you, said it made you feel cherished and taken care of." He shrugged and spread his hands out in front of him. "You were even impressed that I could gauge your mood as to what you wanted to eat. We were that close."

Savannah lowered her gaze to the table top. The tone of his voice had dropped on that last part, and he was right, Savannah did feel those things back then. Tyler had been right, every time about what she wanted, but if she didn't like how he took charge, he would

back off. Every now and then, she'd buck against the routine, and Tyler had calmly accepted it.

If she was honest with herself, she'd admit that she missed all of it. She missed *him*. But missing him didn't make him right for her, so she changed the subject. "I hear you're fresh in from another tour. Do you think you'll go back any time soon?"

His expression darkened. "I lost a couple guys that time around. He turned his head and ran a hand through his hair. "If I'd done more..."

She laid her hand over his in an effort to comfort him and then drew back when she realized what she had done. "I'm sure you did all you could. You all are trained to act, right? It's drilled into you. I don't doubt you did what came naturally. Do you want to talk about it?"

His eyes softened on her. For a minute, she thought he was going to use her feeling sorry for what happened to push his agenda to get her back, but he spoke of his lost friends. "A bomb went off right in front of us. I was in the humvee with four other guys, including the gunner. When we caught on fire, I was able to get two of the others out, but the last two..." He shook his head.

"I'm so sorry," she told him. "I can't begin to understand how hard that must be. I know those guys are like brothers to you."

"Yeah, as sergeant, I'm supposed to look out for them. Do you know how young some of them are? Practically fresh off their mother's milk, and they're over there risking their lives, some losing it." He sighed. "I shouldn't bore you or bring you down with this kind of talk."

"It's all right." She leaned back in her chair to allow the server to place their food before them."

On the other side of the table, Tyler snapped his napkin open and placed it in his lap. Savannah had a vision of how soldiers ate in the field. She didn't expect it was all dainty and mannered, that was for sure.

Tyler guessed her thoughts and grinned. "Hey, I know how to use my manners. The guys get all dirty-mouthed when its just us—okay, I do too—but we clean up nice."

She nodded, admiring the way he fit in his clothes. "Yes, you do." Clearing her throat, she looked away.

Tyler chuckled. “And to answer your earlier question, no, I don’t expect to go back to Iraq. I’m retiring.” He directed an intense look her way. “I’ve decided now is the time for me to get married and maybe have a few kids.”

“You’ve decided?” She rolled her eyes and dropped her fork on her plate. The *clank* it made was too loud, and she glanced around to see if anyone noticed. When no one paid her any mind, she turned back to Tyler. “See, that’s your problem, Tyler, you’re making all the decisions. You don’t ask me anything about what I think.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Who said you were going to be the mother of my children?”

Devastation hit her like a fist in the mouth. She sucked in a breath, and it was all she could do not to burst out crying. Idiot, why would she react like this at the thought of Tyler marrying another woman and giving her children? She balled her napkin in her lap, staring at it until she got a grip on her emotions.

Tyler leaned across the table, caught her chin and raised it. “That reaction is what I was looking for. I’m sorry. That was cruel of me. Savannah, I love you, and I’m convinced more and more that you love me. Neither of us can see each other with anyone else. So, why don’t you give in to the inevitable and put us both out of our misery?”

She pushed her chair back and stood up. “Excuse me, I need to go to the rest room. And I admit that I have lingering feelings for you, but I put them down to our higher than normal compatibility and because of that all the good times we had together. None of it changes the fact that it won’t work between us.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “I won’t let it work. Not now, not ever.”

## Chapter Six

Tyler stood in the pathway leading to the fountain in Forsyth Park. He watched her pause and take in the beauty that was one of their many tourist attractions, but locals enjoyed seeing the tritons blowing water through their horns and the swans spiraling water into the air as well. At night with the lights beneath the water turned on, the scene was even better. Tyler caught up to Savannah and stood behind her, resting his hands on her shoulders. A tremor went through her body, and he moved his head alongside hers.

“Chilly?” he asked in a low whisper, although he was sure it wasn’t the warm breeze that made goose bumps rise along her smooth skin. He planted a feather kiss on her neck, thinking she’d duck away, but she stood still, and that encouraged him to take more liberties like wrapping his arms around her waist.

“I thought we were going dancing,” she complained.

“Don’t you hear it?”

Her head came up. A jazz beat played nearby. She turned to look up at him. “A concert?”

He nodded. Savannah, he knew, had been expecting him to take her to one of the local clubs, but he had planned this night to a tee. He would take her all the places where they had spent time together, recreating the love they shared. Forsyth Park held concerts from time to time, and it was a lucky break for him that one was going on tonight, when she had said yes to his date. If the park concert hadn’t worked out, Tyler had been prepared to hire a band. He had already spoken with the manager of one but canceled when he didn’t need it.

Tyler took her hand, and they strolled along with others who had come to enjoy the music. In small groups, people began dancing as if there had been a signal for them to start, and Tyler took Savannah into his arms. He was grateful for the slow, sensuous beat so he could hold her close and stare into her big, warm eyes—eyes that melted his heart and made him want to conquer the world just for her.

*What do I say*, he thought. What argument could he give to make her change her mind? The food at the restaurant was delicious, the ambience perfect, and yet it had done nothing to crack the shell Savannah had placed around her heart. It was all his fault that

she was like this, a shadow of the woman she'd once been. Sure, she could laugh and maybe enjoy herself, but he saw the loneliness too. Because it reflected his own heart. If he went for all that mushy soul mates stuff, he'd have to say Savannah was his, no doubt about that.

The only positive to come of how he had treated her was that he had ruined her for all other men. It was unlikely that Savannah would commit to another man, but then that meant she would never be a mother, and that tore at his heart. Should he consider finding a way to make her fall out of love with him, so she could go on with her life? *Hell no!* He couldn't do it. He *wouldn't* do it. Savannah would be his once again, and he had to hold onto that belief to have meaning in his life.

Savannah tried to put space between them. "You're holding me a little tight, aren't you?"

"Not tight enough." He demonstrated by gathering her closer, enjoying the feel of her breasts pressed into his chest. He grew hard, and smiled in amusement when she noticed that too. He whispered in her ear. "Am I making you wet, Savannah?"

"Shut up," she grumbled and turned her head, but he saw that she was now biting her lower lip and had closed her eyes. He guessed it was an attempt to ignore what they both felt—attraction. From day one, the sparks had flown between them, and when he'd taken her the first time and every time after, nothing in the world felt better. Her body was everything a man could want and more, and it had gotten him off just to bring her to orgasm after orgasm.

*Savannah, Savannah, let me make you happy again.*

"Do you remember the time I took you out on my uncle's boat?" he asked.

She wrinkled her nose in the cutest way. He had to restrain himself from kissing it. "Don't remind me. We were lost all day, and by the time we got back, I was starving."

He grinned. "Well we only got lost because *I* lost track of time and place lying between your legs. We made love for hours if you recall, and the hunger was probably from all that exertion."

"Yeah right. Nothing at all to do with you deciding I should try caviar with crackers. Ew."



Tyler threw his head back laughing and squeezed the woman he loved tighter in his arms. When he had finished laughing, he told her, “Well, you have to admit I learned my lesson. You drilled it into my head that you hate fish in any form. Period.” He let his voice drop low, knowing it rumbled in a teasing way that she liked. “And I remembered.”

Just as he predicted, she trembled and stirred in his hold, trying to get away. He wouldn’t let it happen. She frowned up at him, pursing lips that made him long to drink from them. “Would you stop, Tyler. I know what you’re doing.”

He widened his eyes in an attempt to look innocent. “What am I doing? I thought we were having a good time dancing, enjoying the music. And look, your white boy even learned how to move to the beat. Aren’t you impressed?”

She slapped his chest, chuckling. “You idiot. Okay, yeah, I admit, you learned a thing or two.”

*Yes, keep that smile on her lips, Tyler. This will work.*

When the music wound down for the night, Tyler guided Savannah in the direction of his car. They strolled at leisure under the tall oaks covered in Spanish moss. He breathed the air deep into his lungs and enjoyed the scented flowers, the fragrance of Savannah, both the city and the woman. He loved home so much, and most of the guys had grown quiet when they had landed there a couple weeks ago. If a soldier let anyone see him cry, they all would have been balling for the sheer bliss at being back.

At the edge of the park, before they reached the street, Tyler pulled Savannah to a stop and made her look at him. “Talk to me, sweetheart. What can I do to make it right? Why won’t you forgive me?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” she muttered.

“Try me.”

She blew out an angry sigh, glared at him and turned away. He waited in silence while she collected her thoughts. “I loved you. I was more into you than you could ever imagine. I leaned on you more than I should have. Maybe I should thank you because after what happened, I pushed to make some changes, got out of that dead end retail job I had and went back to school for real estate. Now, even with slumps, I make decent money every year.” She glanced over to him like she expected him to defend himself, but he kept his lips together. She needed this, to vent. Back then, she didn’t have the chance

because he told her about his decision to join the army just before he was shipped off to basic training. It was the wimp's way out, and he regretted how he handled things. Maybe he had been too used to deciding everything for the both of them.

Savannah went on. "I put too much of myself in you, and I guess the problem was we never argued. Never. When you wanted to do something, I wanted to also, not because you wanted it but because we just meshed. We were one person, you know like the Bible talks about two becoming one? We were that and we weren't even married."

She whirled on him, her voice rising. "Don't you see how you snatched that away? No, ripped it away? Don't you see how if you felt like that, was that sold out on me like I was on you, you'd never have had the strength or even the thought to leave me? So, I know you aren't the one, Tyler. I can't move past that betrayal. A lot of people do everyday, but I can't. I simply cannot do it." Tears spilled down her cheeks. "The worse part of it is, emotionally my life is still in ruins behind your one decision. I hate you for that."

She sobbed, and Tyler's heart cracked. He drew her into his arms, aching because she ached. Shudders rocked her small figure, reverberating pain throughout his. Devastation hit him hard, real understanding for the first time of what he had done. She deserved so much better, a man who would value her and cherish her, someone who would never think that a career or any other thing could take her from him or him from her.

Tyler should have considered it his life's mission to please her, to make her happy. So what neither of them had pursued higher education at that point and both had worked in jobs they couldn't see themselves doing the rest of their lives without being miserable every day they had to go to them. The bottom line was that they would come home each day to each other. Why hadn't he seen that back then?

Seven years had been lost, seven years in which he might have had a beautiful daughter who looked just like Savannah, or a son who would look out for his mother when he grew older, when Tyler couldn't be there. Most of all, he could have had each of those years to hold Savannah. The loss crushed him. Maybe she was right. Did he not love her enough?

After some moments, she pulled back from him, her fingers playing with the top button on his shirt. She didn't meet his gaze. "I want you to do something for me, Tyler."

Dread filled him. “What is it?”

She drew in a breath and blew it out. “I want you to spend one night with me. One...intimate night, and then I want you to let me go. Forever. Can you do that?”

Tyler stepped back, the thought of walking away from her a second time more than he could bear. Yet, was it the best thing for Savannah? He had been selfish all this time with his plans to win her, to remind her of the good times they had together. He never considered that he would also be reminding her of how much he hurt her. She’d grown stronger. He should have allowed her the strength she gained and done the honorable thing—help her to fall out of love with him.

His arrogance had made him sure he could win her back because it was impossible that she didn’t still love him or that he couldn’t rekindle that love. What an idiot he was. For once, he’d do the right thing by her and let her make the decisions. She deserved that much and more. At least she was sweet enough to give them both one night. That had to be enough to last the rest of his life.

“Sweetheart, are you sure about this?” he asked her.

She sniffled and nodded. “Yes, I am. We...we can go to your place, okay?”

He watched her for a few minutes, waiting for her to change her mind, to be sure of what she wanted, and then he took her hand. This time, she let him thread her fingers with his, but the pleasure, the comfort he thought he would feel was missing, knowing this was the last time.

The drive to his apartment took less than half an hour. On the street, Tyler turned off the car and sat behind the wheel in silence. One part of him wanted to rush them both into his place, the sooner he’d get his arms around her, to be as close as two people could get, when they shared their bodies with one another. On the other hand, this was it. If this night flew by, or if Savannah was ready to leave after a couple hours, there was no turning back. In that moment, he decided he wouldn’t retire. In fact, he’d volunteer to return overseas, or anywhere the army could send him. Any place on earth, any danger, was better than being in this city with Savannah so close but him unable to have her.

He glanced over at her, quiet as he had been, her hands clenched in her lap. He couldn’t believe she was as nervous as she had been that first night. “Come on,” he joked, “it’s like riding a bike.”

She smirked. “Don’t be silly, it’s not been that long.” Her eyes widened, and she covered her mouth.

The twist at his gut, knowing she’d been with other men since they were together was what he deserved, but she didn’t mean to hurt him. He knew that. He reached over and squeezed her hand. She squeezed back, and he got out of the car to go around and help her out of the passenger side. *Let tonight last the rest of our lives.*

## Chapter Seven

Savannah stood near an overcrowded bookshelf in Tyler's apartment, wondering if she'd made the right decision. Even if she didn't, she wasn't going back. This time with him would end it all, would seal for her heart that it was over between them. It wasn't what she'd had in mind when she said yes to the date, but hopefully the outcome would be just what they both needed.

While she faced the bookshelf pretending an interest in what was found there, Tyler walked up behind her and rested his fingertips on her waist. Her body came to life with the slightest touch from him. She hesitated only a millisecond before she let him draw her back to his body and run his hands around to her belly and lower.

She moaned and closed her eyes when he rained kisses on her neck while his left hand found the hem of her dress. He teased her intimate place behind her panties. His right hand pulled her dress higher. "Still matching your panties and bra to your clothes, I see," he commented.

Feeling sassy, she turned in his arms and lined her body with his, offering him pouting lips. "You like it."

He raised an eyebrow, towering over her and looking behind at her ass. He let out a low whistle. "Hell, yes, I like it." When he squeezed her butt and lifted her up to meet his hard-on, she wished their clothes weren't keeping them apart. She was already so wet, he would have glided inside her, and she wouldn't have complained. Her body was smoldering like she'd not had sex in years rather than a couple of months.

Tyler picked her up in his arms, and Savannah wrapped her legs around his waist. They kissed with intense and greedy hunger as they fumbled their way to the bedroom. After he laid her on the bed, he began to undress her with slow movements as if he was savoring every new peek at her naked skin. All fear and nervousness fled Savannah. This was more than familiar. This was their bond.

Her lover caught his breath when he unclasped the snap at the front of her coral lace bra and her breasts bound free. He lowered his head and ran his tongue in an unhurried trail from the valley between her breasts to her left nipple. Savannah shuddered. "I'd

forgotten how sweet your smooth chocolate skin is,” he commented. “Like a treat a man can become addicted to.”

He ran his hand over her soft, firm mounds and plucked at her nipples with his tongue. Savannah curved into his kisses and raised her hips toward him as he kissed lower and lower, down her belly to hover over her apex. The lust in his eyes ignited her when he looked up at her. Instead of delving between her legs right away, he moved to one thigh, started at the inside of her knee and then worked his way higher.

Savannah whined for service between her legs. She reached down to handle it herself, but after one dip of her fingers into her wet entrance, he pulled her hand away and licked her juices from her fingers.

“Tyler!” She moaned and squirmed, but he took his time, teasing her. Seeming to find excitement in tasting her from her own hand, he pushed her fingers inside her a second time, withdrew them, and made her watch while he ran the tip of his tongue down the length of each digit. “That’s not fair,” she rasped out.

He chuckled. When she would have complained further, he released her, reared back on his knees and began to undress. Her mouth watering at the sight of him, Savannah never took her eyes off his taut bronzed skin. He tossed his shirt away and began working on his pants. Savannah sat forward, feeling no shame at watching with eagerness for him to reveal his shaft. If he didn’t hurry, she’d help him.

He sprang free, and she could have applauded his perfection. He was as long as she remembered, rock hard and ready. Precome leaked from his head, and she scooped it up with a fingertip to lick it from her finger. Now Tyler shivered watching her lick, and she exaggerated her sucking to drive him insane.

Using his strength against her, he tugged her hand from her mouth and caught the other wrist to lift both her arms above her head. Flattening himself on top of her, he challenged her with his eyes to break free. *Why would I want that?* she thought. She curved her legs around his and ran her feet up the backs of his calves. She mewled like a cat in heat and wriggled under him. If Tyler thought he was in control, she proved otherwise. His breaths were ragged, and he seemed to struggle to keep from plunging into her too fast.

“I concede, you little she-demon.” He laughed in her ear. “You drive me out of my mind. You’re not the innocent little thing I knew so long ago.”

She thought she’d disappointed him, but he captured her lips, and from then on it was no longer a contest of wills, but a blending between them for their mutual pleasure. Tyler parted her legs and lifted them for his easy entry. Savannah’s eyes drifted closed. She matched his gentle, languid thrusts with her own, and they slowed their kisses, nibbling each others mouths, tasting at leisure and savoring every nuance of the experience.

Tyler whispered his love in her ear as he came with her, while Savannah cried clinging to him. She buried her face his in shoulder and breathed him in, imprinting the new memories, although she didn’t want to, of what it felt like to be in his embrace. For the moment, she let herself belong him and took all of what he offered in return.

After the intensity eased, Tyler rolled them both to their sides so they were facing each other. He stared into her yes and stroked her cheek. Savannah found she couldn’t look away. She wanted to cry again but resisted with him looking at her. She’d blubbered enough tonight, proving to him of how she still felt about him. The fact that he accepted her request, that this time together would be their last and he’d stop fighting to win her back, had shocked her. Tyler had always been a man of his word. If he said he would do something, he did it. She’d never caught him in a lie, and like he had mentioned before, their problem had never been about him being unfaithful. All of that had made her sure back then that she’d stay at his side always. When a man that perfect in every way that a woman could conceive still walked out, where did that leave the woman who loved him?

“Stay the night with me, Savannah,” he pleaded. “I want to make love to you over and over. I want to please you. I’m not asking for any more than that.”

She pulled his hand from her cheek and kissed his palm. So big and rough, it engulfed her face, had made her feel safe and protected. Even now it did. “Yes,” she whispered. “I’ll stay...until morning.”

He tugged her into his arms and kissed her lips. Between them, he ran a hand down over her stomach while inching the other under her head and around her shoulders to pull her closer. Tyler pushed two fingers into her and then added a third. He worked her, stroked her nubbin with practiced movements. Savannah bent back over his arm, her eyes fluttering as she whimpered.

“Yes, sweetheart, let me pleasure you. Come for me, my heart.”

Savannah could do nothing but obey. She raised one leg and rested it on his hip. He increased the speed of his stimulation until she cried out with her second orgasm. She convulsed around his fingers, her inner muscles contracting and releasing. When she was calmer, she leaned in and kissed his lips.

“I’d like to please you too,” she told him.

He shook his head. “That would take me going to clean up, and I don’t want to leave your side for a minute tonight.”

She smiled at his sweetness. “Not that. I meant from behind. Anally.”

His eyes widened so much, she thought they must hurt. “Are you sure? Can you...I mean...”

“I can take you.” Rather than explain to him about her past and ruin what felt so right without bringing ghosts of other experiences between them, she rolled over so her back was to him and reached for her purse which she’d tossed on the floor when he carried her in here. Inside were a few packages of KY jelly. She hoped he wouldn’t be disgusted that she had it, but when she glanced at him, he seemed more excited than anything. She handed him one of the packages. “Would you rather I put it on?”

His grin spread over his handsome face, making her heart flutter. “No way. I’ll put it on you. You use one to do me.”

They worked to gather slathering on the gooey substance while kissing each other and nuzzling. When they were both ready, Savannah flipped over and placed a pillow beneath her hips. Tyler positioned himself behind her with his legs between hers. He hiked her hips higher and stroked her rear. Savannah moaned pushing into him, enjoying the slip of his erection over her skin. When he eased inside of her tight space, she cried out, not from pain but from sheer pleasure. She loved this position and had dreamed of sharing it with Tyler.

He drew back but she caught his hip, keeping him from exiting her. “Am I hurting you, sweetheart?” he asked, concern deepening his voice.

“No, it’s good. I want you in me all the way, Tyler. I can’t wait any longer. Push it all the way.”



Her perfect lover obeyed and began a relaxed pump deep into her rear and out again. She pushed back to him to help fill her, and when her muscles expanded, she increased the speed. Tyler let a curse slip. Savannah looked back laughing, knowing he wouldn't last long with her body gripping him so snugly.

"I never imagined," he rasped out.

Neither had Savannah, she thought when he smacked her rounded ass cheek and pounded harder. The slight sting and Tyler's grind sent her over the top. When she cried out her release, he pulled her up so she was on her knees with him. The fit grew snuggler. Tyler covered her breast with one hand and reached down to stroke between her legs with the other. He molded her to his body and found her lips just when she felt him explode inside of her. They cried out together, shudders rocking their bodies and weakening them to do anything except cling to each other.

"Savannah," Tyler moaned in her ear. She knew what he said in that one word, and her heart echoed it.

After a few moments, he pulled out of her and gathered her into his arms to carry her to the bathroom. They stepped together into the shower and washed each other with lethargic movements. Savannah yawned, resting her head on Tyler's shoulder and half asleep. He finished washing them both, turned the water off, and lifted Savannah from the shower. She could not feel more treasured than when he towed her dry and once again lifted her into his arms to carry her back to the bed.

When they were snuggled together beneath the sheets, Tyler pulled her head to his shoulder. She breathed in the scent of soap on his skin, loving it—loving him. As she drifted off, she wasn't sure, but she thought she heard Tyler say, "Please, never let this night end."

\* \* \* \*

The sunlight shined in Savannah's eyes, and she shielded them glancing around the room, trying to figure out where she was. A solid male arm was tossed over her waist, and she was naked. So was he. She hesitated to look into his face, but she did, and her heart seemed to shatter. Tyler lay still, his dark lashes bathing his cheeks as he slept. She

had an urge to touch him, to kiss those full lips that she knew tasted so good, but she resisted. If she gave in, she'd never leave.

After gathering her clothing and purse, she took them to the living room with tears flowing down her cheeks. As she dressed, the pain welled inside. She would burst if she didn't get away from here now. The entire atmosphere radiated him.

On the street and sobbing by now, she dialed Dawn on her cell phone. Her friend's thick voice came over the line. "Hello?"

"Dawn," Savannah cried. "I'm going to walk down a few blocks so he doesn't find me, but can you come get me? Oh goodness, I feel like I want to die, just like it was then, Dawn. I can't take it."

"Sweetie?" Dawn's voice became clearer. "What are you talking about? Where are you? Did someone hurt you?"

Savannah walked blindly down the block. "I stayed with Tyler last night. We slept together. Dawn, I love him so much."

"Then, dummy, go back there and stay with your man," Dawn shouted.

"I can't. I said—We said..." Savannah stepped into the road. A horn blasted, and she turned to the left just in time to see the grill of a pickup barreling down on her. And then there was darkness.

## Chapter Eight

Tyler walked with rigid control down the hospital hallway. He called on his military training to make him put one foot in front of the other, to keep his mind calm. If he let go for an instant, he'd lose it. She was hurt, his love, Savannah. How could he have prevented it? What could he have said to stop her from stepping into that road? When Dawn had called him frantic and crying saying something had happened to Savannah, at first he didn't believe it. He thought she must be in the bathroom since they'd spent the night in each other's arms.

After he'd searched his apartment and found her and her things gone, he knew Dawn wasn't mistaken, and the ambulance at the corner, just pulling off when he got there had torn his heart from his chest, or it felt like it.

He moved to the information desk. "I'm here to check on a patient that was just brought in, Savannah Glory."

The woman checked her information. "Are you family?"

"I'm her boyfriend," he said with conviction.

"If you'll wait for a moment, she's in with the doctors so they can evaluate her. Someone will be out to speak with you soon," the triage nurse told him.

Tyler took a seat in the waiting room. "Soon" turned out to be long enough for Dawn to arrive, and he filled her in on what little he knew, which was nothing. They sat side-by-side waiting. Images of his beautiful Savannah rolled through his mind, tormenting him. Guilt choked off his air supply several times so that he had to force himself to breathe. If he hadn't pushed her to be with him, none of this would have happened. He sat with every muscle tensed and his eyes closed. How could he endure seeing her hurt, knowing it was his fault, and yet, he deserved it because he had walked away the last time he hurt her, leaving Dawn to pick up the pieces. *Fuck, I'm a loser! She deserves so much better, a million times better than what I've given her.*

A hand dropped on his shoulder, and he opened his eyes to concern in Dawn's face. Her eyes were red from crying. "This isn't your fault," she told him.

"Isn't it?"

Before she could say more and because he didn't want to be comforted, he stood up and headed back to the nurse's station. Someone would tell him something or else. Just as he reached the desk, doors opened to his left, and a man who looked like he might be a doctor strolled out. The man directed a glance to the nurse, and she pointed to Tyler. Tyler signaled Dawn to hurry over.

"Dr. Johansen." He stuck out his hand.

Tyler shook it. "Tyler Wright. I'm Savannah's boyfriend. Tell me she's okay."

"We're not sure yet. She hasn't regained consciousness. She has had mild head trauma from the accident and a few lacerations. At this point, we wait for her to wake up. Then we'll know more."

Dawn moved closer. "Can we see her?"

"Briefly," the doctor said and turned to show them the way.

When they were in the room where Savannah lay, Tyler stooped beside her and took her hand. He kissed her tender skin, fighting tears. She looked so small, so fragile. "Why did I have to push her?"

"Oh Tyler, you loved her. You couldn't help how you felt. You did what you thought was best for her at all times," Dawn told him.

He shook his head. "No, I had to control everything. I had to decide the way our lives went instead of trusting her to make her own decisions. I don't know how you've remained a friend to me all this time."

She reached down and dragged him away from the bed. Tyler resisted because he didn't want to be more than a step from Savannah in case she woke up or needed something. But Dawn wouldn't be ignored.

"I remained your friend all this time because I believe you love her. When Savannah needed money to move away from here, who gave it to her?" He didn't answer, so she continued. "You did. I told you what she needed, and you didn't blink. You gave it to me to give to her, and we left it at that, letting her think it was me who helped her get away. Tyler, I know you love her. You've been drilling me for years for updates on how she is, if she needs anything. The one thing that pissed me off was that you didn't go after her when you realized what an idiot you were."

He ran his hands through his hair and walked over to sit in a chair beside Savannah's bed. Hopelessness filled him, as it did then. He spoke low, not sure if Dawn heard him. "She sent me a letter saying she hated me and never wanted to see me again. She said she was leaving, that Savannah meant nothing to her. I believed her. I let her go then. But when she came back, right when I was ready to retire, I thought it was a sign, that we were meant to be. You told me she still had feelings for me, and so I began to hope that I could convince her of how sorry I was. But I couldn't. She doesn't believe in me—in us."

He dropped his head in his hands, at last letting the tears flow. "I have to let her go, Dawn, but I can't live without her. What kind of soldier am I? I love her so much, if anything happens to her...I don't know what I'll do. Yet, I know if she wakes up, I die because I have to give her what she wants."

He found the ability to dry his face, knowing it was what he was used to and not strength alone. Clearing his throat, he sat up and took hold of Savannah's hand once again. "I'll be here until she wakes at least, to see to anything she needs."

"And then what?"

Tyler froze. Dawn wasn't the one who asked the question, but the woman who held his heart, Savannah. He looked at her and found her looking back at him, eyelids droopy but somewhat alert.

"Savannah," he cried out, squeezing her fingers. She winced, and he eased his hold, brought her hand to his mouth and kissed her soft skin. "Sweetheart, how are you feeling? Dawn, get the doctor."

Savannah smiled. "Still giving orders, sergeant?"

He shook his head. "No, not to you, my heart. Never again. You do what makes you happy."

"And if you make me happy?" she asked.

He blinked, not believing what her words seemed to indicate. His mouth had suddenly gone dry, and he found it hard to speak. "What do you mean?"

"If you are the one to make me happy, are you still going to walk away from me, Tyler?"

Before he could say a word, the doctor strolled in, and Tyler had to move to allow the man to examine Savannah. His heart pounding in his chest, excitement and hope rising

inside him although he fought not to jump to conclusions, he planted his feet in a solid position on the floor, suffering through the doctor's examination of Savannah.

At last, the doctor leaned back from the side of the bed and turned to Tyler. "Looks like our patient will be fine. I want to watch her for a couple of days, and then we can release her." He directed his kind gaze to Savannah. "You're very lucky, young lady. I've seen countless accidents like the one you were in cause a lot more damage. I hope you realize the gift you've been given."

To Tyler's surprise, Savannah was looking at him and not at her doctor. "I know the gift I've been given. I won't let it get away."

Tyler's strength nearly failed him. When the doctor left the room, Dawn kissed Savannah's cheek, whispered something in her ear, and told him she'd be outside so they could talk.

He sat down beside his love and took her hands in his. He couldn't stop raining kisses on her fingers. His heart ached, and he wanted to break down, but he forced the emotions back. "What did you mean, Savannah?" he asked, hoping for and dreading her words.

She took a deep breath before she spoke and resettled herself in the bed. He saw the wince she gave at the movements and promised himself he wouldn't stay long. He knew a mild concussion hurt like hell. Savannah needed to rest.

"Last night was supposed to be about me getting over you once and for all, getting you to leave me alone and stop reminding me about how good it was with us. Instead, I woke up this morning worse off than before. Dawn called me a dummy, said I should get back in there and stay with you." Tears ran down her face, and Tyler wiped them away. He would have commented, but she cut him off. "No, let me say this. I heard you two talking just now. I never knew you were the one who helped me leave. We were broken up. You had no obligation, and you did it even after I had written those horrible things to you in that letter. You didn't tell Dawn half the ugly stuff I said."

He looked away. "You were angry."

"I didn't mean any of it. We were amazing together, Tyler. You were—*are*—amazing. That's why it killed me when we were apart, and then I started thinking that it was all an illusion, but when you started trying to get me back, I saw all those wonderful qualities in you. It was never an illusion, but I was scared that something new would pop

up and make you leave me again. I justified that fear with saying if you truly cared and knew what you did was the wrong move, then you would have said something long ago.

“I know now that you did prove your love, when you kept reaching out to me through Dawn. I’m going to kick that girl’s butt for not telling me, but that’s beside the point.” She blinked away her tears and looked him in the eyes without wavering. “If you want to be with me, I want to be with you, Tyler. Forever. I want to be your wife, the mother of your children.”

His heart bursting, he grinned at her. “Are you asking me to marry you?” Embarrassment made her sweet face irresistible. He leaned in and kissed her lips.

“I wasn’t. That’s for you to decide.”

He shook his head. “No, it’s for us both, together. I love you, Savannah, and I absolutely want you for my wife. So, since we’re agreed, let’s do it.” He grinned and winked at her. The joy that broke over her beautiful face made him catch his breath. He vowed at that moment to do all in his power to make her happy. He would follow Savannah anywhere, and he’d never let anything come between them again.

The End

### **About the Author**

**Tressie Lockwood** has always loved books, and she enjoys writing about heroines who are overcoming the trials of life. She writes straight from her heart, reaching out to those who find it hard to be completely themselves no matter what anyone else thinks. She hopes her readers enjoy her short stories. Visit Tressie on the web at:

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