

PRELUDE TO FOREVER

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Summary: The evolution of a twenty-year friendship. Short chapters become lengthier as we navigate our way through the story of Michael Carter and Rachel Green. The story takes them from age eight to age thirty and follows how their relationship evolves. Told in both characters point of view as chapters alternate.
Key moments that define the future.

PART ONE

Eight

Rachel

I stared out of the window and watched as the rain poured from the sky. A small pool of water had formed between the two trees in our front yard. I wondered if it was deep enough to drown in.

"Rachel, sweetie- I just got off the phone with Mrs. Simmons, Daphne's not going to make it."

I closed my eyes and focused harder on the sound of the rain.

"Honey, it's a thunderstorm- some of the roads are washed out- we'll reschedule your party for another day."

I felt the weight of the cushions shift as my mother sat down on the couch next to me and rubbed my back. I took a deep breath, opened my eyes and looked at her.

"But my birthday is *today*." I cried. My vision blurred for a few seconds before two big fat tears spilled over on to my cheeks.

"Just because your friends can't make it doesn't mean we can't still have a party." My father came into the living room wearing a party hat. He blew one of the party horns and danced around in a circle.

My mom smiled sadly at me. I sighed and turned my attention back to the front yard and that's when I saw the lights from a car coming down the street. As it got closer, I could tell it wasn't really a car. It was a truck- a big truck, with big wheels covered in mud. It stopped in front of our house.

"Who in the world?" My mother whispered as she leaned in next to me and looked out of the window.

I wiped my tears, jumped from the couch and ran to the door. I stepped on to the porch just as the passenger door swung open and two small legs wearing a pair of rain boots landed into a large puddle with a splash. I watched wide-eyed as a kid, that I knew very well, sloshed his way over to the porch. He wore a yellow rain slicker with a hood and carried a black garbage bag.

He ran up the steps, stopped directly in front of me and removed the hood before he extended the bag towards me with a smile.

"Happy birthday, Rachel." He grinned.

I took the bag and discovered there was a present inside wrapped in bright purple paper.

"Thanks Mikey. You want some cake?" I smiled so big it felt like my face would split in half.

He nodded and followed me inside. I overheard his dad tell my dad, that Mikey threw a fit and half about missing my birthday party, so they came over to give me my present.

My mom, dad, Mikey and Mikey's dad sang happy birthday to me and we all had a slice of cake before Mikey and his dad had to leave. I fell asleep listening to the pretty song on the ballerina music box Michael Carter gave me for my eighth birthday.

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Stupid

Michael

I flopped around in my bed and tried to get comfortable. Stupid cast kept getting in my way. I sat up and was about to yell for my mom when somebody knocked on my door. I hoped it wasn't my brother trying to cheer me up with his stupid jokes.

"Come in."

I wished I would've asked who it was before I invited *her* in.

I narrowed my eyes at her. "What do you want?" I asked rudely.

"I um- I came to see if you needed any help with your homework." She stared down at her feet.

"I don't need your help, I'm plenty smart on my own." I frowned.

She raised her head and looked at me. "I didn't mean to like help you do it or whatever- you can't write so maybe, I thought- my mom sent me over here, okay." She huffed.

"I don't want you helping me do anything."

She sighed. "Are you still mad at me?"

"Yes and I'm never forgiving you." I started to cross my arms to prove my point but I forgot I couldn't. So, I just made a fist with my good hand.

All of a sudden she looked like she was about to cry.

"Well fine, who cares? You're just a stupid boy anyway! You shouldn't have been jumping from the roof of your house on to the trampoline!" she yelled at me.

I got up from my bed and stood to face her.

"And you're a stupid girl who needs to mind her own business!"

"You wanted me to lie to your parents?" She whispered as if my parents were in the room.

I shrugged. I guess I didn't really want her to lie. Well, maybe just a little.

"You could have told them you didn't see me or you didn't know what happened. I thought we were friends but I guess I was wrong."

I turned away from her, walked to my desk and flipped through a book. I thought she'd get so mad she'd leave but Rachel Green never ever did what you thought she was supposed to do.

She came over and stood next to me.

"I'm sorry, Michael. I thought you were going to die or something." She said softly.

I looked at her and rolled my eyes. "It's just a broken arm."

"I am your friend- I mean if you still want to be friends." She said sadly.

I ignored her and walked to the door. I turned back and looked at her. Her head was down and she was tugging on the sleeves on her sweater. I didn't like seeing her sad even if I was still mad at her.

"Well come on, I guess we should get a snack before we start on homework." I offered.

She smiled all big and goofy and skipped over to the door.

"I probably would have told your parents that you were abducted by aliens and when they realized your brain was broken, they just dropped you from their spaceship while it was floating in the sky and that's how you landed on the ground with a broken arm." I took a deep breath because that was a mouth full.

She just stared at me before she busted out laughing. "That is so stupid. They would have never believed that. I mean aliens *can* land their spaceships on the ground." She grinned as she played along with my ridiculous story.

"Well, I would've said something else and not snitched on you. Because that's the kinda stuff friends do."

She dropped her head, "So, we're friends again?"

"I guess. I mean you are the only girl in fifth grade that can really play dodge ball. That has to mean something." I teased her.

She bumped my shoulder and I pretended it really hurt. But then I felt bad because she looked like she was going to cry again.

"I'm joking." I admitted.

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Stupid boy! It's not funny!" She screeched as she stomped down the hallway.

I laughed quietly as I followed her to the kitchen.

PART TWO

Crimson

Rachel

I leaned forward on my elbows, so that I could hear Carmen Adams whisper about how cute she thought Michael Carter was and how she was going to kiss him at the seventh grade spring dance.

Ew.

Michael Carter was my best friend, practically my brother and to hear her talk about him like that was just. .ew.

I frowned and leaned away from her.

"Come on Rachel, you guys are like family. I need your help." She pouted and it made her heavily glossed lips look deformed.

"My help? What could I possibly do to help you?" I looked over my shoulder at the group of boys on the other side of the cafeteria. Michael sat in the middle of the group laughing.

"You know, put in a good word for me- tell him that you think I'm nice and pretty and that he should kiss me."

I turned my attention back to her. "Are you serious?" I asked. "You really like him?"

I couldn't believe a girl thought about Michael that way. I guess he was kind of cute. Not that I ever thought about him like that or anything. I looked over my shoulder again and this time he stared directly at me.

I quickly turned away.

"Oh my god, he's on his way over here." Carmen squealed.

"Who?" I turned just in time to see Michael.

"Hey Rachel, hey Carmen." Michael sat next to me and took a chip from my bag.

"Hi Michael." Carmen sounded like she was out of breath.

"So. . . what are the two of you up to?" He asked.

Carmen blushed and twirled her hair around her fingers.

Michael picked up the chips and finished off the bag.

"Hey, didn't you already eat lunch?" I shoved him. I was really annoyed that he ate the rest of my chips.

"Hey Rachel, I um, I'm going to go to the library and return a book- remember that thing we talked about? Maybe you might mention it to Michael?" Carmen gathered her empty tray and eyed me. I stared up at her totally confused until she puckered her lips at me and nodded slightly at Michael as he checked my bag for scraps.

"Oh yeah, okay- yeah." I said as she made a quick exit.

"So, why was Carmen Adams acting weirder than usual?" He asked after she left.

"Hmm- well, she wants to kiss you." I said just as he took a sip of my soda.

He started coughing and sputtering.

"Wha- huh- what? Did she say that?" He asked. He had a strange expression on his face but I figured he was probably just as grossed out as I was when she mentioned it.

"Um, yeah- I'm supposed to tell you she's nice and pretty and that you should totally kiss her." I giggled.

He smiled and the tips of his ears turned red.

"Oh my god, you want to kiss her!" I accused with more volume than I intended. A few people looked in our direction.

"Ssh! Will you be quiet! Every boy in our class wants to kiss Carmen Adams." He said it like it was no big deal.

"What? Really- why?" I frowned.

"I'll give you two reasons." He grinned and placed his hands about three inches in front of his chest.

My mouth dropped open. I couldn't believe Michael was talking about Carmen Adams breasts. I crossed my arms over my flat chest and stared at him.

"What? You asked." And he had the nerve to smirk at me.

"You are so- just- ugh." I picked up my trash and stood. Boys were just gross.

"What? Why are you- hey, there's something on your pants." I felt his hand brush against the back of my thigh.

"What?" I turned and looked at him over my shoulder. I stared down the back of my pink jeans but didn't see anything. "Ha ha," I laughed dryly. He always tried to play stupid tricks on me.

"I'm serious. It's red- did you sit in something?" He frowned as he inspected my seat.

I could suddenly feel a trickle down *there*. Kill me now. I sat back down and stared at him as my heart thudded violently inside my chest.

"What's wrong?" He asked concerned as he leaned closer to me.

I opened my mouth and felt tears prick at my eyes. "I need to borrow your shirt." I cried. Michael always wore a long sleeved flannel shirt with a white t-shirt underneath.

"For what? Why are you acting so crazy? Are you crying?" His mouth fell open.

I wiped away my tears. I was completely mortified but I needed his help. "Michael, I think I just got my period. I don't want to walk across the cafeteria with blood on my pants. Can I *please* borrow your shirt?"

His eyes widened. "Are you okay? Does it hurt? You should go to the nurse and call your mom or something." He was ten seconds away from having a panic attack.

I closed my eyes and sighed. "I just need your shirt, so that I can go to the bathroom."

"Oh- yeah- okay." He removed the shirt and gave it to me just as Ethan Tucker walked over.

"Carter we're going outside, you coming? Hey Rachel. Whoa. What's up?" Ethan asked as he looked back and forth from Michael to me obviously noting my teary eyes and Mike's nervous expression.

"Nothing. Rachel's not feeling to good and she's a little cold, so I gave her my shirt. I'm going to go outside- you gonna be okay?" He asked.

I nodded my head and waited until he and Ethan left the cafeteria before I tied his shirt around my waist and hurried to the girl's restroom. It was official: I was riding the crimson wave.

The rest of the day was pretty exhausting. It started with my mother crying hysterically for almost an hour. She went on and on about how her baby had become a woman and when my father interrupted us to see what was wrong, he looked like someone told him I had two months to live. Under normal circumstances I probably would have been embarrassed but the fact that Michael Carter had been there when I got my period was clearly a sign the universe hated me.

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Flesh

Michael

"Damn bro, check out Rachel. I didn't know she was hiding all that junk in her trunk." Tyler Jones whistled lowly.

"I know I've been trying to hit that for the past month." Ethan Tucker chimed in.

My head whipped around and I followed their line of vision totally confused. Rachel stood on the other side of the yard talking to Angela Washington. Angela wore a one-piece swimsuit and a pair of shorts but Rachel on the other hand wore a white two-piece. An itty-bitty two piece with her legs and arms and ass and breasts all on display.

She had to know these pigs would talk about her.

"I just want to reach out and-," Before Tyler opened his mouth again I pushed him. *Hard*. He stumbled over one of the lawn chairs and fell to the ground.

"Dude! What was that for?" He yelled.

"Don't talk about Rachel like that-she's like my sister!" I warned.

I was pissed. I looked over at her again and she and Angela stared in our direction. I stomped over to her.

"Not that I'm complaining but why did you knock Tyler Jones on his ass?" She laughed.

I grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her inside the house.

"Ow!" she complained but I ignored her.

"Don't you have something else you can wear?" I frowned.

"What? Is there something wrong with this swimsuit?" She stared down at herself alarmed.

I hadn't meant to make her feel self-conscious but there was no way she could go back out there wearing that poor excuse for a swimwear. I stared at her for a second longer than necessary and felt like such a pervert.

"It's like too small or something." I mumbled.

She placed her hands on her slender hips. I wondered what the skin on her hip bones felt like. I was definitely a pervert.

"It is not. Did Tyler say something about my swimsuit?" She narrowed her eyes.

I sighed. "Him and Tucker are saying foul shit about you. Rachel, you don't want to be one of those girls who people think are slutty-," I started.

She frowned. "What? People think I'm slutty? Why- what did those lying bastards say about me?" She shrieked. She was pissed and her chest was heaving. I wondered what the skin along the tops of her breasts felt like. I shifted from one foot to another and hoped I wouldn't soon have a situation that would make this even more awkward.

"It's just the way you're dressed- come on I mean-,"

"Hello! It's a pool party! What do you expect me to wear?"

"The outfit Angela is wearing is cool. Come on Rachel just- cover up your- *something*. Leave a little something to the imagination." I pleaded. *Or I'm going to have to commit a murder.*

"So, this isn't really about my swimsuit, it's about you being overprotective?" She smiled.

"Whatever."

"What did Ethan say?" She asked genuinely curious. She was practically vibrating.

Oh hell no.

"He was going off about Carmen again. I think he still has a massive crush on her." I lied.

Her face fell. "Too bad she still has a massive crush on you." She muttered.

I didn't have time for the high school soap opera.

"You got some shorts or something?" I asked hopefully.

She rolled her eyes.

"Yes dad." She said mockingly as she pushed past me and headed back outside. I watched her through the glass patio doors as she walked over to the chairs near Angela and pulled on her denim shorts.

She threw her hands up silently asking if her choice was okay. I gave her a thumb up. I looked over at Dumb and Dumber and they both looked really disappointed.

I mean there were certain girls we talked about like that but not Rachel. She was off limits. Not because she wasn't pretty. She was beautiful. Or because her body wasn't banging because it was- the past three years she had gone from a flat chested thirteen year old to a pretty well developed sixteen year old. All the guys were noticing her and I wouldn't be able to hold them off much longer. And by the sound of it Rachel didn't want me to hold them off.

But she deserved better- these were just some high school clowns, I didn't want her to mess up her reputation behind any of them. They didn't respect her. A few of them still had their V cards and just wanted some willing girl to help them with that problem.

I was lucky to have gotten it over with last summer. My older brother David, dated this girl named Amanda who had an older cousin and well, long story short- an abandoned shed on the Fourth of July was where I lost my virginity.

As far as I knew Rachel was still a virgin. I planned to cock block her at every turn until she at least graduated high school and went off to college. Hopefully the prospects would be better there and not like the

vermin in our hometown. So, I made it my mission to make sure both her reputation and her hymen remained intact.

PART THREE

Passage

Rachel

I looked out of the window that faced the Carter's enormous backyard and watched as Michael played football with his brother David, their cousin Jonathan and David's best friend, Paul. Although they were in their second year of college and Michael was only a high school senior, he looked just as grown up and mature.

He had changed so much since we first met in Miss Beecham's third grade class. He was practically a man now. He was tall, muscular and shaved every day. He was also extremely popular with the girls. He had a reputation for being a good kisser and having a "hard" body. And although I was a virgin, I got the innuendo.

I wondered sometimes what it said about me that I spent a lot of time with the most handsome, most sought after boy in my senior class and all we ever did was hang out, talk and watch movies. Not that I wanted to make out with him or anything- okay, I admit my curiosity was piqued. I just wanted to know if his lips were as soft and warm as they looked or what it would be like to feel his hard body against mine. But unfortunately I was stuck in the friend zone, a spot I'd held for the past ten years.

A part of me knew what I had with Michael was much better. I knew the *real* Michael. I knew his secrets and his dreams and his fears. He loved old Motown music, he hated girls who wore a bunch of perfume and lip gloss, he had no intention of pursuing a professional career in baseball although he was our school's star player, he was afraid of the dark and his favorite food was actually the prune cobbler his Aunt Charlotte made for Thanksgiving every year.

Yeah, I was definitely lucky. My best friend was handsome, smart, funny and kind. Sometimes I just wished-wondered if. . .

"Rachel, sweetheart? Are you okay?"

"Huh?" I was pulled from my daydream about Michael by his mom. I'm sure I was blushing like an idiot.

I had gone to the Carter house to get my prom dress altered. It was a bit too long but otherwise the royal blue dress was amazing. It fit me in all the right places and complimented my skin tone.

"You were a million miles away," Maggie Carter, Michael's mom smiled. She was like a second mother to me. She and my mom, Donna had become best friends over the years just like Michael and I.

"Sorry. Just thinking about. . .stuff,"

"So, are you excited about the prom?" She asked as she stuck another pin in the hem of my dress. Thank God for Mrs. Carter's sewing skills, my mother used to buy new shirts every time the buttons fell off.

"Yeah, I guess." If I were being honest, which I wouldn't be with her, not about this- I wished I was going with someone else. . .Ernest Tate was nice but he was kind of geeky. He totally caught me off guard when he asked me and he was the only one who did so. . .Michael was actually the one who talked me into giving him a chance.

"Oh honey, what's wrong? I thought every girl looked forward to going to the prom. I know I did." She smiled brightly. The reason behind her smile? George Carter. Michael's insanely handsome dad. He and Mrs. Carter had been together forever. They were high school sweethearts and were even more in love almost twenty- five years later.

"It's just weird, I guess- pretty soon we'll graduate and then go off to college. It's like all of these rites of passage are coming so fast. So much is changing."

I knew I was being melodramatic but I couldn't tell her that I was freaked out about going off to school without Michael. I was headed to UCLA and he was off to Boston University. A million miles away from each other. My heart suddenly hurt as I gazed out into the backyard again. Michael was no longer outside. He would probably disappear from my life just as fast.

Mrs. Carter stood and grabbed both my hands. "You are like a daughter to me and I love you very much, Rachel. Yes, things are changing but there are some things that will always remain the same- your connection to this family and Michael will never be broken."

She made me cry but feel better at the same time. I hugged her tightly.

"What's going on in here?" Michael asked from the doorway. He was sweaty and grimy but still looked incredibly handsome.

When Mrs. Carter and I broke a part, I wiped my eyes and turned to face him. I was about to say something sarcastic but the expression his face made me change my mind. He gaped at me and swallowed a few times before he walked into the room. I looked at his mom, who had a twinkle in her eye and a smile on her face.

"Wow, Rachel you look- beautiful." he said softly.

I frowned and looked down at myself and remembered I was in full on prom gear. I even had my hair pinned up to see how the style would look. I smiled at him and took notice of the predatory look in his eyes.

Mrs. Carter seemed very amused.

"Uh- yeah, thanks. So Mrs. C., are we done?" I cleared my throat and placed a hand at my neck, which I'm certain was scarlet.

She chuckled. "Yes, we are. Place the dress on the hanger. I'll be right back." She left Michael and I alone.

"So, are you excited about prom?" Michael asked the exact question his mom had asked five minutes earlier as he fingered the fabric of the dress. "Blue looks really good on you." He smiled faintly.

"I'm kind of excited and you're just saying that because blue is your favorite color."

"What? No, seriously it's good- really good. You need some help?" He extended his hand to help me off the footstool.

I took his hand and when I was securely on the floor, he held on tighter for some reason. He took a step closer and my heart leapt to my throat. He stared at my mouth. He was going to kiss me.

"Hey asshole, what's taking you so long- whoa, hey Rachel. Nice dress. You look hot." David winked as he interrupted our moment.

I quickly moved away from Michael and almost tripped over the footstool. "Hey- hey David." I croaked.

Michael sighed harshly.

David looked from me to Michael and laughed. "Did I interrupt something?"

My eyes flew to David's. "No, what are you- no- I've got to get out of this dress- I mean not like right here but in private- like by myself, alone- good grief." I muttered as I made a hasty exit to the bathroom.

I leaned against the door to catch my breath. That day something shifted and I was scared as hell that my thoughts about Michael Carter had suddenly crossed a line.

Mistletoe

Michael

I brought in a stack of firewood and sat it on the hearth while I kept my eyes glued to the front door.

"Are you okay son? You looked stressed. The semester is over, you should try and relax." My father appeared behind me and placed a hand on my shoulder.

"I'm okay." I lied.

I was extremely nervous. It was Christmas Eve and I would see Rachel tonight. I hadn't seen Rachel in person in almost three years after we parted ways on pretty shitty terms. We'd half assed apologized and made up over e-mail but I still missed having her in my life. I wondered what she'd been up to and whether or not she had a boyfriend. I don't know where that had come from. . . Rachel was totally allowed to date or have a boyfriend, I hadn't been a saint over the past three years. Not that it mattered- we weren't a couple or anything. I had ruined all chances of that ever happening on the night of our senior prom. . . .

"So, are you leaving already?" I asked her.

"Yeah, Ernest's allergies are acting up, so he's going to take me home."

What a spaz, I almost felt bad for paying him to ask Rachel out. But at least it kept her from the clutches of Ethan Taylor and the asshole brigade who had bets on who would be getting laid on prom night. It's not like she couldn't get a date on her own, I just figured Ernest would be a safe choice, so I told him I would pay him to ask her out. He was totally freaked out and damn near had an asthma attack when she said yes.

"Man, it's so early."

"I know I really wanted to do something. . . .else." she shrugged.

She looked so beautiful. She was by far the most beautiful girl at the prom. Even my date, Alicia couldn't hold a candle to her especially with all that shiny lip-gloss plastered on her mouth. She was definitely going to have to wipe that shit off before she put her lips on me.

"Something else, huh?" I frowned intrigued by her comment.

She blushed. "What are you doing tonight?" she asked suddenly.

"Um- I- don't know. I think we're hanging out with some of Alicia's friends." I lied. We already had a hotel room reserved thanks to David. He came in handy sometimes. I hated lying to Rachel but I didn't want to throw something like that in her face. It seemed cruel.

"I see. Can I ask you a question?" she asked shyly.

I knew I should have said 'no' based on the tone of her voice. "Yeah?"

"Were you um- were you going to kiss me yesterday at your parent's house?"

Yes. "No," I squeaked out as I cleared my throat. "I was just helping you off the stool. We both know how clumsy you are." I teased.

She smiled faintly and held her head down. "I wish you would have." she admitted softly.

"You wish I would have what?" I played dumb and begged her silently not to do this.

I cared about Rachel, a lot, she was about the only perfect thing in my life and I didn't want to cross that line. Well, I actually thought about it but I had to be strong for the both of us. If we hooked up and it didn't work out and I lost her. . . I would be utterly devastated. I was such a selfish bastard.

She rolled her eyes and placed a hand on her hip. "Stop playing dumb, Michael. You know what I mean. I wish you had kissed me. I'm just so tired of people thinking I'm so. . . innocent. I have thoughts and desires you know- I was actually contemplating losing my virginity to Ernest-,"

"What?" I yelled before she finished. "I'm going to kick his ass. That wasn't part of the deal!"

Fuck my life.

"What are you talking about? Deal? What deal? Did you have a bet with him?" she frowned.

And that's how I lost my best friend. Rachel was beyond furious when she found out what I did and how I had basically been threatening guys to stay away from her. And the worst part is when she asked me if I did all of it to keep her for myself- she had this look in her eyes and in that moment I knew if I would have said "yes", I would have been forgiven but instead, I hurt her and said "no" because I was confused and stupid.

That first year of college was absolute hell. I'd never been without Rachel and I didn't realize how dependent I'd become on her friendship. It was really messed up that I could no longer even call her to tell her about my day or to ask her opinion on something important. I floundered and almost lost my scholarship. She sent me an email during our second year to say she was sorry to hear about Aunt Charlotte passing away. I replied back and asked her how she'd been doing and thank God she replied. It opened up the first dialogue between us in two years.

Over the past year we'd sent e-mails here and there but things still seemed a little strained. I wanted to move past this. I wanted my friend back. I wanted my Rachel.

I rubbed my palms against my pants and cleared my throat.

"So um, is it just us and the Green's tonight?" I hoped my inquiry came across as casual although I was still curious about Rachel's relationship status.

My cousin, Jonathan smirked at me. He and David had given me shit about Rachel ever since David caught me almost kissing her three years ago.

"Actually I think Rachel is bringing a friend this year." my mother said as she flitted around and adjusted decorations.

My heart sank. I cleared my throat. "Oh really." My voice cracked.

David laughed loudly and Amanda, now his fiancée, stared at him confused. He leaned down and whispered in her ear. No doubt catching her up on our history.

My father clapped me on the back. "You want a shot of whiskey to calm your nerves?"

"My nerves are fine. Why would I be nervous?" I laughed nervously.

Suddenly the doorbell rang and I desperately wanted that shot of whiskey.

My father crossed the living room and answered the front door. Donna's musical laughter was the first thing I heard after Oscar's grumbling. They walked through the door and exchanged hugs with my parents. But it was just the two of them.

I started to hyperventilate. Jonathan appeared next to me. "Breathe boy, breathe."

"Michael!" Donna screeched as she rushed over and enveloped me in a warm hug. I hugged her tighter and missed Rachel even more.

"Look at you, still so handsome. I've missed you so much. Look at him Oscar, he's a sight for sore eyes." She gushed.

"Yeah, I guess he is." Oscar mumbled as he waved at me.

"Where's Rachel?" I blurted out.

"Real subtle. Hello Donna, don't you look fetching tonight. Is that a reindeer on your sweater?" Jonathan interrupted as he kissed Donna's cheek.

"Yes, and look- his nose lights up!" She giggled.

It was then that I realized Rachel's mom had been in the eggnog already.

"Mom said Rachel was bringing friend." I tried again.

Donna smiled. "Oh yes, yes, Sammie. They'll be here any minute. Rachel wanted to drive herself for some reason. Oh Maggie, the tree turned out so nice." Donna left me and joined my mother on the other side of the room.

Sammie? What kind of name was Sammie? To hell with a shot; I needed a tall glass of whiskey. Just as I was about to make my way to the kitchen, the doorbell rang again and I was once more frozen in place.

"I'll get it!" David yelled.

I swear, I could feel her and smell her before he opened the door. But when it opened nothing could prepare me for the stunning woman on the other side. Her hair had grown out and it hung in deep waves down her back. It was a lighter color that made her brown eyes sparkle.

The "freshmen fifteen" she complained about had landed in all of the right places. She looked amazing. A goddess. She practically hung from David's neck because of the way he picked her up and swung her around.

Once her feet were planted on the ground she turned over her shoulder and smiled all big and full of teeth at Sammie, who was still on the front porch. She extended her hand and pulled a petite *girl* inside the house. A girl? Sammie? What the hell? Was Rachel a lesbian now? My brain couldn't even register that possibility.

"Man, her girlfriend is kinda cute." Jonathan teased as he pushed past me and went to greet Rachel. Everyone made their way over to Rachel and her friend and college roommate, Sammie aka Samantha, who from the way she was looking at Jonathan was definitely not a lesbian. Unless she was bisexual. . . I digress.

Rachel stood in the foyer and stared expectantly at me. I realized I hadn't moved an inch.

“Mikey?” my mother called out concerned.

I almost tripped over my own feet as I made my way towards Rachel. I hugged her tightly and buried my face in her hair.

“Rachel.” I whispered her name reverently.

She stared up at me and smiled. “Hi Michael.”

Our family conveniently disappeared giving us a few minutes alone.

“I missed you so much. You look amazing. How have you been?” I moved a strand of hair from her face and placed it behind her ear.

“Good, things are good. Better now.”

I grabbed her hands and gripped them tightly. “Rachel, I am so sorry for how things ended before we went away to college. I was a complete ass and although I don’t deserve, it I’m asking for another chance to be your friend.”

“It’s in the past Michael. You’re forgiven. I’ve missed you too. Let’s start over.” She seemed so much more laid back than I remembered.

“Michael, Rachel! We’re eating dinner!” Donna yelled.

“We should probably get in there.” Rachel laughed. She stepped away from me and I looked up and saw an opportunity.

I grabbed her elbow and pointed up to the ceiling. Her eyes widened and she looked terrified but before she could respond I pulled her close to me and kissed her. It started off chaste but soon our lips began to move against each other with fervor. She was so soft and smelled so good. She tugged at the hair on the base of my neck and I slipped my tongue in her mouth and she pulled away. She covered her mouth and stared at me wide-eyed.

“What-why-Michael, I have a boyfriend. His name is Brian and we’ve been dating for a while. It’s pretty serious I – shouldn’t we- oh god.” she rushed out of the foyer and went to join our families in the dining room leaving me alone under the mistletoe.

PART FOUR

Move

Rachel

I sighed contentedly and smiled as I looked around my newly rented apartment. I couldn't believe I was officially a college graduate. A college graduate, who had scored a job at the largest accounting firm in Seattle right after graduation.

My life finally seemed to be on track. A few years ago. . .not so much.

The first year of college was hard for me both academically and socially. I was a virgin from a small town and very susceptible to the allure of college life. Initially, I was unfocused and a bit reckless but after a year, I pulled my shit together and brought up my dismal grades and made the dean's list two semesters in a row. I stayed away from the college social scene and spent a lot of time alone or hanging out with my roommate, Samantha.

Samantha was an only child and didn't really have any family or friends for that matter. She was pretty shy but when she opened up she became quite the chatterbox. She was also the sweetest person I'd ever met in my life. One night after a killer cram session, Samantha begged me to go to a local bar to have one drink and that's where I met Brian.

He was handsome, funny, and smart. But one of the things I really liked about him was that I always knew where I stood with him. No pretense or bullshit. We started off as really good buddies, always teasing each other mercilessly. He included me when he hung out with his friends and he wasn't overbearing. He was protective but he did it from a safe distance.

We fell into a comfortable routine and soon the group dates turned into one on one dates, the playful shoulder bumps turned into hand holding and the forehead kisses became toe curling open mouth kisses. We had some pretty heated make out sessions before we finally had sex for the first time. It was sweet and beautiful and I wished I had waited for Brian instead of losing my virginity during my freshman year to a frat boy after I drank one too many beers.

Everything was going great between Brian and I until Christmas Eve two years ago. Brian was unable to come home with me, so I asked Samantha. Samantha was apprehensive and felt she would be imposing. I begged and pleaded with her especially after I found out we were having dinner with the Carter's and *he* would be there. . .

It's not that I wasn't excited to see Michael because I really missed my childhood friend. I had actually forgiven him for paying someone to ask me to the prom like I was a grotesque leper who couldn't get a date. I'd also gotten over the crush I developed on him during our senior year and I had finally moved on. But I needed a buffer just in case I hadn't moved on as far as I thought.

Seeing him again had been surreal and his smile made my pulse quicken. I didn't realize just how much I'd missed him until I saw him standing in his parent's living room as he looked at me shyly. He was still so handsome.

When he hugged me, an electrical current ran through my body and I felt this eerie sense of calm wash over me easing all prior anxiety. His voice and laughter were like food to my soul and it didn't matter that we hadn't seen each other in three years, Michael would always represent home.

I never expected, in my wildest dreams that he would kiss me. Michael Carter kissed me. Full on kiss on the mouth and I kissed him back. It was euphoric. The kiss itself was very brief but I *never* felt that way when Brian kissed me.

It didn't hit me that I was doing something very wrong until his tongue slid past my lips. I pulled away horrified that I had technically just cheated on Brian. And I'd enjoyed it.

I told Michael I had a boyfriend and the pained expression that crossed his face broke my heart. But what did he expect? Should I have sat around the last three years pining over him?

We joined our families for dinner and barely said two words to each other for the rest of the evening. I tried to talk to him before I left but he shut me out. For the next year, my phone calls and emails went unanswered. My feelings ran the gamut from hurt to angry. We were supposed to be friends above all else and he wouldn't even talk to me. I guess it was payback for not speaking to him for over a year. Needless to say, my preoccupation with Michael put a strain on my relationship with Brian. I never told him about the kiss but he told me I was "different" when I returned from Christmas break.

I told him he was being paranoid and then I lied and said I was just concerned about Michael because he was going through a rough patch. Brian gave me an ultimatum and told me if I didn't stop obsessing over the relationship with Michael, he was going to break up with me.

At first I was really, really pissed off. I mean the nerve. I'd known Michael practically my entire life. We were like family. I mean, he was there when I got my period! But after it started to become painfully obvious Michael was never going to return my phone calls, I was about to cave to Brian's demand.

Then he called.

"Good to know you're not dead or anything." I spat bitterly.

"I'm pretty sure my mother would have told you if I was dead. So, what's up?" He sighed harshly.

"What's up? What's up? Are you serious? Michael, you haven't talked to me in almost a year! What the hell!" I screamed at him.

"I'm sure you've been preoccupied, so it's not like you were sitting around waiting on me to call."

He sounded so cold and angry.

"Why did you call me?" I asked. I already had my suspicions.

"What? You called. I'm calling you back."

"I've only called you like a hundred times."

"Rachel- fuck- what do you want me to say?" He yelled.

"Your mom told you to call me didn't she? Oh my god, you totally hate me don't you? Is this about Brian?"

"Brian who?"

"My boyfr- you know who Brian is. . .I don't get your whole attitude. We were friends- nothing else- the kiss was a mistake and-,"

"Don't- don't you say that-," he choked out. "First of all- you kissed me back, so don't act all self righteous! Were you thinking about your boyfriend when you were kissing me? And all the times we talked on the phone before the holidays, not once did you even mention you had a boyfriend!" he yelled.

I didn't know what to say.

"You're awfully quiet now." His tone was smug.

"You're right. I never mentioned him- I don't know- I guess part of me didn't know if you'd be comfortable talking about that or maybe I didn't want to blend my past with my future or something-," I rambled.

"So he's your future?" he asked incredulously.

I sighed. "Yes, no- I don't know. Michael, it had been three years- we never talked about being anything more than friends. You never seemed interested in me that way- I didn't know I couldn't have a boyfriend." I said mockingly.

"I never thought in a million years that you and I wouldn't be friends. It was the one constant thing in my life, the one thing I treasured. . .," his voice trailed off.

"I miss you Michael. You were my first friend, my very best friend and I want that again." My voice cracked.

"Rachel- are you crying?"

"No." I lied. I wiped the tears that had spilled down my cheeks.

"You're still the worst liar I know. I miss you too. I'm sorry for kissing you I should-,"

"No- no- Michael. It was inevitable at some point, right?" I laughed nervously. "So are we friends again?" I asked hopefully.

"Always," he promised.

Brian had initially been upset that I rekindled my friendship with Michael and although he didn't make good on his threat to break up with me, things were never quite the same. And then tragedy struck- Brian's dad was in a horrible car accident that left him paralyzed. Brian made the tough decision to drop out of school and move home to take care of his dad and run their family business.

He didn't even give me a chance to say anything before he broke up with me. He said he wasn't interested in a long distance relationship and that he would be too focused on his dad and the business anyway.

So, I muddled my way through my last year of college and relied on Michael's increasingly infrequent calls and e-mails to get me through. He and his entire family had surprised me and showed up to my commencement ceremony last month. The first thing I noticed was how much he had changed. He had matured a lot and was really focused on his education. He decided that he was going to graduate school to get his MFA.

He also told me that he'd met some girl and things were going really well between them. I could sense his apprehension in telling me but we had promised to be completely honest with each other. A part of me was happy for him but I'd be lying if I said another part of me wasn't disappointed, big time. I had this childish fantasy in my head that we'd reunite after college and we'd both end up in the same city and that maybe just maybe our time would come and we'd. . .

The shrill ring of my phone startled me from my thoughts. I picked up on the third ring.

"Hello."

"Rachel?" A familiar voice asked.

"How quickly we forget our friends." I teased.

"You didn't sound like yourself at first. How are you? Everything okay? I didn't catch you at a bad time, did I?"

I laughed. "Slow down, I can only answer one question at a time."

"Sorry, sorry. Man, it's great to hear your voice. It's been a crazy day." He sighed.

"What's wrong, Michael?" I decided to get comfortable I could tell something was up. I stretched out on my new couch, which was currently the only piece of furniture in my living room.

"I've been offered a job."

"An internship?" I asked confused.

"No, it's a full time salaried position." He clarified.

"What about your Master's?"

"I'm still going to get it but I'll only be able to go part time, maybe in the evenings."

"Wow, this must be some job for you to even consider this- what is it?" I asked.

"I'd be one of the program directors for the Soundbridge program at the symphony." He sounded giddy.

"Soundbridge- isn't that-," my heart thudded in my chest. "A part of the *Seattle* symphony?"

"Yes! How awesome is that?"

Oh my god, Michael was moving. To Seattle. I couldn't think or breathe. We would be living in the same city for the first time in almost five years.

"Rachel?" He called again.

"Huh? Oh I'm sorry- I just- I'm in shock right now. First of all, that sounds like an awesome opportunity. I know you always wanted to teach music and that is like- wow- you'd be so perfect for that job!" I gushed.

"But-?"

"There are no buts- I mean I just I didn't even know you were looking for a job- especially in Seattle."

I wondered if he was still with his girlfriend.

"Yeah, well Jonathan actually told me about it. Apparently one of his girlfriends- or should I say conquests, does marketing for the theater district and that's how he found out. He and David want me to move back closer to home, so he sent me the job information and I applied and had a couple of interviews. They made me an offer this afternoon!"

Every time I heard Jonathan's name, I thought about Samantha. They seemed to hit it off when she met him on Christmas Eve but when we left he gave her a hug and told her it was nice meeting her. He didn't ask for her phone number or anything and she was too shy to ask him. So, we went back to school and after graduation Samantha got a paid internship at Dior in Paris. I hadn't seen her in almost a year. I really missed her.

"You went on two interviews and this is the first I'm hearing of this?" I pouted focusing my attention back on Michael's news.

"I know. I'm sorry I just didn't want to jinx anything. As much as I wanted the job, I never actually thought I'd get it. You're actually the first person I told."

That revelation made me smile.

"Now there are just so many decisions to be made. But before I can do anything I have to talk to Janet. I mean, I'm sure she thought we would be in Boston for the long haul since we'd talked about moving in together but now. . . I just-she has her job here and I'm just – I don't know that she wants to pick up and move and follow me across the country." He said sadly.

Ah Janet, the girlfriend. Guess that answered my silent question.

"Well Michael, I mean you have to consider your future and how many opportunities may come along like this. Maybe you and Janet can do the long distance thing or who knows maybe she'll want to move to Seattle with you."

And it would kill me.

"You need to talk to her," I encouraged. "It sounds like the two of you are pretty serious, right? So who knows?"

I wanted him to tell me it wasn't that serious and that he would leave Boston with or without her. My stomach flip-flopped as I awaited his response. I stood and paced back and forth.

"Have I ever told you how thankful I am to have you in my life? You're right, I need to talk to her; I mean this is a stepping-stone for our future. Things will work out great. I'm sure she can find a job in Seattle and after I finish school, we can make it official and get married." He sighed wistfully.

Married?

I could feel the bile rising up in my throat as my entire body began to quake but I was unable to will my feet to move and instead of running to the bathroom to empty the contents of my stomach, I threw up on my brand new couch.

Change

Michael

"Hey, what's up man, you look beat!" Jonathan laughed as I approached the bar.

He had a beer waiting for me.

"I am. I really love my job but this new project is a lot of work," I yawned. "I just wish there were more hours in the day for sleep. Hope you don't mind, I told Rachel I was meeting you and she got excited for some reason and wanted to join us." I announced as I took a sip.

"Oh yeah, probably because we've been sleeping together for the past month." Jonathan grinned.

I literally choked on my beer. Most of it went up my nose. He patted my back and I pushed him off me.

"What the fuck- you better," I coughed. ". . .be joking or I'm kicking your," cough "ass."

Jonathan laughed heartily. "You can't even breathe; I doubt you could kick my ass anyway."

"Jonathan. . .," I clenched my jaw and my fist at the same time.

"Dude, do you know me at all?" He feigned hurt feelings.

I rolled my eyes. "You'll sleep with anything that has a pulse."

"Ouch, I'm wounded that you think so little of me. No, I haven't been sleeping with Rachel, I'm waiting for you to get your head out of your ass and do the job for me." He winked and I punched him in the shoulder.

"Ow," he laughed. "Seriously, what are you two waiting on? It's been like twenty years of foreplay. You're both single now, so what's the deal?"

I sighed harshly. "Rachel and I are at a really good place right now. We're closer than we've ever been and I really need her in my life as a friend more than anything. I don't want to mess that up like I've done in the past."

"Sometimes friends make even better lovers. I mean have you even- dear God," Jonathan muttered as he cut his soliloquy short.

I figured some woman had caught his attention, so I took another sip of my beer and ignored him.

It's not like I wasn't attracted to Rachel or that I didn't fantasize about being with her but what we had was so very precious to me. She was the only person I trusted implicitly. The only person I could truly talk to and share every fear and dream. Romantic or sexual relationships between men and women were often very volatile and filled with drama. I didn't want that with Rachel. Not to mention, if things didn't work out between us I was certain I'd slit my wrists or something to take me out of my misery.

I'd been distraught when I told Janet about the job in Seattle and she not only tried to talk me out of it, saying it wasn't a "real" job but then she went on to say I needed to make a choice between her and the job because there was no way in hell she was going to move to Seattle.

I really cared about Janet enough to consider a future and marriage with her but I realized I wasn't in love with her. So, I followed my heart and moved to Seattle. My family was so excited and even Rachel was glad to have me in the same zip code. We spent a lot of time together and I'd even gotten an apartment a few blocks away from hers. We were both working and I had classes two nights a week but most of our free time was spent with each other. I think we both made a really conscious effort not to cross the invisible line between us.

I knew our attachment was probably unhealthy because we didn't even date other people. I honestly didn't have the time but I wasn't sure what held Rachel back from dating. I saw the way guys looked at her. It was the same look Jonathan had on his face. . . . I turned my attention back to him and followed his line of sight. It was Rachel and a really cute girl.

The girl looked familiar but I couldn't place her. Jonathan was practically comatose as he stared at her when they approached the bar.

"Hey." Rachel said by way of greeting. She quickly hugged Jonathan before she wrapped her arms around my waist and squeezed. I squeezed her back with the arm not holding my beer. She stepped away and motioned to the girl with her.

"Hey guys- do you remember-,"

"Samantha?" Jonathan whispered before Rachel could complete the introduction.

Samantha? Samantha? There was no way this was the same Sammie aka Samantha from Christmas Eve almost three years ago. The Samantha from Christmas Eve was small, waifish and dressed like a teenage boy.

This Samantha was the complete opposite. She was still petite but the fitted white t-shirt she wore showed off an impressive rack and her jeans hugged her little body just right. Her hair was cut really short and flipped on the ends and her eyes were free of black eyeliner and they were a beautiful grayish-green. She smiled and her entire face lit up.

I stared at Rachel and my eyes widened. She grinned and nodded her head in confirmation.

"Samantha? Hey! It's been a long time. You look great." I complimented as I also gave her a one-arm hug.

"Hi Michael. Jonathan-," she smiled.

He was completely speechless. I laughed loudly and clapped his back.

"You okay, cousin?" I laughed.

"Huh? Yeah? Okay. Hi Samantha. Wow, you look- how have you been?" He asked still obviously entranced by the woman before him.

After Samantha told us about her travels abroad and how she just accepted a job in Los Angeles to work for a couture fashion designer, she and Jonathan slipped into a cozy booth in the back of the bar.

"So, is that why you were so excited about seeing Jonathan?" I smirked at her.

"Yep," she smiled as she looked over at the two of them. "She flew in last night for a quick visit before leaving for L.A. in the morning. Jonathan was the first person she asked about."

"I've never seen him like that- it almost makes me want to forgive him for what he said about you." I said without thinking.

"He was talking about me? What did he say?" She placed her hands flat on the bar.

Shit.

"He was just being an ass, seriously it was nothing."

I stared at my hands as I peeled the label off my beer but could feel her eyes burning a hole in the side of my head.

"You're staring at me aren't you?" I asked.

"Yes."

"You're not going to drop this are you?"

"Nope, tell me." She bumped my shoulder.

I tilted my head towards her. "He said he slept with you." I shrugged.

Her jaw dropped and her face turned red. "What!" She yelled. A few people looked over at us including Jonathan and Samantha. Rachel raised her fist to him.

I laughed and grabbed her wrist as I turned on my bar stool to face her.

"He was joking. It was a stupid joke. I didn't believe him." I fingered the charm bracelet I'd given her for her as a college graduation gift.

"Well thank God that- wait a minute, why didn't you believe him? You think there's something wrong with me?" She asked indignantly.

"No. Are you serious- shut up," I let go of her wrist. "I just know Jonathan wouldn't do something like that. .to me." I muttered more to myself than her.

I picked up my beer and took a sip before I chanced a look at her. She stared at the beer in front of her. Her brow was furrowed and her face was a mask of deep concentration.

This time, I bumped her shoulder.

"Come on, don't do that shit, you know I hate it when you do that- I can't read your mind." I whined.

"I just- what does that mean exactly? He wouldn't do that to *you*?" she frowned. "Michael Carter please tell me you aren't threatening guys to stay away from me again."

My eyes widened. "No! I swear, no! Why would you say that?"

She shrugged. "I'm just trying to put what you said in context."

"Stop always trying to analyze everything." I smiled.

"Michael are we- do you think we're meant to be anything more than friends?" She asked quietly.

I wanted to pretend I didn't hear her. I wanted to ramble on and on about the weather or some other asinine topic to keep from broaching this subject, which had been taboo up until now.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath and turned to face her once again and was blown away by the depth of emotion in her eyes.

I ran my hand up and down her arm and she shivered.

"Rachel- you're like the most important person in the world to me and if I messed this up-," I motioned between the two of us. "I don't think I could live with myself."

"What makes you so sure things would get messed up?"

I shrugged. I didn't know and the truth was I was afraid to find out.

"I mean- we pretty much spend all of our time together exclusively anyway. It's just that- I think we've both come to depend heavily on each other and when we start dating other people or getting into serious relationships- things won't be the same anyway." She said sadly.

"So you think we should become a couple because we already spend so much time together?" I frowned.

She rolled her eyes. "You know what? Forget it,"

She picked up her beer and took a long pull.

"Rachel don't do this- we need to-," I started but was interrupted by Jonathan and Samantha's return.

"Hey, Samantha and I were going to go get a bite to eat. Y'all want to join us?" Jonathan asked. He had a stupid grin on his face as he stared at Samantha.

"No, I'm not really hungry. But I am getting ready to leave. I'll walk out with you." Rachel threw a ten on the bar and shrugged on her jacket and adjusted her purse on her shoulder without looking at me.

Jonathan and Samantha were busy looking at each other and never noticed the tension between the two of us.

"Rachel, I'll walk you out. I'm leaving too." I said pointedly.

"Don't do me any favors Michael. Samantha, you go ahead and catch up with Jonathan and he can drop you by my place later. Have fun." She kissed Samantha on the cheek and left the three of us standing there wondering what the hell had happened.

Instead of leaving, I ordered another beer after Samantha and Jonathan left. I waited an hour before trying to call Rachel. I figured she needed some time to calm down. I sent her a text but she didn't answer. I would learn later that it was at that precise moment she met someone who could quite possibly take her away from me forever.

PART FIVE

Culmination

Rachel

I stared at my reflection in the mirror and smiled. I admired my body and was proud of the results I'd achieved from working out in the gym so diligently. Samantha was right- turquoise was a really good choice.

I looked at the suitcase on my bed and peeled off the swimsuit and folded it before I tossed it inside. I pulled on a t-shirt and a pair of sweats, so that I could finish packing. I couldn't believe I was going on a business trip with my boyfriend to Hawaii of all places. I was so excited. About the boyfriend and the trip.

Jason and I had been dating for about three months. I met him the night I left Michael at the bar with Samantha and Jonathan. I was so pissed at Michael although I had no right to be. It was totally his prerogative to not want to start a relationship with me. But I couldn't understand why we spent so much time together if it wasn't headed for *more*. I didn't want to get so attached to him again because it was inevitable that he would find someone and get married and she would not approve of our relationship and I would be left a lonely old spinster with a house full of cats.

I hated cats.

I shuffled my way into the supermarket after I left the bar to drown my sorrows in a carton of double chocolate ice cream. I was comparing two brands when someone next to me laughed.

"Chocolate or chocolate, such a hard choice,"

I rolled my eyes because I was not in the mood to entertain stupidity. Anyone with a brain knew there was a huge difference between mocha almond chocolate fudge and double chocolate turtle pecan. I turned to find a pair of twinkling brown eyes staring intently at me. They were attached to a smiling face.

"First of all, your lack of knowledge about chocolate ice cream is pathetic. Second, if that was your attempt to flirt with me it was even more pathetic." I said sourly.

His face fell and for a minute I felt victorious. Then I felt like shit.

"I'm sorry- I've just- I've had a really bad day."

"No apologies necessary. That was pretty corny to mention the ice cream." He smiled faintly.

I leaned against the freezer door. "So you mean you don't have experience at picking up girls in the frozen food section of the grocery store?" I teased.

"Am I that obvious- forget I asked- you already said I was pathetic." He pouted.

For some reason, that made me laugh. Really hard. He joined in on the laughter.

"I'm sorry- really-," I chuckled.

"I told you no apologies necessary, I'm glad I could amuse you. Especially since you've had such a bad day."

I pulled a strand of hair behind my ear and smiled at him. He was actually really cute.

"I'm Jason by the way." He extended his hand.

"Rachel." I shook his hand firmly and we spent the next twenty minutes debating the best and worst ice cream flavors.

When I left the store, I had a carton of ice cream and Jason's phone number. I ignored Michael for a full twenty-four hours and decided I was being childish and called him first. I decided not to even bring up the conversation (of lack thereof) from the bar and he seemed content to just forget about it; however he seemed upset when I told him about Jason.

It got to the point I rarely mentioned Jason to Michael because he was always so negative about our relationship. The truth was that Jason was an incredibly nice guy; someone I could definitely see myself with long term. He made no secret about the fact that after he turned thirty-one, last year, he decided to stop casual dating and was also looking for something serious.

Jason worked for an insurance firm and they were sending all of their top salesmen to Hawaii for a conference and he asked me to go. I didn't tell Michael because I didn't want to hear the negative commentary again. Instead I told him I was going out of town for to a conference in San Francisco.

I continued to pack as I danced around my bedroom. I hoped we got a chance to go to a luau. I'd always wanted to hula dance. Our flight to Honolulu left the next morning at 9:30am. I could barely contain my excitement.

I stopped dancing when I heard a knock at my door. I wasn't expecting anyone. I padded through the hallway and looked through the peephole.

"Michael? Hey, what are you doing here?" I frowned as I opened the door. He never showed up unannounced.

His eyes were wild and he was out of breath. He looked equal parts pissed and afraid.

"What's wrong? What happened?" I asked.

He entered my apartment, closed the door and grabbed my shoulders before he pushed me against the wall.

"Please tell me you're not going to Hawaii with *him*." he said between clenched teeth.

I didn't have to ask how he found out. Samantha apparently couldn't keep shit from Jonathan and Jonathan was a little girl because he ran and told Michael.

I sighed and pushed his chest. "Get off of me."

"So it's true?" He sagged against the back of the front door.

"Michael stop being so dramatic." I rolled my eyes.

"Dramatic? My best friend is going to Hawaii with some guy she barely knows and she doesn't tell me? What the fuck?" He yelled.

"I'm sorry I didn't realize I had to tell you my every move." I said defiantly as I crossed my arms over my chest.

He stared at me with glassy eyes. "Rachel, I need to tell you something," he took a deep breath.

I steeled myself for a revelation about Jason.

"I love you." He said simply.

"I know, I love you too Michael, but you can't do this every time-,"

He placed a finger against my lips.

"No Rachel, I mean I'm *in* love with you. Please don't go to Hawaii with this guy." He said softly as he stroked my cheek.

My mouth fell open and tears filled my eyes. I think I'd been waiting most of my life to hear those words from him but now they seemed so empty.

I roughly pushed his hand away from my face.

"No- no- you- don't you dare!" I shrieked. "You can't come here and do this to me! When I try to talk to you- you blow me off or pretend that there's nothing to talk about and that you want to stay friends but now that I'm happy and I've found someone who's not afraid to admit how they feel about me-," I collapsed into uncontrollable sobs against the wall. "You just can't-,"

"Rachel-," he advanced towards me.

I held up my hand to stop him. He grabbed my wrist and I tried to pull away but he was stronger.

He pulled me to him and I fell against his chest. He held on tightly to me and buried his face in the top of my head.

"I'm done running away from this Rachel," his voice was strained. "I have loved you for more than half my life. I am so scared of losing you but I can't pretend any longer. I want to be with you Rachel- I want more- with you. *Please.*"

I pulled away and stared up at him to find tears streaming his face.

I shook my head. I couldn't believe what was happening. I was so conflicted. On one hand I had Jason, who was smart, handsome, funny and honest. But on the other hand there was Michael- he was. . . . well, he was everything. But was I really ready to give myself to him completely and officially? What if he changed his mind or things *didn't* work out? We'd never be able to turn back once we crossed that line.

"Michael-," I sighed not even sure what to say.

We both stared at each other for a few minutes before he finally spoke.

"I know I have been the one in the past who has come up with every reason why things between us should stay the same and I know I've been an asshole but I swear to you- I'm ready now- and I just hope you feel the same way," he took a deep breath and wiped at his eyes. "Rachel, you're it for me- I'm not talking temporary or trial basis. You're my best friend and every time I think about my life or my future you're there."

"Michael- why now- three months ago you were still undecided and now all of a sudden you're just so sure?" I asked skeptically.

"I've never been undecided about you Rachel. Just scared."

"I know. . . that things won't work out. Why are you so sure they will?" I batted the tears away from my eyes.

"First of all, the reason I was scared things wouldn't work out is because I was afraid I wasn't good enough for you. Afraid that maybe you wouldn't truly want a future with me- maybe you would feel like you could do better."

I stared at him with my mouth open. "Are you serious? Michael- I – you-," I wanted to tell him there was no one better but he held up a hand to stop me as he finished.

"Second- I wanted to make sure if we were together it was *forever*. I sense something different with you and Jason and I don't know but I'm getting this vibe that I could lose you and it's made me think a lot about this- you and I- over the past few months and I just- I'm a selfish bastard and to be honest I just figured you'd always be there, Rachel. But I don't just want you around as a fixture in my life. I want what our parent's have- a best friend, a lover and a life partner."

My heart swelled so huge I thought it would burst.

"Rachel, please say something." He begged.

I could feel the tears before they spilled over my cheeks again. There was nothing left to say- some things didn't need to be explained or justified. Some things were just meant to be.

"You had me at forever." I smiled.

He exhaled loudly and wrapped his arms around me and lifted me from the floor.

"Oh my god, oh my god." he chanted over and over as he spun me around.

He placed me on my feet and stared down at me and his eyes began to glisten once again. He gently placed his trembling hands on either side of my face and held me tenderly.

"I love you so much Rachel Green. I promise to always love you." he said quietly.

"I love you too Michael, more than words." I pledged.

He slowly lowered his head and softly brushed his lips against mine and gently pulled my bottom lip between his. He made a few more sweet passes before I locked my arms around his neck and deepened the kiss. Electrical currents ran through my body as our tongues slid against each other. I moaned and pressed my body closer to his. His hands slid to my waist and he pulled me flush against his body.

We pulled away breathless and he rested his forehead against mine. I ducked my head and placed open mouth kisses on his neck.

"Rachel-," he groaned. "You're going to start something-," he warned.

Well, duh. That was totally my intention.

"Is there a problem with starting something?" I teased.

He gripped my waist and I stared up at him.

"What are you going to do about Jason?" He asked apprehensively.

Who?

I closed my eyes and sighed. I was such a horrible person.

"Hmm, maybe I'll break up with him after we get back from Hawaii?" I shrugged. Of course I was teasing but the look on Michael's face was priceless. His eyes bugged out of his head and I laughed loudly.

"You think that shit is funny?" He frowned as he pushed me back against the wall.

"No." I squeaked.

He slowly leaned in next to me and took my earlobe between his teeth before sighing.

"So what are you going to do?" He pulled back and stared at me intently. I sighed.

"I have to talk to him. I know you're not a fan of his but he really is a good guy and I just- he deserves an explanation."

Michael pulled away from me with a dejected look on his face. I fisted his shirt to keep him from going too far.

"Hey- don't- don't pull away. I love *you* and I don't want to be with anyone else." I assured him.

He grabbed my hand and kissed my fingers. "I know- I just can't help but think if I wouldn't have had my head up my ass in the bar that night, Jason wouldn't even be an issue."

I couldn't argue that point, so instead I just wrapped myself around him and held on tight.

"I need to call him and let him know- he's expecting me at the airport tomorrow morning."

I felt Michael tense. He reached in his back pocket and pulled out his phone.

"You can use my phone." He said somewhat seriously.

I gaped at him. "Michael- no. I'll call him from my own phone. I just- I want- can I have some privacy?" I asked. "I just- I don't want to be cruel Michael, he doesn't deserve that."

I didn't really have any secrets from Michael and wasn't planning on leading Jason on but I probably would say some things that Michael didn't want or need to hear.

"You want me to leave?" He asked quietly.

"No- well not for the rest of the evening. Maybe you could go and get us something to eat?" I suggested.

He hesitated but agreed.

I dialed Jason's number with shaky fingers after Michael left. He answered on the third ring.

"Hey beautiful." He said and I knew he was smiling.

"Hey."

"Oh no- what's wrong?"

Although we had only known each other for a short period of time he was really good at reading my moods.

"Jason- I- I won't be able to go to Hawaii with you." I spat out.

He was silent.

"Is this a joke Rachel?" He asked hopefully. "I never quite know with you sometimes."

"Unfortunately, it's not. Michael came over and we talked and-,"

He laughed bitterly. "Say no more. I always knew he wanted more than friendship with you. This totally sucks but the heart wants what it wants I guess. Pretty fucking lousy timing." he muttered.

"Yeah," was all I could think of to say.

"Can I ask you a question?" He asked.

"Anything."

"Did you care about me at all?"

"Oh Jason, of course I did," I cried. "You are an amazing guy. This thing with Michael- it's- it's destiny- he's been in my life since we were eight and we've been fighting this attraction for most of our lives it seems."

"I get it-I just hope he treats you better than you deserve, Rachel."

"Oh Jason-," I sobbed.

"I've got to go- I need to make some phone calls to see if I can find someone to take a pretty girl's place. Have a nice life Rachel."

"Bye Jason."

When Michael returned I was still sitting on my bed clutching the phone. He stared at me for a long time.

"Are you sure you made the right decision?" He asked softly.

I rolled my eyes. "There's only ever been one decision Michael. *You*. Just promise me one thing,"

"Okay." he agreed.

"There is no turning back- you can't shut me out or not talk to me-,"

"I know Rachel, I know but that goes both ways- hey, we've got a huge advantage on our hands because we know each other so well but we are human and we will make mistakes but the key is to love and forgive as we learn and grow together."

"Our families are going to freak out." I grinned.

"Please, I think our mothers have been planning our wedding since we were ten." He laughed.

I climbed into his lap and wrapped my arms around his neck.

"This is forever Michael Carter, you can't get rid of me." I rubbed my nose against his.

"Forever is all I want." he smiled as he kissed me deeply.

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Consummation

Michael

I paced my apartment nervously as I stared at the clock on the wall. She would arrive in less than ten minutes. I fluffed one of the pillows again and surveyed the area making sure everything was perfect.

Rachel and I had been "more than friends" for a little over two months and we had yet to officially consummate our relationship. Time and opportunity seemed to become extremely scarce as both our work schedules picked up and I started my thesis.

It was rare that we got to spend an entire weekend together without any other commitments but this particular weekend was one of those free weekends and I planned on taking advantage of it.

I prepared my mom's secret lasagna recipe and I also bought Rachel's favorite wine along with a dozen long stem roses and a bunch of scented candles to help set the mood.

I'd never done this for a woman, including Janet. I just wasn't any good in the romance department. I hoped Rachel didn't think I was corny as hell and laugh at my attempts to romance her. I'd be lying if I said I didn't want the night to end with us wrapped around each other. . .*naked*.

I still couldn't believe we had finally stepped over the sacred line of friendship but I had never felt so sure of any decision in my entire life. Rachel was it for me and I was a damned fool for not admitting my feelings sooner. So much time had been needlessly wasted.

I hated that it took her relationship with Jason to make me open my eyes. The way he looked at her and the way he talked to her- there was something so intimate and familiar about it.

It pissed me off that after three months he was so close to her and he acted like he'd known her all his life. I was the one that had known her for most of her life, the only one who showed up to her eighth birthday party, the one who gave her a shirt to cover her pants when she started her period, the one who held her hair while she threw up when she tried to be cool and drink the spiked punch at Tyler Jones' sixteenth birthday party, I was the one who held her when she cried because her grandmother died, the one who thought about her every morning when I woke up and every night before I went to bed for the past twenty years.

I couldn't lose her. I wouldn't lose her to him or anyone else. She was my other half and when I had the epiphany that we were supposed to be together, I literally ran from my apartment to her front door and hoped like hell I wasn't too late. I still thanked God everyday that I wasn't.

My head snapped towards the door when I heard a light tapping. I took several deep breaths and hoped I wouldn't have a panic attack. I could already feel the beads of sweat on my forehead.

I opened the door with shaky hands and my heart leapt to my throat when I came face to face with her. We hadn't seen each other in three days but it felt like much longer. She wore a simple blue, sleeveless dress and her hair was pulled back into a neat ponytail. She looked so beautiful.

She cleared her throat. "Can I come in?" she asked.

"Shit- yeah- of course sorry," I moved and allowed her inside. "You look good- you smell nice too." I gave her a quick, nervous peck on the lips.

I was such an idiot. It was just Rachel. . .that thought alone should have calmed me but I didn't want to treat her like I'd always treated her. I didn't want her to have any regrets.

"Michael- what- what is all this?" She gasped as she looked around the apartment and eyed all of the flowers and candles.

I shrugged. "I just- I thought it would be nice to have a romantic evening in?" I have no idea why I framed it as a question.

She smiled brightly. "It looks great and something smells amazing."

"Yeah, it's sandalwood, I think." I referred to the candles.

"Um, no I was talking about the food- it almost smells like-," she went to the kitchen and shrieked "Lasagna! Is this your moms recipe?" She asked hopefully.

I nodded. I was still transfixed on her and how the dress she wore hugged her curves just right and how when she smiled her nose crinkled a bit.

"Hey, are you okay?" She asked concerned.

"Um, yeah- hey do you want something to drink? I have wine." I offered.

"Sure wine sounds good- can we have it with dinner? I'm starving." She placed a hand on her stomach for emphasis.

"Sure." I pulled a corkscrew from the drawer.

Rachel took two glasses from my cabinet and placed them next to the bottle. I watched her move effortlessly and unconsciously around my kitchen like she owned the place. She owned me too.

I opened the wine and I began to pour as she dipped a finger in the layer of marinara sauce on top of the lasagna. There was something so sensual about the way she sucked the sauce from her finger. . . I imagined her mouth was on me and. . . .

"Michael!" She yelled suddenly.

I snapped out of my stupor and realized I'd over poured the wine and it was spilling over the top of the glass on to the counter.

"Fuuck!" I muttered as I tore half the paper towels from the roll and began to do a shitty job of wiping up the mess I made.

Rachel grabbed my wrist and took the paper towels from me and proceeded to clean up the mess. I leaned against the counter and ran my hand over my head.

She stood in front of me and ran her hands up and down my arms. "What's wrong?" she asked.

I sighed harshly. "I wanted to have a nice romantic evening with you. But it appears I'm incapable of being romantic-," I started.

"All of this is very romantic Michael- I am very touched by your gestures." she said sweetly.

I didn't deserve her.

"There is no need to be nervous-," she started.

"I'm not nervous." I lied as I tried to maintain some dignity.

"You keep forgetting *I know you*- you're nervous. Is there something you're not telling me?" she hedged. She looked really worried.

I was such an idiot. "No, I'm just being an idiot." I sighed.

"Good thing for you, I have a soft spot for idiots." She smiled but it didn't reach her eyes. She was probably waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I gripped her hips and pulled her closer to me and kissed the top of her head before I tipped her chin and raised her face to mine. I pressed my lips firmly against hers and she automatically opened her mouth to allow my tongue inside. There were so many things I loved about Rachel but kissing her was definitely at the top of the list. My entire body was on fire as my hands drifted to her ass and pressed her closer to me against my now very obvious erection.

She moaned in mouth and I gently pried her away from me. Her expression was now one of pure wanton lust and any doubts she had, had now evaporated.

"You should eat-," I managed to say.

I was ten seconds away from pushing everything on to the floor and taking her against the counter.

"I'm not that hungry anymore." She lied as her stomach growled.

I laughed at her. "Come on let's eat."

We made small talk through dinner and Rachel told me that her lease at her apartment was up soon and that she had found a place on the other side of town.

"Are you serious?" I frowned.

"What? The renewal fee is going to almost double my rent. I can't afford that."

"So you're just going to move across town without even talking to me about it?"

I didn't want her to move across town, I would never see her. Hell, I could barely function without seeing her for three days.

"Hello- I'm talking to you about it now." She frowned.

I sat back in my chair and frowned. "That's too far away."

She laughed at me. "Are you serious, Michael it's only about twenty minutes away."

I didn't want her *twenty seconds* away- I wanted her with me all the time. Every morning and night. I turned my chair sideways and pulled her chair closer to mine.

"Aah!" She yelped as she gripped the table to keep from falling.

"Come here." I grabbed her by the waist and lifted her from the chair. I pulled her on to my lap and she pushed her dress up and straddled me.

I made circles on the tops of her exposed thighs with my thumbs and tried to steady my breathing.

"Move in with me." I said hoarsely.

"What?" She asked genuinely surprised.

"The past three days without you were hell. I want you here all the time." I lowered my head and stared down at my fingers gripping her thighs.

When she didn't answer me right away I was about to push aside my pride and beg but then she ran her fingers through my hair and forced my head up. I looked into her eyes and saw so much love there that it made a lump form in my throat.

"You don't think it's too soon?" She whispered.

"Yeah, twenty years is not nearly enough time to know someone." I said sarcastically.

She pushed my shoulder. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah- I don't think it's too soon but if need some time-,"

"No, I don't need any time, I just want you to be sure. You know you're going to have to give up half your closet." she smiled.

"Is that a yes?" I asked hopefully as my heart thudded wildly in my chest. I couldn't think if anything more perfect than Rachel moving in with me except Rachel marrying me and having my children.

She nodded her head and hummed in the affirmative.

I hugged her tightly and screamed like a girl.

"A little excited?" she teased.

I framed her face with my hands. "I don't think I will ever be able to put into words how much I love you, Rachel. Seriously. I just want you- always." I kissed her deeply and she started grinding against me.

"I want you too Michael- now- I want you *now*." She said breathlessly.

I secured my arms around her and stood without uttering word. I continued to kiss her as she wrapped her legs tightly around my waist and I carried her to my bedroom.

We quickly undressed and lay next to each other in our underwear. This was a far as we'd ever gone before. I ran a finger from her shoulder to her elbow and then her hip to the back of her knee. She giggled.

"Tickles," she whispered. "I know this sounds stupid but I feel like I have butterflies in my stomach or something- I feel like I'm about to have sex for the first time." She admitted as I ran my fingertips over the tops of her breasts. She was so soft and beautiful and perfect.

"I feel the same way Rachel- this is the most special moment of my life so far- I love you and this means the world to me." I confessed.

She kissed me hard and ran her hands up and down my chest. I ran my thumb over her pebbled nipples before I reached around and unhooked her bra. Once the fabric was out of my way, I kneaded her breasts with my hands and pulled my mouth away from hers to lavish attention to her breasts.

She writhed and moaned underneath me and I knew that once I was inside of her I would probably last like a virgin. I planted kisses along her stomach before I dipped my tongue inside the waistband of her panties.

"Michael-," She whimpered.

"I need to get a condom." I pulled away from her and she gripped my shoulders.

"No, I 'm on the pill and I know neither of us has been with anyone in a while- I want to feel all of you." Her breath was coming out in short pants.

"Rachel," I groaned as I buried my face in her neck. Hearing her say that was almost my undoing.

"I'm not going to last long, so I'm apologizing in advance." I breathed into her neck.

"S'okay, we've got all night." She pulled her underwear down and I clenched my eyes shut. Once I saw her completely naked I was going to be totally done for.

I slowly opened my eyes and stared down at her body.

"Perfect, perfect," I muttered as I pulled my boxer briefs down over my hips and kicked them off across the room once they were at my ankles.

"Are you ready Rachel?" I asked.

"Yes, yes- I'm ready Michael- I've wanted you for so long- so long,"

I positioned myself over her and rested my weight on my elbows. I gritted my teeth as I slowly pushed inside of her. She raised her hips and tried to hurry our coupling.

"Rachel- stop- don't- don't move." I ground out.

"S-s-sorry. Oh my god, Michael," she moaned loudly.

Once I was all the way inside of her and I could feel our hips pressed together, I froze. I was inside Rachel. We were making love. Rachel Green, my best friend and my main reason for existing. I was so overwhelmed in that moment.

"Michael, Michael baby, please open your eyes, look at me." Rachel begged.

I slowly opened my eyes and looked down into her angelic face. Her eyes were glistening.

"It's okay, we belong together Michael. Nothing has ever been so perfect or so right in my life." She smiled as a single tear trickled down her cheek. It was then that I realized it had fallen from my eye and not hers.

"I love you, I love you, I love you." I chanted over and over as I began to move inside her. I kissed her and felt my entire soul open up as my orgasm coursed through my body.

I lay on top of her with my weight barely being supported by my shaky arms. I could feel the sweat as it ran down my spine. Rachel's hands were on my back as she held me tightly. I could feel her still moving beneath me before she suddenly stilled and a soft cry left her mouth. I stared down in her face just in time to

see her lips part and her eyes roll upward as they closed. I smirked down at her but the smirk slid off my face when I felt her explode around me. It caused my body to tremor and I began to stiffen again.

"Oh- shit- oh-," I grunted as I started to move again. Her eyes flew open.

"You said we had all night right?" I smiled.

Rachel and I made love three more times that night and I may or may not have asked her to marry me as I dozed off to sleep next to her and I can't be sure but sounded like she said yes.

PART SIX

Mistake

Rachel

I was running late, really late. Michael and I were supposed to meet David and Amanda for dinner and I ended up on a conference call with our London office that went on much later than expected. So instead of going home to change clothes and ride with Michael, I took a cab and met him at the restaurant.

I sent Michael a text letting him know I was on my way and he replied:

No worries, we're at the bar waiting. Take your time-be careful. Love you.

I smiled as I placed my phone back in my purse. I took a deep breath and tried to calm my nerves. I relaxed into the seat and smiled as I thought about how good things had been over the past year.

I moved in with Michael after the lease was up at my apartment and initially the transition had been a little challenging as we tried to combine both our belongings and our busy schedules. But eventually we got into a rhythm and things were going really well. Michael's career at the symphony had taken off and I was promoted to a managing accountant position. Yet despite how good things were, I couldn't help but feel something was missing.

Next year, Michael and I would both turn thirty and it just seemed like we were several years behind other couples we knew. David and Amanda were married and working on their second child. Samantha had opened a boutique in downtown Seattle and she and Jonathan were getting married next month. I'd even heard from some old college friends that Brian was now a father.

It's not that I was unhappy with our current relationship status but I felt like we had waited twenty years to admit how we felt about each other, I didn't want to wait another twenty or ten or even five years before we got married. We both knew that's where our relationship was headed but it was like this unspoken thing between us, we just never talked about it.

The truth was I couldn't wait to become Rachel Carter. I wasn't going to be one of those independent married women clinging to their single identity. I wanted the world to know I was his in every way. I really couldn't imagine ever loving anyone the way that I loved Michael.

I smiled as the restaurant came into view and dug through my purse to get money for the fare. I paid the driver, opened the door and practically skipped inside the restaurant. I knew it was silly but I was always anxious to see Michael after I'd been away from him, even if it was only for a few hours.

I scanned the virtually empty bar and saw Michael and David. They stood off to the side and each held a beer in their hand. They appeared to be deep in conversation, so deep that when I approached them they didn't even see me, which allowed me to overhear part of their conversation.

"Fuck, I don't know. I just- I think it was a mistake we're practically on top of each other- I definitely think we need some space," Michael sighed. "It's just that-,"

Before he could finish David spotted me. He smiled brightly and I saw his lips move but couldn't make out the words because they were drowned out by the sound of my heart galloping in my chest.

It was a mistake? A mistake? Michael thought us moving together was a mistake and he wanted space.

"Rachel, babe, are you okay?" He asked concerned as he placed a hand on my shoulder.

I stared up at his face. There was no way the past eight months had all been a lie. His face started to blur as tears filled my eyes. I pushed his hand away and ran to the ladies room. My intent was to run out of the front door of the restaurant but I suddenly felt like the room was spinning, so I took a detour.

When I rushed inside I came face to face with Amanda.

"What the- Rachel? Hey, oh my god, what's wrong?" She asked concerned.

I started to hyperventilate. "He-it's- wrong- mistake- space-," was all I could get out.

"Okay, you aren't making any sense." She pulled me away from the door over to the sink. At that very moment Michael yelled my name outside the door.

"Rachel! Rachel! Are you okay?"

Amanda narrowed her eyes and placed her hands on her hips before she went to the door.

"Will you stop yelling? You're going to get us kicked out of here and this is my favorite restaurant." She said somewhat seriously.

"What happened, what's wrong with her? She just got here and she was all freaked out- did something happen to her? I need to see her. Rachel! Rachel! Are you okay?" He was frantic.

I splashed water on my face and took in my appearance. I looked a little crazed. My pupils were dilated and my face was flushed. Suddenly I went from devastated and hurt to totally pissed off. I scowled at my reflection and spun on my heels to face him.

Amanda had her arm across the door effectively blocking him from coming inside.

"Rachel!" he called. He looked a little crazed as well.

"You bastard! You were the one who practically begged me to move in with you! How dare you say it was a mistake and you need space!" I screamed.

Amanda gasped. "You bastard." she echoed.

He stared at me wide-eyed. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

"I overheard you talking to David! You said it was a mistake to move in together and that you needed space."

He rolled his eyes and took a deep breath. He placed a hand over his heart.

"God, you almost gave me a heart attack, I thought something had happened to you!" He yelled.

A lady appeared behind him with an apologetic look on her face.

"I'm sorry; I've really got to pee."

Amanda moved aside and we stepped out into the hallway.

"Why don't you two take this outside." Amanda suggested.

"I have nothing to say to you- how dare you talk to your brother about this and-," I hissed through clenched teeth.

"Is there a problem?" The restaurant manager approached us.

"Um no, everything here is fine." Michael said pointedly as he looked at me.

I narrowed my eyes at him and stomped away. I walked out of the restaurant with him on my heels. When we were outside I turned to face him.

"Why didn't you tell me how you felt?" I tried to remain strong but the tears came anyway.

"Are you insane? Rachel, think about it- have I ever given you one reason to think or feel like I don't want to live with you? Seriously?" He screeched.

"Well, why would you tell David-," I started.

He held up a hand to cut me off. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

He stepped closer to me and grabbed my hips roughly. He pulled me to him and rested his forehead against mine before he spoke.

"I love you. I have always loved you. I will always love you. Nothing about us is a mistake, nothing." He said deeply.

I gripped his shirt tightly and sobbed into his chest. "I'm sorry, I overheard you talking to David and I just thought maybe you-,"

"I was talking about the apartment. My apartment is too small. I was saying it was a mistake to renew the lease for another year that maybe we should have looked for a house or something with more space but I didn't know how you'd feel about buying a house when we're not even married yet."

I was such an idiot. I buried my face in his chest and groaned.

"Yes, you are an idiot." he chuckled. Apparently I'd spoken out loud.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." I placed my hands on either side of his face and the look he gave me broke my heart.

"That shit hurts Rachel- when you doubt me. I've done nothing to deserve that." He said softly.

"You're right and I don't deserve you- but I'm not letting you go," I tiptoed and kissed his lips. "I missed you today."

He smiled. "You say that every day."

"Because it's true and if you think the apartment is too small we can look around at some houses. A year gives us plenty of time to save up for a down payment and to really take our time and find what we want."

The idea of buying a house with Michael made me giddy but it would be so much sweeter if we both signed the same last name on the deed.

"Maybe it will give us enough time to get some other things squared away too." He smiled.

"Like what?" I asked confused.

"I'm starving- can we go back inside and eat?" He asked pulling away from me.

"The old distract Rachel with food trick, huh?"

He laughed as he laced his fingers through mine. "It works every time,"

"You're lucky I love you." I playfully punched him in the shoulder.

"Yeah, I am."

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Forever

Michael

I'd been standing for almost forty-five minutes in shoes that pinched my feet. I began to shift my weight from one to foot to another in an attempt to ease the pressure. I didn't want to appear nervous because I wasn't—not really. There was no doubt in my mind that she would arrive soon.

I stared out at the crowd and my mother gave me an encouraging smile while my father looked slightly agitated. David had left my side to check on things for like the fiftieth time before he reappeared.

"Still no sign of her. What are you going to do?" he asked.

I turned and tilted my head as I smiled faintly. "Wait."

Wait. Wait. Wait. I would wait on Rachel for the rest of my life if I had to but I knew that wouldn't be necessary, I knew that she wouldn't keep me waiting much longer especially not on our wedding day.

I took a deep breath and recalled the exact moment I had proposed three months ago.

We had been looking for a house to move into once our apartment lease was up and as soon as we stepped inside the cottage style home on the outskirts of the city we both knew it was meant to be ours.

Rachel ran through the single level house screaming about all of the features that were original to the home like the crown molding, hardwood floors and bay windows. I followed her around and imagined how our stuff would look strategically placed in various corners of the house.

Rachel gasped and I watched as she walked over to the window that faced the back yard. She placed a hand over her heart and smiled. I stood behind her and followed her gaze. A beautiful gazebo sat in the middle of the landscaped yard and on one side was a handcrafted children's play set.

I wrapped my arms around her waist and she leaned into me.

"This is the one," she whispered.

"Yes, it is." I hadn't planned on proposing to her at that moment but it just felt so right. I'd been carrying the ring around in my jacket pocket in case the inspiration hit me.

I ran my hands down her arms and grabbed her hands to turn her towards me.

"Rachel, I can't put into words how much I love you and how much your friendship has meant to me. You're everything to me. I can see us living in this home buying eclectic art work to hang on the walls, standing side by side preparing dinner, making love in front of the fireplace and sitting out in that amazing yard watching our children play. This is where our forever starts Rachel."

I took a deep breath and took the ring from my pocket and kneeled in front of her.

"Yes!" She blurted out.

I laughed at her enthusiasm.

"Humor me, please?" I looked up at her and I could already see her eyes getting cloudy.

She nodded.

"Rachel Elizabeth Green will you do me the extreme honor of becoming my wife?"

She fell to her knees in front of me and hugged me tightly as she wept.

"Um, now is the time you're supposed to say, 'yes'." I teased.

"Oh- of course- yes, yes, a thousand times yes Michael!" she exclaimed. "God I love you so much." She cried as she held out a shaky hand and I slid the ring on her finger.

The minister, who cleared his throat loudly, brought me back to the present.

"Son, do you still want to-," he started but was cut short by a voice I would recognize anywhere.

"Michael! Michael, I'm here! I'm here!"

It was Rachel.

I took off down the aisle and met her as she appeared at the front door of the church. She launched herself at me and I held her tightly.

"There was a train, then we had an accident- there was a pothole and then I broke my heel-," she cried.

"It's okay. Everything is perfect, I'm just glad you're okay." I assured her.

She pulled away and stared up at me. "I just didn't want you to think I had stood you up. I didn't want you to think I didn't want to marry you because I do more than anything."

Tears streamed her face and her make-up was a mess. I could tell her hair had once been carefully pinned away from her face but it had started to unravel and as I looked her over, I could see the bottom of her beautiful wedding gown was soiled with mud.

I looked up and noticed Rachel's parents and Samantha as they ran up the steps.

"Oh my god-," Samantha panted. "She like" pant "ran half a mile" pant "in one shoe."

Samantha held up the other shoe with the broken heel.

I laughed loudly. It really sounded like the universe was conspiring to keep us a part. Well, the universe could kiss our asses there was nothing that would stop us from getting married.

Samantha started wiping at Rachel's face while her mother tried to re-pin her hair. Rachel kicked off the other shoe and smiled but just as quickly her smile faded.

"I left my flowers in the limo."

"You don't need them, you're perfect," I smiled. "Let's do this." I offered her my arm.

Her father cleared his throat.

"If you don't mind, I only have one chance to do this and I didn't just run half a mile- almost having a heart attack in the process-for you to steal my thunder," he said gruffly. "Go take your place in the church. You've waited this long."

I sprinted back to the altar amidst laughter and cheering. The organist began playing the bridal march and everyone stood.

Rachel clung to her father and smiled brightly as he escorted her down the aisle.

"Rachel and Michael sitting in a tree-," David sang behind me.

"K-i-s-s-i-n-g," Jonathan finished.

This had been their little juvenile game since senior prom and my almost kiss with Rachel. But this time I just smiled widely and joined in.

"First comes love and then comes marriage, hopefully there will be a baby carriage."

David laughed and clapped me on my back as Rachel and her father finally approached us.

I stood in front of them and stared into the eyes of my best friend. We were both smiling so much I was certain our faces would be hurting by the end of the evening.

"Who gives this woman away to be wed?" The minister asked.

"I give her away to be wed to this man today but she's been his for a lot longer," Oscar smiled, a genuine smile that made his moustache twitch. He grabbed Rachel's hand and placed it in mine. He squeezed our joined hands and looked back and forth between us.

Tears filled his eyes and he cleared his throat. "Take care of my baby girl."

I hugged him tightly. "Forever." I promised.

Exactly twenty-one years after I met her in Mrs. Beecham's third grade class, I married Rachel Green, my best friend. It had been a long journey filled with twists and turns, happiness and sorrow but it was always based on love. I couldn't wait to see what the next twenty-one years would bring.

THE END