

Savannah

Perry Martin

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Cheers, mate. You're one of the good guys.

GLOSSARY

Arsehole: British pronunciation of asshole.

Bollocks: Testicles.

Bonkers: Crazy.

Chord: Three or more musical tones sounded simultaneously.

Chord progression: A series of musical chords that change beneath the melody of the song. All songs contain chord progressions.

Chuffed: Very pleased.

Cockney: More recently, it is variously used to refer to those in London's East End, or to all working-class Londoners generally. Linguistically, cockney English refers to the accent or dialect of English traditionally spoken by working-class Londoners.

Duff (someone up): Beat someone up

Elastoplast: Band-aid

Elevenes: A short break taken at around eleven in the morning to consume a drink and/or snack of some sort.

Fender Stratocaster: Famous brand and model of electric guitar.

Fiver: British five-pound note.

Flippin' (Flipping): As in "Are you flippin' bonkers?" Mild expletive.

Gibson Hummingbird: Famous brand and model of acoustic guitar.

Gob: Mouth

Key (of a song): In music theory, the key of a piece is a group of pitches, or scale upon which a music composition is created.

Limey: Slang term for the English, derived from the British naval use of lime juice to combat scurvy.

Nick (in the nick): Prison

Pulling someone's leg: To make a playful attempt to fool or deceive someone.

Tomás de Torquemada (Thomas of Torquemada): A Spanish Dominican friar and the first Grand Inquisitor in Spain's movement to force Roman Catholicism upon its populace in the late 15th century, otherwise known as "The Spanish Inquisition".

Tosser: A stupid or despicable person.

Tube train: Subway train.

Underground (the): The subway

Wanker: Same as tosser.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The story within these pages is set both in England and the U.S.A. I do realize that, in England, “soccer” is actually called “football” and I apologize, in advance, if I offend any sports purists in my home country by using the international term “soccer”. It was merely done to more easily draw the distinction between American football and English football as mentioned within the pages of this book.

DEDICATION

For Rowena.

My wife, my life, my one true soul mate.

Prologue

Los Angeles, California

Saturday November 13

Present Day

IT WAS SATURDAY AFTERNOON when Michael Easton finally awoke after passing out dead-drunk on the worn, brown-leather couch of his one-bedroom apartment the night before. He was lying flat on his back, and his first, tentative attempt at opening his eyes ended painfully the moment it began. The sunlight pouring through the curtain-less kitchen window was blindingly bright and, because of the apartment's layout, it was shining directly on his face. He already felt like he'd been run over by a steam roller, and spears of light attacking his bloodshot eyes with needle-like precision only added to the agony. With a groan, he rolled over onto his side and tried again. He was successful this time. Successful, that is, if peering at his surroundings through half-open slits in his head could be considered "opening his eyes".

He was now facing his "entertainment center"—a second-hand, 19-inch Zenith television which sat atop a small shelf unit he'd bought from the "as-is" section of IKEA. The cable box fit snugly on the middle shelf, and beneath it was an old Sony Tuner/Amplifier he'd connected to a pair of weather-beaten speakers he'd picked up from a Goodwill store.

"Nothing but the best for Michael Easton, the rock star who never was," he thought bitterly as he rose gingerly from the couch.

Carefully keeping his back to the window, he squinted as he searched the room for his sunglasses. He spotted them over by the front door, next to his shoes, the only articles of clothing he'd managed to remove before collapsing on the couch late last night. With his sunglasses on, he risked opening his eyes fully and shuffled off to the bathroom. Not daring to turn on the light, he removed his shades and set them on the counter. After washing his face and rinsing his mouth with cold water, he opened the medicine cabinet and shook out

three tablets from a bottle of aspirin. He popped them into his mouth and washed them down with tap water.

Feeling just a few degrees above sub-human, he put his shades back on and headed to the kitchen, intent on brewing a pot of strong, black coffee. (He supposed he ought to be grateful he hadn't yet descended to the level where he started the day with a beer, or something even stronger). Picking up the carafe, he threw yesterday's remains down the sink, rinsed it out and filled it with water. He poured the water into the coffee maker, removed and disposed of the old grounds and inserted a fresh filter. That's when he noticed the empty bag of Starbucks House Blend. There it lay on the kitchen counter, its pathetically crumpled state alerting him to the fact that he was out of coffee.

"Shit! Just frigging perfect!" he thought, groaning as he realized he'd have to venture outside far sooner than he wanted.

With a weary sigh of resignation, he dragged his body over to where his shoes lay and put them on. About the only good thing that could be said for this crappy apartment was that there was a Starbucks within walking distance; which was just as well because he'd had to take a cab home last night. He'd left his car in the parking lot of a sports bar a few blocks from the hotel he worked at, playing guitar and singing all the latest pop drivel for the Happy Hour clientele to get hammered to while they mostly ignored him.

Check that—the hotel he *used* to work at.

He swore at himself when he remembered how he'd managed to lose what had been a halfway decent paying gig. A gig that, at this point in his miserable existence, he *desperately* needed. Just one more step on what had become an inexorable descent into complete ruin. He hadn't quite hit rock bottom, but it was looming in sight. Like a great, yawning chasm, it seemed to be beckoning him to take those last few steps.

He exited his apartment and shambled out onto the landing. His was a second floor unit in a complex that more resembled a seedy motel than anything else. The color scheme was bland-beige stucco and shit-brown doors and trim. A real charmer. There was a small, kidney-shaped swimming pool directly below him that was currently full of screaming, splashing kids enjoying the unusually hot November weather that the Santa Ana conditions tended to bring to Los Angeles around this time of year. In fact, it felt hotter today than it had at any time during the summer. Michael briefly debated going back inside and changing into shorts and a t-shirt—then decided against it—it wasn't worth the trouble.

A short walk later found him standing on the sidewalk opposite a strip mall that housed the neighborhood Starbucks. The crosswalk was at least a couple of hundred yards farther down from where he stood and, being in no mood for the extra effort it would take to cross legally, he waited for a break in traffic and then trotted across to the other side of the street. Once inside the coffee house, he paid for a Grande Bold and a Cranberry-orange Scone. Then he searched out an empty table in a relatively secluded part of the store.

By the time he'd finished the scone and drunk half his coffee, he felt a little better—physi-

cally, at least. Mentally was another story. Last night had been a disaster. It was highly likely he'd jeopardized, if not completely ruined his chances of working in any of the better hotels in the Los Angeles area; possibly nationwide. After all, Broadview were a national chain and he imagined word got around quickly in those circles. *Damn it!* Just when things had started to improve—when it looked like he'd be able to pull himself out of the deep shithole he'd gotten himself into—he'd screwed it all up. *Again!* Just like he'd done every frigging time before.

It was the nightmare. He was positive of it now. He'd finally come to the realization that, whenever it reared its ugly head, it was always succeeded by an irresistible compulsion to destroy anything and everything that mattered to him. There had been a significant difference this time, though. Because this time the nightmare had shown him the witch. The witch who had, without a doubt, cast a spell on him. And in her words he'd found an explanation for the wreckage his life had become.

He'd been cursed!

* * * *

Los Angeles, California

The Previous Night

As Michael waited by the hotel elevators, guitar case in hand, he glanced at the promotional poster in the display case that hung on the wall to his left. Staring back was a smiling image of himself. Light-brown, medium-length hair framing the face of a handsome, brown-eyed, up-and-coming rock star. The picture was only a few years old, taken when he was twenty-one, back when his life had held the promise of a bright future. He shook his head and heaved a heavy sigh. Whenever he caught his reflection these days, he saw a gaunt, pale face with haunted eyes. So much had changed in such a short time.

Below his picture had been printed:

***NOW APPEARING IN THE SKY LOUNGE
RECORDING ARTIST MICHAEL EASTON
MON THRU SAT 5PM TO 8PM
(Happy Hour drink prices 5pm to 7pm)***

The “recording artist” part wasn't strictly true. He *had* signed with an Indie label at one time, and he'd actually started recording an album of original material. But, as with everything else in his life to date, he'd managed to balls that up. The project had eventually been abandoned and his contract terminated. He still wasn't sure if the record company was going to file a lawsuit. So far he'd heard nothing from them and, to be honest, he was quite

content to let sleeping dogs lie.

In an alarmingly short space of time, he'd gone from being a promising rock star, with a slew of potential hit songs ahead of him, to a has-been—or more accurately, a never-was. And now, here he was, performing in The Sky Lounge of The Broadview Hotel to audiences who could really give a shit if he played or not.

Michael always showed up at the hotel half lit. It was the only way he could summon even the barest amount of enthusiasm for a gig he'd come to absolutely hate. For some time now it had been his normal practice to start drinking in the afternoon, just to smooth out the rough edges. Today had been no exception. He'd stopped off at a nearby sports bar and slammed down a few before continuing on to experience the “thrill” of playing the Sky Lounge. The thing was, as much as he hated playing here, it paid pretty well and he needed the money. Plus, he was a musician—that's where his talents lay. This gig might suck, but it was paying the bills, and at least he was still playing music. As long as he stayed in the game, there was a glimmer of hope that things might someday change for the better.

The muted, mid-range chiming of the doors opening caught his attention and Michael stepped into the empty elevator. Once inside, he pushed the button for the top floor. The doors closed and, as the elevator started its ascent, he mentally prepared himself for what he'd come to think of as “three hours in musician's hell”.

Michael preferred to arrive at least an hour before he was scheduled to play. It gave him time to set up at a leisurely pace and then load up on a few cocktails before he started. He was entitled to two free drinks, then paid fifty percent per drink thereafter—and he always took full advantage. The small stage he performed on faced the bar, and it was obvious, from the indentations in the plush, mauve carpet, that it had once been home to a baby grand piano. Now all that stood on it, other than the sound mixer that amplified his guitar and voice, was the bar stool he sat on, a guitar stand and a solitary microphone stand. Everything was pumped through the house speakers that dotted the ceiling of the lounge, and the amplifier had been preset to “an acceptable volume” that Michael was forbidden to alter.

After setting up, briefly testing the microphone and tuning his guitar, he wandered over to the U-shaped bar, found a seat and ordered a vodka on ice with a twist. When his drink arrived he swiveled around on his bar stool and, for the umpteenth time, cast his gaze through the large windows that surrounded the lounge. The sun had all but disappeared and the distant San Gabriel mountains now appeared as a hulking silhouette, like some giant, mythical god keeping watch over the glittering city below. As much as he hated playing here, Michael was forced to admit the Sky Lounge offered a remarkable view of the sprawling Los Angeles landscape and beyond.

Right now the lounge was fairly empty. But that would change over the next half an hour or so. Once five o'clock rolled around, it would fill up with businessmen and women. Some came to unwind. Some to get good start on the evening's drinking. Others, perhaps, felt the need to fortify themselves before going home. Whatever their reasons, they flocked in and,

after a few drinks, the soft murmur of voices became a virtual sea of overly-loud conversations interspersed with empty, raucous laughter—laughter which Michael suspected, in some cases, covered up the fear or despair that lurked beneath the jovial, alcohol-flushed faces. Eventually the noise level would reach a point where he could barely be heard over it when he was performing.

Michael threw back the rest of his drink and ordered another. He knew he was drinking too much, too fast, but he was beyond caring. He'd been on edge ever since he'd woken up this morning. The nightmare had returned last night for the first time since he'd begun working here, and he'd leaped out of bed screaming at the top of his lungs. It had taken a good amount of the vodka he kept chilled in his fridge to send him into the depths where the nightmare couldn't reach him. Even then, he'd left the light on, not wanting to trust himself to the darkness.

The nightmare. He'd been haunted by it, on and off, since he was eleven years old.

It was always the same thing.

It starts with darkness. The kind of darkness that harbors one's deepest fears. Next comes a chaotic montage of images that flash through his mind like a video on fast forward—too fast for him to grasp even an inkling of their content. And then the terror takes hold. The kind of terror one would feel if someone's—or some *thing's* hands were encircling their throat and they were fighting desperately for air as the life was slowly but surely throttled out of them. Finally, there is the screaming. Screaming so prolonged and high-pitched, that it pierces one's eardrums like the sharp end of a needle.

Then, last night, as he'd tossed and turned, desperately trying to claw his way to wakefulness, a new horror had manifested itself. For the first time he'd seen the witch, cursing him. Her ugly, twisted face spitting venom in a harsh, sibilant whisper. Most of what she'd said had been unintelligible, but a few phrases had come through with crystal clarity. With a shock, he'd recognized them as part of the destructive impulses he'd struggled with these last few years. They'd apparently dwelt inside him all this time. Triggered by the nightmare, they would emerge from his sub-conscious and compel him to self-destructive action.

He shuddered involuntarily as fragments of her hateful incantation paraded through his mind: "*Cast a spell on you ruin your life destroy everything you care about curse you curse you CURSE YOU!*"

Whatever spell she had cast had been powerful enough to override any attempt he ever made to resist it. It never failed to turn him against his better nature. Looking back, it was obvious the curse had been ruining his life, little by little, until it had cost him, among other things, his wife-to-be and a promising music career.

Michael glanced down at his hands. They were trembling. Forcing himself back into the present, he downed the remainder of his drink. It burned down his throat and helped chase the dark thoughts away. Then he ordered a double to take up on stage. It was almost five o'clock. The sooner he started, the sooner it would be over.

He stumbled a little as he weaved his way through the tables and chairs that stood be-

tween him and the stage, and it occurred to him that he hadn't eaten since breakfast. The booze had gone straight to his head. "*Ab, the hell with it!*" he thought recklessly. He was a pro and he'd performed in far worse condition. As if to punctuate the thought, he took another swig before setting his drink on top of the amplifier behind him. Picking up his guitar, he settled down and gave the mic a quick tap to make sure it was on. There had once been a time when he would introduce himself and start building a rapport with the audience. He didn't bother anymore. Most of these assholes wouldn't have noticed the difference between him and a chimpanzee sitting up there jerking off. So without the slightest preamble, he launched into his first song.

It was toward the end of his second set that the trouble began.

The crowd had been louder and even less attentive than usual; and Michael, who had continued slamming down double vodkas during his break, was becoming increasingly irritated. To make matters worse, there was a particularly obnoxious group of suits sitting right in front of him, their jackets removed and ties loosened, who seemed to be in contest with one another over who could shout the loudest.

During a pause between songs, one of the suits, a burly, red-faced man in his fifties, looked up at Michael and yelled out drunkenly, "Hey asshole, play 'Smoke On the Water!'"—a song completely unsuited for a solo performer—and proceeded to guffaw at his own "wit".

Michael laughed sarcastically and said, "Yeah! I remember *my* first beer!"

This drew a laugh from the others at the table and one or two people nearby. The heckler scowled and waved his hand dismissively. "Ah, you suck! You can't play guitar for shit!"

Michael's hackles rose as he shot back, "Maybe so—but you're butt ugly—and I can always practice!"

One of the heckler's friends roared with laughter and slapped his colleague on the back.

"Screw you!" was the best response the red-faced man could manage.

"Sorry, you're not my type, sweetie!" Michael said, and then blew an exaggeratedly effeminate kiss at the heckler.

Another laugh from the heckler's table and a few other groups of people who had become interested in how this little episode might continue to develop. Something was happening here. The singer might be making humorous remarks, but there was no humor in his eyes. Instead, there was a hardness in them that implied he wanted to sting and hurt with his words—and in that, they were right. Michael was using this exchange as a way of venting the frustration and bitterness that had been building up long before he'd started working at the Sky Lounge—it was merely the catalyst that was finally bringing things to a head.

"Don't get smart with me, asshole!" the heckler fired back.

"Am I getting *smart* with you? How would *you* know?"

The laughter became louder as more of the crowd gave their attention to these terse exchanges. The red-faced man was now visibly angry. His eyes were twitching and a small,

blue vein began pulsing on the side of his head. He glared at Michael in open hostility as he shouted with finality, “You’d better watch your mouth, funny man! You don’t know who you’re messing with. I could get you fired. Why don’t you just shut up and play and maybe I’ll let you keep your job—*asshole!*”

The heckler turned his back to the stage in a way that suggested the game was over and that, despite the points he’d scored, Michael had still lost. It might have been the fact that he’d been on edge all day. Or that he was drunker than usual. But whatever the reason, Michael was unreasonably infuriated by this. Unable to match wits with him, this frigging Neanderthal buffoon had resorted to threats—hinting that he somehow had the pull to get Michael fired. He wanted to scream at this idiot and tell him that actually *wasn’t* a threat. He’d be doing him a favor. Rage simmered inside him and threatened to boil over. He’d had it with this shit gig! Who needed it?

That’s when the now familiar self-destructive impulse arose in him. And, as usual, there ensued a few moments of internal struggle while the more rational part of him tried desperately to fight against it. At times like this he could swear he felt some sort of “presence” trying to help him overcome these compulsions—urging him in the direction of sanity and survival. *“Let it go, Michael. It’s not worth it. You need this job. Please, just let it go!”*

But it was useless. There was no winning. He should know that by now. The compulsion to continue to wreck what little remained of his career and his life was just too strong. He knew what he had to do. *Destroy!*

The brief battle for rational thought lost, he reached behind him and turned the volume of the sound mixer up far beyond the acceptable level, to a point just below feedback. Then, positive that, for perhaps the first time, everyone in the room could hear him, he announced loudly: “You know, I realize I owe dick-weed down here an apology. He really brought it home to me just how much I fucking *bate* playing here.”

As he spoke, he indicated the red-faced heckler who then whipped his head angrily in Michael’s direction and attempted to get out of his chair. His colleagues restrained him, shaking their heads. It was obvious they recognized the reckless madness in Michael’s eyes. The Happy Hour crowd, stunned to almost absolute silence by this completely unexpected admission, were looking at one another with eyebrows raised. Was the singer going postal on them?

Michael continued his rant: “And I just want you all to know how much I loathe having to perform for a bunch of self-absorbed assholes who wouldn’t recognize talent if it was shoved up their asses with a giant Q-tip. So . . . not that any of you give a shit—I’ve decided to quit. But before I go, I’d like to leave you with one last song.”

It was specifically stated in the contract Michael had signed that there was to be absolutely no profanity on stage. Having already broken that rule with his brief farewell speech, Michael compounded the breach by performing the David Allen Coe classic “The Rodeo Song”—intentionally playing and singing as badly as he could. The humorous, profanity-laden, country two-step was the perfect Sky Lounge swan song. If he hadn’t already de-

cided to quit, performing this tune would almost certainly have gotten him fired.

Ironically, after months of ignoring him, people were finally listening, some of them even laughing at the lyrics to the song and clapping their hands in time to Michael's tasteless guitar bashing. Just as he was winding up the song, he caught sight of the hotel's Food and Beverage Manager entering the lounge. He'd no doubt been notified by one of the staff that the singer was having a meltdown. The stern look on the manager's face told Michael he was in big trouble, but at this point he really couldn't give a shit.

With a final flourish he hit the last chord of the song and screamed into the microphone: "Thank you one and all! Goodnight and good-fucking-bye!"

* * * *

Los Angeles, California

Saturday November 13

The worst of Michael's hangover was fading, only to be replaced by pangs of regret when he recalled the previous night. What the hell was he going to do now? He could probably kiss his last week's salary goodbye. He was in breach of contract and they could legally tell him to take a hike. Hans Brummer, the German Food and Beverage Manager, had been furious. And Michael had only made matters worse by goose-stepping down to the elevators and yelling, "*Sieg Heil!*" as he was escorted off the premises by security. He shook his head despairingly. After that little performance, he doubted there would be any chance of throwing himself on Hans' mercy and asking for his job back.

He briefly considered calling his parents. They were only forty-five minutes away in upscale Orange County. Maybe a change of scene would help. He could move back in, regroup and then

He shook his head. No, he couldn't—*wouldn't*—let them see him like this. He'd made it to the brink of stardom under his own steam and, no matter how low he'd sunk, what was left of his pride wouldn't allow him to give up completely. Somehow, someday he'd figure out how to beat this thing and regain everything he'd lost.

He supposed he ought to call a cab and go pick up his car. It was a miracle he hadn't been pulled over when he drove from the hotel to the sports bar where he'd spent the rest of the evening getting completely blitzed. Thank God he'd found an ounce of common sense remaining and not tried to drive back to his apartment. He searched his pockets and cursed under his breath. "*Shit! I left my phone at home!*"

Swallowing the last of his coffee, he rose from the table and exited the store, resigning himself to the walk back. As he approached the sidewalk, he passed a mother and her daughter heading in the same direction. The girl, who looked to be about eleven or twelve

years old, was dressed in soccer gear and was bouncing a ball expertly from knee to knee. Despite his dark mood, Michael was impressed by her level of skill.

His side of the road was clear of traffic, and he walked briskly across to the median and waited while several cars passed. He was just about to cross when he saw something out of the corner of his eye. A soccer ball came bouncing into view. At the same time, he heard a woman's panic-stricken voice screaming, "Susan!"

As he turned in the direction of the woman's voice, the whole world suddenly transformed into a slow-motion movie. The girl's mother was running toward the street, waving her hands and frantically calling her daughter's name. The little girl, racing across the road, had her attention fixed on the ball she was chasing. Hurting toward her was a silver Ford F-150. The driver of the truck hadn't yet seen the child and, even if he had, there was no way in hell he could've stopped in time.

In the midst of all this, Michael uttered one, solitary word—almost reverently: "*Redemption!*" The moment he said it, he wondered what the hell he was talking about. Of one thing he was certain, though—he could save her.

In less than a heartbeat, he assessed the situation. There was no time to pick the girl up and carry her to safety, so Michael did the only thing he could think of. In two rapid strides she was within reach, and he shoved her as hard as he could, out of harm's way.

In the last instant before the truck hit him, a roaring sound filled Michael's head and he felt himself tumbling down into the darkness of his nightmare. Then there was the sickening sound of almost two tons of moving metal colliding with bone, muscle and sinew.

The last thing he heard was his own voice screaming.

Chapter One

Leaving It Behind

London, England

12 Years Earlier

YOUNG MICHAEL EASTON gazed out the living room window of his suburban home at the rain-drenched street before him. A solitary car passed by, the sound of its tires on the wet road reminding him vaguely of bacon frying. The heavy downpour that had erupted earlier was now only a light but constant drizzle, and the dark, rain-laden clouds overhead cast a dismal gray hue that seemed to drain the color out of everything.

“English weather!” he thought disgustedly. Just one more reason to be glad his parents had decided to move to Southern California.

Michael had been just two weeks shy of his twelfth birthday when the decision had been made, and the news had brought the first, real smile to his face since “the thing that happened”. Or at least that’s how it was referred to now, if it was spoken of at all. For his part, Michael had almost completely blocked the actual incident from conscious recall, the horror of it being too much for his young mind to deal with. All that remained was the recurring nightmare he’d all too often wake up screaming from.

It had been two months now and he was *still* being plagued by it. He was beginning to despair of it ever going away. It had gotten so he dreaded going to bed at night and, when he did, he always left his bedside light on. He shunned the darkness, fearful that it might somehow awaken the terror that lurked buried in his sub-conscious.

Michael’s parents hoped that a complete change of environment, far away from anywhere or anything that might serve as a reminder of the dreadful event, would help push the nightmare out of his mind. His mother had often expressed an interest in living in America, the country of her husband’s birth—California, in particular—and so the decision to relocate, despite being such a drastic upheaval physically, had been relatively painless emotionally.

Michael honestly didn't care where they went—he was just glad they were leaving England. Anywhere in the world would be better than here, surrounded by what he suspected were constant reminders of “the thing that happened”.

Little by little, over the last few weeks, the family's belongings had been boxed, bundled and packed until every room in the house became nothing but an empty shell, save for the boxes and cartons stacked in it. The last of the furniture had been loaded into a huge container truck that morning, and a moving van was returning shortly for what remained. Michael's father was on his way back from Hertz with a rental car, and the family would spend their last few days in England staying at a hotel near Heathrow Airport before departing for California.

“I don't know about you, but that's one thing *I* won't miss about England.”

Michael turned at the sound of his mother's voice. She was standing in the archway between the dining room and living room, and her comment was obviously directed at the dreary weather. She smiled as she made her way toward him, although her gray-green eyes held a hint of sadness. Was that because they were now finally leaving? Or because she was thinking of *why* they were leaving? Michael didn't know. Perhaps it was a little of both.

He turned back to the window as she came up alongside him. “I was just thinking the same thing. The rain hasn't stopped since it began this morning.”

He felt the gentle touch of his mother's hand on his shoulder. “I'm very optimistic about this move, Michael. You'll see. Once we get to California, things will soon get back to normal.”

As he watched the moving van pull up outside, he tried his best to sound positive. “I hope so, Mum. Right now it's hard to imagine that things will ever be normal for me again.”

The rain had finally let up just as the movers were loading the last few boxes into the back of the van. One of them, a burly, happy-go-lucky Jamaican, had humorously cursed the irony of this abrupt weather change in somewhat colorful language. Michael, who had been helping with some of the smaller items, had laughed along with the moving men. It had lifted his spirits to be outside and doing something, especially something that contributed to his ultimate departure for the sunny climes of California and what he truly hoped was a new start.

He was standing by the front gate now, squinting at the cloudy sky as if willing the sun to break through, when his father pulled up in the rental car.

Michael watched his father step out of the car and walk toward the moving men, who were just now closing and locking the back doors of their van. Vaughn Easton, a tall, ruggedly-handsome man in his early forties, was a pilot with an international airline. Michael always loved telling kids that when he first met them. It seemed such an exotic occupation and it never failed to impress. His father was American and he'd met and fallen in love with Michael's future mother, the petite, fair-haired Samantha, on one of his trips to England. It had been a combination whirlwind courtship and long-distance love affair that some had

predicted wouldn't last and yet, here they were many years later, still just as much in love.

While his father spoke with the movers, Michael gave some thought to what his parents were going through on his behalf. Yes, this had all been *their* idea. But it was mainly for his benefit, and he couldn't help but feel a little selfish. And, although his mother had assured him she'd always hoped they'd move to California someday, he knew she probably hadn't been expecting "someday" to arrive quite so soon. Once again, he truly hoped this would all be worth it—for their sake as well as his.

It was the last week of July and the summer holidays had officially started in England, weather notwithstanding. School wouldn't resume until the end of August and, according to his father, it was about the same in California, so he wouldn't be missing any study time. For the last month or so, Michael had been home-tutored, for obvious reasons. The events surrounding him were still very much in everyone's minds, and the administration at his school had been concerned about the disruptive influence his continued presence would likely have on the other children.

His parents had concerns, too; but theirs centered around their son. Though he seemed to have no conscious memory of what had actually occurred, it was obvious he was being tormented by nightmares. Once, at his mother's gentle urging, he had reluctantly described what he saw and heard while he slept. But there really hadn't been much to tell. Darkness from which it seemed there was no escape. A deep, menacing, roaring sound. And fragmentary, disjointed, fast-moving images—none of which made any sense to him. All he knew was that the combination of elements carried with them a feeling of such terror, that he would always wake up screaming at the top of his lungs.

It had been diplomatically suggested by the school headmaster that the family might want to consider moving out of the area. Michael's parents were forced to agree. The thing was—how far would be far enough away? The media had deemed the incident newsworthy—perhaps not front-page, headline news—but still enough of a story to have made an impact that stretched far beyond the bounds of London. They could move farther north, or south, but there was still a better than even chance that someone would recognize Michael. Then what? Move again?

That's when Samantha had suggested California. Surely the airline would let Vaughn relocate. What difference could it make to them? He was an international pilot. As long as he still flew where they wanted him to, why would it matter where he lived? Naturally, Samantha would miss having her parents close by, but thanks to air travel, the world was a smaller place these days, and Vaughn could have them flown out to California for a visit pretty much anytime. Michael's grandparents were aware of what had happened, of course. They sympathized and completely understood and endorsed the decision to relocate.

When Michael's parents had discussed it with him, he'd agreed in a heartbeat. If escaping the confines of the rain-soaked island of his birth held the possibility of ridding himself of the almost nightly hell he experienced, he was all for it.

The sound of the burly Jamaican's hearty laugh roused Michael from his thoughts, and he

looked up to see his father shaking hands with the two moving men. They turned and walked to the right and left of the van respectively. The Jamaican was on the driver's side and, just before he swung himself up into the cab, he called out to Michael. "Thanks for your help, man! Say 'hello' to all them gorgeous California ladies for me!"

Then, with a wink and a laugh, he positioned himself in the driver's seat, slammed the door, started the engine and drove off.

Michael waved at the departing vehicle as his father came over and put his arm around his shoulder. "Well, Michael, we're more or less on our way." He looked skyward briefly and then smiled at his son as they walked to the front door of their house for the last time. "Let's hope we leave this weather behind us, eh?"

Michael smiled and nodded as he thought, "*That's not the only thing I want to leave behind.*"

The flight from London to Los Angeles had been blessedly uneventful. Nothing had been said, but Michael knew his parents were privately concerned that he might have one of his nightmares if he fell asleep on the plane. Fortunately the whole leaving experience seemed to have driven all thoughts of "the thing that happened" from his mind—at least temporarily.

It had been fun to live it up in a hotel suite for a few days. Then, once they were on the plane and California-bound, his father used his influence as an airline pilot to arrange for Michael to spend a little time in the cockpit. It was scary and wonderful all at the same time, being so close to the wide open sky amid all the complex instruments and dials. Michael recognized some of them. There was the Altimeter, Attitude indicator, Airspeed indicator and the Magnetic compass. He smiled as he mentally called off several more; pleased that he'd retained the things his father had taught him a few years ago.

There had been in-flight movies to watch, music to listen to and plans to make. Vaughn had arranged a few weeks off so the family would have time to settle in at the house they'd secured in Newport Beach; and he'd promised that some of that time would include visits to Disneyland, Sea World, Universal Studios and the like. With so much to excite and interest him now, and in the future, Michael had found it hard to sleep and, when he finally did, he'd fallen into an exhausted, dreamless slumber.

The family arrived in Southern California mid-summer, at the height of the tourist season. As promised, once they were more or less situated in their new home, they made the rounds of tourist attractions. Michael was enthralled by everything he saw. The Americans and British might share a common heritage and language, for the most part, but beyond that, there are noticeable differences in culture and lifestyle.

It's an undeniable fact that much of the Western world has become Americanized to some degree, whether they choose to admit it or not, and Great Britain is no exception. Most people drink Coke or Pepsi, wear Levi's, eat cheeseburgers and know what a classic Ford Mustang is. But for Michael, actually being here in the birthplace of this "modern-day Roman Empire" (to borrow a phrase from one of his schoolteachers) was something else al-

together. For one thing, he found the sheer size of the country daunting compared to England. California alone is almost twice the size of the land mass that includes England, Scotland and Wales.

Michael saw freeways that seemed to go on forever, in every direction, until they finally joined with another freeway, bumped up against the Canadian or Mexican borders, or simply dead-ended at the coast. The streets and boulevards were wide and spacious, and palm trees were in evidence almost everywhere. The beautiful, coastal areas of Newport Beach, Corona Del Mar and the artists' haven of Laguna Beach appeared as three-dimensional, full-sized postcard pictures. He knew he'd eventually come to take all of this for granted as he gradually assimilated into the Southern California lifestyle, but for now, he reveled in the fascinating newness of it all.

Starting at a new school had carried with it the expected anxiety that came with having to find one's way around an unfamiliar place, not knowing the routine and having no friends. On the plus side, he was pleased to find that, unlike the school he'd attended in England, uniforms weren't required. Everyone showed up in everyday clothes. There was a mixture of smart, sloppy, and somewhere in-between, while a brave few seemed determined to stretch the bounds of good taste in order to express their individuality. Michael opted for in-between and, most of the time, settled for jeans, t-shirt and sneakers.

His outgoing personality, bolstered by the novelty of his English accent, quickly won him friends. In little over a year, Michael had almost completely transformed into a So-Cal native. Except for his accent. He'd noticed that girls found it attractive and, as he'd grown into adolescence, that seemed to be a pretty good reason not to lose it. All in all, moving to California had been, from his point of view, a sound decision.

Magically, the nightmare that had haunted Michael for almost two months in England seemed to have disappeared completely.

For now.

Chapter Two

Lindsay

Los Angeles, California

Present Day

ON THE MORNING OF HIS TWENTY-FIRST birthday, Michael awoke in his studio apartment with an old English ditty rattling around in his head. *“He’s got the key to the door. Never been twenty-one before.”* A slow, languid smile spread across his face as he stretched and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. He rolled over to his left, expecting to find the sleeping form of his girlfriend, Lindsay. She’d stayed over last night and, at exactly one second past midnight, they’d celebrated the official start of his twenty-first year with a bottle of red wine. And then one thing had led inevitably to another. He was a little disappointed to discover she’d left while he’d been sleeping. But then he remembered she had to work today, like any other weekday. The world didn’t stop turning just because Michael Easton had reached the magical age of twenty-one. He, on the other hand, being an up-and-coming rock star, had the luxury of sleeping in while the nine-to-fivers went about their daily grind.

“Up-and-coming rock star,” he thought with a wry smile as he climbed out of bed and made the short walk to the kitchen to crank up his coffee maker before jumping into the shower. That statement was a slight exaggeration. Music was his life, there could be no doubt about that. But at present he was still firmly in the category of “struggling musician”. And what a struggle it was, at times, to even come up with the rent for this shoe box of an apartment. He supposed if he became desperate enough he could always move back into his parents’ house in upscale Newport Beach. But he was pretty certain he’d never allow himself to reach that point. That would mean admitting defeat, and it was important to him that, for better or worse, he make his own way in the life he’d chosen.

He’d been bitten by the music bug not long after he’d turned fourteen. Up to that point his main interest had been tennis. He was an excellent player and could probably have even-

tually turned pro had he been so inclined. But once the music had gotten hold of him, it had slowly but surely become an all-consuming passion and tennis had become more of a recreational activity.

There had been countless hours listening to songs and their structure—trying to figure out what made the hits stand out from the misses. Endless days and nights of learning and practicing guitar licks until his fingers literally bled. Experimenting with melodies and lyrics and coming up with what he remembered as being some God-awful songs while he'd continued to hone his craft.

Eventually it had come together. He'd discovered within himself the exact combination of talent, tenacity and perseverance that those who finally succeed in their chosen field seem to have. And he'd personally come to believe that, to achieve the excellence he was striving for, some sacrifice was required. So while his teenage friends had been at the beach, the movies or otherwise just hanging out, he'd sequestered himself in his bedroom-studio and put in the roadwork, so to speak.

By the time he was eighteen, Michael had become an accomplished, if as yet unknown, musician and songwriter. He started performing in local Orange County coffee houses and restaurants, rapidly gathering a small but loyal following. As his confidence grew and his fan base increased, he began securing gigs in the Los Angeles area where he felt he'd have more chance of being discovered.

During this period, his father, no doubt recognizing his son's passion, had helped him finance a small recording set up at home where he could record demos of the songs he wrote. It was nothing special, but it at least gave him the ability to commit his creations to CD and get some sense of what was working and what wasn't. Before long he'd compiled an extensive catalog of material, some of which he believed had hit potential. It just needed to be heard by the right ears.

By his nineteenth birthday he'd earned enough to pay his father back and had moved himself and his recording set up to the L.A. area. He spent most of his meager savings coming up with first, last and deposit on his small studio-apartment, and had been eking out a living as a full-time musician ever since. There had been some rough times when he'd almost given in and applied for a part-time job. But in the end, he'd refused to compromise and had somehow managed to tough it out. He was bound and determined to make it as a musician and nothing else.

Lindsay Collins was a down-to-earth Midwestern girl who had come into his life a few months ago. She was a pretty, auburn-haired twenty-three-year-old, and they'd met when he was performing at Uptown, a trendy bistro-like restaurant that served pseudo-French food in a subdued, candle-lit atmosphere. The establishment was locally famous for the quality of its entertainment, and Michael was pleased to have been considered good enough to perform there. He played mostly original material interspersed with a few covers of songs he felt suited his vocal style, but it was one of *his* songs that had caught Lindsay's attention and prompted her to introduce herself during one of his breaks.

Michael was sitting in a secluded corner of the restaurant, working on a new song lyric, when she appeared at his table. “Sorry to disturb you” she began in a polite, hesitant voice.

He looked up and smiled, reassuring her with a slight shake of his head. “That’s okay.” Glancing at the sheet of paper he was writing on, he added, “This can wait. Pretty women shouldn’t have to.”

He was pleasantly surprised to see her blush at his compliment. It hinted that there was something genuine and unpretentious about her.

“Well I just had to tell you how much I liked your song ‘Autumn,’” she said. “It’s got such a haunting melody. And the lyrics are beautiful. Was there really a girl called ‘Autumn?’”

Michael indicated the chair across from him and she sat down. “There should have been. It flowed out of me so easily it felt like I was writing from memory.”

She regarded him with child-like wonder. “I’m amazed by people who can create. Writers, musicians, artists. I always wonder what it is that inspires them.”

“I sometimes wonder myself. But never for too long. I’m superstitious that way. I worry that if I question the source of my talent too much, I might lose it.”

“That would be tragic.”

“Tell me about it. Then I’d have to get a real job.”

She laughed. It was an infectious, almost adolescent laugh that he found endearing. This girl was cute. Not drop-dead gorgeous, but definitely pretty. Michael decided he liked her and wouldn’t mind getting to know her better. Before he could ask, she beat him to the punch. “Is it okay if I buy you a drink?”

During the few years he’d been playing coffee houses and restaurants, Michael had cultivated a confident, easy manner that made him appear older than he was. Lindsay must think he was of age. “It’ll have to be non-alcoholic. I’m not old enough to drink yet.” He leaned in toward her and added conspiratorially, “At least not in public.”

Her eyebrows rose. “You’re kidding. How old are you?”

“A few months short of my twenty-first.”

“Oh. I thought you were older. You seem so mature. In that case, can I get you a coke or something?”

“That’s okay. Save your money. I’ll just have them whip me up a cappuccino. I get them gratis.” He scanned the restaurant rapidly, looking for any evidence that she may have come here with someone. He spotted a solitary glass of Chablis a few tables down. It had to be hers. “Are you going to stay for my next set?”

“Absolutely!”

“Cool. I’ve got another ten minutes or so before I start. Do you wanna bring your drink over and join me?” He winked as he added: “That way you can save my seat while I play.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Hmm. Is that how all groupies start out— ‘seat-saver?’”

He gave her a crooked grin and shook his head. “Not at all.” Clearing his throat, he said in mock-solemnity, “In fact, the position of ‘seat saver’ is greatly revered and is a prized sta-

tion in the world of music, ranking far above mere ‘groupie’. You should be honored that you were elevated to that status so quickly. It means you are one of the chosen.” He gestured in a humorous and completely incorrect imitation of the Catholic Sign of the Cross.

She laughed again. “Well . . . since you put it like that, how can I refuse?” Her chair scraped and shuddered across the floor as she stood up. “I’ll be right back.”

She returned, drink in hand, just as Michael was ordering a cappuccino from one of the waitresses. Settling herself at the table once more, she asked, “Your accent. English, isn’t it?”

Michael nodded. “Born in the great city of London.”

“How long have you been here? In the U.S., I mean.”

“Nearly ten years.”

“So you came here as a child?”

“Uh-huh. My dad’s American. He’s an international airline pilot. Met my mum on a trip to England. It was love at first sight, according to her. Anyway, long story short, my dad ended up relocating, married my mum and settled down in merry old England.”

Michael’s cappuccino arrived and he sipped on it while they spoke.

“What made your parents decide to move here?”

He’d been asked this many times since arriving in California. The real reason was buried somewhere in a forgotten past, and that’s where it belonged, so he answered as he always did. “It was my mum’s idea. She’d always fancied living in sunny, southern California.”

“Are you glad you moved here?”

“Absolutely. I hated the bloody English weather.”

Lindsay giggled and mimicked his accent. “Bloody English weather.”

He laughed and applauded her effort. “Hey, that’s pretty good.”

“Well, it’s been a while, but I *did* play Eliza Doolittle in a high school version of ‘My Fair Lady’. You know . . . the rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain?”

Michael nodded and did his best Professor Higgins. “She’s got it! I do believe she’s got it!”

She laughed and clapped her hands. “Exactly!”

Draining the last of his cappuccino, he stood up and said, “Duty calls. But before I leave, there’s one thing I just *have* to know.”

A curious frown furrowed her brow. “What?”

He grinned. “Your name.”

She blushed again as her hand went to her chest. “Oh! I thought I’d already . . . I’m sorry . . .” She extended her hand. “Lindsay Collins.”

Michael took her hand and shook it gently. “A pleasure, Lindsay.”

That’s how it had begun just a couple of months ago. If he was honest, he’d have to admit he hadn’t really been looking for a relationship at that point in his life. It had just somehow subtly gone that way. They enjoyed each other’s company, shared similar tastes in music, movies and food, and had eventually become a couple. Last night had pretty much put

the final seal on it.

Did he love her?

If he was asking that of himself, did it mean he didn't?

He took a moment to examine how he felt. There was no doubt in his mind that he cared a great deal about her. She was a sweet, generous, goodhearted person and he couldn't imagine ever doing anything to hurt her.

If that wasn't love, it was close enough.

Michael had just finished showering when he heard his cell phone. He trotted into the living area, towel wrapped around his waist, dripping water onto the carpet. The "Whole Lotta Love" ringtone stopped just as he picked the phone up. Checking the caller ID, he saw the call had come from his musician friend, Hank Aspen. Michael smiled when he recalled first hearing his friend's name. He'd told him, with a name like that, he could've been the next John Denver. Hank had good-naturedly suggested that Michael piss off.

Tall and almost impossibly thin, Hank was a bass player with a heavy-rock band. They'd met at a club they'd both been performing at and hit it off, despite their different musical styles. Hank had been impressed with Michael's voice, guitar prowess and original material. Michael liked Hank's bass playing—reminiscent of The Who's John Entwistle—and his ability to harmonize. They'd even discussed the possibility of a future musical collaboration.

Picking up his phone, Michael listened to the message his friend had left. "Happy Birthday, my man! Congratulations! You can legally drink and, if it wasn't for the fact that you're a damn Limey, you'd be able to vote. Then you could do what I do. Get drunk and *then* vote. That way you have an excuse for putting an asshole in office!" Michael chuckled and held the phone away from his ear. Hank's loud, raucous laugh could probably be heard in the next apartment. He was always his own best audience. "Anyway, we're all looking forward to tonight at Rick's Cafe. Take a cab, my friend 'cause we are bound and determined that you're not even gonna be able to walk by the end of the evening's festivities, let alone drive. Later, dude!"

Michael sent his friend a quick text in reply and then wandered into the kitchen to pour himself some coffee. He leaned against the counter, mug in hand, and thought about his bass-playing buddy. When they'd met, the first thing he'd noticed about Hank was his girlfriend, Bev D. She was well-endowed with what Hank jokingly referred to as her "Beverly's Hills". Her actual name, he later discovered, was Beverly Dieffenbach, but that was considered privileged information known to a select few. To the rest of the world she was Bev D, and you'd better know it. She was a stunning, platinum blonde, with a pair of the bluest eyes he'd ever seen. Eyes that could entice or reduce you to ashes, depending on her mood.

To Michael they seemed an odd couple. Hank was an easy-going guy who laughed often (and loudly) and rarely seemed ruffled by anything. Bev D was an ice princess who had the goods—and knew it. Hank was crazy about her, that was obvious—and it was also obvious why. What Michael couldn't figure out was what Bev D saw in Hank, whom she often re-

ferred to as her “stick insect of a boyfriend”. In time, the glue that bound her to Hank would become apparent to Michael. It said a lot about the kind of person she was.

Unfortunately, given what eventually happened, it would also hint at the kind of person Michael would eventually become.

Chapter Three

First Glimpse

London, England

10 Years Earlier

THE FADED, RED-BRICK EXTERIOR, Gothic spires and high-arched windows of the imposing main building of young Michael's primary school, towered cathedral-like over the playground crowded with children in navy-blue uniforms. It was a crisp, breezy, spring afternoon and the puddles left by the morning rain had mostly evaporated, leaving just a few damp patches here and there.

Michael and his best friend Jeff Gardener had just eaten lunch and were on their way down to the playing fields, hopeful there might be a soccer game in progress that they could get in on. Michael had just recovered from a bout with the flu, and today was his first day at school in almost two weeks. Lazing around in bed watching TV and being pampered by his mother had been fun for a while, but the novelty had soon worn off and boredom had set in. It felt good to be back on his feet. Off to his left, he noticed a pretty, sandy-blond-haired girl sitting alone on a bench, just finishing the last of her lunch. He'd never encountered her before today and assumed she must be new to the school.

Inclining his head in the girl's direction, he asked, "Who's that?"

A gust of wind ruffled Jeff's mousy-brown hair as he followed his friend's gaze. When he saw who had caught Michael's attention, his gray-blue eyes became slits. "That's Savannah Fitch. She showed up while you were out sick. Bloody well stay away from her!"

"Why?"

"Because she's spooky, that's why. Her dad's a thief who's in the nick and her mum's a witch."

Michael turned to his friend, eyebrows raised in disbelief. The girl looked harmless enough to him. "Your kidding, right?"

Jeff shook his head. “That’s what everyone says. No one in the school will have anything to do with her and, if you know what’s good for you, you won’t either. She’s 100% off-limits.”

Michael glanced over at the girl again just as she looked up from her sandwich. She gave a hesitant smile and, without thinking, he returned it. The smile broadened and her face lit up, making her green eyes sparkle like sunlight on rippling water. To Michael’s surprise, his heart gave a little flutter and he felt a peculiar tingling in his stomach. The last time he’d experienced that particular sensation he’d been all of seven years old. He’d had a crush on a teenage girl who’d been his babysitter for a short while. He remembered being absolutely heartbroken when she’d told him she was moving up north to Yorkshire. The day before she left, she’d kissed him on the cheek and hugged him while he cried on her shoulder. He smiled inwardly when he recalled tearfully telling his mother he would never again wash his face, because he intended to preserve that kiss until the day he died.

He was jarred out of his musings by Jeff tugging at his arm. “Come on, Michael. What-cha gawkin’ at the spooky witch girl for?”

Michael reluctantly pulled his gaze from Savannah, but said not a word to his friend as they continued across the playground toward the playing fields. He didn’t answer because he couldn’t quite explain what had just happened. And he could well imagine the reaction he’d get if he told Jeff that, when Savannah smiled at him, he’d felt butterflies in his stomach.

* * * *

At the end of the school day, as Michael made his way back home, he allowed his mind to wander back to the sandy-haired girl. Savannah. Her name had a nice ring to it. She seemed perfectly normal to him. *Better* than normal when he recalled her smile. Despite Jeff’s earlier admonition, Michael felt a strong urge to befriend her. Not just because she looked lonely and he felt sorry for her—although that might be a small part of it. No, there was more to it than that, he shyly admitted to himself. It was because of her sparkling green eyes and the warmth he’d seen in the smile she’d cast his way.

Nevertheless, he was conflicted. What would Jeff and the other kids think if they knew how he felt? He definitely ran the risk of some teasing. His friends might even turn against him. Worse still, based on what Jeff had told him, he might just find himself on the receiving end of the same kind of treatment Savannah was suffering. And yet, despite all that, it didn’t seem right to him that she should be ostracized that way—heartlessly shunned by the rest of the school because of something her father had done and for some ridiculous notion that her mother was a witch.

Who could have spread such a spiteful rumor?

It didn’t take Michael long to come up with the most obvious candidate. Colin. Colin McColm, the school bully who, along with his gang of misfits and losers, pretty much ruled the school. When it came to Colin, being ostracized would be the least of Michael’s worries.

Their paths had crossed once before and it had come to blows. Michael was forced to admit that befriending this girl had a definite downside.

But when he pictured Savannah sitting all alone in the playground, his young heart went out to her. He'd never seen anyone more in need of a friend. And then, once again, he considered that smile of hers. At just the thought of it, butterflies began chasing each other around his stomach. That reaction convinced him to seek advice from his mother once he got home.

Michael waited until his mother and he were through with dinner before broaching the subject of Savannah. His dad was probably halfway to Los Angeles by now and, with a two-day layover, wouldn't be back for a few days. But even if his father had been home, Michael would still have chosen his mother for this particular conversation. If it had only been about whether or not he should befriend the girl, he'd have felt comfortable talking to his dad. But there was also the way he'd felt when Savannah smiled at him. That was a potential matter of the heart, which was definitely more his mother's province.

He helped clear the table and stack the dishwasher and then, as she put the kettle on for tea, asked in a hesitant voice, "Mum? Can I talk to you about something?"

Samantha leaned against the counter and regarded her son affectionately with her soft, gray-green eyes. "Is she pretty?" she asked with a knowing smile.

"How did you know . . . ?"

She chuckled. "Something in the way you asked gave me the idea that this *might* have something to do with a girl. Am I right?"

"Well . . . yes and no. I mean . . . it's about a girl . . ." Michael blushed. ". . . and she *is* pretty. But that's not all. It's . . . er . . . it's a bit complicated."

The kettle was boiling and Michael's mother attended to it. "Hmm. I can't imagine what could be more complicated than first love. Now you've got me curious." She indicated the kettle. "Do you want a cup?"

Michael shook his head. "No, thanks."

They sat together at the kitchen table while she sugared and stirred her tea. Then, with a mischievous twinkle in her eye, she asked, "So . . . are you the victim of unrequited love?" Noticing her son's perplexed frown she added: "Meaning—the love you feel for her is not returned?"

Michael shook his head, a little uncomfortable with his mother's playful teasing. "No, it's not like that. I haven't spoken to her yet. In fact, we haven't even met."

"Then . . . what . . . ?"

"She's a new girl at school," Michael explained. "She's only been here a couple of weeks. They moved to London from up north. Well, her mum and her did. Her dad's in jail."

His mother nodded slowly, understanding creeping across her face. "Ah, I'm beginning to get the picture."

"None of the kids will have anything to do with her," Michael continued. "They say

she's spooky and that her mother's a witch."

Samantha shook her head. "Sometimes children can be so cruel."

"Even my best friend, Jeff—he told me to stay away from her."

Michael's mother regarded him seriously. The playfulness was gone from her voice when she asked, "And what do *you* want to do?"

"That's the problem. I'm not sure. Nobody likes her—or at least they act like they don't—and they say rotten things about her. But . . . when I saw her today, I felt sorry for her. And then . . . when she smiled at me . . ." Michael blushed again and turned aside from his mother's gaze. "I felt . . . you know . . . funny inside." He raised his head slightly and gave his mother a sideways glance. "A good funny . . . if you know what I mean?"

Samantha nodded, and the tenderness in her eyes told him she understood.

"And," Michael went on. "I just couldn't imagine that someone with a smile like that could be as awful as everyone says. She just looked like she really needed a friend."

"And so you're worried about what your friends and all the other kids will think if you befriend her. Is that the problem?"

Michael nodded, ashamed for feeling that way. It flew in the face of everything his parents had instilled in him regarding personal integrity and doing the right thing. Because of that, he tried to justify his doubts. "It's not just what they'd think of me, but what they might say—or even *do*. There's someone who would *definitely* do something once he found out."

"Colin?" Michael's mother was aware of his previous encounter with the school bully. "But you stood up to him before."

Yes, he had. And thanks to two years of boxing lessons from his father, a former college champion, he'd managed to hold his own for a while. But the taller, heavier bully had eventually emerged the victor. Michael raised a wry eyebrow at the memory. "Yeah . . . and got a wallop, too!"

"True. But as your dad would say: 'Better a bruised body than a bruised soul'. You kept your integrity and held your ground."

"Because it was the right thing to do," Michael reminded her.

"Exactly. So . . . regarding this girl . . ." she paused. "What's her name?"

"Savannah."

"Savannah. What a nice name. Makes me think of *Gone with the Wind*." She gave a smile of approval before continuing. "So what's the right thing to do as far as Savannah's concerned?"

"Befriend her, I guess. I mean, it's not fair that the other kids treat her that way."

"No, it isn't."

"But . . . I might lose my friends. The other kids will probably tease me, or worse. And . . ." He trailed off, realizing he was repeating himself. Those concerns had already been voiced.

His mother regarded him sympathetically. "Michael, I'm afraid you're learning, at an age

younger than most, that doing the right thing isn't always about doing the most popular thing."

Michael nodded. Because of his upbringing he knew she was right. Nevertheless, he tried one last time to lay the responsibility for his problem at someone else's doorstep. "So . . . what do you think I should do?"

"It's not for me to say, Michael. I think you know what you *should* do—but it's your decision to make, and you're the one who'll have to live with that decision." She reached across the table and took one of his hands in hers. "But based on what you've told me, I *can* give you one piece of advice that might help you decide."

Michael looked at his mother expectantly. "What's that?"

She let go of his hand and stroked his hair lightly. "Follow your heart, Michael. Follow your heart."

We hope you enjoyed this excerpt from "**Savannah.**"

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