

C.E. HILBERT

THE BOY NEXT DOOR
JUST JILTED HER,
BUT THAT WON'T KEEP HER
FROM SMILING.

BLESS HER HEART...

*Merry Christmas,
Savannah*

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C.E. Hilbert

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Merry Christmas, Savannah
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Dedication

To Mom, Jen & Paige...Thank you and Merry
Christmas!

1

“Well, so much for Daddy’s dream.” Savvy Dixon mumbled as she tossed the embossed invitation on the entryway table. She ignored her home’s opulence as she wove her way through the living room and main dining room, which were draped in this year’s Christmas color theme of burgundy and bronze. Colin Fancy, her family’s home for centuries, was a mix of stiff tradition and overcompensation.

She pushed through the swinging door connecting the dining room to the kitchen, and the aroma of roasted chicken consumed her. “Myra, that smells divine.”

“Oh, Miss Savvy, t’aint nothin’. You know your daddy loves him a roast chicken on Sundays and when he gets bad news.”

Myra’s crisp white apron was tied twice around her middle. For most of Savvy’s life, Myra had been head housekeeper and cook at Colin’s Fancy. She had been Savvy’s greatest teacher.

“And he got him some bad news today.”

Savvy tugged an apron from the hook that held a dozen and tossed it over her shoulder-width permed hair. Tying a neat bow at her waist, she glanced at her geometric patterned leggings and oversized backwards

V-neck sweater and wondered why she should bother to protect an outfit that would likely be out of fashion before she returned to school for the second semester. "You heard about Jerry?"

"Oh, your daddy is as hot as I've ever seen him. He had his eye on ensuring the Reynard property would be forever connected to Colin's Fancy. Seems like he's been talking about your wedding to Jeremiah since the day you was christened."

Yep, sounded about right. Savvy had been pummeled with her future since she was able to toddle down the hallway into Daddy's study and listen to him and Jerry's daddy talk about the grand life the two would have. "A Southern Dynasty", they had touted. Two of the great families of South Carolina coming together to restore honor and stability to the state. Maybe even the south. Their collective dream was Machiavellian at worst and Victorian at best. But now, Jerry had mucked everything up by falling in love with a Virginia beauty queen. The marriage announcement arrived this morning along with an invitation to celebrate the newlyweds in two days at the Reynard plantation home.

"I'm not exactly thrilled that the boy who pinned me freshman year in college went and eloped without a word. I mean, I had to find out while my nails were drying at Miss Drake's this morning. I had to put on my best pretend face. Had to act like I knew all about little Miss Virginia and Jerry's whirlwind romance. When those hens started digging for dirt, I tried to blow off our pinning and relationship as boy-next-door-slash-first-love rubbish.

"I skedaddled out of that shop so fast that I'm amazed I didn't chip a nail. I can't believe he did this to

me, Myra. I am mortified.” Savvy flipped on the hot water in the wide farmhouse sink and lifted a packet of yeast from the metal tin beside the flour and sugar jars.

Tapping the packet against the back of her hand, she locked her gaze with Myra’s. “I mean, I know we haven’t been...well, you know. But I thought he at least cared about me as a friend. I thought I was in love with him. We had already planned who we were going to ask to be in our wedding and what kind of cake we wanted for the reception. How could he have done something like this without telling me first?”

“Oh, Miss Savvy, I’m sure he has a reason. Mister Jeremiah’s always been the quiet sort. I can’t imagine him doing anything so rash. And besides, if all you had planned out was the cake and who was going to wear some ugly replica of the not so good old days of the south, well, I’m guessing, you two wasn’t really in love.”

Savvy dumped the contents of the yeast packet into a measuring cup, shoving the cup under the stream. The water burned her hand, and she jerked away from the scalding water. The glass slipped through her fingers and shattered against the porcelain.

Myra slammed her hand against the faucet, stopping the water. “Miss Savvy, watch yourself. That’s how ya kill the yeast, and ain’t nobody want some flat-as-a-board bread sprinkled with glass shards with my roasted chicken.”

“Myra, what am I going to do? What is my life supposed to be if not Mrs. Jeremiah Reynard?”

“Well, Miss Savvy, about time you done figured that out.”

2

“Are you sure you want to go tonight? We could egg his car or TP the guest house where I heard they were shacking up. Or we could blow the whole thing off and head down to Savannah for the night with Gerald and your brother. Hit a few places along the river?”

Savvy glanced at Mellie’s reflection in her vanity mirror. Mary Ellen “Mellie” Fredrick had been Savvy’s best friend, her advocate, her defender, and her true sister—from a different mister—since they met at five years old on the first day of kindergarten. With dark brown eyes and skin a shade darker than burnt caramel, Mellie was one of the prettiest girls in the county. People used to joke that when Savvy and Mellie walked down the street, their combined beauty caused men to simply stop and stare as time seemed to stand still. Savvy new it was all southern hogwash, but a teeny, tiny part of her reveled in the collective beauty the two friends presented side by side. But, tonight, no amount of beauty or collective years of sisterhood would take the sting out of seeing her former beau dancing circles with a new girl. Not even vandalism.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but I’m guessing Pastor Fredrick wouldn’t look too kindly on his only daughter getting arrested for TP’ing one of the major

donors to the new wing of the church. I'm a big girl. I need to walk into that party with straight shoulders and all the southern charm of every Dixon woman who has come before me. I will show them that nothing can topple Savannah Dixon. Not even the boy next door." Savvy lifted her signature deep red lipstick to her full lips and swiped two more layers. Cosmetics would be the best she could muster for the armor she would need for the number of "bless your hearts" she expected to receive tonight. She loved everything about the south, except the fact that in the community the size of a nickel where she'd been born and raised, people talked about you more behind your back than to your face. And tonight, she would be the main topic of conversation.

Mellie pushed off the bed and padded the few feet to Savvy's vanity. Settling on the velvet tufted bench, Mellie stretched her long arm around Savvy's shoulders. "If that's what you want, then I will be there every step of the way. Gerald will too."

"Well, it's always good to have a Marine for back up."

"Ooh-rah."

"I love you, Mel."

"Not as much as I love you." Locking her gaze with Savvy, Mellie's lips stretched into a sideways grin. "Now, we have to take you from every day-Savannah-gorgeous, to what-were-you-thinking-about-Jerry knock-out."

Savvy handed Mellie her hairbrush. "I am a canvas. Make me into a masterpiece."

3

Savvy clutched her faux fur stole across her shoulders as she walked the cobblestone lane leading to the grand front entrance of the Reynard family home. The original structure was built at the beginning of the nineteenth century after one of Savvy's long dead relatives sold Jerry's so-many-times-removed grandfather the land north of the creek. The creek was where Savvy and Jerry had collected tadpoles as children, sneaked their first kiss as preteens, and made a pact after high school graduation to get married on Savvy's twenty-fifth birthday. The creek and the winding border it created acted as the seal of the couple's juvenile love, and now it stood as the fissure splitting it in two.

Shaking her head against the onslaught of memories, Savvy traversed the final stones to the seven smooth marble steps narrowing towards the twelve-foot-tall front door. The veranda was classically decorated in boughs of twisted magnolia branches laden with clear white twinkle lights. The aroma from the front door wreath of cedar and boxwood punched Savvy's senses with her final steps. The scent softened the effect of the joyous echoes wafting through the thick masonry that penetrated Savvy's invisible armor.

"You've got this, Sav," she mumbled. She reached

for the handle, but the door swung wide out of her grip, revealing the revelry steps inside. Her breath caught in her chest at the sight of Jerry dipping his new bride back for a Hollywood worthy kiss.

“Nope. Nope. Nope...” Pivoting, she stomped on the path and headed toward the gazebo settled between two live oaks off the back patio of the house, classically decorated with intricately woven pine branches, thick velvety ribbon and white twinkle lights.

Taking the five stairs in two steps, she began pacing the thick wood planks. “Savannah Dixon, you need to get a hold of yourself, girl. He’s just a man. You are better off without him.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

Savvy whipped her head to the left toward the deep timbre floating through the trees. “Who said that?”

“Sorry, miss, I didn’t mean to scare you.” She saw his legs first, walking toward her with a slow deliberate gate, as if he were created from the low rising fog off the creek. The rest of his form revealed a tall, lean body topped by broad shoulders. His face remained hidden by the darkness, but there was no mistaking the military haircut or his dress blues.

“I’m Rayburn Boudreaux.” He moved onto the bottom step of the gazebo and extended his wide palm to her.

Savvy moved slowly toward the steps. Heart beating in her ears, she rested her hand in his warm grip. With his touch, her whole body melted. She felt his gaze scrape the length of her, thoughtfully taking in her black patent heels, full skirted, hunter green velvet dress and her black faux fur. When she felt his focus

settle on her face, she lifted her gaze and her heart stopped.

Compassion and desire lingered in his soulful, dark green gaze. His high cheekbones reflected obvious hours in the sun, but it was his broad toothed smile bookended with cavern deep dimples that kick-started her heart into overdrive. "Savvy Dixon." Her voice held a husk that sounded foreign to her own ears.

"The pleasure's entirely mine." Rayburn lifted Savvy's hand to his lips. The touch was barely a whisper, and yet every fiber in her body zoomed to life.

Shaking her head, she ripped her hand from his. "Excuse me, but I would really like to be alone." She turned her back to him, staring into the foggy night, and hoped the armor she was struggling to keep in place would lock around her.

"I don't think you do."

Savvy felt each step as he closed the distance between them. The pounding of her heart deafened her to the outside world. Rayburn rested his hands on her shoulders and even through the thick fur, she felt their gentle heat. With the barest of pressure, he turned Savvy to him. She kept her focus on the pointed toes of her heels.

Cradling her chin, he forced her gaze to his. Her breaths shifted to shallow bursts. His focus was intent and felt as if he read her thoughts, felt all of her hidden feelings.

He stood nearly a foot taller than she did, even in her towering heels. Sliding her arms around his shoulders, she stretched on to the tiniest point of her toes. With scarcely the brush of her lips against his, her

body ignited.

He tugged her tight into his embrace, his arms like two steel bands around her waist. Cupping his face between her palms, his skin was smooth from a clean shave. His heady scent—a mix of soap and evergreen—filled her lungs. She felt as if she were drowning, and her only lifeline was in clinging to his thick muscled frame.

He drew his lips from hers and sprinkled butterfly weight kisses over her cheek and neck. The connection was intoxicating, and she sank deeper into the pool of desire.

“Savvy?”

Savvy heard her name as an echo in the distance, barely penetrating the seductive haze consuming her.

“Savannah Dixon! You get out here this instant.”

Mellie’s voice screeched through the fog and cut the tender connection between Savvy and Rayburn. She stepped back, still in his embrace, and stared into his heavy-lidded gaze.

What was going on? Wasn’t she supposed to be twisted up over Jerry’s new bride? She was supposed to be sipping a cup of cider and brightly commenting on Jerry’s and her mutual affection for each other with a plastered rush week smile on her face. She was supposed to be the jilted girlfriend whom everyone looked at in astonishment at how well she was holding up. She wasn’t supposed to be the girl barely resisting being seduced by a too-hot-for-his-uniform Marine in the backyard of her ex-boyfriend.

Shaking her head, she twisted away from Rayburn and stumbled down the stairs to the grass below, ripping a hole in her sheer tights.

“Savvy!” Rayburn hustled down behind her. He

lifted her by the elbow to help her stand, but she shook off his assistance. She locked her arms over her chest as she stood, unwilling to lift her gaze to his.

"I'm fine. But you should go. I can't ... Just go."

"I can't leave you."

Savvy felt tears burning, straining to let loose down her face. "You have to. I can't explain what just happened to Mellie. I can't explain it to myself."

"Can I call you?"

Savvy shook her head. "I'm sorry. Please just go. Please."

Rayburn's shoulders dropped and he turned, disappearing into the evening mist.

The dam of tears broke, cascading over Savvy's cheeks. What just happened? Drawing in a deep breath, she turned toward the sound of Mellie's calls and began to walk back to the house.

"Savvy...Oh, my goodness, Savvy! What happened to you?" Mellie rushed toward her with Gerald in his dress blues shuffling behind.

Savvy shook her head. "I'm fine. I just needed some air and went to the gazebo. When I heard you calling me, I started down the steps, but clumsily missed one and tumbled into the grass."

"Are you hurt? Do you want us to take you to the emergency room?"

"No. Nothing's hurt. Just my pride and my pantyhose. But I don't think I can go in there tonight."

"But what about all those Dixon women and what not?"

"I guess they'll just have to get their dose of southern charm on another day."

4

Savvy lifted her fourth batch of muffins from the oven and set them on a cooling rack. Tugging off the oven mitts, she turned to the breakfast table where Myra shucked peas for dinner.

“Miss Savvy, I don’t know who you are going to feed with all those muffins. It’s just you and your daddy living in this house.”

With a steaming cup of coffee in hand, Savvy slid onto the bench opposite Myra. “Baking and cooking keep my mind off of things.” “Things” had become her euphemism in the last week. “Things” was synonymous with Jerry’s elopement, his new bride, her well noticed lack of attendance at the party to celebrate said bride and elopement. Oh, and Savvy’s unexpected encounter with Marine Rayburn Boudreaux, but only she knew the origin story for that “thing.”

“You need to get back out there. No use letting the good years of your life collapse on you because of something someone else did to ya. How you respond to these ‘things’ will determine the course of your life, Miss Savvy. Best not let it get set to this kitchen, y’hear?”

Savvy stretched her hand and squeezed Myra’s. “What would I do without you?”

Myra pursed her lips and shook her head as she

shucked three more peas into her bowl. "Good thing you'll never find out."

Savvy leaned back into the bench and closed her eyes. *Holy Father, thank you so much for Myra. After Mother died, I thought I would be lost, but Myra has been all the mother I could have ever asked for. Please help me to forgive Jerry. Help me to see how this is part of Your bigger plan. Oh, and please forgive me for the thing in the gazebo. Amen.*

With a deep cleansing breath, she tugged a second bowl toward her and began to shuck peas. The task was simple and boring— just what her brain needed. Myra chatted on about the Christmas play at church, allowing Savvy's thoughts a reprieve from the cycle of doubt and worry playing on repeat since she first heard about Jerry and his new wife. Her clean mind shifted from her new status of dumped girlfriend and floated to the memory of being locked in the strong-armed embrace of Lance Corporal Rayburn Boudreaux. Heat chased up her neck as the memory of Rayburn's lips trickling kisses down the same path ignited in her mind.

"Savannah Dixon, get in here right now!"

Savvy flipped her focus to the door. Could Daddy read her thoughts? She puffed out a heavy breath and scooted from the bench. "Well, this ought to be good," she mumbled.

"Go easy on your daddy. He's had a rough couple days."

Savvy patted Myra's shoulder. "Yes, ma'am." Clearly, Myra couldn't read Savvy's wandering mind.

Pushing open the swinging door, Savvy took in the sight of her father yanking an unknown woman to his thick chest. Her older brother Bent stood behind

them tugging at his white shirt collar.

“What’s going on?”

All three heads turned to face Savvy. Her brother was tall and lean, standing well over a foot taller than her father. The young woman beside him had thickly teased brown hair with blonde highlights smattered through the hair-sprayed strands. She was dressed in a brightly colored sweater dress, neon tights, and chunky heel boots. She was beautiful under the thick coat of make-up, but her eyes countered the stunningly trendy package. Dark and deep set, the ice in them forced a chill up Savvy’s spine.

“Sav!” Bent closed the few steps between them, lifting her into a tight hug. “Trust me. OK?” he whispered in her ear before he set her down.

“Savvy, I’d like you to meet Stasi.” Bent swept his hand to the petite brunette.

Savvy stretched her hand to Stasi. “Nice to meet you, Stasi. Welcome to Colin’s Fancy. Will you be staying long with us?”

“Of course she will,” Daddy said. “She and Bent got themselves hitched this morning at the courthouse. Stasi’s your new sister-in-law.”

Savvy snapped her attention to her brother whose expression had transitioned from excited puppy dog to don’t ask any questions in the blink of an eye. Something wasn’t right, but she wouldn’t ask in front of Daddy. She knew better than to stoke that hornets’ nest without cover. “Well, bless your heart! Aren’t you two sneaky little somethings?” Savvy’s voice cracked with the forced excitement.

“It’s a little sudden, but Stasi and I fell in love, and well, I couldn’t think about her going back to New York.”

"New York? Well, how exciting. A new sister from New York."

"Sister-in-law," Stasi said through a clenched teeth smile.

"Right. Well, this calls for a celebration doesn't it, Daddy?"

"Of course! We will have to have a party just as soon as possible."

"I don't know. I think Stasi should get settled in first," Bent said.

"Don't be silly. I just bet Stasi loves a good party, don't you?" Savvy smiled to the point of face ache. "And this will be perfect. Mellie and I were just talking about throwing a Christmas Eve party. This will be the perfect bonus reason." She tugged Stasi into a hug. "Don't you worry about anything, Stasi-honey. We'll make your welcome to the south better than anything you could ever imagine. Why, I bet we might just surprise the New York right out of you. Bless your heart."

5

“A party on Christmas Eve? Are you insane, Savannah Dixon? Did you fall on your head the other night?” Mellie shouted after Savvy shut the door to her bedroom.

“It’s not insane. It’s smart. I promised Daddy we’d throw a party to celebrate Bent getting married—even if I think it is the stupidest thing he’s ever done. And that’s saying something. Remember when he took Daddy’s hunting truck mudding? It took us three days to get the mud off that old Ford. But getting married in secret? It’s like eloping is contagious or something. Plus, with my freak out at Jerry’s the other night, every tongue has been wagging in this town. I need to do something to balance the social scales. We need to change the narrative.”

“And you are going to do that by throwing a party the one night that everyone in town will be in church?”

“Yes, well, I thought about that. We’ll make it a post church celebration. Give everyone something to do until Santa comes.”

“I don’t know, Sav. How are you going to find a caterer in a week?”

“I’m not. We’re going to do it.”

“It’s now official. You are insane. I’ve questioned it in the past, but you have sealed your fate. Savannah

Dixon, you are in...sane."

"Mellie, think about it. We've talked since we were little girls with fake ovens in our bedrooms about opening up our own catering business after college. Well, after college is only a year away, and I need a plan since my goal of marrying Jerry and building a house that spanned the creek is out. And I'm guessing you are looking for something to keep you busy when Gerald gets deployed."

Mellie sighed. "Guilt has always been a weapon you so easily pull out of your arsenal, Savannah Dixon."

Savvy clapped her hands. "I knew you would agree with me."

"When have I not given in to one of your schemes?"

"You didn't try out for cheer in the seventh grade because the skirts were too short for your daddy's liking." Savvy giggled. "But I forgive you for leaving me all alone with Shandy Rice. That is what friends do. Forgive."

"Gee, thanks. Now tell me how you are going to change the 'narrative.'"

6

Three days later, Savvy snapped the lid on the last container of decorated cookies in the shapes of bells, Christmas trees and stockings for the party. The day after she confirmed the party with Daddy, phone and hand-delivered invitations went out, and shockingly, nearly every one of the extended Dixons and countywide friends accepted the spontaneous celebration to meet the newest member of the Dixon clan.

Colin's Fancy was expecting over one hundred people for the post worship celebration. Savvy expected that a quarter of the attendees wanted to see if she had gained the requisite post-break-up ten pounds, another quarter wanted to check out Bent's unknown Yankee wife, another quarter wanted to have something to do other than sit around the tree and drink their grandmommy's eggnog, and the last quarter wanted to see she and Mellie fall on their faces catering an event with less than one week's notice. Well, at least half would be disappointed. She hadn't gained a single ounce and all of the food preparations were coming along better than she could have ever imagined — thanks almost solely to Mellie's uncanny organizational abilities and Myra's unending, internal recipe box.