

Runaway Bride Book Excerpt

Prologue

"Why didn't you tell me, Chad?" Savannah cried, amazed that her voice still worked. She paused, looked at him as a sudden sadness filled her, and then looked away, unable to cope with his helplessness. She didn't recognize Chad this way. Composure was out of the question, for both of them.

There was no way they could straighten this out.

"You are just so sweet, Savannah," he cried, glancing up at her with tears in his eyes. "I couldn't bear to hurt you."

Sweet! She was sick of hearing that word. She didn't feel sweet at this moment. She wanted to shout, scream, throw a fit, and yet, every time she looked into Chad's pitiful face, she knew she couldn't.

He continued in a choked voice, as though she weren't even there.

"I couldn't. I haven't told anyone. I mean...how could I? You know my folks as well as I. They'd never accept it. This isn't something you just blurt out Savannah. My brothers have all succeeded in life. Our parents, they've had such dreams for you and I." he replied, his hoarse whispering words echoing in the emptiness of the house. A house that would have been hers one day. A house she had contemplated cleaning and filling with children.

Savannah looked around the charming old house, thinking of the many times she had dreamed of making it such a beautiful home, now it was all lost. It would never be hers.

"You should have told *me!*" Savannah heard the bitterness in her own voice spill over, as she wiped away a tear. She pressed her lips together in silent anger, not at Chad, but rather herself for not knowing how to handle this situation. "Didn't you think I could understand? I always thought we could talk about anything."

How could she have been so blind, so naive? They had friends that were gay. She accepted them with all her heart. But Chad...

Why couldn't she see what had happened to Chad? Why hadn't she at least suspected something was different?

"I know. You are absolutely right, about that. I should have opened up to you about it long ago. In time, maybe you'll forgive me." He glanced up at her, then down, unable to meet her steady gaze. All he could do was sit there, obvious discomfort and withdrawal mingled. "I should have at least told *you,*" Chad reprimanded himself. "But Savannah, I didn't want to hurt you. I never wanted to hurt *you.* You mean so much to me, Savannah. I mean, you're such a sweet little thing. I admire you...endlessly, Savannah. After all the well laid plans we've had. I do love you...in a way. That's why I let it go on so long. Being married to you wouldn't be so bad..."

There it was again, that word sweet. Be so bad? He made her sound pitiful....

Sweet, naive, ignorant fool.

"I'm glad I found out," Savannah sighed, her shoulders slumping slightly, "...in time."

"Yeah, I guess." His voice was soft, yet alarmed. "I have a feeling I've lost something very special...you!"

"Chad, let's don't go there. Please, don't confuse me, not now. Everything is just too...exposed right now. I need some time. We can still be friends. I do love you...."

"I know...I'm sorry. I really don't know how I'm ever going to break it to my family." He said hanging his head as though already receiving their rejection.

Savannah looked at him, willing her lips not to tremble as she spoke. "Well...you have to come up with some explanation. I'm leaving..."

"Leaving? Now?" He suddenly stood up, grabbed her by the shoulders, then let go.

"Well you certainly don't expect me to go through with this...wedding of ours, now do you?" Savannah stared at him in astonishment.

He firmed his lips and frowned helplessly, gesturing with his hands in mid air. "No, I guess not."

"Chad you can't live a lie." Despite everything, she still had feelings for Chad but those feelings had changed, drastically. She wanted to help him. And she wanted him to be happy. So he would have to stand on his own and be the man she knew he could be.

He nodded slowly, his hands going to her shoulders, gently this time, as he stared into her eyes, "If I could love a woman.... I'd love you."

Savannah watched his face closely, as though searching for the Chad she thought she knew so well. "Somehow, I believe that. But it doesn't change a thing. You have got to tell your parents...my parents, the truth. You have to straighten this out, Chad."

"Oh, Savannah, I can't do that...not now, not yet!" Chad cried, his movements' jerky as his hand went to his forehead and he reeled away from her, unable to face her any longer. "I love my parents, your parents. I can't just blurt something like this out. It would kill them. You know that. They could never accept it. I'm not even sure I accept it. Losing you is the biggest tragedy in my life."

"Thank you for that." Savannah twisted about, her wedding dress swishing around her as she moved hurriedly to face Chad again. The very sound of it irritated her. Everything irritated her right now.

Chad didn't want to face her; he didn't want to look at her.

He looked so handsome standing there in his black tux, his light blond hair immaculate, his blue eyes pleading with her to understand. And she did to an extent. Only, why hadn't she figured it out? It was maddening to think she was that naive.

"How long do you need?" She barely whispered the words, holding her breath for his answer.

"A lifetime?" An indefinable emotion colored his blue eyes with dark foreboding.

"Impossible. You've got to face this head on. I can't hide out forever. You've got to straighten this out and soon. For both our sakes." When he sat so stone still, she shook his shoulder, "Do you understand?"

"You're absolutely right, of course. But...I don't know how to do it...yet." He paused, glancing at her again. "Where will you go?" Chad asked, his face laced with concern as he finally looked her in the eyes.

"I don't know. This wasn't a planned event. I really don't know....but--I've got an aunt, out west, no one ever visits her. Maybe I will." Savannah sighed heavily, unable to look at Chad any longer. It was obvious Chad didn't want to confront the congregation waiting at the church across the street, nor their parents. His courage had waned and somehow she had to reinforce its importance.

"That's good thinking."

Savannah wanted to cry, wanted to shout, wanted to run as far away as possible. She couldn't face that crowd, either. She hadn't had the time to think. All she knew was that she couldn't marry Chad.

He couldn't possibly know how much he had hurt her. Her pending marriage had been all she had thought about for months. The preparations she'd made, the dreams she had, all gone. Perhaps she had been in love with the idea of marriage itself, but nonetheless, those hopes and dreams had gone by the wayside this morning. Crushed!

Why did her mother insist on the biggest wedding of the century? She and Chad had both agreed they wanted a small wedding. Why had she allowed her mother to take charge of what started out as a simple ceremony between two people? Now, here she was in this designer wedding gown, looking for the nearest exit. And Chad...poor Chad.

She should be mad. She should scream, protest, throw something, but all she wanted to do was sit down and have a long cry. And it hurt holding it back now. But one of them had to be strong.

"You can't tell anyone where I'm going, Chad. Do you understand?"

"Yes, of course I won't. Savannah..." He looked at her sheepishly, then in desperation he pleaded, "If you can keep my secret a while longer, I can surely keep yours. But Savannah..."

"What?" she nearly shouted, her emotions seemed to be going up and down a roller coaster ride of extremes. One minute she wanted to comfort Chad, the next she wanted to strangle him.

Emotions were not a luxury right now. She had to think.

"I'm sorry. For so many things. For leading you on, for letting this get so out of hand. For being...me!" Chad cried, then he chewed at his bottom lip.

The sincerity in his voice had Savannah nearly in tears again, but she had wept all she planned to for the moment. She wouldn't cry, not yet at least.

Nothing had changed...except they wouldn't be getting married. She still loved Chad, differently of course, but she loved him nonetheless. She couldn't just turn the love off. Even now. If only the family could come to understand. Coming from such a rich aristocratic family, denial would come first, then later, much later, acceptance. *But knowing them as she did she was sure they wouldn't be prepared for this any more than she had been!*

Understand? She didn't understand it either!

How could one know someone for so many years, and yet not know them?

She had all of thirty minutes to plan, and think of how she was going to handle things. The congregation was sitting in that church across the street waiting for her untimely appearance. Her father was probably pounding on the dressing room door by now.

Right or wrong, she'd made her own decision, this morning. She wasn't marrying Chad. Running out on Chad like this seemed the coward's way out, yet, what she had just faced was still fresh in her mind and she felt she had every right. Perhaps she had opted for the easy way out of this situation, too.

There wasn't time to plan it out, think it through. She had to act, and now.

She'd think about all of this later, right now, they had to make some quick decisions and she had to form some kind of plan for *her* life. Some kind of future. A future without Chad.

"A month," she said slowly.

"A month?" he wailed. "Oh God, Savannah, I don't know if I can do it in that time."

"You have to."

"But you won't be able to see their faces, the hurt, and anguish. How can I ruin that smile on Mama's face?" He asked sincerely once more. "She's wanted us to marry for years. How can I possibly tell her now?"

"That's something she'll have to learn to get over, as I will." Savannah took Chad's hands in hers, "Look Chad. You chose this life. It was your decision, now you must face up to that decision. You have to tell them. Within a month."

Chad paced, and Savannah watched him sadly. She couldn't weaken. She had to be strong for them both. But if she was strong why were her limbs trembling so? Why did she feel as though her whole life was suddenly in ruin?

"Maybe Douglas will help you." She offered.

"Oh God...Savannah. I'm not sure I can do this." Chad said and flopped into the recliner again. "We didn't plan it. Honestly. I'm not sure how it happened, it just did."

"It doesn't matter now. It's done. You have to face it, Chad, for both our sakes. I'm leaving you at the altar. Everyone is going to blame *me*. But you know..."

"Yes, it's *my* fault!" He practically choked on his own words.

"Then you will tell them?" Savannah encouraged.

"Give me two months." He pleaded with her.

"Two?" Savannah found her temper rising. Didn't he realize she was barely keeping herself together, and he was *begging* for two months. Never had she seen Chad so despondent. But it certainly wasn't her place to tell her parents or his that he was gay. He had chosen that life, now he had to face the truth about himself and his life.

Savannah might have been furious with him, had it been any other problem she might have handled it, but this...she couldn't. She simply didn't know how. She couldn't explain, and he wouldn't.

"Three at the very most," he was whining. She'd never heard him whine in all the years she had known him. Dear God, how could thirty minutes change so much in their lives?

Savannah took a deep breath. Inside she was seething with some unspent rage. A rage that cried he had no right to do this to her. But he might ruin both their lives yet, if he didn't tell his parents, and hers.

What would she do out west with an Aunt she barely remembered? She wasn't even sure her Aunt Lucy would know her now.

"Three months, that's it," she decided firmly. "I can't put my own life on hold any longer than that. As it is, I'll lose my job. My parents will worry themselves sick, and blame me. You have to straighten this out. Face your life, Chad. You've chosen it, now you have to face it."

"I know. Just give me the three months. I'll find a way to tell them." Chad nodded slowly as though everything were going through his head at once.

Savannah smiled and nodded, "Okay Chad. By the end of summer, you'll have to tell them."

"I do love you, you know." He leaned towards her.

Savannah nodded slowly, sadly, "Yes, I know." How hollow those words sounded now.

"Didn't you ever once suspect?" He asked curiously. "I mean... we never..."

"I just thought you were being a gentleman," she felt a tear slip down her cheek. The dream that she was saving herself for her husband seemed totally foolish and silly now. And yet, it was so much a part of her belief that she refused to let Chad or anyone ruin her ideal. "That's one of the things I loved about you most."

"I'd thought about...at least trying, for your sake." He admitted. "You're such a gentle sweet person, it wouldn't be hard. I could have loved you both."

"Good thing you didn't. You know, Chad, you are the only man I've ever been serious about."

At that moment she mused the fact that she hadn't told him she had loved him. Perhaps it was a little false pride holding her back. Or perhaps there was something lacking in her own make-up that kept her from it.

"I never meant to hurt you, Savannah. I never meant for this to happen...it just did. Funny thing is, I didn't know myself till last summer. Remember, when we went swimming with Douglas and his sister."

Savannah felt suddenly queasy, dizzy. She needed to leave. She didn't want to hear anymore, and yet, this was Chad. Her Chad, till only moments ago. How could a few precious moments destroy something so lovely? The boy next door she'd grown up with, fell in love with. It was a fairytale, a dream, it wasn't reality. And in one moment that whole illusion was spoiled. And everything she thought she knew about men, seemed very little.

She couldn't lay all the blame on Chad either, because she had been a part of it all, too. Chad had simply chosen another life. She sincerely wanted Chad's happiness, and her own.

"I've got to get out of here, Chad," she said backing away from him as he stood up and started to approach her. She didn't want him near her. Not right now. It was simply too soon. She didn't want to hear about Douglas, she just wanted to escape, so she could cry in private.

There was hurt in his eyes, she saw it. But it was all too fresh in her mind. She needed time to assimilate what she had witnessed. Seeing him and Douglas in the garden, kissing, passionately, destroyed something inside her, facing that issue was just too much right now. She wasn't sure what it was, but something was very different, and she knew deep down she'd never trust her feelings so easily again.

"I've got to go," she said quietly, not quite meeting his eyes.

"Savannah, forgive me for hurting you."

"I--I forgive you, Chad. I don't think you could help it. I hope you and Douglas...can make a life."

"Thanks, sweetie, I knew you'd understand, somehow."

Savannah smiled sadly at him. "Good luck!"

"Okay...Savannah?"

"Yes," she didn't turn around to look at him,

"I do *love* you, you know that don't you? In my fashion, I'll always be here for you. You know that!"

"Goodbye, Chad. And...I love you too! I only wish I'd known sooner, that's all." her voice broke and she ran from the room. Out into the garden, she ran, quietly, stopping only long enough to take her high heels off, she carried them in one hand, her beaded bag in the other.

She headed for the church parking lot across the street where her parents' car was parked. Climbing in she checked under the rug for the key. It was there. Good ole predictable dad. She started the engine, it purred.

In a moment she would be driving away. She saw Chad on the lawn, waved and peeled out into the noontday traffic.

No one saw her, but him. Thank God.

She couldn't stop herself from looking in the rear-view mirror. Chad had gone inside. What would he say to them, how would he explain it to them?

There wasn't time to worry about what she was doing, or whether it was right or wrong. Her parents would be furious. She was stealing their car. Not only that, but she was leaving with no explanations. But until Chad could come to terms with his own life, she could do nothing more. . . except cry, and as she looked once more in the rear-view mirror she saw the tears streaming down her face, and she pulled over for a few minutes. It was time to cry.