

CANE
SERIES
THREE

LOVING
Mr. Cane

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SHANORA
WILLIAMS

LOVING MR. CANE

CANE SERIES #3

SHANORA WILLIAMS

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NOTIFICATIONS

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NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SHANORA WILLIAMS'

newsletter

AUTHOR NOTE

Hey there!

Just a heads up, this is the third book of the Cane Series and cannot be read as a standalone. To read [Wanting Mr. Cane](#) (#1) and [Breaking Mr. Cane](#) (#2), the first and second books of the series, you can find them below.

- 1) [Wanting Mr. Cane](#)
- 2) [Breaking Mr. Cane](#)

For those eager for more Kandy Cane, I really hope you enjoy this continuation of their story!

Sending all my love,

Shanora

PART I
SURRENDER

PROLOGUE

CANE

WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, I HEARD TALES ABOUT A MAN FEARED BY everyone. Men I thought were spooked by nothing and no one were afraid of him. Men who shot at police officers, served lengthy prison sentences, and faced the barrel of smoking guns daily felt threatened by him.

It astounded me that these men never spoke ill of him. It was always proper, never trash-talking or bragging. They only called him by *one* name, and had even told me several times that if he were called by anything else, there was a high likelihood that you'd be dead within a week. It was a name that, at the time, made no sense to me...

But then I met him, and I understood why everyone gave him his due.

He wasn't your typical dealer. He wore expensive suits and watches and kept up with his appearance. Unlike most, he didn't use his supplies. He was 100 percent clean, and that's what kept him on top of his game.

He was smart and dedicated.

Persistent and precise.

He played the drug world like a game of chess, always making the right move that would keep him one step ahead, never swaying or deterring. He'd never slipped up—not once—and it was insane of me to want to work with someone like him...but when it came down to it, I had no other choice.

His name was Draco Molina. Many knew him as *El Jefe. The Boss*. And a boss he was, because when he made a statement, it was abundantly clear.

When he ran jobs and scheduled deliveries, they were always on time, and when he needed his money, he came for it, whether you were ready to pay up or not.

CHAPTER ONE

KANDY

BEEP...BEEP...BEEP...

The noise was relentless, pulling me out of a dark haze.

I peeled my eyes open and looked to the left. First thing I saw was blonde hair and then a blue blouse.

“Mom?” I croaked. My throat was bone dry.

“Kandy, sweetie! Oh my gosh!” She hopped up and hugged me tight around the neck. I lifted my arms and tried hugging her back, but it hurt too much.

“Ow,” I groaned, holding my stomach.

Mom looked down with worry in her eyes. “You were stabbed, Kandy,” she informed me, and when the words hit me, the events rushed through me like a tidal wave. Gasping, I held the area where the wound was patched up. It was on my pelvis, slightly to the right. The bandage stretched to my hip bone.

My breathing picked up as the memories rushed to me. *She was screaming so loudly. Her eyes were so wild. The blade was so sharp.*

“Oh, God,” I breathed. “W-where is she? Where’s Cane?”

“Kandy, sweetie. Calm down, please.”

“No—where is he? Is he okay?” I demanded, and Mom’s eyes softened before flashing over to the left. I looked with her and realized Dad was standing by the door.

“Is it true that Kelly did this?” she whispered, voice breaking. “Did she *attack* you?”

“Y-yes. I remember. She came for me with a knife.”

“Oh my God.” Mom shoved a hand through her hair. “We thought Cane was making things up. He’s in custody for questioning right now. I just don’t understand why she’d do such a thing after telling us to be wary of Cane. I knew I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions!”

“He’s in custody? No, you have to tell them he didn’t do it! Call them, Dad!” I demanded, focusing on him. “I’ll testify myself. He didn’t do anything!”

“Are you sure about that?” Dad took a step closer, and I couldn’t understand why he was frowning. I had literally been stabbed and he was looking at me like he hated me. “Did he know and needed a way for you to get rid of it?”

“W-what?” I asked, scowling.

“Is this why you really left?” Dad’s voice boomed.

I frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“How long have you known, Kandy?” he barked, demanding an answer, but I had no clue what the hell he was even talking about.

“Derek!” Mom warned, giving him a not-so-subtle glare. “Not. Now,” she gritted through her teeth.

“What is going on?” I demanded. “How long have I known what? That Kelly was crazy?”

“No!” His voice made me feel small. “That you were *pregnant*, Kandy!”

His words seemed to make the whole room vibrate. My heart plummeted, and Mom sucked in a sharp breath, as if she were bracing for a flood to break through the dam.

“*Pregnant?*” My voice broke. “But I—I’m not pregnant. *How?*”

“What do you mean how? By having sex, that’s how—and with the wrong fucking people!” Dad snapped.

I was losing it. Maybe I was in a coma and having a terrible, terrible dream. There was no way I could have been pregnant. My mind raced to the days and weeks before. I hadn’t felt sick at all, or fatigued, none of the things I’d read about. I was fine.

My mind ran in circles, trying to recall any symptoms, but I came up short. And if that news wasn’t bad enough, what my mother said next truly

did me in.

“The stab wound punctured your uterus, Kandy.” Mom sniffled, grabbing my hands and squeezing them. “You bled a lot, but it was mostly the baby. According to the doctors, you were six weeks along...but you... you *lost* the baby, honey.” Tears rolled down her pink cheeks. “I’m so sorry, sweetie.”

So.

So.

Sorry.

The word *sorry* wasn’t fitting enough. It did nothing to the hollowness in my chest, didn’t fill me up one damn bit.

They say there are five stages of grief. Well, this was where stage one started: denial. And the next one, anger. It swept through me like a plague, but despite how mad I was, I couldn’t do anything but break down and sob into my own hands.

Kelly stabbed me, almost like she knew where it would hurt most. I was in a rage. I wanted to find her and strangle her. I’d never felt so hostile, and yet still so helpless. I couldn’t leave the hospital, and Cane was being questioned for something he didn’t even do.

That night, I wept. Mom held me. Dad was too livid to come too close at first, so he walked out and got some air. He was gone for only twenty minutes before coming back and wrapping me in his arms. Both of my parents—my beautiful, loving parents, who only wanted the best for me—were holding me, cooing to me. Murmuring that everything was going to be okay.

I felt safe—still angry, but safe.

In that moment, my parents were my rock, and my worries had temporarily subsided.

Little did I know that stage two was a walk in the park compared to stage three and four.

Anger is easy to feel and easy to let go of. But to bargain and ask for the right thing to happen, and then to feel like there is nothing left to do but let go and accept the terrible fate?

Well, that’s the hardest part.

CHAPTER TWO

CANE

I WAS SO SICK OF BEING HOUNDED WITH QUESTIONS. THE DETECTIVES WERE on my ass all night, and at one point, I thought they were never going to let up.

Was I a dumbass for touching the knife? Yes, but that didn't make me the threat. I was trying to stop that bitch from killing me.

“What would possess you to touch the weapon that harmed Kandy, Mr. Cane? Explain it to me, because it truly doesn't make any sense.” Detective Maye stood in front of me, her dark hair pulled back into a tight ponytail, wrinkles forming around her eyes. She had to be in her early forties, with brown skin and dark brown eyes. She'd been hounding me ever since she walked into the room with her hefty partner Jordan Rowe at her side.

Apparently, she was the bad cop, and he was the good one. Either way, neither of them could fool me. Luckily, thirty minutes ago, my attorney, Mario Valdez, came waltzing into the room, and I was glad because I needed this night to be over.

“Look, I don't know what else you'd like him to say,” my attorney said, sitting forward. “As he explained, he took the knife from Miss Hugo's hands and tackled her to the ground because he was under attack. She had already stabbed a young lady, Detective Maye. She most likely would have gone after him, too, if he hadn't stopped her. Instead of questioning my

client, how about you bring Miss Hugo in and question her about it? He isn't the only suspect of this horrific crime."

"We are looking for her right now," Detective Rowe stated.

"My client has been here for well over fourteen hours. He is tired and exhausted and upset about the events that happened under the roof of his own home. He's not under arrest, is he?"

"Not exactly," Detective Rowe muttered, looking sideways at Detective Maye.

"Well if he isn't under arrest, he should be able to leave. If you have any more questions, he will be around to answer them. He won't be far."

Detective Maye glared at me. When her phone chimed, she took it out, finally pulling her eyes away from me to check the screen. She then showed the phone to her partner, whose bushy eyebrows shot up to his forehead when he read the notification.

Detective Rowe grunted as he stood and walked to the door to open it.

"You can go," he said.

"Is there something we should be aware of, Detective Maye?" Mario asked, collecting his pens and papers and tucking them into his briefcase.

I stood up, heading for the door.

"The victim has spoken to one of our investigators." Detective Maye let out a short breath. "She remembers everything. Says Miss Hugo showed up and attacked her, and Mr. Cane here tried to stop her. I suppose your confession has been proven true."

"Good," I said, even though Mario told me to keep my mouth shut. I didn't give a damn. I was sick of them making me out to be the fucking bad guy. "And for the record," I said in Maye's face, "I would *never* hurt Kandy. Next time you come at me, come at me with your facts straight."

She looked at me through narrowed eyelids. "Don't leave the city, Mr. Cane. You are still considered a suspect until we get a hold of Miss Hugo, especially considering the new information we just uncovered. This doesn't mean you're in the clear."

"Whatever," I grumbled, turning away and walking out the door. I didn't care what new information they uncovered. They were so full of shit.

I hurried to the window, where I was checked out and given my car keys and cell phone, and then burst out the door. It was still dark outside, probably around 2:00 a.m. Though it was late, I wanted to see Kandy. She

was probably terrified after what had happened. I needed to know she was okay.

“Cane! Wait!” Mario called after me.

I stopped at the bottom of the cement steps, looking over my shoulder as he walked down.

“She is right about you staying in the city. You can’t travel anywhere until you are in the clear and they have enough evidence from neighbors and the girl. They’ll ask Kandy some thorough, deep questions. They’ll bring Kelly in, and she will most likely lie, but I want you to remember what you told me.”

“What exactly did I tell you?”

“She recently found out how you could afford to build Tempt, thanks to her snooping around and piecing the puzzle together, and if she gets that shitstorm of a conversation started, there will most likely be another investigation opened, and they’ll come searching your place. My question to you is—will they be able to find anything?”

“They won’t find a damn thing, Mario. My house is clean. I don’t do that anymore.”

“Okay. Okay.” He held his hands in the air. “Just making sure.” He pulled a pack of cigarettes from the pocket inside his jacket. He took one out and pinched it between his lips, then offered one to me. With a sigh, I plucked one out, needing something to take the edge off. Not only that, but I was going to have to either hitch a ride with him to the hospital, where my car was, or call up a taxi. I wasn’t up for the latter.

I hadn’t smoked since my mother got out of rehab. We promised each other. For me, it was no more cigarettes. For her, it was no more drugs and no more Buck. It had been one hell of a day, though. A cigarette was what I needed.

“Be honest,” I mumbled, the cigarette between my lips. He sparked the end of mine, and I inhaled hard before exhaling. “I won’t be in the clear for a while, will I?”

“Not if Kelly tells your truth.” He took a drag. “I looked into her background before I got here. Called up a few people who could get me some information. She has a lawyer here named Chase Berry. He’s a damn good lawyer, and somehow always knows how to plead a mental case for her.”

“Mental case? More than one? Fuck my life.”

“Yeah. She’s had a lot of accusation, but there were three in particular that stood out to me the most.” Another drag. “There was a restraining order. I don’t know all the details, only that she threatened the fiancée of a man she was dating. From what I gathered, she and that man had probably stopped dating a long time ago, but Kelly was thinking they were still together.”

“Shit.” I took a harder pull.

“She went to an inpatient facility for three months to get out from under that one. Apparently therapists deemed her as bipolar with narcissistic tendencies. One therapist said she was pushing more toward Borderline Personality Disorder.”

“You’re fucking kidding? And that’s what I’m dealing with? Fuck, how didn’t I know she was *this* fucking crazy? Took a damn stabbing for me to see how dangerous she actually is.”

“I don’t know, but I’d keep a close eye on her. What she says could damage your career and your reputation...and you know *El Jefe* has no patience for messy situations.”

I frowned and slowly dragged my gaze back over to his. He was already looking at me. Dropping his cigarette, he stepped on the butt of it, getting rid of the spark. “What the hell did you just say?”

“El Jefe. He wouldn’t be pleased to hear that your career is on the line,” he repeated nonchalantly, as if that name were just a common one.

“Wait...” I held a hand up, shaking my head. “You *work* for him?”

“I’ve worked for him for years. He’s the one who had me reach out to you when you first got Tempt started, told me to keep a close eye, make sure your business stays in the clear, no red flags.”

“I could have gotten my own damn attorney,” I growled.

“Yeah, well, with his money being pushed into your business and into your pockets, he had to take precautions. I’m sure you understand that.”

“Where is he now?” I hoped he wasn’t here.

“I have no idea where he is. He doesn’t update anyone on his whereabouts; he just shows up. I heard he’s on the way to Georgia, though, and you’ll have a lot of explaining to do. Hopefully this whole mess will be cleared up before he arrives.”

I stabbed the butt of my cigarette on the brick wall behind me. “If I were him, I wouldn’t come to Georgia right now, especially anywhere near me.”

“Oh, trust me, I’m almost one hundred percent certain that word has already traveled to him. He’s not coming anywhere near you just yet...but he will come.”

I rolled my shoulders and then gritted my teeth. “Can you drop me off at the hospital?”

“Sure.” He walked toward the parking lot, and I followed after him. During the ride, all Mario could talk about was all the ways shit could go wrong if Kelly said the wrong things.

I wasn’t too worried about Kelly right now. I was more worried about what Jefe would do if Kelly dragged my business under. Would he strip me of everything I’d worked so hard for? Would he threaten me and the people I loved? Would he torture them? It was always up in the air with him. You never knew what he would do or what kind of mood he was in and how he wanted to carry things out. It’s what I disliked most about him.

Mario pulled up to the hospital, and I pushed out of the car. “Thanks,” I mumbled when I climbed out.

He nodded. “No problem. Just...watch your back, all right? Be careful. If you need anything, let me know. I’ll do my best to help.”

“Yeah. Sure.” I closed the door and watched him drive away. When I could no longer see the taillights of his BMW, I turned and marched into the hospital, putting all my worries aside, ready to see my Kandy.

CHAPTER THREE

KANDY

THE QUESTIONS THE DETECTIVE HAD ASKED ME WERE INSANE, BUT WHAT was even more outrageous was how he was trying to get me to say something—*anything*—negative about Cane just to try and catch a case or make him appear guilty. Even though I had repeatedly told them Kelly attacked and stabbed me, he asked if I had any suspicion that Cane had an ulterior motive to get rid of me, but maybe Kelly took it too far. And when the detective found out I was pregnant and lost the baby due to the stabbing, all hell broke loose. He assumed the worst of Cane, but Cane wasn't like that. He didn't even know I was pregnant—hell, I had no idea until a few hours ago.

“She’s had a rough night, and she’s tired,” my dad finally said when Detective Jakes scribbled the final notes on his notepad. “Let her rest, and you can pick up on the questions tomorrow.”

He bobbed his head. “Yeah. Of course. It’s late.” When Detective Jakes walked into the room, it was clear he was very familiar with my father. Shook his hand before introductions and everything. I had a feeling my father had dumped a few accusations on Jakes’s lap to try to create more trouble for Cane. Detective Jakes walked to the door. “See you later, Derek, Mrs. Jennings.”

“Night,” Dad called, and he was gone.

I let out a heavy sigh, and Mom pushed out of the recliner. “If you don’t want to talk to them tomorrow, you don’t have to. They can wait until you’re feeling better.”

“I don’t want to, but they haven’t caught her, Mom.”

“I know.” She looked down. “But they will.”

I looked at Dad, who was checking his cellphone. “Cane was released about thirty minutes ago.”

I perked up a little, sitting up just a bit. It hurt, but I avoided a wince. “Really? He’s not in trouble?”

“I’m sure he’s still listed as a suspect, probably can’t leave the city until they find Kelly.” Dad took a step forward. “Kandy, are you sure Cane didn’t know about the baby?”

“I’m positive, Dad. I literally *just* found out. He couldn’t have known before I did.”

He released a breath, lowering his gaze briefly before looking sideways at me. He then cleared his throat and sighed.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he mumbled, stepping away.

“No, Dad. What is it? You cleared your throat. You clearly have something you want to say.”

His brown eyes flickered over to Mom’s, who was frowning at him, waiting for him to say whatever he had on his mind. “What is it now, Derek?”

“I just...well, when I used to meet up with Cane, I remember telling him all about Kandy and how becoming a father was the best thing to ever happen to me.” I swallowed hard, pushing up on my hands, wincing just a bit when I felt the sting below my stomach. Mom rubbed my hand. “I remember asking him if he wanted kids, and he told me ‘hell no.’”

What?

“I asked him why, and he said because he was afraid to bring a kid into *his* world,” Dad continued.

“W-what is that even supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t push on the topic—just figured he never wanted kids with all that he’d gone through with his father and even his mother. Taking care of his sister—he was basically a father to her.”

“Lora,” I murmured, and Dad stared hard at me.

“You’ve met his sister?”

“Yes. I’ve hung out with her several times.”

He grimaced. “That girl is no good, from what I remember. He always told me about the stuff she was involved in, and it was never good. Stay away from her.”

“Stuff like what?”

“It’s too much to get into right now, but I’m going to be frank and tell you, you need to stay away from Cane, period. This was why I got so upset—why I refused to accept that you wanted to be with him. Because I know who he is, I know where he came from, I know the people he has dealt with, and I have caught him in several lies and made him explain it all to me. I have kept his secrets and watched his back because he was my friend, but when it comes to jeopardizing my daughter’s life, I will pour all of those secrets on the table if it means saving you.”

Shit. He made it sound like the stuff he knew was gruesome. Even his fists had balled up, like he was remembering something that angered him.

“He’ll most likely come to check on you,” Mom said, and I was glad she’d shifted the topic. “But I don’t think it’s safe for you to go with him again, Kandy.”

I dropped my line of vision, putting it on my lap instead. To be honest, I didn’t know what to do anymore. I knew Cane would visit if he was out, but I wanted to look him in the eye and ask him about all of the things my father knew. I wanted him to tell me, so I could decide if it was best to keep my distance or continue making this thing work and getting through it together.

I was a little shaken after what Kelly did to me. To be frank, I didn’t want to go back to his house ever again, so my parents didn’t have to worry about that. There was that man on the news, the phone Cane had in the closet, and then *she* popped up. So much had happened in the span of ten minutes. I was too afraid of what would come next, but deep down, I still wanted him. Still *loved* him.

A knock on the door made me jolt, and Mom rubbed my arm as Dad turned and walked toward it. He opened it halfway then I heard him hiss at the person behind it.

“No!” he snapped.

“Derek, who is it?” Mom called, tilting her head, trying to see past him.

Dad glanced over his shoulder with a deep frown. Mom got up and walked around the bed to get to the door. She peered over Dad’s shoulder

and when she saw the person, I noticed her brows dip.

“Who is it?” I called.

They both looked back regretfully, and then Dad pushed the door open a little wider, taking a step aside so I could see. Cane stood on the other side of the door, his gray button-down shirt covered in dark-red stains, his pants low on his hips due to the absence of his belt. When he saw me, his gray-green eyes stretched wide. They were dark, though, full of an anguish that I, for once, understood.

“Hey, Kandy Cane,” he murmured, voice deep, husky.

My eyes instantly watered, the rims burning, trying to fight emotion. I wanted to smile at him—something deep inside me was begging me to reassure him—but something else that was much, much stronger told me that a smile wasn’t warranted.

“Sweetie,” Mom whispered, coming to me and stroking my hair back. “You don’t have to talk to him right now either. It’s almost three in the morning, and you’re exhausted.”

“No. I want to talk to him now.”

Dad huffed, glaring at Cane as he stepped into the room.

“Alone, please?” I requested, and Dad’s head swung over rapidly. He looked at me like I’d lost my mind, opening his mouth to say something until Mom stepped forward and grabbed his hand.

“You get five minutes. That’s it,” Dad snarled at Cane. “And the door stays open.” Cane lowered his gaze as they left, and when they were gone, he slowly carried his eyes over to mine. In that moment, all I could really do was look at him. I had so many questions I wanted to ask, but I also wanted to feel his warm arms wrapped around me again. I wanted his comfort, the peace only he could provide. Cane peered over this shoulder once more, then came closer.

“Kandy, I—” He struggled for words, looking me all over, eyes damp and red. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered brokenly. He was at the bedside, looking right down at me. “I didn’t know she’d come—didn’t realize she was that much of a threat. If I’d known, I never would have taken you home with me. It should have been me it happened to, not you.”

I couldn’t conjure the right words for a response, so I looked away instead.

He grabbed my hand and brought it up to his lips, kissing my knuckles, the back of my hand. I closed my eyes, fighting the wave of emotion that’d

swept through me when I felt his lips on me, his breath running over my skin. The monitor beside me beeped, filling the silence that was brewing between us.

“Will you say something?” he finally asked, voice low.

“I’m not sure what you want me to say, Cane.”

“Anything. Whatever is on your mind.”

I swallowed hard, focused on my lap. After several minutes passed, I said, “There’s obviously a lot I don’t know about you.”

I took a glance up, and he’d straightened his back. “I told you there were things about me you wouldn’t like, Kandy. Things you’d find out...”

“I know but...I didn’t know they would be as bad as working for a cartel.”

“I don’t work for the cartel. I only work with *him*.” He gritted his teeth after the statement.

“Is he really coming here?”

“He will...but not any time soon.”

I sighed, pulling my hand out of his. He watched the action before staring me in the eyes. “What can I do to make this right?”

“There isn’t much you can do, Cane! I was stabbed in *your* house by ex!”

His eyebrows dipped slightly, and he pulled back a bit to see my whole face. “Do you not *trust* me anymore?” I looked away, and as if that one gesture said it all, he said, “I didn’t know this would happen, Kandy.”

“I know you didn’t...”

“So why lose trust in me? I’d still do anything for you. I’d take a bullet for you if I had to—”

“Cane, I was pregnant!” I finally blurted out, and his eyes grew wider, almost like he didn’t believe me. He looked me all over, as if I were under an X-ray.

“What are you talking about? *How?*”

“What do you mean *how*? By being with you! When Kelly stabbed me, it didn’t just hurt me—it killed someone that was growing inside me!” Saying it out loud was like talking with glass in my throat. It hurt like a bitch to admit. I was still in denial about it...still hoping this was all a fucking nightmare and that I’d wake up soon.

“Shit, Kandy, I’m sorry—I didn’t know. Why didn’t you tell me you were—I mean...”

“I didn’t know I was until a few hours ago. The doctors told my mom, and she told me.”

He sighed. I couldn’t help thinking it was a sigh of relief. “Fuck. I’m so sorry, baby.” Standing, he cupped my face, bringing his lips down to my forehead. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered again.

“I guess it’s a good thing for you that it’s gone, huh? My dad told me you don’t want kids.”

He pulled back, glaring down at me. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“That’s what my dad said you told him. I guess before you started Tempt. You told him you were afraid to bring a kid into your world.”

“Wha—Kandy, that was before I ever even met you,” he scoffed. “You can’t possibly think that I’m happy to know the baby is gone? It’s going to fuck with my head even more now!”

“I honestly don’t know what to think about you anymore.” He pulled his hands away, looking at me as if I’d shot him right in the heart, and I stared right back, my eyes burning. “There’s so much about you that I don’t know, and I’m sure what I’ve found out so far is only the tip of the iceberg. You have all of these secrets, and they’re coming out one after another. And with each secret, there is a threat, and when I’m around, those threats end up hurting me. Not you, but *me*. When we’re together, I’m the one who ends up losing everything.” I choked on my next breath, and he held my face in his hands, bending down to catch my eyes, but I refused to look at him. I couldn’t look into his eyes. It would kill me even more that I was saying all of this.

“Kandy, you know I will protect you with my *life*—I promised that not even two nights ago. I’m sorry this happened—I should have taken better precautions or locked the damn door after the caterers left, but I wasn’t thinking.” He paused, eyes shimmering with guilt. “I—I asked you if you trusted me, and you said yes.”

“Yeah, well, maybe I didn’t know what I was getting myself into when I said that.”

He looked taken aback, eyes even wider. “You’re just saying this because you’re hurting...right? Because if this is you talking out of anger and emotion, then I get that, but if this is *really* how you feel then I don’t know what to say...”

I pushed his hands away and swiped a hand over my face, ridding myself of the tears.

“Do you not want to be with me anymore?” His question came out forced, as if it pained him to even ask. Or more like he was afraid of the answer.

I was quiet for a really long time, so long that I could tell he was holding his breath, waiting for my response. “Cane,” I whispered. “I want to be with you—I do. I love you so, so much...but it shouldn’t hurt this much to love you. When we first started this, it was fun and different and exhilarating, but it’s not that anymore. Now, it’s just toxic and dangerous. Every day, there is a new layer of your life revealed, and each one is scarier than the last.”

“Kandy—”

“No, Cane. I just...I think the best thing for me to do right now is go back with my parents. You have so much going on in your life, and to be honest, I don’t think I’d feel safe going back with you.”

He looked as if I’d slapped him right in the face. Blow after blow, I knew it—could feel it—but I couldn’t stop. I couldn’t pretend I was okay with this. The worst thing was his eyes. They were filled with so much regret, guilt, shame, and worst of all, pain. “Kandy, baby...please,” he begged. “I would never let anyone hurt you like that again.”

I shook my head. It was all I could do.

“Kandy...”

A throat cleared behind him, and Cane looked over his shoulder. I peered up, spotting Mom and Dad by the door. “Time’s up,” Dad grumbled, but Cane ignored him, focusing on me again.

“Are you sure about this?” Cane whispered, caressing my hand. I stared down at it, the olive slivers of skin between dark ink. I studied the dark rose on the back of his hand, then the word RISE on his knuckles, and came to the realization that I would probably never find out the meaning of that phrase.

“I think it’s best,” was all I said. I matched his stare, and he slowly pulled his hand away, looking me all over.

I could tell he had so much more to say, but with my parents waiting there, watching, he kept his next sentence brief. “If space is what you need, then I’ll give it to you, but I want you to know that I love you and nothing in this world will ever be able to change that.” He kissed the top of my

head, and as much as I'd been trying to hold it together before, I lost it when his mouth was on me.

The tears I'd tried fighting were unleashed, and I squeezed my eyes shut. Crying hurt the wound beneath my belly and my heart, but I blocked out the pain and brought my hands up, burying my face in it. Cane held me around the shoulders and shushed me, his lips in my hair.

It wasn't space that I needed. What I didn't need was him. No matter how much I loved him, or how much I enjoyed being around him, I knew he was no good for me. Dad had warned me. Mom had even said so.

When Cane and I were in a room alone, we were amazing together—our chemistry off the charts—but out in the real world, we weren't a good match. He was older. I was younger. He had a shaky past, and my life was just getting started. Our paths had crossed many, many times, and sometimes fate made us feel like we were winning, but our lives were passing each other, not fitting together. We happened to find an escape in each other...but that escape was over.

This was our reality, and everyone knew reality was a bitch. Karma was coming for us, but I figured if I let him go now, maybe I could beat her to the punch, spare myself another dose of it. Maybe I could save myself the grief and trauma by making a selfless choice, and that choice was to let Cane—*my* Quinton Cane—go.

"We've got her," I heard my dad murmur, and before I knew it, Cane's arms were gone. His scent had faded. I cried with my hands in my face for a while, even as a new set of even stronger arms wrapped around me. I don't know how much time passed before I looked up and realized that only my parents were in the room.

Cane was gone, and once again, my heart was broken.

CHAPTER FOUR

CANE

HEARTBREAK.

I'd never experienced it until that moment. The feeling couldn't be described, only felt. I always heard about the monstrosity of a broken heart—that it leaves you helpless and hopeless, completely broken inside and numb on the outside. Anyone who hasn't experienced it won't know what it's like. Anyone who has, knows that it will tear you the fuck up.

A heart is already fragile, vulnerable, but a *broken* heart comes with a dollop of pain and a heavy sprinkle of misery.

I went home that night and stared at the blood on my bedroom floor. It had gotten darker. The house was so much quieter, and my thoughts were so fucking loud. I couldn't stand it.

I rushed back downstairs, grabbing the mop bucket from the pantry that I'd never touched before and filling it with hot water. I rushed to the laundry room and dumped some bleach into it, snatched up a towel and a sponge, and then went up to my room again.

The cops had already come by to check for evidence and get their DNA samples. All that was left was a mess—a reminder of what I'd lost. Not only Kandy, but a baby. *My fucking baby*. She was only nineteen years old, and I'd gotten her pregnant, then she was stabbed because of me. Our relationship had cost her so much. She was right.

I dropped to my knees and scrubbed.

Scrubbed.

Scrubbed even harder.

I scrubbed so hard that my hands reddened from the action, and my muscles locked to keep balance. Before I could stop myself, a roar had ripped through me. It bellowed, echoing throughout the house, down every hallway and bouncing off the walls. The sounds closed me in and, defeated, I dropped the blood-stained sponge into the bucket, watching the crimson stain bloom in the water, tainting it.

I huffed hard, eyes falling. The floor was clean. Hardly a trace of any blood left.

I thought it would satisfy me, but it only reminded me of my reality.

Kandy was done with me for good, and her family had been finished with me long before that.

I didn't know when I would see her again, but what I did know was that I couldn't stay in this house anymore. I couldn't stay in this city. There was nothing left for me here.

After the investigation was over, I had to leave Atlanta behind for good.

CHAPTER FIVE

KANDY

THE DETECTIVE RETURNED THE FOLLOWING MORNING, A WOMAN TRAILING IN behind him. The questions were way worse this time around, and they still hadn't found Kelly.

Where could she have gone that quickly? The detectives had confiscated my phone, so I had no idea if Cane was trying to get in touch with me or not. As badly as my heart was hurting, I did wonder if he was okay.

Two days later, I was clear to check out. Mom pushed me in a wheelchair to get to the exit and Dad was parked in front of the hospital, watching us come toward him when we got closer. He put on a faint smile and said, "I got it," to Mom, before walking around the wheelchair and gripping the handles. He helped me get into the front seat of the car, but hunching over was beyond excruciating, despite the high dosage of pain meds my doctor had prescribed. According to my doctor, Kelly had used a tremendous amount of force with her blow, to have stabbed me deep enough to puncture my uterus. It almost felt like a phantom version of that knife was still penetrating me. Yes, it hurt that bad.

"You okay?" Dad asked as he buckled in. Mom was sitting in the backseat.

I nodded. "I'm okay."

With a bob of his head, Dad took off. The ride was mostly quiet. Some old school music played softly, which soothed the awkward void. It was a relief when we'd made it home. I wanted nothing more than to curl up in my bed after being cooped up in that hospital room for two whole days with my parents breathing all over me. Don't get me wrong, I loved that they were there for me and that they cared, but it became overwhelming having them make every single decision for me, like I didn't have a mind of my own.

When Dad pulled into the driveway of our house, he parked and killed the engine of the car, then rushed around to the passenger door to help me out. "Want me to carry you up?" I looked into his eyes and realized he was dead serious.

"Uh, no, Dad. It's okay. Just help me walk up?"

"Yeah." He held onto my midsection, making sure to avoid my wound, and took slow steps with me until we made it to the door. Mom was already inside, waiting at the threshold. She gave me a sympathetic smile, and I forced one back before turning and heading up the stairs with Dad still at my side.

"Probably feels good to be out of that hospital, huh?" he asked as we entered my bedroom.

"Yeah. I was getting sick of the Jell-O."

He chuckled and helped me sit on the edge my bed. "You hungry? Thirsty?"

"I'm good right now, but thanks."

"Okay." He took a step back, shifting on his feet. "Oh, before I forget." Reaching into his back pocket, he pulled out a cellphone with a white and pink case, then handed it to me. I smiled at him. "They looked, but said they didn't find much of anything. They were going to return it tomorrow, but I went up to the station and grabbed it today. Phone's all yours again."

"Thanks, Dad."

He turned for the door. "If you need anything, text me or your mom. We don't want you walking up and down the stairs until you're feeling better."

"I will."

He lingered, like he always did when he had more to say. Finally, he manned up to his feelings and faced me, then marched my way. He collected me into his arms, holding onto the back of my head while kissing the top of it. It was sudden, but it was comforting, and I clung to his arms.

“I was scared as hell, Kandy,” he confessed. “I know it may seem like I was more angry than anything, but I wasn’t. I was *terrified*. I saw all that blood and thought I was going to lose you.”

The rims of my eyes burned. “I’m here, Dad. It’s okay.”

“I know.” He kissed the top of my head again. “You’re here now, where you belong. Anything you need, I’ll get it for you.” He pulled back, but held my face in his hands, his eyes red-rimmed and damp. “Get some rest, okay?”

“Kay.”

Finally pulling away, he walked to the door, but this time didn’t stop or linger. He walked right out, cracking the door behind him. I took a look around my room—the Justin Timberlake poster on the wall to my left, and the collage board on the wall behind me, covered with photos of me and Frankie, my parents, and even a few of my parents, me, and Cane when we used to have dinner. I focused on each picture of Cane, and in each one he had that subtle smile and spark in his eyes, like he was content with where he was. I was certain he didn’t feel that way anymore.

I heard murmuring outside my door and turned to hear better.

“Think she’ll be okay?” Mom whispered.

“She’ll be fine,” Dad assured her. “Just give her some space and time.”

“What if Cane wants to see her again?” Her voice was full of concern.

“He’s not setting foot in my house,” Dad grumbled, then the whispering drifted as they went downstairs.

I laid down on my side, staring ahead at the window across from me as a tear slid over the bridge of my nose. I didn’t deserve this place. My parents were out there, willing to do literally *anything* for me, and I’d chosen Cane over them, not even realizing what all he was capable of or all he had in store.

Dumb and naive, that’s what I was. I’d jumped the gun and now I was suffering the consequences of my actions. I brought a pillow in front of me and pressed my face into it, stifling my sobs. I wanted to wail, but also didn’t want my parents to hear me.

What was my life now? What was my purpose? I no longer had school, I didn’t have a job, and the man I loved seemed like a complete stranger, with a life that was built on lies.

I wish I could say that time would ease my pain, but it didn’t. Each day was worse than before. I had dreams about Cane. Nightmares about the

stabbing. I even had a dream that transitioned into a nightmare, only this time, Cane was the one holding the knife. I woke up screaming for help every night, and Mom would rush into the room to hold me until I fell asleep again. I felt awful, not only for what I was going through, but for what my parents had to go through because of my irrational, hasty decisions. If I hadn't walked out on them that night, this never would have happened.

Eventually, I became numb to it all—the nightmares, the *guilt*. The medicine I took would knock me out cold, so I took more and more of it. It also made me lose my appetite, so the dinner Mom would bring to my room, on my favorite blue tray, would remain untouched. She noticed, I'm sure. I saw the way she looked at me when she came in each morning to take the old food out.

Per doctor's orders, Dad helped me walk back and forth through the hallway to restore my strength. After a few days, he'd help me walk up and down the stairs, just so my body could get used to the activity again. Eventually, walking up and down the stairs wasn't so bad, I just had to do it slowly. Mom wanted me to start coming down for dinner and I did, but I couldn't help staring at the empty seat at the end of the table—the seat that was only a few inches away, where he used to smile and laugh and tease me. My chest tightened, and I looked up, realizing Mom was staring right at me.

“You okay, honey?”

I nodded, pushing my lips together.

Her eyes dropped down to my plate. “You've barely touched your food, Kandy.”

I studied the broccoli, mashed potatoes, and baked chicken briefly before pulling my eyes up. “I'm not that hungry.”

“Kandy, you have to eat,” she urged.

“You really do,” Dad cut in, and my eyes swung over to him. He had his uniform on today. He'd taken the first two weeks off just to be home with me. “Your mother said she's been bringing food to your room, and you haven't eaten any of it.”

I shrugged. “I don't know what you want me to say. I'm not hungry. I guess it's the meds.”

“Well, should we take you back, have them prescribe you something else? You have to eat something, Kandy. What about that spaghetti you like

so much?” Mom asked.

Spaghetti...

Shit.

The thought of it made my eyes burn. I was going to cook spaghetti for Cane before Dad saw us in the parking lot of the grocery store...before I had to come back here. That was one of the best days we'd had—being together after everything had unraveled. Holding hands in public. Not giving a damn about reality and getting caught up in our own little world. Why couldn't things go back to the way they used to be?

“Kandy?” Dad called, but his voice was nothing more than muffled noise to me. The tears I'd been biting back trickled down my cheeks, hot and thick. Dropping my fork, I pushed back from the table and stood.

“Going to my room,” I announced, and took off as they both called after me, desperate and confused.

I took the stairs as quickly as my body would allow and rushed into my room, closing the door and locking it behind me. I grabbed my phone and then curled up on the bed.

I knew it wouldn't have been wise to text Cane after what I'd told him at the hospital. The thought of it made my heart ache, but there was one other person I could contact to see how he was doing.

Lora.

CHAPTER SIX

KANDY

THE PHONE ONLY RANG THREE TIMES BEFORE SHE ANSWERED.

“Kandy?” She sounded like she was out of breath.

I sat up completely. “Oh my God, Lora?” I was so relieved to hear her voice. “I’m surprised you answered.”

“Surprised? Why? I’m glad to hear from you! What’s going on?”

“Um...other than recovering from a near-homicidal experience?” I forced a laugh.

“Yeah, Cane told me about what that crazy bitch did to you. I’m so sorry that happened to you, Kandy.”

I shut my eyes, but the tears fell anyway. I swiped them away with the back of my arm before reopening my eyes and sucking in a deep breath. “Have you, uh...have you talked to Cane much?”

“I have here and there. He’s mostly been at work. Hardly showing up at home and hasn’t really been calling. I think he’s trying to avoid being in the house because of the press. They’ve been camped out behind the gates, trying to take pictures and figure out who the stabbed girl was.”

“Oh. Yeah, my parents don’t want people knowing.”

“Understandable.” There was a brief silence. “He’s...not doing well, Kandy.”

I sat up a little higher. “What do you mean?”

“I mean...well, for example,” she sighed. “I went to his office to bring him lunch. He sucks at taking care of himself when he’s stressed. Anyway, I brought him lunch and noticed a lot of his suits and pants folded in the corner. There were food containers everywhere. It’s like he’s been sleeping there every night. I know he’s trying to avoid the press, but I think he’s afraid to go back to that house, period.”

“Because of Kelly?”

“What? No! God, no. Because of the memories, I guess. He told me that moment replays in his head over and over again—like he’s being forced to watch it happen, just so he can know how much he fucked up by not stopping Kelly in time. He feels guilty, like it’s his fault.”

I swallowed hard, lowering my gaze. “It wasn’t his fault. Both of us knew the risks involved. We knew Kelly wasn’t all there. She moved too fast for either of us to realize.”

“They caught her; did you know?”

I was shocked to hear that. “They did?”

“Yeah. Your parents should know. Have they not told you?”

“No...they actually haven’t updated me about any of it since we left the hospital. They’re being very overbearing, treating me like a baby again.”

“Understandable,” she stated bluntly. “Their only daughter was stabbed by some madwoman who is clearly dick-whipped. I would be the same way.”

I sighed. “Did Cane tell you anything...about me?”

“What exactly?”

My bottom lip trembled. “He came to the hospital...I told him I needed time. Space.”

“Ohh.” She said it like she’d come to the realization of something. “That’s why he’s being like this. He’s avoiding the issue. Same shit he always does when he feels like he’s lost control.”

“I didn’t mean for him to feel this way. I’m just...I’m *scared*, Lora.” My voice cracked. “He said he knew that—that guy that was on the news. Said he was coming, and that it wasn’t safe, and then that shit with Kelly happened and I just—I kept thinking about it, and it freaked me out more and more—”

“Wait...what guy are you talking about?” she demanded.

“I think his name was Jefe or something like that. Some guy that the cops are looking for.”

“Shit! He should *not* have told you about him. What the hell was he thinking?”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s fucking insane. And if he finds out that you know who he is and that he’s coming, that’s not going to be good, Kandy. That guy is—he’s a monster. Okay? He’s ruthless. If anyone stands in his way he has no problem making that person disappear. Do you get what I’m telling you?”

“I, uh...I think so.”

“Listen, maybe it’s a good thing you told Cane that you needed space. It gives a solid reason for you not to be associated with Cane, and Cane can be stubborn sometimes, especially about the things he wants. You don’t need to be around when that guy shows up. Okay? You need to stay far away.”

“Okay. I will.” I swallowed hard. “Lora?”

“Yeah?”

“Cane isn’t a good person, is he?”

She was quiet for a really long time. So long that I thought she’d hung up. “Cane has a good heart—loves harder than a lot of people—but he has never been a *good person* in the way you mean, and I’m sorry you had to find out the hard way.”

My heart dropped to my stomach. That wasn’t the answer I wanted to hear, not by a long shot.

"In the beginning, I told him it wasn’t wise to get close to your dad," she went on. "He was a cop, and we didn’t know much about him other than the fact that he was good at his job and had saved our Mom’s life, but of course he didn’t listen. Cane thought he was changing—becoming this great person who had been forgiven of all of his sins, just because he’d made a best friend." She sighed. "He hides it well, Kandy, but Cane has done some fucked-up things that I’m sure he isn’t proud of, just to be where he is now. He wants to be the good guy so, so much...but we weren’t born to be good people, and my biggest fear is that he has forgotten that."

God. Of course. Of course that was her response.

I wanted there to be hope—a reason for me to hold on—but hearing it from his own sister was proof enough that I needed to stay away.

“I guess it’s a good thing he’s leaving.”

My brows dipped. “Wait, what? Leaving? To go where?”

“He bought new headquarters in Charlotte several weeks ago. He wasn’t going to move his office until the summer, but with all this stuff going on, I guess he’s ready to go sooner. He said he’d mentioned it to you.”

“Yeah, but he never said when.” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“He hasn’t bought a house or anything yet. He’s only moving his office right now, getting settled in to work there. He’ll most likely commute back and forth for a while. I’m sure he will get in touch with you if he has any other plans, Kandy. He’s probably just trying to find the right words...the right time.”

I tried swallowing, but my throat was so dry, the lump was hard to get down. It wasn’t that I hadn’t heard from him. I had. He’d called several times, but I never answered. It killed me to do it, but I ignored his voicemails and deleted them as soon as the notification popped up that I had one from him. I couldn’t handle hearing his voice because I knew he would say something to make me fold.

“Look, I have to go,” she said, rushed. “Mom has a meeting in thirty, and I just finished a workout and need to shower. Let me know if you want me to bring you a meal, some ice cream—anything. I’m here for the time being, okay?”

“Yeah.” I sniffled. “I will. Bye, Lora.”

“Later, Kandy.”

I hung up and stared down at my phone for several minutes, then went to my call log, finding Cane’s name. The urge to call was so intense—I felt the anticipation in my heart and at my fingertips—but a knock on the door startled me, and I shut the screen off.

“Yeah?” I called, and Mom twisted the knob and walked inside. She shut the door behind her and walked over to me.

“Kandy,” she murmured, sitting next to me. “I’m worried about you, sweetie. You haven’t talked much about what happened. It’s like you’ve been bottling it all in. I see your wound is getting better, and it’s easier for you to walk around the house, but your eyes. *God*, your eyes.” Her expression was pained as she grabbed my hand and looked me all over. “You’ve lost weight. You have those horrible night terrors, which are understandable, but I can tell you aren’t getting good rest.” She brought her free hand up, running the pad of her thumb on the skin beneath my eye. “Your light is gone, and I don’t know what to do anymore.” Her voice

thickened, and then she dropped her head and started sobbing, but I gently brushed her hand away, pressing my ear to her chest.

“I just need time, Mom. That’s all.”

“You’ve had quite some time, baby. It’s been three weeks. We should talk more about what happened.”

I didn’t say anything, but my eyes did widen. I guess I didn’t realize it’d been so long since it happened. It still felt like yesterday.

“What about...what about the baby?” she whispered, and I frowned then, picking my head back up and looking her straight in the eye.

“What about it?”

“You aren’t mourning it?”

I scoffed. “Wh—I mean, what do you expect from me, Mom? I was stabbed, and I found out from my parents that I was pregnant. Of course I hate that it happened, but with Cane leaving, maybe losing the baby was for the best. I was only six weeks along anyway. It’s not like I had any sort of connection to it.”

She glared hard at me, her eyes so wide I thought they’d pop right out of her head. “I understand you are hurting, but if you *ever* say anything like that again, I will slap you straight.”

I leaned back, looking her over. “I—I didn’t mean it that way—not cruelly. I just meant that—I mean it’s not—”

“Did you know that I miscarried *twice* before having you?”

I swallowed thickly, frowning. “N—no.”

“Well, I did and the first time was brutal. I didn’t realize what was happening to me because I didn’t even know I was pregnant. I was young and dumb and in college.” She continued staring. “But the second time, I’d graduated and moved to Atlanta with your father, who’d gotten a job at the station early on because he was good friends with the Sheriff.” She sucked in a sharp breath. “We were living in a one-bedroom apartment with a little money saved up, we were married, and wanted to start trying. I remember taking a test and finding out that I was pregnant, and your father and I were so, so happy. But then a few weeks passed and I woke up in a puddle of my own blood.”

“Oh my God, Mom. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you—”

She held a hand up, stopping me mid-sentence. “Your dad was home and he rushed me to the hospital, but it was too late. I didn’t want to try anymore after that, so I focused on my career instead. Little did I know that

by asking several members of our family about it, miscarriages seem to run deep in the women in our family. Your Nana miscarried four times before having me. That's why I am an only child. I miscarried twice. I prayed that it wouldn't pass down to you—that your father's genes would be a lot stronger—but with that stabbing, who knows what will happen. That's why I think you need to go and get another check-up—see if they can run tests. I know having a baby is the last thing on your mind right now, but it'll make me feel better if I know you can at least *try* in the future without suffering like I did.”

I nodded, lowering my line of sight.

She tipped my chin back up, making our eyes connect again. “When I was pregnant with you, I bled. I bled a lot, actually. But I was smarter. Instead of breaking down like before, I threw on some pads and rushed myself to the hospital. They checked me in, and thank God I did that because if I hadn't driven there myself, I would have lost you. *You, Kandy.*” A tear escaped her but she forced a smile. “I love you so, so much, baby. I love you more than anything on this earth, and I only want what's best for you. Okay?”

My eyes prickled with heat. “Okay,” I whispered.

“I know you want to see him,” she murmured.

I looked into her eyes. “I do...but I know I shouldn't.”

Her lips pressed a moment. “I overheard you on the phone,” she confessed, looking apologetic. “Your father would hate that I'm saying this, but if he's leaving or whatever he's doing, that means he won't be here as much. I think you should at least talk to him one last time, settle the tension. But you can only do so if you agree to let me have you checked thoroughly by a professional. I know this great doctor who works uptown. He's very thorough and honest.”

I nodded rapidly. “Yeah, Mom. Okay. I'll do it.”

“Good.” She leaned in to kiss my forehead. “Now get some rest.” Standing up, she turned and made her way to the door. Before she could leave, I called after her. “Yeah, sweetie?”

“Why didn't you tell me Kelly had been caught?”

My question clearly took her off guard. She thought on it for a beat, and then answered, “Because it wasn't the right time, and the last thing I want is to talk about the *bitch* haunting my daughter's nightmares.”

I blinked my tears away, nodding. When she was gone, I laid down and cried myself to sleep.

Tomorrow would be a new day, and I refused to let the tears keep taking over me. I had to get over what had happened—I had to be stronger. Kelly was caught now, which meant she couldn't come looking for me, trying to threaten me again. I needed to get better, not only for myself, but for my parents too.

CHAPTER SEVEN

KANDY

THE DOCTOR MOM TOOK ME TO SEE WAS DR. BHANDARI. HE WAS SHORT and quite thin, with a great head of black hair and pearly white teeth— I'm certain those teeth were veneers. With his sable skin, bright brown eyes, and strong accent, I safely assumed he was Indian.

I'd peed in a cup, had blood drawn, and was even offered a complimentary lollipop all in the span of forty-five minutes. I rolled the stick of the lollipop between my fingers, the wrapper still intact, and couldn't help thinking how the old Kandy would have been eager to eat it.

“Okay, Kandy. Would you be so kind as to get on the table for me?” Dr. Bhandari stood from his chair, gesturing to the exam bed in front of him. “I'm going to perform an ultrasound, see how everything's looking for you.”

I placed the lollipop on the counter beside me and then glanced at Mom, who was sitting in the chair on the opposite side of me. I climbed onto the bed and laid flat on my back, staring up at the ceiling. There was a design on the ceiling, made of starfish and koi fish. It was soothing.

Dr. Bhandari's assistant came into the office, moving things around and starting up the ultrasound machine while he shrugged out of his jacket, washed his hands, and then put on a pair of latex gloves.

“Okay. Are you comfortable?” he asked, hovering over me. I nodded. “Good. Okay, so just do me a favor and lift your shirt and lower your pants

just a little so that I can apply the gel to your pelvis.”

I did as told, and his assistant came up right away to tuck what looked like a napkin in my pants. “This is so your pants don’t get any gel on them,” she said.

I smiled at her before she stepped away.

“Okay, machine is up and running, and here we go with the gel.” Dr. Bhandari smiled warmly at me as he grabbed a clear container with blue gel inside it. He poured some onto my belly and then brought the ultrasound wand down, running it over my pelvis. He ran over my wound several times, but luckily my stitches had dissolved. It was mostly tender to the touch now, but he was careful.

Dr. Bhandari’s eyes squinted, even behind his glasses, as he moved the wand with his right hand and used his left to capture pictures on the computer. His chitter-chatter had come to a stop at this point, and that alone made me nervous.

“Everything looking okay?” Mom asked anxiously, sitting forward in her chair.

“Uh...hmm...” Bhandari lowered the wand. “Kandy, I’m going to press on the wound just a little bit to get a better shot, okay?”

I nodded. “Kay.”

He pressed down and a sharp pain shot through the area, but I closed my eyes and breathed as evenly as possible. He took several pictures on the computer, and when he finally let up, I released a steady breath.

“Okay. All done.” He placed the wand down, and the nurse stepped up, wiping the gel off my stomach with a warm rag. When it was all gone, she took the napkin-looking thing that was tucked in my pants and tossed it, then smiled warily at me before leaving the room.

Dr. Bhandari sat down in front of the computer, going through the images. I looked at Mom, but her eyes were cloudy, full of worry. I was worried too, especially when he took off his glasses and swiped a hand over his forehead. “I, uh...Kandy. The doctors told you that the stabbing punctured your uterus, correct?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“Well, I don’t think they realize how deep that knife actually went.” He used the mouse of the computer to draw a circle around something on the screen. “See that dark little area right there?”

I nodded.

“That is your uterus. The knife wound went so deep that it hit the lining of it, almost where the egg had originally implanted itself. From what I am seeing, you would have been fine to carry the baby, but with the stabbing, and how it punctured, there’s a chance that every pregnancy could lead to a miscarriage, or quite possibly that you may not get pregnant at all ever again.”

“Wh—what do you mean? Won’t the wound heal?” I asked, panicked.

“There is a possibility that with time, it will heal. We can always perform surgery, see if closing that wound from the inside will help, but that can lead to even higher risks and more unnecessary complications. I personally would not advise the surgery, but as your doctor I must tell you every option possible. The thing is, this isn’t like a C-section, where doctors cut in the correct place so the child can be delivered and so the mother can heal properly. This cut is jagged and in an awkward spot.”

Okay,” Mom breathed. I looked over and saw tears brimming at the rims of her eyes. “B-but her eggs and everything else is fine?”

“Yes, her eggs are okay. When we ran the tests, the count was standard. It’s just a matter of *carrying* a child that concerns me.” Dr. Bhandari looked at me. “What I am trying to say, Kandy, is that your uterus is not as strong as it once was. It could take years for that wound to heal, and even if it does, the lining has been damaged. It will be hard for a fertilized eggs to stay attached, which could result in either never getting pregnant, or getting pregnant, but the egg not being able to securely attach to the uterine wall, which in turn results in miscarrying.”

The information was hitting me hard, but all of my words had been lost. Mom stood and came to my side to rub my shoulder, still listening to him go on.

“I never like to say never. There are always possibilities, and there is always hope,” he went on.

“So... what would you suggest she does?”

“I would suggest resting the uterus. I don’t recommend birth control or even sexual activity at this point, as your uterus is still healing, but in two to three weeks, you should be okay to do those activities again. I’m just adding time here, just to make sure you heal properly because everything seems okay, and you’ve stopped bleeding. I can recommend some vitamins that are good for healing. Perhaps walking a bit more, stretching, staying active...” Dr. Bhandari was still talking, but his words became a buzz.

I remembered the stages of grief—how once I was angry, but now I wanted to bargain. I so badly wanted to climb off that bed, drop to my knees, and pray that the doctor was wrong. I instantly regretted dismissing the child that had become attached to me. I'd lost that baby, and would probably never get the chance to have another. I was so young. So, so young. There was no way I couldn't carry a child.

Ever since I was playing with baby dolls, I knew I wanted to have two kids—a boy and a girl. I wanted to have a nice, quaint, elegant wedding, and grow as a family in a two-story home. I wanted to paint my daughter's room a sherbet orange because pink was too cliché, and I'd paint my son's room green, because blue was just as basic...but now he was telling me that none of that would be able to happen. Sure, there was always adoption, but I never, ever thought it would have to come down to that for me.

Mom and Bhandari kept talking as my vision blurred, and even though the next stage had already hit me before, it hit me even harder in this moment. The next stage is *depression*. It's lethal and ugly and can attack anyone.

I don't know when they'd wrapped up on their conversation. I went with the motions. Mom walked with her arm hooked through mine to get to the car. She helped me get inside, too, and when I got in, I could only stare through the windshield. She was talking, telling me everything would be okay, and that I still had a young body with plenty of time to heal...but she didn't know that.

There was hope, yes, but I heard the percentage. There was an 85 percent chance that if I tried to have a kid, I would lose it. Not that having babies was high on my to-do list at the moment, but knowing that I likely would never have one changed everything. It meant the life I'd dreamed of wouldn't be mine. It would change my personality, my life. I was too young to want to try...but it was all I could think to do, just to see if I could. I now had to live my life in this paralyzing fear that if I ever got married one day and we wanted to start a family, that there was an 85 percent chance that I would not be able to. The other 15 percent felt meaningless.

To my surprise, I didn't cry when I got home. I took more pills to ease the minimal pain of my wound and they knocked me out cold. Mom said I'd slept a total of 14 hours that day, and that it was the calmest I'd slept since the incident. No screaming. No whimpering. I don't even think I dreamed.

The next two days, I tried remaining numb to the feeling, but all I kept wondering was—why? Why did all of this have to happen to me? Why was so much stacking up against me? I had reason to believe I was a good person. I was nice, had manners and respect, was raised by two loving parents, both of whom were also good people. Yes, I'd made mistakes, but what human hasn't? I was still young, still learning, and life wasn't being fair to me at all.

Curled up in my recliner, I stared out of my window, watching the wind yank fresh leaves off the tree in front of my house. It was gray outside, the sky so hazy I couldn't even figure out where the sun was. I heard Mom in the kitchen, pans and pots clattering and silverware scraping. She was most likely cleaning.

I didn't care.

I didn't care about a lot of things.

I didn't care that I hadn't showered in days. I didn't care that the world was still spinning, that I was lucky to be alive. I wasn't living.

I sat in that chair, slept in it—lived in it for three whole days. Food was brought up, of course, but I didn't budge and neither did Mom. She understood my grief, I suppose.

"I know it's hard," she whispered one day, caressing my hair, "but you are strong, baby. God didn't raise us to be weak."

Those words went in one ear and right back out the other, but the next set didn't.

"I called Frankie a few days ago," she murmured. "Told her everything that's happened. She's in town. Wants to see you."

I perked up then, turning my head and peering up at her. "Tell her she can come by."

Mom smiled and relief shimmered in her eyes. "Okay."

She took off instantly, as if she were afraid I'd change my mind at the last minute, but I wouldn't. I think what I needed was Frankie. Someone who I knew wouldn't judge me for anything I'd done. A friend who would see both sides of the story and tell me what to really do.

An hour later, there was a knock on my bedroom door.

My best friend walked into the room, and of course her smile was sympathetic. She shut the door behind her with one hand and in the other she had a plastic bag. "Hey, K.J.," she said softly, like I was some lost, fragile child.

“Hey, Frank.” I had finally made a move and got out of the recliner to sit on my bed with my back against the headboard. Frankie came toward me and dropped the bag on the bed. She looked me all over, but I pulled my eyes away before she could find them.

“I brought some of your favorites.” Her voice was hopeful, cheerful. She opened the plastic bag and dug out a bottle of Mountain Dew, our favorite brand of gummy worms, and even had my favorite cheese puff chips. I couldn’t help smiling as she dangled the gummy worms in my face. “I’ll let you have all the green ones.”

I huffed a laugh, grabbing the pack and tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “When’s the last time you washed that nest anyway?” she asked, and when I looked up, of course she was focused on my hair.

“I thought washing was only required if I left the house.” I bit into a gummy worm, shrugging.

“Actually, now that I think about it, that’s true.” She sighed, taking the worms from me and digging in for a handful. “You could have called me, you know? Sent a text—anything instead of ignoring me.”

“I’m sorry,” I murmured. “I’ve had my phone off for the past few weeks. Haven’t really wanted to talk to anyone.”

She nodded. “It’s okay. I understand. Your mom told me about Kelly.” Her eyes stretched wide as she chewed. “I still can’t believe that happened. And then to know that you might not be able to have kids because of it.” She slid closer to me.

I avoided her eyes.

“Tell me how you feel,” Frank insisted, and I finally looked up at her.

“It should be pretty clear how I feel. How would you feel?”

“Honestly? I’d feel like killing her.”

“Well, if prison wasn’t a consequence, I’d have done it already.”

“I know. Fuck.” She dropped the pack of gummies. “I read in the newspaper that they aren’t taking the case to trial. The story isn’t even on the news anymore. That’s how quiet they’re keeping it. Anyway, someone vouched for her mental health, so it will be a quiet case. For all we know, she’ll strike a good deal and only have to do community service or something.”

My eyes stretched. “*What?*”

Frankie looked uneasy. “I—I thought you knew, K.J. They made it a bench trial a few days ago. No jury, just a judge. Your parents haven’t told

you?”

“No, they haven’t told me!”

“I guess they didn’t want to upset you. But hey, she can’t bother you anymore, right? She would be stupid to come after you while her trail is so hot.”

“She should be in *prison* for what she did to me,” I growled through my teeth. “She won’t suffer with community service or a stupid slap on the wrist. That’s bullshit, if she pleads mentally unstable.”

“I know, but she’s rich and pretty, and from what your mom told me, her family has a lot of power. There’s never really any justice these days for people like them.” She lowered her gaze. “I didn’t tell you to upset you.” She paused, drawing imaginary circles on my comforter with the pad of her finger. “Have you talked to him? Cane?”

I looked her over, then shook my head. “Not since the hospital.”

“Are you upset with him about what happened?”

I thought on it for a moment. “I don’t think it ever would have happened if he’d let her go the right way. He never broke up with her. Not only that, but there’s a lot I’ve learned about him since the stabbing. Cane isn’t who we think he is.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I just mean that...he’s not safe to be around. Even Lora said he isn’t a good person, that it’s probably best if I stay away.”

Frankie inhaled deeply before exhaling. She then kicked off her shoes and climbed up to where I was to sit beside me. “But what does that have to do with *loving* him?” she whispered, and my eyes shifted over to hers rapidly. “When you love someone, none of their flaws are supposed to matter. When you love them, you work through it, even if some of their flaws fucking suck. And as for the secrets, you just have to figure out if they’re worth making your own too.” She put on a faint smile, lowering her gaze. We were quiet a beat. I could hear the TV playing downstairs. Mom was watching *The View*.

“I still love him, and I miss the hell out of him, but even if I saw him, it wouldn’t feel the same.”

She sighed, nodding subtly. “Well, I did tell you to be careful, K.”

“I know.” I put all my attention on her. “Are you ever going to tell me what’s going on with you?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” Her eyes got bigger.

“I mean...you’ve changed, Frankie. I’ve noticed since the last time I saw you. Your hair is...*plain*. Probably the plainest it’s been since we were kids,” I laughed, pinching a strand of her dark hair between my fingers. “And your eyes, Frank. They’re...hollow. Empty. Like something bad or crazy happened.”

She pressed her lips, avoiding my eyes.

“My mom says I lost some of my light since the incident, but if I have, at least you know why now,” I went on. “I’m your best friend, so I deserve to know what happened to your light, and why it became so dim.”

She finally looked up at me, but her eyes were filled to the brim with tears. She bit them back though, blinking rapidly and sitting up higher, drawing her knees to her chest.

“I told you it was because Mom—Aria—is starting to lose money. I mean, that was the main reason, and working all these hours is killing me.” She sighed, and it took me a second process who Aria was. She hadn’t used the name in years. Frankie had grown up calling her adopted mother, Mom, when her real name was Aria. Aria tried getting Frankie to stick with calling her by her real name, but she never did. After all, she was only four years old when she lost her real mother, who just so happened to be Aria’s best friend.

Aria took Frankie in when the accident with her mother happened, raised her, and it changed things for Frankie. In my opinion, I think Frankie lived in denial her entire life and never accepted that her real mom was gone, so she insisted on calling Aria that as a replacement. It was her comfort and to be completely honest, I didn’t blame her for it.

“She was getting so much money, but was wasting it all,” Frank went on. “I thought we were fine until she called me one day, asking to borrow a hundred bucks for the power bill. And it got worse from there. I finally called her on it, asking what was going on. She said the companies that had sponsored her before were looking for younger people—*millennials*. She was losing money and fans quickly. She’d even gotten a part-time job as a secretary for a travel agency, but what she made there wasn’t enough to cover all the bills.”

“Wow. I’m so sorry, Frank.”

“Meh, that’s just a part of it. The bigger issue is that she has cancer, and is no longer working at said job.”

“What?” I gasped. “Oh my gosh.”

“Yep. Pancreatic. Stage 2. She’s getting treatments, but lately she hasn’t been looking so good. She’s thinning out, losing hair. All she has is Clay and me.” When she said her last sentence, her face scrunched up, and her eyes filled with a familiar guilt.

“What is it?” I murmured.

She looked at me through the corner of her eye, then dropped her legs, raking her fingers through her hair. “Clay is thinking about dropping out of college and moving back in to take care of her. Can you believe that? He’s actually thinking about leaving a full scholarship behind and it pisses me off! He’s telling me all these crazy things, like how I need to stay in school because one of us has to make it.” Her eyes fell, her dark eyelashes touching her cheekbones. She was quiet for several seconds, running her fingers over her bangles. “Kandy, there’s something about Clay that I never told you....”

“Something like what?”

“Like...how we kissed before...”

Holy shit.

Holy. Shit!

I held my hands up, like I was pausing the entire conversation. “Wait—with Clay? Your *brother* Clay?”

“He’s only my brother by law, not blood,” she stated, like she’d practiced the statement a million times. “I’ve never felt a brotherly bond with him. Ever, and how could I? Technically, before I even moved in with Aria, we were friends before becoming family. At first I hated him, and then I warmed up to him, and then I hated him again for making me look so fucking stupid.” She rubbed the tip of her nose.

“But how did that happen? The kiss?”

“Ugh. I don’t know. It’s a lot. There have always been little signs here and there, but we never acted on them until we got older. Not only that, but the last thing I want to do is hurt Aria. The first time something happened was when I was seventeen. Clay was home for spring break and came into my room saying he wanted to watch a movie on Netflix, and since I was the one who had the account, he needed the password. Well I refused to give it to him, so he did that stupid thing he always did and tried to play-wrestle with me. It was all fun and games as kids when we used to get into fights, but we were older by then. *Hormonal.*” She shrugged. “Anyway, he picked me up and dropped me on the bed and then he was on top of me. He was

between my legs, and he had my wrists pinned to the bed. Like I said, we wrestled all the time, but the way he looked at me, and how close his mouth was to mine, it was just...*different*. He climbed off all quickly and then I gave him the password for my account, just to get him to leave.”

“Wow,” I breathed. I don’t even know why I was so surprised. Frankie and Clay argued and fought often, and now that I thought about it, there was always something there that made them not seem so brotherly-sisterly. I mean, I grew up with Frank and always knew him as her brother by adoption, so I only saw Clay as her brother. I never had a sibling, so I suppose I couldn’t place it, but their bond was very unique. There was always more, and he was always *very* protective of her. Overly protective. “Were there other times?” I asked.

“Yeah. The other times were more intense,” she went on. “There was one night when Clay had a spur-of-the-moment party at the house and had invited the whole football team and some dumb cheerleaders over. I think you had practice that night, so I didn’t bother you. Anyway, I’d been drinking during the party and had to go up to my room to change. Well, Clay came stumbling in my room with Irene.”

“Ew, Irene?”

“Yes, Irene Hall. The girl who sucks every guy’s dick. I don’t even know why she was there. Anyway, he came into my room, knowing damn well I was in there. I was changing clothes because some douche had spilled his drink all over my shirt and pants. I asked Clay what the hell he was doing in my room, and he had the nerve to tell me to get out of my own room so he could do shit with her.”

“Oh my God, he didn’t!”

“Yes, he did! I flipped the fuck out! I told Irene to get lost, and I guess he was pissed that he’d lost his free pass on getting head, so he slammed the door closed and got in my face. He told me I was always cock-blocking him and he was sick of it.” She rolled her eyes. “I told him that he does the same damn thing whenever I have a guy around—even at school. We got into this heated debate and I shoved him away, but he came closer, and before I knew it, his mouth was on mine. He started...*kissing* me. And the kisses were fucking torture and bliss, K.J. I’d never felt anything like it. It was so fucking wrong but so damn hot. And God,” she groaned, throwing her hands in the air, “I hate that I’m even saying all of this because it’s so freakin’ horrible! I mean, I could taste the alcohol on his breath. I can still

remember the taste. *Modelo Negro*. He always drank that beer. The next thing I know, he was picking me up and pushing me against the wall. He started kissing my neck. He was hard and grinding on me. He kept saying how frustrating I was, and I kept telling him how irritating he was. We were still arguing while kissing and humping like dummies, and it was so fucked up. So, so fucked up. I mean, we grew up together, K.J. He should feel like a brother to me, but I wanted him to fuck me so badly. He almost did, but we got interrupted.” She whipped her head over to look at me, as if she forgot I was sitting there. “Is that bad?” she whispered.

I couldn’t do much but look at her. “I, uh...I don’t know. Do you think it’s bad?”

“Yes, it’s bad, K! Clay is—he’s supposed to be like family! I’m not supposed to want him! And imagine how Aria would feel!”

“But...technically speaking, he’s not. Society makes you think it’s wrong because you’ve known him your whole life and because you got adopted into his family. I do understand how this could ruin things, though. Especially for Aria...but Clay is really, really hot...”

“I know.” She groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I feel so stupid. Clay and I have known each other since we were babies...and before I realized I was going to be his adopted sister, I had a stupid crush on him. All these years, I’ve tried to get rid of that feeling and face reality, but it doesn’t help that I actually *know* he’s not family, you know? I mean Aria always tells us, we’re family, to take care of one another, so she obviously wants us to stick to that family bond.”

“Well, shit, Frankie! Why didn’t you tell me this when it first happened? I’m your best friend!”

“This isn’t like your situation with Cane, okay? Clay is supposed to be my *brother*. Everyone knows him as my brother, even you. I didn’t want you judging me or thinking I was some slut or—”

“You are *not* a slut,” I stated. *God, I hated that word now.* “You are my friend, and I love you. You didn’t have to keep that bottled up for so long.”

“He also didn’t want me to say anything to anyone. Not even you.”

“And you, Frankie Martin, listened?” I quirked a brow, smirking.

“Yes, because he was right!” she laughed. “No one can know, okay? I wasn’t even supposed to tell you, so if you come around and he’s there, pretend things are still the same. Pretend he’s just Clay, my annoying older brother.”

I nodded. "Got it."

She exhaled hard. "Feels good to have that off my chest now."

"I bet," I giggled. "I'm glad you told me, Frank." I picked the gummy worms up again, this time with a smile. "And you know what? I needed this. You."

"I know. That's why I'm here." She rested her head on my shoulder. "You're a strong girl. One of the strongest, sincerest bitches I know, and if you really love Cane, don't let your fears stop you. Trust me, your mind will feed on that fear, and it will be your biggest setback. Don't let that fear control you."

"It's hard not to be afraid, Frank. I mean, Cane is different. There's so much that sets us apart."

"Well, how about you find the reasons that make you stick together?"

"How am I supposed to do that?"

She sighed, picking up her head. "You know, there's this thing I learned in my psychology class. There was a girl who had gotten into a bad argument with her boyfriend, and she started randomly crying in class. My professor took it as a learning opportunity. On the board, he made two topics. On one side was 'Bad Things.' On the other side was 'Good Things.' He told the poor girl to come up and write down all the good things and the bad things, and then told her that if the bad outweighs the good, leave it alone. If the good outweighs the bad, see what you can do to heal the situation. So...I'm telling you now to make a list."

I let her words sink in, and after I told her I would, she changed the subject to work and college. After she heard from Mom, she came here just to see me, and I couldn't thank her enough for skipping classes and possibly missing more important life lessons from her psychology professor, all for me. She truly was my best friend in the world.

Around 11:00 p.m., Frankie gave me a big squeeze goodbye, and when she was gone, I sat on the bed, staring at my phone. I looked toward my laptop, the one Cane had given me, and then at the notebook that was sitting there. I had two options that night. I could forget about making that list and forget about Cane altogether, or I could make the list, and try to find some light in our darkness.

I chose the latter.

I hopped off the bed and sat in my computer chair. I created the "Bad Things" side and the "Good Things." It was easy for me to write the bad. I

had so much negativity swirling inside me—so much hate for what had happened—but realized none of it was directed at him. All of my hate was for Kelly, but Kelly had never determined our relationship. Why would I let what she'd done to me determine our status now?

I wrote until my hand began to cramp and my eyes got tired. I checked the clock, and it was 3:00 a.m. I read over my list several times, and for the first time in a while, my heart blossomed.

BAD THINGS:

- Can be a sarcastic asshole
- Too much baggage
- Crazy ex who wants to kill me
- Too many family secrets
- Gets jealous way too easily
- Work-a-holic
- Works for a cartel leader
- Hasn't always been a good person

GOOD THINGS:

- Makes me smile
- Good at giving gifts
- Great sex
- Big heart
- Treats me like I am special
- Makes me so, so happy
- Doesn't want kids (good now that I can't have any)
- Always ready to fight for me
- Tattoos
- His hugs are amazing
- He loves me

I SAT BACK IN MY CHAIR, READING OVER THE GOOD AND BAD, SURPRISED that the good outweighed it. Before, the bad was so strong—so intense that

it was all I could focus on. I had overlooked all of the good. Why? Because I was afraid of what would come next. I was so focused on the bad that the good came close to meaning nothing...but there it was, right in front of me. His goodness shined bright, and I'm sure I'd missed a lot more, but it was there. Right in my face, the letters seared in my brain.

Maybe there was something left to fight for...but even so, a part of me was still too afraid to go after it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CANE

TWO WEEKS LATER

“ARE YOU REALLY LEAVING TODAY?” LORA STOOD BETWEEN THE FRAMES OF my bedroom door, watching me collect some paperwork from the desk.

I looked around, holding my hands out. “Doesn’t it look like it?” I gestured to the empty room. Everything was gone except my desk, which I had used last night to finish up some work. I’d hired movers several days ago to take my belongings to the new home I bought in Charlotte, North Carolina. The new home was slightly bigger than the one in Atlanta, and I don’t know what had possessed me to buy it. It just felt...right.

“You’re leaving so much behind, and really fast, Q.” She came into the room, folding her arms. “There’s too much up in the air. You don’t even know what’s going to happen to Kelly. They’ll probably call your lawyer, want you to testify.”

“They don’t need my testimony anymore. Apparently her lawyer has worked out some kind of plea deal. My lawyer is there to speak on my behalf, in case they need anything from me, which I highly doubt they will.”

“And Jefe?” she demanded, staring me down.

I looked down, stacking the papers. “He’ll know where to find me.”

“And Kandy?” Her voice was firmer this time.

I was about to staple the papers, but her name was more than enough to stop me. I stared down, avoiding my sister’s eyes. “I can’t do anything about her, Lora. She already told me she needed space at the hospital, and I haven’t heard from her in weeks. I’ve tried calling, but get her voicemail constantly, and she’s clearly been ignoring my texts. I don’t want to show up and make matters worse for her or her family.” I finally looked up. “If she wants to move on, who am I to stop her?”

“You’re Quinton fucking Cane, that’s who!” she yelled, dropping her arms. “When have you ever backed away from something you wanted?”

I scoffed and shook my head, stapling the papers together. My eyes roamed to the letter to the right. On it was Kandy’s name, written in my ledger. I’d written it last night, right here at this desk, while sipping on too much scotch. I couldn’t sleep worth a damn, and she was constantly on my mind. The rapid move was making me feel all sorts of things, but most importantly, knowing that I would no longer be a short ride away bothered me. I was going to be in a completely different city, but I couldn’t leave without letting her know how I felt first. After reading over it this morning, though, I felt like a fool for writing it. She didn’t want me...but I still wanted her. So fucking much.

I set the stapled packet down and picked up the letter with a sigh. I suppose at this point I didn’t have much else to lose.

Walking around the desk, I met up to Lora, focusing on Kandy’s name on the envelope in bold blue ink. “I need you to take this to her before you drive down. Let her know I’m leaving tonight.”

She frowned down at it. “You want me to take it today?”

I met her eyes. “If possible.”

She took it away from me. “What does it say?”

“Don’t worry about that. Just go by her house, ask for her, even if her parents are there. It’s better if she sees you.”

She frowned. “Why me? Why not just do it yourself?”

“You know damn well if they see my face they won’t open that door.”

She exhaled, and her pale hair shifted with the blow. It was no longer a deep, pastel blue. It’d turned into a faded color with more blonde showing than anything. “Fine. Any other requests?”

“Yeah, I need you to stick around for as long as you can tomorrow, and if Kandy calls you by ten the next morning, I want you to answer, then I

want you to pick her up and bring her to Charlotte with you.”

“What?” she gasped. “Why would I do that? What makes you think she’ll even want to go there?”

“If she calls, it means she does.” I scratched the top of my head. “I’m letting her know that I haven’t given up—that there are choices and that I’m here. If she calls you, it means there’s still a fighting chance for us.”

“Ahh.” She grinned, pressing the letter to her heart. “A second-chance love letter. Actually, it’s more like a third-chance thing. Okay, fine, whatever! I’ll take it over, but if I do, you have to let me choose the apartment I want later. I’m tired of you getting to decide where I get to stay.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine.”

She cheered. “Good. Text me her address!” She turned on her heels and trotted toward the door. Before she left, she said, “And for the record, I think she’ll want to come.”

I watched her leave then huffed a laugh.

For once in my fucking life, I hoped my sister was right.

CHAPTER NINE

KANDY

THE LAST THING I EXPECTED WAS THE KNOCK ON THE FRONT DOOR TO BE someone coming for me. It was shortly after my check up with Dr. Bhandari, who'd confirmed that my wound had healed nicely. He told me to allow three more weeks for my body to adjust before performing any sexual activity or taking birth control...but I was sure sex wasn't going to be a problem anytime soon.

When I walked downstairs and saw the pale blonde hair and circular sunglasses with yellow lenses covering her eyes, I couldn't contain my smile.

Lora stood on the other side of the door, and when she spotted me, she took off the sunglasses and rushed into the house, reeling me in for a hug.

"Hey, little munchkin," she cooed while Mom closed the door.

I hugged her back, holding on tight. "Lora! What are you doing here?"

"I came to drop something off." She looked over at Mom, who was looking between us with a mask of confusion, still trying to figure out who she was.

"Oh—Mom, this is Lora, Cane's sister."

"Oh! Wow." Mom put on a smile, extending her arm. Lora accepted it and shook her hand. "It's nice to finally see the face of the mysterious Lora."

Lora laughed. “What? Does my brother talk about me to you guys like some sad loser?”

Mom laughed with her. “He’s mentioned you quite a few times. Would you like something to drink or anything?”

“Oh, no, thank you.” Lora waved her hands as kindly and dismissively as she could. “I’m only here for a few minutes, and then I have to finish packing.”

“Packing?” I asked, brows pulling together.

“Yeah. I’m leaving tomorrow.” She met my eyes. “Which is why I’m here.”

I looked back at Mom, who’d taken a few steps to the side. “It’ll only be a few minutes,” I told her.

“Yeah! Go ahead.”

I walked to the door, pulling it open and walking out. Lora trailed behind me, closing the door with her. She dug into the inside pocket of her jacket, pulling out an envelope and offering it to me. “Q told me to give this to you.”

I took it, spotting my name on it in his jagged script. “What does it say?”

“That, I don’t know, but he did tell me to let you know that he’s leaving tonight.”

My heart dropped to my stomach. “Him too? Why tonight?”

She shrugged. “I guess he’s ready for a fresh start? Most of his things have been moved already. The new house is really nice. You’d love it.” Her smile was faint. “Look, Kandy. I’m only here to deliver his message, but I’m sure his letter explains more.” She took a step closer to me, looking me all over. “I know it’s scary. It’s scary as fuck being around a Cane, honestly. Our minds can be corrupt as fuck sometimes, and we have so many flaws, but one thing I can say is that when our hearts have been taken, there is no getting them back, and you have his heart. You’ll have it for the rest of your life.”

My vision blurred, but I looked away, blinking quickly to fan the tears away. “And he wants me to make a decision by tomorrow?”

“Doesn’t have to be tomorrow...but I think a fresh start would be good for both of you.” She leaned in and pressed her forehead to mine, then she grabbed my hand, stuffing something into my palm. She wrapped my

fingers up around it. “If it feels like the right thing to do, do it. But if it feels wrong, stay. He’ll understand.”

She pulled back and stepped off the porch. I watched her walk to her car, waving once before jumping into it and riding off. When she was gone, I looked down at my hand. She’d stuffed a wad of cash into it. *What the hell?*

I looked at the white envelope in my other hand next. For some reason it felt heavier, like I could feel all the weight he’d been carrying in the single form of a letter.

Walking to the rocking chairs in the corner and sitting, I sucked in a sharp breath before ripping it open. My heart thundered in my chest, and my hands shook violently as I focused on the words.

KANDY,

I KNOW THIS ISN'T THE BEST WAY TO EXPRESS MYSELF. SHOWING UP WOULD have been so much easier, but I played each scenario over and over again in my head and knew there wouldn't have been a way for me to see you without your parents interfering, or your father tossing my ass on the street. (By the way, I caved and called your mom to check in on you. She told me about the nightmares, and I'm so fucking sorry. God, I wish I was there to hold you.)

Forgive me, because I've been drinking tonight, and my guilt is really fucking me up. I have to let you know that I'm leaving tomorrow. My whole house was packed up days ago, my cars are being driven down, and the new house is waiting for me. The kitchen will still have a TV in it, and there is a pool at this one too. I know how much you loved the pool. There is a room upstairs that is just for you. I want to fill it with notebooks, pens, and books, and even a desk because I know you love reading and writing.

Look, I may be a dumb, drunk man right now, but I'm not afraid to tell you that I want you there with me. As a matter of fact, I'm begging you to come.

I plan on making a new start, but it won't feel fresh without you. You've been on my mind constantly, Kandy. I haven't been able to sleep because all

I can remember is your blood on my hands, stained in my clothes, and even my bedroom floor. All I can think about is how bad I feel, and how you didn't deserve what she did to you. I should have been the one to get hurt that day, not you. You did nothing wrong, and all of this happened because Karma knew what made me vulnerable, and you are it.

I know you are hurting. I know you are scared. I know I've fucked up your trust way too many times, and God knows I don't deserve you, but if you come with me, things will be different. It's selfish of me to even bother asking, but if there is a sliver of trust inside of you for me, I want you to dwell on it, and I want you to really think about the option of coming.

Tomorrow, Lora will be leaving and meeting me in Charlotte. She's scheduled to leave at ten in the morning. If you feel in your heart that you can still be with me, then call her before that time and have her pick you up, or text her and ask for the address if you want to leave sooner. If you have already made up your mind and think it's best to move on, then I understand that, too, and I will let you move on. I won't push or budge. I'll let you live a normal life—one without all of my fucked-up flaws and past mistakes, and sins coming to bite me in the ass, but I'm begging you right now to please, please think about it.

Whatever you decide, just know that I love you so much, and I would have regretted not letting you know that I am still here for you.

You are my girl. My world. My sweet, sweet Kandy. You mean everything to me, and there is nothing that will ever be able to change that. If walking away is what makes you happiest though, I get it—and I will respect your decision. Just know that I will never love another woman as much as I love you.

If I see you again soon, I'll hug and kiss the hell out of you until you can't stand it anymore, but if I don't...maybe I'll see you again some other day.

YOU HAVE MY HEART,

CANE

I DROPPED THE LETTER IN MY LAP, SNIFFLING HARD. I SWIPED THE BACK OF my arm over my face, and then looked at the back of the second paper. Sure enough, Lora's address was written there. There was something else inside the envelope, too. It was another address, this one for Charlotte. I assumed this was his new one.

A car door shut and I looked up, spotting Dad in the driveway, climbing out of his work truck. I stuffed the letter back into the envelope and then folded it, tucking it into the pocket of my hoodie.

"Hey, baby girl!" Dad bellowed. "You're outside! That's a first." He came toward me, dropping a kiss on top of my head.

"Yeah." I forced a smile. "Needed some fresh air."

"Nothing wrong with that." He looked toward the door. "Where's your mom?"

"Inside. I think she's getting dinner ready."

"Good." He rubbed his belly. "Starving." He rubbed the top of my head, like he used to do when I was younger, then walked to the door. He smiled back at me once before going inside and shutting the door behind him. I stayed in the chair, watching cars drive through the neighborhood. After a while, I read over the letter again. And again. And another time. I read his letter a total of eight times, absorbing his words. His anguish. His guilt and regrets. The drunken script and how he stretched some of his r's and e's.

Before I knew it, dinner was ready, and I ate. I smiled at Dad's corny work stories, and even shared dessert with Mom, who was surprised by all of it. She looked at me suspiciously, but it wouldn't have been like her not to wonder what was going on. She knew when something was up with me, so when I went up to my room, and she came in several minutes later, I prepared myself for her questions.

"What did Lora stop by for?" she asked, sitting beside me.

I refused to lie to her. "She gave me a letter from Cane."

"Oh?" She blinked twice. "What did it say?"

"Just...stuff. How he misses me. Also that he's leaving tomorrow to move to Charlotte."

"Oh."

I looked down. She did the thing I did, running her thumbnail over her cuticle. "Are you thinking about going with him again?"

Sighing, I said, "I don't know, honestly. Even if I wanted to, I'm too afraid."

She laughed softly.

“What?” I asked, looking at her.

“Nothing—nothing. It’s just...well, that sounds familiar.”

“Familiar how?”

“Well, your father asked me to move here, to his hometown, right after I graduated. It was so sudden, and I had just finished law school, so of course I didn’t have a good job. Your Nana insisted that I shouldn’t do it, but of course I didn’t listen. Still, I was terrified. I mean, we were dead broke, and when we moved here, your dad had to work at this crappy restaurant at first, just to pay the bills. He was still in training to become a cop. We stayed in this horrible box-looking apartment on the other side of town. It was just awful.” She looked up, eyes shimmering. “But we were happy, and no one could tell us otherwise. We had each other, and to me that’s all that mattered. Not the piled up bills. Not what my mother was telling me. Just us, and eventually we proved everyone wrong.”

“That’s good.” I focused on my lap. “Cane mentioned in the letter that he called you.”

“He did. I updated him about your recovery, told him you’d been waking up in the middle of the night because of nightmares.”

“Did you tell him about what the doctor said?”

“No,” she responded quickly.

“Good.” I swallowed thickly. “I’d rather tell him myself...when I’m ready.”

She pressed her lips together and bobbed her head. She then leaned in to kiss my temple before wrapping an arm around me and holding me. “Think wisely, Kandy. I don’t want what happened last time to happen to you again.”

“I know,” I murmured, and honestly, it really wasn’t Mom I was worried about. It was Dad.

Last time I left, he refused to accept it. After what had happened, I was convinced that he was never, ever going to accept me leaving to be with Cane again, no matter how much I loved him and he loved me. I had to think wisely about this one. I loved Cane so, so much, but was he the right choice for me? Did I want to make the same mistake twice? What if the outcome was worse than last time?

I held my mother for a while, and when Dad called for her, I finally let go. She kissed my forehead before leaving, and when I heard her going

down the stairs, I pulled the letter out again, reading it over and over.

I fell asleep with it clutched to my chest, and when I woke up at 4:00 a.m., my decision had been made.

CHAPTER TEN

CANE

I'D BEEN EAGER ALL DAY, HOPING THAT I'D RECEIVE A TEXT FROM LORA saying she was on the way with Kandy, but knowing Lora, she wouldn't have told me upfront. She liked having a surprise to throw at me, something to catch me off guard. It was well past ten, and I still hadn't heard from her.

I sat in my new office on a teleconference, hardly listening to Mr. Tribble go on about how he wanted Tempt to sponsor one of Charlotte's local events. I kept eyeing my cell phone while his dull voice droned in the background.

"I'm sorry, Tribble. Can I call you back tomorrow? I have an important call to make right now."

"Oh, uh—yeah, sure, Mr. Cane. I'll be looking forward to the call."

I hung up and then snatched up my cell. One of the perks of my new office was that there was a door that led out to the rooftop. The roof wasn't furnished yet. There was only a lounge chair out, one Cora had insisted I get since she knew I'd take the majority of my calls out there. From the roof, I could see most of the city. Cars whizzed by, and the people looked like bugs scattering about. Charlotte was a beautiful city and was growing by the year.

I dialed Lora, but of course she didn't answer.

"Fuck," I grumbled. I wasn't in the mood for her games. I needed to know if Kandy was with her or not. I tried again, still no answer.

Eventually, I was left with no choice but to go back to work, but I hardly got shit done. I was too damn distracted, so I decided to leave.

“Going home to work,” I grumbled to Cora on my way out of the office.

“Do you want me to reschedule the call with Mr. Val?” she asked.

“Please,” I responded, pushing the button for the elevator. I waited for it to come up, but noticed Cora was still looking at me. “Something on your mind, Mao?”

“Actually, yes.” Cora stood from her chair and sighed, fiddling with the pen in her hand. “I wasn’t sure how to tell you this, but I received a call yesterday morning.”

“From who?”

“A Mrs. Hugo. She said she was Kelly Hugo’s mother.”

That made me frown. “Her mother?” The elevator chimed but I ignored it, walking toward my assistant. “What did she want?”

“She wanted to schedule a sit-down meeting with you. I told her that you had moved locations, and she said she didn’t mind having to travel. I know there was a lot that went on with Miss Hugo, so I told her I would get to you when I could.”

“I don’t want to see her if Kelly will be with her.”

“She insisted that Kelly won’t be.”

I ran my fingers through my hair then planted a hand on my hip. “What the hell could she possibly want?” I muttered, not directly at Cora, but more so to myself. “I know this is about Kelly’s trial. She’s probably trying to get me to vouch for her, but fuck that.”

“What would you like me to tell her, sir?”

“Tell her I will see her tomorrow afternoon in my office at 4:00 p.m. sharp and no later.”

She bobbed her head, sitting down right away and writing it on a notepad. “Anything else?”

“Yeah. Cancel my call with Tribble. His event sounds like a complete waste of my time. He’s not even considering donating to a charity.”

“Will do, sir. And can I suggest something?” Cora called after me as I headed to the elevator again.

“What?”

“There’s this thing called relaxing. It’s a nice thing many people do when they need to relieve some stress.” She grinned. “Perhaps you should try it one day.”

I chuckled. “I think you’re just hinting at a day off. You want it, just ask for it.”

She laughed. “Not at all, sir. Just thought it might help boost your spirits. Have a great afternoon.”

The elevator doors opened. “Later, Cora.”

When the doors closed, my smile collapsed. I headed for the parking deck and drove home. Cora had no idea how much I wanted to relax, but with Kelly’s case still lingering in the background and Lora not answering the goddamn phone, it was impossible. Ever since Kandy told me she needed some space from me, I haven’t been able to chill. I’ve been on edge for weeks, all because I needed my fix of her. At this point, I’d have taken anything.

Her smile.

Her laugh.

The feeling of her chest pressed against mine.

Her soft skin beneath my palm.

Anything.

I got home, jumped into the shower, and changed into gray sweats. As I dried my hair with a towel, I heard a car door slam shut. Walking to the window, I peered out of it, spotting Lora’s car in the driveway. I jogged down the stairs before she could get to the door.

“Why didn’t you answer your fucking phone?” I snapped when the door was open, just as she’d walked up the stoop.

Lora looked me in the eyes, and for once they weren’t playful and she didn’t look like she was ready to spew some of her sarcastic jeers. I looked around her, but only saw Mama at the trunk, taking out her bags.

“Where is she?” I asked, voice hoarse.

Lora sighed. “I waited two more hours. She didn’t show. I’m sorry, Q.”

I worked hard to swallow, fighting the wave of emotion threatening to take over me. “No, it’s fine. Not your fault.” I stepped around her, going out to help Mama carry her bags inside.

“This place is beautiful,” Mama breathed, taking in the decor once she’d stepped inside.

“Thanks, Mama. How about you go choose which room you want. I’ll bring your bags.”

Mama smiled and went straight to it. When she was out of the picture, I walked outside, meeting Lora at the trunk.

“Did you say something to her that would make her not want to come?” I demanded.

“What?” The skin around her nose scrunched up as she took out a tote bag. “Why the hell would I do that?”

“Because I know you, and you always try to scare people off.”

“Well, newsflash, asshole. Kandy isn’t afraid of me. I did what you said and delivered your fucking letter. I told her to call me if she needed anything, and that was it.”

“Are you sure that was it? Did she ask any questions?”

“She asked if she had to decide by today. I told her no.”

I breathed hard through my nostrils, pinching the bridge of my nose. “For fuck’s sake.”

“Q, chill the fuck out, all right? I can relate to Kandy a lot. She has to think about it, but when it’s clear to her, she’ll let you know what she decides to do, whether she comes or not. She’ll need that closure.” She slapped me on the shoulder. “She won’t leave your dick hanging. So pull your shit together and get me some fucking food. I’m starving.”

She went inside, slugging her backpack over her shoulder. Huffing, I took the rest of the bags out and slammed the trunk, going inside too.

I should have known she wouldn’t come. I don’t even know what I was thinking. She was safer back at home than she was with me, honestly. I just wanted her so damn much that I was blinded by my own selfishness.

Maybe she realized I didn’t deserve her after all.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

KANDY

IT WAS SEVEN IN THE MORNING, THE EARLIEST I HAD BEEN UP IN A WHILE. Cane's letter was on my desk, and my heart was beating heavily in my chest.

A suitcase was on my bed, packed with enough clothes to last me for a month. I stared at it, contemplating, for a really long time. I didn't realize how much time had passed as I paced my room, eyeing the letter, eyeing the suitcase, until a knock sounded.

I looked back, and Dad came inside. He was about to say something, but then fixed his gaze on the black suitcase on top of my bed. His lips parted, like he was about to speak again, but then it clamped shut. He closed his eyes, inhaled, and then exhaled.

"Dad," I pleaded, but he cut me off.

"Your mother is downstairs. We all need to talk." He turned away. When I heard him walking down, I sighed and reluctantly followed after him.

Rounding the corner, I spotted my parents in the living room. Mom was sitting on the arm of the love seat, and Dad stood right beside her, his hands in his pockets.

"Lora Cane visited my house yesterday?" Dad inquired.

"Yes," I whispered.

"What did she want?"

“She gave me a letter...from Cane.”

“That said what exactly?”

I looked him in the eyes. “He misses me.”

Dad huffed and crossed his arms.

Mom stood. “And you miss him,” she stated, like she already knew I would say it next. She put her eyes on Dad, turning to face him. “The other night, she was whimpering his name, Derek. *Whimpering*. She was still a little out of it, but she claimed all she wanted was to be with him. She said it to me that night.”

“So what? It was probably just a dream!” Dad bellowed. “She doesn’t need to be around him again! You see what happened the last time we let her go!”

“I understand you’re upset,” Mom said evenly, “but I’ve had time to think about what happened, and we both know the stabbing wasn’t his fault. He can’t control Kelly’s actions, and he even reported that he’d just found out about her mental instabilities and about Kandy’s pregnancy. He had no idea what Kelly was capable of!”

“I don’t care about any of that, Mindy! Our daughter almost *died*—she lost her ability to have a child because of him!”

I had to admit, that statement hit me right in the gut. So he knew this whole time? I guess I should have known. He was Mom’s best friend, after all.

“Was Cane the one with the knife to her?” Mom snapped. “No, it was Kelly. You heard Kandy’s story, and you also heard the doctors. Cane saved her life by bringing her to that hospital! The least we can do is let her talk to him!”

“So now you’re going to back him up? A few weeks ago you were ready to have her press charges on him!”

Mom started to fire back, but I took a step forward. “Guys! Seriously? I’m still in the room!”

They both stopped arguing, whipping their heads to stare at me.

“Look, I appreciate everything you two have done for me and everything you have sacrificed for my sake. Dad, I understand your anger, but...like I told you before, *I love Cane*. I love him a lot. Just like how you and Mom are, and with all the stories you guys have told me about the things you’ve been through, I know that the best thing to do is to fight for what I love, not let it go to waste.”

“Don’t compare what your mother and I have to what you had with Cane! It’s only lust, Kandy! You’re young and easily manipulated, and he took advantage of that!”

I stepped closer to him. “No, he didn’t, and I have told you plenty of times before what really happened and how we started! You can’t always protect me, Dad! I’m not a kid anymore!”

“Kandy, he is *not* the man for you!” his voice boomed.

“How would you know? You aren’t around when we’re together!”

“You almost *died!*” he barked, getting toe-to-toe with me. “I had to watch blood pour out of you in that hospital, watch you cry and grieve, all because we left you to be taken care of by him, and he fucked it up! Forgive me if I don’t fucking trust him!”

“Derek!” Mom cut in.

I breathed hard through my nostrils while he raged like an angry bull. The room went absolutely quiet. If a pin hit the floor, it would have sounded like a heavy thud.

“I’m going to Charlotte to see him,” I stated, and didn’t give a damn how he felt about it. “I’ll be down there for however long I feel like it, so unless you handcuff me to something in this house, I’m going.”

Mom’s head dropped as she sucked in a breath through her teeth.

“You are out of your goddamn mind,” he snarled. He stormed around me to get to the hallway. He took my car keys out of the tray that all the keys were in and stuffed them into his pocket. “If you leave, it won’t be with the car I worked my ass off to buy for you.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Whatever,” I scoffed. “There are plenty of other ways to get there.” I turned away and rushed back up the stairs. Mom called after me, but it was too late. I wasn’t looking back.

I slammed the door behind me and snatched out even more clothes from my closet, stuffing the suitcase. I was livid, but he wasn’t going to stop me from going. He could be such an asshole sometimes, and the fact that he would withhold his support from me, going so far as to take my car, blew my mind.

I would find a way there and he knew I would, so taking my car keys was a pointless move.

IT WAS NEARING 6:00 P.M. WHEN I HEARD THE STAIRS MAKE THEIR USUAL deep croaking as someone made their way up, and then there was a knock on my door.

“What?” I muttered. I was in the bathroom, running a finger over the bags beneath my eyes.

Dad walked right in, taking a look around my room, before cracking the door behind him. He ran a hand over his head, the other hand in his back pocket. I couldn’t stand it when he acted like he didn’t belong—like my room was some magical portal he’d never been through.

“Mind if I sit?” he asked as I stepped around the corner to see him completely.

“It’s your house,” I mumbled. He sat at the end of the bed, letting out a long, weary sigh, then he patted the spot beside him.

“Sit, Kandy. We need to talk.”

I frowned at his hand, but to make sure I didn’t act like as much of a stubborn ass as he did, I sat, though not too closely.

We were both quiet, only breathing. Thinking. “Look, I know you think I’m overreacting about Cane, but I know so much about him. So many secrets that he will *never* tell you because he knows it will make you look at him differently.”

I tried hard not to look at him. “Secrets like what?”

“Like how he pulled a knife on a store clerk because he didn’t have enough money to pay for groceries once.”

I blinked quickly. “That’s not so bad.”

“Or how he almost killed someone who hurt Lora.”

“Would you not do that for me?”

My throat thickened as Dad locked his eyes on me. “You want to know how I really met Cane?”

“I thought it was because you saved his mom’s life?”

“No. We’d met way before that. We didn’t become really good friends until I helped her.” He ran his palms over the thighs of his pants nervously. “I used to get calls all the time about fights and suspicious activity in his neighborhood, and guess who was always the one being questioned or arrested?”

“Cane,” I whispered.

“Back then he was a juvenile, so most of it didn’t go to his record. Minus some fights here and there, it’s a pretty clean record, honestly. Lots

of it was disregarded.” He sighed. “Anyway, when I really got to know Cane, he was eighteen. Fresh out of high school and didn’t know what to do with himself. I’d heard he was working for a man named Horacio, who was this big drug dealer in his area. Most of what we heard was rumors. We were never able to confirm it, and there was never any proof, but that was mostly because Cane was smart. He’d been pulled over many times, but never with any drugs on him. No…” Dad tapped his temple with two fingers. “He was too smart for that, but he slipped up one day. We got a call for an assault on a young woman. I was nearby with the partner I worked with back then, so we raced to the scene, and that’s when I saw Cane and his sister, Lora.”

I was shocked to hear that. “Lora? For what?”

“She’d gotten into an argument with some guy she talked to, he hit her, and she called Cane. Cane dropped everything to come for her, and when we got there, we saw him inside a gym beating the man to a pulp. I mean, he had blood everywhere. All over the floors, on his face. The man’s face was hardly recognizable by the time he was done with him. We pulled him off, my partner searched him, and we found a small bag of coke on him.”

“Wow.” My heart was racing now.

“Yeah. Anyway, I drew up the paperwork that night, but I couldn’t stop looking at him, you know? I mean, he was just a kid, and he was lost. I knew all about his mother and her addictions and how there were always reports of her getting abused. I also heard she was sick and needed a kidney...so I purposely didn’t report the coke. I left it off the record and only reported the fight.” He dropped his head. “I told him what I did for him and made him promise me to never get into any trouble again—to get his shit straight and get out of that fucked-up part of town. Stop selling, go to school—something. He promised he would. He spent two nights in jail and was out. Didn’t get into any more trouble again for a while.”

I dropped my eyes. Dad went on.

“Not even three years later, we got another report for that area—another assault. This one was on his mother. His father had returned and was threatening to kill her. He’d hit her many times, left her with a black eye and a busted lip. He’d even ripped some of her hair out, and had punched Lora in the ribs so hard that some of them were fractured. It was brutal, and the worst part was that he didn’t stop, not even when we got there. That’s when I stepped in, set him straight. That same night, I brought his mom and

sister into the station, got their written statements about what happened, and then took his dad's. Cane came into the station, took his mom and sister home, but not before talking to me. He was wearing khakis and a dress shirt. I remember because I'd never seen him wear anything like it. He had this nice Rolex watch on, his hair styled differently. He looked...*different*. That's all I could say. I couldn't put my finger on it, but he wasn't the same eighteen-year-old kid who was getting into fights and selling drugs. His eyes were darker, like he'd seen bad things, but that was just his life in general.

"Anyway, he asked for my number, said he wanted to repay me for saving his mom. That's when we started meeting for beers at that cheap bar up the street. We hung out a lot, and he really felt like family to me. He told me about school, about his sister and how she was thinking about moving out of her mom's place to stay with one of her friends from school. He even told me how he had this idea to open a company that sells wine. He knew some man who had a vineyard and made great wine. He wanted to invest in it one day. Everything seemed to be smooth sailing, but there was one night in particular when he got a phone call. I don't know who it was from, but when he looked at the screen, he seemed nervous all of a sudden. He told me he had to take the call and walked off. I watched him go, but when he talked on the phone that night, it looked like he was arguing. He came back, said he had to go. I thought nothing of it. But then it happened *repeatedly*—I'm talking for a solid month. I got suspicious then. I mean, he was a kid from the wrong side of the tracks and could have been pulling anything behind my back. Hell, I could have been in danger. Not only that, but he was a fucking genius—probably had the most street smarts I'd ever seen in a person.

"So he paid the tab one night, we left early, and I waited a while in my car before following him. He drove for a while, until he reached an abandoned warehouse. I parked a little ways away with my lights off, and saw him pull up beside a black truck." He breathed a little faster. "A man stepped out with a black suitcase in hand, handed it to Cane, and then left. It was quick. Sudden. I knew it was an illegal exchange. From that moment on, I watched him every single time he left early. Every single time he answered that phone, I knew he was going to that warehouse." He frowned and shook his head. "And then one night I saw him...a man the news had been talking about for months. A man that the FBI had been looking for, for

a long time. He was the reason we started cracking down on the Hispanic gangs in Atlanta. The coke was too clean and more and more fights were happening in the cities. Browns against blacks. All of that.” He met my eyes. “The man I saw was named *El Jefe*,” he rumbled, and my eyes stretched so wide I thought they’d leave my skull. *That name*. God, why did it always give me chills? “I saw him one night during one of Cane’s drops, and realized Cane was good friends with that man—that he worked for him. I got down to the bottom of it and eventually confronted Cane. I followed him all the way to school and demanded to know what was in the suitcase. I’d taken pictures of him with El Jefe as leverage, just so he couldn’t deny it, and that’s when Cane told me the truth. There was money in his suitcase.”

“Money?” I asked. “For what?”

“Money he earned for pushing Jefe’s drugs. He was selling it to college kids, organizing what was being sold in Atlanta. He was taking trips back and forth for the drop-offs and the pick-ups, but was using me as his alibi. He was getting paid good money for it, I’m sure, especially if he got out of college without any debts and opened his own company right away.”

“Holy crap,” I breathed. “So what did you do?”

His eyes squeezed shut. “I kept his secret.” He shrugged. “I disrespected my job and made a mockery of my career by keeping his damn secret. And you want to know why I kept it?”

“Why?”

“Because Cane informed me that El Jefe knew who I was. To this day, he knows everything about me. He knows every single person that is connected to Cane. It’s the way he operates, probably so he can know who to target if things get awry.” His face was serious, eyes misty. “The only reason I kept his secret is because I knew telling it would have bitten me in the ass. I had a daughter to live for. A wife to take care of. After finding all of that out, I had no choice but to make his secret my own.”

“Oh my God, Dad,” I wheezed. “Why stay friends with him after finding that out then?”

“Because...he was a good kid. He was respectful, loyal, and I could tell he was going places. Not only that, but he promised he was going to get out of it, and back then I didn’t have many guy friends. Hell, I still don’t. At that point, he had already met you and your mother. He was in deep with us. I couldn’t just cut him off—not without lying to your mother, which I suck

at doing—and there was no guarantee El Jefe would leave us alone even if I did.” He shrugged again. “It also looked like he *needed* a friend, you know? I mean we all have our demons—trust me, I have many—so who was I to judge? Who was I to tell him that in his position I would make different choices? I had no right to even think like that, and he guaranteed that as long as I kept quiet, things would be fine and he would get out, so I let it go. Things returned to normal. I think by now he’s gotten out—haven’t heard much about El Jefe since that explosion that happened at his home during the raid, but you never know what else lurks in Cane’s shadows.”

I nodded, lowering my gaze. Cane wasn’t out. That much was clear, from what I remembered with the black flip phone he had in his closet and how panicked he was when he saw the news.

“Look, Kandy...I’m not telling you this to scare you or make you think he’s a bad guy. He’s not all bad. To be honest, he’s one of the best men I’ve ever met. He’s got wits, he’s talented, he thinks on his feet, but he has a hell of a lot of baggage. When you met him, he may have seemed like this nice, wealthy guy with a big house and nice cars, but I’m almost positive he had to do some foul shit to get all of it. I don’t know what all he had to do for El Jefe, but anyone who works for that man doesn’t get things easily, and for Cane to be in the position he’s in now, it only means that he sits at the same table that man eats at and is just as dangerous as he is.” He grabbed my hand, and I picked my head back up, meeting his eyes. They were sincere, watery. “I love you so much, Kandy, and all I want is for you to be safe. That’s it. It may seem like I’m holding you back, and that I’m putting you against him, but it’s for your own good. I only have your best interests in heart, and I know for a fact that your best interest is *not* Cane. If you go...I—I don’t know what I’ll do. I just know that it won’t sit well with me.”

“He wants what’s best for me too—that’s why he hasn’t shown up here. He gave me time to think things through, and I have.”

He scowled. “You ever think he didn’t show up because he knew he was no good for you?”

“No—and that wouldn’t be true. He sent me a letter—he didn’t show because he knew you’d run him off.”

“He’s just lonely, Kandy! And he has a lot to feel guilty for, so of course he’s going to send you some sappy letter to make you feel better! Going back with him wouldn’t be smart, and you’re a smart girl, so don’t let him make you stupid!”

A grimace took hold of every single one of my features. I should have known this conversation would go south. He could never let things go.

“Look,” he said, pushing to a stand, “just...stay home, okay? Be in a place where you know you’ll always be safe and won’t have targets on your back. Let him go, Kandy. You don’t need him.”

But that was where he was wrong—because with each passing day, I felt like I was losing more and more of myself by not having Cane around. I missed him so much that it was hard to breathe sometimes, and even harder to get him out of my head.

Dad dropped a kiss on my forehead before leaving the room, but little did he know that my mind had been made up way before he came upstairs to have that talk with me.

CHAPTER TWELVE

KANDY

IT WAS TIME. MY SUITCASE WAS PACKED. I WAS NERVOUS AS HELL, BUT ready.

Mom was in the kitchen, and as if she could just sense something different about my walk, she rounded the corner. She looked down at the suitcase next to me. “You’re actually going?” she asked, eyes wide, panicked as she focused on my face again.

“I have to, Mom.” I kept my voice strong and my chin high.

“No, Kandy—you don’t have to. You *want* to!”

I turned, rolling my eyes and going for the door.

“Kandy!” she called, hurrying around me. She stood in front of the door. “Do not leave like this again.”

“Well, how else am I supposed to go, when you guys are always trying to keep me trapped here? I get it, you’re scared! Well, guess what? So am I, but I’m not going to let my fears keep me trapped in this house!”

Mom blinked back her tears. “At least wait for your Dad to get back? He’s on the way—”

“You and I both know that wouldn’t be wise.” I looked her over as she pressed her back to the door. “Mom, would you rather me sneak away and not tell you? You can’t fight me on this. I’m going.”

“So your mind is made up?” She sounded defeated, like she knew she was losing the fight,

“My mind was made up weeks ago.”

Her back straightened and finally she moved away from the door. I walked past her, opening it and walking right out. Just as I expected, there was an Uber waiting for me at the curb.

“You called an Uber? What money do you have?” she asked.

“I have enough,” I told her.

“Who did you get it from?” she asked, catching up with me as I hustled to the car.

“Lora gave it to me. I guess she figured I would need it.”

“Jesus Christ. She’s no better than he is!”

The driver popped the trunk, and I tossed the suitcase into it.

“How will you get there? An Uber can’t take you that far,” Mom called after me.

“Bus,” I said.

“Jesus, Kandy. I know you love him, and I understand visiting, but *staying* with him? Why do you want him so much? You saw what happened last time, and you still want to go back?”

I pressed my lips, my eyes falling to the black asphalt. She was never going to understand. Neither of my parents were. Hell, I didn’t understand myself sometimes, but my heart was far from quiet. It was screaming. My heart wanted its beat to be in sync with Cane’s, and even though I knew my heart could be vulnerable and stupid, my mind had teamed up with it. This was happening. Besides, no one said anything about staying. I only wanted to visit.

I hugged Mom tight, sighing over her shoulder. “I love you,” I murmured.

“Kandy,” she whined. “What can I do to get you to stay?”

I pulled back. “Nothing, Mom. There’s nothing you can do that will get me to stay here. Even if you convinced me today, I would still want to see him tomorrow.”

She raked her fingers through her hair, looking both exasperated and terrified.

I heard tires rolling and looked over my shoulder. Dad’s truck.

“Shit,” I hissed.

Mom’s eyes expanded. I looked at his truck, and there was no chance in hell anyone could miss that frown through the window. He didn’t even park

in the driveway. He stopped right in the middle of the street, putting the car in park, jumping out, and glaring at the Uber driver.

“What the hell are you doing, Kandy?” He marched around the car to get to me.

“Going,” I stated, grabbing the door handle.

“Did you not hear what I told you last night? All those things you know about him—*terrible* things—and you still choose to go?” His voice was tight, the anger slowly surfacing.

“I heard everything you said, but like I told you before, I’m going to see him.”

Dad turned to look at Mom. “Are you serious right now? Talk to your daughter, Mindy! You’re just going to let her go?”

“Derek, I can’t stop her!” she shouted as I opened the back door. “Even if we don’t let her go now, she’ll find a way.”

“Are you kidding me?” Dad walked around the car to get to my side as I climbed in. He slammed a hand on the top of the car and peered inside, glaring hard at me. “Kandy, if you go, don’t bother coming back. Do you hear me? Since you want to be grown and think you know it all, don’t come back to my house!”

I looked up at him, seeing all the pain and anger swirling deep in his irises. He didn’t mean it, I knew he didn’t, but he was hurt and frustrated and didn’t know how to get me to stay. He knew he couldn’t drag me out—it wasn’t like him. He couldn’t force me to stay home, or cuff me to my bed because I’d only neglect him.

“I love you, Dad,” was all I said, and his mouth twitched. Cars honked around us and I looked up, spotting several vehicles behind his truck, trying to get by.

“This is a mistake, Kandy,” he mumbled. “You’re smarter than this.”

“I have to go,” I insisted. By now, my vision had blurred. I could hardly see him through the thick wave of tears.

Cars kept honking.

“Sir, I’m about to start my meter,” the Uber driver said.

Dad glared at him and then focused on me again. When one more car honked, he finally pulled away, cursing beneath his breath and slamming my door, storming for his truck. He climbed in and got behind the wheel, driving the truck to the end of the driveway.

“Take me to the bus station please,” I told the driver, and he pulled off.

“KANDY!” I heard Dad yell. I looked back at Mom, who was going toward the driveway, holding Dad back by the chest and yelling for him to calm down. Then she looked at the car, her face tear-stained.

I looked away before their anger and fear and doubt could get its claws into me.

I bet the driver thought I was an idiot. I cried the entire way to the bus station. He repeatedly asked me if I was okay, but I was sobbing too hard to answer. I hated breaking their hearts, but I also hated limiting myself. The feeling of being torn had to be one of the worst feelings ever. How was I supposed to decide?

How was I supposed to be happy when I felt happiest with Cane, but my parents also comforted and comforted me in a way that no one else could?

I understood their worry—their fears—but at the end of the day, this was my life, and my mistakes were my own, and no one had control over my destiny and my future but me.

I wasn't sure if I was doing the right thing, or if I'd even stay with Cane, but I was sure I'd regret it for the rest of my life if I didn't at least talk to him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CANE

I HAD TO ADMIT, I WAS AT A LOSS. KANDY'S MESSAGE WAS LOUD AND clear. If she really wanted to be with me, she'd have come with Lora.

I scoffed at the thought, turning in my desk chair. She wasn't coming. I'd lost her, and this time there was no point in fighting. Kandy wasn't a dumb girl. She knew right from wrong, and I was no good for her.

I pressed my hand to my chin, looking over the deal in front of me. We were opening a Tempt store in Uptown Charlotte. I wanted to be thrilled that we were even able to do so, but the thrill wasn't in me. My eyes veered to the left, and I glanced at my phone, wanting so badly to call her. "Fuck it," I mumbled. I pushed out of my chair and swiped the screen of my phone to unlock it, but just as my finger hovered over her name, there was a knock on the door.

"Sir," Cora called, popping her head in. "Mrs. Hugo is here to see you. I have her in the waiting area."

I frowned, looking toward the clock on my desk. "She's early."

"Would you like me to tell her that it will be another moment or so?"

"No." I looked down at my phone screen, Kandy's name right there, then sighed, shutting it off and tucking it into my front pocket. I turned toward Cora. "Send her in."

With a nod, Cora left the room, and as I stepped behind my desk, the door creaked and heels clicked on the marble floor. Mrs. Hugo walked into

the room and looked right at me with her cold, green eyes. Yes, *cold*. The woman had no warmth to her whatsoever. I'd met her once, and never wanted to meet or see her again, yet here she was.

Her white hair was pulled up into a formal updo, pearls in her ears and draped around her neck. She wore a black dress, her lips stained red. There were deep lines around her mouth, and small wrinkles around her eyes, despite the visits for Botox that I'm sure she'd made a habit of. Nonetheless, she was a very good-looking woman. She had to be well in her sixties, but could have easily passed to be in her fifties.

"Mr. Cane," she chimed, giving me a fake smile.

"Mrs. Hugo. What gives me the pleasure?"

She continued her smile, coming closer. The door closed behind her, per my instructions to Cora. She glanced back before focusing on me again. "Oh, don't mind me. I won't be here for very long. Don't want to hold a busy man up."

I folded my arms over my chest. "Interesting that you say that, because I'm curious to know why you bothered coming to me at all."

Her mouth twitched, her smile slowly fading. "I think you know why I'm here."

"If it pertains to your daughter, I truly don't give a damn."

She breathed hard through her nostrils. "Listen, I am just here to tell you that if you are waiting for some great, big trial to happen where you get to testify about how scared you were, it won't be."

That caught my attention. Brows narrowing, I said, "It's a bench trial, but I'm sure the judge will want the witnesses to give some kind of testimony."

"No they won't," she uttered with too much confidence.

"Why the hell not?"

She simply shrugged and smirked, like she had it all figured out. "The family lawyer is very good at what he does. He made some agreements with the judge, and we were just informed yesterday that Kelly won't do any time in prison."

"What?" I growled, dropping my arms. "How?"

"How else do you think?" she laughed. "I'm sure you know very well that money is power, Mr. Cane, and we have *a lot* of it. The judge they assigned the case to is lousy. Easy to pay off if someone wants to brush something under the rug. But of course, to make him look good and keep a

steady record, we had to bargain. Kelly will do four years in intensive psych, but if she shows improvement early on, she will most likely get an early release.”

“That is a fucking joke!” I barked.

“Not only that,” she went on, “but the girl’s parents agreed that they wanted to keep this out of the news, so their lawyer is speaking for them. Since they knew it would be hard to push for Kelly to get a prison sentence, and that it was very simple to prove Kelly’s mental instabilities, their lawyer came to us with a deal. They requested an immediate restraining order to go into effect for the next twenty years and \$50,000. We’ve paid them, the restraining order has been filed, and Kelly will start psych tomorrow. The case has been closed as far as I know.”

“Are you kidding me? That’s bullshit!” I spat. “Why would they let her get off that easily? She deserves to fucking rot for what she did to her!”

“Like I would let my daughter rot for you,” she snarled. “You and all the other men before think you can just use her up and toss her aside like some dirty towel. Well, you’re wrong.” She took a step forward. “I’m not saying what she did was okay, but *you* are the reason she cracked.”

“Oh, I’m the reason she cracked?” I laughed dryly. “I told Kelly to stay away from me repeatedly, but she didn’t listen. She even resorted to trying to blackmail me over something she had no business snooping around for in the first place. Matter of fact, she blackmailed me twice!”

“The girl you were with, wasn’t she almost half your age?”

“How the fuck does that matter right now?”

“I’m just asking a question.” She rolled her eyes. “You know, there are things about Kelly that I’ve had to pay people to keep quiet about. She hasn’t always been like this, but she meets men like *you* and she just...loses it.” She paused, doing a small shake of her head. “I’m sure you know she was checked into rehab before?”

“Yes, the one I met her at. The one she *lied* about.”

“Yes, well, anyway...she was there because of the man she was with before. Kelly left the nest early. Went to college, did well. Worked for a while. She was living a wonderful, normal life. She decided to move to New York around her thirtieth birthday, and that’s when she met Carter. Carter was wealthy and handsome, but he was a heartbreaker indeed.” She sighed. “Anyway, during her stay in New York, she spent more and more time with Carter. He owned a nightclub there, made great money, but he

was also into the party life. You know, drugs, drinking, all of that. He made Kelly do all sorts of drugs with him, which made matters worse for their situation. They were never officially dating, but he slept over her place often. She never slept at his. There was never a title on their relationship, but Kelly called him her boyfriend. He didn't address her as his girlfriend. To him, she was just Kelly. I want to say their little thing lasted for a year or so. Kelly was falling for him more and more, but he began to pull away." Mrs. Hugo walked toward the window, looking out of it, studying the skyline. "There was one night when she called me crying about how he hadn't answered her calls in a whole week. She even told me she'd visited his club, but he was never there. I told her to let it go and move on—that he wasn't worth the trouble—but of course she didn't listen. She's just as stubborn as her father. It didn't help that she was still doing the drugs during her free time." She paused. "I didn't hear from Kelly for two weeks straight, and then when I did hear from her, it was because I had received a call from her. She had been arrested and was in jail."

"For what?"

Mrs. Hugo peered over her shoulder. "For assaulting Carter's fiancée."

"Shit," I hissed, remembering Mario's story about Kelly's record.

"Turns out he'd been engaged all along. His fiancée worked in Japan, so she was hardly home. She probably visited here and there, but not much until she came back for good. Their wedding was coming up, and of course Carter had to be there for the arrangements, which meant leaving Kelly in the dust. He was lonely when the fiancée was away—Kelly was just a fling and nothing more to him. But Kelly got...*possessive*. He told her that he was engaged but she didn't care. She insisted that he leave his fiancée behind for her, but he refused to do that. She kept popping up at his club and his apartment, making demands. He could keep her out of the club, but not away from the apartment, so he broke his lease and moved in with the fiancée...but somehow Kelly found them." She turned to face me. "Kelly saw them leaving one night and ended up grabbing the fiancée by the hair and cutting her face with a pocket knife. She was arrested that same night."

"Damn." I narrowed my eyes at her. "Is this what you meant when you asked me on the phone a while ago if she was acting different? Was that a warning?"

"Yes. And that isn't the first time she's been so unpredictable. Kelly has been possessive her whole life. We had to pay Carter and his fiancée a large

sum of money, just so they wouldn't file a suit against her. She used to threaten me when she couldn't get her way. She'd destroy my clothes by cutting them up or bleaching them. She'd break my jewelry or mess up the furniture. She'd manipulated her father many times just to make him buy her things or to do things for her. We had her checked in to see several therapists for her personality behaviors."

"What personality behaviors?"

She sighed. "She was diagnosed with Bipolar Personality Disorder at first, which they had told us was simple to treat. But then more and more kept happening at her school and at home, so we took her in again to get tested and she was diagnosed with Narcissistic Disorder as well."

"Go figure," I muttered.

Mrs. Hugo frowned.

"Look, if you're telling me all this to try and make me feel sorry for her, it's not working. Kelly stabbed a *nineteen-year-old girl* who did absolutely nothing to her. She has a fucking problem."

"Yes, she does, which is why she doesn't deserve prison time. She needs help—someone to save her from men like *you*."

"Or maybe she needs help, so men like me don't end up in her clutches." I walked around my desk. "You can't possibly think you're going to be the person to help her."

"I'll be whatever I have to be for my daughter."

"Oh, please, Mrs. Hugo. Don't come into my office trying to ride your fucking high horse now, all right? Kelly told me all about how you treated her as a child. You deserved what she did to your clothes and jewelry. You never made time for your daughter. You and your husband tried to buy her off so you could travel and shop and do whatever the hell else you liked to do during your spare time. Don't act like you give a damn about her now!"

She took a step closer to me, looking me over. "You do realize that the only reason Kelly wanted you is because she considered you another Carter? And just like Carter, you abandoned her completely, all for a younger girl. So don't you stand there and pretend you're any better than me! Men like you make her crack!"

"Kelly already knew what we had wasn't a real thing. She made it deeper than it was and only ended up punishing herself for it. It isn't my fault she has a problem with facing reality."

“Oh, whatever.” She turned away, walking to the door. “You better pray she gets better, Mr. Cane, because if she doesn’t, I’m sure you’ll see her again. Unless the therapists can help, she won’t move on until she finds another man just like you or Carter. That is my warning.” Mrs. Hugo gripped the doorknob and swung the door open. She marched out without so much as a look back. When she was gone, I slouched down in my chair, seething.

How the hell was she getting off virtually scot-free? This was clearly her second offense. She deserved to rot in jail for what she did.

My jaw clenched as I stared at the skyscrapers outside my window. If Kelly got out early, my troubles with her wouldn’t end, and if I really wanted Kandy back, there was no way in hell she’d stick around if she knew there was even a sliver of a chance that Kelly could return.

“Fuck!” I shouted, knocking papers off my desk. I dropped my face into my hands, then shoved my fingers through my hair.

There was no doubt about it now. One way or another, Kelly had to go. The only question now was—how to get rid of her? Money wouldn’t do; they had plenty of that. There were other options—*violent* options—but I wasn’t bold enough to go back to who I used to be because if I went there, there was a chance I wouldn’t return.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CANE

MY DRIVE HOME WAS SOLEMN.

I drove through Charlotte with the Maserati I bought a week ago, the sunroof peeled back and the wind rushing through my hair. It didn't take long for me to get home.

Pulling up to the house, I spotted Lora's car parked in front of the garage. When I walked into the house, I could smell something spicy cooking.

Mama was in the kitchen preparing fajitas, and Lora was sitting at the kitchen island with her laptop, scrolling through a clothing store website. *Of course.*

"How was work?" Mama asked. She'd been unusually chipper lately. I wasn't sure if it was because of the move and being in a new place, or the fact that we had talked about the bakery she wanted to open so badly. She'd made plans—said she wanted the walls painted teal, and had been describing all the things that would be on the menu. I had to keep her happy somehow, but I had no idea when the bakery would be feasible. She still had to prove to me that she would be okay and that all of this wasn't one big dose of fluffy bullshit.

"Fine," I mumbled, opening the fridge and pulling out a Gatorade.

"Whoa! Grouchy much?" Lora was still staring at her laptop screen.

I cracked the drink open, taking a few gulps. "Going upstairs."

“Oh, hey, listen! Before you go...” Lora slid off the stool, slinking her way over to me. “I might have to fly to Cali soon. I haven’t visited Aaron since he was arrested.”

I cocked a brow and folded my arms then. “I thought you were mad at him?”

“I just need to tell him that I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to be together anymore.”

“Ouch,” I hissed. “While he’s behind bars? That’s really fucked up, Lo.”

“Well, it’s the truth, okay? I’m not going to sit around waiting for him for the next fifteen years! I’m not that kind of woman, and he knows it. I don’t want him being all hopeful about the future. When he’s out, then maybe we can talk again. Besides, do you really think I’m going to go fifteen years without having sex?”

“Okay, first of all, that’s fucking disgusting. I don’t want to hear you talk about sex. And second, what you’re basically implying to me is that you, Lora Cane, are not a ride-or-die chick?”

“Oh, shut up.” She punched my arm but with her being so damn petite, she couldn’t hurt me with her hands if she tried.

The doorbell rang and I looked down the hall at the door. Lora looked too before focusing on me and frowning. “You expecting someone?” I asked.

“No.” She took a step back. I looked back at Mama but she only shrugged with tongs in her hand.

I marched to the door, twisting the knob and pulling it open. It could have been a neighbor or Mrs. Hugo again, for all I knew...but it wasn’t.

Standing on the other side of that door was a person I thought I would never see again—at least not so soon.

Kandy’s maple eyes swung up to mine, wide and glistening. Her face was pale, her hair in a curly, kinky mess, like she hadn’t really bothered brushing or combing it lately. She wore a jean jacket over a halter top shirt and black joggers. She had on the same vans she wore the day I brought her to the hotel, when I visited her in college. The handle of a black suitcase was locked in her hand, and she fidgeted on her feet, like she was unsure what to do next.

“Hi, Cane,” she whispered, doing a small wave with her free hand.

My breaths came out short when she spoke.

I was tempted to blink, but was afraid that if I did, she would vanish, and my actions in that moment couldn't be controlled. It was like my heart got ahold of every single emotion inside me. It pumped madly, leaving me with no choice but to follow through with what I wanted. I took a step down and practically slammed into her, cupping my hands around her face.

I kissed her.

I kissed her so fucking hard.

I couldn't believe it. She was here. *Fuck...she was here. She chose me.*

Dropping my hands, I scooped her up in my arms and she moaned, letting go of the suitcase and causing a loud thud on the ground. She had no problem wrapping her legs around my waist as I cupped her ass in my hands. I held on tight, kissing so deeply I could hardly breathe, but I didn't give a damn. She could have every breath, every heartbeat. She could have all of me.

"Oh, baby," I breathed on her mouth, her forehead pressed to mine. "You're here. You're here."

"I am," she nodded. "I'm here, Cane."

I kissed her once more and then placed her on her feet, but I didn't let go of her. Fuck that. I refused to let go again. I tangled my fingers in the hair at the back of her head, bringing her mouth to mine again. She held on tight, curling her fingers in my shirt like she was afraid to let go. God, I missed that. It made me feel like she actually *needed* me.

"Ahem!" someone said behind me, and I glanced over my shoulder, spotting Lora walking to the door. "How about you two save all that sloppy kissing for the new bedroom, huh?"

Kandy laughed.

"No one told you to watch," I countered.

"Hey, don't get smart with me!" She pointed a finger at me. "If it wasn't for me, she wouldn't even be here."

"Lora, all you did was drop the letter off for me. Don't get cocky."

"But that's not all I did for you. See, guys are stupid. You didn't provide enough for her to go on. Right before I gave the letter to her, I got a new envelope, opened the old one to take your letter out, and then put it in the new envelope with your new address written inside of it. I also wrote her name the sloppiest way that I could, to match your shitty handwriting." She folded her arms with a smirk. "I knew she wouldn't come right away. Girl

thing,” she shrugged. “And unlike you, I wanted to give her another option, so I gave her money, too.”

I frowned at her. “You better not have read it,” I grumbled, annoyed that I hadn’t thought about Kandy’s financial situation myself.

“Oh, relax. I didn’t want to read your sappy letter, lover boy.”

“Yeah, whatever.”

Kandy tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, putting on a small smile. “Thanks, Lora.”

“Hmm.” Lora smiled at her before giving me a smug grin. “You owe me even more now, bro.” She pranced off, and I looked at Kandy again. She gave me a coy smile.

I still couldn’t believe she was here.

My Kandy.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

KANDY

AFTER WHAT FELT LIKE OUR ONE-THOUSANDTH KISS, CANE HELPED ME WALK inside.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come with Lora,” I said as he shut the door behind us. “I didn’t want to leave from home like before.” I dropped my eyes. “Telling my parents this time around was ten times worse, though.”

“Worse how?” Cane asked, voice low.

I looked up, and even though my heart was still beating with joy because of our moment on the porch, my eyes still prickled. I couldn’t even form the words. What Dad said really stuck with me during the entire bus ride and even on the Uber ride to Cane’s house. I kept thinking about how hurt he was—the anguish in his eyes. The *rage*. *How many times was I going to break my father’s heart?*

“It just was.” I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. “Dad is...well, you know how he is.” I sighed. “I thought about everything that happened, and I know it wasn’t your fault that Kelly attacked me. The only reason I didn’t answer the phone, or text back, or even come to see you was because I was scared. I still am scared—and—”

My statement was cut short.

Cane cupped my face in his hands—the hands I’d missed for weeks. He held me for a long time, staring into my eyes. “You have no reason to be sorry, and every right to be worried. What you went through was my fault,

and I take full blame...but you don't have to be scared anymore, Kandy. You're here. *I'm* here. I've always been here for you, baby."

A sob caught in my throat, but to stifle it—as if he saw it coming—he pressed his mouth to mine, with my face still in his hands, and kissed me again. This time it was slow. Careful. I don't think I'd ever felt him kiss so gently. His mouth was just as I'd remembered, tasting like mints and cigarettes. My fingers scrambled to hold onto him—any part of him. I curled them into the single pocket of his black button-down shirt, and we both groaned.

He parted his lips, and I did the same, letting him taste me. When his tongue swept over mine, it triggered something inside me. The pit of my belly warmed up, blazing like a million watts, and then the feeling built up into a fluttering frenzy.

He groaned, wrapping a hand around the back of my head, slowly breaking the kiss. I opened my eyes to meet the cool, half-gray eyes that were slowly becoming a warm pool of green.

"I missed the hell out of you," he whispered, pressing his forehead to mine. "I'm glad you came." I closed my eyes, melting into his grasp. He held me close for several seconds and then planted a kiss on my temple before letting me go. Picking up my suitcase with one hand, he grabbed my hand with the other and started walking down the hallway. "Come on. Let me show you around."

I walked hand-in-hand with him through the hall. The first thing I noticed was how long the hallway actually was before we met up to an open area. Thick, white pillars were built into the floors, holding up the beams, and the floor was made of ivory marble. The floors in the foyer were all marble too, and unlike the other house in Atlanta, this house had *two* staircases. One to the right, one to the left.

When I'd pulled up to this house, I noticed it was slightly bigger than the Atlanta home. Although his home in Atlanta had a nice exterior and was a decent size, this one was much more appealing. The bricks outside the home were tan and dark brown, and there were even bigger pillars out on the patio.

The foyer was absolutely breathtaking. Black and white decor accented the walls, some on the tables. There were a few wooden accent pieces as well, to give it a rustic, masculine look.

The ceiling was high and arched, a large chandelier hanging up top, the crystals looking like diamonds as the lights shimmered on them. “Wow, Cane,” I breathed. “This place is beautiful.”

He smiled a little. “It’s fancier than the one in Atlanta was.” He looked around. “I don’t know what possessed me to get a house that has more rooms.”

“Because you’re not alone anymore,” I noted. Our eyes latched again, but I pulled away, looking at the left staircase, the one we were nearest to. “Can I go up?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “Go ahead.”

I took the stairs up carefully, noticing my reflection in the marble when I looked down. When I reached the top, I went left. There were three doors this way, each of them black. I went into the nearest one. It was a big room, a large glass desk inside it and a rolling chair behind it. Some boxes were stacked in the corner, the curtains open to reveal the front lawn, which had a fountain in the middle of it.

“My office,” Cane stated.

“Great view.”

I went to the next room. This one only contained a queen-sized bed, a dresser, and a TV. There were suitcases inside it and a neon orange duffel bag. I assumed this room was Lora’s because the duffel bag had sticker of a stick figure holding up its middle finger. The last room on the left was completely empty.

“Gotta figure out what I’ll do with that one,” he chuckled nervously behind me.

“Where is your mom sleeping?”

“Oh, her room is downstairs. Leads right out to the pool. She loves it.” I smiled at him as he looked me over. “Come. Let me show you my room.” He reached for my hand again, and I accepted it, letting him lead the way. We walked past the staircase that was on the right, and on this side of the house, there were two doors. He opened the very first one. It was his room for sure. I remembered the large bed frame and dresser from before, both a dark brown. The biggest difference was the windows—many more than at his house in Atlanta, revealing a line of trees in the distance. The view was amazing. I walked in, running my fingers over the cotton sheets then trotting into the walk-in closet.

“Holy shit! This closet may as well be another room!” I laughed.

“I intended on sharing it with a special someone...”

I pressed my lips together, fighting a smile.

“But if you are only here to visit...” His sentence trailed off.

I walked into the bathroom, postponing that topic for now. This bathroom was much bigger than his last one. It was mostly white marble. Clean. Shiny. Three windows, all tall rectangles. A tub was near the north wall, the shower only a few steps away from it. Two sinks. Two separate mirrors, not a whole one like the last place.

“I don’t know if you remember, but I had mentioned to your mother during the last dinner at their house that I’d opened an office in Charlotte for Tempt,” Cane said. “At that point, I was just going to commute back and forth from the Atlanta building to get here. I had no plans of leaving Atlanta behind, but when you got *hurt*,” he grumbled, through clenched teeth, “I figured I would get a house here, too. I had Lora find some last-minute options for me. When I was clear to go, I came down here and saw this one. Fell in love with it, honestly.” He looked around, sighing. “But I didn’t buy this house for myself. I got a bigger place because I wanted more people in it...and I wanted you to be one of those people. I want to share all of this with you...” He held his hands out, like he was displaying this room for the very first time. “But if you’re only visiting...”

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” I confessed, my tone abrupt.

He took a step toward me. “What made you come here?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Stupidity, maybe? Recklessness?” I huffed a laugh, looking up at him. His eyes burned with sincerity, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

“You can be pretty reckless,” he chuckled. He was in front of me now. “If you weren’t ready, you didn’t have to come, Kandy. You don’t have to be here just to make me happy.”

“Weren’t you the one who told me that love can be selfish sometimes?”

His eyebrows inclined. Confusion.

“I made a stupid, selfish decision by coming here, right back to you,” I said, and he winced a bit, “but...there isn’t a minute that goes by that I’m not thinking about you, Cane. I just hope I don’t regret it later.”

His face softened.

“Some loves are a once-in-a-lifetime thing,” I went on. “I don’t want ours to be something I have to bury.”

“Good.” His smile was so sweet. “Me neither.”

“But if I’m here, Cane, you can’t hold anything back from me anymore. You have to promise me that you’ll be completely open and honest from now on. No more surprises. Next time some shit goes down, I want to be prepared...and I’m sure there will be a next time.” He nodded and was about to bring his hands up to hold my waist, but I held my hand up just as quickly, taking a step away. “Promise me. I want to hear you say it.”

“I promise I will let you know *everything*, Kandy. No more lies. No more secrets. I am an open book.”

I watched his eyes, the desperation burning deep within them, but there was one question that’d been bothering me since the accident had happened. “Did you know Kelly was coming to your house that day?”

“I had no idea. The last time I’d spoken to her, I told her to stay away from me.”

I swallowed hard. “And...El Jefe?”

He dropped his head. “He hasn’t shown up yet...but I’m sure he’ll come.”

“When?”

“I don’t know, Kandy.”

I used my palm to rub my forehead. “Do you think I should go back home until he makes an appearance?”

“I hate saying it, but I think that by now, he knows everything about you. I’m sure word about the case has gotten to him. He probably knows every detail. He studies those kinds of things before he strikes, just to be ahead of others.”

“*Strikes?* What does that even mean? That he’ll *attack* you?”

His throat bobbed before he answered. “I don’t know what he’ll do, Kandy, but one thing I know for sure is that I’m an asset to him. He needs me too much to do anything stupid or hurt anyone I care about.”

I dropped my line of vision, focusing on the floor instead. “H-have you ever killed anyone?”

“No.” He blinked hard, forehead creasing. “But I have come close to doing it before. Twice.”

“How close?” I looked up.

“So close that Lora had to stop me before I pulled the trigger.”

“Who were you about to kill?”

Cane’s eyes glistened as he studied my face. “One time, it was some idiot who was fucking with Lora. I didn’t use a gun on him, just beat him

really bad, to the point he could have died. The other time, it was Buck, and I pulled his own gun on him.”

The tightness in my chest loosened just a bit, but not much. My heart was still pounding. I suppose I should have seen that one coming. He hated his dad.

I turned and slouched down on the bed, running my hands over my face. “This is so crazy,” I muttered into my hands.

“Is it really that crazy to be with me?”

“From all the red flags I’ve seen and what my dad told me, a lot of people would say it is! I’m just trying not to let it overshadow how I feel about you. I want to be with you, Cane, I do—but I don’t want to get hurt again.”

Cane’s eyebrows pulled together. “What did Derek tell you?”

I leaned back on my palms. “How you two *really* met—the things you did as a teenager. The fight you got into while saving Lora from some guy. How you worked for a man named Horacio and sold drugs for him.”

Cane shut his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. “What he said must change the way you look at me...”

“No. The day I got stabbed by your psychotic ex-girlfriend is when I changed the way I looked at you.”

“Why? Because you finally snapped out of the fantasy and realized that I wasn’t perfect?” he demanded. “Newsflash, Kandy, I have never been fucking perfect, and I told you that many times.”

“I know you haven’t, Cane!” I countered. “But I was in so much denial because I love you that much! I didn’t want the man I loved to be a fucking criminal!”

Cane blinked rapidly, thick lashes fluttering, in total shock. “Is that how you see me now? As a criminal?”

“No, Cane. But I know that everything you have now came from what you used to do and who you were involved with. That guy I saw on the news—El Jefe? If he’s coming to you, it means you’re still involved, and it means I should be as far away from you as possible. If that’s not the case, then tell me I’m wrong.”

“You are wrong,” he scoffed. “All I do is help him make money, Kandy. That’s it. He invests in my company, and in turn, I double or triple his investment. To the world, he is just a private investor. No one outside of you, Lora, and Derek knows who he is to me. Kelly has an idea of it

because she snooped around in my closet and saw a few receipts, but she doesn't know for sure."

"So you don't sell drugs to anyone?"

"Not anymore. Not for a long time."

"And you're sure you've never killed?"

"I'm positive," he answered firmly, and relief swirled through me. His eyes dropped then and all of his features pulled together, like he was agitated. He sat beside me, running a hand over his face.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Did your parents tell you about the deal they made with Kelly?"

"No. They just told me it was a non-jury trial. They didn't really want to involve me in the details. I gave my written testimony, Mom made me record what happened and how I felt, and she handled the rest. I just had to sign some stuff."

He cursed under his breath.

I leaned in closer. "What, Cane?"

"They should have told you what went down." He shoved his fingers through his hair. "They struck a deal with them. They accepted \$50,000 and a restraining order good for twenty years, but in exchange, Kelly is only doing four years in a psychiatric facility."

I closed my eyes, sucking in a breath. Frankie had warned me about this, but I didn't think it would actually go down that way, and it didn't make me any less angry. I thought surely she would get jail time—that maybe someone would see that she didn't deserve to be set free, that she was dangerous.

"The judge was shitty, Kandy. He was bought off by Kelly's mother. Had it been a fair, open trial, he wouldn't have been able to give her such a short sentence. But without a jury, and both sides—in this case, your parents and presumably you—being in agreement, the judge was able to exercise his discretion."

"But it's not fair!" I yelled. "She knew what she was doing when she carried that knife in her hands!"

"They drug tested her; she wasn't on anything. They think she just had a mental breakdown."

"About what?" I wheezed, pushing off the bed. God, the words hurt—the truth and reality of the situation hurt. "She tried to *kill* me, and she's the one who is given a slap on the wrist for a fucking breakdown? What about

the fact that I can't fucking sleep because I have nightmares about her trying to kill me, huh? Or the fact that it took me nearly a month and a half before it didn't hurt to move, which was a pretty clear reminder of how she attacked me? Or even the fact that I'm probably *never* going to have kids because of her!"

"Wait...*WHAT?*" Cane's voice was so loud that my tirade became a washout. My eyes stretched wide as I pulled my lips in and pressed down with my teeth. I said too much. Damn it! This wasn't how I wanted to tell him. God, why did my temper always take control?

Cane stood up, brows furrowed as he looked at me. "What the hell do you mean 'you can't have kids because of her?' What are you saying?"

"It's nothing. I—it doesn't mean anything."

"Like hell it doesn't, Kandy! If you have something you need to tell me, tell me! No more secrets, remember?"

"Fine!" I dropped my head, running my hands over my face. "I...went to see a doctor. Mom took me. He ran some tests, checked my uterus, mostly where the wound was, and told me that she'd damaged it so badly that I may not be able to carry a child."

"What?" he breathed. "How is that—You told me about the pregnancy, but I thought...w-where exactly did she stab you?" His voice was full of pain, and it didn't help that angry tears were building up in his eyes. I stood up and lowered my pants, showing him the area that was now just an angry dark-red line.

Cane's eyes fell to it briefly before rolling back up to mine. He studied my face. The longer he looked at me, the harder it was to keep my tears at bay. They streamed down my cheeks, and I choked on a sob.

"He said that it might take years for me to completely heal in there, and even when I do, my uterus will be weak—so weak that it probably won't be able to hold a baby. Even if I tried, it could result in a miscarriage, or rupture, or just not happen at all."

"Oh, fuck, Kandy." He cupped one side of my face. "Fuck, baby. I am so sorry," he whispered. He dropped to his knees, wrapping his hands around my waist. "I didn't know about any of this. I'm so sorry. I thought you lost the baby from the stress of the stabbing. Now I see why you didn't answer your phone." He kissed the wound, and having his lips there both seared and froze me.

Eventually, I pulled him back up to standing, sinking into his arms and burying my face into his chest. I didn't come here to cry, but I had to let it out.

All the rage.

All the hurt.

All the guilt.

I had to let it go, and I knew he would stand there and take it from me—absorb my pain and then get rid of the wasted energy so that we could start anew.

We didn't leave the room for the rest of that night. His phone rang constantly, but he ignored every single call. He picked me up and put me on the bed, then climbed up with me, letting me curl into him. My face was in his shirt, which I soaked with tears. My fingers were clutching him everywhere because I didn't want him to leave. I wanted him right there with me, where he belonged.

"It's okay, baby," he cooed in my hair. "We'll be okay."

We...

I hadn't heard that word from him in so long, but the sound of it calmed me. He had no idea if we would be okay...but we were okay together. We were always okay together; that's why I was here, because this feeling was something I couldn't give up. I loved it too much. Being in his arms, no matter the circumstances, always completed me.

I'm not sure when I fell asleep. All of my weeping, along with the traveling, left me exhausted.

When I woke up, he was still there, and all I could do was stare at him. He was sleeping, and I don't know how I hadn't paid attention before, but there was hair on the lower half of his face. Lots of hair. He'd grown a beard while he was away from me, and somehow it was very fitting. Thick. Brown. It wasn't bushy. It was just enough to cover the lower half of his face—a very thick layer that I instinctively combed my fingernails through. How hadn't I felt it last night when he kissed me? Was I that out of it? That happy to see him? So elated that nothing else mattered but the two of us, reunited again?

Being with Cane in that moment was a risk, but so was falling for him. When I met him, he was just my dad's best friend. I was never supposed to want him, but I did, and now I had him, and neither of us wanted to let go.

Loving Cane was the dumbest thing I'd ever done in my life, but what we had was real, and there was no denying how we felt.

Only we understood what we had.

Only we knew how deep our love really ran.

Many people in this world allowed their love to die because of fears and trials and a momentary defeat...but I refused to let that stop me from having the one thing I'd always wanted: him.

PART II
SURVIVING

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

KANDY

IN THE SPAN OF THREE WEEKS, I GOT A NEW CAR, A BRAND-NEW WARDROBE, and gotten weekly manicures. The new car was Cane's idea. The new wardrobe and manicures? All on my bohemian, free-spirited girl, Lora.

Seeing as Cane wanted me to be happy, and wanted to give me everything, he had no problem giving me a credit card to shop around, just to get me out of the house and feeling better. I didn't want to buy much or use up all of his money, but of course Lora racked up on things for me—some of it I was sure I wouldn't even wear, but seeing as we wore the same size dresses and shirts, I think she picked most of it out for herself. I didn't mind. It was nice spending time with her.

Not only that, but Lora stopped by Walmart to get hair products for my *wild mess*, as she called my hair. I had to admit, I had stopped caring for my hair like before. Lora braided it for me almost every day, telling me how she wished her hair was as thick as mine and could hold a curl like mine could. She made me feel much better about myself, and not once did she bring up the past or my losses, which I'm sure Cane had told her about.

Cane was pleased to see all of the clothes, shoes, and hair products. He'd told me repeatedly that he wanted to see my side of the closet fill up. Probably because it meant I'd stick around a little longer.

Despite all of the shopping and being so warmly welcomed into the new home, Cane worked a lot of hours and had to travel often. He was trying to

stick close to Charlotte, but with Lora and Miss Cane around, I told him it was fine. I wasn't alone in that huge house, and even though Lora was on the hunt to have her own place, she promised not to move into one until I felt good enough to be on my own again.

But of course, in spite of all of the positivity, there was a downfall—I hadn't spoken to my parents much since I left home. I called Mom the night after I'd arrived and told her I'd made it safely, but she didn't have much to say. She was glad I'd made it safely, but told me to be careful.

I had even started a group chat with them the day after that arrival to check in and see how they were doing. Mom responded and said she was fine. Dad didn't, but I already knew he wasn't going to. Like I said—grudges.

I tried not to let the heavy stuff weigh me down, like Kelly's stupid slap on the wrist, and also the fact that my parents were sitting on \$50,000 from the case and hadn't told me about it. I kind of wished Cane hadn't told me. Somehow it felt better not knowing what was going to happen to her and expecting the worst punishment possible, than to hear about that measly sentence she got and what the outcome was for my parents.

From what Cane had told me, she was already in psych and no longer a threat to us...but she was only going to be in there for a few years. We could have all the restraining orders in the world, but I knew that when Kelly wanted something, she went after it, even if the cost was her freedom.

On the other hand, my injury was much, much better, and time was healing the emotional wounds between Cane and me. But there was one thing I was afraid to follow through with—one thing I knew he was a little bothered about—we hadn't had sex since I came to Charlotte.

There were moments when he'd come to me, and I'd let him kiss me, slide between my legs. All of my clothes would be off—everything but my panties and bra—but I would stop him before he got *there*, every single time. When I would stop him, he'd roll over casually and then reel me in to spoon me. He always said it was okay, but it was becoming a consistent thing, and I knew he was getting slightly frustrated. Either way, he did a pretty good job of not revealing those frustrations.

About a month into the transition, everything seemed fine. We were all happy. I made use of the sauna often, as well as the whirlpool bathtub in our bathroom, always sinking into it with a good book. There was a room next door to Cane's bedroom that Lora and I had turned into a lounge area. Cane

said the room was mine to do whatever I wanted with, so I bought a bookshelf, some books, notebooks, and even an elliptical, because with all of the delicious meals Miss Cane made, I was going to need to burn the calories off somehow.

I thought everything was smooth sailing until Cane came home one day in a rage. I was lounging on his bed, watching a movie on Netflix, when he barged into the room and slammed a paper down on the dresser. I sat up rapidly, frowning in his direction.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I’m going to fucking kill her,” he growled through his teeth as he turned for the closet.

I hopped off the bed. “What? Kill who?”

“That bitch Kelly.” He yanked at the buttons on his shirt. “She sent me a fucking note today. Straight to my office.”

“A note?” I walked up to him, shoving his hands away and helping him unbutton the shirt, because he definitely wasn’t getting the job done. “What did it say?”

He huffed, and when I was finished unbuttoning the shirt, he snatched it off and tossed it into the hamper. He went back out of the closet, grabbing the folded paper that appeared to have been crumpled before, and offering it to me.

I took it from him, giving him a wary glance before focusing on the folded note. There weren’t many words. There was literally only one sentence.

“I hope you don’t think this is over,” I read out loud. I grimaced at her cursive script before looking up at him. “What is this even supposed to mean?”

“It means she’s fucking insane! She sent this from the clinic she’s in. She’s trying to get under my skin.”

“Well, don’t let her, Cane! Seriously! Tell the clinic not to send you anymore letters from her!”

“How the hell can I *not* let her get under my skin, Kandy? When I think about her, my mind immediately resorts to the shit I would have done ten to twelve years ago. You don’t understand, all right? I want to *get rid* of her. For good.” His eyes were dead serious, more gray than green.

“You can’t do that.” I stared into his eyes. “She’s just toying with you. She probably knows I’m with you. I don’t know how, but I’m sure she has a

gut feeling.”

“I don’t give a fuck about her gut feeling,” he grumbled, sitting on the edge of the bed. He dropped his face and pressed his palms to his forehead, groaning. I stood in front of him, lowering to my knees and grabbing his wrists, gently pulling his hands off his face.

“No one hates her more than me,” I said, “but you’re with me now, okay? You have me. I’m here, Cane.”

“I know,” he murmured. “And that’s what terrifies me. But it scares me even more when you’re away.” His lips pressed together. He studied my face, mostly my eyes. He looked like he wanted to say something else—something more serious—but he turned his head instead, looking through one of the windows. I had a feeling there was more on his mind—more he needed *from me*—but I was too selfish in that moment to ask.

I decided to change the subject instead. “Do you have to travel anywhere tomorrow?”

“No. No more traveling until next week.”

“Good, because I’ve been thinking about what you said a while ago about us having a getaway.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “You said you weren’t ready to go anywhere else yet.”

“I think I am, but not out of the country or anything. I want to go to a place I’ve never been but have always wanted to go to.”

“Where, exactly?”

I grinned. “New York City.”

Cane’s confused expression transformed into a bright, bold smile. “New York City?” he laughed. “Out of all the cities, states, and countries, that’s where you want to go? It’s very overrated; I’ll tell you that now.”

I giggled, holding his hands. “I’ve never been, and I think it would be fun! Look—I’ve been scrolling through Pinterest for fun things to do there and googling hotels we can stay in. There is this one really nice hotel that has rooms that are pretty much made up of windows. It shows all the skyscrapers and buildings—they all seem so close, almost like you can touch them. I can show it to you.”

He smiled wider, eyes soft. “Damn,” he murmured.

“What?” I asked, nervously biting my lip.

“Nothing. I just haven’t seen you this excited for something in so long. Show it to me.”

I hopped up, grabbing my phone and then rushing back to him. I sat on his lap, and he wrapped his arms around me, resting his chin on my shoulder as I scrolled and clicked to get to the site.

“See?” I brought my phone closer. “The only thing is that it’s kind of expensive, but—”

“Done.”

“What?” I looked over my shoulder.

“It’s done. You want to go to New York City, we can go. Send that link to me. I’ll have Cora book us a room and we can fly out tomorrow.”

I turned as far as I could in his arms to see his face. “You’re serious?”

“As long as you don’t mind me making a few calls while we’re there, then I’m dead serious. You need to travel. See different things.”

Biting my bottom lip, I turned fully in his arms. I wrapped my legs around his waist, and laced my arms over his shoulders. “Are you just saying yes because you feel guilty?”

“No. I really want to take you somewhere. Get you away—like, really away. Plus you’re excited about it. Can’t pass that feeling up.”

“Of course.” I rested my forehead on his shoulder. He held me tighter. “Listen, I’m sorry about not doing anything...I mean...”

I sighed. I couldn’t even complete my sentence. I had no idea what was wrong with me. I mean, everything seemed to be getting better. Ever since I had reunited with Cane, most of my nightmares had subsided. I had two incidents where I screamed in my sleep. The first time it happened, he was there to hold me and rock me back to sleep.

The second time, he wasn’t, but somehow Miss Cane heard me and came up to the room, holding me in her arms and humming a sweet song to me until I fell asleep again. She was the last person I’d expected. She really was a good person. Now I could see why Cane had fought so hard to protect her and to get her clean.

“*You’re a brave girl,*” she said that night when I laid back down. “*Brave and beautiful. I admire you.*” Miss Cane wasn’t much of a talker, I knew, so when she spoke, I had reason to believe everything she said was honest. With those words, I went back to sleep that night and woke up peacefully the next morning.

Still, the nightmares weren’t as bad as when I was without him. Being with him made me feel much more alive.

“Don’t be sorry,” he said, his voice calm. “I understand.”

“But you need it. Me.”

At that, he laughed, a deep, heavy chuckle that made my belly clench in the best way possible. “Fuck yeah, I need you, but I’m patient. I’ll be ready when you are.”

I picked my head back up, placing a kiss on his lips. After I was done, I said, “Maybe I should put my new wardrobe to use for the trip, huh?”

“You and Lora spent over \$2,500 on clothes. Hell yeah, you better put that wardrobe to use.” I giggled as he latched his fingers behind me, locking me in. “You do know that I love you, Kandy? Right?”

“Yes, Cane.”

“And that I will do anything for you?”

“I know you will.”

“I mean it, baby. *Anything.*”

“You’ve only told me, like, a million times,” I laughed, then kissed him to shut him up. I knew he would do anything for me. His guilty heart always compelled him to spill that truth, but there was no need for him to feel so badly anymore. I’d forgiven him a long time ago. It was time for us to move forward now. Time for us to go back to being the Kandy Cane we used to be.

We didn’t have to hide anymore; we were free to do what we wanted, when we wanted, and all I wanted to do was enjoy our freedom.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CANE

“IT’LL BE A THREE-DAY TRIP,” I SAID AS NEO DROVE TOWARD THE PRIVATE runway. “I have to be back by Sunday afternoon. Cora will handle most of the stuff that needs to be handled at the office, and I’ve already signed some contracts, so I should be okay for our trip.”

“Cane,” Kandy said, a smile riding her lips. “Relax, okay? I’m sure you have it all handled, and even if you don’t, work can wait for once.”

“Okay. All right.” I held my hands up in a small surrender. “I just want you to know that for the next three days, minus the two calls I have to make, I’m all yours.”

“And I’m okay with that.”

She grinned, looking ahead at the jets parked on the strip. She looked so much better than she did a month ago. She’d lost a lot of weight after the accident. I could see it every time she changed clothes around me, and it pained me. I’d never been able to see her ribs before, or so much of her hip bone. I made sure Mama was always around to make her breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Of course Mama didn’t mind. She loved cooking for us when she could. I was glad Kandy didn’t make a big fuss about it, either. She ate every single meal Mama made and loved it.

Her hair, which was frizzy and untamed when she arrived, was shiny and healthy, braided into two neat cornrows, courtesy of Lora. Not only that, but as the morning sun poured through the sunroof, she looked like she

was glowing. Her lips were glossed, her face makeup free. Eyebrows freshly arched. She looked like an angel.

I vowed to never let her get that low ever again. She'd lost confidence in herself. She stopped caring. She'd lost herself completely. I was sure she was still trying to find herself after what had happened and after the bad news she'd found out, but she was coping well—better than I expected. Still, I noticed the sadness in her eyes every so often. She'd stare off sometimes, like she was deep in thought, and when I would ask her what was wrong, she'd shrug it off and say it was nothing. But I knew it was something.

Her parents.

Her future.

A lot had changed for her because of me.

She needed a distraction from reality, and I was ready to give it to her.

WE LANDED IN NEW YORK WITH DECENT TIMING. IT WAS JUST AROUND noon when we got to the hotel she'd been dreaming about.

“Oh my gosh,” she gasped as soon as she was out of the car. “It’s even better in person!” She swept her eyes all over the building, gawking while the driver took our bags out of the trunk, making way for the sidewalk with them. Car horns blared, and there was nothing but noise and chatter and ringing cellphones surrounding us. New York City wasn’t one of my favorite places to visit because of how damn busy it always was, but it was lively and energetic and there was a lot to do here.

It was a little foggy outside, and there was also a chill in the air despite the fact that it was well into spring, but the cool weather wasn’t going to stop us from having a good time.

“Let’s check in,” I murmured on the shell of Kandy’s ear. She nodded, hooking her arm through mine. We entered the hotel, the driver following behind us with our bags, and were greeted warmly by the front desk attendant, a young woman named Tierra. She clearly knew who I was and gushed repeatedly about Tempt’s wine.

“I love it so much!” she said, handing the keys to me. “You know we have Tempt wine on site too?”

“Do you really?” I raised a brow.

“Yes! It can be delivered for room service or served in our hotel restaurant. You’ll see once you check the menu. It’s a favorite around here.”

“Wow. That’s good to hear. I didn’t realize we served here.” I looked at Kandy. “Ready to go up?”

“Absolutely,” she breathed.

“Enjoy your stay, Mr. and Mrs. Cane,” Tierra sang. Kandy blushed while I nodded at Tierra.

“Hmm. Mr. and Mrs. Cane.” I fought a smile, looking sideways at Kandy. “Has a ring to it, doesn’t it?”

She laughed. “I’d say so.”

It took no time getting up the elevator. When I opened the door to our room, I could see why Kandy was so stuck on staying here. Almost everything inside it was white but the counters in the kitchen area, which were a tan marble. There were a few items with accent color on the walls, like the clock being a sea green, and the small, built-in aquarium showcasing vibrant, beautiful fish, but the walls, floors, and even the comforter on the bed was white.

I think the best part was where the bed was located: tucked right in a corner of the room, closest to the windows. It was swathed in a thick comforter and fluffy white pillows, and the view beyond it was incredible. Skyscrapers and buildings stood tall and strong, and Kandy was right—the buildings seemed so close you could touch them. It was perfect.

“Wow.” Kandy rushed toward the window, looking down. We were in the penthouse suite, overlooking almost everything.

“Is this what you wanted?” I asked behind her.

“It is. I love it so much, Cane.” She turned to face me. “It’s exactly what I needed.”

I met up to her when she turned to look out the window again. Placing my chin on her shoulder, I wrapped my arms around her midsection. “I’m glad it’s what you needed; let’s try to make the most of it. You hungry?”

She turned in my arms with a grin. “Very.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

KANDY

CANE TOOK ME TO A RESTAURANT HE'D BEEN TO WHEN HE VISITED BEFORE, one that he loved, and I was pleased to say that I felt the same. The bourbon salmon was delicious.

For our first day, we didn't do too much. We were more like tourists, taking walks, sightseeing and window shopping, although Cane insisted on buying things that awed me. Of course, I didn't let him.

There were so many roads and so much noise. It was beautifully chaotic, and had definitely distracted me enough that I was totally focused on the moments we were in.

When it got darker, we made our way back to the hotel, but we weren't in a rush. The walk was slow, casual. Cane had his arm hooked over my shoulder, and I was leaning into him as we walked, a small, goofy smile on my face.

"You're smiling," he pointed out.

"Am I not allowed to?" I looked up at him.

"Of course you are. I'm happy to see you doing it." He held me tighter. "Just curious to know what that smile is for."

"I'm smiling because of you, *man*."

"Because of me?" He looked down, smiling too. "Stop it, *girl*. You know it's not because of me."

I laughed at the dumb inside joke we'd started when we got here. We were window shopping, and I told him I didn't need more shoes to take home and he said, "If you say so, *girl*." I told him, "I'm serious, *man*." Since then, we'd kept at it. Our own little thing only we could understand.

"You may not think so, but you make me happy."

"Happy?" He quirked a brow. "You sure you want to use that word in particular after all the shit you've been through because of me?"

"I'm positive." I spotted an empty bench ahead and grabbed his hand, dragging him to the bench with me. I sat on the middle of it and he dropped down beside me, a confused expression on display.

"The hotel is right over there," he said, pointing in the direction of it.

"I know." I dropped my hands in my lap, looking up at the buildings, the dark blue sky. The sun had dipped beneath the horizon nearly two hours ago. It was dark and crisp out, a comforting chill in the air. "I just want to enjoy it a little more before we go up."

I felt him looking at me while I still had my eyes pointed to the sky. It was seriously so beautiful, and even though there were a lot of lights surrounding us, I could spot a sprinkle of stars.

"I've spent a lot of time with you, but never heard you mention going to New York. What makes you so fascinated with it now?"

I shrugged. "I don't know." I lowered my gaze, looking at him through the corner of my eye before focusing on the tips of my black and white Nikes. "When Kelly hurt me, I just remember thinking that I wasn't ready to die yet."

I looked at him and he closed his eyes, his entire body tensing.

I placed my hand on the top of his. "But it wasn't like an '*oh shit, I don't want to die*' kind of thing. It was more of a '*I don't want to die not knowing what the world looks like*', kind of thing."

His eyes popped open and expanded, like that was the last thing he thought he would hear. "Oh...I see..."

"When I was younger, I remember making this bucket list with Frankie. New York City wasn't at the top of our list, but after what happened, and when you asked me about a getaway, I started to wonder, why not, you know? I mean, New York City should be experienced at least once in a person's life, especially if they live in this country. It's also a city that is always in TV shows and movies, so it's the obvious place to visit first."

He chuckled. "Very true." He grabbed my hand and caressed it with the pad of his thumb. "Where else do you want to go?"

I thought on it for a moment. "New Orleans, Belize, any part of California, Bora Bora, Scotland, Paris...a few other places."

"I bet I can make all of those happen one day. I can take you to each and every one of them."

I smiled, meeting his eyes. "Would you really?"

"Yep." He wrapped an arm around me, pulling me to his side. After dropping a kiss on my temple, he said, "Just say when and I'll make it happen."

I put my arm around him, resting my cheek on his chest. I breathed in and could smell hot dogs grilling on nearby hot dog stands. "I love it like this."

"Like what?"

"When it's just us. No interruptions or distractions. No warnings or secrets."

"Me too," he murmured.

I picked my head up, then grabbed his hand and stood. "Come on." I bobbed my head toward the hotel. "Let's go back."

He stood too, and we walked hand-in-hand back to the hotel. Of course, Tierra smiled at us from behind the counter. "You guys are so cute," she said dreamily, as if she wished she had her own Mr. Cane.

All I could do was smile at her.

On the way up the elevator, it was only us, and as soon as the doors closed, Cane stepped in front of me, caging me between his arms.

"What are you doing?" I asked, smiling, my breaths ragged.

Our foreheads connected, and his lips came down on mine. He kissed me whole and deep, and it was unexpected, but I melted with the kiss anyway. I felt like I was going to turn into a pile of mush. I curled my fingers into his black jacket, bringing my other hand up and curling those fingers in the hair at the nape of his neck.

A moan gushed out of me, and Cane started to pull away when the elevator chimed, but I didn't want the kiss to stop. I reeled him back in with a tug of his jacket. A deep groan erupted from his chest, and he picked me up in his arms, carrying me out of the elevator.

I don't know what came over me at that point. I suppose this always happened. We'd kiss so hard, grind, tug, and pant, but as soon as he got

down *there*, I'd panic. I always panicked.

Cane stumbled toward our room door. I felt him digging in his pockets with one hand for the key. Once retrieved, he stuck it into the lock, pushing the door open, all while I kissed him on his lips, his neck, his cheeks, anywhere I could put my mouth. The door automatically shut behind us, and he wasted no time going toward the bed.

My heartbeat ratcheted up as he placed me down and then climbed on top of me, making out with me just as passionately as he had in the elevator. He sucked my bottom lip between his teeth, and a soft groan filled my throat. I was heated, ready...but so fucking terrified. God, why was I so scared?

Cane snatched off his jacket and then pulled his shirt over his head, revealing his beautiful, lean, inked body. I sat up, kissing from his chest to his stomach, and when I got to the waist of his jeans, I unbuttoned them with shaky hands and even shakier breaths. My hands shook so badly that he stopped me when I got to his zipper.

"Kandy," he warned.

"It's okay," I assured him. It'd been a little over a month since I returned, and I owed him this much. He *needed* me. I couldn't be selfish anymore. I continued unzipping his pants, shoving them down his legs. I started to pull his briefs down, but he grabbed both of my hands, bringing them up so I'd have no choice but to follow the action.

He caught my eyes, and it was in that moment when I realized my vision was slightly blurry.

"Fuck, Kandy. Look at you." His face softened, eyes swirling with a mixture of desperation and sadness. His voice was soft, and it made my chest ache. My heart was still drumming.

"I want it...I want you," I told him, keeping my voice as steady as I possibly could. I tried pulling away, but he held on tighter.

"Stop, Kandy." He brought my knuckles to his lips, kissing both hands. "This isn't a race, all right? You don't have to rush to get back to how you were before."

"I'm not rushing, Cane. I *do* want you. I miss you so much. I'm just..." I inhaled sharply.

"Just what?"

"I don't know...I mean, my doctor said I would be fine three more weeks after my appointment. I guess I'm just worried that it won't *feel* the

same.”

He sighed, nodding. “I get it.”

Releasing my hands, he laid flat on his back on the bed, then flicked his fingers, gesturing for me to come to him. I kicked off my shoes and went to him, resting my cheek on his chest. His heartbeat was steady, comforting. I closed my eyes, breathing as evenly as possible.

“Maybe if we go slow,” I suggested. “I mean...not our usual rough, dirty stuff.”

At that, he chuckled, and hearing it made me smile. “That’s going to be tough. Rough and dirty is all I know,” he teased, and I laughed. He placed a finger beneath my chin, tilting it up so I could look at him. “It doesn’t have to be tonight, Kandy. I told you I’ll be ready when you are.”

“I want it to be tonight. Today was so perfect. I want to end it that way too.”

He rubbed my cheek with the pad of his thumb. “Having sex doesn’t make everything perfect, little one.”

“It will tonight, though.” I pushed up on my elbow, looking down at him. “If it becomes too much, or if I feel overwhelmed, I’ll tell you. I promise.” I cupped his face. “Please, Cane.”

He groaned, squeezing the bridge of his nose with two fingers. “I’m afraid I’ll hurt you, Kandy. What if you aren’t healed enough?”

I smiled down at him. “I think we’ve been through this already. You didn’t hurt me my first time. It was great...and I feel fine down there now. I trust my body...I’m just nervous...”

He dropped his hand, looking me in the eyes carefully. I guess he saw how serious I was, because he finally said, “Okay,” and then rolled on top of me. He pushed up on his knees, helping me take my jeans off. I kicked my way out of them, and he went for my long-sleeved shirt next. When it was off, his eyes traveled down. He focused on the scar, the dark brown line on my pelvis. It wasn’t directly in the middle, but more so to the right and in a long slant.

I hated looking at it because it always reminded me of where it came from and who did it. My body didn’t have many imperfections, other than childhood scars on my knees and legs, but this was one that I was going to have to look at and live with for the rest of my life.

“You’re beautiful,” Cane murmured, crouching down. His lips pressed to the crook of my neck, then my collarbone, and then traveled down my

chest. “Lift up for me,” he rasped, and I sat up a bit while he reached under me to unhook my bra. When it was loose, he helped me out of it, then tossed it aside. He continued his way down my body, kissing the valley between my breasts and working his way over, sealing his mouth around my nipple and sucking until it became a pebble. My breath hitched when he let go and made his way over to the other one, sucking gently.

He kept making his way down more and more, until he was at my navel. He kissed me just below my belly button, then hovered over the scar. *What is he doing?*

“Your fear is rooted deep,” he finally said, and I glanced down while he held my hips. “You think that when I look at this scar, I’ll only think of *her*.”

I swallowed hard, my pulse whooshing in my ears.

“But that’s wrong, baby.” His breath was warm on my skin as he spoke. “Look at me,” he ordered, and I locked on his eyes. He lowered his face to kiss my scar. Not once, not twice, but three times. He kissed it like he was in love with it—like that scar was my lips, and he owned it. “From now on, when you see it, I want you to think of it as a victory. I want you to remember that you fought through it and you *won*. When you see it, I want you to remember that you *conquered* it. You understand?”

My eyes filled with tears as I nodded.

“She doesn’t own this scar, Kandy. She doesn’t own *you*. Your body is *yours*. Your mind is *yours*. Don’t let either one escape you again.” He dropped another kiss on it. “I take you as you are, Kandy. With or without scars. With or without babies. With or without tears. It changes nothing for me, and I mean it. I still love you the same—if not more. I don’t care what you go through or how much shit changes while we’re together, I’m here for you. I accept you, and this scar?” His head shook. “It means nothing to me because I *see* you as so much more than you see yourself.” He brought a hand up to push my legs apart. “And I mean it, baby. I fucking love you, from the bottom of my heart, and always will.”

After his last statement, his tongue pushed through the lips of my pussy. A gasp so sharp it could have cut through glass ripped right through me, and my back bowed. He held my waist, plunging his tongue deeper, rolling it over my aching clit. I’d been worked up for months, and was sure he had been too. We fooled around and teased, and I think all of it led up to this very moment.

My fingernails dragged over the sheets, and I moaned harder with every swirl of his tongue. Tears were at the corners of my eyes, on the verge of falling, and as he lapped me up, devouring me like I was all he ever wanted to taste, the tears fell, and I came. I came so hard and so fast that I didn't even have time to prepare for it.

My cries echoed off the walls, a mixture of release and ecstasy bursting through me. In that moment, I was letting it all go. The hurt, the fear, the loneliness—everything that was setting me back before.

Cane was right. I was letting what happened rule me, even when I promised myself I wouldn't. She was in my past.

Gone.

Abandoned.

Dust.

But he was here—right here—giving me everything I wanted and needed.

This wasn't my typical kind of orgasm. No, this was *ethereal*. My tears wouldn't stop flowing, and my cries transitioned to whimpers. My worries had been chased away, and all I wanted was him. He climbed on top of me as the wave of my release settled, kissing my lips, drinking my cries. Eventually, I started kissing him back, digging my nails into his waist. I felt his cock at my entrance, and he breathed raggedly. He was so hard—I could feel him, dying to be inside me.

"You okay?" he asked, smoothing my hair back.

"Yeah," I gasped. "Take me. Please?" I begged.

He was torn, I knew. Like he'd said earlier, he didn't want to hurt me. I knew all he wanted to do was go fast and come, but he didn't. He thrust into me, and I held onto him tightly.

"Kandy, I—"

"Keep going," I pleaded, and as if he couldn't resist the sound of my voice, the way that I begged, he thrust even deeper. There was a sharp pain that made me gasp, and he was about to jerk back, but I shook my head, holding him. "Don't stop," I breathed. "It's okay. Keep going."

His breaths came out ragged and quick and with one more thrust, he was fully inside me. I gasped even louder, a heavy sensation taking over me. "Fuck, Kandy," he hissed. "I'm stopping."

"No, Cane."

"Yes! I'm hurting you!"

“No, you’re not. I swear.” I clutched his upper arm with one hand, using my other to pull his face closer to mine. I kissed him deep, and he groaned behind my lips. I expected him to pull away—I felt the resistance as I claimed his lips—but then he let go, and his muscles relaxed, and slowly his hips began to move. His strokes were short and easy, and with each one, the pain faded.

I held onto him even tighter and kissed him as hard as my lips would allow me to. Cane broke the kiss, cursing beneath his breath. “Fuck,” he growled on my mouth. Bringing his hands up, he cradled my face in his hands, devouring me all over again. His cock felt so big inside me that it was almost unbearable, but the longer he went, the more my body adjusted to his size again.

Every single one of my moans became tangled with his groans. Every breath was a release of the toxic past that I so badly wanted to leave behind. He dropped his head, resting his forehead on my shoulder, his cock buried deep inside me. I missed this feeling so much.

Him on top of me.

Him *inside* me.

Owning me.

“Gonna come inside of you,” he panted, and it didn’t matter to me if he did or didn’t. I nodded, wanting to give him whatever he needed. My pussy clenched around his girth, and as he pumped just a little bit faster, a growl ripped through him. “Ah, shit, Kandy,” he moaned, his mouth going to the crook of my neck.

He picked his head up to look down at where we were connected, and I felt his cock pulsing inside me as he came. “Fuck, there’s so much cum. It’s everywhere.” He looked up at me, his eyes sparkling, a faint smile on his lips. “It’s been so long, baby.”

“I know it has,” I murmured.

He dropped his body as gently as possible on top of mine. I closed my eyes, unable to fight the smile that swept over my lips.

“You okay?” he asked in my ear after several quiet minutes.

I opened my eyes, running my palm over his shoulder. “I’m so much better now.”

“I love you, *girl*.”

I giggled. “I love you, *man*.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CANE

WE MADE LOVE TWO MORE TIMES THAT NIGHT, EACH TIME BETTER THAN THE last. I never knew making love could feel so good and form a connection so deep that I felt it in my spirit. Each time was enigmatic and amazing, especially when she found the confidence to climb on top and ride me until I came.

Her pussy was so tight, her tits bouncing as she worked her hips up and down. She'd unbraided her hair in between rounds, so when she rode me, some of her hair fell over her face. With the city lights pouring through the windows and the moon beaming down, she looked damn near exotic. She had no idea how perfect she was—no scar was going to take away from that.

“You’re so damn beautiful, baby,” I whispered, and when she came all over me, I came too. Coming *inside her* was another league of its own. It couldn’t be described—only felt.

Kandy was the only woman who could take my breath away. She was the only girl who made me feel like a king—like I was on top of the world by having her in my arms. Being with her made everything in my world feel right, which was why when she wasn’t around, everything unraveled.

I wasn’t sure what time it was after we’d finished. I wasn’t big on sleeping during the middle of the night and lately, Kandy wasn’t a big sleeper either. We were both lying on the bed, her head on my chest. We

breathed softly, not really talking. Just listening to the noises outside the windows—the faint sounds of cars and buses rolling by.

Don't ask me how it was so peaceful. It was just was. The moon was bold and full, making her tan skin appear brighter.

Kandy traced a finger over the rose on the back of my hand. When she moved up to my knuckles, she tapped each one and made a small noise. "I've always wondered what that stood for," she said. "Rise? You have it there and here." She leaned up to kiss the bend of my neck, where the word RISE was permanent in my skin.

"Hmm." I lifted my hand, studying my knuckles. "Long story."

"Lora has the same word on her wrist. Did you get them together?"

"The one on my neck, I got alone, but the one on my knuckles, I got with her."

"What does it mean?"

"A lot of things for us. But we got them as more of a promise."

"A promise for what?"

"To never let anyone *knock us the fuck down...*" I smirked. "Lora's words."

She laughed.

"I got the one on my neck when I was sixteen. I had a little altercation with Buck. He was beating on my mother, so for the first time in my life, I hit him back. I shoved him, and he got pissed and hit me back, of course, but I didn't fall and curl up like before. I stood my ground, taking the hit. He hit me again, made my mouth bleed, so I hit him back. I guess he realized I was getting old enough to do something about his shit, so he stormed out and left the house for a week."

"Wow," she breathed. "Well, at least you stood your ground. Scared him off."

"Yeah." I sighed. "The second time was much worse, though." My throat tightened just thinking about it. "I...uh...caught him with Lora." I cleared my throat. Fuck, I hated talking about this.

Kandy grabbed my hand and entwined our fingers. "It's okay," she murmured. "You don't have to tell me."

"I want to. It's just...I hate thinking about it. Pisses me off every time I do. I've never talked to anyone about it other than my family and your dad."

"I understand," she said softly.

I closed my eyes, letting the hate dissolve enough so I could tell her. “I caught him in Lora’s room. Lora had to be about twelve at the time. I was twenty and in college, but I came back and forth to help Lora and Mama out when they needed me. I ran to the store one day and left Lora there. Buck wasn’t around all day, so I figured she would be fine, plus she said she didn’t feel like going, so I went alone. But when I got back and saw his truck there, my heart literally dropped to my fucking stomach. I heard Lora screaming and dropped the groceries to run inside. I got to her room, and that motherfucker was on top of her with his pants halfway down. He had her skirt off, but thankfully couldn’t get to her panties because she was putting up a fight. All I remember is seeing red that day. I mean, I flipped the fuck out. I knew he hit my mother often, and he hit me too, but when it came to Lora, that shit heated me up.” I clenched my fists, opening my eyes. “I snatched him off of her and hit him so hard in the face that his nose broke. He started gushing blood—it was all over the place, pouring all over Lora’s carpet. I remember screaming at him to never touch her again, to leave her the hell alone. All of these threats. He tried to fight back, but I wasn’t letting him that time. I beat him until his face was bloody, then I went to his closet and got his gun, pointing it right at him. Lora literally had to beg me to calm down before I ended up killing him.”

Kandy let out a sympathetic sound and squeezed my hand tighter.

I continued. “When she got me to calm down, she took me to my room, and it took me a while to pull myself together. I was so mad that I didn’t even realize how distraught she was. I had to chill out, so I helped her wash up and find something else to wear. Buck was still on her floor, still cursing and threatening us, even though he was clearly fucked up. I remember when Lora walked by, she stared at him. I kept telling her to come with me, but she kept staring at him. Watching him. And then she went up to him and stomped on his balls.”

“Holy shit! Are you serious? Lora did that?”

I smiled, remembering the look on Buck’s face as she did it. “Yeah, she did. Apparently that wasn’t his first time touching her. He’d done it before, but Lora hid it from me. That day I made her promise to never hide shit like that from me again.” I released my fingers, showing Kandy my knuckles. “To us, RISE means to never fall. RISE means it’s okay to stumble and to be afraid, but to never back away from our fears. Instead, we face them. It means that if we get knocked down, we will get the fuck back up and face

whatever is trying to ruin us. Of course we had more altercations with him growing up, but Buck damn sure didn't touch Lora like he used to. After that happened, she grew a backbone. She decided she was done taking his shit and was standing her ground with him and Mama. That's why she's so fucking stubborn now." I laughed, and Kandy laughed with me. "When Lora turned eighteen, I remember her calling and telling me she wanted to get her first tattoo. That's when I got this one and she got hers. After she got her first one, it became an addiction, and she got a whole lot more, as you can plainly see. Same happened to me, though." I grinned. "Lora is strong-willed and stubborn, but she has every reason to be. Our childhoods were awful. We had a mother who loved drugs and alcohol more than us, and an emotionally and physically abusive father who always swore we wouldn't amount to anything. One of my missions in life was to prove him wrong, and I have...but now he's trying to come for the company that I built from the ground up."

"What's going on with him anyway? Where is he?" she asked.

"He's still in Georgia. He's been there since he was released because he's been on probation...but I know he's planning something. It's been a few months, but he's not an idiot. He's keeping quiet, but he'll come once his probation hearing is done. It's just a matter of time after that."

"Oh."

I exhaled, bringing her on top of me. Her hair curtained one side of her face, a soft smile on her lips.

"I want a tattoo too," she said.

"Really?" I kissed her cheek. "Where would you get it?"

She pointed to the outside of her hand, near the edge of her pinky finger. "Right here. I want it to say RISE too."

I smiled. "I can arrange that."

She laid her head on my chest, and I kissed the top of it. I felt so much better after filling her in on the truth.

Before I knew it, we'd fallen asleep. Only us, beneath the milky moon, with the sounds of the city surrounding us.

Only us, just the way I liked it.

CHAPTER TWENTY

KANDY

WHEN I FELL ASLEEP, THERE WAS ONLY THE PALE MOON, BUT WHEN I WOKE up, the yellow sun was beaming down on me through the window. I moaned and rolled over, reaching for Cane, but he wasn't there. Startled by the realization, I sat up and looked around the room. He was nowhere in sight.

"Cane?" I called.

No answer.

I pushed out of bed, grabbing the T-shirt he'd worn last night and tugging it over my head. I tiptoed my way to the kitchenette, and that's when I spotted the note on the counter.

Went to the lobby to make a call.

You were sleeping so peacefully, and I didn't want to wake you.

I'll be back with breakfast.

I grinned while reading the note again. He would probably be a while. That being the case, I went to my suitcase, pulling out some clothes for the day. I took a shower, washed my hair, and when I came back out with my toothbrush hanging out of my mouth, I spotted Cane in the kitchen.

"Will French toast do?" he asked, glancing over his shoulder.

"French toast sounds perfect. And it smells good," I garbled out. I went back to the bathroom to finish up, got dressed, and then met him at the

table.

He had both of our plates ready, so I dug right in.

“Sorry I wasn’t here when you woke up. I had to make those calls today for Cora.”

“It’s fine. Stop apologizing.”

He smirked and cut into his toast, popping a piece into his mouth. “You like art?”

I shrugged. “Sure.”

“What do you say we go to a museum today?” His eyes shimmered, and I laughed, grabbing the syrup.

“That sounds fun, babe. Let’s do it.”

“Oh, I’m your babe now?” he teased.

“Oh, shut up.” I giggled. “You’ve always been my babe.”

“I’m surprised you aren’t using that word all my interns use now. What is it? *Bay*, or some shit like that?”

“You mean *bae*?” I broke out in another laugh. “And no. I hate that word so much.”

“Yeah.” His nose scrunched up. “Me too.”

AFTER EATING, CANE TOOK A QUICK SHOWER. I DID MY MAKEUP WHILE HE was in there, and we were off. He ended up taking me to The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Going there felt strange. I’d never been in a museum on vacation, but I felt very hip for going—like I was ahead of my own time and generation. There were so many different forms of artwork there, some of it catching my attention much more than I thought it would. We spent an hour and a half at the museum, but instead of calling his driver, Cane flagged down a taxi, all because I was dying to have the experience of riding in a taxi in New York City.

To be perfectly clear, I hated it. All the movies I’d watched weren’t kidding about the traffic. It was awful. Due to our late start that morning, we ate a late lunch, and then after lunch, we walked to Central Park, where a small band was doing live music. The cool thing about this band, though, was that they played on recycled items: the drummer played on empty paint containers and old pot lids, and the singer didn’t have a mic, but was

playing an acoustic guitar, while another guy played a harmonica, and another woman used a stick over the ridges of a water bottle.

To my complete surprise, Cane danced with me, right in the middle of Central Park.

“I never took you for a dancer!” My voice was shrill as he held my hand and reeled me into him.

“There are a lot of things you don’t know about me, Kandy Cane.” He smiled, and it was everything to me.

To say our day was amazing wasn’t enough. It was phenomenal. Breathtaking. Every single moment was pure bliss. The sun began to sink again, so Cane called a driver and had him take us back to the hotel. Once we were inside the room, that feeling came over me again—the one where I couldn’t keep my hands off of him.

“Take me again,” I urged.

He laid me on the bed, but flipped me over so my backside was facing his front. He took off all of my clothes, and when his pants were gone, he climbed on the bed behind me, causing it to dip. His hand pressed to my upper back, and he pushed down just enough for me to rest my cheek on the comforter.

“Tell me if it’s too much,” he rumbled, voice thick, and he moved his hips forward, slowly entering me from behind. I clutched the sheets, sighing as he plunged his way in.

“Oh, God,” I panted, not because it hurt, but because it felt so damn good.

“You like that?” His voice was huskier. He pulled back and thrust forward again, and I clutched the sheets.

“Yes,” I breathed raggedly. “Keep going.”

“You really love having my cock deep inside you, don’t you, baby?”

“Yes. I want you to come inside me again,” I pleaded, and for a moment he paused, and I opened my eyes. I sat up, peering over my shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“You know I love coming inside you, but you’ve never *begged* for it. Why do you want me to now?”

“I don’t know. I just do. It doesn’t matter anymore, right?”

He shook his head. “It does matter.”

“It doesn’t.” I pulled away, grabbing his hand and forcing him onto his back. Climbing on top of him, I lowered my body until the crown of his

cock was in my pussy.

He groaned heavily. "Shit, Kandy."

"What?" I breathed.

"I know what you're trying to do."

"What are you talking about?"

"There's still a possibility of it happening. The doctor never said it was *impossible*."

"I know it's not."

He held my hips in place when I started to ride him, and I could tell it took everything in him to make me stop. "Not like this. Not while you're so young."

"I'll be twenty this year."

"Reminding me of your age doesn't change a damn thing. That's still too young to have a kid. You want to go back to college, right?"

"Yes, but—"

"No buts. I know I did it last night—too many times, obviously—but I was being reckless because we hadn't done it in a while."

"I just want to try, Cane," I whined.

"Kandy," he warned, voice gravelly as I worked my hips again. "Please. It's not the right time to try."

"Just...try with me. If it doesn't work, then I'll let it go, I swear."

"But what if it does?" he asked, then groaned as I rolled my hips forward.

"Then we'll worry about that when we get there."

He started to say something else, but I didn't let him. I lowered my chest and placed my mouth on top of his, pushing my tongue through his lips while working my hips. From this angle, I could feel every single inch of him. I held his face, bouncing up and down on his cock, loving the sounds he made, like having me on top of him was the best feeling in the world.

With every swirl, lift, and drop of my hips, I could feel him getting harder and harder inside me.

"Oh, shit, Kandy," he growled on my mouth. "I'm about to come."

I don't know why that made my belly flip with pleasure. I sat up and went a little faster, one hand flat on his chest, and my other massaging my breast. He watched me perform the action on top of him, and then his eyes glazed over, his lips parting.

“Get up,” he forced out, but I didn’t move. “Baby, up,” he pleaded, but I deepened the jerk of my hips, keeping him all in. “Oh fuck! I’m about to come!” His hands went to my hips, locking me in place, and I yelped as he thrust his entire length into me. He cursed repeatedly as he came, the back of his head hitting the pillows, his mouth still wide open, indulging in the orgasm.

When his body was no longer tense, I leaned forward and kissed his upper lip.

“You’re hardheaded as fuck,” he said, then spanked my ass.

I smiled down at him, lowering my face to kiss the crook of his neck. “You made me this way.”

He let out a raspy laugh. “We’ll talk about what just happened on the flight home. I’m feeling too good right now to regret it.”

I couldn’t fight my smile, and even though the next day rolled by, Cane spoke nothing of what happened, though I was sure he wanted to. I think he came to the agreement that if something did happen, we’d face it when it arrived, but as for now, he left it as is. Although we did have sex that morning, he was in control, and he pulled out and came on my belly, smirking down at me as he pumped his cock. I stuck my tongue out at him but he caught it between his lips, sucking on it briefly before letting me go.

We spent our last day eating and walking and doing more sightseeing. We even shopped for a few things, and Cane stopped by a jeweler store to look at rings. I told him he was insane. He told me he was in love.

I wasn’t ready to go back, but that dreaded Sunday came anyway, and we were on the jet, and I was curled in his arms. “Did you have fun?” he asked.

“I did. It was everything, Cane. I don’t want to go back.”

“I know.” He hugged me tight around the shoulders, kissing my cheek. “Me either, baby.”

I fought the urge to sulk about it. We had so much fun, and the time seemed to fly by. Now, we were going back to reality, and I really wasn’t in the mood for it.

WE MADE IT HOME SAFE AND SOUND, DROPPING OUR SUITCASES AT THE door and heading up stairs. I crashed on the bed while Cane spoke to Lora on the phone. She'd gone to California with Miss Cane.

"Did you visit Aaron?" I heard Cane ask from the closet. "Oh yeah? What did he say?" Silence. "Well, it was bound to happen, Lora. You can be sad about it, but you know he wasn't any good for you anyway. You'll waste your life waiting for him. Plus you deserve better." Silence again. "All right. See you Tuesday." Cane came back out of the closet, sliding his phone into his back pocket.

"Is she okay?" I asked.

"Probably a little heartbroken, but she'll be okay."

"She doesn't talk about Aaron with me much."

"Yeah, 'cause she knows he's a dipshit." He rolled his eyes. "He was never any good for her, and they were not compatible at all. She's thickheaded, and he's just as stubborn as she is."

"Yeah, but she loved him, right?"

"Yeah, for all the wrong reasons." He sat beside me. "She can do better. She doesn't need to settle for men like him anymore."

"She'll figure it out, I'm sure."

"Yep. Until then, she's here with me. Where she needs to be. I don't need her running off and into the arms of some other idiot."

"Um, I'm pretty sure no guy is ever going to be good enough to you when it comes to Lora."

"Damn right," he said, and I cracked a smile, shaking my head.

"You are so relentless."

He grabbed my chin, dropping a kiss on my lips. "And you are perfect." He gave me another deep kiss, and for the rest of the day, we chilled out. We ate lunch and dinner, and around 9:00 p.m., he had to go to his office to make some calls and email a few people back. I decided to lounge on the couch and watch romantic comedies on Netflix. But as I watched the movies, I couldn't help glancing at my phone.

I hadn't heard from my parents in a few weeks, and I wanted to call so badly, but I wasn't even sure what to say to them. I knew Mom would ask me to come back, and Dad probably wouldn't even bother talking to me. Even though I loved being with Cane, I missed them so damn much. I promised myself I would call the next afternoon, but I shouldn't have because that promise haunted me, snatching away precious moments of my

sleep. It didn't help that Cane was still working in his office, well past 2 a.m., when I finally fell asleep.

Eventually I did drift off, and for some strange reason, I dreamed that I was in the middle of an ocean, floating on a small piece of wood. I was going nowhere, and for some odd reason, I *liked* it.

Something about my dream told me that I liked being in the middle of the ocean because I was no longer facing the worries at home. But when I woke up with Cane holding me, I knew being alone was the last thing I ever wanted.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CANE

THEY ALWAYS SAY THERE IS CALM BEFORE THE STORM. IN MY WORLD, IF there is too much calmness, there is a definite storm headed my way. I should have been prepared for the monstrosity—ready for it to shut the power off and destroy my home, ripping through like a fucking hurricane, but I was so caught up in the moment. So in love. So *content* that I refused to think about that brewing storm...but it was coming.

And this time, it was deadly.

I had to work the following day, but something felt off about it. The air was humid and thick, clinging to my skin, causing me to break out in a sweat. It was hot as hell, the sky covered with bundled gray clouds. It looked like it should have been pouring down raining, but it hadn't...at least not yet. On my way to work, every stoplight turned red. At work, one of the employees spilled coffee on my shoes when I was walking into the building.

I had a normal work day, though, and finished up most of my emails and calls, drawing up new plans for the rest of the year. When I was done, I packed it up, walking down to the lobby with Cora.

“Have a good night, Mr. Cane,” she said as we reached the VIP parking deck.

“Same to you, Cora.”

Her car horn beeped when she pressed her key fob. I watched her crank it up and go, and then headed for my own car, parked in its designated spot in the corner.

I couldn't help feeling like I was being watched while walking. I looked all around me, the hair standing up on the back of my neck and on my arms, but I ignored the feeling and hurried to open the door. I hopped in and left, letting the feeling roll off my back as I hurried home to Kandy.

I EXPECTED A SMILE AND A HUG FROM KANDY WHEN I GOT HOME, BUT I GOT neither. She was sitting on the kitchen counter with a bowl of ice cream in front of her. She wasn't really eating it, though. More like sliding her spoon around in the soupy mess.

"Hey," I said, stepping around the counter.

Her eyes drooped up slowly, and I spotted the hurt in them. "Hey," she murmured.

"What's going on? Why do you look so down?"

She huffed, dropping her spoon. "I called my mom three hours ago, and she hasn't called back yet."

"Maybe she's busy," I offered.

"No. She always answers, Cane. Always. I think she's really upset about the situation we're in. She probably thought I'd be back home by now. I mean, she texted me back before, but this is the first time I'm calling just to call and...*nothing*."

"Hmm."

"Maybe it's best if they don't hear from me," she muttered. "I hurt them bad this time. I've tried not to think about how I just walked away, but I realize it was so fucked up."

"You did what you felt was right at the time, Kandy. Don't beat yourself up about the choices you make. You can always go back home if you need to, talk to them in person if it'll help."

"Yeah, I can, but what if I've ruined my relationship with them forever?"

I shook my head. "I know your parents, and I know there is nothing in this world that can ruin your bond with them. Your mom could be tied up

right now and probably hasn't had a chance to call you back yet. Just try again...or call D."

Kandy rolled her eyes at that last comment, picking her phone up from the counter. "I'll try my mom again." She turned away, dialing as she walked toward the patio door. When she was out, I walked to the fridge, taking out a green apple and biting into it. My phone chimed in my back pocket, and I pulled it out. It was a text from David, the man I paid to keep an eye on Buck.

DAVID: HIS PROBATION HEARING WAS THIS MORNING, BUT HE CHECKED out of his motel a few minutes ago.

I'll follow, keep an eye on where he might be headed.

"GODDAMN IT," I GRUMBLED. I KNEW THIS WAS GOING TO HAPPEN. I HAD no idea his probation hearing would be so soon, but I prayed to God he hadn't checking out of that motel to come find me. I wasn't in the mood for his shit right now.

The patio door slid open again, and I looked halfway over my shoulder before tucking my phone into my pocket, spotting Kandy's figure.

"That was quick. I'm assuming there wasn't an answer?"

"Cane," she whispered, but there was something off about her voice. Although it was quiet, it was tense, panicked. I turned quickly, and my eyes stretched wide when I realized why she sounded so terrified.

The barrel of a silver revolver was pointed at the back of her head, a tan hand wrapped around the wood-inlaid handle. His finger was wrapped around the trigger, and I knew damn well he would pull it without hesitation if he had reason to do so.

I took a step forward with my hands up, silently begging with my eyes that he remain calm as he pushed her inside with his other hand, using the tips of his fingers to nudge her.

His hair was just as I'd remembered—pushed back, slick with gel— but his face wasn't clean like usual. He had dark scruff surrounding his chin and jawline now. His eyes were still the same. Dark and bottomless. I could never read his eyes—never knew if he was annoyed or content. I thought

after so many months, he wouldn't show up at all—that he considered it too risky and didn't want to take any chances—yet there he was. In the flesh. Right when I least expected it.

Draco Molina. Kingpin. Cartel leader. A murderous, intimidating motherfucker.

“Who the hell is she?” he growled, the gun still pointed at her head.

My heart pounded in my chest, my pulse rising in my ears, and I saw tears line Kandy's eyes.

“That's Kandy. She's my girl. She's won't say anything about you, so put the gun down.”

“Just because you tell me she won't doesn't mean I should believe you. She's young. Young people tend to do dumb shit.” His nostrils flared as he looked her over from behind, and then swung his eyes up to put his focus on me. “Give me *one* good reason why I shouldn't blow her brains out right here, right now. And make it quick. I don't have time to waste.”

“Because I love her,” I said hurriedly, fists clenching. I hated when he played these stupid fucking games.

His chin tipped, but his eyes narrowed in exchange. “Love...” He sucked his teeth. “How old are you?”

“She's nine—”

“I'm asking her,” he snarled, still glaring at her. “Turn around and face me.”

With her hands still in the air, she moved her eyes from me and turned slowly to look at him. She was shaking, her bottom lip trembling. The tears that had lined her eyes had spilled. He didn't lower the gun, either. He still held it in her face, lifting it higher and pressing it to her forehead.

“Please,” she pleaded.

He pressed his lips, eyes still hard.

“Draco,” I pleaded. “Stop this shit! She's fucking scared!”

“Good,” he grumbled. “She should be. I want her to know that her life will be mine if she says a fucking word about this encounter. Now, how old are you?”

“Nineteen,” Kandy sobbed, and my chest tightened. I was at a fucking loss. I didn't have a weapon on me, and even if I did, I wouldn't have been able to use it on him. Technically, he was my boss. He was one of the main reasons I'd gotten to where I was in life and with Tempt.

“Okay. Kandy Jennings, correct? Nineteen years old? Your father is Derek Jennings, who happens to be a fucking cop. Your mother is a lawyer. The way I see it, you were born to be a fucking snitch.”

“I—I won’t say anything. I swear!” she cried. “I—I know who you are. I know not to talk.”

He cocked a brow. “You know who I am?” he repeated, then released the cylinder, steadying his hand.

“Draco,” I snarled through clenched teeth, taking another step forward. “Leave. Her. The. Fuck. Alone.”

“Well if you know who I am,” he went on, ignoring me. “Then you know not to do anything stupid, right? Because if you do, then I’ll find out, and I’ll have no choice but to cut your life short, and that would be terrible because I’m sure you have so much to look forward in life.” His head went into a slight tilt, eyes boring into hers. “I know a lot about you, little Kandy Jennings. I know you have a friend named Frankie Martin, right? Yeah, she goes to the University of North Carolina. She’s your best friend. Your mother works at the Hammel Law Firm of Atlanta, and your father is about to be promoted to a sergeant’s position at the Atlanta Police Department.” Kandy’s eyes nearly bulged out of her head, her sobs abruptly stopping. That motherfucker knew everything about her! “Your address is 1716 Peach Tree Lane, and your bedroom is painted sky blue. Yeah,” he sneered. “I know a lot, so if I find out that you, Kandy *Alexandra* Jennings, ran your fucking mouth or uttered my name to anyone other than the man standing behind you, I know where to find you and everyone you love. Since he claims to love you and has proven his loyalty to me, I’m letting you off with a little warning. You may see me now, but when I’m gone, it’ll be like we’ve never even met, right?”

She bobbed her head, sniffing hard. “Yes, yes. I swear.”

“Good girl.” He lowered the gun. “Now go upstairs. I need to talk to Cane alone.” She turned away from him rapidly. “Oh—and before you go,” he called, and she stopped in her tracks, peering over her shoulder, but not fully. Fuck. She was terrified, and I wanted to rip him to pieces for it. “Give me your phone. You’ll get it back when I’m gone. Wouldn’t want you making any stupid, rash decisions while your heart is racing.” He stuck his hand out, and she wasted no time going to him and dropping the phone into his palm like it was on fire.

“Kandy,” I called as she rushed away from him. Her mouth still trembled as she ran into my arms. I kissed her forehead. “It’s okay. Just go upstairs until I come up. All right?”

She nodded and I lightly pushed her out of the kitchen. I heard her running down the hallway, and when I could no longer hear her footsteps, I faced him.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I snapped when I heard a door slam.

“Oh yes, I did. Don’t need her running her mouth.”

“She won’t say anything. I fucking trust her.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t,” he muttered, looking around.

I was getting fed up with him already. He and I could never remain in the same room for long. He got on my nerves just as much as I did his. “Why are you here? If this is about money, you could have called me to wire it.”

“We have that to discuss, among other things.”

“Things like what?”

He frowned. “Like how you’re losing money, not gaining. Did you think I wouldn’t find out?”

“There was a slight hiccup. Shit went downhill for a while, but business is picking up again.”

“Yeah, it went downhill because you were too caught up in *her* young pussy to think clearly.”

“Wrong.”

“Right.”

I let out an agitated breath, shaking my head. “I fixed the issue. Your money has still doubled. I didn’t touch those funds.”

“I know you didn’t. You’re too smart to do something that stupid.” He tucked the gun in the holder clipped to his belt and then placed Kandy’s phone down. “I’m a fugitive now, did you know that? Well, I take that back. I’ve been one for a while, but I really feel like one now since I’m no longer safe in my own country. If I show my face to anyone or do anything, I’ll most likely be turned in. My face is on every news channel, billboard, and highlight reel. There are people who want the cash, and can you blame them? Four million to capture me, dead or alive. Pretty fucking steep.”

I looked him over as he swept his eyes all over my kitchen. “I came to tell you that I’ll be in hiding for a few years, might come back out when things cool off, but I’ll be investing all that I have into Tempt until I find

another solution. Right now, your company is the cleanest. Hasn't been targeted or suspected of any foul shit, no red flags, and that's what I need in order to keep my money safe. I can't keep it in any international accounts of my own anymore. I need it here, right under their noses, where they'd least expect it."

"Okay. I can make that happen. How much are we talking?"

"About \$735 million."

"What?" I spat, frowning. "Draco, I can't make a report of a private investment that big without it getting suspicious. Ten to twenty was fine, but seven hundred? That's too fucking much."

"You're smart enough to figure it out."

I blew a breath. "I think you're overestimating my abilities. The only way I can hide that much is if I have my accountant work with a private offshore bank. Some of it has to go international. Keeping it all here might help you, but it's a big risk for me."

"Then find me an accountant who can do the offshore work. Do whatever you need to do, but I want some of the accounts written in another name."

"Whose?"

"Gianna Nicotera for now."

"Nicotera? Why does that name sound so familiar?"

He glared at me.

My eyes widened. "Wait...isn't she the girl you kidnapped? She belonged to that Italian mob, right?"

He grimaced. "She belonged to me."

"You took her against her free will, and from what I heard, you tortured her. That's kidnapping."

"She had no free will. She was mine since I was thirteen. I had every right to take her from the dirty bastard that didn't fucking deserve her." He was getting agitated now, eyes darkening.

"Okay, look. I don't give a shit about any of that right now. When are you trying to get the money deposited?"

"As soon as possible. I have two of my people coming with some of it in a few days. They'll be delivering it in increments. I want to be here to watch the accounts get set up and to know my money has been moved safely. I also need a favor."

"I can try, Draco, but I can't make any promises. What's the favor?"

“There is no fucking *trying*, Cane. You have no choice but to do this,” he snapped. “Remember that without me, you wouldn’t even have this fucking company. You came to me and made me a promise. You told me if I needed something done, you would make it happen, did you not?”

I sighed. “Yeah.”

“Okay. So make it fucking happen. I don’t want excuses; I want solutions. Figure it out and make sure you keep your name off record. Don’t ring any bells. Split it up if you have to, I don’t care. Just make sure my money is somewhere safe and easy for me to access when I need it.”

I ran my fingers through my hair. “Okay, fine. What’s the favor?”

“Gianna is pregnant.” He rubbed his hand, where his ring finger was. “We’re not sure what the gender is yet, but when the baby is older, we’ve agreed to let him or her come to America to go to school. I’ll need Gianna and the kid in a safe place, and since I won’t be able to be here as much, and she’s too wary to get a home with her or Clark’s name, I figured you could put it under yours.”

I blinked rapidly. “Shit...you got her *pregnant*? You sure she isn’t planning to make a run for it?”

Draco grimaced. “She isn’t planning shit. You’ve only heard the stories, Cane. Gianna and I have been through some shit, but we’re on the same page now. She knows the truth about her past and knows I would do anything to protect her. She’s not my prisoner. She can leave whenever she feels like it. It’s her choice to stay with me.”

“Okay—chill the fuck out.” I rolled my shoulders, releasing some of my own tension. “I didn’t realize things had gotten so serious. Is she the reason I haven’t heard from you in a while?”

He pressed his lips and shrugged. “Let’s just say that I had my hands full because I was dealing with her.” He looked me over once before walking around the island counter. “Why are you with her, anyway? The girl?”

“Do I need a specific reason to be with her?”

He cocked a brow, turning fully to face me. “She’s your best friend’s daughter.”

“He *was* my best friend.”

“And I assume you two are no longer friends because you can’t keep your cock away from her?”

My jaw tightened. “Don’t talk about her like that, and it’s not like you have any fucking room to say shit. Kidnapping women and punishing them and shit.”

He fought a smirk. “I do what I need to do.”

I scoffed, pressing my lower back against the edge of the counter.

Draco folded his arms, leaning against the counter edge across from me. “Are we going to have any problems with her father? He knows a great deal about you and me. You told me he’d keep quiet, but with you and the girl fucking like rabbits—”

“He won’t be a problem. He may be upset, but he wouldn’t jeopardize himself like that, let alone his own daughter. That’s information he’s withheld for years, and not only that, Kandy would be upset if he ran his mouth and it backfired on me. His bond with her would be destroyed, and that’s the last thing he wants right now after everything that’s happened to her.”

“Yeah, speaking of what happened to her—Mario tells me some ex of yours stabbed her?”

I dropped my arms, agitated at the thought of Kelly.

“What happened?” he demanded.

“A woman named Kelly Hugo came to my old house, saw me and Kandy in my bedroom, and had a knife with her when she came up. I wasn’t fast enough and thought she was coming for me, but she was going for Kandy. She stabbed her.” I swallowed thickly. “Kandy was pregnant and didn’t know it, but she miscarried. Because of where she’d stabbed her, she may not be able to have kids anymore.”

For once, he actually seemed surprised about something. “Damn.”

“All she got was a slap on the wrist. She’s in a psych facility right now, and I’m sure it’s a good one—one that treats her like she’s at a fucking retreat. Her parents are wealthy, and they had a good lawyer pleading her case. They bought the judge off and placated her parents with a bullshit restraining order and fifty grand.”

Draco’s head cocked, jaw flexing. “What does Kelly know about you?”

I looked into his eyes. “A lot of things.”

“Stop fucking playing with me and speak, Cane.”

I huffed. “She knows I built Tempt on drug money. Knows about my mother’s drug habit and that my father was the one who mentioned naming the wine Tempt while he was drunk one night. He’s out of jail right now

too, and I'm worried she'll get a hold of him once she's cleared and give him more ammunition and reason to go against me. I don't need him getting a cut of my business or being anywhere near me or my family. I have lawyers working on securing everything, but Kelly's family knows people too—"

"Do you want me to get rid of her?" he asked.

I frowned. "What?"

"You heard me."

I pushed off the counter. "Things aren't like they used to be, Draco. You can't come over here trying to be *Jefe*, especially when there's a price on your head. Shit, even talking to you could have me arrested."

"That doesn't answer my question," he said. "And you know you don't have to worry about me. I always take care of myself and never leave any evidence behind. Do you want her taken care of?"

His question both agitated and fueled me, the conflicting feelings fucking with my head. Of course I wanted Kelly out of my hair, but with all the things Draco could do, I wasn't sure if it would backfire on me or help in the end. Kelly knew too much, though, and I promised Kandy we were fine now—that she didn't need to worry about Kelly anymore. But Draco... having him do anything to her at all, was too much of a risk.

"Let me think about it," I told him, and he took a step back.

"Fine. But remember that Tempt is *my* company too, and if there is a threat or anything targeted at it, I will end it before letting it get in my way." He walked to the patio door. "I'll be directing my people to this home address and will be back in a few days." He opened the door, pushing loose tendrils of his hair back. "She's just a human, and humans are easy to break and even easier to get rid of." He looked me over. "Don't let this new life make you weak."

With those words, the door closed, and he was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CANE

I CHECKED MY BACKYARD TWICE BEFORE GOING UPSTAIRS TO GET TO Kandy.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed, waiting for me. When she heard me coming, she hopped up, clasping her hands together, her eyes wide with worry. “Is he gone?” she whispered.

“Yes.”

“Is he coming back?”

I looked away. “Most likely.”

She sighed, rushing toward me. “I didn’t think he’d show up...not like that. With a *gun*,” she gasped. “W-what did he want?”

“He wants to invest some more money in Tempt.”

“Oh.”

I sat down, and she took the spot beside me. She breathed unevenly, like she was still trying to catch her breath from what had happened earlier. I reached for her hand, holding it in mine. “He’s really fucking scary, Cane. If he’s coming back, I should probably go home.”

“He only said and did that stuff for show. He likes to feel in charge—like he owns the room. He’s the one who has always told me that knowledge is power. The more you know about someone, the more power you have over them.”

“You know a lot about him?”

“More than I care to admit, honestly.”

“Is he as bad as the media portrays?”

I nodded. “Oh, yeah. Don’t underestimate him. He’s quick to make a move if he feels threatened or if he’s crossed.”

Her eyes got bigger. “Have you ever crossed him?”

“Wouldn’t be alive if I had.”

She fidgeted a bit. “God, this is insane. How did you even start working with someone like him?”

I sighed, rolling my neck. “I heard about him through the grapevine. Many of them warned me that he would probably kill me before he heard me out, but at that point in my life, I had no choice. At first, I was selling stolen goods to people, but I wasn’t really making any money from it, and my mother was in the hospital because she’d almost overdosed on coke, and I didn’t have the money to pay for the bills. While she was in the hospital, the doctors discovered she needed a kidney transplant. I was at a loss.” I looked down, and her eyes were wide and glossy.

“And then what?”

“I met this guy named Horacio who sold for Jefe. Your dad told you about Horacio, I believe. Anyway, I told him I wanted in—that I’d do anything to make some money, so he had me start selling for him first. I was so good at it that he took me under his wing and had me pushing heavily. I sold coke to people all over the city, some rich and some poor. I think word got out that I was selling so well and being very discrete about it, so much so that it reached the ears of Jefe. Jefe wasn’t a man of many words. He thanked me by giving me more to push, which meant more money for both of us, but he would never meet up with me. I made so much that I could afford to pay off my mother’s medical bills, pay for my college classes, and keep Mama’s kitchen full of groceries...but to me, it wasn’t enough. I wanted out of selling. I wanted out of that shitty neighborhood. I wanted to do something bigger, so I got my business plan together, packed up a bag, and when the next delivery came, I took a big risk and followed my supplier.”

“What?” Kandy gasped.

“I know. I was young and dumb. I mean, everyone knows not to sneak up on a man like him. I’d told a few people that I wanted to see him, but they told me it was impossible and that I was an idiot for wanting to see him anyway. I didn’t care. I followed the supplier all the way to Texas. He

stopped at a warehouse that was in the middle of nowhere. I watched from my car for a while. Jefe didn't show up until later that night. I knew without even seeing pictures that it was him. The way he dressed was different from everyone else. He wore suits and nice clothes and all this fancy fucking jewelry. I didn't really have a plan, and honestly, I didn't need one. I was snatched out of the car before I was even given the chance to think it all through."

She gasped again.

"Some man with white hair dragged me to the warehouse with some big man following behind him. I was scared for my fucking life. I was so stupid, thinking some cartel leader would hear me out. They tossed me in a room, and I waited for almost an hour before Jefe came inside. Instead of killing me on the spot like I thought he would, he asked me who I was and what I wanted, all with a gun pointed at my head. I told him I was his top money-maker in Georgia right now. I was the one pushing so much of his product. To my surprise, he heard me out, but he didn't lower that gun. Not for one second. Some big guy came into the room with my notebooks and binders, tossing them on the table. Jefe asked what they were for, and I told him it was for a business I wanted to launch, and that I wanted to collaborate with him—that I wanted out, and that I could double his money if he went the route I wanted to take. I told him I'd been working on it since I was nineteen, and that I had really put a lot of thought into it. At first, he wasn't interested. He told me I was a dumb motherfucker to even bother seeing him. I thought I was dead...until he told me he wanted me to set up shop to sell over fifty kilograms of cocaine."

"Holy shit," she breathed.

"I went back home and sold that shit. I sold it to the kids I went to school with and even the business owners I had worked for before. I went to a simple community college in Fayetteville, North Carolina. They were bored there, and I carried the thrill. The coke that I was selling was some of the purest. It couldn't be topped, and was the best on the East Coast, so it wasn't that hard to sell. It only took me a month to get rid of it all." I swallowed hard. "Lora helped me."

"She did? How?"

"For the first few months, she sold it to her friends and perverts around the neighborhood who always catcalled her. When she was eighteen, a friend of hers hooked her up with a job working at this exclusive escorting

club as a host. I had her give it to the girls that performed, and had them sell it to their clients. I'd dragged her into it, all for my own personal gain." I dropped my head. "I was good at it, though. *Too good*, and Draco noticed. He noticed a lot of things. I told him I'd sold it all within a month, but didn't hear from him for three months after that. By that point, I'd graduated college and everything. Then one day he showed up in my city. Popped up right at my apartment. He had one of his men put a stack of money on the table—two million to be exact—and told me he was investing it into my company privately as a start-up. He told me that if I wanted out of selling drugs, that the money he gave me had to be doubled within a year. It wasn't wise of me to take the deal. For any business owner, it was hard to double that much money that fast, especially for a new business, but see, the thing about Jefe was that I had no choice. With him it was either push his cocaine for the rest of my life, or invest his money and make a profit off of it. I didn't have any other options. If I didn't do one or the other, I was dead. So I took my chances. I took the money and within ten months, I had doubled it...but not legally."

"What do you mean *not* legally?" she asked.

"There were men who would buy from me—older, rich men who cheated on their wives and hired escorts from my sister's job to come to their hotels. We had a whole package deal going on. I had dirt on them that I could use against them if they didn't help out. I told them to invest in my company, get the word out about it, or I'd tell their wives about their secret lives. Many of them didn't want their secrets brought to light, and of course they were angry with me, but I promised them a return of income too...and eventually they got it."

"Wow, Cane. I didn't realize it was that deep."

"Yeah." I ran my slick palms over my pants. "The thing is, I thought after I doubled Jefe's money, he would leave me alone. But no, he kept coming back with more, demanding me to flip it. Without saying it, he saw something in me—a drive that was hard to find in other men. He knew that I could reach the wealthy Americans, and he wanted to keep their money. During it all, we got a little closer. He trusted me a lot more than he had in the beginning because I had proven my loyalty to him. I built Tempt, got the wine going, and it only got better from there. After two years, I did stop selling drugs completely, and I made a deal with Jefe to let Lora out, but of course she ended up with Aaron a couple months later. We were friends,

and he'd been selling Jefe's product in South Carolina for a while. He decided to move to Atlanta, where he spotted Lora at the club." I shook my head. "Lora had the chance to get out, but never did...and I honestly don't think she really wanted to. She liked the thrill. The secrets. She liked capitalizing off of it, even though it was dangerous. I blame myself for ever getting her involved, and sometimes I hate myself for selling the very drugs that my mother couldn't stay away from."

Kandy sighed and tightened her grip around my hand. "You did what you had to do, Cane."

I looked into her glossy eyes. "Yeah, but at what cost? Just to live the good life? My choices didn't repair my family, like I thought it would. If anything, it ripped us apart."

Her lips twisted for a moment. "But you're all here, on the other side of it. That's all that matters. Sometimes you have to unravel before coming together again." She rested her head on my arm.

We were quiet a moment.

"I bet this makes you want to run back home, huh?"

"He knows where I live..." she muttered.

"He does. Going home would be pointless. Not only that, but if he notices you're gone, he'll think you talked, and he's always hasty to get shit done. It sounds wrong, but you're safer here, honestly."

She pressed her lips, looking up at me. "Your life is so...*complicated*," she said, exasperated. "I know you had to do what you did to get to where you are now, but it's scary as hell having all of these random things happen."

I dropped my head. "I know. I apologize."

"I'm just glad you're not into that anymore. And I'm glad you wanted to change. Everyone deserves redemption."

I smiled.

"If you think I'm safer here, I'll stick around, I guess. I don't want him showing up at my house and threatening my parents the way he just threatened me. God only knows what my dad would do." She waved a dismissive hand, like the mere thought of that annoyed her. "Knowing that *the* El Jefe is in your back pocket is in-fucking-sane but I'll never say a word. And it's not like he'll be in your hair every day. Right?"

"Not every day, but having him around *period* is dangerous."

“I know...” She looked so worried. Seriously, I didn’t deserve her. As badly as I wanted her in my life, I knew she didn’t belong here. She didn’t grow up the way I did. She didn’t know how to handle situations like that—especially ones that involved notorious kingpins.

“He shouldn’t have done that to you,” I murmured. “I’m sorry, Kandy.”

She held me tight. “It’s not your fault, Cane. Let’s just get through this and hope he never comes around again.”

I clasped her chin between my fingers and lowered my head, dropping a kiss on her lips. “You don’t have to go through any of this with me, babe. You know that right? If you wanted to walk away from all of it, I wouldn’t stop you. You deserve better than all of this shit.”

“I know I don’t have to,” she insisted.

“So why bother?”

She stared up at me. “Cane, I love you, okay? I fucking *love* you. When I came back, I knew there would be more to this than what happened with Kelly, but I prepared myself for it. Am I shaken up about what just happened? Yes. But...this is your life. This is your world. I wanted to be in it, and now I’m here. I’m not running away this time. We’ll get through this, just like we’ve gotten through everything else.”

She was truly something else. “You’re crazy. You know that?”

“Only for you, obviously.” She rolled her eyes, but I saw the smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

I wrapped her up in my arms. “This will all blow over soon. I promise.”

Although I had hope that it would, I suspected the drama was just getting started. Buck was free, without cops on his back. Jefe was lurking around in my new city, and I had no idea how long he was going to be around. And Kelly...*fucking Kelly*. If I didn’t do something about her, she’d return too. Not now, but eventually.

I had no idea what Kandy was thinking, and hell, it was selfish of me to keep her around with all of this chaos in my life...but she had accepted me for who I was. The *real* me, not the man she thought she knew years ago. Not the man who put on a facade for her and her family.

Me, Quinton Cane.

My only hope was that she’d be able to handle me once the storm was over.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

KANDY

EL JEFE RETURNED ONE MORE TIME AFTER HIS FIRST ARRIVAL. WHEN HE showed up again, he didn't have a gun pointed at my head, but he did have a man and woman with him, who were both strapped at the waist with guns and knives and other things I didn't want to know about.

The woman had strong, lean arms, wavy black hair, and she looked easy to piss off. To be honest, she was just as intimidating as her boss.

The man seemed much more relaxed. He had dark hair, pale skin, and golden-brown eyes. He kept smirking at me as I sat on the love seat in Cane's office. Cane was in front of his desk, on his laptop, typing something up and murmuring with El Jefe. The people he'd brought along, showed up with so many brief cases. The brief cases filled up every single room, from the den to the kitchen, and even our bedroom. I had no doubt there was money inside each and every one of them.

Cane had introduced the woman as Patanza and the man as Clark.

"I'm sorry. I have to know something. You're young as shit," Clark said, looking me over and laughing. "And you're boning this man, right over here? Is it just a sexy thing going on or is it serious?"

"Clark, shut the fuck up," Patanza muttered with a thick accent.

"Hey, I'm just asking." He held his hands in the air. "It's just weird as fuck. She's way too fucking young. He might as well be her babysitter."

I glanced at Cane, who looked me in the eyes and simply shook his head with a long blink. "Ignore him," Cane mouthed.

"I'm sorry, but what exactly makes it weird?" I asked, folding my arms and ignoring Cane's directions. This Clark guy was super arrogant, and he didn't know shit about what Cane and I had. I couldn't stand his judgmental attitude. From the moment he'd walked through the door, I could tell he was a cocky jackass, with all his smirking and arm-folding.

"Well, you look like you've barely reached twenty, and that fucker over there has gray hair coming in. Shouldn't you be in college or something right now?"

"Clark," El Jefe warned, and Clark looked back with an inclined brow. "Shut the hell up."

"For fuck's sake. You fucking Hispanics are always so serious."

I fought a smile while the woman rolled her eyes.

El Jefe put his eyes back on the computer screen again. He was sitting on the edge of Cane's desk, watching everything Cane did carefully. The man was truly intimidating. He sat with his head high and looked down, like everything beneath him was worthless. Even with the hair on his jawline, I could tell it was a strong jaw.

My eyes dropped to his finger, and I noticed a wedding band there. *He's married?* Wow...what kind of crazy woman would marry a man like him—a man who wasn't afraid to point a gun at a nineteen-year-old girl?

"Did you think about what I said?" El Jefe murmured to Cane.

"Yeah, I've thought about it."

"And?"

"And I need more time to think about it."

El Jefe scoffed. "Don't be a pussy about it. You either want it done or you don't. It's that simple."

"Shit, I apologize for not being a natural born killer like you."

El Jefe looked amused, but I was curious what kind of conversation Cane had with him to bring up the word "killer."

"Natural born?" El Jefe repeated. "Nah, the world made me this way."

Cane muttered something under his breath, and with a few more taps of his keys, he said, "I'm done. I got in touch with my accountant, and she has created one account in Canada, one in Russia, and one in Japan. I'll give you the account and routing numbers when I have them, and take the money to her so she can have it all deposited safely."

“Good.” El Jefe stood, and Cane pushed out of his chair. He was about to speak again, but then a car door slammed shut outside.

Patanza grimaced, rushing toward Cane. “Who the fuck is that?” she demanded.

Cane frowned, walking toward the window. He pushed one of the blinds up to take a look out, then let out a sigh of relief. “It’s my sister, Lora.”

“*Tranquilo*, Patanza,” El Jefe commanded, but her shoulders didn’t relax. He said something else to her in Spanish, and with every word, she became less tense.

“I need to let her know you’re here,” Cane said, and walked my way, grabbing my hand and leading the way downstairs. Of course they followed, moving like trained assassins. God, looking at them made me shiver, and not in the good way.

Cane met up to the door, but Clark was already standing there with a gun in his hand.

“Put that shit away,” Cane hissed. “It’s my sister.”

“Put it up,” Jefe ordered behind us, and Clark groaned, tucking it in the holder on his waist. “I swear to God, if I don’t get any action soon, I’m going to flip. It’s been boring as fuck ever since the shootout.”

“Shootout?” Cane questioned.

“Long story,” Patanza muttered.

Cane released my hand to open the door. Lora walked toward the house, dragging a suitcase on wheels by the handles. “So glad to see the house isn’t burnt down!” she yelled. “I tell you, Q, I don’t think El Jefe is ever going to show! I’m pretty sure we can relax now since that motherfucker —” Lora’s sentence was cut short as Cane opened the door a little wider, just enough for her to see El Jefe standing in the middle of the foyer. “OhmyGodholyshit!” she gasped loudly, stopping right on the porch.

El Jefe raised a brow, looking Lora over. “I see you still have that filthy mouth of yours.”

Lora stared at him behind her round, yellow sunglasses, and it was the first time in my life I had ever seen her so speechless. “Jefe,” she breathed. “I guess I spoke too soon.”

“I suppose you did.”

“Where’s Mama?” Cane asked.

“At one of her meetings, and I’m kinda glad I took her.” Lora looked from El Jefe to Clark, and then to Patanza, who was giving her a death

glare.

“Who is she to get the right to disrespect you?” Patanza snarled at her.

“Calm down, Patanza. We’re leaving,” El Jefe announced. “Cane had to take care of a few things for me.”

“It’s done now,” Cane announced. “But next time you show up, make an announcement first. I don’t like surprises.”

El Jefe gave a small smile. “What is life without a few surprises? Before I go, I need to speak with you and Lora. Patanza, Clark, wait out in the truck.”

Patanza nodded and turned to walk away, but not without glaring back once at all of us. Clark followed her, smiling once at us before disappearing around the corner. They were complete opposites. I wondered how a guy like Clark even worked for El Jefe.

“Look, Jefe.” Lora held up a hand, stepping inside the house. “Those days are over. All right? Don’t start asking for fucked-up favors.”

El Jefe gave her an amused smile. “Cane, tell your girlfriend to wait somewhere out of earshot. I need a second with both of you alone.”

Cane put his attention on me. “Go. It’s fine.” He squeezed my hand before letting it go, and I rounded the corner to get to the second foyer, but stopped at the bottom of the staircase. It was wrong to eavesdrop, but I couldn’t help it. El Jefe was talking to them about something that I was sure Cane was never going to tell me. Not out of disrespect, but to protect me.

“Cane says everything is fine with Tempt, but I want to know the truth,” I heard El Jefe say, his voice low and deep.

“The truth about what? Tempt is fine. He got the company back on its feet after a few months. It’s the shit going on in his personal life that’s fucked up,” Lora stated.

“Things like what?” Jefe asked.

“Well for starters, having a fucker like you in his house. If anyone saw you, it could damage his career, and it wouldn’t just be him losing money. You would too.”

“Point taken. Why else?”

Lora was quiet a second. “I don’t know if he’s told you about our Dad being out.”

“I can handle Buck,” Cane stated.

“He beat on you, no?” Jefe asked.

“When we were younger, yes,” Cane answered. “That’s no longer a problem for me.”

“And what about Kelly?” Jefe inquired.

“Kelly needs to fucking rot,” Lora snarled.

“Rot as in what? In a hole? In a cell?”

“Rot as in to leave Q the fuck alone for good.”

“Lora,” Cane warned.

“What?” she yelled. “It’s true! She’ll come back, and you know it, Q. Imagine if she shows ‘good behavior’ and the therapists find it convincing, she could get out even sooner than the pathetic length you were told. It’s bullshit! You saw what she did to Kandy, and that shit wasn’t cool. If you want Kandy to stay around, you need to make sure Kelly never comes back again. You know how to make that happen, but you’re too chickenshit to do it!”

“Yeah, because I can’t, Lora! I have to take precautions now. We’re not in the dark anymore.”

Lora gave a dry laugh. “Precautions are not going to stop that wicked bitch. She’s still sending you letters, making threats. That bitch will never stop!”

“Enough,” El Jefe said calmly, but there was enough bass in his voice for them to stop arguing. “Cane, you have one more day to give me an answer. All I need is a yes or no. It’s that simple.”

Cane groaned. “It’s too fucking risky.”

“Who gives a fuck?” Lora screeched. “It’s not like you’re the one doing it, and when has this guy *ever* left evidence behind?”

“By saying yes, I’m basically pulling the trigger, Lora.”

She huffed. “You know what? Who cares? Fuck this conversation. Do whatever you wanna do, but don’t come to me when she fucks up everything in your life all over again.” I heard footsteps coming down the hallway. Before she could get to where I was, I hurried upstairs and into Cane’s bedroom, clicking the door shut as softly as possible.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. El Jefe was giving Cane a choice about Kelly? Was he really thinking about *killing* her? God, the thought of it made me sick to my stomach. Cane wouldn’t do that. He couldn’t. It wasn’t like him.

How was I even going to bring this up in a conversation without him knowing that I was listening? Of course I hated Kelly, but murder was

unspeakable and irreversible.

After hearing their heated debate, I told myself I wouldn't bring it up in a conversation with him. Cane's decisions were his own, and even though he'd told me repeatedly that he would do anything for me, the idea he would order something like *that* terrified me.

I just hoped he didn't do something he would regret.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

KANDY

CANE SPOKE NOTHING OF THE CONVERSATION WITH JEFE AND LORA THAT night, and it didn't help that he had to be at work the next morning and had a full schedule. He'd assured me that El Jefe wouldn't be back to the house again—at least not for a while—but still, it didn't stop my mind from racing.

I knew it was bothering him too. He walked around like he was on edge—like there was this gigantic weight on his shoulders and he wasn't sure how to get rid of it. And could I blame him? El Jefe had pretty much given him an ultimatum. I didn't know what he was asking, exactly, but it had to be serious.

I tried taking my mind off of it by applying to attend the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. A few weeks back, Cane said he knew people there and could probably get me in. If I did get in, I would start in the fall, and he was going to pay for my tuition.

Even though I was psyched to be going back to school, and glad that I could still live with him instead of on campus, the entire situation about Kelly bothered me, so a few days after hearing El Jefe's ultimatum—when Cane had to spend a weekend in Texas—I did something I knew he would never approve of: I packed a bag and drove to Atlanta.

I had no idea what I was doing, or why the urge to go was so intense, but after doing extensive research and looking into the case, I was at

Douglas & Howard Mental Health Facility.

“Good Lord, what am I doing?” I muttered to myself, staring ahead at the building. It was a large building, well-kept, made of red brick. All of the hedges were trimmed, and a few patients walked around in yellow uniforms. “This is so fucking stupid,” I said, but it didn’t stop me from shutting my car off and getting out. I placed a flat hand over my brow line to block the sun beaming down on me.

Kelly was in that building...

I don’t know what possessed me to come all this way, but I was there. Right fucking there, and it was too late to go back now.

“Fuck it,” I breathed, and I marched ahead, straight to the entrance. I swung the door open and met up to the front desk, requesting Kelly Hugo. I signed a few forms, and was told I’d have to wait thirty minutes until the next visitation hour started...so I did.

And then the announcement was made. A buzzer went off and a security guard escorted the guests into a room with spotless, white tables and dark blue chairs. Several patients walked inside, all of them wearing the yellow scrub uniforms.

I took a seat at a table in the middle, my pulse swimming in my ears. I looked all around me, mostly at the guests who smiled as their loved ones sat across from them. Some of the patients smiled back, most didn’t. When I looked at the door they were coming through, I finally saw her.

She wore yellow scrubs like all the other patients, her brown hair pulled up in a loose, frizzy bun. Her face was makeup free, just like it was the day she stabbed me. The man who had signed me in pointed to where I was sitting, and she looked at where his finger led. When she saw me, her eyes narrowed, her head cocking slightly. The man walked away, but she just stood there, probably wondering why I was here. I bet I was the last person she thought would visit.

Finally, she walked to the table I was sitting at, grabbing the chair across from me and pulling it out. Not once did her eyes leave mine.

“Hey, Kelly,” I said, not smiling. Not wavering.

“You are really fucking bold,” she replied with laughter in her voice. She planted her elbows on the table, leaning in slightly. “Of all the people I thought would be my first visitor...it’s *you*.”

I shrugged. “You’re probably expecting me to be afraid of you or nervous about being here...but I’m not. I really only came to see if you

were still alive.”

She frowned. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

I looked her over. “How does it sound?”

“Like a threat,” she hissed.

I pushed my lips together. “I’ve never been good at making threats.”

Kelly shook her head, eyes rolling. “Why are you here?” she snapped. “You got your money and your restraining order, which is clearly being broken right now. What else could you possibly want from me?”

“I don’t want anything from you. Like I said, I’m just checking to see if you’re alive...and to face the one thing that has given me nightmares for weeks.” I clenched my fist under the table. “Cane is really pissed about the slap on the wrist you got and how you’re playing the mental card. I am too.”

She chuckled. “Oh, so you’re with him again? Even after what was done to you because you were too close?”

I didn’t answer. Only looked her in the eyes.

“Are you proud to be his *whore*? Because that’s all you are. A whore who sucked a taken man’s cock.” She leaned forward a little more. “You know, just because I’m in here doesn’t mean that he isn’t still mine. I know so much about Quinton—so much that he has no choice but to keep me around so that I’ll be quiet.” She gave me a smug look. “Has he shown you the notes I’ve given him?”

“Only one, and it was all I needed to see. I’m sure he’s burned the rest. Just proves you’re batshit.”

She laughed and pointed at me. “You’re cute. Coming in here, trying to act like you’re better than me just because you have him for a moment. Let me explain something to you,” she seethed, her upper lip peeling back. “I had him once, and I can have him again. You are a young, stupid girl who doesn’t know *shit* about men, and when he realizes how fucking naive and worthless you really are, he will drop you right on your ass.”

I studied her, almost with pity. “You really are insane. It’s no wonder you’re in here. See, you’re so crazy that you can’t even see how much he actually wants to be with me. You’re so blinded by your own ignorance, that you can’t see what’s right in front of you. Cane and I got back together a little over a month ago, and it has been absolute bliss. I’m not saying this to brag, but just to let you know that even though you think he belongs to

you, he has always been mine. Since the first day I met him, he was mine. Way before you even knew him.”

She stared back. “I can’t wait until the day I get out of this place. Then you’ll see who he truly belongs to.” She pushed out of her chair and pressed her palms to the table. “What I did to you was just the start. Trust me, I am capable of things that are a whole lot worse.”

I held her eyes and thought she was about to say something else, but I was so, so wrong. Instead, she spat on me. Right on my cheek. I gasped, and she laughed as a guard yelled “Hey!”

“Enjoy him while you can, you stupid bitch.”

I wiped her spit off my face and pushed out of my chair as the guard grabbed her arm and dragged her back to the doors. Throughout the entire walk, she looked back at me with that same stupid, smug grin.

That fucking bitch!

Livid, I shoved my chair in and marched out of the visitation room. I was so pissed that I ran right into someone’s chest on my way out.

“Shit! Sorry!” I gasped. The person caught me by the upper arms, and when I looked up, I met a familiar shade of golden-brown. “Holy shit,” I breathed.

Clark looked down at me, wearing a sports cap and a black jacket. “What the hell are you doing here?” he demanded.

“What are *you* doing here?” I whisper-hissed.

A slow smile spread across his lips. “Got business to take care of. Jefe’s orders. Finally some action. I suggest you leave now.” He pushed me toward the door, and I stumbled a bit as he marched down the hallway, taking a look around before cutting a corner and disappearing.

I didn’t bother sticking around. I rushed out of the building and to my car, breathing rapidly.

I sat in my car, expecting him to come right back out. I believe an hour passed before I heard the sounds of police car sirens and ambulances. They got louder and louder, and I pulled my eyes from my Instagram feed to look around, spotting them rolling through the entrance and to the building. The EMTs rushed out of the ambulance, taking a stretcher with them and running inside.

I held my breath as the cops cleared patients from the yard and moved them to their rooms.

And then I saw Clark.

He wasn't walking out of the front door like I'd expected, but slipping out a side exit marked for staff. He hopped a fence and then took off, disappearing into a line of trees.

"Holy shit. No," I breathed. "No, no, no, no."

I gripped the steering wheel, waiting for the EMTs to come back outside. When they came rushing out, I saw a patient in yellow scrubs lying on the stretcher. She was still, eyes closed. Her face looked pale, and her lips blue.

"Oh my God!" I screamed, because it was Kelly on that stretcher. And if I weren't mistaken, she already looked dead.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

KANDY

I DROVE HOME IN A FRENZY AND WAS LUCKY I'D MADE IT BACK ALIVE, given my mental state. I still couldn't believe what I'd seen, and I prayed Cane had nothing to do with it.

I was in such a rush that I didn't even stop by my parents' house, like I'd planned on doing. Mom had texted me that morning, but I was nervous and driving, so I didn't respond.

I made a mental note to call her once I was settled, though I was curious why she didn't just call me herself.

It was dark when I got back, and as soon as I reached the front door of the house, I burst through it, slamming it behind me like someone was chasing after me.

"Yo! What the fuck!" Lora yelled, rushing around the corner. When she spotted me, her brows furrowed even more. "Kandy, what the hell is going on?"

"Did you know?" I demanded, rushing toward her and gripping her shoulders.

"Know what?" she yelled, pushing my hands away.

"About Kelly! Did you know, Lora?"

She blinked rapidly. "Kelly? What are you talking about?"

"I went to see her." I sniffled. "And when I was leaving, I—I saw that—that guy! The one who came with Jefe! I saw him going into the clinic, and

when he came back out, an ambulance showed up. They had a stretcher, Lora, and Kelly was on it! She looked...she looked *dead!*"

"What?"

My eyes were thick with tears. I was panicking now, breathing unevenly, shoving my fingers through my hair.

"Okay...Kandy. Just calm down, all right? Come here." She grabbed my hand, leading the way around the corner, where a recliner and loveseat was set up. She sat me in the recliner and then dropped to her knees in front of me, grabbing my hands. She studied my eyes and was quiet for so long I wondered if she even had anything to say.

"Is everything okay?" I looked around Lora, and Miss Cane was there. Confusion warped her face, her eyes stretched wide.

"Yes, Mama. It's fine," Lora insisted. "I got it. Go finish cooking. We'll be in there in a minute."

Miss Cane gave us a wary glance, but she walked away. When we heard dishes moving again, Lora faced me.

"Okay, I need you to listen to me," she said, so low I could barely hear her. "What just happened to Kelly? Yes, I knew it was going to happen, but she fucking deserved whatever they did to her. She never would have left Cane alone otherwise."

"D-did Cane make this happen?"

Lora dropped her head, sighing. "No, he didn't. He told Jefe not to do anything too hasty. He said he couldn't live with the guilt of knowing someone died because of him, no matter how much he disliked the person." She picked her head back up, her eyes boring into mine. "But I am *nothing* like Cane, you hear me? I have done a lot of shit I hated doing in order to survive, and I have lived with it all. I have no problem living with this, too."

"Lora, you—"

"I did what I had to do to protect my family, Kandy. That bitch was never going to leave him alone. *Ever*. And for once in my life, I wanted to be the one to help him, not the other way around. Q has *always* been there for me—done everything in his power to protect me. Even when I straight up abandoned him, he came to check on me, but I blew him off, and even now, he's still here." Her eyes were getting watery and red, but the tears didn't fall. "It was my turn to protect him this time."

"By killing her?" I wheezed.

“I didn’t kill her. I didn’t even tell them what to do to her. All I did was tell Jefe that I wanted her out of the picture and for her to never bother him again, and I reminded him that he owed me, so he said it was done. That’s it. I don’t know what they did and didn’t know she’d die so quickly, but he knows how to cover his tracks. It won’t come back to us.”

I couldn’t believe this. Cane was right about Lora. She was stubborn. She just couldn’t let it go.

She released my hands, dropping her face into her palms. “You weren’t supposed to be there,” she said, looking back up. “What the fuck were you thinking, going to visit her?”

“I heard you and Cane talking to El Jefe when I was asked to leave. I just wanted to see if she was still alive, and I wanted to confront her about what she’d done to me. I had this hunch—I don’t know!”

“Yeah, well you saw her, and now she’s dead.” She exhaled. “God, I need a joint.”

“Does Cane know you asked El Jefe to do that?”

“No, but I’m sure the news will travel to him, and he’ll figure out that it wasn’t a coincidence.”

“God, Lora. This is all so fucking crazy.”

“This is who we are, Kandy. We’re fucked up, okay? I’ve told you that we aren’t good people. We do whatever we need to do to stay safe. If you can’t handle that truth, then maybe you should reconsider what you want and where you need to be. Not being a bitch, just being real.”

I swiped some of my tears away, looking away. Rubbing my elbow, I asked, “Why did El Jefe owe you?”

She frowned at me, dropping her head. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

I swallowed to clear the dryness in my throat. “Is it bad?”

“Q doesn’t even know, so yes, it’s bad.”

I touched her arm. “I would never tell him your secrets, Lora. I swear.”

“I know you wouldn’t...but what I did is fucked up. I feel guilty as fuck about it, and it’s hard to make me feel guilty about anything.” She stood up, planting her hands on her hips.

“It can’t be that bad...”

She looked at me sideways, then raked her fingers through her hair. She then stepped back and dropped down on the love seat that was behind her. We sat quietly, and I didn’t want to make any sudden movements because

she looked like she was on the verge of telling it all. If she'd held it from Cane, she'd held it from everyone.

"I'm sure Cane told you I was engaged to a guy named Aaron."

"Yeah." I sat forward a bit. "I remember."

She rubbed her temple with the tips of her fingers, closing her eyes. "Aaron is going to be in prison for the next fifteen years, and it's my fault."

"How?"

Her eyes peeled open, locking on mine. "I'm the reason he got caught by the cops the night he was arrested."

"What?" I gasped. "Why would you do that?"

"Because I had to, Kandy! Okay? Aaron was getting out of control, with the way he was selling, and he was starting to use the drugs too. One of Jefe's people found out he was using the supply, and they came to me, told me that he was a liability, and then he gave me a choice. I could get him caught and arrested so he'd be out of the picture, or they would kill Aaron and make Cane sell the rest of it since Cane was the one who introduced Aaron to Jefe's product. So I set up my fiancé." She made a noise of defeat, tears lining the rims of her eyes. "I planted some coke in his trunk and anonymously called the cops to give them a tip that he was riding with it. Gave them his license plate number, name, and all." She stared hard at me. "I love my family, and I know the last thing Cane ever wants to do is sell that shit again, plus I also didn't want Aaron to die, so I did what I had to do. I told Jefe he owed me for it. He never promised me a favor, but he knows how hard that was for me to do. I literally hate myself for it, every single damn day since it's happened."

"Oh my God, Lora. So that's why you really came back?"

"Shit, Kandy, I couldn't stay there anymore. Aaron's people were starting to ask me too many questions, and I got tired of lying. Not only that, but Buck was sending me threats. I started to feel like I was being watched. My own apartment didn't even feel safe. I was paranoid as fuck over there."

"I can only imagine."

Her face went from soft to serious. "You *cannot* tell Cane about this, okay? I mean it. I don't want him to know, because if he does, he'll be pissed at Jefe, and he'll blame him for fucking up my life and Aaron's. Even though he despises Aaron now, he knows how much he meant to me."

"I won't say a thing, Lora," I promised. "You have my word."

“Good.” She stood up, stretching her arms above her head. “Mom’s making tacos tonight. I’ll go to the store, buy some margarita mix or something for us to drink with it. It’s been a really fucked-up day.” She left the room without another word to me. I heard her tell Miss Cane where she was going, and then she was out the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

KANDY

TO GET RID OF THE HEAVINESS ON MY CHEST, I TOOK A LONG, HOT BATH, soaking in the bath oils Cane had bought me when I first moved in. He'd bathed me several times, hoping to soothe me after what had happened. I loved it when he washed me. He was always careful and diligent with his actions.

While I soaked the day away, I glanced at my phone. I was still shaken by what happened. I'd never seen a dead body before. Even though I hated that woman, it didn't make what I saw any less terrifying.

Cane would be back in town the next morning, but I couldn't wait a whole day to talk to him. However, I didn't want to mention what I saw at the psych facility to him over the phone, and considering how he always got me to tell him what was wrong, I decided not to call at all. I washed well, then took a hot shower to wash the oils away.

I wrapped myself up in a towel when I was done and heard a knock on the bathroom door. "Kandy?" Miss Cane called.

"Yes?"

"The tacos are ready! Oh, also Lora told me to tell you to get your *a-s-s* downstairs and share a margarita with her."

I laughed. "Great! Thank you, Miss Cane! I'll be down in a minute."

THE TACOS WERE INCREDIBLE. MISS CANE HAD A REAL GIFT. WHILE WE ate, I noticed that Lora was putting on her nonchalant act again. For someone with so much guilt, it was surprising how well she hid it. I'm sure the two margaritas she had helped. After dinner, I assisted Miss Cane with cleaning up while Lora scrolled through Pinterest, looking for a new hair color.

"I'm torn," Lora huffed. "I don't know if I should go with this neon orange for the rest of spring or a pastel pink? I feel like the orange will make me look spunky as hell, but the pastel pink will make me look all soft and fluffy."

"Let me see," I said, stepping up beside her. She went to her Pinterest board, showing me the images. "Hmm...I think the orange would look good for the summer. I'd save pastel pink for a special occasion." I clicked on a picture of a girl with silver hair. "What about this one?"

"I'm not sure about that one. I feel like I'll get bored with it after a week or two." She grabbed a piece of her blonde hair, twirling it around her fingers as she studied the hairstyle. "But I do need something new." She smiled up at me. "I'll try it, but if I hate it, I'm going to the orange."

I laughed, going back to drying dishes.

A door clicked shut in the distance, and Lora and I froze up, while Miss Cane looked back. We heard the footsteps coming up the hallway, and I don't know why I was so fucking terrified. The hairs on my arms stood up and my throat went bone dry as I turned toward the kitchen opening. I really, really hoped it wasn't El Jefe again.

But then I saw *him*.

He wore a white button-down shirt with a simple black tie. The sleeves of the shirt were rolled up to his forearms, revealing the delicate ink on his skin. He'd trimmed his beard down several days ago, just enough for it to not look scraggly and wild. Lora's hiked up shoulders relaxed a notch, and Miss Cane smiled at her son.

"You're in luck," Miss Cane said, walking around the counter to hold his face and kiss his cheek. "I have a few tacos leftover."

"Thanks, Mama," he murmured.

"You're back early, butthead," Lora noted.

"Closed the deal a lot sooner than anyone expected." He walked up to her, nudging her arm with his elbow.

"Don't brag, dude. It's not cute." Lora playfully rolled her eyes.

He chuckled, then turned, putting his focus on me. I placed the empty glass in my hand down, giving him a forced smile. As if he noticed how forced it was, his eyebrows pulled together for a split second. Walking up to me, he held my waist, placing a kiss on my forehead.

“Everything all right?”

I kept my breaths steady. “Yeah,” I lied. “Everything’s fine.”

“Okay. You eat?”

“Yep.”

“Good.”

Cane went to the counter and practically inhaled the tacos. He even had himself a margarita, though he assured me he wasn’t a margarita guy. I knew he was more of a scotch man.

He and Miss Cane talked about her meeting that morning, as well as her little shopping adventure with Lora at a boutique. Apparently Miss Cane owned a leather jacket now.

Everything seemed perfectly fine...until his phone chimed.

As soon as he read whatever was on the screen, his face paled, eyes growing wider. My eyes flashed over to Lora, who looked at me and subtly shook her head, like she was demanding that I keep my mouth shut and to not ask any questions.

Releasing an agitated breath, Cane slid his phone into his back pocket and stood up straight. “Lora,” he growled. “Outside. *Now.*”

He stormed away, and Lora pressed her lips, groaning as she hopped off the stool. She shrugged at me before walking around the counter, and before the door could slam closed, I heard Cane yell, “WHAT THE FUCK, LORA!”

“What’s that all about?” Miss Cane asked, coming up next to me.

“I’m not sure,” I murmured, but I had a feeling I knew.

Miss Cane pulled out her cellphone and sat on a stool. “Those two are always arguing. Should we go out there? Break it up?”

“Uh...no. I don’t think so. Something tells me going out there won’t help.”

“I hate when they get like this.” She lowered her gaze to focus on her phone. “Do you have Facebook?”

“Yeah, I do, but I hardly get on my account anymore. Why do you ask?”

“I’m looking for friends. Mind if I add you?”

I smiled at her. “Sure. Feel free. I’m under Kandy Jennings.”

I busied myself by putting the dishes away and wrapping up the leftover food. All the while, their yelling got even louder. The door creaked on its hinges as one of them came back inside. Lora popped up around the corner, snatching up her cell phone and then leaving the kitchen without looking at either of us.

The front door slammed again, and I expected Cane to come into the kitchen, but he didn't. When I looked around the corner, he was walking down the hallway to get to the door that led out to the deck.

I chased after him, catching the door before he could slam that one too. With all this slamming, I was sure one of the windows were going to break.

"Cane," I called as he paced the large, cemented deck.

He only huffed in response.

"Cane...what's going on?" I took a step closer.

He finally stopped his pacing, facing me. "I just got a text from Cora. She said that Mrs. Hugo, Kelly's mother, called the office. She told Cora that the clinic found Kelly in her bed, and her heart wasn't beating. They think it was a heart attack or a reaction to one of the drugs she was taking, but I don't believe that shit for a second. I know Draco did this. I know it!"

I looked away, swallowing hard.

Cane lifted his arms. "Why don't you look surprised?" he demanded.

My eyes swooped up to his. "Because I already know," I whispered. "I was there...when it happened."

If I thought he was upset before, he was pissed now. "What the fuck! You were there? *Why* were you there, Kandy?"

"I—I don't know, okay! I overheard the conversation you and Lora had with El Jefe, and I had this nagging feeling. I kept worrying that you'd told him to kill her so I went to go see her and make sure she was still alive!"

"Kandy, I would never do something like that! What the fuck were you thinking, going there to see her! They have cameras all over that place, and if they find out you were there the same day she died, there will be hell to pay! Do you know how bad this will look for you?"

"I'm sorry!" I wailed. "I didn't know they were going to kill her, Cane! I—I saw that guy. Um...Clark? The one who worked for El Jefe. I saw him go in there and then he hopped a fence and ran when the cops showed up."

"Fuck," he hissed. "This is unbelievable!"

"I thought you called it," I murmured. "I was scared, Cane. I was worried."

I dropped my head but felt him looking at me. Sighing, he stepped toward me, holding my shoulders. “Trust me, I wanted to, but I couldn’t do it. Not like that. I wanted to take care of it myself—not with death, but I would have come up with something.” He removed one hand from my shoulder, swiping it over his face. “I’m going to have to call someone, see if he can get the tapes from security and if we can pay the clinic off to give them to us and take your name off the visitation list.”

“I’m sorry, Cane. If I’d known, I would have stayed away, I promise.”

“You wasted two hours of your life going to see her, Kandy. That’s probably the dumbest shit you’ve ever done.” His phone chimed and he pulled it out, reading the alert. ““Check your porch,”” he read in a hushed tone. He stared at me for a moment, and then rushed back through the door. He jogged down the hallway and I followed.

Swinging the front door open, he rushed outside as tires of a car screeched, and over his shoulder, I spotted a black car driving away.

Huffing hard, Cane looked down and picked something up. He came back inside with it and I met up to him, staring inside an unmarked brown box.

There was a sticky note on top of it.

**Problem solved.
Don’t fuck up again.**

Cane’s nostrils flared as he read over the note several times. He then opened the box, pulling out six DVDs and the visitation list with the date of that day and names.

“Holy shit,” someone said behind me with laughter in their voice. I looked back, and Lora was in the hallway, looking at us. “That’s the security footage from the clinic?”

Cane picked his head up. “Yes.”

“Oh, shit!” Lora cupped her mouth, hiding a smile. She stepped back and dropped one hand, holding the other up and pointing at Cane. “I fucking told you!”

“Still doesn’t make this right, Lora!” his voice boomed.

She shrugged. “But you’ll never have to worry about that bitch again, will you?”

She didn't even bother waiting to hear his response. She was walking down the hallway before even I could let the words sink in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

CANE

I COULDN'T SLEEP AT ALL THAT NIGHT, WHICH DIDN'T MAKE ANY FUCKING sense.

For starters, I obviously didn't harbor any positive feelings for Kelly. I'd wanted her out of my life for so long, but knowing about what had happened was...*insane*. As guilty as I felt, a small part of me was dancing with joy and relief, and I hated that part of myself. That part of me was thrilled she was gone—glad that she was no longer a problem—but the way it happened wasn't what I wanted.

He had to have poisoned her. There was no other way around it. Draco was good with poison, acid, and a lot of other shit that I didn't even want to wrap my mind around. He knew about drugs that could kill without leaving a single trace in the bloodstream. It didn't help that Lora went behind my back and told him to do it. It pissed me off that she was still in touch with him, even when I'd told her to stay away from him and to never ask him for any favors. He wasn't the kind of man she needed to be mixed up with, especially when it came to owing favors, because once you asked for one, you owed him for life.

Turning on my side, I looked at Kandy. She was sound asleep, and had that dip between her eyebrows that made her look innocent and sweet. She was deep in my world now and had witnessed things that I never wanted her to see. Draco had taken care of everything, that much was clear. The

DVDs and the visitation list had been burned, so there was really no evidence or way for anyone to find out Kandy was ever there. I had nothing to worry about when it came to Kelly and her family, so why the hell couldn't I rest?

I tossed and turned, grunted and groaned, until finally a small haze took over me.

I succumbed to that haze, clinging to it and letting it lull me to sleep, but before I let go, one final thought hit me.

Kandy's biggest fear was gone. We would be at peace again—no longer living on edge, wondering which day we'd get a surprise from her. Despite how it all went down, my girl would be content again—safe—and to be frank, that was all I ever wanted for her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

KANDY

I HATE SAYING IT, BUT WHEN I WOKE UP THE NEXT MORNING, I FELT...*FREE*.

The sensation hit me full force, beaming inside of me, almost like a church choir was singing in my heart, letting me know that the majority of my worries were over. Yes, there was still Cane's dad, who could show up at any given moment, but Cane didn't seem so worried about him. He'd handled him before, and was certain he could handle him again. There were also my parents, who I had yet to speak to properly since leaving, but I would. The timing had to be right for that to happen though.

Sunlight had just spilled over the horizon, and Cane was resting beside me. I rolled onto my side carefully, trying to keep my movements minimal so I wouldn't wake him up. I studied my man as the sun crawled up his inked chest. I drank him all in, and it was impossible to stop the gush of warmth that coursed through me. My heart began to race faster as my eyes swept up and down the length of his body.

Cane was an imperfect masterpiece.

He was mine.

There was no longer a target on our backs as heavy or as menacing as Kelly...and with that thought alone, I curled into his chest. With a heavy groan, he wrapped an arm around me, and in the safety of his arms, I drifted back into slumber.

“KANDY,” A DEEP VOICE CALLED. I FELT A TAP ON MY SHOULDER, THEN MY hair was pulled back, a gush of cool air hitting my face. Lips pressed to my ear, the warmth of breath running on the shell of it and down my neck. “Kandy, wake up. I want to take you somewhere.”

“Where?” I groaned, rolling over. I peeled an eye open, looking up into Cane’s gray-green eyes.

“It’s a surprise, but it’s a bit of a ride. Come on,” he smiled softly. “Get dressed. We’ll stop somewhere, get some breakfast first.” He grabbed my hand and helped me sit up.

“What do you mean *it’s a bit of a ride*? Where exactly are you taking me?”

He smirked, releasing my hand. “Keep laying in that bed and you’ll never find out. Let’s go.” He walked to the door. “I cancelled a meeting for this little trip with you. Don’t stand me up.”

He winked before walking out, and I bit back a smile, climbing out of bed. After getting showered, I tossed on one of the maxi dresses Lora had picked out, styled my hair, put on some jewelry, and walked out the room.

Miss Cane, Lora, and Cane were in the kitchen. Lora had a mug of coffee in hand and a sleep mask printed with the words “Fuck Off” pushed up to her forehead. Cane was standing beside her, wearing dress pants and a short-sleeved, button-down shirt. His hair had been trimmed, which meant he’d gotten a haircut sometime this morning after I’d fallen asleep again. His beard was neat, and looked so damn good on him.

“Morning, Kandy!” Miss Cane chimed. For the first time, she wasn’t making breakfast.

“Good morning. No breakfast today?” I asked.

“Nah.” She waved a hand. “Cane told me he’s taking you out for breakfast, and Lora and I are getting manicures and then catching a matinee.”

“Oh, that sounds nice. By the way, I got your friend request last night. I added you.”

Her smile spread even wider as I gave her a small wink.

Cane came up to me, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “You ready?”

I nodded, draping an arm around his midsection. “Yeah.”

WE CAUGHT BREAKFAST AT A RESTAURANT CALLED LE BLANC CHÂTEAU, which was clearly one of Cane's favorite restaurants in Charlotte because he knew exactly what he wanted, pronouncing each French word smoothly, like he'd said the words many, many times before.

We'd arrived just around the middle of brunch hours, and I decided to go with a bacon and cheddar quiche, which was beyond delicious. We ate and sipped mimosas, but not once did he bring Kelly up in a conversation. Not that I minded. I still wasn't sure how to wrap my mind around what I saw, and being filled in about the truth was an even bigger pill to swallow. Plus talking about it would have killed our vibe, and at the moment, we were chill.

Once brunch was wrapped up, Cane paid and led the way back to his car. "Are you going to tell me where we're going?" I asked, buckling my seatbelt when we got inside it.

"If I told you, it would ruin it." He push-started the car, wearing a faint smile. "You'll figure it out soon enough. It's a good thing you used the restroom before we left, though." He pulled off, and I sank into the leather, deciding to enjoy the surprise.

Cane drove with a mixed shuffle of Drake, The Weekend, Miguel, Childish Gambino, and Kendrick Lamar pouring out of the speakers. The top of the Aston Martin was peeled back, the windows rolled down. I tilted my face toward the sky as we rode on the freeway, basking in the sun. When I dropped my head, I felt eyes on me and looked over. Cane was looking between me and the road ahead with a smile.

"What?" I laughed, pushing my hair back.

"Nothing." His smile spread wider as he turned the music down a bit. "You're just too beautiful for words. And you look happy."

Heat crawled from my neck to my cheeks, and I grabbed his hand, bringing it up to my lips. "I probably shouldn't feel so happy but..." I thought on my next statement, mulling it over. "Before, I felt like there was this gray cloud over my head with a storm building up inside it, day by day. I felt suffocated—like I was holding my breath, waiting for the day that cloud would get too heavy and break open, releasing the rain and thunder and even the crackles of lightning." I let out a steady breath. "I hate how it happened, Cane."

He kept his attention forward. "I know."

Squeezing his hand, I brought it to my lips, kissing his inked knuckles. I kissed each letter, starting with the R. "But as fucked up as it was...if it hadn't happened, we wouldn't feel like this. Liberated. *Free.*"

His mouth twitched, a subtle smile taking over his lips. "All I want is for you to be happy and for things to go back to the way they used to be."

"No." The back of my head hit the headrest. "I don't think things will ever go back to the way they used to be...but they can get better."

That statement scored me a full smile. He revealed the top row of his teeth, glancing at me. "You're right," he agreed. "It can only get better from here, baby."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

KANDY

WE'D REACHED AN INTERSTATE SIGN THAT WAS UTTERLY FAMILIAR. ONE I'D seen only yesterday.

I turned my head, putting my attention on Cane. "We're going back to Georgia?" I asked, frowning.

He nodded.

"Why?"

"There's something I want to show you."

I was so confused. What could he possibly have to show me in Georgia that he couldn't tell me? I prayed he wasn't taking me to something relative to Kelly. Ugh. That would have been a buzz kill.

Forty-five minutes later, we were cruising on the freeway that revealed Atlanta's skyline. I tried spotting the precinct where Dad worked but couldn't see it from where we were. I did see the building Mom used to work at months ago, though. Sighing, I slouched in my seat as Cane kept driving. I really did miss them.

When he passed the exit that led to Kelly's clinic, I was relieved. Then he passed the exit that led to his old house, the scene of the stabbing. More relief.

He continued driving, going further and further away from the city. *Where in the hell id he going?*

My curiosity only ratcheted higher as Cane took an exit and passed neighborhood after neighborhood, each one appearing more and more unsafe than the last. He took a left turn, and a large sign that said “Welcome to Cascade Heights” appeared. My brows stitched, and Cane slowed the car down.

There were a lot of people on the streets. Some guys wearing basketball jerseys and hats stood on corners, younger kids played basketball on a court, but the goal wasn’t made of a net. It was made of an old crate. There was one house we passed that had a bunch of cars parked on the grass and loud music playing. Men were on their porches smoking, and drinking large bottles of beer...during the middle of the day.

“Cane, where are we?” I finally asked as he took one more turn on a small street and slowed the car down even more. He parked in front of a house that looked like it was supposed to be white but was covered with graffiti and had broken windows and large holes in the roof. There wasn’t any grass—it was more like a yard full of dirt. The house was small, and pretty much in shambles. There were dark marks coming from the bottom of it, too, like it’d been lit on fire and then put out. It looked completely unsalvageable.

“Come with me,” he insisted, killing the engine and getting out.

What? Was he serious?

He pushed out of the car, shutting the door behind him, and I looked around, my heart pumping as I got out. I rubbed the back of my arms with my hands, even though it was nearly eighty degrees outside. “Cane...why are we here?”

“Because this is where I grew up.” He stared at the house, and I lowered my guard just a notch, realizing what this was.

“Oh.”

He inched forward, giving the house a complete sweep with his eyes. “It used to look much better than this,” he laughed dryly.

“What happened to it?” I stayed close to him when I heard deep laughter in the distance.

“When I sent my mom to rehab, she couldn’t keep paying the bills for the place. She wasn’t working after all. The house was in Buck’s name. He tried selling it, but couldn’t make anything happen, probably because no one would be dumb enough to buy a home in this neighborhood. Technically, he still owns it, but I highly doubt he’ll be coming back to this

piece of shit. It's paid off, though. When I'd saved up a few checks from selling for Jefe, I paid the mortgage off myself so Mama wouldn't have to worry about it anymore."

I stood at his side, looking at the house too. "That was nice of you. I can't believe you grew up in *this* neighborhood, though. Doesn't fit you."

"Funny enough, it's all I really remember about my childhood. There were good and bad days. I heard gunshots all the time. Got into a shit ton of fights. I even got robbed...but that only happened twice before I learned to stand up for myself." He looked to his left as a kid rode a bike across the street. "This neighborhood was a fucking hellhole when I stayed here—way worse than it appears now. I constantly promised Lora, my mother, and myself that I would get us the fuck out of here. I told them I would do something great—make a change in our lives so that we didn't have to deal with struggling, or wondering what we would eat for dinner some nights." He snatched his sunglasses off, and I realized his eyes were red and damp.

He huffed a laugh, dropping his head. "I sold drugs here," he confessed. "When I was eighteen, I ran every street in this neighborhood. I *owned* it... and then I met your father." He turned to look at me. "And I realized there was still a chance for me to do good. *Be* good. What I was doing wasn't right. I was a terrible kid, but he saw potential in me. He saw something in me that I couldn't see in myself."

My throat thickened with every word he shared. I had to tear my gaze away so my vision wouldn't become blurry.

"I'm not proud of what I did here to get to where I am now. The people I had to threaten. The lives I almost took just to be at the top of the food chain...but I did what I had to do for my family. They were all I had, so I did what I could, until better solutions arrived." His tongue ran over his bottom lip as he stared at the house. He stalled for a moment, and then he moved, walking up the dirt walkway. "Let me show you something."

I followed behind him, and he went around the back of the house, where a broken-down shed was leaning. Pulling the doors open, he coughed and fanned the air with his hand as dirt and dust clouded him. I stayed back, waiting for it to clear up, and when it did, he stepped inside. He turned halfway, offering a hand, and I took it, gingerly moving into the shed.

It was mostly empty and smelled of mold and moth balls. "Watch your step," he cautioned as he stepped over a hole in the floor.

He stood in front of a shelf that had empty wine bottles on them. The bottles didn't have labels. "What's all this?" I asked as he picked up a stack of papers that was beside one of the bottles.

He handed them to me, and I swiped the dirt and dust off with my hand, reading it over.

It was a business plan for Tempt. A complete outline, with income goals, types of wine, and everything. I looked up at him.

"Buck claims to be the one who thought of Tempt and all it represents, when the truth is he overheard me talking to a friend whose family makes the wine. I had to be about twenty, twenty-one. I went to school with this friend of mine, and he had a father in Italy who owned a vineyard. He'd bring me some of the wine to try, but his father never sold it. He made it because he loved it, but the taste was absolutely incredible. These were the bottles he'd bring or send to me," he said, pointing at the shelf of empty green bottles. "My friend, Joey, visited one night, and I told him we could sell that wine and make his family a fortune. All we needed was his father to agree—which he did—a plan, and a name. We did a lot of the planning at school, but Joey came here a few times when I had to do something for my family. While we were planning, though, I couldn't for the life of me think of a damn name for the brand. Unfortunately, when I was thinking of names one night, going over a list with Joey, I was on the front porch and Buck was around. He came outside and said I should have called it Tempt, because he was tempted to hit me with one of his beer bottles if I didn't shut the hell up so he could hear the game. His words exactly." He huffed a laugh, head shaking. "I never thought there'd be a day when Buck had a good idea...but even Joey said that name wasn't bad, because the wine is strong and still a little sweet, and it sneaks up on you...so we went with it, but he didn't have shit to do with building Tempt. I was the one who came up with that business plan, working hard on it every single night in college when I should have been studying. I was the one who went to Draco and risked my life, all for a dream, and all while still selling his drugs. All Buck did was mention the word during one of his annoying tirades, and it stuck with me. He didn't own the word. He threatened me with it. I don't even know how he remembers that conversation, given that he was drunk like always, but he's used it against me for years, claiming he thought of Tempt and everything it stands for. I was tempted to change the name, but I was stubborn back then and wanted to prove a point to him, that he didn't own

the fucking word.” He smashed his lips together. “You know that he actually tried to go to court over it while he was in prison? Of course it didn’t get anywhere. No one wanted to represent a man in jail. But he’s had time to think. He’s going to come with some bullshit, and he’s going to want a lot of money.”

“Well, why don’t you give him some so he can leave you alone?” I urged

“It doesn’t matter how much I give that motherfucker, he’ll never leave us alone, Kandy.” He looked me in the eyes. “I tried it before. I filled his commissary—stuffed it with money so he could get whatever the hell he wanted and so he would leave us the hell alone, but was he satisfied with that? No. He kept making threats. Kept writing to my mother. Kept sending me letters, telling me that I couldn’t buy his silence.”

Damn. I didn’t even know how to respond to that.

“He’s miserable, and I’m sure you’ve heard of the saying ‘misery likes company?’ He hates knowing that we are happy. He wants us to be just as fucked up and miserable as he is and will do *anything* to make us feel that way.”

“Is that why you brought me here? To vent about him?”

He looked all around him, and eventually shook his head. “No. I came because I wanted to see it one last time before I left it behind for good. When I lived here—way before I met you or your family—I’d constantly come back to this house, even after Buck went to jail and Mama was hardly around. I came at least once a week just to *torture* myself,” he breathed. “I’d remember all that happened here—the hatred that seeped through the walls. The fighting. The years of abuse...but then I met the Jennings.” He put his eyes on mine, taking a step toward me and grabbing my hands. “And when I met that beautiful family and saw how happy and complete you all were, I came back here less and less. Unlike Lora, I didn’t run without looking back. I kept looking back, and it fucked me up for years.” He cupped my face, watching my eyes carefully. “I also wanted to show you where we grew up, to let you see why we fight so hard for what we want...because this is where we came from. What Lora did was truly fucked up, but she did it for you and me, and I can’t fault her for that because if the roles had been reversed, I would have done the same for her.”

I pressed my cheek into his palm, nodding. “I know you would have. And I don’t blame her for it, or you for thinking that way.”

His hand moved down to tip my chin. He dropped a smooth, warm kiss on my lips and then sighed as he pulled away. "Come on. Let's get out of here," he said, grabbing my free hand. "And hold onto that. I might use some of those notes to write a book one day." He winked and led the way back out. We walked back to the car, and I got into the passenger seat. He walked around the car to get to the driver's side, but didn't get in right away. He stood outside of it for a while, and I had a feeling he was giving the house one more view.

When he was in the car, he put it in gear without hesitation and drove off without looking back.

He'd mentioned that when he met my family, that he'd stopped torturing himself by coming back, but I think in that moment, he had really let that torture go.

His brutal past.

The years of abuse.

His broken soul that had slowly been restored thanks to meeting my family.

He let it all go, and for the first time in all the years I'd known him, he was finally in control of his own life.

CHAPTER THIRTY

CANE

THERE WAS ONE MORE PLACE I WANTED TO SHOW TO KANDY BEFORE GOING back home. It was a place that I had pretty much called my second home.

Killian's Tattoo Parlor.

When I first started getting tattoos, I wasn't even the legal age to get them, but I went to Killian's garage anyway. Now, thanks to the fifteen grand I'd promised to give him if I ever got successful, he'd opened up his own shop. I was basically Killian's canvas as a teenager, and he did one hell of a job. Every tattoo I had? They were drawn by him. My tattoos weren't regrets. They all had meaning and represented my life in some way, shape, or form.

"A tattoo shop?" Kandy asked as I locked the car.

"Yep. I'm craving some new ink."

"You're basically slathered in ink," she laughed, hooking an arm around my waist. "Where are you going to get another one?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll get one on my face. Haven't tried that yet."

She busted out laughing. "You do that and I'll strangle you."

The shop was just as I'd remembered. The walls were painted burgundy, and there were three black leather chairs in their own corners. Every corner was vacant except Killian's. He was inking up someone's back, focusing hard on his work, brows furrowed and all, like I'd remembered. That focused face of his still hadn't changed. Killian was a buff guy. He lifted a

lot, and by the looks of him now, he hadn't stopped. His skin was light-brown, his head bald. He had several face piercings and both ears pierced, and of course he was decorated in ink. Full sleeves on both arms. He even had tattoos on his legs and feet. "How can I help you?" he mumbled with his thick, southern accent. He was never a man for many words.

"There's a lot you can help me with, actually," I said.

Killian looked up, his eyes getting bigger. "Ho-ly shit!" he bellowed, stopping the buzz of the needle. "Cane? What are you doing here, man? Shouldn't you be somewhere in Hawaii or some shit where all the rich people are?"

I laughed. "Just visiting."

"You know I'm always happy for a visit." He placed his needle down and said something to the man before taking his gloves off and walking my way. "Look at you, brother. Don't even look a day past thirty."

"The gray hair says otherwise." We did our brotherly hug, clapping each other on the back. When he pulled away, he dropped his eyes to Kandy. "This is Kandy, my girl."

"What, as in girlfriend?" he inquired, cocking his pierced brow.

I smiled. "I don't know. I can't really figure out what to call us. Maybe you should ask her."

"Well, what is it, little lady? This man holding you hostage, or do you really love him?" Killian asked, grinning.

Kandy blushed and fought a smile. "I'm whatever he wants me to be." She giggled. "But girlfriend sounds more formal, so let's stick with that for now." She beamed, looking up at me. I winked back.

"That's good to hear," he said.

"How much are your tattoos?" Kandy asked, looking around at a few of the artworks hanging on the walls.

"I have a price sheet on the wall over there, but seein' as I owe this man for a lot of shit, I got you. What you want?"

Kandy looked up at me. "I want what he has on his knuckles."

Killian focused on my hand. "Oh, yeah. RISE." He bobbed his head. "You got it. Let me finish him up, and then I'll get to you." He walked off, and I looked down at Kandy.

"RISE, huh?" I quirked a brow.

"Yep. We're rising together." She grabbed my hand, bringing it up and entwining her fingers between mine. "We can only go up from here, right?"

I couldn't fight my smile. "That's right, baby."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

KANDY

I GOT THE TATTOO EXACTLY WHERE I SAID I WOULD, RIGHT ON THE EDGE OF my left hand, linked to my pinky. “You’re right,” I said to Cane, in awe of my new ink as we walked out the shop. Killian had covered it in some kind of plastic-looking stuff. He said it was like a Band-Aid, but for tattoos. “It wasn’t too bad, and these are addicting. I already want another one.”

“Let’s see what you think when it starts peeling and itching like a motherfucker,” he laughed, unlocking the car. He started the car up, but I grabbed his hand before he could put it in gear. “While we’re here...I think there’s one more stop we need to make,” I suggested.

He looked me in the eyes, and as if he’d read mind, he nodded once and started driving. The drive from this side of town to get there was close to thirty minutes, but when the area started to look familiar, my pulse quickened, and I tensed in my seat. I could feel Cane glancing at me every so often, but he didn’t say a word. Just drove with the music playing to fill the silence.

And then we were there.

Cane pulled into the driveway, and as he did, my house came into view. My childhood home, painted a dark blue with white shutters. I looked to the left, at the tree that used to have my tire swing on it, and then at the rose bushes that Mom still tended with loving care.

This place was my safety once. It was all I knew.

Dad's police truck was parked in the driveway, and I had a feeling Mom's car was in the garage, since it was well after four in the afternoon. We sat there for a while, just staring, and then Cane finally spoke. "You don't have to do it today, Kandy."

"Yeah, Cane. I do. It's been long enough." I unclipped my seatbelt. I started to get out, but stopped just as quickly, looking back at him. "Come in with me?"

He looked unsure. "I don't think that's wise."

"Please. My dad may act like he hates you, but I know he doesn't. He still cares about you, Cane."

His eyes became glossy. Pressing his lips, he shut the car off and grabbed the door handle, getting out with me. We walked to the front door together, hand-in-hand, and before I could knock, it was already swinging open.

"Mom," I breathed as she looked me all over. Without a word, she rushed out, roughly towing me into her arms. She held me so, so tight, and my eyes burned, just from feeling her warm arms around me.

"Kandy! Oh, my baby!" She released me to hold my face in her hands caressing it with her thumbs. "Look at you." Her smile was a mixture of guilt and glee. She then shifted her gaze to Cane, and her smile slowly faded. Tipping her chin, she looked him over, pulling her hands from my face. "She looks a lot better," she said to him, and I assumed that was some form of *thank you*.

Cane nodded, barely smiling.

"Come inside," she insisted, ushering me in. I went into the house, smelling something sweet in the air. It smelled like her snickerdoodles, which she only baked when she was stressed. Cane followed behind us, closing the door after him.

"Where's Dad?" I asked, rounding the corner and checking the living room. He wasn't there.

"Man cave." Her tone was flat. "He's been down there a lot lately... drinking."

My eyes stretched, and Cane let out a harsh breath. "Any stunts?" he asked.

"Fortunately, no. I think his new role as Sergeant makes him think first now."

"So he got the position?" I asked, excited.

She smiled, nodded.

“That’s good!” I tucked a piece of hair behind my hair. “I tried calling you a few days ago.”

Mom’s eyes fell. “I know.”

My brows strung together. “Why didn’t you answer? Or at least call back that same day?”

Her throat bobbed. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “I guess I was being selfish? I knew you were happy, and I didn’t want to hear the happiness in your voice when I missed you so much.” That surprised me. I opened my mouth, but clamped it shut a second later. “Not only that, but I didn’t want to ruin that happiness. This whole thing with you finding yourself? Clearly, it paid off when you left. You look healthy and well-rested again.”

“I feel better.”

“Good. As long as you’re happy…” She didn’t complete her sentence. I didn’t expect her to. Of course I’d broken her heart. She looked happy to see me, but also ashamed and hurt.

“Well,” she breathed, “if you want to see your dad, he’s right downstairs.”

I bobbed my head, going to the door that led down to the basement.

“Coming?” I asked Cane over my shoulder.

“Nah.” He held up a hand. “I think I’ll hang out up here, let you talk to him alone.”

“You can try my snickerdoodles,” Mom insisted, gesturing with her hand for Cane to follow her. “It’s a new recipe. I had a craving, but instead of my original recipe, I added caramel. You’ll let me know what you think? I plan on taking some to work tomorrow.”

Cane smiled, following her to the kitchen. “Of course.” Before he disappeared around the corner, he looked me in the eye, and that look said it all. *You’ll be okay.*

Sighing, I gripped the doorknob belonging to Dad’s man cave and pulled it open. It creaked a bit, but was nowhere near as loud as the TV down there.

I walked down, and with each step, the stairs moaned and croaked.

“Mindy, you got that beer?” Dad called. The sound of whistles blowing came from the TV, and Dad cheered, “Oh! Yes! Hell yes! Go, go, go!”

I stepped around the corner, and he had his hands in the air, clearly pleased with who was winning whichever sport he was watching. I rested

my head on the corner of the wall, watching him briefly before noticing three beer bottles on the table beside his recliner, all empty.

I softly cleared my throat, and he finally pulled his eyes from the TV to see who'd made the noise. When his brown eyes found mine, his excitement morphed into shock.

Brows narrowing, he stood up straight, taking a step away from the TV. "Kandy," he breathed, and the sound of his voice was enough to do me in. I hadn't heard it in what felt like an eternity. I knew I would miss my parents, but didn't think the feeling would be so powerful. I didn't realize it would consume me whole the moment I placed eyes on them.

I rushed his way, and without a moment of hesitation, he opened his arms. My face pressed into his chest, and he sucked in a breath, holding on tight. "Kandy. You're here...but..."

I looked up. "I'm here, Dad."

"But...why? I thought...I mean, I figured you were happy with him. Did something happen?"

"No, nothing happened and I am happy with him," I confirmed, and his mouth twitched. "I just came back to see you and Mom." I pushed a tendril of my hair back. "I miss you guys so much."

He huffed. "We miss you, too. Every single day, sweetheart."

My eyes burned with hot tears, my vision so blurry I could hardly make him out anymore. "Dad, I'm sorry that I—I mean, I didn't mean to make you feel like you and Mom aren't enough."

"You didn't make us feel like that." He wrapped a hand around the back of my head, kissing my forehead. "How is he treating you?"

"Better than ever."

He studied my eyes briefly, dropping his hand. "You know...I, uh...I know about Kelly."

I swiped my tears away with the back of my arm. "What do you mean?" I tried to play dumb, when really my heart started beating a little faster.

"Come on. Don't play dumb with me. If I know, I'm sure Cane knows, and he's probably filled you in about it. One of the detectives was on the case of her *random* death. He called me, told me what was going on. It was on the news, too, but they've kept Kelly's name out of it so your mother doesn't know about it. I don't plan on telling her about it, either." Dad frowned a bit. "Did this have anything to do with Cane?"

I looked away. "I'm not answering that."

“Why not?”

“Because if I tell you, you’ll conjure up even more reason to dislike him and his family.”

His face became serious. “So it *did* have something to do with him?”

I glared at him. “I never said that.”

“I know it did,” he stated. “Just answer one question for me: did *he* do it?”

“No.” My voice was firm, and Dad’s shoulders relaxed a bit.

“Fine. Then who did?”

“I don’t know,” I lied, “but it wasn’t Cane. He wasn’t even on the East Coast when it happened. You can check his records or whatever it is you do. He was in Texas.”

Dad ran a palm over his face. “Well...it’s not like she didn’t have it coming,” he muttered. “I can’t lie and say I didn’t think of ways to serve her a little more justice myself.”

I folded my arms, looking over my shoulder. “He’s upstairs, you know? Cane.”

He grimaced and was about to walk around me, but I pressed a hand to his chest. “Why is he in my house?” he growled.

“Because I told him to come inside with me. Look, Dad, you can pretend you hate Cane all you want, but you and I both know that it isn’t true. Cane made some mistakes in his life, yes, but he has told me repeatedly that loving me wasn’t one of them. Not only that, but you knew all about Cane and where he came from and who he was involved with, but you still let him into this house every single time for those dinners. You know he’s not all bad.”

“Jesus, Kandy. You’re still on that? Believing every little lie he tells you?”

“To be frank, Dad, Cane has told me nothing but the truth ever since I went back to him.” I folded my arms. “But I see you’re still out to blame him for every little thing.”

“I don’t trust him,” he grumbled.

“Well, I do. Okay? And I love him. He means a lot to me, and at one point in your life, he meant a lot to you and Mom too.” He tried fighting the look, but I noticed his eyes soften. “Look, I know things can’t go back to the way they used to be. Trust me, I get why they can’t, but you had your time to sulk and throw your own pity party. It’s time to accept life as it is.”

He scoffed and walked away from me, sitting in the recliner. “If you came back, thinking I would show him some sympathy, it isn’t gonna happen. As far as I’m concerned, Cane is dead to me.”

“And I hate that you feel that way, D.” Cane’s deep voice rose behind me, and I looked back, watching him and Mom round the corner. I was so involved in our conversation that I didn’t even hear them coming down.

Dad stood up quickly, glaring at Cane. “You have some nerve, Cane.”

“I know I’m the last person you want to see.” Cane raked his fingers through his hair. “Do you remember the day you called me about Kandy’s graduation, and you told me that you really wanted me there?”

Dad didn’t answer, but his eyes stayed on Cane’s.

“I was busy as hell that weekend. Swamped, really. But you told me that if I didn’t make it, you would understand. And if I did make it, it would mean so much to you because I was family to you.”

Dad’s eyes went red at the rim.

“It was the first time you actually called me family. I mean, yeah, you’d hinted at the whole brother thing before, but calling me family was different and special, and I appreciated it. The thing about family, D, is that there are always arguments. There is always drama we have to deal with, but we push through it out of love, man. It can take months—*years* sometimes—but you learn to forgive. And look, I know me being with Kandy crosses every single line in your book. I know I hurt you the day you found out about us...but if anyone in this world knows me, it’s you, and you know I would *never* do a thing to hurt your daughter.” He came closer. “I am begging you, as someone who cares deeply for not only your daughter, but all three of you, to accept this for what it is. Accept the fact that I love her, D, and that I want her in my life just as much as you want her in yours. Stop trying to fight what already is because if you keep fighting it, you’ll only create a bigger barrier between the two of you.”

Dad ran a hand over the top of his head, turning his back to us. “What is this, some kind of intervention?” he muttered.

“No,” Mom said, walking up to him and rubbing his back. “It’s time for you to make changes, honey. Kandy is our *only* child. She’s not five anymore, and I don’t know about you, but I love seeing her like this. I *never* want to see her like she was before. We have to make compromises, baby. It’s that simple. It’ll take time to accept it, but we’re going to do our part as parents and make things right. She’s all we’ve got, Derek.”

Dad's shoulders sagged, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. It was quiet for several seconds, the sound of the soccer game filling the void. "You're practically asking me to hand her over to you," Dad huffed.

"That's not what I'm asking at all," Cane assured him. "She is still your daughter, Derek, and you are the first man she ever loved. Nothing in this world will change that. Ever. If anything, I'm second place for life, but I'll take that if it means having a place in her life at all."

My heart skipped a beat at those words, and Dad turned halfway, looking Cane over. "I need time to think," he mumbled, slouching in his chair and picking up the beer Mom had brought down.

"No problem." Cane took a step back, and Mom sighed. She came my way, rubbing the middle of my back as I turned for the staircase, following after Cane.

When we were in the kitchen, she said, "He's a stubborn ass, but he'll come around. I know it."

"I hope so." I sat at the counter, grabbing a cookie from the plate and biting into it.

"I can order pizza if you two are hungry," she offered, looking between us.

"No...it's okay." I finished off the cookie. "We should probably get back. I don't want things to get too tense around here. But before I go, guess what?"

She smiled, hand on her hip. "What?"

"I might be going back to school."

"Oh, good!" Her eyes lit up. "Where are you thinking of going?"

"The University of North Carolina at Charlotte." I looked at Cane. "Cane knows some people there. He said he might have to pull some strings, but has no doubt they'll take me in the fall."

"Oh, baby! That is amazing! I'm so happy to hear that. Oh, that reminds me!" She rushed to the drawer behind her and pulled out an envelope. "This is for you." She handed it to me. My name was written on it.

"What is it?"

Her grin was smug. "Open it and see."

I ripped it open carefully, taking out the folded paper. When I unfolded it and read it, my eyes expanded. "This is for..."

"I opened an account for you. I know you said you didn't want to talk much about the trial, but the money is all yours. It came in a few days after

you left. We haven't touched it. I was planning on surprising you with it one day to let you know you could use it for school or whatever, but I'm glad he's doing this for you. Now the money is yours. You'll probably need supplies, books—this can go toward that.”

“Aw, Mom.” I walked around the counter, throwing my arms around her neck and hugging tight.

“Oh!” She couldn't help her laugh, and she hugged me back even tighter.

“I was going to tell you to take your car, but I assume Cane has already taken care of that issue.”

He laughed, showing off his perfect teeth. “I couldn't *not* get her one.”

“You spoil her, you know that?” Mom teased.

“Yeah,” he chuckled. “I know, and I'm pretty sure you warned me about that many times over the years. Now I'm trapped.”

Mom and I laughed with him.

She ended up ordering pizza anyway, and we ate with her. She went on about my tattoo, scolding me for getting one, but when Cane explained the meaning of it to her, she let up...but only a little bit. She was a lawyer, after all. She didn't believe in tattoos or piercings other than on the ears.

Dad didn't come up from his man cave...not that I was expecting him to. I don't think there was anyone as stubborn or bullheaded as my father, especially while he was drunk.

Before I knew it, it was time to go. I hugged Mom goodbye one last time. “Tell Dad I'll see him again soon,” I said over her shoulder, squeezing my eyes shut.

“Why don't you tell me yourself?” a deep voice asked.

I opened my eyes and pulled away from Mom as Dad came through the threshold. I didn't think about what to do or how to do it. I just went to him, throwing my arms around him.

He groaned. Sighed. “Be safe,” he murmured, rubbing my back.

“I will.”

“And call me if you need anything or if anything goes wrong.”

I laughed. “Dad, I will.”

It took him a few seconds, but he finally let me go, and I walked off the porch, giving them one more wave goodbye before heading to the car.

Cane was standing by the driver's side, waiting for me. He tipped his head at Dad, who subtly tipped his head too while collecting Mom in his

arms, and then we got in the car.

They stood there, watching us leave, and I looked at them the whole time, only turning away when I could no longer see them.

“Did that make you feel better?” Cane asked when we hit the freeway.

I looked down, and even though there were many emotions swirling inside me, my heart no longer felt heavy or filled with guilt. I was fine.

Like I said before, free.

“I needed that,” I murmured, grabbing his hand. He brought my hand to his lips, kissing softly. “Thank you for going in with me.”

“Walked out without another black eye. I’d call that winning.”

I broke out laughing as he showed off a full, boyish smile. “Yep. That’s a big win. You think he’ll come around to the idea of us?”

“Yeah, baby.” He kissed my hand one more time, and as if he were deep in thought, he looked through the windshield, toward the setting sun and said, “He will.”

PART III
WINNING

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

KANDY

ONE YEAR LATER

BLISS.

That's what the next year was like.

There were no threats. No drama. No lies. No pop-ups from El Jefe. Everything was smooth sailing. I got into UNCC and was studying, and of course Cane still worked. Mom called every single day to check on me and had even visited our house twice when she had the free time. Miss Cane cooked for her, and she really got to know Lora in all her foul-mouthed ways. She loved them both just as much as I did. To be honest, they were the kind of people who were hard not to love. They had flaws—we all did—but Miss Cane had a sweet, sweet soul, and Lora had a kindred spirit—one that made you wish you were best friends with her if you didn't know her. But even though they were fun, lovely people, I couldn't help feeling like they were both hiding something.

For starters, Miss Cane used her cell phone a lot more than she had before, and I could have sworn one night when Cane wasn't in town, I heard her arguing with someone on the phone. I wasn't sure whether or not to tell Cane at first, but eventually I caved, and he said he was going to look into it. I don't think he ever did. He'd probably forgotten, and I refused to

bring it back up twice. She was a grown woman, after all, and it could have been anyone she was arguing with. My biggest worry was that she'd gotten in touch with Buck somehow.

Lora? She was another mystery. Being on her phone was nothing new, but I noticed she'd go long periods of time without being home, and it was always when Cane wasn't around. When I asked her what she was up to, she'd tell me she needed some time to herself, or a moment to breathe, but I didn't really believe it. It wasn't my business, though. I just hoped she was being safe.

Despite all of it, everyone seemed happy. We lived our lives the way we'd always wanted. Cane had his family and me, and I had him. I talked to Dad several times a week, through text or call, and even talked to Frankie more often to fill her in on everyday stuff, but not so much lately. She was still having a hard time with the whole Clay thing. Not only that, but Aria's health was only getting worse.

And then New Year's Eve arrived, and our peace became chaos all over again.

Miss Cane was making spiked hot cocoa and cookies, and Lora was on the deck in the backyard, in front of the fire pit, bundled under a thick blanket, probably scrolling through Pinterest or Instagram like she always did. Cane was in his downstairs office, wrapping up on emails, and I was studying the diamond necklace he'd given to me for Christmas. It was beautiful, but I couldn't wear something like this for just any occasion. Wearing it to school would have made my peers wonder exactly where I came from, and I was already a quiet soul there.

I didn't bother making new friends at my new school. After my last experience with Brody, it just wasn't worth it, although I did take up recreational softball again. I practiced at a park with a few other women who practiced their swings and pitches. They were good people and all minded their own business, which I loved.

Cane came around the corner, watching me as I ran my fingers over the diamonds while looking in the mirror. "I think it's about time you give your neck a rest." He came up behind me, wrapping his arms around me. He reeled me into him, and my ass settled into his groin.

"Never. I love it too much. I've never worn something so *expensive*."

He chuckled low and deep, burying his nose into the crook of my neck. Just as he was about to kiss me there too, someone rang the doorbell.

He pulled away to look at it. “That might be Cora. I told her she could come watch the ball drop with us and share some drinks, since she didn’t go out of town with her family this year.”

“I hope you’ve given that woman a raise with all the shit she’s had to deal with for you,” I teased as he walked to the door.

“I’m sure if she felt she wasn’t getting paid enough, she’d have quit already.” He smiled over his shoulder and without checking the peephole or asking who it was, he swung the door right open.

But he shouldn’t have, because when I saw the person, my smile collapsed and my mood went from chipper to glum. I didn’t have to know him, to know he was a threat.

A man stood on the other side, slightly taller than Cane, and with a tad bit more muscle. He had a head full of mop-like brown hair, and his eyes... they were exactly like Cane’s, only much darker and much more threatening. He wore a black jacket over an army-green shirt, dusty jeans, and brown boots.

When Cane realized who he was, he immediately squared his shoulders, then a deep growl ripped right through him as he yelled, “You dumb motherfucker!”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

KANDY

CANE DIDN'T HESITATE. I REMEMBERED HIM TELLING ME REPEATEDLY THAT if he ever saw Buck again, he wouldn't hold back. I was certain that in that moment, nothing but rage had consumed and swallowed him whole.

Cane took the first swing, and with one punch to the face, Buck stumbled backward, his back slamming into one of the pillars. I couldn't fight the scream that crawled out of my throat as I watched Cane tackle Buck to the ground. Both of them rolled down the stairs with loud thuds, and then footsteps sounded behind me.

"What the hell is going on!" Lora yelled, pushing past me and rushing to the door.

"Wait—Lora!" I ran after her, but she came to an abrupt halt on her own, watching her brother and the man who was supposed to be a father to her, fighting on the grass. Lora's entire body froze up, and she literally looked like she was staring at a ghost.

"Should I call the cops?" I asked, panicked.

But Lora didn't answer.

"Lora!" I wailed.

"Kandy, Lora! What's wrong?" I looked back, and Miss Cane was rushing our way. She saw Cane and Buck tussling on the walkway, just as Buck rolled on top of him and delivered a mean, solid punch to his face. "Oh my God," she gasped. She rushed down the steps, going right to them,

trying to break it up, almost like she had done this many, many times before. Buck ended up swinging his arm back to push her off, but he ended up hitting her right in the mouth, making her bleed.

Lora finally broke out of her frozen state, gasping as Miss Cane hit the ground with a loud, broken moan. Cane saw it happen—saw the arm of the man he hated swing back and hit his mother—and I don't think I'd ever seen him get so angry. He shoved Buck off of him and then climbed on top of him, pinning his arms down with his knees and punching his face repeatedly.

“You. Stupid. Mother. Fucker!” Cane roared, still punching.

“Cane! Stop!” his mom yelled, still on the ground, holding her hand out.

I didn't know what else to do, so I went inside and grabbed my phone. When I rushed back out, about to dial 9-1-1, Lora glared at me. “No, Kandy! Hang it up!” she shouted, and I frowned at her, but she frowned even deeper. I lowered the phone, feeling defeated. Cane was down there, literally fighting like this was life or death, and all I could do was stand there and wait until it was over. I went down the steps to help Lora bring Miss Cane to a stand instead.

“Fuck, Mom! He hit you hard! Your lip is split!” Lora cried out.

A loud grunt sounded in front of us, and Buck shoved Cane off somehow. Cane landed on his back, and Buck was about to return several of the punches Cane had delivered, but then Miss Cane screamed, “Stop this! Now!”

I cupped my mouth, looking Cane all over. He was a bloody mess, but most if it was Buck's. His knuckles were covered with red, the letters for RISE slathered with his father's blood.

“How the hell did you find out where we lived?” Cane rasped, shoulders hiked, like he was ready to attack all over again.

Buck smiled, a bloody smile that made my skin crawl. He spat the blood out and said, “Boy, you think you were hard to fucking find?”

“Fuck you,” Cane spat.

Buck looked at Miss Cane and then Lora. “Hey, pretty girls.” His smile was sharp and slick, and Lora glared hard at him, nostrils flaring, while Miss Cane physically cringed.

“You've got one second to get the fuck off my property before I end your ass,” Cane growled.

“Oh, boy!” Buck cackled. “Oh, shit! So you get yo’ self a little bit of money, and think you runnin’ shit now! Is that it?”

Cane didn’t waver. “You were stupid for coming here.”

“Oh...you know why I’m here.” He slapped his palm with the back of his other hand. “I need my fucking money, not the shit you put in my commissary, but all of it. That company is mine! I named it! It’s mine!”

“Nothing is yours, so back the fuck off!”

Buck sneered, using the back of his hand to swipe the blood off his mouth. “I bet you’d like to know that I got myself a nice lawyer. Yep. I told her my story, and she’s agreed to help me file a suit against yo’ little company if you don’t start payin’ up.”

Cane glared hard at Buck. “You can make all the threats you want about suing me, but it won’t fucking work and you know it. You don’t have shit to back you up, and even if you did, it would be bullshit.”

Buck laughed even louder, and my ears rang. “Look at you! Thinkin’ you done dropped some balls now!” Buck turned toward us, but his eyes focused on me. “I’ve been watching all of y’all. Especially that little young girl right there.” He pointed directly at me and my eyes widened. “I see her when she goes to school and when she gets home. Seen her come to your office a few times too. You came out one day and was all over her. I figured she must’ve been important to ya.”

Oh my God.

“Funny thing is, she looked real familiar too. I couldn’t place it for a while, but then I woke up one night, and remembered that cop that arrested me. I kept thinkin’ about something he told me when they took me in. He kept saying something like how I was a piece of shit to hit my own kids and girlfriend.” He smirked. “He went on about how he had a daughter of his own and would never lay a hand on his princess—somethin’ like that—so when I got out, I looked into him. Found out his name was sir Derek Jennings. Found out he had a little daughter, and then saw his little daughter was livin’ with you. She must suck your dick real good, huh? There ain’t nothin’ like young pussy—”

Cane had clearly had enough. He lunged forward, wrapping his hands around Buck’s throat. We all gasped.

“Keep talking,” he seethed, squeezing his throat tighter. “I fucking dare you to say another goddamn word about her.” He squeezed more as Buck clawed at his hands.

“Cane!” Lora yelled, but Cane didn’t look back. He kept his hands locked around Buck’s throat, refusing to let up.

So I tried. I took a step forward and called his name, my tears on the verge of falling. “Cane, stop! Don’t let him get to you! This is what he wants!”

He looked through the corner of his eye briefly, and with each passing second, he let up a little more. Buck dragged in a breath and then shoved Cane away by the chest. “Remind me to tell my lawyer that you attacked me first,” Buck wheezed.

“Remind me to tell my lawyer that you went against your fucking restraining order.”

Buck smiled, looking at Miss Cane and Lora. “You mean against those two bitches over there? Don’t nobody want them anymore. They don’t have shit I need, and I’m sure your mama’s pussy ain’t what it used to be. But you got what I want.” He cracked a grin, and Miss Cane dropped her head. He was such an inconsiderate bastard. Now I could see why Cane hated him so much. “So this is how this is gone work. If I don’t get five million of what you got, I’ll hit up my lawyer and tell her to file my suit. And trust me, boy, I’ll make it real ugly. I’ll make everyone wonder why they bothered workin’ with a thief like you in the first place.”

Cane’s jaw flexed, fists clenching again.

“You give me my five mill, and I’ll be out your hair. It’s that simple. And to be clear, I only came here to let you know how dead fucking serious I am. Restraining orders don’t mean shit to me. All they’ll do is give me a warnin’.” He spat on the ground, and it almost landed on Cane’s shoe.

Cane grimaced as Buck walked backward. “What do you say I come back in two days? That’ll give you some time to get that money arranged.”

“You won’t come back to this house,” Cane snarled through clenched teeth. “And it won’t be in two days. You’ll meet me at my office. You’ll be there on Thursday, five days from now. You don’t show up, it’s your fucking loss, because if you come here again, I won’t just beat your ass.” He took a step closer to him. “I’ll end you.”

Buck howled with laughter, clapping his hands. “You are a fucking riot! You know that? I ain’t never realized how funny you was!” Cane’s nostrils flared and reddened, and Buck held his hands up, smirking. “Thursday at five for my five mill.”

Buck finally turned, laughing one more time before walking away. He climbed into an old, dark green pickup truck and pulled off, tires screeching, but of course he didn't go peacefully. On his way out, he stuck a middle finger out the window and laughed like it was the funniest thing ever.

Cane watched until he could no longer see him, and then he turned toward us. He pushed Lora away from Miss Cane and grabbed Miss Cane's wrist, practically dragging her up the stoop and into the house.

"Cane! Stop!" Lora yelled. I rushed after them, shutting the door behind me. When I rounded the corner, Cane had Miss Cane's upper arms locked in his hands and forced her to sit down, then he crouched down on one knee. "Give me your goddamn phone," he demanded.

"W-what? Why?" she asked.

"Give it to me! Now!" he barked, and she flinched but dug into her back pocket, handing it to him.

"If I go through this phone, I won't find any random fucking numbers or text messages from him, will I?"

Miss Cane looked from him to Lora nervously.

"Will I, Ma?" His voice was louder and she put her attention back on him. She didn't answer, so he turned the screen on and handed the phone to her. "Unlock it."

"Cane, I didn't get in touch with Buck, I swear!" she cried.

"So why are you so afraid to open your fucking phone?"

"Cane, ease up, all right?" Lora interrupted.

Cane stood up straight, facing Lora. "No, Lora, I'm not going to ease up! We fucking told her not to get in touch with him, but she did it any fucking way!"

"How do you even know she did? Buck could have easily found us! You're not invisible, Cane! It was a whole nine months since the last time we heard anything about him, and you're the one who fired the investigator who was watching him. And you heard him! He was watching Kandy! He could have followed her here one day and saw the house!"

I shivered at the thought, folding my arms and closing my eyes.

Cane turned toward Miss Cane again, but Miss Cane was already standing. She handed her unlocked phone to him, and Cane snatched it away. He scrolled through it maniacally, and when he locked in on

something, he turned the phone back around so she could see the screen and asked, “Who’s number is this?”

Miss Cane’s throat bobbed as she studied the number.

“Whose number is it, Ma!” He roared, and she flinched again, squeezing her eyes shut. Two tears slid down her cheeks, and my heart literally felt like it’d been squeezed when I saw them.

“It’s Andy’s,” she confessed.

Lora and Cane stared at her, confused.

“Who the hell is Andy?” Lora asked.

Miss Cane looked between her kids briefly before dropping her eyes. “He’s a guy I met when I was going to the meetings.”

After that confession, Cane’s eyes expanded, his hostility rapidly transforming to regret.

“I met him a little over a year ago,” she sniffled. “At first, it wasn’t anything. We just met at the meetings, talked over coffee and donuts, but then he found me on Facebook. We started chatting on there, and then eventually we swapped numbers.” She bit back her tears. “I told you I would *never* do that to you again, Cane, and I meant that. I haven’t spoken to Buck since that promise I made you while I was in rehab.” Her voice was thick. “He is just as dead to me as he is to you! I’ve learned my lesson, all right? And I love my kids! I love you two to death, and I made a promise to both of you that I was here! I have been here ever since I got out, and I am not going anywhere. Yes, some days were harder than others, but seeing you two so happy pushed me through it because I didn’t want to be the one who did something selfish to ruin everything again.”

“Fuck, Ma,” Cane groaned, swiping his hands over his face. “Why didn’t you just tell me you were seeing somebody?”

“Because I wasn’t ready to tell anyone yet. I’m still getting to know him.”

“Shit.” He handed her phone back, then pulled her in for a hug. “I’m sorry,” he murmured over her shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she cooed, rubbing his back. “It’s all right, son. I understand.” She pulled back, holding his shoulders. “But you and I both know you don’t owe him a thing. You worked your butt off for that company.”

“I know, but what other choice do I have? I’m finally in good standing with my investors and other businesses around the world. If he starts

running his mouth—which he will—I know it will make me look bad, and I’ll lose money again. I can’t afford it a second time.”

“He doesn’t need five million. That’s too much money, Q,” Lora muttered.

“I know, which is why he won’t be getting that much from me.”

“So...what are you going to do?” Lora asked, arms folding, a slight dip in her brow line.

Cane scratched the back of his head. “I’ve been thinking about what I was going to do for a while. I knew he’d come, and I prepared myself for it, that’s why I let the investigator go.” He looked from Lora to me, and then to Lora again. “I have a plan...but in order for it to work, there are a few calls Kandy and I need to make first.”

“Me?” I asked, pressing a hand to my chest.

“Yes,” he said, locking on my eyes. “It has to be you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

CANE

I HAD CORA CANCEL EVERY MEETING I HAD THAT UPCOMING THURSDAY, then I sent her home early because I knew shit would get ugly, and I didn't want her to be around for it. She'd dealt with enough of my family drama and was a great secretary whose loyalties I'd never doubted.

With a hand pressed to my chin, I watched the clock tick on the wall. On my desk was a manila envelope with Buck's name on it.

Five minutes till. He would be arriving soon.

And sure enough, he did.

I heard the elevator chime, and from my seat, with my door wide open, I watched the elevator doors draw apart. I didn't bother sitting up higher or standing to usher him in, or to shake his lawyer's hand. I remained where I was, watching him walk, a thick woman trailing behind him. He came my way, a stupid smirk on his face. When he entered my office, he looked all around him before focusing on me.

"Got my money?" he asked, dropping down in the seat on the opposite side of my desk.

The woman sat beside him, and I looked her over. "Who is she supposed to be?"

"Leverage," Buck stated. "She's a good lawyer too."

"Oh, really?" I dropped my hand and straightened my back, glaring at the woman. "I think she's a pretty dumb lawyer to bother representing you."

“Excuse me, but that is very inappropriate,” she shot back.

“No, I don’t think it is. What is your name?”

“Cathy Walker, General Practice.”

I crossed my fingers on top of my desk. “Okay, Miss Walker, let me ask you something. Did he tell you that he used to abuse me, my sister, and my mom every single day, either physically or mentally?”

She looked nervous, glancing through the corner of her eye at him before focusing on me again. “No, Mr. Cane, he did not.”

“Of course he didn’t. And did he ever tell you that he tried to *rape* my baby sister—his own *daughter*—when she was only twelve years old?”

All the color drained from her face. She sat up higher in her chair, and Buck shook his head, a small smile on his lips. Although he was smiling, I could see the darkness swirling in his eyes. He wanted to hit me. I wanted him to try it, show her that he was a worthless, hotheaded piece of shit.

“T-that is not why we’re here, Mr. Cane.” Miss Walker laid a folder on my desk that she’d been holding. She flipped through the paperwork, and when she found what she was looking for, she took it out and read over it. “We are here because according to Mr. Hunter, you stole Tempt, the name of your company, from him. And according to Mr. Hunter, he knew the man that made the wine and had come up with an agreement with him to set up an operation to sell it.”

“Bullshit,” I spat. “You really wanna know how it happened? Buck came outside, threatened me, and said the word ‘tempt.’ That’s it.”

“Yes, but he claims to have been there, helping you work on your business plan. He claims that you said you would include him, but that you never did. And when he went to prison, you built the business and then filled his commissary a few years later because you felt guilty.”

I shook my head, scoffing, and just as I was about to defend myself, the elevator chimed, and the doors drew open again. When I saw who it was, I decided to keep my mouth shut. I sat back and smiled, folding my arms over my chest.

Three good people came into my office: Mindy Jennings, lawyer; Joey Moretti, a damn good winemaker; and Derek Jennings, a damn good cop. The same cop that arrested my mother’s piece of shit sperm donor and tossed his ass in jail.

“Sorry we’re late,” Mindy huffed, stepping up to my side. “Joey’s flight was a little delayed.” She placed a few folders down, and I bobbed my head

at Joey, who smiled and nodded back. Joey looked like a nice version of Vito Corleone in *The Godfather Part II*. He still had his slick black hair, but his fashion sense wasn't like Robert De Niro when he played Vito—Joey still wore those godawful Hawaiian shirts he loved to buy from thrift stores.

I looked at Derek, who only came because he didn't want Mindy coming along with a man like Buck in the room, and also because Kandy asked him to. I knew he wouldn't have come otherwise. He gave me a slight nod, and I looked forward.

Buck sat up higher in his chair with a frown. "What the hell is this?" he snapped.

"This? Oh, just leverage." I folded my arms, and Mindy took out her cellphone, setting up the recorder. When she hit play, she called for Joey.

"Let's get straight to the point. Joey Moretti, may I ask if you have any connections or ties to Buck Hunter?"

"None at all," Joey said. "I just remember him as the man who terrorized my friend's family."

"Right. So, if I were to ask you if Buck Hunter ever tasted your father's wine, what would you say?"

"He has tasted it, but he told me once before that he hated wine." Joey shrugged. "He also told me that my wine would never be on a shelf."

Buck grumbled something.

"Interesting. So you remember when you sat down with Quinton Cane to go over business plans, correct?"

"I would never forget it." Joey's eyes lit up, and he looked from me to Mindy. "He had so much hope for our wine. I don't think anyone ever believed in us as much as Cane."

"That's amazing. Okay. One more question: when Buck Hunter threatened Cane, and told him to use the word *Tempt* because he was tempted to hit him, would you consider that a solid form of an idea?"

"No, I wouldn't. For one, Mr. Hunter was drunk, and Cane was a little stoned, but he always got that way when he needed to think. Mr. Hunter didn't even know what he was saying, and it surprises me that he even remembers that conversation. Not only that, but I remember that night very clearly, and I remember Mr. Hunter saying that he should call it '*Tempted*,' but when Mr. Hunter went back inside, Cane said '*Tempt*' sounds better." Joey looked at me, and my eyes expanded. "You were so distraught that day, and I think you smoked like three more joints after his threat, so you

probably don't remember which word it was the man used. I'm sorry that for all these years you thought he'd come up with the real word, but he didn't. I remember because I have it here." Joey dug into his back pocket and handed me a sheet of paper. It was an old paper, ripped and wrinkled around the edges.

I opened it and read over it, but it was basically scribble. A lot of numbers and descriptions of wine. Then there was a sentence at the bottom:

*Tempted is okay, but too long for a label. Tempt sounds way more catchy.
Let's go with that. Tell your dad.*

THIS WAS MY HANDWRITING. I WROTE THIS THE SAME NIGHT OF THE THREAT. "Holy shit. Yeah, I remember now. It wasn't in my notes, but I gave it to you. I forgot all about that."

Joey smiled. "This was all your idea, Cane. All of it. All I did was help my father make the wine, but you did everything else." Joey focused on Mindy. "And other than that one threat that I would say *inspired* Cane, Mr. Hunter really didn't have shit to do with creating Tempt."

Mindy smiled and turned off the recorder. "Thank you so much, Joey."

"Of course."

We all turned to look at Buck and Miss Walker. Miss Walker looked shocked, and I'm betting she was starting to regret her involvement in this whole affair.

"You were drunk?" she hissed at him. "You didn't mention that you were under the influence, or that they had notes, or your crudeness toward the winemaker."

"Does it really fucking matter?" Buck stood and grimaced at all of us. "That boy owes me his life! I sacrificed so much for him! He owes me!"

I stood up. "No, see, I think you have that twisted. I'm the one who sacrificed everything trying to save my family from your sorry ass. I took care of Mama and Lora, not you. I'm the one who got Mama clean after you fucked her up, not once, not twice, but repeatedly! So this is what's going to happen." I walked around the desk, snatching up the envelope. "There is

eight grand in this envelope. You're gonna take this and your lawyer with you when you walk out of this office, and you aren't going to look back, because if you look back, that cop over there is going drag you back to Atlanta to arrest you and toss your ass in jail *again* for breaking your restraining order, and he's not afraid to put a word in with a judge to make sure your ass is in jail for another fifteen to twenty years." I shoved the envelope into his chest while he breathed hard through his nose, staring me in the eyes.

He held onto it, looking around the room, but mostly focusing on Derek. Derek had his hands on his belt, his chest poked out, and his jaw clenched.

"Get the hell out, Buck," Derek hissed. "I should break your fucking face for following my daughter."

Buck stepped away from me, stuffing the envelope into his pocket.

"Let's go," he snapped at Miss Walker.

Miss Walker collected her things. "I am so sorry I wasted your time, Mr. Cane. If I'd known the details, I never would have taken his case. I just saw a big, popular company, and that he was related, and assumed it was deeper than he let on."

"It's fine," I assured her.

She nodded, forced a smile, and then left. When they were both on the elevator and the doors had shut, I turned toward them and smiled.

"Did you see the look on his face?" I laughed.

Mindy laughed with me, and I reeled her in for a hug. When I pulled away, she said, "He won't be coming to you again—at least not about a lawsuit. I'll keep the recording on file just in case, though."

"Thank you so much, Mindy. I know you didn't have to come all the way up here."

"Yeah, Cane." She patted my shoulder. "I did. You're a friend." She turned to collect her things while I gave Joey a brotherly hug, clapping him on the back.

"Thank you so much for coming, Joey! You're looking great, man!" I said, smiling.

"Thank you! I'm on a new diet! Vegan now!"

"Hey, it looks good on you!"

I turned and looked at Derek. He stood where he was, frowning at me as I cocked my head.

"Thank you for coming, man." I met up to him.

“I only came because Kandy called us and said it was urgent,” Derek mumbled. “I didn’t do this for you. He was a threat to my daughter.”

“He was, but still...I appreciate you showing at all.”

“Don’t get used to it,” he muttered, turning for the door. “Come on, Mindy.”

“We have to get going. I have a meeting tonight, but tell Kandy to call me when you see her,” she said.

“I will.”

She smiled over her shoulder when they met at the elevator. I watched them go, and then turned to Joey. “I should get going too,” he announced. “My wife about strangled me when I told her I had to fly here so last minute. You know she’s pregnant?”

“Shit, really?”

“Yep. She’s right at nine months. Baby is due any day!”

“Holy shit, man! Congrats!”

Joey laughed. “It’s a boy, too.”

“That’s amazing. What you always wanted, man.”

I walked with him to the elevator, pressing the button. The doors opened in no time, but before Joey boarded, he turned to me and said, “For the record, I know you see your father in yourself sometimes, but you are ten times a better man than he is. I remember the way he used to make you feel, but I’m glad to see you are past that. You look...happy. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you look like this.”

I ran a hand over my head, smirking. For some reason, when he said that, all I could think about was Kandy. Her soft laugh rang in my head. My skin tingled, craving her touch. I told her once this was settled, I’d come right back to her.

“I am happy,” I told him. “I’m the happiest I’ve ever been in my life, actually.”

“Well,” Joey said, taking a step back and letting the door go. “Happy looks good on you. The woman you’re with must be one hell of a lady.”

I smiled, watching the doors close, but what I really wanted to do was tell him that Kandy was everything I never knew I needed. She was light in my darkness, the calm to my storm. The bliss and ecstasy that I’d slowly become addicted to over the many years I’d known her.

Kandy gave me purpose again, and my purpose was to make her the happiest woman on earth.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

KANDY

CANE CAME HOME EARLY, AND MY HEART POUNDED HARD WHEN I HEARD HIS car door shut from the den. I ran to the window to look out and make sure it was him, and when I saw him walking around his car to come to the front door, I rushed around the corner and yanked the door open. Before he could even make it to the stoop, I was already out, running into his embrace.

He chuckled as he caught me and twirled me in his strong arms. “Oh, little one.” He wrapped a hand around the back of my head, hugging me tight.

I tipped my head back to look him in the eyes. “Is it done?” I asked.

And he smiled, eyes mellow. “Done, baby. And I’m sure he got the message. We won’t be hearing from him for a while. We’re free. Really free.”

I crushed his lips with mine, lacing my legs around his waist and cupping his face in my hands. He did it. I was so, so happy. Finally, he could be at peace. Like, truly, truly at peace. With Buck out of the picture, we could roll out of the chaos and back into our peaceful world, where everything was simple and orderly.

Cane carried me into the house, slamming the door behind him and walking blindly, carrying me up the stairs. I was so glad Lora and Miss Cane weren’t around, because I refused to hold back. So much passion and energy were running through me, and all of it yearned for him.

When we got to the room, he lightly tossed me on the bed and immediately helped me strip while I tugged on his clothes. It wasn't long before we were both naked and panting, and he wasted no time, climbing on top of me. The ridge of his cock ran over the slit of my pussy, and I shuddered, back bowing, dying for him to be inside me.

"Nah-uh," he rumbled, when I tried reaching for him. He fell onto his back and then grabbed me, forcing me up so I could sit on his chest. "Grab the headboard," he ordered, and I did. When my fingers locked around it, he lowered his body, putting only his head between my legs.

"Cane," I panted. "What are you doing?"

"Eating what's mine," he rumbled, and he pressed on my hips, leaving me no choice but to drop down. My pussy was on his parted mouth, and he slid his tongue through the slit. "I've been thinking about this the whole car ride," he said, eyes trailing up to mine. "How badly I wanted you to fuck my face. How sweet your pussy would taste on my tongue with every roll of your hips."

I moaned as he sucked on my clit.

"Fuck my face, baby," he commanded softly.

I don't know why those words—his voice—hit me so hard, but I didn't hold back. I moved my hips, sliding my pussy along the length of his tongue. He held on tight, groaning between my legs and creating a vibration that was so powerful it was hard not to keel over.

"Oh, fuck, Cane," I breathed raggedly, but I didn't stop moving my hips, and he didn't stop eating my pussy. He clutched me even tighter as my legs began to shake, and his tongue—*God, his tongue*. It pressed right on my clit, and he sucked gently, right before swirling his tongue. He repeated that same action over and over again, and I held the headboard even tighter, crying out his name. "Cane!" My legs were uncontrollable by this point. He groaned beneath me, and the vibrations of it on the insides of my thighs sent my eyes rolling to the back of my head.

"We won," he groaned, right before devouring me all over again.

We won. He was right, and I'd never felt so victorious. I shifted my hips forward and backward, and my pussy ached for release. Clutching my hips, his tongue plunged into me, and that was enough to tip me over the edge. A heavy moan ripped out of me, and I clutched the headboard with both hands. Cane groaned, finishing me off while I leaned forward, pressing my forehead to the headboard as he moved from beneath me. The bed dipped

outside both my thighs, and he was right behind me, his hand coming up to wrap around my throat.

“Like this?” he growled in my ear, and I bobbed my head.

He clutched my throat just enough for me to feel the weight of his hand, and with his other, he used it to angle his cock, and thrust himself right into my pussy from behind. “Ah, yes,” he rasped in my ear. He still had his hand around my throat, using the other to hold my hip and keep me steady. He worked his hips up, providing powerful thrusts each time I dropped down, wanting to feel more and more of him, and as we got closer and closer to the edge, I realized what this was:

Power.

Bliss.

Perfection.

Realness.

Beauty.

Love.

This was us. After so many years, and so many ups and downs, we had won, and winning felt fucking amazing.

Cane removed his hand from my throat and palmed my breasts, squeezing them both in his hands, stilling after one final pump upward. He let out a heavy, intense groan, like he'd been holding this one orgasm in for years, and I cried out as he sucked on the crook of my neck, bringing me to the sweet land of euphoria.

“I fucking love you,” he breathed in my ear, our bodies sagging.

I turned my head, and somehow his lips found mine. Our mouths connected, and my pussy clenched around his semi-hard cock. He groaned, massaging my breasts in his palms. “I love you more,” I whispered.

“That’s impossible, baby.”

That same day, we had victory sex two more times, in two different parts of the house: his office and in the bathroom. Each time was better than the last, and by nightfall, we were raw, exhausted, and mostly satisfied. Cane said work could wait, and curled up with me in our bed to watch a movie. To many people it may not have seemed like much, but to me it was everything—he was here, and I was smiling, and there was no better place to be than in his arms.

Were Cane and I perfect? Hell no, but we were happy and in love, and at the end of every single day—no matter how hard things got or how trying

it seemed—being happy and in love was all that mattered to me, and only a fool would try and convince me to think otherwise.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

KANDY

TWO YEARS LATER

IF SOMEONE HAD TOLD THE NINE-YEAR-OLD GIRL ON THE TIRE SWING, WITH the Chucks and rainbow socks on, that the man smoking in front of her house would turn out to be her soulmate, she would have laughed right in their face and told them they were wrong.

Yet, there I was, sitting on a beach in Belize, like Cane had promised me, sipping on a frozen margarita, with that beautifully twisted man at my side. It felt good being twenty-one. I felt a more equal status with Cane since I could actually go to bars and clubs without worrying about age or restrictions.

He and I had a lot of fun over the past two years. Of course he still worked hard and left town often, but during the moments when he was back, I cherished his presence. I made sure to take opportunities with him. To travel with him, even with school in the way. We mostly did our traveling when I had breaks, or during the summer.

Right now it was mid-June, and I was lying beneath one of the shady blue umbrellas, enjoying the warm air and crisp splashes of water from the ocean whenever the wind blew. We'd been planning this trip to Belize for a little over a year now.

“You deserve another getaway,” he’d told me one night when I was studying. “You’ve been working hard.”

“We both have,” I said. “But what about Belize?”

Of course I was only kidding, but he’d considered it done the moment I mentioned it. Now we were here, and it was nothing short of amazing. We sunbathed and drank and had lazy sex in our overwater bungalow. We ate out every single night, and drank some more. It was the perfect romantic getaway.

The sun began to sink and we packed up, walking back to our bungalow hand-in-hand. I tossed my beach bag down on the patio, and we both went to shower together before catching a meal.

That night over dinner, I had many questions to ask him. For some reason, our little getaway made me think, and not just about the positives, but some of the negatives too. Of course, the negatives nagged at me the most, and since our trip would be coming to an end in two days, I figured asking that night would have been best.

When our food arrived, I asked, “Do you ever just sit and think about our future? Like how one day you’ll be sixty and I’ll be forty-ish?”

He looked up from his lobster and into my eyes. “Hmm...no. I don’t really think about the age aspect too much anymore.”

“It doesn’t scare you to know, though?” I urged.

“Not at all,” he said, then bit into his bread roll. “Does it scare you?”

“No.” I shook my head, holding back on a smile. “I just wonder if you’ll even want me five or ten years from now.” The music changed to a calmer, soothing one. It was like jazz music, but with a hint of R&B.

“Kandy,” he said, reaching across the table and grabbing my hand. “I will never get tired of you. Don’t make excuses now. You’re stuck with me for life.”

I giggled as he kissed the back of my hand.

“But now that you mention it,” he sighed, “if I’m sixty or seventy and can’t get it up, that’ll scare the fuck out of me.”

My eyes stretched and I burst into a fit of laughter. “Oh my gosh! Why?”

“Because I need to be able to please my woman at all times—liver spots, dentures, and all. I should probably start looking into Viagra if I can’t, just in case.”

“Oh my goodness!” I laughed as he grinned. “You are insane.”

He released my hand to take a sip of his sweet tea. I took a bite of my shrimp, still looking into his eyes.

“So...what about having kids one day? Do you still not want them?” That was the main question on my mind. I didn’t bring kids up much since he found out my truth. Not because I had forgotten, but because I didn’t want to ruin our perfect moments by making him or myself feel bad.

He sighed and his gaze lowered a bit. “I’d love to have them with you.”

“But you can’t.” I dropped my head, but he reached across the table to tip my chin. “Says who? Just because one doctor gave you a few opinions doesn’t mean it’s set in stone, Kandy. We can always see other doctors for other opinions.”

“Yeah, but I just...I *feel* it, Cane. Remember that time in New York when I pretty much made you come inside me?”

He huffed a laugh. “How could I forget?”

“Well, I was ovulating that day. I had it all planned out, was hoping it would work, but nothing happened. I got my period like clockwork. I guess it doesn’t matter though. I wasn’t ready to have a kid back then anyway.”

Cane let out a long, weary sigh, then grabbed my hand to squeeze it. “Kandy, you’re still young, okay? And no way was your body fully healed then. You can’t worry yourself about that right now. You haven’t even finished school yet. You don’t even know what you want to do after you graduate. You ever think that maybe nothing happened because it wasn’t meant for it to happen just yet?”

“No,” I muttered.

“Quit sulking,” he lightly scolded, and my eyes swooped up to his. “Look, how about this: once you graduate and figure out what you’d like to do during your free time, as a career or part-time thing, we can see a doctor for another opinion, and if you really want to try, we will. I’ll find the best doctor around.”

I bit back a smile. “You’re saying you’re willing to knock me up when I’m ready?”

“I’m saying that I’ll do whatever you want me to do, as long as it puts a smile on your face. Besides,” he tilted one shoulder, shrugging. “I don’t mind the idea of having a little bundle of my own.”

“I’m not in a big rush to have a kid. I don’t know what I was thinking that night. There’s just this urge to know if I can or not, and it bothers me as

a woman, you know? It'll continue bothering me until I see something happen."

He nodded. "I get that."

I sipped my coconut water.

"All right. My turn to ask you a question now," he said, voice lower.

"Sure."

"Do you feel like you could be with me when I'm wrinkled and liver-spotted?"

"Of course I can, Cane. I love you."

"I know you do, but I mean, *really really* be with me?"

My brows dipped. "I don't understand what you mean..."

He smirked, then dropped his fork to stand up. He walked around the table, and when he was right next to me, he cupped my face in his hands and leaned over to press his lips to mine. He kissed me for a long time, his lips supple and smooth. Perfect. Pulling away, he studied my eyes, his shimmering from the decorative lights hanging above.

"Okay...let me ask you one more question. One that'll make a little more sense."

"What?" I asked.

Cane released my face to dig into his front pocket, and when he pulled out a velvety black box and dropped to one knee, I sucked in a sharp breath, covering my mouth as he asked the one question I had been waiting to hear since the moment I fell in love with him.

"Kandy," he said, opening the box with sweet laughter in his voice. "This might sound crazy, but will you marry me?"

AFTERWORD

Book 3.5, [Being Mrs. Cane](#), will be releasing on November 15th, 2018! To find out more about the conclusion of Kandy Cane's story, just flip to the next page!

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They say there is happiness at the end of every love story, but they never truly mention the hardships it takes to get there.

With Cane, I'd been through hell and back, and now, I was going to be walking up the alter, promising my life to a man that I'd gambled everything for.

Some would call me dumb.
Some would deem me insane.
Others would say I was a fool in love.
But I knew what we were, and I knew what we had was real.

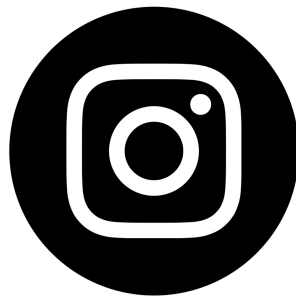
With every marriage, there is always something that can hold you back or make you think twice, and this something was going to be one of our biggest wars yet, or our greatest victory ever.

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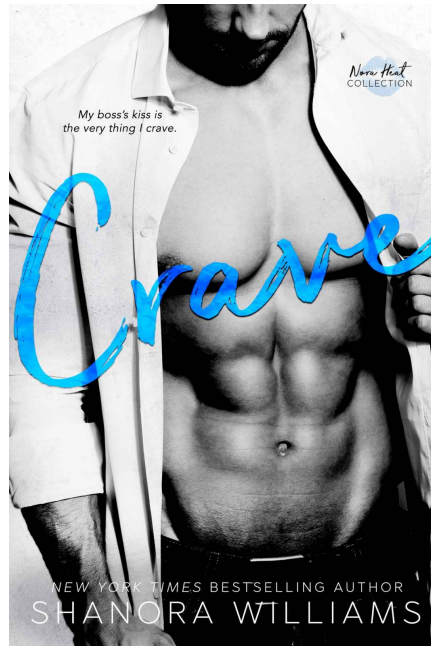
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