



A  
CANE SERIES  
SPINOFF  
NOVELLA

# TEMPTING *Clay*

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SHANORA  
WILLIAMS

*tempting clay*

A CANE SERIES NOVELLA

SHANORA WILLIAMS

# *contents*

[Heads Up](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[A Love Letter to Kandy](#)

[More Books By Shanora](#)

**Copyright © 2023 Shanora Williams**

All rights reserved. This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook is copyright material and must not be copied, reproduced, transferred, distributed, leased, licensed or publicly performed or used in any form without prior written permission of the publisher, as allowed under the terms and conditions under which it was purchased or as strictly permitted by applicable copyright law. Any unauthorized distribution, circulation or use of this text may be a direct infringement of the author's rights, and those responsible may be liable in law accordingly.

Thank you for respecting the work of this author.

Cover Design by [CT Cover Creations](#)

Editing By [Erica Edits](#)

Trademarks: This book identifies product names and services known to be trademarks, registered trademarks, or service marks of their respective holders. The author acknowledges the trademarked status in this work of fiction. The publication and use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

## *heads up*

*Tempting Clay* is a spin off novella for my already published [Cane Series](#). It can be read as a standalone, but for better clarity of the relationship between the characters in this story, I highly recommend meeting them in [Wanting Mr. Cane](#).

If you already know who Frankie and Clay are, enjoy the story!

## *tempting clay*

For years there has been a missing piece to the puzzle of my heart, and I have no doubt Clay carries it. But because he's my brother by law, I've kept my feelings for him at bay, which has resulted in us avoiding each other as much as possible.

When a family concern arrives that forces us to face each other again in our childhood home, all I can wonder is how far we'll take things now that we're adults.

I want Clay more than my next breath, and despite feeling like a traitor toward his mom—*my adoptive mom*—I'm tempted to make this encounter worth it.

Because deep down I know that if we don't act on our true feelings in the heat of this moment...we never will.

## *one*

THERE WAS something my best friend Kandy always used to say about society. We're born into a world where what we *really* want doesn't matter. Especially if it goes against the standards or the norm. If the idea of it makes anyone uncomfortable, it's automatically lumped in a negative category.

For Kandy, she'd fallen in love with her dad's best friend. Not quite normal standards and often frowned upon, but she couldn't help it. She just fell and sometimes when you fall, it's hard as hell to get up.

I will be the first to admit that my relationship with my so-called brother Clay was not normal. Before I'd ever become his adopted sister, we were friends—and okay, I admit that I'd always had a bit of a crush on him. To put it simply, Clay's mom was my mom's best friend. But my mom died in a car accident, and Clay's mom, Aria, took me in. Aria eventually adopted me and I'd been living with her and Clay for the majority of my life. The status of being "just friends" with Clay had morphed into something else entirely. No longer was he the kid I had a small crush on. By law, he was my *brother* and I hated everything about it. But what could I do? Walk away from the *only* family I had because of a measly crush? Not likely.

For years, I tried avoiding my feelings. I swallowed them down out of respect for Aria. My adopted mother saw us as one big happy family and I wasn't going to be the person to ruin that, and Clay loved his mom so much that he'd never jeopardize her happiness for anything...even if it made him undeniably happy. But things like that are hard to stick to when you love someone in a way you never thought you could.

When that person is your safe space, and you feel like you can't breathe without them, that's how you know it's real. They can walk into a room and



they're all you see. The spotlight is on them and your heart doubles in speed, your knees go weak, and all you want is to be in their arms. That's how I felt about Clay as we got older, but it wasn't until we were twenty-four when I realized there was no turning back.

## *two*

IT WAS SUPPOSED to be a pretty chill day when Clay popped back up. But the day went south when Aria went to the hospital. She'd recently come out of remission from pancreatic cancer and since I'd finally graduated college, I came right back home so I could take care of her.

I dropped Aria off for an appointment and somehow that appointment spiraled to a doctor informing us that he needed her to stay overnight. Things had been hectic since Aria's diagnosis, and I thought it would get better, but apparently it was getting worse again.

"Everything will be fine," Aria insisted in the hospital room while holding my hands. A yellow and teal flower scarf was on her head, the ends hanging limp on her shoulders. Beneath the scarf was a pixie cut—one she was proud of because her hair had grown back long enough for the style. "There was probably something with the bloodwork," she went on. "Don't worry. I'll call you when I'm ready to be picked up."

Only Aria didn't call so I could pick her up. She called instead to let me know she'd be staying another night.

I was waiting for her to be home so she could relax and I could cook for us, but since she wasn't coming, I got dinner started for myself. Whenever I was stressed, my go-to was chicken tortilla soup and after leaving Aria at the hospital, I went to the grocery store and snagged all the ingredients for that specific dish. It was one of our favorites when I was in high school. Aria would let me and Clay cook our own meals once a week. I often went with chicken tortilla soup or tacos. Clay went with quesadillas or hot dogs with fries.

The thought of Clay made my chest tighten. I hadn't spoken to him much

since he left for college. Aria didn't know how distant we'd truly become, but she would say things like, "Your brother is doing well." As if she knew there was a rift between us that needed salvaging.

But there was no saving us. Clay and I had drifted apart for a reason and it was better that way. It was hard to be in the same room with him at first, with all the summer breaks and holidays, but for the most part, we avoided one another. I would go to Kandy's house and sleep there if he was in town, and for Christmas, the most I would get him was a pair of socks and we'd call it a day—and I only bought him socks because Aria would catch on. He would give me things like ink pens or a T-shirt. Sure, it was awkward, but we were adults now and this was the *real* world. We couldn't keep acting like horny teenagers, especially with Aria's health on the line.

I sighed as I chopped the tomatoes on top of the bamboo cutting board. As I prepped the chicken with seasonings, I heard a car door shut from a distance but ignored it. I figured it was a neighbor because no one was coming here tonight. I had Aria's car and mine was locked up next to it.

But then a door in the house creaked on the hinges and softly clicked shut. Wait...that couldn't be Aria, could it? How would she have gotten home?

My brows puckered as I washed my hands, and when I turned around, my heart plummeted to my stomach.

## *three*

STANDING at the mouth of the kitchen was my brother, Clay Martin. As he stood there, eyes locked on mine, it was like all the air had been sucked out of the room.

Of course, he was still in great shape (four consecutive years playing football and conditioning between will do that to a man) but his blond hair was shorter, tapered on the sides and long enough at the top to fall onto his forehead. He wore basketball shorts and a tank that revealed muscular, sun-kissed arms. The straps of a black duffel bag were in his right hand, his car keys dangling from the left.

“Clay,” I breathed, looking him up and down. “W-what are you doing here?”

His eyes shifted to the stove, at the mildly brewing pot of chicken broth and tomatoes. “Is that chicken tortilla soup?” he asked.

My eyes swung to the soup before locking on him again. “Yeah, it is.”

He dropped his duffel bag where he was and walked into the kitchen. “Good. I’m starving.” His keys clattered on the kitchen table, as he slumped down in one of the chairs. It took a moment for the air to fill the room again, and his cologne was the smack in the face I needed to pull me out of my stupor.

“Um...you didn’t answer my question,” I said, facing him. “What are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be at school?”

“Yeah, but Mom called me, said she was in the hospital again and staying overnight.”

“Oh.” I shifted on my feet.

His eyes connected with mine. “She also said you needed my help.”

I frowned. “Why would she say that?” I gestured to the kitchen and the brewing soup. “As you can see, I don’t need your help with anything. I have it handled around here.”

Clay ran his fingers through his golden hair, peering up into my eyes. “I swung by the hospital to see Mom...”

“And?”

“And...she told me you were home alone so...I thought I’d swing by here too.”

His confession caused me to hesitate. I stared into his green eyes, searching for the truth because I knew when he was lying. He was a terrible liar and he had a quirk whenever he did it. The left corner of his mouth twitched, like he was attempting to bite the inside of his cheek. But he wasn’t lying right now. The sincerity bled from his pores and there was no cheek twitching. Either he’d stopped the quirk, or he’d become a better liar.

I pressed my lips, then turned for the chicken again. I placed it in the pan to sear.

“How long do you plan on staying?” I asked, still trying to play it cool.

“Dunno. Until Mom is home, I guess.”

I tried not to freeze. That could be *days*. I couldn’t handle that. “Don’t you have, like, a football camp thing or something?” I probed.

“No, I graduated, remember? All that training and conditioning is over. You’d know that if you’d made it to the graduation.” I looked over my shoulder and he was frowning.

“You didn’t make it to mine either,” I countered.

“I sent you flowers,” he shot back.

I started to speak, but clamped my mouth shut. He *did* send me flowers, straight to my college apartment: peonies—my favorite. And I sent him a box of his favorite candy bars: Snickers. Quiet gifts. Neither of us reached out to thank each other.

“I couldn’t make your graduation, Clay. It was all the way across the state, and it was the day before mine. I wouldn’t have made it.”

“I know.” He rubbed his forehead.

“Look, Frank, I’m just here to make sure Mom is okay and to check on you like family does,” Clay insisted.

The word *family* ran like ice down my spine, but I turned my back to him again as I watched over the chicken. I wasn’t sure what to say to that. How could he not see that we’d crossed the boundaries of family? We couldn’t be

“just family,” no matter how hard we tried.

I swallowed that bitterness down and said, “Well, if you’re sticking around, you should take your stuff to your room and wash up a bit. The food will be done soon.”

“Right. Yeah.” Clay stood and his feet thumped across the floor as he left the kitchen. I watched him pick up his duffel bag and go before my eyes landed on his taut ass. Fuck me. It looked so good in those slippery shorts.

*No. Stop it, Frankie.* I shook my head, focusing on the chicken again.

## *four*

WHEN THE SOUP WAS READY, I poured two bowls and set them on the table, then went for the jug of sweet tea I'd made earlier that day. Clay was already slurping his soup and crushing tortilla chips into it with his large hands as I poured the tea into glasses.

When I sat down, his eyes found mine and he smiled. I wanted to smile too but couldn't bring myself to do it. The last time we were alone *things* happened. That's why we lost touch with each other in the first place. That's why it'd become so awkward. We'd gone too far with our actions.

"So, what are your plans now that school is over?" he asked, sitting up straight.

I slurped some soup. "Not much, really. I'll probably hang here with Aria a few weeks longer, make sure she's okay. Kandy wants to go to Hawaii in July, but I'm still thinking about it."

Clay scoffed. "What's there to think about? She's still with that Cane guy, right?"

"Yeah."

"Right, so she's still rich," he said with a shrug. "Free trip."

"Sure, it is, but I like to have my own money when I travel too, so I've been thinking about getting that part-time job at Victoria's Secret again." My face reddened at the sheer mention of Victoria's Secret. Really? I had to bring the idea of lingerie up with him?

Clay had frozen a bit, his spoon halfway to his mouth. He swallowed hard before eating again. "Yeah, sure, I get that." A silence wedged between us. Then he asked, "But you're doing okay, right?"

"I'm fine," I said around a mouth full of tortilla chips.

“I just mean...well, you don't have to stop living because Mom is sick. She said so herself. When's the last time you did anything fun?”

I shrugged. “I don't know. I'm not really focusing on fun anymore, Clay. College is over, and I plan on putting my degree to good use if I can.”

“Your degree in?”

“Psychology, asshole. God, how do you not know this? I told you what I was majoring in for months before we graduated high school!”

“I know! Sorry, I just forgot. Sheesh.”

“Typical.” I rolled my eyes.

“You don't know what I majored in,” he countered.

“Sports medicine, so you can still stick around athletes, even injured ones, apparently.” I rolled my eyes again and he chuckled.

“You think you're so smart.”

I couldn't help my grin. “I *am* smart.”

He smirked, slurping the soup again. Pointing his spoon at his bowl, he said, “You were always good at making this soup.”

I smiled a little. “Thanks.”

Silence again. He was eating, and I liked our little banter. In fact, I'd missed it. It was almost like we were just Frankie and Clay again, two wannabe siblings who cracked jokes with each other.

“So...any new girlfriends?” I asked. And I immediately wanted to facepalm myself. Why would I ask that? I didn't care if he had a girlfriend. Well, actually, I *did* care...and okay, maybe I asked because it would be nice to know.

Clay lowered his spoon, eyeing me. “Nope. No girlfriend.” He paused. “What about you? Any boyfriends?”

“Nope.”

“Cool.”

Great. Dinner was awkward again. Why did I ask that stupid question? Clay finished eating first then rinsed his bowl and spoon before putting them in the dishwasher.

“I'm gonna take a shower,” he announced, then he left the kitchen.

When he was gone, I placed my spoon down and rubbed my forehead. I didn't know how long he was going to be home, but I was already feeling myself slipping.



## *five*

WHILE CLAY SHOWERED in the bathroom we used to share as kids (well, more like argued over), I took pajama shorts and a tank with me to Aria's room. Her shower was nicer, plus she had this detachable showerhead that came in handy for moments of pent-up frustrations. Moments like now, with Clay in the house and us pretending we didn't want each other. Pretending we were just brother and sister. Ugh. It was so exhausting to pretend.

But I wasn't going to explore with the showerhead today. I honestly would have felt bad to do that with Aria in the hospital and all. It felt disrespectful. I washed my hair and body, then rinsed the remnants of soup out of my mouth with mouthwash.

When I was done and my hair was blow dried, I caught Clay standing in his bedroom. His door was cracked open and he was shirtless, a towel low on his hips. Tendrils of damp hair clung to his forehead as he rifled through his duffel bag. He picked his head up and spotted me, and my heart accelerated as I looked away.

"You're staring, Frank!" he called out.

"I wasn't!" I shouted back. I rushed to my bedroom, placing all my clothes down before going back downstairs to clean the kitchen a bit. I'd planned on watching a new spy movie starring Idris Elba with Aria, but since she wasn't here, I decided to watch it solo. I went to the sofa with a blanket and flipped to the Netflix app. As it loaded on the TV, I unlocked my phone to send Kandy a text.

Me: Please tell me you can come over.

She responded almost immediately.

BFF KJ: Can't. I have food poisoning. Cane made me try mussels for the first time. Never again.

I rolled my eyes. Great. I was stuck here with...*him*. I shot her a text back.

Me: That sucks. Feel better. Also...Clay is in town.

BFF KJ: WHAT?

Me: Yep. And I just saw him half naked. That's why I need to get out of the house.

BFF KJ: Where's Aria?

Me: Hospital. Not sure how long she'll be in there.

BFF KJ: Oh God. Sorry to hear that. She okay?

Me: She swears she's fine. I'm kinda worried though.

BFF KJ: I know you are. She'll pull through.

I wasn't sure what to say to that, so I hovered my thumb over the keyboard, that is, until Kandy sent another text asking,

BFF KJ: So you two are alone?

Me: YEP

BFF KJ: Think before you act ;)

I sent her the middle finger emoji just as a voice asked, "What you gonna watch?"

I gasped when Clay's deep voice filled the room.

"Shit, sorry, Frank. Did I scare you?" he asked.

"No—um." I darkened the screen of my phone and sat up higher on the couch. I pulled the blanket over my chest because I had no bra on and figured he'd stay upstairs playing video games or sleeping or something. "I'm

watching some new movie with Idris Elba.”

“Didn’t you used to have a crush on that guy?”

I rolled my eyes. “Who *doesn’t* have a crush on that guy?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Clay moved around the sofa and sat on the opposite side.

“I didn’t say you could join me,” I joked.

“It’s not just your house,” he said, a smile on his lips.

I couldn’t help smiling with him as I picked up the remote to start the movie, then wrapped the blanket further around me so neither my boobs nor my ass were out. I should’ve worn sweatpants and a hoodie. What the hell was I thinking? I contemplated going upstairs with the blanket wrapped around me, but realized that would have been a little dramatic. It wasn’t like Clay hadn’t seen me in pajamas before...or without a bra. Or like he hadn’t actually touched one of my boobs that one time we kissed during a house party in someone’s laundry room. But it felt different now...and perhaps that was due to my own illicit feelings.

Clay was supposed to be my brother by law, but I wanted him to fuck me in every way possible. There, I confessed it. And five years prior, we almost came close to doing that but stopped ourselves. The *only* reason we stopped was because we knew it would break Aria’s heart. She always saw us as one big happy family. She had no idea that her son and adopted daughter were infatuated with one another. All these years, I tried to say that it was just a hormonal, emotional thing. We’d found out Aria’s diagnosis and she was sick and weak. We spent all summer taking care of her and it brought us closer... but not in a safe way. One minute we were sitting on the back deck drinking, and the next, I was on his lap, and he was cupping my ass and groping the hell out of me. We’d had a few drinks and couldn’t stop kissing for the life of us. It was like we couldn’t get enough of each other. We almost had sex—*almost*. The only thing that stopped us was a text from Aria to Clay’s phone, requesting some water.

And that wasn’t the first time Clay and I had done things. There were times in high school where we kissed or fooled around. It was so wrong, but it felt so, so right. It was almost like because we couldn’t have each other, we wanted it more. I could understand why Kandy was so hooked on Mr. Cane. When something felt that good, it was impossible to let it go.

I couldn’t help thinking about that night on the deck again. I could still remember the heat of his body, the taste of hard cider on his tongue, the way his hands gripped my waist and cupped my breasts.

I cleared my throat, staring at the TV. Though the movie played, I wasn't tuned in whatsoever.

"How about some beer?" Clay asked, interrupting my thoughts. "I brought a six-pack with me. It's in the car."

Beer was bad. Me, Clay, and alcohol did *not* lead to good things, and I knew it...so why was I so damn hardheaded? Instead of turning it down, I said, "Dude. Why didn't you say so sooner?"

## *six*

“I PICKED these up on the way back from school so they’re not cold,” Clay said, shuffling through the kitchen cabinets for a bottle opener. When he found it, he cracked one of the beer bottles open and slid it across the counter to me.

“It’s fine,” I said.

When he ran out to his car, I hustled to the mudroom for a hoodie. Sure, I still had shorts on, but at least my nipples wouldn’t be staring back at him. “Remember when we used to steal beers from Grayson? He thought he was losing his mind.” I laughed.

Clay chuckled. “Yeah, don’t even mention that asshole. He deserved getting his beers stolen.” He took a swig of his own beer. “Can’t believe he cheated on Mom.”

“I don’t think Aria liked him all that much anyway. I think she dated him because he had money, and he was kinda cute. But she never really talked about him.”

“Yeah, she’s never been big on dating.” Clay shrugged, planting a large hand on the counter. I studied the veins running up from his forearms to his biceps and forced myself to look away as I sipped my beer. Leaning against the fridge, I attempted to play it cool, despite my heart thumping simply because of this little night we were sharing.

Something buzzed and Clay sighed, withdrawing his phone from the pocket of his shorts. He had on a red pair of basketball shorts now and these looked even better on him than the shorts before. He read something on his phone screen, then frowned before darkening the screen again and slipping it into his pocket.

“Uh-oh. I know that look. I thought there was no girlfriend.” I smiled behind the lip of my beer bottle.

“There isn’t. It’s just this one chick from college. Her name’s Katy. Met her at a grad party and she clearly hasn’t been able to let it go. We didn’t do anything though, just talked and stuff,” he added rapidly.

I pressed my lips, tapping a finger against my beer bottle. “You’re not into her?”

His head shook. “No. She’s...not my type.” I couldn’t help noticing as he said that, his eyes lowered to my legs. I stood up straight and moved across the kitchen to sit on the counter. I brought one leg up and folded it on the counter while my other dangled off the edge.

“I might move to California,” I said after a few sips of beer.

Clay’s jade eyes rapidly lifted to mine and his brows pulled together as he asked, “Why?”

“There’s a paid internship this mega popular therapist is offering. Her name’s Miranda Powell. She’s huge on Instagram and so many people recommend her. I applied for the position and got to speak to her last week. It seemed promising.”

“Oh.” Clay stood tall, bringing the rim of his bottle to his lips. After a heavy sip, he asked, “So, what, you plan on living there now?”

“I don’t know. It depends on how the job goes. This internship could turn into a full-time gig—well, that’s what Miranda says anyway.” I shrugged. “But even if it doesn’t, there’s a lot of opportunity out West. I might hang around for a bit.”

“And never come home,” Clay added, cocking a brow.

My brows stitched together. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, you’ve been trying to escape being here for years, Frank. It’s pretty obvious.” His jaw ticked and his knuckles turned white as he gripped his beer tighter.

“It’s just a job, Clay. I’m pretty sure I will come back.”

“If you do, you’ll make sure I’m not around, right?”

This time, I scoffed as I studied his face. His gaze was pointed to the floor and his jaw was still pulsing.

“Where is this even coming from?” I tried keeping my voice calm. The last thing I wanted to do was blow a fuse.

His green irises connected with mine and he huffed as he stood straight again. “Look, Frank, I know Mom isn’t going to live forever. And I know

once she's gone, you'll have no reason to stick around here."

My eyes felt tight as he spoke, but I didn't blink. I was too afraid that tears would arrive, and I would cry. But I did look away.

"We're not actually siblings and I get that," he murmured. "You won't owe me a damn thing. You'll run off, find a new life, someone to make you happy. You said it to me before—that it has always been like that for you. Starting from scratch, adapting, moving on. The thing with your mom was so fucked up and your dad is a piece of shit who—"

"Just stop, Clay." I held up a hand, turning my head to focus on him. Anger had crawled like ice in my veins. I didn't know my mom for long, and I didn't care about my sperm donor whatsoever, but I couldn't deny that it didn't sting to think about how he rejected me. As if I were some lost, sad puppy and not his own blood. "You should be glad that you'll never have to see me again. What is it that you told me the last time we saw each other? That you wish I'd never wormed my way into your life?"

Clay stood taller, jutting his chin. "Frankie, I never meant that and you know it—"

"It doesn't matter if you meant it or not. It was your truth in that moment, and you said what you felt." I blinked, feeling my eyes getting watery again. "Let's just...let's not do this tonight. Okay?" I placed my beer bottle down. I didn't want to drink with him, not after remembering those hurtful words.

He'd only said them because I wanted to tell Aria the truth. I wanted to tell her that I'd never seen Clay, her son, as my brother—that I'd had a crush on him since I was five years old and with each passing year that crush blossomed into more. I wanted to tell Aria that I was jealous of all his girlfriends, and that I was sad to see him go to prom with Bethany Campbell, the cheerleading captain, and not me. I wanted to tell my adopted mother everything because I was tired of holding it in. But after having time to think about it, Clay was right. Telling Aria wouldn't have changed much. And it didn't matter how much I wanted him if he was too afraid to ever act on it. Out of respect for his mom—my adoptive mother—and even me, he never wanted to. He'd have rather let it be a secret than to own up to his feelings.

I walked out of the kitchen, biting back tears as I curled on my end of the sofa again. The kitchen light turned off and I picked up the remote, continuing the movie. I would have rather watched it alone than with him.

I figured Clay would make his way upstairs, run away from this same argument like he always did. Why did he even care what I did? So what if I

moved to California? I had my life, and he had his, and his *clearly* did not involve me. He had girls like Bethany and Katy to tide him over.

Footsteps padded through the house and in the corner of my eye, I noticed a silhouette. When I looked over, Clay was standing next to the other end of the sofa with his eyes trained intently on me.

“Frankie, you know I didn’t mean what I said.”

I moved my attention to the TV again, pretending he wasn’t there.

“Frankie,” he said, more bass in his voice now.

Still, I ignored him.

Clay huffed, then stormed through the living room to get to me. He snatched the remote out of my hand and turned the TV off. I shouldn’t have retaliated, but I did. He knew it would piss me off and get my attention. He’d been doing it since we were ten.

“Hey!” I shouted. “Give it back, Clay. Now!”

“Not until you talk to me.”

“No!” I climbed off the couch, reaching for the remote, but he jerked his hand away. “There’s nothing to talk about!”

“There’s a lot to talk about!” he snapped.

“Like what? Huh?” I demanded, staring into his eyes. “What could there possibly be to talk about, Clay? Our life is what it is! Who cares? Just let it go!”

“I care!” His voice was a soft roar, if that was even possible. Loud but also deafening by how powerful it was. Clay smashed his lips together, studying my eyes. He looked like he wanted to cry, and I’d only seen him cry twice before. Once when we were eight and he’d jammed his finger in the car door. The second when Aria received her diagnosis for pancreatic cancer. But this time, it was different. His face was full of sorrow, as if he wanted to apologize to me, but he had nothing to apologize for. It was what it was, and there was no denying or changing it.

I expected him to say more, elaborate on what he said. Instead, he let out an exasperated breath and offered the remote back to me. I grabbed the end of it, ready to snatch it away, but before I could, he yanked his end of the remote toward him and reeled me forward. I smashed into his body and he cupped my face with his other hand, crashing his lips down on mine.



## *seven*

IT TOOK me several seconds to realize what was happening. I was in Clay's arms, my lips molding with his, and I did *not* see it coming. But dare I say, I'd wanted it to happen all night. I was hoping one of us would break—that we'd fall into the sinful acts we'd done before.

I couldn't help myself as I moaned, wrapping my arms around his neck and sinking into him. He tasted like the beer with a hint of mint, as if he'd brushed his teeth prior to drinking it, but he still felt like Clay. *My Clay*. He gripped me by the hips and picked me up with ease. I let out a slight yelp as he carried me to the couch again, placing me flat on my back and maneuvering between my legs.

His dick was hardening in those beautiful red shorts and I could feel the solid form of it pushing on the cotton fabric of my own. I reeled him in closer, never wanting our lips to part. If I could, I would have kissed him all night. It wasn't ethical by any means, but I didn't care.

Clay began to thrust between my legs, his dick growing harder by the second. I sighed when our lips finally parted, and glanced down. In the dim light, I could see the shape of his dick resting on my pelvis.

"Do you wanna know why girls like Katy have never been my type?" he rasped on my mouth.

"I don't care," I muttered, but that didn't stop me from stealing a kiss.

"It's because they don't challenge me like you do," he went on, breaths hot. "They don't make me want to rip my heart out and throw it at them the way you make me do. Because that's what happens every time we're together, Frank. Every time we're like *this*, I'm ripping my heart out and handing it over to you because you're the only woman my heart beats for."

And I'm sick of denying it.”

I swallowed, looking into his shimmering green eyes. I had never been spoken to that way. And I'd dated a lot of boys, some of whom didn't even deserve my time.

I couldn't help going back to the times when we were in high school, and Clay would be angry whenever I brought a boy home. He'd play loud music, knock on my door to check on me, and so many other things just to interfere. I used to think he was so annoying, but he was trying to cling to what was his. And it's crazy because all this time, he's been mine too. All the times he's brought girls over, I've done silly things to interfere too, hoping he'd never go to second base and definitely not third. Not while I was under the same roof.

I'd wanted so badly to deny him and to prove that I could live a life without him. I wanted to show that I could find another man who *wasn't* my adoptive brother who could make me equally as happy as Clay could. And maybe that's why I was moving to California. A part of me wanted that fresh start. A part of me wanted to be away, just to forget, just to create a new identity for myself. But deep down, I would *never* be able to escape Clay. He held the reins to my heart, and I was a fool for thinking that could ever change.

I spread my legs wider, and Clay groaned as he kissed me again. He shifted sideways and lowered a hand to push my panties aside.

“I've missed touching your pussy,” he breathed. He thrust one finger inside me, then another, and a moan burst out of me. “I've missed feeling how tight you are.” His mouth skimmed down to my collarbone and he laid a kiss there. His fingers pushed deeper, and I arched my back, wanting more as his mouth traveled up to the bend of my neck.

He withdrew his fingers, sliding his thumb over my clit. That one movement sent a shock wave through me.

“I want you,” I whispered when his mouth found mine again. I sat up as he sat back, pulling the hoodie over my head. When I was just in my tank top, Clay's eyes fell to my chest. I looked down and my nipples were hard beneath the thin fabric of my shirt.

“Fuck, Frankie.” He studied my c-cup breasts, then reached forward to take my shirt off. When it was gone, he shook his head and said, “You're so beautiful. You've never realized it but look at you.” He'd never seen me like this—completely shirtless. All the times before, we still had our clothes on,

despite the groping and tugging. We dry humped for the most part, but this was different. It was intimate and sexy and turned me completely on.

I climbed on his lap then took his shirt off too. His chest was firm, solid, and I slid my hands over his bare shoulders, sighing. He wrapped a large arm around me, hugging me to his body and bringing his mouth to one of my nipples. As he sucked one into his mouth, I threw my head back, rocking on top of him. He went to the other, sucking on it until it was hard, then his hands went to the waistband of my shorts.

“Take these off,” he demanded, and I didn’t usually let Clay command me to do anything, but if he was going to make demands as assertive as that, he could tell me what to do all day long. I sat up enough so he could pull down my shorts. I leaned onto one leg so he could get the other out, and when they were gone, I worked on taking his shorts down.

I dropped to my knees when Clay’s shorts were at his ankles and stared at his dick. It was thick, with veins crawling from the base to the shaft, and the head was bulbous and moist with precum. The anticipation was clear as day. He gripped the base of his dick, lightly stroking it while staring down at me with parted lips.

“You want me to?” I asked, looking at him beneath my lashes.

“Please,” he breathed. “I’ve dreamed about this moment.”

I couldn’t help my smile as I pushed up on my knees and moved his hand away so I could wrap my palm around it. When I licked my lips, he groaned and settled further into the couch.

“Stop teasing, Frank,” he mumbled.

“I’m not.” But I was. Teasing him was always the best part, and I kept teasing him as I laid kisses on the head of his dick. I spread his precum on my lips and licked it away. He shuddered a breath, tensing beneath me. I carried the kisses further down until reaching his balls, and a hiss pushed through his clenched teeth as I kissed them. From there, I stuck my tongue out and dragged it all the way to the head of his dick. That caught him by total surprise. His entire body seemed to be lit on fire and a groan poured out of him. I did it again, this time dragging my tongue down to his balls and sucking each one into my mouth.

“Jesus, Frank. Where’d you learn that?” he asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said with a smirk, and before he could ask any more questions, I took him into my mouth. The taste of him exploded on my tongue as a harder groan fell from his lips. I looked up into his eyes as he

looked down at me and took him deeper down my throat.

“Holy shit,” he rasped, palming the back of my head. “I’m gonna come if you keep looking at me like that.”

I didn’t want him to come yet, but it also felt like a challenge, so I kept looking at him as I sucked him slowly, making sure to take my time licking around the head and letting my lips suckle on it, before taking him all the way into my mouth again. I repeated the action so many times, his eyes were rolling to the back of his head.

“Frankie...seriously. If you don’t stop, I’m gonna...”

He was gonna come. I stopped, just as he clutched a handful of my hair. He wasted no time then, grabbing my wrists and hauling me up. He stood with me, then bent me over the arm of the sofa. When he was behind me, he asked, “You still on the pill?”

“Yes,” I breathed.

“Good.” Those were the last words he said before gripping my waist and thrusting into me from behind. And oh my word, was it good. I’d been dreaming about this day—having him inside me, having him *crave* me—and it was better than anything I could’ve imagined.

He held my waist tight and thrust into me slowly but firmly. Each time he went inside, he held the position, making sure I could feel him. He buried his fingers in my hair with one of his hands, yanking on it and whispering at the shell of my ear, “This is my pussy.”

And I melted. I was a puddle of goo.

“Keep talking to me,” I breathed.

“I’ve wanted to fuck you for so long, baby. Look at you. Your ass is perfect and your pussy is gripping me so tight.” He grunted as he released my hair, and I took that opportunity to stop him so I could force him onto his back on the sofa. He landed with a soft grunt, and I climbed on top of him. His dick was so hard, pointed straight up, so I sunk down on him with ease, and he threw his head back, a hot breath pushing out of his mouth as I planted my hands on his chest.

“It’s my turn to fuck you,” I said, and I rode him, grinding my hips forward and backward.

“Shit, Frankie. This really is a goddamn dream.” He cupped my waist as I kept riding him, locking eyes with me. “It feels good, right? You like having my dick inside you?” he asked in a raspy voice.

“Yeah,” I panted.

“So come on it.” He spanked my ass and I moaned even louder. “Show me it’s yours.”

His deep voice was orgasmic. I breathed raggedly, circling my hips. He was so hard and so deep inside me, hitting every spot that pushed me to the edge.

“Oh, Frank. Look at you.” He cupped one of my breasts in his hand, tilting his hips up so I could feel him even more. “Your pussy is so wet.”

“I’m gonna come,” I breathed. “Oh, Clay. I’m gonna come.”

Clay sat up and I don’t know how he managed to stand with my pussy still wrapped around him, but he did. He cupped my ass and bounced me up and down the length of him and I was done for.

No, seriously, it was game over—for both of us, really. I wrapped my arms tight around his neck, and as I cried out his name, he moaned mine. We came in unison, and Clay stumbled forward, placing my back on the couch again while still inside me.

“Oh, fuck,” he breathed, twitching. “You feel so good. Fuck, Frankie. I’ve always wanted this.” His dick throbbed inside me, and I clenched around him, which made him groan and shudder.

It took a moment for us to catch our breath. When we did, Clay pulled out of me, his sated dick glistening with a mixture of both of our releases. He kneeled between my knees, his hands out at his sides as he looked down at my naked body. Then he gazed into my eyes and shook his head.

“We just did that,” he murmured.

“We did.” I twisted my lips, unsure what else to say.

Clay leaned down so that his elbows were outside my head on the sofa. His tongue parted my lips and he let me taste him. I let him taste me too, then sunk my teeth into his bottom lip. And when he said, “I need more of you,” I wanted to squeal because frankly, I needed more of him too.

## *eight*

I DON'T KNOW how we made it upstairs, but Clay picked me up and carried me to my childhood bedroom. When my back met the cool comforter, he sank between my legs and pulled me down until my hips were at the edge of the bed.

I was still completely naked and wanted to pinch myself several times just to make sure this was real. Because I'd had dreams of moments like this with Clay—moments where he'd confess how he really felt and give himself to me in every way. That was what he was doing tonight. He spread my legs apart, staring at my pussy with a carnal groan.

“Need to taste you,” he murmured. “Can I do that?”

“Yes,” I breathed, lifting my head to look down at him.

His eyes locked on mine as my thighs rested on his shoulders. I tried breathing evenly as he moved in closer, but I swear I was about to lose it. Clay ran his tongue over his lips, and I could feel his breath running through the lips of my pussy. Then he pushed forward, parting me, and plunged his tongue into my pussy. A sharp gasp burst out of me as his hot mouth slid up to my clit and I accidentally tightened my legs around his head. This was too good—*beyond* good. So good my body didn't even know how to react.

“Oh God,” I breathed.

“Open back up,” he rasped.

Another pent up breath escaped me. “Okay,”

“I told you I want you, baby,” he said. “Let me have it.” He laid a kiss on my inner thigh then went back in for seconds, only this time, he focused solely on my clit.

“Oh my God, Clay,” I breathed.

“You taste so good,” he said between hungry sucks and licks. “I’ve wanted to taste you for so long.” He sucked my clit into his mouth just before grazing it lightly with his teeth. His palms came up to the backs of my thighs and he leaned up, folding me in half so he could have full access.

I cried out and clutched a handful of his hair as he groaned and circled his tongue around my clit in a torturous, slow motion. Two fingers slid into my pussy as he worked his tongue, and I arched my back and moaned. I bucked my hips forward and backward as he circled his tongue around my clit and finger-fucked my pussy, and just before I could come, he pulled away.

“Nuh-uh,” he mumbled, placing his knees on the bed. “You come around my dick.” He gripped the base of his hard dick, hauled my hips upward, and sank into me. He held his dick there, staring down at me with heated green eyes, and I came. A noise I never knew I could make escaped me because that was all it took. One stroke of him and I’d shattered to pieces.

“Look how pretty you are when you come, Frank,” he murmured. “I want to see you like this every day. Feel you wrapped around me. *Only you.*” As he spoke, he delivered slow, powerful thrusts while my eyes were rolling to the back of my head. He thrust inside me again until he was balls deep and a groan shot out of him as he palmed my waist. Before I knew it, he was leaning forward until we were chest to chest, him moaning against the shell of my ear. “Holy fuck,” he sighed. “I love coming inside you.”

We laid together a few seconds, catching our breaths in a drunken bliss before Clay sluggishly pulled out and rolled onto the bed beside me. We breathed softly, staring up at the ceiling fan. There were still glowing stars on the ceiling from when I was younger, and to this day, they burned bright.

“This night feels like a dream,” I whispered.

“Yeah. To me too,” he said back.

I turned my head to look at him and he was still staring at the ceiling, clearly deep in thought.

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

“Probably the same thing you are.”

I twisted my lips, sighing. “How this is going to work between us?”

He nodded. “Spot on.”

I lay back and focused on the stars again. I didn’t know how this would work. There were no more boundaries to cross now. We’d done it all and there was no salvaging what he had as friends and “siblings” before. None.

“I’m going to tell Mom about us.”

That caused all the peace in the room to fade. I rapidly sat up on one elbow to peer down at him. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I can’t keep denying what I want, Frankie.” His glistening eyes connected with mine. “If Mom knows, she’ll understand. Plus, I’m sure she’d rather me be with someone she knows she can trust and not some random chick out here.”

“Clay, you can’t be serious. Other than you when we place nice, Aria is all that I have. What if you tell her and she hates me for it? Or she finds it disgusting? We’ve known each other since we were kids and all this time, she thought we saw each other as brother and sister. That’s going to burst her whole idea of us if she finds out we’re into each other in *this* way.” I gestured between our naked bodies, hoping to make the point clear.

He only sighed. “That’s your fear talking, Frankie.”

“No, it’s not. It’s reality speaking for me.” I moved to the headboard, folding my arms over my chest. Clay sat up to rest on his elbow.

“I think you don’t want to tell Mom and would rather hide it because you think she’ll abandon you, or that she’ll look at you in a different light, but I know my mom and she’ll love you the same. We’re adults now, Frankie. We can’t keep lying about what we want.”

I avoided his eyes and looked out the window instead. “I just...I don’t see how this could work, Clay. Even if Aria is like “okay, no biggie,” everyone else we know has considered us siblings. It’ll be weird to everyone if they see us together.”

Clay’s fingers gently gripped my face, and he turned my head to look at him. “I don’t give a fuck what *anyone* thinks, Frank. All I care about is what makes you and me happy. Do you know what all that time in college away from you made me realize?”

“What?”

“That there is no life without you. I know you might think we’re not meant to be together, but you have to face a different type of reality, Frankie. Mom isn’t gonna be here forever and when she’s gone, it’ll be just us. And where will that leave us? Are we just gonna pretend we don’t know each other anymore? Or like we’ve never tasted each other? Never fucked? Because I’ll tell you, Frank...I don’t want to live like that. I don’t want to lie or fake it. I don’t want live a life that doesn’t include *you*.”

His words were tugging my heartstrings, hitting every emotional chord and nerve, but I couldn’t help thinking how terrifying they were. Sure,



everything could be okay, but there was also the possibility of it all blowing up in our faces and putting a bad taste in my second mother's mouth. I had so much respect for Aria and I wasn't afraid to admit my respect for her surmounted my desire to be with Clay. I loved him so much, I really did, but he had to realize it was safer like this—to hide. To lie. To pretend.

I climbed out of the bed, shaking my head. "I'm going to take another shower," I told him, and I left the room and rushed to the bathroom before he could get another word in.

## *nine*

IT TOOK me twenty minutes to actually get in the shower. I sat on the toilet seat for those twenty minutes, listening to Clay as he sighed and huffed. I supposed he gave up on waiting for me and left my room because when I came out, he wasn't there. I wasn't sure what he was doing or what he was thinking, but what I did know was that I was a coward.

I could have it all and I could have him...but something was stopping me. As I showered, I realized what was stopping me was myself. Because deep in my heart, I knew Aria. And she loved Clay with her whole heart, but she also loved me. But when you grew up the way I did, with your mother passing while you were young and your father wanting nothing to do with you...well, it was easy to cling to familiarity. And I supposed I was afraid that if we told Aria, the dynamics would change. I was scared of seeing what could happen if we let go of the lies, the fear, the hiding and allowed ourselves to be us, unapologetically.

I changed into new clothes and went back downstairs. I found Clay in the kitchen, sipping another beer as he sat on a barstool. He was still shirtless, but he had on his red shorts again, bless his heart.

"Hey," I murmured from the mouth of the kitchen.

He looked me up and down in my sweatpants and T-shirt. "Hey," he said. I stepped deeper into the room. "Got another one of those for me?"

He nodded, climbing off the stool and opening the fridge to collect a beer. After popping off the lid, he slid it across the counter to me and I picked it up, taking a swig.

"Look, I'm sorry for freaking out." I shifted on my feet. "You were right about the possibility of feeling abandoned. But you have to understand where

I'm coming from with this, Clay. You and Aria are pretty much *all* that I have. I mean, other than Kandy and her family, but that's different."

He nodded, eyes softening as he studied mine. Mine were filling with tears, so I lowered my gaze.

"What I'm saying is...I don't want to fuck this up. I don't want to lose the only family I have on this earth; that's why I'm okay sacrificing my feelings. Because it brings stability. And if we throw a wrench in it, I'm afraid we won't be able to fix it."

Clay sighed, then walked around the counter. "Come here," he said, opening his arms to me. I stepped into them and he closed them around me. As he held me, I couldn't help sighing and melting into him. He still smelled faintly of his body wash and deodorant, and a wave of nostalgia hit me. I'd smelled his body wash as a teenager for years and secretly used to love when he walked through the house, all fresh and clean. I'd fantasize about laying on his chest and sniffing him.

"Listen, Frankie...if you're not ready to tell Mom anything, then I won't tell her. I'm sorry if I scared you by saying that. But I am tired of hiding it... and I don't want what we're doing to end."

I nodded into his chest.

"But you should know that no matter what happens, you will never lose us. We love you so damn much. You're our family."

I smiled into his chest that time.

"I'm just so tired of hiding who we are and what we want," he went on. "I don't know if I'm just maturing more or what, but the older I get, the more I realize my soul mate has been right under my nose. Sure, we started out as friends, but you can't deny it's turned into more."

"I don't deny it," I whispered. I picked my head up and looked into his eyes. "We should tell her tomorrow."

His eyebrows shot up. "Tomorrow?"

"Yeah. I planned on visiting her tomorrow, taking her some food. We should go together and tell her."

Clay nodded. "Okay. Are you sure?"

"No," I said, laughing. "But if I don't do it now, I never will."

"Okay." He smiled and nodded again. "Okay, if you're sure, we can do that. But I'm gonna be honest with you, I have a feeling this news will make her day."

"How could it possibly make her day?"

“Oh, come on! You don’t remember how she used to joke about us being boyfriend and girlfriend before your mom passed away? She was practically setting us up!

“Was she?” I laughed at that. “I don’t remember that at all. Besides, that was before life got real.”

“I guess you wouldn’t remember. It was so long ago, but I remember because I used to tell my mom it would never happen. I was all boyish about it,” he chuckled. “Little did I know, she was right.”

“So, is that what we are?” I asked, lacing my arms around the back of his neck. “Boyfriend and girlfriend?”

He flashed me a boyish grin. “If that’s what you want us to be.”

“But what about when I go to Cali? Cause the Clay I know hates long-distance relationships.”

His mouth quirked up on one side as he held my eyes. “I’ve waited long enough to have you, Frank. Long distance doesn’t mean a damn thing to me. We’ll make it work.”

“Wow! Listen to yourself!” I said, punching him playfully on the chest. “I don’t know this mature Clay at all, but dare I say, I *really* like him!”

“Shut it.” He laughed, then held me tight again, nuzzling his nose into the crook of my neck. I giggled as he picked me up and carried me to the sofa, and for the rest of the night, we curled up together on the couch and watched movies until we fell asleep.

It was the best sleep I’d had in a really long time.

## *ten*

I CLASPED my hands in my lap as Clay drove his Jeep to the hospital. I'd never been more nervous than I was in that moment. We were on our way to see Aria, and Clay was sitting so confidently behind the wheel. He wore jeans and a solid white T-shirt. His hair was still slightly damp from the shower he'd taken before we left.

As Clay pulled into the parking lot, I sucked in a breath and clasped my hands together in my lap.

"Hey, it's gonna be fine," he said after finding a spot to park.

"I know. I'm just so nervous."

"Yeah. I am too...but I think it'll be for the best."

Clay unlocked the doors, and I climbed out to collect the lunch bag from the back seat with Aria's food in it. As we walked into the hospital, the scent of lemon and bleach overwhelmed me and caused a churning in my gut, but I continued walking with Clay, gripping the hell out of the handle of the bag.

After signing in, we found the elevators that would take us to the oncology wing. Inside the elevator, Clay took the bag from me, then pressed in closer.

"Look at me, Frank," he said, and I peered up into his green eyes. "We'll be fine."

I nodded, swallowing thickly, and he planted a kiss on my forehead that sent a soothing warmth through my body. I was surprised when he grabbed my hand and gripped it in his as the elevator doors spread apart. We walked down the hallway hand in hand, approaching Aria's room, and when we stopped at the door, Clay looked my way and asked, "You ready?"

"Yep," I breathed. "Ready."

He gave the door a knock before walking in, and the first thing I saw was Aria on the hospital bed. She had a teal scarf on her head and was lounging with the TV remote in hand. Three wide windows were to her right, overlooking the vast parking lot and a slice of the Atlanta skyline. I couldn't help tugging my hand out of Clay's as Aria's head turned our way, and to avoid him giving me a funny look, I rushed toward her and wrapped my arms around her shoulders.

"Hi, Aria," I said.

"Oh, hi, baby!" she sang. "I didn't know you guys would be coming so soon."

I pulled back but held on to her shoulders. "Yeah, well, we wanted to see you. Make sure you were okay."

"Oh, I'm fine. They only kept me overnight to run some tests, but I get to go home tonight, so that's good." Wrinkles formed around her mouth as she smiled and rubbed my arm. Then her attention shifted to Clay, who stood by a chair and raised the bag in the air.

"We brought you some real food so you wouldn't suffer another day with bland hospital food," Clay said, setting the bag on the table.

"Ohh. What'd you make?" she asked him, eyes lighting up.

"It's some leftover chicken tortilla soup, and it was Clay's idea to bring one of those Hershey pies you love," I informed her.

"Well how about you give me that pie right now?" Aria said, and I laughed, walking away from the bed to get the pie from the bag. As I did, Clay cleared his throat, and I peered up at him.

"Now?" he whispered.

I shook my head, taking out the pie and a plastic fork and carrying it to Aria. She opened the package and dug right into it, then moaned as she sat back against her pillow.

"Mmm. This was exactly what I needed." She pointed the prongs of her fork at the pie. Then she looked between us. "Did you two come here together?"

I slid my eyes to Clay, who took a step forward and nodded. "We did." He placed a kiss on her cheek, then sat in a chair on the opposite side of the bed. I pulled a chair from the corner and sat too.

"Well, it's nice to see you two getting along again," Aria went on mindlessly. She took another bite as I stole a glance at Clay. His eyes were already on me as he leaned forward, resting his elbows on top of his thighs

and folding his fingers together.

“Yeah, about that. Mom, listen...”

My heart slammed as I shook my head. “Clay,” I warned.

But he ignored me, and Aria looked between us, mildly confused as she slowly chewed. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I answered rapidly.

“No, it’s *everything*,” Clay countered, eyeing me. “You said we would do this, Frank. It’s time to do it.”

“Do what?” asked Aria. Worry was sinking into her eyes now as she continued looking between us.

My leg bounced as I lowered my gaze. I knew I said I was ready, but this was scary as hell. I didn’t even know why. Aria was so nice. It wasn’t like she was going to slap me across the face...I didn’t think.

“So, there’s something Frank and I want to tell you. It might not be easy to hear, and I totally get it if this changes things, but Mom...you should know that I’m in love with Frankie. I—I love her a lot. And for years I’ve been fighting how I felt about her because she was supposed to be like my sister, you know? But she’s never felt like a sister to me, really. And she has never seen me as a brother either.”

Aria’s jaw dropped as she stared at her son. Shock was written all over her face and I smashed my lips together as she lowered her fork and pie to her lap and slowly turned her eyes to me.

“Frankie...is this true?” she asked in a near whisper.

I nodded, and it was then I realized a tear had escaped my eye. “I’m sorry, Aria. I know this is the last thing you want to hear, but...I do love Clay. Just not in the way you want us to love each other. I’ve wanted to be with him since we were younger, but I was so scared because I knew it would change things and that you’d probably kick me out of the house or something and I didn’t want to lose the only family I had so I—”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Aria crooned. “No, Frankie. Stop.”

I was full-on sobbing now. The emotions made my throat thick and my heart race. “I just thought you would hate me,” I whispered. “That’s why I never wanted to tell you.”

“Aw, Frankie. No, sweetie,” Aria cried. “I could *never* hate you! You’ve brought so much joy into my life, are you kidding me? Oh, honey, come here!”

I picked my head up and climbed onto the bed to lay next to her. She

lifted her IV-free hand and pressed it to the side of my head so my ear was on the center of her chest, and I was comforted instantly. This was something she used to do when I was younger too—back when I was only six or seven and I'd have panic attacks, wondering where my mom was, then remembering I'd never see her again. Aria would soothe me by holding me and rubbing my back, just like she was doing now.

I shuddered a breath and swiped some of the tears away with my hand.

"I can't believe you've spent all these years afraid to tell me because you thought I'd abandon you," she murmured.

I nod, just as Clay locked eyes on me and said, "I told you," with a laugh. "This won't change anything, right, Mom?" he asked.

"Nothing at all. You're both adults now, and if this is how you feel, who am I to stop it? Even if I didn't like the idea of it—and I'm not saying I don't—it's not up to me to decide who you belong with. If your heart belongs to her, let it belong. Oh, I always hoped it would work out between you two?"

"Told you." Clay smiled, his cheeks turning a bit rosy as Aria lifted a hand to caress his cheek.

"You'll always be my babies, though. No matter what," she said. And I found comfort in those words. I felt like I'd unleashed a huge load from my shoulders. I lay in Aria's arms as Clay took my hand and stroked my knuckles and I'd never felt so at peace. So safe. Being with them was exactly where I belonged and no matter if Clay and I stuck together or not, they would *always* be my people.



*epilogue*

## ONE MONTH LATER

I TOOK the internship in California, despite how much I hated the idea of being away from Clay now. What? It was a great opportunity and even Clay couldn't deny it. And it wasn't like I was going to be in California forever. If I were to get a full-time job, we'd make it work, I was sure of it, and if I didn't, then I'd fly back to Atlanta and get a job using my degree.

Still, I missed Clay and Aria something fierce. I normally spent my whole summers with Aria, so it was a change to not be there with her. Aria, fortunately, was still healthy and called me every day since I landed in California. She often demanded me to ride to the beaches to take pictures, but she had no idea how expensive an Uber was to get there. She was out of her mind. I did send her pictures of my workspace and even a few from one night I went out with other interns for dinner and drinks. Clay picked up a gig as an assistant trainer for a minor football league in Atlanta.

It was my first day off in several weeks, and we'd only had the day off because of the Fourth of July. Normally on the Fourth, Aria would prep burgers, kabobs, and corn on the cob, then light up the grill so we could eat and watch the neighbor's fireworks. There was a man named Ken down the block who always bought the most expensive fireworks. I'm pretty sure some of them were illegal, but we got a free show annually, so we didn't care.

But this year was going to be different. I'd be spending the Fourth alone. But it was fine. I'd watch fireworks from my balcony and sip beer and make hot dogs on the indoor grill. That was the plan anyway, until I received a FaceTime call from Clay.

"Hey, babe," I said as I unpackaged the hot dogs.

"Hey, send me your address," he said. He had the phone at a low angle that revealed more of his chin than his face.

"Provide an explanation on why you need it and I might," I said, laughing.

"Because I ordered flowers for you and want to make sure they go to the right place."

"Aw! Are they peonies?" I asked, grinning.

He looked into the camera. "Possibly. Come on, hurry. Shoot it to me so I

can let the delivery driver know.”

“Okay, okay.” I gave him the address to my rental.

“Cool.”

Then he hung up. I frowned, staring at the blank screen. “What the hell?” I shot him a text: “Thanks for hanging up in my face!”

I waited for his response as I warmed up the grill. As the hot dogs were grilling, there was a knock on the door; I washed my hands before making my way there. I checked the peephole and saw a big bouquet of peonies in front of it, with a large hand wrapped around the stems. The flower delivery guy.

But when I swung the door open, my heart sped up several notches because it wasn’t a flower delivery guy holding the flowers. It was Clay. He lowered the flowers with a wide, beautiful smile.

“I hung up in your face so I could be *in* your face right now,” he said, and I squealed as I bounced on my toes and threw my arms around him.

“Oh my God, Clay! What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see you,” he said, chuckling as he steadied the flowers.

“How did you even get here? What the hell?” I laughed.

“Mom bought an airplane ticket for me when I told her I wanted to surprise you. There are no games this weekend for the minor league, so I flew straight here.”

“Wow. You’re insane,” I breathed. “You came all the way here for me?”

“Of course, I did. I love you.”

His lips landed on mine, and I swear I was the luckiest girl in the world. Clay Martin was mine now after all this time, after all these years. *Mine*.

I was never letting him go.

## *a love letter to kandy*

Thank you so much for reading Tempting Clay! I hope you enjoyed it!  
If you're a fan of the Cane series, I'm happy to share that I have an exclusive  
letter written by Cane to Kandy!  
Just tap the link below, sign up, and read it!

### **Cane's Love Letter**

If you're new to the Cane series, please swipe to the next page to check out  
the series order and more of my books!

*more books by shanora*

**CANE SERIES**

WANTING MR. CANE (#1)  
BREAKING MR. CANE (#2)  
LOVING MR. CANE (#3)  
BEING MRS. CANE (#4)

**WARD DUET**

THE MAN I CAN'T HAVE  
THE MAN I NEED

**NORA HEAT COLLECTION**

CARESS  
CRAVE  
DIRTY LITTLE SECRET  
MY PROFESSOR

**STANDALONES**

BAD FOR ME  
COACH ME  
TEMPORARY BOYFRIEND  
MY FIANCE'S BROTHER  
DOOMSDAY LOVE  
DEAR MR BLACK  
FOREVER MR. BLACK

UNTIL THE LAST BREATH

**SERIES**

FIRENINE SERIES

THE ACE CROW DUET

VENOM TRILOGY

**THRILLERS:**

The Perfect Ruin

The Wife Before

The Other Mistress

*Most of these titles are available in Kindle Unlimited.  
Visit [www.shanorawilliams.com](http://www.shanorawilliams.com) for more information.*