

SWEET AS
Candy...

MICHELLE KARISE

KANDI'S

Crush 

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I wrote my first novel because I wanted to read it.

Toni Morrison

1931 - 2019



PROLOGUE

KANDACE

TEN YEARS AGO

MY HEARTBEAT ECHOED IN MY ears. I ran down the dark and narrow hallway as if my life depended on it.

His approaching footsteps grew louder as he gained on my lead. His legs were almost a foot longer than mine and far more powerful.

When I turned to look behind me, the turquoise of his polo shirt filled my view. For one second, I contemplated throwing my arms up in surrender and screaming ‘uncle’ while flashing a pretty little smile. But the look on his face said he wasn’t in the mood for games.

Run, Kandi! Run faster!

I pumped my arms harder and harder hoping they would become wings, allowing me to fly away from the chaotic scene. The rapid movements only made my chest ache as if someone had reached inside and squeezed my heart.

I was the fastest girl in my fifth-grade class, but I was no match for a high-school football player.

Two hours ago, we’d been in the middle of a weekly trip to Winn-Dixie when the piano riff ringtone on Mama’s new iPhone 3 blared over the noise of the busy grocery store. As she’d searched for the cellphone in her purse, I had prepared to run down the aisles for another last-minute request from my

aunt. Mama rolled her eyes and immediately switched to her soothing and caring voice. It was the tone she reserved for old people, little kids, and Mrs. St. Clair.

Mrs. St. Clair's shrill voice pierced the hum of the crowded store. Her frantic and hurried tones were so loud, I wondered if Mama had her on the speakerphone.

"Yes. I'll make sure everything is okay, Genevieve," Mama soothed. "I'm sure everything is fine. I'll call you when I get there. Try not to worry and enjoy your vacation."

A tacky person would call my mama a maid. She preferred to be called a household manager. My mother was the chef, laundress, and housekeeper for the St. Clair family. She also supervised the gardener and the evening housekeeper.

Mrs. St. Clair's phone call had worried me. She always ruined my time with my mother. Today was Mama's day off, and she'd promised we would hang out. Going to the grocery store and stopping by the St. Clair house wasn't my idea of fun.

A groan escaped my lips as we'd pulled into the driveway behind the house, but the sight of Chadwick's blue bicycle lying in the driveway put a tiny smirk on my face. Now, I could entertain myself. Chadwick was a fancy teenager who thought he had better things to do with his time than play with me. I loved getting under his skin.

We weren't but a few steps into the kitchen when Mama presented me with a grape soda and bent down to look me in the eye.

"Go to the sun parlor. Sit in the chair and read your book. Don't wander through the house. Don't touch anything. Don't break anything. And *don't* push any interesting buttons," she'd ordered.

Why did she always bring that up? How was I supposed to know it was the silent alarm? Nobody had gotten hurt.

"Do you hear me? Don't start trouble."

"Yeah. I heard you," I'd answered. My eyes had wandered around the large white kitchen while I searched for something

fun to do.

“Excuse me?” The sharp tone and hands on her hips instantly reminded me of my manners.

“Yes, ma’am,” I’d corrected softly.

Following Mama’s instructions, I had walked directly to the screened-in back porch and took a seat in one of the white wicker chairs. I reclined with my feet on the floral pillowed ottoman and found the page I’d marked in “Little Women.”

I’d only read three paragraphs when yellow and black wings fluttered over the pages of the book and my eyes traced the movements of the swallowtail butterfly until I lost sight of it. It was unusual to see butterflies in the late spring, and I wanted to see the beautiful creature up close.

Amidst the gentle hum of crickets and evening cicadas, I’d heard quiet voices. I strained to make out a low pleading whisper followed by a girlish laugh. Propelling myself from the chair, I had tiptoed across the gray slate tiled floors and peered through the window screen. Chadwick sat on the garden bench, his arm wrapped around a skinny blonde girl.

Is this the reason he ignores me? I’ll fix him!

Holding my breath, I carefully opened the screen door and stepped onto the staircase leading to the gardens. I breathed a sigh of relief when the screen door closed without alerting my presence. I crept down the stairs until I reached a large green shrub. The greenery dwarfed my tiny frame, hiding me from view as I leaned forward to peer around it.

The hand that wasn’t around the girl’s waist had inched upward beneath her t-shirt, and her rosy pink lips parted when Chadwick’s fingers tickled her bare flesh. She’d giggled while playfully swatting his hand away.

The light hits hadn’t stopped Chadwick. His hand continued its slow trek along her skin until it reached its intended destination. He whispered in her ear before dropping his head and kissing her on the neck.

Yuck!

His lips then glided up her neck and stopped at her mouth. He'd licked her lips and then their tongues touched.

They were licking each other's tongues! *Gross!*

I had averted my eyes as I struggled to keep my lunch down when the sound of a zipper shattered the silence and pulled my attention back to the two. I leaned further around the bush, hoping to get a better view of the scene.

"Come on, Regan. Touch it for one minute," Chadwick moaned.

"Nooooo!" she'd squealed. Lowering her voice, she added, "That's nasty." She rapidly swung her head back and forth, looking at the neighboring houses. "Someone will see us."

"It's just us. We're the only people out here. Look at what you do to me."

"My mama told me I would get pimples if I touched a boy down there."

"Not true. Your mama would be one big zit."

She'd gasped in speechless shock at his statement.

"Chadwick St. Clair! I'm going home!"

"I'm fucking with you. Please, baby. Don't go. Besides, God intended for us to populate the earth," Chadwick had pleaded in a half-moan and half-coo. Regan seemed to soften reluctantly.

"Okay. But you have to promise you won't tell."

"Mmm. I won't tell a soul. Don't stop. Pump me . . . stroke me." He sucked in a breath. "Yeah. Like that."

"Wow! It's like a snake. So big and thick."

"I'm close. Keep going."

I had risen on my tiptoes but lost my balance, and I crashed into the shrub. My fall interrupted the couple, and they'd both turned toward the noise. Regan stood to get a better view of the backyard while Chadwick frantically zipped his pants.

“Who’s there?” asked Chadwick. His face had been red with embarrassment as he stood.

“Don’t stop! Keep going!” I parroted, giggling.

“Kandi? I am going to murder you!”

I’d run for the stairs, and my nerves caused a brief struggle to open the screen door. After what felt like minutes, I jetted for the interior French doors.

“Wait until I get up there! I will kill you!” he screamed.

“Don’t you need to control *your snake*? I can’t wait to tell my mama!”

He ran along the garden pathway with Regan jogging close behind. I’d closed and locked the interior doors behind me, watching as Chadwick bound up the stairs and into the sunroom. He’d stalked over to the glass door and glared down at me. I stuck my thumbs in my ears and wiggled my fingers.

“That’s what you get, you ol’ nasty boy.” I sang the classic rhyme. “Chadwick and Regan sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love. Then comes marriage . . .”

I won!

I had cheered inwardly, grinning with satisfaction. After years of trying, I’d annoyed him and get away with it. For a minute, I’d held my arms up like a champion. He fished in his pocket and pulled out a key, but I was sprinting down the hallway toward the kitchen before he could open the door.

I ran down the hallway until I reached the kitchen and collapsed in my mother’s arms.

“Kandi, what is all of that commotion? Did you see a spider?” I was afraid of spiders, and it was my mama’s job to take care of them.

“No, Mama. Chadwick’s bothering me.” The corners of my mouth curled at the satisfaction of winning. For the first time, I got away with teasing Chadwick.

On cue, Chadwick plodded into the kitchen. Red-faced from embarrassment and anger, he bent over and placed his

hands on his knees to catch his breath.

“Hi, Celeste.” His words came out in a rush. “Kandi disturbed me and my . . . friend.” He gestured toward the front window, and we watched Regan stomp through the wrought iron gate. Her blonde hair bobbed as she hurried down the sidewalk toward her house. Chadwick threw his hands up in frustration. “Great! Look at what she did! Regan’s going home.”

“Did your mom give you permission to entertain in the house?”

“We weren’t *in* the house. We were outside.” His expression showed no emotion. Even I knew he was being less than truthful.

Mama rolled her eyes. Since I no longer had their attention, I snuggled in closer to her, taking shelter in the warmth of her body and embrace. I turned to look at Chadwick. You could light a fire with his expression.

“Young lady, I told you to stay out of trouble,” Mama scolded me. “Chadwick, run after your friend. Wait for me in the garden dining area. I’ll bring sandwiches, lemonade, and iced cookies.” She spun to face me. “Kandi, you stay where I can see you.”

“Thanks, Celeste.”

When Mama turned her back to me, I stuck my tongue out at him. He groaned in response, glaring at me again. I followed him as he walked to the front door. I was afraid that he was very angry with me. I watched from the front window as he hurried down the stairs, running a few yards before catching up with Regan.

“Kandi, why did you do that?” Mama looked at me

“Because it was fun,” I shrugged.

Mama would never get it. Chadwick was so cool.

I didn’t understand his friendship with Regan. Why was she such a big deal? Was she the top reader in the library’s summer book club? Could she recite pi rounded off to twelve

digits? Did she break the school's record by rotating a hula hoop around her waist one hundred and fifty-seven times in a minute? I was smart. I was funny. What did Regan have that I didn't?



CHAPTER

One

KANDACE

TODAY

MY MOTHER, CELESTE ALEXANDER, WOULDN'T know subtlety if it slapped her across the face.

I'd thought it was odd when she confirmed my attendance to our weekly Sunday dinner. I should've known something was up when I learned that Goody and Pop-Pop, my grandparents, had spent all day preparing for an old-fashioned seafood boil.

"Bonjour!" I called out as I entered the decorated backyard. My grandparents stood over a large stockpot boiling on an open fire while my mother arranged a cake carrier on a card table. My favorite aunt, Marie-Therese, placed small aluminum buckets on a long picnic table. The group greeted me with a chorus of hellos and waved with their arms held high.

After hugging and kissing my grandparents, I walked over to my mother and planted a kiss on her cheek. She closed her eyes before pulling me in for a tight hug.

On that night, my mother was drop-dead gorgeous. She wore a bright yellow linen sundress which complemented the

burnished glow of her skin. The breeze flowing through the backyard tossed her honey-blonde colored curls from side-to-side. Although she was nearly forty, she didn't look a day over twenty-eight.

During the brief embrace, my eyes moved around the scene. My grandparents' modest backyard was a magical paradise. Twinkling white lights illuminated the gazebo and the trees. A red and white checkered tablecloth draped the long picnic table. The melamine dinnerware reserved for celebrating special occasions outfitted each place setting.

I blinked at the fabric napkins underneath the shiny stainless-steel flatware. *Folded napkins? Real flatware and not the flimsy plastic forks?*

They were up to something. The Alexanders take pride in being simple, everyday folk. We don't believe in displays of excess, and this dinner was a well-orchestrated show.

"Are we expecting guests?" I asked before turning to hug my aunt.

She plastered a fake smile and shrugged her shoulders. She patted me on the back and resumed setting the table.

From the corner of my eye, I caught my grandparents' worried stares. They both averted their eyes when I turned my head in their direction.

My face crumpled with worry. *Was Goody or Pop-Pop sick? Was someone else in the family sick?* I pushed all negative thoughts out of my head. I didn't even want to think of anything that could threaten the lives of my loved ones.

Maybe Auntie was pregnant! My eternally single twenty-nine-year-old aunt always complained that her eggs were drying up. Mama filled two Mason jar glasses with a pink liquid that I recognized as Sex on the Bayou, dashing my hopes for a new addition to the family. They giggled like schoolgirls until my mother placed her index finger over her lips. They glanced my way before clinking their glasses in a toast.

Mama and Auntie were co-owners of Scrub-A-Dub Cleaning Company. The sisters opened the business eight years ago with a small investment from my grandparents. Clever marketing and use of environmentally friendly products catapulted Scrub-A-Dub into a premier house cleaning company. They captured market share by servicing areas that other cleaning companies were afraid to venture into.

Dinner began promptly at six o'clock. We locked hands and bowed our heads. As the patriarch of our family, my grandfather led us in prayer. Soliloquy is more like it. The prayer went on for minutes. He thanked God for a loyal family and our ability to support each other during hard times. He intended the prayer for someone at the table.

I popped open an eye and analyzed each person's demeanor. Buzzed from the moonshine, Auntie Marie swayed back and forth in her chair. My mother's bowed head bobbed as her right leg rapidly tapped the ground. My grandmother nodded her head and interjected "amens" when appropriate.

Their strange behavior continued throughout dinner. They each stole glances at me when they thought I wasn't paying attention.

"Kandi, why don't you have a sip?" asked Marie-Therese. She picked up a pitcher and filled the Mason jar in front of me.

My eyes met my mother's as she nodded permission. I winced as the liquid slid down my throat, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. I know from experience that the cranberry, orange, and moonshine concoction is best when sipped slowly. You had to pace yourself because moonshine would put hair on your chest or make you hallucinate that there was a crop of hair between your breasts.

"Kandi, I'll allow you to have a glass, but this won't become a habit. I don't want us to go down the path that leads to you calling me by my first name like we're girlfriends," she said.

Celeste Alexander considered it her responsibility to ensure that I was on the right track. In her mind, it wasn't appropriate for a mother and daughter to bond over cocktails. I

didn't want to be a falling-down drunk with her—I wanted to be deemed as capable of having a drink without getting hammered.

“You guys are acting strangely. What’s going on?” I spat out, unable to take any more of their phony behavior. My mother stiffened and wrung her hands.

“We’re short-staffed. Virginia Johnson is out on emergency bed rest.”

I groaned. I was the intended target of the prayer. Sensing my disappointment, her next words came out in a rush.

“Kandi, we had to shift a few assignments to cover her absence. Then, I received a last-minute request from Chadwick St. Clair.” My ears perked up at the mention of Chadwick. I didn’t know he was back in New Orleans. Last I’d heard, he was in law school in Washington D.C. I continued to listen carefully to her next words, feeling on edge about what she needed from me. Most importantly, how her request related to Chadwick.

“He’s wrapping up a renovation project in the Warehouse District. Someone needs to coordinate the post-construction cleaning and long-term maintenance of the common areas. He also needs someone to service his loft once or twice a week.” She said, trying to catch my gaze. I refused to look at her, she continued, “Chadwick is family. I couldn’t say no.”

“Kandi, we’re sorry,” Auntie Marie spoke up, “I know you wanted to spend the summer running around the city with your friends. But *the family* needs you to start work in the morning.”

I closed my eyes and counted to ten. My fury hadn’t diminished, so I continued until I reached thirty.

My family waited with bated breath as I pondered my response. If I declined this request, there would be another one to take its place. Chadwick St. Clair was a bachelor. I was sure the job would be a cakewalk. *How bad could working for Chadwick be?*

“Okay,” I huffed. “I’ll do it.”

“Good. I’ll call Chadwick tonight and let him know to expect you in the morning,” said my mother.


“This feels like bribery,” I stated, waving my arms around at the elaborate meal and decorations.

“It is. After a little more of this, you won’t remember any of it. Salut!” Marie-Therese picked up her Mason glass of liquor and smiled wickedly, showing her straight, white teeth.

“Goody, did they put you up to this? What about you, Pop-Pop?”

My dear, sweet grandparents both laughed and held their glasses up, “Salut!”

I raised my glass and whispered, “Salut.”


IN DECEMBER, I WOULD GRADUATE WITH A BACHELOR OF Finance from the University of Florida. Desperate to have me closer to home, my mother had offered to pay my rent, bought me a new car, and provided a job at Scrub-A-Dub. I was to be the first Director of Operations, an inflated title for the simple job of handling all the administrative efforts for the company. I’d accepted the position as a method of repayment for my mother’s years of sacrifice to give me a better life.

For the past three years, I’d been a full-time Floridian, opting to return to New Orleans for holidays and family events. I’d chosen year-round class schedules to avoid my family’s manipulation tactics, not to mention their interference in my life.

I attended classes for the last two summers, focusing on my studies by taking the maximum course load of classes each semester. While my friends drank until they fell on their asses and dated almost any guy who showed interest, I concentrated on maintaining a three-point-five grade point average and performed service projects with my sorority.

I’d worked hard all three years of college and needed a break. My goals were to spend the summer exploring my

creative side, dating, and relaxing. Working for Chadwick St. Clair was *not* on my agenda.

The last time I'd laid eyes on him was the summer before I'd started college. His parents had been away on holiday, and Chadwick was in the middle of studying for his LSATs. He'd moved in to take advantage of the quiet, empty house and spent every waking moment eating, sleeping, and breathing the exam.

I'd been cleaning the kitchen when he'd stumbled out of the study to grab his hundredth cup of coffee and knocked right into me.

"Excuse me, miss. I didn't mean to bump into you," he apologized.

"Chadwick. It's me," I'd giggled. He'd studied my face and blinked in surprise.

"Kandi? Is that you?"

"The one and only. Sorry, I didn't alert you to my presence. I didn't want to disturb you."

The Chadwick I'd remembered was tall and all boy. He'd always had a ball in his hand and a perpetual scowl plastered on his face. That day, Chadwick looked like he'd pulled an all-nighter, but even through the bloodshot eyes and thick stubble, he had still been breathtaking.

After years of not speaking to me or even looking my way, he'd spent three months listening to my angst-filled musings about college life. He'd been patient and had at least pretended to be interested. That was the summer I'd learned that underneath the façade of cool arrogance lay a charming and well-mannered guy.

For the first time in my life, I'd had a willing listener who hadn't judged or tried to convince me that my opinions were wrong. Some days, we talked for hours about pop culture and current events, and other days, I expressed nervousness about the next stage of my life.

He'd calmed my nerves as I talked about my fear that I hadn't selected the right major. I had teared up when I talked

about moving to a new city where I had no family or friends. He didn't tease me., he always offered the right words to soothe me.

My attraction had grown with each passing day. I had taken extra care in making sure that my hair had the appropriate amount of curl and tinting my lips in raspberry colored lipstick.

On my last day before packing up and moving to Gainesville, he'd pulled me in for a hug. I had wrapped my arms around his chest and innocently pressed my body against his. His body was steel, and he smelled like sandalwood.

He'd whispered in my ear, "Don't worry. You got this," before he kissed the top of my head.

To some women, a kiss on the top of the head is nothing, but this kiss meant everything to me. He'd kissed me! This was the first time Chadwick's lips had touched any part of me, and there was nothing brotherly about that hug. I doubted that Chadwick went around kissing the top of every woman's head.

If we'd had more time, who knows what could have happened? Maybe we would have shared a deeply passionate relationship. Maybe we would still be together.

I often thought of the kiss and his words of inspiration. I looked back on that moment fondly. I knew of his reputation, but that little moment had shown me that, at his core, Chadwick St. Clair was a sweet guy.



CHAPTER

Two

KANDACE

GROANING AS I SWIPED AT the bead of sweat trickling down my cleavage, I adjusted the vents to direct the cool air toward my face. It was early May, and the city was already a festering cauldron of steam and heat. My fingers bumped over my gold Saint Zita medal that hung loosely from my neck. I prayed to the patron saint of cleanliness for the strength to get through the heat and my first day at work.

Spending my summer working was a disappointment. Working for Chadwick made it a little more tolerable. The last time we spoke was my first semester of college, and I'd never stopped keeping tabs on him. Thanks to Google Alerts, I received real-time updates of new photos and articles. After our time together, he'd moved to Washington D. C. He had spent the first year working for a shipping industry lobbyist. By all accounts, he'd spent the next year and a half attending Georgetown Law school by day and allegedly fucking socialites at night.

Now that I thought about it, the last six months, I hadn't received any alerts notifying me of new web pages, newspaper articles, or blogs on Chadwick. Why did he move back to New Orleans?

I wasn't one hundred percent sure of his playboy lifestyle, but Chadwick St. Clair had always enjoyed the company of women. And they fell under his spell at the snap of his fingers. The combination of his cool confidence and beautiful, steely blue eyes made him every woman's wet dream.

I arrived at the brick and steel façade building thirty minutes early. I parked the minivan with the Scrub-A-Dub logo plastered on the side into the first available parking space. The building originally housed the operations for a clothing manufacturer, but the previous owners had converted to apartments a few years ago. Chadwick was renovating the building into high-end condominiums.

My hands trembled at the memory of Chadwick's warm eyes and deep voice, and I took several deep breaths in an attempt to calm my nerves. I adjusted the rearview mirror to inspect my hair and makeup. Not quite satisfied, I unbuttoned the top three buttons of my white polo before grabbing my backpack. I groaned when I stepped into the damp, sticky air before I began a slow trek to the lobby.

The building was eerily quiet for a Monday morning. I'd expected dozens of construction workers and contractors crawling over every single inch of the site.

I entered the modern, well-lit lobby armed with my trusty clipboard in one arm and my backpack slung across the other. The day's goal was to develop a cleaning plan and agree upon a schedule.

I pressed the elevator call button and the large steel car clunked noisily before the doors opened. I stepped in and scrutinized every detail. The brass and wooden interior hinted at its age. This thing was so old it had to be the proof-of-concept to the first elevator ever. What could go wrong?

Everything went wrong. I pressed the second-floor button, but the car didn't move. Thankfully, the door didn't close and trap me inside. I pulled out my phone and accessed the secure app containing the alarm and entry codes for Scrub-A-Dub's customer community. Five seconds later, I located Chadwick's

instructions and entered the code into the keyless entry system before pressing the button for the second floor again.

The doors closed and then popped open before closing for a final time. The car began its slow, noisy ascent, and I panicked when the elevator crept past the second floor. *Fuck*. I hurriedly pressed the buttons for each of the floors, and the elevator continued to climb before making an abrupt stop. I breathed a sigh of relief until the elevator doors opened, exposing the concrete block surrounding the elevator shaft. Fear rose in my throat and threatened to choke me as my claustrophobia kicked in. *Fuck! I will die in this deathtrap*. My throat tightened as a cold sweat broke out across my forehead. *Damn Chadwick and his fucked-up elevator!*

My eyes darted around the steel box as I rapidly developed an escape plan. I could pry open the ceiling panels and shimmy up the cable. Before I could ‘Bruce Willis’ that shit, the doors closed, and the elevator continued to rise. The car lurched and opened to reveal a modern living room. I quickly realized I was looking into Chadwick’s personal living quarters. I searched the elevator instructions on my phone but gave up quickly, pressing any and all buttons, including the emergency alarm. As the siren pierced the air, Chadwick ran from one of the rooms, wielding a golf club as a weapon.

A rush of air escaped my lips when our gazes met. Beads of water dripped from his dark brown hair to his face and torso. The wide expanse of his tanned, smooth chest peeked through the opening of a navy-blue bathrobe. I wanted to run my fingers through the fine patch of fuzz and down the rippled muscles of his abdomen.

His blue eyes were wild as his gaze drifted from the top of my head down to my sneaker-clad feet. His broad chest moved with each sharp inhalation. He looked at me with a feral scowl before a small smile curled his lips. His arm lowered, and his muscles retracted as his stance changed from that of a spring ready to snap to a less agitated one.

The heat of his gaze seemed to burn right through my clothing, leaving me naked and exposed. My lips. My neck. My breasts. My thighs. The sacred space between my legs.

Every place pulsed and warmed under his stare. I wanted to reach in my backpack for a bottle of water, needing a sip of the cool liquid to quench my thirst. Instead, I pushed the emergency alarm button again, and the loud siren immediately went silent.

“Shit! Kandace? You scared the crap out of me.” He exhaled with relief as his eyes nervously darted around the loft. He stammered, “Sorry. Celeste didn’t mention that you would . . . I had a late start this morning. Just got out of the shower.”

As the pair of doors began to close slowly, I pressed the “Door Open“ button. Miraculously, the doors remained opened, allowing us to continue our conversation.

Chadwick’s near nakedness combined with the stutters shook my confidence, so I babbled, “I’m sorry.” We sounded like two idiots apologizing to each other, but for what, I wasn’t exactly sure. “I didn’t realize this elevator was so temperamental. I wanted to check out the other floors before I . . .”

My words drifted as I noticed the reason for his nervousness. Fearful, wide eyes framed the face of a tall, buxom brunette as she inched behind him. She’d wrapped a matching navy bath sheet around her torso and her long, wet hair hung down her shoulders past her ample breasts. Sensing curvaceous nymph’s presence, Chadwick’s eyes widened. He slowly turned to look at her.

“False alarm. Angel, why don’t you wait for me in the bedroom?”

A blush flamed across my cheeks as I realized I’d interrupted the couple’s intimate moment.

“No. No. I’m so sorry. I’ll come back.” I returned my gaze to my phone and attempted to figure out how to work the steel coffin.

“My, um, friend, um, is preparing to leave.” He ran his hand through his hair. “Come in and take a look around the

living room and kitchen? I'll be out in a second." He held up an index finger. "Stay. Don't go anywhere."

"Okay," I squeaked. The bronze doors closed, making nary a sound as I took a tentative step into the loft. He glanced back over his shoulder before he rushed into the bedroom, quietly closing the door.

His friend?

The apartment had silvery gray walls decorated with large pieces of modern art. The black-framed, floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked the bustling street below and were each covered with sheer curtains. A dark gray, oversized sectional sat atop a wool rug. The pièce de résistance was the seventy-inch television mounted over the massive gray tiled fireplace.

There were red Solo cups and empty bottles strewn throughout, ruining what would otherwise be a perfect space. From the living room, the kitchen was in view. The marble countertops, large island, and high-end appliances were a chef's dream. My nose wrinkled at the piles of takeout containers scattered in the kitchen. *Gross!* A Mr. Coffee coffeemaker sat on the counter. Like me, the appliance seemed out of place amongst the expensive furnishings.

Despite the mess, the space was more elegant than I expected. Someone had put thought into the interior design and décor, which made it feel a little less like a bachelor pad. Guess it helped that he was twenty-six years old and insanely rich.

I busied myself collecting the wine bottles, Solo cups, and carryout boxes scattered on the living room table and kitchen countertops. Ten minutes later, the bedroom door opened. Chadwick wore a pair of gray sweatpants along with a black t-shirt that clung to his muscular chest. He smirked and nervously rubbed the back of his head.

His friend had exchanged the blue bath towel for a red minidress, and the fabric hugged her ample breasts and hips. She'd bundled her long, brown hair into a loose topknot, and dark sunglasses framed her narrow face. Her expression was

impassive as she flung a black Chanel bag over her shoulder, and she sauntered to the elevator with her head held high.

I wanted to give her snaps and yell, “Yassss girl! It’s your world!” Deciding to use better judgment, I continued to do what I did best. I occupied myself with straightening the room.

My cheeks heated at the realization that I was yet again spying into Chadwick St. Clair’s love life. At least this time, I wasn’t an awkward schoolgirl with a massive crush. Or was I?

The room was silent as the three of us waited for the elevator to arrive. Chadwick simultaneously avoided eye contact with both of us while shifting from one foot to the other. After what felt like an eternity, the elevator announced its arrival with a loud clunk. His friend entered the elevator and blew a kiss to Chadwick as he nodded a goodbye.

Once the elevator doors closed, Chadwick walked to the kitchen area. I tried to breathe deeply as I counted each step until he stood next to me.

He pulled me in for a hug as I leaned in stiffly and wrapped my arms around him. I assumed he had a girlfriend, so I poked my ass back to keep a distance of at least one foot between our lower halves. In the unfortunate event that our crotches should touch, I didn’t want ‘little Chadwick’ to grow against my thigh. If the rumors were correct, ‘not-so-little Chadwick’ was more like it.

This is a professional relationship. I’m here to do a job. I’m not here to daydream about Chadwick.

I’d thought I could control myself around him until I looked up at his face. At five-foot-seven, I’m not a munchkin, but he was still at least half a foot taller. His strong muscular arms flexed around me. *My God.* He smelled familiar and oh so wonderful. A day’s worth of stubble covered his sharp jawline, and his aquiline nose and high, chiseled cheekbones emphasized his best feature—his eyes. They were the color of glaciers on a cloudy day and framed with long, thick eyelashes. The sum of these parts was one beautiful specimen of a man.

I administered three small pats to his back before breaking out of his embrace. When his brows knitted in confusion at my awkwardness, I cleared my throat and looked quickly away. He crossed to the opposite side of the large marble island and climbed onto a barstool, smiling at me.

“What’s up?”



CHAPTER

Three

CHADWICK

LONELINESS WAS A DANGEROUS STATE of mind. As an only child, I'd never had siblings to keep me company. I'd used my imagination to entertain myself. I'm embarrassed to admit that I'd played two-player games of checkers by myself. At the end of the game, I was not only a big winner but a big loser.

My life had changed when I joined the Pop Warner league. At twelve, I'd met three boys who became my best friends. I had combatted loneliness with James, Quad, and Mike. Our friendships formed while playing football, but our teenage years made us brothers. We'd shared tales of our first sexual experiences. We'd stolen from our parents' liquor cabinets and skulked away to the levees. While the barges and towboats floated by, each of us had drank from the bottles and planned our futures. We'd pledged to remain brothers until the end.

I had moved to Washington D. C. to work in the lobbyist industry before I attended law school. For two and a half years, I'd lived within the Beltway, but I had eventually grown weary of the hustle and bustle of the city. The coffee was flavorless up north. The parties, galas, and masquerades were stiff and boring. In a city where politics ruled all, everyone

was sophisticated and calculating in their quest to reach the top. I had longed for a slower pace and the familiarity of my hometown.

After months of scouring the New Orleans real estate listings and auction sites, I'd learned of a potential investment property. The previous investors had learned that the building required extensive lead abatement work. They didn't have enough capital to finish the project, so I'd offered to take it off of their hands. They had quickly accepted my lowball offer.

While my friends purchased cars and designer clothes, I bought real estate. During my freshman year at Columbia University, I'd found a cheap studio apartment on the Upper East Side of New York City. I'd seen a diamond in the rough and polished it until it shined. After my senior year, I sold it for three times my initial investment.

That's how I caught the real estate bug.

I had continued to focus on flipping properties while I lived in D. C. I'd spent more time researching real estate than studying the law. Since my father had attended Georgetown Law, it had been a foregone conclusion that I would follow in his footsteps. Working with the trades gave me a greater sense of purpose, and I relished the feeling of accomplishment at the completion of a challenging job. The law didn't fulfill me—therefore, I had no desire to practice. Eventually, I dropped out of law school at the end of my third semester.

Three months ago, I'd returned to New Orleans, ready to pick up where I'd left off as a single man about town, enjoying fine food, top-shelf liquor, and high-class women. I'd planned on going out with my friends and returning home in the wee hours of the morning. Instead, I'd ended up attending intimate social gatherings such as couples' game nights or book club meetings. I wasn't even a part of a couple, but that didn't stop the invitations. There were always nice, homely cousins or smart friends in need of a plus-one.

Last night, the inevitable loneliness had crept back in. Two days before, my best friend, James Pennington, had proposed to his high school girlfriend. While I was happy for him, I was

still miserable in my own personal life. I was the last bachelor in my social group, and there were no romantic prospects in sight.

The best solution to loneliness was a stiff drink and a warm body to commiserate with, so I strolled to a neighboring Emeril Lagasse restaurant for dinner and struck up a friendly conversation with the bartender.

The girl in the red dress had walked in with a group of vivacious friends. She'd stood tall, lean, and unaffected by the high energy of her companions. Like a predator in the wild, I'd stalked over to the long-legged vixen and whispered sweet nothings in her ear.

Getting my dick wet would have satiated my need for companionship, but like an idiot, I'd foolishly decided against booking a hotel room and brought her back to my place. Three glasses of red wine, a few hits of a blunt, and a blow job later, we'd passed out in my bed. At the crack of dawn, I'd awakened to a hand tightly wrapped around my cock. Touching and rubbing had led to licking and sucking. We'd been in the shower when Kandace had loudly crashed back into my life.

I hadn't planned for the lady in the red dress to spend the night, and I certainly hadn't counted on Kandace's arrival. I'd played bedroom games my entire life, but I'd been unprepared to smoothly and politely usher my overnight guest out while greeting my unexpected early morning arrival.

Celeste hadn't warned me that Kandace would be the person to clean my apartment. If I'd known, I would've picked up the mess in the loft, and I sure as hell wouldn't have chosen last night to break my three-month sexual dry spell.

I pulled a shiny red apple out of the fruit basket and took a large, noisy bite while Kandace scrutinized the room and jotted down notes on her clipboard. The last time I'd seen her, she'd been adjusting to womanhood and preparing for college. We'd spent the summer trading secrets and stories of our insecurities. Despite our parting promise to remain friends,

we'd lost touch. Three years later, she'd returned to me as a grown woman.

Kandace Alexander.

Her name rolled off the tongue. Her nickname couldn't have been more fitting. She was candy personified—sweet, tempting and addictive. I couldn't help but wonder if she would melt in my mouth just as easily.

At twenty-one, Kandace was a gorgeous woman. An explosion of dark brown curls surrounded skin the color of creamy caramel. The coils tickled her shoulders in a way that mesmerized everyone she met. She'd once been willowy, almost reed-like. But today, the white polo and khaki pants she wore clung to every curve of her body. The fit was so exact that it wasn't difficult to imagine how she might look naked.

I chewed on my lip for a minute as I concocted an excuse for my guest's presence.

"Hey. About earlier . . ." My implication was clear as I nodded toward the elevator, but she interrupted me with an artificially bright smile and a shrug.

"No worries. I shouldn't have arrived early. I didn't mean to intrude. Your apartment is beautiful, but your elevator is shit! I must have called on Jesus fifty times in that death trap. Are you sure your friend made it down without incident?"

"Thanks to you, she knows there is an emergency alarm button," I chuckled. "My favorite ride is when the elevator resets itself. The car zooms up several floors, then the doors open to the concrete shaft. The elevator repairmen looked at it a few weeks ago. It's a work-in-progress."

"From here on out, I'm walking up the six flights of stairs. I need the exercise anyway." She sobered before continuing, "I love you like my cousin, and I hate to say this, but you're a slob! Look at this!" She held up two trash bags containing bottles and carryout boxes. I grinned sheepishly.

"Remember Penn?" She flashed a look of confusion, so I clarified, "James Pennington?"

“Oh, yeah. I remember him and your band of slimeball friends.”

“Ha-ha. Not anymore. James stopped by to celebrate his engagement. We called Quad and Mike to join us. It was like old times, and things got out of hand.” She frowned in apparent concern. “Don’t worry, Kandace. My friends are either married or engaged. I rarely entertain.”

“There’s a blast from the past. You guys still hang out, eh?”

“We’re still close.”

“Aww. I’m happy that you guys are still friends.”

Kandace rested her chin against her knuckles and leaned against the island countertop. I got a closer look at her eyes—dark brown with bronze flecks throughout. Her eyes were truly the windows to her soul. When she was happy, the bronze highlights glowed like embers. When she was sad, they were dark and less lively. When she was excited, like now, the colors seemed to dance in her eyes.

“You’re back in New Orleans full-time, huh?” she grinned.

“Yes, I am. There’s no place like home.” I smiled back at her, relieved that my overnight guest hadn’t affected her. I didn’t want her to request another assignment. I needed her to stick around because in all honesty, I could have used a friend.

The last time I’d seen her was the summer she’d been preparing for her first semester at college. Celeste usually kept a tight rein on Kandace, and I’d been surprised she’d allowed her beautiful, most prized possession to attend a college seven hours away.

At age eighteen, Kandace had grown to be a beautiful young woman. Gone was the annoying brat with the gigantic poufs attached to the sides of her head. She’d secured her shiny, black coils with a tortoiseshell barrette and cascaded past her shoulder blades.

Her small, almond-shaped eyes were no longer framed in thick eyeglasses. Instead of avoiding eye contact like she had in prior times I’d seen her, she had looked me directly in the

eye. Her voice had sounded melodic and evenly pitched. I'd hugged her tightly upon recognizing her, noticing the way her boyishly lanky frame had filled out.

Kandace had been stunning and barely legal, and I'd fought the urge to forbid her from leaving. I'd wanted to lock her away in my parents' garage and throw away the key. So long as I could have locked myself in with her.

We had spent hours and hours talking about life. Her interpretations of events and people had been opinionated and lively, and I couldn't help getting caught in her spell. Knowing she was inside the large house had made it difficult to concentrate on my studies. As the days progressed, I'd roamed the hallways and rooms until I found her. I'd leisurely leaned against the doorjamb and talked with her about anything and everything—school, life, goals, my exam . . . Anything to remain the object of her attention.

Under the dark cloak of night, I'd fantasized about taking her into my bed while my hands drifted past the waistband of my pajamas and fisted my cock.

But I'd known I couldn't go any further than fantasizing, and I'd tried to tamp down any rising emotions by acting cool around her.

I'd been in deep when I'd braved the Apple store for her graduation present. I hated shopping in general, but I'd truly despised the hot and crowded Apple store. Not to mention the store had reeked of corn chips and raw onions, but I'd endured the worst because Kandace had confided that she was saving to pay for a new laptop.

The following day, I'd eagerly awaited her arrival. I'd paced the hallways, running through the script in my head. I'd planned to congratulate her and wish her well on her upcoming academic pursuits. Yet, when I'd looked into her eyes, I froze. Being too cool to express my true feelings, I'd shoved the elegantly wrapped boxes into her hands.

“Um. Er. Happy graduation. If this isn't what you wanted, we can return it.”

I had shifted from foot-to-foot as she'd walked to the kitchen island. She'd carefully unwrapped the boxes, her jaw had dropped at the top of the line gold MacBook along with the matching iPad.

“This is more than I could've ever imagined. Thank you so much.”

“No worries. I thought you could use it.”

She'd walked over to me and stood frozen in hesitation before sinking against me. I had instinctively leaned down and pressed an innocent kiss to the top of her head.

I hadn't expected that she'd sigh with content and snuggle her face against my chest. I'd closed my eyes, my arms wrapped tight around her, breathing in her sweet scent.

We'd stood entwined in a bear hug. For a fleeting moment, I'd forgotten that she was completely off-limits. I'd wanted to slip a finger underneath her chin and tilt her face upwards until we gazed into each other's eyes. tilt her chin until our lips met. I wanted to feel her warm sweet breath on my mouth and taste the perfectly shaped flesh. I knew better. I couldn't take this any further than an innocent hug. Celeste Alexander knew my reputation with the fairer sex, she would never approve me dating her kind and innocent daughter.

This time I'd been the one that sighed before I'd reluctantly broke our embrace. Pushing all of my attraction to her to the furthest recesses of my mind, I let her go.



CHAPTER

Four

KANDACE

T*HIS IS A PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP. I'm here to do a job.*

I repeated the words like a chant as I arrived at the penthouse the next day with a napkin-lined basket filled with freshly baked goods and a jar of my grandmother's blackberry preserves. Energized by my first day of work, I'd stayed awake until two o'clock in the morning baking banana nut muffins, apple bread, and butter pecan cookies.

I gripped the handrails in the brightly lit stairwell and hesitated before climbing the six flights. I shuddered as I thought about any woman in Chadwick's bed. Should I give him a courtesy call or enter as planned? I preferred not to repeat yesterday's snafu. If he was with the Kim Kardashian clone, then I would have to deal with that. But if he was with a different woman, I would surely grow to hate him. I needed to prepare myself for the possibility that he might even be engaged in a threesome.

Steeling my nerves, I tiptoed through the rear door. Chadwick must have been asleep because the house was quiet, so I put in my AirPods and cranked my Rihanna playlist. I quietly opened the kitchen cabinets and the refrigerator. Thankfully, grocery delivery service put everything away. I

brewed a pot of coffee with chicory while I used a duster to rid the cabinets and dark wood furniture of the day's construction dust. I didn't understand why Chadwick thought this was a part-time job. The loft was large, but there wasn't a lot to do.

I dust mopped the kitchen while quietly humming one of Rihanna's soulful ballads. A massive hand squeezed my forearm, and I backed into a wall of muscle. Startled, I gasped until I realized it was Chadwick. I quickly removed an earbud.

"I didn't realize you were awake."

"Good morning. I didn't mean to scare you."

Have mercy.

He wore black basketball shorts and a blue sleeveless workout shirt. The blue of his shirt deepened the color of his eyes to a beautiful turquoise. His dark chestnut hair was damp from a shower. My eyes found and focused on the cord-like veins rippling through his forearms. Chadwick in workout clothes reminded me of when we were younger—boyishly handsome, tall with tousled hair. He'd been a dreamboat then. He was sexy as fuck now.

Kandi, close your mouth.

My feet were rooted in place as my eyes drifted from his arms to his throat. The blood coursing through his body caused the vein in his neck to pulsate. My eyes followed as he ran a tongue along his soft, full lips.

Chadwick took pleasure in me gawking at him like a pervert. Judging by his smile, he enjoyed it. Self-consciousness raced through my thoughts. I cleared my throat and looked everywhere but at his biceps.

"Good morning."

"You've returned. I thought I'd scared you away," he said, swinging his long legs over the bar stools. He sniffed the napkin-lined basket. "Are these for me?"

"I had a late-night baking marathon and wanted to drop yummy treats at the office. I had a couple of extras," I lied. I'd

baked the treats especially for him. Reaching into the basket, I handed him the jar of preserves.

“Wow! Thanks.” He slathered on a large heaping of jam before taking a big bite of a muffin. He talked with his mouth full. “*Mmm*. Muffins and cookies. Two of my favorite things to eat. I also enjoy cakes. Nice, round, perfectly shaped cakes.”

A hint of a grin pulled at the corner of his lips. He was the king of the double entendre, and he would *always* try to embarrass me.

“Kandace, if you work here, prepare yourself for a little friendly ribbing. You spent the first decade of your life making my life pure hell, and now it’s time for payback.” He took another bite of the muffin and finished chewing before he spoke. “This is your last summer of fun before the real world kicks in. What do you have planned?”

“I subleased an apartment over in Iberville. I have no real plans other than hanging out with friends and weekends at Orange Beach. Oh, and I will work here.”

“Fun times.”

“What brings you back here? Are you going to work for St. Clair Enterprises?”

“No, I’m not. I have a few real estate projects in the works. Even though I will work for myself, my father pressures me to join St. Clair. He wants to groom me to become CEO,” he sighed.

“That’s awesome!”

“Is it? I’m indifferent.”

“Aww. Come on. It’s your destiny. It is more prestigious than being a whiskey brewer. I never told you, but I think brewing whiskey is an awesome career choice.”

Surprise registered in his expression. I remembered every one of our conversations. I even remembered the conversations I’d eavesdropped on.

“You wanted to be one of the Costco sample ladies.” He shook his head.

“I was seven years old. In addition, the samples are delicious. After giving it some thought, I want to be a demonstrator at Costco. I’ll apply in the morning.” I reached into the basket and grabbed a cookie from a sealed container.

“Hey. Those are mine.” He moved the basket closer to his chest. “How about a trade? Your cookie for one of mine?”

“In your dreams.” I glared at his smirking expression. His face relaxed into a friendly smile. “Have you figured out what you want to do when you grow up?”

“I don’t have a clue. What about you?” He took another bite of the muffin.

“I majored in finance because I enjoy math. I hate that I don’t have any creative pursuits.”

“Are you sure? You’re a damn good baker.” He chewed noisily. “Maybe you’re supposed to play with numbers during the day and explore your creativity in your free time. I have a suggestion! Bake cookies for your starving friends.”

“Let me guess. You’re my starving friend?” I handed him a napkin as he continued to chew and nod. “You make a good point. I’m fortunate to have the rest of my life to figure it out.”

Chadwick’s phone rang, and he excused himself before walking to the console table in the foyer to retrieve it. He turned his back on me and took the phone call. I resumed dust mopping the floor.

Chadwick and I were both expected to live a life that other people had mapped out for us. We both knew it, whether or not we said it out loud. Our aspirations didn’t matter. Family obligations came first—no ifs, ands, or buts.

I blinked away the sting of tears gathering in the corners of my eyes. The prospect of spending the rest of my life pleasing my mother was a bitter pill to swallow.

My mother’s micromanagement didn’t stop with my job. It extended to all aspects of my life. She cajoled, advised, and

hovered in all key decisions, from fashion choices to boyfriends, forcing her input into my life. Other girls would have rebelled at the first sign of their mother encroaching their personal space. I allowed it because I knew that to fight my mother was a zero-sum proposition. Life was much easier when I did what she wanted.

Last week's fix-up was a prime example of my mother invading my personal space. I'd hauled myself out of bed at the butt-crack of dawn for a Celeste-approved date. He'd suggested we meet at a cute, little coffee shop near the Smoothie King Center. Convinced that my companion had picked the little coffee shop because it would appeal to me, I had felt a little more optimistic about the date.

I'd taken a seat in a chair and looked over the menu. A rush of humid air had burst into the tiny coffee shop each time the door swung open. My heart had raced, hoping he would wander through the door only to be let down when he didn't. I'd prepared myself to dine alone, when fifteen minutes after our designated meetup time, he'd sent a text message to let me know he was running late.

The door had opened, and my heart skipped a beat. At six-foot-five with a body chiseled from decades of athletic prowess, Pierre Butler was a sight to behold. My heart rate had sped up when I'd taken in his smooth cocoa-colored skin and high cheekbones. Pierre didn't belong on a basketball court. He belonged on a fashion runway.

The man had been fine.

The man had also been twenty-two minutes late.

He'd walked over to our table with a confident swagger. He'd approached me with a look of approval as he scanned me from head-to-toe. We'd exchanged pleasantries and placed our orders with the server, who'd all but bowed when he recognized Pierre.

My mother had been giddy, uncontained excitement and hope oozing from her voice as she relayed the details of the date she'd arranged for me. Pierre's own mother thought the

world of her beautiful, perfect son, and they were both pushing for romantic courtship.

By the end of the coffee date, I'd known I wasn't interested in Pierre.

I hadn't worried about hurting his feelings because I knew it went both ways. He'd appeared bored within minutes of our introduction. His eyes had darted from person to person as though he'd hoped to find someone more interesting.

In a relationship with Pierre, my job would have been to look pretty and smile when appropriate. He had asked nothing about me, preferring to spend my valuable time waxing poetic about his future NBA career. His hopes and dreams were a disjointed and disorganized jumble of words. I'd saved myself by pretending I had an important errand to run for my grandparents.

My mother knows nothing about me if she thinks Pierre Butler is the ideal man for me.

Pushing the coffee date out of my thoughts, I swept the dust pile into a dustpan and emptied it into the kitchen trash bag. Chadwick had completed his call and was sitting at the kitchen island.

I tried to hide the tears forming in the corner of my eyes. If I'd continued to think about the date with Pierre, I would definitely cry. I needed to take my mind off my overbearing mother and my dismal love life. My lips trembled as I squeaked out my next question.

“Chadwick, what's your plan for the evening?”

“I'll probably go to a restaurant and eat at the bar. Maybe get a steak.”

“Are you going out on the prowl? Going to bring back *fresh meat*?” I cringed the moment the question left my lips. The question was inappropriate and a little too familiar. Chadwick wasn't my friend—he was my client.

“I don't know. Maybe,” he said. He shrugged, appearing unaffected by my question.

“Well, don’t break any hearts.”



CHAPTER

Five

CHADWICK

“**D**AY FIVE . . . I EXPECTED A TRAIL of women filing in and out of here,” Kandace said, squinting and tilting her head sideways.

“No. That part of my life is over. There’s food in the refrigerator and vodka in the freezer. I’m more than adequately prepared to entertain myself.”

Kandace raised an eyebrow, casting a dubious response at the announcement. The statement is true. Somewhat. Aside from the lack of judgment with the girl in the red dress, I’ve been on the straight and narrow since I returned to New Orleans.

“I think you’re losing your touch. Are you losing your touch, St. Clair? Be honest.”

“Why don’t you go into the bedroom with me? I can give you a firsthand experience of my touch.” My heart thumped so loudly, I thought it would escape my chest. I was teasing, but I had become comfortable with the idea of the two of us alone in my bedroom.

“I see what you did there. You’re funny. Hilarious, actually.” She rolled her eyes to the heavens. “You couldn’t

wait to think with your dick.”

“You say the word ‘dick’ like my cock is repulsive. I’m proud of it. It’s a thing of beauty . . . Thick, long, with a slight curve. Don’t believe me? I can show you.”

A sly grin spread across my lips as my eyes shone with glee, and I moved my hand to the waistband of my shorts. Her eyes widened as though she was afraid of what I would do next. She raised her eyes to the ceiling and fixed them on the pendant lights that hung over the island. She extended her hand and sliced through the air.

“I’ll pass.”

“Kandace, look over here.” She refused to look my way. She was afraid for no reason. I hadn’t intended to show her my cock. I was just having a little fun. “Look. My hands are on the counter.”

“You’re so fresh.” She flung a dish towel at my waist.

“I think you like it.”

“Yeah. It’s attractive,” she snorted.

I believed there was a bit of truth in every joke. For one second, I had thought there was a possibility that she liked when I flirted with her. I sobered a little before I asked my next question.

“It’s summer in the city. When my dick is not on your mind, are you dating anyone?”

“No. Not seriously. I’ve had a couple of boring coffee meetings.” She then added an optimistic lilt, “But I have a date tonight. A real date, complete with appetizers and adult beverages.”

My fingers dug into my palms, and I stopped breathing as I tried to stifle any outward reaction. *A date? With whom? Where are they going?* I inhaled a calming breath before I spoke.

“Ah. A real date? Tell me about it.”

A blush crept across her cheeks.

“I met him on Bumble. I like that the women decide if they want to initiate contact. It’s very empowering.”

“A dating app? Those are for desperate people and hookups. Nobody seeks serious relationships by using apps.”

“Gee, thanks. Thank you for labeling me as desperate. Tell me which one you’re on, so I can avoid it.”

“You shouldn’t rely on apps to meet men. You’re a cute girl with a friendly personality. It’s hard to believe that men don’t fall over themselves trying to get your attention.”

“Unfortunately, men don’t throw themselves at me. I do everything the experts say you’re supposed to do. I smile and greet men at the grocery store. I’m always dressed well for the occasion—not too flashy and not too plain. I make eye contact with guys I’m interested in. Yet, I rarely pick up guys.”

“You?”

“Yes, me. My love life is so pitiful that my mother has resorted to hooking me up,” she sighed.

“I’m sure if you open your eyes, you’ll find there are many guys interested in you. Don’t use apps as your primary method of meeting men. Get out there and have fun with dating.” I felt a little silly dispensing advice about dating and romance. I hadn’t had a girlfriend since my freshman year in college, and now my experiences with women were more of the ‘one and done’ variety. “Tell me about the asshole,” I said grudgingly. She perked up and began to chatter.

“His name is Will, and he’s a twenty-five-year-old computer engineer. He lives in Pontchartrain Park. He’s a riot. He likes to text funny jokes and memes.” She pulled a cell phone from her pocket and swiped until she found his photo. She turned the phone toward me and held it next to her face. “Aren’t we cute together?”

I didn’t even see the guy, I was so focused on the stars in Kandace’s eyes. A streak of jealousy blazed deep within me. *Will in Pontchartrain Park* wasn’t the right guy for her. She needed a man who was original and romantic, not some nerd

who text messaged jokes that other men created. I answered the question the only way I knew how.

“He looks like a weirdo, and he sounds corny.” *Way to go. You sound like a real d-bag.*

She bristled at my rude remark.

“No. He’s a nice guy. I thought you guys looked a little alike.”

“Do you need your glasses? We do not look alike. Where is he taking you? Please, don’t say you will hang out at his place.” If I planted enough bad seeds, maybe I could sabotage the date before it even happened.

“No. We’re going to VINO. I’ll take an Uber there and go home alone. I think the date will be a lot of fun.”

VINO was a self-service wine bar within walking distance of the loft. The automated pouring machines dispensed wine by the ounce. The bar was a nice romantic atmosphere and perfect for a first date. Maybe Will wasn’t as stupid as I thought.

“Good. Call me if anything should go haywire.”

“You worry too much. Everything will be fine.”



AFTER KANDACE LEFT FOR THE DAY, DARK AND OBSESSIVE thoughts replaced my light and airy mood.

A dating app? Dating apps were for hookups. Nobody was interested in finding love on any of the popular dating apps. I knew this firsthand. When I didn’t want to work too hard for female company, I usually checked out the offerings on Hinge or Tinder.

My hypocrisy didn’t escape me. I was jealous of her date.

When I’d asked Kandace about her romantic life, I hadn’t expected she would be actively dating. The last time we’d talked, she was very single, but alas, anything can happen over three years.

I should've called Celeste to inform her that her daughter was meeting a stranger for drinks. Celeste would have put an end to this dating foolishness.

VINO was within walking distance. I thought about casually strolling into the bar, but I knew I'd look like a creep if I popped up. Instead, I picked up my phone and opened Facebook. Women typically documented every step they took, so I was sure Kandace had posted an update. Unfortunately, she was a betrayal to her sex because she hadn't updated her Facebook in months. An Instagram search for her proved unsuccessful.

Feeling defeated, I resigned to spending the evening catching up on editorial news programs. Armed with a canister of almonds and a bottle of Sam Adams, I sprawled out on the sectional with the remote glued to my hand. I devoted the next two hours simultaneously flipping through channels while checking my phone for text messages from Kandace.

My fixation on Kandace's date wasn't healthy. I was jealous of some asshole who wouldn't make her happy.

I tossed back a handful of almonds when the doorbell rang, and I lazily pulled out my iPad to open the security app. It wasn't unusual for stumbling and falling revelers to mistake my building for their hotels or condo rentals. I readied myself to point them in the right direction or shoo them away. Instead, Kandace's wild mane of hair filled the screen, and I immediately buzzed her in.

I met her in the elevator vestibule. Her tear-stained face was crimson-tinged, and her eyes were swollen and puffy as she avoided my gaze. Fury blazed through me. I grabbed her by the shoulders and scanned her for any obvious bruises or marks.

"Kandace, what's wrong? What happened?"

Her chest heaved while she tried to catch her breath.

"My date was awful."

"He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"No. It was such a disappointment. I will block him."

I released my breath with a huff. *Whew*. It was a crash and burn.

“We met at VINO. He talked about himself the entire time. He told stories of every single piece of lowbrow sex in his sexual past. Sex with prostitutes. Sex with judges. Sex with cougars.”

I inspected her as we rode the elevator to my floor. The man was a fool. She had everything a man wanted in *and* out of his bed. Kandace was funny, and she had an opinion. Not to mention she was sexy. She wore a simple black sweater tank and white skinny jeans. The sweater cinched in at her waist and accentuated her full cleavage. Kandace was way too hot to deal with the likes of that asshole.

I guided her to the sectional, and with eyes lowered, she continued the story.

“He got angry because I picked two pours of the more expensive wine. The pours were six dollars. Apparently, he’s a ‘quantity over quality’ man because he drank several one-dollar pours of swill. He also had two vodka tonics. One hour into the date, he began slurring his words and talking too loudly.”

“He wanted to get you drunk,” I answered bluntly. She winced before acknowledging that I was right.

I walked over to the kitchen for a bottle of water and a box of tissues. She wiped her nose before opening the bottle. I took the seat next to her and attentively listened to the story.

“Thanks. Once he was drunk, he started putting his hand on my thigh. I smacked it away, and the other hand started slinking up my stomach. Eventually, he grabbed at my boob.” She lowered her head in shame. “I elbowed him in the side, but I should’ve punched him in the nuts.”

I let out a low growl. I took her in my arms and pulled her into a tight hug. Every curve on her body pressed against me as she sniffled.

“I’m fine. He started getting belligerent, and . . .” Her breathing faltered. “He called me a . . . cocktease!” she wailed.

Her beautiful face crumpled as my anger rose to epic proportions.

I pressed my lips together to stifle a stream of obscenities, clutching her against my chest.

“He said I’m no Meghan Markle or Beyoncé. *Ha!* Like he’s Prince Harry.” She snorted and rolled her eyes. “He spent the entire evening coming up with limericks and raps. He made up one about me. Wanna hear it?”

“Go right ahead.”

“Okay . . .” Kandace avoided eye contact as she recited, “There once was a girl named Kandi. She gave me a job that was handy. Her wrist game was strong as she stroked on my schlong. She made a young man feel dandy.”

She stuck her tongue out and crossed her eyes. Like a pressure valve, the silly face released the pent-up anger that we both felt. And for the first time that evening, we erupted in simultaneous laughter.

“He’s a regular poet laureate.” I breathed deeply as I bit down laughter.

“Ugh. He’s awful. It was the worst date of my life. To top it off, he inhaled all the appetizers, and I’m starving.”

“I’m sorry the date didn’t pan out as you had hoped. Have a seat. Let me make you something.”

I returned to the kitchen and reached into the cabinet to pull out one of the white plates. After pulling out the fixings for a traditional New Orleans po’ boy from the refrigerator, I began to pile slices of turkey and Swiss cheese on a loaf of French bread. I slathered one side of bread with mayonnaise and piled lettuce on top of the meat. Once satisfied with the presentation, I poured a few chips on the plate and walked back to the sectional. She gave me a weak smile before accepting the plate.

“Thank you. This looks delicious.” She took a bite and chewed for a few seconds. She appeared to be deep in thought. “You wanna know the worst part of this fiasco? I can never show my face at VINO again.”

“I have a strong mind to take you back there tonight.”

She shook her head and gave me a half-smile.

“I can’t ask that of you. You’ve done enough. I’ve never been so embarrassed in my life.” She paused for a second before adding, “Except for the time my mother twerked to the rap song ‘Back That Ass Up’ at my sweet sixteen birthday party.”

“Celeste?”

“Yes. She heard the opening to the song, and she and Auntie Marie went crazy. They made a big scene.” She raised her arms and added a dramatic, “Aww. That’s my song!” She frowned, “Once all eyes were on them, they were on the dance floor. Twerking! My mom is a great dancer, but I had to pull her away before she dropped it like it was hot. She did this in front of my friends, their parents, and my teachers. I almost died.”

“I guess she backed it up and stopped . . .” I guffawed, paraphrasing the famous line from the classic rap song. “Celeste is definitely a MILF.”

“Not helpful,” she warned.

“I’m sure some guys look at her in that way. I don’t see her as anything more than a family friend,” I backtracked. “Unfortunately, sex appeal is one tragedy of having a young-ish mother. My mother is a *mom*. But if you tell her I said that, I’ll never speak to you again.”

“At least she’s normal,” she laughed. “Thanks for cheering me up. You’re the first and only person I reached out to.”

My chest swelled with hope. Maybe she saw me as more than a client or family friend.

As she finished the sandwich, her phone chirped, and she peeked at it.

“Oh, my God. It’s him! He text messaged me a copy of the receipt. The asshole wants me to *CashApp* him my share of the bill. Thirty-eight bucks.”

“Fuck him. Better yet, tell him to come here and get it from me,” I growled.

“No, unnecessary.” Her fingers typed at a lightning-fast speed as she crafted a response. With a satisfied grin, she read, “Will, as requested, this is eighty dollars. This will cover the entire bill for appetizers and drinks. I included an additional four dollars to cover the tip. Best Regards, Princess Meghan. P. S. Lose my number.”

We roared until our laughter settled into chuckles.

“No more online dating for me. I’m sorry for interrupting your evening with my tragic love life. I’ll call an Uber.”

“Not a chance. Come on,” I told her, grabbing the keys to my Jeep.

Minutes later, we pulled into the parking lot at the modern apartment complex. She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. Her pretty lips were soft as they brushed against my stubbled cheek, and I caught a whiff of mint gum as she breathed against my ear.

“Chadwick, thank you for being here for me. I’ll never forget it.”

As she pulled away, her left breast brushed against my tricep and I nearly rocketed out of my seat. I bit back the urge to grab her by the wrist and pull until our lips touched.

I didn’t get a chance to react. Kandace had sprung out of the vehicle and began walking toward the building.

I hopped out of the Jeep and pocketed my keys to walk behind her. Sensing my presence, she glanced back at me.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m escorting you to your door. It’s late, and I want to make sure you are safe.”

Her eyes narrowed as she sized me up.

“Don’t get any funny ideas,” she warned.

I raised my hands in response. I followed three steps behind her, enjoying the view of her curvy ass as she

navigated in stiletto sandals.

Kandace possessed an air of coquettish charm combined with an element of street smarts, and few women could pull off the two with the same level of authenticity. I wasn't sure, but I suspected she had limited dating experience. She'd been heartbroken, the disappointment in her tone had been palpable as she'd described the date. Women who are players would use the date as a funny story to share with their friends and charge the hurt to the game. They would quickly rebound and continue to kiss frogs until their prince miraculously appeared in front of them.

Speaking of kisses, players know that kisses on the cheek are for lovers and are precursors to sex. When Kandace had leaned in my direction, I'd prepared myself to feel the gentle tug of her teeth on my ear. If she had taken that step, I would have pulled her across the console and onto my lap so she could straddle my rock-hard cock.

I almost crashed into her when we arrived at her apartment door. She turned to face me and with a cocked eyebrow, her eyes roamed from my head to my feet and back.

"I have to check to make sure that there are no burglars," I improvised. She sighed and turned the key in the door. She opened the door and turned on the light and spoke into the empty apartment.

"Is anyone here?"

She stepped into the apartment while I stood at the doorjamb. I leaned in and my eyes scanned the room.

"It sounds quiet. Are you sure you don't want to invite me in for a nightcap?"

"Bye, Chadwick! See you on Monday!"

"Sweet dreams."

I turned and happily jogged down the hall and along the sidewalk back to the Jeep.

On the drive home, I rolled down the windows and turned my iPhone to an eighties music playlist. My hands

rhythmically slapped the steering wheel while I bobbed my head to the rhythm of The Police.

I considered the evening a success. Kandace had sought me out and allowed me to comfort her. I would have preferred to console her when she wasn't hurt or crying because of the actions of another man, but I'd take whatever I could get. I had also ensured that she had something to eat and arrived home safely. Then, she'd given me one of the most intimate kisses of my life. All this did was increase my need for her. I would keep wanting and pressing until I had her.

She will be mine.



CHAPTER

Six

KANDACE

THE MONDAY AFTER THE DISASTROUS Bumble date, I drove the four miles from my apartment to the Scrub-A-Dub office. A bundle of invoices lay on the passenger's seat, if I was lucky, the office would be empty. I could place the documents on my mother's desk and run a few errands before meeting the girls.

I pulled into the parking lot of the off-the-beaten-path strip mall. I parked next my mother's gold Lexus SUV. Dread filled my chest, threatening to scour away my last shred of happiness. I sat in the car and said a silent prayer.

My plan of attack was to check if there were any outstanding tasks, then make an excuse to leave. I vowed to avoid a disagreement or hurt feelings with my mother. I raised my head and straightened my back in determination.

"Good morning!" I called out as I pulled the door open.

"Chère! We're in the back!" Marie-Therese answered. I walked into the storeroom where the two ladies were unpacking boxes and comparing the contents against an invoice. She looked up at me and smiled. "Good morning, sweetheart."

My mother peered at me over her reading glasses, her gaze landing on my hair.

“Good morning! Thank goodness you’re here. We need you to finish unpacking these boxes, noting any missing items on the invoice. Once you complete that, put everything away on the shelves and cut the boxes for the recycling bin.”

What am I? Five years old? I’m capable of figuring out the steps required to unpack a box and prepare it for recycling. I don’t need every single step written on a notepad.

“Okay. Yes, ma’am. I stopped by to see if there was anything you needed me to do. I’ll get started on it immediately.”

I shrugged out of my backpack and hooked it on the back of the door, ignoring my mother as she stared at me. Taking the box cutter in my hand, I exposed the blade and turned toward the unopened boxes. I selected the largest box and began gliding the box cutter along the seams, slicing through the packing tape. I felt my mother looming behind me. I fought the urge to roll my eyes. I was sure she would correct my form or figure out some way to ‘manage’ me.

I unfolded the box flaps and reached inside for the invoice. I counted the cans of the aerosol window cleaner and wrote a check mark next to the quantity. I searched the pile of boxes before selecting another. I slashed open the box top, praying she would walk back to her desk and leave me in peace.

“How are you getting along with Chadwick? Have you developed a staffing plan for the common areas?”

I didn’t turn to face her. I continued to open the boxes and count the contents.

“Everything is going well. No. I haven’t had time to develop the staffing plans. I’ll work on them this week.”

“He plans to sell the lofts in three months. How will you know how many people we’ll need for the contract? Keep in mind that we are already short-staffed. We need to understand his requirements to figure out the number of new hires.”

“Mama, it’s only been a week.” I put down the clipboard and pen and turned to face her.

“You’re right. It’s been a week! What are you doing over there?” My mother raised both hands and punctuated the air with her movements. Exasperation leaked from every single syllable. She straightened her back and lowered her voice. “You gotta get your head out of the clouds. Thank goodness you work with us—Corporate America wouldn’t stand for this.”

Those were fighting words, and I was ready for a fight. My mother enjoyed bringing up the reason she believed I was back in New Orleans and working for Scrub-A-Dub. This spring, on the advice of my favorite professor, I’d applied for a position at FinaSoft. Two weeks and four rounds of interviews later, the hiring manager invited me to join their junior sales program.

The Atlanta-based position was three states away from the domineering watch of my mother. Free from scrutiny and ‘management,’ I could stay out all night without worrying that Mama would find out and demand an explanation. For once, I could be a young, twenty-something exploring nightlife and dating.

The bad part was that I would be alone in a strange city. The Atlanta metropolitan area had to be at least three times larger than New Orleans. I couldn’t imagine living in such a big city with no friends or family.

I had declined the offer because I was too afraid of taking a chance. I’d told my family and friends that I didn’t get the job. In my mind, lying to my family, professors, and friends was easier than admitting the truth.

At that moment, my mother wasn’t playing fair, the conversation could have easily devolved into an argument. Instead, I exhaled and said my words in a slow, measured cadence.

“Mother, I’m working hard. His house needed more care than we originally thought.” I cringed and instantly regretted my choice of words when she blinked in surprise.

“Mother?”

I called her ‘Mama’ affectionately, but she became ‘Mother’ when she approached ‘getting on my nerves’ territory. Catching the hint, she adjusted her demeanor by straightening her back and changing her voice to a more conciliatory tone.

“I know Pierre is cute. But you have got to focus on your career and doing everything well.” Her expression brightened a little. “Speaking of Pierre, how was the date?”

I finally turned to face her. “He’s very handsome.” *And arrogant to the point of rudeness.*

“Well . . . Was it a love connection?”

“Mama, I don’t like him. He talked about himself the entire time.”

“He was likely nervous. I think you two will be good together. His parents are good people.”

Pierre received the Celeste Alexander seal of approval because his parents’ values and expectations aligned with hers. She knew his mother from the old neighborhood and followed his successes on and off the court.

She paused, seeming to choose her words carefully. “Kandi, just give him a chance. I’m sure you two will have fun at the ball. You didn’t respond to my text messages with the gowns I found online. Did you like any of those?”

The Sportsman Ball was in one week. Created after the Deepwater Horizon disaster to raise awareness of the dangers threatening the state’s wildlife, the ball was one of the more conservative local events. It was possible that Pierre and I would be the only twenty-somethings in attendance.

My mother had set it up without even asking me, and I had wanted to scream in frustration when she’d informed me that my attendance was mandatory.

Either I work on these boxes or I stay here with her chattering like schoolgirls about a guy I don’t even like.

“Marie and I are excited about going shopping with you. Everything is on me—dress, shoes, hair. Money is no object. Also, you can wear Nana Alexander’s comb. It’s perfect for the twenties theme.”

My great-grandmother passed along her antique wedding jewelry to my mother. Mama and auntie wore it on special occasions. *I didn’t wear it for my prom, but I’m allowed to wear it with Pierre?*

“Mother, I can pick my clothing.”

“I know you can pick your own clothing. I just want to make you happy. Well, I’ll leave you to the unpacking.” Her posture slumped before she turned on her heel, walking back to her desk.

Damn it. I hurt her feelings.

I guess I should have plastered a phony smile on my face and pretended to be excited.

One hour later, I emerged from the storeroom. I’d unloaded all the boxes, stacked the inventory on the shelves, and placed the boxes in the recycling bin.

“All done! If you need nothing else, I will head out.” I announced. I hooked my arms through my backpack and began walking to the door. Auntie Marie gave me a sympathetic smile.

“Thank you, sweetie. I think that’s all we need. You were a big help.” She winked and flashed a megawatt smile.

“Kandi, don’t forget to get those staffing plans completed for Chadwick’s property. We would like to build a forecast for the next three months.” My mother used her softer, less authoritative voice. The same voice she’d used when I was younger, before I had hit puberty.

“Will do.” I walked over and planted kisses on her cheek and then did the same to Auntie.

I slipped on my sunglasses and stepped out in the midday sun. I tilted my head toward the sky, letting the sun rays hit my face and taking a deep breath. My grandmother always touted

the benefits of sunlight. She believed that it could not only kill germs but could elevate your mood. The sun's rays weren't quite doing the job today, though. At least I successfully survived my second official duty as the Director of Operations—unpacking boxes.

Mission *fucking* accomplished.

“I HAD A LONG DAY. I’LL TAKE WHATEVER YOU GUYS ARE having,” I announced rudely from the foyer of Natasha’s apartment, closing the door behind me. Keely and Simone were seated at the breakfast bar, and each held a glass of red wine.

My best friend, Natasha, and I lived in the same apartment complex, though we were in different buildings. Her one-bedroom apartment was like mine in terms of style. She decorated the sparsely furnished living room in Overstock and Amazon.com chic. Natasha was a sous chef at her family’s soul food restaurant, so her kitchen looked like a Williams-Sonoma store blew up. She had the latest and greatest kitchen appliances and dinnerware. It only made sense to have our girl-time at Natasha’s place.

Though the four of us were all close friends, Natasha and I were best friends. It was a fact we did not hide.

“My girl . . .” Her bright smile faded at the residual tension marking my face. “Damn. It looks like you need a drink. Something to help you shake that mood? You’re in luck. You can either have a glass of wine, a margarita on the rocks, or a shot of tequila. There’s a Spanish rosé that pairs nicely with the cheeseboard. Simone brought a bottle of Tito’s. Your choice.”

I threw her a look that made it clear mixed drinks wouldn’t be nearly potent enough. She reached into the cabinet producing four tiny shot glasses. She filled each glass to the brim. We each licked our palms and sprinkled salt on them.

“On the count of three,” she whooped. “Un. Deux. Trois.” Each lady tossed back the tequila in record time. I winced as

the sting of the clear liquid shot down my throat, and we shuddered at the sour juice from the limes.

The four of us had attended Holy Cross, a Catholic high school for girls. My mother had approved of our friendship with the goal of preserving my innocence in a world where girls, in her opinion, grew up too fast. My mother wasn't aware of half of the shit we'd been into. Nothing too serious, but we'd drunk, partied, and experimented with marijuana. With each passing school year, our friendships had strengthened while the hemlines of our pleated skirts had inched higher, and our necklines lowered.

We spent our days cruising around the city in Keely's Escalade. We'd flirted with guys who didn't want us and avoided guys who did. We had spent our time dispensing bad relationship advice and even worse fashion guidance. It had been Simone's idea to cut my mid-back length curls to a chin-length curly bob. My hair looked more like Dora the Explorer than Rihanna, and it had taken two years to grow it back out.

Natasha could put together quite the spread. She pulled out a wood and marble platter and arranged sliced cured meats, cheese, and crackers. She took special care placing the fruit and nuts. Once satisfied, she directed us to the living room. I flopped on the floor next to the coffee table and tilted a wineglass filled with a dark pink rosé to my lips.

"Oooh. Kandi," Simone cooed, her blue eyes sparkling. "You've been working for the beautiful Chadwick St. Clair. Did you ever think he would grow up and become New Orleans' most eligible bachelor? I can only imagine the number of women swinging from the rafters. He must buy condoms in bulk."

"He buys them at Costco!" Natasha giggled. "I heard he has something slutty in his pants." We squealed before breaking into giggles. She swallowed her laughter. "No lie. Regan Dupree is friends with my sister, Savannah. Regan said he has *a snake*."

I snorted, remembering the time I caught her in the backyard with Chadwick.

“A garter snake? Or an anaconda?” I asked. “I’m not interested in what he has going on in his pants. Besides, I can’t say anything about him. I’m bound to the terms of a little thing called a non-disclosure agreement.” The gears appeared to be turning in Simone’s head. She routinely added one plus one and got three. Her interpretations of events and reactions were always incorrect. “Simone, say what’s on your mind before your head explodes.” I braced myself for her response.

“I can see it now.” Her voice became dreamlike, and her eyes had a glazed, faraway look. “You’re bent over, scrubbing the oven. He stands in the kitchen watching your heart-shaped, cornbread-fed booty as it swings back and forth. He’s hypnotized. *Bam!* Out of nowhere, he comes up behind you and rubs his big, hard *anaconda* on your ass.” She clutched her hands into fists and shook. “Ooh. I sense that Chadwick St. Clair has a huge dick. He has all the hallmarks.”

I cringed a little but played it cool.

“So, you have given my work life some thought, huh? Enlighten us on the hallmarks of an insanely big dick.”

“This is Simone’s Not-Yet-Patented Big Dick Checklist.” She was already drunk. She grinned and her normally big eyes were closed in narrow slits. I wondered if I’d prepared my guest bedroom for overnight guests. She couldn’t drive home, and we wouldn’t dare put her in an Uber. “First, it’s in his walk. Does he lean to the side? If so, he has a baby’s arm holding an apple between his legs, and it’s likely dragging the floor.”

“Not true,” Keely chimed in. “But I like the direction of this conversation. Keep going.”

Simone rolled her eyes dramatically but continued.

“Second, are his hands small? Thin fingers mean a thin dick. Stubby fingers equal a short dick. Big, long fingers mean a nice manly side of beef.” She wiggled her fingers theatrically. Our groans were not the response she expected. Ignoring us, she said, “Third, a man with a big dick doesn’t advertise.”

“I agree,” Natasha nodded, raising her brow. “A big dick energy is typically quiet because the man is confident. It’s always the guy you least expect. It’s frustrating because celebrities have ruined it by assigning the energy to random guys who live in their parent’s basement.”

Simone hummed in agreement.

“Tash, bring it in here.” They gave each other a high five before Simone turned to face me, “Is Chadwick quiet?”

I thought about the question before I answered.

“I would say he’s easy-going and loyal. He always makes time to offer advice, and he’s acutely aware of life and love. He truly cares about people.”

“That’s nice, but for once we need the non-pageant answer. It’s just us girls. Objectify him!” She took a sip from her wineglass. “Yep. He definitely has something going on in those pants, especially with the way the women go crazy for him. I bet that loft turns into a brothel at night.”

For some inexplicable reason, the thought of other women in Chadwick’s loft and basking in the spotlight of his attention bothered me.

“Come on, guys. Let’s talk about something else. I came here to get away from work.”

“I must say this,” Keely spoke up. “I read an article stating larger size penises are the outliers. Finding a man with a cucumber in his pants is the equivalent of finding a unicorn. There aren’t that many. Also, it isn’t about size but the love you share.” The quietest member of our group was always the voice of reason. Even in the most inopportune moments. We all groaned in unison.

“Why, thank you for bringing a dose of reality to girl talk,” Simone responded dryly.

“Simone. No more drinks for you. You’re cut off,” I told her. She waved me off with a smile.

“I’m good. I’m good. Is Chadwick aware you’re saving yourself for marriage?”

“Kandace’s virginity shouldn’t come up in any polite conversation.” Natasha said, rising up in her seat. “I’m sure Kandi looks at Chadwick as a brother type and not as a casual sex partner.”

I nodded in agreement as I manufactured a picture-perfect response to Simone’s question. The goal was to put any thoughts of sex with Chadwick to rest. I’d wanted to appear composed and unaffected, instead, my words came out in a rush with a tone that was more emotional than I’d intended.

“The thought of having sex with Chadwick makes me want to vomit,” I spat.

I avoided eye contact with the three people who knew me best. I felt them evaluating my facial expression and knew they were biting back their opinions. They weren’t stupid, they could see through me.

I lied to my friends and to myself. The thought of fucking Chadwick ended with an uncomfortable and persistent throbbing in my lower regions.

I exhaled the breath that I had been holding, and I looked around at my friends. As expected, my protestations hadn’t convinced my them. Natasha and Keely were too polite and kind to call me out. Instead, they both offered comforting smiles. Simone wasn’t polite and didn’t know the meaning of the word. She smirked at me and nodded.

“Okay, Kandi. Whatever you say.”



CHAPTER

Seven

CHADWICK

I PACED AROUND THE COCKTAIL table with my phone tightly against my ear and a crumpled report from the city building inspector's office in the other hand. I strained to hear the voice on the other end.

“Please tell me this isn't what I think it is. We didn't pass inspection?”

The general contractor for the loft project, Leo, practically screamed over the sound of construction noise. He stumbled and stuttered through what should have been a simple ‘yes or no’ answer.

“Chad, it's simple electrical work. The inspector found issues with the junction boxes, the GFI in the bathroom, and the ventilation system. When I learned we had a new inspector, I reached out to the Chief. His hands are tied. There's not much more we can do.”

A rapid expulsion of air pushed from my lips as I prepared myself to hand over my wallet and possibly my firstborn child. At this rate, my kid will enter college before this project completes.

“How much?”

“Time? About three weeks to fix and pass inspection. Money? It shouldn’t be that much. I don’t expect an invoice for the remediation, but we may need to make it worth their while to come back quicker.”

“Of course.”

“Sometimes, things pop up. This is one of those things. We took a chance with the new electricians. Next time, let’s go with our usual contractors.”

Resolving the electrical issues would put my timeline in jeopardy. The downstream tasks, like installing drywall and finishing, would fall behind schedule. I’d lose money each day we were late. We should have passed inspection, but this failure didn’t fall on Leo’s shoulders.

“I know. I took a risk by giving the smaller company a chance.” My shoulders fell in resignation that I may have to pay unbudgeted dollars toward this fix. “Thanks. Talk with you soon.”

I pressed the red button on my iPhone and fell back onto the sectional. Out the corner of my eye, I saw Kandace prance around the dining area while swiping a lambswool feather duster over all the hard surfaces. Her ever-present AirPods were in her ears. I leaned back against the cushions and draped my arms over the back of the sofa, watching as she flitted from room to room—oblivious to the fact that my eyes followed her every move.

This girl did not understand what she did to me.

Since the night she’d landed on my doorstep, I’d wanted nothing more than to gather her in my arms, place my lips on hers, and learn if she was as sweet as her name.

“Kandace! Kan-dace!” I called over and added a little wave.

She was engrossed in her music or whatever she was listening to. I suspected it was a suspenseful romance novel or a podcast. She enjoyed listening to those and enjoyed talking about them even more. Arising from the sofa, I walked to the dining area and stood in front of her.

“Kandace?” God. When I’m awake, her name rolls off my tongue, yet in my dreams, I exhale it against her lips.

Fuck. Now I’m acting like a sap.

“Oh. Sorry.” She let out a little laugh after she removed the earbuds. An easy smile formed on my lips as her brown eyes met mine.

“What are you listening to?”

“A podcast about a female executive in Silicon Valley. She claimed to have an invention that would revolutionize the medical industry, instead she managed to bilk investors for millions of dollars.”

“Ah. A podcast.” I repeated. “Listen, the weather is nice, why don’t we go out for ice cream?”

“I have a few more things to do.”

“Don’t worry about it. Please join me.”

“Okay. Give me a few minutes to wrap up.”

Ten minutes later, I led Kandace to my parking spaces in the enclosed garage, heading toward the Porsche. I only had three cars—a Porsche 911, a Jeep Rubicon, and a Range Rover. I’d had each black late-model vehicle detailed to a mirror finish and customized with darkly tinted windows and European tire rims. She stopped walking and tapped the corner of her mouth.

“Hmm. Which ride should we pick? If I remember correctly, the Porsche is for the ladies. The Range Rover is for riding around with the fellas. The Jeep is for you. I still can’t believe you own three cars.”

I shrugged. A boy never grows up, their toys just become bigger. My love for cars had begun when I was sixteen and received my first car, an electric-blue Ford Mustang. Over the years, I’d enjoyed the feel of luxury vehicles on the road. My father owned three cars that he used for business, while in Arizona, there was a warehouse filled with his collection of vintage Bugattis and Lamborghinis. I would argue that owning three cars wasn’t so bad.

“The Range Rover is smoking hot,” she said, pointing to the SUV. “Let’s take that one.”

We settled into the cabin, and I deftly wheeled us through a midday traffic jam. Within minutes, we were on the highway and making our way to City Park.

I parked in the first available space in the almost full parking lot. I imagined that many people wanted to take advantage of the unseasonably cool temperatures and spend a little time outdoors.

Kandace beamed and bounced as we headed toward the walking path, strolling side-by-side. She was ecstatic next to my amused demeanor. The wind blew through her hair, and I took a deep breath to inhale her sweet, clean scent of mango and vanilla.

“I love this park! I haven’t been here since I was in high school,” she exclaimed.

“My mother and I used to visit in the summers. I would beg until she agreed to rent one of the swan boats. Once we were in the middle of the lake, I liked to pedal at top speed.”

“I never had the chance to ride one. My mother hated the park in the summer, she complained about the heat and the bugs. Her negativity ruined the fun, so we spent our time doing indoor activities.”

“Let’s change that.” I took her by the hand and guided her toward the boat dock. She stopped in her tracks when she saw a black wood gondola. Her eyes shone brightly.

“Ooh. A gondola?”

“Do you want to take a ride?”

“I think we need a reservation for it. The swan boats are fine.”

“Your eyes lit up at the gondola. That’s what we’re riding.”

We approached the launching dock where the gondolier, dressed in a black and white striped shirt and black pants, stood on the boat. The boat had intricately carved golden inlays, and black fabric covered the seats.

I shared Kandace's excitement for the ride, it seemed like it would be a lot of fun. That was until I met the gondolier. The older man looked down at his phone, his fingers gliding over the screen.

"Hi. What can we do to get a ride?" I yelled over.

Without raising his eyes from the phone, he held a finger up while he continued to type furiously. After fifteen seconds of silence, he shot us a bored expression.

"Sign up online and pay the one-hundred dollars." His dry, unaffected tone matched his equally dry facial expression.

Kandace's face fell before she turned to walk away. I pulled her by the hand to prevent her from moving. I prepared to pull out all of my charm and tell a little white lie. I also reached into my pocket for my wallet and pulled out two one hundred-dollar bills.

From an early age, I'd learned that money had an interesting way of getting people to see things your way. And I'd tested that theory against snobby maître d's, unenthusiastic valets, and brusque nightclub bouncers. Today, I would try it with a rude gondolier.

"My girlfriend would like to take a romantic ride, and my purpose in life is to make her happy. What if I gave you double your going rate?" I held the two bills out. The man glanced over his sunglasses, and I wanted to knock that straw hat off his head. He looked between the two of us before answering in a clipped tone.

"Hop on. I can't give you any cheese and crackers. That's for the customers who reserved in advance."

"That's fine. We would just like the ride." Not quite the start of a romantic excursion as I had hoped. I climbed down into the boat and held out my hands. Kandace gripped my hand and stepped onto the boat before taking a seat. Once I had settled next to her, I nodded to the gondolier. Without warning, he swept the oar into the water, and we propelled away from the dock.

City Park embodied all things New Orleanian in beauty and culture. It perfectly combined architecture and nature. Italian music blared from the sound system onboard the boat as the gondolier steered us through a canal underneath the canopies of four-hundred-year-old live oak trees. Spanish moss dripped from the curled branches and dipped into the water. Flocks of white gulls flew overhead, and we rowed under rustic stone bridges.

Exactly one hour after we started the ride, we disembarked at the boat dock. Kandace practically glowed, intoxicated with joy. She leaned over and hugged the gondolier, and to my surprise, he smiled back and wished us a good day. I reached down to help her out of the gondola, and after we walked toward the food trucks, I conveniently forgot to release her hand.

At one point, our fingers intertwined, and I unconsciously rubbed my thumb across her knuckles. Old feelings and warm memories flooded my thoughts. Kandace always had her head buried in a book, her mind full of big dreams and plans for the future. The version of her now standing at my side was so different and yet so familiar. I wanted to learn this new Kandace's secrets and desires. How much had changed since we'd last spent time together?

I guided us to SneauxBalls, a New Orleans' style snowball truck. The line snaked along the walkway, there had to have been at least twenty people in front of us. I never once released her hand. An eternity passed before we moved to the front of the line. Kandace walked to the window to place her order.

The cashier was a young woman, with flaming red hair and a lip piercing. She couldn't have been much older than eighteen years old. She smiled brightly as she listened.

"I'll have a King Cake Strawberry, please."

"Your wife has excellent taste. That's my favorite. What will you have—"

"We're not married," Kandace cut her off, laughing nervously.

The cashier's eyes widened with embarrassment, and I jumped in.

"Not yet," I corrected, gathering Kandace into my arms and resting my chin on her head. "She's my fiancée." I held her and swayed side-to-side a few times, and Kandace's body relaxed slowly. "I'll have the Dreamsicle."

Once released from my arms, Kandace turned to glance at me. For a moment, just a tiny moment, she stared at me. Unable to decipher the expression, I raised my wrist and held my watch over the payment processor until a pulse and beep alerted the payment approval.

The cashier pushed two mason glasses filled with the flavored shaved ice and condensed milk confections. "Congratulations on your engagement! Laissez les bon temps rouler!"

Let the good times roll.

I spotted an empty park bench along the walkway, neatly tucked away in a shaded area, and I gestured toward it. Kandace and I made our way to the bench, narrowly avoiding a horde of children playing tag and a group of senior citizens power walking. We both sat and faced each other. She took a spoonful of the snowball and groaned in appreciation.

"Thank you. I needed this."

"You're very welcome. Did you hear anything else from the *CashApp* guy?" I cringed at the eagerness in my tone. She swallowed her bite and shook her head.

"Thankfully, he disappeared." She sighed resolutely, then lifted another hefty spoonful of the snowball to her lips. "I will take your advice and focus on meeting guys outside of dating apps."

I wanted to smack my palm against my forehead. That advice had gone against my master plan. I didn't want her to meet other guys—I wanted her to see me and *only* me. There was no way to talk her out of dating without looking jealous. I needed to make a move before it was too late.



CHAPTER

Eight

KANDACE

YESTERDAY'S TRIP TO THE PARK with Chadwick had been fun. Who wouldn't enjoy spending time with a smart and funny guy? I'd never ridden in a gondola, and it was nice doing that with him. For a moment, I'd had to check my emotions. I'd thought we were just hanging out, yet it had felt like we were on a date. Maybe we were. He'd held my hand the entire time and hadn't asked me to split the bills.

But it was Chadwick. I didn't think he liked sweet dates in the park. I thought he enjoyed late-night activities like nightclubs, strip clubs, and bars. It surprised me he could go out in the sunlight without bursting into flames.

In the two short weeks of working with him, I'd learned that underneath the façade of cool arrogance lay a charming and well-mannered man. He never made me feel weird, even when the cashier had mistaken us for a married couple. He had played along with it.

Anyone could tell we were from different worlds. He was the epitome of velvet. His every move and gesture was smooth. He didn't walk—he glided at an unhurried pace.

Me? I was cotton. Plain. Utilitarian. Neither elegant nor formal. If the girl in the red dress was his style, then I had a snowball's chance in hell.

I wasn't even sure what I wanted from him. I didn't engage in random hookups, which seemed to be Chadwick's *modus operandi*. And with as much as I knew about his background and his family, I doubted he would date a woman from the other side of the tracks.

“TONIGHT, THE GIRLS AND I WILL PARTY AT CLUB ILLUSION.” I ignored Chadwick's look of confusion. “You know. The new nightclub in the Warehouse District. Are you familiar with it? We have VIP tickets. I spent the entire week developing the outline for my final thesis, and I'm ready to blow it out.”

“Have you determined your topic?”

“Yes. The title is, ‘Societal Attitudes Toward Debit and Credit Cards.’ I will explore the topic across generational groups,” I paused for a minute before continuing. “Have you thought about returning to law school?”

“No. The only person interested in me getting a law degree is my father. I have no desire to follow in *Martin St. Clair, Esquire's* footsteps and become a lawyer and CEO.” There was more than a little sarcasm in his tone. “I'm not taking over St. Clair either. I will finish construction here and have the spaces ready for the market. After that, I'll start the next project.

“Have you started networking for a full-time job?” he asked, surveying every inch of my face. “Quad is a vice president at one of the ‘big four’ firms. And there's always St. Clair. I'm sure there would be something for you in the Corporate Finance department. I can put in a good word for you.”

It was nice to have someone willing to go to bat for me. I pushed my dreams of corporate domination out of my thoughts. I'd committed to work at Scrub-A-Dub, and I

intended to honor that commitment. I fixated on an invisible stain on the countertop as I answered.

“Come January, I’ll be a full-time employee at Scrub-A-Dub. This is my life.”

“Is that what you really want to do?” He cast a questioning glance.

I shrugged my shoulders because I didn’t know what I wanted to do.

“Help me understand. In six months, you will graduate, *with honors*, from one of the country’s top business schools. Why on earth would you want to clean toilets for the rest of your life?”

Ouch! The question ripped me to my core and hit way too close to home. The phrase ‘wasted potential’ sprung to mind. My professors and classmates had been so excited for an update on my post-graduation plans, but my answer had made their excited smiles fade into looks of confusion and disappointment. My classmates would do big things while I fell back on good old faithful—working for my mother.

I vowed not to let him shame or upset me. This was my life—good, bad, or indifferent. I pushed my shoulders back and held my head high.

“Cleaning is honest work. You fail to acknowledge my role as a director in New Orleans’ premier cleaning service. We provide a service to the community. Scrub-A-Dub employs workers who don’t have the education or access to traditional employment. The people we hire don’t have mothers with small businesses or access to trust funds.”

The intensity of my tone seemed to catch him off guard. He blinked and reared back in his chair. My words came out harsher than I intended, and I immediately regretted it. The words had sprung from a place of deep hurt. For one second, I considered apologizing but decided against it. Sometimes you had to be true to yourself and let the words fly.

I’d expected Chadwick to understand my sense of duty and obligation. He understood the pressures of being pushed into

the family business. I didn't want him to view me through the same lens as everyone else.

He stood and walked toward me, but I raised both hands to stop him. He stopped in place and eyed me intently. His Adam's apple bobbed as he took a long swallow. The heat bloomed from my chest to my neck, arms, and face.

"I'm all done here," I continued, sneering slightly. "The fridge is stocked. I completed the dusting. I watered the plants. And *your toilet is clean.*"

I grabbed my backpack from the sectional and stalked to the elevator before turning to face him.

"I'll see you on Monday morning."

"Kandace . . . Wait. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

I turned away as a teardrop gathered in my eye. I refused to let the tear fall. Sniffling and tapping my foot, I waited for the slow ass elevator to arrive.

A firm hand gripped my elbow. Chadwick pulled me against the firm expanse of his muscular chest, and the steel of his arms surrounded me from behind. I sank reluctantly into the intimacy of his embrace, shivering at the warmth of his breath against my ear. My nipples hardened until they hurt, and I became angered by my body's betrayal.

"Come here," he murmured, his arms tightening around me.

"I'm fine." The tears collected until there was no more room and finally spilled from the corner of my eye.

"No. You're not fine." He gripped me by the shoulders and turned me to face him. He paled at the sight of my tears. Placing a finger on my chin, he gently tilted my head to meet his gaze. Several tears rolled down my cheeks, and he brushed away each one. His words were soft and soothing. "I'm an asshole. There's no excuse for my insensitive remark. You and your family work hard, while my life has been one of privilege. Please accept my apologies."

He pulled me closer against him. The taut muscles of his chest and arms caged me in, and the iciness of my demeanor melted in the warmth of his embrace. His clean, male scent intoxicated me, and the barrier I'd created collapsed.

Years of having a crush on him came back strong. This was wrong, yet *so* right. But I couldn't allow it to go any further. I straightened my back and shrugged out of his arms.

By some act of divine intervention, the elevator arrived without incident.

"Apology accepted, Chadwick. I got to go." I took one more look at him before boarding the elevator. "Have a good weekend."

He rushed over to the elevator and stuck his hand between the doors, blocking them from closing. His eyes met mine.

"I don't think you should drive while you're upset."

"I'm fine. I'm fine." *Maybe saying it twice will make it true.*

"I'll ride down with you."

"No."

Frustration marred his handsome face. He sighed and shook his head, resigned to letting me stew in peace. He removed his hand from between the doors.

"Text me when you get home."

"Yeah. Okay," I grumbled before the elevator doors closed. I made my way to my car and peeled out of the garage, my mind racing for the entire five-mile drive to my apartment.

In record time, I arrived at the complex. I pulled into a parking space and bound out of the compact sedan, slamming the door shut. Chadwick had asked me to text him when I arrived, and I did so with a huff of irritation. I briefly debated gloating about the job in Georgia. That would shut him up and force him to see me differently.

Like a petulant child, I stomped to my sublet. Arguing with Chadwick had made me late meeting the girls.

A quick, hot shower did nothing to quell my miserable attitude. I surveyed the contents of my closet before selecting the first decent outfit.

This will have to do.

Once I'd glanced at my appearance in the floor-length mirror, I trotted over to Natasha's building. I entered her apartment without knocking and slammed the door behind me. Keely and Simone were already there, and the three were drinking without me.

"I had a long day. Please tell me you're drinking something stiffer than wine."

"What's going on?" Natasha asked in concern. "Why are you in such a horrible mood?"

"I have a better question. Are you wearing *that*?" Simone interrupted before I could respond, scanning me from head to toe. She peered at me through two sets of thick, false eyelashes.

"Yeah. This is it."

I looked down at my black cropped top and high-waisted geometric printed pencil skirt. Thankfully, I was wearing my black stilettos and carrying a black quilted Chanel bag. The designer shoes had been a Christmas present, and the purse was one of Auntie Marie's cast-offs.

I glanced around at each girl and immediately felt a little underdressed. Simone wore a form-fitting white catsuit while Keely and Natasha wore short brightly colored minidresses. Layers of makeup contoured their faces. I had done little more than apply powder and lipstick in my foyer mirror.

"No. Absolutely not!" Simone decreed. I looked down at my clothes.

"What? It can't be that bad."

"Kandi. We're going to a nightclub," Natasha said. "You may want to dress more . . ."

"Revealing," Simone supplied. "You want your titties to pop out of your blouse and your ass to burst out of your pants."

Our goal is to rack up free drinks and exchange telephone numbers.” The rest of us stared at each other with our mouths agape. The insinuation that we were selling ourselves for cheap drinks offended me. Simone merely shrugged and twisted her mouth. She said, “Sorry. Not sorry.”

Still shaken from my disagreement with Chadwick, I pouted dejectedly.

“You guys go without me. I just want to chill.”

“Kandi, three weeks ago, you declared this summer would be different,” Natasha reminded me gently. “You vowed nightclub visits, dating, shopping, and weekend trips. After three weeks, you’ve had *one* dreadful date. Time to get out of your comfort zone, sweetie.”

Yuck. Natasha was being patronizing. She didn’t need to remind me—I remembered. Elated to have finished a challenging semester, I’d arrived at Natasha’s apartment for the usual girls’ night. We’d downed shot after shot until I was drunk. After a few drinks, I’m overly affectionate or combative. That day, I’d had bravado and tequila flowing through my veins.

“I agree. This,” Keely said, waving dramatic hands over my torso, “brings down our average. You’re beautiful and have a smoking hot body. Fortunately, you have a friend known for her style. By the way, I just hit a hundred and seventy-five thousand followers. In celebration, let me pick out something for you and post to my account.”

Without waiting for my answer, she grabbed me by the hand and led me to Natasha’s bedroom. Simone and Natasha followed behind us. A slight panic rose in my chest. I didn’t want a lot of crap on my face. Or worse, wear in an outfit that would leave me nearly naked.

My transformation from chic to full glamazonian took thirty minutes. When Natasha finished my hair, each girl sighed and gave each other high fives.

“Don’t celebrate too quickly. I’ll be the judge of this.”

I went to the walk-in closet and looked in the full-length mirror. I usually prided myself on looking appropriate and cute, and this look was *miles* away from my comfort zone. Natasha pinned my long, curly hair into a loose and messy bun with several tendrils running away from the topknot. The black minidress was sweet and sassy. Two straps tied in bows held up the bodice. A ruffle-edged hem accented the flouncy skirt, and the mid-thigh length combined with my stilettos made my legs go on for days. I was uncomfortable with the shortness of the dress, having worn nothing this risqué. But really . . . What was the harm in a peek of ass and thigh?

“Keely, I love it!” I admitted, still admiring my reflection. “Let’s go out and meet some guys.”



CHAPTER

Nine

CHADWICK

IT WAS FRIDAY NIGHT, AND I could have sat on the sectional and ruminated on every single thing I'd done wrong. Or I could go out and have fun.

Fuck it. I was going out.

I text messaged my best friend, James, to invite him out for drinks. If there was anyone who could cheer me up, it would be him.

My heart panged with regret when I thought of Kandace's crumpled face. What could I say? I had a habit of saying things without thinking about the other person's feelings.

But the question had come from a place of good intentions. Kandace was intelligent and passionate—she'd worked hard all three years of college. Why was she set on taking the path of least resistance? If given the chance, she could make her mark on the world.

I worried about our conversation because I was sure I'd messed up the one bright spot in my life, and I needed her. If Celeste called to announce a reassignment, I would pay more or beg for Kandace to stay.

Her disparaging remark about the trust fund had socked me in the chest and knocked the wind out of me. I understood the reason she'd lashed out. I'd hurt her. Contrary to popular opinion, I had a job. It may not have been a traditional nine-to-five, but real estate and construction projects gave me fulfillment and a sense of purpose. If I wanted, I could live on my trust fund and never work a day in my life, but my life wouldn't be the same without my projects.

It had become increasingly difficult to act normal whenever she was around. But I'd likely ruined any chance I had with her. It was better for my sanity to focus on another woman. Speaking of sanity, my physical needs took the forefront. I pushed all thoughts of Kandace out of my mind while I flipped through my mental Rolodex of female body parts and voices.

I entered the master bathroom and stripped until I was naked. I adjusted the thermostatic shower controls to my favorite temperature, and water streamed from the wall and rain shower heads. Once the shower glass was coated in steam, I entered. The water washed over me as I scrubbed the day's events away.

Although my body was clean, dirty thoughts and need filled my mind. I wrapped my hand around my cock as I pictured the woman in my dreams seated next to me on the sectional.

She looked at me with an unmistakable fire as she stroked my face. I closed my eyes and fell into the gentle and soft caresses.

"Did you miss me?" she asked. Her voice barely registered above a whisper.

Before I could answer, she leaned over to kiss me. In response, I opened my mouth and our tongues met, and we both moaned in appreciation.

I groaned as her lips moved from my mouth to my neck. She breathed against me as she licked and sucked at the tender flesh. Her fingers threaded my hair, pulling me closer and closer.

She pulled the hem of my shirt from my trousers, eagerly searching for bare flesh. My dick sprang to life as her soft fingers traced along the rises and dips of my abs. I inhaled sharply when her fingers unexpectedly skimmed under the waistband of my trousers. Her hand hovered at the space between my stomach and my hardening cock while she listened and smiled as my breaths morphed into full-blown pants. But then, she moved her hand away. She was such a naughty girl to tease me like that.

I groaned my displeasure at her cruelty. *Not so fast.* I grabbed her wrist and prevented her hand from moving. My eyes met hers. *Don't stop.*

I loosened my grip when her fingers continued their descent along the trail of fine hair leading from my navel to my hard cock. Instead of unfastening my pants, she smiled against my lips as her hands moved over the fabric, rubbing against the length of the swell.

“It seems *someone* is happy to see me,” she chuckled.

Taking the power into my hands, I quickly positioned her horizontally against the sectional. My body filled the space between her legs, and the hard ridge of my cock pressed against her soft, lace covered pussy. I gazed into her golden-brown eyes.

This time, my lips caressed her neck, licking and sucking. My fingers traced the edges of her black lace bra as my tongue followed. With breasts heaving, she threw her head back when I pulled down her bra and flicked my tongue against a hardened nipple. A low groan of pleasure escaped her crimson lips when I moved to the other breast.

My hand traveled from her breast down to her stomach, and she shuddered in anticipation of its next stop.

I leaned in for one more kiss before my hand moved to her soaked black lace panties. She was warm and so inviting.

“My God. You're so wet.”

Her opened legs were an invitation to go further and further. Responding to her cues, my fingers reached the edges

of her panties. I lightly stroked the soft flesh at the junction of her thighs and pussy.

“Tell me what you want.” I breathed the demand against her neck.

She moaned in response while opening her legs wider, and my fingers moved inside her panties.

My finger glided easily along her wet slit, and my cock was harder than a fucking rock. I unzipped my pants to create room.

Touching and rubbing against her was all a tease. My cock was hard and ready. I wanted to bury myself deep inside of her and fucked her until we were both satisfied.

“I want to fuck you so badly,” I groaned. Impatient, she raised and lowered her hips, bucking against my fingers breaching her opening.

Instead of fucking her properly, I owned her with my hand. A promise of what was yet to come.

I pushed the delicate lace fabric of her panties aside and teased her opening with my fingers. My thumb circled her clit, a vow to make her come. I pushed my fingers deep inside of her soaking wet pussy. *Damn*. She was so tight. My tongue licked at my lips as I looked up at her beautiful face.

She was a fucking sight. With her legs splayed open, a soft moan escaped her parted lips as her chest heaved. Her nipples hardened from arousal and the chill of the air-conditioning. The soft waves of her hair framed her head like a halo as she lolled back and forth.

My pace quickened as my fingers moved faster in and out of her. My other hand pumped my dick to the same rhythm. As we sprinted toward our release, her sex rippled against my fingers. We kept going until our simultaneous eruption.

Back in the shower, I tilted my head back, rivulets of warm water ran from my hair down my face to the shower floor. I placed my left hand on the tiled wall to stabilize myself as my right hand glided over my length.

With a firm grip on my cock, my hand stroked faster and faster. The image of Kandace's head slumped back with her lips shaped into the perfect 'O' was the motivation for my release. I held my head back into the shower spray as I shot thick ropes of cum. In a perfect world, I would have squirted ribbons all over her tight wet pussy, decorating it like my own special present.



THE MAGNOLIA ROOM WAS A POSH BAR IN DOWNTOWN NEW Orleans. Its quiet, secluded atmosphere made it a haven for local celebrities and athletes. It was the place you went when discretion was paramount. The bar had a reputation for exclusivity because they granted entry to the select few of New Orleanian society.

Getting off in the shower resulted in loosened muscles and an adjusted attitude. I sat at the bar and sipped a Manhattan as I surveyed my surroundings. Three seats over was a dark-haired beauty who was desperately attempting to catch my eye. I ignored her. The only dark-haired beauty on my mind was Kandace.

My best friend strolled in without a care. In typical James fashion, he was late. I'd known him for almost twenty years, and he had never been on time for anything.

"What's up, Playboy?" He grinned, his perfect white teeth gleaming. We slapped hands and then hooked our thumbs before pulling back.

"Nothing much. Dude, why the fuck are you so late?"

He sat on the barstool next to me and shrugged.

"I had to console Kenya. She's lost her mind with the damn wedding planning. Every single aspect has to be perfect."

James and his fiancée, Kenya, were planning an October wedding. When we were younger, it had been James' idea to remain bachelors for the rest of our lives. He'd pledged he would never get married. That had gone by the wayside once he'd reunited with his high school sweetheart. They had

quickly moved from dating to exclusivity to engagement. Three months after their reintroduction, James had proposed.

“But don’t most women want the perfect wedding?”

“I’m convinced this isn’t normal. If it were, there would be no marriage. Check it. I *jokingly* said I’d be wearing a white tux and white shoes. She lost it.” He continued after I grimaced. “I will not wear no bumpkin-ass shit. Listen . . .” He popped an imaginary collar. “Bespoke navy brocade jacket. Black satin lapel. Black slacks. Black patent Christian Louboutin dress shoes.”

James’ style was too flashy for me. But I expected nothing less from my friend. He was always the ladies’ man and always the center of attention, he craved the spotlight. He’d used all of his charm and wisdom to reinvent himself from a professional football player with a lackluster career to a wealth management advisor to several stars of the NBA and NFL.

“I just wanted to fuck with her. I hoped we’d laugh and get back to loving each other. Sometimes Kenya can be a brat. But these were not the typical Kenya tears. She did the ugly cry. After seeing my baby so distressed, I had to make it up to her, so I stopped by Saks. I hope she likes Louis Vuitton. We can go to City Hall tomorrow and end the torture for all I care. I just want to spend the rest of my life with her.” He scanned the bar before flagging the bartender over and ordering a Hennessy. “What’s going on with you? I haven’t heard from you in weeks. Are you dating anyone? Kenya’s sister is still single.”

“I don’t need a hookup,” I blurted, searching for the right words. I was about to make a major confession to my best friend. The moment I said it aloud, it would be real. “Do you remember Kandace?”

“Hell, yeah. I remember her. I saw her a few weeks ago at the Drake concert. She’s grown up nicely.” He raised and lowered his eyebrows suggestively, which angered the shit out of me. I growled a warning.

“Watch it.”

He raised his hands.

“Damn. Calm down. Have you forgotten I’m happily in love and almost married?” He took a sip of his drink, fighting back laughter in his smile. “Why are you asking about Kandi? Are you two seeing each other?”

I cast my eyes downward. The hopelessness of the situation was clear before I even spoke my next words.

“No. We aren’t seeing each other. She works around the loft. Sometimes, I wonder about her.” Backtracking because I knew I sounded foolish, I began a stream-of-consciousness ramble, “She’s a nice girl, but she’s so young. You know I’m no good in relationships, and I don’t have time. She’ll want more. She may want it all. I’m not built for monogamy. And because of our families’ friendship, I can’t fuck around with her.”

James lowered and shook his head while chuckling. He gave me two hearty pats on the back.

“Make it happen. You aren’t getting any younger. It’s time to settle down and have kids. I want you to be blissfully happy. Like I am.”

“Didn’t you just buy an expensive apology gift?”

“Touché,” he said, raising his glass to me. “Stop being a pussy. Call Kandace and ask her out for drinks.”

“She’s out with her friends.”

“Where?”

“Club Illusion over in the Warehouse District.”

“That wack-ass nightclub?” He downed the rest of his drink in one gulp and reached into his pocket to pull out a pile of bills. “Let’s roll.”



CHAPTER

Ten

KANDACE

CLUB ILLUSION WAS A TWO-STORY nightclub in the heart of the Warehouse District. With our VIP passes, we avoided the queue wrapped around the building and walked directly in the club. Fluorescent lights bounced on the walls while the deep bass beat droned. Go-go dancers gyrated on elevated stages to electronic remixes and beautiful people sat draped over chairs and sofas.

The girls and I made our way to our section with the goal to see and be seen. Everything we did was strategic—the slower we walked, the more men would see us. We took our time to navigate through the partygoers dancing and flirting.

A burgundy velvet rope cordoned off the VIP section, and a duo of brawny security guards verified admission. The tall and muscular men both wore black button-downs and matching black slacks. Earpieces similar to what the Secret Service uses were visible in their ears. The younger of the two flashed a wolfish grin and slowly shook his head.

“Mmm-mmm. I *love* my job.” He directed the comment to no one in particular. “*Good evening ladies*. Welcome to Club Illusion.”

Ignoring the inappropriate ogle and blatant flirtation, we each flashed a hot pink wristband toward the bouncers and the brawnier of the two released the rope from a gold post. With a look of disinterest, the older man rolled his eyes and nodded upwards toward the stairs.

“The hostess will greet you and escort you to your table. Enjoy your evening.”

With Simone leading the way, we leisurely walked up the stairway.

The section was semi-private and at least twenty degrees cooler than the lower level. The hostess sat us in the section and took our drink orders. Our table sat near the private dance floor and had a perfect view of the dance floor and DJ stand.

Our seats neighbored a group of at least ten guys. Several members fell over themselves trying to get our attention. I assumed that they were there to celebrate a bachelor’s party.

My friends hadn’t sat down. They were too busy exchanging pleasantries with the guys. I stood at the railing and watched the crowded dance floor.

Less than fifteen minutes after we placed our order, two scantily clad bottle girls danced their way over to our booth. One carried a large bottle of Grey Goose which had a sparkler attached to the top. Gold sparks sprayed in the air as Simone and Keely stood and shook their hips along with the servers. The little dance worked because the neighboring bachelor party erupted in whistles and catcalls.

My friends returned to the red tufted benches and continued flirting with the bachelors while I busied myself by making a vodka and club soda accented with lime. I took a small sip, determined to pace myself.

I watched my friends having fun and flirting as I sat on the opposite end of the sofa. *Why am I here?* I didn’t even feel like myself. I was dressed in someone else’s clothes and wearing a minimum of five layers of makeup on my face. Lounging on the sofa with a pint of Chunky Monkey ice cream along with an entire season of *Game of Thrones* sounded more appealing.

I'd thought about faking an illness and leaving. I would tell the girls I had tummy troubles and that I called Auntie Marie to pick me up. Instead, my favorite Aunt and I would go to the drive-in burger restaurant for cheeseburgers, french fries, and shakes.

But I ultimately took Chadwick's advice to appear available and open. I gulped back my drink and bobbed my head to the beat and mouthed along with the feminine moans in the electronic dance song.

Kandi, stop acting so weird and go be with your friends.

After five minutes of sitting alone, I considered walking over to the group and introducing myself. Instead, I pulled out my cell phone and started scrolling through my Snapchat account. I'd taken a few selfies and posted to my timeline when a text message vibrated my phone. It was Chadwick.

Please accept my apologies.

At that precise moment, a bottle girl made her way to our table. Like everything else served at the club, a flaming sparkler topped the bottle, but this time it was a magnum of Veuve Clicquot champagne. I eagerly responded.

*Wow. Did you do this? Where are you?

*I'm at the bar.

I walked over to the banister separating the VIP section from the lower level, skimming the long, mahogany bar for the familiar dark-haired Adonis. Our eyes met, and he raised his cocktail glass in salute. My heart did a small flip when he smiled. I returned his wave and walked to the bench. Natasha, Simone, and Keely changed their focus the bachelor party to the bottle of champagne.

"Chadwick sent over a bottle of champagne!" I exclaimed over the loud music. "He's at the bar."

"He's a class act," Simone purred. "Kandi Cane, please invite him over. We want to thank him."

I detected the mischief in her invitation and knew it was less about thanking him for the drinks and more about prying

into our working relationship. I sighed and rapidly typed another text.

*Stop by. I want to thank you.

*Unnecessary. Enjoy your evening.

I frowned, prompting Natasha to glance at my phone.

“Go to him. Invite him over,” she hiccupped. “He can’t pull that elusive shit. We want to meet him.”

“Be nice.”

I stood and smoothed my dress down before making my way through the crowd, taking slow, deliberate steps as I wobbled to the bar. The last thing I wanted was to fall and bust my ass.

A sense of dread filled me, I wasn’t sure if I was ready to see Chadwick. Once he was in my line of sight, my mood changed. The girls said he looked like a model, but in that nightclub, he was a god amongst mortals. He didn’t belong on this earth.

Chadwick’s smile faded to a frown as he scanned me from head to toe. He didn’t like my dress. My dress, or lack thereof, was one more thing to judge. He touched the barstool next to him.

“Have a seat.”

“Thank you for the champagne,” I said, shimmying onto the barstool. “Why didn’t you tell me you would be here?”

“James and I were in the neighborhood.” He gestured to a smiling and dancing James on the dance floor.

“Out looking for fresh meat, eh?” I kept my tone neutral to the point of feigning boredom. To my surprise, he roared.

“I’m enjoying the crowd. I’m not planning to take anyone home, unless you want to go with me.” Chadwick sipped the amber liquid in his glass. He didn’t even try to disguise the flirtation in his tone and smile.

I ignored his flirtations by using my favorite method of deflection—sarcasm.

“Ha-ha. Come over to VIP. I would like to introduce you to my friends. We don’t bite.” I stood, tugging him off the barstool. He reluctantly stood and fished in his pocket for his money clip.

“I like to bite,” he said with a wink, putting down a wad of cash on the bar and signaling the bartender. He sighed, “Someone has to make sure your ass doesn’t fall out of that dress.” He caught James’ attention and pointed to the upper level of the club. James nodded his head and continued to dance.

“He dances alone?”

“He’s a great dancer and enjoys the attention,” he laughed. “He’ll stay at that all night.”

“Chadwick, I’m afraid that we didn’t receive extra wristbands. I don’t think they’ll let you into our section.”

“Don’t worry your pretty little head about that. Now, let’s talk about the dress . . .”

I struck a pose, unsteady on my heels.

“You don’t like it?”

“I love it. I pray your mother doesn’t find out you’re dressed like this. She’d put my nuts in a vise.” He took a slight bow with his arm outstretched.

I took his hand in mine and guided him through the hot, crowded lower level. I flashed my wristband and prepared myself to appeal to the bouncer to admit my unexpected guest. Instead, Chadwick nodded a hello to the bouncers, and the surly older guy unhooked the velvet rope to let the two of us in. I looked at him in stunned silence as Chadwick nodded in gratitude. Before we ascended the stairs, he leaned into my ear.

“I know them from being out and about, if that is what you are wondering.”

I did wonder how he made it through security without saying word. I’d never known someone with such a charmed life. Chadwick had the magical ability to get whatever he wanted.

We walked up the stairs to the cooler and more secluded area, and I breathed a sigh of relief. We were alone with no pesky friends to embarrass me. The girls were on the private dance floor having a great time. Natasha and Simone were dancing with a tall guy I recognized as an LSU football player while Keely twerked on an equally tall and muscular guy.

“Would you like a vodka and club soda?” I offered.

“Yes. Thank you.”

I grabbed a glass and poured the clear liquids into a cocktail glass, handing the drink to him before settling onto the red leather tufted bench. I leaned back and took a long swallow of champagne. He slid closer until his denim-clad leg touched my bare leg. We were so close I could smell his cologne. He glanced down at my cleavage, and I was a bundle of nerves. I placed a hand on my bouncing leg to stop the movement. I tried to disguise the nerves by tapping my foot to the rhythm of the movement. Chadwick gestured to the dance floor.

“Wanna dance? I’ll let you twerk on me.”

“It isn’t appropriate for my client to grind up on me,” I replied curtly.

“Can’t dance, huh?”

“I can dance. Just not with you.”

“Your loss. I got the moves like Jagger.” He thrust his hips with emphasis, and I couldn’t help but smile.

“I’ll survive.”

“Afraid you’ll fall for me?”

I laughed away his flirtations.

“Isn’t there a drunk girl somewhere you can lure into going home with you?”

“I’d rather go home with you.” He moved closer and brushed my arm with the backs of his fingers. The touch left goosebumps in its wake. “Interested?”

I blinked my eyes twice and attempted to shake myself back to sobriety. *Is he serious?*

“I’ll make you feel good,” he vowed.

“Yeah. I’ve heard,” I replied acidly. He gave a loud, boisterous laugh.

“I like your sense of humor. But in case you haven’t noticed, I haven’t brought a woman home since your first day.” He straightened before leaning in close to my ear. His voice nearly dropped an octave, and desire dripped from his words like a rainstorm as he played with the strap ties of my dress. “I want someone closer.” His fingers tickled down my arms and took my hand. He nudged me and whispered in my ear, “I’m talking about you.”

I licked my lips and cinched my legs together. My knees were so tight, you couldn’t slide a penny between them.

“Images of your legs wrapped around my neck fill my fantasies.” He leaned down and placed a tiny kiss on my shoulder. His fingers playfully intertwined with mine.

I’ve been propositioned in many ways. Some men are subtle. Some men are crude. But I’ve never been so close to taking any of the offers seriously. I was thankful for the darkness because there was a tightening sensation between my breasts. I pulled at the bodice of the dress to make room for my heaving chest. Chadwick brought our entwined hands to his mouth and kissed the back of my hand.

“What do you say?”

“I’m not interested in contracting every STD known and unknown to mankind,” I answered. I intended my joke to add much needed levity to our conversation.

“Sweetheart, I’m clean. *Spotless*. Almost as clean as if you had cleaned me.”

I stifled a grin and hardened my expression.

“Chadwick, if you’re going to be fresh, then I’ll leave.”

“I can always tell when you’re uncomfortable. You use archaic phrases. This is the second time you’ve called me

‘fresh.’ What are you? A grandmother?” He kissed the back of my hand again. “How about it? Give me a chance to redeem myself. Come home with me.”

My mouth bobbed open and closed. I couldn’t find the words to respond. Even if I could have crafted a coherent thought, I wasn’t able to form the words.

Come home with me.

Four simple words brought out an unexplored emotion. *Lust.* Without answering, I rose and walked out of the VIP area. Wobbled was more like it. I could not control the tremble in my legs. Without looking back, I marched down the stairs and into the ladies’ room.

Within the safety of the stall, I fanned myself with my hands before taking a few deep breaths. Chadwick was too much for me. One minute he enraged me, and the next he turned me on. Sitting next to him with his sexy voice purring in my ear and the not-so-subtle touches had stirred something in me. My panties were uncomfortably damp. I pulled at the hem and twisted my body to check out the back of the dress. I was sure the moisture had soaked through the layers of fabric.

I couldn’t escape him. Thoughts of him plagued my days and nights. He was so close that he lived within me. *His voice. His scent. His heat.* He stirred feelings I’d never had for a man. I wanted to straddle his lap and ride him, but my sexual morality wouldn’t allow it.

After my blood pressure returned to close to normal, I washed my hands and retreated from the ladies’ room.

On my way back to the VIP section, a tall, narrow-shouldered guy asked me for a dance. I accepted because I needed a distraction from my thoughts. Chadwick was in VIP awaiting an answer. Fear kept me from giving him the answer we both wanted.

After a few minutes of dancing, I realized my dance partner, who introduced himself as Collin, was a handsome guy. We danced to a remix of one of Lady Gaga’s songs. The pulse of the beat drummed in my chest. With my eyes closed,

my hips swayed seductively. A smile stretched across my face as I lost myself in the song's rhythm. I peeked up at the VIP section to see Chadwick glaring down at us. His eyes bored holes into my skull. His friend, James, stood next to him, and they both leaned in and whispered to each other.

I was having fun, but my joy was short-lived. Collin thought it was a great idea to ground his dick against my ass.

I turned around and took two steps backward. Collin stepped forward three steps. His moves were too close and too intimate for me, and I couldn't get away from him. His aggression overwhelmed me, and I wanted to walk away from him. Fear of making a scene kept me silent. Instead, I counted down until the end of the song.

Once the song ended, I tried to escape back to the VIP area, but Collin pulled me against his body. He slung his massive arm around my neck and breathed against my face. The putrid scent of Hennessy, marijuana, and pizza assaulted my nostrils.

"You could at least tell me your name or let me buy you a drink," he insisted. I responded that my shoes had irritated my feet, but before I could finish my answer, he tightened his hold around my neck. "Your fucking feet were fine a few minutes ago when you rubbed your ass against me. What's your name? Or are you a stuck-up bitch?"

Panicked, I struggled to break free. Before I could respond to his awful words, before I could call out to my friends, before I could do anything . . . Chadwick shouldered his way through the security guarding the VIP section. Like a flash, he sprinted toward us. The crowd gasped in surprise and created a path for him. Surprised at the commotion, Collin loosened his grip, allowing me to break free. I scurried away before Chadwick pushed Collin back a few feet.

"You don't lay a finger on her."

"Mind your own fucking business," Collin spat. "I'll touch the bitch if I want."

Chadwick frowned and pulled his elbow back. The crowd screamed as he slammed two blows against Collin's face causing him to stumble before falling to the floor. With his fist clenched and jaw set, Chadwick walked over to the incoherent man to ensure he was no longer a threat. James materialized next to him, pulling him back.

“Whoa. Chill. He's done.”

Three bouncers ran over to the commotion, and I expected them to throw Chadwick out. Instead, they slapped Collin on the cheeks to rouse him. The larger of the three nudged his leg with his foot and said, “Come on, buddy. Yo' ass gotta go.” Once they'd roused the man, two of the bouncers picked him up by his shoulders and dragged him out of the club.

My friends were quickly by my side, and Natasha wrapped her arms around me. Each attempted to calm me in their individual way. Natasha rubbed my back while Keely patted my arms. Simone straightened my hair and mumbled obscenities under her breath.

Chadwick stalked over with his hands still clenched into fists. The girls were wide-eyed as they quickly moved out of the way. He gathered me in his arms. Instinctively, my own arms wrapped around his waist, and my face pressed against his shirt. Embarrassment took hold as I buried my face in his chest.

“Are you okay?” he whispered.

I nodded as I glanced out the corner of my eye. My friends were watching us in stunned silence.



CHAPTER

Eleven

CHADWICK

FUCK. THE MOTHERFUCKER HAD DESERVED it. The heat had risen in my chest when he'd rubbed his dick against Kandace's ass. But the volcano had erupted when he'd locked her in his arms and refused to let her go.

Enclosing her in *my* arms, I murmured soothingly against her hair as I stroked her. Not sexually like before. I wanted her to feel comforted, but in a different way.

"How did you get here? You didn't drive, did you?"

"Uber." Her voice was muffled as she cried into my chest, and I grunted in acknowledgment.

"I'll pay the bill. Tell your friends you're leaving with me." It wasn't a request but a command. Sensing the seriousness in my tone, Kandace hurried over to her friends.

James appeared at my side and slapped me on the back.

"Playboy. Face the facts. You're in deep." He chuckled, his eyes sparkled with amusement. "I'm about to head out. I have to make up with my fiancée. I'll text you tomorrow."

"We're right behind you." I flagged down the hostess and settled the ladies' bill. I also tipped the security guards three

crisp one-hundred-dollar bills. They patted me on the arm and congratulated me on giving the asshole the ‘two-hitter quitter.’

I returned to find Kandi and her friends clustered in the booth. Every so often, one of the friends glared at me and then whispered a remark to the group. Their conversation was taking way too long. The way I saw it, Kandace would tell them she was leaving with me and then do precisely that. Period. End of discussion. Either they hurried it up, or I would carry her out. Before I could interrupt their huddle, Kandace nodded her head and gave each of them a hug before briskly returning to my side. I angled my head toward the circle of friends who were still eying me suspiciously.

“What were you talking about?”

“They wanted to make sure I’m safe with you.”

“Are you *safe*?” I scoffed, “I’ve known you longer than they have.”

“What can I say? You have a reputation, and you just knocked a guy out. They care about my well-being.”

“And I don’t? Come on. We’re leaving.” I practically dragged her through the club to the valet stand. If it weren’t for Kandace’s tall shoes, we could have walked much faster. Picking her up and throwing her over my shoulder wasn’t an option because her dress was so short.

I flagged the valet, who pulled the Porsche around to the front of the nightclub. I opened the passenger’s side door and waited for Kandace to slide in. Once assured she was safely buckled in, I ran around to the driver’s side. I handed the valet a fifty-dollar tip before closing the door.

I took a quick glance at Kandace’s sweet face. She appeared to be fine, despite tonight’s dramatic turn of events.

I revved the engine and slowly pulled out of the parking space. In response, the clubgoers created a path. Once the way was clear, I launched onto Canal Street and punched the gas. I didn’t give a fuck about the police—I wanted to get away from the nightclub.

“Celeste would kill me should anything happen to her,” I whispered to myself, glancing over at her again. Her hair had unraveled slightly, but her dress was still intact.

I’d spent all night imagining untying the strings that held it up. I had to restrain myself from pulling down the top and exposing her breasts. I wanted to take a pebbled nipple between my teeth and lick and suck at the tender, ripe flesh. I growled at the sudden tightening of my pants, and I shifted in my seat to make room for my stiffening cock.

“Are you in pain? Let me look at it,” Kandace said, grabbing my hand and raising it off the gearshift. She gingerly rubbed her thumb over my red and swollen knuckles. She whispered, “Thank you,” before she placed a chaste kiss to each knuckle.

My dick stood at full attention.

I’d known she would be at the club. I’d originally gone intending to watch her from afar. If I hadn’t made my presence known, none of this would have happened.

We arrived at my apartment in record time. I followed behind her, entranced yet again by the tiny black dress.

“It’s the fucking dress,” I muttered to myself. Once in the apartment, I gestured toward the sectional and said, “Make yourself comfortable.” With the remote in her hand, Kandace sat on the sofa and flipped through the channels until she found a rerun of *Two and a Half Men*.

In my bedroom, I searched the dresser for something resembling pajamas.

“There are snacks, water, and fruit. Anything you want. Help yourself,” I called out to her.

“I’m okay,” she yelled back.

With a clean pair of shorts and t-shirt in hand, I returned to the living room. Kandace was sprawled on the chaise, my favorite part of the sofa. She accepted the clothes and headed to the bathroom to change.

I grabbed an ice pack from the freezer and wrapped it in a dish towel, sighing with relief when I placed it on my swollen knuckles. I immediately sat in Kandace's place.

She returned the living room wearing my Georgetown tee. The shirt fit a little large, but she looked perfect.

"Hey! I was sitting there," she scolded. Spying the ice pack on my hand and my pained facial expression, she took the seat next to me. With concern written all over her face, she inspected my knuckles and eventually smiled, "I don't think it's broken. You'll live."

"Today hasn't been my smoothest day. This morning, I insulted you. Then, I behaved like a Neanderthal at the nightclub in front of a room full of people armed with camera phones." *Fuck!* I needed to contact the St. Clair security team so they could scour the internet for any photos or videos of the fight. *What if that asshole filed a lawsuit?*

"Chadwick. Please stop. I accepted your apology for this morning's mistake, but don't say you're sorry for the fight. *He* should apologize to me. Not you. Thank you for knocking him out. I'm eternally grateful." She sighed before adding, "I'm so tired of men. If a woman doesn't give them what they want, they turn into complete asses. It's exhausting and frightening. Whatever happened to courtship?"

I pretended the courtship question was rhetorical. I couldn't answer because I'd never courted a woman. I'd dated plenty of women and fucked many more. Courtship was a serious step toward marriage, and marriage was not on my radar.

The women I liked weren't wives and homemakers. They were the party girls who didn't mind going to strip clubs. Women who gave head from the passenger's seat and engaged in first date sex. Party girls had little to no expectations of me, my time, or my heart.

I wrapped my arm around Kandace's shoulders and pulled her into my side. Her slender arm wrapped around my waist as her warm body relaxed. She found the perfect spot and sank into me. I leaned over and kissed the crown of her head, her

fluffy curls tickled my face and I inhaled her sweet scent. She sighed contently and my chest swelled with pride. A man is always happy to make a woman feel content.

I memorized every movement, fearing that I would never hold her like that again.

What the hell was happening? I'd never felt this way before. I didn't 'hang out' with women. But here I was, hanging out with the most traditional yet modern girl I'd ever met.

James was right. I was in deep.

We sat in silence, entwined in each other's arms as we caught up on the adventures of Charlie, Allen, and Jake. At the end of the episode, she softly yawned.

"Why don't you go to bed?" I whispered. "The guest bedroom is yours."

She stood and stretched. My t-shirt and shorts dwarfed her body. Yet, I didn't want her wearing anything else. She leaned over to kiss my cheek.

"Goodnight."

Once she had disappeared into the guest room, I lowered the television volume and changed to the sports channel. A deep sigh of relief marked my inner peace. I'd spent the last three weeks worrying about Kandace's whereabouts every night. I could rest when she slept less than twenty steps away.

It was a little past two a.m. when I retired to my bedroom, and I hesitated briefly outside the guest room door as I passed. As though she'd sensed my presence, I heard her sweet voice call out to me.

"Come in."

The words were music to my ears. I opened the door slowly and spoke into the darkness.

"Can't sleep?"

I flipped the dimmer to the lowest setting and took a seat in the chair next to the bed. Kandace sat upright, the glow of

her iPhone illuminated her gorgeous features.

“Yeah. I’m tired. I should go to sleep, but I’m all wound up.”

“You’re still a bookworm,” I said, nodding toward her phone, which displayed an e-book app.

“You remember,” she smiled. I grinned back.

“I remember. You used to walk with your nose pressed in a book. Literally. Celeste used to guide you by the hand while you read.”

“Yeah. She was my Seeing Eye person,” she laughed.

“Do you want to hear a story?”

She eagerly put the phone away and patted the empty side of the bed. I sat next to her on top of the white quilt. This was a preventative measure. If I moved under those covers, I’d want to climb on top of her.

“This is a true story,” I began with a serious tone. “Once upon a time, in a town called New Orleania, there was a young prince named Chad. Like most princes, Chad was always the center of attention. Therefore, he could be self-centered and spoiled. One day, his parents introduced him to a small sprite named Princess Kandi. She was a tiny little fairy with big brown eyes and long ponytails trailing down her back, each braid lovingly adorned in ribbons and barrettes.”

“Over time, she grew to be a smart, nerdy, and spirited little girl. She made it her life’s mission to embarrass the prince. She cock-blocked, made fun of his bad haircuts, and imitated his walk after he broke his foot. By the way, I haven’t forgotten.”

“Sorry,” she chortled. “I love this story. Princess Kandi sounds like one of my favorite people in this world.” Her fingers reached out until she found my hand and linked her fingers with mine.

“One day, he realized she had metamorphosed into a beautiful young woman. She was a jewel in a kingdom of jaded, unnatural and desperate women. Smooth pickup lines

and dark corners didn't impress her. Any prince worthy of taking her hand had to understand how hard he must work for every single smile and conversation. Therefore, she didn't encounter a lot of princes.

"One day, the brave Prince Chad opened his eyes and truly saw Princess Kandi. He craved the beautiful princess and wanted her. However, he was at a loss. He was a one-trick pony, and his game wouldn't work on her." I sighed. "So, what should the prince do?"

Kandace choked slightly, her eyes wide.

"Good things come to the patient and the wise."

"I'm anything but patient." I placed a soft kiss on her hand. "We both know I'm not wise." I leaned in close to her face and lightly pressed my lips against hers. My mouth trailed briefly to her jaw, and she responded with a sharp gasp.

"Oh."

When I returned to her mouth, I kissed her with more pressure. Her eyes closed as her soft, full lips moved against mine. My tongue flicked at the seam of her mouth, and she opened her lips to let me in. I dipped my tongue into her mouth and brushed against her minty tongue. I chuckled inwardly, realizing she'd used my mouthwash.

"I see you helped yourself to my mouthwash."

"And your floss," she giggled, unrepentant. Licking her lips, she whispered, "I couldn't find your toothbrush."

Taking the hint, I pulled her close, and once again, my lips danced with hers. This time, her tongue slid into my mouth and her hands dug in my hair. My dick stiffened at the sensation. I closed my eyes and focused on the feeling of her warm tongue moving against mine. My lips and tongue trailed from her mouth down to her chin and then to her neck. I took the same path back to her mouth, exercising considerable restraint with this kiss. I didn't want to go further. At least not tonight.

She pulled her mouth away from mine. Our small pants were the only sound in the room.

“You’re the only person who calls me Kandace. Why don’t you call me Kandi?”

“I don’t want to call you what everyone else calls you. The only other name I want to call you is *mine*.” I licked my lips. Kandace was sweeter than sugar, and I wanted more than a taste. “Sweets, have dinner with me tonight?”

I couldn’t tell if her smile resulted from the kiss, my new nickname for her, or the dinner invitation. The bright smile faded abruptly, and she replied with visible disappointment.

“I can’t. I’m attending the Sportsman’s Ball.”

“You’re going to *that*?”

I couldn’t imagine why a twenty-something would want to attend that ball. The planning committee comprised senior citizens from the Ladies’ Auxiliary. I’d heard that the food was always of mediocre quality and the entertainment was bland.

“I’ll go with you. Please allow me to escort you.”

She smiled shyly, avoiding my gaze.

“I have a date. His name is Pierre Butler.”

The Pelicans had picked the power forward in the first-round of the NBA draft. The mighty basketball player had arisen and conquered our small city with an impressive skyhook. He was everywhere—news, radio, blogs, and billboards.

A small growl escaped my lips, and my body tensed as a streak of jealousy rose within me. I’d just poured my heart out to this woman, confessed my attraction to her, and expressed my desire to take our friendship to the next level. I felt vulnerable, and for the first time, I was afraid she would turn me down.

“Are you two—“

“No! Of course not. Our mothers set this up. My mom thinks he’s an appropriate suitor.” She rolled her eyes.

“Why didn’t Celeste ask me to escort you? I would have done it.”

She gave me a sideways glance causing the two of us to break out into hysterics. She patted my hand while simultaneously trying to catch her breath.

“Do you really want me to answer that?”

“Cancel. Go with me.” I was nervous at the thought of Kandace wrapped in another man’s arms.

“I can’t. You wouldn’t like it if I stood *you* up.” She stroked my cheek with her soft hand. “I’m not interested in him.”

“Fine,” I agreed with a sigh. “Go with him. When you’re done, come back to me.”



CHAPTER

Twelve

KANDACE

“**K**ANDACE IS PRESENT AND ACCOUNTED for. Tell us what the hell happened.” Eyes narrowed into slits belied Natasha’s saccharine sweet smile. This wasn’t girl talk—she was two seconds from exploding.

“What she really means is, what’s going on with you and Captain *Freaking* America?” Simone clarified after a long sip of cappuccino. “There’s way more than a vendor-client relationship there. Are you fucking Chadwick St. Clair?”

This morning, Chadwick had dropped me off at my apartment. The drive had been awkward. I hadn’t had a change of clothing or my hair products. I’d tried to use whatever I could find in his bathroom, but my hair was a nest. Like the girl in the red dress, I’d bundled it in a topknot and worn sunglasses as a disguise.

Once I’d arrived home and recharged my phone, it had become crystal clear why my battery drained. My voicemail was full, and I had fifty unread text messages from my friends. The last text was for a mandatory lunch date. Judging by the content of the group chat, we’d be forgetting the shrimp and grits. Chadwick St. Clair was on the menu.

I'd dressed in record time and rushed to the Treme neighborhood, finding a place to park with surprising ease. One by one, the girls had trickled into the restaurant, each with a varying level of a hangover. Their outfits were a complete one-eighty from last night's looks. They wore no makeup and dark sunglasses framed their faces. In addition, they either wore joggers or leggings. Flip-flops were the shoes of choice.

"No. I'm not sleeping with Chadwick," I frowned.

It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the absolute truth either. At the nightclub, he'd expressed an interest in sleeping with me. I'd thought he'd had too much to drink and was kidding, but he hadn't been drunk at all. He was serious. Very serious.

A true believer in the hair-of-the-dog-that-bit-you philosophy, Keely sipped her 'breakfast in a glass,' which was what she called a Bloody Mary loaded with skewers of bacon, boiled eggs, and blue cheese stuffed olives.

"The fight made its way to the local blogs. Surprisingly, there is no video footage and no mention of your name. The *City and Town* blog referred to you as 'the mysterious beauty.'" She plucked an olive off the skewer. "He kicked a guy's ass, then he rushed over and gathered you in his arms. He *comforted* you."

"If you aren't sleeping with him, you'd better *prepare yourself* to sleep with him," Simone spoke up. "I highly suggest making sure you're hairless. *Everywhere.*" She cocked a brow.

An older couple at a neighboring table dining overheard her last statement. The woman looked over at our table and twisted her face in disgust. I averted my gaze as my ears instantly heated. I wished I'd never discussed my decision to abstain until marriage.

"Simone cut it out," Natasha chastised. "You embarrassed her." She turned her attention back to me. "Kandi, I'm still upset with you."

"Natasha, I'm sorry for making you worry." My eyes pleaded with my closest friend to forgive me. She nodded

which I hoped meant that she did. I felt relieved that she was no longer angry and revisited Simone's remark. "I'm not listening to her. Simone, the last time I followed your advice on hair, I walked around with a triangle-shaped structure on my head. Can we please change the subject?" I begged.

"Okay, Kandi Cane. Whatever you say. You and Chadwick are just friends. End of discussion." Simone sighed and rolled her eyes in frustration. "Let's hop onto another man. Are you prepared for your date with Pierre?"

Keely peered over her eyeglasses and our eyes met.

"What I want to know is how did you swing a date with Pierre 'Chocolate Thunder' Butler? He's like Teflon, no woman can stick to him."

"Our mothers attended the same high school. They've been trying to set us up for the past four years. I was interested, but he was too busy attending prom with starlets and pop singers. But he changed his mind after the NBA draft. What better way to improve his image than to tie him to a squeaky-clean college co-ed?"

"You're manna from heaven. The corporate sponsors will eat you two up with a spoon. The tennis shoe and athletic wear contracts will fall from the sky. Now, if you're smart, you'll take advantage. You could net at least fifty thousand followers by being seen on his arm and possibly get a contract for weight loss tea or teeth whitening. I could guide you through a few steps in improving your social media presence."

"I don't want to increase my followers, and I don't want to promote nasty tea. I don't even want to date Pierre. I'm doing this as a favor to my mother. That's it."

"That's it." Natasha repeated with a tone that challenged the other two to continue the conversation.

"Since you guys aren't being honest, I have a story to share," Simone announced, flipping her blonde hair off her shoulders. "Two weeks ago, I met a handsome older man at the Whole Foods on Magazine. We are engaged in a full-on daddy-daughter relationship. You're judging me. Well, let me

allay your fears. He isn't a *Bill Clinton daddy*. He's more of a, um, *Brad Pitt daddy*. Post-Jennifer Aniston and pre-Shiloh. Before the stress of living with Angelina and all of those damn kids drained the sexy from him."

Simone continued to regale the group on her latest daddy-daughter romance, but my thoughts drifted back to sex with Chadwick. After he'd left the guest bedroom, I'd had trouble falling asleep. The kiss had left me with a tingle between my thighs, and I'd longed to feel more of him.

But there was that little matter of my virginity.

I was an idealist and a true romantic at heart. I craved a lifetime of commitment with the perfect man who would sweep me off my feet and prove himself worthy of me.

I knew I would never settle for anything less.



"DID YOU DECIDE ON THE MANGO OR THE RED?"

I sat cross-legged on the teal blue sofa in my living room, video chatting with my mother. A glass of wine rested on the brass and glass coffee table. I didn't want to get drunk, but I definitely needed something to get me through the evening.

"Mother, I decided on the red. I doubt many women would wear a crimson gown this time of year. I would like to stand out."

She ignored the signal that she was getting on my nerves.

"Wow. I think the mango would look lovely with your complexion. Plus, it's such a youthful style. The low back on the red is so . . . mature. Are you sure you don't want to change your mind?"

"Absolutely. One hundred percent. Unequivocally sure."

This date with Pierre was a big deal for mother and Auntie. It was my first adult gala, and I was going with an NBA player. Last week, we'd spent a whole day shopping at Canal Place. At Saks, we'd found a dress and a spare. The red strapless gown with a low back had been my instant favorite,

while the mango with illusion panels on the sides had been the one Mama and Auntie had preferred.

Despite the dull evening I was sure to have, my mother couldn't have been more thrilled. She was more excited about this date than about my high school prom.

"Your hair," Mama said, tilting her head to one side. "Up or down? I think you should straighten and wear it in a chic up-do. Taming that hair will highlight your beautiful face. We want to see your eyes."

I sighed and bit my tongue. My mane was iconic. People almost instantly recognized me by my hair, and I was not willing to change it to please someone else.

My mother didn't hate my hair—she just wanted it surrounded in hair pins until each strand was properly *controlled*. She wanted to fry my tresses into *submission*.

The symbolism of the request didn't go unnoticed. This was less about my hair and more about me. My mother wanted to control all aspects of my life. She apparently thought it would right the wrongs of bad decisions and choices she'd made in her life, most notably falling in love with my father and getting knocked up her freshman year in college. She hovered to protect me from going down the same winding and sometimes fucked up path.

"Mama, I gotta run."

"Wait. Are you excited about going out with Pierre? He's cute, isn't he?"

"Yeah. He's nice looking."

"Why don't Marie and I come over and help you get ready? This could be a big night for you two. I want to make sure you look perfect." I didn't answer, preferring to sit in silence—an action she was all too familiar with. "Kandi, you're a mature and capable woman. But I'm still your mother, and I want the best for you."

"I understand. I don't need you to doll me up. Natasha is coming over to do my makeup."

There was a knock at my apartment door. *In the nick of time.*

“Mama, hold on for a second. I think she’s at the door right now.”

I peeked through the keyhole. On the other side of the door stood a balding man in a black jacket and white shirt. A fine mist of perspiration dotted his forehead, but he didn’t look shifty. Still, better safe than sorry.

“Who is it?” I yelled in my most ferocious voice.

“Hello. There is a delivery for Kandace Alexander.”

“Delivery?”

“Yes. A special delivery.” A smile stretched across the man’s face.

“Ooh. A special delivery,” my mother cooed, having apparently overheard the conversation. “Is it from Pierre? Maybe it’s flowers.”

Doubtful. Only a gentleman would send flowers. I ignored her and opened the door, standing in the doorway with my hand outstretched. The ball was due to start in ninety minutes. I didn’t have time to dawdle with this delivery guy or my mother.

“I’ll be back. I will help my partner bring everything inside,” the man smiled.

“Everything?” My mind raced with the possibilities, and I couldn’t figure out what he was going to deliver.

“Everything,” he repeated before he turned and walked away while mumbling something about a thousand dollars

“Kandi, what is it? I can’t wait to see what it is! Marie and I could stop by and at least see the two of you off.”

My mind drifted back to my senior prom, and I imagined my mother and auntie taking hundreds of photos of Pierre and I with their cell phones. I took that as a hint to hurry from the phone.

“I’ll check and call you right back.” I ended the chat without saying goodbye. I grabbed my keys from the console table and followed the man to the parking lot.



CHAPTER

Thirteen

CHADWICK

IT WAS TIME TO RAISE the stakes to a full-on romantic assault. I prepared myself to give Kandace everything—seduction, romantic gestures, one-on-one time . . . Whatever she needed to see things my way.

I had to admit that Kandi’s date, Pierre, made me nervous. I assumed they had a lot in common. Not only was he closer to her age, but he was very good looking and a popular athlete. Most women would go for a man like that. My reputation diminished my romantic value, and I was afraid her innocence would lead her straight into Pierre’s arms.

That was why I’d called in a last-minute favor to my florist. Maybe it was an overstatement to call Calliope’s Flower Boutique *my* florist, I sent flowers to my mother to celebrate holidays, birthdays, and as a general ‘get well soon.’ In my adult life, I’d never given flowers to .

My phone vibrated as a photo of Kandace with her sorority sisters displayed on the screen. I smiled and pressed the answer button.

“Chadwick! What did you do!” she squealed gleefully. “They’re beautiful! I’ll send a photo. Gosh! Twenty-one dozen

yellow roses with red tips? Thank you! You've made my day."

At the suggestion of the florist, I'd chosen the yellow roses with red tips because of their meaning. The roses symbolized friendship budding into romance. I decided on twenty-one dozen for each year she's graced this earth.

"Remember . . . Go to the ball with him, and when you're done, call me. I want to see you."

"Yes. Of course."

I didn't enjoy attending black tie events, but galas, balls, benefits, and receptions were an unfortunate part of my life. The Sportsman's Ball was a significant event—it would be my first formal social event since I'd returned to New Orleans. I broke from my typical habits and go solo. My usual tactic was to sift through my contact list to find a suitable date. 'Suitable,' meaning a beautiful woman who possessed a graceful presence and hellcat bedroom tendencies.

My sole purpose of attending the ball was crystal clear. I went to cockblock. By hook or by crook, Kandace would leave with *me*.

When my car pulled up to the red carpet, a throng of local photographers greeted me and asked for photos. I stood and posed for the requisite number of pictures before heading into the dimly lit ballroom.

Feathers and blood-red roses arranged in tall, classically beautiful centerpieces transformed the room into a twenties speakeasy. Adding to the mood was a lounging area with dark brown leather sofas accented with crimson pillows.

There were groups of ladies taking photos in ankle-length fringed gowns while holding long cigarette holders. Small groups of gentlemen clustered around the bar. They laughed and slapped each other's backs while a mixologist created specialty cocktails with various bottles of elixirs and spirits.

I leisurely surveyed the gathering. Every few feet, I stopped to chat with old friends and acquaintances, socializing with the crowd until I spotted Pierre towering over the sea of

revelers. With my place card in hand and a slight spring in my step, I headed in that direction.

Kandace was a stunning vision. She was a ray of sunshine in a sea of black, gold, and white gowns, and I couldn't take my eyes off of her. The low back of the red strapless dress had me thinking lascivious thoughts. How she would respond if I ran my tongue along the golden-brown flesh of her exposed shoulder?

A smile spread across her face as our eyes met. Her gaze casually drifted from my head to my feet and back up again, raising an eyebrow in approval.

“Chadwick, what are you doing here?”

“I'm here to support the cause.”

“What's the cause?” she challenged, her mouth curving into a grin.

“Aww. Come on, Kandace.”

“Chadwick, I'm serious. What's the cause?” she glared. There was no escaping this. I searched my head for a reasonable answer. I floundered for a second before her eyes brimmed with laughter. She giggled, “Gotcha!”

She pulled me in for a hug. My arms wrapped around her waist, and my nose sank into her lush coils.

“You're gorgeous. I like the dress,” I whispered. We held each other for far too long. Even to the average person, we looked less like friends and more like lovers.

Pierre was definitely an average person because he cleared his throat. He had watched our exchange with a mixture of anger and skepticism.

Kandace responded to the interruption with a dismissive smirk. He didn't catch the slight movement, but I saw it. She was unhappy on the date. That made it easy for me. My anxiety began to subside, allowing me to relax and enjoy the ball.

“I didn't mean to be rude. Chadwick St. Clair, this is Pierre Butler. Pierre, Chadwick is an old family friend.”

We exchanged pleasantries and a too-firm handshake.

“It looks like dinner is about to start. We had best find our table,” he said apologetically, placing the palm of his hand on Kandace’s lower back and guiding her toward their table. It was a simple move, but it made me want to break his multi-million dollar hand.

I leisurely strolled behind the two, wearing a smug, self-satisfied grin. Pierre hadn’t gotten rid of me. He didn’t understand the lengths I would take to get what I wanted.

“Chadwick, what is your table number?” Kandace asked, glancing back at me.

“Fifty-four.”

“We are also at table fifty-four. What a coincidence,” Pierre replied with a slightly sour expression.

Our table was close to the dance floor but far away from the Chairman’s table. We introduced ourselves to our tablemates, the Landrys and their single friend, Sandra.

After we settled into our seats, Kandace placed her napkin in her lap and leaned toward me.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing much.” I added a breezy, “A family friend planned this shindig. I may have called in a few favors.”

In between the second course and gumbo, I excused myself to make a trip to the bar. I noticed Kandace’s cocktail glass was empty.

“Kandace, would you like a drink?” I asked loudly enough to draw Pierre’s attention. “What about you, Sandra?”

Pierre leaped to his feet like an eager puppy.

“Don’t worry. I’ll get Kandi’s drink.” Before she could voice her drink request, he sprinted toward the bar. I flashed her a smile and shrugged my shoulders.

“No worries. I’ll pick up a drink for you. Prosecco or champagne, right?” I added a wink and puckered my lips when she nodded in assent.

I sauntered to the bar, running into a few more acquaintances along the way. I caught up with Pierre in time to catch him eyeing a young, petite brunette with big tits. She smiled, and he nodded in return. This time, it was my turn to clear my throat. Pierre slowly turned to face me and flashed a phony smile.

“How long have you known Kandi?”

“Her whole life,” I replied curtly.

The bartender moved in front of Pierre whose brow furrowed as he realized he hadn't gotten Kandace's drink order. I grinned and leaned in a bit.

“She likes champagne or a rosé.”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah. That's right.”

At that point, I realized there was nothing to worry about with Kandace and Pierre. To the casual observer, they were a young couple in the beginning phases of their relationship. But I saw things differently. They both appeared painfully bored with each other. Kandace was naturally vibrant and funny, but with Pierre, she was far more reserved. She smiled with her mouth but not with her eyes when he told a joke. She appeared distracted in conversation with him, preferring to talk with me.

Pierre looked bored out of his mind. This young man had just signed a fifteen-million-dollar contract. I was sure he would rather be out with his teammates and not at this stuffy gala.

After dinner, the dancing portion of the event began. Mr. Landry nursed a mild case of sciatica and spent the evening glued to his chair. I alternated dances between Mrs. Landry and Sandra.

“I'll ask the young man for a dance,” Sandra whispered conspiratorially during one of our dances. “Then, you can spend some time alone with the lady. She's lovely. I think you two would be a stunning couple.”

“Thank you, Sandra.”

True to her word, at the end of our dance, she walked back to the table and tapped Pierre on the shoulder. He took her by the hand and led her to the dance floor.

Finally, I was alone with Kandace, and apparently, I wasn't the only one who'd been looking forward to it.

"Why are you here?"

"I'm here for you."

"My God. You *are* serious? You? And me?" She gestured between the two of us.

"I wouldn't be here if I wasn't."

"Excuse me," she said abruptly, easing her chair back. "I need to go to the ladies' room."

Are you kidding me? She jumped up and fled. Again. This was getting ridiculous. I gave her a few seconds before I excused myself from the table. I was on her heels as she weaved and navigated a clear path through the crowded ballroom.

I stood outside of the hallway leading to the restrooms, leaning casually against the wall as I scrolled through email messages.

Kandace exited the restroom a few minutes later. She jumped when I took her by the hand and led her into a darkened banquet room. Her eyes widened as I closed the door and backed her against the wall. The light from the hallway streamed through the glass door pane, illuminating her beautiful face.

Her breaths were quick and shallow, but she relaxed a little as I wrapped my fingers around her wrist. My thumb brushed against her tender skin as I felt the blood course within her veins. I looked into her eyes and waited as her blood pressure slowed. I moved my hand to her face, and she leaned into it.

"My sweet Kandace," I whispered into her ear.

She shivered as the warmth of my breath tickled her soft flesh. Her perfume, an intoxicating blend of jasmine and mandarin oranges, floated past my nostrils. The scent was

decidedly female and took hold of all of my senses. I pressed my nose to her pulse points, needing more. I'd always believed a woman's scent was better when shared with her lover and not the world.

I moved my mouth over hers, teasing her soft lips. I stayed there for seconds, not moving. The hunger slowly built between the two of us before I flicked my tongue between her lips. A moan escaped as she opened in anticipation of a kiss. Instead of moving my tongue into her delicious mouth, I leaned my head back until our mouths were mere inches apart.

"I'm running out of options here. You walk around my loft and this party as if I don't matter. This whole thing is a new experience for me."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She seemed to analyze my words and attempting to collect herself.

"You must learn to deal with it. Maybe you aren't as big of a deal as you think you are," she replied with a glint of playfulness in her eyes.

"You're teasing me. You want me to chase you."

Her nervous laughter was a shield deployed to deflect the truth in my words. I took it as an invitation to move my body closer to hers.

"I can't escape you. You're everywhere, and it's driving me wild," I growled.

"Chadwick, come on. You're the king of one-night stands and friends with benefits. How am I supposed to deal with your reputation?"

"You enjoy the experience that comes with it."

"I'm not interested in being a part of your harem or a notch on your bedpost, which I'm sure is whittled down to a splinter by now."

Fuck.

She delivered the sharp words with such precision that they cut me deep. Her measured expression showed that she was in complete control. It was impossible for me to mimic

her energy. I wore my emotions on my sleeve, especially in chasing and capturing women. Then, I detected a trace of mischief in her eyes.

My hand lightly glided down her arm until our fingers entwined. She sighed as I brought her hand up for a kiss.

“What are you going to do?” she whispered, her voice dripping with desire and challenge. “Pull up my dress, turn me around, and fuck me against this wall?” Her other hand patted the wall behind her. Need punctuated each word as the sentence came out with a tremble, slow and controlled yet breathless.

I groaned. The way the expletive flowed so freely from her lips should have been illegal. I wasn't used to that side of Kandace. She was always demure and fun. Her sweetness and innocence caught my attention, but the naughty brat side of her made me lose control.

I leaned my forehead onto hers and pushed my hips forward, trapping her against the wall.

“Now or later, Kandace. You will be mine.”



CHAPTER

Fourteen

KANDACE

H*EAVENLY FATHER, PLEASE GIVE ME the strength to fight off this temptation. I promise to attend church service every Sunday. Not bedside Catholic, but at a real brick-and-mortar cathedral. I promise to dress like a chaste nun. I will do anything to stop this slow torture.*

Chadwick's behavior stunned me, and that was putting it mildly. I had thought we would play games with each other until he grew bored and moved on to the next flavor of the week. I hadn't prepared myself for the moment that he would take our innocent flirting to the next level.

He had me backed against a wall. Literally and figuratively.

I stood there with the palms of my hands pressed against his solid chest as he pushed his hardening cock against my hip. The unexpected move made me gasp. With my eyes closed, my head fell back. A low growl hinted that his pleasure with my response.

I licked my lips at the licorice scent of the absinthe on his breath. My fingers itched to lift his white linen shirt and run over the rises and dips of his washboard abs.

If I move to the left, he will hit me right on the clit. I played it cool. I wasn't one of those women who would open their legs at a mere pat on the head. *Nah, son.* This shit came with requirements.

Get your head back in the game, Kandace.

“Wow,” I said sarcastically. “This is such a romantic overture. You make me swoon.”

He lazily twirled a strand of my hair between his fingers. He whispered into my ear with the heat of ten thousand suns.

“You're soaked for me right now. Don't deny it.”

True . . .

I wanted so badly to take him up on the offer. I could have inched up my gown, pulled my panties to the side and lost myself in him. All of me. To hell with our friends and my date on the other side of the wall. All I wanted was a few minutes of us moving and merging into each other repeatedly. Anything to ease the constant throb between my legs.

“I think you're caught in my net, butterfly,” he murmured. “If you weren't, you would have pushed me away or told me to stop.”

I peered at him through slits and slowly exhaled.

“Then, I should watch what I'm doing.”

A soft moan escaped my parted lips and my legs involuntarily opened wider. He chuckled before moving to the left. Now, his rock-hard cock was directly against the junction of my thighs, and he continued the seduction.

“Tell Loverboy you have a headache. I'll be at your apartment in one hour. Pack a bag, but keep the dress on. You're staying overnight at my place.”

I disentangled myself from his clutches. Breaking free of his grasp allowed me to summon the strength to take control of the . . . situation. I smoothed my trembling hands over my hair and down my gown.

“Chadwick. Thank you for the flowers. They’re gorgeous. I’m a modern woman, but traditional southern values flow through my veins. I’m not easy, and I’m not for sale.”

His expression showed frustration, but I didn’t sense any anger. He gritted his teeth in denial.

“I expect nothing in return.”

Once I was in control of my legs, I reached for the door handle. Chadwick reached out to grab me by the elbow, and exasperation filled his voice.

“Kandace, be open-minded to us.” I pulled on the door handle and glanced back at him.

“Good day, Mr. St. Clair. Enjoy the party.” But I couldn’t leave him in such a state of disappointment, so I added with a little smile, “I’ll meet you at my place in an hour.”

He rewarded me with a big, toothy grin.

Fantasizing about wanting him was fun. But now I was the next person on his sexual conquest list, and it intimidated me. I wouldn’t have the willpower to decline his advances.

He was a dangerous one for sure. I didn’t think he would intentionally hurt me, but I knew I would become caught in his trap. I needed to prepare myself for him to move on to another woman. I would keep my defenses up. If I didn’t, I’d end up fucked in more ways than one.

I crept back to the table with my legs tightly clamped together. I walked each grueling inch, acutely aware of the slickness between my folds. A sweet pulse radiated through my swollen, achy clit. For a second, I contemplated going back to the ladies’ room to remove my uncomfortably soaked panties.

My heart raced, and my mind clouded. All because Chadwick rubbed his cock against me.



IT HAD TAKEN LITTLE TO CONVINCING PIERRE TO LEAVE THE ball. I’d blamed the early departure on tummy troubles. With an almost indecent level of enthusiasm, he’d offered to take

me home. In another time and place, his indifference would have offended me.

Pierre had walked ten paces ahead of me through the ballroom. He'd avoided eye contact as a valet brought around his Mercedes-Benz sedan, and we'd driven to my apartment in silence. He'd dropped me off so unceremoniously that I'd half expected him to slow to a rolling stop so I could tuck and roll out of the car. He'd made no promises to see me again or even call. It was just as well. Why should he waste the energy?

Aside from being young and about to embark on our adult lives, we had little in common. He would travel around the country playing basketball and likely meeting basketball groupies, while I would be here working at the family business.

Tomorrow morning, my mother would call for a post-date run down. I didn't look forward to letting her know that I wasn't interested in Pierre. I expected a persuasive argument of why I should give him a third chance. I knew it would disappoint her to hear things didn't work out, but she'd just have to get over it.

I took a deep breath while weighing the possibilities of what was about to happen. I may have been a virgin, but I was a smart woman. Chadwick didn't invite me to his house simply for the pleasure of my company.

I was nervous but fully prepared to have a little fun with him. I had envisioned a hot make out session between the two of us on the sectional. I shivered at the thought of his hands on the back of my head, holding me firmly in place as his tongue explored my mouth. Maybe I'd let his hands roam over my fully clothed body.

In my mind, kissing and light petting was the extent of what I could offer. I couldn't give much more than that.

At some point this evening, I would need to be honest about my virginity. That conversation would be awkward but he needed to know before we went too far. I was nervous that the confession would likely scare him off.

I reached into my closet and pulled out a Lululemon duffel bag and threw in a change of clothes. *Damn it.* I should have bought a few pieces of sexy lingerie. Chadwick was the type to like high-end lingerie made of silk or lace, not cotton Hello Kitty undies from Forever 21.

My phone buzzed with a text alerting me he was waiting for me in the parking lot. I peeked through the wooden blinds down to the parking lot below my apartment. He parked the black sports car next to my car, dwarfing the tiny blue Honda Civic. I replied that I would be down shortly.

The soft knock at the door startled me, and my heart rate skyrocketed. I forced myself not to race to the door, but my nerves had me fumbling to turn the locks.

He stood in the doorway, huffing and puffing. He'd unbuttoned the top two buttons of his linen dress shirt.

“What happened? Are you okay?”

“I ran up the stairs before you could change your mind.” He laughed, but I knew he wasn't kidding. He was serious which, in turn, shot my nerves into overdrive. I clutched the doorknob tighter, transferring all of the nervous energy to the hardware. I calmed down enough to wave him into the apartment.

“Welcome to Maison Alexander. Have a seat. I'll finish packing.”

“A much different view than from the hallway.” His eyes roamed the small space. Nice. Very nice. The roses fit in well.” There were bouquet upon bouquet of roses placed throughout the tiny living room, my bedroom and even the bathrooms.

“Thank you again. The flowers are gorgeous.” I walked to the bedroom to continue packing, reaching into the linen closet and pulling out my toiletry bag. “Shoot! Where are my manners? Do you want anything to drink?” I called out. “I have water, soda, juice, um, almond milk. A digestif? There's sherry and brandy.”

“No. I’m fine,” he said from behind me. Surprised, I spun to face him. This hot guy wasn’t just in my apartment, he was in my bedroom.

He fingered the small diamond pendant around my neck lightly, and the unexpected touch made me flinch. Locking me in his gaze, he tugged me tightly against him, and my entire body trembled in response.

“Hi, beautiful,” he murmured, his eyes heavy with longing.

“Um. Hi,” I replied, not sure what else to say. *Jesus, Kandi. Could you at least try to not be so awkward?*

He leaned in slowly, caressing my hair and kissing the hollow beneath my jaw. The days’ worth of stubble on his chin tickled the sensitive flesh. My head rolled back and forth and I squeezed my eyes shut as a small moan escaped my lips. He nipped my neck before popping off with a groan.

“We should leave,” he whispered with a hint of a growl. “Do you have everything?”

I responded with a slight nod. I couldn’t for the life of me remember what I’d just thrown into the duffel. I thought there were several pairs of panties and a camisole. I wasn’t sure what I would wear to sleep, but I decided it didn’t matter. I wasn’t attending a sleepover. Chadwick and I wouldn’t polish our nails, braid each other’s hair or have a pillow fight.

I didn’t think our sleepover would require clothing.



CHAPTER

Fifteen

CHADWICK

I MADE SURE KANDACE WAS safely tucked inside of the car, placing the small, black duffel bag in the trunk before I bounded to the driver's side. Once inside, the signature scent of a new car along with Kandace's perfume tickled my nostrils.

I snuck a few glances at my companion who was sitting quietly in the passenger seat and tugging at her fingers. She avoided eye contact by focusing on the passing scenery. Was she nervous?

I sure as hell was. I would fuck her, a woman I'd known her entire life, and so many things could go wrong. She could be a cold fish in bed. I'm strong, and not small by any means. I could hurt her. Or we could lack any sexual chemistry . . . Well, judging by her reaction in the banquet room, I doubted that.

"Hey. Are you okay?" I asked softly, pulling her out of her thoughts.

"Yeah. Just thinking."

"Care to share?"

She closed her eyes and shook her head, and I knew it was better to drop the issue.

When we arrived at my loft, I led her to the sectional. She tucked the red gown beneath her before she sat. I pulled out my iPhone and flipped through the playlist in search of the most romantic song in my arsenal. With a few taps on my phone, Maxwell's silky rhythms glided through the wireless speaker system. I went to the kitchen and returned with two cocktail glasses of Brandy and milk.

"A nightcap for the lady and one for me." I handed her the glass, and she appeared thankful before she took a long sip of the drink.

I studied her silhouette. The sleek line of her perfect nose sloped to her full, lush mouth. I stared at her lips as my thumb stroked the skin at the base of her neck, her body trembled at the unexpected touch.

"The dress is perfect." She let out a nervous scoff at the compliment. "Stop it. Accept this compliment." I playfully pouted as I continued, "You hurt my feelings when you didn't dance with me at the nightclub. And you didn't dance with me at the ball tonight either. I ended up rotating between Mrs. Landry and Sandra." I stood and took her by the hand. "Dance with me."

I pulled her from the sofa and embraced her, leading us into a slow back and forth sway. She began to stroke my back in a rhythmic motion. The drink, music, and the dancing loosened Kandace's mood. She melted into me as we slowly rocked with each other.

"I spent all night fantasizing about holding you like this. I wondered what your reaction would be if I ran my thumb along your spine." She let out a slow hiss in reaction to my thumb moving along each vertebra.

There were so many places I wanted to kiss her, and I intended to explore them all. But at that moment, I favored the spot just beneath her ear. I nuzzled her there and left a sweet little kiss.

“Why are you here with me?” I murmured.

“Because I wanted to be here with you. Why did you invite me?” she moaned.

“Because I want to make you mine.”

I cradled her face in my hands and bent until our lips touched. Her right arm wrapped around my neck as her left hand pulled me closer. I walked her back to the sectional until her knees bent. Worry marred her pretty face as she flopped onto the seat cushion and stared at me.

“Kandace, I’m already yours. I’m just waiting for you to claim me.”

Heaving a sigh, she buried her face in her hands. *Okay, not the reaction I expected.*

“I need to make a confession.”

Oh shit! I took the seat on the cushion next to her. With her hand in mine, I searched her face as I attempted to understand her feelings. Maybe it was too soon to bring her back to my place. I shouldn’t have jeopardized our friendship over my selfish wants and needs. Yet, if she walked away, I was afraid my life would never be the same.

She stared at the wall before taking a deep breath. My thumb stroked her knuckles, and the small gesture encouraged her to continue.

“I’ve never had sex. I’m a virgin.” The words came out so fast it took me a moment to register what she’d said.

I’m a virgin.

The words echoed in my head. I wasn’t sure of the appropriate response because I had never been in that position before.

“Wow. *Why?*” I didn’t mean to sound rude. But why on earth would anyone deny themselves the pleasure of making love? Sex was like breathing. If you don’t breathe, you don’t live.

She avoided my gaze and answered, “My mother was eighteen when she became pregnant. She was a college freshman, and my father was a senior. They met during a campus tour and were together for five months. Once she learned she was pregnant, she finished out the semester and returned to New Orleans. My father continued to go to school and eventually graduated. Meanwhile, my mother had to sacrifice her dreams of becoming a pediatric nurse to raise me. She eventually returned to college and achieved a bachelor’s degree, but her number one priority was to provide for me.”

“I didn’t know about your father.” It seemed idiotic now, but in the twenty-one years of knowing Kandace, I had never given a moment’s thought to her father.

“Yeah. He reached out to me when I turned fifteen. He lives in Birmingham. He’s a chief technology officer at a tech company. It was so weird at first, and I’m still adjusting to his presence in my life. We’re still working on our relationship.” She paused. “Throughout my life, my mother has been brutally honest about being a teen mother. It was like *Scared Straight*. I was afraid of pregnancy, so I abstained.”

I fell back on the sofa and stared at the wall. I couldn’t believe I’d missed all the signs—the nervousness, the blushing, and the somewhat prudish behavior. All of those things hinted at a limited sexual experience.

“Wow. I didn’t expect this.”

“I can go home. We can forget all about this. I’ll call an Uber,” she whispered. When she started to rise from the sectional, I wrapped my hand around her wrist.

My heart beat like a Paleolithic era drum as the caveman in me reared his ugly head. My initial thought was to ruin her, to bring her a pleasure so intense, she wouldn’t even notice other men.

I wanted to be the first.

I wanted to be the *only*.

“I don’t want you to leave. But let me get this straight . . . You’ve never done *anything*?” I approached the question

tentatively.

“What do you mean?”

“Oral sex? Dry humping?”

“No.” She shook her head slightly.

“Has anyone ever fingered you?”

“No. Not really.”

“Not really?” I tilted my head to the side and smiled at her. “Don’t be coy. I’m curious to hear the answer.”

“No.” She blushed, looking at her lap.

“Touched you underneath your clothes?” She shook her head. What did she do in college? Now I understood why she was an honor student. I’d done pretty much everything on that list and more before my junior year in high school. I had to ask the question that lingered in my head. “Have you ever had an orgasm?”

Her cheeks flushed hotter as she nodded her head. *Bingo.*

“Tell me how you did it. Did you touch yourself? Or did you use a vibrator? Or did you hump a pillow?” I shot a devilish smile. I continued to stroke her knuckle with my thumb as I awaited the answer.

“All the above.” She bit her lips to stop her smile.

“Really?” I cocked a brow. That answer told me she wasn’t a prude and definitely not innocent.

“Really,” she chuckled, before sobering. “Chadwick, guys flee when they find out I’m a virgin. The world runs at a full sprint, but I’m running a slow jog. Nowadays, people meet, fall in love, and break up without leaving their couches. I want more.”

I quietly contemplated her words. She was perceptive because at that moment, I was afraid. I’d never slept with a virgin. When I’d been one myself, I’d fucked with a more experienced girl. I understood why some men had treated her like the plague. At some point in our lives, most men have uttered misconceptions about sex with virgins—virgins

become clingy and possessive, there's too much responsibility with being the first, or the woman is sad and lonely. I knew Kandace, and she was none of those things.

I knew how to please experienced women, but a virgin? That threw me for a loop. I imagined everything would have to go slowly. I would need to guide us through every single sexual experience. She would have to tell me what she liked and may need education on pleasing me. I also realized that I couldn't take anything for granted—especially consent.

It was a lot of pressure, but I would rise to the challenge. I would set the standard for all men after me. I grimaced at the thought of another man looking at, let alone touching or tasting, what was mine.

Her eyes darted around my face, searching for a clue to my thoughts and feelings.

“I hope this doesn't change our friendship.”

“It's the most perfect thing I've ever heard.” I softened my tone. “Can I touch you? I promise to make you feel good.”

She nodded. Before she could change her mind, I leaned in to place a light kiss on her lips. My teeth nipped at her bottom lip before taking it into my mouth. My palm softly cupped her chin. Our tongues entangled as we merged into each other. My tongue left the warm confines of her mouth and traced her lips. Low, guttural moans escaped as she breathed against my lips.

She exposed her neck, and I took the clue to nuzzle my favorite spot. I stayed there until I remembered there were other parts of her to explore.

I slowly unzipped the strapless dress and pulled the fabric down until it fell open. The flesh-toned strapless bra dipped dangerously low, almost to the point that her breasts could escape. I traced a path of kisses from her shoulder down to the tops of her golden-brown breasts. My cock rose as my hands deftly unhooked her bra and tossed it onto the sectional. My hands replaced the fabric as I moved to her beautiful, firm breasts, and she shivered when my fingers brushed against the

tender flesh. She moaned as I took the chocolate brown tips in between my fingers.

I gently squeezed the hardened tips before bending to take one in my mouth. She gasped before relaxing as I flicked my tongue against her.

“Every part of you is beautiful,” I murmured. Her hands clung to the sofa in a death grip, and I moved to place them on the back of my head. “Touch me. Talk to me. Let me know what you need or what feels good to you.”

My mouth continued to roam her breasts, alternating between each perfect peak. I bit, sucked, and licked every delicious inch. Her pelvis rose and fell as I hit the right spots.

“Are you okay with continuing?” I asked, scooting closer.

“Yes,” she nodded, breathing raggedly.

Leaning down until I reached the hemline of the red ball gown, I pulled back the fabric to expose her skin. When the cool air of the loft hit her exposed thighs, her eyes and mouth flew open in surprise. She relaxed once I massaged the flesh and continued my mouth’s exploration of her breasts.

My fingers traced along her inner thigh to the lacy edge of her panties, and I moaned as I swiped my thumb down her drenched seam. Her legs widened in response, which I took as an invitation to continue.

I wanted to be the first in all things. My fingers. My tongue. My cock.

I growled into her neck. The only thing separating me from that unexplored flesh was a lacy strip of fabric. I moved the panties to the side as my fingers swept against her moistened slit. She was completely hairless.

“Fuck! You’re bare.” I growled, “Did you do this for Pierre?” A wild streak of jealousy ran through me as I simultaneously fought the urge to pull her panties down and rub my face against her pussy.

“No. I did it for you,” she breathed, embarrassment tinting her tone.

“Good answer.” I groaned as my index finger met the slickness of her tight, wet cunt. I moved my finger in and out of her, adding my middle finger as I circled her clit with my thumb. Her pussy clenched around both fingers. “Jesus. You’re so wet and so fucking tight.” The hand that wasn’t deep within Kandace adjusted my throbbing and hardening cock.

“Right there. Keep it going,” she pleaded.

Her head rolled back and forth as she raised her hips to meet each movement. Her sweet, tight pussy beckoned me. Her magnificent breasts heaved with each breath, and her mouth opened in ecstasy. Alternating between small circles and the thrusting motion of my fingers, we quickly found our rhythm and moved beautifully together.

I was afraid my trapped cock would burst the seams of my boxer briefs and pants. If I unbuttoned or unzipped my trousers, this petting session would turn into a full-blown fuck. I wanted to savor this moment with her. This wasn’t about me. This was about giving Kandace the first time of her life.

“You like this, don’t you?” I laughed as she rapidly nodded her head, and I continued to move my fingers inside her, caressing her in long, slow strokes. “Are you ready to get started?”



CHAPTER

Sixteen

KANDACE

WHAT? *AM I READY TO start? I thought we started!* Insecurity ran rampant through my brain as the what-ifs began to cloud my thoughts. What if I couldn't satisfy him? What if I sucked at sex? What if I couldn't achieve an orgasm from sex?

I shook myself back to reality, tamping down my apprehensive thoughts.

"I'm not ready to fuck you," I admitted.

"Who said anything about fucking?" He panted as his finger quickened its pace. He growled, "Open your eyes. Look at me."

I nervously peeked out of one eye, expecting a look of disappointment. Instead, the feral gleam of desire marked Chadwick's handsome face. I opened my other eye and followed his lips as his mouth moved closer and closer to mine.

I'd read many taboo romance novels and perused erotic picture books. I'd watched internet porn. I may or may not have had an X-rated Tumblr account. I'd taken part in more sexual girl talk sessions than I could count. Even though I

hadn't had sex or even an intimate touch from a man, I'd considered myself knowledgeable of all things related to sex.

But I was wrong. So wrong.

Nothing could have prepared me for the divinity of a solitary finger dragging inside of my wetness. The first stroke of his finger launched me from this earth. Like the blast from a rocket, I jetted off into space with my back pressed firmly against the sofa.

My heart was thumping a thousand beats per minute. I allowed myself to enjoy this gift—Chadwick taking care of my primal needs.

He was so skilled. So knowledgeable. Chadwick knew exactly what I needed. Concentration and control were written all over his face as he increased the speed of his thumb. His two fingers delved deeper within me, stretching my tight, virginal pussy.

The simple movement of his mouth on my nipples, rolling his tongue and taking the taut tips between his teeth, blasted me straight to the heavens. I floated, enraptured in raw feelings and foreign sensations. He could have all of my measly earthly possessions. He could have my virginity and even my soul. I didn't care about any of it. I only cared about him and that moment.

My legs trembled uncontrollably, yet I didn't have the strength to release the scream trapped in my throat. Twenty-one years of pent up desire exploded out of every inch of my body as I helplessly fought to regain control. His fingers, combined with my release, plunged me from the farthest recesses of the heavens back to earth. I rode the free fall through the layers of the dark obsidian, navy, and light blue stratosphere.

After my release, he leaned back against the sofa. "Good, huh?"

Without warning, he roughly placed the palm of my hand against the sizable bulge in his slacks. He closed his eyes, and a sharp gasp rushed out of his mouth as my hand instinctively

traveled along the rock-hard ridge of his cock. Goodness, gracious. This was my first time touching a penis. He was so thick and long and just . . . *big*.

“Kandace, do you feel this? I’m so hard for you. Not today, maybe not even this year, but someday . . . I will smell, taste, and fuck that pussy. You will wrap your beautiful lips around this big cock. But bottom line—you are *mine*. No more bullshit dates. No more making me jealous. Do you hear me?”

I nodded. *Yes, I hear you.*

He stood and popped his fingers in his mouth. To my horror, he licked his fingers clean as if I were the most delicious delicacy in the world.

“You are sweeter than candy,” he added with a mischievous smile. “I will have fun with you. For now, I’m off to take care of this. My eyes followed him as he walked to the guest bathroom, and I quietly laughed to myself once the door was closed.

What’s better than one finger? Two. Definitely two. I was delirious—deliriously infatuated with Chadwick.

Five minutes later, he returned to the living room, and where I lay slumped against the sofa. My elegant and expensive gown was bunched down around my waist, exposing my breasts. My panties were twisted and so wet against me. Concern painted his face as he nudged my leg.

“Hey. Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I nodded my head and arranged my clothes. “Yeah. I’m great.”

He crawled onto the large sectional and gathered me in his arms.

“It’s official,” he declared, kissing the top of my head. “You belong to me.”



THE NEXT MORNING, I AWAKENED TO SNORING. MY LEGS WERE caught in a vise, and I winced from the sunlight streaming

through the floor-to-ceiling windows. *What time is it?* I looked to the left side of the bed.

Chadwick was glorious in the early morning light, deliciously shirtless and draped across the king-size bed. He hugged his pillow with the duvet barely covering his torso. In an act of possession, he'd trapped my calves underneath one of his massive legs.

This has been quite a week. It had all started with the impromptu date at the park and ended with me in Chadwick's bed. With each interaction, I learned a little about him and, in the process, myself.

I wanted to believe him when he said I was his, but in the back of my mind, I wondered if the flowers, flirtation, and impromptu trips to the park were part of his game. Would he remain interested after we had sex? I hoped he would, because I'd had an incredible time and felt so close to him. I didn't want the feeling to end.

I lay perfectly still and stared at his gorgeous face, counting the number of eyelashes and memorizing each freckle and line. Careful to not make a sound, I softly inhaled and exhaled. I didn't want to awaken that beautiful man, but he stirred only a few minutes later. His blue eyes brightened when our gazes met.

"Good morning, beautiful," he yawned.

"Good morning." I cringed when I rubbed my tongue over my unbrushed teeth. *Did I pack a toothbrush?*

"I can't imagine a lovelier sight. You're gorgeous in the rays of the morning sunlight." His voice brought warmth all over my body. He reached out and ran his fingers along the ridge of my nose. "I had a great time last night. I would kiss you, but morning breath."

"Nice," I deadpanned.

"I now know what you're like in the morning." With an impish sparkle in his eyes, Chadwick continued, "Kandi, men frequently have an issue in the morning and sleeping next to

your lush curves has done nothing to keep my dick under control. Sweetheart, I don't want you getting any ideas."

He rolled over and rose from the bed, my gift was an unhindered view of Chadwick's back. *Mmm*. The man was a Greek god—sculpted and tall. I unrepentantly allowed my eyes to roam his physique, following as he sauntered to the bathroom. My heart soared when I saw the simple, small black heart and arrow tattoo on his left shoulder. *Jesus!*

He was everything a man should be and everything I thought I would never have. My mouth watered at the sight of the bulge in his boxer briefs. I should have averted my eyes, but I couldn't. Damn. Feeling my gaze, he looked back at me. The move shocked me out of my lascivious thoughts.

"I'm not fully hard," he laughed, a playful glint in his eyes.

My jaw dropped. *Kandi, close your mouth*. I immediately dashed any thoughts of sex with Chadwick. No ma'am. I liked my reproductive organs where they were, thank you very much.

But honestly, who was I kidding? Some things you had to try out, and Chadwick's dick was at the top of the list.

I was afraid to look at myself in the mirror, especially since I hadn't worn my sleep bonnet or even washed my face before bed. My hair could have been all over my head and day-old makeup caked and smeared on my face. I reached for my duffel bag reluctantly and opened my small, lighted mirror, shuddering at my reflection. I looked like death warmed over. I used a Kleenex and a small tube of Vaseline to straighten out my makeup, popping an Altoid for good measure.

Kandi, why do you care how you look? It's Chadwick. He will get it however you present it to him.

I sucked on the mint as I hurriedly finished the repair job before he walked out of the bathroom. He strode to my side of the bed. My eyes glazed at the sight of his broad shoulders and drifted to his perfect pectorals, finally coming to rest on his rippled abdomen. He had a tapered 'V-Cut.' The V-Cut along with his soft happy trail created an arrow. An arrow that

pointed straight to his dick, which was resting against his right thigh.

As much as I wanted to lose my virginity to him, his size was intimidating. I wouldn't be able to walk for days. My pussy throbbed in response, and I shifted against the pulsation.

He laughed as I struggled to remain calm and appear unaffected.

He stepped closer, and for a second, I was face-to-cock. Thankfully, he kneeled in front of me before my naughty thoughts took over completely. He reached out, and I allowed his fingers to caress my cheek. He scanned my face as if committing every detail to memory.

“I will never pressure you to take this further than you like. We move at your pace.” He leaned into me and placed a chaste kiss on my lips. I tasted the minty freshness of his mouthwash and the warm heat of his breath. “I didn't sleep a wink last night. I watched you and memorized your silhouette. I was nervous because I was there next to you, the woman of my dreams.”

Chadwick St. Clair just referred to me as the woman of his dreams. For three long years, I had dreamed of him and imagined when he would see me not as that little bratty schoolgirl, but as a woman filled with desire. Now, I was in his bed, and I'd never shared how I felt about him. Why did I deny myself the pleasure of the one good thing in my life? He had made himself vulnerable on so many occasions while fear had gripped my heart.

I had two choices. I could continue to deny my attraction toward him, or I could be a woman and explain my thoughts and feeling. I chose the latter. *If I blow it, then I blow it, but at least he'll know.*

My hand sought his and caressed the rough skin.

“I've fallen for you, and it scares me.” He stared at me in shock before his expression softened. Feeling braver, my eyes met his, and I continued with my confession. “You're perfect, and I'm not. I'm inexperienced in all facets of life, and well

. . . You're not. I have an overbearing mother that I'm too afraid to tell to back off. I'm unsure about my future while working a job I don't love. But the one bright spot in my day is stepping off that elevator and seeing your smile and hearing your voice."

On cue, he flashed his pearly white teeth. "Okay. Continue."

"One of my biggest regrets was not letting you know how I felt before I went away to college. You were so kind and attentive that summer, and for the first time in my life, I had felt like my opinions mattered. I was so sad when I hopped in that car to go to Gainesville knowing that we would never have that moment again. I contemplated calling you, but I fooled myself into thinking I was content with our lives moving in opposite directions."

I stopped rubbing his hand, and my fingers trailed to his chin before I leaned in and kissed him until we both gasped for air. My hand slid to his chest and hovered over his heart. I closed my eyes and silently counted the racing beats. I opened my eyes to see him drinking me in, and I said the words I thought I would never utter to another human being.

"Chadwick, I need you in my life."

I expected him to express an equally big revelation about me. Instead, he climbed over me and settled behind me on the bed. He spooned me from behind, his hard chest tight against me as our bodies seamlessly fit together. His heavy arm wrapped around me, clutching me, and I was afraid I would have marks where his fingers pressed into my skin. He held me in his arms until the movements of his chest slowed.

"I'm all yours," he murmured before we drifted off.

He's mine, all mine, and I'm never letting him go.

What felt like a few hours later, I awakened and slipped from his arms. I quietly gathered my gown and looked for my duffel bag. The time was eleven a.m., and I felt it was best to leave so he could get a jump on the day's activities.

He turned in his sleep and rubbed the spot where I had been a few minutes before. Startled, he sprang up, and his eyes scanned the room.

“What are you doing?”

“I need to get home. I’ll call an Uber.”

He flung his legs over the side of the bed and stood before taking a few steps to be at my side.

“No. Stay. Eat breakfast with me. I’ll order carryout and then we will relax on the sofa.” There was a hint of finality to his tone.

“I didn’t pack any pants.”

“I’d rather you walk around naked. But if you need something to wear, then wear my workout shorts. I need you here with me. If you will walk around naked, then I had better take a cold shower.” My cheeks flushed as his eyes caught mine. Enjoying my embarrassment, he continued, “See? I’m excited just thinking about it.”

He tricked me. My eyes followed his to the large bulge in the front of his briefs and a river flooded my panties. He sobered a little and tilted my chin back up to meet his gaze.

“Sweets, I’ll stop teasing because I want you to know that I’m serious. You’re in control here. You decide when we will take the next step. I won’t pressure you. I’m ready whenever you are. Waking up next to you with your scrumptious ass pushed against me and not being able to taste you or really feel you . . .” He ran a hand through his hair and let out a whoosh as he exhaled. “That’s the hardest temptation I’ve ever faced. All I want is to feel those long legs draped over my shoulders as I bite your lips. Both sets.”

“Show me,” I squeaked.

“Excuse me?” He stammered, “What . . . What exactly do you want me to show you?”

“I would like you to drape my legs over your shoulders and bite my lips.”

With our eyes locked, he backed me up until I collapsed against the mattress. I watched intently as I slowly inched my way back to the headboard. My heart beat a hundred miles an hour when he placed his knee on the mattress and crawled toward me. His leg nudged mine apart to create space for his large, muscular frame. Settling at my center, I moaned at the delightful pressure of his pelvis against mine. He leaned down and gave me a slow kiss that sent shivers to my toes. I needed to get closer to him. I opened my legs wider, and his tongue moved deeper in my mouth in response.

His fingers roamed through my long, dark curls before our mouths met for another kiss. Our desires wrapped around each movement. Our kiss was a silent answer to the question that lingered in our minds.

Yes. We would be together.

Chadwick didn't play fair. He pressed his hard dick against my wet, panty-clad pussy. Could he feel my wetness seeping against his boxer briefs?

"So sweet," he muttered against my mouth as he inserted a finger inside of my panties.

I gripped the cool, white sheets and squeezed my eyes shut, trying to control my reactions. He couldn't know how nervous I was. Puzzled by my reaction, he added a second finger and slowly pushed himself in until he was to the hilt. His thumb circled my clit.

"You're so tight. I desperately want to fuck you, but this is so much more fun." His abs rippled as his hand moved to adjust himself. I whimpered at the thought of his big, thick cock pushing into my tight pussy. "Let's get this t-shirt off of you."

I quickly grasped the hem of the shirt. In one swift move, I pulled the t-shirt over my head while he slid my panties down my thighs. For the first time in my life, I was completely nude in front of a man. My hands instinctively moved to cover my bare breasts and pussy.

“No. Never cover what’s mine. You’re perfect, so fucking perfect,” he groaned in a soft whisper. Propped on his knees, his eyes scanned my naked body. His fingers lightly traced up and down my legs as he studied every curve and line of my form. Admiration filled his gaze as he looked down at me. “I want to bury myself so deep within you that it will take an eternity for my cum to drip out of you.”

With his chest pressed against my bare breasts, his hands slid around my hips and gripped my ass. He slammed his still clothed, rock-hard cock against my bare body, and I moaned in appreciation.

“Do you like that?”

“Yes,” I nodded, drawing the word into a hiss of pleasure. My heart raced as he dropped a light trail of kisses from my mouth to my clavicle. My hands rubbed up and down his muscular back, and my skin tingled as he kissed the valley between my breasts down to the flat planes of my stomach. He moved to lie flat on the bed. *It’s happening.* This was what I’d asked for. His head aligned at the apex of my legs. He took a deep inhale before diving in.

“Such a pretty little pussy. We will have so much fun.” His silky voice was ragged as desire dripped from every syllable.

He moved his tongue up and down my slit, and the warm, wet sensation took me by surprise. I cried out in pleasure as his tongue moved through my folds.

“I know why your name is Kandi. You’re too sweet.”

He leaned back in and pushed his tongue deep. My hands moved boldly to his head and held him in place. The tip of his tongue skillfully landed on my clit before he dragged it around and around the throbbing bud. This time, my hands pulled at his hair. I wanted to scream in pleasure, but I was afraid I would explode.

“Ohhh. Don’t stop. That is so good.” It surprised me that I could form the words to encourage him to continue.

My hips thrust upward as he tongued my sex in long, languishing swipes along with deep in and out motions. His

hands held me firmly in place as my fingers rubbed faster and faster through his hair and scalp. I lost control as he fucked me with his tongue.

He dragged me from my safe, innocent virginal doldrums into his filthy lair. He took me right to the edge before he pulled back.

I leaned up on my elbows, looking down at him. *Why did he stop?* Our eyes met, and he licked his lips before he spoke.

“Tell me what I want to hear,” he demanded.

I didn’t have any idea what he was talking about.

He leaned back with a smirk before he plunged back in. He breathed against my skin, slowing and quickening the pace. Teasing me. Making me beg for more. My legs stiffened as pleasure flowed from my toes to my thighs and settled at my center. The spasms ebbed against his tongue.

He didn’t lift his face from between my legs as he repeated the command.

“Tell me what I want to hear.”

“Don’t stop?” I guessed out loud. He laughed and smacked the sides of my legs before resuming the sweet torture to my sex.

“Tell. Me. What. I. Want. To. Hear.” Our eyes met, and he held my gaze. Then, it hit me. I knew exactly what he wanted to hear.

I love you.

My goodness. I’d just revealed my heart to him. He couldn’t expect me to tell him I love him. Could he? It seemed disingenuous to say I loved him while his head was between my thighs. But after I gave it a second thought, I realized that maybe he didn’t want to hear the three little words.

“I’m yours. There is no other man for me.”

“Not the answer I expected. Try again.” He leaned down and continued to tongue my dripping wet sex.

No words could describe this feeling. I moaned, arched my back, and squirmed against his mouth. He was relentless as he licked me. I closed my eyes as my sweet release came with the force of twenty thousand volcano eruptions. He slowed his pace until the waves subsided.

He sat up and gathered me into his arms until my breathing slowed.

“Chadwick, I love you.”

“And I love you, Sweets.”



CHAPTER

Seventeen

CHADWICK

MY PARENTS LIVED IN A white, two-story Italianate mansion in the Garden District. In the late 1800s, Charles St. Clair had earned his first million dollars and built the home for his family of ten. A regular fixture in New Orleans holiday home tours, the house had also been the setting for top-selling vampire novels and movies.

The house was an edifice, but my mother made it a home. In her quest for a beautiful life, she'd added warmth and character to the large, sterile home. There were always bouquets of beautiful flowers on display, and she'd taken care to create a large gallery wall filled of photos of family and friends.

Nine thousand square feet hadn't been able to contain the ninety thousand square feet of personalities within the walls of this house. There had been many arguments between a rebellious teenager and his firm, demanding parents.

I parked my Jeep in the stone driveway. My mother's white Mercedes convertible was parked inside the opened garage. Excited about seeing my mother, along with my newfound relationship with Kandace, I bounced into the house

with an extra spring in my step. I entered through the back door and hung my keys on a hook in the mudroom.

“Mother? Mom?” I hollered from the back door.

When silence met my calls, I grew concerned. I walked through the hallway leading to the main living areas, peering through the doorways of the kitchen, bathrooms, and informal living room. I found her in the formal sitting room, the most ornate and photographed room in the house. Elegant festoons topped the gilded draperies. Intricate ceiling medallions and gilded trim added an air of formality to the room. The jewel of the opulent space was a large mural of the Garden District during the early twentieth century.

“Mom. You had me worried. Why didn’t you answer?”

The word best used to describe Genevieve St. Clair was impeccable. At forty-nine, she was youthful and fit. Styled in an off-white knit pantsuit, she sat on the antique sofa and thumbed through a gardening magazine. Her chin-length, blonde bob was smoothed and glossy from her twice-weekly blow out appointments. It didn’t matter if she was having a night out or a quiet evening at home—her signature shade of cherry red always coated her lips.

“I was ignoring you. What did I tell you about yelling in the house?” she playfully scolded. She stood before pulling me into a tight hug. Rocking me back and forth, she cooed, “My handsome boy. I’ve missed you.”

“I can’t breathe,” I choked out dramatically, stiffening until she released her grip and playfully slapped me on the arm.

My mother was my best friend. Through circumstances neither of us wanted, we clung fiercely to each other. My father viewed his role in the family as the provider. Many hours at work and travel had left little time for being a consistent male role model in a boy’s life, which meant my young mother had been mostly on her own with the difficult task of disciplining, supporting, and nurturing a rowdy boy. I considered her parenting a success because I made it to adulthood in possession of all of my limbs.

“You’re staying for Sunday dinner, right? Dante will have everything ready at three thirty. He’s preparing a fabulous Keto meal. Your daddy read a book, and now it is our new way of eating. Are you familiar with Keto? It’s such an easy diet, and the results are incredible.” Dante was my parents’ personal chef.

“I’m familiar with the Keto plan.” I bit my lip to contain my laughter.

“Your daddy looks good.” She whistled and grinned. “Don’t tell him, but sometimes when I’m out for lunch with the ladies, I eat a big ol’ hunk of bread slathered with lots of butter.” She poured me a glass of iced tea from a neighboring pitcher. “Sit and talk with your mother. Catch me up on everything. How is the loft conversion going?”

“The lofts are coming along. There are a few issues with the electrical inspections. Once we pass, we’ll move to drywall installation and painting.”

“Fantastic. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Mom. What’s going on with you?”

“I’m doing well. I’m preparing for next month’s anniversary party and the Anthea’s winter festival. It’s in December, and I expect you to be in attendance.”

My mother was a charter member of the Krewe of Anthea, it was one of New Orleans’ most exclusive, all-female social organizations. Anthea translated to ‘Lady of Flowers’ in Greek. Twenty years ago, a group of homemakers from the neighborhood garden club had started the organization. Under my mother’s leadership, the group had grown from thirteen members to three hundred. Throughout the year, they held fundraisers for city beautification projects and scholarships. During Mardi Gras, the members dressed in floral-themed costumes and rode on the parade float.

“I’ll be there.”

She looked at me over her reading glasses. Her eyes pierced mine and held me in place. That was ‘the look’ she used when she would speak with parental authority. I’d been a

wild teenager, so I was all too familiar with that look. I didn't breathe or even look away.

"You'll need a date."

"I'll have a date," I agreed.

"A nice girl. Someone you can marry. Not the usual women you show up with." She rolled her eyes and shook her head.

I knew exactly where she was going with this conversation. My mother had nearly disowned me after the last gala I'd attended. My date, Whitney James, had drunk one too many of the garden rose martinis, and had passed out at the table. I'd ended up carrying her out of the ballroom. We'd never spoken again.

My decision to take Whitney to the gala had been another fuck-up in a series of fuck-ups. My parents knew of my sexual reputation. Their disappointment in me was no secret—I sensed it in my father's glare almost every time he looked my way. The heir to the St. Clair fortune and New Orleans' number one bachelor should go for quality over quantity.

"I know the perfect girl for you. Remember Arden Leblanc? She has a lovely granddaughter. A gorgeous girl. She's a recent Loyola law graduate. You two have so much in common. You should get to know each other."

"Mom, that's unnecessary."

"Soon, I will be an old woman. I don't want to be too frail to push a stroller or pick up my dear, sweet grandchild."

The dramatics were an elaborate ruse for compliments.

"Mother, you aren't old at all," I deadpanned, rolling my eyes. "You will be a fun and vibrant grandmother."

"I don't want my grandchildren to call me Granny or Grandmother." She mimed the gagging motion. She added an emphatic hand gesture. "They'll call me Gen-Gen or nothing else."

I wasn't sure I had what it took to be a good father, though I didn't have the heart to tell my mother that. The amount of

work required to develop young minds overwhelmed me. But if I said any of that out loud, she was liable to have a stroke. I changed the subject instead.

“How did you know Dad was the one?”

“Why do you ask? Is my baby boy keeping secrets from me?” she teased.

“No. I was just wondering.”

“I hate to say this, but when you know, you just know,” she said, shrugging slightly. “It was the summer of my sophomore year when I met your daddy. He was fresh out of law school and had shadowed Daddy Jack. The sorority sister that fixed us up described him as a real humdinger. I was excited and took all the care in the world when I got ready. I wore a white pleated leather miniskirt with a cute little cropped top. Thought I was Kim Basinger,” she chuckled.

“In walks your daddy, looking like Harrison Ford, and I swooned. We sat in that tiny Italian restaurant and talked for hours about anything and everything. He was so smart, so mature, and I was smitten. In those four short hours, I’d planned our wedding, named our children, and daydreamed of us sitting on the porch surrounded by a brood of grandchildren.”

“We sat there for so long we got thrown out of the restaurant,” she laughed. “After dinner, he escorted me to my car where we stood at the driver’s side door and kissed for an eternity.” She ignored my frown and continued the story. “He pulled away from me and stated that he wasn’t ready for marriage. He also added that he wasn’t looking for a wife or a girlfriend. That’s when I knew I had him and that he would be my husband.” She reached for her glass and took a sip. “So, who is she?”

“I was just curious. There’s no one in particular,” I lied.

“Bull. Shit. You’ve never asked me anything about love. You’re keeping secrets from me, and that’s your right. But I will tell you to keep your heart open for whatever happens.”

We looked each other in the eye for a minute. My mother knew me better than anyone and had the uncanny ability to see through all of my games and facades. I wasn't sure if my new love with Kandace showed on my face, but I was certain she knew something was going on.

“Where is Dad?”

Her expression softened at the mention of my father. After almost thirty years of marriage, the two were still blissfully in love.

“He's at the golf course. He promised he would make it in time for dinner. He'll be happy to see you.”

The last time my father and I had spoken was five months ago. I had avoided the Mardi Gras crowds, preferring to watch the parade from the terrace of the St. Clair mansion. Bundled in our hats, cashmere scarves, and leather gloves, my father and I had sipped spiked coffee and shared our Lenten promises. He'd promised to give up fatty cuts of red meat while I had vowed to abstain from one-night stands.

My promise had garnered a smile and opened the door to a difficult topic. For the hundredth time, he'd asked me to begin succession training for St. Clair Enterprises. Well, he hadn't asked, he'd demanded.

His impatience was about the family legacy. He was nervous that everything our ancestors sacrificed for the company would go to waste. For the past hundred and twenty-five years, a St. Clair had sat at the helm of St. Clair Enterprises. As the oldest male descendant, it was my duty to carry on the family name and the success of the company.

The warm, brandy-filled mug had made me pliable and clouded my judgement. The liquor, coupled with my father's refusal to accept the word no, had left me no other choice but to agree. I had hesitantly agreed with the proposal and set a tentative start date for August.

Once I was sober, I had realized I'd made a horrible mistake. I didn't want to be a full-time employee. The next day, I'd explained that I didn't want to take over as CEO. I

suggested that he reach out to one of my younger, more industrious cousins for the role.

We hadn't talked since that day.

As expected, my father arrived in time for dinner. Before greeting my mother and I, he stopped at the liquor cabinet and poured three fingers of Macallan whiskey. After knocking back the drink in one gulp, he turned his attention to his family. He hugged my mother and kissed her on the cheek, then held out his hand to greet me with a stern, "Son."

The three of us dined on salmon steaks and dill sauce along with bacon-wrapped asparagus. The table was silent until my father spoke up.

"I hear everything is going well with the building. I can't wait to see it."

"I think you'll like it. I'm proud of the work done so far."

"After you're done with this pet project, I trust the construction bug will be out of your system. At some point, you will need to grow up and take the reins of our legacy. I've worked too hard for you to squander this opportunity and our fortune." His steely gaze locked with mine. "I hope you will reconsider."

The iciness in his tone lowered the temperature in the room, so much so that my mother shuddered before looking down at her plate.

"We must work on your dating life. I have a few friends with suitable daughters." To Martin St. Clair, 'suitable' meant a wealthy socialite devoid of personality and well-versed in public personas. Someone who could clean up my public image. A lady in the street and bore in the bed.

At twenty-six, I didn't need my father to manage my life. I wanted to tell him there was a more than suitable woman in my life. A woman I could share my future with.

This morning she had woken up in my arms. She'd spent all night clinging tightly to me while we slept in my bed. With a smile plastered on my face, I had memorized each breath, snore, and eye movement.

When you know, you just know . . .

With no regard for table manners, I pulled out my phone and typed furiously. By the end of dinner, I had a date for dessert with Kandace. She would be my dessert.



FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY ADULT LIFE, I WAS IN LOVE.

I had experienced my first love at the tender age of fifteen. I'd fallen for the first girl who had touched my dick. Chloe Randall had been one grade above me. The spoiled daughter of our neighborhood association president, Chloe had been wise beyond our years. She'd been well-versed in using what she had to get what she wanted. With lips permanently fixed in a pout, she'd purred requests for gifts. Unable to see the future and filled with raging hormones, I'd given her easy access to my wallet. I'd showered her with stuffed animals and jewelry. Anything to persuade her to continue touching my dick.

After two months of being led by the dick through the streets of New Orleans, my friends James, Quad, and Mike had pulled me aside and given me the lowdown. Under their tutelage, I had learned a motto that had shifted my mindset as it related to the fairer sex.

Always leave with more than you came with.

I stopped trusting women and began dating for sport. I'd spent the next eleven years sampling the various women in New Orleans, Manhattan, and Washington D. C. . Women who wanted whatever I offered, be it gifts, sexual fulfillment, or social connections. I always went for female hustlers with ulterior motives for being with me, the ones whose gazes drifted around the room to check if anyone was watching us.

In short, my interactions with women had become sexual transactions. Quid pro quo. Kiss me and I'll kiss you back. Suck my cock and I'll finger your clit. Fuck me and I'll buy you a handbag or a pair of shoes. I always gave the bare minimum and expected the stars in return. And I did so at the expense of many hearts.

Years of loose sexual morals made me mechanical and unfeeling and eventually took a toll on my relationships. Kevlar covered my cold, dead heart, and nothing could penetrate my armor. But the proverbial Tin Man had received his heart ten weeks ago when Kandace had crashed her way back in my life.

I love her.

This time, love looked a lot different. It wasn't about the gifts, the sex, or the prestige of being with me, it was a bond and a connection. Kandace knew my background and reputation, and she never judged me for it. She gave me her heart, and for that, I would be thankful for the rest of our lives.

Past dating experience had jaded my view of love, and sometimes I had questioned whether she was truly into me. But some things you just knew. Her eyes glowed when she talked to me. She always ended our kisses with a soft, sweet sigh.

For the past month, we spent our days running through the household tasks. When we completed our work, we explored the city. At the end of each day, we plopped on the sectional and watched television until she fell asleep. Each night, I gathered her in my arms and placed her in my bed before settling in beside her. She slept in my arms, and when we inevitably broke apart, she reached for me.

She spent a majority of her time at my loft, yet I craved more. There was only one way to convince her to give herself to me. To prove that I was in it for keeps. A dramatic gesture would move our relationship forward. My next move could be a beautiful thing, or it could crash and burn.

It all started with panties. Tiny black panties, as a matter of fact.

I'd had trouble sleeping. Like a heat-seeking missile, Kandace's ass had remained pressed to my dick. I spent the night acutely aware of the slightest movement. Her sexy brown body and curly chestnut hair took up over half of the bed, leaving me a tiny slice for myself. Let's not even discuss

how she hogged the covers and left me to sleep under a handkerchief-sized sliver of the blanket.

Then, to make matters worse, I'd peeked under the covers. In the middle of the night, the shirt had risen above her toned thighs to reveal her panties. To call them panties would be an overstatement. She wore two postage stamp-sized squares attached with a sliver of string.

The scraps of fabric hardly covered her bare little pussy. All night, her lips tempted me. My mouth watered while my dick throbbed. I wanted to climb on top of her and slowly slide my cock inside until I was buried deep within her. My fingers twitched in desperation to reach down and straighten the tiny panties. Instead, I slept with my hands firmly wrapped around my swollen cock.

A raging case of blue balls impacted my decision-making, and a major life step that took most men many years took me only a few weeks. If this ended horribly, I would chalk it up to involuntary celibacy.

Three years ago, I had kissed a girl before she left for college.

Today, I wanted to marry the woman she had grown to be.

“CHEERS!” KANDACE HELD UP THE GREEN BOTTLE OF BEER and clinked it against mine. She sipped and placed the bottle on the coaster. “Dinner was delicious. I didn't know you could cook.”

“Sweets, you had very little faith in my grilling skills.”

“I've never had a meal made of all grilled foods. Grilled steak. Grilled corn. Grilled zucchini and peppers. Grilled pineapple. Wow. That was a first,” she teased. “I'm stuffed, but I want to thank you in my own special way.”

“What did you have in mind?” I asked. My heart thumped wildly when she took my hand and led me indoors to the master bedroom. We stood face-to-face at the bed before she tugged my shorts down over my hips. I eagerly removed my

shirt and barely stepped out of the shorts before she roughly pushed me onto the king-size bed. I panted short, fast breaths, moving to the center of the bed to make room for her. She dropped next to me and placed a hand on my chest. I laughed softly and opened my legs wider as a subtle suggestion of what I needed.

Eyes hooded with lustful appreciation, she leaned over to kiss me as her soft, smooth fingers followed along the path leading from my lower belly to my cock.

“I’m putting you on notice.” She leaned against me and wrapped her leg over my thigh, the move setting every single neuron in my body on fire. “I’m ready.”

“What do you mean?” I raised from the bed and rested on my elbows. and looked over at her. My eyelids fluttered, and I let out a ragged breath when her hand gripped my already swollen cock.

“We’ve been together for eight weeks, and I’m ready to make love to you. I need you.” Her confession set my world on fire, and I growled low and deep in my throat.

The first time we’d done this, she’d been afraid a firm touch would hurt me, but now her grip was confident and experienced. She leaned in to bite my earlobe before she stroked me with all the enthusiasm you would expect of an overachieving, honors college student. I sank back on the plush pillows and closed my eyes as she grasped the base of my cock and began a smooth up and down motion. My student ended each stroke with a twist of her wrist. Concentrating on not coming, my thoughts drifted away to anywhere but my bedroom.

“What brought this on?” I hissed when she removed her hand from my cock to take off her white cotton tank top displaying her taut, firm breasts. I reached out to trace around the perfectly sized areola. She squealed and leaned away from me. Then, she resumed the sensual yet tortuous rub along my dick. Just the way I liked it.

“I almost lost my mind last night when you slid your cock back and forth between my *hot, soaked lips*. I raised my hips

off the bed and prayed you would slip inside of me,” she moaned against my lips. “I can’t take any more of this torture. I *need* you to fuck me.”

I wanted her as much as she wanted me and I was so ready, but she needed to hold off for a little while longer. My plans for us were bigger than a fuck buddy or a girlfriend-boyfriend relationship.

Kandace didn’t make it easy on me. She knew exactly how to please me and took pride in fulfilling my needs. She pushed her breasts against my bare chest and whispered indecent words a man needed to hear while having his dick stroked. She moaned as she moved her hand over my *big, beautiful cock*, and I lost myself in her.

When I couldn’t take anymore, I squirted thick ropes of cum into her hand. She kept pumping until every drop of seed drained from me, and satisfaction spread across her face.

She plucked several tissues from the box inside the nightstand and wiped the cum off her hand before focusing on my softening dick.

After we were clean, she stretched next to me while I came down from my high. I wrapped her in my arms, my finger slowly tracing circles along her back as my mind raced a thousand miles an hour. *Should I do it now? Or wait?* I waited. Post-orgasm is not exactly the most romantic moment.

Instead, I rolled Kandace over onto her back. Her legs widened, a completely instinctive movement. She was so aroused that it took very little time to have her shattering against my hand in return.

Once we were both satiated, we resumed our favorite positions on the sofa. I spent the best moments of my life with Kandace’s body wrapped in my arms. I draped my arm over her chest as she sat between my legs on the sofa. The pads of her soft fingers trailed up and down my arm. I pressed her back firmly against my chest and murmured into her hair.

“Sweets, what could I say or do to convince you to move in with me?”

She broke out of my arms and turned to face me. Delight and astonishment danced in her hazelnut colored eyes.

“Are you serious?”

“Do you have any hesitation to living with me?” I took her fingers in mine, bringing her hand to my mouth.

“I’ve never lived with a man. It will take some getting used to.” She paused before continuing. “Why on earth do you want me to live with you?”

“I spend more time with you than anyone else. I enjoy having you here.”

“Same here. I guess we would need to figure out the financial arrangements.”

“No, that’s unnecessary.” I leaned in and kissed her before she could object. We kissed until we were both breathless, and I’d hoped she would drop the subject of money. Changing the subject, I asked, “How will your family react when they find out about us?” She stared into space and I gently nudged her. She shook her head before speaking.

“Yeah. Um. I think my mother will be critical of our relationship, but that shouldn’t be a surprise. Auntie will give me a high five. Goody and Pop-Pop will think we’re moving too fast. My friends already suspect that something is going on between us. Though they already miss the train wreck dating stories.”

“I won’t,” I muttered, gathering her in my arms. “James knows how I feel about you. Quad and Mike will be pleasantly surprised that I found love. My father will search for a hidden agenda. My mother will be sad that we’re living together. She’ll see it as me taking the chicken-shit route. She wants me to settle down and get married.”

“Aww.”

“I remember the first time Celeste brought you by our house. My mother had you in her arms and called me over. I was so disappointed that you were a girl I didn’t even look at you. I ran upstairs to the playroom and stayed there all afternoon until I knew you’d left.”

“I didn’t know that!” She laughed and tossed her head back on my chest.

“Yep. It’s true.” The laughter released some tension. “Once you learned to talk, you got on my nerves. The cockblocking, jokes, and pranks had me wanting to get away from you. Now, I can’t get enough of you. You’re all grown up, and I’m fortunate that you spend your free time with me. I love your humor. Thank you for introducing me to reality television. I’m up-to-date on all of your pop culture references.”

She reached up and stroked my face. We could spend an eternity looking into each other’s eyes.

“The past two months have been incredible,” I went on. “Your warm, generous spirit has rubbed off on me. I want to continue feeling like this for the rest of our lives.” I took a deep breath. “Here’s the deal. I don’t just want you to live with me . . .”

I moved off the sectional and bent down to one knee. Her expression changed from confusion to realization. With tears in her eyes, she covered her trembling bottom lip with her right hand.

“Will you do me the honor of being my wife?”

Anxiety riddled its way through my brain. *What if she says no?* I suddenly realized I’d forgotten about the ring.

“Shit. I have a ring.” I reached into the drawer of the cocktail table and pulled out the red leather jewelry box. “This is the ring my grandfather used when he proposed to my grandmother. They were married for fifty years until he passed away. She gave it to me with the instruction to propose to the woman who captures the true essence of my heart.”

Kandace was silent. *Come on, Sweets. Don’t do this to me.* Each nanosecond that ticked by threatened to break my heart. I attempted to plan a way to back out.

“Cursing during the proposal isn’t a good way to start off a marriage.” She sniffled as a lone tear rolled down her cheek, but her smile took my breath away.

“Does that mean?” I was afraid to finish the question.

“Yes. I will marry you.” She nodded, tears rimming her eyes.

I slid the platinum, emerald-cut diamond ring on her finger, and she pulled me to her until our lips touched.

I stood, taking her with me. I couldn’t control the grin that stretched across my face. “You’ve made me the happiest man in the world. I promise I will do everything in my power to make you happy.”

“I can’t wait to tell my . . .” Her words trailed off. “What about our families?” she whispered. I shook my head and smiled, not giving a damn what judgment any of them might pass on us.

“Sweets, I don’t care about our families’ opinions. I want to marry you.”



CHAPTER

Eighteen

KANDACE

BREATHE, *KANDACE*. BREATHE.

I stood in the tiny vestibule leading to the altar where Chadwick and I would vow to love, cherish, and forsake all others. Looking toward the heavens, I practiced the perfect, “I do.”

At any moment, our wedding consultant, Natalia, would give the alert to begin my walk down the aisle. She would fling the white French doors open, and I would take the first steps to my future.

My future with Chadwick St. Clair.

Five days earlier, Chadwick had slid his grandmother’s diamond ring onto my finger and asked me to be his wife. I was giddy with joy when I suggested we elope. We excitedly rattled off locations for our ceremony, and three days later, a private jet whisked us away to Vegas.

Eloping sounded so romantic. I imagined the two of us like Romeo and Juliet, sneaking off in the middle of the night to elope.

The theme of the wedding was, “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.” Other than our wedding vendors and the great state of Nevada, our nuptials were a secret. After less than two months of dating, our families and friends would say we were moving too fast. Our marriage needed to remain a secret until our families became comfortable with our relationship. Chadwick had advised against secrecy, fearing it could lead to hurt feelings. He’d gone along with it, but we’d compromised that in six months, we would have a small ceremony for our families and close friends.

Chadwick would never admit it, but I sensed a bit of relief in his demeanor after we agreed to elope. His friends had shared plenty of stories of Bridezilla behavior during the wedding planning stage, and he preferred not to experience that firsthand.

We both feared that our mothers would have insisted on an expensive and bloated affair that rivaled the nuptials of the royal family. We would’ve had to give up an entire year of our lives for a perfect pageant. There would’ve been a dozen bridesmaids, fireworks, and hundreds of drunken guests. Our wedding wouldn’t have resembled the day we planned in our minds.

Eloping would disappoint my mother, grandmother, and aunt. They enjoyed being front and center in all aspects of my life. In addition, my mother liked to live out her dreams through me, and my wedding had always been at the peak of her fantasies. I shuddered at the thought of the four of us shopping for wedding dresses. I wouldn’t have been an engaged woman capable of deciding about what she wanted to wear—they would have treated me like a doll. Silent, pretty, requiring help to dress herself, and made for someone else’s enjoyment.

The soft white lace and chiffon Reem Acra gown was far more traditional than I’d ever imagined myself wearing, but when I tried it on, I felt like a princess. It was the gown I wanted to wear when I walked down the aisle into the arms of my future husband.

If I had to hurt a few feelings to have a stress-free wedding day, then so be it.

Truthfully, I was far from relaxed. I wasn't sure how my life would change once we were back in New Orleans. I'd always known that the St. Clairs were well-off, but I didn't get a true sense of their wealth until Chadwick and I departed for Las Vegas.

We'd agreed to a proper ceremony with a reverend, formal attire, and cake. Yet, I hadn't prepared for Chadwick's version of elopement—private jets, hotel penthouse suites, and couture bridal gowns. Without a blink of an eye, Chadwick charged an amount equivalent to the median income of a New Orleanian household to his black credit card.

I grew up in a solidly middle-class household and couldn't imagine being so wealthy that our spur-of-the-moment nuptials would be a drop in the bucket. I'd imagined a difficult adjustment not only to marriage but to marrying into a lifestyle where money was no object.

Then there was that little matter of outsiders doubting my love for him and viewing me as a gold digger. I knew that I needed to develop a thicker skin or else I would become insecure in our love.

There was no manual, mentoring program or classes for marrying into wealth. Sensing my apprehension, Chadwick assured me he would be by my side for the rest of our lives.

But as I stood in that small hallway, my nervousness elevated to a mild panic, and fear gripped my thoughts. I was marrying a family friend, and my grandfather wasn't there to walk me down the aisle. My grandmother and aunt would not sing "The Lord's Prayer." My mother wouldn't make sure my veil was straight and kiss me before she joined the processional. The only connection to my family was my great grandmother's antique comb. What was I doing?

"You're perfect," Natalia cooed, sensing my panic. She pulled the blusher over my face before walking around to smooth the waist-length veil over my gown. "Don't be nervous. You've got this. Wait until you see your groom . . ."

She fanned herself. “I think you’ll be thrilled when you see him.”

Natalia and I both giggled, and my case of the jitters dissipated. Over the last two days, we’d become fond of each other. She was a consummate professional and shared my love for romanticism. From the selection of couture gowns to the trips to the Forum Shops for the bridal trousseau, the wedding planning process had been a first-class experience, and Natalia had pulled off a miracle in a remarkably short time.

Natalia nodded to her assistant, Randy, and he opened the doors with a flourish. A string quartet dressed in all-black began the opening strains of Pachelbel’s “Canon in D.” I lifted my right foot to begin my march.

Goodbye, Kandace Marie Alexander . . .

Our wedding coordinating team transformed the Primrose Courtyard into a magical terrarium with flowers spilling over every surface of the courtyard. Lush greenery lined the walls, and roses accented two large topiaries. Orchids hung from an invisible wire and appeared to float from the ceiling. Dusk swept over the site as flickering luminaries cast a golden hue over the ceremony site. Chadwick and I would pledge our love for each other under a large canopy covered in green vines and accented with hundreds of tea light candles.

I took tentative steps along the rose petal-lined aisle runner. I was afraid I would trip over my gown and face plant. Now, that would be some entrance. I slowed my gait to the speed of a turtle’s crawl.

I worked up the courage to look at my groom waiting at the end of the aisle. Astonishment and relief flashed over his face when his blue eyes met my brown, and he greeted me with a shy smile. I wiggled a wave in return.

My husband-to-be could have been on the cover of *GQ* magazine. He was handsome, impeccably attired, and so sexy. Today was one of the most important days of our lives, and he was so relaxed in his crisp, navy-blue tuxedo and a white linen shirt. *Aww. He shaved for the wedding.* He’d even used

product, foregoing his usual messy cropped hair for a perfectly coiffed style.

His eyes seemed to levitate me until I practically floated down the rest of the aisle. Each step brought us closer and closer to our future. Monogamy. Love. Children. Everything I'd dreamed and hoped for but never thought I would get.

After what felt like an eternity, Chadwick extended his hand and I reached out to grab my future. I slid my fingers into his, and we stepped up to the officiant.

"Sweets, twenty hours is too long without you in my arms," Chadwick whispered. "Thank you for marrying me." His eyes glistened with tears.

"It was torture. I missed you so much. I was in good hands, though." Cue the waterworks. Why was I crying so much at my wedding? I was an emotional wreck.

The officiant cleared his throat.

"Has the beautiful bride and handsome groom finished their private conversation? If so, let's start the ceremony."

"Oh, sorry," I blushed.

"Dearly beloved . . ."

He began the ceremony, and everything faded to a hum. Everything but Chadwick. We may as well have been the only two people on earth. We both vowed to love, forsake all others, and support each other's dreams. There were moments in the ceremony that held special significance. Chadwick squeezed my hand and emphasized that he would share all that he had with me. I teared up when I declared that my family is his family.

With trembling hands, we each placed matching platinum bands on the other's fingers, and the officiant looked between the two of us with a genial smile.

"Chadwick and Kandace, you have spoken the words that unite your lives. By the authority vested in me by the state of Nevada, I pronounce you husband and wife. Chadwick, you may now kiss your bride."



JOYFUL ENERGY AND HOPE SWELLED IN MY CHEST AS I LOOKED up at my husband. I couldn't believe that I was *Mrs. Chadwick St. Clair*, and he was all mine. I interlaced my fingers with his, he looked over at me and a broad grin stretched across his face. A hint of pink dotted his clean-shaven cheeks. Was his excitement from the crowded casino or our secret marriage? His hand wrapped tighter around mine, in response, I leaned closer to him until our sides met.

Over the chaotic sounds of the slot machines and the roar of conversations, the usually unaffected and weary gamblers turned their heads to gawk at our wedding finery and shout their well-wishes.

“Beautiful! Congratulations! Best Wishes!”

It was a little past midnight, and we were giddy at our secret and being in love. The oxygen-infused air casinos pumped in along with newlywed excitement gave me the energy to gamble and party the night away along with many other things. We walked around the casino floor, randomly inserting bills in slot machines. We hoped our luck in love would result in hitting the jackpot.

Clinging tightly to each other, we stopped at a roulette table. Chadwick observed that the seven and fifteen were illuminated on the tote board. Deciding that our wedding date was a sign, he requested two thousand dollars in chips. We placed the entire amount on red.

The wheel spun and spun until the ball landed in the number eleven pocket. *Red!* We doubled our initial bet and jumped up and down to celebrate our win as our tablemates applauded. Throwing caution to the wind, we placed another bet. Before I knew it, we were up six thousand dollars.

After an hour of playing, we'd lost a significant amount of our winnings. Like our win streak, my energy level came to a screeching halt. My eyes felt heavy as I stifled a yawn. Chadwick looked at his watch before wrapping an arm around me. He leaned in and kissed the side of my head.

“Come. It’s time for bed.”

It’s time from bed.

The crowded casino spun as my heart began to palpitate so loud and so fast. Now was the moment for lovemaking, and I was ready for everything he had and then some. The last six weeks had been pure torture with the three of us—me, Chadwick, and his big, engorged dick.

We cashed in our chips, and he guided me through the crowded casino to the bank of elevators. Sliding his hands into my hair, Chadwick pulled me forward until our lips met. Filled with desire for my husband, I kissed him hungrily and reached around his back to draw him closer. Once we arrived at our floor, we walked arm-in-arm down the hallway until we reached our suite.

He waved the keycard over the sensor until the door lock clicked. My breath hitched as he effortlessly scooped me into his arms. The unexpected move caught me by surprise and a laugh escaped from my lips. I wrapped my arm around his neck and kicked my feet as he carried me across the threshold.

“I made it too easy for you. I should have had that second slice of cake!” He backed us into the room and kicked the door shut with a hearty laugh. Chadwick walked across the open space to the bedroom and gingerly placed me on the bed.

Someone had set our honeymoon suite up for seduction. The dresser held a silver ice bucket containing a bottle of champagne. The window curtains and sheers were drawn displaying a panoramic view of the strip and the city.

“The room is beautiful,” I sighed. I kicked off my white platform shoes and laid back on the fluffy white duvet.

“Our wedding fairies had a hand in this.” He winked in response. After removing his tuxedo jacket, he took off the silver cufflinks, placing them both on the dresser. Loosening his tie, he hastily plucked the top two buttons of his shirt and toed off his shoes.

My pulse quickened as he rolled up his sleeves, the glow from the candles highlighted the corded veins racing along his

forearms. I expected him to move on top of me, instead, he stretched out on the mattress and pulled me into his side.

In silence, we watched the flickering lights along the miles of streetlights. My fingers rubbed at the metal surrounding the soft flesh of his finger, and I savored the feeling of possessiveness.

The mood of the room changed to expectation. For so many years, I'd built up losing my virginity as the penultimate of all experiences, and at that moment, I was a bundle of nerves and excitement.

I hadn't held myself back from other men merely because of a fear of pregnancy. I'd saved myself for Chadwick. Somewhere deep down inside of me, I'd always known he would be the one.

I rubbed my hand over his chest and my hand trailed to his waistband. He sucked in a breath before slowly exhaling with a hiss.

"Sweets, I will be honest. My heart is racing like I'm running a marathon. This moment should be memorable and perfect. I want you so much, but I need to relax. Let's take our time and sip a little champagne."

I completely understood his trepidation because I was equally, if not more anxious.

He rose from the bed and made his way to the champagne bucket. After removing the cage from the bottle, he freed the cork with a satisfying *pop*. He returned, holding champagne flutes in each hand. I sat up in the bed and downed the liquid. The bubbles danced deliciously over my tongue and tickled my nose. I wrinkled my nose to keep from sneezing, eliciting a laugh from Chadwick.

Smooth, Kandi. Real smooth.

I placed the flute on the nightstand. I gingerly searched through my fancy updo and plucked out the hairpins, letting my hair spill free and trail down my back. I look up to see him standing at the edge of the bed, one hand on the champagne glass and the other in his pocket as he watched me.

He placed his flute next to mine and slowly leaned toward me, his eyes blazing against mine. The look put my body on alert. My nipples puckered in anticipation of being sucked into his mouth. My clit cried for his fingers or his tongue. I vibrated with so much anticipation that my pulse raced.

He continued to unbutton his white shirt and slid off his white undershirt. I gulped as he unveiled his rippled abs and arms. This was my husband. He was so undeniably sexy . . . and mine, all mine. I'd lived a charmed life, but at this moment, I understood how lucky I was.

Wearing only a pair of tuxedo pants, he climbed onto the bed and lowered his body over mine. He leaned in and covered my mouth with his lips.

"I've waited three years to make love to you," he growled. "Throughout the ceremony and dinner, my mouth watered at the thought of tasting this spot." He nipped at my exposed collarbone. "I got hard knowing that this spot is mine."

Our lips met again, and I moaned into his kiss, and all my tensions fell away as I deepened the kiss. My tongue demanded entry, and he parted his lips.

He peppered me with kisses—my neck, my lips, my shoulders, my clavicle. I was ready, yet the kisses went on and on and on. In my impatience, I leaned up on my elbows, my chest rising and falling with each breath.

"When are you going to undress me?" I panted.

He let out a belly laugh. "I'm trying to figure out how to get this dress off of you," he admitted, and I joined him in laughter.

"Don't worry, my love. I'll talk you through it."

He rolled off of me as I slid to the edge of the bed, and he sat next to me. I turned and presented my back.

"First, unbutton the bodice of the gown."

"Can I just rip it?"

"Absolutely not! You will not rip my bridal gown. *Unbutton.*"

Following my instructions, he unfastened the first silk-covered button and kissed the newly exposed flesh, repeating the action until he uncovered my back.

I held the top of the gown and stood before releasing the dress and letting it pool on the floor. Leaving me in a pair of tiny white silk La Perla panties. The lingerie, with its blue, hand embroidered flowers, was my *something blue*. The little slip of fabric cost more than a majority of the items in my wardrobe. I chose them for this moment, and I knew he would like them. I didn't expect just how much he would like them.

He sucked in a tiny breath and let out a low groan of approval. "Turn and let me see you."

With cheeks heated with excitement and my arms rested at my side, I slowly turned to face him. I bit my quivering bottom lip and fixed my eyes on the white duvet cover. One look, and I would have been all over him.

"No bra? You mean to tell me you didn't have a bra on all day yesterday?" His voice deepened, sending a flood into my panties.

I shook my head.

"What a missed opportunity. I could have teased you until your nipples hardened. I know how much you like that."

He was right. I enjoyed that. Now I regretted not whispering it during our celebratory dinner.

In that dimly lit room, his steely blue eyes had changed to the deepest shade of black. I took a breath, then hooked my thumbs around the waistband of my panties. With quivering hands, I pulled them over my hips and down my legs. When they reached my ankles, I held onto his shoulder with one hand. I lifted my left then right leg, removing the panties.

He took in every inch as he gazed at me hungrily. From my face, along my cleavage to my stomach. He sucked in a breath when his eyes landed on my sex and then continued until he ended at my perfectly painted toes.

"My sweet angel. You're too fucking perfect. I'm the luckiest man on this earth." He interlaced our fingers and

pulled me to him. He drew me closer until I stood in front of him. I quivered when he placed a small kiss on my stomach and then ran a path down my hip.

My husband.

I straddled his lap. His erection throbbed in approval as I shifted my bare pussy directly on top of his clothed cock. My clit contacted the bulge and sent my eyes rolling into my head. I thought I would pass out.

“No,” I paused and exhaled a ragged breath. “I’m the lucky one.”

“Undress me.”

With unsteady fingers, I opened the top button of his pants. Then, I slowly and gingerly lowered the zipper and parted the fly. He hissed when I *accidentally* grazed my knuckles against the hard muscles along his happy path. He turned, gently placing me on the bed. He inched out of his pants and boxer briefs and returned to the bed.

Kneeling over me, he mashed his cock into me, hitting the perfect spot. A rough moan escaped my lips when he dipped his head and sucked the exposed flesh of my neck. His large hand roamed from my stomach and cupped my breast.

The torture was unbearable. I needed to take my mind off his lips and the stiff penis lodged between us.

“Please . . . Please fuck me,” I begged.

“Soon. First, show me how excited you are for me.”

He did the meanest thing he could have ever done at that moment. He moved a finger to my seam, exploring my wetness. He brought the moisture up from my opening to my throbbing clit and massaged the bundle of nerves until I exploded.

He drove me insane with the foreplay, firing every neuron in my body. I didn’t want his finger, I needed his cock.

He positioned his big, muscular body over mine and slid his erection against my wet folds. The tip nudged against my opening, causing me to writhe in ecstasy.

“Sweets, this will hurt. I’ll go fast, but I promise I’ll make it feel good. This is all about you and your pleasure.”

Our eyes met, and I slowly nodded approval to continue.

Without further warning, he plunged past my barrier. I let out a yelp at the sharp pain. Even though I was so wet and ready for him, I felt like I was being torn in two. The stretching sensation hurt more than a little. I fought the urge to push him off of me and run out of the room.

Then he kissed me.

There was nothing carnal about the kiss. The kiss was a silent reminder that he would never hurt me. A promise that he would always protect me and do what was right.

The pain dissipated, and I pushed out the breath that I was holding in. He slowly pulled out before sliding back in.

“That’s it. Relax for me. I won’t ever hurt you again. Damn. You’re so fucking tight,” he murmured against my cheek.

After a couple of slow thrusts, the tinges of pain turned into pure pleasure. His heavy body pinned me to the bed and I could feel every inch from his crown, to his shaft, and to his root. I wrapped my legs around his waist and threaded my fingers in his hair. Under the flicker of candlelight, we stared at each other as he tenderly rocked back and forth in my sex.

“You are so perfect,” he growled. “Ever since the day you arrived at the loft, I’ve wanted you, but never thought I deserved you. Now you’re mine forever—*my* wife. I love you so much.”

“I’m yours and you’re mine forever,” I answered. My throat tightened with emotion and a one tear rolled from the corner of my eye and down my cheek.

“Don’t stop. Fuck me harder.” I sighed, the words came out in a soft moan.

He moved faster. His grunts became more primal and his movements were less controlled.

Our rhythms paced together as we chased our orgasms. He released first. Five seconds later, I spasmed around him. Waves of pleasure rolled around me and warmed me.

His mouth was back on my lips. He kissed me slowly and softly, lavishing praise on me between each kiss.

“You’re so brave. Did you enjoy it?” he asked.

I nodded before answering.

“I can’t wait to do that again.”



CHAPTER

Nineteen

KANDACE

CHADWICK AND I RETURNED TO New Orleans, riding the crest of newlywed bliss. The first night, we packed my car and his SUV with my clothing. At the end of the sublease, we would donate the furniture and decorative items to charity. It amazed me that all of my worldly material possessions could fit into two vehicles, but I felt my life was much richer with my man.

Before we married, Chadwick and I had agreed to introduce our relationship slowly to our families, and once they'd gotten used to us being together and in love, we would announce our marriage.

The more noses in our marriage, the greater the potential for drama, and I didn't want us to stress ourselves by trying to prove our feelings. I wanted to enjoy being newlyweds and keep the two of us wrapped in a protective bubble. In a few months, we would reveal our marriage to our family and friends. This secret marriage ordeal would be over, and we would move on to the next phase of our lives.

With one last look, I whispered a goodbye to my old life and shut the door behind me.

My first post-wedding social outing was a Saturday brunch with Natasha. We'd met at Buchanan's, a small, luxe jazzy spot in the French Quarter and known for its boozy brunch. Before I entered the restaurant, I carefully removed my wedding ring set and tucked it into a small jewelry pouch inside my purse.

The crowded restaurant was alive with activity. In the center of the restaurant sat Natasha, looking like she didn't have a care in the world. She stood and gave me a hug after giving me a once over.

"Dang, girl. You look great! Looks like you got a little sun. Where've you been?"

"I've started jogging again. I wake up at five o'clock in the morning and get in two miles a day." I lied. The only exercise I'd had was bouncing on my husband's cock every morning and night.

"I need to join you because I've put on some weight." She patted her nearly flat stomach for emphasis. Before I could say she hadn't gained a single ounce, she narrowed her eyes. "Is that why you're late? You're usually very prompt."

"Time got away from me." I avoided eye contact by placing the napkin in my lap. "How are you? How's work?"

"I'm well. Still waiting on your response to the Orange Beach weekend trip. Keely and Simone confirmed a few days ago. Are you going?"

Shit. I'd forgotten to answer the invitation. She wasn't used to me not promptly answering her text messages. That was likely the reason for the third-degree.

"I don't think I can make it." I scanned the busy restaurant for the waiter. I attempted to change the subject. "Is that orange juice? Or did you order a mimosa?"

"Orange juice. Don't change the subject. How can I convince you to go? I need you as a buffer between me and Simone. She'll drive me batshit with her stories and innuendos. We'll battle the whole weekend if you aren't there."

“I’m sorry. I’m behind on work. I don’t think I can make it.”

I didn’t want to go. Chadwick and I were in the honeymoon phase of our marriage. While I loved my friends, I couldn’t get enough of my husband. He was the reason I was late for brunch.

Chadwick was imaginative and easily aroused. His enthusiasm for me was the biggest boost to my ego. The simple act of bumping into each other in the hallway ended with us tangled and panting against each other. Every night, I fell into a deep sleep after he fucked the life out of me. In the morning, I would rise and ride him until we both fell back asleep.

That morning, I had awakened and stared at him while he slept soundly on the other side of the bed. I had disappeared under the layers of covers, careful not to disturb his slumber. He’d been naked and pitching a semi-tent. Taking his cock in my hand, I’d licked the tip and sparked an instant reaction. His hand had reached for my head and held me in place as I took him in my mouth. His grip on my head had relaxed as he’d fallen back into the sensation of my lips wrapped tightly around him.

Giving head. Cock sucking. Blowjob. Sucking dick. Such crude terms for one of the most intimate acts in love. We should call it *cock worship*, ‘cause that’s what it was.

“Earth to Kandi. Are you there, Kandi?” Natasha waved to me, breaking into my thoughts. I caught myself with an uncontrollable smile spreading across my face. Ever observant, my best friend saw the blush. Her eyes narrowed to slits as she evaluated my response. “What’s going on with you? You aren’t working every single day, so how can you be behind? How are things going with Mr. Dreamy?”

“Who’s that?”

“Chadwick!” she said, exasperation written all over her face.

“Oh. He’s okay.”

“What about Pierre? How is he?”

I plastered a fake smile and added an even faker, “He’s awesome.”

“Gotcha! He stopped by the restaurant this week. He said he hasn’t spoken to you since the ball.” She leaned forward in her seat. “What the fuck is going on? I’ve stopped by your apartment to see if you wanted to watch movies or have girl time, and you weren’t there. Your car is never in your parking spot. Then, you stroll in here late with *freshly fucked* painted all over your face. What are you holding out on me? Are you dating Chadwick?”

“Nothing is going on. I’m looking forward to the start of my last semester and spending time with my family.”

My words came out too practiced, and they had done nothing to diffuse her curiosity. It was now her life’s mission to understand what was going on with me. She looked me over one more time before stopping at my wrist. *Oh, shit.* I’d forgotten to remove my wedding day gift—a gold Cartier Love bracelet. She adjusted her reaction, sadness taking over her tone.

“I hate that there are secrets between us. You’re my best friend, and I don’t like that you don’t feel you can trust me. I hope everything is okay.”

I grabbed her hand and squeezed with emphasis on each word.

“You’re my best friend, and I love you. I want you to know that I’m happy. I want to take time to enjoy my happiness and not overthink. Everything will come out in due time.”

“I pray that one day you’ll feel comfortable sharing with me.”



WITH A CLUB SODA IN MY HAND, I WALKED AROUND THE ST. Clair’s backyard, speaking to their friends and loved ones. I’d spent the rest of the morning and part of the afternoon with sadness in my heart. Brunch with Natasha had been nice, but

the secret had loomed over our conversation. When we'd departed, she gave me a friendly hug and patted me on the back three times before we'd walked in separate directions. A far cry from our usual parking lot chit-chats that would sometimes span hours.

Maybe I was being too sensitive. I needed to get myself together. And in New Orleans, when life brings you down, you party.

Martin and Genevieve St. Clair were celebrating their thirtieth wedding anniversary with an extravagant, catered barbecue. They'd invited their seventy-five closest friends, including my mother, aunt, and grandparents.

Chadwick and I had arrived in separate cars and fifteen minutes apart, lest someone spy us arriving at the same time and put two and two together. Before we left the loft, I asked him for his wedding band.

My husband didn't like the deception. He felt that it was a lot more trouble than it's worth. He'd shook his head and reluctantly twisted the ring off his finger. Wriggling his fingers in my face, he asked how to disguise the imprint of the ring.

I'd naively asked why anyone would look at his ring finger. He reminded me that women always look at ring fingers. He was right. A single woman would look for a wedding band on *his* finger. I jokingly told him to keep his hands in his pocket, but deep down I was serious. I fought back the wild streak of jealousy that rose in my chest. I didn't want to think of another woman talking with him, smiling at him, or worse, touching him.

I sat at a tablecloth covered picnic table with my mother and aunt. They'd found the perfect spot in the backyard overlooking the raucous party. On the stage was a Zydeco band, each member wore a brightly colored outfit. The centerpiece was a woman wearing a neon green crinoline playing a washboard while dancing on stage.

Lubricated from the flowing drinks with the very generous pours, a few brave souls danced with each other. The line to

the bar stretched ten deep. The servers began passing bottles of water in addition to a variety of hors d'oeuvres on trays.

“Chère? Do you think Keely would help us with our social media marketing?” Auntie Marie yelled over the loud music. “We’ll pay her. We have a hundred and thirteen followers and half of those are family. I think we can expand our customer base with more followers.”

I nodded, not listening. I watched Mrs. St. Clair as she pranced around the backyard, flitting from guest to guest. I was most interested in Mr. St. Clair’s reaction to her. The two were golden bronzed and appeared refreshed from a recent holiday in St. Lucia. He would search the yard for her and smile when his eyes landed on her. They were so cute and obviously in love.

“I don’t know if it is worth it. I don’t believe that social media likes translates into contracts.” My mother frowned. “I think we should focus on more community events and move into online ads.”

On the day after the ball, I broke the news that Pierre and I did not work out. The news disappointed my mother, but she is persistent. She vowed to look through her contacts list in search of another potential love interest. At that point, I gave up. There was no sense of arguing with her about not fixing me up. She’d ignored my refusals. I doubted that she would ever understand my feelings.

I excused myself from the table when the sisters began to brainstorm different marketing strategies. They couldn’t enjoy a moment of celebration without bringing up business.

My mood brightened when I watched my husband with his parents. A photographer walked around taking photos of the partygoers. At one point, he gathered Genevieve, Martin, and Chadwick for family photos. With glasses held high, they posed with silly grins. After the photo, Chadwick scanned the backyard and our eyes met. He walked over and whispered into my ear.

“Our families are here. This is the perfect opportunity to break the news. How about it?”

“Let’s wait a little while longer,” I stammered, trying to come up with an excuse to delay the news. “Today is about your mother and father. Not about us.”

“You are correct. I’d like to discuss this later tonight. I can be persuasive when I want to.” He said, adding a wicked wink.

I leisurely roamed through the backyard, drifting from conversation to conversation. I held Chadwick’s baby cousin, caught up with a high school classmate, and even danced with Mr. St. Clair.

My heart fluttered when I walked to the keg. Chadwick and his bonehead friends huddled around it and surveyed the party.

“Just like the old days. What are you four planning?” I walked over with a breezy smile plastered on my face. I picked up a blue Solo cup from a neighboring cocktail table.

Denham Roberts the fourth, affectionately known as Quad, the biggest and dumbest of Chadwick’s friends, stood in front of the keg, blocking my access and wearing a falsely stern expression.

“Twenty-one and older. Squirt, we’ll need to see some identification,” he barked, his arms crossed over his chest.

“I’m of age. Let me through,” I grimaced.

“Nah. I’ll be the judge of that. You don’t get through until you show me a driver’s license. Louisiana state identification, please.”

Some meatheads never change. I wasn’t in the mood for raising a big stink. The best course of action was to find something else to drink. I rolled my eyes and prepared to walk away. To my relief, my dear husband came to my rescue.

“Cut it out,” he growled. His eyes blazed into mine. “She gets whatever she wants.”

“Chill, C. Just joking. Right, Squirt?”

“Yeah, Playboy. Chill out,” James laughed.

Quad moved from in front of the keg and held his arms out to hug me. I did a Matrix-type move and avoided the hug completely. The move was anything but subtle. The guys let loose a chorus of “oohs“ mixed with laughter.

“I see you fellas haven’t changed.” Before I could pump the keg, Chadwick reached for my cup. He worked the keg, managing to get very little foam in the cup, a gentle smile on his face as he handed it back to me. His fingers brushed against mine, causing electrical sparks.

“I hope you enjoy it.”

“I’m sure I will. Thank you,” I answered in a tone that was anything but innocent.

I left the meatheads behind and continued to wander the backyard, drifting from one conversation to another. I eventually landed at Chadwick’s mom, Genevieve. It was startling to remember she was now my mother-in-law.

“Please tell me you’re not one of her fans,” Mrs. St. Clair groaned.

“I am. I love the pink home décor and the menagerie of animals . . . She’s the star of the show.”

Chadwick’s mother and I were engaged in a lively conversation about all things related to the *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*. Our love for housewives’ shows was one of the many things we had in common.

“Oh, honey. I thought you were an honors student,” she teased. She paused for a second before switching gears. “Kandi, I have a fabulous idea. One of the Antheas has a single son your age. I think you’ll be cute together.”

She didn’t know I was in a relationship with an Anthea son, and we were *very* cute together.

My phone buzzed. My heart skipped a beat when I read the text message from Chadwick. It was an instruction to make an excuse to come inside the house and meet him in his bedroom.

I searched the yard for my husband and spotted him bounding up the stairs leading to the enclosed porch. Our eyes

met as he opened the sunporch door. I blushed as he winked at me, a silent invitation to crash into each other. The seconds crept like hours as I waited for five minutes to pass.

I politely excused myself and Genevieve pranced over to the next group of revelers. I nonchalantly walked to the door and entered the kitchen without notice, slipping through the entry leading to the second floor. Relieved that I'd escaped attention, I crept into the cool, darkened hallway leading to the bedrooms.

I stood in the hallway for a minute as my eyes adjusted to the sudden darkness. When I was younger, I frequently spied on Chadwick in his room. I knew the route to his bedroom like the back of my hand and probably could have found my way blindfolded. I tiptoed over the wooden floor, avoiding the creaky spots until a powerful presence came to stand behind me.

Fuck. I'm caught.

A wall of muscle bumped against my back as two strong arms encased me, and a familiar hardening cock pressed against my ass. I relaxed in his arms as his hands moved down my sides to my hands.

"Shhh," he whispered. He took me by the hand and pulled me into his bedroom, closing the door behind us. "Welcome to the trophy room."

The bedroom had changed very little over the years. Several football trophies and plaques still rested on a large etagere, and the queen-size bed had the same wooden headboard. I assumed Mrs. St. Clair replaced the movie posters and sports with framed art of coastal scenes. The room still had a familiar scent of laundry detergent and polished wood, but it seemed much smaller than it had when I was younger.

"My mother can't stand to get rid of these memories."

I walked over to the dresser and peered at the framed photos of the St. Clairs and Chadwick's friends.

“Wow. I remember you and your friends were assholes. Now, you’re all grown up. Well, except for Quad,” I snickered, sitting on the bed to flip through his high school yearbook.

“Back then, I would never have imagined a woman like you in my bedroom, my bed, or my life.”

He leaned in closer and took the book from my hands, placing it on the nightstand. I melted like putty when his warm breath tickled the shell of my ear. His hand inched from the bed and up my side until he reached my breast. My nipple sprang to life as he rubbed his thumb against the stiff, pebbled peak. I giggled and leaned into his hands. His hands continued to entice as he leaned in to kiss me below my ear, and I craned my neck to allow greater access. He increased the pressure of the kiss and sucked on the skin of my neck.

“I love you,” I breathed. “Now, fuck me.”

With the muted sounds of the lively party as our lovemaking soundtrack, Chadwick pushed me down into the mattress. He looked at me with a combination of feral hunger and true adoration.

Taking my lower lip into his mouth, he nipped at my tender flesh. I shivered when the day’s growth of beard brushed against my face.

Nudging my knees apart and settling at my center, he unbuttoned and unzipped his khakis. He inelegantly stripped the pants off and flung them against the bed.

“I need you so much.” I opened my knees wider to encourage him for more.

“Patience. I’ve never brought a girl here. You are the first. Being caught by my parents terrified me so I never tried. I would have been nervous to have the girl of my dreams in my bed. With my luck, you would have made me beg for a touch of your fine pussy.” He draped a leg over one of mine, pinning me against the bed. His lips traced my chin and landed at the base of my neck.

“St. Clairs marry for life. In thirty years, we will be right here. Doing this. I will never tire of you,” he uttered against

my skin as his tongue roamed over my collarbone.

His thumbs brushed lightly over my hips as he lowered my panties down my legs until I was bare to him. His tongue continued its journey down to the rock-hard peaks on my breasts.

“I love your body.”

He moved until his face was at the juncture of my thighs. He closed his eyes and inhaled my scent deeply. He always did that before he gingerly flicked his tongue against my bare flesh. My body writhed in response to the simple move and sank further into his web. Our moans steadily grew louder.

“Chadwick, quiet. You will get us caught.”

“Shhh. You’re loud,” he teased. “And delicious.” He took delight in the aromas and flavors of my womanhood.

After he had his fill, he lifted me and took possession of my mouth. I caged him between my long legs. Before I could register what was happening, he sank his large cock into me. Inch by agonizing inch. We moaned and ground in perfect rhythm as he moved in and out of me.

I felt the heat of his breath against my neck as we panted in sync with the rhythm of our movements. He moved deeper and deeper as his hips drove faster and faster. We raced each other to our orgasms, and I found my release only seconds before he reached his. *I won!*

We rolled away from each other, panting and lying flat on our backs. I stared up at the ceiling while my inhales and exhales returned to normal. In true Kandace fashion, I exclaimed the only thought in my head.

“I hope my poor body can handle another thirty years of that.”



CHAPTER

Twenty

CHADWICK

I KNEW THE DECISION TO keep our marriage a secret would be a big mistake. I should have known the truth would come out before we were ready. Kandace was a terrible liar—she had no poker face. We had naively assumed that she could act her way through questions about our relationship. Meanwhile, I was used to lying for selfish reasons, but I maintained openness with my parents. They knew me well enough to sense when I lied.

Last night, *Martin St. Clair, Esquire* had summoned me to his office for an after-hours meeting. The invitation had all the warmth and professionalism one would expect for a prostate exam, and I'd assumed he wanted to pull out a last-ditch effort to convince me to join St. Clair and begin succession training.

I dressed in my finest professional attire—a navy suit, white shirt, and navy tie—and made my way to the corporate headquarters.

The St. Clair Enterprises corporate offices were in the Hancock Whitney Center, the tallest building in New Orleans. The company occupied two floors of the towering skyscraper. He had decided the office location with the intended purpose of magnifying St. Clair as a global organization. I remembered

the controversy when my father moved the offices from the warehouse space. Many employees had felt he'd forgotten his roots. "Always go big or go home," was his response to the naysayers.

I waved my badge over the security panel, and I entered the marble floor lobby when the doors clicked open. The receptionist desk was empty, as the staff had gone home for the evening.

I walked through the maze of cubicles and offices before reaching the open area where my father's assistant sat. Milly was a few years older than I was and recently married. I was sure she would rather have been having dinner with her new husband instead of working late.

"Your father is expecting you. Go on in." She nodded toward the heavy mahogany door.

My father looked up from his computer in response to my knock and waved me into the office.

"Come in. Shut the door. We need to talk."

I closed the door and crossed the room to sit in the leather chair facing his desk. Dad's office was what you would expect from any executive of his level, outfitted with latest in office design of wood and steel. On his desk sat several picture frames containing photos of my mother and me. In the corner was a kitchenette with a small refrigerator and wet bar.

His tie hung loosely around his neck, and he'd rolled his shirt sleeves to his forearms. He looked casual, but his facial expression was another story. Something had him stressed out.

"Hey, Dad. What's going on?" I settled into the chair.

"Would you like something to drink? Water? Brandy?" He gestured to the minibar in the office's corner.

"No, thank you." I was not repeating the mistake of being intoxicated around my father. I needed all of my faculties to decline the likely request to join St. Clair.

"I'll cut straight to the point. Is there anything you want to talk about?" he looked at me intently. I had so many secrets, I

didn't know what to discuss. I shrugged.

“Kennedy scheduled an emergency meeting with me a few days ago.”

Jackson Kennedy was the head of security for St. Clair Enterprises. He was the right-hand man for my father and had worked with us for almost twenty years. We had a security detail that continually monitored and assessed physical and electronic threats against my family.

Fear gripped my heart. Over the years, I had taken various threats from jilted lovers in stride. In my heart, I'd known they were just harmless threats, but now I was a married man with real responsibilities. I couldn't risk anything bad happening to Sweets. I would never forgive myself.

“What's going on?” My heart raced a thousand miles an hour as I leaned forward in the chair.

“Why don't I give you a hint? Let's talk about Las Vegas on the fifteenth of July. Does that ring a bell? It doesn't?” He waited for my response. I grappled for an excuse, a story. Something. When I didn't answer, he said, “Your wedding day.” He flung a copy of our signed marriage license onto the desk between us.

“I worried when he called me personally. I didn't believe him. *My son* would never get married and not invite his parents. I sent him back to dig deeper. That's when I learned you used corporate jet hours to whisk Kandace for a quickie wedding in Las Vegas. How do I know this? It isn't because you told me. No, her name was on the flight manifest. I would have expected a drunken weekend with your buddies, but not *marriage* to a family friend. Is she pregnant?”

“No! She isn't pregnant.”

“Good. Good.” His voice softened, and I could hear the hurt in his voice. “I thought we were working on a closer relationship. We can't have one if you continue to lie. I'm disappointed that you didn't share such an important decision in your life. I didn't see my son get married. My wife, *your*

mother, will be heartbroken that she didn't throw you the wedding you deserve."

"I didn't lie. I just didn't mention it," I sighed.

"Speaking of your mother, this puts me in a hell of a predicament. I pride myself on honesty, and your mother and I don't have secrets. Knowing you're married means I have to lie to her every day when she asks me what's going on. I don't enjoy lying. You have one week to tell her, or I will.

"Then, there is a matter of the prenuptial agreement," he went on. Noting my confusion, he scoffed, "That's right, there is no prenup. You're sitting on a world of financial risk and putting a young girl's future in jeopardy by following with your dick." He sighed, "I take it Celeste doesn't know?"

"Kandace isn't a young girl, she's a woman." I looked him square in the eye, daring him to argue with me about that fact. "Celeste doesn't know. You're the first person to learn of this."

He closed his eyes and began rubbing his temples.

"Kandi deserves more than this. *You* deserve more than this. She shouldn't be your little secret."

"She isn't a secret. She's my wife. I love her, and she loves me."

He leaned back in the chair and appeared to be contemplating the next steps. His head lolled back and forth as he moved his jaw round and round. It was an exercise he believed would prevent TMJ issues. He leaned forward and locked eyes with me.

"One week." The tone was emphatic. "After which, my daughter-in-law will receive the introduction she warrants. Bring her by for Sunday dinner."

"Yes, sir."

"Son. One week." He reminded me.

Messaged received, loud and clear.

The typical fifteen-minute drive home had doubled during rush hour. My thoughts were as tangled and snarled as the

bumper-to-bumper traffic. I walked from the elevator through the threshold of the living room, loosening my tie and heading toward the liquor cabinet. I twisted the cap off the bottle of Maker's Mark with a loud sigh.

"C, I almost didn't hear you come in. Do you know why I didn't hear you come in?" Kandace sang from the bedroom. "After three weeks of fussing, the elevator company finally sent the right guy. He figured out the issues and got it to stop making that horrendous sound. An elevator brake something-or-other." She entered the living room. "I negotiated a twenty percent dis—" Her smile faded when she saw the stress in my expression.

"What's going on? Why do you look like your puppy ran away?" She walked over to wrap her arms around my waist, rising to her tiptoes to kiss me. "Hi, honey."

I gripped her ass and gave her a slight squeeze. I backed her toward the sectional until the backs of her knees hit the cushions. She fell back onto the sofa.

"Hello, beautiful. Great job on the discount. Did you have a good day?" I began unbuttoning my shirt, exposing my white undershirt.

"Don't change the subject. What happened?"

She gazed up at me in concern. We were still in the newlywed phase of our marriage, and I hated to put a damper on things. But there was no way I could keep this from her. I sat next to her and buried my face against the sweet-smelling skin of her neck.

"I don't want to talk about it," I groaned. She held up her hand and pushed against my chest, preventing me from nibbling against the flesh.

"No. You will not do that. Tell me."

I continued to kiss her behind the ear, my beard tickling her. She squealed and pushed me away. I leaned back against the sofa pillows and heaved another sigh.

"My dad knows. He called me to his office and showed me a copy of our marriage license."

I guzzled a swallow from my glass before she grabbed it from my hand and took a swig. She winced as the bourbon burned her throat.

“What else did he say?”

“He gave me one week to tell my mother, or he will tell her. Sweets, I know you wanted to wait, but we need to prepare ourselves to tell our families. How do you feel about it?”

“I can do it. I’ll need a few more days. I don’t expect my family to turn cartwheels.”

“We can tell my mother first. Then, we’ll tell your family.”


“If you don’t mind, I’d like to tell my mother alone. I don’t think she’ll react favorably toward you.”

She leaned into me, her hand rubbing my chest. I sank into the sensation and enjoyed the casual gentleness. The move felt natural and comforting. I reached for her hand and kissed her wrist. The pulse flickered against my lips. We sat like that for ages.

Kandace’s phone rang. She looked at the photo of Celeste and ignored the call. One minute later, Celeste called again. Kandace ignored that call, too. Then, Marie-Therese called, at which point she turned off the phone completely.

“Goodness. She spent the better part of yesterday yelling at me for not having the staffing plan prepared for you. I’m sure that’s what they want. We have bigger fish to fry. We need to figure out how to break the news to our families. How do you feel about roasted chicken breasts?” She stood to walk over to the kitchen. I smacked her ass as she walked by.

“Let’s go out.”

WE WALKED TO THE  NEIGHBORING EMERIL LAGASSE restaurant for dinner. Over Lobster Cannelloni, we agreed to tell my mother, then Kandace would break the news to Celeste over a mother-daughter brunch. She wanted to do it in public

because she was unsure how Celeste would react. She would ply her mother with mimosas and then spring the news on her.

We clinked our glasses together and drank to developing the perfect plan.

After dinner, we walked home in the warm summer evening. I draped my arm around Kandace's shoulders while she wrapped her arms around my waist.

"That pecan pie was delicious!" she beamed at me. "Too bad I only had a tiny piece—"

From the corner of my eye, I saw two women pacing back and forth in front of the empty storefronts under construction. They both wore intense expressions. One was gleeful, and the other was visibly angry.

"Ain't this a bitch?"



CHAPTER

Twenty-One

KANDACE

“MAMA? AUNTIE? WHAT ARE YOU guys doing here?” I moved out of Chadwick’s arms and walked over to where they stood.

“So, it’s true?” Marie-Therese looked between the two of us. Excitement tinged her question, her eyes darting between the two of us. Before Chadwick or I could answer, my mother began her harangue.

“You ignored our calls. I assumed the six thousand dollar bracelet was a fake.” She looked over at Chadwick and added a nonchalant, “Nice taste.” She wailed, shoving a piece of paper into my hands, “I even believed the lie that the bruise on your neck was from a flatiron. I’ve been such a fool.”

It was a printout of an article from *City and Town*, a local gossip website, and I groaned as I read the headline. It was safe to say our marriage was now public knowledge. The article, “Off the Market: Chadwick St. Clair,” detailed every single aspect of the wedding and honeymoon, from my dress to the flowers and even the tears in Chadwick’s eyes. The worst parts were the details of our bar tab and allusions to Chadwick’s performance on our wedding night.

At some point, we would have to address who leaked our wedding details, but for now, I needed to resolve this mess with my mother. And it *was* a mess. Her voice was stern, and she focused all of her attention on me.

“It’s bad enough that you got married. But I had to learn about it from a *blog*?” She turned to Chadwick, “I know this was all your doing.”

She flopped down on the concrete stairs leading to a neighboring storefront. With her hands over her eyes, she shook her head back and forth. Chadwick and my aunt looked at my mother with similar looks of amusement.

“I regret putting my baby girl in harm’s way,” she said to no one in particular. “I raised my daughter to be a good girl.” She spat out, “She’s a far cry from the whores and witches that frequent this . . . this . . . *brothel*. A proverbial den of lowlifes. Her innocence stolen by some overindulged playboy . . . My baby. I’ve failed you.” She sobbed the last sentence.

I looked helplessly over at my aunt. She firmly pressed her lips together in a vain attempt at hiding her laughter. She walked over and intertwined her pinky with mine. This was a secret gesture we had always shared when one of us needed support and acceptance. She lifted my left hand and surveyed the wedding set. She nudged me with her arm and raised her brows in approval. Untwining her pinky, she held out a fist with her other hand. I grinned as I balled my fist and knocked it against hers.

That small moment of acceptance was short-lived as my mother continued her diatribe, this time with her eyes firmly planted on Chadwick.

“You married my daughter in *Sin City*? Never mind the fact that she’s an only child, an only niece, and an only grandchild. You didn’t think, ‘Hey. Maybe Celeste would like to attend our wedding.’” She groaned and sobbed uncontrollably.

“Mother, I’m not a child. Yes, I married Chadwick in Las Vegas last month,” I said, redirecting attention to me. I walked over and stood next to Chadwick. I’d had enough of her

treating me like a young girl inconsequential to any adult conversation. I didn't need her permission. Her approval was different. I needed that.

"Are you . . ." She didn't finish the sentence, but the question was clear as day when her eyes shifted to my flat belly. She thought he married me because I was pregnant. *Great.*

"No. We waited until our wedding night." For once, I willingly offered private details of my sexual life. I prayed for the day when my virginity would no longer be a topic for open discussion.

"Hmph. I'm sure you loved that," she sneered at Chadwick. "I'm going home. Fuck this." She started to walk away but quickly turned back and pointed a finger at Chadwick. "I know you. My daughter isn't a Kleenex, and you will *not* use and discard her like the throngs of women who have come in and out of here. If you harm a hair on her head, I will blow your dick off with my daddy's shotgun. Mark me on this." She jabbed a finger to his chest for emphasis.

Chadwick's eyes widened, and for the first time, he was speechless. He couldn't use natural charm to defuse my mother's anger. In fact, he knew it would only make her angrier. He stayed quiet and accepted her rage.

In a show of support, I moved between the two with my back against Chadwick's chest.

"Mother. You are making a scene. That's enough," I said. My words were eerily calm and quiet and had an uncharacteristic bit of firmness.

Daggers shot from her eyes and without another word, she turned on her heels and stomped away.

Auntie Marie walked over and hugged me. She then turned to Chadwick and hugged him, then whispered something in his ear. He nodded in response.

"Marie! Let's go!" Mama yelled back.

"Coming." Marie-Therese turned to follow my mother, but not before she smiled at us, making a circling gesture at her

temple.

We watched as the two of the closest people in my life burst through a crowd of gawking onlookers. My eyes darted around at the throng of people spectating one of the most important moments of my life. I was happy the secret was out. We'd no longer need to hide or shirk around corners, but the public nature of the reveal was an embarrassment.

Chadwick stood behind me. His chin rested on my shoulder as his arms wound around my waist. He held me against his solid muscles, and I sank into the warmth of his touch. In his arms, I was safe and secure.

"Let's go. We better tell Genevieve." We entered the elevator to make our way to the parking garage. Once inside, I whispered, "What did Auntie say to you?"

"Welcome to the family," he responded with a chuckle. "Once we tell my mother and your grandparents, we can stop hiding."

Genevieve St. Clair took the news a little better than my mother. Chadwick and I walked hand-in-hand into the St. Clair family home. She was in silk pajamas and had removed her makeup. For a second, she stared at the two of us in confusion. My heart raced until realization hit her that Chadwick and I were a couple. I stood stiffly until she took me by the hand and led us to the kitchen banquette.

We sat at the table, and in a rush, Chadwick explained that we married three weeks ago. He told her about the wedding and the article in the blog. He explained our decision to marry in secret.

Tears formed in her eyes and she stood to hug us. She also cried when she saw I wore Mother St. Clair's ring. I laughed when she asked about a layette and sighed dramatically before falling into her seat when we said that we were not expecting a baby.

By the time we left the house, she had text messaged her event planner and florist. She now had a project—planning our wedding reception.

At that point, we were both free to break the news to our friends. It was no surprise that we were married, but they were all *very* surprised that we had eloped.

I was happy and relieved that our friends and the St. Clairs welcomed us into the family with open arms. But there was still the matter of my family. Any time my mother cried uncontrollably, I shifted back to the mindset of a ten-year-old child, giving in to her demands to ornament my hair in barrettes and ribbons. It was important that my mother respect me as an adult, capable of making her own decisions. I knew I needed to work with her. Besides, I wanted Goody and Pop-Pop to hear the news from me rather than someone else.

THE NEXT MORNING, I TEXT MESSAGES MOM AND AUNTIE, inviting them to join us for Sunday dinner at our place and asking them to bring my grandparents. Auntie Marie was the first and only person to respond. She'd vowed to make sure that the immediate family would attend.

I spent the following Sunday preparing an Italian meal with homemade ice cream for dessert. My husband had cleaned the loft until it was spic and span. We also opted to leave alcohol off the menu, substituting with fresh-squeezed lemonade. Alcohol would only heighten emotions, which was the last thing we needed.

At precisely five thirty, the security system had alerted us of our guests' arrival, and I sent the elevator down to the lobby. My heart beat loudly in my chest, and my palms were sweaty. I stood at the threshold to the loft with a smile glued to my face. It was as phony as a fifteen-dollar bill. Behind me, my husband stared at me wearily.

We hadn't really discussed the importance of my family's approval and support and my fear that they wouldn't. For the past two nights, I'd cried softly in bed. I hadn't thought he would hear me, but he'd wrapped me in his arms and kissed my tears away.

The elevator chimed before the doors opened. In walked my grandparents, mother, auntie, and . . . my father? I hadn't

seen him since my winter break.

The tall, brown-skinned man with graying temples walked into the room. Instead of the typical suit and tie, he was dressed in khaki chinos and a navy blue polo shirt. I realized that my father was in New Orleans for leisure and not business.

“Frank, ahem, Dad, what are you doing here?”

“Your mother called to catch me up on this wedding business. I want to meet your husband.”

My mother hated my father. They’d argued constantly ever since he popped into my life. My father annoyed my mother. She hated that he lavished me with expensive gifts and shopping trips to New York. But she was a clever one. She’d needed reinforcements, so she’d called in the big guns.

Goody walked into the loft and looked around in amazement.

“Wow. This is how the other half lives. This place is fabulous.” She handed me a large mason jar filled with clear liquid. I knew immediately that it was her special occasion moonshine, and I kissed her cheek as I accepted the container, resisting the urge to lock it away somewhere.

“Thank you, Goody.”

She turned and gave Chadwick a huge bosom hug, an official welcome to the family. Pop-Pop planted a kiss on my cheek and shook Chadwick’s hand, patting him on the shoulder. Chadwick smiled appreciatively. Auntie Marie greeted me with a small, almost apologetic smile.

“Come here.” She pulled me in for a hug and whispered, “Our sweet little baby girl is a wife.”

My mother gave me a polite and chilly hug. She completely ignored Chadwick, and I reached out for his hand to offer support. This is the second time that she has disrespected my husband and this time was in our home. She wouldn’t do it again.

“Dad, I would like you to meet my husband, Chadwick St. Clair. Chadwick is a longtime family friend. Gosh, I’ve known him my entire life.”

“Mr. Vincent,” Chadwick extended his hand. “It’s nice to meet you. Kandace has said many good things about you.” We all knew that was a lie. There wasn’t much to say about my father. I hadn’t fully recovered from his period of absence from my life.

“Young man, when you get a chance, I would like to have dinner with you.” A gentle smile graced his face. A face that was strikingly similar to mine.

I groaned on the inside. I didn’t mind him tagging along with everyone else, but I minded Franklin stepping in with this doting father act.

“Of course,” Chadwick answered.

I offered to take everyone on a tour of the loft. Everyone but my mother wanted to go. She opted to pout at the dining table. An awkward silence engulfed the room when we returned to the dining area. My mother looked like she’d swallowed a bullfrog, and we were all uncomfortable with her unpleasant disposition.

“Why don’t we eat dinner?” I suggested. Chadwick and I walked to the kitchen to retrieve the lasagna and breadsticks.

“I’ve never seen Celeste like this,” he whispered.

“I have. This is one of her tantrums.” I huffed irritably and picked up the lasagna pan with the potholders. “She will not control my life or guilt me on this. She’ll survive. Take the salad and the breadsticks.” I pulled my shoulders back and held my head high before returning to the dining area.

Eight navy-blue upholstered chairs surrounded the large reclaimed wood dining table. Chadwick sat at the head of the table with my grandfather at the opposite end. I sat between my father and Chadwick, facing my mother, aunt, and grandmother.

Pop-Pop led us in prayer, and we ate in silence for a few minutes until Auntie Marie put her fork down.

“This is painful. Let’s talk. I believe we should celebrate love, and I hate that we didn’t know about the ceremony. Promise me you won’t keep any more secrets.”

My grandparents nodded in agreement.

“If you had told me twenty-one years ago that this would happen, I would have called you a liar,” Goody chuckled. She glanced between Chadwick and me. “We were at the St. Clairs’ house with you. Chadwick walked past without acknowledging your presence. Genevieve asked if he wanted to hold you. You should have seen Chadwick’s face. He looked like someone had ruined his summer because you weren’t a boy. Now, here you two are.”

Everyone but my mother laughed. She turned her nose up as she finally spoke.

“Why did you get married? We didn’t even know you two were dating.”

“Love. We married for love,” I replied honestly. My mother flashed a devious half smile.

“Love. I didn’t think I raised a romantic. I’m sure you’re in love, but what about him?” She nodded toward Chadwick, and I turned to face him. He nodded, affirming his love for me.

“I love her. Very much.” he smiled, keeping his eyes on mine.

“You’re incapable of loving my daughter the way she deserves,” Mother said dismissively. She chewed loudly on a heaping forkful of salad. “What about work, Kandace? What are you going to do for work? Or are you going to sit on your ass and shop?”

The rude comment elicited a gasp from our guests.

“Young lady, you’ve gone too far.” Pop-Pop glared at my mother.

“Pop-Pop, I’m okay,” I assured him, turning back to answer her. “I will not *sit on my ass*. I will work. I can spend more time on the administrative side of Scrub-A-Dub. I could lend a hand with staffing for the Loyola contract.”

My mother put her fork down, her eyebrow arched to the heavens.

“So, he’s making you work? Hmph. All of his money and your little measly salary. What are you paying for? The groceries? The power bill?”

To the others at the table, it may have appeared that she had lost her mind, but I immediately recognized this tactic. She was searching for cracks in our story, maybe even our marriage. Once she found the divide, she would exploit it for her own use.

“I will support her in any way she needs,” Chadwick spoke up, but the answer didn’t satisfy Mama. She shot out questions in rapid succession.

“What about school? What about your friends? What about enjoying your youth? I thought you wanted to see the world?”

“Being married doesn’t change any of that. I’ll graduate in December. I didn’t make plans for graduate school. My friends are happy for me. I would rather travel with Chadwick than do it alone.”

“What about children? How would you see the world with a baby in your arms? Or maybe Chadwick would prefer to hire nannies to raise your children?”

That was a low blow. During Chadwick’s teen years, Martin and Genevieve took long vacations, and the household attendants stepped in to check on Chadwick. My mother was always judgmental that he was home alone.

All eyes looked our way. We hadn’t discussed children, but I knew I wasn’t ready. I doubted I’d want children until I was in my thirties. Chadwick cleared his throat cautiously.

“When it’s time to have children, my wife and I will determine how to best to raise them.”

Gauging my reaction, my mother realized she’d found the divide.

“Did you two not discuss this before you flew away to Las Vegas? If you didn’t discuss children, I know you didn’t

discuss working, financial matters, lifestyle, and all the important topics you should discuss before marriage.” She smiled and took a dramatic bite of the breadstick.

“The inquisition is over. I’m done talking about this,” I said firmly. “We do not owe anyone an explanation about our lives or our marriage. For the first time, I have someone important in my life.” His hand found mine under the table. The simple move gave me the strength to stand up to my overbearing mother. “I know you mean well, but this is too much. You have no choice but to accept my marriage.”

“Genevieve called me yesterday,” she announced, as though I hadn’t spoken. “Seems she’s planning a reception for you two. Ain’t that a bitch? Your father and I may have wanted to throw a reception. The bride’s family usually takes care of the wedding expenses. But I guess you’re a *St. Clair* now.”

I didn’t miss the implication. This was about more than just my marriage. She was afraid the allure of wealth would trap me in its clutches. She thought I would forget about the Alexanders. I would never turn my back on my family. I opened my mouth to say that, when she spoke again, turning her head to the side.

“I get it. The dick must be incredible.”

A frustrated Marie-Therese threw down her napkin, pushed back her chair, and stood up.

“Celeste, you’re behaving like a child.” She turned to me with anger flashing her eyes. “I refuse to let her sit at your dinner table and insult you. We’re leaving.”

“Marie, you know this is bullshit. You guys are sitting around this table like it’s all normal. We all know that in a few months, he’ll get bored, and then they’ll get an annulment. I can’t believe I’m the only person who cares about Kandi’s well-being.” She turned toward my father. “And *you* invited him out to dinner? Wow.”

Auntie Marie faced Chadwick and said, “You have the patience of Job. Don’t let this interfere with loving my niece.

She deserves all the happiness in this world.” She then turned to me, and her bottom lip trembled, “Chère, focus on your marriage and your new husband. I’m proud of you, and I want the best for you two.”

Goody and Pop-Pop gave both of us big hugs and smiles. Goody winked conspiratorially.

“I was your age when I married. You will be an excellent wife and mother. Stand up to her.”

My mother stomped away, grabbing her purse from the entry table and pressing the button on the elevator. She didn’t bother to wait for the others, glowering at us as the elevator doors closed.

“I’ll talk to her,” my father promised. That response elicited a small chuckle from me. *Right. He’ll make it all better.*

Shell-shocked from the dinner party from hell, Chadwick slumped on the sectional. I sat between his legs, and his fingers caressed my arms. He was my place of solace.

“I’ve never seen her that angry.” I leaned back against his solid chest. He bent down and kissed the top of my head.

“Neither have I.”



CHAPTER

Twenty-Two

CHADWICK

“SWEETS, ARE YOU READY?” I called out from the living room. It was five thirty, and if we didn’t hurry, we’d be late to our own wedding reception.

My wife had not seen or heard from her mother in five weeks. Her mood had slowly sunk into deeper levels of depression. I’d been trying to stay out of their family conflict. However, if my wife didn’t cheer up soon, I would have no choice but to step in and put an end to this shit.

At the very least, I hoped that seeing our friends and family toast our marriage would momentarily lift our spirits.

Kandace walked out of the bedroom and stood before me in a soft white strapless floor-length dress. She’d spent her morning at the hair salon getting her hair straightened and swept into an elegant updo which showed off her graceful neck.

“How do I look?”

My eyes focused on the heaving mounds visible from the top of her gown. I pointed to my dick with a smirk, and she walked into my outstretched arms. I wrapped myself around

her, wanting her to feel the love and admiration I held for her. She sighed against my chest.

“You look like a perfect gentleman, but we both know that you’re anything *but* a gentleman.” I gave her ass a playful swat. She jumped a little before she wiggled her bottom and laughed. “You’re perfect. But keep that up and we’ll be late to our party, because that smack just made me a little wet.”

Our private black town car arrived in front of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel at the designated time. On the drive over, she looked out the window and absentmindedly snapped the small white evening clutch open and shut. I knew she was nervous at the prospect of our first public event and seeing her mother. Celeste was such a live wire—you never knew what she would or wouldn’t do.

“Hey there. Are you ready? Don’t worry. I’ll always be on your right-hand side,” I promised. She rewarded my chivalry with a thankful smile. “Let’s go, babe. We have people waiting for us.”

At the elevator, an usher handed us two feather-embellished parasols, black for me and white for Kandace. We grinned at each other when a gentleman in a pinstripe suit and a Stetson hat held out two feathered fans and took a deep bow. He would be the Grand Marshal of our little parade. He blew a whistle, and the brass band, all dressed in bright red suits, began to play a song I couldn’t place. But judging by the gleam in my wife’s eyes, she knew.

“It’s “Crazy in Love” by Beyoncé!” she yelled over the loud blare of the horns. “My mother remembered I wanted to enter to this song at my wedding!” Pure, unadulterated glee lit up her face as she began to dance in rhythm with the music. Her energy was infectious. I felt the joy bubble up in my chest and began to dance with her.

For the first times in our lives, we were at the front of a second line parade. The Grand Marshal joined our dance party, though his moves were far smoother and more rhythmic than ours. From inside the reception hall, an emcee announced us as “Chadwick and Kandace St. Clair” before the ushers swung

the large heavy doors open. Camera flashes and bright spotlights temporarily blinded me, but once my eyes adjusted, I made out the crowded ballroom filled with our family and friends.

Our parents had spared no expense. I had explained to my mother that Kandace's parents wanted to contribute, and they had all agreed to split the costs down the middle. There were dozens of circular tables adorned with beautiful floral centerpieces. There was a large cake near the dance floor and a long banquet table filled with gifts.

It looked like the party had started long before we arrived, as each guest had a drink in one hand and a white handkerchief in the other. We walked through the crowd of applause and I received many claps on the back. The brass band led us directly to a small table for two in front of the dance floor.

Another spotlight shone on our parents as they clapped and smiled at our entry. The mothers wore coordinating navy gowns while our fathers had donned black tuxedos.

My eyes drifted to Celeste. She danced with Franklin with a phony smile on her face. Our guests likely didn't notice, but Kandace and I both knew she hated him and was putting on a show for our five hundred guests.

Once the noise of the crowd died down, the wait staff handed us flutes of champagne as my father's loud voice boomed in the reception hall.

"Please raise your glasses to my son, Chadwick, and my beautiful daughter, Kandace." Celeste shot him a glare, but Martin St. Clair was well-versed in public presentation and appearances. He ignored her stare and added, "Congratulations on your marriage. Genny and I want *lots* of grandchildren. To Chadwick and Kandace! Salut!"

The crowd repeated a chorus of congratulations before tilting back the glasses filled with amber fluid.

Kandace put on a brave front as her father took the microphone.

“Your mother and I love you more than words can describe. We wish you two a lifetime of happiness. Everyone join me in a toast to sweethearts. May all sweethearts become married couples, and may all married couples remain sweethearts.” Franklin’s words were surprisingly familiar and warm. He smiled at Celeste standing at his side and she flashed another fake smile. Kandace’s eyebrows raised and fell.

We both walked onto the stage to hug all of our parents. Kandace’s face crumpled as Celeste’s arms encircled her but didn’t touch her with any pressure.

Someone passed the microphone to Kandace’s friends. Representing the group, her best friend, Natasha, delivered a humorous and loving speech.

“To quote, Dr. Seuss, ‘You know you’re in love when you can’t fall asleep, because your reality is finally better than your dreams.’ Congratulations Chadwick and Kandace! We love you!” She raised her glass before taking a sip.

James went next, speaking for my friends. In true James form, he wore a grey tuxedo that was as shiny as aluminum foil. I was a little worried. I’d known him a long time, and he knew all the skeletons in my closet. He grinned and raised his champagne flute to me. I held my breath and prepared myself for an embarrassing speech.

“Some of you think the four of us are best friends. We’re not. We are brothers. Our brother is happy, and we are thankful he found love. Because, let’s be honest, everyone’s tired of reading about your exploits online.” The crowd roared with laughter. “They say you don’t marry the person you can live with—you marry the person you can’t live without. Congratulations to Chadwick and his lovely bride, our new sister, Kandace.”

After the rounds of toasts and speeches, the emcee signaled that it was time for dinner and that Pop-Pop Alexander would say the blessing. The reception hall was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. After the chorus of amens, the elegantly clothed waitstaff brought plates to each of the tables.

“I can’t wait to get you out of this dress. I will rip your panties off with my teeth,” I murmured, leaning down to kiss her bare shoulder. A collective female swoon followed by a chorus of *awws* echoed throughout the room. Kandace looked down at her lap and tried to hide her blush as we were both reminded that there was a spotlight on us. She bit her lip and giggled a response that was music to my ears.

“I’m not wearing any,” she whispered. “We still need to cut the cake, and there will be dancing. Then, we can leave this place.”

My jaw dropped, her erotic admission stunned me. I didn’t care about dinner, cake, drinks or dancing. I wanted to throw her over my shoulder and carry her to the nearest bed.

“I believe there is an empty banquet room. We can sneak off. Or I can get us a room.” The palm of my hand rubbed her lower back. “How about it?”

“There is a literal spotlight on us. Do you want hundreds of nosy eyes to follow us out of this room? Do you think we can disappear for an hour? Everyone’ll know.”

“They’ll chalk it up to newlywed antics.” I knew my wife was far too proper to do something so brazen. Her innocence was one reason I loved her.

I estimated we had to endure at least four more hours of the party before we could go home and make love.

Kandace and I made it through dinner and cake cutting relatively unscathed. There was no drama until my wife broke the ice with Celeste. She spied her mother crossing the dance floor and walked over to take her hand. She twirled her mother around playfully.

“Well, hello there, nephew. Wow. I have a nephew.” Marie-Therese stood next to me and nodded toward Kandace and Celeste on the dance floor. “Don’t worry about those two. My sister is stubborn and scared. It may not seem like it, but she loves you, and her daughter is the air she breathes. Eventually, she’ll accept your marriage. She requires lots of coddling and ass kissing. She’ll come around. I promise.” She looked

around the room and her eyes settled on a guy I did not recognize.

“Excuse me, nephew. I think I just spied my next baby’s father.” With those parting words, she made her way over to the tall stranger.

I watched my wife and her mother dance together. Each woman smiled and laughed genuinely. I was happy to see that they were getting along. I flagged down a waiter for a refill of a glass of water.

My excitement at the possibility of a quick resolution waned when Kandace returned to the table with a cool expression.

“Did you talk to Celeste?” I asked.

“I did.”

“And?”

“She called the reception *bourgie* and boring. She complained that we didn’t have a money dance or a cake pull. I walked away. I’m done.”

“Sweets. Don’t say that. You can’t abandon your mother. You need each other. This will pass.”

“Will it? When? Because right now I’m tired of her and her shit.” She glanced around the banquet room filled with our family and friends and plastered a smile on her face.

Thankfully, we made it through the rest of the evening with no further incidents.

After we arrived home, Kandace washed up and slipped into the nightshirt of my cotton pajamas. I was wearing the bottoms with a white t-shirt. She’d been gorgeous at the reception, but she was even more lovely with a makeup-free face and her hair down. Red splotches marred her pretty face.

“Aww. Come here, Sweets.” She walked to the bed and fell into my arms. I let out a long sigh. “Why can’t life be easy?” I stroked her hair and held her until she fell asleep in my arms.



MY RACING THOUGHTS KEPT ME AWAKE. I HADN'T A WINK OF sleep, my mind filled with things to do lists and upcoming goals. I looked at the clock on Kandace's nightstand to see it was eight thirty. Kandace was still asleep, and I gazed at the ceiling and thought about the next stage of my life.

The soft launch of the lofts went very well, the larger spaces sold quickly. Five lofts were now under contract with seven more to sell.

Now that the building was ready for buyers, I had shifted my mind to a new project. Two weeks ago, I'd happened upon a foreclosure sign hung on a rusty wrought-iron gate in front of an Italianate house. My real estate agent, Rachel, had frowned as we strapped respirators over our mouths and noses and entered the crumbling Victorian. The home was best described as a haunted mansion. There were decades of neglect and there wasn't a single surface that didn't require repair. Massive holes dotted the roof and floorboards, and there were piles of crumbling plaster on the floors that remained.

The house wouldn't go through a gut remodel. It would be a historic preservation for our forever home. I saw the potential in the property, and I almost purchased it on the spot. Then I remembered that I was a married man. I reached Kandace using FaceTime and did a video tour of the house. I eagerly explained my vision for updated kitchens, bathrooms, custom doors, and the spare bedrooms. She looked weary, and I could tell she didn't share my vision. But I asked her to trust me.

As I lay in our bed, I ticked off the massive list of things to do for both properties and felt a little overwhelmed. All of those things were a distant second and third from the biggest project I had, and that was making my wife happy. There was a risk that this fight, or whatever you wanted to call it, with her mother would ruin their relationship permanently. As the saying goes, 'happy wife, happy life,' I had to do whatever it took to get them back on speaking terms.

I smiled to myself and looked over at my better half. She stirred in her sleep and looked up at me, smiling dreamily.

“Good morning. Breakfast? Pancakes?” she asked, stretching.

“Sounds good.”

Her eyes filled with fire and mischief, and I knew what was coming next.

“How about you feed me and then I’ll feed you?”

The intent was clear. Her eyes roamed over my chest and down my stomach until they landed on the tent in my pajama bottoms. Her fingers tiptoed to the waistband of my pajama bottoms and tugged at the fabric. I lifted my hips and pushed the pants down my thighs. My dick bobbed as she unbuttoned and shrugged off her pajama top with a playful smile. I reached out and traced my fingers over a hardened nipple.

“If you’re hungry, you’re more than welcome to eat,” I growled.

“I hoped you’d say that.”

She flushed with pleasure and let her hand glide over my engorged cock before leaning down to take me in her mouth. My fingers moved into her hair as she expertly licked the pearl of pre-cum collecting at the tip of the crown. Then she flattened her tongue and crashed down, almost swallowing me whole. Adjusting the angle of her head to avoid hitting the back of her throat, she eagerly took all of me.

My perfect wife. My beautiful and *talented* wife.

My head slumped when the wet warmth of her mouth surrounded my cock and her fingers tickled my sack. I used every fiber of my strength to keep from thrusting my hips forward and ramming into her throat. I would not fuck my wife’s mouth.

At least not this morning.

My exquisite wife kept me in a perpetual state of torture by smoothly moving her head up and down, savoring every inch. Her eyes hinted at amusement and pride, and her perfect lips

smiled around my cock. She enjoyed driving me mad with her mouth.

The hand not wrapped around my dick drifted from her breast down to her hot, wet cunt.

“Sweets, that’s mine. Don’t touch it.”

She let out a groan of displeasure, which made me jolt until I almost came out of my skin.

I lost all sense of time as my wife satisfied me with her mouth. I didn’t want it to end.

“That’s it. Don’t stop. Keep going.”

Kandace continued to suck and knead and moan against my dick until my release spurted into her pretty throat. She pumped her hands until all the seed drained from me, and like a champ, she swallowed every drop of my seed without spilling.

She licked me clean and left me completely satisfied as she moved to rest her head on my shoulder, wrapping her body around mine.

“Did you enjoy the reception?”

“Yes, I did. How about you?”

“I loved it until the drama with my mama.” She smirked as she tried not to giggle.

“Are you ready to go back to work?” I asked with hesitation, not wanting to change the mood.

“Not really.”

“I don’t think you should do it. If it isn’t in you to do it, then don’t fit yourself into someone else’s mold. Do what makes you happy.” I grinned and pinned her hot, naked body to me. She smiled wryly.

“I’m being a chickenshit.”

“No, you’re not. You’re the bravest woman I know. Loyalty to your family and your heritage is important and counts for something.”

I gazed at my wife. I couldn't contain the amount of love I had for her. I ran my tongue in a path from her mouth to her clavicle. Her eyes lit up with anticipation, and her breathing quickened.

“My sweet, I'm still hungry for you.”



CHAPTER

Twenty-Three

KANDACE

ON MONDAY MORNING, I AWAKENED bright and early. I took a long shower before sliding on my Scrub-A-Dub polo shirt, khakis, and tennis shoes. I pulled my hair back with a tortoiseshell headband. I brushed on foundation, mascara, blush, and plum sheer lipstick. I looked at the reflection staring back at me. My smile was unassured. Was I going to make it through the day? How would my mother respond to my presence?

On the kitchen countertop sat a small glass vase filled with yellow roses with red tips. My husband stood at the range cooking breakfast - scrambled eggs and bacon.

“Good morning, Sweets. Give me a minute for the toast. I cut a grapefruit for you and put it in the refrigerator, or there is juice.”

“Wow. Thank you. The flowers are beautiful.”

“I wanted to give you a reminder that today will be a beautiful day.”

I would report to the Scrub-A-Dub offices. I hadn't been there in the ten weeks since Chadwick and I married. I hadn't heard from my mother since the reception, and since two

weeks of the silent treatment was too long, my mood had grown sullen. I'd vowed to face my mother and get her to say more than two words to me. I missed her.

We hadn't had a Sunday dinner in over two months. I feared that if we didn't resolve things soon, our family might never fully recover. Auntie had tried to reach out to me, but she was in the middle of my mother and me. Goody and Pop-Pop kept me in the loop, but as with most facets of our lives, Celeste Alexander owned and managed it.

My mother and I built the foundation of our relationship on her setting expectations and me exceeding those expectations. I was a devoted and faithful daughter. I did what she wanted at the expense of my happiness. I desperately wanted her to open her eyes and see the love I shared with my husband.

She knew Chadwick. Yes, he had a complicated past with women. But he had shown me nothing but kindness, openness, and love. I needed him.

I needed my mother, but in a different way. Growing up, my mother and I were inseparable. We had a bond solidified by years of us being together all the time. I knew that no matter how angry she was with me, she would be by my side. I may have disappointed her, but I knew she loved me.

Chadwick and I sat at the island and ate our breakfast in silence.

"What's on your schedule for the day?" I asked.

"Rachel will bring some folks by. She also wants to talk in more detail about an offer."

"Woot! Woot!" I raised my hands and shimmied my hips. "You're kicking ass. I knew you would do it."

At seven forty-five, I gathered my bags and headed to the elevator. Chadwick took the bag from my hand and escorted me to the garage. We lingered at my car as he licked his tongue across his bottom lip, pulling me closer to him with a hand on my hip. I moaned as I stood on my tiptoes, and my face moved closer and closer until our lips met. In my mind, I

wanted a soft, sweet kiss, but I needed a kiss that would rock me to my core. His hand moved from my hip and traced up my arms to my face. He lightly stroked my chin with his thumb while I simultaneously rubbed circles with my finger along his back. After at least five minutes of kissing, he pulled himself away from me, his chest heaving rapidly.

“Go to work,” he groaned. “Have a good day. Be safe and bring that sexy ass back to me.”

“I will.” Neither of us moved. We stood and gazed at each other until I broke the moment and opened the car door to slide in. I pulled at the seatbelt, and he fastened me in before giving me a quick, chaste kiss.

“Call me. Let me know what’s going on.” He pressed two fingers to his lips and blew a kiss my way. I puckered my lips in response.

“I will. Love you.”

“Love you.” He closed the door.

I shifted the small sedan in reverse. He walked backward to the elevator entryway before swiping the entry key and entering the vestibule. I pulled down the ramp to the street below, the morning sun blinding me as I made my way to the Scrub-A-Dub office.

I drove the six miles to the storefront. My heart raced knowing that my mother and auntie weren’t aware that I was coming. I didn’t know what to expect. If Mama was unkind, I prayed I wouldn’t cry.

They were smiling and chatting when I walked through the door. It hurt that they could laugh when I’d been in such pain. The door chimed, and both sets of eyes looked up at me. Auntie smiled and rushed over.

“Kandi. You’re here! We didn’t expect you. What are you doing here?”

“Good morning.” I leaned in to hug her. I walked to my mother’s desk, and I leaned over to press my cheek against my hers. “I’m here to take on more responsibility. Makes little sense for me to work around the loft.” I smiled tentatively at

Mama, hoping it would thaw the chill between us. She sipped on her coffee, avoiding my eyes.

“I’m surprised you aren’t here to find someone to clean your place,” she said dryly.

“We can handle it ourselves.” I pulled out the chair to my desk. They piled several stacks of file folders on the white-lacquered surface.

Auntie smiled and nodded, her eyes gleaming. She had been a constant supporter throughout the years. I knew she was excited for me and my marriage. She loved me, and she loved Chadwick. But she was crazy for us together.

“As you can see, we need all of those invoices filed. Then, someone needs to take an inventory of supplies and call about overdue payments. Can you handle that?”

“I’m Kandi-baby.” I snapped my fingers and wriggled my shoulders. I walked over to the coffeemaker and popped in a pod. I waited while the coffeemaker dripped hot coffee into my black and gold Saints mug.

“We haven’t had Sunday dinner in weeks. I would love a bowl of your shrimp etouffee,” I said. My mother avoided eye contact, preferring to stare at her computer screen.

“We had dinner at my house on Sunday. It was a last-minute decision. I figured you were probably out and about with your husband,” Mom sneered. My cheeks flushed from embarrassment, but I stayed strong.

“How long will this go on?”

“What did you say?”

“How long are you going to treat me like shit? I get it. I got married to a man you do not approve of. I eloped in Sin City. But at some point, you need to get over it.”

“At some point in your life, you’ll learn that everyone may not approve of your choices. I don’t have to. Kandi, I like Chadwick. I like him a lot, but he isn’t what I had in mind for you. He has lived a life that I don’t think you’re ready for. He has slept with a lot of fast women. You aren’t that.”

“I don’t care about his past or the other women.”

“You should. Why do I care more about this than you?” She let out a breath in a huff. “I care about how all of that will blow back on you. What happens when you get a pair of underwear in the mail? You know those whores will do anything to sabotage your marriage.”

“I trust him.”

“What about money? I don’t expect you to work here. You shouldn’t be working at all. He has plenty of money to support your dreams.”

“I *want* to work. I’m twenty-one years old, sitting at home would bore me to shreds. I need a purpose.”

“Children. If you’re working, who raises the children? Nannies? You see what nannies and *staff* did for him. Do you want my grandbabies to grow up like that?”

“It’s been four months,” I sighed. “We aren’t discussing kids.”

“Fair enough. Let’s talk about race. He’s white, and you’re black. How are you going to feel when someone mistakes you for the nanny and not the mother? What are you going to do then?”

“You raised me not to care what strangers think. I can’t control how stupid people think.”

“He’s your first. Don’t you want to know how it is to date and sleep with other men?”

“I saved myself for a reason. I’m satisfied with him, and I don’t care about any other men.”

Marie-Therese let out a loud groan. I braced myself, hoping and praying the sisters wouldn’t begin arguing.

“Celeste, stop it. If you keep badgering her, she won’t want to come around us anymore. You pretend that you don’t care, but you miss her. Apologize and let’s move on from this shit.” My mother glared at Marie-Therese before continuing with the questions.

“Aren’t you afraid he will tire of your virginal ways? What if he wants something hotter than missionary with one woman every night? Are you prepared to bring in another woman to be the star in your marriage?”

“Ha! This is the reason I didn’t tell you about our relationship or the wedding. Stop trying to manage my life.”

“You think this shit is easy? I sacrificed everything for you. I had hopes and dreams, but I made the best of it so I could give you a better life. You’re supposed to build empires, not be some rich man’s concubine.”

“You know what? I’m done with this.” I slammed down the coffee cup on the desk. Coffee dripped along the side onto the white desk. *Let them clean it up.* I marched over to the cabinet and pulled out my purse. I hooked my arm in the strap, adding a casual yet snide, “Bye, Auntie. I will see you around.”

“There she goes. Grown women don’t run. They stand in their truth,” my mother scoffed.

“Yeah. Whatever. Bye, *Celeste.*” I stormed out the door into the warm, autumnal sun. I peeled out of the parking lot and headed home.

When I reached our building, I kept going. I drove around the city for an hour. I let the stress overtake me, shedding a few tears. I didn’t want Chadwick to know that I lasted less than fifteen minutes at the office. He couldn’t know that I ran out before the tears slid down my cheeks.

I hated that I’d been unable to answer my mother’s questions. It would bother me to be mistaken for the nanny. And I had thought about the chance that he may get bored with me sexually. Sometimes, I even wondered if he’d married me for my virginity.

I couldn’t believe I was at one of the lowest points of my life. I had love, and I was *in love*. But I needed my mother.

I sighed and pushed down my negative thoughts. I wasn’t good without my family, and I wouldn’t have been good

without Chadwick. Yet, if I had to choose, I would pick him every single time.



CHAPTER

Twenty-Four

CHADWICK

I HOVERED OVER THE STAINLESS-STEEL kitchen sink while I wolfed down a peanut butter and grape jelly sandwich. Since Kandace had become a permanent fixture in my life, I'd become more conscious of cleaning after myself and lending a hand with the household chores. But that didn't mean I didn't revert to my old ways now and then. I used the organic peanut butter and jelly dispensed from squeeze tubes. I chose the convenience of eating over the sink because there would be no utensils or plates to wash or tables to clean. I could wash any crumbs that fell into the sink into the garbage disposal.

The elevator chime announced Kandace's arrival. Between bites, I called out to her.

"Sweets! That was fast. Guess what? We received a contract for the smallest unit on the third floor. Let's go out and celebrate."

When she didn't respond to my greeting, I leaned over to look for her in the foyer. She stood in the entry, red-rimmed eyes accented with dark circles, lack of consistent sleep and sadness painted on her face. I turned off the music app and walked over to her. The loft was quiet, the pads of my feet

slapping against the marble floor the only sound in the cavernous space.

“What’s wrong?” I asked with a hint of caution.

“Celeste being Celeste.” She sighed and shrugged her shoulders.

Oh no, not again.

There were three people in my marriage, and it was more than a little crowded. Kandace and my mother-in-law hadn’t spoken since the day Kandace stormed out of Scrub-A-Dub. Celeste was still a constant fixture in our lives. Memories of the good times with her mother flooded my wife’s conversations and inserted their way into our activities. The only time Kandace didn’t worry about Celeste was when we were making love.

My wife stood in front of me, but her mind was a million miles away from here. She avoided my kiss and walked down the hallway leading to the kitchen.

“What do you want for dinner? Shrimp stir-fry with brown rice?” she called.

“Did you miss what I said? We sold a unit. Let’s go out to celebrate.”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to stay home and rest. Why don’t you call the boys to meet up for drinks? I don’t want them to blame me for keeping you from them.”

“Are you sure? I can order in and stream a few movies. Your choice. I’ll even suffer through another viewing of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy.” That statement garnered a weak smile. “Do you want a glass of wine or something?”

She shook her head and lowered her gaze before asking the most ridiculous question in the world.

“Why did you marry me?” she asked, tilting her head slightly.

Fear quickened my heartbeat as I waited for the anvil to drop on my head. My greatest fear was that once my wife realized she was too good and too kind for me, she would pack

her things and leave me. I ran my hand through my hair, searching for the right answer. I needed to tread lightly because I hadn't mastered the art of tactful communication with my wife. Yet, I needed to know why she asked.

“Where is this coming from?”

“Answer the question.”

“I married you because you're the one honest thing in my entire superficial life. I wanted to spend the rest of my life feeling this way. I love you,” I said honestly.

I tamped down the hurt when her expression didn't show any level of appreciation for my confession. Instead, she began a rapid-fire, almost prosecutorial line of questioning. She grilled me harder than any of the top students at Georgetown Law.

“Are there any crazy ex-girlfriends that would intentionally sabotage our marriage? Any loose romantic ends?”

“No. *No.*” I felt the acid of red-hot anger rise in my chest. I was almost at peak-level. Not because any of this was true, but because Kandace had apparently fallen right into Celeste's hands. Her mother had successfully planted seeds of doubt, and now I had to work overtime to make her feel that our love is real.

“My virginity had nothing to do with it?”

This was when my annoyance reached its breaking point. I shook my head impatiently. I'd never given a damn about a relationship enough to fight for it. In my former life, if a date or fuck buddy had become too demanding, it was time to move on to the next easy lay. My wife was a part of me. She was my heart and soul. I needed her like I needed air.

“Why would I take such a permanent step if I had an ulterior motive? Sweets, you were ready, but I wanted more for us. If I'd wanted to just fuck, I could have found someone willing to give me that.” My voice rose with anger and indignation. “I don't care what she thinks. I just want you to

be happy with me.” I added with a yell, “I thought we were happy!”

“We *are* happy!” She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. She opened her eyes and stared at me, softly adding an apology. “C, I’m sorry for bringing this back to you.”

The tension fell away from my body, and I took long, quick strides until I stood at her side. I took her by the hand and backed her against the countertop. Her breath hitched, and her amber pupils drank me in.

“I’m still working at being the best husband. I live in constant fear that you’ll wake up and leave me. My number one mission in life is to make you happy, and I’m fucking serious about that. When you’re sad, I feel like I’ve not done my job. And then, I devise methods of cheering you up. Unfortunately for you, pretty much all of those methods involve my dick.”

She gazed up at me expectantly, the look in her eyes a slow simmer.

“I’m sure I’ll enjoy all of your ideas,” she croaked out.

I took that statement as an invitation to step forward. My eyes followed the curves of her silhouette. She was so soft and so pretty and all *mine*. I cupped her chin and lay my lips on her pout. Ramming my dick into her was so cliché, but I couldn’t think of any other way to show her how I felt about her.

I reached up and slowly removed the headband, watching the mahogany tendrils fall free and frame her face. I placed the headband on the neighboring console table and moved closer to her. She widened her stance in anticipation of me slipping between her long, lean thighs.

I moved closer and took her chin in both of my hands, my thumbs gingerly rubbing over her bottom lip. The skin was so soft and smooth. She surprised me by catching my thumb in her teeth. Mischievous blazed in her eyes as she wouldn’t let go. The light nip sent a shiver down my chest and straight to my cock. A dull, hungry ache grew along with my length.

My other hand lowered to her waistband. I'd had plenty of experience unhooking buttons and snaps, so I had no problem pulling down her slim khaki pants with one hand. My fingers crept down her stomach to meet the lacy edge of her panties. She gasped and released my thumb, and my fingers continued until they sank between her folds.

With her head leaning against my shoulder, I closed my eyes, sliding my finger in and out of her wet pussy, imagining that it was my fully erect and very hard cock.

"C. . . I'll never wake up and leave you. You're stuck with me." The words come out wrapped in desire.

"You're stuck with me and my cock. What do I need to do to get you and Celeste to talk?"

"Nothing. We just need time. . . to miss each other."

I'd been quiet throughout this mess between the mother and daughter. I knew that I needed to intervene and get the two talking. But now, I needed to focus on the matter at hand, losing myself inside my lovely wife.

She snaked a leg around mine and pulled me closer, the ridge of my cock slamming against her tightness.

"Fuck me," she breathed against my lips.

I hooked her legs around my waist and carried her into the living room. She slid down my body to land on her feet. I fell back on the sectional and reclined with my feet shoulder width apart. I pulled down my workout shorts. Spreading my legs, I grabbed the base with one hand and stroked from the root to the tip. A rivulet of pre-cum oozed from the head and dripped down the shaft, and I gathered the fluid in my hand to use it for lubrication.

"This is what you do to me," I said as a low moan rattled from my throat.

She swallowed and stared at me stroking myself, completely mesmerized. She stood before me in white cotton panties with the small strip of lace trim. The panties were like my wife, demure and delicate.

At the start of our relationship, she was almost apologetic that she didn't have designer lingerie made of silk or satin. Like most women, Kandace believed men liked their partners to wear European lingerie. That was an incorrect assumption. Nothing made my dick harder than when my wife wore nothing but a pair of pink plaid knee socks or a pair of white cotton bikinis. I enjoyed her realness. Her personality was neither faked nor forced. No thongs, boy shorts, or crotchless panties could compete with my wife's demure panties.

She slowly pulled down the tiny patch of fabric, revealing her beautiful brown skin and the glistening slit of her perfect cunt. She straddled my hips, positioning her pussy over my towering cock. She held onto my shoulders and lowered herself down my length. Her eyes closed tightly in delicious pain as she ground down on me.

We both exhaled gratefully once she buried all eight inches of me deep inside her warmth. I relished the tight stretch of her cunt around my thick dick. She felt like heaven.

She leaned in and kissed me softly on the lips.

"Thank you for caring for me." She ran her fingers through my hair, her warm breath misting my lips.

I rested my hands on her waist, and she began a slow hip roll. She enjoyed every slide back and forth, using me as she needed. Her eyelids fluttered as she varied the rhythm, adjusting the angles until she found that sweet spot. With her pretty, perfect tits pressed against me, she continued to target that spot, and her quick breaths became full-blown pants. I closed my eyes and concentrated on not coming too quickly.

"That's it. Take this. It's all yours," I added for emphasis. "*And nobody else's.*"

"I know. I shouldn't have said that. I trust you."

I didn't respond other than to thrust nice and deep, showing no mercy. I bit my lip and continued the smooth thrusts as she held on for the ride.

"Don't stop. I'm close," she cried out.

She tightened around me and spasmed until she shook into orgasm. Pulling her to my chest, I stroked her back and whispered promises of love and fidelity. She nodded and brushed away tears, her chest rising and falling as she tried to catch her breath. We stood still and just held each other. My still-hard cock pulsed, reminding us that something still connected us, and that I hadn't achieved my release.

She groaned and shuddered against my erection, slowly arching into me.

“Are you going to come for me again?”

“Yes,” she breathed.

I reached down between her legs to thumb her swollen clit and resumed the slow, deep thrusts. Her slick channel clenched around me, pulling me in deeper and deeper. She uttered quiet chants, demanding me to fuck her harder, stronger, and faster. As her loving husband, it was my duty to oblige her every request.

I needed to come. God, I wanted to spill my cum deep inside of her. My dick grew and swelled as I fell into her moans and cries.

She trembled as she chased her climax. With her head falling back and her eyes rolling to the top of her head, we chased each other toward our orgasms.

Something about this time felt different. I pulled away from my wife, convinced our love was invincible. *Nothing* would ever separate us.



CHAPTER

Twenty-Five

KANDACE

AFTER THREE AND A HALF months of living with Chadwick, I'd grown used to constant noise. He'd always filled the loft with sounds from the home theater or music blaring through the wireless speakers. If he wasn't watching television or listening to music, he was engaged in noisy workouts or loud telephone conversations with general contractors and tradesmen.

While I loved the liveliness in the loft, I enjoyed our quiet moments more. Nothing was more fulfilling than cooking for my husband or reading a book while lounging together on the sofa. I cherished the strength of his sculpted body molded against mine as he held me in his arms. The most perfect moments were watching him while he slept, memorizing his Adonis-like profile.

That morning, Chadwick had met with a contractor to perform an inspection of the dilapidated Victorian's plumbing system. My husband's eyes had gleamed when he'd asked me to tag along and provide opinions on the property. I'd almost gagged at the thought of donning a respirator and walking through a smelly, moldy house.

Chadwick had a gift for picking and renovating real estate. He had an innate ability to anticipate buyers' needs. He didn't need my input. I'd begged off, using my thesis as an excuse.

The truth of the matter was that I was thankful to have a moment alone. I wanted to clear my thoughts and focus on editing the fifteen-thousand-word essay.

On that day, when he was away from the house, the quiet clanging of my thoughts and my sadness was the only noise in the large loft. Melancholy settled around me, and I welcomed any distraction, noise, good sex, or fun times to prevent me from thinking about my mother.

In the home office, I stared at the screen and then at the stack of papers sitting to the side. My brain couldn't focus on either to reconcile the two.

After two hours of studying the page, I had made no changes. I closed the laptop, pushed back my chair, and retreated to the master bedroom to rest my eyes.

"I'll close my eyes for a few minutes and then finish editing," I said aloud, pulling back the layers of bedding on the massive bed. I gave myself permission based on the logic that a short nap would leave me refreshed for when Chadwick returned to the loft.

I stretched out on the bed, soon drifting off to sleep. The last thoughts before I floated into a deep slumber were about the good days when my family had weekly Sunday dinners and regular phone calls and FaceTime sessions. Now, we were so fractured. I regularly talked with my aunt and grandparents, but our conversations seemed overly cautious and superficial. We updated each other on the goings-on in our lives. We discussed the weather, politics, and television shows . . . Anything but the feud with my mother.

My family was strange, but this was a little *too* strange. We should have referred my mother to as She Who Shall Not Be Named. Her name never came up in the conversations, but there were frequent references to her. There were conversations regarding shrimp etouffee, shopping trips, and

trips to the movies. All of my mother's favorite things and activities, yet they never mentioned her by name.

Why were they so afraid to discuss her? Maybe they wanted to stay out of it? Either way, it made me feel like the feud hadn't impacted them. I felt like they didn't care.

Their indifference hurt because I had thought by now, someone would have stepped up and appealed to her sensibilities. I'd frequently imagined Pop-Pop calling a family forum so we could work through this.

Aside from the differences in the relationship with my family, the rift with my mother had impacted me in ways I never would have imagined. In the last three weeks, I'd battled bouts of insomnia. Each night at two forty-five in the morning, my eyes popped open, and I lay awake staring at the ceiling. I would close my eyes and unsuccessfully attempt to go back to sleep as my wonderful husband wrapped himself around me and slept so peacefully.

I had tried every cure for insomnia—lavender oil, Chamomile tea, turkey sandwiches, warm milk—to no avail.

My days and nights had somehow switched. I couldn't sleep at night, but during the days, I experienced excessive bouts of drowsiness. I would be in the middle of an activity and drift off to sleep.

The insomnia was just the foundation of the mess I'd become. The lack of sleep brought on excessive mood swings, absent-mindedness, crying fits, and full-blown panic. I looked like an extra from *The Walking Dead*. My dark-rimmed eyes were always gritty and sore.

The stress of a fractured relationship with my mother and lack of sleep had made me so fragile that I was prone to bursting into tears at the slightest provocation. The most embarrassing moment had been when I was late for a hair appointment because I'd misplaced my keys. Panicked, I'd run around the loft, looking under the sofa and chair cushions, in the kitchen drawers, and underneath the console table in the foyer. I'd even dumped the contents of my purse on the floor. *Twice.*

Frustration had taken hold, and I had sunk to the floor and sobbed until I had a headache. Once I'd calmed down, I canceled the appointment. When I'd reached into my back pocket for my phone, lo-and-behold, I'd found my keys.


Chadwick had walked in on me sitting on the floor with my face buried into the sectional. He'd sat on the sofa and lifted me into his arms, but I had avoided his gaze in humiliation for having behaved like an infant. I'd slowly opened my eyes. He had stared deeply into my dark-circled, bloodshot and puffy eyes and just held me until the tears had subsided.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he'd whispered. He kissed my cheek as his fingers drew circles on my back.

I buried my face in his chest and rapidly shook my head. I couldn't even wrap my mind around the issue. I didn't know how to articulate what was going on with me. I just knew that I missed my mother, and I didn't know how to make it right.

When I hadn't answered, he continued, "At some point, you will tell me everything in your head. Promise me."

I promise.


EVEN THOUGH MY LIFE WAS IN SHAMBLES, I WELCOMED AN unexpected visit from my auntie.

I was in the fourth week of no sleep. I hadn't spent time with my friends or family, preferring to stay home. I didn't have the energy to field phone calls and respond to text messages. When they couldn't get in touch with me, they began to reach out to Chadwick with inquiries.

Auntie Marie called me from the road and explained that she was ten minutes away. I was ecstatic to entertain a guest. I rushed to the master bathroom and patted on a little powder foundation and a few dabbles of coral-colored blush before running to the outdoor parking lot.

I eagerly met her at her tiny sport coupe. She emerged from the car, wearing large, dark designer sunglasses. She'd

filled the passenger seat and the entire back seat with bags.

My heart beat rapidly, and I hugged her tightly to me.

“If the mountain will not come to Marie-Therese, then Marie-Therese must go to the mountain.” She laughed at the paraphrase of the famous quote. “Chère, I’ve missed your sweet face. I went to The Corner Café for your favorites—turkey sandwiches, salad, fruit, and brownies. Lots of carbs so you’ll have fuel for your newlywed activities.” She wriggled her brows. “There’s enough for leftovers.”

I ignored the ribbing and a growl from deep within my stomach at the mention of my favorite sandwich shop. She pulled the bags out of the passenger’s seat and handed them to me.

“You didn’t have to do this. I could have made something for us,” I said. I took a bag in each hand and stared in confusion as she reached into the back seat for the other bags. She gripped three large shopping bags, shiny white satin ribbon peeking out from the tops.

“Nonsense. I don’t want you to do anything. Let’s just sit down and catch up. Also, I came bearing gifts.” She held up the bags. “Since you guys had such a short, *quiet* engagement, we didn’t have time to give you a bridal shower. And you know how much I enjoy showering brides.”

During the elevator ride to the loft, she caught me up on her recent trips out west.

“The book club took a trip to Vegas. I went out there a few days earlier intending to relax.” She smiled brightly. “We stayed at the Wynn, and I went to the spa for a day of beauty. I saw where you guys got married. *Beautiful.*”

“Well, you look refreshed.” I nodded to the living room. “You can put those there.” Auntie placed the shopping bags on the floor. She followed me to the kitchen area and watched as I set the food bags on the countertop and began to sort the various containers and wrapped sandwiches. I turned to reach into the cabinet for plates.

“Where’s my nephew? Is he going to join us?” She scanned the loft.

“He’s meeting with contractors and home inspectors in preparation for closing on our next home. He bought an old, broken down Victorian in the Lower Garden. He envisions that the house will serve as our family home. It looks like a smaller version of the St. Clair mansion. Auntie, I wish you could see this house. He FaceTimed during the tour. I could smell it through the phone. I can’t believe he wants us to move there.” I scrunched my face up, and the gesture elicited a fit of giggles.

“Chère, let that man have dreams for his family. I’m sure it’ll be gorgeous when it’s done.”

“Auntie, he’s an incredible man and everything I dreamed of. He supports me and always looks out for my best interest. He says what’s on his mind.” I stopped and thought about that before letting out a small chuckle. “Well, we’re working on *delivery* of what’s on his mind. So, what’s going on at Scrub-A-Dub?”

Marie-Therese brought me up to speed on all the business goings-on. She talked about the recent contracts with Loyola and potential opportunities for expansion into neighboring states.

“Chère, I’m here to see how you’re doing. Why are you avoiding us?” Her question was soft and hesitant.

“It seems better for now. I don’t want to make things worse.”

“But when you do that, it hurts all of us.” She put down her spoon, her words trailed off as sadness took over. “Your mother is . . . something else. One of the proudest moments of my life was when you finally stood up for yourself. I wondered when you would break out of the box she put you in.”

“Auntie, I didn’t want to be disrespectful, but I couldn’t take anymore.”

“You weren’t disrespectful. I expect a married woman to stand up for herself.” She reached over and placed a brownie on my plate. “Kandi, there are some things even I don’t share with Celeste. She can be so judgmental. She would never understand half of the things going on in my life, so I don’t tell her. Life is easier that way.”

Now, I was curious. Auntie was extroverted and funny, and I would never have thought she had secrets. For a brief second, I contemplated delving deeper into the topic but decided against it. I didn’t feel like I’d moved to the level of maturity for that discussion.

“Let me tell you about your mother. I was only eight years old when she brought you home. I was so excited because you were like a living doll. Well, until I realized that I was no longer the baby in the family.” She tossed her head back and let out a loud laugh. “I enjoyed dressing you and doing your hair. Meanwhile, Celeste was so afraid. She would watch you while you were asleep to make sure you didn’t stop breathing.”

I smiled. It was a rare occurrence to hear a positive memory from when I was a baby. Mama had shared stories to frighten me away from teen pregnancy.

“Kandi, she vowed to give you so many opportunities. She didn’t want to mess up your life. She didn’t worry when you were nothing but buckteeth and thick glasses. But the year those braces came off, and you started wearing contacts, she began to worry. In her mind, her baby had blossomed into a beautiful, long-legged woman overnight. Actually, we *all* worried. You were gorgeous but so naïve, it terrified her. She didn’t want men to use you. Her life’s mission was to get you through college. After college, she wanted to find a man who wouldn’t hurt you. She went overboard. Her actions represent the extreme, but she means well.”

“How long will this go on?”

“Kandi, she’s miserable, but give her time. I would settle for nothing less than an apology to you and Chadwick. Until then, she must suffer.” She leaned over and placed a hand over

mine. “Now, let’s talk about the suitcases under your eyes. I know you’re a newlywed, and you guys aren’t sleeping much. Tell that man you need a full eight hours.”

“Auntie, I’ve been going through a bout of insomnia. This whole mess with Mama . . .”

“Yeah. I’m sure it’s a real mood killer. Have you gone to the doctor? I’m sure it’s your iron levels. They’ll likely give you supplements, and you’ll feel much better.”

“I have an appointment for next week.”

“Good. You gotta look good for your husband. Speaking of that, I have a few gifts for you from my last trip to Vegas. I bought several items from *Agent Provocateur*,” she added a wink. “I didn’t want to say anything, but stop whatever diet you’re on. You’re looking a little too thin. You don’t want to lose that lovely figure.”



CHAPTER

Twenty-Six

CHADWICK

IT HAD BEEN FIVE WEEKS since Kandace walked away from the Scrub-A-Dub office and never looked back, separating herself from her mother. She rarely, if ever, mentioned my mother-in-law, yet Celeste was a constant intruder in our lives.

I knocked on the door to the master bedroom. My shell of a wife had isolated herself in the bedroom to make the final updates to the thesis, but lately, I'd been catching her distracted and deep in thought.

If she wasn't daydreaming, she spent the day shuffling aimlessly from the living room to the bedroom. From time to time, I caught her organizing and reorganizing the kitchen cabinets and pantry. In fact, each day, she found a new area to spruce up.

Then, there were the tears. So many tears. Whether she wanted to believe it, my wife was a crier. But lately, the tears flowed like the water out of a fire hydrant. Last week, she'd had a full-blown meltdown because I had eaten the last chocolate ice cream bar. She'd hidden it on the top shelf in the freezer, behind the bags of vegetables. I'd promptly gone out to buy more, and now chocolate ice cream bars overran the freezer.

That had been our first argument. At least I think it was an argument. We raised our voices, and she'd shed a few tears. My confusion had grown as Kandace went on and on about the *special* ice cream bar. Unable to figure out what the hell was going on, I'd retreated to our bedroom. I had thought it best to stay far, far away from her. That had been the first night we hadn't spent the evening nestled in each other's arms.

After two hours of reading articles and playing games on my iPad, I had been more than ready to make up. I'd walked into the living room with my hands in my pockets.

"Kandace? Sweets?" I'd called out softly. I had found my wife sitting on the sectional. This time, she'd had a wad of Kleenex in her hands.

I'd slid onto the sofa until our bodies touched. She had sniffled and wiped her nose before regarding me with puffy eyes. I'd controlled my need to solve her problems and I just let her cry.

After a few minutes, she had leaned her head on my shoulder. She whispered, "I'm sorry C. I don't know what came over me. This shit with my mom is getting to me. I feel like I'm all over the place around here. The last thing I want is to take this out on you. Please forgive me?"

Of course, I would forgive the love of my life.



I WAS BEYOND FED UP WITH MY MOTHER-IN-LAW'S BEHAVIOR. The mother-daughter feud mired the happiest moments of our marriage.

It was time to put an end to this nonsense. We couldn't keep jeopardizing Kandace's mental health and well-being.

Taking matters into my own hands, I pulled out my cell phone and called Celeste. I explained that we needed to talk about Kandace and suggested we meet at a local brewery, Harper's. I felt a modicum of accomplishment when she agreed to meet me. In my mind, Celeste and I would meet, and then she would make up with Kandace. All would be well.

I would keep my role in their reconciliation quiet. It would be better if Sweets didn't know I'd had a hand in getting them together. She needed to think this was all Celeste's doing.

Three days later, I sat in the center of Harper's Bar and Grill, sipping on iced tea as I spectated the buzz of activity in the restaurant.

Celeste was almost twenty minutes late and hadn't text messaged her whereabouts. I expected that she would arrive spouting a litany of apologies and excuses. I found it hard to believe she would miss an important discussion about her daughter's well-being.

Firing off a text message to Celeste, I waited for an answer of when she would arrive. I stared at the phone obsessively, waiting for it to ring or chime. Each second that ticked by added to my irritation.

I thought my mother-in-law would be more mature. The Celeste from my childhood would have encouraged me to sit down and talk through my feelings. She would have inspired me to be the better person. It seemed hypocritical that she didn't live up to the standards she set for others.

I reviewed the menu for the third time and started on my second glass of tea, but after thirty minutes of waiting, it was clear she had stood me up. I left a bundle of bills on the table for the waitress and made my way to the parking lot.

I sped to the strip mall the location of the Scrub-A-Dub office. I drove too fast through the parking lot and pulled into a space in front of the store, next to Celeste's SUV.

Being ignored and stood up had stung, so I could only imagine what my wife was going through.

I exhaled a deep breath and hopped out of the Jeep. When I stormed into the office, it surprised me to see Celeste and Marie-Therese were eating lunch and chatting. The door chime alerted them to my presence, interrupting their shared laughter, and they both turned to face me. Marie-Therese greeted me with a bright smile, but Celeste appeared cool and unaffected.

“Celeste, may I speak with you? In private?” I asked, walking past Marie and heading to Celeste’s desk.

“Well, hello to you, too.” She was downright indignant, and I couldn’t for the life of me understand why she thought she was qualified to admonish anyone on manners. “Whatever you have to say to me can be said in front of Marie.”

Marie threw up her hands and began packing up her salad. “Celeste, I’m not involved in this. Stop acting like an ass and talk to your son. Chadwick, do you want anything? Water? Coffee?”

“I’m fine. I just drank two glasses of sweet tea at Harper’s.” I turned to face Celeste. She expressed no hint of remorse about standing me up. *Game on.* “Thank you.”

Marie-Therese patted me on the shoulder before she walked into the back room.

I sat in the chair directly in front of Celeste, and she stared back at me. The stress of this ordeal clearly weighed on her face. Her skin was ashen, and she had dark circles underneath her eyes.

Growing up, Celeste had been the only one of my parents’ employees who saw through all of my shenanigans. I’d always felt like she knew my thoughts before I even opened my mouth to say the words.

She stared back at me now as if she could still see through me. Celeste always knew when I was nervous or lying, and it scared me. I regressed back to my teenaged years. But this time, I wasn’t lying about my relationship with someone’s daughter—I was telling the truth about hers.

She closed the lid of her MacBook, and her hazel eyes met mine in challenge. She was ready for a fight.

“Celeste, this has gone on long enough. Kandace isn’t doing well. *You* aren’t doing well. Call your daughter and invite her out to talk. You two need each other.”

Celeste’s brows furrowed in concern. The movement was almost undetectable. Her eyes left mine to stare at the wall

behind me. She straightened her spine and then returned to my gaze.

“I’ve raised my kid. You’re her husband. Don’t pile your responsibility onto me. *You* take care of her,” she said. She gave me a shit-eating grin. “What is it? For better, for worse? She’s all yours.”

“Grow up Celeste,” I said. Her eyebrows raised in surprise. I didn’t mean to lose my patience with her, but she was behaving like a child.

I sat in silence while my anger subsided, when I spoke, I chose my words carefully. Celeste was my mother-in-law, and I planned to remain married to her daughter for the rest of my life.

“Celeste, I had hoped you would be mature about this. Kandace is your only child. She needs you.”

“She should have thought about that the last time I saw her. You would not *believe* the level of disrespect she lobbed my way. She raised her voice and stormed out that door.” She pointed to the glass door leading to the parking lot. “I didn’t raise my child to have a smart mouth. Especially after I supported her throughout college and gave her a job.”

She leaned forward over the desk, and her eyes met mine.

“Chadwick, I love you. You’re family. But I love my daughter more. I’m afraid for her. Once you fall out of love, she won’t be able to recuperate. I’m frustrated that she doesn’t see that.”

“Why do you assume the worst?”

“I’ve been through the worst.” She turned away and stared at the television hanging on the wall. “Chadwick, I imagine I’ll get used to your marriage, but I’ll never be one hundred percent happy with it.”

“This isn’t about me. *Or you*. This is about your daughter. She’s slowly fading away, and I need her to be well. I don’t want you to look back on this moment with regret. There is nothing I can do to fix this—this is all on you. You need to make this right,” I ordered.

“She’s angry and stubborn. She’ll never talk.” Her eyes were downturned as her eyes glistened with moisture. Man. Celeste had the victim act down to a science.

On her desk was a box of Kleenex. I slid it over at her. She pulled two tissues from the box and dabbed the corners of her eyes. In all of my years of knowing her, this was the first time I’d seen her vulnerable side. I had a bit of a soft spot for my mother-in-law. I didn’t want her to cry. I changed the subject with a lame attempt at thawing the ice.

“Kandace didn’t want to take part in the graduation ceremony, but I knew that she would regret it if she didn’t. I convinced her to get a cap and gown. She’ll wear special honors regalia too.” She dabbed at the corners of her eyes, responding with a silence that made me nervous, so I kept chattering. “We’ll make it a long weekend. We rented a six-bedroom house, so there’s room for everyone—Marie, Goody and Pop-Pop. My friend James will be there with his wife, Kenya. There will be a personal chef, games, and s’mores. My parents will fly in for the ceremony. Kandace’s friends haven’t decided if they are staying with us or if they will rent a nearby townhouse.”

I winced, my words came out in a rush. In an attempt to steel my nerves, I inhaled and forced myself to slow down.

“We’ll likely charter a jet for everyone, or we might rent a party bus.”

She attempted to mask the hurt in her eyes by looking away from mine, but it was evident in her voice.

“Kandi hasn’t invited me,” she sniffled.

I sighed, trying to control my rising frustration. Her stubbornness was enough to drive anyone insane. She shouldn’t require an invitation to her daughter’s graduation. She should just go. Besides, it was a public ceremony, so there were no tickets. She knew that.

“*I’m* inviting you.” I took a deep breath and placed my hands at my temples. “My parents are in New York City for the holiday. So, Kandace and I are having a quiet

Thanksgiving dinner for a few of our friends. Join us. This is *me* inviting *you* and the Alexanders.”

“I’m planning a small dinner with my parents. We’ve started planning the meal.” She sputtered and searched for excuses. I turned to walk away. She stood and started to follow me.

“Goodbye, Celeste.” I demanded more firmly. “See you on Thanksgiving at four o’clock.” I took one last look before I turned on my heel and marched to the Jeep.



CHAPTER

Twenty-Seven

KANDACE

MY HUSBAND STRETCHED OUT ON the chaise of the giant sectional sofa and watched the television mounted to the brick wall. In the past, we had challenged each other for that space, but that morning, we lay side-by-side. I clung to his large muscular frame like plastic wrap.

“The Macy’s Parade isn’t the same without Mariah Carey. Her Christmas album is my all-time favorite. My mother and I ...”

The album brought back happy memories of the two of us holding hands and dancing around the living room. I fought back tears at the thought of a Christmas without her. Chadwick slowly rubbed my arm, his rough hand moving up and down.

He shrugged his arm from around my neck and stretched it to the ceiling. I groaned at the immediate loss. He opened and closed his palm to get the blood flowing back in his numb limb.

Once he regained feeling in his arm, he moved it back underneath my neck, and I moved even closer than before. The poor man couldn’t get away from me if he tried. I needed

every single piece of him, from his innocent hugs and loving attention to his thick erection deep inside of me.

I rolled over and draped a leg over him. Inching closer until our pelvises touched, I rubbed my throbbing center against his muscular thigh. He groaned and leaned over to meet my lips.

Thanksgiving was a special holiday for my family. I usually spent the days leading up to it with my mother and grandmother preparing for the meal and the next day at the mall fighting Black Friday crowds. My mother didn't invite us to Thanksgiving dinner, but to be fair, an invitation wasn't necessary. Instead, we would spend our first Thanksgiving together with Natasha, James, and Kenya. It had been Chadwick's idea, and our friends had eagerly agreed to join us for dinner. We'd had the meal catered by Natasha's family restaurant. Understanding my pain, she tried her best to put together the finest in Creole cuisine for us. We would dine on fried turkey, oyster dressing, corn maque choux, collard greens, and sweet potato casserole.

For dessert, Chadwick had ordered mini cakes from a wonderful local bakery. I had a twinge of regret, since dessert was always my area of responsibility. I usually spent Thanksgiving Eve creating a glazed, marbled red velvet cake. This year, I wasn't lifting a finger.

He groaned loudly, patting my hip twice, before pushing my leg off of his.

"I want to lose myself into you, but Natasha is on her way. We don't want her to walk in on us fucking. And you need to shower and dress."

"What if you joined me for a shower? Kill two birds with one stone?" I grabbed him by the shirt and leaned in closer.

"Stop pouting and go get dressed. I'll let you fuck me when our guests leave." He winked at me.

Forty minutes later, I emerged from the master bedroom. After weeks of slumming around the house wearing joggers and my hair bundled in a ponytail, I put forth a little more

effort today. I chose a simple peacock blue smocked dress. I pulled my hair from the ponytail and applied a bit of makeup to add a little color to my sallow skin.

When I entered the kitchen area, Natasha and Chadwick were busy unpacking aluminum foil pans and plastic containers filled with the turkey and sides. Before dinner, we would transfer each dish onto white serving platters.

“What should I take on?” I asked. I leaned in and hugged my best friend. She opened her mouth to answer, her lips formed a perfect ‘O’ shape when she took in my appearance. In the short time since my reception, I’d lost a few pounds and had little sleep, but I didn’t think I looked that bad.

As if he could read my thoughts, Chadwick walked over with his arms outstretched. He wrapped me into an embrace.

“Sweets, you look beautiful. Don’t worry about helping, Natasha and I have it under control.”

“Um. Yeah. We’ll take care of everything. Dinner will be fabulous.” She sang out the last word, dragging out the three syllables. “My grandmother packed two dozen bacon deviled eggs. I put together a cheeseboard loaded with dry-cured meats. Kandi, go have a seat, and I’ll bring the tray over.”

Jesus. I must have looked worse than I thought.

Shortly after she placed the cheeseboard in the center of the cocktail table, James entered the loft with his typical boisterous demeanor. He handed over a bottle of Dom Perignon to Chadwick and pulled me in for a big hug. His wife, Kenya, presented me with a vase filled with autumn foliage before giving me a hug.

Jealousy was a green-eyed bitch. The two were so perfectly matched, both were attractive and stylish. Their wedding had been gorgeous. They’d had perfect bridesmaids and groomsmen. The weather had been perfect, and their parents had appeared elated. Here they were one month later, visibly happy and so in love.

I was thankful that neither gave me a second curious glance after the hugs. They both sat down on the sofa, and we

began catching up on their honeymoon to Bali. James cast his phone on the television so we could watch a slideshow of their five hundred honeymoon images. Most of the photos were of Kenya's happy and smiling face.

Kenya practically glowed, and her smile was so genuine. I wished I felt as great as Kenya looked.

Over warm apple cider, appetizers, and light jazz, we caught up on life. I noticed that Chadwick seemed distracted and rushed. I caught him checking his watch several times and made a mental note to ask him about it later.

"It's a quarter past four, let's eat dinner."

He took me by the hand and led me to the dining room table. Our guests followed closely behind. Chadwick sat at the head of the table and I to his right.

We were about to lower our heads to say the prayer when the doorbell rang.

Perfect fucking timing. For the first time in six weeks, I had an appetite. I had just placed the napkin in my lap and prepared myself to dive into all the food.

"Please excuse me. Give me a minute to see who it is." He removed the napkin from his lap before sprinting to the iPad to check out the security system.

Chadwick buzzed the guest inside, and I leaned back in my chair to see who would be so rude to interrupt our Thanksgiving dinner.

We all sat in our chairs, expecting the uninvited, unanticipated guest to appear. The only person who would be so rude was Quad, dragging along his poor wife, Emery. He had an uncanny ability to know when food was being served.

The elevator arrived, and we finally saw our unexpected guests. My mother and grandparents walked out of the elevator into the foyer.

My eyes fell upon my mother. She looked so small and so frail, so unlike herself. I leaped from my seat and ran over to the three with my arms extended.

Tears pooled in my mother's eyes when my arms encircled her body. Unlike the night of the reception, she pulled me into a tight embrace, and we rocked each other back and forth. With our arms interlocked, she stood back and examined me from my hair to my feet before returning to my eyes.

Shame washed over me. I couldn't believe we had allowed this to go on for so long.

I turned to my grandparents and hugged them while Chadwick helped my mother out of her jacket. She regarded my appearance with a visible wince of regret. Pop-Pop handed a large box over to Chadwick.

"Just in time for dinner, I see. We couldn't arrive empty-handed. There's brisket, macaroni and cheese, and pecan pie in the box. I smoked the brisket all day yesterday."

"You're a good man. Very good man."

"No turducken?" Natasha yelled over before hugging my grandmother.

I refrained from gagging. My grandfather's specialty is chicken stuffed in a duck that is all roasted in a turkey. I think it's gross, but my family and friends think it is the best thing since . . . well, smoked meat.

Each of our friends followed with hugs. Chadwick took the box to the kitchen with my grandfather following closely behind. I smiled when Chadwick groaned appreciatively when he peered into the box.

Joy overwhelmed my heart. My family was here. My mother was here. But we were missing one person. I turned back to my mother and gave her a shy smile.

"Where's Auntie?"

"She went to Vegas for the weekend. She felt lucky and wanted to get a jump on holiday shopping. She asked us to FaceTime later."

For the second time, we all sat around the dining room table. But this time, four of the most important people in my life were sitting next to me.

We bowed our heads in grace as my grandfather rattled off a prayer, thanking God for the bounty and family. Pop-Pop carved the turkey, and we passed platters of food around the table. We all ignored Chadwick's look of disappointment. He'd spent the previous night watching turkey carving videos on YouTube and had been looking forward to the honor.

My mother scooped a heaping serving of macaroni and cheese and plopped it on my plate. She smiled sheepishly when I looked at her.

"Natasha, you put your big toe in this dressing. This is the best oyster dressing I've ever had." My grandfather jumped when Goody cleared her throat. "Sorry. *Second* best."

Part of the Alexander tradition was to go around the table and say one thing that we were thankful for. I answered, "Love," while I looked at my husband. Chadwick answered, "My wife." To my surprise, my mother answered, "For new beginnings."

At the end of the dessert course, our friends and loved ones all congregated in the living room to talk and recuperate from the huge meal. Mama, Goody, and I cleared the dinner table and covered the food in plastic wrap. It felt like old times.

Instead of joining the group in the living room, I led my mother to the master bedroom and closed the door behind us. I gestured for her to take a seat in the sitting area.

We both sat on the navy-blue velvet sofa. She wrapped her arm around my shoulder, and I slipped mine around her waist. With my face buried into her side, I inhaled her familiar scent of her signature perfume—blackberries and vanilla. I'd missed her smell. I'd missed her touch.

We had wasted so much valuable time, and she had said so many hurtful things to Chadwick and me.

"Mama, I needed you." All of my hurt sprang forth, and I choked back the sob trapped in my throat. Unable to hold back the tears, I wiped away each one with the back of my hand.

"I know, Chère." The endearment was a soft touch after the last three months of fighting. I could hear the tears in her

voice before she swallowed them back. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t here for you.” She rocked me gently as we clung desperately to each other until our tears subsided.

“I learned of the wedding when one of the book club members called to congratulate me. I read that dreadful article and was so embarrassed that I didn’t know about it. I thought we were so close and that there would be no secrets between us. I didn’t understand what had happened.” She paused before continuing. “Mom and Marie-Therese helped me to see our relationship through your eyes. I may have been *a little* overbearing.”

“A little?” I chuckled. Leaning away from her chest, I peered at her from the corner of my eye. She laughed, and I sank back into the hug.

“Kandi, on the day I brought you home from the hospital, I vowed that I would give you a limitless existence filled with love and opportunity. My thoughts were to guide you through this life by being a bit overboard with protecting you from harm. Now, look at you. You’re a married woman with a husband who adores you. When he stopped by the office, he stood up to me. I knew then that he would do whatever it took to make sure you’re happy. He deserves you. Please forgive me.”

I didn’t know Chadwick had a hand in our reunion. All the puzzle pieces fell into place. It explained the amount of food he’d ordered and the stalling before dinner time.

“I forgive you.” I took a pause before continuing, “I hope our relationship can move forward along a different path. You can’t continue to run my life. No more debating my fashion choices, my hair, or *any* of my life decisions.”

“I’ll work on it. I can’t promise I’ll change overnight, so please give me a bit of grace. I want you to tell me when I’ve crossed the line.”

“We’ll be honest and patient with each other. That’s all I can ask.”

We spent the next hour talking about everything that occurred in the last four months. We talked about newlywed life, my upcoming graduation, the happenings at Scrub-A-Dub, and the next phase of my life.

We didn't leave the room with any unsaid words. There was still a lot of damage, but I was optimistic we would work together and heal.



CHAPTER

Twenty-Eight

CHADWICK

THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA'S WINTER commencement exercises were a series of ceremonies spread over the course of a weekend. Thousands of graduates, families, and friends descended on the tiny town of Gainesville to honor the achievements and launch the graduates into the next phase of their lives.

Hordes of students and their families descended on the city. Every hotel, restaurant, and bar was bursting at the seams. Everywhere you looked there were there were smiling faced men and women posing for photos while stretching and clapping their arms for the signature, "Gator Chomp."

Kandace had requested a low-key graduation celebration, but the St. Clairs and the Alexanders didn't know how to do *anything* low-key. We celebrated with a four-course meal prepared by a private chef. After dinner, spent our evening wrapped in thick plaid blankets, sitting around the firepit with mugs of hot chocolate or warm brandy.

Kandace was the first to retire to the bedroom, and she yawned before excusing herself. Before she left, she ran a finger along my shoulder blades and then leaned down to kiss me goodnight.

“Don’t stay out too late,” she whispered.

I crept into the master bedroom not fifteen minutes later, quietly undressed, and climbed into bed to spoon her slender body. My fingers traced over her soft skin, moving from her breasts down her stomach to the delicate folds between her legs. I rubbed the tender flesh until she came all over my fingers.

The next morning, my wife and my in-laws awakened at the crack of dawn to attend the first ceremony of the weekend. Held in “The Swamp”, University of Florida’s football field. The weather was far cooler than any of us were used to. Celeste, Frank, and I huddled together and drank large cups of coffee.

Overall, Celeste seemed to be in a better mood. Her face radiated pure joy as she searched for Kandace in the group of students on the grass field.

Since the Thanksgiving dinner, Celeste and I had experienced a breakthrough in our relationship. For the first time in our long acquaintance, she looked me in the eye and apologized. She’d explained that the elopement didn’t give her time to prepare for losing her only child. She felt as if someone had amputated her arm, like a part of her was missing. She apologized for misjudging our relationship and my motives.

I couldn’t complain. It was a start, and I hoped the apology meant we were on a different path.

While this ceremony was for everyone, we considered the second ceremony, the business school event, to be the official graduation. Unlike the event at the football stadium, Kandace would walk across the orange and blue festooned dais, receive her diploma jacket, her perfect face displayed on the Jumbotron.

The next evening, the Alexanders, our friends, and my parents were all seated together in the Exactech stadium. We wore matching orange t-shirts emblazoned with #TeamKandi in blue lettering. Besides the matching shirts, we each held white handkerchiefs.

I studied the program until I read “Kandace Marie St. Clair.” An asterisk next to her name showed she achieved Latin honors, Summa Cum Laude. Pride filled my chest. I couldn’t believe I was so lucky to have such a smart and caring wife.

A brass quintet played the processional. Excitement built, and the arena hummed at a gentle roar. We began yelling and waving our handkerchiefs in the air. Our voices carried over the cries of, “there he is,” and “over here.”

“There she is!” Celeste waved her hands like a madwoman. “Kandi! Kandi! Up here!”

I scanned the group until I found my wife’s signature curls. She searched the crowd until she found the cluster of orange shirts. She waved her arms, and we twirled the handkerchiefs in response.

Joy surrounded our group as we sat through the speeches, including a rousing speech from the valedictorian that centered on following your dreams.

Our group sat on pins and needles while the announcer called hundreds of names. The moment arrived when my wife would receive her five magical seconds to celebrate her hard work and accomplishments.

We yelled and waved our handkerchiefs when Kandace began the ascent to the stage. She took cautious steps up to the dais, and I held my breath as she teetered on the stage. She stood on the edge, waiting for the usher to call her to receive the diploma jacket.

My wife’s name echoed through the stadium. She walked to the center of the stage and stood in front of the university crest with her hand resting lightly on her stomach. I took a deep breath and looked at our family. Celeste flashed a knowing grin.

Kandace posed for a photo with the business school Chancellor and patted her stomach. This time, she walked across the opposite end of the stage with her hand resting lightly on her lower abdomen.

We'd all had a late night, but not so late that they would miss such an obvious hint. I looked at them expectantly and watched as realization slowly rolled through the group.

Kandace's best friend, Natasha, was the first to get it. She screamed and then patted me on the shoulders.

"I can't believe it. I'm going to be an auntie!" she yelled.

The week before Thanksgiving was when we had learned that Kandace's mood swings and lack of appetite were because of pregnancy rather than merely insomnia. She had gone to the family doctor to inquire about sleeping pills or iron supplements to help with her overall energy level. The doctor recommended a full blood panel along with a pregnancy test.

I'd arrived home that evening to find my wife sprawled across the sofa. She'd placed a large bottle of water and a package of saltines in front of her on the cocktail table.

"Sweets, what happened?" I'd expected to hear drama about something she had heard or experienced with Celeste. I hadn't been at all prepared for the news.

"The doctor performed a battery of blood and urine tests. I'm pregnant." She'd given me an uncertain smile. "I hope . . . I hope this is okay."

Okay? I had wanted to turn cartwheels in the living room, but I'd needed to understand her reaction. I'd sunk down on the sofa next to her and took her hand in mine.

"Are you serious? You're pregnant?"

Tears had glazed her eyes as they'd met mine, and she'd nodded.

"When, Sweets?"

"About seven weeks along. July fourth is the estimated due date. I'll have more details after the ultrasound. I know this doesn't fit our timelines. I want to make sure you're ready to become three."

"I will be there for all appointments. I'm ecstatic and flattered that you will be the mother of my child. Are you happy?"

“I’m terrified. I’ve been a wreck these last few weeks. I can’t imagine another seven months of the emotional ups and down. I hope the hormones settle down a bit.”

I had pulled her over into my lap and had stroked her back. I’d laughed at a joke floating in my head.

What do you call people who use the rhythm method?

Parents.

The pregnancy shouldn’t have come as a surprise. We’d used no type of contraceptives and had half-heartedly relied upon an app to determine Kandace’s fertile periods.

In addition, there had been a few slip-ups when I hadn’t pulled out in time. I wouldn’t have guessed we would be so lucky as to conceive so quickly in our marriage.

“I’d hoped this would happen when the timing was perfect. Now is not the time.”

“When is it ever the perfect time to do anything?” I brushed away the tears trailing down her cheeks. “I can’t wait to meet this little one. I’ll have the contractors clear out the office so we can get a blank slate, and our mothers can argue over who will decorate the nursery.”

“I need my mother. I can’t do this without her.” She’d broken into a sob.

“Don’t worry about that. I want you to focus on staying healthy and stress-free for our child.”

“They gave me prenatal vitamins. They’re huge. Also, I have to consume more calories and folic acids.” She sighed and looked down. “I’m not ready for this.”

Turned out, neither of us had been ready.

Morning sickness had hit Kandace hard. The simplest meal would set her off—eggs were the worst. She’d feasted on crackers, sorbet, deli sandwiches, and soup. She’d drunk ginger ale by the two-liter.

She had been miserable, but I’d looked at each wave of nausea and episode of morning sickness as a good sign. That

had meant our baby was growing and healthy.

After we'd dined on Thanksgiving dinner, Kandace led Celeste by the hand to our master bedroom. There she broke the news of the pregnancy. Turns out my mother-in-law knew the moment she walked into the loft. Kandace expected anger or judgment, she was stunned when Celeste dabbed at the tears of joy gathering in the corners of her eyes. Celeste promised to support us in any way required.

Celeste's presence was what we both needed. When it was just Kandace and I, we were terrified that the slightest exertion would harm the baby—that included household chores and leaving the house. She stopped driving and we'd even abstained from sex. Celeste assured us that Kandace could continue living a normal life and still maintain a healthy pregnancy.

The three of us hoped the second trimester would be easier. Once Kandace had learned which foods to avoid, the sickness had become less common, and she'd seemed to be happier.

Every day, she stood naked in front of me and asked if she looked pregnant. The first two weeks, I'd squinted my eyes and said yes. But at almost three months, there was definitely a small swell of her stomach.

After the graduation ceremony, we navigated our way through the crowd until we found Kandace standing at the agreed upon meeting location.

I grabbed her into my arms and inhaled her sweet scent. "Sweets, you did it. Everyone is shocked."

Our loved ones interrupted our moment alone when our loved ones ran over to us. They pushed me out of the way to hug Kandace.

The graduation was an afterthought because everyone was excited about the pregnancy. Our mothers had tears in their eyes, and our fathers patted me on the back. There were so many questions around how she felt, the sex of the baby, and the due date.

“The fourth of July?” Simone sobbed. “Oh Lord. Is the baby going to be a Cancer?” Her eyes widened in horror. Natasha nudged her in the side and gestured toward our parents and grandparents. Simone plastered on a smile and added, “We wish you a safe pregnancy. Congratulations.”

“Kandi, why are you wearing those shoes? You should have on flats or tennis shoes. You young people.” My mother scolded after taking notice of Kandace’s platform heels. “What if you fall? Chadwick, you must carry her to the bus.”

“She’s heavy,” I whined playfully. My mother slapped me on the arm and my wife mockingly rolled her eyes at me.

After the laughter and questions subsided, Natasha asked to see the baby bump.

“Are you guys ready to see the big mama?” Kandace’s fingers grasped the zipper of her robe and slowly lowered it until she revealed an electric blue, fitted sheath dress. There was the tiniest hint of a rounded belly. Her face lit up, and the ladies cooed as if it were the most precious thing in the world.

My mother turned to me and said, “You can’t raise a baby in that loft. There’s not enough space for a baby and the things a baby needs. You’ll need a nursery and a playroom. Your daddy and I will buy you a real house. A house that’s move-in ready, unlike that pile of wood you’re fixing up.”

“Mom, the apartment is two thousand square feet. We can raise a child in that space until the house is complete. I don’t want you two to buy us anything.”

“But the baby needs plenty of space to explore. As parents, it is important to encourage creativity and free thinking. Please consider the offer.” My mother wrapped her hand around my wrist and shook.

Where was this concern for ‘free thinking’ when I was growing up? My parents insisted that I do as told, no questions allowed.

“I know you two like those gray walls, but the palette should be bright and engaging.” Celeste perked up and added her opinion. “Studies have shown that colorful nurseries are

key to intelligent and well-adjusted babies. Our baby shouldn't live in a jailhouse. The nursery should be sweet and cute. Noah's Ark is a beautiful theme."

My mother agreed, nodding her head eagerly.

"I like European nursery designs. Lots of soft yellows and creams colors. Wallpaper is back in vogue. *Ooh*. Maybe a mural like the one in the St. Clair sitting room?"

"I like it. Which bedroom? The one closest to the master bedroom makes sense. We have plenty of time because the baby will sleep in the bassinet in their bedroom for a while."

"Mother . . ." Kandace groaned.

"Sorry. I've crossed a line. Tell me when to stop." Celeste raised her hands. When Kandace's scowl turned into a smile, Celeste laughed and brought her daughter in for a hard hug.



EPILOGUE

KANDACE

“I DON’T KNOW, MARIE. IT looks like it is moving side-to-side. What do you guys think?” My mother kneeled on the side of the sectional while I lay flat on my back. She’d threaded a gold necklace through my wedding band and dangled the two over my swollen belly, watching as the necklace moved in circles.

The first barbecue of the season had turned into an impromptu baby shower. My close friends and family surrounded us while my mother used an old wives’ tale to predict the sex of our child.

Each woman had different predictions. Keely, Natasha, Mama, and Genevieve all hoped for a boy. Marie-Therese, Goody, Kenya, and Simone wished for a girl. I just wanted relief from pregnancy and an end to the constant indigestion and back pain. And the exhaustion. And the bladder abuse.

“Ms. Alexander, I agree with Marie-Therese. The ring is definitely moving in circles. I think it’ll be a girl.” Kenya cocked her head to the side and stared intently at the necklace.

“Mother St. Clair always believed if a little boy shows an interest in your pregnant belly, you’re having a girl.” Genevieve said.

“Come here, Mikey.” I turned over and held my arms out toward my son. His big hazel eyes stared blankly at me.

Genevieve smiled at him and leaned close to whisper, “Go pat your mother’s tummy.” She nudged him, and he shook his head and took two steps backward.

We had been one month shy of celebrating our first wedding anniversary when a hazel-eyed incendiary force of nature had screamed his way into our lives. Michael Alexander St. Clair arrived with so much intensity we weren’t sure he was our son.

Our curly-headed, auburn-haired boy had spent the first eight months of his life going from mad to calm and back at the flip of a switch. Now, he was a few months away from officially hitting the terrible twos, and his new favorite word was *no*.

Our son was the spitting image of his father. Not only did he look like Chadwick, but he also soaked up all of Chadwick’s mannerisms and personality. His penis, girls, and food fascinated him.

“No,” he answered definitively, his eyes sparkling with laughter. Genevieve nudged him again, but he turned and buried his face in her knee. “No. Gran-Gran.” Much to Chadwick’s amusement, our son insisted on calling Genevieve, Gran-Gran.

“This little one is truly not interested, so I think we have another boy on the way!” Genevieve cheered and clapped her hands. One side of the room groaned, and the other side cheered with her.

“My grandmother believes that if the woman craves meat, cheese, or salty foods, then it’s a boy. Last week, Kandi inhaled a half-pound cheeseburger. It sickened me. It was like something out of National Geographic. Her hands were constantly moving. Very animalistic. Almost primal,” Natasha interjected.

“I thought the doctor said you should watch your diet. I don’t think you should eat so much meat,” my mother said. She studied me and I immediately knew that she noticed my unexpected weight gain with this baby. With Michael I hadn’t

gained a lot, but this baby craved meat, cheese, and salty foods. The foods that supposedly pointed the sex toward a boy.

“Thanks, Natasha,” I said, a heavy dose of sarcasm filled my tone. I patted my mother’s hand. “She said I could have some indulgences *in moderation*.”

After twenty-four years of motherhood, my mother had a hard time not smothering me. Now, however, I didn’t view her interference as edicts but as suggestions and concerns.

At least her attention was no longer focused solely on me. She had two additional people to lavish her *special brand* of love on. She thought Michael’s hair was too long and that his high energy level was because of the occasional cookie or cup of juice. She casually mentioned that Chadwick’s interval workouts made him too thin. She was concerned that he wasn’t eating enough calories and decreed it was my responsibility to fatten him up. She also mentioned that I should incorporate meat substitutes into my pregnancy diet.

I righted myself on the sofa, and my mother and I both turned our attention to Marie-Therese. Marie had taken residence at the cheeseboard and had stuffed her mouth with slices of prosciutto and cheese.

“Marie-Therese, it’s your turn to hop on the sofa. Well, after you’re done eating all the crackers and cheese,” my mother laughed.

“No. It’s too soon.” My aunt’s eyes widened, and she shook her head. She looked down at her stomach. “Besides, I’m not showing.” The pregnancy was a surprise to everyone, including Marie-Therese and her boyfriend, Beckham. She wasn’t entirely comfortable with our friends and family knowing about the pregnancy before the second trimester. She constantly worried about the health of the baby since the day the doctor let it slip that she was rapidly approaching advanced maternal age.

My mother peered over at her. “Says who? We see that big old belly.” She laughed affectionately.

Shortly after Michael's birth, I'd begun working at St. Clair Real Estate Investments. The company was a separate entity of St. Clair Enterprises, and Chadwick served as the Chief Executive Officer. The company had a small team of real estate professionals who bought, sold, and flipped properties. I was the Chief Financial Officer. My job was to scrutinize finances and keep my husband's pet projects within budget and on time.

During the restoration of our home, he'd gone over budget by hundreds of thousands of dollars. The house was gorgeous, and the quality of the construction was impeccable. I didn't mind the overage for our personal home, but the lack of discipline in spending could make a profitable project turn unprofitable. So, he asked me to join the company to manage the contracts, research suppliers, and document the corporate financials.

Chadwick also presided over St. Clair's board of directors. After years of pressure to take over the company, my father-in-law and Chadwick negotiated. Chadwick agreed to attend quarterly board meetings and provide input on the direction of St. Clair Enterprises, but he would not take his father's place as CEO.

The French doors leading to the deck opened. On his way to the kitchen, Chadwick peeked into the living room.

"Did I hear correctly? It's a boy?" He grinned.

"No! You didn't. It's inconclusive!" I yelled over.

"I told Beckham that Marie is going next. He said he wants no part of that Louisianan, Creole hoo-doo," he teased.

"No, he didn't. Chadwick, stop teasing him," Marie-Therese called over.

"Hey. A little teasing won't hurt him. Don't forget what I went through."

"Son, I love you. Now, go out there and grill the chicken before your wife eats us all," said my mother.


CHADWICK

ONE YEAR LATER

“SWEETS, HELP ME OUT HERE,” I CALLED OVER TO MY WIFE.

Dressed in yoga capri pants and a bra top with her hair in a high, curly ponytail, Kandace took a casual sip of her coffee and smiled at me.

The sounds of blocks falling to the floor and running echoed through the house. I could only imagine the chaotic scenes going on upstairs. There are many words used to describe our son—spoiled, wild, loud . . . We preferred *spirited*.

“Remember the deal? Three times a week, I get three hours of pure, unadulterated me time. I cook the food, and then for three *glorious* hours, I’m not a mommy.”

“Sweets . . . Come on,” I pleaded.

“Michael! Downstairs! Now!” A satisfied smirk pulled at her lips.

There was a moment of silence followed by a meek, “Okay.” With Titan, our Maltese puppy, in tow, we heard a soft patter of little feet running down the stairs.

“*Boom*. That’s how it’s done.” She took another sip of coffee and arched an eyebrow.

Four years ago, after a whirlwind romance, Kandace and I had run off to Las Vegas to get married. We’d had a few months of family drama along with a sooner-than-expected pregnancy. Now, there were four of us.

When Michael had turned a year and a half old, we found it necessary to bring in another bit of energy to calm the storm. Our baby girl, Lily Isabelle, was the exact opposite of her brother. She woke up in the morning smiling and cooing. My favorite times of the day were during early morning feedings. I hung out in the window seat and watched Kandace with Lily, love written all over her face as she took a deep breath of her scent.

Michael scurried onto the banquette as naked as the day he was born. I wiped excess cereal off Lily's face.

"Michael, put on your pajama bottoms and have breakfast with us." Michael didn't move, so I switched into my stern voice. "Son."

Michael scrambled off the banquette and slid on a pair of pajama bottoms. He climbed back on the cushioned seating. Titan took his place under the table. His tail wagged as he eagerly awaited any crumbs of falling food.

Licking the grape jelly off the toast, my son picked up a nearby foam bat and waved it over his head.

"Look! I have a BIG PEE-PEE!" he yelled excitedly.

I laughed. I knew I shouldn't—laughter only encouraged Mikey. I sobered when I caught my wife's disapproving expression.

"Yes, son. You do. Now, eat up."

After Michael devoured the toast, he ate the eggs and finished with his least favorite—grits with butter and sugar. He danced in his seat and smiled at Kandace.

"Hey, Sweets. I like the food."

This was yet another little thing he'd picked up from me. Most time, he called Kandace, "Sweets." She took it all in stride. She was one of the most confident and caring mothers I had ever seen.

"I'm glad you like it. I enjoyed making it for you."

"You're a good mommy. Can I have a cookie?" He smiled like a Cheshire cat.

"Eat your breakfast. You can have one for a snack after naptime." He frowned when he heard the word nap.

I raised the bat off the table and whispered, "You know I also have a big pee-pee. My bat is huge. Not straight, though. But I don't think you mind. I always hit home runs. Want to play?"

"Naptime," she winked. This time, I sulked.

“Yeah. About that. Next year, I want to try for a third. Then, I can retire.”

“Really?” She put the coffee mug down, paling slightly.

“Yep. We have to break the tie. We have two on your team and two on mine.”

“Nope. Not listening.”

“I’m not getting any younger. I need a football player. That’s it. Baseball already has this one.” I reached over and mussed Michael’s hair.

With his eyes squeezed shut and head thrown back, Michael sang, “I love baseball!”

His long curls tossed back and forth. Lily laughed and began squealing at the top of her lungs. She spat cereal with her laugh and smacked her hands against the highchair tray.

“I think it’s time for Mommy’s exercise class,” Kandace announced, glancing at her watch. She stood from the chair. Leaning over, she kissed Michael on the top of his head. “Bye, Mikey.”

He stirred the grits on his plate and yelled, “See you later, Sweets.”

She kissed Lily Belle before rubbing me on my back and planting a kiss on my lips.

“Bye, my love. I’ll see you in a few hours.” She jumped when I smacked her ass.

“Do what you need to do and bring that sexy ass back to me.”

Now, I was a husband and a father. A *father*. Nothing brought me more joy than to come home to their beautiful faces. My son was in awe of me. I amazed my baby girl. My wife was in love with me.

I didn’t know Kandace would make me so happy. I woke up every morning to the same woman. I went to bed with her. I thought of her throughout the day. My love for her ordered my

steps. Every day, I wanted to be a better man because she made me feel better.

My advice for any bachelor contemplating the life of marriage and fidelity . . . Make sure you find a woman who laughs at your jokes, looks at you with stars in her eyes, and is thankful when you fix the leaky sink. A woman who, after four years, still sighs when your dick sinks slowly and deeply inside of her.

Because there is no greater magic than true love.

THE END

If you have a moment, please review Kandi's Crush on Amazon and Goodreads. Help other romance readers and tell them why you enjoyed the book.

Thank you!



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LOVE,

MICHELLE KARISE



ABOUT THE Author

Michelle Karise is a St. Louis-native who lives with her temperamental Shih Tzu, Rooney. The sassy, Type-A personality is a member of several professional organizations, notably the Romance Writers of America.

Travel, martinis, and wit are her jam and nuance is her butter. She constructs stories featuring intelligent female leads and the confident and strong men that love them. Sometimes the hero and heroine don't do what she wants, but she is always confident that love will prevail.

Her debut novel, "Kandi's Crush", is slated for a November 2019 release.

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