



Kissed

BY THE

BARTENDER



MOUNTAIN MEN OF WILDVALE

CHELSEY CLARK

Kissed
By the Bartender
Mountain Men of Wildvale: Book 2

Chelsey Clark

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CHAPTER 1

CANDICE

A feeling of nostalgia envelops me as I shake off the afternoon rain from my hair and step into the local bar, my guitar hanging from one shoulder and a mash-up of my songs playing aimlessly in my head.

The last time I was in Wildvale, I was only just old enough to enter a bar, let alone chug down a beer.

Strangely though, this place feels like home, warm and cozy like a cup of steaming chocolate by the fireplace in the midst of a cold winter evening.

I glance around. The red brick walls combined with touches of wood and framed photos of Wildvale in its early days, the soft lighting that gives just the right illumination for the bargoers, and the rustic laid-back atmosphere. ...

Everything here reminds me of sweet old memories with family and friends.

This is home.

Why did it take me so long to come back? And I have only a month to enjoy the freedom away from my handlers and away from the pressure of a looming life-changing decision.

One month to reflect and weigh the choices. One month to have some me-time while my parents are having the time of their lives on a cruise.

Just one month before I'm scheduled to play at the Wildvale Stadium, and then to move on to whatever path I decide to take for my future.

A clap of thunder cuts into my reverie. I let out a silent, sarcastic laugh as I'm dragged back to reality. Through the windows, I see the darkening sky. This April shower's bound to turn quickly into a bad storm.

The tune playing in my head transitions from upbeat to ominous. Slow and brooding.

I take a seat near the door. It has a great view of the place. It's my way of easing back into this town after such a long time. I'm still hesitant to go all the way in.

I put down my guitar beside me. My ever-loyal companion.

I pull out my journal and a pen and start writing all my fleeting thoughts and mixed-up emotions. This helps me relax.

The warm, inviting atmosphere of the bar embraces me. At least it isn't crowded today. No one recognizes me either, which is something to be thankful for.

I hear the loud pattering of the rain on the glass and the howling wind.

At least I'm safe and dry for now. I'll figure out where to sleep later since the inn I'm supposed to stay at didn't have an available room until morning.

"Hi, honey!" I'm startled by someone greeting me. I hadn't noticed a waitress coming up.

She smiles at me warmly. "My name is Kyndrah. What can I get for you?" I can tell that she was sizing me up, probably trying to figure out where she has seen me before.

"I'll have some ice water with lemon, please," I answer. "And any salad with a light dressing." I didn't even bother checking

out the menu.

I look down at the notes and scribble in my journal. But the waitress speaks up again.

“Excuse me, not to be rude, but I usually know everybody who comes in here...” she starts to say. “I recognize almost everyone in these parts, even newcomers, are recognizable due to their kin folk showing off their pictures and such. But you... you don’t seem to ring any bells, honey. Would you mind me asking your name?”

“Candy,” I say with a slight smile. “Candy Barr’s my stage name, but you might know me as Candice Barron. I was born and raised here in Wildvale.”

Her eyes light up. Her smile spreads even wider as she steps closer and gives me a hug.

“Oh, good lord!” she exclaims. “It’s so good to see you home. I’ve followed your music for seven years, but I had no idea that Candy and Candice are one and the same. I’m so happy and proud that Candy’s someone from my town!”

Her energy is definitely contagious. I feel the gloom within me disappear. “Thank you, Kyndrah.”

“For a big star like you, I’ll have that salad made in no time!” she says cheerfully before walking away.

Moments like this make my music career totally worth it. Whenever I met admirers and followers who appreciate what I do, I feel uplifted. It feels amazing to learn how my music has touched them in some way. It’s very rewarding.

My family and I moved to LA when I turned eighteen where was offered a contract as a recording artist. They discovered

me from a singing competition I joined in upstate Vermont. Since then, our life has never been the same.

Before that, I never thought I'd ever leave Wildvale. But here I am— a big singer! I'm supposed to be on cloud nine because I'm living the life of my dreams, right? I'm following my passion! So why am I having second thoughts?

A peal of laughter catches my attention. I glance towards the young couple who seemed very much in love. I feel a tinge of bitterness. Sometimes I fantasize about living a normal life in my twenties, away from the spotlight and all the expectations. Just hanging out with some friends and falling in love.

My eyes shift to the bartender they're talking to. I immediately gasp as I recognize him. I feel a flutter in my gut. My heart skips a beat.

His emerald eyes sparkled with delight as he listened to the couple. He ran a muscular hand through his tousled hair in shades of brown. His hair was longer and he was much taller than I remembered.

I can see the outlines of his broad chest and shoulders even from afar. He is definitely more well-built than before. Before I can help myself, my eyes begin to wander down and I find myself thinking about what the rest of his body looked like underneath the clothes.

A slow and steady blaze ignites within me. Heat spreads throughout my core. I feel my heart racing faster.

Joseph Lyons. My childhood best friend. My first love.

It's been years since we last spoke. Why didn't we stay in touch?

To my shock, he turns his head toward my direction. But luckily, he doesn't see me. I catch a glimpse of the scar on his left eyebrow and a flurry of images flash back. Memories from our past.

I feel the urge to slide my fingers over his scar, to touch it and remember how we used to be. A tingle runs down my spine as I imagine my hand gliding over his chiselled jaws, feeling the rough stubble on his chin, touching his red, moist lips.

Soft guitar strums echo in my head. Sensual, romantic music plays in my imagination.

As the storm rages outside, the heat in my body intensifies.

Oh, boy! My stay at Wildvale just got even more exciting.

And it hasn't even been a day!

CHAPTER 2

JOSEPH

I smile as I look at my good friends, Olivia and Patrick. They are so happy in love, and even though I've always been single, I cannot be any happier for them both.

“A toast!” I say as I gain the couple's attention once again. They have not been able to keep their eyes off one another. “To the happy couple. May they find joy in many more therapy sessions with Doctor Bartender Joseph,” I bow and then take a shot of tequila.

Olivia lovingly called me Doctor Bartender when she first met me, and now the name is stuck.

I turn towards the door and notice a woman sitting in the corner. She isn't someone I've seen at the bar before. I turn away and give Olivia and Patrick their drinks.

“We'll miss you,” Olivia says with a smile.

“But we'll visit often,” Patrick says.

“Two margaritas on the house for the future Smyers,” I say. But I can't help but turn towards the woman by the door.

She has dark hair that falls about her face in curls. She is alone except for Kyndrah who puts a salad and water in front of her. But a few people start to gather around her. Something about her made it hard to peel my eyes away.

“Who is she?” asks Olivia, leaning in, just in case I didn’t want to broadcast what was on my mind.

One of the many reasons Olivia is one of my good friends.

My eyes flick to the woman as several people hug and high-five her. She must be well known around here, though I’ve never met her... I think.

“Someone I used to know,” is all I can say, not even blinking or looking away.

Finally, I pull my eyes away from her and notice that Olivia is not drinking her Margarita. She winks at me, and I know the reason right away. She tugs Patrick away, and I get back to work trying to ignore the strange woman who glances at me from time to time.

Who is she?

A few minutes later, Patrick and Olivia scamper out from the back with smiles on their faces.

“See you later Doc,” Olivia yells as Patrick pulls her outside towards their SUV.

“Bye you two,” I yell across the room as thunder cracks as if on cue.

I wipe up the bar and dump out the margaritas. I can’t help but look towards the woman by the door.

My eyes stare at her legs as she crosses them. She is slumped over her notebook, furiously jotting down something.

She seems to be about my age. Her brown eyes sparkle whenever she looked up from her notebook. I feel a connection to her and I have to figure out who she is.

Her long, wavy, chocolate-brown hair touched her ass and suddenly I want to be doing the same thing.

“Hey Candice,” Kyndrah calls out to her from halfway across the room. “Do you need another water, honey?”

“Sure! Thank you, Kyndrah.” So, her name is Candice. Suddenly the realisation hits me like a ton of bricks.

She’s Candice Barron. My childhood best friend and the only person I ever wanted to be with. I just didn’t know how she felt so I let things be. When we graduated, I let her slip away for a better life. My, has she grown up to be a fine woman.

And now, here she is, in my bar.

“Hey, Kyndrah, let me take that over to her please,” I ask as I take the water from her hand.

“Sure thing,” Kyndrah flashes a wicked smile. She is reading a little too much into it.

“Thanks. Will you watch the bar for me?” I ask her. “The crowd is thinning out. Probably because of the storm coming, but I just need to talk to Candice... she’s an old friend of mine.”

Kyndrah smiles as she recognizes something in me that I can’t place. She sends me away to take the water to Candice.

I walk over slowly and not once does Candice look up from her paper. My stomach twists. This is not nerves; this is longing to do the things I can’t do with her seven years ago.

“Candice Barron,” I say, as I place the water down in front of her.

“Why, if it isn’t Joseph Lyons?” She says with a smile as she shuts her notebook and nods to the seat across from her.

I take it.

“How have you been?” I ask her.

“You never called me,” she says. I’m taken aback for a moment.

“I...I...” I stutter. “I didn’t want to bother you... hey, you never called me either,” I say for a lack of better things to say.

“True,” she giggles, and my heart skips a beat.

The thunder is getting worse outside and more people are leaving the bar. I know a bad storm is coming since our town was tracking it for the better part of the week. I know I need to get home, but something is making me stay.

“There’s a bad storm coming,” I finally say to her.

“I don’t mind riding it out here,” she says as she takes a sip of her water. “With you,” she winks. “We have some catching up to do.”

“That we do,” I say.

“So, who are you with now?” she asks.

I guess she was expecting me to be married by now.

“I haven’t dated anyone since high school,” I say regretfully.

She, on the other hand, must have all the men in the world, as gorgeous as she is.

We talk for a long time until Kyndrah comes up behind me.

“I’m locking up and heading home before the worst of this hits. My baby is home alone,” she says.

“Isn’t your husband home too?” I ask her.

“You know how he is, Joseph. He is so distracted by the TV set that my daughter Kala is just as good as being alone.” She laughs heartily. “You two don’t get too wet,” she elbows me and walks out, locking the door behind her.

“Is it ok to stay in here?” Candice asks.

“Yeah, I practically run this place. The owners are cool. They brought me on six months after bartending school to run to manage the place. We are just fine here,” I smile at her. “But I don’t want to keep you from anything...or anyone.”

“There isn’t anyone Joe,” she smiles, a little weaker this time. “And truth be told, I don’t have a room at the inn until morning, so it’s either here chatting with you, or sleeping in my car in a Walmart parking lot.”

“Here it is,” I say.

I’m locked up with my first love for the entire night alone. I can’t let myself get in her way.

God help me!

CHAPTER 3

CANDICE

H

ot as Hell.

That's what goes through my mind as Joe towers over me in all his six-foot goodness.

I remember how his vibrant green eyes gazed at me longingly when we said goodbye, how his lips parted as if he wanted to say something more. It was just like how he is looking at me right now with unspoken words that are filling the air with tension.

I think for a moment. His birthday's in December and mine is in May. So he must be twenty-six now.

A wave of regret and sadness passes over me. I can't believe I never even bothered to wish him on his birthday all these years. But then again, he never wished me either.

What happened to us? I want to ask.

We used to be inseparable. I had such strong feelings for him growing up, but I never said anything because I didn't want things to be weird.

But now... We're full-blown adults. Maybe it'll be different. Maybe this time we'll talk. Really talk.

Who better to discuss my pressing concerns with than a former best friend? Just like old times.

I badly need a friend. Or maybe something more.

He leans forward. My heart thumps against my chest.

I look at him closely... he seems far more mature and distant than he used to be.

Back then, he was witty and liked to make others laugh. In fact, he used to overcompensate with humour and was always very sociable. He seems closed off now, but I guess it's too early to tell.

And man do I want to get to know him all over again... in so many ways. I look at his arms and see the muscles beneath the white t-shirt and red flannel. He is hot... like rugged lumberjack hot.

He wiggles his eyebrow at me, the one with the scar, and laughs for a moment.

"Do you remember where this baby came from?" He asks me, pointing to the scar, and I recall the entire event.

His eyebrow scar has always made me smile. I was with him the night he got it. He was fighting for my honour when he caught a few seniors looking up my skirt at homecoming. It made him even sexier if you ask me.

We laugh and talk so much about high school and the time before that. But it's the what-has-happened-since-leaving-Wildvale conversation that I am not sure I am ready for.

"So, you know my story. Graduated from high school then went straight to bartender classes, and I've been here for the past six years," he says.

What about you?" he asks, shoving the question I wanted to avoid in my face.

"What happened to you since leaving Wildvale? What have you been up to?"

"It's a long story," I say.

"As it so happens, I am good at listening to long stories. They don't call me Doctor Bartender for nothing," he says. He goes up to the bar and gets two mugs of beer.

I can't keep my eyes off him as I feel my core heat up once again. I fear this feeling might never go away unless I did something about it... unless we did something about it.

Finally, he walks over and puts down the beers.

"They do not call you doctor bartender, do they?" I ask with a laugh.

"They do," he says, as he takes a swig. "Now, the doc is in. Let's hear it," he says with a laugh, and I can't help but want to spill it all.

I take a long drag of my beer and hope it will help.

His foot brushes against mine and I wonder if it was on purpose. I don't know if I should return the gesture. Or was it an accident? No, it must have been on

purpose. There it goes again.

I risk it as I swish my foot beside his. But then he sticks his feet behind his chair. I've read too much into it and now I didn't know what to do... or did I?

I don't know if giving it all up would mean anything.

But what are the odds?

He didn't want me then, and now he moved his feet away from mine.

"Oh hell, you're so stupid, Candice!" I blush as I realise that I just blurted out my thoughts out loud.

I stare at the table, embarrassed.

Suddenly, his hand slips into mine. With a finger on my chin, he pulls my face up. Now I am staring into his emerald eyes.

"What do you have stuck in that pretty little head of yours?" He asks, his eyes softening. Lightning cracks behind him through the window, his eyes glowing soft.

"I haven't talked to a soul about this yet..." I begin.

"I'm here now, Candice There isn't anyone else around here, and you will get wet... or fried if you leave now. Now, what is it?"

He moves around and takes my hand, pulling me over to a sofa on the far side of the bar.

It's a very manly-looking sofa, but it's comfy.

"I only have a month before I have to decide on something that will make or break my life and career," I say quickly, as if ripping off the band-aid.

"And if you choose one way, you will let everyone down. But if you choose the other, you will be letting yourself down?" He says. My mouth gapes open in shock.

"How did you...?" I begin to ask.

"It's written all over your face, Candice," he says, as he turns towards me and gives me his undivided attention.

"In a month when I have my concert here in town, I have to tell the executives whether I want to renew my contract and go worldwide, or if I want to drop it and stay small scale, perhaps even move back here," I say.

"I love to sing. But this got so much bigger than me so fast!" I add hesitantly.

“It’s putting your light out darlin’,” he says, and I haven’t heard it put any better than that. “I can’t make any decisions for you. All I can say is, do what feels right. For you, not for anyone else.”

“Somehow, that’s easier said than done,” I say, and he frowns for a moment.

“When I got out of bartending school, I got an offer to go to New York at a huge rave-type bar. It was a lot of money and a lot of work, but it wasn’t home. It only lasted six months before I came back home, tail between my legs. I’ve been here ever since,” he says, gesturing to the bar.

“There’s nothing like home. But Candice, there’s nothing like living your dream either,” he adds tenderly.

Suddenly, thunder cracks and I jump into his arms, tears running down my face. Not a soul has ever spoken to me the way he did, and I love it. At least now, I feel like I might have someone to mull over my life-changing decisions with.

Joseph is someone who won’t judge me for who I was, but rather for who I am at this moment right now, a woman, confused, sitting on the lap of a man who once meant a great deal to me.

Only time will tell what happens next.

CHAPTER 4

JOSEPH

The morning came with calm from the storm that lasted all night. The ground is wet, but a rainbow float in the sky, making the storm seem like a beautiful thing.

It truly had been a beautiful thing; it gave me the best eight hours of my life.

I think about the wonderful night Candice, and I had. We did nothing but talk, and we had a lot of catching up to do... we still do. Now that she is back in my life, I'm not sure if I can let her go again.

Not that I have much of a choice in the matter, considering she had bigger decisions to make. But deep down, as I open her car door to let her inside, I hope I can be a part of that process.

"I hope I get to see you again soon," she whispers.

"The universe has a funny way of making things happen," I snicker. "Besides, you know where to find me, and as far as I know, there is only one bar in town."

"Here's to hoping the universe knows what it's doing," she says.

She then leans up and kisses me on the cheek and my heart goes out of rhythm momentarily.

In seconds she is in her car with the door closed, and in the blink of an eye, she vanishes around the corner.

I'm happy to have the day off. But even though I haven't slept in well over twenty-four hours, I have far too many things to do to head home now.

I spend the day running errands for the bar and myself, paying bills, and restocking the bar. The owners are great at mostly everything business-wise, but ever since I became their full-time bartender, they put me in charge of things regarding the bar.

Along with Kyndrah, they tend to take care of the restaurant. It's a great system, but with little to no sleep, I'm just about spent.

I think of going home and making dinner for myself, but I'm too tired to cook and decide to eat out.

I go to a restaurant called Bear Paw. It's one of our only local eating joints that isn't mom-and-pop. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy mom-and-pop every now and again, but sometimes a man needs some steak and potatoes.

I never liked eating alone, but since my family and friends all lived elsewhere, I was forced to go alone.

The entrance to Bear Paw is decorated beautifully with ornate brown and gold accents. It looks like an upscaled hunter's cabin complete with a stuffed bear or two.

"I need a table for one please," I say to the hostess as she looks over the ledger to find me a seat.

The place is busy for the most part, almost all the tables are taken. Even the waiting area is almost full. I see a few lone chairs at the bar, but I don't want to sit at a bar after working in one every day.

Then, my eyes fall on a table in the middle of the restaurant. Candice is sitting there alone; her notebook and pen sitting in front of her.

I smile, but then notice the man who is hovering over her. At first, I think that he's a waiter. But he isn't dressed in the customary Bear Paw uniform.

Candice is frowning and fiercely trying to get the man to leave her side.

"Come on Candy Barr. You're such a hot little thing in person," the man says. "Let me join you."

"No. Just go away, please," she replies. I can tell that she was trying to be polite and not cause a scene.

"You know what," I whisper to the hostess. "I have a friend over there. I think I will join her tonight," I smile at the woman, and she let me through.

"Enjoy your time here at Bear Paw, sir," she says, but I pay no attention to her.

"Darling," I say, coming up beside Candice and kissing her on the cheek. "I'm so sorry I'm late," I add ignoring the man. "Work ran late," I continue. "Oh, hello, who are you?"

"The name's Tim," he growls.

"Hi Tim, I'm Joe. How do you know my girlfriend?" I ask as I shake hands with him.

"Girlfriend?" Tim questions.

"Yes," I pause and look at Candice. "Isn't that right dear?"

"Uh," Candice stutters for a second. "Yeah, that's right," she nods to Tim, and he stomps off angrily.

“Well, now that the creep is gone, I will leave you to your meal,” I say with a smile.

“Please stay,” she says, pulling me to the seat beside her. “Wait a second... were you stalking me?”

“No!” I say defensively. “I was exhausted and didn’t want to cook. Then I came here and saw that prick messing with you.”

She leans into me, putting her head on my shoulder.

“I’m glad you came,” she says with a sigh.

As her head touches my shoulder, I feel chills throughout my body. I had never felt this intensely before. Even when she was sitting in my lap last night, I didn’t feel this way.

I fight the feeling that was tugging at my jeans and hope she doesn’t notice.

“Did you see the look on that guy’s face?” I say with a laugh.

“Yeah. I’m sure he’s over there on Google, trying to find out if Candy Barr is in a relationship,” she sighs again.

“What the internet doesn’t know won’t hurt them,” I say, which makes more sense to me than I care to admit.

It isn’t until now that I realize how popular she is. I think about how exhausting it must be to be living in the spotlight all the time. Sure, she enjoys singing and performing, but this can’t possibly be a life that anyone can enjoy completely all the time.

I know I wouldn’t be able to.

Maybe that’s why she questions the decisions she has to make in less than a month.

For the rest of dinner, I make sure to keep the conversation away from admirers and fame. She needs a night when she doesn't have to worry about anyone wanting to be around her because of her popularity.

I knew I enjoy her company for a very different reason. She could never sing another day as Candy Barr, and I would still admire her, with or without her fame.

That night I lay in my bed as exhaustion takes me over. I can't help but allow sleep to pull at me and even as I enter the first stages of lucid dreaming, I know it's going to be an interesting sleep.

Candice stands as pretty as a picture at the head of the bar. It's now called Lyon's Roar. We own it, as in both of us.

It's the same bar, but different in so many ways. Candice is in a stunning dress, organza and blue, my favourite colours.

"Daddy!", a little voice calls from behind me. I look behind me and see a little girl jumping into my arms. I'm her daddy. She belongs to Candice and me.

Shortly after the child leaps from my arms and into the arms of her mother, two other tots, twins, just slightly older than the girl, walk into the room.

Their smiles are infectious, and they look just like their mother.

It was a happy picture. As much as I knew that this was a dream, I try to will it into reality.

My eyes fly open as the buzz of my phone wakes me up. I roll towards my nightstand and see that it was morning.

I gulp down some water from the bottle that stood there as I check my phone. I had a text from Patrick.

Doctor Bartender! I wanted to be the first to tell you that Oliva and I are expecting our first child.

I smile a little. I already knew this since Olivia had secretly told me in the bar. But I didn't want to rain on his parade by telling him that I probably knew before he did.

Congratulations you two. I'm so happy for you both.

I smile as I get out of bed and throw my pants on.

After getting a cup of coffee, I scroll through my daily news feed. I ignore all the ads from tabloids and similar paparazzi-driven sites.

I'm mostly in it for the weather.

Usually, I scroll past the ads on celebrity gossip, but when I see Candice's face pop up, I have to click on it.

I'm shocked to see what's written about her.

CHAPTER 5

CANDICE

I sit in disbelief in my room. I was sent an online article by my manager, my mother, my publicist, and just about everyone who has my personal email. It's a farce of course, but that doesn't matter. People will believe anything.

Candy Barr, aka Candice Barron, has fled to her small hometown in Vermont to escape the public eye. Considering the recent discovery of her illegitimate pregnancy, star Candy Barr is hiding out until a decision is made regarding her career and the fate of her unborn bastard child.

We will update you as soon as we know more.

There's an unflattering photo of me attached showing my stomach seeming bigger or rather more bloated than usual. I'm devastated and I melt into a puddle of salty hot tears.

Someone knocks on my door. I'm not expecting anyone. I wipe my tears quickly and walk towards the door. I'm half afraid that there might be paparazzi on the other side but I take my chances and open the door.

"David Roe, the owner of the inn, is a good friend of mine. I hope you don't mind, but I asked him for your room number when I ran into him at the front desk," Joseph says with his arms open.

I run into them.

"It's not true Joe, it's not," I say, the tears pouring out again.

His arms are the only thing comforting me, and I melt into them.

“I know. People are awful,” he says as he closes the door behind us.

“Will you stay with me today?” I hear myself asking him.

“I can stay until I have to go to work this afternoon,” he replies sweetly.

“I’ll take it.” I smile at him.

He sits on the chair beside my bed. I slide onto the foot of my bed, and we chat for a while. Mostly about the outrageous article. I can’t imagine where they would have even come up with something like that.

As we talk, I feel more relaxed with him around. But I start dreading being alone once he went to work.

I look at him closely and admire his handsome features. From the scar on his face to his relaxed muscles, he tugs at my feelings in so many ways. Deep down, if the tabloids had been right and I was pregnant, I would want him to be the father.

I shake my head trying to get rid of the thoughts that flooded my mind. Whatever I felt for Joseph in high school has escalated to an all-new level.

I fight myself to not outwardly react to my feelings. I’m an overly flirtatious person, but Joseph deserves so much more than that.

“Well, I suppose I should be getting to work,” he says after a couple of hours. “Are you going to be okay here alone?”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine,” I say, lying through my teeth.

“Why don’t you come in and hang out,” he suggests, making my heart leap.

“I don’t want to be in the way,” I reply.

“No way you will be in the way,” he says with a smile. “You can sit close to the bar and write or drink...whatever you want to do.”

“Really?” I ask.

“Really,” he says, pulling me up to my feet.

I’m happy for the chance to not be alone and quickly put on some decent clothes and rush behind him.

Less than an hour later, we’re at the bar. Joseph is frantic because Kyndrah’s daughter is sick, and she can’t come in. I watch him as he tried to find someone to fill in.

“Damn it,” he slams his fist on the counter.

I walk over to him from the table I have set up as mine for the night.

“What’s wrong Joe?” I ask, walking over to him.

“I called around to a few of our other girls and they’re all some concert in Newbury,” he growls. “We’re going to have to close for the night,” he says, scribbling a “closed for the day” note to stick on the door.

“Wait,” I find myself saying as I put my hand on his to stop him from finishing the note.

“What?” he asks, his face softening.

“What if I take Kyndrah’s place for the night? I mean how hard can it be?” I found myself asking something I never thought I would.

“I wouldn’t want to put you through all that,” he replies.

“All what? I just have to write orders, take them to the kitchen, bring the food back, and fill drinks,” I say with far more confidence than I actually feel.

“Alright, if you’re sure,” he said with relief.

“I owe you one anyway,” I say.

“How do you figure?” he asks.

“You kept me company after that stupid article came out. This is the least I can do.” I smile at him as I take an apron off the wall and tie it around myself. “Can I put my things behind the bar?”

“I’ll put it in the back,” he says, walking over to my table and packing up my notebook and pen. “It’s Friday, so we’re going to be pretty busy tonight and I don’t want your guitar to be splashed with beer.”

“Good call,” I smile as I pick up an order pad and a menu, trying to familiarize myself with a job I’d never done.

I was nervous with my first few customers, but as the night went by, we were having the time of our lives working together.

I’m delighted when one of my old childhood girlfriends, Lana O’Mark, comes in. I hadn’t thought about her when I got to

town, but now that I had her number I can maybe hang out with her.

Hell, I hadn't thought about meeting up with anyone, but now that I'm around Joseph and thinking about hanging out with old friends, it feels like all the pieces of a long-lost puzzle were falling together.

As I pause to catch my breath from the busy night, I look over at Joseph. I think about what it would be like to work with him here in this town.

It feels so easy. So natural.

I can picture us owning and running a place like this. It's a strange feeling.

The last thing I need is another choice, but I should at least consider this one.

CHAPTER 6

CANDICE

We work our butts off the whole night. Even though it was busy, it was fun too. I never had the chance to do something like this, or even work a normal job.

I can't believe how much I missed out on growing up. I had to grow up fast, and LA is the kind of place that either chews you up and spits you out or sucks you into its magic and mayhem.

I think I am one of those who got sucked into it all and lost the chance to live at a normal pace.

“Congrats,” Joe smiles at me as he turns the closed sign on at the end of the night. “You just survived your first night as a short-order waitress at a dive bar in the middle of the boonies.” He laughs out loud, and I join in.

He reaches into his register and counts out over two hundred dollars. He hands me the money and I look at it, wondering what it was for.

“Why did you—”

“It's your tip Candice,” he says. “Plus, whatever you got at the tables in cash and what you made for work. That's your tip when people paid with a card.”

“Holy shit,” I say as I pulled another crumpled wad of cash out of my apron pocket. “Is it like this every night?” I ask.

“Mostly just the weekends. But we do get our fair share of traffic through here during the week too,” he says. “You know

darlin’,” he pauses for a moment and my heart races fast at hearing him call me that.

“The patrons like you a lot. I don’t want to make things more complicated for you, but I just thought I would throw this out. You have a job working here with me for as long as you want.”

“Really?” I squeal in delight.

“Yes,” he says as he wipes down the bar and I move to clean the tables. “If you want to make some extra cash or work off some stress over the next few weeks, you can. You don’t have to, but you can. And...” he trails off. Suddenly, I want, no I need to know what he has to say.

“And, what?” I ask as I walk closer to the counter.

“And nothing.” He shrugs, turning his back to me.

“Come on Joe, you know me, you can tell me anything,” I urge him.

“I don’t want to make things any harder on you.” He sighs as he pulls the bag out of the trash. “I’ve got to take this out. I’ll be back real quick.”

I wait for him to come back, wondering what the hell he wasn’t saying to me. Eventually, he walks back in and puts a new bag in the trash without another word. I don’t say anything to him, only watch him.

“What?” he asks when he realizes that I’m staring at him.

He smiles at me and tosses his towel into the laundry behind the counter.

“Nothing you could tell me will make my decision any easier or harder,” I pause as I pull off the apron. “I just want to feel free Joe, and this is the most freedom I have had in over seven years. There is so much that I want to do and I’m afraid that I won’t get to do any of it.”

I frown and he closes the gap between us. I feel the heat of our bodies mix into the space between us. I want to fall into his arms, but he doesn’t move any closer to me.

I smile weakly at him, fighting the urge to close the gap.

“Your friendship and compassion mean more to me than you will ever know,” I say as a tear trickles down my cheek. “I trust you, Joe. You say that I can tell you anything, and that works both ways.”

“I don’t want to hurt you, Candice,” he says, reaching out to me but then slipping his hand into his pocket. “I was just going to tell you that if you decided to stay, you can work here if you wanted to.”

“I’m honoured. Really, I am,” I say. “When I get things figured out, you will be the first to know.”

He smiles at me before going to the back to fetch my things. He walks outside and I follow him silently. He was going to take me back to the inn. When we get into his car, we sit in there quietly for the longest time.

He’s still thinking about something but he isn’t ready to share it with me.

“Joseph...?” I turn to him questioningly after another moment of silence.

“Do you trust me?” He turns and asks me.

“You know I do,” I say.

“Then buckle up. We are going on an adventure,” he says before revving the engine.

As he sped past the inn, I fight the urge to ask him where we were going. The mystery made it even more exciting. Eventually, we end up at a cluster of storage buildings, that seem like mini garages.

Joseph jumps out of the car. I follow him as he opens the door to one of the storage rooms. He smiles at me and wheels out a motorcycle. A motorcycle that I didn't know he had.

He puts the car in the storage room, locks it back up and asks, “Have you ever ridden on a motorcycle before?” tossing me a helmet from the saddle bag.

“It's been a long time,” I confess as I put the helmet on.

I watch as he got on and pat the seat behind him. With a little effort, I climb onto the bike behind him. My heart is racing at the excitement of this adventure.

Something told me that every day would be like this if I were with Joe. It makes me wonder what it would have been like to have been with him since high school.

I push the thought from my mind.

Wherever we were going, it is taking a great deal of time to get there. It's getting dark, with only the moon lighting the way. There's something about the cool wind whipping my hair and the open road that makes me feel exhilarated.

This is the kind of freedom I was talking about earlier at the bar.

I smile as we continue to drive. As the path gets narrower and more winding, I try to remember that I trust this man. Soon we pass the cliffs of the Appalachian Mountains.

I'm both scared and elated as we drive on. I fall more in love with the man that I had my arms around. I wrap them tighter around him, trying to feel his muscles and warmth. I hope he thought it was because I was scared, not because I was falling for him so hard.

I don't know where I was going to be in a month, let alone where my life would take me. But I hope somehow that I would find my way back to this man.

Eventually, the motorcycle slows down and we come to a clearing at the top of a cliff. By the looks of it, this is one of the highest spots in that region. Sure, the mountains are much taller than where we are, but the road doesn't seem to go much further up the path.

The clearing is stunning. The moon lights up everything. A small cabin sits at the edge of the woods, only a hundred feet or so from the cliff. I've never seen anything like this.

We get off the bike. I pull the helmet off and hand it to him.

"This place is amazing," I say.

"It's mine," he replies. "I bought it a few years back with the money I made in New York. I wanted something I can come to when I feel stressed or when I needed a break. So," he holds his arms out, "here she is."

"Look at the stars out here. They shine so brightly! And the moon..." I take in a breath of fresh air. "It's just breathtaking."

“Now you know the appeal,” he says before running into the cabin and coming out with two blankets.

I watch as he lays the blankets out on the ground near the edge. Sitting here, I see the town in a way I never thought I would see.

In all the years I lived down there in that little town, I never took the time to see the wonders of it like this.

We stare at the stars for a long while. The lights twinkling from the town below make it even more mesmerizing.

“Can I ask you something,” he asks, breaking the silence.

“Anything,” I say, still dazed by the beauty of it all.

“If I would have said something in high school,” he pauses, “I don’t know. Told you I loved you, do you think we would still be here today? Together?”

I look at him in shock. I need to find my words. I’ve wanted this for so long, and now that it is here, it feels strange. I love Joe, yes, that much is true. But knowing that he loves me means a whole different thing.

“I think so,” I mutter without thinking. “I mean, we can’t be sure, but Joe, I have always cared for you.”

There’s an uncomfortable silence between us for a moment.

“What about now?” I ask. “I mean, if I choose to stay, that is. If I am to stay, is there any chance I can stay with you? Find out what we missed out on all those years ago?”

“Candice, now that I have found you,” he leans in a little closer and whispers, “I will gladly follow you across the world

if that's what you want. I care for you deeply," he says, moving closer. "Maybe even more."

Our lips meet as we kiss passionately. There is nothing in life that can possibly be this good. We pull away and laugh, our mouths just inches from one another.

We both look over to the side where his cabin sits, inviting and ready for whatever might be in store within it.

CHAPTER 7

JOSEPH

I smile at Candice as I carry her to the cabin. I don't know what's going to happen, but my heart is beating quickly as if it's about to take flight.

I look down at her. The moon shines on her supple shin. All I want is to kiss her skin, all of it, inch by inch. I want to feel what it could've been like between us all those years ago.

I want to feel what it could be like to be with her now.

With the swell of emotion rising in my chest, and the feel of her body pressed against mine.

Goddamn it.

Candice still knows how to leave me tangled up in knots, desperate for her.

I feel like a teenager all over again.

I swing her around to face me and our lips meet. She tastes like salt and honey. It tastes familiar; like something I have always known but never got to taste before.

When we pull back, she's smiling at me. Her eyes are the perfect combination of colours as they dance in the moonlight. All of the years we spent apart, all of the time I spent pining after she feels like it's led me to this moment.

To her.

I set her down and reach for the doorknob hesitantly. I don't want to read too much into this situation, but I want to be with her, in every way possible.

I hope she has the same thing in mind as I do.

She leans in to kiss me again, jumping up and wrapping her legs around my hips.

I know that she feels what I feel, as it rubs against her through our clothes.

"Do you want to go inside?" I ask her.

"Uh, huh," she breathes through the kisses. "Fuck, yeah, I do."

I fidget with the knob, trying to open the door while kissing her. When I finally get it open, I carry her in but I accidentally bump her head as I walk through.

"Ouch," she says, rubbing the back of her head.

"I'm so sorry," I say, setting her down and patting her head.

"It's ok," she says, looking around the cabin. "It's stunning," she adds as she walks inside.

"Thanks," I reply. "I've been working on it for five years or so."

The walls and floor are all redwood. A large brown and gold rug lay in the middle of the living room. There's a brown leather couch in front of the fireplace and a small table to the side.

"Why don't you live here?" She asks me in wonder.

I look at her, a wave of sadness washing over me as I reply, "I don't want to live here alone, so I stay at my place in town."

this place is a little far from work, but the drive is worth it. But it's only worth it if I have someone to be with when I get home."

My feelings rush out before I can think about what I'm saying. "Maybe we could..." I begin, but I stop myself.

It is ridiculous to imagine a future with her after we spent so long apart.

And especially when Candice hasn't even decided what she wanted to do with her life.

I can't get in the way of her career, no matter how badly I wanted to.

"Maybe you and I can call this home someday?" She finishes my thoughts.

"I'm sorry Candice. I didn't mean to say anything that might influence your decisions," I say, shutting the door behind us.

"You didn't," she replies. "I did." She wrapped her arms around me with a smile "I think I love you, Joseph Lyons. I've always loved you" she says with a kiss. "I'm sorry I wasted so much time."

I frame her face in my hands and look into her eyes. "I think I love you too Candice Barron. I'm sorry too. I don't want to waste any more time."

She smiles and we kiss again, falling onto the large couch. There, we kiss passionately, our feelings reaching a new height. My head is spinning, and my heart feels like it's beating at a million miles a minute.

I'm addicted to her, to the feel and smell of her.

To every last exquisite detail, and I don't think I can get enough.

"Joseph," she begins as she pushes herself away from me. "I think I have..."

"Shh," I stop her from finishing. "Not now," I add, kissing her once more.

I want more.

I want to lose myself in her, to hear her cry out my name and know that we are the only two people in the world.

Suddenly we became desperate. Our hands and lips are all over each other as I take in her beauty. I can't wait to see every last inch of her.

With one hand, I reach up the back of her shirt and feel for her bra clasp, but then harden even more when I realize she isn't wearing one. I don't know how I didn't notice that. So, I place my palm on her upper back, bringing her in harder against me.

She inhales, bringing her closer to me still. I can feel the heat coming off her and am sure she has felt mine. I have no idea what's stopping me, or why I feel the need to go slow and drag the moment out between us.

From the intoxicating smell of her floral perfume to the way her body feels against mine.

Like we were two pieces of a whole.

"Joseph," she moans as I nip at her collarbone. "Take me please, all the way," she whines out as she puts her hands on my belt, pulling it off.

“Are you sure?” I want her to be sure that this was exactly what she wanted.

Because once I was inside of her, I didn't think I could stop.

And I want to be sure she didn't want me to.

Suddenly, I am filled with the overwhelming desire to spend all night inside Candice, familiarizing myself with every curve, every scar, and every inch of her skin.

I'm eager to discover all of it.

“Yes,” she answers, fiddling with my jeans buckle.

My heart is beating faster now, drowning out everything else.

I reach down, and with one motion, pull her shirt off, exposing her perky breasts. I place my hands on her, lightly squeezing them in my palms.

Finally, she has me free from my pants and my thick cock springs from my jeans.

“Commando,” she smiles as she reaches down, taking my thickness in her hands.

While kissing her, I take my pants off, and hers as well. She is nearly naked in front of me. Only her panties remain, and damn do I want to pull them off with my teeth.

“Do it,” she says as if reading my mind. I smirk and head down her body, planting kisses all the way.

I stop at her wet centre. I can see the moisture staining her panties. With my teeth, I take the left string just over her hip and begin pulling them down her legs. In no time they're off and I'm face-to-face with her heated core.

It takes everything in me to hold still and not rush through it.

Candice puts her hands in my hair and pulls as I sink my face into her center, tasting her goodness.

“Mm,” she lets out a moan and I feel myself grow harder.

Is this what I’ve been missing out on?

All at once, I find myself grateful for the fact that, out of all the bars in the world, Candice stepped into mine.

Candice links her fingers over my neck, and I growl.

I thrust my tongue deep, pushing it against her clit. Her hips jolt forward, pushing up her ass, bringing her closer still.

As I play with her, her back arches as she lifted her ass off the couch. I feel her throbbing nub against my mouth and knew that she was ready.

Fuck.

Every last cell in my body screamed her name.

Pulling back, I pick her up and throw her over my shoulder. She giggles as I smack her ass while I carry her to the bedroom.

I toss her onto my bed. As she lay splayed on my sheets, I can’t imagine wanting anything more than I wanted her.

Nor do I want to imagine anything else.

Candice is finally back in my life, and I have no intention of letting her go.

I’m going to spend all night showing her just how much she means to me.

CHAPTER 8

CANDICE

I see Joseph standing over me, his naked body glistening underneath the moonlight, and my entire body trembles. Slowly, I sit up on my legs and try to think past the hammering of my heart, and the rush of emotion rising within me.

He is beautiful.

Even more beautiful than anything I could've imagined.

I want to run my fingers over every nook and every crevice, and I want to learn every scar and every dip of his body. My mouth turns dry when I see the hungry look in his eyes, and my body jerks at the need in his growl.

Fuck.

I don't think I have ever wanted anyone as much as I want Joseph.

As much as I've always wanted him.

Just like in high school, Joseph can still make me feel like the I'm the only woman in the world, and I'm addicted to the feeling.

To him.

Joseph's eyes move over my body, starting at the top of my head and ending with the tips of my toes. Everywhere he looks, goosebumps break out across my skin. I'm fervent and

wild with need and feeling like I might burst into a million pieces.

He leaves me wanting more, and I'm impatient for him.

Now that I know the spicy sweet taste of him on my tongue, and the feel of his toned, muscular body against mine, I don't want to know anything else.

I can't.

All I can think about is him.

"Joseph." I breath, cocking a finger in his direction. "What are you waiting for?"

"I've been waiting for you my whole life," Joseph whispers, before covering the distance between us. He steps in front of the bed, and I barely have a chance to tilt my head back before he cups the back of my neck. His mouth is hot and searing, and it makes the blood roar in my ears.

Wave after wave of desire builds within me, and my stomach turns molten.

Joseph is a lot better than I imagined he would be.

And I have the feeling that I'm just scratching the surface with him.

Joseph growls into the kiss, and it sends another wave of desire slamming over me. I whimper and link my fingers over his neck. Then I wind my fingers through his hair, tugging on his scalp as I did. Without warning, he wrenches his lips away and presses hot, open-mouthed kisses down the side of my neck and over my jaw.

I am falling hard and fast, but I don't care.

Because I know Joseph will be there to catch me.

I know this with every fibre in my being. Still I cling to him, rubbing myself against him, an unfamiliar yearning starting in the pit of my stomach. Joseph drops a hand between us and rubs me. Spots dance in my field of vision, and I feel like I'm about to explode.

He trails his finger back up to my chest and pushes my breasts together. "Do you have any idea how long I've wanted to do this?"

"As long as I have?"

Joseph dips his head and takes one nipple between his teeth. "Longer."

I moan and throw my head back. "Oh, Joseph. Oh, God."

He moves to the other nipple, and my vision turns white, and all I can see is him.

All I can feel is Joseph's mouth on my nipples, and the molten hot desire pumping through me, making me feel like I am on fire.

Every last part of me burns for him.

Abruptly, Joseph releases my nipples and stakes a step back. He positions himself at my entrance and rubs himself against me. "I don't want to rush into this."

I rake my fingers over his back. "Please. I want to feel you inside of me."

Joseph's head falls to the crook of my neck. "I want to be. I want to fuck you till you can't move, but we've waited so long."

I trail my fingers over his back and up to his shoulders.
“We’ve got time.”

Joseph leans back to look at me, and the hungry look on his face nearly has me coming then and there. He pushes me, so I fall backward onto the mattress. Then he bends down to kiss me and nudges my legs apart. When he settles in between my thighs, my heart soars, and I feel like I am flying.

Nothing in the world can bring me down.

He leans back to look at me, and another wave of emotion, more powerful than the last one, washes over me. I link my fingers over his neck and touch my lips to his. Joseph makes a growling sound that has my stomach heating. In one quick thrust, he is inside of me, and I hold myself still.

Without warning, he eases out and slams back into me, so he fills me to the hilt.

I cling to him, the smell of tobacco and old spice wafting up my nostrils and making the swarm of butterflies in my stomach erupt. Joseph makes low growling sounds in the back of his throat as he eases in and out, while the bed dips and creaks underneath us.

It has never felt like this with anyone.

Suddenly, I realize it will never feel like this ever again.

I can’t tell where Joseph begins and I end as he eases in and out of me. My hands fall to my sides, and I clutch the sheets. Once my pulse begins to quicken, I buck against him.

I am lost, and Joseph is the only one who can find me.

He places his hands on either side of the headboard and thrusts in and out at a steady rhythm. It isn't long before my pulse quickens, and I am spasming and writhing against him. The force of my orgasm rips through me, leaving me panting and gasping for breath. Sweat breaks out across my forehead and down my back.

Once my vision clears, I realize Joseph is looking at me intently.

He lifts my hands up over my head, looks directly into my eyes, and slams into me. Joseph doesn't break our gaze as he eases in and out, pushing us both closer and closer to the edge. He laces his fingers through mine, and I buck and writhe against him.

Eager for more.

Desperate for more.

I don't know how I've lived my whole life without him, but now that I have a taste of what it's like to be with him, I don't want to go back.

I can't.

Another orgasm rips through me, and my hips rise up off the mattress. I ride out my high, chanting Joseph's name as I do. Before long, his own release comes, and he is jerking and writhing against me. Once he's done, he releases my hands and holds me to him. I press my head against his chest, over the hammering of his heart, allowing everything to wash over me.

Why couldn't I see it before?

“That was...fuck.” Joseph rolls off of me and collapses onto the mattress. “You are a lot better than I thought you would be.”

“You’re not so bad yourself.”

Joseph chuckles and twists to face me. “I aim to please.”

I cover the distance between us and kiss him. “Oh, you’ve definitely pleased me. A few times, in fact.”

Joseph cups the back of my neck and presses his forehead to mine. “I think I can do better next time.”

I released a deep, shaky breath. “Is that a promise?”

Joseph kisses me again, pouring every ounce of emotion he has into the kiss. “Count on it.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” I warn, in between giggles. “Don’t want to go raising my expectations or anything.”

Joseph leans back to look at me. “I can’t believe you’re here. You have no idea how many times I’ve imagined you here and imagined us together. I...”

I held my breath. “What?”

Joseph shakes his head. “Nothing, never mind.”

I lace my fingers through his and frown. “Tell me.”

“What were you going to say to me earlier?” He asks. “On the couch. When I stopped you.”

“I just wanted to let you know that I’ve made a decision,” I say.

“A little too soon isn’t it,” he asks before scooting to the end of the bed.

I sit next to him as he puts his head in his hands, rubbing his temples. I can't tell if he's upset or tired.

"What's wrong Joe?" I ask, rubbing his back.

"Candice," he says. "I don't want to be a factor in your decision. You are a talented musician, and I don't want to be the reason that changes."

"Why don't you just listen to me before you go worrying your handsome head over me making a decision based on you," I blurt out more forcefully than I intended. "For your information, my decision is based on me, not you."

"Really?" he asks, looking into my eyes.

"Yes. Joseph Lyons, you can't be so stuck up to think that I can't make my choices and still consider how I feel about you at the same time," I say as I nudge him in the ribs with my elbow.

"No, in all honesty..." I decide to be brutally vulnerable with him. "Listen, while you are a factor in my decision, you are only a little part of it. I love singing and I love my music, but I can do that from here."

I continue before he cuts in, "I can start recording from home if I want, or I can play at venues around here. I want to settle down. I'm not a world-tour kind of person. I want normal and stable, and I want you. I want Wildvale and the bar. I want this for the rest of my life."

"I love that," he confesses. "But I don't want you to resent me for being the reason that you gave it all up."

"That's why I'm not giving it up for you," I smile at him. "I'm giving it up for me."

EPILOGUE

JOSEPH

Two Years Later

W

e're sitting in the small restaurant of the Wildvale Inn. The owner David Roe is walking around making sure that everyone has enough to eat. He has quickly become one of my best friends, besides Candice that is.

We're there to celebrate our son, Brawley's first birthday.

His name means "meadow on the hill" in honour of the place where his mother and I were engaged and the place we now call home. The cabin in the mountains has become our favourite place to live, though we still stay in town during the week.

We both work so much during the week now, so the cabin was a much-needed break. Last year, the owners of the bar offered it to Candice and me for a low price. We thought it was a steal, and today, The Lyons's Den is thriving.

Though it's been a challenge to run one of the most popular places in Wildvale while raising a baby, it was a challenge that we accepted and excelled in.

"Happy birthday little man," David says as he brings out the cake that matched the bear-themed party.

"Yes, happy birthday," Candice's friend Lana O'Mark said as she walks in. "Sorry I'm late, it's snowing a lot out there."

"Yep, our little man had to be born in the middle of December," Candice says, kissing Brawley on the top of the head. "And well, Wildvale is known for its snowstorms."

I watch Candice steps back. The fact that she's expecting our second child is already showing on her, even though she's only three months along.

"Thanks for coming." Candice kisses Lana on the cheek and then takes her coat.

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world," Lana smiles. "Though I can't say I missed the cold."

Candice and I wink at each other as we notice a long glance between David and Lana.

“I wonder if they know each other,” I whisper to Candice as she came to my side.

“It is a small town. But Lana moved back permanently after six years, and David has only been here for five, so I doubt it,” Candice points out.

“True,” I say as I put my hand on my wife’s back.

Lana has only been back in town once in the six years since she left, and it just so happened to be the summer Candice came back to Wildvale.

We’re excited to see what would happen. But most of all, we’re happy for all the amazing and loving friends and family that we have.

As we sing happy birthday to Brawley, I look over the room. The people in our lives are few but worth more than anything., and something I wouldn’t change for the world.

The best is yet to come

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