

ALL
FOR
YOU

DUET

KELLY FINLEY

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AFTER HIM

BOOK ONE

PREFACE



Content warning: Please be aware this story deals with characters with a traumatic past of possible sexual violence. There are no on-the-page graphic descriptions of said violence, abuse or harm to minors.

This is a story about surviving and a love that wins above all.



AFTER HIM PLAYLIST

Running Up That Hill by Meg Myers

Chasing Cars by Snow Patrol

Looking Too Closely by Fink

Fire For You by Cannons

deja vu by Costanza

Make Me Feel by Olivia Rodrigo

17 by MK

Keep Running by Geographer

MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT by Elly Duhé

Her Touch by SÏDE

Bad Together by Dua Lipa

Hot Blooded by New Constellations

Savages by Kerli

Sink In by Amy Shark

Bad Love by RY X

Wild Horses by The Sundays

Gravedigger by MXMS

LOVE ME HARD by Elly Duhé

Fine Line by Harry Styles

Available on SPOTIFY

A black and white photograph of a couple kissing in profile. The woman is on the left, and the man is on the right. They are silhouetted against a bright, hazy background, possibly a sunset or sunrise over water. The text is overlaid on the image.

AFTER HIM

BY KELLY FINLEY

CHAPTER ONE



Running Up That Hill by Meg Myers

TONIGHT I'LL MAKE A DEAL WITH YOU, GOD.

I'm watching three men in this ballroom.

If I promise to kill one and ruin the other, can I finally be free of the third one? The beautiful man I hate so much that I'll love him forever?

After all... you know it too.

They deserve it after what they did.

That deal tastes sweet. Sweet like the candied almond sliding over my glossed lips. The crunch—the sugary shards pulverized by my hard bite—I love it. Candy calms me.

Sitting at this table while a magnolia centerpiece blocks the view of one of my targets across the room; *that annoys me.*

My other target stands at nine o'clock, slamming SoCo and lime shots down his throat. I can feel his glower sliding

down my body. He deserves the heel of my stiletto stabbed in his neck. But that'd be bad manners.

I won't make the hard-working staff at this golf resort scrub blood from the cream carpet.

The third man?

Redix Dean, Hollywood's Romeo.

Of course, he fucking smolders over my right shoulder, sitting beside his sexy date.

My hand shakes to the syrup of his voice. Fighting back every emotion, every pain and memory, I don't think I can do this.

Ten years is a long time to go without seeing the love of your life.

The stunning sight of him walking into the ballroom an hour ago slammed my heart into a brick wall when I didn't think it could break any more. I was wrong.

Redix makes calm breath and logic impossible. He destroys me all over again.

But it doesn't hurt me anymore.

That's what I tell myself so I can breathe.

"Don't you dare let him get to you." A silky hand grabs mine trembling under the table. "You hear me, Cade Bryant? Keep your chin up and your cheeks dry. You can cry about him later."

My mama can see past my stone facade. Her command fills my heart, steeling my spine.

"I know, Mama." I force a smile her way. "I won't give him the satisfaction. None of them."

"That's my girl. You can live with a broken heart. But like hell if you won't die with your pride too."

She lifts a crystal glass of sweet tea to her lips. It rattles against her teeth. Mama hides it well, what the second round

of chemo's doing to her. But I see it, hiding my concern. Mama refuses pity.

"You should be drinking water," I warn, "not sugar and caffeine."

"Take my sweet tea from my grasp"—she winks—"and I'll give you a fight you won't win."

Damn, I love her.

If people think *I'm* headstrong, Mama wears hard-headed like a well-coifed hairdo hiding hairpins that can take your eyes out. No one fucks with her. Sheriff Gloria Bryant is a force.

And as her daughter, Sergeant Cade Bryant, I'd be wiser stealing a steak from a starving Rottweiler before fighting with Mama.

"I'm fine." She takes another ornery sip. "Quit fussin' over me and focus on this shindig."

"This shindig is bullshit."

No, it's hell.

A hell I won't back down from. No way I'd miss this confrontation with Redix, no matter how he left me in pieces.

"No, it's part of this island's game, and you know how to win it." Mama raises her chin, considering the swanky ballroom full of Hilton Head Island's biggest players. "Smile pretty for these bow tie-wearing, golf-club swinging, rich men in God-awful madras pants, and you can get away with murder... like *they* try to do."

Redix didn't wear madras tonight.

No, he's proudly freeballing in tuxedo pants, making my mouth water. I mutter, "Madras pants shrivel my dick."

Mama cackles, patting my hand again. "Not as much as bow ties shrivel mine."

Our inside jokes. Our crass mouths. I can't live without her.

Please, God, give me more time with her.

Okay, fine, I've been making lots of deals with heaven and hell, so why break a bad habit?

But after six years on the police force, I know Mama's right. Madras pants or khakis—not all these men are as innocent as their attire.

I resisted it at first. Fighting like mad, I went in the opposite direction of my mama. All the boys who bullied me, calling me “giraffe.” All the adults who cooed, “You're so pretty you should be a model.” Well, far be it from me to ever listen, but I did.

I spent a decade in that hellacious industry. What else can you do when you're thirteen and soaring to five feet ten? Because like hell if I was playing basketball.

But after what happened. To me? To Redix? I became just like my mama—the law because I want justice.

And apparently, I still want Redix Dean.

Because my pulse is racing, my cheeks are flushed. My thighs are weak. My pussy wants to put on these Christian Louboutin heels herself and walk the runway to him and jump his dumbass, sexy bones.

But my heart won't budge. It's barely holding back the tears stinging to fall. What's even worse? I can feel Redix feet away, laughing.

Is it at me?

“Are you gonna work the room?” Mama tries scratching, unseen, at the brunette wig itching her scalp. “You got seven pairs of eyes on you; three sets I know you're watching too.”

“No.” Facing straight ahead, I raise an eyebrow. “I'll make them come to me.”

Finally, my target steps into view from behind that damn centerpiece. That smirk on his face? It's for me. His grasp controls his wife's body, but his eyes are fucking mine.

That evil man deserves to choke blood on a magnolia flower.

That stain? I'd scrub it myself with my toothbrush from this carpet.

Uncrossing my long legs, I pour one back over the other. The attention it draws. The heat of his stare sliding up my bare calves. It's been a long time since I wore this dress with these heels.

So fuck Redix Dean.

If he thinks he can come back after ten years, strolling barefoot in his tux across this ballroom, smiling while every asshole on Hilton Head Island toasts his charitable contributions... he can *suck it*.

Laugh all he wants; he's watching me.

This outfit is driving him wild with tender memories. The Hervé Léger vintage purple bandage dress wraps my curves so tight; men can vacation in my cleavage. And these black heels let me tower over most in the room.

Not Redix.

His beauty reigns supreme—I grin—but he dropped to one knee for me in this dress.

We were eighteen then, officially adults, hating the glamorous job but loving each other always. We were supposed to get married that summer. No one could stop us— young love on a rampage. With the money from our modeling exploits, Redix wanted to buy a house for us somewhere high over an ocean cliff, together as we were destined to be.

It turns out—destiny is a motherfucker.

It ruins everything, including us.

Now marriage isn't on my mind; murder is. It's either that or release this sob choking my throat. Pain swirling with passion and revenge, I can't stop the memory of that soul-destroying night.

The one when Redix left ten years ago and never spoke to me again.

Why's he back?

Is it to make me pay for the fault that's mine?

That pain threatens to fall over my lashes... but I won't do it. I'll take this damn salad fork on the table and stab my smoky-lined eyes out before I let him see a tear fall for his celebrity ass.

“Well, I'll be,”—Mama elbows me—“here comes one now.”

I didn't need the alert. The approach of his body tingles my flesh. His aroma—vanilla and leather—arrives next.

Goddamnit. I'm still attracted to him. And it's on a he-better-fuck-me-now-before-I-kill-him level making a black widow blush. But the shell of my skin hides it.

“Mama G,”—Redix purrs the childhood name he gave my mama—“I just had to come over and sit down next to the prettiest lady in the room.”

“I'm no lady.” Mama's not amused. “I'm the law.”

That bad-boy grin on his face? Curling his lush lips back to his square jaw? That's the look that drops panties and shatters hearts, including mine.

His big hand turns a small gold chair around. His strapping thighs straddle it like he's riding a horse across the ballroom, lassoing every pussy in sight. He takes the empty spot on the other side of my mama while my teeth clench, fighting it all back.

“You're looking beautiful as always, Mama G.” His sky-blue eyes won't meet mine. “I've missed you.” The genuine concern in his voice? Fuck him. He has no right after all this time. “How you been feelin'?”

“I feel right as rain anytime a handsome man sits beside me.”

Typical. Mama's playing back. No man gets the upper hand on her, not even one she's known since he was nine. Redix was a beautiful boy back then. By his teens, he left beauty behind for hot-as-fucking-hell.

Secretly, I've watched him on the flatscreen since. Sometimes it hurts too much. Remembering the kiss of his lips, his tongue teasing my mouth, how he used to dance with my heart.

But sitting this close now in the flesh at twenty-eight?

Redix Dean's allure travels across a room like a sexy slug leaving a trail of slick lust behind. A trail that everyone wants to slip in and break their necks because his sex is worth the fall.

"My mama told me about this last diagnosis." Redix props his chin on his forearms folded in front of him; obvious he actually cares. "But if anyone can kick cancer's ass, it's you."

"I feel like kicking more than cancer's ass," Mama answers. "I feel like kickin' yours. You just up and left. You got a lot of nerve coming back now."

God, if I could reach out and hug Mama. Every furious thought I have... it's firing from her mouth.

"Ah, come on *now*. You can't stay mad at me." No matter how many years Redix spent in Hollywood, he still deploys his Southern drawl with a sly grin. It disarms nukes. "I'm too cute. Besides, I'm a good boy now, here for a good cause and all."

"You can sponsor all the Teen Crisis centers you want across this state; that don't excuse it." Nope, Mama's locked and loaded. "It's pretty damn rude coming home without a peep prior. Who do you think you are? A boy raised with manners, that's who. But it seems you've sold 'em and your soul to Hollywood."

"No, ma'am." Redix doesn't flinch. He's smiling at her smackdown. "I could never forget you, my manners... or my home."

That butter knife on the table? It just stabbed my heart.

Redix didn't forget Mama. Or his home. But he forgot me and the manners it takes to even look at me.

It's willful. Past ignoring me—it kills me. He's blaming me for what destroyed us.

In perfect, bullshit timing, his date approaches our table. Resting her hand on his shoulder, offering a smile to the table, "Are you going to introduce me?" *she* has the manners he forgot.

He cups his hand gently over hers. Their intimate touch backslaps my jaw. "Angie Conrad, meet Sheriff Gloria Bryant. 'Mama G' as I called her because she kicked my ass to Sunday and back with all my trouble."

"Ms. Conrad"—Mama's smile is sincere—"it's a pleasure."

My ribs heave two inches higher. Redix didn't even introduce me.

"Ms. Conrad, this is my daughter, Sergeant Cade Bryant." Mama flicks her eyes at me with a don't-lose-your-shit look. "She and Redix were quite close growing up. 'Friends' doesn't even describe it."

"Oh?" Angie barely grins my way. "Redix has never mentioned you." Was that innocent or bitchy? "Still, nice to meet you."

"Likewise." I smile, emptying the gun of my glare, firing back at her, and then aiming five shots into Redix, who refuses to turn his face my way.

It's embarrassing me, hurting me... and he knows it. My God, he really hates me.

Fine. The feeling *is* mutual.

And *I'm* full of shit.

Tension takes a seat at our table. The urge to run hits me, but *hell no*, I won't move.

"I'm off to the Ladies Room." Angie can't handle it. "And then"—she's cooing into Redix's ear—"I want that sexy dance

you promised.”

Redix smiles, shamelessly eyeing her ass while she sashays away.

Is it possible to want to cry, kill, and fuck someone all at the same time? Yes, right here on this table. I want to rip Redix Dean into sex-stained shreds.

“To what do we owe the honor then?” Mama’s raising questions and her iced tea. “What finally brought the King of Coligny Beach home?”

That beach? That night? That pain? It surges through me, remembering Redix there, along with the other man stalking me on my left and the third one looming across the ballroom.

These three men haven’t stopped haunting my world like a nightmare that won’t end until God makes good on her deal.

I see it; how the same memory washes over Redix, too, making his asshole act waver. He rakes his left hand through his long strands before tucking one side behind his ear. That gesture? It’s the last one Redix made before he turned his back on me and walked away.

And I never stopped loving him since.

“I came home for amends.” He answers Mama... before slowly... and finally... aiming his penetrating eyes into my soul. “Ain’t that right, Candy Cade?”

Murder or mad sex?

I’m gonna commit both.

CHAPTER TWO



Chasing Cars by Snow Patrol

“ISN’T THE MAN OF THE HOUR YOUR EX-BOYFRIEND?”

Jameson, my colleague, is never subtle. Neither is his hard body pressed against mine on the dance floor and...

This night is torture.

I glance up, and he grins, squeezing my waist even tighter like I’m his.

But I’m not annoyed. Jameson saved me. I didn’t answer Redix’s ominous question. Right after it, Jameson came over and asked me for a dance. Hell, I’d do one buck-naked on a pole to piss off Redix and ignore him back.

“He’s not my ex-boyfriend.” Damn, Jameson’s shoulders are broad. “He’s my ex-fiancé.”

“When?”

“Ten years and a lifetime ago.”

“Well, he’s staring now like he wants to beat the shit out of me.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll beat the shit out of him first.”

Really, Jameson can defend himself. So can I.

In the three years since Jameson joined the Sheriff’s office, we’ve had a love-hate-respect-annoy the fuck out of each other relationship. But I’ve got his back. Even though he wants to bend me over and take me hard that way too. That’s not a guess. He told me one night over too many beers.

Jameson keeps my back to Redix and his date, and I can feel it; Redix’s glare searing into Jameson’s hands pressed above my swaying ass.

I don’t like teasing Jameson. But I do like the jealousy he stirs in Redix. Because he can...

Jameson is one of the few men as tall as Redix. His frat-boy face has aged into handsome—making him so fuckable as long as he shuts up. And I’ve seen him on the beach with his girlfriend of the season. His body won’t stop with a brunette happy trail that travels over shredded abs... to a place I’ve wondered about.

But I’d become a nun before I fuck on the job.

As one of the few women in the office and the retired Sheriff’s daughter to boot? No sex is worth losing the respect I had to earn, even though I can feel Jameson’s dick against my hip.

It’s a giant distraction.

“I’m touched, Bryant.” He sways into me. “You’ll get my back, but you’ll be a bitch, busting into my crime scenes whenever the hell you want.”

“Those victims deserve me being a bitch for them.”

“Do you even have a life? Or do you sleep with your radio, waiting for a call?”

“What I sleep with is none of your business.” My eye catches Redix. He’s glaring at us. Good. “Besides, they’re not *your* investigations. They’re mine too.”

“Why can’t you be like most detectives?” Jameson’s question lifts my eyes to his green ones. Fuck, they sparkle. “Why can’t you just wait for the case to land on your desk a day later?”

I smile. God, Jameson *is* hot. “Because I have no patience.”

“It’s a virtue, you know.”

“I’m not a virtuous woman.”

His erection firms, and when it comes to sex, I have no shame. I’m an angel in many ways, but not when I need a fuck. But at work, I’m going for sainthood, the patron saint of *Revenge Against Evil Men*.

Does this saint exist?

Yep. I made her up. I burn candles for her every night. Penis candles.

But my body reacts. Redix’s body feet away, awakens it. It makes me brush against Jameson’s hard dick, wishing for what I really miss.

“Damn, Bryant,” Jameson sighs, his hands teasing the crest of my ass cheek, responding to my slight tease. “You and your banging body are gonna get me in trouble with HR.”

Usually, I’d knee a handsy guy. But this is my fault. On paper, Jameson and I are a perfect match. But he’s not *him*—the man whose soul is intertwined with mine.

No man can replace Redix Dean, though I wish one could.

I’ve built a life for myself in his void. It’s full of hard work, grueling training, and a lethal deal, and that deal doesn’t involve me using Jameson. I can’t hurt him like that.

I pull back, letting his hands remain on my body because I feel our audience—the man doing the same to his date.

Redix is practically fucking Angie on the dance floor. Everyone in the ballroom knows he has the moves to do it. Those blockbuster male stripper movies he made tortured me

for five years. The billboards and ads with Redix's shredded torso all oiled up? They stuck pins in my aching eyes.

"You're a big boy." Jameson rubs against me. "Control yourself, or I will."

"We're just dancing, Bryant." Jameson smiles at my subtle rebuke. "Every man and a few women in the office want you, but we all know... you're off limits."

"Like your investigations?"

He chuckles, turning us more. Redix and Angie are right there. My heart tightens. My ankles wobble. The sight silences me, but I can't look away. Redix is caressing Angie with his nose buried in her long brown hair, and it's wrong. My body's in Jameson's arms, knowing where it truly belongs. It's not right.

Redix and I belong together.

We always have.

All whip-smart comebacks leave me. Only the pain of missing him for so many years remains. It's left me not knowing what love is anymore. I haven't felt it since him. I can't. Redix left and took my soul with him.

"It's been a while, you know?" Jameson's tone is grave. Oblivious to my pain, he's talking shop instead. "It's been six months since the last case. Another one's coming along with the spring break tourists."

That snaps me into focus; the job. The one I give everything to. The twists of bitter fate that find me here—I was called to do it. "I know." The certainty unnerves me too.

The string of sexual assault victims who remember nothing about their attack has plagued this island and me for years. Someone's targeting the tourists—a fact that the powers that be on this island move heaven and earth to hide.

"That's why I sleep with my radio by my bed."

"Yeah,"—Jameson's shoulders tense under my touch—"me too."

See, that's why I like Jameson. He can whine all he wants; we're a good team.

But the unsolved cases are piling up. Five last year. Two the year before. One the year before that. They're escalating.

Jameson is chasing the forensic evidence or lack thereof. I focus on the human side—the survivors who remember nothing but going out, hitting a string of bars, and then waking up in a parking lot or on a park bench. It makes me clutch Jameson. I'm desperate. I need to stop the person targeting young women.

The young women who look like me when I was eighteen.

The song changes.

I need to check on Mama to make sure she's not ready to leave. But the notes of the next tune drop along with my heart to the floor. My eyes flick up, catching Redix's. They're glued to mine while his hands hold another woman—no way the DJ randomly picked this song.

Redix did. He's looking right at me.

No...

His look is plunging straight into my heart, plowing through every memory we made to this song, leaving behind broken pieces of me, the debris of my life.

A sob constricts my throat, burning like hot ash through what we shared to the intensity of these lyrics.

“Chasing Cars” by Snow Patrol.

Why is he killing me? Didn't we suffer enough? Didn't we share every first to this song, only to have it all stolen, leaving us smashed like shells on the beach? That beach? Where we were both left in pieces that no one can glue back together.

The lyrics sing across the dance floor, across a decade. There's no space between the look in Redix's eyes and my soul, knowing exactly what he's thinking, despite who he's touching. It doesn't matter. I have his heart. And he has mine. It's a curse killing us both.

So many secrets we created together to this song, sharing a depth of love we couldn't explain. And I can't explain now, why it's wrecking me again.

"I gotta go."

I pull away from Jameson. Away from any man who's not Redix. Since I can't have him, at least I'll have this...

The tears that are coming, no matter how hard I fight them back. My steps take me fast, kissing Mama's cheek goodbye. She whispers she'll be fine. There's a room full of her friends who'll dote on her. And if anyone understands, it's my mama, witnessing my pain and raising me to leave with my dignity.

Running, my heels click fast across the parquet floors, my grip searching desperately for my keys at the bottom of my clutch. But the song chases me; the driving beat and heart-breaking lyrics follow as the sweetest memories slam the heavy front door open.

Tears blur my vision. *I need to get out of here.* My red Cruiser beckons me from the shadows under the Spanish moss dripping from the trees above. My car? Redix was there when I bought it.

Fuck, I can't escape him.

I'm in my front seat in a blur, hands trembling, fumbling to start the engine.

A bang hits my window. "Open the fucking door, Cade!"

The shout startles my frayed nerves, dropping my keys on the floorboard. I turn and look up at the last person I want to see through crying eyes.

CHAPTER THREE



REDIX LOOMS LIKE AN ALLURING NIGHTMARE.

“Fuck you!” I shout.

“You already have. Many times. Now open the fucking door!”

Goddamnit, where are my keys?

My shaking hand searches, trying to pick them, and my heart up from the floorboard.

“You’re many things but not a coward, Cade. Get out here and talk to me now.” The thunder of my pulse, it only pisses me off more. “Talk to me before I break this fucking window.”

“Break my fucking window, and I’ll break your fucking face.”

“I wish you would.” He’s laughing. “That would save me a lotta trouble.” That grin? I want to punch it off his sexy lips. “Are you afraid of me, Candy Cade, after all this time?”

The taunt works. I’m a sucker for it.

Dare me not to die, and I will just out of spite.

This asshole knows me too well.

I yank the door handle, kicking the door open to make him jump back from its swinging punch.

“Call me ‘Candy Cade’ again, and I’ll choke you on a piece of it.”

Amusement smears across his face as he mocks, “*Welllll helloooo, darlinn’.*”

“Fuck you and the horse you rode in on.”

“Didn’t know you were into threesomes.” I want to kill him. “But okay.” But that hair? I want to fuck him first. “Ride me and my big horse, Candy Cade, just like our first time.”

“Whip it out, and *I’ll rein it in.*” I sneer. “I dare you.”

“Damn, woman.” His grin cocks up so high; even I can’t smack it away. “How’s it possible you’re even finer after ten years? You’re givin’ me a boner just watchin’ you fuss n’ fight.”

“Is that what you want to talk about, Redix? You wanna talk about hard dicks after ten years?” I stand as tall as I can, my lips still inches below his but close enough to fight back. “You’re such a coward. Jerk your dick around, but not me. I’m not playing your fucking game.”

“Oh, Candy Cade...”

He leans closer, his heat steaming inches from my flesh.

“I do jerk around every morning, remembering you and every fucking game we played.”

He isn’t lying. I see it in his eyes.

The vision of him stroking his gorgeous cock rushes my body so damn fast, imagining his hips jerking, coming with my name on his moaning lips.

Shit, I’m in trouble.

“What’s your motive, Redix? This is the first time you’ve dared to speak to me after what happened. Even you aren’t pathetic enough to only talk about your dick.”

He licks his lips. “My, my, Detective. You’d be surprised.” He braces his arm against the car, leaning into me. “With you in front of me, my dick demands *all* my focus.”

I glance around. We’re alone in a parking lot, and Redix towers over me like he wants to lift his favorite dress and fuck me til I’m sore for days.

And I’m terrified...

Because I want it too.

“You’re such an asshole.”

Nope, not happening, no matter how my pussy screams for him. My heart refuses. My mind rebels. No way in hell, even if he is the most beautiful devil.

“You followed me out here to flirt about fucking while you left your date in the ballroom.”

“I don’t date.” His breath tickles my ear. “I dabble.”

If my eyes could roll any farther, they’d see the back of my skull.

“Drop your Romeo bullshit. I knew you before you had pubes. What are you after, Redix? They’ve named three of these teen centers after you using your money without you coming home.

“But tonight, you waltz back in, hosting a party for *this* one, the one down the street from my house? Then you send me an embossed invitation like you have no memory, no heart. And now you’re holding court with those men? They’re here too? Fuck, you’ve changed. You’re pure evil now.”

How much can a night of hell and a decade of depravity alter someone into a soul you don’t recognize? Because that’s all I see. A man who left me in hell while he spent years earning millions and cashing in on California sin.

“You’ve changed too, Candy Cade.”

Redix Dean is the one asshole I can’t intimidate. His arrogance fires back.

“You went from walking runways to running line-ups. You’ve got small guns for arms now, and you cut all your long brown hair off. I used to love wrapping it around my fist while I fucked you so hard. Did you do it to spite me?”

Yes, I did.

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

“It only backfired.” He unbuttons his shirt twice, revealing his weapon, his body underneath. No one can resist it. Not even me. “Bless my wicked soul; I walked into that ballroom and saw you with that short hair. *Fuck me*; you’re even hotter now. Only you, a model woman with a cock-teasing body and a heart-stopping face, can make that look drop-dead sexy.”

The long bangs I kept cloak my left eye. Strands tickle my lips while the spring air brushes the nape of my neck. My one-eyed glare refuses his admiration.

Fuck his flirt; I fire the big guns.

“I cut my hair off after that night. You man enough to talk about *that*?”

The flirt disappears from his face. “Stop it, Cade.” His body moves, pushing mine against the car. “We’re never talking about that night again.”

“Again? You left, but I never did. I’m still here and planning to do something about it. But what did you do? Get famous and fucked for the past ten years.”

“No, I became a drunk, an addict for nine years, so *fuck you*.” His vulnerable reveal grabs my heart. I didn’t know that. “This is my first sober year since. *That’s* why I’m back. I’m not here for you. I’m here to make amends. To move the hell on. Maybe you should too.”

If anyone knows why I can’t move on, why I’ll get revenge, no matter what it costs me... it’s Redix. He’s my reason why.

Years can pass, but this fact remains—I have a deal to keep.

“But when I saw you tonight, Cade.” Truth and seduction drip from his lips nearing mine. “Fuck, I may be sober, but I gotta taste you again; my first drug. We could play games for old times’ sake.”

“You’ve got a date, and I’ve got pride.”

I try moving but find no space with his body pressing mine against the car. A white-hot grin takes his face. “Damn, darlin’, I forgot how hot you are when your panties are all up in a twist.” He braces both arms beside me, trapping me with a grind into my core. “I bet they’re wet for me too.” Yes, they are. “Face it, Candy Cade. We do this to each other, don’t we?”

Oh God, I can feel him again.

His hard cock hits my body at the exact aching spot. The alignment of our lust is perfect alchemy. Ten years of abandon, it washes away in the hurricane that is Redix Dean surging over my shore. He floods me. Memories of him, of how he took me from a shy virgin to a shameless vixen, only for him.

How I did the same to him, from shaking and nervous to confident and commanding, able to make me come with his fingers, his tongue, his cock.

Even the mere sight of him pulls my body taut to snap with an urge for his sex.

But I *have* changed. Three things dominate more than his allure: my pride, my pain, and my plan.

“This is my motive, Cade.” His hips roll into mine. Breath leaves my lungs while heat storms in, dizzying my brain. “Give me a taste of your sweet candy, just a few good licks.”

Did he just say that?

“Like those three women who gave you head while you sucked a watermelon Blow Pop, asking if they wanted to lick that too?”

His eyes shock back.

“Yeah, I saw the video, Redix—me and millions. The only thing that shocked me was that it was watermelon. You used to

be a cherry guy.”

He sneers. “You don’t know the whole story.”

“There’s a lot I don’t know, and I begged you to tell me, but you walked away and left me ruined.”

“Make peace with it, Cade. Ten years is plenty of time.”

My God, what’s wrong with him?

This isn’t the boy who was my best friend riding bikes. This isn’t the sweet teen who’d be a clown to make me smile. Who always held my hand and gave me the last piece of his candy.

Where is the man who tried protecting me and swore he’d never leave?

Until he did. For ten years.

“Okay then.” I grab his tuxedo lapels, pulling his lips close to mine. The surge is sudden. It’s so fast through me with his cock pressing between my thighs, gasps escape our mouths at the reunion, at the power of it. We’re underestimating this; every part of us wails for the other. “You wanna taste me again? You wanna play games, Redix?” Something’s different in his eyes, glimpses I don’t recognize. Touching his lips to mine, a tide of memories washes in.

No.

This tender dance; he used to be so sweet, I used to be so soft, we used to be in love.

For years I’ve waited for him to come back and swear it, saying he was sorry, making my pain disappear. He was my best friend. My first and only love, and that hope washes away while the horror rushes in...

He only wants to fuck me again—that’s it—just like everyone else.

I shove him away.

“Go to hell, Redix Dean”—my force stumbles his steps back—“and taste the Devil’s sweet pussy instead.”

I escape, jumping into my car, slamming the door, and finding my keys with a quick swipe.

Yes, you can have the love of your life, the one who will hold your heart forever. And he can smash it in his grasp before you leave him standing in a parking lot alone.

And don't you dare look back, no matter how hard you're crying about it.

CHAPTER FOUR



REDIX

Looking Too Closely by Fink

DEAR CANDY CADE,

A year ago, my sponsor told me a year ago to keep a journal, but I never listen.

I mean, I don't even write fucking grocery lists.

The only things I write are notes on my pages that help my buzzing brain remember my lines.

But when I saw you tonight dancing with another man tonight... either I start writing, or I start drinking.

And I'm not drinking again.

I don't know what to do around you now, so I'm an asshole—I know how to do that.

And YOU know how to leave me standing in a parking lot like the asshole I am.

So here I sit, like an idiot, on my childhood bed in my mama's old house, and this pen in my hand feels weird.

I'd rather it be a bottle. Or a glass. Or a shot.

That I know too.

I don't know where to start, but my sponsor said to start at the beginning.

Okay.

Here I go...



YOU ARE MY BEGINNING, Cade.

I'm writing this to you because my life started with you.

And trust me, I almost died trying to change that. I couldn't empty enough bottles to free my heart of you.

A boy doesn't remember when he started loving his mom or sister. You're just born with that love in your heart, I guess.

But I remember the moment I first felt love.

It was with you. It was the day we met.

Do you remember it?

I do. I think about it all the time.

It was August at a shoot for a Christmas ad. Jesus, remember the outfits they made us wear? Santa's little elves?

But it paid the bills for my mom. I was only nine years old but the man of the house. I had to take care of her and my baby sister. So I smiled for every camera she sat me in front of.

It was so hot that day, I hated life. No kid should wear red velvet in August in South Carolina.

Then you plopped beside me on the park bench with bouncy curls in your long, brown hair, swinging your legs and handing me a candy cane.

I took one look at you, at your dollface and those lips I'll die for, and my insides were a marshmallow. I went all squishy inside for you.

Suddenly, I didn't feel hot. You made me feel warm.

“What's your name?”

“Cade.”

Your voice makes me smile, even when you're pissed off. Sorry. Not sorry.

“Like ‘Candy Cade’?”

I was pretty damn clever with that joke. Back then, you liked it too.

“Yep.” You licked those red stripes, and I was fascinated by your tongue. “What's your name?”

“Redix.”

“What kind of name is that?”

“Don't know. It was my granddaddy's name.” I crunched the cane, not able to take my eyes off you. “What kind of name is Cade?”

“My first name is stupid, so I make my mama use my middle name—Cade.”

“Your name is ‘Stupid Cade’?”

“Funny.” You hit my arm. I liked it. “No, it's ‘Magnolia,’ and I hate that name.”

“I like magnolias.” I hit your arm back. You smiled. “They're fun to climb.”

We sat beside each other and didn't need to talk.

That's when you became my best friend.

“Thanks for the candy.”

“You're welcome.” That's when your smile became my sunshine. “I got plenty to share.”

You opened your Hello Kitty purse and showed me your constant stash.

I swear, Candy Cade.

How you don't have cavities and how you still have that sinful body, I don't know. I never met someone so addicted to candy or someone who tasted as sweet as it, either.

But I get it.

Because you became my addiction that day, and I tried replacing you with everything else.

That failed.

And now I'm back.

I'm trying to fight that demon that makes me find a bottle in my hand or a pill in my mouth without even thinking about it.

I'm doing my steps. Every damn day, sometimes hour by hour, I fight to stay sober. And I can do it.

But I lied to you tonight.

I do have a motive.

It's you.

I came home to find us again.

The first thing I did when I got out of rehab was get an ice cream cone.

I sat by myself on the patio outside the shop, licking lemon sherbet and watching an old couple. They were married, I assumed, but I could tell they were best friends too, like we were. They were sharing a spoon over a cup of chocolate ice cream.

Then, the sweet old woman got a drop on her chin. The man smiled and wiped it off with a napkin before pecking her cheek.

And all I could think at that moment was...

I want that life. That love.

And I knew with who.

You're the only woman I'll carry a napkin for.

The only one who can share my spoon.

The only one who I share my heart with.

So I made myself wait a year. To get stronger. To stay sober. To come back for you.

But then those guys were there tonight.

I didn't know they'd be, I swear. I'd never do that to you. But there you were too, and I thought I'd be strong enough to take it.

I'm not.

We were all in that room, and I did the one thing I've perfected. I acted like I was the cock of the walk.

That's the only way I can see them, and see your face, and not want to kill them or a bottle of Absolut.

I'm a fucking shitstorm. I know.

Angie being there didn't help. She's been warm enough to remind me that I'm human but cold enough not to see I'm in pain.

So I came over to talk to Mama G.

You know I love her like my own. I'm scared that she has cancer. I know it's scaring you too. And I thought she'd help me talk to you.

(Ha! She's pissed at me too. I love her.)

I need people to give me the lines, Cade. To tell me what to say to you because I can't find my own.

I just feel so much now that I can't handle it.

It makes me want to drink. I fucking love it. Drinking numbs those feelings while the pills take away my memories, and I'm free.

Without them?

I'm sitting here wanting to rip my hair out, make love to you, or kill those assholes.

What the fuck do I do, Cade?

So I had the DJ play our song.

I thought you'd hear my heart.

The one I've been hiding for ten years.

Do you know how many times I've played that song?

Every time I do, I see you on top of me, with me inside you. God, your tits are my undoing.

Sorry, but I could fill this journal with every raunchy thought I have of you.

Shit, you'll never see this, so I'll confess right here—I've never been fucked better. And God, you have the prettiest pussy.

Even though we didn't know what we were doing, goddamn, if we didn't figure it out together until our sex became poetry.

How you would go so slow for us, making it last for as long as you could. Every time I watched you come, it made me do it so damn hard.

No one makes me feel like you do, Cade.

That's the genius of staying drunk or high.

You don't have to suffer how no one else can fill the void. How there's only one person in this world for you, but you can't have them. So if you stay fucked up, that reality won't kill you.

But even sober, I keep fucking up.

I told the DJ to play our song, which only made you cry. So I ran after you.

Then I fucked up again because I got so overwhelmed standing that close to you. I just lost it. I played the asshole and earned the Oscar.

What can I say to you after all this time?

Because I'm not talking about it.

You want answers I won't give because the truth will hurt you.

And, like always, I'll protect you. No matter what.

So I guess we're both fucked.
Because I still love you, Cade.
But love already killed us once.

CHAPTER FIVE



IT HAPPENED AGAIN.

Poor Ms. Ryan used two cups of salt, not sugar, for her lemon pound cake. While I chew a piece, smiling, my lips are sucking back into my face, never to be seen again.

Ms. Ryan pats my hand. “Want some more coffee, dear?”

Coffee? I’ll need to drink Lake Marion if I ever want to pucker up again. “Yes, please.”

Never would I offend Ms. Ryan.

“I found another loose deck board.” She gets up from the table. “Have I sweetened you up enough to help me?”

Everyone knows my addiction to anything sweet and lemon. For Ms. Ryan, that includes salty too.

“Yes, ma’am.” My tongue is two feet thick. “I’d be happy to help.”

Every weekend I stop by Ms. Ryan’s house.

For her, it gives her plans, a reason to bake for a guest.

For me, it reminds me why I sacrifice everything for this job, why I've been fixing up her old dock and doing yard maintenance too.

It never ends... and I don't want it to.

"Did I hear right?" She fills my cup. "That Redix Dean is home again? He's staying over at his mama's place?"

"I guess." Ah, Ms. Ryan's serving gossip too. Usually, I love it. Not this time. "I don't really know."

"You don't know? You and Redix Dean were thick as thieves. And your mamas are best friends. I know all my spark plugs aren't firing, but even I remember as much."

Shit, playing dumb won't work.

Funny how memory serves at the worst time.

"We haven't spoken since he left," I explain. "We had a falling out of sorts."

A falling out? No.

More like we plummeted to our deaths off the rim of the Grand Canyon of love.

"Well, you, him, and my Pamela, y'all used to tear through here on your bikes and eat me out of house and home and all the candy on this island."

That last part was me.

Pamela had loved Oreos. I remember that about her. And that her favorite color was yellow. She wore it all the time.

"Yes, ma'am, we sure did." The mention of Pamela urges me to stand. "And you were so kind to put up with us."

"You make her proud, you know." She cups my cheek. "My Pamela may be an angel now, but she's smiling down, as proud of you as I am."

The sudden lump in my throat burns; the tablespoon of salt I swallowed doesn't help.

Pamela Ryan has been missing for eight years. Presumed dead is the only peace we've found.

Pamela went to the College of Charleston while I went to Clemson University. Our sophomore year, she came home for spring break, took her roommates out on the town one night, and then disappeared.

She was last seen at a bar, and poof! She was gone.

I came home for the search parties, combing through every pond and pile of pine needles on this island.

Finding Pamela would've been easier.

Forgetting Pamela, I never could.

My friend's disappearance is the second reason why I became a cop. I can't replace Ms. Ryan's daughter, but I'll be here as much as possible, keeping Pamela's spirit alive.

And eating salted lemon pound cake with a puckered smile.

The boards on Ms. Ryan's dock are almost all new. I've been replacing them over the years.

She stays inside, avoiding the mosquitoes that never bother me. Guess my blood isn't sweet enough for their bite.

Being here brings it all back.

How I lost my best friends in two years—Redix and Pamela.

I wasn't the same after that.

But if I think my grief is bad, it's nothing compared to what Ms. Ryan has survived.

It's not that her spark plugs aren't firing, as she jokes. The woman is losing her mind to the hell of not knowing what happened to her daughter. She hasn't moved since, hoping Pamela will show up one day at her front door.

I'm guilty of the same.

And I can drill new screws into a board or whatever else she needs to give her small relief.

Setting the power drill down, I suddenly hear dispatch crack over my police radio by my backpack on the porch

steps.

The number calls out across the humid morning, shooting shivers down my spine.

“Ten-ninety-five.”

A sex crime.

My boots take off across the dock, up the backyard hearing the rest of the call.

Suddenly, a rut in the ground traps my left foot, twisting my ankle and slamming me to the ground.

The pain is instant, but I ignore it, crawling toward my radio.

Jameson’s voice cracks back, taking the call.

I hear the location—the parking lot by the vacation club hotel on the beach. Grabbing my radio, I accept as the second response vehicle.

“Oh! Bless your heart!” Ms. Ryan rushes out, shocked by my sprawl over the stairs. “What did you do?”

“Just rolled my ankle a bit. No biggie.” I hop up on my right foot, my left foot screaming “hell no!” to any weight I threaten it with.

“We need to get you to the emergency room.”

“No, ma’am. I’m fine.” I smile through the pain. “I gotta get to work.” Cringing through a hop and a shuffle, I grab my bag. “I’ll finish up later. I promise.”

Hobbling to my car, thank God I didn’t fuck up my right foot. I need it to press the gas pedal down and race across the island. Killing my blue response lights three blocks before the resort; I never draw attention to the victim.

By the time I’m on the scene, my ankle is swollen like a stuffed pork loin, and I don’t care.

Jameson has the victim in the passenger seat of his patrol car, trying to protect her from the onlookers craning their necks.

“Her name is Natalie.” He fills me in. “Twenty-one and from Ohio. Here with her family. She’s not remembering much and doesn’t want to go inside to let her parents know.” His eyebrow raises to my lop-sided stance. “Jesus, Bryant. What did you do?”

“Nothing. I just twisted my ankle.” I focus on Natalie in the car. “Lemme talk to her.”

I slide into the driver’s seat. “Hi, Natalie. I’m Sergeant Cade Bryant.” She glances at me, wary. “I’m here to help. You’re safe now. Would you like for me to take you to the hospital? I’ll stay with you. You’re in control. Just tell me what you need.”

“Can we just sit for a minute?” Natalie’s hands are shaking. “I need to think.”

There’s an empty lot down the street. The gathering crowd in this one pisses me off. Natalie deserves privacy, so I aim the car that way.

“I don’t remember anything.” She shakes her head while I drive. “I went out with my cousin. We were having drinks at The Pelican and got separated in the crowd. I tried to find her. I remember walking to the restroom, looking for her, and then... nothing. I woke up in the parking lot to some nice lady walking her dog, and she let me use her phone to call 911.”

I know that bar—The Pelican.

It’s the same as many on this island, pouring drink specials and dollar drafts with people packed to the rafters—normal vacation revelry.

But what happened to Natalie?

That’s never okay.

“I shouldn’t have been drinking like that.” She stares out the window, her face stunned. “I know better. It’s all my fault.”

I draw a deep breath, parking the car before turning to her.

“Natalie, you’re not the criminal here. You have every right to drink. You can get drunk as hell just as long as you don’t drive. It’s not your fault.”

“But look at me.” She gestures to her jean shorts and pretty, yellow peasant top.

“You look cute.”

I know where this is going.

“Dressed like this? Everyone’s going to blame me.”

“So if you called the police this morning because someone broke into your new BMW, would you feel like you were to blame because you had a nice car?”

That turns her startled eyes to mine. “No. I guess not.”

“Exactly.” Natalie looks like all the victims so far: young, brunette, pretty. “Because it’s a crime to take someone’s property.”

Natalie looks like me at eighteen.

“And above all, Natalie, your body is your property and yours alone. No one has the right to it because it’s pretty, dressed cute, or even drunk. If a businessman drinks with his colleagues, wears a nice suit, and then gets robbed, do others blame him for dressing like that? Like he has money?”

“No.”

“Damn, right. You have the right to dress however you like. That doesn’t give anyone a reason to touch or hurt you.”

My blood is boiling.

It happens every damn time I respond to one of these calls or hear people blame the victim.

Like there’s some outfit that keeps women safe.

Bullshit. If there were, we’d all be wearing it.

The tragic thing is when I take these calls and hear the victim blame themselves.

“You sound mad, Sergeant.”

I sigh. “I’m sorry. I’m not mad at *you*, Natalie.”

I inhale, taking my rage down a notch to only “I’m gonna kill *the fucker* who did this” instead of “*all fuckers*” level.

“Natalie, it’s my job to be mad *for you* until you get mad for yourself.” I barely touch her trembling hand. There may be evidence on it. “Because mad gets you justice, blame won’t.”

“I remember some guys at the bar. One was in a striped shirt, talking to my cousin. Another one had a parrot on his T-shirt. He was older...”

Now... we’re talking.

I listen while anger starts dripping through Natalie’s veins, firing up whatever memory she has.

I jot down notes on my steno pad, as many details as possible, without re-traumatizing Natalie.

When we’re done, I pull the patrol car back into the resort parking lot. Jameson is standing there with Natalie’s parents. The crowd gathered got their attention. After we park, they open the door and pull Natalie into a hug so fast it softens my angry heart.

But then I see it.

Some guy standing in the crowd has his phone aimed at Natalie.

I don’t remember getting to him so fast, but I do. Grabbing his wrist, I twist it behind his back and slam him against the trunk of a pine tree.

“Show me right now,” I snarl, “how you’re gonna delete those pictures.”

“What?” He’s stunned by my swift attack.

“It’s a federal offense taking those pictures. Deal with me now, or deal with the guys down at the jail who love preppy boys in palm tree shorts.”

I watch him thumb over his phone, deleting the photos of Natalie from the device. “*And* from the cloud,” I insist as he finishes. “Show me your ID.”

Reaching into his pocket, he hands me his wallet. I toss it to Jameson, who’s got my back. Jameson takes a photo of the voyeur’s ID before handing it over.

“Now, if I see pictures of this crime scene online.” I cram the wallet back into his pocket. “I’ll find you. Do you believe me?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I smash his lips against the bark, whispering in his ear, “And you’re gonna respect women and their privacy from now on, aren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.” His smushed mouth can barely reply.

“Because if you don’t”—I can taste the salt on his ear—“I’ll end you, and no one will ever know. It’ll be the secret highlight of my week.” I twist his wrist harder. “Am I bluffing?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Now leave.”

I shove him away.

Jameson lowers his voice. “It’s not a crime to take those pictures.”

“It’s not my fault he’s a dumbass.” I watch, making sure the guy leaves. “It’s only my job to protect the victims from him.”

“One day, Bryant,”—Jameson shakes his head—“you’re gonna snap.”

I wink at him. “Yep. I’ll save you a front-row seat for it.”

The rest of the day, I spend at the hospital with Natalie. There’s no other place I belong.

She consents to the rape kit. Tragically, there’s evidence of an assault. I grind my teeth because, yet again, there’s no evidence left of who did it.

I stay with her until she’s back safe with her family. They have to pack to leave, and after what happened to their daughter, they want off this island fast. I share my contact information and promise Natalie... I will get her justice.

That promise I’ll keep above all others.

“Wanna grab a beer?” Jameson hovers over my desk later. “You need one after today and a bag of ice on that ankle. It looks like shit.”

“You sure know how to charm a lady.” I’ve ignored the throbbing all day. Now, while staring at reports on my computer screen, I can feel the pulse in my foot.

“Did you ever notice this?” Fuck it, I’m on to something, pointing at the screen and then my notes. “Natalie was targeted the night before her family was scheduled to check out. And look,”—I point to three open files on my desk—“so were these victims. All targeted the night before they left.”

“This island is a revolving door,” Jameson replies. “That’s four out of nine victims. Not really a trend.”

“Are they combing the surveillance videos from The Pelican?”

“Yep. Standard protocol. There isn’t much.”

“That fucker.” I tap my pen. “Mr. Davis. He owns that fucking bar and won’t post cameras where we need them. He only cares about the bartenders at the registers, not the customers in the crowd. That makes two victims who last remember that bar.”

Jameson sits on the edge of my desk. “Yeah, but that place is iconic. I swear every tourist goes in. Good fucking luck finding a lead there.”

But it fries my nerves.

I know who owns a third of that bar.

My target number two. The man I’ll ruin.

“Maybe I’m wrong about that bar and these checkout patterns.” I save Natalie’s file. “And when I’m wrong... it feels so right. It makes me do crazy shit.”

“Don’t tease, Bryant.” Jameson’s grin rises. “Doing crazy shit with you is my love language.”

“Excuse me.” I reach for the phone on my desk. “Gotta call HR.”

“Have a good night.” He laughs, throwing his hands up and walking away. “Put some ice on that ankle before you return here Monday.”

By the time I drive home to my condo, the pain is so bad it sours my stomach as I take the elevator to my third-level unit.

It’s a simple one-bedroom place, but I only care about the ocean view. That’s why I used my modeling money years before to buy it and the one for my mama down the row.

I hobble there first.

“Mama!” I open the door without knocking. “Do you have a bandage? I messed up my ankle.”

The blind foyer I hop down opens into a living room with an adjoining dining area.

I look... and stifle a gasp.

Redix Dean is sitting right there at Mama’s dining table.

The grin on his face? Pure delight at my shock.

“What’s he doing here?”

CHAPTER SIX



Fire for You by Cannons

DAMMIT, IS HE GONNA RUIN MY EVERY DAY NOW?

Doesn't he have a gazillion horny fans to feed his ego instead of my ailing mama?

"They're visiting," Mama answers, sitting between Redix and his mom.

His "not a date" Angie sits across from him and won't look at me.

Mama taps Redix's arm. "Go in my bathroom and get her an ACE bandage out of my medicine cabinet."

"Yes, ma'am." He sounds way too happy.

"I'm fine." I start limping that way. I want help from Redix like I want a migraine. "I'll get it."

"Sit down, young lady." Mama's command wins. I plop down in the chair by the table.

"Hey, Elise." I greet Redix's mom, ignoring Angie like she's ignoring me. "Y'all been here long?"

Elise visiting my mama is normal.

Redix visiting is bullshit.

And his not-a-girlfriend joining him is a big pile of it with buzzing flies stinking up the room.

Elise answers with a pained smile, “We just came by to deliver some dinner and to let Redix visit a spell.”

Like the Devil, he returns to the room, scorching the temperature.

I roll my eyes.

Smoking hot in jeans and a thin white T-shirt, his steps bring him inches from me. Like a traitor, the throbbing in my ankle climbs up my thighs, morphing pain into pleasure. The sinister smile on his face is a mile wide and making it worse.

“Need me?” he asks.

I try snatching the bandage from his grasp with a “Hell no,” but he yanks it back, chuckling.

“Quit being so damn proud and let the man help you.” Mama already sounds exasperated by our silent drama.

Great. The asshole’s been home forty-eight hours and already won her over.

Now I’m the only hold-out with spite.

I want to roll my eyes again while Redix kneels before me, but they rebel too. They want to watch him.

The tan on his skin. The silver rings on his fingers. The hairs on his sinewed forearms. The gloss of his sun-kissed strands.

I’m so fucked.

The way muscles curve across his shoulders; I remember grabbing them while he did things to my body I can’t forget. It’s vibrating on a higher level with his proximity, the sultry smell of him filling my senses.

As he lifts the cuff of my jeans, his fingertips brush my flesh, and a shock travels my depths, pulsing my heart and

tingling my sex.

Every time he touched me, that happened.

And despite how I fight it, it's happening again...

“So, like, we're flying back to LA tonight.” Angie tries burning away the tension in the air with her vocal fry of a voice. “Redix is coming to my premiere next week. My dress is a Prada and...”

I'm not listening.

I'm watching while Redix unlaces my boot with his back to Angie.

He's going so slow... and only I can see it. It warms my heart before it bursts into flames when he suddenly lifts his gaze from my ankle to find my stare.

His hands are shaking.

The sky of his eyes holds mine, speaking memories of all the times he touched me, thrilling me with sensations I'd never felt. I can't stop them.

How he'd unbutton my pants, tug my zipper down, and ease his way into every part of me.

He's there now, surging through my every aching nerve.

Good god, I'd forgotten how he steals human breath when he gets this close.

He murmurs, “We need to get you in bed with this ankle, Candy Cade.”

The naughty innuendo makes him smirk.

No, he needs to swallow a box of rat poison or pick me up and fuck me hard on that table. Either would be fine, but not a soft bed with him, not his soothing touch having this much control over me again.

“Lord, I haven't heard that nickname in years—‘Candy Cade,’” Elise says, adding to my unease. “You two have such history.”

I can't talk.

Angie doesn't stop; skipping past that comment, she rambles on, proud of how TMZ stalks her and Redix.

I wince at him, gently tugging off my boot. The warmth of his fingertips pulling my sock off next, slowly exposing my bare flesh, begging for his touch.

He doesn't speak, either. He's caressing my skin, heat oozing between my thighs, and *his eyes won't leave mine*.

Why?

He's here with her, not me. That hurts—much more than my ankle.

But he's binding my injury, my pain, careful with my flesh like a relic he's cherishing.

Who is he now?

A cocky celebrity heartthrob or the love who used to rub my feet?

He's gently wrapping around me time and again like he does my mind, at least every hour, of every day, for ten years. I never stopped thinking about him.

Guess he did, though. Drunk or high, he forgot about me.

For four years, he soared to success with his series "Romeo Returns," landing him in every horny heart and then on the big screen with one blockbuster after another.

My favorite's the movie he made about a homeless teen who surfs his way to success and love. It reminds me of us, but I'll never admit that to him.

No, we don't say a word. We just spin, swirling together in pain and lust. And maybe our love is still inside him, *somewhere?*

"They even followed us on our first date," Angie drones on. "He took me to an ice cream shop in Malibu."

Redix winces, closing his eyes before they flick back to mine. Because he sees it, he feels it across my flesh. My shock of pain at what Angie just said.

That was *our* thing... and that *hurt*.

So. Damn. Much.

My ankle. My heart. My god, I can't take it.

"I'm fine." Kicking away his finished touch, anger surges me to my feet.

Mama's voice fills the raw air between us. "Are you staying for barbecue?"

Usually, I would. On nights I don't go out, scoring a one-night distraction from the ego Redix battered, I visit with Mama, especially lately, given how sick she's been.

"No, thank you." I glare at Redix. "I'd only throw it back up."

Pride hides my pain as every part of me feels bruised in his presence.

It's not fair. How many times can someone break your heart?

Redix stands up, scolding me. "Don't be rude to your mother."

It's on. It's war—words fire like canons from my mouth.

"*Rude?*" Six foot four, and he doesn't intimidate me. "You won Best Actor in Rude, Redix Dean. Coming back here like you're morally superior. Where were your morals when you made *your* mom lie to me, making up stories about why you weren't calling me back or even texting me? Not once."

He's glaring, seething. "Stop it, Cade."

"No, I won't stop, and I didn't then. I kept asking her, begging her to have you call me until it broke her heart." I glance at his mom at the table. Tears are in her eyes. They're in mine too. "Until she had to tell me the truth. That you didn't wanna speak to me again, and that hurt us both so much. It should've been you, man enough to tell me, but no, you made your mom do it, and your sister too."

"You need to chill out."

Angie finally speaks to me.

That was a mistake.

Three excruciating steps her way; I don't feel them as I'm about to clothesline her neck. "You need to mind your fucking business." I sneer closer. "Do you even know what happened between me and Redix?"

"That's enough!" Redix's shout shakes the room, his frantic eyes staring me down.

"Did you tell her about our *ice cream date*?" My voice thunders, too, turning to confront him. "Or how you followed me into the parking lot last night? How you said you wanted me again? Shall I tell her how *hard* you did?"

Angie gasps.

Mama starts drumming her fingernails on the glass table. "Alright, you two," she says. "If I want a soap opera, I'll turn on my TV."

Breath huffs from Redix's chest. I see it along with his flared nostrils.

They match mine.

"Sorry, Mama." I glance at her. I mean it. "And I'm sorry, Elise." I catch her eyes next. "I'm sorry that y'all have been caught between us for so long. But don't worry"—I pick up my boot, sock, and backpack from the floor—"there's no 'us' anymore."

I have to say it. I have to look him in the eye.

"And I wish like hell there never was." To make him hurt like I do.

I limp across my mama's foyer, my wounded ego following me out the door.

Destroyed hearts don't say goodbye.

CHAPTER SEVEN



APRIL IS MY FAVORITE MONTH.

Its warming breeze eases through my wet hair, calming me down. That and the Lemonheads I crunch while sitting on my balcony, letting the night ocean soothe my rage. The shower I took helped, too; anything to wash this horrible day away.

I shouldn't have lost it like that at Mama.

It's been hard on her, on Redix's mom too. They know how much we loved each other.

Redix's mom, Elise, was the sweetest about it. She never mocked us.

"Love is real at any age," she said. "So are broken hearts. You two just need to be careful. I don't want to see you get hurt."

We got more than hurt.

The worst part is that our moms don't know just how bad. I stare at the inky waves, hoping they never find out.

That wish traps my gaze until a sudden knock on my door startles me.

Mama should be asleep. But nope. She's here to give me an earful for my rude outburst, and I deserve it.

I shuffle to the front door in my smiley-face hipster panties and tank. An ironic purchase, I know.

"Alright,"—I flip the lock and turn the doorknob—"lemme have it." I swing the door open without checking the peephole...

And huff at the sight.

"Why do shitty days turn into diarrhea with you around?"

Redix stands there, glaring down at me, ready to wage another war.

But his eyes dart down to my panties and start fondling up my body, tickling over my happy breasts before they land on my pissed-off face.

"At least part of you's happy seeing me." His eyes fall back to my breasts. They're well aware he's feet away. "I bet I know what else is smiling for me too."

That sexy hair knot he's wearing makes me wanna yank it and use it like a steering wheel, traveling his mouth down to where, yes, I'm smiling.

"What do you want?" I ask instead.

He steps into my foyer, uninvited. "For that to never happen again."

I'm too proud to make another scene, so I step back and shut the door behind him.

"No one can ever know, Cade." The look on his face is fierce, with no flirt in sight. "I know you have a helluva temper, but control it."

"Quit pissing me off, and I will."

"I'm serious."

"I am too. As a heart attack."

I lean against the wall. My ankle throbs. Other parts of my body join in.

His white T-shirt is cling wrap, revealing the abs I'm counting down his torso. It reminds me I have panties to wash.

“And tell that girlfriend of yours to mind her own business, or I'll feed her her teeth for breakfast.”

“I told you...”

He mimics me, leaning against the opposite wall. The jut of his hips features his generous package. I force my eyes not to glance down at it... remembering.

“She's not my girlfriend.”

“Seems she didn't get that memo. Guess she's too focused on her premiere and Prada dress.” I nod toward the door. “Does she know you're over here talking to me? *Again?*”

“She just flew back to LA. *Alone*. I think someone pissed her off.”

“You should've known better than to bring her here. You might as well have dropped a lit match in a fireworks store.”

He laughs. “You jealous?”

“Nope. But I own a mirror and see my reflection looking at her, minus the long brown hair.” His eyes can't deny it. “Am I your type now?”

“All of LA is gorgeous.”

“So I'm gorgeous to you?”

“You know you are. To everyone. You also know you got a goddamn temper like a viper. I want you to control it. And your mouth.”

“Yeah, I wanted things too and didn't get them either. So go fuck Angie's mouth and control it instead.”

He's quiet, raising his chin like he's trying to read between my lines and my panties.

His stare drops between my thighs, starting the tingle, the delicious hunger only he can fill.

“You’re such a jealous hellcat over Angie.” Finally, his eyes rise to mine. They’re a prison, holding me captive. “What about that dude you were dancing with?”

“I work with him. That’s all.”

“Seems he didn’t get that memo. He was too focused on your ass and wanting to fuck it. Him and every man in that room.”

Why did that suddenly hurt? So deep? Hitting so hard it forces every drop of pain in me to escape.

Redix knows why.

And that hurts worse.

Because it’s painfully true... and proven.

I turn my chin, trying to hide the wound. I start hobbling away. I’ll jump off that balcony before Redix sees my tears.

“Cade, wait.” He gently grabs my arm. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

I won’t turn around. They’re falling down my cheeks, drops of vulnerability only he can draw from me.

“Please just leave.”

For days, for months, years, I’ve spent building muscles on my body, strength in my heart, and skills in my hands to fight this off.

But he comes in my door and in minutes... it’s all gone.

“Look at me, Candy Cade.”

That gentle voice?

That’s from ten years ago.

Redix didn’t say words back then. He poured them like warm oil over my heart, healing my every ache.

Tonight, it only causes me more.

“I’ve never told anyone.” I can’t look at him while I keep our promise.

I know what I'll see; a face I can't stop loving; a body I can't stop wanting; a soul I'm bound to.

The man I can't have.

"It's our secret, Redix. And I'll die with it. I've been dying since it happened, and you left."

He barely says it. "It breaks my heart when you cry."

I close my eyes. "Then you should have nothing left of it by now."

His hand won't let go of my arm. "Did you really mean it?" Tenderly, he's holding on. "That you wished we *never* happened?"

"I don't know." It's true. It's streaming tears down my cheeks. "I loved you so much." Saline spills over my lips. "But I hate how much this hurts now."

The heat of his touch turns back pages to tender moments we shared, not brutal ones like this.

"We've always been too close, Cade." The wisdom in his words injures me more. "That's why I left. And why I didn't come back. I knew we'd get too close again if I came home too soon. And that can't happen. I hurt you before, and I'm not doing it again."

With three steps away and a soft whoosh, I hear him leave.

He does it every time.

I bite my lip so hard because the tears won't stop. They fall because I hate him.

Because he's right.

Because even a broken heart can love someone so much that it wishes for another chance with him, to fill its hopeless cracks.

CHAPTER EIGHT



REDIX

DEAR CANDY CADE,

This journaling shit works.

I'm not drinking.

Usually, with those tears I made you cry, I'd throw shots back until empty glasses fill the bar in front of me.

And when you said you wish we never happened?

Fuck, that hurt.

Because all that I am is us.

You've been my every thought and next breath, Cade, for so long.

So, yeah, the old me wouldn't need to hear more. He'd be numbing that spit on my grave halfway through a bottle with his favorite buddy Johnny Walker by now.

But nope. I've changed.

Or at least, I'm trying to.

It ain't easy, though. Not when I see you in pain. Even your swollen ankle melts my heart.

But touching you again.

God, I was losing my mind.

I know you saw my hands shaking while I took off your boot. The only thing that stopped them was the touch of your soft skin.

Damn, I just wanted to keep touching up your legs, feeling inside you, for every part of you I've missed.

I know we're still in pain; we're still in love... and we felt it.

Then Angie made that comment—the one about ice cream.

Fuck, I saw it on your face, and I might as well have slapped it because I know that hurt you.

I'm sorry.

It's not what you think. There's so much you don't know. About Angie. About that night. About the shit that's been my life since.

One day, I want the courage to tell you that one of the things I've lived for, through the hell of it all...

It's for that memory of us.

Of our first kiss over an ice cream cone.

I cherish it. I've shared it with no one but you, Cade, I swear.

Remember us before we kissed?

We'd hold hands on the bus. You'd fall asleep with me on the sofa watching TV. We couldn't stop holding each other. You were like water, and I needed every drop of you.

It wasn't sexual at first.

I mean, it was with me after a while.

I can't tell you how many times I jerked off thinking about you from the age of thirteen. But I didn't know if you liked me

that way. We were best friends.

Then you went away one summer with your dad when we were sixteen. He took you on long trips after your parents divorced, and my heart hurt with you gone.

But you'd send me postcards with five things you liked about me on each. I still have them.

Some of my favorites I still remember...

1. *You're a clown for me.*
2. *Boys call me "giraffe," and you said you love giraffes.*
3. *You let me put your long hair in pigtails.*
4. *Your smile is my candy.*
5. *I let you win at Uno.*
- 5+++ *You hold my hand, and I'm safe.**

*That one's my favorite.

I waited on your mom's front steps the afternoon you said you'd be back. I didn't care how desperate I looked.

I was. I missed you.

You got out of your Dad's RV and said goodbye to him. He waved to me; he always liked me for some reason.

After he left, my jaw hit the ground.

It's like, in two months; you grew the best pair of tits I've ever seen. You had them before, but not like that. You didn't wear a bra in that green halter top, and my mouth suddenly watered.

(Embarrassing confession number whatever: They fill my hands perfectly. Like they're made just for me. They are.)

You had a look in your eyes when you saw me again too.

Something had changed between us.

I couldn't stand up and hug you. You thought I was being a dick, but I wasn't. Mine was hard as hell while you sat beside me, and we talked for hours until your mom came home.

My world started spinning after that.

I started sweating around you because I wanted you. And I worried if I told you, I'd fuck up our friendship.

Because I lived for our friendship.

I still do.

Finally, you suggested we skip school. I was game as long as I was with you.

It was almost my 17th birthday, and we kept looking at each other for too long. And we kept smiling but weren't touching like we used to.

It's like we were scared of the new feeling between us.

I was.

We spent all day on Coligny Beach talking shit until my stomach growled, then you said, "Let's get some ice cream."

It was a blur. Holding your hand. Ordering a cone. You found us a private corner behind the store. My heart raced because I hoped what you were planning. But then we just stood there, licking cones with our eyes on each other.

I couldn't take it anymore.

I should've asked, but your eyes told me to. Like they dared and begged me at the same time. I don't know what got into me. I just coated my lips until they dripped with lemon sherbet and leaned toward you.

"Wanna taste?" I asked.

I know. I'm sorry. I'm an arrogant asshole, but you know the truth. It's an act.

“No,” you said, smiling, “I want a kiss.”

I don't know who kissed who first, but I lost it. Like there was no time, there was no one else. Not one thing in my world but your lips on mine.

Yes, I waited for my first kiss because I was waiting for you.

Sorry, it took me so long.

But when we finally did, your kiss became the one thing that made sense to me. That made my life worth it.

It still is.

Our lips touched, and you've had my heart since. Our cones melted while our bodies became like fucking fire for each other. And when I tongued you, trying my best like I'd seen in movies and porn, you moaned back.

I thought I was gonna come in my boardshorts.

Not to be a perv, but that's what you do to me.

It's more than sex with you, Cade. It's more than wanting every square inch of you. Of my body in pain craving yours. Of me knowing I will lose my mind if I touch you again.

It's you.

It's your lemon sherbet kiss. It's your dick-teasing, smiley-face panties tonight. It's your hot temper and smart mouth.

And it's your tender heart. I know it's there. It's my world.

And I'm so sorry because I can't stop breaking it.

CHAPTER NINE



COATING MY THIGHS, I REAPPLY SUNSCREEN AFTER SITTING BY the pool for two hours. At least the smell of it makes me happy.

“I can’t stay much longer.” Penny sighs, staring down at her full boobs. “These girls are gonna explode.”

“They look amazing.” I’m half jealous. “Nursing and maternity leave are doing you wonders. Maybe I’ll get knocked up and take a few months off too.”

Penny is my closest friend and colleague.

Really, it’s been rough for her. She’s not ready to return, and I don’t blame her.

But we always joke like this.

“The hottest man alive is across this pool,” she says. “He’s looking happy to help you in that department.” Her nod toward Redix is as subtle as a bomb. He’s lounging beside his sister and his nephew. “I can see his huge package from here. It looks *very* ready to deliver.”

“Fuck my life; why is he here?”

“Because this island isn’t big enough for the two of you. And his sister lives in this complex too. You’re destined to collide.”

Penny adjusts her bikini top, staring at him. “I don’t care who I’m married to... Mother of God, look at that body. I’d let Redix Dean fuck me *and* my life up. Don’t you just wanna go over there and climb on top of him?”

Yes, I do.

Hell, once word gets out that Redix is lying out by this pool, the line of women who want to ride him like Space Mountain will wrap around the block three times.

“I just want him to leave.” I drop my voice as low as I feel after last night. “That man won’t stop breaking my heart.”

With Penny, I drop my guard. Secrets don’t exist between us. Neither does pride.

“I know.” She nudges my knee. “Ignore me. I’m just a mess of horny hormones right now. I didn’t mean to make fun. I know this is tough on you.”

“You’re entitled to your horny hormones.” I nudge her back. “I bet your husband would love it if you climbed on top of him. I’m happy to babysit my goddaughter any time.”

“I wish. I’m still a human drive-thru, open twenty-four-seven for breast milk.” She starts packing her beach bag. “Speaking of, I gotta bail. I need to feed her and maybe fuck my husband if we’re lucky and don’t fall asleep first.” Standing up, she puts her back to Redix. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine. Thanks for coming by to listen to me bitch.”

“Honey, that ain’t bitching. That’s called ‘heartbreak,’ but you can take it. You’ve suffered it this long.”

“I know, and I promise—no matter what—he’s not fucking up my life again.”

Because after what happened to Natalie and eight other victims, I’m keeping my deal.

“Well, call me if you need me.” Penny bends over, pecking my cheek. “Or if you decide to revenge fuck him.”

“Never.” I peck her back. “Love you.”

“Love you too.”

While I watch her leave, latching the pool gate behind her, I scope Redix.

He’s hiding his famous hair tucked into a bucket hat and his impossibly blue eyes behind sunglasses, but there’s no mistaking the sensation across my body.

He’s watching me.

His gaze is a breeze across my sweaty flesh—perfect and opening me up for more.

I shift on my chair.

This I’ll allow, spreading my thighs open for his stare. Even with my ankle wrapped, that’s not the part of me trapping his attention.

My black bikini bottoms have it right where I can feel his heat.

I close my eyes and arch my back, lowering the lounge another notch.

The certainty of his eye fuck pools arousal between my slick thighs.

Damn, all the times we stole my dad’s boat and fucked in the sun. Our bodies had no tan lines because we spent hours nude.

The first time Redix went down on me, he burnt his back to a crisp and didn’t care. He laughed, kissing me, swearing it was worth the time he took to make me come like that.

The feeling of his tongue opening me with that indulgence, I was so shy. Then he used his fingers, too, taking me to my highest edge so far. I couldn’t keep still until he grabbed my thigh and held me under his moaning mouth, catching my first fall over his tongue.

We hadn't fucked yet, but we did everything else.

Redix drove me wild, making me wait, saying, "I'm not fucking the Sheriff's daughter until she's legal; I don't care how blue my balls get."

"Like my mama would arrest you."

"Like your dad ain't a former rogue cop who owns a shotgun. I swear if we get busted skipping school with me fucking his daughter on his boat, that man will shoot my balls off. No matter how much he likes me."

"You're like a son to him. He'd never hurt you, and he never uses this boat. He's got the other one that he lives on. No wonder my parents are divorced. My dad's never around, and my mama never leaves. They're complete opposites."

"But we're not." Redix had smiled down at me, twirling his fingertip around my nipple. "We're perfectly matched."

Yes, we were.

One month later, when I turned eighteen, we shared even more.

And it hits me now.

A tear falls behind my sunglasses at what it felt like to be so in love... and how I feel now... so abandoned.

"Your hot body with that tattoo is gonna get some fucked up tan lines with an ankle wrap on."

That voice slithers into my ear. I recognize its hiss before I even open my eyes.

It's Sunday, after all.

And if the weather allows, I'm always by this pool, knowing this man always comes after me.

And the tattoo on my hip bone? He's been obsessed with it since he first saw it on my eighteen-year-old body at the beach.

Because he's target number one.

I open my eyes, and his shadow hovers like a tombstone. But I can't let on.

Harnessing all my hate, I smile. "Funny. My ankle doesn't hurt when you're around."

He likes that, when I flatter him.

"Did you get my gift this week?" He makes me sick. How he knows where I live, leaving things at my door.

"Yes. I love your cologne."

It makes me sick how he sprayed it on me at school. "So you'll smell me all day," he used to say.

"Good," he says with a sneer while I gag. "I smell better than him, don't I?" He's delighted Redix is across the pool. Like I finally belong to him, and Redix has to watch just how much. "Better than that perfume ad y'all did together."

God, he's been obsessed with that too. The ad Redix and I shot ten years ago. The one of us for BOUND perfume that made Redix famous and me a target.

I flick my guilty eyes towards Redix across the pool deck, dread surging through my heart.

Because Redix is sitting straight up, hatred twisting his beautiful face.

This is killing him.

Me too... but it's part of my deal.

"TJ, why do you give a shit about Redix Dean?" I sit up strong, trying to stay in control of my target. "I don't."

It's taken me years to get TJ to trust me and believe that I want him, not Redix. Not anymore.

"That pretty boy doesn't belong back here." The sweat stains on TJ's white visor disgust me. "He never fucking did."

The air hangs heavy with more than humidity.

This game I'm playing with TJ usually has no witnesses. I make sure of it.

My biggest nightmare is having Redix across the pool, watching my betrayal.

It's the worst kind.

"Just ignore him." Chess pieces move in my mind. "That's what I do."

Redix, please don't do it. I send up a desperate prayer. *Don't start another fight over me. The last one destroyed us.*

"I saw you the other day." TJ won't look at Redix. His mirrored shades are focused on my generous cleavage as usual. "I liked the yellow one."

This sick fuck follows me around this island.

I knew he was watching me through the window of the surf shop, trying on bikinis. No shock; he likes yellow. It's his M.O.

"Wear it," he insists, "and come out tonight. I'll buy you a few shots."

That's also TJ's M.O.—buying women *more* than a few shots.

I can prove that, but it's not a crime. Still, I know how guilty he is, and one day, I'll dish out my sentence.

No matter what.

"Not with this ankle." Right now, I need this monster to leave. Redix's rage is palpable. I make myself flirt. "I'll let you know when I'm *ready* for you."

Never before have I taken it this far with TJ.

He's been after me since I was fifteen, like he marked me as his and tormented all who challenged his claim, especially Redix. TJ's family moved here when we were teens, and he's been obsessed with me ever since.

One day on the school bus, he and Gentry Evans came after me, insulting my mama and mocking Redix, who wasn't there that day to protect me. No, he was on some modeling job, and I was alone.

I had no one to save me.

And I felt it.

The threat of those two boys. Of just how much they wanted to have me, to hurt me. I'd never felt fear that great. It surged tears over my eyes.

But then that girl—Charlie Ravenel—stood up on the bus.

She was a senior and such a badass. No one messed with her. She told them to leave me alone and punched TJ in the dick. Then she looked at me while I cowered in my seat, like, “Always fight back.”

My life changed after that.

Thanks to Charlie, those boys left me alone for a while, and I swore... *never would I feel that helpless again.*

My dad enrolled me in Krav Maga for self-defense, and I was obsessed with earning a black belt.

But belts can't protect me from TJ's obsession.

Not then. Not now. He's still after me.

To be fair, I'm equally obsessed with him, but for another reason.

That reason has my mouth flirting with TJ while my heart twists with Redix watching me do it.

Because I'm not defenseless anymore.

No, I'm *lethal*.

This is my fight now... to the bitter end.

Satisfaction at his victory has TJ smiling like he can't believe his change of luck.

“That's a deal I'll make you keep, Sergeant.”

No, he makes me cringe while he aims for his usual prowl toward the beach.

Once he disappears on the other side of the dunes, I slow my glance back to Redix. If I thought I saw hatred on him before, wrong. It's oozing from him and burning my way.

God, please. Do another woman a solid. Please make this deal worth it.

CHAPTER TEN



deja vu by Olivia Rodrigo

IT TAKES AN HOUR.

I thought he'd never talk to me again, but Redix dives into the pool and, in one breath, swims the length and jumps out on my side, dripping with pool water and rage.

“Is that what you've been doing for ten years?” He charges toward my chair. Thank God, no one's on my side of the pool, no witnesses for our drama. “While I've been gone, have you been *fucking* him?”

Redix has every right to be mad.

So do I.

“Who I've been fucking for ten years is none of your goddamn business.”

“You can fuck the US Marine Corps for all I care, but not him, Cade.” With his hat and glasses off and his hair slicked back, every crease of pain across his face glares at me. “NOT. HIM.”

I deflect. “Where’s your girlfriend?”

There’s too much passion, too much pain for reason to fit between us.

“Why don’t you go dabble her, and I’m *sure* you’ll get over me. You have for ten years.”

“I can fuck all of LA if I want. Nothing would be worse than you fucking TJ, and you fucking know why.”

“No, I don’t know why, Redix, because you won’t tell me what happened.”

“Leave it alone, Detective.” His lips snarl. “What you know is enough.”

“What I know is Angie Conrad told TMZ that when you take her on those dates for ice cream, your favorite flavor is lemon sherbet, and you like to kiss her with it on your lips.” Yes, I know. I never fight unarmed. “Sounds familiar. Does she know why?”

His face freezes.

I can’t read him.

But I can see the tattoo on his hipbone. And I can read the outline of his package under his white Billabong shorts hanging low from beneath his Adonis belt. It flusters me, knocking me off my game for a second.

The silence between us has its own zip code.

I let it sit long enough, my thighs wanting to spread for his hard fuck while my fist wants to uppercut his perfect balls two feet from my face.

“Or what about that woman?” Nope, I’m not done. “What was her name? Jenna? The one who told E! Online that y’all have matching tattoos. Does she know the story about your other one?”

That news had knifed my heart.

I almost dropped my phone on the drugstore floor when I read it, ready to vomit with the pain. Instead, I stood in the candy aisle, quietly wiping away tears.

He still won't answer me, so I keep firing.

"I don't know which was my favorite. Your post announcing that you were dating Heather Moore—your Juliet and co-star—and she was wearing *my* fucking jean jacket from high school. How low can you go? Because five million people loved that post. And millions more loved that video of you fucking another woman in a parking lot a week later.

"Seems America loves their Romeo with his pants unzipped and his cock balls deep in random pussy.

"Or is it the security footage of you in a hotel elevator? Yep, that one's my favorite. How you're looking at your phone with your big cock out of your zipper while some woman is on her knees, sucking you off. The whole world thought it was hot. It only *helped* your career.

"You don't need to fuck *all* of LA, Redix. The half of the city you've already fucked has you doing *just* fine."

Something dances in his eyes.

"I don't remember any of that." It's pain. It's remorse. "I was fucked up the whole time."

"Yeah, well, I remember it. Every soul-killing second of it." Goddamnit, I hate the tears falling down my cheeks. "To answer your question, *that's* what I've been doing for ten years; dying on the sidelines of your celebrity sex life."

He drops down on the lounge beside me.

"Please don't cry." His tenderness suddenly soars my heart rate to near-dizzy levels. "Not over me. I'm not worth it."

He reaches for my hand, but I jerk it away.

"Despite how you hate me, Redix, I would never do that to you, not with TJ."

"I don't hate you."

"You sure act like it. You can't stop blaming me or hurting me, or insulting me."

His face softens.

“That’s because I’m an addict and an asshole, and after all this time, I don’t know what to say to you, Cade.”

His candor shocks me. He’s being so honest, so vulnerable. The tender look in his eyes is like we’re suddenly eighteen again, and it rushes in so fast because I’ve missed him so much.

I can’t stop it...

“Insult me one more time, Redix Louis Dean”—I know how to make him smile—“and I’ll drown your pretty ass in that pool.”

There it is.

It lifts his cheeks, softening me too, and glimpses of who we used to be together quickly reappear.

Did they ever leave?

“Drowning in your arms, Magnolia Cade Bryant, it would be the best death I could wish for.”

“Don’t say that.” More tears suddenly fall, washing away my fury. “I’m so proud of you for getting sober.”

The fact that Redix has a problem with alcohol and drugs and almost died because of it doesn’t surprise me.

I have unhealthy addictions, too.

One’s sitting right in front of me.

I’ll die for him too.

He looks to the distance. “It ain’t easy staying sober when TJ comes around.” In that memory, he disappears momentarily before looking back at me. “And FYI. Angie is *not* my girlfriend. I told you; I don’t do them or dates. That’s just bullshit my manager makes up.”

Warmth flushes my heart. The hope in it scares me.

“Tell that to Angie. That’s not the look in her eyes when she’s around you.”

“I was right.” The grin on his face is a dangerous curve. It makes me wanna wrap my arms around his neck. “She makes

you jealous.”

“I have no right to be.”

“Since when does my Candy Cade care about being right?”

“Please stop calling me that. I’m serious.”

“Why? You used to love that name.”

Shaking his wet hair, his strands sprinkle drops across my belly, teasing my flesh.

“Because it brings back memories of us that hurt too much.” I’m not afraid to confess it. “Like the one with lemon sherbet.”

He flinches again, regrets and the ocean reflecting in his eyes.

“I never did that with Angie. With anyone but you. I just told my publicist those stories to feed to the press, to hide the real truth. That I’m an addict.”

“You sold *our* stories to the press to protect your career?”

His chin drops in shame.

What do I feel?

Sudden relief those stories aren’t true. Dismay that he exploited our love for fame. Hurt that even though the stories aren’t true, the videos are.

Every emotion storms through me as his eyes finally meet mine.

“I’m so sorry, Cade”—they cloud his too—“I’m so sorry for so much.”

He reaches for my hand. I let him hold it.

“I don’t have any matching tattoos but ours. And I never gave away your jacket. Heather found it in my closet, but I made her give it back. And all that other stuff? I wanna fucking die when I see those videos. I’m not proud of them. All I remember from these past ten years is my job and missing you.”

It snaps.

The lock over my heart breaks open with those words from his lips. My soul's been crying to hear them.

He's sorry. He missed me.

Redix guards his emotions, so when he shares them, they're gifts.

So I give too. "We need to talk."

He looks away. A crowd has gathered outside the pool fence with phones raised, recording us from a distance.

"Shit,"—he winces—"that fucking TJ asshole leaked this; I know it. Dammit, I should know better."

We both know what's happening.

Our pain, our past... it's going viral.

"I don't care." I tell him, "They don't matter. We do." I step to the ledge one more time for him. "I've missed you, I've missed us, and we need to talk about that night."

He drops my hand, tension twitching across his face. Like I just put a knife to his throat.

He won't look at me. "I gotta get out of here."

It's like I'm not here.

Jumping up, he rushes to the other side of the pool. Not acknowledging his sister or nephew for their own good, he grabs his stuff and storms silently through the small crowd, pushing past smiling fans. They follow him like beggars while he rushes toward the parking lot and jumps in his mom's Volvo parked there.

And just like that...

Redix Dean leaves me again. Asking for his love. And watching him run away instead.

Yes, he breaks my heart.

Every—damn—time.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



REDIX

DEAR CANDY CADE,

How am I supposed to do this?

I'm parked outside the liquor store. Only this island would have one that looks like a five-star restaurant.

I want to go in and drink myself into oblivion, but I grabbed my journal from my backpack instead.

Because I feel like I'm sailing into a storm with you.

I can see its danger on the horizon, and part of me wants the wrecking.

So bad.

I watched you with your friend at the pool today, and I had to bend my knees up on the chair to hide my hard-on.

My nephew wanted to play, but I had to refuse because my fucking dick wouldn't stand down at seeing you in a bikini.

So many times, I pulled your bikini bottoms aside and slid inside you. Fuck, you were so tight and wet for me, and I wanted that so bad today.

I saw what you did—how you spread your legs for me again. You arched your back like you wanted me to pull your top up and take your gorgeous tits in my mouth.

Shit. I'm getting hard just thinking about you again.

I always do.

What I found inside you, Cade, years ago. It's better than what I found inside any bottle. And trust me, from an alcoholic, that's the highest compliment.

I was going to come over and talk with you today. I felt happy just planning it, shooting the shit like we always used to.

Do you remember that? How we'd stay up until dawn on the beach over the weekends. I told you everything back then. And I was your only secret.

You were my best friend, Cade. Like my job was to make you happy, and yours was to take care of us. We could've lived to infinity like that together.

But TJ appeared—then and today—and I fucking saw red. Truly, I almost lost my mind.

The only thing that kept me sane was my nephew worshipping every move I make. He means so much to me, so I fought it.

I felt sick, Cade.

What TJ and Gentry Evans did to us, how can you smile back at him? The sight of you letting him look at you like that?

The Candy Cade I love would have gouged his eyes out. I know you can. Mama G told me about all the training you've done, all the belts you have now. Like you're preparing for war or something.

Fine by me. Kill him. Not me.

And I know you know that it kills me—you with TJ.

God, are you that hurt by me?

You must be with everything you said about every drunken fuck up I've made along the way.

It's not all true what I said.

I do remember some of it.

The woman I fucked in the club parking lot? She was wearing your perfume. Our perfume. BOUND. I was drunk, but I remember smelling her and closing my eyes and only fucking you.

The woman in the elevator? She got on with me and, without a word, went down on her knees. I took out my phone, and in my half-drunk haze, I looked at pictures of you I've saved on it while she gave me head.

What that video doesn't show is that I didn't come. I rarely can. I start thinking about you too much. How I miss you too much. How I'm so lonely and lost without you.

Because those women aren't you.

It's bullshit. How some think a kiss, a blowjob, or a fuck is a betrayal. Maybe for some. Not for me.

Those people have only given their bodies to a few while everyone's taken from mine. People have been using my body since I can remember. For the camera. For their profits. For their pleasure.

My body means nothing to me. I sold what's left of it to the world long ago.

But my heart means everything to me.

And it only belongs to you.

I protected it behind a haze of drinks and drugs so no one could take it from you.

I never gave it to anyone else.

That's cheating. That's betrayal. Who we promise to love. That's what matters.

And I've kept my promise to you.

Every piece of me has been bought and sold, Cade, but not us.

Women in LA, Miami, hell Atlanta, Paris, and even Beijing. Honestly? Many have tried, but no one is you.

No one can replace what you mean to me.

No one knows what this feels like except you. You've always understood me because we've shared so many happy years until we shared the same hell.

And now you want to talk about that night?

And I can't.

And I can't stay away from you either.

Because I want my best friend, I want her body and her love. I want to feel my heart again, Cade.

It's you... and I want you back.

CHAPTER TWELVE



17 by MK

ICE CUBES MELT IN A BAG OVER MY NUMB ANKLE.

My heart feels the same.

Whatever's streaming on the screen in front of me, I'm not watching it.

One shot of tequila and three beers in, and I don't give a shit. This is my pathetic life, my mind toying with revenge.

Natalie and eight other victims. The lack of clues, of my guilt, that they look like me, the disconnected drops of evidence; they taunt me. It mocks my logic—*can you solve these cases?*

The next taunt?

Redix.

Goddamnit. When isn't he on my mind?

With a final swig of beer, I scroll for a show. Something, please, distract me. And it better not be anything starring Redix Dean.

No, give me something happy.

A strange knock hits the air. It raps again on my front door.

“Don’t shoot.” A voice pours into my space. “Mama G gave me your key. She said I had to check on your ankle.”

“I’m fine. You can leave.”

Redix Dean better not enter my home.

He better not find me sitting on my sofa in pajama shorts and a sports bra with my wrapped foot propped on the ottoman beside my pathetic plate of pizza crusts, crushed candy boxes, and empty beer bottles.

I’m a Grade A pathetic sight, and it’s about to make his day.

Fuck me.

He appears in my living room looking like masculine perfection while I slouch on the sofa like a feminine cautionary tale.

“Take a break from the ice,” Redix instructs like he’s Dr. PleaseFuckMe entering the room. “Let’s give it twenty minutes, and then we’ll ice it again.”

“Let’s give it a go fuck yourself for ten more years before you can kiss my sweet ass again.”

And fuck him for leaving me hanging today.

The smile on his lips? A convent would be seduced.

“Pull those sexy shorts down,” he says, “and I’ll pucker up right now for that hot ass.”

I cut my eyes back to the flatscreen, clicking on YouTube to find a song about women who murder their exes.

They exist.

Redix waltzes into my galley kitchen like he owns it.

I watch him through the pass-through, how he pulls open drawers until he finds the one with dishtowels. Without a word, he comes over and plucks the dripping bag of ice off my ankle. Wiping the puddle away before he wraps the bag in the

towel, he tosses it across the room into the sink. Of course, he makes the shot with a grin.

“Satisfied?” Damn, those jeans look good on him. “You can leave now.”

“I’m not leaving.” He plops down in the side chair. “You said we need to talk.”

“About that night?”

“Nope.”

“Then don’t let the door hit ya where my bullet can split ya.”

He laughs, nudging his bare foot against the beer bottles. “Are you drunk?”

“I’m not drunk.” I reach for my real vice—a fresh box of Lemonheads. “I don’t have a drinking problem. I have an ex-fiancé who’s a famous horny asshole problem.”

“No, you have a messy condo problem.”

He jumps back up and, in one sweep, has all my trash from the ottoman in his hands before promptly dropping it into the garbage can under the sink.

I crunch the sweet lemon candy I love.

“What are you doing?”

“Famous ex-fiancé horny assholes can clean too,” he says, and in five minutes, he has my kitchen tidy.

He noses around.

My bathroom is spotless. I’m a stickler for clean in there. And my bedroom? The door is closed. He’ll have to step over my dead body to get in there.

“Where’s your vacuum?”

He’s standing over me, blocking the light from the ceiling fan.

And my heart stops.

I love it when he wears his hair down like that. It's six inches past his shoulders and my weakness. I used to get off grabbing fists full of it when his face was buried in my pussy.

Okay, maybe I'm buzzing.

"If you're gonna keep being my maid,"—I crunch more candies—"you have to put on a sexy outfit first."

"If you insist."

His T-shirt is off faster than I can protest. And holy hell, I'd sell my soul. Today at the pool and now tonight standing before me?

Redix Dean is sexual oxygen.

I need to fuck him right now to stay alive.

And he's giving it, looking down at me the same way.

"If you're gonna boss me around, Candy Cade"—he flops his hair over—"sit back and enjoy it with a smile."

I lean back, spreading my thighs.

"Men telling me to smile become my next target practice. The ones who call me 'Candy Cade,' I hit them first."

That makes him laugh again, his abs flexing in front of me like a dozen hard-glazed donuts I'm gonna lick.

God, he's beautiful like this. Happy. Flirting and being sweet.

This is the one I fell in love with.

He doesn't wait for my answer. Nosing more around my place, he opens two closets until he finds my vacuum.

Just to egg him on, I lift my phone and record the sight.

How much will TMZ pay for Redix Dean vacuuming shirtless with his faded jeans barely hanging from his perfect ass? Thousands because he won't stop smiling at me like he loves the attention.

My pussy loves it too.

Talking over the vacuum, he asks what music I'm into now. I share my favorites. He shares his and the books he's been reading. He asks about my dad. They have a powerful bond, part of the past he won't talk about.

He lifts the ottoman like it's dollhouse furniture, vacuuming under it. "How often do you get to see him?"

"We fish when we can. Other than that, he's running dolphin tours off Tybee and Daufuskie." I shout over the vacuum. "What about your mom? Who's she dating now?"

The drama of Redix's mom and her boyfriends is not his favorite topic, but he used to open up to me about it.

"She's got a new one. Renie likes him. She said he's not such an asshole to her."

I always liked Redix's little sister, Renie. But like his mom, she runs every time she sees me. Renie hates being stuck in the middle of whatever this is, which breaks my heart.

How I never met his nephew, Renie's son. I see him around the pool. I'd love to meet him, but I'm not picking that scab tonight.

This is too much fun, too easy just catching up with him.

"I can't believe you still have your car," he says. "Need me to get it tuned up for you?"

"Nah. I've taken good care of it." Like the care he's showing me now. "Thanks, though."

"Those bruises on your shins, on your wrists." He notices my marks? "They from all the fighting you do now?"

"Yeah."

I don't notice them anymore.

But I notice him and the small patterns he's making in the carpet.

"Do you have competitions?" he asks. "I'd love to cheer you on." That makes him grin my way. "I'm proud of you. My sister tells me about the work you do. She'll text me articles if you make the news. I bet your parents are proud too."

He's kept up with my career? And he's proud of me? "Thanks." I don't know what to think, but it makes me feel... a lot. "We don't have competitions in Krav Maga. It's too brutal. It's fighting to stay alive, not for sport."

"That's my Candy Cade." He turns off the vacuum. "I loved how you fight."

Loved?

So we're past tense now?

Not for me.

Talking to him, watching him so close, all feeling returns. To my ankle. To my heart. To the part of me only Redix brings to life.

He sets the vacuum aside, grabs my watering can, and starts wetting my hurricane plant, and I can't help it. The swirling leaves. The attention he gives. Dirty thoughts fill my head. "She wants every drop."

He's pure porn looking like that.

That cocks his half-grin. "Does she now?"

He pours the last stream down his torso, water flowing over the rocks of his abs and soaking the top of his jeans.

Oh shit, fuck straws.

My tongue wants to lap those drops up.

This is more than how we flirted as teens.

This is a desire in adult bodies at salacious levels. It's shallowing my breath.

He stares at me for too long before swaggering back into my kitchen. Setting the can down, he starts nosing in my fridge while I map the shredded muscles down his back, ones I crave to scratch again. *I'd rather he nose between my thighs.*

"Got anything to drink around here that's *not* alcohol?"

"The ocean."

"Funny."

He pours himself a cup of pineapple juice. Sipping on it as he returns to the living room, a lucky stream dribbles down his naked chest.

It's not fair.

In ten years, he's gained twenty pounds of muscle and another ton of sex appeal oozing from his pores.

"Whoops." His fingertip lifts the nectar off his pecs. He sucks it off his finger, and I'm busted. "Enjoying the show?"

My clit bought tickets.

"You always did like my juice."

"Hell, yes, I did." His grin slays me. "I'll make you laugh and give you a real show."

"What are you? A circus clown?"

"No." He grabs his package with a spark in his eyes. "But I do have an elephant you can ride."

"Shut up!" *Why did I just giggle?* "I remember how big it is. But Dumbo, you're not."

I'm lying.

It's huge.

And fuck, yes, I want it.

"You sure?" He picks up my remote and enters something on the YouTube search bar. "I'll jog your memory."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm giving you a private show."

"The hell you are." I sit up straight. "I don't want one."

He stands with his back to me, clicking the remote. "Tell that to your hard nipples." I glance down. *Fucking bitches.* They tattle on me every time. "I bet you're wet for me, too, aren't you, Cade?"

Hell, yes, I am.

"Watching a hot, shirtless man clean your house will wet any woman's pussy."

“So will this.”

He presses play on a music video and turns around.

I glance at the screen and laugh. “‘Pony’ by Ginuwine?” I can’t, but he does, and I’m giggling again like I’m fucking twelve. “Please, don’t.”

“You mean don’t do this?” His hips start rolling as hard as my laughter. “Is this bringing anything back?”

As kids, he clowned around, dancing to get me to laugh.

As an adult, he’s a clit-tease toying with my lust.

“Yes, I remember.” But he never danced like *this*, and I’m crying happy tears. “This is so bad.”

Half embarrassed. Half aroused. Damn, he’s hot, making my cheeks blush at the liquid flex of his obliques.

“You look painfully cliché.”

I love cliché.

“Damn right, darlin’.” He grins, rolling a wave down from his wide shoulders to his narrow waist, to right where he wants my stare. “I danced twenty-one million cliché dollars into my bank account”—he pops his hips—“twice with this blockbuster show.”

I’m howling back on the sofa, surrendering to the spectacle. The way he makes me laugh and how it was his favorite thing to do always made me feel special.

And I feel it again... and more.

He grabs the vacuum cleaner like it’s his dance pole.

“Are you fucking my Hoover?”

I’m jealous of a cleaning appliance.

“Uh-huh.” Fuck, he can dance. “She’s a good hard suck.” He always could.

He can move like there’s no gravity. Like he has no bones. Like he’s one strong snaking muscle seeking its deep, wet home.

Me.

Heat flames through my body when he pops his hips like a jackhammer and then scoops them like a slow spoon through the lust he's piled up.

This is the sight that broke the box office and hearts.

"Okay, that's enough!" My abs hurt from laughing, but what else can I do? *Fucking is my other choice.*

"Stop." I toss a throw pillow at him. "This is getting crazy." I throw another. "For both of us."

"Damn, Cade."

He smacks the pillows down before he starts slapping the air like he's slapping my ass bent over for him.

"You look so... God." *Slap.* "Damn." *Slap.* "Beautiful." *Slap.* "When you laugh with me." He coils his hips in ways most men can't. "Or when you *come* with me."

The sudden cinch of my sex; it's lightning through my body responding to his words, to that image with him.

"Yeah," I sigh, "and you know how hot you look like that, so you can just stop."

I hug the next pillow to my chest while laughter leaves my body. Only lust remains. Because he's fucking the air like the thrust of his hips can find new spots inside me, naming each one after him.

I lean back. I have no strength to fight this, watching him lick his lips while he steps closer... so close.

"Do I, Cade?"

He grinds inches from my face. The contours of his hardening dick make it obvious he's freeballing like usual.

"Do you think I look hot like this?"

I gaze up at him. "You know you do." With his cock pumping inches from my lips, he's getting harder, making *everything* water.

“Want me to stop?” He unbuttons the top of his jeans. “Because if I’m making you laugh or come, I don’t wanna.”

“Is that so?” His button-fly jeans press his erection down his thigh, and I feel the sudden slick in my shorts. “Am I who you want now, Redix?”

“You’re all I want.” He releases another button. “Everything I fucked for the camera; it was you. It was us.”

The top of his sexy, trimmed patch appears.

I chew my lip, remembering what’s just below it.

“Imagine if we did it again, Cade.” His hands travel the path down his perfect arching torso like it’s flexing into the caress of my hands instead. “Can you? Can you imagine me fucking you again?”

Why do I suddenly feel shy?

And why does that turn me on even more?

Because our love was so pure, so innocent... but I’m *not* anymore.

No. I’m ready. I’ll show him how shameless we can be together now.

“Yes, Redix. I can imagine you fucking my pussy again.” Sliding my hand under my pajama shorts, I give him my show. “Just like this.”

“*Fuucck.*” His mouth drops open, watching my hand play under the silk of my peach shorts. He releases another button on his jeans. “Let me see your wet pussy again.”

“Let me see your cock.”

He’s looped the video. It starts again, which means we can torture each other all night because that’s what the past ten years have been for me.

It was torture without him making me confess, “So many times I did this. I fingered myself to you dancing in those movies.”

With my ankle propped on the tufted ottoman, I let him see flashes of my fingers sliding into my pussy.

He kneels on the ottoman in front of me, and his hips start matching the rhythm of my hand.

“Show me how you do it.” He stares. I never held back with him, not ten years ago or now. His body is my everything, my awakening, and my death. “Show me how you missed me, Cade.”

I can't believe it.

The sight of him so close again. The smell of him so near.

God, how I've ached for him for so long.

It makes the smack of my hand relentless, my palm striking against my clit to the tempo of his hammering hips.

It makes me demand, “Let me see you, Redix. Show me how you missed me too.”

He rips the last button of his jeans open to his thick base, and I moan at the sight while he insists, “Give me another taste.” Leaning across the narrow divide between the ottoman and the sofa, he braces his ripped arms beside me on the sofa, trapping me between them.

I lie back like he's over me, fucking me with those expert hips.

Licking his lips, he's inches over mine, and the heat of his flesh is so close it torches my skin without a touch.

He knows the rules of this strip. No touching, only teasing, “Come on. Remind me how sweet your pussy tastes on my tongue.”

I offer him my two glistening fingers to suck. The feel of his soft lips and warm tongue across any part of my flesh, even on my fingers, damn, I'm close.

His eyes close, sucking them with a groan before I return them to my ache for him.

“Let me taste you too.” I can see the drops of pre-cum. The dark spots on his light denim parch my mouth for his cream.

I'm desperate for any part of him, touch or taste. "Redix, please."

"You're so beautiful when you're gonna come." He pulls back and watches. "I know that look in your eyes; I put it there."

Yes, he did.

I'm in sweet pain for him. It has me writhing on the sofa, opening wide so he can see me plunge into my wet need. I'm rising so high for this fall from his sky eyes. *Let it destroy me.*

"Who made you come first, Cade?" His massive hand strokes over his length, barely hidden by his jeans. "Who, Cade? Who touched your tight pussy and fingered you so slow at first. Who found your clit and taught you how to come?"

My body knows, my thighs trembling at the truth, at the sound of his voice, at that look in his eyes, "*You.*" I'm lost in them and don't want to be found again.

The grip of his hand tightens over his shaft, along with a grind of his teeth.

"Say it. Say the name of the only man who makes you come. The one your pussy was made for. The one it begs for. The one it comes so fucking hard for."

It rips right through me. "Redix!"

His name bucks my hips, arching my spine, rolling my eyes back to the light, the explosion at the sight of him, the thought of him; it snaps right through me. It steals my breath with the biggest orgasm I've had in ten years.

Huffing for air, I need to see him.

He's watching me like he can read every line of pleasure written across my body because he can.

He wrote them.

His lips are trembling. His whole body is. He's going to come. I know him too. I'm so ready for it. Ready to come again at the sight of it, even in his jeans, I don't care. Everything about him is seduction.

But the look in his eyes cracks, and I don't recognize him.

"Fuck, Cade." He jumps up and storms down the hall.

"Redix?" My bathroom door slams shut. "Redix? What's wrong?"

I struggle to stand after coming so hard and with a twisted ankle.

What the hell?

I hobble down the hall to the white door of my guest bathroom.

"Redix? Are you okay?"

"Put your hand on the door." His voice sounds staggered, like his forehead is pressed against it and begging for me. "Cade, touch the door. My hand is too."

"Redix?" I hear the brush of his hand against the wood. I match my touch over his on the other side. "I'm touching the door, okay." I'd do anything for him. I'll always protect him too. "You're scaring me. What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong." His voice is dark but clear, like it's pressed against my lips, not the door. "Fuck, you're perfect. You're so fucking perfect for me and so beautiful." The staccato of his breath, I can hear it; he's about to come. "Every time, Cade, I think of you every time I do this."

"Then let me touch you. I want you too, Redix." Why am I crying? Because as odd as this is, it's beautiful. It's us. "I always have."

It doesn't matter how many years apart, how much pain separates us, or even a damn door—we belong together.

"Stay with me, Cade. Don't leave... oh fuck... I need to hear your voice."

"I love you, Redix." My lips, salty with tears, brush the door. "I never stopped loving you." With a painful groan of my name, his fist hits the other side. "No matter what, Redix." His deep gasps fill the air, flushing my body, recognizing the sound of him coming for me. "I love you."

I don't want to admit it, any of it, to him or me... but it's true.

We can't be within feet of each other and not feel it. We were bound together from the moment we met.

Silence fills the air.

"Redix?" I jiggle the door handle. It's locked. "You can open the door now." The water is running. Is he washing his hands? "Redix? Please. It's okay. Open the door."

Minutes I stand there, vulnerable with my love, alone and bewildered, scared in the hallway while his silence terrifies me.

Finally, the door opens.

"I gotta go."

He won't look at me.

I block his way. "Tell me what's going on."

"Let me by."

"No."

He grabs my arms, "Let me go, Cade," and shakes me. "Now!"

He has my heart.

"No!"

But I'm not afraid of him. Not his physical pain. I can defend myself from that.

But not this. My heart's in his grasp, and it's defenseless against him.

Please don't break it again.

"Talk to me. You used to tell me everything, all your problems."

"No, I can't. I can't tell you." His massive arms press me back against the wall, pinning me there. "Because *you* are my fucking problem."

The craze in his eyes, there's an agony there.

I see a man I don't know. A past I can't remember. A secret he's hiding from me. It fills him with so much pain... I can see it.

Then it happens again.

The act that hurts me the most. That rips my soul and breath away—the most excruciating turn of his body, of his heart leaving mine.

I slide down the wall at the sound of his slamming exit.

No more tears fall from my eyes.

They've left me too.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



REDIX

Keep Running by Geographer

DEAR CANDY CADE,

There's not a bone in a body I wouldn't break for you.
There's not a last breath I wouldn't give for you. There's not a
day I wake up, and you're not my first thought.

And I'm sorry.

I'm an asshole.

Because I'm embarrassed.

I didn't mean it. You're not my problem. You're my
answer.

I'm the problem.

I'm the broken one, and you're still perfect. You're more
amazing now.

You didn't let them break you. You're even stronger.

But they broke me.

Yes, I put my pieces back together, but it's ugly, all my scars, and I don't want you to see them.

I want you to remember me like we were.

Like how we used to be on the beach at night, lying on a blanket, we'd search the sky for shooting stars and then search each other. The way your touch and eyes used to adore every inch of me, like nothing was wrong with me.

You more than made me come. You made me believe in myself.

That's not true anymore, and that's why I run.

Because if I stay.

If I stop and let you look too closely, you'll see.

How half of me, the part you see, the part that danced for you tonight, it looks perfect. I make sure of it. It's my job.

The other half, the side I have to hide, it's fucked up. It's my secret.

And I'm scared that if you see that side of me, it'll break you too.

I want to tell the pilot to turn this plane around.

I want to go back to your place and pick you up and kiss away your tears and run away with you.

But you don't run. You're the brave one. You stay. You fight.

I know you don't understand, but this is how I fight for you. This is how much I love you. And protect you.

And I'm so sorry I hurt you again, but if you ever find out.

You'd run too...

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



IT'S BEEN A MONTH.

My ankle is healed.

I'm not. Like the skin under a blister, I'm raw. Hurt. Exposed.

I try hiding it. Combing through files and trying to solve these cases helps. The only ones who notice my heart stunned by pain are Jameson and Penny.

Letting Redix back into my life, if only for a few days, I should've known better.

He's back in LA. Probably fucking Angie. Probably holding her.

Does he think of me when he does?

He doesn't call. Doesn't text. It's the usual.

And like hell if I'll reach out for him. I'll starve on my last piece of pride before I make the same mistake twice.

I'm used to this. It doesn't hurt me anymore.

Yeah... I'm full of shit.

Penny gives me the perfect dose of compassion and best friend “I told you so.” The new mom in her adds a “I’m gonna fucking kill him if I see him” warning for good measure.

I half believe her.

But I might beat her to the killing.

Our history, the secret of what happened. It plagues my soul.

Someone needs to pay for it.

It works that way, right?

If I sacrifice myself to get rid of the evil, will I have revenge? Will Redix have peace? Will those victims have justice?

What’ll happen to me when I do it? The afterward.

I don’t care.

But with every year that’s passed. Every crime that’s been committed. Every victim that looks like me.

I will end it.

“Bryant.” Jameson’s voice sounds annoyed, pulling me back from hell. “If you don’t answer me, I’m turning on the dubstep.”

He reaches from the driver’s seat of his patrol car. His phone is inches from his fingertip.

“You play that shit, and you’re buying lunch today.”

We’re on our way to Shelter Cove. I gotta deliver this package for my dad that came to my house. I’m meeting him at the marina. I talked Jameson into coming with me and splitting some oysters for lunch, killing two birds with one fun stone.

“Well, then answer me.” Jameson grins. It’s cute. “What did you find on your wild goose chase?”

“It’s not a wild goose chase. It’s a score. Four of the victims so far were renting condos from Sunset Rentals.”

“That means five *weren’t* renting from them, remember?”

He parks his patrol car under the shade of a crepe myrtle.

“Yeah,” I answer, “but guess who’s the owner of Sunset Rentals and a partial silent investor in The Pelican?”

Jameson looks my way, intrigued by the new intel. “Who?”

“Our very own South Carolina’s youngest State Senator, Gentry Evans.”

He’s target number two.

“Why do you hate him so much?” he asks as we aim toward the marina slip where I’m meeting my dad.

“Besides his sexist, racist, homophobic politics?” I slide on my shades. “Everything. Gentry Evans is loaded with power, money, and pure malice. Trust me.”

“That’s your hate, not proof. We need evidence.”

“You and your evidence.” I know he’s right as I wave, spotting Dad on a yacht I don’t recognize. “When are you gonna learn to trust your instinct too?”

“When instinct wins us cases.”

Walking single-file, we make our way down the narrow dock.

If Dad’s height doesn’t make him stand out, his sun-bleached brown hair and handsome face do.

Yep, my dad, Jeff Bryant—he’s a catch.

“My Magnolia,” he calls out.

And I roll my eyes. That damn name is his fault. I hate it, but I love him.

Jameson and I jump aboard the Grady White. Dad already knows my sidekick. But I don’t know the man who emerges from the boat’s cabin, punching my breath away at the sight of him.

“Silas,” my dad says, “this is my daughter, Sergeant Cade Bryant, and the man who puts up with her on the daily, Deputy Grant Jameson.”

“Hey, y’all.”

This Silas guy smiles, and my nerves go haywire. *God, he looks so much like Redix.*

“Nice to finally meet you, Cade. Your dad won’t shut up about you.”

I clear my throat. “How do y’all know each other?”

Because fuck me sideways, who knew Dad had such hot friends?

“Silas owns Marshside Marine on Daufuskie,” Dad answers. “He’s helping me with my busted engine. This is his boat.”

I hand Dad the package, the new water pump he’s been waiting for.

“He’s taking me over to my old boat. I gotta use it for now,” Dad informs me. “So don’t go sneaking out with it like you have for the past fifteen years.”

Dad winks, and I blush. I don’t know why.

Like he didn’t figure out all the times Redix and I took his boat out for days of sex on the water.

But in the past few years, I’ve been using it for other reasons, mapping secluded rivers at night, where only gators are my company.

Does he know about that too?

“I hear Redix came home.” Dad sets the box down on the captain’s chair. “All of Tybee lost their shit over it. Every damn bar I go to, someone’s going on about him.”

“And on Daufuskie,” Silas adds, taking out a pocketknife to open the box. “Everyone always asks me if I’m his brother.”

It’s eerie. He looks like it. But I don’t miss how Silas keeps glancing up at me, his bright smile reaching his hazel eyes. Those are different.

“He left”—I hate telling my dad—“as usual.”

That speaks volumes to Dad. He cares for Redix. It hurt him too when he left years ago. And now, he's done it again, and he didn't even say hi to him.

"I see," Dad replies.

He was there that night. He knows pieces too. But the whole story?

Only Redix knows.

"What do y'all have new on those cases?"

Dad changes to a subject he knows doesn't destroy me. It only fires me up. Jameson fills him in on the details we know. More like what we *don't* know. We have no DNA. No fingerprints. There's evidence of assault but no trace of who's doing it. We're after a pro, and Dad's always curious.

Once a cop, always a cop.

"What do you know about Senator Gentry Evans?" I ask Dad.

That cuts his eyes at me.

One fact we know about Gentry Evans *won't* be said aloud, not with Jameson and this other hunk of a man, Silas, around.

The rest?

Dad purses his lips. "He and his family own half of this island. Got their fingers in every profitable pie and every judge on their bankroll." He eyes me, warning, "They're not to be fucked with."

Dad doesn't believe that. Rules piss him off. And law? And power? He hates those too.

That's why he made a horrible cop but a great vigilante. And why he's retired and divorced from Mama.

Yep, I'm a chip off his ol' block too.

"Gentry Evans brings his golf buddies around on his yacht." Silas tucks his long hair behind his ear, and my heart jolts. That gesture. It's so familiar. "I ain't ever seen so many entitled assholes gathered onto one vessel before in my life."

“I believe it.”

I’m afraid I’m staring because Silas is that stunning. *Just like him*. And he’s not wearing a shirt. His hot body is Velcro, and my eyes are stuck on it.

“When do they usually come around?”

“Why?” Jameson sounds more like my father than the real one next to me.

“Because maybe I should day-trip to Daufuskie.”

I give zero fucks for making it obvious. I’m going after Gentry Evans like stink on shit.

Dad says nothing. I see logic firing behind his eyes, knowing exactly what I’m up to.

Am I worried? Maybe.

But it won’t stop me.

“When’s Gentry usually there?” I deliver my most disarming smile to Silas.

It works. His smile back warms me in places I thought only Redix could. “During high season, the second and fourth Saturdays. Like clockwork.”

That gives me one month to find out more.

I have no evidence, but I know how evil Gentry Evans is. That’s all the proof I need.

And I trust a group of wealthy men gathered for sport like I trust stepping on a stingray buried in the sand—they’ll hurt you.

Jameson and I say our goodbyes. My stomach is growling for oysters.

Over lunch, he keeps eyeing me suspiciously.

“If you go out to Daufuskie, Bryant.” Finally, he says what’s bothering him. “I’m your backup. Promise me. This is my case too.”

“Copy,” I say, seeing a text light up my phone screen on the table. I grin. It reads:

Your dad gave me your number. This is mine. If you want that trip.

Or anything else. I'm interested.

Silas

Jameson's not pleased.

"Does that happen to you a lot?" He's smart; he doesn't need to read the text to read what happened. "You meet a man, and then he's coming after you?"

I stop smiling. "Yeah."

"What are you after?"

His sunglasses are off. I glance up and see it on his handsome face, and it's a vulnerable ask. I know what he wants, what he's after—me... in a gentle way.

"Revenge," I say with no apology.

Slurping down an oyster, my deal keeps falling into place.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



REDIX

DEAR CANDY CADE,

I'm gotta write until my hand cramps. Until I can put what I want to say to you in this journal but can't say to your face. Not with how you look at me, right through to my soul.

I'm back in LA.

This new series I'm doing is fun. You'd love it. I'm a rock star. I know. Not a stretch. The hair, makeup, and wardrobe are killer—all 90's grunge stuff.

I'm learning to play the guitar for the role too. It makes my days too short.

Because my nights are too long.

Because you're not here.

Because big shock; I fucked up again.

Do you know how many times I've almost called you? Or ditched out and texted you?

But what can I say except "I'm sorry."

And if that sounds pathetic and not good enough in my head, I know it will to your ears.

What I need to tell you is that I'm keeping you from getting hurt. But your smart Detective mind will ask the follow-up questions, so that won't work.

Remember all the times I protected you? I need you to. Then maybe you'd understand. How protecting you made me feel like a badass with his gorgeous princess. I know you hate shit like that, but it's true. I was my best when I was protecting you.

Even at thirteen.

We were at the bus stop with other kids. You were listening to my iPod and dancing around, and then suddenly, you grabbed my arm, freaking out.

You looked down at your white jeans, and I saw it too. You started your period. Your first.

I felt so bad for you. It was obvious. I mean, not like a crime scene, but there was blood. The bus was coming up the street, so we couldn't leave without everyone knowing. So I took off my sweatshirt and tied it around your waist to hide it. All the way to school, you rested your head on my shoulder. You didn't feel good. You said you wanted to throw up.

I was worried about you, but I whispered into your hair, "It's okay. I'll take care of you."

Fuck, you wouldn't let go of my hand that day, and I loved it.

Then I got into trouble in second block, remember?

That asswipe, Mr. Johnson, he made my life hell because I sucked at... well... everything. He called me out for wearing a ~~wifebeater~~. (Whoops. Sorry. You hate that word. I get it.)

I had on a tank underneath my sweatshirt.

And Mr. Johnson said in front of the class, "Mr. Dean, are you aware that you are violating the dress code today?"

Well, fuck him. I was protecting you, and I'd go buck naked to do it, so I answered, "Mr. Johnson, are you aware that your wife loves my dress code?"

Yep, two days in suspension was worth it.

It's our tragedy, Cade. I'd do anything for you. No matter how it hurts me.

I already have.

And still, I lose it when I get so close to you. Like I did the night I danced for you. You looked so damn cute in your shorts and bra, with your hair slicked back and no makeup on.

I love you like that.

Like I really do.

You're stunning. Natural. Confident. Seriously, Cade, no one has a face like you. They used to pay you thousands for it, but now it's all mine to worship.

I wanted to kiss you because I'm drawn to your lips like a goddamn magnet. So I cleaned your condo instead—anything to keep me from taking you to your bed.

And when I make you laugh?

You make my heart avalanche. Joy. Love. All kinds of feelings tumble through me.

I'll dance until my feet fall off for you.

But we're playing with fire. We always do. You get that look in your eyes when you get turned on, and it makes me so fucking hard. My body takes over watching you come.

Damn, I get lost in you, and I never want to leave.

You own me, Candy Cade.

No matter how far I run. No matter where I go. No matter who's by my side.

You must know I'm yours even if my body can't be anymore.

And you're right—Angie's in love with me.

I didn't notice it, but now that she's met you, she knows. I'm in love with you, and she's doing crazy shit.

Eric, my assistant, booked us dinner at Chateau Marmont. My manager wants me out with Angie for the paparazzi to "catch" us on a date.

It's all bullshit for the press.

In the past, Angie was good for the show and didn't cross a line. And she has a real boyfriend now. He's a nice guy and cool with our deal.

But last night, she followed me into the men's room. She'd been drinking and was all over me. She tried to get me to drink. She tried going down on me. She didn't care if we got caught or that I'm fighting to stay sober. I told her to stop. I was so fucking pissed off. She was breaking our deal, and I didn't want her.

Then she got mad and stormed out, saying, "Why? Can only your gorgeous model girlfriend have your body now?"

She has no clue.

No one does.

Not even you, Cade.

I wanted to drink that night. So bad. I ordered a beer from the bar and stood there in front of it for ten minutes before I walked away.

Because I feel so lonely.

Our secret is killing me, and the only thing I wanted more than that beer... was you.

I know it now. I think I always did.

The only reason I want to stay sober?

The only reason I want to live?

It's you.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



THERE ARE MORE PEOPLE THAN GRAINS OF SAND HERE.

It's Memorial Day, and Coligny Beach looks like Times Square on the Atlantic.

But not even the bad memories or crowd can piss me off because I have a date. Well, it's not a romantic one, but it's the first time I've felt excited in two months.

Yep, two months and ten years, and I need to change; anything to move on from Redix.

Maybe I'll take that Silas guy up on his offer. But I can't make it obvious. He's dad's friend. I'll wait until July, go to Daufuskie, and see what I can get on Gentry Evans. Going with a shirtless Silas? That'll be a bonus to explore.

Or maybe my "no dating a guy I work with" rule is bullshit.

Maybe I should give Jameson a chance.

Shit, with the way he's smiling at me now while my flip-flops dodge towels on the sand, headed his way? Some of our

work crew is sprawled under beach tents, and yep, exceptions can be made.

I've never dated a man. Why not start with two? Silas and Jameson. Come on. That'd be a fair try.

Scratch that. *Look at Jameson's happy trail.*

Make that a *hot* try.

I mean, Redix and I never dated. We were inevitable. There was no courtship, only pure combustion. Shards of him are still lodged in my heart. But they don't hurt.

I'm such a liar.

"There she is, *finally*." Jameson holds out my favorite beer. He already opened it for me.

"Sorry, y'all." I yank off my tank and shorts and stuff them in my beach bag. "I had lunch with Mama. She got her lab results yesterday."

"She's okay?" Penny looks worried, sitting in her chair under the tent with Nina, her baby girl, asleep in her arms. "It's not bad news again?"

"No, thank God." I take the beer Jameson offers me and plop down beside him. "All's looking good."

"Speaking of looking good..." Jameson no longer annoys me. "Bryant, your body in that tiny, white bikini is a felony offense."

"*Annnnd*.... here we go." Penny laughs. "Who's winning?"

"Me," I reply. "I have twenty-six. Deputy Horny has twenty-four, and you're behind at only fourteen."

How many times can we turn law enforcement into sexual innuendo is our favorite drinking game.

I'm the champ.

"Oh yeah?" Penny kicks a little sand my way. "Breast milk would leak your intelligence too."

"That's fifteen now." I'm glad Penny's back. "Keep it coming."

“That’s what he said,” Penny sings back.

Yep, we’re on a roll.

Jameson’s hand lightly brushes over my thigh while he reaches for the cooler, and...

It flips my stomach.

What the fuck?

Our flirting—it’s been a joke. Something to break the tension because I’m obsessed. Scanning through the files, searching databases, and online, I’ll do anything for the break we need.

Flirting with Jameson, I’m not trying to find love. I just want to find my smile again.

“You know, you two are obvious, right?” Penny teases me later.

Jameson and the other deputies are throwing a football. I was content holding my sleeping goddaughter. But that just made my happy stomach sour.

“What are you talking about?”

“You and Jameson.” Penny pops a frozen grape in her mouth. “Y’all are obvious as hell. Watch, you’ll fuck right here on the sand within the hour.”

“Oh, shit. That ruins it then.”

“Why? He’s *not* coming back. And even if he does, I’ll fucking strangle you if you give Redix Dean another chance. Give Jameson a chance.”

“Not if the whole office knows. I’ll never live it down.”

“What if y’all work out? What if office romance turns into something serious that no one can give you shit for?”

I switch shoulders, resting Nina on my left one while I watch Jameson laughing in the waves.

“Cops fucking *can* happen. Cops living happily ever after together—that doesn’t.” I glance at Penny. “Just ask my parents.”

The fact that my parents are opposites was a major factor in their divorce. The other two reasons bother me.

How Dad retired early because he snapped one night. He got too rough with a man caught abusing his own daughter, and Dad almost went to jail for what he did to him.

And then there was all the hell Dad caught from other cops because his wife became the Sheriff... and his boss.

When will all men be fucking adult enough to handle women in charge too? Not soon enough for my parents' marriage. It ended when I was twelve.

"I just wanna see you happy. You've been miserable for weeks." Penny points to the dozen men feet away. "Any one of those guys would give their left nut to be with you. I think Jameson is worth a first try. He's hot as hell."

"Nope." That's all I need to know. I've been so blinded by heartbreak that I almost fucked up... and fucked Jameson. "I'm going back to my M.O. No sense in breaking my one-night streak now."

"Well, we did have some fun, didn't we?"

"Yep."

I pat Nina's tiny back. I'm not ready for this yet though holding a sleeping bundle in my arms soothes all my broken edges.

"I met a hot guy on Daufuskie," I tell her. "He wants a date. And every year, thousands of Marines train minutes away. When I wanna get laid, I go into any bar in Beaufort, and it's like shooting sexy fish in a fucking barrel. Easy peasy, do me pleasey."

Penny howls back. "Do you remember that one Marine? The one before I met Hank?"

"The one who was hung to his kneecap and showed everyone at the bar?"

"I won more than a big bet that night. My God, I couldn't walk for days."

“I thought Redix was hung, but I swear, you fucked a horse that night.”

Penny sounds back with a believable *neighhhh* that has me rolling back in the beach chair. I have to set Nina down in her carrier.

“What’s so funny?” Jameson approaches, curious about our loud giggles.

“Penny’s gonna buy a horse.”

“You like to ride?” His innocent ask only adds to the joke.

“Oh, I *love* to ride”—Penny’s shameless—“Yippy-ki-yay, motherfucker.”

That does it.

I fall over laughing. God, I needed a day like this, back with my friends and not thinking about Redix Dean every damn hour.

I make it until five o’clock until it hurts again. Sipping another beer beside Jameson, I watch a cute couple walking by.

They’re teenagers, clearly in love. The smiles lighting up their faces brings it all back. Me and Redix. Particularly on this beach. Our beach. The one that went from our haven to our hell.

“Hey, Bryant, where’d you go?” Jameson nudges me.

“What?” I can’t take my eyes off the couple.

“I was telling you the good news. The one about the surveillance footage I found.”

That gets my attention. “What is it?”

“You mentioned a man with a parrot on his T-shirt, right?”

“That’s what Natalie remembers before she blacked out.”

“Well, I got a guy in a parrot T-shirt. I found it on some liquor store surveillance recorded last month.”

“Which store?” My pulse climbs, hope rushing through my chest with this major break in the case.

“The one off Pope Avenue.” Jameson tsks. “But you can’t see his face. Just the shirt. It wasn’t the right angle.”

“Fuck.” Hope leaves with my exhale. “Everyone goes to that liquor store. That’s like finding a drunk needle in a glass bottle haystack.”

“But it’s a lead. The first one we’ve had, so you’re welcome.”

“Sorry. You’re right.” I clink my beer to his. “Good catch.”

“Looks like we’ll be spending time at the liquor store.”

“Looks like we’re hunting parrots.”

I chew on this lead while I kiss Penny and Nina goodbye and while me and the guys pack up our gear. Throwing sandy tents in the back of Jameson’s Jeep, I notice dark clouds rolling in.

“Shit, the bottom is gonna fall out.”

“Did you ride your bike over?”

“Yeah.” I point to it locked up next to others.

“Throw it in. I’ll take you home.”

Thoughts of *should I* or *shouldn’t I* date Jameson have me biting my lip all the way to my place.

What if he’s the one?

What if I’ve been so blind to other men because Redix Dean has kept me in the dark for so long?

The one-night stands I have? I’ll only let a man fuck me from behind so I can close my eyes and imagine Redix instead. He’s the only man I feel safe with, the only one I really want. If I imagine him, I can come.

Yep, that toxic habit needs to stop.

I glance at Jameson.

“Something on your mind, Bryant?”

He knows my dilemma. The man is wicked smart. I don’t answer while he pulls into my parking lot and helps me with

my bike. Not that I need it; I just want more time to consider my next move. Jameson doesn't give me long. After I lock up my bike, he steps me back, gently pressing me against the grill of his Jeep.

“What's got you thinking, Bryant?”

Damn, he can be sexy when he's not so serious at work.

“Us,” I reply, my lips inches from his chiseled chin.

“Is there gonna be an ‘us’?”

I can feel his hard cock pressing against my hip. Something about his green eyes makes me question everything. I don't like all the answers I'm getting.

“There shouldn't be.”

“Why not?” His lips draw close, *very close*.

“Because we work together and have cases to solve.”

“And because she's still in love with me.”

A voice fires from the shadows, shooting straight into my heart.

“What the fuck?” Jameson's head snaps around.

I wrench away from his touch, knowing exactly what I'll see the second I peer around him.

Redix.

He's leaning against the wall beside the elevator to my building.

Waiting on me.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT by Elley Duhé

NOPE. I MADE A THOUSAND RULES ABOUT WHY THIS CAN'T happen.

I pull away from Jameson, rage hitting me like a bullet.

“Leave, Redix.” How dare he explode into my life again?
“You had your chance. And left. As usual. We’re done.”

“I need to talk to you, Cade.” He doesn’t budge.

“She said you need to *leave*.” Jameson’s steps threaten a confrontation. “Do it, or I’ll make you.”

“I’d like to see you fucking try.” Redix’s sneers can piss off the Pope. “Come on. Bring it, big boy.”

Redix has two inches and lots of muscle on Jameson, but Jameson has skills like me, ones untrained muscles can’t fight.

This can’t happen. Not again. Not another fight over me.

“Both of you put your dicks back in your pants,” I snap.
“We’re not playing whose is bigger because *mine* is, and I’m not dealing with any shit tonight.”

Jameson touches my arm. "I'll stay if you need me."

"She doesn't need you, dude." Redix keeps poking the bear. "And she *never* will."

That charges Jameson toward Redix, but I grab his arm and turn him around.

"Stop!" I gun my eyes up at his. "Don't be baited by him. Just go. I've got this."

Anger tenses his jaw. "You sure?"

"No one fucks with me." I offer him a smile to cool him off. "I'm fine."

"See, she's real fine with *me*." Redix taunts. "I'll take care of her *real* good."

"Shut the fuck up." I glare at Redix. "Ain't no one paying you for lines right now, so be quiet and pretty like you know how."

That turns Redix's sneer my way. Exactly how I plan. Anything to get these bulls back into their pens.

Jameson doesn't take his eyes off Redix while he backs away, climbing into his Jeep. He leaves without a word, and I feel bad. All Jameson does is everything nice for me, even swallowing his pride.

Throwing my bag over my shoulder, the sky begins to pour while I stomp off toward the stairwell. Like hell, I'm getting stuck in an elevator with that man.

"Cade, talk to me." His voice follows.

"Eat a bag of dicks, Redix."

"I'm ready to talk."

His steps don't retreat, following mine up the stairs.

"Too late because I'm ready to kill you."

"Fine, let's talk, and *then* you can kill me."

Dammit, he's hot on my heels all the way to my front door. My keys are in my hand, but I know better. Once I open it, he'll force himself into my heart again.

“I’m serious.” I turn my scowl at him. “I’m done talking to you. Keep following me, and I’ll arrest you for stalking because that’s what this is. Now leave.”

“Cade, I want to drink again.” The look in his eyes clings to mine for help. “I want to drink again, and I have a bottle in the car, but if I can talk to you, I won’t. I’ll be okay. I’ll make it another day.”

“Don’t you dare manipulate me like that!” The fear of it, how Redix teeters on the edge of death with his addiction; it’s hell. “This is your demon to kill, not mine! Go downstairs, throw that bottle away, and then leave like you always do. It’s your choice, Redix. All this time, you’ve had control over you and *me*... but not anymore.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry I left. I’m sorry I’m back at your door like an asshole. Okay?” His steps get too close. “Just let me fucking talk to you. Let me explain and tell you why.”

“After all this time, and now you’re ready because it’s what *you* need?” I bring my nose inches from his. “Yes, finally tell me, Redix. Which was worse? Everything that happened to us? Or the nothing you did about it?”

“Nothing? Is that what you think I did?” The agony in his eyes knifes my soul. “I did nothing *but* protect you from them, Cade.”

The truth bombs through me.

No matter how hurt or mad I am, I shouldn’t have said that.

I know that much.

It was all my fault.

They were after me, and Redix tried to protect me from those boys. The tragedy is that we both got hurt anyway. The guilt of it. The burden of it. It breaks me.

Before his eyes, I fall into a million pieces of pain that pour down my silent cheeks, imploding my heart, making breathing impossible.

He pulls me into his arms, and I collapse where I belong. Where everyone can attack us from the outside, but if we hold each other like this, with my heart pressed to his, they can't take this from us.

They can't take our love—this love we'll protect.

Redix can run all he wants, but he'll never leave my heart, and he knows it, so I let him back in. It finds us with no words, only tears in my place with the lights off and a spectacular lightning storm raging outside, over the roaring ocean, while we lie together on my sofa.

Redix wraps around me, pulling my back to his chest and holding my hands in his, and that's when I notice; *his big hands are shaking.*

They don't stop until I gently press my lips to them. Twisting his legs around mine, he buries his nose into the nape of my naked neck, the sound of his choppy breath, the feel of his chest breathing with mine; we don't need to talk. All we've needed is each other, to lie in our pain together until some of it washes away.

It feels like an hour passes while the storm blows over, and the night grows as quiet as we are.

"I've been sober for one year, two months, and thanks to you, one more day, Cade." His voice is hushed over my ear. "And in that time, I've been so alone. I haven't told anyone. I haven't been with another woman. After you, after ten years ago, I've never had sex sober. I couldn't get hard sober, and I didn't want to.

"I don't remember much of what I did or with who. And I'm so damn lucky all my tests came back clear. That God, I hope I didn't hurt anyone. But all I remember in flashes over the years was no matter who I was with; I was missing you."

My throat burns to the pain he shares, to the truth he dares to tell me.

It's been the same for me.

All I think about is him.

“I had to leave that other night because I was embarrassed.” He keeps confessing, “I don’t know my body now because it feels everything sober. I want to feel that with you again, but I can’t control it. I could come in ten seconds or rip you apart all night. That’s how powerful it is. That’s what I feel with you. And it scares me because I’d protect you all over again, even from my pain.”

“It’s okay.” I turn around in his arms. “It’s okay. I understand.” I cradle his head into my neck and hold him back. “We can just talk, and that’s okay.”

“I want to do more than talk with you, Cade. I want to laugh with you. I want to play games like we used to. We never stopped being kids together, and I loved that. If I want happiness, I have to find it with *you*.”

It’s my truth too.

I lift his chin and trace my fingertip along it. I want to ease his pain, our pain.

“What kind of games do you want to play?”

“Uno.”

“Uno?” I can’t help it. I laugh through tears. “Are you for real?”

“Yes.” His smile is instant. “I always beat you at that game. Everything else is bullshit because you’re too smart for me and always win.”

“Okay.”

I trace down his nose next; ideal masculinity blesses every feature of his face. His dark eyebrows. His dark stubble. The contrast to the light streaks in his hair. The way his lips are in a constant soft pout over a hard jaw. The way his eyes are a sky you dream about.

“I’ll play Uno with you again,” I grin, “and I’ll let you win.”

“Let me make you dinner first.”

“Good luck with that.” There’s peace in his arms, making my heart beat happy. “My cupboard is bare.”

“No, it’s ain’t.” He sweeps my long bangs back, tucking them behind my ear. “I went grocery shopping.”

The evidence is obvious.

“You kept the key to my place?” The one Mama gave him. *Typical, Gloria Bryant. She set us up.* “I’ll let you break and enter, only this once.”

“Don’t be mad. I had to put the ice cream in the freezer.” I don’t need to ask. “I want another ice cream date with you, but I’ve been dodging fans with phones for the past twelve hours, so we gotta stay here.”

“The units in this building are sold out all summer with your fans looking for you.”

“Sorry about that. Welcome to my hell.”

I’m thrilled to be back in it. And I know we can only talk about this in small doses, so I let it go. I’d rather have him than the truth, at least for a night.

It turns out, Redix is a great cook. He learned the skill his first year sober, and I reap the rewards of his love for Korean food.

“Here.” He plops an onion on the cutting board. “Chop this.”

I stare at it with a blade in hand. “How?”

He laughs, nudging my shoulder. “How can you *not* know how to chop onions? You’re twenty-eight and...”

“Don’t you dare say ‘and a woman.’”

“*And...* you have skills to kill a man with a knife, but you can’t slay an onion?”

He’s breathtaking when he smiles at me. When I let him teach me, wrapping his big body around mine, he guides our hands, and all I want to do is never let him go. The onion and truth make me tear up again.

“When I hold you like this”—his lips press to my ear—“it feels like we’ve been apart for ten minutes and not ten years. Is that weird?”

“No.” Everything feels right. “That’s called best friends.”

And it’s the best meal I’ve ever eaten, too.

Later, I sit on the kitchen counter watching him clean up because he won’t let me help.

“Tell me what it was like.” So much I don’t know about his life now. “Like, how did you go from Hilton Head to Hollywood?”

“I got in my car that next day and drove to LA. You hear about actors who struggle for years, but I lucked out. My modeling portfolio and connections had me an agent by the time I got there.” He clicks the dishwasher shut. “I landed *Romeo Returns* within my first month, and it’s been a wild ride ever since.”

“What’s your relationship with Angie?”

I won’t tell him how the thought of them together makes me sick, how I get jealous over no man but Redix. But he winces like he knows anyway.

“She’s tricky.”

That hurts. “How?”

I have to know. I’ll never be the other woman, other Uno player, or whatever we are.

“My manager introduced us and said she’d be good for me. Angie’s got a show and wants publicity. We did the awards circuit together, and she gave the interviews, repeating my publicist’s stories. We’re a PR stunt, not love.

“Then I went out one night to a club without her. I guess I was so lonely in the lie that I got so wasted, and I almost died. Eric, my assistant back in LA, found me barely alive on my front steps. I didn’t even make it inside. I went into rehab for six months, and Angie stuck around for that and the year since.”

“She’s in love with you.”

“I fucked her twice before rehab, not since. She knows the deal. We’re business and friends. Having her on my arm keeps the focus on our fake relationship, not my real addictions.”

I stare him down, sharing a look with him that speaks a thousand words while I insist.

“Nothing happens between us if you’re with someone else, fake or real.”

Redix holds my stare, he knows my mind won’t change, so he reaches into his back pocket for his phone. Pressing a few buttons, he places a call.

“Hey, Ang.” Silence. “Yeah, I’m fine. I’m back home.” Silence while he talks to her with his eyes on me. “Yeah, I’m with *her*.” My cheeks warm. “And I’m gonna kiss her tonight.” My heart jolts. “I’m gonna make this perfect with her again.” My stomach flips. “So I wanted to tell you. To be honest. We cool?” Silence, while my mind dizzies. “Yep. You too. Bye.”

It’s just like that.

Do I feel bad for Angie or good for us? I don’t know, but that’s Redix. At least he told her the truth before he steps between my thighs, spread open on the countertop.

Is this really happening?

Ten years and we’ll finally kiss again? I’m floating above a reality I can’t believe.

“I could do it right now, Cade.” The satin of his lips slides over mine, and the room spins. “But I mean it. I’m gonna make us perfect again.”

Turning around, he opens the freezer. The couple of minutes he takes to prepare a lemon sherbet ice cream cone finds my heart overwhelmed by how he remembers.

Urging his way back between my thighs, he presses his lips to the scoop, and the heat of his mouth melts the cream. He holds the cone up to mine to do the same while asking.

“Magnolia Cade Bryant, can I kiss you again all night?”

“Don’t call me that.”

I smile with drips from my lips, and he’s my match with drips from his.

“Well then, shut my mouth up with yours.”

With my sudden inhale, his lips are sliding sweetly over mine, and it’s a rush of lust and tears pulling me back into him. The return of us, it’s crushing me, and I love it. It has his hand dropping the cone in the sink and pulling the nape of my neck into his grasp so we can have more. More of us. More of our love. More of our passion. With every gentle swipe. Every light lick. Everything about our reunion fills the tiny kitchen with our moans.

Redix cradles my jaw in his massive hands and won’t stop with his kiss, with his tongue. And I taste him—lemon and tears—and oh my God, *I’ve missed him*. It surges from my lips, firing through my core and wetting my sex.

It’s sudden. It’s powerful. It’s every need I have demanding him again.

I wrap my legs around him and draw him in. With a groan into my mouth, he grabs me even tighter, his hips thrusting between my thighs. My heart, my body, I burst because he’s sober... *and hard as hell for me*. The steel of his shaft crazes my body for more, so much more; I’ll never get enough of him.

He grabs my hips. “Candy Cade.” His nose nuzzles against mine while we catch our breath. “Do you know why I *really* call you that?”

“Why?” I pull his hair knot free so I can lace my hands through his thick mane again.

“Because you’re the sweetest thing in my life.” Strands tumble over his shoulders while he drags his thumb over my bottom lip. “You’re the only one this special to me.”

That truth has us reaching for each other, our lips and tongues searching again and again, finding the pieces of us we

lost along the way.

He picks me up, and I hold onto him while he walks us back to the sofa. I'm losing time with my body wrapped around his. Lying me down, he's on top of me and back in my arms.

We kiss for so long that my lips swell and my muscles go liquid, weak with pent-up desire. I can feel his massive need, too, urging into me.

It's a pain I can't bear anymore.

"Redix, what can we do?" I huff through our kiss. "I don't care if you come in ten seconds or rip me apart." My tongue tangles with his, and whose groan is deeper; I don't know, but I rip my mouth away. "Just touch me again."

He lifts my tank top off, and his eyes darken at my white bikini top underneath. The day on the beach, it's still warm on my body.

"Damn," he rasps, "you smell like suntan lotion." He gently bites my neck, murmuring down my flesh, "This smell on you makes me horny as fuck."

My cotton shorts are next. He tugs them off, and I hope he'll mount me right here.

"This is what I mean." He stares down at my tiny bikini bottom, taunting him. "I worry that I want you so bad I'll hurt you."

I take his hand, "Then start at the beginning, like the first time you touched me," and place it between my thighs.

It was Redix who found my desire. Taking his time with me, he slowly searched until he made my back arch, answering, "Yes." I had tried as a teen, touching myself. It felt good, but I never got there, my frustration worsening until Redix finally unlocked my body and he's held the key ever since.

Lying next to me on the sofa, he thrills my sex again, sending shocks through me as he pulls my bikini top off, cool air pebbling my nipples.

“Fuck, you’re so goddamn beautiful,” he growls, tugging my bottoms off next. The exposure, the anticipation, he knows every move to take me there.

“Spread your legs for me, Cade. *That’s* how you like it.”

Yes, I do. Open only for him, the brush of his fingertips tickles over my folds. Redix knows my secrets.

“You like it slow.” He whispers in my ear. “You like me to tease you, to take my time, to get your pussy so damn wet.”

His mouth is next, his tongue matching his light strokes; its wet caress indulges my nipples, lifting my hips for more of his touch inside.

“Redix, please.” I need more.

“*Shhhh*. We got all night.”

His fingertips are tickling up and down, his touch dancing over where I need him but he’s not touching me there.

“Let’s enjoy this.” He is with his middle finger circling, tracing sweet torture over where I’m open, slick, and aching for him, but he doesn’t enter. “We’ve waited so long for it.”

I let him take me slowly through the tease like he knows how. He was the first one here, and he’s so good at it.

It has me spreading for him, craving more, and loving the lack of sensation; the lush caress of his touch over my soaked sex until I feel it. It’s here, thrashing inside me and wanting to reward us.

“You’re ready.” His mouth leaves my nipples dripping before he hums over my ear. “You’re so wet and ready for me, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” I want to cry.

He kisses my ear. “Beg for me.”

“Please, Redix.” He’s teased me to snap.

“Again.”

“Please make me come.”

He grabs the nape of my neck, squeezing hard and ripping my gaze to his.

“Is that what you do? You come thinking about me?”

“Yes. Only you.”

“*Now, Cade.*”

He spans my pussy so hard, hitting my clit and breaking me in half as my back, my neck, and my shoulders bow off the sofa with a loud scream. The climax, the satisfaction, the ache; they hit me simultaneously because he’s not inside where I need him.

It’s not enough.

It’s my pain and pleasure, and he knows it, priming me for more.

“Again,” he growls, staring at me, claiming me, and looking so fucking hot. He’s not stopping with two of his fingers slowly sliding into my clenching cunt.

And I can’t stop the yearning, my loud moan at his penetration, at feeling his flesh enter me again.

“Redix, please, you can be harder now.” At seventeen, I needed him to be tender, to be slow. Now my mature body, my experienced sex, demand his hard advance. “Harder.” I cup my hand over his and shove his fingers deeper inside me. “I want you so fucking hard.”

“Like this, Cade?”

Devilish delight takes his eyes. It’s scary, and I want it as his hand starts to pound, his fingers taking me while his palm pummels my clit.

“You love it like this, don’t you?” He has my body twisting for his touch, writhing and rolling to get every inch of him. “Come on. Show me how much you need me inside this sweet, wet pussy.”

I spread even wider for his force while his mouth takes my nipple harder than ever. It makes me cry out for him so loud...

The world can hear how desire denied for so long sings from your lungs, how you don't want to breathe. You only want more.

I only want Redix.

His lips hover over my nipple, his taunts and touch driving me mad.

“You like it hard like this?” His hand jerks, his long fingers curving deep inside, all the way to my core. “You like it rough, Cade?” He's found where I'm so tender. “Because I can be so fucking rough with you.” He's so intense, making my head lash, not in refusal. “I want you *that* bad. I always have. I want to fuck you and rip you apart until you come a million times for me.”

My body begs with my words, “Redix, don't stop.”

I'm shaking with tremors from a depth I've never felt. A surge of sensation, pain, and pleasure whirls inside my sex to the sensitive spot he's pounding, unrelenting to the place he's claiming as his.

“For me, Cade.” His eyes lock on mine. “You're *all* for me.”

He watches in awe how with no sound, I fall apart for him, quaking over him, every muscle contracting while I feel the tide rush over his fingers. Stars fill my vision while my pussy is pulsing so hard over his touch that I can't move, I can't breathe. My body seizes while I release everything I've held inside for him for so long, his kiss taking my gasps until I find logic and breath again.

“Fuck, look, Cade,” he says. “Look at what I can make you do now.”

His hand drips with my clear arousal. I feel it pooling under me too. He puts his fingers in his mouth, sucking the new taste of me, the well he tapped before he swears.

“Goddamn.” There's wonder in his eyes. It matches mine; surprised he made me come like that. “Fuck, we belong together.”

He dips in for another taste, making me moan before licking his fingertips wet with my cum; he's watching me. He's hungry. The tent in his jeans and the strain in his eyes look agonizing.

"Can I touch you too?" I want everything with him but don't want him to run away again. "However you want."

He sits up and rips his T-shirt over his head, throwing it on the floor before he unbuttons his jeans and lies back beside me.

I love how tall he is. How big everything is on him—hands, feet, cock. How everything about him makes me feel safe beside him.

"Like this." He picks up my hand and trails it down his sculpted torso. "Touch me like this, like it's really you again, like I've been imagining you for so long."

His skin is hard silk, and I remember how he likes it.

How he loves my lips on his chest, my tongue licking his nipples. It all comes back to me while I skim my fingertips from the base of his barely exposed cock to his belly button. Back and forth, all night long, I could treasure his flesh. And his smell. Vanilla and leather fill my nose while my mouth travels down his iron chest to his rock-hard abs, flinching softly at my kiss.

Damn, he's beautiful.

I linger over his hips, covered by jeans. I know he's commando underneath. I know what's hidden under his jeans. But something is different for him, the way his ribs are panting.

"Can I touch it?"

"Yes," he barely answers.

I let him do it. He pulls his jeans open, revealing the tattoo on his right hip bone. It matches the one on my left hip. Two small dorsal fins, dolphins breaking the surface side-by-side.

I trace over the primitive black lines and the memory we share.

The first time Redix was inside me, the first time we had sex at eighteen, two dolphins swam around the boat. We could hear them in the water, so we peeked over the starboard side and laughed. There they were, like we were busted... or blessed. We took it as a sign and got the tattoos the next week, permanent marks where our bodies met, where we joined and still are.

I don't ask; it's impulse. Pressing my lips to his flesh, I kiss his tattoo, but suddenly, he recoils. Like I touched him with a hot knife.

"Cade." He stops me. "Touch me instead."

He pushes down his jeans, revealing his length resting heavy on his left side. *Good god*, I'd forgotten how big and thick he is, how gorgeous he looks like this.

"Come up here and kiss me while you do it," he says.

His hand guides mine over his hard shaft; its warm velvet under my clutch. Touching his thick cock again wets me even more while my lips skate over his.

"It's okay if it's ten seconds," I murmur into his kiss. "We can do this all night."

And he groans, letting me.

Three times I touch him like this.

Each one is like he's discovering something new. Or remembering a pleasure long forgotten.

A few times, I've been so drunk to the point of numbness, but for Redix, for nine years, he was. How it must feel for him to be so awake again in his body after all this time. It's like it's our first time but without all the awkwardness. Only pure trust and raw desire are here.

The first time is fast. My strokes make his body shake, his gaze in awe and prisoner to mine.

"God, Cade. Don't stop. *Fuuuccckk*."

He keeps my fist pumping, his lips trembling, and he's all mine and vulnerable in my tight grip. He doesn't grunt the first

time. He just comes over my hand with creamy ropes over his belly and sweet relief all over his face.

It's so beautiful.

He barely goes soft before he wants me like that again. Like he can't get enough.

The second time he trusts me more. He lets go of my hand and lets me indulge him. He lasts longer, writhing and moaning, thrusting into my grasp, into my tight twist over his tip, and my long wrap pumping down to his base.

“Oh fuck, Cade!”

He keeps swearing it and getting him off gets me so wet. He's taking longer and fucking my fist like I need him to fuck me with those incredible hips, strong and hard and banging into my grip. His hand cups my breast, palming its weight while his gaze holds mine.

“You're gonna make me come again,” he huffs. “Shit, you feel so good.”

His groan is so loud, his thighs shaking while he spills his cum over us.

The third time is an hour later. With my body pressed against his, feeling my ragged breath on his chest, my hand gripping him hard, he knows what I need too—his hand between my thighs.

And we do it.

At twenty-eight, we could do more at all that we've already shared, but we don't need to. Not tonight.

It's our touch, our bodies finally together, and we only need each other to be safe and sighing the other's name.

By early morning, we're a sticky mess on my white leather sofa, and don't care. The sun will be up soon, and so will our second chance together.

“Should we shower?” He won't stop kissing me.

“Not yet.” I don't ever want him to leave. Not one part.

“We’re covered in my dry cum.” He’s not shy about it, grinning, “And yours and it’s hot as hell.”

“Yes, and I only want more of you.”

He rolls on top of me, gazing down like he’s finally home.

“I only do it with you,” he confesses. “I can only come for you.”

And suddenly... I believe him. How with all those women, it wasn’t him. Just his shell. His body barely reacting on instinct.

But with us, it’s always more. We couldn’t be more alive than when we’re together.

He kisses my forehead. “Can we sleep in your bed?”

Fear shoots through me. “No man has ever slept in my bed. I’ve never fallen asleep with another either.”

He knows why.

“Makes me still special then.” He kisses my hair softly. “Like old times. We’ll fall asleep all messy and on the couch together.”

I turn and pull a throw blanket over us before he hugs my back to his chest. We settle into each other, into our love still clinging to our skin, and I don’t want to be anyplace else.

“Thank you, Candy Cade.” His voice gets so deep when he’s tired.

“For what?” And I get so soft in his arms.

He’s quiet for a moment before trapping ten years of pain into one sentence.

“For saving my life too.”

And I squeeze my eyes shut to my tears, to Redix’s hands in mine again.

The weight of us is brutal and beautiful, and we hold on, sinking together.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



IT'S TOO DARK.

I'm trying to find him, my feet stumbling over mounds of sand. Terror fills my lungs when I think I hear his groans of pain.

I'm hurting too.

“Redix!” I scream into the black wall of night. Only the ocean answers back with crash after crash.

“Redix!” It screeches from my soul, shredding my vocal cords.

I have to find him.

I have to save him.

It's all my fault.

A cracking noise startles me out of my nightmare. I shoot straight up on the sofa.

My police radio. It calls out across the dawn of my living room...

“We have a possible ten-ninety-five. Coligny Park. White female. Unresponsive. Medic is en route.”

I jump up and grab the radio from its charger. “Bryant. One-forty. I’m en route.”

It sounds next across the room. “Jameson. Two-twelve. I’m en route.”

“What’s going on?” Redix mumbles from the sofa while I dart down the hall to my bedroom. I grab a pair of khakis and a white polo with the Sheriff’s emblem.

“Work,” I call out over my shoulder, throwing them on.

“Will he be there?”

Suddenly, his voice is behind me while I pull on my boots.

Guess he heard Jameson’s voice.

“Yes, he will. It’s his work too.”

I smooth my hair, tucking my bangs back before I clip on my duty belt. My gun is still secured in its holster.

“The real question is”—I turn to Redix leaning in the doorway—“will you leave again?”

He gently grabs my hand while I brush by him.

“I’ll be here, with you, for the week. We can talk about the rest when you get home.” He kisses me before saying, “Be safe.”

I screech to a halt.

I’ve never had someone worry about me.

Not even Mama. Or Dad. If they did, they didn’t say it. Like it’s taboo.

“Thanks.” I peck his cheek before rushing out the door.

Fifteen minutes later and Jameson beats me to the scene. I swear he sleeps in his uniform.

Medic’s already here. The victim is loaded into the back of the ambulance. Jameson’s interviewing the man who found her. He’s a local out for his morning run and not a suspect.

“She has no ID.” Jameson steps to the side, debriefing me.
“No phone. Nothing.”

And I don’t miss his terse voice, his eyes wanting to ask about Redix.

But we have a job to do.

“I’m going with her,” is all I say.

“I’ll meet you there.”

The ride to the hospital lets me study the victim. Early twenties. Brunette. Yellow sundress. A red stain spilled down the front of it. White sandals. Blue toenails with a sand dollar painted on her big toes. It’s a fresh pedicure—no sunscreen or sand damage.

I want to vomit.

Another victim in yellow.

Another victim who looks like me ten years ago.

The guilt is vicious.

After an hour in the emergency room, she wakes up. I want to hold her hand, but we haven’t collected evidence yet.

“Hey there.” I give her my softest smile. “I’m Cade. I’m a detective. You’re in the hospital, and you’re safe. Can you tell me your name?”

The way the victim searches around, her eyes terrified while reality comes back to her—it breaks my heart.

“Kayla,” she whispers.

“Hey, Kayla. I’m not leaving your side, okay? We’re going to take care of you.”

It takes three hours. In that time, Kayla consents to the rape kit. I pray for more evidence this time. It doesn’t get answered. It’s the same M.O. Proof of assault. No trace of who did it.

Kayla uses my phone to call her friends. She’s renting a condo with them—a bridesmaids party here from Georgia for the week.

“When are you scheduled to check out?” I gently ask.

“Today.”

“Do you know the company you rented through?”

“No, but Amber, the bride, does.”

“Okay.” I jot notes on my steno pad. “I like your pedicure. Did you get it yesterday?”

“Yeah.” Kayla’s smile is weak. “We all got mani/pedis before we went out last night.” She gives me the place’s location but can’t remember the name. I recognize it. It’s close to that same liquor store.

“I remember the bad storm last night,” Kayla stares at the ceiling. “The Pelican was packed because everyone came in from the patio. I couldn’t move. It was so hot. I was drinking to cool off. I’m not a big drinker. I get migraines from it. You have to believe me. I’m not that kind of woman.”

“Kayla, I believe you.” I stand beside her bed. “I believe you and every kind of woman, ones who never drink, ones who do, ones who get high or are just having fun. You have no reason to lie and every right to get justice.”

“Will you help me? Will you find him? I don’t want another woman hurt.”

“Oh, I’ll get him. So help me, God, it’s a deal.” She nods with relief. “Do you remember how that stain got on your yellow dress?”

Yellow?

My friend, Pamela Ryan, it hits me.

She wore a yellow dress when she disappeared. I had borrowed that same dress from her and wore it that night—ten years ago. I didn’t want to return it, but she asked for it. It was her favorite.

And now it’s my curse.

“We were in a group,” Kayla answers. “We were dancing. Guys were around us.” Kayla closes her eyes. “Someone

knocked my arm. I remember because the drink was sticky down my chest.”

“Do you remember who bumped you?”

“No.” Kayla pauses. “Stripes. Navy and white stripes. I remember a guy’s sleeves. They were long, and I thought it was weird because it’s like Memorial Day and so hot.”

When Kayla’s friends arrive, they confirm the same. “Do you remember anyone in a parrot T-shirt?”

The women exchange glances, shaking their heads no.

I ask Amber, Kayla’s friend, who she rented their condo from.

“Sunset Rentals,” she says, making my empty stomach twist.

That’s five from that rental company—the one owned by Gentry Evans.

Out by the nurse’s desk in the Emergency Room, I comb back through my notes.

Sunset Rentals.

Why target renters the day before they leave? One—they’re relaxed, in trusting-vacation mode.

And two—I seethe—police procedure.

If you target someone before they have to check out, it makes it hard for us to interview the victim, to collect all the evidence.

Sure, the victim can stay longer, but by then, they want to escape from here.

Smart tactic.

Dumb assumption because I’m ready. I sleep with my radio.

“We found a lighter at the scene.” Jameson startles me. I didn’t see him come in. “We’ll run the prints on it but can’t be sure it’s relevant.”

“It’s a lead, right?” He’s not smiling back at me. “What did the cameras show?”

That park is under surveillance; any dumbass would know it.

“Nothing,” Jameson replies. “We got her walking up from the dark beach and stumbling before she collapses by the bench.”

“Shit.”

He’s not stupid enough to get caught on camera. It’s like he knows where all the cameras are—more importantly—where they *aren’t* on this island.

I check my phone. “It’s almost eleven. I’m going to The Pelican. That’s the third victim from there.”

“You want backup, or am I kicked out of this too?”

“I’ll take the backup.” I ignore his jab. “You drive while I dig online.”

We escort Kayla out of the hospital to her friend’s waiting car. I give her my card. “Call me or email me if you remember anything or have questions. Either way, I promise I’ll keep in touch.”

Jameson drives and doesn’t say much. He plays Bob Marley while I tap away on the laptop in his car, searching for the nail salon owner where Kayla and her friends went.

Because if there’s anything Sheriff Gloria Bryant has taught me, if you want to find a criminal... start at the top.

That’s where most of them are.

“Guess who owns that nail salon?” Fury strikes me at the find.

“The same man who owns half this island?”

“Yep. Senator Gentry Evans.”

I text Penny. When she’s on shift, she can go check that salon out.

While we continue our drive, Jameson finally cracks. “Did you let him stay?”

“It’s complicated.”

His lips press in a line of anger. “Broken hearts and Redix Dean aren’t complicated. It’s his M.O. It’s clear as fucking day, Bryant.”

I stare out the front windshield, unsure how to answer.

He’s not wrong.

“I’m sorry I got you in the middle of all this,” is all I can say.

“I’ll get in the middle of anything for you.”

I’m about to thank him, but he parks the car with a hard brake. We’re at The Pelican, and work is the priority.

“Let me handle this one.” I see a woman, a server taking a smoke break by the back door.

I get out of the car and signal her my way, out of the camera’s range at the door, while I ask her if the owner or manager are in.

“Not yet,” she says. “They always run late.”

“Typical.” I keep my smile true, and she grins back. “What’s the manager’s name?”

“Our Bar Manager, he’s Derek Baucom and a new, giant pain in the ass.”

“Really?” Yep, loose lips *and* pissed-off women can sink ships. “How so?”

“He brought in his man-crew from New York and won’t let us women tend bar anymore and make the good tips. It’s bullshit.”

“Sounds like it.” And it sounds like the perfect cover for a crime. “Did he work last night?”

“Yep.”

“When’s he usually back in?”

“Late.” She flicks her cigarette. “But he’ll be here early Tuesday because like hell if I’m opening for him all week.”

“Thanks.” I shake her hand and step back toward Jameson’s car, all that intel swimming in my skull.

In the minutes it takes for Jameson to get me back to my car at the crime scene, I search social media for Derek Baucom and my starving stomach twists.

“Look at this.” I show him my phone screen. “Derek Baucom, their new Bar Manager, posted a month ago. Seems he owns a long-sleeved navy and white striped pullover.”

Finally, smiles lift our faces.

“It’s a lead,” we say in unison.

Yep, this is why I won’t mess things up with Jameson.

Too much is on the line.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



REDIX

Her Touch by SYDE

DEAR CANDY CADE,

I'm sitting on your couch, and damn! I'm happy. I don't even need to be in your bed.

I just need you.

Besides, we used to sleep together on the couch all the time. Like that one afternoon, we fell asleep watching *One Tree Hill*.

You loved that show but I hated it. I only watched it to be next to you.

Holding you against me like that, I had the hottest dream. Something about your tits and my cock, and we woke up to my cum in my shorts and on your back.

Yes, you were my first wet dream. But we were seventeen then, and it'd been a while since I had one. But you didn't laugh at me.

You just rolled over, said you thought it was hot and started kissing me. Your hand went down my shorts, and I got hard again, and in a few more minutes—I swear with feeling your hand stroke my cock for the first time—I was coming again for you.

Shit, it's making me hard now, and I'm twenty-eight.

God, my body is waking up to your touch.

Last night, I can't believe how much I felt with you. But it makes sense. I've dulled my senses for so long. Now I'm wide awake... and sorry... and so fucking horny for you.

But it's more than wanting to fuck you again, Cade.

I want a life with you.

Mine's been so grey, like a silent film clicking on reels.

I swear I don't know how I've survived so long.

But now I'm alive with you.

And you're damn Technicolor.

I forgot how good this feels, me still smelling you on my skin and knowing I can have more soon. I haven't felt hope for so long.

Until now.

But then I remember our dark past and what you can't know. What I can't tell you.

How far back does our hell go?

More than ten years.

You told me about it. How when we were fifteen, TJ and Gentry bullied you on the bus. I'm so sorry I wasn't there that day to protect you.

But you told me how that senior—Charlie Ravenel from over on Daufuskie—punched TJ in the dick. They left you alone for a while because no one scared her. And she was hot, which intimidated the boys, including me.

And I watched it.

You changed after that. You started doing martial arts with your dad. It's like he wanted you to learn to fight back too.

But it didn't stop those two assholes.

TJ and Gentry.

I knew they were after you.

So that made them come after me too.

But that night.

It wasn't just TJ and Gentry.

I don't know who the third guy was, but he drove the car. You never saw him, and I didn't recognize him either. But I can't forget the tattoo on his forearm. His right one. It's the mudflap girl you see on trucks.

He was the worst one. Bigger and older. He's why I can't hear so good out of my right ear. He punched it so hard it bled and rang for weeks.

Fuck, my hand's shaking. I gotta stop.

I'm not doing this. I'm not remembering more.

I told you enough last night, and now you're giving us a chance, and I'm not ruining it.

We're going to be happy now.

I'm going to spoil you, Magnolia Cade Bryant.

I know what to do, where to go, and everything so that I can prove it.

How much I'm gonna love you 'til I die.

CHAPTER TWENTY



AN EMPTINESS GREETS ME WHEN I GET HOME. I HEAR NOTHING.
My place is spotless.

“Hello?”

Silence.

It drops my nervous heart, and my logic fears the worst.

He left again. He got jealous about Jameson.

Last night, we were too intimate. It was too intense.

Me falling asleep in his arms? It reminded him of all we
lost.

I’m fooling myself. Redix and I walk a fine line between
desire and disaster, and he’ll always run. He’ll always leave.
He can’t take it.

Can I?

Our love is a tightrope over hell. I teeter on it, walking
down my hallway with a familiar ache threatening my chest.

My bedroom door is closed. Pushing it open, my heart
leaps.

My Léger purple dress is on the bed; my Louboutin heels are placed on the floor. *He didn't leave.*

A magnolia flower sits beside my black clutch. Fuck him, I grin. *I hate magnolias.*

Glancing into my bathroom, a note is written in lipstick on the mirror, and I walk in.

*You're looking at the most
beautiful woman alive.*

Be ready at 7.

It's a date.

With an Asshole

Looking back at my bed, I'm shocked. How did he have time to buy those? A new pair of white lace panties and a matching bra are there too.

What's this sensation?

Hope. Romance. My first date with anyone.

With Redix.

I check my phone and have four hours to get ready and a text.

PENNY

Why do I feel like you're about to get your heart broken?

Again!

It takes her one ring to answer. "Please tell me it's not true."

"Let me guess; Jameson has a big mouth."

“Jameson has a broken heart.”

“I never promised him anything, and we never even kissed. And thank God,” I say, “because we work together and have nine unsolved cases and—”

“And you have a hot, jealous, unstable, famous ex-fiancé who no man can compete with,” Penny adds before I can keep explaining why this bad risk is a good idea.

“I love him, Penny.” I watch my face in the mirror say it; never have I looked more certain. “We have a lot to work out, but I need to give us a chance.”

Silence.

I hear Nina crying in the background.

“Is this his *only* chance?” Penny finally speaks. “Promise me this is the *last one*.”

“I promise.”

Do I really? Will I ever be over Redix?

I hear her pick Nina up. “Did you at least fuck him? Please tell me you did so some of this would be worth it.”

“Not really.”

I start rummaging through my makeup drawer.

“How do you *not really* fuck Redix Dean? One hundred and thirty million of his followers would.”

“I guess we’re going slow. His sobriety. My broken heart. Us being back together. It’s a lot.”

I’ve told Penny our history—every young-love detail up to that day.

When Penny asked why we broke up, I had to lie. I told her that Redix wanted to go to Hollywood and didn’t want to be tied down to me.

That story protects her because I can’t get her involved, not in my deal.

No one can know.

Especially Redix.

“That sounds like a recipe for devastation.” Penny doesn’t sugar-coat. I love that about her. “Are you happy? I need to hear you say it with no bullshit.”

I look up and consider my reflection.

A light is in my eyes. A genuine smile is there. I’m glowing, looking through the note Redix left me.

“Yes, I’m very happy.”

“Okay. I’ll holster my weapon for now. But he’s dead if he hurts you again. And clean this up with Jameson. I got enough shitty diapers at home; I don’t need them at work.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I smile. “Speaking of—work your magic at that nail salon this evening. Ask if someone was hanging around the same afternoon as Kayla and her friends.”

“Copy,” Penny replies. “What are you working on?”

“I got a Bar Manager to schmooze Tuesday.”

“Please,” Penny huffs, “just smile at him, and he’d confess serial murders to your gorgeous face.”

I take my time getting ready after our call ends.

Penny’s just protective over me. I am a bit too, but God, I’m so ready for this. Every part of my body, I prepare it for Redix, for whatever we’ll do, I can handle it. Besides, it makes me happy and horny, and time flies.

My doorbell rings promptly at seven. My hands shake, opening the door, and every reason why stands before me.

Fuck me now and always.

He takes my breath away.

No shoes on groomed feet. Perfectly tailored black trousers. A matching dinner jacket. A tissue-thin white V-neck T-shirt showing off his smooth, carved chest. Hair tumbling down. One hand in his pocket and a “The Devil’s Here for Your Soul, Ladies” smile on his face.

This is Redix Dean.

From behind his back, it stutters my breath; he hands me a pink tulip.

“Sorry.” His grip was so tight he broke its stem. “Guess I’m a little nervous.”

My ankles go weak. If I cry, I’ll mess up my makeup. “I don’t have a gift for you. Sorry.”

“Yes, you do.” His hand reaches for mine. “It’s this.”

“Wait.” I tug at our tender grasp. “Is this a date?”

“Yes.”

“Not until you ask me.”

His grin back; it reaches between my thighs.

“Cade Bryant, will you please honor me with a date tonight?”

That only took nineteen years.

“Yes.”

I float.

Held by his hand. Down the elevator. To the Mercedes, he’s renting. Over the familiar palm and pine-lined road he’s driving down.

I don’t care where we’re going. More pink tulips are on the dash for me, and I’m swimming in bliss.

There’s a yellow orchid arrangement on the floorboard too, and still, I don’t ask.

“Come on, Detective.” He talks over our senior year playlist. “Don’t you wanna know where we’re going?”

“Nope.” I uncross my legs, parting my thighs for his glance. “I like letting you be in control.”

“Careful there, darlin’.” His voice is lube sliding across my eager pussy. “That’s dangerous permission.”

“I’m prepared for danger.”

He has no clue how much.

But right now? I'm prepared to ride him in this car.

God, this is going to be a long night.

After a bit, I realize where we're going first, and I fight back touched tears. He parks in front of Ms. Ryan's house.

Redix and Pamela were close too.

"I called her and asked if we could come by," he informs me while he carries the orchid to her front door.

Ms. Ryan is beside herself with our hugs and smiles. We spend an hour at her house. She gives Redix a tour though nothing has changed, not even Pamela's room. The three of us stand before Pamela's yellow bedspread, and Ms. Ryan can't take her eyes off us. We're holding hands and I can't believe it, either.

"She'd be so happy to see you two together again." I've never seen Ms. Ryan so lucid, so alive. "She loved you both."

Redix squeezes my hand. His is sweating. He's nervous, and I didn't appreciate it until now—*this is his first time confronting that Pamela's gone.*

That something horrible happened to her, and we may never know what or who. Though I have a suspicion that haunts my soul.

"I just love watching you on the red carpet." Ms. Ryan feeds us salted lemon pound cake in her kitchen, her eyes sparkling for Redix. "My word, you look so handsome. You make me so proud."

"Will you go with me next time?" He's chomping on the cake, smiling through lips that want to pucker. "I have the Golden Globes next January. Ms. Ryan, will you please be my date?"

"Don't you tease an old lady."

"I'm not teasing, ma'am." He reaches for her hand on the table. "You'd be the prettiest one there, and I'd be the luckiest man alive."

I can't stop the hitch in my heart. He just gave Ms. Ryan the other important thing missing from her life—hope, something real to look forward to, and I clench my teeth to keep from crying.

“Redix Dean.” I hold his hand over the center console while we drive away. “Is it possible sobriety made you even sweeter?”

My hand feels safe in his, and he doesn't say a word. Deep down, I know how humble Redix really is. I'm glad to see it shine. Minutes later, he's surprising me more by pulling up to the resort where we had our big fight.

“Come on,” he says, opening the car door for me, “we're righting every wrong tonight.”

“You should know”—I take his hand, wanting to shove it under my dress—“that I want to be *very wrong* with you tonight.”

The smirk on his face.

“Food before fucks, darlin'.”

His beauty can guide me into hell... but it leads me to the restaurant instead as the staff fall over themselves. Seating us at the best table. Getting a fast round of drinks, seltzer and lime for us both. Crab cakes are set down before we ask for them.

“Are you a golf guy nowadays?”

The eighteenth hole is right outside the window.

“I'm picking up healthy habits.” He sips his seltzer. “The owner here—Luca Mercier—he's a friend, and we play. And this place is more secluded. I didn't want our date ruined by fans or tourists.”

“So this really is a date?”

“Yep.” He leans back in his chair. “You finally tamed me, Cade Bryant. You're my first date.”

“You're mine too.”

“No way.” His eyes shock wide. “How’d you look that hot without going on a date so long?”

“It’s a rule of mine. I don’t date either.”

“What *do* you do?”

Oh, here it is.

Do I tell him?

It’s not fair, really. I know a lot of his sins. Hell, the world does. I can only imagine what he’s done that wasn’t caught on camera.

“Tell you what.” I’m addicted to deals. “I’ll tell you two of my hottest stories, and you tell me two... of what you remember.”

“Oh shit.” He grins. “That’ll make me jealous and horny, and that’s playing with fire.”

“Same goes. I’ll start.”

A bite of crab cake gives me a second to think while the way Redix stares at me. The look in his eyes? I want to dive under this table and taste him instead.

“A Marine—”

“Great,”—he rolls his eyes—“a *Marine*.”

“Like a Marine can compete with you, Romeo. Hush, and let me finish my story.”

I’ve suffered with jealousy over Redix and his women for so long, dishing it back out in a fun way; it feels fair.

“He got us a hotel room. Then he asked if his friend could join us.”

Redix’s eyes narrow with lust. “Man or woman?”

“Another man. Another Marine. They were both jacked as hell.”

The jealous heave of Redix’s chest; I love it.

“I started with the first guy while his friend watched us. I told him to go down on me, then I told him to fuck me so slow,

like how we used to, and I swear it was so damn hot.”

“Did you suck any cock?”

“No.”

Redix adjusts himself. “How did he fuck you?” It’s turning him on. Me too.

“From behind”—I bite my lip, confessing—“it’s the only way I’ll fuck. And it let me watch the other guy jerking off to me getting fucked so slow.”

“Did he fuck you too?”

Redix can never judge me. Nothing compares to his exploits. And yeah, I’ve had my own. Because I can live with a broken heart *and* a pussy that needs to get fucked exactly how I want.

“Yes. I told him to go next. And I told him the same thing. To fuck me so slowly, I begged him not to stop. My pussy couldn’t get enough dick that night.”

His tongue licks his bottom lip. All I put in his head swirls in his eyes. Lust. Jealousy. XXX payback. It’s all true, but so is the pain in the edge of his expression staring me down from across the table.

“With all the dick you can have looking like that, why can’t your pussy get enough?”

I can tease Redix. I can torment him. I can take him on. Because we’re equals. But I’ll never hurt him.

Even though I can.

“Because they’re not you. I always close my eyes and imagine you instead.”

“Goddamn, Cade.” His lids slide shut. “You’re killing me.”

“Your turn.”

“Alright then.” His eyes open, and I brace myself. “Something hot that I remember?”

“Yes.”

“It involved a banana.”

I gasp. I'm not prepared for that, and he's delighted by my shock.

"And the second hottest thing I remember?" He won't stop, and I'm dying. The taboo. The image. I'm not jealous; I'm curious. "One of those jumbo candy canes."

"My god,"—I sigh a moan he can hear—"you have a food fetish."

"You started me on eating lemon sherbet, Candy Cade, and I've been chasing your sweet taste ever since."

Why we stay for dinner, I don't know. But we do.

Every morsel on my plate has me ready to lie on this table and be his buffet.

"You owe me one more," he says. "I gave you two stories; you're next."

"It involves strip Uno."

His eyebrows pinch. That really hurts him.

"With who?"

"You."

"We never did that."

"Not yet."

He smiles with sin in his eyes.

When the server asks about dessert, Redix answers, "No, thank you. She'll be serving me hot cherry pie at home."

The server blushes. At Redix's sexy face. At his powerful fame. At his shameless reference. I'm under his spell too as he takes my hand, and when I stand, the panties he bought me are slick with my arousal. I'm about to suggest a trip to the grocery store when the sight in front of us grabs my soul instead.

The couple standing in the doorway of the restaurant?

Senator Gentry Evans and his wife.

When Gentry's conservative smile aims our way, Redix's hand twitches in mine.

"Well, what a delight." Gentry's within choking distance. "Mr. Dean and Sergeant Bryant, bound together as usual." The urge to vomit at his voice slams me. "Mr. Dean, meet my wife, Stacey. She's a big fan."

The grip of Redix's hand over mine starts sweating again.

"Nice to meet you," is all Redix seethes back.

Stacey looks innocent. I feel sorry for her. She has no idea what evil she's married to and I have to play this smart.

Despite how I want to sink my teeth into Gentry's neck and kill him right here, I won't. I have disastrous plans for him, and I need proof first.

"I can't believe it." Stacey gushes at Redix. "I'm your biggest fan. I loved *Romeo Returns*. And your movie—*The Tease*—it's my favorite. I watch it all the time."

This is justice enough right now.

Stacey doesn't care. So overcome by Redix Dean two feet from her, she's practically lying down, lifting her preppy dress, and spreading her thighs for him to fuck her right in front of her husband.

Most women would.

It twists Gentry's face and I chuckle. *This ass zit*. His evil can never best Redix's beauty.

I'm fucking loving this.

"Which was your favorite?" I ask her about Redix's iconic male-stripper films. "*The Tease* or *The Teaser*?"

Because he made two that had people coming in the aisles.

Yep, she's personally enjoyed those films. More than once, I can tell by the flush under the pearls across her chest.

I squeeze Redix's hand back. He's gotta let me do this—for us—just one little dose of revenge for now.

“Oh Lord, don’t make me pick.” Stacey cuts her eyes at Redix. “I loved them both *so much*.”

Hell, yes, she did. I can tell. She loved those movies like me, moaning his name into a pillow.

“I’m glad they brought you so much pleasure.” Redix joins in and...

Fuck you, Gentry Evans, because your wife would rather be fucking him. And I assure you—she’ll imagine him every time you pathetically try.

Redix drops his voice.

“I aim to please, Mrs. Evans.”

“And you *always* do.” I punch next.

“I’m a lucky woman”—I wink at Stacey before smirking at Gentry—“because most men can’t hit what they aim for. Right, Mrs. Evans?”

I tug at Redix’s hand.

He takes the signal, concluding, “I hope at least *dinner* satisfies you, Stacey.”

We leave them standing in a pile of an awkward sex life from here forward, and I can’t tell if Redix wants to laugh or lose his mind next, so I lead the way out to the valet’s stand. While we wait for Redix’s car, I pull him into a hug.

“We’re okay. Just breathe,” I whisper into his chest. I can feel his heart pounding under my cheek. “Don’t let him ruin us again.”

Redix kisses the top of my head. “I’m really trying.”

We don’t say another word in the minutes it’s taking the valet to fetch the car. I just close my eyes and wrap my hands around his waist, squeezing him tight while he holds me back. I wish the world would disappear, but at least we have each other.

Click. Click.

My eyes snap open.

What the fuck?

A dumbass with a fancy Nikon is ten feet away, taking our picture.

“Hey!” I shout.

“Ignore him, Cade,” Redix mutters.

The valet pulls the car between us and the photographer, still snapping pictures. But if there’s a threat to Redix? Yep, I snap too.

My long legs in these heels move fast. I can’t be stopped. Before he knows what’s happening, I grab the photographer by the back of his neck and slam him down on the car’s hood. Snagging his free wrist, I wrench it behind him, bending back two strategic fingers that make him cry out while I snarl.

“Say ‘cheese,’ Motherfucker.”

“Cade!” I hear Redix as fast as I feel his arms around my waist. “Cade! Stop!” He tries pulling me off him.

“Take another picture”—I force the photographer’s fingers back more, making him scream—“and it’ll be the last you take.”

But Redix is too strong, and my sanity returns. I let the guy go, leaving him sprawled on the hood of the Mercedes.

“Damn, woman.” Redix is laughing, lifting me off the ground and pulling me farther away. “Get in the car before you get arrested.”

I don’t give a shit. Like anyone on this island would arrest me.

The photographer scrambles away, caressing his camera like that’s all he cares about, relieved I didn’t break it instead. The valets clap for my performance while I drop into the passenger seat. I try calming my pulse while Redix keeps chuckling.

“You can’t keep doing that, Candy Cade. Best control your cute temper. You’re dating me, and that’s part of it.”

Dating?

It makes me laugh too.

“So, in three hours, we went from *a date* to *dating*?”

“Yeah.” He aims the car toward my place. “Didn’t you get the memo?”

“No.” I cross my legs. That catches his eyes again. “You have to ask me first. Did you get the memo? Telling me what to do will get your fingers broken.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Bad Together by Dua Lipa

I'M CURIOUS.

By the wrapped gift box Redix takes from his trunk. By what he's revealed tonight. I've always known, under all his cocky swagger, Redix is a man who cares too much.

But I never knew he could be that kinky too.

I don't know what to think. Am I worried that he has no boundaries when drunk? Or am I excited to see if he's the same sober?

But we need to go slow. He said sex is different for him now, and I understand. Like we have to be careful. Like if we join again, it could destroy us in the most beautiful way.

"What's in the box?" I tease him while unlocking my front door.

"When you win a round of strip Uno," he kisses my cheek, "I'll let you open it."

But I don't win. Sitting at my dining room table, I've lost two rounds, heels, and a dress. I want to keep losing, but what's in that box distracts me. It's big and Tiffany blue with a white bow while Redix sits across from me, fully clothed and fully amused. The detective in me can't help it.

"There's no Tiffany store in this state. How did you get that present for tonight?"

He grins, dealing our third round. "I've had it for a year and brought it with me this time."

I can't stand it. Sitting in lingerie in front of him, and he's been planning this? I don't pick up the cards.

"I'm boycotting this game until I open that box."

"That's not the rules."

"I *never* follow the rules."

He tosses his head back. "Jesus, Candy Cade. You never had patience either."

"Yes, I do." My voice stammers. "I've had it for ten years."

That softens his face.

"Okay. No more waiting." He slides the box my way. "For you."

The box is square. I pull the ribbon off and lift the lid to find three smaller boxes inside. They have gift tags on them with his handwriting. I'd recognize it anywhere. He writes in all caps.

"Open them in order."

His voice is gentle, so are his eyes watching me.

I open the one labeled "PAST." It's the biggest. When I pull back the tissue, tears fall so fast I can't stop them. It's the postcards I sent him when I traveled with Dad. He has them wrapped in a purple ribbon.

"You *kept* these?"

I choke on air as he stands up. Steps bring him to his hand, reaching for my cheek.

“You kept my heart while I kept our memories.”

I stand up, too, and his lips take me. A sob wants to escape my throat, but it goes away when his tongue meets mine. I sigh as it warms me, his gift, his kiss, his body pressing into mine.

“I’m still that same boy, Cade.” His lips ghost mine. “The one who wakes up excited to see you every day.”

“The one who spelled out ‘Candy Cade’ on Sweetheart candies for me,” I remind him, “for Valentine’s, and I ate them for you, even though I feared the magic marker you used would kill me?”

“Yeah, that one.” Love swirls in his eyes. “Open your next gift.”

I want him now, but I’m so touched by his gestures, I listen. He stands behind me, wrapping his arms around me while I open the next box. “PRESENT,” it reads. I know the shape. The size. The rattle. Yes, it’s a box of Lemonheads.

“What’s this for?”

His breath steams my ear. “*Tonight.*”

A white-hot jolt of lust shoots through me. I hope I know how these will be enjoyed.

“Hurry,” he says, “and open the last one.”

It reads “FUTURE,” and it’s a necklace box. I open it... and gulp.

It’s a gold double-link pendant holding two chains together. It’s elegant in design, like the infinity symbol. It’s sexy in its message, like bondage links.

“Infinity, remember?” he asks, making my belly flip as he takes the necklace from the box. “That’s what I promised you.”

Clasping it around my neck, I’m eighteen again when we were waiting to buy wedding rings, so he gave me an infinity

necklace as a promise. He swore that's how long he'd love me. Tragically, the necklace didn't fulfill its promise. It was taken from us that night.

Everything was but this, but us.

"This is my promise to try again with you," he says before kissing my neck with the chain around it.

It's strong and delicate in the same form, like us, and my heart slams in my chest as he turns my chin. Gentle at first, he kisses me until it's not so tender, his tongue taking me with a fervor that makes me moan into his possession. He presses his forehead to mine.

"Cade Bryant, will you please be mine?" He's putting my heart back together. "Again?"

"Yes."

And the pain ends with my exhale.

"You know what I feel for you." His voice strains. "You know what we've been through, and it'll fucking overwhelm us if we talk about it, but not tonight. I want us to play. Can we?"

"Yes."

I want it too. I could cry and hold him for hours at the brutal memories and sweet gifts he's kept wrapped up for so long... but not now. I need this. *I need him.*

He unhooks the bra he bought me. It falls to the table. Kissing my shoulder blades, his hands graze the slope of my breasts, making my nipples peak as I stagger into his touch.

"Climb up there now."

His command is soft, but his pinch of my nipples is hard, sending me into action as I crawl on top of the table, on all fours, hungry for this.

"Lie down." The sound of his voice is barely restrained, and I'm desperate for what he's holding back. "And *be still.*"

With my breasts pressing against the cool wood, I let my body obey, lying flat on the table.

I trust him. Only him. He won't hurt me; he'll only cherish me until I'm screaming for more. But I don't know what to do with my hands until he takes control, lifting them above my head like they're in cuffs.

“Hold them there, and don't move.”

I turn my head to face him.

“Kiss me after every command, and then I'll listen.”

That's my deal. I'm not a woman who'll fully submit to any man. He grins, knowing that, bowing down while I lift my lips for his kiss. It's gentle, negating his hard commands until he nips my bottom lip and his voice drops...

“This is our new game. Will you let me play?”

“Yes.”

Eyeing me, he opens the box of Lemonheads and I don't say a word, every nerve in my body anticipating this as the slick surface of the candy barely touches my flesh. He rests it between my shoulder blades. I hold still so it won't roll off while he places a second lower, balanced on my spine. He touches the next against the small of my back and...

Will there be more?

God, yes, I almost arch when he lifts the delicate band of my panties and tucks a candy under it, leaving it to savor at the top of my crevice. I try not to move while playing his game, but I'm impatient, watching him step back to enjoy the sight of me.

“I told you”—he removes his jacket—“you're my Candy Cade.”

I'm not fighting him. I just want him on me, in me, taking me, *please, anything*. And when he lifts his T-shirt—his obliques, his abs—they all flex for my view, and I stifle my moan. I might as well be cuffed because I dare not move, or I'll lose, but he catches me adoring him, and the smirk on his face warns he'll do much more to me.

“I'll go so slow with you, tonight,” he says, “slower than those Marines ever did, and I'll make you feel way *more* than

enough.”

“You know you’re way more to me.”

I lift my chin carefully, asking for his kiss without moving the rest of my body. He lingers his lips over mine.

“Are you? Are you mine again, Cade? All mine to eat?”

“Yes,” I whisper, and he doesn’t tie his hair back.

His strands tickle over my arms to my shoulders as he takes his first treat. The wet heat, the warm tease of his tongue circling the candy; I’m melting. Gently, his lips lift the first candy from my flesh. The crunch, I can hear his bite while he licks and kisses his way down to the next one.

Thank God he only played with four because I’m in chaos. And his silence only makes it more intense. It’s part of our game, his fetish, and now it’s mine too.

With the second candy, the tip of his tongue won’t stop his torment, his lips are so soft, and my skin prickles to his kiss before he eats it.

It takes him to the third candy and I never knew this spot on me, with his lips brushing over the small of my back, cascading thrills from my pussy to my toes; it’s so sensitive. I almost cry out when he eats the third candy, electricity sparking down to my clit when he returns, kissing my back there again and again.

I’m going to explode.

I know what’s next, and when he does it... I’ll burst with lust I can’t control.

It’s soaking my panties. He’s had them sopping all night with our first date. And they’re useless with my arousal wetting through to my thighs. I’m waiting, ready, breath held in my lungs... but he doesn’t do it.

The candy tucked into my panties is still there, but his kiss isn’t.

I gasp when it lands on the back of my thigh instead, his fingertips tickling the same trail up the inside my other leg,

stopping just before where I'm screaming for him.

“Redix, *please*.”

It's insanity. It's lust caged and shaking the bars of my body.

“Now!”

I'm going to lose it. He has no idea what I'm capable of now. I can only play for so long before I *will* win.

“You want me again, Cade?”

The heat of his mouth is right there, at the apex of every place he needs to be; some part of his body must be inside me; I need him in my pussy right now.

“Do it, or the game is over.”

He can hear it in my voice. I can't take anymore.

“Then hang on, darlin'.”

And he does it, and oh fuck, it's fast, and I cry out, his tongue darting under my panties, scooping up the candy as he snatches the lace down over my cheeks before he yanks my hips up, turning my body into a fuck doll and I love it.

“On your knees,” he demands, pulling me closer to him.

I'm open and on all fours with my feet hanging over the table's edge while he leaves my soaked panties around my thighs.

“Spread that pussy for me, Cade, and show me my dessert.”

I bow only for him, resting my cheek on the table while my ass is in the air, and damn, he does it. I hear him pull the chair out to take a seat to dine on me, his fingertip swiping slow down my slit.

“Look at you,” he taunts, “so wet and ready for me. You're so glazed and puffy for me to eat.”

The pleasure is sudden, so intense, when his tongue flicks over my sensitive nub.

“Oh God,” I gasp as he dives in, his tongue ringing my slick entrance before dipping in to taste me. It rolls my eyes back with a loud groan. *Holy fuck*, I’m drenched, and I can hear how much with his slurp licking through my aching sex.

The caress of his tongue—its perfection—up and down, his moaning pace doesn’t stop devouring me. I want to cry, but he’s mastered my body. No, *he’s trained my body*, taking me right past shock, into a moaning, uninhibited lust.

“Oh my God,”—I clench my fists, still obeying like they’re bound over me—“Redix, you feel so fucking good.”

The sensation, the strokes of his lips, of his unrelenting tongue, and then his fingers across my pussy, aching for him; it’s shaking my legs.

“You’re so fucking sweet for me, Cade.”

His palms spread me wider, his tongue swiping over my clit before plunging in, lapping up my deepest taste; this would be the most decadent death. And then he does it. His tongue rings slowly over my ass, and I bite back a roar while he murmurs, “*Ummmm*, you’re *so* fucking sweet for me,” into my depths.

I’m light-headed. I’m close. “Redix, I need more.” I’m in a frenzy, and only he can help.

His fingers go next. “You need this, Cade?” Three of them pound hard inside my aching cunt and it’s brutal, and I love it. “You need me to be rough with you, so you’ll come for me?” *Pound*. “So.” *Pound*. “Fucking.” *Pound*. *Pound*. “Sweet.” *Pound*. *Pound*. *Pound*. “For only me.”

It growls through his voice because it’s not a question. It’s true as I cry out with his next fierce suck of my clit, making me gulp for air and the words, “Oh fuck, yes, Redix” before I break.

My legs shake around his face. I clutch my hands and let my climax drop, all the fire in my veins rushing to that one spot he’s claiming and sucking so hard with his lips. I gulp and let go again, groaning with another spasm over his mouth.

With my lips pressed to the table, “Redix” falls over them while I get weak, closing my eyes.

“Come here,” I hear.

I open them, and he’s standing by my head.

“Come up here,” he says again.

I rise in a haze on shaking knees while he reaches for me, pulling me into a kiss that tastes like my cum and lemon dessert. I love the flavor. He kisses me until my sanity returns, until his lips dust over mine, asking, “Where are your toys?”

“What?”

“It’s been ten years and I know you have them. Where are they?”

“Second drawer in my nightstand.” I’m not embarrassed watching him fetch them. Not after that. Not with what he wants next.

May our games never end.

I roll over on the table and take my panties off. I’m dizzy but want to play too. Scooting to the edge, I sit up and spread my legs wide. I can feel my pussy still dripping and glistening with light pulses for his return.

When he walks back down the hall wearing only pants and desire, he sees me waiting, spread open for him and his eyes drop with his jaw and the words, “Fuck, what I want to do to you.”

I see what’s in his hand, and mine fall too. “Then do it.”

He found my dildo.

“Is this what you’ve been playing with, Cade?” He holds it to my lips and I start licking it, wishing it was him. “You fuck this big dildo and think of me?”

“It’s too small.” I lick the shaft. “It’s not as big as you.”

“It’ll do for now.”

He takes a seat in front of me and I can see the real massive thing towering, straining under his black trousers.

“Show me how you fuck for me,” he commands.

I have no shame with him. Desire rules me, and I want this. I climb back up to my knees, setting the flat base of the dildo down on the table and hover, poised over its tip.

“We share this, Redix.” But I won’t take it in. “We share this or nothing at all.”

“Alright.” That sets him into motion. He unclasps his pants before lowering his zipper. “You like giving shows? You like watching too?” Reclining back in the chair, he takes his hard cock into his grasp. “Then let’s fuck together.”

I start my glide down and up the cool, rigid silicone shaft, and I feel so dirty, so bad for him, and I love it.

“Tell me,” he demands, his fist matching my slow tempo. “Tell me what you do alone on your bed.”

“I get on my knees like this.” I’m going faster, my fingertips playing with my tits. “I tease my nipples like this.” I do it without thought because my body knows this private ritual. I’m not going to last. Not with how taboo this feels. Because doing this for him, with his eyes in awe, I’m the one on display but in complete control.

“I fuck this dildo like I fucked you, Redix, wishing it was you again.”

He stands up, his fist pumping faster over his perfect cock. And it’s too long. It’s too thick. It’s beautiful and monstrous and too hard, leaking milky drops for me. He’s going to lose it too.

“Do you remember how I feel?” He presses his forehead to mine. “How my hard cock drives in and out of your tight, wet pussy? How it tries to resist me? How you can barely take all of me, but I fuck you anyway, and you love it.” I’m stammering for breath at the memory, at the sight before me. “Because I do, Cade. I mean it—I jerk off every morning remembering you.”

“Oh, God.”

It's a craze, a mania across my senses, imagining it then and seeing him now. His right hand pumps over his swollen cock while his left takes my breast, his fingertips twirling over my nipples.

"Oh fuck, Redix."

"Goddamn, Cade," he curses back with shaking lips. Mine tremble too.

He takes his hand from my breast and grabs the dildo. It's up to his mouth, his tongue licking the slick of my cum for him off it before he deep throats it, sucking the cock. The erotic display almost takes me, but he takes it and slides it back inside me.

"Fuck this cock," he says. "Fuck it hard like it's me."

I do and don't stop until I'm there, "Shit," and I'm shaking again. He's thrusting the toy into me, in tempo, with the pounding of his fist over his thick shaft, and I'm done. With one deep groan, I'm swaying and letting the orgasm rip down through me, holding onto his stare while he watches my safe destruction.

Redix.

I don't need to say his name aloud.

It's seared across my soul.

"Cade." His body stiffens, hard like a stone. "Only you."

He grabs the back of my neck, and I want it too. I drop my mouth fast enough to take his salty spurts across my tongue with his gasps of "yes, yes," and "oh fuck, yes."

He groans, more cum coating my lips, and I love his taste, licking them clean as I lift back up.

"I always think of you, Cade."

He swears as his hands grab my face, pulling me into our most intimate kiss, and it's our flavor and truth, and I don't know why he wants us like this.

Why he loves these games.

But my heart surrenders in his embrace because I'll never lose if I'm with Redix.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



REDIX

DEAR CANDY CADE,

This sucks.

I miss you.

It's been two lonely weeks without you. And this heatwave—LA in June—it's making it worse. It's like there's no place I can find peace without you.

I hated leaving you too.

We had a great week, though.

I love sleeping with you on your couch. It makes you have to lie right beside me so I can hold you all night.

It meant a lot to me, the day we went back to Ms. Ryan's house. We finished replacing the boards on her dock because you've been so good to her, and I will too.

I meant it. I'm taking her to the Golden Globes with me. I'll have my stylist and team spoil her and give her the most incredible night.

Maybe you can come too?

Damn, that'd be incredible.

Like the thousands I spent to get the miniature golf course closed for only us. But it was worth it. Our second date. It was perfect. Even when you were a smart-ass, giving me a blue golf ball to play with. "Like when we were seventeen," you said.

You wore that short dress with no panties to drive me crazy. Bending over to putt the ball, I kept getting glimpses of your pussy. By the eighteenth hole, you were so slick for me.

And you beat me.

And I love it.

I'll lose everything just to see you smile like that. Just to make you come like that.

When you let me go down on you in that pirate ship when we were done, it was nighttime, and no one could see us, which sucks because I can't get enough of your taste. I can't get enough of you, and I want the world to see it. It's like I've been starving, and only you can feed me.

That's weird, right?

Then again, you loved it too. Fuck, when I make you come, Cade, you get so wet now; sometimes, I can even make you drip and it drives me insane.

When I look up with my mouth on your pussy and see you watching me, I'm gazing up at heaven. I can see it in your violet eyes. How much pleasure I'm giving you. How I control your entire body with the tip of my tongue.

I know you want all of me.

I do too.

But we can't.

Not ever.

Our games keep you from finding out.

Have you caught on yet? That I won't take my pants off? That I won't fuck you? I don't know how long I can keep this

up because I want you so bad, I'm losing my mind.

But I'll never let anyone see all of me.

Especially you.

Not after what happened.

Like, I had to do a fucking sex scene today (literally), and I hate them.

On screen, a good editor makes it look hot for the audience, but it's not for the actors, those of us who aren't pervs.

I had twenty men standing around me while I had to act like I was fucking a woman and enjoying it. And I felt sorry for the actor in the scene with me. Emma's super nice. The director wanted her topless with my face in her cleavage. Then he wanted my bare ass pumping into her for the shot.

Thank God we have Intimacy Coordinators now. She backed me up when I stood up for Emma and for me. That shit wasn't in the script, and we could shoot that scene under a sheet without us being naked. I don't care if they stick a strapless thong on me.

The director started shouting at me.

"Suck it up, Redix. You'll do those damn BDSM BOUND perfume shots for millions, but not an innocent fuck scene? This is my episode, my vision, and you'll do what I say."

I threatened to walk off set and Emma backed me up, so we got our way.

Those photos, Cade? We'll never live them down, will we?

When people see BOUND perfume, they'll always see us. And when I smell it, I remember you and that photoshoot.

Yeah, we were only eighteen but didn't look it. Mario Rossi, that man is a crazy designer, in a good way. He put us in black leather. Me in pants and no shirt, and you in a matching skirt and bustier. That's what it's called, right? I don't know, but fuck, you looked like sex incarnate.

They slicked our hair back and our bodies down. And then Mario surprised everyone.

He put a collar on me and one on you with a gold chain connecting us.

It didn't look tacky. Or raunchy.

We made it look beautiful.

Because it was.

The photographer ate it up because everyone could tell—we were in love. We were bound together. We were still virgins, but the tension was so hot between us that the lens caught it. How we looked like animals about to mate for life.

We were.

It was only days later when we finally did.

Our parents didn't freak out about those photos, but others did.

Remember how our principal threatened to kick us out of school for it? Like we cared. We were graduating in two months. But Mama G raised holy hell, saying we were legally adults and doing our jobs and that they had no right to punish us.

I still see that picture of us in stores at Rossi counters, almost kissing and chained to each other.

It used to make me so fucking proud and sad at the same time.

Because they gave you hell about that picture, spraying you with cologne in the hall at school and calling you a slut.

Their cologne. Those guys. TJ and Gentry.

I've always wondered... if that photo of us is what finally set them off.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



I TAKE A QUIET MOMENT TO SCOPE THE SALON.

The Beauty Hut is owned by Gentry Evans Properties, and I count eight hard-working women I bet he thinks he owns too.

They busy themselves with their clients, mostly tourists; I can tell by their sunburns. Locals know better. We shower in SPF.

When Penny came here the other week, she got nothing but closed lips. Her uniform made them nervous, so we're back in plain clothes, getting pedicures while Jameson waits outside in his Jeep. He's still digging for the owners of that liquor store. It lists a holding company, but we want real names.

That's the dots we've connected so far.

The Pelican Bar. Sunset Rentals. The Beauty Hut. Gentry Evans has ownership in each. And wherever Gentry is, TJ lurks nearby.

Why they're so close, I've never understood. Maybe they bonded over their sick obsession with me.

“Cat got your tongue?” Penny asks from her chair next to mine.

“No. The Devil demands my attention.”

“Which one? Redix Dean?”

“No.”

She has every right to worry. I do too. I’m not used to having a “boyfriend,” especially a hot celebrity one with a wild-boy past who lives thousands of miles away.

“Derek Baucom,” I answer. “For a bar manager, he pours nothing but bullshit. I’ve been to The Pelican twice, and he’s knee-deep in it.”

Both times I interviewed Derek about the victims from that bar, he squirmed. I can see it behind his fake-ass smile and “I never saw those women before” refrain.

He’s lying. There’s something in his eyes that bothers me too. Like he’s delighted in my presence, like he has something on me, but how? He doesn’t know me. His records confirm he just moved here from New York. And yes, he owns a navy and white striped shirt. He wore it the second time I interviewed him. Unfortunately, wearing long sleeves in June isn’t a crime.

Gentry Evans as co-owner of the bar that Derek Baucom works for? It’s not the evidence we need. TJ hanging out at that bar? It’s not proof enough, either.

I smile, thinking of my running joke with Jameson—they’re all leads.

And it’s *my deal*. I’ll lead those men into hell with me when I catch them.

“What about your other devil?” Penny asks. “Will he dare to return?”

“We’re fine. He’s working in LA, and I’m working here. At least for a few weeks.”

“You don’t *sound* fine.”

Shit, every time. She knows me too well.

“Yes, I miss him. I confess—Ice Queen Cade Bryant has finally melted for a man.”

“You’re not an Ice Queen. You’re a big softie. And anyone would melt for him. Just don’t be one of those women. Don’t disappear for a man.”

“Oh, I won’t.”

Because I have two other men I obsess over.

I don’t tell her that.

“Excuse me, ma’am? Would you like a manicure too?”

The young woman beside my chair asks so softly I can’t refuse. “Sure. Thank you.” I offer her my hand.

She starts filing my nails, and I notice it. Her hands are shaking. I glance up. Her eyes meet mine, and she’s not trying to hide it. She’s scared. And she wants me to know.

“Can you show me where the restrooms are, please?” I ask, knowing exactly where they are.

“Yes.”

She steps back from the chair, letting me slide orange slippers on as she leads the way. We turn the corner and walk down a hallway where the restrooms are at the end. She turns around and peeks around my shoulder. It’s clear. No one followed us.

“You’re police, right?”

“Yes,” I answer, “but we’re not here for any of you. I’m here to help another woman.”

I know a few of these women are undocumented. Their lives here are so precarious, like hell if I’d do anything *but* protect them.

“My sister.” Tears well in her eyes. “She’s missing.”

“Does she work here?”

“No. She cleans for a rental company that has vacation condos.”

“Which one?”

“Sunset Rentals.”

That intel drops like a bomb.

Every weekend on this island, it’s a mad rush to clean those rentals after guests leave and before the next group arrives. Those cleaning crews work crazy hard, flipping dozens of units in hours.

I glance up. No cameras are on us, but I see the one by the back door.

“How long has she been missing?”

“Two days,” she says. “It’s not like her. She went to work and didn’t come home. I went there yesterday morning to the office and asked for her. Her manager said she went out with some man after work. No, she didn’t. She always comes home to me.”

“But you didn’t report it because...”

I stop and let her eyes answer me. *Yes*, they’re both undocumented and completely vulnerable to all kinds of abuse.

“Can you tell me your name?”

“Mai Le.”

“And your sister’s?”

“Cam Le.”

“Do you have a picture of her on your phone?”

“The owner doesn’t allow us to bring our phones to work.”

Of course, Gentry Evans doesn’t. What a wicked way to control your staff.

“Tonight. Ten o’clock.” I ask her, “Can you meet me at the QuickTrip just over the bridge?”

The security cameras at that gas station don’t work. The owner, Ms. Dubois, hasn’t fixed them in years.

“If you can give me her picture,” I promise, “I’ll try to find her.”

Penny, Jameson, all the other deputies, I know they'll help too. We don't give a shit about immigration status. We only want these women to be safe.

Someone's shuffling behind me in slippers. I whisper to her, "If you can't make it there, I'll be back here tomorrow morning. Okay?"

She nods quietly before darting back down the hall.

My logic fires while Penny and I check out. Before leaving, I quietly ask the staff if any man ever hangs around outside. Each says no, and Penny glances at me. We can tell something's up. Once we're back in Jameson's Jeep, I fill them in.

"This is new," I tell them. "Targeting locals isn't the M.O. It's been tourists, the young women visiting so far."

And they all looked like me. But Cam Le is Asian, the first woman who doesn't.

Frustration twists Jameson's face. "There's no way to confirm they're connected."

"They are," I insist. "I can sense it. And it all has to do with Gentry Evans."

"I agree," Penny chimes up from the back seat. "It's no coincidence."

"I'll back you up tonight." Jameson drives toward the office.

Penny has to go home, but we'll keep her in the loop.

All day my brain is full, and my phone is empty. Redix doesn't call or text. I'm not worried. I'm working, and so is he.

By nine-thirty, I'm raging with impatience. Jameson and I are parked on the far end of the parking lot at the QuickTrip, waiting for Mai Le from the salon to appear. I'm staring at the lights illuminating the sliding glass doors of the convenience store, willing her to arrive.

Jameson's tapping on his phone, and then I hear it, his tell—he clears his throat.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing.” He flips his phone over on his thigh.

“What? Get a hot sext?”

“Drop it, Bryant.”

“Jesus, what's got you ill as a hornet?”

He turns his glare toward the driver's window. Anger drips from his face in the reflection.

“You're scaring me, Jameson. What is it?”

“Fuck,” he mutters, “I don't want to do this.”

“Do *what?*”

I've never seen him this mad, not even at a crime scene.

“This.” He turns his phone back over and taps the screen. “I'm sorry”—he shows me the image on it—“but he's an *asshole.*”

My ears start ringing. My fingers go numb. It's Redix and Angie on Instagram, holding hands over dinner on some outdoor LA restaurant patio.

It flips my world and my eyes look away from the pain and can't find focus. *They're supposed to be over.* I heard Redix call Angie myself. I can't think past it, past the deception.

I want to scream.

“I'm sorry, Bryant.” Jameson sounds a mile away. “It posted an hour ago. I'd rather it be me to show you than some random dick.”

Everyone knows. That photo of Redix and me at the golf resort splashed all over the local papers, and social media, and the press and fans went apeshit.

The famous BOUND perfume couple, our local star-crossed young lovers, are back together.

I don't care. I'm so numb to that stuff; it doesn't faze me. The guys at work making dumbass jokes. My neighbors asking me where Redix is. I've been too happy to care.

Now, I exhale happiness and inhale horror.

He did it again.

Redix Dean lost my heart and all his chances.

"I'm fine."

I focus back on the front glass doors. Mai Le is standing there by the corner of the building. I jump out and focus my anger on at least helping her.

Mai texts me the picture of her sister, Cam. I jot down all the notes. Where Cam was last seen. Where she likes to go. Eat. Shop. All of it. She shares what she knows of Cam's coworkers and the friend who usually gives her a ride to the island. Once I'm done and say goodbye to Mai, I need something, anything, so I dash inside the store for my only relief.

Candy.

"Ms. Dubois,"—I try to refocus, talking to the owner behind the counter—"you ever gonna fix your cameras?"

I'm glad tonight that she didn't. I didn't want Mai on camera—nothing to expose her to even more risk.

"You and your mama," Ms. Dubois cracks a grin, "y'all worry about me too much. I'm fine. I don't need no cameras when I got this." She pats the counter. Her shotgun is underneath it—*more power to her*. "You have a good night, sweetheart. And you send your mama my prayers, alright?"

"Yes, ma'am. I will."

Her kindness is a temporary relief from my shock, flashes of that picture of Redix and Angie firing across my mind.

Opening a bag of Skittles—because fuck Lemonheads now—I'm looking down as I walk out of the sliding doors and bump into another force.

"Easy there, Sergeant."

That voice ruins my life more and I have to rein it in; every ounce of strength I have to act like I'm not ready to murder someone in two seconds. Because I am. His hand on my hip makes it justifiable.

"TJ." The smile on my face is as fake as a beauty queen's tan. "Fancy seeing you here tonight."

"Just grabbing some smokes."

Fuck, he reeks of it and cologne. A gag grabs my throat while I glance past him.

Jameson's clocking our every move while TJ commands, "I'll grab a six-pack, and you'll join me."

This man is obsessed, powerless to stop himself. He's after me like my shadow, my dark hell.

"I'm on duty." I wink. "Some other time."

"You owe me a good time, remember?"

The yellow tobacco stains on his teeth; I gag again.

"Oh, I remember."

The pen in my back pocket? It'd look so good stabbed in his right eye. Or left. They're both on my tits.

His nose lifts.

"You don't smell like me tonight. Did you throw away my gift because you're back with *him*?"

Evil bends his eyes, his pupils carving over my cleavage. *God, he's twisted.*

"I'm not back with anyone." That was about Redix and painfully true.

"You behave tonight," I say; really, I pray as I turn around and walk across the parking lot.

Normally, eyes on my body, I can feel them and don't care. I've been eye-fucked all my life. But TJ's glare? It's more foul than the stench of the putrid dumpster I'm walking past in June.

“You know TJ?” Jameson asks when I plop into the passenger seat.

The entire Sheriff’s office knows TJ. He’s a local legal legend. Drugs are his most notorious offense. But somehow, TJ keeps walking free out of every courtroom. Must be nice having Senator Gentry Evans as your best friend.

“Yeah. We went to high school together.”

Jameson can’t know more.

Or what happened.

Or what’s next.

“His prints were on that lighter we found at the scene,” Jameson says. “We got him on camera smoking there hours before Kayla was found.”

“Believe me”—I pop a green apple Skittle in—“that may not be the evidence you need yet, but TJ is wicked like Gentry. One is just more high-class about it.”

And TJ comes here at ten to buy smokes every night, I note.

While Jameson drives us back across the bridge, I fill him in on the details Mai Le shared. I also text him and Penny the photo of her missing sister and the other deputies on shift.

If I can focus on helping these women, I don’t think about the crush of my heart, the burn in my throat that wants to cry.

No.

This isn’t about me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Hot Blooded by New Constellations

JAMESON AND I SEARCH ALL NIGHT.

We take a break, a few hours to sleep, meet before dawn, and start searching again. We comb the island for every location Cam Le has been but we can't find her.

Once Sunset Rentals opens, I take the lead. Jameson interrogates like the Boston mafia. That doesn't work around here. You use soft words and a sharp mind in the South.

I find Cam's crew mate, the one the office manager said cleaned the last condo with Cam. When I ask what happened next, the woman's eyes shift, scared. "She went out with some man."

"Did you know him?"

"No. He picked her up from the unit."

"What did he look like?"

"I couldn't see him."

"What kind of car?"

“A white one. That’s all I remember.”

The woman looks terrified. I can’t bring myself to scare her more. Besides, I know she won’t tell me; too much is at risk for her.

“Those units down on Forest Beach Drive they were cleaning,” I tell Jameson in the car, “see if they have surveillance of the parking lot. We need to find that white car.”

Jameson nods. He’s way too skilled at this by now. It’s noon, and we’ve burned through every location used by Cam Le with no leads but that white car. There’s nothing left to do until we get that footage and we hate it.

I’m in a swirl of thoughts when Jameson asks, “You okay, Bryant?”

I know what he’s really asking about.

“Yeah. I’m fine. He says it’s old. That the picture was taken two months ago.”

Jameson huffs, and yeah, I don’t know if I should believe Redix, either. It’s like he’s been caught red-handed and is blowing up my phone, guilty. Thousands of miles away, and Redix can fuck up, and I’d never know. Women or liquor or drugs. Or all three.

I hate this feeling. Vulnerable. Anxious. I’m walking on eggshells, waiting for him to crack and break us both. Because yes, I love him, but I’m not dumb. Redix has proven what he’s capable of.

He’s texted and called all night and this morning, leaving me messages. I checked them, but I didn’t answer.

I don’t think I should yet. I don’t know if I can trust him. Or me. I’m a live wire inside, ready to touch something and explode into flames, so it’s best men stay clear.

Except for my dad.

I’m reluctant to keep my fishing date with him because I want to work on this case, but Jameson reminds me we’re in a holding pattern.

I don't even go home to change. I just leave my duty belt and gun locked in my trunk, needing a few hours on the water.

"Y'all two"—Dad casts his line an hour later—"you know I love you both, but I don't know if y'all can ever work this out."

We share the same doubts about Redix and me.

Usually, Dad and I don't talk much. We're happy quietly casting our lines for some cobia fish and drinking beer. Today, I don't need to say a word either. Dad knows Redix and I are trying to heal. And he knows the look on my face when it hurts.

"Well," I finally answer, "I know you can love someone, but that doesn't mean you're meant to be with them."

Dad nods.

I'm talking about me and Redix... and my parents.

I know my parents still love each other. I've caught Dad leaving Mama's several early mornings when he thought no one was watching. Especially lately with Mama not feeling well. It's none of my business what's going on between them. I'm just relieved there is a 'them' to have.

"He does love you." Dad casts his fly again. "He fought like hell for you, and that's why I love him too. That's why I forgave him for leaving."

"You're never going to tell me, are you?"

Dad knows more than me about that night. And though I begged for the first few years, he never cracked and told me.

"It ain't my place to tell anyone else's pain." His answer stays firm. "That's for y'all to work out and god love ya if you can."

"He doesn't want to talk about it. Then. Or now."

"He had to fix himself," Dad says. "You did too, and you can fight for yourself now."

That I know.

And when Dad flicks his eyes over to mine, it's like he knows just how much of a fight rages in my soul.

“Magnolia, you listen to me.” That name. That tone. Jeff Bryant is not to be ignored. “What happened to you two. Y'all might never get justice, but you need to find some peace.”

“I'd rather have the justice.”

“Careful there.” Dad's dark blue eyes hold a world of truth, of a pain he already knows. “‘Justice for all’ also means for the one who delivers it too.”

Dad's words and last hug won't leave me. They wrap around me all the way home.

Everything else in me feels hollow. Snapping my duty belt in the trunk back on, my stomach growls—my heart withers. Even my head rattles, empty. I don't know what to think. That's why it takes me a second to register the odd smell when I open my front door.

Pizza?

“Mama?” I call out.

But instinct has my hand on my holster, unsnapping my 9mm.

I always suspect. TJ. Gentry. Some sick fuck.

How long until one comes after me again? They all know where I live. And I'll never shake that memory of TJ grabbing my wrist, of him taunting Redix.

“Watch, pretty boy, while I make her suck *my* ice cream cone.”

It shivers evil around my soul.

It has the ridges of my gun handle under my palm. I'm pulling it out, index finger finding the trigger. I can do this lightning-fast...

“It's me.” His giant silhouette steps out of the kitchen into my line of sight.

“Fuck!” My shoulders drop, so does my breath. “I almost shot you! What the fuck are you doing here?”

“I got on the first flight.” Redix looks as shocked as me, his eyes on my gun. “You won’t answer my calls or texts, so you left me no choice.”

“No, it’s *my* choice.” I snap my gun back in. “I’ll answer the phone if I want to talk to you. Otherwise, this is stalking. Breaking and entering. Again. This isn’t some romance story making it seem cute. This shit is scary. How’d you like it if you were pissed at me and I showed up at *your* house uninvited?”

“You’re pissed at me?”

“Hell yes, I’m mad.”

“Why?” His large body fills my small foyer. “I told you those pictures are old. They were taken of us at The Ivy in April. Paparazzi take them and use them later when they need the cash.”

He steps closer, his eyes scanning my tense body.

I’m still on guard.

“You don’t trust me yet, do you?”

“I trust the boy I rode bikes with. The boyfriend who held my hand on the bus. The one who used to dance with me on the beach. But then he left for ten years without a word.

“And I don’t know if I can trust the Redix Dean who came back. The celebrity who got so wasted he was caught at the Golden Globes with Jenna Anderson giving him a blowjob.”

“I mean it, Cade.” He’s even closer, his smell overpowering the dinner he cooked for us. “We’re back together, and I’m not leaving you again.”

“No, you’re back in my life like a whirlwind, and I just gotta hang on because I know it won’t last. You always leave.”

That shakes his head. “Yes, I have to go to work for weeks to some bullshit location, but I’m coming back to you, and I’ll be faithful while I’m gone.”

“Redix, how can I trust your words when your actions have shown me otherwise? Nine years of fucking up can’t erase one year of getting it right. Not yet.”

It hurts me to say it, but we’re not kids anymore or teens in naïve love. It’s the truth, as painful as it is. And we’ve been through too much to deny it.

“You’re right.” His hands surrender. “I was fucked up for a long time, and now I gotta earn your trust again. No more breaking and entering. No more stalking. It’s your choice, and I’ll respect it.”

He slowly searches my eyes, swearing.

“Just know I never left you, Cade. But I had to find me again, and I couldn’t for a long time because I found a bottle instead. But I swear, *I’m back now.*”

There’s a depth to Redix few can see. They can’t get past his stunning facade to see his pain, but I always could. It matches mine in the most hellish way.

“It’s okay,” I sigh.

“No, you’re right. It wasn’t okay. But I swear we will be now.”

It happens too fast. How I soften for his sheepish grin. How he always clowns for me. How he holds his wrists out for me to cuff them.

“Though I do want you to arrest me with those handcuffs. They look hot as hell on you.”

I’m not hot. I’m relieved. I touch the cuffs.

“These aren’t for play.”

“Wanna bet?”

He’s on me in two steps, his lips colliding with mine. His hand wraps around my neck, pulling me in with no escape. And I love his prison.

Tracing his tongue over my bottom lip, his moan is low, his grind into me hard. It forces mine while my tongue meets his, too.

Trust, joy, lust, every emotion wants to flood me when he walks me back against the wall, our bodies begging for the heat of the other. The force of his desire, of all his muscles, traps me without restraint. I grab the back of his neck and kiss him back, searching for the soul I love inside him, stirring memories of every sensuous moment we shared and demanding many more.

“Jesus, Cade,” he rasps into my mouth before he pulls back, dragging his thumb over the seam of my lips. “An airplane could crash land on your lips, and all would survive. Goddamn, you’re my rescue. Every. Fucking. Time.”

Matching his awe, I rip open his short sleeve shirt. Buttons fall to the floor, and he grins. My lips are on his neck, my tongue wandering down to his hard pecs as they flex at my touch.

God, the flavor of him, dominates like his seductive smell. I need more, making him moan as I suck his nipple, telling me he does too.

“I want to taste you”—I start dropping to my knees, my hands on the button of his jeans—“every fucking drop of you.”

I’m salivating for him. Yes, only he can fill this hunger...

But suddenly, he grabs my elbow, halting my descent.

“Cade, stop.”

It’s quick. The frustration. The confusion. The hurt. I surge back up.

“Why can’t I?”

He steps back.

“I’m not—”

“Trust, Redix.” Gently, I grab his hand. “We have to trust each other. That means *you* trust me too. And I want to. I want you so much, and it’s not fair. All those other women had you. And I let you have me like you wanted. When is it my turn?”

He does it again, that gesture that sings the saddest song—tucking his long hair behind his ear.

“Cade, fuck, I want you too. Believe me. Look.” He grabs his cock. It’s straining hard and ready under his jeans. “It’s just...”

His eyes dart away.

“I’ll never hurt you.” I reach for his cheek. “And you’ll never hurt me. Not if we do this together.” It hits me so hard; tears suddenly fall. “We heal together. It’s the only way.”

But he won’t look at me.

“I don’t want to hurt you that way.”

“You won’t hurt me. I trust you with this. You’re the only man I trust to touch me. The only one I can let go with.”

He exhales, meeting my eyes.

“If we do this, it’s gotta be my way.”

“So far, I love your way.” I smile, my body swearing it too. “There’s whipped cream in the fridge for *your way*.”

His smile soothes my every edge while he insists, “Take the pizzas out of the oven while I shower first.”

“You’re ruining the romance.”

“No, an oven fire ruins the romance.”

He’s only a few minutes in the shower while I set the pizzas out to cool. I hope they’re frozen again when I’m done with Redix tonight. I only want to devour him.

Especially how he looks walking down my hallway. He’s back in jeans with his hair hanging in long wet ropes I’d gladly hang my neck in.

“Let me take a shower too,” I tell him.

“Ok. I’ll wait.”

“No, you’ll watch me.”

Something in me fears he’ll bolt when I disappear into my room. Besides, it turns me on even more. Letting him lean against my bathroom vanity while he watches me through the shower glass enclosure. When I turn the shower off, he’s at the door, pulling it open and dropping to his knees.

“Let’s make you dirty again,” he insists, slinging my wet leg over his shoulder.

“You want to taste me tonight?” I lace my hands through his damp strands. “You want my candy, Redix?”

Need weighs his eyes down though they’re looking up at me.

“Yes.”

“Only if I get to taste yours too.”

He agrees by burying his face between my legs, his tongue slurping up shower water, and my desire. Fuck, I’ve missed him. I roll my hips, sliding over his mouth, his nose diving in deep. He groans when I clench his hair, controlling my glide over his face.

“Is it sweet?” Looking down, I marvel at his show. “Is my pussy sweet on your mouth?”

“Fuck yes,” he murmurs before his fingers thrust in hard. “Come on.” He curls them deep inside. They’re so fucking long, like everything else on him, that they’re doing it again, that new insanity I crave, the one he floods my body with.

“Drip it down my hand, Cade.”

I lean into his pressure, grabbing the back of his head for balance, for more of this thrill, and we both moan at his suffocation. I lose my mind to his touch, letting the orgasm he gives me shred the breath from my lungs as I scream out for him. Shaking, the lush frazzle of my release glosses his face. I moan and drip again when I hear his bellow into my tender flesh. Grabbing the glass door, I’m going to collapse. I need to lie down, to revel in this amazing demise while it leaves my body, but I won’t. I need his pleasure, too, more than my own.

“Redix,” I huff. “Please.”

He stands up, wrapping his arm around me to replace my depleted strength but also to pull me into his favorite kiss. The one that tastes like me. I let him take my mouth until I feel my legs again.

“It’s your turn,” I sigh, “however you want, but we do this together.”

Pressing his forehead to mine, silence holds him. I’m scared he’ll change his mind.

“On your bed,” he finally says.

He’s demanding my trust too. But I’m ready. Only he’s allowed in my heart, in my bed. It’s been my sanctuary all these years, but now... he is.

The white bedspread barely sinks when I turn and sit on the edge of it. Standing steps away with a wild look in his eyes, I know he wants this. Pressed underneath his jeans, his cock is hanging hard for it.

“Lay in the middle.” He pauses. “On your back with your head on a pillow and spread your legs for me.”

I obey.

Why I’m spreading my thighs, I don’t know until he opens my nightstand and takes out my most indulgent purchase. It’s purple, made to thrust inside while a dual flutter tongue is on it. It was expensive but with forty-four settings? Nope, it’s priceless.

He studies it for a second before pressing a button. It’s obvious what he can do to me with it. But not what I get to do to him. I wait, refraining from any demands until he makes his.

“We only do this if you’re getting pleasure too.”

I nod, watching him climb my way. Redix, back here with me, beside me on my soft bed, it’s almost too much. The tenderness of it. The memories it brings. The vulnerability it creates.

He knows it, crawling to kneel beside my head; he can see it in my eyes, so he asks again, “Are you sure?”

My mouth is watering. “Yes.”

“No hands, okay? Let me be in charge.”

“Okay.”

I've never felt so safe and so exposed at the same time.

The low hum of my toy fills the room. He tickles it, teasing it around my pussy, gauging my reaction and my lips part at the pleasure—both pairs—opening with the need.

Watching his hand unbutton his jeans, I'm rapt by the sight. I swallow, ready for his full reveal. Pushing his jeans down his thighs, my heart stammers at his proud erection springing free and at our tattoo, inches away from it.

Our tattoo.

I see his eyes take in mine too. Something flashes across them while I can't stop my hips from rolling for his gaze, for the toy he's teasing through my sex.

"Remember," he insists. "No hands."

I obey while he leans forward, and I turn my head for the fat crown of his cock inches from my lips. Watching my wonder, he thrusts the toy inside me and clicks it twice, making me groan and lift my hips off the bed.

"You want this, don't you, Cade?"

"Yes." I don't care if it's a beg. It is. "I want to suck your cock, Redix."

"Gimme that tongue and lick it first." The words drip from his mouth in that bourbon voice. *God, the intensity in his eyes.* He likes saying it as much as I crave hearing it. "Go ahead. Lick my cock again, Cade. Just like I taught you the first time."

And I can't wait anymore. My tongue darts out, meeting the seam under his sensitive tip for the first time in so long, and we shake, our bodies shuddering at the reunion.

He stammers, "Damn, you feel good."

Quickly, his taste is on the tip of my tongue, early drops of him within minutes of me licking and circling his tip before dragging the point of my tongue down to his base and back.

My hips match the circling dance of my tongue, desperately seeking the satisfaction he's holding back with the

tease of my toy.

“You want more, don’t you?”

My eyes are open to his question, to his heft hovering over my mouth. This pillow cradles my head at the perfect place to worship him from below. And my god, he’s divine. His cock is so hard while his face, it’s laced with desire fighting care.

“Yes.”

It’s my favorite word to give him as I spread my thighs wider, opening my mouth even more.

“Take more of me.” Is that his permission or a command?
“As much as you can.”

I turn my head and body to the side, keeping my legs open for the toy, for his play through the lips of my soaking sex. And he lets me do it. Craning my neck and opening my mouth, I take all I can of his massive cock.

“Oh fuck!” he groans, flinching at my pursuit, at my throat, taking him more. I want him so much, but he pulls back.

“Gimme a second.” His breath is staggered. “Fuck, I’m so sensitive; I swear I’m gonna come in your mouth.”

“I want you to come in my mouth.” I challenge his eyes. “I want you to fuck my mouth so hard until I can taste my tears and your cum tingling down the back of my throat.”

His eyes darken.

That look in them, I relish it.

He grabs the back of my head with his free hand, pulling me closer, positioning my mouth at the perfect angle. With three more clicks of my toy, I cry out when he thrusts it into my pussy before holding it there tight, buried inside me, while the flutter tongue on it indulges my clit with a maddening buzz. It’s a frenzy over my nerves, inside and out, pushing me to the edge.

“Say it again.” His dripping tip is at my lips. “Say what you want, Cade.”

I have no shame. No patience. No fear with him.

“Fuck my throat, Redix, as hard as you can until you come in it.”

With a groan, he does it with abandon. I gasp, trying to find air, and he’s delicious. I can’t stop moaning over his shaft, over the drips of my spit that he’s dragging from my mouth over my lips and down my chin with his ceaseless pump. Controlling the back of my head, he’s lost in the sight, in this pleasure. I’m watching him, and he’s watching me, making us crave even more.

“You’re so beautiful, Cade.” His hips thrust, and I can’t take his full length, but I relax my throat until we hear that *gluck*, that sweet suck of my lips, of my throat as full as I can be of him. “You’re so fucking beautiful with my big cock in your mouth, with me fucking your pretty face.”

It’s a tease, taunting me to my edge. It’s also his truth. I can see it in his eyes, in his ask.

“You love this, don’t you? You’re mine, first, aren’t you? I made you like this. I taught you how to be a dirty girl for me.”

The doubling, the taste of him, the warm press of his hand holding the toy inside me is like a damn circus of pleasure performing in my pussy; I’m going to come so hard.

“That’s it.” And he’s watching it. “Dance that wet pussy over your toy while you make me come in your hot, tight throat.”

I can see him. Taste him. I love him. I can’t take my eyes off him while gentle tears fall from their corners because I want this.

Because his thighs are shaking, his lush lips fall open. His sky eyes look into mine while they witness this—his fuck of my mouth until I feel him swell against my lips. He’s going to take me with him.

“Come on, Cade. Show me how you love it.” He sees it, demanding, “Let me watch that sweet pussy come while my cock squirts down your throat.”

My body bucks, coming so hard. My scream is muffled by his mass and his loud growl. My eyes are open, but it's blinding. "Yes!" He groans, his shaft pulsing over my lips while my orgasm seizes my body, quaking at the taste of him, warm and salty. "Fuck!" He shoots more down my throat, making us spasm together again with our pleasure.

I'm breathless, gasping for air over his creamy cock as he trembles on his knees before my face, and I don't know the sudden look on his. He pulls out of my mouth, pulling the toy out of me too.

"It's okay." I barely utter, "We're okay," as he yanks his jeans back on but doesn't button them.

Quickly, he lies beside me, searching my eyes, holding my cheek. "You okay?"

"Yes."

Worry weighs his eyes. "You sure?"

"More than okay." I tilt my lips for his, reaching for his face too. "I'm hungry for more of you."

He kisses me with a chuckle, unafraid to swirl his tongue through his taste in my mouth. That only makes me desperate for another meal of him, but the buzzing between my thighs stops us.

He lifts away and grins, grabbing the toy from the bed.

"How do you turn this damn thing off? It has more buttons than the space shuttle."

He's almost not wrong. I grab it, laughing and clicking the combo to turn it off.

"Well, it does rocket me to the moon and back."

"How can my cock compete with tech like that?"

That stops my laugh, my eyes finding his gaze, assuring him, "Nothing compares to you, and no one ever will."

Devouring pizza minutes later, I'm still right.

Redix is more delicious.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



REDIX

DEAR CANDY CADE,

Sometimes when I see our future, I fear it.

Other times, I can't live without the hope of it.

Because for twenty-four hours, I thought I had lost you. I saw that damn post of Angie and me, and I knew it would hurt you, and I about lost my shit. You weren't answering my texts and calls, so I dropped everything to fix it. I told my manager I had a family emergency and didn't show up to set. I've never done that before, but fuck it.

You are my family, Cade.

Like I've always felt protective over my mom and little sister too. I was the "man of the house" from a young age. Even my modeling money supported us.

But you're a different kind of family.

You're the one I chose. You're the one more like me than anyone. You've always been a gift my heart wraps around to protect.

Eric couldn't get me a charter flight home fast enough, so I had to fly commercial.

And coach.

No, my ass ain't too precious to fly coach. It's too famous. I had every passenger around me wanting selfies and snapping pics of me when I just wanted to close my eyes and pray you'd give me another chance.

I get it. I won't pop up in your life like that again. Hell, you almost shot me, so that'll teach me.

But we worked it out. We always did because, yeah, we've had our fights. You have a temper, and I have no filter.

That's a hot mess right there.

Remember the fight we had over senior prom? I asked you to go with me. (That would've been our first real date.) But you said no. That TJ and Gentry would ruin it for us.

At first, I was like, "Fuck 'em," and got mad at you for not going with me.

Those boys had been calling me names for years, from "pretty boy" to "model ass" to every gay slur in the book. By the time we were seniors, I was bigger than them. I didn't worry about them.

I should've.

I think deep down; you knew they were a threat.

You get that from your parents. You're a born detective. You can smell guilt a mile away.

But I was determined to have our prom. So I rented a tux but didn't wear the shirt or shoes. I showed up at your mom's with pink tulips. Some bloomed at the house where our bus stop was, and you used to say how you loved them, so I cut a few from the yard. (Sorry, Ms. Parker).

I told you to put on a dress.

I didn't ask you, so by your rules; it wasn't a date.

But you finally stopped fighting me. You wore a white dress. I remember because you almost looked like *my* bride in it.

I hoped you would be.

I still do.

Our parents helped me. Our moms put lit candles in jars in a circle on the beach for us. They left a picnic basket too. And your dad hooked me up with some champagne and a speaker for my iPod. I even got a wrist corsage for you. No magnolias, I told the florist. And it was small. I know you think big shit is tacky.

When you saw the glowing candles in a circle like our own dance floor, it made you cry.

God, you're so beautiful like that.

When you're not pissed and trying to right some wrong, you give me your heart, and it's like I'm holding a tiny bird in my hands. Delicate. Trusting.

You danced with me on that dark beach. We had it to ourselves, and you kissed me, swearing it was better than any prom could be.

And it was.

Our song played. I knew it would be the seventh on my playlist. I got on one knee and proposed to you with "Chasing Cars" playing for us, and fuck, you saw it... yeah, I had a few tears too.

People told us eighteen was too young.

Yeah, I agree for most.

But we were never like most, Cade.

The world shut us out from a young age, treating us like a beautiful circus sideshow to gawk at, and we found each other in that loneliness. I always hated it. I never felt comfortable in it. You're the only one who knows how it feels for me when people want me, when they come after me. Because they come after you too.

Everyone always took from us, but we only gave to each other, so much friendship and love. So I gave you that necklace, the infinity one that night.

And I will, Cade.

I will love you for infinity.

Because life is too small. It's too short to contain us. It never could.

You got to wear that necklace for a month. It was our happiest.

You think you lost it that night. You didn't. I know who has it. So fuck him.

I bought you a new one. I'm watching you sleep beside me, and it's around your neck.

You look like an angel, you know?

Like when you're awake, your violet eyes are so intense, your beauty is too much.

What are those mythical women called? ~~Syrens?~~ No. Sirens. Women who sound so beautiful they lure men to their death.

Yep, that's you.

But not with me.

You bring me to life. I know how soft you really are. Like your heart. Like this bed. I'm honored to be here. I know why you don't trust men. So when you sleep beside me like this, it's like you're an angel, only trusting me to protect you.

Because you know I will.

But I don't know what to do when I look at you like this, after what we did tonight. Because I know what you want next. I do too. You were my first and I want you to be my last.

I love you, Cade. I always will.

But if we don't stop, that may be the most evil thing I ever do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



“YOU’RE GOING WHERE?”

It’s not like I report to Penny, but we’re a team, and I owe her the update.

“I’m going to New York. I’m on a private jet Redix booked for me, and they let you use your phone.”

It takes Penny a second. I don’t blame her. I’ve never taken a day off except for family leave to help Mama. So I’ve banked over three months of vacation and never planned to use it.

But plans change.

“Why New York? Why not LA, where he lives?”

This’ll knock her socks off. I can’t believe it myself.

“Because I agreed to do a photoshoot with him, and he’s meeting me there.”

Here it comes...

“A what? A fucking photoshoot? Are you a cop or a cover girl?”

There's no anger in her voice—only shock.

“It's the ten-year anniversary of BOUND, our perfume ad. The designer, Marco Rossi, he's releasing its companion fragrance, FREE. He booked Redix for the new campaign—”

“And he talked you into doing it with him.”

Now she sounds miffed.

“Sorta.” The Atlantic sparkles outside my window. “He cut a deal with Marco and got him to pay us two hundred and fifty thousand each. Redix is donating his to his crisis centers, and I'm gonna pay off all my mama's medical bills and donate the rest too.”

“And the promise of a hot fuck in Manhattan has nothing to do with this?”

I wish. Redix and I still haven't fucked, made love, whatever we want to call it.

He had to leave early the following day after his surprise visit, leaving me hungry for much more, and he's been gone for two weeks since.

“Look. It's the July Fourth holiday, and I've worked every single one for six years. We're at a stalemate on our missing woman case and hitting our heads against a brick wall on the others. This is three days of me taking a break before I snap and heads roll.”

“Okay, okay.” Penny relents. “I get it. I'm losing my mind too at the progress we're *not* making.”

“When I get back next weekend, I'm babysitting. You've got enough milk stored, and I want my goddaughter all weekend while you and Hank do God will only know what to each other. I'll even use this money and book y'all a suite somewhere. Deal?”

“Hell yes, that's a deal. I got no guilt over Redix Dean and his money spoiling me.”

“It's *my* money.”

“It was *his* deal.” Penny’s coming around quickly. “What else is gonna be *his* by the end of this trip? Are you gonna come back as Mrs. Dean?”

The mention of that? Of a future that far from now with Redix?

I can’t see it. I can’t see past *my* deal. The one I made with God. It’s all I’ve focused on for years. I gave up wedding plans for an event much more momentous.

But can I change?

With the way I’m feeling about Redix again? With every sweet thing he does, big and small? I know he’s feeling this too.

Nothing but a vast ocean is in my view... and ten victims... one missing woman... Pamela gone... and two broken souls if you count me and Redix.

No. For their sake... I can’t change.

“I’d like to come back laid for now,” I answer Penny.

“New York and modeling? I’m not jealous about that,” Penny says. “But if you finally get to fuck Redix Dean? Girl, I’d walk barefoot over hot pavement to New York City for that man. And my God, when I got there—I’d ride him like the Kentucky Derby.”

I snort the champagne I’m sipping. “I’ll buy you the big hat.”

“One with lots of feathers because, oh my, how I’d tickle his ass too.”

His ass. His body. I’m dying for every naked inch of him. I don’t know why he’s so shy, but I haven’t seen or touched all of him yet. I’m in pain for one more time with him. It makes me throw the rest of my champagne back.

“Feathers. Leather. Chains. I don’t care.” I lower my voice as the attendant comes by to refill me. “You have no idea how bad I need him.”

“Yes, I do. You’ve tried hiding it all these years but suck at it. You know I *caught* you one time.”

“Caught me?”

I lift the full glass of bubbles to my lips.

“You were at your desk looking at your phone. The look on your face, I thought something was wrong with your mom. But when I came over to ask if you were okay, I saw what was on your screen. It was Redix and that video of him fucking that woman like a dog in a parking lot.”

Another big sip of champagne cools the sudden burn in my throat.

All those videos of him, all the times he got caught fucking around. His fans and the press think it’s funny. It’s part of the sexy, rebel mystique of Redix Dean. It’s a myth. That’s not him. I can see it in his eyes in those videos. That’s what hurts so damn much. It’s not him in that body. He’s lost in whatever drunk or high he’s on.

“I know how much you love him, Cade.” Penny’s tone warms. “That’s why I worry—you’d do anything for him.”

“I’d kill for him,” I mutter, trapped in that thought.

I didn’t mean to say it aloud.

Penny laughs. “Just remember, if he hurts you—”

“I know. I know. You’ll kill him first.”

By the time we land in New York, I might have a slight buzz. I change and refresh on the plane. I’m woozy as a chauffeur drives me to dinner. Redix is meeting me there. The maître d’ at Le Coucou combs his eyes from my heels to my black silk Gucci slip dress to find my soft smile. It hides my sudden nerves.

Do I fit in? It’s been ten years. For me and this dress. Isn’t it vintage by now?

I shouldn’t give a shit, but I’m back in old territory of the discerning eyes of SoHo nightlife.

The maître d’ winks.

“I’m a big fan. BOUND is still my fragrance.” I exhale... and want to hug him but just wink back. “Your *date* is waiting on you, ma’am. He wanted me to be *very sure* I called him that.”

I can’t help it; I’m laughing as I follow him to our table. When Redix stands to greet me in his black sharkskin two-piece suit with no shirt underneath in front of the entire restaurant, I relish it. Because under the warm glow of the enormous candelabras above, his eyes soften with his lips and the gentle kiss he gives me.

Enough to be discreet. Enough to declare it to the world.

We’re together.

“Damn, darlin’.” He pulls the chair out for me. “You’re ready for the runway again looking like that.”

No, I’m not. I don’t want that life. But I want this—a romantic dinner with him. Maybe... a new life too.

“I bet your parents are having a shit-fit that you’re up here with me again.”

He’s delighted by that concept before sipping his seltzer.

“They love you, and you eat it up. Hell, I think my dad loves you more than me.”

“That’s impossible. But he *likes* me more than he does you.”

“Shut up.”

I toss a little piece of my baguette at him with a smile. It’s probably true.

“You remember how he caught me stealing his expensive whiskey for us? I filled his bottles with tea like an idiot, like he wouldn’t taste it. He never did whoop my ass for that.”

“You got me there.”

“I should’ve known I had a problem then.”

“What? With whiskey?”

“No.” His bad-boy smirk tingles my thighs. “...with doing anything for you.”

I’m dazzled. Gazing back at him, I bite my lip and want to crawl across this table and kiss that adoring smirk off his face. But I don’t get the chance because a woman appears at our table instead.

“Redix! I want a selfie with you!”

Her lips keep moving after she barks. Yep, she’s had too much wine.

“Excuse me, ma’am.” Fury skyrockets through my veins. “We’re trying to enjoy our dinner. *Alone.*”

“Don’t be a bitch,” she slurs. “I just want him.”

A phone is in her hand. A fuck is in her eyes for Redix. And the dinner guests next to us are equally annoyed. The napkin in my lap lands on the table with my toss.

“You’ll get your selfie with him when you show me your invitation.”

“*Cade?*” Redix watches. “*Darlinnn?*” He’s amused.

“What invitation?” she asks, swaying inches below my rising tower.

“The one that invites me to kick your ass *after* you do.”

She snaps her neck. “You don’t own him!”

I step in front of Redix, blocking her. “Like a gun, I do, bitch.”

It’s a rush I can’t stop to protect him, even from a drunk pain-in-the-ass holding a Coach bag.

“Alright, ladies.” Redix jumps up, wrapping his hand around my waist, pulling me into his embrace. “Ma’am, if you want a picture of me, she’s in it too.”

She glares at us before storming off. The maître d’, the sweet one, he’s right behind her and sweeping her out the door.

“Sorry, folks.” Redix politely waves his hand, announcing to the open room of dinner guests, “Dessert is on me.” Then he

whispers in my ear, “And you, because fuck, that turned me on.”

He’s on cloud nine, holding my hand while he shakes the hands of the other dinner guests, who thank him as we leave—these folks he takes pictures with. But I’m not thrilled. I shouldn’t have lost my temper. But it hits me so fast with him I see red.

No, I see blood. Blood from our past. And blood in the future if anyone threatens him.

My temper always amuses him.

He has no idea.

It’s more now.

It’s a lethal deal.

We wait for the same chauffeur in the same Mercedes who dropped me off to pull up to the curb. Redix enjoys the time, kissing me and not caring about the paparazzi dickhead snapping pics feet away.

I ignore him too.

This is life with Redix, so I squelch my frustration about photos taken. His soft lips on mine make that a hard possibility until the Mercedes whisks us away.

When the chauffeur turns down Canal Street, Redix tells him, “Drive us up to Central Park and back, please. We want to enjoy the sights.”

The grip of his hand holding mine over the backseat lets go.

“I love it when you do that, Candy Cade.”

He slides closer to me while covertly sliding his hand under my ass on the seat, and my heart stutters.

“Why are you so protective over me now?”

His question reaches for my heart while the slick leather of the back seat lets him find his way to gathering up my short dress in his grasp until only my thong is in his way.

“Because you fought for me, so I’ll fight for you too.”

“Cade.” It stalls his advance, his eyes saddening. “I don’t want you getting hurt over me.”

It’s too late, and we both know it.

I lean toward his lips. “I’d do anything for you.” That past, this present, and the intensity of what we share makes my hips circle over his hand. “You don’t even need to ask.”

Desire shoots lightning across his eyes because he knows it.

“Anything?” he asks, his finger easing past my thin lace.

The chauffeur is watching the traffic while I turn and watch Redix.

“Anything.”

I’m sitting on his hand and a mountain of need for this. My thighs part just slightly. Soft jazz plays loud enough to mask our conversation. My dress drapes long enough to hide his hand playing with my sex.

“You’re so warm.” His finger, one so thick and long, slides inside me, and I bite back a moan. “It feels so warm inside when you fight for me.”

I love how he’s watching me. With his hair in a knot, only a few strands fall over his sexy face that won’t stop staring at me; it’s making me squirm. He uses his other fingers, pulling the thin thong aside so I can do this. So I can rub my clit into the seat while his fingers fuck me from underneath.

“It’s very moving when you protect me.” His bottom lip, his teeth bite it before he says, “I feel it very deep inside.”

Two of his big fingers slide inside my cunt while 6th Avenue blurs by. I clench around his touch while the wet he’s making me slicks the leather.

“I feel you deep inside me too.”

A saxophone wails through the speakers while I grind down on his fingers, craving more of him, but this will do for now because I can’t stop. Redix Dean does this to me. Desire

for him has me willing to risk all to satisfy it. I hang on to his gaze and let it happen.

“You like this feeling, don’t you, Cade? Of being so bad for me. Of being my dirty little girl.” He pumps them, sliding his slick fingers in and out. “Is there anything you won’t do for me?”

He has no idea.

“I’ll do anything.”

The friction of my clit against this leather, it’s rubbing that tiny spot that’ll deliver tremendous pleasure.

“What will you finally do with *me*, Redix?”

A veil of lust drops over his eyes, of dark intent, and I’m desperate for its arrival. I need him so much it hurts.

It makes him slam three fingers, and the words, “Whatever I fucking want, Cade,” inside my tender opening. “You’re fucking mine.”

I muffle my gasp; the sear of pain comes before the fast rush of pleasure. It’s glazing his fingers, smearing over the seat, and *oh God*, he starts curling them hard, combing them down my walls deep inside.

I’m going to leave a shameless puddle behind.

“Redix, fuck me.”

But I can’t say more. My mouth, my body twists for him, demanding it, but I have no sound, only the pressure he’s raging inside me. It’s so loud.

“Not tonight, Candy Cade.” His lips near mine. “I want my dessert. Chocolate-covered strawberries are melting for your nipples in our suite.” He’s jerking his hand. I’m grinding hard. His lips dust over mine, his free hand wrapping around my neck and holding me there. “There’s whipped cream and a banana I’m gonna use on your hungry pussy too.”

I burst. His mouth takes me in a kiss while I’m washed away in the current of his touch, his taste, his tease and kink of

just how deep I want to go with him. To places dark. To places forbidden.

I let it wash over me, the permission and the pleasure, as I gasp back into his breath.

And I was wrong.

I am changing.

My whole world is crumbling wet over his hand.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



THE MIRROR IS LYING.

This woman isn't me.

But I like her.

Marco Rossi sent over his glam squad along with our wardrobe. This fashion I'm wearing is as edgy as the night Marco has planned.

It's not just a photoshoot; it's an event—a huge party with a DJ and a dance floor in a chic SoHo studio. Our photoshoot will be open. Guests can snap their pics while the photographer does too.

Redix agreed that we'll do the arrival, the rope line into the event, the photo shoot, and two hours after schmoozing the VIPs. After that, we're free to go.

But I don't think I'm ready to set the woman in the mirror free.

She's bound in leather, rejection, and pain.

Redix teased me to the point of a broken heart last night.

Yes, there was chocolate, strawberries, whipped cream, a banana, my writhing body, and his moaning mouth devouring it all. It felt so good that I lost my mind; he had me crying out for him, screaming his name. Lying naked on top of the dining room table in the suite at The Crosby, I didn't understand why.

Why did he stop?

Why won't he make love to me?

Why does he pull away and get quiet?

I kept asking him, begging him, and he tried kissing me into silence to soothe the sting of his rejection.

But I couldn't take it anymore. I pushed his kiss away last night and cried alone in the shower. I slept alone, too—in one of the bedrooms of this two-bedroom suite, where I assume he slept in the other.

Because I need to know. Why? Why won't he tell me what's going on?

I've been understanding. I haven't pushed him. I love him, and I'd never hurt him.

So why does he keep me at an agonizing distance? Why can't he understand that I need to know?

It's my story, my pain too. I just can't remember it all.

Why won't he trust me if I trust him again?

This denial between us. It's as lonely as the past ten years without him. Maybe it's worse. Because it's a taunt of my broken heart that deserves better, we both do.

We need the truth.

We need each other.

He tried apologizing by waking me up with a breakfast tray. My eyes were swollen from crying, and they started weeping again at the sight of him.

"I'm sorry, Cade," was all he would say.

He sat beside me on the bed, and I silently picked at my food. I felt sick.

“Do you want me to cancel tonight?” He asked me around lunchtime.

“No.” My tears had stopped. I stared out of the wall of paned windows to SoHo outside. “I gave Marco my word, and I’ll keep it.”

I let Redix pull me into a silent hug while I tried to decide how much more of this I can take.

These past two months with him have glued pieces of my heart back together. Like half of it’s back; precarious slivers stacked upon another, but he’s holding his beautiful bare foot there, threatening to smash it again.

So this fierce woman looking back at me?

The one who’s had enough?

She’s a stranger I’m ready to meet.

The stylist strapped me into Louboutin Black Sleeping Beauty pumps. There’s a red rose over my toes while their gold heels are adorned with thorns. The many inches of my legs are glossed and bare up to the eight inches of this black leather miniskirt.

Even smaller is the wide black leather strap bound tight around my breasts, holding them up high and knotted in the back as my top. My short hair is slicked back, and my lips match the rose on the shoes. My lashes are done, but I’m sure they’ll add more makeup at the shoot.

But the real sight that captivates me in the mirror?

I’m wearing the same BOUND perfume collar from ten years ago. It’s black. Simple. Elegant with its delicate gold hardware. But the gold chain is missing this time. I won’t be bound to Redix tonight.

Like this new perfume.

Like ten years later.

I’m free of him.

If I choose to be.

I like this woman in the mirror... because I don't know what the fuck she's gonna do next.



MARCO WON'T STOP GUSHING over me.

And he won't stop with his hand around my hip, introducing me to every VIP in sight.

“My Goddess,” he cries, “you must return to me. Be my spokeswoman. A grown one now on every campaign with this body, this face with that short hair, Mio Dio, you are sex on two long legs.”

It's all in good fun.

I'm not coming back, and he knows it. But he sure is trying. And with me at twenty-eight and Marco a sexy forty-something, I know when a man wants to do more than *work* with me.

I'm not his innocent virgin bound in leather anymore. I don't need fashion or collars to assert my sex and power. I have more than any restraint can harness.

Marco's coming onto me. The couple who owns *Oomph* magazine propositioned me too. Marco's hair stylist—she's acting very interested. I feel like fresh meat, and Redix is watching it all from across the room because the same is happening to him.

But no one gets a bite of me tonight.

I don't know what Redix will do with his savory body everyone's after too.

I never have.

“Where is your Romeo?” Marco sips a Negroni, searching the sea of chic people. “It's time for the show.”

I point to Redix, but I haven't spoken to him. He had no words when he met me in the hotel lobby for our limo. All

he's wearing tonight is a pair of black leather pants, a matching black collar, and a cloak of tension.

Marco's PR team joined us in the limo along with Redix's assistant, Eric. On the ride over, they chatted about the night, the names we must know, the schedule we must keep...

All while, Redix watched me with a storm in his eyes.

I looked back and saw no trace of the boy I knew, the young man I loved, or even the asshole who followed me into a parking lot.

Who is he now?

When we stood for the cameras at the rope line, blasts of lights, shouts of his name, a scurry of people told us where to stand, and he just held on to me, pressing his oiled flesh against mine.

We didn't smile.

We let the cameras take pictures while we tried to decide, with no words, if we could be saved.

Or if we're damned for infinity.

In a rush of assistants, I'm hurried across the room and plopped into a makeup chair for a retouch. Redix sits beside me for his. After a whirl of people directing us, we stand in front of a white backdrop. Music pumps bass through the air. Lights on tripods make our almost naked bodies glow. Guests hold their phones up. Marco talks with his team and the photographer.

Hundreds are in this room, looking at us, and I don't know who I'm looking at.

The points of my heels touch his bare toes, and he's still inches taller than me. The sky in his eyes stares down at me, taking in the landscape of my body, the terrain of the pain in my eyes too.

And I'm looking back at his.

Will this ever stop?

“Lightning!” Marco shouts. “I want it. Give me your love again! Your lightning in a bottle!”

Redix wraps his hand around my neck, pulling me near, and the crowd cheers. His grip squeezes hard. The heat of his lips burns inches from mine, and the restraint in his eyes, won’t let me go.

We don’t kiss.

We don’t move.

It’s not part of the performance, and it’s not sure between us. Lights flash, cameras click, and we are bound to the question...

What will we do?

“Libera! Libera! Free!” Marco shouts, directing us. “Your fragrance. Your love. It’s free now!”

“Can we be?” I whisper to Redix, reaching my hand for his hard jaw, sliding it back into his silky strands. “Can we finally be free, Redix?”

I drag hard through his hair, yanking it to pull his lips to mine.

The crowd cheers again.

And we hold for the shot.

For the camera.

For his answer.

It’s seconds before he lifts his lips from mine.

“Is that what you want, Cade?” Agony rages in his eyes with the storm we barely survived. “You want me to leave you? You want to be free of our love forever?”

I reach up, with no direction from Marco, no cameras, no world around us.

It’s just us.

It’s just Redix’s storm and my battered shore, and we must be unleashed.

“No,” I answer him. With a snap, I drop his collar to the floor. “I want *us* to be free of this. Free of what happened.”

The camera’s clicking like mad, Marco whistles his approval, and the crowd does too, but they’re not here.

We’re there, ten years ago, and right now with Redix’s eyes searching mine. Searching for our future.

“I don’t care if it’s ten seconds,” I swear, “or if you rip me apart, at least we’ll finally be free *together*, like you know we’re meant to be.”

I feel his lips, so suddenly they’re on mine while his pull snaps off my collar too, and it falls to the floor. My bare skin he’s exposed underneath sighs at the freedom. Our kiss, it’s off-script and out of control, and every sound around us loves it.

Redix’s big hands cradle my jaw, and he’s sharing our love, our pain and passion, and our secret with his kiss.

I know they went *after him*.

I know they beat him.

And I know he saved me.

And now...

I’ll. Save. Him.

I pull him in and kiss him back, holding his heart on fire—the scald of his pain—and not getting burned. It’s my turn now. I’ll do it all for him.

The night is too long. The two hours we have to stay after, they separate us into the crowd of fans wanting selfies, of bodies touching mine, trying to claim it—it doesn’t belong to them.

From across the room, I see where I belong. I see Redix suffering the same.

His assistant, Eric, is a true pro. Throwing his clout around, he gets Redix and me out on time. With a final kiss on Marco’s cheek and a dodge through a wall of paparazzi cameras outside, we find shelter alone in the limousine.

“Jesus, Cade.” Redix lifts my chin so my eyes meet his. “With the way you look tonight, I mean it. You want us to be free together, but I’m afraid I’ll hurt you when I do.”

“No, you won’t.” I grab his thigh. “I’m stronger. No man can hurt me now.”

“You tell me.” His thumb drags over my bottom lip. “Just say ‘stop’.”

“No. *That’s* how people get hurt.” I graze up his thigh to his hard length bound by leather. “Earn my fucking ‘yes’ and make me moan it.”

His eyes slam shut with a slow shake of his head.

“Fuck, I’m gonna lose it with you.” Lifting his eyelids, the tip of his finger traces over my naked collarbone while he asks, “Are you still on birth control?”

“Yes. Ironclad. And my tests, they’re all clear. Yours are too?”

“Yes. What about condoms? I have some.”

“You’re the only man I never used them with.” I reach for his hand, lingering up my thigh. “And I’d like to keep it that way. Always.”

I want nothing between us.

He can play his games tonight; I’ll still get my way.

Redix is the only man allowed fully inside me: then, now, and forever.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Savages by Kerli

THE HOTEL SUITE IS DARK WHEN WE OPEN THE DOOR.

He doesn't turn the lights on. There's enough streaming in through the wall of windows while I stand under his nose, pressing my palms to his bare chest, his hands cupping my ass.

Every muscle on his frame is tense.

"You can change your mind," I offer. "But I won't change mine. I need this for us."

It's straining his face; all his desire and damage is ready to rage.

"I'm holding so much back with you," he says. "I don't know what I'm going to feel." His lush lips pull tight. "What if we remember? What'll it do to us?"

"I don't know." His heart thunders under my hands. It's as fragile as mine in this moment. "But I'll be there with you, I promise."

"I need to hear it again, Cade. Tell me what you want."

I'm not afraid.

I'm starving.

“You've shown me your tenderness, gifts, games, and five seconds.” I pull his mouth to mine. “I've waited so long for you, Redix. Now I want you to rip me apart.”

He pants against my lips. “There's so much I want to do with you.” His hands reach around, untying my leather sash top. “I want to play games tonight, but I need your hands tied.”

He drags the leather strap over my breasts, tickling its buttery edge around my nipple until I stammer a sigh.

His eyelids drop. “Is that a yes?”

I never let a man do this. Never do they have my trust. Or honestly, my time. And though I want to feel Redix, I want to grab his back while he's buried deep inside me; I also want this. He was my first at innocent sex. I want him to be my first at bad love.

“Yes, you may tie my hands.”

I submit them in front.

“No. Turn around.”

I do it with a grin.

The bind he ties around my wrists, it's not that tight. Truth is, I have the strength in my arms to stretch this soft leather enough to escape. That certainty lets me permit this because I'm beyond curious. I'm rapt by what he'll ask me to do next.

He guides my waist, leading us from the suite's dining area to the sitting one. Two sofas and two chairs are centered around a fireplace. But in July, he shows no interest in that cozy space.

No, he guides me to the wall of windows.

Sixteen huge panels of glass paned by iron separate us from the buildings of SoHo. There are ones across from us while this building forms an L so other guests can see us too.

Illuminated windows of people doing their deeds fill my vision. A curious eye could see through the night and watch what we're doing too.

"If we really want to be free." His hand reaches under my skirt, his fingers skimming my thrilled sex. "Then we let anyone watch just how much."

Oh my God, I've been on display all my life.

But like this?

Redix steps in front of me, between my body and the city outside, tickling his other fingertips down my cleavage, over my belly, and back up to my nipples. His touch is a welcome fire over my skin, prickling in the cool air.

"Can I show the world how sweet your pussy is, Cade?"

"Yes. But only you can taste how much."

He's kneeling, lifting the skirt to my waist, and scooping his tongue into my lust with no pause. Luckily, I didn't wear panties tonight because nothing's getting in his way. His mouth, his nose, he's plunging in and, "Oh shit," I sigh at his aggression, wobbling my knees.

I step them wider apart; I can't help it; he can eat more. He knows how. I've been his meal for months, and he's a connoisseur for my desire, with his fingers spreading me open, his tongue pummeling my clit into pure madness.

I'm gasping over his mouth, my naked breasts arched with my hands bound behind me, his tousled mane buried between my thighs, and my God, we're a sinful sight.

"Are you feeling free, Cade?" His fingers slide in while his glistening smile watches my reaction. "Are you letting them see how sweet you are?" They scissor, fluttering deep inside me before his mouth is on my clit again with the most exquisite suck. "What dirty little fucking girl you are for me."

"Oh fuck, Redix."

His free hand grabs my ass to keep my buckling knees standing. On these heels, it's not easy, but it makes my pussy

the perfect height for his dessert. For the whip of his tongue across my sex. For his fingers mixing through me too.

My eyes drop heavily with the weight of an orgasm threatening to crash down through me.

“Be free, Cade.” His taunting mouth hums against my pussy, his fingers fucking me fiercely while my eyes find focus out the window. “Show them how dirty I’ve made you. How this pussy is mine. Come on. Drip that cum down my hand.”

In my haze, I see a man’s silhouette watching me naked, watching Redix eat my pussy like his last meal, and that’s all it takes.

“Oh fuck!”

I’m falling. My eyes. My body. My pleasure. It’s rushing over him, wanting to pool on the floor, but his hands grab my ass, holding me up to lick the last taste of my satisfied sex.

He stands up, his cock straining under his pants. “On your knees now.” He cups my breasts, his fingers swirling over my nipples. “Will you moan a yes to suck my cock?”

He tugs my nipples so hard.

“Yes,” I gasp. It tumbles from my throat, from my lungs still recovering.

His grab is kind, helping me lower to my knees that are still weak, but I feel the burn of his desire to do this the second I’m before him.

This is new. My exposure. My submission. It’s wetting my mouth equal to my pussy while he drags his zipper down.

Hell yes, we’re free, and it can’t be fast enough, his grip pulling his length out from his pants, freeing it for my mouth to devour because I do. The moment his cock is before my lips, I take him with the speed my famine demands.

“*Daaammn, Cade.*” He’s hungry for it too. “Fuck yes, let me fuck your dirty mouth.”

Not holding back, he cups his hands around my head and guides me down, holding me as far as my mouth can go, as far my lips can stretch until a slight gag hits my throat, and he pulls back fast. He lifts my face, making my watering eyes meet his.

“Do you want it like that again?”

“Yes,” I answer before darting my tongue out for his leaking cock. “Fuck my throat, Redix.”

I want him to see this. I want that man watching us to see this.

Everyone, watch how Redix Dean submits to me while I’m on my knees.

I crane my neck, taking him in while he guides me too. His hard tempo. His sweet taste. I’m taking it all to get my reward.

“Goddamn, I’ll never forget this.” He fucks my mouth, watching my eyes. “Your red lips drooling spit over my cock. Your tits bouncing while I fuck your mouth. Your hands tied behind your back while you’re on your knees. Your pussy’s so wet because someone *is* watching us. They’re watching me face-fuck you, and you love it.” I groan. I agree. I can imagine what we look like, and I want it too. “Fuck, Cade, you’re so bad for me; it’s beautiful.”

The black leather of his pants. The BOUND cologne he’s wearing. The feel of carpet under my naked knees. The tight wrap of his hands through my hair while I take him, yes, it’s perfect.

His grip tightens. “They’re gonna watch me come in your sweet mouth. The one that belongs to me. Moan, if you want my cum.”

I moan so loud, the vibrations down his cock; I know he can feel them.

He staggers back, “Oh fuck,” holding onto my head, his cock pulsing in my mouth before... yes... I taste him.

That flavor of his sober desire, his real desire, it’s only for me and spilling down my throat and filling me with warmth. I

swallow every drop of him before I sit back on my knees, watching him gasp for sanity while he gazes down at me.

With a lick, I clean his last drop off the corner of my mouth before I ask, “What are we free to do next?”

He grins, dragging his hand through his strands before he helps me to stand as I glance out of the windows.

There are enough shadows over our faces that you can't be sure it's us. But the lights outside hit the curves and carves of our flesh, the motion of us making any mature human sure of what we're doing.

“You're going to stay right here.” He insists before his kiss sweeps through my mouth. I taste us, my tangy lust on his tongue mixing with his salty desire on mine. It's my favorite flavor, making me moan as he chuckles. “Is that a yes?”

“Yes,” I answer before I nip his bottom lip. It's so sexy.

Steps take him to the dining room table. Every muscle on his gorgeous frame flexes when he picks up an armless chair, and my eyes narrow. That sight, that perfection of masculine flesh, more than any person has ever seen, it's headed my way and *all for me*.

He sets the chair down in front of me and I'm confused.

“What are we doing?”

“We'll play my game until I'm ready to fuck you.” He sits down, grazing his palms over my naked hips. “With the way you look, it won't take me long.”

“What do you want to play?”

I let his hands guide me, answering me and turning me around so he can unzip my skirt. It falls to the floor before I kick it away.

I'm exposed before the window, but he doesn't turn me back. His lips land on my ass cheek before he gives gentle bites, and my shoulders drop with a soft moan.

It's so tempting. I know he'd take his time with me, but that's another thing I've never done—let any man have my

ass. And I'm not starting tonight. Not with the way Redix is hung.

It's like he senses it across my flesh.

He knows my body so well; I'm not ready for that so he turns me around and kisses my belly. I glance down. The sight, his adoration, it softens me, lust churning with love.

I know he does. It's in all he remembers, in the way he plays with my hair, in the way he laughs, feeding candy to me. He hasn't said it yet, not again, but Redix shows me love with the backs of his fingers cherishing softly down my body.

"I'm going to make you come again," he says with his lips tickling over my belly button. "Watching you come will get me so hard again, and then I'll be free to fuck you."

God, this man. I've never had a lover take his time to lavish me. Then again, I didn't let them. "How?"

Seduction pours from his eyes. "Ride my thigh, grind your dripping pussy on it while I suck your tits and get you off, and that man over there watches you come." Grabbing my hips, he grins. "Is that a yes?"

I wet more right here. His wanton command. His body a temple of sex. The leather of his pants is like the leather of the Mercedes—the perfect mix of gloss and friction my clit loves to ride.

It's a shameless one I'll give him and the city outside.

Straddling his left leg, I center my pussy over his strapping thigh and start. His hands grip my rolling hips with such strength that he's controlling my glide up and down. I'm so slick from before it's a slippery display within seconds.

"Look at you, Cade." He's staring down at the gloss I'm leaving behind. So am I. "Fuck, baby, that pussy gets so wet for me." His grip strengthens, and I know I'll have bruises and love it. "Look at how free you are with me. Look how you'll let me play anyway I want with you."

And I will.

What's unleashed in me? What has me doing this?

His tongue starts circling my nipple, jutting out for him before he sucks it hard, making me groan because... *it's him*.

My body, my heart, my whole life is open to him again like it knows its origin. I'm right here with his desire asking me to do dark deeds with him, and permission wails inside me, needing it too.

I'm more than seduced. I'm found again. Redix makes me feel adored, safe, and so free to be bad. It's beautiful to him. Because only with him.

"Watch me." My demand lifts his gaze. His cock, which never really went soft, is getting hard again. "Watch me be your dirty girl, Redix."

I'm close. The spellbound look on his face, the glide of my slippery pussy grinding on his hard thigh, the heat of my clit ready to explode, the audience spying my naked ass giving this lewd show, I'm going.

"Watch me." My lips tremble, and desire hoods his eyes as his cock firms to its fullest pride. "Watch me come for you."

That's my poison and cure. That I do this to him. That I can get him so fucking hard by the sight of me, it shoves me over. The buck, the shake of my body, I almost fall at its power, but he grabs my arms, holding me while it flashes through my senses. My chin drops, and I go limp with its release, but he won't let me disappear into it.

Cupping my cheek, he lifts my eyes.

"Are you ready, Cade? You've been begging for my fuck. Are you sure you're ready for me to rip you apart?"

My inhale, it's sudden. It's in control. "Yes." It snaps up my lungs, and every part of me agrees. "Do it."

He grabs me like a doll in his arms, but he's not being so gentle. Moving fast, he drops us from the chair to the floor. In a quick twist, he turns me around, on my knees while he kneels behind me.

"Bend over and spread that ass for me"—his hand gently pushes my shoulders down—"open that wet pussy for me."

I hear him unsnap his pants as I touch my cheek to the carpet, my bound arms resting over the small of my back. Leather gives a soft squeak while he must be freeing himself for what I'm hoping for. His fuck, *yes, please*.

But also that he'll remember, he has to ease in. With his size, I'll go blind with pain to the tips of my ears if he doesn't.

When he does. When I finally feel him again, my groan comes from the deepest place as I feel him drag the velvety, wide tip of his cock up and down through my folds. *Yes, he remembers*.

"Fuck, Cade." He's right at my aching entrance. "Fuck, look at how your pussy opens so damn wet and swollen for me." Moving in a coaxing slow circle, he slowly presses in. "Say it again. Say I'm free to do this. That you want it like this."

"Yes." I jut my hips, pushing them back, greed growling through my command, "Fuck me, Redix. Please, God, finally fuck me again."

The stretch, the feel of him, inch by massive inch entering, makes me moan while shivers shoot down my thighs, my walls giving slowly to take him and loving it. The burn of his penetration all the way inside; it becomes a searing heat melting away ten years and all the cold he left behind.

"*Yessss*." I want to cry into the carpet. My cheek's pressed to it, my soul worshipping his return. "Yes, Redix, yes."

I forgot. How this is where we belong. How our bodies fit. How when he's inside me, our love, our nightmare... it's all been worth it.

"Are we free, Cade?" His tempo picks up, pulling back out and leaving me so open, his void making me throb until he's pushing back in again. "Does my cock feel good filling up your tight puss—"

"Yes, Redix." I don't let him finish because I'm losing control with his fuck. "*Yessss*."

There's an insanity to wanting someone so much. To missing them. To watching others enjoy them, taking them

when you know they belong to you. It's not jealousy. It's our truth, and our bodies know it.

We should never be apart, and we may never survive together.

"Is this how he did it, Cade?" It's hard, his grip on my hips yanking me slowly down his length. "Is this how that Marine fucked you? And then the other one?"

I don't know the tone of his voice. But I know that's the part of our past he wants to focus on. The one where I let another man in, and then another, and it wasn't him. I can't see his face. I can only feel his fervor driving faster into my pussy. "Yes." And it feels so damn good. "Yes."

"Did you think of me?" It's a grunt, his question, and it sounds like it's killing him. "Did you think of me while you got fucked? While they fucked this pussy that belongs to me?"

"Yes." His hipbones start slamming, hitting hard into my backside, and I brace for it, wanting even more. "I closed my eyes, and it was you, Redix. It's always you fucking me."

He grabs my wrists bound behind me and pulls against them, ramming into me hard, the slap of our bodies filling the room for minutes of this great grueling fuck. It's finally enough. He's more than enough.

"I'll fuck you so good I'll make you forget them all, Cade." My God, he *is*. He's free to fuck me as hard as humanly possible. "Did he make you come like this?" His breath's uneven. His cock's pummeling me, the force of him hitting through to my clit. "Did you come?"

"Yes, Redix." It's that spot, the one only he can find. It's so deep inside only he can reach it and grab my soul. "I said your name." It's pain. It's pleasure. Singing through my body, it makes me cry out at his punishing tempo, and I need more. So much more. How do you get ten years back?

His hands grab my shoulders, lifting me until my back's pressed against his sweaty chest. He holds me in the prison of his arms wrapped around my body, and his cock *is not stopping*.

Those strong hips of his. They can dance in languid circles, and they can pile drive his mass inside you until you can't move. Until you can't breathe.

And you don't want to.

"This is me, Cade"—his voice fills my soul—"ripping you open, ripping you apart like I need to. Is this what you want?"

He's in my core, thrashing my senses, hitting, stretching, and claiming every part inside.

"Yes, Redix." All the way to my heart swelling for him, I can barely speak. He's knocking the breath from me. "All of you." I gasp. "I want you."

"You have me. This is me fucking you so hard you can't breathe without me. This is me filling you with my cum and erasing every man from your body but mine." It's true. His hips hurt, hammering into the tender crease between my thighs and cheeks. "This is *my* cock, Cade, deep inside you, only you"—tears start falling from my eyes at his words pressed to my ear, carving into my soul—"this is where I belong."

I cry out.

It's too much, and I love it.

What are we doing? We're a storm. We're a ruin and a wreck, and we won't stop. The truth traps us as tight as his arms binding me, as tight as my cunt clenching around him, ready for the mind-splitting orgasm he'll give me no matter how much it hurts, and I need it like my next breath.

Redix is brutal. He's changed. He's mine, and he's fucking me harder than I knew possible. "Redix, please." I can't take much more. He'll have all of me until there's nothing left, and it's my bliss losing it all to him.

His fingers reach down and indulge my clit. "Every pussy. Every body. They were all you, Cade. It was always you." His words groan from a depth way back, from when our heaven became hell. "I did it all for you."

It's endless—the rapture he forces through me. My sex is pulsing and weeping for him and the memory that wants to

take us too.

But we fuck ourselves into oblivion, into where it doesn't hurt us anymore. To where he's holding me so tight, the torment wants to beat us but bound together; our bodies fight back.

We can do this.

Our love wages a war, unleashing the lust raging inside us, letting it win all until pleasure screams from my lungs with him inside me. His loud roar follows mine, filling me and every desperate need we have, and nothing can fight this.

It's too savage.

It's too beautiful.

It's us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



REDIX

DEAR CANDY CADE,

There's a new freckle on your face.

It's between your perfect eyebrow and your sexy hair.

Damn, I can watch you sleep beside me and never want to close my eyes.

I want to reach out and treasure every inch of you again. I can't believe I'm here. That we're back together. I thought I'd die before I saw this day and I almost did. It's like you became a dream I couldn't have anymore.

But now I'm wide awake with you.

It makes me want to wake you to be sure it's real, but you look too peaceful beside me.

But I know what woke me. I hurt you, and you won't admit it.

You groaned in your sleep when you moved in my arms, which stirred me. I feel guilty as hell. I was too rough with you. I can see the marks I left on your hips and your arms,

holding you too tight because I never want to let you go again.
I can't imagine how sore your pussy must be.

I didn't want to do it that way.

I've been dreaming about our first time back together for so long.

And it wasn't like that.

Because that was the most primal fuck of my life.

I lost my mind inside you, Cade, and I didn't want it back. I felt like an animal so desperate for you. Like I was trying to fuck away all our demons until only our heaven remained. To be so deep inside you, I wanted to find us again. I kept fucking you and searching, and I went crazy with how good you felt, with all I can feel with you now.

Damn, our sex is volcanic.

Like destruction and creation at the same time.

I fear it.

And I need it.

That's why I stopped with you the other night. I'd licked off all the chocolate trails I swirled across your body. I sucked whipped cream off your clit and teased your pussy with a banana making you come twice. Then I licked you off again until your hips came off the table, and you begged me to fuck you with tears in your eyes.

It killed me to reject you, to break your heart.

I thought you were going to leave me. That my games of trying to satisfy us without fucking pushed you too far.

I couldn't talk through the panic, through the fear that we were over. But you stayed for the shoot. And when I saw you in that outfit, I started sweating at the sight of you. I had to fight back my dick getting hard. The jealousy I felt knowing everyone would see you like that too. Fuck, I watched you at the party and fought to stay sane.

Cade, you're gravity, and no one can resist you.

I can't.

It's not a choice.

I have to be with you.

But you can't find out.

So I decided if I stay in control of our sex, if I can control your hands and what you see when we do, you won't find out.

And to be back inside you?

For ten years, I've been so lost without you. You're where I belong, and it was worth the risk.

I knew it the first time I was inside you. There was a moment with you on top of me, with you looking down at me with so much love in your eyes that I came in seconds.

Yes, me being eighteen and desperate for years to fuck you had a lot to do with it. And you, with that body and face, any man would lose control.

But it was much more.

We were on your dad's boat. We skipped school, and you had it all planned for us. You even waited for the best weather.

Damn, I was so nervous. I jerked off twice that morning before I met you at the boat because I worried I'd only last a hot second.

That didn't work.

You set blankets out like a bed. It was a calm day on the water with no clouds, and it was still morning because we couldn't wait anymore.

I did everything I could to get you ready. I love that. How I still know your body better than my own. But like last night, I worried our first time that I'd hurt you. That's why you climbed on top and had control. And I got to watch the most amazing thing I've ever seen.

Us. Together. Finally.

I was barely inside you, and your tight heat and that look in your eyes hit me so fast, so hard and deep that I came

knowing... I'm yours.

I've known it for so long.

That's what I've been fighting all these years.

Because we belong together, Cade, and that'll destroy us. Like we're going to burn it all down and see if anything grows back.

I don't trust it will. I fear the truth will hurt you so much that nothing'll be left of us.

Do you remember what happened after our first time?

We did it four more times that day. Each time I got deeper inside you and lasted longer. Because that's what my horny dick could do at eighteen.

Hell, it ain't too different now that I'm back with you ten years later. I can't believe how hard I get and how hard I get again minutes later.

You're like my sexual fountain of youth.

But we didn't know better. Your body couldn't take five times. Yeah, it felt good to you at the time, but then you got an infection.

Real romantic, wasn't it?

It scared me so much. That next day you stayed home from school legit that time because you were doubled over and crying on the sofa that it hurt every time you peed. I thought I tore something inside you. That I'd permanently hurt you. Then Mama G came home for lunch and found us there. It took her a second to know exactly what happened.

Remember what she said?

"If y'all are old enough for sex, you're old enough for its consequences." She wasn't mad at me. "Go on down to the store and get her some cranberry juice. And quit treating her body like a pretty pin cushion you gotta stick every ten minutes."

Damn, I love her.

She didn't shame us. She schooled us. Our parents were always cool like that.

But until the juice and the medicine Mama G got for you kicked in, the pain you were in, Cade, I felt so damn guilty. Like I had all the fun, and you paid the price.

I remember telling you, "I'll slam my dick in a door for you to make this fair."

That made you laugh while you pulled me down on the sofa and made me hold you while we watched *One Tree Hill*... again.

God, I wanna go back to those days.

When too much sex was our only problem. When you were thumbing through *Architectural Digest* and showing me what our house would look like one day. When I was booking modeling gigs and banking money so we could have that dream.

I'd do anything for that innocence again.

And you still are, Cade.

You're innocent of what happened, and I need to keep it that way. So much was taken from us.

I can't take that from you too.

CHAPTER THIRTY



SUNLIGHT AND SOUND—A SHOWER—WAKE ME UP.

That and the dull ache between my thighs. My pussy feels like I impaled it on a railroad timber. I smile... because I loved every minute of it.

Glancing over, the bed is empty, but a black leather journal is lying where Redix was when I closed my eyes.

Since when does he keep a journal?

I'll never pry, but I'm curious. Wonder what he's writing? Did he give us five stars for last night? I sure as hell do.

I've never fucked like that. So savage and beautiful at the same time. So intense it gives me a hurricane of butterflies just remembering it.

Redix held me for an hour after. I couldn't help my tears, and I felt his too on my shoulder until it turned into gentle laughs that we finally did it. That we crossed over together, and it didn't destroy us.

Quite the opposite.

“That was worth the wait,” I sighed into his hands holding mine.

“Anything is worth us being back together,” he said, turning me around and pulling me into his chest.

When he had time to pull his pants back up, I didn’t know, but I wanted him again. But he said he needed a shower and sleep. He made up for it, though. The back massage he gave instead had me asleep within minutes.

That gives me some ideas, checking my phone.

10:08 am glows back.

We have the whole day and’ll spend it here, playing Uno and making love. As long as his body is next to mine, I don’t care. And no, it doesn’t scare me. This need I have for him again. It feels right, destined.

So does a fuck in the shower with him.

Yes, that’ll be steamy.

Throwing my legs over the edge of our sumptuous bed, the minute I stand up, I wince.

Okay, cowgirl, make the next one a slow ride because your pony is sore.

Whatever. I just wanna wrap around him all wet.

The door to our bathroom suite is closed. He’s funny like that, so private lately. Guess we’re easing back into this whole “free” thing.

The sound from the triple shower heads drowns out the door unlatching. He doesn’t hear me come in.

Steam clouds most of the view, but my heart stops—he’s so beautiful like that. Eyes closed. Head back. Shampoo suds rinsing from his long hair. The tattoo on his hip bone. Our tattoo. It’s discernible through the haze. I take a second, letting it sink in—*me and Redix. Together again.* Fully and finally fucking.

It’s natural.

It's paradise.

I'm in love.

"Want some company?"

"FUCK!" His voice bombs the room, ricocheting off the tile and striking me with shock. "Fuck, Cade!" And anger. He backs against the tile. "You scared the fuck out of me."

"I'm sorry."

I really am. I've been known to strike and ask questions later when I'm surprised too. "I just thought we could—"

"Can I have some privacy?" He jams the shower lever, shutting down the water and my hopes. "I'll be out in a second."

"Privacy?"

Something's off. I get having time to yourself in the bathroom, but this is a shower. And after he fucked my brains out last night, what is there to be private about?

"Why are you freaking out?" I step toward him. "It's me—you know—your best friend whose pussy you fucked last night."

"Yeah, well, knock next time. Or better yet, respect a closed door."

"A closed door?" It's all wrong. Something. "Redix." I step to the shower threshold. "Why are you so mad? It's just a fucking shower."

"No." He reaches beside me, yanking the towel off the bar. "It's just fucking respect."

His tug, it's more like a rip so hard that he pulls the brass towel bar from the wall, clanking it to the floor.

"What the hell?" It lands by my foot.

He whips the towel around his waist. "Just leave, okay?"

His towel's secured fast enough for him to insult me more by pointing toward the door.

"No, it's not okay."

I won't move. My pulse is climbing with my anger. With more of his rejection. This makes no sense.

"Why are you acting like this? We go from the best sex of our lives to you not showering with me? What did I do wrong?"

"You didn't respect my privacy." He tries brushing by, but I block him. "Move, please."

"No."

How did this happen? From sleeping safely in his arms to waking up with the happiest smile to now a fight in the bathroom over a goddamn door knock?

"What are you hiding?"

It's something. Guilt drips from his face.

"You can't stop, can you?" That look in his eyes is back; it's cruel. "You always gotta know. You always gotta look too close." His grip tightens over the towel. His words seethe, "I'm not your goddamn case to solve, Detective."

"No. You're a mind fuck, so be a man and talk to me."

"I am a *fucking* man." He sneers, dripping inches above me, his huge pecs swelling with fury. "A man who wants you *to leave*."

It hurts so much, spinning my world. The powerful pull he takes me with and then the wrecking shove he slams into me next. It feels constant. Brutal. Unfair. It dizzies my head, bashing my heart with its madness.

"So you can bury your bare cock deep inside me and pound my pussy all night until you fill me with your cum, and make us cry, but we can't shower together?"

It's crude. It's harsh. It's the truth, and it hurts like hell.

"Yes."

That's a punch so hard I gasp.

"What is it?" I reach for his towel. "Why is this between us?"

“Stop!” He grabs my wrist, and it happens so fast...

It’s a trigger, firing a memory buried deep of TJ grabbing my wrist, and starting my war. My instincts fire. My mind doesn’t work, but my training does, so fast it shocks us both. My other hand grabs his wrist holding mine, twisting with force, torquing his arm around, his fingers sliding into my grasp where I bend them back, tension about to break his bones...

“Ow!” He shouts. “Fuck!”

I let go; not sure what I just did... but it hurt us both.

What just happened to me? To us?

“Sorry.” I back away. From the shock. From the sudden shame. “I’m sorry.”

I turn and run out of the bathroom. I can’t see. Disbelief clouds my logic. A flood of tears blurs my vision while I grab my jeans, still packed in my suitcase, and get dressed without thinking.

I need to leave.

What I just did; it’s bad.

I hurt him.

And that kills me.

“Cade? Where are you going?” Redix appears in the bathroom doorway. “It’s okay.”

“None of this”—I tug on a tank top—“none of this is okay.”

My tears won’t stop. Like a deep well of pain is buried inside me, and I just tapped into my darkest nightmare.

“I gotta go.”

“Don’t leave.” Despair bends his face. “We’ll be alright.”

“No, we won’t.” I cram my things into my suitcase. “We won’t be alright because you won’t talk to me, and I can’t take it anymore.”

My toiletry bag is in the bathroom behind him. *Fuck it.* I don't need it.

I can't take another second of this. Shame. Guilt. Agony. I'm suffocating.

"I'm so sorry I hurt you," I say, shoving on my flip-flops, darting next for my purse. "But that's how much this hurts me when you push me away like that, and we have to stop. Because now, I'm hurting us both."

He steps my way.

"I'm fine."

"No, you're *not* fine." My hard stare stops him. "You're better, but you're not fine. And neither am I." I sling my bag over my shoulder, my hand grabbing for the suitcase handle. "You don't trust me, not with everything like I do with you, and it hurts too much, Redix, because it's like they won. They broke us both, and now we're breaking each other."

I don't know how I'll get home. What flight, train, or bus will get me there, but I have to escape. I can't look at him. Disgrace for hurting him so fast I didn't even blink; it fills me.

That's not me.

I'd never hurt him.

But I'm terrified... because I *can* hurt others... so fucking fast they won't know what hit them.

"Cade, wait. Lemme get dressed, and we can talk."

"Are you going to tell me what happened?"

He's silent. Not even his eyes answer me, and I know he never will.

All my hopes, my happiness, gone.

I'm buried alive by his frozen beauty that holds our secret.

I turn toward the suite door but look back for one last moment at him, at my world.

He's a stunning smear before my crying eyes.

“Our love is so much. It always has been, and,” I cry, “but our secret is fucking killing me.” My lips tremble. “And I just want you to know that whatever our truth was, whatever you’re keeping from me—however bad it was—I would’ve still loved you, Redix. I’ll always love you. And I know you love me. But you won’t love *yourself* enough to give us another chance. And *that* just killed us.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



A WEEK GOES BY LIKE SLOW HELL.

The nights I'm working don't help either. This is the fourth one in a row where I'm sitting in an unmarked car parked outside The Pelican.

I'm watching Derek Baucom.

He's got an erratic schedule for a Bar Manager—a lot of coming and going from the place where you'd think he'd stay on shift.

But no, he leaves, drives to his condo in his black truck, stays there thirty minutes or so, and then goes back to work. Twice a night for four nights, he's done it. He's not going home for a dog. I never see him walk one. It makes me sick, not liking my worst guess of what he's doing. But I don't have a warrant to find out.

I tried going through the garbage at his condo building, but in that big dumpster, I can't tell what's his. I can't find any clues or proof.

My phone glows. I glance at it on the console.

And it's him again.

REDIX

I'm thinking about you

They're sweet thoughts

He's texted every day with something cute.

But I can't reply. It hurts too much, dragging out the pain. It weighs my chest down with a sob that won't come.

The first night I was home, I answered his call. It was awkward because I didn't know what to say.

"Cade, we can get through this." There was no asshole swagger in his voice, only desperation.

"Do you trust me?" I was watching the full moon glow over the ocean. "Are you going to tell me our truth?"

Closing my eyes, I held my breath for his answer.

There was none.

He didn't say a word.

Like his silence hurt less than a "no."

It didn't.

"I meant it." I felt so sick, all our dreams drowning. "We can't do this anymore. If you won't tell me, then we have no future."

I ended the call.

Saying goodbye to Redix? Again? It would've wrecked me right there on my balcony. But it did, anyway. Salty tears trickled into my mouth while the familiar ache kept me sitting there alone for hours.

Like I've done... for so many years without him.

Tonight, my phone glows again. I almost can't check it.

Doesn't he know how this kills me? How I need to stop thinking about him? How maybe if I can make it a whole day

without remembering his lips on mine, his body holding me so tight, maybe I can wake up with a smile again?

Please.

I don't want to hurt anymore.

Relief hits me.

It's Penny. She knows I came home heartbroken, and she didn't rub it in. Not with this island buzzing about the pictures of me and Redix at the FREE perfume event. There's no place I can escape him.

PENNY

What's the difference between a pregnant woman and a lightbulb?

She's as bored as me. And trying to cheer me up. Sitting outside the liquor store, hunting for the elusive parrot T-shirt culprit, she's been pinging my phone with inappropriate jokes all night.

I love her. I reply:

One's not very bright

I grin because she started this, and it feels good, and I need it. My ribs have cracked with all her dumb model jokes, so it's payback.

PENNY

Oh! Burn! Good one.

No, bitch.

You can unscrew a lightbulb.

Dots appear. Jameson's diving in. He's undercover watching Coligny Park. He's been blasting us too.

JAMESON

How is life like a penis?

Oh, this is too fun. I have five replies and a fingertip that can't tap fast enough.

It gets hard

It comes and goes

It's not good if it's short

...

I'm typing another when muffled voices lift my eyes.

Three guys, they're stumbling across the parking lot. I glance at the back door of The Pelican. It's still closed. My target hasn't moved.

Putting my eyes back down, the phone in my hand is a prop now while I pretend to be a distracted patron, not an undercover detective.

"Hey, pretty lady. You shouldn't be out here alone."

My periphery clocks pink shorts first. I lift my glare, only to find this dick weed growing on the other side of my window. A woven belt with sailboats on it. Blue polo shirt. Red drunk face.

Oh, what I want to say, but I can't blow my cover.

"Just waiting on my boyfriend. He'll be out any second."

"I'll keep you company until then." He reaches for my door handle.

This fucker. It's locked. And now... I'm pissed.

"You better leave," I snarl. "Now."

The guy behind him? He leans across the hood of my car, peeping into the front windshield and jeering, "Nah. You *need* some company."

No, I need to press the gas pedal and turn you into roadkill.

The third guy, he's just laughing, like this is their thing—harassing women for sport.

It takes everything I have to put my nose back down. To ignore them while I text Penny for backup. Because one more move and these guys are gonna need a medic.

“Come on, gorgeous. We'll treat you nice. Better than that boyfriend.”

The sick shit unzips his fly, pulls his limp boyhood from his pink pants, and rubs it on my windshield. The other two laugh, staggering drunk, while this one taunts, “Come on. Roll down your window and suck on my anaconda.”

It's barely a snail. And I'm barely holding it back.

“Girl, you're too hot not to fuck with,” he mocks and...

Red. Blood.

It drops a veil over my mind, and I snap. My restraint gone. I grab the door handle, kicking it open so hard that it slams the guy in his pathetic dick, knocking him down.

“And you're too stupid not to beat the shit out of.”

I stand up over his sprawl on the ground.

The second guy, he steps over his drunk friend. “Stupid bitch!”

He takes a swing with his right, but I grab his wrist, pulling him toward me, my other hand striking the back of his neck and wrapping around it to shove his face into my kneecap. *Once. Twice. Three times.*

Fuck yes, it feels so good before I shove him down to the pavement too.

“You next?” I ask Chuckles, the third one who's barely standing with his eyes wide.

“What the fuck's your problem?” The first guy whines, scrambling up from the ground.

“Your useless, tiny dick.”

I see over his shoulder. Penny’s car is racing into the parking lot.

“You fucking bitch.” The second guy crawls up. “You broke my nose.”

“No, dumbass. You took a swing at the wrong woman.”

I keep my fists up, swaying in fighting stance because I want more.

The second guy wipes the blood from his nose with the bottom of his gingham shirt. “What are you? A fucking cop?”

Penny’s car parks behind them. It’s unmarked too.

“No.” I drop my fists. “I’m payback for all the women you’ve harassed. Careful. The next one you bother might not be so nice.”



DROPS OF LEMON fall into her tea with a firm squeeze. Mama’s eyeing me, contemplating just how much of an ass-chewing I’m gonna get.

“Well,” she says, “my daughter finally made it to Paid Administrative Leave. Ain’t I proud?”

Anyone else, and I’d roll my eyes, but I’ll never disrespect my mama.

“It’s standard procedure, Mama. I was provoked.”

“Uh-huh.” She buys that like an extra car warranty. “You know the difference between your generation and mine?”

I’m not mad.

Mama looks too cute in her red beach caftan and matching hat. I’ve laid her out like the Queen of the Nile by the pool under an umbrella to get her some fresh air. *And* to let her chastise me for the trouble I got in for my bar brawl.

“Your generation didn’t do anal?”

I can’t help it. I gotta see her laugh.

And it works. Ridiculously and so loud, the whole pool can hear us cackling.

After we wipe the tears from our happy eyes, she says, “No. I would’ve taken a picture of him and his little dick. Flyers with his name on them would be tucked under every windshield at The Pelican for months.”

“So you’re saying you *didn’t* do anal?”

“I did what every proper lady does.”

“Which is...?”

“What in the Sam Hill I wanted to”—she toasts her tea to my beer—“and I did it with a smile.”

This is the best day I’ve had in over a week. Because this past one has been even worse.

Redix stopped texting me. It’s what I wanted. And that hurts even more. Like I ripped out ribs, and it’s hard to breathe.

Mama and I lounge for an hour. I try focusing on other things, but it’s impossible because Redix’s sister and her son are across the pool. They wave to us. We wave back, and I just want to scream at the ache of missing him.

“You know I see it?” Mama adjusts her sunglasses. “How much you suffer over him. How you have for ten years. I leave you two alone because I respect y’all, but I know when my daughter is hurting.”

“I’ll be alright.”

Mama can never know how far I will go to make it stop hurting us forever.

“I never stopped loving your dad, you know. After our divorce, I felt like I had failed. I wanted to go back and make us right again.” She turns my way. “But love can’t go back, kiddo. You gotta move on and trust it will find you again.”

Words won't come. I can't speak with the grip that truth has over my heart.

I need to let Redix go.

I close my eyes, remembering when I should have let the dream of us die so we could find peace again.

Ten years ago, Redix tucked his hair behind his ear and said, "Let me go, Cade."

His busted lip. His black eyes. His bloody ear. The bruises on his face matched the ones on my heart, aching so bad I couldn't pull in a breath.

"Please," he said, "I don't want to hurt you. Go find someone else to love."

His blue t-shirt, his back in it, turned on me and walked away. And my world, my heart, he left me standing there.

"Redix, please!" I had no pride, no answers, only an avalanche of pain begging, "Don't leave me."

But he never even looked back. I don't remember the next minutes, the next hour. It was just him driving away and Mama finding me still sobbing on my bed hours later, crying so hard my lungs burned.

"Let it out," I remember Mama whispering while I let every piece of me fall apart. I remember it now.

"Let him go," Mama said. She was crying too.

"Well, here comes trouble with a capital T," she mutters now.

From behind my sunglasses, I open my wet eyes and...

Suck a dick, Fate.

TJ is on his usual prowl, stalking across my complex's pool deck on his way to the beach.

"Well, this is quite the catch." His voice rasps, and I retch. "Hilton Head's finest ladies by the pool."

That's TJ's danger, his delusion. After what happened, it only took two years of me being home and smiling at him to

convince him that I magically forgave him. So desperate to believe his sick truth, he denies the facts. It gives him the balls to walk up to our loungers like we're friends, like I want him.

It *is* what I want.

With Mama here, it's not.

Because nothing gets past her.

"We're just enjoying some family time." My tone is sweet. "Enjoy your day too."

Mama doesn't greet him, though—not her typical tactic. Manners are her default setting. But with TJ, flames could freeze at the cold stare coming off her.

"Did you enjoy taking those pictures with Redix Dean?" The tone in TJ's voice? It's flat. It's creepy. "You lied to me. You said you two weren't together."

Damn, he's a gross fuck.

He thinks I belong to him. He always has.

Swallowing my disgust, I have to make him believe it, so I answer, "When someone pays you two hundred and fifty K for a picture, you can act like anyone's your center of attention."

"I see." He sneers. "Well, you'll *always* be mine."

With a smile toward my mama, he tips his sweaty visor.

"Sheriff, you have a good day."

Shivers hit me as he slithers through the dunes toward the beach.

"Don't say a word." Mama's voice is ice. "I know what he is. What he does. And the less we speak about it, the better."

Is she telling me to move on from my past?

Or is she endorsing my future deal?

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



PAID LEAVE OR PROTOCOL; I DON'T LIKE THE DAYS OFF.

It truly is a punishment because I'd rather be working. I need to solve these cases, but we've had nothing. No more attacks. I'm grateful for that. No more evidence. I'm losing my mind over it.

Even the surveillance video of the parking lot of the condo building where Cam Le went missing? It's infuriating.

"The cameras are angled toward the edge of the lot." I was baffled when Jameson came over and showed me on his laptop. I'm not allowed in the office. "It's like he doesn't want coverage of the exits and cars."

"It's like he's hiding something," Jameson added.

Gentry Evans owns most units in that building. It reeks of wrongdoing. Jameson got a warrant to search the unit Cam Le last cleaned. He said they found nothing, just a normal rental.

Penny interviewed Cam Le's colleague again. She agreed; the woman knows something but is too scared to say it.

Jameson and Penny take turns watching her and the other cleaning crews.

Secretly, I've been watching Derek and TJ. It's a wicked punishment because TJ only makes me think of Redix more.

It's been another week, and he's left me alone. It's what I want, right?

Then why does it feel so wrong?

I guess because we're really over. I guess he'd rather keep his secret than me.

It leaves me untethered.

I used to be so tied to anger that he left. So attached to the hope that he'd come back and we'd find each other again. But now I'm lost, adrift, because I don't know who to blame. Me, for wanting the awful truth. Or him, for not wanting to say it.

My phone vibrates on the ottoman.

SILAS

Word is Gentry Evans will be here today at 12 with his crew

Wanna day-trip?

No. I know *exactly* who's to blame.

And exactly what I'm still attached to—revenge.

Sure

Pick me up? One hour.

Harbour Town

I can't break my promise to him; I text Jameson next with an invite. I know it's last minute, but hell can't stop me.

He replies:

JAMESON

Meet you there. Bringing a date

It doesn't bother me. I want him to be happy, and he won't find that with me.

Good

It'll be perfect cover

Gentry Evans will never drop his guard around me on duty. But if he sees me on what looks like a double date, day-tripping to Daufuskie Island, maybe he will.

The Saturday in late July is perfect weather. Meeting Jameson's date at the dock delights me too. She's gorgeous and super chill. He introduces her first as an MMA fighter before even sharing her name.

"Cade Bryant,"—Jameson's chest puffs up proud—"meet Scarlett Jones."

I shake her hand. She gives me a firm grip and a gentle smile, and I like her. Her company may turn this into a good day.

And when Silas pulls his boat into the slip, and he's not wearing a shirt? Maybe, finally, it'll be a great one.

Jameson drapes his arm over Scarlett's shoulder. "I told her she should come to work with us."

We chat while Silas ties us off at our destination.

"I can't work for the police." Scarlett jumps onto the dock. "I have a record."

"Hell, yeah." Silas grins, wrapping a rope whip-fast around a cleat. "Y'all are my kinda company to keep."

I'm intrigued. By her. By this day.

We grab a picnic table outside the crab shack by the water's edge. Positioning myself to watch the busy marina, I

wait for a wicked man to arrive. Not that anyone could miss Gentry's huge yacht. It's like a turd floating in a clear pool.

"What's the record for?" I ask Scarlett since she brought it up.

"Teenage stupidity." She has dimples when she smiles.

I toast her beer. "Guilty as charged."

"Who doesn't do stupid shit when they're young?" Silas's easy voice soothes my bruised heart... just a bit.

Around him, my mind wants to wander to Redix. He's his damn twin. But I force myself to focus on Silas. How his eyes are hazel and full of laughter, and not blue and swimming with pain.

"What did you do?" I ask him. "Since everyone's fessing up."

Silas tucks his long strands behind his ear, cinching my heart with *that* memory before he answers, "I fell in love with a woman I can't have."

"That's the worst offense," Jameson says, and I cough.

That was meant for me.

"Well, she's far away and finally happy." Silas gazes out over the water like she's standing before him. "That's all that matters."

And all I can do is admire his sexy profile. And wish the same was true for me and Redix. That he's far away, and we're finally happy.

It isn't.

The hour passes. The beer is good. The fried shrimp are the best, and I'm not taking my eyes off the marina while Silas fills my mind with fun conversation. Fishing. Boating. Then he asks me about my modeling and why I went from a glamorous job to a grueling one.

A white Pershing yacht glides into view. Everyone knows who it belongs to.

“Because of men like that.”

I point to the luxury vessel. Its loud music is almost as obnoxious as the party of men howling on it.

“We all hear that,” Silas agrees before going to the bar for another round of beers and shrimp baskets.

I could turn and watch his sexy, shredded back of tan muscles. And that cute ass in navy board shorts.

But I don't. I surveil from behind my shades.

The name of Gentry's yacht—*After Tail*. It makes me wanna fire rounds into its hull and watch it sink... with all onboard.

“You know,” Scarlett says, “it's doing shit like this that makes me want the job working security. I got a company, HGR Security, they cover high-profile clients: CEOs, celebrities, and such. They're after me hard to come work for them.”

“You'd be great at it.”

Jameson admires Scarlett while my stare won't leave the men on Gentry's yacht.

I count four so far, jumping onto the dock, bottles in hands and voices booming for all to hear.

“Maybe so,” Scarlett says, “because I can tell you with one look at those men—they're big trouble in expensive leisurewear.”

“Good instincts,” I reply to her before swallowing down my gasp.

Holy shit. It's Derek Baucom, the bar manager from The Pelican. He emerges from the lower deck.

“Well fuck me,” I mutter. “He doesn't just *work* for Gentry. They're friends.”

Jameson seethes at the intel while I start connecting dots, drawing a disturbing picture in my mind of how this is all coming together.

Senator Gentry Evans owns the perfect places to hunt for vulnerable victims—rental units, a nail salon, a beach bar.

Derek Baucom pours the drugged drinks for them, controlling his staff and the cameras not aimed at their crimes.

And I know it with no evidence...

TJ provides the drugs, the GHB so powerful they remember nothing while he reels in the victims from the floor.

But TJ's not on the boat today—he's not invited to this party because of his criminal record. *Not* appropriate company for a conservative state Senator.

Still, behind closed doors, I know how far Gentry and TJ go back. You can't keep them apart.

I get it now. These three are a vile triad with enough power, position, and poison to get exactly what they want... and not get caught. Yet.

Minutes later, I'm at the bar, leaving my friends behind and knowing these jean shorts and yellow bikini top work like a lure.

More like a curse, really.

"Sergeant Bryant"—Gentry's high-class drawl drags through my depths of disgust—"I see you're enjoying your time off."

He's standing too close to me. His freckled arm brushes mine leaning on the bar.

"I'm making the most of it."

I sip my beer, clocking Derek behind him and sneering my way.

Derek's wearing short sleeves today, and I fight the snarl of my lip at how it reveals a tacky tattoo.

A mudflap girl.

It's so sexist I want to chew it off his flesh. Because, fuck, I hate the way he looks at me; all-knowing.

Of what?

How do I know him? It's not from investigating him these past few months. It haunts me, like a splinter in my memory I can't dig out.

"What about you guys?" I arch my back just enough, letting my thin bikini top serve a purpose. "What finds you mixing business with pleasure?"

Gentry can't help himself. He never could. His stare goes right after what he craves, my body. I swear if he lays a hand on me nowadays, he'll pull back a broken one.

"Taking care of my friends and family." Gentry's arm is moist against mine and twisting my stomach. "Derek here is my cousin." *What the fuck? Don't flinch.* "He told me about the other night. About your trouble at The Pelican."

My glance flicks toward Derek. Evil thoughts pool in his brown eyes, sliming over me, but I can take it. I'm too familiar with this; I might as well use it to my advantage.

"Careful what you believe." I bat my lashes... because *fuck these two*. I want to rip their balls off. "You know Hilton Head Island floats on liquor and lies."

"Make me believe otherwise then," Gentry taunts. "Your little dust-up with my customers? Why were you at my bar that night?"

Of course, he wants to know. Careful.

"Just a ladies' night out ruined by drunk men. The usual."

Satisfaction glares from his eyes. "They weren't too rough on you, were they?"

"A fight's never too rough for me."

"Is that so?"

I want to puke at his lean toward my ear. At his pussy-parching preppy clothes. At his hair in a slick part. At his traditional wedding band as he perverts my ear...

"I'd love to feel it again, Cade. Just how hard you fight back. How much will it cost me now?"

That memory flashes, but I bite back the rage in my blood.

You didn't come this far to fuck up now.

I turn eye-to-eye with him, inches from his thin, chapped lips... and smile like a priest.

“Your life.”

Walk away before you do it. Right here. Breaking this beer bottle in half on the bar, stabbing the jagged edge into his jugular, and twisting it with a laugh. Because I want to so much.

It hits me so hard that I have two choices—*move or murder.*

It has me in a blur, my steps aiming away from the crowd at the deck bar toward the park across the sandy parking lot.

My pulse is in my ears. My heart wants to rip out of my chest and turn back, committing the bloody crime.

Because all I can see...

Is that night.

How Redix and I held hands by Coligny Park. I was wearing a yellow dress I borrowed from Pamela, wanting to be cute that night for him.

He goes back to buy us another ice cream cone because he wants more lemon kisses. I do too. I'm smiling, watching him from a distance, standing by the curb, and waiting for the love of my life to return.

“Hey, gorgeous.” A hand grabs my wrist. It was ten years ago, and I can still feel its cold clamp over my flesh and heart.

Turning around, I yank it away.

“TJ, leave me the fuck alone.”

I was learning the skills then, how to break his hold, but Gentry was beside him. And his BMW idled at the curb behind them.

“Come on, Cade.” Gentry's steps toward me weren't seeking fun. “It's almost graduation, and you owe us a night.”

They were after me.

You know it. You know when you're prey. When a wound, when a kill is next. When it's yours. It washed over me then, turning my thighs to Jell-O and my blood to ice.

"Hey!" Redix shouted from a distance. "Get the fuck away from her!"

That's when our nightmare began.

And I can't wake up from it until I end this. We'll never be free until I do.

That's the deal, God. I'm keeping my end. You keep yours.

I don't see the glassy water before me, the stunning Lowcountry glimmering on the horizon. I'm stuck in that hell, in that night, until I hear a deep voice.

"Cade?" It's Silas. "You okay?"

I don't answer him. I don't turn around. I only shake my head.

No, I'm not okay.

"You want me to drown an asshole for you?"

He's so sweet. It makes me huff with a slight grin. "I wish I could go back." I talk to him and the water.

"Back to what?"

I feel his heat, how he's standing behind me, trying to protect me.

I turn to face him. I turn to see a man so much like Redix before it happened. The beauty of his face; Silas is a few years younger than me, but there's an intoxicating mix to him, an innocence with wisdom that seems so promising. Any woman could start over with a man like him.

"Back to feeling love again," I answer. "One that doesn't hurt."

The touch of his hand to mine; it's gentle.

"I don't think love is supposed to hurt."

"It does," I reply, "when you can't have the one you want."

That softens his face like I shared his truth too.

He holds his arms open, and I take his embrace. I need it. I need it so much; he smells so fresh, like coconut and sex. His bare chest presses against mine, and there's no history, no pain with him, only perfection.

Can I do this? Do I really want this freedom? To let go of Redix? Forever?

I close my eyes and see Redix lying beside me on the sofa, tickling his fingertip over my bottom lip, "my Candy Cade," with his smile adoring me.

I can't hate him or blame him. I know how much he loves me. *He proved it.*

I whisper into Silas's flesh. "Can you get me outta here, please?"

It hurts too much. I can't talk on the ride home. Or when Silas pulls his boat away. Or when Jameson and Scarlett hold hands up the dock ramp, waving goodbye.

I get a text before I jump into my car.

SILAS

I'm a boat ride away if you want to go forward

Not back

What's wrong with me?

Every amazing man I meet, I push them away.

If I were Penny, if I were my best friend, what would I tell myself to do?

Give Silas a chance.

No. Give myself a chance.

The thought is there while my elevator climbs to the third floor, and I hope the feeling reaches my heart too. I'm searching for it, grabbing the keys in my bag, when the sight by my front door grabs me.

Three dozen pink tulips in three vases. Each with a note I read:

PAST

I know I've used up as many chances, at least three dozen. But please give us one more.

PRESENT

You're my truth. You're my every reason. You're why I'm still alive.

FUTURE

Please give me one perfect day and one perfect night with you. And then I'll tell you.

For infinity, your Asshole

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



REDIX

DEAR CANDY CADE,

My hand shakes writing this.

Your plane is landing, and fuck me; I'm nervous.

No, I'm crazy.

Why did I agree to tell you?

These past few months. The days I got to spend with you. I never knew I could be that happy again.

It's like, for ten years, nothing excited me. I woke up, and every day was a beige blur. But back with you, my life is neon. It's bright again. Even sitting in traffic excites me because all I do is daydream about you and listen to our songs.

We've had the best laughs. The best talks on your sofa while I held you again. I don't have nightmares when I sleep with you.

And damn, our sex. It bombs me with pleasure I didn't know existed.

Then you left me in New York, and that bombed us too.

(Me punching the wall after you left didn't help.)

I tried getting by without you. But no matter how hard I worked, how many meetings I went to, or hours I spent bitching to my sponsor, how I was right not to tell you, it didn't fucking matter.

He told me, "You never have to fear the truth."

Well... I fall asleep and wake up to my truth.

I love you.

And we're fucked.

Because of the look on your face when you find out—it will hurt you so much, Cade.

It's what I do, right? Hurt you every time, even when I'm not trying. Even when I'm trying to do the right thing.

Remember when you found out about Pamela?

We three were best friends. I swear we rode hundreds of miles on our bikes together. As kids, we were perfect. I was the wild one. You were the smart one. Pamela was the sweet one. That worked until we were fifteen. You went on a trip with your dad for the summer, and Pamela and I hung out at first.

But I could tell she liked me. She used to touch my arm and giggle.

Fuck, it weirded me out because I didn't like her like that. I liked you, but she didn't know, and you didn't either.

I felt like I was cheating on you, so I avoided Pamela that summer. That only made me feel like more of an asshole.

She chilled out until we were seniors. Then she started asking just me to come over and hang out because she didn't want to be alone after some dude broke her heart. I got so worried about her one night, so I went over. She hugged me, and I let her. Then she tried to kiss me, and I freaked out and left.

I didn't tell you. I didn't want to come between y'all. You two were so close. You'd talk the girly shit that bored me, and

that's how we three worked. It's not like she was trying to fuck you over, Cade. We were all just so close.

And I'm a cocky fuck to say it, but Pamela wasn't the first or last ~~girl~~ (sorry) woman to fall for me.

But then you read what she wrote in my yearbook. How she thanked me for always being there at night, for my hugs and stuff, and she signed it, "Love you always."

Shit, the look on your face.

It was just the two of us sitting on the beach, and I never saw such hurt in your eyes before. I was worried you'd think I cheated on you. That I'd lose you for trying to be a good friend to her. But you just got all quiet and stared at the waves.

"It's alright," you finally said. "She can't help that she loves you too."

You were always sweet like that. You don't give up on people. You see their pain too.

"I like her like a friend. But I love you, Cade. Like you're-the-love-of-my-life love."

I'd never said that to you, not like that, and you turned to me with tears in your eyes and gave me the biggest kiss.

God, I wanted to marry you right there on the sand.

That's why I never told you later about Pamela and TJ.

Yep, that's right. It made me fucking sick.

I knew it would you too, and I didn't want to ruin your friendship or your memory of her later. But she didn't know better. She got my new number from my sister and called me in LA. Pamela was in college and freaking out because she and TJ became a secret thing over her Christmas break, and she didn't know how to tell you.

I mean, she knew how much you hated TJ because he was always after you. But she had no clue how much. Or why.

I told her that TJ was a dangerous asshole and to stay away from him. Like I talked to her for weeks and begged her to

drop his ass. She said she would. She asked if she could come to see me in LA after she did.

I know she dated him, thinking it would make me jealous. She had no idea. It made me scared, so I agreed. I'd do anything to protect her too. So she promised to end it with TJ when she went home for spring break.

And then... I didn't get any more calls from Pamela.

When my sister told me she went missing, I don't remember much of the following months. I just drank until I didn't feel. Blame. Guilt. Grief.

It should've been me who disappeared, not her.

I wish I was stronger back then. I'd give anything if I could have saved her. It only made me want to save you more. To never tell you or hurt you again.

You said I have to tell you the truth if I want a future with you. But the truth can't seem to stop fucking up our lives, Cade.

So I decided to try this...

I'm sitting here in the hangar in my car, waiting on the jet I sent for you, and I have it all planned.

One perfect day with you.

One perfect night together.

Something we'll always remember.

Because we'll need it. Because after that, once I tell you the truth? I pray that somewhere, Pamela's watching out for us.

She always loved you too.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



Sink In by Amy Shark

IT MAKES ME BITE MY LIP... HOW REDIX IS WAITING THERE with a pink tulip in his hand.

His big heart breaks me open. The sight of him lighting up my shadows.

White linen pants. Black shirt open to his tan chest. Sun-streaked hair falling down. No shoes on, of course, while he leans against a blue Land Rover that's got to be vintage. And he won't take his eyes off me.

Usually, I'm so strong.

But my heart hammers. My knees shake.

I have to grab the metal railing, stepping down from the jet in the shade of the private plane hangar we pulled into.

I don't know what we'll do or what he'll finally tell me, but with that look in his eyes, we'll be okay no matter what truth comes from his lips.

He doesn't say anything. Once I'm within his grasp, his hand cups my jaw, and his lips are on mine. The soar of my pounding heart takes my breath away as his deep kiss claims my mouth.

I've missed him so much; just the touch of him wakes my soul. His soft moan back, the heat of his skin against mine, does the same to him.

"*Damn*, you're beautiful." His breath lingers over my lips, his fingertips twirling the infinity lock he gave me around my neck. "No questions, Detective, for one day. You'll let me spoil you. Deal?"

"Deal."

I'd agree to a forehead tattoo right now.

His sky eyes study mine, and I can tell. "You're nervous?"

"You keep giving me chances"—his thumb tickles over my bottom lip—"and I keep fucking them up."

"But it's me, your best friend."

"Exactly." His gaze won't let go of mine. "*It's you*, my world, and I can't lose you again."

"You never lost me." My lips reach for his again. "And you never will."

He has to believe me. It's our only chance. I kiss him as passionately as I can, not giving a shit about the airport staff around us. He has to trust me, or we won't make it. I may be his, always, but it doesn't mean we can live together.

Not without the truth.

"I've got one question," he asks, wrapping his hands around me in my mini sundress and pulling me near. My stomach flips, feeling his cock happy to see me too. "Do you need a nap, or can I start spoiling you now?"

Jet lag ceases to exist in his arms. "I'm wide awake and ready."

He opens the car door for me, seeming far more at home here than he ever did in Hilton Head. California suits him. He

looks like their surfer king ambassador.

I've only been to LA a few times, which was forever ago, flying in and out as a teen for photoshoots with my dad as my chaperone. I'm certainly not that teen anymore. Not with the thrill between my thighs at the sight of him, at the silver rings on his tan fingers clicking against the steering wheel as we wind through traffic.

He points out the sights, telling me about his show, and I'm trying to listen, but I pinch my thigh, not believing I'm here. The sign we pass after a while reading "Malibu: 21 Miles of Scenic Beauty" isn't bluffing.

I kick off my sandals and put my feet on his dashboard.

"How long have you lived here?"

"I got this place when I went into rehab. It became my way to start over. My old house had too many fucked up memories."

"So you moved in once you got out?"

"Yeah, I worked with a designer to get it ready. I went right back to work too. I was fucking lucky I still had a job. But the showrunner is a friend of mine—Lorraine Morris. She's from Savannah, actually, near us. We met out here when I was starting out, and she said she'd write a show for me, and she did."

"That's *The Band*, right?"

I catch his eyes lingering up my legs, at how my white dress skims high up my bare thighs.

"Yeah. Lorraine held the production for me until I got my shit together. I'd do anything for her now."

"How much longer until you wrap this season?"

I hope it's not long. At this rate, I'll burn through all my vacation weeks trying to see him. I already feel guilty for taking days off again, but Mama told me to—playing the "you only live once" card. And from her, I had to honor the wisdom. But I cheated a bit. I made Penny promise to keep me

updated if anything changes. With Redix's pull, I can be home on a plane in hours.

"Just a couple more weeks." He grins my way, and he's my home. "Then I have a film in Atlanta."

"Really?" That's hope. That's only a four-hour drive from Hilton Head. "For how long?"

"A few months if all goes as planned."

His lips purse. The veins in his neck tense too.

"What?"

"I might as well tell you now—Angie's cast in it too. It was planned over a year ago."

Dread fills me. *Why?* But I gotta give him a chance.

"Is she gonna be a problem for us?"

He reaches for my hand, "Not at all," squeezing it gently.

We let the tunes he's playing from our teens fill the minutes to wherever he's taking me. I don't care. I just let him rub his thumb over my hand and lead the way. When we pull in front of a quaint shop off the Pacific Coast Highway, I read the sign above the door and melt.

"Ice cream for lunch?"

"They have a special flavor here."

The delight in his eyes when he takes my hand; I'll never stop loving him.

I hear the gasps. A few people recognize Redix when we walk across the stone patio into the tiny shop. But they don't approach him. I hope that's a California perk.

"Dude!" The guy behind the counter points his chrome scoop at Redix. "You want the usual?" He glances at me. "Two cones?"

"Nah, man." Redix won't let go of my hand. "Just one, thanks."

I'm fascinated by the process as the guy whips up a blend on the cold marble slab before us. "What flavor is that?"

It doesn't look like our lemon sherbet.

His cocky eyes stop my heart. "Redix Road."

"How'd you swing that?"

He winks, "I kinda own this place now," reaching out for the waffle cone with his custom concoction.

Grabbing a few napkins first, he leads me back outside, pulling a chair out for me from under an umbrella-covered table.

"Tell me what you think."

He offers me the first bite. Vanilla cream. Lemon zest. Graham cracker. Something herbal—basil—it zings across my palate, and I close my eyes... and moan.

"Damn, darlin'." He grins like a demon. "Ice cream on your lips and that sound in your throat? I'm trying to be a gentleman."

I can't help it. It's so good that I go for two more delicious bites. And I'm so ravenous, a drip lands on my chin. He pauses and cocks his head, and smiles so big I should take a picture. I've never seen him this happy. Happy to take a napkin and gently dab the drop off my chin.

"I can't believe you're finally here with me," he says like it's a sacred ritual.

He takes the cone from my hand and gives a few licks with his eyes locked on mine.

That look, I know it; it changed my life.

Pressing his lips into the sweet cream, he melts it, and I can sense people watching with phones up.

He doesn't care.

"I promise—this is only with you, Cade."

He reaches around my neck and pulls my lips into his creamy kiss. It starts sweet, his lips sliding over mine until his tongue dances in my mouth, and I explode—memories firing

with lust. My body tensing, wanting him, ready to straddle him in that metal patio chair.

It's killing me, and I want this death. The romance. The passion.

He bought a fucking ice cream store.

I can't hold back; reaching around, I grab his neck to take him now, and someone whistles across the patio.

He lifts his lips. "Now that'll go viral." His breath hovers over mine. "And this time... it's very true for me."

I kiss him again, not caring if we're on the screens of Times Square. You give me Redix Dean, lemon, sugar, and our lips together, and I won't be stopped.

"Take me home," I insist, breaking his rules already.

"Hold your horse ride, darlin'." He's amused. And it looks so damn good on him. "I got hours to spoil you."

Giggles sound over my shoulder.

Redix peeks over it and smiles. "Do you mind?" he asks me.

"Make their day," I say.

He's so sweet about it. Four teen girls, young ones, are gawking at him. He buys them and their parents ice cream before wrapping his arms over their shoulders and giving them all the selfies their gushing hearts desire.

"Is that your girlfriend?" The girl with braces dares to ask him.

"She's more than that." He walks over and takes my hand as I stand. "She's the love of my life."

The group of girls "Ahhh," and so does my heart.

I'm fourteen again too. I'm back in that innocence, and that constant weight in my chest lightens. Their parents corral them away while we clear our table to leave. Then he wedges me against his car when we get to it, his husky whisper teasing me.

“Do you wanna selfie with Redix Dean, little lady?”

Only he can wear arrogant and make it cute. And I’m not fourteen. I’m horny as hell.

“Oh, you’ll be taking pictures with me.” I urge my hips back into him. “But they won’t be in a parking lot with my clothes on.”

He’s freeballing in linen pants like the sight of his arousal doesn’t cause traffic accidents.

“Are you gonna spoil me, too?” he asks.

I stroke his length quickly getting hard under soft fabric.

“Yes. It’ll be a very dirty spoil.”

He cups my hand, pressing it down hard. “That’s called ‘porn.’”

My insides fire. Desire rushes through my body at his thick cock in my grasp.

“That’s called ‘later.’”

I stop my tease and grin at the proud chubby in his pants while he laughs and hops into the driver’s seat. Our adventure continues, winding down the shoreline before we stop in front of a funky cottage. Like time hasn’t touched it. I don’t ask. I let him take my hand again as he knocks on a wooden gate. A darling woman with gray hair pulled into a long braid opens it and greets him with a hug saying, “This must be her.” Her eyes sparkle my way.

“Cade, this is Audre Locke.” Peace fills his face. “She parties with me on the weekends and runs my favorite pottery studio.”

Parties? Pottery? With a got-to-be-seventy-year-old woman?

Who is this serene soul, and what did he do with the wild boy I knew?

Audre shows me around, proudly pointing to the bowls and plates Redix has been making for his new place. I’m

impressed by the white and blue glaze he's using on his designs. It reminds me of home.

"This is how you spend your weekends?"

"This and play guitar." He pulls me over to two stools sitting in front of tables. "If I keep my hands busy, a drink won't get in them."

"What else don't I know about you?"

I'm enthralled as he drops a ball of gray clay before me.

"Lots." He plops one down on the other table too. "This is the good stuff I *want* you to know."

Audre brings us lemonade with sugar cookies. *Someone gave her the memo on me.* She turns up the old stereo on the porch. Billie Holiday croons softly before Audre disappears inside, leaving me and Redix to our creations.

"No peeking." He insists as we sit back-to-back. "We'll surprise each other."

I start squishing the slick ball.

"What the hell do I make?"

I love this already.

"Whatever your hands dream up."

We're quiet at first, for a long time, while we work, and I know what we're doing. We're counting down the hours until he tells me, until this all changes. But I swear I'll do this for him. I'll make this day as perfect as I can too.

"Tell me." It's easier to ask with my back brushing his. "Why did you really come home this spring?"

"Well, Detective." He chuckles because he knows me too well; I can't help myself. "I owed my family a visit. And those teen centers mean a lot to me. I got my buddy, Luca—he owns that golf resort—I got him to support them too, so I owed him a donor party."

I'm quiet.

He doesn't mention me, and tears bite my eyes, feeling forgotten by him.

That he moved on.

And I never did.

"I missed you too, Candy Cade." His voice is soft, and I gulp back my sob. "My mom told me about Mama G, and all I kept thinking was how scared you must be, and I wanted to be there for you. For her too."

My lips won't open.

It's true. I was terrified of my mama's diagnosis—pancreatic cancer. I still am.

I hear him turn in his chair before a supple kiss lands on the nape of my neck, and my shoulders drop with a sigh.

"I had a perfect plan of getting sober and coming back for you," he confesses with his lips to my flesh. "But then I saw you again, and I got all fucked up inside because, damn, I missed my best friend and forgot how it feels when I see you."

His fingertips tickle down my arm. "It's like fireworks went off inside me seeing you in that purple dress again."

"Do you remember what we did in that dress?"

"Yes." Desire threads his voice making mine cascade down my body. "It was the first time I fucked you from behind. In front of the bathroom mirror. We went from clumsy virgins to racy adults that night."

I tilt my neck for more of his soft bites. "That was our first hotel room together too."

"What were our parents thinking?"

"That we were eighteen, had our own money, and there was no stopping us anyway."

And I need him to touch me again. *Now*. But our hands are covered in clay, and he tortures me instead. Straddling me from behind while his lips won't stop with their meal of my neck.

“I swear, seeing you again.” His kiss singes my flesh, and my panties soak. “Being with you again, kissing you, fucking you so damn hard. Each time I’m with you now, you have more of me. You’ve *got* to know I’m yours, Cade, no matter how much I change.”

He nibbles my ear, melting my heart, and I worry my pussy’s gonna wet through my white dress.

“Take me home now, or poor Ms. Audre is gonna see her own Redix Dean strip and fuck show right here on this table.”

“Nope.” I can feel his grin on my skin. “I gotta finish my gift for you.”

The heat of his body leaves mine while he turns to pick it up, saying, “Once this is fired up, you’ll think of me every time you use it.”

I’m making him a lop-sided candy dish. From him, I’m expecting a perfect plate or maybe a breakfast bowl for my Froot Loops.

Instead, I turn around...

And he presents me with a clay dildo. Almost to his perfect enormous proportions, and my snort is equally as big. “What the fuck?” I start laughing and can’t stop.

Because only Redix wouldn’t give a hell, only he’d ask a poor old woman to fire up his massive clay dick in a kiln.

“You expect me to use this?”

“I expect to *watch* you.” His clowning grin spins my world. “Why use soft silicone when this’ll be big and hard like me?”

“What color are you gonna paint it?”

“Blue”—he kisses my bare shoulder—“for all the years you left my balls that way.”

“You’re gonna offend Ms. Audre.”

But I’m not offended. I’m wetting more at the thought... and its size... and the show I can give him... and wondering how long it takes to fire that big boy up until it’s ready.

“No, it won’t.” His grin won’t stop. Neither will his kisses up to my ear. “She taught me how. She sells dildos on Etsy.”

Stop it now.

I can’t take it, grabbing my stomach; it hurts from laughing at the image—wild celebrity Redix Dean making ceramic dildos with Malibu’s silver-haired potter.

“You’re too much.” I want his lips, his laughs, everything about him.

He gives them back, chuckling through our kiss.

“If you can take the real me, darlin’, my blue monster dildo *ain’t too much*.”

I don’t remember laughing this much, not since we were last together. And I don’t know whether we’re eighteen again or have found a new bliss, but I can’t stop.

All afternoon he charms me. Spoiling me at a surf shop where he’s already picked out a board for me and where he pops wood at the sight of me trying on a wet suit. He gives me the giggles when we get pedicures together because he gets his toes to match mine—lavender. His eyebrows won’t stop dancing, joking about the foods he could find other uses for when we devour an early dinner.

By evening, my laughs are punctuated by yawns as the travel finally catches up to me. But when the black metal gates swing open to his oceanfront home, shock wakes me up.

“This looks like one of the homes I used to dream of.”

It’s a modern design of earthen rectangles stacked upon each other, concealing what’s got to be a breathtaking view of the Pacific on the other side.

“When I saw this listing”—he pulls into the pristine garage—“I had to have it. I hope you like it.”

Like it?

It’s overwhelming. My hand shakes in his while he ushers me inside. The entire back of the home has glass walls open to the oasis of palms and tall hedgerows offering privacy

surrounding the pool and deck. It's almost exactly like the homes I used to show him in magazines, pointing to pictures of white walls, white sofas, natural woods, and glass everywhere.

“Do you like it?” His hands gently turn me around. “I got this for you, Cade.” A stillness washes over me. “I got it for *us*.”

My world stops spinning. My breath seizes. I stop marveling at the view and focus on the sentiment. On what he just said.

All this time, I thought he wanted to forget me. That he hated me. That he came here to get away from me because it was my fault.

But no.

He remembered me. He was designing our dream home, building a sanctuary from our past hell.

More pieces of me heal as a happy sob escapes my heart.

Redix was never an asshole.

He was just a boy who became a man who wanted to share his big heart but didn't always know how.

This is how.

Cradling my wet jaw in his palms, he pulls my lips to his, saying, “I'll take that as a yes.”

I kiss him from depths where only he belongs before insisting, “Now, Redix. I don't know what else you planned, but fuck me right now. Right here on these wood floors, or on that white fur couch, or those marble countertops. Anywhere... but fuck me now.”

“Damn, woman.” His nose nuzzles mine. “I can spend millions, but none of it can buy you patience.”

“Because you gave me the perfect day.” I lift my dress off to only my drenched panties underneath and toss it on his smiling face. “Now, let's have the perfect fucking night.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



Bad Love by Ry X

IN HIS BEDROOM UPSTAIRS, THE VIEW AND AROMA ARE ALL him. Salt wafts with waves of vanilla and leather, and I'm immersed in Redix.

“Your last surprise is out there.” He points toward the balcony. “I wanted to wait until sunset to light those candles.”

He put them in jars like our prom night on the beach. They surround the mattress he pulled off the bed. It's in front of the glass wall to the waves crashing beyond.

It's so romantic. It's seduction laced with memories, and it sews back together the ripped seams of my soul.

“You remember so much,” I swear if he's not making me laugh, he's making me cry, and all I feel is everything.

“This is how I imagined it.” His touch lingers across my shoulder. “I used to lie in bed alone and dream that if I got you back one day, I'd bring you here for our first time together again.”

I face him, worried.

“You didn’t like our time in New York?”

“I loved it. I think I lost my mind fucking you again, but that’s not how I wanted it to be. I know I hurt you too.”

I’m the asshole. “I’ll wait.” I pushed him too far, to the savage night that left us raw.

But after all that time apart, it’s what we needed. To let desire rage from our bodies. But we need this now. To let it heal us too.

“However you imagined it,” I say, “just tell me.”

“The guest bedroom across the landing. You’ll find all you need in there. A spa shower too. Take your time and meet me back here.”

I like his plan, and I love it even more when I see a gift box wrapped in a purple ribbon on the guest bed. In it, I find a white lace bra and panty set. It rushes my body. The panties are crotchless. The bra has no cups. Under it?

My jean jacket.

The one he gave me for my sixteenth birthday. The one he wrote in purple Sharpie inside that’s still there.

My Candy Cade,

*This will keep you warm when
I’m not around. But I promise I’ll
be back for you.*

I left it in his car that day... before that night.

And he kept it all this time.

And I keep shaking it off. The tears that want to take me, but desire keeps them at bay.

I know we have to swim through every emotion together, no matter how terrifying or terrific if we want to crawl to shore together. If we want to survive.

While I'm in the shower, he taps on the door, telling me my luggage is there if I need it. Wearing his gifts, I only need to slick my hair back, spritz on BOUND perfume, dab on some cherry lip balm, and grab one surprise in my hand.

Dusk colors the walls of his home as I find my way back to his bedroom. Lust pools between my thighs as I push all other thoughts away but him.

No matter what, I'll remember this night. How I know he'll indulge me. How he'll make me beg and then deliver. How our bodies always come together even if our lives can't.

I don't see him at first with pillows stacked high atop the mattress outside. Sunset smears over the ocean, giving way to night above. Candles glow in a circle around the bed. There's a wooden tray beside it with his ceramic bowls. My steps travel over teak boards until I find him lying there, and I gasp at the stunning sight.

Redix is nude, his hair spilling across the pillow while his tan, shredded body reclines across white sheets on the bed. With one arm relaxing above his head, from his biceps to his pecs to his dozen carved abs, it's all seducing my eyes to where he's very eager for me.

"May I?"

I'm brazen with my phone in hand. I never want to forget him like this.

"Be my dirty guest." His gaze follows me as I step onto the bed. "And stand right there."

He guides my legs to straddle his thighs, making my stance wide so the panties he bought me part along with my sex for his view.

"Damn, Cade." His palm starts stroking his cock. "You never stop being beautiful."

I take pictures without a word.

Every part of him; from his sinewed thighs up to his heavy cock and tan hand stroking it, to his trimmed patch up a thin

trail to his belly button resting in the canyon of his abs; he's always been *beyond* beautiful to me.

I'm in wonder at my perfect match. At the one who's never wrong about me. At the only one who always feels right. When my lens finds his eyes, they pierce my heart with words that hang in the air.

I love you.

"My turn," he finally says.

I press RECORD for the video and hand him my phone. While he aims it up at me, I step wider and tower over his narrow waist.

"Should I leave my jacket on?"

"No." His next words wrap around my heart. "I'm back to keep you warm."

I take it off, tossing it out of our way.

He's spoiled me today, so I spoil him. Tickling my fingertips across my breasts, jutting high in this risqué bra, twirling over my exposed nipples, I tug at them for his delight.

He grins. "Yes, Cade, just like that."

I lick my fingertips and do it again.

His bourbon voice. "Yes, play with your pussy for me." It can seduce me happily into hell. "That's it. Rub your clit like I taught you. Get so wet for me."

I am. I'm sliding my middle finger across the slit of lace before diving inside, my palm grinding over my clit; I make my body desperate for him.

"Show me," he demands, and I move my hand, splaying my sex open for his view. "Fuck." He sees it. He sees everything, my pussy throbbing for his stare. "Fuck, remember the first time I got your pussy like that? So full and pink for me?"

"Yes," I sigh, and I can't take my eyes off him; my hand starts again, and it won't take me long.

“You get so dirty and wet for me, now, don’t you?” Not with him talking like that. Not with his cock like granite under me. Not with one hand tugging at my nipple while my other starts fucking myself like I need him to, so soon, so hard. *God, I want him.*

“You’re gonna come, aren’t you?” It’s in his eyes too. He knows my desire. “Do it, Cade. Be my dirty little girl and come like I’ll make you come so hard tonight.”

That promise. That need. It takes me, my legs teetering, quivers hitting my thighs while my shoulders collapse with the weight of release as my syrupy spasm makes me barely gasp, “Redix, please.”

I drop to my knees with a shuddering surrender.

“Let me taste.” He sets my phone down while I collapse beside him.

Taking my slick fingers into his mouth, the suction of his tongue is as strong as his groan. My cum is like the ice cream he loves to lick before he commands, “Strip naked, lie back, and don’t move.”

I’m electric, desperate for his fuck, while I rip my panties off before my bra flings off too. He watches me while he dives his fingers into a bowl beside the bed. When I see the crescent piece of ice he’s holding, I know his game and object, “I need you to fuck me *now*.”

“Oh. *I will* fuck what’s mine.” He pushes me down on the mattress. “But I’m gonna get you wetter than you’ve ever known for it first.”

And he does.

Starting with a cold trickle, ice melts across my mouth before the heat of his tongue clings over my tender lips, and I’m going to die, and that’s fine. More than fine while he does the same, biting after the drips down my neck. Filling my clavicle with a puddle, he laps it up before circling my nipples with ice until they’re freezing peaks. My spine arches when his mouth finally takes them, one after the other, into his hot,

ruthless suck. I cry out for him as he does it again and again and again.

I'm huffing for breath while he murmurs, "God, I want you," down my belly that flutters for his journey of ice and fire across my skin. "Every fucking inch of you belongs to me."

I'm in awe, overwhelmed by the sensations of him, and please don't ever stop. "Close your eyes and just feel this." I hear his voice insist before he kneels between my thighs.

I close my eyes and open more than my legs to him.

He wedges them wider and leaves me like that, air caressing my tender skin screaming for him. The tease of it, he lets it linger before a cold touch greets me next.

"Your pussy's so hot for me, Cade." He circles ice over my clit, and it's torture I love, making my legs jump while I hold back a scream. "It's so hot; it fucking melts me."

His voice slides warm inside me, along with a frigid piece of ice. It frenzies my nerves to a sensation I can't take just before he sucks my folds, each one, over and over while he lets the ice melt. Then the lush lick of his hot tongue fires over my desperate, cold hood before the warm slurp of his mouth sucks on my pussy with a heat that lifts my hips for more as I hold back a roar.

Goddamnit, this ache hurts so fucking good.

"You're so wet now." It's him; it's my fierce need I can't control. "You're so ready for me." It's his fingertip, circling where I'm starving. "So pink and hungry." It's how he plays, drinking me for excruciating minutes, and I'm in heaven. "Are you sure you're ready for my fuck?"

He barely touches my clit, and I scream, "Redix, please!" I'm begging from my soul, from my greedy depths. "I need you."

"Climb on top." The mattress suddenly sinks to his flop beside me. I open my eyes and find his fist holding his cock up, tall and full. "Take me, Cade. What you can of me, just like our first time."

I leap up and throw my leg over his. Madness possesses me, a craze for him no one can stop, no matter his size.

“I’ll take all of you,” I swear, replacing his hand with mine around his thick shaft. “All of you, Redix Dean. You fucking belong to me too.” I sink faster than we can handle, and he bottoms out, hitting my soul.

“Oh, *fucckkkk!*” He groans so loud, his back bowing to my sudden descent. “Fuck, Cade.” The shock, the lust, the vulnerable stance in his eyes watching me drives my hips rolling hard. “Goddamn.” He grabs them like he can hold on and control me. “Goddamn, you feel so good.”

But he can’t. It storms my body. His mass shoving out my breath. His stretch making me moan. The glide of his measure making me indulge. The frenzy in my clit, it’s dominating my every move.

“Hell yes, ride me so slow.” He starts guiding me while my thighs lift and lower, letting my pussy revel in his hard length, in how it loves resisting his tight invasion. “So fucking wet and tight.”

Circling my hips, I lean forward, kissing his lips. This is like our first day together, when we couldn’t get enough of each other. When it was so new, we marveled at the power of our sex.

“Fuck, yes,” he growls into our kiss, “this is how I remember us.”

“We’re so much more now.” I exhale, “So much more,” as his hands grab my ass, seizing me like his lifeline. Like each long sink of my pussy around his cock is his favorite, and each lingering rise is his best reward.

Our eyes, noses, and lips hover over each other sharing our breath in perfect rhythm. By the hard clench of his hands, the urge in my body, all this time apart, and to be watching each other—we need more.

I sit up and lean back. Bracing my arms behind me on his thighs, I spread my pussy open to give him more of our show

because this is my hunger for him; this is how we satisfy it. This is how he's more than enough.

"Damn, look at us." His jaw hangs. "Look at me inside you again. Look at you fucking my cock." His pecs tense while his eyes are mesmerized by what he's watching and what I can feel—the milky slick I'm painting up and down his shaft.

"I can see you, Cade. All of you." His eyes reflect our fuck while my hips roll, displaying my wild search, my arousal pooling at his wide base. "That's it. Spread your pussy." I need to find this with him. Show this to him. "Baby, you're so full taking my cock. Fuck yes, ride it."

I can. I will. All of him. This is mine. He's mine. His strong grip guides my hip. His other thumb strums my clit. His heart is grabbing for mine. His sexy eyes hold mine captive while my fingers take my nipple to the very point.

"I'm gonna come, Redix." It's hitting me so fast. "I'm gonna come so hard on your cock."

"Yes." He's there, and I'll take him with me where he belongs. "Do it for me."

It's thunder, it's a crash, it's a wet burst through our bodies while I don't know who is louder or who loses more control, *but—we—do*.

It pours through our flesh, rushing ecstasy through every place we're joined, our eyes staring at each other while our storm rages through. It's only grown stronger in our years apart. The pulsing. The convulsions. The intensity. We share it until I collapse on top of him, and his arms hold me while it leaves us both shaking.

"You were always with me, Cade." He cradles my head to his pounding chest. "And you always will be."

It pulls at my heart, moving my lips to his. The passion in our kiss owns my senses until he pulls his lips away, saying, "We're not done. I want more of us like this." He lifts my ribs, "Come up here," pulling me up.

"What are you doing?" I'm still in a haze.

But the dare in his eyes; it rouses me fast. “I wanna taste our fuck dripping from your pussy.” That does too. “I wanna taste my cum in your pussy where it belongs.”

My legs shake with the taboo of this. With his hands guiding my pussy to mount his face before his tongue scoops, dipping into where he left his pearly cum for me inside.

“Oh god,” I gasp, watching as he devours me, and I don’t look away. *Fuck, this is so erotic, so intimate.* There’s no limit to us, making me shudder, trembling at the erasure of anything between us.

He moans like he’s been craving this. Diving his face, nose, and tongue into my folds, his hand lifts mine, guiding it to his long hair, to grab a fistful. And I know what he’s telling me he wants. I do too.

“Do we taste good, Redix?” My hips move, sliding my glossy pussy over his face. “Does our fuck taste good in your mouth?”

He moans again, the grip of his strong fingers over my ass pulling me down to drink. Like he’s been in a desert and can’t get enough of my pussy, of our cum, of where I’m still open from his cock and our... *fuck, this so is hot,* and he has no shame with me. His hunger only matches mine.

“Do you taste what you do to me?” I grip his strands tighter. I feel his tongue answering me. “How you get my pussy so wet for you? How I can milk your delicious cum from your huge cock? How I’m suffocating your sexy face with my pussy? How this pussy belongs to you?”

My dirty words are driving his mouth into a frenzy. The primal greed between us, the urge we can’t fight. It makes me lift and reach behind me, searching, and I find it. His cock is hard again, consuming our fuck, and I can’t contain my groan.

“Come here,” he growls, yanking me back for his feast. With a fierce shake of his head between my thighs, he ravages me like a starved animal, and I’m done, coming so hard over his mouth that I lose all sensation except the touch of him where I need him most.

It's a whirlwind, how fast he moves while I lose control. Flipping me on my back, he pins my wrists above my head while his knees wedge between my thighs, pushing them far apart, and he's not stopping.

“Now, Cade.”

His arms brace above me, his lips glisten with our cum, his exquisite body tents over mine, and I get this view. This delicious sight of him just before his magic hips start their ruthless dance into my depths.

“I can taste our fuck in my mouth.” He drives into my cunt so hard I see stars. “I can see my cum dripping from your pussy.” The fullness, the pressure, his fuck is brutal perfection. “I can feel you resisting me; you're so fucking tight.” In and out, he's thrusting. “I swear I'm gonna fuck you so hard again, and you'll *love* the pain.”

He does, and the orgasm his merciless mouth gave me doesn't disappear. Like a loud symphony, it's still singing through my body, lifting open for his.

“Yes, like this.” It strains from his throat while his abs flex to his driving tempo, and my hips rise to match it. His rhythm is perfect, glistening with sweat while his cock drums into me, and I never want him to stop. His eyes watch mine, then our sex, then back to wonder with me. “Fuck, you feel so wet and tight. So swollen and hot. Fuck.”

“Redix, fuck me harder.” He worries he'll hurt me, but the only thing will be if he stops. I'm desperate, pushing against his restraint. “I can take you.”

“Grab my shoulders,”—he insists, releasing my wrists—“and don't let go. Hang on to me.”

Because we know it's going to wreck us. Like a tsunami, it'll wash away our years apart, the distance between us gone, and the pain... we can hope for that too. We can hang on to each other. We can do this so hard that it'll disappear in the torrent that's us together.

He lowers to his elbows, his knees pushing my thighs wider to where his mass bottoms out inside me, and he starts

moving in circles, driving into my core.

“Don’t let go of me, Cade.” His forehead presses to mine, his stammering breath hovering inches from mine while I dig my nails into his shoulders. “Fuck yes, like that.”

He hisses so sweet at my possession. And yes, it’s possible he can fuck me even harder as he claims every piece of me, pummeling my clit, and I’m ready to scream in surrender. My sex and soul are soaked by his force everywhere inside, and “Redix” is all I can barely say. But it’s everything I feel, barely hanging on to his flesh, on my edge while I stare into his eyes. My demand, my vulnerability, my deal; it’s all for him.

“With me.” His breath shallows while the muscles in his back seize under my hard grip. “Do it.”

His last thrust is merciless. It thrashes through me, snatching him too and dragging us down to our favorite depths where we gasp for breath, where every part of me floods for him, where he gives me every piece of him too. Another groan escapes my soul as I feel him pulsing inside, sharing more with his grunts, over and over, as we both wash ashore.

“I love you.” He finally says it. It’s welling in his eyes, gazing down at me. “I love you so much, Cade, and I never stopped.”

“I love you too.” Tears trail from my eyes, wetting my hair. My body sags with my gentle cry. “I love you, Redix, and I always will.”

We were never meant to be apart.

But can we stay together?

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



CLOUDS TRAIL ACROSS THE SKY BEFORE A GENTLE BREEZE blows them away, revealing a twinkling brilliance above us.

It's been a perfect day. Then a perfect night. And we held each other in silence for minutes after it. My head lies on his chest. His arms wrap around me, so do his legs, but we're not saying a word, and we know why.

We're afraid.

Do I really want to know?

Can't I just live in this innocence?

It's tempting. In his arms, I can forget all and only remember that I love him. But it's not fair. It's too much to let him carry alone. He has for ten years, and it almost killed him.

"I can't sleep." I kiss his chest. "Can you?"

"No." He squeezes me tighter. "I don't want this to change."

"But we have to." I lift my head and turn his chin my way. "We have to change. This secret. It's destroying us."

“I’m afraid the truth will too.”

“Then let’s be afraid together.” I rest my head on the pillow we share. My eyes bore into his, and I swear, “I’m in this with you.” I reach for his hand. “Please tell me what happened.”

“When I tell you”—his eyes glass with fear—“promise me we won’t lose this. Not after everything we’ve been through to get here.”

“I promise.” I do from my soul. “I won’t leave you.”

I see the lump in his throat as he swallows down the pain. It keeps him quiet before he asks, “What do you remember about that night?”

“We were getting ice cream. You went back for our second scoop, and I was standing by the curb, waiting for you. Then suddenly, TJ grabbed my wrist. I turned around, and Gentry was behind me, too, standing by his car, idling at the curb. I knew it from the look in their eyes—they’d hurt me. Then you ran over, and the three of y’all started fighting. I tried fighting, too, but it was a tornado of fists, and I got knocked to the ground.”

“Do you remember who grabbed your necklace when you did?”

“No.”

“It was Gentry. That’s what set me off so bad.”

“I thought I lost it because it happened so fast. Then TJ went after me while I was on the ground. He said, ‘Watch, pretty boy, while I make her suck my ice cream cone,’ and started unzipping his pants and grabbing my neck like he was going to make me suck his dick, but you started wailing on him, right?”

His nostrils flare. “Yeah.”

“But once you got TJ off me, Gentry said, ‘Fine, pretty boy. We’ll take you instead,’ and both guys had you, dragging you back into the car...”

Tears wet the pillow under me, but I won't stop. "And you screamed for me to run. Like it was either you or me, and you let them take you."

The sacrifice in Redix's eyes at that moment is branded on my soul forever.

"And I'm sorry," I cry. "But I couldn't stop them. They shoved you in the car and jumped in, too, and took off. I don't even know who was driving, but I chased after the car, but it didn't matter. They sped away, and I couldn't breathe. They had you. And it should've been me."

I fight back the sob confessing, "That's all I think about, every single day, that it should've been me. They were after me, not you, and I'm so sorry."

His thumb wipes away my tears. "I'd do it all again for you."

I kiss his palm, biting back the guilt. "What happened next?" I barely whisper, "Please tell me."

"You got your dad, didn't you?" He doesn't answer me. "Why didn't you get your mom too?"

"Because you had weed in your pocket, and I was dumb and eighteen. I worried you'd get busted with it. So I called my dad for help. If I called Mama or the police, I worried you'd get in trouble and lose your career or something. I didn't know better."

"It's okay." He brushes back my bangs. "You did the smart thing. Your dad saved my life."

"How?"

He's quiet. His hand starts shaking, brushing over my hair like it soothes him.

"I don't remember much, Cade; that's the truth. It was a shitshow of punches in their back seat. And then something stung my arm like a hornet, but I kept fighting. I clocked TJ's jaw real good, and then my world spun into black."

"So you don't remember anything?" They drugged him. I try not to ask like a detective, but it's obvious, and their M.O.

“It’s okay if you don’t.”

“I remember waking up some and being dragged. I could hear the ocean. I felt sand under my feet. I kept coming in and out and...”

His teeth grab his bottom lip in a hard bite.

I don’t press. I don’t say anything.

“I remember TJ and the smell of cigarettes.” His voice strains. “I remember Gentry smelling like fucking Abercrombie. And some other guy. The driver, I guess. He was wearing your necklace by then and punching my face and ears. I tried to rip it off his neck, but I couldn’t move.”

I give him the time he needs, my molars crunching, not to let my reaction steal this from him.

This is his story, not just mine.

He anchors to my eyes before he reveals.

“Cade, all I remember next is pain and then your dad. He had a fucking gun on them. He told them they’d better run like hell before he killed them, and I worried he’d do it for me, so I groaned something like ‘help.’”

That sounds like my dad. He didn’t kill them.

But I will.

“Those assholes ran, and your dad took care of me. He didn’t even ask. He knew why I was there with them and not you.”

“I was looking for you too. Dad told me to hide at the park, but I didn’t. I came out onto the beach, calling for you. It was so dark, and I couldn’t see anything. I just felt sick because I had to find you.”

“I heard you. That’s when your dad called out for you.”

“But when I found y’all, Dad told me to leave. Like he didn’t want me to see you.”

“You should’ve seen the look on your face when you did. I could barely see through my swollen eyes, but that... I’ll never

forget.”

Redix’s beautiful face; they beat it black and blue. Red drips fell from his ear, streaking his hair. His shirt was gone. His jeans were barely on and drenched in blood. It was soaking him everywhere.

“I’m sorry. I fainted.” I remember up to that point. “You were covered in blood, and I couldn’t take seeing you like that.”

“Your dad took care of us until your mom showed up.”

“My Mama? I don’t remember that.”

“She said you were in shock and took you home while your dad took me to his boat.”

That night, hours of it are lost to me. I just remember waking up the next morning to the hell of knowing something horrible had happened.

“Why did he take you to his boat? Why not the hospital?”

“I wouldn’t let him. While he patched me up, I begged him to let it go. That it would only make it worse for you.”

“We could’ve thrown them in jail for what they did.”

“TJ would’ve gone, but not Gentry, not with his family’s power, and that’s why I worried. I didn’t know who the other guy was and what if he’d come after you too.”

Questions swirl in my brain. Like I should start an investigation, but I won’t. Not with the trembling in Redix’s hand I’m holding.

Tonight, this isn’t about my revenge.

This is about his peace.

But a couple of questions have haunted my soul for years, have left me aching inside for so long.

“But why did you leave me? You came over the next day and told me we were over, to find someone else to love, and then you left. For ten years. And you took my broken heart with you.”

It trembles my lips, asking him. His do the same, bravely answering while his eyes threaten tears too.

“Because I didn’t know how I’d hide from you what they did to me.”

“What do you mean? Did they ra—”

“I don’t know.” Quickly, he answers, “I don’t remember. When I woke up, I was in so much pain; there was so much blood, I don’t know.”

The detective in me knows, “That’s evidence of it.”

“You don’t understand. That’s not where I was bleeding.”

“What?” I can’t separate being the woman who loves and hurts for him from being the detective who keeps asking. “What do you mean?”

“It’s not your fault, Cade.” His hand squeezes mine tight. “Promise me you’ll know that.”

I’m confused, “I promise,” spinning in a haze of unknown while Redix slowly rolls onto his stomach and pulls the sheet away, hiding his body.

It takes me tragic moments to see, to let it sink in.

My fingertips reach out to make sure it’s real...

Oh my God, it is...

And sobs escape. Tracing over his skin, I touch the horrific, jagged scar on his buttock—two dorsal fins.

It’s our tattoo carved deep into his flesh.

They *did* this to him. They *hurt* him like this.

Mocking our love, they branded his flesh because they were after me... but Redix protected me.

So they went *after him*.

There’s no breath. No sight through my tears. No sound but my cries. My hands shake while all I can do is kiss his scars and let every piece of pain, of guilt flow from me.

Saline meets my lips pressing gently against his mutilated flesh, and with his slight flinch at my touch, I only sob more. My tears fall over his scarred skin while he lets me touch him there, finally understanding why.

Why he ran.

Why he hid.

Why he needed years.

Why he could never escape their torture because he'll be wearing it for the rest of his life.

"It should've been me." It's all I can think. *"It should've been me."* It's all I can say. *"It's my fault they hurt you."*

I'll never let it go; my deal.

"No." Quickly, he rolls back over, lifting my wet jaw in his hands. "No, Cade. I was there for a reason, and I'd do it again for you. If they had taken *you*, it would've been a lot worse. What they could've done to you; that would've hurt us more, and you know it."

I'm grabbing for breath. For logic through his words.

"I'm so sorry." I can hardly speak. I'm tethered to his eyes and barely hanging on. "I'm so sorry I got mad. I'm so sorry I fought you and left. I understand now." I need this from him. "Please forgive me."

"I never blamed you." His lips are on mine, gently tasting the tears we share. "I loved you then, and I love you now, and I never wanted to see this look on your face. This is *why I didn't tell you*."

"Why I was afraid to make love to you or to take my pants off. I've never let anyone see me naked until now. Except for your dad. He cleaned me up and promised he'd never tell."

"He never did, I swear."

"I know. I trust him with my life. Like I do you and your mom."

"I'm gonna kill those men."

Because I can. Because now I know their first victim was Redix, and I'll be damned if they haven't hurt their last victim because I'll do more than scar them.

I'll slit their throats.

“No, you won't.” He hooks his finger under my chin, lifting me out of my silent vendetta. “Don't let them ruin us anymore. We're finally back together. You finally know, and this is what I meant.”

He bites down, tensing the muscles across his square jaw before he insists, “I'm not a victim, Cade. I'm not a sad story that needs special care. Or a case you need to solve. I don't need justice. I need peace. I lost nine years of my life trying to get my shit together, and I did. And now...”

His gaze fills with love, looking down at our naked bodies, skating his fingertips across my belly.

“I want to be the man able to touch you, to let you touch me, to fuck you, to make love to you, to have fun again like we did today, and they're not taking another *goddamn minute* away from us. Promise me.”

“I promise.”

Part of me does.

The other part?

It's going to take time... if ever.

The deepest sigh escapes his lungs before he draws another, asking, “Can we stop with the fucking questions now? This is our truth, and it's time we move on. You're here like I always dreamed. We had a perfect day, and I want three more together with you before you leave. Okay?”

“Okay.”

I'm still reeling with what I know now, but the scar on his flesh? I only love him more.

For minutes he holds me, and I'm even more determined—
I'll fight for him.

“Okay,” I say. “We get three more days of perfect together.”

“And nights.”

His grin is soft, trying to shift the mood to something lighter.

So I help him. “Do we have to stick to nights?”

I can never make up for what he did for me, but I *will* die trying as he rolls on top of me, smiling.

“You mean I can stick you every hour?”

“Remember what happened the last time you turned me into a pin cushion?”

He always does this. “That’s why there’s cranberry juice in the fridge.” Smiling down at me, he’ll do anything to make me laugh. “I’m gonna poke you for days, Candy Cade.”

“Can you poke me in the shower?”

“Yes.” His lips cling down my neck. “If you let me do dirty things to you with soap.”

For three days, God, I’ll make Redix Dean so happy.

If you promise to keep our deal.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



REDIX

DEAR CANDY CADE,

Your bottom lip pouts when you focus. It's so sexy I want to bite it. In a sweet way. And then your face, it's like an innocent doll. But then you've got those violet cat eyes with those thick eyebrows that intimidate the shit out of people.

Sorry.

I'm staring.

You look so damn cute cooking in my kitchen. That sarong you've got wrapped around you? I'm gonna rip it off in about ten minutes.

So for now, I'll just enjoy this, sitting on my sofa and watching you across the room.

Fuck, I'm happy.

I find myself writing that a lot lately.

We had a second perfect day.

You let me take you surfing. You're a good sport because these waves ain't like the ones at home. But you've always

been a badass. You have no fear. You paddled out with me, popped up like a champ, and owned them until one wiped you out. I got scared when you didn't come up. I panicked and swam over, but then you did, coughing with a smile.

Moments like that...

Man, I fall in love with you all over again.

But are we kidding ourselves?

I've watched it cross your eyes today.

Yes, we can forget and have fun. I can make you laugh or make love to you in the shower. I didn't know what my body would do, letting your hands slide down over my ass while I had you against the wall. But I was too deep inside you and wanting you so much that I fought it off.

How it hits me like a sudden punch when I feel you touch my scar.

It's like fighting back a wildfire that's going to explode.

And I catch them.

The quick glimpses you give my body now that I let you see it. I'm trying. I'm walking around naked to make us both get used to it. But I don't know if it's working.

I've always known that look in your eyes. When you care so much for me or someone else that you forget yourself.

Remember how you used to let me and Renie stay with you?

My mom would have some dickhead boyfriend over, and I didn't trust a strange man around my little sister. Most of them didn't like me either. One kept calling me "Brad Pitt" like he hated me, and I felt it. I had to protect my sister and get her out of there.

You let us spend the night with you. You gave Renie your bed and your stuffed animals. We were sixteen, and I loved that about you. That you still had yours. That you'd do that for her.

But Renie was scared to be alone, and you only had a twin bed, so you slept on the floor beside her, and I slept beside you. The look in your eyes. All I felt was guilt and love that we made you worry.

So you told your mom, didn't you?

I never asked you, but my mom called the next day and said that man was gone and we could come home.

I think Mama G had something to do with it. She's like that. Like a shadow, silent but watching. Reminds me of you.

Well, the watching part.

Not the silent one because, damn, you have a mouth when you wanna use it.

Pun intended.

Because hell, yes, you used it on me this morning.

You went to your knees while I was brushing my teeth, and I saw stars to you sucking my cock so deep. Now that I'm not hiding. Now that I can really let go, I did. I let you grab my ass while I held your head and thought you'd choke on me, but you kept moaning like you loved it.

Damn, you always make me come so hard.

Even with a fucking toothbrush in my mouth.

And our perfect night?

I'll never forget it.

All those other women I barely remember fucking. They're a blur but not you, Cade. I see you, touch you, and God when I make you moan; it's locked in my memory forever.

I disappear in you. In your taste. Our taste. Fuck, that turns me on. I've never done that before, and now I won't stop. It's us together and so damn real. Like I'm finally alive again and need to live every day with you.

But is it enough, Cade?

Our love?

Yeah, we can laugh. We always could. We can hang out without a word or fuss over stupid shit like the right way to hang toilet paper. (OVER, BTW).

And like hell if we can't fuck ourselves into bliss.

But then I see it in your eyes. How you're blaming yourself about me.

Your guilt.

That's what I feared.

I tried protecting you from that for ten years because it's tearing you up inside.

I fought like hell to get better, and I love you so much; I don't want it to destroy you now. Because it's not your fault. I don't blame you.

But I know you blame yourself, so I can't tell you how sometimes I remember things I don't want to.

So now, you fight your guilt while I fight my addiction, and you don't know how strong it can be. I worry it'll sneak up on us. Like a rogue wave.

The only thing that's stronger... is my love for you.

And I promise, Cade, I'll hang on to you as long as I can.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



I DON'T KNOW WHY THEY'RE PUTTING MAKEUP ON HIM. REDIX perpetually glows. And he keeps a sexy shadow of a beard that I love the tickle of down my belly.

But our perfect day three is on hold.

He got called to the studio for reshoots. Something about the producers changing the script for a love scene: they re-wrote it into a break-up since the actor playing his girlfriend won't renew her contract.

"Emma should be paid more, so fuck them if they won't," Redix said, pulling us into the studio lot.

"Why don't you threaten to walk out to help her?"

It was an ungodly hour as he parked outside a row of trailers.

"I tried." When we got out of his car, he put his hand out for mine to hold and I loved it. "They'll only replace Emma's character with another groupie girlfriend. We're all dispensable at some point."

I don't see how. Not him. Not with how Redix seduces any lens. He *is* the perfect rockstar. Or Romeo. Or surfer. Or CEO. The man can make the role of filing taxes wet your panties.

"I'm glad you're finally here," Eric, his assistant, side-whispers while we watch from our chairs as the crew hustles around set. "I worried New York was a fluke. It's nice seeing your face with him in LA, too, since I've seen your name on so many papers."

"Papers?" I like Eric. He took care of us at the photoshoot.

"He didn't tell you yet?"

"Tell me what?"

When it comes to Redix, surprises aren't always good.

"He's supposed to, so that you know."

"Know what?"

My nerves twitch. The three cups of coffee I've sucked down don't help.

"His house. He's supposed to tell you that he left it to you. He also put you in charge of his estate should something happen to him."

The confusion. The worry. It's written across my face, and Eric reads it fast.

"We made him do it," he explains. "Me. His manager. His agent. After his last stint in rehab, we made him get his affairs in order. It was decided his mom and sister would be too upset, so he said if anyone could, you'd take care of his things."

What shocks me more? Redix's trust in me. His dance with death. Or his plans in case he does it again.

"How bad was he?"

If Redix trusts Eric, so do I. And for all the good Redix shares with me now, I know he's hiding bad too.

"If he starts drinking or using again? If you really love him? Don't enable him. Leave... and don't look back."

I've seen too much as a cop. Too many lives and people wasted. The scary picture is clear.

"That's why it's good you're here." Eric sips his tea. "And Angie's not."

"I thought Angie's history, an act."

A knot, it twists in my stomach.

"She is. Was. She was business to him, but he was more to her. And she never respected his sobriety. Like tempting him was a game."

"It's one she'll fucking lose if she tries that shit around me."

"I see what Redix means." Eric chuckles. "How you fight for him. It's good. He needs someone who cares about him and not his fame. I've never seen him this healthy and happy. I can finally relax."

I turn back, watching Redix in his cast chair. He's grinning my way. He does look happy... and the picture of sexy health.

Munching on donuts from craft services, I watch for three hours how he shoots a sex scene with Emma. How he gets into character, lying in bed with her on set, shooting a hot scene that's so believable, I feel weird—jealous, horny, and proud—an odd mix.

The Intimacy Coordinator negotiates how Redix will kiss from Emma's neck, licking down between her naked cleavage to her belly. He has underwear on, while Emma only wears a flesh thong.

They reset for another angle meant to look like Redix is going down on her. I twist in my chair and tingle between my thighs, knowing the act for real. My pulse doubles while they reset again for a closeup of his face disappearing between her thighs.

Just before they call "Action," he glances at me, and when they start rolling, his moan—*it's for me*.

A wet desire slides down my body. Why did I wear a miniskirt today with no panties? Oh, because we've been

fucking every chance we can, but now that's a mistake because I'm so turned on.

Then they run the new scene. It's where his character, the rockstar, leaves when his groupie-turned-girlfriend asks him in the middle of their sex to commit.

"Stay with me," she sighs, her eyes begging his.

"I never stay," Redix replies. "I leave. That's what I do."

My throat tightens. There's truth in his tone. You can see he loves her, but it's not stopping him.

This is for the camera, right?

The heartbreaking drama unfolds as he pulls away and yanks on his clothes in a blur, leaving her sobbing on the bed.

"You're really good, you know." An hour later, I'm sitting on the table in his trailer, watching him hang his wardrobe in his closet. He's done for the day. "Watching you act gave me all kinds of feels."

"Oh yeah?" The black t-shirt peels off him, his muscles flexing for my view. "Thanks, Candy Cade." His smile flexes too. "Seriously. That means a lot. That you like my work."

"Were you acting?"

His jeans fall to the floor. My jaw follows. Wardrobe put him in grey boxer briefs, and his package hangs impressively from below his belt of obliques. *Fuck me.*

I stammer, "Or is that the *real* you?"

He steps out of his pants, eyes reading me.

"You jealous again?" It's three steps across the small space, and he's between my legs, dangling over the table. "Did you like watching my mouth on another woman, or did it make you wanna fuss 'n' fight like you do because, fuck, both turn me on?"

"I asked the first question."

He chuckles, "Yes, Detective," his lush lips near mine, strands of his hair framing his approach. "I'm acting because

I'm not a rock god or with another woman." His lips kiss mine through his words, "When I close my eyes, I'm the man who loves Cade Bryant and only her."

Part of that, I believe.

"How do you not get hard then?"

"Because thirty crew are standing around me, and I know I can jerk off when I get back here."

"That's what you do in here?"

"At least once a day." The look in his eyes confirms it. "*I think about you all the damn time.*"

He pours that last line like honey while his thumb grazes my nipple under my thin tank, and I want my own with him.

Sex. Action. Now.

"Do you finally trust me now?" But he's also focused on that need; this is more than lust. That we're together in ways no one can take from us again.

"Do you trust you're the only one for me?" he asks.

It's been like this since he told me. An intensity fueling our passion to depths I didn't know possible. Love and pain and truth, and it makes us so real.

"Yes, I trust you," I swear to him; my heart warms with it too. "More than anything."

He rewards me with a kiss that thumps blood to my sex before I demand, "Show me what you do when you come in here thinking about me."

He pulls my hand down the narrow corridor to the small bedroom in the back of his trailer. Opening the nightstand, he takes out a bottle of lube before pushing his underwear to his ankles. It doesn't escape me. How he doesn't hide his scar before he turns around and sits down on the bed.

"I do it like this," he says.

The openness, the desire he shares with me as he pumps lube into his palm before he starts pumping his thickening

cock.

God, he's gorgeous looking up at me, and it's more than trust.

I love him.

I believe in him.

I believe in us, and I strip down and step between his open thighs with my naked body awake to his hungry stare.

"Damn, Cade, this is much better with you *actually* here."

His kiss lands in my cleavage, and we start our own scene. His right fist jerks his cock while his left hand teases my nipple. His mouth sucks my other one, making me weave my hand through his hair and pull him in for more. The intimacy, the lust, the trust I feel watching him, I want it all again with him.

Another first we can share.

"Redix," I sigh as his lips leave my thrilled nipple dripping. "Have all of me. Right now."

He stares up at me, and I can't tell if it's exactly what he wants... or fears.

The hand on his cock stops while both grab my hips, and his lips skim my belly, muttering, "I don't want to hurt you."

I lift his chin.

"You won't hurt me. I want you to. You've given me everything, and I'll give you all of me too." His cock surges, leaking, and is that his answer? "Is it what you want?"

"To fuck your ass?" His middle finger glides between my slick folds. "Hell yes, I want to." His fingers spread my lips open to the cool puff of air he blows over my clit. "*If* I'm the only one who ever will. Promise me, Cade." His warm tongue flicks my sensitive hood after he demands it.

"*Oh fuucckkk,*" I reply to his tease.

And when the lapping of his tongue starts drinking me like I'm a bowl of water and he's a thirsty dog, slurping up my

pussy and shaking my knees, the words tumble out, “Yes, Redix, I promise.”

“Lie down.”

He makes room beside him. I crawl onto the bed and flip over to see him going to his knees at the edge of it.

“I’ll get you so wet and ready”—pulling my legs, he brings my ass to the edge—“*then* you can tell me where you want my fuck.” God, the look on his face, he does want me, all of me, as he pushes my knees open. “Keep them wide like that and let me in.”

Hooking my arms around my knees, I hold my thighs open to him. My sex, body, and heart are splayed open for him, and I want this. I’m so exposed, so ready for him to have all of me.

And he does.

His mouth dives back into my pussy with a hunger that lifts my shoulder blades off the bed. “Goddamn, Redix,” I swear.

Where does he get his appetite for me? I don’t care. I’ll be his goddamn meal for life; he feels so good.

“You’re so fucking sweet for me, aren’t you, Cade?” He sinks two fingers into my syrupy walls. “Just like this.” Sucking my clit, he thrusts and curls his digits inside, and pleasure floods my flesh, my lungs huffing for more.

“Yes.” He’s going to make me come like this, so many times until I’m begging for him. “Redix, please!”

And he does please me. Twice I come with his mouth devoted to my clit, to my pleasure, while his finger teases, then breaches my ass harder for more. It doesn’t end with him. There’s no time, no way I want him to stop.

“Redix, I’m ready.”

“Ready for what?” His finger probes my ass deeper while his eyes lock on mine. A devilish smile is in them while he flicks his tongue across my clit, and I’m on goddamn fire before he asks, “What do you want, Cade?”

Five hundred of him to fuck me now and forever, but I'll take this.

“Fuck my ass.” Even the command frees me.

“You sure?” He presses two fingers inside to prep me while I groan because he loves hearing me say it again.

“Please, Redix.”

Still watching me. Still grinning. Still ramming his fingers in my ass, he sucks my clit again before he taunts again, “Are you sure you want me to fuck this tight little virgin hole too?”

I couldn't be more bold, more desperate. “Fuck my ass *now*, Redix.”

“I'll go slow.” He stands up at the edge of the bed. “Just tell me if you want me to stop or if you want more.”

With everything he's done for me, I'll always want more of him. I grab his thick cock after he covers it in lube. “Let me guide you.”

“Take your time,” he says while his fingertips tease my pussy, keeping my urge for him so my body will permit this.

Gazing up at him, I ease in his tip. The way he's looking down, watching us, I want it too. “More,” I demand the feeling. I want him, and he pushes in. “More.” The pressure, I exhale, trying to soften, to relax, slowly taking him in. “More.”

He's stretching me, his fingertips thrilling my pussy like he knows how while the hard mass of him slowly drives in. Teasing my clit, he mixes the pain with sweet pleasure.

“Is it all for me, Cade?” His eyelids hang heavy, watching what he's claiming. “Am I the only one who'll fuck your ass?”

“Yes, Redix,” I sigh. He's the only one... in every way. “More.”

Suddenly, it shoots to the tips of my ears, scorching across my lungs, the burn of him, the ring he's blazing through inside while he's found the tip of my clit, his wet finger dancing across it. I crave his fire until it ends. Until he's filling me,

body and heart. Gently, he slides two fingers into my pussy too, and there's no reality but him, and I go crazy, keening at the pleasure. His fingers, his hard cock, every part of him cleaves to my walls, and I'm blissed out.

This isn't an act. This is real, and we've always been this way. We always get lost in this paradise together, just us, never wanting to leave. We can survive together here, forever.

He draws back, giving me relief, but I don't want it.

"Are you all mine now?"

"Yes." I can't stand it. "Again, Redix. Please." It's thrashing, the need, the demand in my body while he drives in again. The euphoria in my clit that he's pinching while he does it, "Oh my God," I'm losing my mind.

I open my eyes to find it, and he's looming over me. "Who makes you come, Cade?"

"You." I'm possessed, loving his control, his plunging cock in my ass, and his fingers claiming my pussy. And I don't want this pleasure without him.

"Who kissed you first, who touched you first, who fucked you first?" It's taking him, too, his thrusts quickening. I don't know how much I can take. "Who makes your pussy come? Who's fucking your ass for the first time?"

"You, Redix." But he feels so good. He always has. "Always you."

"I'm yours too." Breath, he can't find it. Me neither. Pleasure, it's the only thing we feel, and I'm going to break for him. Only him.

How is it possible two people can love each other this much? Want each other this much? Survive so much and keep coming back for more?

There are no answers but our truth.

It's the look in his eyes when he swears, "I'm the only one who'll fuck your tight ass, and I swear I'm gonna come so hard when you do." It'll break him, too, the tremors across his flesh matching mine. "Come on, Cade." It's fracturing through

me, his massive cock urging into my ass, his tender fingers teasing my pussy, his heart held in my hand, his thighs shaking with mine. He smacks my clit. “Make us come with my big cock in your ass.”

It’s blinding. The pleasure that takes my body, the release of my spasms, I scream for him. The whole studio can hear me, and I want them to know I’m his while my body seizes, and he falls over the top of me, groaning deep in my ear.

All our love and lust are right here, pulsing through us, and no one can take it away.

He buries his face beside mine while I wrap my fingers through his strands. Kissing my cheek, he chuckles into my flesh. “Goddamn woman, you make my legs weak.”

“I can’t *feel* my legs.” I chuckle, pulling his chin up for my kiss. “I only feel you.”

His nose nuzzles mine. “I don’t want you to leave.”

I dread it too. “I have to.”

“I’m coming home next weekend.”

“You have to work.”

“I have to see you, so I’ll *make* it work.”

“Redix.” I search his eyes. “We’re okay now. We love each other, and we’ll make this work.”

He nods, seeking my kiss again for reassurance and I want to promise infinity to him again. That everything is fixed and we’re healed. But then I hear a distinct ring from the phone in my purse on his table, and I know...

That’s Penny.

That’s not good news.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



“HE’S DOING WHAT?”

This is crazy.

I’m talking to Penny on my phone, throwing clothes in my suitcase, and rushing back home because she says Jameson’s about to go rogue to bust these cases open.

“He found out the liquor store is owned by Gentry Evans too.” Penny sounds equally pissed. “The store where the Parrot T-shirt dude was spotted. So now he’s gonna surveil Gentry’s yacht.” She also sounds worried. Me too. “That’s The Pelican, the rental company, the nail salon, and the liquor store. It’s all a trail to Gentry, and Jameson’s gonna blaze a path to catch him on it.”

“Yeah, well, with how he goes in like a blowtorch in a tissue factory, he’s gonna burn these cases to ash—all eleven of them.”

“Eleven? Girl, you’ve been California-dick-dreaming with Redix Dean. We’re up to ten now unless you forgot.”

No, I didn’t forget.

It's eleven cases if you count Redix.

Because I do.

Glancing over at him, he's sitting on the foot of his bed, texting on his phone to get my charter flight home moved to as-soon-as-fucking-possible.

"You gotta talk some sense into him," Penny insists. "He'll listen to you."

"Why me?"

"You know why. Jameson's in love with you."

"He's not in love with me. He's with Scarlett."

That flicks Redix's eyes up lightning-fast, and I wince.

Fuck, my mouth. It has no patience.

"He's just frustrated." I keep talking to Penny. "We all are. We've been at a stalemate with these cases for over a month, and it's making us all crazy."

"Well, crazy is going after Gentry Evans without backup. I'll cover his ass by day, but I'm not chasing that rich, sick motherfucker across the dark Atlantic. I have a baby to go home to."

"Alright, alright."

See, this is what happens when I take time off and dare to be happy—fucking man-shit hits the fan and ruins it. Story of every woman's life.

"I'll call him."

I wrap up that call to Penny and stop to zip up my suitcase.

"I got you leaving in two hours." Redix looks hurt. "You'll be home before two a.m."

"Thank you. I'm so sorry I gotta leave like this."

I step to the edge of the bed and hug his head to my cleavage. He kisses that spot and then the necklace he gave me.

"This is my job. You get reshoots, and I get real shit."

“Call him.” He doesn’t look at me. “I know you need to.”

I know Redix isn’t thrilled about Jameson. But if I can watch him pseudo fuck another woman, he can deal with my partner who’s lost all patience. I tap the phone in my hand, holding Redix with the other. It’s two rings, and Jameson picks up.

“Hey.” My tone is flat.

“Hey.”

So is Jameson’s. He knows where I am, and he’s pissed about it.

“It’s *our* case. I waited for you. Remember? Daufuskie? You gonna wait for me too?”

The seconds he takes to answer find me pulling away from Redix and walking to stare at the ocean, imagining I’m at Jameson’s desk instead and trying to talk some sense into him.

“I overheard Gentry at The Pelican,” Jameson finally answers. “I was there with Scarlett, and I heard him bragging about how he’s been partying on his yacht. I’m getting your friend Silas to take me out to follow him.”

“So you went behind my back and called Silas too?”

My blood is starting to boil.

“If I avoided every man in love with you, Bryant, none of us would be left to work.”

“Goddamnit, Jameson.”

“What, Bryant?”

“Do I gotta call you off like an attack dog? You go after Gentry without me, with just you and a civilian, and you’re gonna shit this up. I know that water. You’re from Boston. You don’t. I grew up with that man. You didn’t. I’ve dealt with him before. You haven’t.”

“Well, you’re not here doing *your* job. I am.”

That hurt. Spinning my head and bruising my heart.

“Don’t you dare.” I can barely speak.

Because he has no idea. This is more than my job. This is my deal. My past. My pain. The love of my life, Redix, and my revenge.

Something touches my shoulder. It's Redix standing behind me, but I can't face him as tears drop down my cheeks.

How did I get here?

Where two men like me. One man loves me. And two others I want to kill. All because I don't want anyone else hurt because of me.

"I'm sorry, Bryant," Jameson speaks through my stunned silence. "You're the best fucking detective, and I'm sorry. I'm just frustrated."

"I care about my job." It's all I can exhale. "Too much."

"I know you do." Jameson tries soothing more. "I'll wait until tomorrow night, and we'll go out then."

"Copy."

I end the call.

"That's a lot of passion for just a colleague."

Redix's tone isn't mad. It's right. It's worried.

"There's a lot of unsolved cases."

"Cases that involve Gentry and TJ?"

"I can't prove it yet." I turn around and bury my head in his chest, wiping my tears on his T-shirt. "But I'll die trying to."

"Don't." His hug is too tight, and I need it. "They're not worth it."

"No, they're not. But their victims are. They're worth the whole fight."

And I don't say it. But I know the truth now.

All of it...

After what they did to Redix? To those women?

They're worth more than a fight.

They're worth murder.

CHAPTER FORTY



She Was Out In the Water by One Little Plane

THIS SHOULDN'T BE AWKWARD AS HELL... BUT IT IS.

It's midnight, and I'm on a boat in the middle of the Calibogue Sound with two men.

One who's so mad at me that I never gave him a chance; you can take a chainsaw to the tension between us.

The other is so sweet to me, hoping I'll give him one; he's as tempting as dessert on a diet.

But I love Redix. That truth hangs heavy in the humid air.

An hour before, Jameson met me at Harbour Towne with a Po' Boy sandwich, trying to make up for his insult, and it worked. I don't want to be mad at him. We need to click to work.

Silas was kind too. He packed a cooler with two gallons of Arnold Palmers—sweet tea and lemonade.

"I'm no cop," he said, pouring me a cup before we headed out, "but I know we gotta stay sober and caffeinated for this."

The August night on the water is calm. The quarter moon gives us some cover while Silas's marine radar lights up with all the boats anchored along the sound on a summer weekend.

"Where do we start?" Silas asks.

"Let's head out to open water." Jameson stands portside, looking through night vision binoculars.

"That's not Gentry's style." I sit beside Silas, who's kicked back in his captain's chair. "He likes his Lowcountry too much. I know his favorite spot."

"Was that intel you planned on keeping to yourself?" Jameson's still pulling his jealous boxers out of a wad.

"No," I answer calmly. "I'm sharing it now."

"Where to, Sergeant?" Silas smiles my way.

And I like him. It's like his gorgeous feathers can't be ruffled.

"Savage Island, down Bull Creek. That used to be one of his favorite spots."

Silas eases the throttle down. "Dare I ask how you know?" He keeps smiling at me while we go slow enough to talk quietly and not draw attention.

"Because he never stopped asking me to go there with him when we were teens."

The island's name is befitting. It's now private, but it used to be a plantation. Gentry used to go on about how his family was gonna buy it and say to me, "Come with me and let's go savage, Cade."

His sick joke used to roll my eyes. They never did buy it, and I never went.

Silas swishes us through the water with no lights on. Jameson was smart to call on his help. Only my dad knows these creeks off the sound that lead to the ocean better. But I've scoped them myself, noting secret spots where no watercraft glide by.

We slow as we make another hairpin turn through the marsh grass.

“They’re gonna see our boat on the radar if they’re looking,” Silas quietly warns. “Just like I can see theirs. That’s gotta be it.”

He points to a red blip on the radar. It’s not moving and anchored up the creek offshore of the island.

“They don’t know you or this boat.” I crouch down low. “That’s our advantage.”

Silas maneuvers us into a spot down the creek from the yacht. He kills the engine and drops anchor. Grabbing his rod, he keeps the ruse going like he’s night fishing while Jameson and I stay low, scoping through our night vision binoculars.

We can see in clear green Gentry on the deck of his yacht. He’s with a woman who’s not his wife. It’s the Office Manager from his rental company. I’d recognize her blonde hair bun and huge rack anywhere.

“Well, Mr. Family Values sure likes his wine and other women,” I mutter, watching them sip glasses. “Typical.”

“I see movement in the galley,” Jameson reports. “Looks like one, maybe two others onboard.”

I’m praying for a miracle—like Cam Le, the missing woman—to emerge and seal this guilty case shut.

“It’s TJ,” I report, knowing his white visor from a football field away. “And look... motherfucker is wearing a parrot T-shirt.”

“I’m getting the video now.” Jameson’s using his binoculars to record while I roam my scope across the vessel, checking for more movement.

Nothing.

I move back to our suspects and grin. “Looks like it’s a party for three now.”

Gentry’s office manager has a great pair of tits she’s pulling out of her bikini top for both men to enjoy. TJ’s

sucking on one while Gentry's on the other, and Jameson clears his throat.

"Enjoying the show?" I need to crack the ice between us.

"What's the show?" Silas asks, keeping his voice low and casting his line.

"We got two men sharing tit duty," I answer. This would almost be fun if it weren't for these two sick fucks. "And oh, wait... she's going *down*."

The woman drops to her knees before them while they drop their zippers. I want to gag, but she's got that job right now.

"They *are* close friends," Jameson mutters. "They're sharing her."

"It looks consensual," I say. "Why, I don't know, because I'd rather suck a sewer line than those two cocks."

Silas snorts, Jameson chuckles, and "*Hooolllyyy shhhittt*," I huff.

I can't believe my eyes.

"What?" Silas is desperate to be in the know.

"Gentry's going down too... on TJ. Holy fucking shit, I never knew this about them."

The sight blows my mind while I watch Gentry and this woman blow TJ.

"Didn't they go to high school together?" Jameson asks, scoping the sight too.

"Yes." Pieces move, changing the picture I've had in my mind for so long. "I knew they were close. Now I know why."

"You think TJ's been blackmailing Gentry over this?"

They're moving. Gentry's standing up and kissing TJ while he drops his shorts. They're madras, I can't see it, but I know it.

I'm in shock. "Gay, bisexual, I'm totally cool with it. But this?" TJ bends Gentry over the captain's chair and starts

fucking him while his lady friend offers her tits to his mouth. “I can’t tell if this is sex or love, but they’ve been doing this for a while, that’s for sure.”

I drop my binoculars, letting the logic seep in.

“I always thought Gentry was in charge, like he kept TJ loyal with money and got him to do his bidding.”

“It’s looking like TJ’s *very* in charge to me.” Jameson’s still watching them.

“That don’t mean anything,” Silas says. “Top or bottom in sex doesn’t translate into life, business... or crime.”

“That’s true.” I don’t ask how Silas knows that, but he’s right. “All this time, I thought Gentry controlled TJ with his power and money. But now they’re secretly a couple? And TJ’s wearing that parrot T-shirt too?”

“You think TJ’s the ringleader?” Jameson asks. “And he’s using Gentry for access to victims?”

My mind draws their evil design. How Gentry uses his rental company and that woman, the Office Manager, to find the tourists, the young women renting his condos. Then he tracks their movements across every business he owns on the island, using cameras to find the targets.

Inevitably, some end up at The Pelican, where Derek Baucom, the bar manager, steps in. Using the drugs, the GHB in liquid form that TJ supplies, they pour it into the victim’s drink, and TJ works the floor, scooping up the victim off camera.

Where is Gentry this whole time? Waiting outside in one of a dozen cars he owns. Where do they go? Any one of the hundreds of condos Gentry owns.

And the wicked dicks know me and how our small island runs; if they wait until the night before check-out, it makes our job hard. We don’t get the time we need to form a rock-solid case with the victim.

The worst part?

The victims—they all look like me at eighteen. Like that night when I wore Pamela's yellow dress, and they couldn't get me, so they went after Redix instead.

"I don't give a fuck who the ringleader is." I twirl the infinity necklace Redix gave me. "They're both guilty and going down."

A sudden pang—it nails my heart thinking about Redix.

How he told me to drop it.

Yes, he'd want me to get justice for the victims. But revenge? That would betray Redix and the peace he wants now.

But what about the victims? The ones who look like me. What if there are more? What if the law can't catch these men?

And what about me? What do I want?

If I can't have justice, do I want love or revenge?

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



REDIX

Here Comes The Night by DJ Snake, Mr Hudson

DEAR CANDY CADE,

I still smell you on my sheets.

You left Lemonheads on my kitchen island. I finished them with a smile, thinking of you, but I left the box there like a Candy Cade centerpiece.

You forgot your hairbrush in my bathroom. It smells like lavender.

I found your “Woman Up” T-shirt and smiley-face panties in my dryer.

Ok, Detective. I confess. I might’ve humped the pillow you slept on while holding your panties in my hand.

Yep, I’m guilty as hell, and please, cuff me. (We’re doing that next time I see you, I swear).

Because I can’t stop thinking about you.

Because I miss you.

Because I love you.

You've been gone two weeks, and I couldn't fly home, which sucks. I've been stuck here. I have great days thinking about you and horrible nightmares with you gone.

It's like telling you unleashed something in me.

It was good for us because you wanted to know, and now we're together.

But for me?

It's haunting me even more.

It's that tattoo.

The one of that mudflap girl.

It keeps flashing by the side of my face. It's covered in sand. And then I scream out. The pain, my body remembers it. It's a razor flame ripping my skin open. That's when they cut me, I think.

The tattoo guy was holding me down and laughing. I remember that now. And your necklace, it was swinging from his neck.

Then I wake up, and I'm covered in sweat, but I reach over and hug your pillow, and I can survive another night.

I swear, Cade.

Only you make it okay.

You're the only reason I believe in love.

Like I love my mom and sister. And my nephew, I love him so much. My favorite is building LEGOs with him.

BTW. Don't freak out. But I want to marry you and have a mess of kids together. You're a softie around babies. And to have one with you? Wow. My heart just jumped.

We've got a ways to go, but it's all I want.

It's the only thing I'm living for.

But for now, I gotta go to Atlanta.

Warning: this psycho-thriller film is gonna be a shitshow.

The cast did table reads this week before we shoot on location, and Angie was in rare form. She's playing a housewife obsessed with me, her sister's boyfriend and I swear she's gonna win the fucking Oscar.

Because Angie is obsessed with me.

I can't tell you because I know you'd snatch her bald if you knew.

She's throwing a hissy fit over our ice cream video. That shit went viral, and Angie went ballistic. "I guess you're Instagram official now," she said, all jealous-like.

Fuck, it's pathetic.

I don't need a fucking post to tell the world I love you. That I always have. And I know you hate that shallow shit too.

But now I gotta spend three months with Angie wanting to tan my hide. No, fuck my hide, more accurately, but I can ignore her.

Because I'm gonna see you as much as I can. I've got a week in Atlanta next with pre-production bullshit... and then I'm coming home.

Luca, my friend who owns the golf resort, remember? He's putting on a charity golf tournament. We're going to build another Teen Crisis Center.

I want one in Charleston next.

Luca cares about kids because he's a dad. He's got the cutest little girl, and he's a widower and raising her by himself.

And now you know why I do those centers.

If I'd had a safe place, I could've gone ten years ago. Like where counselors talked to me, maybe I wouldn't have left you to find a fucking bottle in my hand for the next nine years.

But I'm okay.

You're my safe place now. You always have been. When I hold you, I don't hurt. You're my world and all I want.

It makes me wonder what you're doing now. It's two here, five there.

Are you home from work? Did you get my gift yet? I sent it special delivery. It should be waiting by your door.

I want to see you open it and smile.

I'll FaceTime you now.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



MY PHONE VIBRATES ON THE COCKTAIL TABLE. I GLANCE down. It's Redix trying to video call.

"Romeo is ringing." Penny sees it too. "Millions of women would answer that call."

I text him.

Still at work

Gimme a couple hours?

His reply is fast.

REDIX

Any time for you, Candy Cade

"Girl, you got him wrapped." Penny sucks down her Sprite before declaring, "That video of your ice cream kiss is all the evidence required. It's so hot, and I gotta say, sweet as fuck."

Our ice cream kiss went viral, and people glance at me now. It's why I can't go undercover. Between being five foot

ten and the woman Redix Dean loves bound in leather or covered in ice cream, I'm as obvious as an airhorn blasting through a funeral service.

Fuck it. Our love is worth it.

This is worth it, too—watching Derek Baucom, who knows we're watching him work. I wanna see what he'll do. Because guilty men always crack. You just gotta step on their nerves hard enough until they do.

“Yes, and everyone can know,” I answer Penny, “we're back together, and yes, it's for good.”

“What exactly will that look like?” she asks. “A sergeant dating a celebrity? The hottest one, in fact, with a wild past?”

“He had his reasons.” Flashes of that scar on his buttock hit my mind like ice water, shooting guilt through my veins. “And he's not wild anymore.”

“If you say so.” Penny's eyes go back to Derek behind the bar. “If Redix Dean has changed and makes you happy, then I'm his biggest fan.”

Suddenly, Derek glances up at me and grins; then he goes back to grabbing bottles from the well and pouring concoctions at lightning speed.

“What's his deal?” Penny sees it too. How every spare glance from that man is on me. “Do you know him?”

“No.” Fuck, do I? I don't break my stare. “But I know his sick cousin, Gentry, and their putrid pal, TJ.”

The thought of those three men working together; I'm obsessed.

“We got traces of GHB on Kayla's yellow dress.” Penny lowers her voice. “We got TJ spotted in the parrot T-shirt Natalie remembers. And we got Derek on Instagram in a striped shirt also seen by a victim.” Penny throws her tattered straw on the table. “And none of that is the evidence we need. It's all circumstantial dots on a map with no connection.”

“Give it time.” I think of those evil men. Of ten years ago. Of Redix. “It'll surprise you what it can do.”

An hour later, Derek looks like he's clocking off before the dinner shift.

Penny pays our tab while I go out to a car I've rented this week. From the passenger seat, I put on a white T-shirt and a baseball hat with long blonde hair extensions sewn in. Sunglasses too. I've got three disguises, and this is my favorite.

Keeping my nose down on my phone, I text Penny I'll do the tail of Derek home. Tomorrow, we watch TJ again.

Minutes later, Derek's truck roars to life in the parking lot. I let him turn onto the highway before pulling out behind him. I stay far back, expecting him to take his usual route home through the busy traffic circle, but he doesn't.

Surprising me, he turns right, and I have to react on a dime, switching lanes to follow. Winding through residential side streets, he parks in front of a group of townhomes. They're off a golf course and often rented for tournaments.

This is new.

I stop a block away and watch him amble up to the front door, press in a code, and enter. Then nothing. For two hours. He's in for the night but why this new place? I'll be back tomorrow while he's at work to check through the dumpster and snoop around.

Until then, I drive by, using my periphery to note the unit number when I grin, spotting what's on the door of the condo next door to the one he entered.

A doorbell camera.

Thank you, technology and paranoid people. Many criminals forget about those little gadgets.

I don't. I memorize the condo number with the camera and call Jameson hands-free.

"Hey." He sounds bummed.

"Hey, did I interrupt a hot date?"

“Nope. She moved to Atlanta. Took the job there with that security company, so I’m nursing a beer alone.”

Scarlett took that job with HGR Security? I don’t blame her. They were stroking a huge check to recruit her. Women in private security are rare and highly valued. Sometimes I’m tempted to do it too.

“I need you to run a search on Palmetto Bluff, unit number 1803. Find the owner.” If I give Jameson a lead, he’ll perk up. “They have a doorbell camera, and I want the footage. Derek Baucom just went inside, next door to it.”

“On it.”

“Penny and I are on TJ tomorrow. You?”

“I got Gentry at the golf course. That man might as well hold office there, not at the capital.”

“They all do—putters, pricks, and politics—this country runs on it.”

I end our call and work my way home. Shaking the day off with a deep exhale, I focus on calling Redix when I get there. Throwing myself into work helps for hours, but when I get home, there’s a hollow silence that matches the one in my heart.

I miss him.

A box by my front door lifts my lips when I see it’s from him. I wait until I change and sit on my balcony lounge with it on my lap to start our video call.

“You stalking me again?”

His handsome face fills the screen with his pool behind him.

“How the hell am I supposed to date you long distance and not be able to send gifts?” He swigs a seltzer. “Packages aren’t stalking, are they?”

“Legally?” I start opening it. “No.”

“Well, damn darlin’, I wanted to break the law for you.”

“That’s my job.” *I’m not joking.*

“How was your day, Detective?”

“Not as exciting as yours.”

“Come on. Thrill me with your boring details.”

I tell him how we’re watching a bartender, but I don’t bring up TJ or Gentry. They’ve stolen so much from us; they aren’t taking these simple joys too.

Redix won’t stop smiling through my mundane story. “Do I ever tell you how proud I am of you?”

“Every day.” One of the many things I love about him. He trusts that I’m good at this. Too damn good, actually. “I’m proud of you too.”

“You’re gonna be real proud when you open your gift. Set your phone down so I can watch.”

I prop my phone up against a candle on the table beside the lounge. “You gonna give me a hint?”

“It doesn’t require one.”

I glance at my phone; guilt drips from his grin. The bubble-wrapped bundle inside has me certain. Yep, I open it and laugh at the blue ceramic dildo.

“It’s huge.”

“We miss you.” Lust hums in his voice. “Do you miss us?”

“Yes.” Kissing my phone isn’t desperate, right? “Don’t let it go to your pretty head.”

“Too late.” Lying back on his lounge, he holds his phone like I’m on top of him. I can’t resist his request at that angle, “Will you show me how much you miss me?”

“Right here on my balcony?”

It’s dusk, but yards away, the summer beach below is still full of people.

“Even better.” He moves his phone to track his other hand. It rips open the Velcro of his board shorts, revealing the real,

hard thing, and it's torture, seeing what you need to survive like water... but it's only a screen.

“Let them see how much you miss me.”

“It's not fair.” I lift my sundress. “Anyone looking up here can see me, but you have full privacy there.”

It thumps through my blood. The risk up here. A warm breeze across my bare thighs. My arousal puddling for him. How he's watching me...

The size of this thing.

“Press record on this call to make it even,” he says. “This can leak, or you can sell it. I don't care. I'm proud of how much I want you.”

Pushing his trunks down, he kicks them off as his nudity fills my screen, surging my body with heat. He's a goddamn painting, a Renaissance of porn waiting to perform.

I press record because I *will* repeat this ritual many times.

He grins. “You need to get it wet first.”

“If I put this in my mouth, teeth will crack.”

I lick it instead, and he groans at the sight. “Fuck, I miss you.” His palm skims up and down his shaft, lying heavy on his abs, and it's so fucking hot I don't need much spit.

This vision of him wets me, making me bold because I need something. And if it's not his real cock pounding me into bliss, I'll try this one.

Pulling my panties off, I do the same to my dress before pulling the lace cups down on my bra, exposing my breasts for our pleasure.

“Goddamn,” he sighs, “play with them like I do. Lick your fingertips and pull at your nipples.”

This is how we'll do this; he can direct my body thousands of miles away, and I won't fight it because I can't. He tells me how to play with myself, directing my fingers to thrill my flesh.

“Tickle your clit like I do. Lightly with your fingers. That’s right. Now use your middle finger...”

The sound of his voice, the ocean waves, and beachgoers fill my ears, and I’m so fucking turned on.

“Are you wet for me?”

“Yes.” I can’t take my eyes off him.

“Finger your pussy. Is it ready for me?”

It’s soaked and aching. “Yes.” It almost hurts without him.

“Then show me.” The pump of his fist over his cock is rhythmic, pacing himself for my show. “Fuck my dildo for me.”

I turn on my lounge. It has no arms, so I can spread open for my phone propped up on the table, and he can watch it all. Leaning back and grabbing the chair behind me, I use my free hand to wedge the fat tip inside. It’s cool, hard, and slick and teasing me; I want him so much.

“Like this?” I ask, easing it in. It’s his proportions, stretching me, thrilling me. “Is this what you want, Redix? You want to watch me fuck this for you?”

“Yes.” His eyes fill with hunger. Pre-cum drips from his tip as he spits into his palm before stroking his gorgeous shaft and lifting his hips into his tight grip. “Fuck yourself until you come on it, Cade. Do it so fucking loud and moaning my name.”

Oh, I will.

It’s a new sensation. It doesn’t bend or buzz like my toys, and it doesn’t fill me, not like the manic response my pussy gives to Redix’s real cock inside.

But this is so hard, rigid, and big... and this is so hot. With my bare feet on my balcony, I lift my hips, spreading wide and opening myself up to this pounding display for him, for my phone.

“Can anyone see you?” He’s enthralled; his horny eyes are glued to his screen and my sinful show. “Is anyone watching

how dirty you get for me?”

I glance over the edge of my balcony and sigh. There’s a man—a jogger with no shirt on, sweaty, and standing alone. He’s hot, and the bulge in his shorts is obvious as he’s watching me, knowing what I’m doing though he can’t see the whole show.

That’s only for Redix.

“Yes. A man can see me.” I feel it from the peaks of my nipples to my clit, shrieking with pleasure. “He’s hard and watching me fuck for you.”

“Let me see how wet it’s making you. Show me my toy.”

I pull it out and lift it to the screen, close enough for him and the man below to see. The giant phallus glistens with my arousal on it.

“Now, Cade. Fuck it now and come because I’m going to.” He is. I can tell by the pump of his hips into his fist, his cock swelling to bigger than his replica. “Fuck it so hard for me.”

The video records him jerking off for me, his eyes captivated by the sight of me as I go for it. As hard and fast as possible, I wish it was him, the real him touching my flesh, taking my body, and sharing my life. Fuck, I want him so much, and this force inside me isn’t enough. It’s getting so slick and slippery with need.

“Yes, Cade.” He’s matching my tempo, dancing on his edge too.

“Oh God, Redix, I…”

Drop the dildo on the concrete balcony. Blue ceramic breaks in half with a loud crash between my feet.

His eyes go wide. “Did you just break my dick?”

I can’t answer. It happens too fast. I go from almost coming to laughing my ass off, and he joins me.

“Damn, woman.” He’s rolling on his lounge, tears wetting the corner of his eyes. “Leave it to you to fuck me so hard you *break—my—dick.*”

“Here’s a fat tip.” I pick up the half that was his dildo’s head. “Put a handle on it next time.”

That starts another round of laughter, and I swear my stomach hurts, and I love it. Glancing over, my audience of one is gone, and I lie back on the lounger to recover. Redix is so cute, hiding his laughing face behind his arm.

“I miss you.” It’s a sigh, a painful one, because it speaks from every part of me.

He rolls to his side, holding his phone like we’re sharing a pillow in bed. “I miss you too.”

“Can you give up Hollywood, and we’ll run an ice cream shop together?”

“Yes.” Something in his eyes; he’s only half kidding.

I ask about his day, and he tells me about table reads and how he spent the afternoon finishing his last pottery plate.

“Can I send them to you?”

“All the pretty bowls and plates you made? They’re for your house.”

“I’d rather you think of me every time you eat frozen pizza.”

“I think of you all the time.” And the feeling returns. The one where I need him, but he’s not here. I let my fingers wander down to finish what we started. I let him watch me too. “Redix, get here.”

“I will. I promise.” He’s starting again, too; the urge in his eyes matches mine. “Real soon.”

It doesn’t take me long. Not while I’m watching him. I’m right back to where I was in minutes, gasping and crying out for what I can’t feel right now. For what I’ve wanted for so long, and now I have it... but he’s not here.

“Redix, please,” I beg from my cliff, falling for this man every time. It isn’t about pride when there’s this much love. “I need you.” I’m so close, and so is he; the muscles in his abs and bicep are tensing up to my climax. “I need you...”

And it bursts. I show him my love, my lust, how it flows from me. It's all for him.

“Fuck, Cade.”

He can see it, watching my little river over the chair before he's coming too, his creamy ropes spilling across his tan abs while his back arches into his grasp, but his eyes never leave mine.

With him gone, it's a new void I can't stand. “When will I see you?” It hurts.

He pulls the phone down to his face like he's pulling me near.

“Next weekend. I've got us a suite at the golf resort. I'm gonna spoil you again. Every fucking chance I can, okay?”

“Okay.”

It scares me. How much I feel for him again. I didn't realize how numb I'd become to it before this.

Redix talks about how alcohol and drugs numbed his pain all these years of missing me. Me too. My heart, it froze. All I cared about was revenge. Was training for a fight. Was planning a perfect cover. I didn't feel the pain.

But I do now. With one ice cream kiss, he melted me again.

“Hey, Magnolia Cade?”

I hate that name. “Yes?” Still, I answer him.

“I love you.” The screen stays over his face. He's not acting. I can see it in his eyes. “I'll always come back for you, I promise.”

“I love you too. No matter where you are, I always will.”

But our love. It wasn't enough these past ten years to beat our pain.

Is it now?

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



IF THIS IS SPOILING, THEN LET ME DIE ROTTEN.

The bed linens under me are the softest I've ever felt. Our resort's personal butler delivered the best ice cream sundae to our suite's door, and this time *I* devoured Redix like a treat.

There's the shower we took in the luxury spa bathroom after. It was almost as indulgent as the in-room couples' massage he scheduled next.

There's the Marchesa dress bag hanging in the closet where Redix is hiding my surprise outfit for dinner tonight.

Then there's the small gift box on the desk in our suite.

And... *there's him.*

He's staring into my eyes from the pillow beside me. I know what he's doing. He's giving me every gesture, big and small, to make up for what we suffered apart. It's working. Not because of his gifts. It's because I feel whole again. Because he's my present, past, and future.

"Do you have to bring that thing with you everywhere?"

He plays with my hair, asking about my police radio charging by our hotel bed.

“I’m on-call.” I play with his hair, too, twirling his strands around my index finger. “I’m yours as long as hell doesn’t break loose.”

“Will you take it to dinner too? I got a special one planned. Me and you. Luca and his daughter. It’s her fourth birthday, and we want to spoil our ladies.”

“It stays in my bag, I promise.” My fingertip lingers down his nose. “And you don’t have to spoil me anymore today.”

“Alright then.” His grin almost works. “Get up and iron my shirt, woman.”

“Uh-huh. I’ll get right on that.” Did I mention lying beside him? It’s luxury too. “How’s Atlanta?”

“I’d be an asshole to complain about the Presidential Suite at the Waldorf.”

“Swanky.”

“It is. I put a guest fob in your purse. Come see me anytime.” His eyebrows dance. “It has lots of windows and a dining room table just waiting for us.”

I linger my fingertips down his abs next, “That’s a tempting invitation,” seeking what’s below.

“Save that.” Gently, he stops my hand. “I got more plans tonight.”

“Speaking of plans.” It’s been on my mind for weeks. “Eric told me about yours, for your house and estate. Why didn’t *you* tell me?”

“I was going to, but I didn’t want to ruin our perfect days with the worst part of my life”—his thumb tickles my hand—“and I’m ready for something new with you.”

I’m finally brave enough to ask. “How bad was it? Your drinking?”

“Well, I had beer and eggs for breakfast. Beer and steak for lunch. That kept me steady for work until it was time to clock

off, and then I'd ride a river of vodka or whiskey into hours I don't remember. That's where Eric came in. I've tried to, but I can't pay that man enough for keeping me alive."

"How'd you stay so fit?"

"Genetics and hours in a gym can hide a lot of pain. All my dad gave me before he bailed on us was the high-functioning alcoholic gene."

"Do you worry you'll lapse again?"

"It ain't sobriety if you ain't humble. I decide every day, sometimes every hour, not to drink."

"It's my fault. Your drinking. It started after—"

"Hey." His finger lifts my chin, his eyes swearing it to mine. "It is NOT your fault. I was drinking and getting high long before that night. You know that. I wasn't comfortable in this skin. Too many people looking at me all the time. Fucking King of Coligny Beach or Hollywood's Romeo. I hate that shit. People always after me. It's taken me years to learn to live with it."

"I know the feeling."

It's a horrible one. People always want something from you when you're cursed with DNA many deem attractive. Yes, there are many far worse things to suffer. But no one is immune—even the pretty pay.

"That's why you're my one gift," he says. "You see the real me."

"I see the boy who made me playlists and Kraft macaroni and cheese. What do you see in me?"

That makes him grin. "I see the girl who put Hello Kitty Band-Aids on my scabs." I laugh. I forgot about that. "I see a woman who holds my hands, and they don't shake." That hits my heart. "You always took away my pain, Candy Cade."

"You always protected me from it."

We don't say it. Our eyes speak the memory.

“I still want to protect you.” The way he lingers his fingertips across my cheek. “I’ll give you everything I have.”

“I don’t need *everything*.” The bow of his lip beckons me to trace it. “Just my favorite parts.”

“Oh, you’ll get that too.” It’s sudden, his roll, landing on top so he can gaze down at me. “You get my house, my millions; you’ll take care of my family... and every part of me.” He starts nudging in, hard.

I spread my thighs. “I thought we were saving this.”

“With you”—it’s my favorite slow sigh as he enters—“I’ll keep giving you everything.”



THE SPOILING CONTINUES TO DINNER. I look like Redix’s Oscar date in the gown he bought me. The nude fabric with red silk rose embellishments clings from my right shoulder and sweeps to the floor.

He even dresses up. That means he wears a shirt under his tux. And shoes. It’s only appropriate as our four-year-old guest of honor steals the show.

“Gia,” her dad softly instructs, “what do you say for your birthday present?”

Gia’s dad, Luca Mercier, has got to be the sexiest CEO on the planet. Like, literally, he is because Redix told me earlier how paparazzi are after him now that he’s the most eligible billionaire. It’s not a hunch. It’s a fact—hot, single dads with billions are global catnip.

Luca’s daughter jumps down from his lap, her brown curls springing with her fearless bounce. It’s like she owns this resort—well, she sorta does as she strides over to Redix, puckering her lips up for his cheek.

“Thank you for my shark, Red.”

It’s cute how she shortens his name to suit her.

Redix bought her a yellow stuffed shark. Apparently, they're all the rage for kids.

"You're welcome, princess." He takes her peck on his cheek.

"Redix and I got close," Luca explains, "when we met on the golf course recovering from our darkest days. He'd come to stay with us and let my little angel brighten them." His eyes light up, talking about his daughter. "Looks like you brighten his now."

When Luca smiles my way, there's warmth in his eyes. I'd wish the same for him, to have love again, but maybe it's too soon. Redix told me how Luca's wife passed away two years ago. And I can see how Gia makes Redix smile. I've never seen him so tender, maybe with his nephew, but this bursts my ovaries.

Maybe one day, we will...

"Thank you." Gia turns to me. I can tell she forgot my name, but that's okay.

"You're welcome."

"You look like a princess." Her small hands play with the roses on my dress.

"I tell you what, you be the princess, and I'll be your friend, okay?"

Without hesitation, the little girl climbs into my lap, and every thread of me unravels to her embrace.

"She, uh..." Luca stammers to explain. "She needs a..." and he stops when I smile.

I understand. Gia needs a mom, so I let her sit in my lap and play with the roses on my dress because I can only imagine how I'd miss my mama too.

The feelings, the wishes I start making as Redix holds my hand later while we walk back to our suite—I never dreamed this far ahead. I lost them to a nightmare and never thought I'd get them back.

“I know what you’re thinking, Candy Cade.”

He beeps open our door but won’t let go of my hand. I don’t answer while we let it close behind us. It’s gentle, his light grip on my neck, pulling my lips towards his, saying, “I wish it too.”

His kiss claims my lips while he unzips my gown, and my resistance falls to the floor.

I didn’t know this was possible again. The butterflies in my belly, the flutter of my heart, the tears he brings to my eyes, making love to me so slow, so perfect. We can’t capture it in our hands, though we try holding on to the love between us. My hand caresses his scar while he’s deep inside me because I can.

I will love away our pain. I will stand in our fire and burn it down to find what’s new, what we can build with nothing but this love, our promise—infinity.

“Cade.” He clasps my hands in his over my head. “I want it.” He’s holding my gaze, holding every part of me—heart, body, and future. “I want all of it with you.”

The race of our hearts, the way his body takes mine into the softest moans, he has me.

“I am,” I promise to his breath lingering over mine. “I *am* with you.”

It’s the happiest I’ve been, closing my eyes in his arms minutes later.

“You didn’t open your last present,” he whispers in my ear.

I see the small gift on the desk in the moonlight through the curtains. It’s not a ring box. “This is my gift.” I kiss his hands in mine.

“So is the car I bought you.”

“What?” I roll over to find him grinning. “I don’t need a new car.”

“Yeah, you do. It’s a fresh start for us. Your car goes back too far.”

He's right. My car makes me think of that year. The last one we were together.

"Redix, I don't need you buying me things. I've loved you since you were riding an old, red Schwinn bike."

"That's why those are keys to a new, blue Land Rover."

It doesn't stop. He's overwhelming me with everything perfect. Perfect days in Malibu. Perfect nights here. Perfect gifts. Perfect sex with the perfect man.

All this love. "I don't know what to say." All this hope.

"Well, damn darlin'... that only took twenty years." I can see his grin, his kiss searching for mine in the moonlight. "I finally got that sexy mouth of yours to shut up."

Only he can say that in the cutest way.

Especially when his lips are on mine, and then his body, and then finally, an hour later, when he's sleeping beside me.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



IT SPLINTERS THROUGH THE PEACEFUL DAWN, THROUGH MY dream about a tiny hand in mine.

“Possible ten-ninety-five. Heritage Hotel. White female. Unresponsive. Medic en route.”

It’s instant. Dropping my feet to the floor, I answer my radio, “Bryant. One-forty. I’m en route.”

In a whirling snatch, I throw my uniform on from my suitcase. That hotel is around the harbor from this resort. I’m minutes out.

“You gotta go?” Redix isn’t mad. He’s barely waking up.

“Yep.” I rake my hair back.

“When will you be back?”

“No telling.” I snap on my duty belt and grab my backpack. “I’ll keep you posted.”

“Hey.” His voice can summon me anywhere.

“Hey.” I walk to the edge of the bed, grabbing the hand he’s holding out to pull me down to his kiss.

“Go get those motherfuckers.”

My lips caress his before it charges through me, confessing, “That’s the deal.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” I let go of his hand and turn towards the door. “Have fun at golf. Raise some millions.”

“Oh, I will, *Candy Cade*.”

He annoys me... and that makes me smile while the door slams shut behind me.

The quiet morning street whizzes by while I race my unmarked car to the other hotel. I see her standing in front, the hotel manager waiting for me as I park by the entrance. I beat Jameson here for the first time as the ambulance wails into the parking lot behind me.

Showing my badge, the manager informs me while we cover ground fast, “I found her in the hallway outside her room. She won’t wake up.” She leads the way, running up a flight of stairs to the second floor.

“What’s her name?”

“She’s checked in under ‘Sarah Matthews.’”

I see her on the floor. Rushing toward her, I don’t see any trauma. But I see the M.O. Brunette. Yellow shorts. Young. Pretty.

Bile burns up my throat.

“Sarah?” I can’t touch her without the latex gloves I snap on from the pocket of my cargo pants. “Sarah, can you wake up for me? You’re safe.”

I squat, checking her pulse. It’s there but low. The elevator dings. That’s the medics coming up.

“Who checked in with her?” I rise, asking the manager and reaching for my gun while I take the keycard she’s offering.

“No one. But I can check our cameras, the tapes from last night.”

I nod, but I'm focused on the now.

Who's in this room?

I don't have backup yet, but I'm sick of waiting. With a beep, I slam the handle and kick the door open; gun raised and ready to fire.

It hits me fast—the stench of cigarette smoke.

I glance left to the bathroom. The door is open, and in the mirror above the vanity, the curtain is pulled back from the shower.

It's clear.

Aiming my weapon, I step through the foyer. It's a fatal funnel, anyone could fire on me here, but I don't care.

Someone was in here minutes ago.

The room opens to a king bed, unmade, in the center. Gun up, sight ready, I check the other side of the bed. No one. No cigarette butts. Just an empty room, Sarah's luggage on the dresser and a window, its curtains open to the morning light.

I kick the burgundy bedspread draped over the floor aside, and hope rushes in—two vials peek out from under the bed, like they rolled there, unseen and forgotten.

Minutes later, while I'm with the medics in the hallway loading Sarah onto the gurney, Jameson comes running down the hall.

“What do we got?” His eyes scan the scene.

I don't need to explain except I tell him the good news. “We got this.” I lead him into the room and point to the floor. We're waiting for forensics to take pictures, but I'm elated to show him the evidence left behind.

One vial on the floor.

He nods, encouraged.

I grin back.

The other vial? It's in my pocket. And part of my deal.

It's after two o'clock before Sarah wakes at the hospital. Whatever he drugged her with, it was potent. In that time, I learn she's from Miami. She's here with her boss for Redix's golf tournament.

I texted Redix earlier to keep him posted. He texted back once with a quick:

REDIX

I love it when you kick ass, Candy Cade

I don't hear from him the rest of the afternoon and I understand. We're busy.

When her boss storms into the Emergency Room, his face is red with anger and sunburn from the golf course.

"Is she okay?" He glances at Sarah resting behind the curtain. "Shit, she's like a daughter to me."

I can tell he really does care.

"She will be. Was she with you last night?"

"Yeah. We were with a tournament group at The Deck Bar. It got late. She told me she was tired and going back to her room. That's the last I saw her."

"What time?"

"Between midnight and one."

We'll check the hotel tapes for that hour. That's all her boss can offer while he waits for Sarah to be released into his care. The rest is the usual. There's evidence of assault but not who did it. But now we have that vial. Jameson rushed it to the lab for analysis.

The other one is still in my pocket, calling to me like a siren's song demanding revenge.

That cigarette smoke? That was TJ. I don't need proof to know his smell. If he was dumb enough to leave vials behind, he's getting sloppy, and maybe... we finally have his prints.

It's five o'clock when I open the door to my and Redix's hotel suite at the golf resort. I already checked the hotel bar, where a party rages after the tournament.

"Where's Redix?" I asked Luca, returning his quick pecks on my cheeks. He's so European, so sexy that way.

"He left a long time ago," he answered. "He went up to your room, I guess."

But he's not here as I'm scanning it now.

This hotel room? I have the same unease as I did in the one this morning.

Like TJ was here, but that's impossible.

The service cleaned the room. My luggage is still on the chair. The dress Redix got me still hangs in the open closet. The gift box, too, it's sitting on the desk... but the car key is gone.

And so is Redix.

I call him. And three more times that night. It keeps going to voicemail. Finally, at two a.m. I leave him a message:

"Hey. Are you okay? Call me, please." I pause, staring at the rolling black ocean. "I love you."

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



REDIX

DEAR CANDY CADE,

I'm so sorry.

This fucking journal. It's not working.

This swanky suite. I don't want to be alone in it.

I had to get out of there. I had to take the car I gave you and drive so damn fast off that island and to Atlanta because I'm never going back there again.

What the fuck was I thinking?

I had my shit together. I had you. I had everything I've dreamed of for us, for so damn long.

And then it happened.

I was shaking hands, thanking the foursomes lined up in golf carts for their support. The tournament was going great. I even dressed for it. I wore a damn navy polo with white shorts to look the preppy part, like a man you could donate your thousands to.

I'd do anything for those crisis centers.

Then a hand grabbed mine. I glanced at his eyes before I looked down at his choking grip. It was trying to hurt me. And I saw it.

The tattoo.

The mudflap girl.

Our grasp strangled while I looked back at him but didn't recognize his face.

But fuck me, Cade. He had your necklace on.

It was him. The guy who drove. The guy who held me down.

I jerked my fist away, about to punch him with it.

Then I realized Gentry sat beside him. And TJ, looking like shit warmed over, sat behind them on the cart.

All three stared me down, and I was back on the beach with them, memories flashing like lethal grenades in my mind.

"We always enjoy your hospitality, Mr. Dean." Gentry always sounds evil.

"How's your wife?" I asked him. "I can tell she *wants* my hospitality."

Fuck them. I didn't let them see it, Cade. I glared back, ready to rip them apart. I swear I can now.

The tattoo dude thought that was funny. Gentry didn't. Neither did TJ.

"How's your girlfriend?" TJ asked. "She always did have a thing for ice cream." Fuck, his teeth are so brown. "I think it's time she got a real mark, a real treat." I clenched my fist to punch him before wailing on the others while TJ laughed, "I bet she'll moan like you did when we give it to her."

I pounced, but arms were around me so fucking fast I didn't know where they came from.

"Gentlemen." It was your dad. I invited him to play with me and Luca. "Make another illegal scene here, Senator"—he

took on Gentry first—“and I’ll make sure this whole damn state knows about it.”

He held me back. Damn, Cade. Your dad’s been more of a father to me than my own. He keeps appearing like an angel in my life just in time.

Luca came over too. “We got a problem?”

Luca is a wall of muscle and intimidating as shit. We could’ve taken them easily, and I wanted to.

“Not at all.” Gentry knew it. “Y’all enjoy your round. And Mr. Dean”— he tipped his fucking visor at me—“I’ll be very generous with you... as usual.”

He pulled their cart away, and I was going to chase after them and bash their heads in with a nine iron.

“Hey, man. What was that about?” Luca could tell shit was up. “You okay?”

“He’ll be fine. He’s strong.” Your dad answered for me. He wouldn’t let go of my arm to keep me from doing something stupid. “This goes way back. Just give him time.”

I don’t remember the next hours on the course with your dad and Luca and his buddy. That night kept flashing, and I felt sick. Since I couldn’t kill them, I had to do something.

We got back to the resort, and I’m sorry, Cade. I ran.

I didn’t have a choice. It’s a craze in my veins, hijacking my mind, and running is the only way to be free of it.

And not look back.

Not even for you, and my God, I’m so damn sorry.

I’ve tried so hard, but I can’t turn this around. This nightmare in my mind. It won’t stop.

I try closing my eyes and thinking of you. And I can. I see every beautiful moment with you, but then I see that night.

That look on your face when TJ grabbed you.

Fuck, I love you so much, Cade.

When they grabbed you, they took my soul.

And they won't let me go.

How can I ever be free of them? Even just to breathe because I can't. I can't stop the memories.

There's only one thing that works. I'm just gonna have one beer. There's some in the minibar.

Just one beer, I promise, then I'll feel better, and then I'll call you and be okay.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX



Wild Horses by The Sundays

FORTY-EIGHT HOURS IS ALL I CAN SUFFER.

He's not answering his phone or texts. Eric, his assistant, won't answer me either.

"Go." Penny grabs my hand, shaking on my desk at work. "There's nothing to do here. Go get him."

For all her jokes and bitching, she loves me and knows I'm dying inside.

"The prints, though?"

How can I do this? I'm forced to decide between some justice for these victims and going after the man I love.

"We got one of them—Derek Baucom." Penny keeps me focused. "He must've realized he left that vial behind and knows we're after him. He's in the breeze, but we'll catch him."

The prints from that vial scored the evidence we needed. That's one down—two more to go. Because TJ was in that

room with Sarah, too, I know it without evidence. He and Gentry get away with it... but not for long.

“Check every single rental Gentry owns.” I’m desperate to catch them. “Derek’s truck hasn’t been seen crossing the bridge. He’s on this island somewhere.”

“Jameson’s on it. Gentry’s fighting the search warrants, but he doesn’t own every judge. We got this.” Penny squeezes my hand. “Now get the fuck out of here.”

Jameson glances up from his desk. He hasn’t said much but knows what’s going on.

I let Redix Dean into my life again. I believed in our love. I had such hope...

And he left me.

Again.

But “I told you so” isn’t on Jameson’s face. No, he hates this for me.

Something’s wrong, and everyone can read my anguish.

My mama and dad too. It’s like they did an intervention on me last night, shocking the shit out of me by knocking on my door together.

“Sometimes you walk away,” Dad said, “because that’s what’s best if you really love someone.”

He had me wrapped in his arms, standing in my kitchen, and I felt twelve again, crying like when he and Mama divorced, and he tried explaining why.

“And sometimes you fight for love,” Mama said. “Sometimes it never dies.” She took my hand and Dad’s. “Like maybe we should have. So many precious years we’ve lost apart.”

Their legacy is mine—a decision I have to make.

Fight for love or let Redix go?

A memory slams my heart. At his place in Malibu, we were making pizzas from scratch... and a huge mess as Redix

swiped pizza sauce down my nose. “That’s for later.”

I flicked flour at him. “That’s gonna start a food fight.”

“That’s what I’m bettin’ on.” He pressed me against the kitchen countertop, beaming at me with that devilish smile that lights up my world. “I love it when you fight.”

I rested my hand on his thudding heartbeat. “Why?”

He pressed his hand over mine. “Because you look so beautiful when you do.” His lips drew nearer to mine. “And because you always win. I’m counting on it.”

That kiss turned into a pizza burning and him buried inside me. My legs wrapped around his waist while my hands grabbed his back with tears in my eyes because I couldn’t hold him close enough.

I’ll never let him go.

“I love you.” I peck Penny’s cheek and jump up from my desk, duty belt still on, before grabbing my bag from my chair. “Hold the fort down.” And I’m out the door.

Atlanta is four hours away, and those miles between us?

Nothing will stand in my way.



“HELLO?”

Speeding down the interstate, I answer my phone hands-free.

“Cade? It’s Scarlett. I called Jameson for your number.”

“Hey.”

I can’t really talk. I’m focused on the crowded road to Atlanta and what I’ll find when I arrive.

“Hey. Look.” Scarlett pauses. “I hate doing this, but I’ll always help another woman.”

“Yeah?” My stomach twists. Scarlett’s in Atlanta. That much I know, afraid of what I’ll learn next.

“I’m training with HGR Security. I’m shadowing this guy, Wade, and we’re cast security for this film down here.”

“And?”

“The film is Redix Dean’s. You know him, right? Y’all are sorta together?”

“Yeah.”

My foot presses the gas pedal down to switch lanes in lightning zigzags.

“I think you should get down here. He’s not good. That’s all I can say. I’m not really supposed to tell you, but I know trouble when I see it.”

“I’m an hour out.”

“Okay. Good.” She’s quiet. “You need help?”

Tears threaten. Every time I’ve been in the shit, another woman has been there to get my back. From high school on the bus with that Charlie girl, to Mama, to Penny, to Scarlett.

“Can you meet me at the Waldorf?”

“I’ll be there.”

GPS and my fear, they race me there, cursing through Atlanta’s traffic until I drop my keys in the valet’s hand at the front of the posh hotel. Grabbing my bag from the passenger seat, I see Scarlett leaning in the breezeway and waiting for me. Her eyes flick down to my duty belt.

“You come straight from the office?”

“Yeah.” I search for the key fob Redix left me. It’s buried at the bottom of my bag while we storm through the lobby. “Thanks for this.”

“Anytime.”

We don’t say anything in the elevator. I know she’ll get my back. I just don’t know who’ll protect my heart.

Swiping the fob in front of the opulent door with brass handles, I shove it wide open.

“Cade!” Eric jumps up from the sofa in the suite’s living room. “What are you doing here?” He looks like hell collided with crap.

“Where is he?”

His eyes dart left toward a door. That’s the bedroom.

“How long has he been in there?”

How long can I stand here until I’m ready to confront this? I don’t know if I can because it’s in my throat about to strangle all breath away.

What did he do?

Eric shifts. “Since last night.”

I charge toward the bedroom door.

“Cade, don’t!” Eric can’t stop me.

No one can.

The door opens to my kick, and so does my heart, the one Redix’s ice cream kiss and gifts and home and love had glued back together. It explodes again into a million pieces.

My breath, my hope, our dream, dead.

Three naked bodies; they’re on the bed. Redix. Angie. And a woman I don’t know.

“What the fuck?” Angie pops up. The other woman giggles, quickly hiding her phone behind her back.

That’s a mistake.

Redix doesn’t wake up.

I seethe at Angie, “Get out.” A silk thread, pulled tautly, it’s holding back my rage.

“Fuck you, crazy bitch.” Angie’s true colors show along with her huge tits. “You don’t own him. I do again so *YOU* get out.”

It happens so fast. My gun. It's drawn from behind my back and aimed at her.

"Damn fucking right, I'm a crazy bitch for him." She's in my sights. "Now get the fuck up and out of here. Right now."

Giggle girl screams, jumping out of the bed.

"And give me your phones," I snarl.

She's been taking videos of him passed out. Guilt hangs as obvious as her blonde hair extensions.

Redix still isn't moving.

"You're fucking crazy!" Angie scrambles out of the bed behind the other woman.

Scarlett stands in the doorway, hand out, waiting for their phones.

Redix STILL isn't moving.

But I am. To his side. His color. It's pale. His breath? The wild life that screams from his beautiful lungs? I can't see it.

"Redix?" It's training. Instinct. I check his pulse, trying to find it while tears start falling because...

I can't.

"What did he take?" I aim my gun back at Angie, my vision smearing with agony.

"Nothing." Angie's eyes are suddenly wide and scared.

"Bullshit!" My aim is perfect, my fury uncontrolled. "I will fill you with fucking lead; you pill-poppin' bitch. Now tell me!"

Her feet shuffle, bloodshot eyes flicking to her Prada bag on the floor while her hand shakes in front of her shorn pussy.

"What did you give him!" Pressure, it's building. On me. On the trigger. *I will pull it for him.* A million times, I will. "Now! Where's the bottle you gave him?"

Eric appears behind Scarlett, his face frozen with shock.

"Call nine-one-one," Scarlett urges him. "Now!"

Scarlett blocks the doorway, sneering at Angie and her accomplice. “Hand me the fucking bottle,” she says, “and your phones if you want to walk out of here still looking pretty.”

Angie scrambles for her bag, but I can’t focus on her. On anything else.

I drop my gun on the bed. “Redix.” I shake him. “Wake up!” His shoulders, his cool flesh in my hands. His life is my home...

And it’s slipping through my fingers.

“Wake up!” I rub the valley I live in, his heart, my most cherished place.

He’s naked and too still, too void of breath.

“Wake up!” My fingers return to his neck, searching, hope dropping from my grasp. “Please.” I can’t find his pulse. “No. No. No. No.”

I can’t think. I can’t do this without him.

“Don’t leave me.” My lips press to his. No matter how long. No matter how far. He always came back to me. “Don’t leave me.”

He said he’d come back for me. I’ll wait, breathing every breath for him until he does.

“Don’t leave me again.”

From the moment we met...

His smiling lips crushed the candy cane I gave him. “What kind of name is Cade?”

“My first name is stupid, so I make my mama use my middle name—Cade.”

“Your name is ‘Stupid Cade’?”

“Funny.” I hit his arm. I liked him. “No, it’s ‘Magnolia,’ and I hate that name.”

“I like magnolias.” He hit my arm back. He liked me too. “They’re fun to climb.”

He sat beside me and didn't leave my side. That's when we became best friends. "Thanks for the candy."

"You're welcome." He made me happy. "I got plenty to share." I opened my Hello Kitty purse and gave him my heart, and he's held it since. It only beats for him.

My best friend, his caring eyes, his big hands holding mine, he can't leave.

I press my lips to his cool cheek, swearing, "You promised me. Candy. Bikes. Ice cream. Candles. Pizza. Love." Tears, they stream over my lips brushing his. "You promised me infinity."

He always took care of me...

"I don't feel good." I started my period. "I wanna throw up." My head rested on his shoulder, and I wanted to stay with him forever.

His sweatshirt wrapped around my waist; his lips whispered in my hair. "I'll take care of you, Candy Cade." He held my hand and didn't let go. He protected me. He sacrificed everything for me. Even himself. "It's okay."

And I held onto him. I cherished him.

I always will.

God, I'll give up heaven for him. I will live in hell. Just for him to open his eyes.

"Please don't do this." His skin is sticky. With sweat. With sick. With everything killing him inside. "Please don't leave me."

But his eyes won't open. His lips won't smile. His mouth won't say one more asshole joke. Or kiss me. Or call me "Candy Cade." Or swear that he loves me.

"Don't leave me." I can't feel anything else. "Redix, please, I love you."

A slow thud—his artery—it beats under my fingertips. My tears, they fall from my chin, dripping onto his. "It's okay. I'm not mad. It's okay. Come on. Wake up for me."

There's nothing he can do. No woman he can fuck or mistake he can make, or years he makes me wait. Pride dies when you hold death in your arms. When you realize love is all we live for, all we'll die for.

I pull his limp body into my embrace, rubbing his back while he slumps over me. He's so heavy, the weight of this threat; I'll fight it for him.

"Please. I'm here. I'm not mad. Wake up for me. I love you. Please."

He has to hear me. He has to know I'm here. I always will be.

Time, it's a blur. All I can do is rub his back, willing my breath into his lungs, my life back into his.

Or he can take me with him.

I'll let him. I want him to...

until...

hands are pulling him from my grasp.

"We got him, ma'am." It's an EMT. Two more are standing behind him. "What did he take?"

"This." I hear Scarlett. "And alcohol." Eric's standing beside her while the room descends into every effort to save him.

The sight of his limp body thrown onto the gurney. His hand flopping almost lifeless by his side. The oxygen mask they smother over his face, forcing air into his lungs.

I throw up on the bed.

"Cade." Scarlett's there in my storm, holding onto me while I can't tear my eyes away from my worst nightmare.

My world leaves with his body rushed out of the room. Reality goes too. I'm in a car—Scarlett's. I'm in an Emergency Room. I know them too well. I'm in a haze, a hell for hours until Eric appears in the waiting room.

"He's stable."

The sobs, the relief, I don't care who witnesses it. Scarlett won't let me go until I can breathe again. "I have to see him."

"That's not his wish." Eric stands there, drained but determined.

"What?"

"He left instructions, Cade. If this ever happened again. No visitors. He's going straight to rehab."

I jump to my feet. "But it's me."

"*Especially* you," Eric says. "He never wanted you to see him like this."

"But I'm in charge of his estate, you said."

"That's if he doesn't make it. Until then, his orders are in writing. He doesn't want to see you."

My shoulders draw up. "Good fucking luck getting me to go." My fists clench. "I'll never leave him."

Everything urges me toward him. Scarlett stands up beside me.

"Don't make me do it." Eric's face, it's full of remorse. "Please leave with dignity, or I'll have to call security."

My gun's still on my belt. My logic can't accept this. My heart can't stop bleeding every drop of love, of any pride I have left. I'll lose it for him.

"Don't do this." I'm about to do something crazy through tears, my vision blurring with them. "Please. I have to see him." I can feel it taking over.

"I'm sorry." Eric won't move.

"Come on." Scarlett stops me, wrapping her arm over my twitching shoulder, wanting to reach for my gun, my only way to get to Redix.

"Give him time," she says. "He'll come around."

The disbelief, the defeat, I walk with it out of the Emergency Room.

“Take me back to his room,” I tell Scarlett when we crawl into her sports car.

I still have the key fob, and I want to know what the hell happened.

It doesn't make sense. How did we go from the most incredible night, where he swore his love to me and dreams for our future, to two days later, and he relapsed? And he fucked Angie? And some random woman?

What forced him to the edge of death again?

I comb his hotel suite. Empty bottles, of beer, of Absolut, of Johnny Walker, fuck, it's a mess. But I know him. This isn't him anymore. It feels so wrong.

Scanning the room while Scarlett checks the bathroom, my eyes fall on the nightstand.

The nightstand.

When we were teens, he always kept candy in his nightstand for me. Lemonheads. Like he knew I belonged in his bed. I pull the brass ring on the drawer, and there it is. His black leather journal. The one he's been writing in for months.

Sliding down the edge of the bed, I have to read it. His darkest thoughts. His pain. His secrets. They'll be no more.

What fills my eyes over the next hour reading it?

I barely can through my tears. They're falling over the pages, over all his capital writing and love. Over all the answers I need.

Gentry with his taunts.

Derek Baucom was the driver, the third guy.

TJ targeted Pamela before she disappeared.

How Redix tried. How he fought until he could take no more.

There's one last journal entry. It's barely legible. Like he wrote it drunk.

Hey Candy Cade,

*Remember how I used to carry
you into the ocean? It made you
laugh. I wanna go back to those
waves with you. I wanna drown
there, loving you for infinity.*

Hey, God.

He said I'm the beginning.

Now I'm the end too.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN



Gravedigger by MXMS

PAMELA RYAN WORE A YELLOW SUNDRESS THE NIGHT SHE went missing.

It was the same one I borrowed the night they went after me and took Redix instead.

Pamela was always sunshine.

Redix was the wild one who made us laugh. I was the moody giraffe, the one picked on, and Pamela was light and smiles, loving me despite my scowl.

And now I know...

How much she loved Redix too. I understand.

And that she dated TJ before she went missing. I don't need to know more.

There's glass in my throat thinking about her. My heart hurts too, rejected by Redix and scared for him. It's been three days, and I've heard nothing from him.

Deep down, I fear it. Like he's gone for good. So I'm not waiting anymore.

Too much pain, too many people hurt, laws that don't work, fuck it, I know what I need to do.

Checking my makeup in the mirror, I have it all planned.

Flat sandals so I won't be too tall. Bare legs lotioned up to a sheen. Jean shorts, their hem kissing my ass cheeks. Hair swept softly back with sparkling butterfly clips. Eyes done to doe-eyed perfection. Lips glossed, asking to be kissed.

And yellow.

A yellow sweater tank secured around my neck by one thin strap barely conceals my braless breasts.

I look harmless. Ready for a date. A drink. A night of fun.

A murder.

"Wanna come over?" Penny calls me for the fourth time today, worried. "I got pizza, beer, and Lemonheads."

"No, thank you." I love her, so she can't know. "I just need time."

"Tomorrow then?"

"Yeah." But she can be one of my alibis. "I'll get coffee and donuts."

"The breakfast of cops?" She snorts. "I'll take a dozen powdered ones."

"You got it." I end that call to Jameson calling too.

"Hey." I try to sound calm, not ready for blood. "What's up?"

"Going out for a beer. Wanna come?"

"Where you going?" Because I gotta avoid him.

"The Deck Bar. I can pick you up in fifteen." He's checking on me. He's also scoping Gentry. "You need to get out of the house."

"I need to stop crying."

That isn't a lie. Because all I feel is tears dripping with rage.

“For all the shit I gave you, Bryant, he loved you. It was obvious. You just can't fight anyone's demons but your own.”

Fight my demons?

No. I'm going to kill them.

“Thanks.” Someday, Jameson's going to make a lucky woman very happy. Not me. My heart is lost on another man... who's gone. “I'll finish my pity party tonight. Wanna fish with me and Silas tomorrow?”

Because I like my life complicated and my alibis simple.

“Sure. It's a date.”

And that's as good as it gets for covering my ass.

No one else is guilty. This is my deal...

Me and you, God. You promised. Redix will be free.

We all will be after I do this.



NO ONE on the island knows about the Land Rover Redix gave me. Scarlett had it delivered back here from Atlanta. It smells like a new car and breaks my heart. I park it a block away from the QuickTrip and walk to the gas station.

Hiding in the woods on the edge of the parking lot, I know he'll show up for his nightly run for smokes.

Ten o'clock. A few minutes late, he jumps out of his beat-up Mustang for his legal drug.

I walk across the lot, pacing my entrance to time with his exit.

It's perfect. Like it's written in the stars.

“Well damn, Sergeant.” TJ's too thrilled to see me, like he loses all logic around me. “Got a date?”

“I did.” I don’t smile. “Until she stood me up.”

The cameras at the corner of the building? They don’t work. And Ms. Dubois working inside? She’d never rat me out. She’s loyal to my mama.

“Be *my* date then.”

His golf shirt reeks of his cologne and evil. Both he’s put on me for years. And his eyes? They never stop ripping my clothes off. This yellow top? He’s drawn to it like a target.

“I ain’t got an ice cream cone,” he sneers, “but I got shots.”

“I’m too old for ice cream.” That feels true. “And bars and people only piss me off.”

He likes my salty mouth. It draws him in like honey as he asks, “Let’s go burn one then where you won’t get busted.”

Burn one? What doesn’t this man smoke?

“You know what?” My tone stays low and slow, not too eager. “Yeah. It’s been a shitty week.”

The score in his eyes, that I finally said yes, he can’t see through his blazed mind to question why. His stained teeth grin. “Well, alright then.”

“Meet me on my boat.”

“Harbour Towne?”

“No. Too many cameras there.” He thinks so I won’t get busted. That’s true. But not for smoking weed. “Ms. Ryan’s dock. You remember where it is?”

Since he went after Pamela, he knows.

“Yeah, it’s been a minute, but I remember.”

“Gimme an hour. I gotta gas up, and I’ll meet you there.” I gotta keep him motivated. “I’ll bring some wine.”

The way he leans toward me, I fight the urge to punch his dick. “It sounds like I’m *your* man now.”

Fuck, he’s delusional. That’s why he’s so dangerous. He doesn’t dance with the same logic as most. In his mind,

everyone wants him. “No” isn’t a word. When he hears it screamed or slurred, he believes deep down... *you really want him.*

And I do.

Dead.

I try to make myself blush, asking, “Red or white?”

“White and sweet,” he says, “like I like my women.”

A gag, it hits me, and it stops my eyes from rolling. “See you there.” I move to step inside the store.

“Where you going?” He barks like he owns me.

I turn, tasting sweet thrill. “To get candy, of course.”

It doesn’t take much time. Why would it? I’ve been planning this for years.

At the dock where I’m picking TJ up, I pull the throttle back, slowing my approach to it over an hour later. I’ve replaced all the deck boards on Ms. Ryan’s dock, so it’ll be ready for this. And if Ms. Ryan witnesses this crime, she’ll never tell.

They say women have big mouths. Maybe some do. Our hearts are bigger, though, able to keep a guilty secret for any woman who needs protection.

They gently clank, the wine bottles I brought on board.

Usually, it’s a rookie mistake to have glass on a vessel. But glass bottles have corks, ones you can punch a tiny needle through, filling the bottle with something extra.

That’s what I’ve been waiting for. Well, one thing. The right poison. Using what TJ has against his victims, I love the poetic justice.

And the other thing I’ve been waiting for? I wasn’t prepared for it.

How much I’d fall back in love with Redix—not that I ever stopped. How his laughs filled my heart. How his smile soared my soul. How when his lips were on mine, the world

stopped. And when his body joined with mine, I didn't need anything else.

My love lives with him.

What is he doing now? Detoxing with shakes so bad they're torture? Beating himself up for relapsing? Feeling guilty that he cheated on me? Wanting to be free of this? How has this burdened him for so long?

For ten years, he fought to survive it.

This is what I've been waiting for; it's my turn to fight for him. He'll be free.

And the victims? They'll get justice. And they'll be no more after tonight.

Once we catch Derek. Once we get that last shred of evidence we need on Gentry. Once I give TJ everything he wants, I'll get it too.

Answers. Proof. Revenge.

Standing on Ms. Ryan's dock with the full moon behind him, even TJ's silhouette is wicked.

"I thought you were standing me up."

He's annoyed I made him wait fifteen minutes... because impatience reveals the truth.

"It's a no-wake zone. I had to go slow." I don't kill the engine. Reversing back, I edge the boat to the dock, close enough for him to jump aboard. "And we have all night."

He likes that answer as he lands on the deck and steps my way. "Where we off to?"

Cupping his hand, he blazes up a blunt without asking.

"I got a spot I like."

I've scoped it for years. Noting how vessels rarely go by. How even as the tides change, I have enough depth not to run aground. How the hungry gators like it too. They've been good company over the years.

TJ uses the time to scope me. Standing beside my captain's chair, he marks every spot down my body, plans he's been making since I was fifteen.

"Your boyfriend know you're out here with me?"

"No one knows where I am." That's true. "And he's not my boyfriend." That hurts.

"You two. Two of the prettiest people together?" Smoke slurred with envy escapes his lips. "You never belonged with him. You belonged with us."

He offers me a toke. I have to take it, to make him believe. His spit on the paper touching my lips twists my gut. With my generous exhale, I clench my teeth, saying, "I belong with no one."

He laughs. "You're always feisty and hot as hell. That's why we can't resist you."

The bow of my boat, I snake it to my spot, pulling back to neutral feet from the shore. It's the perfect depth here.

"Grab the anchor." I ignore his comment... for now.

TJ blindly follows my command. I open the cooler while the anchor splashes down, and he secures its rope. With his back to me, I pull the cork on some cheap muscadine and fill a glass.

I offer it to him with a smile. "I'm a red girl."

Who's drinking a safe bottle of Merlot.

We clink full glasses. Taking his first sip, I watch his eyes plan his crime after he gets me drunk.

My plan? Keep him standing right here, between the two chairs, under the hardtop of my boat, where there's more privacy.

And surprises waiting.

"Why do you always say 'we'?" I bite my lip. "When you talk about Gentry? Why is it always 'we,' the two of you?"

“We’re close.” The sips he’s taking delight me. “No one comes between us.”

“What about *me*?”

“You bond us.” He steps toward me. “He’ll hear about tonight.” His stench fills my nostrils. “He loves the graphic details.”

Everything I am holds back as my stomach turns and my throat gags, but I let him do it, and it’s so foul. His kiss. His thin lips soil mine, his teeth clashing into mine while his tongue trashes my mouth. My fists clench when his hands grab my ass, groping his moist fingers under the denim to get his first attempt at my body.

It’ll be his last.

I shift my weight, letting his touch mangle my flesh and heart; *I don’t want this.*

But I want revenge.

And it starts. The move I’ve practiced, the way I know how. I moan into his ashtray mouth. Seizing his hand on my ass cheek, I lift it to my breast for his grope... all while my other hand finds the zip tie handcuff I tucked in the seat of my captain’s chair.

He pants, grabbing both my breasts, and I moan back, driving his body into a frenzy. While I grind against his cock, over and over, he’s slobbering over my lips while I loop the cuff around his wrist, grabbing his other one and binding them so fast, he’s too horny to know what just happened.

“What the hell?” He stumbles, staring at his bind. The drug is kicking in, making him sweat. He slurs, “Is this a game?”

“Yes.” I squat before him, my mouth inches from his hard-on under madras shorts. “I like it kinky.”

He gazes down at me like his dream is coming true. *Mine is.* My hand skims up his skinny thigh under his shorts while my other reaches for the metal cuff tucked under my chair. It’s attached to a nylon rope attached to a cinder block on the other end, hiding the whole time.

My lips near his zipper, and he reeks. His words are as repulsive.

“Yes, bitch. Do it. Suck my ice cream cone now.” I smile. *Click, click, click, click.* The cuff locks on his ankle before he can resist.

“Bitch.” He kicks his foot, not able to budge it. “What is this?”

I surge up. The yellow bandana I tucked in my back pocket? It’s shoved in his mouth before he can ask more. The piece of duct tape I stuck to the side of my chair? I rip it off and smack it over his mouth before I spit in his face.

“This is revenge.”

With knife strikes of my hand, I hit pressure points, his nerves wincing as he cries out to my blows every time he tries shoving past me.

The drug, his favorite one, he’s getting clumsy. Stumbling back, he falls into the chair behind him. The euphoria in his eyes, the side effect, has him unafraid.

“You have minutes to live,” I tell him, “and answers I’m gonna get in them.”

The heave of his chest slows. He won’t resist me. He won’t even scream. I yank the tape off, pulling the bandana from his mouth.

“Where is Pamela Ryan?”

I need to find her, to give this peace to Ms. Ryan so she can finally say goodbye. It’s a fate I need too. For Pamela. For Redix. To finally let them go.

A grin rises, revealing his stained teeth and soul. His eyelids start dropping. “You’ll never find her.”

I’ve suffered him too long not to know him. “She’s still alive?” It’s shock. It’s hope. “Where is she?”

“She’s his.”

“Who?”

Gentry or Derek?

The bob of his chin, he threatens to pass out on me, so I slap my hand across his face, loving the sting in my palm while his eyes shoot wide open.

“Who has her?”

“She’s his, and you’re mine.” It’s a hallucination in his eyes, of the truth. “You were always mine.”

I know where his sick logic goes. To me. To Redix.

“You cut him, didn’t you? It was you?” My grip squeezes his chin; I hope I break his weak jaw. “You were always jealous of him.”

With delight in his eyes, he gazes up at the stars. I can see that vile night in his eyes.

“The tattoo y’all share.” He slurs. “It should’ve been mine.” He sighs. “So his pain was mine instead. It was *all* mine. The way he screamed and moaned while I tore into his flesh; it was *all* for you, Cade.”

It’s lightning, the power through my veins into my right hook crashing into his cheekbone; I don’t care if I break my hand.

“The next scream of pain?” I hook with a left and do it again. “It’s all yours.” I punch down next, smashing his pathetic dick with my fist. “And this is *all for him*.”

I uppercut his balls. It doubles him over in pain, and I hope he pukes.

My hand grabs his neck, squeezing hard and forcing his sight to mine.

“I was never yours. I’ll always be his. I’ll always love Redix Dean, no matter what you did to him, to us. You’re a sick, pathetic fuck. No one wants you, TJ. Everyone wants Redix Dean, and so do I.” I spit in his eye. “I’ll love him until the day I die.”

That hits him, somewhere deep in his drugged psyche, that was a knife to his demented ego. I see it shake his core.

“All those women you hurt?” I snarl. “Who looked like me? You had to drug them because no fucking way did they want your nasty hands on them. Men like you and your pitiful dicks; you need to be killed off.”

His artery under my fingers, I feel his sluggish pulse, and I press down, trying to stop it. “Where is Cam Le? The maid for Gentry’s condos?”

The focus in his eyes, he can’t find it, slurring, “She’s his.”

“Where?”

She’s still alive. So is Pamela. I will find them.

“Where we like to play.” His mind is there, not here. “Where I’m gonna play with you.”

He’s deranged.

“No.” I shake my grip, rattling his skull. “I’m the one playing now, Motherfucker.”

His neck squeezed in my grasp; my bicep tenses for this; it’s trained for this. It’s a matter of minutes and my call when.

“See how much fun this is, TJ? You thought pretty girls were only for fun, didn’t you?” My teeth clench with every fucking time men like him hurt someone. “We’re also for murder. We’ll kill you all.” The power in my grip, in my rage, it’s blinding. “This is real fucking fun, isn’t it?”

In one fast flash, Lucidity takes his eyes while he sneers, “None were as fun as him.”

It’s gone. My logic. My restraint. All I see is Redix while I let it possess me, while I let my deal, my revenge take the life from the man who hurt him. Who hurt all those women.

And this doesn’t hurt me.

Not at all.

I don’t care what happens to me. If my soul is damned, I squeeze harder, choking with both hands now. If I lose my mind too, it can go.

As long as those women have justice, as long as Redix doesn't hurt anymore.

TJ and all my pain, all my tears, Redix's scar, his battered face, his strong heart, his love and fight that never gave up for me, I'm doing this. For every woman TJ hurt. For Redix... we'll finally be free.

I don't even hear it. The engine of the boat trolling up behind me.

"Magnolia Cade! Stop!"

That name. That voice. It could summon me out of hell. And it does. I glance up... and it's Mama.

"He's mine." Mama's standing on Dad's boat. Dad's steering, sloshing beside this boat while her eyes lock on mine. "He's *always* been mine."

My hands drop, my jaw too.

What are they doing here? How did they know?

TJ slumps over in the seat. He's barely alive, but he doesn't deserve to be. If life returns to his lungs, he'll only hurt more people.

We know it.

And now I know it too.

What brought my parents back together? Me and Redix and justice.

My dad kills his engine and drops his anchor. He jumps onto my boat, his old one.

"I had Silas put GPS on this boat when I had to use it last. That's how I found you." He grabs my arms while I search for my reasoning.

"Listen to me," he says, "this is for us to finish, not you."

"But I need to—"

"No, you don't." Mama's voice is calm. It always is, just like the iron in her eyes when her mind is made. "I needed to

do this years ago, just didn't get the chance, not wearing a badge."

"You can't—"

"Yes, I will." You can't argue with her. "This is my justice. Those boys? Those men now? They're hurting other women. They hurt you, my baby, first. Then they hurt, Redix, my boy too. I love him like my son, and this is my job to finish."

I'm stunned. I don't know why. Dad was the vigilante, not Mama. But facing down death has changed her.

I should've known. She's been watching me this whole time. And Dad's been tracking his old boat.

He flops TJ's body onto his new one, letting it hit the deck with a thud.

"Clever," he says of the handcuff around TJ's ankle that's secured to a rope attached to a cement block Dad has tucked under his arm while he crawls back onto his boat.

"What are y'all gonna do?"

"What I should've done that night," Dad answers, pulling his anchor back up.

"Don't speak another word about it." Mama's drawl warns before she looks back my way. "What did you find out?"

Of course, I interrogated him first. She's raised me too well.

"Pamela's still alive. So is that other missing woman."

"Oh, thank God." Mama grabs her chest. "Then you go find them and catch their ass."

This leaves Gentry left to deal with. And Derek.

The engine on Dad's boat sputters back on while silence takes us all.

My parents saved me from committing the worst sin for the best reasons. And somehow, I don't worry about what this act, what this secret, will do to them.

Someone hurt their kids. Someone hurt innocent people.

There is no guilt, no sin.

TJ sentenced his soul the minute he put a knife into Redix's flesh.

Yes, God. This was the deal.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT



A YEAR LATER...

I WEDGE my toes underneath a pile of sand, keeping my bare feet warm in the October breeze.

Some days this month, it's warm, like summer doesn't end. Other days, they're like me. Cool. Muddled. Not sure if they'll let the lonely darkness take them.

My friends have left for the day, but I'm still here, letting my ass get numb watching the Sunday beachgoers. Despite being off-season, this beach, Coligny Beach, is rarely empty.

Except at night.

I know this too well.

Penny, with her pregnant-again belly, had me laughing today.

"I thought you were too tired to fuck," I joked with her.

"Please,"—she chewed on her favorite frozen grapes—"all I had to do was lie back and let Hank do the work. It's only

fair. He works for ten minutes, gets us both off, and then the next nine months are on me.”

“More like *in* you.” I try hiding the pang of what I’m missing inside.

I would’ve liked a baby. Or three.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever want kids.” Scarlett sat on my other side, swigging cider. “But the ones I’m working for sure are cute.”

Scarlett’s working a job on Daufuskie Island. Her coming around to hang out, too; it’s made life bearable.

“Any babies of Daniel Pierce and Charlie Ravenel have got to be cute,” I said.

That’s the famous couple she’s working for. Everyone knows now that they live on Daufuskie. It exploded over social media, and I feel sorry for them. Between his fame and her job, that’s a security nightmare.

Luckily, they have Scarlett on their HGR Security team. I’m sure glad she was on mine.

“Daniel Pierce *is* a hot man.” Scarlett grins. “Who only has eyes for his hot wife.”

“Is Charlie still a badass? She was when we were in high school.”

“More than you can imagine,” is all Scarlett can say about her job. I respect that. I respect secrets.

I have my own.

My girlfriends left an hour ago, but I still can’t move. I don’t want to go home to an empty condo, to my empty heart. I can always go bug my parents. They’re back together until Mama has enough of Dad and sends him to his boat for a few days.

“If I want a man under my feet all the time,” she says, “I’ll wear him like high heels.”

They’re cute, though. Like they’re honeymooning again.

But we never speak about it. Not once. We know better.

Jameson wouldn't keep quiet about it for the longest time. Too many questions filled that man's mind and mouth when TJ stopped popping up places.

"What happened to him?" Jameson wouldn't let it go. "You think he's shackled up somewhere with Derek Baucom?"

We haven't found Derek. We found his abandoned truck at The Pelican, but he got off this island unseen. We know how with no proof. Gentry and his "After Tail" yacht helped Derek disappear.

Gentry, in the meantime, is doing evil business as usual, appealing search warrants of his condos and throwing his political sway around.

So fuck him; I searched through dumpsters outside them. Don't need warrants for that.

It filled me with rare hope. I found used sanitary pads in a white garbage bag dumped outside the condo I last saw Derek disappear into—the one by the doorbell camera. Though the camera only showed Derek entering from the front, I know a woman was there. She could've been brought in through the back.

By the time we got the warrant, that condo was clean.

But I know Derek had a woman hidden in there. I suspect it was Cam Le.

They're my next deal—Gentry and Derek.

"Maybe it was drugs." I swirled a French fry in ketchup, unable to look Jameson in the face about TJ's disappearance.

Until I did. I worried he'd see my guilt. But Jameson only gave me that other look. The one that wanted me.

I got so close again. I made myself try. Almost a year without Redix, with no word from him, and I was broken. I closed my eyes and let Jameson kiss me in the parking lot of The Deck Bar.

It slammed my lonely body, hard. Because Jameson was... so hard. Planes of shredded muscle. A hot mouth tasting of mint, moaning and hungry for mine with his rigid cock pressing into me, leaning against my Land Rover.

He inched my skirt up, and parts of me responded, needing something. But the part of me that matters, my heart, couldn't. Not with him. It belongs to someone else.

"We have to stop." I gently grabbed his hand, about to reach between my thighs. He would've found me wet, but that's not enough anymore.

Something in me shut down. To every man.

"We can't do this. It won't work."

"Bryant,"—his lips lifted from mine, huffing with lust and frustration— "this is the last time. I won't lose any more pride over you. You know if we try, we'd be so good."

"I know if we try," I dropped his hand, "I'd break your heart."

Two weeks later, Jameson put in his resignation.

Yep, I send every man off this island somehow.

Scarlett got Jameson a job working for HGR Security. They're just friends now. "Not meant to happen," as she put it.

Lately, when I talk to Jameson, he sounds good. Flying in a private jet to exotic places, he's the private detail to a rare bird—a woman billionaire. The last time he called, he sounded happy. Too happy. *Uh-huh*—I grin—I know the sound in his voice. Jameson's in love.

So is that couple. Those teenagers playing in the waves. They're cute.

She's got her arms wrapped around his neck, protesting as he carries her and wades in thigh-deep. He's laughing and gazing back at her because she's loving it.

I used to.

Redix did the same with me, picking me up and wading into the surf while I giggled into his shoulder. Until one time,

it wasn't so funny.

He plunged us under, and a rip of a wave took my bikini top with it. I dropped my shoulders under the water while we tried to find it. We couldn't, though.

"This is what you get for dragging me out here." I wasn't amused.

"Damn, right." He was thrilled. "I'd drown to see your gorgeous tits."

"Redix! I'm serious!"

He tossed his long wet strands back and laughed. "I am too!" Putting his back to the shore, he shielded me from eyes aimed my way. "Come on. Lemme see them."

I couldn't resist him then or ever. I stood up, cool water and the breeze teasing my flesh.

"Goddamn, darlin'." He couldn't take his eyes off my nipples rising for his stare. "Can I have them for my birthday?"

"Maybe." I ducked back under, suddenly shy by a wave of lust. "Get me out of this damn ocean first."

"I'll take care of you, Candy Cade."

He confused me at first, reaching to untie his swim trunks and yanking them off underwater.

"What are you doing?" I tried peeking. Even then, I wanted him so much.

"I'm gonna save you." Picking me up, he wrapped my legs around his waist, and we paused, that position making my pussy tingle while he kissed me, promising, "They'll all look at me now and not you."

Hell, yes, they looked at him.

Squeals, oohs, and nervous laughs took the beach while Redix Dean strode out naked from the waves. I buried my blushed face in his neck while he carried me and his swim trunks in his hands.

“How y’all doin’?” he asked their wide eyes while he walked toward our towels yards up the beach.

The saltwater dripping from his nude warm skin; I was safe. My body held in his strong arms; I was home.

He glanced down at three women on the beach, holding full wine glasses and smiling. “Enjoyin’ the big show, ladies?”

Because he was then and still is now. The most beautiful, big, and wild heart. My most beautiful best friend.

I still miss him. And the tears still come.

There’s a painful ache you get when you miss someone. It hurts like a bruise on your soul, and time presses down on it. You don’t want to breathe. You don’t want to move. You don’t want to do anything but feel the pain because it’s all you have left.

And powerful memories.

I heard he’s out of rehab. And he emerged looking healthy... and peaceful.

Without me.

Without our past haunting him.

God made good on her deal.

He’s free now.

I’m not, and that’s what I wanted—to swap our places like I wanted to that night.

I’m the one with a dark secret now.

Paparazzi were there after Redix left rehab. Tough to say if his team planned that, but they got cute videos of him later on the patio of his ice cream shop in Malibu. He treated dozens of families to free ice cream. The smile on his face, sitting on a bench beside a swarm of kids, he was licking a cone, and the light was back in his eyes.

Happy for him; it made mine water then.

Like they do now.

I drop my shades over my eyes.

Like hell, if anyone can see me cry.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE



REDIX

DEAR CANDY CADE,

The nape of your neck, how your dark hair comes to a perfect point showing me the exact soft spot to kiss?

It pulls me to you, Cade.

Hell, who am I bullshitting?

Everything pulls me to you.

Like this journal, it's tan. It's new. Kinda like me.

I guess you found my old one. I guess that's good. You know everything now. How I never wanted to hurt you. I just wanted to protect you. That's why I never told you those things.

Because it kills me when you cry.

Because I'll still take all the pain for you.

Remember when we were twelve and too big to be at that playground, but of course, we didn't listen? You started a stupid game of "let's see what we can jump off of." And me,

like the idiot I always am for you, thought it was the best idea ever.

And it was.

Until you jumped off the top of a sliding board.

Damn, woman, you forget you have bones that can break. But it broke my heart because I heard the thud when you landed and knew it hurt. You curled in a ball and bit your lip until it bled to keep from crying in front of me.

“It’s okay.” I climbed up the sliding board ladder. “I’ll do it too.”

“Don’t” was all you could barely say, watching me.

“Hey, Candy Cade!” I’d do anything for you. “Watch this!”

That’s what everyone says, right? Just before their next trip to the Emergency Room.

I jumped and landed beside you. My ankle broke, and the ground smacked me so hard for being so damn dumb.

Because that hurt like a motherfucker.

“Are you crazy?” You reached for me, worried I was hurt. I was.

“I am for you,” I said before I puked in the grass from the pain.

But then I got a badass cast with crutches for two months. And I got you carrying my backpack and spoiling me.

Fuck, if that got me more time with you? I was ready to jump off buildings next.

Instead, Cade, I jumped off the edge of sanity into my hell. Because that’s what happens to me when I drink or pop pills.

I popped a beer open that afternoon, and reality disappeared after four more beers in minutes. I don’t remember much.

My memory’s kind that way.

But I had lots of dreams about you. I wanted to stay in them with you. I had you and no pain, and that's all I wanted. In my dreams, you kept holding me and telling me it'll be okay. That you weren't mad. That you loved me.

And I held on for you. For those dreams with you. I didn't let go to whatever was pulling me under because I wanted a life with you more.

But when I woke up, I couldn't face it. How I hurt you. And me. And everyone I loved. How I fucked up again.

I can't tell you the shame of it. How it feels bigger than me and like I'll never win.

But I tried.

I swear—my life, my addiction—it feels like I'm trying to turn the Titanic around... on a motherfucking dime.

And I did it this time.

No more secrets. I told my sponsor, my group, my new counselor, and every damn person who'd listen; I told them what happened, all my scars and pain. And after a while, it worked.

I was free.

My sobriety feels different this time. Like I crossed over.

I guess I shouldn't say I'm a new man. I'm a better one.

I'm a man who's staring at who saved him. Who he loves.

She's sitting right in front of me on the beach.

Our beach.

CHAPTER FIFTY



MY BACK POCKET VIBRATES, WAKING ME FROM MY STARE, contemplating the line where the ocean kisses the sky.

SILAS

Wanna go fishing?

Wanna grab some beer?

Me? I just wanna see you

He's a temptation. One I've resisted for over a year. We hang out. We laugh. But something holds him back. Me too.

Is it the way he looks so much like Redix? How I feel so comfortable with Silas. It's a bittersweet marvel, and I don't know.

Maybe I should let go. Maybe if I do, I'll drift safely toward Silas, toward a new shore, and not get sucked under in this ache.

Because I can't stay in this pain forever.

I make myself reply. It feels strange. Does this mean it's wrong? Making my fingertip text him back; I'm tired of hurting.

I just want

...

It stops me.

I don't know what at first until I really hear it. Above the waves sloshing to shore and the wind blowing over my ears, a song plays behind me.

“Chasing Cars.”

And my chin starts trembling, shaking with my lips quivering; I didn't think I could cry any more. The sky blurs, and my shoulders, I try to keep them from shaking into sobs, but they do because...

This can't be happening.

This isn't chance. This isn't coincidence. I close my eyes; *it's him*. And I can sense him, hearing his call.

Redix is sitting right behind me.

“Is this stalking, Detective?”

That bourbon voice, I huff a laugh, joy filling my lungs with the air I need.

“Yes,”—I turn my wet chin so he can hear over my shoulder—“it is.”

“Does that mean I'll get cuffs and your hands on me too?”

“It means I'll beat the shit out of you.”

“I'd rather”—his voice draws closer—“you beat the fuck out of me.”

His heat rises over my back, warming through my long sleeve shirt.

“Come on. Beat the fuck out of me, Candy Cade.” His lips find my ear, reaching for my heart again. “I deserve it for what

I did.”

Remembering his limp body, his eyes that wouldn't open, I can't speak. What emotions tumble through me, smashed like broken shells in the surf, I don't know, but I can't move. But he does. His tan legs appear in my side vision.

“Is this seat taken?”

“Yes.”

“Who are you saving it for?”

My sunglasses, I push them atop my head, pushing all pride aside too. I look up at him, not afraid to answer, “For the love of my life. For the one who promised me infinity.”

Wearing only board shorts, he sits beside me on the towel, my breath burning as he faces me.

“I'm so sorry, Cade.” He swallows hard before barely saying, “I don't know what else to say.”

“Yes, you do.”

It's in the sky of his eyes staring at me. “And I love you.”

“Say it again.”

“I'm so sorry I hurt you, Magnolia Cade Bryant, and I love you. Like the love-of-my-life love and for infinity.”

Tears burn my eyes like the fire in my chest at his body and face so close to mine. I turn away, the horizon giving me breath. Giving me a moment.

“Say more.” Because it's not enough.

“I'll never be able to say it enough.” He can read my soul. “But I can tell you what I've kinda figured out.”

Silence protects my heart.

“Last time.” His toes wedge in the sand beside mine. “I got sober for everyone else. That's been my life. It's been for everyone else. From my drunk dad, who made me the man of the house at eight. To my mom, who I smiled at every camera for. To my little sister, I had to protect.”

He's quiet, his next words strained. "To the best friend, I fell in love with. To the guy, others assaulted. I don't regret it, but who else was I? I didn't know. I got sober for everyone else I loved but didn't love myself yet."

I chew my lip, hearing every truth I've known about him all this time. It's not too different than my own.

"But this time, I got sober for myself." His foot wedges closer to mine. "Last time, I didn't want to die. This time, I want to live. I want to live for me, for the man it's taken me a year to know and love."

He mirrors me, wrapping his arms around his knees bent in front of him and turning his gaze my way.

"And that man is very fucking humbled and sorry that he hurt you. And I know you saved my life. And you don't owe me anything else, but please just let me thank you for that."

It's in his voice. *He has changed.*

Redix was never one for words, not ones that talked about himself, about how he felt. He was always too focused on me, on everyone else, on being what we all needed.

Only in tender moments between us, when no one else was around, when his body was touching mine, did he say what he felt.

When we were kids, it was how happy he felt. When we were teens, it was the desire we felt. As adults, he's finally saying what I've seen in his eyes all along.

He sounds like his journal, like he knows his truth, and he's not afraid to share it. In fact, he's made peace with it.

I can feel it in his body, relaxed next to mine. Like the connection we've always had, I feel it fill mine too.

I level my eyes at him. "Tell me about this man you've learned to love."

His smile melts my frozen edges. "He likes playing guitar and surfing. He likes writing in his journal and helping kids in crisis, like he was." It warms my soul. "He likes playing Uno and burning pizzas. He likes making ceramic dildos." A

chuckle lightens my heart. “And he’s really in love with this woman who likes candy but loves him even more. And he’s so fucking sorry, and he really misses her.”

I do it first. My hand slides across his scruffy cheek, seizing his silky strands and pulling his lips to mine.

He matches me. He always has. Perfectly. His big hand cups my wet cheek, his kiss seeking mine and...

It’s not in me, with his lips taking mine, so soft, so sexy—I can’t find it. I have no anger. No jealousy. No betrayal. We’ve been through too much.

Redix protected me. He almost died for me. He swapped my pain for his, and I held him in my arms with his life barely hanging on.

Only a fool would stay angry when life is this precious, when love is this great.

“I forgive you.” I slide my lips over his, not wanting to lose his touch. “I was never mad at you.”

His nose nuzzles mine. “You should be.”

“Since when do I do what I should?”

“I mean it. What I said.”

“Which part?”

“All of it.” His eyes anchor to mine. “From the depths of my soul, Cade, I swear it. I’m so sorry.”

“Never say it again; the sorry part. But the love part? Prove it to me, Redix Dean.”

A giggle breaks the air. I glance over his shoulder. A group of teens is turned our way. Their phones too.

You can ignore Redix Dean like a tide of elephants.

“Take me home,” I insist... in every way.

His hand reaches for mine, “I know just the one,” and pulls us both up.

I thought we were going to my place. I thought I would be alone forever. I thought this day would suck like all my others.

I thought I was being punished for what I almost did, though I'd do it again for him.

But he won't let go of my hand, guiding me through the crowd, smiling and pushing through to protect me; I don't need it.

I just need him. Because I thought wrong.

Because *this* is right.

Us. Together.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE



LOVE ME HARD by Elley Duhé

MY EYES, I CAN'T TAKE THEM OFF HIS PROFILE. EVEN THOUGH I don't know where he's driving us. Even while he's filling me in on all the good news.

The bad stuff? I don't want to talk about it anymore. It's stolen enough from us.

"I've been filming in Savannah," he says. "You remember my friend, Lorraine Morris?"

"Yeah."

He's holding my hand on the center console.

"She's doing another series and asked me to do a guest role, a few episodes, and I said yes. She's covered my ass so many times."

"How long are you here?"

"Another month or so."

"And then what?"

He takes his eyes off the road, the one draped by palms and Spanish Moss, and glances my way. “That depends.”

“On?”

“On if I can stay and ride bikes with you.”

I laugh. I can’t help it. There are so many memories between us. That’s one of the happiest ones. I don’t answer him. I’m too distracted by the driveway he turns in to. It’s a huge home but understated, blending into the trees around it.

“Where are we?”

I know this island. This is beachfront, the most prized part of it. Whose place is this? Is it one of Luca Mercier’s houses?

Getting out of the car, it’s his turn not to answer. His hand reaches out to mine, leading me to the front door. When he holds it open for me—an empty living area, windows, a pool, dunes, and seagrass—they greet me before the Atlantic does.

The shock. The wrap of his arms around my waist. The way he vows, “I’m not running anymore. This is my new home here.” It takes my heart while his voice softens. “And if you let me try to win back your trust and love, I hope it will be *our* home here.”

Standing in his empty living room, I turn to him. “You don’t have to *win* me back.”

“Cade, I relapsed, and I cheated on you. I slept with two women. I don’t remember it, but I did.”

I’m so tired of this. Of guilt. Of pain.

“Yes, and you saved me from three men. We’re more than even.”

His jaw clenches, his eyes not believing me.

“Redix, I thought I lost you. And all I cared about was that you lived. That even if you never came back to me, at least you were okay. This was never about years apart. Or about other women. Anyone who gives a shit about that hasn’t held the person they love in their arms, thinking they’re gone. My love for you is too big to ever feel betrayed.”

“But I fucked up. And you kept taking me back. Then I *really* fucked up, and I should have to fight for you now.”

The pause. It's long while the memory moves like a shadow across our eyes.

“You *did* fight for me. And I'm not anyone's pushover, or trophy to win back, or stubborn hard-to-get-game. And anyone who judges me otherwise can go fuck themselves, and the tomorrow they assume they're guaranteed. I know my worth. I know my heart. And I know that I want to be with you.”

He throws his chin up, fighting back tears. “I don't deserve you.”

“Yeah, *you do*. Because I've always loved that man you love now too. And I want to surf with him, and help other kids with him, and play Uno with him. You can forget guitar because I have no fucking patience. But I'm all about burning pizzas, ceramic dildos, and letting him call me ‘Candy Cade.’”

His hands cradle my face. “So I get my best friend back? You'll give me another chance?”

“I'll give you more than a chance. I'll give you infinity.”

“Careful, darlin'.” He presses his forehead to mine. “That's a long time to spend with an asshole.”

“Not when it's as cute as yours.”

His grin lights up my heart. “When have you seen my asshole?”

“Tonight.”

He kisses me through laughter and tears before a tour of the house. Its white marble floors and white walls with natural wood-trimmed windows are empty of furniture. But full of our love as he saves the owner's suite for last.

It's massive. White carpet meets glass doors to the pool deck and ocean beyond. The only thing in the room is a Bali-style king bed with two pillows, sheets, and a blanket.

“How long have you been here?”

“Too long without you.”

I hear it in his voice. Worry. “What’s wrong?”

“What will it look like? Us trying again?”

“What do you want it to look like?”

“Well...”

His left hand, the one with a silver ring on his index finger, tucks his hair back, and my heart leaps because he doesn’t turn away and leave this time.

“I’ve only had two years to dream about it.” Instead, he faces me to say, “I want ice cream kisses and to fuss about toilet paper and what we watch at night because no more *One Tree Hill*. I want to ride bikes with you, red ones like when we were kids. I want to vacuum and water our plants. I want to nap on the sofa with you. I want”—every wish I’ve had with him, it won’t stop flowing from his mouth—“years from now, if we’re ready, to make a beautiful baby with my best friend.”

Have I ever felt this happy? Have I ever felt this ready to live again? This is everything I’ve ever wanted, and it’s right here—a future with Redix.

I close the last distance between us. “Can we start trying now?”

It’s sudden. It’s been waiting.

The grip of his hand around my neck pulls me into his kiss—our kiss—the one that flows heat through my veins and lightens my heart.

His tongue dances with mine while our soft moans find their familiar rhythm. His hard body urges against mine, and it’s been over a year, and arousal explodes through my every nerve.

I need air. I need to yank my top off. I do because there’s a fire in my sex we need to quell while I stand before him in my bikini top, my ribs huffing for breath.

“Fuck,” he sighs, looking at me. “I missed you.”

I drop my jean shorts to the floor. “Take ten seconds or rip me apart again; I don’t care because I missed you too.”

“Oh, I’ll do both,” he replies, reaching to tickle his fingertips under the edge of my bikini bottoms. Lust weighs his eyes down, but he thinks it through.

“Cade, I’ve been sober and celibate ever since. And I’m clear.”

Fuck, that turns me on and soothes my heart that he’s waited that long again.

“What about you?” he dares to ask.

“There was someone else.”

Pain flashes across his eyes. “It’s okay. I didn’t expect you to wait on me or even to forgive me.”

“We did wait on you.” I grin. “Me and Mr. Blue.”

He smile lights up the room.

“I thought you broke him.”

“Only in two pieces. I glued it back.”

He chuckles. “You fixed my dick?”

“Yep.” I strip off my bikini.

His eyes watch mine as his board shorts drop to the floor too.

“Look.” His real one springs to large life. “You’ve fixed my dick in many ways.”

Stepping into his shadow, I barely touch it. “What about you?” Pushing it down to the vice of my thighs, I tease his tip with the wet that’s starting to coat my crevice. “What kept you satisfied?”

“I’ve destroyed six pillows and have carpal tunnel from moaning your name.”

His hips thrust gently into my gap while my nipples graze inches below his. He stopped waxing his chest. It’s so sexy, the hair dusting his sculpted pecs. And his arm, he has new tattoos.

But nothing captures my gaze more, falling down his shredded body, than our matching tattoos. We stare at them,

his fingertips lingering over mine, our past, our connection—two dorsal fins paired for life. His light touch over our story, it makes me tremble.

“I stopped my birth control,” I confess that too. “It made me more depressed, and I didn’t need it.”

“We don’t need it,” he says, “at least, I’m ready. But I have condoms.”

“Redix, I’m ready too, but what if…”

The sight of him, of life slipping from his breath, I can’t shake it. It’ll haunt me forever.

“Life is nothing but ‘ifs.’” His hands lift my jaw. “And if I get to spend the rest of my life with you, Cade, it’ll be the happiest one.”

Our kiss affirms everything, his tongue sweeping gently through my mouth, all my hesitation gone. “No condoms. I’ve waited too long for this. For our dream together.”

His arms sweep me up before he tosses me, giggling onto the plush new bed.

“Lie there,” he demands, smiling, “on our bed where you belong.”

I spread my thighs. “Then climb up here with that big cock where you belong.”

He picks up my foot instead, kissing my ankle and muttering, “You need more patience.”

“You *need* to fuck me.”

He kisses a trail up my calf while his knees crawl onto the edge of the bed. “I need to make you beg for my fuck.”

I’ll be screaming for it because his hungry mouth is leaving wet trails up the inside of my thighs.

He’s right; I have no patience with his gorgeous body climbing over mine. With his tongue next, circling warmly around my nipple, then the other.

“Beg for me, Cade.” He nips at my nipple, his hard shaft urging against my thigh.

Has someone got a megaphone?

“Please fuck me, Redix.” I’ll shout it for all to hear while I grab his strands, trying to lift him to where our bodies align. “Please.”

But he pulls away. “I need you louder and wetter.”

Turning his body around then grabbing mine, he uses his strength to flip me over.

“I’ve never done this before,” I sigh, lying on top of him with my pussy in his face and his beautiful cock in mine.

“I don’t think I have either.” He goes back to kissing up my thighs, and the pull of his hands spreads me open as he rasps, “Damn, Cade. You have a model pussy too. So glistening and pink for me.”

His praise makes my thighs shake, and he hasn’t even started.

I’m staring at his cock, hard and flexing up, seeking me too. I kiss his tattoo, our tattoo, every part of him to the deep ridge of his Adonis belt, following its path.

I moan as my tongue finally licks from his base, up his thick vein, while his tongue thrills me, from flicking my clit lightly to long flat licks. The sensation rolls my eyes back before he dips into my entrance and tasting my nectar for him.

Oh fuck, this is so good. I wrap my hand around his base and hold his tip up, swirling my tongue around his crown while his deep moans vibrate through my pussy.

I want him, as much as I can. Wrapping my lips and hollowing my cheeks, I slide my mouth so tight down his shaft.

There’s no way I can take all of him, but his hard taste is taking me to the edge of where I end, and he begins. It’s getting smeared and lost in our reunion. Those strong hips, he lifts them, trying to fuck my throat while his tongue starts

pummeling my clit, the sound of him lapping through my desire taking me along with my glucking sucks of his.

It's a storm of sensations. His aroma seeps from his sexy flesh—vanilla and leather. The saline taste of him in my mouth, his hard velvet dragging over my lips, the strong wrap of his hands around my ass cheeks as he pulls me open for his feast. His firm nose and stubbled chin make my most sensitive skin scream with lust at his soft mouth, diving into my depths.

“Cade, I'm gonna come.” His voice fills my ears along with his cock in my mouth, swelling with the same certainty. “Fuck, you taste so good; I'm gonna come in your mouth.”

I'm ravenous, my hard grip slapping his tip against the flat of my tongue before I insist. “Do it.” I take him as deep as I can again, letting us both enjoy my soft gag. “I want to taste you in my throat, Redix,” I swear before I take him again.

“*Fuucckkk.*” His groan is muffled in my drenched lips, sucking on each one while his grip is so hard, probably bruising my flesh.

I love it, moaning over his cock while he shakes his head with his mouth buried in my pussy. He's ravaging me like his last meal while the arch of his back comes with his loud groan, and suddenly... I taste him.

His hot, salty spurts make me lose it, the firecracker of my clit exploding at the double satisfaction of his mouth and mine, his sex and mine, both of us drinking the other in.

I need to catch my breath. I need us never to end.

My head and body rest on top of his, the heave of his chest matching mine until we both calm.

“Come here.” He gently rolls me over, resting me on my back while he turns again, his kiss finding mine, his long strands tickling over my face.

I love how he does this, how he craves our taste. I do too. Craning my neck for his mouth, I need more of him, and he knows it, muttering through our flavor, “I'm never done with you.”

I lose all time. All the minutes gone to every part of me that hurts; he heals with his fingers, the back of them, or their tips; he uses everything to cherish every part of my flesh with his touch for so long.

“We can’t lose this again, Cade.”

He’s skimming over my heart; it knows it’s him. It’s beating for his touch.

“I know.” I linger my touch down between his pecs to where I count his abs and all the time we spent apart. “People will die before I let you go so easily again.”

“My hot-tempered woman.” His eyes laugh. *He thinks I’m joking.* “You know it turns me on when you fight for me.”

“How quickly can you get turned on again?”

I leap up, faster than I’ve ever shown him I can, grabbing his wrist and pinning it above his head. When he laughs, trying to grab my other hand, my grip clamps down like a snake, pinning that one down too.

“Fuck!” His smile soars. “Keep being rough with me like this, and I’ll be hard in a second.”

I grind on his cock. “Oh yeah?” Thrilled at how it firms for me. “You wanna be rough?”

“Fuck yes.” He pushes back. I let him. Flipping me back over, I flop onto my back, loving this. “You want it rough, Cade?” He climbs off the edge of the bed. “You sure?”

My hips, he yanks them down, perching my ass on the edge of the bed while he stands at the perfect height between my thighs.

“Yes.” I lift my legs, letting him grab my ankles and spread them wide apart. “I can be *so bad* for you, Redix.”

“Show me then.” His grip on my ankles is tight. The muscles across his shoulders rip down his arms, tensing with urge. “Play with your pussy for me, and show me how bad you are.”

I dip two fingers in and fuck; I'm soaked from his mouth and my release. He looks down, rapt by my show, at my pumping inside where I ache for him.

"I'll be such a dirty girl for you, Redix Dean. I'll let you fuck my pussy. Fuck my ass. Fuck my throat. You can even fuck me in front of a room full of people. I want them to see how bad you make me."

Lifting my fingers to my tongue, I suck the taste off before I do it, again and again, until his cock swells ready again.

"I'll fuck you like that and more, Cade." His fat tip, he nudges it against my fingers. "Do you want this? Rough?"

"Yes." I'm pulsing for him. Reaching for his length, I wedge him into my pussy. "I'd kill for you to fuck me, Redix. And only you."

He doesn't hesitate. Flexing those hips, he thrusts inside me, throwing my head back, my body crying out at the small pain groaning into my strongest urge satisfied.

"You want me like this? You want it hard like this?" His grip on my ankles squeezes hard, like the pound of his mass driving inside me and smacking through the air.

"Yes, I do." I'm at his mercy, bending my knees and curving my hips under, tilting to take even more of his possession. "All of you."

He leans over, letting go of my ankles, his beautiful weight pressing my knees to my chest. I'm so open, ready, and willing to take everything he gives me.

"Fuck, Cade." And there's no stopping him. I can see it in his eyes, staring back at mine. "Fuck, I missed you. So much."

"Redix," I sigh, calling his lips to mine.

He hears me, from across a million miles he can, pressing his mouth to mine, and our truth is here. Time disappears to our deep kiss, our tongues caressing before he lifts his mouth from mine to watch us and his stunning plunge into my everything wide open for him to take; this can't end. Over and

over, we kiss, we cling, we crave the sight of us joined, till the pleasure builds and it's innate to our sex.

He starts thrusting faster, and I start climbing to my favorite brink.

“Watch us together.” His breath shallows. We're trembling and can't tear our eyes away. “How we belong. Me inside you.”

How can he do this? His gaze holding mine captive. His body mastering mine. He's fucking me deeper, harder than I can wish for, discovering new places, new aches inside me, and I missed him so much too. The pain of it slipping away as he dives back in where he belongs, inside all the cracks of my heart. It's whole again.

“Redix.” I don't know where he's hitting, what perfect deep spot he found, my heart, my soul, but it's his. A lightning frenzy of my nerves, it's balling up fast and getting ready. “Redix, please.” I don't know what's happening to me, but it's him. It's us, and I gasp before it detonates. “Don't stop.”

Crying out; I can't control it. It owns me, gushing from my core, streams in pulses dripping over my flesh and coating his.

“Oh fuck.” He marvels at it too. What he just did to me. “Fuck.”

And I can't stop because his ruthless hips don't. With all his strength, his thrusts take me again, my thighs shaking, feeling the little rivers he's releasing between my cheeks. “Fuck, Cade, yes. Keep squirting for my cock.”

He's gazing down while I can see it, the seize of his every perfect muscle, a deep groan clutching his ribs. “Cade.” He can't stop it either, what happens between us; his grunts while he comes, and my moans feeling him pulsing inside.

I reach for him, pulling him down and wrapping my legs around him. He rolls us over, wrapping around me, too, and we don't need words. We just need this.

My tears at his return. His kiss of them away. All the pain, all the waiting, we let it go to have this again.

“Now that’s how you make a baby.” I can’t resist the joke.

“I failed Sex-Ed, remember?” He tickles his fingertip across my bottom lip. “Because *you* were my Sex-Ed. Besides,”—he’s going to kiss me again, and I’m going to love him forever—“we have infinity to keep trying.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO



Fine Line by Harry Styles

IT'S THE BEST WEEK OF MY LIFE.

Redix goes to set, and I go to work. When he gets a day off, I take one too, and we spend it furniture shopping in Savannah. Since he doesn't give a shit about that stuff, I get to pick out items, and he just smiles, loving that I love this.

He's more focused on this Saturday. It's Halloween and my favorite holiday because of, duh, the candy.

"I'm in charge of the costumes," he informs me while he preps our dinner, his chef's knife going to town on some radishes.

"Oh, really?" I'm still struggling with this whole onion-chopping-crying-torture. "Where are we going in said costumes?"

"That's my secret, Detective."

A lock of his hair falls from its knot. It's kissing his lips where I want mine.

“Don’t I get a hint?” I can’t see through the burning tears.

“Yes. It’s circus themed.” He pops a radish slice into his grinning mouth. “I’m the elephant, of course.”

I try to laugh, but I can’t see shit.

“Jesus, Candy Cade.” He grabs a paper napkin and starts blotting my tears. “Let me do this before you lose a finger.”

“Onions will not beat me.”

I’m blind; it’s official. He keeps dabbing, and I keep crying until he shoves the cutting board out from under my nose.

“Tell you what.” I can tell he’s smiling by his tone, declaring, “New house rule: You cook desserts, and I make dinners. Deal?”

“You had me at sugar.”

“Second rule: Toilet paper goes over.”

“Uh-huh. I’ll flip it back right every time I pee.”

I’m pulled into a hug, where I wipe my tears on his T-shirt. “Will you at least let me win at Uno?” He murmurs into my hair.

“Now we’re talking.”

Days later, he makes the perfect pirate, and I’m his wench as we take his nephew, Nicolas, trick-or-treating around our new neighborhood.

All the kids running around, all the candy rustling in bags, it’s pure bliss. Especially when Redix takes my hand while we stand on the sidewalk, watching Nicolas sing “trick or treat” to a couple who opens their front door. It’s two men in full puppy-face makeup, while one holds the cutest baby dressed like a cat.

“That’s gonna be us one day,” he whispers.

“Then you better take my bounty tonight.”

He grabs my ass. “Can I take your booty too?”

This feels so right. “Yes, you may.”

It makes me want to rush home, but we revel in this for another hour until his nephew is exhausted, and his sister, Renie, is in our driveway picking him up.

“Good night!” I wave to her from the front porch as she closes her car door.

The night has quieted. The sidewalks have cleared of the holiday revelers. The light of the full Hunter’s Moon filters through the tree branches, their leaves fluttering in the breeze.

I’m stilled by the moment. Redix is inside, getting ready for our celebration while I draw a deep breath, so happy until...

The low rumble of an engine pulls me back, drawing my attention to a black sedan, a BMW. It slowly drives by our new house.

I stare at the tinted windows and can’t see who’s driving, but...

Something feels off.

I go back inside, locking the front door and hitting the alarm code. My service gun is in a safe under the new nightstand by our bed, with my police radio charging on top.

We’re safe.

I let it go, the odd feeling, for the rest of the night. It’s not hard with a distraction like Redix Dean wanting to play dirty pirate, and I’m his wanton wench. Hell, we don’t even need the costumes.

“Four eighty.” My radio splits the night air hours later. “We have a wellness check requested for a ‘Charlie Ravenel.’ White female. Thirty-four. Daufuskie Island. Last seen at four p.m.”

The grab for my radio with that name; it’s instant.

“Bryant. One forty. I’ll take it.” It’s not classified as a priority call, but it is to me.

Redix grumbles from his pillow. “Did they just say ‘Charlie Ravenel’?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m working with her. She’s detail for Riley Chase.” He rolls on his back, awake as I am now. “Is she okay?”

“I don’t know.” It’s five hours until daylight. I can’t go on the water, not on duty, and not without backup. And the office is slammed tonight. It’s Saturday and Halloween; other calls take priority.

But I want this one. Charlie Ravenel saved me years ago. And like hell if I won’t return the favor.

I try to sleep a few hours in Redix’s arms, but it won’t work. At least it soothes my nerves, feeling grateful for this life with him now, but I’m worried about another woman.

Is Charlie okay?

I’m dressed before dawn. Grabbing my puffy jacket from the walk-in closet, it stills me—my clothes hang on one side, Redix’s on the other.

Wow. How life can change on a dime.

And sometimes, thankfully, for the better.

“Tell her I said ‘hey,’” Redix calls out from our bed while I clip my belt on. “Tell her I still owe her a day fishing.”

I hope that’s the case. That it’s something harmless, but I know the hell that Charlie Ravenel and Daniel Pierce have been through this past year. They’ve faced down lethal threats.

“Will do.” I lean over, kissing Redix goodbye. “I’ll be back later.”

“I’ll be waiting.” He grabs my pillow and hugs it to him with a grin.

I don’t make him wait long. Three hours later, I’m back home and find him in the kitchen whipping up omelets.

“Everything okay?” He returns my kiss. “Is Charlie okay?”

“She is now.”

I don’t like it. Now I have to keep two deadly secrets from Redix. What Charlie Ravenel did to keep her family safe. And

what I did, what my family did, so that we can be free and others on this island can be safe.

One isn't my secret to tell—I'll go to my grave backing up a woman like Charlie.

The other, it terrifies me if Redix ever finds out. He said he wanted peace and my deal delivered. Just not how he'd approve of it.

But now the secret scratches at my soul like a rat in a cage.

I know I did the right thing; the only thing left to do since courts were built by men and laws weren't written for women.

Still, death is the greatest burden—no matter the reason.

Redix is so strong now. I've never seen him shine this bright. I've never heard him talk this much or square his broad shoulders even taller.

I'll carry the secret now. We have too much hope; our future together is too bright.

“Glad she's okay.” His lips peck mine. “Now eat up. I've made breakfast and plans.”

His plans involve a surprise in the garage because he's spent the last two days there forbidding me to enter. When I'm finally allowed in, he takes his hands off my eyes, to my surprise, and I gasp before I laugh.

“Two red bikes!” They're perfect. “You got us two red Schwinn's?”

“I painted them to match. I'm going down the list of everything we want together.” His lips nuzzle my neck. “Tonight, we burn pizzas again.”

But this afternoon, we're riding. Everywhere. The November first day is mild, perfect for exploring the wide sidewalks we used to roam as kids.

Redix tells me to lead the way. “So I can watch your ass,” he informed me before pinching it.

For a moment, winding down the black paved sidewalks, I think of Pamela. How she's somewhere out there. I've been

looking for her. The trail to her is cold, but I won't let up. I'll never stop searching for her or Cam Le.

The other victims, they're safe. I couldn't give them details or a day in court, but when I called them, I tried to let it sound true from my voice—no one is after them anymore.

“Hey.” Redix pulls up alongside me at the crosswalk. “Let's get some ice cream.”

The joy on his face, it's like we're ten again. Like fun and friendship are all we know.

But then I glance down at his bare sculpted chest and abs under the white linen shirt he's left unbuttoned... and we share much more together. He is *very* much a man—the only man I'll love.

I lead the way to our spot, the one where we had our first kiss and where our nightmare began.

But that's all in the past.

I can feel it as his lemon sherbet-coated lips slide over mine now, kissing me through his murmurs, “I love you, Candy Cade.”

We don't care about tourists feet away with their phones up. Nothing comes between our love anymore.

“I love you too, Redix Dean.”

He pulls his lips away and nuzzles his nose to mine.

“If I get on one knee again for you, what will you say?”

“*If?*”

“*When.*” His smile shines through my soul. “*When* I get on one knee, what will you say?”

“Do you want an answer now?” His sky eyes, I can fly in them. “Or should I wait?”

“We've waited long enough.” His hand cups my cheek. “I want to know—”

“Where is he!” The sudden shout makes me jump. “Where is he!”

Redix snaps his neck around. I glance past his shoulder.

Gentry Evans is charging our way with a black BMW with tinted windows idling at the curb.

That curb.

The same one he, TJ, and Derek attacked us from.

“I know you did something, you crazy bitch.” Spittle drips from Gentry’s thin lips along with his fury. “Where is TJ?”

I charge past Redix, protecting him and aiming right into Gentry’s wrath. My forearm snaps up to Gentry’s neck.

“You better back the fuck down, Senator.” Out of my right side-eye, the crowd that gathered for me and Redix is witnessing this too.

Who should fear this more?

Me or Gentry?

“I know it was you.” From the look in Gentry’s eyes, he’s barely hanging on to his sanity. “I know you did something to TJ.”

“Back off her,”—Redix seethes while he reaches around me and shoves Gentry’s shoulder— “or I swear I’ll fucking kill you this time.”

“*She* did the killing.” Gentry drops that truth bomb, and it explodes my world apart. “Did she tell you that, pretty boy? What she did for *you*?”

“Get out of here,” I snarl. “You’re fucking crazy. And you’re making a career-ending scene.”

The only thing more powerful than Gentry’s fury is his ego, his need for a clean reputation. He’s filthy as fuck, but only Redix and I know just how much.

Gentry glances at the crowd, at phone screens in the air. He yanks at his golf shirt, smoothing its wrinkles before looking back our way.

“This isn’t over.” He lowers his voice. “I know what you did to TJ, and I’ll destroy you for it.”

I step to him, nose to nose.

“And I’ll take you down with me, Motherfucker—to the gates of hell we go. I don’t know what happened to TJ, but I know you have Pamela. And I know you have Cam Le. And I know you’re hiding Derek. And I will rip your fucking world apart to find them.”

The eerie peace that floods Gentry’s eyes; it shakes my core. But I won’t show it.

“Leave,” Redix growls at him, “or I’ll rip you apart myself.”

“Don’t get too comfortable here, pretty boy.” Gentry steps back. “Y’all play house all you want. Just know”—his sneer takes me back ten years, and I want to scream at its return—“you’re playing house with a murderer now.”

He turns and slithers back to his car.

And my soul weeps. I know what just happened, and I can’t face it.

“Cade.” But his grip turns me around, and I make myself look Redix in the eyes.

He stares back at me and he’s never looked at me this way.

All I’ve ever seen in his eyes is love, laughter, passion... or pain.

All for me.

What’s there now? It’s this one question; it’s after him now.

“What did you do, Cade?”

NOT THE END

Keep reading WITH HIM for the hottest
happily ever after ending



WITH HIM

BOOK TWO

PREFACE



Content warning: Please be aware this story deals with characters discovering bisexuality and being outed against their will. Also, a character fighting cancer is in this story. Themes of sexual violence are also included. There is no on-the-page trauma, but rather memories of it. In the end, this is a story about celebrating life, survival, and ALL love.



WITH HIM PLAYLIST

Love is a Bitch by Two Feet

exile by Taylor Swift feat. Bon Iver

Simple Things by Miguel

Good Stuff by Griff

Moth To A Flame by The Weeknd

Keeping A Secret by Bleachers

Forgive Me by Sofi Tukker, Mahmut Orhan

Don't Sleep (Freestyle) by SKYLR

Bad Things by Summer Kennedy

Nothing Compares by The Weeknd

Feel It by Michel Morrone

Lost On You by LP

Closer by Kings of Leon

My Enemy by CHVRCHES, Matt Berninger

Body Say by Demi Lovato

Silhouette by Active Child feat Ellie Golding

Infinity by Jaymes Young

Available on **SPOTIFY**



WITH
HIM

BY KELLY FINLEY

CHAPTER ONE



Love Is a Bitch by Two Feet

Now

I'M GOING to hell anyway, so I might as well commit this sin because this feels like heaven. Like pure bliss sliding through my veins, desire erasing every reason why I can't fight this anymore.

Because I want this.

And they *need* this.

Redix kisses the nape of my neck while he slowly unzips my dress. The teeth of the zipper open, and so do I. Air rushes my exposed back where his fingertips linger down my spine before tracing back up to the straps of my crimson dress.

He hesitates with his body pressing against my back, with every part of him hard, while his husky whisper asks from his depths, "Will you choose *us*, Cade?"

For the man in front of me, I have chosen him in so many ways. But that's not who Redix is asking about.

Because Silas's kiss is different. Tickling his lips over mine, his tongue plays like he's going to spend forever in this moment, and I don't want it to end either, not with where this is going.

"Yes," I answer through Silas's lips, indulging my mouth, his hands skimming my hips while Redix gently bites down my neck, making me moan at him dropping my dress to the floor.

I'm exposed in every way.

My darkest desires. My torn heart. My haunting secret.

I can't decide what I want except for *this* right now. Standing in a black lace bra and matching panties, I love two men and won't choose.

Why should I?

I'm not the only force binding them together.

Redix slides my bra strap down, kissing my shoulder, sending tingles to the tips of my fingers. There's as much passion and question in his kiss as I'm holding in my heart. His long strands tickle across my back while we share something taboo, something that may mend us, and with everything we've already shared, we *need* to do this.

We need to decide.

Do we hate each other for what I did?

Or do we love each other so much for it?

I don't know what to feel except his lips across my flesh, his steel body pressing into mine; his warmth and smell are so familiar that I'm safe taking this risk.

Yes, I can let go for now and not know. I can choose *us* for two nights.

Because Silas is skimming the lace of my bra with the see-through fabric pulled taut over my pebbled nipples. He's touching my breasts like a sacred relic to treasure.

Like there are questions between us, too.

Silas traces his fingertip over my nipple; the attraction between us slashes arousal to my belly down to a lush ooze between my thighs. Pinching his fingertips lightly over my sensitive nub, he twirls his touch, knowing how to tease me because that's what we did for so long—teasing each other to the point of such trust. To the point where the attraction between us isn't the question.

It's the love.

What does love look like between people when you don't see it the same way?

I try letting go of my questions and my need for answers, and I can... for now.

With Redix tugging down the lace cup of my bra, exposing my flesh for Silas, and saying, "Taste her," I lose my grip. With him palming my full breast and lifting my nipple to Silas's waiting mouth, lowering to devour me, I'll keep falling. With sudden heat cascading down my body, one man sucks my nipple while another holds it for his taste as he gently pinches the other.

I'm going to drown in this pleasure with these two men, and if I don't ever breathe again, maybe I shouldn't. Maybe this should be my end because I don't know my next day or answers.

Nothing in my life makes sense. Everything's out of control.

And that's what I always need: control.

But I lost it the minute I almost killed an evil man. A man who hurt Redix, who assaulted him because of me. A man who deserved it for hurting other women, too, so hell, yes, I had to do it. But every day since has been a hell of the loneliest days, then the most passionate nights, followed by months of emotional chaos raging through my heart.

Redix hates me for what I did for him. And the reason I did it is why he'll never stop loving me, either.

All the while, Silas anchored me in this storm, and I didn't know another man could be my best friend, but he is. We've shared so much—the longest talks, the biggest laughs, the forbidden nights. I brought Silas's world back to him, and he's been my accomplice while I wreak havoc on the world of evil men.

So that's my life now.

I go from a cover girl to a cop to a criminal to a cunt dripping for two perfect men.

The heartbreak and the healing of these two men lavishing my flesh—for what will surely be two days of them fucking me into my last shred of a self—is that they share so much.

More than me.

It's beautiful to me that they have each other too. That they found comfort in the other. But in a world like ours, with cameras hunting Redix for his fame, expectations burdening Silas because of his name, and laws restraining me in my job, can it last?

It's an assault on my senses; it's embarrassing if it didn't feel like fate that they look so much alike—with the same long hair, square jaws, lush lips, and eyes that claim your soul. And their bodies? Redix is taller, but Silas still has a few inches on my five-foot-ten frame. Muscles shred down both men's tan bodies, and their hands hold expert talent at thrilling my flesh.

I'm so lucky... and I'm so *fucked*... in every sense of the word.

I'm standing between two beautiful mountains of masculine perfection, and this valley's a paradise for most.

I fear it'll be my hell, too.

Redix travels his hand down my belly, making it flutter. His fingers sink under my panties while Silas won't stop sucking my nipples—*my God, what are we doing?*

“Damn, you're so wet for us, Cade.”

Redix's voice; it's imprinted on my soul. I'd know it in a cacophony of a million because I've always and only wanted

him.

Until he didn't want me.

Until he couldn't even look at me.

Through shouts, tears, and excruciating silences, we destroyed each other and have been trying to recover ever since. Can we?

He needed peace, and I needed space, and what if that's how we'll work?

Silas swept into my days and thrilled my nights, and I could be another woman with him. Someone new. Someone free. Someone without a tragic past.

Then I'd see Redix again, and I could never change. I could never stop loving him or wanting to sob at the ache of missing him, and no matter how he smiled for others, I could feel the question burdening his soul.

Can he forgive me?

Because no matter how we fill each other with fury or hurt, the love is there, and the passion is all-consuming.

"You're so fucking beautiful," Silas murmurs, sinking to his knees before me while Redix's fingers tease through my soaking folds.

I look down into Silas's hazel eyes. Eyes that have brought me nothing but peace, the perfect man to start over with. He's been my joy despite my life being a raging hell. But we're so different.

I've never met anyone like Silas. Rules don't govern him; he won't let them. Freedom is all he demands, and he wants it for me, too.

But love comes with obligations. It makes us sacrifice. It makes us cry. It isn't always about what we want.

Love has seasons: hot summers, and sometimes it's winter and cold as hell.

At least, that's all I've known of love.

“Can I, Cade?” Silas’s lips are so close to mine, the ones needing these men to fuck me so much it’s insanity in my body, and who’s he asking anyway?

Me or Redix?

Redix sinks his fingers inside my pussy, the one he was the first to have, and I groan at the depths only he can touch. It’s art, it’s poetry, it’s exactly how to touch me because he discovered my desire first.

But mine is *not* his to give away.

I gaze into Silas’s eyes, and he’s asking *me*. Because in our months together, Silas has taught me so much. About sex, about love, about how big a heart can be, cherishing so many, and breaking for a few.

This is what he’s been teaching me: that I belong to no one.

That I can let go of one idea of love and trust another will grow back.

“Yes.”

It’s my answer; it’s my permission to give as Redix sinks his fingers in deeper and Silas drags my panties down my thighs. They planned this. They orchestrated this night. They need this, too, to answer their questions. Surprises I’ve learned about Redix. Secrets I know about Silas.

The three of us need to do this together.

Redix spreads my folds for Silas’s tender kiss, and I’m chained to this wall for them to share me, and I know...

This is the only way.

My world spreads open to them, and this is how I’ve been torn for so long because this is about more than these two men.

This is about two others who are still out there. Two evil men who’ve hurt so many they deserve to die, too. They tried to hurt me first, but Redix protected me. He took their violence for me, and our storm has raged ever since. Waves of revenge and justice for my plans for both evil men, and I won’t give

up. I will find the women they took. I will get back the dreams they stole from me.

The question is...

Who will I share those dreams with?

Redix and I wanted that life together. We fought for those dreams. Are they gone? Is Silas the one I'm supposed to share them with? Because I could. I can see those dreams with either man.

The real question. The real secret I haven't shared... is that maybe I don't want either.

Maybe I want a life with both of them.

Or maybe I want a new life alone.

Redix turns my chin for his kiss, the one that reaches in and cradles my soul. I whimper at our truth, tears springing up to feel his passion swirling with hate. But we can still do this. Our love is stronger.

Silas kisses my lips, his tongue greeting my tender clit, and I groan into Redix's mouth at Silas's lavish attention. Silas is everything good, and I cherish him. I'll always be here for him.

The two men start claiming me for the two nights they've promised, and it overwhelms my heart, my sex weeping to know...

How did we get here?

CHAPTER TWO



REDIX

exile (feat. Bon Iver) by Taylor Swift

MONTHS BEFORE...

“HELLO, my name is Redix, and I’m an alcoholic.”

“Hi, Redix,” the group sitting in a circle of chairs replies.

My hands wrap around my paper cup of coffee as I lean forward to share.

“I... uh.”

How the fuck do I say this?

I can memorize pages of lines. I can win a Golden Globe acting like a rockstar in an orgy. Or a surfer staring down a monster wave. Hell, I even know every Taylor Swift lyric because she’s hella talented, and I did a music video for her.

But talk about my shit?

Nope.

It's been two months, and the words are boulders in my throat. Stuck.

There are no secrets in this group.

Hell, it's secrets that got me here in the first place. I've been sober, my second time around, for seventeen months and ten days, and brutal honesty is *the* reason why.

I stare at the white linoleum floor. The smell of the Christmas tree in the corner, my coffee, some guy's strong cologne, and the words I can't say hang in the air.

Because if I share *this secret*, more lives get ruined.

And that's just what I need. To add another name to the list of—*How Redix Dean Fucked Up My Life*—people I've hurt.

“Redix,” Mike, the guy who guides our meeting, offers, “we're here to listen if you need to share.”

Oh, I need to share.

I need to yell. I need to punch a wall, concrete preferably. I need to smash everything I own before I burn it all because I'm so fucking pissed at Cade. I made her leave two months ago and haven't seen her since.

She left me no choice. What she did makes my life hell again. And when it's hell, it's hard staying sober. And I have to stay sober because I'm dead the next time I put a bottle to my lips.

And just to mind fuck me on the daily.

Our fight keeps looping in my mind. It keeps breaking my heart all over again...



“YOU HAD NO RIGHT!”

It thundered from my soul. Tears fell from her eyes and the home I bought for us... it fell around us, too.

Everything fell apart that day.

“This is my pain. My scar. My fucking hell, I was finally over; peace I finally had, and you had no right to take it from me!”

She wouldn't answer me. She couldn't.

“Why would you do this to us, Cade? We were finally free.” Every dream I lived for had her in it. But in one act, in one moral broken, *the highest moral*, she killed my dreams too. “I don't wanna believe it. But I do. I can see it in your eyes—it's true.”

She just stood by the bed we shared, the one we wanted to make a baby in, and she couldn't admit a damn thing because then she'd admit to murder.

Cade Bryant will never be stupid enough to do that.

“You let them win!” I couldn't stop yelling. “You're one of them now. You're a criminal, too. You hurt people, too.”

“There's always more than one victim in a crime.” Her words were measured, careful not to indict herself or me if anyone gets called to testify. “The law isn't big enough to get justice for all.”

“Justice?” I grabbed half a row of her clothes hanging in our closet and threw them on the bed. “That's not justice, Cade; that's vigilante murder. There was no trial, no jury, no sentence. You just fucking decided for yourself. You were judge, jury, and executioner.”

“Please don't do this,” she muttered.

“I didn't do anything. I never got my say. You never talked to me about it. You sure as shit didn't ask me.”

“You never asked me either.”

She didn't flinch. Not while I piled her clothes on the bed because she needed to leave. I couldn't breathe next to her. I sure as hell couldn't sleep or even live with her. Not after what she did.

“You never asked what *I* needed to heal, and I never judged your pain.” She didn't yell. “Your addictions. All those other women. Every soul-crushing thing you did, and I never

hated you. I knew you were hurting, but I've been hurting too. They took from me, too, and from those other victims. So, how dare you judge me?"

"All this time, I know I failed you, and you never abandoned me." Fuck, I choked on the words. On pain. On love.

"Please don't do this," she murmured again.

I didn't listen even as tears wet her lips.

"You were the one I protected, Cade. You survived being the good one, while, yes, I was the bad one for so long. And I got sober believing that. That the hell I went through was worth it because they didn't ruin you too." I broke. I gulped back tears; I couldn't help it. "That's all I believed. That if I could hang on and get strong again, we could be together. And now that's a lie because they *did* get to you. They ruined us both."

Her chin trembled. I'd never seen so many tears pour down her beautiful face. Her voice barely worked.

"I'm not ruined. Neither are you. They didn't win because our love survived." She glanced in dismay at her clothes on the bed. "Don't you believe in us?"

"I believed *in you*. But you killed that too."

"You can still believe in me. I'll always do the right thing, even if it's not the perfect ending."

I wanted to vomit. "So you killed TJ? What was his perfect ending? Did you shoot him or use your bare hands?"

Fuck, it made me sick imagining Cade going that far.

I get the impulse. But to plan a murder? To actually do it?

What does that do to your soul?

That man, he's probably at the bottom of the ocean, but he's still a ghost in our lives. TJ wanted Cade. He stalked her. He tried to attack her, so I protected her, and he ripped my soul into pieces for it. Now he has hers, too.

“What about Gentry and Derek?” I glared at her. “Are you gonna kill them too?”

Those two evil men were there, too. They had the drugs, the power, and the intent to take Cade, but I wouldn't let them.

So they went after me instead.

And I'd do it again.

But not for it to end like this.

Not for it to end us.

“There's a warrant out for Derek Baucom, and Senator Gentry Evans is a person of interest in a missing woman's case.” She answered like a Sergeant, like a woman raised by two cops who knew exactly what *not* to say.

“And if the law doesn't work this time either, you're gonna do it?” A suitcase in our closet, I dropped it at her feet. “You're gonna kill Gentry and Derek for what they did to me? To us?”

I stared into her purple eyes.

“Please don't do this,” was all she kept saying.

I've loved Cade since we were nine years old. She was my best friend, and I could read her every thought. She was dying inside. Her heart, the one I cherish, I was killing it with my rage. Mine too. I felt it rip into shreds.

“You killing TJ killed *us*, too,” I sneered.

She expected this all along... and she did it anyway. She knew I'd never condone this.

Would I? That she'd go rogue and kill the rapist who hurt us both?

No. She chose revenge over our love, so I chose no forgiveness.

“It's my job to protect people.” Her lips quivered. “They looked like me, dammit, almost all the victims, and I won't let another woman get hurt. I'll do whatever it takes to stop them.”

“Including more murder?” I dropped her shoes by the suitcase.

That image of her killing TJ. It kept strobing in my mind, disturbing my soul.

Yes, Cade can fight. She can defend herself. I love that about her. But kill? I couldn't love that. I survived too much violence to condone it. Ever.

“Murder will never free you.” I confronted her. “It'll only kill you too.”

Her stuff was piled on our bed. The suitcase lay open, ready, looking like an empty coffin, and I was dying inside, too. I towered over her, and usually, I'd pull her to me and hold her, and everything would be okay. *We* would be okay.

Not then.

“I'll never understand why.” She stood silent, and fuck, it hurt so bad, but I kept going. “We were finally free of them. We were starting over.” It gripped my heart so hard. “Since we were eighteen, we had our dream. To get married. To have kids. To have a house by the ocean. Remember? I lived for our dream when I was sweating and throwing up and shaking so bad my fucking teeth hurt. All I lived for was you.”

That punched her chin. Turning toward the windows, she couldn't look at me. But I invaded her space, trying to shove my pain into her heart.

“Now we're right back in that night again, and that's not justice... that's hell.”

It started dripping through my veins: a new pain, another reason to run.

Our hope and love—I stared at her beautiful profile—and I couldn't feel it anymore. I only felt its absence.

“Go ahead, Cade. Do it,” I seethed. “You've already killed our love. You might as well continue your killing spree.”

I was vicious, furious.

I couldn't find reality in the horrible one that exploded into what had been our perfect week back together. It was supposed to become our perfect life because I was about to propose to her again. I wanted our kids to play on the beach. I wanted to cook her dinners. I wanted to sit on a porch and hold her hand, staring at every sunset until my final one *with her*.

But Gentry Evans ruined our lives just before I went down on one knee for her. Like everything else, he took that from us, too, accusing Cade of killing TJ. He loved destroying us all over again.

She fired back at Gentry that she knew his other crimes, that she'd end him too.

All the while, the ground opened under me, and my finally happy world disappeared beneath my feet.

I didn't know her.

Did I? Did I *not* know she'd do this all along? Were there warning signs I should've seen?

Cade Bryant is a fighter. I always supported that. So tired of boys harassing her because she's so fucking stunning; she learned to protect herself when I couldn't. And she's wicked smart.

Fools think beautiful women have no intelligence. Bullshit. The beautiful need it to survive the threats that come their way.

Like hell, I don't know that reality, too.

This island, Hilton Head—she knows its every dark corner and luxury location. The water surrounding it, she grew up on it. Between her mother, our former Sheriff with an iron fist, and her dad, who spends his days on a boat, Cade is perfectly trained for this one act.

How to get away with murder.

“No matter how much you hate me, Redix, for whatever I have to do.” Her hands shook while she started packing. “I'll never stop loving you.”

When she cries, my heart has no restraint. I'll do anything to make her smile, to make her better. But I watched tears pouring from her beautiful eyes that afternoon while she piled stuff into the suitcase.

And my pain dulled. It was that wicked numb I'm addicted to. The one I sought for nine years. The one I find at the bottom of a bottle. The one that'll kill me if I ever touch another drop again.

After what she did?

That temptation dangled over my tongue. Liquor never lets me down. It delivers freedom from this pain. Forever.

"Leave," I told her, and that terrifying urge to drink again. "Leave and never come back."

Who was that for?

Her. Me. Our past. My addiction. Her crime.

I turned my back on her and walked to the sliding glass door to the pool outside. Slamming it back so hard behind me it cracked, and I didn't give a shit.

I had to find my sanity, my sobriety. It's all I have left.

We don't call or text. We avoid each other.

Cade's a ghost, and our fight, our new secret... it haunts my soul.



"REDIX?" Mike asks again as our circle gets impatient with my heavy silence. "Would you like to share or pass?"

"I pass."

I can't talk about it.

Not even if I need to.

I hate Cade. I hate her for making me feel this way because I love her. Because this feels like a disease threatening to end

us, and I don't know what—or who—can heal us.

Still, I'd never hurt her, even by divulging to this group sworn to secrecy that she committed murder for me.

That truth is my new demon.

My eyes lift from staring at the floor, and this place returns. In this sanctuary in a church with light streaming in through stained glass, I get lost in the dazzle of jeweled colors in the window before I look back at the crowd and the woman sharing now.

“Hi, my name is Karen, and I'm an alcoholic.”

“Hi, Karen,” we reply.

Her eyes find mine, and she softly smiles.

Huh, I've never noticed her before. I don't notice many women.

And she's looking back at me... like that's exactly what she wants.

CHAPTER THREE



Simple Things by Miguel

I HAVE TWO CHOICES. I GRIN; AIN'T THAT THE STORY OF MY life.

Do I go with the Tom Ford navy suit or the black Brioni? They're both tailored for me, and I'd rather wear board shorts.

Hell, the expensive suits still hang in the garment bags my grandma gave me.

"Every southern gentleman starts with two suits," she said. "One for business and one for romance."

My grandma was the best. That woman never left the house without looking like elegance defined. Then she'd hide behind her house and spit tobacco with me. She taught me how. My record is ten feet.

And Grandma was the only one who gave me a damn thing after I got caught. She cared for me until her final days, so I swear I'll make her proud tonight. I need to pick the right suit because I won't let Cade down, either.

She said her dress is crimson red, and even if she bought it at a thrift store, tonight she'll look like the million-dollar model she almost was.

This is a big night for her.

For me, too.

She's after an evil son-of-a-bitch, and I'm about to confront my parents. We haven't spoken in years, and I know they'll be at this holiday party. It's the biggest one thrown yearly in Savannah, and every powerful player will be there. I fucking hate it.

But for Cade, I'll do it.

Since Redix Dean broke her heart—again—we've been spending more time together. Mainly we fish. Sometimes, we sail. Other times, she looks so sad I ask if I can hold her, and she lets me. I pull her into my arms, and we nap on the bed in my boat's cabin.

That's all.

But that's a lot to me.

We haven't kissed. We haven't done anything but be friends who are way too comfortable in each other's arms.

I can't explain it, but I feel safe with Cade. Like she's where I belong, where my truth is. I've been full of questions for so long, but when I'm with her, she's a peaceful answer.

And damn, when she's close to me, I want her. Like there's only one other woman I've wanted this bad, but I could never have her. And Cade's just as beautiful, so different in how she looks but stunning still the same.

Sometimes, I can't stop staring at her.

She'll jump on my boat wearing cut-off jean shorts, showing off her legs that go for miles. Then she'll yank her sweaty tank off, revealing a bikini top barely covering her tits I'd die for. Then she'll cast a heart-slammng smile along with her fishing line.

Jesus, I can't help myself. I watch how her perfect breasts move with the arc of her arms, how her cleavage deepens, then opens for my stare. I can't tell you how many times I've popped wood at the sight of her.

Hell, who doesn't?

When I do, I know she sees it. I caught her glancing, and it only twitched my desperate cock more, but that's as far as we go. Wanting each other. Watching each other. I kinda like the long tease.

You can't tell me she doesn't want me too. That there's something about me she needs. I see it in the way she stares. How her lips part when I greet her with no shirt on. How she gets goosebumps when I brush against her (on purpose).

But she's in too much pain, and I'm too stubborn to fall for another woman I can't have.

Because despite how Cade clams up about whatever happened between her and Redix, her heart belongs to him. It's as obvious as a goddamn lightning strike.

So why the hell put myself through this again?

Why fall for another woman I can't have?

I fell for Charlie Ravenel, and it's been hell. She was my babysitter, eight years my senior, and my first love, and time is an asshole because it didn't work in our favor.

Charlie went off to college, then she joined the Marines, then she married one, and I was so damn scared while she served in Afghanistan, and I was right to be. She came home a widow and shot three times, and I swore I'd take care of her.

But Charlie didn't feel that way about me. Hell, she suffered so much she didn't feel anything. Then she took a job as a bodyguard in Europe and returned a few years later in love with Daniel Pierce.

How the fuck do you compete with *him*?

You can't. He's a goddamn orgasm wrapped in a huge British celebrity bow, and I don't blame her.

And when Daniel questioned me about planting all those flowers in Charlie's yard for her, she defended me to him, saying, "Daniel Pierce, hush your fuss. Silas is like my little brother."

Yep, that'd be a boner-killer, but mine was non-stop for her.

I never saw Charlie as my big sister.

No, I saw her as the most stunning badass I'd ever met, and no one held a candle to her. Sure, I fucked around. I even fell in love, but still. If Charlie Ravenel called, I dropped everything for her.

But now she, Daniel, and their twins, who I love so much too, are away while he films *The Druid* in Spain, and I felt hollow without her. And him. I grew to care for Daniel, too.

My life sucked. All the fucking around I did, didn't help until Cade and I started hanging out more.

Hell, yes, lightning can strike twice.

Because Cade Bryant looks nothing like Charlie, but damn if she ain't a hot badass too. Where Charlie's petite, Cade's tall. Charlie's blonde and Cade's a brunette who wears her hair in this sexy short style that makes her look like she'll fuck you or fuck you up... and you'd drop to your knees for both.

So it's my motherfucking luck that I meet another incredible woman, and guess what?

She's in love with a celebrity too.

Redix Goddamn Dean.

Just drop the ball and call the game done if Redix Dean appears on the field of love because he wins any sex or heart thrown his way.

Game over.

So why do this?

I don't know. That's a state of mind I'm a pig in shit for because I'm happy that way.

I'm not like most folks. I trust my heart and wherever it takes me. I don't *need* to know. I've loved someone I can't have. I've loved someone who couldn't love me back. So fuck it, I've learned the hard way that love doesn't kill me, so bring it.

I pick the navy Tom Ford because Redix will be there tonight, and I know he'll wear black. He always does.

And I'm so damn tired of people asking me if I'm his brother.

If they only knew how we're VERY different.

But I can't hate the guy. Yeah, he keeps breaking Cade's heart like eggs dropped to the floor, but the man is beautiful. It makes his sins easier to forgive.

And his sacrifice?

Cade told me what Redix did for her. How when they were high school sweethearts, Redix protected her from three men who tried to rape her, so they kidnapped Redix instead. She hasn't told me what happened to him. I respect that. It's not my pain to know... but I can imagine.

That sacrifice makes Redix more than beautiful. It makes him a God to me because *that's love*. Love like no one ever wants to know but can't deny.

So it's a humble compliment if people think we're spit from the same mouth.

But we're not.

While Redix and I look alike. While we both care for the same heart-stealing woman. I come from a world neither Redix nor Cade knows.

It's one I don't tell most about because why?

I got kicked out of it and disowned for who I dared to fall in love with. But I never wanted that life in the first place. You can't rob someone of something they didn't want.

But I miss my mom. And sure, I'd rather my dad be proud of me than disgraced, but I can't be the son he wants. I'll die

inside trying.

So here we go.

I'll slip this expensive suit on, yank a comb through the knots in my long hair, and slide on these bespoke shoes custom-made for me. And I'll take Cade Bryant on a fancy date.

She'll hook her gorgeous arm in mine, and we'll enter the lion's den together.

And nope.

I ain't fuckin' scared.

But maybe I should be.

CHAPTER FOUR



I'M TRYING NOT TO MOAN, BUT THIS FEELS SO GOOD. MY EYES close, and this woman rubbing my feet is giving me the best pedicure of my life. And I need it. I need every ounce because every part of me hurts. Nothing else feels good. And I mean... *not a damn thing.*

The man I love hates me.

The job I love; I'm a fraud now.

My parents? I looped them into my crime.

My friends can't know, so I have no one to talk to.

I could turn to Silas, but I'll never hurt him.

I made a deal with God to end three wicked men. I got one, but two remain, and my soul burns because I can't catch them. Yet.

And all of it is my fault.

If I let it, this pain would destroy me. It's the torture of missing Redix so much mixed with the ache of guilt and the irony that I did it all for him...

And I lost him.

And it feels so cruel. Like how much is a heart supposed to endure? How much can you love someone and have it bring you more tears than smiles?

The framed pictures I have of us? I put them in a drawer. I can't look at how he once loved me. Of us at eleven when my mama bought us matching red bikes. Of us at seventeen, the day after we first kissed, and didn't want to stop. Of us a few months ago in his kitchen when he was teaching me how to chop onions, and all I did was cry from the damn things and laugh.

We've fought before. We've fucked and made up. We had more combustible passion between us than an oil tanker. But it's gone. Not in a huge explosion. No, in one crude wreck, we were over.

And I'm fighting like hell not to let it end me, too.

And I'm losing.

I sense it with an exhale: someone sitting in the pedicure chair beside me. It's what I bribed the shop manager to do. Slowly coming back to my plan, I open my eyes.

I first notice the short hem of her pink and palm tree Lilly Pulitzer dress. Then, her French-manicured tips. Then, her three-carat diamond wedding ring. And then the curled ends of her long blonde hair.

But I don't speak. I let it fester. She recognizes me. I'm too tall with too many Redix Dean paparazzi pictures taken of me.

She clears her throat. "Excuse me?" There's nothing but kindness in her voice. "Haven't we met?"

Oh, yes. We've met.

She's Stacey Evans, the unfortunate wife to Senator Gentry Evans—the man I'm going to ruin—if not kill.

I turn her way with a genuine smile, "Why yes," reaching out to gently shake hers.

Southern women don't shake hard; we merely touch to gauge the climate between us. It's warm. Stacey's innocent. I know it like the sun will come up.

"But I can't place where we met," I say.

Bullshit. We met at Luca's golf resort months back when Redix and I were there for dinner. Stacey wet her panties at the sight of Redix, even though she was standing beside her husband, Gentry. He had to watch her public orgasm while I watched it with delight.

Every chance I get, I'll stick a pin in Gentry Evans like a voodoo doll. But I can't take him out. He has my friend Pamela Ryan, the young woman who disappeared almost nine years ago, and *I will find her.*

"We met at the golf resort," Stacey offers. "I could never forget. You're too pretty to miss." She's a rare society woman, one who dares to be sincere. "You're Cade Bryant, right?"

"Yes, and you're Stacey Evans, Gentry's wife."

A tight wince pulls her face, but she turns it into a grin. "Yes, Gentry's wife." Then her smile lights up real. "You were with Redix Dean, and my word, you two are a stunning couple."

I hide it, the flinch of my heart. "We *were* a couple. But we've been friends since we were kids, so there's always that."

"Just friends with Redix Dean?" She leans back in her massage chair. "Girl, I don't know how you do it. No offense, but your *friend* is hotter than Georgia asphalt."

I like her too. Why a funny woman like Stacey Evans is married to a piece of shit like Gentry Evans? Maybe I'll find out because befriending her *is* part of my plan.

Stacey holds answers she doesn't know.

Think about it. If one person can access files, accounts, and hidden places. If there's anyone who knows your habits, like where you go and when; it's your partner. And Stacey Evans is more than Gentry's wife. She's his political golden

ticket. Her grace blinds everyone so they can't see the dark world Gentry hides.

She's a beautiful decoy.

Because that man is running a human trafficking ring, I know it. He started small, trying to take me, then he took Redix, and then he took almost a dozen women who looked like me. All those crimes were for the worst night of our lives.

In that time, he's honed his crime.

He's gotten good, so fucking good that we can't catch him. We got close with Sarah Matthews, his last victim. He and TJ and Derek—his former foul trio—forgot the vials of their drug, the GHB that fuels their violence. They used it on the victims to get them to comply, to erase their memories and any evidence of their crime.

But I found those vials. One I submitted as evidence, and it linked Derek's fingerprints to the crime. The other vial, well, I used it for justice, for revenge against TJ.

I had to end his spree. TJ was the impulsive one. The most dangerous in the short game because he was ramping up his attacks.

Gentry's the long game. I gotta play him differently. This is a mind game. He's woven his fabric of political power and family money into a wicked empire. It's gonna take time. It's gonna take more than me to take him down.

Derek's the wild card. He's Gentry's cousin. He drove Gentry's car the night they took Redix. He held him down, laughing while TJ scarred Redix for life.

But why did Derek stick around? You'd think he'd run. But he came back until he had warrants out for him.

The search for Derek is on while I figure out how Gentry's getting away with this, where he's hiding Pamela Ryan and Cam Le, the two missing women.

Being Stacey Evans's new friend? It may be a double win for me.

“No offense taken,” I reply to her compliment about Redix. Shit, statues get horny when he walks by. “Redix Dean *is* hot.”

“I can’t imagine.” The nail tech starts removing Stacey’s old polish while she swoons. “I mean, I *can imagine*. Millions of women do.”

“And men.”

“Oh, don’t get me started.” She sighs, and I’m onto something. *Redix*. That’s how we’ll bond. “Redix Dean is sweet too, isn’t he? I just know it.”

She’s got a fantasy that’s close to real.

Yes, Redix was sweet. The candy he loved eating off my body was evidence of it. *That* and every sentimental thing he did for me. Every time he held me or made me laugh. It makes my throat burn because I have to let him go. Redix hates me. And after every emotion we’ve been through, hate was never one.

Ironically, TJ’s death was our death. And I’ll mourn losing Redix until I die, but I had to stop TJ. Other women were getting hurt because of me; it was the least I could do. No. It’s the *only* thing I could do.

So why does life keep screwing me so wrong when all I did was try to make things right?

“Yes,”—my voice softens—“Redix is a *very* sweet man.”

“I knew it,” she sighs. “Those are hard to come by.”

That’s odd words for a loyal wife. “Gentry’s kind too?” Those words taste like shit in my mouth.

“Politicians don’t get to be kind.” Ice freezes her tone. “They’re calculated. Everyone’s a pawn for more power.”

Am I any different than Gentry? Here I am trying to use his wife as a pawn to get to him. *Fuck, Redix was right*. I’m gambling with my soul in this game.

“Tell me.” She leans over. “Tell me one sweet thing Redix Dean does so I can believe in romance again.”

Yeah, I really *do* like her. We could be friends, so I give her this.

“We had our first kiss over a lemon sherbet ice cream cone, so... let’s just say ice cream became a *very* sweet way he’d enjoy me at night.”

“Oh, sweet Jesus.” She closes her eyes. What she’s imagining? It’s nothing compared to what my body will never forget. “I wish.”

It’s sad the way she shakes her head. Like so much is missing from her life.

“There’s got to be something sweet in your marriage?” Okay, that’s a legit thing a friend would ask, not just a detective digging. “Just one thing?”

The roll of her blue eyes is subtle. “Gentry likes giving pearls. Lots of them.” The triple strand she’s wearing is evidence. “I mean... he *really* likes giving pearls, if you know what I mean.”

Gag. I have to fight it.

Redix giving me a pearl necklace? I’ve moaned for his hot jewelry several times.

Gentry? I’d rather be spewed with cabbage vomit.

“Maybe Gentry shows his love with romantic places? Or lavish trips?”

Okay, now I’m digging. But I need to know where “they play,” as TJ admitted with my hands strangling his throat.

Where do those men take their victims? The ones who haven’t come back?

“If Gentry’s not on the golf course, he’s on his yacht.” The way she shifts, she’s pissed. “And it’s all business, and I’m not invited.”

Silence sits between us while she enjoys her foot massage and the polish dries on my toes.

What’s next?

Gentry, golf, his yacht, and all the rental condos he owns. How are they connected? That's what I'll investigate. And this woman needs a friend. She deserves to know what evil she's married to. What if he's making her an accomplice, and she doesn't know?

"You got special plans for that fancy pedicure?" Her toenails are Christmas red.

"Yeah," she groans, "we have the Holiday Riverboat Party tonight in Savannah."

"Really? I'm going too."

Confession: I knew the Evanses would be going tonight. And I knew Stacey would be here this afternoon.

You don't even have to pay me to be a detective.

"You are?" She perks up. "Is Redix your date?"

No. Redix is my heart smashed into pieces.

Silas is my date, the man I wish could put it back together. But the adult in me knows that's *my* damn job and no one else's.

"No, I'm going with a guy friend. A very hot one."

"Two hot men in a lifetime? What's your trick?"

There are no tricks.

Just fate, who's a real fuckwad sometimes.

Still, I want to make Stacey laugh. "The trick is..." Her eyes widen. "You gotta be shameless and willing to try *all* tricks."

Bull's eye. That strikes something in her that sparks a deep smile that lessens my guilt.

"So, I'll see you there?" She touches my arm like she needs someone to have fun with.

I do, too.

"Yeah, I'll look for you and maybe afterward." How the hell am I gonna pull this off? "Let's grab coffee sometime. I'll tell you more of my tricks."

“It’s a date,” she replies like we just met on the playground and’ll be besties for life.

And maybe, even in this fucked up, scary world of some shitty men, that’s how women survive it.

CHAPTER FIVE



REDIX

IF THERE'S ONE WOMAN I'LL NEVER DOUBT, IT'S LORRAINE Morris.

She's got my back. She's covered my ass.

And she writes hit shows and shares my love of greasy burgers. It was my first week in LA. I was finding caloric comfort in scarfing one down at Tommy's and...

"Young man"—Lorraine had no fear, and I had grease dripping down my wrists—"you belong on the screen."

We were ride or die instantly.

Lorraine gives me the best roles and too many chances. So fuck yes, I move heaven and earth to help her too. She's got to make an appearance at this swanky holiday party, and I'll be another Lowcountry tourist attraction to help her ratings.

Lorraine hooks her arm in mine and declares, "Let's shovel some shit!" while our feet step aboard the Georgia Queen, Savannah's famous riverboat, for what's sure to be a cruise through southern politics.

The December night is warm enough to roam the decks of the three-level boat and ignore the big egos inside. But that's why Lorraine's here. We head straight for the ballroom with its gold ceiling, and I hear them; gasps and murmurs the minute we enter the large room.

Yeah, I'm used to it.

So is Lorraine. She's almost as famous. And you can't miss her signature braided locks, red eyeglasses, and "don't fuck with me" smile.

I side whisper, "Who do we schmooze first?"

"Everyone who gives me permission to shoot my shows in this state," she replies.

"Shows?"

I just wrapped my guest role for her pilot season of *The Tour*; and I thought that was the only one she shot here. I'm on a break until production starts shooting season three of *The Band* this spring in LA.

"I want to move production here for your show, too," she answers as we head to the bar. "We can shoot in Atlanta, use Tybee for beach scenes."

I order a seltzer for me and a bourbon for Lorraine while I don't buy it.

"So that's the only reason?" I eye her, handing her the drink before I sip mine.

She watches me over the rim of the tumbler before she admits, "You need to be here, don't you?"

Do I? I've only stayed here in my almost empty house because my mama, little sister, and nephew are here. They come over a lot. Hell, I think my mama's trying to move in. And I like my AA group here.

Malibu has my other sanctuary home, but returning there will only remind me of what I'm missing.

Everywhere I go, it's Cade.

I'm a dumbass to think I can keep running from her. No, she's a part of my heart that's bleeding, that's leaving a trail of pain behind me, and there's only so much I can lose before I have nothing left.

"You don't have to do that."

I hug Lorraine. She's so tiny in my grasp. This woman; I'd give her my last kidney.

"Well, it's not a done deal." She squeezes me back. "The head of the Georgia Department of Revenue is here tonight, and I gotta win her over."

"Shit," I huff. "You'll have 'em eating out of your hand."

She winks, "Maybe," and pulls us into the sea of people in fancy formal wear.

I'd prefer getting four cavities filled to the hour we spend working the room. My cheeks hurt from giving selfies. My bladder is full, and my brain is empty from small talk. Lorraine's stuck in a droning negotiation about tax incentives while my glazed eyes rise to a vision entering the ballroom.

It torpedoes my chest, and I didn't know pain like this was possible. I see the most beautiful woman standing there, and all the times I broke her heart?

This is retaliation.

The elegant red dress she's wearing bombs through me. The sexy slope of her bare neck not wearing our infinity necklace scatters shrapnel into my lungs. Her stunning smile sends bullets flying.

And the man on Cade's arm?

The one who looks like my fucking twin?

This is war.

A cruel one like the one I waged on her fucking every woman who reminded me of her.

I was drunk as hell.

And that's no excuse.

But this guy? His navy suit says money. His hair knot says he doesn't give a shit about it. His full lips whisper into Cade's ear, and the way she looks back at him, she's happy.

Fuck, this hurts.

And damn, I need to inhale.

Because... *I'm not happy.*

I made Cade leave, and I didn't do it so I'd be happy. I did it so I'd stay sober. So I'd live.

But seeing her on the arm of another man? A man who I'd even turn my chin for? This is a life I don't want to live. Because he's hot, and he hasn't fucked her yet because when he does, we'll have the same look in our eyes.

Cade will be our last fuck.

Lorraine's too close to me not to sense my destruction. She glances my way, clocks my gaze, and knows instantly.

"Excuse me, folks." She grabs my elbow. "This lady needs a little night air."

We go in the opposite direction outside, and I can't see. Lorraine tugs my arm while my logic is a maze. Turn left, and I hate Cade and left again, and I hate seeing her with another man. Turn right, and I can never forgive her, and back left because I want her to be happy.

I'm so lost. I miss her, but I can never touch her again.

Every fucking hour I think about Cade, us, and what she did. She didn't fix a thing. She made it worse. TJ still violates us and will until the day we die because we can't be together now.

That dark river or a bottle of Absolut? Gimme one to drown in.

"Talk to me." Lorraine pulls us to the deck railing where no ears are around. "You look like you saw a ghost, but that's her, isn't it?"

"Yes." Light sparkles on the night current of the Savannah River. It's tempting, but the cool breeze gives me a needed

breath while sending shivers down Lorraine's arms. I drape my jacket over her shoulders. "You need to quit saving me."

"You need to tell me what happened."

Though more than a foot shorter than me, Lorraine's like my big sister and won't back down.

"You know about what happened to me."

My story, I'm starting to share it with no names, not even Cade's. But sharing about my secret scar and assault heals me and helps others. But Lorraine knows everything, all but this last part, and I trust her with my life.

"Cade, she"—every time I imagine it, disbelief floods me—"she got rid of the man who did it."

Lorraine's right eyebrow shoots up, but she doesn't say a word.

"And I feel so guilty I want to drink."

"Guilt for what?"

"That a man—no matter that he deserved it—he died because of me. And I feel guilty because Cade did it because my relapse pushed her over the edge, and now it's haunting her too, even if she'll never admit it. I want to forgive her, but I can't because it was wrong... for everyone."

"Sounds like 'wrong' is the wrong word." She reads my confusion and explains, "Wrong implies there was ever going to be right in this situation. And too many people were hurt—you, her, and other victims. Nothing was ever going to make that right again."

"So what would you call it?"

"Desperate."

"Like she had no choice?"

"Did she?"

The black water captures my stare while I try to imagine another way. "I don't know."

“It’ll come around one day, what y’all need to heal. Just be open to it.” She rubs my back. “You okay?”

“I’ll be alright.”

“You sure?”

She, like everyone, even me, worries I’ll relapse. “I promise.” I rub her shivering shoulders. “Enough of my bullshit, let’s get you back inside to yours.”

Lorraine goes to the bar, and I know it’s to make sure my next drink is another seltzer. But my sobriety feels strong tonight. Though my heart doesn’t. And I gotta piss like a racehorse, so I weave through the crowd for relief. Taking the stairs two at a time, I climb to the next level for the men’s room. My eyes are down, steps turning for the next half flight, when high heels fill my vision.

Black Louboutins.

They block my path, and breath pops from my lungs.

It’s her.

And I’m not ready for this. I glance up and the shock in her eyes; she’s not either.

“Hey.” She’s the first to murmur.

“Hey.” I’m supposed to step aside and let her pass. I don’t. What do I say next? “I like your hot date.” Yep, I revert to an asshole when hurt. “Looks familiar.”

“He’s a nice guy.”

“He’s my twin. You have a type now?”

“Yeah,”—pain and pissed-off swirl in her eyes—“it’s called men who don’t hate me.”

“Low criteria.”

“Matches how I feel.”

Fuck, we’re gonna make this brutal. We’re gonna hurt each other because we’re dying inside.

“That’s your fault.”

“And he’s my hot solution.”

She tries to step by me, but I’m too big to pass even three steps below her. What the hell do I want? Spin the wheel and tell me.

“Did you even care that it would end us? Will you ever tell your parents what you did?”

The questions kill me as cold frosts her eyes.

“Leave them out of this.”

I try imagining what her mama would say. As the former Sheriff, Mama G would be livid, but Cade’s protecting her from the truth. And Cade’s dad? Well, he’d probably load the gun.

Did she ever stand a chance of not being a lethal renegade?

I step aside and mutter, “Happy Birthday.”

It’s today, the seventeenth. And I mean it. And I hate like hell I’m not celebrating it with her because mine’s the tenth. We’re only a week apart. That, like most things, used to bind us.

Now... everything tears us apart.

“You too.”

Her tone, I don’t know it. She brushes past me and her perfume; it’s not ours. It’s not BOUND perfume. It’s the new one from the same designer we also did the ad for—FREE. And it seems she is.

Free to leave me in the wreck she made.

My next step is a blur until I hear, “Redix?”

I turn, and the way she’s staring up at me—vulnerable, loving. We’re back on our beach for our prom, and she’s gazing up at me in the candlelight. That night, I proposed to her, giving her an infinity necklace because she was the love of my life, and I only wanted to spend it with her.

“Are you happy like this?” she asks.

No.

Because her neck is bare now.

“I’m *healthy*.”

Tears fill her eyes as she nods. All she ever did was take care of me. All we ever did was sacrifice for the other until nothing was left of us.

She softly stammers, “Have a Happy New Year.”

She’s not being a smart-ass, and she doesn’t mean the eve. She means the rest of my life. She’s letting me go...

Is that what I want? To be free of her, too?

I swallow glass. “You too, Candy Cade.”

No, it’s what I need.

A tear escapes over her dark lashes before she turns away, and I walk up the stairs and have no idea what kind of life I’m stepping into.

But it can’t be with her.

Not if I want to stay sober. Not if I want to stay alive.

CHAPTER SIX



Good Stuff by Griff.

I NEED TO BE BITTER.

I need to seethe.

I need to move on, and I can't because I'll never hate him.

All I remember is every reason I love him. The bike rides. The beach days. The ice cream kisses. The stupid onions. Our burnt pizzas and naps on the sofa. Our hot sex and his cute jokes and sweet gifts.

Redix was brutal. He kicked me out of the house he bought for us. I threw my suitcase in the car he bought me too, and I drove back to my place crying and didn't stop for days. Sometimes, I still can't stop.

Because he almost died in my arms.

And I can't make myself feel anything but the good stuff.

That's why I did it. I had to free him even if I had to lose him to do it.

It's only fair.

He's healthy now. I gently push through the crowd, and that's all that matters. *Redix will live*. He won't slowly kill himself anymore. So it's okay if I'm dying inside. I swapped our places, and I owed him that much.

"Hey." A hand gently pulls my arm. "Hey, you okay?"

My teary eyes lift to Silas. And I only fight back more tears.

Why can't I love him the way he deserves? Like I do Redix? I do feel something for Silas. I cherish him. He's more than *hot* to me. He's everything new and safe and inviting me to live again.

What's that called?

"I just saw him."

It's all I need to say.

"Come on."

He takes my hand and leads me to the edge of the crowd. Long rows of dining tables draped in white tablecloths are pushed to the edge of the room, each centered in front of a tall window. Finding an empty table, he guides me to the chairs by the window and pulls one out for me. I grab the linen napkin at an empty place setting and dab my eyes while I try to maintain my dignity and sit down.

Silas sits down beside me. He won't let go of my hand. "You need some water?" He picks up a crystal pitcher and pours me a glass.

"Thanks. I'm fine." The glass shakes in my hand while I take a sip. "I'm sorry. This was a mistake, and now we're stuck here."

I see Gentry and Stacey in the crowd. Lorraine Morris and her gorgeous braided locks, I see them too.

"We're not stuck." He signals for a waiter. "Two Blantons, please," he orders and still won't drop my hand. It rests on my thigh. "Nope, we're gonna turn your smile and this party out."

His wink lifts my lips and heart. He gives me a few moments to gain my composure, and I'm being selfish. This night is about him, too.

“Are your parents here?”

“Yep.” His full lips pull thin before he sips the drinks served to us. “They're by the stage. My mom's the blonde in emerald green.”

I search the crowd, and wow, you can't miss his mom. She stands like royalty. The man beside her, that's his dad smiling like he owns the room.

This doesn't add up.

All Silas has told me is he hasn't spoken to his parents in years, that they got in a fight. Silas lives in a humble home by the river on Daufuskie Island. He said his grandmother left it to him. The free-spirited man rarely wears a shirt, always wears flip-flops, and has marine grease under his fingernails. But his parents look like cover models for *Southern Living* magazine.

“Silas, who are your parents?”

All I know about Silas Harper is that he's obsessed with boats, owns his repair service, and loves fishing with me. That's feeling like half of the story.

“When I tell you,”—he squeezes my hand—“I ain't guilty by association, promise me?”

“I promise.”

Brace yourself.

“My parents are Earl and June Van de May.”

Holy shit. Pick up a feather and break my bones with it.

“Van de May? Like the energy company? Like the university? Like the most powerful family in the South?”

He sucks bourbon across his teeth before confessing, “That's the one.”

“You’re not Silas *Harper*?” This is a distraction from my hell, and it’s welcome. “You’re Silas Van de May?”

He glances my way. “And there’s ten point three billion reasons why I don’t use my real name.”

“So why?” I stammer, seeing his resemblance to his parents, not the heir of a tycoon. “So why don’t you live in Charleston with them?”

Because even I know that’s where the Van de May fortune started.

A wisp of his hair has fallen from its knot. He brushes it back, not looking at his parents. Or me. His gaze is on the night outside.

“That’s a long story for another night.”

I’ve never seen Silas like this. Usually, he smiles like nothing upsets him. Usually, he eats a bait worm to make me laugh before he steals one of my Lemonheads to chase the flavor down. Now, the legacy of ten billion dollars drops on his shoulders.

“Wanna make a swim for it?” I joke because we need it.

“Nope.”

Pulling another long sip, his eyes contemplate me. The lure in them suddenly cinches my sex. They’re not backing down. Instead, it’s like they’re backing me onto a bed as he tempts me, “I’ll tell you what I’d rather do.”

“What?” And what the fuck? Who turned the heat up?

“I’d rather take a deep, wet swim *in you, Cade*.”

My clit just joined the party. And my mind just left it because I was crying fifteen minutes ago. But that’s the power of Silas. He’s a light switch to my emotions, and I suddenly feel very on.

He sets his glass down and asks, “You better now?”

“A little.”

His heat leans closer. “I think we need to make you feel *a lot better*.” His tone and eyes on me are intoxicating, and we’ve never gone this far.

“What’s bringing this on?”

And why doesn’t this feel wrong?

“This room is full of people with power and rules.” He doesn’t look at them. “They think they control us.” I’m drawn like honey to his full lips, and I need something sweet. “Show them they don’t.”

My eyes narrow. “But we haven’t done anything together.”

Not yet.

“Not *us*.” Temptation dances in his eyes. “*You*.” His thumb grazes my thigh, covered by the tablecloth. “You’re in control. You know how to make yourself feel better.”

His hazel eyes aren’t suggesting retail therapy or a threesome with a pint of Ben and Jerry’s.

Flames flush my thighs. “Right here?”

Why does this sound good to me, too?

“Right now,” he says. “I’ll sit right here while you remind yourself who you belong to. Not to him. Not to me. We don’t belong to people, Cade. We belong to ourselves. And the rules weren’t made for people like us, so fuck ‘em.”

He’s speaking my gospel truth, and pain creases his eyes. I want to ask him what’s wrong, but he sounds so damn right right now.

No one can see me. And if they look my way, they’ll see a woman who deserves this. Who needs to feel like herself again. Or someone new. Anything but how I’ve been feeling for months.

“What about you?”

I don’t want to be selfish.

“The thought of fucking you makes me leave *way* too much creamy evidence behind.”

Fuck, I need CPR. Silas imagining fucking me? Of coming so hard for me? My heart just stopped, and my pussy takes over. With him sitting beside me and no one else at this table, it's pulsing for this, begging me to do it. My left hand holds his on my thigh while my right sneaks under the tablecloth and lifts the hem of my dress. Silas sips his drink with his free hand. Watching me, he has the sexiest grin while I slide my hand under my lace panties, and I'm wetting fast at this no-no.

Because *yes-hell-yes*.

I glide my middle finger into my lonely pussy and fuck; my clit sparks like an electrical fire while I start fucking my hand in a room full of people.

Oh my God, I can't believe I'm doing this.

"Does it feel good, Cade?" But Silas inspires me. "Does it make you feel better?"

"Yes," I sigh at the touch of my sex, and this is all mine. Even if I get caught, I'm the only guilty one, and hell, yes, this world can go fuck itself while I fuck me.

His breath hovers over my shoulder. It looks like we're having a romantic chat. "Own your pussy like it belongs to you first. Touch yourself with no shame." But we're not as his free hand holding mine caresses my thigh. "Are you getting wet?"

"Yes." I stifle a moan.

Wet and swelling and glossing my fingers, the pump of my hand, it's subtle but knows how to do this. Like my best lover, it always delivers.

I'm staring at a room of the most traditional people in the South and fingering myself under the table while a sexy man holds my hand and says, "I bet your pussy's so hot now it's throbbing to be filled," and *oh fuck*.

"Yes."

My edge is minutes away, and I could play here all night. From the crowd, uptight lips smile my way. They all do this behind closed doors, but I'm doing it in front of them, my

arousal glazing from my fingers to my palm. It's not in me to follow the rules. I do what I have to. Usually, it's for others, but this is for me. I need this pleasure. I need to be free.

Silas leans even closer, whispering in my ear. "I bet your pussy tastes like champagne. I bet you suck a cock like heaven until a man sees stars. I bet you fuck like dirty sin, begging for more, and I bet when you come, you moan like a naughty angel who can't be satisfied."

Who is this perfect devil, and where has he been hiding this whole time?

I can't speak. My thighs go liquid, and I can't be stopped. Silas won't let me. And when my sex-dazed eyes focus through the crowd, I see him. Redix is staring my way. His eyes won't move because of the look in mine; *he knows what I'm doing*. He knows what I look like before I come.

He taught me how.

There's no anger in his eyes. Or jealousy. I know his desire, too. I was the first to touch it. To taste it. To feel it drip from me. We're captive to this lust. I'm the jailer, and he and Silas are prisoners to my show, and they're not looking away.

The fire in Redix's eyes. The steam in Silas's words. My pussy opens for both.

"Oh *fuck*," I whisper. Cum coats my hand, and I'm looking straight at one man while another is beside me, touching me, and I want more, but this is enough for now.

"That's it." Silas opens my thigh wider. "It's your pussy. Take it." He unleashes me, making me pump harder. His lips ghost my ear. "You're making my cock hard as hell for you, Cade." His fingers are inches from my steaming sex. "I can hear you fucking your wet pussy like I want to. So I'm gonna go in the men's room, close my eyes, and jerk my cock off, imagining fucking you right here on this table for all to watch."

Redix's lips part. Silas's words unleash. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? For everyone to watch us?" He nips my earlobe. "For *him* to watch us."

“Yes.” I come. “Oh.” So hard. “Oh.” Tiny noises leave my throat while I fight to hold my body still. Only my eyes reveal my quaking release while I come, clenching over my hand for these two men to witness. “Oh.” I can’t even slam my guilty eyes shut to that fantasy—*these two men*.

“Happy Birthday, Cade.” Silas finishes his drink before staring back at me. “Who do you belong to?”

“Me.” I huff.

“Damn right, sugar.” He reaches for my messy hand. “Now put your cum on my palm so I can stroke it over my cock and moan your name while I come to your sweet smell.”

My God, he won’t stop being dirty and free, and I love it. I need it. I wipe my hand over his under the table while he charms, “Finish your drink, and I’ll be back with another.”

I watch him leave. His navy jacket can almost hide the bulge in his pants, but he’s moving fast through the crowd, darting right past his parents. The sea of people moves, and Redix disappears behind the waves of formal wear.

I’m still recovering my breath when a giggle escapes my lips. Did I just do that? Wiping my hand clean on a linen napkin, I grin; yes, *I did*.

And damn, I feel hella good.

Maybe Silas is onto something.

My whole life, I’ve been the Sheriff’s daughter. Or the disgraced cop’s kid. Or Redix Dean’s best friend turned girlfriend turned model woman. Then, I became obsessed with three more men, and revenge against them defined me.

And I don’t know how to stop being that woman for everyone else. But I know where to start.

It’s time I just do me.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Moth To A Flame by The Weeknd

THIS IS EASY.

I'm a pro at masking my desire in public. At holding an apathetic face while I want to pound my dick into flesh, mine or someone else's.

And damn.

Watching Cade come was like watching shooting stars. One after another, and you can't believe the wonder.

Maybe I shouldn't be so stubborn. Maybe I *should* fall for her all the way, even if she'll always love another man. Because I care for her. Because I know what her favorite fishing lure is. Because I know she hates "American Piss Beer," as she calls it. And because when she lets me hold her, I'm not an heir or a disgrace.

I'm just a guy who thinks she's funny as hell, so damn smart, and Jesus Christ, her eyes. They're so blue, they're purple. They're rare jewels like her, and I'm lucky just to have a chance.

The DJ's playing "Santa Claus is Coming To Town," and I smile, gently dodging the crowd, because yes, *I'm coming real soon.*

Black marble thuds under my steps as I find the hallway to the men's room empty except for a large silhouette looming there.

I know him.

Millions do.

And I'm sucked into Redix's gravity with my steps closing in on him while his eyes drop from my face, down to my hard-on and back up to my eyes.

That feeling of confrontation, I step right into it.

"Hey, man." I'll take the first word.

"She's not a toy." Redix has three inches on me, but damn, it's freaky. He's my mirror. "Don't play with her like she is."

"She ain't anyone's tragedy or a trophy either."

Redix Dean may beat the shit out of me, but I'll go down scoring pain too. I learned the hard way how to fight. But his fists don't clench. His shoulders don't lift, and his feet don't shuffle into a fighting stance.

Something else storms his eyes. And yes, they take your goddamn breath away.

He doesn't want to fight.

"*Please* don't hurt her," he says, and I know it hurt him like hell to beg that.

"I won't hurt her."

"You say that, but you don't know"—his jaw clenches—"you don't know why she really cries."

And why he's fighting it back, too, I see it, and suddenly, I want to hug him. What is it between him and Cade? Whatever it is, it's a Mount Everest of magnificent love that can kill you if you take it on.

“Look, man.” I like Redix. Hell, I more than like him. Like anyone, I’m two feet from him and under his spell. He makes my chest warm and my mouth wet, and something sleeping inside me rouses awake. “I know a little about what happened between you two. And I’m sorry. It must be hell. But your love is obvious, and it’s breaking her heart not to have it anymore.”

What the fuck am I doing?

I got no clue.

But you gotta feel this. It’s overwhelming standing in front of him with thoughts of her in his eyes, of him fighting for her not to be hurt.

It’s an opiate. It’s love, and my mind knows the logic, but now my body and heart feel it for the first time, and it’s potent.

“I don’t have a choice.” Every muscle in his perfect jaw clenches. Damn, even his anguish is beautiful. “It’s about more than love.”

I could pry. I could insult him. I could tell him how stupid he was for letting her go. But he knows.

“Well,”—and I’m not going anywhere—“I’ll be there when she cries, I promise.”

I should’ve just punched him.

His face turns to the side, flinching.

Fuck, that was the worst thing to say.

He can’t bear the thought of me hugging Cade. So why won’t he do it? What the hell can be so bad between them?

“Just take care of her, please.” Redix doesn’t look at me. Some place else churns in his mind and it’s not this riverboat. “Just promise me that, man. Promise me you won’t hurt her, and I won’t get in your way.”

Won’t get in my way?

Redix Dean is Cade’s air; maybe I’ll be her water. One you can live a lot longer without.

“I promise.”

I put my palm out to shake his hand, and *oh fuck*, it's slick with Cade's cum on it, and I forgot. He's showing me his heart. He's dropping his ego for her, and I'm not being a dick about it, but I can't pull my hand away now. It'll only offend him more.

When his big hand grabs mine, my pulse triples. My nerves turn into hot wires. And my heart is stunned...

Because he feels her cum on my hand and glances down at our palms, at our skin touching. Because his flesh is so warm, his grip so strong, making me sweat. Because when he doesn't let go and looks back at me, it's not anger or jealousy in his eyes.

It's a look I've seen before. It's a question and a risk and a recognition, and we don't say it aloud.

It's confusing us both, so I say, "You can't stop someone from the love they feel for someone else." I loosen my grip. He does the same, eyes still on me. "At least... I'll never try to."

I push past him, his aroma marking my senses. He lets me go, and I'm grateful because I'm a hurricane of forces raging through.

The men's room—there are four stalls in it, and I take the farthest one. Two men finish their business and wash their hands while I undo my pants and drop them to my ankles. My boxers only make it to my thighs because I'm getting so hard again, gripping my cock in a practiced pump.

What the hell?

Pressing my forehead to the cold metal stall wall, I can silence my breath but not my mind.

Cade fingering herself. Cade's eyes glazing over when she comes. Cade's tits in a bikini. Her fine ass in shorts. The V of her pussy in bikini bottoms, God, how does she taste? How good would it feel to fuck her? Damn good, I know, pumping faster, my hips thrusting. Into where Redix's skin touched mine. His heat. His lips. His sexy eyes. They were on my hard dick.

“Fuck,” I gasp as quietly as I can, cum hitting the wall and spilling over my fist. “Oh, fuck.” I shudder with another rope of release.

And I'm fucked.

CHAPTER EIGHT



MY BLANTON'S IS FINISHED, AND I'M PARCHED FOR ANOTHER.

How long does it take Silas to jerk off?

That tickles my stomach as I watch Redix walk back into the ballroom. His eyes land on mine, and I don't know that look.

Everything about that man: he loves root beer. He hates mustard. He likes to dance while he folds laundry. He loves it when I kiss his belly button. I can put him to sleep playing with his hair. I know everything about him but not *that look*.

It's not hate.

It's not love.

My heart flinches—he's been watching me with Silas. He's sad? But this is what Redix wants, what he needs. For me to be out of his life for good.

I always believed we'd heal together, but maybe I was wrong. Maybe the only way we survive what we've been through is to let each other go. Maybe then, our nightmare will finally be over. I want that for him.

For me? I can't let go.

Besides, Redix has to beat women off with a stick, so I'm sure he'll move on soon if he hasn't already.

Damn, I'm a hypocrite. That hurt to imagine. It makes me put my nose down to stop more damn tears. Reaching for my phone in my clutch, I text Silas.

Missing you and my drink

I'd get it myself, and I must look pathetic sitting at a table alone, but I don't give a damn. I need to get my shit together. I still need to say hi to Stacey Evans and stick another pin in Gentry.

They're working the crowd, but she keeps glancing my way. She's gorgeous in her white gown, but she smiles too long. She hates this, too.

Finally, Silas appears with drinks in hand. I stand before accepting mine, and without a word, we sip, and he looks odd too. Like he just jerked off, and that's hot, but it's something else.

"You okay?" It's my turn to ask.

"Yeah." He throws back the bourbon and sets the glass down. "Care to dance?"

I finish my drink, too, and take his hand. A Michael Bublé holiday tune plays while Silas wraps his arm around my waist, and he *can* dance. Like cotillion dance, and now I know why.

Silas isn't just a free-spirited surfer dude. He's a prince to a southern fortune and trained to take over.

"Did I tell you how stunning you are tonight?" His words and steps are perfect.

"Five times."

"I'm going for twelve." He dips me. "For the twelve days of Christmas."

That makes me laugh, and we're finally having fun like usual until I hear, "Son?"

His grip tightens, and our dance stops. I turn, and it's his mom, and I step back for them to talk.

"Hey, Mom." It's sudden how he softens and gives her a gentle kiss on the cheek. Like a man raised with manners, Silas introduces me, "Mom, please meet Sergeant Cade Bryant. Cade, this is my mother, June Van de May."

"Ms. Bryant." She smiles sincerely. "What a genuine delight."

"It's a pleasure to meet you."

"It's been a while since I've seen my son, but if he's keeping your beautiful company, I understand why." Her eyes glimmer green. "Bryant? Like Sheriff Gloria Bryant? You're her daughter, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Son."

A voice approaches over June Van de May's shoulder, and Silas's father appears. Over introductions, Earl Van de May hears my family name, and his eyes shift from scrutiny to approval.

"Your mother built a strong legacy." His dad lifts his chin. "She's *lucky* to have a child who makes her parents proud."

Covertly, I grab Silas's hand. That was a low blow, and it had to hurt. I'm right because he squeezes mine back.

"Well, you must come up." His mom sounds warm, desperate even. It's obvious she misses her son. "Silas, bring Ms. Bryant up for New Year's Day and our tradition. We're having black-eyed peas and collards for good luck."

Why a billionaire family practices that old Southern tradition, I'm shocked. Then again, they define tradition now, and that one's delicious. But I don't accept. This is Silas's call.

"We'll see, Mom." He gives her another soft peck. "If our calendars are clear." His father says nothing.

"Thank you for the invitation." I try to ease the tension.

“Nonsense, dear.” She leans in and pecks my cheek. “You’re welcome in our home anytime.”

“Dad.” Silas strains the word, and that’s how they say goodbye.

“Ms. Bryant, it’s been a pleasure,” his dad says before turning to continue his reign over the room.

“I’m sorry he said that,” I tell Silas the second they walk away.

“Don’t apologize for him. I’m used to it.”

“I’d be honored to be your date to their party.”

“You might prefer jumping into an alligator pit.”

“With you? That’d be fun.”

We start our next dance, and halfway through, another interruption sounds over my shoulder.

“Cade!” It’s Stacey Evans. I know it before I turn around.

“Hey!” The quick hug I give her is legit. “You look amazing.”

“You look like another magazine cover.”

We fawn over each other while Gentry fumes over Stacey’s shoulder. Oh, the questions that must trouble his pathetic mind. Lemme give him some more.

“Let’s grab that coffee,” I suggest. “This Tuesday morning. Sound good?”

“Perfect,” she says. “I finish yoga by ten. So ten thirty at C’est Bon?”

“Stacey, don’t you have a prior engagement that morning?” Gentry’s words pour hot tar over our plans. “You need to stay home for the painters.”

Stacey rolls her eyes. “They’re not scheduled to start until Wednesday.”

“I moved them to Tuesday,” Gentry lies, and now the games begin.

How can he block my access to his wife without betraying his guilt?

Stacey glances back at me. “Sorry, we’re doing a quick house refresh before our New Year’s Eve party.” Her eyes light up. “You should come. You and...”

She looks up at Silas, and I swear this woman’s so lonely she’s dropping her panties for him, too.

“Stacey, this is Silas.”

I don’t know which last name to use for him, so I don’t say either.

“Silas?” Gentry steps closer like a cat over a koi pond. “Like ‘Silas Van de May,’ son of Earl and June? You were just speaking to them.”

Fuck, that cat didn’t stay in the bag long. Then again, it’s Gentry’s corrupt prerogative to know the most powerful families, and though Silas uses another last name, the public record of his lineage is crucial to those in the know.

“Yes.” Silas doesn’t offer more.

“Well,”—Gentry licks his lips—“my lovely wife is always right. You two come to our New Year’s Eve party and bring your parents if you like.”

Gentry’s shameless. No, desperate. He knows damn well that I’m after him, but he’s too money hungry to avoid an opportunity to have the wealthiest donors in his home.

“We’ll see.” I wrap my arm around Silas’s waist, feeling his abs tense at my first touch. “We may stay in and cuddle to New Year’s Rockin’ Eve and have a private celebration.”

Stacey’s eyebrows dance, Gentry smirks, and Silas kisses my cheek. “I’ll toast to that.”

He kissed my cheek.

The heat of his lips thrills my flesh even after they’re gone. It heats my core, tingling my fingers but scaring my heart.

What am I doing?

I'm this close to Gentry, my enemy. I'm starting to adore his wife, Stacey. I'm making romantic plans with Silas. His billionaire parents just invited me to their home.

And all the while, like destiny wants to bake more fuckery into the layered shitcake of my life, the crowd parts, and Redix is looking right at me.

At me holding Silas, a man I want to love.

At me smiling at Gentry, a man I want to kill.

Yes, Redix, this is me moving on.

He pushed me to do it. He knows I'll get revenge, and yes, I'm crazy to do it. When he finally turns away and breaks my stare. I know it.

Yes, this is me... breaking into pieces, losing the love of my life.

CHAPTER NINE



REDIX

THERE'S A LIST OF THINGS THAT KEEP ME SOBER.

My steps. My meetings. My journals. My sponsor and counselor. I'll pick up a guitar or spin a new bowl on the potter's wheel I bought. I'll do a hundred bench presses or run on the beach. That last part usually gets fucked because someone will recognize me, and I can't run at night.

Not on that beach.

Not after what happened to me there.

My favorite thing that keeps me sober is this. Playing with my nephew, Nicolas.

"Alright, little man." I look over the instructions for the LEGO Space Shuttle. "What's next?"

A pile of white LEGOs covers his bedroom floor, and I'm six years old for this, too.

"We gotta build the command module."

His nose won't look up from his busy fingers, and I love this. Hanging out with him is simple. It's pure joy, and I can

forget seeing Cade with that guy this past weekend.

Silas is his name.

I overheard someone whisper it like parlor gossip. Apparently, he's the heir to the Van de May fortune.

Fucking great.

He's hot, he's got Cade, and he's got billions.

And I don't know what I felt that night staring him down. Too many emotions attacked me, and you'd think I'd want to punch the guy, but I have no right. That's just bullshit alpha male instincts telling me to, but those are fucking exhausting.

And for the insecure, small dicks who gotta prove with their fists what's not in their pants.

Sorry, that was alpha too.

I mean, "they need to learn to love themselves" and all that shit. That's what my counselor's been driving into my brain like an iron spike.

Slowly, it's sinking in.

But when I saw Silas up close, I felt something else. Fast.

Silas isn't me in a mirror. No, he's the me I would've been before a few men tried to break me. I couldn't stop staring at Silas, wondering...

What would I be like if that night never happened?

I'd be happy and whole and married to Cade. I'd have a simple life with her and love it.

That dream died with the old me.

The one Silas looks like.

I was talking about Cade, feeling her in my heart, and looking at him and anger left me. All I felt was warm and safe. I've never felt that around another man. Not after the ones I've survived. And I knew Cade was safe with him, too, and that's all I want.

It was so fucking weird because I know what he got her to do under the table.

Wait. Nope, that's wrong.

Cade Bryant doesn't do a *damn* thing for any man if she doesn't want to. No, she was doing that for herself. And my God, it was fucking hot.

My cock thickened, and my throat choked while I couldn't tear my eyes away. How she was fingering herself and getting off in a room full of people. How Silas was whispering to her and making her come with everyone around, and heat shot through my veins. Not furious heat, aroused heat like I wanted to sit across the table and watch them together.

What the fuck?

And then I felt it on his hand—her slippery cum, and I swear I could smell her sweet musk on his skin, and my brain didn't work. Only my body responded, which messed with my head and heart, and I only made it worse by going home and jerking off about it late that night...twice... and the next morning.

See, it's bullshit.

I can't forget Cade. Or that she's with Silas.

But I can do this. Focus on someone else, not me and my drama.

I focus on my nephew.

Nicolas searches for the blue LEGOs that look like captain's chairs while I just watch. Usually, his mom, my little sister Renie's here too. But for the first time, she asked me to babysit so she could go on a date.

I try not to be the protective big brother. Renie's twenty-four and an adult, but she's had it rough. She got pregnant with Nicolas at eighteen. I was twenty-three at the time, living in LA, and had my own drama case, but I remember my mama calling me about it.

But who was I to judge Renie?

Teens have sex. I told my mama to support her. I did. I sent her money. I bought her this beachfront condo, and Renie's kicked ass. As a single mom, she went to college for an

accounting degree and now works at a small firm. As far as I know, she doesn't date around. She's too protective over Nicolas.

Just like me.

"Argh!" Nicolas throws the LEGOs down. "This is too hard! Uncle Red, it's too hard!" He flops down on the floor beside me, "I can't do it," and starts to cry.

Maybe the Space Shuttle was ambitious for six.

"Hey, it's okay." I smooth his hair. "Come here."

I lift him into a hug. He's also tired. It's ten o'clock and past his bedtime, and I should've listened to Renie's strict eight o'clock rule. This is why. Nicolas melts into a heap of frustration in my arms, and I love him.

"It's okay, little man. We don't have to finish, and it's just a toy. We'll go putt-putt tomorrow, and if you want me to help you again, I will. Okay?" I wipe his cheeks, and he nods with his teary blue eyes. "Let's get you ready for bed, and I'll read you some more *Danny Do's*. Sound good?"

An hour later, I finally have him asleep. He's the cutest kid in Superman pajamas, and I watch him for a while before plopping down on my sister's sofa, flipping on the flatscreen, and scrolling.

The click of the front door turns my head to Renie entering, and I can tell... she's crying.

"Hey, hey, hey." I jump up and rush to her. "What happened? Are you hurt?"

"No." She won't look at me.

"Renie, what's wrong?"

"Nothing." She lies, and I pull her into a hug.

"Was it your date? Did he hurt you?"

Because I'll kill him.

That sudden impulse humbles me.

“No, I’m fine.” She pulls away, tossing her blonde hair over her shoulder. “He’s just an asshole, that’s all.”

“Renie, so help me God, if a man hurts you—”

“Redix, stop. It’s fine. He didn’t hurt me. He just disappointed me.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve been out with him before. A long time ago, and I thought he’d change by now, but he hasn’t. He’s a dick.”

“Why the hell are you giving him another chance then?”

Fuck, tick another mark in my HYPOCRITE box. Everyone gave my dickhead antics *dozens* of chances until I finally got my shit right.

Renie collapses in a chair, looking defeated. “Because he’s Nicolas’s dad, and I really wanted it to work.”

Holy shit.

Me and Mama never knew who Nicolas’s dad was. Renie just said it was a one-night hook-up, and the condom broke, and wouldn’t answer more. It was hard enough for her to be eighteen and pregnant.

“Look.” I sit on the sofa, trying to cram down every protective instinct I have. “I’ll never judge you. I have no fucking room to, so if you wanna talk or need anything, I’m here.”

She sighs, staring at the ceiling. “I always knew he was the dad. Don’t freak out, okay, but he was my first, and then I got pregnant. Yes, I was drunk, but I remembered him. And then, he disappeared for two years and showed back up, and I told him about Nicolas.”

“Has he met him?”

Because the only disappointing dick allowed around my family is me. *And I’ve changed.*

“No.” Renie snaps her eyes my way. “He’s a fucking party animal with a mean streak, and I won’t let him meet Nicolas. Not until he gets his shit together.”

Something. She's not telling me something.

"Renie, how drunk were you? Like, could you even consent to sex?"

"Jesus, Redix, that's none of your business."

"But you said you were drunk. Like, how drunk?"

"I don't know. It just happened, okay. I was underage and drinking at a bar when I shouldn't have been. He came up and flirted with me, and I don't remember how it happened, but I woke up in the backseat of his car. He was going so fast; it hurt like hell because it was my first time, and there was never a condom. I remember that. When he was done, he dropped me off at home and disappeared. What do you want me to say? I've been catching hell from Mama about it ever since."

"Do you know his name? Nicolas's dad?"

"Yes." She rolls her eyes again.

"Who is he?"

Because it sounds like he raped my little sister, and yes, I'll kill him.

"Derek Baucom," she grumbles.

And my world explodes.

CHAPTER TEN



IT'S BEEN DAYS SINCE THE RIVERBOAT PARTY, AND SILAS IS acting weird.

Not like ghosting me, but he's lost in thought a lot.

He's helping me shop for a Christmas gift for Nina. She's the one-year-old daughter of my best friend Penny, and I'm scanning across too many choices.

"Should I get her a music bus or an activity block?" Standing in the aisle of the toy store, do I just buy everything? "She just took her first steps, so maybe a walking toy?"

Quiet answers me. Silas is staring at the ground. He asked to come, but he was just being nice.

"Hello?"

His eyes snap up. "What?"

"This is torture for you, isn't it?"

"No." A smile lifts his face. "It's fun. I want kids one day."

Why that flutters my heart? It's that same fear again.

Are we getting too close? Are we going too fast?

I haven't fucked Silas. Or kissed him. So why do I know fate is pulling me down that road?

"Then what's on your mind because it's not toys and kids?"

"Shit, I'm sorry." He grabs a box off the shelf. "Let's get the music bus and then a cup of coffee. We need to talk."

That sentence is a mouse trap ready to snap. "*Okay.*" But he's so good to me, I hold my tongue.

The amount of people in this toy store days before Christmas is a holiday hell. Weaving through the crowd, we make it to the long lines at the registers. While we wait, my right cheek tingles, so I glance that way. Redix is two lines over. He's hiding under a baseball cap with a cart full of toys in front of him, but I'd spot him in a blinding blizzard.

He's looking at his phone, but I know he saw me, and my breakfast suddenly soars in my stomach. My feet want to bolt, but I'm stuck. In a toy store. With another man. And why do I feel right and wrong at the same time?

"You alright?" Silas spots him, too.

"Yeah."

Lying sucks ass.

We get through the line with our purchase, out the door, and into the parking lot before I hear the last thing I want to.

"Cade?"

Fuck you, fate. You're a piece of shit that won't stop stinking.

I turn around. Redix is feet away with bags in his cart and eyes on me. "I need to talk to you."

Silas takes the bag from my hand. "I'll leave y'all to it," he says, jumping into the passenger seat of the Land Rover Redix bought me.

This is as awkward as Santa porn.

"Redix, this isn't a good time."

I don't have the heart for this. It's too vulnerable and feeling too torn between these men.

"It's not about us." His voice is low. "It's about Renie and Nicolas."

"What's wrong?"

That changes my mood instantly. They're like family to me too.

Redix steps closer, so close I can smell his BOUND cologne, and my heart wants to scream at the torture, "I can't take this!"

"Renie told me last night who Nicolas's dad is."

Why does that put fury in his deep voice?

"And?"

"It's Derek Baucom."

That jabs my lungs, the logic punching through.

"What? Are you sure?"

"That's what she said. And she saw him last night. He's here somewhere on the island."

There's a warrant out for Derek Baucom. He's wanted in the rape of Sarah Matthews, and I suspect him in the disappearance of Cam Le. I know he has her. I know he's part of Gentry's crime ring.

Redix just stares at me while the dust settles from the bomb he just dropped.

"Does he know Renie is your sister?"

This can't be a coincidence. Derek Baucom's one of the three men who attacked Redix when we were eighteen, and now he's the father of Redix's nephew?

"I don't know, but it's fucked up. Renie finally told me about him, and I swear it sounds like he raped her. She was only eighteen and drunk, for God's sake."

"Did you tell Renie he was one of the three?"

I don't need to say the three who...

But the flash of the horrific scar on Redix's buttock smacks my mind. Derek, Gentry, and TJ assaulted Redix and left their mark on him in many ways. They wanted me but Redix made them take him instead. And now he wears a scar that mocks our matching tattoos. It's forever carved into his skin and our souls.

"No." He's fuming, teetering on losing control. "I don't know what to do, and I was gonna call you, but I didn't know"—he glances at Silas in the car—"if I could."

"If Derek's back, you need to keep her and Nicolas safe. Keep them at your house, okay?"

He nods.

"Find out where they met up, what he drives, anything you can find out about him. And get me the contact number she uses for him. Can you do that for me?"

"I can try."

He looks sick, and I want to wrap my hands around his chest and pull him in like I always do, but he hates me.

"Should I tell her?" he asks. "Tell her who Derek really is?"

"You don't have a choice. This is about their safety. He wants something if he's back here and risking getting arrested." That terrifies me. Derek Baucom is a predator and not to be underestimated. "You need them and your mama at your house with security there. Got it?"

"The cops?"

"No. A private detail that won't fuck around." It takes a second, then I remember. "HGR Security. The one Charlie Ravenel works for. Call them and get guards twenty-four-seven, okay?"

"Alright." He stands like he's ready to fight. "What else?"

"Let me talk to Penny and some of the other deputies. I'll tell them he's back, and we'll come up with a plan. We'll have

to talk to Renie. Okay?”

He nods again. And what more is there to say? Everything. It's in his eyes and spilling from my heart. “It's not your fault.”

I know he's blaming himself.

“Yes, it is.”

“You don't know that.” I'm lying again.

“Don't blow sunshine up my scarred ass, Cade. It *is* my fucking fault.” His voice raises, and I can't debate him. “Derek targeted you, then me, then my little sister and my nephew's dad is a rapist, and this is so fucked up, and I'm so damn tired of it.”

I can't help it. My impulses always win. I pull him into a hug because if he's hurting, I'll kill again for him. He lets me hold him, he's back in my arms, where we belong and heal. And for a painful second, we're back together, but he doesn't hold me back.

Pulling away, he says, “I'm fine.”

The passenger door opens. “Everything alright?” Silas leans out and slices into the tension.

“We're fine,” Redix says with eyes on him like a rifle scope.

But he doesn't hate Silas. It's weird. Redix looks at Silas like he knows him. Like they share a secret.

Is it me?

“I'll follow up on those items.” Redix steps back, and this is business now. Serious business. “Thanks for the help.”

And Redix does it.

He's not aware of the gesture, but it's woven into my soul, the pain of it. How he tucks a lock of his hair that's fallen from his hat behind his ear, turns his back on me, and... leaves me... standing there... with my heart crying silent tears.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Keeping A Secret by Bleachers

THERE'S A PINK ELEPHANT RIDING IN CADE'S BACK SEAT while we circle through the Starbucks drive-thru.

I order an Americano, and Cade gets whipped cream with coffee and a lemon pastry. This woman and her sweet tooth. She has the metabolism of a hummingbird to eat that way but look like a supermodel. Then again, her dad's the same way.

We're friends, and when I hang out with Jeff Bryant, he's a bottomless pit whose fifty-year-old body shames most twenty-year-olds. Yep, Cade struck the sexy DNA lotto.

We get our drinks, and she pulls her car into a parking space and turns to me.

"You wanted to tell me something?"

I love this about her—Cade cuts straight to it. I can't stand it when folks hem and haw. Just fucking say what you feel.

"We got *two* things to talk about now." My coffee's too hot to sip. "Which one's first? Me or Redix?"

Her eyebrows shoot up like she's been caught. "You first. I talk about my shit too much as it is."

And damn, now I want to hem and haw. I could drag this out for days. But fuck it.

"Cade, I'm bisexual, and that's why my parents cut me off."

Nothing. Her face. Her eyes. She doesn't react while she finishes sucking sweet goop up her straw before she says, "It's bullshit they cut you off. That has to hurt you, and I'm sorry."

"So *that's* what you get from that?" She keeps winning me over. "What about the bisexual part? It doesn't bother you?"

"Why should it?"

"It bothers most people. Everyone in my family. Most of my friends. Hell, most don't even know. And when I tell people I'm dating, it's usually a deal-breaker."

"Are we dating?"

"I have no fucking clue what we're doing, but I like it."

She looks out her front windshield. "Silas, I don't know what we're doing either, but you being bisexual doesn't bother me at all. I'm totally fine with it because, honestly, I'm too busy trying to figure out what *I* feel."

"It's obvious what you feel."

Her eyes cut my way. "*You're* gonna tell me how I feel?" Warning: Never cross this woman. "You're a *brave man*."

Laughter bolts up from me because this is the first time I've kinda pissed her off... and it's funny.

"I ain't mansplaining. It's obvious; you love Redix Dean." Now my coffee is cool enough. I take a sip before I add, "And you like me too, and that's fucking with your head."

She flops it back on the seat and sighs. "I want to hear your story. I'm so tired of mine."

"My story?" I take another sip. "Well, my first love was a girl named Charlie Ravenel."

“Charlie Ravenel?” Her chin shocks my way. “You know her?”

“Yeah. She used to babysit me. You know her?”

“Yeah. We rode the bus to high school together.”

“Well, then you know how beautiful she is, so of course, I fell in love with her but could never have her. At first, I was too young, and then Daniel Pierce came along, so I was fucked. Not by her, unfortunately, so I learned to move on.”

“If Charlie was your first love, when did you realize you were bisexual? That you liked men too?”

“At The Citadel.” Suddenly, this ain’t an easy chat. My chest tightens. “My parents made me go, so I’d be a real southern man and all. I didn’t want to, but I didn’t wanna disappoint them. The fucking buzz cut alone felt wrong to me. But then I met Alec and didn’t want to leave.”

“So it was Alec?”

“Yeah, he was the college quarterback and in my barracks and company, too.”

“A bisexual man at a military college?” Cade’s logic moves fast. “You had a target on your back.”

“No shit. That’s why no one knew. I wasn’t weirded out by what I felt for Alec; I just knew like hell if I could show it.”

“Did he know?”

“Yeah. At first, we were friends, cadets getting through the training. Then it was Thanksgiving, and his family didn’t have money to fly him home, so he came home with me.”

“Your parents didn’t know?”

“Not at first. Hell, Alec and I didn’t know until one night we got pretty wasted on my dad’s bourbon, and he told me how he felt. We, uh...” Damn, I forgot how this hurts remembering him, how he had the best laugh in the world. “We did everything together that weekend, and I was in love. So was he, but we knew we had to hide it.”

Cade reaches for my hand on the console. I didn't realize it; it was shaking.

"What happened?" Her voice is soft, so are her eyes, and she isn't judging me.

"We hid it for a year. Everyone thought we were best friends. We were... and more. And I had all kinds of dreams that we'd be together forever. Like we could make it work once we graduated. But then..."

Bitter coffee churns in my stomach when I remember.

"We got caught together by his coach. It was just us in the barracks, and we should've known better, but we were young and dumb. And the fucking coach, that perv saw the whole thing. Alec was bottom that time, and the coach clapped when I came. It was fucking sick what he did. That motherfucker watched us and waited and laughed, degrading us on purpose."

"Did everyone find out?"

"Hell no. The coach couldn't lose his star quarterback, but I got burned. Because I was top, he said I 'defiled' Alec, and it was my fault. They called my parents and kicked me out for dishonorable conduct, and my dad hasn't looked me in the eye since."

"I'm so sorry." She squeezes my hand, and I like her touch. "What happened to Alec? Do you keep in touch?"

"No. He's playing pro, and I guess he stays closeted. Like he has a wife and all. I don't know. Maybe he's bi, too."

"And your parents? They just kicked you out?"

"Yep. I don't give a shit about my family's money. Trust me. It comes with too many strings attached. Like if I want to inherit the Van de May fortune, I can't be with a man."

"Do you *want* to be with a man?"

"I want to love who I choose to love and be proud of it. No amount of money is gonna change that. My parents cut me off, but my grandma stood by me. She understood. Deep down, I wonder if she struggled with the same thing, but she never told

me. She just gave me her family's old house on Daufuskie and a million to set up my business."

"She sounds badass."

"She was, but she passed away five years ago."

Cade's quiet, and I finish my drink. It's a lot to dump on her, but I feel better. I've been wanting to tell her for a long time.

Now... I have to... because there's more to it.

"Why now?" She's reading my mind. The woman's a born detective. "Why did this come up now and not last year when we started hanging out?"

Fuck. Here we go. I'm about to shoot my foot off when all I want to do is walk toward this woman.

"Because I met Redix at the party."

Her eyes get wide, and my pulse jumps.

"Because I won't lie to you, Cade. I'm attracted to him. I haven't felt that way toward another man since Alec, but Redix confronted me about you at the party. And I felt like a dickhead because he was protecting you and telling me not to hurt you, and I know he meant it. But the whole time, I was like, *holy shit, I'm attracted to this man.* Like really hard."

She's gonna hate me.

She's gonna get jealous.

It's a betrayal of whatever we are, and she's gonna tell me to get out of the car and never talk to me again.

I don't blame her.

"Everyone's attracted to Redix." She smiles. "I'm used to it. You're not feeling anything wrong."

"Thank God." I huff.

Damn, that's been bothering me. And damn, she needs to stop being so fucking incredible.

"I don't want to be with him, Cade. I'm just attracted to him and feel guilty about it."

“No need.” She takes the last suck of her drink. “He doesn’t want to be with me either, so there’s no guilt.”

“He *does* want to be with you.”

“He hates me.”

Why won’t she tell me what happened between them? Here’s her chance, but she turns to stone. Like nothing can crack her. Not even me sharing everything with her.

“He doesn’t hate you, and I won’t stand in y’all’s way.”

“Silas, Redix and I are done, and I’m making peace with it. But I’ve loved him for so long it won’t happen overnight, but it’s for the best. I need to let him go.”

Silence fills her car, and it’s heavier than the new smell of it. This is a crossroads, and we know we’re at it. But I’m not like most men.

“Look, whatever happens between us,” I tell her, “you’re free. You don’t belong to me. Or to him. I don’t believe in that shit. Acting like you own someone because you love them. Love is the opposite to me. It’s trust and freedom, and I’m starting to love you.”

Her chin drops with her eyes, but I’m not afraid of this.

“You can be with me, Cade, and you can be with him. You can be whatever you want. Not like it’s my permission to give. It’s just what I believe. I don’t know what’s troubling you, but I feel it in my heart. You gotta be free to let it go.”

She starts sobbing, and I can’t stand her pain. I reach across the car and pull her into my arms.

Her tears wet my T-shirt while she mutters into my chest, “I’m starting to love you too, and I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t hurt me.” Her hair smells like lavender. “Let me show you; the heart is big enough to love lots of people. Even if we can’t be with them.” I kiss her silky strands. “Trust me. I know.”

I want to kiss her so much.

But she's still fighting this, I can tell. Like she's cheating on Redix to be with me. Or like she's cheating on me to still be in love with him.

And all I want to do is help her see love doesn't have to be that way.

It can be bigger if you let it.

CHAPTER TWELVE



REDIX

Forgive Me by Sofi Tukker, Mahmut Orhan

SHE ALWAYS BRINGS MY FAVORITE DONUTS TO THE MEETINGS—old-fashioned ones with no glaze.

Wonder if she noticed that about me?

“Hello, my name is Karen, and I’m an alcoholic.”

And now she’s sharing again. This time, I listen more closely.

“Hi Karen,” we reply, and she starts.

“It’s been a rough week. I just get overwhelmed being a single mom. I love my son, don’t get me wrong. I got sober when I found out I was pregnant, but sometimes, I just need a break. And that scares me because the only break I can get without a babysitter is in a wine bottle, and I don’t want to go back.”

Karen’s cute. She can’t help that she’s a brunette with short brown hair, just like Cade. But she wears hers in a bob, so it’s different. And she’s a single mom to a son, and I’m a softie for that because of Renie and Nicolas.

I told Renie everything. I didn't want to ruin our Christmas, but she had to know about Derek. It's for their safety.

Nicolas loves living at my house, though. The pool is heated, and he's always in it. But Renie's nervous now, and I hate that.

I called HGR Security and have two guards on shifts. They shadow Renie and Nicolas wherever they go. One of the guards is a woman—Scarlett. She covers the day shift and makes Renie feel less jumpy. The other guy, Keith. He covers nights and seems good, too.

But I dread the meeting scheduled this afternoon. Cade and some deputies are coming over to talk to Renie.

Fuck, it's gonna be rough having Cade back in the house.

I bought it for us with hopes of a family there, but after what she did—that dream's dead.

I don't hate her anymore. I just grieve the loss because I spent ten years dreaming of a life with Cade, and I held it in my hand for one perfect week before it was taken away.

It's so hard forgiving her for that. She chose our past instead of our future. Why?

Our future felt like a castle I built in my mind. I escaped there in my darkest hours, and it kept me alive. *Cade* kept me alive.

But now we're back in the haunted house of our past. Or at least, I am.

When I saw her with Silas at the store, they looked happy. Guess he's her castle now. He's good for her. I saw how she stands close to him and how he helps her with little things like taking the bags for her.

But I can't shake it.

I look at him and feel something, and it's not weird. It intrigues me. It gives me hope. For what, I don't know. It lightens my chest and pulls me to him, and that must be what Cade feels for him, too.

Like I find myself thinking about her. That's not new. I do it every hour if not every minute. But now I think about Silas next and what does it mean? That I'm jealous? Shouldn't I feel like shit?

I do when it comes to missing Cade.

But the two of them together? I don't.

I just feel... what... *warm* when I think about them together. And then something else, and I can't name it.

I can't really share what I need to say at these meetings, so I listen to Karen and then get lost in my head until it ends. Even if I don't talk, the group and routine keep me strong.

"Sorry, they're a little stale today." A voice speaks softly behind me while I go for my favorite donut. Karen appears at my side and grins. "I try to get them fresh, but I had to pick them up last night because today's been too hectic."

"My sister's a single mom, I get it. You're doing the best you can. And donuts are always good as hell."

Her smile is big, and when she touches my arm, maybe I don't hate it.

"Thank you. I needed to hear that. All I do is feel like I'm failing."

Our chat continues into the parking lot, and she tells me about her job: public relations for the tourist bureau. And about her family, they live in Beaufort. I get an earful by the time we reach my car.

"Would you like to get coffee sometime?" She's not shy, but suddenly, I am. "And fresh donuts, I promise."

Would that be a date?

I've never done this with anyone but Cade because all the other women were easy pick-ups, and fuck, when I'm drunk, I'm too easy. But I'm stone-cold sober now, and what do I want?

"Redix, I know who you are," Karen says. "That sounds stupid to say the obvious, but the whole group does, and I'm

just being honest. It's not fair because we all hide behind anonymity, and you can't. We know all about you."

"Yeah,"—I lean against my car—"it's a mindfuck sometimes. I don't know who to trust."

"I get it."

She chews her lip, casting her eyes through her lashes. *Yep, that's flirting, for sure.*

"So full transparency." She wears red lipstick. It's kinda sexy. "I've seen the posts of you lately with some gorgeous woman. If that's your girlfriend, I don't mean any disrespect."

At least she's honest. And blunt.

"She's not my girlfriend anymore."

That sentence crushes my chest.

She grins. "Trust me. I didn't ask you on a date. It's just coffee and donuts." That's not true, and she's hedging, and it's kinda cute. "I have to be so perfect around my mom-friends, so it's nice just to hang out and really be me."

Why does this feel awkward? Like it's wrong, but it's not. Cade's moved on. Hell, I made her. And if I can't be with her, I can't be alone forever.

"How about after our meeting next Monday?" My stomach twists, but I make myself do this. "I got family stuff for the New Year, but then I'm free."

"Sounds good." Her face lights up. "Have you got fun plans?"

"My mama, sister, and nephew; we'll celebrate."

I'm about to be polite and ask about her plans, but she blurts, "I'm surprised you don't have a hot date for New Year's."

"No."

"Still licking your wounds from that pretty ex-girlfriend? Is that why you don't share much?"

Shit, she's insightful. Or am I that obvious?

“Something like that.”

“That’s gotta be hard, I’m sorry.” Her feet shuffle. I glance down. *She’s wearing Louboutins.* Like, I wouldn’t know those black heels anywhere, but it’s an odd fashion choice for an AA meeting. “I mean, I recognize her, to be honest. She’s a local deputy, right?”

“Yeah.”

It’s weird talking about Cade to another woman. But this is what you do, right? You talk about your exes?

“How does that happen? A Hollywood actor meets a Hilton Head Sergeant? Did she arrest you or something?”

“We grew up together.” Now my bare feet shuffle. “It’s a long story.”

“We’ve all got those.” She steps back, and I can breathe easier. “Well, see ya at the next meeting and for coffee next week.”

“Yeah.” Karen’s also wearing a black leather jacket. It’s December, but it’s not that cool today. It just reminds me of Cade. “See ya.”

The afternoon goes by too quickly, and the doorbell rings promptly at four o’clock. I draw a deep breath while Scarlett answers the door and checks credentials.

“Hey stranger,” Scarlett greets Cade.

They know each other?

Cade stands in my foyer in black slacks and a white button, and she’s here to work while her beauty still pummels my heart.

“Hey there,” Scarlett greets another woman. She’s dressed in a deputy’s uniform, along with another who enters behind her.

Cade makes the introductions. I shake hands, and the other woman, Scarlett seems to know too. I recognize her now. I’ve seen her at my sister’s pool with Cade. Penny’s her name, and she’s staring me down like I killed her family.

My mama takes Nicolas to his room and leaves us in the living room. I'm an asshole because I don't have enough furniture yet for everyone to sit on. So I stand with the others while Cade sits down with Renie on my one sofa.

"I need to ask you some questions about Derek Baucom." Cade touches Renie's hand. "Would you like some privacy for that?"

"No,"—Renie lifts her chin—"I didn't do anything wrong, so there's nothing to hide."

The smile that takes Cade's face, fuck, it's beautiful.

She's proud of Renie.

I am, too.

While Cade asks questions about the last time Renie saw Derek, she jots notes on a little pad. When the questions get more personal, the care in Cade's questions, I've never seen her like this. I've imagined what she must be like on the job. Smart, strong, a badass; like a fish born in police waters. Hell, she was. Mama G was pregnant with Cade when she was sworn in.

But this is a Cade I've never seen. How she's so respectful to Renie. She doesn't push but gets the information she needs to help her. This must be what she's like with all the victims...

All the victims.

Ten women, Cade told me... and they all looked like her at eighteen.

The evil of it. The guilt of it. I never appreciated how much it must haunt Cade. How she gets this desperate look in her eyes to catch the three men who did it.

Well, two men now.

That's what Lorraine said; it sounded like Cade was desperate, not wrong.

And I've been a morally righteous ass because I know the feeling now. I'm desperate to keep my sister and nephew safe from that man.

It sickens my soul that Derek Baucom went after my sister. I still hear his laughter. I still see his mudflap girl tattoo. I still see the infinity necklace I gave Cade swinging from his neck while Derek held me down and TJ ripped into my flesh.

It hurt so much, *it burned...*

“Who’s a pretty boy, now?” Derek hissed in my ear before he punched it.

“We’re gonna make you real pretty for her.” My ear was ringing, but I heard his snarl. Flames, a pain I’ve never known, burned to my core while he laughed in my ear. “Even your blood is pretty, boy.”

“Excuse me.”

I can’t breathe. Knots choke my throat, and I need air. Standing outside by my pool, I stare at the calm horizon, but my mind isn’t. It feels frazzled like wires want to unravel, but I need them to stay connected. To stay in control.

Derek went after Cade.

Then he went after me.

Then he went after my sister.

It’s one thing if they hurt me. And I’d do it again for Cade. I’d do anything to protect my sister, too. But the damage is done, and it won’t stop wrecking us. Something snaps and...

I need a drink.

Fuck. NO. Not this again. It won’t make me feel better. It won’t stop this. It’ll only kill me.

Please. I pray. Please help me.

“It’ll be okay.” Her voice is like an angel because it saves me every time. A soft touch lands on my back. “We’ll be okay.”

I can’t look at her. She’ll see the tears I’m fighting. I’m supposed to be strong right now, and I’m making this about me.

“Do you wanna talk?” Cade asks.

I close my eyes, and, no, I want to run. Or I want to hold her and never let her go, but all she does is fill me with more guilt.

Cade killed a man for me. She violated every law and every ethic she has to get revenge, and it's my fault. I overdosed. I relapsed, and I pushed her to the edge. And now, neither of us will ever be the same.

"Please tell me he can't hurt my sister anymore." It's all I can choke out.

"I swear to you. I'll protect her from Derek. I'm looking for him. She gave us some good leads, so we catch him."

"I mean TJ too. Is he really gone?"

Ocean waves are all I hear. *Goddamnit, why won't she admit it?* I spin around.

"Swear it to my face that TJ is gone for good."

She stares up at me, and her silent lips press so hard together I swear they turn white.

"You think you helped me, Cade?" The pain, the guilt, my heart snaps. "That you helped those victims too? You didn't. Until you admit it, it'll never be right."

"Taylor John hasn't been seen on this island in over sixteen months."

She's too cool about this. Too collected and too calculated like there was never any passion between us, so I fucking lose it.

"Tell me! Say it to my face!" Anger. It's ripping at my seams. For my fault. For my sister. For Cade. "If it was so fucking right, then admit it! Is he dead?"

"Renie doesn't need to fear TJ."

Her control mocks my rage. She's telling me without saying it, and I feel sick.

"Go be happy with your new love. With Silas. Just know, after what you did, I'll never be happy again."

Tears spring over her lashes, but she won't move. Fuck, we've been here before. I've watched this horror film; our love was murdered before our eyes. Over and over.

"You don't mean that," she murmurs.

"Don't tell me what I fucking feel! You have no idea what I fight inside! What I see when I close my eyes!"

The pain is worse now than the afternoon I found out—the one when Gentry ruined our lives again. Because this time, she's moved on.

She gets to be happy.

She gets to be free.

"I'll suffer this the rest of my life, Cade, because you made it harder for me. Harder to stay sober. Harder to be happy. Harder to ever feel normal again. I can't even fucking tell anyone. I've got this goddamn cancer of a secret killing me inside, and you put it there."

This hurts so much because I see it in her violet eyes. How she finally gets it. How much I suffer. And how much I'm hurting her too. I might as well kill her myself because there's nothing left. There's no air. No life is left between us, and I want to fall to my knees and weep at the grave of our love.

"I can't tell you." She barely whispers, "It'll only hurt you more."

A glass door slides open, and a voice pierces the air. "Cade, you okay?"

It's her friend Penny, and her glare is aimed at me.

"I'm so sorry," Cade mumbles. "I never meant to hurt you."

I can't stop it; my tear that falls. "Well, you *did* hurt me. More than *they* ever did."

That smacks her shocked face and turns her feet, running away through my backyard before she disappears around the corner of my house while Penny storms my way.

“Listen here, you goddamn Hollywood motherfucker!” She’s gonna pull her gun. *Here it comes.* “Quit breaking her heart! It’s enough. You’ve done it too many times, and there’s almost nothing left of her. Don’t you see that?”

By the time Penny’s steps from me, she screeches to a halt at my tears, too. She can shoot me. It’d probably hurt less than this. And it’d be a lot faster than the life I have to live without Cade.

“Look.” Penny grabs a breath. “I’ll handle this case. I’ll update you and your sister. Deal with me, not Cade. This is hurting you both.”

“Okay.”

Penny searches my eyes, and I don’t care. I’m a grown man who loved a woman so much the world can watch me weep over losing her.

“Give it time.” Penny looks very pregnant and very compassionate. “Pain is a season that’ll pass.”

“Thank you.”

That’s all I can say to her kindness. She’s Cade’s best friend, and I don’t mind her chewing my ass out. But I’m not wrong. She has no idea what Cade did.

“Will you excuse me, please?”

I disappear through the door to my bedroom, pick up my guitar, and pluck away at a song I need to learn to play. To stay sane. Because I didn’t mean what I said, that last part to Cade.

Fuck, I need to take it back.

Those three men hurt me. Cade didn’t. All she did was love me so I could survive it.

Everyone leaves, and through my strums, starts, and stops, I hear silence fall over the house. Finally, I can eat alone. I don’t feel like talking to anyone. Sneaking into the kitchen, I try to be quiet. I don’t even turn the lights on. I’m searching for something in the walk-in pantry when the lights slam on, and Scarlett’s at the threshold with her gun drawn.

“Shit!” She groans. “It’s you.” I think I just pissed myself, but I appreciate her stealthy approach. “Sorry, I thought you were in for the night.”

“I was hungry.”

“Didn’t mean to scare you.” She holsters her weapon. “I was getting ready to leave, then I heard a noise.”

“I’ll live.” I set the soup can back. I’m not hungry now, but I’m curious. “How do you know Cade?”

Scarlett’s eyebrows flick up like she doesn’t want to answer. But she works for me, and I should know these things.

“I dated her friend, Jameson, for a hot second before I moved to Atlanta. Then, I helped her that day. The day she found you.”

Holy fuck. I had no idea.

“How bad was it? I mean, for Cade?”

I almost died that day. That’s the only thing I know. I was drunk as hell, and Angie and some woman fed me pills like a Pez dispenser, and I was breaths away from dying.

“Honestly?” Scarlett backs into the kitchen while I follow. “It was bad. I’ve seen some rough shit, but that was heartbreaking. She thought you were dead, and you sure looked it, and she didn’t care. She just held you in her arms until the medics pulled you away. And then your assistant wouldn’t let her see you at the hospital. He said you wanted it that way, and I’ve never seen someone so desperate.”

“She was desperate?” *That word again.*

“Yeah, she *was*. She would’ve shot up the hospital walls if I hadn’t been there. Like she would’ve made Swiss cheese of that fucking place to get to you.”

I can see her doing it.

“You know, Mr. Dean—”

“Please call me, Redix.”

“Redix, I wish I had someone who loved me that much. Who’d fight for me like that. It’s rare and a shame to let it die.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



“YOU LOOK BEAUTIFUL.”

I wedge my foot into my Louboutins. “Thanks, Mama.” I smile at her sitting on my bed, watching me dress for a New Year’s Eve Party.

“You sure you want to go?”

Senator Gentry Evans’s New Year’s Eve Party, to be exact.

“Yes.” I shimmy into a silver sequined mini dress. “I’ll have good company; his wife is a good person.”

“Well, Stacey Evans may be good, but Gentry is heinous. He needs to be caught. The right way.”

I start lotioning up my bare legs. “I’m working on it.”

Mama’s quiet for a bit. It’s not like her, and I worry.

“You look tired. Are you not sleeping well?”

“I’m fine.” She rolls her pretty eyes. “And I gotta see this—Mr. Silas Van de May picking up my daughter for a date. Who would’ve known he’s an heir to a fortune? Your dad’s known him for years and had no clue.”

“Because Silas doesn’t want his family’s money, and my family being here when he picks me up is weird as hell.”

I dab on FREE perfume.

“Well, your dad wants to watch some damn fishing tournament, and our satellite is out, so deal with it.”

Dad’s out in my living room, making himself at home, but I know it’s also to give Silas his blessing. I’m twenty-nine. I don’t *need* their blessing, but my parents are former cops—they’re gonna give it anyway. And it’s weird officially dating Dad’s close friend. But they’re almost thirty years apart, so is it really?

I loop on earrings and a bracelet next. In my jewelry box, the new infinity necklace Redix gave me... replacing the one stolen from us that night... my touch lingers over it.

How we left things? What he said?

I cried for a day over it. Like tears fell until I was empty. Until no more pain could bleed from my heart over him. I know he didn’t mean it. He’s in pain. He feels guilt over Renie and Derek; it must be hell.

But I can’t be battered by his storm anymore. I’m doing what I can. I always will. But if he wants to rage and rip his life apart again, I won’t stand by and get hurt, too.

“You’re thinking about him, aren’t you?”

Mama’s propped up on my bed and doesn’t miss a thing.

“He really wants to know.” I turn to her. “He wants me to admit it.”

“Well, tell him the truth then. Tell him that me and your dad took care of TJ.”

“No.” Steel firms my resolve. “If it ever gets out, and Redix knows the truth, he’s an accessory, then you and Dad have one more person who’ll have to testify against you.”

“Darlin’.” She sighs. “That makes as much sense as tits on a bull. By the time an investigation and trial get done and I get sentenced, I won’t be alive. So tell him.”

“Don’t say that!” My mama jokes about her terminal diagnosis, and it isn’t funny. “Quit talking like that.”

“Why?” She sits up. “You livin’ forever?”

“No.”

“Well, me neither. Mine’s just coming sooner, so make peace with it.”

We don’t know how long Mama has, and she and Dad are living like every day is a holiday, and I do my best to help.

Mama’s fearless. She jokes about it. Cries with smiles about it. Brings up memories and tells everyone she sees that she loves them. She’s riding her wave to shore with all the grace and grit you’d expect from her. And I’m trying to be on board for her sake, but damn.

This is my Mama we’re talking about.

“Listen to me.” She pulls my hand to the bedside. “You go on with this man, Silas. Or you go on with Redix. Or you go on with some other person, I got no expectations. But either way, you GO ON. You hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You go feeling sorry for yourself or sorry about me, and I swear I’ll haunt your ass from the grave. I’ll knock you so hard into tomorrow, and then I’ll find you there and knock you into the next day, too.”

She’s never laid a hand on me except for pulling me down into a big hug as she smiles.

“Life is lemon cake, Magnolia Cade. It’s bitter and sweet until the last bite, so you best enjoy it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I whisper in her ear and swallow down the burn in my throat at how much I love her and swear like hell I’ll be strong for her, too.

“Magnolia Cade!” Dad shouts from the living room, and the whole damn building can hear him. “Where’s the damn fishing channel?”

I pull away from Mama, and she laughs.

“You can take the man from the boat, but you can’t take the boat from the man.”

“Number one eighty-two!” I shout back, laughing.

My parents’ love. It’s had its ups and downs; it teaches me mine will be the same. No matter who I’m with.

It’s easy jokes and introductions when Silas comes to pick me up.

“I’ll have her home by ten, Mr. and Mrs. Bryant.” He makes fun of their hovering by the door. He knows my dad and wins my mama over in a second.

Besides, his black suit with his hair slicked back into a knot makes him look so sexy he’d win over a firing squad.

Minutes later, a valet parks his truck while Silas offers his hand, and we step into Gentry and Stacey’s palatial home, and I have one plan.

Find Pamela Ryan and Cam Le.

My best friend disappeared from a bar in Hilton Head when we were twenty. All presumed she was dead until I got TJ to admit otherwise. Minutes from his death, evil smirked from his eyes, along with the intel that both Pamela and Cam, the maid who went missing, are being held somewhere by Gentry and Derek.

My gut tells me Derek has Cam.

And Pamela? My God, it’s been almost ten years, but she’s alive. Gentry has her. Growing up, she was part of our trio—me, Redix, and Pam—and Gentry witnessed it all. So if he couldn’t have me. And if he couldn’t keep Redix. He took Pam. And I’ll draw my last breath finding her.

“Want some champagne?” Silas whispers in my ear over the band playing, and it tickles my thighs.

“Just one for now,”—I wink—“we got a job to do.”

Silas knows Pamela’s story. He knows why I’m here, and he makes the sexiest accomplice.

A waiter passes with a tray of full flutes, and Silas grabs us two. We're sipping and scanning the crowd, and within minutes, Stacey Evans is by my side.

"I'm so glad you came." She wraps her arm around me and whispers in my ear. "I gotta tell you something."

Silas gets pulled into a conversation with a couple who knows his parents, so I focus on Stacey.

"Are you okay?"

"More than okay." Delight dances in her eyes. "I'm dying to tell someone, and my heart just knows you can keep a secret."

I chuckle. "Like a fucking vault."

Why I feel so connected to Stacey, I don't know. Maybe it's because she's in danger, and I want to protect her. Maybe it's because she's nothing but truly kind. Or maybe it's because she's another woman, so why wouldn't I?

"The painters that came over." Stacey pulls me into a hushed chat. The music swirls around us while she confesses, "I learned a few tricks with a very skilled one."

This champagne is opium because I just went numb. In a good way. "One of the painters?" I'm proud of her. "Is that what you wanted?"

"Hell, yes, I started it." She squeezes my hand. "I don't know what's gotten into me, but Gentry's been so mean for so long, and I'm so lonely, so please don't judge."

"You deserve love, too." I toast her glass. "Or at least a skilled trick."

"We gotta do coffee so I can tell you more," she gushes. "I'm just bursting and need to tell one of the few friends I trust."

"I got your back." I scan the crowd. "You sure Gentry doesn't know?"

"How could he? He was off on his yacht on one of his exclusive golf tours. I could have an orgy with a football team,

and he'd be none the wiser."

"Do you need me to call the Carolina Panthers?"

We both start laughing, and that turns heads. Shit, we gotta be careful, but this intel changes everything. Stacey's ready to break free of Gentry's prison, and I'm the jail-breaker who'll help.

"These golf tours?" I ask her. "What are they?"

She rolls her eyes. "They're through his rental company. Men book a golf tournament, and they get a yacht trip and a condo here for a week, too—all private, all elite, and all bullshit. I know they're fucking around the whole time."

Oh, I know it, too.

I saw it myself between Gentry and TJ. But I didn't know Gentry's evolved it into a sophisticated business model. One that screams criminal to me. I gotta figure out how they're all connected. And then, I gotta prove it.

Another guest grabs Stacey's attention while I smile my way into getting Silas free of his chat. Pulling his hand through the crowd, I tell him, "Let's find someplace private."

"Well, Happy New Year to me." He's game.

Guests gather everywhere, outside and in. But the crowd thins down a hallway past a powder room leading to an impressive office. It's empty, and this is my chance.

"There's gotta be something in here," I tell Silas.

He scans Gentry's desk without touching anything. I start combing the rows of bookshelves—leather-bound classics I'm sure the dumbass Senator has never read. But there are lots of pictures of him on his yacht, fishing with groups of men.

I pause and scan the horizon of the photos for clues. *Where is he fishing?*

It's the Lowcountry islands, but which one? There are dozens of islands, some public, some private. But I swear, in a few, I can barely see the Harbour Towne lighthouse on Hilton Head in the distance.

He's not going far. And that's the only place Pamela could be. Maybe Cam, too. Hidden on one of those islands.

I'm about to ask Silas because he knows the terrain even better, but heavy footsteps clip down the hall, headed this way.

Shit, we're gonna get caught.

"Come here." I yank Silas into my arms and plant a kiss on his lips.

It's a ruse at first, a desperate act so we won't get busted...

And then it's more.

It's the satin of his lips sliding over mine. It's the grab of his hands, pulling my neck and my body into his. And I match it, weaving my hands through his hair and yanking the lapel of his suit to where there's no space between us.

The moan that escapes our throats when our tongues touch. It's tentative at first, searching for more until we both take the other and give into this desire, and it flames my sex. He groans into my mouth, tangling with my tongue, and my desire puddles in my panties when I feel him grind his hard cock into me.

Oh fuck, he's so big and good at this.

Silas wraps around me like a silk rope, and I crave the confinement. I want to let go, to let him try to heal me, to let him fuck me so hard against these bookshelves; all my pain gone. I've wondered about him for so long.

"Good God, Cade." He murmurs into our kiss, and I forget everything but his mouth on mine, his body craving mine, his thick cock...

"Ahem." It startles us, and I don't know why. "Making yourselves at home?"

Standing on the threshold, Gentry looks half pissed, half aroused. I can see his small pleasure tenting his pants at our show.

"Excuse us." Silas takes over. "We just wanted a little privacy and got carried away, New Year's Eve and all."

“Well, the ball doesn’t drop for five minutes, but be my guest,” Gentry smirks. “Who am I to stop a Van de May man from what he wants?”

“Right now, we want another round of champagne,” Silas answers, reaching for my hand and trying to get us out of this.

“By all means.” Gentry doesn’t move. “It’s uncanny, Ms. Bryant, isn’t it”—his eyes burn into mine—“how much Mr. Van de May looks like Redix Dean? Must make this quite titillating for you.”

Sweat slicks my palm, along with my rage boiling up. There’s a letter opener on Gentry’s desk that’ll look really good stabbed into his neck... twenty times.

“Thank you. I get that compliment a lot.” Silas saves me. “Mr. Dean and I do have some beautiful things in common. But in other ways, we’re very different.”

Silas uses his height, his status, and his fearless swagger to push our way past Gentry.

Finally, the evil fuck steps aside and lets us pass, but not before Silas says, “Redix and I may look alike, Senator, but I assure you, we don’t *fuck* alike.”

Who that was meant for, I don’t know, but I love hearing Silas own it. I’m tired of the comparison, too. Redix is a fire, and Silas is a refreshing breeze. Both are needed, but I only have one right now.

Our kiss still tingles on my lips while I’m in a daze, and the main living room is packed with society rubbing shoulders. The flatscreen above the fireplace is ticking down to New Year’s, and so is my heart.

I don’t feel guilty. I don’t feel shame. I don’t belong to anyone, but I want to kiss Silas again. I want to feel better.

We don’t grab more champagne. Instead, Silas gently grabs my jaw in his hands while the crowd shouts down, “Five! Four!”

And his eyes search mine. “Three! Two!”

And I don’t look away. “One!” I need this new year.

His lips land on mine again, and the crowd cheers while my body rises to his. The tips of our tongues meet again, and minutes don't exist. Painful years and sweet days melt away to his lush kiss, swelling my heart even bigger.

Yes, I have a lot of love to give, and he wants it. Skating his hot lips to my ear, he asks, "You ready to go forward, Cade?"

My eyes are still closed, and I see it. I hold Redix with one hand and Silas with another. And fuck you, Fate, and this world with its rules because you've taken enough from me.

I don't have to let go of one man to love another.

"Yes," I answer under a shower of confetti.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Don't Sleep (Freestyle) by SKYLR

CADE'S QUIET WHILE I TURN MY TRUCK TOWARD THE mainland.

“Where are we going?”

Of course, she asks.

“I have a little place in Bluffton, a loft I rent from my friend Quincy.”

“Damn, Silas. You're an onion with layers to discover.”

She makes me laugh.

“It's nothing fancy. I need a place on the mainland, and we fixed up the loft above his garage. It's simple but someplace new for *us*.” I glance at her. “I figured there're lots of memories at your place.”

Nodding her head, she looks out the window, and I give her time. If Cade changes her mind, that's fine. If we just hold each other, I need that too. But my God, if I finally get to

touch her, taste her, and fuck her, damn, I'm gonna have to hold myself back.

Watching Cade from afar has been sweet torture, but we needed the distance. Her for Redix and whatever's going on between them, and me because of Charlie and Alec.

Yeah, I've fucked other women, but you know it when you're with someone who will mean more. I live with my heart open and felt it the minute I met Cade.

At first, she was about as interested in me as day-old bread. But everything's changing for her and pulling us together, no matter her past.

I like that she still loves Redix. It's one of the things I respect about her. That she doesn't give up on someone. That she believes in the deepest love, one that won't die. Too many walk away from love over one fight, one mistake, or one tragedy.

Maybe it's because I could never keep the love I wanted. Even while I loved Alec, I loved Charlie, too. To this day, I miss Alec. And if Charlie calls, I'm there. I don't have to fuck Charlie to love her. Though don't get me wrong... I'm dying to, but that'll never happen.

I don't need to claim Cade or anyone as "mine" to love them.

People aren't possessions; they're gifts.

Lose one, and you learn that real quick.

The porch light over the door above the garage lights our way up the stairs. It's dark until I hit a switch, and a couple of lamps turn on.

"Home, sweet second home," I pronounce while Cade looks around.

"Silas, this is nice."

"It's amazing what white paint can do."

The place is simple and what I can afford. A brand new studio apartment with all that's important: a big bed, a new

bathroom, a small kitchen, and a chair. I don't need more than this. But I need her, taking her hand and pulling her to me.

“You sure you're ready for this?”

“No.”

“Cade, I”—there's confidence in her eyes as tears well in them, too—“I won't make you do anything.”

“No one makes me do a damn thing. I *need* to do this.”

The strap of her dress is spaghetti thin while I trace over it. “Do what?”

“I need to know who I am without him, without my past.” Her hands glide down my starched white shirt, along with tears down her cheeks. “But I don't want to use you to do it.”

“Haven't you been with other men?”

“Yes, but I was never open with them, not like I am with you. I never wanted to change until now. I wanted to stay stuck in my past, the one that's wrecked me for so long. Like if I stayed there, I could change it; I could erase what happened. But I can't. And it hurts too much. I need to let it go. I can't stay there forever.”

“So you worry you'll use me?” My fingertips linger down her neck. It's so soft and rising to my light touch. “Trying to change, trying to forget him?”

“I'll never forget him. I'll always love him.” Her hands rest on my chest, over my heart beating so fast this close to her. “That's why I'm afraid. I won't lie to you or hurt you, Silas, but I don't know how to do this, but I wanna try.”

“You're not hurting me by loving him. Just let me try to love you too.”

I kiss her lips, and I'm in awe again. They're so full, so soft, and I've never kissed a woman with a mouth like hers. It pulls you in, and you don't want to leave. I come up for air, kiss her ear next, “Like this,” and find my way down her neck while she moans, driving me mad.

I've been staring at her neck for so long. With her short hair, it's exposed and long, and all I've wanted to do is sink my teeth into it; in the sexiest way.

"Silas." She sighs my name, and I give her shoulder a gentle bite because my cock is a dog on a chain for her. It needs to be set free. It needs her. "Do you have condoms?"

"Yes."

It's short steps into my bathroom while I grab three from the drawer because I *will* try all night with her. I'll try anything to ease her pain. When I turn back her way, she sees my supply in hand.

"How many guests have you had up here?"

"Are you asking how many women I've fucked?"

"And men."

"No men. None other than Alec, like I told you. And women? Maybe nine or ten."

For the first time since we got here, she laughs. "That means eighteen or twenty."

It lights up my heart. "You're telling me I'm the second man for you? What about women?"

"No women, though I'm not opposed." She steps out of her heels. "And men? Maybe fifteen Marines or so."

"Marines?" Fuck, that turns me on. "Nice choice."

"*Smart* choice."

"Why smart?" I lay my jacket and the condoms down on the chair.

"Because I only do one night. I only..."

Something drops her gaze to the floor like she's suddenly plunged into darkness.

"Cade, what is it?"

"This is what I mean. I don't know how to do this."

I lift her chin. There's a storm in her eyes. Desire. Sadness. A heart-breaking vulnerability. "We start by you telling me everything like I told you."

The pause she gives, it's like she's ashamed of this secret. "Other than Redix and after that night, I only let men fuck me from behind and close my eyes almost the whole time."

"Why?"

Her eyes confront mine like she's finally confronting this. "Because I have to forget everything and think about him to come."

"We don't have to do this."

Her tears stop, "I want to," and determination sets across her sexy face.

"No. Let me be clear. I'm not doing this if you have to close your eyes to be with me. *That* would be using me." I search hers with mine. "*I'm not him.*"

"I know you're not." She unbuttons my shirt while her body rubbing against mine awakens my heart, reminding my cock of how long I've wanted her. "I want to try with *you*, Silas, and watch you the whole time."

Dropping my shirt to the floor, "I need something new," she says, "and I need to feel it with you." My pants drop next while she follows to her knees, and my body is a live wire begging for her touch. "And I'll start here."

Dragging my boxer briefs down, she stares at how much I want her. At how hungry my cock's been for her for so long. At how I'm fucking throbbing and swollen for her and the time she takes rubbing my thighs while her lips part, studying my length, I'm already dripping for her.

She sees it, and with her hands still massaging my legs, her tongue darts out for my first drops. "Oh shit," I groan at the first feel of her mouth.

"What do *you* want, Silas?"

She's the one on her knees, but I'm the one worshipping her.

“Take your dress off. I wanna see you naked while you suck my cock.”

With a flick, her straps fall off her shoulders, along with her sparkly dress to the floor. Underneath, she’s only wearing black lace panties, and I praise a sight that’s teased me for so long. Her breasts. They’re perfect. Full and natural and peaked for my eyes, I want to feast on them, too.

But first, she teases my tip with wet kisses from those full lips. I’m holding back as she starts licking my shaft, dragging her tongue down to my base and back up to my sensitive crown, and goddamn, I could bang her throat, but she beats me to it.

Cade goes from a tease to torture that’s heaven while her cheeks hollow, and she starts her attack. Sucking my cock like water in the desert, she feasts like she’s the only one allowed to drink me.

No more holding back. No more past. We want to try to fuck the pain away and hell out of each other, and, “Oh fuck, yes,” I guide her gently. But she goes harder and deeper, and, “Fuck yes, suck my cock,” I can’t get enough of her raiding mouth.

How spit drips from her plump lips. “Yes, that’s it.” How light gags hit her throat as she chokes down my cock, blowing my mind too. “You like this, don’t you?” And her short hair in my grasp. And her eyes looking up at me. “It’s *my* cock fucking your throat now.” She’s so damn sexy, moaning so much like she knows it too. “God, Cade, you’re sucking my cock so good. So—fucking—dirty like I knew you would be.”

I can come in her perfect mouth, but she stops.

Popping her lips off my cock, she offers her gorgeous tits up. Her hands push them together into a tight cleavage that will be my death; please, and thank you. “You’ve been wanting them, haven’t you?”

Bending my knees to indulge, “Hell yes, I have,” I circle my tip over her nipples while I can’t believe this is finally happening. “I’ve wanted you for so long.”

My cock's slick from her mouth, and when I start gliding between the soft skin of her breasts, *shit, this is hot*. "Gimme your cock, Silas." *She's hot*. Sucking my tip when it nears her lips, she's incredible, and I'm so damn lucky. "You like fucking my tits, don't you?"

"Yes." I can't stop worshipping the sight of it. The way she's looking up at me. I'm putty in her hands and so hard for her tits. "Damn, how this looks." My breath is leaving me, and I need control and groan it back before coming all over them. "I gotta stop."

I reach to help her stand. With her heels off, her exquisite body perfectly matches mine, and I want to take my time with her.

Tracing over every inch, I discover her slender curves and perfect pussy. How her legs are sculpted. Her abs are carved. Her arms are strong. She's a goddamn Amazon with full tits and a pussy ruling me.

Her eyes search mine while I memorize her. What she's looking for, staring back at me, I don't know, but I'll try anything for her—anything to give her what she needs.

"Here." I walk us to a full-length mirror I propped against the wall. It's there to make the room look bigger. Now, it reflects our sex and gives me a chance to give her this.

"Don't close your eyes." I fall to my knees with my back to the mirror while she's facing it. "Watch. *I'll* be the one making you come tonight."

Lifting her leg over my shoulder, I have to pace myself because I want to dive in. I want to fucking swim in her. Licking and nibbling up her thigh, she starts shaking, and I see how wet she already is, her sweet musk threatening my control. I look up, and she's staring at our reflection, then down at me like she's desperate to try this.

"Do you wanna watch us, Cade?"

"Yes."

"Then say it."

Her fingers weave through my hair before she grabs it tight and demands, “Silas, eat my pussy.”

Dipping my tongue in first, I hear what I need. I taste what I crave, what I wondered about for so long, and she’s more than I imagined.

“Oh God,” she cries out while I lick and lap through her folds. I’ll memorize every part of her, everything that makes her moan because she starts grinding over my face, and I’m hungry for more. “God, Silas, yes.”

I groan while she leans forward, bracing herself against me because I swear I’ll make her come all over my tongue.

My fingers explore where she opens for me, and “Yes, do it,” cries from her voice, and I drive them in while her clit demands my suck. Her gasps, her groans, her thighs shaking by my cheeks, this woman tastes so damn good. She’s glossing my chin while her eyes pore over mine, and her pussy fucks my face and fills my heart; *my God, I want her.*

“Yes, Silas, yes!” That’s my name and the praise I need while she watches herself baptize my mouth with her cum. I’ve never tasted a woman drip so sweet, her sex pulsing over my fingers while she does it again. Gripping my head so hard, all I can breathe is her, and she’s divine as she shakes over my face with another spasm.

After three quick breaths, she meets me on my knees. “Fuck me,” she huffs. “Fuck me now,” she insists before kissing me, and of all the things I’ve done, this is new. Tasting her tang on my tongue as it mixes with drops of my salt on hers; *damn, it’s hot.*

And the list gets longer of all I want to do with her. Of all I can introduce her to. Of all I can make her forget.

She has no idea.

I grab a condom from the chair and rip it open, telling her, “Get on your knees in front of the mirror. You’re gonna watch us fuck too.”

Rolling the condom on, I relish the sight of her on all fours. She’s two feet from the mirror and the most gorgeous

pussy ever bent over for me.

“Fuck.” I spread her open. I can’t get enough of the sight. Her ass. Her cunt. Her slick lips. Her wet thighs.

“Like what you see?” she asks with no shame, like she’s truly opening up to me.

“I’m gonna *fuck* all I see.” I tongue her ass, and she cries out again, and I’m so tempted, but not now. Teasing her tightest hole with my fingertip makes her grind back on my hard tip, toying with her entrance.

“Whose cock do you want, Cade?” I taunt her reflection, her violet eyes staring back at me, barely nudging in.

“Yours, Silas. Fuck my pussy so hard and make me come on *your* thick cock.” Damn, she’s getting dirtier, and I’m all for it. “Twice,” she demands.

“Woman,”—I grab her shoulders—“I’m gonna fuck you so hard you’ll forget your name,” and I thrust in with a hard grunt. With talk like that, she wants it rough, and her “Oh fuck, yes” confirms it.

I can do this. I can pound her until we see stars, and I start to, and it feels so fucking good... but then I see her beautiful face in the mirror... at how her violet eyes start closing... and...

She’s not just *any* woman, and this isn’t just *any* fuck.

I want her to forget *more* than her name. I want Cade to forget her pain, her past, and her broken heart, at least for a night.

Because she doesn’t judge, and she always loves, and she always fights, and she’s so damn breathtaking doing it. And we need this. We need something new and to find it together.

“Cade,”—I pull her shoulders up—“watch us like this.”

We lift on our knees. We spread them wide so we can watch while I slowly thrust into her, and she meets my ride.

My lips hum over her ear. “Do you see us?” We’re stunning. We’re captivating, and my hand cups her breast

while the other slides between her thighs, and I feel my cock entering her again and again, and “Silas” is all she sighs.

Her hand reaches up to pull my kiss to her neck. Her other reaches around, caressing my hip, telling me our tempo.

It’s slow. It’s long. I’ve never seen this, and the way she’s marveling at our bodies joined, I don’t think she has either. “Watch, Cade. Watch me make you come.” Our gaze is latched on our reflection. Her clit, her nipple, they’re both in my grasp and with a gentle pinch, I rattle and tug them until she bucks and trembles in my grasp.

“Oh, God.” Her pleasure looks like pain because she lets it take her. She’s letting go. She comes so hard, her body quakes, but then she’s grinding back on me, searching and not stopping.

“You want more?” I grab her hips. “You wanna forget your name?”

“Yes.” She drops to all fours again. “Do it.” Her eyes challenge mine in the reflection. “Do it hard.”

Oh, this permission. I’ll lose my mind or sell it for free to fuck her like this. Thrusting hard into her, she cries out, and I don’t fear it. It’s what she wants, groaning, arching her spine, and grinding back on me for more. With both hands grabbing her shoulders, I control each brutal plunge of my cock into her pussy, over and over, and *holy fuck*; I’m shaking.

She’s watching me. She’s watching us, and this is it. This is what we need. “I knew you’d be so tight for me.” I stare into her eyes. “So damn wet and wanting it.” Another slam. After slam. After slam. “I knew you’d need a hard fuck after you looked so damn dirty sucking my cock.” Her eyes roll back with a moan.

“Watch,” I demand, and she opens them. “Don’t close your eyes. Watch your pussy get fucked so hard.” The gasps that leave her lips; she’s loving this. The look in her eyes: I’m addicted. “Watch yourself come on my big cock.”

Damn, her thighs are shaking. Mine are, too. And my lips. My whole world is quaking at our fuck. It *is* changing. We’re

changing. I reach around for her clit, for her release, to see her set free. “Whose pussy is this?”

“Mine,” she huffs.

“Is your pussy gonna come because it loves getting fucked?” Her clit’s so swollen, so ready.

“Yes,” she huffs.

“*Yeah, you are.*” I rub it so hard and fuck her so hard that she breaks apart in the reflection. Her eyes fly wide open. Like something releases, like she’s drawing breath for the first time with her scream while I growl, “What’s your name?” and she can’t answer.

My cock, my need, my insanity, it’s here, and my breath can’t be any thinner; I can’t want her any more than this. “What’s my name?” With three more thrusts, I grab her shoulders so hard she sighs, “Silas,” and I lose it all to her, everything rushing from me, all I’ve held back for so long.

“Oh God, Cade.” I can’t help it. I close my eyes and toss my chin back while my body seizes. While I pray. While I can’t believe we’re together. Because she feels so damn good, and I’m so thankful, *finally*, for her.

We find our breath and our bodies on the rug. She turns around, and I pull her into me.

“Is that what you needed?” I whisper into her hair. “Is that how you wanna change?”

“Yes,” she sighs into my chest and finds my heart. “Thank you.”

I lift her chin and choke up at the tears in her eyes. “You’re gonna change me too, Cade. We both need new lives.”

“We *all* do.” She pecks my lips before nuzzling into my neck, and I know she’ll never let Redix go, either. And somehow, I believe, a woman like her, she’s strong enough for us both.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



REDIX

“YOU LIKE IT BLACK WITH NO SUGAR, RIGHT?” KAREN SETS the coffee down in front of me.

How much is she watching me?

Then again, I’ve been watching her.

She sits right across from me in our AA circle, and I notice how she always wears those heels, black leather, and lots of red lipstick. It’s a hot look. It certainly dresses up a church.

“Yeah, thanks.” I stand up and pull a chair out for her. Though it’s a bit cold—even I’m wearing a jean jacket—she wanted to sit on the patio of this coffee shop, so I held the table for us.

It’s fine by me. No one’s out here, so I won’t get spotted. “How do you take your coffee?”

“Lots of cream and sugar.” Her smile is permanent. “Coffee’s optional.”

I ask her about her New Year’s; then she talks about her job and a project she’s working on. When we get to mine, I tell

her I'm waiting to hear if my show gets the green light to film in Georgia this spring. Lorraine should know any day.

I hope it's a yes so that I can stay with my family. If not, I might convince them to move to LA with me, anything to keep Renie and Nicolas safe.

"I gotta admit it's weird." Karen picks at her muffin. "Like you're Redix from my AA meetings, but you're also *Redix Dean*, and I can't stop staring; I'm sorry." She touches my knee. "I hope that doesn't weird you out."

"Not really." It does. And I don't want to insult her, but her hand on my knee makes it worse. "It's a surreal life, and if it starts feeling normal, you're in trouble. That means you're living in the lens, not your life."

"What does that mean?"

"You either look at yourself the way you think others do, like through a camera lens, which is all I knew for so damn long, and it's toxic. Or you look at yourself as you really are, which keeps me sober."

"Who are you really?"

It's lightning, the turn of my chin: that question strikes, and Cade flashes in my mind. I sip my coffee, and I can't answer.

Because I miss her, I ache without her.

And I fear I'll never stop.

"I'm sorry." Thank God, she takes her hand off my knee. "That's gotta hurt. That's too intense for morning coffee."

I shrug. "That's my life."

"And it's been so public. All those videos of you. You were drunk in them, weren't you?"

"Every day, for nine years, I was drinking."

"I can't judge. I did crazy shit too. One time, I danced topless on a bar."

That makes me laugh. “Sounds innocent compared to what I did.”

It feels good finding the humor with someone who gets it. How when an alcoholic drinks, it owns your actions. We’re serious about it in meetings. But if I can’t laugh about it, I’ll go crazy.

“Yeah.” Her smile is pretty. “You did some pretty fucked up shit, no offense. Like all those women? And those three going down on you with that Blow-Pop?”

“God, it’s awful.” It makes me wince and laugh at the same time. “It’s so damn embarrassing.”

“Embarrassing is the strip tease I did drunk in Walmart.”

“Embarrassing is getting caught getting a blow job at the Golden Globes.”

“Were there ever any men?”

I’m still laughing, “Maybe,” because she gets me. “I could’ve fucked the LA Rams and their cheerleaders and not remember a damn thing.”

We’re rolling. “Well, there’s a few Clemson football players I went on my knees for,” she admits, “so there you go.”

We shoot the shit for another hour, but this needs to go slow. I don’t know what this is, if anything.

“Sorry to cut this short.” I stand up and offer her my hand. It’s manners. “I got some work I gotta do.”

She holds my hand to stand like Cinderella from her carriage, and I know she’s falling for me. But she’s a single mom, and I gave up being an asshole for good, so I’m not taking advantage of her.

I walk her to her car. She twirls my way after she opens her door. “Dinner next time?”

I’m glad she asked because I never would, and I need to try. This is the only way to move on from Cade.

“Sure. This Saturday?”

“Sounds good.” She’s leaning *way* too close to me.

It makes me flinch back and glance into her backseat. “Hey, where’s your car seat?”

“Huh?” Her eyes dart that way, and then she laughs. “Oh.” And pauses. “It’s gross. My son had an accident, so I had to hose it down. It’s drying in my garage.”

“That’s not gross; that’s a parent’s life.” It’s weird. She’s never told me. “What’s your son’s name?”

She stammers, “Chandler.”

“Chandler?” I laugh. “Like from *Friends*?”

“Don’t make fun of me.” She slaps my chest. “I’m a huge fan.”

“Obviously.” I grin as my phone buzzes in my back pocket and with all the shit that’s going on. “Excuse me. I gotta check this.”

BEAUFORT COUNTY SHERIFF

It lights up my screen, and *oh shit*. “I need to answer this. See ya Saturday.” It’s polite. I peck her cheek and turn away, answering, “Hello?”

“Hey, Hollywood Motherfucker.”

“Hey, Penny.” She hates me, and it cracks me up. “Everything okay?”

“Sorta,” she says. “No new leads or anything, but we’re looking. And I got a favor.”

“For you, my favorite deputy—anything.”

“Such a smooth talker.” I know she’s laughing. “Listen, can you do a DNA swab of Nicolas’s cheek? Like without upsetting him, but if I bring you a kit, you think you can get one?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Derek lived in New York. He was all over the place. Here, there, Virginia. But some unsolved cases match his

M.O., using the HGB and all. And his tattoo is described by the victims.”

It flashes, and I slam my eyes shut, trying to make it stop.

The mudflap girl tattoo on Derek’s arm. I see it while he’s laughing and punching my ears. Gentry’s pinning down my ankles. TJ’s yanking down my jeans.

“Redix? You there?”

“Yeah.” My hands shake while I turn on my car.

“I’ll bring a kit by this afternoon. Is that okay?”

“Yeah.”

Razor blades. It’s hot, the rip of my flesh. It burns to my ears as they fill with blood from Derek’s punches.

“Hey.” Penny soothes. “You okay?”

Dismissal was my response for nine years, but not anymore.

“No, I’m not. Talking about Derek brings it back for me, too.”

She’s quiet for a second. “Thank you for sharing that with me. I didn’t realize. I’ll be more careful in the future.”

“I don’t need special treatment.”

“No, but everyone deserves respect.” Another pause. “I’ll be by later today.”

Our call ends, and deep down, I wish it was Cade coming by.

Even if it’s business, I want to apologize for being so cruel and taking my anger out on her.

Cade’s the safest place for me; deep down, I know it when I’m in pain. I lash out, and she’ll still love me. But that’s not fair to her. It hurts her, and that’s the last thing I want.

It’s like just when I healed from my own shit, I found out about Renie, and I gotta dig so deep to find my peace.

Cade used to be my peace; even just the thought of her made it okay.

I gotta find my own peace now.

It's hard because I feel like someone's following me every time I drive. For weeks now, the feeling's making me paranoid. It's like I'm being watched everywhere I go, but not by the media. It's like I'm doing something wrong. And every time I sleep, I have nightmares. My best times awake are with my family or in my meetings.

I go home and shop online for furniture for the rest of the day. Me and Cade were supposed to do it together, but I need something for guests to sit on.

Nicolas and Renie come in the door, and he's wide open when he gets home from school, running all over the house. I swear I'm signing that boy up for the track team one day.

I love it. I chase him for hours. Then I make our dinner, Mama gets him a bath, and Renie gets him ready for bed. The house is finally quiet again, so I knock on Renie's bedroom door.

"Come in," she mutters.

"Got a few minutes?"

She puts her book down, "Maybe," and pats the bed beside her.

"What are you reading?"

"Hot smut."

I plop down beside her. "Save me the book."

I tell her about Derek and the DNA test Penny dropped off. I ask if she's okay, but she isn't fazed by it. She wants to catch his ass too.

"Why isn't Cade handling my case?" Renie drops her nose, and the interrogation begins.

"Because we got in a big fight. Two, actually, and it's not professional if she does."

“Can’t y’all work it out? You fussed when you were teenagers but always made up.”

“We’re not kids anymore.”

“No shit. You’re adults who should know better. You should work it out.”

I play with the tassel on her throw pillow. “It’s not that simple.”

“Do you still love her?”

“I’ll never stop loving her.” The tassel tickles my fingers. “But I can’t be with her anymore. I’m angry with her about something she did, and it makes me want to drink. And I’ll die doing that, so I have no choice.”

When I put it like that, it sounds so simple. Sure as hell doesn’t feel that way.

“You gonna tell me what she did?”

“I can’t.” That quiets her for not even a minute.

“Can I ask a question?” She settles into her pillow. “What do you love about her?”

My heart suddenly bursts. What *don’t* I love about Cade?

Except for that one horrible thing.

“I could always see her big heart. Like how she was everything for everyone else. The tall, pretty girl. The one bullied about it. The Sheriff’s daughter. The model. The cop. The one who has to protect victims. She’s always taking care of people. But when she’s with me and is just my Candy Cade...”

Oh fuck. I choke on air. My eyes burn, and this pain keeps sneaking up. I don’t want to live without her.

“When it was just us...” I stammer, remembering lemon kisses. I swallow down the rocks in my throat instead.

“When she was just my best friend...” I can’t help it. I miss her. I miss us. I miss that dream I lived for. A tear falls to

the velvet pillow, and I don't care. "She was free and happy and fun, and those guys took it away from her."

Renie reaches for my hand. "And you."

I can admit it now. "And me."

"Can I make an observation?"

Oh shit, when Renie says that. "Can I stop you?" I laugh, and I needed it.

"Y'all are exactly alike."

"Thanks, Captain Obvious."

"I'm serious, Captain Asshole, you are. You're just like Cade. The son who took care of Mama. The brother who watched out for me. The guy who protected Cade. The good-looking man who smiles for every camera."

I wink. "You think I'm good-looking?"

"Shut up." She back-hands my arm. "Lemme finish." I get quiet. "You and Cade are just alike except for one thing."

"What's that?" I adore my sister.

"You ran," she says. "You had to leave to find yourself again, and I get that. We all do. Mama and I missed you, but we got to talk to you and visit. Cade didn't. And then you dropped back into her life like a bomb. Twice. And she always took you back. She never stopped believing in you. None of us did."

Shit, she's right.

"Hey, look at me, you stubborn turd," she sorta jokes. I look up, and we both have teary eyes. "Let Cade go. Let *her* leave this time and find herself. And let her fuck up like you did a hundred damn times and forgive her and take her back."

"How'd you get so damn smart?"

"Quit joking." She smacks me again. "Did you hear me? Believe in Cade like she did in you, and take her back."

"What if she doesn't want me back?"

"Did she ever stop fighting for you?"

“Cade Bryant doesn’t stop fighting, period.” I like talking about her like this. And all I can see now is her... *with him*. “But she’s in love with some perfect man now.”

“You’re just saying that because you went on a date this morning.”

“What?” My spine shoots up. “It wasn’t a date. It was coffee with a friend, and how the hell do you know about it?”

She rolls her eyes. It’s constant around me.

“Because you’re dumbass *Redix Dean*, and pictures are all over Instagram. Do you *not* check your hashtag?”

“No.” I reach for my phone and type it in, and *oh shit*.

Posts and reposts of me and Karen at the coffee shop are everywhere.

How the fuck did that happen?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Bad Things by Summer Kennedy

TWICE, I'VE SPENT THE DAY WITH SILAS'S PARENTS.

First, it was New Year's Day, eating black-eyed peas and collards. Silas and I were still on a post-fuck high, and nothing could burst our bubble. It was supposed to be informal as we sat at his parents' kitchen island, that's the size of a king's dining table. Three dozen other "close friends" were there too.

Everyone was kind to me, Silas's mom in particular.

"I donated to your mother's campaign for Sheriff every time," she said. "We need more women in power."

I see where Silas gets his feminism.

But not his dad. He beamed around me, but you could freeze lava with how he treated Silas.

"I'm sorry he ignores you." I held Silas in bed that night. Sleeping at his loft feels like a new life, and I love it. "Can I do anything to help?"

“I wanna see my mom, even if my dad’s a dick, so if you’ll keep being my eye-candy of a date, that helps.”

Silas didn’t take it out on me, but I saw the hurt in his eyes. How they treat me like I’m perfect and redeem Silas from his supposed sin.

It’s the opposite. Silas is all good, all redemption, and all heart, and I’m the one who sinned in the worst way.

The second day we spent with them was the following weekend. We went up to Charleston for a regatta. Silas crewed for his dad, but he told me the only thing he barked at him were orders.

I stood shoreside with his mom, and she grabbed my hand, saying, “Thank you for bringing our son back to us.”

“He misses you,” I told her. “I think he misses his dad too, but he’s not going to be someone he’s not.”

“I love my son no matter what.” Her eyes hid behind sunglasses, but tears were in her voice. “I’m working on my husband, but he needs time. You being here helps.”

It pisses me off and hurts Silas. Like it’s okay if he dates a woman. But not if he dates a man. Like, only half of him is acceptable, and that breaks my heart because all of Silas is perfect to me. Women or men, I love that he’s so free with his heart.

My whole life, I’ve lived on guard. Maybe it’s because I was always at risk. But every day, in subtle ways, and sometimes Silas outright says it—I’m free too. I’m not bound to him.

And deep down, I know I belong *with* Redix, but I don’t belong *to* him.

After the love he keeps losing, Silas gets that. He helps me understand that. That no one is ever truly yours.

That helped when I saw those posts of Redix with some woman. I have no right to be jealous. Redix is in pain, and I ache when he hurts. He doesn’t want me, and I don’t want him to be alone.

But *that* woman? She's wrong for him. One damn picture on my phone shouts it in my ear. Why can't I shake it? Maybe I *am* a jealous bitch and don't want to admit it. But that instinct crawls under my skin along with the one I'm culling tonight.

This is my third event with Silas and his parents, and it's a doozie. A huge fundraising gala at Festival Hall in Charleston, and every power player is here—including Senator Gentry Evans and his lovely wife.

That same lovely wife is fast becoming my friend; I'll do anything for her.

There was finally a light in her eyes as she confessed to me days ago, "I swear I'm a woman on a rampage, and I love it. Fuck, Gentry. I know he fucks around, so I'll fuck *whoever* I want too."

"Why do you stay with him?"

We were splitting a lemon square and huddled in a cafe's private corner near her house.

"Because of my dad. He has Alzheimer's and needs full-time care I can't afford. It's thousands a month. My mom died when I was young, so it was just me, and we didn't have much. I married Gentry right after college, and I was so naive I signed a prenup. I have no career experience. No money of my own. So if I divorce Gentry, what'll I do with my dad?"

"I can help you."

"Thank you, but"—Stacey grabbed my hand—"your friendship's all I need."

"Speaking of." I had to tell her, not everything until I know its scope. "Stacey, Gentry's into some shady shit. Like, people are getting hurt. I can't prove it yet, but I worry about you."

She was quiet for a bit, chewing on her lip.

"I sense it. Something's been off with him for years. Like I don't know him anymore. At first, his arrogance was cute. Now, it's terrifying."

We spent an hour talking about all she knows about Gentry's businesses. The property he owns. Habits he has. My mental notes are long, and I remember it all.

That's what finds me here. Silas and I stand in the middle of Festival Hall. He's looking delicious in a tux, and I rented a white Valentino dress because I'm on the hunt.

Stacey doesn't know the names of the men who pay for Gentry's exclusive golf tours, but she knows a few faces. We suspect some will be here tonight.

And I know if I pull this thread—which men pay for Gentry's "golf tours"—I'll unravel the illegal ring he's running of women, sport, and violence. I just need to find one. One man buying the trips, and then we'll follow the trail of his financial transactions.

"Promise me, Sergeant." Silas sways with me on the dance floor, and every time I look into his hazel eyes, the world disappears for a second. "Once you're done being a badass tonight, you'll let me show you some fun."

"This *is* fun." His hand rests on my ass cheek, and my short dress thrills with the desire brushing between my bare thighs. "And you're a badass, too, helping me."

"All I'm doing is faking it for my parents when what I really care about is you and helping those missing women."

He twirls me, making me promise him, "I'll do anything for you, too," before pulling me back into his arms.

"I know." His nose nuzzles mine. "That's why I'm taking you someplace after this."

"Where?" I rub against him. "What is it? Is it close?"

"Damn, you make interrogations hot." He laughs. "Can you tie me down too?"

"Yes." I'm not kidding.

His lips tickle my ear. "It's a private club. It's a place we can be free."

Lust rushes to my thong so fast. Of course, Silas knows such places, and damn, kill this cat, I don't care... I'm curious.

"Is it a deal?" He twirls me once more.

"Yes."

I'm beaming at him until my eyes land on Stacey, who's trying to get my attention. Standing across the dance floor with Gentry, she's smiling beside a bald man who's toasting Gentry.

The look in her eyes? That bald man is one of *them*—the exclusive golf tour men.

The rest of the night, I schmooze with Silas and his parents. They introduce us to couples who own everything you touch. All the while, I keep that man in my sights.

He's with his wife. They're working the room, too. He hovers like he owns her, and her face and French twist are pulled so tight, I swear she's gonna break. I'm too good at this. I know it when I see a woman who's being hurt.

It takes too long for Baldy and his wife to move toward the exit. I give Silas a signal, and we follow.

I need that man's name. I need someone we can follow.

The valets hustle outside, pulling luxury cars up to the curb. All the while, I can tell Baldy and his wife are in a fight. He's hissing low, and she's cowering away. He grabs her arm and yanks her into a threat he whispers in her ear.

That motherfucker.

I know what's next.

Our cars pull up simultaneously, and I tell Silas, "Call the police, then block him in."

It's happening so fast. The couple disappears into their Rolls Royce. Silas jumps in the driver's seat of my car while I rush to the woman's passenger door to witness Baldy grabbing her neck in a painful choke while he's yelling something.

"Excuse me, Ma'am?" I tap on her window. "Ma'am, I'm sorry, but I think you dropped something."

He lets go of her, and her frightened eyes turn my way. There's nothing in my hand but a scheme to open her door.

"It looks like a diamond earring from your bag." My smile is innocent. My hand on the door handle isn't. All it takes is her one click, and I swing it open.

"Come with me." I grab her hand, and she complies with my orders. "It's okay. I got you."

"What the fuck?" The abusive shit shouts. "Eva, get back in here!" He opens his door so fast. "Stupid bitch! Get in the damn car!" He steps around his car's front while I gently push her toward mine.

"That's my car. Go! Get in there. You'll be safe." She rushes for my passenger door. Silas is at the wheel and ready for the next move.

"You nosy bitch!" Now, Baldy targets me. "Who the fuck do you think you are? Leave my wife alone."

"I'm Sergeant Cade Bryant, and you assaulted your wife." I position my feet. "Turn around, put your hands on the car, and don't make a scene because they're all watching."

A dozen people stand on the granite steps of the hall's entrance, Silas's parents included. They're all witnesses to this.

He rushes to shove my shoulders with both hands, sneering, "Fuck you," and it's training. It's over ten years of men like this, and I don't even think.

I step left while my right hand flies up, cupping his chin and slamming him back while my right foot kicks his ankle out from under him. He falls to the ground in my grasp while I use his shock to flip him on his stomach.

"Stay down," I command, grabbing his wrist and torquing it back. He yelps, squirms, and tries to fight me, but my knee's in his back, and the pain in his hand is too much. "Fight me, and you'll make it worse." I'm one snap away from breaking it.

And I can't help it. I think of his wife, of so many women.

“See, asshole.” I squeeze his bones about to break. He screams while I hiss in his ear, “Fuck with women again, and this is what you’ll get.”

Men in the crowd rush to help me. *That’s cute.* I don’t need them because this man looks up from the concrete in red-faced pain and knows he’s done for.

It’s an hour while the Charleston police get my statement. The man is in cuffs in the back of a patrol car. His wife is safe with a sister who came to pick her up. Witnesses seal his fate, and an officer gives me his name.

Claude Olan Turner III.

This bald, rich dick is the sledgehammer I need to knock Gentry’s world down.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



TELL ME A BLOODY KNEECAP AIN'T SEXY, AND I'LL POINT TO Cade Bryant and prove you wrong. She didn't even know she was bleeding until we jumped into her car, and I told her.

"Do you still wanna play?" I ask her from the driver's seat, watching her dab her kneecap with a tissue.

"Hell, yes." She grins up from her task. "It's only midnight, and now I'm *really* in the mood."

"Sugar lips, *every* man got in the mood watching you kick ass tonight."

That amuses her. "Sugar lips?"

"That's what they taste like."

I shift her car into drive, but she grabs my arm.

"Wait," she says, and I press the brake. "Before we go anywhere or do anything, I just wanna know." Her hand won't leave my arm. "What are we doing? You and me?"

Putting the car in park, I turn to her. "Do you really *need* to know?"

“Don’t you?”

I sift through my mind, searching my heart, and I feel sure.

“No, I’m kinda happy not knowing what we are.”

“But your parents think we’re serious. All of South Carolina society thinks we’re an item. We’ve spent every night together for two weeks, and you’re my dad’s close friend. But I don’t know what we really are.”

Desperation, sadness, insecurity; none of that appears in her violet eyes. It’s just pure curiosity shining through and making me smile.

“You just listed what other people think or expect.” Damn, she’s hot. Like she-can-kick-your-ass-and-you’ll-love-it hot. “What do *you* want?”

“I don’t wanna keep hurting, and I don’t wanna hurt you. And I want to help you with your family. And I don’t want to lose my fishing buddy.”

“And *fuck* buddy.”

It’s serious, the look she cuts my way. “Silas, you’re more than my fuck buddy, and you know that.”

I’m trying to lighten the mood after a helluva night for her, but she’s right. What connects Cade and me is more than sex. It’s really hot sex. And everyone around us can see it.

But for every true answer I give her, there are more questions in my heart.

“I feel like one of those fish that can fly,” I confess. “You ever seen ‘em? Like they need to swim *and* fly, and that’s me. I don’t want to hurt you either. You’re much more than a friend or a fuck to me, but I can’t tell you what that means.”

“Doesn’t that bother you?”

“No. I feel safe with you and not knowing. I don’t need to know what my next day will be, what the rules are, or what someone expects of me.”

Her eyes challenge me, and I hear myself.

“Spoken like a rich white man, I know, but that’s not it.” I look out the window and try to find a way to say it. “I fell in love with a woman I couldn’t have. Then I fell in love with a man I couldn’t be with and learned that love doesn’t have to know.”

“All I’ve ever known is knowing.” She shrugs. “Knowing that I loved Redix. Knowing I was going to marry him. That I was going to get the men who hurt us. I had my life planned. And now—”

“And now you’re free.”

She doesn’t reply. Her eyes cast down, and she’s looking for chains that aren’t there anymore.

“Cade.” Her eyes lift. “Let’s not know together.”

“Then what?”

“Then we’ll know it when we feel it.” I lean over and pull her into a kiss. Damn, when I touch her, I’m vacationing in a paradise that’s not mine. “Do you still want to go to that club?”

She sighs over my lips, “Yes,” and in twenty minutes, we’re there.

The brick building is nondescript. It’s one of the dozens that used to be the Navy Yard by the river. Now, businesses are popping up. But I was introduced to this place years ago and come back occasionally.

And, of course, the detective asks, “How do you know about this club?”

I clear my throat because this history isn’t romantic, unlike Charlie or Alec.

“A friend of my mom’s owns it. She’s secretly a dominatrix and hosts private parties every Saturday night.”

I drop that bomb and let Cade see through the dust.

“You know that sounds like *Fifty*—”

“I know.” I stop her. “Maybe that’s where she got the idea, but it’s not like that. Faye reached out to me after my parents

disowned me. Guess she put one and one together, pun intended, and I come sometimes.” I laugh. “Another pun intended.”

“So you’re into BDSM?”

I park the car outside the building. There are a couple dozen parked here. Some I recognize.

“Nah. That’s not my kink. A little bondage, yeah. But pain doesn’t get me off.”

I give her a lot to ponder while I take her hand and lead her to the door where two guards stand.

“You don’t have to do anything,” I explain before entering. The guys know me and only ask for our phones. “We can just watch. But get ready. You’ll see a lot.”

“Silas, I’m not a virgin college reporter.” She doesn’t need to roll her eyes. Her tone lays me flat. “I did BDSM modeling campaigns, I’ve been a cop for seven years, and I fucked Marines for fun, sometimes two at a time. I’m fine.”

And she’s not fazed. The man bound to a St. Andrew’s cross, the woman bent over a paddling bench, the two men fucking on a sofa; none of it makes her bat a lash. Not even when Faye greets us in black latex with nipple clamps on her bare breasts does Cade’s hand twitch in mine.

“Long time no see.” Faye pecks my cheek and offers her hand to Cade. “Mistress Faye at your service, if you like.”

“I’m Cade.” She shakes her hand like it’s a bridal shower. “Thanks for having us.”

“Oh, Ms. Cade, I haven’t had you... yet.” Faye winks. “But the night’s just starting.” She sashays away, and I guide Cade to the bar.

“There’s no alcohol served. But they’re known for their virgin lemon juleps.”

“I’m never leaving,” Cade announces, accepting her drink with a smile.

Truth is, I can't tell you why I thought this was good for us. I just felt it. I know Cade doesn't believe me about not knowing. That she won't hurt me, and I expect nothing from her. I just like being with her. And I *really* like fucking her.

I know it'll drop my heart like an atom bomb. If Cade's the right one for me, it's gonna hit me in a moment that will define the rest of my life.

For now, I want her to have this.

She's in a prison of being everything for everyone else. What'll she look like when she's free? In a massive room with people seeking what they desire with no shame?

"Let's sit down." I lead her to my favorite sofa. It's purple velvet and gives us a great view of the room.

"What do you like doing here?"

Her question is for me, but her eyes scan the room. There's a group on the stage to our left, and couples, and triples with singles mingling about.

"I like watching." I gesture to the two men. "I like fucking." The couple by the bar also demonstrates. "I like being watched."

We sit, sipping our drinks and holding hands while the sounds of sex and music fill our ears. I kiss her cheek. "Do you see anything you like?"

"I don't know what I like yet," she says as she stands up. "But right now, I feel overdressed."

She slips her dress off and drapes it neatly over the sofa behind us. The surge in my cock is instant. She stands before me and the room in stiletto heels, a white lace thong, and a matching strapless bra, and she's a lighthouse. A beacon of statuesque sex that quickly summons a man and a woman over.

"Care for some company?" The nude woman, a gorgeous redhead with long curls that look aflame, doesn't offer introductions. Other than with Mistress Faye, names aren't used here.

Cade glances back at me like she's testing my freedom dictate.

"Please do," I invite the hot couple to join us.

He's wearing a dark beard, a shredded body, and nothing else except a hard-on for Cade. Or me. Or both. I have to be careful until I know.

The man takes the leather chair beside me, and the woman sits on the sofa on the other side of Cade. When her hand reaches out to caress Cade's thigh, Cade turns to my lips for a kiss. I give her my strongest one, my lips and tongue blessing her mouth and whatever she wants. This night is for her. For her to ask questions and not know the answers.

She only needs to know pleasure.

Her lips ghost over mine like she's asking me, like she has to be sure. "You're free," I tell her, and she spreads her thighs.

Moaning into my mouth, kissing me with a tongue that's got my cock like granite, I catch glimpses. *I want to see this.*

How the woman unclasps Cade's bra in the front. How she takes Cade's nipple into her mouth, and that makes Cade gasp into mine. Her tongue dances in my mouth, matching the woman's circling her perfect pink peaks arched for all to suck.

I pull my lips away for a second to glance to my right. The man is watching them, and his cock is equally enraptured. Then he looks at me, and I'm getting more confident. I could do so much tonight. I've watched men here. I've fucked women here. My kink is the men watching me fuck their women. Not because I want to own, degrade, or shame them.

No, I want to fuck them until they feel such pleasure they scream for more. Until they both know how good it should be and that they're lucky to have it, to have each other.

Because I want it. I want to find that *one* who's free to love me forever.

Is it Cade?

"Silas," she calls my lips back to hers, and I give them; I give it all to her. She mewns into my mouth when the woman's

hand slides under Cade's thong, and I feel drops of cum wet my boxers for the way Cade writhes over the woman's hand.

It's not long.

Not with the woman working Cade's pussy into a smacking lust. Not with Cade glancing away from my kiss to see the man and others watching us. Not with her leg draped over my thigh. She's spread open for all to see, and her back arches as she groans into my mouth with her first orgasm.

"Oh God," she cries... and we're just getting started.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



I'M GONE, AND I WANT TO DISAPPEAR.

This riptide of lust pulls me under, and all I am is wave after wave of demand and desire and only wanting more.

The plush sofa barely creaks to this gorgeous woman moving to kneel between my legs. Like it's a waltz, like they know their next steps, Silas leaves my side and stands behind her.

Stripping off his black jacket, his black tie before his starched white shirt, and then his perfectly tailored pants, his boxer briefs drop last, and he's a sight.

The woman also turns to watch the spectacle because you *have to*. Look at how his body is pure muscle with deep lines guiding you to the next. Look at how his hair dusts past his shoulders. Look at how his cock is full and proud and aimed at me like his eyes.

I look at the man to my right, who's enjoying the sight too. A moan grabs my throat at the man jerking off to Silas's hard beauty. From a table by the sofa, Silas grabs a condom, and

with one knowing look, he asks the woman, who smiles and answers yes to his question.

She pulls my thong off while my belly flips, and heat burns to my edges while I shift my hips and spread my legs wider for her. Silas watches us as he rolls on a condom and kneels behind the woman.

There's no permission required, only verbal consent, and I'm not jealous. I'm not anything but a woman who wants to be sucked and fucked until hell could break loose, and I don't give a damn.

For the first time, I'm no one.

I'm not a saint or a sinner or a savior. I don't belong to Redix, our past, the men who hurt us, or to Silas.

Her tongue flicks fire through my clit, and all I am is moans of "Yes," with my body demanding even more. Lacing my fingers through her silky tresses, I tilt my hips, spreading my thighs wider with my eyes, watching Silas sink into her pussy with a grunt.

I love his primal grunts.

Blood thumps through every part of me. The pulse of it matches the drum of Silas's cock into this woman while he grabs her hips and makes her mouth thrust into my pussy with each luscious pound of his hips.

Oh fuck, this is heaven.

This isn't wrong, and it's everything right, and I don't need to know a damn thing but that I'm going to come. Her expert fingers dip inside me, and I'm dripping for more. With a hard flutter of her tongue over my nub and Silas's jaw dropped at the sight of me and this woman, I'm flying.

My back bows while my arms flail like wings, and I cry out over the music. The lights twinkling on the dark ceiling blur my vision, and my breath wants to climb up the walls, but I grab it down with a loud groan.

She doesn't stop. And Silas leans over her, his chest to her back. He's tall enough to reach my wet pussy and take his own

taste while his hips still thrust into the woman's backside.

"She tastes so sweet, doesn't she?" he asks her between the licks they alternate, and they grin, and why haven't I done this before?

Drips of my awe wet my ass cheeks and the sofa beneath me.

Another couple has gathered to watch and let them. Let them see how Silas sucks my clit, and pulls away for the woman to curl into my taste and back and forth, and my thighs start to shake.

"Do it." Silas rises. "Come." He grabs her hips and starts thrusting because she's moaning into my pussy and right there with me. "Fucking come so hard," he growls, and she does, gasping into my sex. I thrash against her mouth, and we ride this long wave to shore.

Silas helps her up to the sofa beside me. She flops back to watch because he's standing up. *Because he's not done.* Ripping that condom off, he discards it and grabs another, and the man in the chair is still jerking off.

The stare in his eyes at Silas is like he's craving a masterpiece. A work of art that you come back to see time and again, and I will, too. I need to come again.

I've never been with a woman, and having my pussy expertly eaten is a welcome gift, but I need cock. *Now.* And having that thought, having that one shameless demand and satisfying it.

Hell, yes, I'm free.

The white leather ottoman behind Silas is big enough for him to lie on. Taking my hand, he pulls me to him. I playfully push him down while I straddle him. He secures a fresh condom on, and I don't hesitate once he's done. I need sex like water. Sliding down his length, he grabs my hips, and we drown in it.

Watching only me, his gaze won't leave mine. My hands brace on his steel pecs, and we're aware of another couple watching us. Of the woman going down on her knees to our

new voyeur. Of our previous companion touching herself to our show. Of her companion sitting beside her now, his eyes rapt and seeking his pumping finish to ours.

But it's nothing to the trust I feel. To the praise, I want to give Silas. To the pleasure, I feel as he shares this with me.

We don't know what we are together and don't need to.

All I see are his eyes watching mine. All I know is his warm hand reaching for my breast, palming its weight, and teasing my nipple. All I feel is that pleasure and his cock filling me, his base hitting my clit, and his hips matching my ride. All I want is the freedom he delivers. It doesn't hurt here. It only heals.

His other hand grips my hip hard, and he wants this; my hard grind rolls over his shaft as he groans loudly for all to hear.

"Fuck yes," and I know he wants to say my name. "Show them how you fucking ride my cock." I want to cry his name too, but I can't, so it's just his words. "Fucking take me," he roars. "Take what you want."

That's what I ask myself, what I need to know. What I need to let go of now and trust I'll feel it again.

What do I want?

This storm in my body. It's raging in my heart, and it needs to stop. It needs to break across the rocks of so many painful years and be gone forever. I throw my body into this, desperately needing to let it go.

"You love this, don't you?" He's taunting me there. The woman on the sofa fingering herself comes to our fuck. "You love them watching you get fucked." The man to my right comes in the mouth of a woman on her knees, both enjoying our show.

"Yes." I can do this. I need this, and I won't stop until I have it.

Silas sees I'm suspended above him, above my cliff. "Whose pussy loves this cock?" Oh God, our audience wants

me to say it's his. "Whose pussy is this?" The bearded man on the sofa who wants Silas comes to his taunts. He comes because he wants to be me, fucking Silas's luscious cock. Silas sees the man come and groans because he's ready, too. "Whose pussy is gonna come so hard?"

I jump. "Mine." I crash, my hands grabbing his shoulders, my chin dropping to the shudders breaking across my body. "Mine." It shakes my lips, quaking my thighs. "Mine." That truth pours from my depths along with my cum down his shaft.

"Fuck, yes!" He thrusts into me, and my answer. "Yes!" He opens his throat, his ribs seizing with gasps while I feel him pulsing inside me with groans of "Oh God" as my name threatens to escape his lips.

The room, the audience, the world, and my heartbreak disappear while I take Silas's kiss. His arms wrap around me, pulling me deeper into him, and I feel new.

I am.

And in this void of a place I've never known. I'm happy. I'm free...

And suddenly, I think of him. *Redix*. And he's here with me. He'll always be, and I hold back my cry into Silas's kiss because this isn't our end.

This is our beginning.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



REDIX

Nothing Compares by The Weeknd

MY FOOT BOUNCES WHEN I'M NERVOUS. IT'S A NEW HABIT FOR my sober body that doesn't know what to do. My heart feels wrong. But my head says it's right. And for so long, I did everything wrong.

So this. I can make myself do this.

I can sit across from Karen at this romantic Italian restaurant. I can order a seltzer while everyone else drinks wine. I can make polite conversation and order the veal piccata she wants. And I can smile while my armpits sweat.

Because I don't belong here.

"I'm sorry."

I've said it twice already, but I can't let it go. It's been two weeks since some tourist took that picture of me and Karen at the coffee shop, and the poor woman has been hounded.

"I'm fine." Her red nails bat my apology away. "It's not that bad. My friends are jealous, and my neighbors gawk, and I feel like JLo and Ben, so I'm not complaining."

Ben fucking hates this shit, too, especially when his kids are targeted, but I hold my tongue. I don't have it as bad as him, so one coffee chat posted ain't the end of the world.

"Besides," she says, "they all want to know if we're dating, so I guess we officially are."

We are?

That's news to me. I sip my seltzer and let it slide. If one coffee and one dinner make two a couple, then who am I to debate it?

There's a mountain of shit I don't know about dating like a normal person. And I feel a mountain of pain because I don't want to.

I know what I want. I just don't know if I'm strong enough to have it again.

For the rest of my life, I see myself with Cade. Married to her. Our kids run around the house and jump into the pool. I strum a guitar on the sofa while she sits on the other end eating candy. She drops ice cream on her chin, and I wipe it away with a napkin.

That's what I want.

But what if a year into that, I think about what she did, and it taunts me, and I pop open a beer without thinking? Or we get in another fight about it because she won't admit it, and I flood this secret between us with Absolut instead?

"Ahem." I fold the napkin in my lap and try to clear the awkwardness from the air. "Who watches Chandler while you're away?"

"Um." She pushes salad around her plate. "My friend Jennifer. She's available all the time."

"My sister went through a phase with my nephew when he'd melt down anytime she left him. Nowadays, that boy is on me like a bur in fur. I think he likes having a man around, too."

"Where's his dad?"

That question sets off fireworks, ones I can ignore as easily, and I reach for a sip of soda.

You mean the man who attacked me and raped my sister? That dad? Damn, I'm sitting on thumbtacks. I don't know how to talk to Karen.

Shouldn't this be easy? Shouldn't I be excited?

I'm not. I'm nervous as hell in this dimly lit restaurant full of couples in love when all I want to do is beg for my love back.

"His dad was never around." I force myself to answer. "That's for the best, trust me."

Don't think about it. Don't think about it.

"Same goes. Once my ex found out I was pregnant, it was SEE YA! Such a jerk. It was all perfect until I got pregnant."

"Weren't you drinking, though? Couldn't have been that perfect."

"Oh, uh. Yeah. No. I was drinking, and it was bad, and then I found out I was pregnant, and he left."

"Getting sober while pregnant must've been hell."

Hell would've been a spa vacation compared to the detoxes I've known. I get so sick; it's inhuman. It's why I didn't want Cade around. No one wants an audience for that. And by the time I felt better, I felt shame.

"Yeah, it was," is all she offers.

Fair enough. I get not wanting to talk about it.

"Well, butter my biscuit"—a voice I've heard for twenty years sounds over my shoulder—"look who it is."

It's quick, my leap out of the booth. "Mama G." I pull her into a fast hug. "I've missed you."

When I pull back to see her smile... I swallow my shock. Her skin doesn't glow, and she feels like delicate bones in my arms.

"You feelin' okay?"

“I’m fine,” she lies.

I’m about to fall over myself with worry, but Cade’s dad walks up and pulls me into a back-slapping hug.

“Hey, Son.” His hug is tight, and those words shred my heart. Jeff Bryant is the closest I have to a dad. And I miss him and Mama G. *And Cade*. “You’re looking fit as an ox.”

“Yes, sir.” A cough takes the air, and I remember. “Oh, uh. Excuse me. Gloria and Jeff Bryant, please meet Karen Brown. Karen, these are...”

So many years. So many memories. Cade and Christmas and our birthdays with her parents. They should be mine, too.

“These are my second parents, so to speak.”

“Ms. Brown.” Mama G has the grace of a queen. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

A bit of polite small talk volleys between us before Mama G asks, “Will you please excuse us, Ms. Brown? I need to speak with Redix for a spell.”

Cade’s dad stays at our table, chatting with Karen while I get pulled toward an unoccupied corner.

Mama G doesn’t ask. “We need to talk.” She commands.

“It’s not serious.” Getting caught with Karen feels like a betrayal. It’s not. But tell that to my guilty heart. “This is only our second date, I swear.”

“Son, you’re doing nothing wrong. I see what’s going on.” Her hand grabs mine, and her grip is weak; her skin feels like cold silk. “That’s why I need to talk with you.”

“What’s going on?”

“Life. That’s what’s a-wastin’, and I got no time for it. So let me say it plain—it was me.”

“Ma’am?”

“All this”—she flits her hand toward my sad-ass attempt at dating—“because you think Cade did it. She didn’t. *I did.*”

My heart bungee jumps from my chest before my logic jerks back, trying to understand what she just said.

“You hear me?” She’s losing patience with my shock.

She’s talking about TJ and making no sense. How could Mama G pull that off? Honestly? Not as sick as she’s been.

“Gentry said it was her.” I don’t want to believe that piece of shit... but I do.

“Gentry Evans is so dumb, he could throw himself at the ground and miss.” Mama G’s still a badass, making me laugh. “But we’re smart enough not to say anymore.”

All I’ve ever known is a truth so hard from Mama G’s mouth she’d make God confess to guilt. But still. It doesn’t add up.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I’m a cadet in the Mama G Army and won’t disobey orders.

“You do with that morsel what you wish. Just know this, too. There were months I was so mad at Jeff that I couldn’t stand to look at him. It took me too long to realize anger is the hot belly of love. It’s when you feel nothing that love is gone.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now... you go be a gentleman and tend to your date.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I offer her my arm and escort her back to the man she loves. And I don’t want them to leave, but they do. I can’t even force myself. My date is over, and my mind is spinning. I feel bad for Karen, but she has no clue what I just learned.

If I believe it.

Because Mama G doesn’t lie. But she does protect the ones she loves. To death, I know she would, and Cade is no different.

So what’s the truth? And does it matter?

“That was her parents, right?” Karen can’t hide her disappointment as we stand closely between our cars in the parking lot. “That woman is the former Sheriff; I recognize her from the news.”

“Yeah.”

“What about her dad?”

“He was a cop, too, but left the job early. Long story.”

“Were y’all married? Is that why her dad called you ‘son’?”

What Cade’s dad means to me. How he saved me that night. And her mama, what she just told me? They’re my family, no matter who I’m with.

“We weren’t married, but our families are close.”

“That must make this hard.”

Fucking excruciating.

She shuffles on her heels. “Look, if this isn’t gonna work.”

“I don’t know what’s gonna work.”

I don’t want to lie. Her heart looks broken, and I don’t want to hurt her.

“Then why are you here with me?” She closes the distance between us. “Why did you go out with me again?”

“Because I know I have to try. And you seem so familiar —”

“Then let’s try.”

She cuts my words off by putting her lips to mine and pulling my neck down. It happens so fast. She’s kissing me, and shock keeps me from pushing her away until I just let her. I let her kiss me because I know how to act through a kiss while other thoughts storm my mind.

What if Cade didn’t do it? Do I want her back? Will she even take me back? What about Silas? Why doesn’t he fill me with rage? Why do I wonder about him, too?

Karen's tongue searches for mine and I try hard and search, too, but I feel nothing pressed to her lips. Not my heart. Not my body. Not even my dick responds.

"Karen." I pull away, trying not to hurt her. "I need to figure my shit out. It's only fair to tell you."

"I understand." Her cheeks are flushed, but her words are controlled. "We do steps, right? I'm here, and we'll do this in steps. As slow as you want. Just one more date."

And because I'm tired of letting people down, breaking their hearts, and bombing their lives, as my sister said.

"Okay," I agree.

Because this feels like a current pulling me down the river when all I want to do is sink into dreams of Cade. I miss her so much; I'd drown there to have her back.

CHAPTER TWENTY



“LEAVE.” I GENTLY NUDGE PENNY TOWARD HER MINIVAN. “GO get a box of chocolates and five screaming orgasms.”

“Five? Two would be a win for me, but rub it in, Ms. I Went To A Sex Club And Had A Public Threesome.”

I don’t blush. That memory tingles my body, and a not-guilty smile lifts my lips. I share everything (almost) with Penny, and she’s been munching popcorn from the sidelines of my adventurous sex life with Silas lately.

“You’ll have at least three tonight,” I promise her, “with those toys I put in your gift. Happy Valentine’s Day.”

“Alright, fine.” Penny drops into her driver’s seat beside the red bag I left her. “I’ll be back tomorrow by noon. Please don’t let her get off her schedule.”

I get to babysit my goddaughter, Nina, while Penny and her husband get a rare night off. More like getting off, I hope for her sake.

“I’ve got this.” I hold Nina and munch her fat cheeks, making her giggle. “We’re gonna have a blast. We’re going for

a walk and some ice cream, and then it's a gourmet dinner of baby food and then a late night watching *Bridget Jones*."

Seriously, spending Valentine's with a one-year-old is perfect.

Silas wanted to do something romantic, but I wanted to do something for Penny. Deep down, I've only known Valentine's alone. Not since I was eighteen—when Redix made us a picnic on the beach—did I spend it with someone.

It never felt right to share that day with someone else. Truth is, it still doesn't.

"I'm just a phone call away." Penny lingers with her car window down.

"Leave." I flit her away.

"Text me if you can't get her down for bed."

"Leave." I blow her a kiss. "Or I'll shoot."

Finally, Penny drives away, and I load Nina up in her stroller for a long walk. Our stroll toward Coligny Park relaxes us. Nina's content to chew on a toy and watch cars cruise by, and I need the time to clear my head.

Life has felt like a three-ring sex circus. Three Saturdays in a row, I've asked Silas to take me back to the club. Each time, we fuck for all to watch. And I know we're a helluva show. Silas's allure attracts eager viewers. We always invite a woman to join us, and I descend into an ocean of lust for a night of looking for something, but I can't find it.

Then, our weeks are wonderfully mundane. Work. Sleep. We grocery shop together, and I click away all night on my laptop, searching satellite images and all property records for where the hell Gentry is hiding Pamela and Cam.

I have no proof for warrants. Not enough evidence to search private property to prove what Gentry's up to, but I feel it. Pamela and Cam are so close I can smell them on the breeze if the wind shifts right.

And that abusive asshole from Charleston? Claude Olan Turner. My research found that he owns a tour bus company,

and Gentry uses it for golf tours. It's all connected... but I gotta prove it.

And I'm losing patience.

Not like I had much in the first place.

Everything's so unknown, so uncertain. I have no control. I feel like I'm free-falling.

"What can I get you?" The teenager behind the ice cream counter asks.

"One scoop of chocolate in a cup, please." A tub of lemon sherbet sits beneath my nose, and I can't.

I can't taste it without Redix. Some days, I miss him so much; nothing tastes good.

But Nina loves chocolate, and Penny said it's okay. I stroll us over to a bench and feed her little spoonfuls.

"Nicolas! Slow down!" A commotion races by in a little red jacket, and pounding feet follow. "Nicolas! Wait!"

That voice. It's carved into my heart and makes it ache.

Redix runs past me. Scarlett's on his heels. They're chasing after a six-year-old and catch up with him at the front of the ice cream store. I watch while my pulse whooshes in my ears. Scarlett stands guard while Redix picks Nicolas up and gently admonishes him before kissing his forehead and ordering a scoop of bubble gum ice cream.

It floods my veins.

Redix looks so natural with the boy in his arms. So loving and protective. And when they turn to find a place to sit, his eyes land on me, and we both grab the breath punched from our lungs.

"Hey." He steps my way, and I get dizzy.

"Hey." I can't help but smile at him.

Scarlett's discreet. She keeps a watchful distance, but I see her grin.

“Hey, Cade!” Nicolas bounces up to me with ice cream coating his cheeks. He reaches for Nina’s chubby hand. “Who’s this?”

“This is Nina. She’s my goddaughter.”

“May I?” Redix gestures to the end of my bench, and I smile, so he takes the seat, gazing at Nina. “She’s cute like her mom.” She does look like Penny.

Nina starts fussing at her audience like she wants out of her stroller.

“Can I feed her?” Nicolas eyes the spoon in my hand.

“Sure.” I unbuckle Nina and lift her out, but she’s attracted to Redix and reaching his way. *Typical*. “She’s got a crush.”

He sees it, too, reaching out to take the squirming toddler. Her sticky chocolate hand grabs a fistful of his hair in one fast grab, and we laugh.

Can’t blame her.

Nicolas is done with his cone and starts jumping up and down. “I want to feed her!”

“Here.” I pass the bowl to Redix and give the spoon to Nicolas. “Use this, and Uncle Red will help you.”

The sight—a gorgeous man with a baby girl content on his knee while a little boy feeds her ice cream. Yep, my ovaries sing.

“Careful with her.” Redix soothes when Nicolas gets too eager. “Take your time.”

And that takes me.

To the time Redix was my best friend, making me laugh. To the time he was my boyfriend, sharing my every first. To the ten years he left me. To the months he came back, and we were healed. And now to the time we’re not together anymore.

I’m slipping farther from his shore when I only want to swim back to him. He’s where I belong.

It’s not long till Nicolas gets bored and itches to run.

“I got him.” Scarlett clocks it and follows him down the boardwalk, where he starts splashing in the park’s fountains.

Redix doesn’t move. He hands me the spoon, and I feed Nina the last bite but I can’t look him in the eye.

What if he knew?

Everything I’ve done. With Silas. With other women. At a club.

Part of me feels guilty. More of me misses Redix and oddly wants to tell him. Not to hurt him, but we’ve shared so much. It doesn’t feel right. He should know this part of me, too, the one he helped me find first.

How I found a woman between my legs and Silas in my mouth last weekend, and I was incoherent with desire. The only thought I had after my mind blitzed out with a huge orgasm and I adored Silas’s kisses was, “*I wish Redix was here too.*”

And it’s not about the sex. It’s the freedom, the healing, the letting go that I want Redix to have, too. He needs it. More than I do, he needs something new, something that drags us both out of our painful past.

“I’m thinking of opening a gallery here.” He fills the heavy silence. “I’ve got all these bowls and plates I make. I think I’ll open a place and hire a staff to sell them, and we’ll donate our money to my crisis centers.”

“That’s a great idea.” I mean it. I believe in him. “They’d sell like hotcakes.”

“I thought about bringing artists in, too.” We start talking. Like we always could. “You know, Lowcountry and Gullah artists who sell their art. I even thought about funding artists’ residencies. Paying them to live here and create and teach about the history and art from here.”

“People would love it.” It burns; my tears that want to fall at his inspiration. He’s so happy talking about it. “You could even do art tours out to the islands.”

“Yeah!” He takes the baby wipe I hand him and carefully cleans Nina’s sticky hands. “I didn’t think about that, but that’s awesome. We could offer art tours and do festivals and raise awareness about teen mental health at the same time.”

This isn’t the Redix I knew.

Yes, the wild boy in him wants to start a new business. But the man who’s been through hell only wants to help others. And the one who loves himself now wants to do it in a way that celebrates art and life.

This is Redix Dean now.

And I love him even more. And I gulp down the lump in my throat because it won’t stop hurting, how we’re not together.

“How you been?” He’s watching my eyes. “You keeping Mama G out of trouble?”

That was a joke. And a verbal hug. And why that odd look in his eyes?

“She and Dad left for Vegas yesterday for a week of shows and gambling. They’re living their best life for as long as...”

Holding back a Hoover Dam of tears as to why, I shrug, and Redix sees my strain.

“Hey, Candy Cade.” They’re soft. His words. “I’m here if you need to talk. Or not talk and go for a walk instead.”

“Thank you,” is all I can push over my lips.

Redix loves my parents. You can’t rip away a part of your heart and survive. He grew up with me. He’s fused into every part I am, making my parents his, too.

Nina squirms in his arms and reaches for me. When Redix passes her back, his hands brush mine, and warmth cascades over my soul.

Is this us now? Just old friends?

His eyes lock on mine while a baby passes between us and, no. We’re both in that moment, our last one together, when we made love and wanted to make our baby. Why does that feel

like forever ago? And why does the wish in his eyes still call to me?

“I like him, Cade. A lot.” He shocks me, not holding back his words like he used to. “Silas is a good man; he takes care of you, and I’m happy for you both.”

It’s sincere. I know him too well, and every crease on his beautiful face tells the truth.

He used to get so jealous at even the thought of another man. Like the Marines I liked to pick up for one-night stands. Redix would fuck me like he wanted to erase them from my body.

But he’s not acting like that about Silas. Why not?

There’s no tension in his muscles. No narrowing of his eyes. They’re wide and open, and has he let me go forever?

“Your girlfriend seems nice.” I’m lying. That hurt to say, but I do it for him. “I want you to be happy too.”

“We do AA together,” he shares without a smile. “I guess we’re dating, but it’s not serious. We’re not—”

“You don’t owe me details.”

I can’t bear to hear it. I’m a hypocrite from hell, but I don’t want to imagine Redix with *that* woman. It feels wrong.

“Then why do I feel like I do?” he asks, searching my eyes and closing the distance.

Only a baby resting on my shoulder is between us, and his heat wraps around me like a velvet blanket.

“Why do I feel wrong with her but right about you and Silas? Why don’t I want to punch him, and why do I have to make myself hold her hand, and why do I always hurt without you?”

It’s raw. It’s real. It’s Redix like I’ve never known him. His emotions used to overwhelm him. They tortured his big heart while he held his face in smiles or sexy smolders for everyone, acting like he was perfect. On the outside, he was. On the inside, only I could see his pain.

Now, he sees it too. He's sober, healthy, and mature enough to say it with no shame.

"I don't know."

And it's a me I don't recognize either. I don't have the answers anymore. All the smart-ass comments that usually fly from my mouth are gone.

We're just sitting together in a pile of questions and a love that time can't erase with a baby in my arms, and this feels right beside him.

And it bites at my eyes. All the dreams we had. All the plans we made. Every tear we've shed together and every laugh with his arms around me. I see it in his eyes, too, and what has to happen to bring us back together?

Nicolas's laughter from the fountains fills the air. The ocean in the distance roars deep. My heart thunders in my chest, my eyes staring up at Redix as his phone buzzes like a swarm of hornets in his back pocket.

He ignores it.

"Cade, I know." His gaze pierces my soul as only he can. "Mama G told me." God, his lips. I miss them and want to kiss them... *what did he just say?*

"What?"

"Mama G told me about TJ."

The buzzing. It's in my brain. It's in his back pocket. It's blowing up my world with what-the-hell-is-going-on?

"Dammit," Redix mutters, reaching for his phone. "Sorry."

The way he answers it with "What's wrong?" It's gotta be his sister or his mama. "What do you mean 'everywhere'?"

His eyebrows pinch. His huge shoulders thunder up, and... *something is wrong.*

"Alright. Alright. I'll check." He grabs a breath. "We're on our way home."

“What’s wrong?” He hangs up and starts tapping on his phone screen while I have to know. “Was that Renie? Is it Derek? Is she okay?”

“Hang on, Detective,” Redix grouches to my questions. “Renie’s fine.”

Nina’s resting on my shoulder while Redix has his nose down, his chest huffing while he reads whatever’s on his phone screen.

“Redix, what is it?”

“Holy fuck,” he mutters. “Holy mother of fuck.”

He’s scaring me. “*What is it?*”

Silently, he offers me his phone while he gazes in shock at the horizon. I read the screen. It’s TMZ. It’s a breaking story in black, white, and red with headline reading...

REDIX DEAN DOES IT AGAIN.

THIS TIME WITH HIS GAY LOVER.

My eyes scan fast over the grainy, dark image of Redix with another man on his knees before him in a club, clearly giving him a blowjob. Over the copy that reads “Exclusive,” it says that an unnamed man reported his phone stolen, only to have these photos archived on it and leaked to unknown sources.

Why am I not surprised? Why am I not shocked that Redix has been with a man, or men also?

Because when he’s drunk, it’s all impulses and desires owning his actions. The problem has been he does it in public, where he’s at risk.

“Hey.” I touch his arm. “It’s okay. It’s nothing to hide.”

What he said about TJ and my mama, I don’t care. That’s done. It’s the look on his face. This is his new hell.

“I won’t hide it.” He won’t look at me. “I’ve done so much drunk, I’m not surprised. But that man just got outed, and that’s not okay.”

“You can’t see who it is.” The detective in me thinks fast. “You can barely confirm it’s you.”

“It is, and they’ll figure it out. I’m not ashamed of being attracted to a few men before. I’m *ashamed* of how I behaved drunk. Trust me. They’ll find out who he is, and that’s not fair. They can come after me, not him.”

Redix being with a man is news to me, but it’s the same story. It’s what I love about him, how he worries for others and always wants to protect them.

But he’s right. This is blood in the water to media sharks.

“Do you know who he is?”

“No. I...” He stammers, pausing to process. “I didn’t remember it until I saw that picture. Now I sorta do. And one other time, I think. With the same guy at the same club.”

“Why now?” My logic won’t stop. “Why did this story leak now?”

“Probably because I took Ms. Ryan to the Golden Globes last month. The press thought it was sweet that I took my childhood friend’s mom, and it raised awareness about Pamela’s missing person case.” A wince hits his cheek. “But they’re cynical fucks. I bet some thought Ms. Ryan was my beard or something. They were looking for an angle to fuck me.”

“Maybe.” It sounds plausible. But it feels off. Still, I assure him, “It’ll be alright.”

“I’m not worried about me. I’ve caused enough trouble for everyone.” He lifts his chin. “Nicolas!” he shouts, and heads turn his way. “We gotta go!”

Scarlett moves, wrapping her hand around the boy’s shoulder and escorting him our way.

“I’m here if you need to talk,” I say. “If you need anything.”

I want to hug him. I want to help him. But he’s pulling away too fast.

“Thanks.” He grabs Nicolas’s backpack. “I gotta get him home before I get spotted out here.”

He’s not focused on me. Or on being outed. All he cares about is getting his nephew home safe because we both know...

A hellstorm of press is coming his way.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



I DON'T KNOW WHAT RICH DICKHEAD IS GONNA BUY THIS yacht but the owner, Mr. Nash, sure wants to sell this Sea Ray so he can upgrade to a new one.

It took me weeks to get it working again after his son and college buddies ran it aground on a sand bar and fucked the engines up.

That's my job.

Trying to get a lipstick stain off the ivory upholstery on the berth cushion in the cabin is not. And don't get me started on the used condoms I found, *not* thrown away.

The commission is high, though. If I can sell this for Mr. Nash, who's too busy doing fuck-knows-what in Palm Springs, I get a big cut. He's sending a potential buyer over today, and the payout better be big because it's only February, but I'm sweating my balls off trying to get this cabin pristine.

"Hello?"

A deep voice calls from the dock, and shit, I need more time, and damn, I left my shirt at the helm.

“Hop aboard,” I shout out. *Fucking lipstick.* “I’ll be right up.”

I’m about to call Cade. She’s gotta know the secret to this, but for now, I cover the stain with a pillow.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the cabin’s mirror. Sweaty, bare chest. Hair in a messy knot. Marine grease smeared on my shorts. Boat shoes that’ve seen better days. Fuck, not the look of a half-a-million-dollar salesman.

It’s seven steps up the wooden ladder to the helm, and I say, “She’s a beauty, isn’t she,” going for the hard sell anyway before the sight punches my gut.

He’s equally shocked.

“Yes.” Redix stands on the deck of the stern. “She *is* a real beauty.”

Have you ever zapped your finger in an electrical socket by accident?

That’s the feeling you get at the first sight of Redix. Then, it’s heat firing through your nerves while logic takes a quick break, and you get to look like a stunned dumbass in his presence.

How long can we stare at each other while my hands start sweating and I map his eyes combing down my naked chest? Long enough for me to kiss my commission goodbye.

“You want me to show you around?” Fuck it. I’m fucking the hell out of his ex-girlfriend, and I love her in a way, and I don’t hate him, so what the hell? “Or do you wanna chop me into chum?”

No, I don’t hate Redix. I feel him burn like a long fuse down my body.

How he’s wearing his hair down, faded jeans, flip-flops, a white T-shirt that barely exists, silver rings on his tan fingers, and I’m feeling anything but hate.

“Show me where they keep the knives,” he answers, and his grin raises a white flag.

For now.

“You’re standing on one of the best parts of the boat. That stern has a helluva deck. Lift that lid. There’s a grill and a gourmet station under it.”

When in doubt, I jump into my job, and honestly, this boat can sell itself. Redix starts nosing around. I give him a wide berth. Sitting on the bench in the cockpit, I stay out of his way while he starts studying the helm.

“She’s got inboard propulsion. A VesselView link system. Automatic engine trim...” and I spew a list of the features while he nods, taking it in.

And damn, his shoulders are broad. As he studies the helm, the silhouette of the muscles across his back makes words rattle off my tongue while I have to stop my eyes from studying his perfect ass.

What the fuck? No. What about Cade? No fucking way. He’s off-limits.

He follows me down the steps into the cabin without a word. He uses his eyes, listening as I show him the forward berth, the aft berth, and the flatscreen with a gaming system there. The head, its shower, and teak floors. The sound system and the...

Am I insulting him or boring him?

“You know much about boats?”

“Some.” He clicks open a storage cabinet. “Jeff’s raised me around them and—” he stops.

He just mentioned Cade’s dad. And his shoulders drop like he stabbed himself in the heart.

I know pain on another man when I see it. He won’t even turn around and look at me.

I’ve met Redix three times, and each one overwhelmed me with a sensation I don’t want to admit.

Yeah, I’ve seen him on screens for a decade, and me, like millions, am stunned by the sight.

But you don't know a person from a screen.

You know them when they're feet away and in so much pain you can feel it seeping from their pores. The energy around them is heavy with sadness and whatever plagues their soul, and you're a total dickface not to want to help.

“What do you want to use a boat for? Fishing?”

Fuck, I don't know how to dig us out of this awkward hole we're sinking into. It's powerful... but I'm trying.

He turns around. Desperation tenses his eyes. “I want it for my family. To teach my nephew to waterski. To take my mama out looking for dolphins.” He plops down on the ivory sofa. “We're kinda prisoners in my house right now.”

And I know why. Anyone who has a device with media does. A week ago, a story about Redix and some man he was with years ago exploded in the press, and I can't imagine his life since. It's twisting his face. Not with shame. Not anger, either.

He looks like he's gone fifty rounds and had the hell beat out of him, and he's two more punches from falling. Like he's strong as hell and has a lot of pride, but he's human.

He can't take anymore.

“Look, man. This boat is perfect for that. I fixed it up myself. You can run like hell in this vessel or troll nearby.” I won't look away from him. “I made sure it works for both.”

Because I know his history with Cade, I know what he did for her. How he sacrificed himself and took the violence from those men who wanted her first.

And I damn well know the guilt she feels about it, and I don't know all the details, but the agony on his face is heartbreaking. Like he doesn't want to run. Or stay nearby. He wants to drown.

A hard swallow moves down his throat, and he stares out the galley window.

“Thanks. You've done a great job taking care of it. It's a beautiful boat.”

He just said much more. About him. About Cade. About the blessing he just gave. You'd think he'd be happy, but his eyes search for the way to go.

I know the look.

When your heart tells you to do something for someone else, but your soul is dying as you do it. When you love someone, and they aren't in your arms. When it hurts to be near them, but you'd rather have that pain than nothing at all.

I felt that way about Charlie. She was my everything. I felt that way about Alec. He was my dream. And I tried and couldn't find a way to be with either of them.

I can't do this. I can't watch him suffer.

"It happened to me."

Who gives a damn that we love the same woman? Doesn't that make us more alike than some dumbass dude I shoot the shit with at a bar?

"I got outed too," I tell him.

He tilts his head and studies me, and I don't know what he's thinking. My mind is confused, but my body is sure, sweating at his intensity. Either way, I swear looking at Redix Dean is like gazing at the aurora borealis. Your jaw just drops, and you keep talking.

"I was a cadet at The Citadel and got busted with my boyfriend and humiliated by a football coach." I drop onto the sofa across from him. "I got kicked out of college; my parents found out and kicked me out too. I walked out of their big house with what I could throw in a duffel bag in five minutes. That was over six years ago, and I don't regret it."

"I'm sorry that happened to you."

"I'm not. They raised me to be an entitled asshole, and all I wound up being was entitled to be myself. I love who I love with no apologies."

His elbows rest on his knees, and he clasps his hands, his eyes peering up through his dark eyebrows. "Do you love her?"

I mirror him and lean forward, too. “Yes, I do. And so do you.”

“It’s no disrespect, man. I’ll never stop loving her.”

“I hope that’s true.” I’m about to leap off a cliff saying this, “Because she misses you too. She doesn’t say it, but I see it in her eyes.”

The confession. The intimacy. My vulnerable admission that Cade’s not “mine”—he deserves it. With what he survived for her, he’s earned it.

And it silences him. Like he’s opening the gift I gave him and appreciating the magnitude before he asks, “Does she know what happened to you?”

“Yes. She knows everything about me. I’m an open book. I’m a bisexual man with a billionaire’s last name, and all I want is a simple life and true love.” His foot is bouncing. “But Cade isn’t so open. She’s holding back with me, and whatever it is, it’s killing her inside, and I suspect it has to do with you.”

“She’s done everything for me. Too much, actually. And I can’t decide how I feel about it.”

“You did everything for her too. I got a lot of respect for you, man. It only makes me like you and want to see y’all together.”

That shocks him. “You giving her up that easily?” Like it pisses him off too.

“Hell no. She’s not mine to give.”

“No.” He chuckles, and I swear it quakes my heart. “She’s not anyone’s to own. That’s what I love about her. You might as well try trapping water in your fist.”

Why can’t more people do this? Share what they love about someone instead of feeling like they have to keep the person for themselves. There are too many incredible things about Cade to want to keep them from the world.

I need to see his smile again. “You ever get her started on the right way to hang toilet paper?”

His face lights up, and we both say, “Over!”

His big laughter fills the tiny cabin, and it moves through us, and our eyes keep finding each other.

“Thanks,” he says. “I needed that.” He throws himself back on the sofa and gazes up at the skylight. “I’m sorry, man, but I’m about to lose my fucking mind. I don’t care about that damn story. I’ve done so much shit drunk; all I worry about is that I never hurt someone. But that guy got outed, and apparently, he’s a football player, an LA Ram, and it’s gonna fuck up his career. I got money saved. I don’t give a shit about my career. I’m just so damn tired of messing everyone’s life up.”

“I get it with not outing someone.” I kick his foot like we’re buddies on the playground. Why? I don’t know. “But he was the one sucking your cock in a public club, so he’s gotta own that too.”

The moment those words slide off my tongue, the vision fills my mind, and my cock responds.

Redix and his dick and me sucking him off.

Shit. Stop it.

He drags his hand over his face and huffs. “I never thought of it that way.”

I’m thinking of it that way. And I shouldn’t be.

I’m staring at his thighs in a way I shouldn’t be. I’m noticing the buttons on his fly and the generous bulge under them in a way I shouldn’t be. I’m roaming my eyes across his abs in a way I know I can’t. And I wonder about his lips and his tongue when I need to stop.

Not because he’s a man.

It’s because he’s Cade’s.

Silence sloshes around us for too long. It lifts his head off the back of the sofa, and I catch it. How I’m not wearing a shirt, and he’s taking mental pictures. How I’m still leaning his way, and suddenly, it’s hot as fuck in here. How when he leans

forward to mirror me again, he's moving into me, into my space, into my heart and body, and he knows it.

I always have to be careful. I can never assume a man is into me. This world tolerates, hell, it encourages men to take women without permission. And the only ones who suffer the consequences are the women who didn't consent. But even when you just *ask* some men, when they act interested, violence, deadly violence, can be the outcome. That fear keeps so many hidden.

I can't read this wrong, and mainly, it's only my wish, which is so wrong, but something pulls Redix and me together. It's more than attraction. It's more than the perfect woman. It's more than two bodies in a confined space.

I care about him. I *see* him. Fuck, people say we look alike, and yes, we do to an eerie degree, but it's on the inside. We recognize each other in a way that gives me faith.

"So what do we do next?"

He's asking about it too. It heats my blood with certainty.

And my answer is dangerous. And it would betray Cade, so I draw a breath and say, "You buy a boat today."

He grins. "I've got an appointment to check out a pontoon tomorrow."

"A pontoon? What are you? Seventy?"

He still grins. "I could make it look good."

Desire answers from my veins, "Yes, you would."

It's in his eyes, too. "Sold."

"And you're gonna stop blaming yourself because *that doesn't look good on you*. It's bullshit."

"Sold." It's relaxing his face, his broad shoulders, too.

"And everything else?" I stand up because I can't breathe. This cabin is getting smaller, and this is getting much bigger than I can handle.

"Yeah?" He stands up, too.

The rise and fall of his chest is a foot from mine, and I swear he's looking at me like I just pulled him from the ocean and put that breath there. Like I saved him, and he wants to thank me.

“I don't have the answers, man, but—”

I barely finish before his lips are on mine, and his kiss is a supernova. It's a million fucking lights ripping breath from my lungs while his lips are so perfect, aggressive and soft and grabbing at mine. The stubble on his chin scratches against mine, and I dare to search for his tongue, and he groans into my mouth when I find it.

What are we doing? What are we doing?

I couldn't fight this current pulling me under if I wanted to because I can feel the hard planes of his body push into mine. His lips moving with mine.

And I don't want to fight it.

“Fuck,” he mutters into my mouth, and that's what I feel and want to do. And I'm terrified and so damn ready. His hand grabs the back of my head, and I match him, too. “Fuck,” he keeps sighing, coming up for air, and we both grab for breath before our lips dive in again, our tongues swimming together and wanting much more *and what the hell are we going to do?*

It's tentative. My hand reaches for his waist, where his jeans meet his cotton shirt, and the flex of his body into mine, his cock urging hard against mine. And everything I want to do with him. Taste from him. Feel from him. My naked chest feels home brushing against his, and I moan from forgotten depths, and I can't find any reason but one.

“Fuck.” He rips his lips from mine and huffs, “We have to stop.”

Our foreheads press together because we know why.

We love her... and this is the hottest fucking mess.

We don't say anything. We don't pull away, and we don't move forward. The heat of his lips still sears across mine. My hands still touch him, and his grip is still in my hair.

“I have to tell her,” he says.

“*We* have to tell her.” I can never lie to her.

“How?”

“I don’t know.”

His deep voice pours the question over my heart. “What do you want?”

I lift my forehead to find his eyes. They look as deep as the ocean floor, and I drop my heart like an anchor to them. “I want you both.”

God, I can see it. Lust demands I imagine it, and my heart says it’s right, but my mind fears I want too much.

He shakes his head, stepping back. “I’m not going to hurt her.”

“I don’t think it will.”

“She’s going through enough.” He rakes through his hair. “I won’t risk it.”

“I won’t risk lying to her. Nobody wins when we keep secrets.”

He looks at me like I just spoke a gospel truth he wants to kneel to. It’s two long breaths from his lungs before he says, “We do it together.”

“Agreed.”

“Just give me a little time. There’s so much shit with this man after my sister, this fucking story and the damn press, and then there’s Mama G.” The pain hits his face. “We just can’t bomb her life. Okay?”

“Okay” because I need the time too.

It wasn’t supposed to go this far. It wasn’t supposed to feel this strong.

Yes, I told Cade I was attracted to Redix. She’s got to be used to that from women and men because he’s the goddamn sun of gravity pulling people to him. But all I want is Redix

and to pull Cade into my arms and give her answers I don't have yet.

And what does Redix want?

I see a man with a big heart who's searching, who deserves something real and safe that won't hurt him anymore because he's fought so hard to survive. He needs to be free, too.

I can't answer that question for him. But I'm willing, no, I *want* to ask it with him, with Cade too. I've always been a rebel, and this is the hill I'll die on.

It's mindless; my steps up the ladder. We both need air. We both need time. I just kissed Redix Dean, and I want much more than that with him, and I love Cade Bryant.

I gotta find my steps and my goddamn mind as I grab a fresh breath of air and emerge from the cabin. Redix is waiting at the bottom of the ladder. I glance back at him and smile before turning my head to glance across the marina's dock.

"Oh shit." I duck down.

"What?" Redix is too loud.

"Quiet." I peek back up over the edge of the helm's window to be sure.

Bald head. Chest like a barrel. Eyes like a shark. I've seen his picture on Cade's laptop, in her police files. I know those eyes, and they're searching our way.

"What the fuck, man?" Redix whispers.

"The guy. The one who went after you and your sister. He's got a mudflap girl tattoo, right?"

His nostrils flare. "Yeah."

"He's fifty feet away at the top of the ramp and looking this way." I jump back down the ladder and secure the hatch closed.

Redix rushes to the cabin window and pulls a curtain aside. "I'm gonna fucking kill him."

“Not if he kills you first.” Redix glances back as I warn, “He followed you here, dude. Gotta be. I bet he’s been following you the whole fucking time. It’s you he’s after. Not her.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



THE LEMON CURD CAKE IS A FAMILIAR COMFORT TO ME. BUT you can stun me with a wet noodle at the dish Stacey Evans serves from her mouth.

“So he’s got a sexy friend. He’s on the same painting crew, and he’s got these tattoo sleeves, and I’ve never been with a man with tattoos, and it’s so hot.”

“So, both of them?” I’m opening an investigation into Stacey’s XXX-rated sex life. What’s gotten into this woman? A hot painter and his best friend, apparently. “You slept with both of them? Together?”

Who am I to judge?

“There’s no sleeping,” she whispers. “No bed either. We use the formal living room where Gentry entertains his asshole friends.” A chunk of blueberry muffin pops into her smiling mouth. “That’s what makes it even hotter.”

If the world could harness the wrath of a woman pissed off, all its problems would be solved. There’s enough of us getting so damn pissed, watch out. Until then, we deserve to

fuck along the way, given how the world has fucked so many of us so far.

And Stacey Evans is leading by example.

“Just don’t get caught,” I beg her. “I want you to be happy, but I worry what Gentry will do if he finds out.”

Stacey shrugs. Like her heart’s been lonely for so long. Like Gentry’s so cruel, any kindness from others overwhelms her. It’s obvious; she’s so desperate for the touch of another person that she’s willing to risk all to get it.

“I’m serious.” I touch her hand. “He’ll kick your dad out of that facility for sure, but what will Gentry do to *you*? He’s far more evil than you imagine.”

I can’t tell Stacey everything.

How I’m working with the FBI on this case now. Arresting Claude Olan Turner III at that fundraising gala in Charleston for assaulting his wife was my lucky break.

He was the thread I needed to pull. I found an FBI agent willing to dig into how Turner and Gentry work together. How Gentry moves people in Turner’s vans and where they go. The open case on Cam Le’s disappearance was enough for the agent to start her own cyber investigation.

With Turner, we got most of the transactions. How he rents Gentry’s condos. How he transports himself and others in his vans around the island. How they party on Gentry’s yacht, but that’s not illegal.

What *is* illegal is what I suspect Gentry’s doing—running sex workers through his condos for his clients. Through surveillance, we can catch him doing that eventually. Because I fear most of those women are being exploited, drugged even. That’s Gentry’s M.O. That’s what he did to Redix.

And he’s selling this all under the guise of “golf tours.” I need to find the damn golf course, the final guilty transaction he uses to cover it all up.

Because if you can’t catch a man red-handed, catch him with green in it. With the money he exchanges for his crimes.

It's not a blood-pumping action scene or a hostage scenario. No, it takes tedious work, so I'm sitting on the point of a needle, hoping to bust Gentry the *right* way, the *long* way. And I'm sweating bullets at what his wife's doing in the meantime.

"I'll be fine." Stacey squeezes my hand back. "I'm going through his files for you. I'm looking for proof because I'm smarter than you know."

"Oh, I *know*. What do they say about blondes? *You're* the dumbass if you believe it."

She laughs before sipping her tea. The corner where we sit in this cafe feels like a retreat from the madness lately. If my mind isn't on someone else's drama, it's on mine.

My mama told Redix about TJ.

That can ruin so many lives: his, his family's, my parents'. They'll all suffer if what I started ever gets out. And what Mama said about her time if it does? That's the worst.

Pamela and Cam are out there somewhere. And Gentry has them.

I can't let my mind dwell on what they have to endure. I can't let my heart feel it yet. It'll fill me with anguish and rage that'll cloud my logic. I've gotta stay focused and find them.

Derek Baucom is lurking on this island.

What is his vendetta against Redix? Is he obsessed with Renie? Does he want his son? Too much evil motivates a man who's hurt the ones I love.

Redix was outed.

Paparazzi are everywhere. He and his family are prisoners in his world. Yeah, it's a rich one, but no one wants to live trapped.

Silas has been so sweet through it all.

The man takes my laptop away after midnight and makes me forget my troubles. Yes, he enjoys it too. The intensity of

his moans is primal when he's inside me. There's no torment in the time we're connected.

And through it all, I feel so damn guilty. I'm the center of this storm wrecking everyone's lives, and I just want to collapse on the sand and beg for a fucking break.

"Hey, enough of my shit." Stacey's witnessing my mental descent. "I worry about you too."

"I'm fine."

"You're full of shit. I'm not holding back with you, missy. Don't start doing it with me."

If she can confess to threesomes she's been having while cheating on her shithead husband, I guess I'll share too.

"I'm so confused. I'm so overwhelmed that I just want to drown, you know? I have no fucking clue what to do with my life but catch evil men. And that sounds all lofty and shit, but it isn't. It's all my fault in the first place."

Stacey knows everything, but what's not my right to tell. Redix's scar. Redix's maybe rape. That I almost committed pre-meditated murder for him, but my parents did it instead.

Yeah, there's a lot of fucking drama swamping my life, and I'm sinking.

"So it's *your fault* some men have fucked-up, violent ideas of the world?" She challenges me. "It's your fault they think if they want something, they're entitled to it? It's your fault they want all the power and no damn responsibility when they wield it? It's your fault when they make rules that only serve them?"

Damn, look at the brain on Stacey.

She's smart. As fuck. And pissed. As hell. I love her.

"You know better." She pats my hand. "You're just tired. You've been through a lot for so long, and you need a break, and no bullshit, it doesn't look like it's coming yet, but it will."

"Fuck." I throw my chin up. "If I finally get a break, what the hell will that look like?"

“Look. Silas is as fine as a frog hair split four ways, and maybe he’s the one. Maybe he’s the break for you.” Her pause weighs a ton. “Or maybe you just need a break from *them*.”

That grabs my chin down. “Them?”

“Yes, them. Silas *and* Redix. Girl, I ain’t one to talk, but you got a lot of steamy pots on your stove. Maybe it’s time you get out of the hot kitchen and give yourself a cool break.”

Why she makes so much sense makes me feel dumber than a tree stump.

All I’ve ever known is loving Redix. Or missing him. Or fighting for him. Or escaping into Silas, hiding in his simple and seductive world because I didn’t want to face my own.

Who am I if I don’t let a man define me—a lover or an enemy?

I’m about to answer her. I’m about to go down the list of things I want to do alone. Find a porch and sit with a stack of books. Travel. Scuba dive. Do jigsaw puzzles and drink beer. I’m about to start finding some smutty books online like my mama reads when my phone vibrates.

It’s Silas... and it’s odd. He’s busy showing a boat to some wealthy asshole.

“Hey,” I answer while Stacey starts clearing our table. “What’s up?”

“He’s here.” Silas sounds out of breath. “Derek Baucom is here at Shelter’s Cove, wearing a black T-shirt and khaki cargos. Call it in now.”

“Okay.” I have a dozen questions, but there’s only time for one. “You okay?”

“Yeah, we are. Hurry.”

We?

I don’t have time. “I’ll be right there.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



REDIX

“IS SHE ON HER WAY?”

Half of me wants to see her. That’ll never stop. The other half of me knows this dread. One I fight to avoid hurting Cade yet again.

I glare out the cabin window, watching that fucker Derek plod down the metal ramp of the dock next to the one this yacht is moored in. Silas stands behind me, watching too.

He’s behind me and way too close, and I like it.

“Yeah, she’s coming. Should we just go out there and jump his ass?”

“No.” I’ve been raised around cops, too. “We don’t know if he’s armed, and he’ll be long gone by the time we get to him.” Derek’s neck cranes, scanning this marina with over four dozen yachts and sailboats in slips. “Besides, if we interfere with Cade’s job, she’ll shoot us *after* she shoots him.”

I’m fighting every instinct to rush that man, to tear Derek limb from limb. I could smash his skull on a boat cleat and smile while doing it.

And if I didn't have this drama before me, I could turn around and kiss Silas again. I could kiss and touch him; my God, he makes me feel better.

He didn't have to do that. He didn't have to be so kind and show me around the boat. He didn't have to be professional and a gentleman trying to make me comfortable.

He does have to be good to Cade, or I'd fucking kill him, but he doesn't have to be so warm about it.

It surprised me. What he told me about being outed at The Citadel? And how he was kicked out of his parents' house? That had to have been rough as hell.

Men are supposed to be tough. We're supposed to "be a man" and show no emotion unless it's angry-as-fuck. I'm supposed to be a jealous, insecure dick, act like I own Cade, and beat the shit out of any man who "takes what's mine." And I was like that... when I was an emotionally immature drunk.

And women are supposed to love men like that?

What fucking bullshit.

Damn, can't people see what a slippery slope that is? It ain't romantic. It's fucking violent and dangerous.

I know. I barely survived it. Many people don't.

Those three men thought Cade was theirs because she's so beautiful, because they wanted her, and men are raised "not to take no for an answer."

Cade screamed, "No." I remember barely being able to slur "No." And those possessive men didn't stop until Cade's dad showed up with a gun.

So fuck you, World, for raising men to be its biggest problem. And thank you to other men who refuse to be.

Silas is one of them, one of the good ones.

His phone rings.

"Yeah," he answers, "it's the Sea Ray. White hard top. Thirty-five footer. Last slip off the third ramp."

That's Cade looking for us.

He ends the call, and we say nothing. In the meantime, Derek walks back up the ramp toward the sidewalk in front of the building of condos. He's looking, but he can't see me.

Goddamn, I thought my paranoia that someone was following me was from my guilty heart. But I was right. Derek's been following me this whole time.

What does he want? Why is he so obsessed with me?

Then again, sociopaths don't need a reason. They just need a target.

"Shit, I hope she's careful." Silas watches over my shoulder. "What if you're right? What if he's carrying?"

"She is, too." Derek starts walking toward the patio bar, scanning the crowd. "And I can guarantee you she's a better shot than him. That woman was raised with a baby rattle in one hand and 9mm in the other. Trust me."

I'm not worried about Cade. In situations like this, she's fine. It's everything else I worry about. Derek and his stalking of my sister and nephew. Mama G and what she told me. That damn story getting leaked, and an innocent guy whose life may be ruined.

And Silas.

I shouldn't have kissed him. I could fucking lie and say, "I don't know what came over me," but I do. I've never met a man like him. Not sober, at least. Yes, he looks like me, and that could be weird as hell, but he's different in ways I wish was.

That's what I'm drawn to.

I've only met him a few times, but you can smell the freedom he lives with like the salt in the air. He's intoxicating. *Invigorating.*

He makes me want it, too.

Because I've never been free; I've been trapped my whole life. Taking care of my family since I was a kid. Smiling for

every fucking camera. Being what I had to be for everyone else. Protecting the people I love.

It's more than wanting freedom to be with a man. I've never been scared of those feelings in the past. LA is crawling with hot men, and you have no pulse not to notice them.

Close-minded and insecure are not my flaws. With the violence I've survived, I'm all for more love in this world.

I didn't remember the man from the club until that picture triggered my memory. He was funny. He had nice eyes. I bought him drinks, and he told me stories of growing up on a farm in Kansas. I remember... some story about a donkey had me rolling.

I don't remember how it happened, but I remember him kneeling before me. I watched him, my cock almost not responding with all the vodka in my blood, but my heart wanted to. Because that man was hot and kind and funny, and I was damn lucky he was showing me his affection.

Because I needed it.

I went back the following week.

I remember the relief I felt to find him again; that sticks with me. One more night, we told stories. One more night, I gave him my affection, a sad excuse it must've been in my drunken stupor, but he returned my adoration, which must've been when the picture was taken.

Like a bullet of beauty, Cade charges around the corner of a condo building. There's a swarm of deputies around her. Her hand is on her weapon, but she won't draw it in public. Deputies cover the marina while she looks across it, and I swear she's looking straight into my guilty heart.

It's not guilt about attraction. It's guilt about destruction because that's what I've done... *again*.

I kissed Silas without thinking. It was a feeling, one so strong toward his big heart, and damn, I wish he'd put a shirt on. It was a kiss I'll never forget, but it's one that can destroy Cade's delicate world.

I've done that too many times.

She heads this way, and Silas unlocks the hatch and pulls it open. He pokes his head out, and I hear her say, "Stay down until we've cleared the area."

A police radio cracks. She talks on it while Silas looks back at me. I sit my guilty ass down on the sofa again and wait for this next injury.

It'll hurt me.

But it'll hurt Cade worse.

"They're clearing the condo buildings and the other vessels." Her voice nears, and I prepare myself for when she sees me sitting here.

"Okay." Silas backs down the ladder and almost blocks me from her sight.

"Guess the dickhead buyer bailed on you?" she asks as she turns her back and descends into the cabin.

I can smell her perfume. BOUND. She's wearing our scent again, and it wafts with memories I don't deserve.

"No," Silas answers.

"I'm the dickhead," I answer, and you could crack Cade open with a thumbtack at her shock.

"You?"

She looks so badass. Tight black jeans. White tank. Black tactical boots. The woman could do a strip tease in hospital scrubs and make a dead man come.

"Since when do you want a boat?"

"Since that evil shit, Derek and that story have turned my family into prisoners in my house."

That turns her attention whip fast back to where it would go anyway. "They're looking for him. Stand by."

Her radio cracks with updates of deputies clearing locations and finding nothing.

“He followed me here.” I clear my mind, too. “I think he’s been following me for weeks. That means he knows my house. Where I go. Where Nicolas goes to school because I pick him up.” Fuck. It just occurred to me. “Who’s covering Nicolas?”

“Scarlett and your sister.” Cade watches through the cabin window, her eyes scanning. “They’re picking him up from school.”

“I want Scarlett in school with him.”

“They’ll never allow that,” Cade answers. “It’s disruptive for the kids. Nicolas, too.” She turns back my way. “Y’all may want to pull him out until we catch Derek.”

“Great,” I mutter, “another life I get to ruin.”

My pity party would sound way more legit if Cade knew how I just fucked up again.

Silas opens the cabin’s refrigerator. “Here.” He hands Cade and then me bottles of water. Seems this may take a while.

He sits on the edge of the berth cushion. I’m still on the sofa, and Cade turns her back to us while she surveils the marina from the cabin window, volleying replies on her radio.

It happens three times—the guilty exchanges between me and Silas.

We needed time.

Fate’s an asshole because we don’t get it.

Because the cabin is so small, Cade starts to smell it’s not right. She turns my way, and I swear the woman is a microscope. In ten seconds, she can count how many trimmed pubes I have and how many times I’ve jerked off this week thinking about her.

Eight times, not pubes.

And yes, there’s more to confess while she gets the final “all clear” notice on her radio.

“Copy,” she replies, turning to us. “Shit. He’s gone. But I promise we’ll catch him.”

She can't hide the frustration in her voice while her eyes frisk my body. Lifting her nose, her stare bounces. From me. To Silas. From Silas. To me. My feet sweat at her glare, and the NSA needs to hire her because she'd crack any code. I'm about to crack at the look from her violet eyes alone.

"What's going on?" she asks, and of course, her eyes land on me because fuck-ups are my thing.

I hear it.

How Silas clears his throat to answer, but the words fire from my mouth first because, if anything, I owe her honesty.

"I kissed Silas an hour ago. I kissed him, and I want to do more with him, and I love you, and I want you back because I'm fucking miserable without you, and I'm a selfish asshole like usual for it all."

Her head jerks back.

"I'm sorry." I stand up and confess, "It's my fault. I shouldn't have done it. I shouldn't have fucked up your world again. Y'all got something good, and I'm the dumbass who made you leave, and I'll regret it until the day I die, but I swear I'm so sorry, and I only want you to be happy."

"Fuck." Her hands fly up. "Fuck, turn off the fire hose and let me breathe."

Shit, that just shot from my mouth, and I close my eyes.

I fucked up. Again.

"It's not his fault." Silas stands up beside me. The triangle we're standing in is so damn ironic. I almost laugh, but this isn't funny.

"I want you and I want him too," he says. "And we all just need to talk about it."

I don't speak. Silas doesn't either. We just watch while Cade shakes her head and stares at the skylight.

She has the biggest heart. Will she forgive us?

She has the temper of a viper. Nope, she's gonna kill us.

“I can’t believe it,” she finally mutters. “Talk about a straw and a camel’s back.”

This can go so many ways when all I want to do is hold her because I feared this. It’s too much for her right now. Breath rises and falls from her gorgeous body. I watch it through her thin tank. I’ve kissed those ribs and her pebbled nipples. I’ve pressed my lips to her breasts so often that my heart is buried beside hers.

I’m never wrong about her, and I wince, preparing myself for what I regret is next.

“I need a break.” Her eyes land on Silas first. “I just need to catch my breath after ten years and let everyone take care of themselves because I’m going to crack or kill someone.”

She’s not kidding, and it hits me harder than Silas will ever know because she’s done both.

Wait? Does he know?

I glance at him... he doesn’t.

This is about romance for him. It’s about dates and new love and sex and fuck, I’m jealous for the first time. I don’t have that with Cade anymore. We have too much darkness that binds us, too.

“You have my blessing,” she says. “I mean it.” Her eyes lock on mine, and... *what’s happening?*

“I love you, Redix.” She steps so close she heats my flesh. “I always will, and I’ll never stop. And you *know* that.” Tears well up behind her lashes, and I swallow rocks. “You fought to live knowing I’ll always love you, and please, never forget it. But now, you finally love yourself, too, so you’ll be okay.” The certainty in her voice; I hear it, watching her tears escape. “If you want to be with Silas, please be happy. You deserve it because being with me threatens that, and it makes you wanna drink.”

“Cade, I’m stronger now. No one can make me drink but myself.”

“I believe you.” Tears cling to her jaw, and I can’t believe we’re doing this in front of Silas, but why not? He’s part of this. “But for the first time, Redix, this isn’t about you. My *whole life* has been about you, and I don’t regret it.”

She gulps back a sob and fuck me, I want to hug her, but I know better. She needs to say this.

“I’m not mad about anything that’s happened,” she says. “I’m grateful because I’ve lived for you too. I lived for just the thought of you for so many years, and every time you ran, I knew you’d come back.

“But what about me? What if I want to run? Because I do. I want to do it alone and figure out who I am without the ghost of you or the hope of you.” She’s never looked like this. “I need to let you go.”

“Candy Cade, I—” but I stop.

Because the pain in her eyes; it’s killing us, but stopping her now would only make it worse.

“And I love you too.” She turns to Silas. “You’re right. I don’t know how to name our love. And I cherish it because of that. Because you showed me I can be free.”

“I’ll never hold you back.” Silas sounds so sure with her. “It’s your life.”

“I know.” She wipes her cheek, smiling at him. “You have my blessing. You two are the most incredible men I’ve been lucky to love, and I want this for you.

“Just don’t hide anymore, Silas. You say *you’re* free, and you are in private clubs or a bedroom, but would you take Redix to your parents’ house as your date? Are you ready to stand in that storm and face them? Because they roll out the red carpet for me, they want *me* to be with you. But *you* deserve that red carpet, that acceptance from them, not me.”

I can’t believe it as it happens.

As Cade steps toward me and kisses my cheek. *My cheek. Not my lips.*

“You can ride bikes and burn pizzas with him too. It’s okay.” Her whisper ghosts my ear. Her words should be razors to my soul, but they’re not. They’re gifts. She wants me to heal, too. “Just save the ice cream kisses for our memory.”

It’s a blur. It stuns my heart as she kisses Silas’s cheek next.

“Take him fishing and make him smile. He can be your best friend, too.”

We have no words, only stunned silence as we watch her climb the ladder and leave us standing side by side.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



TWICE, I'VE RUNG THE DOORBELL, AND STILL NO ANSWER. I know my parents have ears that work, and they have an entire house staff.

So they're ignoring me.

Should I ring it again? Hell, should I even be here?

I look down at the new brown boat shoes I bought for this... and I have to try.

Cade was right.

It's been two months since I've seen her. Two months since she gave me and Redix her blessing. We were so shocked we didn't know what to do with it.

At first, we sulked and grieved her in our own ways. He went back to his life; I went back to mine.

I miss waking up to her. I miss her empty candy boxes lying around. I miss my fishing buddy.

Then, a couple of weeks ago, Redix called to apologize, talking like Cade ending us was his fault, saying he felt bad

like he was ruining my life, too.

I don't see it that way.

Cade and I were on borrowed time.

And I know what she means about figuring out who you are when you're not loving someone else. I did it for so long with Charlie; maybe I don't know either. It's not to say that I didn't love Alec, too. I did. I still do. But I've never known an adult minute when I haven't been in love with someone else or searching for it.

Redix called to apologize, which turned into a meeting on the boat the next day. He did buy it, and I spent three hours showing him all its bells and whistles.

It was three long hours because I wanted to say more, but I didn't. Neither did he. It's like talking about Cade hurt too much. I can see it wearing him down. Like he misses her so much. I do, too.

I walk around like there's a bruise on my heart. It must feel like a sledgehammer smashed his.

We ignored her blessing, though she meant it. I knew it by the look in her eyes. It's like she wasn't hurt at all by us. This was what she needed to heal, too. To not be with anyone.

What Redix and I needed in those hours was painfully obvious, but we didn't act on it. No, we let a friendship build though attraction cracked between us, but we just laughed, especially when he came in too hot with the boat into the slip and about wrecked the damn thing.

That was funny.

And when he yanked his shirt off and jumped in the water because it was hot as hell for April, that was just *hot*. I caressed the throttle knob watching as he climbed aboard dripping wet, and I had to turn my head.

At any gala, I'd be proud to show up with a man like Redix on my arm. Not because he's Redix Dean and a celebrity folks drool over.

It's because I wish I could be more like him.

Yes, my love is big. I don't believe in limits or rules. But Redix loves deep. Deeper than I've ever known, and there's no doubt he loves Cade more than most people have ever had to prove.

I huff, staring at the haint blue ceiling of my parents' grand front porch. Because Cade may be gone, but her calling bullshit on me still rings in my ears.

I haven't been free. I've been trapped, needing the one thing I'd really like—my parents' love.

How many minutes pass, I don't know. But I hear honey bees swarming by the edge of the porch. A lawn mower buzzes in the distance. My shoes shuffle over the porch rug with a pineapple on it and...

No one's answering.

At least I tried.

I turn to tread back down the stairs, out to my truck parked in the circular drive. It looks like a jalopy in front of this mansion. I grin; why the fuck not?

"Wait!" The voice turns me back as my mom swings the door open. "Sunshine, please wait." That's what she called me when I was a boy because I was "so happy and bright," she used to say.

It's almost Easter, and she's dressed for it in a pink eyelet dress. It's her favorite holiday. Her egg hunts are epic.

"Son, please don't leave." She rushes down the stairs and throws her arms around my neck. "I wanted to answer, but he told me not to, but I can't do this anymore, not even for him. I miss you, and I just need to see you."

That's my dad she's talking about, and for my mother to defy him, well, she does it all the time, but not about this. I know their marriage. This is a deal-breaker.

"It's okay, Mom," I whisper into her hair. "Y'all may have kicked me out of the house, but you're always in my heart."

That makes her cry. Gentle sobs shake her shoulders, and I keep her in the hug. I can feel the lithe yoga muscles and relief

on her body as she holds me like it's my first day of kindergarten.

"I love you." She strains through her tears. "I love you and whoever you love."

"He's not welcome here. Not without proper company."

The voice booms from the porch, and it takes a big inhale to steel my spine.

My dad. He went from being my hero, my Titan of the Sea, to my mentor, to my biggest disappointment. For a man as wealthy, powerful, and strong as my father is, he sure will break to rules that divide his own family.

"This is my home too, Earl." My mom spins on her heels. "I'll invite the entire county jail here if I want."

"It's alright, Mom."

Shit, this is starting a war when all I wanted was peace.

"No, it's not alright." She stands taller than I've ever seen her. "Six years, Earl, you've kept me from my son with your backward ways. I thought you'd come around. That you'd miss him too. That maybe lightning would strike sense into your thick skull. Or time would. But no. You go on and close your heart and die that way, but I won't."

"June, we're not making a scene in front of the entire house."

My dad stands in pressed pants. Even his golf shirt is ironed. His blond part is perfect. His tan is flawless. His shoes have no marks. It's all about appearances with my dad. What everyone else sees. Some things never change.

"What about your wife?" I ask him. "What about your son?" Because I've had enough. "You always told me a man does for his family, but what are you doing, Dad? You're tearing ours apart and breaking Mom's heart."

Mom wraps her arm around my waist; it's clear she's made her choice.

“My marriage is none of your concern, boy.” Damn, my dad can be a real dick. “Leave now, or I’ll call the authorities.”

“For what, Earl?” My mom shouts. “Your mother put his name on this house too. This is his estate. His land.”

My dad folds his arms. “Over my dead body.”

“If that’s how you want it!” My mom snaps back. “Fine. I’ll step over any dead body who tries to keep me from my son anymore.”

Holy fuck, where’s Mom been keeping this?

She’s firing all shots like she’s been holding back, and now it’s time to storm the beach.

“Mom, just drop it.” I don’t want this. I don’t want to upset her. “You can visit with me anytime you want.”

“In that piece of trash by the river, your grandma left you?” Dad raises his nose. “No Van de May belongs there.”

“Cut the shit, Dad. Grandma *made* you a billionaire. Grandpa died when you were five, and she turned the company into an empire. Not you. She was a widow raising a young son and broke all the rules to do it. And maybe that’s why you’re so angry because you lost your dad and don’t know how to be a good one.”

I march toward him, across the driveway, and up the stairs. He doesn’t flinch even when I’m inches above his height.

“And you know what, you stubborn old man?” I want to poke his chest, but I don’t. “No matter how you treat me like shit. No matter if you wanna disown me, you can’t.”

“No man *like you* can run this family.”

“A man *like me*? Like I’m an insult? Fuck you, Dad. You’re lucky to have me as a son. I can love a man. I can love a woman. I can love whoever the hell I want... because at least I LOVE. And that’s more than you’re capable of right now. You have an incredible wife, a good son, and you’re too damn stubborn to fight for us. But hear me out...”

I stare down eyes that match mine. His jaw and brows are mine, too. And somewhere deep down, he's still the man who showed me how to tie a rolling hitch knot. He's the one who made the best grilled cheese sandwiches after a rainy day on the water.

"I still love you, Dad." With the clench of my throat, I swallow it down. "*That's* how you can't disown me. *That's* how I'm *THE* Van de May. I'll love you until the day I die. And deep down"—I poke his chest this time—"you still love me too. Maybe one day, you'll be man enough to act like it."

I trod back down the steps. That's not the talk I wanted to have, but that's the fight we needed. It should've happened years ago. But I was a kid then. I was too shocked and scared and hurt and mad.

Not anymore. I know who I am. I don't know who I'll love next, but at least I know *I will*.

"Bye, Mom." I pull her into a hug. She's dried her tears and grabs me back. "Come see me next weekend. Will you?"

"Nothing but death will keep me from it." She throws down that old Southern phrase, and it's not hyperbole with her.

When I jump in my truck and turn on the ignition, I want to punch the air triumphantly. Because Cade's right. I didn't need her by my side to confront my dad or to see my mom again.

There are some things we gotta do on our own.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



I'M NOT USED TO AIR LIKE THIS. IT'S CRISP AND THIN AND feels like tiny icicles awakening my lungs instead of the heavy, steamy air I live in.

Spring in the Appalachian Mountains is nothing like the season on the Lowcountry coast. The six-hour drive cleared my mind, too. With each week alone, I'm getting better at it.

Crashing my parents' vacation here helps. But they asked me to. They're renting a mountain chalet for the week, clicking down a list of places to go. They begged me to come this week, so I took it off.

"You need another blanket?" I ask my mama, who's sharing the sofa with me. We have the doors open to the panoramic view, and the morning breeze is refreshing but cool.

"Nope." Mama tugs at the afghan, covering her legs and mine. "This smutty book is keeping me plenty warm."

My mama and her books. I read them when she's done, but I can't handle steamy pages right now. It only turns up my sex drive that's been in fifth gear with thoughts of Redix and Silas.

And since I'm on a self-imposed celibate hiatus, I'm not torturing myself.

Mama "hmphs," and that lifts my eyes from the thriller I'm reading.

"I don't get it," she says.

"Get what?"

"When women authors write this about men."

"Write what?"

"Jeff!" Mama shouts out to my dad, frying bacon in the kitchen. "Come here, hun."

He pops his head around the corner. "Need more coffee?"

"No," she replies. "Answer me this." Her book falls to her lap, and she shimmies her thin body up to start her interrogation. "Do your balls tighten up when you come?"

I spew my coffee. Like legit. It splatters my pages, the afghan, the microsuede sofa, and a bit of Mama.

My dad laughs.

"Mama!" I admonish her. "Ewww!"

But she holds her line of questioning because that's Sheriff Gloria Bryant.

"I'm reading a fuck scene," she explains, "and this author wrote that the man's balls tighten when he comes, but I've never heard of that. Is it true?"

Her tone sounds like she's asking my dad about the migratory patterns of bottlenose dolphins. But no.

"Mama, I don't want to know about Dad's balls."

"Why?" She fires at me, equally unfazed. "You think I don't fuck your dad?" Her grin is too thrilled to say, "Well, let me tell you, *I do*. As much as I can."

"I can't keep up with her." Dad sips his coffee, grinning, after he says, "I'm a lucky man."

“Both y’all need to stop.” The vision in my head needs to stop, too. “I know y’all fuck; I just don’t need a blow-by-blow about it.”

Bad choice of words, and yep, my dad picks up the ball (another pun unintended).

“Speaking of blows.” Dad dances his eyebrows at my mama. “*It is a Saturday.*”

“Ewww! Stop it!” That’s a fact I’ll never be able to burn from my brain—oral sex Saturday for my parents.

“Oh, lighten up.” Mama gently kicks my leg under the blanket. “Like you don’t fuck. All those times I caught you and Redix. He ain’t quiet, you know. And don’t tell me you didn’t get a piece of that Silas hunk, cuz if you didn’t, let me whomp you upside the head for being a dumbass to miss out on that fine man too.”

“You’re my mama. You can know about my sex life. But no offense,”—I yank at our blanket—“it’s not a topic of conversation with my dad.”

“Why?” My dad looks too amused. “I saw how Silas was hot for you the minute y’all met. And do you know how many used tissues you and Redix used to leave behind on my boat? I know all about your sex life. I just don’t ask you about it.”

Kill me now.

The book in my hand makes the perfect cover for my flaming red cheeks because all the times Redix turned me into a fucking dessert buffet are firing through my mind. And after those XXX visions, here come the sex club adventures with Silas too. This sofa needs to be ten feet deeper so I can sink and die of embarrassment.

“Well, I need an answer.” Mama chimes up. “Do your balls tighten before you come?”

“Can’t say that’s what I feel,” my dad answers, and please, no, I can’t think of testicles right now. “But ask around. I’m curious, too.”

I drop my book. “Do *NOT* start a text poll about balls.” Because I know my mama.

“Too late.” She’s already tapping into a group text on her phone. “My guys will tell me.”

All the men who worked for Mama, hold your morning coffee because you ain’t gonna believe what she’s texting you.

Mama’s phone pings for the next thirty minutes, and she won’t stop giggling at the answers and her replies. I could roll my eyes and leave the room. But never. She’s too funny like this. She’s too cute and happy, and I want to weld this memory into my heart.

My dad comes over and laughs at the text messages before refilling her coffee and giving her a soft kiss. “You need to eat so you can take your pills.”

His reminder is gentle. His care is unrelenting.

“I ain’t hungry.” Mama makes a mule look willing.

“I ain’t asking if you’re hungry.” But Dad can pull her rope anywhere. “I’m telling you to eat some breakfast.”

This is the love I’ve seen, and I know I’m lucky to witness it. It pushes tears to my eyes, but I blink them away. I want this kind of love, too, one day. I want to fuss about breakfast, talk about balls, and embarrass my kids.

When we were teens, I was this open with Redix. For a few fleeting months when we were back together as adults, it was this natural, too.

I did the same with Silas. I shared everything with him except for the darkest secrets I couldn’t reveal.

But I don’t have either man now.

And honestly, that’s okay.

My soul needed to stop the marathon I’d been running for over ten years. I need this time. My mind needs a break. My body is tired. And my heart can only take so much.

The old me would feel guilty for leaving Redix and Silas like that. Years ago, I would’ve stayed and taken care of them.

I would've loved them, fucked them, cried for them, and fought for them. But they're grown men. They can take care of themselves, and if they can't, they need to learn how.

And so do I.

This is me taking care of myself. For two months, I've been alone, and I need it. And maybe that's not long for some, but for me, it's forever.

All I remember is every day waking up either excited to see Redix or missing him. He was my first thought. He was my every dream. And when he pushed me away, I fell into Silas's strong arms so fast it wasn't fair to either of us. Yes, he'd been waiting on me... but what do I want?

I come home to my empty condo. I don't have weekend plans. I don't check my phone for missed texts or calls. I focus on my job and my cases, and I make sure I get a daily run on the beach, too.

My world revolves around me for a change. Not forever. Just for now. And I can feel my heart growing stronger. Like I could survive so much pain before. But now I'm preparing for peace, for happiness one day. I just don't know how to get there.

Somewhere in the frenzy of pings from my mama's, one from mine gets my attention. It's Penny, and I excuse myself to the deck to answer her call.

"Hey. Everything alright?"

"My water just broke."

"What? Are you okay? Do you need an ambulance?"

"Relax. I'm at the office, and it looks like I peed the floor. No biggie."

Penny refused days off before she was due. She said she could be bored waiting at home or work, so she'd rather have the distraction.

"Well, get your ass to the hospital." I have no patience. I'm six hours away and helpless.

“I am. Hank’s on his way. My mom’s watching Nina. Bitch, this ain’t my first rodeo. Chill out. I gotta update you.”

“Okay.” I know what about—Derek and Renie’s case. Everyone’s working on it, and Penny’s in charge. “What’s up?”

“The DNA sample Redix got from Nicolas matches three open rape cases out of New York.” Her voice sounds strained. “So when we catch Derek, he’s going in for good.”

“But we gotta catch him.”

That’s the problem. Derek Baucom is a slippery eel. I know he’s hiding on the water somewhere and slithers onto the island for his stalk. There’s just a lot of damn water to search.

“We will.” Penny groans. “But you gotta take the lead because I’m taking the three months off I’ve earned.”

“Yeah, you are.” I wish she could get more maternity leave.

“Just tell me you can handle this without another shouting match with Redix. I know y’all run hot, but someone needs to work with Renie.”

“We’ll be fine.” That’s true. I’m not mad at Redix. I want him to be happy. “Renie and I go way back. I got this.”

“*Gooodddd.*” She groans even louder.

“Bitch, get to the hospital.” She’s gonna have that baby in the office, I swear.

“I am,” she says before she gasps. “Oh, that was a good one.” Contraction, she must mean. “By the time you get home, your godson will be here.”

“I’m looking forward to it. Love you. Now go!”

I end our call and stare at the misty mountains. I need to get back to work. The thought of leading Renie’s case again fires me up. She’s like a little sister to me.

And I can handle being around Redix again.

Maybe.

What if he and Silas are a thing now? It's not odd to imagine, just new. All I've known is Redix fucking lots of women when he was drunk, and only me when he was sober.

Thoughts of him with Silas warm my heart and flame through my sex. How Silas could heal him too if he lets him.

But what if Redix is still with that woman from his AA meetings? Imagining him with her? I wanna shoot something. I'm such a hypocrite.

Because what if Silas has been going to the sex club alone? As fine as he is, there'd be a long line of fucks waiting for him. That kinda makes me jealous.

No, it makes me sad.

I know he's free about sex, and God knows I've enjoyed how he's taught me to be, too, but I can just sense it. Silas wants more. He needs more. He has the biggest heart, and it's casting a wide net, hoping to pull love into his life.

Is it me? Is it Redix?

I don't know.

Because no matter if I ever love another man, they'll have to share my heart with Redix. Maybe that's an asshole admission, but it's true, and I'm making peace with it.

"What's rattling in that skull of yours?" Dad appears by my side.

"Everything."

"Me too." He huffs the fresh mountain air. "I can't figure it. What the hell made them open up my case again?"

Dad asks what we have no clue about. He's been retired for almost twenty years as a former cop. You'd think the reason why—that he got investigated for excessive use of force—would be water under the bridge. Yes, my dad beat the hell out of a man sexually abusing his five-year-old daughter. There's no excuse for what my dad did, but I understand it.

That's why he took early retirement. That's why he and Mama divorced. His outburst disgraced her and almost took

down her job as Sheriff, too.

But now, some reporter's investigating it again, asking around, saying she wants to do a feature on police brutality and corruption. It's an important issue, but why focus on my dad? We don't know.

"Was that the office?" Dad asks.

"Yeah, Penny's in labor, so I gotta head back today. We just confirmed DNA matches on Derek Baucom in other cases, so when we nail his ass, we got him for good."

Dad nods. "What about Gentry?"

How my dad hates that man, too. What he must've seen the night Gentry, TJ, and Derek attacked Redix, I can't imagine. Actually, I can, and I don't know how my dad didn't kill those guys then.

"The FBI is pursuing the cybercrime route with him. His golf tours are a cover for a larger ring; I know it. He uses several courses. I need to figure out the one he's using to cover it all up."

"That can take some time."

"Yeah. But at least the attacks on women stopped, so we have some."

Those attacks stopped because of what me, my dad, and Mama won't say aloud—we stopped them by putting TJ at the bottom of the ocean.

Dad's quiet. And I don't need to peep a single word to know exactly where his mind goes next.

"Y'all ever gonna work this out?"

My history is too short, too easy with Silas. He's asking about Redix.

"He can't forgive me. The whole TJ thing ripped open a wound he fought to heal. Even though Mama told him it was her, he's still angry with me. He hasn't said it, but I see it in his eyes."

“Give him time. He’s angry about what happened to him, and he needs to let himself feel it.”

“When he does, he takes it out on me.”

Dad winces. “That’s because he’s safe with you.”

“It still hurts like hell.”

“Yeah.” He pauses. “Does it hurt him? You being with Silas?”

“No. He likes him.” *A lot.* I don’t say it.

“Don’t blame him. Silas is a helluva man too.”

Dad tousles my hair like I’m in the middle of a schoolyard conundrum, not almost thirty, and in love with two hot men.

“I don’t worry about you anymore,” he says. “Since you were a baby, folks went on about how beautiful my daughter was, and that scared the hell out of me, but not anymore.”

“Why? Because I’ll kill a man now?”

It’s a joke. And it’s not.

“That, and”—Dad wraps his arm around my shoulder —“love doesn’t kill ya, Magnolia Cade. It just makes you feel a lot. All the good and all the bad. And that’s a gift to cherish because it’s much better than feeling nothing at all.”

I bury my face in his chest, smelling my childhood in Dad’s cologne. He’s talking about me. He’s talking about him and Mama, too. They spent too many years apart, feeling angry and hurt, and now they’re cherishing every day they can get because we all only get so many before they’re all gone.

And I want more days too. Days filled with love, not anger.



THE SIX-HOUR DRIVE home passes quickly. Thoughts and miles fly by.

I'm kinda missing them. Okay, it's a lot. I miss sleeping on Redix's chest. I miss fishing with Silas. The list is long with all I adore about them both.

It's late afternoon as I pull into the QuickTrip gas station before crossing the bridge back to Hilton Head Island. I need to fill up on gas and candy. And my favorite store owner is here, too.

"Afternoon, Ms. Dubois," I call out as I make a beeline for the candy aisle. "You doing alright?"

"It's spring break." She smacks her gum while I set my goodies down on the counter. "I'm busier than a cat covering crap on a marble floor."

Damn, she's like my mama.

"Glad to hear it." I lay a ten down and don't want the change. "Have a good one," I wish her as I turn toward the glass doors...

And stop dead in my tracks.

The parking lot is full of tourist cars fueling up, but I'd spot him in a hurricane.

Senator Gentry Evans stands by his parked BMW on the edge of the parking lot. His back is toward me, but I'd know those damn madras pants anywhere. He's talking to someone, and I can't see who, but I know if it's in a gas station parking lot, it's criminal for him. He does official business on the golf course.

It's a few minutes while I stand, munching Lemonheads, waiting to see. I hope it's not Stacey. I hope they're not fighting because I'm not in the mood to kill him today. I'd rather have pizza tonight.

When he finally steps his pancake ass aside, my ribs yank a breath in so fast.

It's that woman.

The one Redix is "dating" from his AA meeting. She's standing in the parking lot, wearing a leather jacket on April

Fool's Day, and this ain't a joke. She's working for Gentry Evans. It's obvious by her nods and cocky smile.

I'd say, "this bitch" but I won't waste my fourth favorite curse word on her.

"Fuck, shit, and damn" go first before an "I knew it" hisses from my soul.

The question is, *what am I gonna do about it?*

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



REDIX

Feel It by Michele Morrone

LORRAINE WENT ALL OUT ON THIS TRAILER.

She's gotta be forking over almost ten thousand a week renting this thing for me. It's got a double-length white leather sofa. Ebony wood cabinets. A huge flatscreen on one end. A plush queen-size bed in a room on the other.

All this for moving our production to Georgia. It's like she owes me something, but I'm the thankful one. Shooting closer to home makes my life a lot easier.

We're shooting beach exteriors on Tybee Island this week, so it's damn convenient. It's only an hour and a half to drive home.

I flip through my pages for tomorrow while my foot bounces. All this luxury, and I'm still nervous.

Lorraine's on her way to meet with me about "an opportunity," she said. Of course, I'll hear her out, but I don't want an opportunity that takes me far away. Not now. Not with this shit with Derek and keeping my family safe.

And with Cade gone.

And with Silas here.

I'm nervous as fuck because he's coming by too. He finally found the spare key to the boat I bought, and instead of sending it to me like a normal business transaction, I invited him to come to set.

Because this ain't business.

Every day I think about him. And Cade. Since I can't have her, why don't I feel guilty about wanting to be with him too?

If there weren't so much history, this would've been done weeks ago. I've never had these feelings for another man, not like this, and I couldn't have resisted him this long.

But there is Cade.

And I don't feel guilty. I'm waiting on her. I respect her. I love her and miss her.

There are photos on my phone of her that I scroll through every day. There's a framed picture of her on my dresser. I took it when she was last lying beside me in bed. She was giggling because I know her ticklish spot (her right thigh), and damn, she'd stop a war with her laugh. And she left panties and a T-shirt in the dryer. They're in my top drawer, waiting for her to come home. Like I am, too.

I get that she needs time. I had my chance, so she deserves hers. And I don't know what that means for our future—if we even have one.

But right now, she gave me and Silas her blessing.

And with the way I'm feeling, I have to do this.

It's starting to drive me crazy. Not to drink. But damn, I need to fuck. I can do it all day to my fist. Thoughts of Cade will get me there in minutes. But now thoughts of Silas float into my mind, too, and desire crawls beneath my skin, clawing to get out.

I can imagine how damn good it would feel if I ever get to satisfy this urge. It's more than the need for sex. It's like my

soul is begging to feel better.

I don't know if Silas still feels the same way. But I need that boat key. And I need to find out.

Tap. Tap, tap, tap. Tap. The distinct knock on my trailer door isn't the P.A. calling me to set. I'm done for the day. That's Lorraine's knock.

"Come in!" I shout and look up to see her whoosh in with a grin from ear to ear.

"You like the digs?" she asks, admiring her lavish gesture.

"I'm fine in a pop-up tent."

"No, you're not. You're the first on the call sheet and too damn famous and sexy to sit out where all the tourists are looking for you."

Our show, *The Band*, shooting here in Georgia, has whipped up my fans, and it's a constant battle keeping them from trying to sneak on set.

"Want a drink?" I get up and grab her a bottle from my refrigerator. A Cheerwine soda. It's her favorite.

"Thanks." She takes it and a seat.

"You're killing me with the suspense." I flop back down on the sofa. "What's this opportunity? And please tell me it ain't filming in London or Madrid."

"Nope." Three long sips she takes, milking the tension and her next ask. "It's something that might be filmed here. Interested now?"

"Is it your show, too?"

"Of course."

I lean back. "Pitch."

"I can't say much. It's too new, but before I waste time with the studio, I want to know if you'll consider it."

I just cock my head. Two shows I've done with Lorraine. Why the hell would I say no to another?

“Daniel Pierce pitched me a series,” she says. “Like a *True Detective* but way sexier. He wants to co-star as the straight-laced detective led astray, and we need an undercover narc with a heart of gold.” She pauses for effect. “We need *you*.”

“Sounds intriguing.”

“Enough to consider it? We’ve got his screenplay in the writers’ room now. I can get it to you in a month.”

“Yeah.” This does interest me. Playing life on the other side of drugs? That could be a fun challenge. “Send it when it’s ready.”

Tap. Tap. That’s the P.A. knocking.

“Excuse me.” I get up to open my door.

“Mr. Dean. We have your guest, Mr. Harper, here to see you.”

Who’s Mr. Harper?

I look over the P.A.’s shoulder and see Silas standing there like a cat-that-ate-the-canary. I forget he doesn’t use his family’s name. “Yes, thank you.” I step back, holding the door for Silas. The P.A. hustles away while he climbs up the stairs.

“Hey.”

His voice is low. His eyes stare deep. They answer my question. *Yes, he still feels it, too.*

“Hey,” I answer, but I gotta hold back. This is work, after all. “Silas Harper, meet Lorraine Morris.”

I turn to introduce them, but they laugh and rush to hug each other like long-lost friends.

“Well, damn, this world is small.” Lorraine pulls him in close. “And that’s fine by me with your fine ass in it.”

What the hell?

“Hey, gorgeous.” Silas squeezes her back.

“Y’all know each other?”

“Yeah!” Lorraine laughs. “Every time I visit Daniel Pierce and his gorgeous wife, Charlie Ravenel, on Daufuskie, this hot

young man is my personal ferry service.”

Silas looks comfortable beside her while Lorraine’s eyes bounce from him to me. “Anyone ever tell you y’all look like ___”

“Yes,” we answer, and all laugh.

“Seems we have mutual friends everywhere.” I could explain more to Lorraine, but this story could get long, and I really want to be alone with him.

His eyes have hooked on mine, and my body is a mile ahead of my brain. It’s like we last left each other with so much tension; ice is crashing around us to the heat.

“Well, I’ll leave y’all to it.” And it’s like Lorraine can read a room like a menu because she knows my history—good and bad. “Think about my offer,” she says before a goodbye peck on my cheek. “And you”—she turns to Silas—“still owe me a night out in Savannah.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replies, leaning against the long row of kitchen cabinets.

Lorraine leaves, and lots of questions remain.

“You know Charlie Ravenel, too?” he asks.

“Yeah. She went to high school with me and Cade. Long story. And she worked security detail on Lorraine’s show I just did.”

Silas’s eyebrow shoots up like there’s a big story behind what I just said about Charlie.

“How do you know her and Daniel Pierce?” I ask.

“When I visited my grandma on Daufuskie for the summers, Charlie would babysit. She was my first love and broken heart.”

“So you went from loving Charlie to loving Cade?”

“I’ll never stop loving Charlie,” he answers. “Don’t think I’ll stop loving Cade either. Hell, I even love Daniel Pierce.” His steps narrow the distance between us, and heat scorches to the tips of my ears. “What can I say? I care for a lot of

people.” My body gnaws with a tension that almost hurts when he’s this close. “And I care for you too.”

That didn’t take any time.

I thought this would be a long talk and a lot of guilt, but he came here with the same question in his heart—the same need in his body brushing against mine.

“Here’s your key.” He drags it from his pocket before setting it on the counter beside me.

“Thanks,” I mutter.

We aren’t kissing. We aren’t talking. He just pulls me by my waist into his body, and no words are needed. I get a very hard impression of what he wants next. He’s so close I can feel his breath on my lips while I ask, “Can we do this?”

“She gave us her blessing.”

“Do you *want* this?”

I’m so sober, but he’s flooding my senses to drunk levels.

“You can feel how hard I do.”

Yes, I can. His cock is urging against mine under my jeans. He’s wearing jeans, too, and there’s too much denim between us. The impulse to grab, the need to be touched, seizes my mind.

“Have you been thinking about this?”

I lift the hem of his black T-shirt just enough to skim the flesh above his waistband. His skin is hard satin, and I’m mesmerized by the ridges, by his abs undulating beneath my fingertips.

His lips open to my touch, to my tease across his flesh, while he answers, “I think about you all day.” The pad of his thumb drags over my bottom lip. “I can’t get you out of my mind.”

The tip of my tongue licks his thumb, and I want more of his flesh in my mouth. I crane my neck and start sucking his thumb so that I can know the flavor of his skin.

“You’ve been thinking about me too.” He still hasn’t kissed me, and his thick appendage tastes good in my mouth, and I want more while he reaches for my cock, dragging hard down my length. “Haven’t you?”

Oh, fuck. I think I moan it, too. I pull back from his thumb and go for his lips.

Damn, how I’ve been thinking about him. About how his shadow scrapes against my chin. How his soft lips cushion his hard teeth when his warm tongue calls mine to play. He tastes like cinnamon and sex. He smells like coconut and fucking on the beach.

I rush him back against the countertop, and we have no space but this. But his mouth taking mine and his hand stroking my cock over my jeans, and fuck, *I want him.*

My hands wander under his soft shirt, up his iron stomach, over his rock pecs. He’s so different than Cade. She’s all firm curves with a velvet cushion over her flesh to devour. But Silas is everything steel. Everything is rigid and smooth like me.

“Can I take this off?” I tug at his shirt. I’ll never assume with anyone, woman or man.

“You can take whatever you want,” he replies, ripping it off and throwing it to the floor faster than I could.

“Damn.”

I press my palms down his body, and I want to take him. I want to feel him. I don’t know this journey across another man’s flesh, not that I remember, and I can’t believe I’m doing this. Not out of shame. But because I’ve wanted Silas for months.

Our lips are still meshed. Our tongues are still greedy. Lust makes me want to have him so fast, but I don’t know how or if I can.

When I reach for his cock, tenting his jeans, he growls back into my kiss and cups my hand, and I know I can do *this*. I can stroke him, sensing drops of my pre-cum at the feeling of his hard cock filling my hand.

He answers me, unbuttoning his jeans before dropping his zipper and pushing them down. I break our kiss and gaze down because I have to see him.

I've been wondering for so long.

His jeans hang from his thighs. His light grey boxer briefs can't contain his surging cock, and the light drops of his cum darkening them. *Shit, he's hot.* Dragging the thick, white band of his boxers down, I've never touched another man's underwear, pulling it down with both hands to reveal what I never thought I'd crave.

The anticipation. The slow reveal. The deep line of his tan obliques and the line where the sun doesn't see his skin all beckon my search. When I see the top of his trimmed dark blond patch and the base of his wide cock appear, my fucking mouth waters.

I almost hesitate.

I know what will spring before me, what will demand my mouth to taste, to lick, and I want to revel in this wonder, but my desire is too impatient. Pulling his boxers down his thighs, his cock aims at me, leaking and swollen, and I let out a primal groan as I wrap my fist around his shaft and greet this new pleasure.

"Oh fuck, yes." He moans and helps me.

Wrapping his hand over mine, we pump his cock, his lips reaching for mine again, and we moan. We're both seeking this. Wanting this. How I know how to stroke him. How to twist and pump and thrill him until his thighs shake for me is the biggest turn-on. He's hard putty in my hands, and I will milk every drop from him. And lick it up, too.

"I want to taste you," he says, pulling away from my kiss, pressing his forehead to mine while stroking my length. "I want to suck your cock, and you can take all the pictures you want. It's no secret or shame. I want you, Redix Dean."

"You want my cock in your mouth?" He's swelling in my tight grip, a feeling I never want to let go of. "You want to

wrap those scruffy lips around my hard cock and let me fuck your deep throat until I come in it?"

"Yes." He's pumping our fists faster, his shameless hips meeting our tempo. "I want you to watch me. Watch me suck your cock while you love every fucking minute of it."

His lips are trembling. His thick vein is growing more rigid against my palm, and he's going, and I'm vicious with my grip because I *will* fucking take him there.

"Show me, Silas." He grunts. "Show me how you want me. How you come thinking about my cock in your mouth. Of my cum shooting down your throat and spilling over your chin." He groans. His eyes drop, and watch, too, panting and thrusting into my pounding fist. "Let me see your cum," I demand. "I think about it too. I wanna watch it shoot from your big cock into my fist."

"Oh fuck." He huffs, and I get my wish. "Oh fuck." It coats my hand. It splatters across my jeans, his creamy ropes landing on my blue shirt, and I squeeze him harder for more. "*Daaaammn*," he heaves with another rush, ribbons of his cum decorating my jeans and my cock surging, desperate for him underneath.

"Fuck," he huffs and pulls me into another kiss. A deep one. A long one while he recovers his breath, and I'm aching for more.

More of him. More of his sex. More of his big heart. I want to keep being free with him. I want to *be* like him. It's more than attraction to his body. It's like pieces of me heal with him; they get stronger with him. Only one other person does this to me.

I lift my hand to my mouth and lick his cum off for him to watch, and I've never seen a man look back at me this way. Helpless. Hungry. Humble. And I love his salty taste, like a new favorite dessert.

"Your turn," he says, reaching up to cup my jaw and start another round of this intimate dance.

His other hand starts unbuttoning my jeans. I want to remember this, gazing down to watch him.

“Is this okay?” he asks.

Like he knows more about me than most. About what I’ve survived. Why I stayed drunk for so long, and why I still have nightmares. His touch is tentative. *He does know*. Cade must’ve told him. And he cares, too, and that only makes me fall harder for him.

“Do you think about her too?” I ask while his palm keeps friction against my shaft.

“Yes.”

“Do you miss her too?”

“Every day. I think about you both. Is that wrong?”

“It doesn’t feel wrong.” I reach for my zipper, our hands shuffling to make room for each other. “I think about her. I love her. I think about you and feel for you, and I swear I moan and come to you both.”

“We’ll get her back,” he swears before taking me in another kiss, and his lips are starting to feel like another home for me. Like another place where I’m safe and free, and I don’t have to fear what he’ll see when I drop my pants.

I’m about to tell him. To prepare him. The scar on my buttock is horrific; he’ll at least feel it, if not see it when I do. And I don’t know how I feel about that, but I trust him.

“I need to tell—”

Shit, the phone in my back pocket starts buzzing. I ignore it. I begin to tell him again, but it buzzes more, and I worry that it’s someone outside my trailer door.

“I have to check.”

He grins and understands.

But it’s not a number from the crew. Or my family.

It’s Karen from AA texting me.

KAREN

Please help me

I'm staring at a bottle of wine, a glass I just poured and I need help

Please

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Lost on You by LP

IT DOESN'T TASTE THE SAME. THE LONG LICKS I TAKE OF THE lemon sherbet ice cream coat my tongue, but it's not right.

I made myself come back to this ice cream shop by the park. The one where I had my first kiss. The one where I had my worst night. My dreams were taken here... and I want them back.

But the ice cream tastes too bitter. Without Redix standing in front of me with his devil grin licking the cone, too, there's no going back.

I used to want that—the impossible dream of changing that night. Of swapping my place for Redix's and letting those men take me like they wanted to instead of him. I would've survived it. And I would've killed them the next chance I could.

Yes, it would've changed me and hurt me in ways I *can* imagine.

But this is where Redix and I are different. He wanted peace afterward and I wanted war.

Now, I don't even want that.

We both need to change.

Don't get me wrong. This tiger ain't changing *all* her stripes. No, I'll sink my fangs into any evil man. I'll just take them down a different way this time.

I'll admit I regret how it went down with TJ. Not that he's dead. He had to be stopped. But I hate that I let it possess me. I let him stalk my mind as much as he stalked me. I was equally obsessed, equally out of control for revenge.

But when it comes to Gentry, I got all the time in the world. Because one hasty move on my part and Pamela and Cam can disappear for good. So, I'm weaving the perfect rope to wrap around Gentry's skinny neck.

And Derek? I got one ready for him, too. He's wanted in so many cases; all he needs to do is stick his neck out, and he's done.

But now I got a new itch to scratch.

That woman Redix is dating from his AA meetings. Fuck patience from heaven. I'm pissed as hell. I know what she's up to. I know what she did. Twice.

Redix's heart is too big. He's too kind to see it. He has his AA meetings on Monday mornings, but I'd never violate that sanctuary for him. I know it helps to keep him alive.

Tossing my half-eaten cone away, I gotta do this. I have to tell him about her. And I need to update Renie on Derek's case anyway, so I can walk my flip-flops into Redix's house and not lose my shit. I promise.

It's a Wednesday and almost four o'clock. I drive to his home and ring the doorbell. I'm not on duty or in uniform. Nope. I'm calm and smiling, and they should be home because school gets out at two o'clock.

Scarlett lets me in. "Well, hello, hot stuff." She's incredible. I wish she had more time to hang out, but she's

working all day guarding Redix's family and sleeping all night for the next one.

"Backatcha." I wink. And no, I'm not wearing this white mini sundress to get Redix's attention.

And I'm lying. A bit.

"Who's home?"

"They're out by the pool." She points to the wall of windows and Renie and Nicolas on the other side.

"Where's he?"

Scarlett shrugs. Keeping tabs on Redix isn't her job. And disclosing her client's personal life could make her lose it.

I walk across the living room and notice the furniture Redix has bought. That *hurts*. We were supposed to pick it out together. We were supposed to do a lot of things together.

"Hey," I call out to Renie when I open the sliding glass door and step onto the pool deck.

"Well, hey, yourself." She sits up taller on her lounge chair.

"Hey, Cade!" Nicolas shouts from the diving board.

"Hey, buddy!" I shout back.

He jumps in and swims to the side while I sit beside Renie and quietly update her on Derek and the other cases in New York.

"I guess when I'm honest with myself," Renie tells me with her eyes glued to Nicolas, "he did it to me, too. I never did say no, but I never said yes either, and he sure didn't ask. I was too drunk and later too devastated to admit it."

"You're not alone, unfortunately," I reply. "It sadly happens like that a lot. You're not to blame. It's the criminal who didn't ask for consent who is."

"I know that now," she says. "Nicolas!" She shouts. "Stop running!"

He's throwing a beach ball in the heated pool and running around the wet edge to the diving board to jump on it.

“But at least I got him.” Renie can’t help but smile.

Nicolas is a cute boy. He’s got her DNA and laughing eyes. He doesn’t look a bit like his evil father. No, he looks a lot like Redix did at that age, which melts my heart. I want to ask her where Redix is. Maybe he’s on set, but I don’t.

“He didn’t come home last night.” She reads my mind. “He’s never done that before, and it scares me. Makes me worry he’s drinking again.”

“I’m sure he’s fine.”

Did I want to know that? That Redix stayed out last night. He’s not drinking again. I can sense that. But who was he with? Silas, I hope. Not with that woman.

“Nicolas!” He’s running again. “That’s the last straw, young man. You’re in time out.” Renie jumps up like the good mother she is. “You’ve got five minutes,” she tells him. “Sit right there on that chair.” She turns back to me. “I gotta get him a dry towel. I’ll be right back.”

She disappears inside while I smile at Nicolas. His knees bounce, and goosebumps rise across his skinny shoulders in the cool spring breeze.

“Watcha doing here, Cade?” he asks. “How come you don’t come over no more?”

Because I love your uncle so much, I sacrificed our future together so he could have one.

“I’m just catching up with your mom,” I say. “Sorry, buddy. Sometimes work keeps me busy, too.”

“Let me show you my new trick!” He jumps up like he already forgot he’s in trouble, and he’s fast.

Running around the pool’s edge again, I shout, this time at his wet feed padding across wet pavement, “Nicolas! Stop running, please!”

And it happens so fast. Like we feared it would. He slips. Falling over the edge as he turns its corner, he smacks into the water after knocking his skull against the pool’s concrete edge.

“Nicolas!” I jump up.

Without a thought, I dive in. He’s knocked out cold, and blood smokes in the water around his tiny head. I get to him fast and flip him on his back so he can breathe.

“Nicolas!” Renie shouts, running back outside.

“Call nine-one-one,” I tell her, swimming with his tiny body to the pool steps. “He’s breathing, but call them.”

Scarlett’s standing behind Renie and already on it. Damn, if we haven’t been here before.

“Is he okay?” Renie rushes to the steps and moves to take him from my arms.

“Careful,” I warn her. “Lay the towel down. We need to keep him still in case he broke something.”

I heard the smack to his skull, and it makes me sick. The blood staining his blond hair is scary, too.

“Oh my, God, Nicolas.” Renie carefully starts dabbing at the contusion with the edge of the towel.

“He’ll be okay.” I hope I’m right.

The medic arrives quickly. It’s minutes, and he’s loaded onto the gurney and into the ambulance. All the while, I can’t shake the memory of seeing Redix like that. Of watching his almost lifeless body rushed away in an ambulance. It’s times like these when I want him back so much. Nothing feels right without him.

Renie rides with him. Scarlett and I follow in her car, and I try calling Redix. I’m wet and shivering as my call rolls to voicemail. I hate texting this, but he leaves me no choice.

Meet me at the hospital

It’s Nicolas. He’ll be okay but get there ASAP

By the time we arrive and park, they have Nicolas rushed in for scans while Renie stays by his side if he wakes up. It’s another hour before he’s done. Another hour later, they find him a room to keep him for observation overnight.

They think he'll be fine, and he seems it. Nicolas wakes up and starts talking like nothing happened. He thinks getting his head shaved for stitches is fascinating. He asks for a mirror to see it.

Scarlett and I chuckle from our chairs in the hospital room while his mom looks so relieved by his bedside.

Minutes later, a commotion approaches from the hallway. The smell of him arrives, along with the sound of high heels clicking in after him.

"Hey." Redix rushes into the room with his eyes on Nicolas. His shitty girlfriend clicks in behind him. "Hey, buddy. You okay?" Redix gently brushes over Nicolas's shorn head.

"I got stitches! See!" Nicolas turns his head so we can all see them. It's a hard sight on Redix, but he forces his smile.

"I see," he says. "You okay?" He reaches for Renie next.

"Yeah," she squeezes him back. "Just scared the mess out of me, but we're fine. They want to keep him overnight just in case."

Redix finally turns his head and clocks me and Scarlett sitting in the corner.

Did he just wince?

"Cade saved him," Renie announces, and I swear she does it to spite his girlfriend.

"It's no biggie," I mutter because if I open my mouth too much, his girlfriend is in the perfect place and will look really good with *all* the stitches I wanna give her.

"Thanks," he says to me, and like he just woke up, he remembers who he came in with. And who he spent last night with, it doesn't take a genius to figure that out.

"Um..." Redix makes the introductions and saves me for last. Because how do you introduce me?

"This is the first woman I loved, kissed, lost my virginity to, proposed to, sacrificed myself for, left for ten years, came

back and fought to get her back, and almost proposed to again, but then kicked her out and now I told her I want her back and I'm attracted to her sorta ex-boyfriend."

Nope. That takes too long.

"Karen, this is Cade," is all he says.

"Hi," she says, and that guilty smile needs to be smacked off her face. "Nice to meet you."

"You sure about that?" I ask her.

Fuck. That just slipped out, I swear.

Scarlett coughs, Renie grins, and Nicolas is oblivious, while Redix cuts me a look that wants *my* blood.

The interesting thing? Karen's not even nervous around me. That either makes her a sociopath or a stupid shit. Or both.

It's a long hour while they visit with Nicolas, and I get to watch her squirm. Scarlett keeps stifling her smile beside me because she knows the impulse I'm holding back. I don't have to tell her Karen's on my shit list. Scarlett knows guilt when she smells it, too.

"Well, we should let you get some sleep." Redix is wrapping it up. "I'll make sure we have your favorite popsicles when you get home tomorrow, okay?"

It thrills my ovaries how sweet he is with his nephew when he kisses his cheek goodbye. And when he hugs his sister.

I stand up. "I'll walk y'all out."

He looks at me like that's as good of an idea as playing with live electrical wires. In the rain. But fuck this. I may not make a scene in front of Nicolas, but cue the camera for when we are alone.

We don't say anything on the walk down the hall. Or down the elevator. Or out the doors into the parking lot. But Redix looks as comfortable as getting an enema, and Karen holds his hand like that's gonna save her.

It's almost midnight, and I ask, "Where'd y'all park?"

Redix hits his car fob, and he's parked at the very edge of the lot under a canopy of palmetto trees. He looks at me nervously while I follow them there. I know he thinks I'm jealous or that he's doing something wrong. I can't watch him suffer anymore because of her.

"Karen"—I step into her cloud of perfume—"you have one minute to tell him the truth, or I swear I'll strangle you so hard *it* and your eyes will pop out."

"Cade, stop it!" Redix is sweet to be defending her lack of honor.

"Tell him." I keep my eyes on her.

She shakes her head like a shocked virgin watching porn. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're so full of shit, your eyes are brown."

"That's enough." Redix wedges between us. "What the hell is going on with you?"

I glare at her and tell him, "She wants your gorgeous cock so bad she's afraid to tell you that she works for Gentry Evans."

I watch her reaction. It's stone. It's cold.

"What?" He steps back.

"She's lying," Karen seethes. "She's just jealous."

"I'm as jealous of you as your tits are real." Enough of her bullshit, I turn to Redix. "She works for Gentry Evans, and he planted her in your AA meeting. She leaked the story about that man you were with at the club, and she's got some reporter looking into why my dad retired from the sheriff's office so long ago."

The smirk on her face says it all, but Redix doesn't see it. He's looking at me like I just kneed his nuts.

"That can't be." Betrayal twists his handsome face as he turns to Karen. "You wouldn't do that, would you? You're in AA. You're in recovery like me. You wouldn't lie about that?"

I hate this for him. I hate she did this to him. He needs those meetings, and she just violated them.

“What was last night, then?” Redix asks her frozen face. “Was it real?”

Please don’t tell me he made love to her, thinking they shared a grueling journey to sobriety. Damn, that’d be so wrong of her.

“She’s lying,” is all Karen can repeat. She doesn’t even answer his questions or validate his pain, which hurts him, so that’s all it takes.

“Answer him, now!” I grab her by the throat and slam her against his passenger window. “Or I’m gonna make you *real* fucking sober with pain.”

Redix doesn’t stop me this time. He’s stunned silent.

“Tell him!” I’ll do it again for him. It’s taking me over, and I swore I’d have more control, but he’s hurting, and my thumb starts pressing down on that critical artery in her throat.

Her eyes shock wide open. Her body stiffens like a board. Her lips lock up while her neck tries to thrash in my grasp, but I’m too strong. She didn’t think I had this in me.

Think again.

I squeeze harder. And smile.

“It’s true.” She coughs. “It’s true.” She grabs her throat when I suddenly let go and take two steps back before I snap her neck next.

“Gentry can’t even hire a good fucking liar,” I sneer. “Tell him how you caved and pissed your pants.” I can smell it. “And watch your back because I know where you live.”

“Get out of here.” I wanted to say it next, but the words seethe from Redix’s throat. “Now.”

She runs for the hospital entrance, her Louboutin heels clicking fast over the black pavement.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him while I watch her stop in the breezeway and grab her phone. “I’m so sorry she did that to

you.”

“Are you?” He looks at me, equally hurt. “Because you looked too thrilled to almost strangle her to death.”

“Damn, right,” I tell him. “She tried to hurt you. She tried to hurt my parents. What do you expect me to do? Get a mani/pedi with her?”

“You didn’t have to do it this way.”

“I didn’t have a choice.”

Yes, I did. And that felt good. And he knows when I feel good. He can see it in my eyes.

“Can you even stop yourself sometimes?” He’s dismayed. “Or does it just take over, and you gotta hurt someone too and make it worse?”

“Listen here, Hollywood. We don’t all get happy endings and justice when the fucking credits roll. I know you’ve been through some real pain, but don’t you dare judge how I handle mine in my world. Or how I do my job. All day long, you earn millions while you’re surrounded by people who love you, who want to fuck you. But me? I sacrifice my life, and people hate or want to kill me. So don’t come at me because you’re angry about her.”

“I’m not just angry about her. I’m angry about a lot of fucking things.”

“Is that so? Well, then bring it. Make me your emotional bitch you gotta take it out on because I’m used to it by now.”

Damn, we’re so close, we go right at it. My mouth knows no edit with him, and he’s not holding back either.

“I wouldn’t take it out on you if you told me the fucking truth.” Yep, he’s not backing down either. “You could’ve told me you planned to get TJ because I know that’s how it went down. That it had something to do with us fixing Ms. Ryans’s dock and your dad’s old boat.” His eyebrow arches up. “See. I’m right.”

How the fuck did he just read that on my face?

Dammit, he knows me too well, and when did he get so smart about covert crime?

“I know you were helping those victims too,” he says, towering over me while his BOUND cologne wafts down. “But I’m mad as hell because you never told me. We never talked about it, and you owed me that. I finally told you everything, shared everything with you. You know my soul, Cade, so why didn’t you talk with me first? That’s what hurts.”

“If I had told you, it would’ve risked you and my parents.”

“Fine. Then fucking let it. Haven’t we been through enough? Don’t we love each other enough to survive that together? But no. You won’t admit it, and I can’t live with secrets. They’ll fucking kill me because they pressure me to drink thinking about how you risked *our* love for *him*, for the man who hurt me most. So yes, I’m fucking angry as hell.” He grabs a breath and captures my heart like it’s the last thing he’ll hold. “Because I love you so much, Cade Bryant, and I’ve lost you, and I can almost live without you, but I’ll never be happy doing it.”

My world, my head, they’re spinning so fast. There’s no dark, empty parking lot; it’s just us. It’s just this question. I love him so much, too. Like the tides of my soul are pulled by him, and he’s my world. He’s the boy who saved me. The man who loves me, but he’s just so mad at me.

“You haven’t lost me.” I can’t help the tears. “And you never will. So what’ll make you happy now?”

“This,” he says before crashing his mouth into mine.

His hand grabs the back of my neck, and his other pulls my body into him while his tongue claims our kiss. It’s a rush. It’s a surge over us, and this is where we belong; it doesn’t matter our pain.

We have this love, too, and I grab him, pulling him back into my body and heart with his long hair in my tight grasp. Our breath, lips, tongues, and bodies tumble together as we can’t get at each other fast enough.

“Now.” He lifts my thigh, wedging me against his car. “I’m not waiting anymore.” The smocked top of my dress tears down in his grip, exposing my breasts while he swears, “I belong with you, and I want you back right now.”

“Then take me.” My hand finds his jeans and makes quick work of opening them enough to grab his swollen cock. “Take me right here and show me how you want me back.”

I don’t care who sees us; let them watch. I know Karen can. Our bodies are only half covered by shadows as Redix frees his cock to answer my demand.

Hell yes. Let her watch *who* he really loves. *How* he really loves. That we’ll do *anything* for each other. That he’s the raging sea and I’m the shore, and there’s no separating us.

He lifts me, his hands wrapping around my ribs, bringing my nipple to his mouth for his hard suck. “Yes,” I cry out at the return of his mouth to my flesh. His full lips and soft tongue with his toying circles rush arousal to my sex while he moves to the other one, leaving them dripping with his spit like they’re his.

“Fuck, Redix, now.” I pull my panties to the side. He’s squeezing my thigh so hard in his grasp, lifting it to wrap around him while our bodies know how to align. They know this by instinct, by the urge and primal routine. It’s more than muscle memory. It’s our hearts forever bound together. His cock drives in and buries inside me, stretching and burning, and I groan at his massive return.

“Oh God, Cade.” His voice, his breath, they’re so deep against my ear while he drives in again, making me gasp. “Fuck, I missed you,” he swears, and I don’t even feel the steel of the car behind me; I just feel his steel.

He’s everywhere I need him inside, and he never left. He’s always with me. I could get lost, I could let go and not care, but I see over his shoulder, and Karen’s silhouette looms in the distance of the hospital entrance, watching us. And it makes me recall, it makes me fear...

“Redix,” I huff, “you don’t have a condom on.”

“I don’t need one.” He wedges his forehead against mine. “I’ve only been with you. I only want you.” He thrusts into my pussy again, proving it.

“And him,” I say. “What about Silas?”

“And him.” His lips dust over mine. “I want him too, but we haven’t—”

“But you can.” I pull his shirt up and grab his back harder, feeling his muscles flex under my grip. “And I want you to. You need to.”

“We all need to. All three of us.” He nips my bottom lip. “But I need *you* right now. I want to fuck you right now because you’re the only woman, Cade. The only one I want.”

His cock is seated in me while he grinds hard, those fucking hips of his working magic across my nerves and rubbing the base of his shaft against my clit like he knows how. He’s the goddamn maestro of fucking me.

He pulls back, his eyes searching mine because he knows he’s getting me there and loves watching it. But it occurs to him, glancing over his left shoulder, he sees it too—Karen’s watching us from a distance. She knows better than to record this if she wants to live, but let her memory never forget.

He turns back and grins. “She didn’t stand a chance,” he says, pulling his cock out of me and leaving me huffing.

“What are you—”

But I see too quickly what he’s doing, and fuck yes, he drops to his knees before me. Draping my leg over his shoulder, he lifts my dress higher and starts his feast of my pussy, and she *better* be watching.

This is love. This is lust. This is Redix Dean eating me out like I’m his last meal.

She could never have him.

Grinding my pussy over his outstretched tongue, I ride his face, over his nose, and back down to his chin; I have no shame, and he has no hesitation. Wedged against his car, I lace my hands in his hair and let him devour me, his tongue

fucking my cunt before his lips start sucking my clit. My eyelids start dropping. I'm watching Karen in the distance, and he's groaning into my drenched pussy and fuck her; I come on his mouth so hard and loud; he's *mine*.

And he's not done.

Surging up so fast, he wraps my legs around his waist and he's a hard piston in my pussy again with his brutal thrusts and "Yes, fuck me, Redix," I love it.

"Is that what you want, Cade?" He asks me between kisses with my cum on his lips. "You want me to fuck you and him?"

Oh God, that vision takes me to heights I've never known. "Yes," I sigh. "Fuck us both. Is that what you want?"

"I want to taste you both in my mouth." His chin glistens with my arousal, and my clit is a firecracker about to explode. "I want him to watch us. I want to watch you with him. I want everything together."

He's close, too. His thrusts pin me to the car, and I'm about to jump. "I want both of you," I confess over his quivering lips. Mine are, too. "I want both of you to fuck me at the same time."

I leap. I confess it, and I send myself falling into his eyes, and he falls with me, releasing his deep groan with my gasps. I come so hard on his cock, spasms quake my core, and it hurts so good because this is us; pain and pleasure and love and passion and our lives together, we must find a way.

"As long as you stay with me," he sighs as we find our breath. "As long as I don't lose you." He nuzzles his nose to mine. "You're always my first, Candy Cade."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



THE PILE OF LAUNDRY IN MY HAMPER IS OBSCENE. I THROW MY wet bath towel on top of it, and I swear I'll do it tomorrow and air dry for now.

I've been busy. Everyone is back on the water, and I've got a repair waitlist. I love it, though. Nothing makes me happier than fixing something with my bare hands.

Well... a couple of things do, but I don't have either to make me happy.

The way I left things with Redix the other night bothers me. It was so intense. It felt so right what we were finally doing, and damn, I wanted him too.

But then he got a text from that woman in his AA group, and I guess I have to admire him. He dropped me to help her. Like it was part of his sobriety code of ethics, and I get it.

But something felt wrong. He kept apologizing, rushing us out the door of his trailer so he could bail her out of whatever crisis she was in. I sat in my truck a few minutes afterward, trying not to feel used.

It sorta worked.

Redix wouldn't do that, would he? He wouldn't use me to get his bi-curious rocks off and then ghost me. He's not that kind of man, is he?

Yeah, he has a wild past. I've seen the videos online. I don't know everything, but I know he was drunk during them. And I know whatever broke him and Cade up has to do with his sobriety now.

He's changed, I guess.

I'm just getting to know him, and he comes with lots of baggage, so I can't explain why my heart feels open to him. Just like it does to Cade. But I don't doubt her, and I know why. She reminds me of another woman who I trust with my soul.

But Redix?

It's different with him than it was with Alec. I was barely an adult with Alec. Now, I'm a grown man who knows what I want. I want Redix and his passionate heart. I want Cade and her fire. They're so different than me, and that pulls me to them.

And I meant it. I want Cade *back*.

That's not the right word.

I don't want to go back to just me and her. I want the three of us in the future. Not just because it's my wildest fantasy.

My heart wants to feel it. I want to feel a drop of the love Cade and Redix share. I want that in my life. I want it in my heart. It's like they swim in the deep end of life, and maybe I've been too shallow. Growing up with billions made me entitled. Getting kicked out of it made me numb.

And all I want to do is feel everything now.

I slide on a pair of grey boxers and flop on my bed. My friend Quincy's outside in his yard, and I can smell his cigarette smoke from here in his garage loft.

That reminds me of someone I miss, who I haven't talked to in months. I check my phone. It's midnight here—six a.m. where she is. With baby twins and Daniel filming, I bet she's up.

“Hey, you little shit.” Her beautiful face appears on my screen... and she smiles. “Long time, no see.”

“Hey, Charlie Girl.” Damn, my first love still rips my breath away. “How y'all doing over there?”

“We're great. Look at who wants to say hi.” She turns her phone on video chat towards the cutest little boy on my screen. “Say hi, Duke. Say hi to Silas.” He lifts his chubby hand toward the screen.

“Hey, little one.” God, he's getting big. “Where's Caroline?”

Charlie turns the screen back to her. “Daniel has her outside. They're picking strawberries for breakfast.”

As much as I love this woman, and always will, “happy for her” doesn't describe it. Every time I see her stunning face, the bullet scar across her cheek reminds me of how she deserves every happy day she has now.

“What's going on with you?” she asks. “I know it's something. I can see it on your face.”

“Nothing.” I lie, and she laughs.

“Either tell me or put some clothes on because one of those needs to happen.”

I wander my hand down my abs, holding my screen high so she can watch. “I thought we could sex cam.” It's too fun teasing her.

“You couldn't handle it.”

“That's true.”

“Quit procrasta-flirting and tell me what's going on.”

“I think I'm falling in love. Again.”

“About time.”

Charlie knows I love her. I never made that a secret. That I wanted to fuck her more than breathe? She learned about that recently.

And she knows about Alec. She was serving in Afghanistan when I wrote to her about him. I told her what happened with my parents and she called me as soon as she got the letter. I could hear the loud aircraft from the base she was stationed at in the background, but she didn't care. I had her undivided attention because she was worried about me. The feeling's always mutual.

"I'm falling for two people, actually."

She smiles at the screen, and it's like she's sitting beside me in bed. *I wish.*

"That sounds like you," she says.

"What do you mean 'sounds like me'?"

"You have a big heart." She grins. "I raised you that way."

"You did not *raise* me. I had too many wet dreams about you for you to be talking about raising me."

"I'm so flattered and splattered."

She goes for the joke, and damn, I'm next if her husband, Daniel Pierce, ever fucks up again.

"Don't tempt me," I reply. "Tell me what to do. I have all the feels for another woman and man. They're a couple with a heartbreaking past, and I worry I'll get my heart broken too if something happens."

"You just might. But it's worth the try if you feel so strongly for them."

"Easy for you to say. You have the perfect marriage."

"Oh, kiss my go-to-hell, I do not. You, of all people, know that."

"I'm not saying y'all are perfect. I'm saying your love is. Like it's real and tested, and I want that too."

“You wanted it so much that you told Daniel you’d do a threesome with us.”

“Still do. I’ll rearrange my dance card for you any day, Charlie Girl.”

She blows a kiss at the screen. “I’m in Spain.”

I wink back. “And I’m right here waiting for ya.”

We always do this. We flirt, and it’s no disrespect to Daniel. I think he likes it. Jealousy gets him off. *Lucky man.*

“Seriously, though.” She props her phone up on something while she sips coffee. I can see she’s wearing an old USMC midriff T-shirt that gives me a peek at her abs. Shit, she’s hot. “Why are you so afraid of getting hurt? That’s not like you.”

“Maybe these two are different.”

“Maybe,” she says. “Or maybe it’s something else.”

“Like what?”

“Like you don’t want to be hurt again, like how your parents hurt you, so you don’t let yourself love hard enough to really be vulnerable.”

That’s a truth bomb, and it drops close to my heart. “Maybe you’re right.”

“Look, I buried my parents. I buried my first husband, and I’ve been through some shit. Life can hurt like hell, but you survive because love makes it worth it. And you find it again. In the craziest ways, trust me.”

“I trust you more than anyone.”

“Besides, you’re so hot. Who’s to say you won’t break *their* hearts?”

“You think I’m hot?” That stirs my cock, I can’t help it.

“And I think you’re smart, and sweet and sexy too, and we’re all lucky to have you.”

“Quit flirting, or I’ll tell Daniel.”

“Please do,” she laughs. “Then I’ll get fucked hard tonight. He’s treating me like a porcelain doll lately, and it’s driving

me nuts.”

“Why?” And why does she put that image in my head? Charlie getting fucked hard by Daniel Pierce. I want tickets for that show. And to join in. “Wait a minute.” It hits me. “You’re pregnant again, aren’t you?”

“It’s early, so don’t tell anyone, okay.”

“I won’t, and congratulations. Y’all are gonna have a mess of kids.”

“No, we can have a few kids and a million fucks. That’s what I signed up for.”

A cry storms the background, and she turns her head and signs something. “Are you hungry?” she asks her son. “Hey,”—she turns back to me—“I gotta go.”

“Thanks for the chat.”

“Thanks for your big heart. Someone will cherish it one day, I promise. I know I do.”

“Love you, Charlie Girl.”

“Love you too, little shit. Call again soon.” Her fingertip ends our chat, and I sit back up, taking it all in.

Charlie’s pregnant, and life is great with Daniel. That’s good.

Cade wants to be alone, and Redix has his hands full with another woman. That’s not.

And there’s shit-all I can do about any of it.

The tennis ball on my nightstand calls my hand to toss it. I do this every night. It drives Quincy batshit hearing the ball bounce off the wall and pissing him off is fun.

But this isn’t. Because the dust settles in my heart about what Charlie said—*I don’t love hard because I’m afraid of getting hurt again.*

Why does God keep making women so damn right?



I MUST'VE FALLEN asleep because my lamp's still on and the tennis ball's in my hand when a gentle knock raps on my door.

That's not Quincy's bang.

Rubbing the sleep off my face, I hope it's her. It *sounds* like her. Or maybe this is just an amazing dream.

When I pull the door open, it's not. I'm wide awake, and Cade's standing on my porch in a tiny white dress. My eyes swear her legs go for miles, and her tits are the perfect stopping point. Her eyes drop to my body in only boxer briefs, and whatever she was gonna say fails her because her jaw drops too.

"Wanna come in?" It's obvious.

"Can we?" Her smile is tentative.

We?

Redix steps up behind her, and I didn't see this coming. A dozen assumptions drop through my logic, but it doesn't matter. Even on *my* porch, they belong together.

"Sure." I step back and don't know what to think. I just feel. Worried. Excited. Confused. My life isn't mine anymore as the two of them enter, their beauty together sucking all the oxygen from the humble room.

This is why they're on that iconic BOUND perfume ad together. *This* is why no one can set eyes on them and not be dazed at how it's even possible such human perfection can exist together, let alone love each other.

They're goddamn radioactive sex standing side by side.

I drop into my one chair and take it in. Because whatever's coming my way, I'm gonna need the strength.

"We owe you some answers." Cade sits on the edge of my bed because she's comfortable here.

Redix leans against the door because he's not. Like he knows he hurt me last time, and he's not sure how pissed I am.

"It's a long story," she says, "but to cut it short—I had to catch my breath for a second. I had to be alone for the first time so I can change, so I can keep healing."

"I never wanted to hurt you," I defend myself. "I only wanted you to be free."

"I know. You've been my dearest friend, my accomplice, and my sexy, soft place to fall, and I can't find a label for how I love you, but I do. And that'll never change. But I have to make peace with it. Part of me *is* my past. I'd just be grateful if you could love me and everything that comes with it."

I glance at Redix, and *he comes with it*. Pain storms his eyes because *he's* her past.

Jesus Christ, what happened?

"I've told you everything about me"—I look back at her—"and you're still hiding from me. Both of you."

A lump swallows down her elegant neck while she turns to Redix, and he nods. He's ready for me to know too.

"I was eighteen when those guys—the ones I told you about—when they tried to take me one night, to hurt me," she explains. "Redix protected me and let them take him instead. And he doesn't remember what they—"

"I do." Redix's voice breaks in. "I remember some. How they drugged me. Beat me up. Cut me. Maybe they did more to me, which haunts me because I'll never know, but at least I'm strong enough to talk about it now. I wasn't for nine years. I lost my mind and Cade to booze and pills and fought to get it back. To get *her* back. And we were almost whole again, but then I saw those guys again, and I relapsed and almost died. And—"

He stops and looks at Cade.

This is their dividing line. I can feel it. This is what broke them.

“And I almost killed the man who hurt Redix the most,” she finishes. “I had to because he was hurting other women too. And I couldn’t catch the man using the law, so I trapped him.” There’s a clench to her jaw before she confesses, “But my parents stopped me, and they ended him instead. And I tried hiding that from Redix because everyone I loved would be at risk if it got out.” She turns her chin toward Redix, swearing it to him. “And I’d do it again because I had no choice.”

“And she knew I needed the truth and peace to stay sober.” His eyes burn back into hers. “That the fight needed to end, and what she did only started another one. And I’m trying to make peace with that because I love her. She’s my best friend. She’s my beginning, and I pray my end because my life means nothing without her.”

That softens Cade’s face. His too, and the storm between them calms, and part of me is honored they told me; the other part has questions.

I turn to Cade. “This is what you’ve been hiding?”

“Yeah. You knew about Gentry and Derek. TJ’s the one who’s... gone. So if I told you, you’d be an accessory too. But my mama confessed to Redix because she doesn’t give a damn if she gets caught.”

“I ain’t judging you about ending an evil man,” I admit because I helped do it for Charlie.

I can’t say that either, but I suspect Cade would understand.

“But where do I fit in with y’all? This is a helluva story, and there’s no room for me in it, so why are you here?”

Her face goes even softer. She gets up, steps to my chair, and takes my hand. I have so many questions, but her touch is a powerful answer that makes me stand.

“Because you *made* the room. You opened my heart and helped me see I’m free to change. That my life can belong to me again, not the men who attacked me and Redix.” She tucks

a lock of my hair behind my ear. “Silas, you’re the beautiful soul who cooled my painful fire.”

My lips grab for those words from hers. I’ve never felt this adored, this amazed to know a woman like her. And to be able to kiss her? To pull her into my arms and sink into every part of her?

This passion has always been just out of my reach, like Charlie is. But Cade isn’t. She’s in my hands, pressed to my body, and I can have her. She moans into our breath reunited, and I hear the shuffle of feet and pull back for this answer, too.

“What about you?” I ask Redix with my hands cradling Cade’s face. “Why are you here?”

Cade steps back and clears his path to me.

“I’m here for you.” Redix steps my way. “Cade’s *always* with me. No one stops my love for her. But it’s like you heal us both. You remind me of the man I would’ve been if not for that night. You help me see I can be him again. You’re fucking incredible. You love and live with no fear, and you make me feel like I can again, too.”

But I *am* afraid. And when he cups my jaw, the power of his touch, I’m scared of how I feel for them, but I can’t resist it.

“I’m sorry about the other night,” he says. “Nothing happened with her. Karen was playing me, and Cade helped me figure it out. I hate that I left you like that. I never want to hurt you, but sometimes I don’t always know what to do.”

“Kiss me,” I demand. “That’s what you can do.”

And he does. Cade’s kiss still warms my lips, and when Redix’s meets mine, it’s a fire, a heat I didn’t know possible. He’s tangling with more than my mouth, my lips, and my tongue. He’s marveling at my heart, and I’m equally in awe of his. Of how brave he is and how strong he is, he doesn’t even know it.

“What do we do?” I break this kiss and have to know this final answer. Each of us is asking it. “How do we do this together?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Closer by Kings of Leon

“WE JUST RUSHED YOUR WORLD,” CADE ANSWERS. “WE CAME in here like a hurricane, so you tell us. What do you want, Silas?”

The floor beneath my feet is solid wood planks, but I swear it wobbles; it quakes to her question. Not in my wildest dreams did I ever think I’d get this chance.

“I want both of you.” I try to look them in the eye. Her. Then him. And it’s almost too much. *It is too much.* His dominating beauty and her stunning appearance. I’m in a maze of lust, falling for them, and I don’t know which way to turn.

“You tell me,” I say to Redix, remembering what they just told me. “You’ve been through hell. I don’t want to upset you or anything.”

Is it possible for desire and wonder to blow through a man’s eyes with gale force?

Yes. He looks back at me with a grin, barely pulling his lips, and answers, “Take her and take me too, however you

want me.” He glances at Cade. “If that’s what you want?”

“Yes.” She pushes her dress down, exposing the tits I crave before her dress falls to the floor, and she’s standing before us in only a white lace thong.

“However you want,” she tells me, and God, this can go so many ways.

It’s overwhelming all the choices, all the consent, all the desires I can fulfill with the two of them. Because I’ve never felt this permission. This power to be wholly me and wholly fucking the hell out of who I want. Both of them.

But something tells me where to begin. With who and how this all started.

“Let him watch how I fuck you,” I tell Cade. “How you don’t close your eyes when I make you come too.”

I look at Redix, and half expect him to protest. To act possessively over Cade. But he doesn’t. A thrill, a desire in his stare runs deep for this.

“And you,” I tell him. “Stand beside me and let me taste how much you like watching me fuck her.”

Cade crawls down to all fours on the carpet in front of my mirror, wearing a smile and a thong. I step into my bathroom, leave my boxers, and pull condoms from the drawer. When I return to the room, my heart jumps to see Redix stripping down, too. His gaze goes from her ass in the air for me to my hard cock while he pulls his T-shirt overhead.

I have to drag a breath over my lips to make sure this is real.

“I have a scar.” He warns me. “She’s the only one so far who’s seen it.” While he unbuttons his jeans, a soft cry escapes Cade’s lips, and we both look at her.

This is very real.

“Hey.” Redix rushes to her side. He kneels on the floor beside her and lifts her eyes to his. “I’m okay,” he assures her. “I promise.”

She kneels up, and it's this poignant kiss between them. Like their mouths and bodies are grabbing for years, and so much shared, and not even time can capture what they have together.

That's the power, the love I want just a taste of tonight.

"I'm so proud of you," she whispers over his lips. "I love you so much."

"I love you too." He grazes his thumb across her cheek. "This isn't pain anymore. This is love." I'm humbled to be included in his question when he looks up at me. In their answer. "Right? This is love."

"Yes." I'm beginning to feel it. A new sense of it because God knows I'm witnessing it.

Redix stands back up. I swear he towers above me as I drop to my knees behind Cade. But I wait for him. She's ready. I'm ready, but I won't do this without him.

I see the slight tremble in his hands as he pushes his jeans and then his boxers to his ankles and steps out of them. I hold my breath for what I'll see upon his rise back up, and I'm not prepared when I do.

His tan ripped thighs. His deep belt of obliques. His groomed hair. A tattoo of two dorsal fins on his hip bone. It matches the one on Cade's. His soaring cock, and holy shit, he's perfect and hung like mad. Saliva pools in my mouth, but then a sharp breath leaves my lungs when he moves to show me his scar.

Cade watches in the reflection while he turns to his right, letting me see his left buttock. He's not afraid and willing to share this, so I confront it, too.

It's horrific and harrowing. It's two shapes, dorsal fins. I know because I've kissed the tattoo on Cade's hip bone, and she flinched. It was an odd reaction, and she asked me not to do it again... and now I know why.

His scars run deep. They're carved wide across his sculpted glute muscles, and there's no denying it. They marked

him because of her. They wanted to do this violence to her, but he protected and endured it instead.

Oh my God, this is what they've survived together.

"I'm not hiding anymore." His voice is strong, unwavering as he turns back to face me. "*We're* not hiding anymore."

He catches Cade's adoring look in the mirror, and all I can do is reach my lips and kiss his thigh. To kiss any part of his flesh for what he did for her. To witness how much a man can love another person.

I want this. I want him. And her. I've almost lost my erection to the shock, but then he starts stroking his in my face and says, "Show me how you free her too," and there's no pain in his eyes. He's staring into mine and claiming his desire, and, fuck, mine surges back.

I see Cade watching me in the mirror. "Show him, Silas." She arches her back, opening for me. They need this, and I understand how our sex and love heal them. How it forces them to change, and I've never felt a demand in my body so powerful.

I pull her thong down to hug her thighs and slowly swipe my fingertip up her perfect pussy. It's already glistening for me while I roll a condom on. I tease my tip through her lips while hers part in anticipation, and Redix's cock hovers inches from my mouth.

"Tell him." I tease her with words, circling her entrance while a drop of cum leaks from Redix's cock. I want to taste it, but I want this first. "Tell him how free you've been, Cade." I barely push into her pussy, and she moans while I say, "Tell Redix how bad you've been for me."

She doesn't make a sound until I drive into her, making her gasp while I stretch my tongue for his cock and lick his first drops.

"Oh fuck!"

I swear it cries from both of them. And me, too. Because I taste his salt on my tongue as I sink into her tight, wet heat and don't ever let this end.

“Tell me.” Redix holds his girth up to my mouth. I lick around his crown and flick his sensitive ridge with my tongue while he groans before he demands, “Tell me, Cade. What did you do with him?”

I pull back and drive into her again and again. Sliding my shaft and seating it deep inside her, I watch her in the mirror. She’s enraptured by the sight of my mouth exploring Redix’s proud cock, and it’s like she doesn’t hear anything but his moans and my grunts.

“Tell him how bad you were.” I smack her ass. “Or I’ll stop fucking your wet pussy until you do.”

“Oh shit,” she groans at my taunt, and I pull her up by the shoulders.

She’s not getting out of this. She’s not going to come until she stops hiding, too.

Redix drops, and we’re all on our knees while he reaches between her legs and wraps his other hand around her neck, pulling her gently to his lips.

“Tell me, Cade.” He starts playing with her clit, and I can feel his fingers on my cock while I’m thrusting into her. “Tell me how dirty you were for Silas.”

She smiles back. Like she was only teasing to get us here, and that drives my hips harder while I reach to pinch her nipple and fist his cock with my other hand, and he groans at my grasp.

“Say it,” he says. “This sweet pussy of yours isn’t coming until you do.”

His hand scissors her clit and the sides of my cock pumping into her, and she needs to say it because fuck this feels so good. And it’s so hot watching us in the mirror.

“Grind that hungry pussy back on his cock.” He’s taunting her to her edge. “Show me how you love fucking him, too, and tell me how dirty you’ll be for us now.”

“Tell him.” I tug her nipple, and she gasps while he rattles her clit. “Tell him what you became.”

“Silas fucked a woman while she ate me out.” She teases the image over Redix’s lips, and his teeth nip her bottom lip to the confession. “And then he fucked me like a sweet slut in front of a room of people.” She gasps again. “In a sex club. Three times.”

“You’re gonna be our sweet slut now, aren’t you?” Redix taunts her, still holding her by the neck. “You’ll be so fucking dirty you’ll fuck us both for all to see, won’t you?”

His mouth takes her kiss next while he smacks her clit, and she bucks against me, coming so hard over my cock and his hand that he has to hold her up as it crashes through her. I’ve never heard her groan so loud. I grab her hips to stay inside her, and it’s only the beginning.

“Are you gonna be a sweet slut for me too?” He smiles while she gasps for breath. “I wanna see it, Cade. See how you’ve changed.”

“Yes,” she swears back to him, and after one more kiss from her, he stands back up.

“Did you do this in that club?” Redix asks me while he holds his cock back to my mouth.

“No,” I answer, and I can’t hold back much more. “Only you.”

My hips slam into Cade’s backside, bouncing off her perfect ass and fucking her sweet pussy that’s starting to wet my thighs.

Redix puts his fat tip to my lips. “Then wrap your mouth around my cock if you want to taste me while you fuck her. And know that I just fucked her an hour ago. Her cum’s still on my dick, and she’s loving this, both our cocks railing her pussy in one night.”

The groan from Cade at his confession, at his taunt, it’s primitive. It’s guttural, and it sways her back to take me too. Like her body, her nature demands both of us. Like she can’t get enough of us.

And to be inside her, where he was too, his cum probably still dripping from her. This is what I wanted the other night in

his trailer. His flavor. His pleasure, too. To let go and have this together, all three of us. My lips open for his cock again, and this time, it's no tease.

I want it all.

I hollow my cheeks and slide down his shaft. Taking as much of him as I can, damn, I've wanted him, and he tastes so good, filling my throat until my soft gag.

"*Fucckkk*," he roars as I watch him from my knees. He's blissed out. His jaw drops, watching my mouth full of him, and he gets this vision, seeing my cock pounding into Cade's pussy too.

It's going to end us. I can see Cade out of the corner of my eye. She's watching in the mirror, and she's coming soon. We're a euphoric sight. We're a reflection of three bodies and lust, love, and trust shared, and please don't let this be one night.

Redix reaches his hand in my hair. He's not forcing me; he's telling me. His cock's swelling in my mouth, his pre-cum tingling my throat. He's close, but not sure, so I lock my eyes to his and moan so fucking hard with his cock in my mouth that he loses it.

Not even words fall from his lips. Just deep grunts while his thighs shake, and I swallow what I can of his cum because he won't let me go. He shoots again down my throat, and I pull back, letting it spill over my lips and chin, and Cade's hips shake in my grasp. She comes at the sight of us, at me gazing up at him.

That takes me, yanking me down into an orgasm that blinds me as I feel her turn in my grasp, her lips searching for my Redix's-cum-covered kiss, and he kneels for it too.

The three of us share this. This taste. This moment. And I don't know what more we'll share, but it's also starting to seep through my veins.

This is how we heal. How close we can be. This is how deep love can go.

CHAPTER THIRTY



REDIX

CADE SLEPT IN MY ARMS, LETTING ME SPOON HER WHILE SHE held Silas's hand. His bed is small for our three bodies, but I love it. It reminds me of sleeping on the sofa with her, of a happier time together.

Silas wanted it this way. He said he was the last to sleep with her, and we needed this reunion.

It has been too long since I've held Cade. She's home to my body, and there's no warmth like hers. When she's beside me, I don't have nightmares. I close my eyes, smell the lavender in her hair, and find peace.

But this morning, I open my eyes to find him looking at me from his pillow. Sunlight streams in from the window, and he's brighter.

"You snore," he says.

"No, I don't."

"Not you." He flits her nose. "You."

"Fuck you," Cade murmurs.

“Okay.” He wedges into her.

“Careful, darlin’.” I tickle my lips over her ear. “You say that now, and you’re gonna get a two-for-one deal.”

“No one’s getting anything until we shower.” She rolls to her back and tortures us with tits begging for our suck.

“Alright.” I circle her nipple. “All three of us. We rub-a-dub-dub in the shower together.”

“No can do.” Silas crawls out of bed, and damn, his ass is cut, and fuck a shower. I want *him*. “That shower stall barely fits me.”

He walks to the kitchenette at the corner of his loft. I glance at Cade, and we both smile at his tan nudity. He’s such a tease.

“Quit eye-fucking me,” he says with his back turned. “I can’t make coffee with a hard-on.”

“Go shower.” I nudge Cade out of bed. “Because once we’re caffeinated, I’m fucking someone real soon.”

“Me first.” She pecks my cheek before crawling out of bed.

Silas glances over his shoulder and grins, watching her disappear into his bathroom. Then he glances back at me, and I’m not shy. I lay naked with no covers and my arm above my head, hoping to torment him half as much as he does me with that body.

“How do you take it?” he asks as he turns around, and yes, you can start a pot of coffee with a hard-on.

“I have no idea, but I’m willing to try with you.”

He leans against the tiny countertop while the carafe behind him fills, and I don’t know if it’s his heart or his cock asking, “You really haven’t done much with a man before?”

“Not that I remember.” I sit up and grab another pillow to put behind me because we need to have this talk. “All I remember is what those pictures triggered. That man at the club. Twice, I recall now, but that’s it. I’m not trying to hide it

or anything. It's just that not-remembering is exactly what I tried to do for so long until it almost killed me—twice.”

Cade steps naked and dripping out of a cloud of steam.

“Got any towels?” she asks Silas, and he rolls his eyes.

“Shit. They're all dirty. Sorry.” He opens a closet door. “I wasn't expecting a guest.” A clean white T-shirt appears in his hand. “Or two.” He tosses it her way. “Here, this is all I got.”

I'm not complaining. Watching Cade dry her incredible body off, damn, I'm next. I jump up for the shower and swat her ass on my way there. She giggles and swats mine back before grabbing her first cup of coffee. When I'm done, I turn off the shower lever, and Silas is standing in the doorway, watching me with a clean blue T-shirt in his hand.

“Need me to dry you off?” he asks.

I'm about to say, “Hell yes,” but Cade calls out, “Y'all start without me and asses will be whipped.”

“Promise?” I shout back, taking the T-shirt and a kiss from Silas while our naked bodies rub past each other in the doorway.

I pour a cup of coffee while Cade taps on her phone and Silas showers up. Cream swirls in my cup as I pour it. I usually take it black, but Silas has the flavored stuff, and I'm ready to try everything.

I meant what I told him last night. It just rushed from my heart, and it was true. I look at Silas, and he's everything I would've been. I was just like him. Wild. Free. Happy and fun.

But all that spirit inside me was crushed. It's like Derek Baucom held me down while TJ and Gentry ripped me apart, and bloody pieces of me were left in the sand that night.

Cade's dad saved my life.

Cade saved my heart.

And now I'm searching for my soul back.

And when I look at Silas, I hope I find a soul like his.

The three of us; it heals Cade and makes me feel like I can, too. For the first time, I'm not being pulled back into the hell of that night and those feelings. Finally, I think I can move on. I can move on with them. There's too much love between us not to try.

I stare out his window, looking over the river and swirls of marsh grass, until I hear Cade mutter, "Fuck yes."

"What?" I turn around, thinking it's gonna be something sexy with Silas, but her nose is down to her phone. "What's going on?"

"Stacey, Gentry's wife, she just texted me. She found some bank statements he tried to hide in an air-conditioning vent."

"Gentry's wife? Why are you texting her?"

"We're close now. She hates Gentry too, but she's stuck in their marriage, so she's trying to help me catch him."

"Catch him how?"

"His money. His businesses. That's how you take a man like him down." Her eyes lift and find mine. "I promise. I'm using the law this time."

I'm trying to make it settle with my heart in ways that don't disturb me. What she almost did to TJ, that she *planned* it, but Mama G finished instead. And no, I ain't weak and afraid to fight back. TJ deserved it. He needed to be stopped; I get that now.

But have you ever loved someone who almost committed pre-meditated murder? Try it. It carves questions into your soul you don't want there. And she did it because of *me*. That'll fuck with you too.

I trust Cade with my life, but I've seen her snap. I saw her last night with that Karen piece-of-shit. Cade's not like most women. She'll kill you with her bare hands. And I love those hands. But can I live with them? Can she even control them?

"Your new boat." She yanks me back to the moment. "Can we go out on it today?"

"Yeah. Why?"

Silas appears as naked as the two of us in the doorway, and it's hard to focus. Her tits and his cock, and mine wants a whole other conversation.

“There's a couple of islands I want to check out. Gentry doesn't know your new boat. But he knows Silas's by now.”

“What are you looking for?” Silas asks, using the same blue T-shirt to dry himself off.

“Two missing women. That's where you can hide them,” she answers. “I wanna invite my dad too. Between you,” she nods to Silas, “and my dad and my research, maybe we'll find something.”

Did she just hear herself?

“You want to go out on my new boat with me and Silas and your dad?” I let that sink in with her. “That man is gonna smell this threesome from a mile away, and me and Silas will get our balls shot off.”

She cocks her head, considering our new conundrum. I expect her to cringe and agree. But she shrugs and says, “He's gonna find out anyway.”

“Pump the breaks, NASCAR,” I warn. “We need to think about this. Are we really gonna go public, the three of us, and just expect everyone to be happier than a pig in shit about it?”

“They won't be.” Cade puts her phone down. “I'll be called a whore and slut for sure. You have your career to think about. And Silas, well. You've already lost your inheritance. What more can they do to you?”

“I don't give a fuck about my career.” I humph, “Hell, it'll probably help. I've been cashing in on that wild-sex life myth for so long. I'm not the one I'm worried about.”

“I don't care either,” Cade echoes. “I've been bullied and judged my whole life. At least now, I'm having fun.”

Silas doesn't speak. His shoulders drop.

“What is it?” I ask him.

“I’m finally talking to my mom. She’s come by a few times, and it’s good having her back in my life. She likes Cade and says she’ll like anyone I love, but you *and Cade*? That’s pushing it. I could lose her again.” He toes the floor. “And my dad’s been calling. Leaving messages that he wants to talk. That he’s been thinking.”

That quiets me. Cade too. My mama worships the fucked-up ground I’ve walked on. And Cade’s parents are so open, I don’t worry about them.

“Well, I don’t know about your dad, but just have your mom meet Cade’s mama.” I wanna cheer him up. “She’ll teach her to chill real quick.”

That makes Cade chuckle, and me recall, “Like that time when we got caught fucking on her balcony, remember?”

Cade starts laughing, and I tell Silas, “We got out of school early for senior exams, and every chance I got, I was fucking Cade, of course.”

“And I was fucking *you*,” she chimes in. “Don’t make it sound like I was the virgin and you were the stud.”

“Okay, Ms. Horny Pussy, yes. You pushed me back on the lounge chair, pulled my zipper down, and your dress up, and we were fucking right there.” Silas grins. “So she’s riding me, and I’m about to come when her mama appears in the doorway, asking us why we’re home so early.”

Cade falls over, laughing. “Oh my God, I was so embarrassed. My dress covered us, but she could tell what we were doing.”

“*Yeah*, she could because I had the big O on my face, and you wouldn’t stop twitching that tight pussy on my cock, and while you explained to your mama about exams, I came inside you.”

“My poor mama!”

“Your poor mama? Poor me.” I laugh. “That woman wore a gun on her hip. I was coming inside the Sheriff’s daughter, and it could’ve been my last one.” I tell Silas, “You think you

and Cade's dad are friends, but just you wait. He'll hawk it real fast that we're fucking her. So will her mama."

"I'm not hiding it from them," she insists. "Look, we don't have to tell everyone. We can be discreet, but life is too short with my parents, and I'm sharing everything with them. Trust me; we can trust them."

"I trust them." Silas aims for his bed. "And I want to hear more about you riding Redix."

The tug in my cock is sudden. Blood rushes through my veins, and I set my coffee down and aim for the bed, too, because this is on.

Whatever this is, we *will* have it.

Silas is kissing Cade by the time I join them. I don't hesitate, spreading her thighs and taking my favorite kiss of her pussy that's still drying from the shower. She tastes like soap and sugar and wanton sex, and I moan into her folds.

That arches her back, my tongue teasing circles around her clit while Silas does the same around her nipples.

Goddamn, she starts writhing and moaning, and it's so fucking hot. It won't take her long because this is all new to us. It's a body rush across our mountains of flesh twisting on the bed, and I could do this all day.

Twisting two fingers inside her, I pull her clit into a suck between my lips while Silas does the same to her nipple. His fingertips tug at her other one, and she snaps. Breaking across my tongue, she comes thrashing under our touch, and that's just round one.

When I glance up and see Silas's erection, how it's so hard for her pleasure, I want his too. I move over, grab his thighs, and flip him to his back. Dragging my tongue up the thick vein of his cock, I've never done this to a man. Not that I remember. It was always me getting my cock sucked, but I want this so bad.

Grabbing his base, I lift his mass for my mouth and moan before it's even sliding between my lips. He tastes like soap,

too. Like salt and man, he mixes with Cade's cum still on my tongue, and I'm starving.

I'm an animal feasting, and Silas's back bows off the bed with his, "Fuck, yes." He grabs my hair. "Yes." He thrusts his hips. "Yes, suck my fucking cock." And I groan, feeling mine leaking.

Heat approaches my face, and I open my eyes to find Cade's staring back at mine. There's lust in them. Delight too. She drags the tip of her tongue up one side of his cock while I do the other, and I've never heard a man moan like this. Like Silas is coming apart for us, and fuck, it's incredible.

"Give me your pussy," I hear him growl, and Cade turns to straddle his face with her mouth still joining mine in this meal.

We take turns. I plunge down his length, as far as I can, loving his hard cock in my mouth while I knead his balls to see if he likes that too. His legs spread wider with his groan, telling me he does, and *all* I want to do between his thighs is take his fat tip as far as I can into my throat.

"Fuck!" It's muffled by his face in Cade's pussy while she goes next. I hold his base up, rubbing his dripping tip across her gorgeous lips before she locks her eyes to mine and fills her mouth with another man's cock.

Damn, that gets me off. Only him. Any other man, and this wouldn't happen, but Silas is special. You can't walk into a room he's in and not feel it wave over you.

The man's his own breed. He's not a billionaire. He's not a mechanic. He's not a ladies' man or a toy for anyone. He's a warm ocean of care and charisma and so much sex appeal that you want to drown in his salt, every drop of him, until you heal.

We take him. Back and forth. I plunge down his shaft, and then Cade does. Silas is a lucky man. I *think* I know what I'm doing. I know how I like my cock sucked by the one who does it best. She's doing it to him, too, so no wonder his hips are thrusting for more of our mouths.

Cade starts gasping, getting that look in her eyes. Her violet ecstasy clings to my gaze as I get to watch this. He's making her come again. Silas is licking her pussy while we suck his cock, which has her shaking. She can't breathe. She doesn't want to.

So I do it. I sink my mouth down his shaft, and he's right there with her. Swelling and firming even more against my lips, and here they go. I squeeze his base hard and knead his balls, and he rockets into my mouth. I hold my tongue out for more, and Cade comes moaning at the sight of his cum spurting across my lips.

I'm about to as well. I kiss and caress his semi while she gets her breath, and I'm hard as hell and desperate.

"Show him." I fall on the bed beside them, tugging at Cade's thighs. "He wants to see how you ride me, so show him, Cade."

She goes for it, swinging her leg over, and I'm seated so fast inside her wet pussy that I gotta grab her hips and my sanity. "Goddamn, woman," I huff and hold on.

Once he's recovered his breath, Silas kneels beside her. His eyes are glued to where our bodies join, and I'm trapped by the sight, too.

"Lean back and show him how you love riding my cock." This is my favorite position with her.

How she spreads her thighs wide, and I can see my shaft slick with her cum while she pistons up and down my cock, and her clit swells for more. Fuck, it's beautiful. The way she leans back and braces her hands behind her on my thighs, arching her breasts to the perfect peaks to watch their bounce.

She's a goddamn Amazon of sex like this. Totally in charge. Totally ruling this fuck, and you want her taking you however she damn well pleases.

"She gets so wet fucking like this," I tell Silas. It's not a taunt. It's obvious. "See her cum dripping to my base? She's so fucking dirty and in control like this. She's gonna pour it down my cock."

That makes Cade moan because she loves breaking rules and being the bad one, too.

“I see,” Silas sighs. “And I’m gonna taste it, too.” His mouth lowers, and I fight to hold it back. So does she. Because when his tongue licks where my cock is sliding into her pussy, we both groan like never before because we’ve never known this pleasure, this taboo, and why not? It’s fucking incredible.

“*Oh fuuuuccckkk*,” she cries out while he licks her clit, and I fuck her pussy, feeling his tongue each time he darts it out for a taste of me too. “Fuck, don’t stop,” she shouts. “Fuck yes, you two.” She’s so gone. Her hips are shaking in my grasp, and she’s in ecstasy.

His wet, long strands block the sight, but I can feel him, and he’s taking me too. But not without her first.

Because she *is* my first. And my last. My heart knows it while this stunning sight of her pleasure enraptures me as I’ve never seen.

“Oh fuck!” she screams out, falling over us with convulsions he’s ready for. Lifting up from our fuck, Silas grabs her throat and takes her in a kiss while she keeps coming, milking my cock with her spasms while I twist beneath with my release.

“Oh, God,” I groan at the vision. At the two of them. At my new world. At all the pain. It’s gone in the stars of pleasure that seize my mind while I come so deep inside Cade. “Oh, God.” Because this is what I can be now.

I’m not afraid to live. To feel. To love. It won’t hurt me anymore. These two make it all worth it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



IF YOU COULD PAINT THE COLORS INTRIGUED, AMUSED, AND proud, they would color a rainbow down my mama's face.

Though her skin doesn't glow and her face is thinner than I've ever seen, her eyes light up, watching me, Redix, and Silas.

Redix has tucked her under a thick blanket on the outdoor lounge sofa in the cockpit of his new boat. Silas fetched her a bottle of water. I gave her a spare pair of sunglasses while she sat watching us.

Like she knows.

So does Dad.

We're going slow through the no-wake zone, and there's no escaping her scrutiny.

"So how exactly do y'all work?" She finally asks, and Redix tosses his chin up, laughing.

I swear Silas blushes, and I just answer, "However we want. It's not like there are rules for this."

“It’s not like you follow them.” Redix pecks me on the cheek.

My dad is studying the nautical maps I’ve marked up. All the islands I know can’t be suspected have red Xs over them. I know he heard Mama and my answer. But he’s not saying a word, and suddenly I worry.

He’s gonna shoot their balls off.

Redix senses it. He glances at my dad and then cuts me an “I told you so” look. Silas grins at the top of my dad’s head. Yeah, they’re friends, but fucking his daughter and her ex-fiancé is pushing that bond to the max.

But my mama? Nope. She kicks the hornets’ nest with pure glee.

“Jeff,” she says, “has the cat and her two dogs got your tongue?”

Sitting beside her on the sofa with the map spread out on the table in front of him, Dad doesn’t look up. Redix steers the boat. Silas stands beside him, and I’m between two men I love and my parents, who are trained to kill and how to get away with it.

Yep, this was a great fucking idea.

Like turning your back on a tiger.

“I got one question.” Dad finally sounds off. He doesn’t look up, like the maps are way too interesting to him and my new threesome love is boring, but he asks to be polite, “Do either of you feel your balls tighten when you come?”

I’ve never heard my mama laugh so loud, and I join her.

Silas and Redix exchange confused glances before laughing, too. And finally, Dad looks up and says, “Either of y’all break her heart, don’t worry about me. She’ll kill you herself.”

And that’s his blessing.

I knew my parents would be okay with this. They have bigger fish to fry. Mama tries hiding it with brightly colored

tracksuits and cute hats, but she's losing weight fast. And her hair has no luster, and her skin doesn't glow. All the life in her is in her big mouth, huge heart, and whip-smart mind.

We all know what's coming. We just don't know when.

"Well, y'all need to answer the damn question." Mama won't relent. "Because I'm as lost as last year's Easter egg, and I need this riddle solved."

"You wanna know about my balls, Mama G?" Redix smiles back at her. He *is* the son they never had. "I keep 'em smooth and firm like a peach." He's loving this, too. He and my mama can riff for days. "But no, they don't tighten up. They just deliver a big sloppy grin for your daughter."

She asked for that image, and now my stomach hurts from laughing.

"What about you, Silas?" Mama has no patience. Yep, apple and tree right here. "You're family now, too, so tell us."

"You wanna know about my family jewels?" He's diving right in.

"They're worth ten billion." Dad's in on it, too. "That's about what? At ten bucks a sperm times a hundred million. Hell, that's a billion bucks every time you blow a wad."

Redix yanks the throttle back because he can't steer and dies from laughter at the same time. None of us can.

God, it's gonna be a perfect day, and damn, I'm so lucky.

"I did raise my daughter to have expensive taste." Mama toasts Silas with her bottle of water. "Pun intended."

"Mama!" Why I protest, I don't know. What won't we laugh about now?

"Me and my balls are very happy." Silas pulls me into a hug. "But no, they don't tighten when I come. They just stroke a big, creamy check."

And then it happens.

It's not like we forget ourselves; it's just that the moment is too pure. There's too much life, love, and happiness on this

lavish vessel in the water. Redix leans over and kisses Silas. Not a hot one. A sweet one. Then he does the same to me, and we three look at my parents because what else is there left to say?

“You have our blessing,” my dad says. “And you have her”—he wraps his arm around Mama’s thin shoulders—“full of more questions, so gird your loins, boys.”

More banter travels between us while we head out into the sound. I put out a fruit platter with Mama’s favorite cream cheese dip while Redix steers and Silas points the way to go.

The mood turns quiet as the water narrows into one of the many rivers that lead inland. And serious.

“There’s no telling what’s on some of these islands,” Dad tells me as we lean over the map. “Some are hundreds of acres with dense trees and brush. You sure as hell can’t see nothing from the water.”

“I’m working on a drone,” I tell him. “But if he’s smart, which unfortunately he is, he’s got something well hidden.”

“But no matter where he’s going,” Silas chimes in, considering the map of where the Atlantic meets the coast of the states of Georgia and South Carolina. “All these barrier islands, you gotta have a place to dock a boat.”

“But wouldn’t that make it obvious?” Redix pulls the throttle back to neutral while we slosh in front of one of the largest islands, Daufuskie. It’s public with hundreds of residents, Silas included. It’s not suspect, but there are islands around it that are private property.

“What if he knows you’ll look for a dock and just to be the sneaky fuck he is,” Redix says, “he times his approach with the tide and runs a small boat ashore? You don’t need a dock for that, just rubber boots.”

It sinks to the pit of my stomach. All of them are right. And while I’ll put a drone up in the air and scour over the top of every private island across the Lowcountry, the tree canopy is thick, even in the winter.

“Your best bet is the money trail with Gentry,” Mama advises. “When you got as much as he does, it’s gonna fall out along the way and lead a trail right to him. Just stay on it and don’t give up.”

“His wife found statements for a bank account she didn’t know about,” I update her.

“There you go,” she says. “See—men and their money. They’ll stick their dick in the breeze for sex, but they sure will squirrel their money away to hide their own nut.”

“What about Derek?” Redix asks while Dad’s got binoculars out, and so does Silas.

The tide is high. We waited for this hour to get as close as possible from the water to some of these islands right off Hilton Head.

“Derek’s hiding somewhere out here too.” Redix scans the horizon and seethes. “And I’m fucking sick of living scared with Renie and Nicolas, waiting for his next move. Scarlett guards all day. Keith guards all night. And they can’t go anywhere without their shadow. It’s taking a toll on us.”

“Derek’s hiding on a boat somewhere,” I answer him. “I know it. But that means he’s gotta come ashore for supplies, so we’ll catch him. He’ll get lazy, and we got him, I promise.”

Redix wraps his arms around my neck and buries his nose in my hair. He’s exhausted with this. We all are. But Derek’s lived his life on the run. We just have to wait him out.

“Well, at least y’all got each other.”

Mama lifts our eyes, and the smile on her face looking our way is serene. Redix has his arms around me, and Silas is holding my hand.

No, we’re not the picture of Southern tradition. But we are the picture of love and lust in the Lowcountry, so fuck you, Rules. You were never fun to follow anyway.

We spend the rest of the afternoon searching. Marking off islands in the area we know can’t be it. But once the tide starts rolling out, we have to head back.

Silas docks Redix's boat in the slip at the marina because he jokes with Redix, "You're a little heavy-handed with that throttle. You gotta learn to ease it in."

My parents don't hear the joke because Dad's helping Mama wrap up in her jacket, but I clock it loud and clear.

"Speaking of easing it in." I grab two handfuls of ass, one cheek from each. "Grab the marine grease because that's what we're doing tonight."

"You want a Marine too?" Redix winks.

"You two warm me up first." I tease back.

Silas helps Redix tie-down and lock the boat up while I help Dad with Mama. Years ago, she would've leapfrogged over the edge. Now she shakes. She doesn't have much energy for this. I'm about to descend into a dark hole of worry about her when Mama grabs my hand as she stands up on the dock.

"Now, you and me," she says, "we're gonna sit a long spell while you answer all my questions, you hear?"

Mama's smut books have her mind racing about me, Redix, and Silas. *If she only knew.*

"I just gotta know this for now." Her grin makes the Devil look like a choir boy.

"What?"

"Do they make *your* balls tighten when you come?"

She punches me again with laughter. "I don't have balls."

"Yes, you do." She barely backhands me. "I raised you to have the biggest pair."

"No, you raised me to have ovaries."

"You got me there." She winks. "They're even stronger."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



THE LAST PERSON I EXPECT TO SEE IS SITTING ON THE STEPS TO my screened-in porch.

And I ain't got the patience for this.

I'm exhausted. I spent the week on St. Simons Island, summoned by a priority client who should've rebuilt the engine of his fishing yacht years ago. He thought he was doing me a favor by letting me crash on it while I fixed it. The only favor I got was the handsome check I earned.

What pissed me off was leaving Cade and Redix behind. We never got the night Cade wanted. It was an hour after our boat ride with her parents before I was called to Georgia for a week.

Now, I'm back. I'm fucking soaked from the downpour I hit on the river on my way home, and I have to deal with *him*.

My dad.

I've been avoiding his calls, so in typical Van de May style—he won't be ignored.

I yank my hair out of its wet knot because his only offense is breathing so far, and I'm already pissed.

I snap. "I thought a Van de May doesn't belong at this piece of trash by the river?"

It's not a piece of trash. My house on Daufuskie is perfect. It's simple, humble, and hiding under a tree canopy covered in Spanish moss with the best sunset views. And my dock is upgraded to top of the line.

Dad must've taken the ferry over or a private charter because I don't see a boat moored here.

"I didn't come all this way to argue with you." He doesn't move from his spot, blocking the path up to my house.

"Then why are you here?"

"Because your mother has spent the past month living at her sister's house and not ours where she belongs."

I shrug. "Not hearing my problem to fix."

"You're the reason I got a problem."

"I'm your son, so if you're gonna reduce me to a problem, get off my porch. I won't be insulted on my own property."

Dad throws his chin up to the sky. "I swear she spit you from her mouth."

"Who? Mom?"

"No, Grandma. *My mom*. You're just like her."

"That's high praise."

No one can insult my grandma, not even her son. That woman meant the world to me. She was my partner in tobacco-spitting crime. She made the best pecan pie in the world. And she was the first to say I was wonderful as I was; no sense in changing.

"Yes, it *is* high praise." Dad rests his elbows on his knees, and this is gonna be a long talk because his ass ain't moving. "So quit acting like I licked all the red off your candy, and listen to me."

I huff. Taking it down a notch. “Go on then.”

“Your mom’s been gone, and don’t ever challenge a southern woman to a silent standoff. Monks have less patience. So she’s left me in a big, empty house with nothing but my thoughts.”

Don’t get your hopes up. My dad is too set in his traditional ways to change.

“And?”

“And”—Dad tousles his perfect part. He only does that on a boat when deciding how fast to tack—“You were right. I didn’t know my dad. He died when I was five, so what do I know about being a good one? And that’s all I ever wanted to be.”

Don’t trust this. No matter how you want to.

Because I remember the apathy on his face when he told me to leave. He withdrew all the money from my account, told my mom not to speak with me, and pointed to the door. I walked out with twenty-two dollars in my wallet, a duffel bag of clothes, my toothbrush, and a heart so stunned it didn’t feel anything for months.

And when it did, all that crushed me were waves of disappointment.

“So your grandma raised me right,” he says, “all on her own. But I remember all the talk, all the judgment, and sneers when she never remarried, though she had courters. A society widow back then remarried, and the looks we’d get in church and at the club? I sensed them over the years. Then my football buddies gave me hell because my mom spent *a lot of time* with her best friend, Ms. LeeRay, and no men. Do you remember her?”

“Barely.” Ms. LeeRay died when I was a boy. All I remember is she was always with my grandma and giving me Junior Mints and that my grandma wasn’t the same after she died.

“I knew who she really was to your grandma,” he says, “and I loved Ms. LeeRay too. And you can act as proud as you

want nowadays, but it was unheard of back then. A scandal at the least and dangerous at the most.”

“Times have changed, Dad.”

“Yes. But some things may never.” For the first time in years, Dad looks me in the eye, and I see the man I used to worship. “That’s why I got so angry, Son, because I was afraid. What you did at The Citadel? Hell, at many places. You could get hurt. Or killed.”

“You realize I’d get high-fives if I’d been caught with a girl? She’d get shamed, but I’d get notches on my belt. But because I fell in love with a man, a good man, my whole life got destroyed. And you were part of that destruction.”

“I was afraid for you. And people act out when they’re afraid.”

“Admit it, though.” The rain starts again. It’s a mist I’m thankful for because I’m fighting back tears to say it. “You were ashamed of me too. I saw it in your eyes.”

Many emotions pass over a person’s face. Shame is not one you forget when it’s cast your way. Years can pass, but it’s powerful and creeps up on you. The fight is not letting it pass across your face in the mirror. To not let someone else’s problem become yours.

A lump swallows down his throat. He looks away at the water, and I’ll wait an eternity to hear him at least say it.

“What I figured out this month. Hell, all these years without you was that I was ashamed of *myself*.” That shocks me. “I should’ve been stronger for you. I should’ve stood up for you.”

It starts to fracture. The ice around my heart for him. It starts to fall off in chunks into the ocean that’s separated us for too long.

Charlie was right; this hurt me more than I could admit. My parents rejecting me after so many years of love; it shredded my soul, and I wasn’t the same.

I settled for distractions. For easy companions. For partners for a night or maybe a few weeks. But no one got that close again. No one got to hold me or try to heal the tattered pieces of me inside.

We don't need our parents' approval to live our lives. But their love sure is nice to have if you can.

"I'm sorry, Son." He faces me, and the words that free me the most fall from his lips. "I love you... and I'm sorry."

It's not fast. It's not dramatic. He stands up and trods down the wet steps. I walk across sopping grass to meet him halfway, and it's natural how our arms wrap around each other. I bite it back. Emotions flood me, and I just squeeze my dad once more.

"So does this mean you're gonna get your wife back too?"

Dad pulls back from our embrace and grins. "I told you a man does for his family. That means he eats crow for them, too."

"So when I show up at the Yacht Club with Cade Bryant, you're proud." I keep my grip on his shoulder. "What if I show up with a man instead? What happens then?"

Dad pulls in a deep breath. "I get used to it."

"I deserve more than that. So does the person I love."

"I'm human. I can change, but it ain't overnight. I love you, and I'll get used to it. Just be patient with me." He grins. "I'll welcome a man. But that Cade Bryant? She's a hard diamond. You'd be a fool to give her up."

I have to ask. I have to seize this moment because I'd rather confront it now in private than with dozens of witnesses. "What if I show up with a Cade *and* a man?"

Dad cocks his eyebrow. I can see the struggle in his eyes. Like I'm asking him to change from stripes to spots to stars... in seconds.

"Then I gotta give you a toast," he says. "Because I don't know where the hell you inherited the stamina for all that."

The laugh is fast. It erupts from my chest, and I pull him in for another hug.

At least he's honest.

At least he's here.

At least he's trying.



I DON'T GIVE him much time to backtrack. My dad said he'd try. Like "getting used to it" was a hit to first base, and he promised me a home run if I came to play.

So I do.

Like the World Series.

I accepted his invitation to an after-regatta party at my parents' estate this weekend.

Cade knew how to dress the part when we stepped onto the patio, brimming with guests. Her demure gingham sundress is preppy; it's proper. Redix impressed me. Only he could wear seersucker pants and make them look like he didn't leave his perfect balls at the door. Because that's what most men look like in preppy fashion. Like they got money but no balls.

Cade flatly refused to let us wear bowties, though. "They're lady-boner killers," she warned, so we both opted for crisp, white linen button-downs.

Jaws dropped at the sight of us entering the party. "Just a small one," my mom had said. A few hundred people under a big event tent in the backyard, with dozens more spilling onto their long dock out to the river.

I knew heads would turn for Redix Dean. He's a global celebrity, a local legend, and a visual orgasm wearing flip-flops.

But then he stayed by my side the whole time. We didn't hold hands, but our shoulders brushed. Our smiles were wide

for each other. His whisper in my ear was often with his sexy taunts like, “You make khakis look way too hot.”

It’s obvious to everyone we’re very close.

And then there’s Cade. People knew her, too. From her modeling. From the famous ad she did with Redix and all the paparazzi photos since. And she’s in the local news some.

When she holds my hand with pride, her smile captivates, and everyone turns her way. You can’t hide her statuesque beauty under any dress. And you can’t miss how she’s not intimidated. Not even by the South’s most judgmental characters.

For two hours, we worked the crowd. We had lots of admirers, and Dad made the introductions. When he did, he didn’t lie. I *am* friends with Cade and Redix. I *do* fish with her, and I *did* sell him his boat.

But Dad knows the three of us are much more, and it starts to ease into his shoulders. Over the hours, he’s wearing “used to it” pretty well.

So I meet him halfway.

I’m all smiles, handshakes, and chats, but I don’t shove my unconventional relationship down the throats of my dad’s closest friends.

Not yet.

I don’t hold Redix’s hand or kiss him too. Though I want to. And the affection between Cade and Redix is minimal. Mostly for this show, you can sense they still have shit to work out.

Mom doesn’t need any time. She adores Cade and swoons for Redix.

We finally get a break from the crowd by hiding in the kitchen. Chatting with my mom, who’s fussing over deviled eggs the catering staff is taking out to the guests, Cade asks her, “So what was Silas like as a kid?”

“A blond water rat.” She winks my way. “I could always find him down by the river.”

“Did you grow up in this house?” Redix looks around at all the crown molding and my mom’s penchant for anything regal and yellow.

“Yeah.” I sip my iced tea and wonder how much has changed since I left. Nothing probably. But what about...

“Your room’s still the same.” Mom reads my mind. “I kept it waiting for you.” She swishes over to me, giving me a peck. “Give them the grand tour. I’ve got guests to tend to.”

It’s almost embarrassing the opulent rooms I stroll Cade and Redix through. Room after room of yellow, coral, and green and everything pineapples and palm trees. All formal. All colorful. All very southern.

I save my bedroom upstairs for last. It’s at the end of the owner’s hallway, and I hesitate to open it. It’s like stepping back into innocence before all the pain.

“Hey,”—Cade caresses my shoulder—“let’s go forward, remember?”

I turn to her, giving her a kiss and taking my own advice. Bedrooms may not change. But people can.

I open the door, and even the smell is the same. Clean linens. Lemon-polished furniture. A waft of leather and boy are still in the room.

“Dude,”—Redix picks up a framed photo of me playing lacrosse in high school—“I swear this could be me.”

“Yeah, rub it in.” Cade noses around my old desk. “Y’all both were pussy magnets in high school.”

“Only for yours.” Redix cocks an eyebrow while I shrug, guilty.

“What can I say?” I push open the white door to the ensuite bathroom. I used to love the giant tub in here. “I got around some.”

They follow me in.

“You were twelve years old with a spa bathroom?” Cade marvels at all the white marble and gold fixtures.

“I just liked the tub. I could practically swim in it.”

Redix leans against the double-sink vanity. His scrutiny is deep. “Did you ever get lonely? Like all this money, but still, you had no one who knew the real you?”

“Yeah. Deep down, I always felt like I didn’t belong. For the longest time, I couldn’t say why. I was just too busy being what my parents wanted.”

“What freed you?”

How Redix sees my pain in a matter of seconds, I’m drawn to him. How Cade makes me stronger. They feel like the sun, and I’m being pulled into their explosive orbit.

“I met Alec, and pieces fell into place. I felt lucky to be with him and scared at the same time. I wasn’t scared of *loving* him. I just knew I couldn’t have this world and be with him also.”

“Do you still feel that way?” Cade’s voice hums with concern. “Like you can’t be who you are and have this too?”

I look over her shoulder to the large window overlooking the lawn and river—dots of people mill about in pastels outside. Music wafts up to this second level. That’s as close as I’ll allow that world to affect me.

“Fuck ‘em,” I answer. “This is my home and family. The one my grandma worked hard for. If they got a problem with me, it’s exactly that—their damn problem. Not mine.”

“Just promise me.” Cade wraps her hand around my waist. “If *we* ever become a problem, we talk about it.”

“Yeah.” Leaning back on the counter, Redix crosses his arms. “No secrets. We talk before things become a problem.”

That was meant for Cade as much as me. His eyes firing into hers confirms it.

“For now.” She reaches, pulling me by my neck to her lips. “We very much belong together.”

It’s so easy kissing her. Tasting the lemon on her lips from the pie she ate downstairs, she stirs my appetite. Gently biting

down her neck while I cup her breasts, she's been teasing me with her incredible cleavage in this dress.

Yes, I belong.

I belong with them.

I turn, and Redix lifts off the counter and goes next. Taking a long kiss from her before he equally shares mine; he smells like his cologne and the sun we got outside. I brush against him, and the seersucker he's wearing can't contain his growing appetite for this, too.

"Right here," I tell them. "Will you?"

"You do so much for us." Redix grabs the back of my neck. "You make us better. Let us do the same for you."

"I want us three together. Where I was lonely for so long, but I'm not anymore."

In quick strides, I close and lock the bathroom door. It's barely a minute before we're all undressed. Cade wears only a sultry smile. Our clothes drape over the dry edge of the tub while she turns to sit atop the countertop of the bathroom vanity.

"I could watch you two forever," she says, spreading her legs. She fingers herself, lightly circling over the pink nub of her clit.

"You wanna watch?" Redix's deep voice likes her tease. He presses behind me, and I moan as he starts stroking my cock, getting hard at the sight of Cade.

We're presented with so many choices again, and we still owe Cade her night, but it's like we all know. This one's for me. This is my coming home party.

Cade's getting so ready for our fuck. The peaks of her nipples beckon my lips to them because, holy hell, the woman is a fantasy in the flesh.

So is Redix behind me. His grip on my shaft gives expert pumps and twists. His chest presses to my back while his hips deliver slight thrusts. Like from his position, it's instinctive.

There's no thought for him, only an urge to fuck as he wedges his stiff cock between my ass cheeks.

"Fuck me," I tell him. "Fuck me while we fuck her together."

The steam of his breath over my ear is as hot as the look in Cade's eyes. "Are you sure?" he asks as her fingers dip inside before she pulls them out and offers them to my lips to suck. They're glistening and taste like her tangy sugar.

"You want my cock in your ass, Silas?" Redix sounds intoxicated by it while I lick Cade's fingers clean and moan with my demand for it.

Easing from between their seductive bookends, I grab my pants from the tub. There are two condoms in my wallet.

Don't judge. I usually carry five.

Without a word, I hope it's still in this bottom drawer, and yes, it is—the same jar of Vaseline.

"Just use a little," I tell him while I tear the condom open with my teeth. It turns me on; rolling it down his hard length before I take a small swipe of Vaseline and coat his sheathed cock. "It's not ideal, but it's all I got here."

His eyes are transfixed. "I'm not complaining." He slightly thrusts into my fist, prepping his massive cock for this. "I've never done this. I don't wanna hurt you."

"Just go slow," Cade soothes, scooting to the edge of the countertop. She's at the perfect height for me while I wrap my cock too.

And she's so wet for this, I can tell, but I tease her. I lick her nipples, sucking them to pert, wet tips for me to play with while I say, "He starts, and you get to watch."

I brace my hands on either side of her thighs and sway my back to take Redix in. Like he can intuit what I need, how to get me ready, he uses his fingers, teasing then entering me while he strokes me again.

"It's gonna feel so damn good fucking you," he says, and that alone stammers my breath with Cade's perfect breasts in

my face, taunting my tongue to keep licking them.

Wedging his tip, pushing it to my entrance, his husky voice urges again over my ear. "Tell me I can do this. That you want this."

And I know why he has to be sure. That'd he'd never do it any other way. And fuck, it could break my heart if I wasn't so damn hard for him and desperate for Cade.

"Yes, I want you to fuck me," I tell him before pulling Cade into a kiss. And I want her lips. I want her breath. I want her with us while he does this with me.

"You're so tight," he almost sighs, and it's slow, it's exquisite. It's how many minutes, I don't know, but the time he takes with the strokes he gives makes me demand more. I have to growl back coming just feeling his burning entrance, at his mass inside, taking more than my breath away. He's pushed into everywhere, my body and heart. Just like her.

"You can move," I tell him when he's finally inside and holding still for permission. "You can fuck me."

His pecs heave pressed to my back while he lets go of my cock and grabs my hips, and my breath is a struggle with his thrusts.

"Your ass feels so good," he groans in my ear, and my muscles are liquid lead. Pressure dominates my senses, and it's him inside me and exactly what I crave.

"Fuck me, Redix," I tell him before I nip Cade's lip and really feel his mass urging into me. Goddamn, I forgot how good this feels. It makes my eyes roll back, begging him, "Yes, fuck my ass."

"You're both so beautiful," Cade sighs, looking down at how hard I am for his fuck. How I've needed this. How my thick jutting cock bounces with Redix's moans and thrusts. "Damn, this is hot." Cade reaches down, her nipple near my lips and hand stroking me tight.

"Fuck, hang on." I almost blow right there. My brain blitzing, not believing this pleasure. This sight. Damn, it's paradise.

Redix holds still. I grab breaths until I have control again. Because I want more than this. I want to be who I am completely. I want both of them. Like if I can be between them, I'll feel it; I'll know my answer.

"You're with us," I tell her, and Redix moves with me. Like he's glued to my back, he slightly steps forward with me and bends his legs with mine, and we find the rhythm while Cade guides my cock into her ready pussy.

"Oh Goddamn," I groan because I don't know how long I can last like this. Her tight heat. His blinding presence. They both squeeze the air from my lungs, and it feels so natural between them, trapping me in ecstasy that robs my reality except for this truth.

How the three of us meld, filling spaces that have ached for so long. That felt a void or a pain, and finally, having this together is almost too much. I almost fear I can't do this. If I let go, I'll fall so deep into their love. And it's a raging one. But I try.

I kiss her, then Redix leans over my shoulder, kissing her, too. Each touch of her lips fills me with awe, my mouth wanting more. I grab her hips and thrust into her pussy, finding our rhythm, driving into her while he grabs my hips, moving into me the same. Oh fuck, we're three mouths moaning with pleasure, three bodies pulled into a wild surge of pleasure, and three hearts that trust this, that need this.

"Fuck, this feels incredible," Redix swears into my shoulder. "Your tight ass is taking my cock, and I can hear yours smacking into her sweet pussy. My God, I could fuck y'all forever."

And I could, too.

But Cade is shaking, her eyes not looking up from how our bodies align. She's close. I lick my fingers and circle her clit. "You like this, don't you, Cade? How we're both fucking into you."

"Yes," she sighs, and she's there.

“Redix is fucking my ass with his big cock, and I’m fucking your tight pussy, and you’re gonna come like our sweet little slut, aren’t you?”

Muffling her screams, holding still the thrash of her body to keep ours aligned, she shakes so hard. We can hear the partygoers on the lawn outside while her eyes roll back with a primal groan that sends Redix into a fast pump.

He’s watching her, too. Like her orgasm unleashes him every time, and he’s thrusting fast, and “Fuck yes,” I encourage him. “Fuck us both,” I demand because he is, and it’s making me come, and that sends Cade into another spasm like her first one never stopped.

Her head rests on my shoulder while she bites into my flesh with a deep moan, and Redix takes my other shoulder the same way. His shaft pulses so violently, his grunts as deep as his cock is inside me, and my knees get weak. I brace myself. I have to hang on to Cade while I come harder than I knew possible. It erases my brain. It yanks me down into the three of us together and drops me so deep into this love.

It’s powerful. It’s goddamn amazing. I don’t know how they survive this.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



REDIX

My Enemy by CHVRCHES

TWO THINGS I NEVER THOUGHT I'D EVER WEAR—SEERSUCKER pants and a smile so content because I was just with a man, too.

And for me, it could never be just *any* man.

Only him.

Silas is the only man I've ever felt this pull toward. To kiss him. To taste him. To be inside him. And he's the only one I can watch even touch Cade and have it warm my heart instead of turning me into a raging fury.

All I've known is feeling protective over her, with good reason. Yes, she can protect herself now, but I trust no one else with her heart.

Hell, truth is, Silas is safer for her. I've broken her heart so many times while all he does is cherish it.

Just watching the two of them holding hands and sipping tea while we return to the party. I could feel jealous. I could

feel defeated. I could bow out and resign myself to a life of misery and let only Silas love her.

But that's impossible.

I watch Cade smiling with guests. Her post-fuck glow makes her a beacon like subconsciously, people can tell, and it attracts them to her.

But only Silas and I see it true.

We love her.

And what we just did in his bathroom is more than true for me. It's more than sex. It's more than fucking a man for the first time. A man who was fucking the only woman I'll ever love at the same time.

It was a surrender. It was a letting go of binds that have held me down for so long. Each time I'm with Silas, I think I'm free, only to kiss him again or feel his touch, and then I feel another piece of my pain break away.

And Cade is my anchor. Without her, I'd be too scared to do this with him. It's not right if she's not there. Nothing's right if she's not in my life.

And Silas? I didn't know a heart could expand like this. I didn't know it could morph into shapes that allow for more love.

Yes, I'm fucking glowing too. I radiate with a peace I've never known, and the afternoon sun over the river ain't got nothing on me.

I'm standing with the two people I need the most as we make our last mingle through the crowd, working our way back toward Silas's family home.

“My, my”—a voice slithers over my shoulder—“ain't I shittin' in high cotton to find you two here.”

It's sudden. It's a trigger. It fires inside me at the sound of his evil, and Cade whips around, confronting it first.

“Senator Evans.” I turn to watch her eyes go dead while her voice stays sweet. “Mrs. Evans. How lovely to see you

both.”

I thought I had my bearings.

I thought I was over this.

Her greeting turns Silas from his conversation to join us. They both square their shoulders at Gentry while I sip my tea and stare at the horizon.

I was wrong.

I’m not afraid of Gentry. I could pound the man’s skull into chunks on the pavement. I don’t fear him. I fear the memories.

Those I can’t kill.

Those could kill me.

“Mr. Van de May.” Gentry gives his full attention to Silas. *What a dick.* He knows where power resides. “Thank you for inviting us to this lovely gathering. My crew is enjoying themselves.”

“I won’t take the credit.” Silas stands beside me, his arm brushing mine while he faces my enemy. “I *didn’t* invite you. All the racers and their crews are here.”

“Indeed, let me introduce you to some of mine...”

And Gentry drones on with names. He won’t miss this opportunity. To be seen with the Van de May heir? To act like he has Silas’s full support, it’s a deft and dick political move, and I’m seething inside while Cade reaches for my hand.

She stands on the other side of me, closer to Gentry’s wife, and Cade’s rage is palpable. I know when it’s itching through her veins. She can feel the twitch in my hand, too, the way it sweats, and that’s all it takes.

“Gentlemen.” Her voice drips like honey. “Just how do y’all have the fine pleasure of knowing our state Senator because Gentry and I go *way* back. He’s got quite the past, you know.”

Don’t do it, Cade. Just walk away.

She promised me she'd follow the rules this time and use the law.

"That was just a little mischief among kids." Gentry laughs, and his cronies chuckle with him.

I don't need to know the dickhead crowd he must run in. Do they all find humor in an assault?

"Mischief is a lie, Senator." Cade squeezes my hand, stepping toward Gentry's taunt.

Fuck, why? Why can't we ever escape this?

"You sure do keep mischievous company," she says. "Criminal, in fact." Because she won't let it, Cade won't stop fighting. "I bet all these fine, traditional southern men would be well served to know the company *you* keep. On record."

I don't want to go back. I need to move on.

I don't want to be tied to Gentry like a prison sentence. I fought too hard to free myself. To find the good in all the bad we survived.

Why is Cade so obsessed? Why can't she leave it alone?

"Mere speculation." Gentry sounds delighted. Like this is a sport for him, too. "Such accusations, they're par for the powerful course."

"Which course?"

"Sea Oaks and more. We do serious business, and it's what we expect. Men in our positions are targeted all the time."

"Your position?"

Cade's pulling the trigger. Silas is a witness. Gentry's wife, I can smell her perfume; she's not peeping a word.

And I know I look odd, standing like a stone, staring at the horizon, but fuck *you*, World, I've fought enough.

"Your position, Senator,"—*but Cade will never stop*—"is that you're cousins, golf buddies, and a business associate with a man wanted in three states for rape. Derek Baucom. There's a warrant for his arrest, and he's been spotted in *your* district."

Cade keeps firing. “Your *position*, Senator, is that you have a close association with a known drug felon we went to high school with. Taylor John. He’s been in trouble with the Sheriff’s office so much so his recent disappearance from *your* district is odd.”

Damn, she’s ruthless. TJ’s dead because of *her*. But she’ll implicate Gentry just to take him down. And the seethe in her voice? No one can deny the truth in it.

“How do those scandals score on *your* political course, Senator?”

She’s too damn smart.

And that peace I felt for just a few minutes? It’s like the perfect week Cade and I shared. It was our dream. It was all I wanted.

And Cade just destroyed it again with her vendetta against Gentry.

“Perhaps, Senator.” She empties her gun. “Your friends should know the true company you keep. Not all of them can afford such associations with known criminal *mischief*.”

Throats clear at the awkwardness she just blasted into the air like a July Fourth fireworks show. Eyes dart. Feet shuffle. Distance grows between Gentry and his “friends.”

No, they can’t afford to be associated with *that*.

“Well, Ms. Bryant.” Gentry finally seeps a reply. “You know mischief, too. Just ask your friend, Mr. Dean. He hasn’t said a word, but he doesn’t need to. We’ve all seen his videos and the recent news. We all know about *his* scandals.”

“Hold him down.” My memory flashes. I can’t stop it. *“Hold the pretty boy still.”* It’s Gentry’s voice. It’s Derek pinning my wrists. *“This is gonna feel real good.”* Gentry’s talking by my feet, grabbing my ankles. *Sand’s in my mouth. I’m choking on it and a pain I’ve never known.* *“Yeah, TJ. Make it look good.”* Gentry’s voice is a scab on my psyche. *Picking it open while the feeling of the wet, hot drips of my blood across the flesh of my ass seeps back into my memory.* *“I’m gonna want a picture of this.”* The delight in Gentry’s

voice. The sneers on Derek's face. The grunts from TJ and Gentry's laughter.

Gentry laughed.

He laughs.

“Nice deflection, Senator,” Cade fires back, “but your scandals are illegal...”

And I'm gone...

There's an open bar at this party. I mapped it the second I walked in. I've been drinking iced tea all day, but I can smell the beer they're pouring. It lures me over.

Without a word, I don't hear the rest of the fight. I walk away from it.

Voices are muffled. Sights tunnel. All feeling goes except for this driving urge. Steps take me toward my escape and away from those memories. In seconds, six feet stand between me and the bar's edge.

The edge of my death.

That's how it works. Addiction picks up where it last left off. For me, I was two breaths away from dying before Cade saved me.

But now, it feels like she's pushing me there, pushing me into one more breath left before I give into this.

The bartender's an older man. His hands fly over bottles, flipping glasses over and pouring more escapes into a cup. The thought drops from the heavens like I pray every day for it to.

My dad would be his age.

I haven't seen him since I was five. He could be dead. He could be on a barstool. It's one or the other.

The bartender lifts his eyes and sees me staring. He doesn't know my face; he knows the question in my eyes. He stands up straight and stops his commotion to confront mine inside.

What do I want?

No other person. No other thought. No other reason I do this but for me.

No.

The pull of my heart away from this is more powerful. With every step I take away from that temptation, I move faster, my feet sure of the direction I need to go.

Anywhere but here.

Minutes later, they find me. Leaning against the car I bought Cade, I wait because it's all I can do. *I'm not going back.*

Silas and Cade step out the front door of his house and don't take their concerned eyes off me. I'm not fine. I'm not drinking. And I'm angry with Cade.

What else is new?

"Are you okay?" she asks once she's feet away.

"Don't ask like you care," I answer, climbing into the back seat because I can't look at her.

Silas takes the driver's seat while she jumps into the passenger side, and it's a stone silence over the three of us for the first of the two-hour drive back to Hilton Head.

"I didn't have a choice." Her voice finally cracks the quiet.

And me.

"Pull over," I bark.

Silas slows off the edge of the Lowcountry highway. He finds an unmarked sandy road, probably someone's driveway, and parks us there. I jump out. Crickets scream around me while the noise in my head is worse.

Cade jumps out, too. "Are you gonna talk to me?"

"I gotta piss." I drop my fly and seek this mindless task because all else leads to ruin.

"Then piss and talk." She's by my side and doesn't flinch at my stream. It flows like the rage in my veins. "I didn't do anything wrong."

“That’s just it, though.” I shake the dew off and adjust myself. I won’t look at her. The storm blowing in overhead is far calmer. “You *did* something, didn’t you? You always gotta do *something*.”

“What are we gonna do? Let him get away with what he did to us? To other women? Let him keep Cam prisoner somewhere? Let him keep Pamela forever? Because he’s got her—”

“And how the fuck does that bring her back?” I glare her way. “Admit it. You lose your temper, you gotta get your revenge, and you forget tactics. You piss Gentry off too much, and Pamela will disappear for good. Wherever she is, she’ll join TJ wherever you dumped his body if you keep this up.”

“Don’t tell me how to do my job.” She steps my way, and we know this fight. It keeps playing in our lives, and it won’t stop. “If you push a man like Gentry like I just did, he’s gonna react. I got him to admit the golf course he’s using—Sea Oaks—just by pushing him enough.”

“Decide. Decide now because every time you push him, you push me too! This is how it was with TJ, and now it’s Gentry. Last time, you picked TJ. When are you gonna pick me? Pick us? When is our love more important than your revenge?”

Silas steps out of the car, and God, he’s perfect because he knows to let us fight this out. He leans against the door. Not entertained. He’s concerned.

“I don’t have a choice,” Cade shouts back. “You or Gentry? No, it’s been you *and* Gentry for over ten years. Face it. We can’t run from him anymore.”

“Face it? Fuck you! I *remember* it. Every time you poke that snake, a new memory comes up. And they make me wanna drink. But thank God, I’m stronger now; I can fight it off, but I’m tired, Cade. I’m fucking tired.”

Her expression softens. “What do you remember?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“Try again.”

My eyes slam shut with my inhale.

Dammit, she's right.

The secrets eat my soul away.

"I remember Gentry laughing and holding down my ankles. I remember sand in my mouth. I was choking on it. Whatever they did to me? It hurt so much that I sucked in a mouthful and thought I'd die. With Derek watching. With TJ doing the damage and Gentry laughing about it." It burns in my throat. The words. The truth. "And I wanted to die. Of humiliation. Of pain. Of anger I couldn't act on. *That's* what I remembered today because you *had* to talk to him."

She rushes me, crying and wrapping her arms around my neck.

I don't hold her back.

"When, Cade? When will you let this go? When can we finally be happy?"

"Life isn't always happy."

"No shit." I pull back from her arms. "I look at my ass in the mirror every day, and I'm not fucking happy. But I don't go around making it worse." I point to Silas. "I wanna be like him. I wanna feel free and able to move on, but you won't let us. You keep dragging us back."

"I have to stop him. I have to catch Derek. I have to find Cam and Pamela too. Can't you understand that? It's my job."

The violet pools of her eyes. I've been swimming in them for years. I know their storms and their placid days. I know when she's bright and when darkness takes her over.

Because I love her... and I know when she's lying.

"But it's more than your job, isn't it? You said Silas helped you change. But you're lying. To him. To me. To yourself. Those three men. That night. It still controls you. And it does me, too."

Tears stream down her cheeks. "I want to be free of it, too."

“But you keep doing this, Cade. You keep pulling us back into our hell.” A bright flash cracks the sky before thunder booms in the distance. “And it makes me so angry, and that’s gonna be the death of us.”

She can stop that truth as much as she can the coming storm.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



“ARE YOU SURE THE CAMERAS AREN’T WORKING?”

That’s the third time I’ve asked her. It feels weird. Not wrong, just a violation of my instinct because I don’t trust her husband. I fear he’s watching us.

“Yes,” Stacey assures me. “Girl, I don’t want those cameras catching what I’ve been doing. The renovation crew had to disconnect them for some electrical upgrades. Their crew chief made sure of it.” She grins my way. “Sure of it *for me.*”

“The crew chief?”

Every day, I’m more impressed with this woman.

On the outside, Stacey looks like a blonde, proper, and preppy southern Senator’s wife. Like one who should have no sympathy for the less fortunate while she bestows tons of damning judgment on all who are different.

But no. That’s not Stacey Evans. She’s a conservative Senator’s wife on a wild rampage. She’s fucking every man

she wants while she fucks up Gentry's life too. She doesn't share his cruel, narrow-minded politics or his wicked ways.

I'm gonna build a shrine to her.

Because though she doesn't talk about it much, I know Gentry's abusive to her. And she's finding different ways to get her power back.

"Yes, the crew chief." She leads me through her house, pushing past the plastic tarps, concealing the construction zone that used to be her kitchen. "*And* a couple of his crew."

My steps halt over a pile of sawdust, and I'm gonna choke on the coffee from the travel cup I'm drinking from.

"The crew chief and *two* of his crew? Dayum, tell me more."

It actually tingles my pussy. The thought of it. Three men. I still haven't had my night with my two—Silas and Redix—the kind of night *I really* want.

Because Redix is angry with me again, and that's not how Silas wants to be in the middle of us.

It's Sunday. I've spent this week alone, and Stacey's sexy crew isn't working. Apparently, Gentry's away on one of his criminal golf tours, and little does he know the FBI is watching him.

We got all the transactions we need, down to the golf course hosting the tours. Now, we're waiting on the surveillance. They're following the men on this tour. Hopefully, someone will slip up soon. And Stacey Evans, Gentry's sweet, devoted wife, is anxiously waiting too.

We stand in a mess of a kitchen demolished while Stacey and I have the house to ourselves, and she dishes while she sips the latte I brought her.

"It's incredible." The smile on her face has no shame. "Ford's the crew chief. He's so fucking hot. He's forty with this incredible body and in charge of everyone. Including me."

"In charge?" That raises my eyebrow. "Be careful. That's not always sexy. It can be abuse."

“Not like that, trust me.” She sits on a new cabinet still in its box. “He’s alpha as hell with his crew—and when we all fuck—but he wants to help me. Help me with my dad and the shit pile I’m in. He’s raging over Gentry’s control, but I told him he can’t do anything. Not yet.”

“You told him about my investigation?”

Please don’t tell me she got fucked so well and hard that she divulged that secret in a screaming orgasm.

“No, I promise. Trust me, I know when to keep my mouth shut.” She smirks. “Or full of something else.”

I laugh, relieved. “Three of them? That *is* a mouthful.”

“Girl, don’t knock it till you tried it. Because those three—Ford, Luke, and Mateo—I swear they’re gonna be my salvation from this awful marriage.”

“Sounds like they got you praising God every day they’re here.”

“Uh-huh. That’s why this renovation is taking so long. I make sure of it.”

I love this woman. Who knew I’d find a close friend in someone married to my worst enemy?

But it does feel weird standing in Gentry’s house. Even though he’s not here, his evil’s in the air.

“What about you?” Stacey can read my tension. “Something’s wrong, I can tell.”

“The problem is something’s *always* wrong.”

I make a big box my seat, too. I’ll get dust on my jeans but don’t give a shit.

“I get a week of everything perfect, or a day of it, and shit goes sideways, and it’s all wrong because Redix is mad at me again.”

She puckers her rosy lips, considering my conundrum. She knows almost everything (except for the truth about TJ) and is equally torn.

“What happened to the break you were taking from them?” She challenges me. “You spent two months alone, and then you’re back with him *and* Silas. Is that what you want?”

“It took me two months to get my head together about who I love. I love ‘em both. And Silas and Redix are good for each other. They have their own bond, and I love it. I support it. Because Silas and me? We’ll always be close. I’m secure in that. Whatever the hell we call it.”

“But *you and Redix?*”

Her tone pushes that question front and center.

“But me and Redix...”

It’s the real question. One I’ve been asking myself for months.

I never used to question us. Not from the day we met at nine years old, and I gave Redix a candy cane and my heart. I knew we were meant to be together. So did he. That’s the heartbreak of it.

Those three men. That night. The ten years since. The crimes they’re still committing. The people they keep hurting. Everything keeps ripping me and Redix apart.

Everything makes me question us, when I only want one sure answer: how we can make it.

Because we have to.

“I can see it,” I tell Stacey. “I can see my life with Redix. Years from now, we’re married. We have kids, a house on a beach, and simple things like pizza nights and coffee in bed. And somehow, I know Silas is with us, too, and it’s easy. It works, and we don’t fight anymore. We’re finally healed and happy.”

Tears bite at my eyes. They burn at the vision in my heart, the dream that my soul knows is right... but it just *won’t* happen in my life.

I share through the few that fall. “But I can’t see how we get there. It’s like something’s gotta give. He gets so angry with me. Like it’s all my fault, and it’s not. He needs for us to

move on, but we can't yet. We're stuck in this. And if we don't get out soon, that dream will die."

When I think of that. Of a life without loving Redix every day. Of not being by his side. I can live it... but it'll ache with a painful void I know too well, one I can barely survive.

Stacey gets up and sits beside me, giving me the hug I need.

"Can I sound corny?" she asks.

"Please do." I'll take any answer.

"I believe in love. Even if I don't have it yet. I still believe if you love someone, it's not about being right while the other's wrong. It's about accepting each other." She squeezes a little tighter. "And accepting ourselves."

Maybe I need to accept that Redix will never condone what I did with TJ. He'll always be angry about it. He doesn't understand I don't have a choice. Fate makes decisions for you sometimes.

"What about you?" I nudge Stacey. "Are you gonna keep accepting Gentry's abuse?"

Because it is abuse. Emotional. Verbal. Financial. That's pain, too, even though he hasn't laid a hand on her. *Yet.*

"I promise I'm getting out." She stands up, gesturing to the kitchen in a mess. "I'm remodeling this house, so we get top dollar. I'm divorcing him, and we're selling this, and I'll take half of all I can get. This house, too."

She kicks an open moving box. "And all his shit? Every room I remodel, I go through it." She kicks it again. "Junk he leaves in drawers. Bank statements he hides in A/C vents. I'm going through it all to get what's mine, too."

I get up and peer into the box. It's full of pens, rubber bands, takeout menus, the stuff you cram in a kitchen drawer.

But then I notice it.

An old photo under a Thai takeout menu.

"What's this?" I pick it up.

“That’s Gentry’s old sailboat. His dad left it to him. He’s been trying to refurbish it for years but gets too busy breaking the law and lives.”

Her sarcasm hits me along with this picture. It’s of Gentry as a boy. He’s standing with his dad on the bow of a Bayfield sailboat with a red boot stripe.

I had no idea he owned this boat. I know all his others. All his cars. All his condos. Everything about him that’s public or on property records.

But not this boat.

“Where does he keep this?”

“I don’t know.” Stacey shrugs. “A couple years ago, he said something about getting the hull gel-coated. Haven’t heard him mention it since.”

I set the picture on the box and grab my phone in my back pocket to snap a copy.

Because this is it, this is where he’s hiding Derek. I know it.

Now we just gotta find it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



REDIX

“Y’ALL JUST NEED TO TALK.”

Silas hands me a wrench while I wedge my shoulders under my kitchen sink.

I know what’s clogging this damn thing. Nicolas keeps dumping the oatmeal he hates down the sink. Renie makes him eat it. And he washes down the guilty evidence that he won’t.

I can’t see Silas, but I answer him, “Think I’m beginning to realize talkin’ doesn’t fix everything,” and I can feel him. His shin rubs against mine, and every part of me feels peace with him.

I wrench the pipe open while Silas jabs, “Spoken like a stubborn man who thinks fighting is talking.”

It makes me grin—the shit he gives me about everything.

Mostly, he’s joking. But when it comes to Cade, he ain’t fooling around. He’s fighting for us to work this out.

I don’t answer him, proving his point while I crawl back out before pulling the drainpipe open.

“Why don’t you hire someone for shit like this?” He’s still on me and looking fucking hot doing it in boardshorts and nothing else.

“Like you don’t like fixin’ everything with your hands too.”

I gotta see it—the guilty smile that lifts his full lips when I glance up at him from my knees.

“You’re a hot, rich celebrity,” he says. “You could pay someone for this so we can focus on me fixin’ *other* things with my hands around here.”

Damn, I could rip his shorts down. I could take him in my mouth and hear his moans, and *that’d* fix me up just fine for a while.

And his emerging hard-on agrees.

But we’re not alone. Any minute, someone can walk into the kitchen. I love having my family here, but at times it sucks. Like literally because right now, I wanna suck his cock so bad. We both know it, so I turn back to my task.

“You can’t fix some shit with me and Cade.” I yank, and there’s the evidence gooped up in the drainpipe. “Trust me. We keep trying, but it ain’t working.”

I knock the nasty goop out into a bucket before I hand Silas the pipe. Not the pipe I wish was in his hands, but he goes down the hall to wash it out in a bathroom sink.

I watch his wide, naked back, his tan muscles tapering to his narrow waist. And I don’t miss his firm, round ass in those navy board shorts, either.

And suddenly... I miss Cade.

This doesn’t feel right without her. She should be with us. But we got in that fight on the side of the road and haven’t spoken in a week. Like we both need to go to our corners and sit a round out.

It puts Silas in a bad spot. He sees her. He sees me. But every time I see Cade, I want to punch a wall because we’re stuck in this fight.

I'm angry. She's stubborn. And we're fucked. More like not fucking or doing anything because what can we do?

Talking won't solve that she'll do whatever it takes to take down Gentry. Legal or not.

Talking doesn't solve that Derek's out there somewhere. And the stalk of him threatens the safety of my entire family.

Talking doesn't solve that I'll always love Cade. But I worry.

I always thought *I* was the one ruined that night. And yes, it did its damage to me. And I'm healing.

But Cade won't admit it. Maybe she doesn't want to commit murder over it anymore, but it still controls her. She hasn't changed. She's obsessed. She's stuck in our past when I need to move on from it.

"Hey." Renie appears in the kitchen, making me jump. "We're going to the movies and maybe some nighttime putt-putt. I gotta get him outta here."

Nicolas bounces like a puppy behind her. My mama tries holding down his shoulder, and Scarlett, their bodyguard, stands behind them, very used to this.

"Alright." I trust Scarlett. Nothing happens on her watch. "Y'all have fun."

They pile out the front door while Silas returns down the hall, cleared pipe in hand.

"You're still on your knees." His eyebrows dance.

"And we're finally alone," I answer him.

The sink can wait. I can't. I can't look at him, at that body, at that big heart shining through that sexy smile on his face and not have this. Something I never thought I'd crave, but I do now. So much.

The white string holding his shorts up unties too quickly before I drag them to his ankles. His shorts fall as fast as his cock rises for me. It's jutting out. Proud and ready for my lips

as I lick them before dragging them down his thick shaft. All my troubles disappear with him.

While his warm cock fills my mouth, I wish Cade were here. Kneeling beside me and pleasing him, too. But she's not. And I want this too much. I need him too much. No matter how mad we are at each other, she blesses my love for Silas, too.

He grabs my hair, and his moans turn me on. I'm dripping in my jeans. I lock my eyes on his. "You look so hot with my cock in your mouth, Redix Dean," he growls, and I can taste him on my tongue and moan at my name over his lips, praising mine. My fist and mouth start their merciless pump, and he thrusts right back. "Fuck yes, like that." He grips my hair harder.

Part of me wants him like this. On my knees while he comes in my throat, but another part of me wants much more with him.

I pull my mouth off his cock and stand up. I grab the back of his neck and reply, "Your cock will look so hot in my ass too."

"Fuck." He slams his eyes shut. "Don't tease me."

"I'm not."

"But..."

I know what he's thinking. I know what he worries about. And I love him even more for it.

"I want it," I swear it to his eyes when he opens them, and this feels right. "I want this with you."

"Without her here?" He worries about that, too. Like we're moving on without Cade. Like I'm choosing him over her.

Never.

"She's here," I tell him. "She's in my heart. Yours too. We'll figure it out, I promise."

That's what my soul believes. It's just my head; my logic can't see how me and Cade will work. But when I'm with

Silas, my heart feels it—we *can* work. Somehow.

We take a shower together. Standing in the massive marble-encased steamy room, our wet bodies grind into each other while our kisses get more aggressive.

What is this I feel for him? It's love. It's lust. It doesn't feel wrong, but acting like I own him, like he's all mine, doesn't feel right either.

You can't own this man. You can't claim him as yours. His wet hair slicked back. His perfect body with skin that feels like hard, wet satin. His hands that are so fucking strong. Yes, he can fix anyone—even *me*.

When he grabs my cock and rubs it against his with our undersides touching in his tight grasp, jerking us both off, I'm going to lose my mind. And all my troubles.

"Oh fuck," I groan, wrapping my hand over his and helping him.

"You sure you want me to fuck you?" He presses his forehead to mine, and other than Cade, I've never felt this desperate for anyone else.

"Yes," I answer, crashing my mouth against his again. His lips are full like Cade's, but his tongue invades my mouth. His aggression isn't like hers, and I want more.

The sensitive friction of our cocks rubbing together drives me crazy, and I have one thought. "Fuck me, Silas." I pant against his lips. "I'm gonna come just saying it." The surge is sudden. "Fuck my ass."

And I do. Spilling over his fist, glossing down our cocks, I grunt and come so hard, and I know I'll get hard again in minutes. His breath shakes, and his eyes take in the sight. Tightening his grip even more, his body follows mine, releasing spurts of his cum over our cocks too.

"Fuck," he grunts too, and it's so hot. His sounds and huffing ribs satisfy me as he leans against the tile wall. "I'm gonna need a few minutes before I can."

"We got time."

Minutes later, I lock my bedroom door just in case. I close my curtains to the dusk outside, and we crawl into my bed together. Everything's ready for this. Lube and condoms are on my nightstand. Our bodies are fresh from a shower. There's nothing but trust here, except there's one thing missing.

That one beautiful, maddening, sexy, and smart part of us that's not here.

"I wish she could see this." Silas kneels between my legs, spread for him. He's hard as hell at the sight of it, and so am I.

But I feel it, too. She's missing.

It's a feeling I've suffered for so many years. When Cade isn't by my side and sharing my life, the void hurts. It's everything wrong, and only she makes it right.

As much as Silas soothes and satisfies me in ways I didn't know I needed, I need Cade, too. That'll always be my truth, my dream... even if I can't make it happen in life.

"Get your phone," I tell him.

We won't do this without her. He calls her, putting her on a video chat.

"Hey," she answers him, and I can hear it in one word from her voice. She misses us, too.

"We want you here for this." Silas turns the phone screen so she can see our bodies, our hard cocks, how we're aligned to fuck. "He wants me to fuck him." Those words make my cock leak. "And he wants you here too."

The look on her face. Even on a phone screen. I know her too well. She's not jealous. She's not angry. She's not even shocked.

"Y'all are beautiful," she sighs, and I can tell she's in bed too. "Lemme just watch."

"I want you here," I confess from every part of me. "I want you with me. With us."

I stroke my cock, trying to tempt her. Because we can wait the twenty minutes it'll take her to get here. Hell, I've waited

this long ever to want a man to fuck me. What're a few more minutes?

“I am *with you*.” She lifts the phone so I can see her hand pull off her silky pajama shorts, exposing her beautiful bare pussy. “I’m right there with you both, and you need this. Just the two of you. You should share this.”

And she speaks the truth in my heart, I just now realize. Like she’s known it all along, and now I do too. I *do* need this. I need Silas to take me like I want. Like I ask him to. Like I give consent for and not any other way like I fear I’ve survived.

This will heal me even more.

“You sure?” Silas turns the screen to his hand, stroking his cock too. Like that’ll change her mind.

“Yes,” she says, and I take his phone. The sight of her fingering herself to this fills me with a sudden desire and ease to really let go and trust this. I let her watch while Silas leans over me, taking my mouth in a deep kiss while our hard cocks rub together again, and mine jumps against his, begging for more.

She watches while he kneels back up and rolls a condom on. While he covers his fingers in lube, I bend my knees back. When his fingers penetrate my ass, playing and toying with me and prepping me for his fuck, I can’t help my moans. The thrust of my hips and the urge in my cock wants so much more.

“Fuck me,” I groan my command, my permission demanding more of him, and he delivers. Removing his fingers, he wedges his thick tip into me, and I exhale to let him in.

“Go slow.” Cade’s voice fills the air. And it’s hot because that’s what she told me when I fucked Silas. Because she cares and she wants this too for me.

Silas does go slow. “You want this?” He almost whispers. “You want my cock in your ass?”

“Yes.” The pressure’s insane. The penetration almost burns, and I grunt through it and love it. “Give me more.”

I hand the phone to Silas so Cade can see.

“Watch him fuck me,” I tell her, and it makes us all moan. I can hear her on the other end, fingering herself, and I know she’ll come like we will.

Silas holds the phone in one hand and my cock in his other. His hips and fist slowly match their tempo, which rolls my eyes back.

“Does it feel good?” Cade’s voice asks from the phone, all the way to my heart. Like she’s right beside me and knows this is the way.

“Yes,” I answer her. “*So—fucking—good.*”

I never thought I’d need this. I never imagined consenting to this. But I do. So damn much. It’s building, flooding me with a hot, horny urge to always do this. To fuck and be fucked with no restraint. No shame or fear. My God, I want this.

And wanting this. Wanting him to fuck me. Asking him to. It’s the liberation my soul needed. It releases my pain.

“Yes,” I hiss again as he drives in deeper, making my thighs shake. “Yes, Silas. Fuck my ass.” It groans from somewhere deep inside me; I can’t control it. “Fuck, you make it feel so good.”

The sensation is new, maddening, and satisfies while he pulls out, only to plunge back in with the sexiest damn grunts. He’s loving this, too. He’s watching this. How hard my cock is for it, how I’m leaking for it, and it makes him like an animal. He starts rutting and fucking my ass, and we’re starving for more.

“Oh God,” I hear Cade groan, and I can imagine what she can see, and it only makes me want more.

“*Harder,*” I tell him. “Fuck me harder.”

The look in Silas’s eyes. It’s dark. It’s hot. It’s taking over, and his jaw clenches as his thrusts become brutal and just what

I want. “Goddamn, your ass feels so good,” he swears with another thrust. “So fucking tight.” Another thrust. “Your cock’s so hard for my fuck too.”

I’m not going to last. Not with my first time like this. Not with how good this feels. His hard cock’s slamming the air from my lungs. His fist is strangling my cock, and drops land on my abs, and I’m so close.

“I’m gonna come.” I want them to hear it. To see it. “I’m gonna come with your cock fucking my ass, and then you’re gonna fuck Cade’s ass while I fuck her too.”

And that does it. That ends her with a loud groan from the phone filling the room and grabbing my throat. The sound of her coming is imprinted on my sex, on my desire, and it does it every time. I come squirting wet streams across my abs while I grunt, my fucking legs and lips shaking so hard I can’t control them.

“Fuck!” It ends Silas, too. He pulls out of me so fast it almost hurts, but I’ll never forget the sight. How he yanks the condom off and squeezes his cock, making ropes of his cum mix with mine while his whole hot body shakes. “Redix,” is all he says before he kisses me again.

“I love you” fills the air through our kiss, and she’s saying it to both of us.

“We love you too.” Silas turns his face toward the phone still in his hand. We recover our panting breath, his cheek resting by mine while we see her on the screen. Silas murmurs, “And he forgives you.”

“No, I don’t.” I almost laugh at how he’s forcing this on us. “She *knows* I’m still mad as hell.”

Cade laughs, too. Because it’s true. We love each other so much we can *feel* every emotion, all the easy ones, the hot ones, the fucked up ones too. We can admit to them.

The question is, can we live with them? Can we survive them?

“Well then, y’all stay mad as hell.” Silas flops beside me, holding the phone up so she can see us both. “Because mad

sex is hot sex.”

“We’ll see,” Cade replies, and she’s not smiling now. She’s not convinced, either.

“Y’all work this out,” I say. “I’m gonna go clean up.”

I grab the condom and gotta find my sea legs again. My body’s not used to this sensation—freshly fucked. But I like it. Wetting a washcloth in the bathroom, I like the sight on my abs, too, watching them flex under my cum mixed with Silas’s. I’m gonna want a picture of this one day soon. But for now, I’m thirsty.

Night has fallen over the house. Silas is still talking to Cade on the phone, something about where old sailboats are moored on this island, while I throw on a pair of shorts and wander out into the living room.

It’s one with a vaulted ceiling and a magnificent view of the ocean outside. The wall of windows and sliding glass doors let me appreciate the sight while the house is quiet. Renie, Nicolas, my mama, and Scarlet aren’t back yet.

I’m proud of them knowing Silas is here for the night. That he’s a part of my life, too. I’m not hiding it from them. And they don’t judge. They like him, too. Hell, everyone likes Silas.

That thought makes me grin until I catch a sight that pisses me off.

Who the fuck left the door open?

I notice it. One of the sliding glass doors to the pool outside isn’t shut all the way. A few inches are open, and this should be locked. My night guard, Keith, is walking his usual perimeter around the house and should’ve caught this.

Dammit, we’ve been dealing with this for so long people are getting lazy. Too comfortable.

I know who left it open. Nicolas. He thinks I have enough money to air condition the entire beach outside. He’d get in trouble if he weren’t so cute and if I didn’t love him so much.

Locking it closed, I glance outside. The ocean is calm. The palms sway to a light breeze. Silas's laughter with Cade on the phone fills my home. And my heart.

And it slams me again, missing her. How she should be here. My home is hers. My life is hers. I'll give anything for her. *Again.*

But what more can I sacrifice? When do we finally get to live our dream, our future, and not our past hell?

Because Silas heals parts of me, but for what... if I don't have her too?

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



Body Say by Demi Lovato

I'M SHAKING.

They're overwhelming me, and my nervous system can only take so much.

It started with tulips sent special delivery to my door this morning, along with a big gift box. Inside was a crimson Alexander Wang mini dress with Redix all over it. The man knows fashion.

The tulips were Redix, too, but the note was all Silas. And I know... he's the one who initiated their scheme.

Let's go forward.

It's your turn tonight.

No fights. Only fucks.

We'll pick you up at 7.

What woman wouldn't wet her panties to that? The two people she lusts for the most are orchestrating a night for her pleasure.

Yes, it's every woman's fantasy, but when it's presented to you, it's also terrifying. It's too good to be real, so you fear it's not.

They show up, side by side at my door, and go ahead and rip my lungs out because I couldn't breathe.

"Damn, we're lucky," was the first thing out of Silas's mouth, while Redix just smiled at his choice of my fashion.

Mix luck with lust and love and sprinkle it with a little fear. That's how I feel in this dress with a dangerously short hem. The lingerie they sent too is silk perfection against my anxious skin. My favorite Louboutins are on, and my hair and makeup are done. I mixed my perfumes, dabbing BOUND and FREE on my pulse points.

I thought that'd prepare me for this.

I thought wrong.

They're dressed in tailored black suits with white shirts. Redix's hair hangs past his shoulders while Silas has his up in a knot. Other than that difference, they're clearly a pair. And when we walk together out to the waiting car and, minutes later, into the elegant restaurant, it's clear to all eyes on us—we *are* a threesome.

Three bodies, three hearts, and three minds that don't give a shit about the stares we get—the whispers. The eyes glued to us or the couple of phones that rise to our entrance.

I hold their hands while we're led to our table.

Redix planned this, too. This is Luca's resort. This is his five-star restaurant. He's one of Redix's closest friends, helping him roll the red carpet out for this night.

"Is Luca here?" I ask as Redix pulls the chair out for me.

"He's home with Gia but sends his best," he replies as a bottle of Taittinger's Champagne is presented to us as we take our seats.

“I don’t want to drink—”

“Y’all enjoy the bottle. I’ll enjoy my seltzer.” Redix kisses my cheek. “I’m fine.”

And that’s his olive branch to me for the night.

Yes, we’ve been fighting. Maybe we will for a long time. There’s tension between us, an answer we can’t find, and a divide that worries me. It terrifies me actually because it won’t go away. Since the whole TJ thing, this pain between us feels like a disease our love can’t cure.

It’s in my bones. It makes me ache. It hurts him, too, and we don’t know what to do.

Silas feels like a remedy. His love soothes and gives us strength. It heals some parts of us, and I just hope we do the same for him.

It looks like it. He’s watching our brief reconciliation with glee. He sits on my other side and rests his hand on my bare thigh.

“Let’s not get too full.” He orders a few selections from the menu before dismissing the waiter with a smile. “We have sweeter things to eat tonight.”

Silas drops that tease with a grin, and I have only one appetite, and it ain’t for anything served on a plate.

“How long has this been in the plans?” I ask before sipping champagne.

The two guilty sinners exchange a look.

“He made plans a few weeks ago,” Silas informs me. “But y’all keep fighting.”

“We’re not fighting tonight.” Redix leans over, gently kissing my cheek before his whisper tickles my ear. “We’re fucking the hell out of you instead. Just like you want.”

And why we wait for the French appetizers that somehow Silas knew what the hell they were and how delicious they’d be? Or why we start laughing about the over-the-top plans

Redix is making for Nicolas's birthday party next week, I don't know.

We're having fun. I'm being spoiled. But I have no patience. I want this. I fear this. And it needs to happen now.

Like Redix can read the impatience written across my horny body, three small dessert plates are presented to us—lemon sorbet.

“Send these up to my room instead, please.” Redix makes the request, and the entire staff reacts.

He wants to share that memory, our first kiss over sweet lemon, with Silas. So do I. I'm a rush of emotions and don't know what to hang on to. The staff leaves to fulfill Redix's wish while I look at him and Silas.

“I want this. I want you both,” I tell them. “But I'm terrified of it too.”

“I've been scared as shit this whole time,” Silas confesses. “From the moment you two walked into my place together.”

“Why?” I thought Silas was the fearless one.

“Because it's powerful with you two—the love. I know when y'all fight, you think it's gone, but it's not. It's even stronger then. Because at least you're fighting for it.”

That leaves me speechless. Redix too.

Because Silas is right.

Fighting doesn't have to mean a relationship is over. It can mean you care so much for it that you'll defend it, protect it, and do anything to keep it alive.

And yes.

That's the history between me and Redix.

It's carved into his skin and our hearts.

“Somebody once told me something very wise,” Redix says, touching my cheek before turning to Silas. “She said we can be afraid together.”

I bite my lip at that memory. That moment before Redix finally told me what he'd been hiding from me for so long. His scar. His story. His pain and why he'd been afraid to tell me.

It almost snatches me down a river of tears because I love these men so much, and sometimes I think fate is a shithead for the hell it throws our way.

And sometimes, like tonight, I think it blessed us because at least we're in this together.

I hold their hands proudly. We walk out of the restaurant with all eyes on us. Some judging. Some admiring. Most drooling at the sight of Redix and Silas. And suddenly, fear jumps in the back seat because once I focus on what's next, desire's driving now.

I love them. I trust them. And hell, yes, I want them.

We make a fast trip to the suite Redix reserved. It's five-star luxury with a river view, and I don't care. All I see are these two men, a sumptuous king-sized bed, and the luggage they've already packed and delivered to the room.

"You have us for two days. No interruptions." Silas pulls me to him, kissing me while the heavens part and all the angels sing...

Hallelujah! Praise the Pussy Goddess! I get to fuck these men for two whole days.

Redix kisses the nape of my neck while he slowly unzips my dress. The teeth of the zipper open, and so do I. Air rushes my exposed back where his fingertips linger down my spine before tracing back up to the straps of my crimson dress.

He hesitates with his body pressing against my back, with every part of him hard, while his husky whisper asks, "Will you choose *us*, Cade?"

"Yes," I answer through Silas's lips, indulging my mouth, his hands skimming my hips while Redix gently bites down my neck, making me moan at him dropping my dress to the floor.

They tease me. They touch me. I'm standing in the black lace bra and panties they bought for me, and all my thoughts, fears, and emotions rage like a storm inside me.

For minutes, my mind torments with questions without answers. But their mouths, their hands, with Redix behind me and Silas dropping to his knees before me... nothing's as strong as my body's desire for them, and it takes over.

Redix turns my chin for his kiss, the one that reaches in and cradles my soul. I whimper at our truth, tears springing up to feel his love swirling with hate. But we can still do this. Our love is stronger.

Silas kisses my lips, his tongue greeting my tender clit, and I groan into Redix's mouth at Silas's lavish attention. He's everything good, and I cherish him.

But I worry, can this last with Silas, too?

Redix teases my nipples. The lace of my bra is pulled down, exposing my breasts, still dripping from Silas's tongue, and he knows how to play with me.

"We're gonna get you so wet, Cade." He nips my ear while Silas pulls my panties off. "We're gonna make you come so many times your pussy will be dripping for our hard fuck."

My knees buckle at his taunt. At his promise.

Redix feels my wobble and pulls me to sit on the chair behind him. I surrender on his lap, my back to his chest with my legs draping over his thighs while Silas follows.

"Look at you, sugar lips." Silas kneels, grinning with his mouth steaming over my flesh. "We're gonna take turns fucking this sweet pussy. We'll have you begging for our cocks for days, like our sweet little slut, won't you?"

I groan my permission and need, grinding on Silas's mouth once his warm tongue flicks my clit. Leaning into Redix, I let go to this pure pleasure. Hands toying with my breasts. A mouth devouring my pussy. My arousal's wetting my thighs, and Redix's hard dick pressing into my ass is driving me mad. It's like Silas senses it.

“Lift her up,” he says.

Redix does, pulling me up to free his lap for Silas’s access. Like usual, Redix is commando, and Silas knows it. Unzipping his black suit pants, he makes quick work of freeing Redix’s hard cock for all to enjoy.

When Silas sinks his mouth over Redix’s fat tip, my moan matches the one from Redix’s throat. Wedging Redix’s cock between my lips, Silas teases us. Not letting Redix fuck me, he licks my clit and Redix’s tip before rubbing it against my aching nub, and I will lose it. He’s making my pussy drip as wet as his spit down Redix’s engorged cock. Fuck, it’s sexy, and it’s torture.

“Come here.” I want him too much. “Silas, stand up.”

He does; his chin is glistening, and his eyes are possessed. I do the same to him. Dropping his zipper, he stands before me while I sit on Redix’s lap, and I want to taste him.

He’s so hot. They’re both still in their suits with their cocks out, and good God, I’m getting light-headed.

Silas wraps his hand around my head, guiding my mouth down his cock while I moan as he fills my throat. My body shifts to Redix moving under me as he leans forward. He’s next. I hold Silas at his thick base, pressing his crown to Redix’s lips next, and damn, he loves it as much as I do. Sucking Silas’s cock, giving him this pleasure, turns us both on. So does my pussy still gliding over Redix’s slick shaft.

We indulge him and each other. Taking turns plunging down his cock, there’s nothing we won’t do for him as his breath huffs thinner and thinner.

“Stop,” Silas sighs. “This night is for you.”

He pulls my hand to stand. I barely can. I just want to lie back in the lust that envelops me, and he can tell.

“Over here,” he guides me to the bed, and Redix follows.

I flop down on it and insist, “Get undressed.” Just so I can watch their strip, and they make it a show for me, stopping to

exchange kisses with me and each other. I fling my bra off, too, and suddenly, I'm inspired.

"Come here," I summon them to the edge of the bed. I want us together, as close as I can. To where their bodies touch. To where I sit on the edge and revel in the sight of their cocks rubbing together. My hands can't get enough of them. Reaching for their hard chests, roaming down the deep ridges of their flexing abs, my hands wrap around the hard velvet of their cocks, and my mouth goes next. One cock. Then the other. Over and over. No way I can get both in my mouth, but their taste mixes across my tongue, making me so hungry to try.

They kiss. They moan. They watch the sight, too, until Redix says, "Cade, this is for you, remember?"

"But I like this," I reply, fisting their cocks in each hand.

"I can tell you do." Redix grins. "But quit doing for us. It's your turn." A light flashes across his eyes. "And it's time for dessert."

Silas looks a bit confused, while Redix is loving this, insisting, "Show him how I like to eat it."

The flood to my pussy is sudden, nerves lighting up while wet rushes my sex, and my mind is even more excited. I turn to kneel on the edge of the bed, resting my cheek against the white bedspread. The exposure thrills me like never before.

Redix spreads me open, pouring his words like honey down my crevice. "Look at our sweet treat to eat."

I moan, and on cue, Silas gets it now. Steps take him to the silver tray left on the table in the suite. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch him open the special container keeping the lemon sorbet cool while I feel Redix's warm lips kiss the small of my back.

"We'll make you so sweet"—Redix keeps teasing me—"before we get you so fucking dirty for us, Cade."

Cold drops thrill my flesh before an icy slush pours over my ass while Redix lets it drip down to my pussy, and I'm dying for this.

“*Daaammnn*,” Silas mutters at the sight, at sharing Redix’s fetish.

We’ll be paying for new sheets in this suite, and no one cares because, holy fuck, they eat.

Redix’s hot tongue circles, teasing my ass, and I’m just going to die here, and that’s fucking fine because Silas kneels for his meal, circling his tongue around my clit, and I can’t move. I won’t move. This feels too damn good.

“Oh fuck yes,” I mutter into the sheets while the sounds of their sticky smacking mouths fill the air, tongues thrilling my holes and shaking my thighs. It’s the only sweet sound I want to hear before Silas says, “I wanna eat her more.”

He guides our bodies, and I don’t resist. Silas crawls onto the bed, turning, straddling my legs over him, and putting my pussy over his face while his gorgeous cock is mine and Redix stands behind me.

And I don’t know what’s next until I hear Redix say with such deep delight, “Clean her up so we can fuck her, both of us.”

“Oh my God,” I mutter with Silas’s dick pressed to my lips and Redix pulling my cheeks farther apart, so wide and so open for Silas, and they can take me. I’ll surrender only to them.

“Isn’t that right, Cade?” It’s Redix’s voice, muffled with his tongue flicking my ass and rolling my eyes back. “You’re so fucking hungry for our cocks, aren’t you? You want both of us.”

I feel Silas groan into my pussy, his tongue dipping into my taste before his fingers start pounding into me, and yes, I want more. But this? Both of their mouths devouring me—they make me come so fast, I’m desperate. I huff, “Fuck me,” with my ass in the air. “Fuck me now.”

Redix is in the perfect position to satisfy. It’s a few seconds before I feel his invasion, his slow drive into my entire being, while Silas won’t stop with his mouth on my clit.

I can't speak. Groans grab my throat at this unbelievable pleasure. At Redix's huge cock stretching and fucking me to perfection. At Silas's mouth, playing my clit like a maestro. And then a wet finger, two of them, press into my ass, and I know what Redix is getting me ready for, and I lose it.

"Oh fuck." I come so fast again. It hits my body like a lightning strike, shaking my legs, taking my strength, and cinching my sex so hard that Redix has to grab one of my hips to stay inside me.

"Fuck, Cade," he growls, hanging on to me because I'm not done. I reach for another breath before I groan and let it hit me again because his cock feels so good, and Silas won't stop with my pussy. This new ecstasy won't stop.

"Damn, y'all taste good," Silas mutters into where Redix is thrusting into me, and I let go, giving them one more. I growl like the animal I've become, like a pussy in heat with another dripping release all over Silas's mouth and Redix's cock, and I'm not shy.

"Goddamn, she's ready," Redix almost sighs at the sight and sensation.

Like he's in charge for the night, which is fine by me, he directs our bodies. He lies down on his back beside me, guiding my weak thighs to straddle him next.

I gaze down at him, catching my breath and surprised by his choice. "I thought you said you were the only one to fuck my ass."

"Think again," he smiles, and I know only like this. Only with Silas is this okay for him, and I agree.

Silas kneels beside me, watching me slowly slide down to Redix's base. I want to start my ride, my show for them, but Silas insists, "Stay right here." He lubes up his fingers from the bottle on the bed and says, "Let's make sure you're *real* damn ready."

Because I may need to reconsider. Redix already fills me to a stretch, to a pressure my body can perfectly accommodate, but no more. Like it's obvious to Silas, probably because

Redix has fucked him too. So Silas glides his fingers between my ass cheeks and gently grabs my neck with his other hand.

“Look at me,” Silas says. And fuck, he can be so dominant sometimes. The man is mercurial, and I love it when his usual cool sears to molten hot during our sex. “Look at me and tell me you can take this. That you love this.”

Two of his fingers slide in my ass and fuck, it’s intense. But I’m so wet and pulsing, I’m ready for it. “Yes,” I murmur into his control. “Yes, it feels so good.”

“What about this?” Silas likes this. His eyes delight as he eases a third finger in, and it burns my edges.

“Uh,” it escapes my lips. It’s so much. But my hips roll without my control. My body answering louder and wanting it.

“Make her come like that,” Redix insists, like he wants to be sure. Like he wants to watch this, too. He loves it when I’m on top, and now he gets a new vision.

“Come on, Cade.” Silas wants it, too. “Ride his cock and come with my fingers in your ass.”

It’s not a command. It’s happening. I tilt my hips just enough, my throat still in his tight grasp, and my hands braced on Redix’s steel stomach; it’s the perfect position to rub my clit on his base while Silas relishes this.

I won’t stop looking at him. “You *do* want our fuck, don’t you, Cade?”

“Yes.”

“Show me.” Silas grins, his eyes still staring into mine. “Make that pussy come so hard if you want my cock fucking your tight ass too.”

I buck at his command. At the look in his eyes. At the slam of his fingers invading me and Redix’s cock filling me to the brim. My body relents with an orgasm shaking through me, opening me even more for this.

“Now,” I tell him. I can’t be more ready, and yes, I’d even beg for it.

Redix pulls me down, resting my chest on his, and in this position, my body relaxes safe and content. It's my home, with my heart beating against his.

The bed shifts, and Silas moves to the perfect position. His legs wrap over Redix's, and our bodies line up. The heat of it. The touch of us together in this most intimate position. Complete surrender takes my body.

"Be careful with her." The words beg from Redix's lips, and I lock my eyes on his, tears wanting to escape.

It doesn't matter how angry Redix gets. How much we fight. How much we feel so overwhelmed and defeated sometimes, we still have this. He still *loves* me. And my love for him fills every part of me as he cups my cheeks and holds me there, immersed in it.

He doesn't look away as the pressure of Silas starts to ease inside me, too. "Oh God," I sigh at the power of it.

"Tell me," Silas says, pulling my cheeks wide apart.

I know he'll be careful. I know he won't hurt me. "Yes." I start to pant. His penetration is so intense. "Yeah," I mewl. It's pressure to the tips of my ears. Tingling to my fingertips. "Yeah." But I want it. I don't want him to stop. "Yeah." It strains my ribs, constricting my breath.

Back and forth, Silas moves slowly in, pulling out gently to push back in again, a little more each time. "Keep telling me," he says. "Tell me you want this."

"Please, more," I beg Redix's eyes and Silas's cock. Redix is already seated deep inside me while Silas finds new space, slowly stretching my body for this. Like he's already done to my heart. I have room for him. Two men fill me with love so great I can take their bodies and lust, too. I want it.

"Yes, fuck my ass, Silas," I say with my eyes on Redix while a dark desire starts to shadow his. "Can you feel him?" I ask Redix. "Can you feel him fucking my ass while you're fucking my pussy?" Even those words feel orgasmic on my lips.

"Yes." Redix thrusts his hips.

“Oh fuck,” I gasp. I wasn’t ready for that. “Let me,” I suggest, and they hold still.

I reach behind me, guiding Silas at my pace while my thighs lift and lower on Redix’s length. It’s slow. It’s a ride that drives them in, deeper and deeper, until the pressure, the pain leaves my body, and now it demands pleasure.

They do, too. Finding a gentle rhythm, Redix is enraptured under me, watching my face, feeling Silas’s cock inside me at the same time. I know it’s getting him off.

“Yes,” Silas keeps moaning from behind. “Fuck, this looks so hot.” He grabs the bottle of lube from the bed. “Here,” he says, and I feel more slick ooze pour over us, the glide of their cocks easing in as my body takes their thrusts faster, my pace getting hungry.

“Oh my God,” it’s all pleasure beyond my wildest imagination. “Yes, fuck me,” I’m telling them both, and their hips work together; their cocks are alternating pistons, one sliding out while the other slides in, and my greed grows. And will it ever stop for them?

“Yes,” I lift from Redix’s grasp so he can feel *and* watch, so I can arch my back and take more of Silas’s fuck while Redix rolls his hips under me, his cock making my pussy clamp down for more.

My tits start bouncing to their dual fuck as Silas grabs my shoulders, pulling me down his length while Redix grabs my ass, his grip spreading me so wide for their matching thrusts now.

“Oh, God.” I can’t find myself. I can’t find any thought. “Oh, yes.” I don’t want to except for this. “Don’t stop.” Except for their fuck. “Fuck me so hard.” And they do.

“Yessss, that’s it.” Silas pulls me harder, arching my back more. “Roll that sweet pussy and tight ass over our cocks.” He drives me crazy talking like that. “Take us like you want it.” And he knows it. “Come on, Cade. Keep fucking both our cocks.”

I want to stay here. I want to stay on this edge. I never knew it existed, and now I'm never leaving. There's nothing I won't do with them here. I've never let go like this. I've never known trust like this, pleasure like this.

Redix looks up at me in bliss, unable to speak from the pleasure, but Silas won't relent. He's going to take me. "Your pussy's gonna come so hard because you fucking love this, Cade, don't you? You love getting fucked like this. You love two cocks inside you."

Yes, I do. I can't speak. I have no control. It's the biggest wave ever rising inside me, and I fear its crash. My body shakes, scared and thrilled for its arrival while my eyes lock on Redix's, and I'm safe.

His mouth hangs agape. His eyes are hooded. He's losing it, too, watching and feeling this.

"Come on." Silas urges me through clenched teeth. "See how dirty we make you, Cade? With my cock in your ass and his in your pussy?" He smacks my ass to make me snap. "Come on our cocks."

"Oh, God!" I convulse. I explode. No sight. No sound. It's an annihilating pleasure, detonating my body stretched to an expanse it almost can't take. Every part of me shakes, clenching down on the bliss of them inside me while it pulses through.

I swear it lasts forever, this perfect destruction while Redix pulls me down, holding me through it. With three more thrusts inside, my shaking body ends Silas with deep, loud grunts, his hips shuddering against my backside, his tight grip on my shoulders.

My breath heaves. I start to come back when Redix lifts my lips to his. He's not done. He didn't come yet, but he's close; I know it by *his* breath.

"Cade," Redix whispers against my lips. Silas is still hard inside me while Redix keeps pumping his hard cock, riding out the wave of my pleasure. "Cade." But the look in Redix's eyes. There're tears in them. It's more than his orgasm. I know

his heart. I know his soul. I see it in his gaze, desperately asking mine. “Cade, please.”

I know what he’s begging, what he needs more than anything, and my soul begs it, too.

Hang on to our dream. Please don’t let it die.

His jaw tenses, his back arching. It locks his body in a seizure he can’t control, his cock pulsing inside my walls so full I feel him filling my body while my heart floods with it.

“Redix, I love you too.” I cry to his gaze, clinging to mine. Because we’ve been through so much. And we want this. We need each other like our next breath.

Our love is so great it hurts sometimes, and we want to find the other side of our nightmare.

We want our dream together.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



IT'S LIKE WATCHING TWO BATTERED PEOPLE CRAWL TO SHORE. Like they've been through hell and almost drowned, but together, they fought to survive.

And all you can do is feel happy to see they made it. Like they make you believe again in hope.

I'm still inside Cade. I'm still recovering my breath, and I can feel their love. I can hear Redix softly calling her name, and I can feel her orgasm, leaving her in tremors while he comes pulsing against my cock. The intensity of it takes them into tears.

I'm not jealous. I'm not hurt. I'm in awe. It tightens my throat, threatening to burn my eyes while I can feel them share this.

They've had this love for so long, they don't realize how amazing it is. How rare it is.

Cade starts crying in Redix's arms. He holds her there, and I ease my way out to give them this moment. They need it. They've been through so much, and they're tired of the fight.

I lie down on the pillow beside Redix to catch my breath. But I give them space; I try to give them this time like I'm not here.

But Cade lifts from his hug and sees me lying here.

"I love you, too," she says, leaning her tear-stained cheeks over me before her soft kiss. "Thank you." She nuzzles her nose to mine.

"You're welcome." I mean it.

Redix turns to me. "You okay?"

"We're post-threesome fuck." I try to joke. "What else would I be?"

But we all feel it.

Something just happened. Something just shifted, hitting me so hard that I have to turn my head.

I can't look at them.

"Hey." Cade climbs off Redix. "Hey, come here." She's on top of me, trying to turn my chin her way. "Silas, what's wrong?"

I can't talk. Not until all the pieces settle in my chest.

"Hey." Redix touches my shoulder. "We just gotta talk, remember? That's what you tell my thick skull all the time."

Cade lies on me, her limbs twisting with mine, and I wrap around her body, holding her warmth. Redix slides up closer beside me, and his touch calms me, too.

"We all stay right here," Cade murmurs against my chest. "We keep holding you until you're ready to talk."

I huff a small laugh. *If that ain't the truth.* Cade's so stubborn she'll cling to me like a barnacle until I speak.

This moment was coming; I always believed it. I kept asking myself the question about Cade. Then, about Redix. I kept my heart open to it, and it just hit me like a wave over my back, knocking me down, pulling me under, and I can't deny its power.

“I feel it now.” I turn my head so I can tell them both. “I feel what I want now.”

“Which is?” Redix’s eyes can be so soft sometimes. Like the safest blue sky to fly in. For all his brawn and swagger, he’s got the biggest heart.

“I want what you two have.”

“You *do* have us,” Cade says.

“You know I love you,” Redix says it for the first time to me, and it’s all I’ve felt for quite a while.

“I love you too.” I smile at him. “Both of you.” I squeeze Cade’s hips. “But I want my *own* love. I wanna find someone like y’all found each other, and I wanna start new and discover everything with them. And I wanna fuss and fuck and fight and laugh, and I want it all.”

“Do you feel left out with us?” Cade’s brows furrow. “I’m so sorry if we made you feel that way.”

“No. That’s not it. I love you both, and I’m happy for you. I just feel... I don’t know... selfish. I want *my* love. And maybe I don’t want to share it with anyone else.”

“But what about us?” Redix looks hurt. Like he’s losing me. He’s more afraid of this than Cade.

“I don’t know who I’ll meet, but I know I will one day. I’ll find them. And what if they’re not okay with this? With us? I don’t know.”

Redix flinches. “So we’re over?”

“No.” I crane my neck for his kiss. He relents, giving me one back, but he worries. “We’re not over.” I hum against his lips. “I just want to tell y’all now... I’m not staying forever.”

“You need to be free,” Cade says, like she gets it completely.

“Yes, I want to be free to find a love like you two have. Y’all need to stop taking it for granted.”

It’s a long night while we talk it out more.

Cade understands. I see it in her eyes, though I know she's worried because Redix is hurt.

He's not even mad. He goes straight to painful silence until I start kissing him into a reaction. Until I touch his chest and start opening his mouth with all that my hands can make him feel.

"I feel like I'm losing you." He grabs the back of my neck. "When I just found you."

"You're not losing me." I grab him back. Cade's pressed to my back and encouraging this. She doesn't want him to hurt either. "You're letting me go, but I promise I'll keep coming back."

"What will that look like?" Redix has been through so much. He doesn't like uncertainty.

"What do you mean?" I smile. "You only want me for the sucks and fucks?"

That makes him laugh. "I mean, hell fucking yes, those are great." I swear he stares into my soul. "Just don't take your friendship away, too. You can't be with someone that fucking insecure that we all can't at least be close friends. Promise me that."

"I promise."

And I do, crawling on top of him, proving it with my body while Cade joins me, and we both please him until he's sure.

Until I'm inside him while Cade has his hard cock in her mouth, and I've never seen Redix writhe so much. I've never heard him groan so deeply. It's more than the pleasure we're killing him with. It's a promise he's asking that we'll stay connected somehow.

And we spend the rest of the night and the next day, the three of us in bed. Or in the shower. All over that suite with room service trays sliding in and out the door, we fuck and talk and fuck again and sleep until, I hope after two days, they know.

I'm always going to love them.

And yes, if I can, if we want, we can fuck, too, because it
heals us all.

But I just wish they'd get it.

That they could see past all their hurt and pain. That they
have a love so great anyone would want it.

And I know there's someone out there waiting to find it
with me, too.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



I'M DRENCHED.

I wake up sweating, my tank top soaked, and something's wrong.

Tapping my phone, it's one a.m. I'm alone in bed, trying to recover my body and heart from our two days in the hotel suite. It was so intense. All that we felt and fucked and tried to work through.

Some of it worked.

Silas and I will always be okay. I never felt possessive over him. I want him to be happy. And maybe it's because I had more time with Silas, but Redix isn't taking it well.

Silas wanted time alone. He kissed us goodbye and left, and I could see it written across Redix's dropped shoulders: he's heartbroken.

We're not completely healed either, and now he feels he's lost Silas, too.

I wanted to be there for Redix, but he wanted to be alone, too. Like a fresh wound opened for him, and I fear he blames

me for it. So we all need some time apart.

But something. A nightmare? A feeling? Like that night on the beach. That horrible night when they took Redix, and I wouldn't stop searching for him.

That same eerie feeling wakes me while I throw my clothes on. I'm so close to him, we're so connected, and I know...

Redix is in danger.



THE CONSOLE on my car glows 1:40 am when I park outside Redix's house. It's almost dark inside the house. Only its exterior lights illuminate the night. A summer storm is blowing in over the ocean, thunder rumbling nearby.

His night guard, Keith, must be on the other side of the house, checking the perimeter.

I don't want to wake everyone up inside. His sister, nephew, and Mama have their bedrooms on one wing of the house. Redix's owner's suite is on the other. I could go around and tap on his sliding glass door, but that'll scare the shit out of him.

Fuck it. I call him.

Two rings, and he picks up. "Hey." He wasn't asleep. I can tell.

"I'm outside. Can you talk?"

"Yeah, be right there."

I meet him at the front door. He swings it open, wearing pajama pants and a white T-shirt. His body is perfect, but his face is wrenched with pain.

"Come in." He steps aside.

A couple of table lamps glow in his open living room while he closes the door behind me. The ocean flashes outside

under a blast of lightning before thunder rolls while the rest of the house is quiet.

I turn to him. “You okay?”

“I’m sober if that’s what you’re asking.”

He knows me too well. His bare feet aim toward the sofa in his living room. I follow him, watching him fall into the cushions before he buries his head in his hands.

“We scared him away,” he mutters.

“He was never going to stay.” I don’t sit down.

“Why would he?” He looks at me. “Hell, we don’t even stay. We fight all the damn time.”

“Let’s not start one now.”

I didn’t come here for this. Silas is right—me and Redix fall into this too easily, taking our love for granted. We’re tired, frustrated, and still hurting, and we take it out on each other. Like we’ve known each other for so long, we assume we’ll always survive the damage we do.

We won’t.

Something has to change.

“Look, can we just—”

I’m about to sit down. I’m about to put my ego down when a loud *boom* of thunder hits the air, and we both turn our heads toward the windows.

“Dammit, Nicolas.” Redix jumps up. “He keeps leaving the damn doors open.”

The sliding glass door between his living room and pool outside is open a foot wide.

Redix goes to close it, but I grab his arm, the hairs on mine standing on end. My ears strain to hear. My muscles draw up. My nerves start firing. I can sense it...

“Where’s everyone?” I whisper.

“They’re asleep. Why?”

“Where’s Keith?”

“Around here somewhere.”

But I haven’t seen Keith, and if he’s running his usual nightly rounds, I would’ve seen his flashlight outside by now.

This sensation. It’s what woke me up.

I reach for Redix’s neck, pulling him into a kiss. He’s shocked but takes it.

“Derek’s in the house,” I whisper in his ear like we’re making out. “Don’t react. Keep kissing me.”

Every muscle on his body tenses against mine. We kiss again, but it’s not passionate. It gives me a second to think.

I snake my hands through his long hair, pulling his neck down like I’m about to devour it. “When did you last see Renie? Nicolas?”

“This afternoon. Mama, too.” He whispers in my ear.

I kiss his neck. “Have you heard them?”

He kisses mine back. “I’ve been in my room.”

That’s been hours and given Derek plenty of time.

They’re here. He’s here. I know it.

I go back for Redix’s lips; if Derek’s watching, listening in, we can’t blow this. “My gun and radio are in my car.” I ghost his mouth with whispers. “Fight with me. Act. Follow me out there and back into this house. No matter what.”

I shove him away, raising my voice. “So you think fucking’s gonna solve things?”

It crosses his eyes fast. My plan. His next move. “Why not?” He raises his voice, too. “You fucked him too. And we all loved it until you and your revenge. It’s your fault he left.”

Is he acting?

I turn toward his front door. “Go to hell, Redix Dean. I’m tired of being your emotional bitch.”

My eyes scan. My pulse, I try calming it, but it reacts. The long hallway to the guest bedrooms on my right? It's dark. A light's on under one of the bedroom doors at the end of it.

That's where Derek is.

"Yeah, well fuck you, Cade." Redix is on my heels. This act is easy for him. But keeping calm, it's straining his voice. "Go ahead, run instead of fighting for *us*. It's what you do now."

Opening the front door, *make sure you keep it unlocked*, I sneer, "I'm sick of fighting. It's *all* we do."

My steps eat up the distance, down his front porch, while Redix follows me, shouting, "Because you don't fucking listen. You're so goddamn stubborn. What are you gonna do? Jump in your car and drive away? Because you can't stand the truth?"

I do jump in my car. Grabbing my police radio on my passenger seat, I turn it on while Redix yells at my passenger window. "Come on, Cade. Grow the fuck up and talk to me. But you won't, will you? No. You always gotta..."

He keeps yelling, his shouts shaking with the thunder rolling overhead.

"This is Bryant, one forty, to dispatch." I crouch low using Redix's position between me and the house so Derek can't see if he's watching through a window. And like Redix was raised around cops too, he knows what to do too. "I need multiple units at 10 Pelican Lane. Wanted suspect Derek Baucom is inside. Possibly armed. Possible hostages. The security guard is down. Homeowner, Redix Dean. White male. Long hair. White T-shirt is with me. I'm going back inside. Repeat. I have wanted suspect Derek Baucom. I need backup."

It rolls off my tongue while I tuck my gun into the back waistband of my jeans.

"You gonna face me, Cade?" Redix keeps shouting at my window like the asshole he can certainly act like. He's buying me time. "You gonna man up and face me?"

"Dominquez. Two ten. En route."

That's Penny. Thank God she's back from maternity leave.

"Bryant." She calls on the radio. "Advise status."

"I'm outside the home. Going back in. Suspect inside. Possibly armed."

"Bryant, wait for backup."

That's protocol.

That's not happening.

"I'll leave the front door unlocked," I answer. "Going radio silent."

I turn it off, shove it under my waistband, and pull my T-shirt over to hide the radio and my gun. Grabbing my pocketknife from my duty belt, I slide it into my back pocket while Redix keeps priming me with his taunts.

"You just gonna sit there, Cade? And treat me like a fucking idiot?"

"Fine!" I jump back out of my car. "You think I'm the fucking idiot? What's in your bedroom? Or on your phone?" I push past him in his driveway and storm up his front steps. "You think I don't know about all the others, Redix? How many have you fucked by now?"

"You wanna see?" He charges in behind me. "I got nothing to hide."

We stand in the foyer. Our voices raised. Our act still going, but our eyes dart, looking for our next move.

"Nothing to hide?" I have an idea. "What about your family? Your mama? Does she know about him?"

That cracks his veneer. Redix can act mad at me, but bring up Silas? "Yeah, she knows. I'm proud that I love him. At least we don't fight."

"Yeah? What about your sister?" I need to draw Derek out. To sound like I'm seconds from turning toward that door and raiding his hideout. "Why don't I tell her that all this time, you've been with me, you've been with him too? Whose side do you think she'll take?"

“She’ll take *my* side.” Redix towers over me. He’s leaning in and getting into this, and he turns, so I turn, following his performance. “Because he fucking listens. He asks what I need. He doesn’t hurt me like you do. He chooses *me*. He only loves me back, and I love him too.”

This is too much.

This is his truth, and we’re *not* acting. His words stab my heart, yanking my breath away, and it hurts so bad the tears are instant.

“You love him more than me, don’t you?”

“I—”

His face twists with the words rising from his heart, with his truth about to fire from his mouth, but his eyes dart up, looking over my shoulder.

And it happens too fast...

Redix shoves past me, knocking me aside. He charges forward, blocking me while his huge body rushes his target.

I reach for my gun.

“Redix, stop!”

I can’t see who he’s lurching for... but it’s Derek.

“Redix!”

My shout and a gunshot blast the air. I don’t scream. I hold aim while I watch his body fall forward on top of Derek.

My eyes. My sights. They track his movement. Tracking their fight while I search for my target and where that gunshot landed.

Redix grabs Derek’s wrist. The one holding the gun that just fired. He’s got inches and pounds of muscle on him, and he uses it, slamming his arm against the white marble floor. It knocks the gun from Derek’s grasp.

Punches are thrown. Redix hooks Derek’s jaw while he jabs at Redix’s nose. They brawl. They’re sprawled on the floor while my training takes over.

I rush for the gun. Avoiding their struggle, I grab it from the floor. Derek's not armed now. That risk is eliminated while I secure the hostages next. Redix can handle this fight, but I don't know if Derek's working alone.

Gun aimed down the hall, I approach the bedroom door. It's unlocked. I kick it open and scan the room.

Renie. Nicolas. Redix's mama, Elise. They're on the floor. Hands, feet, and mouths taped. On my right? Feet are sprawled on the ground. My back to the wall, my gun raised, I clear the room. I find Keith, their night guard, passed out on the floor. No trauma.

"It's okay." I grab the knife from my pocket. We can hear the fight, the struggle of Redix and Derek trashing the living room while I keep my gun up, covering the door with one hand and slicing through the tape over their ankles with the other. "It's okay," I tell them. Their eyes are wide. Terrified. "We gotta get you out of here."

I free their hands next. Then Renie and her mama rip the tape off their mouths.

"Grab him," I tell Renie, who scoops Nicolas in her arms. "Let's go."

I keep them covered while they run toward the sliding glass door in the bedroom to the patio outside. Blue lights are flashing across the dark rainy night.

I turn my radio back on when a loud crash, a lamp breaks in the living room, and all my fear for Redix ices my veins, but this is the priority.

Get his family safe.

"This is Bryant," I call into my radio. "I'm exiting out of the back with three hostages secure. Suspect still inside. No longer armed. Homeowner is in active altercation with the suspect. Stand down."

Renie holds a scared Nicolas in her arms while she steps into the rain outside. Deputies are there, waiting for them. Redix's mama follows, and they'll be okay.

I turn back toward the fight.

“Hey!” Penny charges in through the open door. Two deputies follow her. “I told you to wait for backup.”

“Uh-huh.” She knows better. I don’t follow rules because all I’m following is my instinct to protect Redix next.

Running entry formation back down the hallway, I have three deputies behind me, all with our guns held at ready.

What will I find? I don’t know if I can face it.

I have to trust. In Redix’s strength. In his fight. He can defend himself.

We turn the corner, and the room is trashed. I scan it fast, my eyes landing on Redix.

The left side of his white T-shirt is drenched in blood, and he’s got his back to me. His hands are around Derek’s neck. He’s lifted him so high that Derek’s feet dangle in the air as Redix’s grasp chokes him against the window to the storm outside.

“Are you fucking laughing now?” It seethes through Redix’s voice. He doesn’t even know we’re here. “Huh? Motherfucker? Wanna laugh now?”

Derek’s evil face is red with rage, and the breath Redix is taking from him.

I give the signal to the deputies to lower their weapons. Penny doesn’t want to. She gives me a look, and I answer, “This is his fight. Let him have it.”

“Fuck you,” Derek coughs. “I took everything you loved, pretty boy. You had too much.”

Why Derek’s so fixated on Redix is obvious. Tragic and disgusting. It’s Redix’s curse. His beauty puts most in a state of euphoria, but for a few, it makes them evil with demented jealousy.

Derek’s everything ugly on the inside. Violent. Insecure. Entitled and wanting to take everything he doesn’t have. It doesn’t matter his exterior.

So once he went after Redix and couldn't have him because my dad stopped him, he went after his sister next. And I saw the suitcase in the bedroom. He was going to take Nicolas. Not that he loved the boy. It just would've destroyed the last piece of Redix if he did.

Even through the sweat and blood pouring from him now, all Redix has ever been is beautiful. The best son, the best brother, the best uncle, and the best friend protecting us all, and few see the burden that's been for him.

But I have. I've seen the price he's paid for it too. Time and again.

"Argh!" Redix slams Derek's skull so hard against the glass. It's thick, but that impact starts to splinter the perfect facade.

"Fuck you," Redix growls back, slamming Derek's head again. His big, strong hands squeeze Derek's neck so hard he can kill him.

And I want to let him.

My colleagues, the deputies, and Penny stand with weapons itching to do something, but they won't defy me.

Redix can do it. He can kill Derek and kill his pain, too. Derek's eyes glass over, his face red, and his body limp. He's seconds away.

But this isn't Redix.

This is rage, and though Redix and I align in a perfect match in every way, this is our fatal difference.

Redix is passion and peace and everything protective. His soul has survived so much.

I'm the vengeance. I'm the one he sacrificed for, so I'd be strong enough to do this for him.

"Redix, stop!"

My shout booms with a rattle of thunder, the reverberations traveling through him.

His hands drop from Derek's neck. Derek's limp body slides to the floor, unconscious.

The heave of Redix's chest, his shoulders rising and falling, he doesn't even feel that his arm's been shot. That Derek's bullet went straight through it. It's not a fatal wound, but it's weeping blood down to his wrist and staining his shirt to his waist.

The deputies rush over, guns drawn, while Penny cuffs an unconscious Derek. She starts calling in the medic and other deputies outside.

Chaos rains down over the house while they secure the scene. While Redix can't find his sanity, and I don't even think he sees me standing before him.

He's lost in that night.

In all Derek did in the name of hurting him.

Medics take Derek out. A couple of others try talking to Redix, to address his wound, but he's not responding.

"Just give him a minute," I say. "Give him some space."

The room clears. Deputies and medics stand on the edge of it while we all watch Redix on his mental edge.

"Hey." I touch his sweaty arm, the one not shot. "I'm right here. It's okay now."

His eyes, his logic, finally see me here. "No, it's not," he says. The fracture in his eyes. The pain and torment in them. I've seen this look before. It's right before he runs. "It'll *never* be okay what they did to us."

He moves so fast. Lifting the side chair beside him, he slams it into the glass window. It shatters, almost breaking to the storm outside.

And I step back. I'm not shocked. Redix slams the chair against the window again, and I glance at the deputies. They're ready to intervene, but I put my hand up.

"Let him," I say.

It's his house. It's his rage. It's his pain, and I've never seen him like this.

Redix slams the chair over and over until, finally, the window breaks into pieces, pouring a glass avalanche over the floor. He's yelling. He's shouting. He's picking up the matching chair and going for another window. Another perfect facade he wants to ruin like they tried to do to him.

"Fuck you!" He shouts. He's never been so angry, so loud. "Fuck them!" His blood drips to the floor. Sweat pours down his face. "Fuck them!" But he won't stop.

He's in that night. The one that changed us forever, and I'm right there with him. Seeing him beaten, battered, and bloodied, all for me, and my vision blurs with the tears he's not crying while this madness takes him.

He's fought it for so long. He's run from it. Numbed it. Written about it. Talked about it.

Almost died from it.

And now... for the first time... he lets himself feel it.

The anger. The rage. Tears drip from my chin because I know his madness. I know his hell. I've felt it, too. I wanted to kill too.

TJ. Derek. Gentry.

"Fuck them!" The chair crashes into the glass again, and his shouts break my heart, clenching my teeth to his agony. "They didn't." Because he's roaring from his, he's in this pain, smashing the chair again into the glass. "Fucking break!" All his might. All his muscles. All his fury. "Me!"

It explodes to his violence. The chair lands on the patio outside over an ocean of glass, and Redix crashes to his knees on the edge of his house, of his sanity.

I fall with him. Wrapping my hands around his neck, I hang on through my sobs, and he won't hold me back. He's still lost. He's still trying to come back.

"I love you" is all I can swear into his flesh. His sweaty neck smells like the blood soaking his shirt, and "I love you"

is all I feel, all I can say.

The last time he was this far gone, his limp body was in my arms. He was breaths away from dying and never again. I'll never stop fighting for him.

I turn his chin, searching his eyes. "I love you." I try reaching him again. "It's me, Candy Cade. I'm right here. They didn't break us. No one can."

He blinks, gazing at me until something shifts behind his eyes, his soul forever changed.

"I get it," he mutters. "I understand."

He presses his forehead to mine, and it's true. Love is stronger than violence. Not even death can take it away. Not from us.

His hand, dripping with blood, reaches for mine. "I love you, Cade."

"Hey, come on." Penny startles me. Her hand lands on my shoulder, and I see the medics behind him. "Let them help."

His gunshot wound. They need to stop the bleeding. It's getting bad.

I let go of him and stand up. I clear a path for the medics to kneel beside him, silently dressing his wound to prepare him for transport.

"They got this." Penny keeps pulling me away from him.

I resist. "I'm not leaving him." I'll ride in the ambulance with him. I'll hold his other hand in the emergency room. I'll keep talking to him and holding him and never leave his side again.

He understands. He forgives me. He almost killed Derek, and now he knows how the madness takes you. How you'll do anything for someone you love. How our love belongs to us, but the anger belongs to the ones who hurt us.

How we can let it go now and go back to the love.

"I need you to come with me." Penny sounds funny. That darts my eyes her way, and I see her phone, not her radio in

her hand. "I got a call," she says.

Her pull, she's guiding me toward the front door, and the look in her eyes. It's scaring me.

"What's going on?" I ask her.

I don't want this answer.

"Cade, it's your mom," she says.

And I lose the next month of my life.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



IF I COULD WRITE MY ENDING, I'D WANT IT TO BE LIKE THE one my mama had.

Because it's always too soon. And time is never enough. And it hurts like hell to watch someone go.

But we all will.

And in typical Sheriff Gloria Bryant fashion, my mama went out exactly how she ordered. She even planned the goddamn menu down to the lemon cake I love and magnolia flower centerpieces I now love too.

The first week in hospice care, she was lucid. She was in no pain and in rare form. I sat on one side of her, and Dad sat on the other. We looked through picture albums and her tablet with more recent stuff.

Mama said, "We're walking memory lane together to the damn end."

It was a beautiful journey. We've been blessed. I've been lucky. I'd forgotten to be thankful that even though my parents

divorced before they reconciled, we still did all the holidays and birthdays together.

“Come on.” I nudged Mama while we stared at a Christmas picture of us when I was sixteen. When they gave me my first cell phone as a present. “Y’all were still fucking back then, weren’t you?”

“What makes you say that?” Mama giggled too much. Dad smiled, guilty as hell.

“Because look at you.” I pointed at the picture. “You look way too happy over my new damn phone. And I remember it now. How y’all disappeared the hour before Santa came to visit.”

“Ho, ho, ho.” Mama beamed proudly. “Santa did come, and Ms. Claus did twice.”

I was rolling. My parents were too cute. And if we weren’t talking about memories, Mama wanted stories about my sex life with Redix and Silas.

“Go get a quick cup of coffee for the next two hours,” she shooed my dad away. “I gotta hear this.”

Dad kissed Mama on the forehead, while he didn’t want to stay for the details.

“All I wanna know,” Dad said, “is if Silas has the same habit of going through a box of tissues like Redix did. The ones I used to find all over my damn boat.”

“Dad!” I cuddled up next to Mama. “That’s gross.”

“Is it?” My dad’s eyebrows danced. “If it’s so damn gross, then why’d y’all do it? All. The. Damn. Time.”

“Because he might be like our *son*,” Mama answered for me. “But you’d be a fool not to fuck Redix Dean. Every. Damn. Day.”

Dad shuddered like that grossed him out before he left us laughing.

“Alright.” Mama held my hand. Her grip was weak, cold, and comforting. “Don’t spare me anything. Start with the first

kiss between you three, and go from there. Every smutty detail.”

“Mama, I ain’t giving you every smutty detail.”

“You better.” Her eyes sparkled until the very end. “I wanna go to heaven with a little sin on my brain. And sex is the best sin because it ain’t really one.”

It was weird at first, telling her everything. But then it was fun. And making us laugh. I’ve never seen my mama’s eyes get so wide when I got to the parts when it was all three of our, well... parts. Of all of our bodies together.

“How did they fit?”

Mama was fascinated. Like I was sharing the results of my science experiment, not my first double-penetration with two well-hung studs.

“Well,” I couldn’t believe I was saying it, but then again, I shared everything with my mama. “It was the *opposite* of throwing two hotdogs down a hallway.”

She howled back, her frail shoulders shaking with laughter. “Oh my, Lord!” She was crying happy tears.

“Yeah, that’s what I said. Many times while it felt like two giant sausages trying to thread the same tiny sewing needle.”

She wouldn’t stop laughing. “Then why in the Sam Hill did you do it?”

“Because what hurts at first starts to feel real good.” And then I remembered it, the sensation never forgotten by my body. “And when it’s Redix and Silas, and when I love and trust them... it starts to feel so damn good you don’t ever want it to stop.”

“Hand me a fan.” Mama interrupted my story.

“Are you okay?” I reached for the church fan Penny had brought over a few days before. “Do you need me to call the nurse?”

“No.” Mama barely had enough strength, but her fanning habit was too strong after all those years in a church in the

Lowcountry swelter. “I’m fine. Wonderful actually. It’s just your stories are making all my angels sing... if you know what I mean.”

“Mama, this is weird.”

I can’t tell you how many of those moments we had. I cherish them all.

“It ain’t weird. We’re laughing about all the great things in life.” She stopped fanning herself. “That’s a helluva lot better than spending your last minutes crying over it.” She squeezed my hand. “Now, don’t stop.” She laughed. “Wait... that’s what *you* said, isn’t it?”

“*Yeah*, I did.”

So I didn’t hold back. I told her everything, and she loved it like her favorite books come to life (pun intended) until the story of our last time together.

“It was powerful, actually.” My head rested on the pillow next to hers. She was turned my way like I was telling the best XXX-rated bedtime stories. “The last time the three of us were together, I swear I couldn’t stop crying after it. Like something came over me. At how I’m gonna miss Silas and how Redix and I can’t seem to get it right.”

I didn’t want to burden my mama, not then. But she could see it along with the tears in my eyes. “Mama, I don’t know what to do.”

“You’re not gonna know,” she said. “You’re gonna feel it. Not everything is tactics and training. Just let go, and you’ll feel the answer. You’ll know when it’s right.”

She played with my hair. I was five again and so thankful. “You know when I knew me and your dad were good again? That we were back together until the end.” She stopped. “Until now.”

The lump in my throat. It was a mountain holding back my sob. “When?” I barely muttered.

“When we were fussing and fighting, and I started coughing. And right in the middle of telling me what a mule-

headed beauty I was, your dad poured me a glass of water, just like that. He was pissed as hell, and so was I, but that's love. You keep caring through the anger."

We had lots of great talks—way too many laughs. So much so I swear we were pissing off other people on the hospital floor, but we didn't care.

Everyone visited.

Penny brought welcome news when she came by in the first few days. They tracked the phone they found on Derek back to where Gentry's old sailboat was hidden on the island. And there, they found Cam Le. Alive.

"How is she?" I was afraid to ask.

"She's gonna be okay, all things considered," Penny answered. And like my mama was still Sheriff, Penny debriefed us. "We found so much on Derek's phone. It's like he's been obsessed with Redix all this time. We even found chats where he posted threats and outright lies about him. It's sick."

"Is Redix okay?"

"Yeah." Penny can't help but like him now. "He doesn't care about the stuff Derek posted on him. But he created a fund for Cam. For all the victims. They'll have all the medical care, counseling, and even housing and such to get their lives back. And Silas got his family's foundation to help, too. It's gonna be okay from here."

That news filled my fragile heart, and I had to fight the tears biting at my eyes. "What about Pamela?"

"No clues yet." Penny hated delivering that news. "Gentry claims he had no idea Derek was using his old boat as a hideout, and we found no evidence of an alternate location. We're back at square one with Pamela."

"No, you're not." Mama sat up as tall as she could in bed. "You're gonna find her. She's gonna be okay. I promise."

Part of me wanted to believe her. Like she had the ability to give such a divine prophecy. The other part of me hated

why.

Silas came by a couple of days later. He was great with my mama and took my dad to lunch several times over the weeks to give him needed breaks. I remember that part.

But I wouldn't leave her side.

Redix came by a few times with his family. His arm was bandaged, and he was back from whatever hell he disappeared into that night with Derek. Redix was so focused on my mama and worried about his because our moms were best friends. And Elise was not taking Mama's passing very well.

I think that's when it started to hit me, too. I barely remember Redix leaving the last time or what he said to me. I just remember his kiss on my cheek and that I was slipping away.

Days passed, and with each one, Mama slipped away more into the relief they gave her from the pain. Dad never left her side in the end, either.

It was a couple of days before her last one. In one of her final lucid moments, I swear Mama looked at me like the past fourteen years hadn't happened.

Like when I was fifteen, and she was waking my grumpy ass up and telling me to turn my damn snooze button off and go to school.

"Mama." I groaned into my pillow then. "Leave me alone."

"Never," she said.

"Life is lemon cake, Magnolia Cade." She said it then. She said it again one last time to me. "And you're my sweetest part."

She kissed my cheek.

And she'll never leave me alone.

CHAPTER FORTY



REDIX

I DIDN'T RECOGNIZE CADE.

Not while she stood in my storm, and I trashed my house at the fury raging inside me over Derek. At all the pain he and Gentry and TJ wreaked upon our lives.

For the first time, I got it. I understood her anger and why she came so close to killing TJ.

If it weren't for Cade stopping me, I would've killed Derek. Just to kill his laughter in my mind. To hurt him back for hurting my sister. For all the women he hurt. To punish him for being a shitty father to the best kid in the world.

But I stopped and finally saw Cade in a new light. It wasn't perfect. It wasn't even beautiful. But it was honest. And real. And very human and just like me.

Then I didn't recognize Cade at the hospital with Mama G. Like she smiled and laughed for her mama. And she talked to me, but she was drifting away. Not even I could reach her. I could feel it on her soft cheek when I last kissed her goodbye.

Cade wasn't there. She was lost in grief.

Silas and I hung out a lot over the month. We just talked. He helped me with the repairs and window bullshit that had to be fixed on my house.

I don't regret trashing it. I needed to. I needed to break everything until the anger didn't own me anymore.

It's like anger was the one emotion for so long I didn't let myself feel. It was the most powerful one, and drinking kept it away. Then, when I stopped doing that, it came back.

I blamed Cade for it. I thought all my anger was her fault for what she did to TJ. Or almost did, but Mama G, like the badass she is even in death, was the ultimate one.

I guess I put all my anger on Cade because, deep down, I knew she could take it. She's strong as hell. She loves me, and I used the excuse of what she did to TJ because I didn't want to face who was also to blame.

Until I did.

That Derek Baucom piece-of-shit has been obsessed with me. After all the evidence the Sheriff's office found, it's worse than I ever imagined. It's like I'm the reason he hates himself. Like if he could keep hurting me, one day he might feel better.

He was deranged, and the second he raised his gun at Cade's back to take her from me, too, that was it. I didn't even feel the bullet through my arm. Fate wasn't an asshole that night. It did me right. That damn bullet went clean through and didn't even hit my bone. My bicep isn't thrilled about it, but it'll heal.

So will I.

Because TJ is dead, and I'm thankful for that. And Derek Baucom's in jail and won't ever see sunlight but for one hour a day for the rest of his life.

My family is safe. And my house can be fixed. But now I gotta fix the one thing that means the most to me.

My Candy Cade.

I still don't recognize her now.

She's dressed in black. The irony is she looks so beautiful even at a burial; it's bittersweet. Her eyes won't leave Mama G's coffin, and she won't let go of her dad's hand. He's sitting beside her, eyes glued on the same magnolia casket spray. And I grin, for just a second, up to the hot August sky.

Magnolias.

Mama G loved them. Jeff, Cade's dad, thought it'd be a great idea to name their beautiful daughter in honor of that. And that beautiful, stunning, incredible daughter gets so damn pissed it's cute whenever you call her that name or give her those flowers.

Yep, Mama G got the last laugh.

Silas stands beside me. We were pallbearers, and now we're sweating expensive BOUND cologne in the South Carolina heat.

I've cried my tears over Mama G. I couldn't help it when it upset my mama so much to see her go. But now I'm standing strong for Cade. I'm focused only on what she needs, and it's beginning to fall into place.

My skull ain't so thick anymore. And my eyes are wide open. So is my heart. I've never seen Cade like this, and it's like, for the first time in ten years, she needs me to save her again.

I know exactly what should happen next. Mama G whispered it into my ear three times before she passed. And I promised her I would.

Making those plans in my head, romantic ones for later, for when the time is right, I don't notice him at first. A small crowd of dark suits and one blonde in a perfectly tailored black dress make their way to the hundreds of guests gathered in Mama G's honor.

And I can't believe his nerve.

Because he never had the balls.

He's just got pure evil.

“The fuck he will,” I mutter, my steps covering ground to stop the procession of his wicked posse this way before Cade sees him. Because if she sees Senator Gentry Evans at her mama’s funeral, two bodies are going in the ground today.

Silas sees it, too, and backs me up. We meet them halfway across their path through the tombstones under palmetto trees and Spanish Moss.

“Turn around now, Senator,” I say, “and don’t make a fucking scene, or I swear it’ll be your last.”

“I told you,” Stacey hisses beside him. “This is highly inappropriate and not a good idea.”

Her eyes look at mine with nothing but an apology in them. I don’t blame her. She can’t stop Gentry’s wicked ways.

I love the only one who can.

And she needs me right now.

“Mr. Dean.” Gentry smiles too big. “As the distinguished Senator of this district, I will not disrespect the memory and service of our first woman and longest-serving Sheriff in this state. I will pay my respects just like everyone else who has also come to.”

It seems like everyone who ever served under Mama G or just simply loved her is here, even Silas’s parents.

But *not* this man.

“You’ll turn around,” I seethe, “or I’ll strangle your ass back into your car and kill you there, and ain’t no one stopping me. Your choice, Senator.”

“Mr. Dean,” he sneers. “Hollywood clout doesn’t matter here on Hilton Head. You underestimate your power.”

I step to him. So close, I swear he still smells like that vile Abercrombie cologne he used to wear, and it twists my stomach. But now, I’m inches taller, many pounds stronger, and way too tough to ever back down.

“Gentry Evans,”—I grab his neck—“you haven’t *felt* my power yet. But keep fucking with me, and you’ll feel it take

your last breath.”

“And I’ll help him.” Silas steps to my side. “And I’ll make sure every political donor in the South shows you the power of never giving you another damn dollar again.”

Because Gentry’s so damn twisted, so evil that if violence doesn’t control him, money will.

His mouth snarls. His eyes glare into mine, and I’m so tempted. I could end him, squeezing his throat to death now like I almost did Derek.

But I remember.

Two women.

Two friends who still need me.

Cade.

And Pamela.

So I let go. “Leave now,” I growl, “before anyone even sees you were here.”

That may save him face like I give a shit. But that’ll also save Cade’s heart because I don’t want her to see this.

Stacey grabs Gentry’s arm, yanking him back toward the car. He wrests it away from her grip, sneering, “Who the hell do you think you are?”

“We’re leaving,” she says. “Quietly. Or I won’t be so damn silent about everything I know. You understand me?”

I see why Cade likes her. Why they became allies over that evil fuck. As they turn away, I just hope he doesn’t hurt Stacey, too.

“You think she’ll be alright?” I mutter to Silas.

I don’t put anything past Gentry, especially hurting women.

“I got her number,” Silas says. “I’ll check on her later.”

We return to the service, our polished shoes stepping over sandy grass. Oddly, I’m relieved to see Cade so lost in grief and not focused on the world around her. At least she was

spared from Gentry. For the day. And it's a long one. Funerals in the southern heat sweat you down to your last grieving tear.

I don't know how Cade does it. How she goes through the motions, even at the party afterward Mama G wanted to be thrown. It reminds me of a jazz funeral meets an Irish wake. Lots of drinking. Music. Toasts. Tears and laughter. By the end of it, I'm the only sober one.

Even Silas has a couple of drinks, enough to make him whisper in my ear, "I miss us. All three of us."

The heat of his lips on my skin firms my cock at the most inappropriate time. But Mama G supported this love: the unique one me, Silas, and Cade share.

"I miss us too." And I can tell Silas is sober enough to mean it and to remember me saying, "But I want you to be happy. Like we got schooled today—life is short, so fill it with love."

The other person who should be here is across the room, smiling at guests while her soul is a million miles away.

"You were right," I tell Silas. "You keep telling me how special me and Cade are and not to take it for granted." I reach for his hand. This whole room can see us, and I'm proud. "And you're special too. I love you. And so does she. And we'll never stop."

I kiss him. Not with the same heat, the same passion, and God-I-want-to-fuck-you-so-hard urge in my body. That'll always be here, but not today. This is love. This is our life, and I don't want to live it without him either.

Silas takes my kiss before pressing his forehead to mine, swearing, "Because I feel this love. The one you share with Cade. I'll know it when it happens to me, and I won't ever take it for granted."

"You're gonna have a helluva time beating it." I grin. "Just sayin'."

His grin back heats my veins. "I haven't found it yet. And just cuz' I can't stay, it don't mean I'll ever leave. Just sayin'."

And we leave it at that. No fucking at a funeral. Though of all funerals, Mama G would approve. I'm surprised it wasn't one of her dying wishes.

"Y'all go treat each other like angels," she'd probably say, "and fuck like devils too."

That thought helps me keep my shit together while I escort my crying mama to the car. Renie will take her home. I want to turn back for Cade, but Silas and his parents walk toward me on the sidewalk outside the event hall.

"It was nice to see you again, Mr. Dean." Silas's dad shakes my hand. "My regrets it had to be under such sad circumstances. Please bring Ms. Bryant by some other time for a visit." He slaps his other hand on Silas's shoulder. "With my son, of course."

What that invitation means to Silas, I see it lighten his hazel eyes, washing so much of his pain away.

"I'd be honored, sir." I return his handshake before pecking Silas's mom's cheek. "Ms. Van de May, I hope to see you again, too."

"I'll be sure of it." Silas winks my way.

I watch the three of them leave, still stunned as the logic sinks in—*Silas Van de May*. Heir to billions. Boat mechanic to some. Hot-as-fuck man to most... and the only one I'll ever love.

I turn back to search the crowd for Cade. I want to take her home.

But I can't find her. I find her dad, giving him another hug while he tells me, "She went home. She said she wants to be alone."

"What can I do for you?"

"Me?" he asks. "Son, I've been blessed with loving the most incredible woman for almost forty years. I'll be fine. I just wanna get back on my boat for a while."

He was always happy there. Like if he couldn't be with Mama G, his other home was the water. I know the feeling.

But I don't like the one I have going home. My house is like nothing happened. Renie returned to her place with Nicolas. I miss them like hell, but she deserves to have her life back.

And though I thought my mama would never want to leave, she did.

"You need to get on with your life, too," she told me the day she left. "Quit putting it off like someone guaranteed you tomorrow."

Night rolls in. I can't sleep. I can't do anything that feels right. I walk outside to the empty beach yards from my house. Every time I used to come out here, on any beach on this island, particularly at night... I'd think of that one.

What's worse is that I think of all I lost, we lost, after it. For nine years, I woke up missing Cade. I didn't want to open my eyes to the day. I wanted to keep them closed and remember carrying her into the waves while she laughed. That always made me happy because nothing else did. Eventually, I'd roll out of bed, pop open a beer, and start my empty day. Numb. Drunk. Lost.

But like my mama's favorite gospel song, I'm found now. I know my truth, all the happiness I can have, all the love I can wake up to.

And though I'll never know what really happened to me that night, I don't need to.

Because all I need to know is who saved me.

And I need to save her again, too.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



Silhouette by Active Child feat. Ellie Goulding

THE COLD TILE FLOOR RELIEVED THE STICKY HEAT ON MY SKIN. I slid down here hours ago, by my front door, and haven't moved.

I don't want to. I just want to lie here and let this puddle of tears grow under my cheek.

My dad needed to get back on the water, and I needed to collapse. To free what I've held back to be strong for Mama for so long.

She said to me, "You can cry over me at first. Just promise me you'll laugh more and annoy the hell out of people with stories of my brilliance forever."

A chuckle shakes my ribs at her words. It turns into another sob I can't stop. It convulses through me, shaking my soul's frame, and I just let it.

My hand grips the smooth tile, and I hang on to let it all go until I don't remember anything. Until the shadows grow long

across my condo from the sunset, fading to night through the windows to the ocean outside.

And I fade with the light. Just letting go. Into the darkness. Thinking of her.



“COME ON.”

A husky voice wakes me. Along with hands, strong ones lifting me from the floor and into his arms.

“Come on, Candy Cade.”

I smell him, vanilla and leather. I feel his hard chest under my cheek. I wrap my hands around his neck and lace my fingers through his long hair, and I don't need to open my eyes because I'm home.

Because he saves me, too.

“She wouldn't mind a few tears shed.” Redix carries me down the hall to my bedroom. “But she'd tell you to take a shower too.”

“I don't wanna,” I whimper into his chest.

“I'm not asking.” He gently sets my feet, still in heels, down on my bathroom floor. “Come on. We're taking a shower and washing this day off you, and then we're feeding you.”

“I'm not hungry.” I let him unzip my dress.

“I'm not listening.” He drops it to the floor. “Now, do you wanna deal with these, or should I?”

He's asking about my black pantyhose. Only for a funeral would I wear them. I look down at them, having no energy for anything, while he turns the shower on. “I don't care,” I answer.

“Suits me fine.” He rips the back seam over my ass so fast I swear they're tissue and not silk. “*Damn*,” he mutters,

quickly turning my pantyhose into gossamer shreds in seconds. “That’s on the menu for future nights.”

“Are you getting horny right now?” I kick my heels off. I’m not offended.

“Nope,” he answers, peeling off his T-shirt before dropping his jeans. His waking cock answers yes.

I swear the man has a religion against underwear.

I swear I kinda love that about him.

“Come on.” He guides me under the water with him.

And it does feel good. The sweat, tears, day, and grief wash off with the soap he lavishes over me. We don’t use words. His care says it all. Like we could have a long conversation to confirm it, but that would be a waste of precious time.

We know where we stand. Where we were always meant to be. From the moment I saw the cute boy looking so unhappy and alone, sitting on a park bench and wearing a red velvet elf costume. The way he smiled at me when I sat down beside him, I knew he’d be my everything.

We’re together again. Not like anyone could ever keep us apart.

And when I see the fresh scar, the bullet wound through his arm, it hits me. A wave of everything he’s survived, and my mama who didn’t, and I start crying, my tears falling with the shower water, and he holds me tight. “I got ya, Candy, Cade.” Wrapping his arms around me. “We’ll be okay.” Resting my cheek on his wet chest. “We made it.” I’m safest here, so I cry until there’s no hot water left. Until I think my tears are done for the night.

He kisses my cheek, then pecks my lips before turning off the water and handing me a towel. “Dry off and climb into bed.” A white towel hangs from his waist next. “I’ll go find us something to eat.”

“Good luck with that.”

Since I've spent the past month in the hospital, there's no telling what's growing in my refrigerator.

"I don't need luck," he says, gently pushing me toward the bed. "I got delivery."

I drop the towel and climb under my sheets, and it's official. I'm not leaving this bed for the next month. Hopefully, Redix can be here for most of it.

Part of me wishes Silas were here, too, but that doesn't feel right for some reason. Like we gotta let him go and learn who we are again without him.

Silas has been the sweet, sexy, strong glue that held our broken edges together for so long, but that's not his purpose. He deserves better. I get what he means about finding his own love. It's not that he doesn't love me and Redix.

The three of us will always love each other.

He just wants that seed. That bloom of a new love you find where you least expect it. The bright, brilliant one that surprises you and captivates your heart for life.

And maybe it'll be another man. Or another woman. Or another couple. Who knows with Silas. But he's right.

The love between me and Redix is too damn powerful for *us* sometimes. Much less asking another person to navigate it, too. It's like asking someone to cross the Atlantic in a canoe. Only Redix and I have the strength together for that.

And it's a strength we've earned the grueling, soul-breaking way.

"I got Thai food here in an hour." Speaking of Captain Thinks He's In Charge, Redix saunters back into my bedroom. "And water and a snack for you now."

I'm hoping for Lemonheads. I'll settle for Skittles. When he presents me with a banana, I can't even.

He rolls his eyes. "I'm not fucking you with this tonight." He drops his towel and sits on the bed beside me, handing me a glass of water I reluctantly sip and then set down. "You're

gonna eat it. You need your electrolytes after all that sweating.”

“You saying I stink?”

“No.” He breaks a piece off and holds it to my lips. “I’m saying it was hotter than blue blazes today, and you’ve lost weight. Now, come on.”

I turn my nose. “I don’t want it.”

His voice drops so low. “Eat it.” It’s almost funny.

I drop mine, too. “No.”

“Quit being stubborn.”

“No.” I bury my face in the pillow. “You’re not the boss of me.”

The bed shifts. He crawls over me. “Magnolia Cade Bryant, if you don’t eat this damn banana, I’m gonna cream your corn.”

I crack my eyelids open to his naked silhouette over me. “Promise?” I tease. The lamp by my bed glows, making his tan skin glisten above me. He’s half grinning and half worried, and I don’t know why I’m being so obstinate.

Maybe it’s because he cares so much. Maybe it’s because he can read my heart and know exactly what I need. Maybe it’s because he’s that boy at eighteen who sacrificed everything for me, and he hasn’t stopped. He’s right here. Letting me whine. Letting me be a pain in the ass while he smiles like he loves everything about me.

Or maybe it’s because we can fight and still love each other...

This is my answer. I feel it.

“Split it with me,” I tell him, trying not to be distracted by his nude beauty straddling me. “You were sweating your balls off today, too.”

He puts a quarter piece in my mouth and then pops a piece in his, chewing while he talks, “My balls are doing just dandy, thank you.”

The last half, he splits, putting another piece in my mouth while he chews the rest, and these questions hurt while I swallow down the banana. They have since the night of our pretend fight that felt very real.

“Do you love him more than me?” I ask, almost afraid of the answer. “Would you rather be with him?” Not that if I lost Redix’s love to Silas, I’d be angry. I could almost barely survive it.

“I could ask you the same thing,” he says. “He made you very happy. And y’all never fought.”

“Neither did you two.”

“He gave me hell about stuff, but no, we didn’t fight like you and me.”

My heart is thudding. It needs to know. “So what’s your answer?” I dare to confess, “Because *you’re* my answer. You always have been.”

He leans forward, bracing one arm by my head while his other hand, his fingertips tickle down my cheek to my lips.

“My answer, Detective, is the same as yours.” His gaze shelters mine. For twenty years, it’s been my heaven. “My answer is that I love my best friend, the one who saved me too, the one who gave me her candy, and I’m never leaving her again.” His lips near mine. My heart thuds, tears welling in my eyes. “My answer,” he almost whispers, “is that I love the one I share this dream with.”

“What’s the dream?” My lips tickle against his.

“That you marry me, please, Cade Bryant.”

I can’t stop them. Tears fall. But these aren’t sad. These are sudden. And pure. And finally, this is the way. “Yes.”

He smiles, so true and from his soul, while he confesses, “I promised Mama G I’d ask, but I was gonna wait a few months, but I can’t wait anymore.”

“She’d want it like this.” My fingers thread through his strands. “She wouldn’t want us to wait. She’d want us to live on. *Together.*”

He nuzzles his nose to mine. “Our dream starts today, Cade. Promise me.”

“Our dream started the day we met.”

The touch of his lips. They’ve never felt this soft, this real and safe, and they’re never leaving. They’ll always be a pillow away, or at the end of my day, or kissing me by the kitchen sink.

And then his kiss becomes his deepest promise for our dream, months before we’ll swear it over rings. It moves into me, along with his body urging against mine.

We know this dance, this position, while my thighs, my heart, my entire soul open to him one last time because *this is it*. There’s no going back, and we know it. We feel it as his hand finds mine on his scruffy jaw, and he moves it. Wedging our bodies, lining up his hard tip at my wetting entrance, he rests my palm on his left buttock.

His glute muscles flex under my grasp, the welts of his scar rising against my hand, and my every next day is certain. They’ll be spent loving him.

He’s never done this, invited my touch of his scar, encouraging me to keep my hand here. Like we won’t run from it, or deny it, or fear it. It doesn’t control us anymore.

Tipping my hips, rising to meet him, I want him now, but he mutters down my neck, “You’re not ready yet.”

“Yes, I am,” I sigh at his gentle bites.

“I want you wetter,” he says.

And he knows exactly how to grant that wish. His long strands mop down to between my thighs, and twice, his generous tongue makes me come before I grab at his broad shoulders.

“Redix, now.” I can’t stand the urge. I have to have him. It’s more than my body demanding him. It’s my entire life needing to wrap around him.

He holds my hand, lacing his fingers in mine. He won’t let go of it over my head while my other hand returns to his scar.

To his ass flexing with his slow thrusts deep into my aching sex, and we've never been this close. We've never been this open and unafraid and sure. There's no space where he's not inside me.

His lips won't leave mine, his body moving with mine; he's my dream. He moves deep inside me, and this is all we are. Bodies and hearts and souls matched. This is us. Drawing breath together. I can love others so much, but I belong with only one person.

We could fuck hard, or we could fuck kinky and bad, and I know we will. For the rest of our lives, we can, but not tonight.

This is about our love surviving. This is about our life going on. This is about the dream we share.

And from this night on, we'll never be apart again.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



“DAMN.” REDIX WRAPS AROUND ME. “LOOK AT ALL THE debris on the beach.”

A category one hurricane came ashore the day after Mama’s funeral. We knew it would, and I didn’t need an excuse to stay in bed holding Redix for two days while Hurricane Emma barreled through.

“I’ve seen worse.” I sip my coffee, leaning back into his body as we stand on my balcony and survey the damage.

It’s true. It’s not that bad—just a lot of limbs blown down from trees. At least we didn’t lose lives or electricity.

“I should go check our house,” he says. “We gotta lot of big trees to worry about.”

“Our house?”

“Yes.” He kisses my head. “*Ours*. And please finish ordering the furniture because I hate that shit. I don’t know what to pick.”

“You do know fashion.” I turn around in his arms. “But all your taste is in your mouth when it comes to interior design.”

“Hey, don’t be hating on my La-Z-Boy.”

“It’s *not* staying in the living room.”

“If you can lift it, you can put it wherever you like.”

“What the hell made you order one in yellow anyway? Of all colors.”

“I like it,” he says. “Yellow makes me happy.”

Yellow.

It lights through me. Not with a logical thought or a strong hunch. It’s like a prayer I swear my mama’s answering for me because she can now.

Pamela.

Yellow was her favorite color and the one she wore the night she went missing.

“Your boat.” I pull from his embrace. “We gotta go out on your boat this morning. I’m putting my drone up. That storm knocked down lots of branches and limbs. Maybe we can finally spot something.”

“We’re not doing this alone.” He’s right on page and not wrong. “We need your dad and Silas. We got one shot to beat Gentry to wherever the hell he goes before he can cover it back up again.”

It only takes a couple of hours to call my dad in from wherever he pulled his boat ashore on Tybee for the storm. Silas didn’t take long to get his boat in the water and come over from Daufuskie, either. They meet us at the marina, and our three vessels head out. I have a hunch, looking at the maps Dad and I already used to eliminate some barrier islands while others are still suspect.

I was right about the storm. Limbs and logs litter the water, and we all have to go slow, careful not to run over one and fuck up an engine.

We use our radios. Talking in code in case a guilty party can hear us, we act like we’re looking for the bald eagles that nest around these islands. Because there’s one small island in

particular, it calls to me. Records say a holding company owns it. Some company out of Delaware, which makes no sense.

Why would a company in a small state known for big banks own a tiny barrier island in South Carolina? Unless someone's laundering money through accounts and into a bank account you can't trace back to an owner.

The questions fire through my mind while I send my drone up. The quadcopter buzzes through the sky while Redix anchors us on the river. Silas and my dad navigate to other spots near the small island's shore, making sure no one arrives or leaves without their notice.

"Fuck, the signal is lagging," I mutter while I watch the camera in the remote controller in my hands.

Over the months, I've gotten good at flying this thing. But there's shit I can do about a weak signal out on the water.

"Be patient, Candy Cade." Redix doesn't annoy me. We're both on edge, and his words ease my firing nerves. "Just keep looking."

I close my eyes for a second and draw an inhale, sending up a prayer to Mama. *You promised me...*

When I open my eyes again, the tree canopy below the drone is tattered with green limbs down everywhere. The pines still stand tall, but I see a clearing, a small swath of land cleared by an old water oak that fell in the storm. To its north, at the top of the crown of the fallen tree, an older magnolia still stands.

And I see it...

The rusted metal roof, a rectangular structure draped with camouflage netting blown off by the storm.

"Oh my God." My hands start shaking. "Oh my God, we found her."

I don't need to enter. I don't need to set foot in there to know it. My gun's in my backpack. My mind's already steps ahead, storming this island with my loaded 9mm, a pair of bolt

cutters, and fury no man could ever survive because I *will* get my friend back.

Nine years it's almost been. Nine years, Gentry's kept Pamela someplace and then moved her here. I can't imagine what I'll find when I get to her, but I swear she'll be safe now.

Redix watches over my shoulder, his chest pressed to my back, and breathing hard because he sees it too.

"It looks like an old shipping container," he says. "Fuck, this area is littered with them."

He's right, and I gotta think this through.

I turn to him, and while every impulse in me wants to break every rule and go in there to get Pamela right now and fuck up Gentry's world for good... I won't do it.

I have a job to do the right way. I have a dream I'm living with the man I love, and breaking the rules over another evil man won't take it from us again.

"I'm calling this in," I tell him. "Hey, guys." I radio my dad and Silas. "We found the nest. We're gonna wait for others to come see this, too."

It takes an hour for me to radio the office, for multiple response units, state and federal, to find their way to our coordinates. Dad and Silas hold their position the whole time in case Gentry approaches.

But he doesn't.

His name isn't listed on this island. But if Pamela is in there and alive, she's the only witness we need. Her and all the federal financial crimes Gentry's been committing with his "exclusive golf tours."

And though I want to be the first one Pamela sees. So she won't be scared. So she'll know her nightmare is over. So she'll have her life and hope back; it's not safe.

I'd never risk this chance, and I have too much to live for.

I stand back while a tactical team runs advance, clearing the land for any traps or explosives that may be set for those

who approach. Thankfully, they find none.

Standing in the shade of the old magnolia tree, I wait with Redix beside me, and I bite my lip so hard it bleeds. Sobs want to yank me down a hole of grief for what Pamela's endured, but that's not what she needs now.

A team enters and secures the structure, and it's forever but only minutes before a big FBI agent emerges with a tiny woman wrapped in a silver emergency blanket in his arms.

Then I can't be stopped.

I rush to her side.

All the times Pamela was there for me. When boys in middle school were cruel and called me "giraffe" and grabbed my breasts that barely budded at the time, sneering, "You're skinnier than a boy." Or when they grabbed my crotch and laughed, "Where's your dick?" Pamela defended me.

"They just got *little* dick problems," she'd laugh, pulling me down the hallway to the candy machine.

She was stronger than me back then. *She* was the fighter. And today, she's the strongest person I know. Because she survived.

Still in the FBI Agent's arms, she's held there while her eyes squint to the sunlight, and I know she can barely see, but she'll know this.

"It's me." I stroke her long brown hair. Small waves of relief ripple through me because she doesn't look as bad as I feared. She looks fed. She looks very pale, but she doesn't look scarred or disfigured. But my heart holds strong; it holds back the wails I want to scream for all I know that she's survived inside. "It's Cade. Redix too. We're here."

She can't open her eyes. The sunlight's too brutal, even in the shade. But tears fall from their corners while she says, "I knew you'd find me."

And I want to cry for her. I want to sob with relief and grief and will many times later.

“How long has it been?” she asks, and it’s grace that she can’t see because that unleashes my tears, clenching my teeth so she can’t know, not yet. She’s lost all sense of time while each day, every day, I’ve searched for her.

“It’s been some years.” I hold her cheek. The agent hasn’t put her down. He lets me have this with her. “But we’re here for you. For all the rest of them. Me and Redix and your mom, and you’re safe. You won’t hurt anymore.”

She nods. “Go get him.”

She won’t say his name—Gentry—but the look on her face is vengeance. Like we’re thirteen again, and she’s shoving a bully into a locker. Like her pain is finally over.

“I’ll drag him down to hell for you,” I promise, and I know I’ll bawl and grieve for her later, but for now... I’m strong for her, too.



ALL THE RAGE. All the fury. I don’t show it except for my right hand twitching for my gun while I lead a procession of agents and officers through the front door of Senator Gentry Evans’s palatial home.

His lovely wife, Stacey Evans, invites us in.

The thrill on her face matches mine because he’s hosting friends for drinks this Sunday afternoon while they watch some dumbass golf tournament on the flatscreen.

For Senator Gentry Evans to get arrested in front of all his important buddies, hell yes. And you can be damn sure I’ll be investigating these assholes too.

“This is bullshit!” Gentry’s shouting toward the screen with a beer in hand. “They need to scrap these shotgun starts.”

He doesn’t even see us at the threshold of his newly remodeled living room. Special glee fills me at all the fucking of other men Stacey’s been doing in here.

But these men are oblivious, with their backs to us and eyes glued to a screen.

Before I say it, I send another prayer to Mama. It's like since she couldn't have justice in her life, she sure as heaven made it possible I'd get it in mine.

And for Pamela and all the women he's hurt. And how it started that night that changed me and Redix forever, that tried to rip us apart, but they never could; this is sweet revenge because now it's his turn to suffer...

“Senator Gentry Evans, you are under arrest.”

How those words thunder from my mouth. How they heal my soul. How Pamela and Redix, and all the victims will get justice. In public. In a trial. In a jail sentence of multiple lifetimes.

Gentry turns my way, shocked, and my smile could sell snow in a blizzard.

This is too fucking great.

I list all the crimes on the arrest warrant, making sure his friends hear each horrific one, of just how evil he is. Gentry's so stunned. So mortified and knocked from his wicked pedestal, he doesn't even fight the satisfying clicks I give of the handcuffs I make sure are extra tight on his wrists.

I hope they shred his skin off by the time he's in a holding cell.

I don't know what guilty party called the local news station (Redix), but they're waiting outside, getting this live shot of me escorting Gentry out of his home in handcuffs with his head hanging low, defeated.

Yeah, he's in federal custody, but the FBI agents let me have this, too. They know the story of Pamela, of my friend, so this public act on her behalf is payback the whole nation will see.

Gentry doesn't speak a word. He's too smart. He won't indict himself any further, though I don't know why he cares. There's no judge or jury he can bribe to get out of this.

I press my hand over his perfectly parted hair, shoving him hard into the backseat of a patrol car. He's wearing madras pants and a bow tie, and I love this too much because I hate those fucking pants almost as much as I do him. And I'd rather strangle him with that bow tie, but his preppy ass will get a daily beating in prison... I'll make sure of it.

He won't look at me. Staring straight ahead with his hands cuffed in front of him, I can smell his god-awful Abercrombie cologne as I lean into the car, my lips nearing his sweating face, terror seeping from his greasy pores.

"This is for Pamela, Redix, and me." I flick his cheek, making him wince. "How you like us *now*?"

I laugh as I slam the car door behind me.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



REDIX

“I GOT THIS ONION SHIT DOWN.”

I look up from the peppers I’m slicing to smile at Cade dancing around our kitchen.

“Pony” by Ginuwine is playing for old-time’s sake on the Bluetooth speaker, and Cade’s giving one helluva show for me and the empty dishwasher behind her.

“If you’re gonna shake your ass in those tiny red shorts, put the damn knife down and grind it my way.”

She doesn’t even cry anymore when she chops onions. Hell, she hasn’t cried in months. It’s been four of them since Mama G passed, and we found Pamela, since we’ve all found the peace we deserve.

I got Pamela the best care. I found a place in Arizona where she and her mom live now. It’s like a spa resort with cottages where Pamela gets all the medical care and counseling she needs. We have a trip planned to visit her next month. Pamela looks good on our video chats in the meantime.

“Mom loves the weather here,” she told us on the last chat. She’s starting to get a tan. “They have these adorable tiny therapy goats we do yoga with, too. They hop all over us.” She even had a twinkle back in her eye. “Y’all should get one.”

“Yes!” Cade was way too excited. “Let’s get a tiny goat.”

“Oh shit.” I was outnumbered. “You two and your crazy schemes.”

“The crazy scheme was you taking my mom to the Golden Globes,” Pamela laughed, and it felt like old times, the three of us joking together. “She won’t stop talking about it.”

“Good,” I answered her. “Because she’s going again with me this year.”

I’d do anything for Pamela and her mom. So would Cade. And those details Pamela shares with a gentle smile. But she’s not ready to share more, and we all understand why.

Cade wants to get married at our house in Malibu. That way, Pamela doesn’t have to return here, and I don’t blame her. I like the idea. Our wedding deserves a destination without the history that’s here. Though we’re strong enough to live with that, too.

Pamela and Penny will be Cade’s bridesmaids, while zero guesses who’ll be my best man.

“You mean you want this ass?”

Cade turns and starts working her firm cheeks over my cock like I have pockets full of twenties.

“Woman, you better grab your ankles because I’m about to fuck one of your tight holes.”

She laughs, but I can play just as much as she can because, *damn*, she’s turning me on. I push the chicken in the skillet away from the heat and turn off the burner because something else is about to get cooking.

It’s been like this since I got home. She’s all feisty because she busted Gentry, Derek’s in jail, too, and TJ’s gone for good.

We're more than free. We're happy as hell even though I had to leave for two months to film in Vancouver, so Cade's been jumping my bones every night since I got back.

I'm the luckiest man alive.

"When are you gonna tell me?" I love how she interrogates me. Turning around, her palm glides down my length, hanging heavy for her under my shorts. "What are we doing for my thirtieth birthday?"

"*Our* thirtieth birthday."

"You're older by six days, and I know you've got something planned, my sexy Sagittarius."

I taste her neck. "Are we gonna eat, or are we gonna fuck?"

My hard cock in her hand ain't craving stir-fry right now.

Her lips find mine, demanding, "I want a hard answer."

"Do you interrogate all your suspects like this? Because I'd shoplift hemorrhoid cream every damn day to have my hard cock in your hand."

"I'm asking the questions." No, she's pulling my shorts down.

I'm thrilled by this and my big plans for our birthdays. "And I'm not answering them."

"Well then." She swishes away, leaving me and my bare boner in the kitchen. "Guess we're both *not* screwed."

I drop the chopping knife in my hand on the cutting board and shout, "Woman, you better run!"

Pulling my shorts back up, I chase her through the house while she squeals at my pursuit.

She beats me to our bed and flops there. "Tell me!" When she whines, it's cute. For about four minutes. "You've been whispering with Silas for weeks, and I'm dying to know."

"It's a big damn box of the patience you don't have." I crawl on top of her. "That's your birthday present."

“Fine.” She pinches my ass. “Then what are you getting me for Christmas?”

“Double whatever you get me.”

“So we’re going to Hawaii for *two* weeks?”

“That’s my present?”

“Surprise.”

“But we just opened the gallery, and we’re slammed.”

Timing the opening of my charity art gallery with the holidays was a stroke of financial genius. It’s also been a shit-ton of work during what’s supposed to be my two months off before going back to set. But it’s all for a good cause. We’ve already raised a quarter million.

“I know.” She tickles her fingertip over my lips. “That’s why we’re going after the New Year. Your artists can handle it. Trust me.”

This will be her first birthday, her first Christmas, her first everything without Mama G, and I’m taking care of everything. Our families are coming over. We have gifts and wedding plans to make.

But our thirtieth birthdays? Mine is December eleventh, and hers is the seventeenth. And yes, I’ve made plans with Silas.

With that reminder, I roll to my back. “I think we should wait until Saturday, until your birthday.”

“What?” She jumps on top of me. “You big tease, that’s three days from now.”

“Yep. And I need you good and horny for it.”

“But I’m horny now.”

“And you smell like onions.”

“Uh!” She pins my wrists over my head, almost looking offended, but her beauty gazing down at me wins, and waiting until Saturday won’t be easy. “Take that back.”

God, this is the sight.

It's the one I held onto in my darkest days when my body threatened to die along with my soul. When I couldn't find anything but pain and hell, I closed my eyes and prayed for Cade like this. Smiling at me. Loving me. Our bright future sparkling in her purple eyes. And me driving her so fucking crazy she's deliriously happy.

This is what I lived for.

"Make me," I tease her.

"You said we have to wait til Saturday."

"Fucking isn't the only way to make me talk, Detective."

Her eyes narrow while her gorgeous smile grows. "Oh yeah?" She knows my spot and goes for it. "How about this?"

When she starts tickling my armpit, I'm done for. I laugh like I'm fucking nine again, and if she doesn't stop, I swear I'll piss myself.

"Take it back." She's way too happy torturing me.

"Nope." I could flip her over. I could overcome her power, but why? This is too damn fun.

"Say it." And she's way too happy, and I can't stop smiling up at her.

"I love you, Candy Cade."

Because that always makes her stop and kiss me. And it always makes it better, and it's so damn true.

And it will be.

Till the day I die.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



GET A CALCULATOR AND MULTIPLY “PISSED AS HELL” BY A billion.

That total is less than what I feel right now.

Because it’s my thirtieth birthday. And it’s a Saturday. And Redix got called into an “important meeting” with the head of the studio and Daniel Pierce, of all people.

So we had to cancel my birthday plans. Whatever the hell they were.

“We’ll do dinner tonight.” He kissed me this morning. “And I promise I’ll make it up to you soon.”

“Who the fuck calls a Saturday afternoon meeting in Savannah?”

This Hollywood life on my shores is bullshit. Normal people have weekends off—especially *my* birthday weekend.

“When the head of the studio wants to turn his fishing vacation into a meeting, you go.” Redix slid his jean jacket on. “Besides, this is for Lorraine. She really wants this show.”

“Fine.” I really wanted to throw a fit on the bed. Instead, I threw a pillow at him. “Just go. And good luck.”

I can't be mad at him. But I can punch the balls of the studio president if I ever meet him.

So now I'm staring at a holiday ham and some potatoes in my grocery cart. Apparently, I gotta cook my own birthday dinner, so I grab a carrot cake for our vegetable.

The whole damn day, I fume, so I go for a run on the beach. That way, I won't bite Redix's head off when he gets home. He texted he's an hour away. He's super sorry and added a line of red heart emojis.

Maybe I won't kill him. Some of my pissed-off washes down the drain with my long shower. Then, like a cherry on my shitpie of a birthday, the doorbell rings while I'm dripping wet and wrapped in a towel.

I ignore it. It's delivery boxes.

But the motherfucker keeps ringing the bell, so whoever's on the other side of this front door is about to get a new asshole.

“What the fuck?” I'm so mad I throw it open without checking.

“Ho, ho, ho,” voices greet me, and light travels slower than my mood just changed.

It's Redix. It's Silas.

It's two hot men with no shirts on wearing matching black leather pants and red Santa hats and grins that tell me they've been planning this all along.

“Damn, you look sexy when you're about to fuck someone up.” Silas steps to me, crowding the front door with his lips on mine before I can utter a curse.

God, I've missed him. It's been months since he's touched me like this. Yeah, we hang out. But he hasn't been with me or Redix since our nights at the resort this past summer. And now I'm dropping my towel to the floor because it's not that cold

outside, and it gets even hotter when Silas cups my ass and pushes me against the foyer wall.

“Now, now.” I hear Redix warn while Silas tongues my mouth, making me moan. “Rudolph, put that big, red nose away. We got plans tonight.”

“What plans?” I huff into Silas’s kiss.

Redix starts laughing while Silas gently bites my neck, and I wrap my leg around his waist.

“You wanna get fucked right now, or do you want answers?” Redix asks. “Because you can’t have both.”

“Who says?” I complain while Silas grinds his hard cock covered by leather into my naked pussy that’s happy to get railed by the open front door.

“This horny Santa.” Silas pulls away before pecking my lips. “Go look under your bed.”

It’s a big red box. Inside is a long, white faux fur coat. Under that is expensive crimson lingerie. I can tell by the embroidered tulle and gold hardware this is the finest lace and bondage detailing, with straps from the bra that lead to a collar with a gold ring. The suspenders and thong that match are equally ornate.

“You know what shoes to wear.” Redix leans in the doorway while Silas sits on the bed, hoping to watch me change.

I already know where we’re going. “Gimme fifteen minutes.” I disappear into the bathroom because my pussy is already there.

The two hours it takes the chauffeur to drive us to Charleston goes by quickly. I know there’ll be no fucking in the limo, so I focus on the French pastry box Silas opens. It’s full of savory treats we devour to satisfy our appetites until we arrive.

“Did you really meet with Daniel Pierce today?” I ask Redix while I swipe a croissant crumb off his pillow lips and devour it myself.

“Yep,” he answers. “We just got a green light on a series together.” He nips my ear. “But I’d never cancel your birthday plans for a meeting. I value my balls too much.”

“Me too,” Silas adds, saving the best for last, opening a small box with lemon lavender macarons inside. He holds one over my lips and teases, “Open up.”

My mouth and legs comply.

While Silas feeds me a yummy dessert, Redix glides his hand up my naked thigh, his fingertips playing with the edges of my already-soaked lace.

“Tell us what you want tonight,” Redix insists. “It’s your dirty thirty. Everything’s on the table.”

“It’s your dirty thirty, too, but how are *you* gonna do this?” Silas and I fucking at the club is safe. But Redix is known to millions, and that’s a big risk. “You’ll get spotted, even if it’s a private club.”

“Not tonight,” Silas answers. “It’s just us, some trusted friends, and guests hand-selected by Mistress Faye. Everyone’s signing NDAs.”

“Friends?”

“Stacey and her guests. Scarlett. Penny and her husband couldn’t make it,” Redix answers. “Penny was bummed, but they have in-laws in town. But Stacey and Scarlett? You’d think it was their birthdays, too. Who doesn’t want one safe night at a sex club?”

Stacey and Scarlett? That doesn’t freak me out. Hell, Stacey Evans is a young cougar unleashed. And Scarlett? I’d like to see her break loose. She’s so sweet and gorgeous and deserves it.

“I even talked Luca into coming,” Redix says. “He hasn’t been with a woman since his wife died, and that was almost four years ago.”

“Four years? And you think a sex club is the best place for him to start?”

“Yeah,” he and Silas answer in unison.

I can't be too worried about other people's sex lives. I'm too excited about my own.

"What about you?" I play with Silas's hair. "It's been over four months since you were with us. What have you been up to?"

It's not jealousy. I truly want him to be okay.

"I've been up to no one," he says. "Been taking some time to myself and giving y'all time to get your shit together."

"Sure have been spending lots of time at my gallery." Redix jumps in. "Wouldn't have anything to do with a gorgeous blonde artist in residence, would it?"

Redix has several artists he's sponsoring. They moved to the island and give demonstrations in his gallery, where they feature their unique talents. Come to think of it, Silas *does* spend a lot of time there.

Silas grins back. "I might've invited a few artists to come tonight."

"What?" Redix sits up. "Dude, they *work* for me. They can't come to a *sex club* where I'll be fucking. I'm their boss."

"So?" Silas replies.

"So, that's inappropriate if not illegal." Redix yanks his hand through his strands. "This is a hashtag me too situation."

I sit back and love this—these two finally having a little fight.

"No, it's not," Silas replies. "*I* invited them. They're *my* guests, and they don't *have* to come. And the whole world has seen you fuck. Several times."

"Help me out here." Redix looks at me. "Am I fucked?"

"You're gonna be." I tickle my fingertips down his bare chest. "By me and him. And y'all are so cute in this first fight." I look at Silas. "You must be into one of them to get him pissed off like this."

"Maybe." Silas won't stop smiling. "Or maybe I want everyone to see who I love and how I love, and if they can

accept me after that, then great.”

“See.” I look back at Redix. “He did it for you. For us. Now kiss and make up.”

Silas leans across me, way too eager to comply. Redix leans in for his kiss, and my view from the middle warms my heart and wets my sex.

“And by the way.” Redix lifts my chin to his lips as the limo parks outside the nondescript brick building. “I hired a photographer.” His lips dust over mine. “So I’ll always be able to remember my very dirty thirty with my future wife.”

I’m almost naked under this faux fur coat, but don’t feel the mild winter air. I’m too hot for this as Silas pulls the door open for me, and Redix holds my hand as we walk in.

The night is incredible. Our small group of friends and a larger group of trusted club members are here, and who gives a hell? Everyone wears states of dress in whatever rocks their socks, and I’m standing with two stars of the show tonight.

Stacey and her three guys? Holy fuck, that’s a story right there.

“How are you?” I kiss her cheek but still worry. We talk like we’re at the coffee shop and not holding martinis at a sex club. “Your life’s been turned upside down since Gentry’s arrest.”

“*Please*. The paperwork isn’t even a pain in the ass,” she replies. “As long as he’s gone for good, all thanks to you, I do not dare complain.”

“Yeah, I see who’s been buttering your biscuit,”—I raise my glass to her—“all three of them. I wouldn’t be complaining either.”

“You’re one to talk.” She laughs. “Fucking those two men.” She points to Silas and Redix, talking with Luca but smiling our way. “That’s gotta be hotter than three rabbits fucking in a wool sock on an August day.”

I hug her, laughing and not giving a damn I’m in fuck-me lingerie, and she’s wearing a Lily Pulitzer dress with pearls

like a proper tease. Because I know she's not wearing panties under that short hem.

"Besides." She squeezes me back. "It's your birthday, and we're gonna watch you enjoy it."

"You're gonna watch?"

"No offense, but hell yes, I'm watching Redix Dean fuck." She points to the stage at the top of the room. That's when I first notice the bed draped in black sheets in the middle of it. "And with Silas looking like his twin, girl, if you need help, I got your back. It's the least I can do."

"Thank you for the offer. But I'm happy to get used to this. I'm marrying one of them in May."

"And I'll be cheering that on, too."

When she walks away, wishing me best, her group of men looks eager for her arrival. They're sprawled over the purple sofa I recognize, and how Stacey and those three men make sense to me; they just do.

"I can't believe I'm here." A voice sounds over my shoulder, and I turn to hug her next. "But I'm glad Redix invited me. I need this."

I've never seen Scarlett look this hot. I mean, she's stunning even when she's not trying. But tonight, her long, russet waves hang free while her hips are bound in a tight, black pencil skirt, and her breasts look incredible in a matching bustier.

"It's not weird, is it?" I sip my drink, searching her green eyes. "I mean, you worked for Redix and all. Feel free to bail if it is."

"Hell no." She softly punches my arm. "You can't shock me." She pauses, and all she's seen of my life and Redix's almost death flashes across her eyes. "I'm happy for you both. You deserve some fun after what you've been through."

I adore her. I don't know all of Scarlett's story, but I know some of it's dark. The stunning sleeve of tattoos on her right arm hints at it. Crosses and flames and flowers and skulls.

She swirls her bourbon. The club made an exception tonight for this private event. Drinks are being poured in moderation, and I see someone trying to hide a big lemon birthday cake on a table in the corner.

“And I wanna know who Redix’s friend is.” Scarlett nods toward Luca. “He looks like a Greek God, but bigger and meaner with a dark tan.”

I could tell her who he is. That he’s Luca Mercier, a billionaire and one of the world’s most eligible widowers and single dads. A man who’s as hot and as powerful as the sun. But that’d only warn Scarlett away. That’s the opposite of what she’d go for.

“He’s just a friend Redix plays golf with. He’s super sweet and super European. Lemme introduce you.”

I don’t give her a chance to change her mind. Grabbing her hand, I pull her toward the guys talking and make brief introductions.

Tonight, Scarlett isn’t a former MMA fighter or a vigilant bodyguard. Nope, she’s my ravishing friend who needs to get laid. And she’s got a big heart, and somehow I know if Luca actually does this, Scarlett would never break his heart either.

They hit it off over sly smiles and curious eyes while I drag my men away.

It’s time to start this show.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



DAMN, I'M NERVOUS.

Not because I'm on a stage and about to fuck Cade and Redix for a room full of people to watch. That turns me on. Or because there's a photographer about to take pictures and video too. That's hot as hell.

My hands sweat because I haven't been with either of them in months. I've missed them. At first, I thought I could go without them. But I can't. I know who I am, and who I love, and I won't live any other way. But I know I'm about to feel the power again of them together, and I have to be ready for it.

Because I'll always be best friends with Redix.

I'll do any house project with him or throw a football together on the beach. No one's taking that from me. Redix means too much. He makes me want to push myself, to be brave enough to love with everything I have, even if it wrecks me.

That's how he loves Cade, so I've kept a distance from them.

They need each other. They need to be together. I think they finally get what I've seen all along.

When I see how Redix loves Cade, how she loves him back, it's like you can feel how love is worth it, what it's supposed to be like. Why people risk everything for it and swear it until their death.

That's the two of them together.

And they've inspired me to try to love like that, too.

In our months apart, when all I did with Cade was hang out, go fishing, or sleep on a lounge chair beside her with books in hand while we dozed off under an umbrella together, I felt lucky. How I finally get to love a woman like her, and I don't think she'll ever know what that means to me.

For so long, I had this hole in my heart that grew as I did around my love for Charlie Ravenel. But I could never have her. And I ached over Charlie for so long. Every day, I felt like something was missing.

Then I met Cade.

And she's not Charlie, and that's exactly how it was meant to be.

Cade's her own incredible woman. One I've never seen be so strong when she fights for someone she loves, or so lost in grief for losing the same. Watching her and Redix at her mama's funeral and over the following months, I realized having them in my life is a gift I won't forsake.

Their love makes me know that's what I'm living for. To love someone like *that*. So whoever's going to love me next needs to accept them.

I think that person's in the crowd tonight. I invited a group of people just so this one special person can see the real me.

Because I'll never hide who I am—or who I love. No one's gonna define me, shame me, or make me label it.

Fuck labels. They don't love. People do.

Amazing people like Cade and Redix, and I'm excited about their wedding. It's like I can see their dream, and I believe in it, too.

The three of us stand together on the stage, and Cade kisses me first because we've all missed this. In her long fur coat with that sinful body bound tight in red bondage lingerie, I want to open every part of her again tonight... starting with her incredible lips. She tastes like a lemon drop martini, and my tongue finds hers again, and we moan at the reunion.

After a minute, Redix's lips join our kiss, and it's a dance of parting lips and caressing tongues and breaths grabbed before we go back in for more, sharing much more than sex.

They made my life whole again.

I have my family back. I have my mom laughing with me over brunch every Sunday. I have my dad taking my advice on how fast to tack when we sail. I have them asking when Cade and Redix will be joining me again. My parents not only accept me. They love the love I have in my life.

And so do I.

I slide Cade's coat off her bare shoulders, and I'm not giving her up. Redix lays it down, fur side up on the bed, and we'll always have this together.

I kneel first, dropping to where Cade's pussy hovers in front of my hungry mouth. I bury my nose in her sweet musk. It soaks her lace, and I lick the delicate fabric, getting a small taste of her, which only makes me crave more.

Redix watches while I pull her thong down her thighs and leave it there. She loves this. Standing in front of the crowd, I gaze up at her, looking down at me. Her perfect nipples are exposed by the lace bra Redix has pulled down, and they peak hard for all to see. For Redix to lick while my tongue takes its first grateful swipe through her lust.

Fuck, she tastes good. And damn, I've missed it when she moans like that. I tease her, parting her lips with my fingers but not letting her thighs open any wider than her thong will allow. This tease only wets her more.

“I’ve got a surprise for the birthday girl.”

I hear Redix’s husky voice taunt while I take more licks of Cade, and he reaches for something hidden under the covers. I know what it is. I got so damn hard buying it and putting it there for tonight. I don’t know if Cade will go for this, but if she does... *daaammnn*.

Redix kneels beside me. I make room for him while I know we look like XXX-rated stripper elves with our Santa hats and black leather pants. And the shameless humor of it only makes me harder.

“Candy Cade,”—Redix looks up at her—“let’s show them how sweet you are for us.”

He pulls out his surprise—a jumbo candy cane stick.

Her smile answers before she does. “You can taste birthday boy, but not too much. I want my pussy burning for cocks, not peppermint.”

Redix has such a kink for this. Months back in the hotel suite, he showed me a whole new way to enjoy the cream from eclairs, and I’ll never look at them the same.

He licks the cane wet, the first few inches of it, and I swear the devilish grin on his face is what makes box offices come hard for him every time he’s on the screen.

“Taste her too,” he tells me, spreading her folds for his candy and my kiss.

I flick her clit while Redix teases her pussy with the candy, and “Oh fuck” moans so loud from Cade while someone in the crowd whistles.

That only drives Redix on. He pulls the candy out, licking her arousal off, offering me a lick too, and it tastes like her cum, his mouth, and mint, and damn, it’s delicious. Over and over, we tease her with the candy and our tongues until her thighs shake. Until her moans won’t stop, and I worry she’ll either fall over in an orgasm or burn from one.

Redix sees it, too. He takes the candy out and tosses it aside. I pull her thong off and sling her leg over my shoulder.

She braces against me while I lick all the sticky mint off her sex, and Redix kneels behind her, spreading her cheeks for his mouth, and she's going soon. With my tongue fucking her pussy and Redix teasing her ass, she shakes over me so hard, throwing the hat off of my head before she grabs a fistful of my hair.

"Oh God!" she cries out while someone in the crowd shouts, "Hell yes, girl," and Cade jolts. She comes so hard we have to hold her up.

Shaking over my face and soaking my chin, goddamn, she's sweet, and I don't know what's next. But Redix takes charge. He lifts her by the waist and tosses her on the bed, and she smiles because she loves it.

"Spread your legs for my fuck, birthday girl," he tells her, and it's obviously his birthday too. Unzipping his leather pants, he frees his massive cock, making my mouth water. "And open your dirty mouth for his thick cock too," he taunts her, and I'm here for it.

I kneel by her lips and unzip my pants, and Cade's tongue is waiting for me. She darts the tip of it out for my drops the second my hard cock hovers over her waiting mouth. "Fuck yes," I growl at her lips plunging over my fat tip.

"Yes, birthday girl. Suck his cock," Redix keeps taunting her while he starts fucking her, holding her thighs open for his thrusts, and goddamn, they're hot like this. Cade groans with his fuck and my cock in her mouth. "Such a dirty birthday girl, aren't you?" He's gonna make her come so fast. I can tell by her breath gasping over my cock, her spit dripping from my shaft.

This is so fucking incredible, and then I see the photographer, some badass chick in leather, taking these shots of us before I gaze into the crowd. Most are watching us. A few are fucking to us, and the one I'm curious about has eyes locked on me. That only makes me groan with Cade's mouth milking my cock, pulling me closer to my edge.

"Show them," I tell Cade. "Show everyone watching how we both fuck you, and you love it. How you beg for our cocks

to fuck every tight, wet hole you have cuz' you're so dirty. You're so horny for us to fuck you any way we want."

That ends her. Cade's back bows while her throat moans with my cock filling it, and damn, I could blow right here at her coming so hard, but I growl it back.

"Come here." Redix is watching me. He knows when I'm close. "I wanna suck your fucking cock too."

I stand up on the bed beside him. He cranes his neck to wrap his full lips around my cock with Cade's red lipstick and spit still on it, and shit, I've gotta control it. Because I want this to last. I want to keep looking down and watching his cock disappear into her gorgeous, glistening pussy with his ruthless thrusts while he devours my cock like it's his last meal.

Cade starts moaning at the sight of Redix sucking me off, and Redix joins her. I slide his hat off to grab a fistful of his hair, and that rolls his eyes back. His soft gags and expert mouth know just how to end me. And he's gonna come too, I can tell by his tensing pecs, by his thrusts seeking something deep inside Cade.

She's rubbing her clit and is right there with us. "Yes," she says to me. "Give him your cum. Come down his throat." Redix moans, agreeing, his vibrations thrilling my cock. "You look so beautiful with his big cock in your mouth." She's not teasing Redix; it's true.

And I glance up into the crowd and see another pair of eyes trying to hide in the corner, watching us. And why does that stare suddenly captivate me? But let them. Let anyone see this.

That I love this man. And I love this woman. My heart is big enough to love so much. Just like this...

"You wanna drink my cum?" Looking back down at Redix makes my thighs shake. I know he won't answer. I know he does. I know this will take him too. "I'm gonna come so damn hard for you, Redix."

And he goes first. His gorgeous body seizes with his deep groan, filling Cade with half his cock pulsing inside her. I can

see it, and that pulls me too. “Fuck!” I shout while I fill his mouth. “Fuck,” I say it for all to hear while my body heaves again, another spurt filling his mouth, my cum dripping from his chin. That’s all Cade needs. She’s writhing again with another big orgasm, and the night isn’t over.

We lie on the bed, cuddling together while we recover and get ready for another round. Redix drinks a seltzer while Cade eats lemon cake, and I sip a Blantons. When she props up on her elbows, she gazes out at the crowd.

“I would’ve thought Stacey and her men would be going at it.”

I glance over at the group on the sofa. “By the looks of that crew”—I’m impressed—“she’s pacing herself.”

“She deserves it. She’s been so lonely for so long.” Cade grins before she whispers, “But look.” I follow her stare, and Redix does, too. “Scarlett and Luca are going *at it*.”

“Good for him,” Redix says, and I agree.

Because Scarlett is hot as hell. I’ve noticed her but keep a respectful distance because she intimidates me; I’m man enough to admit it. But right now, she doesn’t look like she’ll rip your balls off and fry ‘em up in a pan.

No, she’s riding Luca with her skirt to her waist, and he’s got a fistful of her dark red hair that’s a lure for anyone’s hard grasp. They’re fucking on that chair like animals that need to mate to save the fate of humanity.

“Four years, he’s waited,” Redix mutters.

“I can tell, but I can’t imagine,” I answer before wetting my whistle with whiskey.

“I can.” Redix huffs. “All the years I waited for Cade. To get my shit together.”

She leans toward him for a kiss. “And it was worth it.”

“*You are worth everything,*” he answers before pulling her into a deep one.

“There y’all go again.” I interrupt them. “Looking so damn in love that I love it too.”

Cade turns to me. “You gonna fess up and tell us who this person is because I saw you clocking someone while you were getting your cock well sucked by us.”

“Nope.” I won’t look into the crowd because that’ll give it away. And those eyes in the corner keep distracting me. “If they have a problem with this, then they’re not the one.”

“Hey.” Redix reaches over Cade and tucks a strand of my hair back. I love it when he does that. “Don’t lose love over us. We don’t have to fuck to be together. I just want you in our life always.”

I wink. “You just want my handyman skills.”

“I *do* like your hands.” He grins. “And you look damn hot, all sweaty while you swing that big hammer.”

“Speaking of a big hammer.” Cade lingers her touch down my abs. When it reaches my cock, it twitches back to life. “It’s your turn.”

And I don’t need an engraved invitation.

“On your knees, birthday girl,” I demand because this is my favorite way with her. Like the first time I fucked her and felt the power of her sex, of our sex.

Cade’s amazing. It’s like Redix shows me how to love, and she shows me how to live. Both do it with no fear.

She’s quick to obey, and my cock is quick to ready at her beauty. Rolling on a condom, I watch Redix choose his place in front of her mouth.

Why she trusts us. Why she lets go and lets us take her, it’s like she said. I cool her fire, and that fire is Redix. She needs us both. And we need her.

I kneel behind her and pull her back to my chest. Redix stands before us while I slowly seat deep in Cade’s pussy, and damn, the return of her heat makes me bite her shoulder. She feels so good I almost forgot how much.

Our bodies know this performance. People gather for it, and it's a stunning sight, I know. I've watched it in a mirror. My hand finds where my cock is sliding in and out of her slick welcome pussy while I gently scissor her clit. My other hand toys with her nipple while she groans with Redix's cock in her mouth.

"That's it." He guides her head to where she's softly gagging on him. "All this cock is for you."

He pulls her off and lifts her chin so she's gazing up at him. I am, too. He's like a statue built by the gods for sex, and that I look so much like him puffs my ego, I gotta confess.

"You wanna suck my cock while Silas fucks you until we make that sweet pussy come, don't you?" She moans but doesn't answer, so I pinch her nipple, making her gasp while Redix demands, "Say it. Tell everyone how dirty you are for us."

"Yes, I am," she sighs with delight as he guides her mouth back to sucking him, and she goes to town. I can feel her clit stiffen between my fingers, her sex swelling for my cock, and she's loving this.

"That's my dirty birthday girl." His taunts return. "Show them how you love getting railed by two hard cocks all night."

He has her shaking. I'm tempted, too. I lean forward, and Cade shares his cock with me, taking turns plunging down his fat length. "Fuck yes, you two." Redix gazes down at us like he's obsessed with this, but this next one's for Cade, and I know what to do for her.

I grab her throat, strumming her clit with my other hand while I don't whisper in her ear. I want everyone to hear. "You're gonna let this pussy come with my cock fucking it and his cock in your mouth, aren't you?" I take her harder, hands and cock, and growl, "Come on, Cade, you're so fucking dirty, aren't you? You're my cute little cock slut."

She bucks. She convulses in my grasp, and I let go of her throat while she gasps for air. I have to grab her hips because

she's coming so hard she's pushing me out, but I fight to stay in her.

“Yes!” she shouts once Redix leaves her mouth. “Yes.” We leave her gasping, “Yes.” I feel her arousal drip to my balls while she's still shaking. I've never felt her so wet while she says, “Redix, I know you want him too.”

That's their powerful love again. They share everything, including my love, and I want it this way.

Her body still quivers, but she maneuvers us around. We have more condoms and lube for this, and I ready myself. Kneeling between Redix's spread thighs once he lies on his back, Cade kisses him while I slowly take my time penetrating him. Because this is us, we have this trust. We have this connection.

Cade strokes him while she sucks his hard length, and he groans for more. “Fuck me, Silas.” His husky voice drives me insane. “Cade, don't stop,” he insists, which drives me deeper. “Yes.” His trust and vulnerability look so beautiful across his massive, strong body. The lust in his eyes possesses me. “Fuck my ass,” he demands, and I'd do anything for him, for both of them.

It's not my birthday, but they're my gift. I get to watch this stunning sight before I turn to look at the crowd.

There are those eyes again, hiding in the corner, watching me fuck Redix while he's in Cade's mouth, and yes, I can't be without them.

They'll get married. They'll live their lives and have a slew of kids, and I'll be there for it. Happy for them, I know it.

The question is... will it just be me? Alone? Or will I ever find someone all for me?

“Cade.” Redix always says her name like he's drowning and she's his rescue. “Cade.” Because she is. He calls her again, and she knows his mind, his soul, and his heart.

She moves to straddle him, and I make room for their love because I cherish it. Leaning back and moving his thighs so

she can fuck him too, God, this is my heaven. It feels like it, too.

I press my lips to her back. I feel his hands reach for mine, and I hold onto him. "I love you." We all say it... because we feel it.

We're not afraid of it. This power pulls us together. This connection saved us all. This pleasure rewards us, and we won't apologize for it after the hell we've survived.

I don't know why fate brought them to me, and I don't need to.

Because with her.

With him.

We're healed.

And it's love.

EPILOGUE



Infinity by Jaymes Young

OVER A YEAR LATER

“SHE’S GONNA EAT IT,” I warn Redix. “Watch. She’s just like her daddy.”

“No, she won’t.” He bounces Glory on his knee. “She’s just gonna—”

And there she goes. She grabs a fistful of the homemade playdough I made, and it’s in her mouth.

“See,” I laugh. “She can’t resist. Just like you.”

Redix laughs, too, while he gently scoops it out of her mouth. “Baby girl, why you gotta keep proving your mama right all the time?”

But she’s too cute to ever get upset with.

Glory Bryant Dean is six months old and the perfect mix of us. She’s got wisps of my dark hair and his full lips and bright eyes.

And she's got her daddy wrapped around her little finger.

I'm a big softie for her, too.

Being pregnant with her at our wedding only made it more special. Like we were finally blessed. Like our prayers were being answered, we named her after her grandma watching over us.

"Be careful," I warn him again. "If you get red playdough on those pants, it's gonna look real interesting in the wedding photos."

"Shit," Redix huffs before he gobbles Glory's cheeks, making her laugh. "My playdough pants are gonna be the last thing people focus on at Silas Van de May's wedding of the century."

"Ummm,"—I whirl the lint roller over my lavender dress—"you forget who *you* are."

"Cade Bryant's husband?"

"You're cute." I wedge my foot into my heel, then the next one. "And you're Redix Dean, who's about to star in another big series with Daniel Pierce, so I hate to tell ya, but they'll be watching you today, too. So please don't fuck up your seersucker pants."

"He's the only man I'll wear these for."

"You look great," I tell him because Redix can wear a lawn bag like high fashion. "But what about me in this tight dress? I got all these post-pregnancy curves, and I love 'em, but for a wedding? I don't know. Is it too much?"

"*Hell no.*" He pushes away the playdough and feeds Glory a piece of banana. "You're rocking those tits and ass."

Yes, I love my new curves, but this is a big day for me too. "I'm nervous about seeing Charlie Ravenel. She'll be at the wedding, and I know she wants an answer."

"She's recruiting you hard, but it's your call. I support you working here for the Sheriff's office, or for her, or I can just keep you knocked up all the time."

“That won’t stop me.”

I smooth my dress, halfway not listening because I don’t know what I want. I love my job. But I could do some good work with Charlie’s security company. And the flexibility would be nice because I *do* want to be knocked up. At least twice more if we can.

“Hey.” Redix’s husky voice could lift me from anywhere.

I flick my eyes up, and he looks so handsome. The sun shines behind him through the window. He’s sitting at our kitchen table with our baby daughter in his arms, and I swear he glows in a white linen shirt with his hair down.

“You look beautiful, Candy Cade.” He gets up, holding Glory like she’s attached to him. She might as well be, and I love it. “We’re all lucky to have you.” He pulls my hand, leading me out of the kitchen. “Come on. I got a little something for you today.”

“I’m not the one getting married. Silas gets all the gifts.”

Why is he guiding us to our bedroom? It’s not like we can fuck with Glory awake. Babies are precious sex-life stealers.

“Oh, we gave Silas a gift, alright.” Redix talks over his shoulder. “His bachelor party was epic.”

“Any party at that sex club is epic.”

My stomach suddenly flutters with butterflies remembering it and all we did. Damn, Silas needs to get married again or something because we all enjoyed that night... and then some.

And who Silas is marrying? I never would’ve guessed it, but they’re perfect when I see them together. The love in his eyes, I think it equally surprises him, and that’s what’s going to make today so special. I better pack some tissues in my clutch.

“Well, this”—Redix opens the top drawer of his dresser —“is just between us.”

He hands me a box wrapped in white paper with a purple ribbon. I know this will mess up my makeup because *his* gifts are epic. And they always melt my heart.

“What did you get? I’m running out of fingers for tattoos and rings.”

We tattooed matching infinity symbols on our wedding fingers. I thought that was beautiful and sacred, but then Redix gave me a rare violet diamond wedding ring that can’t be topped.

“Please just sit on the bed and open it, Detective.” He and Glory sit beside me. “Not every conversation has to be an interrogation.”

“That’s *not* who you married.”

I laugh because this tiger has changed her stripes enough. Me not asking questions? That’s not happening.

But it silences me when I pull the purple ribbon off and rip the paper to open the box. There are no questions, only sweet tears. For a moment, I can’t believe my eyes, my breath stolen by the shock of it, too.

“Where did you find *this*?”

Redix kisses my cheek, strands of his long hair tickling it, too. “When we were cleaning out some of Mama G’s stuff. I had it stitched back up.”

It’s my red Hello Kitty purse. The one I wore the day I met Redix. The day our dream began. The one that hid my stash of candy that I shared with him.

Along with my heart.

His lips return to my cheek—the one with tears spilling down it.

“Maybe Glory can use it one day,” he says, and I love that idea. My mama gave me this purse. “Look inside.”

My hands are shaking. Why this is hitting me so hard, in the sweetest way, I know.

It’s because Redix never stops loving me. He always tries to make me smile. It’s because I cherish the day we met and every one since, even the darkest ones, because now we appreciate the light we share even more.

Or maybe it's because my mama gave me this purse, and though she'd go on about me brushing my teeth and not getting cavities, my dad would sneak me candy to hide in it. Yep. Rule maker and rule breaker; they were the perfect pair.

"Maybe Glory will wear this purse and meet her best friend, too," I say, turning to Redix because it's impossible for me to love him more, but I know ten years down the road, I will. And forty years from now?

Well, I know how big my heart can grow.

It already loves him, our daughter, our families, and our friends. And one incredible man who's about to marry an incredible person.

Love is beautiful that way.

If you let it, it won't stop growing.

"There's more." Redix pats Glory's tiny head resting on his chest while his big smile lights up my world.

I look down and there's a gift inside the purse. It's a necklace box, and I worry, whatever this is because I never take off the infinity necklace he gave me a couple of years ago. But when I open it, all my worry vanishes.

"Oh my God." Only awe and love and tears flow. "How did you get *this* back?"

It's the original infinity necklace he gave me when we were eighteen. When he first proposed to me on the beach. It got taken the night our nightmare began.

"I asked Penny to get it out of evidence for me. I knew Derek had it. And like hell if I wasn't gonna get it back one day."

He lifts my chin, and I search his eyes. There's so much love in them while Glory wriggles in his lap.

Redix Dean can give me all the gifts he wants, and I'll cherish them. But his love, the one that gave us our daughter and our dream, it's the greatest gift and my new deal with God.

This is what I fight for now.

“I got you back too, Candy Cade,” he whispers against my lips, “and I’m keeping you for infinity.”

And I kiss him. And I never thought I’d see this necklace again.

For so many years, I feared they took it along with our joy, our peace, and our dreams.

But they could *never* take our love.

And now...

We have it all back.



It’s just the beginning...

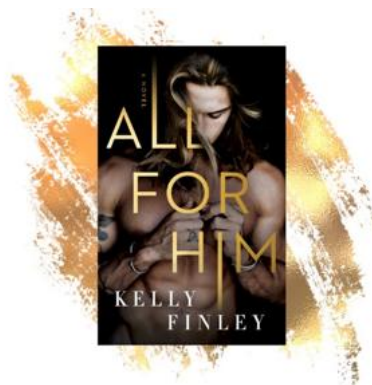
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AFTERWORD



This story became much more than I ever thought. At first, it was a story about a badass, beautiful vigilante. I wanted to flip the script on a man “avenging a woman’s honor.” But when it came to who that man was, this character, Redix, rose from my heart, parts of which come from my past.

I know and love people who have survived violence, and people who have proudly earned their sobriety. And I know a few that didn’t survive. They live on in my heart.

If violence has affected your life, please know you are not alone. You are strong and others are there for you too.

Please consider visiting www.thehotline.org for the support you deserve.

If addiction has affected your health, there is help. There is hope and there are many who understand.

Free and confidential support is available to you at 1-800-662-HELP/4357 - the national helpline of [SAMHSA \(Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration\)](http://www.samhsa.gov).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kelly Finley hates writing bios but appreciates that you made it this far. So here you go...

She lives in the Carolinas with her sexy husband and cherished family. A rebel with many causes, she fancies black leather, dirty jokes, big hearts, and smart mouths.

Dedicated to writing books featuring characters with proud love, shameless heat, brave hearts, and whip-smart minds—she’s most likely at her keyboard putting the next spicy story on the page for you right now.

Her books are so spicy that her readers are calling her “**The Queen of Spice**,”... and she wears the crown with pride.

Want to connect with Kelly and her readers, aka. **The Lemonheads** (when you read AFTER HIM... you’ll get it)? Follow her on Facebook or connect using the

Discord App.

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All For You Duet

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