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Chapter 1

Candice Stevenson always had a pretty laid-back life growing up. She was born into a middle-class family in the United States, in the small town of Summerville, New York. She was an only child to her parents and had always been their greatest pride and joy. However, even in her early years, she had shown quite a few signs of becoming a troublemaker. She enjoyed pulling her mother's hair and throwing tantrums when she didn't get her way. When she started pre-school, her classmates were openly terrified of her. She would often be found terrorizing them by putting boogers on their arms or screaming in their ear during nap time. She had quickly become quite a handful to everyone around.

Her mother had hoped that it was all just a phase she would soon grow out of as she entered elementary school. Surprisingly, people around her started to notice a change. She was less violent and more thoughtful in speaking and interacting. She would smile and laugh and even begin making friends in school. She met Stephanie on the playground, a chubby girl who was being picked on by some of the other kids. Candice didn't know why, but she felt the immediate urge to run over to her and at least try to help. She was on the small side, and the boys had only laughed at her behavior, dismissing her as a baby. That word had always been something to set her off as she let out a roar before kicking the boy in his shin. He had screamed before looking at her fiery eyes and running off with his friends.

What Candice didn't realize was that she had essentially started a war between her and Jeremy Knight on that day. The plus was that at least now she had a friend as she turned to the frightened girl, who shivered slightly in the corner, trying to stay calm in front of her. Candice stood next to her, placed an arm around her shoulder, and said, "Don't worry, I have got you

now." And she did have her. Through all the elementary school and middle school years, the pair stayed by each other's side. Candice hated to say it, but Stephanie was a goody-two-shoes, always afraid to break the rules or step out of her comfort zone. She liked to please people and played the role of a golden girl perfectly. She even had the curly golden locks to match.

On the other hand, Candice had fiery red hair that couldn't be tamed and an identical personality. She was the heat to Stephanie's cool and nearly gave her mother a heart attack more than once. Her mother had prayed that some of Stephanie's behavior would rub off on her.

Stephanie was an only girl with four brothers. Her parents were very wealthy and had very little time to take care of her, and her brothers kept to themselves, which meant she was always over at Candice's house. Unfortunately, she didn't rub off much on Candice. Instead, Candice rubbed off on her, teaching her to not feel so insecure about her weight but to embrace it.

Even as they entered high school, they promised to not let anything sever their ties or break their bonds. But then Candice's dad left. It happened so unexpectedly that, at first, she had thought of it as a cruel joke. Even though she knew her parents weren't always on the same page, she never thought it would have gotten that bad. Her mother had refused to tell her why he'd left.

Candice had been so upset that she had called Stephanie terrible names and blamed her. She had plunged into a cycle of depression and self-loathing, essentially distancing herself from her friend. She started coming up with more and more excuses as to why she couldn't hang out and avoided her in school. This allowed Stephanie's insecurities to kick in, as she couldn't help but wonder if she was the cause.

She continued to try and keep in touch with her friend, but Candice pushed back every time. Finally, one day, Stephanie found Candice sitting alone

next to the football bleachers. Stephanie gulped, taking in Candice's new black attire. A new piercing adorned her nose. She hadn't seen Candice in weeks, which meant Candice had been skipping school again. She wasn't sure what to say with her constant mood swings, but she still approached, albeit nervously.

"Hi," she stammered. Candice rolled her eyes before ignoring her completely and staring ahead. Stephanie sighed before taking a seat next to her. Other students were slowly starting to make their way onto the field.

"So, how are you?" she continued hopefully.

Candice huffed before eventually answering her. "What do you want?"

Stephanie furrowed her eyes in confusion at her behavior. "What do you mean? Do I need a reason to check up on my friend?"

Candice turned to look at her for the first time and noticed her bloodshot eyes. "Are we really friends, though?"

"Of course we are. We've been friends since the first grade."

Candice threw her head back and laughed. "Well, maybe I don't want to be friends with a fat freak like you."

Her cruel shout caused the other students to turn and look at them as Stephanie's lip wobbled at the hurtful words. She grabbed Candice's arm, trying to convince herself that she didn't actually mean any of what she said.

"Please don't mean that."

"But I do! I am done with you! You are a freak. Find someone else to leech onto," Candice yelled. Laughter rippled through the air. Stephanie waited for Candice to take back her words, but like a knife twisting deeper into her

heart, all Candice did was pull out a cigarette from her pocket. She didn't recognize this new Candice. And quite frankly, she wanted nothing to do with her.

Stephanie turned and ran away, tears streaming down her face. She didn't know it, but it was silently killing Candice on the inside to do that. Candice hoped that Stephanie would turn back to look at her just one more time. Maybe she would see the torment in her eyes. But Stephanie never did.

So both fifteen-year-old girls went their separate ways. Both forever changed. Stephanie vowed never to let anyone take advantage of her ever again and changed her mindset and body. She wanted to never be caught unaware by anyone else ever again. And with this, she turned herself into the very thing she sought to protect herself from. A bully.

On the other hand, Candice felt her old self fading away. The happy child that was naïve to the world's cruelty was gone. All because of her mother, who had drowned herself in alcohol after her husband left. After he'd left, their home was never the same again. Her mother sought the comfort of alcohol and drugs, and when that wouldn't work, she would turn her frustrations towards Candice. She made her a personal punching bag, and when she wasn't screaming at her, one of the many men she brought home was.

She had called her dad multiple times the first few months, but he had never cared enough to answer or give her a response. It had turned her cold, and she would often wander the streets at night. She told herself that Stephanie would be better off without her, so she had pushed her away. She was only good at destroying things. And in the end, she would ruin her as well.

As the new school year started, Candice knew there was something different in the air. Within the last few years, she had changed entirely, her once shiny red locks now dull and lifeless. Her blue eyes lacked any light,

and her body, the one she hid underneath long sleeves and dark washed jeans, was littered with scars.

She made her way into school filled with dread, hating that this was one of her only escapes from her torments. As she walked through the halls, she noticed a small crowd gathered around a figure and couldn't help but grow curious. Once she approached the group, she was startled to find a familiar set of blond locks in the middle. But this wasn't the Stephanie she knew and loved. She looked far skinnier, and her clothes were a lot shorter. She couldn't help but notice the smirk on her face.

Candice felt the guilt over what she had done to Stephanie, and she had spent the better half of the summer trying to find the right words to apologize. She cleared her throat, and everyone's attention snapped toward her. Candice expected a reaction from Stephanie, but she only raised an eyebrow at her.

"Stephanie, I have been trying to call you all summer. I wanted to apolo-"

She was abruptly cut off when Stephanie spoke.

"Save it, you freak. I'm not interested in your sob story. You know, you actually did me a favor. You were holding me back. But now I see I don't need you." Stephanie threw a deathly glare before she turned to walk away.

Candice had hoped that it was only a momentary lapse and that Stephanie would eventually get over it and find it in her to forgive her, but it seemed that she never did. Instead, she seemed to grow on the social hierarchy with a newfound queen bee status. Stephanie made it a mission to put down those that had bullied and ridiculed her. She was the only junior on the cheerleading team, making the other girls practically idolize her.

Candice continued to spiral further and further down into depression. Her mother's new boyfriend was a disgusting man who gave her perverted gazes

when she wasn't around. He had attempted to lay a hand on her once, but she had threatened to tell her mother, forcing him to back off. She had since developed an intense hatred for men in general. Her dad had left her, and the men her mother brought home were either perverted or in search of getting her high.

She isolated herself in school, not wanting to get close to anyone. She was tired of everyone leaving her behind or not liking her. But that all changed when a boy named Jamey from the football team approached her one day. She had assumed he was only joking or trying to fool her, but he seemed persistent and would always try to lighten her mood. He was good-looking, with brown curls and forest green eyes. She had to admit that eventually, she started to fall for him. He helped her escape from the madness that was her life.

And one day, as they sat in his room while studying, she looked at him and couldn't help but confess her feelings for him. His eyes widened, and his mouth opened slightly at her words before he finally spoke up. She mentally braced herself for rejection and cursed herself for reading the signs wrong.

Fortunately, he told her that he, too, had feelings for her, and he had been meaning to ask her out but wasn't sure how. Candice felt a warmth inside her, overjoyed and hoping that maybe things were finally looking up for her. They arranged to meet at a diner that Friday for milkshakes and fries at 5pm.

Candice wore her favorite navy blue dress that she had bought with her savings from working weekly shifts at the library. She sat giddily at the table as she waited for him. But her excitement dwindled as 6pm approached, and he still hadn't arrived. When 6:30 came, it finally clicked that he had stood her up, and tears strung to her eyes. She felt so foolish for thinking he actually wanted her. Just as she was heading towards the door, Stephanie walked in with her posy.

She looked at Candice and stifled a laugh. "Aww, are you waiting for Jamey? Did you honestly think he would be interested in someone like you?"

Candice felt her lip wobble at the humiliation. "So you did this?"

Stephanie smiled wickedly. "Of course I did. You didn't honestly think that someone like that would want someone like you, did you?"

Candice felt her blood boil.

"Why would you do that? When will you stop?" she wailed.

Stephanie strode forward until they stood toe to toe. "I won't stop until you realize you will never be good enough, and everyone on this Earth will eventually leave you. Because you don't belong here."

Candice felt her eyes water as Stephanie's words rang through her head. Candice played tough with a hard shell on the outside, but she was a volatile mess. She had been so stupid. Nobody would ever like her.

Candice looked toward Stephanie one last time as she noticed her retrieve her phone and begin recording a video. Her eyes watered as she rushed out of the diner, riddled in humiliation with the sounds of booming laughter trailing behind her.

When she finally made her way back home. She was unsurprised to find the house silent, with her mother passed out on their old pull-out couch. There was a bit of drool pooling around her open mouth. Candice rolled her eyes and walked over to her room at the end of the hall. Her room was a small storage space with a single bed and a chest of drawers. It carried nothing special. She had stripped it bare of any sentiments when her father had run away. Crawled into bed, she dreaded having to face people at school the next day.

Candice woke up the next day in a particularly irritating mood because of a vivid nightmare of the previous night. She wanted to face Jamey and make him admit his fault for what he had done to her, but her own shame held her back. To think she had actually grown feelings for him.

On the school bus, she noticed all the other juniors sneaking glances at her as the girls giggled and whispered amongst themselves. Some of the boys even openly pointed fingers at her. She felt irritation bubble beneath the surface of her thoughts but chose to remain silent.

She continued to get the same reactions when she got inside the building. She found Stephanie staring at her from across the hall, with Jamey standing next to her. She looked at him, but he refused to meet her eyes, so she paid him no mind. Lunchtime couldn't have come any sooner, as it seemed that everyone had learned about what happened the previous night. Candice made her way to the bleachers at the football field and decided to eat her tuna sandwich there to avoid the swarm of students.

She felt a surge of tranquillity at the first instance as the wind blew through her hair. But then that peace was interrupted when someone came to sit next to her. Rage boiled within her as she turned and came face to face with Jamey. His eyes held guilt, but she ignored it as she asked, "Why? Why did you do that?"

Jamey was silent initially as he chewed his bottom lip, but the look on her face caused him to gulp before finally speaking up. "It was all Stephanie's idea. She wanted to see how gullible you were and see if you would actually fall for the trick."

Candice scowled. She knew Stephanie had a right to hate her, but that didn't automatically mean she had to hold a vendetta against her. She was making her already complicated life a lot more difficult.

"Why did you do it?" she asked eventually.

After a while, he spoke up again, saying, "Because I am in love with her."

Candice felt a pinch in her heart at the words. So, it really was all a game to them.

"Everyone seems to be. Well, jokes on you because Stephanie no longer loves anyone but herself. And you will never be more than a slave to her," she said, standing up to leave.

He grabbed her wrist, causing her to jump back and flinch. His brows furrowed as he looked down at her hand he still held in his grasp. The sleeve of her long black sweater had been pulled up slightly and showed three long lines. His eyes widened at the sight as he stuttered, "What—what are those?"

Candice scowled, wrenching her hand back and pulling down her sleeve.

"None of your business," she hissed back at him.

He stared at her worriedly before taking a step forward. "If someone is hurting you, you should speak to someone."

She grabbed her backpack, ignoring him, before making her way to leave. As she moved out of sight, she yelled back at him. "Even if I wanted help. I wouldn't get it from someone like you!"

After that day, she avoided Jamey like the plague while he made it his mission to search for her wherever he went. She was unsure if he did it out of pity or if it was another one of Stephanie's games, but all she knew was that she wanted nothing to do with it or him.

For some reason, Jamey was even more persistent than she had initially anticipated. Eventually, she had no choice but to corner him inside a storage closet at the end of the school day.

"Why do you keep following me?" she hissed at him. He was silent for a moment, looking anywhere but at her.

"I've been worried about you ever since I saw those bruises. I don't want you to do anything rash," Jamey said, and Candice recoiled.

"I am not suicidal if that is what you are thinking. Stop acting like you actually care and just leave me," Candice yelled at him.

"I am sorry. I just don't want to see something bad happen to you," he said.

She stared at him before asking, "Why?"

He was silent for a moment before speaking. "My sister used to hurt herself as well. Until one day I found her... dead. Look, Candice, I am sorry for what I did. Please forgive me. Don't harm yourself because of me."

Candice felt angry.

"This has nothing to do with you. But if it means that you will leave me alone. Then fine, I forgive you," she said reluctantly, and his shoulders visibly relaxed as he hugged her.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"Whatever, now get off me!" she shouted, shoving him, but he only grinned.

And despite how they had started, a friendship simmered. Candice's feelings diminished as she recognized that they were better off the way they were. Stephanie continued to torment Candice throughout most of high school, but she eventually quit when she realized Candice no longer cared.

Candice rushed to leave immediately after high school was over. Now a legal adult, she could escape her mother's clutches. She moved to North