

*One*

*Three Years Ago*

*Friday, April 10*

Candace Swain forced a smile as she walked out of her dorm room.

Smiling was the last thing she wanted to do, but Candace had an image to uphold.

She was going to be late for the Sigma Rho Spring Fling—the last big party before the end-of-year crunch. Studying for finals, capstones and senior projects, stress and more stress, and—for some of them—graduation.

The mild April weather was perfect for an outdoor gathering. Candace had led the sorority's social-events committee with setup, and they'd included heat lamps along the perimeter. The Mountain View dorm—which housed all campus sororities, each with their own wing—was on the northeast corner of campus, adjacent to the football field. The Spring Fling was held on the large lawn that framed the north entrance, where they had the most room. It was open to all students for a five-dollar admission, and was one of the biggest moneymakers for the sorority, more than charities. Candace had fought for—and won—giving the profits to a rescue mission that helped people get back on their feet. She volunteered weekly for Sunrise Center, and it had changed how she viewed herself and her future. She now planned to be a nurse in the inner city, working for a clinic or public hospital, where people deserved quality health care, even if they were struggling. She even considered specializing in drug and alcohol issues, which were unfortunately prevalent among the homeless community.

She used to think of her volunteerism as penance for her failings. She wasn't religious but had had enough preaching from her devout grandmother to have absorbed things like guilt, penance, sacrifice. Now, she looked forward to Tuesdays when she gave six hours of her time to those who were far worse off than she. It reminded her to be grateful for what she had, that things could be worse.

Candace exited through the north doors and stood at the top of the short flight of stairs that led to the main lawn. Though still early in the evening, the party was already hopping. Music played from all corners of the yard, the din of voices and laughter mingling with a popular song. In the dusk, the towering mountains to the north were etched in fading light. She breathed deeply. She loved everything about Flagstaff. The green mountains filled with pine and juniper. The crisp, fresh air. The sense of community and belonging felt so natural here, something she'd never had growing up in Colorado Springs. With graduation on the horizon, she had been feeling a sense of loss, knowing she was going to miss this special place.

She wasn't close to her parents, who divorced right before she started high school and still fought as much as they did when they were married. She desperately missed her younger sister, Chrissy, a freshman at the University of South Carolina. She'd wanted Chrissy to come here for college, but Chrissy was a champion swimmer and had received a full scholarship to study practically a world away. Candace had no plans to return to Colorado Springs, but she didn't know if she wanted to follow her

sister to the East Coast or head down to Phoenix where they had some of the best job opportunities for what she wanted to do.

Vicky Ryan, a first year student who had aspirations of leadership, ran up to her.

“That weirdo is back,” Vicky said quietly. “Near the west steps. Just loitering there, freaking people out. Should I call campus police?”

Candace frowned. The man Vicky was referring to was Joseph, and he wasn’t really a weirdo. He was an alcoholic, and mostly homeless, who sometimes wandered onto campus and wouldn’t accept the help he had been repeatedly offered. He wasn’t violent, just confused, and sometimes got lost in his own head, largely from how alcohol had messed with his mind and body. But his problems understandably made her sorority sisters uncomfortable. He’d twice been caught urinating against the wall outside their dorm; both times, he’d been cited by campus police. He wasn’t supposed to be on campus at all anymore, and Candace knew they’d arrest him if he was caught.

“I’ll take care of it,” Candace said and made her way around the edge of the party.

She found Joseph on the narrow grassy knoll that separated the football field from the dorms. A small group of students approached her, but one in their group turned toward the grass, likely to confront Joseph.

Candace walked faster, caught up with the student, and smiled brightly. “I got this.”

“It’s okay,” he said. “I’ll handle him.”

“I said I will take care of this. I know him. But thank you anyway.”

Mr. Macho didn’t want to walk away, yet Candace stood firm. She didn’t want anyone to harass Joseph, and she knew he would listen to her. While he wasn’t violent, he could be belligerent, and being confronted by a jerk wanting to impress his girlfriend was a surefire way to trigger Joseph and have him dig in his heels. It would only lead to an arrest, and that wasn’t going to help him in the long run.

The group walked off, grumbling; Candace ignored them. She approached Joseph cautiously, so as not to startle him. “Joseph, it’s Candace,” she said. “Remember me? From Sunrise Center?”

He turned slowly at the sound of her voice. A tall man, nearly six foot four, he could intimidate people. But he was also skinny and hunched over from years of walking the streets and looking down, rummaging through garbage, with his hangdog face, ragged salt-and-pepper beard, and watery blue eyes. He was the kind of guy her grandmother would have called a bum—dressed in multiple layers of dirty, mismatched clothes, and smelling of dirt and stale beer. He looked about sixty, but she knew that he was only in his early forties. She’d heard he’d been living along Route 66 for the better part of ten years. The people who ran Sunrise Center didn’t know much about his personal life, only that when he was sober (which was rare), he would talk about home being east, at the “end of the line.” But no one knew if that meant Chicago or any of the stops in between.

Candace wanted to know more about his story, how he came to be in these circumstances, why he wouldn’t—or couldn’t—accept help. Many of the homeless who came to Sunrise for shelter or food would talk to her freely. But not Joseph. When she’d pried once, he disappeared for a while, so she stopped asking. She would rather him be safe than riding the rails, which was dangerous.

“Candace,” he said slowly after several moments.

“You can’t be here, Joseph. The campus police told you that. Don’t you remember?”

He didn’t say anything or acknowledge that he understood what she said.

“Would you like me to take you over to Sunrise Center? You can get a hot meal there, maybe a cot for the night.”

Again, silence. He turned away from her but didn’t leave.

She *really* didn’t want to call campus police, but if she didn’t do something, someone else would.

“Is there a reason you are here?” she asked.

“Leave me alone,” he said.

“I will, but you have to leave. Otherwise someone is going to call the police.” *If they haven’t already.*

He abruptly turned toward her, staggered on the slope of the lawn. His sudden movement startled her; she stepped back.

“No cops!” he shouted.

“You have to leave, Joseph,” she said, emphatic. Her heart pounded in her chest, not so much from fear but uncertainty. “Please go.”

Again, he turned abruptly, this time staggering down the short slope toward the stadium fence. She held her breath, watching him. He almost ran into the fence, put his arms out to stop himself, then just stood there. A minute later, he shuffled along the field perimeter, shoulders hunched, without looking back.

She breathed easier, relieved that he was heading off campus. She would talk to the director of Sunrise on Tuesday, when she went in to volunteer. Joseph couldn’t keep coming here, but she didn’t really want to call the authorities on him. He needed help, not more trouble, and definitely not incarceration.

Candace was about to return to the party when she heard someone call her name. She turned and saw one of her former tutoring students, Lucas Vega, running toward her. She didn’t want to talk to Lucas tonight. How many times did she have to tell him to leave her alone?

She stopped anyway and waited.

“Candace,” he said, catching his breath. “Thanks.”

“What do you want?” she snapped, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry,” she said bluntly.

"I didn't mean to upset you the other day. I am sorry about that."

She blinked. He sounded so sincere. And truth be told, something he'd said to her a few days earlier made her think long and hard about herself, her life, and the time she'd spent as a student at Northern Arizona University.

*A lie for a good reason is still a lie.*

Lucas and his wide-eyed, good-natured innocence, his innocuous questions had her feeling guilty for no reason. He had picked up on that. And pushed.

No reason? *Ha.* Plenty of reasons. All these doubts and worries she'd been having this semester, the sleepless nights, all came from something she'd done as a freshman that she now had good reason to regret. But what could she do about it? What would come of the truth now?

Maybe there was no good reason to lie.

"All right," she said. "Thank you." It was easier to forgive Lucas than to hold on to this anger. None of what happened was Lucas's fault.

"So will you tutor me again, for finals?"

"No. Afraid not." She could forgive him for prying, but she really needed first to forgive herself. And she didn't know if she could do that with Lucas around, reminding her of her failures and mistakes. He didn't even know what she'd done, but seeing him now was like reliving the past, and her chest tightened. "I'm sorry, but I have too much studying of my own, too many tests. And I'm not working at the writing lab anymore."

*Because of you.*

Was that even fair? Was it because of Lucas...or because of her own guilt?

He was disappointed, but that wasn't her problem.

"Okay, I understand," he said.

"Besides, you're smart. You'll be fine."

He shrugged. "Thanks."

"Uh, you want to come to the party?" She gestured over her shoulder. They could hear the music from where they stood. "I'll get you a pass. Won't even cost you the five bucks."

He shook his head. "I'm fine. I'm not really one for parties. But thanks anyway."

He turned to leave.

"Lucas," she said. He looked at her over his shoulder. "I'm really sorry."

Then she left him there, waiting for something she couldn't give him.

It took Candace several minutes before she could work up the courage to return to the party. An idea she'd been thinking about for the last few months was now fully developed, as if something inside

clicked after her brief conversation with Lucas. Everything shifted into place, and she knew what she needed to do; it was the only thing she could do.

No one was going to like her decision.

When she realized she no longer cared what anyone thought, a burden lifted from her heart. She was certain then that she was doing the right thing.

Everyone at the party was asking for Candace, and Vicky had become worried when her friend and mentor hadn't returned after thirty minutes. She sought out Taylor James, the Sigma Rho president, and told her about the homeless guy. "I don't know where Candace is," she said. "I should have just called campus police."

"Candace says he's harmless," Taylor said, frowning. "Sometimes she's so naive. I'll go look for her."

"Thanks. The party is great by the way. Everyone seems to be having fun. How does it compare to previous years?" This was the first party Vicky had helped put together for the sorority, so she was eager to know how well she'd done.

"As good or better," Taylor said with a wide smile.

Vicky tried not to gloat as she practically floated over to her friends chatting near one of the heat lamps. It wasn't cold, but the warmth of the heat lamp and the glow from the string lights added terrific ambience to the place.

"Oh my God, Vicky, this is a blast," her roommate, Nicole Bergamo, said. Nicole was a half-Black, half-Italian math major who could have easily been a model she was so tall and stunning. "Everyone is talking about how great it is."

Vicky smiled, talked for a bit, then moved around, being social, doing all the things that she'd seen Sigma Rho board members do. Hundreds of people were dancing, talking, mingling, eating, drinking, playing games. Mostly, they were having *fun*, which was the whole purpose. When the new Sigma Rho advisor, Rachel Wagner, told her it was the best Sigma Rho party she'd been to *ever*, Vicky thought she'd never come down from cloud nine.

"I agree," said the gorgeous woman who was with Rachel. "I'm Kimberly Foster, by the way," she introduced herself. "I'm a sorority alum, and I'm so happy I came up this weekend. You've done a fantastic job. Rachel said you're part of the social-events committee. Isn't Candace leading the committee? I haven't seen her yet."

"Yes, she's around," Vicky said. "This is all her vision. We just implemented it."

"I love Candace. Oh! I see her over there."

Vicky looked to where Kimberly was gesturing. Candace was talking in a small group.

"I'm going to catch up with her," Kimberly said. "Nice to meet you, Vicky."

The two women walked away, and Vicky continued her rounds. She was having a blast as her worries that the party might flop were replaced with pride and satisfaction over its success.

Hours later it was midnight, and per city ordinance—because their dorm bordered a public street—they had to cut off the music. That put a damper on things, but it was fine with Vicky—she was exhausted after working all day prepping and all night making sure everything was running smoothly. She was a little miffed that Candace was hardly there: Vicky had only caught a glimpse of her twice. But whatever, she'd seemed preoccupied, and that would have been a party downer.

Vicky ran into the dorm to get extra trash bags—they had to clean up tonight so wild animals wouldn't get into the garbage and create a bigger mess in the morning. She came back out and heard voices arguing near where the DJ had been set up. He'd already packed up and left. She couldn't hear exactly what was being said. It seemed like a quiet, intense exchange between Taylor and Candace though Rachel and her guest Kimberly were there, too. Everyone, especially Taylor, seemed angry.

About sixty people were still milling around, mostly Sigma Rho sisters helping with the cleanup. Nicole came up to Vicky and said, "What are Candace and Taylor fighting about?"

"I don't know. It's probably nothing."

"It's not nothing," Nicole said. "I heard Taylor call Candace a *selfish bitch*."

"Ouch. Well, Rachel is there. She'll mediate."

But Rachel looked angry as well; it seemed that Candace was on one side, and the other three women were yelling at her.

"You're wrong!" Candace screamed, and Vicky jumped. She glanced at Nicole, who looked perplexed as well. Vicky handed her a garbage bag, and they both started picking up trash. She didn't want anyone to think she was eavesdropping.

But she was. As she inched closer to the group, she heard Kimberly say, "Let's talk about this tomorrow, okay? When everyone has had a good night's sleep and we can all think more clearly."

"I *am* thinking clearly," Candace said. "I'm done. Just...done."

She left, walked right past Vicky without even seeing her. There were tears in Candace's eyes, and Vicky didn't know if she was angry or upset, but probably both. Vicky thought about going after her to make sure she was okay, then felt a hand on her shoulder.

She jumped, then laughed nervously when she saw Rachel. Taylor and Kim had walked away in the other direction.

"Sorry. You startled me."

"I'm sorry you had to witness that," Rachel said.

"I didn't, really. Just saw that Taylor and Candace were arguing about something. I didn't want to intrude."

"It's going to be fine. Just a little disagreement that Candace took personally."

"About the party?" Vicky asked, her insecurities rising that she'd messed up something.

"Oh, no, the party was perfect. Don't worry about that."

Relieved, she said, “Maybe I should go talk to Candace.”

“No, let her be. I’ve known her since she was a freshman and took my Intro to Bio class. She has a big heart, and sometimes you can’t help everyone.”

Now Vicky understood, or thought she did. Taylor had been the most vocal about the creepy homeless guy hanging around the dorms, and she’d been the one who’d called campus police last time, after Candace said not to.

“Let me help,” Rachel said and took a garbage bag from Vicky’s stash.

Rachel chatted with Vicky, who felt lucky to be able to spend so much one-on-one time with her sorority advisor. Rachel was so smart, an associate professor at just thirty-two, an alum of the University of Arizona Sigma Rho chapter. Plus she had such interesting stories to share. By the time they were done with the cleanup—it didn’t take long with so many people working together—Vicky had forgotten all about the argument between Candace and Taylor.

It was the last time anyone saw Candace alive.

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