

## *Chapter 1—Mandy*

She walked like a woman who used to be pretty.

*Mama.*

Shirley Temple black curls bounced on her shoulders, determined to sustain youth even though the hair had long ago turned gray. The color might have been too severe for most women in their fifties, but for this woman, such harshness matched the perpetual gaze down her nose and her disapproving frown. Even when she smiled, which was rare, her lips turned downward; the only indication that the expression was, in fact, a smile, was the baring of teeth.

Relentlessly, she marched forward, sensibly low heels beating a *click click* on the hospital linoleum and her blue-and-white muumuu billowing behind her. The vision was not unlike a bat swooping toward a terrified mouse. The cheerful Florida sunshine felt further away than a few walls.

Mandy gripped the edge of the nurses' station and watched her mother approach, but clenched for the tirade that would blow back her hair and leave her as deflated as discarded birthday balloons, as empty as a broken piñata. According to her rapidly escalating heart rate and inability to breathe, her body told her she had two choices: fight or flight. Because fight hadn't worked in twenty-six years of trying, Mandy held out no hope of her mother backing down. Flight would result in a comical yet terrifying chase that ultimately would end with Mandy cornered and her mother righteously angry for having an ungrateful daughter.

Fight or flight?

Neither.

Instead, Mandy froze like a lab rat suffering from learned helplessness; when all else fails, hold still and take the punishment. "Hi, mom."

“Don’t ‘hi, mom’ me, young lady! How dare you pack your bags without so much as a word to your mother. After all I’ve done for you!” Her nostrils flared when she dragged in a deep breath. Oh, she was just getting started.

In that brief pause, Mandy fooled herself into thinking she might explain. “You were at work, and leaving today was a last-minute decision. I was going to call you tonight.”

Pink-tipped talons grabbed her shoulders with a little shake, and her mom’s voice went up two octaves. “Where in the world did you think you were going?”

Mandy took note of the “did” and mentally corrected the question to, “Where in the world *do* you think you’re going?” Thank goodness the nurses’ station was empty, or she’d have wanted to crawl onto a gurney, slink under a blanket, and find her happy place. As it was, she worried Jude would overhear from her room. Mandy looked over her shoulder and saw that the door was ajar. Great. “I’m headed to Georgia to help with a Haircuts salon grand opening.”

Her mom’s eyes grew wider, and her chubby fingers clutched harder. “Is this Jude’s doing?” Before Mandy could answer, her mom leaned closer, nearly touching their noses together. “She’s been a bad influence from day one. I had hoped the cancer would get her out of our lives.”

Sometimes her mother’s self-focus was shocking, but narcissists rarely see their own poor choices, and holding up a mirror won’t offer a glimpse. She closed her eyes and reminded herself to be a grateful daughter, a mantra programmed into her superego since birth. “She’s dying,” Mandy whispered, hoping her mom would take the hint and lower her voice. “And she needs help opening the new franchise.” She could have explained that Jude’s nephew lived in Georgia, and Jude had sold her Florida salons to move near him. She could have told her that the cancer had spread faster than Jude anticipated. But her mother wasn’t exactly a listener.

After her mom pretended to lose her power of speech with the shock of Mandy's revelation—an act that wasn't the slightest bit believable—she hissed, “Well someone else will have to do it. You're far too fragile.”

It was a low blow and one Mandy should have seen coming. She'd struggled with a craving for pain killers after a car accident sent her through back surgery. But she'd stopped taking the prescribed meds a year ago and felt like her old self again, happy with life even in the absence of the narcotics her mom purchased and offered and pushed. “I'm fine. And the grand opening is only for a few weeks, then I'll be back home again,” she lied.

“That's ridiculous. Where will you live?” Her mom released Mandy's shoulders and folded her arms. The inquisition had begun.

“An apartment Jude found for me.” At least that part was true.

“What about a lease? Most are for a year.”

“Not this one. It's month to month.” Why does one lie always lead to another? Mandy had actually cleaned out her savings account to pay a deposit as well as first and last month's rent on the year-long lease.

“Where?” Her mother tapped one foot.

“Savannah.” Next question?

“What's your title at the salon? Errand girl?” Her mother cut her eyes to suspicious slits.

“Manager.” Point and match.

Uncrossing her arms, her mother fisted her hands on ample hips. “Manager.” Mandy nodded, maybe too eagerly. “And the manager will only work there a few weeks?”

Shit. She was getting too close. “Yes, another stylist will take over as manager when she finishes selling her house.” Complete crap. Now Mandy tossed out lies and details with wild

abandon. “Her name is Zee, and she’s worked at one of Jude’s Florida salons for years.” Well, there was a stylist named Zee, but she already lived in Savannah.

“Uh-huh.” With a raised eyebrow, her mother pursed her lips. “You know I’ll expect to see you at home within a month.”

Holy shit, she was going to get away with it. “Sure, of course, a month.” Mandy hoped and prayed that cutting the apron strings would open a world where she could be independent and successful, making her own decisions and living her best life. If she could just break away from her mother, she’d have the strength to stay away, and her mother would have to accept the change. What Mandy needed was a fundamental shift.

A tingle of excitement warmed her in the otherwise cool hospital. She looked forward to living alone. Maybe she’d get a cat.

“Hmm, we’ll see about that.” Mandy’s mother pushed past her and charged into Jude’s room, bent on excavating the truth or at least making Jude’s day a little bit darker. Mandy followed with no hope of saving Jude when she couldn’t even save herself.

The slip of a woman rested in a narrow hospital bed with her eyes closed, apparently sleeping through the incessant *beep beep* of machines hooked up to keep track of her decline. The Jude of today was a mere suggestion of Jude a year ago, even six months ago, when she’d bragged about her full head of silver hair and invincible stamina. Although she’d been the proud owner of five Haircuts franchises, she’d spent hours each day cutting hair alongside her employees, scrubbing the bathrooms, and throwing herself into any job that other stylists complained about. New hires quickly learned to respect and admire the five-foot, three-inch powerhouse.

Under glaring fluorescent lights, Jude looked half dead. Mandy silently reached for her mother's hand and tried to pull her back to the hallway. She wanted Jude to find peace in her final days or hours.

Her mother jerked away, stopping at the foot of Jude's bed. To Mandy, she hissed, "Jude needs to explain herself. I have every right to know what she has secretly planned for my daughter."

From the bed, Jude opened one eye. "Janice, if I ever explain myself to you, it'll be the last thing I do." She must have pushed the call button because a nurse appeared at the door. Jude's voice lost its power, leaving her whispering on an exhale to the nurse. "Please take the young lady to the coffee machine."

Mandy let the nurse guide her out, but she stood outside the open door, worried her mom would upset Jude and somehow feeling responsible for the looming problem. As she listened, Jude croaked, "Janice, come closer. I'm weak. I need your help."

Her mother answered, "Doesn't everyone? It's my life's work." She often referred to her psychology practice, where she counseled lost souls under the guise of Christian values. A crinkle of bedclothes let Mandy know Jude or her mother moved in the room.

Jude murmured again. "Closer." Two seconds later, Jude's voice took on its characteristic bark. "*Get the fuck out of my room!*"

Janice, super-mother, saver of souls, confidant to the masses, stormed from the room and nearly ran into Mandy. Behind her, Jude shouted, "Don't come back unless you want to be haunted!" The old Jude would have thrown bedpans and water pitchers at the door, but her strength must have been all wrapped up in yelling.

Mandy's mom stood in front of her, breathing like she'd run an impossible twenty yards, and waved her hands in the air. "She's crazy! And you're crazy for letting her get in your head." After turning on her heel, she stomped back down the long hallway, still waving her hands over her head. "Good riddance to you! You won't last a week!"

Mandy tiptoed into Jude's room to find that Jude looked wide awake and ready for a fight. When she saw Mandy, she unfolded her arms and relaxed a scowl. "Hi, sunshine." Jude waved her over.

Obediently—because she usually was—Mandy stood beside the bed. "You shouldn't wear yourself out; we need you at the grand opening."

Batting the comment away with a flap of her hand, Jude said, "We both know I won't last another week."

"I need you there to boss me around like you always do." The chair scraped when Mandy dragged it toward the bed and plopped down.

"Mandy, listen to me. You'll be fine. You're the manager; your team is strong. *You're* strong." The heart rate monitor beeped faster. "You just need to get the hell away from your mama."

"She means well." Probably from years of training, Mandy couldn't bring herself to trash her mother. "And she's right about one thing: Managing is a huge step."

Jude frowned. "Don't make me invoke the dying-wish rule, which is only trumped by the old-woman, dying-wish rule."

To keep herself from crying in front of Jude, Mandy smiled, but the effort didn't reach her eyes. "Have you talked to your nephew?"

“When I stand at death’s door, I’ll call Bruce so I can burden him with all my worldly possessions. Having a hair salon drop in his lap might not make him jump for joy.”

Mandy straightened the bed covers. “I’m sure he’ll be grateful for the generous gift. I mean, his *own* hair salon. What could be better?”

“Be still, child.” Jude pressed Mandy’s hand against the blanket, calming her need to move. “I’ll tell Bruce this too, but I don’t want a funeral or any other pity-fest where a mortician overcharges for a casket and shitty folding chairs in a frigid viewing room. Good Lord.”

At the thought of death, Mandy’s tears came. “People who love you will want to honor your memory.”

“A couple of shots of Jameson will do that. Hell, have more than a couple. But that’s it. No other organized bullshit.”

Using her free hand, Mandy dashed the tears from her cheeks with an impatient swipe. “You’re the boss.”

Jude smiled, suddenly looking tired, probably from all the talking—and yelling at Mandy’s mom. “I’ve decided I want a dying wish.”

“Name it.”

“No, I want to know *your* wish before I die.” She weakly squeezed Mandy’s hand. “What do you want from life?”

“World peace?” Mandy giggled, trying to lighten the mood.

“Cut the crap.” Jude’s signature gruffness returned.

“Okay.” Looking toward the door, Mandy gave the question serious consideration. “I want a good life, whatever that is.”

“Dig deeper. What’s your dream?”

A blush crept up Mandy's cheeks. "I'm embarrassed to say."

"Who's going to tell?" Jude sucked her teeth. "I'm on the way out the door."

Mandy shook her head at the comment but decided to bare her soul. "I know it's a long shot, but one day, if I'm just dreaming, I'd like to own a salon. But that's a long way down the road, if ever. For the foreseeable future, I promise to do a good job managing your salon."

Jude winked with what seemed like the last of her energy. "I'm counting on it." She turned her head away and closed her eyes. "Now get out of here so I can rest in peace."

"Not funny, Jude. Not funny." Mandy was glad Jude couldn't see her face. Tears streamed unchecked down her cheeks, and she clenched her fists to stifle sobs that couldn't happen in front of Jude. By the time she reached the door, her mentor was already asleep and snoring lightly, machines beeping the rhythm of her gentle heart.

Mandy peered right and left down the long hallway, partly expecting her mother to be waiting like the twins in *The Shining*, but the coast was clear. Heart pounding against her ribcage, she darted toward the elevators and down to the hospital lobby, certain her mother would be waiting for her in the parking lot...or in the back seat.