

Tasting Candy

Chapter One

He was a glutton for punishment. Blade had no other explanation for coming to Tough Bodies Gym. His mother had put him up to it. She always worked things out to her advantage. He was a thirty-four year old man and yet he'd never been able to say no to Mom.

His gaze swept the impressive gym, and he felt a surge of pride. Blade's construction business, Vaughn Building and Remodeling, had been contracted to build it and they'd done a fine job.

But as he watched his sister Lacey show Candice Warner the proper way to do a crunch, Blade groaned. Up, down, then it started all over again. Blade's blood heated and his cock turned hard just watching Candice's firm, perky body shift in sinuous, slow movements. Her face contorted as she worked through the burn, her body dripping from the exertion. He could easily picture her in the throes of one hellacious orgasm.

She wore a pair of black workout shorts and one of those bra-like exercise shirts. Christ, she was put together just right, too. What the hell was she working out for anyway? From his vantage point, she didn't need to improve her figure. She was perfect the way she was. Blade swiped a hand over his face and practically moaned at his own weakness, which, of course, was Candice.

It had been that way from the first. He'd walked into his brother's office all wound up from work, then he'd spotted her. She'd glanced up at him from her desk with those innocent blue eyes, her sandy-brown hair pulled into a messy bun, and he'd immediately forgotten his own name. She'd smiled sweetly at him, and he'd gotten hard as a railroad spike.

Blade had shamelessly given her the once over, noticing the enticing blush that had heated her ivory cheeks. She'd turned all pink and warm right before his eyes, making Blade ache to take her against the office door and fuck her right there on the spot, make her scream out his name and beg him for more. From that moment, he'd been hooked.

Magnetism, karma, chemistry, whatever the hell it was, he knew he would have to have her or die.

But damn if he wasn't too chicken shit to make the first move. He'd always been the aggressor with women, but for some inexplicable reason, Candice made him hesitate. In some deep part of his soul, Blade knew that he shouldn't be screwing around with someone so innocent. He was the wolf to her Little Red Riding Hood.

Still, when he'd confided all this to Lacey, she'd laughed and told him that if he didn't make a move on Candice then some other man would. The thought still pissed him off.

Shoring up his nerve even while he reminded himself that this was nothing more than an errand for his mother, Blade moved farther into the spacious, private workout room and cleared his throat. The action had the desired effect. Lacey glanced his way, while Candice bounded to her feet. She was always such a jumpy little thing.

“Blade, what are you doing here?” Lacey asked as she rose to greet him with a hug. Candice’s gaze darted around the room as if searching for an escape route. She seemed intent on getting away from him.

“Mom wanted me to drop this off. And to make sure you’re coming to the cookout tonight.” Blade pulled the business card out of his front shirt pocket and dropped it into Lacey’s hand.

“Crystal’s Weddings and Banquets, Inc.” Lacey rolled her eyes. “Oh, for crying out loud, Blade.”

He threw up his hands in self-defense. “Hey, don’t shoot the messenger.”

Deep down, Blade was pleased as punch that their mother was pushing Lacey on the whole matrimony issue. Lacey had fallen in love with Nick Stone, a man she’d been best buds with for years. While he respected Nick as a man, all that had changed the minute he became intimately involved with his baby sister. Blade wasn’t at all happy that she and Nick were living together. He was just old-fashioned enough to want to see a ring on Lacey’s finger. It’d go a long way toward giving him peace of mind, as well as ensuring Lacey’s future.

Lacey wadded up the small card and threw it toward the corner. It landed in the wastebasket. “I’ve told her when Nick and I decide to get married, she’ll be the first to know.” Then as an aside, she complained, “And of course Nick and I are coming to the cookout.”

Blade shrugged. “Yeah, well, I think she wants to see it in writing or something.”

Lacey swung around. “Where’s Candice?”

“She went out the door.” He ought to know; he’d been surreptitiously watching her every move.

Lacey gasped, as if startled that Candice had left the privacy of the workout room. Blade was baffled as to why that was such point of concern. Lacey moved quickly toward the entrance. Curious, Blade followed close behind.

“But why would she go out to the main floor? She never goes out to the main floor,” Lacey said in a rush.

Lacey’s worry for Candice became infectious. “I assumed she was going to the bathroom or something. You know, giving us a minute.”

“You don’t understand, she never goes out to the main floor, Blade. Never!”

“Okay, you’re starting to worry me here, sis,” he rumbled. “What’s the big deal?”

“Just help me find her.”

He could do that, Blade thought, slightly panicked now. Several minutes later, they'd still had no luck finding her. But it was Saturday, and sweaty bodies packed the room. Candice was just one woman. Such a large crowd would swallow her up.

Finally, Blade spotted her plastered against a wall. Three heavily-built weightlifters hovered over her, flirting, which pissed him off. As he drew closer, Candice appeared frozen in fear. Christ, she was scared to death.

"What the hell?" he snarled, more than ready to kick some ass.

In a few long strides, he yanked two of the huge men away from Candice. He slammed them both against the opposite wall, then glared at the third man, promising bodily harm if he so much as blinked. "You three hassling the lady?"

They all stammered at once. Blade was about to hit one of them when Lacey arrived. "Let them go, Blade," she pleaded, but he wasn't in the mood to be accommodating. "It's okay. I don't think they meant any harm."

Blade wasn't so sure. Keeping his eyes on the three idiots, he asked, "Candy, are you okay?"

"I-I'm fine." Candice's reply was so small he barely heard her. He released the two Casanovas and watched as all three men hurried off. When he turned around, Candice was red as a beet and breathing erratically. Even more puzzling, his sister was helping her back toward the private workout room.

"Lacey?" he asked, feeling like an intruder. Lacey's stern expression forced him to hold all his questions for later. A sense of helplessness settled in his stomach as he followed behind the two women, blocking curious patrons. He might not know Candice well, but he realized she was probably embarrassed. Candice was shy and she wouldn't appreciate the gawking stares.

Once they were back in Lacey's private workout area, Blade closed the door, effectively shutting out prying eyes. Lacey seated Candice against the wall on the floor, then ran to fetch a bottle of water.

Blade stood back, watchful and unsure what to do to make the shell-shocked expression on Candice's delicate, oval face go away. She breathed easier, but now her cheeks were deathly pale. Her huge, dark blue eyes appeared to stare at nothing. She kept clenching and unclenching her fists. He was afraid she'd hurt herself if she continued to dig her fingernails into her palms.

What could the three men have done to make her panic? It didn't appear as if they'd done anything more than talk to her. Hell, there hadn't been time for more than that, but why would she get so upset over a little harmless flirting? Answers. Blade needed answers and he wouldn't get them by playing guard duty.

He closed the distance between them. Candice blinked and stared up at him, then smiled. God, she was pretty when she did that. There was such a sweet innocence about her. Every time Blade was in her presence, he felt out of her league.

He crouched in front of her and took her fists in his hands, then gently uncurled her fingers and smoothed his thumbs over the little crescent moons she'd created with her nails. "If those assholes hurt you, I'll kill them. Just say the word, Candy."

She blinked as if dazed. "No, but thank you, Blade. They didn't do anything wrong. I just had a panic attack, that's all. And my name is Candice, not Candy." His sister returned and handed Candice the glass of water, then fussed over her, breaking the fragile connection between them.

"Why did you go out to the main floor?" Lacey asked as she started to fan her with her hands. "You know how busy it gets on weekends, hun."

Candice shrugged. "I wasn't thinking. I only wanted to give you two some privacy and I thought if I could just get to the bathroom and back I'd be okay, but..." Her words trailed off and she peeked at him again, making it clear that she wasn't about to discuss the strange episode in front of him. He wanted her to open up to him, but every time the opportunity arose, she managed to wiggle away again.

Lacey massaged her arm in a soothing gesture, and a pang of envy shot through him. He wanted to be the one massaging Candice's smooth, ivory skin.

"I think we better quit for today, don't you?" Lacey said, "You should get home and take a nice warm bath. Try to relax and forget about all this."

Candice nodded and started to rise, and just that quick, Blade was there, grabbing the opportunity to touch her again. He helped her to her feet, but she stepped back as soon as she was upright. He was forced to release her or look like an idiot.

"I'm fine now, really. I'm sorry you had to take your time searching for me, Blade. I know you're a busy man." When he started to tell her he hadn't been put out, she talked right over him in that soft way she had. "I can't tell you how much it means to me that you were there to help me with those guys. Thank you."

She smiled one last smile and walked away. She retrieved her gym bag and left out a back entrance, leaving Blade to stare and wonder what the hell had just happened.

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"The award for the biggest fool who walked the earth goes to Candice Warner," she complained. Would she ever stop thinking every man was like Lance? It didn't seem to matter that she grew physically stronger with each workout, or how well she did in her self-defense classes, she still cowered around men. She was furious with herself and also saddened now that Blade had witnessed her mental breakdown. She didn't want him seeing her as a helpless ninny.

Candice had started working at Merrick Vaughn's company, Vaughn Business Solutions, less than a year ago, and she'd loved every minute of it. Her supervisor, Chloe Vaughn, Merrick's

wife, was about the best boss anyone could ask for. That was how she'd encountered Blade the first time. Candice would never forget that day as long as she lived.

He'd come to meet Merrick for lunch, and she'd nearly swallowed her tongue. He was so ruggedly handsome, so powerfully built. Dressed completely opposite to Merrick, Blade sported a pair of tight, work-worn jeans that molded to his tall, powerful frame as if made for his body alone. His white t-shirt had been dusty from work and his big, heavy, black boots had left clods of dirt on the carpet in his wake. He'd smiled at her briefly, and she'd wanted to melt into a puddle. Then he'd glanced down, noticing for the first time the mess he had made, and he'd grimaced. Even his grimace was sexy.

Candice had gone speechless when he'd bent to scoop the clods with his hands, and she'd stared unabashed at his firm backside, wishing for all the world that she was bold enough to reach out and grab a handful of him.

Destroying her composure further, Blade had walked around her desk, coming within an inch of touching her, and tossed the dirt into her trashcan. As he straightened, Blade grinned and whispered a husky apology, his dark, sinful voice turning her bones to liquid in a heartbeat. Never in a million years would Blade ever know how close Candice had come to taking those precious clods of dirt out of the trash and spiriting them home with her as if they were sparkling diamonds.

The way he'd stared at her, all of her, as if he could see right into her private thoughts. As if he knew exactly the way he affected her and was pleased by it. It had unnerved her, and she'd tried to avoid him ever since.

"He must really think I'm nuts," Candice muttered to herself as she filled the tub with suds and hot water. The one man she'd actually been attracted to, the only man she'd thought of in a romantic way since the ordeal with Lance Markum a little over a year ago, had just witnessed her in a full-fledged panic attack. And all because a few men had flirted with her. It was beyond belief!

She slipped off her clothes, then sat in the inviting warmth, determined to regain her equilibrium. She closed her eyes and allowed the solitude to surround her and take her mind away from the sadness of the past and into her dream world, where everything was warm and men treated women with respect. She used the words her therapist, Dr. Jackie Lewis, had given her, to force her mind to focus on what could be, and not what had been.

"I have the courage to embrace my strengths. To get excited about life and to give and receive love. I have the courage to face and transform my fears." She repeated the mantra three more times before she fell asleep. The lavender soap and warm water took her off to a safe place where she could explore her desires without getting hurt.

The soft glow of a candle suffused the room. Candice wore a long, pale pink satin nightgown, and her lover stood in a pair of black silk boxers. They stared at each other for a long moment, then he smiled and beckoned her to come to him. She went willingly. When she stood a few

inches from him, she smiled and allowed him to slip the straps of her gown down her shoulders and arms until the pink confection pooled at her feet.

She reached out and grasped at the edges of his boxers and slid them off his lean hips. Desire darkened his eyes as she tugged him forward. When the wet heat of his mouth closed over her nipple, suckling and tugging, Candice squirmed and clutched, edgy for more. For all of him. Suddenly, a ring disrupted her dream, and Candice reached out, only to grasp at thin air. Her fantasy lover disappeared as she lay in a cooling tub of water and wilted bubbles. Then someone banged a fist against her door and she groaned. She couldn't even have a flaming wet dream!

"Just when things were starting to get good, too." Disgruntled, she stepped out of the tub and hurriedly dried off, but the pounding came again.

"Just a minute already," she yelled. Then fear started to creep in. Who could be knocking on her door at...well, it was really only mid-afternoon. Still, she didn't have a bunch of friends, and most anyone she knew would call first.

Candice threw on her robe, grabbed the mace she kept by the front door and called out, "Who is it?"

"It's me, Blade."

"Blade?" she repeated with surprise and more than a touch of elation.

"Yeah, Blade Vaughn, Lacey's brother."

Candice rolled her eyes. As if she could possibly know more than one Blade. As if she wouldn't recognize the sexy, deep baritone of his voice. Candice unhooked the chain and undid the three locks, then slowly opened the door.

"What on earth are you doing here?" She thought of something else. "And how did you even know where I live?"

Blade's eyebrows shot up and his face lit with amusement. "We need to talk, and Lacey told me." With a hint of a smile playing at his lips, he asked, "Do you always answer your door wearing a robe and wielding a can of mace?"

Candice's face heated as she tucked the mace into her pocket. She'd forgotten about both her robe and the mace with Blade Vaughn standing on her doorstep. He must have come straight from the gym, because he was wearing the same clothes. With his requisite work jeans, a battered navy blue t-shirt that had seen better days and work boots, he was, as usual, devastatingly handsome. And that's when it hit her like a Mack truck. Oh god, how on earth could she have missed it?

It was him! The man in her dreams. The sinfully sexy guy she'd been making love to for the past several months. He was none other than Blade Vaughn! Candice's entire body warmed at the

idea of having a flesh-and-blood reproduction of the person who'd brought her to climax, not once, but dozens of times in her dream world.

She looked at his face more closely, committing details to memory, comparing and searching. Of course, Candice thought with a heady sigh, she should have recognized him. The mustache, the deep-set eyes and broad face. Oh lord, she wondered if the rest of his body matched her dream version.

Wow.

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