

# SWEET SINCLAIR

MASTERS OF THE CASTLE, BOOK FOUR



MAREN SMITH

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## CHAPTER 1



Maybe Sinclair Adleton stood behind the glass display counter, making notes in her business ledger. The sun was shining through the storefront windows, making the candy jars that lined them sparkle, and casting a rainbow array of color back across the floor where it refracted through the rock candy.

The fudge display was fully stocked, as were the three-tiered shelves of regular and sugar-free chocolates. Warring scents of cinnamon and saltwater taffy competed for mouthwatering attention with every indrawn breath, and everywhere one looked, all that could be seen within Maybe's Candy was row after row of M&Ms and malt balls, Red Hots and candy corn, licorice and Blow Pops and taffy and even nostalgic goodies like candy cigarettes, Fizzies and Mallow Bars.

They occupied every surface and space, filled the glass jars and wooden barrels—shelf after shelf, row after row, from one wall to the other and from the front of the store all the way to the back. Her shop wasn't the biggest store of its kind, but Sinclair was proud to boast that it still packed well over 800 varieties of candy into this crowded 1200 square foot space, and every single item within the

display case was made fresh by her own hands. Unfortunately, the only thing Maybe's wasn't packed full of was customers.

Maybe's Candy had been Sinclair's dream ever since she was a kid. She had saved for this, worked for it—delivering papers since she was twelve and flipping burgers from the day she turned sixteen. She had worked throughout high school. She had worked throughout college. When the ideal retail space had opened up (as if by magic right there on Main Street, not half a block from the freeway onramp), Sinclair had jumped at the chance to lease it. But at the very last minute, that lease had fallen through and the only other available storefront in her price range was this one, three miles off the high-traffic part of town, in an older more dilapidated area. Still, she'd taken it, and three weeks after Maybe's Candy opened its front doors, that ideal retail space she'd originally wanted opened its doors as well—Casey's Sinful Desserts, run by none other than Casey Silverton, her dormitory roommate all through their last year at college.

At one time her best friend, Casey had been the one who had wanted to be an office manager but who had instead listened quite attentively every time Sinclair talked about her dream. Until Sinful Desserts opened up, she hadn't known just how much Casey liked her ideas. Apparently, it was just enough to steal them.

So now here they both were, each with a candy store of her own and both in a town of less than fifteen thousand people. Granger literally was not big enough for the two of them, and since their friendship was likely never to recover from Casey's betrayal, the war of the candies began.

Sinclair fired the first shot. She added nickel and penny candies for little kids with only small amounts of money to spend and liqueur-filled chocolate bottles for adults. Casey added ice cream to her store and all summer long did a thriving business with shakes and old-fashioned malts.

Sinclair offered Bogo prices—buy one, get one free—on all candy throughout her store for Halloween. Casey set up a Trunk-

or-Treat in her parking lot and although she didn't discount her candies, she still had a hell of a lot of customers on the big night.

For Christmas, Sinclair decorated Maybe's Candy to the nines, invested pennies she really didn't have in top-notch advertising and brought in every kind of Christmas candy imaginable: Candy Cane Hershey's Kisses, chocolate bark foil-wrapped bells, Santa pops and Pez dispensers, and Twenny Christmas Tree Swirl Pops, to name just a few. She sold completely out of every liqueur-filled chocolate bottle she could get her hands on, and on the other side of town, Casey brought in a real Santa and sold out of damn near everything she had.

It wasn't fair. This was her dream, not Casey's, and now—running out of money and ideas—unless she did something truly spectacular for this coming Valentine's Day, she was going to lose everything.

But what, what could she possibly do that Casey couldn't counter? Staring at her daily ledger, Sinclair tapped her eraser against the blank page and tried her best to start feeling a little less depressed and a little more creative. She could do this. She had to, because otherwise Maybe's Candy would not survive another year without a serious financial pick-me-up. Sinclair sighed, rubbing at her forehead, but no good ideas were forthcoming.

A flash of reflected sunlight rolled across the surface of the store windows as a silver sports car eased to a stop right outside her store. She knew that car; her heart fumbled a beat. He was back—Parker, that good-looking man who'd made her small shop his weekly habit, every Monday just like clockwork, for almost a year now. Practically from the moment she'd opened her doors.

There was something about that man that just drew her. He was kind, funny, smart, and when he leaned against the counter to flirt while she rang up his standard one-pound bag of caramels, the way he'd look at her never failed to make her feel as if *she* were the only piece of candy in the place that he had any interest at all in sampling.

It was really too bad there was something wrong with him.

Her hand went to her hair before Sinclair could stop herself. She quickly checked her reflection in the glass of the display case and was rubbing her suddenly sweaty palms over the curve of her jeans-clad hips when he pushed open the door. She could tell by his grin that her primping had not gone unnoticed.

“Good morning, handsome,” she said with a grin.

“Oh, you’re beautiful and you know it,” he replied, letting the door swing gently shut behind him. “You could have sugar on your nose and chocolate in your hair, it wouldn’t make any difference. You’d still be beautiful.”

“Some might say you’re biased,” she teased, a flush of warmth tickling up through her stomach as he strolled up to the counter. His shoulders were broad, his waist narrow, and his sandy brown hair just long enough in the bangs to brush boyishly over to one side. The right. He was a right-hand brusher, and Lord, but the way he filled out a pair of jeans was downright criminal. Fortunately for him, she was a confectioner and not a cop.

“So, how’s sales?” he asked, propping his arms on top of the glass.

“Well, uh...” She tried not to wince, and when that failed, to laugh it off. “You’re customer number three today.”

“Ouch.” He cringed for her. “Well, school’s not quite out yet. I’m sure you’ll get a rush once the kids start running wild.”

She hoped so too, but that hadn’t been the trend so far this week. Sinclair had cheaper candy, homemade pieces that were to-die-for delicious, and a much greater variety, but Casey’s shop was situated almost a mile closer to the schools. That right there put Maybe’s Candy at an incredible disadvantage.

Wanting to keep Parker’s visit light, she turned the conversation away from her financial problems to something safer. “What can I get you?”

His grin broadened. “What can you always get me, sweetness?”

“Caramels,” they said together. She laughed. “Do you have a preference?”

“Nope. You pick. If it comes from your hand, it’ll taste sweeter anyway.”

“Flatterer.” She could so easily have fallen in love with him, but that something that was wrong—whatever it was—always got between them. She wished she could put her finger on whatever it was. Married, maybe? She never saw even the faintest shadow of a ring on his finger, but why else would he keep coming back week after week, flirting and flattering and coming right up the verbal cusp of asking her out, only to stop short. She just couldn’t figure it out!

Bag in hand, Sinclair began to pick and choose a variety of tasty caramel treats from the displays she’d hand-created behind the counter. Then she ventured out onto the floor to pick from the barrels and other shelves. After all this time, she knew his order pretty much by heart. He always got one pound and she always made sure he got a nice selection.

“You look good this week,” he said, following her from a safe distance, although she could tell he was taking great pains to look as if he were just browsing.

“Thanks.” Her face flushed. “So do you.”

He grinned, trailing along behind her as she rotated through her stock, picking through the salted, the whips and the nougats, and now and then, stole peeks right back at him. This little ritual had become a familiar dance for them. For the last year, they’d been do-si-doeing around one another, pulled in on both sides by this mutual attraction Sinclair knew for a fact she wasn’t imagining. And yet, in all this time, they’d never dated, or gone for coffee, or exchanged phone numbers. She couldn’t count how often she’d caught him looking on her with longing, and yet, he always stopped before he became something other than a customer in her store. And because he kept coming up short, she did too. He just didn’t

strike her as the shy sort. Something had to be wrong, either with her or with him.

Maybe it wasn't him. Maybe it was her. Maybe women just plain didn't float his boat. That old adage must be true: all the really good guys were either married or gay.

"Have you thought about moving your store?" Parker suddenly asked.

"Uh," Sinclair said, trying to pretend she was engrossed in the monumental decision between soft caramels and hard candies. "Unfortunately, this is the only available retail space in my price range. It's okay. Things'll pick up around Valentine's. I'm hoping I can come up with something really good to help advertise my presence."

"Like half price shipping to anywhere in the world from now through Valentine's and free shipping to anyone in the military?"

Sinclair dropped the caramels she'd been picking through and swung around to look at him. "Ooo! That's a great idea!"

"Yeah." Wincing all over again, Parker scratched one eyebrow. "Casey's is advertising that on a banner outside their store. I read it on the way over."

"Well... crap." Tsking, Sinclair went back to picking through the candies and tried not to let it show just how crushed she felt right then. "It's still a good idea, I guess." Even if it did come from the enemy.

"You'll come up with something better," Parker assured her.

"I've been trying." She jostled the weight of the caramels, judging it to be a little over a pound. She didn't put anything back though. She just twisted the bag off, walked back around the counter and charged him the regular price. "I'll be honest, though. Nothing's coming to mind."

"Maybe you're trying too hard."

"Maybe you should start acquainting yourself with the caramels at Casey's."

"Sorry. I'm a one candy shop at a time kind of guy."



“Aw.” She grinned again, feeling instantly better. “You mean you aren’t even a little bit tempted by a piece of hot toffee on the side?”

“Temptation is the spice of life,” he acknowledged, reaching for the bag when she offered it over the display counter. His fingers brushed hers, just a little too deliberately to be accidental. “But while I am a big believer in temptation, Casey can keep her caramels. I’m more than happy with my current purveyor. As long as your doors stay open, I’ll keep coming back.”

“Aw, thanks.” All those gorgeous looks and a real sweetheart nature to boot. If only he wanted her enough to risk asking her out. If only she could get over her mother’s ‘Ladies do not...’ lectures so she could ask him. “Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere. I’m too stubborn. I’ve just got to think a little harder, that’s all. I’m sure to come up with something to blow Casey’s shop right out of the competitive waters.”

Leaning up against the counter once more, Parker started to open his mouth, and in that moment, Sinclair was struck by the inexplicable certainty that this was it. He was going to ask her, maybe even say something as corny as, “If we put our heads together—like, say, over dinner—we might come up with something faster.”

Her chest seized. It was the strangest, breathless feeling. And it was premature because, in the next half second, she saw his face gradually change. It was a look she knew very well; she had seen it cross his face many times by now. His grey eyes shuttered and his mouth closed. He tried to smile and then took a slow step back from the counter.

Sinclair made herself smile too, but it felt brittle. “See you next week?” she asked, too brightly.

He visibly deflated before shuttering himself behind another masking smile. “Yeah. Next week.” He nodded, knocked twice on the glass countertop, and turned and walked out of the store.

It was an awful feeling of loss, having to watch him go. He glanced back at her one time before letting himself into his car.

Shaking his head at himself, he drove away, leaving Sinclair to wonder for the hundredth time what kept going wrong between them.



“WHAT THE HELL is wrong with me?” Parker exploded. At least he didn’t do it right in front of her store where Sinclair would see it. No, he managed to keep himself calm, cool and collected for two full blocks before suffering his mini meltdown at a red light in front of the local pizza parlor. “God!” He barely resisted banging his head against the steering wheel. “You’re beautiful!” he told the unresponsive stop light. “Gorgeous! I want you! I *love* you!” Wilting, Parker groaned and rubbed his face with both hands. “I’d wear your ass for a hat from now until the day I died, if you’d just let me.”

The back passenger door swung open and six large pizza boxes were unceremoniously dumped onto the seat behind him. A second later, that door slammed shut and the front passenger door tugged opened. Long dark hair tied back into a neat ponytail, Sam dropped down to sit beside him. “I seriously recommend you save the ‘I love you’ and the ass-wearing until at least the second date. Women get funny about things like that.”

Wilting all over again, Parker bowed his head. “There’s not going to be a second date,” he muttered. “There’s not even going to be a first one.” With his friend and the pizzas they’d come for both safely in the car, he pulled back out into traffic. “I can’t ask her.”

“Sure you can. It’s easy. It starts with ‘hey, gorgeous’ and ends with ‘wanna go for coffee?’”

Parker shook his head. “I can’t, Sam.”

“You’re just out of practice.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

Sam glanced at him. “What then?”

“She’s vanilla.”

“You don’t know that.”

"I know I've never seen her at the Castle," Parker shot back, growing more irritated with himself by the second. "I guarantee, if she had any inclination towards the kind of stuff we do, she would not have lived in this town for this long without at least one trip to the Castle."

Grunting, Sam acknowledged the truth of his logic with a nod.

"Vanilla relationships don't work," Parker said, more to himself than to Sam. "I've failed at every one I've tried. One of us would have to change. Either I'd have to try and play it straight with her, or she'd have to be submissive for me." He shook his head again. "It won't work. I'd make her miserable. It's better just not to start."

"If you really believed that, you wouldn't have spent the last year torturing yourself with weekly trips to see her. Seriously, how much have you spent on caramels? You don't even like candy." Sam picked up the bag of caramels from where Parker had dumped it between the two front seats.

"The Littles and the nursery kids love them." Snatching the bag back, Parker tossed the caramels in the back next to the pizzas.

"If I didn't know you better, I'd say you were getting in touch with your masochistic side."

"I don't have a masochistic side."

"After flirting for a year with a woman you refuse to ask out even just to coffee." Sam smirked. "Yeah, tell me another one, Pinocchio. The girls are going to love your growing nose tonight."

They drove out of town in silence. Less than five miles away from the turn off to the Castle, for some inexplicable reason, Parker said, "She's going to lose her store. So I guess it doesn't matter anymore. She won't be a temptation for that much longer."

Sam turned his head toward the window, softly musing, "That's too bad."

Parker looked at him. "What the hell does that mean?"

"What did I say?"

"It's not what you said, it's the way you said it. You had a tone. Leave her alone, Sam."

“What?” Sam spread his hands, laughing. “Did I say I was going to do anything at all?”

“You didn’t have to say anything. I know you. Everybody at the Castle knows you. I don’t need any interference in this, so just leave it alone.”

“Hmm,” Sam mulled that over a moment before shrugging with both eyebrows. “Okay.”

“I mean it, Sam.”

“Okay.”

“I didn’t muck things up when you were chasing after Hannah,” Parker warned. “Butt out.”

“I said okay.” Sam chuckled, holding up both hands. He turned his head to look back out the window, watching as the tallest turrets of the Castle began to appear through the trees in the distance. “I promise,” he grinned, “I’m not going to ask her anything at all.”



THE HANDMADE CANDIES were wrapped and put away, the kitchen was cleaned, and the floors were mopped. The till had been reconciled, and it was exactly two minutes to closing time when the phone on the wall behind the display counter rang. It had been a long day and Sinclair was both frustrated and tired. For a moment, she actually contemplated not answering it. If she hadn’t, the entire course of her life would have turned out much, much different.