



Sutton and the CEO's Baby

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Description: ?Sutton- How can I become a mother when I have never had a good example of one? Terrified of this new life growing inside of me, and in the middle of planning a wedding, Mark and I are back in Otterville Falls. With new secrets about old friends, and another dead body, Otterville Falls has never been so riled up. I can only hope that we don't scare Mark away before he marries me.

?Mark- Sutton is my world. Something's wrong in this town and it all leads back to the woman I love. Nothing and nobody will stop me from protecting what is mine.

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PROLOGUE

A mansion in the hills of Southern California.

“What do you mean he’s dead?” Forrest Coswell’s voice was deceptively calm. A man would have to be three parts insane and a fourth part delusional to ever feel comfortable in his presence.

“In a regular way. Shot twice in the head in a seedy motel just inside a shithole town called Otterville Falls.”

Forrest, a man in his fifties, had enjoyed the finer things of life and it showed. His stomach was no longer flat, his face was ruddy from too much drink, and there was a cruelty to his lips that couldn’t be erased.

As he eyed the private investigator, Forrest demanded shortly, “Who did it?”

The other man wore all black. A private investigator with a military background, this man was the best of the best. Forrest hadn’t minded paying top dollar to retain him. He would finally find the answers to where his sniveling wife had disappeared to all of those years ago.

The PI shrugged nonchalantly. “That hasn’t been confirmed, sir. But the person skulking around has been identified.”

“Well, don’t keep me waiting, man!”

“His name is Justin Landry.”

The pencil in Forrest’s hand snapped in two. It had been a long time since he had anything to do with the Landry family. In a hoarse voice he asked, “Is she there?”

“Dead. She went by the name Jo Landry and gave birth to a daughter twenty-six years ago. There is a birth certificate on file that names Hollingsworth Sutton III as the father. It is as you suspected, she is the daughter of your wife. Ms. Landry is currently living in New York City. I am told there is a boyfriend, business mogul Mark Williams.”

“That fucking bitch,” Forrest spat.

The PI didn’t flinch. The more he learned about this man, the more he distrusted him. Everyone had their secrets, even a lowly PI. It was better to stay calm and gather all of the details rather than fly off the hook.

“How do we know that Sutton isn’t my child? Her whore of a mother was my wife, damn it!”

The PI shrugged. “We don’t know for certain. Tests would need to be performed.”

“Find out why Justin Landry is in Otterville Falls and get me a fucking DNA sample.”

The PI raised a brow. “I told you on the phone that our business was completed.”

“The hell it is,” Forrest shouted, getting to his feet.

The PI wasn’t afraid of the older man. He had dealt with far worse in the military. Besides, once he had learned that Mark was involved, he couldn’t—no, he wouldn’t be

a part of the investigation. He was a man of his word and did the job he had been hired to do. But that didn't mean that he would sell out those that meant something to him.

His relationship with Mark? It was complicated.

Getting to his feet, the PI walked out during the middle of Forrest's tirade. He walked down the opulent halls out the door into sunshine. Taking the steps two at a time, he pulled out his cell and called his informant.

"Is there anything new on the case?"

An elderly man replied, "It's hot here, but they are no closer to finding a killer. No sign of Landry either. Does Forrest know?"

"He does now," the PI responded.

The elderly man swore.

"Listen, if it wasn't me, it would have been the next PI. The Landry name was too easily traced after Sutton claimed her inheritance. As long as she's in New York she is safe."

Ending the call, the PI wished that he had never heard the name Forrest Coswell.

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EARL LOOKED AT THE cellphone in disgust. The PI had hung up on him. Creeping along the back alley behind Abberly's, Earl made his way to the back entrance. Knocking three times, he sank back into the shadows and waited until the door slowly opened.

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“Well, get in here,” Martha hissed. “What happened?”

Earl came into the light and ambled his way over, looking spryer than a man of eighty ought to. Martha ushered him in and then looked both ways, thankful to only encounter the darkness and nothing worse.

With a finger pressed to her lips, she and Earl crept back into the manager’s office at Abberly’s. Once the door was shut and the lock was turned, Martha sank into Earl’s arms.

“I didn’t think you were coming back this time.” She shuddered at the thought of never holding him again.

Earl held her tight, or as tight as an elderly man could. “I can’t protect her anymore. We need to tell Mark. We can trust him.”

Martha stilled.

Never once in all of the years they worked together had Earl mentioned giving up. They were so firmly entranced in their covers that it had become second nature. Hell, they had been working on the same case for over twenty-five years. At some point, they had fallen in love. Through thick and thin, right and wrong, Martha and Earl protected Sutton and her mother to the best of their abilities.

They knew all those years ago when Judith approached them with bruises on her face and a broken arm that things might not end well. Never in their wildest dreams could they have imagined they would get wrapped up in hiding Judith, and then later her

daughter, for the length of time that they had.

Martha and Earl had fallen so deeply into their roles that it was hard to remember that those weren't even their real names. Earl had been a driver for the Coswell family and Martha the housekeeper. It was obvious that something wasn't right between the master and his new wife.

Forrest Coswell was a multibillionaire tech genius with a handsome face and a way with the ladies. When Judith first met him, she had been head-over-heels in love. Running away at eighteen, they were married in Vegas and whisked off to live in Silicon Valley with all of the other insta-millionaires well on their way to being billionaires.

When the abuse first started, Judith blamed it on the stresses of their fast-paced life and the pressures of work. Forrest was always dreadfully sorry and swore it wouldn't happen again. But it did happen, frequently. It wasn't until he broke her arm that Judith finally realized if she didn't leave, he would eventually kill her.

But how does one escape someone richer than God?

How does one lose themselves so completely that no one or nothing could ever find them again?

Martha didn't hesitate when Judith approached her with an escape plan. With the help of Earl, the Coswell's chauffeur, they waited until a little after two in the morning. When Forrest had long since drunk himself unconscious. Then the three of them crept into the garage and picked the least conspicuous car.

They ditched the car as soon as they could, hitchhiking under different assumed names and running as far and as fast as they could go.

Judith changed her name to Jo and tried to convince Martha and Earl that they could return to their lives. But they wouldn't leave her, not for all the money in the world.

It was heartbreaking to watch as Judith dissolved into Jo and then merely another druggie in a backwater town. Her daughter—a beautiful, inquisitive sprite—, deserved every bit as much loyalty as Judith had, and so they stayed on.

Earl spent many nights at the trailer pretending to be drunk or in a fight with his wife.

Martha got a kick out of being the bitchy wife and made sure that nobody could ever question their cover.

Then Mark Williams showed up talking about inheritance and changing Sutton's entire life.

Earl and Martha watched in dismay as Sutton packed her bags and moved to the city. Not knowing what to do from there, they almost left Otterville Falls.

That was, until Gabe called Earl into his bar late one night, after hours, and showed him a bunch of old articles about a missing woman who had disappeared with two staff members. The pictures were faded and worn, but Judith's resemblance to Sutton was uncanny.

Thinking to blackmail Sutton, Gabe pressed the issue with Earl.

That was when Martha had taken Sutton's gun. She wasn't about to let that scumbag Gabe ruin everything they had risked their lives for.

But before she could threaten him, Gabe turned up dead. Sutton returned to Otterville Falls, and Mad Max was doing some crazy shit.

Earl had a hunch that Alice and Reena might know more than they were letting on. They spent every day at the bar. Earl took the opportunity to cozy up to them. The girls were more than happy to spill all they knew, which wasn't much. And when Earl asked them to fake a runaway with him, they hooted and laughed at the fun they would have. Alice had a sister in Nevada that was more than willing to let them stay while Earl researched what had happened with Forrest Coswell.

Martha was reluctant to play the jilted wife, but knew it was the only way she could explain his absence, particularly when there was a murderer on the loose. It touched her the way that Sutton took her in, especially after all of the years Martha had pretended to hate her.

"Is there any news from Alice and Reena?" Martha asked as they broke apart.

Earl shook his head. "Max is still there protecting them."

Martha's lips twitched. "The entire town is in an uproar about the sex scandal of the century."

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A wry smile crossed his face. “Don’t think that Alice and Reena aren’t eating that up. Alice said that she has never had as much fun. I just don’t think that they realize all that is at stake. I mean it, Martha, it’s time to come clean.”

She nodded, looking every bit of her advanced age. “Okay, but let’s tell her in person. This isn’t something you say over the phone.”

Earl nodded. “Deal.”

CHAPTER 1

Sutton

Sutton Enterprises – New York, NY

I grabbed my best friend, who I hadn’t seen in weeks. and squeezed the stuffing out of her.

“I missed you so much, Candice!”

“We spoke on the phone last night when I arrived back in town,” she teased.

“It’s not the same.” I pulled back and noticed the bags underneath her eyes. “Candice, are you sure you are okay to work today? I don’t want to put too much pressure on you.”

Candice laughed, but I could hear the strain in her voice and seesaw the dejected way

she was holding herself.

“Everything is going well with Abberly’s. Martha cried when I told her you had signed the place over to her. I wish that you could have seen her face. She’s not calling it a bar anymore. It’s now a diner with a fair amount of alcohol.”

I made a face. “Whatever makes the woman happy, let her have at it.”

Candice tipped her head to the side, considering. “You know, it’s funny now to hear her sing your praises. One would think she was a loving grandmother or something. It’s hard to reconcile the Martha now with who she was when we first came to Otterville Falls.”

“Maybe Earl leaving was the best thing that could have happened to Martha,” I threw out.

Candice’s eyes widened. “Didn’t I tell you? Earl, Reena, and Alice are back. They kicked him to the curb.”

“Shut up! You have to tell me everything!” Eyes sparkling, I leaned forward.

This time when Candice smiled, it reached her eyes.

“I have the juicy gossip! So according to Joe, Earl about near drove them crazy with his lazy ways. Apparently, the girls have moved on to greener pastures. And you will never guess who...”

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“Why do I get the feeling that this is going to completely rock my world?”

Candice scrunched her nose. “Why are those swingers in their late sixties getting more ass than I am?”

I thought that considering Alice and Reena to be anywhere near late sixties was a gift. But that wasn’t what I wanted to talk to her about. I really wanted to know what happened back there, but I wasn’t sure if she was willing to share yet.

“Who?” I tried to think. “Not Father Montgomery?”

Candice squealed in disgust. “Eww, no! It was actually your old pal Max.”

“Mad Max? Why, he must be ten years younger than they are! What in the hell is going on?” I could hardly believe the words coming out of her mouth. “There is no way that Max is hooking up with those girls.”

Candice just laughed. Leaning back in her chair, she shrugged. “I am telling you, after living in Otterville Falls for these past few months, nothing surprises me anymore. Not even the sex lives of two very scandalous ladies.”

“Wow, I am blown away.” I shook my head as if to clear it. “Any other news? How was everything when you left?”

Fidgeting, Candice pulled on her ear absentmindedly before replying, “Well, they are fully staffed at the diner and things seem to be running smoothly.”

“What about Knox?” I asked softly.

Her lip began to tremble, and her eyes filled with tears.

“No. No. No. Candice, what happened? I thought things were going well?”

It took her a minute to gain her composure. “I would tell you I don’t want to talk about it, but the truth is that I have to say something to someone. I feel like there are so many things bottled up inside of me. Maybe if I let a little bit out, I can actually take a deep breath.”

I nodded. “You can tell me anything.”

She continued, “I can’t believe I was so stupid. I really thought he actually cared for me. I should never have stayed out there. What kind of pathetic girl chases after a man—no, moves her entire world across the country—for someone that doesn’t give a damn?”

“Candice, are you sure he doesn’t love you?”

She laughed bitterly. “He made it quite clear. I feel like such a fool.”

“I’m going to kick his ass,” I blurted out, rising to my feet. My stomach lurched, and I had to hold still for the slightest of moments while the world settled. Then I was in rampage mode again. “He won’t get away with this!”

“No!” Candice wailed. “You have to swear to me, Sutton, not to say anything. Please don’t get involved. I just want it to be over. My time in Otterville Falls was a fantasy. I don’t belong there. Honestly, I couldn’t have lived in your trailer for the rest of my life. It is better this way, I promise!”

I wanted to argue. “Candice, I hate seeing you like this. I hate that he hurt you. I never would have believed it of him.”

She shrugged. “It’s not his fault. He didn’t do anything. I had expectations, but he couldn’t live up to them, and it’s not like I have the right to demand that he do anything. There were no promises broken.”

“I don’t give a damn about promises and expectations. I care about you. Be honest, Candice, do you need to take some time?”

Candice shook her head emphatically. “The last thing I need is to spend more time with my own thoughts. What I need to do is bury myself in the work. I need to forget about Otterville Falls. There is no future in it.”

“Did he break your heart?”

Her glassy eyes met mine, and I had my answer.

“I am going to kick his fucking ass!”

She gave me a tremulous smile. “I really missed you, Sutton. I know that I should have told you earlier what was going on. I guess I was afraid even then that what he felt for me wasn’t enough. When I was little, my parents would give us oranges at Christmas. And I don’t know what it was about that orange, but I would always hide it away, afraid that someone would take it from me. By the time I went to eat it, the fruit had always turned bad. I think what happened with Knox was the same way. I desperately tried to hide it and somehow ruined everything in the process. I feel like my heart has been ripped from my chest. It’s my own damn fault.”

Candice heaved a sigh. “Enough about me, let’s talk about you. When were you going to tell me about this?”

She motioned to my abdomen.

I tried to look busy shuffling papers on my desk. “What are you talking about?”

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Her head tipped back, and a broad smile crossed her face. “You, Sutton Landry, are a terrible liar. You look a little green, and I have seen you place your hand on your stomach four different times.”

I had to snicker at that because I was a terrible liar, but I still couldn’t believe that she could tell I was expecting.

Her eyes narrowed. “I guess the better question is does the big boss know?”

My skin was turning beet red. “Well, I wasn’t sure.”

She raised a brow. “Did you take a test?”

“They aren’t always that accurate,” I retorted.

Candice looked sympathetic. “You have to tell him, Sutton. Mr. Williams loves you. He won’t be upset.”

The thing was, I knew that Mark loved me. I had finally gotten it through my thick skull that this man—this billionaire CEO—he actually loved me.

All my inconsistencies and imperfections aside, Mark loved me.

But I didn’t know if he was really ready to jump into fatherhood quite yet.

“Why don’t you go tell him?” Candice encouraged.

I nodded. “Okay, let’s do it.”

CHAPTER 2

Sutton

I made it out of my chair and about two steps before the pounding of my heart got the better of me. I knew the man loved me, of course he loved me. But a baby? Was this the path that he wanted to take?

“Candice! I can’t just walk in there and blurt out, ‘Hey Mark, have you had a good afternoon? Oh, and by the way, we’re having a baby. Could you pick up sushi for dinner?’ It just doesn’t work like that.”

Candice wrinkled her nose, pretending to consider as she said, “I’m not so sure you can have sushi. They have all kinds of rules about what pregnant women can and can’t eat.”

“Candice!” I whined, “I am serious.”

She nodded. “So am I. Sutton, have you seen a doctor yet?”

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“No.” My voice was small. “I wasn’t sure if I believed it. Besides, I didn’t want to bother you out there and I didn’t feel comfortable asking anyone here about it.”

“What about that nice Mandy Brand? You seemed to get along well, and she seemed open and down to earth.”

I sighed. “I know, but that was before all hell broke loose with Gabe. Speaking of which, I can’t believe that they still don’t have any leads.”

Candice nodded and I watched as a bit of sadness entered her gaze. “I know that Knox has been working hard on the case.”

I am an idiot. Here I was going on and on about me and she was in real pain. I felt terrible as I exclaimed, “I am sorry, Candice. That, that was completely insensitive of me to ramble on just now.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “No, I don’t want to wallow over what might have been. I thought we had something, but I was wrong. It’s okay. I’m a big girl. It’s time to move on. However, Sutton, you are a master at changing the subject. Just go tell him about the baby.”

I stood back up again and she gave me a supportive nod. I swallowed hard. “Okay, I will do it. But does it really need to be now? Isn’t the morning just as well?”

Candice stood and lovingly pulled me to the door and down the hallway. She knocked when we stood in front of Mark’s office.

“Come in,” Mark commanded briskly.

“I think he’s busy,” I whispered frantically.

“I think you’re a chicken,” she hissed back, and I nearly smiled. She was spot on and she knew it.

Candice opened the door and yanked me in behind her. The first thing I noticed was that he was buried in paperwork. We had been playing catch up since we returned from Otterville Falls.

The second thing was his incredible eyes as they met mine and immediately softened. He looked tired, his chiseled jaw was shadowed, and I could see that he had been running his hands through his hair. He really was utterly and devastatingly handsome.

Rising to his feet, he came to give Candice a warm handshake. “We’re happy to have you back with us. Did you enjoy your time in Otterville Falls?”

Candice could have won an Oscar for the performance she put on.

Her smile was professional and assured as she answered, “Thank you, Mr. Williams. I had a wonderful time, but it's good to be back. You both will need to excuse me. I have several things I would like to finish up before the end of the day. Sutton, if you need anything I will be in my office.”

With that she softly closed the door behind her, and I found myself staring at the it like a forlorn pet when their master heads out for the day. I needed to get my shit together. I was Sutton Landry, one of the most influential women on Wall Street. I wasn’t afraid of one little baby.

Only I was afraid—I was damn near terrified.

Mark was giving me a curious look. “Is everything okay, sweetheart?”

I swallowed hard, not able to meet his eyes. “I need to tell you something.”

He rounded the desk and came to stand next to me. “Did they discover something new about the case?”

“No, nothing actually.”

Fucking hell, why does my voice sound so artificially high?

“But I do have gossip about Earl that will knock your socks off.”

He made a face. “Earl’s sex life is no concern of mine.”

I laughed, feeling the knot in my stomach unravel just a little bit. “I don’t think he has one anymore. I guess those crazy ladies have sunk their claws into Max now.”

Mark’s eyes popped. “He must be ten years younger than them, if not fifteen! Well done girls.”

I smirked. “Makes you wonder what kind of sexual voodoo they are practicing.”

“Ugh!” He shuddered. “Why would you go and deliberately put those kinds of images in my head? I need to wash my brain with bleach now.”

I laughed again and the knot loosened even more.

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Mark pulled me into his arms. “I don’t think that is what you wanted to tell me though, is it?”

I melted into him, marveling at the strength of his embrace.

“What are you afraid of?” he asked gently.

“Is it that obvious?” I blurted out.

“You are acting rather odd, more than usual.”

“I’m not odd,” I replied, but there wasn’t much heat behind it. “What if it’s something that will change how things are between us?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Life is always changing, Sutton, but how I feel for you won’t ever change. You can tell me anything. You know that.”

I looked up at him, biting my lip.

He looked at me intently and then glanced down to see that I was holding my stomach. It was instinctive actually. The baby would have been no bigger than a pea and my stomach hadn’t grown at all.

Understanding lit his eyes and he pulled me closer into his embrace. I felt his warm lips as they grazed my temple. There, in his arms, I knew safety. I opened my mouth to speak but nothing came out.

I felt him smile against my cheek. “If you remember correctly, Sutton, I have been wishing for this.”

I pulled back and searched his face as I asked, “How do you even know when I can’t get the words out to tell you?”

He traced the edge of my jaw with his fingertip. “First, I like to think that I am becoming an expert on all things Sutton. Second, you haven’t had a period in over two months.”

I felt my cheeks flame as I gasped aloud, “Do you track that?”

He went on as if I hadn’t spoken.

“Third, you have been rather grouchy,” he continued, “and food hasn’t settled very well in your stomach. In the past month you have requested that we go out for ice cream five times.”

“Are you calling me fat?” I cried out.

He laughed. “No, but I am saying that I think I know the woman I love.”

“Okay, Sherlock.” I hugged him close, loving every inch of this amazing man. “What is your hypothesis?”

He kissed me gently. “Did you know that your breasts are growing larger and that your face is glowing?”

“I am breaking out like the sweaty kid in gym class.”

He choked on a laugh. “Be that as it may, I have never in my life seen anyone more

beautiful than the future mother to my child.”

There it was. He said it aloud and now it was real. I knew that I was being irrational. Okay, I was fucking crazy. But this wasn't something I saw for us, not this soon.

“Why didn't you say anything?” I blurted out.

He shrugged. “I was going to tonight if you hadn't brought it up. I was actually worried that you didn't know, and I was concerned about alarming you. I know that you have had a lot of changes recently. I didn't want you to have one more thing to stress over. But experts say that you should be seeing a doctor soon.”

I couldn't help the smile that broke across my face. “How do you know that?”

He led me sheepishly by the hand over to his desk. In the top drawer was a book about pregnancy and expectant mothers. It seemed that every other page was marked, and he had notes in the margins.

This man. Dear merciful heavens, the love I had for him was overwhelming. “You're amazing, and I love you so much.”

He yanked the book out of my hands and pulled me close. Placing a swift kiss on my lips, he gave me a sexy grin. “You are an amazing woman. The woman that is carrying my child. Do you know what that does to me?”

He nudged me with his hips, and I felt his massive erection.

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“Just so you know, sex won’t hurt the baby,” he mumbled as he placed soft sweet kisses on my neck. “I checked with multiple authorities on childbirth. Trust me, I did thorough research, and I may have spoken with an OB-GYN.”

I giggled. “And you say that I’m crazy. Have you really talked to a doctor?”

“Yes,” he said huskily against my lips.

He slipped a hand up the back of my skirt and caressed the naked skin on the inside of my thigh.

“I will do everything in my power to protect the both of you. The best doctors, the best care, anything that you want, my love,” Mark growled, “Your wish is my command.”

He didn’t fuck me hard and fast. I wasn’t slammed up against the desk or plastered across the window as I had been on numerous other occasions.

Mark picked me up as if I were the most delicate thing on earth and carried me over to the couch. There he stripped me of my clothing until I was naked and trembling.

He licked and sucked at my breasts and I couldn’t help the involuntary thrust of my hips that accompanied the light tugging of my nipple.

“Please,” I begged, spreading my thighs and pulling him closer. “I need to feel you inside of me.”

“I love you, Sutton,” he said gruffly, passion heating his gaze as he pinned me beneath him.

“I love you too,” I whispered.

He pushed inside of me, going slow enough to drive me damn near crazy. The feeling of fullness and utter elation that I always felt were there as he entered me. But there was more. I could feel the care and love that Mark had for me and our child. I knew that he was being careful, no doubt still worried that sex might hurt the baby.

It was all the more tender as he uttered, “You are my everything, Sutton. My family.”

I felt the orgasm climb lazily upward as he stroked into me with long deep thrusts. My hands dug into his skin and I found my legs wrapping tightly around his waist, urging him onward.

“I love you, Mark,” I cried out and then he tilted my hips the smallest degree so that he rammed my g-spot, and all was lost. I came harder than I could remember coming before as wave after wave shook my body and pulled his own release from him.

It was unlike anything we had done before and yet all the more special because we were celebrating the beginning of our new family.

CHAPTER 3

Sutton

“Well hello, Mrs. Landry, why don’t you just step on this scale for me and I can get your weight?”

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When you grow up in a trailer with a crack whore as a mother, chances are you don't go to many doctor appointments. Or in my case, I'd never been to the doctor. I can tell you that my first impressions weren't favorable.

I frowned at the medical assistant. Reading her tag, I said, "Listen Tina, is this really necessary? Oh, and it's not Mrs. Landry. I'm not married."

It wasn't that I was trying to be difficult. Honestly, I just sure as shit didn't want to get on a scale in front of Mark.

She pursed her lips as if to say, Not one of those types—difficult.

Yes, Tina, I am one of those types. In fact, I am likely president of the fucking fan club for those types. Reigning in my internal dialog, I tried to reason with her.

"Tina, I am not really a scale kind of person. I prefer to go off how my clothes fit. I find that scales are very demotivating, and not an accurate gauge. Don't you?"

Mark's barked cough sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

Tina's eyes narrowed as she said in clipped tones, "Medical science isn't gauged off of a feeling, Mrs. Landry. We need to track certain measurements during your pregnancy to ensure that you and your baby are healthy. And yes, I feel that scales are precisely accurate. That's why we use them."

Before I could ask Mark to hold my shoes while I gave this bitch an education, he intervened.

“Just a moment, Tina. May I call you Tina?” He shot her a panty melting grin that was both boyish and disarmingly charming.

What in the hell?

The chubby woman blushed, and you would have thought she was sixteen rather than the wrong side of fifty.

“Certainly, sir,” she said, smiling widely.

I fought rolling my eyes.

“Tina,” he said her name like a caress. She was damn near coming in her scrubs.

“Mrs. Williams is feeling faint. Perhaps she can sit and wait for the doctor?”

“Oh, of course, right this way.” Tina marched right past the scale into a patient room.

“I beg your pardon. I had down here the name Landry.”

Mark grinned and leaned in confidingly. “This is the future Mrs. Williams. So, if you wouldn’t mind updating her chart, I would greatly appreciate it.”

She bit her lip. “I don’t know, Sir. For legal purposes I really shouldn’t.”

It was getting thick in here and it had nothing to do with me.

He leaned in toward her. “I’d consider it a close, personal favor.”

It was as if she had decided right then and there to give up her panties and become his willing slave.

“Of course, Sir,” she stammered, her blush staining her cheeks and neck. “I would be

more than happy to assist in any way. You know, sir, some women ask to stand on the scale backwards, so they don't have to see the numbers. Others ask their handsome husbands to look away or not come in until it's finished."

I nearly choked on her use of handsome in the sentence. I was tempted to ask if they let the ugly ones watch, but I didn't think that Mark would appreciate my sarcasm.

Embarrassment washed over me. Did I really care about a stupid number on the scale?

Tina was motioning toward another scale that was stationed in the patient room. They had these damn things everywhere.

I wasn't about to be embarrassed about my weight, was I? With resolve, I climbed onto the scale—and closed my eyes.

"All done," she chirped, and it was over before I knew it. "Dr. Roberts will be right with you, but in the meantime, I would like you to slip out of your clothes and into this gown for the exam."

I looked from the flimsy paper in my hands back to Tina. "You're not serious. That looks like an oversized handkerchief."

Tina eyed me over her glasses. "Somehow I have a feeling that this is going to be a long forty weeks."

This time Mark didn't bother to hide his laughter.

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BY THE TIME WE ARRIVED home, I was madder than a hornet.

“I could have caught hypothermia in that tissue they called a gown!”

Mark’s eyes danced as he answered, “We can bring your own if you wish, or Dr. Roberts offered to get you a cloth one from the hospital.”

“And that man! He stuck his... well you saw what he did. How could a woman possibly go there willingly? I feel violated.”

“I think you scared the poor man,” Mark replied. “Did you have to tell him that you usually require dinner and a show before going to third base?”

I felt my lips twitch. Dr. Roberts was a good-looking man in his early fifties. I got the impression that his clientele weren’t usually as colorful as I am.

Mark tried to gather me in his arms, but my emotions were running too high.

“Well, he shouldn’t have been feeling me up in the guise of a”—I signed quotation marks— “‘breast exam.’ It was indecent!”

“Sweetheart, when was the last time you went to a doctor?”

I frowned. “I don’t remember.” I didn’t remember because it had never happened. That didn’t stop me from arguing. “I sure as shit would have recalled if Doc Zander

tried sticking his arm up my vagina. Not to mention the metal clamp. Was that really necessary?"

"I think you surprised him just as much as he surprised you."

I felt heat flooding my face. "I did say sorry."

"I don't think Dr. Roberts was expecting to be kicked in the face," Mark continued. "I would be willing to bet that this was his most memorable appointment to date."

I wanted to die.

"How did you get birth control pills without ever getting an exam?" Mark asked.

I shrugged. "They hand those out like candy at the women's center in Otterville Falls."

"I don't even want to think about how frightening that thought is. Sutton, Dr. Roberts was only doing a routine exam. He was the OB-GYN for Mandy Brand. In fact, he's good friends with Elliot. I have a feeling that I am going to need to smooth some feathers so that he allows us to come back."

I huffed. "He said that in all of his years of practice he had never had a patient quite like me."

Mark grinned. "I think Dr. Roberts was trying to say you are unique."

"More like that I was a pain in the ass," I said in a small voice.

Mark pulled me close and this time I allowed him.

“Sutton, you are a pain in the ass,” he mumbled into my hair.

I tried to pull back in indignation, but his arms were firm.

“But that doesn’t mean you aren’t the most amazing thing that has ever happened to me. I have to say, I wasn’t sure what to expect from our baby’s first appointment. But you kicking the doctor’s ass never even occurred to me.”

“It was only a black eye!” I insisted, feeling a bit sheepish. “I thought Tina was going to tackle me. Do you think she has a thing for the doctor?”

Mark’s chuckle sent goosebumps on my skin. “She is rather protective of the man. Did you notice that she went back to calling you Mrs. Landry at the end of the appointment?”

I nodded, moaning a little when he nipped at my earlobe.

“I know that I am acting crazy.” My fingers dug into the muscles of his back. “I can’t seem to help myself.”

He pulled back and cupped my face. “Are you hungry?”

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I was about to scoff when my stomach grumbled loudly. Apparently, I was starved.

We ended up ordering barbeque chicken pizza, which Mark barely raised an eyebrow over. It wasn't something I usually wanted but at this moment in time, I had to have some. Afterward, we made love on our bed, Mark moving into me with speed and precision until I shattered beneath him. He flipped me over onto my knees and proceeded to give me another earth-shattering orgasm, which pulled his own from him.

When we lay there sated and content, I was just about to fall asleep when a wave of nausea hit me. I scrambled to the bathroom and barely made it to the toilet before the pizza made its second appearance for the night.

I will never eat barbeque pizza again.

What I hadn't realized was that Mark had stumbled into the bathroom after me. He didn't run away screaming from the puke fest, but he stayed with me and helped me to clean up afterward. I threw up again when I brushed my teeth and he didn't say a word as he scooped me up and took me into the shower.

The hot water felt amazing against my skin, but when it started to make me nauseous, I turned it to cold. I felt like aliens were attacking my body; I couldn't regulate anything that I was feeling. Despite all of this, Mark was there. He dried me off and guided me over to the bed, tucking me in on my side.

"I love you, Sutton." He tenderly kissed my forehead and I had a horrible urge to cry.

Damn hormones.

“I love you too,” I croaked. “But I don’t love this.”

He smoothed my hair back from my face. “I would do anything for you. You know that, right?”

I nodded, careful not to allow my chin to touch my chest.

“I wish you could carry our children,” I muttered.

He stilled. “Children, as in more than one?”

I was about to retort that there was no way in hell that I would go through this again. But then I thought about a little boy with his eyes and a little girl with long dark hair.

My voice was wobbly when I answered, “Let’s just get through this one. But yeah, I think I want a few.”

Mark growled, “I would have a dozen with you, my love. When can I make an honest woman out of you?”

I laughed and turned carefully onto my back. “It must be love if you are talking marriage with the ode to vomit still lingering in the air.”

He smirked at me, the one that would have melted my panties had I been wearing any.

“I would marry you any time, any day, anywhere. You just say the word.”

I sighed. “Let me get through this mess with the morning sickness and then I will

consider making an honest man out of you.”

He gathered me against him, careful not to touch my stomach. “You are the best thing that ever happened to me. I know you never knew your father, but I couldn’t be more grateful to him for insisting that I find you.”

I felt that tightening in my chest that was always there when we talked about him, which wasn’t often. I had shied away from conversations, not wanting to feel the pain and rejection. But now, carrying my own child, I couldn’t help but wonder how my mother must have felt when she was pregnant with me. I knew she did it on her own, but I hadn’t taken into consideration how alone and scared she must have been.

CHAPTER 4

Mark

The last person I expected to see in my office was Sheriff Knox Bridges with his hat in his hands.

“Do you want me to call Sutton in here?” I asked, lifting my hand to call her in.

The sheriff shook his head. “No, I wanted to speak with you first. We have a lead on the murder investigation. We found Father Montgomery’s handprints on the gun. Now, he insisted the only time he touched the gun was in Martha’s home. Which is plausible, except she insists that Father Montgomery was never in her home when she was there. I don’t know what to think. I wouldn’t put it past him to go in when she wasn’t there.”

“You think he took the gun and killed Gabe?”

Knox shrugged. “It’s possible. However, we finally got the tests back on some shot glasses that were sitting on Gabe’s desk. One had Gabe’s prints, the other Mad Max, and the third, Earl.”

I blinked. “Earl? I thought that Reena and April vouched for him being at their place.”

Knox nodded. “Yes, but they both claimed to be asleep from two in the morning on. Earl could have left and gone to the bar.”

“What about Max?” I questioned. “Could have just as easily been him.”

Knox blew out a frustrated sigh. “My gut tells me it isn’t Max, but you can’t convict someone on a gut feeling.”

“What does your gut say about Earl?” I had to ask.

Knox shook his head. “Not a damn thing. I don’t think he’s capable of murder, but I also know that he is a forgetful drunk and he had been there drinking. His marriage was falling apart because he was cheating, and it looked like they may have known about it.”

“How?” I demanded.

“I brought Max back in. He said that Earl was there spouting off about the great pussy he was getting.”

“What time was this?”

Knox answered right away. “One in the morning is what Max claims.”

“Where is Earl now?” I had to ask.

Knox ground his teeth. “That is a question I would like answered as well. I went to Martha, but she says she hasn’t seen him. I know he isn’t in the trailer. He wasn’t when Candice was there, and nothing has changed since she left.”

There was a note of dejectedness when he spoke of Candice. I had noticed that she had lost her sparkle as well since returning to the city.

“What would you like us to do?” I had a feeling I was going to dread asking the

question.

“I want to know if Sutton knows where Earl’s hiding, and I want her to testify about the conversation stating that Father Montgomery was Gabe’s dad.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. Sutton was having a difficult time of it and I wasn’t sure flying back to Otterville Falls was the best for her.

“I need to speak with her doctor first.”

Knox stilled. “Is everything alright?”

I nodded. “She’s pregnant, almost out of the first trimester, but she’s been really sick.”

Knox swallowed and nodded thoughtfully. “I can try to do the statements here if necessary.”

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I wasn't about to make the decision for her.

"Just a moment, let me call Sutton in," I said, reaching for my phone.

Moments later she was bursting in the room, a wide smile on her pale face. Behind her stood Candice. It was apparent that she hadn't been expecting the good sheriff. The color drained from her face and she stood there like a statue.

"What are you doing here?" Sutton's tone was friendly as she hugged her longtime friend Knox.

I felt a surge of pride at the sheer beauty she possessed. Sutton didn't do anything that didn't involve her whole heart.

"Had some things I needed to talk over with y'all."

Candice started to back out the room, but Knox was fast and closed the door before she could go through it.

I could see her jaw clench and looked over at Sutton, who was also staring at the two of them.

"Are you not going to say hello?" Knox asked. His voice had dropped an octave as he addressed Candice. "Mighty strange, especially since you never said goodbye either."

Candice's eyes blazed with fury.

I almost felt sorry for the man. I knew an angry woman when I saw one, and Candice was furious with Knox.

“You have plenty of others to keep your bed warm. I doubt you even noticed I was gone.”

She shoved a surprised Knox aside and fled the room. He looked like he was going to give chase but thought better of it.

“What in the hell was that about?” He turned to Sutton, who suddenly became very interested in a paper on my desk.

“Hmm?” she murmured absentmindedly. She was a terrible liar and we all knew it.

“Cut the shit, Sutton. Why is Candice so mad at me?”

Sutton’s head snapped up. “Why? You want to know why? Well Knox, I’m not going to tell you. Candice is my best friend and I won’t betray her confidence. Maybe you should ask her yourself.”

Knox looked like he wanted to hit something. “You don’t think I haven’t tried? She won’t take my calls, blocked my texts. Won’t even answer when I call from the police station. I don’t get it.”

Some of Sutton’s ire fled. “I don’t know, Knox. She came back completely heartbroken. I don’t know what happened out there, but all I know is that I have never seen that confident, beautiful woman cry until the day she came back.”

“Heartbroken?” His tone was incredulous. “I asked her to stay with me in Otterville Falls. If anyone was heartbroken, it was me.”

Sutton blinked, eyes wide. “You did?”

Knox scowled. “As good as.”

I could sense that there was something the sheriff was missing. But I had every faith that Sutton would bring it all around.

“Tell me what you said to her.”

Knox rolled his eyes. “This is really childish.”

Sutton turned to me and said, “When he pulls his head out of his ass, I would be happy to talk to him. For now, I am going to head back to my office.”

“Stop!” Knox growled. “Fine, I will tell you. I asked Candice to consider sticking around because we were having fun.”

Even I winced.

“Stick around?” Sutton’s eyes were wide. “Fucking hell, Knox, she’s a sophisticated woman. Not a hooker from Hartsfield looking to kill some time. Did you tell her your feelings and why you wanted her to stay?”

He glowered. “It was implied!”

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“You really are a dumbass, aren’t you?” Sutton replied, shaking her head in disgust. “Candice came back here sobbing that you didn’t want her.”

Knox bristled. “I want her more than the air I breathe.”

“Then maybe you should tell her that instead of ‘stick around,’ dumbass.”

His cheeks heated. “Have I lost my chance?”

Sutton shrugged. “I don’t know. But if you are half the man that I think you are, another sun won’t set without you telling that woman how you feel.”

Knox turned with determination and strode toward the door.

I couldn’t help but chuckle and follow as Sutton hightailed it after him. Life had been one big adventure after another since Sutton had come into it.

“Where is her damn office?” Knox demanded halfway down the corridor.

“You can’t swear, dumbass! This is the city!” Sutton responded.

People had begun to come out of their offices to see what all of the commotion was about.

Candice opened her door and gasped as Knox reached out and yanked her against his chest.

“Sutton said you had a broken heart,” Knox boomed out.

The look Candice gave Sutton could have frozen hell. I wrapped a protective arm around her.

“Sutton should learn to keep things in confidence,” Candice bit out.

Knox shook his head. “No, she shouldn’t. Because I have been ripping my hair out trying to figure out why you left me.”

“Left you?” Candice seemed to forget she was in the office. “All I was to you was a bit of fun. What did you say to me? ‘Hey, stick around, sweetheart, and we can have some fun!’ Do you have any idea how much you hurt me? I thought...”

Her voice broke and he pulled her tighter against him despite the way she was pounding on his chest.

“You thought we were falling in love?” Knox asked gently.

Candice began to cry, and Knox looked like he was fighting back emotion.

Shit, Carol from accounting was beginning to tear up. I yanked Sutton back against my chest and watched along with everyone else as Knox professed his love.

“I don’t think—I know I am in love with you. I have been ever since I first set eyes on you in Otterville Falls. I can’t sleep without you there. I’m not eating, but mostly I am sick, and completely and totally heartbroken. So, if I am barking up the wrong tree, I need to know now, Candice. Because I have never loved a woman like I love you.”

She launched herself at him and they began to kiss like they were the only ones in the

room, or hallway as it were. Cheers from fellow staffers erupted around them and after a moment they broke apart. Candice's eyes were shining as she cupped his unshaved chin.

"I love you, ya big cowboy. Maybe I can stick around a while."

"Or forever," he added hopefully.

She smiled so wide it wrinkled her nose. "Maybe that too."

All thoughts of the investigation were pushed aside as these two finally ironed out their differences.

CHAPTER 5

Sutton – 2 months later

“There isn’t a dress in the entire city that doesn’t make me look pregnant!”

Mandy Brand gave me a look.

“You are pregnant,” Mandy said jokingly.

I made a face. “I don’t want to look like a walrus!”

Mandy grinned. “I don’t think that is possible. You have the tiniest little baby bump imaginable.”

I turned toward the three-way mirror and tried to see myself through their eyes. Obviously, everything was going to show in a fitted dress. But in the princess gowns, I felt like a giant puffball. These hips didn’t need accentuation.

Mandy tipped her head to the side. “I think I liked the first one better.”

The poor frazzled bridal shop assistant looked up with dismay. She had been sorting through the rejected gowns, and the pile wasn’t small.

Mandy shook her head. “Not to worry. I don’t remember which one it was either. A part of me thinks one white dress is pretty much the same as another.”

Candice—who was on video chat—and I drew in a sharp breath.

“That is just blasphemy,” I said in mock horror.

I could hear Candice snickering from Mandy’s phone as the bridal shop assistant went for help.

“Do you think we are the worst clients they have ever had?” I worried my bottom lip.

Candice piped up from the phone. “You aren’t quite Bridezilla yet.”

“Why am I acting so crazy?”

“Pregnancy,” Mandy said wisely. “How many weeks are you now?”

“Seventeen. After this I am meeting Mark over at Dr. Roberts’ for the ultrasound.

Mandy grinned. “What do you think of his medical assistant?”

I grimaced. “Tina? What is up with that woman anyway?”

Candice chimed in. “I sense a story. Do tell, ladies.”

“While I was pregnant, Tina insisted on calling me Mrs. Johnson even though she knew I wasn’t married. I thought at first she was just old school. A part of me worried that she was judging me because I was obviously a single mother. But then she started giving me sexual advice.”

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Candice choked on what seemed to be thin air.

Mandy picked up the phone. “Are you alright?”

Candice nodded and then asked, “Sexual advice?”

Mandy grinned. “Oh yes, she said that all of my ailments could be solved with some good sex. When I tried to tell her that I was single, she started to offer up ideas for vibrators.”

The longer Mandy talked, the more we laughed, and soon my drama of the perfect dress began to fade.

It has been a couple of difficult weeks. Because my nausea was so bad, Knox ended up having to take my statement in the city and Candice went back to Otterville Falls with him until my morning sickness passed.

After Candice left, I met up with Mandy a few times. Each time I found that she was sweet, engaging, and intelligent.

Soon we were fast friends, and despite the fact that I desperately missed Candice, it was nice to have someone who had been through a pregnancy of her own.

After careful consideration, Mark and I had decided to get married sooner rather than later. Hence, the wedding dress shopping.

“What is new with the case back in Otterville Falls?” I asked.

Candice sighed. “According to Knox, it’s two steps forward and three steps back. He was certain that the lid was about to be blown off and then nothing panned out.”

“It still bothers me that Earl just disappeared. That wasn’t like him. I would have sworn the man was going to live out the rest of his days in my trailer.”

Candice shrugged, saying, “There has to be more to it than what Knox has discovered.”

I wrinkled my brow. “I still think that Father Montgomery had something to do with it. Why else would he have been in the bar?”

Mandy’s eyes widened. “The priest?”

I blew out a snort. “He is no man of God, I can guarantee you that.”

“Is that why you chose to get married here in the city?” Mandy asked.

I sighed. “My life is here now. Sometimes I wonder if I had been living at all until Mark found me that day.”

Being a billionaire certainly helped when one was throwing together a wedding. Suddenly venues opened up when you offered the right incentives. Candice knew all of the ins and outs of party planning. Honestly, I was beginning to wonder if there was anything she didn’t know.

Mandy had taken me all around town looking for dresses. For the right price, bridal boutiques were willing to do last minute alterations. But they couldn’t do anything if I didn’t pick a dress.

“What am I going to wear?”

Mandy went to the pile and started sorting through the dresses. “I really think that the first gown was the one we wanted.”

After a moment she was able to pull a designer gown from the pile. It was sleeveless with a heart-shaped bodice and Venetian lace that was tight until my hips and flared out from there. I had vetoed it because I was sure my belly was huge in it.

“Just give it one more chance,” Mandy begged, lifting it up and holding it out to me. Begrudgingly, I took it out of her hands.

The bridal shop assistant hadn’t returned, so Mandy helped me to remove the current gown and slip into the first one.

After closing the buttons and using clamps to make the fit better, I turned and looked in the mirror.

Mandy clasped her hands together. “Oh, Sutton.”

Candice was yelling from the phone, “I can’t see!”

Mandy went over and picked it up. “There, can you see her?”

“That is the one,” Candice said breathlessly.

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I blew out a breath and looked in the mirror.

Suddenly my eyes began to tear, and I realized that I looked like a bride. I was really going to marry the man of my dreams and this was happening.

The bridal shop assistant walked in with her manager and they froze by the door.

“Is this your dress?” the older woman asked.

I nodded, emotion clogging my throat. This was the dress.

**

LATER THAT DAY, I WAS still riding that high when I met Mark at Dr. Roberts for the ultrasound.

“Is that the baby?” Mark asked, squinting at the black and white screen.

Dr. Roberts chuckled. “That’s Sutton’s bladder.”

He moved the ultrasound wand lower and suddenly a very defined shape of a baby appeared.

Mark’s hands started to shake. He grabbed my hand and I saw the way he was staring at the monitor.

“This is your baby.” Dr. Roberts pointed to the screen. “Here we see a nice strong

heartbeat and straight spine. And look, the little thumb is in the baby's mouth."

"It's incredible," Mark breathed, never once looking away from our child.

For the next twenty minutes, Dr. Roberts went over every aspect of the baby and answered a whole host of questions that Mark had for him.

"Do you want to know the gender of your baby?"

Mark looked at me with hope and anticipation in his eyes.

I nodded. "Yes, please."

Dr. Roberts moved the wand around a bit more and then pointed to the screen.

"Congratulations, you are having a boy!"

A boy. The tiny alien thing that had been making me deathly ill for weeks was a boy. I felt a surge of love and protectiveness wash over me that I can only describe as life changing.

Mark's eyes were glassy as he thanked the doctor for the twentieth time, and we readied ourselves to leave. In a lot of ways, we were walking on cloud nine.

**

"WHAT ARE WE GOING TO name this baby, Mrs. Williams?" Mark asked as he leaned over and kissed my cheek.

The driver had picked us up and we were heading back to the apartment. Over the past few weeks, we had spent a great deal of time looking at places to live. While Mark's apartment was a spacious two bedroom, we really felt like it would be

cramped when the baby arrived.

Settling on a cute brownstone in Prospect Heights that needed minimal renovations, we purchased the home and construction was already underway.

“I suppose we can pick out colors for the nursery now,” I mused.

“What were you thinking?” Mark traced my lips with his fingertips.

“Neutral tones, creams, and grays.” I kissed his roving finger and he smiled.

My heart melted. He was just so damn handsome.

“Did you have a name picked out, Mr. Williams?” I asked, returning to his previous question.

Mark nodded. “I don’t want to pressure the kid, but what do you think of Hollingsworth IV? It would be nice to have another Hollingsworth at the helm of Sutton Enterprises someday.”

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I nodded, blinking to clear my eyes. “Yes, that would be perfect.”

Mark’s phone rang, and he pulled it out to silence it when he noticed that Knox had been calling. I pulled my own phone out and saw that I had two missed calls from Knox.

“Hello?”

Knox’s grim voice came over the speaker. “We have another body.”

CHAPTER 6

Sutton

“Sutton, I don’t like you going back there without me,” Mark complained as he rubbed the back of his neck. “I also don’t like that Knox won’t tell us over the phone what is going on.”

I paused in folding a skirt into my suitcase and looked up at the man I loved. There were dark circles under his eyes, and I knew that he was frustrated and angry about the current situation we found ourselves in.

“We have already put him off for over a week now. And besides, Knox said it was about my family, Mark. My mother’s family. I don’t really know anything about them. Max said we lived with my grandma when I was a baby and that’s where we got the trailer. But I have never seen any paperwork on that. He’s lied to me so many times before, maybe that was just another lie?”

“Just wait until I finish this merger. I can take time off then and be there with you.” He pulled me against him and nuzzled my neck. “What about the wedding and the baby?”

I swallowed hard. I was just so happy that sometimes my emotions would flare up out of nowhere.

“The baby is fine. Dr. Roberts already reassured you that traveling in my second trimester was completely safe. I will be going with Candice, so I am not alone. As soon as the merger is completed you can meet me there. From how hard you have been working, I wouldn’t be surprised if we didn’t see you a day or two after us.”

“Fuck, Sutton, this doesn’t sit well with me. I hate that I am needed in Tokyo for the deal to go through. Maybe I should just call it off?”

I stiffened. “Don’t you dare! You and my father worked for years to bring this company on board. I know it means the world to you.”

His arms tightened around me, and he cupped my breast. “It doesn’t mean anything close to what you mean to me.”

I turned my head as he lowered his and captured my lips. Kissing Mark was one pastime that I could never get tired of. I was feeling a lot friskier at this stage of the pregnancy. At least, I tried to blame my wanting sex all of the time on the baby. If anything, just being around the man brought out the temptress in me.

I rotated my hips, rubbing that firm erection against my bottom. He growled and flipped me around. His hands went to my skirt, undoing the buttons.

His fingers couldn’t go fast enough for me. The second my skirt hit the floor and his fingers were inside of me, I gasped. It was always like this with Mark. For the

briefest second, I felt bereft at the thought of going to Otterville Falls without him.

But I couldn't ruin this business opportunity for him. He had wanted this so badly and I wasn't going to take it away. Our relationship was about giving, not taking.

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I fumbled with his belt for a second or two, and then thankfully was able to yank his zipper down. We both hissed as I took his length in my hands.

“A bit forward there, future Mrs. Williams.”

I laughed at his teasing expression before he kissed me again, this time with all of the love and frustration he had been feeling. I needed him like I needed oxygen.

It was seconds before I was straddling his waist and sinking down on his length. There wasn't time to remove the rest of our clothes or even my shoes. I was riding him with wet and wild abandon, and he was thrusting up inside me as if he could merge our bodies together by the sheer force of will.

My release came barreling up, fast and swift, and suddenly my pussy was clenching his cock, my fingers digging into his shirt and my body flying over the edge of oblivion, I felt his cock jerk as he called my name and spurted deep inside of me.

As we struggled to catch our breath, I nipped his shoulder. “I am going to stink like sex if you keep this up.”

He grinned. “I don't have a problem with that.”

I swatted his arm as we tried to pull ourselves back together.

“I am well aware, but I prefer not to scandalize Candice if I can avoid it.”

He chuckled, the sound rich and deep. “Sweetheart, I am afraid that her days sharing

the trailer with us were enough to send the woman to bedlam.”

My cheeks heated. “We are the worst.”

Mark laughed. “Or the best at what we do?”

Rolling my eyes, I looked over at my suitcase, which was still half packed.

“I really need to get going with the packing,” I said, rubbing my belly absentmindedly.

Mark’s large hand covered mine. “What about the brownstone?”

We had recently purchased a brownstone and it was under renovation.

“It will be there when we get back. I am hoping that this doesn’t take forever to sort out.”

Mark sighed. “And then we will get married?”

I leaned up and kissed the underside of his chin. “And then we get married.”

Walking over to my dresser, I began to pack underwear and socks.

He grunted. “I will be there as soon as I possibly can. There is this matter to take care of and then I am free. Listen, Sutton, there is something I have been meaning to talk to you about.”

I glanced up. “Sure, what is it?”

“You know my half-brother, Brian?”

I stilled. Mark hardly ever spoke about his half-brother. Brian was a product of his father's indiscretion during his marriage to Mark's mother. Neither one of them acknowledged Brian as a member of the Williams family. I had asked Mark at one point why Brian didn't demand paternity testing, but he said that Brian didn't want anything from his father.

In the press, Mark was an only child. But in truth, he did have Brian. They weren't overly close by any means. But I was aware that Brian existed and that he owned a high demand personal security company and often took on private investigations for the rich and famous.

I paused. "What about Brian? Has he contacted you?"

Mark shook his head. "No, nothing like that. I actually was thinking about calling him. He's been on my mind lately and, well, I just wondered if we should send some of his guys down with you and Candice. Just as a precaution."

"Really? Mark, this is Otterville Falls. I have lived there my entire life and know every person who lives there. Nothing bad is going to happen to me."

He clenched his jaw. "Yeah, I bet Gabe thought the same thing."

This time I really did scoff. "Gabe has always been on the lookout for a fast buck. You know that he had to be involved in something. I don't know what it was, but knowing him it was bad. I don't have enemies, Mark. There isn't anyone that's gunning for me."

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“Then why does Knox insist that you come down there? Why is it so damned important for you to be there without me?”

I realized what this was all about. He wanted to be there. And perhaps sending his brother was a substitute.

“Look, I will let you know if for any reason we need Brian.”

Mark swallowed hard. “I just want to tell the Toyko people to fuck the deal. If thousands of people wouldn’t be losing their jobs, I would.”

My heart melted. “You are a good man, Mark. I will miss you, but it’s only for a few days.”

There was a loud knock following the ringing of the doorbell.

I looked up in panic. “Shit, that has to be Candice and I am nowhere near ready!”

I started throwing things inside of the suitcase as Mark hopped up and left the room to answer the door. I was vaguely aware that even though I looked like I had just been fucked, Mark had somehow managed to remain his handsome, calm self.

I heard her laugh and his deep tones and then the clicking of her heels as she walked to our room.

“Mark said to come on back,” she said as she eyed the mess of clothes and my disheveled state. “He said that he’s been on you to focus at the task at hand but that

you keep getting distracted.”

My lips twitched. “I was on something alright.”

Mark called out from the other room. “Stop telling our secrets, woman!”

Candice smiled and walked over to the suitcase to help me refold the clothes and get everything ready.

“Is he still freaking out?” she asked softly.

I nodded. “Worse than ever. You wouldn’t think I had ever done anything by myself before he came along.”

She smiled. “I still remember him coming after you the day we ate at the deli across town. He was like an avenging angel and you melted like cheese on toast.”

I laughed. “You have been in Otterville too long if you are using ‘cheese on toast’ euphemisms.”

Candice laughed. “I can’t help that. The people there, they tend to grow on you.”

“Like a fungus,” Mark called out from the other room.

“Nobody asked you,” I yelled back and then turned to Candice. “How are things with you and Knox?”

Her smile dimmed. “Fine.”

“That’s every woman’s trigger word for anything but fine. Spill it.”

She winced. “I am excited to go back.”

“So, do you think you will stay? I mean, after this is all said and done,”.,” I asked carefully.

Candice paused. “I think that if he asks me I will have a hard time saying no. But I don’t think he’ll ask me.”

“Candice?”

“I’ll tell you about it later,” she said sadly.

CHAPTER 7

Sutton

When something important is on your mind, sometimes you just have to blurt it out. So that is precisely what I did.

“Do you think my ass is getting bigger?”

Candice choked on the sip of diet soda she had just sipped. “Excuse me?”

I frowned. “You heard me. Obviously, it is because your face resembles Old Man Mackey’s barn when it’s freshly painted, shit, damn, and hell. I’m a real fatty, aren’t I?”

Candice wiped her mouth with a napkin. “You do know that you are pregnant, right?”

I gave her a feigned look of horror. “What? Why am I always the last to know?”

She smirked. “You’re snarkier when you are gestating.”

I slumped down into the seat of the plane. It was unladylike, but it was just Candice and me, so I reasoned that it didn’t really matter.

Okay, we did have the flight crew, but by now they were used to the random noises coming from the bedroom when I flew with Mark. It’s likely that they were overjoyed that Candice was with me this trip.

I missed Mark. It had only been a few hours and already I was turning into a sad sack. I needed to take my mind off things. Looking at Candice, I decided that it would be much more fun to talk about her life.

“How’s Knox?” I gave her an innocent look. By the way her eyes narrowed, she really wasn’t buying it. But I didn’t care. I finally wasn’t thinking about you-know-who and I wanted to keep it that way.

“I am sure he’s fine,” she hedged. Something wasn’t right; she wasn’t glowing like a Christmas tree.

“Hey.” I reached out a hand and gently touched her arm. “Is, “is everything okay?”

Candice nodded stiffly. “Yes... No... I don’t know.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

She shook her head. I almost pressed her for more. If; if ever a woman looked like she needed to talk, Candice did. But just when I resigned myself to not stick my nose where it wasn’t wanted—Candice broke.

“I am just being a worry wart. Things were super rocky and then he came to New York...”

I cut her off. “And swept you off your feet.”

She flushed. “I thought that we were good. But then, there is a new deputy from a few counties over, her name is Natalie and she is way too pretty to be a cop. Knox just texted me that she’s definitely going to be working with him.”

I raised a brow. “The feminist inside of me takes offense to the statement that she’s

too pretty to be a cop.”

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Candice groaned. “I know! I am a jealous cow. She is curvy and leans over everything. Half the time she is shoving her tits in his face, and the other half it’s like she’s handing out an invitation for anal.”

I snorted with laughter.

Candice smiled sadly. “I realize how unreasonable this sounds, but I can’t help the rage that builds up every time I think about her.”

“Does Knox know how you feel?”

Candice sighed. “I don’t know. I tried to be diplomatic about it.”

“Okay, that sounds reasonable.” I encouraged her to keep talking.

“I asked how things were working out with Natalie, and Knox went on and on about what a great job she was doing. He said that she helped relieve his stress.”

My lips twitched. “I don’t think he was referring to blowjobs, Candice.”

Her eyes snapped to mine. “You don’t know that! Remember Bethany the Bitch? She would have sucked anybody’s dick to get a leg up. She just happened to have a handsome boss.”

Her heat surprised me, and I held up my hands. “You are right, I haven’t met her. But I do know Knox. He, and he cares for you; he’s not running around getting a piece of ass on the side.”

She grumbled something that I didn't quite hear. "What was that?"

Candice glared at me. "I don't want to tell you."

This was getting better by the minute. "Why?"

"I may have asked Knox to fire her." Her cheeks flushed with the admonition.

I snorted. "He can't fire someone from another county. And seriously? You did?"

Candice dropped her head into her hands. "I told Knox that he needed to get rid of Natalie. I gave him an ultimatum."

Suddenly her eyes were glittering, and I knew that things were much more serious than I had previously thought.

"Candice, what did you do?"

She whimpered a little, the sound so unlike her that I really was getting worried.

"I told him if he didn't get rid of Natalie that I wasn't going to sit around and watch him fuck the secretary. And he just sent me a text saying that he can't get rid of her."

My eyes went wide. "Candice, she's not his secretary or technically even his employee. He can't fire her because you're jealous."

"I know," Candice wailed. "That's what he said too. Then he said a whole lot of other things about me being unreasonable. And how you can't fire people because your girlfriend is insecure."

I drew in a harsh breath. "He didn't!"

She closed her eyes and a lone tear escaped, blazing a trail down her cheek. “He did. And the worst part?”

I nodded.

“He’s right. I am being unreasonable and insecure.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. “Candice, you can’t help how you feel. Maybe if you sat down and talked it all out with Knox, maybe that would help.”

She bit her lip. “He didn’t even consider my feelings.”

“I am so sorry. How did things end?”

She shrugged. “I threw down that silly ultimatum and came back to New York. I told you that I needed to clear things up but honestly, I was taking a break. Everything was happening so fast with Knox. What is the end result, Sutton? Am I really going to give my entire life up to live in Otterville Falls? What would I do? What happens if Knox and I fall apart?”

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“All valid concerns,” I murmured gently. “Did you talk to Knox about them?”

“Yes,” she bit off. “Well, I sort of yelled them at him as reasons why we would never work.”

I sat back. “Candice, are you two together or not?”

She was still for a long moment before her large brown eyes met mine. “I don’t know.”

“Wow.” I blew out a long breath. “Do you love him?”

Her face crumpled. “So much, Sutton. I am such an idiot. It’s like I sabotaged myself and now everything is wrong between us.”

“Maybe you just need time to make it right again?” I suggested.

I had never seen Candice like this before. Her posture was slumped, and her eyes looked tired. “Things will be okay,” I promised. “We can fix this.”

Her lips pressed together in a firm line, indicating that she didn’t believe me.

Well, that was her mistake. Little did she know, but Knox and Candice had just become my little project. After all, matchmaking for my dearest friends seemed like the perfect thing to do while Mark was off in Tokyo making the deal of the century.

I decided that it was time to change the subject. When we brought the brownstone in

New York, I insisted that we have a home in Otterville Falls as well. Mark was surprisingly on board with the request.

Maybe he was just sick of sharing a single wide with one bathroom. Who knew? I watched as he called the realtor and asked for the biggest house in Otterville Falls.

I had tried to dissuade him. Everyone knew that the Baker estate was haunted. I tried to tell Mark that, but he wouldn't listen to me.

Instead, he had construction workers pulling crazy hours preparing the house so that when we arrived, we would have somewhere to stay.

"How's the house?" I asked Candice, who had been Mark's go-to on the project.

Candice smiled. I could tell she was thankful to talk about something else.

"Sutton, it's completely gorgeous. You won't even recognize the place."

"Then we are good to go straight there?"

She shook her head. "No, I guess there were some vandals that broke in and stole all of the tools. So, it will be another five to ten days."

I felt the little hairs on my arms raise. "It's those ghosts, Candice. I am telling you!"

She shivered. "Stop! There is no such thing as ghosts."

I scoffed. "Of course there is. Alice said that when she was a girl, she saw a marble drop right out of the ceiling at the Baker Mansion. And Reena said that somebody pushed her down the stairs!"

“What was she doing there? I thought nobody had lived there in fifty years?”

I rolled my eyes. “All the kids traipsed through the Baker Mansion at one point or another hoping to see a ghost. There are hundreds of accounts, I’m telling you.”

Candice looked unconvinced. “Either way, it’s not ready, so we are going to need to stay at the trailer.”

Was it just me, or did Candice sound as relieved as I felt?

CHAPTER 8

Sutton

Sitting in Alice and Reena's formal visiting room, I could hardly see the plastic covered furniture or overabundance of knickknacks. All I could do was stare at the faded documents that Knox had given me.

In a matter of moments, my entire life had just been turned on its ear.

"My mother's name is Judith Landry Coswell?" The words came out of my mouth, but I could hardly believe they were true.

When Candice and I first arrived in town, Knox asked that we meet over at Alice and Reena's. It was highly unusual, but then most things in this town were done ass backward, so why not this as well?

The older women had ushered Candice and me into their home with open arms—and a box of tissues.

This should have been my first clue.

I have to admit, when I first arrived, I flushed beet red thinking about their sordid affair with Earl and then Max. There I was, a grown woman, and I felt like a five-year-old.

But instead of the cougars that they had been painted to be, I met the same old Alice

and Reena. They smothered me with hugs and kisses and then cooed over my belly. I had tears welling up in my eyes.

No matter what anyone said, these people were my family.

It wasn't until after we sat down that I looked around the room and had the sneaking suspicion that they were staging an intervention.

There, in that tiny sitting room were, was Candice, Knox, Martha, Earl, and Mad Max. And to make matters worse, they were all staring at me.

"What is going on here?" I demanded.

It seemed that as Knox began unraveling the story, I became more wide-eyed.

It was as if he were telling me the plot to his favorite thriller on television. Not the actual events of my mother's life.

She had a family who was wealthy and had searched for her for years. My mother, who sold her body for drugs, was a college graduate.

I shook my head as bile rose in my throat. She had married young. Her husband was abusive, both physically and emotionally. Earl and Martha left everything behind just to protect her and then later to protect me.

I excused myself and barely made it to the bathroom before throwing up.

"Honey, are you okay?" Candice handed me a roll of tissue so that I could wipe my mouth.

"There is a new toothbrush under the sink," Reena called out from behind Candice.

I would have laughed had I not been so shaken. Here they were, still caring for me all of these years later.

Alice and Reena had not been shagging Earl or Max. When Earl and Martha came to them for help, they dove all in. These elderly women threw caution aside and jumped to help.

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It was sweet, and beyond crazy.

I brushed my teeth and went back out to join them. There was one thing I had to know.

“Why now?” I looked from Earl to Martha. “Why tell me after all of these years? You didn’t think to tell me when she passed. So why bring the truth out now?”

Earl’s hands shook as he spoke. “We promised we wouldn’t, Sutton. You don’t know what that man is capable of. He would have killed Jo if she had stayed there.”

My mother had been married when I was born. She had been married for a few years, and according to the law, never divorced. He had abused her, hurt her, and stalked her until she had to go into hiding.

A wave of remorse and regret washed over me. I didn’t even know the woman they were describing. Max had said we lived in my grandmother’s trailer, but I found out that my mom had pawned some jewels and bought the place on her own.

It was already furnished. The woman died in the grocery store and Judith bought it all, cracked formica, ratty couch, and old lady trunks.

“You are a bodyguard?” I asked Max, who had been rather silent while Martha and Earl unburdened themselves.

He nodded ruefully. “I used to be. I’ve gotten old, Sugar. But I promised that I would always look after you, and I have tried to stick by that promise.”

Martha and Earl seemed so different all of a sudden.

It felt strange, and I didn't like looking at them as strangers. Martha looked sad and old and hadn't said one nasty thing to me since I arrived. I found out that she was a widow early in life before she went to work for the man my mother married.

She and Earl were never married.

How? It was too much. I felt lightheaded.

"Your mother's family didn't want Judith to marry Forrest," Martha was saying. "She told me that they cut her off when she ran away to Vegas with him. I don't know a lot about them. But I know she missed her brother Justin terribly."

The body.

That was why Knox was here. The body had been identified as Justin Landry. He shared my last name, and, looking at those old pictures, he even looked a little like me.

I tried to swallow the shock I was feeling. "And this Justin, the body you found, he's my uncle? Were there any next of kin? How did he find us? I don't understand how you can lose someone for twenty-five years and then all of a sudden find us."

"It's the publicity about your inheritance," Knox added. "Everyone loves a Cinderella story. When your stocks went through the roof and then you and Williams decided to wed, that was front-page gold."

I nodded, like I understood, but I didn't understand. I shouldn't have come without Mark. I needed him with me, holding me. This was too much.

Knox pulled out a crumpled paper. On it was a list of names that were all crossed out besides Justin Landry.

“We found this in Gabe’s office. We don’t know if he was contacting these people to try and find out more about you or your mother. We don’t know who he talked to. But every name on the list that has been crossed out is either missing or dead. I am inclined to think that this came from Gabe’s killer and not Gabe.”

“And you are sure this body really belongs to Justin Landry?” I asked.

Knox nodded. “The forensic reports are back, and he was identified by his daughter.”

His daughter.

“I have a cousin?” I asked hoarsely.

Knox winced. “I had meant to break that to you another time.”

I felt slightly hysterical. “I’ve had enough of hidden secrets. Please, just tell me the truth.”

“Okay,” Knock said. “Her name is Margaret Landry, she’s a law student and lives in Boston. She was here briefly to identify the body, but she left with it for the funeral.”

“How do we know she is really my cousin?” I asked.

“You can take a DNA test if you are worried, Sutton. It’s an easy procedure and you will be able to tell if you and Margaret are related.”

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“Margaret isn’t the concern,” Earl interjected. “Forrest is a loose cannon and we have reason to think that he might be after you. I know that he would have done anything to get to Jo. You are all that is left of her, Sutton. He’s a dangerous man.”

“Why would he want me? I am not his daughter.”

Knox looked uneasy. “Your mother was still married to him when she left. Coswell could believe that there is a chance you are his blood. Then there is also the money. Maybe he will try and blackmail you, or worse.”

I frowned. “I thought you said he was rich?”

“Was,” Earl said grimly. “There are reports that his finances are not what they once were. With bad investments and gambling, I would say that Forrest Coswell is a prime target. The problem is that he still has enough power to cause problems.”

“Where is Mark?” Martha demanded.

“Tokyo,” I said faintly. “I told him to go. I insisted.”

Martha reached over and took my hand. I almost jerked it back. I wasn’t used to her being so nice. I wasn’t used to her giving a flying fuck about me.

I searched her face. “What about your life in California, before all of this? Don’t you want to go back?”

“Don’t be stupid, girl,” Martha said without any heat. “You are our life. We chose to

stay after Jo died. I might have been a right pain in your ass, but I have always cared about you, looked out for you without you knowing.

‘Thank you’ seemed trite to say to two individuals that gave up everything for your mother.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked in a small voice.

Martha looked at a loss for words and Candice pressed a tissue into my hands. I was crying, but I didn’t even know it.

Martha shook her head. “I couldn’t, child. I just couldn’t.”

Alice leaned forward to speak. “We don’t want you alone out at the trailer. You and Candice should stay here until the Baker place is finished. There isn’t room for Max to stay there too. And I won’t hear of you not having a bodyguard around.”

I was hesitant to remind them that Max was hardly in his prime.

“No, we will stay at the trailer.” It was Candice who spoke up, and for once I was grateful that I didn’t have to make the decision. “Knox will stay with us until we are able to move into the Baker Mansion.”

This stunned everyone into silence.

Knox was quick to come on board with the plan.

“Of course, I will keep them safe.”

I could see Candice gritting her teeth. She hadn’t offered the invitation so that Knox could share her bed. She wanted me to be safe. As much as I appreciated the gesture,

I did think that a little one-on-one time might help those two stop dancing around each other.

“Why don’t we get a good night’s rest and talk more about it tomorrow?”

Reena’s suggestion was more than welcome. I felt wooden as I stood and hugged the individuals that I thought I had known my whole life. It was like walking into a production and never being given the script. There was an entirely different world that I had been completely ignorant of.

Candice took my hand and we walked back to the car. Knox promised to follow us just as soon as he stopped to grab a few things at the station.

The moment he mentioned work, Candice stiffened but she didn’t drop my hand, or say anything. We just kept walking.

“We should go back to the city,” Candice said when we were alone in the car.

I frowned. “Why? I don’t have as many people in the city to protect me as I do here.”

“I don’t feel good about it,” Candice said with a shrug. “I just think we need to get the hell out of here.”

I drove us back to the trailer, contemplating what Candice had said to me. But I didn’t see that the city would be that much safer. When Mark got here, we could make our final decision. But for now, I felt better being surrounded by the people that cared about me.

“I am staying,” I said firmly. “If my uncle died trying to find me—, or worse, trying to warn me—I owe it to him to find out. I also want to reach out to this cousin of mine. I feel guilty. Almost as if my existence caused her to lose her dad.”

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“No, Sutton, that’s not true. And besides, what if this Margaret person is a trap? You don’t know that she’s not working for Forrest,”.” Candice warned. “I know it sounds like a long shot, but everything that has happened in the last few hours has been completely outrageous. So why not this?”

“I don’t know,” I said softly.

I hoped and prayed she wasn’t right. My hand went down to cover my baby bump and I felt the slightest of movements. My baby wasn’t going to be in fear for his life. We needed to get to the bottom of this as quickly as possible. I wasn’t about to have my happily ever after ruined by some prick in California that I had never met.

CHAPTER 9

Mark

When I got out of negotiations, there were four missed calls from Earl. I had no idea the old man knew how to work the cell phone that Sutton had insisted he carry with him. Knowing that he wouldn’t be calling unless there was a problem, I called him right away.

Earl answered on the fourth ring. “You need to be here.”

As far as greetings went, this that wasn’t the most promising.

“What is going on, Earl?”

He grunted, “Your Sutton, she needs you here.”

“I tried to call Sutton before going into the meeting. Earl, you didn’t call me four times just to tell me to call my wife. What in the hell’s going on?”

Earl launched into the most incredible piece of nonsense that I had ever heard.

“I don’t believe it,” I stated flatly. “Hollingsworth spent hundreds of thousands of dollars trying to find this woman. If she was going by her maiden name, he would have found her.”

“Who do you think tipped off Hollingsworth that he had a daughter?”

That made me pause for a moment.

“I am not sure how he learned of it,” I said honestly. “Are you saying he knew that Jo and Judith Landry were the same person?”

Earl sighed and said, “I don’t know anything anymore. I am an old man, sir. I have lived my life trying to protect these girls. All I know is that your Sutton is alone and scared. She won’t admit it, but I have known her since she was in diapers.”

“I am on my way. I just need to catch the next flight. But I have an idea of someone who can be there immediately.”

“Who?” Earl’s tone was guarded.

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“My brother, or half-brother, Brian. He was in the special forces. More recently he owns a personal protection company and sometimes does private investigating. I will get him down there protecting the girls and should be there myself in a day or two.”

Earl hung up the phone and I immediately called Brian.

We had never been close. It was one of those situations where I didn't even know he existed until I was nearly an adult. My father had an affair with one of his secretaries. When he found out she was pregnant, he threw her out. She demanded paternity testing, and instead of admitting his faults, he paid a lump sum for them never to contact him again.

Brian's mom knew that my father would never publicly acknowledge him. So, she took the money and raised him as best she could. He approached me when he was in high school. Actually tried to beat the shit out of me. I was thankful that he attempted that before joining the Marines. I barely beat him back then.

Once I learned what my father had done, I wanted Brian in my life even if it was limited. He didn't want money or a handout, but he agreed to have contact with me. As time passed, the anger that Brian had for my father faded and he was able to see me for who I was. We were both products of that terrible man, but we didn't have to be like him.

“Mark?” Brian answered. “I expected your call.”

That had me pause.

Brian kept talking. “Listen, man. We need to talk.”

My anxiety, that had jumped when Earl told me about the latest bullshit just went through the ceiling.

“Does this have anything to do with Sutton?” I demanded.

“That client, Coswell, he was married to Sutton’s mother.”

I felt sick. Brian had contacted me about a possible lead on Sutton’s mother. But I hadn’t taken it seriously. We had gone down several paths and none of them had panned out.

I took a shaky breath, snatching up my things. “I need you to get to her.”

He was quiet for a moment and then said, “I’m alone now. Tell me what you want me to do.”

“Sutton is in trouble and I’m out of the country. I want you to go to Otterville Falls to protect her.”

“On my way,” he said, and then hung up the phone.

I spent the next half hour making the arrangements for the flight back to Sutton. I still wasn’t convinced that Jo and Judith were the same person.

That aside, I knew that Sutton was Hollingsworth’s daughter. So many of their mannerisms were the same. Whoever this Coswell was, he had no claim to her. What I didn’t like was the fact that Brian thought he could be dangerous.

When I boarded the plane, I was too keyed up to sleep on the long flight. Images of

the last few months together flashed through my mind. The way that Sutton would fall asleep with her hand tucked underneath her cheek, or how her feet would always get cold when we were watching television, so she would stick them in my lap.

I missed the curve of her belly and seeing the changes in her body from the pregnancy. I missed lunchtime quickies and grabbing sushi on Friday nights. I just flat-out missed her.

The thirteen-hour flight to NY was sheer torture, and after I landed blurry-eyed, I raced to the apartment to grab clean clothes. From there, I raced to the airport and the private jet. It was twenty-four hours from the time that Earl had called me and I hadn't closed my eyes even once.

I felt bad when I learned that the house wasn't ready for them. When I arrived at the trailer, there were four cars parked out front.

The door slammed open the moment I turned off the car and Sutton came rushing out to greet me. I barely got out the door before she was in my arms and I was kissing her, loving her.

My hands roved all over her body. I needed to know that she was with me.

"Erm," somebody cleared their throat.

Like I gave a shit. There was no way I was about to let this woman go. They could go fuck themselves. A few moments later, we were doused by a bucket of cold water.

Sutton wrenched her lips away, sputtering, and I cursed up a blue streak.

"Who in the fucking hell did that?" I sputtered.

Martha stood there, grin on her face and bucket in hand. “Welcome home, Mr. Williams.”

I glanced around to see my half-brother, Brian, not even attempting to hold back his laughter. Knox seemed to be glaring at Brian, and Earl was looking at Martha like she hung the moon.

I had officially entered hell.

And Martha was still cockblocking me.

CHAPTER 10

Mark

We were gathered in the trailer's tiny living room and Knox was shooting off his mouth. "I am just saying that if you need more rooms until the Baker Mansion is finished, someone is welcome to stay with me."

It was obvious that he wanted Candice to come and play house with him. It was equally as clear that Candice wasn't about to take him up on his offer. I wasn't sure what had happened to the lovebirds to put up her back against him and, frankly, I didn't care.

Brian shrugged. "You aren't needed."

He had about four inches on Knox and a good forty pounds. Where Knox was runner lean, Brian was brute strength. I'd have a complex about him myself if I didn't know for a fact that Sutton loved me.

Brian never lacked for a lady's attentions.

Knox sputtered. "Look, just because you come in here..."

“No offense, Sheriff, but I am here to protect Sutton, and, by extension, Candice. We appreciate your update, but you can go on ahead and work on your case.”

Knox looked like he wanted to knock Brian’s block off. But Brian acted like he was completely oblivious to the tension coming from the smaller man.

Candice cleared her throat. “I’m sure that Brian will do a great job protecting us.”

Knox gritted his teeth. “I was doing just fine at protecting you before the Hulk arrived.”

Brian smirked at Knox. “Yeah, that’s why they called me in—because you were doing such a kick-ass job.”

I snorted back a laugh and tried to cover it with a cough.

Brian was one mean motherfucker. I wouldn’t mess with him and I certainly wouldn’t argue with him.

Knox looked close to having steam come out of his ears. “You can’t all stay here. There aren’t enough beds.”

Candice blinked innocently. “We could always share.”

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Brian grinned, and Sutton had to leave the room with a coughing fit of her own.

I wasn't sure what was going on with Knox and Candice, but I knew the look on my brother's face, and it said pure mischief. I needed to put a stop to all of this.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but the house is finished. I had a voicemail when the plane touched down in N.Y. They'll be done with the place tomorrow and start delivering the furniture we ordered. Should be okay to take residency in a night or two."

Brian almost looked disappointed.

Then, to everyone's surprise, Candice said, "If it's only for a night or two, I can stay with Knox."

You would have thought it was Christmas in Knoxland. For the rest of the conversation, we rehashed everything that had been shared with Sutton.

Brian was careful not to mention that he knew Forrest personally. We had decided that it was best to keep that option open if we needed him to play informant again with the man. Knox brought us up to speed with Justin's daughter.

"I asked Sutton not to reach out, but she's already contacted the woman."

Sutton's back straightened. I could tell she was itching for a fight.

"Knox, it may surprise you, but I don't take orders from you. I don't take orders from

Mark and I'm sleeping with him."

I laughed. "She's got you there."

Sutton came and sank beside me. I could feel the tension radiating from her and decided that it was time to kick them all out.

Candice and Knox headed toward his place, while Martha and Earl went back to the small home on the parish that they shared. Brian took off to give us some alone time, and finally I had Sutton to myself.

I carried her to the bedroom and slowly began removing her clothes, one piece at a time.

"You are so tense, baby. Let this go," I commanded as I pulled her panties down her sweet thighs. "Just think about how good this feels."

As I spread her thighs and took her sweet pussy in my mouth, I felt the tension holding her back begin to slide away. One lick from her core to her bud had Sutton moaning and grasping at my hair.

"Fuck," she muttered. "You are so good at that."

I smiled against her thigh. "You want more?"

She groaned as I began to lick and suck her pussy. I picked her up by the ass and didn't let her down until she was boneless. It was the least I could do.

CHAPTER 11

Candice was quiet as they drove in Knox's police car back to his place. He lived not far from Fullsome Creek, which if you followed for about half a mile, you would run into the Baker Mansion. She had been to Knox's home a time or two while they were dating. But Candice felt more comfortable out at Sutton's trailer.

Knox lived closer to downtown where there were neighbors and eyes that watched your every move. In the city, where Candice was raised, she didn't know the people that lived on the same floor let alone the entire neighborhood.

You worry about yourself in New York, and in the city if someone tried to get in your business, you quickly put them back in their place.

It wasn't that her family wasn't friendly. Candice's parents worked most of the time and the nannies would arrange for play dates and take her the children to practice and dance lessons. It was a different way of life. She couldn't say that one or the other was better; it was just different.

When Knox pulled into his driveway, he immediately came around to open her door. He was always a gentleman like that no matter how many times Candice told him she was perfectly capable of opening the door on her own.

Secretly, she liked the old-fashioned chivalry.

Knox popped the trunk and grabbed her bag before they moved up the walk to the front porch.

“Hey there, Sheriff,” Mrs. Beason called out from next door.

She was out drowning her weeds much like she was most days. Whatever plant had been originally placed there was long gone. Her garden hose ran most waking hours of the day, with her eyes being as poor as they were. Mrs. Beason just watered everything anyway, just in case.

“Good evening, Mrs. Beason. I will be right over to fetch your mail for you.”

Candice glanced down at the mailbox in front of Mrs. Beason’s home.

“I can grab your mail, Mrs. Beason.”

The older woman swung the hose around as she squinted, searching for the young lady that had been speaking to her.

“It’s Candice, Mrs. Beason.”

Candice jogged over to the older woman’s box and pulled out the mail. She had several pieces of junk mail and a few bills. Once she got closer, Candice asked if she wanted her to put the mail in the house.

“Oh yes, dear! Just on the table, that would be fine.”

Candice opened the door and made her way to the kitchen, placing the mail in the center. She turned to go when she saw something on the computer that caught her eye. She moved closer and saw pictures of children taped to the side of the monitor. Their clothing was years out of date, and one could see by the quality of the images that these were old photographs.

Candice tried to remember if Mrs. Beason had ever had a visitor during any of the

times she had visited Knox. Sadly, the answer was no. Candice made her way outside and noticed that Knox had taken over the watering while Mrs. Beason sat in a lawn chair chatting away about this, that, and the other.

It was moments like this when Candice felt her heart melting into a big puddle of goo. The men she had dated in the city would never have taken the time out of their evening to talk with a lonely widow. Knox looked over at her and smiled, effectively melting any resistance that she might have been building against him.

“Candice!” Mrs. Beason beamed. “I wasn’t aware you were back in town. When are you going to give up those city ways and stay with us for good?”

Leave it to Mrs. Beason to bring up the one thing that she and Knox never talked about.

“Maybe someday.” Candice smiled at the older woman, noticing how thin and frail she looked in the lawn chair. “Have you eaten? I could fix you something.”

There had been a time in Candice’s life when offering to cook a meal would have been akin to offering up her kidney. So many things had changed for her in Otterville Falls.

“Oh no, dear, I had a bacon and tomato sandwich for lunch, and I am still paying for it.”

Candice swallowed her smile. “Oh, I do hope that you feel better.”

Mrs. Beason shook her head. “I think that mayonnaise has turned.”

Knox looked up abruptly. “Did you get new mayonnaise? Because I told you the last time I got a glass of sweet tea that it was expired.”

Mrs. Beason scoffed, “Expiration dates are a ploy they use to steal your money. We never worried about such things when I was growing up and I daresay we were a far sight healthier.”

Candice winced at the thought of what sour mayonnaise could do to one’s insides.

Knox shook his head. “I am throwing it out.”

“Don’t you dare!” Mrs. Beason waved her arthritic hand.

When all was said and done, Knox had thrown the offending product out and replaced it with the one from his fridge that wasn’t expired. Candice looked up at Knox as he followed her inside of his house. He took his cowboy hat off. There was something so sexy about a man in wranglers and a cowboy hat.

Knox caught her staring and gave her a shy smirk.

She knew that she needed to stay strong. This on again off again crap was wearing on both of them. But at that moment, all she could think of was the way he tenderly took care of Mrs. Beason, the way he always made sure she had something to drink and a comfortable place to sit.

Stupid country cowboy charm tended to get her out of her panties faster than anything else she had found. So, when he reached an arm out and yanked her to his side, she didn’t fight him.

No, her hands went to his brown uniform and began to untuck it from his jeans. She knew the corded muscles just below the cloth rather intimately and she wanted to see them again. But it appeared that she would have to wait, because Knox had other things in mind. His hands cupped her face and he kissed her.

The feel of his rough hands against her satiny smooth skin always gave her goosebumps. And the way the man kissed, holy shit, it was an art form. His mouth

slanted over hers, demanding entrance. Once Knox had what he wanted, he tended to savor her, needing every precious drop of her resistance until there was nothing left.

Candice felt every inch of her body come alive. He was magic, and when he kissed her, she became more than just the girl from the city. She felt free, and damn if that had ever happened with anyone else.

Candice worked her fingers underneath his shirt and lightly scraped her nails down those delicious abs. Knox moaned into the kiss, biting her lip and yanking her closer. His hands slipped down to the hem of her shirt and he yanked it over her head, quick to bring their lips back together as fast as humanly possible.

Candice was a curvy girl, with a woman's body that she was unapologetic for. Knox craved those curves, dreamed about them, beat off to the memory of them, and fuck if he wasn't falling in love with them. He pulled the cups of her bra down so that her large breasts jutted out. He bent his head and took one of them in his mouth, loving the way she moaned and sank her hands into his hair.

She pulled him closer to her, needing more than the gentle ministrations that he had been giving her.

He slipped a knee between her thighs and then bit down on her tender tip. The pain mixed with unbearable pleasure had her gasping and calling out his name. His mouth captured the other nipple and he sucked hard while pinching the first between his fingertips.

Candice had never come from nipple play alone, but if anyone could convince her, it was Knox. He didn't just jump into a quick fuck. Everything was careful and calculated. For the most part, Candice was thankful that he was such a devoted and kind lover. But there was that little doubt that always crept up, making her wonder what it would take to make this man lose control.

His fingers went to the button on her jeans, and he yanked them down as soon as possible, quickly followed by his own. Candice moaned as he traced the folds of her pussy through her satin panties. He had a hand full of gorgeous ass, and the other feeling how incredibly wet she was for him.

Candice, not to be outdone, slid her hands inside of his boxers and grasped his length. He hissed as her hand cupped his balls and the other stroked him from root to tip. He wouldn't last if she played that way, and Knox wanted this to last.

He wanted to pull her so far under his spell that nothing and no one could ever come between them. It seemed like it was always something. His job, her life in the city, the new employee, Sutton——no matter when, it seemed that they were constantly fighting to be together.

Knox had known a fair amount of fighting in his life. From his abusive childhood to life as an officer of the law, he fought long and hard every day for what he believed to be right.

This right here in his arms, Knox knew was right. She was right for him and he would prove it if it damn near killed him.

CHAPTER 12

Once they divested themselves of all of their clothes, Knox led her back into his bedroom. Candice shoved Knox back on the bed and he obediently laid down. His eyes couldn't help but rove over her gorgeous curves and fantastic tits. The woman was more than beautiful. She had a classic loveliness and wrenched at his heart. He loved her and didn't know what he needed to do to prove it to her.

Candice traced the lines of his body with her finger, ignoring his throbbing erection that she had in her hands moments ago. Languidly, she circled his flat brown nipples and slowly made her way past his sculpted abs and defined hipbones.

Knox knew there would be no rushing her if she wanted to take things slow. But fuck, he really hoped that she didn't.

With a naughty look in her eye, she leaned over and licked the precum on the tip of his erection.

Knox swore and dug his fingers into the bedsheets.

Watching as Candice smirked and leaned down, taking him into her mouth again, the salty musky taste not unpleasant as she. She licked and swirled her tongue around every inch of his dick. Knox couldn't resist sliding one of his hands into her hair.

She used one hand to jerk him off while her mouth took as much of him as she could. Slowly building up the pressure, she hollowed out her cheeks and pulled him back as far as she could.

“Fucking hell, Candice!” he rasped.

He knew that she loved it when he came unglued. It was far too infrequent. Candice sucked him inside again and pleased Knox until he couldn’t stand it any longer. He yanked her off his dick and she released him with a pop. Then he sealed his lips on hers, ravishing her mouth, loving the taste of himself on her tongue.

He broke away to whisper, “I want to do so many things to you. Filthy, dirty things that will leave you sore for days.”

Candice felt her arousal jump at such an honest admission. Sex between the two of them had always been good, but she was more than willing to kick things up a notch.

“Why don’t you?” she whispered back.

He paused as if considering. “I don’t want to hurt you or scare you.”

Candice pulled back, cupping his cheeks with her hands. “I want you to let go, Knox. Don’t hold things back from me. I can feel it and that is what hurts.”

He growled and took her mouth once more, his hand sliding between her legs again. She moaned into the kiss as he found just how wet she was for him. He slid two fingers inside, not waiting for her to adjust to him.

He was wild and frantic, and Candice was getting wetter by the second. His thumb circled her distended clit, flicking it gently and rubbing circles. She was gasping, arching, begging for more when he leaned down and bit her nipple.

Candice jerked as her orgasm ripped through her. Spasming around his hand, her pussy clenched hard, trying to pull him deeper inside.

Knox pulled back and grabbed something from the nightstand. He poured some of the lube and began to caress her tiny puckered hole.

Her eyes flew open and she gasped.

“Is this alright?” His voice was like gravel, and she knew that if she told him to stop, he would immediately.

“Yes,” she moaned, loving the feel of his slick fingers tracing the forbidden place.

“You will tell me to stop if you don’t like it?” he pressed.

Candice nodded. “I promise.”

Knox poured more of the tube onto her ass and began to tease the tight opening with his fingertip. She moaned and pressed down against him. They had never talked about it before, but Candice liked the anal play. It wasn’t something that came up in regular conversation, but it showed, once again, how right they were for each other.

His finger slipped inside and they both gasped as her body clamped down on it.

“Just relax, baby. I’m going to make you feel so good.”

“Yes,” she gasped. “Make me feel good. Fill me with your cock.”

Knox’s eyes darkened. “You want my cock in your ass, baby?”

Candice moaned again as he added another finger. “Yes, please.”

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Knox loved the way that she writhed beneath him, her tits falling to the side and bouncing with the thrust of his hand.

Pulling his fingers out, he applied more lube to his cock and placed it against her entrance.

“Just relax, Candice. You look so fucking beautiful. Your body is getting ready to take me.”

She mewled as he pressed the tip of his cock inside. It was a tight fit, but she already was loving the way it made her feel.

He moved in further, and then a little further, going slow and making sure that she was able to take him.

Candice moaned, “More Knox, I need more.”

His control snapped, and he began to shove his length inside of her ass, burying himself to the hilt. It was so tight, impossibly so. They both were panting and sweating as he fucked her ass with the abandon that she so desperately needed.

His hand came down to finger her pussy as he rammed inside of her. Never had Knox imagined that Candice would allow him to do this. It felt so amazing he knew he wouldn't last very long. But he needed it to be good for her, wanted her to find that release she so desperately chased.

Knox curled his fingers upward, rubbing against her g-spot and loving the way her

hands flew to her breasts like she couldn't stand not to be touched.

Her body was glorious as he watched her take him balls deep. Her legs began to shake, and he knew that she was nearing her release.

“Come for me Candice, come hard so I can fill your ass. You can do it, baby, I need you to come.”

And she shattered, Knox watched every second of her release until he couldn't stand it and his own was upon him. He came harder than he could ever remember coming.

His body felt wrung out. He could barely pull himself from her and watch as his seed slowly made its way out. Grabbing a towel, Knox helped her clean up and then gathered her tightly against him.

“I don't know what I did, Candice. But I am so fucking sorry. I want you in my life, I need you.”

She was just about to respond when his cell phone rang. He couldn't ignore a call. He was the law in town.

He kissed her quick and said, “This won't take me but a minute.”

“Sheriff,” he said briskly, answering the phone.

“Knox, I need you to come over here. There is someone outside the building.”

Candice recognized his deputy, Natalie's, voice on the other end.

Knox stood up from the bed and began to pace.

As much as Candice would have loved to sit back and enjoy the view, she couldn't help the feeling of anger that began churning in her gut. Natalie was a deputy. Why did she need Knox to check out something suspicious?

Why did it seem like every time they were pulling things together, Natalie came along and shook things up?

Knox hung up the phone and cursed.

"I am sorry, I need to go check out a disturbance."

Candice nodded. She wasn't about to get into an argument with Knox over this. He had already said his peace and she was the fool that kept climbing back into his bed.

"I won't be gone very long." He leaned over and kissed her head.

Candice watched as he dressed in wranglers and another sheriff's uniform shirt. He combed his hair and made for the door, but he stopped before he left and turned back to her.

"I'm really sorry about this."

Again, Candice nodded. "Me too."

And then he was gone. She stayed for the first hour, knowing that she was a fool but desperately wanting to give him the benefit of the doubt. However, after two hours, she knew that it was time to go.

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Getting dressed in the clothes they had ripped off, Candice clear through the house, she grabbed her bag and considered leaving him a note.

But Candice had never been very good at goodbye. No, she figured, it was better to just walk away.

When Knox returned home fifteen minutes after she left, he was anxious to see her again. Not only had he searched a mile perimeter around Natalie's place, but he had also called some of the surrounding precincts to keep an eye out.

As soon as he could, he raced back to his home. The lights were off, but he figured she had just gone to sleep. Knox wanted to have her there for him when he was out late at night. He opened his bedroom door and she was gone.

Candice wasn't in the bathroom or the kitchen, and then he noticed her bag wasn't by the door. He had no idea where she could have gone on foot in the middle of the night. But he couldn't help but worry if this really was goodbye.

CHAPTER 13

Sutton

Candice had dark circles under her eyes as she clutched her cup of coffee like a lifeline. But she wasn't drinking out of the cup, only holding it as if it were her sole source of heat. I had found her holed up in the office at Abberly's.

Knox called ridiculously early asking if she had made it back to my place, which she

hadn't. I had a small freak out, but Mark was there to be the voice of reason. There were only a few places she would be comfortable going: Alice and Reena's, the trailer, or Abberly's, and it was there we found her staring at the wall with dried tears on her face.

Mark made himself scarce, saying that he was going to make sure we would be able to move into the Baker place that afternoon. I wanted to castrate Knox. I didn't know what he did, but I hated the look on my best friend's face.

"You girls hungry?" Martha peeked her head in and gave Candice a concerned look.

She shook her head. "No, thank you."

I was about to tell her I was starving, but then I saw Candice's lip begin to quiver. Then suddenly she was telling me everything. I was a little confused on how it was the elderly neighbor's fault that she ended up in bed with Knox again, but I knew it wasn't the time to question.

Candice needed me to listen and be a friend, and that I could do. When she got to the part about Natalie calling, I started to get mad. What was it about this girl? Could she not see that Knox and Candice were perfect for each other?

And why was Knox being so obtuse? Could he not see that by rushing to Natalie he was pushing Candice away?

Later, when we were packing our things at the trailer, I asked Mark these very questions. He was adamant that we stay out of it.

"Sutton, the last thing you want to do is get involved. You can't win. If you say that Knox is a dick and they get together then she will resent you. If you say that she should stay with him and he ends up dicking around on her then she really will resent

you.”

I frowned. “So, what am I supposed to do? I can’t just sit there and not say anything.”

Mark grabbed my hands and pulled me in between his legs while he was sitting on the bed.

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“You have to be Switzerland, Sutton. I am telling you there is no winning when you pick sides.”

I huffed. “I am not picking sides. I am always on Candice’s side.”

His lips twitched. “What if she is wrong?”

“I don’t care,” I retorted. “She’s my best friend. I stand by her.”

Mark pushed a lock of dark hair behind my ear. “She is lucky to have you.”

I shook my head. “No, Mark, I am lucky to have her. She wouldn’t even be going through this heartache if it wasn’t for me. She would never have met Knox or come to Otterville Falls.”

“Just be her friend, but don’t give advice.” He,” he said and kissed my nose. “And the movers asked if there was anything you wanted to be taken to the new house.”

I looked around the old trailer. It had been my home for the majority of my life. There really was nothing of value, and everything that reminded me of who I was. The sound of the fridge humming would always remind me of Mama, searching through it with that worried expression on her face. The chip on the kitchen table from where Earl dropped the old frying pan.

I bit my lip, suddenly feeling a lump of emotion in my throat.

“Hey,” Mark whispered, pulling me closer so that he could whisper in my ear, “we.

“We won’t get rid of anything.”

I nodded. “I know. It just feels like the ending of a chapter. I know it’s a good thing. I am excited to live in a haunted house, honest.”

Mark chuckled. “The house isn’t haunted. And besides that, we renovated every last inch of the place. I doubt that there is anything original still left.”

I nodded. “I bet Ms. Bertha Victor likes her new stomping grounds.”

“Who the hell is Ms. Bertha Victor?” Mark pulled back with a hint of unease.

“She came to Otterville Falls as a mail-order bride. The Baker House was a bed and breakfast back then, and it was said that she never made it to the morning. Folks around here call her the Gray Lady.”

Mark scowled. “There is no Gray Lady!”

I shrugged. “Someone needs to keep the soldier company.”

“What soldier?”

I couldn’t help but smile at Mark’s expression. “The soldier sadly doesn’t have a name. But he is often seen at the top of the stairs in his Confederate uniform, watching for the Yanks that would eventually shoot him down at that very spot.”

“Shit, Sutton, you are freaking me out!”

“I thought you didn’t believe in ghosts,” I teased.

“I don’t,” he said staunchly.

“They aren’t mean ghosts, as far as I know. They might drop marbles or close doors, but nothing more than that.”

Mark shivered. “That is creepy. There is no such thing as ghosts.”

I patted his shoulder. “Of course there isn’t.”

“You are a minx!”

He kissed me hard on the mouth and I was just sinking into him when Candice called out that the movers had arrived.

The next few hours were spent directing the movers and driving over to the new house. I was shocked at how much it had changed from when we last had been through. I felt like I had entered one of those shows on television when they do the before and after.

Everything was light and bright; the ceilings were lifted, and walls removed to create an open floor plan. The kitchen was breathtaking and I literally stopped and just stared for at least five minutes.

“If you don’t like anything, we can change it,” Mark was saying, but I could hardly put together what he meant.

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How could I not love everything that had been done? The furniture was exactly what I would have picked, even the style was elegant with just a shade of country home. The emotion that I felt earlier was back with a vengeance.

Mark saw my face and panicked. “It’s okay, we can paint walls, anything that you want.”

“It’s perfect,” I choked out. “Completely perfect.”

Mark wrapped me in his arms. “Let’s go see the bedrooms.”

We took the back stairs from the kitchen up to where most of the bedrooms were located. A fully furnished mother-in-law apartment was put into the basement, and that is where Candice was currently unpacking her things. The old home had more than seven bedrooms, and on the third floor, Mark had the attic turned into a master suite.

I was huffing a little when we made it all the way up, and then my breath caught. Never in my life had I ever seen anything so beautiful. The bed was massive, and the linens looked to be as soft as clouds. Everything was in off-white and cream, which looked amazing against the palest oak floors I had ever seen. The master bathroom contained a massive shower that we could have entertained in and a soaker tub that could fit the two of us easily.

I no longer felt sad that we weren’t in the trailer.

Mark led me to what I thought was another closet, but it opened into a small nursery.

And that was when I began to cry.

“You are the best boyfriend,” I choked out.

He growled, “I can hardly wait until that is ‘husband.’”

I kissed him, our tongues tangling and our bodies reaching for each other instinctively. I needed him, wanted to christen our new home and bedroom. I knew that this would be the place where we would stay every time we came to Otterville Falls. And I knew that if Mark put this much into the house, he planned on spending time here.

“I love you,” he whispered against my lips and then picked me up and carried me to the bed.

“I am too heavy for you to carry around.”

He rolled his eyes. “Please, you are casting aspirations on the mother of my child.”

I reached up and cupped his cheek. “I love you too, you know?”

He kissed my nose. “Yeah, I know. And I also love your sex drive when you’re pregnant.”

My eyes widened. “Are you talking about sex in front of the baby?”

Mark grinned. “Sorry, Little One, your mom and I are going to embarrass you a lot. It’s best you get used to it now.”

I yanked his shirt up and he pulled it over his head. My mouth began to water when I saw his naked chest, the sculpted muscles never failing to melt my panties. Mark was

right—there would never be a time when I could keep my hands off him. Our baby had better get used to his embarrassing parents.

CHAPTER 14

Sutton

“I really appreciate you coming out here, Brian. It means a lot to Mark and me.”

I could see the flush rise on Brian’s cheeks as I grabbed a box of cereal and plopped down beside him at the new kitchen table. Mark came in after me and kissed the top of my head.

“You’re embarrassing him, Sutton,” he murmured against my hair, loud enough for Brian to hear.

“You’re not,” Brian tried to protest, and I got the impression that he rarely got praise. “I am here for you and the baby.”

Mark laughed. “But my sorry ass can take care of itself?”

Brian’s eyes, so very similar to Mark’s, narrowed until you only saw a slit of silver. “I should hope so. You are a grown ass man.”

Mark rolled his eyes and grabbed a bowl to sit beside me.

“It’s understandable that you would want to keep your nephew safe.”

Brian blinked and then slowly smiled.

It occurred to me then that he hadn't considered the baby a part of his family. It pissed me off to no end that Mark's father didn't acknowledge Brian. He was a good man and didn't deserve the shitty father he was given.

"So, what's on the agenda for today?" Brian asked as he ate his cereal.

"Sutton's alleged cousin is supposed to be coming today," Candice answered as she walked into the kitchen.

Brian's eyes were glued to her full breasts underneath her nightshirt that clearly were not corralled into a bra.

Mark elbowed me, and I got him right back.

"Maybe the two of you could take some time to get Brian acquainted with Otterville Falls," Mark suggested. "It's important that he knows the area."

As far as matchmaking went, I thought it was fairly obvious, and what was worse is that Mark had tried to feed me all that bullshit about staying out of other people's affairs, and here he was shoving the two of them together.

Candice shrugged, a move that Brian watched with bated breath.

"Sure," she said with a kind smile. "I would be happy to show you about."

Brian nodded. "Thank you, I should be ready to go in about an hour. I have some work I need to get submitted and then I will be free."

Candice glanced up at the new clock in the kitchen. "Sounds perfect. I will be ready."

Brian stood to set his bowl in the sink and head back upstairs to his room. He was a

few inches taller than Mark, and where Mark was ripped in a runner's body kind of way, Brian looked more like one of those professional wrestlers.

However, when you looked at their faces, it was clear they were siblings. Even some of their mannerisms were the same. I knew that Mark hadn't been close to Brian, but I wondered how much of that was because neither one knew how to bridge the gap.

"How did you sleep?" I asked Candice, noticing that she was yawning for the second time since she walked in.

"Pretty good. No sign of the spectral inmates, so that was good."

Mark choked. "There is no such thing as ghosts."

In unison Candice and I both said, "Of course not!" And then laughed, which Mark ruefully joined in.

"Are you alright with taking Brian around?" I asked Candice. "I know it's been a few rough days."

She looked up with clear eyes. "Actually, it will be nice to take my mind off other things. And Brian is a nice guy. I'll introduce him in town so that he knows the regulars. And Martha does serve a fantastic burger or salad, so we will head there afterward. Do you want to meet up at Abberly's?"

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I looked at Mark to see if he had anything planned. He and he nodded in response. “Sounds good to me.”

We spent most of the morning putting things away how I wanted them and then meeting the new maid who would be coming in twice a week to help out. I was mortified that Mark had not only hired a maid, but chosen one without my knowledge.

But once I met Besty Mae, I knew that we would get along like a house on fire. She was home from college and needed to earn a little money before she went back. Mark told me later that we would be paying her full tuition, and I marveled for the millionth time what an amazing man he was.

By the time we arrived at Abberly’s, I was starving. It seemed that breakfast was a hundred years ago. I walked in and immediately was taken back to the time when Mark and I had first met. I was late for work and Gabe was on my ass. It was hard to fathom that Gabe was gone now.

Abberly’s itself looked about the same, but since Martha took over it was spotless and actually served good food. The same fry cook was behind the grill, but even he had a smile and a wave when we came in.

“Well, hey there.” Martha said when she came out to greet us. “How was the first night in the Baker Mansion?”

My eyes flew to Mark because I knew that he hated the fact our new home was called by its former title.

“It was perfect,” Mark replied with a stiff smile. “We’re supposed to be meeting Candice and Brian.”

Martha nodded. “Of course! I seated them out on the patio; come with me.”

She was so different from the nasty woman that I grew up with. But I had to admit, I liked Martha more than ever. She had so many layers that I hadn’t any clue about.

When we walked out onto the patio, Candice and Brian were laughing over large glasses of iced tea.

“Looks like you two are having fun,” I commented as Mark and I took our seats.

“Sutton, you will never believe what Brian said to Father Montgomery.”

I turned to Brian. “That man has been a thorn in my side for longer than I can remember.”

Brian nodded. “Candice and I stopped near the church to visit with Earl, and Father Montgomery came charging across the lawn. He proceeded to ask who I was and if I had anything to do with the likes of that sinner Sutton Landry.”

Mark bristled by my side, but Candice waved him off. “No! You have to hear what Brian said. It’s perfect.”

Brian smiled at Candice. “I told him to watch his mouth; he was talking about my future sister-in-law.”

“And that he was a self-righteous prig that needed to learn his place,” Candice finished. “Father Montgomery’s face turned puce and he stormed off. It was wonderful.”

Mark clenched his jaw. “Something needs to be done about that man.”

Brian nodded. “I agree. He is a menace.”

I felt a surge of pride. “Thank you for standing up for me.”

Mark clapped his brother on the shoulder. “Thanks, man.”

It was then that Knox walked out on the patio. He did a double take when he saw the four of us sitting together. I felt Candice stiffen beside me.

Mark stood and shook his hand, followed by Brian. I noticed that when Knox shook hands with Brian, they both squeezed awfully hard. It appeared they were in a silent pissing contest.

“You are welcome to pull up a chair,” I said, trying to help the tension fade a little.

Knox frowned. “No, thank you. I was just looking for someone.”

Mark raised a brow. “Did you find them?”

Knox looked straight at Candice. “They were busy.”

Her cheeks heated and Brian slipped an arm around the back of her chair. Knox’s nostrils flared and I wondered if he was going to hit him.

Mark sensed that things were getting ugly so he tried to fill the gap. Unfortunately, he picked the worst subject to bring up. “How is your new deputy working out?”

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Candice turned to glare at Knox. “I think he’s taking good care of her.”

Brian’s brows rose and I sat in horror, watching the gauntlet that Candice had just thrown down.

Knox’s brows drew together. “Natalie is working out just fine. She’s new in town and it’s been a hard adjustment.”

Brian leaned forward. “Well Sheriff, she’s lucky to have you.”

Candice swallowed, and I could almost feel her heartache radiating out of her.

“We would love to meet her sometime,” Mark added.

Knox nodded, but his eyes stayed on Candice.

“It’s good to see you.” His words were low but unmistakably directed toward her.

Candice turned to Brian as if she hadn’t heard Knox speak. “Are you ready to go?”

We hadn’t even ordered yet.

Brian hopped up. “Sure thing. It was great running into you, Sheriff. We’ll see you both back at the house.”

Knox looked murderous as Brian swiftly whisked Candice away.

CHAPTER 15

Mark

“Baby, wake up!” I brushed the hair back from Sutton’s face. “I need to head to the airport.”

She moaned and turned in my arms. I had already gotten up and showered, but I still needed to put my clothes on. Sutton looked so warm and cozy in our bed that I couldn’t help but climb back in with her even if it was only for a moment.

“I don’t want you to go,” she said groggily, not opening her eyes.

I smiled and kissed her forehead. “We talked about this last night, Sutton. Both Brian and I think that addressing the Forrest issue head-on is the way to go. There is no point sitting and waiting when he may not even be a threat.”

Sutton opened her eyes. “I will miss you.”

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I leaned down and kissed her, loving the feel of her in my arms and the burning in my gut that always came from being close to her. I deepened the kiss, pulling her curvy body into my erection and loving the little baby bump that we had created together.

Sutton threw one of her legs over mine and I cupped her ass, squeezing it tight.

“I want to go with you,” she murmured before sucking on my Adam’s apple and causing my dick to throb.

“I don’t want you anywhere near that fucker until I know for sure he isn’t a danger to you. Brian will be here to take care of you and I will be home later today. I am not even staying over. Besides, your cousin is supposed to arrive soon.”

Her hand reached out and cupped my dick., and I have to admit that I lost my train of thought for a moment as the sensations washed over me.

When she began to stroke me, I knew I was a goner. “That feels so good, baby.”

She was wet and aching when my finger touched her pussy, and suddenly I needed to be inside of her more than anything in the world. Shoving the blankets away, I lifted her leg higher on my hip and sank inside of her wet heat.

Sutton moaned, her mouth searching out and finding mine. Our kiss was as deep and slow as the strokes of my cock in her heat. Nothing in the world could ever compare to what it was like to make love to her.

I knew that we had planned on a big wedding in New York. But, but the longer we

were stuck here, the more I wanted to just head to the justice of the peace. I loved this woman more than the stars in the sky and I wanted to call her my wife.

Sutton's core clamped down as her release began to build. I snuck a hand between us and started to rub her clit as I thrust into her again and again.

She broke her mouth away, crying out my name, and then she was coming. Her pussy was so fucking tight on my dick that I couldn't have held back my release if I wanted to. I loved the feel of her squeezing me, milking me until there was nothing left.

We lay in each other's arms. I hadn't even pulled out of her body yet. If I could figure out a way to be connected always, I would have done it.

"Baby, I really have to go."

I kissed her softly again and then pulled out. She whimpered at the loss but didn't say anything when I stood up and went to the new master bathroom. Flipping on the shower for the second time that day, I was grateful that we had gone with the tankless water heater, which should never run out of hot water.

I was lathering up when I looked across the steamy mirror and saw a faded woman standing there in an old-fashioned gray gown. I am not proud of my next actions. All I can say for my behavior is that she scared the ever-loving piss out of me, because when I screamed, it nearly brought the house down.

Sutton stumbled out of bed, yanking down her nightshirt and promptly tripping over the shoes that I had left there to put on before I left. She yelped in pain and I grabbed her and tried to run when the door to our bedroom slammed open and Brian stood there in his boxers, aiming a gun.

"Where is he?" Brian shoved past us and went into the bathroom.

Candice peeked around the corner and caught a glimpse of my naked ass with Sutton in my arms. She squeaked and abruptly went back down the stairs. By the time Brian came back into our room he was frowning.

“I didn’t see anything. What happened?”

Sutton started laughing, and it was then that Brian noticed my lack of clothing.

“Fuck, Mark, get some damn clothes on!”

“It was that ghost lady! She was in the bathroom just a few minutes ago!”

If I ever held any respect from my half-brother, I may have lost it in that moment. Shaking his head in disgust, he walked out of our bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

“That’s a new door!” I barked out.

Sutton was laughing so hard I almost dropped her out of spite. It was a good thing I loved her, and she was carrying our child.

“So, do you believe in ghosts now?”

I tossed her onto the bed, where she bounced twice before landing and turning to stare at my naked body.

“Well?” she demanded.

“Yes, alright, it freaked me out. Sutton, there was a ghost in the bathroom when I was showering.”

“Maybe she’s a voyeur.” Sutton’s eyes sparkled with mischief.

“That’s not funny.”

But it really was, and now that I was out of the shower, I was starting to doubt what I had really seen. Maybe it was just being in a new house or the way the shadows fell?

I turned to get dressed, ignoring the way that she continued to laugh. I went into our new walk-in closet, loving the smell of fresh wood and paint. I heard her get up and pad into the closet behind me. Her arms wrapped around my waist, and I felt her face rest against my back.

“I still don’t want you to go,” she said softly, melting my heart for the millionth time.

“Me either, baby. Me either.”

**

BY THE TIME I ARRIVED in Los Angeles, I was more than ready to put this part of our lives behind us. Surely this Forrest person would be reasonable and Sutton and I could move on from all of this. The car drove me from the airport into the city center and I took the elevator up to the fourteenth floor.

The building wasn’t unlike something you would see in New York. I could have very easily been going into Sutton Enterprises. A thin woman stopped me as I walked in and I gave her my name. She asked me to have a seat, and it wasn’t more than five minutes before I was escorted back into the office.

Forrest wasn’t as large as I had expected him to be. The man was clearly in his late

fifties or early sixties. His hair was thinning, and he had a hard glint in his eye.

“If you have come here to tell me where that bitch has been hiding all those years, I already know.”

I stiffened. “I am assuming you mean your dead wife and not my fiancé?”

Forrest’s eyes narrowed. “I was speaking of Judith, but I heard she had a daughter. If you want money, you are barking up the wrong tree.”

His color was high, and it seemed to me that he was trying to act like the badass that he wasn’t.

“I am here to find out your intentions toward Sutton Landry.”

Forrest rose to his feet. “If she is my daughter, I have a right to know.”

“She isn’t your daughter,” I said flatly. “I knew her father very well. She looks like him and acts like him. She doesn’t have her mother’s blonde, willowy frame. She is dark and curvy, not that it should matter to you because she is no relation of yours.”

“I want a DNA test done.”

“Sutton already had testing done to ensure she was Hollingworth’s heir. There is no need for you to worry yourself.”

“Why did she do it?” Forrest leaned over the desk. “I want to know why that bitch left.”

“Sutton doesn’t know that. Her mother died years ago.”

“She took something from me, something important. I want to go through her things.”

My brows rose. This is the first time I had heard this angle. There was something very off about Forrest and the way he kept coming at me with things. I didn't trust him.

“Look, there is no reason for you to have anything to do with her. Everything that was left behind has been thrown out.”

Forrest screamed, spitting obscenities.

“I will find out where Judith put it.”

“I suggest you get a search warrant then.” I stood and walked to the door. “Because you aren't welcome.”

CHAPTER 16

Sutton

My fingers shook as I tried to dial Mark's number. I couldn't focus, couldn't even fathom the news that Knox just gave us.

"Sutton, are you there?"

It was Mark on the other end of the phone. I needed to tell him something. I looked up to see Candice staring back at me with worried eyes. Knox hadn't stayed long after stopping by; he just wanted me to know.

"Sutton?"

"Mark?" My voice was barely a whisper.

"You are scaring me, baby. What's wrong?"

"It's Max." I barely got his name out before choking on a sob.

"Mad Max? Fuck, what happened? Is he okay? Did something happen to Alice and Reena?"

"No, they are fine." I swallowed hard, but the tears came anyway. "Mark, Max is dead."

“What? What happened?”

I tried to piece together what Knox had said when he came over. Candice and I were talking about the baby and if I needed to find a doctor here in Otterville Falls when the doorbell rang.

Brian was the one to answer it, and he had a certain wariness about his tone when he called us down. I knew the moment I saw Knox’s face that something was wrong. He had asked me to sit down.

I tried to wrangle my thoughts as I spoke to Mark, “Alice called the station because Max hadn’t been back to their house in almost forty-eight hours. She was worried because he had never been gone that long before. Knox said that that they immediately started a search...”

I broke off, not able to finish the rest. Candice kindly took the phone from my shaking hand.

“Mark? This is Candice. They found his body out near Sutton’s old trailer. Yeah, sure, yeah, I will put her back on.”

She handed the phone back to me and Mark’s voice came through. “I love you, Sutton. You are safe. Brian is with you. Don’t leave the house and don’t let anyone in. The plane is about to leave L.A. and I will be there as soon as possible.”

I nodded. “Okay, I love you,” I said through a choked sob.

“Oh, baby,” he sighed. “I hate that you are so upset. Please don’t cry.”

“He’s dead because of me.” I voiced the thoughts that had been swirling around my head.

And heard Brian and Candice's shock, as well as Mark's on the phone.

“No, this is not because of you. Sutton, I have to get off the phone, we're taking off. You are safe, this isn't your fault. I love you!”

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“I love you, too,” I whispered, but in my heart, I knew he was wrong.

“Sutton, this is not your fault.” Brian came over and knelt in front of me. He had so many of the same features as Mark, it was a comfort to have him there.

The ringing of the doorbell wrenched through the air.

And for a moment, we all sat there in silence. It couldn't be Knox. He had left not fifteen minutes ago, and he said they had a lot to do.

The bell rang again, and Brian got up and walked over to the side table in the entryway and pulled out a small gun that I hadn't even known was there. He motioned for us to move out of sight and then he slowly opened the door.

“Natalie?” I heard Brian say in disbelief.

Just how in the hell did my almost brother-in-law know Natalie, the slut that was ruining my best friend's life?

“We need to talk, Brian.”

I walked out into her line of sight. “Come on in, Deputy. I am Sutton Landry. I believe you are already acquainted with Brian and Candice?”

The shapely blonde nodded. “Yes, Ma'am.”

She turned to Brian. “If this isn't a good time...?”

He put the gun back into the drawer and motioned for us all to go back into the living area. I noted that he locked the front door after he closed it. When we were all seated, Mark Brian turned to me.

“Sutton, this is Natalie Green. She is one of my operatives. I sent her down here to check things out before Mark asked me to come and stay with you. She is a retired sergeant in the US army and damn fine detective. I hope that you will understand why I didn’t share with you and Mark that I was sending her. I didn’t want her undercover status to be compromised, because I suspected that there might be foul play in the legal system.”

“Knox?” I was flabbergasted. “,.“Are you serious?”

Brian gave me a hard look. “You never know these days.”

“I don’t believe it,” Candice said softly. “Knox is an honest man. He might be oblivious as fuck, but he isn’t a crooked cop.”

Brian smiled at Candice and I once again was struck by how much he resembled his brother.

“You are a loyal individual. That says a lot about you, Candice. And no, Knox hasn’t done anything to warrant further concerns.”

Natalie nodded., “I have found nothing on the Sheriff. But I was supposed to meet with Max two nights ago at my place and he never showed. Instead, there were two men that did their damndest to break into my place. I didn’t want to take them both on by myself, so I called Knox just in case, but they took off before he arrived. I think they had something to do with Max’s death. That is why I came. Brian, I think it’s time to come clean to Knox.”

He nodded. "Of course, I figured as much. You are free to tell him the truth, and that he will need another deputy."

She laughed. "And that as well. I can serve in the place until he finds someone new, but it's not fair that I'm here under false pretenses."

I could feel Candice beside me, the confusion and anger rolling off of her.

Natalie looked up and caught her gaze. "I want to apologize to you. I needed to see what kind of a man Knox was. Part of that was seeing if he would flirt or cheat on his girlfriend. I wouldn't have done anything with him even if he had noticed my advances. But it wasn't fair to you. I am sorry."

Brian scowled. "I thought you weren't with Knox anymore?"

Candice looked at Brian and tried to smile. "I'm not."

"Because of me," Natalie finished. "Fucking hell, I really am sorry."

Candice shook her head. "It's between Knox and me, but..." She trailed off for a moment. "Thank you for telling me the truth. Sutton, I am going to get something to drink. Please excuse me."

Brian and Natalie watched her walk stiffly from the room.

I could see the contriteness in Natalie's face as she said. "I really fucked that up. I only flirted with him a little, that's all."

Brian shook his head dismissively. "You were doing the job that I sent you here to do. I needed to know his character and if he was a dirty cop. If their relationship was solid, it should never have affected it."

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I wasn't sure that I agreed, but I kept my mouth shut. I knew very little about detectives and undercover work.

Natalie got up to leave when I thought of something else. "You said that you were to meet Max at your place?"

Natalie nodded. "Yes, the night before last."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "He called me, said that he had found out something that might change the case. Apparently there wasn't a whole lot of love between Knox and Max, so he said he would rather speak with me."

I let out a small huff. "That is just like Max, to try so damn hard to do the right thing and still get it in the end."

My eyes filled with tears again. "I can't believe he's gone."

The doorbell rang again and this time both Natalie and Brian got their guns. I was sent to the kitchen with Candice and told to keep quiet. There was a long pause before a gun fired and Brian yelled out, "Fuck!"

I knew that I was supposed to stay back, but when I heard the shot, something came over me and I had to know if Brian was one more victim to add to my chain of deaths.

I raced into the foyer and saw Natalie bent over laughing along with a blonde woman standing in the doorway looking horrified. Brian was cursing and looking at the mantle, which now had a brand new bullet hole.

“What happened?”

Natalie smiled. “Brian shot your ghost.”

CHAPTER 17

Sutton

“You shot the Gray Lady?” I gasped, not sure why I was so horrified. I mean, she was dead.

Brian shook his head. “No, it was an officer. I reacted the moment I caught his uniform. It took me a moment to realize that it was sadly out of date,- something from another century.”

“And transparent,” Natalie added helpfully.

The woman on my doorstep looked terrified.

“I beg your pardon.” I stepped forward. “Are you Margaret?”

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She nodded. “Yes, but most people call me Maggie. Are you Sutton?”

I reached a hand out to welcome her inside. “I promise you, things are not always this crazy. Please come in.”

Natalie bade her goodbyes and Brian offered to take Maggie’s luggage to her room. When Candice and I sat down, I took a good look at the woman who, as far as I knew, was my only living family.

“I am so sorry for your loss,” I began softly, and then immediately regretted the words when her eyes filled with tears.

But she smiled tremulously. “Thank you. My father was a good man. He spent many years looking for Aunt Judith.”

“Did you know my mother?” I couldn’t help but ask.

Maggie shook her head. “No, I only know the story of why she left.”

“Could you share it with me?” I didn’t mean to come across as pleading, but there were so many missing holes in the puzzle that was my mother.

Maggie nodded... “My father said that Aunt Judith and Grandfather used to get into terrible fights. He said that his father had a nasty temper and would scream and yell all kinds of threats. But after he cooled down, he never meant them.

“I guess that when she started dating Forrest, Grandfather told her that she had to pick

between Forrest and her family. If she chose him, she would be dead to the Landry's. Of course, a young girl of eighteen wouldn't want to abide by this stricture and ran off with Forrest. Grandfather felt horrible about what he had done and tried to get into contact with her, but Forrest stopped every attempt.

"My father suspected that something wasn't right in the marriage when Judith didn't contact them; months had gone by and it wasn't like her. He tried to reach Forrest and was told that Aunt Judith had disowned her family and wanted nothing to do with them.

"The next time he tried to contact her, she was gone. Forrest accused our family of hiding her but realized rather quickly by the alarm in Justin and Grandfather that they had nothing to do with her disappearance."

I closed my eyes, little things from the past popping up. When I was very young, my mother used to sing songs to me in French. I had forgotten about that until this moment. What young girl growing up in rural farmland learns to be fluent in French?

And later when she was drugged out of her mind she would talk about the amazing places that she had seen and wanted to take me with her. I had shoved off the notion that it could be real.

"Do the Landrys speak French?" I asked in a hesitant voice.

"My father and Aunt Judith did; their mother, Lauren, was French. She passed when they were teenagers, but my father sang me some of the songs when I was a child."

Tears sprang to my eyes. "My mother used to sing them to me."

My hand slipped around my waist to cuddle the little one resting inside. I didn't know if I could remember the words to the songs, but maybe with Maggie's help I could

pass this little piece of my mother and grandmother onto my child.

“How did your father find out she was in Otterville Falls?” Candice asked. “After all of those years, how did the trail bring him here?”

Maggie sighed. “That is the strangest bit of all. My father had given up on finding his sister. I know that sounds terrible, but there had been more than twenty years of fruitless searching. My mother had just been diagnosed with stage 4 melanoma, and when they did the surgery, they found it had spread throughout her body. I think when mom died, the hopes of finding his sister died with her. Dad just seemed to exist but not really participate in life, if that makes any sense at all.

“And then one day he was calling me at school. Dad was so excited that someone had information about Judith. He needed to go to a place called Otterville Falls and there he would find her.”

“And you have no idea who called him or how he got the number?” Candice asked.

Maggie bit her lip, trying to think. “I wish I did. I got the impression that it was a man; dad, Dad said that he was going to meet with someone. And then the next thing I knew, Sheriff Bridges was calling...”

She trailed off as a tear escaped her luminous eyes.

“Fuck,” I muttered. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Maggie shook her head. “No, it isn’t you. Honestly, I think my dad would be glad to know that we finally were able to meet. He adored Judith and hated the rift that Grandfather had put between the family.”

“I am thankful you traveled down here, Maggie, and agreed to stay for a while so that

we could get to know each other. I hope that it isn't disturbing your studies too much."

Maggie flushed and averted her eyes. "I haven't been doing very well in school. The stress of it all, plus Dad's passing, it was just too much. I was able to withdraw from my classes this term and have taken a short leave of absence."

I felt a surge of sympathy for my cousin. She was only a few years younger than me, and it seemed that she, too, knew a great deal about loss. Candice was still moping about Knox and Natalie, and I felt like shit about Max. It seemed that the only thing to do was to pull out the blender.

Granted, my drinks would be virgin ones and not nearly as fun, but at least we could drown our troubles in empty calories and they could have the alcohol.

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The sound of the blender brought Brian down the stairs. I immediately noticed the way that he was looking at Maggie. It wasn't the same brotherly way he looked at me or Candice. I was torn between thinking that he might like her or that he might be distrustful of her.

Knowing Brian, it was most likely a combination of the two.

"Is there to be a party?" he asked in that gravel tone that reminded me so much of Mark.

Candice smiled up at him., "You want in?"

Brian smirked a little as he sat down at the bar next to Maggie. "Hell yeah I do. And none of that shit Sutton is drinking. Give me the good stuff."

Several blends later, my guests were flying high and feeling fine. I smiled at their antics when Candice decided that balancing things on their faces was a good idea. And then Brian insisted on balancing Candice and picked her up clean off the floor, hoisting her over his head.

We all laughed until I nearly peed myself. It was nice to laugh; it had been a while. Maggie seemed to blend in perfectly with the dynamics of the group. She too decided she was going to balance Candice above her head. The only issue with this is that Candice probably outweighed Maggie by fifteen pounds. There wasn't much to my cousin.

No matter how hard she tried, Maggie couldn't lift Candice off the ground.

I heard the garage door go up and raced to the door. The moment that Mark opened it, I flung myself in his arms. It didn't make sense, but all of the emotion and turmoil came bubbling up, and soon I was sobbing and he was carrying me through the kitchen. We went past our drunken guests that looked surprisingly sober at that moment, up the stairs, and into our room.

"It's okay," he murmured to me as he settled into the chaise lounge with me in his lap.

He rubbed my back and held me close. It was what I'd needed all day long, and he was there. I told him about Maggie and her father Justin. I told him about Max and how I should have visited him more and how guilty I felt.

I felt so fucking guilty about everything but it seemed that every word, every breath that I released when speaking with Mark, let a little more slip away.

He continued to hold me when I told him about Brian and how strange he had been with Maggie at first. I told him about Natalie and how she really worked for Brian and they thought Knox might be a dirty cop. When I finally had purged it all, he held me.

"I love you, Sutton. Nothing bad is going to touch you or our baby. I promise you that."

I leaned into him and felt the exhaustion of the day start to kick in. The next thing I knew, Mark was carrying me over to our bed and helping me out of my clothes. He pulled me against his broad chest and finally I slept.

CHAPTER 18

Mark

“Absolutely not!” I felt outrage laced with fear creep up the back of my neck. “I refuse to let Sutton be bait for a madman.”

We were sitting in a conference room down at the police station. There was Candice on the other side of Sutton, Maggie, Brian, Natalie, Knox, and then myself.

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“Forrest is unstable,” I continued. “He wants something that he believes belongs to him. And I have no doubt in my mind that he wouldn’t hesitate to kill for it.”

“Forrest can’t be the killer. He was in L.A .when we found Max,” Knox stated calmly. “I know that it doesn’t mean he isn’t behind the deaths, but he’s not the one pulling the trigger.”

“I still refuse to let Sutton be in danger,” I said adamantly.

“But she wouldn’t be,” Natalie argued. “I would wear a wig and pretend to be Sutton while Brian pretended to be you. From a distance we could pull it off. We would put it out there that you were looking for whatever was left behind by Judith at the trailer. I can’t imagine more than three or four nights without a hit.”

Brian nodded. “If not sooner.”

“And I am supposed to risk my brother?” I shook my head. “No, it’s too dangerous.”

Natalie smiled. “With all due respect, Mr. Williams, this is what your brother does for a living. I doubt that anything this perp throws at us will be something we haven’t seen before.”

Knox was clearly agitated with Natalie and didn’t seem to want to agree with her.

Brian leaned forward. “Mark, I want to do what is best for Sutton. I feel that flushing out the killer would be in the best interest of everyone, instead of waiting around like sitting ducks.”

When he put it that way, it seemed like I was being a hysterical idiot.

Sutton placed a hand on my arm and I immediately felt better. I clasped her hand in mine.

“What about the funeral tomorrow? Is she safe to go?”

Sutton stiffened. “I won’t miss the funeral. Don’t ask me to.”

If I had my way we would be back in N.Y. and away from all of this insanity. But I knew that this was something she needed to get to the bottom of.

“No one will attack at the church in broad daylight,” Knox responded.

Candice spoke up. “Father Montgomery is allowing Max to have a church service? That doesn’t sound like him at all.”

Knox looked at her with enough heat to start a bonfire. “I don’t know, they seemed to be rather close these past few months. Perhaps Max repented of his sins and made a clean confession of it all?”

Sutton snorted. “That doesn’t sound like Max. And Alice and Reena would have said something if hell had frozen over. By the way, they still aren’t answering my calls. Are you sure they are okay?”

Knox sighed. It was a weary sound that should have come from a much older man.

“They are upset, understandably so. It’s been a hard road for everyone.”

I hated the pinched look on Sutton’s face because I knew that she was taking that to mean it was her fault. But it wasn’t; she had nothing to do with Max’s involvement

with her mother nor with anyone else's choices.

"Are we agreed to set the trap at the trailer?" Brian brought the meeting back around.

Sutton nodded. Then Candice, Natalie, and fucking Knox. With a growl I agreed, but it wasn't freely given, not by a long shot.

"We'll plan on going there tomorrow night after the funeral. Sutton, I need you to drop hints tomorrow during the funeral that you heard Max was looking for something of your mother's."

I bristled. "I thought she wasn't to be involved."

"Mark." Sutton's sexy voice wound its way around me and had my cock jerking in my jeans. "You will be right next to me. Nothing can happen when you are there."

And I felt like a damn king. I don't know how she did it, but fuck, the woman had me wrapped so tightly around her heart that I didn't know where she ended and I began.

"Fine," I bit off. "But you don't leave my side for a second."

She leaned her head against my arm and I smelled the sweet scent of her shampoo. Suddenly my jeans were tight and I had to reach down and adjust myself.

Brian smirked at me and I had a tiny glimpse of what it would have been like had I grown up with a little brother in the house. We most likely would have fought like cats and dogs but we would have had each other's backs, instead of us both growing up alone. My fucking father once again doing his damn near best to screw up the lives of those around him.

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Shaking off those thoughts, I helped Sutton to her feet and we left the Sheriff's office. From there she insisted on stopping at Alice and Reena's place.

I had no idea the two women were so attached to Max. He was a crusty son-of-a-bitch that never did impress me. But they sobbed and carried on like they had lost the greatest saint to ever walk the earth. Do people always have to be dead in order to appreciate them? They did the same thing when Gabe passed. I just didn't get it.

By the time I got Sutton out of there and headed back to the house, we were able to meet Candice, who had stopped by Abberly's and picked up some dinner. I had to admit that Martha was a damn fine cook.

We placed the dishes in the sink and spent the next few hours watching television until I noticed that Sutton was nodding off. Brian still wasn't home yet, so Candice opted to stay up for him, but I took Sutton upstairs to bed.

The moment I set her down, she wrapped her arms around my neck and tried pulling me on top of her.

"You are going to smash the baby." I rolled to the side and pulled her with me.

Sutton laughed, the sound so fucking sexy that my cock hardened with record speed.

"It's not funny." I nipped at her bottom lip, while kneading her round ass in my large hands.

She moaned softly,. "You aren't going to smash the baby, Mark."

“I am taking care of my family, woman, don’t get involved.”

Her eyes danced with mirth. “Do you honestly think that caveman shit is going to work with me?”

I yanked her wrists above her head, holding them with one hand and then answered her with one word.

“Yes.”

I released her hands for just a moment while I divested her of her shirt and bra. I was just as quick with her jeans, loving that these pregnancy pants slid on and off with ease. She called them ‘mom jeans’ or something and complained about how unsexy they were.

“I think I am in love with your preggo-pants,” I murmured.

Sutton barked out a laugh. “You might be the only person in existence that likes them.”

“Loves them,” I corrected. “How could I not love pants that come off in seconds? And if you are wearing them, they are sexy as fuck.”

Her eyes darkened, and then widened when I grabbed her hands and yanked them once again above her head. But this time I used a soft cloth to tie them together.

“Can you keep them above your head, or do I need to attach that to the headboard?”

Sutton blinked, those dark eyes begging me for all the naughty things that I wanted to do to her.

“I can keep them there,” she rasped.

I grabbed her legs and parted her thighs impossibly wide. “Are you good?”

Sutton’s breathing had increased but she held my gaze. “Perfect.”

I looked at her pretty pink pussy, wet and plump with need and desire. I saw the way her full breasts seemed to elongate their tips just so they could reach out and touch me.

She had goosebumps on her flesh and the heady smell of her arousal was in the air. Her black hair was strewn across our linens and the tender curve of her baby bump had my dick throbbing. Never in my life had I ever seen anything so fucking amazing.

I could hardly breathe. “Sutton, fuck, Sutton.”

She smiled. It was slow and sensuous as it slid into place. Her eyes narrowed and she opened her thighs even wider in invitation.

I wanted to take a picture of her to savor this moment for the rest of my life. I knew that I would be using this for fodder when she wasn’t around. My dick was painful in my pants. It wanted inside of her, the sooner the better.

But I wanted to make this good for her. Sutton was my life and I needed to make sure she realized it. I started kissing along the edge of her foot and she laughed, because my Sutton is horribly ticklish. She squealed and moved her legs away.

I grabbed one slim ankle and shrugged. “Looks like we are going to need more ties.”

CHAPTER 19

Sutton

Mark ran a finger down the arch of my foot and I flinched, trying not to giggle, but as they say, resistance is futile. He knew how ticklish I was and was taking advantage. Seeing as how he had tied each ankle to opposite bedposts, I was helpless to do anything about his wandering hands.

With a raised brow he went into the closet for a moment and came back with a bottle of something and a large pink vibrator.

I gasped. “What are you going to do with that?”

Mark turned those sexy silver eyes on me and I felt my pussy throb. Nevermind, I didn’t care what he did with it as long as it was to me.

Mark poured some of the oil in his hands. It smelled nice, like lavender and something deeper. When his hands cupped my calves and began massaging, my eyes rolled back in my head. It felt so good. I had no idea how tense I had become. I moaned as he worked at the tight muscles, easing the ache, and then moving on to my foot.

I didn’t laugh as he used a firm hand to knead out the knots and smooth the oil evenly over my skin. He moved on to the other calf and foot, and the sounds that I made were borderline pornographic. I had no idea how much I needed this.

Mark moved up to my thighs, the sides of his hand barely brushing my pussy before moving away and continuing their ministrations. It felt so incredible. I can hardly describe the feeling other than heavenly. My body ached and my arousal soared.

“More,” I pleaded, but Mark was on his own timetable. He made sure every inch of my body was rubbed down, everything but my breasts and pussy. By the time he finished, I was panting and the strain behind his pants looked painful.

“Let me take care of that.” I licked my lips and stared at the bulge.

“Fuck, Sutton,” he rasped and began to take his jeans off. By the time he stood there without anything left on his body, I was more than ready to take him in my mouth.

The salty tip of his dick traced my lips and then he moved inside, careful not to push me too far. I loved the feel and taste of him, the look of lust and possession on his face as he stared intently at my mouth. I sucked him back as far as I could, choking a little at his length, but wanting to have as much of him inside of me as possible.

Hollowing out my cheeks, I took long pulls where his cock hit the back of my throat and he groaned low and loud. I could sense that he was getting close. His eyes were hooded and his jaw clenched when he pulled out of my mouth.

A trail of saliva hung between his dick and my lips. He reached down to brush it away before kissing me, the taste of his tongue sweet and dark. He tasted like sex, cherries, and Mark.

He moved down to my tender breasts and pinched one peak while flicking the other with his tongue. My hips bucked and I moaned as he played with me. I was helpless to his ministrations and I loved every minute of it.

Mark sucked hard on my nipple, causing me to cry out as a flood of liquid coated my

thighs. I was so wet that I could feel my juices dribbling down the crack of my ass. I would have been embarrassed, but Mark loved me like this.

He kissed and licked my breasts until I was certain I couldn't stand another moment. And then he slowly made his way south.

“You smell amazing,” he rasped, taking a deep breath. “But you taste even better.”

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I couldn't help the groan of satisfaction when the flat of his tongue licked my folds. And then with his thumbs, he separated me further until he could see every inch of my pussy. And he kissed me.

I was writhing with need, screaming his name, loving the feel of his whiskers against my inner thighs. Mark made love to me with his tongue, kissing me, loving me, and licking until I was helpless, literally shaking with need.

I came with a rush, my hips trying to hump his tongue. The orgasm seemed to rip through my body and I felt my nipples harden to a point that I hadn't ever remembered before. An instant later a thick vibrator was at my core.

He didn't need lube but had somehow added it anyway, and the next thing I knew he was easing it inside of me. I gasped at the invasion; it was unexpected but not unwelcome.

Mark turned it on and I immediately felt my arousal skyrocket. I had just come, but somehow another release was barrelling toward me. I tried to hold out, but it was too much with him thrusting possessively in and out of me and the vibrations driving me wild.

I came again, this time jerking forward, having a hard time finding my breath. My arms strained against the cloth and I moaned at the sensation.

"Are you alright?" he asked as he tenderly kissed my forehead.

I nodded. "So good, so fucking good. But I need you."

Mark smiled. "I'm not done yet."

I frowned. "I don't know how many more I have in me."

He smiled and held up a small silver plug that I hadn't noticed before.

"Is that a butt plug?" I squeaked.

Mark laughed. ". "Yes it is."

"For me?"

He laughed louder. "Again, yes."

I wasn't sure what I thought about that. My pussy was still throbbing. The vibrator was still inside of it, only on a low setting. Mark picked up the lube and coated the silver object. Then, very carefully, he pressed it against my ass.

I expected it to hurt. In many of the romance novels I read, the girls made it sound horribly painful. Maybe it was that way if you started with a dick, but the plug didn't hurt., I only felt full. My pussy began that slow build and Mark took the vibrator and pulled it out before thrusting it back in again. Slow and steady, over and over.

"I need you!"

Sweat coated my body. I felt out of control with need and desire. And my ass felt full with the plug inside of it. Mark pulled the vibrator out and stroked his cock a few times before climbing up between my thighs and tracing my pussy with the tip of his dick.

I moaned. "Mark, please."

He smiled and then slammed his length inside of me. I gasped at the sensation. It felt fucking incredible to have him inside of me with that plug. I was so full, so needy. I rocked my hips up, needing him to move, to fuck me harder, faster.

“Fuck, Sutton, you are so tight,” he ground out. “I love your pussy, your tits, everything about you. Fuck, I love being inside of you, baby.”

He thrust into me again and again, over and over, as the sounds of sex filled the room. I was so wet that you could hear the squelching as our skin slapped together. I was half mortified and half so turned on that I thought I would explode.

He leaned down and pinched one of my nipples before picking up my hips as far as the restraints would allow and fucking me at his will.

Colors swam in front of my eyes. I could feel the release growing, throbbing. It was in the base of my spine, the heaviness of my breasts, and the pit of my stomach. My pussy sucked at his dick hungrily as he slammed into me. I clenched my vaginal walls and we both shuddered at the new intense pleasure.

The next thing I knew he was grabbing the discarded vibrator, and while continuing to thrust his cock into my channel, he placed the tip of the pink dildo on my clit and turned the vibration on.

I bit down so hard I tasted the coppery metal of blood.

Never had I come so fast or so hard, my body convulsing, thrashing and crashing as wave after glorious wave rocketed through me. Mark came hard, his cock filling me with heat as he unloaded. He couldn't have lasted through my release. I came so hard that I had forced his own.

He slumped over me and yet still managed to prop an elbow on one side. I knew that

he was protecting Junior, and it only made me love him all the more.

“Please untie me,” I said hoarsely.

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Mark startled and then flushed. “Of course!”

He undid the soft cloth and frowned at the redness on my skin. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

I cupped his face in mine. “You could never hurt me. I loved every minute of that.”

Mark’s gaze caught mine. “I didn’t scare you?”

I laughed. “If you want to scare me with a massage and three mind-blowing orgasms every day, I think I might learn to live with it.”

A crooked smile crossed his face. “That is good to know.”

I went to get up and he caught my wrist. “Where are you going?”

I smiled at him. “I need a shower. I am covered in oil and sweat.”

Mark’s face grew pensive. “And you are going to our bathroom?”

My lips threatened to split into a smile. “I had planned on it.”

“But what about...you know who?” he ended in a whisper.

I leaned down and kissed his lips.

“I am not afraid of a ghost, Mark. She’s not going to harm me.”

“How do you know?” he countered.

I frowned and thought about it. Finally I answered truthfully. “I don’t know. But I would bet my life on it.”

CHAPTER 20

Sutton

Alice and Reena sat in the front pew while Mark and I opted to sit in the one behind them. Father Montgomery, for once in his life, hadn’t said anything nasty to me. I wondered how much of that was because I had Mark on one side and Brian on the other.

Candice sat next to Brian and I noticed that they had developed a bit of a friendship. It seemed purely platonic, but Knox didn’t know that. The glare that he was sending our way was almost tangible.

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Next to him was Natalie, in a particularly tight dress that showed a lot of cleavage. Candice did everything in her power not to look in her direction. I knew that she wasn't over Knox and wasn't sure she ever would be.

Maggie had opted to stay at the house, seeing as how she had never met Max. I didn't blame her. I hated funerals myself and it seemed like we had been to way too many recently.

Alice's shoulders shook as she quietly sobbed, and I saw Martha reach over and take her hand. Earl and Martha were right next to Alice and Reena. It seemed that I had everyone who was important to me surrounding us, and it made it just a little bit better.

I hoped that Max was at peace and that he and my mother were finally able to clear the air. It got me wondering about how the reunion with my mother and father might have been. I had never been a religious person, seeing as how the local minister hated me. So the thought of life after death hadn't been one that I contemplated often.

But as I sat there, burying another one of the people who had been a staple in my life, I had to think that there was something more.

The baby kicked and my hand automatically came up to cover it. Without creating too much of a scene I took Mark's large hand and placed it over the bump hoping that the baby would kick again.

I loved the way his eyes lit up when a confident kick came through. It was just another testament that life kept going no matter what stage you were in.

Mama had said once that grief doesn't ever get easier, only more familiar. I didn't understand what she meant at the time, but as I have grown older her words have proven to be truer than I should have liked.

I grieved the mother that I should have had. There is a part of me that was still angry that she chose the drugs and alcohol to ease her pain. It didn't make sense to blame a dead woman or to hold any harsh feelings. I loved my mama, even in her imperfections.

But as I felt my baby move, I wondered how she could have allowed the things that happened to me to occur.

There was more than one occasion where she would be passed out, either drunk or high, and her client would come looking for me. I learned the best places to hide in the trailer. I learned that crying didn't solve anything, and that sometimes the world really is a bad place.

I don't know why all these feelings were coming up at Max's funeral. I knew that he slept with my mother on more than one occasion. I wondered if money was ever passed between them. If Martha and Earl had hired Max to protect us, where did they get the money? Was sex the payment that had been expected, or was I making things out to be so much worse than they already were?

I still didn't know what to think of Max. I blamed him for sending my natural father away. But had Hollingsworth even the slightest clue what kind of a mess he had entered into? Would he have accepted us had he known my mother was a married woman?

Suddenly, I felt tired. The pressures and stresses of the occasion were weighing heavily on me. The next thing I knew, we were filing out to the churchyard for the graveside service and I hadn't heard one word that was spoken.

Guilt pricked at me, but still I couldn't focus on what was happening. I saw the people around us. Most of the town had shown up to pay their last respects. It seemed that nothing drew a community closer than weddings and funerals. When was the last time Otterville Falls had a good wedding?

We were way over the quota on funerals, that was for certain.

After the last prayer was said, many of the town came up to say a kind word to me. They knew that Max had been pseudo-family to me—goodness, he had protected me against at least half of their nasty comments over the years.

I wondered when it was that everything from the past was washed away. Was it when I inherited all of that money? Were they kind to me because of that, or would it have happened anyway? Had the tragedies that plagued us since Gabe's death been the deciding factor? I just didn't know.

It was surprising to me how many asked what our plans would be. It wasn't awkward at all to plant the story that we would be returning to the trailer to look for a hidden item that Max had mentioned to me offhand. I said that it was likely something of an heirloom. It had to be small because I hadn't uncovered it since Mama's passing.

Several of the ladies went off fluttering about how exciting it would be if there was a lost treasure. I wasn't sure if they remembered the trailer that I grew up in, but I could damn well guarantee that there wasn't a lost treasure there.

However, there could be a document or even a key that I had missed. Honestly, I didn't look that closely through Mama's things. We never had anything of value—ever.

The plan was for Brian and Natalie to head there in our rental car after the funeral. Natalie would take my jacket and wear a dark-haired wig with large sunglasses.

I wore my hair down so that it would look like the wig.

The only hitch was that we had to lay low while they were at the trailer. It was decided that we would stay with Martha and Earl until dark and then we would go back to the new house.

I can say without a doubt that I had never been so happy to see darkness fall. Martha and Earl could not have been kinder hosts, but I was exhausted, emotionally and physically.

Mark and I snuck out of the house and into Brian's rental. From there we went straight to the Baker Mansion and didn't leave the car until the garage was shut.

"Do you think anyone saw us?" I asked Mark as we walked into the house.

All of the blinds had been closed and it was strangely quiet.

Mark shook his head. "No, I think we are safe. Where is Maggie?"

I shrugged. "I will check the living room."

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Five minutes later, we had looked through every room in the house. Her car was still out front but Maggie was gone. I had a terrible feeling in the pit of my stomach as Mark called Knox to report her absence.

He cursed and said he would be over in a few minutes with Candice. I briefly wondered how their afternoon together had gone. I couldn't help but imagine it being rather awkward.

I sat next to Mark on the sofa and curled into him. "What if something terrible happens to Maggie?"

His arm tightened around me. "You can't think like that. I have a feeling that if they wanted to kill her, they would have. Look, nobody else has been taken. They were all killed outright."

I wasn't sure if I felt better about this, but I nodded. "You are right. Were you able to speak with Brian and Natalie?"

"For a few minutes," he said into my hair. "Brian said it's been quiet in the trailer and they haven't found anything that looks unusual."

I blew out a breath. "I hope we are making the right decisions about all of this."

Mark's phone rang and he pulled it out of his pocket and answered it.

"Hey, Brian."

I was close enough that I heard Brian's voice. "We have a ransom note. Natalie and I are on our way over."

And then he hung up the phone.

CHAPTER 21

Sutton

Bring \$3 million dollars and the files that Judith Coswell stole from her husband to the Wickshire Cemetary at midnight Saturday if you want to see Margaret again.

The words stared me in the face as I re-read a copy of the ransom note over and over again.

"And you have no idea whose handwriting it could be?" Mark asked Knox, who had brought Candice over when they received the news.

"We are sending it to forensics now, but my gut feeling is that it's a woman's hand. Most likely they had Margaret write it. I hate to cast aspirations, but we don't know Margaret Landry very well. Is there any way that she could be in on the scam?"

This drew my head up to Knox, who had spoken.

Could Maggie be in on it? The thought made me feel ill considering I had invited her into our home and she had a key to our house.

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“I don’t see it,” Candice spoke up. “I know that you never really know someone. But she seems to be what she says she is. I know that she was feeling real grief over the passing of her father. I can’t imagine that she would be a part of his death.”

“She is a law student who recently started doing very poorly in school,” Brian added. “She claims that this has to do with her father’s passing, which is typical. She also mentioned that her family had once been very affluent. But through checks I have determined I found that the Landrys don’t have any more than the Coswells did. Apparently, the recession took a beating out of both fortunes. She has a tremendous amount of debt.”

“And that gives us a motive,” Knox said softly.

“You knew all of this and still encouraged Sutton to invite her to Otterville Falls?” Mark’s jaw was tight as he glared at Brian and Knox.

Brian raised his hands. “Everything is circumstantial. There is nothing concrete saying that she isn’t who she says she is. We could be grasping at straws.”

“It doesn’t look good that there is no sign of a break in here or even a tussle. Did she just open the door and allow them to take her?” Natalie added.

Brian nodded. “My thoughts precisely. Something doesn’t seem right about this kidnapping.”

“I just don’t see it.” I sighed. “And what if you are wrong and she is being held captive?”

“It’s something that needs to be considered.” Knox rubbed his hand across his jaw, scratching his whiskers. “The real question is, are we going to meet the demands or not?”

“We can’t,” I blurted out. “I have no idea what they are talking about. I have never seen a file or business information that my mother kept. If she did steal something, why wouldn’t she have sold it to feed us? There were plenty of times we were desperate for something to eat. Or if we are being completely honest, she most likely traded it for drugs.”

Brian shrugged his shoulders. “For all we know, she didn’t take it, but maybe she did. We don’t know if it’s digital files or hard copies. We don’t know if she has a secret security box somewhere. But I think we need to search that trailer top to bottom until we find out once and for all if it’s there.”

I frowned. “I thought that is what you were doing?”

Natalie shook her head. “No, what Brian is suggesting is that we take the place apart, look for something that could have been hidden behind a wall or buried beneath the floorboards. If it’s that important, it wouldn’t be in a common place.”

“You want to take the trailer apart?” My voice sounded small.

Mark’s hand slipped into mine, but I hardly noticed it. It shouldn’t have bothered me; it wasn’t like we were going to live there or even that there was anything of value there. But the thought of taking it apart made my stomach churn and my head spin.

“We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to,” Mark said with resolve and then glared at the group as if begging them to refute him.

I think that was what finally broke down my resistance. Mark would protect me from

any hurt. But sometimes we have to tear down the past to rebuild the future.

I nodded shakily. “Okay, let’s do that. Do we have enough time between today and Saturday at midnight?”

Brian’s eyes held compassion in them as he responded. “It’s Tuesday. If we work hard we should be able to get through everything. What do you want to be done with the items?”

I didn’t need to cart them around with me, but I hated to let them go.

“We can open it up to the town, like a yard or garage sale,” Candice suggested, “only everything will be free. The rest can go to a thrift shop unless Sutton wants to hold on to it.”

I accepted the suggestion gratefully. “I would like to try that. There is plenty of property out there. We can set things on the grass and put a notice in the paper.”

Knox nodded. “I think it’s a fine idea. You might want to check with Alice and Reena. They might enjoy something like this, help take their minds off of Max’s passing.”

Ideas starting forming in my head. “We could ask Martha to have baked goods, coffee, and cold drinks. That would help her and make it homier.”

“This isn’t the fair,” Brian grumbled.

But instead of Brian’s words making me feel bad, I laughed. “You don’t know small towns, Brian. Everything we do is an event.”

It was decided that we would have everything ready by Friday morning. An ad was

placed in the paper in Otterville and the two closest cities. Martha was more than happy to provide the food and she was even able to get Alice and Reena to help with the preparation.

Long tables were borrowed from the school so that items could be laid out. Of course there weren't any prices because it was all free for the taking. But I found myself walking up and down the aisles touching items from my past.

I was surprised at the toys and baby outfits that my mother had kept. I hadn't known she had a thimble collection tucked away. The old sofa and dining table were set out along with the fridge and washer and dryer.

The people in Otterville Falls that we expected to come weren't the ones from the right side of the track. The trailer court that we lived off of had many families that were struggling to get by. I wasn't surprised when they were the first to come through.

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The woman who took the old washer and dryer cried when Mark and Brian offered to set it up for her. I was so proud of Mark and only giggled a little at the fact he wouldn't have the slightest idea how to set up such a thing.

I doubted he had ever used one in his life. Brian, however, not being raised with the silver spoon, I had full faith in.

By midday most of the items had been collected, even the old sofa. The guys were tired from all the heavy lifting and I was a little sunburned despite my efforts otherwise. I had expected to feel desolate after letting Mama's things go. But actually, it was the opposite. I felt lighter than I had in months. As we loaded up the remainder of the things to go to a thrift store, I looked back to where my trailer had been. So many memories, and now it was just a pile of old sheet metal, ripped up floorboards—junk.

“Are you ready to go?” Mark asked, slipping a hand around my waist.

“Thank you.” I lifted my face to kiss him, And then turned to Candice, Brian, Natalie, and Knox.

“You didn't have to spend your day here. I appreciate the support and love that you have shown me.”

Mark's arm tightened. “We both do.”

It was nice to be a ‘we.’ I thanked God every day for bringing this man into my life.

Just as we were about to get into the car, I saw the old stump that resided in the weeds that should have been a backyard to the trailer. I had a vague memory of my Mama and me burying a time capsule that I wasn't supposed to open until I was eighteen.

It had been such a fun day. I drew some pictures and cut out things from an old magazine of what I wanted for the future.

“Wait, I want to get one more thing,” I said, turning to Mark. “Do you have a shovel?”

He blinked. “I am sure we can get one.”

It was less than forty-five minutes later that the shovel hit the metal box. Mark turned and grinned at me, his white teeth glowing against his tanned skin. Once he was able to free the dirt around it, he pulled it out.

“There is a lock on it,” Mark observed.

“Just a second.” Knox went over to his car and grabbed a large tool. With a squeeze of his wrists, the lock was snapped off.

I bent down and opened the box. But the treasures that I had made and cut out of the magazines weren't there. In its place were some very official looking documents.

CHAPTER 22

Mark

“And then this man came up to the house and Reena asked him if he was lost because he kind of looked confused...”

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Reena shook her head. “No, Alice, you are messing the story up. I asked if he was lost because he walked up and down the drive three times. I didn’t know if he was trying to read the house number, because it’s hard to read with the ivy growing over it.”

Alice rolled her eyes. “Okay, so Reena thought the man was illiterate.”

“That’s not what I said,” Reena interrupted again. “Look, Alice and I were sitting in the front room getting ready for Jeopardy! like we always do when she saw a man out front. We both watched him walk up and down the drive a few times. So I stepped out on the porch...”

“And I grabbed the gun!” Alice added.

Reena nodded. “Yes, Alice grabbed the gun and I asked the man if he was lost. He startled a little at my voice. I guess he wasn’t expecting us to approach him. Then he asked if we knew where y’all lived.”

“Exceptin’ he didn’t sound like anyone from Otterville Falls. He had to be from somewhere out west, I would imagine.” Alice’s brows knit together. “He didn’t sound anything like Mark or Brian.”

“Anyhow,” Reena took the story back, “we said that Sheriff Bridges would be the best one to ask for directions because he knew everybody.”

“That was really smart of you, Reena.” Alice patted her plump friend’s arm.

Reena beamed. “Well, it was just so excitin’. And then he said that he was willing to pay, and we said there was no reason to give money for something the Sheriff would hand out for free.”

Alice jumped in again. “The man nodded like that made sense to him, tipped his hat, and left.”

I felt dread in the pit of my stomach. “And did you tell Knox about the man?”

They nodded.

“Yes, Mark. We, we told him first, but then we wanted to come here and tell you and Sutton because maybe he might ask someone else that would just show him your way. Not everyone has a criminal deductive mind like Alice and me.”

Alice’s eyes sparkled. “Indeed, that is just what we have.”

I ran a hand through my short hair, knowing that it most likely was standing on end. Sutton had been exhausted from the sale and was currently sleeping.

“Do you mind telling my brother the story you told me?”

The ladies’ cheeks pinked.

“That handsome man? Goodness, me, I should be delighted!” Alice tittered.

A part of me felt bad about letting them loose on Brian, but the larger, more sadistic part hoped that they laid it on thick.

I texted Brian that I had some more information. He wasn’t far from the house, and within twenty minutes, the whole story had been told again.

Brian looked at me. “I am going to bring some more guys to monitor the house from the outside. Ladies, you should never open the door to a stranger.”

I almost smiled at their looks of outrage.

“I will have you know, sonny, that I know a thing or two about people.” Reena’s chins were wobbling. “And this man, he wasn’t a threat to us.”

“Any stranger is a threat,” Brian went on, undeterred. “We already have one girl missing and Max is dead. For all we know, the man that you spoke with could be behind all of this.”

They paled.

“You think we were talking to a murderer?” Alice barely got out.

It was impressive the way Brian had been able to get his point across to the ladies so quickly. My brother was good at his job, and I felt a surge of pride knowing that he was watching out for us.

“Ladies, are you arming the security system that I put in at your house?”

They looked back at me guiltily.

“It’s just that it’s a bit complicated. And then if we step outside for a moment, the damn thing goes off and wakes half the block.”

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I sighed. “Alice, why are you stepping outside in the middle of the night?”

She blushed and looked away. Reena, however, had no problem outing Alice.

“She smokes when she doesn’t think anyone is looking.”

Alice’s eyes grew wide. “How did you know that?”

Reena rolled her eyes. “I’ve lived with you for over thirty years. Don’t you think I would have figured it out?”

Brian lifted an impatient hand. “It doesn’t matter.”

Reena’s eyes narrowed. “Like hell it doesn’t matter. Cigarette smoke will kill you, and I don’t want to be in the market for a new roommate. It was hard enough to lose Max.”

And then they were crying, Lord have mercy.

Alice sobbed. “I am sorry, Reena, you are right.”

Reena blubbered, “I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

Brian looked at me with incredulous eyes. Sometimes I forgot that he wasn’t used to the Otterville Falls crowd. And then it struck me that I was used to them. The drama, the petty fights, the fierce loyalty—it didn’t phase me anymore. What was even more terrifying was that I was beginning to really care about these people.

Sutton Enterprises still took up a large part of my day. Working remotely and doing video conferences had become like second nature to me.

Was I becoming...countrified?

“Look, if you are not going to use the system, then I will have a guard in place.” Brian was ignoring the sob fest.

I reached over and handed them a box of tissues. “We are very grateful that you came to us with the information. Can you tell us what the man looked like?”

This seemed to help bring them back to the present.

“It was a man,” Alice said. And Reena nodded her head.

“Yes, definitely a man.”

I could hear Brian’s jaw clenching.

“What did he have on?” I encouraged.

“Oh!” Reena’s eyes brightened. “He was wearing blue jeans and a baseball cap.”

“I think it was a ball team of some kind,” Alice added. “It was black with orange letters?”

“Giants,” Brain added. “Could they have been an S and F intertwined?”

“I think that was exactly it!” Alice sighed. “And then there was the scruffy beard. Couldn’t really see much of his face.”

“How much beard are we talking?” Brian used his hands to show length.

“Um, not quite Unabomber but distinctly past ten o’clock shadow,” Reena added helpfully.

I snorted, not sure where these girls got their imaginations from.

“You have given us a lot to go off of.” Brian got up and we all followed. “I would like to escort you home to make sure you get there safely.”

You would think the man had asked them to prom. The girls giggled and flirted themselves silly all the way out the door. I was just turning back to the documents when Candice walked in.

“How is she?” I asked.

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Candice smiled. “Still sleeping, I just checked in with her. I also have compiled a list of OB-GYN’s in a thirty-mile radius like you suggested. It should be in your email. I contacted Dr. Roberts and he said that flying in for prenatal appointments won’t work with his schedule, but he greatly appreciates your generous compensation proposal.”

I tilted my head to the side, considering the smirk on her face. “Candice, are you making fun of me?”

“Mr. Williams,” her eyes danced, “I would never!”

The corner of my mouth quirked. “I might be acting a little irrational, but my world depends on her health and happiness.”

Candice’s smile faded. “I completely understand. It’s because of you and Sutton that I still believe in love. We will come through this, Sir.”

I nodded.

“Were you able to go through the documents?” she asked, changing the subject.

I looked down to the desk where they were spread out.

“Much of it is stocks and bonds, old ones that are worth a fortune. The concern is, how do we know if they were Judith’s from before her marriage or if she did indeed take them from Forrest?”

Sutton

“New rule,” I huffed as we walking out of yet another country OB-GYN office. “The doctor has to only see human patients.”

Candice snorted and covered it with a cough.

Mark raised a brow. “To be fair, they were his piglets.”

I slipped into the front seat of the car and Mark closed the door after making sure that Candice was also inside safely. To some women, this might bother them. I know that I am fully capable of opening and closing my car door. But the fact that Mark wants to open and close them as a sign of respect and chivalry, yeah, there is no way I am going to shoot that down.

When he slid behind the wheel, I continued the conversation. “It’s bad business to run out of the middle of a meeting to see your farm animals give birth.”

Mark grinned. “It could have been worse; the sow could have been delivering at the office.”

Candice giggled from the backseat. “I think that was my favorite part! When you asked him if the veterinarian had been called, Sutton. His face was priceless! He looked so perturbed, like you were doubting his abilities.”

“What about the one that had the lifesized cut out of his son? He was still my favorite!” Mark added as we began the long drive back to Otterville Falls.

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“Are you kidding me?” I knew he was just saying that to get my goat. But I couldn’t help but remember the strange man’s office. “He had three inches of dark roots!”

Mark grinned at me. “Maybe he’s looking for a new stylist.? They can be hard to find, a lot like an OB-GYN.”

I snorted. “His hair was shoulder length, half of it was bleach blonde and the other half almost black. He had a lifesized cut out of his son who was in college and he sang while he walked.”

“You can’t blame the man for being musical,” Candice added from the back seat.

“Cher, he was singing Cher.”

Mark cracked up and I couldn’t help but join in.

“I don’t think it would have been as bad if his voice wasn’t so high pitched.” Mark reached over and took my hand. “We will find the right one. Don’t worry, sweetheart.”

It was times like these when I knew I had hit the jackpot.

We spent the rest of the drive in relative quiet. But about five minutes before we hit Otterville Falls, the phone rang. I grabbed my cell and answered. “Knox, we don’t want any more bad news.”

“Then it’s a good thing I called,” he said dryly. “Can you guys swing by the

hospital?”

**

“I’M FINE, HONESTLY!”

I heard her voice before I rounded the corner.

“Maggie!”

She turned her head and gave me a smile. “Hey there, Sutton.”

She looked thinner and I could see bags underneath her eyes, but otherwise she looked good.

“What happened?” I gasped, coming forward and taking one of her hands.

“They decided to let me go.” She shrugged and looked over at Knox.

He nodded. “I got an anonymous call that there was something of interest out by the property where your trailer was. I drove out there and there she was, trussed up like a Christmas goose.”

I sank down into the chair next to the bed, “. “Do you know where you were? How did they get you?”

Maggie’s brows knit together in concentration. “I always had a blindfold on, but it felt dark. I don’t know how else to describe it except that I thought I was in a cellar or basement? There was a cot that I slept on and the floors were cold. I had a smelly sleeping bag that I could slither in and out of to keep warm. But my hands remained tied behind my back and my feet were cuffed.”

“How did you go to the bathroom?” I asked in horror.

Maggie blushed. “You don’t want to know.”

Knox cleared his throat. “They have been able to get her cleaned up and the doctor on staff did an exam. He wanted Maggie to do some fluids but she is resisting. He also doesn’t think a round of antibiotics would go amiss.”

Brian stormed into the room. “Thank God you are alright.”

Natalie followed him inside. “We searched the basement underneath the church. That’s where they had her. Father Montgomery is gone.”

“Dead?” Candice gasped.

Brian turned. “We can’t see any sign of foul play. His car and belongings are gone, and we think he’s the one that dropped Maggie off at your property.” He turned back to Maggie. “You need to tell us every detail of your kidnapping. Father Montgomery was at the church during the funeral when you were taken. In order to figure out who was working with him, we need to know everything you can remember.”

Maggie nodded. “Of course, it’s stupid really. I feel like an idiot. This all could have been avoided if I wasn’t so damn embarrassed.”

I reached out and took her hand again. “Embarrassed about what?”

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She wrinkled her nose. "I went to the drug store to pick up my meds."

"Why is that embarrassing?" Brian asked.

She hung her head. "I haven't been handling things very well since my dad passed. The doctor back home put me on an antidepressant and something to help the panic attacks. I needed to get mine refilled, but I know how this small town is and didn't want it passed around. So, I called in my prescription for the town over."

"Is that where he got you?"

She shook her head. "I never even made it into my car. I locked the door and was walking down the front steps when I heard something behind me. I went to turn, but something struck the back of my head and the next thing I knew I was tied up."

Knox stepped forward. "We were able to get the medication transferred to the hospital, and it's being filled at the pharmacy here. But you have been without it for a few days and the doctor wants you to stay overnight to make sure you are really okay."

Maggie bit her lip. "I hate that doctor."

Mark motioned for Candice to go out into the hall with him. I wondered for the briefest moment what that was about but shook it off when Maggie turned to me.

"Tell them that I am okay to go home. I have spent the last week by myself. I don't want to stay here alone."

“You won’t be alone.”

I looked over to see Brian staring intently at Maggie.

“I am staying with you. The doctor is going to give you your meds, an antibiotic, and a round of liquids and then you are going to sleep.”

I expected her to argue, but Maggie just blinked before nodding slowly.

The door opened and a young man came in that didn’t look older than seventeen.

“How is my patient?” He smiled and showed off perfectly straight teeth.

Maggie shrugged in a noncommittal fashion and Brian took a step forward to speak with the young doctor.

Candice and Mark had followed the doctor back into the room. She drew me aside and motioned to the young doctor. “Well?”

“Well what?” I was confused.

“Sutton, he delivers babies!” she said excitedly.

I turned around to see the doctor begin the IV in Maggie’s arm.

“I think he graduated high school last week.”

Candice laughed. “He can’t help that he has a baby face. Dr. Young, appropriately named, went to school in Boston and moved out here because he has a passion for the heartland of America.”

“Dr. Young?” I scoffed.

He raised his head. “Yes?”

I hadn’t meant to be so loud. “Sorry, doctor. HowDoctor, how are you?”

He smiled, and I wondered if he even knew how to shave.

“I am twenty-seven years old, if you are wondering.” He winked at me and went back to work.

Dr. Young was older than I was? How could that even be possible?

I wonder what moisturizer he used.

CHAPTER 24

Sutton

“This is a really stupid idea, Sutton.”

“Candice, with all due respect,” I paused as my grin widened, “this is an exceptionally stupid idea.”

“Then tell me why we are doing this again?” Mark grumbled at my side.

“Because Knox is being a pantywaist and won’t let us see the crime scene,” I explained for what had to be the millionth time.

We approached the church in the dark of night with Earl as our trusty guide. Who better to lead us than the man who had broken in on numerous occasions to steal the sacramental wine and tithes? Granted, I knew now that the tithes he had swiped had gone into helping me and my mom over the years—and the wine, well, that’s all on Earl.

“Will y’all shut up?” Earl grumbled right on cue. “I’ve never heard of such loud criminals in my life.”

“Neither have I, but I must admit I am enjoying the show.”

We all froze at the sound of Knox’s voice coming out of the darkness.

Shit.

Fucking hell.

“Did you find the button you were looking for?” Candice called out suddenly.

I really did adore the woman. It’s a true best friend that will try and cover your ass even when they think you are completely in the wrong.

Knox stepped out of the darkness. “A button?”

Candice raised her chin. “Well, why else would we be here?”

A slow smile split the sheriff’s handsome face. “Oh, I dunno, maybe something about Knox being a pantywaist?”

I felt color suffuse my cheeks. “I was just saying that in general.”

A bark of laughter escaped Mark, followed by a forced coughing attack.

Earl stuck his hands out. “It was my idea. Go ahead and arrest me.”

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Knox shook his head slowly. “Y’all are a real piece of work, aren’t you?”

We hung our heads in shame.

“And you, Mark?” Knox continued. “I wouldn’t have thought you would have any part of something like this.”

Before Mark could speak, I smarted off. “Like he could stop me! Look, Knox, are we in trouble or not?”

He paused for a long moment. “Not—yet. Technically you haven’t crossed the crime scene tape. I suppose that I could buy into the story of the lost button.” He inclined his head toward Candice. “If I know for a fact that you aren’t going to go and do anything else stupid.”

“I told you it was stupid,” Candice muttered for me to hear.

“You have my word,” Mark said, yanking me back against his hard frame.

For some reason that rankled. Maybe it was the hormones from the pregnancy or just plain stubbornness.

“Why can’t we see where Maggie was being held?” I blurted out.

Knox slid his hands into his pockets. “Not that I need to explain myself, but I have a forensics team that is looking for prints.”

Well damn.

I hated it when people made sense.

“Sutton, I know you want to protect your cousin,” he said kindly. “I am not trying to make things difficult for you. But I need you to not make things difficult for me either.”

I huffed, “Fine.” Then, looking around, I realized something. “Where is Earl?”

Knox swore and took off toward the church with us in quick pursuit. What we found was something that I will never forget even if I live to be a hundred years old.

The back end of an eighty year old man hanging out of the bathroom window. The ladder that he had used was laying on its side on the ground and he obviously didn’t have the upper body strength to wriggle himself the rest of the way in.

“Are you okay, Earl?” I hadn’t meant for the question to sound like I was holding back laughter, but indeed it was rather hilarious the way his skinny legs were flailing in the air.

“Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Earl cursed, and in the process, he managed to dislodge one of his shoes. It sailed down and landed in the bushes below.

Mark and Knox grabbed the ladder and set it to rights. Then Mark climbed up while Knox held it steady to extract Earl from his perch. However, Earl seemed to have missed the memo to stop squirming because his leg flew out and caught Mark right between the legs.

“FUUUUCK!” Mark nearly lost his balance on the ladder. I gasped and could only watch in horror as he held on with one hand and clutched his injured balls with the

other. “Fucking hell, Earl! Stop moving.”

There was a muffled sorry from the older man and it was several minutes more before Mark was able to rescue Earl. They both finally made their way back down the ladder to the ground. At which point Mark looked murderously at the old man.

“You are welcome,” he bit off and then walked toward me with a rather stilted pace.

I threw my arms around Mark. “I thought you were going to fall!”

He grunted. “I thought my balls were going to fall off.”

Knox laughed and I growled at him. “It’s not funny.”

A giggle escaped Candice. “But his face! I’ve never seen you look like that before, Mr. Williams.”

Mark rolled his eyes. “Yes, glad to be of service. Sheriff, I assume our business is concluded for the evening?”

Knox’s eyes were still alight with humor. “I think that, in a strange sort of way, justice has been served. Sutton, I promise you that as soon as the place is swept for prints, I will call you and you can have a look.”

I turned to my old friend. Sometimes it was hard to remember that he was the law around here. I mean, to me he was Knoxy, the boy who lived in the trailer court and was often one of my only friends. He was extending the olive branch here and he didn’t have to. I knew that he extended me a lot of courtesies that most folks wouldn’t get.

I moved away from Mark, and to Knox’s surprise, gave him a big hug.

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“I am sorry for being a pain in the ass, Knoxy.”

He patted my back awkwardly, most likely receiving a death glare from Mark. “It’s okay, Sutton. I know this has been hard for you.”

What surprised me was that, when I broke away from him, Candice took my place, throwing herself into his arms.

“Thank you,” she said quickly. And then as fast as she had embraced him, she was moving away with her eyes averted.

Knox hadn’t really even had time to respond. But I could see the heat in his eyes as he watched her walk away. There were so many things unfinished between the two of them.

Mark wrapped an arm around me again, and, with a quick goodbye to Earl and Knox, we headed down the street, following Candice to the car that was parked two blocks over.

Once we were out of earshot, she turned to me. “I know that I am an idiot to still care for that man.”

I tipped my head to the side. “Why do you say that?”

She shrugged. “After everything that happened with Natalie, my jealousy must have really turned him off. He hasn’t said one word, nothing.”

Mark opened the door for us both and then climbed behind the wheel.

“Candice,” he began, “you know that I am not a fan of becoming involved in other’s affairs.”

I grunted because he had said as much to me about a thousand times.

“But,” he went on, taking a deep breath, “I will say this. A man doesn’t look at a woman like the sheriff looks at you without having deep-set feelings for her. When you walked away just now, I almost expected him to go after you.”

Candice sniffed. “Then why didn’t he?”

“Maybe he isn’t sure that is what you want,” I said softly.

Mark nodded. “Also, remember that the man is a sheriff and about as noble as they come. He deals with women in crisis all the time. He isn’t about to put you in a situation that you feel uncomfortable with. The man cares; I just don’t think he knows what to do about it.”

Candice was quiet for a long moment. “So what do I do?”

I was about to open my mouth when Mark answered, “Let him know how you feel.”

CHAPTER 25

Mark

“Are you telling me you were taken out by an eighty-year-old man?”

I scowled at Brian. “We weren’t fighting.”

He smirked. “Bro, you need to work on your game. That’s just sad. Don’t you want this baby to have a little brother or sister?”

I flipped him off. “And have them miss out on fun conversations like this? I would never deprive my child that way.”

Brian’s smile dimmed a little. “Sometimes I wonder what it would have been like if we were raised together.”

It was the first time that he had ever opened up about our shitty past, and the fact that I grew up in opulence and he in near poverty.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Me, “me too.”

“Do you ever hear from him?” Brian looked down, his voice gruff.

I knew who he was talking about: our father who had disowned him even after a paternity test.

“No,” I said shortly. “I haven’t spoken to him in years.”

“He has been reaching out the last few months. Calling the office phone and leaving messages. They are all as fucked up as he is. He usually begins with telling me I am a bastard and then moving on to say that I will never see a dime of his money.”

“What the fuck? Shit, Brian, I don’t know what his problem is.”

Brian shrugged, running a hand through his short hair. “Me either. I called mom, who was horrified and said that she would contact him, but I strictly forbade her. If that jackass wants to take someone on, he is welcome to come to my door. I have laid low and made something of myself. I am no longer afraid of the man and I haven’t been for a long time.”

I didn’t even know what to say.

“He’s a sadistic fucker who delights in hurting everyone around him,” I said finally. “If you ever need my help...”

Brian shook his head, smiling. “Thanks, but I got this. Let’s talk more about how you took two women and a geriatric man to break into a church. There are all kinds of issues there that a therapist would delight in.”

I snorted. “You know what they’re like. You have, you’ve lived here long enough to know that some battles you won’t win. The last thing I wanted was Sutton to go without me. And yeah, we did intentionally go while you were staying with Maggie at the hospital. You can thank my future wife for that smart planning.”

Brian smiled. “I like her, your Sutton. She’s nothing like I thought she would be and everything that is good for you. Shit, look at you! CEO of one of the largest companies in the world and you’re taking time off in Nowheresville, USA just because you know that she needs you. You are nothing like him, you know?”

I didn't know. There were times that I worried I was becoming just like him.

"It's because of her," I said, and as soon as the words were out, I knew it was true. "She gave me a heart and sense of purpose. I know that sounds crazy, but she did."

Brian nodded. "I get it. I don't want it, but I get it."

"You can't see yourself ever settling down?" I had to ask, "Will I never be Uncle Mark?"

He paled before bursting out laughing. "Don't scare me like that! Fuck, Mark! That is deep shit."

I grinned at him. "Someday someone will come along and knock you on your ass. You think you are impenetrable, I know. I did too. It's the ones that you never suspect that do it. They sneak under your defenses, and before you know it, you are a goner."

Brian made a face. "You make it sound like a disease—a fatal one at that."

I hummed a few bars of "Death of a Bachelor" just to get my point across and Brian scowled.

At that moment Maggie came walking down the back stairs into the kitchen. Brian jumped off of the stool that he had been sitting on and raced over to her.

"Why are you out of bed?" he growled.

Maggie looked up at Brian in confusion. "I was lonely."

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Immediately his expression changed. “Shit, I mean shoot, I didn’t mean to snap at you. It’s only that you are supposed to be resting. The doctor said that some of your tests came back indicating you could be fighting an infection.”

Maggie’s cheeks pinked. “I am taking my antibiotic and I don’t want to lay in bed and think about being locked in the dark. So, if it’s alright with you, I want to do something.”

I waited to see how my little brother would deal with this. For a man that insisted he wasn’t anywhere near falling for someone, he certainly was rather concerned about Maggie. Almost obsessively so, and that made me smile.

“You are welcome down here,” I said with a smile. “Sutton is lying down but I could wake her.”

Maggie shook her head. “No, that is quite alright. I will just go watch some television.”

“I’ll go with you,” Brian offered. “Would you like something to drink?”

Maggie shook her head but rethought things when she saw Brian’s face.

“It would appear that I am thirsty,” she said dryly.

I chuckled and went to the fridge. “We have water, soda, beer, and even some wine if you would like.”

“Water would be wonderful,” she said softly.

I reached out and plucked two water bottles and tossed them lightly to Brian.

With a quick ‘thanks,’ he placed his hand on the small of her back and began to lead her into the back living area with its large sectional and big screen television that also doubled as a painting over the fireplace when it wasn’t in use.

Maggie curled up in the corner, and I noticed that Brian sat on the cushion next to her. The sectional easily sat eight or nine people, and besides that, there were two large, overstuffed chairs.

My little brother might not want to admit it, but he liked Maggie Landry. I grinned. There was something special about those Landry girls.

With Brian and Maggie sorted, I went upstairs to see if Sutton was still napping. She was tired from our midnight breaking and entering. When I opened the door, she looked so beautiful laying there that I stood and watched her for a moment.

“Come here, creeper,” she said in a groggy voice.

A smirk crossed my face. “You shouldn’t invite creepers into our room.”

Her eyes slowly opened so that I could see the humor in them. “But then I would never see you?”

I frowned and she giggled. Turning over on her back, Sutton began to unbutton the shirt that she was wearing. My cock took immediate notice—, after all, naked usually did mean good things for us.

“It’s so hot in here,” she complained, lifting up and tossing the offending garment to

the floor. She next unsnapped her bra and let her glorious breasts free with a sigh. I could get off listening to that sound, pure bliss.

I started unbuckling my pants.

Her eyes widened and then she laughed. “What are you doing?”

“Fucking hot,” I retorted. “Got to be naked.”

Granted, I had been more eloquent in my life, but her tits were warm and full. I could see the purple veins underneath her milky skin and wanted to lick each and every one of them. I had my clothes off and was pulling her pants and panties off before she could get to the next item.

Sutton’s eyes sparkled. “I like you this way!”

I sealed my lips onto hers, taking her breath away, my kiss intent and forceful enough that I felt her laughter slip into desire. I slid a hand between her legs and slowly teased her folds. She moaned and pushed her pussy against my hand but I was going slow. I wanted her to really want this as much as I did.

She bit my lower lip in frustration and I did the same to hers. And then we were kissing and my finger had slid into her core.

She was so wet, deliciously and amazingly wet. Lifting that finger to my lips, I licked her desire off of it, seeing her eyes darken and that pink tongue dampen her bottom lip—the same lip that was still pink and puffy from my bite.

“I need you,” I ground out. And, then rising to my knees, I pushed her thighs apart. “I need you in my mouth and around my cock.”

“What are you waiting for?” she asked breathlessly.

CHAPTER 26

Mark

My mouth came down on her sweet pussy and licked her soaked folds, loving the taste of woman and sex on my tongue. I loved the little sounds she made as I ate her out. Sutton had always been a very sensual creature, but since becoming pregnant she was almost insatiable, and that was just the way I liked her.

My hands cupped her perfect ass and I let the slight stubble on my face rub against her tender folds as I speared my tongue inside of her, mimicking what I would soon be doing with my cock. I wanted to devour every inch of her, and leave no skin untouched.

Her hands sank into my hair and she wasn't shy about shoving my face forward. I had to laugh against her core, the vibrations making her cry out. I kissed her pussy like I did her mouth. I wanted to taste everything, feel everything. She was moaning and her thighs were spread impossibly wide. This is how I sometimes pictured her when I was dreaming. I would never get enough of Sutton no matter how many times we made love.

I was an addict, completely addicted to her. I slid a finger into her wet channel, and then another, my mouth coming up to tease and play with her clit. Sutton's back arched off the bed and I loved watching her fall apart. It always came as a surprise to her. I loved the way her mouth would get caught in a perfect oval. And I always worried when she took forever to start breathing again.

“That was,” she panted, “holy fuck,” another breath, “wow.”

I smiled, wiping my face on the sheet and moving up to brush away some of the hair that was sticking to her cheek.

“Good, huh?”

Sutton looked at me incredulously, “‘Good’. ‘Good is for ice cream cones and diet coke when you are thirsty. That was...”

“Great?” I ventured.

“Incandescent,” she said with a sigh, still shuddering with aftershocks.

I moved over her and then thought better of it. Sutton had assured me on numerous occasions that I wasn’t squishing the baby, but I didn’t want to take any chances.

Flipping our positions, I watched as she slowly took my aching cock in her hands and rubbed it against her slick folds.

“I want to be inside of you, baby,” I growled.

She smiled wickedly at me. “And you will, soon.”

She placed my cock at the heat of her entrance and slowly sank down a fraction of an inch. My hands grasped her hips as her pussy squeezed my cock.

“That feels so fucking good.”

She smirked at me. “I know.”

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Slowly she lowered herself and then rose up, only to sink back down again. It was achingly slow and I felt the heat from every slide into her channel. My hands moved up to her breasts and began to tweak her nipples. I loved the way they tightened into hard points. When I flicked at them with my tongue, I could feel her pussy tighten on my cock.

Her breathing hitched and she began to move a little faster. I grinned to myself, but she leaned down and captured my lips with a kiss. I loved kissing her while I was inside of her. I can't explain it, but it felt incredibly intimate. Her kiss was heated and sloppy as her thrusts became harder and faster. I tensed, feeling the familiar tingle in my spine. I wasn't about to come before she had another release.

My hand snuck between us and I began to rub circles on her clit, that little, swollen bud that was standing at attention. She gasped at the sensation and her pussy clenched me like a vise. My balls tightened and I knew I was going to come. I kissed her hard, rubbing furiously and thrusting my hips up. My seed filled her, and it seemed that the moment I started coming, she erupted. Her body clamped down on mine and I felt myself going again, or maybe it was just an extremely long release.

Either way, by the time I was finished I felt completely boneless. I couldn't even move. All I knew was that I had the perfect woman in my arms.

"That," I panted, "that was incandescent."

She laughed, her body strewn across mine. "I would have to agree with you about that."

“Sutton, let’s get married.”

I hadn’t meant to bring it up again. I knew that she wanted to wait until everything in Otterville Falls was taken care of. But I was tired of waiting. I had a raw desire to make this woman my wife. I felt like every moment I was letting slip away was time wasted.

I almost apologized. I didn’t mean to rush her, or if I did, I certainly didn’t want it to look that way.

“Sutton, look,” I began.

But she placed her finger on my lips, stopping me from speaking.

“Okay,” she said softly.

I blinked. “Okay, that means yes?”

She kissed my lips. “That means yes. One week, here in the garden. We will need to ask Knox to officiate since Father Montgomery is on the run.”

She grimaced when she said the last part.

“If you want to get married in a church, we can do that.”

She shook her head. “I was never welcome there, not really. And recently it reminds me of those we have lost. I want to get married here. It’s our home.” Her eyes twinkled. “And I think the Gray Lady would like that.”

I shuddered. “Thank heavens we haven’t seen her of late.”

Sutton pursed her lips. "I wouldn't say that."

"If you tell me she's watching us, I might need to throw up." And," I said, and I wasn't kidding.

Sutton laughed. "No, I don't see her right now. But I did the other day in the bathroom again. Do you know what the room was before the remodel?"

I shook my head. "No idea what it was used for. But it was part of the master bedroom before we decided to add the bedroom next to this as one big suite."

"I have a theory," she said, propping herself on one elbow. I loved the way her dark, just-fucked hair made a halo around her head.

"What is that?"

"I think it was her room," Sutton mused. "The small room that they added. You know how they said she came here as a mail-order bride?"

My nose wrinkled. "Do I want to hear the rest of this?"

"Hush," she retorted. "It makes sense to me. I just wonder why she can't move on."

"Sutton, I don't believe in ghosts," I stated firmly.

She rolled her eyes at me. "Right? That's why you screamed like a little girl the time you saw her."

"It was probably a shadow." I kissed her forehead. "Or even my imagination."

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“You don’t have much of an imagination,” she said dryly.

I laughed. “I don’t know. I feel like it’s coming right along. With many aspects of my life, I think you have helped to develop it.”

Her face softened and she cupped my cheek. “That was one of the sweetest things you have ever said to me.”

“I do love you,” I said, leaning up to kiss her. “And you promise?”

She nodded. “One week, even hugely pregnant.”

I tilted my head to the side. “You are six months pregnant. I don’t think you can consider that hugely.”

“You have a penis. You don’t get to vote.”

A bark of laughter escaped me. “There is a penis clause that I didn’t know about?”

Her eyes danced with mirth. “There is always a penis clause about something.”

All this talk about my cock and she was beginning to make a valiant effort for round two.

“Tell me more about the penis clause,” I growled and pulled her face into a kiss.

Sutton grinned. “All those with penisespenis’s are not allowed to comment on

pregnancy woes. It's in the pregnancy bible."

I frowned. "I read that one book cover to cover and didn't see it in there."

She nodded. "You wouldn't. Only those without a penis can see the words. Sorry, love."

I pushed up, sinking myself inside of her again. Her eyes widened and she grinned at me.

"My penis has something to say." I thrust into her again. "He doesn't like being left out."

She moaned as I slid in and out of her channel.

"The penis clause can always be amended," she said breathlessly. "As long as negotiations go like this."

I grinned and fucked my future wife until we were both senseless once again.

CHAPTER 27

Sutton

“Dear friends, family, and loved ones...”

“Aaachooo!” Praying that I didn’t have boogies hanging off of my nose, I motioned for Knox to continue.

Knox’s lips twitched. “God bless you. We are gathered here today to celebrate the wedding of...”

“Aaachooo!” Damn it, what was wrong with me?

“Sutton, are you alright?” Mark leaned over and whispered in my ear.

Obviously, I was not alright. My head felt stuffy and I knew that more sneezes were around the corner.

“Where was I?” Knox shifted nervously.

He was standing under the gazebo that had been brought in for the wedding. We were in the rose garden that had been hastily planted for today. There were several rows filled to the brim with people from town. Even Mandy and her husband Elliot had flown in for the day. They didn’t want to leave their daughter overnight, so they wouldn’t be staying long after the ceremony.

Mandy and Maggie were beautiful bridesmaids and Candice was as stunning as the maid of honor. Brian looked pretty good all decked out in his tux, but Mark—he... He literally took my breath away.

Or maybe that was the roses?

“Just keep going!”

Knox nodded. “Right, erm, we have gathered here to witness the marriage of two individuals and to offer our love and support for your commitment to one another. We are thankful for your presence and would like to ask your blessing, well wishes, and...”

“Aaachooo! Damn it!” I took the handkerchief that Mark offered, wondering where on earth he came up with it.

Several people in the crowd snickered.

Knox cleared his throat. “—and encouragement for their decision to be married. They also remember other loved ones who cannot be here to share...”

“Aaachoo! Skip to the important parts!” I hissed, handing my flowers off to Candice. Maybe I was allergic to something in the bouquet?

“Important parts—I can do that. Um, here, Sutton repeat after me: I, Sutton Landry...”

“I, Sutton Landry...” I looked up into Mark’s eyes. I really loved this man.

“Take Mark Williams, to have and to hold.”

Mark’s silvery eyes were glued to my face. He was worried about whatever he saw

there.

“Sutton?” Knox prompted.

Right, I was supposed to talk.

“Take Mark Williams to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, for richer and for poorer and whatever else Knox has written down until death do us part. And yes, I will.”

I looked at Mark, who couldn’t help the raised brow and curve of humor to his lips.

“I, Mark Williams, take you, Sutton Landry, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, for richer and for poorer.” He paused. “And something about Knox’s speech until death do us part. And yes, Sutton, it is always yes. I choose you.”

I felt a lump in my throat. “I choose you.”

Knox was scrambling through his notes; obviously, we had skipped a few steps and he needed to catch up.

“Aaachoooo!”

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I looked up to see Mark had been right in the spit zone. If there is any question of whether the man was marrying me for love, this had been the ultimate test. I offered my soiled hanky but he politely declined, taking one from Brian.

They must have come with the tux?

“Sutton, we need to take you to the ER.”

I frowned. “No, this is my wedding day.”

Mark ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “You are starting to resemble a pomegranate.”

“Is that a fat joke?” I huffed.

Knox snorted with laughter but cut it off when my gaze swung to his.

“You are rather red,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Finish the damn wedding.” I was not about to move this thing again. I had on the white dress. Mandy and Elliot had flown in from N.Y. and we were getting married.

“Do you have the rings?” Knox fumbled with his script.

Maggie stepped forward and handed me Mark’s ring, while Brian gave Mark my ring.

“Repeat after me...” Knox began.

My palms and tongue were starting to itch. I knew it wasn't a good sign. So, I grabbed Mark's hand. “This is a symbol of our love, don't fuck this up, I love you.”

The crowd laughed again as Mark repeated the same strange vow back to me and slid the massive ring on my finger.

“Having pledged your love and fidelity—well, I am not sure you did that.” Knox flipped back a page.

“Ambulance is waiting in front of the house,” Brian whispered into Mark's ear, but I heard it.

“No! I won't leave until Knox says man and wife. We are man and wife!” I was a little hysterical, or maybe a lot.

“Man and wife,” Knox parroted just as Mark swept me off my feet.

Literally, he picked me up and started back down the aisle with Knox chasing after saying something about the authority vested in him and he pronounced us once again man and wife.

The crowd was halfway on their feet when Mark ran by with me in his arms. He rounded the corner and the EMT was there with an injection of something.

“But my baby,” I cried out.

“It's just Benedryl for the hives, ma'am. You're going to be fine. Is this your husband?”

The EMT motioned to Mark.

“Yes,” he said shortly.

I started to laugh. I couldn’t help myself. I was laying there covered in hives and looking very much like a pomegranate. But I was in a wedding dress—a high waisted one that didn’t squish our baby, but a wedding dress.

I had pictured many things at my wedding, but this, it had never crossed my mind.

Mark got into the back of the ambulance and we headed toward the hospital that we had seen Maggie at just a week earlier.

My eyes started getting droopy. “I’m really tired, Mr. Williams.”

The concerned look never left Mark’s face as he spoke with the EMT.

“We gave her a good dose of the Benedryl. She so she might be sleepy. We need to put the oxygen mask on just in case the allergic reaction causes her airway to close even further. She keeps knocking it off; can you help calm her?”

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Mark took my hand. “You have to keep the mask on, Sutton. Please, Baby, we need to get you better.”

I closed my eyes and felt the mask go back on my face. But this time I didn’t shove it away. I didn’t want Mark to be sad; he was my new husband.

Married.

I was married to Mark.

The next thing I knew, I awakened, feeling groggy with an IV in my arm. Dr. McChild, or whatever his name was, was speaking with Mark over by the door.

“Poisoning,” he said firmly. “She is allergic to whatever was in her system. Did she eat something new? Use a different lotion or detergent?”

“Shampoo,” I croaked. “I used a new shampoo this morning. It came when the groceries were delivered yesterday.”

The men immediately walked over to me.

“I used the new shampoo and didn’t have any problem.” Mark frowned.

Dr. McChild looked at my chart. “Are you allergic to anything, Sutton?”

I shook my head. “Not that I was aware of.”

“Can we get some of that shampoo in for testing?” he asked earnestly.

Mark nodded. “I will call my brother, Brian. You are certain this was poisoning?”

The young doctor sighed. “I would be shocked if it wasn’t.”

It was just then that Knox and Candice came bursting in the door.

"Are you alright?" Maggie was right behind them, followed by Brian. Mark gathered them all together and the doctor repeated his conclusions.

Brian left immediately to get the shampoo while Maggie and Candice tried to cheer me up. Mark and Knox were speaking in low voices, and I couldn't make out what they were saying. It seemed that they agreed on something, because Mark turned to me and smiled softly.

"I love you," he said quietly.

"What do you think of your wedding night?" I said, motioning to my hospital gown.

"Are you impressed with my lingerie?"

Knox coughed, and the girls laughed.

Mark walked forward and kissed my lips. "You are the sexiest recovering pomegranate that I have ever seen."

It's a good thing I love him.

CHAPTER 28

Candice rubbed her arms and stared out of the window of the police cruiser as Knox silently drove her back to the Baker Mansion. Things had gotten a little better between them, but they still weren't anywhere like it had been before Natalie showed up.

When they pulled up, Candice opened the door before he had the car turned off.

"Thanks for taking me to the hospital to see Sutton." Candice forced herself to look into his eyes.

That was a big mistake, because in those eyes she saw all of the need that she was trying so hard to keep at bay.

"Would you like to come in?" The offer was out before she knew what she was saying.

Knox didn't even hesitate to turn the police cruiser off and race around the back of the car to extend a hand to Candice.

She blushed and took his arm. It was sweet and old-fashioned, and something in her heart fluttered for the briefest moment. Candice fumbled with her keys but eventually was able to get the door open. Maggie and Brian were somewhere in the house, so she motioned for Knox to follow her into the kitchen. She had intended on making coffee, but the moment she set her purse down, Knox had his arm around her waist and was drawing her close.

“I need to talk to you.” His voice was gruff.

Candice swallowed nervously. “We are talking.”

Knox growled. “I don’t mind talking here, but if I end up losing control and trying to fuck you on the counters, I don’t think Sutton will appreciate it.”

Candice gasped as she registered the impossibly hard cock that brushed against her belly.

“We could—” She coughed. “We could go to my room?”

“Perfect.” Knox released her and followed when Candice picked her purse back up again and made her way to the steps leading to the basement.

Knox hadn’t expected a basement to be as gorgeous as this one was. The ceilings were at least ten feet and the light colors made it feel open and breezy. There was a full apartment downstairs with three bedrooms. One Maggie was using, and Brian was in the other. But Candice’s room was at the other end of the basement; it was the largest and had a full en suite with a walk-in closet. The other two bedrooms had bathrooms as well, but they were smaller and only consisted of a shower.

The moment she closed the door, Candice rounded on him.

“You wanted to talk, so let’s talk. We don’t need to be naked or fucking to communicate.”

Knox grinned. “But you must admit that it is more fun that way.”

Candice narrowed her eyes. “You have five minutes.”

His face grew serious. “Candice, I am sick of us dancing around each other. I don’t know how I fucked up so badly. All I know is that I will do anything to get you to forgive me. I am miserable without you in my life. I need you. I love you, and I hate being apart from each other.”

Candice wanted to believe him, she really did. But a large part of her was still worried that if another Natalie came along the same thing would happen.

“Say something,” he pleaded. “What happened?”

Candice cleared her throat. “Did you have feelings for Natalie?”

Knox frowned. “Was I angry that she was an undercover detective?”

“No!” Candice was exasperated. “She’s a beautiful woman, Knox! I know that men like women who look like that and who flaunt their ‘assets’ like she did.”

He shook his head. “You think Natalie is beautiful?”

Candice’s lips were pinched. “You don’t?”

Knox sighed. “Honest?”

She nodded and steeled herself for the worst.

“Honestly, I didn’t look at her beyond thinking that I was damn lucky to get someone to fill the spot so quickly. And then she started coming on to me. I wanted to fire her immediately, but with all of the ignored open cases here and the government breathing down my neck, I worried if I let her go, they would fire my ass along with hers. I feel like the past eight or nine months I signs, just grateful to have some help. But I hate that I hurt you. I never meant to. Stupidly, I thought you were waiting patiently for me to wrap up this case. Now I know how it must have looked to you. I don’t know what else to say except I would never cheat on you. I only wanted to do what was right for the department. But if I have to choose between the two of you. The choice is clear.”

Candice felt her heart beginning to thaw. “Knox, I don’t know what to say.”

Knox shrugged. “Do you want me to give up being sheriff? Is that what bothers you? Because, Candice, I will do it. I will go back to New York with you and do something there. Sell hot dogs. Shit, I don’t give a fuck! I just want to be with you. Please tell me that it isn’t too late.”

Candice launched herself into his arms. “I am sorry, Knox. I was so jealous of Natalie that I couldn’t see straight.”

“Jealous?” His voice was shocked. “She’s pretty but, Candice, you are gorgeous! Do you not see yourself in the mirror? And even if you weren’t a total knockout, I would

still move heaven and earth to be with you. Your heart, your devotion to your friends, you are beautiful inside and out. Natalie is no competition to you.”

Candice choked. “I’m sorry. It’s my fault we grew apart.”

Knox clutched her to him. “I refuse to believe that this isn’t something we can fix. I am in love with you, Candice. So bloody in love that I am making a mess of things.”

She wrapped her arms around his trim waist. “I love you too. So very much, Knox.”

He moved to grasp her face with his hands. Then, tenderly and carefully, he claimed her lips with his own. It was a tentative kiss, almost like it was their first. But once they tasted the familiar taste of each other, the kiss changed. Hunger began to flame inside of Knox. He needed her in a way that was almost painful.

Candice kissed him back, pouring out all of the love that was trapped inside of her. The jealousy and frustration of the past began to fade. This was what she needed. Knox was who she was meant to be with.

Suddenly she regretted telling Knox that being naked was a bad idea. She wanted him naked, buck ass naked and preferably balls deep inside of her. She yanked at the buckle of his belt at the same time he was trying to figure out how to get her out of the maid of honor gown she was still clothed in.

Finally giving up, Knox grabbed the material and yanked it in half, buttons flying through the air.

Candice let out a horrified laugh. “That was designer.”

Knox’s nostrils flared as he smelled her sweet perfume and the scent of a woman.

“I don’t give a fuck,” he said gruffly.

Candice yanked the dress off and was left in a mini corset and white silk panties.

Knox could hardly breathe. “You’ve had that on all day?”

Candice looked down. Her breasts were shoved together by the corset and looked like they were being offered to him. It made her waist look tiny, and she said a silent prayer of thanks that she had gotten the Brazilian the last time she went to the salon. There might be some crazy things in Otterville Falls, but they knew how to do a great Brazilian.

She cocked a hip. “Do you like what you see, Sheriff?”

Knox’s eyes narrowed. “I think you might be in danger of indecent exposure, Ma’am.”

Candice ran a finger across her collarbone, down to the swell of her breast, dipping between them.

“Whatever do you mean, officer? It’s just so darn hot.”

Candice began unlacing the stays of her demi corset and loved the way his pants got tighter and his cock grew thicker.

Knox pulled his handcuffs out. “Looks like the lady might need to be taught a lesson.”

Candice felt a thrill race through her, and in defiance she pushed the corset off, revealing her breasts.

“Do you worst, officer.”

CHAPTER 29

“Ma’am, you have the right to remain silent, but I like it better when you don’t.”

Candice grinned at him. “Oh really, what other rights do I have, Officer?”

Knox traced the swell of her breast with this finger. “You have the right to as many orgasms as I can give you. And I’m not a quitter.”

He pinched the tender tip and Candice felt her core flood with desire.

Knox picked her up, literally sweeping her off her feet, and placed her in the middle of the bed. Then, very carefully, he removed her silky panties until she was bare before him. His breathing hitched, and his cock felt strangled in his pants. She was so fucking beautiful lying here. Her hands clasped together above her head. Her breasts jutting forward as she took shallow breaths.

Knox started to remove his uniform. Each button was slow and deliberate as more and more of his heavily muscled body was revealed.

Candice could hardly stand the anticipation. Secretly, she liked a little dominance in the bedroom, and she knew that Knox could give her what she needed. Her pussy ached to be touched and tasted. Her nipples were hard and pointing out as if begging for his attention. There was something so primal about the man.

He slipped his shirt off his broad shoulders and Candice feasted on the sight of his naked chest. His hands went to his belt buckle and he slowly zipped his pants down.

Candice tried leaning up so that she could see better.

“Put your hands up, ma’am, or I will be forced to use these cuffs.”

Candice blushed. “I have some softer ones, officer. Officer, that is, if you want?”

Knox’s eyes widened. “Where?”

Her blush extended down to her rosy pink tips. “Top drawer of the dresser.”

Knox opened the drawer and pulled out a black vibrator and some nipple clamps. Behind that was lube and finally the furry pink cuffs. He held them up, and upon seeing them, Candice nodded.

“Ma’am, I can see that we have been hiding a bit back.”

Candice hoped that Knox wouldn’t be angry. The sex they had before was amazing, it really was. But when he teased her with the cuffs, she wondered if he would be open to other things. Things that she really wanted him to do to her.

“Are you mad, officer?” Her eyes were cast down.

Knox moved to Candice and lifted her head with a finger on her chin. “No, I am not mad. But I do want you to promise me something. We have had so many miscommunications between us. I want you to talk to me, tell me if you are scared or jealous, and I especially want you to tell me what you like when we are in bed together.”

“You don’t think I am”—she paused, looking for the right word— “strange for wanting these things?”

Knox was shocked. “Of course I don’t. You are a beautiful, sexual woman. There is nothing wrong with your wants and desires. You can tell me anything.”

“Have you done anything like this before?” she asked nervously.

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Knox grinned. “Nope. I’m a virgin Dom. Does that scare you?”

She grinned back at him. “No, I trust you.”

“What is our safe word?” he asked, sobering up. “I do know that much, and I never want to do anything that you don’t want.”

Candice blushed. “How about ‘pickles’?”

He barked out a laugh. “I can’t say they have ever come up before during sex, so it’s safe to assume that we won’t stumble onto it accidentally.”

He moved toward her and gently parted her thighs. Candice hissed when his fingers traced her folds.

“Are you alright with me using the vibrator?”

“Yes,” she said breathlessly.

His finger traced down to circle the tight, puckered hole of her ass. “How about here?”

Candice’s body tightened, and she moaned as he pressed against the rosebud. “Yes.”

His nostrils flared. “Damn girl, there are so many filthy things I want to do to you, with you. What is your safe word?”

“Pickles,” Candice repeated and then moaned when he leaned down and took one of her nipples into his mouth. He sucked on it hard and then released it with a pop. Then, getting up, he went back to the dresser and removed some scarves that she had in another drawer.

“What are you doing?” she asked breathlessly.

Knox gave her a wicked smile. “Loving you.”

He tied each of her limbs to the furthest reaches of the bedposts. She was spread wide for him and the scarves were tight enough to hold but not hurt her skin.

Then Knox leaned over and captured her lips in a devastating kiss. Candice pulled at the restraints, forgetting that she was tied. Her hands wanted to feel the touch of his smooth skin, his silky hair, and the iron heat of his cock.

Knox leaned over her, their chests brushing lightly and her nipples beading up to impossibly tight points as their naked skin rubbed together. He kissed her deeply, thoroughly, and when he finally pulled his lips away, she couldn't have told him her own name.

The vibrator flipped on and Knox traced the tips of her breasts with the black cock buzzing in his hand. She moaned and thrashed. “That feels so good.”

“I want you to feel good, Baby.” His fingers slipped to her pussy. “It’s getting so wet.”

A finger slid inside of her, and then another. He fucked her with his hand as he continued to tease her tits with the vibrator. When her hips began to thrash, Knox moved the vibrator to her aching core.

His mouth came down to suck on her perfect tits while the black cock rubbed back and forth, back and forth, not slipping inside and not staying on her clit long enough to send her over the edge.

Candice felt so keyed up, her body felt fevered, and she wanted more than anything to be filled.

“Please, Knox,” she whispered, biting back a groan when he gently bit her nipple.

Knox moved back and watched as he slipped the large black cock deep inside of her pussy.

Candice moaned, arching her back and struggling to take the vibrator. He whispered terms of endearment and love as she adjusted to the massive size. And when it was fully seated, Knox began to slowly fuck her with its length. She pulled hard on the restraints, her face flushed, and her eyes glazed.

Knox pulled the toy out and circled her clit with it, before letting it rest against her tender flesh. Candice went off like a rocket. Her body shook with the want and desire that was raging through it. Never in her life had she come that hard. Then he picked up her hips and slammed his cock into her, pumping into her heated flesh again and again.

She screamed as her orgasm exploded into a massive litany of pleasure and the slightest tinge of pain that made it all the sweeter. Candice felt him pull out of her and she cried out, not wanting to lose the full feeling that she was drowning in.

He picked up the lube and coated the vibrator and then her small hole.

“Can you take me here, baby?”

Candice moaned as he fingered her forbidden hole.

“You remember your safe word?”

She nodded and then gasped as the black vibrator was again switched on and placed against her asshole. He made sure that there was plenty of lube before he pressed the broad tip forward and it disappeared inside of her.

She grunted and he placed a gentling hand on her leg. “Relax, Candice, it will feel better if you relax.”

Candice focused on the pleasurable feeling and allowed her tensions to slip away. The vibrator slipped in further and then further still.

Knox had never seen her more beautiful. Her complete submission to him was not only surprising, but it was humbling. He knew that it took a strong woman to allow someone this much latitude with her body.

He would never hurt her. Knox hadn't known how much these things would turn him on. The front of his underwear was damp with pre-cum. He had a friend that was into BDSM, and so he knew many of the basics, but he hadn't looked further into it. By the way that she was responding, Knox knew that he wanted to know more.

CHAPTER 30

Candice was lost in an endless wave of sensation. He flipped the vibrator to a higher speed and Candice's body arched from the new pleasure endings that were sending rapid-fire messages to her brain. She hadn't known that sex could be like this.

Sure, she had read stories with bondage and BDSM, but she hadn't known, couldn't have guessed, the true magnitude of how it would affect her. This, right here, right now, with Knox, this was life changing.

His hooded eyes watched her as he slipped the last piece of clothing from his body. Candice could see the tension in his jaw, the pulse that seemed to have a mind of its own. His muscles stood in relief as if waiting for the moment that he could be bare—for her.

“You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen,” he murmured softly as he traced the curve of her breast.

Candice whimpered, “Please, Knox, I need you.”

Her mouth felt dry, her skin fevered, and her ass—holy shit!

Knox brought the broad head of his wet dick and rubbed it against her tender folds. The way she looked, splayed out so that he could see everything, was driving him wild. The way that she whimpered and moaned for him was like little licks of encouragement to his cock.

He was so hard that it actually hurt. The relief he felt when placing his tip against her wet pussy was almost more than he could stand. Her body shook, from the pleasure and the vibrator lodged in her ass.

Her pulse was racing and her eyes wild. Knox loved the way her breasts rose and fell with each rapid inhalation. He couldn't wait any longer. Knox felt like he would die if he couldn't feel her heat around him, swallowing him.

He pushed inside and had to grit his teeth. She was already tight, but with the toy in her ass it made her impossibly tight. His resolve to go slow was rapidly dissolving as

his need and desire ratcheted through his body.

He gripped her hips and thrust inside.

Candice screamed at the invasion, feeling fuller than she ever had before.

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“Focus on your breathing, baby,” Knox panted. “You are doing so well.”

Candice whimpered as the pleasure licked up and down her body. She felt glorious when he praised her. She wanted more of his words, more of his cock. Her hips jutted up and Knox’s eyes flared.

Suddenly, he couldn’t keep still. His hands sinking into the flesh of her hips, he buried himself inside of her. The vibrations, along with the tightness of her channel, had him seeing stars.

He needed her desperately and was lost to the moment as he pulled out and thrust again to the core. She was shaking in his arms, her body twisting and turning against the restraints. She had tears in her eyes as she begged, “Let me cum, Knox, please let me cum.”

He was helpless to ignore her plea. “Cum for me, Candice. Cum all over my dick. I want to be covered in your juices.”

He rammed into her at a crippling pace and suddenly the dam broke. She shattered as the waves of ecstasy crashed over her. Nipples tightening, breathing stopped, and it was as if time stood still as the intense pleasure carried them both over the edge.

Finally, when dots began to appear before her eyes, she drew in a long, shaky, ragged breath. Her body was still contracting, almost as if it couldn’t help itself. Her eyes closed, and she sank down against the mattress.

Knox helped to ease the black vibrator out of her ass and then untied the knots of the

scarves. She was limp and boneless, her body sated to the state that she had no idea what was going on around her. Only that she had just been fucked within an inch of her life and it was the best she had ever had.

“You are trembling,” Knox said as he returned to her with a hand towel.

Very carefully, he cleaned her up and then pulled Candice into his larger frame. Covering them both with a blanket, Knox thanked his lucky stars that this woman was his.

“I can never let you go,” he said against her hair. “You know that, right?”

Candice was nearly asleep but opened one bleary eye to say, “You’re mine, Knox Bridges, only mine.”

He felt a swelling in his chest at the simple way she had claimed him. He wouldn’t fuck this up again. This impossibly amazing woman was in his arms and seemed to want him. That was more than he had ever even hoped to dream of.

He kissed her head and listened as she drifted off to sleep. She was perfect from the top of her dark curls, to her beauty marks, down to the sassy nail polish on her toes. He had expected to stay awake for a while, but their lovemaking must have taken a toll on him, because the next thing he knew, the sun was shining through the curtains.

Knox woke with a lurch, reaching for his phone, which wasn’t on the nightstand. It rang again, and he slipped out of bed to go grab his pants. The moment he answered the phone, Mark’s voice blared through the receiver.

“Where are you? I have called the station a dozen times!”

There was panic in his voice, something that Knox didn’t like hearing.

“Who is it?” Candice asked groggily.

“Are you with a woman?” Mark’s voice was incredulous.

“What is going on?” Knox had to ask him a direct question and get him back on track. The last thing he wanted to admit was that not only was Knox with a woman, but the fact that he was also under Mark’s roof could pose some problems

“Was that Candice?” Mark’s voice rang out, loud enough for them both to hear.

Then there was the sound of footsteps followed by a sharp knock on the door.

“I know you are in there, Bridges.”

Candice sat up. “Is Sutton okay, Mark?”

“Yes,” he bit off. “Open the damn door, Knox!”

Candice looked at Knox with an apology in her gaze.

Knox stood up and yanked on his pants. Throwing his phone on the bed, he went and opened the door. Mark stood there with a glare on his face.

“What are your intentions with Candice? Because if you are here just to dick around, I am going to have to ask you not to come into my home.”

Candice’s lips twitched. She knew that Mark and Sutton considered her family, but she hadn’t any idea that they had adopted her. He was acting like an angry father finding a boy in his daughter’s room.

“What is all the noise?” A bleary-eyed Sutton joined them. The moment she saw

Knox clad only in pants and Candice huddled in the sheets on the bed, her eyes cleared and then narrowed.

“Are you okay, Candice?”

The smile that was threatening grew legs and spread across her lovely face.

“It’s okay, mom and dad,” she teased.

Knox scowled, and Sutton’s lips twitched.

“We worry about you,” Sutton admonished, placing a hand on Mark’s arm.

“I know you do. We worked things out last night. I love him, and he loves me.”

Knox looked back at where Candice was still sitting on the bed. Her hair was wild, and she had the beginnings of a purplish mark on her neck.

“I do love you, Candice,” he proclaimed. “More than anything. I want to be with you, always.”

Sutton drew in a breath. “Are you proposing? Damn it, Knox, get on one knee!”

Mark drew Sutton into his arms. “I think they have it from here. I will give you fifteen minutes. And then I really do need to speak to you.”

Knox nodded in agreement and then closed the door behind them. Just as Sutton suggested, he sank to one knee.

Candice’s eyes widened. “What are you doing?”

Knox gave her a crooked smile. “I do want to marry you, have babies, eat pizza, and take care of my sweet neighbor together. I feel like I have loved you for forever, and I don’t want to spend another night apart. Will you marry me?”

Candice felt her lip tremble. The sheets forgotten, she reached her arms out to him.

Knox rose and went to the bed, cradling her in his arms. “Is that a yes?”

She nodded, eyes bright with emotion. “I really love you too, Knox.”

“I know you do, sweetheart.” He kissed her lips, and what was meant to be a sweet and tender kiss turned into something else altogether.

It was a full forty-five minutes until they were able to rejoin Mark and Sutton in the kitchen.

“Well,” Mark waved them in the direction of the pancakes. “Eat up, we have a situation.”

Knox stilled. “What is it?”

“Maggie is gone again.”

CHAPTER 31

Sutton

“My mother’s papers are gone, everything that we dug up in that time capsule.” My hands were shaking as I told Candice and Knox what Mark and I found that morning. “When I noticed that the door to her room was open, I looked inside and—well, you can see she left in a hurry.”

“How did she get into the safe?” Candice asked.

She had pulled on some pajamas and was blowing on her hot coffee. She looked tired and well loved. I couldn’t wait to get the full story about her night with Knox, but for now, this was critical that we resolve. I just had a hard time believing that Maggie had played us, even now.

“We don’t know,” Mark said grimly. “There aren’t signs of a forced entry. The front door was still locked when we got up; I can only imagine that she locked the door on the way out.”

“Those locks need to be changed immediately,” Knox instructed.

“Already on it,” Mark replied. “The locksmith should be here any minute. We are waiting to hear from Brian if he was able to locate Forrest or Father Montgomery. She’s got to be with one or the other. Natalie and another agent are watching the house.”

“Do you want to formally report a theft?” Knox looked around. “I don’t see a whole lot that we could track, but it would be in the system.”

“No,” I said decisively just as Mark said ‘yes’ just as firmly. “We will talk about it.”

Mark nodded. “That’s fair, we will let you know.”

Knox sighed. “Never a dull moment in Otterville Falls, is it?”

**

AFTER THE LOCKSMITH left, Mark and I sat down for some lunch. I fixed some sandwiches and he grabbed the fruit and drinks.

“Why don’t you want to report it?” Mark asked, taking a big bite.

I played with the crust, not feeling terribly hungry.

Shrugging, I replied, “It’s not like we need the money or that we know for sure if my mother should have had it. I wish that we had more information to go off of. But honestly, in my gut? Why would Maggie steal the papers and leave, making her look one hundred percent guilty? If I was in the same situation, I would take the papers and hide them, then pretend that I didn’t know what happened. I wouldn’t want to implicate myself.”

A smile played on Mark’s face. “If you were to rob someone of millions—, perhaps billions—, of dollars, that is what you would do? Have you thought about it much?”

I scowled at him. “Yes, for my first crime I intended to take out my new husband. What do you think?”

Mark's brows rose. "Aren't you afraid that he will find out? Smart, good-looking guy like him, I can't say that he wouldn't see it coming."

I rolled my eyes. "You've never met him. He is totally enamored with me, can't keep his hands to himself. He would never suspect a thing."

"You are pretty sexy." Mark moved closer to me. "Where is this husband of yours?"

My lips twitched. "Yes, this pregnant belly really brings the boys around."

His brows clapped together. "What boys? Is someone bothering you?"

I laughed at his murderous expression. "You are adorable. Did you know that?"

Mark made a face. "Men aren't adorable, Sutton. They can be sexy, smart, hung like a horse, fuck like a champ, but no—never adorable."

I leaned forward and took his face in my hands, loving the way his whiskers tickled my palms. "You are amazingly sexy, smart, hung like a horse, and damn do you ever fuck like a champ. But sweetheart, you are adorable."

He shook his head, but the smile playing about his mouth led me to believe that he liked being adorable—just a little bit.

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Mark kissed me softly. “Are you ready to go see Dr. Young?”

Dread pooled in my gut. The last thing I wanted to do was to see the boy wonder. It was bad enough that I had been there on our wedding night because of the allergic reaction I had from the shampoo.

Brian never was able to figure out where it came from. Now that Maggie was gone, I had a terrible suspicion that it might be her. I didn’t want to think that. She was so nice and we had let her into our home.

I also wondered how much of it was me wanting to have some family and her being my only link.

I shoved the thought aside. There were some things that I just couldn’t focus on at the moment.

“Dr. McChild looks like he is twelve. I can’t show my vagina to him.”

Mark choked back a laugh. “I am happy that you are being discerning as to who you show your vagina too.”

I poked him.

“But,” he continued, “you need to see a doctor, and Dr. Roberts has sent all of your information to Dr. Young, not as you have nicknamed him...McChild.”

I grimaced. “You don’t understand what it is like. They aren’t just taking a peek

beneath the hood. How would you like him poking around your dick, or better yet, your buttohole?”

Mark laughed again. “Would you be there? Sounds kinky.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the way he was wagging his eyebrows.

“You look like a crazy person,” I said.

“You are sounding like one,” he retorted. “Now, am I going to carry you or are you going to walk?”

“You are kind of a bully. They say that people change when they get married. I just hadn’t expected it to happen in the first week.”

Mark laughed again. “I love you. Would you rather see the OB-GYN/veterinarianOBGYN slashVeterinarian?”

A shudder ran through me. “No.”

And then because I had to ask, “Do we know how the piglets are doing?”

Mark’s crooked smile melted my heart. “We got a lovely thank-you note. Apparently, they had never received a newborn gift for their piglets before.”

I blushed. “Well, it seemed the thing to do.”

Rising to my feet, I allowed Mark to escort me out to the garage where I got into the SUV. The drive to Dr. Young’s office wasn’t far and I was thankful to see that the building, an older home that had been remodeled, was in beautiful shape. We walked into the office, and I liked the overstuffed chairs and cozy, homelike feeling.

Oh, Dr. Can't-Shave-Yet had done an excellent job with whoever did the decorating.

There were two other families there when we registered with the receptionist. I nearly dropped my bag when I saw Reena behind the desk.

"Since when do you work here?" I asked.

She smiled saucily. "Well, I was seeing Dr. Young to help with the depression after Max passed and he was looking for a receptionist. Sutton, I tell you this has been the most fun I've had in years."

I was shocked, to say the least. "., "Where is Alice?"

Moments later Alice came through the closed door. "Mary Lou?"

"Alice?" I said in surprise. "Do you have a medical background?"

She shook her head. "No, I just call them back to their rooms. Dr. Young has a nurse that does everything else. Don't I look cute in my uniform?"

Both Reena and Alice were wearing matching scrubs. Alice had to be a size two and Reena a size twenty-two and they both looked absolutely darling.

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I gritted my teeth. This Dr. Young was playing a deep game. The best way to get on my good side was to take care of the people I loved. And by the looks of things, Alice and Reena were happier than I had seen them in weeks.

Mary Lou went back with Alice, and Mark and I sat down for a moment.

“Well, what do you think of Dr. McChild now?” Mark’s tone was decidedly smug.

“Remember when I said you were adorable?”

His eyes widened and that sexy smirk was back. “Yes?”

“Damn it, you really are.”

CHAPTER 32

Mark

“Are you feeling any better, Mark?” Alice lifted another ice pack for me to replace the one that was currently sitting on the goose egg forming on my skull.

“Thank you, Alice.” I blinked, trying to get the world to make sense again. “Did the doctor say what I think he said?”

Alice sent a nervous look over to Dr. Young. “Was everything okay with the ultrasound?”

I had forgotten that she wasn't in there. Sutton and I had done all of the preliminary tasks of a prenatal appointment. From there Dr. Young had told her that she was past due for an ultrasound. He had squeezed the jelly stuff on her belly and pulled out the wand, just like Dr. Roberts had at one of the early appointments.

But I couldn't even wrap my brain around what happened next.

Dr. Young had smiled and asked, "Do you want to know the sex of your babies?"

Babies.

Two.

Duo.

Twins.

Things got a little fuzzy at that point, and the next thing I knew Alice was hovering over me. Apparently Dr. Young had called her in to bring a snack and an icepack.

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“Are you sure?” I said gruffly.

Dr. Young smiled. “A hidden twin is not a common occurrence, and yet it does happen. Sutton is almost twenty weeks, seven months so it would be hard to miss Baby B at this point. If you think you won’t hit the ground again, I can show you with the machine?”

Sutton was biting her lip, eyes glassy and a worried expression on her face.

I smiled weakly. “Of course I want to see them—err, Baby B. I want to see all of the babies.”

“How could this happen?” Sutton blurted out.

Dr. Young raised a brow. “The usual way, I assume. Twins occur when the fertilized egg splits in two or there are two fertilized eggs. In your case, it was a fertilized egg that split in two.”

“How do you know that?” Sutton’s voice was borderline hysterical.

Dr. Young continued to restart the ultrasound. Once the wand was pressed against her belly, he began to explain.

“Here you can see clearly there are two heads.” He continued to point out various body parts. “They share the same sac as well as the placenta. I would be willing to bet that you have identical twins here.”

“Twin boys?” Sutton asked in wonder.

Dr. Young shook his head. “No, do you see here? You are having a girl, and then over here, the same. I have labeled them Baby A and Baby B with the intent of making sure we get accurate measurements and keep good track of them. But if you would like to supply names I can put those in as well.”

“But they said we were having a boy?” Mark said weakly.

Dr. Young smiled knowingly. “It would appear that they were wrong. I can definitely see two girl fetuses.”

Sutton looked over at me. “Why don’t we have names? I am a terrible mother!”

Dr. Young wiped her belly off and helped Sutton to sit up. “It is normal to feel overwhelmed. You have recently married and there has been a lot of stress and extenuating circumstances that have been on your mind. However, now that we know there are twins, I would like to see you every two weeks. It’s important that we keep a close eye on these girls. We want what is best for you and Mr. Williams.”

Sutton nodded. “Alright, we will be here. Should I be doing anything else? I feel like my world has just been flipped upside down.”

Dr. Young shook his head. “You are healthy, the girls look good, honestly everything is going as it should be. Normally we would have a mother with twins come in twice a month at twenty-four weeks. I am just going to add the one extra appointment because of the stress you have been under and the allergic reaction you had. It’s better to be on top of these things and that is what we will do.”

**

AS WE LOADED INTO THE SUV, I couldn't help but feel a surge of excitement. I knew that Sutton was reeling from the news just as badly as I had been. But now I was starting to wrap my head around it, I couldn't help but picture two little girls with dark hair and silvery eyes. It was a vision that made my heart feel full to bursting.

Sutton was quiet, too quiet.

I reached over and took her hand. "Everything will be fine. I promise you."

She looked up at me with tears in her eyes. "I don't know how to be a mother. What if I ruin them?"

I pulled over to the side of the road and took her in my arms.

"Sutton, you will be an amazing mother. You are a phenomenal woman and one of the kindest people I have ever met. There is nobody on this earth that I would rather be having a baby with. And by some miracle of God, we are getting two. Thank you, baby."

She melted against me and I could feel some of the tension leave her body.

I squeezed her tight. "And we can always hire a dozen nannies if they end up being a nightmare."

She snorted in a horrified way. "They aren't going to be a nightmare. They are going to be perfect."

"What should we name Baby A and Baby B?" I asked. "You could name one and I could name the other!"

She didn't look convinced.

“Okay, what about Gertrude? We could call her Gerty?”

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Sutton shook her head. “No, you aren’t naming the girls.”

It seemed so natural for her to speak that way, almost as if they were already here.

“Okay,” I said with a smile. “You give the girls first names and I will give them middle names.”

She pursed her lips. “Okay, but I reserve the right of refusal of anything too hideous.”

The corners of my mouth threatened to turn up into a smile. “Deal, but I reserve the same right of refusal for their first name.”

Sutton rolled her eyes. “Fine, it’s a deal.”

We shook on it and then I captured her lips for a quick kiss before turning the car back on and navigating back to the Baker Mansion. After pulling into the garage, Sutton and I made our way inside through the kitchen.

Candice was sitting at the bar talking with Brian.

“How did it go?” She popped up to her feet.

Sutton smiled; it was hesitant, happy, and only just the smallest bit manic.

“We are having girls!”

Candice squealed in delight. “I am so excited you are having a girl!”

Brian cleared his throat. “Girls?”

Candice’s eyes widened and she looked at Sutton and me in disbelief.

I wrapped an arm around Sutton’s waist and grinned. “Twins, we are having two little girls.”

Brian got out some champagne and Sutton toasted with sparkling cranberry juice. It was nice to celebrate with the ones closest to us. Knox came over after his day at the station was done, and he, too, was thrilled with the news.

“I’m happy for you, Sutton,” he said with warmth in his tone. “If anyone deserves a happily ever after, it’s you. I wish that I had better news for you. But there is no sign of Maggie or Father Montgomery.”

Brian nodded. “Forrest is off the grid as well. There has been something I wanted to ask. Did we establish a connection between Father Montgomery and Gabriel?”

Sutton’s brows came together. “There was a rumor that maybe he was Gabe’s dad. I can’t remember who told me that.”

“Why do you ask?” Knox wondered.

“This is just my train of thought. I don’t think they were family. I think they were lovers. I think that Gabe was threatening the minister with going public about their relationship. I think that Gabe inadvertently said something about Sutton and not wanting to worry about her anymore. I think that the preacher broke into Martha and Earl’s place and found information about Sutton, and so after he killed Gabe I think that Father Montgomery looked closely at how Max, Earl, and Martha were tied to Sutton. I believe that he somehow found the truth about Judith. I think he was the one who contacted Forrest and I think he was behind Max’s murder.”

“Wow, do you have proof?” Knox shook his head. “We can’t do a damn thing without proof.”

Brian sighed. “No, but I think if you find Forrest, the preacher, or Maggie, you will likely find them all.”

CHAPTER 33

Sutton

“Hold on, are you trying to say that Gabe and Father Montgomery were having an affair?” I scoffed. “There is no way.”

Brian shrugged. “Why not?”

“Because,” I spluttered, “I have known Gabe my entire life. He’s a total manwhore.”

Brian’s eyes narrowed. “Okay, then tell me who his conquests were.”

“Every girl we went to high school with!” I retorted. “Gabe was always bragging about how he hit it with Kelly Summers, Donna Flagen, Amberly Jones, I could go on and on.”

“Out of those three girls, would you say that at least one of them would have a juicy, salacious story about Gabe? Some wild nights partying or at least a memory of hooking up?” Brian asked.

I nodded. “Definitely. I know that Kelly was his girlfriend for almost a year.”

A smirk broke out across Brian’s face. “Kelly was the one who told me that Gabe was gay.”

“You are shitting me,” I gasped. “She did not.”

Brian raised his hands in surrender. “Kelly said that her relationship with Gabe was strictly platonic. He promised to raise her popularity level in high school if she would cover for him. I don’t know Donna Flagen, but Amberly Jones had a very similar story. But where this gets really interesting is that Amberly’s older brother Kevin, who is gay, said that they dated until Gabe up and broke things off about a year ago.”

I could hardly believe it. “Gabe dated Kevin? He’s gorgeous!”

Mark tensed beside me.

“Nothing compared to you.” I kissed his cheek and Mark grumbled something, which I chose to think was ‘I love you.’

“Kevin was openly living the lifestyle when we were in school. He and Gabe have always been very close, I can see the connection. Looks like I am going to need to speak with Kevin and Amberly.” Knox got to his feet. “Anything else, detective?”

Brian shook his head. “No, but I do really feel like the connection is there.”

Knox nodded. “We will look into it. In the meantime, I want you all to consider not going to the Otterville Town Days.”

I drew in a harsh breath. “Not go to Town Days? Shit, Knox, why don’t you just take away Christmas as well?”

He made a face at me before continuing, “It is unlikely we will have an attack there. But I worry about Sutton being out in the open.”

I shrugged. “I understand, Knox, but I already promised Martha that I would help out at Abberly’s booth. She is going all out this year.”

Candice nodded. "I did too. Martha said she needed all the help she could get."

Knox sighed. "I don't like the idea of having the carnival people in town and not being able to keep an eye on everyone. But I understand that you can't live like you are trapped inside. Maybe we could compromise."

Mark agreed. "How about we are in by dark? In the daylight, Brian and his agents can keep a good eye on things. When darkness falls, we will be back home."

Knox nodded slowly. "Yeah, that could work. Do you have enough men to cover everyone at Town Days?"

Brian nodded. "Yes, but you are right. I would be better if they were indoors before nightfall. Town Days starts the day after tomorrow, right?"

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“Yes.” I grinned. “Tomorrow we will be helping set up all of the booths.”

Mark groaned. “‘We,’ meaning ‘me’?”

I smiled wider. “Precisely. I shall act as management.”

He growled and nipped at my ear.

Knox had gathered his hat and was moving toward the door. Almost as if he couldn’t help himself, he turned back to look at Candice. She was staring at his back and stood the moment he turned. Almost like a movie, she raced into his arms and kissed him goodbye.

It wasn’t overly dramatic or gushy, but it said more than mere words could.

Brian excused himself, and Mark went to get some work done in his office. Candice pretended to look at a magazine by her side.

“Spill it,” I pounced, snatching the magazine away.

Her cheeks reddened and her eyes lit with excitement. “Everything is just as it should be. I was silly to get so jealous of Natalie.”

I grinned at her. “Tell me everything!”

Candice told me what happened between the two of them, down to the naughty details.

I sighed. “You two are perfect for each other.”

She gave me a funny look. “Why do you sound sad?”

I hadn’t realized that she would pick up on it. I wasn’t sad, not really. I just hated change. I knew that eventually Mark and I would return to the city and Sutton Enterprises. Sure, we would visit and spend time here, but Candice and I had become like sisters. I didn’t want to see it end.

However, I also knew that I was being a selfish cow. This was her time, and I would be damned if I would make her feel bad.

“I’m not sad.” I took her hand. “I am so happy for you and Knox. Truly, I couldn’t be more excited. Also, I think we need to research BDSM toys.”

Her face flushed with embarrassment. “Sutton!”

“What?” I laughed. “It will be fun. Let me grab my laptop!”

**

TWO HOURS LATER WE rolled with laughter as I suggested installing a St. Andrew’s Cross in the basement.

“Oh! Candice, look, you can get the dungeon kit and a bondage horse together!”

She pointed to the one below it. “This one vibrates. What is that thing sticking out?”

I looked closer. “I think that’s his penis.”

Our heads tipped to the side as we tried to figure out what we were seeing.

A little further down, Candice exclaimed, “Oh! That earring is so cute!”

I nearly spit the ice tea that I was drinking across the room.

“That isn’t an earring. That is a butt plug.”

Candice frowned. “No, it couldn’t be.”

I clicked on the image and a site pulled up with hundreds of pretty butt plugs with jewels on the end.

“Hey, Sutton, I was wondering if you wanted to...” Mark’s voice trailed off. “What are you looking at?”

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I smiled up at him. “Butt plugs. I ordered a few, I hope you don’t mind.”

He swallowed twice and I could see him getting hard behind the fly of his pants.

“Whatever you want,” he blurted out before turning rapidly and leaving the room.

“Wait,” I called out. “What, “what did you need me for?”

“Nevermind!” came his reply from the other room.

Candice and I burst into hysterical giggles.

“I can’t believe you just said that.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief. “You are going to have to buy some now.”

I nodded. “I think I will, right after I order your vibrating bondage bench!”

By the time we put the computer up we both had some kinky things ordered in the mail. But nothing as severe as a bondage bench. I didn’t know about Candice, but it wasn’t too appealing to me.

If she and Knox wanted to delve further, they had my blessing. I loved seeing her so happy.

We also ordered some practical things as well. Seeing as we only had one crib and things for one baby, we went ahead and ordered duplicates of everything. Then seeing as how we now knew the babies were girls, we bought some things to add a

feminine touch to the nursery.

One can't look at baby things and not get some baby clothes as well. All of the little outfits seemed twice as cute when buying for two.

Martha called to make sure that we were still planning on coming to set up in the morning. We assured her that we would be there at ten.

“Perfect!” Martha exclaimed. “I have matching shirts for us and everything!”

As Candice and I rolled our eyes at the thought of wearing matching t-shirts with Martha, I couldn't help the surge of affection for the older woman. This crazy family of mine wasn't conventional but I loved them as fiercely as they loved me.

I didn't know what the future held, but I knew that Mark and I would be bringing our babies into a family that would care for them, love them, and always stand by them. And maybe, for now, that was enough.

End of book #2