Beaumont Brides

Deleted Scenes

Book 2

Preston didn’t drive straight to campus. Instead, he drove around the block to see if anyone was wandering through the neighborhood, mainly Mr. Private College. From a block away, he spotted the young man and a couple of friends hanging out by a lamppost in front of a tavern that had closed for the night. As if they hadn’t drunk enough already, they were passing a bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag. Where were the cops when you needed them? but in this part of the town, the police left the college kids alone unless wreaking death and destruction. Most of the students did nothing more than drink and drink and drink. It didn’t bother anyone else except themselves, which they’d realize in a few years. Or not.

Apparently, one of them had told a joke because they were weaving and holding their stomachs. The young man lifted his gaze and spotted Preston’s headlights. His face tightened and he stumbled backwards. As if finally realizing Preston wasn’t the police he wove down the sidewalk toward Preston.

Preston got out of the car.

The young man pointed the bottle at Preston. His friends leaned against the lamppost and watched.

“I thought it was you.” His words were slurred and he listed to the left.

“No, you didn’t. you thought I was the police.”

“No.” The man drew out the word and shook his head.

“Yeah, you did, but that’s moot. I here to make your promise. You’ll never see me again.”

“That’s a promise I like.”

“You’ll never see me again unless you bother that waitress again, then you’ll see more of me than you’ll like.”

The man laughed and his shoulders shook. He looked around as if expecting his friends to be nearby. he seemed shocked when he saw them slouched against the lamppost.

He turned back to Preston and narrowed his eyes as if trying to focus. “Does she know you hunted me down?”

“For the record, I didn’t hunt you down. You’re pretty transparent. I had a feeling I’d find you nearby. And no, she doesn’t know about this meeting. It would be better for you if she didn’t know.”

“For me?” He stabbed his thumb into his chest. “Ha! I’d say she’ll be a little testy when she finds out you’ve designated yourself as her knight in shining armor. It’ll be Mount Vesuvius when I tell her.”

“If you remember, which I doubt you will, and if she lets you talk to her, and she’s made it clear, she won’t be doing that. Do yourself a favor and go home. You’re going to feel like death warmed over tomorrow morning. Can you find your way back or do you need a lift?”

“From you? I don’t need no lift. I know exactly where I’m going.”

“So do I, pal, so do I.” Preston climbed into his car.

He waited until the young man realized Preston wasn’t standing in front of him anymore. He turned away and stumbled down the sidewalk to his friends.

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In the dark glowed an ember end of a cigarette. It moved toward her.

“I’d say you’re being rather rude to your date. She invited you to an award ceremony. The least you can do is pretend you’re interested.” She felt a bubble of panic rise up her throat and fought it down. She took a deep breath filling her lungs with enough air to calm her.

“I did that.” Light from the fountain lit his face. “I didn't see you for a while. I thought maybe you left.”

“I am leaving. I’m leaving right now.” She whirled away.

He leaned toward her, grabbed her arm and jerked her to him. “Not so fast.”

“How dare you.” Her jaw clenched, she slapped him across the face.

His cigarette flew from his hand and plopped into the fountain. He released her.

Realizing what she’d done, she pressed both hands to her mouth. She hadn’t meant to slap him, he grabbed. She didn’t even like him. Not as a person. Not as a man.

“You keep your hands to yourself.” Her voice low, it grew tighter with each word. “You made a bold move. Don’t you ever touch me again.”

“You’re a regular little spitfire, aren’t you, darling. I had you pegged the first time I saw you. All prim and southern belle proper, but I’ll bet you can show me a good time beneath the sheets.”

“You’re drunk.” She curled her fingers into her fists. The heat of her anger spread through chest and into her limbs.

She’d waitressed enough to know how to handle belligerent customers. This man was soft and rich—the easiest kind to put down. Give her another minute, she’d have him slinking away.

“I may be drunk, but—”

A French door into the dining hall opened and the speaker’s voice grew louder.

“What’s going on?” Preston’s voice split through the night.

“We’re doing fine, Mr. Officer Cadet.” The man leaned to one side. He spread his legs, but leaned to the other side. “Go inside. Get your award.”

“I want to hear that from Willow.” Preston’s gaze locked onto her.

“I can handle this.” Willow narrowed her eyes at him. “I’ve put up with worse at the bar.”

“I never said you couldn’t.” Preston’s voice was even.

The door filled with white uniforms and guests wearing black and red and blue and diamonds. A woman cadet pushed through the front. The woman who invited the drunk weaving next to the fountain. Her face tightened with anger. She turned away. Pushing through the crowd she stormed through into the banquet hall.

Preston grabbed the man’s arm. “Time for you to call it a night.”

“What do you mean? I just got here.”

“Then you’ve been drinking all day.”

“Does it show?”

“Preston rolled his eyes. “Come on, pal. You’ve already insulted your date. Tell everyone goodnight.”

Another cadet took the man’s arm. “We’ve already called driver to come get him. I’ll take him to the foyer and wait with him until his ride comes. Come with me, Party Spoiler. You’ve caused enough problems for one night.”

\* \* \*

“Preston, wait.” Ed called after him.

Preston slowed his pace and lifted his eyes to the cloudy sky that had been promising rain since he’d climbed out of bed this morning.

“Why are you leaving? You said you’d hang out with me.”

“Sorry, Ed, I’m just not into a club mood tonight. Hang out with the other guys. They’ll help you meet girls.”

“No, they won’t.” Ed tugged on one of his fingers. Never was it more evident that Fort Peyton had admitted Ed because of his family connections—oldest money in Charleston, according to rumor.

Preston laid a hand on his shoulder. “Maybe another night. I’m not always going to around to help you.” He swallowed. He hadn’t meant it to come out that way. “You’re going to have to learn to meet girls on your own.”

“I know.” Ed glanced over his shoulder at the nightclub.

“Start tonight. We’ll talk tomorrow.” Preston turned away. He didn’t want Ed’s hangdog face to guilt him into returning to the club. He moved away slowly but tuned his ears to the sound of Ed’s footsteps heading back to the club. When he heard them, he released the air locked into his lungs.

Ed would learn. It wouldn’t be easy, but someday he’d realize he was worthy. There would be a woman who would agree, someone who wouldn’t just be checking his family’s bank account.

\* \* \*

She looked around the apartment. How could she afford it? She’d been so excited the day she’d signed the leasing contract. One month later, Ethan had moved in. With him gone, there was no way she could afford the rent, though Ethan had rarely contributed to their living expenses. She was already working two jobs. She still have four months left on the lease. She could find a roommate, but who wanted to share space with a woman who threw up every thirty minutes? By the time the baby came, only a saint could tolerate the tiny cry begging for food and a clean diaper that would permeate the one bedroom apartment. And who would babysit when she was at work? Not Mama.

\* \* \*

He pushed away from the table.

“You’re not leaving already.” His suitemate Ed crooked the corner of his mouth.

“Yeah, I’m leaving. I should’ve left ten minutes ago.”

“We hadn’t left the barracks ten minutes ago.”

“Exactly.” He scanned the club filled with debutantes and the current crop of debs delight. Unlike the other cadets, this lifestyle held no allure for him. He had hoped to escape it when he’d been accepted to Fort Peyton.

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That hunky guy I saw you with at The Grill a few weeks ago.”

“You mean Ethan?” A wave of panic caught her. But she hadn’t seen him in months. She swallowed convulsively. Was he back? Did he know she was pregnant? She didn’t need another complication in her life. “What about him?”

“Not Ethan. He’s gone. Goodbye and good riddance. I’m talking about the other guy.”

“What other guy?” Her heart beat a little faster. Several of her friends had seen her with Preston.

“I’d be in trouble if I told you.”

“Tell me what? Did something happen to him? Where are you? Are you at the hospital?”

“I’m at the hospital because this is where I work. I move patients to and from the operating room.” Silence dropped through the phone. “That’s all I’m saying. It was nice talking to you, Willow. Don’t be a stranger.” The phone went dead.

“I have to paitings here. I’m sorry, but I don’t have time―”

“Don’t you worry about

“What about your paintings and your other stuff?” Laverne’s bewildered voice called after her.

“Oh.” Willow whipped around and stared at the older woman surrounded by Willow’s crates filled with paintings and artist supplies. She gripped her hands into fists. “I don’t have time to arrange everything in my car.”

“Isn’t that a shame?” Laverne’s full mouth curved into a smile.

“Do you know anything about this?” Willow narrowed her eyes at her.

“Know anything about what? You’re not making sense.” Moving down the steps, Laverne fluttered her hands at Willow. “Get going, girl. You won’t know what’s happening until you get to the hospital.”

Willow stared at the crates filled with her canvases. “I can’t leave my paintings on the porch. I’ll take these inside.”

“He’s in post op.” She took Willow’s hand. “Come with me I’ll make sure you get in, but you have to promise not to tell anyone.”

“I promise,” she whispered roughly.

Earlene led her down a hallway to a pair of double doors labeled NO ADMITTANCE in bold red letters. Earlene punched in a code and the doors floated open.

“Good luck,” Earlene rasped.

“You’re not coming with me?” Willow panicked and reached for Earlene’s hand.

“I have to get back. Nurse Ratchet is supervising our floor today. If I’m gone more than five minutes, she’ll send out a search party. Get in there before the doors close.” She gave Willow a gentle shove.

Willow clamped a hand to the crown of her hat and shuffled into the sterile room lined with curtained cubicles. A nurses’ station stood in the center but was unattended. Willow wandered down the hall dividing the cubicles.

“May I help you?” Willow turned to see a woman standing near the entrance.

“I’m here to see Preston Lowe.” Willow’s heart pounded so hard she could barely draw a breath. What if they threw her out?

The woman moved to the nurses’ station and studied her computer screen. “You must be Mrs. Lowe.” The woman’s gaze dropped to Willow’s stomach. “We didn’t realize he was married.”

*Married!*

Her knees weak, she grabbed the back of a chair.

“I…” She tightened her mouth and rubbed her hand over her stomach. She was a bad liar. If she said anything, they’d know the truth.

“I’ll take you to him.” The woman’s stern face dissolved into a smile. “Is this your first?”

“Yes.”

“You must be so excited.”

“Yes. Very.” Her voice was flat, but the woman didn’t seem to notice.

\* \* \*

He said little to his mother. Whatever news he shared with her was passed to Trudy who used the information as a reason to visit him at the hospital. Distress flickered in her eyes when they traveled to his stump resting on the prosthesis. In her eyes lay the shattered dream of marrying the man who would continue to support her in the manner to which she was accustomed. The thought of marrying an amputee seemed to destroy her. The last time she visited, Preston took her to the garden. What he had to say, no one else needed to hear.

She was young and beautiful. Other men wanted to date her. She should give them a chance. With a sad nod, she picked up her purse and left, her long hair a riot of dancing curls waving him goodbye.

\* \* \*

Graduation didn’t go smoothly. As predicted, his mother questioned him about his orders when she stepped off the plane.

And Trudy also arrived at the airport to greet his mother, though her stray glances at his prosthesis filled her eyes with disappointment. She hadn’t given up hope that he’d come to his senses and propose marriage to her, even though he’d never shown interest in her. Looking into Trudy’s eyes he saw the struggle with making a commitment to an amputee.

Willow seemed to like him for himself—as a friend. That made it easier to control himself.

“The ceremony’s about to start, Preston. You need to sit on the dais.” His mother didn’t add with the other important people.

They were standing near the platform. Several professors and board members congratulated Preston. He introduced them to his mother and Trudy.

“There’s still time.” Preston looked over the crowd.

“Who are you looking for?” Kim asked.

“Some other friends,” Preston said, though they both knew he was looking for Willow.

She had said she’d try to come, if she could find someone to watch Abigail. Blanche couldn’t watch the baby even if she wanted to, which she didn’t. Laverne wanted to, but Willow thought a newborn would be too much for her even though she babysat her grandchildren and great grandchildren. Willow thought Laverne’s relatives took advantage of her.

“The nice thing about grandchildren is that they go home after you spoil them rotten.” Laverne had said. She rocked back on her heels and laughed.

The graduation crowd quieted. The graduates and the guests took their seats.

“I’ll see you after the ceremony.” Preston escorted his mother and Trudy to their reserved seats in the front then climbed the steps to his seat on the dais.

It wasn’t until he was giving his speech that he saw Willow in the audience. She was sitting on the end of a middle row. Her smiling face beamed at him as if realizing he’d just noticed her. Her presence energized him. He didn’t want to look away, but after looking at the audience he managed to look back at her. He could tell by the shifting from the administrative officers and the regents that they had noticed the change in his tone.

He finished his speech to a standing ovation, which humbled him. He accomplished what every other cadet had accomplished. These were men and women who were dedicated to their futures. Where they would be five years from now was the chance they were willing to take.

He glanced at Willow who was on her feet clapping and whistling. His mother turned around to see who emitted such a raucous sound. When her gaze traveled over Willow, her expression turned sour. She seemed to sense Preston’s happiness at Willow’s presence and her scowled deepened. The cadets received their diplomas and ended the ceremony with the celebratory hat toss. Cheers, applause and conversations filled the quadrangle.

“I want to talk to the president about your orders.” Kim hadn’t asked to see Preston’s diploma. Making sure Preston landed a career that catapulted him into a prestigious position that reflected on her carried more interest.

His gaze swept the quadrangle. Where was Willow? He saw her floppy hat, one slim hand pressing it to the crown of her head. She was walking away.

“I’ll be right back.” He sprinted away.

His mother calling after him didn’t stop him. Willow had come to the ceremony. Now, she was leaving. Why?

“Willow,” he called above the din.

If she heard him, she didn’t stop. She seemed to quicken her pace.

“Willow.” He slid through groups gathered around the campus talking, taking pictures.

The relief of finally receiving a degree floated over the field.

He reached through the crowd and grabbed Willow’s arm. It felt slim and delicate beneath his touch.

He heard the catch in her breath. When she turned to him, there was a sheen in her eyes.

“Hi.” He could think of nothing else to say. There was nothing between them. He released her.

“Hey, Preston. Congratulations.” Her eyes were too bright as if she would burst into tears. She looked over her shoulder.

“Did you come with someone?” His gaze followed hers.

“No, just me. I left Abigail with Laverne. I should get back. It’s hard to leave her even for a few minutes let alone a few hours.”

“I’m glad you came.”

“So am I. You must be so proud.”

Maybe he had accomplished something, but it felt more like a stepping stone to what he really wanted—an overseas assignment.

“Preston. Preston.” His mother’s voice sliced through the hubbub.

“You should get back to your family.” Willow said.

When would he see her again? He had to ask, but if he did there would be a connection. He couldn’t risk what that would do to him. How did everything get so complicated? A few months ago, he knew he would be shipped overseas, and he’d never look back. He’d meet the soldiers who had served several tours. It made his blood pound knowing the opportunities that waited for him.

But now?

“When are you shipping out?” Willow asked.

“The end of next week.”

“I’ll be busy with Priscilla. She has some ideas of what she wants to do with my art. And then there’s Abigail. You should see her, Preston. She changes every day. I hope I get to see you before you leave.”

There it was. She wanted to see him. He wanted to see her.

Don’t do it, Preston.

“We should do that.” How he kept hope out of his voice he’d never know.

“Preston.” His mother was at his elbow.

“Preston.” Trudy sounded breathless. “We’ve been calling after you. Didn’t you hear us? The president said he had a few minutes to talk to us. All of us.”

“Hello, Mrs. Duvall. It’s nice to see you again.” Willow’s face spread into a smile that lit her eyes. “Hi, Trudy.”

“Hello, Willow.” Trudy sounded bored.

“Willow.” His mother’s voice had an edge. “It was kind of you to attend the ceremony.”

“Kind?” Willow almost choked. “After all Preston’s done for me?” She seemed to miss the darkness in Kim’s eyes. “I wouldn’t’ve missed it for anything. You must be so proud.”

“I am. Yes. Preston, darling, the president is waiting. We’ll talk to him and then we have that dinner reservation.”

“Have dinner with us.” Preston couldn’t stop looking at Willow.

“I couldn’t do that. I mean with this being a family event. It was nice enough that you invited me to the ceremony. I have your gift in the car but seeing you’re in a rush I’ll drop it by later.” She stepped backwards—away from him. “Enjoy your dinner.” She turned and hurried away.

The crowd moved into her wake.

She was gone.

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The conversation with the president didn’t meet with Kim’s expectations. With her usual huff, she voiced her irritation. It was Preston’s firm voice that quieted her. He was accepting an overseas assignment. When he took leave, he wouldn’t travel to Colorado. He’d returned to Charleston. Already he wondered what it would be like to see Willow with Abigail.

Willow had her own life. She had her own friends. She was making a name for herself. She had her daughter. She had a future—a future that could include falling in love with someone who would love her and her daughter, marry her. Give her the life she deserved.

Graduation day should’ve filled him with relief and joy. Instead, he felt weary.

He had nothing to offer Willow.

Soon he’d be overseas. Within a few months, he wouldn’t think about Willow every day.

The following day, he drove his mother to the airport. Trudy had offered to accompany them, but Preston told her he didn’t see the need for her to endure another boring afternoon. Her own graduation was next weekend. After that, she’d begin a European tour.

Kim led every conversation back to the post that waited for Preston at the Pentagon. He offered no comment.

When they arrived at the airport, she invited him to join her for lunch. He declined. He hadn’t told her he was shipping out next week. She’d learn soon enough when she started receiving his emails.

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was the last day for the graduates to leave campus. Most of them had left, but Deena had texted her that she’d seen Preston jogging along the Battery. It was hard to miss him. He had one muscular leg and one metal leg. She’d waved him down and asked how he was doing.

“*He didn’t ask about you, but I could tell he wanted to, so I told him you were doing great. You are, aren’t you? You haven’t kept in touch*.” Deena had typed.

“*I’m fine*.” Willow typed. “*I hope you are, too*.” She waited before finishing the text. “*I’m glad Preston is fine, too*.”

She dropped her phone.

\* \* \*

At the hospital this morning, Priscilla had helped her pack up Abigail and Laverne and Greenberry and driven them to the farm. On the way, Willow called her mother to share her good news. She thought Abigail’s arrival was good news. Blanche sobbed quietly into the phone filling Willow with dismay. Did Blanche cry because she was happy, or drunk? Maybe both. Through her tears, her mother tried to speak but Willow couldn’t understand her. Before she could ask the call disconnected. Willow gave a rough exhale and stared out the window. She’d give her mother a few days and call her again. She wanted Blanche to see her granddaughter but not before she set ground rules—no smoking or drinking around the baby. Her hope that Blanche would be the doting grandmother her own had been was tenuous. Blanche’s happiness came from the fulfillment of her own needs. Expecting more seemed

Willow felt Priscilla’s questioning look but the sadness filling her throat made talking impossible. Priscilla seemed to understand and drove along the tar patched road in silence. From the backseat came Greenberry’s and Laverne’s soft conversation. It was the soothing sound Willow needed to remind her who her family was.

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You going to stay out here all day?” Laverne walked down the front steps, the steps facing the river, and moved down the path toward her.

“I’ll come in. Abigail’s been so quiet I almost forget she’s here. I’ve been peeking beneath the blanket, but she seems happy to nap.” She lifted the blanket. “It’s almost feeding time. I’ll clean up now so I’m ready when she wakes.”

“I’ll help you.” Laverne moved around the canvas and stared at the painting.

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“I need something from town. My list is inside. Let’s get these paints cleaned up. While you shop, I’ll give Abigail a bottle.”

“She doesn’t need a bottle. I’m right here.”

“But you won’t be. I want you to go to the supermarket on Ocean Way.” She whisked paintbrushes in turpentine.

“There’s no supermarket on Ocean Way.” Willow stored her paints in her artist box.

“Sure, there is. You better hurry before it closes.”

“It’s eleven in the morning.”

“I know. They’re hours are a little different.”

“Laverne, you’re not being very subtle. The academy is on Ocean Way.”

“Is it?” She wiped the brushes on a cloth and handed them to Willow.

“You know it is.”

“Put these in your box. I’ll carry Abigail inside.”

“I’ll carry Abigail.” Willow handed the artist box to Laverne. “You take the box.”

“I don’t think I should take the painting.”

“You won’t. I can carry Abigail and the painting just fine. Put the box in the solarium. Where’s this grocery list you’re all fired up about?”

Laverne grabbed the handle of the artist box and marched up the steps to the house. She was in the kitchen by the time Willow entered.

“Here’s the list.” She slipped the carrier handle from Willow’s grasp. “I’ll have Abigail fed and changed by the time you get back.”

“A couple of times.” Willow looked at the grocery list. “Cornmeal? You want me to drive to town for cornmeal? Miller’s Corner has cornmeal. I’ll buy it there. You like theirs better anyway.”

“No.” Laverne’s voice was sharp and made Willow wince. “They don’t grind it right.”

“Since when?”

A knock sounded on the back door. Laverne frowned. Her head tipped. “Who could that be?”

“I’ll get it.” Willow moved past Laverne.

Preston stood on the other side of the screen door.

Willow shook her head. “Laverne was about to send me on a shopping trip to town.”

“If you need to leave…”

“I don’t need to leave. She… never mind. I’m surprised to see you here. Is everything all right?”

“Everything’s perfect.”

The turmoil grinding through her added to her confusion. She loved looking at him, being with him.

“I don’t understand why you’re here and why you’re not halfway across the Atlantic by now.”

“I’m not going.”

“Preston, I’m sorry. I know how much you wanted this position.”

“I did want it.”

“I don’t understand. Everything had been arranged. President Carlson made sure you got the assignment you wanted.

“He did, and I’m going to owe him an explanation.”

“Did someone—”

“Meaning my mother? No, she had nothing to do with it. I’m looking at the woman who had everything to do with it.” He gave her a hot look that made her pulse jump. “Actually, I’m looking at the two women who had everything to do with my decision.” His gaze dropped to the baby carrier.

Soft cooing sounds rose through the blanket.

“She’s waking. She’s been asleep a long time. I thought I’d have to wake her.” She pulled back the blanket.

Abigail squinted her eyes. Willow laughed and Abigail looked around as if trying to find the voice that gave her comfort.

“Are you waking, little one?” Willow scooped her into her arms. “Are you ready for lunch?”

“May I?” Preston nodded toward the baby.

“She’s almost ready to eat. She may not keep her good mood.”

“That’s something I’ll have to get used to.”

His words scooped air from her lungs. “What are you saying?”

“The night I saw, the night I went to The Club with my friends, I fell in love with you.”

Confusing emotions tore through her chest.

“I know I’ve been distant. I didn’t want to get close to you. I knew getting close to you would interfere with what I wanted.”

“I know you want to serve overseas.”

“I thought I did. As I was packing, all I could think about was not seeing you for a long time, if ever. These few days without you have felt as if half of me has been torn away.”

“Preston, you don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Have you ever known me to not know what I’m saying?”

She looked away. “That’s beside the point. Think about it. You have your whole life ahead of you. I’m a package deal. Abigail is a part of me.”

“I’m so glad she is. So, what I’m about to ask is a question for you and for Abigail. Will you be my wife?”

“You would want another man’s child?”

“She isn’t another man’s child. If you say yes, I’ll make her my child.”

Willow trembled. She dropped into a side chair.

Abigail quieted as if sensing something about her mother had changed. She waved her tiny fists. Willow held her close.

“Willow Dockery, will you marry me?”

“I can’t think of anything more I’d rather do.”

“Is that a yes or a no?” Hesitancy flickered in his eyes.

“It’s a yes yes yes!” Her voice filled with tears and joy.

He knelt before her taking her hand in his, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers. Rising to his feet, he guided her from the chair. Wrapping his arms around her and the baby, he gave a shuddering exhale.

Willow leaned into the curve of his chest still filled with wonder at the man who wanted to be her husband. Lifting her face to his, she kissed him again and let his love rush through her. At last she was where she belonged.

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Whipping off his shirt, he swiped at the dusty backseat. Dust swirled, and he leaned away from the cloud floating out the door.

“Get a blanket or a towel.” He shouted at Blanche. He didn’t want Willow laying in this questionable car. God only knew what might be living in it.

Blanche gasped before shouting a foul word. “Lenny Todd, get a towel.”

Steps sounded over the pavers and disappeared into the house before Lenny Todd reappeared in the doorway. “Where do I find a towel?” Lenny Todd’s bushy brows hooked over his nose.

“Do I have to think for everybody? In the linen closet.” Blanche’s southern charm soothed the screech rumbling through her voice.

Lenny Todd ducked into the house.

“Forget the towel.” “I found it. I found the towel.” Lenny Todd held the terrycloth above his head like a trophy. Grabbing the handrail, he half walked half stumbled down the steps. Holding the towel in front of himself, he ran to Blanche. “Here. Is this what you wanted?”

“Don’t give it to me. Put it in the car.”

He looked at the car, confused.

“Lenny Todd, drape it over the backseat.” Blanche paced at the base of the steps. “My baby girl can’t lay on that dusty upholstery.”

His eyes brightened as if understanding his mission. He ducked into the car.

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“Did you check into other options?”

“Like abortion?” Her face paled.

The doctor didn’t comment.

“Oh, God,” Preston muttered. The words hit Preston hard. He hadn’t meant to say anything but when the doctor looked at him, he realized he had.

“I’ve thought about it.” Willow’s voice was controlled. “No matter what I do, it’s a decision I’ll live with for the rest of my life. Right now, having the baby is the decision I can live with.”

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“That’s too far.” She waved her hand dismissively. “I’ll drive to Mama’s.”

“You’re staying with her?” His gaze dropped to her swollen stomach, her hand resting gracefully on the perfectly shaped mound. “Is that wise?”

“Probably not the best option but I didn’t want Laverne and Greenberry to wait. The fact they wanted to come was such a blessing, especially since Mama…you know.” He hated seeing the disappointment in her eyes.

“I’ll pay for a hotel for you to stay in. Don’t stay at your mother’s. You know she and her friends will be smoking and drinking until dawn.”

“Preston, I don’t need your money.” She stuttered a laugh. “For once, I can say that and mean it. I have money of my own.”

“Will you at least consider staying at a hotel? I’ll drive you to the farm tomorrow. Why wait until tomorrow? I’ll drive you there tonight. At this hour, traffic is light. It won’t take long.”

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I’ll know more after the tests. If that’s the case, we’ll discuss treatments.

“Meaning chemo.” How had this happened?

“It it’s that serious. We’ll try radiation first.”

“If that doesn’t work, will I lose my leg?”

“We have a long way to go before we come to that conclusion.” Preston didn’t miss the flicker in the doctor’s eyes.

“If that will happen, I want to know now.”

“Not if I can help it.” Dr. Bergstrom spread his hands palms down on his knees. “

A muscle jerked in Preston’s jaw. The radiation had to work.

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The rumble in his stomach heaved up his throat.

“Preston, what’s the matter?” Her voice trembled. Her arms wide, she stepped backwards.

He muttered a foul word and looked around. Seeing the open door and the shaggy rug that covered the tiled floor, he dashed down the hall to the bathroom and slammed the door.

\* \* \*

“Preston, what is it?” Willow chased after him. At the door, she spread her fingers over the panel. “Are you all right?”

She heard a gurgle and a stream of liquid hitting water. “Oh, no, Preston, are you sick? Open the door. Preston, what’s going on?” she called through the panel.

Another wretch with more splashing.

“Preston? Preston.” She pounded harder.

The toilet flushed. Water poured from the faucet.

The door opened.

Preston wavered and braced his hands against the doorjamb, his face void of color.

She cinched her bathrobe around her middle. “Should I call an ambulance?”

“No.” He rasped. He shuffled past her to the front door.

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