

## Sweet Water

What was wrong with everyone? How did no-one else see it?

Mary sighed, closed her school locker, began walking to class.

The whole world was *wrong*. Everything felt so... twisted. She couldn't put her finger on what it was, exactly. Couldn't quite figure out *what* was wrong, but she could *feel* it. The world wasn't how it was supposed to be.

When a familiar face caught her attention, Mary stopped.

Her older sister – Sandra – smiled at her, held her arms out wide and wrapped Mary in a tight embrace.

"Mary!" Sandra grinned as she held onto her younger sibling. "How are you? It's been too long!"

Mary blinked, frozen in place.

What was her sister doing here? At twenty-one, Sandra was way too old for high-school. She'd dropped out as soon as she'd turned eighteen, gotten hitched right away – just like every other girl around.

"Sandra?" Mary asked, pushing her sister back. "What're you doing here? Has something happen to Junior or David?"

Sandra shook her head, smiled.

"The kids are fine," she said, hand moving down to rest on her slightly protruding belly. Already pregnant again. Third time in as many years. "Hubby got me a job here. I'm gonna be his secretary, and a fill-in teacher for Sewing and Cooking classes."

"Principal Mathias hired you?" Mary asked, stunned.

"You don't need to call him that," her sister said, rolling her eyes. "He's family. You can call him Max, you know."

"You're going to be *working* here?"

"Yes, Mary," Sandra smiled. "Is that so hard to believe?"

Just three years ago, she'd been a student at the school same as Mary was now. So yes, it *was* hard to believe. Why had the principal gone out of his way to make *this* happen? Wasn't it bad enough that he'd stolen Sandra away? Did he *really* have to parade her around the school now too?

"What about..." She looked at Sandra's belly. The beginnings of her third pregnancy. "That."

Sandra giggled.

"I'm pregnant," Sandra said. "Not diseased. It's a baby, not a monster. When I'm close to the due date, I'll take time off. No big deal."

No big deal. Sure.

As if being twenty-one and pregnant with her third child was normal. As if marrying her principal at eighteen, dedicating her life to being his wife and child-bearer, was normal.

Except, it *was* normal.

Every single girl Mary knew, as soon as they turned eighteen, got hitched with some older guy in their life – started shooting out babies like it was a sport. Not a single one of Mary's friends who was over the age of eighteen was still around. Not one.

Only Mary herself seemed immune. She'd turned eighteen last week.

"I should get to class," Mary told her sister. "Don't wanna be late for Cleaning lessons."

Why was that a thing?

Why did girls have to learn about cooking and cleaning and sewing and house-care when boys got maths and science lessons?

"Before you go," Sandra said, reaching out to stop Mary as she walked by. "I wanted to invite you over for dinner this evening. I'd like to spend some time with you for once, and give you the chance to get to know Max a little better."

"Can't," Mary shrugged. "Dad and Mom are expecting me home by-"

"I already called them," Sandra smiled. "They said it was fine! I'll pick you up after school, okay? By the main gate. It'll be fun, I promise."

Great. Just great.

Mary climbed into the passenger seat, already regretting the decision that'd been made for her.

"Max needs to stay behind for a little while, school work to take care of and such. So we'll get there before him. Nora is going to sort out the cooking for today, so we can spend some time together. Just me 'n' you, like the old days."

The old days. When the two of them had promised they wouldn't get married. They'd go to college and university and show the world that women could be more than just housewives. What'd happened? How had Sandra changed from that into *this*? The ideal, homely housewife and mother. Where had it all gone so terribly wrong?

"Will *Nora* be watching the brats, too?" Mary asked.

"Of course," Sandra smiled, starting the car's engine. "She has a lot more experience than me, and certainly more than you do. If you want, you can ask her all about what it means to be a woman. She's so *wise*, Mary. There's so much you can learn from her."

Nora. Principal Mathias' first wife. Closer to her husband's age than Sandra, that was for sure.

Hell, the principal's eldest child was probably older than Sandra was.

"No thanks," Mary grumbled. "Not interested."

"One of these days," Sandra noted, eyes on the road ahead of her, "you're going to have to grow up, Mary. Every girl does. I did. The world isn't about you. It's about *us*. A community, a family. We're women. And we have a place where we belong. The sooner you realise that, the sooner-"

"I'll find an old man to knock me up?" Mary snapped. "I don't want that, Sandra. It's not me."

"Don't worry," Sandra smiled. "You'll find your way eventually. You'll see it, just like I did. When you have a husband, when you have children, you'll understand. This is the way the world is meant to be. Not that silly stuff we used to talk about years ago."

Wanting a life for herself wasn't *silly*.

Why should she have to lock herself away and look after kids she didn't want? Why couldn't she become a doctor or a politician or a business leader? Why was it that only *men* did that stuff?

"What happened to you?" Mary sighed. "You used to be so..."

"Childish?" Sandra supplied.

"Different," Mary stated.

"Things change," Sandra told her. "People change. I'm happy with who I am now, how I live. I'm happy in a way I can't even begin to explain, Mary. Max and the boys? It's everything I never knew I wanted. They *complete* me. You'll know too, soon enough. You're at that age yourself."

"Nope," Mary said softly. "Not interested."

"You will be," Sandra smiled knowingly.

Screaming babies. So much screaming.

Mary wanted to go into the next room and throttle them both; Maximus Junior and David. Sandra's annoying, snot-nosed brats. Every sound those little shits made stabbed at Mary's mood, soured an already unpleasant experience all the more.

Why was she here?

"Drink," Sandra said, nodding to the glass of water she'd given Mary. "You can't live

on milkshakes and soda, Mary. You've got to drink water too."

Mary hated water. Never drank the stuff. It was so flavourless and bland. But, knowing Sandra wouldn't shut up about it, she grabbed the glass and downed the water in one go. Grunting as she slammed the empty glass back down on the coffee table in front of her.

Oddly, the water tasted sweet. Slightly metallic.

It tasted... nice.

"You might not think it by looking at him," Sandra said, raising her own glass of water to her lips, sipping delicately. "But Max is a wonderful husband. He leaves Nora and I to do the housework, doesn't interfere. And he doesn't get in the way when it comes to raising the kids. Plus, he's always helpful when it comes to the food I cook – always giving useful pointers on what I can do better and what I'm bad at."

"Sounds lovely," Mary said dryly.

Ignoring her sister's sarcasm, Sandra continued. "He makes a decent income. More than enough for all of us. And he makes sure to spend plenty of time with me. Especially between pregnancies. And he's really good in bed, which is a plus!"

Mary glanced up at the ceiling, wished that God would sent a lightning bolt to end her misery there and then. She did *not* want to hear about how well Principal Maximus Mathias preformed in bed.

"He's a good husband," Sandra stated. "And a good father."

"Uh-huh," Mary groaned. "I'm sure he is."

"Would you like some more water?" Sandra asked, eyeing Mary's empty glass. "It'll be a while until dinner's ready."

She wasn't lying. It *was* a while until dinner.

Several hours and many glasses of water, in fact.

By the time dinner was being served, Max had arrived home and introduced himself – a wide smile on his face. He sat at the head of the dining table, telling his wives all about how busy work had been. School events that needed planning, administrative issues and the like.

His voice was different from any time Mary had heard it before. Powerful and strong and handsome. Commanding.

In the background, the sound of crying babies stirred something inside Mary. Made parts of her tingle excitedly. She listened to the sound with a smile, enjoying the sights and pictures that flashed behind her irises. Images of her having her own, adorable little ones.

"Sandra tells me you haven't found a husband yet," Max said as they ate. "Better hurry up, or all the good homes will be taken. Don't want you married to some loser, cleaning his working-class hovel for the rest of your life now, do we?"

"Ah," Mary blushed. "No. Not yet."

"That won't do," Max said, shaking his head. "Not at all."

Mary gulped, looked down at the table.

Maybe her sister was right. Maybe *this* was where she belonged. At home, pregnant, a proper housewife.

"We have space," Nora said, eyes on Mary. There was something odd about the way she spoke the words. Like they were rehearsed, acted. "Another wife would make things a lot easier for me and Sandra. And more children would only improve your standing, husband."

"True," the man smiled. "Very true."

And suddenly, all eyes were on Mary.

She blushed, unable to meet any of those stares.

Her, a housewife? That seemed so... perfect. Getting to spend time with her sister again, like they used to. Bearing Max's sons, taking care of them while he provided for the family. Cleaning this house. Cooking. It all seemed so marvellous an idea.

"I could..." Mary whispered shyly. "I mean, I think..."

"Speak up, Mary," Max said, voice powerful.

"If Dad were to give you his blessing," Mary blushed. "Maybe I could be your third wife..."

Across the table, Max smiled.

"He already has," Mary's principal stated.

Mary looked up at him, face hot.

"The ceremony is tomorrow," he told her. "Sandra's already prepared everything – your dress and the venue and all that. We'll get married after school."

"I..." Mary nodded her head, warm relief flushing through her. "Yes."

"Excellent," Max said, setting down his knife and fork, standing up from the table. "You'll sleep here today. While we may not be married quite yet, I'm sure there'd be no problem with you sharing my bed tonight. Nora, Sandra, clean this mess up while I go show your new sister-wife the ropes upstairs."

Mary hummed happily, glass of water in her right hand while her left massaged her big, pregnant belly.

Her first child. A boy!

It was perfect. She'd get to give her husband another son! Another heir. He'd be so pleased with her!

Elsewhere in the house, Nora and Sandra were busy cleaning and caring for Hubby's other children. But, with the due date so close, Mary was on full relaxation duty. No hard work, only rest and self-care.

She raised the glass of water to her lips, sipped its delicious sweetness.

What would her husband name this child?

Something strong, Mary hoped. Something manly. She wanted her son to grow up to be just like his father. Commanding, powerful, influential. She wanted the best for her baby boy. Just like her mother and father and big sister had wanted for her.

And here she was. Happily married. Closer to Sandra than they'd ever been as youths.

Living in this perfect, flawless world together.

Mary couldn't have hoped for anything more from life.

She sipped more water from the glass, shut her eyes and sighed contentedly.