



Sutton and the CEO Forever

Author: S. Cinders

Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: ??He turned my world upside down. Will I ever learn to breathe again? ?SUTTON? It's time I faced up to the truth. When Mark came into my life, he turned my world upside down. I love him so much that it hurts. But can we find a way to exist when we are split between two worlds? As we come to the conclusion of Sutton and Mark's epic love story. We will finally find out who is behind the murders, if Candice and Knox are meant to be together, and we just might have one last surprise that will change everything.

Total Pages (Source): 69

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

Part I

Our story will be told in two parts. I hope you enjoy the conclusion to Sutton and Mark's love story.

Bedding the Billionaire Series

Special Delivery – Book 1

Special Recovery – Book 2

Sutton and the CEO – Book 3

Sutton and the CEO's Baby – Book 4

Sutton and the CEO Forever – Book 5

Sunday School Sadie -Coming Soon

CHARACTERS IN THE BEDDING THE BILLIONAIRE SERIES BOOKS 1-5

Sutton & Mark - Books 3-5

Knox & Candice - Books 3-5

Elliot & Mandy - Books 1-5

Will & Shay - Books 1, 2 & 5

Gina & Marco - Books 2 & 5

Julio Cerone - Books 2 & 5

Natalia (Natalie) - Books 4 & 5

Brian Williams -Books 3-5

Katie McCleary - Book 5

Prologue

Sutton 6-years-old

“Come on, Sutton Button. We don’t want to be late for the fair!”

“Just one more time, Mama?” I pleaded.

With a relenting smile, Mama nodded. I grinned at her, showing off the space left by my missing front tooth as I twirled around in my new dress. Mama had found it at the thrift store in town. She said that it was only a little bit faded, but to me, it was the most beautiful dress in the entire world.

I skipped up to her and took her outstretched hand. “Are you really going to ride the Ferris wheel with me?”

Mama tucked a stray curl behind her ear and nodded as she gathered up her purse. “A promise is a promise, Sutton.”

I couldn't contain my squeal of excitement. Mama hated heights more than anything. But she promised if I did all my chores and was extra quiet with her late-night friends, she would take me on a ride.

"I didn't promise to like it," she warned. But I could tell from her twinkling eyes that she wasn't really upset. Mama had the prettiest eyes. She always said that the eyes were the windows to the soul.

We left our little trailer and began to walk toward town. It was a hot summer day that promised pink sun-kissed shoulders and cheeks by early afternoon. I could hardly contain my enthusiasm. Everything about the fair excited me, from the smell of popcorn in the air to the street below our sandals, sticky from fallen snow cones. I could have lived quite happily on this day forever.

As we approached the fairgrounds, I saw how the banners were hung across Main Street. A glorious welcome to one and all.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

Mama gave my hand a squeeze. “This is going to be a fantastic day, Button.”

Some kids might have thought they were too old to be called a baby name like Button. But I didn’t care. When Mama called me that she would absentmindedly caress my cheek and often kiss my temple. We didn’t have much, but we did have each other. And Mama said there were plenty of folks who had all the riches in the world, but they didn’t do what we do—love.

“Should have known you’d be here, Earl,” Mama teased as we approached our elderly neighbor.

Earl was throwing back a cold beer at ten in the morning. He seemed in a jovial mood as he ruffled my ponytail. “Hey there, squirt.”

I grinned at him and opened my mouth to speak. But before I could utter a word, I heard Martha, his wife’s, sour voice from behind me say. “Why are you talking to that trash, Earl?”

I looked around us, but there weren’t any trash bins. I couldn’t imagine what she was talking about. The only thing Earl had been speaking to was people—Mama and me.

Martha approached Earl, tight-lipped and cross as ever. “Stand up straight, girl.”

Immediately I looked at Mama to see how to act. But she simply smiled at the older woman. I didn’t understand it one little bit. Martha was Earl’s wife and quite possibly one of the orneriest women in the entire universe. I liked her just about as well as I liked Father Montgomery, and that wasn’t saying very much.

“Afternoon, Martha,” Mama replied as if she hadn’t heard the older woman tell me what to do.

I never could understand why Mama was so nice to everybody, especially Martha. It didn’t make a lick of sense. I thought she was an old biddy. But I tried to follow Mama’s example and didn’t retaliate by sticking out my tongue. At least, I don’t think Martha saw me.

“You look mighty pretty in that dress, Sutton,” Earl said, trying to smooth the tension.

A wide smile broke across my face. “Thank you, Earl! Mama found it at the thrift shop. Isn’t it the prettiest thing you’ve ever seen?”

Before Earl could answer, Mama let out a mangled cry and snatched my arm rather hard. The pinch made tears spring to my eyes.

“Ouch! Mama, you’re hurting me!” I cried out.

But Mama wasn’t paying any heed to what I was saying. One minute we were standing at the foot of the fair, and the next moment Mama was dragging me away.

“Mama, stop! Please!” I pleaded with her as the fair began to shrink in the background. “I’ll be good. I swear I’ll be good!”

Mama didn’t stop, nor did she explain. If anything, she started to move faster away from town.

When I let out a scream, Mama clamped her hand over my mouth and began to drag me behind her slightly. Suddenly the tears of disappointment turned into tears of fear. What was happening? Why was my mother acting so strangely?

She didn't release me until we were safely back in the trailer. Mama had locked the door and then pulled all of the shades. I continued to cry, but she ignored me like I wasn't even there. Her movements were jerky, and her skin looked pale.

Suddenly it occurred to me that maybe our leaving had nothing to do with me at all. I swallowed hard and then asked, "Mama, why did we have to go?"

She looked over at me with confusion and then sadness. She moved over to the worn sofa and motioned for me to come and sit beside her with a sigh.

"Do you know that I love you, Sutton?"

I knew that Mama was serious right now because she only called me Sutton when she was angry or said something important.

"I know, Mama. I love you too."

She nodded. "I know, baby. But there are some people out there, bad people, that would do anything they could to take you away from me. I won't let that happen. I'm sorry about the fair today, truly I am."

"There were bad people there?" I asked innocently.

She nodded. "I was careful that they didn't see us, but we will need to stay out of sight for a few days."

I knew this game well. Mama and I had played it in the past. Sometimes we would pretend that there was lava outside or crocodiles. You had to play quietly and keep the lights off most of the time. Mama had a small television that she would plug in under the table. Then she would drape blankets over the outside so that nobody could see into our fort no matter what.

“Should I get the TV?” I asked.

She nodded and got to her feet. But instead of going to the cabinet with the blankets, she went over to her purse and took out a pill bottle. She counted out two white pills and then took them with a glass of water.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

“Are you sick?” I asked.

She looked at me, but a little of the sparkle that usually shone back at me was somewhat dimmed. It was the last time we ever watched TV under the table in our blanket fort. It was also the last time my mama took me to Town Days. I went later on as a teenager when Mama was either high or entertaining someone.

But it never was the same again.

1

Sutton - Present Day

“Hey, are you doing okay?” Mark asked as he slipped his arm around my ever-increasing waist and kissed my temple.

I nodded, shaking away the memory of the last time I had been to Otterville Town Days with my mother. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

I lifted my face for a kiss, which Mark happily supplied. “I am wonderful, just waiting on Martha with the shirts.”

Martha, my former arch nemesis, was now in her late seventies. She was married to Earl, a man who, for years, I had thought was a drunken fool that crashed at my trailer when his crazy wife had thrown him out.

What I hadn’t known was that Earl and Martha had been servants for my mother and

her abusive ex-husband. They had helped her escape and then stayed on to help protect the two of us.

It wasn't until a couple of dead bodies popped up and shook our entire town and information was revealed that my mother wasn't just a trailer park crack whore. She had once been part of a wealthy family and been a rich man's wife. She'd even found love for a short time here in Otterville Falls.

The first dead body that turned up was Gabe, my old boss at a rundown bar called Abberly's. I have to admit there was no love lost there. After Gabe, there was Max, an old family friend, followed by Justin, my mother's biological brother. The worst part was that Knox, the town sheriff, didn't have enough evidence to charge anybody.

Mark waltzed into my life with this crazy story about how my mother had hooked up with billionaire Hollingsworth Sutton III and gotten pregnant with me. Apparently, my father hadn't even known I'd existed until he was on his deathbed. Instead of the crack-addicted prostitute, I thought I had buried, my mother had been a trust-fund baby

To make a long story short, I'm a modern-day Cinderella story. Poor girl finds out she's worth millions, falls in love with the prince (aka Mark), and lives happily ever after. Only our 'happily ever after' has been fraught with one death after another.

To make matters worse, we still weren't sure who the murderer was. There was only one thing consistent with the cases: they were all somehow connected to me. If that stress wasn't bad enough, I felt like I had been pregnant for at least ten years. The last trimester was killing me.

"Hey there!" Martha came in with a large bag in her grasp. "Here are the shirts."

She shoved the bag in my direction. Luckily Mark caught it before it fell to the

ground. Did I mention that Martha was now a businesswoman? After Gabe's death, we found that his mother, Ruth Ann, had left Abberly's to me. His mama was a good woman who took me under her wing when Mama died. I didn't need the old place, so I was thrilled to turn it over to Martha and Earl for all of the years they'd sacrificed for me. It turned out Martha really enjoyed running the place. She had converted it into more of a diner instead of just a rundown bar. And she even planned on hosting an event at Otterville Falls Town Days.

"What can I do?" I asked.

Martha blew a strand of hair out of her face and consulted with her clipboard. "Can you and Mark pass out the Abberly's t-shirts to those working the booth? I want us to look professional."

"Sure," I said automatically.

Martha sighed in relief. "Thank you, I feel like a chicken with its head cut off."

Mark opened the bag. His gasp was worth a thousand words.

"Before you say anything," she added defensively, "I got a good discount on the color."

I stared at the murky green color, then at Mark, who clearly was not impressed. I tried to paste a smile on my face. "They're great."

Martha's face soured. "You are a terrible liar."

Laughing, I took the bag from Mark, and we proceeded to pass them out to Brian, Candice, Joe, and a few others. Excitement began to build inside of me.

Mark tugged on his t-shirt, trying to read the tag. “What are these made out of? Sandpaper?”

I laughed. “You sound like a snob.”

He grumbled something underneath his breath but then swooped in and twirled me around. I was amazed that, at nearly nine months pregnant with twins, he could still lift me.

I giggled and threatened to puke on his head until he put me down.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

“I still don’t see why we are helping out,” Mark whispered to me. “Can’t we just pay someone?”

I mock gasped and shook my head. “Where is the love in that?”

“I didn’t know that all of my actions had to have love behind them. That might make hostile takeovers a little uncomfortable.”

I knew he was teasing me, so I merely swatted his ass and turned to visit with Candice. It was true that few things in life can compare to Otterville Falls Town Days. I can try and describe it, but honestly, unless you are there to smell the popcorn and cotton candy in the air or feel the fine sheen of sweat coat your skin, you truly don’t know what it’s like until you’ve experienced it firsthand.

When Mama got sick and stopped taking me, I would tag along with Ruth Ann and Gabe. Abberly’s had been a part of Town Days even back then, and alcohol sales during Town Days made up for a good part of Ruth’s Ann’s budget for the summer months. Gabe never wanted anything to do with me, but Ruth Ann would take me on the Ferris wheel. She loved it and would rock the basket back and forth while we were high in the air, and I would laugh even though I was sure my belly was going to slither down my body and come out of my toes.

There were times when Mad Max would slip me a dollar, and I would buy the biggest, pinkest cone of cotton candy that Ruth Ann would give me.

I remember the rodeo riders and the clowns who chased the angry bulls while the cowboy got away. There was a pie-eating contest we’d watch Reena win every year,

and Alice's preserves won the blue ribbon more times than I can count.

Town Days were as much a part of me as the faint southern accent I stumbled into from time to time.

The day at the fair started with a steady stream of customers. We sold a lot of cookies, lemon bars, brownies...anything that was grab and go, we were able to sell. When lunch came around, the grill opened, and we had ribs, chicken, and corn on the cob. There were sandwiches Martha had premade, and of course, the beer was flowing freely.

Brian manned the grill while Mark and Earl took care of the bar. The few times I looked down at them, Earl was drinking more than he was serving. I stifled a laugh; some things never change.

In the early afternoon, Mark came and whisked me away to see some of the fair. The best part was that he had a golf cart arranged so I could get off my feet. Once he realized I was more worried about my feet than the sights, he stopped and rubbed them, stinky socks and all.

"You are the best husband I've ever had," I said with a sigh.

Mark laughed. "I'm the only husband you will ever have."

I smiled. "Then it's a good thing that you're the best."

"Let's get you home," Mark suggested just as Brian approached.

"You finished with your shift?" I teased.

Brian, Mark's younger half-brother, was a head taller and more muscular than my

husband. A retired Marine, he was one scary motherfucker. I could see a lot of Mark in him. But where Mark was all polished edges, Brian was raw and often standoffish. It wasn't until he really knew someone that he would let his true personality show.

"It's time to get you two home," Brian simply said.

Brian's company specialized in keeping high-profile clients alive. He also was involved in private investigations. Mark and I didn't talk about it much, but they hadn't been close growing up. Brian was a product of an affair, and their dad refused to acknowledge him, even after the DNA tests proved Brian was his son. I didn't know their father, as neither Mark nor Brian had anything to do with him. But as I watched the brothers interact, I began to wonder about my father.

Who had Hollingsworth Sutton III been? It was silly, but part of me wasn't altogether certain that I really wanted to know. It seemed that every little thing revealed about my mother sent us further and further down the rabbit hole. Would the same thing happen if I learned about my father?

But then I would think about the twins I was carrying and the idea of them not knowing Mark. The thought made me physically ill. I wondered if that was how my father felt when he learned he had a daughter he'd known nothing about? A daughter who grew up in abject poverty and subjected to some of the worst situations possible, all while he could have given me the world if he had only known about me?

"Hey," Mark squeezed my hand. "Are you sure you're doing okay?"

I smiled tiredly and let go of the stresses plaguing my mind so I could sink into his embrace. "I will be."

Mark

The bags under Sutton's eyes worried me almost as much as the way she kept rubbing her lower back. The twins were a lot for her small frame to carry, and as much as I loved watching her carrying our babies, I knew I'd breathe a sigh of relief when they finally arrived.

She reached over and tucked her hand into mine almost absentmindedly. It was these little touches that pulled at my heartstrings. The love I have for this woman scared me sometimes.

I didn't have a good example of how to be a good man. My father was a cold bastard who did wrong by both of his sons. I hated what he did to Brian. Shit, I hated him. Perhaps because the pregnancy was coming to a close, I started to worry about my babies. Would I be the father they would need me to be?

I caught Brian's gaze in the mirror and noticed his jaw was tense and his gaze intent. Without alarming Sutton, I looked in the direction Brian had indicated with a slight nod of his head.

Our home was off to the left, and we were going right past it. He had to have seen something. I raised an eyebrow in silent communication, but Sutton must have noticed where we were.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

“Why did you drive by?” she asked sleepily.

At that same moment, his phone began to ring. “Just a second,” he said. Once on the call, he was all business. “Location? How many? Wait for my signal.”

Sutton tensed beside me, and I automatically pulled her closer to my side. I knew she was brimming with questions. Hell, so was I, but I also knew Brian was good at his job. When he was able to brief us on the situation, he would. For now, the best thing we could do was wait.

He drove down one of the back roads until he could swing past Farmer Johnson’s pasture and head back toward town.

“Candice will meet us at the police station,” Brian began. “Wait there until we have a better grasp of what’s going on at your place.”

“Is someone in the house?” Sutton asked in a scared voice.

I hated that I couldn’t take all of this away from her. She had been through so much already. It seemed every moment of our lives was fraught with danger.

“No, nobody is in your home. However, someone was snooping around. I told Natalie to stay back until I could take a better look at who we were dealing with. There isn’t any way they will be able to get into the house. Your security system is top of the line. I have a feeling that they are waiting for you.”

“If that’s the case and you show up in our car, something could happen to you?” I

reasoned. “I don’t like that.”

Sutton tightened her grasp on my hand. “I don’t like it, either.”

Brian pulled into the station and turned to us just as Candice opened the door. “Let me do my job. You know as well as I do these motherfuckers won’t know what hit them.”

My brother was one scary son of a bitch, and once he was in protection mode, I did not doubt he could take care of himself. However, I had spent a lot of years without him in my life. I didn’t want to be the reason he left this world. Before I could spew something utterly cheesy, Sutton spoke.

“Please be careful. I know you’re like a better-looking Rambo, but please.”

I grunted at that. “Seriously? I’m right here.”

Candice and Brian laughed while Sutton looked immediately contrite. “I didn’t mean...”

I kissed her temple. “I’m just kidding.”

“Come on then,” Candice encouraged. “We need to get you off the street.”

Sutton and I left the car and watched as Brian drove off. Once inside the police station, I could see how completely exhausted she really was.

It was another forty minutes of mindless chit-chat between Sutton and Candice before Brian called my cell.

“It’s clear, you can head back,” he said and then hung up.

Brian wasn't the best at telephone conversations. Nor did he mince words.

I tucked my phone away and then turned to see the worried expression on Sutton and Candice's faces. "It's okay," I assured them. "Let's go home."

"I heard gunshots," Natalie was saying just as we walked into the house.

"Gunshots?" Sutton repeated as she stopped abruptly. "Is everyone okay?"

Natalie and Brian turned to face us. A red stain was blooming underneath one of Sutton's white kitchen towels. I heard her gasp, but it seemed as if it came from far away.

"Woah!" Natalie called out, but her voice sounded muffled as well.

I felt someone tugging on my arms. When had I decided to sit on the floor? Glancing up, I saw clear concern on Sutton's face, along with the amusement on Brian's.

"I didn't realize you cared so much," Brian teased.

Sutton touched my forehead. "Did you hurt yourself?"

Fucking hell.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

“No, I’m fine.”

“But one minute you were standing there, and the next you were falling,” Sutton was saying as she attempted to get down on the floor with me.

“No, wait, you stay there. I am getting up,” I said gruffly, getting to my feet.

“You may want to be sitting when the babies come,” Natalie said wisely. I only glared at her a little as Sutton walked me to a kitchen chair like an invalid.

“You should be babying him,” I said and motioned to Brian. “He’s the one shot.”

“And yet you were the one who hit the floor,” Brian added with a smirk.

“Do you need to go to the hospital?” Sutton asked him.

Brian removed the towel so we could see the wound. “Nah, it just grazed me. I’m fine.”

“What happened?” I asked.

Natalie spoke up, “While monitoring your house, we saw two figures in black casing the place. I called Brian, and that’s when he dropped you off at the station. When your car returned, they must have thought it was you. The gunshots started the minute Brian opened the door.”

“They aren’t messing around anymore,” Brian added. “We need to catch the

bastards.”

The next words were out of my mouth before I had even thought about them. “Maybe we need to go back to New York.”

Candice, who had been rather quiet since we had returned to the house, said, “I was thinking the same thing.”

“But I’m in my last trimester,” Sutton said with what was damn near a wail. “I finally got used to Dr. Young, and I thought Brian could protect us better here.”

Everything she said was true. But there was also the fact that I was struggling running the company her father left to us. I was also worried sick that Sutton was going to meet her death in Otterville Falls.

I knew we had just built this beautiful home, and we had planned on living part of the year here and part in New York. But it seemed to me every moment we spent in Otterville Falls brought the implosion of my family that much closer.

Sutton was looking at me in dismay and, if I wasn’t mistaken, a hint of betrayal in her eyes.

“I don’t think you can leave during the middle of an investigation,” Natalie said. “We could talk to Knox, though, if you are serious.”

Sutton backed away from me. “No, we aren’t leaving. Not yet.”

I stood and went to her, hating that she was stiff before sinking against me.

“It was just an idea,” I whispered against her hair. “Don’t worry. We don’t need to go anywhere.”

I just hoped that I wasn't making a massive mistake.

3

Sutton

Ifelt like vomiting, my eyes darting between the bloody towel at Brian's shoulder and Mark's tired face. It had been a very long day. That had to be why Mark was suggesting that we leave Otterville Falls. I couldn't go through another move. To be perfectly honest, I may have been having contractions.

They weren't regular; I had timed them. But they were enough to take my breath away. I just needed some time to think.

"Are you sure you're okay?" I asked Brian for the second time.

"Yeah," Brian assured me. "They only nicked me, not even worthy of stitches."

I knew I should be grateful that Mark's brother was okay. However, all of the day's emotions began to overwhelm me, and once the tears started, they seemed to have no intention of stopping.

"Who do you think was behind this?" Mark asked.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

Natalie answered, “My gut feeling is Father Montgomery and maybe Maggie. But I don’t have any proof.”

“How do we prove that Father Montgomery is behind this?” Mark asked. “There has to be something we are missing.”

Brian nodded. “I agree. That’s just what we need to find out. I thought I saw the white of his clerical collar in the bushes.”

“Who wears all black to assassinate someone but still straps on their clerical collar?” Candice asked. “That’s ridiculous.”

“We need to find the bullet. Once we have the bullet, ballistics will tell us what type of gun was used and if it matches any of the other shootings. Then all that’s left is determining who has a matching caliber weapon, but my money's on the priest.”

“I agree, Brian,” Natalie said as she handed him a new towel. “Do you want me to put these towels in the laundry?”

I blanched. “No! Just throw them away.”

Natalie hid her smile. I knew that this was old hat for her, but I wasn’t used to caring for bullet wounds in my kitchen.

“But they both got away?” I asked Brian.

“I’m sorry, Sutton.”

“No, don’t be sorry. I just wish I knew what was behind all of this. Did someone see Maggie? Why do you think she was here? I don’t understand.”

“She was carrying the documents from your mother,” Natalie said. “One of the masked individuals ended up dropping a briefcase. I don’t know what’s in there, but we did see your mother’s maiden name. The case and the contents were sent with Knox to the police station.”

“What’s he going to do without you helping out?” Mark asked Natalie.

In the guise of law enforcement, Natalie went undercover to check out Knox, the chief of police. The only thing that came of it was a raging case of jealousy by Candice, who just happens to be dating the handsome sheriff.

Thankfully, they were able to get things worked out, but now Knox was down the help he desperately needed.

“He hired someone,” Brian said through a mouthful of chips.

Apparently, being shot also made him hungry.

“Who?” Candice and I asked at the same time.

Brian shrugged. “I don’t know. However, Reena and Alice have offered their rental up for the new deputy.”

“The one next to your place?” I asked.

Brian nodded. “Yeah, I just hope the guy doesn’t throw any wild parties or anything. Those old row houses are pretty close together.”

A yawn escaped my lips. "Excuse me."

My hand went to the babies, and I let out another yawn.

"I think Sutton and I are going to get some rest," Mark said quietly. "Brian, would you lock up before you go?"

He nodded. "Sure thing. I hope you feel better, Sutton."

I said my goodbyes to everyone, and Mark started to steer me toward the stairs.

As I left the room, I heard Natalie say, "I know you think you are tough and all, but we are going to dress that wound."

I could hear his rumble of complaint as Mark, and I started up the stairs. Suddenly I was more tired than I could stand. The day spent in the sun on my feet had tuckered me out. Not to mention that the fear and excitement of the shooting had worn me down emotionally.

Mark seemed to understand. When we got to the top of the stairs, he picked me up and carried me the rest of the way.

"I'm too heavy," I protested weakly.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

Mark snorted. “That is ridiculous.”

I should have made more of a fuss or him to release me, but I was just too damn tired.

He put me on the bed, and then I heard the water running in the bath. I almost fell asleep, but Mark was back, taking off my shoes and rubbing my sore feet.

Looking down, I gasped. “What in the hell happened to my ankles?”

Mark snickered, and I glared at him.

“I think that swelling in pregnancy is normal. We can call Dr. Young in the morning.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off my hideous cankles.

“I am the ugliest woman on earth,” I wailed as Mark yanked my Abberly’s t-shirt over my head.

“Surely not the ugliest,” Mark teased. “There are billions of people on the earth, Sutton. I doubt you’d even made the top five hundred.”

I unsnapped my bra and threw it in his face. “You think you’re funny, don’t you?”

He smirked at me, that stupid smirk that always made my knees weak.

“You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. And those tits, fuck, Sutton, I

have the wickedest thoughts about them. You have no need to worry about your ankles swelling. You are perfect.”

“My ass and my nose are spreading too,” I felt a tingling of pride. My tits really were fantastic.

Mark moved to me and cupped my ass, “Yeah, don’t think I haven’t noticed this. I spend a large part of the day hard because of your ass.”

He picked me up again and carried me into the bathroom. From there, I dropped my panties and sank into the steaming water. Mark was quick to disrobe, and I didn’t even pretend to look away as more of his sculpted frame came into sight.

“Like what you see?” he grinned.

He sank into the steamy water and pulled me back so that I was resting against his chest. I could feel his hard cock against my ass cheeks.

It felt right; being with Mark always centered me when I felt the maelstrom of life taking over.

I rubbed my ass against his cock and smiled when his hands reached around and cupped my breasts.

“I thought you were too tired,” he whispered against my ear.

“I am never too tired for you,” I replied and then turned my face to the side so that he could kiss me.

Our lips met, and he gently kissed me once, twice, three times before opening my mouth and deepening the kiss. It was liquid fire that caused my pussy to clench and

my nipples to harden. He brushed his tongue against mine and pulled on my nipples, twisting and rubbing until I could hardly stand it.

I kissed him back just as hungrily. I wanted everything his kiss offered, desire, security, passion, and love. I could feel his cock pressing against me. I broke the kiss on a gasp when he lifted my hips and positioned the head of his dick at my opening.

We both groaned as he sank deep inside of my pussy. I put my hands on the side of the tub and raised and lowered my body, loving the feeling of his cock stretching me impossibly wide. Mark usually fucked me, but in this position, I was able to take the lead. I ground down against him every time I landed, only to take him harder and faster the next time.

His hands were everywhere, on my breasts and then between my thighs, rubbing frantically until my clit was hard and aching. I was on the edge of release, water splashing out of the tub as I fucked him harder and harder.

His cock was pistoning up inside of me as hard as he could, and I knew he was close when I felt his teeth bite down gently at the apex of my shoulder. The pinch, followed by his tongue sucking and licking the tender spot, threw me over the edge, and I came hard.

My body contracted as I screamed his name, unable to control the high-pitched wail as my pussy milked him, pulling his release from him until he shouted, and I felt him filling me.

It was glorious.

It was also very messy. Looking around, I saw more water on the floor than there was in the tub.

“Let’s get you into bed,” Mark said as he softly kissed my neck. “I’ll clean up the water.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

For once, I didn't argue.

4

Sutton

Dr. Young gave me a sympathetic look. "Sutton, I am afraid that you're developing edema, which is common in pregnancy. But with the additional stress you just told me about, I want to do a quick ultrasound to check things out."

I swallowed my heart. "Is edema bad?"

Dr. Young smiled, and I was reminded once again that he resembled a child. "Edema is swelling."

Mark squeezed my hand to reassure me everything would be okay. I couldn't help but worry. Every horror story I had ever been told had started with the mother not feeling well and the doctor going in for an ultrasound.

Suddenly the thought of something happening to the girls gripped me, and I started to shake.

"Hey, what's going on?" Mark wrapped an arm around me, and I melted into his arms. I couldn't tell him that I was worried something had happened to the girls. I was freaking out, wondering if the movement I had felt was just gas.

They didn't seem as active as they had in the past. And the statistics weren't great.

People lost babies all the time, especially with twins.

I started to cry, and that was when Dr. Young's nurse came back inside.

"Are you doing okay, hun?"

No, I was not fucking okay. I was melting down and quite possibly going to give myself a brain aneurysm from overthinking everything.

"Has she been overly emotional?" The cute nurse asked Mark.

He eyed me warily as if wondering if he would land himself on the couch for a week by answering the question honestly.

Opting for the truth, he nodded. "Yes."

She made a sympathetic sound and walked over to me. "There are all kinds of crazy hormones in our bodies anyway. But when you are pregnant, your body produces a lot more. Considering you're carrying twins, I'm sure your hormones are off the charts."

"What am I supposed to do?" My voice cracked.

She patted my arm. "If it gets severe enough that you feel you can't function or you have thoughts of harming yourself, we can give you something. Many women also find that after they deliver, there's a huge fluctuation that causes postpartum depression. I had it with my boys, and my sister did as well. It's nothing to be ashamed of. I thought I was the worst mother in the world because I hated my baby. Once I got straightened out, things were a million times better."

There was a short knock on the door, and Dr. Young entered with the ultrasound

machine. He saw my tear-streaked face and paused for a moment. “Is everything alright in here?”

I felt stupid saying my hormones were making me cray-cray. Thankfully the nurse spoke up for me.

“Not a thing, we were just talking about some of the pleasures of pregnancy.”

I gave her a grateful glance.

Dr. Young nodded. “Of course. You give us a call if you have any trouble or any questions, do you hear?”

With embarrassment, I nodded. “I am sorry,” I said, turning to the nurse, “I have forgotten your name.”

The nurse took it in stride. “No problem at all, my name is Stephanie. It’s lovely to meet you, Sutton.”

She shook hands with Mark and me before going over to prep for the ultrasound. In moments the wand was gliding across my belly, and two distinct hearts were beating.

I couldn’t contain the tears; Mark’s eyes were red, too.

“They look really good,” Dr. Young said after a while. “The placenta is in the right place, and their heart rates are normal. It’s obviously getting a little tight in there. But we have your scheduled date, if they don’t come before. Have you had any contractions?”

At my hesitation, Mark nearly busted a gasket.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

“You’ve been having contractions?” he nearly shouted.

“I mean, maybe?” I answered hesitantly. “I read about those Braxton-Hicks contractions. Sometimes I have some tightening in my back and lower abdominal area. But I have kept track of them, and nothing is regular or anything.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Mark asked in a wounded tone.

“I didn’t want to worry anybody if it wasn’t anything.”

Dr. Young nodded. “Honestly, you aren’t dilated more than one, and you’re not effaced at all. I don’t think you are in real labor. However, that doesn’t mean that things can’t progress quickly. I planned on seeing you again in a week, but please don’t hesitate to come in if you think you’re in labor.”

“Okay,” I answered. “We will, I promise.”

“Great. Let’s meet again next week. But as Stephanie said, if you have any questions or concerns before then, please give us a call.”

As we walked out of the doctor’s office, I felt Mark’s gaze on me.

“I’m really sorry I didn’t say anything,” I reiterated.

“Sweet girl, I’m not mad at you. I just want to be able to take care of you.”

“You do take good care of me.” I leaned up to kiss him and felt something tugging on

my lower belly. Then I felt a gush of fluid between my legs.

Instead of kissing Mark, I let out a squawk of dismay.

Grasping my arms, he cried out, “What’s wrong?”

“I think my water broke!”

“What?”

We both looked down to the floor, where it appeared I had peed myself.

“You’re going to have a baby,” he said in wonder.

“I’m going to have two babies,” I parroted back.

And then the first real contraction hit me.

5

Mark

Never again. I hoped to never ever live through another twenty-four hours like those we just had. I would do anything for Sutton, but being beside her and watching the pain her body was putting her through to birth our children? That was damn near excruciating.

At twenty-two hours, Dr. Young decided it was time to suit up and get these babies out, one way or another.

So with trembling hands, I now held Evie or Avery. I wasn’t sure which one. The

other was being weighed and prepared by the nurse.

This tiny little bundle in my arms looked a little bit like a wrinkly red potato, an exceptionally angry one. And I loved her more than I could have ever thought possible.

“Here’s your other one, dad,” the nurse said, handing me the other bundle to tuck in my arms.

“Look at you,” Sutton’s voice carried over to me. It was raspy, and she was beyond exhausted. Her hair was matted, and there wasn’t a stitch of makeup on her face. I don’t know what it was about that moment, but I had never found her more beautiful.

I felt my eyes welling up again and felt like a damned pussy. But I didn’t even give a shit about being a pussy. I had already cried once when the babies first arrived. It wasn’t like I could control this emotional roller coaster.

“They are perfect,” I replied, but I was looking at her.

I loved the way her eyes closed and her cheeks pinked. Damn, she was my everything.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

“Come with me, dad,” the nurse reached out to take one of the babies and place them in a box carrier of some kind. Then she took the other one and placed her beside her sister. “We are going to put them under the lights for a bit while they finish up with Sutton.”

“We can still do the skin-to-skin contact?” Sutton asked anxiously.

The nurse nodded. “Absolutely. We will try feeding as well. It shouldn’t take very long for the doctor to finish up stitching you back together.”

I won’t even discuss what they did to get the babies out. I am still traumatized by that.

Feeling rather in league with the young doctor, I smiled at him. “Thank you, Dr. Young. You don’t know what this means to me.”

Dr. Young looked up at me from where he was stitching my wife back together again. “I’m happy to do it. Happy birthday to your girls. Sutton did beautifully, and so did you once we gave you a little oxygen.”

I snorted. “It wasn’t necessary.”

“Go with the babies!” Sutton called out, and I did what she asked, even though I didn’t want to leave her.

True to her word, we were back with Sutton within the hour. They had both of us do the skin-to-skin contact, each with a twin and switching after a time. It was one of the

most incredible moments of my life. These tiny infants, mewling like lost puppies, were our daughters.

Avery, who was born first, was the first twin I could do skin to skin contact with. At just a little over five pounds, she hardly looked much bigger than Evie, who was only four-and-a-half pounds. The nurse helped Sutton get the babies to latch on. It looked painful, but according to the nurse, they both took to it well.

It wasn't until Sutton's eyes began to droop that the nurse suggested we try and get some sleep.

"I don't want them to leave," Sutton said sleepily.

"I will go with them," I volunteered automatically, despite the fact that I too had been up for twenty-four hours. I hadn't given birth, so Sutton clearly trumped me in the situation.

"You will? I love you." It seemed that she was out like a light before we had even placed the babies in the transportation carriers.

"What if I mix up which baby is which?" I asked the nurse on the way to the nursery.

She laughed. "Well, we did get footprints when the girls were born. However, we also have their names on their ankle bracelets. Until you take them off, you should be safe."

That was a brilliant idea. "I don't suppose you could tattoo their names on them somewhere," I muttered half-jokingly.

She laughed again. "Spoken like a true father. Let me just give you a bit of advice. Never repeat that in front of your wife if you ever want to practice making babies

again. They get a little sensitive about their offspring. Think Mama Bear.”

Once we got to the nursery, the pediatrician came in and decided they needed a little more time under the UV lamps. Apparently, jaundice is common with premature babies, and ours were born at just over thirty-four weeks. They were both a good size, and their lungs seemed developed, and overall, we were extremely lucky.

I couldn't help the emotion that swelled in my throat again. These two little girls, they were my responsibility. I wanted to give them the world. I wanted to show Sutton that there are men out there who aren't deadbeat dads. There are men that take care of their families and love their children. Hell, after my shitty experience growing up with my father, I wanted to show myself that I could do what he never did.

I wished she'd met Hollingsworth. It was hard not to talk about him because he'd been a large part of my life, but I also understood Sutton's reservations about him. It wasn't as if she hadn't had a rough year. Hell, her whole life had been one roller coaster ride after another.

A ringing brought me out of my thoughts. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my cell. It was Brian asking about Sutton and the girls. As I shared the news, I felt happiness far greater than anything I'd ever felt before.

“Send pictures,” Brian said. “Reena and Alice are on my back, asking when they can come. Candice said that she will be there first thing in the morning.”

I finished up with my brother and then settled into one of the rocking chairs. The next thing I knew, the nurse was waking me up again.

“Time to go back and see mom again. Are you ready, dad?” she asked.

“Do you call all of the patient's mom and dad?” I asked.

The nurse laughed once again. “Indeed, I do. It makes things easier, I’m not as young as I used to be, and this way, I don’t need to remember names. You’re the first one to call me on it, though.”

I shook my head. “It’s just so strange to think that I’m someone’s dad.”

She patted my shoulder. “I can’t say it will be easy, dear. But if you let it, being a father can be the greatest thing you’ll ever do.”

Sutton

“I can’t believe they are actually here!” Alice cooed over Avery and Evie in the hospital bassinet. “Tell me everything!”

I smiled at Candice, who had already heard the story twice before. Then I launched into what happened. “...and then I guess the girls decided they were done being cooked in my crazy uterus. I can hardly believe that the hospital will allow us to take them home in a few days. How is that possible?”

Candice spoke from her perch on the rocking chair. “I don’t think there have ever been two more beautiful babies. You are going to be just fine.”

Despite my exhaustion, I grinned and looked back at the babies. They were so precious. I had no idea how much I would grow to love them so quickly.

“And you went into labor just outside the doctor’s office?” Alice asked.

I nodded. “Yes, my water broke, and then I had the worst pain in my back. To be honest, it felt like I had a really bad stomachache.”

“Yep,” Alice replied. “I heard the urge to poop is a sign.”

Candice muttered something about TMI, and I added, “If you think that’s bad, listen to this. I stumbled, walking back into the office. So Mark picked me up and carried me the rest of the way. I was shouting something about getting him dirty with my nasty baby juice. I may have also been begging for medicine.”

“Dear Lord, that sounds horrible.” Candice shuddered.

Alice just laughed. “Sounds mighty normal to me. Babies are a messy business.”

“Mark said that someday we will look back on this and laugh about it.”

Candice quirked a brow. “And will you?”

I shook my head. “Never. That will never happen.”

“So then they rushed you over to the emergency room?” Alice prompted.

“Yes, thankfully, we were in the same parking lot. But it felt like the contractions were coming fast and sharp because I was dilating. They gave me something for the pain, and then hour after hour, they would come in and tell me that I wasn’t dilating enough. They put an internal monitor in to check the babies’ heart rates, and when they started dipping too low, they started the c-section. Everything after that was a blur. I wish I remembered it better, but things were kind of crazy.”

Alice leaned in and whispered, “I heard you called Dr. Young, Dr. McChild.”

I felt my cheeks heat. “You’ve been talking with Mark?”

Her eyes twinkled. “And that you asked the young doctor if he knew what a vagina was because it was obvious he wasn’t looking at yours correctly.”

Candice rolled with laughter. “You did not!”

“Look, twenty-four hours is a long time to be in pain and not have a baby.”

“Some people go forty-eight hours,” Alice cut in.

“Some people are fucking heroes,” I replied snarkily.

“Mrs. Williams,” Dr. Young’s voice came from the doorway. “I see you have company.”

Candice and Alice immediately stood.

“We can leave,” Alice said hastily.

“No need,” Dr. Young added quickly. “Just came to check on you. I spoke with the nurses, and they said your dressing looks clean. Do you mind if I have a look?”

Dr. Young looked at my incision and did another glance at my charts. Before I knew it, he was on his way.

“Handsome man, that Dr. Young,” Alice said sagely. “I wonder if Katie’s single.”

“Who’s Katie?” Candice and I asked together.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

“New deputy. She’s supposed to be coming to get the keys from Reena and me tonight. Pretty little thing, more red hair than she knows what to do with, and more freckles than stars in the night sky.”

“Are you matchmaking, Alice?” I teased.

She winked at me. “Maybe? Brian already said that he’s off-limits. So maybe the young doctor might want a little law enforcement in his life.”

“And in his bed?” Candice added cheekily.

“If the badge fits,” she cackled.

“Tell me about her,” I asked.

“Full name is Katheryn McCleary, but she said to call her Katie. She’s from somewhere out west, Nevada, I think? Looking for a change, she said. You know who she reminds me of? Sadie, that cute young lady that runs the Sunday school class for Father Montgomery.”

I didn’t know Sadie very well; she was a couple of years younger and from a rather wealthy family. Obviously, we didn’t have anything in common, but I did know who she was. I always thought Sadie was pretty in an understated sort of way. Some might consider her plus-sized or fuller figured, and she dressed in a rather matronly fashion.

“I don’t know,” I said hesitantly. “I don’t think Sadie would be Dr. Young’s type. If Katie is like her, maybe it’s not a good idea.”

“Pfft, they aren’t exactly alike. Anyhow, it was just an idea, I had better run. I don’t want to spread gossip.”

“Tell us!” Candice insisted.

“Well, I didn’t miss the double-take that Brian gave the new officer when she was moving her boxes in. He might have said that he wasn’t interested, but that’s not what his eyes were telling me.”

“Alice!” I chided. “You can’t get involved in all of this.”

“You have my word,” she said, crossing her heart.

Candice quirked a brow. “We know you... remember.”

With a laugh, Alice left Candice and I shaking our heads. It was just then that the girls decided to wake up and be fed.

Later that day, Reena came by. When I told her about Alice’s matchmaking, Reena laughed and said that there wasn’t anything anyone could say or do to change Alice’s mind about something.

“Mark my words, Sutton. There will be hell to pay by the time Alice is through. Anyhow, I think this one is hungry,” Reena said, handing Evie to me. “Let me take Avery, and you can feed her sister.”

Reena picked up Avery and went back to the rocking chair. We had a nice visit until Mark returned from the police station. Seeing Reena, he smiled, “Thanks for keeping an eye on my girls.”

My girls. The way he said it just made my heart swell with love. “How did it go?”

Mark loosened his tie, came over to kiss me, and then sat down before responding. “The paperwork in the briefcase has been verified. It is your mother’s, and therefore it now belongs to you. Most of it doesn’t need any attention from you, especially as you just had our babies and are a little wrapped up in all of that. However, there isn’t anything that we can tie directly to Maggie or Father Montgomery.”

“Was it a bunch of bills or something?” I said wearily.

“Actually, the opposite. A lot of old stocks in various companies and an inheritance from your maternal grandmother. Somewhere around four hundred million dollars, give or take a few.”

Reena gasped. “Four hundred million! Damn, girl, you’re rich.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell her that it was nothing compared to what my father had left me. The father I’d never known. The same father who had meant the world to Mark.

Impulsively I asked, “Tell me about Hollingsworth.”

I saw the surprise and happiness in his eyes as he turned to me and asked, “Are you sure?”

Reena stood and passed the baby to Mark. “I’ve got to run, so why don’t you two have a nice long chat.”

It was time.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

Sutton - One Month Later

I thought I knew the definition of the word 'tired'. It wasn't as if I was a stranger to hard work. However, nothing could have prepared me for the twins. I felt like a zombie most days. A zombie with gigantic tits that leaked everywhere. I hardly ever knew what day it was, or even what time of the day. All I did was feed the babies and change diapers.

And don't even get me started on my hormones. Avery would cry, then I would cry, and Evie couldn't be left out of things. Mark often found the three of us wailing in unison. I also felt incredibly guilty that Mark was under so much pressure to run the company from Otterville Falls.

I knew it wasn't easy and that he had been putting off some important things to stay by my side. But how fair was that? Mark loved Sutton Enterprises. He helped my father build the company, and it was as much a part of him as anything else. Was it fair for me to insist we stay in the country?

It wasn't as if we couldn't afford the best of anything and everything. The twins could have a wonderful life in New York. However, just the thought of leaving Otterville Falls had a lump developing in my stomach.

An entire month had passed quietly, without any news on the case. Perhaps it was time to go. I just didn't want to leave yet. Candice and Knox, Earl and Martha, as well as Reena and Alice, were my family. Sure, we weren't connected by blood, but they were a part of me just as much as I hoped to be a part of them.

Brian had even bought a small home here. He said he could use this location as a base just as well as anywhere else. And Otterville Falls felt like home to me. I wanted my girls to grow up with these people, but was it the best choice for our family?

“Hey baby,” Mark called out, poking his head inside the family room entryway. “What are you doing staring at the blank TV?”

I blinked and looked up, noticing that, indeed, the television had turned off. “Oh, um, I don’t know.”

It was easy to see the look of concern that came over him. Mark made his way into the room, careful not to disrupt the sleeping babies in their swings. Sitting beside me, he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “Sutton, I really think we need to take Candice’s advice and get a nanny. Two babies are a lot of work, and I can’t help out as much as I would like.”

“I just don’t like the idea of a stranger in the house,” I said stubbornly. This had been my excuse from day one. After letting Maggie in, I felt vulnerable. However, Mark was right: if I kept up this pace, I would likely burn out by next Thursday.

I heard a door slam, and then Brian called out, “Where are you guys?”

Mark winced when Evie started to stir. Before Brian could truly wake the girls, Mark hopped up to intercept him. They returned together to the family room moments later. Brian was sporting a contrite expression. Mark sat beside me, and Brian took the chair to the side of the couch.

“Sorry, Sutton,” he said quietly. “I don’t know much about babies.”

I smiled at him. “You’re fine. They’re still asleep.”

Brian cocked his head to the side. “Are you fine?”

Mark tensed. Clearing his throat, he said, “I would be careful here.”

Brian smirked at him. “I wasn’t about to say something cruel to my favorite sister-in-law.”

I grinned at him. “I’m your only sister-in-law.”

“Which only proves that you will always be my favorite,” he replied. “Anyhow, I only meant that you look tired. You both do, actually.”

Mark ran a hand over his face. “It’s definitely not a walk in the park. But we are making it through.”

I appreciated that Mark didn’t say anything about my stubbornness over hiring a nanny. However, it was past time that I got over it. “We need someone to come and help out,” I said. “Mark and I are thinking about a part-time nanny.”

In truth, we hadn’t discussed the hours of the new nanny, but Brian didn’t need to know that.

“Are you sure?” Mark asked with a hopeful glint in his eye.

I nodded. “Yes, it’s time. I just hope we can find someone out here.”

“I have an idea for you,” Brian said.

Mark’s jaw dropped open. “You? Since when are you an expert on childcare providers?”

Brian shrugged cockily. “I have skills you could never hope to obtain.”

While Mark scoffed at his little brother, I took in their similarities. They both had an olive complexion. But where Brian was bulky brute strength, Mark was built with leaner muscles honed from his nights running and his hours at the gym. Their flashing white smiles were eerily similar, as was the cut of their jawline. Both were extremely handsome men.

I couldn't help but be happy that these two had been able to carve out a sibling relationship despite the fact that their father refused to acknowledge Brian.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

“I think you should call Sadie,” Brian added.

“Who’s Sadie?” Mark asked.

“The Sunday School teacher?” I asked incredulously. “She works with Father Montgomery.”

Brian nodded. “I’m aware, but I have done a thorough search on the girl, and she’s clean. I also have ulterior motives, so hear me out. I think if you hire Sadie, the old reverend will feel threatened. It may be a way of drawing him out.”

“I won’t do anything that would put my twins in danger,” Mark said sternly.

Brian raised his hands. “I wouldn’t either. I will be here the whole time, even overnight. I just think that the sooner you can get this behind you, the better.”

“I don’t think so...” Mark began just as I said.

“I think we should.”

Mark turned to me. “Really?”

I nodded. “We have been living under a shadow for a year now, and Brian will keep us safe. You know that. Besides, you will be here as well.”

Mark’s lips thinned a little, and I knew in my gut that he hadn’t told me everything that was going on with the company.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I need to go back to New York to straighten out the Fredrick Brewer deal. It shouldn’t take me more than a few days.”

I blew out a breath. “It sounds like we’ll need that help more than ever. I can’t expect Brian to get up in the night with me.”

Brian looked immediately panicked. “I’m not good with babies.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “You’re fine when you hold them. You are just quick to give the girls back if they cry or fill their pants.”

“Messy little monkey princesses, that’s for sure,” Brian said, watching the girls fondly.

Their thick dark hair was sticking up at all angles, and they looked a little plumper than when we first brought them home from the hospital. At their last appointment, the pediatrician said they were nearly seven pounds.

I did need help, and we all knew it. “Let’s call her,” I said impulsively.

Mark took my hand in his. “Are you sure she’s safe?”

Brian nodded. “As far as I can tell, the only thing she’s ever done that even hints at badis she writes erotica under a pseudonym. But that’s it. And it’s actually pretty good writing.”

Brian broke off speaking when I burst out laughing. “What?” he said.

“Sadie, the Sunday School teacher writes erotica on the sly?” I could barely get the

sentence out between my gales of laughter. The girls began to stir and fuss for something to eat.

“Great,” Mark said sarcastically. “You woke them up.”

I shook my head. “They need to eat anyway. But wow, I didn’t realize how much I needed a good laugh. Thanks for that, Brian. For a moment, I actually believed you.”

Brian opened his mouth to say something but then stopped himself. Mark had gotten up and taken Evie out of the swing and handed her to me. Before I could whip my breast out to feed her, Brian turned and headed out the door.

He’s said more than once that a brother-in-law should never see his sister-in-law’s tits. There was some kind of in-law incest there.

I tried to explain to him that there was nothing more natural than a mother feeding her baby. Brian said I could do whatever I wanted. He just wasn’t going to hang around for it. Mark agreed with Brian, so when it was feeding time, Brian left.

I pulled out my breast and helped Evie latch on. Then I turned to Mark, who was picking up an angry Avery. “He was kidding, right?” I asked.

Mark shrugged. “I don’t know Sadie, but it’s not like Brian to joke around. However, you never know.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

Indeed, you never truly knew about anyone.

8

Sutton - A few weeks later

Having Sadie come work for us was a complete and utter godsend. Not only was she a natural with the girls, but she was as sweet and soft-spoken as they came. Being younger than me and behind me in school, I hadn't had the chance to get to know her.

I was learning to enjoy her quiet humor and bubbly personality. Sadie had been instrumental in getting the girls on a schedule. She also insisted that I get some time with my girlfriends out of the house. I had to admit that in the few short weeks she had been with us, I had learned to like her.

There was something very real about Sadie. She was utterly transparent. I still found it hilarious that Brian had suggested she wrote erotica on the side. I just didn't bother to share that with Sadie. For all I knew, the girl was still a virgin, and the mere suggestion likely would cause her a stroke of some kind.

On this particular afternoon, Candice and Natalie had stolen me away to grab lunch at Abberly's. I had to admit that I was having the time of my life.

"Martha, this is the best thing I have ever eaten!" I mumbled through my ginormous bite. I was inhaling the sandwich that Martha had brought to me and honestly thinking about ordering two more for supper.

Martha rolled her eyes, but I could tell by the twitch of her lips that she enjoyed the compliment. Martha had been a thorn in my side for most of my life. What I hadn't known was that it was only a cover so that nobody would suspect she and Earl were protecting me. I felt a certain closeness with her because she also was protecting my mom all of those years.

Some people might have left when the person you were trying to keep safe was slowly killing themselves with drugs, men, and alcohol. But Martha and Earl didn't. I loved them—sassy mouths and all.

“Girl, just you listen to me. If that handsome husband of yours wants to hire another nanny for the night, you take him up on it. Lord knows you can afford it.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “I don't need another nanny. Besides, I haven't had a major meltdown in ages.”

Martha shook her head as she refilled our sweet tea and then left to help another table.

As she ambled over to see what they needed, Candice said, “She's getting older. I wonder how long she'll be able to keep up with the diner.”

Natalie nodded. “Yeah, it's her that needs the extra help. But I don't think I am brave enough to offer it. She can be scary.”

“I used to think so,” I added. “But it's all just a front. Underneath her gruff exterior, Martha is a cupcake.”

“Oh, why did you have to go and mention confectionary goodness?” Candice complained. “Now, I want one.”

Laughing, I replied, “Then get one. This diet of yours is going to be the death of all of us.”

Candice snorted. “Well, we all can’t have twins and then fit into our jeans a few weeks later.”

I felt heat staining my cheeks as I shook my head. “To be fair, they are my fat jeans, and it’s been nearly two months.”

Everyone has that one pair in their closet that’s just a little bit larger than the others.

Natalie picked up her coffee. “Fat jeans are essential for happiness.”

We all clinked out sweet teas together in a toast to fat jeans everywhere.

“Seriously though,” Candice continued. “I have put on so much weight since coming to Otterville Falls.”

“It’s the down-home cooking,” Natalie added wisely. “There isn’t an organic or vegan shop within a hundred miles.”

I made a face. “Who would want that?”

“I’m going to need to do something drastic soon,” Candice complained.

“Has Knox said anything?” I asked.

Candice shook her head. “No, in fact, he’s been very complimentary about my body. I just don’t feel good about how I look.”

Natalie and I exchanged a look. Candice was gorgeous, and I am not just saying that

because we're friends. She has a dark olive complexion and nearly black hair. Her eyes are a deep brown and tilted, just a touch on the end. She looks like a fashion model, but one with curves I'd kill for.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

We launched into a conversation about the merits of different diets and exercise programs. Before long, my phone was ringing. Excusing myself from the table, I answered the call.

“Hello?”

“Sutton, it’s Sadie. You know how Evie was a little congested this morning?”

A hint of unease crept up my spine. “Yes, is she alright?”

“I don’t think it’s anything to worry about. She’s just running a slight fever. I called the pediatrician, and he said to give her some infant fever reducer. But I wanted to let you know before I did that.”

The girls hadn’t been sick once since they were born. Suddenly I felt terrible for leaving them. I’d known Evie was a little congested, but a fever. I needed to get home.

“Sutton, are you there?” Sadie asked hesitantly.

“Yes,” I replied automatically. “Go ahead and give her the medicine. I was just finishing up here, so I will see you in a few minutes.”

“Oh no, I hope I didn’t ruin your lunch,” she replied worriedly.

“Not at all,” I lied. “I’m sure that everything is just fine. I’ll see you soon.”

Ignoring the worry that was building up inside of me, I walked back to the table.

“Is everything okay?” Candice asked.

“Yes,” I replied, pasting a fake smile on my face. “Evie is running a little temp, and Sadie was just letting me know.”

Natalie immediately stood. “I’m on my way back in that direction. Do you want to ride with me? I think Candice wanted to stop in to see Knox.”

Candice shook her head. “No, no, it’s not a big deal. We can go straight home.”

Candice and I had driven together in my car. While Natalie had met us here at Abberly’s. I didn’t want to ruin the rest of Candice’s day.

“Nonsense, it’s just a little fever. Candice, you take my car and tell Knox hello from us. I’ll see you later back at the house?”

“If you’re sure?” Candice asked, taking the keys from my outstretched hand.

“Positive,” I said with a nod.

“Right then,” Natalie said with a smile. “Thanks again for a fantastic girls’ lunch, ladies. Let’s head out, Sutton.”

9

Sutton

Three hours later, Evie’s temperature had gone up to a hundred and two degrees. Candice still hadn’t returned with my car, and Mark was out of town for business. So

my choices were to drive Sadie's deathtrap or call Brian. Needless to say, I called Brian to go with me to the hospital emergency room.

"Thank you again for staying late, Sadie," I said, tucking Evie into her car seat.

Sadie pushed her dark-framed glasses up her nose. "It's not an imposition at all. I just hope Evie gets to feeling better."

"You have everything you need?" I asked absentmindedly as Brian took the car seat and carried it out to his truck to strap Evie in.

"There is plenty of pumped milk in the fridge," Sadie replied. "We will be fine. Don't worry about Avery and me. Just let us know what the doctor says."

I nodded and then went out to Brian's truck. Once again, I dialed Mark's number, but he still didn't answer. I knew there was a time difference to contend with, as well as moments of Mark's day that he simply can't get to his phone. But I couldn't help the mixture of resentment and fear that flamed in my gut.

Part of me worried that something had happened to him. New York City was a crazy town where anything could happen. Our little family still had a killer on the loose. What if he had been mugged or taken?

Another part of me felt angry that Mark was spending so much time working. I knew that it was selfish on my part. Mark loved the company, and it was our livelihood. But we were both independently wealthy, aside from the business.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

I supposed that I just didn't have the emotional attachment to it that he did. I had enjoyed getting to know my birth father better through Mark's eyes. He would get very animated when speaking of Hollingsworth. It was obvious that Mark adored the man. I also was very much aware that Hollingsworth had been a father figure to Mark when his own had been cold and cruel.

So why couldn't I just let them have that? Why did I feel betrayed or left out somehow? I knew it was silly and immature, but I couldn't help the feelings that existed.

"You're awfully quiet," Brian said. "Is everything alright?"

"Yeah," I answered quietly. "Just worried about Evie."

"She's going to be okay," he said.

I looked over at him. "How do you know?"

"Because she has to be," he said firmly.

I nodded. But it didn't make me feel any better. I knew that bad things sometimes happened to good people.

Once in the emergency room, we were lucky enough that Dr. Young happened to be doing his rotation in the ER. He took us back and immediately began checking Evie out.

“She’s breathing really fast,” I mentioned.

Dr. Young smiled down at me. “I know it seems that way. She is congested, and it looks like she has an ear infection on the right side. How long has she had trouble with the congestion?”

“A few days,” I answered. “What do we do?”

Dr. Young went over his instructions and sent prescriptions for some antibiotic drops. Once we were released, I turned to Brian. “Thanks for being an amazing brother-in-law and bringing us here. I really appreciate it.”

Brian blushed a little. “It’s not a problem. You know, I never thought Mark and I would ever have a relationship. I don’t know if you know this, but when he first reached out to me, he said it was because of something you had said.”

“Me?” I floundered. “What did I say?”

“He said that you were talking about your mom.”

“My mom? I can’t imagine what I could have said.”

Brian smiled. “You know, Mark’s changed a lot since meeting you. Of course, I had met him once or twice growing up. But we were never close, not by a long shot. I thought Mark was a cold bastard like his father. When Mark first reached out, I wasn’t sure I wanted to get to know him better. But he kept going on and on about this amazing woman he had met.”

I felt a lump of emotion building in my throat. “He talked about me?”

Brian rolled his eyes. “He couldn’t stop talking about you. Shit, I just thought that he

wanted in your pants.”

That made me laugh. “Nice, what does that have to do with my mom?”

“Nothing,” Brian returned with a wide smile. “I will tell you what he said, though. Mark was telling me how you felt like you had lived with your mom your whole life and never really knew her at all.”

I felt a pang of regret. “It’s true. I would give anything just to have another moment with her. To tell her how much I love her, how much all of her sacrifices have meant to me. The chance to say that I forgive her for the drugs and the men. I didn’t know, not really.”

“That’s what Mark said. It got me thinking about my relationship with Mark. I work a dangerous job where tomorrow isn’t always guaranteed. If I wanted to truly know what having a brother was like, I had to push aside all of the shitty things that don’t matter. I want to thank you and Mark, for letting me into your lives. I always knew about him. But I never figured on having a sister.”

My eyes welled up with tears. “I never thought I would have a brother. But I am so glad that I do.”

Brian tapped my shoulder awkwardly and then took the car seat from my hands. “Let’s get the princess home. I can swing back to the pharmacy and pick up her prescription.”

I nodded. “That sounds just about perfect.”

It was just then that my phone rang again.

Answering the call, I said, “Hello?”

“Hey, beautiful.”

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

It was Mark. Suddenly the bitterness and resentment of my stressful day melted away. I just needed to hear his voice.

“I love you,” I said suddenly. “So much.”

“Are you getting in?” Brian asked from the other side of the truck.

“I love you too, baby. Are you okay?” Mark asked in a worried tone.

“Yeah,” I said with a sigh, motioning to Brian that I was on the phone. “Let me tell you all about it.”

Then I climbed into the truck, and we headed back to the house.

10

Sutton

During our next girls’ lunch out, I was sharing stories about Earl swiping the sacramental wine from Father Montgomery.

“How is Father Montgomery these days?” Natalie asked, scooping up some ketchup with her fry.

Candice shrugged. “Still not convicted. I swear he is as slippery as an eel. Knox said that he might have more information or another lead to go off.”

I sighed. "I know that I certainly would appreciate it if all of this business was finally at an end."

"Me too," Natalie added, and Candice nodded along.

"How are the twins?" Candice asked.

I grinned. "Fat and sassy."

"Speaking of sassy," Natalie leaned in as if to share a juicy piece of gossip. "Did either of you happen to meet the new deputy, Katie?"

I shook my head. "Not yet. What's she like?"

"She seems spunky and young," Natalie answered. "Pretty little thing. But it was Brian's reaction to the woman that really had me doing a double-take."

"Brian?" I nearly choked. "My brother-in-law, Brian?"

Her eyes sparkled with mischief. "One and the same. I think that Cupid may strike again in Otterville Falls."

Seeing as how Natalie had worked for Brian for years, she knew him better than Candice or I did. I felt a small bubble of hope. If Brian did fall in love with Katie, he would be sure to stick around Otterville Falls. It would just be one more reason for us to stay here and not live in the city.

"I like her," Candice said with a smile. "She might be young, but she has a real positive attitude. She's also driving Knox crazy with her ideas for the station. Apparently, she's worried that it gives off unfriendly vibes. Knox said that the whole point of jail was to make people not want to hang out there. Katie just laughed,

thinking he was joking. But I know Knox, and he doesn't have a clue what to do with her."

Natalie laughed. "When I met her, Katie was telling anyone who would listen about her plans for the garden. She's renting the place from Alice and Reena. How fortunate is that?"

"Isn't that the place next to Brian?" I chuckled. "He's not going to have any idea what to do with her. I almost want to warn him, but I think it will be good for him. Speaking of what's good for us, how are the wedding plans coming along?"

Candice flushed. "Knox has been distracted with the case, but it's coming. Just a bit slowly. When does Mark have to travel back to New York again?"

My heart sank at the thought of him leaving. "Next week. He wanted all of us to go, and I still might. It just depends if Avery still has the sniffles. I don't think she's slept more than twenty minutes in a row for a good week."

"Or maybe it's difficult on all of you because if it isn't one baby up in the night, it's the other one. Is it any wonder you are tired?" Candice teased gently.

"Yeah, there's that too," I replied with a chuckle. "Although they are doing somewhat better in that department."

"Are you ladies disturbing the peace?"

We turned to see Knox had entered Abberly's. As soon as she saw him, Candice was out of her seat and flying into his arms.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

“Nobody ever greets me like that,” Natalie muttered as we both smiled.

I winked at her. “I could always give it a try next time I see you.”

Natalie laughed, and we toasted each other with our water glasses.

“What brings you down here?” Candice asked as she pulled away from Knox.

“A little of this and a little of that,” he answered noncommittally.

“Take a seat, Knox,” I offered. “I’m sure Martha will bring you something.”

Knox pulled up a chair, and soon the conversation turned to the case.

“We need more reinforcements brought in to handle Sutton and Mark’s security. There are some guys that Brian thinks would be willing to take on the job,” Knox said between bites of his quarter-pound cheeseburger.

“Who are you considering?” Candice asked.

“I’d rather not say until things are official. However, I did want to talk about something that’s been on my mind.” Knox finished the sentence in a deep voice staring intently into Candice’s eyes.

“What is it?” She asked breathlessly.

“We keep waiting for the right moment to talk about our wedding.”

I watched Candice's eyes widen in surprise. She hadn't expected Knox to bring that up. We all leaned in, not wanting to miss a second of this conversation.

"Candice, I love you. But you and I both know that it's never going to be an ideal time to get married."

Her shoulders seemed to droop a little. "I know."

"So, I think we should elope," he said grinning. "Go pack a bag, and let's do this."

Candice's eyes lit with excitement. "Today? You want to elope today?"

Knox nodded. "Elliot is loaning us the jet. We can go to Vegas in a few hours. What do you say?"

Candice turned to us, indecision in her eyes. But I could also see that deep down this is what she's wanted.

"Go for it," I said. "In fact, take my car. I will catch a ride back to the house with Natalie. If you and Knox both go and pack now, you can get there before dark."

Candice let out a little squeal of excitement just as Natalie clapped her hands. "Go on now! The both of you! It's time to run away from all this."

Candice got up and kissed us all on the cheek before laying one on Knox that was definitely not PG-13. We hooted and hollered for the both of them. I could hardly remember when I had laughed so much.

Pulling my phone out, I texted Sadie that we would be a little later than expected. Then I messaged Mark.

Sutton: So you knew about the elopement and didn't tell me?

Mark: Once something is in the vault, you can't access it without a code.

Sutton: I'm the one who taught you that.

Mark: You're an excellent teacher.

Sutton: You're a smart-ass student.

Mark: A smart-ass who has the hots for my teacher.

I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face. Mark needed to get home as soon as possible. I had a real hankering for some role-playing.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

“What has you grinning like an idiot?” Natalie teased me.

I looked up to respond when I saw a stranger walk into Abberly’s. The cut of his suit was clear to me that this was no ordinary man.

“What in the world?” Knox muttered.

“Not what, but who?” Candice added

“Well now, this is cozy,” said the handsome stranger with a clipped English accent.

“No,” Natalie murmured from beside me. Her hands clenched at her sides, just as she straightened in her seat.

The man walked directly toward our table. There was some graying at the temples of his hairline, but it only made him appear more engaging.

“Who is he?” I asked as I reached over and took Natalie’s hand.

I wondered if she even realized her hands were shaking. The connection between the two of them was nearly palpable. It was obvious that they not only knew each other, but they had meant something special to one another.

He spoke directly toward Natalie. “Want to tell them who I am, dearest?”

The mocking endearment seemed to break the spell surrounding her. Natalie gently pulled her hand free and pushed her honey-blonde hair behind her ears. She looked

cool and confident. “No, I would rather not.”

The man’s eyes sparkled. Was it because she was sparring with him? I honestly couldn’t tell.

“I would be more than happy to make introductions,” he began.

“No,” Natalie interrupted. “Listen up, everyone. This is Julio Cerone, my husband, and the head of the Italian Mafia.” She leaned over to address Knox, “You might want to keep those handcuffs ready, Sheriff.”

There was silence as everyone looked at each other, waiting for the explosion that never came. Suddenly, Julio began to laugh. “You haven’t changed, I see.”

Knox gave Julio a pointed look. “Italian Mafia? Is she joking? Why do you speak with an English accent?”

Julio scoffed. “Natalia, she always did exaggerate. I sell insurance.”

Natalie snorted loudly. “And I’m the queen of England.”

“You’re the queen of my heart,” Julio said proudly.

“I’m going to be sick,” Natalie announced, pushing her chair back.

Knox sighed, speaking to nobody and everyone at the same time. “Just when you think things are going to settle down.”

Julio raised his hands in mock surrender. “I want no trouble. I just came to get my wife.”

Natalie bristled. “I am not a package. I’m not going with you, Julio. My life is here now.”

Julio nodded slowly. “I see.”

Natalie continued. “So you might as well go back to Italy, or wherever you are living now because I want no part of that life.”

“Insurance can indeed get a little dicey,” Julio said, straight-faced. “However, if this is what you want and what makes you happy, I have no desire to take that away from you.”

Natalie’s eyes narrowed. “That doesn’t sound anything like you.”

“People change, Natalia.”

I could tell that the handsome man was getting to her. There was a flush on Natalie’s cheeks, and she had a death grip on the arms of the chair.

“So,” she said faintly as she licked her dry lips. “When are you leaving?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:48 am

He smiled widely. “You misunderstand. If you are happy here, I will move to join you. I shall have to get used to my new home. It’s far different from Italy.”

11

Two Weeks Before & Half a World Away, in Italy

The private investigator sat impatiently, waiting for the head honcho to call him in. He was tired from the long international flight, followed by the car ride that led to the villa in the Italian countryside. He wasn’t often pulled in to speak with the main boss, though in his line of work, he found himself constantly boarding planes and adopting new personas.

Several months prior to this moment, he had been called in to investigate a shady individual named Forrest Coswell. The best way to get to know someone is to work with them, and so, when Forrest needed a PI, ours was Johnny-on-the-spot.

A beeping on his phone shook his thoughts. He glanced down to see a text had just come in.

JENNINGS:Read the report and forwarded it to Julio. Good work.

The man rubbed his face, knowing he should be thrilled at such words of praise, and he was. It was only that he had a feeling of dangling on the precipice on something far grander than he could even imagine. With a sigh, he texted Jennings back.

JACKSON:Thanks Boss, on location, will inform you of the next mission.

“Jackson?” A thin, beautiful woman with dark hair and a kind smile approached him, “Thank you for your patience. Mr. Cerone will see you now.”

Jackson followed the beauty down the marble hallway and into a large library.

“Thank you, Isabel, that will be all.”

Jackson turned to see Julio Cerone seated at a rich mahogany desk. He was surrounded by opulence, yet he seemed perfectly at ease with the loaded pistol in his hands.

“Well,” Julio’s eyes were intent, and his words clipped.

Jackson had served as a sniper for a special forces unit for over ten years. A bullet to the shoulder and some torn tendons in his knee had earned him a medical discharge. But it didn’t negate the fact he was wickedly good at killing people.

Once back stateside, it was difficult to find work that fit his particular skills. Indeed, it had been something of a godsend when his buddy and comrade in arms, Brian Williams, had started a private investigation service, and Jackson went to work for him.

One of their clients, Will Jennings, was a retired paid mercenary. Jackson didn’t know a whole lot about Jennings, other than he was deadly and had ties to the Mafia. All he knew was that there were occasions when he needed a PI, and because of the delicate nature of his work, Brian often put Jackson on the case.

These past few months had been something of a tangle. Brian and Jackson were shocked when Jennings contacted them about Sutton Landry, now Sutton Williams. Brian had immediately been defensive, considering she was his new sister-in-law.

But as things began to unravel, they learned that Elliot Brand had contacted Jennings as a personal favor to look into the case. Apparently, Elliot's wife and Sutton were close friends, and because of that, they were concerned.

Jackson never did discover the relationship between Brand and Jennings. It seemed odd that the billionaire mogul would be in a position to call in a favor from one of the most dangerous men in the world.

However, it was Jennings that suggested Jackson work for Forrest to infiltrate his organization. And it had worked like a charm. Only Brian knew of his involvement there, and as far as Jackson was concerned, the case was closed.

Until the summons to Julio Cerone's villa. Jennings had said it was nothing to worry about, but that was easy for Jennings to say. He was the Italian mobster's cousin or nephew, something of the sort. Of course, he wouldn't be concerned.

"What would you like to know, sir?" Jackson forced his voice to remain steady.

Julio eyed the younger man, and Jackson felt his heart thundering in his chest. The weapon in Cerone's hands was set aside and replaced with a folder, out of which several photographs were presented to Jackson.

"This woman," Julio pointed to a curvy blonde in a deputy's uniform. "Do you know her?"

Jackson did indeed know the woman; he had worked with her for several years.

"That is Natalie Jones. She works for Brian Williams at the PI firm. She is completely trustworthy, sir."

Julio's brow raised, "On that, we shall agree to disagree. Where is the woman now?"

Jackson felt a shiver of unease race up his spine, “Is she in trouble?”

Julio stared at the man, his clear gray eyes taking in the young PI. What could he possibly know about the world, about life?

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

“She is my wife,” Julio answered honestly. “Her name is Natalia Cerone, and she most definitely isn’t trustworthy, but she is good at taking on other personas. Now, I will ask you again where she is. I am not in the habit of threatening the help, but as you can see, this is an extenuating circumstance.”

“Natalie is your wife?” Jackson blanched. “She is in Otterville Falls. The address is there in the file. She plans on staying on with Brian, who is relocating the company to be closer to his family.”

Julio nodded, “Sutton, the reason why Will got involved in the first place. Do you believe in serendipity, Jackson? Could all of this truly be a coincidence, or is fate having a joke with us as she is so prone to do?”

Jackson felt a bead of sweat roll down his forehead. He didn’t want to die, and he knew that if something happened to him here, he would never be heard from again.

“I think that life can be a real bitch,” Jackson answered truthfully, and to his surprise, Julio laughed.

“Indeed, it certainly can. Isabel will show you to your room. I must apologize that we won’t be staying long. The jet will be prepared to take us to America in the morning.”

“We?” Jackson was starting to wonder if he ever should have joined the PI world in the first place.

“We,” Julio confirmed, “I have no wish to hold you hostage. But if I need to inspire Natalia to speak with me, it is good to have a backup plan. Isabel?”

The slender woman appeared from out of nowhere.

“It will be right this way, Jackson.”

Jackson couldn't do anything but follow the woman. He wondered briefly if he should make a run for it. But that was insanity talking. One didn't run from the Mafia. And they certainly didn't walk away from Julio Cerone.

A pinging sound on his phone indicated that he had another text.

JENNINGS: What did Julio want?

For a moment, Jackson stared at the screen. He hadn't even noticed Isabel had stopped and read the text over his shoulder.

“Well, aren't you going to respond?” her cultured tones were devoid of emotion.

“I am not sure that is wise,” Jackson answered, shoving the phone back in his pocket.

Isabel inclined her head toward the open door. “This will be your room for the evening. I have made certain that a light meal is waiting for you. Someone will be by in the morning to ensure you are ready for the flight. Is there anything else you require?”

Jackson licked his dry lips. “No, thank you for your help.”

She showed him inside and then shut the door as he walked across the bedroom. He felt himself start to relax. The lovely meal and gorgeous room did not make it seem like he was a prisoner.

And then he heard the door being locked from the outside. Scratch that. Perhaps he

was in a gilded cage, but he was a prisoner just the same.

12

Sutton

Later that day, I came home from the grocery store to find Mark had returned. But he wasn't alone.

"You invited him to stay in our home?" I hissed at Mark through clenched teeth.

The man sitting on the carpet in his designer slacks was none other than Julio Cerone, Italian crime lord, and altogether one of the most dangerous men on the planet.

And from the looks of things, my daughters loved him. Evie and Avery cooed and laughed up into his handsome face, taking to him like a fish to water.

Mark shrugged. "Of course, I did. When I heard he was attempting to book a room at the motel, well, it was the humane thing to do. Besides, I was talking to Elliot, and he recommended Julio to protect you and the girls. He spoke highly of the man and even went so far as to say that he would consider it a close personal favor if I would indulge Julio in his sojourn to the American countryside. I had no idea you would be opposed to it."

My lips compressed into a firm line. "Opposed is too mild a term. Mark, he isn't someone to mess around with."

Mark playfully growled in my ear while grabbing my ass. "You won't be messing around with him. So that's not something you should worry about."

"I just don't understand," I replied. "Why is he here? Elliot says that he knows this

man. Isn't that strange to you? Julio waltzed into Abberly's a few hours ago and announced the everyone that he was an insurance salesman."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

Mark snorted. “Insurance? I suppose some people could call it that.”

Julio’s voice came from across the room, startling us both. Obviously, we hadn’t been nearly as quiet we should have been.

“I am sorry to interrupt, but I feel I must explain. I am afraid I had to say something when the good Sheriff wanted to know my employment, and insurance was the first thing that came to mind. Natalia was insistent on seeing me arrested, and as fun as that sounds, I don’t see that contributing positively to my happily-ever-after scenario. As for my connection with the Brands, that is not my story to tell. However, I can assure you that you are safest in my company.”

I turned to see that Julio was holding Evie like an airplane, and Evie giggled madly. I had to admit that the man was charming. It was difficult to connect what my idea of a hardened Mafia member should be like with the man in front of me. But in the same instance, it was obvious he held himself with a great deal of control, always aware of his surroundings.

“Alright then,” I said, “If you don’t sell insurance. What do you do?”

Julio smiled, his teeth white and glistening against his tan skin. “You don’t believe my wife?”

This man was infuriating, but a part of me was coming to like him—damn the man.

“Your wife, as you call her, said that you ran the Italian Mafia. That can’t be right, can it?” I wanted him to deny the accusation. To say that Natalie was just angry at his

reappearance in her life.

“Natalia has always had a flair for the dramatic. To answer your question, at one point, I was considered a key player, but that was years ago. I haven’t been in the thick of things for a very long time. Do you honestly think Elliot and Mandy Brand would have sent me here if they thought I would bring you any harm?”

“Of course not,” Mark said.

But at the same time, I felt like my knees were giving out on me. “You don’t deny it?”

Julio’s bright smile flashed again. There was almost sympathy in their depths. “I won’t lie to you. I want to help you be free of those who will harm you. But my main objective is to win back the heart of my wife. I will do everything in my power to protect you and your family.”

Mark wrapped his arms around me. I sank back against the strength of his body and tried to think with a clear head.

Mark spoke softly in my ear, “Mandy and Elliot trust Julio with their lives and that of their daughter. That’s good enough for us. And besides that, I asked Elliot for a favor months ago. Part of how we were able to uncover Forrest was through this man’s intervention.”

“You helped us find Forrest?”

Julio nodded. “He’s a nasty man with a terrible reputation. He wasn’t difficult to locate. I put a watch on him, and it wasn’t long before he began to implicate himself. I have also had dealings with your brother-in-law, Brian. He’s a good man.”

I clutched my fingers together. “Brian is a good man. Would he say the same about you?”

Julio smiled again, this time a little ruefully. I had a feeling that Julio used his good looks to charm the ladies. He was a devilishly attractive man. However, all of his appeal fell flat as Mark kissed my forehead. I adored my husband, and for him, I would trust Julio Cerone.

Mark added, “I didn’t want to alarm you when we asked Julio to look into things. But we had already exhausted Knox’s resources. Brian felt like it wouldn’t hurt to have someone from the criminal side check things out. Sometimes one needs to explore all the avenues to keep his family safe.”

I drew in a breath to fortify myself and then moved forward out of Mark’s arms. I went over to the couch and sank down near where Julio was playing with my daughters.

“Thank you for that. I don’t intend to be rude. It’s only that this past year has been extremely difficult. I must apologize for not being more welcoming.”

“Mrs. Williams, I have no wish to distress you. And I assure you that you and your family are perfectly safe. I don’t mind staying at a hotel, if you could provide me with a location, of course.”

Mark shuddered as he came to sit beside me.

I shook my head, saying, “Most definitely not. They are known for the size of their bedbugs of truly epic proportions. No, you must stay with us. We practically have an empty house now that Candice moved in with Knox, and Brian moved into his bungalow. Mark and I would love to have you here. Thank you for your help. That was a terrible time in our lives.”

Julio's expression softened. "I will admit, I also had another tie in the affair. I have used Mr. Williams' private investigating firm when trying to take care of business in the United States. I found it too much of a coincidence that the Brands asked me to help a friend that also happened to be related to the man who runs the PI firm that I often use."

"How long have you known Brian?" Mark asked as he took Evie from Julio.

Julio picked up Avery, who immediately stopped fussing and started batting at his face.

"Ten years, perhaps? But not on a personal level. It wasn't until I connected Natalia working for Brian that I truly got to know him. He impressed me in many ways. His business is nearly global and completely airtight. It is no wonder that he has made such a fortune for himself."

Mark blinked. "Brian? A fortune?"

Julio laughed. "Were you not aware? He is rather one of the largest players in the game. People in our business are willing to pay a lot of money to remain safe. They will pay even more to keep their loved ones safe. I would say that my wife really wanted to thumb her nose at me by working for him. But in truth, I think she did it because she saw the person he was. Brian could easily be as underhanded as the rest of them, but he's not willing to be bought at any price. Trust me, I tried."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

“What do you want from her?” I asked tentatively. “If she doesn’t wish to be married anymore. What will you do?”

“If Natalia truly wishes to be free of me, we will divorce. But I have a feeling that she hates what I did much more than the man I am. We have also had eight years apart. Eight long years is plenty of time to sort through your priorities. I want to build a life with Natalia, but I have a feeling she won’t make this easy.”

Mark barked out a laugh. “Women usually don’t.”

Elbowing Mark hard in the side, I felt a certain sense of satisfaction when he grunted in pain.

“Natalie is my friend. I can’t betray that. But I hope that somehow things can be resolved for the best between the two of you.”

Julio raised a brow. “Do you believe me?”

I sighed dramatically. “To be perfectly honest, I’m not sure. But there is something I like about you.”

Mark scowled, and I laughed at his expression. Leaning over, I kissed his cheeks and then kissed Evie as well.

“This isn’t likely to be easy,” Mark warned.

“I will need a game plan,” Julio said, handing Avery to me and then getting up to his

feet. Mark and I followed suit, each holding a twin in our arms. Julio looked at us with open admiration.

“Someday, I hope to have a family. Thank you for allowing me to stay here. I will go finish unpacking my things.”

As he left, Mark and I took the girls upstairs for their naps. The nanny took each one and promised to check diapers and give them a bottle. After thanking Sadie for what was possibly the hundredth time, Mark and I were headed back to the stairs when out of nowhere, he scooped me up and into his arms.

I squealed, but Mark shushed me. “The babies are sleeping. Hell, woman, I think you're going to give Sadie a complex,” Mark teased, biting the fleshy part of my ear. “She’s been with us for quite a while now. I don’t know if you need to give her such detailed instructions every day.”

I blushed, knowing I needed to stop stressing. Sadie was excellent with the babies. Instead of focusing on that, I reached over and pinched Mark’s nipple beneath his dress shirt. “I can’t help it.”

He growled against my neck. “I know, and I find it utterly sexy.”

“You found pregnancy utterly sexy,” I said with a grin. “I’m not sure your sexy meter is functioning correctly.”

Mark tossed me on the bed and began to unbutton his shirt. My heart rate ratcheted up a notch or two with every piece of flesh he exposed. All the way down to those washboard abs.

“No,” Mark replied, shaking his head. “I said that seeing you pregnant with my child was fucking sexy. And for the record, it was.”

Not wanting Mark to have an unfair advantage. I pulled my soft cotton shirt over my head and watched as Mark's eyes narrowed in on my breasts.

"Now I find the mother of my children fucking sexy," he said with a growl.

He unbuttoned his slacks and shoved them down along with his underwear. Once free of them, he grabbed my ankles and yanked me to the edge of the bed.

I threw my bra onto the floor and had moved to the button of my jeans when Mark was upon me. He brushed my hands aside and undid them for me. With a yank, he pulled my jeans off and then spread my legs. He seemed enthralled with the sight of me nearly naked, all except for the silky panties.

"You forgot something," I said in a sing-song tone, grinning wickedly. I ran a hand down my body and slipped it underneath the elastic band of my panties.

His breath caught as I moaned, parting my folds and allowing my finger to slip over my clit. I then moved my fingers lower, gathering the slickness of my desire and rubbing circles on my clit. Mark let out a sound that wasn't even human. Then he was yanking my panties down my thighs.

I gasped as he pulled my hand away and then lifted it to my mouth. "Suck them," he commanded.

Keeping his eyes locked on mine, I allowed him to place my fingers in my mouth. The musky taste of arousal flooded my tongue. I sucked them good and watched as Mark's eyes darkened and became wild.

The next thing I knew, he was shoving my thighs apart as wide as they would go. His mouth came down, and he licked me, causing a muffled curse to escape my lips. I wanted more, needed more. I gasped as he moved in to kiss my core.

“Mark,” I panted his name, thrusting my hips against his face.

It was so good, too good. He knew just what to do to drive me batshit crazy. The pleasure coiled inside of me was building, climbing higher and higher. The tips of my breasts tightened, and I knew that my release was approaching.

He sucked my clit hard, flicking it with his tongue, and I shattered. The orgasm was so intense that black dots clouded my vision. My body convulsed, and he continued to ride me with his mouth. When he finally came up for air, we were both panting.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

“Ready for more, Mrs. Williams?”

“Always,” I replied and got ready for round two.

Only just then, my phone rang. I nearly ignored it, but something told me this wasn’t a call I wanted to miss.

“Just let it go to voicemail,” Mark said, nipping at my belly.

“It will just take a second,” I replied, grabbing my phone and answering in a hurried tone, “Hello?”

“Sutton!” Candice’s panicked voice came on the line.

Sitting up fully, I yanked the phone closer to my ear. “Candice, what’s wrong?”

“Sutton! The car, something is wrong with the car!”

Candice’s words were so rushed that I struggled to understand what she was trying to say. A scream ripped through the receiver.

“Candice!” I tried to speak calmly, even though my heart was hammering against my chest. “What’s going on?”

“There are no brakes. The car doesn’t have brakes!”

Mark took the phone out of my hands and began to talk to Candice.

“Candice, I need you to try the emergency brake,” he said in a calm voice. All the while, he was gathering his things and dressing, as was I.

“It’s not working!” I heard her yell.

“Try and downshift into a lower gear and safely get off the road. Is that a possibility...”

The rest of the conversation was cut off as the line went dead.

“Fuck!” Mark yelled, nearly throwing the phone. Then thinking better of it, he used it to call Brian. He quickly explained the situation and then said, “She’s not in her car. She has Sutton’s. She borrowed it at lunch. Whoever did this had full intention of hurting Sutton, perhaps killing her.”

I hadn’t even realized how hard I was shaking until Mark wrapped me in his arms.

“It’s going to be okay,” he whispered soothingly against my hair.

“They went after me but got Candice instead,” I said with a sob. “If something happens to her, what will I do?”

“Hey,” Mark cut me off with a soft kiss. “Nothing will happen to her. Brian will find her, I promise.”

I knew he would find her. I just hoped that she would be alive.

“I had just turned up the radio and started to sing along,” Candice said in a gruff voice. Her body was bandaged and bruised, and she was awaiting X-rays to see what was broken. But she was okay, and that was all that mattered to me.

“The radio was a little loud, I guess. I didn’t hear the car behind me until it bumped the back of the SUV.”

“What kind of car was it?” Brian asked.

“Black, I wish I could remember more, but I just saw black. My body flew forward, but thankfully I was wearing my seatbelt. I tried to speed up to get away from them, but they kept bumping me, trying to get me off the road.”

“What did you do?”

“I was panicking. The car behind me revved his engine as if he was going to come after me again. The windows were too dark to see inside, but it was an expensive car; I could tell that much. Another nudge and I jerked the wheel to keep from going off the road. Shots rang out from the car behind me, and the back window shattered. I screamed and didn’t realize that my hands had slipped from the wheel. With a loud crunch, I hit something, maybe a tree, but it didn’t stop the car.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

Brian bit off a curse, but Candice wasn't finished with her story.

"It was then that they peeled off, and when I pressed the brake to try and stop, the car wouldn't stop. Somehow I managed to hit redial on my phone, and that's when I called you, Sutton."

"I want to know who's going to pay for my barn," old farmer Johnson said from the hallway.

Before I could rip him a new one, I heard Martha light into him. "That girl nearly lost her life, and you're worried about your stinky-ass barn? Are you serious? What kind of sick fool cares more about his rotted-out barn than human life."

Candice winced. "I didn't mean to destroy his barn."

"I don't give a flying rat's ass about his fucking barn," Knox said, striding into the room. "I can't believe I almost lost you."

Seeing that Candice and Knox clearly could use some privacy. Mark, Brian, and I stepped into the hallway.

"A few brokenribs and a sprained wrist and a broken leg. Young lady, you are lucky to be alive."

Candice had clearly been through the wringer. Thankfully they had given her enough drugs to dull the pain that had enveloped her.

Knox had stayed with her for hours, but eventually, he had left with Brian on official police business.

“And you, Sutton, you look dead on your feet. When was the last time you slept?”

I glared at Dr. Young, who put his hands in the air in a giving-up gesture.

“I am only saying that to help you avoid getting a room assigned to you. You’re going to need to get some rest, take a shower, and maybe eat something.”

“Someone tried to kill my best friend,” I replied, rubbing my arms as if cold. “It was supposed to be me. What if I had taken my babies with me? What if Candice had died? I’m sorry, Dr. Young, sleep is the last thing on my mind.”

He nodded ruefully. “Well, I have arranged for the nurse to bring a reclining chair in for you. If you must stay, you must put your feet up.”

Candice looked at me, blearily. “I suppose I should tell you to go home. But please don’t leave me, Sutton.”

I fought tears as I moved to her side, taking her good hand. “Nothing could tear me away from you. Certainly not Dr. Young.”

The young doctor shook his head with a soft smile and left the room. A nurse soon brought in the reclining chair and settled it right next to Candice’s bed. Holding her hand, I stayed by her side the rest of the day and into the night. Through every vitals check, I was there. Mark didn’t give one word of complaint either.

It wasn’t until morning that I heard an unfamiliar woman’s voice ringing through the hallways.

“Where is my baby? What kind of place is this?”

Candice stirred groggily, so I patted her hand. “I will find out what’s going on. Just hold on.”

“Mom?” Candice croaked.

“What?” I answered just as the door flew open and a woman in her early sixties came flying into the room.

“Thank God you’re okay!” Making the sign of the cross, the woman raced across the room and nearly knocked me to the floor.

“Mom?” Candice cried out.

Mom? I don’t know why it hadn’t occurred to that Candice had a mother, hell, an entire family. Why didn’t I know that?

“You scared us, Candice,” Candice’s mom said as she sobbed at her daughter’s bedside.

“Mom, this is Sutton Williams. Sutton, this is my mother, Leanne. Mom, how did you find me here?”

Leann shuddered. “I don’t know what to think of this godforsaken place. It’s time you came back to the city where you belong.”

Candice shook her head, looking worn and tired. Her voice was thin as she replied, “We have been through this. I am not going back to the city. I love Knox. I’m going to marry him, mom.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

“Why would you throw yourself away on some hick in the middle of nowhere? Listen, I saw the handsome sheriff. He's something else, so have your fun. I won't begrudge you that. But this is not your forever, Candice. You have so much talent and promise, you can't throw that all away.”

I wasn't sure if I should be there for such a personal conversation. And yet I found I couldn't step away. Was Candice throwing her life away in Otterville Falls? And in essence, was that what Mark was going through as well? I knew he was exhausted from traveling back and forth to New York. Guilt filled me as I listened to Candice argue with her mom.

“Excuse me, Candice?” Dr. Young poked his head into the room. “I need to take your vitals.”

While Candice was introducing the young doctor to her mother, I slipped out into the hallway. Hugging my arms against my chest, I felt oddly lost. Candice had nearly lost her life in an accident that had been meant for me.

“Sutton!” I turned to see Knox coming up the hallway.

I tried to smile, but it must have been flat because Knox smiled sadly at me. “You look like somebody kicked your dog.”

“I've never had a dog,” I replied in a trembling tone. “I had a mouse once that I caught in the trailer. But once Mama found out, Scratchy disappeared.”

Knox winced. “That's a terrible story, Sutton.”

I nodded. "I know."

"It's not your fault," he added kindly.

I looked back at the closed door of Candice's hospital room. "What can you tell me about the accident?"

"We had a positive identification on the driver; old Farmer Johnson was plowing his field when they both flew by. I had to make sure before I came to tell you. But he has identified Forrest in the lineup."

"Forrest is here? In Otterville Falls?" I couldn't help the wave of nausea that overtook me.

"He's here at the police station. Sutton, this isn't over, but I think he will take a plea bargain and sell out his accomplices. The man doesn't have an allegiance to anyone."

I nodded numbly. "Can I see him?"

Knox took a step back and removed his hat. Running a hand through his hair, I could see the indecision on his face.

"I won't cause any trouble. I just want some answers."

"Sutton, the man is a real piece of work. I can't see him giving you anything you want. What I can see is him lashing out at anyone that gets in his way."

I swallowed, feeling resolved. "I know. But I just feel like I need to face him. He drove my mother away; he was the reason Martha and Earl went into hiding. He is the reason I grew up in a broken-down trailer. And now, he's the reason my best friend is lying in a hospital bed. He may not have any answers for me, but I have

some words for him.”

Knox was silent for a moment before nodding slowly. “Alright, I will run you over there after I check in with Candice.”

14

Sutton

There are defining moments in each of our lives. Moments you know you’ll always remember, no matter what happens afterward. The smell of Knox’s cop car. The shiny floors of the police station. The sounds of a typewriter somewhere in the next office over.

The way that Knox looked at me when he asked, “Are you sure you want to do this?”

Not only was I sure I wanted to, I knew I had to speak with Forrest. “Yes.”

The man wasn’t nearly as large as I had pictured him. Age obviously hadn’t been kind to him. Where he once must have been a handsome man, he now had a beer belly and ruddy skin from too much alcohol. It was then I noticed a definite rattle in his breathing. On the front of his shirt, I saw small red specks; was that blood? Forrest’s eyes were yellow and sunken. His mouth was drawn into a pinched line, and his bloodshot eyes shot daggers at me.

“You look just like the bitch,” he spat out.

And still, I didn’t speak, just stared at him. This man had ruined so many lives, and he still thought he could hurt me. I was done being a pawn in his game. Suddenly things became clear. Forrest wasn’t anything to me.

I stood up and turned to Knox. “Never mind, I have nothing to say to him.”

Forrest barked out an evil laugh. “No backbone, ay? Just like your bloody mother. She was a broken-down cunt. So what do you think that makes you?”

“Free,” I said.

“Free? What in the fuck does that mean?”

Knox grabbed Forrest’s cuffed hands and started hauling him back toward the cell. Every step of the way, Forrest spewed his venomous words. But they didn’t have the power to hurt me any longer. I refused to let this man have control or power over anything else in my life.

When Knox came back, he looked at me askance. “What changed your mind?”

“He’s sick, isn’t he?” I asked. I knew when someone was on death’s door. I’d seen it with Mama, and I could see it in Forrest’s eyes.

Knox shrugged. “I haven’t had a chance to have someone check it out yet, but he doesn’t look good. Mark’s on his way to pick you up. I’m sorry I can’t run you back home again. I want to try and get some names out of the bastard.”

I nodded. “No worries. I’m just going to walk down to Abberly’s. Would you ask Mark to meet me there?”

Knox nodded. “Sure, have the new deputy walk you down there. I know it’s only a few buildings, but I will feel better knowing that you are safe.”

I nodded and said goodbye. But when I came out of Knox’s office, I found that Katie was busy. I checked my phone and saw that I didn’t have any new messages. So rather than hang around, I dialed Sadie’s number and left the police station. I was just

about to the sidewalk when I heard the squealing of tires.

“Sutton, move!” Someone screamed.

I jumped into the bushes just as a black car zoomed by, nearly clipping me.

“Stay down,” Brian yelled. A flurry of bullets exploded around me. I shrank against the earth, not caring that my face was likely being scratched by the prickly shrubs.

I saw the back window of the car blow out right before both rear tires were shot from my vantage point. The car skidded this way and that before it ran into the side of Abberly’s.

I prayed that nobody inside was hurt, but I didn’t dare move yet. The driver flew out of the car just when another shot came from the entrance of Abberly’s. Standing there in the doorway was Alice, holding a small silver pistol.

The driver, whom she had struck, was lying on the ground, not moving.

I saw Brian and his team moving in and yanking the passenger door open. A woman was pulled out, Margaret, I should have known. The driver had the same build as Father Montgomery. It had to be him. Who else could it have been?

“Sutton?” I turned my face to see Natalie’s worried gaze right above me. “We are clear. Let’s get you out of there.”

I took her outstretched hand and was pulled to my feet. I threw my arms around her and hugged her close.

She hugged me back while whispering over and over, “It’s okay. You’re safe now.”

A few moments later, I heard Mark's voice. I didn't like the sheer terror I heard in his tone when he asked where I was.

I went from Natalie's arms straight into Mark's. Nearly knocking him to the ground, I hugged him as tightly as I could.

"He tried to kill me with his car," I stumbled over the words, trying to get them out. "If Brian hadn't warned me, he would have hit me. I felt the air whipping past. Mark, I would have been gone—dead. You and the girls, shit, what am I doing here? Why are we still in this crazy fucking place? I'm sorry, so very sorry."

"Hey," Mark said softly. "What is this all about?"

"I know I'm making you stay here in Otterville Falls. I've been selfish and unfair. It's probably why all these bad things are happening. It's all my fault."

Mark hugged me closer. "You've got it all wrong, sweetheart."

I didn't even know I was crying until Mark moved back and wiped my cheeks with his thumbs.

"I'm just so sorry," I cried.

"Hey man, why don't you get her home," Brian called out. "I'll clean up this mess and have someone out to take her statement when she's ready."

I didn't argue when Mark led me to his car. I allowed him to put me inside and to buckle my belt. I don't know where it came from, but I felt tired. I was utterly exhausted. Before we even arrived home, I had fallen asleep.

Sutton

“She hit him in the lung,” the pretty new deputy named Katie told me. “He didn’t even make it to the hospital, but we did get Margaret’s statement. She confessed to everything, including Forrest’s involvement. Looks like the plea deal is off the table. He’s going to be put away for a very long time.”

“How is Alice?” I asked.

A slow smile spread across Katie’s face, “Prouder than a peacock. Apparently, when your friend Max stayed with the elderly ladies, he taught them to shoot. They didn’t have a license for the gun Max gave them. Knox is pretty sure it’s stolen. However, he got them both signed up for gun safety classes and conceal to carry permits. He’s a good man, the sheriff.”

“So it’s over?” I asked hesitantly.

Katie smiled kindly at me. “I’m terribly sorry, Mrs. Williams. I know you have been through far more than you deserve. But to answer your question, yes, it’s over for now. When we go to court, we will need you to testify.”

I nodded. “I am happy to.”

“Honestly, I heard Forrest coughing this morning in his cell. I don’t know if the man will make it to trial. However, Margaret Landry is young and will be spending a lot of time behind bars.”

“She’s my cousin,” I said, not sure why I felt the need to offer this information up.

“I’m sorry about that,” Katie said, patting my hand.

“I didn’t really know her,” I answered with a shrug.

The corners of her mouth tipped up. “Well, I heard that Abberly’s makes a mean cup of coffee. If you ever want to meet me there?”

I nodded. “I’d like that. Thank you, Katie. And please, call me Sutton. You’re staying in that rental of Alice and Reena’s, aren’t you?”

I saw her cheeks pinken as she ducked her head. “Yup, right next to your brother-in-law’s place.”

I quirked a brow. “How is Brian as a neighbor?”

Her cheeks went from light pink to a healthy glow. “Oh, he’s amazing, I mean, good. Yes, he’s a good neighbor.”

I fought a smile. Miss Katie Deputy Sheriff had something of a crush on my brother-in-law Brian.

“Well, amazingly good. That’s quite the recommendation.”

Katie dropped her head in her hands. “Ugh, I am mortified. Please don’t repeat that to him. I don’t know why my mouth blurts out the thoughts that ought to remain in my head.”

This time I laughed. I hadn’t thought to laugh this soon after what had seemed to be a nightmare of a time. But Katie was truly funny. I liked her, and it felt so nice to do

something normal for a change.

“Don’t worry about me,” I told her. “I have an entire herd of embarrassing stories.”

Katie looked up at me. “You know, it’s hard moving to a new place where you don’t know anybody else. Thanks for being so kind to me. That means a lot.”

I smiled at her. “I can always use a good friend. Now, let’s talk about that brother-in-law of mine.”

Later that night, after the twins were put to bed and Mark had stepped into the shower, I picked up cufflinks that had been left on the side table and went to return them to his top drawer. There was something silver and elongated.

Shit, was that a butt plug?

I felt nervous and a little excited as I picked it up. The metal was cold and surprisingly heavy. As I heard the shower turn off, I quickly closed the drawer and moved to the end of the bed.

Mark came out with a towel around his waist was using another to dry his hair. My mouth went dry as I watched the beads of water cling to his amazing body. Eyeing me with a slow smile, Mark moved in front of me. With his index finger, he tipped up my chin.

“Are you okay?” he asked huskily.

I nodded.

But my eyes went back to his tight abs. That’s when I noticed that his towel was forming a tent. Being the brazen hussy we both knew I could be, I peeled the towel

away from his body and saw his glorious cock.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

I grinned up at him naughtily before taking the tip into my mouth and sucking the broad head. I knew just what to do to make Mark's knees shake. I licked him up and down like he was my favorite treat.

"Fuck, woman," he growled, pulling my hair into a ponytail. "You have a wicked mouth."

I winked at him and then sucked him in deep.

I knew from the way he tensed that Mark was fighting to not fuck my mouth. I wanted to please him, to drive him crazy. I increased my suction, taking him further inside until he was buried within my mouth so deep that I could swear he was hitting my throat.

He yanked out of my mouth, breathing hard. There was an audible pop as his shaft left my mouth.

"Fuck, you are so damn good at that!"

I grinned up at him with rosy lips that were swollen and spread into a wide smile.

"And you are damn beautiful," he growled, picking me up and yanking my sheath dress off. Clad only in my bra and panties, he worshipped my body with his eyes and then his lips. Kissing every inch of my skin and lighting my senses on fire. He captured my mouth in a deep kiss.

No one had ever tasted as good or felt so right. He picked me up mid-kiss, and we fell

together onto the mattress. Hands were everywhere, and lips were soon to follow. He took one of my breasts and sucked and licked my nipple into diamond hardness. Panting and writhing beneath him, I begged him to take me, but Mark wasn't finished teasing me yet.

As my pussy ached, my hand snaked down between my thighs, but it was smacked away before I could reach my clit.

"It's not time yet," Mark murmured against my skin. "I want to show you something."

I held my breath as Mark got up and opened his drawer. Pulling out the lube and the silver butt plug, he turned and raised a brow.

Rather than say anything, I turned over and showed him the generous curves of my hips and ass.

Mark applied plenty of lube to my bottom and the toy. With his finger, he smoothed the lube around, warming the tight ring with his playfulness. I gasped as the cool metal object first began to enter my body. It was large and stretched me. However, Mark was gentle moving forward and then back slowly, easing it in until I'd taken the largest part, and it slipped inside.

It felt foreign and yet so damn good. I moaned as Mark began to push it back and forth in my ass slowly. Then I gasped when his other hand played lightly with the folds of my pussy. The combined stimulation had me seeing stars.

"Mark, please," I begged him to send me over the edge.

But he must not have been ready yet, because he continued to tease me.

“I want to be balls deep inside of you when you come all over my cock,” he growled in my ear.

Shit, I wasn’t opposed to that in the slightest.

Mark moved back and said, “Get on your hands and knees.”

I felt open and exposed, but I did as he asked.

“I love the way you look,” he rasped. “The way you feel beneath my touch. The way your pussy squeezes me so tightly. I love everything about you.”

“I love you, too,” I choked out just as he shoved his length inside of me.

I bit down on a pillow to swallow a scream. With the butt plug, I was fuller than I’d ever been before. My body was so keyed up that when he started thrusting back and forth, I had to grab the sheets just to cling to something.

I could feel the pressure growing higher and higher. I knew that I was moments away from something big. All of my senses were engaged and stretched to the max. I clamped down hard with my vaginal walls, hoping to speed his release. I wanted to go together.

Mark’s hands went to my hips, and the thrusts were faster and deeper than ever before. I couldn’t hold out any longer. I shattered around him. My body riding the wave of endless pleasure from my pussy and the fullness in my ass. I wasn’t sure how long it lasted. One release seemed to build into another until I was literally wrung dry.

Mark came, great spurts of cum coating my insides and marking me once again as his.

When I slumped down onto my face, Mark laughed and pulled me into his arms.

“Was that good?”

I smiled like the cat who had eaten the canary. “I would say on a scale of one to ten it was at least a forty-five.”

He grinned. “You like the plug?”

I opened an eye and caught his smirk. “Don’t get too cocky on me.”

“I love you, woman.”

I leaned up and cupped his cheek. “I love you too. But um, Mark?”

“Yeah?”

“What do we do about it? It’s still in there.”

He laughed again. “We are just waiting for round two.”

I smiled up at him dreamily. “I love round two.”

Just as I was about to dive in, I remembered something. “Mark, wait. I promised myself I would tell you this.”

Concern etched his face. “What is it?”

“Do you regret giving up your life in New York to live here with the girls and me? I know I have been selfishly wanting to raise them here. I don’t want you to feel like that is the only option. I will move back to New York if you’d like me to. I would go anywhere you’d want me to.”

Mark looked truly surprised. “Sutton, I didn’t love my life in New York. Sure, I love

the city, and I love our business. But that is nothing in comparison to how I feel about you, Evie, and Avery. You aren't forcing us to live here. We live here because this is where our family is. We have Martha and Earl, Alice and Reena, Knox and Candice..."

"Candice's mom is desperately trying to convince her to move back to New York," I replied sullenly.

Mark tipped my chin up to meet his eyes. "I can guarantee you she won't go. Those two are so in love with each other. There is no way on God's green earth that she will go anywhere without him. Besides, in New York, she wouldn't have her best friend and partner in crime."

A smile broke across my face, and soon, I began giggling.

I could tell that Mark was surprised at my response, but I couldn't help it.

"What?" he asked.

"You said no way on God's green earth. Before moving to Otterville Falls, had you even heard the expression before? I seriously doubt it. Like it or not, Mr. Williams, we are in your blood now. I claim you as ours, and I'll never give you back."

He fought a smile. "Really? Well, honestly, I never had a chance. Once I saw you, it was over."

And then he kissed me, and we went for round two.

Part II

While the drama plaguing Mark and Sutton has been resolved, there are still many

storylines that need wrapping up. The second half of our story is what happens next to everyone in Otterville Falls.

I hope you enjoy it.

16

Katie McCleary peered outside of her kitchen window, brushing back the curtains that Reena and Alice had helped her sew. The seams weren't exactly straight, and the lengths were a little mismatched, but Katie told herself that it only gave them charm. After all, wasn't shabby chic supposed to be all the rage?

Her neighbor, the enigmatic Brian Williams, was mowing the grass. The man obviously thrived on a schedule. He cut the grass every Thursday morning like clockwork. And every Thursday morning, Katie set her alarm for six am so that she wouldn't miss the six-foot-four piece of man meat out in his low-slung basketball shorts and little else.

There were tattoos on his chest and shoulder that she guessed were from his time in the Marines. Katie wasn't embarrassed to admit she had run a background check on the man. After all, he was her new neighbor, and the girls, Alice and Reena, seemed to dote on him.

It was her civic duty as the new deputy.

Guilt pricked at her veins. Her duties hadn't consisted of swiping one of the pictures of Brian and bringing it home to drool over whenever she had a free moment.

The man was drop-dead gorgeous and about as friendly as a porcupine. Katie had taken him a plate of cookies when he moved into the bungalow next to hers. How was she to know that she misread the recipe and accidentally left out the sugar? It

wasn't like she baked often.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

He turned, and she caught a glimpse of his six-pack. If she wasn't careful, she was going to fall from her perch at the sink. Katie wasn't quite tall enough to see him unless she climbed up onto the counter. A sacrifice that, clearly, she was willing to make.

He wiped his brow, and the muscles in his chest and arms rippled with effect.

Damn, all she needed was some music, and it was almost as good as porn.

Visions of Brian doing naughty things to her made Katie a little absentminded. So when she looked up again and saw that he was staring directly at her, she screamed, and the office cup in her hand went flying as she fell backward onto the kitchen floor.

Brian took clothes to the cleaners on Monday, paid bills on Tuesday, laundry was relegated to Wednesday, and Thursday was yard work. Organization had always been his strong suit. Growing up with a single mother, he had often been left on his own.

He felt antsy unless he had a plan or a mission. Perhaps that was why he did so well with the Marines. One's schedule was always set in place, with standards and precision. He executed it beautifully.

He ran his business the same way. Brian knew that people thought his business was a small, American-made PI firm, and Brian worked hard for this impression. However, the truth was that through his contacts and with his brilliant business skills, he had made the company into a multi-million, soon to be billion, dollar venture.

The thing was that Brian wasn't about a life of wealth. His natural father had never

claimed him. Money and his position in this world far more important to him than his flesh and blood. Money wasn't a driving force in Brian's life.

The only reason he had decided to make Otterville Falls his home was that his half-brother, sister-in-law, and two nieces were here. When Brian's mom passed away, this was all the family left in the world. That was what mattered to him.

He didn't drive a fancy car, and he didn't build a fancy house. In fact, the home he bought recently was a 1945 bungalow that needed restoration, much of which Brian wanted to do himself. He liked working with his hands and seeing the fruits of his labor.

What he hadn't bargained for was the sexy new neighbor.

Just the thought of Katie McCleary had his dick twitching in his boxers. The woman was small and fiery, with red hair and a temper to boot. She had these amazing tits that had to be real. At the very least, he was dying to find out. And she had an ass that wouldn't quit. She was also in law enforcement and strictly off-limits.

Katie McCleary had 'wife and children' written all over her.

Brian was a PI and dealt with the shittier parts of life. Spouses cheating on each other, swinger couples gone wrong, murders, theft: you name it, and he had uncovered or exposed it. Brian wasn't husband-and-father material.

He saw the way that his brother Mark was with Sutton. The two of them had to be the cutest couple and were obviously an anomaly. That wasn't in the cards for Brian. He had always been a loner and would always be a loner.

He rounded the corner with the lawnmower and began to walk back the direction he came, making sure the lines were straight. He wasn't sure why he did it. Perhaps it

was because she was constantly on his mind, but he looked over at Katie's house. The roses were in shambles, and she had pruned some of the bushes past recognition.

The lines in her grass were wiggly and uneven. It almost had him shivering. He needed order, even craved it. The last thing he needed was to be hyper-focused on the curvy redhead officer who constantly popped into his mind. Her uniform was snug, and she filled out every inch of it.

He supposed it wasn't good form to stare and drool at an officer, but it was something he was guilty of all the same. However, that was nothing compared to the little spaghetti-strap tank tops and boxer shorts with the band rolled down that exposed her perfectly flat stomach.

Shit, damn, and hell! That was enough to make him want to throw her over his shoulder and head for the nearest cave. He fought the urge to adjust his dick, which hardened the more he thought about her.

Must think of something else, he told himself firmly.

Something flashed in the corner of his eye, and he looked at Katie's kitchen window. She was perched there with the silliest expression on her face. Her hair was piled up in a messy bun at the top of her head, and she was holding a coffee cup.

When their gazes locked, her mouth opened, and the coffee went flying. One minute she was there, and the next, she was gone. Brian took off at a dead run, not even waiting for the lawnmower to stop. He pounded on her back door but only heard a groan in response.

His training came in handy, and he kicked down the back door and raced into the kitchen. Katie was laying on the floor with her hand on her head. Her thin tank top was soaked with coffee, revealing that she hadn't yet put on a bra.

Two nipples showed through the wet fabric, and his mouth went dry. The semi-erection from earlier was already back at full mast, and he had a hard time breathing.

“Are you alright?” he gasped.

Her eyes were still closed, but he knew she was hurting by the way she was breathing. His training had taught him not to move a victim of an accident.

“I am going to call an ambulance, just sit tight.”

“No!” Katie came flying up into a sitting position.

She groaned and held her head, “No ambulance, I am fine. Just bumped my head, nothing serious.”

Brian frowned, “You could have a concussion.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

She opened her eyes at this, and he saw her disbelief. “There is nothing wrong with me. It was just a fall.”

“What were you doing up there?” Brian couldn’t help but ask.

“Changing a light bulb,” she said quickly, her cheeks turning pink.

He looked above the sink, where there wasn’t a light fixture.

“A light bulb?”

“In my flashlight,” she lifted her chin.

He fought a smile. She was a terrible liar.

“And where is that flashlight now?” he asked solemnly.

Katie’s cheeks heated to a rosy glow, “How in the hell should I know?”

She knew she sounded like an idiot, but the words kept flowing out of her.

“I hit my head. Obviously, I can’t remember.”

And to her surprise, he laughed.

Later that night, Brian thought about his encounter with Katie. He had checked her for signs of a concussion that she clearly didn't have. Besides a bump, she was none the worse for wear. What had plagued Brian's mind is that he couldn't figure out why she had been on the counter in the first place.

The fact that she refused to tell him astounded Brian even further. He had glowered, spoken in his sternest voice, and even gave her the glare. The same glare that had plenty of Marines spilling their shit. But not Katie McCleary; she would just give him that dimpled smile and shrug her shoulders.

Those same creamy shoulders that couldn't hold up the strap of her skimpy tank top. Do you know how hard it is to stand in front of someone in basketball shorts and hide a hard-on? He prayed that she hadn't noticed.

It wasn't like he noticed how her nipples were erect and pressed against the thin fabric of her shirt. No, that would be inappropriate. Brian wouldn't dream of looking at his neighbor that way. I mean a girl in the club or a one-night stand? They were free game. They knew what they were getting, a night of wild, no-strings-attached sex. But one couldn't do that with a neighbor. There was always the next time you wandered out to get the paper, and they wanted to stop and chat. No, Katie was off-limits.

And so, when he had decided she was doing well enough, he gave her an ice pack and went back to mowing the grass. So what if he checked the kitchen window eleven more times? He was worried about her safety, nothing more.

It really didn't signify that as soon as he showered, his hand wrapped around his cock, and he blew his load against the shower wall, thinking about her. That was fantasy, and this was reality.

Brian dropped his head back and wondered just who he was trying to kid. He was a

fucking PI, for hell's sake. Aware of the classic signs of infatuation, he knew he had them in spades. The safest thing for everyone would be if he just steered clear of the pretty deputy.

With a few hours of daylight left, Brian decided to fix the crooked shutter on the side of the house. He grabbed a ladder and placed it under the window, and then, with the hammer and nail, he began to climb.

Once he was up there, Brian saw that the shutter really needed to be painted. So instead of rehanging it, he decided to pull them all down. It was long after nightfall when the last shutter was stacked in the one-car garage, and he was able to put the ladder away.

Out of the corner of his eye, he happened to see a pair of pruners. Brian's mind flashed to Katie's roses. They were in desperate need of some pruning. He walked around the side of the yard and saw that all the lights were off at her house.

Reena and Alice said that Katie worked earlier. Brian got a crazy impulse just to go do something for her. She would never know, and he liked gardening.

Like hell, he did.

Brian turned to go back into the house, but that little urge bugged and prodded him until he picked up the pruners and went across the grass into Katie's yard. Brian knew how to be stealthy, but he had never had to be quiet while gardening.

A ten-minute job turned into almost two hours of stumbling around in the dark as he pruned roses, fixed hedges, and applied new mulch. With an aching back, he removed all traces of himself.

Brian showered before climbing into bed that night. He felt rather proud of himself.

He had done something nice for Katie, and she would never know it was him. As the water cascaded down his body, Brian took his cock in hand. He thought of how appreciative she would be if she ever found out. Not that she would, but again, this was fantasy.

Katie cursed as her toe smacked the wrong side of the door. Her morning was going to shit, and her head still hurt from yesterday, when she had been caught acting as a peeping tom.

Katie hauled her bag onto her shoulder with a huff and made her way outside to her car. Putting it in reverse, she made it halfway down the driveway when Katie slammed on her breaks.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

She looked at her side yard and then blinked hard and looked closer. Where she had made an absolute mess of things previously stood a sweet rose garden. The trim was new, and the mulch was tidy.

Katie felt her stomach flip. Someone had been in her yard when she was sleeping. Katie wasn't even sure she had locked the door. What if this person had broken in and done something terrible to her?

All of her deputy training started flashing through her mind. Katie was new to the job and didn't have much experience in law enforcement. But she watched CSI and knew all about the creepy things that stalkers did for people.

Her heart pounded, and she felt sick. She needed to tell someone. Knox? No, there wasn't any evidence. What could Knox do?

Katie glanced at her watch. If she didn't leave right then, she would be late for work. With an uneasy stomach, she made her way to the police station. Throughout the day, she made one mistake after another.

Finally, Knox sent her out on a bogus assignment. They both knew it, and it didn't help to improve Katie's mood.

By the time she went home, Katie was grumpier than a mad hornet. When she saw the flower beds, all of her earlier concerns seeped in, and she made up her mind to nip the problem in the bud—pun completely intended.

Katie marched up to Brian's door and banged on it until he answered.

“What?” Brian scowled at Katie in her cute uniform. “Did you have to knock at the door like that?”

Katie blew out a short breath, “I have a stalker problem.”

“You stalk people?” Brian repeated in confusion.

Katie rolled her eyes, “No, ugh, I have someone stalking me. I need to hire a private investigator.”

Brian immediately went on alert. He wrapped an arm around her waist and whisked her into his house.

“Come away from the windows,” he barked. “Why didn’t you tell me about this sooner? Was this why you were on the countertop? Did you see the stalker?”

Katie shook her head, “No, I only learned about it this morning.”

Brian sat back, “You’ve had a stalker for less than a day?”

“Look, do you want the case or not? I am willing to pay cold hard cash!”

Brian’s lips twitched. He wondered if she had any idea how much it would cost to retain his firm. Likely more than she made in the last five years.

“Why don’t you tell me everything? Please start at the beginning.”

Katie took a deep breath, “Okay, well, I was backing out of my driveway when I saw it.”

“A note? What did it say? Do you have it?” Brian felt the familiar zing of adrenaline

that came when working on a case.

Katie shook her head, “No, it was the rosebushes.”

Brian felt his cheeks begin to darken. In a gruff voice, he questioned, “What about them?”

Katie leaned in, and Brian smelled her light perfume. It washed over him and caused his dick to twitch. She was so close that Brian could feel her sweet breath against his ear.

“The stalker was in my rosebushes. I’ve been thinking, and maybe it’s a metaphor. Maybe he wants to cut me up and bury me there?”

Brian’s jaw dropped open. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

18

Julio pulled his car into the beautifully kept neighborhood. He was driving a nondescript sedan and had no issues pulling up next to the minivan in the drive. He locked the doors and made his way up the walk with a whistle under his breath. Before he could knock, the door was flung open by a short, curvy Latina wearing a large grin on her face.

“Julio! We are so happy to see you! Come in, come in!”

Julio reached out and kissed her cheeks, “I do think you are lovelier every time I see you, Gina. How are Marco and the baby?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

Gina waved her hand, dismissively, “They are fine, all is well. Please come inside. Everyone will be happy to see you.”

Julio walked into their home and admired the lovely bright colors that Gina had used to decorate. There was nothing mild or meek about this woman. Having formerly worked with his nephew Jennings as a hired gun, Gina was more than capable of holding her own.

Her husband, Marco, came out with a three-year-old on his hip. The handsome man had a birthmark that covered part of his face. Julio knew that Marco had been, at one point, rather self-conscious of the defect, but through the love of his wife, he had come to realize that she saw him and not the red patches of skin.

“Lizzie, come and see your Uncle Julio!”

The little girl stretched her arms out to Julio, and he gladly took her into his own.

“Be careful,” Marco warned, “She is sticky, and I haven’t figured out what from quite yet.”

Gina smiled and placed a hand on her growing belly, “Let’s hope that this one is a little better behaved than her older sisters.”

Julio turned to Lizzie, “Have you been a good girl?”

She nodded and threw her arms around his neck, “So good! Do you have a present?”

Marco groaned while Gina gasped.

“We don’t ask for gifts!” Gina admonished.

“You ask daddy for things all the time,” Lizzie reasoned and grinned when Julio pulled a candy from his pocket.

“You will spoil her,” Gina said to Julio affectionately.

Julio couldn’t help the smile that crossed his face, “She deserves every happiness and more. Where is my other niece?”

Marco called out, “Jackson?”

A few moments later, the PI that had stood before Julio in his Italian villa walked in carrying little Maisy, who was just a year.

“Julio, good to see you,” Jackson said with a grin. “As you can see, I have been on child duty.”

Gina snorted, “Jackson, you are a guest. I have told you that a dozen times. You don’t have to be the live-in nanny.”

“Wouldn’t that make him the manny?” Marco teased.

Jackson shrugged, “Who would have thought that I would like kids? Have you found Natalie yet?”

Julio nodded and began to explain. Over the course of the time it had taken him and Jackson to cross the sea and land in the United States, Jackson had a much clearer picture of what Julio wanted with his co-worker. He also learned that Julio wasn’t the

horrible man he had thought him to be.

Julio warned that he had once been the person Jackson had feared and knew that Natalie had every right to run from him. But he was finished being that person. He wanted to know if it were possible to have one more chance with his wife or if things were truly over.

It was decided that Jackson would pretend to be still missing. It would be easier than showing up to work for Brian and facing Natalie. She would put the pieces together; she was an intelligent woman.

Jackson found that he had been enjoying his stay with Marco and Gina. They were loud, fought often, and loved each other fiercely. He knew that they had some tie with Julio, but it wasn't discussed how they had become so close.

Gina had let slip that Julio was something of a matchmaker, but Jackson was left in the dark beyond that.

"She is pretending to want me gone or dead, but I can see in her eyes that she still cares." Julio was explaining. "I have to find a way to woo her back to me. She loved me once. I know that she could again."

"Have you tried telling her the truth?" Gina said as she sank into the soft cushions of her sofa.

Julio wrinkled his nose, "Why on earth would I try something as mundane as the truth? I was thinking of being abducted by aliens or, at best, a long-term coma."

Marco snorted, "So you went with the truth, and she blew you off?"

Julio sighed. "She won't even allow me to get near enough to her to speak the truth.

There is so much she doesn't know. So much that I wish I could explain."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

“Have you considered pulling in more people to help facilitate the ending you want?”

Julio frowned and looked at Marco, “It goes against my nature to share intimate details of my life.”

Marco nodded. “While I agree that it is difficult, I wonder if you were to get Sutton and her husband Mark on board. They might help you find ways you would be alone together. Heaven knows you have to have some ideas rolling around that brain of yours.”

Julio smiled briefly, “I do indeed have some ideas, but there is also the little matter of the sheriff she seems to have tucked into her back pocket.”

“He has a girlfriend or fiancé, doesn’t he?” Jackson asked.

“Yes,” Julio confirmed, “Her name is Celeste or Candice, something like that.”

“Women love happily-ever-after stories. And she is good friends with Sutton, isn’t she? If you can convince her you are only trying to save your marriage, I am sure that the fiancé will get on board. And trust me, there isn’t a man out there who would give up what the sheriff has in her. She’s one beautiful woman.”

Gina eyed Jackson. “I thought you were gay?”

Jackson scowled in response. “We call it pansexual these days. I am attracted to all types of people, regardless of gender. And besides, I wasn’t trying to poach her, only appreciating the goods on display.”

“Well said,” Julio snorted, “but keep the appreciation away from my wife.”

Jackson looked over to Julio and winked. “I appreciate what is right in front of me, Julio. I don’t need to see your wife. I already know her.”

And to everyone’s surprise, Julio blushed.

19

Brian blinked blearily at the clock, trying to see what the time was. He had been up most of the night and never had been much of a morning person. Unfortunately, whoever was pounding on his door either didn’t care.

He rolled over and stood, not bothering with grabbing clothes. Brian glanced into the mirror. His body was in perfect condition thanks to his history with the Marines and the gym in Mark and Sutton’s basement.

He was in boxer briefs and his morning wood was obvious. Well, whoever was out there would be getting a big surprise because he would be heading directly back to bed, and he didn’t give a shit if the postman saw his junk.

Rubbing his hand over his day-old stubble, Brian opened the door a fraction to see who his morning wake-up call was.

“Hi!”

A beautiful redhead was peering around the door. Her perky freckles were calling to him, and that damn deputy uniform hugged her curves like nobody’s business.

“Really?”

Katie frowned, “Is this a bad time?”

Brian blinked. Did she not see his bare chest and underwear? He opened the door, thinking it was kind of a sarcastic asshole move, but he didn’t care.

“Sure, come on in. I’m obviously not doing anything.”

Katie dimpled up at him, “Perfect! Thank you so much for seeing me. Some people just really aren’t morning people. I don’t get it. I mean, I feel refreshed and ready to go. Do you have any coffee? It’s okay if you don’t, I really shouldn’t drink it. But a nice latte, how can I turn something like that down? I really miss Starbucks, don’t you?”

Brian grunted something and shut the door, giving Katie a fantastic view of his ass in the boxer briefs. She had no idea that a back could be so sexy, but the muscles and ridges on Brian were panty-dropping delicious.

She knew she was babbling and really didn’t mean to. But the man was in his underwear, for goodness sake, underwear! She had made sure she didn’t look down at his man parts because that would be totally inappropriate, and she was in her uniform.

Brian turned and motioned for her to sit on the couch.

Damn, there was a massive bulge in those boxer briefs... Katie shook her head. No, she wasn’t looking at her neighbor that way. She had learned her lesson falling off the cabinet. Fortifying herself, Katie sat primly on the couch.

“I’m here on official business.”

Brian yawned, the movement causing muscles all over his body to contract. For a moment, Katie caught herself staring again.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

“Are you here to arrest me?” he asked, scratching those washboard abs.

“Do you have any clothes you could put on?” Katie blurted out the question and then cringed at how young and naive she sounded. Worldly women didn’t care about naked bodies. He probably had women over here all the time.

The thought didn’t help her.

Brian’s lip tilted up. “I was sleeping, and I intend to go back to sleep after your official business is conducted. So it seems to me clothes would be a waste of time.”

“Right,” Katie nodded vigorously, “Of course, very practical, and I prefer you this way.”

Shit.

Shit.

Shit.

“I meant, I prefer you to be comfortable,” she stammered as Brian’s smile grew legs and spread clear across his face.

“Katie is there something you needed?” he asked gently.

He loved watching her get all worked up. The woman truly had no idea how lovely she was. Her eyes sparkled, and her mouth was quick to draw into a smile.

“It’s that stalker,” Katie’s words wiped the smile off of his face.

“The gardener who took pity on your plants?” he countered.

Katie frowned, “My shutters were painted last night! Brian, that’s a dangerous situation. I’ve decided I need to put in a security system.”

Brian nodded. “Why not?”

After all, he reasoned, there wasn’t a system out there he hadn’t gotten through.

“But I’m not really that handy,” Katie twisted her hands. “So, I ordered it online, and I was hoping that you might be able to help put it in?”

She bit her bottom lip and looked so damn adorable that Brian had to suppress a groan.

“Sure,” he nodded and then motioned to the door, “Was there anything else?”

Katie nodded, “Yes, it’s that official business that we talked about earlier?”

“Okay,” he prompted, “Go ahead.”

Katie took a deep breath and then blurted out her request.

“I know I’m a trained deputy, but I just think maybe I need a refresher in self-defense, and I was talking to Sutton, and she said that you had taught her some things. I was wondering if maybe you’d be willing to teach me, one on one?”

Brian made a mental note to thank Sutton personally for bringing him into this hellish state. Not only was he her nighttime gardener/stalker, but it appeared he was about to

be her security system installer and personal self-defense trainer.

“You don’t look happy,” Katie rambled on. “I am sorry; please just forget about it. I overstepped, here, let me get out of your hair.”

She shot off the sofa and raced to the door. Brian luckily made up the distance with his long legs. He grabbed her before she was able to get the door open, but he lost his footing and ended up pressing her tight against that same door.

Katie’s eyes grew wide when she felt something long and thick pressing into her stomach. His breathing was shallow, or maybe it was hers, Katie wasn’t sure.

All she knew was he smelled incredible, and his chest beneath her fingers felt solid and strong, and suddenly she really wanted to know what was underneath those boxer briefs. She wondered what he would say if she asked him for a peek.

“Yes,” he grunted.

Katie’s face bloomed as their gazes met.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

“Yes?” She hated how breathlessly it came out.

“Yes, I will help you with your security system and some self-defense moves. But right now, I am tired, so unless you want to carry on this conversation with yourself, I suggest we meet up later this afternoon after your shift.”

“Right,” Katie said, opting to try and act like his massive hard-on wasn’t smashed against her or the fact that she couldn’t stop her fingers from exploring. Her eyes went to his lips, and she accidentally licked hers.

“Katie,” this time his voice was a growl.

“Yes?” she blinked.

“Goodbye.”

In a move that belonged to James Bond, he opened the door, deposited her on the porch, and then shut it in her face.

20

“Katie? Did you hear what I said?”

Katie turned a guilty look over toward Knox, her boss, and the sheriff of the town.

“Something about parking on Main Street?” she offered hopefully.

Knox scowled at her, “No, I asked that you check into the vandalism at the senior center. It's most likely some punk teenagers, but I need to do that today.”

Katie nodded and picked up the keys to the police cruiser, “Right away, sir.”

Knox's lips twitched, “It's just Knox, Katie. Let me know what you find out.”

The door opened to the station, and Knox's fiancé Candice walked in, “Who is finding out what?”

She lifted her face for the kiss that he promptly placed on her lips.

“None of your business,” Knox kissed her hard and then promptly turned back to Katie. “Let me know how it turns out. I'm taking the afternoon off for some wedding plans or something else.”

Candice sparkled, “We are checking out a few vineyards that aren't too far away.”

Katie loved wedding talk, “Have you already picked out your cake?”

Candice shook her head, “Not yet. We are trying to decide if local is best or bringing something in from the city. My mother really wants to be involved as well, so things are kind of all over the place.”

They chatted for a few more minutes as Knox gathered his things, and then they went their separate ways.

Katie rolled the window down as she drove down Main Street toward the senior center. She was enjoying the fresh country air and singing along to the radio when she pulled up to see Alice and Reena scrubbing graffiti off the walls.

“Is that a dick?” Katie asked after getting out of her cruiser.

Alice tossed Katie a wet sponge. “Nice to see you recognize it. How are you, Katie-cakes?”

“I know what a dick looks like,” Katie winced.

Reena wiped the sweat from her brow. “The kids these days have the YouTube and the porn, Alice.”

Katie fought back the impulse of telling the elderly ladies that she wasn’t a kid anymore. But she knew they didn’t mean any harm, and they lived on the other side of Brian.

Brian.

Just the thought of him in those boxer briefs had Katie in a dither. His toned body was meant for touching, and she could hardly believe she’d had her hands on him earlier that morning. Granted, he threw her out moments later, but she would never forget the feel of those abs and that cock smushed up against her.

Katie sighed and turned to join the ladies scrubbing the cement.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

“Maybe they could make something out of it?” Alice suggested, “Like a rocket or hot air balloon?”

Reena and Katie gave her a look that indicated their thoughts on her amazing idea.

“Okay, but it’s not washing off. I think we will need to repaint this side of the building.”

“I am terrible at painting,” Katie groaned. “But I don’t mind getting some folks together. If we are going to paint one side, maybe we should paint everywhere? The front looks a little worse for wear.”

Alice snorted, “And who is going to pay for that?”

Reena grinned, “Our favorite billionaire, who else?”

“Of course! I would love to pay for the senior center to be painted! I can round up Mark and his brother Brian to help. That is a fantastic idea, Katie. Thank you for thinking of me!”

Katie blushed, “Well, it was Reena’s idea, but I said that I would call. Are you sure it’s not too much of an imposition?”

Sutton laughed, “Not even a little bit, and besides, it will be good for me to get out of the house. The twins are a handful right now; I think we are getting more teeth in.”

Katie visited with Sutton about babies and teeth, not that she had any superior

knowledge. But Katie had learned that most people just wanted to be heard, and listening was something she was really good at.

By the time she got off the phone, it was the end of her shift. Katie's back and arms were sore from scrubbing the graffiti. She had asked some questions around the center, but as it was with most small towns. Nobody saw anything, or if they did, they weren't telling a newcomer like her.

Undoubtedly it was some kids, seeing as how it was a giant penis, and the artwork lacked some originality. Tomorrow she would ask questions over at the middle school and high school. Maybe the principal would have a better grasp of who she should be investigating.

Katie gathered her things and was making her way out of the sheriff's office when Natalie, one of Brian's agents, approached her.

"Do you have a minute?" Natalie asked.

Her blonde hair was swept up in a messy bun, and Natalie seemed frazzled.

"Of course," Katie motioned to the police station. "Do you want to go back inside?"

Natalie's eyes widened, and she fairly shouted, "No!"

"Okay," Katie said carefully. "Do you want to go for a walk?"

"Can we talk at your house?" Natalie asked in a rush.

"Sure," Katie pointed to her car. "Hop in and let's chat."

During the short drive to her house, Katie and Natalie talked about painting the senior

center. Alice and Reena had already roped Natalie into helping out. Natalie had stayed with them for a time and felt a real connection to the older ladies. Currently, she was staying in an apartment on Second Street.

“Come on in. Can I offer you a drink?” Katie unlocked her front door and motioned for Natalie to enter.

“Your yard looks incredible,” Natalie took a moment to see all of the improvements that had been done on Katie’s house. “I had no idea you were doing so much work. How do you manage to get it done with working at the station?”

Katie tossed her keys into a bowl and took off her shoes. “I don’t, or more specifically, it’s not me.”

Momentarily diverted from her problems, Natalie gaped at Katie. “What do you mean?”

“I have a stalker,” Katie mumbled, feeling foolish for voicing the opinion that Brian had so easily shot down.

Natalie took a seat on Katie’s couch. “I think we need to have a chat.”

Three-fourths of a bottle of wine later and the girls were speculating who her stalker/gardener could be.

“Maybe it’s Earl? Martha said that he was looking for a new hobby,” Natalie reasoned.

“Martha wants Earl to have a new hobby and stop bothering her at the café so much,” Katie said dryly. “I think Earl would be happy as a lark sitting in the corner booth and talking smack with all of the locals that come into Abberly’s.”

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

“You are probably right!” Natalie laughed. “Well, honestly, I don’t have a clue. And you said you talked it over with Brian?”

Katie blushed. “Yes, but he isn’t overly concerned.”

Natalie swirled the wine in her cup, “Well, Brian is the best neighbor to have if there is trouble. He might be a grumpy ass, but I would have him in my corner any day of the week.”

Katie would have him in her bed any day of the week but thought it best not to say it aloud.

“We have spent all this time talking about me,” Katie set her wine glass down. “Tell me, what’s going on with you?”

21

Julio felt like a damn fool knocking on Natalie’s apartment door with flowers in his hand and nobody answering. He cursed and placed the flowers by the door and turned to leave when an older gentleman’s voice stopped him.

“Lady troubles?”

Julio turned to see the elderly gentleman that was bent with age and thin as a rail. What caught his attention was the sparkle in the older man’s eyes and the way he spoke. It was confident as if he knew a thing or two about winning the hand of a fair lady.

“Julio,” he reached out his hand, and the elderly man shook it in his gnarled one.

“Lord, almighty, I know who you are. Name is Earl, and I am a close personal friend of Sutton and Mark’s.”

Julio nodded. After all, what reason did he have not to believe the man? In his line of work, one just didn’t start talking to someone on the street without at least a gun between them. This whole neighborly business was a bit hard for Julio to get his head wrapped around.

“What can I do for you, Earl?”

It sounded nice and friendly, Julio assured himself.

The older man’s face broke into a wide smile showing an odd number of teeth.

“No, my friend, this is about what I can do for you. My wife Martha said that I need a hobby. And I reckon you’re it.”

“Pardon?” Julio placed a hand on his weapon, tucked into the back of his jeans.

Earl just motioned for Julio to follow him.

It was a gamble, but Julio knew he could take the man out in seconds if necessary, and quite frankly, he was intrigued to find out what on earth the man could possibly teach him. So, for better or worse, Julio followed his new guru down the apartment steps and into the local café where he had first seen Natalia—Natalie, he reminded himself.

“Martha,” Earl yelled out. “Got you a paying customer!”

Julio took a seat at the booth where Earl settled himself and looked at the menu. He wasn't hungry and ended up ordering a cup of black coffee. Earl ordered two sandwiches, fries, and a milkshake. And Julio wondered with a bit of humor if he was paying Earl's tab at Earl's wife's restaurant. It wasn't like he couldn't afford it.

And frankly, this was the most entertained he'd been since stepping into Otterville Falls.

"So, Julio, you want to win your girl back?"

"My wife," Julio corrected. "But yes, that is the gist of it."

"Well, I can see that you're trying to court her with the flowers, but son, that won't get you anywhere."

Julio ran a hand through his dark hair, "She won't answer my calls, refuses to talk to me, and I think she might be tracking my whereabouts, so she doesn't come anywhere near me."

Earl winced, "Time for some evasive maneuvers, Julio."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you know that the senior center was vandalized?"

Julio blinked, trying to keep up with the change in the conversation.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

“I hadn’t heard, was there much damage?”

Earl chortled, “No!” Earl chortled. “Just a giant dick in pink spray paint.”

Julio snorted. “Sounds like a bunch of kids.”

“I figured it would,” Earl said and took a big sip of his soft drink.

“What? You did it?” Julio choked out.

Earl leaned over and shushed Julio. “Don’t be saying that so loud! I don’t need another night in the slammer. Knox is cheap when it comes to the blankets there. Damn near froze to death last time he arrested me.”

“Have I entered the Twilight Zone?” Julio asked and was only partially kidding.

Earl grinned, “Look, I was talking to Sutton, and she told me that you were staying there. I got it in my head that you might need a little help. So, I started the ball rolling with the dick. Things are playing out according to plan. They have already called Sutton to foot the bill of painting the place. You are going to tell her that you want to pay for it.”

“I do?” Julio looked bemused, “I don’t think I do.”

“Oh,” Earl assured him, “You most definitely do. You come in and paint the senior center, offer to update some of the broken things, and suddenly you’re the town hero. Your lady, she thinks you are a criminal, right?”

Julio winced again, “Something like that.”

“Well, soldier, we need to turn you into a boy scout.”

“That’s your plan, to spend my money and hope that Natalie will find out about it?”

Earl grinned. “I know she will because Sutton already told me that Natalie will be there Saturday when they start the painting. Julio, this is your chance. She isn’t going to leave just because you’re there. She would look bad.”

“Can’t I just hire someone to paint it?” Julio asked.

Earl shook his head, “No, we need to show her you are a changed man. The old Julio would have hired someone. Because he is cold and callous and doesn’t give a fuck.”

Julio frowned. “I am cold and callous and don’t give a fuck.”

“Well, son, you are going to need to change that attitude,” Earl lectured. “You are going to be the first person there with a paintbrush in hand and the last one to leave. What’s more, your girl helps out at the women and children’s center. So you, my friend, are about to tap into your sensitive side.”

“Why are you doing this?” Julio asked.

Martha arrived with all of their food, and Julio noted that the two BLTs that Earl ordered did look mouthwatering. Martha served one to Earl and the other to Julio. She also had a heaping basket of hot fries and two milkshakes.

The one thing she didn’t bring was a cup of black coffee.

“Are you sure about this?”

Julio had to be insane to be taking dating advice from the old codger. He was as shifty as any con artist Julio had ever seen. But then there was just something about Earl that drew one in.

“Whatever he is trying to convince you of, mister,” Martha sighed, “I would run the other way as fast as your legs will take you.”

Earl grinned again, “Are you in?”

Julio picked up his BLT. “I’m in.” And then he paused, “What does someone wear when they want to paint something?”

22

“Um, Julio?”

Julio turned his head to see Natalie staring at him in shock. His paintbrush was still against the trim of the senior citizens’ center.

“Natalia,” he murmured, giving her a wide smile, “What are you doing here?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

Natalie frowned at him. It was 7:30 in the morning, and they hadn't intended to start until eight. She had volunteered to come early to paint the trim, and it was nearly done.

"What am I doing here?" she repeated to him, "No, the better question is, what are you doing here?"

Julio showed her his brush. "Painting."

Natalie gritted her teeth, "I can see that. I was just wondering why you were painting."

Julio blinked innocently. "Because it needed to be done. Alice and Reena showed me where to paint. I don't think I ruined anything."

It looked really good. Natalie didn't need to know that Julio had been there since nearly four in the morning. He wanted to show her that he had changed.

"You know Alice and Reena?" Natalie's frown deepened.

Julio gave her his most charming smile. "They are lovely. We were discussing some things that might help improve the center. A wheelchair ramp will be added this week, and the furniture needs some updating."

Natalie shook her head, "Julio, I am sure you don't give a flying rat's ass about a senior citizens' center in the middle of butt-fuck nowhere."

Julio's smile fell, and he moved down the ladder so that they were on even ground.

"How would you know what I care about, Natalie? You won't speak to me, won't have anything to do with me. I like Otterville Falls. Here, the people are kind. I like Sutton and Mark and their adorable twins. And I like spending time at Abberly's with Earl and Martha. So maybe, just maybe, I might give a flying rat's ass."

Natalie cheeks heated, and she took a step back. "Why should I believe you?"

Julio let out a sigh. "I haven't been involved in the business for a long time. I don't know what else you want me to tell you."

The door to the center opened, and Reena poked her head out. "It's about time you got here, Natalie! Your husband has been up since before dawn. Come and see the new appliances he had installed in the kitchen!"

Natalie gritted her teeth. "You can't buy my affections, Julio."

He stared at her for a long while. The tension between them was thick, and even Reena felt it and closed the door. Finally, Julio spoke, his voice low and insistent.

"Please, I am begging you, give me a chance. I am not the man you left."

Natalie felt emotion clog her throat as a myriad of memories washed over her. It had seemed like something out of a dream. They were so young, and he was so dashing. They fell in love and married so fast that she hadn't taken the time to really get to know him.

And then by the time she did, things were out of control.

"I almost died," she choked out.

Julio drew in a sharp breath. “Do you think I don’t remember that? That it hasn’t haunted me every second, even all these years later? I used to think that I deserved you leaving. That there was nothing, I could do that would ever make up for the mistakes I made. I put you in danger, and I nearly lost you.”

Natalie felt chills despite the morning sun. “You said that you used to think that, what changed your mind?”

A ghost of a smile crossed Julio’s face. “Do you remember my cousin Jennings?”

Natalie’s brows knit together. “Vaguely. He works out of New York, an assassin if I remember right.”

Julio nodded, “Yes, that was what he did.”

Natalie raised her brow, “Was?”

“His last job involved a woman that he was in love with. He brought her to Italy to keep her safe, and I met one of the most amazing people I have ever known.”

Jealousy, thick and hot, coated her insides. Whoever this woman was, it sounded like Julio loved her.

“Well,” Natalie made a dismissive motion. “How awkward for you to care so deeply about your cousin’s girl. If that makes you think of me somehow, you can go ahead and...”

Julio dropped the brush and had her against the wall in seconds. The heat of his body pressing into the soft curves of Natalie’s. His breath brushed her cheek, and she couldn’t help the shudder that ran through her. Her body remembered him, craved him.

“Let me go,” she said in a low voice.

“Not until I finish telling you about Mandy,” Julio insisted. “She was finishing up a twelve-step program, recovering from drugs and alcohol. She spent a year in prison and did some pretty terrible things.”

“She sounds lovely,” Natalie said flippantly, and Julio pressed her harder against the bricks.

“She is lovely,” he stared into Natalie’s eyes, insisting she hear the words he was saying. “Mandy did some terrible things in the past. But she pulled herself out of that world. She paid her time, and she overcame great obstacles. And through it all, she couldn’t forgive herself. She thought she was beyond redemption. I saw how much she loved my cousin and how he felt for her.”

“Sometimes, people change Natalie. Sometimes, people become so much more than they once were. That is why I wanted to tell you about her. Yes, she is the reason I came looking for you. But not for some misguided love affair. I have changed. And I hope that you can someday forgive me. It’s time to let it go.”

He moved away so suddenly that Natalie stumbled forward. Julio steadied her, but as soon as she had her bearings, he moved away and started climbing the ladder again.

“Reena is waiting for you,” he said gruffly, then began to paint the trim as if he hadn’t just had his body smashed against hers.

Natalie nodded, although he wasn’t looking, and she moved toward the front door.

She heard the bell as she opened it and noticed that the place smelled of new carpet. She looked around and saw several new improvements.

Julio had to have worked fast to get some of these things in. Natalie had been told that Sutton was footing the bill. It didn't make any sense. Nothing made sense anymore.

"Do you want to tell me what that was all about?"

Natalie turned to see Reena coming toward her with a steaming cup of coffee.

"What?" Natalie asked defensively.

"Child, the windows are open, and it wasn't like you two were very quiet. How did the man risk your life? Did he hold a gun to your head?"

Natalie shook her head. "Of course not!"

"Well?" Reena handed her the cup and motioned for Natalie to join her at the lounge's new tables.

She noticed they were sturdy and much harder to tip over. The last ones had been rather flimsy and really did need replacing.

"There was a job that went wrong. Someone broke into our home and held me hostage."

As the words tumbled out of her, Natalie felt oddly detached from them. It wasn't a story that she shared often. And after that terrible moment, she vowed that she would never feel vulnerable like that again. Hours upon hours at the gun range and years of self-defense lessons had brought her to where she was today. A damn fine private

investigator, and one badass chick.

A badass chick with a huge chip on her shoulder.

23

Brian swallowed hard and tried to get the image of Katie butchering her hydrangeas out of his mind. She was wearing a cut-off shirt that showed her pale stomach and fell off one dainty shoulder. Her shorts barely covered the curve of her ass, and when he looked closer, he realized she was in flip-flops.

Shit.

Brian dropped the curtain and went to slip into some shoes. He was out the door and walking across the yard before he could stop himself. She had the radio blaring something from Taylor Swift, and she was shaking that adorable backside in rhythm with the beat.

She was also doing permanent damage to the plant.

“Katie!”

She didn’t turn.

“Katie!”

Mid-ass wiggle, she whipped around and nearly stabbed him with her pruners.

“Brian!” Her cheeks were flushed, and she had a smear of dirt on her top across her breast.

He stepped forward and took the pruners out of her hands.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

“What are you doing?” he shook his head. “What did the plant do to you?”

Katie’s lips twitched. “Look, I figure if I took care of the gardening, my stalker wouldn’t need to. Makes perfect sense, right?”

Brian blinked, “You’re killing this plant because someone helped paint the shutters?”

Katie frowned. “I am not killing the plant; I am pruning it.”

“To death,” Brian finished. “Look, Katie, I might know who has been helping you out.”

Katie took a step toward him, her eyes bright and eager.

“What have you found out? Did you dust for fingerprints?”

Brian gave her a quizzical look, “How long have you worked in law enforcement?”

Katie flushed. “That isn’t nice.”

Brian took a step closer, tossing the pruners away from them. “I really am not known for my niceties.”

Katie’s heart picked up, and she leaned in. “Yeah, I am starting to see that. It’s like you don’t believe me.”

Brian scoffed, his breath fanning across her face and their chests almost touching.

“That’s because I don’t. You are borderline crazy.”

Katie’s eyes flared, and she reached up to shove him away. But her hands didn’t get the message as they sank into the cotton of his shirt and yanked him into her. His mouth crashed down on hers, hungry and insistent.

It was nothing like the tentative kisses Katie was used to. This was raw and passionate. He was kissing her like he wanted to devour her, like she was the very air he needed to survive.

Her body thrummed with excitement, and she smashed herself tighter against him. Her belly was knotted, and her pussy ached for his touch.

She mewled into the kiss, and he groaned deep in his throat. His hand sank into her hair and angled her head so he could deepen the kiss. Never before had Katie felt so taken. Her body suddenly belonged to him, and she would have been willing to let him fuck her on the front lawn.

Her leg wrapped itself around his hip, and he grabbed her ass, hoisting her up into his arms. Her hands went to the hem of his t-shirt and yanked it up so that she could feel the ridges of his stomach.

The honking of a horn brought them back to their senses, and reluctantly Brian pulled back.

“I won’t apologize,” he said, his voice deep with emotion.

Katie untangled herself from him and took a step back. Her chin lifted in defiance, and Brian felt his cock jerk. She didn’t speak as she walked away from him and up her steps. It was only when she had opened the door and stepped inside that she turned and beckoned him.

“Are you coming or not?”

Brian wasn't sure he had ever moved faster in his life. One second his jaw was dropping, and the next, he was racing his way up her steps and slamming the door closed. He had her in his arms and was yanking that cut-off shirt over her head.

The woman wasn't even wearing a bra!

His mouth closed over the first rosy peak and sucked until it was diamond-hard, and she was writhing her hips against his abs. Her legs were once again wrapped around his waist, but he wanted more of her. He moved her down to yank off her tiny shorts and panties until she was naked before him.

She had the daintiest little freckles scattered across her perfect skin, and he wanted to lick every one of them.

“Where is your room?” he gasped.

Katie shook her head, “Next time, I need you now!”

Brian growled his approval and yanked his shorts off, but before he tossed them aside, he grabbed a condom out of his back pocket. The t-shirt was thrown across her lamp, and he had her in his arms pressed against the wall.

She rolled the condom onto his thick length and said a silent prayer that things would be okay.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

He stroked her folds, feeling the intense heat of her, and he groaned as her muscles contracted against his finger.

“I don’t know if I can go slow,” he growled.

“Please,” Katie thrust her hips against him, brushing the top of his cock. He angled his tip at her entrance and then pressed home.

Katie screamed, and it didn’t sound like pleasure.

“Ouch, ouch, ouch, ouch! Get it out! I think you broke me!”

“Are you a fucking virgin?”

It was Brian’s worst nightmare. Katie had started to cry, and he was terrified he had really hurt her. Carefully he pulled himself out and saw the blood on his cock.

“Shit, you’re bleeding!”

“It hurts!” Katie cried, and Brian did the only thing he could. He yanked their clothes on as best he could and raced them to the emergency room.

“Okay, Dr. Young, I will do that. Thanks for being so understanding,” Katie felt mortified. Not only was Dr. Young terribly young-looking. But she had a feeling that he was holding back laughter.

Brian hadn’t said much after bringing her to the emergency room, but he hadn’t left

her, not even for the examination.

“Vaginal tears are common when a woman is particularly small, and her partner is larger,” Dr. Young handed her some pamphlets. “I am going to give you some samples of lubricant you can use and then advise you to use the vaginal dilators. Keep ice on your vagina, and you will be good as new in a few days.”

Katie’s cheeks burned, “Right, again, I appreciate your help.”

Dr. Young winked at her, “I had been meaning to introduce myself to the new deputy. Things have just been crazy here at the hospital.”

Brian growled, and for the first time, moved to Katie’s side.

“Is there anything else?”

Dr. Young shook his head, “No, she has signed the release. I would like to take another look in a few days to make sure things are healing correctly. Just call my office, and we will get you in.”

Brian muttered something that sounded vaguely to Katie like, “Over my dead body.”

Before she could get up, Brian had scooped her, the paperwork, and her ice bag into his arms.

“I can walk,” Katie blurted out, mortified.

“Don’t talk,” Brian commanded her and then walked her out to his truck and buckled her inside.

“He broke your vagina?” Sutton set the casserole dish on Katie’s counter and fought the urge to smile. Katie looked so miserable that it seemed like teasing her right now would be akin to kicking a small puppy.

“And now he won’t have anything to do with me!” Katie confessed, her hands wrapped tightly around her mug. “It’s been almost a week, and he is avoiding me like the plague!”

Sutton motioned to the coffee pot, “Do you mind?”

“Oh, of course not. Where are my manners?” Katie moved to grab Sutton a cup. She poured her some coffee and brought it over to the small kitchen table.

“Katie, he obviously is worried about you. Why else would he send me over here?”

Katie shrugged and took another sip of coffee. “It doesn’t even really hurt anymore, it’s only a little sore, and I went to my follow-up appointment with Dr. Young, who said everything was going to be fine.”

Sutton grinned, “Yeah, Dr. Young delivered the twins. He’s a good guy.”

Katie nodded, “I thought so too, but Brian didn’t like him at all.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

“Maybe he was jealous,” Sutton offered and put a few packets of sweetener in her coffee before taking a sip.

“Hardly, Sutton, I am telling you I have ruined everything with him.”

“Katie, you know I think you are adorable. And I am so happy that you are here in Otterville Falls. But I have to tell you that your seduction skills are sadly lacking.”

Katie slumped down further. Her unkempt hair laid limply around her face, and her sad expression had Sutton laughing.

“Girl, the man likes you and is fighting it. Seriously, we need to get you back in your game. First thing is that you need to take a shower; you smell like my gym socks. Second thing, we are going to set you and Dr. Young up on a date.”

Katie made a face, “Why? I don’t even like him.”

Sutton rolled her eyes, “You know that, and I know that, but Brian needs to know that you aren’t just waiting around for him to pull his head out of his ass. You said that he stomped over when you were out in the yard.”

Katie nodded, “He said I was butchering a plant. I can’t remember what he called it.”

Sutton’s smile widened. “I will have some flowers delivered tomorrow that will need to be planted. Let’s give our hero a reason to be neighborly.”

“I was only out there because of the stalker,” Katie huffed.

Sutton laughed, "I have a strong suspicion that your stalker and your reluctant suitor are the same person."

"No," Katie shook her head. "It isn't possible."

Sutton raised a brow, "Well, maybe not, but I still think there is more to this than you can see. Let's poke the bear and see what happens. If he doesn't rise to the bait, at least you know, and you can move on."

Katie let out a deep sigh, "Alright, I suppose it couldn't hurt."

Brian arrived home just in time to see Katie bent over, ass in the air as she planted a shade-loving plant in direct sunlight. Damn it, didn't she read the tags at all?

He fought the urge to stomp his way over there and take care of things himself. But what happened next had his jaw-dropping.

Out of her garage in a pair of worn faded jeans came Dr. Young with a wheelbarrow full of some shit or another. Brian's blood boiled.

How dare he worm in on his girl? This wasn't happening.

Brian was out of his car and halfway across the grass when Dr. Young greeted him.

"Good to see you, Brian!"

"Like hell, it is," Brian growled at the handsome doctor. "Why are you here?"

Dr. Young looked around at all of the plants. His expression was fairly clear; it said to look around him.

Brian took in the cases of plants. “Why does it look like Home Depot threw up their lawn and garden department in your yard?”

Katie had righted herself and moved to get in between the two men.

“I am doing some gardening, and Trevor offered to help.”

“Who the hell is Trevor?” Brian growled.

“That would be me,” Dr. Young said. The differences between the two men was almost laughable.

Brian was a retired Marine, his body a finely tuned machine. While also physically fit, Dr. Young had more of a lithe runner’s body and stood at maybe five-ten to Brian’s six-four.

“Why are you so interested in Katie’s plants?” Brian bit off.

“Hey, buddy, I don’t know why you have so much hostility, but I was invited here.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

Brian whipped his gaze to Katie, “You invited him?”

Katie tipped up her chin, “Yes, he isn’t afraid to be around me. Unlike some people who...”

She broke off when Brian moved close and snatched her against his chest.

His voice was low and gravelly. “I am not afraid to be around you.”

Katie scoffed, “I haven’t seen you all week, Brian. You were hiding from me.”

He gritted his teeth but didn’t say anything.

“Look, I am tired of the runaround. If you don’t like me, that’s fine.”

“Don’t like you?” Brian’s tone was incredulous. “The last time I liked you, we spent the evening in the emergency room with this douchebag.”

Katie winced, “That was an unfortunate accident.”

“My dick hasn’t gotten any smaller,” he roared.

Katie’s cheeks were a deep pink when she replied, “That isn’t a bad thing.”

Dr. Young cleared his throat from behind them, “Katie, do you need any help?”

Brian growled at him.

“I was asking Katie.” Dr. Young held his ground.

“Thank you, Trevor. I think I’m good right now,” she said in a rush.

“I think I am going to take off. Let me know if you need anything,” Dr. Young’s footsteps could be heard behind her as he left her yard.

“I don’t like him,” Brian said, his eyes burning down into hers. “But I do like you, very much, too much. I am not boyfriend material.”

Katie frowned, “That’s bullshit. Why? Would you cheat on me? Lie to me?”

Brian’s nostrils flared. “I would never cheat on you. But I might lie to protect you. My job is dangerous and...”

Katie cut him off, “Yeah, and I am a cop. Granted, this town is pretty sleepy, but still, anything could happen at any time to either of us. You either want something with me, or you don’t.”

“I want something,” his low words shocked the hell out of Katie.

“What?” she whispered.

“I am probably all wrong for you,” he continued. “But I care about you, Katie, so damn much.”

And then he kissed her.

25

Katie could hardly breathe. Brian was kissing her! Brian was kissing the ever-loving

snot out of her on the front lawn! Her body was smashed against his, and her mouth was pressed tightly against his as their tongues battled for dominance.

His hand was firmly parked on her ass, and she loved the way his entire palm cupped her tightly. Everything about Brian was intense, including his kisses. He wasn't careful or soft. Brian kissed her like a man that was starving, and she was the last glass of water.

She felt her legs lift off the ground, but she didn't care. All Katie did was wrap them around his waist and continue to kiss the man as he made his way toward her garage. He moved to the front of her cruiser and laid her on the hood.

"Tell me to leave," he demanded.

Katie's legs fell to the side, and her shirt was shoved up, exposing more of the pale skin on her stomach. She reached up, wrenching the shirt over her head, and then in a move that shocked both of them, she undid the clasp of her bra.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

It was true they were inside the garage, and he did have her on the hood of the car. But anyone could have walked in and seen what they were up to. Brian's eyes flared dangerously, and the next thing she knew, his mouth was closing over her nipple.

Katie arched her back, shoving her breast further into his mouth.

His hands slipped to her pants, and he yanked them down, along with her thong.

Katie's fingers dug into his hair, and she writhed beneath him. His big hands were everywhere, caressing her silky skin, molding her thighs, and pushing them apart.

Her breast slipped from his mouth, and for a split second, Brian memorized every inch of her. The way she was sprawled out across the hood. Her red hair, wild and crazy around her face, and her nipple red and wet from his mouth.

Brian kissed down her stomach and moved to the heat of her. She was spread before him glistening and pink. His thumbs spread her even wider, and then his mouth descended on her pussy. She screamed in ecstasy as he ate her, his mouth ravishing her soft center.

She tasted of heat and woman, and everything he'd been denying himself. He cupped her ass and lifted her more firmly against his mouth. Katie was wild beneath him, coming apart in his arms, her body shattering as she came hard.

But Brian didn't stop. His mouth was relentless against her, making her climb again higher and higher until she was on the cusp again. Her fingernails dug into his skull, and he sucked her clit hard, making her come with violent jerks.

His mouth made his way up her body, and then he was kissing her again. She tasted herself on his tongue, and it only made her hotter.

Brian pulled back, eyes dilated, and breathing erratic.

“We need to get you inside,” he growled, and then she was in his arms, and he was carrying her into the house, slamming the door behind him.

“I want you so fucking bad,” he panted as he laid her down on her bed. And then he moved back.

“What?” Katie’s eyes were wild, “What are you doing?”

“I can’t hurt you. You know that I can’t.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Katie screamed at him. “You are going to fuck me, and you are going to do it right now. If you don’t, I swear, Brian, I will literally lose my fucking mind.”

His lips twitched, and she could see how hard he was behind his jeans.

“That is a lot of swearing,” he said with an arched brow. “Do you kiss your mama with that mouth?”

Katie moved to the edge of the bed and grabbed him by the waist of his jeans.

“You are a tease, Brian Williams!”

She slid the button open and then unzipped his jeans. He moaned as she slipped her hands inside of his underwear and brushed the tip of his erection.

“Maybe you need a taste of your own medicine,” her eyes sparkled up at him as she eased his jeans off his hips. “Get rid of that shirt, would you?”

Brian yanked it off, nearly tearing the soft fabric.

Katie’s hot breath brushed over the head of his cock, and she licked the tip, savoring his taste.

“Ah, Katie, damn it!” His teeth were clenched, and he had his hands tightened into fists at his side.

She grabbed his hips and yanked him forward again, his cock brushing against her face.

And then she took the tip in her mouth and sucked while glancing up and giving him a wink.

Brian knew he had died and gone to heaven. Never before had he been so close to blowing his load before she had even gotten his damn cock all the way into her mouth.

She inched a bit more inside and then a little more. Her hands working the part of his cock that she couldn’t fit. Katie hollowed out her cheeks and began to suck. She licked and sucked on his dick like it was her favorite treat.

Brian wasn’t sure when his hands slipped into her hair. All he knew was that he was falling endlessly and hopelessly in love with this woman. The woman that couldn’t garden worth a damn, and she was as innocent as they came.

She didn’t understand half of the things he had done or seen. But she did something to him that he couldn’t explain, and it wasn’t just blow him like no one ever had

before. She tipped his life upside down and back again, and he'd be damned if he wasn't loving every minute of it.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

“Katie, stop,” Brian rasped, “I’m going to come! You need to slow down.”

She sucked harder, digging her nails into his ass and sucking him until his tip hit the back of her throat. And then he was coming, his load spurting into her mouth and down her throat. She choked a little but continued to try and take all of him.

He was calling her name. His knees were weak, and his mind hopelessly clear.

When thought and reason came back to him, he had her in his arms.

“Where in the fuck did you learn that?”

She laughed, and Brian shuddered.

“Maybe I don’t want to know,” he grumbled.

Katie only laughed harder, “If you must know, I read up on it. You know, the Internet.”

Brian blinked, “What?”

“I wanted to do a good job.”

Brian could hardly believe what she was saying, “You studied giving a blow job?”

Katie nodded against his neck, “Well, yeah. I mean, where did you learn the cool moves, you know?”

Brian choked on the air, “Um, the same way, sweetheart.”

“You are full of shit,” Katie pinched his nipple hard, and Brian broke in the most carefree laughter Katie had ever heard come from him.

It was joyful and easily the best sound in her life.

“Hey,” Katie poked his chest again, “Sutton’s thinking that you might be my stalker. I told her how ridiculous that was. I mean, why would you do that?”

Brian went still beside her, uncertain of what to say.

“It’s just crazy, right?”

Brian wondered if he could get away with strangling his sister-in-law.

“Brian?”

26

Julio wiped the sweat from his forehead and turned to Marco. “Can you hand me the wrench?”

Marco smirked and handed him the hammer. “Boss, are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

Julio’s brow furrowed, “Of course I bloody well know what I’m doing. I am fixing the air conditioning unit!”

Marco nodded, “Yeah, I see that, but the coil you just broke in half? They are going to need that.”

“Fucking hell,” Julio muttered.

“Boss, I can have someone here in ten minutes.”

Marco whipped out his smartphone, “Just say the word.”

“You all aren’t having any trouble up here, are you?”

The color on Julio’s face heightened as he saw Natalie climbing up the ladder onto the roof.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

“I don’t believe we have met; I am Natalie.”

Marco grinned at her, “Hi, I’m Marco.”

“He’s a friend of mine,” Julio hurried to say as he moved to her side.

Natalie smiled at Marco, “It’s nice to meet a friend of Julio’s that isn’t a business associate.”

Marco’s smile fell, and Julio winced.

“Oh,” this time, it was Natalie who was embarrassed. “I meant no harm. I am sure you are good at what you do.”

Marco smiled again. “I am a father, and like Julio, I am retired from the other stuff.”

Natalie looked from Marco to Julio, “Did you know each other then?”

Marco nodded, “Yes, and although I have been in the habit of calling him Boss, I actually worked for his cousin Jennings. Hey, you wouldn’t happen to know that PI Jackson, would you?”

Julio choked out, “They work together.”

Natalie gave him a funny look, “Yes, I do work with a man named Jackson, but he has been on assignment for some time.”

Marco rolled his eyes, “Assignment my ass, the man has been eating me out of house and home. It’s a good thing he is so good with the girls. The man loves homemade Mexican food, and my Gina makes the best.”

Natalie looked from Marco to Julio and back again.

“How does Jackson know you?” Natalie asked.

Marco saw Julio’s stricken face and made something up, “Oh, we go way back!”

Natalie nodded as if it all made sense.

Julio was terrified she would put together that the person Jackson had been working for was himself. But she surprised everyone by saying, “I would love to try that homemade Mexican food sometime!”

“How about tonight?” Marco offered. “It’s Taco Tuesday. You haven’t tasted tacos unless they are authentic.”

Natalie shrugged, “Are you sure I wouldn’t be imposing?”

“Nah,” Marco shook his head, “Gina loves to have people over.”

Natalie took a deep breath, “Why not? It’s an offer that’s too good to resist. What can I bring?”

“Can I come?” Julio croaked out.

Marco’s smile deepened. “Boss, you are always welcome, you know that.”

“Will it bother you?” Julio asked Natalie, watching every change in her expression.

She colored but didn't look horrified. It dawned on Julio that they were having a conversation that didn't involve hatred and dirty looks. Granted, Marco was there as well, but it was a start in the right direction.

"Let's get off this roof. I'll call Gina and tell her about the change in plans. Miss Natalie, would you happen to know the name of a local repairman?"

Natalie's grin widened, "That's what I was coming up to tell you. It seems that a concerned citizen saw the two of you up here and called Knox. To make a long story short, a repairman is coming to replace the unit. This one is beyond fixing at this point, but I appreciate you both trying."

"In trouble with the law while you're trying to do a good thing, Boss. That has to be some kind of record!"

Julio punched Marco playfully, who ducked out of the way, and then he glanced up to see Natalie watching him. She didn't look away when their gazes met, and suddenly it felt a lot warmer up on the hot roof.

"I need a shower," Julio blurted out. And he did, not only to cool off but to get himself together. This was his chance, and he couldn't screw it up.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

“Thank you, Gina. I couldn’t eat another bite.”

Natalie sat back in her chair and rubbed her little food baby. They had all eaten their fair share and then some. The girls raced from Jackson to Julio, showing them their dolls and getting Julio to wear one of their crowns.

Natalie was astounded at how the night had gone. There hadn’t been any mysterious phone calls or strange men interrupting. It had been something of a drive out to Marco and Gina’s, and Julio had insisted on driving since he already knew the location.

Natalie had expected the conversation to be stilted and awkward. On the contrary, they began to discuss books and movies, and Natalie was shocked that Julio loved the old classics from the 1930s and 40s. He said that he remembered how much she liked them.

The wall she had constructed around her heart had taken another hit when she saw Julio with Marco and Gina’s daughters. It was obvious he would make a wonderful father. Natalie had figured the dreams she had for them with a family were long dead and gone.

But as she watched him, the things that had once seemed possible danced in front of her face.

When it came time to leave, Natalie really had enjoyed herself and told Marco and Gina that she would love to visit again.

She then turned to Jackson and asked, “Are you going to stay on holiday indefinitely?”

Jackson choked. “Holiday?”

Natalie nodded, “Yeah, Julio and Marco told me that you were hiding out here. Does Brian know?”

Jackson frowned. “Of course, Brian knows. Look, I’ll be back soon. There are just a few loose ends that need tying up.”

Julio said a silent prayer of thanks that Jackson hadn’t ratted him out.

They got back into the car, and Natalie turned to see his handsome profile.

“How long are you going to make Jackson stay there?”

Julio felt his stomach drop. “What?”

Natalie laughed, “You were all acting odd when I first arrived. I should have known.”

“Are you mad? Please do not be angry, Natalia. I forced it out of him, your location. He didn’t betray you.”

Natalie shook her head, “I’m not mad. I mean, I was really mad when you first arrived. But I am not angry anymore. It’s just, Julio, it’s been eight years. We can’t just pick up where we left off.”

Julio nodded slowly, keeping his driving steady and watching the road.

“You are right, of course. But we can start again, no?”

Natalie held her breath, knowing what she wanted to say and what her head was telling her. Could she trust him? Had he really changed?

“One date,” Natalie said quickly before she could think better on it. After all, what harm could one date be?

27

“An airplane? Really, Julio, this is too much.”

Natalie shook her head and started to edge her way toward the long black car they’d just climbed out of.

Julio raised his hands and spoke in a soothing tone, “You promised, Natalia.”

Her laugh was borderline hysterical when she blurted out, “I said one date. Not one kidnapping!”

Julio rolled his eyes, “Nobody is being kidnapped. If you truly wish to go, the driver will take you back to Otterville Falls and out of my life. I am trying to show you who I am now. Part of that is telling you more about where I have been.”

Natalie contemplated his words. During their time together, Julio had always been tight-lipped about his past. The urge to throw caution to the wind was coursing through her.

“Okay,” she said slowly. “But this had better be worth it.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

Julio's handsome face lit from within as a smile broke across it. He was devastatingly handsome. The familiar flutters that had caused her to marry the man in the first place flapped around in her belly. She could remember so many little things.

He used to hold her in the night when he thought she was sleeping and whisper things in her ear about how much she meant to him. Or when he first awakened and how his face would light up when he saw her.

She remembered that he loved to swim, but he didn't care for the ocean. The way he always made sure his socks were pulled to the same height on each foot. It reminded her of when he was dressing and would catch her looking at his hard body.

And then they would be ripping each other's clothes off once again, and all thoughts of dressing were out of their minds.

She closed her eyes and prayed. Natalie wasn't a religious woman, but she did believe there was more out there than what she saw at hand. She prayed that she wasn't making a mistake by giving him another chance, and she prayed her heart could withstand another breaking if she was wrong.

Natalie had been quiet most of the flight.

Julio worried that he had made a mistake by asking her to come along with him. But another, larger part of him knew she needed to get the whole scope of who he truly was. They landed in the UK and took a car into a seedy area of Gravesend in Kent.

Natalie's brow was furrowed, but she followed Julio as he opened the door and led

her to a building that had been recently renovated. He went to the door and pressed the button.

“Bugger off,” an elderly woman’s voice came across the speaker.

Julio smiled, “Nan? Would you let us up?”

“Julio?”

The light beeped, and the door opened, allowing them entrance.

There was a younger couple of humble origins coming down the stairs, and they moved out of the way for Julio and Natalie to pass them.

“Isn’t there an elevator?” Natalie asked as they approached the third floor, huffing more than she would like to admit.

Julio grinned, “No, Nan wouldn’t allow it. Although I did try to get her to accept it.”

He opened the door to the third floor at the landing and then escorted Natalie to flat number 304. Before he could knock, the door was flung open.

“Where have you been? I expected you weeks ago!”

The woman was tiny, bent, and wrinkled with age, but the love and happiness in her eyes belayed the starchiness of her voice. She threw her arms around Julio, and he returned her embrace.

“Nan, I want you to meet someone. Natalie, this is Olivia Rochester, but I have always known her as Nan. She is the woman who raised me.”

Natalie had to fight to keep her mouth from dropping open.

“It’s lovely to meet you,” she stumbled over the words as she reached out a hand.

Nan pushed her hand away and hugged her.

Natalie was again astounded at the strength behind the elderly woman’s hug.

“We can’t sit here all night in this cold air. Come inside.”

It wasn’t the least bit cold, but they followed Nan into her flat. On the walls were pictures of Julio as a little boy. Nan had photographs of him all through his school days. There was one thing that was obvious in all of the pictures.

They had not lived an affluent life. Often the jeans of his pants were torn and the clothes ill-fitting. The backdrop painted a much different and far more humbling picture than Natalie could have ever expected.

“He is a handsome lad, isn’t he?” Nan moved near where Natalie stood. “I can still remember his determination to make a better home for us.”

Julio coughed, “We always had enough, Nan. You made sure of that.”

The older woman cackled, “We had jack shit and were lucky to survive. I have often wondered if you sold your soul to that devil to save me.”

“No!” Julio’s tone was forceful. “Don’t even think that. My mistakes are my own.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

Nan shook her head sadly, “This is Natalia, is it not?”

She didn’t wait for a response before continuing, “My boy has loved you since the moment he saw you. I can’t tell you how many times we talked about you.”

Natalie moved from the photos and went to sit woodenly on the couch.

“I don’t understand. You’re Italian but speak with an English accent. Your family is Italian Mafia, but you were raised in Kent. Things aren’t adding up. In fact, I feel more confused now than I did before.”

Julio sighed, “That is why we are here. I want to tell you everything. The good and the bad. I want you to understand why I made the choices I did. Much like my cousin Jennings, I wasn’t raised in the family. Jennings knew a little about our history. But my mother, after she learned about the Mafia, ran and gave me up for adoption.”

Nan smiled, “My daughter and her husband adopted him, and they lived very happily for three years until one night, I was watching Julio, and they were killed in a car accident.”

Julio swallowed, “I don’t remember them, but Nan has told me so much about them.”

Nan nodded, “I didn’t have very much money, and the funeral costs for my daughter and son-in-law nearly crippled us. We lived a difficult existence. I wish I could have given Julio more.”

“You gave me everything,” Julio was emphatic. “It wasn’t your fault that I fell in

with the wrong crowd. And it certainly wasn't your fault that I was the spitting image of my father. It was only a matter of time. I was following a dangerous road."

Nan scowled. "That you would never have walked had you not been trying to provide for me as a seventeen-year-old."

Natalie shook her head. "Seventeen?"

Nan sighed, "I began to have some severe health problems. The jobs that Julio could get were often of the illegal variety. It was a chance of fate that his father came across him and claimed him as his son. Apparently, he had looked for Julio his entire life but never dreamed Rebecca would take him as far as Kent."

"And you continued because your father wouldn't help Nan?" Natalie said incredulously.

Julio shook his head, shame brightening his cheeks. "No, I went into the family business because I liked the money, the fast cars, the beautiful women, and the adrenaline of living life and death at every turn."

28

"Way to sell it, Kid."

The sarcasm in the older woman's voice, coupled with her look of clear exasperation, had Natalie fighting back a smile. And perhaps the fact that Julio had been completely honest with her about why he did what he did.

Natalie could see in those photographs just how humble Julio's beginning had been. He might think he had been a selfish bastard, but Natalie knew him.

She knew him.

It was as if a light turned on, and everything looked a little differently. Yes, he had been young and foolish. But was Natalie so perfect that she had never made any mistakes? Stupid, awful, terrible mistakes?

Julio cleared his throat, “Natalie?”

She looked up and noticed that she hadn’t been paying attention. Her stomach was doing that weird flippy thing, and she suddenly felt hot. His gaze was warm on her face, and she had the overwhelming urge to fling herself at him.

Julio, sensing something was different, took a step forward.

His hand captured hers, “Are you alright?”

Natalie nodded, her voice coming out breathless as she added, “Just thinking things through.”

“Well, you can think over a meal. I know it’s not supper time, but I have made Julio’s favorite, bangers and mash.”

Julio pulled her toward the dining table. The apartment was small but well furnished.

“Can I just take a minute to wash up?” Natalie asked.

Moments later, she was splashing water on her face and giving herself a firm talking to.

Don’t do anything stupid, Natalie. Just because he brought you to meet his Nan and opened up about a subject that was strictly forbidden doesn’t mean you need to fall

into the man's bed.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

Her heart skipped a beat. Visions of them entangled together flashed across her mind. Things had been good between them. Natalie snorted; that was the understatement of the year. Things had been amazing between them. Their chemistry was off the charts.

Natalie fished her cell out of her purse and called Sutton.

“Hey, girl, just got the twins down for a nap!”

Natalie swallowed, “Well, I got on a private plane with Julio, and now ten hours later, I am somewhere in Kent with his Nan. I am freaking out, Sutton.”

Sutton blew out a breath, “Have you been drinking?”

Natalie barked out a hysterical laugh, “No, but maybe I should be?”

“Look, did you get any rest? You’re probably exhausted.”

Natalie nodded, “Yes, I am tired and hungry. His Nan made bangers and mash, whatever that is, and I saw pictures of him when he was a child.”

Sutton paused, “Natalie, tell me honestly, what did you call for? Do you want me to tell you to stay away from the man?”

It was nice that Sutton knew immediately what Natalie needed.

“Yes, remind me how hurt I was before and that I am making a massive mistake.”

“Well,” Sutton drawled, and Natalie could just picture the teasing glint in her eyes. “I think the man deserves another chance. He has been amazing with the twins, and you said he was fantastic with Gina and Marco’s girls. He has worked his ass off around town, fixing things that don’t even need to be fixed. Natalie, if you don’t want him, you need to tell him. And if you do, snatch him up before somebody else does.”

“Thank you,” Natalie’s voice was small.

“Did I upset you, Sweetie?” Sutton asked in concern.

Natalie sighed, “No, actually, you said everything that I’ve been saying to myself. I am going to give this a chance—a real chance. I better let you go. They’re going to think I fell asleep in the bathroom.”

Natalie wrapped up the call and then straightened her shoulders, grabbed her purse, and opened the door. Julio was standing a few feet away, looking worried.

“Is everything alright?”

Natalie nodded, her smile breaking across her face, “Perfect.”

“Don’t just stand there gawking at each other. Either kiss the girl or come and eat.”

Julio flushed at the sound of his Nan’s admonishment.

“It’s not a half-bad idea,” he said, moving closer, trying to sense her mood.

Natalie tipped her face up, “What are you waiting for?”

Her lips met his in a slow surrender. It was tender and sweet but had enough heat to dampen her panties and cause all of her senses to heighten.

Julio glanced up and noticed that Nan had made herself scarce. Natalie's eyes were still closed, and he couldn't help but capture her lips again. This time with a little more force, opening her lips and tasting her for the first time in far too long.

Her hands clung to his waist and her curvy body molded into his hardened frame. He couldn't help the growl of satisfaction that escaped him. He knew this was right. This was what he had been missing.

Her tongue curled around his, and she pushed herself further against his chest. He felt the hardened points of her nipples and was tempted to yank her into his childhood bedroom and finish what he had started.

But Nan was waiting just around the corner, so reluctantly, he moved his head back.

"Wow," Natalie breathed. "I thought perhaps that I had made things out to be better than they really had been."

His eyes crinkled as he broke into a wide smile, "Well, did you?"

"My memories pale in comparison with the real thing," she breathed.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

And then she brushed past him, making sure her hand brushed across the full length of his hardened cock.

Julio let out a muffled curse, and Natalie laughed as she went into the kitchen to ask Nan if she needed any help.

He had to stand there in the hallway like a fool for another five minutes before he was decent enough to join the ladies in the dining room.

Everything had been placed on the table to eat family style. There were no servants or maids, even though Julio insisted that someone come in once a week for the deep cleaning Nan couldn't get to anymore.

Nan extended her hands to say grace, and Natalie took the older woman's gnarled hand without a second thought. It was a moment Julio knew he would never forget. He cursed his younger self for being so stupid. He should never have kept them apart. He had worried Natalie would judge the way he had been raised.

He had been a fool. But it seemed that fate was finally going to give them the second chance he'd been waiting for. And he sure as hell wasn't going to waste it.

29

They stumbled into the hotel room in a flurry of arms, legs, and passion as clothes were ripped from their bodies. Julio had her dress over her head in seconds, and then he was kissing down her neck. He pushed her silky bra beneath her curvy breasts and sucked one of the globes into his mouth.

Natalie moaned, her fingers sinking into his hair and yanking him closer. She had missed him, missed this. They connected on an elemental level, and yet with him kissing her and making love to her, she knew everything she longed for was still possible.

He moved to the other breast licking the tender tip and blowing on her skin so that it tightened impossibly hard. Growling, he sucked it into her mouth and loved the way she felt and tasted.

Julio moved lower, kissing his way down her soft stomach and then taking in the sight of her tiny panties wet with desire. He licked the satin that covered her sex and then looked up to see her gaze locked on his. The sheer need in them was humbling, and he didn't tease her any further.

Hooking his thumbs into the sides of her underwear, he slid them off and then took her right leg and put it over his shoulder. The heat of her was slick on his tongue as he lapped at her glistening folds. She tasted better than he remembered. The musk and scent of her perfume mingled together, filling his senses.

He cupped her bottom and moved her closer, loving the way she moved against his mouth as he licked and sucked her sweet pussy. She was heaven in his arms, and he would do anything he could to make sure that this is where she would always be.

He found the nub underneath its hood and began to flick the nerve with his tongue. She shook in his arms, crying out and causing his cock to get impossibly hard.

He licked her again and then rammed his tongue deep inside of her, imitating what he would soon be doing with his cock. She cried out and rocked harder against him, close but not quite at the breaking point.

Julio loved that he knew just what she needed and moved back to sucking her clit

hard. She nearly collapsed as the release overtook her. Her body convulsing as the orgasm shook her to her very core.

In moments Julio had scooped her up and taken her over to the bed. He was undressing now, and every inch of his olive-toned skin that he uncovered only caused Natalie to pant with need. Julio had always been in good shape, but it seemed to Natalie that he was in the best shape of his life.

He stalked over to the bed with the small foil packet in his hands. Tearing it open with his teeth, he pulled the condom over his impressive cock and then climbed on the bed.

Natalie had anticipated him coming over her, but instead, he laid beside her and lifted her onto his chest. Her legs fell to either side of him, and she felt his cock nudging at her bottom.

“You can take this as fast or as slow as you want.”

Natalie knew what she wanted. She wanted him, now.

She took him into her hand and stroked his cock against her wet folds. Julio grabbed her hips and waited with clenched teeth.

Natalie eased him into her. He began filling her, and she knew she couldn't go slow any longer. She sank down, taking the full length of him deep inside of her, and then leaned over and kissed him.

Julio ravaged her mouth as her sweet body squeezed his length inside of her hot passage. She was the best kind of torture, and he would do anything in his power to prolong this moment.

Natalie rocked back and forth, breaking the kiss and then pushing on his chest until she was sitting on his cock, buried so deep it was hard to know where she ended, and he began.

Her eyes twinkled as she reached up and cupped her breasts.

“Fuuuck,” Julio breathed. “Please touch yourself, baby.”

Natalie circled her nipples with long red fingernails as she rocked back and forth, rubbing her clit against him. He was digging his fingers into her hips, encouraging the movement but allowing her to choose the speed and intensity.

She pinched her nipples and felt the sensation in her pussy. Julio must have as well because he cried out and tensed beneath her.

“If you do that too much, this won’t last very long,” he growled.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

Natalie laughed. It was the most carefree she could remember being in such a very long time. She rocked harder, taking him deeper, riding his cock like it was the last thing she would ever do, and she wanted to remember it.

Her fingers pinched and pulled on those nipples until they were berry red and diamond-hard.

Julio struggled to hold back. He wanted her to come; no, he needed her to come.

He drove his hips up hard, slamming their bodies together, and then she was coming, her body shaking as her pussy squeezed him.

Julio couldn't hold on any longer. It had been far too long since she had taken him to paradise, and with a groan, he unloaded into her.

She shuddered as she felt him fill her. Natalie slumped over his chest, her body languid and her mind in a whirl.

His low chuckle shook her body. "That good?"

Natalie moved her head a little to catch his eye. "It wasn't bad."

He laughed harder, and she joined in. It should have been strange or uncomfortable after all of this time, but it wasn't. She felt like she was finally back where she was supposed to be.

Natalie moved to get off him and noticed that the wetness between her thighs was

more than what it should have been. She looked down and saw the condom had torn.

Julio, sensing her panic, followed her gaze.

“It’s okay,” he rushed to assure her, but Natalie shook her head and moved back.

“I just,” she swallowed hard, “I just need a minute.”

She went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. Sliding underneath the wet stream, she thought about all of the implications that could come from this. Was this fate taking over, or just a run of shitty luck? There was the morning after pill. Did she want to take it or just wait and see?

As the thoughts rolled over and over her mind, she heard the bathroom door open. Then the shower curtain moved, and he joined her in the shower.

“Are you angry?” he asked, gathering her into his arms.

Natalie shook her head, “No.”

“Then what is it?”

She tried to put together her thoughts, but they were as fleeting as leaves in the wind.

Finally, she answered, “I’m just scared.”

“Of a pregnancy?” he asked.

But no, a child wasn’t what frightened her.

“Of everything, of this being too good to be true.”

Julio closed his eyes and kissed her forehead, “I am in love with you, Natalia. I have loved you for over a decade, and I can’t imagine not loving you. I changed my life around, arranged for the sale of my villa in Italy. Sweetheart, I would do anything for you.”

“Just hold me,” she whispered, and he did.

He carried her back to the bed, and they fell into an exhausted sleep. Between the jetlag and their time at Nan’s, both parties were completely exhausted.

But when they woke, they talked. For hours they talked about what went wrong and the things they’d been doing over the past eight years. They talked about their dreams and how life had changed. And for once, they talked about the future.

30

“And just what in the hell do you think you are doing?”

Jackson paused mid-raspberry and glanced up to see his boss staring down at him. He had one of Marco’s girls, and he was giving her a big slobbery kiss on her cheek.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

“She deserved it!” Jackson retorted, sounding every bit like a ten-year-old and nothing like the grown man he was.

“Uncle Jackson has cooties!” Selena sang and then ran giggling from the room.

Brian reached out his hand and helped Jackson to rise to his feet.

“I thought you were dead,” Brian grumbled.

Jackson laughed, “No, you didn’t. I’ve been checking in. What’s going on?”

“My sister-in-law opened her big mouth and told Katie that I’ve been working on her yard in the middle of the night.”

“Who’s Katie?” Jackson sank onto the cool leather sofa and grabbed the ice water he had abandoned earlier.

Brian sighed, “You have been gone forever, Jackson.”

Gina appeared at the door with a beer for Brian and a tray of cookies, “Can I get anything else for you two?”

Brian stood to take the tray, “You really didn’t have to do all of this. Thank you again for your hospitality. I will be taking his guy off your hands.”

Jackson scowled. “I have to leave.”

Gina laughed, “My daughters will be crushed. They think they have a new brother. Jackson, you are welcome here any time. I hope you know that.”

Jackson got up and hugged Gina, kissing her forehead. Marco was at the door when he pulled back, and Jackson went over to him and gave him a big hug as well.

“I will miss the two of you and your hospitality. I can’t say I have ever felt more welcome.”

Marco smiled. The birthmark on the one side hardly marred his handsome face.

“As Gina said, you are always welcome. We will leave you two to your business. Just let us know if you need anything else.”

Brian began to tell Jackson about his relationship with Katie. The more he talked about the pretty new deputy, the more Jackson understood just how things were with his boss and his neighbor.

“Well, just tell her the truth,” Jackson said reasonably.

“That I was her stalker?” Brian shook his head, “No. She doesn’t know you. So, I figure we can get you out there, and I will catch you doing something. Maybe pruning the trees and then pretend to take you away.”

Jackson started laughing, a deep belly laugh that made Brian frown.

“And what if you marry this girl? Are you going to hide me for the rest of your marriage? Or am I fired? I have been a nanny for Marco and Gina, been kidnapped for Julio and Natalie, and now you want me to be a stalker. I have to say that being a PI has never been so exciting. And honestly, I have never been one that has pushed for the truth. But Brian, listen to yourself...”

Brian sighed and dropped his head into his hands.

“I feel like an idiot.” His words were mumbled against his skin, but Jackson got the context.

“Do you love this girl?”

Brian’s head shot up, a deep scowl on his face. “Why in the hell does that matter?”

Jackson’s smirk was eating away at Brian’s temper.

“Boss, we don’t lie to the ones we love.”

“Maybe I don’t love her,” Brian said in a dark tone that neither of them believed.

Jackson nodded. “Of course you don’t. So, is tonight good for the break-in?”

“I don’t need you to break in. Just do a little gardening, can you do that?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

Jackson smiled wide, “My mama always said I had a green thumb. Don’t you worry, I will make you proud!”

“You set the bushes on fire, you fucking idiot!”

Katie stood there in shock as she watched Brian chew out her stalker, only she wasn’t so sure the man was her stalker. For one thing, Brian seemed terribly familiar with him, and for another, the man just sat there smiling as if this were a garden picnic and not a bonfire featuring her shrubs.

“Where did you get the matches? She doesn’t have matches in the garage, Jackson! Fucking hell, it was an easy job!”

It only took three blasts of the fire extinguisher to put the blaze out. That was another thing. Brian had been weird about going to bed. He kept insisting on watching another show and then swore he heard something outside. This had to be the worst set-up on the planet.

Katie went over to her crispy shrubs and saw the way the foam coated the now-charred branches. The humor of the situation began to tickle the back of her throat. She didn’t think that Brian would appreciate it if she burst out laughing. But just as she was pulling it together, she heard sirens in the distance.

There was the sound of a slamming door, and Alice and Reena came out of their home on the other side.

“We smelled smoke!” Alice cried out.

Brian said something that was truly not worth repeating, and Katie burst out laughing. Once she started, she couldn't stop. The fake burglar joined in, and Alice and Reena starred and the charred bushes.

Once the fire truck pulled up, Katie had tears running down her face.

Brian gathered her in his arms, "Are you okay?"

Katie fought to regain control. "Did you cook all of this up just to avoid telling me the truth?"

His face turned crimson. "I am not a stalker."

Knox had arrived along with the fire department.

"Obviously, the fire has been contained," Alice and Reena were doing their best to give Brian and Katie a bit of privacy.

Katie pointed to the man. "Who is that?"

"Jackson, he works for me," Brian grumbled.

Katie laughed again, "I love you, crazy man."

Brian cupped her face in his hands, searching her eyes, "I don't know why."

Katie's eyes sparkled. "But I do."

"I love you too," he said gruffly, and then he kissed her in front of Jackson, the neighbors, Knox, and the fire department.

Life has a way of coming in ebbs and flows. Just when one thinks that everything is going right, it seems that God or maybe fate sticks a hand in to stir things up a little. What happened the next morning in Otterville Falls did more than shake up their tiny little town.

“Brian, what is it?” Katie asked sleepily as she wiped her eyes and trudged down the hallway from his bedroom. They had been asleep when the sound of sirens had awakened them.

Considering it was only four or five hours from the last time they had woken up with her bushes on fire, they were both a little worse for wear.

“Something is going on next door,” Brian was putting on his shoes as he spoke. “There is an ambulance at Alice and Reena’s.”

Fear struck Katie’s heart. When she was little, an ambulance was at her house, taking her daddy, and he never did come back. Katie scrambled over to where her shoes were and hastily put them on.

Brian could see that she was intent on coming over with him. Without tying the laces, she hopped up and was out the door. Knox had just arrived on the scene, so Katie and Brian veered toward him.

“What happened?” Katie hated how frightened her voice sounded.

Knox’s lips looked pinched, “It’s Reena. Alice said she heard a loud thud, and when she got up to check what it was, she found Reena unconscious in the hallway. They have her stabilized and are getting ready to transport her to the hospital.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

“Was it a stroke? Or a heart attack?” Katie whispered.

Brian wrapped his arms around her, “It’s likely that they don’t know yet. They will need to run some tests.”

The front door opened, and an EMT helped guide the stretcher with Reena’s limp body strapped to it. The woman was full-figured; she was at least three hundred pounds and proud of every one of them. It was an effort to make sure she was safe getting her down the steps and into the vehicle. Then they were speeding away, and a very small and scared Alice was standing in the doorway.

She looked like a child that had been left behind. Reena and Alice had always been a bit of the odd couple. As plump as Reena was, Alice was thin. But the lost vacant expression in her eyes nearly ripped Katie’s heart out of her chest.

She didn’t think about her actions, breaking out of Brian’s arms and going over to the older woman.

Yelling over her shoulder, she called out to Knox, “We will bring Alice to the hospital.”

Knox turned to Brian and nodded. “I am going to head back and pick up Candice. She’ll want to be there.”

“Do Mark and Sutton know?” Brian asked quietly.

Knox nodded. “Sent a text a few minutes ago. They will meet at the hospital as well.”

Otterville Falls Hospital didn't have a large waiting room, but that really didn't matter. People made room where they could, spilling a bit into the ER, which was empty other than Billy Sutherland's boy, who had swallowed \$5.72 in change.

The mood was somber as the sun began to rise. The smell of rich coffee filled the air, and Styrofoam cups were passed around as they all waited to hear the news.

Shortly after ten in the morning, Dr. Young came out of the operating room. There was an air of sadness that clung to him despite the smile he had pasted on his face.

"We did everything that we could," he patted Alice's hand. "There is a possibility that she will make it through this, but she suffered a pretty severe stroke at home and another on the way here. Honestly, Alice, if she lives, I don't know what her quality of life will be like."

Alice nodded as if she was understanding, but does one really ever understand when the rug has been pulled out from under them? Does one comprehend that the person they loved and laughed with might be there in body, but you may never speak with them again?

Sutton wrapped an arm around Alice's slender waist, "We will stay here with you as long as you want. And I already talked it over with Mark; we will pay for whatever is necessary to help Reena. Don't you be fretting about bills or care."

Alice nodded again, but this time her lip trembled.

"I just," she tried to clear the emotion from her throat, "I just don't understand. Reena was fine all day. She wasn't complaining of anything. I just don't get it. Why?"

A fat tear plopped onto her cheek, followed by another one.

Sutton pulled the older woman into a hug and looked at her husband, Mark.

Brian was standing next to Mark and squeezed his brother's shoulder, "I will help in any way I can."

Mark nodded distractedly and then straightened, "Thank you, the nanny is supposed to have this afternoon off. Can you take care of the twins for a few hours?"

Brian's mouth went dry. He had wanted to help, but babysitting hadn't been what he intended.

"We would love to," Katie chirped from beside him. "Avery and Evie are the cutest babies ever!"

Brian blew out a breath. "Yeah, of course."

Mark smiled, "Thanks man, I know that Sutton will feel better if they are with family."

It struck Brian every time Mark said something like that. For so much of his life, their father had gone out of his way to make sure that Brian felt like he wasn't a part of their family. It meant a lot that Mark didn't follow in their old man's footsteps.

At noon Martha and Earl came in with a delivery of sandwiches from Abberly's. Many of those that were waiting decided to head home until further notice. Katie and Brian hugged Alice fiercely and said their goodbyes to Sutton and Mark before headed out to watch the twins.

"How much do you know about babies?" Katie asked conversationally.

Brian gave her a side-eyed glance, "Not too much."

Katie scrunched up her nose, “But you are their uncle, so you have spent time with them.”

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

He scratched his chin, “Yes, I have, but that doesn’t make me a baby whisperer either.”

“Aren’t they walking?” Katie asked a little nervously.

Brian nodded. “For the most part, there is a lot of falling involved.”

As they pulled into the old mansion that Sutton and Mark had restored, Katie felt a swirl of anxiety boil up inside of her.

“How hard could it be?” she asked with a manic smile and opened the car door.

32

“How can a child that size make this much poop?” Katie wailed as she tried to strip off Avery’s onesie. The blown-out diaper had leaked down both legs and up the back.

Brian held Evie in one arm and had his nose covered with the other.

“Hose her off outside! The entire house smells like shit!”

Katie blew back a strand of her red hair that threatened to cover her eyes. “You can’t say shit in front of little kids, Brian. Everyone knows that!”

“Well, newsflash, Katie! I suck with kids!”

Katie finally was able to pull off Avery’s pants, and with it came another plop of

poop on the changing table. Avery laughed, swinging her arms around, and Katie choked, trying to keep control of her stomach.

“You are going to have to trade me,” Katie said, at last, throwing in the towel. “I can’t do this.”

Brian looked at her like she was crazy.

“She’s your niece,” Katie shot him a look that let Brian know she wasn’t kidding.

“Just wait a minute,” Brian grumbled, walking to the crib and setting Evie inside where she was caged in for a moment. He then disappeared for a moment but returned with a pair of yellow rubber gloves and a dish towel tied over his face.

“Alright,” Brian said. Taking a deep breath, he added, “You go fumigate yourself. I am coming.”

Katie traded places with Brian, leaving Avery half-naked and covered in poo. There was poop all over the changing table, a glob on the floor, and from the looks of things, it was in Avery’s hands at this point.

“Don’t move,” Brian said to Evie, who grinned up at him from her spot standing at the crib rail. He scooped up the changing pad, Avery, and all the contents and took them into their en suite bathroom. For the first time, he figured that Sutton might not have been crazy insisting that every bedroom has a bathroom, even the nursery.

From there, he dumped everything into the tub.

“Your mama can order a new pad for the changing table, Avery.”

There was a knock at the bathroom door, “It’s just me.”

Katie stood there with Evie in her arms. The baby was tugging on Katie's fiery locks, and for a second, Brian was transfixed.

Until Katie frowned. "You aren't going to let all of that get wet, are you?"

Brian looked down at Avery, who was scrambling to stand and spread her disgustingness with the world.

"Sure am," he replied and turned on the water. Avery giggled as Brian adjusted the temperature to something suitable, and then he reached up and grabbed the sprayer. "Sorry, baby, but you stink."

Katie went after a garbage bag, and everything that had gotten soaked or soiled went straight inside.

"I might feel bad about ruining their stuff," Brian said later, "If they weren't so damn rich."

Katie laughed and elbowed his side. "You can't swear in front of kids."

"They like it," Brian argued, and it seemed he might be right.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

Brian had used the better part of a brand-new bottle of baby wash to get Avery clean. He also managed to soak his shirt, and it went into the trash bag along with the other things. Katie couldn't help but admire the firm chest and sculpted abs.

The girls looked like they were getting tired, and they had just started to watch something on Disney Jr. snuggled up together. It wasn't long before Katie fell asleep with Evie on her chest, and Brian's arm wrapped around her, keeping them both safe. He had Avery cradled in the other arm, and he felt like he could hardly breathe.

Never before had he allowed himself to imagine this kind of future. He was always certain that he was meant to be alone, and he was okay with that. Some people weren't meant to have a family; some were born when they shouldn't have been.

His father's words pricked at him.

"What are you thinking?" Katie's sleepy whisper startled him.

Brian shook his head, "Nothing really, I guess. I was thinking about my father."

Katie nodded, "You and Mark have the same dad, right?"

Brian let out a short laugh. "Biologically yes, but in every other sense, no. He made it clear that I was no son of his. In fact, he tried to pay me off several times just so that he could prove he wasn't unfaithful to his wife. And this was after they did paternity tests that were 98% sure I was his child. The man was, I suppose still is, delusional."

Katie swallowed hard, "I am sorry, Brian, I can't imagine living like that."

He had a lump in his throat the size of Nebraska.

“Tell me about your mom,” Katie encouraged.

Brian closed his eyes and thought about his mom. “She worked so hard. She wanted the best things for me and would have done anything to ensure that I was safe. She had two jobs, and there were times when I would get upset with her because I wanted her home with me.”

Katie felt her heart squeeze painfully.

“Brian, that is normal. All kids want that.”

He nodded woodenly, “I know, I just... now that she’s gone. I wish that I could go back and tell her how much I appreciated everything she did for me. That I know every time she put on that apron or hair net that it was really for me. I didn’t get it back then, but I certainly do now.”

Katie reached out and took his larger hand into her own.

“She knew,” Katie said, laying her head against Brian’s large shoulder.

“I don’t know that she did,” Brian argued.

Katie shook her head, “You may not say it, but you can’t help but go out of the way for those you love. You did my gardening in the middle of the night. You dropped everything to move to Otterville Falls to help your brother. You relocated your business just to be closer to them. And now you are babysitting your nieces so that Sutton can be at the hospital with Alice. You can’t tell me that your mom didn’t know how much you loved her, appreciated her. Brian, you were still you.”

They sat there in silence for a long moment as Brian drank in her words, considering the truthfulness and then hoping that just maybe this girl might be right.

The sound of a cell phone ringing interrupted their conversation, and Brian got to his feet.

“Hey, any news? Oh, yeah, no man, I understand. I am sorry. Yeah, we will be here. Okay, night.”

He turned to Katie with a shake of his head. “Reena has taken a turn for the worse. They have put her on a ventilator.”

33

Natalie and Julio arrived back in town in time to attend Reena’s funeral. The entire town turned out at the old church. The old pews were filled to bursting, and folding chairs had been added to the cultural hall for the overflow.

Sutton and the new pastor both spoke, and then Alice got up to say a few words.

“Reena Pots was my best friend,” her voice wobbled, and she clutched the well-used handkerchief. “We did almost everything together, some people even thought we were lovers, but that wasn’t true. You see, she was like a sister to me. I knew that no matter what happened in this world that Reena Pots had my back. She was there when I felt like stirring up trouble. She was there when something needed to be taken care of. And she was there when things were hard.”

Natalie felt Julio’s arm wrap around her shoulders, and she accepted the small package of tissues. Sniffs and muffled sobs were the backdrop to Alice’s beautiful tribute.

“Reena Pots was born in Southern California. The youngest of six, they spent hours upon hours picking strawberries in the fields. Her parents had come here to give their children a better life, but without an education, money was scarce, and the family lived quite humbly.”

Alice wiped at her nose before continuing. “Reena married at seventeen to a boy who promised her fame and fortune. Three months later, he left her one morning in a Vegas hotel room, and she learned that the marriage was a fake. Rather than go back and admit defeat to her family, she got a job washing dishes at one of the casinos. Living frugally, she saved up until she could send some home to her parents. Through the years, Reena moved up from dishwasher to housekeeping and then to dealing cards on the casino floor. She loved the glitter and excitement but hated to see when people threw their life savings away on a roll of the dice or flip of a card.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

As the crowd listened to Reena's vast and colorful life, it affected them all a little differently. It was a strong reminder for Natalie that we don't know when our last day will be. All of the years spent apart from Julio, so precious, suddenly seemed lost.

For Sutton, she was reminded of when her mother passed and how difficult it was to lose the most important person in your life. When this happened to her, it was Alice and Reena who had filled the gap. Now it would be her turn to step in and make sure that Alice wasn't left on her own too long.

Katie listened to all of the things Reena had done and experienced, and her heart ached because she hadn't known what an amazing woman Reena truly was. She thought she did, but Katie realized that these older ladies had an entire lifetime of experiences they could share. She vowed to herself then and there that she would spend more time with Alice and get to know her story.

The last thing Katie wanted was to learn about her friends after they were gone.

Knox and Candice were stiff and silent; the sorrow radiating off of them in waves.

Mark held Sutton close, worried about how she trembled in his arms. He knew that Reena was like a second mother to her.

Brian felt slightly numb. He could hardly believe that the funny older woman was gone. It was like they were going through the motions, but it was all a bad dream they would hopefully wake up from.

Katie sniffed rather loudly, and he pulled her against him. She pressed her face

against his suit jacket, and he could see the mascara on her cheeks.

This one woman had touched so many lives. Her friendly, offbeat personality had been a blessing to every member of Otterville Falls. Brian swallowed hard. He wondered if he was to die tomorrow if anyone would be there.

And since coming out to help Sutton, he had developed friendships, gotten closer with his brother, and fallen in love.

“I love you,” he whispered into Katie’s hair.

She clutched him more closely, and he knew that was her way of saying she loved him back. But suddenly, he wanted her to know. To choose him, to be with him not just for today, but for always.

The new priest had gotten up to say a few words, but Brian wasn’t paying attention to them. It was like an unearthly force was urging him on.

“I need to talk to you,” he whispered again, this time into her ear.

Katie turned her tearstained face up to him, and his heart thudded in his chest. She was so damn beautiful.

“I want to marry you.”

Okay, it had come out louder than he had intended it to.

There was a gasp of surprise from several of the matrons in town. Sutton’s mouth popped open, and Candice blinked out of the dead stare she had been in.

“What?” Alice called out from the front of the church, “What did he say?”

“I want to marry the deputy,” someone called out from the back.

“I am sure we can talk about this after the service,” the priest tried getting things back on track.

Alice’s face took on a strange expression, and then she began to laugh.

“She’s lost it,” Candice gripped Knox’s hand, “Do something!”

Sutton, who had overheard the comment, was inclined to agree. But Katie was still reeling from what Brian had said.

“Did you mean it?”

Her voice was every bit as loud as his had been; granted, she had to be heard over Alice’s laughter.

“Are you quite alright, Miss Alice?” Brian asked, moving to stand in front of the small pew.

Alice grinned, wiping her cheeks, “Reena always told me she would go out with a bang. But this? I truly am impressed.”

Alice tipped her head up to the sky, “You did well, Reena. I don’t know how you got him to say it but well played, my friend, well played. And you there, Katie, answer the poor boy!”

Katie watched as Brian sank to his knees. It was a tight fit, and she wasn’t sure he would be coming out anytime soon.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

“You can’t propose at a funeral,” Katie hissed.

Brian smiled, and her heart flipped over.

“Have you seen Alice’s face? This is obviously what she and Reena would have wanted. I love you, Katie, and I want to marry you. I want to have babies and make messes and trim your rose bushes. Will you marry me?”

There was a collective sigh as everyone held their breath, but then Katie nodded quickly. “Yes, I love you too!”

Later Alice would give all the credit for the romance and proposal to Reena. She would tell anyone who listened that Reena had been trying to get the two of them together for ages and couldn’t meet the Good Lord until she wrapped things up.

34

Two months later...

“Martha, I am positively starving! What do you have on special today?”

The girls had gathered once again in the large corner booth. Candice and Katie were talking wedding plans; there were only a few days until Candice and Knox tied the knot. Sutton looked much more refreshed as she sipped her sweet tea and listened to Martha go over the meatloaf and fried chicken plate.

Natalie was tucked in next to Alice, who inquired as politely as she was capable of

when that man would make an honest woman out of her.

Natalie began to laugh. “Alice, we never divorced, while we aren’t living together yet we aren’t separated, either, not legally. It’s complicated.”

“Speaking of complicated,” Sutton said to Candice. “Do you ever regret going against your mom’s wishes to live in New York? She was so adamant about you returning with her.”

Candice smiled, clearly a woman in love. “Does Mark regret his choice to stay in Otterville Falls?”

Sutton shook her head. “No, he said that this is where our family is and where our girls should be.”

Natalie patted her hand. “I feel the same way. You’ve got yourself a good man.”

“I need to find myself a man,” Alice said with determination.

The comment was so out of the blue that everyone stopped what they were doing to turn and stare. Everyone knew what a hard time Alice had been going through since Reena’s passing.

“You want to date?” Martha asked at last. “What’s the criteria?”

Katie nodded. “That is important. You don’t want just anybody.”

Alice laughed. “Are you thinking like original hips or at least fifty percent of his own teeth? Any man I chase would be long since retired, so I can’t say employed.”

Natalie took a sip of her tea. “You know, now that they have the new senior center all

jazzed up, there has been quite a bit more attention. If I know you right, I would say you have your eye on somebody.”

Alice smiled, her wrinkles folding into each other in an enchanting pattern. Her weathered hand came out to pat Natalie’s smooth one.

“Why yes, actually, I do. Did you know that Dr. Young’s father has recently come to stay with him? Poor dear lost his wife last year.”

“That’s terrible,” Katie’s face flushed a little when she remembered the little trick she had played on Dr. Young.

“I know,” Alice leaned in, “They say that she was a mean, bitter, old woman. I don’t like to speak ill of the dead.”

Which everyone knew to be the gateway of something nasty to be said about the dearly departed.

“But I can’t help but wonder if the older Dr. Young might be in need of a little TLC.”

“He’s a doctor as well?” Sutton raised her glass. “You know how to pick them!”

Alice snorted. “Says the woman who married a billionaire!”

They laughed, and all raised their glasses.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

“To new beginnings, and happier tomorrows,” Sutton called out.

“To friendship,” Alice added, and they all drank.

Natalie sat back into her seat. For some reason, her stomach wasn’t agreeing with her.

“What will you have, Nat?” Martha asked with a smile.

“Oh, I am fine. Thank you, Martha. I had a large breakfast.”

Martha nodded but looked at Natalie long and hard before moving on to the next person.

“Remember, you need to pick up your dresses from the bridal shop by tomorrow at five. And then, everything should be ready from there.” Candice seemed to be glowing, “I am just so excited and thankful I am out of that stupid boot!”

Alice beamed. “That was some of my best shooting.”

Candice leaned over and took the older woman’s hand, “You saved my life. It’s hard to imagine all of that drama happened and look how far we have come.”

It was true. Each of the women had grown in ways that couldn’t be measured. And while they were shy one of their soldiers, Reena’s presence was never very far from them.

“You look like shit,” Brian patted Knox on the back and grinned at Mark, who was

laughing.

Knox fought the urge to flip off the Williams brothers in the church house. He couldn't remember a time when he had been more nervous. The church was packed once again, only this time it wasn't to wish someone goodbye.

Knox and Candice had decided to marry in the small Otterville Falls Chapel. The old organ pounded out a decisive cord, and then the wedding march began.

Mark, Brian, and Knox automatically stiffened and moved into place. Avery and Evie were honorary flower girls, not being quite big enough yet to be trusted to make it down the aisle without eating the rose petals.

The bridesmaids began to sweep in, first Katie and then Natalie, followed by Sutton, the maid of honor. They passed all of the smiling friends and family from Otterville Falls and New York. Mandy and Elliot were in the second row with their daughter.

Gina and Marco had made the car trip down, opting to leave their girls with their favorite babysitter, Jackson. A couple Knox didn't know sat between them and Julio, and he immediately remembered that Julio's cousin Jennings and his wife Shay came in to meet Natalie.

Will Jennings had met her once years ago, but his beautiful wife had never had the pleasure. They had a sweet little boy with them that seemed to enjoy playing on Julio's lap.

Alice sat behind them in a dress that was so loud it nearly blinded a body. But that was nothing compared to the shining grin on her face. It matched perfectly with the older gentleman that was sitting beside her. Perhaps love was once again in the air?

Candice appeared at the back of the chapel, and all thoughts of who was in attendance

vanished. Her curvy body was wrapped in off-white silk, the shoulders were bare, and the neck went nearly all the way up in the front. The beading was magnificent, and Knox knew that Sutton had insisted that Candice get any wedding dress she wanted.

He was damn well impressed with her selection. Candice's dark hair was swept up in a fancy number that Knox hadn't the slightest clue how to pronounce. And her beautiful face was lifted toward his.

Damn it, Knox was going to cry, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Fuck, what kind of badass sheriff cries at his own wedding?

But as she walked toward him, Knox felt all of his dreams coming true. They had been through their ups and downs, and life would never be perfect. But surrounded by the people who loved them on this special day, Knox felt like the future was limitless.

"Who gives this woman..."

"I love you," Knox interrupted the priest.

The father sighed, "Now, there are a few things I have to say, so we can do this the easy way or the hard way?"

Candice snickered, and Knox's lips twitched.

"Proposals at funerals and declarations at weddings, this assignment in Otterville Falls is certainly an interesting one."

35

It was a short two weeks later that Katie finally dragged a very cranky Natalie to the

local drugstore. Katie was tired of listening to Natalie complain about how tired she was and how her stomach just wasn't sitting right with her.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

Natalie refused even to think that Katie could be right about her suspicions, but nevertheless, they found themselves in a very pink aisle.

Natalie stood in front of the sea of pregnancy tests and felt a wall of nausea threaten to knock her over. There were blue packages and purple packages. Ones that promised to tell you a week earlier, other ones that promised they were 99% accurate.

There were plus signs, double lines, double tests, strips, even a triple check container, and that was the one that Natalie plucked off the shelf.

Katie snorted from behind her. "I really don't see why this is necessary."

Natalie looked up and down the aisle. "Would you at least try and act like you are on a secret mission?"

Katie shrugged, taking the pregnancy test out of Natalie's hands and walking it up to the front.

"Hey, Tommy! How is your Mama doing?" Katie smiled at the teenager behind the register at the drugstore.

"Doing better, Ma'am, thanks for asking," the young man blushed and rang up the pregnancy test and a pack of magnum condoms.

"Really?" Natalie hissed when they made it out to the car. "Condoms?"

Katie laughed, "What? I need them. Besides, I get them there all the time. It's not a

big deal.”

The girls traveled back to Katie’s house, and Natalie darted into the bathroom to take the first test. She didn’t even need three minutes before two distinct lines had appeared.

“Are you coming out?” Katie asked from the other side of the door.

“No?”

“Was that a question?” Katie asked.

“No?” Natalie replied and then opened the door. “I think I’m pregnant.”

Katie grinned at her, “I know you are.”

Natalie frowned, “I don’t feel different, only slightly terrible.”

Katie’s face took on a sympathetic look, “From what I understand, that is how the whole baby-making process begins. Are you okay? I know things with you and Julio are just getting back on track.”

Natalie nodded slowly. “I guess I’m in a little bit of shock.”

“Let’s call Dr. Young and see if we can get you an appointment. They can tell you how far along you are and what you need to do. He can also help you feel better.”

Natalie slumped again, Katie, “Yes, please, I really want to feel better. It’s been forever.”

“Do you know when your last normal period was?”

She shook her head, “No, mine are irregular, and I haven’t had one in a while. But I know that I have felt terrible for at least two months.”

Katie phoned down to Dr. Young’s office just as Brian was walking in the back door.

“Hello,” Katie paused while the other woman was speaking, “Yes, I need to make an obstetrics appointment.”

“What?” Brian bellowed, racing into the room. “We’re having a baby?”

Katie glanced up. “What?”

But before she could speak again, he had her off her feet.

“I can’t believe we are having a baby!” he kissed her just as Dr. Young’s office tried to get more information from her.

“Brian!” Katie squirmed, laughing in his arms, “We aren’t having a baby, Natalie is!”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

His face fell for the briefest of moments, and then he smiled widely. He placed Katie down and moved over to Natalie to place a warm hand out for her to shake.

“That is excellent, Nat! Congratulations to you!”

Natalie nodded, woodenly, still in a bit of shock over it all.

Katie had gotten back on the phone with Dr. Young’s office and had waved Natalie over to get some information from her.

Brian couldn’t help the disappointment that coursed through him. He wanted a baby with Katie, lots of red-haired babies. He saw the bag of magnum condoms on the table and vowed to talk to her about it.

Shortly after a shocked Julio came to pick Natalie up, Brian turned to Katie with determination in his eyes.

“When does Knox get back from his honeymoon?”

Katie raised a brow, “Should have gotten home this afternoon. He is due back in the office tomorrow. Why?”

A smile broke across Brian’s handsome face, “I think that it’s time we start this party.”

Katie giggled when he swept her off her feet, “What are you talking about?”

“I want to get married,” he growled against her neck.

“I know, you have made that clear,” she gasped when he sucked her skin into his mouth.

“No,” Brian whispered, “I want to marry you now. I want to put a baby in your belly, and I want you to want my baby. I know it’s not exactly like you have planned...”

“Yes!” Katie interrupted his musings. “I want that too. Let’s go!”

Brian laughed, “Don’t you want to pack a bag?”

Katie shook her head. “No? We’re getting married. Why do I need clothes?”

Brian’s eyes darkened. “Fair enough. Do you want to call Knox?”

Katie shook her head again. “No, I will leave him a message. I don’t want anyone stopping us. This is our happily ever after, and I am going to make damn sure that we get it!”

“What did I ever do to deserve you?”

“You stalked me and then lied about it,” she replied deadpan.

Brian opened his mouth to argue and then snapped it shut. “Fair enough.”

When Knox came into the sheriff’s office the next morning, he learned that his deputy had taken a short leave of absence. Apparently, she was off chasing her happily ever after.

The End.

EPILOGUE for Katie & Brian

“Sweetheart, you have to push, one more big one, and he will be out.”

Lucy, the new nurse practitioner, encouraged Katie, but she was exhausted after ten hours of labor. Brian was sweating at her side, wondering what in the hell he could have been thinking. Why had he wanted kids in the first place? It clearly was a mistake, and he was being punished.

“You can do it, Katie,” he rasped through dry lips.

“This is all your fault!” Katie raged at him. “Our baby is huge because of you! We couldn’t have a normal-size baby!”

The nurse had to turn away to hide her smile. Brian looked stricken.

“I am sorry!”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

But it didn't matter. Another contraction was upon her, and Katie was screaming while the nurse was telling her to bear down while pushing, and then the little head was crowning.

Brian was feeling woozy and maybe wonderful. And then, Katie started screaming again, and her nails were digging into his palms. He prayed that this might be it for her because she really sounded like she was dying. The nurse practitioner was saying they were doing so well, and then there was a cry.

A great lusty sound and the pretty nurse was saying that their son was indeed a healthy young man, and Katie was crying, and Brian was feeling woozy again.

"Did I miss anything?" Dr. Young walked in just as Brian's eyes rolled, and he fell backward to the floor. "Oh shit!"

Lucy took care of the baby while Dr. Young helped Brian.

"What are you going to name him?" Lucy asked Katie as she brought the wrapped infant over to Katie.

"Joel Brian Williams," Katie said, taking her baby into her arms. "He's perfect, isn't he?"

Lucy smiled at Katie as she began to take her vitals. "The most beautiful baby I have ever seen. Happy birthday, Joel."

Dr. Young had managed to get Brian back in a chair and was having him sip some

juice.

“You did really well there,” he said, complimenting Lucy. Katie watched as Lucy’s cheeks flushed with pleasure. It looked like Dr. Young might just have found someone right for him after all.

EPILOGUE for Julio & Natalie

It was the third time that night that cries had awakened them.

Natalie moved to get up, but he stopped her.

“No, I will get her. Stay here.” He kissed Natalie’s brow, then rose and went to the bedroom across the hall and picked up their daughter from her crib.

Her bedroom was every little girl’s fantasy. Fairies and ponies scattered on the floor where she had left them, board books, dress-up clothes, and toys galore.

“Lilly, what is the trouble?”

“Dadda, Dadda!” At just over eighteen months, she didn’t have a lot of language, but she could clearly say, Dada.

“Baby, why aren’t you sleeping?”

Julio moved her over to the changing table and proceeded to change her soiled diaper. He then carried Lilly into his and Natalie’s bedroom. It wasn’t often that they allowed her inside their room. But at this point, they were both so exhausted that it hardly mattered.

Lilly was nursing a little in the evening, and Natalie lifted her arms to take Lilly and

see if perhaps she could try and get her to latch on.

“Julio, did you feel her face? She is rather hot.” Natalie sat up and held Lilly against her. The baby whimpered and buried her face into her mother’s neck.

Julio grabbed a thermometer, and sure enough, Lilly was running a little bit of a fever. They grabbed some pain reliever and snuggled her into bed with them.

“It will be morning soon. It’s a good thing that you aren’t going far into work,” Natalie said with a yawn.

Julio smiled faintly, “The living room?”

Natalie laughed, “Yes! Do you regret buying Alice and Reena’s house?”

Julio shook his head, “Not at all. Especially now that the expansion is done. I rather like it. And I think she and the older Dr. Young are quite happy in their condo, don’t you think?”

Natalie nodded. “Yes, I really do. I was going to check in with Martha today. Do you think you could for me? I really don’t want to leave Lilly.”

“Of course,” Julio whispered, noticing that Lilly was drifting off to sleep. “I would do anything for you.”

“I know you would,” she said softly, “and I you.”

EPILOGUE for Candice & Knox

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:49 am

“How did you drop the key between the floorboards?” Knox asked, half amused and half exasperated.

Candice looked up to where she had her husband handcuffed to the bed, “I don’t know. I just accidentally dropped it. How was I to know that it would slip between the cracks? Knox, how am I going to get you out? I can’t let people see you like this. Your thing is out.”

“My thing? You mean my dick?” He said with a nod toward the impressive appendage.

“You can’t say it like that!” Candice turned beet red and looked around their room as if someone could hear them.

Knox laughed. “Relax, look, there is another key in the side table drawer.”

Candice blew out a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank heavens, I was totally freaking out. I couldn’t imagine having to call a locksmith and trying to explain what we were doing. Hold on, let me just grab it, and then I will, just sec, my hands are just a little...”

“Be careful, Candice, don’t drop this one,” he warned.

Candice turned and frowned at him. “I’m not stupid, Knox. Oh, shit, shit, shit! Don’t slip between... fuck!”

With resignation, Knox asked, “I am never going to live this down, am I?”

Candice giggled. “Never. Maybe we should take care of that before I call for help.”

He wriggled his eyebrows. “My dick? I am definitely in favor of that plan.”

And so they did.

Needless to say, Brian wasn’t as amused as Katie was when he went over with the bolt cutters. Thankfully, Candice had covered his thing with a blanket.

EPILOGUE for Sutton & Mark

“What were two lines again?”

Mark snorted. “Are you serious?”

Sutton leaned her head out of the bathroom. “As a heart attack.”

“I don’t understand,” Mark said, shaking his head. “How did this happen?”

Sutton quirked a brow. “If you need an explanation, I am sure Evie or Avery would be willing to share their storybook *Where Babies Come From*.”

Mark shook his head. “You know what I mean. Shit, Sutton, the girls turn fourteen this year. And you’re...”

“Careful there, husband. If you even think to imply that I am getting older.”

Mark smiled ruefully. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

He got up and pulled Sutton into his arms, kissing her softly on the mouth.

As they broke apart, she said, “I think that’s how this happened.”

“Are you ready for one more round of parenthood?” he asked.

“With you by my side?” Sutton replied. “I can do anything.”

He kissed her again, knowing that no matter what was waiting around the corner, that they would always be able to face it—together.