



Sutton's CEO

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Description: ?Sutton- I know for a fact that nothing in this life comes free. When you live in a rundown trailer on the wrong side of town. You know a thing or two about hunger, fear, and despair. Ever since Mama passed away, I have gotten along just fine. I go to work, keep my head down, and do my best to stay out of trouble. But he always seems to find me... trouble, that is. When Mr. Hot-shot New York turned up telling me that I had inherited a bunch of money, I laughed in his face. I knew down to my toes that something had to be wrong. Nobody, nowhere, no-how had ever gone out of their way to leave me so much as a dime. This was far too 'happily ever after' for my liking. I just wished that he wasn't so insistent... -or clearly the best looking man I'd ever seen. -or smelled so darn good. – or easily my greatest mistake waiting to happen.

?Mark- I was groomed to take over the boss's company. I've worked, no slaved, for years making Sutton Industries the most lucrative, sought after, and most coveted fortune five hundred company in New York. Then out of nowhere, the old man tells me on his death bed—no less, that he has a long lost daughter. Not only was I tasked with finding the girl, I was also expected to hand over half the company. My damn company! Well, I found her. Living in the middle of Hillbilly Hell, working as a waitress, and living in a single wide. The sharks on Wall-street would eat this chick for breakfast. How was I supposed to bring this girl up to task when she didn't even own a pair of shoes that didn't once belong to somebody else? This girl is trouble. Walking away would be the sane thing to do. But there is something vulnerable about her. I can't put my finger on it. Won't put my finger on her, no matter how badly I am itching to touch her. I hated being the nice guy. It wasn't in my DNA.

Total Pages (Source): 84

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

Prologue

Sutton

Before Mama got sick, she would often tell me that there were two kinds of people in this world.

“The first ones are like you and me,” she’d say. “Good, hardworking folks that are just trying to get by. Then there is the second type. Those are the ones you really need to worry about, Sutton.”

Then Mama would lean in real close like she was imparting the secrets of the world. I always knew what she was about to say, but I’d get caught up in the drama of it all and listen with bated breath. I can remember the rasp of her voice and the smell of liquor wafting into my nose.

“Those cheeky bastards have money,” she’d whisper with an intensity that I couldn’t understand. “Don’t fall for it, Sutton. Money is the root of all evil, and don’t you forget it. Everything bad that’s ever happened to us happened because of money.”

Tears would fill her eyes, and it was in those moments that I would have done anything to take away her pain. But I guess that Mama was already one step ahead of me. Because unbeknown to me, Mama was already trying anything and everything to forget the things that plagued her mind. All I knew was that she would take another drink or pill that would cause the light in her eyes to blur until the pain of her reality was far behind her. Eventually she would fall asleep or pass out.

It wasn't until I was in grade school that I learned that Mama was quoting the bible with her talk of evil and money. I didn't grow up knowing the bible or the good Lord. Father Montgomery never was nice to Mama. Even as a kid, I knew it. He would call her the town bicycle when he ran across us on the street. Mama would then call him some rather inventive things that would cause his ugly old face to turn a rotten shade of puce. As angry as she would be, I secretly loved to see her fighting back. It was in those moments that I felt like my mama was fierce and strong.

Even later when my rose-colored glasses fell off, and I finally saw Mama for who she was rather than who I wanted her to be, I still held out hope that maybe someday she would stop the drinking, drugs, and whoring. That maybe she would see that despite the hand that life had dealt her, that I was worth staying sober for. That we could be a family. I loved my mama with everything that was in me, but Mama, I'm not sure what she loved best. All I know is that it certainly wasn't me.

Chapter One

Sutton

"You're late, Sutton."

I winced internally as I listened to my boss chastise me for being late. Flinging my bag under the dingy counter at Abberly's bar, I looked up from my crouched position to see Gabriel Reece glaring at me.

Rather than answer him, I yanked my apron out of my bag and went to work tying it on. Sadly, the next time I glanced over at him it was just in time to see his nasty ass staring at the way my t-shirt pulled tight across my chest as I tried on my apron.

Perve.

“We have a start time for a reason, Sutton” he stated in that lofty tone of his.

Seriously, who was the man kidding? There wasn’t another soul in town who would put up with his shit and we both knew it.

“I’m sorry,” I grit out between clenched teeth. I knew better than to give an excuse, even if it was a valid one. Gabe didn’t care if I had an excuse, he just liked riding my ass. It started in Kindergarten and he hadn’t got bored of it yet.

“Look, this is getting to be a problem,” he began, scratching his chest. I didn’t even want to know what the stains were that currently decorated his shirt. There had been a time when Gabe was somewhat attractive. That time was long gone.

“I’m never late,” I started, but he cut me off with a raised hand.

“Sutton, Sutton, Sutton.”

I hated the way he said my name. It was as if he were speaking of dog poop or erectile dysfunction.

“Yes, Gabriel?” I answered frostily.

I could swear that there was a glint of smugness that entered into his cold eyes as he continued to stare me down. Finally, he spoke, “You are late—again. I told you the next time you came in here late I would be taking it off your wages.”

I hated the stupid son of a bitch. I hadn’t been late in over two years. I was so tempted to tell him what he could do with this job, and the stick lodged in his ass. But the familiar grumbling of my stomach forced me to hold my tongue. I needed the money that this terrible job provided. It was the reason, the only reason, I agreed to work for the asshole in the first place.

Glancing at the clock before turning back to glare at him, I answered smartly, “It’s three minutes after the hour, Gabe. What are you going to deduct, fifteen cents?”

Okay, so I hadn’t done the math. But at a waitressing hourly wage, I wasn’t bringing home the big bucks. I could see by his reaction that I wasn’t far off the mark. Gabe looked ready to wring my bare neck. Well, good, I wouldn’t mind wringing his either.

“Sutton, we pay you to be here at three, not three minutes after three. This isn’t a difficult concept, so even you should understand it. If you are unable to be on time for your shift, you can find somewhere else to work.”

Oh, I bet he would love that. Gabe hadn’t always been the owner of Abberly’s. His mama, God rest her soul, had always been good to me. Ruth Ann treated me like gold. Which was saying something in this town, where I not only came from the wrong side of the tracks, but the wrong side of the blanket.

Pushing my way past Gabe, I took in the current customers. I smiled when I saw two of my favorite older ladies glancing surreptitiously over their menus, clearly trying to eavesdrop. As my eyes continued to scan the room, I saw a few of the other tables were taken. Nothing too stressful. This would be an easy-peasy kind of day.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

“Oh, and Sutton? Max has been waiting nearly a half hour for his drink.” Gabe shot me a smug look when I immediately jumped into action.

“Why didn’t you say something instead of tearing up at me?” I grumbled just loud enough for Gabe to hear.

A bubble of excitement lit inside of me. Max was another of my favorite people in Otterville Falls. In a rush, I wound my long dark hair into a messy bun and secured it with a pen. Then I raced over to the bar and began to pour Max a drink.

Thinking that Max had already sat there for thirty minutes, I went ahead and poured another drink. Then I carefully balanced the tray on one arm and strode across the old wood planks completely unaware that my shoe was untied. Tripping, I nearly ended up in Max’s lap. Thankfully the older man was deft enough to catch the tray, save the drinks, and my pride.

“Sorry, Maxie!” I called out with a wink, ignoring his growl of disapproval as I kissed his cheek.

“You alright?” he replied gruffly.

I nodded and moved back to get a good look at him. Still handsome in his early fifties, Max had the look of someone that lived hard. I had heard any number of rumors about him over the years. The people in Otterville Falls loved a good mystery and Max was one of the best.

Max and Mama had a special kind of relationship. I can’t even begin to tell you what

that meant because honest to goodness I have no flipping idea even to this day. Max knew what Mama was, and when he rolled into town on his big motorcycle and stopped at our trailer, I knew what was going on. But I also knew that Mama never cried in the morning when Max stayed over, and there were often groceries in the fridge when he left. Even after Mama died, Max still came in town every few months to check on me. I suppose you could say that he was the only father figure that I had ever known.

“You need money?” he asked in his gruff way.

I answered the same way I always did. “Nah, I’m doing fine. Thanks, Maxie.”

He rolled his eyes and went back to his drink. But I didn’t miss the slight twitch to his lips that indicated a smile was lurking somewhere under all of that gruff demeanor.

With a grin, I grabbed my notebook out of my apron and moved to the next table.

“Hi, Girls!” I said cheerfully as I greeted Alice and Reena. The two elderly ladies couldn’t have been a day over seventy- five. Best friends, roommates, and having never married, you rarely saw one without the other. The ladies were in Abberly’s nearly every afternoon.

“What will it be?” I asked. “Would you like the regular or do you want to spice things up?”

Alice pursed her lips wickedly. “Unless you have found a way to get that boss of yours to lose his boxers, I am betting that there is nothing spicy around here going on at all.”

I gagged a little. “Eww!”

Alice waggled her drawn-on eyebrows, causing me to laugh. With fake seriousness I warned her, “Alice! That’s sexual harassment.” Lord knew that Gabe got a kick out of the ladies thinking he was a hot stud. I personally couldn’t see what they were talking about.

“I would like to harass him—sexually,” she licked her old lady lips lewdly, and I couldn’t control snort of laughter that escaped my lips.

“Don’t let me stand in your way,” I said, pointing to the office. “Go get your man.”

Alice winked at me and turned back to her menu. “Maybe tomorrow. I am not feeling up to a workplace tryst.”

“Shirley Temple for me,” Reena interjected, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “And white zinfandel for the cougar here if you don’t mind.”

“Coming right up,” I said with a smile, jotting down their drinks even though it was the same thing they always ordered. “Y’all want anything to eat?”

Alice looked up hopefully. “Do you have those crab cakes like you did last week?”

“I will check with Joe,” I promised before adding, “You want the same, Reena?”

“Oh, goodness me, no!” she said, chins wobbling. “Well, I couldn’t—well, maybe just a nibble or two,” she said as she tipped her head to the side as she considered our menu. “And some of those onion rings, but just a few mind you. I’m watching my weight.”

I nodded obediently and jotted it down. Reena was as plump as Alice was thin. It hardly seemed fair that Alice could eat whatever she wanted and never gain an ounce. I didn’t give a shit what Reena weighed. I only wish that it didn’t bother her so much.

As far as I was concerned, if the woman wanted onion rings, I sure as hell was going to bring them to her.

Seeing that there was only one more customer in the dining room, I headed his way. He was younger than I had originally guessed, far closer to my age. As I came upon him, I saw that the stranger was tall with a muscular build. His slate gray eyes sat under thick black brows matched his inky black hair. Dear merciful heavens, the man was breathtaking. He was also dressed in a suit that likely cost more than this entire bar.

A warning bell went off somewhere inside of my mind. Never trust money. I knew the mantra almost as well as I knew my name.

“Welcome to Abberly’s,” I said in my most courteous tone. “My name is Sutton, and I will be your waitress today. What can I get you to drink?”

The moment his eyes locked on mine I felt a jolt of electricity run up my spine, nearly causing me to drop my pen and notepad.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

“Sutton?” He repeated my name and I felt goosebumps erupt all over my body. His voice was all sexy seduction.

“Yes?”

Damn it. Why had that sounded like a question instead of a statement? Stupid, stupid, stupid.

“Yes,” I said firmly, nodding my head.

He let out a visible sigh of relief.

Strangely, I felt myself relax along with him. I was about to ask him again about his drink when his arm shot out and his long thick fingers curled around my wrist. The surge of electricity before was nothing compared to the fireworks erupting in my midsection from his touch. His hand felt like it was branding me. I barely heard him when he uttered, “It’s about damn time.”

Chapter Two

Sutton

You didn’t grow up the way I had around men and let some stranger put his hands on you. I was about to hand the fancy city slicker his ass when Mad Max flew across the room and held a fork to the handsome man’s neck.

Trust Max to attack with a kitchen utensil.

“Get your damn hand off of her,” Max snarled menacingly. “We don’t handle women that way.”

Because the man hadn’t let go of my arm, I was now bent at a rather strange angle. Nonetheless, I felt a surge of affection for Max. It meant a lot to me that he cared.

“I’ve got this, Max,” I said, but it was like I hadn’t even spoken.

Throughout this, the stranger didn’t even flinch despite the fact that the tines of the fork were pressed against his jugular.

“Charming,” the handsome stranger said in an even tone. “I assume this is a friend of yours?”

Max growled at him and shoved the fork harder against the stranger’s neck. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Alice and Reena staring on with wide eyes. The last thing I wanted was for this to escalate any further. I tried to nudge Max to the side with my foot, but he wasn’t about to move.

Couldn’t he see that I wasn’t in any danger? In what I hoped was a calm voice, I said, “This is Max. He’s going to put the fork down now.” That elicited a growl from Max, but I kept going. “He was a friend of my daddy’s back in the day.”

The stranger’s brow rose in surprise before a look of incredulity entered his eyes. “Somehow I doubt that to be true.”

A spark of anger lit inside of me.

“Look, I don’t know why this is any of your business. I don’t know you, and I certainly don’t owe you any explanations.” I yanked my wrist to free, and this time he let it go.

I could still feel the imprint of his fingers and rubbed my wrist absentmindedly. I wondered why it hadn't bothered me more. Usually I wasn't a fan of people touching me.

Besides Max, the last person to hug me was Ruth Ann when my mama passed away. She hugged me so tight and whispered that one day I would understand my mama better. I understand my mama just fine, I had thought to myself. Hell, I knew her a whole lot better than most. But I just smiled and nodded appreciatively at Ruth Ann. She meant well, and besides, Ruth Ann had known Mama before she got sick, before the men, and before the drugs.

Max growled at the stranger with such vicious intent that I started to wonder if he just might fork the man after all.

"Listen punk, just who the hell are you?"

Neither man was backing down.

"Is there a problem over here?" Gabriel rushed over to see what the fuss was all about. As soon as he saw me, a look of disgust crossed his face.

Bastard.

The stranger's cool gray eyes stared into my own. My heart thudded wildly in my chest and I felt as if I had been running. It was the strangest response that I had ever had to a man. I took a hesitant step backward.

The stranger spoke. His deep voice was clear and insistent. "Your father was Hollingsworth Sutton, III, renowned billionaire, owner of Sutton Enterprises, and my former boss. To my knowledge he never once rode a motorcycle. For the most part, he didn't even drive himself. I don't know what this Max has told you, but he was no

friend of your father.”

Perhaps it was the intensity with which he spoke, but Max paled and moved away from the stranger, dropping the fork to the ground.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

“Max?” My voice sounded young and scared.

I wanted him to say that the stranger was lying. He and my daddy went way back, and my father had died in a blaze of glory, just like Max had told me all those years ago. Max had said that was the only reason my father wasn't there to raise me himself. I knew that Max gave my mama money to help us survive. But that was a debt to my daddy. That's what Max had said. It couldn't be a lie, could it?

“Baby girl...” I could hear the sorrow in his voice.

“You didn't know my daddy?” My voice was hollow, the accusation rang through the air. Max was one of the good guys, one of the few people in this shitty world that was on my side.

“Now, Sutton, don't look like that.” Max's gruff voice held a hint of sorrow.

“Max, did you know my daddy?” I asked him point blank.

He heaved a sigh, almost as if weighing his words before he uttered, “No, Pumpkin.”

I felt my stomach drop down past my toes.

Max continued hurriedly, “But your mama and I had a special relationship. When I found out about you, well, I tried to marry her. But you know what she was like with all the drugs and whatnot.”

I felt sick inside. I knew all about their special relationship. She had plenty of special

friends that would slip into our trailer late at night. I didn't realize that they were paying for sex until someone in the third grade happily filled me in. They told me my mama was nothing more than a prostitute, and I would grow up to be just like her.

They didn't understand, nobody did. Mama wasn't like that. She could be fun when she wasn't high. We laughed and sang funny songs on the radio. She took me down to the thrift shop, and we would look for fancy dresses to play princess in.

"Yeah," I whispered, "I knew what she was like."

"You want me to get rid of him?" Max motioned toward the businessman who had been silent during this entire exchange, his eyes never leaving me.

I shook my head and answered in a low voice, "I want to hear what he has to say."

Gabriel puffed up, choosing now to exert his nonexistent authority, "Not now, you aren't. You have a shift to work, Sutton. I am not paying you to sit on your ass."

The stranger's mouth looked pinched as he asked in a clipped tone, "How much is her time worth to you?"

"What?" Gabriel looked confused.

"I will need an hour with the girl. If she sits here at this table with me for that length of time, I will give you two hundred dollars."

Gabriel's jaw dropped before his eyes took on a greedy tint. "Three hundred."

"Done." The man pulled out a money clip and peeled off three hundred-dollar bills and then handed them over to Gabriel.

“Shit,” Gabriel said with a smirk. “I’d have done it for two hundred.”

The businessman didn’t miss a beat. “I would have paid five. Now, if you will leave us? We will need some privacy.”

Max and Gabriel ambled away, and the man motioned for me to sit across the table from him.

I folded my arms, not sure that I wanted to know whatever this man was so insistent on telling me. “Why should I?”

His mouth pressed into a thin line. “You are wasting my valuable time. Unless you have the three hundred dollars to repay me, I suggest you sit.”

My ass hit the chair faster than a freight train. I didn’t have three hundred dollars. Hell, I wasn’t sure I had thirty dollars. With a sassy smirk, I saluted him. “Yes, sir.”

His lips looked pinched again. Good. I liked that the was just as irritated as I was.

“My name is Mark Williams,” he began. “I am the CEO of your deceased father’s company, Sutton Enterprises. You may call me Mr. Williams.”

I laughed. It was probably inappropriate, but who goes around telling people to call them mister anything?

Mr. Williams sighed, but then continued on as if I hadn’t laughed in his face. “Because of certain legalities, I was forced to locate and apprise you of your father’s passing.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

“You are too kind,” I quipped sarcastically.

I didn’t like the way he was rattling off information like a census bureau official. To piss him off, I deliberately called him by his first name, “Listen, Mark.”

“Mr. Williams,” he bit off gruffly.

“Mark,” I insisted, my back ramrod straight. “You need to work on your bedside manner. You cannot just walk into a girl’s life and rip it all to pieces. Shit, who tells someone that their daddy is dead and in the same breath insists that they call them Mr. Williams in the same statement? Why did you come anyway? If my father didn’t want me in his life, surely he doesn’t want me involved in his death.”

Mr. William’s jaw clenched. “Your father didn’t know you existed until the very end. He was a good man.”

I scoffed. This time he had really pissed me off.

“Right,” I said. “He was such a good man that he slept with a woman, impregnated her, and then left them both in poverty. Yep, you are right, he sounds like a real winner to me. Perhaps things worked out how they were supposed to.”

I pushed the chair back to stand, but Mr. Williams reached out and grabbed my wrist again.

“I’m not finished.” His slate gray eyes blazed silver for the briefest of moments.

It unsettled me. I couldn't figure out what it was about this man that had me feeling so off kilter. Despite my intention to leave, I found myself settling back into my seat.

"You have two minutes," I bit out.

He growled at me. I felt it low in my belly.

"You, Sutton Landry, are going to listen to me. Your father wanted better for you. When he learned of your existence, he was too ill to travel. His dying wish was for me to collect you personally. I am a very busy, influential man, Miss Landry. I do not run errands for just anyone. You will hear what I have to tell you."

I could see the raw masculinity in his features as he barked out his orders. It's obvious that I had riled the beast.

A part of me felt a shiver of sadness that I had disappointed him. But I didn't want to dwell on that. Who was he to make me feel this way?

"'Collect me personally.' Just what is that supposed to mean?" I retorted hotly.

His gray eyes bore into mine as he said, "To bring you home, Miss Landry."

A small breath escaped my lips. I wasn't sure if I wanted to cry and laugh. "Home? Mr. Williams, really? My home is the old single trailer that I've lived in my entire life. My home is Otterville Falls, and even this shitty bar where I work. Wherever you came from with your fancy suit and Italian shoes, that's not my home."

"This town isn't fit for anyone." He said it so softly that I just barely heard the words.

I felt heat suffuse my cheeks and knew that I was seconds away from ripping his head off or bursting into tears.

“It might look like nothing to you, but it’s everything I have. I am not throwing it away because some smooth-talking city slicker walked into my bar and offered me the moon. Good day, Mr. Williams.”

He didn’t stop me as I rose this time, but his eyes could have burned holes in my back for how intently he was staring at me.

Mr. Williams stayed at that rickety table in the bar for my entire shift. He saw all the regulars, the drunken brawl that was a nightly occurrence, and not once did he leave his seat nor speak to anyone else.

When it finally hit closing time, I approached the table. “I’m gonna need you to move along now, Mr. Williams.”

I was tired, my feet hurt, and after all that work, I had only made one hundred and twelve dollars, part of which I shared with Joe, our short order cook.

“You do not appear to be leaving.” His frosty tones were grating on my nerves. Who in the hell did this asshat think he was?

“Well, Mr. Williams, for those of us who actually work here, we still need to mop the floors, wipe tables, and clean the bathrooms. It will be a while yet until I can leave. So why don’t you run along back to Neverland, or wherever it was that you came from?”

Once again, I could have sworn I heard a low growl. My belly flipped and I felt a strong desire to try and ruffle his perfectly impassive expression.

“Very well,” he said at last. “I will wait until you are finished.”

What the hell?

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

“Suit yourself,” I muttered under my breath. There was no point arguing with a jerk, my mama used to say, and Mr. Williams was a first-class asshole.

Chapter Three

Sutton

I could feel Mr. Williams’ gaze on my body as I hurriedly went through the closing routine at the bar. Every time my eyes met his penetrating gray ones, I pretended that I didn’t notice him staring. But we both knew better.

I couldn’t help but recall the name he had suggested belonging to my father, Hollingsworth Sutton, III. Had my mother named me after him? It had a certain kind of poetic justice. I had spent my life hating my unusual first name and now I find out that it’s the legacy to a fortune. That is, if Mr. Williams was telling the truth. Which I hadn’t yet decided if I was going to believe him or not.

With another glance in his direction, I noticed the tightening of his lips as I bent down to pick something up off the floor. A part of me felt like giving him the universal salute of displeasure. I didn’t want him sitting there, judging me. I could just imagine the thoughts running through his mind. He was likely thinking about how utterly unsuitable I was for his world.

Well, he wouldn’t be wrong. Mr. Fancy Pants was clearly a Park Avenue player and I was nobody from Nowhere, USA. Shit, in my short cutoffs and worn out sneakers I likely could have passed for a kid in high school. Mr. Williams was all man, from the tips of his Italian leather shoes to his broad chest beneath that expertly tailored suit

and his understated diamond cuff links.

As if diamonds were ever understated.

“I’ve got to cut out of here,” Joe called out to me from the kitchen, shaking me from my thoughts. “Maggie just called. The baby has a fever.”

I nodded in sympathy and pretended that Joe’s wife didn’t call every night with some excuse for him to leave early. Far be it from me to call the woman a liar, be she was terrible bender of the truth. It didn’t really matter. I liked Joe, he never flirted with me and tried to keep Gabriel off my back. With a smile, I waved him on like I always did. “Have a great night, Joe. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Mr. Williams cleared his throat.

I turned to him. “Did you need something?”

I tried to ignore the way my pulse jumped when our eyes connected. He was just a handsome man, nothing else.

“Are you here by yourself?” he asked in that clipped tone of his that said boarding schools and brunch on Sundays in the Hamptons.

I raised a brow. “No, sadly you have made that quite impossible by not leaving when I asked you to.”

His jaw ticked. “Your boss is gone?”

I nodded, wondering what he was getting at.

“Good,” he said, standing up.

I couldn't help myself. I took an involuntary step backward.

His face went blank and then paled. "I wouldn't harm you."

"Sure, you wouldn't," I replied in a hurry. In truth, I didn't feel threatened by him. However, he was a lot taller than I had anticipated. Call it PTSD if you will, but I had learned the hard way in life about men who were bigger and stronger than I was.

If anything, he looked even more alarmed by my quick reply. "I assure you. I have never harmed a woman in my life."

I picked up the mop that had begun to slide out of my grasp. "Well, that's fantastic to hear. Why don't you head back to...? Where are you staying, anyhow?"

He shrugged. "I will get a room at the motel."

I couldn't help the bark of laughter that escaped my lips. "You don't want to stay there."

He blinked in confusion. "Why?"

"Because you strike me as the sort of person who doesn't care for bed bugs."

"What?" He shook his head and then continued, "No, you can't be serious."

I took the mop and bucket and finished up the last section of floor as I spoke. "If it wasn't so late, I could see if Reena and Alice could put you up. They have a spare room that they sometimes rent out."

"The elderly women?" he asked.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

I smiled. I don't know why it pleased me that he remembered them from earlier. "Yes. But it's far too late to be knocking on their door. Maybe Knox is home. I could give him a call."

Mr. Williams tensed. "Who is Knox?"

"The sheriff," I replied as I put the cleaning things away and did a double check that the stoves were turned off.

He visibly relaxed. "I don't need to stay with local enforcement. We can begin the drive now back to the airport. I have the private jet on standby."

"We?" I said dumbly.

He nodded, "We."

"Mark," I said, purposefully calling him by his first name. "We are not going anywhere. If you would like to go back to wherever you came from, please feel free. Nothing is keeping you here."

"You are keeping me here," he said purposefully. "I need to speak to you about your inheritance. There are certain requirements that must be met."

"Listen, it's late and I am sure we can talk about this in the morning. How about we call it a night?"

I thought he would argue with me, but after a short moment of silence he nodded and

motioned for me to walk ahead of him. I had already gathered my bag from under the counter, so I walked toward the door. I nearly jumped out of my skin when I felt his hand at the small of my back. “What are you doing?”

He yanked his hand away. “Escorting you to the door!”

“I have been going in and out of this door for years and nobody has ever had to touch me to find it.”

Mark’s eyes blazed for a minute. I wouldn’t have believed that those gray depths could appear as heated as they did now. “It’s called being a gentleman.”

“I don’t know much about gentlemen, but I do know about men who need to keep their damn hands to themselves.”

“Damn it, woman. I am not going to hurt you.”

“That’s what the spider says to the fly,” I quipped.

“What in the hell are you talking about?” he expostulated.

“It doesn’t matter,” I replied. “Just...don’t touch me.”

He nodded jerkily, tucking his hands into his pockets.

I locked the door and started toward the parking lot.

“I’ll just follow you, shall I?” he asked.

I frowned. “Follow me where?”

He looked at me like I was an idiot. Then speaking slowly, he said, “To your home. I want to make sure you arrive safely.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help myself. “Sugar, I have been walking the streets of Otterville Falls my entire life. I am safe here. You go on to wherever you are going to stay for the night.”

His jaw tightened and I could tell he wanted to argue with me. But instead of waiting to hear what he wanted to say, I turned and began to head for the road.

I heard the crunching of his shoes on the pavement. “Where is your car?” he called out to me.

“Don’t have one,” I called back over my shoulder.

“You don’t have a car?” he repeated.

“I don’t have a lot of things, Mr. Williams.” I continued to walk and sure enough he followed along behind me.

“What is the relationship between you and that boss of yours?”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

The question surprised me. I stopped and turned to look at him. Mark's hands were still in his pockets. He should have looked ridiculous in his expensive suit walking along Highway 60 behind me in the middle of the night. But instead he looked devastatingly handsome.

I wasn't under any illusions about what I looked like after a long day's work at Abberly's. My shirt was stained with grease, my hair was hanging limp around my face. In defense, I wrapped my arms around my waist and glared at him.

"What does it matter?"

He stepped closer until there was a frisson of awareness that sparked between us. "I don't like the way he looks at you."

I could feel my brow crinkle in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"Real men don't talk to the women they care about with such disrespect. He undresses you with his eyes, and yet he treats you like something under his shoe."

I grunted in surprise. The man had just summed up the relationship I had with Gabriel in two sentences. How had he gleaned all of that from one shift at the bar?

"We aren't dating," I found myself telling him the truth. "We aren't even friends. His mama was kind to me when mine couldn't be."

I didn't want to go into the reasons why Mama had been absent—not physically, emotionally.

To my surprise, Mark said something under his breath that sounded remarkably like, 'Stupid fucker.'

I was used to obscenities, so that didn't shock me, it was just that it seemed so out of place with his perfectly polished demeanor. It made me like him just a little.

"You are tired," he said softly, those gray eyes not missing anything.

I let out a loud and rather unladylike yawn and replied, "It's nearly two in the morning, and there is a stranger following me home."

I wasn't sure why I felt the need to poke the bear. But when his jaw ticked, I couldn't help the broad smile that broke across my face.

"I just want to be sure you are safe," he said gruffly.

It was oddly endearing. I was either far more tired than I had anticipated, or he was wearing on me. Because the next thing I knew I was offering him a place to sleep for the night.

"Listen, I have a spare bedroom. It's nothing much, but the sheets are clean and there aren't any bugs. If you are going to follow me home anyway, you might as well get some rest."

I could tell I had surprised him. He opened and closed his mouth twice before nodding and adding curtly, "Thank you."

I turned to start walking again, but his hand reached out and grabbed my arm.

"Wait. Let's take my car."

I couldn't help the laugh. "Says the mass murderer to the innocent girl not noticing the rope and duct tape in the back seat."

He blanched. "I do not have rope and duct tape in my back seat!"

It was fun teasing him. I had already decided that he was harmless, but there wasn't any harm in ribbing him a little. "You should pick some up for your next abduction. I hear they come in handy."

He shook his head. "You really are impossible."

I grinned. "So I have been told. Let's see this car of yours."

He led me back to the parking lot of Abberly's where a nice BMW was parked on the street.

"Nice car," I murmured.

Distractedly, Mark answered, "It's a rental."

Like the true gentleman he was, Mark opened my door and made sure I was safely inside before rounding the car and getting in the other side. As he started the engine, I asked him, "What is this inheritance all about?"

He looked over at me in surprise. "We can go over all of the details in the morning. But the basics are that you now have enough money to buy and sell this town if you wanted to. Your father has left you a significant portion of the company. But you have to come to New York to claim your inheritance. I have all the necessary documents for your lawyer to go over with you."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

I frowned at him. “I don’t have a lawyer.”

“Well, you can hire one, or use one of the company lawyers.”

As he pulled out onto the highway my mind continued to process what he had said to me. “Why do I have to come to New York?”

“The will has some stipulations. Part of that is that you have thirty days to decide if you want to accept your inheritance. That would entail coming to New York and learning about the company. After that point, you have six months to prove yourself a viable asset. If at any time you wish to take a lump sum instead of shares in the company, your father arranged for five million dollars to be settled upon you.”

“Five million dollars?” I could hardly believe it. How could this even be possible?

“You are worth billions,” he said shortly. “Only a fool would take the lump sum.”

I felt faint. Billions. “What do I have to do?”

He turned onto the gravel driveway that led to my lone, single wide trailer. “We will leave for New York immediately. Once there you will be pampered, plucked, and waxed at the spa, as well as given an entire new wardrobe.”

“What is wrong with my clothes?” I said defensively.

He wasn’t cruel or derisive when he answered honestly. “The employees at Sutton Enterprises won’t take you seriously in cutoffs. You will have to look the part, then

you will have to learn about the business.”

I didn’t have a college education. Hell, I had barely graduated from high school. A lot of that had to do with Mama’s drug issues. But I wasn’t about to go into that. “Looks like we are home.”

He looked up in surprise even though he had driven us to the trailer. I didn’t ask how he knew the address, and he didn’t offer.

I opened my door before he could make it around the car and shut it behind me. My mind was reeling with the information he had given me. Could I really go with him to New York?

“What would happen if I took the five million dollars?” I asked.

He frowned. “I can’t in good conscience tell you to take the five million. It’s far better for you to come to New York and give it a try.”

I swallowed the lump of fear in my throat and nodded. “Okay, we can talk about it in the morning.”

Chapter Four

Sutton

I snuck surreptitious gazes at Mr. Williams in the moonlight as we approached the trailer. As much as I didn’t want to admit it, the man was drop dead gorgeous. I liked the fancy way he talked and the air of superiority that radiated from his body. I especially liked the five o’clock shadow on his jaw that I had a feeling most people never got to see.

Everything about Mark Williams was precision and purpose. I wondered what it would be like to have that kind of focus and determination trained on me. My body to be specific.

I climbed the steps of my childhood home with Mark close on my heels. I pushed the door open and dropped my bag near the door. It was dark inside, and the trailer wasn't very big. But I was used to navigating through the hodgepodge of furniture.

"Why isn't your home locked?" he asked, his tone laced with disapproval.

I tried to ignore the way that his body heat could be felt despite the fact that we weren't touching. I let out a tired sigh as I answered his question, "Mr. Williams, everyone who is anyone knows this is where I live. Look around you. Do you honestly think there is anything someone would want to steal?"

His eyes never left my face as he replied, "Yes, Miss Landry, I do."

Fuck me twice and call me done, color mounted in my cheeks.

"I am not flirting with you, Miss Landry. I am stating facts. Beautiful women should not live in homes that do not have proper protection."

"You think I am beautiful?" I had the feeling that this wasn't what he wanted me to get from his statement. But I had sure liked hearing it from his lips.

Those same lips compressed into a straight line. "Miss Landry."

"Mr. Williams," I countered saucily.

From the flare in his eyes I could see that my quip hit its mark. I knew that I was pushing his buttons, but the man was too scrumptious not to goad. I couldn't wait to

see what happened when he blew his top or, better yet, blew mine.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

“Miss Landry,” he began again, taking a deep breath. “I cannot in good conscience leave you here without being assured of your safety.”

“I am a grown woman, Mr. Williams,” I said, sighing. “I can handle anything that comes my way. So, if you don’t mind, I am tired, and you have bed bugs to go find at the motel.”

In the next moment, I found myself being pressed up against the counter in my tiny kitchen, his masculine scent of leather and spice enveloping me as I struggled against his iron grip.

“You were saying, Miss Landry?” His lips brushed the curve of my ear. I felt my core clench with desire. This wasn’t supposed to be happening! I thought I had the upper hand.

I struggled to free my arms, but his grip on my wrists tightened. Bringing my knee up, I attempted to slam it into the family jewels, but Mr. Williams trapped my leg with his muscular thighs. My chest was pressed tight against his expensive suit coat.

“Let me go!” I demanded.

“No.” He wasn’t even breathing hard, the bastard.

His brow rose, “I will have you know that my parentage is quite acceptable.”

Heat spread through my body. I was the last person that should be calling someone a bastard, even inadvertently.

“You have made your point, Mr. Williams. Let me go!”

There was a sliver of time where I didn’t think he would. However, he flung me away from him as quickly as he had gathered me to him.

“Now that we have that settled, let’s discuss where I will be sleeping.”

I scowled at him. “After that display, you have some fucking nerve thinking I will put you up for the night. I don’t care whatever I said before. Get out.”

“Language, Miss Landry,” he admonished. “You will need to learn to curb that tongue of yours.”

“Listen, Fancy Britches, are on my last fucking nerve. You are not getting lucky tonight. So, you can just figure something else out. I am not that kind of girl!”

Although there was a part of me that knew I was most certainly that kind of girl if he was on the offering end, I told myself to shut the hell up! It wasn’t lost on me that I was arguing with myself and I didn’t need to add split personality to my growing list of faults.

“I have not had a moment’s luck in weeks, Miss Landry. I will be staying here to protect you, not ravish you.”

“Oh,” I replied, wincing when I heard the disappointment in my voice. I swear I saw his lips twitch. Damn him to hell! “Fine, like I told you, there is a spare room you can sleep in.”

“I should be delighted,” he mocked dryly.

I motioned for him to follow me down the dark hallway. I knew that I should have

replaced the light bulb, but it hadn't mattered as much when it was just me. However, Mr. Williams stayed close behind me, his hand on my back as we walked into the inky blackness.

I flipped on the light in my old bedroom and nearly jumped out of my skin when someone shrieked from the bed.

Mr. Williams had a gun aimed at my unexpected guest. I had no idea where he had been hiding it, nor how he had managed to pull it out so quickly.

"Stop, don't shoot, this is just Earl." I placed my hand on Mr. Williams' arm and tried to ignore the butterflies that were settling in my stomach.

"Who, might I ask, is Earl?" Each word was an icy blast of anger. Mr. Williams didn't lower his gun, not even a fraction of an inch.

Earl had to be eighty and was ninety pounds soaking wet; he was no more a threat than a field mouse.

"Mr. Williams, Earl, is a... erm," I searched for the right word. An acquaintance, Nuisance, Pain in the ass?

"I am family!" Earl's whiskey stained voice protested. "I don't know who you are, but Sutton always lets me stay when Martha is having one of her spells. So sorry about your luck, mister, but I am not leaving."

He was feisty for an old coot that had wormed his way into my heart.

"What did you do to your wife?" I almost hesitated to ask, but curiosity won out.

"I am telling you, Sutton, not a damn thing! I have been the picture of perfection to

that woman, and she is plumb crazy!”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

“You didn’t drink the sacramental wine again, did you?” I asked pointedly.

Martha is pretty serious about the sacramental wine. The thing is that Martha and Earl were the caretakers of the local church. But Earl tended to have poker games in the chapel and grow marijuana in the herb gardens.

Earl pouted, “I came across some extra funds and spent them at the tables. How was I to know Father had forgotten the collection plate?”

“Earl!”

But it was no use arguing. Earl was who he was, and Martha would forgive him eventually.

“Do you have enough blankets?” I went to the closet to pull down an extra one. They were threadbare and bare, but with enough of them, he should stay warm.

“You can’t just let him stay here,” Mr. Williams said with authority.

I had forgotten about him, damn it.

“Have a heart, Mr. Williams. He has nowhere else to go.”

The man’s eyes shot icicles at me, “I do not need a heart, Miss Landry. You, however, could do with a strong dose of common sense. It would appear that you were born without it. He looks like a vagrant and smells to high heaven.”

Earl sniffed his soiled jacket and wrinkled his nose. He turned to look at me hopefully.

I couldn't help the huff of laughter, "Yes, Earl, you can shower in the morning."

"Miss Landry, I must stop this absurd situation. You can't have a strange man sleeping in your home!"

I turned to Mr. Williams, raising a brow. "I know Earl. He is not a stranger. You, however, are. Should I throw you out on your ass?"

Earl smirked at Mr. Williams, and I stifled a smile. "Go to sleep, Earl."

"Yes, ma'am," came his scratchy reply. "Turn those lights off on the way out, would you Sutton?"

"Of course," I replied. "Good night, Earl."

"Good night, Sutton."

Mr. Williams followed me back out into the small living area. I knew what he saw offended him. My furniture hadn't been new since the sixties, and there was not a damn thing in the place that matched. But it was clean, and it was mine. And I wouldn't let him get the better of me.

"What now, Mr. Williams? Are you going to sleep on the couch?"

He eyed my narrow sofa in distaste. "Thank you for your hospitality."

I almost offered to trade him, but my feet were aching, and my bed was calling my name. I went to the hall closet and found a few more blankets with a pillow.

“Why don’t you try and get some rest? The morning will be here before we know it.” I tried to smile at him, but it came out more like a grimace. “Do you need anything else?”

I prayed he didn’t.

“I shall be perfectly situated. Don’t worry about me.” His formal tones were in such contrast to my simple home.

“Good night, Mr. Williams.”

I turned to enter my bedroom, which unfortunately was right off the living area. Just as I was shutting the door, I heard his reply.

“Good night, Miss Landry, sleep well.”

If only that had been the case.

Chapter Five

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

Sutton

A loud crash woke me from my sleep. Out of instinct I grabbed the bat by my doorway and raced into the kitchen. In horror, I saw that Mark lying spread eagle on the floor with a nasty gash on his head. That wasn't the only surprise, either. My neighbor Earl also had a bat in his hands, it was clear what had clobbered Mark, and it looked like Earl might be going in for another swing.

"Stop!" I yelled, causing Earl to pause in his assault.

"Sutton, this here is a burglar," Earl explained. "It's called self-defense."

"No, he's not a burglar. I invited him to stay for the night!"

Earl's eyes bobbed between Mark prostrate on the floor and me standing across from him. "Oh," he murmured, slowly lowering the bat. "I must not have heard that part. Thought he snuck back in."

"Earl, put that away, and then come and help me see if you've killed him."

"I'm not dead," Mark mumbled from the floor. I watched as he raised his hands to the bump and noticed that they came away sticky with blood.

"Maybe we should call an ambulance," Earl suggested as he came back into the room without the baseball bat.

"Earl, where are your pants?"

I had just noticed that Earl was in his tighty-whitey undies and that they were in serious need of a washing. I was a little surprised that he had managed to knock Mark down so readily. Of course, Earl was swinging a Louisville Slugger and Mark was an innocent party not expecting the blow.

Sinking to my knees, I looked into Mark's eyes. I knew from the emergency room that dilated pupils or uneven dilation could indicate a concussion. "Are you alright?" I asked, hating how my voice shook a little.

Mark looked at me for a long moment. I decided that his pupils looked fairly normal, but still wondered if we should call an ambulance. Mark had sat up and seemed to be gathering his wits.

"What was that?" he asked.

"An old Louisville Slugger," Earl replied helpfully. "One of those boyfriends left a few when he moved out several years back."

Mark looked to me with a raised brow. It looked rather ridiculous with his injured forehead. "Not my old boyfriend," I answered Mark's unspoken question. "It was one of Mama's."

Earl laughed. "Sutton doesn't have boyfriends. She's a good girl. Never had any trouble out of her. You should ask my Martha."

I shook my head. "This is crazy. Mark, are you alright? I can drive you to the hospital in your car or we can call an ambulance if that makes you more comfortable."

"Never been better," Mark croaked as he forced himself to stand. At first there was a bit of wobble to his stance, but I noticed that his snark was right on point.

Grabbing some paper towels, I thrust some into Mark's hand and moved to the sink to get more of them wet. Then I guided him over to a chair and told him to sit. We needed to mop off his injury to see if he needed stitches. I also sent Earl after the first aid kit, just in case.

"Just what in the bloody hell was that about?" Mark demanded.

"Earl must not have heard me tell you that you can stay," I said, moving in close so that I could start cleaning him up. I tried to ignore the fact that I was in teeny tiny pajamas and he was in a white t-shirt and boxer briefs.

"Does Earl stay often?"

"Why would you ask that?" I paused in my ministering to his head to look down at him.

Mark's face was even with my breasts, and I noticed that he seemed rather intrigued with the fact that I don't sleep with a bra. I could feel my nipples beginning to harden and chose to ignore it.

Trying to remember what Mark had asked, I answered his question with a question. "I don't know. How often is often?"

He grunted something unintelligible that I was grateful not to have heard.

"Twice a week, tops," I added before I could stop the words from tumbling out of my mouth. I helped him up into a standing position. I tried not to think about the proximity of our bodies as we stood there in my kitchen.

Mr. Williams rolled his eyes. "No, that's not at all often."

He looked very out of place in my avocado green kitchen. I tried to tell myself it was retro, but in truth, it was just dated and ugly. I shoved a wave of embarrassment down. I had nothing to be ashamed of.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

“I hit the counter on the way down,” he said by way of explanation. “He barely nicked me with the bat.”

“Oh, well, that would explain the gash.” I replied as I started to apply pressure. The cut wasn’t nearly as bad as I had thought it would be. He wouldn’t even need stitches. I also knew that head wounds tended to bleed a lot.

“Should we call someone?” Earl came back in, scratching his left butt cheek and holding the kit in his right hand.

“Animal Control?” Mr. Williams suggested deadpan.

I pinched his arm, hard. His very firm, very muscled biceps, if we are being specific. I felt a jolt of energy zip from my fingertips straight to my lady bits. I liked touching his bare skin.

I allowed myself to take in the way his white t-shirt stretched nicely over his muscular chest. Shit, if I wasn’t careful, I would soon be drooling. Hot damn! Who would have thought that the overly stuffy Mr. Williams would have all these delicious bad boy muscles underneath those preppy clothes?

Mr. Williams didn’t even flinch when I pinched him. He didn’t wince when I cleaned up his wound, nor did he complain when I put on the bandage. He was a very good patient, but I wasn’t sure if he would accept that as a compliment or not, so I kept it to myself.

I did say, “I am terribly sorry this happened.”

“It will heal soon enough,” he said gruffly.

“But I would feel better if it hadn’t happened.”

He looked at me dryly, “Have you ever gotten a cut, Miss Landry?”

“Of course, I have,” I retorted.

“Bumps, bruises,” he continued, “scrapes or tears of any kind?”

“Yes,” I said, a little bit of irritation slipping in. What was he getting at?

“So, have I,” he said tersely. “Accidents happen.”

He was right. They certainly did happen. Although, I am not sure that getting attacked with a bat by my elderly neighbor in the wee hours of the morning was your typical run of the mill accident. However, that was another thing I chose to stay silent about.

I gathered up all of the things I had been using. I threw away the soiled items and gave the first aid kit back to Earl.

Just as I went to get Mr. Williams a glass of water and something for his head, he grabbed my arm. Again, that surge of awareness flashed through me. I was tired as fuck and beyond cranky, but shit if the man didn’t have the ability to melt my panties at the softest of touches.

“Yes?” It may have come out sharper than I intended. Mr. Williams made me extremely nervous, and we were both tired.

“Thank you,” he said under his breath, almost as if it were forced from his lungs.

“For what?” I turned, folding my arms and glaring at him. “For making you come to Otterville Falls to fetch me? Or for forcing you to wait through my entire shift? Perhaps because of the way I let you sleep on my terrible couch? Oh, I know! It’s for bringing you into my home and letting an elderly man assault you. You are very welcome, Mr. Williams.”

His lips twitched and a small smile managed to break through.

Suddenly my irritation faded as quickly as it had risen.

“You are a menace,” he said with a twinkle in his eye that I wasn’t used to being there.

“You aren’t going to be suing me and the misses, are you sir?” Earl asked shakily.

I choked back a laugh at Mr. Williams’ expression of horror and disgust. I imagined that there was nothing Earl possessed that would be the slightest interest to Mr. Williams.

“Err, no, Earl. You were just protecting Miss Landry. I understand.”

I felt a surge of kindness towards Mark. In that one sentence, he had managed to make Earl feel like a king.

Honestly, Earl was more likely trying to protect the beer that he kept in the bottom of my fridge. His wife Martha wouldn’t allow him to have any there. But I wasn’t going to interrupt this tender moment with silly things like the truth.

“You are a fine gentleman, sir!” Earl said with enthusiasm. Then, and I kid you not, Earl, wearing dingy underwear, executed a sort of half-bow salute.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

Mr. Williams froze, either in horror or disbelief. I wasn't sure. "Am I hallucinating?"

The strangled question had me fighting back a laugh. I put on a bright smile, "Earl, isn't that fantastic? Your kindness and respect have led Mr. Williams to believe that he is dreaming. Isn't that right, Mr. Williams?"

Mark looked at me like I had lost my fucking marbles, and he wouldn't be far off. I moved closer and pinched him again, loving the feel of his skin against my fingertips. Not that I was thinking about that—because I wasn't.

"Erm, yes, Earl, I am delighted?" Mark might have been slow on the uptake, but he came through like a champ.

A broad smile broke across the elderly man's face, and I could have kissed Mr. Williams right on the spot.

"Earl, it's been a long night. Why don't you get back to bed?"

Earl scratched his butt again. "I reckon you are right, Sutton. I am tired."

Lord, weren't we all. I couldn't remember a time when I was more tired.

As Earl made his way down the darkened hallway, I breathed a sigh of relief.

That was until Mr. Williams pinned me to the kitchen counter. He wasn't touching me, per se. But his arms were locked on either side of my waist, and he was leaning into me with what I would consider a threatening manner.

“Did you need something, Mr. Williams?” My voice was barely a whisper.

“You owe me.” His steel gray eyes bore into mine. The heat that was there earlier had only deepened.

I didn’t even pretend not to know what he was speaking about. I would assume that there were not many times that he had to placate members of the octogenarian set. It didn’t matter. Mark had warmed my heart and I didn’t want him spoiling it.

“It didn’t hurt you,” I muttered, feeling the tremendous source of heat coming from his body.

He lifted his hand to touch the bandage on his head, “I beg to differ.”

I used the opening to slip away, “Come and take some painkillers and then we need to get to bed.”

He stopped when I said the last word.

“What?” I turned back to him. “You should take something for the swelling, and I need to wash my hands again. I don’t want stains on my sheets.”

He blinked. “Of course you don’t. Let me come and wash up.”

Standing side by side at the sink, I felt very domesticated. The heat from his body radiated across the small space. I wanted to lean into him. Hell, I wanted to plaster myself all over him. But I behaved—barely.

Chapter Six

Sutton

“I can’t share your bed, Miss Landry.”

I rolled my eyes and repeated myself one more time. “Listen, Mr. Williams, you have a head injury. That means you need to be monitored. I voted for calling an ambulance, but you voted me down. It’s fucking late, or actually hella early, and I need to sleep. So, your option is to share the couch with me or the bed.”

Mr. Williams coughed, and I could have sworn the man blushed. “That is highly inappropriate!”

“I am not going to ravish you.” I was starting to enjoy this a little too much. “I am exhausted, and I am going to sleep. Now, get your ass in gear. We are going to bed.”

Instead of waiting for him to decide, I grabbed his hand and began to pull. To my surprise, the giant of a man followed me into my bedroom. He looked completely out of place. The mattress was fairly new on the old double bed. I had saved up for almost two years to buy it. It wasn’t top of the line or anything, but at least it wasn’t sagging in the middle.

“What side of the bed do you sleep on?” I asked, yawning.

Mr. Williams was looking everywhere but at me. “What?” he said distractedly. “Oh, um, look I am going to just go back out to the couch.”

It looked like I needed to take matters into my own hands. With brute force I pushed him down onto the mattress. “Lay down, cowboy.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

He turned toward me, and I noticed once again how close we were in my small bedroom. Clearing my throat, I climbed over to my side of the bed saying, “You need to relax and lay down.”

He let out a long-defeated sigh, so I reached up and gently pushed his shoulder until Mark laid back on the bed.

“Are you okay?” I asked hesitantly, my voice sounding louder in the dark.

“Of course, I am.” His reply in that dry tone of his somehow comforted me.

A loud yawn escaped me, and despite the fact that I had a complete hottie in my bed, I was almost dead to the world. All I wanted to do was get some sleep. Sadly, his large body took up a lot of space in my double bed. I found myself rolling into his space no matter how hard I tried to hang on to the other side.

After three attempts at hugging the edge, Mr. Williams gruffly pulled my body into his so that my head was resting on his chest, and his muscular arm surrounded me. I didn’t move, speak, or even breathe. But I did feel. I could feel every inch of him—and it was magnificent.

“Neither one of us will be getting any rest, Miss Landry, if you don’t relax. Come on, let’s get some sleep.”

Rest? Shit, I am now wide awake!

With a gulp I replied, “Yes, sir.”

I could somehow feel his smile against the top of my head.

“Smart ass,” he quipped, and I giggled. I couldn’t help it. “Relax, Sutton, get some sleep.”

“Okay,” I said softly.

“Good, no more talking.”

I worried that there was no possible way I would be able to sleep with a man as sexy and powerful as Mr. Williams in my bed. Hell, I worried that I would spontaneously combust just by his sheer sexual attraction. So, imagine my surprise when my eyes grew heavy, and I drifted off to sleep.

I was having the most incredible dream. Something was hard and hot between my thighs, and a rough masculine hand was caressing my naked breast. Moaning into my dream lover’s neck, I rocked my hips back and forth, loving the way that he made me feel, his hard body driving insistently against my softer one. He pinched my nipple, tugging on the tip and then flicking it with his finger. Shit, I loved to have my nipples played with. I ground my core harder against him and felt the familiar tingling racing up my spine.

I was seconds away from oblivion. Just a few more thrusts of my hips and... nothing.

Damn it all to fucking hell. This was the worst part of sex dreams, when you woke up before the big finish. I closed my eyes, trying to force myself back into a deeper sleep, but it wasn’t coming.

With a groan I moaned out, “No, fucking hell. I was almost there.”

A man cleared his throat and I froze.

Why was there a man in my bed? I didn't do sleepovers.

"Sutton?" The deep timbre of his voice caused goosebumps to appear across my skin.

Shit. I knew that voice. My eyes flew open, and to my complete horror, I found a pair of steel-gray eyes bearing down on me. It was then that I realized the true implications of where I was and who I was with.

No!

My tank top was pushed up and over my breasts, and my leg had been straddling Mr. Williams thigh. Great, I was humping him like a bitch in heat.

Mark cleared his throat once again and it was then I noticed how rigid he was. I was plastered all over him and he was lying there like a board. I swiftly tore away from him whilst tugging my top down. Scrambling out of the bed, I nearly fell on my ass.

The man nearly smiled. "Sutton, are you alright?"

Am I alright? Hell, no! I was all keyed up for an orgasm that wasn't coming, and I just embarrassed myself with a gorgeous man. Mortification drenched my soul. What if he thought I was trying to seduce him? What if he thinks that I am the kind of girl that brings strange men home from the bar?

"Um, yeah. I think I am going to shower now," I blurted out, turning abruptly and grabbing something out of my drawer. I didn't even know what clothes I had snatched up. For all I knew there could be a tube top and pantyhose in my hands.

"Sutton, you don't have to..." Mark began again, but I cut him off.

"Please excuse me for just a minute." I was almost to the door when he barked out.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

“For heaven’s sake, Miss Landry, stop for a moment.”

I paused, not wanting to turn around.

“Can you at the very least turn around so I am not addressing your backside?”

The ever-formal Mark Williams had said the right thing to help my embarrassment begin to fade. By being his highhanded, bossy self, I noticed that I was feeling a little better.

Turning, I raised my chin a fraction. “Did you need something?”

“I need to know that you aren’t upset. You seemed as if the hounds of hell were at your feet. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

His heated gaze reminded me that he was every bit as aroused as I had been. Fire and lust raced through my veins as I remembered the dream. Had his hand been on my breast? I immediately wanted to know what fiction was and what had been reality.

He was looking at me like I was the dessert on the all-you-can-eat buffet line.

I shuffled my foot nervously. As much as I would have liked to climb back into bed with the luscious Mr. Williams, I knew it would have been a bad idea. With a bravado I didn’t feel, I answered. “There is nothing the matter with me. I was only going to take a quick shower so that the bathroom could be free for you and Earl. Was there something you needed?”

His eyes blazed for a moment. “Yes.”

The one word was inauspicious enough, but the way his gaze raked over my body left me without any doubts as to what he wanted. However, his next words surprised me.

“We will not speak of this,” he said coldly.

I raised a brow. “We won’t speak of what?”

He clenched his jaw, which was sexy as fuck with the shadow of beard that was growing there. His eyes went to my breasts and he said in a low voice, “You know very well what I am referring to.”

I snorted. “If I had my way, we wouldn’t have spoken of it now. So, if there isn’t anything else?”

Mark frowned as he looked at my hands. “Are you wearing that?”

I had a candy cane scarf and cutoffs in my hands. I felt the color infuse my cheeks. “Um, no. Hold on.” I whipped back around to find a short denim skirt and a faded peasant blouse, along with a bra and underwear. Without a word, I darted out of the bedroom and raced to the bathroom.

I passed Earl drinking a beer at my table. He just happened to be wearing my bathrobe.

With a nod he said, “I put my things in your washer, Sutton. I hope that is okay with you.”

I smiled at the old man. He was eccentric and slightly nuts, but he had been a fixture in my life for as long as I could remember. He grinned at me with those yellowed

teeth, and I felt a surge of fondness for the old man. “Of course, Earl. You know that you are always welcome. Sit tight for a moment. After my shower I will be out in a bit to make you some breakfast.”

He nodded happily and turned to the newspaper that he likely picked up off my front porch. I knew it was only a matter of time before his wife Martha would be pounding on my door.

I hadn’t yet rinsed the conditioner out of my hair when I heard Martha screeching, “Earl, I know you are in there. Open the damn door. You always go to that whorehouse!”

Martha was everything that Earl was not. She liked to mention Mama’s previous profession as often as she could. I honestly hated her for years. But eventually, I got used to her. In her own twisted way, she did care about Earl.

I rinsed my hair and grabbed my towel. With a rushed dry job, I hurried to exit the bathroom with my towel hastily wrapped around me. It was then that I heard Mark speaking. Dear Lord! Why did he have to try and go to my defense? As sweet as it was, I knew it would only cause Martha to go off the deep end.

“You will kindly lower your voice. What kind of human being addresses people that way?”

“There are two men in here?” Martha’s shrill voice cut through Mark’s words. “Lordy-Lou, Sutton, you are just as bad as your mama.”

I stood there in my towel suddenly wishing that I had let Mark deal with things. Because not only was I dripping onto the linoleum, but I was likely giving everyone an eyeful. My towel did wrap around me, but it wasn’t super thick or plush. No doubt they could see just about everything.

Trying to play it off, I cleared my throat and said, “Good morning, Martha.” When the angry woman standing at my door in her second-best housecoat growled at me, I blurted out, “I was just grabbing a shower, but if you would like to stay for breakfast, you are welcome to.”

Mark’s jaw tightened. I could tell that he was fighting back the words that desperately wanted to come out. Eventually the words won. “How can you allow this...person, into your home? Did you not hear her call it a whorehouse?”

I winced. “Yes, I heard that. The walls of the trailer aren’t soundproof.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

Martha let out an indignant huff. “What else would you call a single woman who is entertaining two men overnight?”

“Lucky?” I ventured for amusing, but the joke fell flat for two of the three people in front of me.

Earl, however, snorted with laughter. It quickly changed it to a cough when he saw Martha’s thunderous scowl.

“I was thinking along the lines of compassionate,” Mr. Williams said through gritted teeth. “She allowed your husband to stay in the guest room because he is an elderly man that didn’t have a place to stay. At his age, a night on the street would kill him.”

Martha looked affronted. “How could you possibly know that? Earl was welcome to come home at any time. Besides, I don’t see how this is any of your business.”

I was starting to get cold and I knew that the longer I stayed out here the worse it would be. “Listen, I am going to get dressed now and then I will be fixing breakfast. If you want to stay, then do so. If not, please close the door on your way out.”

I walked back into the bathroom, turning to close the door when someone bumped me from behind. Strong arms caught my body before I fell. I heard the bathroom door closing, shutting us both inside.

“What are you doing?” I gasped, desperately holding onto my towel.

Mark released me and I looked up to see that he was staring at the bathroom ceiling.

My eyes automatically went up there as well. But I couldn't see anything wrong.

Mark, however, seemed to want to take this moment to tell me what to do. "You cannot allow these people to take advantage of you like this! Good grief, woman, this is beyond ridiculous."

That hurt a little. I knew that Martha and Earl were a bit quirky, but over the years he had become like a second family to me—at least Earl had.

"You wouldn't understand, Mr. Williams," I bit off. "Are you going to leave?"

I could see the frustration and anger still written on his face. But in his eyes, something else lingered: lust. Mark Williams wanted me.

The imp inside of me moved a fraction of an inch closer to him. "I need to put my clothes on. Are you staying or going?"

The lust in his eyes flared and I felt a recklessness race through me. In what could only be described as stupidity, I allowed the towel to drop. His gaze snapped to my breasts and hips as it dipped lower and lower.

With a muffled curse, Mr. Williams yanked open the bathroom door and slammed it behind him.

I couldn't help but feel slightly disappointed. It wasn't as if anything could have happened with Earl and Martha on the other side of the wall. But I wanted it to, and I knew that he wanted it every bit as badly as I had.

Chapter Seven

Sutton

Over breakfast, Mark glared at Martha like he wanted to knock her flat on her backside. It was endearing that he was so defensive of me. After all, we had only met the day before. That thought was completely lowering. How was it that it seemed I had known Mark for ages when, in actuality, it was merely twenty-four hours?

Am I making a mistake trusting this man?

When he had returned from his shower, he looked every bit of the impressive Wall Street mogul that he undoubtedly was. I had just finished brushing out my long dark hair after applying some light makeup.

He stared for a moment and I felt my cheeks heat before he said, “I shall arrange for us to fly home in a few hours. Would that be sufficient time for you to make arrangements?”

I felt a slight moment of panic. What did I really know about this man? “You want us to leave today? What about my job?”

“You are a wealthy young woman, Sutton. You don’t need to work for a bastard with tiny dick syndrome.”

That caused me to snort with laughter. Without a doubt, Gabriel had to have the tiniest dick around. “Mark, what about my friends? I will need to say goodbye and make some arrangements to be sure that Earl, Alice, and Reena are taken care of.”

His jaw ticked again. I wondered how irritating this all had been to him, coming to Otterville Falls and telling me personally about this inheritance. I know that this wasn’t anything like the life he left in New York.

“Listen to yourself, Sutton! Damn, do you take care of the entire town?”

I bristled at his statement. “No, just a few friends.”

“Fine,” Mark snapped. “If you wish to make arrangements for your friends, we could leave tomorrow. Will that be enough time?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

I knew it didn't make any sense to him, but this was important to me. I didn't live in a world of windfall inheritances. If I left this job and Mark Williams ended up being a scam, what was I left with? Nothing—that is what I would have.

He seemed to sense my indecision. "I am sorry. I don't need to rush you. It's only that there is so much to do and we only have thirty days. The longer we spend here, the less time you have to acclimate and prove yourself worthy of the inheritance."

"Who do I have to prove myself to?"

Mark seemed uncomfortable. "Well, the board of directors will vote on it, but the CEO has the final say."

Something about what he said rang a bell for me. "The CEO of Sutton Enterprises?"

He nodded slowly.

"Wouldn't that be you?" I asked, feeling unsure.

He blew out an exasperated breath. "I can't in good conscience tell the board that you will be coming on unless I truly believe that you can handle the responsibilities. We have hundreds of employees that need their jobs as well as thousands of clients that expect the highest standard that we can give them. I need to make sure that when I give my recommendation to the board, I am doing what is best for the company."

I could feel the fire and devotion that he had for the business. I wondered how much of that was because of my father. Hollingsworth Sutton, a man that I never knew. I

wondered what his story had been with my mother. Had he been one of her clients, or something more? There were so many questions about this new future, and not many answers.

I nodded slowly. “Okay, I can be ready as soon as possible. But I will need to do some things. This might not seem like anything to you, Mark. But there are people that depend on me here as well.”

He nodded as well. “I can understand and respect that.”

Impulsively, I moved toward him and took his hand in my own. “Shall we shake on it?”

His smile widened until it reached his eyes. “Of course. Here is to a wonderful new future.”

He didn’t say it, but the wordtogetherseemed to linger after his last statement.

I moved to pull away, but he didn’t release my hand. Instead he pulled me forward and kissed the side of my cheek. “Thank you for allowing me to stay the night and for cleaning up my cuts.”

I blushed wildly and waved him off. “It was nothing. Please don’t worry a moment about it. Let’s go out to the kitchen.”

When we entered the kitchen, Martha was sitting at the table with a nasty expression on her face. Ignoring whatever insult she slung at me under her breath, I began to mix up some pancakes. Earl chattered on about the Little League championships and Mark sat there looking like the one thing that didn’t belong at my table.

Martha sniffed in disgust. “There is too much sugar in this batter, Sutton. I swear you

are trying to give me the diabetes!”

I tried to give her a sunny smile and not contemplate yanking the plate out of the death grip that she had on it. The woman was all piss and vinegar. Mama said that one day I would come to understand Martha.

Can I just officially say today was not that day. With a calm I didn't feel, I replied, “Martha, I used the same pancake recipe that you gave me ages ago. Do you want me to try something new?”

Martha harrumphed, “It's this syrup, I don't think it's light!”

“You don't have to eat here,” Earl grumbled as he took the third pancake and smothered it with syrup.

Mark laughed. I think it surprised him just as much as the rest of us. I couldn't help the smile that formed on my face when Earl joined in. Martha sat there with her usual sour expression, cutting her pancakes to bits. It didn't matter how much she complained about them. I knew she liked my food because she always ate everything I served her.

“So,” Martha turned to Mark and asked, “are you going to shack up with this hussy?”

Mark stared at her without replying. Eventually, Martha turned back to her plate. It really was a beautiful thing to see someone put the woman in her place.

“Don't talk about Sutton that way,” Earl grumbled. “You are just a crazy old bat. Sutton's a good girl that takes care of her elders.”

Martha slammed down her fork. “Well, I never!”

Earl snorted. “Don’t I know it.”

Deciding to intervene before they really started fighting, I asked, “Would you like some more coffee, Martha? Or maybe some orange juice?”

Martha scowled before answering. “Normally I wouldn’t want to impose, but I will take some coffee. It’s not as good as the kind I make, but it will have to do.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

“It’s the same damn brand, Martha,” Earl added as he snatched up his own cup to be refilled.

“There is nothing wrong with the coffee, or the breakfast that Miss Landry has provided, madame.”

We all turned to look at Mark, who had spoken to Martha without raising his head.

“Furthermore, if you continue to make disparaging remarks about Miss Landry, her home, or the breakfast that she so kindly provided you, I will personally see that you are removed from the premises.”

Well, hot damn. I normally wasn’t one for allowing a man to speak for me, but I loved the way that Mark had laid down the law.

Martha looked from Earl to me and then back again to Earl. “Are you just going to let that man speak to me like that? I am your wife!”

Earl grinned but didn’t say a word. The rest of the meal was pretty uneventful, but that didn’t matter, because for once, Martha was quiet. It was a full-on miracle.

I might have fallen for Mark just the tiniest bit at that moment.

Chapter Eight

Sutton

“Must you follow me every minute of the day?”

I don’t know why it didn’t occur to me before, but Mark did not indicate when he said I was free to make arrangements that he would be with me every blasted moment. Don’t get me wrong, he wasn’t rude or disrespectful in any way.

No, it was far worse than that. He was helpful and so devastatingly handsome with his day’s growth of beard and yesterday’s clothes that I couldn’t help but make a complete fool out of myself.

“If I wasn’t here, who would have picked you up when you fell off the sidewalk?” Mark answered with a quirk of his lips.

“I didn’t fall,” I corrected him. “The sidewalk was being elusive.”

A full-blown smirk was beginning to form as he answered me. “What about when you gouged your eye with the straw?”

The injured eye was still throbbing a bit.

“That was intentional.”

He laughed, and dear Lord that was a sound I would never be sick of. I couldn’t stay mad at him because he hadn’t done anything wrong. It wasn’t his fault that everywhere we went the people of Otterville Falls couldn’t keep their eyes off of him—mostly the women.

Alice and Reena fell all over themselves when we checked in on them. First off, they both hugged him. I might have enjoyed the panicked look that he got when Reena gave him an extra nuzzle with her cleavage. Next, they ushered him into their home as if he were the president or God.

By the time we left, Mark had arranged for the local market to deliver their groceries weekly. You would have thought that the man killed a fire-breathing dragon on their behalf.

From there we went to Martha and Earl's, which was located next to the vicarage. Sadly, there we ran into a bit of trouble with Father Montgomery.

"Devil's Spawn! You aren't welcome here!" That was all the good father got out before Mark had him pinned up against the church's brick wall.

In a voice that was backed with steel, Mark threatened, "You are supposed to be a man of God—act like it. I suggest you change your approach to Miss Landry."

I tugged on Mark's sleeve, "Maybe we should go?"

"Maybe he needs to explain to his Maker why he treats perfectly good people like shit," Mark said in what could only be described as a threatening way.

"I am pretty sure that you aren't supposed to say shit at church," I answered, not knowing what else to say.

Mark turned to me. Those gray eyes seemed to see more than I wanted to share. Finally, he said, "We aren't in church. We are outside."

"Everywhere God's light touches is his church," Father Montgomery sneered.

"What happens when the sun goes down?" I asked, mostly to see Father Montgomery fume.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

Mark smiled at me and my stomach flip-flopped.

“Let’s just go,” I said somewhat breathlessly. Clearing my throat, I added for Father Montgomery, “He’s just not worth it.”

Father Montgomery clearly had a death wish. The next thing I knew he was spouting off something that sounded like scripture. It was all about the men of God and harlots in the church.

Before Mark could take him out, I whispered, “You can’t kill the vicar.”

“You are mistaken.” Mark’s tone was deadly calm when he added, “He is just a man, and not a good one at that.”

Sadly, Father Montgomery wasn’t the only one to throw insults at me. There were several others, including Martha and Gabriel, a fact which didn’t set well with Mark. When we were back at the trailer, Mark sat me down in the living room.

“They are abusive to you, and yet you seem to be oblivious to the insult,” he said with disgust. “At first, I thought your intelligence was lacking.”

That hurt a little.

“Has that impression changed?”

He gave one short and succinct nod. “I’ve realized that you do these things out of the kindness of your heart. Heaven knows why, but you do care.”

“They aren’t that bad,” I protested because, honestly, they weren’t. I knew abuse. One didn’t grow up with an addict and a prostitute and not know abuse.

Mark looked at me incredulously. “Martha criticizes every last thing you do. Earl takes advantage of your generous nature. Your boss treats you like the gum underneath his shoe. Alice and Reena use you much as a hired companion would. And the preacher? He should be horsewhipped. Why do you feel you deserve so little, Miss Landry?”

I didn’t like the question, or the pity that I could see in his eyes.

“People are just a little wary of me,” I mumbled. “My mother did a lot of people wrong.”

Mark leaned into me, tracing my jawbone with the tip of his finger before he said quietly, “You are not your mother.”

I drew back, my body tense. “I know that.”

He watched me with knowing eyes. “Do you?”

It was a good question. One that I didn’t have an answer to.

Mark obviously wasn’t finished. “Explain to me why the grocer wouldn’t look you in the eye.”

I was hoping he hadn’t seen that. “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Sutton.” My name was almost a plea on his lips. “What in the fuck happened to you?”

I swallowed but didn't answer. As much as I liked Mark, I wasn't ready to share pasts and friendship bracelets.

"Who takes care of you, Sutton?" he inquired softly.

I pushed away from him, needing some distance. "I don't need anyone to take care of me. I have taken care of myself most of my life and got along just fine."

"Do you want to know what I see?" Mark challenged, grabbing my wrist and pulling me close to him so that I could smell the mint he had eaten after lunch.

"Will you let me go?" I pressed against his rock-hard chest, but he didn't move.

"I see an independent woman that works long hours at a thankless job."

Okay, that doesn't seem to be too bad.

"Everyone needs to work, Mr. Williams," I retorted flippantly.

"I am not finished," he took my hands and pulled them into his chest so that I couldn't escape. "I can see the little girl that was so desperate to be loved that she allows strangers to abuse her kind heart."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

“Fucking asshole. Are you going to tell me that you are a psychiatrist as well?”

I yanked my hands, trying to get free, but Mark held firm.

He growled, low in his throat. “Shit, I didn’t mean to make you cry.” His long-tapered fingers brushed the tears I hadn’t known were falling from my cheeks.

“They are all I have.” I didn’t even know that I was going to answer until the words were out of my mouth. But as I spoke them, I knew that I believed them. “Otterville Falls might look like shit to you, but it is my home, and these people are my family. So, you can take your inheritance and your opinions and shove it up your ass!”

A pounding at the door caused Mark to release me. Wiping my tears away, I opened the door to see Martha and Earl standing there.

“We’ve just come from the church,” Earl said almost apologetically.

“What is your point?” I snapped, immediately feeling bad until Martha spoke.

“The good Lord doesn’t want whores in his chapel,” Martha said darkly.

And something snapped inside of me. “The good Lord welcomed everyone into his fold. The whores, the sinners, the sick and infirm. You are sadly misinformed, Martha! Fuck, they let you go in and you are the most judgmental person I have ever met!”

Martha had never heard me talk back. Her mouth opened, jaw dropping.

A massive smile broke out across Earl's face. "Well, it's about time. Well said, Sutton."

I whipped my head around to see Mark had followed. "I don't want to see you any longer. I will sign whatever I need to and take the lesser inheritance."

Mark eyed me for a moment before answering, "No."

"No?" I repeated dumbly.

"No," he confirmed. "You are coming to the city. You have hidden yourself away here for far too long."

"I am obviously not up to your standard," I quipped.

Mark shook his head. "No, they aren't up to yours. Being poor isn't a crime, Sutton. But being cruel, that should be."

Then, to my surprise, he closed the door on Martha and Earl's surprised faces.

Chapter Nine

Sutton

I knew I looked like a kid at the candy store, but I couldn't help myself. Obviously, I had never flown on a private jet before, because I had never flown before this day—private or otherwise.

Mark and I were having a small disagreement. When I started to lug my old duffel bag out of the closet to pack, he promptly told me to put it away. 'We won't be needing any of your... clothes.' It was the way he said it that really pissed me off. He

might as well have blurted out that we weren't taking the garbage with us. I couldn't even accuse him of being pervy or anything because his nose was clearly out of joint as he looked down at me.

Just when I was starting to think that maybe Mark was actually a nice guy underneath the prick demeanor that usually rears its head, he goes ahead and makes a comment like this.

He is back to dickhead status in my books.

"Sutton, could you stop tapping your fingernails?" he asked impatiently.

I followed his glare down to where my chipped cherry polish was indeed clacking against the armrest.

Make that dickhead ass-muncher.

"Miss Landry, would you like some champagne?"

I looked up to see the pretty stewardess offering me some champagne.

"Not now, Amanda," Mark answered, shooing her away.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

“Did you seriously just speak for me?” I asked, incredulously.

Mark barely glanced up when he replied, “You shouldn’t drink with the anti-nausea medicine you took to settle your stomach.”

Okay, so maybe he had a point, but I wasn’t about to let some man come into my life and take all of my decisions away from me. I unbuckled my belt and went after her.

“Um, hi,” I said, giving her a little wave.

The stewardess eyed me with some trepidation. “Yes, Miss Landry.”

“What are you doing, Sutton?”

I ignored the way his deep voice had my insides melting as he came up to stand behind me. I could feel the warmth from his body and refused to give into the automatic response of leaning into his hard frame. Visions of waking up in his arms danced through my mind, but I promptly squashed them.

I smiled at the girl. “You don’t need to call me Miss Landry. My name is Sutton. Did I hear Mark say that your name is Amanda?”

The girl nodded, looking from me to Mark and back to me again.

“Lovely.” I beamed at her. “Well, Amanda, I am nervous. This is my first flight.”

Mark’s hand shot out and rested at my hip.

When I turned to glare at him, he glared back, saying, “Turbulence.”

Turbulence, my ass.

It was a little bit harder to ignore him now that I could feel the heat from his fingers and palm through my clothes. But I did my best to pretend that he wasn’t there.

Amanda’s face softened as she responded, “Flying can be nerve-wracking if you aren’t used to it. My mom doesn’t care for it at all.”

I nodded. “Where are you from?”

Mark’s hand tightened as he growled low in his throat.

Amanda looked nervous again as she answered, “Georgia.”

My smile widened. “I thought I heard some southern country girl in there. Amanda, I was wondering if I could get a glass of that champagne you offered earlier. I am hoping that it might settle my serves.”

“Of course, Miss Landry.” She turned around and promptly poured me a glass. Then she bravely looked to Mark and asked, “Would you care for any, Mr. Williams?”

He must have shaken his head, because Amanda passed me my glass and then fled into the bathroom.

“You scared her,” he said wryly.

“I am hardly terrifying,” I replied, turning around and seeing that he was indeed very close to where I was standing. “If you don’t mind.”

I motioned for him to move. He stood there for a moment longer than was comfortable and then he sighed and moved back to where we were sitting.

“I still think the drink is a bad idea,” he said with his usual arrogant grace.

“I still think you don’t have any right to dictate what I can and can’t do in life. And I don’t want you getting upset with Amanda,” I added before taking a large gulp of champagne.

His eyes were locked on my face as he replied through gritted teeth, “Oh, I am not upset with Amanda. She was only doing her job.”

I lifted my chin. “Good. Will you please let me pass?”

My brow wrinkled in confusion when he didn’t move. I knew full well that he was mad as hell at me for defying him. But who was he to say if I could have a drink or not?

A muscle ticked in his cheek, but eventually, he moved back a fraction so that I could pass.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

My body brushed against his hard one as I crossed in front of him, and I held my breath so that I didn't make any embarrassing sounds that I would come to later regret.

A moment later, Mr. Williams returned with a glass of his own and the bottle.

He motioned to my now empty cup. "Would you like more?"

Hell yes. I raised my glass, and he filled it up again before sitting beside me and filling his own.

"Sutton, we need to talk," he started slowly, and I knew a lecture was right around the corner.

"Was it that big of a deal if I have a drink?" I blurted out. "I don't have a drinking problem if that is what you are thinking. Just because I work in a bar..."

His eyes flared. "Worked—past tense, and I don't think you have a drinking problem."

My head tipped to the side. "Then why did you make such a big deal of me not having the champagne?"

"Some new fliers get motion sick despite the meds you have already taken. When you add alcohol it only increases the chances of nausea. I only wished to protect you from that."

“Oh.” I felt my cheeks pink. “I never get sick! I have been on the Tilt-A-Whirl eight times in a row and didn’t even walk funny.”

He looked at me like I had just started speaking in Mandarin.

Sighing, I continued, “What I meant to say was that you should have asked me before making the decision first.”

“Interesting you should be so defensive when I try and protect you, but you allow the idiots of Otterville Falls to dictate who you are and the place you hold in their town.”

Heat and embarrassment washed over me. “I don’t expect someone like you to understand someone like me, Mr. Williams. We come from two different worlds.”

His eyes sharpened. “Indeed, we do.”

“I don’t need to defend myself.” The words dropped hotly from my lips.

“I didn’t ask you to,” he said just as sharply.

I hated how calm he was. Especially when I felt like he was judging me. Mr. Lofty-Tofty Williams was looking down on the poor peasant and picking out all of my flaws.

I unbuckled my belt again. “This was a mistake!”

“Where are you going?” he snapped.

“For a walk,” I replied just as we went through some real turbulence. Suddenly, I lost my footing and toppled over. I would have hit the corner of the table had Mr. Williams not acted.

He pulled me against his hard chest. His heart was racing as rapidly as mine was.

“I don’t think poorly of you, Sutton.” His words were a harsh whisper in my ear. “But I think that you think poorly of yourself, and it infuriates me.”

I struggled to break free, but his arms tightened around me.

“There is no place for you to go.”

I stilled, not sure what I wanted. I loved being so close to him, and yet my brain didn’t function as well when all I could think of was his delicious body. I tried to buy some time. “I just need a moment to think.”

The next words seemed to be wrenched from him. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Is this an apology, from Mr. Williams?

“Thank you,” I whispered back.

The plane went through some more turbulence, and I clutched onto his suit jacket.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

“Mr. Williams,” I gasped, “I need to get to the bathroom.”

He glanced down at me just as the champagne made its way back up my throat.

I gasped in horror as vomit coated his shirtfront. It was only seconds before the next wave hit me. In a flash, Mr. Williams carried me to the small bathroom that Amanda had thankfully vacated. There I proceeded to throw up every ounce of liquid that I had drunk.

He gently washed my face and soothed my tears. I didn’t care for vomiting. It had too many bad memories attached to it.

He removed his white button-down and t-shirt, exposing his drool-worthy chest. But I felt so horrible I could hardly enjoy it. Amanda retrieved his clothes from his emergency carry-on and helped me change into one of his t-shirts and boxers while he cleaned himself up.

Then she gave me two little white pills that she said would help with nausea.

I must have thanked her a hundred times. The pills had an immediate effect, and I wanted to lie down. Mr. Williams scooped me into his arms and opened the door to a small bedroom. Placing me down against the pillows, he brushed a finger across my lashes.

“Why the tears, little one?” he asked gently—too gently to be the Mark Williams I knew.

I must have been dreaming, because there was no other way I would have been so honest with him in my response. I always told the truth about Mama, but I was never one for details. And yet I found myself saying to Mark, “Sometimes Mama would be too sick from the drugs. When she started puking, the bad men came looking for me. It only took once to learn that being dead was better than being found.”

I thought I might have heard his sharply inhaled breath before everything went dark.

Dreams about my mother and the earlier years plagued my sleep until finally I jerked myself awake. At first, I didn’t recognize the space I was sleeping in. But as my vision began to clear, I saw that Mark was sitting on the bed of the private plane next to me.

“How are you feeling?” he asked gruffly.

My mouth tasted like the inside of a dumpster and my head felt like it was filled with cotton.

“Fine,” I replied.

His lips twitched a little as he turned around to grab a bottled water. Carefully unscrewing the cap, he handed it to me. “Don’t drink it too fast,” he warned.

“Yes, Daddy,” I quipped.

Mark wasn’t amused.

Like an obedient child, I took the drink and pressed it to my lips. The cool liquid felt great, and I drank a good amount before handing it back to him.

Mark replaced the cap and set it behind him. Then he turned to look at me.

I felt uncomfortable with him staring. “What?”

He pushed himself back onto the bed so that we were both sitting against the top with our legs outstretched. My legs were bare whereas his were encased in his perfectly cut trousers. We were as different as tea and tomatoes.

Chapter Ten

Mark

Horror gripped my stomach as I thought about what Sutton had said: ‘They came after me.’ The phrase rolled around in my mind over and over again as Sutton slept. The woman slept much like she lived, with reckless abandon. Even sprawled out with her mouth open, Sutton was beautiful.

A part of me wanted to wake her and asked what had happened.

Did she know any of their names?

I wanted to kill the bastards with my bare hands. It sickens me to think that they would even think of touching her. I looked over to where she lay sleeping. Her dark hair was spread across the white sheets. Her face was softer, and she appeared much younger lying there in one of my button-down business shirts.

A part of me liked seeing her in my clothes.

And that alone scared the fucking shit out of me. The last thing I needed to do was become attached to her. I wasn’t there to play house with the girl. In truth, she legally now owned fifty percent of the stocks and I was at a disadvantage at forty-nine. Technically I could see the board’s vote of one percent, but I didn’t want to have to get into it. Shit, I didn’t want to get into the legalities with her.

I don't trust her. Fuck, I don't trust anyone.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

The last man I put my complete faith and trust into promised that I would be his sole successor. Then on his death bed he told me that he was giving half the company to an illegitimate daughter he had just barely come to know about. I was angry as hell, but I couldn't let him see it. I had wanted to put Sutton in her place and ensure that she didn't come back to New York with me.

But that was before I met her. Now I didn't know what to think.

Hollingsworth had been more of a father than mine had ever been. Despite the fact that I attended the finest of schools and lived in well-appointed surroundings, I never knew what it was like to be loved or cared for. My father cared about appearances, little more than that. He wasn't there when I graduated top of my class, nor was he there for any of the other major events in my life.

Shit, I didn't even know about my half-brother until he showed up one day. My family was ten shades of fucked up. All that mattered to my dad was knowing the right people in the right places. He had fucking loved when I went to work with Hollingsworth., a man worth billions. My father suddenly wanted to be in my life.

I had to shut that shit down immediately. I couldn't allow my father to ruin the best thing to ever happen to me.

Hollingsworth smoothed the way for me, and for that I will always be grateful. The man was a powerhouse of energy, always looking for the next acquisition, and he knew contracts like the back of his hand. When he became ill, it was a shock for everyone. It was hard to believe that such a strong man could have cancer.

As the disease ravaged his body, Hollingsworth confessed that he might have a daughter. A woman had tried to contact him years ago, but Hollingsworth had brushed it off as a gold digger. Why he had waited until that moment to hire a private investigator, I will never know. But I do know that the moment he found out Sutton's name he was hellbent on finding her.

Sutton is wrong for the job, for New York, and definitely for me. I don't believe in romance or fairy tale endings. I sure as shit have no business being a family man.

No matter how much her sweetness tries to pull me in, I have to be strong. I will only hurt her in the end. I don't do love.

Sutton mumbled something in her sleep, and I turned to see her slide a hand under her cheek. Something stirred in my gut, and for once it wasn't my dick. Sutton was gorgeous. There was no doubt about it. But she also has something more, an intrinsic quality that I couldn't describe. Don't get me wrong. I still wanted to fuck her into next week. However, the desire to protect her was almost just as strong, if not more.

Knowing that this wasn't getting me anywhere, I sank down on one of the white leather chairs in the small bedroom and watched her. The last thing I wanted was for her to get sick in her sleep.

The hours passed rather quickly. Amanda knocked on the bedroom door to alert us that they were preparing for landing. It was then that she awoke. Those eyes, blurry with sleep, were so trusting. Nobody had ever looked at me like that before. It felt like a punch to the gut.

Floundering, I said something inane and reached for some water. I watched the delicate bones in her neck expand and contract as she drank. Fuck, even that was mesmerizing. I needed a drink, something far stronger than champagne. I was fucking screwed.

Sutton sat up against the top of the bed, and I joined her so that our legs were splayed out before us. She was all silky thighs and adorable toes, even with the chipped nail polish. We couldn't have been more different—like chalk and cheese.

“Are we almost there?” Her voice was raspy from being unused.

“We are preparing for landing. It shouldn't be long now. Once the plane touches down, Amanda volunteered a pair of her own yoga pants so that you don't need to leave the plane in my boxers.”

Sutton flushed. “You do realize that if I had been allowed to bring my own clothing, this never would have happened.”

I pursed my lips. Sutton didn't own anything that wasn't short, ripped, or tie-dyed. She couldn't go around that way. No one would take her seriously.

“Sutton, you are a very wealthy woman now. You have to look the part. It is imperative that people see you for who you are.”

She bit her lower lip, and I threatened my dick that he might never see action again if he so much as twitched.

“I don't think there is anything wrong with who I am now.”

The hurt in her voice cut me like a knife.

“You don't understand,” I said, trying to explain myself better. “People in the city, they would eat you for breakfast. You're too nice. They don't call it the corporate jungle for nothing, Sutton. If you want others to respect you, then you have to start with yourself. I have booked the next two days for you to go to the spa. My personal shopper, Nico, will be waiting to gather your sizes and color preferences. He will

know what's appropriate. Nico can be a bit demanding, but he is also the best in the city."

Sutton blinked in confusion. "What could I possibly need to do at a spa for two days?"

Don't think about her naked.

Don't think about her naked.

Fuck, now all I could think about was naked Sutton getting massaged, waxed, teased, and pampered. "Plenty," I said shortly.

The plane's wheels touched down, and Amanda brought Sutton a pair of her leggings from her personal luggage. I had offered Amanda five hundred dollars for the leggings, but the girl had refused. She said that she was more than happy to help Miss Landry. Maybe there was something to her southern charm after all.

After donning the leggings and slipping on her flip-flops, we exited the plane and entered the town car that was waiting for our arrival. It didn't take long until we were on our way to my apartment. I lived in a penthouse suite overlooking Central Park.

I knew that Sutton would need to find her own place eventually. But for now, I would put her up in my guest bedroom.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

In the back of my mind, I was chastising myself. I had planned on taking her to a hotel. But she had offered me a place in her home, and I didn't like the idea of her being alone. I was certain that this extreme desire to see her safe would fade with time.

Obviously, my male instincts were kicking in because of how Sutton allowed that shitty town to dump on her. It was nothing personal. At least, that is what I kept telling myself.

As we walked into the apartment building, Sutton gasped. "You live here?"

The doorman tried to hide his smile as he greeted me. I gave him a slight nod, the same greeting I had given the man since he started. As he gathered my mail together, Sutton beamed at him.

"Hello," she said brightly.

The older man blinked. "Well, hello."

"My name is Sutton," she said, thrusting her hand out for a handshake.

The man looked from me and then back at Sutton. "My name is Frank. It is a pleasure to meet you, Sutton."

I have lived in this damn building for ten years. How did I not know the man's name? The doorman always greeted me as 'Mr. Williams' and I gave him a curt nod.

Wrapping my arm around her waist, I started to guide her toward the elevator. I needed to intervene before she did something drastic like invite him over for Sunday dinner.

“Sutton.” My tone was firm. “We need to get going.”

She frowned at me, a furrow in the center of her winged brows. “I was just getting to know Frank.”

The older gentleman stood a little taller at her use of his first name. He cleared his throat and asked, “How are you, Mr. Williams?”

I muttered something akin to fine. I was feeling irritated that Sutton was once again disturbing my perfectly ordered life. I wasn’t used to speaking with everyone we came in contact with. Hell, I didn’t speak directly to Frank or Amanda unless I needed something. They weren’t friends. They were necessary individuals that helped my life run smoothly—nothing more.

“You will have to excuse him, Frank.” Sutton leaned over to whisper something to the doorman.

He chuckled and nodded before wishing her a wonderful evening. Sutton trotted over to me once again and looked up with big eyes. “What now, Mr. Williams?”

“Mark,” I corrected her instinctively. If she could be on a first name basis with my stewardess and doorman, she could sure as fuck remember to call me by my first name.

Chapter Eleven

Sutton

“I’ve created a monster,” Nico chirped happily as we tore through boutique after boutique.

Nico (Mark’s personal shopper) and I were getting along like a house fire. He was unlike any man I had ever met before. His fashion sense was on point and he was funny as hell. A little over five foot nine and slender, Nico was terribly attractive, and I was intimidated by him at first.

He marched straight up to me and told me that he would kill to have my tits and I knew that there was a bosom friend hiding behind all that New York polish and sass. I had convinced Nico to come along on my spa days since Mark insisted that he had too much work to do. After I got there and found out that you spend the majority of the time naked, I was thankful that Mark was at his office and not watching me get every surface of my body polished and glazed.

Don’t even get me started on that Brazilian wax. That motherfucker hurt worse than having a toenail ripped off. Then they wanted to bleach my butthole. Well, a girl from Otterville Falls has to put her foot down somewhere.

Nico, on the other hand, went for the deluxe anal whitening and about laughed his ass off when I asked him if he was a secret porn star.

I am only partially kidding.

Nico and I had just returned from another full afternoon of shopping when Mark saw all the bags and uttered, “It’s about time. Did you leave anything in the shops?”

“A few things,” I replied with a grin. At first, I hadn’t wanted to buy anything because I felt like I was taking Mark’s money. It made me feel dirty in a prostitute kind of way. But after Nico explained to me that we would be using credit cards with my name that attached to my bank account, I may have gone a little crazy.

The day we had returned from our spa visit, Mark had stared at me for a good three minutes before even uttering one word. I wanted to think that was a good thing. That he liked how satiny smooth I looked. How my long, nearly black hair shone like never before. I felt like a fucking goddess.

Nico grinned at Mark unabashed. “Mr. Williams, dressing Sutton is a pleasure. Everything she puts on is fantastic. I wish all of my clients had her figure.

Mark’s jaw tightened, and I could feel his eyes assessing my body. Why did I want him to find me attractive? Sure, he was handsome and completely fuckable. But he was also a self-righteous prick. Ever since we arrived in New York it was ‘Do this,’ ‘You are doing that wrong,’ ‘Don’t use that fork,’ ‘Don’t curse,’ and I’d swear that even my breathing irritated him.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

My head tipped back instinctively, and I hardened my eyes. My words were directed toward Nico, but my gaze never left Mark's face.

"Thank you, Nico. You have been a lifesaver. I wouldn't have known which direction to turn without your eye for style."

Nico grinned widely. "Not all of your instincts were horrible, darling, just most of them."

Momentarily distracted, I turned back to Nico with a laugh, "I know, no tie-dye!"

Nico shuddered. "I can't imagine where you got the notion that it would be appropriate outside of summer camp."

He rubbed his arms as if warding off a chill or a horde of tie-dye apparel.

"No worries, my friend," I said as I leaned in conspiratorially, "I will protect you from the fluorescent colors of the world."

Nico and I dissolved into laughter, but Mark only seemed to stiffen and withdraw further. After an uncomfortable moment, Nico excused himself and I began to lug the bags that we had brought into Mark's guest bedroom.

With a grunt, Mark began to help me with the things that Nico had left behind. Dumping everything on the bed, I began to pull things out of the bags. I noticed when Mark stilled as I carried a handful of the softest silk panties known to womankind out of a bag. Nico had told me about them, saying that I would never want to go back to

what I had been wearing.

He had sent over a pair this morning along with a note stating that we would be getting the rest of my lingerie while we were out today. When I slipped them on after my shower, I'd have sworn that they felt like I was wearing nothing at all.

Mark cleared his throat. "I can just leave you to it, then."

I looked up. "What did you want to do for dinner tonight?"

I was hungry, that was all. I wasn't fishing for offers or trying to play house with the man. But I could tell that he wasn't taking it as innocently as it had been intended.

"We will look for a suitable place for you to live as soon as possible," he began, and I felt each word like a soft blow. "Now that you have your wardrobe and hygiene sorted it, shouldn't be a problem to get you into something suitable."

My fucking hygiene sorted. What the actual fuck?

Mark was acting like a total douchebag. I had zero patience to deal with that bullshit.

"I can go to a hotel," I said through clenched teeth. "I am sorry if I got in your way."

Mark frowned. "No, there isn't any reason for it."

I felt my blood heat. "The last thing I would want is to be a burden to you, Mr. Williams." I may have drawn out his name in a particularly snarky fashion. But he started it.

"I asked you to call me Mark," his voice was deceptively low, and I knew that I had gotten to him.

Was it petty of me? Of course it was, but I hated that he always seemed to have the upper hand, and just when I decided he isn't an arrogant ass he turns around and says things like 'hygiene sorted.'

"Look, I don't want to argue with you," I lied through my teeth. I was itching for a fight, something to take the edge off of all this pent-up emotion between us. I was scared that I would either break down and stab him with something or kiss the shit out of him.

The first option scared me less, and that is saying something. I was fumbling with the drawer that I had just opened when I felt him right against my back. I wanted to bark out something akin to personal space. But the truth was that it felt nice—calming even.

His deep voice had me thankful that I wasn't facing him, because my eyes closed at the sound rolling over my body.

"I didn't mean to be insulting," he said gruffly.

"I am not offended," I muttered back as I finally managed to slam the door shut again. I tried to maneuver around him, but he wasn't having it.

"Then why won't you look at me?"

Because I don't want you to see the truth in my eyes. Because I spend half my time in your presence feeling like I am less than a piece of shit underneath your shoe.

I didn't answer. I couldn't trust my voice not to betray the emotion that I was feeling. This time I bumped him with my body, and he moved away, but we both knew he didn't want to.

“I’m—” He cleared his throat. “I am sorry.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:51 am

This surprised me. Mark didn't seem like the type of man that apologized to anyone. My gaze traveled up to see him running his hands through his hair.

"I am not used to living with someone," he rambled on. "I was worried when you and Nico were gone for so long. It's not that I want you to leave. It's just complicated."

I finally met his gaze, "What do you mean? You just said that I needed to get a place of my own."

"Is that what you want?" Mark asked harshly as his eyes searched my face for Lord knows what.

No.

I didn't want to be alone. I had spent far too much of my life being lonely. The last thing that I wanted was to be dropped off in an empty apartment in this massive city to sit by myself.

"Is that what you want?" Mark repeated. "Do you want to find an apartment?"

Be brave, Sutton, I tried to tell myself. I could stand up for anyone I felt needed it except for me. There would always be Earl's and Martha's, and I would always want to save them.

But who would be there to save me?

"N—no," my reply was soft, but he heard it. For a second, I thought that he was

about to reach out and caress my face. Surely I was mistaken, because this man didn't have a tender bone in his body. But then I remembered the way he had held me on the plane.

Maybe Mark wasn't as much of a prick as I thought he was. The thought popped into my mind. Maybe this is all he knows, just like all you know how to be is you.

That thought kept me up most of the night, and by morning I had resolved that if Mark would change me for the better then I was sure as shit going to change him as well.

Chapter Twelve

Sutton

The next morning, I turned to Mark as we were leaving the building and said, "I need just one second."

I could feel the heat of his gaze on my back as I made my way over to Frank. Slipping my hand into one of the pockets of my new coat I pulled out the horehound candy. Nico and I had stumbled upon a little candy shop, and after a great deal of begging, he finally let me go inside.

Nico said that sugar was the Devil's treat and that I needed to stay away from all carbs. I thought he was kidding until he started making signs of the cross as I proceeded to purchase almost one of everything in the shop. I loved candy, especially chocolate. Being able to walk into a candy store and buy whatever I wanted proved too much of a temptation.

Frank smiled, his eyes twinkling as he took the small bag from my hands, "What do we have here?"

“I found some of the horehound that you like, Frank. And for the record, I did try it and I hate to say that I have tasted medicine that I would rather eat.”

Frank’s deep laugh filled the lobby. “My grandfather used to bring us horehound. Back in those days, candy wasn’t easy to come by and we would wait weeks for his visit for a taste of the hard treat.”

I shook my head with a smile, saying, “I hope this lives up to the memory.” I looked over to see Mark watching us with a strange look on his face. “I had better get a move on, Frank. It’s my first day at the office and I am a little nervous.”

Frank eyed my new tailored suit and coat. My unruly hair was in as sleek French twist and my feet were encased in a pair of shoes that likely cost more than my trailer back home. That made me think of Earl, and my heart squeezed painfully. I hoped that the elderly gentleman was doing okay without me.

“You look like a million dollars, Miss. I have no doubt that you will knock ’em dead.”

A huge smile broke across my face as I replied, “That was just what I needed to hear. Have a nice day, Frank!”

I waved cheerily and walked over to where Mark was waiting for me at the door. He gave Frank his signature nod and escorted me out onto the sidewalk where the driver was waiting to take us into the office.

Mark’s large hand covered mine. “If you project confidence, that is what others will see.”

I hadn’t realized that I was rubbing my hands together. It was a nervous habit that was a sure tell sign.

“Sorry,” I muttered.

He put a finger underneath my chin and lifted it so that our eyes met. “Sutton, you are Hollingsworth Sutton III’s daughter. You have billions of dollars at your fingertips and wield a great deal of power. You have the upper hand. Keep your chin up and your shoulders back; don’t let the sharks sense your fear. First impressions are critical, but I have confidence in you.”

Have I mentioned that any time I have ever really wanted something it all goes to shit?

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

I didn't even make it all the way into the building before I tripped in the doorway. I would have hit the floor if it hadn't had been for Mark's quick actions. Wrapping his arms around my waist, he steadied me until I was ready to walk again.

Only this time I ran into a woman rushing by with a full tray of hot coffee. Thankfully, we were both wearing our coats and most of the liquid from the four grande lattes landed on the floor.

I apologized profusely as the tall blonde eyed me with trepidation. I had a feeling she wouldn't have been as gracious if Mark hadn't been with me. Her eyes were cold and narrowed.

"No harm was done." Her sugary sweet voice seemed as fake as her hair color.

"Please excuse us, Marilyn," Mark said shortly, grabbing my elbow and yanking me closer to his side.

I stumbled after him, still offering my apologies until they were cut off by the closing of the elevator door.

I glanced up at Mark and noted the way his jaw seemed to be clenched. There was a vein that was ticking near his temple at a frantic pace. The moment the elevator reached the top floor, Mark grabbed my arm again and escorted me down the hallway.

"Ouch, you are hurting me," I muttered.

Okay, so he wasn't really, but I was getting irritated at his high-handed attitude.

His grip tightened. "I am just seeing to your safety."

He stopped in front of a beautiful woman with golden brown hair and black, smart glasses, "Bethany, this is Ms. Landry. Sutton, this is your personal assistant Bethany. She will go over your schedule with you every morning and help you to become familiar with our business and clients."

I beamed at Bethany. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Bethany eyed me warily, giving me a lukewarm welcome. "Thank you."

Mark leaned over and whispered in my ear, "You do remember when we talked about first impressions?"

I was feeling overheated by his nearness. I wanted to lean into him and snuggle up against his rock-hard chest. I took the opportunity to smell the sexy familiar scent of cologne mixed with raw masculinity.

"Sutton!"

"Yes sir," I blurted out quickly, not even sure what I was agreeing with.

"Good." He pulled back and released his death grip on my arm. "I will see you at lunchtime."

Without another word, Mark walked away from where I was standing at Bethany's desk. I tried not to think about how abandoned I was feeling watching his retreat from me.

“Ms. Landry?”

“Hmmm?”

I wasn't paying attention; my eyes were glued to Mark's ass and I wondered how he could make a pair of slacks look so delicious.

“Ms. Landry!”

The voice was more insistent this time, and I turned to see Bethany looking at me with an inscrutable expression.

“I beg your pardon.” I flushed, asking, “Where is my office?”

Bethany didn't seem overly impressed with me. But that was nothing that I hadn't faced a million times before. I watched as she got up and walked around the desk. She was sickly thin, and for a brief moment, I wanted to ask her if she was against carbs as well. But something told me that she didn't want to be my friend.

“Your office is just this way, Ms. Landry.”

I felt her eyes on the spilled coffee covering my coat, but I didn't offer any explanation. She led me to an office just down from Mark's. It was spacious and decorated in soft muted tones. The desk was a pale maple and there was a wall of windows overlooking the city.

“This is a lovely space.” I breathed the words as I walked in and took a seat in the chair behind the desk. “Who was here before I was?”

Bethany's nose wrinkled. “This was Mr. William's office until he took over your father's corner office.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

“I see.” My tone was cool as I stood to remove my coat. There was a new laptop on the desk as well as a large monitor for the desktop that was turned on. “What is my agenda for the day?”

Bethany smirked. “I don’t have any appointments for you, Ms. Landry. But I do have the login information and employee paperwork that needs to be filled out.”

Then she proceeded to dump a shitload of paperwork onto my desk. I looked from the pile to her now smiling face and back down again.

“Really?”

I didn’t even know that I had uttered the question until she answered me, “Yes, Ms. Landry, really.”

Bethany the Bitch, my new name for her, proceeded to turn on her stilettos and sashay out of the office. I didn’t have a pen, so I yanked the drawer of the desk open and searched for one. There was a myriad of office supplies but no pens. I considered using a highlighter but didn’t want to give Bethany the Bitch the satisfaction of besting me.

Standing up in my own fabulous shoes, I walked out of the office. Bethany was in mid-whisper on the phone when she first set eyes on me.

“Can I help you, Ms. Landry?”

“No thank you,” I replied and marched my way over to the corner office.

“You can’t go in there,” Bethany screeched, slamming the phone down on whomever she was speaking with. She wasn’t as graceful this time as she tried to stop me from opening the door to Mark’s office, but she was too far away.

Mark glanced up from his desk, not seeming surprised by me forcing my way into his office.

“I am sorry, Mr. Williams,” Bethany rambled behind me, “I tried to stop her.”

I turned to address her, “That will be all.”

Then I slammed the door in her face.

Chapter Thirteen

Mark

My lips twitched as I eyed a very keyed up Sutton. Her nostrils were slightly flaring, and her chest was heaving. I had no idea what the intrusion was about, but a part of me was happy that she was there. And I had no interest in analyzing how fucked up that was.

It had been fifteen minutes since we first arrived. I was anxious to hear what had put her in such a state. But Sutton was so damn beautiful when she was angry that I hesitated to change that state.

“Bethany the Bitch has got to go,” she seethed.

I coughed, covering a laugh. Bethany wasn’t the warmest of individuals, but I had never had reason to fire her.

“On what grounds?” I asked when I was able.

“Because she is a bitch.” Sutton said the words slowly as if I were hard of hearing.

I sighed, “You can’t fire everyone that you take a disliking to, Sutton. There is a little something called ‘wrongful termination.’”

Her eyes glittered dangerously, “Wrongful termination implies that I want to fire her because of a prejudice or discrimination. There aren’t any laws protecting bitches—I checked.”

“What did she do?” I asked again, trying to get to the bottom of the matter.

Sutton flushed a little. “She was rude and condescending.”

“Something that is hard to prove without a witness,” I countered.

Sutton continued, “Bethany dropped a huge stack of paperwork on my desk and there are no writing utensils in any of the drawers.”

I smiled. “You are going to fire the woman over a pen?”

Sutton nodded. “And she makes personal calls during work hours. When I came out, she was whispering something into the phone, and she hung up when she realized I was coming in here.”

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

I fought the immature urge to roll my eyes and yanked out my desk drawer to grab a box of fine-point pens. I pushed back from my desk and walked over to where she was standing. It was then that I noticed the way her fists were clenched and her mouth was trembling.

She was scared.

“Come have a seat, Sutton. I will be back in just a moment.”

Bethany seemed surprised when it was me leaving the office and not Sutton. I didn’t bother to speak with her. Walking to Sutton’s office, I grabbed the stack of papers that did seem a tad excessive. On the way back out, I stopped at Bethany’s desk.

“Call human resources and set up an appointment for tomorrow afternoon. This is a ridiculous amount of paperwork.”

Bethany flushed guiltily. “Maybe I could go through it and see what is truly necessary, Mr. Williams.”

I had suspected that she might have something to do with it. Damn, Sutton had been right.

“Bethany, you have worked here for over two years now.”

She nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“You are aware that Ms. Landry is Mr. Sutton’s daughter?”

Her blush increased. “Yes, sir.”

“It would behoove you to treat her with the respect that she deserves. Consider this your final warning—are we clear?”

Bethany hopped out of her seat. “Yes, sir. I understand, sir.”

As I turned to go back into my office, I saw her going into Sutton’s office. She had better be making things right, because if she wasn’t, I would have no problems letting Bethany the Bitch go.

When I returned Sutton was sitting behind my desk in her father’s desk chair. She sparkled when she saw me.

“That was fucking brilliant!”

I jolted at her words, “What was?”

Sutton laughed, the sound sneaking its way straight into my chest. “The way you handled Bethany.”

I cocked my head to the side. “How do you know?”

“I listened with the door cracked,” she responded cheekily. I loved that she wasn’t the slightest bit embarrassed to admit that she had been spying on me.

“I have changed my mind,” I said gruffly. “You will be spending the day with me observing and attending my appointments. Once you have the swing of things, I will get someone from HR to prep you on the internal workings of the company. But for now, you are stuck with me.”

The joy on her face was palpable and I felt a kick in my gut. She was too damn tempting to be around all day. This might not have been the best of ideas.

“What do we do first?” she asked anxiously. The signs of the scared girl were so far gone I wondered for a moment if I had imagined it.

“First, you give me my desk and chair back,” I said with a wolfish smile.

Sutton laughed and stood, “I suppose that is fair. What is second?”

I held my hand out to her, “Second, we get you a login and password for your computer. I have been forwarding copies of emails that I had thought you might be interested in.”

She nodded. “Sounds perfect.”

I heard her squeak the first time Sutton pulled up her email.

“Fuck, Mark! There are eighteen hundred unread emails!”

The tone of dismay had me wanting to go slay a few dragons in her honor. I really needed to get my shit together before I fell head over ass for this woman.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

“Just start reading them. It won’t make sense at first, but you will start to see patterns and begin to understand the more you immerse yourself in it. Start with the oldest and work toward the newest messages.”

We worked in silence for the first hour and a half. Then Bethany paged me that my first appointment had arrived.

Sutton and I both stood to greet Elliot Brand of Brand Enterprises.

“Mark! It’s a pleasure to see you again.” The tall, dark-haired man gripped my hand in a firm grasp. “And you must be Sutton.”

He smiled at her and for the briefest of instances. I wanted to shield Sutton from the man’s gaze, but I knew that he was happily married and that there was nothing inappropriate in his eyes.

Sutton smiled shyly and extended her hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Brand.”

He smiled in return. “Please call me Elliot. I have the greatest respect for your father. I am sorry to hear that he passed.”

Sutton’s smile dimmed. “I was never able to meet my father. But thank you all the same.”

Elliot nodded.

I motioned for them both to sit down and then explained to Sutton why he was there.

“Elliot and I have discussed building more luxury condominiums much like my apartment. He owns a fairly large section of the downtown area that is in need of revitalizing. Our piece would be the ground level merchants. We own several companies that could move in and be profitable.”

Sutton beamed at Elliot, “That is a wonderful idea! I love Mark’s home.”

He smiled kindly at her. “Thank you. I too feel that it would be lucrative for our companies and crucial to the community.”

“I will have the lawyers draw it up.” I stood, and they followed suit. “Do you want me to send the final copy over to Nate for your signature?”

Elliot nodded. “That would be wonderful.” He turned back to Sutton. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Sutton. I hope that you enjoy living in the city.”

Her cheekbones were pink with excitement. She had never looked lovelier.

“Likewise, Elliot. I am excited to be a part of this project.”

He left a few moments later, and I shook my head in wonderment.

“What?” Sutton cocked her head to the side in an adorable fashion.

“I was only meeting Elliot Brand today, not getting the final details nailed down.”

Her face paled. “Did I fuck things up?”

I shook my head. “No at all. If anything, you have more of your father in you than you realize. He was always able to close a deal and make it seem effortless. I just witnessed you doing the same thing.”

Sutton's eyes sparkled. "I was just being myself."

I grunted, "Apparently that is all you need to do."

Chapter Fourteen

Sutton

When I walked into the crowded restaurant, I knew not to look for Nico near the food. The man hardly ever ate, and when he did, it was a celery stick.

I am still a little angry with God over celery. Why does it have those stringy things that are so disgusting? I felt like throwing up in my mouth just thinking about it. Over to the left of the bar, I saw Nico on a bench that was just wide enough that it could fit two asses. He was engrossed with something on his phone, and suddenly I wanted to know what that might be.

As I approached, I heard the familiar voices of a trashy reality TV family. "Nico, are you watching the Kardashians?"

Nico whipped his pretty blonde head around guiltily. "No. I would never."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

If the guilty look didn't give him away, his blush said it all. I laughed before rolling my eyes. Then I sat on the tiny scrap of a seat next to Nico and made him scoot over so that I could see what was on his phone.

His bony ass didn't want to make room. But begrudgingly he complied.

"You know that it's fake, right?" I teased, waiting for the reaction.

Nico didn't disappoint. "Fake? I will have you know that I have met someone that knows the person who styles their hair and they are just as wild as they look on television."

"Your aunt's sister's dog groomer?" I flagged the bartender down and ordered a glass of water.

Nico scowled at me. "Do you really think you are funny?"

I grinned. "Of course, I do. And you are too polite to tell me otherwise. Now, I have a situation that I need help with."

Nico brightened. "And you came to me?"

I nodded. "Absolutely. Nico, this is serious. I am to attend my first fundraiser Saturday night. I have to knock their socks off."

"Is Bethany the Bitch still giving you problems?"

I had filled Nico in on my office drama and he was much more sympathetic than Mark had been. I finally finished reading all of those emails—it only took me two weeks. When I explained to Nico how Bethany had treated me and all of the backlogs of emails, he gave me some good advice.

Nico told me to find one of the top performers in marketing that I felt comfortable with and then to promote them as a liaison/personal assistant but to give them a fancy title so that they wouldn't take offense.

I hired Candice right off. She has sleek dark brown hair and several dark moles on her face, giving her an exotic look. She's curvier than most of the women I have met in the city and isn't afraid to wear things that show off her body. Her instincts are sharp, and she has kind eyes.

Bethany about had a conniption and that alone kept me on cloud nine for days. Mark was impressed with my initiative, and I hated bursting the bubble that it had been Nico's idea originally. I said that I had the idea to go with Candice and that she was by far the best.

I thought he would argue with me or get mad when I offered Candice a twenty-thousand-dollar raise with bonus potential. But he didn't bat an eye when I gave him the terms.

Candice now went through all of my emails and sorted them into the different projects and prioritized them, so I knew what to get to first. I gave her the office next to mine, much to Bethany's outrage, and gave Candice the title of Creative Director.

Nico had been spot-on with his advice, and I knew that he would be the one to see me through this fundraiser.

“Bethany isn't speaking to me unless she has to put a call through. She was so pissed

that Candice got an office when she didn't that she seems to have washed her hands of the both of us."

Nico raised a brow. "Lucky girls."

I laughed. "No doubt. Nico, I have to look amazing at this event. I will be meeting a lot of clients and potential clients."

He gave me a shrewd look. "You just want to look better than Bethany."

I glowered at him. "That is completely beneath me." Then after a short pause, I added, "Fuck it. I need to look better than Bethany the Bitch."

Nico barked out a laugh, "Well, you are in luck because I have some new designer gowns set aside just for you."

I blinked, "You knew I would need them?"

"Darling, this might be your first rodeo, but it certainly isn't mine. There are a few that were designed with your measurements in mind and a few others that were your size, so I have them as well. Where would you like to try them on?"

"Can we do the apartment?" I asked hopefully. "I hate having to strip down that many times behind a curtain."

Nico smiled, "I will bring them all to your apartment. Are you going to eat anything?"

I glanced around at the food. There were carrot strings and strange green sauces over what I hoped was chicken that I wouldn't have touched with a ten-foot pole.

My nose wrinkled, and Nico laughed. “Do you want to stop at the golden arches for a cheeseburger?”

I beamed at him. “That would be perfect. I promise that I am cutting way back on them. It’s just that the food at some of these places is so strange.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

Nico shook his handsome blonde head. “You are the only woman I know that actually eats her food instead of throwing it up. I have no idea how you manage to keep such an excellent body.”

I huffed. “I run a shit load of miles to try and atone for my lazy life here. Sometimes I feel like I am going to wake up again in my trailer and this will all be a dream.”

Nico laid a hand on my arm, “You are an amazing girl, Sutton.”

I leaned my head on his broad shoulder, “You are an amazing friend, Nico.”

He chuckled. “Let’s get out of here before I tear up and you starve to death.”

I followed Nico out of the restaurant and onto the street. The driver that Mark had assigned to me pulled forward and I got in when Nico opened the door. He was just about to follow me in when he heard someone calling his name.

Nico looked up and down the street and paled when he noticed a tall man with curly brown hair and chocolate colored eyes. He was wearing paint-spattered jeans and a t-shirt that looked like it was painted on his muscular chest.

“Antonio.” The usual warmth in Nico’s voice wasn’t present as he greeted the other man.

“Nico, I have called a dozen times. Why haven’t you answered?”

Nico glanced down at where I was sitting.

“You can go if you need to,” I said softly.

Nico’s hands tightened on the door, “I said that I would help you, Sutton.”

He sounded angry almost.

“Nico, you can’t ignore me forever,” Antonio continued. “Just talk to me. I thought we had something good together.”

A car behind ours honked and Nico flinched. Without answering the other man, he swiftly sat down and shut the door. I could see Antonio’s shoulders slump a little. His brown eyes were so expressive! I could tell that he had deep feelings for Nico. But I wasn’t sure if I could pry into Nico’s affairs. I really liked him as a friend and didn’t want to lose him.

“Go ahead and say it. I know you are dying to.” His dry rasp caught me off guard. Nico sounded—haunted.

“Who is he?” I whispered as gently as I could.

Nico’s jaw was like granite. “He is an old boyfriend.”

“Did he cheat on you?” I had to ask. I couldn’t imagine what would have made Nico so upset unless it was infidelity.

“No.” Nico’s lips pursed. “He left me.”

“You broke up?” I asked.

Nico shook his head. “No, one morning he was just—gone. I was terrified that something terrible had happened. I called all of the hospitals and morgues. I

contacted the police thinking that someone had hurt him. Come to find out, he had left for Spain. A painting master had offered him an internship and he took it.”

“He didn’t even leave a note?” I asked incredulously.

“No fucking note, no goodbye, no explanation. Now he is back in town after a year of nothing and he wants to talk to me. I can’t do it, Sutton. I fucking loved him, and he left me. I am not something he can put on a shelf and play with when it suits him. I have feelings, and I deserve more than that.”

I slipped my hand into his larger one, “You deserve so much more than that. I am so very sorry.”

He took a deep breath and then another. I noticed that his lips weren’t as tight and saw the muscle in his jaw start to relax.

“Thank, Sutton,” he said finally.

I wrinkled my brow. “For what?”

He leaned down and kissed the top of my head, “For being you.”

Chapter Fifteen

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

Sutton

I turned and looked at my reflection in the mirror, “Nico, you are a lifesaver!”

I heard a sharply inhaled breath from the open doorway and turned to see Mark poking his head into my bedroom. Nico went over to Mark and straightened his already perfectly straight cravat. I couldn’t take my eyes off of Mark.

They say that you should dress for success. Mark was already one of the richest men in the world and knew everything there was to know about being successful. Nico had confided that he too had crushed on Mark when he first started dressing him.

What wasn’t to love? Mark worked out regularly, ate healthy meals, and always looked like he just stumbled out of fashion magazine.

Suddenly I didn’t feel as spectacular as I had moments before. I knew nothing about success. My eyes dropped down and I studied the studded clutch in my hands. What was I doing here?

Fear and doubt swept over me, and suddenly I was finding it hard to breathe. I was stupid to think that I could do this. Bethany the Bitch was better suited to all the glitz and glam of this world. I was Sutton from Otterville Falls. I lived in a trailer and worked at a bar.

I felt the warmth on my open back and leaned into it, still gasping for air.

Mark’s finger lifted my chin so that he met my gaze and I saw the concern laced with

worry in his gray eyes.

“What is going on, Sutton?”

His deep voice was comforting, but I couldn’t tell him the truth. The last thing I wanted to see on his face was disappointment. When had that begun to matter to me? When had his opinion come to mean so much?

I tried to smile. “Nothing.”

Nico excused himself and left the apartment, leaving Mark and me alone together in my bedroom. But it wasn’t really my bedroom. I was still living in his apartment.

“I can tell you are upset.” His eyes searched my face. “What is going through that beautiful head of yours?”

I felt color tinging my cheeks, “Nico did well, didn’t he?”

Mark’s brows came together. “You are a beautiful woman, Sutton. You don’t need a special dress for me to see that.”

Now my cheeks really were scarlet. “You look hot—I mean handsome, as well.”

His full lips widened into a delighted smile. “I look hot?”

“It’s hot in here,” I continued to babble. “That’s what I meant to say.”

He laughed, and the rich tones washed over me. “You are something else, Sutton Landry.”

Suddenly verbal diarrhea wouldn’t stop, “I don’t think I should go to this event. What

if I make a mistake? Your most valuable clients will be there, and I don't know enough yet. I think I will just stay in if that is alright. It will be better this way. You will have a better..."

His lips cut me off, and for a moment, I was frozen in time.

Mark Williams was kissing me.

Mark Williams had his lips smashed up against mine.

And fuck, Mark Williams could kiss.

His large hand cradled my face while the other touched the naked skin on my back exposed by the low-cut dress. Heat infused my body and I felt like I was burning up for his taste and his touch. I couldn't remember the last time someone had kissed me.

A year, maybe more—some drifter coming through town that didn't give two shits about me. He had tasted like beer and cigarettes and I regretted every second of the sloppy mess.

That was nothing like this kiss. Nerve endings were firing synapses all over my body as I fairly melted into his arms. My core ached and flooded with moisture. My breasts became hard and craved his touch. I stepped closer to him of my own accord and opened my mouth even further.

His low growl coming from the back of Mark's throat was the sexiest thing I had ever heard, and I wanted to hear it again. He kissed me harder. His tongue sweeping against mine as he claimed my mouth for his own.

My hands were against his crisp white tuxedo shirt. The heat from his body inflamed me. I wanted to touch his skin, feel his muscles flexing underneath my fingertips.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

Suddenly Mark pulled back. His eyes flared dangerously but his voice was cool when he spoke. “Are you done with that nonsense?”

I blinked once, twice, and then a third time just to be certain that I had heard him correctly.

“To what are you referring, Mr. Williams?”

His face was granite. “The panic mode that you were attempting to fall into. I trust that you are over it?”

I wanted to smack his stubbled cheek so badly that my palms burned. “I am over it.”

I bent down and picked up my clutch that had fallen. I made no move to hide my actions and knew that he got a bird’s eye view of my ass and likely more.

Well, fuck him. I didn’t need his pity.

It was rather silent on the way to the venue. Mark seemed to be contemplating something and I was still seething. Once the driver opened the door, Mark stepped out and then reached a hand in for me to take. I almost didn’t, but then I didn’t want to be seen as petty even though Lord knew I was acting that way.

There were flashing lights from the camera and I felt Mark squeeze my arm. “Smile, Sutton.”

A bright smile flashed across my face and I began to walk on my stilettos like I was

born to it. The slinky blood red dress fit my curves like a glove. If Mark wanted a show, I would be the best fucking actress that he had ever seen.

There were whispers and catcalls from the crowd as this was my first official presentation in society. I killed it, each step feeling more confident, each smile becoming more genuine. They were just people. The reporters, the patrons, the clients. They put their pants on the same way I did.

I heard Mark's name being called by a familiar voice the moment we entered the ballroom. He had also turned and extended his hand to Elliot Brand, the business mogul I had met earlier in the week. On his arm was a lovely blonde woman who seemed a bit shy.

She was introduced as his wife, Mandy, and I learned that she had recently given birth to a baby girl. Soon it was the talk of sleepless nights and fussy times as Mandy told me about her sister who was also expecting a boy in the fall.

I had completely forgotten about the nerves as Mandy introduced me to some of her friends. We got to talking about a child watch project that she had just implemented at Brand Enterprises. I asked if I could meet with her another time to go over the particulars. It seemed like something that Sutton, the company, should look into.

Mark never was far from my side, but he allowed me to make my own way at the gala. I was thrilled to see Candice, and she too introduced me to so many people that I knew I wouldn't remember but a handful.

It wasn't until we were sitting in silence on the way home that something occurred to me.

"You did it on purpose," I said incredulously.

Mark raised a brow. “What are you talking about?”

“Tonight, before the benefit when I was freaking out. You made me angry on purpose.”

Mark’s look didn’t change, but I could tell that I was right, and he didn’t confirm or deny it.

“You did a fantastic job tonight, Sutton.” He smiled at me briefly before his phone began to ring and he apologized for taking the call.

I sat back in the seat in a daze. I wasn’t sure how I was feeling at that point. Mark Williams had gone out of his way to help me. Not only that, but it was happening time and time again. He wasn’t warm fuzzies by any means, but he was shrewd and knew what I needed when I needed it.

Damn, I might be falling for the man.

He had loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top few buttons on his shirt. The scent of his expensive cologne permeated the area until it was all I could smell. He was a dangerous man to fall in love with. I needed to protect myself.

He glanced at me during his call and mouthed ‘sorry’ before shooting me a crooked grin.

Shit, I hoped it wasn’t too late.

Chapter Sixteen

Sutton

“Candice, explain to me one more time the collaborative project that we are working on with Dentex.”

Candice smiled, her white teeth flashing against her olive skin. “I would rather talk about you and Mr. Williams at the charity benefit.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

I felt my cheeks heating but tried to ignore it. We just returned from the boardroom, and after a morning of craziness, we hadn't had a chance to talk about our weekends yet. I looked up at the clock and noticed it was almost 1 p.m.

"Nothing to tell, but you looked gorgeous in that pink chiffon evening gown!"

Candice grinned. "Thank you, and you are not getting out of it that easily, Sutton Landry. Let's get out of here and grab some lunch."

My stomach growled on cue and she laughed.

"Alright," I conceded. "Just let me tell Mark where we are going."

Her eyes widened. "You tell him everywhere you go?"

Suddenly I felt unsure. "Well, yes. I don't want him to worry if he needs something. Besides, if we need the driver, we can let him know."

Candice's lips lilted up in a knowing smile. "I am sure your dad will be okay if we are back before midnight, Cinderella."

I scowled at her teasing, "It's not like that! I don't have to tell him anything if I don't want to."

Her face sobered a little. "I am just playing around, Sutton. If you want to let him know, I think it's sweet."

But I didn't want to be sweet. I wanted to be a hardened badass corporate figure like he was. And then it dawned on me that Mark didn't check in with me when he left the office. Sure, he always made sure I had a driver available and he usually knew where I was because I always told him.

Embarrassment crept up the back of my neck, making me feel like a fool for acting like a child, or worse, the hillbilly that I didn't want to be.

I stood up and grabbed my bag. "I am ready to go!"

Candice looked worried. "Sutton, I didn't mean to upset you."

I smiled, and to my surprise it was genuine. "I am not upset with you, Candice. More with myself."

Candice knew a little of my backstory, but not everything. I hadn't ever had a best friend before, and Candice was technically my employee. I knew that I was blurring boundaries and taking in strays as Mark would call it. But Candice and Nico were two of my first friends that hadn't demanded anything of me.

It was different than when I took care of Earl or took Martha's bullshit day in and day out.

She stood as well and grabbed her things. "If you insist."

We didn't end up taking a car but walked a few blocks up to a café in the bottom of the Brand Enterprises building.

"The couple that owns Brand is so nice," I said in casual conversation to Candice as we stood in line. "His wife, Mandy, has made great strides for the working parents, and I wanted to see if that could be something we can incorporate in Sutton

Enterprises. I am expecting her call so that I can pick her brain.”

Candice nodded. “SE isn’t really known for anything like that. I think it would be great for the employees and also fabulous PR for the company.”

A blonde woman who looked familiar turned around. I couldn’t place her, but one thing that I couldn’t help but notice was that she was about six months pregnant.

“Hi,” she said, “I couldn’t help overhearing. I hope you don’t think I am rude for interrupting.”

I shook my head. “Not at all. Do you work in this building?”

Her dark blue eyes sparkled, “No, but my sister is the woman you were speaking about. Mandy Brand?”

“Oh!” I exclaimed. “You must be Kim, her sister!”

Kim smiled wide. “She told you about me?”

I laughed. “We were talking about babies and teething, and she mentioned that you were having a little boy. Congratulations!”

A handsome man with dark wavy blonde hair approached us and wrapped his arm around Kim. He kissed her briefly on the lips. “Sorry to keep you waiting, sweetheart.”

Kim’s face was flushed, and she looked so happy that I couldn’t help but feel the slightest twinge of jealousy. “This is my husband, Nate.” She gestured to the man beside her. “And this is...Oh my goodness, I never got your names! Darn these pregnancy hormones!”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

“You are fine! I am Sutton Landry, and this is my friend Candice Cook. She is the new Creative Director at Sutton Enterprises.”

Candice beamed at my introduction and shook their hands.

Nate frowned for a minute. “Sutton? You wouldn’t be the new co-owner of Sutton Enterprises, would you?”

I bit my lip. “Would it be a bad thing if I said yes?”

They laughed, and Candice added, “Sutton is doing a phenomenal job. We are happy to have her there.”

We made small talk with Kim and Nate for a few more minutes and then they departed. The man behind the counter called our names when our order was ready, and we went to pick up our sandwiches and drinks.

Taking our lunch outside on the little patio, we selected a shady spot and sat down.

“Now, tell me everything.” Candice wriggled her eyebrows. “I want all the juicy details!”

I took a bite of my sandwich and held a hand up, indicating that I needed a moment. The truth was that I had no idea what to tell her. Finally, that is precisely what I said. “Candice, there is nothing to tell.”

She shook her head incredulously. “He watches your every move, Sutton. If he

weren't so damn handsome, I might think it was creepy. But I get chills just watching the two of you together. Did you notice that he didn't leave your side the whole night? I have never seen Mr. Williams behave that way."

I wanted to ask her more about how he watched me—like he wanted me, or wanted to choke me. Because I know I have been on the receiving end of the latter one.

"What are you afraid of?" she asked quietly.

And before I knew it, I was pouring out my sad, pathetic, and dismal love life. "I am not the kind of girl that men take home. I am the kind of girl that is good for a quick fuck in the alley. Mark isn't that kind of guy. I lived in a trailer, Candice, and not a nice new fancy one either. We are so different you might as well ask if the sun is attracted to the moon."

Her lips twitched. "The sun attracts the moon, Sutton. The sun attracts everything, and you my dear are the sun in this scenario."

I frowned, "Then why does the moon go around the earth?"

She shook her head, "You are getting off point, and it's a binary system but that doesn't matter. Sutton, I don't think you have any idea how powerful you are, and I am not just talking about your new fortune."

"Candice, I am not who you think I am. If you could see Otterville Falls, you would know what I am talking about."

"Trust me on this, Sutton." Candice rolled her eyes. "You are going to knock this city on its ass—wait and see."

A sleek black town car pulled up the curb next to the patio where we were eating, and

Candice nearly choked on her meal. A broad grin broke across her face and her eyes danced in amusement.

I turned around to see Mark exiting the car and walking straight toward us with angry determination. Before I could speak, he launched into his tirade.

“Where have you been? Do you have any idea how worried I was? You didn’t even let Bethany know where you were going.”

I gaped at him. “You aren’t my father.”

His jaw tightened. “No, I am not. But he did leave you to my care.”

People were beginning to stare, and I hated that Candice had a front-row seat to my humiliation.

“I am a grown woman and if I want to go somewhere, I will do it.”

His eyes blazed. “We are leaving!”

I glared at him. “Well then, go. I am not coming with you!”

Candice chose that moment to interject—traitor.

“Sutton, I have to run an errand. If you want to return to the office with Mr. Williams, I can meet you there.”

If looks could kill, my new employee would be six feet under. “I will accompany you.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

Mark growled, actually growled at me. “You will come with me now by your own free will or I will carry you. Am I clear?”

Candice had lowered her face, but I had the horrible feeling that she was trying not to laugh. Damn Mark Williams and his barbaric attitude.

“Bite my ass,” I bit out.

“So be it.”

Chapter Seventeen

Mark

There are few times in my life when I can remember being scared. There had been once when I was out with my parents. I couldn't have been more than four or five because they were still trying to pretend that we were a happy family.

We were at an expensive restaurant that had nothing that a child would want to eat. I remember climbing underneath the tablecloth to pout and my parents continued on with their meal. I wasn't smart enough yet to realize that as long as I wasn't being a nuisance to them, they didn't care about me.

My mother started crying, I remember that clearly. Part of me considered trying to see if she was okay. But my dad was talking in quiet hurtful tones that had my childhood self frozen to my spot. Mother got up and left the table and my father said some curse words that I was not allowed to use.

Then a few moments later he got up and left. I stayed rooted to the place where I was hiding under the table. I figured that they might have gone to the bathroom or something. But a few minutes stretched into a very long time. When I saw the next pair of shoes poking under the tablecloth, they didn't belong to my mother or father and I began to cry.

The couple that found me were very kind, and my parents were popular enough that the owner knew my father, and for a tidy sum, nothing was leaked to the press. I had never known fear like I did that day. Feeling lost and abandoned, I could hardly process what needed to be done—so I did nothing.

My father had yelled at me, berating my five-year-old self for not following him out of the restaurant. I never wanted to feel like that again.

But when I couldn't find Sutton, I began to experience those feelings of not being able to process anything. I know that she thinks she is an independent woman. And I want that for her. But I know the kind of creeps that prey on innocent victims. If she can bring Earl home in Otterville Falls, who knows what she will find here.

I kept imagining her hurt, or worse, and I could not find her. So, when I did find her in that sandwich shop, I may have gone a little bit caveman on her. To be fair, I had given her the choice to walk out and she hadn't picked door number one.

Once I carried her to the car and slid in behind her, I told the driver to circle Central Park. We needed to talk. Sutton's pale pink pencil skirt and champagne blouse were the height of fashion. Along with her nude heels and bare legs I was getting distracted from the matter at hand.

“You cannot just disappear, Sutton!”

She bit her pouty pink lip as if trying to hold something back.

“Just say it,” I taunted her. “You’ve never held back before.”

She turned those heated eyes on me, and I could swear they were on fire. “How dare you embarrass me like that? And in front of Candice, too. What were you thinking?”

I was thinking that I couldn’t find you and I was scared as shit. But that is not what I said. “You didn’t give anyone your location. I needed you to sign off on some paperwork.”

She looked sorry for a split second, and I felt guilt race through my body. I did have some things for her to sign, but it was nothing urgent. She steeled her gaze at me. “Why didn’t you call me?”

I cocked my head to the side as if to say, ‘Really.’ “Look at your phone.”

She pulled it out and turned it on. Two bright pink patches appeared on her high cheekbones.

“Any missed calls?” I asked.

She sighed, her brows drawing together. “Seven.”

I nodded. “Sounds about right. What about texts? Do you have any of those?”

She glared at me. “You know damn well I have texts because you sent them.”

I watched her reading them, the color in her face deepening.

Mark: Sutton, you are not in your office.

Mark: It’s been fifteen minutes, where are you?

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

Mark: Sutton, are you with Candice? Bethany doesn't know where you are. Is everything okay?

Mark:Are you mad?

Mark:Sutton, answer the damn texts!

Mark:SUTTON ANSWER!

“Did you not think that I would worry about you?” I demanded.

She looked up at me. “You don't tell me everywhere you go.”

I ground my teeth. “I am from the city, Sutton. You could take a subway and end up in one of the burrows!”

Her jaw tightened. “I am not helpless. Listen, Mark, I am sorry that you were so worried. I really am. But the whole ‘throw the girl over your shoulder’ routine? That’s more fitting for Otterville Falls than it is for Wall Street.”

It was my turn to be embarrassed. She had a point. I am lucky that a policeman didn't see me hauling her out of there kicking and screaming. The last thing I needed was a trip to the county jail.

“I apologize for being a caveman,” I said gruffly.

Sutton's mouth curved into a slight smile. It was mesmerizing, and I almost missed

what she said next.

“I don’t have to tell you where I am at all times if you don’t have to tell me.”

It was cute that she thought she could lay down the rules. But that wasn’t happening. With a swift yank, I had her sprawled over my lap.

Her round luscious ass was shapely and delicious in pink. The pencil skirt made it hard for her to get enough leverage to get away.

“What are you doing?” she raged at me.

I pulled her closer and let my hand smack down against her firm bottom. She squealed and tried to wriggle away.

“Are you spanking me?”

I laughed. “I should think that would be obvious.”

Another crack and then another. I wished that I could see my handprint on her ass. The thought was arousing, so I needed to put it away. The last thing I should do would be hit on the girl. I was supposed to be taking care of her—a pseudo guardian, if you will, since her father’s passing.

She was taking chances with her safety and needed to know that I am in charge. Another smack and then another. She never cried, but I could tell she was uncomfortable with the way she was trying to move with my arms tightly around her.

When I had given her the final smack of twenty spanks, I lifted Sutton back up and set her beside me. The first thing I noticed were her nipples. They were rock hard against that thin champagne shirt and I could slightly make out the color of her dark

nipples.

Then there was her breathing, low and raspy. She licked her bottom lip, and I felt my cock twitch. Her eyes were dilated and looked almost black, and her hands were shaking. I have never seen an example of a woman who was this aroused before. She was radiating sexual energy.

Sutton's hands were clenching into tight little fists and she stared straight ahead, not looking at me.

"I am sorry I had to discipline you," I said gruffly.

She ignored me.

"I need to know that you are safe, Sutton."

Again, radio silence.

"Look, do you need me to..."

Whatever else I had been about to say was lost when we pulled up to a stop sign and Sutton bolted out of the door. It took me a second to process what was happening. I raced out of the car behind her and saw that as she ran in those ridiculous pumps, she kept looking back to see where I was.

The moment that she realized I was in pursuit, she smiled. It was infectious and playful, and not at all what I had expected. I picked up my speed. She was no match for me in those shoes.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

With a long arm, I wrapped it around her waist and yanked her to me. Sutton's feet left the ground as I pressed her body against mine.

“Going somewhere?” I inquired.

She looked up at me, cupped my face, and planted a kiss right on my lips. I was so shocked that I almost dropped her, my grasp weakening from surprise and delight. The second she felt like she could get away, she shoved me hard with two hands and started running once again.

Little minx. She thought she could outwit me. This was going to be fun.

Chapter Eighteen

Sutton

I raced through Central Park, feeling my heels sinking into the grass. He caught me in moments and yanked me back against his muscular chest. How could something so hard feel so right? My chest rose and fell rapidly with my ragged breathing. I was an idiot to think I could escape him.

And why in the hell had I kissed him? What the fuck was wrong with me? I didn't like the man. He was domineering and bossy. Shit, his chest wasn't the only thing that was hard. Don't think about his dick, don't think about his dick.

“Where do you think you are going?” he whispered silkily next to my ear. I felt his lips against the tender skin and it creamed my panties.

“Anywhere you aren’t,” I spat, ignoring the way that his arm was nestled right up against my breasts as he kept me glued to his chest.

My hips shifted the slightest bit and I felt his cock push further against the soft curve of my ass. It shouldn’t have felt that good. We were both wearing clothes. I was getting a bigger high dry humping his dick than I had in all of my previous sexual encounters combined.

He growled and clamped down on my body so that I was immobilized. Mark placed the softest of kisses along the side of my neck. I couldn’t hold back the moan that escaped my lips. It was long, low, and loud, and fucking embarrassing if I am being honest.

I saw a woman glance our way and her cheeks heated before she quickly averted her eyes.

Shit, now I was going to be picked up for public indecency and I hadn’t been in trouble with the law for a long time—at least a year, maybe even eighteen months.

“Don’t run from me.” His dark command did something to my lady bits that didn’t need more reason to lust after this man. I wished that I could get my womanly urges on board with my brain, because I was seconds away from lifting my skirt and offering him a first-class ticket to paradise. Somehow, I knew that with him it couldn’t be anything but paradise.

“Are you ready to behave?”

I wasn’t a dog. “You can’t tell me what to do.”

And now I was sounding like a teenager. This is what this man reduced me to. Suddenly I started to laugh. It was ill-timed and completely out of context. But all I

had done was go to lunch with a friend. And yes, I was starting to consider Candice as a friend. My first real female friend.

Talk about making a mountain out of a molehill. All the of fight flew out of me and I sagged into his arms as giggles escaped my mouth. I couldn't believe that I had jumped out of the car. And then there was that kiss.

I had been trying to push it out of my mind. The kiss was an evasion tactic, nothing more. But that didn't explain why my nipples were still beaded tight. Nor did it mesh with my lips that were still tingling. I wanted to kiss him again—and again.

It didn't make sense. I wasn't into him.

Maybe if I told myself that a million times a day, I could make it be true. Like my new personal mantra: 'I do not lust after Mark Williams.'

Lost in thought, when he turned me to face him, I didn't react fast enough. One second, I was thinking about how I didn't want his sexy ass body—fucking lie. And the next, he was kissing me. It wasn't like the kiss I had planted on him.

That had been quick and hurried, hard and fast, in and out if you will. This kiss was meant to control. He had a hold on my wrists and held them behind my back so that I was powerless against him. He lit an intense fire in the pit of my stomach. I leaned into the kiss, opening my mouth, practically begging him for more.

His growl of approval was all I needed to reach onto my tiptoes and kiss him back just as ardently as he was kissing me. My body felt amazing against his. I rubbed my breasts against his chest, wishing that my thin blouse and his dress shirt weren't hindering the effect.

He ripped his lips away from me so suddenly that I whimpered.

“You are seconds away from being fucked in the park.” His voice had deepened an octave, and I don’t think I have ever seen his silver eyes so vibrant.

Mark Williams wanted me. He not only wanted me, but he was throwing all of his fancy-pants rules out of the window and kissing the shit out of me in the middle of Central Park. I wondered why he stopped when I heard it: the familiar clicking noise of a camera.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

“Do you have a statement to make, Mr. Williams?” a particularly brave man asked. I was guessing that we would be on the trashy news by six tonight.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

The look in Mark's eyes was feral. I would have taken a step back if he hadn't had me held still tightly against him. The photographer was smart enough not to come any closer, but he didn't leave either.

Another one of them shouted out, "How long have you two been dating?"

I almost responded that we weren't when Mark jumped in. "My fiancé and I are not answering any questions at the moment. Have a good day, gentlemen."

There was a flurry of excitement among the reporters and another series of flashes. But whatever they had asked us next was lost as Mark whipped us around and rushed us to the car. It was a lot longer walk back than it had been on my haphazard run for freedom.

I hung my head in shame and didn't make a comment when Mark opened the door and shoved me inside. He jumped in behind me and then wrapped an arm around my waist. I guess he wasn't taking any chances. I wasn't going to run from him again. Shit, I had only wanted a little independence.

"Home," Mark barked to the driver.

I could see the muscle in his jaw pulsing and knew that he was angry. I wanted to say something, anything, to ease the growing tension in the car.

I opened my mouth to utter heaven knows what when Mark spoke, "Don't."

My mouth popped closed and then I felt a scowl cover my face. I opened my mouth

again to argue, but he clapped his massive hand over my parted lips.

“I need to think, and I can’t do that with you carrying on, Sutton. Just be quiet for a moment, okay?”

I saw the strain in his eyes and the tightness around his mouth. I had really screwed up this time. I met his eyes and noted that they no longer held the fire and desire that they had in the park. He looked tired, stressed, and freakishly hot.

Okay, that last one just slipped out. I am not attracted to Mark Williams.

He dropped the hand that was covering my mouth and his head flopped back against the headrest. He had closed his eyes, and I figured that gave me free reign to stare.

Being this close to him, with his arm still anchoring me to his side, I was able to see every bit of stubble on his chiseled jaw. I loved the way his lips were formed, and the sexy way his Adam’s apple bobbed when he swallowed.

I am not attracted to Mark Williams.

His dark hair was mussed from the wind or perhaps our chase. I wanted to feel it sliding through my fingers. I wanted to put my lips on his throat and hear that rasp in his voice again that I heard back in the park.

I am not attracted—my lady bits clenched, calling me a liar. I was so fucking attracted to Mark Williams I could hardly see straight.

He parted his lips to speak without opening his eyes. “Why are you staring at me?”

“I wasn’t staring.” I quickly looked away only to glance back and catch a sliver of his silvery gaze through the small slits of his hooded eyes.

“Don’t lie to me, Sutton.”

“Don’t lie to me, Sutton,” I mocked. “Don’t run from me. Don’t talk, I can’t think, Sutton. Don’t go anywhere without me knowing, Sutton.’ You are smothering me, Mark. I can’t stand it.”

He stared, and I wondered if he was finally starting to see my side of things.

But he only closed his eyes with a sigh.

I tried to pull away from him, and his arm tightened, bringing me as close as I could get against his hot flesh. Any closer and I would be on the man’s lap. I remembered being on there about an hour ago as he had spanked me.

It had started out humiliating, and somewhere around the middle had turned into something entirely different. I squirmed in my seat, the heat of my bottom reminding me just how much I had liked being spanked.

Who knew I had a kinky side to me? I wondered if Mark had spanked a lot of women. The thought made me angry.

“Do you always spank people you are upset with?” I blurted out.

His eyes flew open as he regarded me incredulously, “I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me,” I challenged, not backing down.

Mark leaned forward. We were already close, and his extra added nearness had my brain on meltdown. But I caught what he said. Shit I couldn’t have missed it.

“Only you, Sutton, only you.”

Chapter Nineteen

Sutton

“He went all caveman on you, girl. It was the hottest thing I have ever seen!”

Candice greeted me wide-eyed the next day at the office. She immediately shut my door so that Bethany the Bitch couldn’t listen in.

“It wasn’t like that,” I responded, trying to ignore the slight sting of my panties against my spanked ass. For the record, it was precisely as Candice described it—caveman, indeed. “We are only friends.”

Her eyes sparkled with mischief. “Interesting to hear you say that.”

She slapped today’s paper in front of me and I choked on thin air. The headline read, “Wedding Bells at Sutton Enterprises.” In a massive full-color photo showing a tremendous amount of my pink-covered ass was Mark kissing the living shit out of me in Central Park.

I flipped it over, feeling sick to my stomach. It was not the best picture of me, but you could see some of my features. Mark, on the other hand, looked like one of those trashy covers on a romance novel, all dark and brooding as he devoured me.

“Shit, shit, shit!”

Candice raised a brow, “It says in there that Mr. Williams confirmed that there was an engagement between the two of you. Have you been holding out me?”

I planted my face into my hands. “No, this all a big mistake.”

She chuckled. “Let me guess: you tripped and fell on his lips? I have to admit, that is one of the hottest pics I have ever seen grace the front page. I picked it for that reason alone when I grabbed my coffee this morning. The other papers had pictures too obviously, but this was the best and in color.”

I groaned. “You are not helping!”

She snorted, “It didn’t look like you needed any help. A bed perhaps, but you both were doing just fine on your own.”

I peeked an eye out to see her lips twitching as she considered my obvious state of embarrassment.

“You want to tell me what happened?” Her tone was gentle this time, that of a friend.

I didn’t want to tell her. Hell, I didn’t want to tell anyone about what an idiot I had been. But somehow the entire story came spilling out of my lips.

“You jumped out of the car?” she repeated incredulously.

“We were stopped,” I defended, but deep down I agreed with her. I had acted rashly, and in doing so royally messed things up.

There was a sharp knock on my office door that had my back straightening before I called out, “Come in.”

Mark pushed the door open. "Sutton, I need to speak with you in my office."

He whipped around and was gone before I could respond.

"Why didn't he just call me?" I whispered to Candice.

She pointed to where my office phone sat dangling off the hook. I must have dislodged it when I threw my head into my hands.

For the first time that morning, Candice looked at me with some concern. "Are you going to be alright, Sutton?"

I nodded, "Yes, I am sure that Mark has a plan. He always has a plan."

"That is your plan?" I screeched.

Mark was sitting behind his massive desk, and I had taken one of the chairs opposite. My legs were crossed beneath a charcoal pencil skirt and my arms were folded against the matching jacket. I knew that I would need to be dressed to kill today. I needed the confidence, and shit, I hoped it would be a distraction for Mark. This particular suit always had his nostrils flaring. But not today. He was all business today.

"For the length of your time here, I feel it would be best that we remain engaged, a business arrangement only."

I gawked at him. “Why?”

His steel gray eyes bore into mine. “Because, Sutton, we find ourselves in a precarious situation. We have the project with Brand and several others that need to go through. The last thing that our business needs—tabloid drama. If our competitors were to ferret out any weakness in our armor, they will exploit it. This is the best way to nip the situation in the bud before it becomes a problem.”

A problem. That is what I was: a problem.

“What about the women that you date?” I blurted out.

His face reddened, “What women?”

“I know that you dated before I came here. I felt bad that I was crushing your social life, but now that we are supposed to be engaged...” I trailed off, not knowing quite what to say.

He shook his head. “That doesn’t matter. The future of Sutton Enterprises has to be our main goal. We can give it some time and then amicably decide to part. The rich and famous do it all the time.”

I felt a quick stab in my gut when he mentioned parting. This engagement wasn’t real, and I didn’t want it to be.

“What is the alternative?” I whispered.

Mark sighed, “You could always take the money and go back to Otterville Falls. But before you say that you will take that option to save your nonexistent social life, I am leading: I need to tell you something. Sutton, you are doing a phenomenal job learning the business. I have to be honest that I wasn’t sure you had it in you. To leave at this point is almost criminal. You were meant to do great things. Please just give it a chance?”

My mind was whirling. Did Mark actually use the word ‘please’ with me? And phenomenal? What in the fuck was going on? I felt my cheeks heat and my heart fill to overflowing. It was more praise than I had ever been given in my entire life. Ruth Ann was the only person who ever saw anything in me, besides my mama when she wasn’t high.

Mark speaking so highly of me had my emotions ruling my mind, and before I knew what I was doing, I had agreed to the engagement.

“You’ll do it?” He seemed shocked, and I laughed.

“Yes, I will be your fake fiancé for the sake of the company, as romantic as that sounds.”

He grinned at me, the crooked smile so genuine that I nearly lost my breath. He was one of those men that exudes so much masculinity and dominance that I wasn’t used to him being so open. I smiled back shyly.

He looked dazed and shook his head. “I had someone pick up a ring. It’s around here somewhere.”

I froze. “Not Bethany. Please tell me it wasn’t Bethany.”

He looked up from patting his pockets. “No, it wasn’t Bethany. Why?”

It didn't make any sense, but I felt the familiar jealousy and unease every time I saw her. "Have you slept with her?"

Mark's jaw dropped. "I beg your pardon! How is that any of your business?"

I stood abruptly to leave. "This was a mistake. I can't pretend to be engaged to you."

I tried to race out of his office, but Mark caught me before I opened the door.

"I don't see how this has anything to do with us, but I have never slept with Bethany nor have I ever contemplated it."

His eyes bore into the top of my head, but I refused to look up.

"She wants you to," I mumbled under my breath.

"You're jealous." He said the words slowly, as if he couldn't believe it to be true.

My eyes flashed to his. "No, I'm not."

A smug grin painted his face, and it only caused to infuriate me further.

"Get off me, you bastard!" I tried to shove his massive body away from me.

He pressed me up against the door, his lips tickling my neck before he kissed me softly on the side of my head.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

“There is only one woman at the office that I want to fuck. I can’t get her out of my head. She is infuriating and often pigheaded. But I want her so badly that no one can even come close to it.”

I was acutely aware of how my breathing had increased at an alarming rate. I felt the bulge of his massive cock press into me and couldn’t help the small whimper that escaped my lips.

He bent his head and kissed me so tenderly that I could have wept from it. There was reassurance in that kiss as well as a promise that this was only the beginning.

When he moved his face away from mine, he smiled that sexy-ass grin of his. “I think I am going to like being engaged to you.”

Chapter Twenty

Sutton

All the rest of that day, Candice and I worked on some of the projects that I had been given. I was finally starting to understand what went on here at Sutton Enterprises, and surprisingly, I liked it.

However, no matter what I did, I couldn’t keep that kiss out of my head. Over and over again, I replayed how his soft lips had landed on mine. The feel of his minty breath brushing across my face and his hard body pressing me up against the door. Everything about Mark Williams turned me on. He made me feel things I’d never felt before, and that scared me.

By the end of the day, I had thoroughly exhausted myself and was horny as hell. I was too tired to be interested in picking anything up for dinner. Mark insisted that his driver stop and pick up some Chinese food that I was really coming to love.

Instead of climbing right into bed, I begrudgingly changed into some yoga pants and a tank top, thankful to be rid of my dress clothes and heels. I debated on leaving my bra off. My back was starting to ache, and getting rid of that bra at the end of a hard day was akin to entering heaven in my book.

With a resigned sigh, I left my bra on and padded out toward the living room.

“Hey, Sutton,” Mark called out from the kitchen. “Do you want red or white wine with your Chinese food?”

I sank down onto the soft couch, loving the smell of my favorite Chinese food wafting up from the coffee table. The upholstery fabric was rich and soft against my fingertips. I loved Mark’s apartment—everything about it reminded me of him.

“Red, please,” I answered him and then curled my legs up underneath me. Mark grinned when he saw me already making myself comfortable. After handing me my glass of wine, Mark picked up the remote and asked me if I wanted to watch anything.

We settled on a movie that I hadn’t seen before and dug into the food. I was a lot hungrier than I thought. I loaded up on chow mein, fried rice, sweet and sour chicken, egg rolls, and crab rangoon.

Eating way too much, I was so full that I had a food baby. Laughing, I rubbed my belly as I let my head roll against the back of the couch.

“Why did you let me eat so much?” I whined.

Mark barked out a laugh. “I really don’t remember me forcing you to eat. And for some reason, I think that if I tried to tell you what you should be eating you might try and cut my balls off.”

“Damn straight,” I answered, blushing because it wasn’t like Mark to talk about balls.

The movie must have been some type of romance because the couple on the TV we’re really going. There was silence in the room as we both seemed to be sucked into it at the same time. The heavy breathing and panting on the screen did nothing to help my growing feelings for Mark. That, combined with him getting my favorite food, almost pushed me over the edge. I was seconds away from jumping the man—to hell with the food baby.

It was becoming apparent that I was going to be hot and bothered anytime I was around Mark. So, the girl crying out as her man pumped into her wasn’t helping. She moaned as his hand ran up her thigh and hip to settle on her breasts.

I don’t know if it was his sharp intake of breath or my own but one second we were watching the television, and the next he was on me pressing me back into the couch.

“Tell me to stop, Sutton. Tell me this is wrong, tell me that this isn’t the time or the place. Tell me you don’t want me,” Mark pleaded as he reigned warm hot kisses on my cheeks, neck, and lips.

If he was looking for a conscience, the last place he should have checked with was with me. I wanted this man. I had wanted him for what seemed like forever, and in a way that was so primal that my fingers sank into his skin, holding him tightly against me. He growled and gently bit my shoulder.

Then, pulling back for a moment, he yanked his t-shirt over his head. Being lost in the sheer beauty of his body, I saw his tattoo and it intrigued me. I made a mental

note to ask him about it later when my brain decided to take up residence in my body again. Right now, I couldn't do anything but think of his hot lips firmly pressed against my body.

He grabbed the edge of my tank top and yanked it over my head so suddenly that my hair flew into my face. I laughed, brushing it aside and secretly wishing that I had gone ahead and left my bra off.

I shouldn't have worried because Mark made short work of the lacy material, and once my breasts were free, he stared in wonder.

"Holy fuck," he breathed, eyes dilated and focused on my tightening nipples. "Why do you have to be so perfect?" his deep voice groaned.

He cupped my breast and took one of the pink tips into his mouth. As he sucked, my back arched, coming off the couch to follow his mouth.

It felt so damn good.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

My fingers slid into his thick hair, loving the way that he felt against my skin. Mark played with my breasts, giving me little love bites on the globes and sucking hard on the aroused nipples. He tugged at them with his teeth and I knew that my core was soaking wet. I was more than ready for him.

“I want you so bad, Sutton,” he growled against my breast. “I want you every time I smell that sweet perfume of yours. Or when I catch a glimpse of you out of the corner of my eye at the office. I have pictured fucking you on my desk, the conference room table, shoved over the edge of your desk. Shit, I can barely walk around the building without getting a hard-on.”

“I want you too.” The words slipped out, but I found that I wasn’t sad that I said them. I did want him—desperately so.

He hooked his thumbs into the edges of my yoga pants and yanked them down my legs and off my feet. I didn’t look to where he threw them. My eyes were glued to his.

Mark’s eyes blazed with lust as he took in my baby blue lace panties.

“Sutton, are you trying to kill me?” he rasped, bringing his face down to my stomach and placing more wet kisses.

I couldn’t even comment on my food baby, I was so wrapped up in him. As Mark tugged on the delicate lace of my underwear, I knew that come hell or high water I was going to know what it felt like to have this man inside of me.

He placed a kiss on my hip and eased the fabric down, repeating the gesture on the other side. My panties went flying to meet my yoga pants and Mark was literally staring at my bare pussy. I usually shaved to keep nice and neat, but when Nico and I had our spa day he had convinced me to go with the Brazilian. I had found that I liked it and decided to keep it up.

It looked like Mark approved of that decision. His fingers traced my pussy and came away glistening with my arousal. He brought his fingers to his nose and smelled me, his eyes rolling back as he muttered something like, 'so fucking sweet.'

My thighs parted on their own accord. He smirked at me before sinking down and taking my hips into his hands. From the first touch of his tongue to my heated flesh I was a goner. The feel of his massive hands cupping my ass, his whiskered chin grazing my delicate skin, and his wet hot mouth devouring me was almost more than I could take.

The sounds coming from my mouth were inhuman. I clutched at his hair, pulling him in tighter, begging him with nonsense words as I climbed higher and higher toward a release of epic proportions. Nothing in my past experience could have ever prepared me for what it was like to be intimate with Mark.

He flashed those steel gray eyes at me and caught my gaze. It was so fucking sexy to see his mouth on my pussy. He growled against my skin and sucked hard on my clit, I gasped as the sensations shoved me over the cliff.

My body spasmed and I clutched my breasts, gasping as wave after wave rushed over me. I couldn't catch my breath and suddenly he was at it again.

"It's too much," I cried out, but Mark was relentless. His tongue thrusting, licking and biting at my delicate folds.

His finger entered me, and I bucked beneath him. He played me like a finely tuned instrument and my body went right along with it. As one finger became two, he pumped them into me, preparing me for what was coming next.

“Come for me, Sutton,” he groaned as my pussy clenched his fingers. “Come on, baby, come!”

And like the good girl that I was, I shattered once again.

Chapter Twenty-One

Mark

I had never been harder in my entire life. Sutton was the most gorgeous woman that I had ever seen. My body responded to her instinctively. I wanted to mark her, claim her so that everyone in this fucking world knew that she was mine. My feelings for Sutton threatened to consume me as I lifted her languid body so that she was on her hands and knees.

I ripped open a condom and rolled it on, half wishing that it wasn't necessary. That alone was so characteristically unlike me that it gave me pause. I needed to lock my heart away from this girl. As it was, she already consumed my nights and most of my days.

She let out the softest purr when I rubbed my cock against her clit. I loved the look of her perfect ass on display for me. I had to grab it and squeeze it. More moans began to erupt from her throat, and right then and there I made it my mission to hear those sounds again.

My hands were shaking so badly with the need I had for her. I wanted to go slowly, savor every second, but I couldn't. Grabbing her hips, I thrust inside of her.

Immediately her warm wet channel had me like a vise and I wanted to blow my load.

What was it about this woman? Why did she always have me on the edge of insanity?

I pulled back and thrust again, loving the way that she cried out my name.

“Mark,” she panted. “Oh, oh, ah, Mark!”

I leaned down and feathered kisses on the back of her neck. I loved the taste and smell of Sutton. Nico had been able to dress her like a corporate shark, but she still smelled of flowers and innocence. It was the same scent that she wore the first night we stayed together in that horrible trailer of hers.

I was thankful she hadn’t changed her perfume. My hand slipped around and grabbed one of her perfect tits. I loved the gasp and moan as I tweaked the already hardened point. My hips took up a fast pace, slamming inside of her so hard that you could hear each distinct slap as I rode her.

My hands moved to her ass. “I am going to fuck this someday.”

She moaned again when I smacked her tight butt cheek and my handprint began to raise up on her tender skin.

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

I could feel myself getting closer, but I wasn't finished yet.

Pulling out, I ignored her mewl of protest and flipped her onto her back. Her tits bounced, and I eyed them hungrily.

"I am going to fuck those too," I murmured.

Sutton looked up at my face with dazed eyes. "Promises, promises."

Suddenly, the need to dominate this sassy woman overtook me. To her surprise, I ripped the condom off and crawled up her body.

"Your mouth or your tits?" I demanded.

If anything, her eyes got darker, and her hands raised up to grasp my thighs.

"Can't it be both?" she asked huskily.

"Fuck, yeah," I growled.

Spitting on my dick, I shoved her tits together and told her to hold them tight. I placed a pillow behind her head and then covered her hands with mine pressing them even tighter. When I thrust my cock into the warm channel, I felt like a Neanderthal and I loved it.

Sutton reached out her tongue and licked the mushroomed head of my dick and I saw stars. Pulling back, I thrust again, and she sucked as much of me as she could with

each pass. My balls began to tighten, and I knew that I was close, too damn close.

She sucked on the tip harder, pushed her tits tighter, until I called out that I was coming, and my cock began to spurt cum all over her perfect tits. I had dreamed about marking her, and now that I saw her in my cum, I knew that I wanted to do it again.

I wanted to watch as my seed dripped out of her pussy. I wanted to see those perfect lips take me and lick up every drop.

Without cleaning her up, I grabbed her hips once again and fucked her as hard as I could with my mouth. My teeth grazed her clit and I knew that my stubble was grinding against her sensitive flesh. Sutton screamed with pleasure, begging me not to stop.

She had to be crazy, because there was no way I would stop, not even if the building were burning down.

Her heels went over my shoulders and began to dig into my back. Her legs were tightening around my head, and I pushed my tongue further inside of her. I sucked harder until her cries became incoherent, and then it happened.

She flew so hard and fast into oblivion that she couldn't control the shaking of her body. Her orgasm shook every inch of her as she came and came on my tongue and face. It was glorious, and something that I would never get used to nor ever forget.

Whether I wanted it or not, Sutton was deeply ingrained in my world and I didn't know how I had allowed her to get there. Her eyes were closed when I set her body back down on the couch, and I realized that she still had her socks on.

She looked sexy as hell with her hair all over the place and her body covered in love

bites and sweat. But those pink fuzzy socks were the breaking point into fucking adorable.

She popped an eye open and looked at me. I had a hard time keeping her gaze because my traitorous eyes kept going to where my cum was drying on her breasts.

“You made a mess,” she said in a husky voice.

I wasn’t sure what I expected her to say, but it wasn’t that. I found my lips tugging up into a reluctant smile.

“It looks like you are the one that is messy.” I pointed to my face that was still covered in her juices. I even had some on my chest. Sutton’s pleasure was all I could taste and smell around me.

She flushed. “That’s your fault too.”

I cocked a brow. “How do you figure that?”

Suddenly Sutton looked away shyly and I almost choked on my tongue. The girl that just let me fuck her tits was anything but shy. Her cheeks heated, and she said softly, “Nobody has ever done anything like that before to me.”

Shit.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I cleared my throat and got up, reaching out for her hand to pull her up to me. She took it hesitantly, and in her stocking feet, I realized just how tiny she was compared to my great hulking frame. Shit, I could have broken her in half! What was I thinking pounding so hard?

“Nobody has ever done what?” I don’t know why I was asking, but for some reason, I needed to know.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

Sutton turned and began to gather up her clothes. The only problem was that she thrust that amazing ass at me as she bent over. I stifled a groan and tried to think of something else, anything else.

“I’ve had sex before,” she said defensively.

“I never said you hadn’t,” I countered, figuring I had better grab my clothes as well.

She turned with her things in her arms, and I could see the high color on her cheeks as she tried to hide behind her bundle of clothes.

“I have seen porn before. I knew about some of this stuff, I just had never done anything but the missionary style.”

I was a fucking prick.

I should have been sensitive and caring.

“I’m sorry,” I said gravely. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Her eyes took on a look of confusion and she inadvertently lowered her clothes. I could see those dusky nipples again begging to be sucked on. I felt my cock getting hard.

“I wasn’t hurt,” she said in a low voice. “I really liked it.”

And then she turned and ran out of the living room, slamming her door, and I heard

the lock slide into place.

I was frozen to the spot, my unfocused gaze not taking in the way that we had actually moved the couch with our fucking. Not seeing the condom or the wrapper laying on the ground, or even her bra that she had forgotten to take with her.

All I could think about were her words, ‘I really liked it.’

A slow smile spread across my face. If she liked that, I had a whole lot more coming for her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Sutton

“What is wrong with... Oh, no way—shut up!” Candice squealed with excitement as I shoved her into my office and slammed the door. The last thing I needed was Bethany the Bitch to catch on.

“I don’t know what you think you know,” I said loftily to Candice. And then, belaying everything I had just said, I gingerly took a seat, trying not to wince.

To say it had been a while for me wouldn’t be over exaggerating. Also, I have never been with a man that was carrying something so, erm, virile between his legs. I ached in places I hadn’t known I had, and it felt fucking fantastic.

“You slept with Mr. Williams.” She giggled, her eyes dancing. “Don’t try and deny it. You are walking the walk of a well-fucked woman.”

I scoffed. “Maybe I went horseback riding?”

“Oh, you went riding all right, I just don’t know who rode who,” Candice teased, and I felt my face flush.

“Is it that obvious?” I grumbled.

“That you are glowing in the post-coital glory of our illustrious CEO? Goodness, Sutton, why ever would you think something like that?”

Her fake southern accent meant to mimic my own had me struggling not to smile. She said that I sounded like Scarlett O’Hara and Reese Witherspoon combined. I wasn’t sure if that was a compliment or not, but Candice assured me that it was hot, and all the guys would love it.

I wasn’t interested in all the guys. Just one particular one, with gray eyes and an ass that made my fingers itch. And a cock so long and thick that it made my mouth water and my thighs clench.

Candice laughed. “Come back to me, Sutton.”

I blinked. “I am right here.”

She raised a brow. “You might have been here physically, but your lady bits were reliving your night of sin.”

That did make me laugh. “You sound like my old neighbor, Martha. She was confident that I was a slut of the highest degree.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

Candice frowned. “Why would anyone think that about you?”

I had explained my past to Candice in theory, but I had left out some pertinent details—crack whore mother hadn’t made the cut. I don’t know what it was about her, maybe the way that she didn’t judge me like everyone else in my life. Or perhaps it was the way she seemed to want me to find happiness, but I found myself opening up to her.

“Do you remember when I told you that I grew up poor?”

Candice nodded.

“Well, there is a little more to it.” Taking a deep breath, I went on. “My mom, she wasn’t like the other moms.”

Candice leaned in. “How so?”

I let out a mirthless laugh. “When I was six, she sent me outside with a bag of money to give a man in a black shiny car. We usually didn’t get fancy vehicles like that around Otterville Falls. But I was familiar with this one. She had sent me out before to trade the man for another brown paper bag. I wasn’t to open it, just bring it inside. And then mommy would need to sleep for a long time.”

“Oh, Sutton.” She covered her mouth.

I continued, “The police were onto Mama, and she wasn’t being careful. There was a raid and I was taken from her for six months. My foster parents didn’t give a shit

about me, only the paycheck that they received from the state. Mom managed to clean herself up a little bit and I was given back to her. A little battered and bruised, but I didn't care. I only wanted to be with my mom."

"Was she able to stay clean?" I glanced at Candice, and my answer must have been written across my face, because she sighed heavily. "I am so sorry."

I gave her a faint smile. "Don't be. We muddled along well enough. Sure, there were bad times and times when she did some horrible things. But there were good times as well. My mother did love me."

I hated the way my voice sounded, almost pleading in a way.

"I am sure she did," Candice replied softly. "What did she do for work?"

I blew out a harsh breath. "Anyone with enough cash to get her high."

"Sutton, I don't even know what to say." I could tell that she was stunned, and suddenly I felt embarrassed for sharing such a private part of my past.

"Anyhow," I went on hurriedly, "two of our old neighbors there, Earl and Martha, they have been a constant in my life. And I mean that in the respect that Martha consistently hated my mother and now me. Earl is a dear and would often come to my place to get away from Martha's caustic tongue."

"What is Earl like?" Candice wriggled her eyebrows. "Is he hot?"

I burst out laughing. The thought of Earl and his nasty underwear being sexy was almost too much for me to handle.

"He has to be in his eighties, usually wears dirty underwear and a stained wife beater.

Oh! And I think he might weigh ninety pounds soaking wet.”

Candice laughed at the picture I painted. “Sounds like a real charmer.”

I smiled widely. “Definitely. If he isn’t stealing from the collection plate, he is drinking the sacramental wine. You can’t help but love his old ornery ass. Martha is something else, and I have no idea why he stays with her except that it’s always been the two of them. Perhaps it is what’s familiar to them both.”

Candice shook her head. “I should like to visit Otterville Falls one day. It sounds like a fun place.”

I regarded her for a moment. I would never have considered Otterville Falls as fun or even put them into the same sentence before. But the more I thought about it, the more I deemed her to be right.

“I think you would like to visit,” I told her truthfully. “There are these two older ladies Alice and Reena who hit on anything that has a penis. The best part is that they look like the odd couple. One is really heavy and the other is super thin. They are good friends of mine.”

Candice tipped her head to the side. “They sound adorable. Is everyone older? You haven’t talked about anyone your age.”

I made a face. “I wasn’t exactly popular for obvious reasons. It wasn’t like I could have friends over, and nobody wanted me to come to their house. I worked with a guy at a bar who later became my boss when his mom passed away. He never treated me well, but he made sure I had a job and steady income. I know that his mama, Ruth Ann, asked him to look after me when she passed, so it wasn’t out of the kindness of his heart.”

Candice frowned. “What about birthday parties and sleepovers? Did you ever do anything like that?”

I shuddered remembering some of the ‘sleepovers’ that my mother participated in. “No,” I said shortly. “My mother’s customers stayed over, but somehow I don’t think that is what you are talking about.”

“Did they ever hurt you?” she asked softly.

I didn’t want to talk about this anymore. “It doesn’t matter now. It’s all over and has been for a long time.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

“Sutton,” she began, but I cut her off.

“Did you get the chance to call and speak with Mrs. Brand? Where are we on the child watch project for the employees?”

Candice reluctantly went back to work, and we managed to knock out a considerable number of projects in the next few hours. Not taking a break for lunch, we ordered sandwiches in and were discussing the accounts payable process when the delivery person arrived. They left, and we dug in as we worked.

I was halfway through my sandwich when the door swung open again.

My eyes snapped to the source of the noise, and my words nearly froze in my mouth.

“Gabriel? What in the hell are you doing here?”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sutton

Candice looked from me to Gabriel and back again. I stood up and awkwardly greeted my former employer from back in Otterville Falls with a handshake that I was tempted to wipe off the moment our hands broke apart.

Bethany the Bitch came racing in. “I am so sorry, Ms. Landry. I don’t know how this gentleman got past my desk.”

I wanted to roll my eyes at her obvious flirting with Gabriel. Sure, he looked good on the outside, but there was nothing on the inside that was appealing in the slightest.

Gabriel tipped his cowboy hat at Bethany. “I’m sorry, ma’am, I didn’t mean to cause any harm. I just needed to speak with Sutton. We’ve been friends since we were children.”

Candice choked, and I could see the censure in her eyes. She wanted to know why I hadn’t told her about Gabriel. I knew that she was thinking that there was some hot love affair that I had buried. Little did she realize that I had told her all about Gabe the Dick. I just hadn’t mentioned his name.

“That will be all, Bethany,” I said dismissively and saw the narrowing of her eyes before she excused herself from my office.

Candice immediately stood, and I introduced them.

“Gabriel was my boss back at Abberly’s Bar after his mother Ruth Ann passed away.”

Understanding lit her face and I saw the way she wrinkled her nose in disgust. Now that she knew what I was dealing with, there wouldn’t be any more hurtful gazes from her.

“Gabriel, this is my right hand, Candice, she has been instrumental in my development here at Sutton Enterprises.”

He looked at me with a strange expression. “Instrumental? Development? Shit, Sutton, I’ve never heard you talk like that before. Have you been taking lessons in deportment?”

And with a few words, he already had me on edge. My fists curled up of their own accord and I knew that my tone was frosty when I replied to him.

“I am a busy woman, Gabriel. What do you need?”

He looked over at Candice. “Can we get a little privacy?”

Just as she tried to escape, I stepped in front of the partially opened door and closed it.

“There is nothing that you need to tell me that can’t be said in front of Candice.”

I didn’t want to be left alone with Gabe. He had a creepy vibe to him that seemed amplified the moment he stepped into my office. I had thought I had seen the last of him.

Candice motioned for the seat adjacent to hers and I followed that up with an invitation for him to sit down.

Once I was back behind my desk, I felt a little better with the distance I had put between us.

“I hate to rush you, Gabriel, but I do have a meeting in a few moments.”

I could tell by the sour expression on his face that I was pissing him off. What did he expect? If he wanted to be welcomed with open arms, he shouldn’t have been such an ass to me for all of those years.

He leaned forward in his chair. “Sutton, there has been a little accident back home.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

I felt the breath leaving my body. “What happened?”

My mind was whirling thinking that Martha finally killed Earl or that something happened to April and Reena.

He scowled. “Mad Max has been drinking pretty heavily and busted up the place two nights ago.”

“Is he okay?” I interrupted him. “Is Max hurt?”

Gabriel’s face hardened. “That’s not really the point that I am making here.”

Candice looked at me and her gaze spoke a thousand words.

“I think it is important to Sutton,” Candice said firmly.

He looked at her with scorn. “This isn’t any of your business.” He turned to me. “Does your secretary have to be here for this?”

I dug my nails into my hands. “First off, Candice is not my secretary. Second, she makes more in a month than you do in an entire year, so you may want to rethink how you talk to her. And third, what in the fuck happened to Max?”

He sat back stunned at my forceful tone. I had given him sass before, but I had never stood my ground so firmly. Gabriel had gone too far by dismissing Max and treating Candice so poorly.

My door slammed open, and I almost expected it to crack.

Mark stood in the doorway with barely suppressed anger. “Who let you in?”

Gabriel bristled. “I am a friend of Sutton’s. I promised my mother on her deathbed that I would look after her.”

Mark’s eyes flared. “So, when you were working her to the bone, that was looking after her? Or having her close the bar by herself in the middle of the night? How about allowing her to live in that dilapidated trailer? You are a real good Samaritan, aren’t you?”

Color suffused Gabriel’s cheeks, and he stood toe to toe with Mark. Gabriel was handsome in a rough kind of way, and his body was honed from hauling beer in and out of his bar. But there was no comparison when it came to Mark.

His chiseled jawline and steel gray eyes captured me. I knew what kind of body he was hiding under those tailored shirts, and shit if I didn’t get wet just smelling his cologne.

“What do you need?” Mark demanded.

Gabriel clutched his hat tightly. “Max busted up my bar. His drinking has been out of control and Sutton needs to do something about it.”

My mind was reeling. I needed to see Max, to find out why the old biker was behaving so out of character. I was just about to assure Gabriel that I would take care of things when Mark answered for me.

“Max is a grown ass man and so are you. How dare you bring those problems to Sutton? She doesn’t even live there anymore. Are you not man enough to take care of

your own business affairs?”

If Candice’s eye got any bigger, they would pop right out of her head. She looked like she was enjoying this, but I failed to see the humor.

Gabriel took a swing at Mark. But he wasn’t fast enough and ended up stumbling when he missed. Mark had security right outside of my office, and in seconds, Gabriel was being escorted out of the building.

“He is not to be let in for any reason.” Mark was livid. “If I find out who let him in, they will be job hunting within the hour.”

Candice fled my office as if the hounds of hell were after her.

I knew that I should have been grateful that Mark was trying to protect me. But I wasn’t. I couldn’t remember a time when I had been so angry. How dare he try and fight my battles for me? I was handling things just fine before he barged in and took over.

I grabbed his arm and yanked him toward his office. I didn’t stop when Bethany tried to apologize to Mark, although I did notice that she had addressed him and not me. Once we were in the office, I slammed his door shut and whirled on him.

“Just who in the hell do you think you are?”

Mark’s huge presence didn’t deter me as I shoved my finger into his chest, “You have no right to butt into my personal business.”

His nostrils flared as his arm wrapped around my waist and yanked me to his body.

“You are my business.”

Page 52

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

I wanted to hate the possessive way that he was glaring down at me, but it was sexy as hell. I wriggled in his arms, but he held me easily against him.

“Let me go!” I demanded.

He smirked. “Or what?”

I tried to stomp my heel on histoe, but he shoved me against the door.

“I don’t think so, Princess.”

His mouth took mine in a savage kiss. I should have shoved him away instead of sinking my hands into his hair and pulling him closer.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Sutton

The feelings of rage quickly transformed in lust and passion. I was still angry as fuck with Mark, but my body was clamoring to be closer to him. His hands caged me in against the door as we both fought for dominance of the kiss.

Teeth clashed, and I tasted a faint metallic hint, letting me know that one of us nipped too hard. My tongue tangled with his and I sucked hard, just to remind him what my mouth felt like around his cock.

The groan that slipped from his throat was almost feral. His large hands clamped

down on my hips in a punishing grasp and I moaned at the contact. I was hot and aching between my thighs, knowing what I wanted and aware that he was the only man who had ever made me feel this way.

The last thing that I wanted was to be emotionally tied to a man that could never, would never, feel the same way about me. It was self-destruction of the worst kind to continue this tumultuous affair. But I didn't stop him when he picked me up and carried me over to his massive desk.

I didn't cry out when he swept everything off of his desk in one broad stroke. My heart was clamoring to escape my chest and my breathing had dissolved into short pants. His hands slid under my skirt and pushed the fabric to my waist as he caressed the silky skin of my thighs.

This was the time I should have stopped him. Mark would never force himself on a woman. But I didn't, because I was too busy fumbling with the buckle of his belt. He pushed my hands away impatiently and unzipped his slacks, not bothering to unfasten the rest. He was desperate to be inside of me.

I clawed at his chest, grabbing the fabric of his shirt to yank him closer. He grunted when his thighs smacked the edge of his desk. There was a sharp sting on my hip and then I saw him throw something lacy behind him.

“You just ripped off my underwear!”

Of all the times I could have spoken up and this is the inane comment that slipped through my lips. Not my finest moment, to be sure, but the smirk that appeared on his face somehow made my fire burn hotter.

He wrenched my thighs apart and thrust his cock deep inside of me. Although I was ready for him, I was still sore, and I cried out at the invasion. Mark stopped

immediately.

“Did I hurt you?” his eyes were intent upon my face.

I knew by the signs of strain that he was struggling not to move. My heart gave a small lurch and I tried to ignore it.

“No,” I panted. “Move, please, Mark, move!”

He didn’t need to be asked again, because he pulled out and pounded back into me. It felt raw and amazing, like nothing I had ever felt before. I thought that the night we had together was beyond incredible, but this...

Words can’t even describe how it felt to have him pounding away inside of me.

“Shit.” It dawned on me why everything felt so amazing. “Condom!”

He stopped, balls deep inside of me—frozen.

I nudged him. “Mark, are you okay?”

He blinked and pulled out of me. His glistening cock was covered in my juices and hard as a rock. Shaking his head, he went to his pants, pulled out his wallet, and grabbed a condom. Something was off though, and I didn’t know what had caused it.

Those thoughts flew out of the window the moment that he slid back inside of me. He still felt incredible, but not as amazing as he had bare. It made me wonder what it would be like to have him cum inside of me.

My pussy clenched, and Mark growled his approval. Pushing my knees back toward my chest, Mark pounded into me at a new angle. He was deep, and I was helpless

against the onslaught. The familiar tingling of my release began forming low in my belly.

My desire for him had become larger than life. I needed him deeper, harder, until we were fused together so tightly that I couldn't tell where he ended and I began.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

Mark found that spot deep inside of me and I whimpered at the contact. He began to pump short furious strokes that battered my g-spot and sent me into oblivion.

Black spots clouded my vision. I couldn't breathe, or reason. It was as if I had transformed into a rolling mass of pleasure. Every nerve ending shook my body, clenching and unraveled as my orgasm swept through me.

Mark grunted, and I felt the warmth of his seed filling the condom. We hadn't been quiet. And in the aftermath when things went deathly still, I realized just how loud we were together.

"Tell me your office is soundproof," I demanded as Mark slipped his dick from my body.

I didn't even watch him take care of the condom. I yanked myself out of his reach and pulled my skirt back down. I wasn't sure if there was a wet spot on the back of my skirt and I sure as hell wasn't going to check with his intimidating gaze glaring down at me.

"No," he said in reply to my question. "There is good insulation, but the offices are not soundproof."

He almost seemed angry, which confused me even further. I hadn't been the one to attack him. I wasn't the one kicking people out of the building or chasing down women in cafes across town.

The more I thought about it the angrier I became. "What is the matter?" I demanded

sharply.

“Did you invite him here?” Mark shot back in a livid tone that matched my own.

“Are you serious?” My face heated, but it wasn’t with embarrassment. I wanted to hurt this man. I had always thought I was something of a pacifist. That was, until I met Mark.

“Why else would he be here?” Mark raised a condescending brow.

“Fuck you, Mark! Fuck you and your stupid ass questions. Gabriel has always been a first-class prick to me. Why in the fuck do you think I would ever invite him here? Do you know me at all? Shit, don’t answer that. I need a moment to think.”

I turned on my heels and stalked over to the door. But before storming out, I turned to give him my final parting shot.

“Your precious Bethany?” I taunted.

His jaw tightened, but he said nothing.

“She was the one who let him in. But since you seem to like her so much, maybe we can let this security breach slide.”

I slammed the door hard enough to shake the pictures on the wall.

Bethany opened her mouth to speak but I held a hand up. “Not now.”

I went straight to my office and was relieved when I found it empty. With another slamming of the door, I rounded my desk and sank down into my office chair. The emotions from earlier were churning along with a few new ones.

Regret that Mark would never truly see me as I really am. Sadness that this all might have been a mistake. Relief that Mark got rid of Gabe for the present, and so much jealousy over Bethany the Bitch that I couldn't see straight.

I had to pull my shit together. What was I thinking? The last thing that I wanted to do was throw all of these weeks of hard work away. I reached up and hurriedly flicked a stray tear from my face. Corporate giants didn't cry, and neither would I. I would not let Mark or anyone else stand between me and who I was meant to be.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Sutton

Some of my earliest memories were of Mad Max coming to our little trailer and playing with me when my mama was sick. I don't remember what ailed her specifically. But I do remember her laying in her bed and staring at the wall—often for days at a time.

Max brought me some cheap toys from the local dollar store. I remember a plastic tea set specifically because he would sit on my worn carpet in his motorcycle club clothes. I remember adoring the brilliant colors of his tattoos and asking him if he could paint some on me too.

One day he came by and I was hiding from him. When he finally found me, I had taken my markers and drawn all over my skin. Instead of tanning my hide, like I had expected, Max laughed until tears ran down his cheeks.

He had taken me into where Mama was laying and told her something along the lines of, "If you can't bother to live for yourself, you can at least make an effort for her."

I didn't understand what it meant. But it must have meant something to Mama

because things got a little better for a while—until the drugs started up.

I was sitting in a meeting with Mandy Brand and Candice to go over the ideas for our childcare center, but I couldn't concentrate on the conversation.

My mind kept reverting back to Max. His behavior was so out of place. I felt like the answers were right in front of me, but I couldn't make them out.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

“Sutton?” Candice repeated my name for the second time, and I blushed with embarrassment.

“I am so terribly sorry,” I said to her and then turned an apologetic look to Mandy.

Before I could open my mouth, she waved a hand and spoke.

“Something is clearly on your mind.” Her voice was soft and sweet just like she was.

Tiny and blonde with deep blue eyes, she looked nothing like me. My obvious curves and thick black hair made a strong statement. Mandy looked delicate like a porcelain doll.

I was my father’s daughter—bold, strong, and independent. I may not have been tall, but my personality often made me seem larger than life. Mama was like Mandy, and for some reason, it really bothered me.

Mandy’s tone held the perfect blend of compassion and empathy. “Sutton, I know that you are new here to the city.”

Everyone who wasn’t living under a rock knew that. There had been interviews, magazine exclusives, and television appearances. The love child of Hollingsworth Sutton, heiress to billions, kept the media in a frenzy for weeks.

She ran her hand nervously over her skirt. “I don’t often talk about this. But when I met Elliot, I was living in a dramatically different environment than I do now. I was jobless, pregnant, and I would have been homeless if my parents hadn’t taken me in.”

I was shocked at her level of transparency. Most people that I had met since coming to the city were overly concerned about how others perceived them. I was learning that Mandy Brand wasn't like most people.

"It was kind of your parents," I replied, and immediately she flinched.

"My parents, they were often cruel to my sister and me." Mandy twisted her hands in her lap. "They had a pretty severe substance abuse problem."

This was something I understood. "That must have been very difficult for you both."

She nodded jerkily. "My parents were murdered in a drug deal gone wrong about a year ago. I am sure you are wondering why I would be telling you about all of this."

She was right. As much as it humanized this amazing woman, I couldn't see how any of it applied to me. I glanced at Candice, who was looking on with wide eyes. When I brought my gaze back to Mandy, she continued.

"Forgive me if I am overstepping here. But I cannot help but see that you are troubled. If there is anything that you ever need—a shoulder to cry on, someone to vent to, or even just a friendly face, I am here."

I cleared my throat to help dislodge the emotion that had settled there. I wasn't ready to break down and share all the gory details of my life. But I was touched that this woman would extend the hand of friendship to me—a stranger.

Candice leaned forward to fill the gap, and I realized too late that I had been silent a hair too long.

"I know just what we need to do." Her dark eyes sparkled.

“What is that?” I asked.

“Girls’ night!” she exclaimed with enthusiasm.

A wide smile split across Mandy’s face. “That is a brilliant idea.”

Candice clapped her hands excitedly. “We can put on our fanciest clothes and go to a swanky club that serves frou-frou cocktails.”

I felt myself crumbling. “I have never been to a club before. How different is it from a bar?”

Mandy laughed, and I found myself answering with an embarrassed grin.

“Week from Friday I am free. Will that work for you ladies?” Mandy asked.

I looked at Candice with only a hint of trepidation. She answered for the both of us, “That will be perfect!”

“Do you care if I ask my sister Kim along?” Mandy asked as she stood to leave.

I shook my head. “The more the merrier. We would love to have her.”

We said our goodbyes and I walked Mandy to the elevator. When I returned Candice was looking at me rather sheepishly.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

“What?” I asked. She was usually so confident and put together that I couldn’t tell what her mood was.

“I hope that I didn’t overstep.” Her cheeks were heated. “I know that I am your employee and shouldn’t...”

I stopped her. “We are co-workers and friends. Candice, you are incredible, I hope you know that.”

She beamed as if lit from within. “Thank you, Sutton. I know that your life was turned upside down when you came here. But I am so glad that you did. I hope that in time you feel the same way.”

And the crazy part was that I didn’t hate my new life, and I had fully expected to.

Her smile fell and she tipped her head to the side in concern. “Are you still thinking about Gabriel’s visit this morning?”

There wasn’t any point to lie to her, and so I answered honestly.

“Max was a surrogate father to me. I am really concerned about him.”

Candice blew out a breath. “We could leave early on Friday and make a weekend trip to Otterville Falls. That way you could check in on Max and see if Gabriel was telling the truth.”

“You would go all that way with me?” My voice was small and hesitant.

Candice shrugged. “Sure, just let me know and I will schedule us some flights.”

It seemed so easy when she put it that way. I had tried to call Max when I returned from Mark’s office earlier, but I hadn’t been able to reach him. Sometimes I forgot that I had access to funds if I needed them.

With trepidation, I agreed to her plan. “Let’s do it. Candice, you had better get your shots and grab a pair of Chucks because we are headed to the county.”

She laughed and waved her hand at me as if I was teasing.

I wasn’t kidding, but I kinda hoped that I would see her face when she realized just what she had signed up for.

This was going to be fun.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Mark

I could hardly believe that we were flying on my private jet—correction, our private jet—headed back to hillbilly hell. I was feeling ten kinds of shit about what had happened in my office with Sutton after that douche canoe Gabriel showed up.

I never lost control like that. But it had happened twice now when Sutton was concerned. I was well aware that I had lost all objectivity when it came to her. I had vowed right then and there that I would take a step back.

Whatever was happening between us scared the living shit out of me. I was also painfully aware that it wasn’t fair to Sutton to force whatever fucked up feelings that I had developed on her while she was trying to adjust to a new life.

And fucking her against my office desk—shit, as hot as that had been—it was no way to treat her.

When I walked out into the hallway with the intent of going and apologizing, I ran right into Bethany. Instead of stepping back as any rational person would do, she leaned into me and clutched my chest in the guise of needing to steady herself.

Sutton had excellent instincts. Bethany really was a bitch. I promptly opened my office door again and invited her inside. Bethany's eyes had widened with hope and a fair bit of lust. It honestly turned my stomach. Did she think that I could fuck one woman and turn around and fuck her too?

What kind of person would allow a man to do that to her?

In a few short words, I let her have it.

“We take security very seriously here,” I began. “Because you allowed someone who was not only unexpected but possibly dangerous on our floor and into our offices, you have proven yourself a liability.”

She tried to ramble some lame excuse about Gabriel's personal relationship with Sutton, but I shut that shit down.

“You didn't contact Sutton to alert her that someone was here to see her. I checked with downstairs and they said you gave the okay for him to come on the elevator. This is unacceptable. You will pack your things and be gone as quickly as possible.”

Her face, which I had once thought somewhat attractive, twisted into something very ugly.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

I wasn't about to argue with the woman, so I called security and they watched her as she packed her personal items and escorted Bethany out of the building.

I wanted to go and speak with Sutton then, but as I approached her door, I saw that she had Candice in with her. I paused briefly before knocking and heard another woman speaking. Sutton was in a meeting of some kind, and so I walked back to my desk and dialed human resources. We would need someone to fill Bethany's position as soon as possible.

Once I had set them on the task, I had gotten lost in some paperwork and was surprised when I heard the faint knocking on my door.

Sutton entered before I could answer, and I couldn't help the little twinge of respect for the woman. She wasn't cowering anymore like she had when we first came to the city.

Even after what had happened in my office and with Gabriel this morning she stood proudly before me with a slight tilt to her chin.

"Where's Bethany the Bitch?" she asked, folding her arms across her chest.

I tried not to watch how her thin shirt stretched across her glorious breasts. Her hair had been tamed a little, but I could still tell that it was slightly mussed from my hands. My cock throbbed, and I wondered if there would ever be a time when she didn't distract me.

"I wouldn't know. My guess is either busy making a voodoo doll of the both of us,

and perhaps planning some way to poison me in my sleep.”

Sutton sank down in the chair opposite my desk. “What?”

“I fired her,” I said firmly. “She compromised your safety.”

Sutton blinked at me in astonishment.

I almost cracked a smile, “I am sorry about what happened earlier.”

A delicate flush painted her cheeks and I wanted to yank her to me. Bend her over my desk and thrust inside of her until everything on her perfect body was pink and crying out to me.

“I need some time off,” she blurted out.

It was my turn to be lost in confusion. She started talking, her manicured hands waving in the air as she listed all the reasons why she needed to go back to Otterville Falls. My first instinct was to throw her over my shoulder and lock her in our apartment for the rest of our lives.

But as she spelled out her concerns, I felt something inside of me twist a little tighter.

“I am determined to go, and I am not asking permission.”

Fuck me. This girl had me tied up in knots.

Sutton continued, “Candice said she would come with me and arrange our travel.”

I blew out a breath. “I will, of course, have the jet prepared for tomorrow.”

I met her wide eyes. “The jet?”

“If you are going to drag us back to Otterville Falls we will be traveling on the jet, not coach.”

I shuddered at the thought of flying with the public.

“You aren’t coming?”

I think it was supposed to be a statement, but it came out like a question.

I smirked at her and leaned forward just a fraction. The tension in the office swelled as I watched her eyes dilate. She unconsciously licked her bottom lip and my dick pulsed in response.

“You had better let Candice know when our flight will be leaving. Also, I called HR about a replacement for Bethany. They are to check with you before anyone permanent is given the position.”

Her mouth dropped open and I wanted more than anything to shove my cock between those perfect lips. Something in my face must have given my thoughts away because Sutton blushed wildly and immediately stood.

I followed suit, not giving a fuck that I was hard as a rock. I knew it was obvious and felt a swelling of masculine pride as her eyes fucked me over, taking in every inch of my body and lingering on the massive tent in my pants.

My tone was low as I added, “Is there anything else that I can do for you, Sutton?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

Her eyes snapped back to mine and she muttered something incoherent before bolting to the door. I was a little disappointed that she hadn't stayed to play, but before she left my office her eyes flew back to me and narrowed in once again on my junk.

I might have been completely wrapped up in her, but shit, she felt the same fucking way I did.

Twenty-four hours later I found myself pretending to read the latest thriller as I secretly listened to every word that Sutton and Candice uttered as they chatted about everything under the sun. I felt a surge of pride at the way Sutton was coming into her own.

She wore her designer labels like she was born to it. But I had to admit that in designer or not, I had always found her irresistibly beautiful.

"Where are we staying at?" I heard Candice ask, and I couldn't help the tilt to my lips.

I decided it was time to give up the pretense of reading. Before Sutton could respond, I spoke, "How do you feel about bed bugs?"

Candice eyed me in horror as Sutton rolled her eyes. "I would never send her to that no-tell-motel."

I raised a brow. "You were more than willing to send me."

She grinned at me. It was so sudden that I felt like someone had unleashed the sun. I

actually felt the warmth radiating from her face. She was mesmerizing.

“Candice is my friend,” Sutton said saucily, implying that I was anything but. I chose not to pick up the challenge that she had thrown down.

Turning to Candice, I answered her question, “We will be staying at Sutton’s place.”

She blinked. “The trailer?”

For some reason, I took offense to the shocked undertones in her voice. “There is nothing wrong with Sutton’s home.”

Candice flushed. “Sir, you misunderstood me. I have no problems with staying in a trailer. It is only I didn’t think... that is to say... I’m sorry.”

And then it hit me, her surprise was that I was okay with the arrangements. Just what kind of an ass had I been portraying myself as? And the worst part was that she was completely right in her assessment.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Sutton

It’s funny how different Otterville Falls appeared to me as we rolled into town.

True to form, Mark had rented a large black SUV that looked like it cost more than three of my trailers combined. I didn’t want to meet Candice’s gaze as we drove down Main Street.

It was still lined with brick buildings that have been there for at least a hundred years. Above the Five and Dime, you could just make out a retro Coca-Cola symbol that had

been painted before I was born.

However, I had never noticed how crumbly and old things were looking. More than a few windows had been boarded up, and it appeared that the streetlight was out again. We only had the one, and often it was on the fritz.

I had a ball of shame churning in my gut that both surprised and saddened me.

As we passed Abberly's, I saw Mark curl his lip in disdain. The feelings inside of me began to fester, but I smashed them down and pasted a smile on my face. I've had plenty of years training in how to appear as if nothing is wrong with me.

As we approached the sheriff's office, I asked Mark to pull over. He had barely stopped when I wrenched the car door open and got out.

I could hear his mumbled cursing, most likely for me to wait for him. Obviously, I ignored it. I couldn't stand to be in that vehicle for a moment longer.

The door opened just as I approached the building, and I saw Deputy Brown greeting me with a scowl on his face.

"Well," he smirked derisively, "look what the cat dragged in."

I ignored the old fool and pushed past him into the dated police building.

Linda, with her seven-inch beehive, was typing away on a computer that looked to be vintage 1985.

"Bless my soul, if it isn't little Sutton!"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

Linda wriggled her way out of her desk chair and threw her arms around me.

“Just look at you, sugar! Why you are prettier than a picture! Are you back with us to stay?”

I patted the other woman awkwardly and tried to extract myself from her clutches. “Is Mad Max here?”

“You bring trouble along with you?” Deputy Brown grunted at Mark and Candice as they entered the building.

Mark stalked up to me and grabbed my elbow. “You will never do that again.”

I gave my arm a hard yank to dislodge him, but his grip was firm. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him to go fuck himself. But out of the corner of my eye, I caught Linda’s open mouth. My fight with Mark was something I could postpone until we had less of an audience.

“Linda,” I gritted out, “is Max here?”

She nodded slowly and picked up the phone. “Knox? We got ourselves some company out here that would like to see the prisoner.”

The door to the back swung open and Sheriff Knox Bridges strode out to greet us in all of his cowboy glory. Six feet of sheer muscle, Knox wore his wranglers tight and his boots dusty. He had grown up poor, just a few trailers down from me, and although we hadn’t kept in touch very much over the years, I was still glad to see

him.

Mark's grasp loosened on my arm. Perhaps it was surprising that Knox was so much younger than Deputy Brown. I couldn't have known and didn't care as I launched myself at my old friend. His beefy arms wrapped around my waist and he lifted me clean off the floor as he twirled us both around.

"Kitten! Aren't you a sight for sore eyes!" Knox's raspy laugh filled the room.

I gave him another squeeze before demanding, "Put me down, you big lug!"

His smile was wider than the Mississippi. "I had a feeling we might be seeing you again, kitten. But I had no idea you would come back wearing all of this heavy artillery."

I could feel my cheeks heat. "What are you talking about, Ace? I look the same as I always have."

With a broad wink, I did a 180-degree turn so that he could take in my designer jeans, flowy top, and ankle boots. Neither one of us grew up with two nickels that we could rub together, so I knew that Knoxy would be pleased I had been served a good turn.

He whistled low and deep. "Hot damn, kitten, when did you become a girl?"

I swatted his shoulder and would have replied if a certain individual hadn't reached out and yanked me to him. I almost smacked into Mark's chest, his reaction was so quick.

I heard a choked laugh come from Candice and I made a mental note to kick her ass later.

Knox was watching the entire affair with curious eyes.

I cleared my throat and made the introductions. “Knoxy, this is Mark Williams and Candice Franks. They are friends of mine from the city.”

“Mark and Candice, this is Sherriff Knox Bridges.” I waited while he shook hands with Mark and then turned to Candice.

Her color was high, and when she giggled, it vaguely resembled a hyena. The moment it escaped her lips, she looked positively horrified.

Knox seemed entranced.

“Look, Knoxy,” I interjected, “I need to know if Max is here. Gabe came all the way to the city to tell me he’s been smashing up the place and drinking heavily.”

Knox frowned. “Why would Gabe come to you? I already told him that you weren’t liable for the damages to his bar.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Mark growled.

Knox looked at Mark back to me again. His eyes held a million questions and I had a feeling that I didn’t want to answer any of them anytime soon.

Knox nodded. “Max is sleeping in the cell. You can go back there, Sutton. But everyone else needs to stay here.”

Mark immediately protested, “Sutton won’t be going anywhere without me.”

Knox shrugged. “Suit yourself, but if she wants to talk to Max, she goes alone.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

I wasn't about to miss this opportunity. Turning to Mark, I could smell his cologne, and it helped to settle some of the nerves that I had been experiencing.

"I will be fine." My whisper wasn't loud enough for anyone else to hear. His face was tilted down so that he could look into my eyes.

"I don't like it." His words seemed to pain him. "I won't allow anything bad to happen to you."

A look of confusion must have been evident on my face because he continued, "I know the way people in this town treat you. I won't have it, Sutton. You won't be disrespected, not on my watch."

It was beyond sweet. Here I had thought that he was just being a territorial prick. But it had all stemmed from the desire to keep me safe. I knew what I had to do.

"Knoxy?" I called out, still staring into Mark's eyes. "I need my fiancé with me."

There was a stunned silence in the room. Candice knew the truth behind my fake engagement. But nobody back home had been aware that Mark and I had become engaged. Even if it was just to save face.

"Kitten?" he floundered for a minute. "If you're sure about it."

I had a feeling that Knox was just being the protective older brother. I slipped my hand into Mark's large one, enjoying the way sparks traveled up my arm.

Then I led him into the back where the one cell of Otterville Falls resided. I had been here enough as a child. Mama had a habit of getting picked up, so I knew just where to go.

Looking smaller and beaten down, Max lay sprawled across the thin mattress. His hair was matted and there was a particular stench of old booze and body odor.

“Oh, Max.” I hadn’t even realized that I uttered the words when his bleary eyes popped open.

“Sutton.” He blinked, trying to focus his gaze. “What are you doing here?”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Sutton

Sitting around my old kitchen table, I watched as Candice kept giving serious glances towards Knox. The part of me that wasn’t hung up on Max’s odd behavior was very much aware of my friend’s attraction to the sheriff.

It was endearing in a way. Candice has always been the consummate professional. I have leaned on her all of these weeks because she seemed impenetrable, unshakable, the epitome of the perfect business icon.

With her blushing cheeks and stammering sentences, it was nice to see that Candice was just as fallible as the rest of us.

Knox had promised to stop in and chat with me once his shift was over. Mark didn’t seem to care two licks for Knox. His arm was casually draped over the back of my chair. But that was only a ruse. There was nothing casual about the way Mark was claiming his territory—me.

“Listen, Sutton.” Knox leaned in. “I appreciate you coming down here to help Max. But honestly, there is nothing you can do. He’s a grown man. You did your part and tried to get him to talk about it.”

And I had tried. All afternoon I had begged and pleaded with Max to let me in on what was going on with him.

“Knox, you know he was like a father to me.” I felt Mark tense up beside me.

Mark loved and respected my birth father, but the truth was that I had never met him. So, my feelings could never be the same. The more I learned about the man, the more I respected him. But there would always be that doubt in the back of my mind.

Why did he sleep with my mama? Why didn’t he ever contact her again? Was she sick back then? Was Hollingsworth Sutton leaving the real reason Mama turned to drinking and drugs?

Or worse, was it me? Being an abandoned single mother, was I the reason Mama’s world imploded?

Knox shook his head adamantly. “No, Max liked to fuck your mama. You are looking at things through rose-colored glasses, Sutton. He was sweet on you, yes, but that man wasn’t anymore your father than the bastard that raised me.”

It felt like a blow.

Candice fired up. “How dare you?”

Knox swung around to face her, surprise lighting his face.

“Sutton really cares about this man. You have no right to be so callous with her

feelings.” Her chest was heaving, and her mouth was drawn into a tight line.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

I reached out and touched her arm. “It’s okay, Candice, he doesn’t mean any harm by it.”

“It’s not okay,” Candice interjected, but Knox interrupted her.

“I didn’t want to tell you this, Sutton. But I found out a few weeks back that Max has another family in Hollow Springs.”

I was stunned. “What are you talking about?”

Mark narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean, ‘another family’?”

Knox ran a hand through his shaggy blond hair. “I mean just what I said. He’s got a wife of twenty-five years, three kids, two of which are married now and have kids of their own. And it’s not like he abandoned them. When I got in touch with the wife, she told me that he drives long-rig trucks and was out on a job. It’s just a story, Sutton. He’s been riding with the motorcycle club for as long as I can remember.”

My mouth was dry, and my hands were shaking. “How is this possible?”

Knox shook his head. “His wife when she found out he was in jail here filed for divorce. She’s devastated, and from what I can tell, the kids are angry as fuck. What Max is doing right now has nothing to do with you.”

Mark pulled me closer to his side. “Are you okay?”

I nodded numbly, but I was far from doing okay. I wanted answers. I deserved

answers. I felt anger and hurt swirling in my gut. Max had been the one constant in my life. It made every memory that we had together feel tainted.

Mark gently brushed away my tears. I hadn't even realized I had been crying.

"I want to talk to him," I said through gritted teeth.

Knox blew out a breath but nodded. "Come back to the station tomorrow."

He grabbed his cowboy hat and stood up to leave. "I'm sorry, Sutton. I didn't mean to lay it on you like this. Honestly, I had hoped you wouldn't find out. I really am sorry."

I smiled weakly. "I should have known."

"What are you going to do about Gabriel?" Mark was addressing Knox, no doubt assuming that something needed to be put in place legally.

"I am headed over there now. We don't have enough to bring him in. But I can certainly put the fear of God in him."

Mark reached his hand out to shake Knox's. It was the first gesture of goodwill that I had seen between the two men. The arms that I had wrapped around him felt like an anchor to the only thing good in my life.

Candice cleared her throat. "I am just going to get ready for bed. It's been a long day."

When we had first arrived at the trailer, I offered to sleep on the couch so that Candice and Mark could each have their own rooms.

Mark quickly shut that down, informing Candice that she would be in the guest room and then blithely ignoring the fact that I had already placed her there.

I could tell that Candice was bursting at the seams to ask where he would be sleeping, not that she didn't already know. But Candice loved seeing my face flame with embarrassment. I had a feeling that if it were anyone else besides Mark, she would have been teasing me relentlessly.

Which made it all the sweeter when I caught her giving my old pal Knox puppy dog eyes. Candice was a smitten kitten. I couldn't wait to speak with her in private.

Mark kissed the side of my forehead as Candice slipped into the bathroom.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," he murmured against my skin.

I was plastered against his side and he never once complained as he rubbed my back aimlessly.

"Why aren't people honest with me?"

He tipped my chin up to gaze into my eyes. "What do you mean?"

"My mom, she lied to me about who my dad was. She knew that I suspected Max was my real dad. When he told me the story about my daddy being an old motorcycle club buddy, she allowed me to believe it."

"She was a broken woman, Sutton." He caressed my cheek with his thumb.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

“And Max, why did he lie about knowing my daddy? Why did he lie about having another family? It wasn’t like Mama didn’t have sex with married men, because she did. Shit, everyone in town seemed to know who was coming and going from this place.”

I felt the anger rise inside of me.

“And then there is Gabriel. He has always been something of a jackass to me. But coming all the way to the city to find me? That’s just weird. Where is this all leading to? What am I missing? Because it seems the only link between all of it is me.”

Mark clutched my face and forced me to look at him. “It isn’t your fault, Sutton. None of this is your fault. Not Max, not Gabriel, and certainly not your mother. For some reason, you have been caught in the crossroads, but you are not to blame for any of it.”

“Maybe it was my fault,” I choked out. “About what happened with Mama. Maybe it was my birth that sent her on that downward spiral.”

Mark’s hands slipped to my shoulders. His hands tightened as if he wanted to shake me.

“No,” he demanded, “You are wrong. The choices that your mother made—they are on her. You can’t keep blaming yourself for everything. Fuck, it’s like you have been punishing yourself for years simply because you were born. That’s fucked up, sweetheart. You are a blessing in the world. Why can’t you see that?”

My heart was breaking into a million pieces. Mark was right. I was so fucked up that there might not ever be a way to put me back together again. I tried over and over again to be good enough, but no matter what I did my mama always slipped back into her habits.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Mark

“We are buying a new bed for this place tomorrow,” I grumbled into Sutton’s hair as we both tried to keep from falling into the pit in the middle.

I hated the fact that she insisted on keeping her ramshackle trailer, but I would be damned if we had to sleep in a bed that was older than I was.

Her hands were placed on my chest, but it wasn’t in the possessive way that I liked. It was as if she were holding on to a lifeline. Her fingers dug into my white t-shirt. I didn’t need to see her fists to know that she was holding me with a white-knuckle grip.

“I can’t shake the feeling that something is really wrong, Mark.”

I hated the fear and hesitation that laced her soft words. Sutton should never be afraid or doubt herself. She is incredible and didn’t deserve the shit life that had dealt her.

I started to rub circles on her back, trying to tell myself that I wasn’t seducing her. Sutton was hurting and confused. This wasn’t the time to try and get into her pants. The problem was my dick had other ideas. Stupid fucker only thought about getting into Sutton’s pants and nothing else.

I moved my hips back a fraction of an inch, and it was just enough for one of those

old springs to fail and I rolled more firmly into the front of her body. There was no mistaking the massive length that was pressed firmly against her.

Even if I would have questioned her missing it, her sharply inhaled breath told me what I needed to know.

“I’m sorry,” I said gruffly, hoping she would drop it. I already felt like an ass for not taking things more seriously when Gabriel had come into our office. I wished that I had punched the motherfucker out. Let him try and sue me. He was trespassing and we both had known it.

Sutton released my shirt and I immediately felt the loss of connection.

“Sutton, I can’t help what my dick does. He has a mind of his own around you. I won’t try anything, I swear it.”

She made a hushing noise and then tugged at the hem of my shirt.

I yanked it over my head, and she placed her small hands on my heated flesh. Slowly she pushed me onto my back, kissing my neck, collarbone, and every inch of my abs down to the deep v-cut of my hips.

My hands sank into the soft material of her camisole and yanked it over her head. Those perfect tits that had cradled my dick before had me panting with the need to taste them, suck on them, and mark them as my own.

She pulled the waistband of my sleep pants down over my cock, yanking the underwear down with it. I was afraid to speak, or even breathe. I didn’t want to break the spell. Usually, it was me being the aggressor, but not tonight. I wasn’t sure if she needed to control something and I was the closest target or if this was something that got her off. Frankly, I didn’t care. It was sexy as fuck and I wanted to see where she

would be going with it.

She licked the skin on my hip and took a teasing bite out of the other side. I couldn't help the growl that escaped my lips, and my hands sunk into her gorgeous dark hair. Lick, suck, lick, suck, slowly she made her way to my cock, which was already coated with precum.

"Fuck, Sutton, what are you doing to me?"

Her cheek brushed the side of my cock and then she winked at me before swiping the tip with the broadside of her tongue.

My hips jerked and I struggled to remain still and let her do whatever she wanted. Lazily, she traced the rim with her pink little tongue and then she licked my dick like it was her favorite flavored lollipop.

Just when I didn't think I could take it a minute longer, she slipped down and sucked one of my balls into her mouth.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

“Fuuuuck!”

With a pop, Sutton released me, and then to my utter delight, she finally sucked me into her mouth. My dick was too big for her to take whole, but she wrapped her hand around the base and sucked for all she was worth.

It was the closest to heaven that I have ever been. Her pink lips stretched wide as she took me deeper and deeper. The way her eyes stayed glued to mine and the feel of her long dark hair brushing against my thighs was enough to push me to the edge.

I yanked her up by the shoulders and plastered my lips on hers. Sutton straddled my waist so that the only thing separating us was her thin pajama shorts and panties.

I kissed her with everything inside of me, all of the worry and frustration over the situation being poured into the most perfect kiss that I have ever experienced in my entire life. My hands went to her pajama bottoms and they slipped inside to cup her tight ass.

Sutton moaned as she ground her core against me. I loved this uninhibited side of her, the way that she owned her sexuality, kicked ass, and took names. It was such a fucking turn on. Shit, everything about her was such a fucking turn on.

She wrenched her lips away from me. “Naked, now!”

I kicked my pants and underwear off, reaching into the side table drawer for a condom. The only thing I found was books.

“Here.” She threw a stack of condoms at me, a row smacking my chest.

I grinned at her and raised a brow. “Rob a prophylactic store lately?”

She flushed all the way to her perfect pair of tits. “I wanted to be prepared.”

I ripped one of the condom packages open, and in seconds my dick was sheathed and ready to go. Sutton climbed on top of me once again, but this time nothing was between us except that thin plastic.

I captured her lips once again for a heavy kiss as she placed my dick at her entrance and slowly, ever so slowly, sank down until there wasn't a scrap of space between us. Our other fucking was just that, hot and intense and almost over as fast as it began.

Tonight was different. As Sutton stared into my eyes, she slowly began to move back and forth, grinding and rubbing her wet core. Deeper and deeper I went until I could have sworn that I was further inside of her than I had ever been.

She sat up, arching her back and moaning as she rode my cock. My hands automatically went to her breasts. Those tiny nipples so tight, I knew that she was just as aroused as I was, and it only urged me onward.

I rocked my hips with her movements. My eyes stayed locked on her face. The raw emotion there was so beautiful that it touched something deep inside of me. Something that I wasn't sure even existed within the cold-hearted CEO that I had become.

She reached back and placed her hands on my thighs, pushing me impossibly deep within her. I picked up my speed and my hands moved back to her hips. She was glorious, magnetic, honestly, the most magnificent sight that I had ever beheld.

She mewled and her inner muscles clamped down on my aching dick. I wanted to cum so badly that I couldn't see anything but her, seeing to her pleasure.

My thumb slipped between her glorious thighs to the tiny nub just above where we were joined, and I began to rub circles around her clit.

I could feel her intense reaction from the way her head jerked back to the vise-like grip her pussy had on my cock. And then she came, and it was mesmerizing. Undulating and free, she shattered above me, her juices coating my dick and balls. I couldn't have stopped my orgasm if I had wanted to.

It was instantaneous and almost painfully pleasurable. I came again and again, sending Sutton into another orgasm that had me seeing stars. She slumped against my chest and I stroked her back, trying to catch my breath.

"That was..." I rasped, but then I couldn't even think of what to say. It was that astounding. I had no words.

"I know," she murmured sleepily against my chest.

I needed to get up and throw the condom out, but I had no desire to move her off of me. I was still half hard inside of her.

Fuck worrying about becoming too attached. It was too late for those kinds of worries. All that mattered was Sutton. I could try and reason out my obsession with her later. But for now, I needed to hold her close.

I told myself it was for her. But in the deepest part of my heart, I knew the truth—it was for me.

Chapter Thirty

“Um, hello?”

Candice had awakened to the sound of Sutton’s cell phone blaring from the kitchen. In truth, she hardly closed her eyes. And it wasn’t because of the ancient bed or the fact that she could vaguely hear moans and groans coming from Sutton’s closed door.

Candice was happy for Sutton. If anyone deserved someone tall, dark, and handsome to sweep them off their feet, it was Sutton. Besides, it was beyond adorable when Mr. Williams went all caveman on Sutton. Candice felt a smile curving her lips.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

And then the phone started ringing—again.

It was obvious that Sutton wasn't going to get up to answer the phone. Candice thought about ignoring it, but the caller had already tried two different times. Something felt—off. She climbed out of bed and padded into the tiny kitchen of the trailer.

Sutton's phone was on the counter near her purse and the name that was flashing caused heat to rise in Candice's cheeks. It was the same person that was responsible for her sleepless night, Sheriff Knox Bridges.

Of course, Sutton didn't have him under anything so formal. Knoxy-poo with a big kissy face flashed as the call came dangerously close to being shipped to voice mail.

Candice grabbed the phone, swiping it in the process. "Hello? Argh!"

It was too bad that she didn't hang on to it. Miss Butter Fingers strikes again! Picking the phone up off the floor, Candice double checked that the screen hadn't been cracked before she attempted to answer it another time.

"Erm, hello?" a distinctly amused male voice filtered through the phone.

Candice blushed ten shades of red. "Sorry, Sheriff Bridges, what can I do for you?"

He paused. "Candice?"

Why did her name on his lips sound like melted chocolate, or better yet, hot kinky

sex?

“Yes, this is Sutton—I mean, Candice.” She smacked her forehead at her insanity. “Sheriff, Sutton isn’t awake yet, can I take a message?”

He blew out a breath. “It’s an emergency or I would say not to wake her. Could you possibly put her on the phone?”

It was her turn to hold her tongue. How could Candice explain to the sexy sheriff that she didn’t want to walk in on her immediate boss and the CEO of the company? For all she knew, they were naked and there were some things that you just couldn’t unsee.

“Candice.” If possible, his voice was even deeper when he caressed her name. “Is Sutton—does Sutton have company?”

Candice nodded, and then it dawned on her that he couldn’t see that.

Stupid hormones!

“Yes, Sheriff, it is just as you say.” She was relieved that he had figured it out.

“I’m headed over there, this is better said in person.”

Candice blanched; it took her at least an hour to get ready in the morning.

Squeaking, she blurted out, “How soon will you be here?”

“Anxious to see me, Candice?”

She snorted. “I just want to be dressed first.”

There was another pause while Knox took a minute to picture the curvy Candice without the smart business clothes. And damn, his imagination deserved a moment of silence.

“Don’t get dressed on my account,” he managed to get through a strangled voice.

Candice’s eyes closed as she silently berated herself. “It’s not that I am not dressed. I am dressed, just not for the day. I mean, I’ve seen people in less at the grocery store, but then there will always be those people that push the limits. I am not one of them.”

Horried at her babbling, Candice was thrilled when someone started banging on the trailer door.

“I have to run, there is someone at the door.”

“Don’t answer that door!” The voice was sharp and commanding.

But Candice had never been one to listen to orders. Opening the door, she spied an elderly gentleman that looked like he was on his last legs. Skinny and bent, he gave her a grin that sported more holes than teeth.

“I need some breakfast.” The old man shoved past Candice with surprising strength.

“Where is Sutton?”

Page 64

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

And then he started to bellow, “Sutton, get your ass out here and get me some breakfast!”

“That’s Earl,” Knox said into the receiver that Candice still had up to her ear. “He is harmless, but I need you to lock the door and not open it until I arrive.”

Candice looked furtively out into the trailer park. She didn’t see anything suspicious, but this time she obeyed him.

“It’s closed,” she told him.

“And locked?” Knox demanded.

“And locked.”

“I will be there in ten minutes.” And then he hung up before she could protest any further.

“Sutton, get your ass out here and get me some breakfast!”

I blinked, trying to get my bearings. It wasn’t that I hadn’t been awakened by Earl’s bellowing in the past. It is just that it had been a long time. I had something warm and hard in my hands and I squeezed it softly, worried that it would fade away as my world became clearer.

“As much as I love your hands on my ass, I have a feeling that if you ignore the fleabag he will likely come in here next. I draw the line at sharing a bed with Earl.”

Heat flamed my face. I had been groping Mark's ass! And it was a very naked ass, not a pajama-clad one.

I ripped my hand away and called out shakily, "Keep your shirt on Earl, give me a minute."

It was Candice who replied to my call. "Sutton, I hate to be a bother!"

Mark groaned. "At home, we don't have this problem in the mornings."

I froze.

We usually called the apartment in the city Mark's place.

Home.

He had called it home, not only for himself but for both of us. There was 'we' and 'home' in the same sentence, and I was freaking the fuck out.

"What's wrong?" he asked sharply.

I hopped out of bed and his eyes immediately flew to my naked flesh. I had been a bit hasty and caught my foot in the covers. I went from standing to sitting on my ass in about five seconds flat.

Mark snorted, and I could tell that he was trying not to laugh. "Are you alright?"

"Peachy." I grabbed my pajamas from the night before and shoved them on.

"Sutton?" Candice called out. She had an anxiousness to her tone that wasn't like her.

“We don’t have time for morning nookie, Sutton!” Earl yelled.

Mark flopped back on the bed muttering, “More’s the pity.”

I wasn’t sure who to answer first.

I went with the one yelling the loudest saying, “Earl, you say another word and I will not make you a damn thing.”

I could hear him grumble something to Candice, but at least he wasn’t screaming anymore.

I grabbed a ratty robe and belted it tightly.

Yanking the door open, I saw Candice and Earl sitting at the table. Candice had my cell phone in her hand.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

“Is everything okay?” I asked, seeing the concern on her face.

“The sheriff called when you were still sleeping. He said he needed to talk to you. I told him that you weren’t awake yet and he said it was an emergency and he would be here in ten minutes.”

There was a sharp rap on the trailer door. “Earl! Are you with that hussy again? I told you to stay away from the loose Landry women!”

Earl bristled, his full eighty pounds shaking with indignation. “I told you to leave me alone, you old battleax!”

Sutton rolled her eyes and went to the door to unlock it.

“Wait!” Candice called out. “Knox said to leave it locked until he arrived!”

“I’m here.” His deep voice carried through the front door. “It’s okay, you can open it.”

Sutton opened the door and saw a very angry Martha, who most likely just wanted to be fed like her husband. But it was Knox’s face that gave her pause.

“What happened?”

Knox blew out a breath. “Gabe is dead.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Sutton

“We had a call about three this morning that came through dispatch about a disturbance at Abberly’s. By the time Brown and I arrived on the scene, all was quiet. The back door wasn’t locked and didn’t show signs of forced entry. We found him in his office slumped over his desk, three shots to the chest.”

I felt Mark’s arms close around me, but I couldn’t feel anything. Was Gabe dead? I hated the bastard, don’t get me wrong, but—dead?

Knox looked as grim as I had ever seen him. And after they uncovered that smuggling ring in the high school, he was pretty low. This was worse.

“Sutton, I don’t suppose you were out and about early this morning?”

I blinked, “What?”

Mark’s arms tightened and I could feel the menace and protection radiating off of him as he spoke to Knox.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Mark growled.

Knox ran a hand over his face, “I know she wasn’t involved in the murder. But it doesn’t look good, y’all coming into town and Gabe dead twelve hours later.”

Candice bristled. “I can safely say that Sutton was here all night long.”

Knox raised a brow, but he couldn’t have been more surprised than I was.

She blushed, but didn’t back down. “I heard her and Mr. Williams multiple times through the night. Nobody came or left this trailer until Earl showed up this

morning.”

The old man nearly wet himself. “I ain’t killed, nobody! I swear it, Sheriff. I didn’t!”

Martha narrowed her eyes. “Well he wasn’t home, I can tell you that.”

If anything, this caused Earl to panic even further. “I’m not a murderer! Sheriff, I don’t even own a gun.”

This was news to me because everyone in Otterville Falls had a gun, including myself. Come to think of it, I hadn’t checked on its whereabouts since I’d been home. I broke out of Mark’s embrace and moved to the fridge, reaching above it to where the gun usually resided.

But no matter how far I felt around for it, I came up empty.

Knox shook his head. “You won’t find it, Sutton. It was at the crime scene.”

For a second the room dimmed, and I was afraid I might hit the floor. Mark had to have been watching every movement of mine because he was next to me in an instant.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

“Who had access to your trailer?” Knox asked.

I felt like the words were coming through a funnel.

“Umm...” Struggling to think, I unconsciously looked at Earl

He threw his hands up. “It wasn’t me! I swear, it wasn’t me!”

Knox sighed. “Earl, do you have an alibi for where you were last night?”

The old man was whiter than a sheet of paper. “I plead the fifth.”

“Very well.” When Knox stood, he seemed every bit as old as Earl. “I am going to need to take you in for some questions, Earl. We can do this informally or I can read you your rights and arrest you.”

“It was me!” Martha yelled out dramatically. “I killed him. It was me.”

We all turned to where Martha was sitting. Her eyes were wild, and she was frantically rubbing her hands together.

“Yeah.” She cleared her throat. “I came and got Sutton’s gun. So, this is all my fault. Don’t arrest him, Sheriff. It was me that took the gun.”

The thought of Martha shooting Gabe was almost comical. The woman might be a right pain in the ass, but she wasn’t a murderer.

Knox rolled his neck from side to side, popping it as if he couldn't wait to hear the bullshit story that he was about to be fed.

“Are you saying that you shot Gabe, Martha?”

She blanched, “No! I mean, err, maybe?”

Candice frowned. “There isn't a maybe here. You either did or you didn't.”

Knox's lips twisted in amusement. “Questioning my witness, ma'am?”

She blushed prettily. “Sorry sir.”

Knox turned back to Martha. “Why don't you try and go with the truth this time?”

“I took the gun,” she said in a rush. “I knew that Sutton kept it there. I only wanted to scare Earl with it. He's been gone more than usual lately and, well, I was worried that he might have found someone new.”

A dark flush coated Earl's face, but he didn't speak up to defend himself.

“I had planned on scaring him straight. I put the gun in my purse but when I went to use the blasted thing, it wasn't there anymore. I didn't know what to do. So, I came over here pretending to want breakfast. I figured that Earl had found it and put it back. But he didn't shoot anybody Sheriff, I know my Earl. He didn't.”

Earl's shoulders slumped. “I didn't kill him, Sheriff. I didn't even know about the gun in Martha's purse. I have no issues with Gabe.”

Knox blew out a breath. “And you won't tell me where you were last night?”

Earl looked right at Martha with guilt written all over his face. “Not in front of the womenfolk.”

Knox nodded. “Why don’t you and I have a chat at the office?”

Earl looked resigned and got up to leave with Knox.

Martha quickly got to her feet. “I’m coming too!”

Earl turned back on her and with a grave expression said, “No, Martha-mine, not this time.”

I almost cried seeing her face. I had always known that she was a right bitch. But I knew she cared for the old bastard. It was clear from her expression that she not only cared for him, Martha loved him.

“What can we do?” I asked Knox quietly.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

“Don’t leave town for a few days,” he said, looking at me to Candice and resting on Mark. “I expect that you will want to stay for the funeral anyhow.”

I nodded just as Mark said, “Why would she want to stay for that man’s funeral? He treated her like shit.”

Knox’s stare didn’t lessen. “Sutton inherits Abberly’s now that Gabe is gone. I know she most likely won’t want to keep it. But arrangements need to be made, and I know Sutton. She will stay to pay her respects.”

Mark looked like he wanted to argue, but I stopped him.

“I will start looking into funeral arrangements.”

Mark whipped around incredulously, “Why would you be doing the funeral?”

Knox shook his head. “You don’t know much about country folks do you, Mr. Big City?”

Mark made a snorting noise. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“We take care of our own. Even bastards like Gabe.”

I felt a tear slip down my cheek. “He didn’t change the will. Before she died, Ruth Ann, Gabe’s mama, instructed him to take care of me. I knew he hated that more than anything. But he never changed his will. He still kept his promise to his mama.”

And with that, sobs wracked my body. I cried for the man that had been a complete ass to me. Nobody deserved to die like that, not even Gabe. I cried for Ruth Ann that had been a better mother to me than my own.

I couldn't help but feel that this was all my fault. All of this happened because I went to the city with Mark. Knox was right, we do take care of our own.

Mark cradled me against his chest, clearly at a loss for what to do or say. I felt a small hand on my shoulder.

"We are here for you, Sutton." Candice gave me a squeeze. "You don't have to do this alone."

And then I cried because for the first time in my life I really wasn't alone, and I felt like my selfishness in needing others had been the cause for all hell to break loose here.

I hadn't realized I had been uttering the words until Mark tipped my chin up to face him. His silver eyes were blazing.

"This is not your fault, Sutton. Do you hear me? None of this is your fault."

But he didn't understand, it really was.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Mark

There were certain things I understood in life. For example, the stock market. As fickle as any mistress, there was a certain ebb and flow that followed an almost cadence-type rhythm. Sure, there were huge losses and triumphant gains, but in

between it all there was the sense of adventure.

Sutton was my stock market, and I was beginning to see that I had invested more of my funds than I had ever thought to be possible.

I am a cautious man. I don't take risky deals. I don't mingle in the unsavory. And I certainly never find myself embroiled in murder cases.

I could also argue that I don't do backwoods America and I am allergic to small towns. And yet, here I am in Otterville Falls for the foreseeable future. All because of that one small, infuriating creature that has literally ripped me up one side and torn down my walls with startling ease.

My parents were the perfect example of a loveless marriage. I had always vowed to myself that I would never find myself in that trap. However, the longer I spent with Sutton the more I feared I was heading straight in their footsteps.

They had cared for one another at some point well enough to speak their vows. But it wasn't until the loss of my sister that they truly parted ways for good. Oh, they are still bound by the laws of the land in wedded bliss, but I doubt they have laid eyes on each other for at least five years.

Not many know about my sister, Irene. She only lived a few hours past birth and I never got to see her. When people asked if I was an only child, I always nodded. It seemed easier to not bring up the child that was supposed to be but wasn't long for this life.

I often wondered over the years what my life would have been like had Irene lived. Would my parents still be together? Would I be as cynical and cold?

They say hindsight is 20/20. I would like to think that Irene and I would have been

close. That growing up with a sibling would mean that, even if we were both raised by the staff, we might have had each other.

It's silly to play 'what if' games and often a dangerous way of thinking. Some things couldn't be changed and there was no reason to be so maudlin about it.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

The more I watched Sutton spiral into grief and remorse, the more I could see that she was following that dark path I had once walked. I would love to say that this is no longer a problem of mine. However, I believe that in a large part, it's human nature and can't be avoided.

She was pulling away from me, and it freaked me the fuck out. I needed to get to her, and I had no idea how to go about it.

Candice was better at the comforting shit. She seemed to know just what to say. All I could think was that death was horrible. Even when someone is old as the hills and twice as infirm, and everyone says it's a blessing they could move on.

There is always some sad bloke trying to keep a stoic face because to him that person was a mother, life partner, or dear friend.

Even with Gabe, who I knew to the depths of my soul was a dick head, he played a large role in Sutton's life. It's that crazy feeling when you want to be mad at them for your sorrow because they never deserved your love.

The days leading up to the visitation and funeral were long and trying. I now officially had met every resident of Otterville Falls. They did indeed take care of their own.

Despite Sutton's withdrawal during the day, she came to me wildly and passionately in the night. We would make love, fuck, and cuddle, and for those brief moments of darkness, I could pretend that everything was going to be okay.

And then the morning of the funeral came. We were all still residing at the trailer. Two new beds had been delivered along with more clothing for all of us. I was beginning to feel a little attached to the ramshackle place.

That should have been the first clue that I had gone off the deep end.

I have been to many funerals in my life. My sister's had been the first when I was six years old. I don't remember a lot about it. Only the sadness and hollowness that I couldn't shake in my little boy mind.

The minister took one look at Sutton and I approaching his church and he bristled. "What have I told you about coming to the house of the Lord?"

I wasn't about to take that, and in seconds, I had him by his priest collar in a chokehold.

"Sutton paid for and arranged the entire funeral. You are going to suck up any prejudice you have against her and treat Sutton with respect. If you can't do that, I will lay you out flat. Are we clear?"

His wispy hair was disheveled and his collar hopelessly crinkled. But it didn't matter. I had gotten the message across and he wouldn't bother her again.

I don't know what I was expecting from Sutton, but aside from a small smile of thanks, she didn't say anything.

We walked up the steps to the chapel that she wasn't allowed in and made our way inside. There was a hush as we entered, and I could feel my fists clenching. How could she have an emotional attachment to these people?

Before I could grab her arm and yank her out of that hell-forsaken church, Reena and

Alice waved their arms.

Sutton sighed visibly and made her way over to them. There was enough room on the pew for four more people, and we had that many with Candice and Knox in tow.

I wasn't sure I wanted to forgive Knox for insinuating that Sutton needed an alibi that morning when Gabe was found dead. But the longer things went on, I was starting to see that it was more about her protection than accusing her of any guilt.

Almost every person in there was staring her down. I was so fucking proud of the way she held her head up high and kept her back ramrod straight. Sutton was no shrinking violet. She stood tall and proud like a sunflower that refused to be cowed by the people she loved.

The minister began the service and droned on and on about our bodies being an earthly vessel. He preached that even though the flesh is weak, the soul was designed to live on. It was when he got to Gabe's many virtues that I thought I might be sick.

I wasn't sure who the priest was extolling, but it wasn't the man I knew. I supposed that a man had a right to be remembered well even if it was a damn lie. But there was someone else that was getting a little too full of this bullshit as well.

It wasn't Sutton.

"I thought we were here to pay Gabe of Abberly's last respects, not the archangel Gabriel."

There was a stunned silence as Mad Max stood at the back of the room, one leg crossed over the other and an unlit cigarette hanging from his lips.

The priest's lips flapped like a fish. "This is highly irregular."

Max shrugged. “So is lying in a house of God, but that’s never stopped you before, Stan, has it?”

There was a horrified gasp from the audience as they began to piece together that the minister and Max knew each other quite well.

“What was my favorite line from just now, Stan?” Max grinned, but it only held threats. “Gabe was a man of charity, of kindness, a man of honor.”

Knox got to his feet. He had released Max yesterday, and I could see that he was regretting that decision. Before he could say anything, Reena stood up with the help of her cane.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

“I liked the part when he said Gabe was a giant among men,” she snickered. “Never knew such a skinflint in my life. That’s funny stuff.”

There was a smattering of nervous laughter through the crowd, almost as if they couldn’t believe what was happening right before their very eyes.

Alice joined her. “He watered down the ketchup so badly that it looked like loose stools.”

Snorts of laughter filled the room.

Another man stood. “It wasn’t as watered down as his drinks. I could have sworn they were 98% water, 1% alcohol, and the last percentage food coloring.”

I felt Sutton move beside me, and when I glanced at her, she had the strangest expression on her face.

More members of their town stood telling funny stories and memories about Gabe. They weren’t all bad, and it seemed that at some point in his life the man did retain some of the things his mother had taught him.

Another movement beside me, and to my surprise, Sutton stood to speak.

“Gabe was as close to a sibling as I had ever had.” She made a funny face. “He treated me like an unwanted little sister that his mother insisted he take care of. And in a lot of respects, that is exactly what happened.”

She cleared her throat, and I could see fresh tears on those gorgeous lashes of hers.

“Gabe had many faults.” Nods filled the room. “But he always looked after me and even cared enough about Max to fly down to the city to find me. I resented him for a long time. I don’t want to paint the past into something that it wasn’t. But I wonder if I had listened to him more closely if we wouldn’t be sitting here today. For that, I am sorry Gabe, truly sorry.”

Once again with just a few words, this woman had ripped her heart from her chest and laid it bare. I don’t know of a time I had ever been so in love with an individual.

In love.

I was in love with Sutton.

Wow.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Sutton

The last thing I ever expected was Max showing up at the funeral. He wasn’t one for church any more than I was. And now that he was there, I wasn’t about to let him get away. I needed answers, and it was time he gave them to me.

After my impromptu speech, instead of sitting, I walked to the back of the room, grabbing Max by the elbow and proceeding to drag him into the churchyard.

“Shit, Sutton, you wrinkled my shirt!”

I gave him a look. This was the same shirt that he had been wearing when I visited

him in jail days ago. Whatever bender Max was on, it was a rough one.

My finger pointed directly at his chest, I burst out, “Cut the shit, Max. Tell me what is going on.”

His bushy brows knit together, and I knew he was going to start in with the lies.

“I’m fucking serious, Max! I’ve never seen you like this. I hear you are breaking shit and then I get here and you’re in jail? You aren’t taking care of yourself and Gabe is dead?”

“I didn’t kill that bastard,” he said quickly. “And it wasn’t me that busted up his bar. I just happened to get there at the wrong time.”

“Really?” I was astonished. “You want to fill me full of bullshit? Fine, Max, that’s just fine. I thought we had a better relationship than that, but I guess I was wrong.”

I turned on my heel to leave and he grabbed my arm.

“No, wait a minute.” Max sounded defeated. “We need to talk, Sutton. There are some things I need to tell you. Things about your daddy.”

“You never knew my daddy!”

I wanted to scream at him, beat my hands against his chest, and cry for the girl that ate up all of his lies. Why was he dragging up things that were still a sore subject to me? It didn’t make any sense.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

“I did know your daddy.” The guilt on his face had me pause. “Not well, but I have spoken to him before. I didn’t want to tell you, Sutton. Because I knew that if you found out the truth, you would never speak to me again.”

“What? Why would I do that, Max? You helped take care of me when my mama couldn’t. I know you gave us money. Why would I hate you?”

He sighed and suddenly looked every bit of his sixty-eight years. I could tell that he had been drinking, and there were dark circles under his eyes.

“Your mama has always been poor, pumpkin. But she didn’t always have the drug problem. When she met Hollingsworth, she was working in a fancy hotel over in Flatts Creek. Your daddy had come in town for some business, and according to your mama, it was love at first sight. It wasn’t a one-night stand, although I believe that the affair was short-lived.”

I felt knots gathering in the pit of my stomach. “Why did he leave her then? Was it me?”

He blew out a breath. “No, pumpkin, he never knew about you. Your mama was so head over heels, and I was terrified that she was going to go off with him and I would never see her again.”

Dread coursed through my veins. “What did you do?”

The man hung his head, and I knew that whatever he had done had changed the entire map of my life.

“I met him outside of that hotel and asked him if he’d seen my wife. I described her and said that we were expecting our first child. He was sick with the thought that he was sleeping with another man’s pregnant wife.”

I felt the world tip and he grabbed me before I could fall.

‘Why’ it was the only word I could get out in my anguish. Why had he taken my father away from me?

“I am damned sorry, Sutton,” he choked up. “So fucking sorry. Your mama was actually pregnant. I didn’t know. She was going to tell him that night. But he never came back. She quit her job and came back to Otterville Falls. Your grandmother was getting on in years, but she happily took you both in. I hoped that someday I might get a chance to make her mine.”

She loved him. It was clear as day.

Max continued, “She didn’t want anything to do with me at first. It wasn’t until your grandma had the stroke when you were little that your mama just broke.”

He brushed a tear from my face. I hadn’t even known I was crying.

“I tried to find that Hollingsworth, but I didn’t know his last name. I should have known it was Sutton. I was a damned idiot, pumpkin. You have every right to hate me. When that Williams showed up and told you who you were, I was terrified that you would find out the truth.”

“You should have told me the truth,” I said, brushing at my face angrily. “You should have told my mother the truth.”

“I did.”

I almost missed his admission. “You told her what you did?”

He nodded sadly. “She was on a mission of self-destruction. I finally broke down and told her everything. And I will never forget her response. She laughed, but there was no humor in it. I’ve never heard anything so chilling in my life. She said that he would never want a used crack whore. And then she looked me dead in the face and made me swear never to tell you.”

I could hardly stand it. I was sad for my mother and angry that she didn’t have the strength to actually be a fucking mother to me despite what had happened. The drugs and her grief over my father had taken up residence in her life.

I wasn’t sure how many more times my heart could be ripped out before it disintegrated.

“Why tell me now?” I said, and I knew that my tone was just as cold as my mother’s had been all those years ago.

“Gabe came to me about some mail he was getting at the bar. Things that were addressed to you. He had ignored them, used to the kind of shit show that some of the bigots around here put on. But this was different, more menacing. I was coming to meet him to talk about a fresh batch of letters when I found the place smashed up. I had told Gabe I wouldn’t say anything to anyone, so when the sheriff automatically blamed me, I just took it. I had no clue that Gabe would come to you. He knew the truth, but most likely didn’t want to talk about it in front of others.”

I gave a hysterical laugh. “He was a right bastard, breaking into my place of work and threatening me.”

Max smiled faintly. “Sounds like Gabe, running where angel’s daren’t tread.”

So many things were racing through my mind. I could hardly take in all the things Max had said to me. But one thing was certain: Gabe was dead because of me.

“Where are those letters?” I asked hoarsely.

Max shrugged. “Maybe still at the bar. I am not sure. I think it might be time to get the sheriff involved.”

“Past time, I would say.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

I whipped around to see Mark standing about a foot behind me. His arms were crossed, and his hands clenched dangerously. He had steel in those silvery eyes and looked very much like an avenging angel.

I instinctively took a step nearer to him and saw his nostrils flare when he saw my tears.

Max must have seen the same thing because he raised his hands. “I didn’t hurt her.”

Mark’s eyes snapped back to mine, looking for affirmation.

I nodded. “I will tell you about it later, but he didn’t hurt me.”

“Sutton,” I heard Candice call from the church steps, “is everything okay?”

I turned to wave at her, and she quickly joined us on the lawn. Knox came up behind her, something that I would have loved to tease her about if I hadn’t felt like my insides were stripped bare and beaten within an inch of my life.

“Are you staying for the luncheon, Sutton?” Knox asked.

Suddenly it was all too much. All of the things that Max had just dumped on me about my mom and my dad, combined with Gabe’s funeral, added up to disaster. I was moments away from a full-on meltdown.

An arm wrapped around me. “We won’t be attending. Thank you for asking. I am taking Sutton home.”

I leaned into Mark, thankful that he had taken charge and that I didn't have to think. Guilt would have most likely weighed on my mind until I would have stayed despite my current mental health. But Mark wasn't having it, and once again I was thankful that there was one person that actually cared about me and my welfare.

Candice raised her chin. "I will stay with Knox. Why don't you and Mark have a quiet afternoon alone?"

Knox looked shocked for only a second before a wide smile broke across his lips. I wasn't sure if Candice knew it or not, but she just gave Knox the green light, and he wasn't one to let that kind of opportunity pass by.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Sutton

I didn't say a word on the way home, nor as we walked from the car into my trailer. I set my purse on the table and just stood there staring at the wall.

Mark made a sound that seemed half frustration and half empathy. I knew that he wanted to reach me, to comfort me. But I was too far lost in my own thoughts. Taking my arm, Mark led me to my room and undressed me like I was a child incapable of doing it on my own.

I could hardly remember my mother doing such a thing for me, and at once it felt too intimate. And yet it was achingly beautiful the way that Mark cared for me with such devotion and respect. Once I was down to my panties and bra, he slipped one of his white cotton t-shirts over my head.

The fabric was much softer than anything I owned, and it smelled faintly of him. We laid down, and he pulled me against his hard chest on the new bed that he had

delivered days before. I curled up into his hard pecs, burying my face and just enjoying having him near.

I didn't think that I was physically tired, but my soul was exhausted. Either way, I drifted off into a dreamless sleep. Sometime later, it could have been an hour or three for all I knew, I opened my eyes and found that I was sprawled across Mark. Our legs were entangled, and his large hand was cupping one of my ass cheeks.

His breathing was slow and deep, and his eyes were still closed. I peered up into his handsome face, wondering what he was dreaming about. I loved the way his dark lashes brushed against his cheeks. They were ridiculous on a man, and yet it made him all the more attractive. His brow furrowed for a moment and I worried that he was going to wake.

I felt the hand on my ass tighten and my pussy clench in response. But then he seemed to fade back into whatever dream he was lost in.

His massive cock was hard and ready, much like it always was when we were in bed together. Sliding to the side, I took his length in my hand through his boxer briefs. I could hardly believe that his length could fit inside of me.

Mark was nothing like any of the other partners I had been with in the past.

“If you keep that up, I will shoot my load all over your hand.”

I flushed as my eyes flew to his amused ones. His voice was still laced with sleep and delectably low. Or maybe that was from arousal, I couldn't be sure.

Feeling bold, I slipped my hand underneath the elastic of his underwear. The tip was already wet with pre-cum, and I swirled that around the mushroomed head, causing his cock to jerk and the veins in his neck to stand out.

“Fuck, Sutton, that feels amazing.” He grabbed my hand. “But you need to stop before I lose it.”

I bit my lip. The thought of me jacking him off was turning me on, and I saw his nostrils flare as he realized the same thing.

In seconds Mark yanked the t-shirt off of my body and had unhooked the clasp of my bra. I was naked except for those tiny white panties.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

He didn't waste any time tracing my folds through the soaked material.

“Always so fucking soaked for me, aren't you, baby?”

I mewled as he rubbed his finger over my clit before going back to stroking the length of my pussy. I wanted his hands inside of me, clutching me, fucking me. The longer he teased me, the crazier I felt. My hips started reaching for his touch, lifting off the bed and searching for relief.

Ever so slowly, he pulled my white cotton panties down until there was nothing left between us. My soaked pussy was throbbing with need. Swollen and pink, I parted my legs and invited him to do whatever he wanted with me.

He growled low in his throat. “You are so sexy, Sutton. You drive me crazy.”

I almost laughed. “You are driving me crazy!”

He smirked. “Oh yeah? What do you want?”

I wasn't one to beat around the bush about things. But I didn't often yell out demands either. However, I was feeling desperate.

“Touch me, lick me, fuck me, just don't leave me like this!”

Grabbing a condom from the side table, Mark quickly removed his boxer briefs and sheathed himself.

I raised my brow. “When did I get a stash of condoms?”

I was fairly certain we had used the last one this morning.

His chuckle was dark. “When your fiancé decided that provisions needed to be stocked up.”

I laughed, but a small part of me felt a pang at the word fiancé. I still wasn’t sure how Mark felt about me. Sure, he liked me, and I would even go so far as to say he loved fucking me.

But did he love me the way I loved him?

Shaking off these thoughts, I opened my legs wider and slipped a hand down my body and into my folds.

His eyes about bugged out of his head. “What?” He cleared his throat. “What are you doing?”

I moaned softly. My eyes at half-mast. “You were taking too long,” I teased.

He yanked my hand away and slipped my fingers into his mouth, sucking off the juices that had gathered there.

“This pussy is mine, Sutton. It’s not that I don’t love watching you touch yourself, but I want to be the one to taste that sweet honey.

Hot damn, the man could taste my honey any old time that he wanted to. The first lick of his broad tongue against my soaked pussy had my hands flying into his hair.

I bucked my hips against his face. He looked up at me and called my name. “Sutton,

open your eyes.”

I blinked, trying to get the room to come back into focus. His dark head was between my thighs. I could see the danger and sinful way that he was looking at me with those silver eyes.

“Keep your eyes on me, baby. I want to watch those pupils dilate for me. I want to see the way that I drive you crazy until my mouth forces you to cum all over my face.”

“Fuck.” The exhaled curse was swallowed up in a scream as he licked me again, but this time, he took my clit into his mouth and sucked hard.

My eyes started rolling back, but every time I broke eye contact with him, Mark would stop and start all over again.

I was sweating and cranky and wanted that orgasm so fucking bad that I was willing to do anything to get it.

He clamped his hands on my ass and buried his face further in my pussy. His mouth was relentless, moving over me like a master as my eyes remained glued to his. I thrust my hips shamelessly in his face, screaming his name and pinching my own nipples to the point of pain.

When the orgasm hit me, I had black spots appearing before my eyes. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. The only thing I knew was a sheer, unadulterated pleasure that crashed over me again and again. I was drowning in liquid desire and had no control over my responses.

Mark drew up to his knees and rammed his length inside of me. My back arched as another scream ripped from my throat. He pounded me again and again, his length

deep and his strokes were sure. I felt another orgasm approaching and cried out.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

“Come for me again, Sutton, come on my cock!” It was a harsh demand and one that I was powerless to avoid.

My pussy clamped down hard on his length as I flew over the precipice to oblivion once again.

He was panting, his face tight with emotion as my pussy milked his cock harder than it had ever done before. Before I knew it, Mark was shouting my name and I felt the rush of cum filling the condom deep inside of me.

“Fuck, Sutton, that was incredible.” He kissed my forehead his, cock still half hard inside of me.

I clutched his back, pulling him back down so that I could feel his weight on top of me.

“What are you doing?” he asked with a bemused expression. “I am going to crush you.”

My words were soft, but he still heard them.

“I have to hold on tight. I’m going to need something to remember.”

He pulled back and looked me in the eye. “I am not going anywhere, Sutton.”

I nodded, but I didn’t really believe it was true. Anyone I had ever cared about had ended up leaving me. Mama and Ruth Ann died, Gabe was killed, and Max ended up

being a liar. Some could argue that I still had Earl, but he and Martha had only ever taken from me. I knew that Earl held me in some affection. But it wasn't until I saw my life through Mark and Candice's eyes that I really could see how lonely I had become.

And it wasn't something that I ever saw changing. If I only had Mark for a short time, I was going to do my damndest to make the most of it.

Because the truth was that I life had a way of shitting on me, and I was waiting for the axe to fall.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Sutton

"Thank you for coming right away, Sutton. We are in such a pickle we don't know what to do."

Sitting in Alice and Reena's crowded living room that smelt of mothballs and dust, I couldn't help but wonder what was upsetting these two sweet older ladies. They were some of the few folks in town that had been kind to me before they found out that I was rich.

Since returning to Otterville Falls with Mark, people have bent over backward to try and make up for a lifetime of insults and snubs. It was almost comical the way they fell all over themselves to try and put in a good word.

I wasn't stupid enough to believe that it was genuine. But Alice and Reena, they had been some of the good ones. If they needed my help, I would see what I could do to make their lives a little easier.

“What’s going on? Is the bank giving you trouble?”

Alice looked stunned. “Why, no, this place has been paid off for years, Sugar.”

Reena gave me a knowing look. “Have those vultures been after your money?”

I blushed. “Just a few.”

I had been hit up by at least half the town with stories so tragically heartbreaking that I wanted to do something about it. Mark, on the other hand, was ruthless with these individuals.

“How many of them came to help you when your mama passed, Sutton?”

There was one answer to that: Ruth Ann was the only one that stepped forward. I think Alice and Reena would if they had anything, but I knew they lived on a fixed income. So, that was why I just assumed they needed monetary backing.

“If it isn’t money, what is it?”

“We’re in love,” Alice said hopelessly.

I had often thought that the ladies shared a rather close bond, so this didn’t come as a surprise to me.

I beamed. “Congratulations! I am happy for you both!”

Alice blinked. “Not with each other. I mean, I love Reena, but I am not in love with her.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

I flushed at my mistake. “I beg your pardon. But you said, ‘we’re in love’?”

She gave a short whistle, and I heard a door shut in the back of the house. To my utter surprise and complete shock, Earl made his way out into the living room. He sat between Alice and Reena, taking each of their hands and glaring at me defiantly.

I am not sure what he expected. But my horrified laughter wasn’t it.

“Is this where you were the night of Gabe’s murder?”

Earl flushed a deep red. “I love my girls, Sutton. I don’t expect you to understand.”

My lips twitched as I tried valiantly and failed to keep a straight face.

“What about Martha?”

Alice scowled. “That old bitty has been an abuser to our Early Bear. She is a horrible woman, Sutton.”

Reena nodded, her three chins bobbing, and I couldn’t help but wonder how the mechanics of it all worked.

Shit, how did eighty-year-old Earl get it up enough for two women?

Ugh, the images flashing through my brain were so disturbing that I visibly shuddered.

“Are you disgusted with us?” Reena asked in a hushed voice.

I could see that my opinion meant something to her, and for that reason alone I pushed aside any thoughts of the three of them in sexual congress and told her the truth.

“I have no issues with your relationship. My only concern is that Earl is still married, and you know that Martha’s mental health is less than steady.”

“That’s why we called you,” Alice piped up. “We were hoping that maybe you could talk to her?”

This time I did laugh, long and loud.

Shaking my head, I tried to control myself. “Martha hates me. She despises the ground I walk on and the air I breathe. What makes you so sure that she would even listen to me? This is none of my business. I love you all, but I won’t be getting in the middle of it.”

Earl scoffed. “You are family. Of course it’s your business.”

I gave him an inquiring look. “There is no blood relation between any of us.”

Earl blew out a breath and Reena looked at him with a concerned, loving eye. The three of them were almost adorable—creepy, but adorable.

“You are like a granddaughter to me!” Earl huffed.

I grinned, “Well Grandpa, you are going to have to share your proclivities with Grandma. I’m not biting. Honestly, what did you think could possibly induce me to get involved?”

Alice looked up earnestly. “We have a lead on Gabe’s case!”

The humor began to fade from my face. “What are you talking about?”

Reena gripped Earl’s hand. “Go on, Early Bear, tell Sutton what you saw.”

Earl nodded. “Alright, but you have to swear not to tell a soul.”

I frowned. “Why would you tell me if I can’t tell anyone? That doesn’t make sense. You know what? Keep your secrets, I am leaving.”

It was a ploy that I was certain they would see through. However, Earl’s eyes widened in surprise and he stopped me from going.

“All right, damn you, Sutton! Sit down!”

I bit my lip to keep a straight face. “Well?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

“I was headed back home the other night,” he began, but I interrupted him.

“‘Home’ meaning my house, or here?”

Earl turned beet red, “To the parsonage when I overheard Father Montgomery speaking in harsh tones with Mad Max.”

I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I still wasn’t certain how I felt about Max. It seemed that he was popping up all over the place and every situation seemed to be more unsavory.

“Did you hear what they said?”

My voice was shakier than I would have liked, but they didn’t seem to notice.

Earl shook his head. “No, not the whole conversation. But I did hear something that might be important. Max said something about Father Montgomery having a son. The priest has never been married. Then Max pressed further and said if Stan wouldn’t do something about the problem, he would.”

“Who is Father Montgomery’s son?” I couldn’t seem to wrap my head around what they were telling me.

Alice tapped her lip. “Well, it begs to reason that Ruth Ann never told anybody about who Gabe’s daddy was. And can you imagine the scandal if people found out that Father Montgomery had fathered a child out of wedlock?”

“And a bar owner to boot? Well, shoot, I think he just might do something terrible to stop that information getting out.”

Alice grinned. “And how hard would it be for the Father to sneak into the parsonage and snag the gun Martha stole from your place?”

I blew out a breath. “You realize that you have little proof over these accusations. For the most part, it is guesses and conjecture.”

“That’s why we need you!” Earl’s eyes were pleading.

“I don’t see how this is going to get you out of Martha’s wrath when she finds out you are cheating on her.”

I had to tell them the honest truth. I saw the disappointment in their eyes and hated that I put it there.

“You need to tell Martha the truth.” I reached out and touched Earl’s knee.

“She’s crazy.” Reena’s voice was laced with fear. “Maybe it was her that killed Gabe.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. I honestly don’t know. But I need to talk to Knox about what Earl overheard. And Earl, you need to be telling your wife the truth. The last thing you need is for her to find out and go postal on Alice and Reena.”

The color drained from his face, making him look every bit of his eighty years.

“I’m sorry Earl, it has to be done.”

The last thing I expected was for the three of them to skip town by morning.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Mark

It's every man's wet dream to be disturbed during morning sex by a howling maniac. Especially one that has just found out her geriatric husband has decided on a polyamorous relationship that doesn't include her.

"I just don't understand how he could do this to me!" Martha sobbed into a rather questionably clean handkerchief.

Sutton patted her back awkwardly. "Are you sure he's gone?"

At this, she looked over at me in warning, the words clearly unspoken but I heard it all the same: Do not say anything.

Sutton had told me about her unusual visit with Earl, Alice, and Reena the day before. I had patiently waited outside for her in the car after she categorically refused to allow me to come in with her. I don't think I was being 'overly protective.' Her words, not mine.

There is a murderer on the loose and she insists on staying in a town where the majority of its residents treated her like dirt beneath their shoes. I don't think we can be too cautious.

"Am I sure?" Martha's shrill voice cut through any thought process I might have had. "Those vultures swept in and stole my man!"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

I had to turn around and swallow a grin. Martha sounded like a participant on one of those trashy daytime talk shows. It was surreal to see her sobbing on Sutton's shoulder like they were the best of friends.

"Do you—" She gulped, her eyes red and watery. "Do you think that he might come back?"

Sutton glanced around wildly, not looking Martha in the eye. "Anything is possible. Do you want to talk to Father Montgomery?"

I could hear the pleading note in her tone, but Martha was already shaking her head no.

"Like that minister cares about me? If anything, he will be glad that Earl's gone. All he did was complain about things coming up missing. He just didn't understand my Earl, that's all."

Sutton was sending me pleading glances over the older woman's head. I shrugged, not having any advice for the sordid situation. From what I had witnessed previously, Martha had never liked Earl. It was a wonder that the man hadn't left ages ago.

However, I couldn't ignore such a plaintive cry for help from Sutton. So, I interjected, "Is there anyone who you can call that perhaps could come and stay with you? A sister or a friend?"

Her face crumpled up and fat tears spilled over. "Earl was my family."

I really didn't have any other advice, except maybe to Earl. If he were there I would say, Keep running friend, and when you think you've gone far enough, go twice the distance.

Sutton's phone broke the awkward silence. She looked at me with a nod and I grabbed the cell and went into her bedroom. It was the sheriff's face that had popped up next to her ridiculous name for him.

I wasn't jealous.

Not even a little bit.

I cleared my throat and answered, "This is Williams."

Sutton asked me once why guys call each other by their last names. She asked if it was some macho thing left over from high school football or days in the service.

And to be honest, I didn't know. I just liked that level of distance. There was something special about your first name. And I liked when Sutton called me Mark. In a world where I was 'the boss' or 'Mr. Williams,' her calling me Mark, especially in the bedroom, warmed me from the inside out.

Every second of every day it seemed that I fell a little deeper for her.

"This is Knox. Sutton sent me a 911 text. Is everything okay?"

I grinned. "You are going to want to sit down for this one."

And then I thought better of it. "Why don't you come on over and see firsthand the tragedy that we are dealing with this morning?"

Knox blew out a weary breath. “Nobody is dead, right?”

I laughed. “Not yet.”

He cursed, and I hung up the phone feeling immeasurably better about our morning. Knox could take Martha off our hands and Sutton and I could get back to where we had been. I believe I had been licking her hip bone on my way to paradise.

There was another ring of the phone, and I looked down expecting Knox to be calling again. But this time it was Candice’s face that appeared.

She didn’t wait for me to speak before she launched into a flurry of words. “I know that I should have called and not stayed out all night. And I know that you were probably worried sick. I don’t want to talk about what happened. And don’t mention that man’s name to me.”

She finally took a breath and I edged in, “I promise.”

There was dead silence for a full minute.

Then she squeaked, “Mr. Williams?”

I couldn’t remember a morning when I had been more amused. Perhaps Otterville Falls was growing on me? More likely a certain dark-haired powerhouse was softening up all of those hard edges.

“Candice?” I replied dryly.

“Sir, just forget everything that I just said. I am on my way, sir.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

I took pity on the poor woman. “If you like, we can pretend you never even called.”

I could hear the relief in her sigh. “Yes, sir. Thank you, Mr. Williams.”

I hung up the phone and walked back out to see Sutton fixing Martha some breakfast.

“Is everything alright?” she asked with curious eyes.

“Nothing will ever be alright ever again!” Martha wailed dramatically.

We ignored her.

“Knox was returning your call,” I said sagely, and Sutton nodded, mouthing, Thank the Lord.

It wasn’t more than fifteen minutes before Candice had arrived back at the trailer. She looked frazzled and mortified to be doing the walk of shame in yesterday’s attire. Thankfully, Martha was too wrapped up in her own tragedy to pick up on Candice’s embarrassment.

Sutton’s eyes danced. “Did you forget where I lived?”

Candice flashed accusing eyes at me, but I shook my head. I was innocent of any meddling.

Candice cleared her throat. “Err, yes, well, some of the streets are very similar.”

Martha frowned, just now paying attention to the conversation. “What are you talking about, girl? Everyone knows this is Sutton’s place. Even if you got lost, which is near impossible, you could ask someone.”

There was a knock at the door, interrupting Martha, and I was more than happy to let another player in our morning farce in.

“Hello there, sheriff.” I said it loudly just in case anyone missed it.

Candice blanched, and Martha asked Knox his opinion, “This girl here couldn’t find her way back to the trailer? Have you ever heard of such a thing?”

Knox looked confused and Candice appeared to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown. So, I helped out. “Candice didn’t make it back last night.”

Knox’s cheeks flushed. For a grown ass man, it was very telling. His eyes whipped around to Candice and she pasted on a glare as if daring him to refute her story.

Knox opened his mouth twice before replying weakly, “That’s understandable, I suppose.”

Candice visibly relaxed, and before Martha could go any further, I stepped in. “Martha do you have that note to show the sheriff?”

And with those few words, she turned into the wretched, weeping creature that we had been dealing with all morning. Knox took the crumpled paper from her hands. I could see his shock as he read the words.

I already knew what it said.

Martha,

A man's got to follow his heart. I don't mean to hurt you, but I love another. Well, two others, but that ain't the point. You never cared for me none and it's time I set you free.

Earl

Knox looked up in surprise. "Two?"

Martha blew her nose loudly in the dirty handkerchief. "Those whores from church, Alice and Reena! Sheriff, you need to find and arrest them. They took my man. I loved him. Lord knew I did."

Knox was looking around in astonishment as if he could hardly believe what was happening.

"I can't just arrest someone for being unfaithful, Martha." He patted her shoulder awkwardly.

Martha snorted. "Then arrest them for murdering, Gabe."

He narrowed his eyes. "Do you have evidence that supports that accusation?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

She sniffed. “Well if they will steal a man, they are capable of killing one.”

He looked at me and I shrugged ruefully. Something told me we wouldn’t be getting back to that morning sex after all.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Sutton

Mark was acting strange, and not the super grumpy-pants strange that I was coming to be familiar with. No, this was a playful, happy, dare I say even lighthearted version that I was quickly coming to lose my heart to.

Who was I kidding? There wasn’t a side to the man that I hadn’t fallen madly, deeply, and desperately in love with. I was in serious trouble.

As soon as I was able to bundle Martha up to go back to the station with Knox, I rounded on Mark. That gorgeous smirk and dancing eyes were more panty-melting than I wanted to admit.

“What has gotten into you?” I insisted, trying to keep a stern face.

Mark stalked over to me and gathered me into his arms. He placed a hot open mouth kiss on my neck, and I sort of lost track of what I had been asking him.

“Eww, still here,” Candice grumbled from the table where she sat messing with her uneaten pancakes.

I reluctantly pushed at Mark's chest, so he released me.

"So, what happened last night? Was it a smash and dash?" I wriggled my eyebrows at Candice and laughed at the color that flew into her cheeks.

"That is offensive!" She pretended to be offended but she was grinning as much as I was.

"There are worse things, like hit and run, or my personal favorite: jizz and jet."

Mark barked out a laugh. "I think it's time I hit the shower so you two girls can talk."

I winked at him as he passed by to go into the bedroom and grab his things. Not two seconds later, he was on his way back through the kitchen, smacking my ass on his way into my tiny bathroom.

I must have been grinning like an idiot because Candice commented on it.

"I don't know that if someone had foretold that I would be in Otterville Falls with the two of you I would have ever believed it. It is amazing how much you both have changed over the last few months."

I sat down in the chair opposite her and grabbed my mug of coffee. It was tepid, but I wasn't about to make another pot.

"What do you mean, 'changed'?" I asked.

She cocked her head to the side. "When I first met you, I knew that you would be amazing. You have this fire in your gut and a strong sense of who you are. But you also tended to be very reserved with Mr. Williams."

I giggled. “You know, you can call him Mark.”

Candice made a face. “Never, it would be beyond weird.”

“So, I loosened up around him. How has he changed from the man you knew?”

Candice leaned forward, eyes wide. “Sutton, the CEO of Sutton Enterprises is living in a trailer park in Otterville Falls. How hasn’t he changed? I knew for a fact that he never even frequented dining establishments that boasted less than five stars.”

I thought of Abberly’s. “Yeah, I didn’t think he was overly impressed with our town when he first came.”

She nodded. “And now look at him! He’s...”

Candice broke off whatever she was going to say when we heard a distinct baritone voice belting out something in the shower.

“What in the living hell have you done to him?”

We collapsed in a fit of giggles.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

“I wouldn’t say I could take all of the credit,” I demurred.

“Oh, it’s you,” Candice insisted. “He’s happy and I would never in a million years tie that description to Mr. Williams before you came along. He’s a man in love.”

I froze. “In love? I don’t think so.”

Candice frowned. “Yes, in love. Why do you think he stays here and hasn’t insisted that I return to the company? Sutton, the man would do anything for you.”

I felt uneasy and shook my head. “We are just having fun.”

She snorted. “Yes, I have heard day in and day out the thumps on the wall from all the fun you are having.”

I blushed wildly knowing that I couldn’t deny her accusation.

Candice tapped her lip. “But it is more than that. It’s the way he looks at you or takes your hand. One almost has to look away because it seems so intimate. He worries about you incessantly, is practically obsessed with whatever you are dealing out in the bedroom. Sutton, that is a man in love.”

A part of me desperately wanted to believe her. But the people who loved me either left or screwed me over. And besides, Mark was amazing, and I was just a broken girl from Otterville Falls.

I heard the door to the bathroom open followed by a cloud of steam. Mark rounded

the corner in low fitted jeans and a tight t-shirt. He didn't stop until he had walked right up to me and kissed the top of my head.

"Are you still discussing the details or is it safe to return?"

I frowned. "We didn't talk about it at all. Candice distracted me!"

She squealed and jumped up from the table. "Gotta run, talk to you both in a bit!"

Her door slammed shut and there was a distinctive click of the lock.

Mark laughed. "Don't worry, I am sure you will be able to corner her at some point. The house isn't that big. If you didn't talk about last night, what were you going on about?"

I blushed wildly.

His brows began to rise. "Now I really need to know what you talked about."

I stood and moved to go into my bedroom, taking a page from Candice's book. My only trouble was that Mark stood up and followed me.

"You aren't getting away that easily." He shut the door to my room and gathered me back into a warm embrace. "What were you talking about with Candice?"

He smelled incredible, and for a moment, I just sucked in the manly deliciousness that made up Mark Williams. But eventually, I had to answer, "We were talking about you."

"Me?" He tipped my chin up and I saw a sexy smirk. "Why were you talking about me?"

“It’s just you have been a little different lately, good different!”

He wrinkled his brow. “What?”

“Look, it is nothing, Candice was just trying to deflect me. She was going on about how you must really—” I couldn’t say ‘love.’ “—erm, like me, and it was nice seeing you this way.”

He was quiet for a moment and I worried that I had screwed everything up by being too honest.

“She is right, you know.” I glanced up at him and saw that his gaze was intense. “You have changed so much about how I see the world. I suppose I am different. But she was wrong about one thing.”

I felt my heart pounding in my chest.

“What was she wrong about?” Mark asked. “Do I have to spell it out for you? I don’t just like you, Sutton. People like their favorite latte, or a television program. Hell, people like puppies and sunsets. That is nothing compared to how I feel about you.”

I could hardly believe the words that were coming out of his mouth. But I needed more. If he didn’t like me, then what? What was it he felt for me?

“You are killing me here,” I blurted out. “You can’t just leave off a statement like that.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

Mark laughed. “Really? And what is it that I am supposed to say?”

I felt like stamping my foot. “That you love me you, idiot! That you are so fucking in love that you can’t see straight and every minute of every day you worry that just maybe I might not feel the same. That you can’t live without me.”

I trailed off in horror, realizing what I had done. I squirmed in his arms, trying to break free. “You tricked me!”

His arms were tight around me like iron. “Didn’t you want to know what I was going to say?”

I was hot with embarrassment and terrified that he was going to tell me that he appreciated my love but couldn’t say the words back.

“No, I don’t think I want to know. I think that I want to just forget that we even had this conversation and pretend that...”

His lips smashed down on mine in a punishing kiss. My fears and anxiety slowly unraveled as the heated desire in my stomach began to grow. He kissed me as if he would never let me go, his arms tight around my body and his tongue demanding submission.

As he kissed me, I raised onto my toes and sank my fingers into his hair. I loved this man, there was no denying it.

He broke the kiss and whispered harshly against my lips, “I love you, crazy woman. I

love you so fucking much that I can't see straight."

I whimpered and closed the distance between our lips. I needed him, craved him,

"I love you, Mark," I panted the next moment my lips were free. "So very much."

He kissed me again, moving us back so that I came bumping up against the bed.

"Let me show you how much I love you," and he pushed me back into the soft mattress.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Sutton

With a playful glint in his eyes, Mark leaned in. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation, and it was true. For the first time in my life, I was willingly giving my trust away knowing that this man wouldn't hurt me.

He went to the closet and pulled out one of his silk ties. I raised a brow.

He grinned and my stomach filled with butterflies. This time when he leaned over me, the tie was placed over my eyes and secured at the back of my head.

"Too tight?" he asked.

"No, it feels fine."

I felt the mattress shift as he moved off of it and then felt his hands on my ankles. He pulled me down until my ass was at the edge of the mattress. Then with deft hands,

he removed my pants and underwear. I felt a little silly in my shirt with no bottoms, but I had told him I would trust him.

I felt the tip of his finger making lines on my hip and then his mouth came down and kissed the lower part of my flat stomach. My hands clutched the sheets as I waited for more.

“Fucking beautiful,” he moaned, and then with his bare hands he ripped my shirt down the front.

“Mark!”

He growled playfully, “I will buy you another shirt.”

“Maybe I liked that one,” I retorted.

But then his lips came down and sucked one of my nipples into his hot mouth and I completely forgot about the torn shirt. Lapping my nipple, he nipped and sucked at the tender skin before taking the tip back inside his mouth and sucking hard.

My body felt like flames were licking at every nerve ending.

“Just a minute,” he rasped, and I heard the door to my room open.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

I almost yanked the blindfold off, but I had to trust Mark. I waited and the door opened again.

Suddenly, I felt something freezing and wet against my breast. I squealed as he rubbed a piece of ice against my nipples, drawing them into tight points. His hot mouth soothed the freezing touch, the opposite temperatures causing my own internal temp to soar.

“I love your tits,” he ground out against my skin.

I laughed. “Yes, I know, you have fucked them before.”

He bit down gently on one of the tips and I cried out at the pleasure-pain of it.

“Did you like that?” he rasped.

“I like everything you do,” I answered honestly—because I did.

Everything with Mark felt new and incredible. It was as if he knew my body better than I did, or at least he knew how to draw the pleasure out of me.

That piece of ice had melted, leaving my skin wet. He grabbed another one and traced a pattern on my stomach.

“What are you drawing?”

I wished that I could see his face at that moment. I liked the blindfold. It certainly

heightened my other senses. My skin felt tighter and more sensitive. I could hear every rush of breath or sharp intake. But I couldn't see what words he was tracing.

I asked again, "Mark, what are you drawing with the ice?"

"Your name," he replied huskily and then leaned down and licked the droplets of water that had formed on my heated skin.

"Why are you so amazing?" I sank my fingers into his hair. "I don't get it."

He paused. "What do you mean?"

I felt his fingers trace the folds of my pussy and I made a keening cry.

"Sutton, what are you talking about?"

"You can't just stop!" I thrust my hips up, wanting his hands on me again.

"What is it going to take for you to believe that I am not going anywhere?" His words were soft, but I could hear the frustration behind them.

"Why are we even talking about this?" I felt irritated and hot. I needed him to take care of the ache in my core—not talk to me.

I felt the tie being loosened. "Do you really want to know what I was tracing on your skin?"

I blinked at the sudden brightness of the room. But then my eyes met his, and I saw the depth of emotion in his gaze.

"Yeah," I said softly. "What were you writing?"

Pink suffused his cheeks, but he answered me anyway, “I am worse than a fucking teenage girl.”

My hand came up to cup his cheek. “What is it?”

“Sutton Williams.”

“Sutton Will...” I broke off as tears began to clog my throat.

“I want you, Sutton. I want you in my life, every damn day. I want your belly to grow with my baby. I want to spend Christmas and birthdays together and pretend to complain when you go completely over the top. But in my heart, I will be loving every minute of it. Because I love you.”

It was finally sinking in, the enormity of it all.

Mark was it for me. I wanted everything that he said and more. I shoved at his chest until he was laying on his back and I could climb on top of him. I made short work of his remaining clothes and felt a thrill as his hard cock bounced against his stomach.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

Climbing back up him, I took his length into my mouth, loving the way that he growled and bucked under my touch. He sank his fingers into my hair and allowed me to play as I licked the broad mushroom head and then sucked him deep.

When I felt that he was right on the verge, I pulled off and straddled his hips. With aching awareness of our need, I slid his tip against my folds. It felt so fucking amazing, my eyes wanted to roll back in my head.

“Sutton,” he warned, and my pussy clenched as I slipped the tip into my heat.

His hands flew to my hips and I found myself being impaled on his length. I was so full, the feeling beyond amazing.

My fingers dug into his chest and I began to rock. Grinding my hips against his hard dick, I sat up and grabbed my breasts.

“Fuck, baby, yeah, touch yourself for me.” His voice was raw with need, and his hips had begun to thrust up, meeting my slow strokes.

I pinched and pulled at the swollen nubs, looking down and loving the sight of his cock buried deep inside of me.

“You are driving me crazy,” he groaned out.

But it wasn't nearly as crazy as I felt at that moment. I wanted him deeper, needed him to push harder.

Mark must have known because I found myself being plucked off of him and flipped around with my ass in the air. He smacked one of my cheeks and I squealed as the stinging sensation burned and then settled into a nice warmth.

I wriggled my hips and he smacked the other side right before slamming inside of me. I screamed as he began to fuck me, no holds barred. It was primal and animalistic and perfect.

His massive cock slamming into me again and again, I could hear the slapping of our skin and feel the way his balls would smack my pussy. He reached around and began to rub tight circles on my clit. I screamed again when he wrapped my long dark hair around his fist and yanked my head back so that he could kiss me.

Suddenly, I was coming, and coming hard. My body convulsing as wave after glorious wave swept me into oblivion. He grunted and I felt his hot seed fill my core. Sweat dripped from his body and landed on my back. I was every bit as worked up as he was.

Slowly, he pulled out and blew out a harsh breath. “The sight of my cum leaking out of your pussy is fucking incredible.

I flipped around and spread my legs, allowing him to watch as I felt what he was talking about. I was still too sensitive on my clit. But I could stroke around it, and his face as I pleased myself with his cum was so hot that I felt my desire begin to rise again.

“Fuck, baby, that is so sexy.”

His voice was pained, and his eyes were glued between my legs. I felt my hips lift as I played and teased my tender folds and then I started to rub my clit. It only took seconds before I was coming again. Staring into his eyes, my orgasm swept me under

the tide.

He scooped me up, kissed my lips, and made for the door.

“Shit,” I cried out. “What about Candice?”

He froze for a moment and then shrugged. “I am not letting you go, and we need a shower.”

Thankfully, Candice had remained in her room, or she would have seen more of us than she ever might have wanted to.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Mark

“You have to do something about that woman.” Knox ran his hand through his blonde hair. “She has been here nonstop asking what leads we have on Earl. I hope the old bastard never gets caught.”

Sutton frowned at her childhood friend, and I smothered a smile. I was inclined to agree with Knox. Not that how Earl had gone about things wasn’t completely shitty, because it was.

But Martha was a special piece of work, to be sure.

“Have there been any leads with Father Montgomery?” Sutton asked, blithely ignoring his request to get rid of Martha.

Knox leaned back in his chair. “Now, you know I can’t be giving you the details of a case.”

Sutton shot him a look before responding, “Bullshit, Knox. What is going on?”

Knox’s eyes darted over to the lobby where Candice had chosen to remain rather than come into the sheriff’s office. There was a story there, I just wasn’t sure what it was.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

“We need to get back to our lives in the city, Knox,” Candice added with a tilt to her chin.

I looked from Knox to Candice and then back again. It was true that we did need to get back. I hadn’t said a word about it. The last thing that I wanted to do was rush her at a time when things were just becoming good with us.

“So, you won’t be staying?” Knox asked Sutton softly.

I felt panic rip through me. We hadn’t discussed this possibility, and I didn’t want to even consider that she might choose to remain in Otterville Falls.

Sutton looked at me and took my hand before turning back to Knox. “This isn’t my future, Knox. This is my past. I have stayed as long as I can, but if there aren’t any further leads, I am going to need to head back to where I belong.”

It irked me a little that Knox looked so flabbergasted. Did he honestly think she would give up her inheritance, our future together, and all the confidence that she had gained to come back here?

“Is she going with you?” He motioned to the Candice, who had made her way out to the lobby, and suddenly it made sense.

“Candice?” Sutton wrinkled her brow. “Of course she is coming with us. She has an amazing job and her family lives in the city. She’s only here to support me.”

Knox nodded. “I see. I can’t make you stay, but have you decided what you are going

to do with the bar?"

Sutton and I had talked about this before Earl ran off. Her original idea had been for Alice and Reena to run the place. She was even going to deed it over to them, but now that they were gone, it didn't make as much sense.

"I don't know," Sutton replied honestly. "I suppose we could just leave it closed. I spoke with Joe and he was willing to stay on and cook, but he doesn't want the place."

Knox leaned forward on his elbows. "I have an idea. It might be a horrible one, but it could also kill two birds with one stone."

"So, you see, Martha, I need someone to run the bar. You would be doing me a huge favor."

The older woman was shocked into silence. Her jaw open and her cheeks flushed with color, she looked positively ill.

"You don't have to serve the alcohol if you don't want to," Sutton continued.

Knox and I struggled not to laugh. Who had ever heard of a bar that didn't serve drinks? Only in Otterville Falls could something so illogical be suggested.

Martha swallowed. "Do you really think I could do that?"

Sutton beamed at the older woman. "You were the first person I thought of!"

Knox's cough brought a scowl from Sutton, but she quickly suppressed it when she turned back to the elderly woman.

Martha reached out and took Sutton's hand. I was proud of Sutton. She only flinched a little.

"I don't know how to thank you." Martha's voice trembled. "I misjudged you, girl. I shouldn't have done the things I did. I know why Earl left and you don't owe me any kindness either."

I could literally see Sutton's heart melting. It was apparent that she still cared for these people even after everything that had happened. Or perhaps that was just Sutton. She wanted to see the best in people. She wanted to help and make people's lives a little easier.

"Nonsense." Sutton's smile was tender. "You are one of my closest neighbors and we have shared many meals together. I want you to be okay, Martha."

Sutton didn't mention that during those meals Martha had often been shouting slanderous things. I was once again overwhelmed by the woman before me. I had once been terrified of getting into a relationship. The last thing I wanted was to end up like my parents.

I had decided that a life alone would be better than living in a home without love.

But that was before her. Sutton had taken every belief I thought I had about myself and turned them inside out. She was more loving and giving than any person ought to be, and it was one hundred percent natural to her.

I wanted that goodness in my life and in my home.

"I can stay and help her get things set up."

We glanced up to see Candice standing in the doorway. I am not sure who was more

surprised at her offer, but my bet was Knox.

The man looked like he had won the lottery and woke up to Christmas and his birthday all in one day.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 5:52 am

Sutton's brow furrowed. "You don't have to make that sacrifice, Candice."

She smiled and walked into the small office.

Candice kneeled in front of Martha. "I know what it is like to be left behind. You have a chance now to build a new life. I would be more than happy to get you started if you would like me to. And, of course, if my boss will allow it."

Sutton nodded emphatically. "Of course, I will allow it. Are you sure?"

Candice glanced at me and back to Sutton before nodding. "I am sure."

The ride back to the trailer was quiet, except for when we made arrangements for the jet to fly us back to the city the following afternoon. Candice had opted to stay in the trailer. She said she was getting rather used to it and liked the new bed I had ordered.

Once we arrived home, she went into her room to rest for a while, and Sutton and I began to pack.

"Am I doing the wrong thing by allowing her to stay?" Sutton asked as she gathered up some jeans.

I turned her so that she was facing me and took the pants out of her hands.

"I don't think you could force Candice to do anything that she didn't want to do," I said carefully.

She had a worried look on her face. “Candice doesn’t work because she has to, she works because she likes the challenge. I can’t help but worry that she is staying because of Knox.”

“Is that such a bad thing?”

She shook her head. “No, I just don’t think he’s the kind that will move to the city, and I know that her life is there. And besides that, Knox has a list of heartbreak a mile wide behind him. I think he will break her heart.”

I leaned in and kissed her cheek before resting my forehead against hers.

“They are both adults, Sutton. They have to lead their own lives.”

She huffed out an angry little breath that was fucking adorable.

My lips tilted up, and I had to kiss hers. As always when we came together, my heart raced, and her amazing scent filled my senses. I couldn’t touch her without wanting more, and I knew that it would always be that way.

Her lips moved under mine in such a soft, sensuous way that I groaned deep in my throat.

“Marry me,” I breathed against her lips.

She moved back—surprise clearly written on her face. “What?”

I led her over to the bed and then pulled her into my arms.

“I used to think that happily ever after was a farce and that love didn’t last. You know how my parents were.”

She nodded slowly.

“But then I met you, and you introduced me to your crazy life. I saw the bullshit that you had dealt with and the heartbreak that you had suffered and still, everything about you screams love. You love effortlessly, without thought or worry about yourself. I need you, Sutton. I need your heart. I need your love. But most of all, I just need you. Please, marry me.”

She bit her lower lip, eyes glassy with tears. “I love you, Mark Williams.”

“Is that a yes?” my voice pleaded.

She nodded, and a tear slipped down her perfect cheek. “A million times, yes.”