



Protecting Andie

Author: *Julia Bright*

Category: Romance, New Adult

Description: Michael "Rider" Balen was set on staying single, until he met his sister's best friend, Andie. She took his breath away the first time he saw her, and then they spent time together, making him like her even more. She was witty and made him laugh.

Andie's breakup earlier in the year turned her off men, but meeting Rider challenged everything she thought about dating. He seemed like the perfect guy, but was it all for show?

When Andie's ex shows up, will Rider be able to keep her safe, or will Andie end up injured or worse?

Total Pages (Source): 44

Rider knew he'd failed his sister. He'd been young when their mother died and not that much older when their father passed away. He was her only family, and instead of trying to stick around, he'd gone off and joined the Navy.

Sure, he'd sent her money, paid for her degree, and made sure she had food and a place to live for all those years until she could take care of herself, but he'd left. Now, he was about to see her for the first time in about six years, and his stomach felt tighter than it did before a dangerous mission.

Six years was a long time. They could have gotten together at some point, but he was always training or she was in school. He'd wanted to attend her graduation, but he'd been deployed. She wanted to visit him for the holidays, but she'd gotten snowed in. Then she'd met Derik, and now it was her wedding week. At least they were finally seeing each other.

The wedding wasn't until Friday, so that gave him three days to hang out and get to know her again, but he wasn't really looking forward to explaining why he'd abandoned her. Sure, they'd had video chats, but it wasn't the same. He should have gotten his butt on a plane and gone to see her.

He stepped from the rental and grabbed his bag from the trunk, noticing he was the only one entering the hotel with a military bag instead of a traditional suitcase. None of these people were military. None of them would understand him. The next four days would be interesting.

It had been years since he'd spent any considerable time with civilians. Sure, the women he hooked up with weren't military, but they didn't talk much because that's not why he got together with them. With this crowd, there wouldn't be any hooking up. His sister wouldn't be pleased if he fucked one of her friends, then walked away. He would be on better than his best behavior and holding real conversations.

"Excuse me," a soft voice said behind him.

He paused and glanced over his shoulder before turning to face the woman. She was short, had soft curves, and green eyes. Her brown hair was curly and hung over one shoulder. It was hair he could lose his fingers in. When her lips spread into a wide smile his heart hammered so hard, he wondered if she could hear it.

"Yes?" he asked, trying to keep his voice even.

"You're Emily's sister." Her hands flew to her face, which was turning redder by the second. "I meant brother. I didn't mean to imply you looked like a woman. You don't. You definitely look like a man. All man." Her eyes went wide, and her mouth fell open. "Oh God, I'm so sorry. I'm fucking this up more. I need to go crawl under a rock."

She was cute, maybe even cuter the more flustered she got. He tried not to laugh, but he knew a chuckle escaped his lips before he replied.

"Yes, I'm Michael, Emily's brother."

"I need you in my room."

He cocked his head to the side, wondering what she meant when she said she needed him.

Her eyes went even wider as her face turned white. “Oh shit. Emily is going to kill me. You probably think I was propositioning you. I’m not. I just have the tuxedo your sister picked up for you. It’s in my room, and she wants to make sure it really fits. She took them the measurements you sent, but the guy said there’s no way your body is—” Her gaze dipped to his thighs, and he saw her take in a little gasp. “He said your thighs were too big and your waist too small.” She waved her hand at him and shook her head. “I mean, you are proportioned very well. Shit, that came out wrong, didn’t it?”

Laughter rose up and he tried to squelch it but some came out. “What’s your name?”

“My name?”

“Yes. What’s your name?”

“Andie, but not with a y.”

“Okay, Andie, not with a y. Let me check-in, and I’ll?—”

“Oh, you’re already checked in. Here’s your key. The room has been paid for, and I made sure you had some snacks and drinks in the room.”

He wasn’t sure exactly who had paid for his room, but he hoped it wasn’t his sister. She had too much going on to pay for his stuff. He lived lean, very lean when Emily had been in college. That wasn’t an issue now. He had money to pay for a room even at this posh hotel.

“Okay. Take me to my room and let me put my bag down, then I can meet you in your room.”

“Thank you. And Michael, it’s nice to meet you.”

He nodded. “My friends call me Rider, not Michael. So maybe call me that because my real name doesn’t feel like me.”

“Sure, Rider. Let me write that down. My friends just call me Andie.” She shrugged and laughter bubbled up. “When you said that it sounded cool, but when I say that out loud, I feel stupid. So never mind and just follow me.”

He couldn’t help but notice Annie’s butt as she scurried in front of him. For her short legs, she moved very fast. It was almost like she was jogging.

She showed him to his room, and he realized her room was just down the hall from his. He would be seeing more of her, which would be nice. Not that he would hit on her, but it would be nice to have her around since she was easy on the eyes and made him wonder if settling down could be a good thing.

He finished in his room quickly and headed over to check on his tux. Maybe he should have had Andie bring it down to his room, but he wanted to get an idea of what kind of person she was, and he thought that a hotel room showed a lot about a person.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

After dropping his bag, he stepped into the hall and looked for her room. It was around the corner, so not visible from his door. As he approached the corner, he heard something bang against the wall, and then there were angry words. He couldn't make out what was being said because the words were low and menacing.

He covered the distance in two long steps and was shocked to see some guy with one hand on Andie's throat, the other tangled in her hair.

"Don't forget it," the jerk growled before he moved to shove her head into the wall.

Rider moved fast and had his hand on the jerk's arm, preventing him from moving. The man gasped and loosened his hold on Andie, which Rider took advantage of and made him drop his hold on her altogether. Rider moved to stand between them and pushed the jerk away.

"You dumb fuck. She's trash, not even worth sticking your dick into."

Rider wanted to let this guy have it, but he didn't want to end up in jail for assault. If the guy threw a punch, Rider would return in kind and then some, but until then, he would behave.

"Leave." Rider's one word didn't leave anything open for argument, and he noticed the man stepping back as he flinched.

Andie moved behind Rider, and the guy yelled out, "Good luck with her. She's a cheating whore."

Rider didn't move, didn't say anything. He just stared the man down until he turned away and stalked down the hall to the elevator. Rider flexed his fists, but when Andie's fingers slid over his arm, he released his fists and turned to face her.

He didn't like the red lump developing on the side of her face, nor did he like the red marks on her neck. He wasn't happy about any of it.

"Let's get you into your room and get ice on this. You need a wet washcloth on your neck."

She shook her head. "No, I'm fine. Don't worry about that. I'm okay."

He stopped her from opening the door and held her gaze. "No, you are not okay. That man assaulted you. Do you want to press charges?"

Andie shook her head. "No. It won't do any good."

"Hey, no one should ever treat you that way."

Her gaze fell and not like when she'd been checking him out. She wanted to hide from him. He'd seen some crazy shit, but witnessing American men abuse their girlfriends or even friends was highly disturbing.

Her shoulders straightened, and she flashed him a smile. "Your tuxedo is right in here. Just need to try it on. If you need adjustments, we can have someone come by."

He wanted to tell her to wait, to get more information, maybe go to the cops, but there was something about the look in her eyes that made him stop. She was on the edge, and he didn't want her to fall. Later, he would figure out who the bastard was. No way would he let the guy get away with what he'd done without some repercussions.

Andie couldn't believe Tony had shown up. She'd broken up with him a little over six months ago, but the plans for the wedding had been made before she kicked him out of her life. His words still echoed in her ears as she led Rider into her room. Tony had seen her talking to Rider and followed them up to remind her she was a useless, ugly bitch. She'd worked hard to get over the things he'd said, but some of it was true.

She wasn't beautiful like Emily or most of the other women she knew her age. She never had been considered pretty. She was passable at most and funny. But the layers of jokes hid the pain she felt inside.

Rider's tux was the first one on the rack because she'd organized them based on the arrival time of the groomsmen. Not that Rider was a groomsman, but he was walking Emily down the aisle.

A pang of jealousy slid through her, but she pushed it away. She wouldn't be jealous of Emily. The woman had worked hard to get where she was, and Andie wouldn't begrudge her the success she'd achieved.

"Here you go. This is a suite, so you can change in the bedroom. Come out and let me check it."

"Okay. I'll be out in a second."

The door closed behind Rider, and she allowed her smile to slip. Tony would ruin everything. Maybe he would stay away. They'd hired a private security company, so none of Tony's friends would be working the event.

She never should have dated Tony. Back when he'd first showed interest in her, she'd

thought herself lucky. No guys looked past her wide hips or the extra weight she carried. They all thought her only friend material. But Tony had come into her life and showered her with love, or what she'd thought was love. Now she realized her standards had been so low she would have fallen for anyone who showed her a small amount of interest.

The door to the bedroom opened, and Rider stepped out. He was looking down, pulling at the cuffs of the shirt. Her breath caught, and heat spread up her chest. He looked like a movie star or maybe a model. A big one, not one of the smaller, skinnier models, but someone like Wolverine or Thor. Not as big as Thor, but he was gorgeous.

"I don't know if the sleeves are long enough. What do you think?" Rider glanced up and met her gaze.

With his dark eyes on her, staring into her soul, she wasn't sure if she would be able to speak, much less check the measurements of his suit.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

Right then, the door to her room flew open, and Emily stepped in. She had a hat box in one hand and shopping bags in the other. When she spied Rider, her shriek filled the room. She dropped everything and launched herself at her brother.

Andie wanted to do the same, but she had no reason to get in on their hug. By the time Emily let go, she had tears streaming down her face.

“Michael, you’re here. I can’t believe you’re here. My brother is here. Babe!” Emily called out to her fiancé. “He’s here.”

Derik stepped into the room, his smile wide. “Rider. It’s so good to finally meet you.”

Rider held out his hand for a shake. They’d met on a video call, but they’d never actually met in person. When Derik wanted to propose to Emily, he’d called Rider, not to ask permission, but to talk about how he wanted to be with Emily forever. They discussed how Derik saw her as her own person and wanted to see her flourish. Rider had appreciated that call. A handshake wasn’t enough for his future brother, so he pulled him in for a hug.

Derik’s chuckle filled the room. “Wow, you’ve got some muscles.”

Rider smiled, not wanting to brag. Of course, he had muscles because he had to have them for work. “All part of the job.”

“You’re in the Navy, right?” Andie asked.

He turned and caught her gaze and noticed the way she was assessing him. If he

weren't at his sister's wedding, and Andie wasn't his sister's best friend, he would flirt. But this woman wasn't available. He'd seen her being abused by some jerk, which meant she was probably still involved in some way.

It was complicated at best and terrible at worst. Besides, he lived in San Diego, and Portland, Oregon was too far away for a long-distance relationship. If he got together with this woman, he couldn't just step out of her life.

Andie needed to stop ogling Emily's brother. He was off limits. She still had to deal with the aftereffects of Tony. It wouldn't be fair to Rider, and Emily would be pissed. She guarded her brother like a lioness. He'd given her a chance to thrive. She'd heard the story many times. Their parents had left them nearly destitute, but her brother had sacrificed everything to make sure she had a college degree and every advantage to succeed.

"Do you think my sleeves are too short?" Rider asked Derik.

Derik walked around Rider and shook his head. "No, it works. And it's only for one day. There's no need for you to bother with getting it adjusted, not when we have fun activities. Your sister set us up to go fishing."

Rider threw back his head, laughter spilling out. Andie had never seen such a beautiful sight. She wanted this loud, expressive man who seemed larger than life.

"Emily, fishing?"

"Yeah."

"What's wrong with fishing?" Derik asked.

Rider shook his head, mirth shining in his eyes. "Dad used to force me to fish. I hated

it because I hated boats. I loathed being on the water, and then I joined the Navy. It's a joke between us."

"Damn, if I'd?"

"No, no, it's good. I want to spend the day on the water with you."

"Good. We have a helicopter out to the coast that is leaving tomorrow morning at six."

Andie wished she liked fishing. She would love to spend the day with Rider, but really, she was excited about the spa day she and Emily had planned. Tomorrow evening they would have dinner with the other bridesmaids and groomsmen. Emily hadn't wanted to be too excessive and have a bunch of people involved. The actual wedding ceremony was only forty-six guests. It made sense. Emily wasn't one to show off, never had been.

"I'm going to get out of this monkey suit and change."

"You should rest some," Emily said.

Rider flashed her a smile. "I need to work out. Thought I would go for a run and then see if they have any weights."

Derik slapped Rider on the shoulder. "I don't know that I could keep up, but why don't I join you?"

"We could all join you," Emily said.

Panic slid through Andie. She hadn't run in ages, and she didn't have her workout gear. Usually, if she did anything bouncy, like jogging, she wore two workout bras

just to keep the girls in place.

Rider raised his hand. “I don’t mean to disparage any of you, but there is no way you all can keep up with me on a run.”

Emily laughed. “No, silly. We could walk the path, and you could run. Then, as you run by, you can holler, ‘on your left,’ like that movie you took me to see when I was a child. Remember, I started calling you Captain America after that because you said you wanted to enter the military.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

Andie liked how quick Rider was to smile. An image of how he'd handled Tony popped into her head. He'd looked scary at that moment. A shiver slid through her. Who was Emily's brother? Was he a good man, or was he the angry person she'd seen confront Tony?

He'd helped her when he hadn't needed to. Way too many guy friends had let Tony get away with his abuse. Maybe those guys weren't friends, and Rider was better than all of them.

She wasn't going to let her lack of workout gear stop her from learning more about Rider. She could walk with Emily. Besides, it had been a while since she'd done anything at the gym.

Planning Emily's wedding had taken center stage, and she really needed some exercise. Emily was the closest thing she'd ever had to a sister, and she had happily signed up to help her make this week special. Emily had never given up on her when Tony had become abusive. She'd built her up every time Tony had torn her down. When she'd walked out of that relationship, Emily had given her a place to stay and the down payment on a new apartment.

Rider nodded. "Okay, but I warn you. Don't try to keep up, or you won't be walking in the morning."

Derik laughed and patted Rider's shoulder. "Okay, okay, I hear you. I will work out with the women, and you can be the beast."

Emily hugged her brother. "Let's all get changed. I'm excited to spend some time

with you.”

Andie was excited, too, but nervous. She wanted to spend time with Rider, but in shorts and a t-shirt, her rolls wouldn't be hidden. Not that she had a chance with a man like him. Hell, it was Emily's brother, so getting together with him was out of the question.

3

Rider would be lying to say he wasn't looking forward to showing off in front of Andie. He wouldn't cross any lines, but she would be in his private spank bank.

He rolled his eyes. He was being arrogant. Just because he had muscles and a good body didn't mean someone like Andie would really be interested in him. He was more than his muscles, but few women saw past to the man he was underneath the meat sack that held him.

He pulled on his workout shirt and a pair of shorts, wondering if he was getting in too deep. Showing off in front of Andie was a double-edged sword. He didn't need to encourage her, but he liked the attention.

Maybe he should download one of the hookup apps and find someone willing to get down and dirty. It wouldn't work. Their week was heavily planned. He could just jerk off later in the shower and be satisfied with that.

The resort where they were staying had a mile jogging path. He texted his sister, then took off, knowing he would pass his sister and her party at some point. He was on his second mile when he saw them on the path. His lips stretched into a wide smile at seeing the pink get-up Andie wore. She looked perfect and huggable in the clothes. He wasn't going to compliment her because he knew it would come off wrong. Yelling out how he liked how rounded her ass looked in those shorts would be wrong.

“On your left,” he said as he came up behind them. They all cheered him on, hollering after him as he continued his run. They walked around the path once, and he’d passed them two more times.

“Are you going longer?” Emily called out after he passed.

He slowed and turned around, running back to them, and slowed to a jog beside her. “One more time. Then I was going to do a workout here.”

“Here?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, we’ll walk down a bit and turn around. We can join you for your workout.”

“See you in about seven minutes.”

He took off, pushing thoughts of Andie out of his mind as he ran his last mile. Usually, for his runs, he wore a weight vest, but he hadn’t wanted to carry the extra weight with him on the plane.

When he finished his last mile, he decided to keep the workout light. He was worried about Derik. He’d seen too many men try to keep up with him and end up in pain or in the hospital with rhabdo. He wasn’t here to show up Derik. The man was good for Emily, and he wanted them to have a happy life.

“What are we doing for a workout?” Emily asked.

“We’ll stick with fifty push-ups, fifty squats, and fifty burpees.” He was planning on doing more, but he wasn’t going to tell them.

He noticed the way Andie's mouth turned down. She looked worried. He wished he would have had a chance to talk to her before he told them what he was doing so he could find out what she was capable of. The last thing he wanted was to hurt her.

"Push-ups can be from knees or angled," he said.

Emily narrowed her gaze. "Angled? What do you mean?"

He knew his buddies would scoff at angled push-ups. Even after surgeries, they didn't do angled push-ups. One of the SEALs had shoulder surgery and was back to fit shape in three months. The guys he hung with were a different breed.

Rider moved to a picnic table and showed them an angled push-up. "Just make sure you don't overdo it. You have a wedding, and you have to be able to use your arms and legs."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

“Got it. I think Andie and I will go between push-ups on our knees and angled.”

He nodded. “Good. And don’t push through the pain. Be smart.”

They started the workout, music pumping through his phone. His sister made joking comments to Derik, and Andie finally joined in. It was the atmosphere he’d wanted to create. They didn’t need to know he was doing more.

Andie couldn’t keep her eyes off Rider. His tiny shorts made her mouth water. Good thing he was wearing compression shorts under them, or she might get an eyeful. Not that she would mind. She would love to see his bare ass.

Heat washed over her, and she had to push thoughts of Rider’s bare ass out of her mind. She knew Rider was working faster than them, but he seemed to be on the same set as they were. Actually, he should be done based on how fast he was moving.

After a moment, she stopped and watched him. He was moving twice as fast as Derik. He noticed her watching and paused.

Rider met her gaze. “What?”

She waved her hand at him, shaking her head. “You’re cheating.”

He shook his head, his gaze getting more intense. “I’m not cheating.”

“You’re doing twice as many things as Derik. That means you’re doing three to every single one we do. You said we were only doing fifty of each. Have you done a

hundred and fifty push-ups?”

He shrugged, looking a little guilty. “It’s not cheating.”

Emily stopped moving. Her face was flushed from working out. “Did you really do a hundred and fifty push-ups and burpees?”

Rider’s lips thinned and he glanced away. “Um, I don’t think that’s material for this conversation.”

Derik wiped his face with a towel he’d picked up from the swimming pool and brought out. “Jesus, man. Are you a machine?”

He shook his head. “No, I’m not. But you realize this is my job. I have to be in insane shape to do what I do.”

Andie put her hands on her hips and cocked her head to the side. “You know, Emily is rather secretive about what you do in the Navy. And your hair is long, and you have a beard. I know that didn’t grow in on the plane ride up here. You aren’t a werewolf, are you? What is your job in the Navy?”

He appreciated Emily not spreading it around, but he didn’t need to be so closed mouth about his life. “I’m special forces.”

Andie realized she was an idiot. Emily hadn’t said it in so many words, but she’d given hints. “Oh shit, you’re a Navy SEAL. No wonder you look better than Adonis.” She slapped her hands over her mouth. Why had she said that?

Rider’s cheeks grew darker, and his gaze slid away for just a second. “Yeah, it’s not something I talk about with strangers, but you aren’t a stranger.”

“I should have picked up on it. Emily gave hints, but sometimes I’m not the brightest.”

His smile spread, and a deep chuckle rumbled from him. “At least you’re cute.”

She could see that he realized what he said about a second after the words slipped from his mouth. Emily and Derik had started talking about something, and they hadn’t heard. Thank goodness. At least she didn’t have to deal with explaining to Emily she wasn’t flirting with her super gorgeous brother.

Rider glanced at Emily and Derik before speaking. “I think we deserve a reward. How about we shower and grab some food, unless you all have plans?”

“We have a meeting with the wedding planner,” Emily said. “But why don’t you and Andie get dinner?”

“You two can talk about us without us there. I’m sure Michael—Rider would love to get the dirt on me.”

Rider chuckled, sending heat straight through Andie. She needed to get her responses under control or she would blow it at dinner tonight.

“Sure,” Andie said, trying to be strong and show that being alone with Rider didn’t scare her. At least he wasn’t Derik’s best man, or they would end up alone a lot more over the coming days.

“I’m game. How about in an hour? I’ll meet you downstairs. I’ll call for a reservation at the restaurant.”

Surprise filled Andie. The place was expensive, and she had expected him to suggest something like a fast-food joint. The restaurant would be more like a date.

“Oh, that place is nice,” Emily said.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

Derik nodded. “Yes, we ate there when we were looking for a venue. It’s very good.”

The smile that spread over Rider’s face made her want to kiss him. But she couldn’t.

“Nice. It’s been a while since I’ve been to a nice restaurant,” Rider said.

Self-consciousness filled Andie. “We don’t have to go there.”

Rider snorted. “Of course we do. We can swap stories about Emily. It will be fun.”

Andie smiled, agreeing to eat at the restaurant downstairs. It was more than she wanted or deserved. She hoped Rider didn’t regret it because in a place like that, with the soft lighting and wine flowing, she would surely fall deeper for him than the lust she already felt.

4

Rider wished this was a real date, but he would be on his best behavior with Andie, never going over the line. He hoped she wore a low-cut dress. He could imagine how good she would look with some cleavage showing, her hair playing at the rise of her breasts.

He closed his eyes in the shower, imagining how soft her skin would be. The thought of losing himself in her forced him to jack off in the shower. When he shut the water off, a trickle of disgust slid through him. She would probably be pissed if she knew how much lust he had for her.

When he stepped out of his room, his body felt satisfied, and he thought he could handle sitting across from her without embarrassing himself. He found a place at the bar where he could see the elevator. Everything was going great. His cock was soft against his leg, and he wasn't having fantasies about Andie. At least he wasn't thinking about getting her naked until she stepped into the restaurant wearing a yellow dress that showed her creamy cleavage. He almost choked on his whiskey. Maybe he should stick to water this week. Having alcohol on board would make it harder to restrain himself.

He sipped the last of his whiskey and moved to her, greeting her, then holding out his arm for her to take. Her soft hand in the crook of his elbow felt like it belonged.

Walking into formal events with Andie would make other guys jealous. It was a shallow reason to get involved, but he wasn't immune to eye candy.

He held the chair for her, making sure to push in as she sat. Before he stood, he took the liberty of getting an eyeful of her. "You look very nice tonight." He whispered the words, loving the way goosebumps rose on her arms. He should behave, but he was finding it difficult with such a beautiful woman sitting across from him.

His words must have flustered her because her creamy skin was splotched, and she was staring at the charger plate in front of her.

"Would you like an appetizer?"

"No, I think I'll just get a salad."

He shook his head. "You worked out hard. We both did."

She rolled her eyes. "You worked out hard. I barely did anything."

He leaned in, resting one elbow on the table as he grew serious. “Was it more than you usually do at the gym?”

Andie wasn’t sure what the hell she was doing. Before Tony, she’d been strong and eaten what she wanted at restaurants. She hadn’t worried about weight or what other people thought. Then, she spent six months with the abusive jerk who wrecked her. Now, she was back to wanting to starve herself and commit to the eating disorder cycle she’d overcome.

She shook off the feeling. “You’re right. I need more than just a salad.”

“They have a hummus plate. We could split that.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Wait, you eat hummus?”

He flashed her a wide grin. “Sure as heck do. I also like quiche and cosmopolitans.”

“Wow, I’m surprised. Most guys think hummus makes their dicks fall off.”

His laughter made her smile. She liked the shyness she saw in him. His attitude was refreshing, and she could imagine having feelings for him. But she didn’t need the complications this week. Emily was her best friend, and she wouldn’t chase after her brother. “Your sister said you were a good person.”

The waiter came over and she ordered a cosmo while he ordered a beer. “Not drinking a cosmo tonight?”

He shrugged. “I had a whiskey earlier and I don’t want to get really drunk. Beer is low alcohol level, and I don’t really like beer, so I know it will slow down my drinking.”

“Oh, that’s smart. I usually order club soda when I don’t want to drink a lot.”

“Yeah, when we’re on duty, we’re not allowed to drink, but sometimes we end up in situations where we have to interface with locals. I’ve perfected the game of not drinking while looking like I’m drinking.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

“Interesting. I thought—” Andie glanced around before continuing. “I thought SEALs were all shock and awe.”

He laughed. “The world is changing. We do what we’re asked.”

The waiter came back with their drinks, and Rider asked for the hummus plate. “Can we order our main meal after we finish with the appetizer?”

“Yes, sir. Take as long as you like. The restaurant stays open until eleven tonight, so you have time.”

“Thank you, Don. I appreciate that.”

Andie was impressed. She hadn’t even taken the time to catch the waiter’s name, but Rider had. He really was observant. She liked that about him.

“So, how old were you when you joined the Navy?”

He blew out a breath and shook his head. “I still feel guilty about that. I just left Emily. I should have?—”

She reached out and put her hand on his, enjoying the electric zing that shot through her. “Oh no, she never felt like you abandoned her. You were her hero.”

“She was only fifteen, and we were living with a relative who hated us.”

“She credits you for saving her. You know how it was. They locked up their food and

wouldn't let her work outside the home. You opening that bank account before you left, and allowing her to use the money kept her alive."

He nodded. "I just feel guilty because it was so bad. If I'd stayed, then maybe I could have?—"

"What? You would have had to work two jobs, maybe three, to provide for the both of you. She has an awesome job now because of you."

He chuckled, agreeing with Andie. "Her job is awesome. I'm glad her hard work paid off."

The hummus plate was delivered, and they both dug in. Andie was hungrier than she'd first thought, and Rider didn't look at her weird as she ate her fourth piece of bread with hummus on it.

Rider swallowed, then took a sip of the water the waiter had poured. "This is good."

"It is. I'm much hungrier than I'd first thought."

"Honestly, I like working out because it makes the food taste better."

She shrugged. "I get that. So, do you really like working out that much?"

He sat back and met her gaze. "Yes and no. I get tired, but my job requires me to do things like scale a building or move fast. If one of my buddies gets shot, I have to have the strength to carry him out because I'd want to be carried out."

The thought of Rider being shot made her so sad she reached out and took his hand. "But you wouldn't be shot, you know. You wouldn't get shot, right?"

Rider had learned to compartmentalize the realities of his job. Death happened. It was part of the whole gig. He'd lost friends, seen them killed in action, blown up when helicopters crashed, bleed out after being shot. It was a terrible reality of war, and even if the USA wasn't in the middle of a war, the world always had some kind of threat popping up, requiring action on their part.

"I'm good at what I do."

Andie narrowed her eyes. "I don't like that answer."

"Really, I'm safe. We do what we can to come home." Her concern touched him. No one other than Emily had ever expressed concern for him, not like this. "What do you do for a living?"

"I teach online courses. I work for a few universities and a few community service centers. My favorite is teaching business requirements to new business owners."

"Really? What does that entail?"

"Some people don't know you have to file taxes if you're a business owner. One guy learned to weld when he was in the military. He'd never worked for himself, but once he got out, he opened a welding business. He didn't know he had to file taxes."

"That's wild."

"Yeah, it's sad, too. But in my job I get to teach people what to do. I dig in and figure out what is required for each state and municipality. I like looking up information for each city where my clients operate and figuring out together with them what needs to be done."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

“That’s just so wild that the guy didn’t know he had to file taxes. But I guess if you’ve never worked for yourself, why would you know?”

She nodded. “It sounds like you know, though.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know if it’s because we’re special forces or if I just have friends who are smart. A few of the retired guys come back and mentor some of the new SEALs. Those guys keep us informed on what’s what.”

“That’s good. I get most of my general knowledge from Emily. Not that I’m using her, she’s just so freaking smart and our conversations go everywhere. She’s honestly how I got into teaching the business class.”

Rider was proud of his sister. She had beat the odds and made something of herself. She’d worked hard and excelled in school, then she worked really hard to get a good job, giving up her summers to intern. “She is great and I’m glad she helped you.”

“I’m glad you did what you could to help her. It made a difference.”

The waiter came back around, ending that part of their conversation. He ordered a steak and vegetables. Andie ordered fish. They continued talking about life and what they hoped for Emily and this week. Andie wasn’t just a pretty face, she was smart and witty. He could get used to spending time with her. If only she lived closer to him.

Anger slid through Tony as he watched that asshole wine and dine his woman. Andie may be an ugly bitch, but she was his. He might have kicked her to the curb, but he needed her back now. It was too difficult to find a decent woman out there, and Andie knew exactly how to be good.

He'd trained her to stay in line and never speak unless spoken to. The new bitches he tried to date were mouthy. They didn't know when to shut up. He'd tried multiple times to train them to be decent, but they butted in, asking questions and demanding answers. Andie knew her place and how to stay in it.

When the jerk reached over and touched Andie's cheek, he wanted to destroy the guy. No one had permission to touch his woman. She was his and no one else could have her.

Getting to her again at this hotel would be difficult. Maybe he could get one of the workers to give him some help. If he could get a keycard to her room, he could take care of her in minutes.

He thought about approaching the desk to grab a key when Andie stood. Maybe he could follow her and attack then. He could make sure she understood.

Tony was about to move when the jerk with Andie got up from his chair. He hung back, trying to blend in. The last thing he needed was that jerk to attack him again.

It boiled his blood to see Andie talking and laughing with that stranger. What the hell did that jerk even think he could get from Andie? She was a bitch and a whore. She wasn't fit for company, and this guy was hanging on Andie's every word. Ridiculous.

They entered the elevator, and Tony had no choice but to leave. If that jerk saw him again, he didn't want to think about what the guy would do to him. He needed to find a way to get to Andie when that hulk wasn't around.

Andie shut the door and closed her eyes. Rider was way too tempting. She needed to get her lust under control. No way she could be the cliché who slept with the bride's brother. It was almost as bad as the maid of honor doing the best man.

“Get it together.”

She unzipped her dress and tugged it over her head. Rider's gaze had been drawn to her boobs. She'd caught him looking more than once. He was just a guy looking at boobs. He wasn't really interested in her.

She changed into sweats and a T-shirt, then grabbed her computer, looking for what else she needed to get done before morning. Her personal emails were easy to clear. Emily was very good at staying coordinated. They were prepared for this weekend. Work was a different thing. She needed to scan a document that had been mailed to her. Why did the university insist on mailing her paper documents when they insisted she send them back a digital copy?

She looked through her bag, searching for the file with the paper tucked inside. “It was right—” She slapped her forehead. She'd left it in her car. After pulling on shoes she headed down, ready to get this taken care of so she could sleep.

Rider couldn't get Andie out of his mind. He wouldn't get any sleep, not without wearing himself out. He pulled on his workout gear and headed downstairs, ready to work his ass off so he was exhausted.

He decided on running and breaking it up with things like burpees and push-ups. His workout earlier hadn't been enough to get him tired, so he knew he would have to go for more than an hour.

He finished his second round of burpees when he heard someone scream. The yell wasn't someone having fun, a drunken reveler. It sounded desperate, like that he'd heard in war zones.

The scream sounded again. He grabbed his phone and shoved it into his shorts pocket before taking off in the direction of the scream. It sounded like a woman, and from the noises she was making, she seemed to be fighting for her life.

Andie had just grabbed the folder when she felt a hand on her back. She spun, seeing Tony.

“What do you want?”

“I'm sick of your bullshit. You are coming with me.”

She tried to pull away, but his hold on her was too tight. She would have to break free, but she wasn't sure how. She let loose another scream, trying to get someone's attention as she clawed at his hold.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

Pain slid up her fingers as her fingernails broke off. He'd pulled her about six feet away from her car. He was going to get her into his vehicle, and then she would never get free. He was obsessed.

Another shriek spilled from her, and he punched her. She sagged, her knees hitting the deck.

"Bitch, get up."

If she did what he asked, he would still hurt her. She'd already learned that lesson. He'd done it before and would do it again. Why this week? Maybe because he knew where she would be. They should have moved the wedding location like Emily had suggested, but she'd not wanted to ruin Emily's perfect week. She'd been in love with this place since she'd first seen it.

Rider spied the woman on the ground, trying to fight off the guy above her. The jerk punched her, and that freaking pissed him off. He didn't have time to stop and call the police, but he figured he could take the guy.

He was about twenty feet away when he realized the woman on the ground was Andie. That made his blood boil.

Rider picked up speed and hit the bastard attacking Andie with force. The oof sound he got from the attacker warmed his icy heart. He wouldn't kill the guy, but he sure as fuck wasn't going to let him touch Andie again.

The man moved to stand, but Rider didn't like that at all. "Stay down!" His voice

echoed off the hotel, and he saw the man flinch. But the jerk didn't stay down. Rider was preparing to knock the man on his ass when he heard sirens and saw lights flashing. The cops were there.

A panicked look crossed the jerk's face before he turned to take off. But Rider must have hit him harder than he'd thought because the guy went down on both knees as soon as he tried to move.

Rider heard Andie moving behind him. He wanted to tell her to stay back behind him, but he couldn't take his eyes off her attacker. The man was dangerous.

"Rider, are you okay?" Andie asked.

"I'm okay. What about you?"

"I'm fine."

She didn't sound fine. She sounded lost. This was the second time he'd found someone attacking her. He needed to find out more about this guy and shut him down.

It took a few minutes for the police to sort things out. Two ambulances were called, though Andie insisted she was okay. Rider didn't like the way the lump on her head looked.

"You should see someone," Rider said as he sat next to her on the curb.

She shook her head but stopped moving and moaned. "I'm fine."

"I can drive you there. You don't have to ride in the ambulance. Maybe a scan to check out that bump on your head."

Andie didn't want to cry, but she couldn't keep the tears at bay. This was the last thing she needed the week of Emily's wedding. Thankfully, Rider had saved her again, but he was seeing her at her worst. What a terrible impression she was making.

All the hurt and anger turned inward. "I don't deserve saving."

He moved so he was kneeling in front of her. "I don't ever want to hear you talking that way again. You do deserve saving."

She stared into his eyes, wondering if he really thought that. Emily and her therapist had helped her so much, but with Tony coming around, abusing her again, it seemed like she was slipping away. Maybe she deserved a guy like Tony. She wasn't cute and didn't have a great job. She was just average at best. Someone like Tony might be the best she could hope for.

"Hey, Andie, you do deserve to be saved. What that jerk is doing is wrong."

She couldn't keep looking into his eyes because his caring about her was too much. If she had someone in her life like Rider, maybe she could really get over everything Tony had done to her.

He cupped her face gently, smoothing his thumb over her cheek. "You do deserve to be saved."

For a half second, he thought she was going to kiss him. But the officer stepped over, interrupting the moment. "Excuse me, ma'am. He is saying you forced yourself on him."

Rider didn't give her a chance to answer. "Get the video from the hotel. It will tell the truth."

The officer nodded. “We have someone on that. Just trying to get a statement.”

She shook her head. “He’s an ex. He attacked me earlier.”

Rider met the officer’s gaze. “I warned him off. I thought he would stay away.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

The officer looked between them then settled his gaze on Andie. “He probably wanted to scare you.”

Rider grunted. “He was dragging her away from her car. He was going to do more than just scare her.”

Rider’s words made a shiver slide down her back. Tony had meant her harm. He wouldn’t have stopped with just scaring her. He meant to kidnap her and do something awful.

She put her hand on Rider’s arm. “Thank you.”

“What were you doing out here, sir?” the officer asked.

“Working out.”

“Again?” Andie asked.

His lips tipped up just a little before he nodded. “I needed to wear myself out so I could get some sleep.”

The officer glanced around and pointed in the direction of the jogging loop and picnic area. “So you were over there.”

“Yes, sir. I was in the middle of my workout and heard screaming.”

“And you ran over? What made you think you could help?”

“He’s Navy,” Andie said as she patted his shoulder.

The officer narrowed his gaze like he didn’t believe her. She wanted to defend Rider, but the officer shrugged and wrote something in his notepad.

The officer frowned. “This guy seems like a real jerk. I’m not sure how long we’ll be able to hold him. Maybe have someone with you at all times. Don’t come out here at night. I know you shouldn’t have to hide and change what you’re doing, but that man is not right in the head.”

“Do you think he’ll get out soon?” Rider asked.

“We’ll take him downtown and see if we can hold him for a few days before the judge grants bail. I’ll keep you both informed. I just need your contact information.”

Rider was thankful he’d shown up when he had. If he’d been inside trying to sleep instead of out here working out, who knows what could have happened to Andie.

He would have to be her shadow this week. No question, he couldn’t allow her to hang out on her own. It was too dangerous. He also needed to contact his buddies and see if they could get a bead on the jerk. Maybe there were pressures he could use against the guy. All he knew was he had to keep Andie safe because he needed to know she was having a good life, even if it wasn’t with him.

7

The next morning, Andie didn’t know if she was sore because of the workout or the attack. No question, Rider had saved her. She owed him. He had driven her to an urgent care location for a CT scan and stayed with her. They hadn’t returned to the hotel until midnight, and it was still dark outside. She would need a nap later.

Rider had insisted on sleeping on her couch. She'd told him it wasn't necessary, but he wouldn't leave her alone.

By the time she finished in the bathroom, the scent of coffee was driving her wild. She'd brought her small Keurig from home so she could get coffee on demand. Had he fixed her coffee? Would he even know what to put in it?

She opened the door, surprised to find him showered and dressed in fresh clothes. He looked good, like he wasn't sleep deprived though he had been up half the night with her. He set the mug of coffee on the table and flashed her a huge smile.

"I made you coffee. Derik came over and sat in here while I showered."

She narrowed her eyes. Was this a joke? "Did you really make me coffee?"

"Yes."

She stared at the mug, noticing the liquid in the mug was the color she liked it. She imagined Rider drank his black. "How did you know how I like it?"

"I asked Emily."

Andie picked up the mug and took a sip. It was perfect. He had gotten it exactly right. No man had ever gotten her coffee right. "You did it right."

His eyebrows shot up like he was expressing the fact he knew it would be right. Of course, a man like Rider got it right. He cared enough to know what she liked and fix things that way for her, at least he'd gotten her coffee correct. Maybe he wouldn't get anything else right.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

“Thank you for everything last night. I slept well knowing I was safe.”

“I’m planning on sleeping in here every night.”

“That’s not?—”

“Don’t say it. He doesn’t know where your apartment is, so you’ll be safe there, but he knew about the wedding. Emily feels awful.”

She paused mid sip, swallowed and put down her coffee. “Please tell me she didn’t find out.”

“She knew last night. They came back when the cops were in the lot and asked at the front desk. It only took her a little while to figure out what was going on. She texted me, and I told her you were okay. She is going to be here in—” he checked his phone for the time, “—ten minutes for breakfast.”

Tears gathered in her eyes, and she set the mug on the table before stepping to the window to stare out at the parking lot below. “This is awful. This week should be about her wedding.”

Suddenly he was right there, his arms around her, hugging her close. “It’s okay. She’s worried about you. And she is fine sharing a little of the spotlight. She doesn’t need to be treated like royalty. She’s just glad you are okay.”

Andie knew she should step back, but Rider’s solid chest, his strong heartbeat, and the feel of his arms around her made her feel special. Like if she stayed right here,

maybe her life would be good—no, better than good.

She lifted her chin right as he looked down. Their gazes met, and she swore she saw lust fire in his eyes. But no, it couldn't be. But he didn't step back or let go. Instead, his hold tightened on her. She noticed his gaze flicking to her lips. A shiver slid through her, and his head dipped just a little. Their lips were only inches apart.

This was crazy. This amazing man was about to kiss her. Her breath hitched, and heat bloomed. Then Rider's lips were on hers, his hand in her hair, supporting her head. But it wasn't like he was forcing her to stay kissing him. She could have pulled away at any second. She didn't want to step back. She wanted to feel him pressed against her, desperate for more.

She let her hands slide down his back, feeling the tightness of his muscles. He felt amazing and she wanted more.

One of his hands was lower, almost to her butt. She pressed harder against him, and her nipples tightened.

A knock sounded on her door, and Rider jerked back, his eyes wild as he looked from her to the door. It was his sister, and it was obvious he didn't want to be caught kissing her.

He cleared his throat and stepped away. "I'll get that."

She nodded and picked up her coffee, trying to calm the heck down after that kiss that turned her on so hot she wondered if she would burst into flames.

Rider didn't want his sister to be mad at Andie, and he sure as heck didn't want to piss Andie off. If they got involved, how long could it last? He lived a thousand miles away. It was too far to have anything meaningful.

She turned on something inside him that was more than lust. He felt something for her, which was crazy. How could he have anything with Andie? They'd only known each other for a short while. He'd heard of Andie but never met her. They'd talked a few times on the phone when he'd called Emily and she was there, but they'd never had a conversation until this week. Now, after one dinner and a few other odd hours together, he wanted to build a relationship with her. He was getting way too ahead of himself.

He pulled open the door, and his sister rushed in. Derik followed close behind, squeezing his shoulder as he passed.

"Oh, Andie, are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

Derik moved to the coffee machine and grabbed a mug. He turned to Rider. "Would you like another?"

"Sure."

The women were still hugging, and Emily was fussing over Andie. He picked up a few words. Emily felt guilty. From the few words he and Andie had exchanged, he knew she didn't want Emily to feel guilty.

He cleared his throat. "Hey, Em, life is unpredictable. You couldn't have known this would happen."

She turned to him, her eyes rimmed with tears. "But I should?—"

He shook his head. "Don't go there. Now that we know that jerk is around, we can keep Andie safe."

“Aren’t you two about to head out fishing?” Emily asked.

“We are. I hired a security detail to—” Another knock sounded on the door right then. “I made some contacts. It’s a woman-led security firm. She was in basic at the same time I was, and our first posting was together. She sent one of her best women who will fit in at the spa, and make sure you two are safe all day.”

Emily gasped. “You didn’t have to.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

Andie shook her head. “That’s too much.”

“No, it’s not.” He pulled open the door, and he was surprised to see the woman he knew, Cassandra, standing there instead of one of her employees.

She held out her hand, giving him a firm shake. “Rider, it’s good to see you.”

“Cassandra, thank you for coming to help.”

“Anything for you. You saved my ass on that ship.”

Andie would be lying if she said jealousy didn’t hit hard as she watched Rider with Cassandra. She could see they had a special connection. She was being ridiculous. They’d had one dinner and shared a kiss, but that meant nothing. Not when Rider had history with the woman.

She didn’t want to be jealous, didn’t want to feel the weirdness at seeing him with such a beautiful woman, and Cassandra was beautiful.

“Let me introduce you.” Rider introduced her to Derik and Emily first.

Then he turned to her and took her hand. She wasn’t sure he even realized what he was doing holding her hand. When his fingers squeezed hers, she almost melted.

“Andie, I’m sorry you were attacked. It sucks when someone tries to use their strength to hurt you. When Rider texted last night, I knew I wanted to be the one to keep you safe. I owe Rider my life. He saved me from an attack not too different

from what you went through. I've been in contact with the police, and I've been assured that Tony won't get out of jail for at least another twenty-four hours. I know the security officer here at the hotel, and he knows to keep watch this week. He added another security officer and is taking this seriously."

Heat rose up her neck to her face. "I don't want to be trouble."

"Trust me, you aren't any trouble. I'm happy to get to see Rider again. Honestly, I want him to meet my spouse. He's coming by at the end of the day to meet Rider and thank him."

"Oh, that's great." Andie took in the latest bit of information, realizing how ridiculous it was that she'd been jealous of Cassandra. Rider had friends, maybe even a few lovers, and she had no hold on him. So what if he'd kissed her? That meant nothing, not really. She needed to get her head on straight and stop thinking they had anything special. He'd made no promises to her, and he owed her nothing.

Derik's phone buzzed, and he turned to Rider. "Our ride is almost here."

Rider's hug was a surprise. That he pulled her close in front of Emily wasn't lost on her.

"You'll be safe with Cassandra. We'll be back this afternoon."

"Thank you. You didn't have to."

He stepped back and put his hands on her shoulders. "I did. I want you and Emily to feel safe."

She smiled and nodded. Of course he was doing this for Emily, not her. He was doing all of this because of Emily. They didn't have a special relationship. They weren't

even friends, just acquaintances.

“We’ll have a good time today at the spa. You two have fun fishing.”

She watched as Rider grabbed a bag and threw it over his shoulder. She hated fishing but wished she could go with him. It was a silly thought, but she wanted to spend time with him.

Emily took her hand and squeezed. “Our appointments start in an hour. Do you want breakfast?”

Andie took her eyes off the guys as they left the room. She wanted life to be normal like it was before she met Tony. She needed to get out of her head. This week was about Emily and making sure she had a good marriage week.

“Breakfast.” Emily clapped her hands together. “Cassandra, have you eaten?”

“I did, before I came over. I’ll be outside in the hall. That way, the two of you can enjoy your breakfast together.”

“You don’t have to,” Emily said.

Cassandra flashed a smile. “I do. I need to place some calls and get some work done before the morning starts for other people.”

“Thank you for doing this. We really appreciate you coming over to watch after us. It will make the day run smoother.”

“You’re welcome, and like I said, I owe Rider.”

After Cassandra stepped out of the room, Emily ordered room service, then took

Andie's hands and pulled her over to the table, plopping down in a chair and pulling Andie down, too.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

“Tell me, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I don’t want this to derail your wedding week.”

Emily pushed a strand of Andie’s hair out of her face, frowning as her bruised cheek was revealed. “Honey, you’re an amazing friend, and though this is horrible, it won’t ruin my wedding week. We’re going to have fun and enjoy the week together. That asshole can’t take this from us. We’ll survive and even thrive. Trust me, Tony may have meant to ruin you, but we’ll bounce back and make it even better.”

She pulled Emily into a hug, tears filling her eyes. “This is why you’re my best friend. I love you. You and Derik deserve all the happiness in the world.”

They both sat back, and Emily’s lips curved up into a smile as if she were amused. “I saw the way my brother took your hand.”

More heat poured through Andie. “I’m sure he was just trying to be nice.”

Emily chuckled before getting up to make herself a cup of coffee. “I’m getting my nails done today. Did you choose that service?”

“I did. They are supposed to have two nail techs, so maybe we’ll be in there at the same time.”

She had been looking forward to this spa day for months, and she wasn’t going to allow Tony to ruin it. She would focus on Emily and fun. Though Rider had left, he’d made sure she would be safe. She appreciated how thoughtful he was. She was sure

he'd done it to keep Emily safe and not for her benefit. There was nothing between them, and she needed to remember that fact this week because they would be spending most of their time together after today.

8

Rider did his best to focus on fishing and having a good time with Derik, but he didn't breathe easier until they were close to the coast and back in cell service range. He knew Cassandra could handle anything. She was a badass. Though he'd saved her from attack when they'd been stationed on the same ship, he knew she could handle herself.

"No messages?" Derik asked as he moved behind him.

Rider shook his head. "No. That means everything is going well."

"I can't believe her ex is doing this. She dumped Tony months ago, but he hasn't been able to find her. I gotta tell you, when she left the jerk, Emily was really worried. In just a few short months of them dating, that bastard changed Andie. She tried to recover, but she's still different, nowhere near as secure as she was before."

"You knew her before that jerk?"

Derik nodded. "Yes. She was very lively and bubbly. Always fun, happy, a ray of sunshine. But that jerk did a number on her. She is much more self-conscious. She tries to hide it, but when the mask slips, you can see the pain."

Rider rubbed his jaw and shook his head. "I shouldn't get involved."

"Ha, I knew it!" Derik pumped his fist in the air. "Emily owes me five dollars."

Rider's mouth fell open. "You bet on us?"

"Well, on you. I made a bet with Emily after seeing you two together the first time. It was very obvious."

Rider shook his head. "Was I really that obvious?"

Derik shrugged. "To me, sure."

"There's no way it would work. I live in San Diego."

"She could move."

"But Emily is here, and I doubt she would want to move for me."

Derik shook his head. "We weren't saying anything until after the wedding. Andie knows, but no one else. We're moving to New York. Emily got a new job. She starts two weeks after we get back from our honeymoon."

"Oh, wow. I had no idea. What about your job?"

"I work remotely. They don't care where I am. As long as I get my job done, they're happy. And the position is one Emily wants. She's moving up fast."

"Wow, I'm happy for you two. That's great."

The fishing boat they were on pulled into the marina and up to the dock. The captain and his crew member tied them off and came over to shake their hand. Because they were staying at the hotel, the fish they'd caught would be given to a restaurant that had free dining for the homeless. He was glad it wouldn't go unused.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

The helicopter flight back to the resort was short, and relief filled him when he ran into Cassandra outside the spa area.

“Was everything quiet?”

“Very quiet. Emily and Andie insisted I eat with them. I gave them a watered-down version of how you saved me.”

Rider nodded. “You know, even if you were there for a date, it doesn’t give anyone permission to do that kind of thing.”

“You’re a good man. I’m surprised you aren’t married.”

He laughed. “I’ve been busy.”

“I get you, super soldier. You’re all about the job.”

Her words made him sad. He was all about the job, but he would give space for a woman like Andie. “I just haven’t found anyone I’d settle down with.”

“Well, settling isn’t recommended.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, your husband is an upgrade.”

“Damn straight. And I work hard every day to deserve him. He’s freaking amazing.”

“Thank you for taking time to do this.”

“Anything for you. And I like your woman.”

He shook his head. “She’s not my woman.”

Cassandra chuckled. “Yet. Just you wait. So Andrew can’t stop by. He had an emergency he has to deal with.”

“Oh, I was looking forward to meeting him. Maybe next time, or you two can come down to San Diego for a visit.”

Cassandra smiled and nodded. “Yeah, that would be great.” Her phone buzzed. “I need to get this. Thank you for contacting me about this gig. I enjoyed the time. I’ll talk to you later.”

He gave her a quick hug then headed inside. Fishing hadn’t made him too stinky, but he needed to shower before dinner. He was looking forward to seeing Andie. He hoped they’d had a good day. After dressing, he checked the mirror, thinking he was too big and looked way too rough for Andie. She deserved better. He was perfect for the battlefield, but in polite company, he stood out.

9

Andie felt relaxed after their day at the spa. The relaxation and pampering had been exactly what she needed. Emily was glowing, and Andie was so happy for her.

Emily and Derik were perfect for each other. Andie wished she could find someone good. Heck, if she could find someone who wouldn’t abuse her, they didn’t have to be good. They could just be nice and that would be enough for her. She could see herself settling down with someone nice. Thoughts of Rider filled her mind, and a shiver slid through her. The kiss had been fantastic, but surely that was a one-time thing. He probably regretted it.

A knock sounded on her door, and she pulled out her phone, seeing a text from Rider. She opened the door, finding Rider looking sharp.

“Hello. I’m a little early for dinner.”

“Um, oh, yeah. I’m almost ready.” The kiss they had shared played through her mind multiple times during the day. Heat rose up her neck to her face. “Um, come in.” How should she play this? Would he want to keep his distance, pretend like it never happened, or would he kiss her again?

“I hope you had a good day. Cassandra briefed me and it sounds like it was quiet.”

She nodded as she moved to the middle of the room, unsure what to do with herself. She wished she was more confident. “It was. Really, I don’t think we need protection.”

Rider took one big step and was beside her, his presence causing goosebumps to form on her arms.

“Oh,” she whispered as she looked up at him.

“I know you don’t know me, and I have no right to make a claim, but I keep mine safe.”

His words ricocheted in her mind, blowing every concept of what she thought was going on. She searched his gaze, fear and desire mixing. She didn’t want to lose him but knew he couldn’t stay here in Portland. His job and his life were in Southern California.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

Then his lips were on hers, but it wasn't the hungry kiss from earlier, this was sweet, pure, like gentle rain on a spring day. When his lips left hers, he didn't move away.

"I know this is impossible. It's a thousand miles away, and I don't have a say in where I live. I'll be in Southern California until I retire unless they ship me off to Virginia or Hawaii, but SoCal is my home. And it's not fair for me to ask this of you?—"

She reached up and put her fingers on his lips. "Are you pulling my leg? Is this just some tumble in the sheets with the fat girl?"

"You aren't fat," he said behind her fingers. "You're fucking gorgeous. I can't get you out of my mind. I've jerked off to thoughts of you way too many times to be considered healthy."

His words shocked her. They'd only known each other for a day, and he was saying he'd jerked off more than once to thoughts of her? She had to set him straight and show him she wasn't worth it. "I'm not skinny." She stepped back and pulled at her shirt.

"What are you doing?"

"Showing you the reality of my fat rolls."

He put his hand on her arm, stopping her. "Look at me."

She stilled and met his gaze, swallowing at the seriousness in his eyes. "What?"

“I don’t give a shit what society has told you about your body and how much fat they think is acceptable on a woman. I’m very attracted to you. You are beautiful, you’re kind, you have a great sense of humor, and you are deep. I know some of this because Emily has talked about you multiple times. I wish I would have met you before now. Maybe it wouldn’t have worked because I was in a different headspace, but I want you. I’m not much, I’m just?—”

“Holy fuck, you’re not much? What the shit? That’s the dumbest thing you’ve said. You’re fucking amazing. The way you sent Tony flying when you hit him was amazing. You kept me safe, and you were able to hold a conversation with me at dinner. Also, your body is freaking amazing.”

“I’ll lose muscle when I leave the Navy. When I’m sixty, I may be fit, but I’ll not be like this.”

“It’s doubtful I’ll lose weight as my hormones change with age.”

“So we’ll both change. Whatever. That’s life. If I wanted a mannequin, I’d buy a sex doll. I want something real. Will you be real with me?”

Andie couldn’t believe they were having this conversation. Tony had told her over and over again how worthless she was, that no one would ever really love her. He’d used a combination of love bombing followed up with complaints, leaving her unsure what exactly she should think or feel.

Rider was telling her he was falling for her, and her outside package wasn’t the only thing that mattered. She reached up and ran her fingers over his dark beard. He captured her hand and kissed her palm.

“So you really want me?” she asked.

“Yes, Andie. I know we won’t see each other for a while, and you’ll have to travel to me because I’m restricted on how far away from base I can be.”

“Has your sister told you their plans after the wedding?”

He nodded. “Derik told me today. I know they are moving.”

“I don’t know that I want to stay here. I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“San Diego isn’t bad. Have you ever been there?”

She shook her head. “No, I haven’t.”

“You could come for a visit and see what you think.”

This was happening so fast. Would he want to be around her that much? Tony had said over and over again that she was incredibly annoying. She wondered how long Rider would last before he got tired of her.

“Are you sure?”

He nodded. “Yes. I have a guest room if you like, or you could stay at a hotel. I wouldn’t want you to feel trapped, so I don’t want to assume anything.”

She swallowed as his gaze ran down his body, heating every part of her. He was so good looking, so sexy, and she wanted to see every inch of him. He put his fingers under her chin and lifted her head so her gaze was locked with his. His eyes were dark, his gaze intense.

“We could do that, too, if you want. I don’t want to assume.”

Heat raced up her chest to her face. “Um, I wasn’t thinking?—”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

His laughter cut her off. “Oh yes, you were. I was thinking the same thing. I want to feel you wrapped around my cock, riding me, under me, bent over the table?—”

A knock on the door interrupted Rider. She checked the time, seeing it was when they’d said they would meet for dinner. “Emily and Derik have the worst timing.”

His chuckle sent a shiver down her spine. “She keeps interrupting us when things get interesting.”

Andie turned away from the door, trying to calm down as Emily and Derik stepped in. She drew in a slow breath, knowing Emily would be able to tell. Her skin was too fair to not show the heat.

She was crazy for getting involved the week of Emily’s wedding. She needed to be cool and calm. The only saving grace was they’d planned everything and left nothing to chance. There were only a few things they had to do before the big day and those tasks wouldn’t take much time.

10

Dinner started slow, but soon, they were all laughing as Emily and Andie told stories. They were back in the main lobby of the hotel when an older couple entered, and the woman squealed. Rider flinched and was prepared for an attack, but then he realized the man looked like an older version of Derik.

“Mom, Dad. I didn’t know you would be arriving tonight.”

“We came in early. Wanted to get a good night’s sleep before the festivities start.”

“Let me introduce you to everyone.” Derik turned and motioned to Andie. “This is Emily’s best friend, Andie.” His parents shook Andie’s hand and then turned to him.

“You must be Emily’s brother. We’ve heard so much about you.”

He shook their hands and accepted the hug from Derik’s mother. It was weird because his parents hadn’t been around, and he wasn’t sure how to act around family.

“This is Ed and Jennifer, my parents.”

“It’s nice to meet you. Do you need help with your bags?” Rider asked.

“That would be so nice. We wanted to get the room before we brought them in.”

“Why don’t you give us the keys to your car, and we’ll get them,” Derik said.

Rider glanced around, seeing a security guard. He turned to Andie. “Stay here with Emily. I’ll be right back.” She nodded, and he turned to Derik’s parents. “We’ll be right back.”

“Thank you. It’s a burgundy SUV. The clicker should make the lights flash.”

Rider headed out, and Derik followed. It took them only minutes to locate the car and grab the bags.

“You worried?” Derik asked.

“Yes and no. I know the guy is still in jail. I don’t know if he would ask one of his buddies to come by. I don’t think he would, and even if he did, they wouldn’t be as

motivated as her ex was.”

“No, anyone else coming for Andie wouldn’t be as motivated. They would see security and leave.”

“With you here, that guy won’t come back. She’ll be safe.”

Rider nodded. “I hope so. I hate that she has to worry. She doesn’t deserve that.”

“Few people who face terrible circumstances deserve it.”

He’d met a few who did, but didn’t point it out since they were stepping into the hotel lobby. It wasn’t conversation for civilians. Others wouldn’t understand.

Derik and Emily said they would help get Ed and Jennifer upstairs and into their room. He and Andie headed to the elevator. Once the doors were closed, neither of them said anything. He glanced over at her, noticing the look in her eyes as they slowly rose to meet his.

“You can go into your bedroom and lock your door, and I’ll stay on the couch. You won’t have to ask me twice. Or I can come into the bedroom with you and do whatever you are comfortable with. It doesn’t have to be more than me just kissing you.”

Andie’s eyes had grown wider as he spoke. The elevator door opened, and they stepped out into the empty hall. He took her hand, leading her to the room.

As he opened the door, she put her hand on his arm. “I want you in my bed.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

His dick was already getting stiff, but her words took his breath away. He ushered her inside, securing the door before pulling her into his arms. She smelled of vanilla and strawberries. It was sweet and refreshing, better than anyone else he'd ever been with.

She pulled back after a second. "I need to freshen up in the bathroom."

He nodded. "Sure. I'll be out here waiting. I should probably spend a moment in the bathroom before we end up in the bedroom."

She looked nervous as she nodded. He hoped he could calm her fears. She didn't need to worry about him. He really wanted her.

He wouldn't press for more than she was willing to give, but he wanted to be inside her, feeling her skin to skin. The thought was making him too hard, and he had to think of something else, or he wouldn't last.

11

Andie wanted this, but fear was keeping her from opening the door and walking out into the bedroom. Rider said he wanted her, but her confidence wasn't there. She couldn't hide all day long. She had to trust that Emily's brother was as good as she thought he was, otherwise, she couldn't trust anything.

While Rider was in the bathroom, she moved from the chair in the corner, to the bed, then stood. She wasn't sure what to do with herself and when he opened the door, she was facing the other way and spun, reaching out to catch herself so she didn't fall.

Rider moved closer and pulled her to him, his arms holding her steady as his lips came down on hers. The kiss was full of passion, leaving her breathless.

She'd pulled on her silky pajama set that she had planned on wearing the night before the wedding when she was staying with Emily. She could either get them laundered or order more to be delivered to the hotel.

The kiss ended, and Rider growled. "What would you like? How far are you willing to go?"

She bit her lower lip. "I want it all."

His lips spread into a wide grin. "All it shall be."

He picked her up, and she let loose a yelp. "Put me down."

He froze and met her gaze. "I was going to put you on the bed."

"I'm too heavy."

"No, you're not. You're light."

He laid her on the bed and stood back, staring down at her. She squirmed, wondering if he was going to walk out.

"I'm going to take off your top, then pull your pants low. Are you okay with that?"

She nodded, fear and desire mixing. "Yes."

He removed her clothes so slowly that it was almost painful. She was itchy with need by the time he stripped her down to her underwear. For some weird reason, she'd

worn her bra, though she never wore a bra to bed.

When he slid his finger under the lace at the top of the cup, she shivered. His eyes stayed on her chest when he reached under her and popped the clasp holding her in. He peeled off the fabric and licked his lips. She squeezed her thighs together as he moved in close and circled one nipple with his tongue.

The gasp was involuntary. When his mouth closed on her nipple, she jerked up, and her hands flew to his head. His beard brushed over her skin, sending shivers down her spine.

He moaned as he sucked deeper, making her wonder if she could actually shatter from her body tightening so much. The pulsing between her legs shocked her. She'd never come from nipple play, but this man was pure desire.

He licked and sucked on her other nipple, then moved back to the first. She gasped and writhed, knowing this man was ruining her for anyone else. If they didn't make it, she would remain single for the rest of her life because anything after this would be disappointing.

Rider was about to lose it. He'd known when Andie had come from him just sucking her nipples. When he went down on her, she would probably fly apart.

He thought he'd driven her crazy enough with the nipple sucking and kissed his way down her body to the hem of her underwear. When he hooked his thumbs in the material, she lifted up her elbows and met his gaze.

"I want to see you naked first."

He liked her suggestion and stood. "Sure, babe." He pulled off the T-shirt he'd tugged on, then shoved his underwear to the floor. Her eyes went wide, and she

gasped.

“Shit, you’re big.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

He chuckled and moved so his lips were even with hers. “It’s going to feel so good inside you.”

“I’ve been checked. I went to the doctor a few times after everything that went down. I have an IUD.”

He nodded. “I always use a condom. Next time, after we talk when we’re both fully clothed and not so hot we could burn the sheets, we’ll go without a condom.”

He could see the disappointment in her gaze, but he wasn’t going to change his mind. All sex was with a condom until he committed to a long-term relationship. It made things easier.

Before she could let the disappointment grow, he kissed his way down her body and then pulled off her underwear. He sat back and studied her neatly shaved pussy. He appreciated the effort.

No question, she was responsive as heck as she almost came when he licked up her slit. When he sucked her clit into his mouth, she bucked off the bed like she’d been hit by lightning. It felt great to have so much power that she came easily.

“Oh God, I’m coming again.”

He chuckled as he kept up the sucking, pushing her over the edge. She had come at least twice. If he wasn’t so hard, so ready to blow, he would have kept at it, making her come a few more times before sinking in.

He rolled the condom on as she recovered and moved so he was on top of her and eye to eye with her. “Are you ready?”

“Please. I need to feel you.”

He moved, holding himself above her as she spread her legs and lifted her knees. The heat coming off her was addictive. This was exactly what he wanted from the moment he’d seen her. He adjusted and rubbed the tip of his cock over her wet pussy before sliding in.

They both moaned as he slowly pushed in, filling her all the way. She moved, squeezing him tightly. He sucked in air, trying to keep himself from coming.

Her creamy skin contrasted with his tanned arms, making her look even softer. This was the only time he wished he didn’t have a conviction of always using a condom. He longed to feel her wet pussy on his cock. The heat and softness drove him crazy.

“I’m not going to last.”

Andie’s hands clutched his arms and then his side. “So good.”

He pumped in, grinding hard against her as he shoved in all the way. It was perfect and pure, just the right amount of soft to make him feel like he was losing his mind.

Andie arched up to meet his thrust. “Oh, Rider.”

His name on her lips was enough to push him over the edge. He shoved in all the way as his balls emptied into the condom. It was more than he’d expected based on experiences.

The last thing he wanted was to leave her, but he had to get rid of the condom. He

pulled out, making sure the condom came with him. She blinked up at him, her face filled with wonder.

Her hands were gentle on his chest as her eyes slid closed. He kissed her nose and then her cheek.

“I need to toss the condom. I’ll be right back.” Making love to Andie had been amazing. He just wished it had lasted longer. What they’d done wasn’t fucking. No, that had meant more.

He tossed the condom and washed his hands, then headed back into the bedroom to find Andie snoring. He smiled, glad she felt comfortable enough with him to fall asleep. She’d lived through hell this week. It had to suck to have an ex threatening her.

The lump from the asshole’s punch had gone down some, and it wasn’t bruising, or maybe she was just good with makeup. He moved closer and inspected deeper. Yeah, that was makeup covering the bruise. At least the skin hadn’t split, and she could cover it. People at the wedding would be curious, and he knew she wouldn’t want the focus to be taken off Emily.

He moved slowly, not wanting to wake her as he slid into bed next to her. Her breathing changed for a second, then evened out. He turned off the lamp they’d left on and settled next to her.

Hours later, maybe minutes, he woke to Andie going down on him, her lips wrapping around his cock in such a delicious manner he thought he would come immediately.

He pumped his hips up to meet her mouth. “Oh fuck, Andie.”

Her moan sent vibrations through him. When she cupped his balls, he shot his load

down her throat. She swallowed his cum, then released his dick and made her way out from under the sheets.

“Holy shit, woman. That was the most amazing thing to wake up to.”

“So you liked it.”

“First off, you never have to do that for me. I never expected it, but good lord, that was freaking amazing.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

She giggled and kissed the tip of his nose. “That was for how good you treated me. I’ve not slept that well in ages. I think the last time I got that good of sleep was about ten years ago.”

“Well, hopefully, we can repeat that for you.”

She rolled to her side, her back to him and scooted back. He took the hint and wrapped his arm under her head and spooned her. She sighed as she held onto his arms.

“I’m thirty years old, and I don’t feel like I’ve done anything with my life. You’re a Navy SEAL, and I’m just me.”

He grunted. “Sometimes, I feel like I wasted my life.”

She spun in his arms, and he could just make out her shaking her head in the dim light. “Not at all. You’ve given Emily a life. She would have never survived.”

He pulled her down next to him. “I know. I just wonder what I would have done if I hadn’t felt the need to join the military. My job is important, but that doesn’t mean I don’t feel like I’ve missed something or done something to screw myself up for the rest of my life. There are so many options and paths we could have taken, but your life doesn’t seem wasted. Think of how many people you’ve helped by teaching.”

Her shoulders rose and fell as she let go a heavy sigh. He pulled her closer and kissed her forehead.

“You aren’t a failure. Sometimes, our brains don’t match up with what we’ve actually accomplished.”

“How are you so wise?” Andie asked.

Her question made him laugh. “I’m not. Really. I guess I’ve seen enough to have a certain take on matters in life. I really believe the only people who waste their lives are ones who throw it all away to do evil.”

“And who would that be?” Andie asked.

“Terrorists. I see a lot of terrorists who do very bad things. They destroy lives without thought.”

“That’s sad. I can’t imagine.”

He squeezed her tighter. “Yeah, it’s bad. But back to you. You haven’t wasted your life. I’m sure your students have benefitted greatly from your classes.”

She made a noise that was half grunt, half musing. “I guess I’m disappointed that I’m at this point, and I’ve never really experienced anything like this. I shouldn’t say that because we just met, really. You don’t want me pushing for more.”

“I’m the one that is pushing.”

Andie couldn’t keep it in. She sat up and turned on the lamp on her side of the bed. “You aren’t pushing. I don’t think you are. You’re amazing. I’m lucky you even looked my way.” She watched him sit up while he shook his head. He cupped her cheeks and held her still.

“No, I’m lucky that you are looking at me.”

“You’re perfect,” Andie whispered.

He scoffed. “Far from it. I’m nowhere near perfect.”

His gaze slid down to her uncovered breasts, lust firing in his eyes. She moved to cover them, but he stopped her. She watched him move to all fours, his cock half hard though she’d just sucked him.

“Your breasts are absolutely perfect.”

She had to lie back as he moved over her. His tongue circled one nipple, then the other, teasing her.

“I get so turned on just thinking about your breasts.” He lowered and started sucking her nipples, going from one to the other until she was writhing below him. “I want you to come on my cock.”

She wasn’t sure she understood what he was asking for. “No condom?”

He drew in a slow breath. “Maybe that isn’t wise. I’ve been tested so many times because of my job. We have to be willing to give blood in the field if someone needs it. That’s one reason I always wear a condom. The other is pregnancy. Honestly, I’m not ready for kids, but if something happened, I would be in their lives no matter what happened between us.”

“I do have an IUD.”

He nodded. “I know. But things happen, and I’m not going to neglect something I make.”

She pushed him off her and sat up. “If we’re doing this, if you’re doing more than

just committing to a week of hot sex, I want to make sure you understand that I'm obsessive about things and hard to live with. I know that."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

His eyebrows shot up. “Like what?”

“The bathroom has to be clean. I can’t stand a dirty bathroom.”

He shrugged. “I entered the Navy young and scrubbed so many latrines and showers I might still have blisters from scrubbing. I absolutely will not live with a dirty bathroom.”

“I change sheets every three days. I can’t sleep on dirty sheets.”

He nodded. “That’s reasonable.”

“I hate olives. They make me want to puke.”

“I don’t have any feelings about olives.”

“When people comment on my weight, it hits me hard. Sometimes, I sit in the bathtub and cry with a bottle of wine.”

He cupped her cheeks. “Hopefully, you’ll listen to me and understand that I think you are beautiful and other people’s opinions don’t matter.”

“Are you just blowing smoke up my ass so you can fuck the fat girl and go home to brag to your friends?”

He pulled her close, kissing the top of her head. “I don’t know who told you that you weren’t beautiful and desirable, but they suck. I am hard as a rock just looking at you

naked. I want you. I want you as you are. I don't care what other people say women are supposed to look like. I want you."

She sighed. "But you don't really know me."

"You are trying to find every excuse, aren't you?"

"I just don't want to fall in love and then have you leave me when your friends start calling me porky or piggy."

"I'd beat the shit out of them if they did, and they know that. I'm not so shallow as to care what other people think about you. And I do know stuff about you. Emily talks, and I listen. I know you're a really good friend to her. You are a good person and worthy of love."

She sat back and frowned, trying to think about when she'd grown so dark. A long time ago she'd been full of happiness. "It was Tony," she whispered. "Before him, I didn't care about my weight, but he put me down time and time again. I took it in."

"Words hurt. They have the power to stick with us long after we should have abandoned them. What can I do to help you?"

She blinked at him, thinking her life was surreal. "You really are a good person."

He chuckled and leaned in to kiss her. "I try to be. It feels good to hear you say that. I know this is new, but I can't deny my feelings."

"I feel like we're moving fast, but I also feel like I've known you for a long time."

"I want this to work between us. Seriously, come to San Diego with me. The reality of my job means I could end up having to leave on a mission. I don't deploy for

another eighteen months.”

“What is that like?”

“I’m gone for six months to a year. It sucks for people left at home, but it’s part of the gig.”

“I can get through anything as long as I have you in my corner.”

“We’ll need to talk about the realities of being deployed. But right now, I need to be inside you.”

The look in his eyes turned her on. He was so freaking sexy. She dropped back to the bed, laughter spilling out. “Take me now.”

“Done,” Rider said before kissing his way from her knees up to her pussy.

She let him do his thing, loving how skilled he was with his tongue. He had her begging for more in minutes. As he slid in, she moaned and arched up, needing more. He felt so damn good she thought she might burst into flames. How the heck had she gotten so lucky?

12

Rider had only had sex one time without a condom and that had been over a decade ago. He’d been young and dumb, but incredibly lucky that nothing happened.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

Feeling how wet Andie was almost made him come as he first slipped in. He held it together until she came, but he fell apart almost immediately.

He pulled her into the shower and washed her body, kissing her as the warm water splashed down on them. After the shower, he dried her off then led her back to the bed. He held her close, loving waking up to her plastered against him. He could wake to her every morning without ever getting tired of the sight of her.

The day was packed with small activities. People were arriving, and Andie was greeting each couple and giving them a bag of goodies.

Rider was amazed that Emily was giving people a bag of stuff for coming to her wedding. Tomorrow they were doing a scavenger hunt and the winner would get a specially-made quilt featuring the area. They had some smaller prizes for the second and third-place winners.

He thought the scavenger hunt was a great idea to get the guests out and having fun in the city. It also made it so Derik and Emily didn't have to provide the entertainment. He hadn't really had a plan for what to do this week before the wedding. He'd honestly thought he would spend time working out, but now he planned on helping Andie. It would be nice to spend time with her and get to know her better.

Andie hadn't had this much engagement or help from a man, ever. Rider engaged so well with all the guests. It was like he was the perfect host. He made people laugh and helped them with any problems. He carried luggage for the older couples and entertained the one baby who'd come with the parents. By the end of the day, she was exhausted. Rider seemed to have a boundless amount of energy and offered to go

pick up food for them. Reluctantly, she agreed because she really wanted a soak in the tub.

She was just finishing up in the tub when Rider came back. The food smelled great, and it tasted wonderful, but she fell asleep while eating on the couch. Rider took the food and stored it before she woke up.

She woke, blinking up at him like she had no idea why he was there. Then it all came back. “Oh my, I’m sorry. I passed out.”

“No worries. You worked hard today and took care of so many people.”

“So did you, and you didn’t pass out.”

He shrugged. “My job is physically taxing.”

She ran her fingers down his arm. “I do benefit from your physically taxing job.”

His laughter was low, and he glanced away shyly. She thought that maybe he didn’t get too many compliments.

“How long has it been since you were involved with someone?”

He shrugged. “Honestly, I’ve never really been serious. My job is a major factor in people not wanting to be close. They don’t like the idea of me being gone for months on end. I get called out for missions that are last minute. If we’re called in, it’s not something that will be quick, and it probably won’t be close. I can’t tell you where I’m going or what I’ll be doing. People don’t like that much secrecy.”

She thought about it for a moment and shrugged. “You know, that doesn’t bother me. What would bug the shit out of me is you treating me like shit.”

He held her gaze. “I would never.”

“I don’t like cheating either.”

“Same. And if I wanted to be with someone else, I would tell you. I would end what we had before I cheated. Honesty is something I value. No, I can’t tell you what I’m doing with work, so it may seem like I’m being dishonest, but I’m not. In my private life, I would be dedicated.”

“I believe you. You seem like the kind of man who would stick by me if something happened.”

“I would. I’ve known a few guys from my first post whose wives got cancer. Only one of them didn’t stick around, and everyone who knew him told him he was a piece of shit. The rest of the guys said it was hard, but they didn’t walk.”

“That would be hard,” Andie said.

He shrugged. “When you live by ‘The only easy day was yesterday,’ it gives you perspective. I mean—” Rider rolled his eyes. “I know this is going to sound shitty, but you stay by dying pets and dying loved ones. If you wouldn’t walk away from your older dog, why would you walk from a dying spouse?”

Andie laughed. “Oh my, that isn’t something you should share in certain spaces, but yeah, I agree. You don’t walk.”

“Guys in the military get blown up. I could come home from a mission without legs.”

She held his gaze, not flinching. “I would never want that for you, but if it happened, we would figure out how to deal with it.”

“We’re getting deep here.”

“We are.”

“So when you come down to San Diego, I mentioned a guest room. I really want you in my bed, not a guest room.”

He made her laugh so easily. It felt good being with him. She could see them lasting. When she first met Emily, she really never thought she would find a man to spend the rest of her life with. She’d hoped she would, but at the time dates were few and far between. With Rider it was too early to call this a done deal, but the excitement of being with him had her thinking it could last.

13

The days spent with Andie were the best he could remember in a while. Sure, graduating BUDs had been amazing, but this beat that feeling.

Emily didn't seem to mind him being with Andie. By the second night of his sleeping with her, it was obvious to both Derik and Emily they were a thing. He was glad he had his sister's approval.

Walking his sister down the aisle was wild. She wasn't his child, but there were paternal feelings. He was so proud of her. They'd had so much go wrong in their lives that they could have ended up in bad places. Seeing her end up in such a good place with a good person gave him hope. Maybe there were good relationships that could really work out.

On Sunday night, he and Andie barely slept. He needed her to know how much he would miss her. He made her promise to make that flight to San Deigo. On Monday afternoon he flew out, wishing Andie was with him. She said she needed a week to get everything ready for her being gone for a month.

Spending a month with Andie had him excited. He was looking forward to getting to know her better. He planned to introduce her to his buddies. Getting them to like her wouldn't be hard. She was good for him, and he knew they would see it.

Since his house was only a few doors down from Kevlar's place, he was looking forward to introducing her to Remi. He thought they would get along, but who knew. Remi had always been nice to him. He thought Andie was a little like Remi. She had

the same kind heart and good nature.

On Tuesday morning he was looking forward to returning to work and finding out what had gone on since he'd been in Oregon. He'd had a few updates from Trip, but nothing major stood out. It would be good to get back into the swing of things.

They'd texted a few times to keep the communication flowing. Of course, when they were in meetings he didn't have his phone with him. When he came out of the meeting, he found that she'd texted him four times. One of which was a photo of a coffee mug, the caption stating that she was bringing it with her. He almost texted back that he had mugs but hesitated. He bet the mug with a floral pattern on it held some significance to her. The last thing he wanted was to diminish her, so he texted back that he was making space in his cabinet for her mug.

"Hey, Rider, how was the wedding?" He glanced over to Trip and flashed a wide grin. "Great."

"So your baby sister is married. You like the guy she married, right?"

He nodded. "Yeah, Derik is great."

"You've been texting every free minute we've had. What's up?"

He glanced at his phone and pocketed it. "Um, I met someone. She's coming here for a month to stay with me."

Trip gasped. "What?"

Rider chuckled, knowing he was about to get the treatment. The guys would give him hell for a few days but then be supportive. "Yeah, I know."

Bud was right there, his lips spread into a wide grin. “Did you say you have a girlfriend who is coming to live with you?”

He shrugged. “She’s coming to stay for a few weeks. We’re trying to figure things out.”

Q approached and slapped him on the back. “I couldn’t help but overhear. You have a woman now? That was fast.”

They deserved some answers. His team had stood beside him in the past and would continue to stand with him. They were his best friends and always had his back.

“Listen, guys, she’s the one. Don’t be mean to her.”

Hop had just come in and slapped his hand on his chest as he gasped. “We would never. How dare you suggest we would be less than kind?”

Rider rolled his eyes. “Just don’t give her a hard time.”

Trip slapped him on the back. “How about we plan a cookout at a park? It will be a neutral space. She can get to know us in a casual environment.”

“Sure. I’ll tell her that you guys want to meet her and see what she thinks.”

“Oh, man, you are into her,” Q said.

“Yeah, he actually wants to check and see what she wants to do,” Hop said. “That’s when I knew I was done for. The moment I cared more about what Vera wanted than you guys, I knew.”

“Was she part of the wedding party?” Trip asked.

“My sister’s best friend. We spent the week together doing stuff.”

“Nice. Did you get some?” Bud asked.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

Rider grunted. “Jesus. That’s none of your fucking business.”

“Oh yeah, he got some.” Rider opened his mouth to tell them to shut up, but Q continued. “Don’t worry, we won’t say anything. We’re happy for you.”

Bud patted him on the back. “Yeah, man, we’re thrilled for you.”

Trip squeezed his shoulder. “I can’t wait to meet her.”

“Thanks, guys. I knew you’d all come through for me.”

“Always.”

Rider left the base, excited to speak to Andie when he got home. He missed her, which was so weird because he didn’t know he could miss someone after such a short period of time, but he sure as heck missed Andie.

14

Andie hated being alone. Emily was gone, and so were all the other wedding guests. She’d left the hotel and felt the downturn almost immediately. She enjoyed getting texts from Rider, but she didn’t want to inundate him with too much.

She knew she was a lot. Talking was a huge part of her personality, and sometimes, people couldn’t deal with that part of her. Mainly, guys couldn’t deal with that part of her. Other women didn’t seem to have an issue.

Rider hadn't been bothered by her talking. He'd actually joined in joking with people, talking to the guests, and having a great time. When the couple who brought their kid with them arrived to pick up their goody bag, Rider gave the kid a shoulder ride and didn't care that the child had gotten sticky lollipop goo in his hair. He'd shrugged it off and told the couple to have a good time.

She'd been surprised by him. Emily had said he was a good guy. Now she knew Rider was a great guy.

When he called that evening, excitement skittered through her. "Hello."

"Hey, it's good to hear your voice. I gotta tell you, I miss seeing you. I'm glad you'll be here in a week."

"Same. I need to take care of a few things, like cleaning out the refrigerator and making sure none of my food will go bad."

"Oh, that's important. I once went on a mission, and the chicken in my refrigerator went bad. It stank terribly."

"That's awful. I guess that's something you have to take care of before you go."

"Yeah. It was a problem until Trip got married. Now, his wife comes over when we get called away. She freezes what she can. If she doesn't think something will freeze well, she takes it and leaves cash on the table."

"Cash?"

"Yeah. She won't just take it. I tell her she doesn't have to pay, but she insists."

"Well, that's nice that she isn't just taking. So is it weird that she comes into your

place?”

“It was at first, but she doesn’t ever look through anything. She just makes sure the trash is empty and nothing will rot. She does it for the rest of the guys, too. Except Hop and Zip now that they are with their women.” Her laughter was music to his ears.

“Their women?”

He chuckled. “Trip is married to Remi. Hop is married to Vera, and Zip is with Talia. I know you told me the names of your teammates. That leaves Bud and Q, who aren’t with anyone.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure Q would ever date anyone.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure I can pinpoint it. It’s just this feeling I get. He’s different, just more stand-offish when it comes to women. I mean, I know he’s not a virgin, but I haven’t seen him with anyone in a while.”

“Maybe he’s just not interested.”

“Maybe. I mean, I get it. This area is wild. It’s not Los Angeles, but it’s still wild. Women come down here trying to pick up military guys.”

“Really?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

“Yeah. Insurance and your husband will be gone when they deploy. They can have the security and the freedom.”

“That’s terrible.”

“Yeah. It sucks.”

“So that’s why you’ve never settled down?”

He was silent for a moment. “I’ve never found anyone I wanted to settle down with.”

“You know I’d never do that stuff to you, right?”

“I got that.”

“How could you tell?”

He sighed, and that sound made her insides feel squishy. She liked talking to Rider and hanging out with him. The last week had been amazing. She needed more.

“I knew by the way you looked at me. How kind you were. You cared about me, not just what I could do for you.”

“I do care about you. I care deeply,” she said.

“I care about you, too. I know we need to spend more time together. Also, my friends want to meet you. A cookout at the park. Are you in for that?”

“God, yes. I want to meet your friends. They sound so cool.”

His laughter filled her with happiness. She wished she was there now. That she had to wait until next Saturday for her flight in the afternoon was bullshit. She should have abandoned everything and driven down today.

They chatted for another hour, talking about nothing important. Before she fell asleep, she received a text from Emily. It was a photo of their view from the resort. The place looked amazing. Happiness for Emily filled her. The woman had lived through some bad shit as a kid and deserved the best.

Maybe Rider was the man for her. The way she felt about him left her hopeful, but stuff could still go wrong. He was a good man, and she just hoped she didn’t blow it.

15

The days passed slowly for Rider. At least he had work to keep him busy. On Wednesday night, they stayed late and went over new information. He hoped they wouldn’t end up leaving town for the next few weeks, but it was a possibility. That was always an eventuality. They left town when they needed to leave and stayed gone as long as necessary.

On Saturday, he woke up early and cleaned his house. There wasn’t much to take care of, but he wanted the place to look nice when Andie arrived.

Time seemed to tick by slowly, and when he finally settled in his car for the drive to the airport, anticipation filled him. Before her plane landed, he switched from the cell lot to short-term parking and went inside.

Waiting had him tied up in knots. What if she hadn’t really gotten on the plane? There was a guy he’d heard of who had a long-distance relationship with someone

he'd met on the internet. She'd said she was coming out, but she never got on the plane. He'd been left standing at the airport looking like a fool. Of course, that woman could have just been someone catfishing him, and he knew Andie was real. Still, he breathed out a sigh of relief when he spied her leaving the secured area.

He knew the moment she saw him because a huge smile lit up her face. His heart squeezed as he moved toward her. He pulled her into a hug as relief mixed with a feeling so deep his throat closed, and emotions threatened to overwhelm him.

She tilted her head up as he stared down at her. Her mouth was too much of an invitation, and he pressed his lips against hers. The kiss felt so good, and he wanted to take it deeper, but they were in public. He just needed to show her how much he cared for her. When the kiss ended, all he wanted to do was get out of there, but they had to get her bag.

Rider brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes. "It's so good to see you. At one point, I was afraid you weren't going to come."

"Oh, honey." She squeezed his arm. "I thought you were going to call me and tell me not to come."

"Never. This week without you was long."

Her lips spread into a wide smile. "I can't wait to get to your place."

"Same. I want to have you all to myself."

She squeezed his arm again. "Behave while we're here."

"You got it. But once we're home, no more behaving."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

He thought his cheeks would crack from smiling. She looked so good, so perfect, and he wanted nothing more than to sink into her and make her happy. How could love be this sweet?

Andie couldn't believe this was happening to her. Rider was way too good for her. She could see it in the way other women looked at her when she was standing with his arm around her shoulder. A twinge of guilt hit. That was her ex talking. Rider wasn't too good for her. He was just right.

She had to work on herself. She knew that, but she was happy Rider was into her even with how messed up she still was. Having him interested in her had given her a boost to her ego.

“You’re frowning. Is everything okay?”

She put her hand on his arm. “Yes. I’m critical of myself, and I’m trying to work on it. I was just thinking.”

“Well, I hope you were thinking good thoughts about yourself.”

She laughed, but he looked very serious. He leaned in and brushed his lips over hers. The zip of electricity that shot through her made her moan. He chuckled and stood tall.

“We’ll have more of that later. First, your bag.”

With her head still swimming with desire, she glanced at the baggage conveyor,

seeing her bag just coming out. “Oh, there it is. The pink one.”

“Nice. I knew you’d have pink luggage. It suits you perfectly.”

Without hesitation, Rider grabbed the pink suitcase and pulled it behind him with one arm slung over her shoulder. None of her exes had ever carried her pink luggage, but Rider seemed proud to pull her bright pink bag behind him.

“My car is just out here. We’ll get you loaded up and home. Then I want to get you in my bed.”

She giggled as an older woman gasped, scandalized by Rider’s words. Her man wasn’t shy about how he felt about her. This adventure to San Diego was already starting well, and she couldn’t wait to see how good it got.

16

Rider’s house wasn’t large, but it was clean. She could tell he took good care of the place. He didn’t live in San Diego proper, instead he lived just outside the city in another small town that seemed to have a lot of families.

“This is nice.”

“It’s not bad. The place is small, but what I need.”

“I like it.”

He set her bag down in the bedroom and then turned to her. “I know you’re probably tired. We can?—”

She launched herself at him, and he caught her, laughing as he steadied himself. The

kiss was electrifying, leaving her needing him even more.

He ended the kiss way too soon, and she started to complain, but he put his fingers on her lips. “How about we shower, and then we can see where that leads?”

“Are you showering with me?”

His chuckle sent chills through her. “If you like.”

“Oh yes. I would love that.” Heat rose up her chest to her neck, and an uncomfortable feeling slid over her.

“Hey.” He lifted her chin. “Are you really okay with that? I don’t want to do anything that would make you upset.”

She shook her head. “No. I want to do this.”

“Good. Because I want to see all of your gorgeous body.”

“If you keep talking like that, I might just believe you.”

“Well, you need to believe me. I know what I’m talking about.”

She laughed, and he sobered. She put her hand on his face and cupped his cheek. “I do believe you. Just give me time to get my head space right.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

“Okay. But you need to know I find you very sexy. Feel how hard my cock is.”

She reached between them, palming his cock. He was right. His cock was hard. She stepped back and pulled off her shirt. He moved to her, helping her undress. She wasn't wearing any shapewear because wearing that stuff on the plane would be a nightmare. Her belly wiggled as she undressed, and she glanced up, taking in the intensity of his gaze. He licked his lips and moved in, kissing the mound of her breasts overflowing from her bra.

“Let's get this off.” He unhooked her bra, and she let it slide down her arms.

The look in his eyes made her breath catch. “You are so fucking sexy.” He moved closer, and his tongue circled her nipple, making her gasp.

He stripped quickly, and she stepped back, drinking in how good he looked. She shook her head, marveling that this man wanted her.

“Come on. Let's shower.”

She followed him to the shower, loving the view. Being in the shower with Rider was awesome. He kissed her neck as he rubbed the bar of soap over her back. It felt so good to have his hands on her.

After he helped her wash her hair and condition it, he reached between her legs and began stroking her. His fingers were like magic, taking her desire higher. He knew exactly how to touch her to increase her desire.

“You’re going to make me come,” she moaned.

“Good. I want you wet when I slide in.”

His words twisted through her, making her even hotter. She was so close. His lips were on her breasts, sucking and licking. It was enough to push her over the edge. She came hard, clutching his arms as she held on.

He shut off the water and grabbed a towel, wrapping it around her. After he dried his body, he took her into the bedroom, and she stretched out on the bed. Anticipation filled her. She wanted to feel good like last time.

She expected him to line up and slide in, but he was taking his own time, kissing her. When he sucked down on her clit, she arched up, crying out as the good feeling flowed through her.

“Rider,” she cried out as she came.

He knew exactly how to make her feel so good, and she loved it. When he finally slid in, it was better than she remembered. This man had the ability to make her lose her mind.

Rider couldn’t hold back. He wanted to be able to last, wanted to be inside Andie for hours, but she felt too good. At least she’d come more than once. He needed to figure out a way to make it last with her.

After he pulled out, he stretched out beside her. He breathed in deeply, taking in her scent. She smelled so good and felt so good in his arms. Living with Andie was going to be perfect. He never wanted to let her go.

“How about I help you put your stuff away?”

“Put my stuff away?”

He smiled. “Yes, I cleaned some space out for you in the closet.”

She sat up, shock filling her face. “You did?”

“Yes. You’re living here for a month. You shouldn’t have to live out of a suitcase.”

She leaned down and kissed him. “Thank you. You’re amazing.”

He shook his head. “No, this is how it should be.”

Andie couldn’t believe Rider had cleared out space for her. She hadn’t expected him to treat her this seriously. She had agreed to stay here for one month as a guest, and he was treating her like she belonged here. It was the first time she felt like she belonged.

“Thank you so much. You’re so nice.”

“You deserve to be treated like a queen.”

She stared at him in wonder. He leaned in and kissed her, then stood and pulled her suitcase up onto the bed.

“I can help, or you can unpack it yourself. It’s up to you.”

She stood, part of her wanting to have his help, but she wasn’t sure what he would say about her underwear that was less than sexy. Insecurity still filled her. He had given her no indication that she needed to worry, but she wasn’t ready for that much intimacy yet.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

“I can unpack my stuff.”

“Okay, I’ll leave you to it. Would you like a snack?”

She shrugged. “Sure. What were you thinking of making?”

“I have stuff for an egg sandwich.”

“That sounds great.”

“Good. I’ll make our food while you put stuff up.” Rider turned to leave but turned back to her. “Thank you for coming to stay with me.”

She couldn’t believe he was thanking her. It was weird because in the past most of the guys she dated acted like they were doing her a favor. “Of course.”

His lips turned up into a sweet smile before he left the room. She should have said more, should have told him how much she appreciated being treated respectfully. Later, she would explain it to him.

Being here with Rider would be amazing. The first hour had been so good, and it seemed like it was only going to get better. At least she hoped it would get better. Finding a man like Rider had seemed impossible. Now she was glad she hadn’t settled like everyone except Emily and Derik had told her to. Maybe she did deserve a decent man in her life.

Waking up with Andie in his bed was heaven. There was enough light to make out her profile and he watched for a long minute before sneaking out of the room. Having her in his home felt right.

In Oregon she'd warned that she wasn't a morning person, and sure enough she slept until almost eight. When she left the bedroom, she headed straight to the coffee pot.

After her first sip, she moaned. "This coffee tastes great." She took another sip then smiled. "Good morning. I haven't slept this well in ages."

He moved to her and kissed her cheek, glad she'd agreed to stay here with him. "How about some breakfast?"

She nodded, still looking a little sleepy. "Sure. That sounds good."

"After, we can take a walk, and you can see the neighborhood."

"I'd like that."

He made eggs and toast as she poked around the kitchen, looking in cabinets. "Whatcha doing?"

"Just looking at stuff, making sure I know where things are so I can cook dinner tonight."

"You don't?—"

"Of course, I'm going to help out. I may be useless in the morning, but after I wake up, I'm good."

He chuckled. "You aren't useless."

“Oh please, I had to psych myself up to get out of bed. I’m trying hard to be chipper. Honestly, mornings are not my thing.”

“I’ll remember that.” He kissed her cheek before turning back to the stove.

Being with Andie felt right. He was glad she had taken him up on his offer to move in for at least a month. Honestly, he hoped she never left. This was a trial for them living together. He didn’t want to overdo it and give her an unrealistic view of what it would be like, but he wanted to treat her special. He knew he would be tired some days and it wouldn’t be all happiness, but he also knew how to control his anger and emotions so he didn’t bring his work life home with him.

After breakfast, they headed out. Kevlar and Remi were outside and waved them over. “Hey, Rider, and you must be Andie. I’m Kevlar, and this is Remi.” He’d already told Kevlar that Andie was staying with him.

“Hello. It’s nice to meet you both. I guess you work with Rider.”

Kevlar nodded. “We’re both SEALs. It’s great having him live close by. When I’m out on a mission, having him nearby makes me feel better about leaving Remi home alone.”

“Oh. How often do you all go out?”

Kevlar shrugged. “It’s not too much.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

Remi snorted and shook her head. “I miss him when he’s gone, but no, it’s not too much.” Remi shot her a warm smile. “How long are you here for?”

Andie didn’t know how close Rider was with this couple. He’d said they were friends, and he and Kevlar worked together. Worry filled her. Maybe Rider didn’t want her saying anything. “Um, well, I think at least a month.” She looked up at Rider, worried she’d said too much.

“It’s a trial run. Honestly, I hope she stays.”

Relief slid through her. He wasn’t angry at her, saying she would be there for longer than the original agreed-upon time. She needed to remember Rider wasn’t a guy from her past. He wasn’t going to blow up because she said something to one of his friends.

“Hey, Rider, I wanted you to look at something.”

“Sure.” Rider squeezed her hand. “I’ll be right back.”

She smiled and nodded though worry took up residence inside. “Okay.”

Remi nodded. “Yes, this gives us time to gossip about you two.”

Kevlar chuckled. “Just make sure to talk about my good stuff, too.”

Remi watched them enter the house and then turned to her. “I’m so happy to see Rider with someone good.”

“Oh. How do you know I’m good? I mean, I am, but...”

“He stopped by last week and talked about you. The guys don’t tell their friends about women they are dating unless they are someone special. Rider’s not known for being the happiest guy on teams. He is difficult to get to know. He’s a good person, but he isn’t the kind of guy who smiles and jokes all the time. I guess I would describe him as serious.”

Andie nodded. “I see that. I’m still getting used to being with him.”

“I think you should meet the other women.”

“Oh, are there a lot of you?”

Remi shrugged. “There are a lot of SEALs, and I don’t know all the wives, but I do know a few who I get together with. We try to keep each other sane when our guys are out on a mission.”

“Is that really a big thing? Like, do they leave all the time?”

Remi laughed. “It’s not that bad. I just get used to him being around, and then he’s gone without much notice if any. I’ve learned to go with the flow.”

“That’s good. I need to learn to go with the flow. Honestly, I’m shocked Rider wants to be with me.”

Remi made a face and shook her head. “Why? You’re so pretty. I’m plain as a blank wall, but you’re gorgeous.”

Andie burst out laughing. “That’s ridiculous. You’re not plain.”

“Oh please, I know what I am. You are absolutely gorgeous.”

Andie glanced around, making sure the guys weren't coming out of the house. “I know I'm fat. Girls like me don't get guys like him.”

“Oh, please. That lie is perpetuated by the media. Guys know what they want, and an unrealistic mannequin type body isn't always at the top of the list. Heck, real guys don't care, they just want someone who loves them. Look at me and Kevlar. I'm squishy, and Kevlar is one hundred percent hot.”

“You're thinner than I am.”

Remi snorted. “But I'm not perfect by media beauty standards. These men want women they can love, not mannequins they have to worry about breaking.”

Andie let go a heavy sigh. “I'm just not used to guys being nice.”

“Ex-boyfriends are exes because of the shit they did. Don't let him back in by judging Rider by that jerk's stupid standards.”

Andie laughed. “You're right. They were stupid standards. He was an idiot, and it's way past time I really get rid of him for good. I keep trying to remember what I was like before him.”

“So he did a number on you?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

“Yes. Then he turned into a stalker. I don’t know why, but he attacked me at the wedding. I shouldn’t tell you this. You’re going to think I’m drama and bad for Rider.”

“No, I promise you I won’t. How about we plan a dinner together next week? I’ll talk to Kevlar about what day is good.”

“What’s good?” Kevlar asked as he and Rider came around the side of the house.

“Let’s have them over for dinner.”

Kevlar nodded. “Sure. We’ll pick a date. Maybe have some of the other guys and their women over.”

“That would be great,” Rider said. “I need to plan a picnic for next weekend. I know my team wants to find out who got me to commit to a relationship.”

Andie’s heart swelled. Rider was openly telling his friends he was making a commitment to her. He knew how to make her feel good, and she could tell this wasn’t just for show. Rider was genuine and open about how he felt about her.

“I’m excited to meet your friends. I already feel welcome, and this is making me feel better.”

Remi put her arm around Kevlar’s waist. “I’m glad you’re here and living across the street from us. I can’t wait to get to know you better.”

They said goodbye and continued on their walk. The neighborhood was big and flat, and the weather was warm. Portland was cooler, and since it sat at the base of a mountain, there were some very hilly areas. This area outside San Diego was very flat.

“What are you thinking?” Rider asked.

“That this area is nice. Different from what I’m used to. Mount Hood is so tall.”

“Hey, Cuyamaca Peak isn’t small.”

She had to stop walking because she was laughing so much. “It’s half the size. I looked it up.”

Now he was laughing, and it felt so dang good to just laugh with Rider. He put his arm around her shoulder, looking proud to be with her.

“We are close to the beach here, so the area is flat.”

“Oh, the beach. I’ll have to get used to that. I bet it’s warmer than the beaches near Portland.”

“The weather is warm, but the ocean can be cold.”

They talked more about the beach and things they could do in the city. The lack of clouds was making her worry a little. She would have to invest in a good sunscreen. They made it back to the house without running into anyone else.

“I have to go to work in the morning. I want to make the most of today, but I don’t want to overdo it.”

“I have two classes to teach tomorrow. I do have a late in-person class on Wednesdays. It runs for about forty-five minutes and starts at five.”

“It will take time for us to get used to each other’s schedules. What time is your earliest class?”

“It’s Tuesday and Thursday at seven in the morning.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah, it’s tough on me. I usually set four alarms to make sure I’m up.”

“And Californians wake up for that class?”

She shook her head. “No, most of the people in the class are Central or Mountain time. Grading papers is one of the most arduous tasks. I have to keep up with the papers. That’s the one thing I always get behind on. Not bad, but I have to set reminders.”

“I’m glad your work allows for you to be here.”

“So am I. I’ve had classes on weekends, but honestly, with you having most weekends off, I can’t see myself doing that again.”

“When I deploy, you’ll be alone.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

She wasn't sure how she felt about him leaving, but if she wanted to be with him, it was just a part of the life. "I may decide to pick up a few extra classes when you're gone. I've done that before when I've needed the money."

"I know this is jumping the gun, but how long until your lease is up?"

"Four months. I think I'll have made up my mind before then."

"I hope so."

She moved to him and put her hands on his chest. "I know I'll have decided. I feel like I could decide now, but I don't want to rush you or us. I want to make sure I won't annoy the heck out of you."

"You won't."

"I talk a lot. I'm a lot. I know that. I'm dramatic, and I can overblow things. I might overreact to something, and you'll think I'm crazy."

He cupped her cheek and smoothed his thumb over her skin. It felt good having him this close, having him care this much. Tears filled her eyes, and she reached up to swipe them away.

"See, overreacting because you are too sweet."

"You aren't overreacting. My emotions are up there, too. I want to spend time with you. I want to have you here with me, and the thought of you liking me as much as I

like you makes me want to hold you close and never let go.”

“I do like you a lot. I think you’re amazing.”

“And I think you’re amazing.”

His lips were on hers, kissing her like he really meant it. She let him lead them to the bedroom. She couldn’t believe he wanted her again. He wasn’t faking it or using sex to get her to do something for him. This man was amazing, and he really wanted her. She’d suspected that being friends with Emily would change her life, but she wasn’t expecting it to change this much.

18

Though it was crazy early, Andie woke up and kissed Rider goodbye before going back to sleep. When she finally woke for the day, the sun was bright outside. She was used to cloudy Portland, but Southern California was bright sunshine and roses every day. Maybe not every day, but she’d only seen a few puffy clouds since arriving.

After taking a shower, she checked her schedule, glad that she had time this morning. Tomorrow morning, she would have to be ready to teach early. Her schedule would be different living with Rider. They’d gone to bed last night at a reasonable time. It would be good for her. Being alone meant that sometimes she stayed up way too late, and her early classes were hell on her.

Her two classes went well. The students weren’t difficult this semester, and no one mentioned the new location. Last year, she’d had someone in a class who wanted way too much information about her. They’d wanted a piece of her, but she wasn’t willing to give them any part of her private life. It was weird having people want relationships though they didn’t know her. Setting boundaries was imperative with teaching, she just wished she’d set more boundaries with Tony.

Rider wasn't anything like her ex. Rider respected her and asked her about boundaries. When she set them, he didn't complain at all. It was a refreshing change, one she really liked.

She finished her last class, and instead of taking a break, she got to work grading papers. Doing that work in the evening wouldn't work now that she was living with Rider. She wanted to be able to give her full attention to her man when he got home.

She was almost finished when she heard him pull up out front. She made a note where she stopped and ran to the door, excitement filling her. She didn't run out to meet him, but she did open the door and pull him in, kissing him as he set down his stuff.

Laughter floated between them, light and airy, like petals blowing in the wind. He scooped her up and carried her to the bedroom. Their kisses turned serious, and she gasped as he slid his hand under her skirt and up her thigh. He pushed her panties aside and found her clit, leaving her gasping as he ran his fingers over her.

He ended the kiss and stared down at her as he continued to stroke her. "You're so freaking beautiful. I want to fill you right now."

"Yes, please."

Rider pulled her panties off and dropped them on the floor before moving her so she stood with her hands against the wall. His fingers slid over her slit.

"I need you to come ."

Her body shook with pleasure as his words circled around her brain. "Yes." Rider had her on edge, and then his voice slid through her, taking her higher. She couldn't hold back and came. She hadn't recovered when he pulled up her skirt and slid in. They

both groaned as he filled her. Having him pumping into her pussy from behind felt so good.

She liked having him like this. She liked having him in any way possible. Again, she was struck by how much he seemed to want her and how awesome it felt.

“You feel so good. I love how hot your pussy is. It was like you were made for me.”

“I was. This feels right.”

He pumped forward, and she gasped as his hips slapped against her ass. They were making noise, and she was thankful his house wasn't attached to another place. No question the neighbors would hear if it was.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

“Fuck, Andie. You’re so good. I’m going to—” Rider didn’t finish his sentence as he came, his cock buried deep inside her.

He didn’t pull out immediately. Instead, he ran his hands up to her breasts, cupping them and pulling her to standing. His cock slipped out as her angle changed.

“I missed you while I was at work,” Rider whispered in her ear.

She sighed. “I missed you, too.”

“Let’s get you cleaned up.”

She liked that he understood that while she liked sex with him, she didn’t want his cum sliding down her leg. He used a washcloth to get rid of the sticky on her thigh and then pulled her close. He kissed her, then pushed back and narrowed his gaze.

“What do you think about burgers on the grill tonight?”

“That sounds good. I need to finish with a bit of grading, and then I can get things ready?—”

“Nope,” he interrupted. “I can take care of food preparation. You finish your work, and then we’ll cook. Once you’re done grading, we can spend the evening together.”

“I’d like that.”

He kissed her again, then headed out to the kitchen to start cooking while she went

into the spare room where she'd set up her computer and finished work. It only took her another twenty minutes to wrap up her work while he got the food prepared to grill.

When she came out of the bedroom, he was walking back inside. She paused, watching him. He looked so good. She was amazed that he wanted her.

"Hey, you finished?"

"Yes, totally done for today. I graded everything I needed to finish. So I'm ahead of where I usually am on Monday night."

"I need to read a report later, but it shouldn't take too long."

"That's good. It will give me time to catch up on any questions from the students."

"I'm glad us being together feels easy."

She nodded. "It does feel easy. I like it. I like you."

Rider placed the extra burger patties in a container and put them in the refrigerator. She'd eaten a sandwich for lunch and was hungry for the burgers, wondering how he dealt with food and shopping.

"If I head to the grocery store, is there anything you need me to get?"

"I have a list on my phone. I usually shop on the weekends, but I didn't know what you would want. There are some things I buy on base, but the grocery store has good prices down the street."

They talked about items she would pick up at the store after she finished with her

class. Since the store wasn't too far away, she planned on walking. Rider had a pushcart she could take with her.

“When did you buy the cart?”

He chuckled. “Honestly, I didn't buy it. It was left by the previous owner of the house, and I didn't throw it out. I meant to, but then I'd think that maybe one day I'd want to walk to the store.”

“I'm glad you kept it. I may not want to always walk to the store, but for now, it works.”

“Are you sure you'll have time?”

“Yes. I need to step away from my desk at some point. I would go crazy if I didn't find time to get outside and walk.”

“Only if you have time. We can go on the weekend next week and make sure we have what we need.”

Rider impressed her with his willingness to participate in their life. She'd never been with a guy who wanted to be a part of a partnership. But Rider was different. He treated her with respect and kindness. She wanted this to work out because losing this connection would devastate her.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

Rider was really happy for the first time that he could remember. Sure, becoming a SEAL had been amazing, and he was satisfied with his life, but pure happiness he felt at having Andie in his life was amazing. They fit together so seamlessly. It was like they were really meant to be together.

On Friday, they had dinner with Kevlar and Remi. The other couples were busy, but they still wanted to get together and get to know each other. Besides, most of them would be at the park tomorrow, and Andie would have the chance to meet them then.

He was thankful Remi was so nice. She didn't act like Andie wasn't important to him. He guessed it made sense. He'd never brought a woman around his buddies. Heck, some people he dated didn't even know he was in the Navy.

With Andie, he was all in. No question, he'd already fallen in love with her. He may not be ready to say it yet, but he felt it.

"Rider, what do you want us to bring to the picnic tomorrow?" Remi asked.

"Don't go out of your way. All the necessities are taken care of. Pick up a package of cookies or chips."

Remi rubbed her stomach. "I'll get both. I love cookies and chips."

"So do I," Andie said.

He put his arm over her shoulder. "I can't wait for everyone to meet you."

Andie's lips pressed together. "I hope they like me."

"They will," Rider said.

"You only say that because you don't see my faults."

Rider let go a bark of laughter. "Babe, we all have faults. You're an amazing woman who is beautiful and kind. They will love you."

Remi nodded. "They will."

"Are you saying that because you're nice and you don't want to upset me?"

Kevlar threw back his head, laughter spilling out. "She wouldn't be nice just to be nice. If either of us thought you were out to take advantage of Rider, we would say something. You don't seem like the type to be in this to screw over Rider."

"Oh, I'm not. I've been screwed over too many times to do that to anyone else."

Kevlar sat forward. "I'm sorry that happened to you. It sucks when people try to mess you over."

Remi put her hand on Kevlar's shoulder and squeezed. "Having good friends, people who won't work to destroy you is important."

Rider wasn't going to say anything about what had happened to Kevlar and Remi. It was their story to tell. Rider had handled the situation well. If he'd been stabbed in the back like Kevlar had been, he would probably have been much more of a jerk to everyone. He was glad Rider still was open enough to have friends.

He checked his watch, seeing it was getting late. They were meeting for a run before

the picnic, so he needed to get to bed. They said goodnight and headed across the street. Andie's hand in his was sweet, and it turned him on. His heart was so full of love he couldn't contain it. They were meant to be together. Now, he just had to convince her to stay.

20

Meeting for a picnic was a great idea but worry still plagued her. She woke early and didn't stop obsessing all morning. The drive to the park felt tense. After cutting the engine, Rider turned to her and took her hand. "You have nothing to worry about."

"I'm still going to worry. They may not like me."

"Trust me, they will. I've spent the week talking about you. They know I think you're special." Harsh laughter escaped her lips, and Rider frowned. "Don't put yourself down. You're an amazing woman. I'm lucky to have you."

She shook her head, wondering if he'd hit his head. She said nothing. He would argue with her about this if she said anything more, and she didn't want to start off arguing in front of his friends.

A guy ran up to the car, and just before he pulled open her door, Rider told her it was Bud, one of the guys on his team. She turned and blinked up at him, thinking he reminded her of a puppy dog.

"You're Andie, I'm Bud." He held out his hand, helping her out of the car.

"Hi, Bud. It's nice to meet you."

"Oh, it's nicer to meet you. I wanted to know who finally tamed Rider. I didn't think he would ever settle down. Let me see your outfit."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

She'd picked a pink knee-length A-line dress that had yellow flowers. Bud clapped his hands as she twirled for him. Rider came over and caught her around the waist and pulled her to him. She looked up, seeing the way his lips tipped up in a smile.

"Oh, I see it," Bud said.

"See what?" Rider asked.

"You two belong together. She softens your hard edges. You're a grump, and she makes you human."

Andie laughed, and Rider rolled his eyes. She liked Bud. At least one of his friends liked her.

They grabbed the food they'd brought and followed Bud to the table with the rest of their stuff. Rider introduced her around to the guys on his team. Then he introduced her to the men who were from Kevlar's team. Kevlar was there along with Remi. Safe and Blink were there, along with their dates. The other guys from Kevlar's team had plans already and couldn't make it.

She chatted with the women and was glad to meet Ellis, Vera, Talia, Wren, and Josie. Remi had been right. The women were seriously nice. She liked Rider's friends. They all seemed to accept her as if she belonged with Rider. She wanted to cry because she'd never experienced anything like this.

Emily was her best friend, but she was only one person. These people were really good people, and they accepted her.

Rider came over and leaned in close. “You okay?”

She nodded. “Yes. Everyone is just so nice, and they aren’t judging me.”

Rider glanced around. “Yeah, they’re good people. They have my back. I know they would do anything for me.”

“I never thought I’d find as good of a friend as Emily, but I could see these women becoming my friends.”

Rider nodded. “I love my sister, but she’s family. We aren’t necessarily friends.”

Andie nodded. “You also were more like a parent to her.”

“Yeah, there is that.”

“Hey, what are you two whispering about over here?” Hop asked.

Andie flashed a smile. “Just talking about how nice you all are.”

Hop laughed. “Aww, you think we’re nice.”

Vera rolled her eyes. “We are nice. At least I am.”

Hop leaned in and kissed Vera. “You are one of the nicest people I know.”

“We take care of our own,” Trip said.

The other guys nodded. It was nice knowing Rider had this much support. When she left her ex, she’d lost anyone who’d been friends with him. It sucked that Tony had run off all her friends. Only Emily had stuck around after she’d started dating the

jerk.

She didn't think Rider would try to cut her off from her friends. He wanted her to have connections. Having people in her life would keep her safe. She'd lived the other type of existence, having her life winnowed down to only one person and the people who supported him. That way, when he did something unconscionable, there was no one there to check him. With this group, there would always be someone to talk to and check in with her.

"I like that you take care of each other. It's refreshing."

Safe turned to Rider. "So you two met at your sister's wedding, right?"

Rider nodded. "Yes. Andie did so much to help Emily with the wedding. Since I didn't have specific tasks, I ended up spending a lot of time with Andie."

"That's cool. You two seem happy."

Andie met Rider's gaze, a smile coming easily. "I am happy."

"Same. I didn't think it could be this good."

"Well, now that you two are a thing, I guess we need to add Andie to the holiday list," Vera said.

Ellis nodded. “Yes.”

Rider asked. “What kind of list?”

“We were talking about what to do about the holidays, and instead of making all the food and cookies and trying to make everything perfect, we decided to coordinate together. So I’m making pumpkin pies, Ellis is making cookies, and Talia is making cheesecakes.”

“That’s awesome,” Trip said. “More food for me.”

They all laughed, and Andie made sure Ellis, Talia, and Vera had her information. She’d said she wanted to stay for a month, but now she didn’t want to leave.

21

The picnic had been a great idea. Not even an hour later he started receiving texts from the guys on his team telling him how much they liked Andie. It made him feel even better about his buddies.

When they’d arrived home after the picnic they couldn’t keep their hands off each other and ended up having sex in the hall beside the bedroom. After, they’d showered and he was sitting on the couch reading an article he needed to catch up on when Andie stepped out of the bedroom, staring at her phone, a deep frown on her face.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Tony is out on bail, but he somehow removed his ankle monitor. They don’t know where he is.”

Rider stood and moved to her. “Where do you think he is?”

She shook her head. “He has no reason to think I’m here. I mean, he shouldn’t know where you live.”

Rider felt his stomach twist tight. The jerk shouldn’t have shown up at the hotel where Emily was getting married, but he had. He shouldn’t know anything about where Andie was, but Rider couldn’t chance it. He would need to search and figure out where the asshole was.

“I’ll see what I can find out.”

“Do you think you can find him?”

Rider shrugged. “I have friends who are skilled at looking for people.”

“Oh. What do they do?”

“They know how to find people. They have contacts.”

“That sounds expensive.”

He shook his head. “Not with this guy. He got medical retirement from the Navy, and now he spends his days tracking down people.”

“Surely he doesn’t do that for free?”

Rider shrugged. “He charges some people, but his friends, he does for free. He’s been

out of town for a few weeks. That's why he wasn't at the picnic. I think he gets home on Monday. I'll text him and see what time his plane arrives. Maybe we can pick him up from the airport."

"Oh, sure. I'd love to meet him."

"He used to be an incurable flirt, but he's changed since he was blown up."

"Wait, what? He was blown up?"

"He was on a team with Sharp, and they didn't get clear of a bomb. It destroyed most of the team. Only Sharp and Thario are still around."

"Oh no, that's awful."

He pulled her close and held on tight. "It was bad. But Thario is still here and making the best of things. I think you'll like him. Sharp is with Danika now."

"Have I met them?"

He shook his head. "No, not yet."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

Andie didn't want to worry too much but hearing that someone Rider knew had been injured was hard. She didn't like to think of Rider being hurt. She knew danger was a part of his job, but the reality of danger was almost too much, and she pushed it from her mind.

"I'd love to meet him. Picking him up from the airport would be great."

"Awesome. So how about we relax and watch a movie or something before bed?"

"Sure, I'd like that."

They settled on the couch, him holding her close as the movie played. She wanted to get used to this. There was no way Tony knew where she was. She didn't need to worry about him showing up here. Being with Rider made her feel safe. She trusted that her man could handle anything that came their way.

22

Rider heard back from Thario, and they were scheduled to pick him up on Tuesday evening. He'd been in Virginia for a few weeks doing something with the FBI. Thario insisted it wasn't official, but Rider thought it might be.

Andie wanted to go in and meet Thario at the baggage claim area, so they were standing off to the side when he heard Frog let go of a loud bark. He glanced up and saw Thario headed his way, Frog right beside him.

"That's Thario and Frog."

“Oh, he has a dog.”

Frog moved to Andie and sat, staring up at her and wagging his tail. “He’s a good boy.”

Andie squatted so she was at the same level as Frog. She lifted her hand and let the dog sniff before petting his head. Rider liked that Andie paid attention to Frog. The dog was a huge part of Thario’s new life and that she included Frog in the conversation showed she cared.

Andie giggled as Frog wiggled in front of her. “I bet you’re a very good boy.”

Frog whined and glanced up at Thario before licking Andie on the face. She laughed, and Frog wiggled more before bumping Rider’s hand.

“He likes you,” Thario said.

She stood and shook Thario’s hand. “Nice dog.”

“He’s going to be happy to be home.”

“Do you have another bag?” Rider asked as he took the bag Thario had been pulling behind him.

He shook his head. “Nope. Just this. I mailed back everything else.”

“That’s smart.”

Thario shrugged. “I can’t travel with extra bags. It’s too much.”

Rider noticed Thario rubbing his hip and knew the guy must be tired. He needed to

move them outside. “Well, your chariot awaits. Do you want to stop somewhere on the way for dinner or go home?”

Thario rubbed his hip again. “Can we go home? My legs are tired, and I need to take them off.”

“Sure. Let’s go. Andie already has pizza loaded into the buffer for ordering. We’ll have it delivered to your house.”

Thario shook his head. “You all don’t need to do that.”

“Sure we do,” Rider said.

It didn’t take them long to get out to the car. Frog settled quickly, and they were on their way. It only took them about twenty minutes to get to Thario’s place since the streets were clear.

Once in his own home, Thario headed to his bedroom, where he removed his legs and used his wheelchair. “I’m tired from travel. I was lucky and didn’t have to travel with the chair, but travel days are tough on me.”

“I bet,” Andie said. “Did you have another chair while you were there?”

“They provided me with one. I appreciated them taking care of that.” Thario moved, so he was right in front of Andie on the couch. “Rider explained the situation with Tony. I set up a search but haven’t seen anything on him. I’ll keep looking, though.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

“Oh, I didn’t know that you already knew.”

“It’s probably weird having a stranger know stuff, but I can tell you that you aren’t alone. Every day, I help people in need. It gives me purpose. I could have crawled into a shell and hidden after the bomb, or I could have become bitter and taken my pain out on everyone else. Instead, I decided to take down people who hurt others.”

“That’s really cool.”

He shrugged. “It may be cool, but it also keeps me from being a drunk who is bitter. I could see myself turning into the worst kind of person who hates everyone. Instead, I focused and decided to share my abilities for good.”

Andie reached out and squeezed his hand. “Thank you for helping me.”

“You’re welcome. I hope we can figure out where he is. I’ll keep looking, and if we find him, I’ll make sure you both know.”

The pizza arrived, and they ate as Thario told stories of Frog being funny while they were in Virginia. The dog huffed a few times as Thario told a story about Frog making a friend with another service dog. They wouldn’t break their work ethic, but when they went outside to go pee, they made sure the other dog went, too, and they would play together for a few minutes.

Rider laughed. “They sound cute together.”

Thario shrugged. “It was. It’s kind of sad they won’t see each other again for a

while.”

“Will they get to see each other again?” Andie asked.

Thario nodded. “Yes. The person is coming out here for training in January.”

“That’s really cool for Frog. He’ll be so surprised.”

Thario nodded. “He’s smart, but sometimes I forget he’s just a dog. He remembers stuff and can comprehend my moods, but he has limits. I’m glad guys like Rider and his buddies come around. It gives me the chance to talk to another human in person.”

Andie stood and moved to Thario, giving him a quick hug. “I’m glad you have people around. It must be tough having your life changed so much so you don’t even have the same job as you did before and everything is different.”

Rider was proud of Andy and how she got it. It wasn’t just that Thario got injured, he lost his place in a structure that he valued.

“It was very difficult at first, but I’m better now. I actually like the freedom, and I get to have Frog. Now then, how about we look at the information I have on Tony so you can add anything I need to know.”

Thario showed Andie what he had, and they talked for about five, maybe ten minutes before Thario turned to him.

“I’ll keep you updated. I have some processes running in the background. We should know more in a day or so. If he’s headed this way, we’ll figure it out. From what I’ve learned about him, he may have no clue where Andie even is.”

Rider nodded. “I hope he never figures it out.”

Andie stood and wrapped her arms around his waist. “You and me both.”

He worried about Andie. She may be a grown woman, but Tony was out to get her. Having the jerk track her down and try to kill her had to be hard for her to deal with. He would do everything possible to keep Andie safe.

23

Andie felt better knowing Thario was in her corner. She and Rider chatted about Thario and what he was doing to help her on the way home. She liked that Rider didn’t tell her to be quiet once. He said he enjoyed listening to her, which was refreshing.

She felt like she was really coming into her own. Living with Rider gave her confidence. “You know, moving here with you makes me feel more like myself.”

“That’s good.”

“I’ve been living afraid, feeling like I’m just on the verge of doing something wrong. But with you, I feel like I’m back to my old self. I have confidence, and I like it.”

He glanced over and nodded. “I know you said you’d stay here for four weeks, but I don’t think that’s long enough. I don’t want you to leave.”

She placed her hand on Rider’s thigh. “I don’t want to leave. I was thinking about that earlier tonight as we ate with Thario. I love Portland, and I think one reason I love it is because of Emily.”

“She’s moving.”

“Exactly. I think I should move, too. It’s a beautiful city, and I don’t want to say it

has nothing for me, but with you here, Portland has little to offer me.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

He pulled up in front of his house and cut the engine. “I don’t know how long it will take for you to close down your place up there, but I want you to move here with me. We have a future together.”

Her heart expanded, and she felt like she’d just won the lottery or something. “Yes. And I do believe we really have something that could last.”

He leaned over and kissed her before opening the car door and hopping out. He was at her door before she could get out. He didn’t pick her up and carry her inside, but he did make them walk fast.

Once inside, he pressed her up against the door, his lips finding hers. The kiss was hot, their passion on fire. When he pulled up her shirt, his fingers ran over her breasts, making her nipples pucker. She needed him inside her.

“I want you,” she moaned as she clutched his sides.

“Bedroom,” Rider said.

She laughed as she pushed him away and scurried for the bedroom, tugging off her shirt along the way. He was right behind her, removing his clothes, too. They tumbled onto the bed together, him intent on getting her to come.

Rider was thrilled that Andie wanted to stay. It was almost too easy. He had found someone who matched him well. She was kind and was really interested in him, not just his body, but his life.

After making love to her, he held her, breathing in her sweet scent. “I don’t know when, but at some point during the wedding week, I started to fall for you.”

She turned and stroked his hair. “I’ve fallen for you. I know those words are loaded, and I don’t want to make you?—”

“I love you.” She blinked, and he smiled, then laughed. “I do love you. I know it’s fast.”

“I love you, too.”

He kissed her, relieved to hear her say she felt the same. He’d never thought he would have someone he could spend his life with. When the other guys on his team found women, he was happy for them and just assumed being paired off with a woman wasn’t for him. Finding Andie had changed everything for him. Now, he couldn’t imagine living without her.

24

Tony breathed a sigh of relief. It had taken him way too much time, but he’d finally figured out where Andie lived. She would pay for sending him to jail. She was supposed to be with him, taking care of him, but she’d left. He needed to get her in line.

He showed up at her apartment, ready to demand she come back to him, but no one answered the door. Her car was in the lot, so he waited. She didn’t leave the next morning by nine, and he had to use the bathroom, plus he was starving. He had to go to the fast-food place around the corner that he’d seen last night and get some food and take time to piss.

When he made it back to the lot across from her apartment, it was full. He had to park

down the road from her place. This was ridiculous. How could he watch her place if he couldn't park right across from her apartment?

Agitation filled him. She had to be with him. There was no other alternative.

Tony left his car and headed to her apartment, knocking on the door again. He kept knocking, knowing she would need to answer because he was being too annoying.

The door across from him opened, and a man stepped out. "She isn't here. She's gone for the month."

Tony stared at him, not believing the guy at first. But it made sense. She wasn't around. She hadn't answered her door, and her car hadn't moved. She wasn't here.

"Do you know where she went?"

"Said to visit a friend. That's all I know."

Tony turned to walk away but then turned back. "When did she leave?"

The guy shrugged. "I don't know. Three weeks ago. Yeah, it was exactly three weeks. She took off on a Monday morning."

He turned and stalked back to his car. Seven days. That's how long he had until she was home. He would make her see that she needed him. She'd always been easy to manipulate until she wasn't.

Doing the dating thing had fucked him over. Other women weren't as compliant as she'd been. He needed her back in his life. She would come under this thumb because, at the end of the day, she was just some dumb bitch who wasn't smart enough to live without a man telling her what to do.

Andie couldn't believe she was headed back to Portland. She wanted to stay in San Diego and forget everything there, but she had to pack up her clothes and send them south to her new home.

Emily was already gone, living her best life on the East Coast. She'd been prepared to be alone and sad with Emily gone, but now she had someone special, and he wouldn't let her be sad and alone.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

Already she had so many good friends. The group had gotten together again before she left, and she'd headed over to see Thario and, of course, Frog for a few hours one afternoon. They figured out where Tony was and she was glad to find that he was still in Portland. He probably had no clue where she was living.

While in town, she would have to make sure to be careful and not let him see her. She planned on being in Portland for less than a week. Then, she would load up her car and drive south. If she only needed to drive home, Rider could have come with her. Packing up her place would take too long for him to leave again so soon.

The first night home, she missed Rider terribly. They chatted for an hour on the phone before ending the call. It was nice talking to him, but she wanted to be back in his arms. She was making great progress on packing and decided to head out to grab some food.

She stepped out of the restaurant with her food and was on her way to the car when Tony moved into her view. She froze. Fear mixed with anger, and she wanted to lash out.

"Leave me alone."

"You know I can't do that. You belong with me."

She shook her head. "No, I don't. You need to leave me alone."

"I can't do that."

“I need you to stop this nonsense. I broke up with you a long time ago. Leave me alone.”

She moved to the left, but he shuffled that way. She stepped to the right, and he moved with her.

“Stop. Let me go.”

She glanced around, looking for help, but no one was outside to hear her screaming. Tony had her by the jacket and was dragging her away from her car. She didn't want to be alone with him, so she dropped the food bag and scratched his arms. He didn't let go. She wished she'd spent the month with Rider training to get into better shape. She wasn't a gym girly and didn't really like to sweat, but at this moment, she wished she had some of Rider's strength so she could fight her way to freedom.

Tony punched her, knocking the sense out of her just before he pushed her into the back of his car. She started screaming again as he slipped a rope around each of her wrists. He'd planned this. He'd planned to take her captive. How did he know where she was?

She still had her phone. Maybe she could get it out and call Rider. She thought about using the voice features, but she didn't want Tony to take her phone and fling it out of the car. The timespent with Thario meant she had agreed to have him track her. It was weird, but Thario was a good guy, and he was honest. He would never look for her on a whim or try to invade her privacy.

She hoped he was watching right now. Maybe Rider would text her and expect a reply. He knew she planned on staying up late to pack. She wanted the tasks done. Too bad Tony had found her. Someone at her apartment complex must have told him she would be back. She had only told two neighbors she was leaving. That had been a mistake.

Rider's friends would never share her information. She had to get out of this. It was dark out, and the punches had made her loopy. She fought to focus on the ropes binding her hands. She had to escape to be there for Rider. He filled her with so much love, and she wanted to return that love. He needed to know he was special, and she loved him more than anything. Sure, she'd told him, but she wanted to live it out with him.

26

Rider didn't want to bug Andie, but he found pink towels that were soft and huge. She hadn't been impressed with the thin, white towels in his bathroom. He liked the pink, so he'd picked them up at the store.

He stared at his phone, wondering if he should text her. She would want to know, right? He put his phone down, then picked it up again, took a photo of the towels, and sent it to her.

After he sent the text, he went to the bathroom to remove the old towels and put up the new set. It was bright, and now he realized he needed a new shower curtain. The old plastic one didn't really fit the pink theme. Andie would know what to put in there.

He emptied his bathroom trash and then checked his phone, worried that she hadn't returned his text. Maybe she was busy, or maybe she'd fallen asleep. He did meal prep for the week, agitated that she still hadn't texted him back. He wasn't one of those guys who demanded attention twenty-four-seven, but he was proud that he'd picked the cute towels and wanted to know what she thought.

Staring a hole through his phone wouldn't get him answers. It was eight thirty, and he needed to get to bed in a bit, but he wanted to talk to her again. He missed her so much more than he'd thought he would.

He was about to call when someone knocked on his door. He moved to the door and pulled it open, finding Remi.

“Hey, Remi, what’s up?”

“I was on the phone with Kevlar while I was driving home, and Thario and Tex called in. They were discussing something new about surveillance, and Thario pulled up his screen for Andie. He said that her location was odd. I stopped here because, I don’t know, I just had this feeling.”

“Shit. I texted her a photo of the cute pink towels I bought, but she didn’t reply. Do you think something is wrong?”

She shrugged and shook her head. “I don’t know, but as I was driving by, I stopped because I knew you’d want to know.”

“Thank you.”

Rider glanced up, and Kevlar was in the middle of the street, heading his way. “Hey, what’s up?”

Rider stepped out as Remi moved back. “I don’t know. She didn’t text me back. I was about to call her. What do you think happened?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

Kevlar frowned. “Thario hung up, so I don’t know, but it doesn’t sound good. He said she was in a car speeding through a part of the city that was far from her apartment.”

“Shit. I don’t like this.”

“Let me get Remi home and inside, and I’ll be over in just a few minutes.”

Remi huffed and rolled her eyes. “I can get myself home.”

Kevlar snorted. “I know. I’m just on edge with all this talk. Let me make sure you’re safe, and then I’ll come back.”

Remi nodded. “Fine. I get it. You’re protective. I understand.”

Rider pulled out his phone and texted Thario before Kevlar and Remi were off his lawn. His phone buzzed with a response from Thario, saying he was tracking her.

Fear rose up, and he wondered if he should call her. Would she answer? Would he put her in more danger by calling? If he called and she was with someone who wanted to hurt her, would that alert the person that she had her phone?

He stood frozen on his front steps, unsure what to do. The last thing he wanted was to get Andie killed, but he had to do something.

Andie used her right hand to work the knot free on her left. She wasn’t sure where

Tony was taking her, but she had a feeling the car ride was almost over. If she didn't get her hand free, she couldn't text for help.

Tony had the stereo up loud enough he couldn't hear her phone buzz when someone texted her. The rope was almost loose enough to get free. She just needed to get one more knot undone, and then it would be enough.

She was about to get the last knot loose when Tony took a corner too fast, and she slid off the seat. Pain flared in her right wrist as the binding twisted her arm. But now her left hand was free.

"Get up!" Tony yelled.

"I'm trying!" she yelled back, realizing this was the perfect cover for getting her phone and texting someone.

She fished her phone from her pocket, her hand shaking. She wasn't proficient in texting with her left hand, but it would have to do. She meant to click on Rider, but she hit Remi's name and typed in the word help, but typed a K for the L. She hoped it was either corrected to help or Remi understood something was wrong.

As she shoved her phone into her pocket, the car slowed. They were at their location. She'd sent the text just in time. Hopefully, Thario could see her location and send someone. She feared what Tony would do if he held her for long.

Rider was still on the porch when Remi opened the door and yelled to him that she texted. He moved quickly, dashing across the street. Kevlar was already on the phone when Rider got there.

Remi caught him up. "She texted what I think is help. It has a K instead of an L, but I'm assuming she is in trouble. Kevlar is on the phone with Thario and Tex. They are

getting the authorities involved.”

Tears burned his eyes, and he felt like his knees had been taken out from under him. “Thank you, Remi.”

He wanted in on the conversation, but he waited for Kevlar to give some sort of indication that it was being handled. When Kevlar glanced up and gave him a thumbs up, he let go a sigh, and his knees might have given way because Remi reached out, giving him support.

“Sit,” Remi commanded, and he moved to the chair she’d pulled out and sank to it, willing his phone to ring. Remi had to be safe. He wasn’t even close, so he couldn’t run to her and save her. He should have taken off work and gone to Portland with her, but he’d just taken off time for the wedding. They could have waited for her to officially move here and close up her apartment. He would willingly pay for another six months to a year’s rent for her to be safe.

After what seemed like forever, Kevlar lowered his phone from his ear, though he was still on the line. “Tex and Thario convinced the police to go to that location. They are gearing up. It may take a little time.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, but we want her safe. We aren’t there, and there’s nothing you can do right now except wait.”

Rider blew out a breath, fear and worry filling him. He wasn’t going to relax until he knew Andie was safe. He had a suspicion her ex was doing something stupid. If that fucker did something stupid and killed her, he would make sure the bastard didn’t live.

The seconds ticked by so slowly that he worried that time had stopped. He wasn't the best at sitting back and relaxing. This was one of the hardest things he'd ever done.

28

Andie jerked away from Tony when he yanked open the back door of the car. Tony reached for her arms, stopping as he saw her left arm wasn't tied any longer.

"What did you do?" Tony yelled.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

“Nothing. When you took that corner too fast, my left hand came undone.”

“Fuck.” Tony started working on the knot on her right wrist. It was tight, maybe too tight for him to get undone. He pulled and pulled again, but the knot wouldn’t come undone. “Dammit. I need to get the scissors.”

A car drove past slowly, and Tony clenched his fists.

“Don’t do anything stupid like try to yell for someone. I’m grabbing the scissors and coming right back out.”

She nodded, unsure why he thought she would obey him. If someone was walking past, she was going to do everything she could to get them to help.

Tony slammed the back door of the car, and she started working on the knot, trying to get it loose. This one was harder than the binding on her left wrist.

Panic was setting in as she pulled at the knot. Then the car door opened, and she might have yelped. It was a stranger with a big knife. She gasped and jerked away, but her wrist was anchored to the back of the front seat.

“Shh, be quiet. Backup isn’t far away.” The knife sliced through the rope, and she scrambled out of the car, following the stranger who’d come to save her.

Tears ran down her cheeks as he guided her around the building. They didn’t stop until they were almost a full block away. He moved her behind a dark van and used a small flashlight to check her.

“Are you injured?”

She shook her head. “Just bumps and bruises.” She held up her wrist with the rope. “This.”

He nodded and spoke into a radio she hadn’t noticed before. This guy was a police officer. How had the police known? The sound of Tony yelling filtered down the block and the officer put his finger to his lips. “Backup is a block away. Don’t make a noise. You’re safe.”

She nodded as more tears came. Time passed slowly and then the roar of multiple people yelling could be heard down the block. She met the officer’s gaze. “Did they get him?”

He held up one hand and touched his ear with the other one. She guessed he had some sort of device in his ear so he could hear. He nodded. “Yes. They got him. You’re safe.”

She slumped against the van, relief filling her. “How did you know where I was?”

“Your friends were tracking you. They gave us the information about your location. You’re lucky. I doubt we ever would have found you if you didn’t have those friends.”

She nodded, then grasped her phone from her pocket and whipped it out, needing to talk to Rider.

29

Rider felt like his skin was too tight, and he needed to crawl out of it. He desperately needed to know Andie was okay. When his phone rang, he jumped and almost

dropped it. He answered, his hands shaking.

“Andie.”

“Rider.”

Her voice squeaked, and he could tell she was crying. His heart stalled. He didn’t know if this was bad or good.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. The police—thank you. Thank you. They got him.”

He heard scratching on the phone, and then a man started speaking. “Hello, this is Officer Thomas. I’m with Andie. She’s okay. She has a few bruises and bumps. The paramedics are about two minutes away. They’ll probably want to take her to the hospital, but she is safe.”

Rider cleared his throat. “Thank you. I can’t express my gratitude enough.”

The officer cleared his throat. “Yes, sir. It is the job, but some days are better than others. I’m glad she’s safe.”

Rider heard the phone being passed back to Andie, and he knew he needed to go up there and be with her. He would need to get an emergency leave or something.

“Rider,” Andie said. Her voice sounded so good he sighed. “He couldn’t get the rope untied and left me in the car. That’s when they rescued me. He didn’t even get me into his house.”

“Good. And I’m going to try to come up there. I need to get some emergency leave.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

“You don’t have to.”

“I do. I won’t feel good until I see you.”

“I’m going to be fine. The paramedics are here. I’ll call you in a bit.”

“Sure. Text me and tell me what’s going on.”

“I will, love. Tell everyone who helped thank you. I texted Remi.”

“I know. I’m sitting here with them. They are thankful you’re okay.”

“Give them a hug for me. They saved me.”

“I will. I’ll talk to you in a bit.”

The call ended, and Rider caught his head in his hands, a shiver running through him. Both Remi and Kevlar were there, their hands on his back. Nothing had prepared him for this. He felt so many different emotions, from anger to fear and relief.

“I have to get there. I have to go, but?—”

“I’ll call Trip. You talk to your CO.”

Remi placed a glass of cool water in front of him. “Drink this, get your head on straight, then call.”

He did as she asked, not really feeling better, but he was on less shaky ground. His CO wasn't a jerk, and since he'd never taken off like this he was okayed to head out. He knew one thing for sure, he had to get to her.

Before Andie even made it to the hospital, Rider had a flight booked, and Trip was on his way over to take him to the airport.

He didn't know a lot, but he would see Andie tonight. When Trip arrived, he didn't ask any questions, just pulled him into a tight hug.

"We'll figure out a way to get her stuff back, even if we have to fly up on a Friday morning and back on Sunday."

"Thank you, Trip. Thank you for your help. Remi and Kevlar saved me tonight."

"They're good people. I'll see you when you get back."

He let go a groan. "It all could have fallen apart tonight."

"Yeah, but it didn't."

"All because Thario wanted to track her."

Trip chuckled as he took the airport exit. "Talk about a guy who has changed."

"Yeah. I don't want to be like that. I want to change now before I have to learn a lesson. I think Andie is really good for me. I'm going to ask her to marry me."

Trip glanced over and flashed a smile. "She's good for you."

"She really is. Like Ellis is for you. When you met her, man, you gained so much."

“I did. Ellis made me a better person. I saw that with you and Andie.”

Trip pulled the car to the curb, and he bumped fists with Trip and hopped out, grabbing his bag from the back seat. He only had his carry-on because he was only going for a few days. He just had to get Andie home with him.

When he showed up at her apartment, and she opened the door, he thought his heart would burst. They clung to each other, tears streaming down his face. After the initial emotions calmed, he checked her bruises. The worst was a rope burn and bruise around her right wrist.

“We can get your stuff later or hire someone to come in and pack everything. I want you home with me. I never should have let you come on your own.”

She framed his face with her hands. “Hey, I’m an adult, and I chose to do this. I don’t want to be in a relationship where letting me do stuff is a thing.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

He shook his head. “I meant with Tony in the wind. I should have known something would happen. I could have?—”

She put her fingers on his lips. “I’m safe, and Tony is in jail. They are keeping him in there.”

Rider nodded as he studied her face. She seemed calm and happy. “I never want to lose you. I know you are your own person, and I love it. I love you.”

“I love you.”

“I want you with me, and I want you to come home with me. I’ll help you pack tomorrow, but I have to head back the day after. I want you to come back with me. We’ll figure out how to get your car and everything else south.”

“Okay.”

“Wait, you aren’t putting up a fight?”

She shook her head and laughed. “I don’t want to stay here if you aren’t here. Most of this stuff, I just need to get rid of. The furniture won’t fit in your place, and I don’t really have much stuff. I think we can get most of it packed up and delivered to the company I arranged to ship it. Like you said, my car can be shipped.”

He pulled her close and held her, knowing if he’d lost her, his life would be over. She made him a better person, and he only hoped he did the same for her.

Somehow, they'd finished packing away everything she wanted to keep, arranged for the furniture to be sold or donated, booked her car on a transport south so it would arrive in two weeks, and cleaned her apartment. They were done, and they still had a few hours before their flight took off.

Rider had slowly made love to her, not wanting to hurt her bruised body. She'd thought him so sweet and careful that she fell even more in love with him.

She slept on the flight home, waking just before they landed. Rider squeezed her hand and brushed her hair out of her face.

"Remi is picking us up."

"Oh good, I need to give her extra hugs."

"They did so much."

"It's funny how your friends have quickly come into my life and become friends. In Portland, there just wasn't anyone who was like that."

He nodded. "Yeah, our group is special. Not everyone is as nice as they are."

"I don't know how I will ever repay them, but maybe hosting a cookout will help."

"They'll like that. Spending time with each other makes life go around."

"It does. I never expected someone like you in my life."

"And I never expected you."

She held his gaze, seeing so much love it made her throat close. Rider really cared for her. The shock of having someone love her hit her afresh, and she couldn't hold back the kiss, though they were still on the plane. She felt like she would do anything for this man.

When she saw Remi, the tears came again. They clung to each other as Rider gathered the bags.

“Thank you so much,” she squeaked out as emotions spilled out.

“Of course. I'm glad you are safe. I was so glad the police found you.”

A shudder ripped through her. “Yeah. That was a scary night, and I never want to relive it.”

Remi laughed and hugged her closer. “Never.”

After a bunch more hugs when Remi dropped them off at home, she stepped into Rider's house and let go a huge sigh. “I'm glad to be home.”

“I'm glad you think of this as home.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

“I really do think of it that way. I’m thankful I met you and thankful you want me in your life.”

He brushed his lips over hers. “I’m glad you want me in your life. I feel like I won the lottery with you.”

She’d never had anyone talk to her this way, and her initial reaction was to reject his words. But she’d grown enough that she could hear him. He loved her. There weren’t strings attached, and it wasn’t transactional. Rider really loved her, and that freed her to really love him.

They were together and would be for a long time. Rider wasn’t like other men she’d been with. He was good and kind. She could trust him to take care of her and never manipulate her. Their relationship would be what she always wanted, and she would make Rider happy.

31

Bud’s new neighbor was driving him crazy. It was after seven in the morning, but the asshole hadn’t even waited until one minute after the hour to start up with the piano playing. Today was the day to go and confront them.

He pulled on a T-shirt and headed over to their door, ready to make them understand the piano was too much at seven in the morning on a Saturday. Part of the problem was they lived in a duplex, and the piano sounded like it was right up against the wall to his bedroom. If they moved it out to the den, or dining room it wouldn’t be so bad. It was absolutely imperative he get them to understand.

The sound of the piano wasn't as loud as he pulled open the screen door and raised his hand to knock. There it was—proof the piano was in the wrong room of their place.

His fist pounded on the door, and then he paused. The sounds from the piano died, and he waited for them to come to the door.

He was about to start pounding again when the door opened just a crack, but no one was there. Then he heard a small voice and looked down, seeing dark eyes that were wide as saucers. It was a child.

“Did you need something?” the girl was small, maybe five or six years old, but she sounded older.

The anger bled out as he took in her braided hair and a gap-toothed smile. But he was over here, and he couldn't think of anything else to do but complain about the noise. “The piano, it's loud.”

“Oh, crap. Noa, you aren't supposed to open the door. Who are you talking to?”

“Our neighbor. That's why I opened the door. I recognized him. He's wearing his booty shorts.”

Bud glanced down, looking at his thighs. He was wearing his short workout shorts. They were very short.

“Don't call them that,” the woman said as she gently moved Noa away from the door.

“That's what you call them,” the little girl said as she moved deeper into their house.

“I'm sorry, what did you need?” the woman asked as she pulled the door open more.

Bud froze as he stared into dark eyes that seemed to pull him in. Her dark, curly hair bunched around her face, making her cheekbones look even higher. Her pink lips were parted slightly, making her look a little surprised. Her skin was creamy, near perfect looking. He wanted to reach out and touch her and see if she was as soft as she looked.

“So, why are you over here at seven in the morning?”

He blinked, coming back to the reason he was here. “The piano. It’s loud.”

She narrowed her eyes. “No, it’s not on the wall we share. It shouldn’t be loud.”

“It woke me up. It’s loud.”

She shook her head while she turned her back on him and started pointing from one side of the house to the other before she gasped. When she spun around, she slapped her hand over her mouth.

“Crap, I’m so sorry. I asked the movers to put it against the outside wall. I can’t believe I got that wrong. It shouldn’t be in the bedroom, should it? That was wrong. I’m so sorry. I can get someone out to—no, I won’t have money until two weeks from tomorrow. I spent everything—never mind. You don’t want to hear that.”

“I can move it for you. I just need to get one of my buddies out here.”

She jerked her head back and narrowed her eyes. “You want to come into my house?”

“No, I want to be able to sleep late on Saturday morning. I don’t want to be in your space, but that piano can’t stay where it is.”

Her lips thinned, and she pointed her finger at him. “If you misbehave, I know where

you live.”

He wanted to roll his eyes but didn’t. “Trust me, I just want sleep.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:40 pm

“What is your name?”

“My friends call me Bud. What time can we come over to move it?”

She glanced at her phone. “I have to work for a few hours. How about four this afternoon?”

“Sure. I’ll be over at four. What is your name?”

“Clove. My parents were wannabe hippies.”

He nodded, not wanting to engage more with his neighbor because he thought she was beautiful, and he didn’t need the hassle of her living next door when things fell apart. And they would fall. He could do his job and was damn good at it, but relationships were a mystery to him.

“Okay, Clove, I’ll be here at four to move your piano.” He turned to leave when he felt someone tapping his arm. He glanced down and was surprised to see Noa standing beside him, holding up a red lollypop.

“You are grumpy and need this. Red lollies always make me feel better. Feel better before you come over at four because Mom doesn’t like sourpusses and will make you do the dishes if you have an attitude.”

Bud stared down at the little girl, unsure what to say. He took the red lollypop and thanked her, wondering if he really was that grumpy. As he crossed the grass to his side of the duplex, he glanced back, seeing the curtain moving. Who had been

watching him? The idea of Clove watching him in his booty shorts made his cock tingle.

“Down, boy,” he said under his breath. He didn’t need any encumbrances, and sexy Clove could be just the type of something that could really snare him.