



# Taken (One to Hold 7.50)

**Author:** *Tia Louise*

**Category:** Erotic, Romance, New Adult, War

**Description:** Stuart Knight is an injured Marine turned angry cowboy. Mariska Heron is a beautiful young artist with vivid dreams and a healing touch.

When the two cross paths, their chemistry is explosive, their attraction undeniable. But Stuart has one thing on his mind—returning to active duty.

He says he's leaving. She walks away first. Still, neither of them can deny their hearts are taken.

**Total Pages (Source):** 17

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:46 am*

## Prologue

Stuart Knight

Years ago, behind enemy lines...

The gun felt right in my hand. Heavy and tight. My back pressed against the dusty wall of the stone shelter where we waited, watching.

We were pulling out. It was our last day in the camp, our last day in country. Conflict hadn't ended, but we were handing over the fight to the local military. Still, we were Marines. First in, last out. Our final job was to provide support, watch for any sign of ambush, before we made our way to the airfield.

The majority of our men had gone ahead with the convoy, but I stayed back with our CO. He was a good leader, and we'd been together since the beginning. While I sat on the gritty floor, he stood by the square window staring out at the miles of tan desert. I was pretty sure I knew where his mind was.

Bending my outstretched leg, I rested an arm on top of my knee. "Thinking about home?"

Derek blinked once and looked down before turning steel blue eyes on me. "Eighteen months is a long time with only a week at Christmas."

"Women make you soft, soldier."

His mouth tightened, and I had to laugh at his reaction. I was pretty happy to be headed home myself, even if I didn't have a girl waiting on me.

"You're the only shithead I'd let get away with a crack like that."

Calling each other "soldier" was an ongoing joke between us.

"It's because I'm your best man. You'd have lost an arm without me."

He exhaled a laugh, and I put the butt of my rifle on the floor, wrapping the shoulder strap around my wrist.

"Keep talking, fucknut." His elbow bent, and he pinched his top lip. "I'll be waiting to laugh when a sweet pair of baby blues knocks you on your ass."

"Not happening." Using my gun, I pushed myself to standing. "I'm more of a hazel guy."

Derek's arm dropped, and he smirked. If I was happy, he was three times as glad to be pulling out. Only I'd be back. Being stateside was just a break for me.

I walked over to stand by the window. "This is my life, and it's no kind of life to share."

"Are you questioning my loyalty, Corporal Knight?"

"Not at all, Lieutenant Alexander. You're a great Marine. But guys like you do your time and retire. Go home, get married, have kids."

"You're a lifer."

“Damn straight.” I straightened my back to stretch my tired muscles. “Only way I can give one hundred and ten percent is not to have somebody waiting on me.”

A shadow moved around the corner of the bungalow across from us, catching my eye.

“My dad was a lifer, and he had a family.”

“Mine too. And we both know how shitty it was growing up with them leaving, Moms crying.”

Long nights, sitting against the wall staring into darkness, we’d shared just about everything to pass the time, to keep from going insane from the monotony combined with the stress of knowing at any time we could be blown up or shot. We were walking targets, and we’d been lucky.

“You’re right,” he exhaled, looking away again, out at the sea of beige. “I’m proud of my service, but when the time comes, I’ll walk away.”

“You’ve got another road ahead of you.” I didn’t think any less of him. Some guys in this outfit didn’t have the right stuff, the right attitude or the honor, but that could never be said of this guy. “I’m glad we served together.”

“Now who’s getting soft?” His deep laugh was the last sound I heard before the staccato clank! of a grenade dropped into the space with us.

We had seconds, if that long. No time to speak, only time to act. Reaching down, I grabbed it, and threw it as fast and hard as I could. It was just out the window when the BLAST! threw us both against the opposite wall.

My back had been curved from the throw, and I hit a bare space. I was winded, but not hurt. Derek was out cold. White smoke filled the room. Our luck had run out, and

we were under attack.

Shots fired outside as I made my way through the blindness to where his dark body was slumped on the stone floor.

“Fuck!” I shouted. He was as big as me and twice as heavy, but I’d be damned if I left him. With a deep grunt, I hauled him onto my shoulders.

His voice was a groan in my ear. “Stuart. Go on. Go.”

“You’re not dying today, soldier,” I shouted back.

Months of working out and not much else between the explosions and the darkness had me strong as a damn mule. I went up the short flight of steps to the exit. I had no idea what I’d be stepping into when I went through that door, but they knew we were in here. We couldn’t stay.

I held Derek steady on my back as I peered into the smoke and dust filling the air. Two bodies in robes right ahead of us. Not Americans. We couldn’t do anything for them, but I would do something for us.

A convoy had been preparing to transport the last of us two houses down. If I could make it that far, it was possible we’d be safe. I couldn’t see a damned thing as I made a break for it. My thighs burned with the exertion and the extra weight, and my lungs seized from the smoke. Derek was a fucking dead weight on my back, but I barely noticed with the adrenaline pumping in my veins. I was born for this.

Blinking hard, I could just make out the hulking shapes of the armored trucks waiting to take us away.

“We’re almost there,” I shouted, even though I was pretty sure he was out again.

Taking the first step, I dug in with my heel, trying to gain speed

with traction. Combat boots, thirty-seven pounds of weaponry, ordnance, spying shit, and my commanding officer. I ran as fast as I could to the symbol of safety. I was just there when my feet went out from under me. My ears rang with the noise of the explosion, and pain shot like fire through the lower half of my body. I flew forward and landed on my chest in the dirt.

I couldn't stop shaking. It wasn't fear—it was adrenaline combined with the effort I'd been pushing to get us to safety faster. My brain tilted on its side. The trucks were near, but they couldn't see us in all the smoke and confusion. Bodies were running all around us. I needed to get up, but I was dazed.

God dammit! I was made for this. I tried to force myself to get up, but my body didn't respond. I was above myself looking down. Derek lay on my back exposed, unprotected. What the fuck was happening to me? I fought against this pansy-assed flake-out. I had to get back down there. I had to carry my brother to safety. I was stronger than this.

Somebody had to see us, but the whole place was in confusion. Another whistling rocket, another explosion. I struggled to open my mouth and yell for backup. Nothing came out. I saw a truck jolt and fly back. It was hit.

Then, like an old-fashioned television switching off, everything blinked to black. I didn't see anything anymore.

Scene 1: Leaving

Stuart

Six years later...

The pickup rumbled down the highway in the direction of Bayville, New Jersey. I needed to get away, but I had one errand to do before I left. Just in case I never came back.

After I left Nikki's, I went back to Derek's place and tore through a bender. When I opened my eyes again, two days had passed. I was sitting on the bedroom floor with an empty bottle of Belvedere, an empty prescription bottle, and the few mementos from after my dad died. As the oldest son and the only Marine to follow in his footsteps, Mom had given them to me.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:46 am*

With bleary eyes, I studied his medal of honor and the assorted badges he'd earned for exemplary service, the flag he'd fought to defend, and then I looked at what I'd become. My own career cut short, I'd slowly devolved into this. A broken-down, wasted warrior. Chips cashed in, I could only think of one last place to go. If that didn't work...

Kicking my ass off the floor, I pushed through the headache and the hangover to the shower. For a while I stood under the warm spray and let it bring me back to life. After that, I dried off and dressed in dark jeans and a long-sleeved, white button-down. It would do for this errand.

I threw all my shit into my pack and grabbed the keys to the rental. I had to return it since I was leaving the state, but I had money to buy something. It was more the delay associated with going through the process. I stopped in a used car dealership and bought a late-model, black pickup. Once I finished in Bayville, I'd drive it as far as Cleveland and fly the rest of the way to Montana.

I thought about my plans. Dad's Medal of Honor should be with someone who deserved it. Lane was a baby, but maybe one day he'd do a better job carrying on our family legacy. I'd shot that privilege straight to hell.

The Jungle Gym was nicer than I expected from the tagline "Where the wild things are." I expected it to be a bunch of MTV reality-show bad actors, since that was what this area was infamous for. Instead I found a decent-sized, respectable gym.

Someone spoke, but I didn't acknowledge them. I was checking out the establishment when I said, "I'm looking for Kendra Woods. She goes by Kenny."



“I’m Kenny.” The voice came from a tiny girl behind the counter. She was dressed in black and had enormous blue eyes.

Her appearance didn’t make sense, and I said what I thought. “I expected someone older.”

“I’m twenty-six, and you are...?”

She was pissed, but I couldn’t imagine my little brother having a baby with this person. She was not his usual leggy blonde. Still, apart from the purple hair, she was cute in a waifish sort of way. Her eyes were a definite plus.

“I’m Stuart Knight. You know my brother Patrick. May I speak to you alone? It’s about my nephew.”

A tremor moved through my torso, and I reached up to rub the back of my neck. I needed to relax, but my action seemed to put her on guard. Probably all of this had her on guard, which wasn’t my intention.

Resistance stiffened her back. “We can talk here. Mariska’s my best friend.”

The person behind her stepped forward, and for a second, my control slipped. A pair of hazel eyes exactly like the sunset in the place I was headed struck me. Then her cheeks blushed a shade of pink...

“Hello,” I said, watching her.

“Would you like a smoothie? I make them myself, right over there.” She turned and pointed to the other end of the bar, and her chestnut hair swayed in long waves down her back. I imagined lacing my hands in those soft waves, pulling her head against my shoulder... “It’ll give you some privacy while you talk.”

“Thank you.” I looked down to break the spell, but my eyes caught on the sway of her ass as she crossed to the other side of the space. Small and perky, I wanted to see the mark of my hands on it.

Clearing my throat, I focused on Kenny. “I didn’t mean to frighten you. I have something for Lane.” I took out the medal wrapped in a piece of heavy black cloth and paused as she crossed to my side of the bar. “It’s my father’s distinguished service award. It was given to me when he died. I need you to give it to Lane as the first grandson when he’s older.”

Concern flooded her blue eyes, and I could tell she was smart. That’s when it all clicked. Patrick was a sucker for smart chicks.

“Are you ill?” She touched my arm carefully. “Do you want me to call Patrick?”

“No. I don’t want my brother involved.”

My voice was sharper than I intended, and another tremor tickled at my neck. I was losing patience. I needed to get out of here and to a drug store. I was about to pay for that fucking bender, and it was going to hurt like hell.

But Mariska was back. “On the house.” She held some kind of beverage. “It’s full of lavender and blueberry. It’ll help you relax.”

Just looking at her beautiful eyes seemed to help me relax, and her cheeks blossomed with that rosy glow. My gaze dropped to her full, pink lips, and a force inside me pulled. It didn’t make sense, but I wanted to explain why I couldn’t stay with her, why I couldn’t take her with me.

“I have to go,” is all I said.

“Where will you go?”

“My uncle has a place out west where I can breathe. It’s a place where I usually find peace.” Fuck. Why did I tell her that?

“Please let me call Patrick,” Kenny interrupted.

“Do not call my brother. I don’t want to see him.” My tone sent her back to afraid, but I couldn’t help it. I was barely fighting off the withdrawals, and her insistence pissed me off.

I went straight to the door and was just about to push through it when Mariska ran up to stop me. She was taller than her friend, but smaller than me. Her skirt swayed around her slim hips with her movements.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:46 am*

“You forgot this.” She touched my hand before holding out the cup.

Her skin was cool against mine, and I wanted to pull her against my chest. Memorize the feel of her body, take a deep inhale of her hair so I knew her scent. I wanted to watch her as I drove deep between her thighs, see how the light changed in those beautiful eyes. I wanted to hear the sounds she made when she came.

But it was more than sexual desire I felt. Her touch, the sound of her voice, did something to me. It filled my head with images of morning light breaking over her skin. Time passing in her arms. Her stomach round with my baby.

Jesus. It was coming off the fucking drugs is what it was. I needed to get out of here, to Uncle Bill’s. If I couldn’t get it together there, none of this mattered. Besides, I didn’t know anything about this woman. Correction, this girl. Up close, I could tell she was at least ten years younger than me.

“Thanks,” I

said and pushed through the door.

Scene 2: Where the Wind Blows

Mariska

Pain. Burning. Explosions. All around me is confusion and yelling. The bright beige of the desert contrasts sharply against the dark green and brown of the armored vehicles, and figures in white robes and sand-colored fatigues rush by without

stopping.

I can't control what's happening, but I've got to complete this mission. I've got to get him to safety. Someone grabs my arms and drags me roughly away. A whistle grows louder from above, then BOOM!

We're all lifted a foot off the ground then slammed back again...

\* \* \*

Gasping, I sat straight up in the bed and stared into the darkness of my bedroom. What the hell was that?

I'd had vivid dreams since I was a little girl. My Yaya said it was because I was more sensitive than others, and she liked to note that I dreamed in color. Very unusual.

Still, all my dreams were about me—a solution to a problem or a premonition of something coming. Nothing in my life was like the images I'd just seen. My body shook, and my heart beat too fast. I was afraid. My dreams never scared me. I could control them because they were mine.

Only... this dream wasn't mine.

My grandmother also taught me to keep a dream journal. She said it would help me understand when the events came to pass. I just had to write them down and wait.

She'd taught me to read coffee grounds in the old Turkish style and to detect auras. She would smile and say everything was connected. If I paid attention, I'd see how. Thinking of her calmed my frayed nerves. I missed her so much.

Reaching for the notepad I kept on my bedside table, I quickly jotted down

everything I could remember from the brief nightmare. By the time I'd finished recording as many details as I could, my eyes had grown heavy again.

Curling onto my side, I looked up at the window over my bed. From this angle, I could see the night sky. It was clear, and a million stars blanketed it. Since she'd passed, stars always made me think of Yaya. They were mystical and magical. They held secrets, and if you could read them, they gave answers. They granted wishes...

Tonight, however, was different. Tonight, I thought of him. He'd said he was going west, somewhere to find peace. A streak of white, and a star shot past. I closed my eyes and made a quiet wish. Then I imagined him under a sky filled with stars just like the one outside my window.

One week later in Great Falls, Montana...

Reality slammed into me like a thousand-pound medicine ball. What the hell was I doing here? It was like I'd had some moment of pure, one-hundred percent, temporary insanity! I'd cashed in all my frequent flyer miles, traveled halfway across the country... to do what?

Stand around and lie to everybody, apparently.

My hands were clammy and I could barely breathe. I was going to see him again in less than an hour. If Elaine hadn't been gripping my arm as we strode out to Patrick's pick-up, I would have turned and run all the way back to the ticket counter and taken the first flight home.

She was so pretty in faded blue jeans and a grey cowl-neck sweater. Her long blonde hair was over one shoulder, and of course, she had on cowboy boots. Patrick was handsome as always, and the only saving grace was they were too busy touching each other and swapping innuendo to notice how badly I was freaking out. They put me in

the tiny backseat of the extended cab, and we headed out on some lonely road into what looked like the middle of nowhere.

Great. This was just great. With each passing mile, I was getting further and further from any way out of the mess I'd created. I was rapidly moving toward complete and total humiliation. My stomach was so tight, it was very possible I'd throw up before the night ended.

Elaine took a break from touching her fiancé to turn and smile at me. "Do you like horses, Mariska?"

"Sure." My voice cracked, and I looked down at my trembling hands clutched in my lap. "I-I hope you don't mind me tagging along for the holiday."

"No way! Friends are always welcome." Patrick was so easygoing, I completely understood why he drove Kenny crazy—and why she called him her big brother. "The house is huge, and my uncle is going to love you."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:46 am*

Blinking up at him, my brow lined. “Why do you say that?”

“He’s an old hippie himself.”

“Patrick!” Elaine slapped him on the arm. “Mariska’s Boho Goth. Pay attention.”

Her humor only escalated the panic I was feeling. I kind of already liked Elaine. I wondered how angry she’d be when I told her I’d lied about knowing Stuart. Would she yell at me? Would she think I was a complete whack-job?

“I’ll show you attention.” He grabbed her face and kissed her quick before putting his hand back on the wheel.

I looked into the darkness outside my window. “We’re really far from town.” My stomach was sick at the prospect of the awkward drive back to the airport. Maybe I could call a cab?

“Wait until you see it on horseback,” Patrick answered. “If the Chinook comes down, we’ll ride out to the lake. It’s beautiful... well, it’s beautiful everywhere.”

“I can’t wait to see it with you.” Elaine’s nose crinkled, and she slid her hand behind his neck. I watched her fingers thread into his hair before glancing out the window again.

It was too cold to hitch a ride back to town. Temperatures were already dipping into the teens, and snow wouldn’t be far away. Coming here like this was the craziest thing I’d ever done in my entire life, and now I’d have to face the consequences.



At the same time, maybe it was the right thing? Oh, god, I shivered, I couldn't even hope for that much. All I knew was I couldn't have that dream again.

### Scene 3: The Cabin

Stuart

One month later, in Great Falls, Montana...

All the things I decided, my plans, what was coming, all of it went out the window with Mariska. I didn't know what I wanted. It was all fucked up and wrong, but I'd brought her to this place. My place.

I'd done my best not to think about her, to forget the feel of her lips against mine, the taste of cool water on her tongue. I'd gone back to Bill's with one goal in mind—I'd gather my things and stay at the cabin until they were gone. I'd be safe here.

Then she appeared. She touched me, and what did I do? I deflowered her, brought her here, and proceeded to fuck her four more times. Shit! Now she lay beside me asleep, looking like some gorgeous promise of a different future, new plans.

No. I shook my head and slipped from the bed, away from her. This was part of the process. My will was still in recovery. It wasn't her fault. It wasn't anyone's fault, but if I let it go further, it would all be on me.

Walking to the coffee pot, I pulled it out and started the process. Water in the carafe, grounds in the strainer. My back didn't hurt. Putting the machine back together and hitting the On button, I leaned to the side. No pain. Leaning to the other side yielded the same result. I felt strong.

Glancing at the bed again, I thought of last night. She'd spent more time working on

my back than she had the first time—most likely because we were pretty well satisfied sexually. When she finished, I actually did fall asleep. I awoke later in the night in the darkness to find her curled next to me. In the past, I didn't spend the night with the women I slept with. As a result, I never knew how immensely satisfying it could be to wake with a hard on and pull her to me. Arms around her waist, I couldn't tell if she was completely awake, but she didn't resist. My hands went under her shirt to cup her breasts. My face was in her jasmine hair, and I kissed that sensitive spot behind her ear. A little moan, and I slipped between her thighs from behind. She was slippery and wet. Bracing her against me, I moved hard and fast. Her back arched as I drove deeper, and it didn't take long before we finished. Another moan, a sated kiss, and we were asleep again. God, it was fantastic. What the hell was I doing?

I heard her sigh, and she stretched an arm over her head. The coffee finished dripping, and I turned away from the hypnotic sight of her, trying to think this through. I brought her here so we could get to know each other better. That's all. Sure. What the hell kind of lies was I telling myself these days?

"How long have you been up?" Her voice was high and thick with sleep. I reached for mugs and poured two cups of coffee.

"Long enough to make this." I carried them to the table. "Cream and sugar?"

"Just cream." She pushed the pillows up against the headboard as she watched me. She pulled my flannel shirt over her naked torso, and I averted my eyes, pouring cream into hers, nothing in mine.

Stepping over to the bed, I handed her the mug then sat on the sofa. "Sleep well?"

The fire had gone out, but it was still warm inside, the result of it not getting very cold out.

“Yes.” She spoke around a sip of coffee. Then a sly tone filled her voice. “It seems I remember another little bonus around midnight.”

“I’m detecting a pattern.”

“I wasn’t wet or naked!” Her voice was still teasing.

“You did touch me, however.”

At that she started to laugh. I couldn’t help a smile curling my lips. Dammit.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:46 am*

“So what are we doing today?” She took another sip. “Besides more of the same, of course.”

“Glad you’re finally onboard with the program.” Another giggle from the bed. “Actually, there’s a lake close by. I’m pretty sure no one goes there but me.”

She was quiet, sipping. My eyes moved from the dying embers to her. She only watched me over the rim of h

er mug.

“I’d be very interested to know what you’re thinking right now, Miss....” I thought about it. “I don’t know your last name.”

“Heron.” Her reply was quiet. “I don’t know your middle name, Mister Knight.”

“William.”

“Same as your uncle?”

“It’s a family name.”

She took another sip, and I watched her thinking. “What’s your middle name?”

“Renee.”

“Mariska Renee Heron.” It rolled off my tongue like music.

“Stuart William Knight.”

Quiet again filled the cabin. Serious quiet. The exchanging of names. I ended that moment. “Do you feel like swimming?”

“Yes.” She sat up and placed her mug on the side table. Scooting to the edge of the bed, I caught the twinkle in her eye. “That should cover wet, and I’m sure at some point I’ll touch you.”

Damn if that didn’t provoke a rise in my jeans. “Is it still a bonus if it happens repeatedly?”

“Don’t be such a stickler for the rules, Stuart William.” She skipped across the room to where I sat, lightly kissing my lips. Things only became tighter across my fly.

“It’s who I am, Miss Heron.”

“Maybe some things can change, Mister Knight.”

Before we left for the lake, I checked in on Freckles. She’d stayed quiet in the shelter, and she wasn’t in danger of getting too cold. Horses in this part of the country developed longer coats that made them look almost plush. She nickered and pushed at me as I filled her food bag.

“Hey, girl.” I scratched behind her ear while she ate. “This is all your fault, you know?”

No response. She chewed as I remembered the day she reared on Mariska. I remembered the flash of adrenaline in my veins at the thought of that beautiful girl being hurt. It was only slightly less than my panic when Cheyenne returned riderless. The fucking protective instinct was only growing stronger the more time I spent

around her.

Rebellious anger twisted in my gut as my mind insisted what had to be done. A knot ached in the front of my throat. This battle was different from coming off the drugs. Drugs sucker-punched me when I was down, hitting me with pain and nausea I couldn't fight. What I was dealing with now was completely different, and I was stone-cold sober.

The swish of feet moving through the grass followed closely by the scent of ham and cheese broke through my angry thoughts.

"Hungry?" Mariska held out a small parcel wrapped in a paper napkin. Taking it from her, I recognized eggs mixed with a slice of the pork from dinner last night and cheese.

Taking it, I gave her a little nod of thanks. "I thought you didn't like to cook."

"Just because I don't like to doesn't mean I can't." She stood back and crossed her arms watching me.

Giving her a reluctant smile, ignoring the battle waging in my chest, I took a bite. Shit it was fucking delicious. "Mmm..." I couldn't help a groan. Months of eating poorly were catching up with me.

She laughed and shook her head before going back to the house. "I'll put on my swimsuit."

Standing beside Freckles, I finished breakfast in three bites.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:46 am*

Mariska

The smaller lake was secluded and gorgeous. I wasn't sure how much longer we had of this Chinook, but every day felt like borrowed time. Sort of like every day I spent with Stuart. The fight was back in his eyes, and I knew we had gotten too close this morning. Or perhaps it was last night when he pulled me to him in the darkness.

Either way, as he alternated between playful and hostile, I knew his resistance was raging back. As for me, I'd brought a leopard-print bikini, because... well, why the hell not? All my cards were in. I had nothing to lose now, and I planned to fight dirty.

Discarding the bandeau top, I pulled on a loose-weave beige cover-up. The knit was essentially a series of open circles that created an even sexier effect than topless. My breasts played peek-a-boo at every turn. Just for fun, I braided my hair in a thick rope over my shoulder.

Stuart took one look at me and cleared his throat, facing the water. "I'm pretty sure this is a mineral spring."

"Do they have those in Montana?"

"A few resorts south of here, near Elkhorn and Helena, are famous for them."

Stepping into the pool, I was intrigued. "You know, hot springs are known for healing properties?"

He stepped forward as well. "FDR bought one to cure his polio."

The water was warm and lovely. I took off my top and pushed gently through the waves. “It feels amazing. Like a spa.”

Stuart seemed to forget his internal battle. He slipped off his shorts and continued into the spring completely naked. My whole body sizzled at the sight of him submerging in the pool. I wanted to wrap around that again.

“Now I feel overdressed.” I pulled off my leopard-print bottoms and held them over my head, giving them a little spin. “Skinny dipping for the win!”

He cracked the tiniest smile. “I’m thinking about what you said.”

Dog paddling toward him, I tossed my bottoms onto the bank. “You don’t need a mineral spring. What you have with will heal on its own with regular therapy and time.”

His brow lined. “I don’t have time.”

Stuart William Knight... I couldn’t help a tiny growl moving through my brain. As much fun as I loved to have, I managed to fall for this gorgeous, strong, sexy, absolutely impossible man.

“What’s the rush?” I pushed my arms, moving back out toward the middle of the lake.

He glanced up at me. “You wouldn’t understand.”

A new response. “Try me.”

His brow lowered. Damn his angry, determined look that made my insides go all gooey. I matched it with my own, and he turned his back, giving me the full view of



those broad shoulders, the nice V at his waist, and of course, that perfect ass. I loved running my hands all over him during “therapy.”

Since he wouldn’t answer, I decided on distraction maneuvers. “Do you think I might be getting a tan?” Inspecting my arm, it seemed a shade darker, and I was sure I saw more caramel in my brown hair.

“It’s possible.” His back was still turned, and I admired the golden glow covering his skin.

“I’ve always tanned easily, ever since I was young.”

He stretched his arms out and did a long push across the small pond. “I feel good,” he said quietly.

“You look good,” I said equally quietly. Then a little louder, “What did you want to be before you wanted to be a Marine?”

Looking up, he seemed to think. “Cowboy.”

That made me laugh. “I can believe it.” He drifted closer to me, his lips just at the surface.

“What about you?”

“I played My Little Pony.” He rose a bit in the water so I could see his lip curl. I laughed again. “You disapprove?”

“I don’t know. What is it?”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:46 am*

“Rainbows and the magic of friendship.” A laugh pushed through his lips and splashed the water. I swam to him. This man had fucked me five ways from Sunday. I’d be damned if I allowed any distance between us now. Going straight into his arms, I wrapped mine around his neck. “What was your favorite cartoon?”

“Shazam.”

Now my lip curled. “What’s that?”

“Captain Marvel.” His hands lightly traced their way around my waist, and I shivered. His voice was more relaxed. “What was your favorite band?”

“Oh, no,” I shook my head. “You’ll only make fun of me.”

“Let me guess. Backstreet Boys.”

My laughter danced across the water, and he turned me so my back was against his chest. I leaned my head on his shoulder. “Mmm... I love your skin against mine.”

Lips touched my neck before he spoke again. “First sexy movie?”

“Henry and June.”

“Artistic sexy.” Lips touched higher, behind my ear. “I should’ve guessed.”

“How about you?” I turned in the water so we faced each other again, nose to nose, lips a breath apart.

“I think it was... Nine and a Half Weeks?”

“You like playing with your food.” He smiled, and I leaned forward to kiss him lightly on the mouth.

“I like playing with you.”

A thrill surged straight to my core. “Do you bring many women here, Mister Knight?”

I was teasing, but his expression changed. “I’ve never brought anyone here.”

“Why not?”

His shoulders lifted me with his shrug. “It’s always been my place.”

Under the warm, mineral spring, my nipples lightly grazed his chest. Whatever it was doing for him, it was sending all kinds of sensations through me.

“Now it’s ours?”

That brought him up short. “No.”

He took my arms from around his neck, but when he turned, I felt something hard and stiff brush against my hip. His erection made me giggle.

“I felt that.”

He didn't respond. He was back to being broody and distant, and it was pissing me off. "What's the matter with you?" I pushed against him, and he flashed.

"Dammit, Mariska." We were both angry now, our voices raised, but I wasn't afraid anymore. I knew he wanted me.

"Do you remember that day in the barn?" he said. "After we rode back from the lake?"

"The day you kissed me?"

He was undeterred. "I told you I would leave. It hasn't changed. I'm going to leave."

Nodding, I traced my finger through the water. "It seems I remember suggesting you take me with you."

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:46 am*

“When I go, I go alone.”

Blinking up at him, I tried to understand this. Here we were, granted it was only Day 2 of our getaway. Still, we had this connection. We talked about everything. We could barely keep our hands off each other. It was hypnotic and passionate, and it had all the makings of something real and lasting... And this is what he did.

“What’s so great about being alone?”

His eyes narrowed, but he took the question as seriously as I put it. “No one gets hurt except me. I have no weaknesses.”

“You’re thinking like a soldier.”

“A Marine.”

My mind filtered through everything I knew. “Derek’s a Marine. He’s also a daddy and soon to be a husband.”

“Derek’s always been different from me.”

“So I’m a weakness.” Pressing my lips together, I wouldn’t argue with him any more. I was mad.

I swam back to the shore and climbed out of the water. It was warm and delicious running down my legs, but I scooped up my bikini bottoms and stepped into them, quickly pulling them over my hips. Next was the loose-knit top I’d worn. It was over

my head in a quick swipe.

“What are you doing?” Stuart’s voice was level, but I could sense a change.

Looking back at him, my braid flipped over my shoulder. “More than one of us can leave.”

With that, I set off toward the cabin. We’d strolled here at a leisurely pace, but I took a fast, determined stride. Minutes later, I was back, pushing through the door and grabbing my bag. When Stuart made me drive over in the truck, I’d been sad because I’d wanted to ride with him again. I wanted my back pressed against his chest, his strong arms around my waist, our hands clasped. We were at the start of this mini-escape, and my brain was full of romantic dreams.

Today, I realized my head was just as hard as his, and I was glad I had a truck to drive back to the ranch. I almost wished I had a plane ticket as well. All of my things were quickly shoved into the duffel I’d brought, and I reached for the door when it opened on its own.

Stuart stood in my way, water dripping from his hair, eyes blazing. “You’re not leaving.”

As angry as I was, my breath still caught at the site of him, towering over me, seeming twice his normal size.

“Yes, I am.” My voice was annoyingly small.

He surveyed me a moment before stepping into the cabin and pulling the door closed behind him with a slam. I was trapped. “Why?”

My brow lined. All the reasons I should go and never look back crowded together in

my mind fighting each other to get out. The result was me stuttering. “You... Are you? Seriously...?”

In one quick move, Stuart caught me, pulling my face to his.

“Stop!” I cried out, slapping his hand off my cheeks.

I was angry. He was angry. I pushed at him, trying to get past, and he caught my arm, jerking it behind my back.

“Ow!” I shouted, twisting to get free. “Let me go!”

“No.” His eyes were dark, and something wicked, low in my stomach tingled in response.

I pushed and fought harder. He blocked every blow, holding my wrists, turning them away, lifting me off the ground, pulling me closer to him. We were both breathing hard, our chests moving together.

My voice was low and angry. “What do you want, Stuart?”

In that moment, I saw the break in his eyes. “You.”

Two blinks passed between us before our mouths crashed together. His large hands were on me, tearing my sweater, grasping my breasts. I whimpered, desperately holding on, chasing his kisses with mine, trying to hold him as his mouth moved over me. It was rough and painful, and my insides throbbed for him.

He lifted me in his arms, and we crashed against the sofa on the way to the bed, lips reconnecting. I grasped at his hair, his neck. His mouth moved to my chin and he lowered me then jerked my bikini bottoms off. I made a little noise, but he didn't

stop. His shorts were off just as fast, and he gripped my waist, turning me on my stomach and pushing into me from behind.

“Oh, god!” We both groaned as he filled me. Rocking the bed, he lifted me off my feet with the force of his thrusting. Pain mixed with pleasure, and I tried to hold on, I tried to keep up as he fought this battle with himself.



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:46 am*

His body flexed and then arched over my shoulder, sending him deeper than he'd ever been. I moaned louder, and a matching groan rumbled from his throat.

"Stuart," I gasped. In this position, my clit was pressed and rubbed against the mattress. It sent shockwaves tingling and shooting down my legs matching the force of him stretching and invading me from behind. The sensation was overwhelming.

Every muscle below my waist tightened with each move. My orgasm snaked up my legs, and my eyes squeezed shut at the building release.

He jerked into me harder and then Smack! A hard slap stung across my ass. Threading his fingers into my braid, he pulled my head against his shoulder.

"Oh!" I whimpered, reeling from the conflicting sensations.

"You're not leaving." His beard scuffed against the sensitive spot on my neck, and electricity shattered through my core.

My eyes squeezed shut as my orgasm, wicked and intense, blazed through my legs. "Stuart," I cried.

He pulled my hair again, biting at my neck. "Say it." It was a hoarse command coupled with a deep thrust.

His intense possessiveness, his grip, his words... all of it combined with the sensations racking my body to make my head swim. What was he doing to me?

“Say it.” He demanded.

My thighs shook. Each push took him deeper, and he kept scrubbing my clit against the mattress. I’d gone from mind-numbing orgasm to pleasure that was now painful.

“I’m not leaving,” I gasped, needing him to stop.

He didn’t stop. He gave me three more swift thrusts before holding himself deep inside me, leaning over my shoulder as he groaned through his orgasm. He pulsed, filling me, then growing still. My heart beat so hard, and I couldn’t move. My bones were liquid as I lay on the bed.

Two more breaths, and he climbed onto the mattress, pulling me with him. I couldn’t resist if I wanted to as he wrapped me in his arms, holding me against his chest. His face was at my shoulder, buried in my hair, and he breathed deeply. We were both panting. Holding him, I could feel his pulse at my temple.

“Stuart,” I whispered.

“You’re mine.” He rumbled against my skin. “You don’t leave me.”

My jaw clenched. I was still recovering from that blazing fuck, and I hated how shockingly true his words were. I’d need the strength of Hercules to walk away from him. At the same time, I knew I had to stay strong.

“But you can leave me?”

He didn’t answer. He only held me firm against his chest. Our breath swirled in and out, mixing and mingling, and I wondered if he’d ever let me go. I wondered if I ever wanted him to. After a few moments, he did relax. He reached down and pulled the Indian blanket over me. Kissing my shoulder, he went to the bathroom and closed the

door.

I pulled the blanket tight around me trying to calm my swirling emotions.

#### Scene 4: Fire in the Desert

Mariska

A few months later, in Bayville...

Deep blues, olive greens and brown. Tonight I started with as much of the landscape as I could remember. A lot of it had been brown prairie grass, but when Elaine and I had driven to town, I'd seen more variety—silver spruce trees, red rock formations, soaring waterfalls. We were there in the winter, but I used my imagination to see what it might be like in the spring or summer.

A square butte west of the city formed a backdrop for the brown of wild horses running across the prairie. It was all so open and vast under the sky. I had to capture the orange arc of clouds over the Chinook.

Again, my hair was up in a high ponytail, but tonight I wore the grey Henley I'd stolen from Stuart. His scent was fading on it, and I wished I'd thought to snoop in his toiletries bag for whatever cologne this was. Sure it was torture, but I was an artist. Suffering was good for my art.

I decided to have a glass of wine. It was Sunday, technically a work night, but our hours at the gym allowed me to sleep in, and I'd had to work every day but Friday. I pulled out a bottle of Chardonnay and had just twisted off the cap when someone knock

ed on my door.

My heart flew into a panic. I'd left my phone in the other room, and Kenny always texted before she came over. She knew I didn't like opening the door at night when I wasn't expecting visitors.

I crept through my living area, which really was getting too crowded with books. I needed to get an eReader, but I still liked to hold them and smell them.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:46 am*

The knock came again, and I jumped. Carefully, I rose on my tiptoes to look through the peep hole, and my heart stopped working.

His back was turned as he seemed to scan the parking lot, but I easily recognized those broad shoulders. The canvass jacket I knew as well as the short, dark hair that I loved to slide my fingers through. He turned back, and the sight of his eyes was like warm honey poured through my veins.

Stuart Knight stood outside my door. He wasn't overseas.

As much as I wanted to throw it open, I quickly assessed my wardrobe. My hair was up in a ponytail, and of course, I had flecks of blue paint in the tips. I seemed to remember touching my cheek with the brush at some point, so I knew there was a streak of green there. You'd think I was freaking Jackson Pollock the way I threw paint all over myself.

Another loud knock, and I let out a little shriek when I jumped.

"Mariska?" His low voice clutched my insides through the wooden barrier.

There was no hiding now. I'd have to see him looking like this. I didn't have time to change or clean up.

Turning the lock, I slowly opened the door, wishing all this had come ten minutes from now. After I'd had that glass of wine. Our last telephone conversation wasn't the most confidence inspiring.

Our eyes met, and his gleamed with something. I remembered the night I'd seen a break in his wall. The night he'd said he wanted me. Those few glorious days I'd been His Mariska.

"I'm sorry I didn't call first." His eyes flickered quickly over my body and the change I saw in them scorched my insides. I hadn't worn a bra under his Henley, and other than that, I only wore black footless leggings.

"You came back." My voice was breathless. God, how I still loved this man.

"I never left. Are you busy?"

"I-I was just painting."

Again his expression changed. His obvious lust was replaced with something like cautious optimism. "I've wanted to see your art. Would you show it to me?"

Several obvious questions—What are you doing here? Why aren't you in Saudi? What do you want from me?—were forgotten for the moment. I stepped back to let him in, and like a gentleman (a good Marine?) he slipped off his boots.

"It's back here," I said, pushing the door closed and turning the deadbolt behind him.

His canvass jacket slipped down his arms, and I took it, tossing it on the sofa. He followed me through the cramped living room, the sparse kitchen where I hadn't cooked in weeks, back to the guest room I'd converted into a studio. It was always too small for a bedroom, and I never had overnight guests.

"Fire in the Desert" was leaning against the wall drying, and "Chasing the Dawn" was up on my easel. It looked better than I thought when I left it minutes ago.

“You do abstracts.” His voice was quiet as he squatted in front of the blaze of orange, yellow, and red on the floor. His eyes lifted to mine, and the mixture of approval and desire made my legs weak.

“I’ve never been much of a portrait artist.” My hands were fluttery, but I gestured to the unfinished work on the easel. “I got the idea for this one talking to your uncle about the colt.”

He straightened and stepped toward it, toward me. He scanned the canvass, and I scanned him, broad shoulders under a navy tee. His dark jeans hugged his ass in the most pleasing way, but they were loose down his legs. I swooned from his handsomeness like I had since that very first day.

“What did he say?” It was as if he needed my answer before he could go on.

“I asked him how long it took to break a horse, and he said it depended on the animal.” I tried to remember his exact words. “He said after all the work he’d done, brushing and gentling him, the colt would still get spooked when he saw him on his back. And he said if the colt threw him, that would spook him, too.”

Stuart’s body seemed to tense at my words. It was time to get back to those obvious questions.

Reaching out, I carefully touched his arm. “I thought you were in Saudi.”

“You’re wearing my shirt.”

“It smells like you.”

Before I could blink, he’d grabbed me. Emotion pulsed fiercely in my chest as he held me against the wall. His arms were under mine, and my head was in his hands.

Our noses just touched, our lips a whisper apart as he spoke.

“I couldn’t get on the plane.” His breath came as fast as mine, and my lips throbbed for his kiss. “I thought my dream was in the desert, but it’s not. It’s here with you.”

I held his shirt, gripping the cloth. “Stuart...” It was all I could say.



## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:46 am*

His voice was unyielding as always. “You saved me from going back to a life that was killing me. How?”

It was a valid question. All of this was useful discussion, but I wanted to kiss him. Leaning forward, the smell of cedar and Stuart filled my senses. His strong arms supported me, and my lips grazed his as I answered.

“I told you. It was a dream.”

His mouth covered mine, demanding as always. He kissed me like I was a country to be liberated, and he was the Marine for the job. Tongues collided, another small noise ached from my throat. Fire sizzled under my skin.

Leaning back, he breathed in my hair, his lips grazed my ear. The scruff of his beard sent sparks down my limbs as he spoke. “I’m so sorry I didn’t trust you. I’m so sorry I thought you lied.”

Tears burned in my eyes. I clutched at his biceps, his strong shoulders. I wanted to feel his skin. “I should have told you everything.”

His lips pulled at mine again. Hungry kisses moved my mouth over and over as he desperately quelled the pain that had nearly torn me apart. I was against the wall, and he was between my legs.

“I never gave you the chance.” He kissed a line to my ear, pulling my earlobe between his teeth, giving me a little nip.

I felt his erection against my thighs, massaging between my legs. I wanted to lose the leggings, lose all our clothes and make crazy love.

“I’m covered in paint,” I gasped.

He lowered me and looked around the small room. “We should give you a shower.”

That white-hot memory flashed in my mind. My voice was trembling and eager when I answered him. “Okay.” I was on my feet and following him across the hall to my bathroom.

“Lift your arms.” He was giving orders again, and I followed gladly. I reached up, and he swept his grey Henley over my head and off.

His breath hissed when he saw me topless. Rough hands rose to cup my breasts, thumbs circled my nipples, and ecstatic desire roared through my body. How I had longed for this moment.

Lowering his caress, he touched the line of stars covering my left side. “This is new.” He leaned down and lightly kissed it, tracing a sizzling trail up my hips.

“I got it for our night under the stars.” He leaned up, eyes full of longing. “The night I made the wish.”

“You never told me what you wished for.”

“I’m still hoping it’s coming true.”

Cupping my cheeks, he kissed me softly this time, pulling first my top lip then my bottom between his. “I love it.”

I could barely take the anticipation. “Now you.” Lifting the navy shirt he wore, I smoothed it off, running my hands up and over his broad shoulders. I rested my nose against his skin, breathing deeply. “You smell so good.”

Strong arms gathered me up, and once again our bodies were skin to skin. A part-groan, part-sigh rose from both of us.

He leaned down to find my mouth with his, and we were lost in a deep kiss. I could only follow along wherever he planned to take me.

This reunion was so unexpected and sweet and incredibly welcome, it ached in my bones.

Releasing me, he stepped back to turn on the shower. Water roared against the back wall. I was still clutched against his firm torso, and his light sprinkling of chest hair teased my nipples. I was so wet. I dropped my face against his shoulder, pressing my lips to his skin, touching it with my tongue.

We had to talk about what happened, what brought him here, but for now I didn’t want to look my gift horse in the mouth. I wanted to hold him, love him, let him surround me, take away all the pain. I’m feeling no pain now. I smiled remembering his words.

“What?” His eyes were back on me.

“I was thinking of our last shower. We got dirty while getting clean.”

“I’d like to get dirtier.”

Passion bubbled in my veins in the most pleasing way as he led me into the small, rectangular space. He was behind me under the steaming hot water, and his hands

slipped up my torso. Strong hands cupped my breasts while long fingers pinched the tight tips.

Dropping my head back on his shoulder, I let out a moan. His erection was at my back now, and I wanted him inside me. In one fluid motion he turned us. “Put your hands on the wall.”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:46 am*

I did as he said, and he spread my legs apart with his knee. Before I could think, he was inside me. “Oh, yes!” I panted, my thighs humming with the intensity.

He had me around the waist as he started to rock. Slowly at first, he filled me, stretching me, massaging every place that had missed him so much. His hand traveled around my thigh to my clit. Two fingers circled slowly, tantalizing me. It wouldn’t take much. The anticipation and surprise combined with his steamy kisses and caresses had already peaked my orgasm to the edge.

As his thrusting became more violent, sparks flushed through my torso. My insides quaked and exploded with so much pleasure, my elbows bent. I would have collapsed if he hadn’t scooped me around the waist.

“Mariska.” His voice was a ragged groan at my neck as he leaned us forward on his forearms, pounding into me from behind. Four more quick thrusts, and he held me clutched in his arms, my back against his chest. I could feel his body tremble as his cock pulsed inside me. He finished with another low groan.

Sliding out, he turned me slowly so that I was facing him again, my back against the cool tiles. Large hands smoothed my hair from my face as his lips trailed kisses from my brow down to my temple. The softness of his touch followed by the scuff of his jaw teased my fading orgasm. At last our mouths reunited, and he kissed me as if taking a slow drink of water.

Leaving me with my head back against the wall, he looked deep in my eyes. “I can’t live without you. Please say you’ll forgive me for hurting you.”

My body was weak with pleasure and relief, but I reached for his face. “If you’ll forgive me for not being completely honest with you.”

He kissed me again, and my insides tightened with intense joy. We were back, he was back, and we were in that magical place I never wanted to leave.

“Those weeks apart, you never left my mind.” He kissed my cheek holding me against his body. “You changed me. I can’t leave you.”

The time I threatened to leave him crossed my mind. “We’ve closed the circle then.” His brow lined, and I continued. “I can’t leave you.”

“Come on.” He reached back and shut off the water. “I don’t know that we got very clean, but it’s the thought that counts.”

“All my thoughts were very dirty.”

“I hope you’ll tell me every one.”

I took the fluffy towel he held out, rubbing it over my hypersensitive body. The tips of my hair were now damp and not covered in blue.

“Hang on,” he said, eyes sparkling. I waited as he took the damp rag and rubbed it over my cheek. “Got a little green there.”

“I’m as much of a paint slinger as an artist, I guess.”

He scooped me into his arms again. “You’re an amazing artist.” A light kiss on my lips and he released me. “I love your work.”

Every word sent healing pulses of joy through my heart. This was heaven, and I never

wanted to leave. “You have to tell me what happened to bring you here, but are you hungry? I could order takeout.”

His hands were on my waist again, thumbs circling against my skin. “Just as long as it can be delivered.”

We were surrounded by Thai food boxes, and the bottle of Chardonnay sat empty on my coffee table between two half-full glasses. He only wore his jeans, so his gorgeous lined torso was on full display. The sprinkling of light hair across the top of his chest made my mouth water, and his dark hair was messy bedhead. Every time his smoky hazel eyes met mine, a little surge of electricity moved under my skin.

I was dressed only in his Henley and my panties, but I’d taken my hair out of the high ponytail and fixed it in a low braid over my shoulder. Yes, I’d done it on purpose.

“You’re going to have to tell me at some point.” I took a sip of wine, and my eyes danced over the rim of the glass. Again, he looked as if I’d hit him with a sledgehammer.

“Have I ever told you what your eyes do to me?” His voice was controlled, level.

A little thrill surged low in my belly. “No, please do.”

He leaned forward and pulled me onto his lap in a straddle. I put my wine glass on the table.

“They’re the color of sunset in Montana.” My hands rested on his broad shoulders as I listened. “They remind me of the one place I can find peace. They make me believe you’re my peace.”

Moving my hands to his neck, I held him as I feathered kisses across his brow. “I

want to be.”

With a groan he pulled me closer, burying his face in my chest. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and held on.

He turned his head to the side and his voice was husky. “It happened to me.”

I was touching him, smoothing my hands over every part of his skin I could find. “What, baby?”



*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:46 am*

Lifting his chin, he looked up at me with troubled eyes. “I’ve had stress-dreams since the attack that sent me home. Explosions, fire, everything you described to me. Things you couldn’t have known.”

My eyes heated with tears, and I placed my palms on his cheeks. “My nightmares?”

His head dropped, and he ground out a reply. “I’m sorry I didn’t believe you.”

I kissed his temple, then I turned and placed my cheek on it. “What made you believe me? What did you dream?”

“The dream changed. It was similar, but little things were different.” He moved, and I leaned back so our eyes could meet. “The pain was worse. I was in agony...”

Images of my own dream flooded my mind. The burning, him lying on the sand.

“Just when I thought I’d die there, something cool touched my cheek. Small hands held my lips and gave me water. It was you.”

I didn’t know what to say. I’d never had this experience before, so I’d never talked about it with my grandmother. Clearly it was significant, but why? I didn’t know if we were being sent a message or if it was a sign. I wasn’t sure I cared.

Tracing my finger down his arm, I felt a tinge of insecurity. “Nothing like this has ever happened to me.”

“I can safely say it’s never happened to me.”

Not meeting his eyes, I had to ask. “What do you want to do about it?”

A finger hooked under my chin, lifting my gaze to his. “I want to make love to you. Then I want to take you back to Montana. I’ve heard a wedding’s happening there. Two people we both know and love. After that, I’m going to take you to the cabin, and we’re going to spend more time getting to know everything about each other.”

The smile that started at the words “make love to you” grew bigger, spreading across my face more with every word. “I love that plan.”

His eyes grew serious. “I love you, Mariska Renee Heron.” A light kiss. “You loved me when I wasn’t strong enough to love myself, let alone you.”

“I had no choice,” I smiled, kissing him back. “I saw you and my soul came to life inside me. All the reasons no one was ever good enough made sense. They weren’t you.”

We held each other. I was still on his lap, facing him in a straddle, the promise of lovemaking hung in the air. Leaning into his ear, I whispered. “Does your back hurt?”

“It’s a little tense. I’d like a massage if you feel like it.”

Standing I held my hand down. He took it and stood without putting any pressure on me. I led him to my bedroom, and he shrugged out of the jeans he wore. Nothing was underneath. My eyes ached at the site of his beautiful body.

“Lie across the bed,” I said.

He swept the duvet back and lay on his stomach across my double bed. It was just like the first time, me drooling over his perfect ass, tight with those palm-sized indentions on each side. I climbed up and sat beside him, and when I placed my palm

to his skin, we both exhaled. We'd been here before, and I'd dreamed of being here again so many times.

Pressing my hands against his muscles, I kneaded with my thumbs until the tension released. Working my way down, I applied pressure, loving his skin, the relaxation of his muscles.

I slid tentative fingers lightly down the arch of his back, up over the rise of his ass. Leaning forward, I feathered a kiss against the side of his derriere. His breath hitched louder, and I kissed a trail up to the top. I skipped over to the other side, and followed another trail across the other perfect cheek.

My braid slid across my shoulder and fell across his back, and he groaned. It was a deep, rumbling sound, and satisfaction unfurled in my tummy. Parting my lips, I took a little bite of that luscious bum, and before I could blink, large hands gripped my arms, moving me up to his body.

"That's enough." I was under him and his strong mouth claimed mine. He was rough and demanding, but now so was I.

I threaded my fingers in his hair and pulled, claiming his in return, biting his lip. He groaned and tightened his hold on my arms. He grew rougher, and the excitement in me grew as well.

"Roll over," he ordered.

I turned onto my stomach, and he spread my legs. "Ass up."

Arching my back, I tingled with the thought he co

uld see all of me until with one swift plunge, he was deep inside.

“Oh!” My voice was muffled in the pillows. He caught my arms and held them crossed over my back, using them for leverage as he slammed into me harder.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:46 am*

My knees slid apart until my clit was pressed between the mattress and his relentless thrusting. It was primitive and erotic, and I could feel the orgasm tightening every muscle in my core. He kept going, and I could sense he was barely holding on.

“Come on, baby.” The groan in his voice sent shudders through my thighs, and with two more hard scrubs the tingling friction assaulting my clit exploded in a blinding orgasm radiating down through both my legs. I cried out his name as my body shook with the force of it, and at once he let go, pulsing his own release as I trembled through the aftershocks.

Lying beside me, he gathered my limp body against his chest. “You are the most amazing woman.” He kissed my eyes, my brow, my nose, my lips. “I plan to spend the rest of my life exploring your beautiful body...” (another kiss) “your soul...” (another kiss) “your gifts...” (another kiss) “and every other part of you.”

I couldn’t help a laugh. “I love you Stuart William Knight.”

He paused, smoothing his palm back over my forehead. “Mariska.” So much emotion filled his voice, it ached joy in my chest. “Be sure to thank your soul for wanting my broken one.”

“You weren’t broken. You only needed a safe place to run free.”

“To serve and protect.” A sly twinkle sparked his eye. “Can I rock your gypsy soul?”

Our lips combined, mixing all the wonder of what we had in a breathless kiss. “You already have.”

## Scene 5: Making a Plan

Stuart

Mariska's eyes hold mine as she moves on my lap. Her long, chestnut waves fall over her shoulders in a rippling curtain, and I'm doing my best to hold on, not finish before her.

We've been together four months, and I'm only scratching the surface of making love to this woman. She's sensual and elemental. She likes to feel every emotion, every sensation. It's fucking amazing and impossible all at once.

"Oh, Stuart," she whispers. Her eyes slide closed and she cups my cheek with one slim hand as her movements quicken. Leaning forward, she presses her soft lips to mine and exhales a little moan. Fuck, I'm on the edge. She arches back, and I catch a tight nipple in my mouth, giving it a strong pull. I feel her clenching around me as I'm buried deep inside her.

"Yes," she whispers, holding my neck as I kiss a trail across to her other breast and do the same, catching that tight dark bud between my teeth. Her body shudders, and she's almost there.

Again, she leans down and pulls my face to hers, roughly consuming my mouth. I'm right there to meet her. It's her pattern when she's getting close. Her kisses grow more desperate, her little noises wild. She's riding my lap like it's a fucking pony, and dammit it's the hottest thing I've ever known. Tracing my fingers across her ass, she groans, rising up on her knees and slamming back down. The pressure in my pelvis is building, and I've got to stop thinking about how gorgeous she is.

"Come on, baby," I growl against her shoulder, giving her a little bite. "Come for me." That does it. One more rise and fall, her knees scrub against my hips and her

insides break into spasms massaging me deep inside her.

“Oh, god!” Her arms are around my shoulders, and she finishes so beautifully. I lean my head back and let go. The force of my orgasm nearly pulls me out of my skin it’s so intense.

“Fuck,” I hiss, gripping her ass and moving her up and forward on me as she cries out more. Rolling us to the side, she’s on her back, and I hold the inside of her knee, spreading her thighs as I drive deeper, harder, finishing those final, blinding thrusts as her fingers clutch my shoulders.

I’m holding the last one, trying to find my way back to Earth, and my eyes blink open. There she is, lying on her back, her hair spread out around her, smiling at me. Those sunset hazel eyes, golden and gorgeous, are filled with more love than I deserve.

I drop onto my elbows above her and kiss the base of her neck. “You are the fucking sexiest woman I’ve ever known.”

Everything about being with this beautiful girl is new for me. I’ve never done the whole “making love” bullshit. In the past, it went along with my “no relationships” lifestyle. If I needed a release, it was pretty easy to find a willing partner. The women I’d been with liked it fast and dirty—bend over the desk, take it from behind, slap that ass, and we’re done. Everyone was happy. Until now.

She laughs, and her fingers curl in the sides of my hair. I feel her lips against my brow, and I hold her as I find my bearings again.

“I’m not sure how I feel about that compliment, Stuart William.” Her voice vibrates against my cheek as she teases me. “It makes it sound like you’ve known a lot of women.”

One more kiss to that fabulous neck, and I lift my head. “Not all of them biblically.”

Her nose wrinkles as her eyes roll, and I swear, I could take her again on the spot. Instead, I go back to the question that got us in this position. “You never answered me. Did you fill out the transfer application today?”

She exhales a growling sound and twists in my arms. My hug tightens over her. I’m not about to let her wiggle out of answering this question.

“Let me go, Stuart.” Blinking up at me, her resistance is so adorable, I kiss her lips, long and soft. Then I swipe my tongue inside, finding hers for good measure.

When I lean up again, she blinks slowly. “You fight dirty.”

“You give me dirty thoughts.” Our eyes meet, and I continue. “Princeton is one of the top schools in the country. You might have heard of it.”

“It’s too expensive, and I have a scholarship at Ocean County College. I like it there.”



*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:46 am*

“You’d rather go to a state school than live with me here.”

She starts to struggle again, and this time I do release her.

“I have a job in Bayville. Kenny, my best friend is there. Remember her?” She sits up, wrapping the sheet over her beautiful body. I resist the urge to pull it away. “I won’t drop my life to move here and live with you and let you pay for everything like I’m some... some...”

Her chin drops, but I catch it and lift her face. “You’re here almost every day as it is. How would it be different?”

“You know how it would be different.” Fire is in those beautiful eyes. I love it. “I’m here because it’s an easy drive back and forth, and I like spending my free time with my boyfriend.”

“Is that so?” A smile pulls at the corner of my mouth, but I hold on. We’re leading up to a question I’ve been ready to ask since December.

“Besides, it sets a bad precedent if I let you win every argument by sleeping with me.”

“Aren’t we supposed to fight it out in bed?”

A little nose twitch, a teasing glance, and I can’t take it anymore. Snatching the sheet away, I catch her around the waist and pull her body flush with mine. She squeals with laughter, and I cover her mouth, kissing her deeply until her struggling relaxes

and her arms slide around my neck slow and easy.

Pulling back, I hold her body and her gaze a moment. Then I say it. “I want you to marry me, Mariska. I want you to transfer to Princeton and live here with me as my wife. Fuck this boyfriend-girlfriend shit.”

Her eyes blink fast, and her brows pull together. For a second, my chest tightens. Sick hits the pit of my stomach when her tears spill over, down her temples and into her hair.

“Baby, what’s wrong?”

Her body jerks with a sniff, and she cries more. She pulls herself up to me in a hug, burying her face in my neck, and I’m going crazy until she finally speaks.

“Stuart,” it’s cut off by another sniff. “Oh, Stuart, I want that so much.”

Relief blasts through me, anxiety gone. I wrap her in my arms, holding her close. Her face is still at my neck, and I feel her tears on

my skin. I feel all of her against my skin, shoulders to stomach to thigh to knee, and I think about that old idea of becoming one. She’s the part of me that’s been missing for so long. Inhaling deeply, luscious jasmine fills my senses.

After a few moments, I slide my hands over her bare back, from her soft shoulders to her soft ass. “So is that a yes?” My voice is low and gentle.

She nods against me, squeezing me in her arms.

“Mariska?” I’m smiling now, holding my wife in my arms. Everything has changed. “Look at me.”

She takes a moment before pulling back, those beautiful eyes shining with her tears. “Will you please call about transferring to Princeton tomorrow?”

A laugh explodes from her lips, and she pulls up, hugging our faces together. “I guess if you put it that way.”

Kissing her jaw, her cheek, I roll her onto her back and prop myself on my elbows. “Thank you for agreeing to be my wife.”

Her eyes roll and she shakes her head. “As if you ever had any doubt.”

“You are a very strong, independent lady, Mariska Renee.” I pause to scoop her lips in another brief kiss. “I wasn’t sure you’d say yes so easily. I worried you might think it was too soon.”

“With as well as I know you?” Her cat eyes slant.

“I thought you might have some old-fashioned notion about finishing school or us needing to date for a year or something ridiculous.”

“Don’t give me any ideas.”

My brow lowers. “Is that something you want to do?”

“Is that something I should want to do?” How she manages to go from sassy to shy in the blink of an eye slays me. I can’t believe how vulnerable she is. Like I didn’t just ask her to fucking marry me.

“No.” I don’t even let that idea hang around five seconds. “I don’t want you away from me anymore. I’m getting your ring as soon as I get back from Baltimore. Give your landlord notice and start packing. You’ll start Princeton this fall. Summer if you

want to start earlier.”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:46 am*

She laughs, and her body arches against mine. Her head falls back, and she lets out the most amazing happy squeal. I was above her, but she pushes me back against the pillows. I'm on my back watching her hold her brow and shake her head.

"It's like a dream," she says. Then she catches my face in both hands again and kisses me. I can't help laughing now. "Do you remember how awful you were in Montana?"

"Hang on," I try to act offended and fail. "You came at me out of nowhere."

"You are literally the man of my dreams, Stuart Knight."

"Don't forget," I say, smoothing both hands over her cheeks, sliding her brown hair back. "You're the woman in mine, too."

"Would you make love to me again?" Her lips curl as her hand moves down between us. Her fingers wrap around my cock, and my body immediately responds to her touch, hard and strong.

"With pleasure," I say, before kissing her lips, her chin, her neck, making my way down her torso to the place I know will have her screaming my name.

Epilogue: Proposition

Stuart

Mom's on the phone, and I don't like the agitation in her voice. "He's getting too old to run the ranch by himself. He needs your help."

Mariska's head is on my chest, and as far as I can tell, she's still asleep. I thread my fingers through her long, wavy brown hair and glance around our king-sized bedroom.

When I came back to Princeton from Montana last January, this place was for sale. So what did I do? I bought the identical, overly plush three thousand square-foot condominium I'd given my partner Derek Alexander hell for buying. It's actually right across the hall from him.

Traveling back to my reason for doing it, all of my arguments were bound up in this beautiful woman whose body is held close to mine. I wanted Mariska to have a palace. I wanted her to be protected by two layers of security if I'm ever out of town on a job. I wanted her to feel like a queen.

It more than paid for itself last spring when we had to hide a former client, Star Brandon, from a blackmailer we feared might try to kidnap her baby girl Cami.

Still, none of this is who I am. I couldn't be more of a fish out of water in this place.

I try to keep my voice even so I don't wake my sleeping fiancée. "I need you to stay calm. It's not good for your heart to get so worked up."

"My heart is fine," Sylvia counters. Who ever said our mother was gentle never met her. "You promised to go with me this summer. I want you to consider how much you love being there and think about your future."

A loud breath exhales through my lips, and I rub my forehead. "We'll stay a month. Six weeks at the most. But I've made commitments to Derek and Patrick here."

"You hate being there, Stuart William. Don't tell me you like it."

“I’ll do what makes sense for Mariska and me.” My voice is sharp, that old alpha-dog coming out, and as much as I love my mother, as much as her heart attack scared the shit out of all of us, I can’t not be who I am.

She immediately softens. “That’s all I’m asking you to do.”

Irritation fans in my chest at her quick surrender. It’s almost like she was just trying to get me worked up. “We’ll see you in a few days.”

“I love you,” she says before disconnecting.

My arm lowers too hard, and the beautiful girl on my chest sits up. Her eyes glow like the sunset, and a sexy smile is on her lips.

“Stuart William?” I love her soft voice. “It sounds like your mother has a bee in her bonnet.”

I laugh as desire bubbles in my chest—my anger momentarily forgotten in the light of this gorgeous creature who agreed to be mine. Lifting her in my arms, I turn us so her back is against the mattress.

“My mother wants us to move from the penthouse suite I’ve given you here to a horse ranch in the toughest wilderness in the continental U.S.”

Leaning down, I kiss her neck, inhaling her jasmine scent. She hums a satisfied sound, threading her fingers in the sides of my hair. “We have some amazing memories at that horse ranch.”

Lifting my head, I look into her eyes. She’s everything I love, and at the same time, she’s quite a bit younger than I am.

“Bill’s house is nice, but when the winter sets in, it’s pretty isolated. You sure that wouldn’t bother you?”



## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:46 am*

She smiles, tilting her head to the side. A wavy lock of chestnut hair falls across her beautiful face. “As long as I’m with you, that’s all I care about.”

My brow lines, and I think of my mother and my sister. I think of all the women I’ve known. Wilderness life might sound exotic, but when reality hits, is not their cup of tea.

We’re young in love, and making a commitment to that life, taking her away from her friends, access to her art... It’s not a decision I’m comfortable asking her to make on a permanent basis.

“We’ll help out this summer while you’re out of school. Derek won’t mind if I telecommute.” Cupping her small face in my hand, I kiss her lips. Lifting her hand, I kiss the rose engagement ring on her finger. “I’m not ready to take you out of this palace. I want to give you everything.”

“I’ve never been a princess, Stuart.” She shakes her head, blinking up at me through thick lashes. “I’m just a gypsy girl. You know that.”

Catching her face, I look deep into those sunset eyes that haunted me every day we were apart. “I want you to have every beautiful thing I can give you.”

Her hands are at my neck, and she meets my gaze with equal force, the amazing strength inside her that’s always matched mine. “You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever wanted. You and our babies and our family.”

Our mouths meet, and I kiss her hard, tongues sliding together. How I found this girl

is one of those twist-of-fate mysteries I'll never solve, yet here we are.

Stepping off the private jet in Great Falls, I hold her hand as I carry our bags to the parking lot where my uncle left us a classic Silverado to drive back to the ranch. She's dressed in a filmy white dress, a flower in her hair, and I help her in the step-side before closing the door and going to the other side.

We drive miles down the lonely dirt road to the ranch situated in the middle of nowhere. The big main house appears on the flat lands, and I pull into the yard to park by my uncle's orange Ford.

I get out and go around to the passenger's side to help her down. "It's as incredible as I remember," Mariska sighs, and I pause to follow her gaze past the barn where the horses wait, and across the great plain.

The sky spreads out as far as the eye can see in orange, yellow, and blue twilight, and it's nothing but brown grasses and big sky.

My soul aches for this land as much as my heart beats for the woman at my side. My mother's right. I belong here, but I'll be damned if I'll sacrifice Mariska to have it.

We'll have to find another way.

Like what you read?

\* \* \*