



My Ruthless Mountain Man (Summer in the Pines #8)

Author: *Ash Henry*

Category: Romance

Description: I came to Solace Ridge to start over and mend the past. Not fall for my best friend's little sister.

Funny how life can change in minutes.

One moment, I'm contemplating whether I should stop uselessly trying to repair the relationship I ruined six years ago with my best friend, and the next, I'm staring at the only woman who ever made my heart race—his little sister.

Kendall, all grown up and graced with the kind of womanly curves that give me dirty thoughts, is standing on my porch like a fallen angel who's been through hell.

She's fifteen years younger than me. I shouldn't be anywhere near her.

But I also can't deny her anything, especially when she needs my help. She claims it's for her brother, but once I hear the way he's put her in danger, there's only one thing I care about—protecting her.

And as she easily slips into my life, I face a crossroads I never saw coming. Keep the woman I'm falling for and lose my best friend forever, or mend fences with him and set aside my only chance at happiness.

All Ash Henry books come with an HEA promise: Hot, protective heroes, steamy sweet heat, and never any cliffhangers, cheating or heroines too dumb to live.

Total Pages (Source): 10

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:07 am

KENDALL

I wish my brother came with a flock of cute animals that cleaned up after him. Instead, I get pizza boxes, dirty dishes, and empty beer cans on the living room floor.

I've tried to be patient with him; I swear I have. Ryan has been here since he lost his last living situation three months ago. He gambled away his rent money one too many times, and whatever friend he'd been staying with had enough.

He's hurting, both from his injuries and the scars I can't see on his heart.

But after the week I've had, coming home to his mess again.

.. I can almost understand why our parents wrote him off.

Since the Navy discharged him, he's spiraled into depression.

Medicating himself with alcohol and gambling until he's alienated everyone who cares for him. Everyone but me.

I slip out of my heels and set them by the door with my purse and mail, sighing in relief when my aching toes sink into the carpet.

It's Friday night, and instead of going out, all I want to do is crawl into bed, pull the covers over my head, and forget the world exists.

Maybe even order some takeout if I can scrape together enough money.

Instead, I'm cleaning up after him. He was sound asleep on the couch when I left for work instead of trying to get a job like he's promised for weeks.

I don't know how much more I can take. With Ryan.

With the constant pressure from my parents to meet another son of some wealthy friend.

With my boss, who thinks I'm an intern with nice boobs instead of a valued employee.

Some days, I want to change my name and move far away from it all.

Find some small town no one's heard of and start over.

I can't do it though. Growing up, Ryan was the only one there when I needed someone. My parents were too preoccupied with their social calendars to deal with a kid from an accidental pregnancy. Now he needs the support. If I walk away, I'll lose him to the darkness he's already drowning in.

I toss the last pizza box in the trash and am halfway to my room when there's a knock on the door. Stifling a groan, I reverse course to answer it.

Jimmy was playing outside with his football when I got home. It's probably in the backyard again. At six, this kid has a long way to go before he makes quarterback.

I glance out the peephole and see his sweet, freckled face smiling at me, one front tooth missing. He lost it last week and was so excited, he ran over to show me his tooth and speculate how much the Tooth Fairy might leave him.

I smile as I open the door. "Hi, Jimmy."

“Hi, Kendall!” He bounces on his toes.

“Did you lose your ball again?”

He shakes his head and points right. “No. But those guys are going to give me twenty dollars because you answered. The Tooth Fairy only gave me a dollar.”

My smile slips as two men appear from the side of the house. I was so focused on Jimmy that I didn’t see them.

“Thanks, kid,” one says, handing Jimmy a twenty. He watches the boy scamper off, then turns a smile on me that sends ice shards through my core. He’s huge. A scar bisects his left brow and his nose is crooked. His suit barely contains his thick arms, chest, and the unmistakable bulge of a gun.

The other man is leaner, more refined in a tailored gray suit, highlighting dark hair and strong cheekbones. He would be strikingly handsome, if not for the deep, cold blue of his eyes. There’s no warmth there. No mercy.

I take a step back, fumbling for the door handle. My heart pounds harder with every breath.

“Don’t run, kitten,” he says, in an accent that sounds Russian. “I just want to talk to your brother.”

I stumble back inside the house and try to swing the door closed. The larger man moves fast. One half-hearted shove and both are inside, crowding me back into my tiny living room.

“Who are you?” I scan for anything I can use as a weapon. There must be something. “Get out before I call the police.”

The second man chuckles. "Please do. Although I do not think they will help."

Because he pays them off? I take another step back, trembling.

"But I am impolite. You asked who we are. I am Ilya Petrova, and this is my associate, Mikhail." He waves to the wall of muscle holding my door open. "I am here to see your brother."

"He's not here."

Ilya tilts his head, studying my face. "You are his sister. I think you would lie to protect him."

I would. Of course I would. I don't know who Ilya Petrova is, but everything in me is screaming that he must be connected to the Russian mob. "How do you know my brother?"

"We had an associate in common. The man owed me a debt and paid part of it with your brother's markers."

The rest with his life. I'm sure of it as I glance between them. "I swear Ryan's not here."

"Perhaps we will look anyway." He motions to Mikhail without taking his eyes off me.

"Wait! You can't just push your way into my house." I step toward Mikhail, fueled by pure panic. Like I could actually stop him from doing anything he wanted.

Ilya catches my wrist and reels me back against his chest. One arm locks around my waist, holding me in place. "Now, now, kitten. Allow Mikhail to look. It will go

better for you if he finds your brother, you understand?"

No. I don't understand any of this. I push against him, but it's futile. He ignores my struggles as if I really were a kitten.

Ilya's hand strikes fast, gripping a fistful of my hair and pulling my face close to his. His minty breath skates over my lips and those deep blue eyes pierce mine. "When Ryan told me of you, he neglected to say you were such a beauty. It seems he has something of value, after all."

My lungs freeze and dark spots dance in my eyes. No! I can't pass out, no matter how scared I am. I don't want to be vulnerable around this man. "Please," I whisper. "Let me go."

Ilya scans my body where it's pressed against his.

He's so close, I can see the flecks of gray and gold in his eyes and feel the warmth of his breath on my lips.

"He's not here," Mikhail says as he comes back into the living room.

"I haven't seen him since this morning."

Ilya nods. He relaxes his grip, though he doesn't release me. "You will deliver a message for me, kitten. Tell your brother he has twenty-four hours to repay the money." The fingers of his other hand flex on my hip. "Or maybe I take you instead."

"How much money?" I'm afraid to ask, but I have to know how badly Ryan is indebted.

"Seventy-five," Mikhail says.

“Seventy-five hundred?” Oh my God. We can’t possibly come up with —

Ilya chuckles again, as if everything I say amuses him. “Seventy-five thousand, kitten.”

I sway as my knees threaten to give out. Ilya catches me and deposits me into a nearby armchair. “Thousand?” My voice breaks on the word.

“So sweet,” he murmurs. “I am wicked to hope he doesn’t pay the money. But I am a man of my word. Twenty-four hours. No longer. Tell him.”

Then they’re gone, closing the door softly as if this was a pleasant visit and they hadn’t just threatened to take me in exchange for my brother’s gambling debt.

Seventy-five thousand dollars in twenty-four hours. They may as well have asked for a trillion. After bills, I don’t even have enough money for takeout.

An hour later, I’m finishing my second glass of wine when Ryan stumbles through the door. It bangs against the wall with a loud thump.

“Shit. Sorry sis.” His eyes are bloodshot and he’s wearing the same clothes as yesterday. He pulls off his gray beanie and runs a hand through his matted brown hair.

How did he get to this point? How did I?

I take another sip and sink further into the couch cushions.

Ryan closes the door and toes off his boots. “You okay?” He eyes my wine glass. “You only drink when you’re upset.”

After Ilya and his henchman left, I curled up on the couch and tried to think of a way out of this mess.

“I had a visitor.”

“Oh yeah?” Ryan starts rifling through the mail. “Did I get a package?”

I huff an exasperated breath. “No. You got a message.”

He glances at me. “What kind of message?”

“The threatening kind. You owe seventy-five thousand, Ryan?”

His face shuts down and he turns back to the mail as if completely disinterested.

“What are you talking about?”

I shoot to my feet, anger vibrating through my body. “Ilya Petrova.”

Ryan freezes.

“He and his goon came looking for you. He said you have twenty-four hours to pay the money you owe him. How did you rack up that kind of debt?”

“Just a string of bad luck.”

“Ryan!”

“What do you want to hear, Kendall? That I fucked up? Fine. I did. Again. Don’t act so surprised.” He scowls at the envelope in his hand, then crumples it up and tosses it aside.

“I want to hear that you can get that kind of money by tomorrow. Mom and Dad won’t help, even if they have the cash lying around.”

He scoffs. “Heaven forbid they help their son when he needs it.”

My eyes prick with tears at the bitterness in his tone. These last five years haven’t been easy for him, but part of it is his own making. “Tell me you can find a way to get more time so we can figure this out.”

“There’s nothing for you to figure out, Sis. This isn’t your problem.”

“They were here, making sure I would give you the message.”

His shoulders sag and his eyes slide closed. “They didn’t hurt you, did they?”

A tear slips free and slides down my cheek. I wish it was the first question he asked instead of the last. “I’m terrified,” I whisper. “He said if you didn’t have the money...” I swallow over the lump in my throat. “Maybe he’d clear your debt through me.”

Ryan’s eyes snap open and his hands clench. “That won’t happen. I’ll fix this.”

“How?”

He puts his beanie back on. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll get the money in time.”

“How can I not worry?”

He won’t meet my gaze. “Lock the doors and try to think about something else.”

What could I possibly think about that would erase the fear coiled tight in my chest?

He puts his boots back on.

I spot the crumpled envelope and stoop to pick it up. Just another thing I have to clean up. I'm so tired.

My brother's gaze falls on the paper in my hand. He glares at it, then stomps to the door.

I look down and see a familiar scrawl. Smoothing out the wrinkles, I realize it's a letter.

Stone Colter's name and address are in the corner.

My heart skips a beat. Stone was my brother's best friend for over fifteen years.

The night of my eighteenth birthday, they had a terrible fight.

Punches were thrown, and they haven't spoken since.

That was six years ago.

But in the last couple months, Stone has been trying to reach Ryan. This makes the fourth letter. As far as I know, Ryan's only read the first.

"Ryan..."

"I'll be back in the morning." He stomps out and slams the door.

If he can't get the money, I don't know what's going to happen. I believed Ilya's threat. It was in his chilly eyes and the way he held me close.

A shiver of fear skates down my spine. I rush forward to bolt the door, then check the other doors and windows. They're locked, but I don't feel any safer.

Holding Stone's letter to my chest, I lock myself in my bedroom.

Ryan tossed the letters aside. But to me, they're a lifeline. Proof that someone out there still fights for the people they care about, even when things are tough. I haven't seen him since that birthday, but somehow, he still makes me feel safe. I wonder what he looks like now. Where he is.

The return address says Montana.

I change into my pajamas and snuggle down to read. Only one thing can take my mind off Ilya and the money.

Stone Colter.

I swear I feel every one of the twenty-four hours as they drag by.

Ryan hasn't answered any of my calls or texts.

I'd be worried that Ilya grabbed him, if it weren't for the black SUV that rolls slowly by my house every fifteen minutes.

Earlier, the window was down, and I spotted Mikhail behind the wheel.

It's a relief to know they don't have him, yet I'm terrified to my core.

Where is my brother? Why isn't he returning at least a text message to let me know he's safe?

I pace by the window and see the SUV again. Ryan has five minutes left. God, where is he? I call him and it goes to voicemail.

“Ryan, where are you? Please call me. They just drove by again and time is almost up.” I hang up and swipe a tear off my cheek.

I want to scream at him. I want to hear that he’d never let them touch me.

It’s that uncertainty that carves out my heart.

I can’t stay here and wait to see if Ilya makes good on his threat to take me instead.

I run back to my room and throw a few things into a bag.

I’m at the door when Stone’s letter catches my eye.

Suddenly, I know exactly where I need to go.

I think I have a few more minutes until the next drive by.

The one that could end with Mikhail at my door.

Taking the letter, I grab my keys and run.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:07 am

STONE

“How’s that railing coming, Stone? Think it will hold up under Anson’s ego?” Ezra calls to me as I drill the last screw into the post, attaching it to the rail.

“Fuck you,” Anson grumbles, though there’s no heat in his words. “Stone, make sure it will hold Ezra’s weight. He’s put on a few pounds since he shackled up with Madison.”

“You’re jealous because my wife is an amazing cook and you’re out here eating canned beans.”

My lips twitch as they start to bicker. We’ve been replacing the deck on the back of Anson’s house for the last four days and I think the heat is baking their brains.

I wipe a bead of sweat from my brow and line up the next post. It’s almost done.

Hell, it probably would have been finished already if these two worked half as much as they argued.

They’re good guys. Anson is one scary motherfucker at times.

He turns those cold, dark eyes on you and you feel like you’re looking into the eyes of death.

But then he’ll give a half smile and the illusion is gone.

Ezra said he was a sniper for a short time before being recruited into some secret program. I don't doubt it.

He and Ezra have become good friends as they rebuild Anson's cabin from little more than a shack to a house that doesn't leak.

It's therapeutic work in an odd way, and that's what Solace Ridge is all about.

Taking military vets like myself who've struggled to re-acclimate to society and bringing them here. Rebuild a cabin. Rebuild a life.

"Eat shit, Blackwood," Ezra grumbles. "Just wait until you find a woman."

"Not happening," Anson replies.

"No one's brave enough to seal that deal," I add.

Ezra laughs. Even Anson snorts when he flips me off.

I like being around them. But watching them banter and the easy rhythm they fall into hits something sharp behind my ribs.

I had that once. Someone to give me hell but have my back in any situation.

Ryan and I were tight all through high school and our first years of service.

It didn't matter that his family had money and mine barely had food on the table.

All that changed when he unleashed a fury I hadn't seen coming.

Spewing years of resentment at me until it spilled over into a fist fight.

I should have seen the signs sooner. Noticed that he wasn't happy. That something was off. But it seems I've developed a habit of missing important clues. People have been hurt because of it, including me.

I'm ashamed to say it took five years to pull my head out of my ass and try to contact him. Not that the timing seems to matter. Ryan is stonewalling me. Emails, calls, even handwritten letters. He's ignoring them all. The worst part? I don't even blame him.

"If you're done daydreaming, Stone, let's wrap it up for the day," Ezra says. "Want a beer?"

"Nah. Thanks man." I dust off my hands and stand.

One more section of rail and a few boards and this is done.

"I need to head home before it gets dark." Giving each a nod, I gather my tools and drive the short distance down the mountain to my own cabin.

It needs as much work as Anson's, but there's something about being in these mountains—the peace of nature maybe—that makes me take things slower.

I park and grab my tool bags, heading around the house to the workshop out back.

It's barely more than a shed, but since I don't have a garage yet, it keeps my tools dry.

I put things away and throw the drill batteries on the chargers, enjoying the cool air on my overheated skin.

It doesn't get that hot in the mountains, but the beating sun still makes it warm.

I whip my shirt over my head and wipe the sweat from my brow, then toss it over my shoulder.

Stepping out of the workshop, I take a breath of clean air and let it settle in my chest. The sun is sinking below the horizon and soon it will be fully dark, with a million stars above.

Ryan would love it. He wanted to be an astronomer as a kid, but his parents squashed the idea because it wouldn't earn enough money.

He joined the military instead as a "fuck you" to them.

I wonder if Kendall, his baby sister, ever got out from under their thumb. She was a cute kid, born fifteen years after him. Despite the age difference, Ryan was her hero. She was glued to his side whenever we had a chance to go home.

The last time I saw her was on her eighteenth birthday.

I happen to be on leave from the SEALs and dropped by to wish her a happy birthday.

She bounced up in a little red bikini, damp from her pool party, and threw her arms around me in a bear hug.

Jesus, I nearly lost my shit. My best friend's kid sister was all womanly curves and silky, dark hair.

Her plump tits pressed to my chest and my hands fell on her warm skin.

.. my dick filled so fast, I grew light-headed.

I couldn't get away from her fast enough.

No way was I going to lust after my best friend's baby sister like a creep.

But damn. That was tough. And I will deny with my dying breath the number of times I've thought about her since.

Thank fuck she's far away. Hopefully tucked happily into a good life with people who love her and treat her as she deserves, instead of the cold disinterest her parents offer.

I'm so caught up in my thoughts that I don't recognize the sound I'm hearing until I round the corner of my cabin and spot the car in my driveway. Movement on my porch catches my eye.

My breath freezes and my blood heats before my brain catches up with what I'm seeing.

Kendall Knowles is on my porch. Her arms are wrapped around her waist, and her dark hair is in a messy bun with strands falling from it.

She's older now, obviously, but so goddamn beautiful that I can't think.

Her hips, thighs, and tits are fuller. Perfect for my hands.

Her lower lip is between her teeth and small worry lines frame her pretty blue eyes.

The longer I look, I notice smaller details.

There's a smudge of dirt on the cuff of her light sweater and a duffle bag at her feet.

Her shoulders are hunched, as if the weight of life is pushing them down.

She swipes a hand over her cheek, seeming to deflate where she stands, and turns away from the door.

Our eyes meet.

“Stone,” she whispers, the light of hope dawning on her face. She says my name like it’s a lifeline.

Ryan’s little sister is standing on my porch, looking like a fallen goddess in desperate need of help.

I don’t know what brought her here, but there’s one thing I know with bone-deep certainty—whatever it is, I’m not letting her go through it alone.

I stride across the distance separating us. “Kendall. You okay, baby girl?” The endearment slips out, but I need the reminder. I’m forty years old, and there’s more than fifteen years between us. She’s way too young for me. And Ryan’s sister.

On the night of our rift, he made me swear I’d leave him and his family alone. Acting on this insane attraction I’m feeling would ruin any chance I have of restoring our friendship.

But there’s no way in hell I’ll turn her away if she needs me.

Kendall throws herself into my arms and holds me tight.

“Oh my God, Stone. I’m so happy you’re home.

I know you barely know me and I’m the last person you expected to see here, but I

didn't know where else to turn.

My parents won't help, and Ryan isn't answering his phone, and I don't know what to do, but I couldn't stay there.

" Her words rush out in a long stream against my chest.

Fuck, I'm achingly aware of how close her mouth is to my bare skin. Every breath is laced with the sweet scent of peach. She smells good enough to eat, which sends my thoughts down a dirty path and floods my brain with images of her writhing on my tongue. This is not the time, asshole.

She tilts her chin up, slaying me with the worry etched in her features. "I hope it's okay that I'm here."

"Yeah, of course it's okay. Come inside. Tell me what's going on." I reach past her to open the door and guide her in with my palm on her lower back, then grab her bag and set it inside.

As soon as I close the door, I yank my shirt back on. It's dirty and smells like sweat, but until I can grab a shower, it'll have to do. I need every bit of separation I can get from her touch.

I've never reacted this way around any other woman. It makes zero sense. Shoving this wayward attraction down, I gently guide her to my small dining table to sit. "Want some tea?"

"Uh, sure. Thank you."

I fill the kettle and set it on the stove, then grab a couple mugs and the tea Ezra's wife, Madison, gave me as part of a welcome basket. I never thought I'd use it, but

here we are.

I glance over my shoulder and see Kendall hunched in on herself again, her hands held tight in her lap.

Like she's making herself as small as she can.

I recognize fear better than most from my time in the service, and my first instinct is to offer her comfort.

Okay, second instinct. I'm ignoring my first.

I pour up the tea, then set some milk and honey out, cataloging how she makes it.

Kendall wraps her hands around her cup as if seeking warmth and offers a tiny smile. "Thank you. You must think I'm crazy."

"I think you're scared. Start at the beginning. Tell me what's wrong and how I can help."

"It's Ryan. He's... spiraled in the last few years since his discharge from the Navy.

Drinking, gambling, and who knows what else.

He's pushed everyone away." Kendall frowns at her tea and takes a long sip.

"Now, he's in trouble, and he dragged me into it.

" Her hands shake as she removes something from her pocket and lays it on the table.

It's a crumpled envelope. The last letter I mailed Ryan. At the time, I thought if he

didn't respond, maybe I would quit. Some wounds aren't meant to heal. I never expected it to bring Kendall to my door.

"That's how I found you."

I nod. "How did you get involved?"

Her breath hitches. "Two men came to my house on Friday looking for him. I think they're from the mob. He owes them a lot of money, and they wanted payment. If he didn't pay, they threatened..."

My gut clenches tight. "What did they threaten?"

"To take me as payment. It sounds crazy, right? But I believed him. He was so scary. Ryan swore he'd get the money, but he didn't come back, and he's not answering his phone. When the time was up, I saw the men and ran. I didn't know where else to go."

Her misery and fear pull at something deep in my chest. I drop to my knees and take her hands in mine. They're soft and delicate, like her. "You did the right thing, Kendall. You're safe. No one will hurt you here."

A tear slips from her eye.

I cup her cheek and wipe it away with my thumb. I tamp down the rage in my gut at Ryan for putting her in danger and focus on making her feel safe.

Kendall can never be mine, but that doesn't change anything. Right now, she's mine to protect. And I'll keep her safe with my dying breath.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:07 am

KENDALL

I didn't know what to expect when I showed up at Stone's cabin. Mostly, I just hoped he'd be home and not halfway around the world somewhere. I did not expect my first meeting after six years to be while he was shirtless.

Seeing his muscular chest and thick arms, the rows of muscles on his stomach.

.. it short-circuited my brain. I greedily took in every cut and angle, the trail of dark hair arrowing down beneath his jeans.

The broad expanse of his shoulders and his strong neck and jaw.

Even the faint white scars on his shoulder, and the tattoos that decorate his chest and naval, inviting my touch.

His dark hair has a sprinkle of gray at his temples and the trim beard on his square jaw is more salt than pepper.

But when he turned those gunmetal gray eyes on me, his lips tight with concern, I turned into a babbling mess in his arms. Definitely not the impression I wanted to make.

I didn't want to be the helpless damsel in distress. I wanted to be the strong sister recruiting help for her brother. The relief at seeing Stone, feeling that instant level of protection like he folded giant wings around me to hide me from predators, was my undoing.

I've never felt safer. Or more aware of anyone.

Like his warm hands as he held mine and the rough pad of his thumb on my cheek as he wiped away a tear.

The scent of cedar and something warm and nutty, like hazelnuts, layered on the natural musk of his skin made my head swim.

I want to curl up on his lap and let the world go by.

Or kiss him and feel his hands on my body, while I slowly take his length inside.

A shiver tracks down my spine at the delicious thought.

"Are you cold?" Stone stands and heads for the fireplace in the living room. "The mountains get chilly at night, even in the summer."

Just having Stone near is thawing the fear freezing my blood from the inside out. "I'm okay. I don't want to trouble you more than I already am."

"Kendall, you're under my protection. I'm always going to provide whatever you need." He clears his throat and lights the fire. "While you're here."

"Thank you, Stone."

"Don't thank me yet. You haven't had my cooking."

That surprises a laugh out of me. I haven't eaten since early this morning when I spent my last two dollars at the hotel's vending machine. I used every cent I had set aside for bills just to get here.

The thought of food makes my stomach growl. “Is it that bad?” I’m hungry enough to eat it anyway.

“There’s a reason I eat in town a lot,” he mutters gruffly.

Maybe it’s a trick of the firelight, but his cheeks look a little pink. My heart softens. I can’t buy dinner, but maybe I can cook something. “I could make dinner before I go.”

He looks at me sharply, then growls. “You’re not going anywhere, Kendall. I thought that was decided. You’ll sleep in my bed tonight.”

Oh. Is that an option? Do I want it to be?

Yes.

Stone curses. “I’m botching this. You can take my room. I’ll sleep out here. Christ, I didn’t mean...” he waves a hand at the bedroom.

He’s adorable when he’s embarrassed. I bite back a grin, feeling lighter than I have since I fled last night. Truthfully, I don’t want to brave the mountain road at night, and I don’t have enough money for a motel. Next time I run for my life, I need to plan better.

“Thank you. Let me repay you by cooking dinner.”

“There’s nothing to repay.”

“Then maybe I want something edible.”

Stone snorts. “I can’t argue with that. Make yourself at home while I lock up. Then I’ll help.”

He grabs a jacket from a peg by the back door and slips outside, giving me a moment to look around.

The cabin is cozy. An odd mix of rustic and modern. There's a newer leather sofa nearby, yet the kitchen looks like it's a few decades out of time. The dining table looks like a thrift store rescue, but the floors were refinished. Is he fixing it up?

There's a bedroom off to the left with a small bathroom, and a second, unfinished room that will probably be a guest room. Does he have many guests up here? Does he have a girlfriend or lover? The thought sends a sharp twist of jealousy through me.

Stone is hot as hell. The only reason he'd be single is if he wanted to be. I want him to see me as a woman instead of Ryan's little sister. This isn't the time or place though. I need to focus on helping my brother, not my feelings for Stone. Guilt pricks at me for the selfish thoughts.

When Stone returns, I've found enough ingredients in the kitchen for basic fajitas. He must eat at least some meals here, because I found a decent amount of vegetables and lean meat. There's not a beer can or pizza box in sight.

Where are you, Ryan?

"You want to try your brother again?" Stone asks as he checks the lock on the kitchen window. As if he knew what I was thinking.

"I don't have a signal on my cell phone up here."

"It's spotty on a good day." He picks up a wireless phone and hands it to me. "It might be from last century, but it works."

I dial Ryan's number, but it goes straight to voicemail. This time, I don't bother

leaving a message. If he didn't respond to the twenty plus messages I already left, one more won't change anything.

Stone frowns when I hand the phone back.

"I have to believe they don't have him. But why won't he let me know he's okay?

" I stab the spatula into the vegetables cooking on the stove instead of stirring them.

"Is it too much to ask after living with me rent free for three months?" Stab.

Stab. "I didn't even push him to get a job because I know he's struggling.

" Stab. Then the fear I was afraid to voice slips out as I stare at the pan.

"What if he's avoiding me because he knew he couldn't come up with the money?

He knew what Ilya would do, and he couldn't face me?

" I hack at them again, my mind churning.

"They're dead. They're not going to answer, baby girl.

" The weight of Stone's hand lands on my lower back, spreading warmth up my spine.

He takes the spatula from me and nudges me aside.

"If he's in that deep, he's probably too ashamed to talk to you.

I'm not excusing him. Only a fucking coward leaves the person helping him most to

the wolves.

But maybe he's trying to delude himself that things aren't as bad as they seem, if only to get through another day. "

My throat grows tight. "I don't know how to help him."

Stone pulls me closer. "Maybe you can't."

"If I don't, I'll lose him to the darkness. He's my brother." I grip his T-shirt, holding tight. "He's the only one who..."

"Who what?"

"Who has ever cared about what I wanted. He used to bring me back presents from missions, just to make me smile." Our parents were only happy when we did what they demanded.

Ryan began to rebel after they told him he couldn't socialize with someone like Stone, who didn't come from money.

I think they were harder on me because of his rebellion.

I didn't even graduate from college with a degree I was interested in. It was the one they wanted for me.

"Not the only one," Stone whispers against the top of my head. He brushes a kiss to my temple, then returns his attention to dinner. He points the spatula at what's left of the green pepper and onion. "They might need last rites."

In the midst of all my anxiety, he makes me smile. Stone's right. Ryan isn't the only

one. Throughout my life, Stone has been that steady presence, like a second, protective older brother. But standing near him like this, there's nothing brotherly about what I'm feeling.

I take the spatula back, and together we finish dinner.

The vegetables might have had a death-scare, but they weren't terrible when we loaded up the taco shells.

Stone's moan of approval as he devoured one fajita after another made butterflies erupt in my stomach and arousal tug low between my thighs.

His gaze lingers on me throughout dinner.

Not in a predatory way like Ilya, but in appreciation of what he sees.

That surprises me too. I have more curves since the last time I saw him.

My bust and hips filled out once I was living on my own and responsible for my own meals, instead of having a strict diet provided by the family chef.

Very few of the boys in college liked a curvy girl.

Those that did were usually so focused on their studies that they forgot to date, so I don't have much experience.

My cheeks flame as I imagine all the things I want Stone to teach me.

Starting with how to make him moan like he did eating the food I cooked.

As I clear the dishes from the table, it's an effort to turn my thoughts back to where

they should be—on Ryan.

Stone takes them from me and places them in the sink with our tea cups from earlier.

“They’ll hurt him if he doesn’t pay. But there’s no way he can win that kind of money by gambling.

He said he was having a string of bad luck.

And our parents won’t lift a finger to help him anymore.

” I huff a frustrated sigh. “I don’t suppose you have seventy-five thousand dollars in cash you have no need for? ”

“Afraid not.”

“Can you help me come up with a plan?”

He takes my shoulders and turns me toward his bedroom. “Yes, but not tonight. You’re exhausted and stressed. Looks like you haven’t slept much the last couple days. Did you drive straight here?”

“I stopped at a motel but couldn’t sleep more than an hour.”

Stone steers me into his room and grabs a flannel shirt from his closet. “Here. Get a shower and try to sleep. We’ll make a plan tomorrow.”

I take the flannel, barely resisting the urge to press my nose to the collar. Maybe a few hours of rest won’t hurt. I stifle a yawn as Stone brings my bag in.

“You’re safe, Kendall. There’s nothing you can do to help Ryan tonight. Get some

sleep.” Stone presses a kiss to my cheek, then closes the door behind him.

Giving in to temptation, I press my nose to his flannel and breathe in his scent.

It settles something inside me that’s been coiled tight for two days.

My muscles loosen and my body relaxes, liquid pooling between my thighs.

I wish he’d stayed. I’m safe, I know that.

Yet the thought of being snuggled up against him in bed, with his strong arms around me all night, promises a safety I haven’t felt in, well, ever .

I think I brought pajamas. Honestly, I have no idea what I threw in my bag in two minutes of manic packing, but I’d rather wear Stone’s shirt to bed.

Maybe it’s foolish to feel so protected when Ilya’s threat remains. But for the first time, I can breathe.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:07 am

STONE

I spent half the night finding any intel I could on Ilya Petrova.

He's a Brigadier in Bratva, the Russian Mob, and seems to operate mostly in gambling, drugs, and stolen goods.

Kendall is gorgeous, so I have little doubt that he wants her for himself and to pressure her brother.

In order to remove Ilya's threat to her, I have to take her off the game board.

If he can't use her as leverage against Ryan, she won't be as valuable.

My plan is simple but unhinged. Kendall would have to be crazy to go for it, which means I need a backup plan.

I could call Derek at Citadel Securities in New Orleans.

His father's a financial genius and passed the knowledge onto his son.

Derek is sitting on millions of his own making.

He might have the cash on hand to pay Ryan's debt.

I'm just not sure that's the best option.

Ryan got himself and his sister into this mess.

It doesn't sit well to let him escape with no consequences.

Yes, I've been trying to mend our friendship, but I'm furious with him for dragging her down with him.

I don't believe he did it on purpose, but that doesn't change the facts. What a clusterfuck.

It's after 8 a.m. when I shuffle to the coffee pot and get it started. I hear Kendall moving around in my bedroom a few minutes later.

Stretched out on the couch last night, it was damn near impossible not to think of her in my bed and fantasize about being there with her. That's when I came up with this batshit crazy plan.

She comes out of the bedroom beautifully disheveled.

Her dark hair falls in soft waves down her back and my red flannel shirt hangs halfway down her thighs, showing off an ample amount of leg.

Shit, seeing her in my shirt flips a switch in my brain.

It should not turn me on, but my heart picks up speed and my cock fills, obnoxiously tenting my sweats.

Her sleepy blue eyes land on the coffee pot, and she heads toward it like it has a gravitational pull.

A smile tugs at my lips. I didn't peg her for a morning zombie, but it's fucking

adorable.

“Here, baby girl.” I put a mug of coffee in her hand and steer her toward the milk and sugar I laid out.

“Good,” she murmurs after her first few sips.

“Sleep better last night?”

She nods and pushes a lock of hair from her eyes. I can tell the coffee is starting to kick in. There might be life in there after all.

“I wonder if Ryan finally called?” she says when the cup is nearly empty. “Oh, I forgot to charge my phone.” She looks around, searching for where she put it.

“It’s on the counter. I plugged it in last night after you fell asleep.”

Kendall reaches over and takes my hand. “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me for every little thing, Kendall. I said I’d take care of you and I am.”

Her eyes meet mine and a number of emotions flit across her face. Gratitude, surprise, uncertainty maybe, and something warmer that I’m not ready to name.

“I’ve never met anyone like you, Stone.”

I thread our fingers together, hoping that’s a good sign. If not, I’m about to detonate those good feelings. I take a big swig of coffee to fortify myself. “I have a plan.”

She leans forward. “You do?”

“Fair warning, it’s... unorthodox.”

“Okay.” She drags the word out, looking at me expectantly.

“We need to make you more than just unavailable to Petrova. Hiding you will only work for so long. If he can’t find your brother, and I suspect Ryan is lying low, he’ll need leverage to force him out.

If he’s the kind of man I think he is, he won’t stop until he has what he needs to put Ryan down. Maybe permanently.”

“That’s one of the reasons I ran. His interest also seemed personal.”

“Easy to see why. You’re beautiful, Kendall.”

A flush spreads across her cheeks and down her neck, disappearing beneath the buttons of my flannel. I want to peel it off her to see how far it goes.

“Maybe he won’t find me here.”

“Are you content to stay here and wait until he finds Ryan?”

“No, of course not. Despite everything, Ryan’s family. I don’t want to see him hurt.”

I squeeze her hand and stroke my thumb over her palm. “Then we have to give Petrova a very good reason to look elsewhere for his leverage and give ourselves time to either find Ryan or pay his debt.”

“What’s your plan?” She drains the last of her coffee.

“Marry me.”

Kendall chokes.

Shit, I should have timed that better. Way to go, Colter.

She wipes her mouth with a napkin and stares at me. “What?”

I did warn her that it was unorthodox. Maybe that was the wrong term.

I should have gone with outlandish or straight to insane.

“Think about it. Not only will you be off the market, but if you’re officially mine, he’ll have to bring a lot more fire power if he wants to take you from me. It won’t be worth it.”

Kendall pulls her hand from mine and goes to the coffee pot. She doesn’t pour right away. When she finally turns around, there’s a storm in her eyes.

“No. That’s not... I don’t want to just be a game piece to you—or anyone. You wouldn’t offer to marry me if I weren’t in this situation.”

I’m not sure that’s true. She’s been here less than eighteen hours, and she’s already brought life to this house. To me. Having her here feels right. “Kendall?—”

“Stone, you should want the woman you marry, and if I ever wed, the man should want me for more than a chess move.”

Is that what she thinks? That my interest is nothing more than for her protection? Pushing to my feet, I cross the distance and crowd her against the counter, caging her in with my hands.

Her slight gasp inflames me, burning right through any restraint I might have

attempted. I dip my head and trace her nose with mine.

“You think I don’t want you?” I ask against the delicate shell of her ear. Then I press my lips to hers and show her how very wrong she is.

Desire sings my veins as the scent of peaches fills my senses. Her hands skim up my arms and clutch my shoulders, holding me in place. She rises onto her toes and opens her mouth, deepening the kiss. Jesus, she even tastes like peach.

A moan rumbles out of my chest, and I cup her neck in one hand, tilting her head so I can kiss her harder, deeper.

Swiping my tongue against hers until she fills all my senses.

The flannel slides over her skin beneath my other hand.

I move her closer until her hips are pressed to the hard length of my dick. She feels amazing.

I grip the flannel in my fist, tugging it up while I trail kisses across her jaw and down her neck.

“Stone,” she whispers, rotating her hips.

“Fuck, you feel good, baby girl. Let me make you feel even better.” The moment my palm lands on the bare skin of her ass, my thoughts scatter.

Only instinct remains. I lift her onto the counter, spread her thighs, and step between her legs, yanking her forward until her hot core is pressing against my sweats.

Kendall grips my hair and yanks my mouth down to fuse her lips to mine.

My heart is hammering in my chest, and every lungful of air imprints her scent into my cells. How did I go this long without her? Without touching and tasting her? Making her mine.

She pulls away, breaking the kiss.

I growl and follow her lips.

“Stone, wait. I think someone’s here.” She tenses in my arms, eyes wide as she looks at the front door.

Pound, pound, pound.

It takes a second to clear my head. Not the hammering of my heart in my ears but someone at the door.

The person knocks again, and I hear a familiar voice swear. It clears the fog of lust from my brain.

“It’s okay. Sounds like a friend.” Her shoulders relax a fraction, but I can tell she’s scared. I help Kendall off the counter, grab my Sig Sauer from the drawer by the door, then move to the side window for a look. It’s Bishop, the leader of the Hollow Point Rescue group here on the mountain.

I nod to Kendall, return my gun to the drawer, and open the door.

“Took you long enough,” Bishop grumbles. His favorite cowboy hat is pulled low, and dust covers his dark green Hollow Point T-shirt.

“Good to see you too.” I look over his shoulder at the empty porch. “Where’s your sidekick?”

“Dillon is not my sidekick. He’s my?—”

“Fanboy.”

“... intern .” Bishop says, sounding resigned. Dillon grew up in White Falls. At twenty, he knows the mountain trails almost better than Bishop. When the team leader moved here to resurrect the rescue program after a few hikers perished, Dillon appointed himself Bishop’s work-study.

I snort. “Whatever you say.”

“Fuck,” he mutters.

I wouldn’t call us friends exactly, because Bishop keeps people at bay, but he’s part of the growing group of ex-military guys who’ve moved here seeking peace. We understand one another as no one else could. “What brings you?”

“You weren’t answering your radio. When I drove by and saw your truck, I decided to check in.”

Damn, I think I left it in my truck when I returned home yesterday. I’d planned to go back for it after putting tools away, but then I saw Kendall.

Bishop’s gaze skates over my shoulder to the living room and stops. One dark eyebrow raises. “No wonder you didn’t answer.”

I glance back to see Kendall standing there in just my flannel, with her hair tousled and kiss-swollen lips. She looks like she just left my bed. I step in front of her, blocking Bishop’s view. Maybe it’s a caveman tactic. I don’t care. I don’t want him looking at her.

A grin flits across his lips. “Staking a claim, Colter? Afraid of the competition?”

I step closer. “She’s not your concern.”

He chuckles, then eyes me. “She’s too young for me.”

He’s four years younger and ribbing me for it. “She is. And way too fucking young for me, but...”

“But the age gap doesn’t seem to matter,” he finishes, and for a second, the teasing drops. Something like understanding mixed with commiseration flickers beneath his smile. Something that says me too .

I shake my head. “Did you just come to give me shit?”

“That’s a side benefit. I came to ask if you’d heard or seen anyone around this morning.

I had reports of some guys seen in the area.

Someone thought they were hikers, but the second report said they weren’t wearing any gear.

With the storm hitting in a few hours, I thought I should find them. Make sure they get back to town.”

“I haven’t, but I’ll keep an eye out.”

“Find your radio while you’re at it.”

I follow Bishop out and wave as he leaves, then turn to grab my radio from the truck.

Kendall is standing in the doorway.

That's when Bishop's description clicks.

Some men in the woods with no hiking gear.

No. It's not possible. There's no way they could have found her so soon. Not unless...

I glance at her car, dread filling my gut. Striding forward, I skim my hand under the wheel wells, then drop down to look underneath.

There's a goddamn tracker on it.

"Goddamn fucking hell!" I rip it off, but the damage is done.

"What's wrong?" Kendall calls.

Once again, I missed something important. Something obvious. And once again, it could get someone I cared about killed.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:07 am

KENDALL

“I’m never going to fucking goddamn learn!” Stone growls as he pushes past me into the house. He drops something on the table, stomps into his room, and slams the door. A minute later, I hear the shower start.

What just happened?

I cross my arms over my waist, feeling confused as hell. Stone’s giving me whiplash. He asked me to marry him, kissed the hell out of me, then told his friend I was way too young for him, and now... I don’t know what’s happening.

On the table is a small, nondescript black box.

It must be what Stone found when he searched around my car.

I’m not a mechanic, but judging by Stone’s fury, I can guess this isn’t a normal part of a vehicle.

Which means it was probably placed there, and only one person comes to mind—Ilya.

Did he track my location and follow me? Did I put Stone in danger by coming here?

My stomach flips, and suddenly I feel sick.

That’s when my phone dings with a text. I rush over and find one tiny bar of signal.

Enough to receive a single message.

Ryan: Dammit Kendall. Call me.

I stare at the words for a beat, then reach for Stone's house phone. I can't risk losing my brother's call with bad cell service.

He picks up on the second ring.

"What the hell, Sis? You're at Stone's? If I hadn't seen his number on my caller ID, I'd think your messages were fucking with me," Ryan snaps. It sounds like he's driving.

Is he for real? He's mad because I'm with Stone?

I clench the phone feeling my heartbeat spike.

"Don't yell at me, Ryan. I've been worried about you since you walked out and didn't come back.

I had Ilya Petrova's man driving past our house every damn minute and you wouldn't return my calls.

What was I supposed to do when your time was up?

Wait to see if Ilya was kidding about using me to pay your debt? "

"I told you I'd take care of it."

"Have you?"

He falls silent.

“Did you pay him, Ryan?”

I hear a thump, like he slammed his fist on something. “No. I tried to find him, to talk to him and get more time. But he wasn’t at his usual places. I couldn’t exactly walk up and ask his people.”

When I don’t respond, he snarls, “Enough about my problems. Let’s talk about why you ran to my ex-best friend the second there’s even a hint of trouble.”

“Because I didn’t have anyone else to go to! I thought he could help us. That maybe since he’d been trying to reach you, he hadn’t completely written you off like everyone else has.”

“That’s low, Kendall.”

I sink into the nearest chair, suddenly feeling hollow. Spent. Sometimes I don’t recognize my brother anymore.

“You know why we aren’t friends. Fuck, you were there for half the fight. He wrote me off long before that party, Kendall. So don’t count on him to be there for anyone but himself.”

“Like you?” The words are out before I can censor them. They’re how I feel, but I never wanted to hurt him by saying so.

He sucks in a sharp breath. “I’m nothing like him.”

No, he’s not. Stone has done nothing but protect and care for me in the one day I’ve been here. I haven’t had that from Ryan in years. “I’m sorry.” For my words, and my

feelings. Because it feels like Ryan just set fire to the last bridge connecting us.

“Tell it to my face when I get there.”

He’s coming here?

“Is that your brother?” All of a sudden, Stone is beside me pulling the phone out of my hand. “What the fuck, Ryan?” he barks. “Leaving your baby sister to a man like Petrova?”

I hear a string of muffled curses, then a click and a dial tone. Ryan hung up.

Stone tosses the phone on the counter and turns to me. That’s when I realize that he’s standing in the kitchen wearing only a towel around his waist. Rivulets of water trickle down from his damp hair, over the hard planes of his chest and the dusting of hair there.

I follow a droplet as it courses over rock hard abs, dipping in and out of the intriguing ridges in a winding descent toward a thick blue towel. The desire to catch it with my tongue is nearly overwhelming. I lick my lips.

“Kendall.” Stone’s voice sounds strained.

It snaps my attention back to him. God, I was ogling him after everything that just happened. I can’t do this. I can’t be near a half-naked Stone when I’m confused about his actions, angry at my brother, and afraid that I put people I care about in danger.

“I’m going outside.” Maybe a walk in the fresh air will settle my rioting emotions long enough to think straight.

Stone catches my wrist. “It’s not safe, honey.” He points to the black box he took off

my car. “That’s a tracker. There’s an excellent chance Petrova knows exactly where you are. He might already be here.”

I tug my arm from his grip and look out the window.

Thick, dark clouds obscure the sky, promising rain.

With the storm rolling in, I wouldn’t have gone far anyway.

Now I’m trapped in a cabin with an extremely sexy man who would marry me just to protect me but doesn’t want me because I’m too young for him.

And even if he did, Ryan would see our relationship as a betrayal.

Hell, if Ilya shows up, maybe he’ll drag me away and none of this will matter.

I’ve got a headache. The pain stabs at my temple, making it throb.

“Give me a minute to get dressed, Kendall. Then we can talk, okay?”

No. Nothing is okay. But what choice do I have? “Fine.”

A strange look crosses his face. He strides into his bedroom, and a few minutes later, returns wearing jeans and a gray T-shirt that molds to his muscles and matches his eyes.

It’s unfair to be stuck with a man this hot who’s only interest is in protecting me. Somehow, that makes my head hurt more.

Now that he’s dressed, I’m uncomfortable wearing only his flannel shirt.

Last night, it felt warm and comforting, even a bit sexy.

Now I feel exposed. I hurry to the bedroom and dig through my bag, pulling out a pair of black leggings.

Unfortunately, the only shirt I packed that's long enough to cover my ass is a frilly pink blouse I wear to work.

Looks like I'm sticking with the flannel. At least I can have leggings under it.

Rain is already pouring when I rejoin Stone. He's sitting on the couch with a fresh cup of coffee in hand. On the small side table, I see a cup for me. One sip and I realize he's made it exactly the way I like, with plenty of milk and a spoon of sugar.

Ryan's lived with me for three months and has no idea how I like my coffee. I sink onto the couch beside him. The coffee soothes the tightness in my throat and my headache begins to ebb. Stone wants to talk, but I have nothing to say. These last two days have been overwhelming.

"Kendall, I'm sorry for storming in here and ignoring you earlier.

Seeing that tracker pissed me off. I should have found it yesterday.

I should have thought to look ." His eyes squeeze close.

When he opens them again, there's a pain I've never seen before in their depths.

"I just hope my mistake doesn't come back to bite me in the ass again. "

There's a story there causing him to doubt himself. It's written on his face. "Again?"

“First Ryan and our friendship. Maybe if I hadn’t been so caught up in my own life... paid more attention to what he wasn’t saying...

Then a few months ago, I almost got some friends hurt.

Wasn’t paying attention to my surroundings, and even though I used to be a fucking SEAL, some dirtbags took me down fast. They used me as leverage to draw my buddy and his woman out of hiding.

It could have ended badly. Would have, except Derek’s a badass.

He’d bury anyone who tried to hurt his girl. ”

Our gazes meet. A fire begins to burn in my veins from the intensity.

“The same way I feel about you.” He brushes a lock of hair off my cheek and tucks it behind my ear. The move is tender and makes my belly flutter.

“Stone...” I want this man so much, my chest aches. “You couldn’t have known about the tracker. And what happened with Ryan, that’s partially on him. He should have talked to you.” He seems to consider my words, then shrugs them off like he can’t give up the guilt.

“Ryan is still in trouble, Bratva is looking for you, and you’re stuck with your brother’s ex-best friend until the storm lets up.”

“At least you’ll keep me safe through the storm.”

Stone’s deep gray eyes sharpen on me. He reaches forward, grips my hips, and pulls me onto his lap, with my legs to the side. He cups my cheek in one large hand, tilting

my head until I can't help but drown in the intensity of his silver gaze.

“This storm and any others, baby girl.”

I swallow past the sudden lump in my throat.

I want him to mean that. It's always been Stone.

I realize that now. I crushed on him as a teen, but even in college, he was there in the back of my mind, never far from my heart.

He's a hero, and not just to me. He saved countless lives during his time in the SEALs.

How can I not look up to him? Or feel the warmth of love creep in when he didn't hesitate to take me in yesterday, and declare he'd stand between me and the coming storm?

Maybe I've always been in love with Stone Colter and didn't realize it.

My parents and Ryan will have meltdowns over it. But you know what? I no longer care. I've never gone after what I wanted. It's been dictated to me. This time, I'm letting my heart decide. If that means losing the love of my family, then so be it. It's their loss.

“What about when this thing with Ryan is over?”

He presses his forehead to mine. “Stay with me. You're mine, Kendall. I won't let you go without a fight.”

“Even against my brother? Being with you would probably sever any hope of

rekindling your friendship. Are you willing to give that up?”

He pulls me astride his lap, holding me against his chest. “Yes.”

My heart beats harder. He didn’t even take the time to consider a response. “Are you sure? I don’t want my heart broken, Stone. We barely know each other as adults. You think I’m too young for you. What if, in a few days or weeks when you know me better, you change your mind?”

“It won’t happen. Remember that day you turned eighteen, and I came to your pool party?”

How could I forget? That’s the day I lost Stone and my brother, just in different ways.

“You wore that tiny red bikini and nearly gave me a heart attack. I thought you were the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen.

You still are, Kendall. Only now your beauty goes beyond this long, dark hair, pretty eyes, and tiny red triangles.

” One corner of his mouth tips up as he looks down my body to my breasts and hips. “Which I want to see you in again.”

I giggle. The heat in his eyes is turning them more silver than gray, and I can’t look away. “I don’t know about that. I’ve put on some weight.”

“Mhmm,” he murmurs, voice laden with appreciation. “Now you’re perfect.”

Hardly, but it melts my heart that he thinks so. “I wanted to say yes,” I whisper.

“To what?”

“When you asked me to marry you. I know it was just to protect me, but I wanted to say yes anyway. Even if I only had you as mine for a few days, I wanted them.”

“It was never just about protection, Kendall.” He cups my cheek, feathering his thumb across my skin. “It’s you.” He nips my lower lip, then slides his tongue across it.

“I want this. I want you, Stone.” Even if it costs me everything. It’s terrifying and freeing all at the same time.

His hands tremble as they slide under the hem of my shirt. “You sure?”

I answer him with a fierce, hungry kiss full of everything I can’t put into words.

He grips my hips and grinds the hard length of his cock between my thighs. “Is this what you need, baby girl?” he rasps.

I roll my hips against his, feeling the ache between my thighs only he can soothe. “Yes.” He feels so good. “More.”

He chuckles against my neck, placing a hot kiss there. “Oh, there’s much more.” Then he lifts me into his arms and carries me to his bed.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:07 am

STONE

I drop Kendall onto my mattress, grinning when she bounces and laughs. It's the most beautiful sound I've ever heard, and I want to hear it every day.

I lean down and cup her tits, loving the weight of them in my hands. My flannel is soft, and as much as I love seeing it on her, I want to see her naked even more. Little Kendall in a bikini was overwhelming. My Kendall in all her glory is going to be life-changing.

The buttons give easily beneath my fingers, revealing a creamy strip of skin as I work my way down. I don't push the shirt aside, not yet. She's like unwrapping the present you've waited all year for. I want to savor the experience because there will never be another like this.

Once her shirt is unbuttoned, I climb onto the bed and press my lips to hers.

The kiss starts soft, then explodes into heat and passion.

I can't get enough of her taste. I need more.

Trailing my lips down her throat, I kiss a path down all that creamy skin I revealed, tasting heaven.

Sliding my hands beneath the fabric, I reverse course, peeling the shirt away until her gorgeous tits are revealed.

Jesus, they're perfect for my hands. Her nipples are a pale pink, already at hard points from the lightest touch.

I pinch one, delighting in her gasp, then suck on the other.

Fuck, I will never get tired of watching her squirm beneath my mouth, blue eyes glued to mine. I switch to the other side, savoring the feel of her hard bud on my tongue, then work my way back down to the place I want to taste most.

Her leggings peel away easily. I help her out of the sleeves of the shirt, and both pieces are tossed away, leaving her in only a pair of lacy pink panties.

Her legs are smooth under my palms as I move them aside, fitting my shoulders between them. I glance up, checking to make sure Kendall's still with me. Her eyes are practically glowing with lust.

She grips the sides of her panties and pushes them down.

I help strip them off and focus on the neatly trimmed hair. The smell of her desire makes my cock so hard, it's pushing painfully against my zipper. "Gorgeous, baby girl. You smell so good. I want to taste this pussy."

"Please," she whispers, hips rolling on the bed.

She's so wet for me. I slide my fingers between her folds, back and forth, ghosting my touch over her entrance and her clit. "Here?" I tease.

Kendall gives a little growl and shimmies her hips to get my fingers where she needs them. "Yes. There."

Fuck, she's cute when she's demanding. It almost makes me want to tease her more.

There's plenty of time for that, Colter. Once this shit with Ryan is over, you'll find a way to convince her to stay. Then you can spend days teasing her like this.

I want that so fucking bad. Before she showed up on my porch, I thought I wanted nothing more than to help other vets like me and restore the relationship I so casually destroyed. Now, all I want is Kendall. Everything else is secondary, because without her, it's all meaningless.

Lowering my head, I lick a stripe up her pussy, savoring the taste of peaches and the musk that is all her. I can't help the moan that escapes my throat. Grabbing her thighs, I yank her closer to my mouth, move her legs over my shoulders, and lick her like a starving man.

Kendall arches her back, crying out in ecstasy when I latch onto her clit, flicking it with my tongue. I lick and suck, flick and tease until she's gushing for me. Then I slide one finger inside her pussy. Two. She whimpers, riding my hand as I plunge them into her core.

"That's it, baby girl. Ride my hand. Take what you want. What you need."

"Stone!" Her back arches again, legs trembling as I push her higher.

Her hands go to her tits, plucking at her nipples. Fuck that's hot.

"That's right, honey. Show me how you take your pleasure."

"Put your mouth on me," she cries, half demand, half plea.

Gladly. Leaning forward, I suck her clit again, adding pressure as I fuck her with my fingers. I reach up with my free hand and move her hand aside, pinching a nipple and rolling it between my fingers. When I do it a second time, sucking her clit harder,

Kendall screams my name, splintering apart.

I lap up every bit of her honey, bringing her slowly down.

Kendall grabs my shoulders, urging me up.

I climb up her body, press a deep kiss to her lips, letting her taste herself on my tongue, then lie beside her and pull her close. My dick is so hard it hurts, but I've never felt better in my life.

She curls into my side, resting her head on my shoulder. "When I can breathe, it's your turn."

"It doesn't have to be."

She rises up to one elbow and glares down at me. "Yes. It does."

I like this bossy side of Kendall. Knowing her parents and her soft heart, I don't think she's ever really demanded what she wants. If she needs to do that more using me, fuck if I'm going to say no.

"Then maybe I need to keep you out of breath a little longer." I pull her on top of me, loving the weight of her there. "Because once I'm inside you, I plan to stay there all night."

Her eyes soften and she places a tiny kiss on the corner of my mouth. "I like the sound of that."

Pulling her close, I settle her in my arms and listen to the rain pounding on the roof. Life has never seemed more perfect, and that unsettles me. If there's one thing I learned from my days as a SEAL, it's that peace never lasts. And when it comes to

Kendall, the danger to her terrifies me.

My woman is more tired than I realized. The heavy emotions from these last days have drained her. In moments, she's asleep in my arms.

I hold her for a couple hours, listening to the rain and living in the moment. It won't last. I know that. Ilya is out there, and I still have to deal with Ryan and his bullshit.

The more Kendall and I talk, the more I revisit that fight on her birthday.

I've carried guilt around for years, feeling like it was my fault that things got to the point they did.

Now, I can't help but wonder how much was Ryan's own insecurities that played a factor.

Yes, I missed the warning signs. Had I seen them and taken action, I never would have been in the SEALs.

I might not have Kendall in my arms right now.

Nothing about that alternate scenario feels right.

This is where I'm meant to be. I need to make him see that.

The crunch of tires on gravel pulls me from my thoughts. I slip out of bed and move to the window. Speak of the devil.

Kendall stirs behind me. "What is it?"

"Get dressed, honey. Your brother is here."

“What?” She scrambles up faster than I’ve ever seen her move, grabs some clothes and flies into the bathroom, slamming the door closed.

Fucking adorable.

I close the door to the bedroom behind me and grab my boots and a rain jacket. It’s pouring and muddy as hell, and I’m about to meet my best friend for the first time in six years with the taste of his sister on my lips.

Nothing about this is going to go well.

Ryan is already striding across my drive. He points a finger at me. “You’re a goddamn asshole, Stone!”

He looks like hell. He’s lost at least twenty pounds since I saw him last, has a few days’ beard growth, and his shirt is stained and dirty.

Gone is my friend from high school and the military.

In his place is a man that looks like a strung-out addict.

And he’s been living off Kendall’s generosity for three months? Fuck him.

“Looked in the mirror lately, Knowles?” I fold my arms over my chest and wait for him on the porch.

“Fuck you. You don’t know a damn thing about what I’ve been through these last years. But then you never cared anyway, did you?”

“Yeah, I did. Still do.” Though right now, I’m wondering why.

He scoffs. “Bullshit. Same old Stone. Telling me what I want to hear instead of the truth.”

“You want the truth? You’ve been blaming everyone but the person responsible for all these troubles, Ryan.”

“Who? You? I already know you’re to blame.”

Pain spears my chest. Because he hates me so much, and because he’s blinded himself to his own failings. “No. You .”

Ryan lunges forward, throwing a sloppy punch.

I grab his wrist, twist it behind him and shove him face first into the porch post.

“That’s right. Show me how much stronger you are.

How much better,” he seethes as blood trickles from his nose.

“I don’t know how I ever looked up to you.

I thought you were amazing, bringing yourself up from nothing, seeming to care about others in a way I hadn’t seen before.

But it was all a fucking lie. You’re just like everyone else. ”

He said all these same things the night we fought. Hearing them again makes me release him and take a step back. “You were my best friend, Ryan. If you had told me you were unhappy?—”

“I tried, but you didn’t listen!” he shouts and swings around, glaring at me as he

wipes his nose.

“I would have followed you anywhere. Done anything for you. But I couldn’t make the SEALs.

Look at me, man.” He waves to his body. “I never had the physique for that, and you knew it. You purposely went where I couldn’t follow, just to put me in my place.

Well guess what, asshole? My parents were right about you all along.

I am better than you. I was then, and I am now. ”

Pain stabs at my heart and my chest tightens at his words.

“I never meant to hurt you or go where you couldn’t, Ryan.

The SEALs were what I was meant to do. I knew that even though we wouldn’t be in the same unit anymore, you were already far outpacing me on the technical side.

You know how bad I am at math. I couldn’t have kept up with you if I’d tried. ”

“That’s right. You didn’t try. Maybe if you’d stuck around, I wouldn’t have fucked up that maneuver that got me booted from the Navy.”

I heard rumors of something he was involved in, but no one I knew had hard facts. All I know was that it happened a little over a year after our fight, and no charges were brought. Maybe the Navy gave him the choice to leave honorably. “You think it would have been different if I’d been there?”

He leans back against the post, eyes hard. “Guess we’ll never know.”

Before I can respond, the door swings open. Kendall stomps out, hands on her hips, and glares at her brother. She's put her hair up in the messy bun I love and is wearing my flannel again. A fact her brother zeroes in on.

"Ryan Knowles, where the hell have you been?"

"Not fucking my ex-best friend," he spits. "Guess I left that to you."

Her mouth drops open, and she takes a step back, as stunned as if he slapped her.

That's it. I'm done. No one talks to her that way, especially the family that's supposed to love her. I slam my fist into Ryan's mouth and another into his gut.

He doubles over, spewing curses.

"Stone, don't!" Kendall says, grabbing my arm. "Don't hurt him."

"So he can keep hurting you ? I don't think so, honey."

"You make me sick," Ryan growls. Then he turns on his sister. "And you betrayed me. You want to play house with Colter? Fine. But don't come running to me when he tosses you aside for what he wants next. It's what he does to others."

Her lip trembles. She lifts her chin a notch. "What about what you do to people, Ryan? I wouldn't be here if you didn't owe so much money to a mobster. He threatened and terrified me, and instead of facing him and protecting me, you disappeared and left me vulnerable."

"I doubt he'd have hurt you. It's me he wants." By his tone, I'm not sure he believes his own words.

“And if he couldn’t find you, how do you think he planned to draw you out?” I argue.

Ryan looks uncertain but quickly hides it beneath a sneer. “If he plans to use Kendall now, it’ll be a waste of time.”

She sucks in a gasp.

“Get out before I bury you,” I snarl. I’m one second away from ripping his fucking head off and shoving it down his neck.

Ryan looks at Kendall. “Despite everything, you’re still my baby sister. Come with me. We’ll get the hell out of here and go far away from Petrova.” He glances at me. “And everyone else who wants to hurt us.”

Kendall crosses her arms over her waist, shoulders hunching. She shakes her head. “No. I’m staying here. Stone will protect me.”

He scoffs again and jumps off the porch. “It’s your funeral,” he calls as he marches back to his car. His tires squeal as they dig into the mud, then they catch and he speeds off, going much too fast for the pouring rain and muddy mountain conditions.

I’m at Kendall’s side in an instant, catching her when she sags against me. Lifting her into my arms, I carry my precious woman inside.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:07 am

STONE

Kendall is strong. She spent the last hour pacing my living room. At first, she couldn't believe her brother showed up, spewed such nasty things, and asked her to come with him. Then she raged at his audacity and self-centeredness, only to try to explain it away as a result of his deep hurt.

I make another cup of tea for her and set it on the coffee table, then pull her down onto the couch beside me and into my arms. For a moment, she stiffens, then snuggles into my side.

"He's wrong, Kendall. I'd lay down my life for you.

I'm not going to push you away in favor of something or someone else. "

She's silent for a long time. "I want more than your protection, Stone."

"You have it." The words come easily because I mean the promise behind them. She wants tomorrow with me? She has it. Forever? I'll put a ring on her finger tomorrow to tell the world she's mine. It's that simple.

She relaxes against me, snuggling her head under my chin. "What happens now?"

"It will be dark in a couple of hours and the rain should let up soon. I don't like waiting for something to happen, but there's not much more we can do tonight." I blow out a frustrated breath.

Ryan made his intent clear. He's going to run.

Even if Ilya were to get his hands on Kendall—and he'd lose them if he tried—Ryan's so angry with us right now, any attempt to use her as leverage would probably fail.

If that happened, Ilya would only have one use for her.

She'd be his plaything until he grew bored and got rid of her.

There's only one way I can see out of this. "I'll call a friend in New Orleans. He should be able to get me the money in a few hours."

Kendall sits up. "You plan to pay the debt?"

"If that's what it takes to keep you safe, then yeah."

"No. That's not right. Ryan made this mess.

He can't keep blaming you for all his problems. You shouldn't pay guilt money to fix it.

Even if you had stayed in the same unit or whatever, who's to say he wouldn't have continued to make bad choices and still end up here?

How many people would have died if you weren't with your SEAL team to save them? "

Too many.

"None of his actions are your fault, Stone. You can't carry that guilt."

“Maybe I wouldn’t have lost his friendship.”

Tears well in her eyes. She blinks them away and says, “He’s so twisted up inside. I think you probably still would have.”

I cup her cheek and place a soft kiss on her lips. “Maybe you’re right. But paying the debt is no longer about Ryan. It’s about you. If I have to drop Petrova’s ass in the middle of Fort Knox to keep him away from you, I’ll fucking do it.”

Kendall climbs into my lap and wraps her arms around my neck, holding me close. I feel the bonds between us growing deeper with every breath. Every confession. I will forever be indebted to Ryan for the friendship we had. Through it, I found Kendall. The woman I’m in love with.

The difference in our age doesn’t matter. All it means is that we can learn different things about each other. What matters is how I feel, and just the thought of losing her scares me like nothing ever has. I need her with me. Now and always.

“You don’t have to clean up after him, Kendall. I admire your loyalty and the love you have for him. But he has to learn to face his own actions. You heard him out there. He still believes all this is someone else’s fault. That he’s the victim.”

“I know he’s responsible for his choices.”

“Then you have to let him face the consequences, or he won’t change.”

“I’m so afraid to lose him, Stone. That he’ll go so far out on that limb, it will snap, and he’ll fall to his death.”

“I know, baby girl.” I can’t tell her not to worry.

Even if he does fall, he'll have to catch himself for once.

Her brother has been her hero her whole life.

Seeing him fall without trying to help would break her.

"We'll do what we can. At some point though, it's up to him.

I won't let you keep getting hurt every time he needs someone to mop up his mess. "

She tangles her fingers with mine. "I'll help you stop feeling guilty if you will help me stop trying to fix him."

I bring her hand up to my lips for a soft kiss. "Deal."

She smiles like the sun breaking through the dark storm clouds.

I pull her in for another, tender kiss, letting it linger.

Right as the heat begins to build, my radio crackles across the room.

...accident. ...on foot. Be advised of road blockage, and possible...

The hair prickles on the back of my neck, and my muscles tense. I set Kendall on the cushion beside me and shoot to my feet, grabbing the radio. "Hollow Point One, this is Colter. Please repeat."

Kendall is by my side in seconds, barely breathing. The worry flashing through her eyes confirms she's feeling this sense of foreboding too.

"Acknowledged Colter. This is Bishop. Two miles south of you, a truck slid into a

tree and is blocking the road.”

Shit. Ryan tore out of here full of fire and fury, too angry to drive reasonably in the pouring rain. “The make?”

“Old Ford truck, probably from the ‘70s.”

Kendall’s hand covers her mouth.

“The driver?” I ask, jaw clenched.

“On foot. He and the other group are unaccounted for at this time. The storm is clearing. Hale will have the thermal drone up in the next few minutes.”

Hale is Hollow Point Rescue’s main tech guy. The thermal imaging cameras on his drones have located lost hikers faster than the search helicopters. He should be able to locate Ryan.

The radio crackles again. “Walker here. I spotted the boot prints of four men heading south prior to the storm. Might be some of your missing hikers.” Mason Walker works with Ezra and I on Solace Ridge. He’s also an expert tracker.

“Be advised the four may not be lost hikers. If so, the crash victim is their target,” I reply.

“Colter, next time you throw a party, make it pizza and beer—not hostage situations. I’ve got enough work to do,” Bishop grumbles. The radio clicks, and he adds, “Drone is up. Keep your radio nearby. We’ll call when we have something.”

A second later, my phone rings. It’s Mason.

“The weather is shit for tracking, but I know you don’t want to wait by the radio. Meet me at the crash site. We’ll go from there.”

“Thanks man.” I hang up and make another call.

“What?” Anson says on the fourth ring, when I’m about to hang up.

“I need your rifle.”

His voice is sharp when he asks, “Where?”

I fill him in on the situation. Maybe the four men are hikers, but my gut is screaming otherwise.

“I’ll be there.” Anson hangs up.

Kendall grips my forearm. “You’re going to rescue Ryan?” There’s a thread of uncertainty in her voice.

Probably because I threatened to bury him not two hours ago. But despite all that’s happened, all the hard feelings, he’s still Kendall’s brother and someone I care about. “Yeah, baby girl. He’s burned damn near every bridge, but you love him. I’ll try to bring him back in one piece.”

She presses a hard kiss to my lips. “I love you, Stone Colter.”

My heart flips over in my chest, then bangs against my ribs. Before I can bask in the warmth, she douses it with ice water.

“I’m going with you.”

“Oh hell, no. You’re staying right here. Lock the doors, draw the curtains, and sit tight.”

“Alone? Hell no. I’ve seen that horror movie. The bad guy always finds the woman alone in the cabin and kills her violently. You might as well say ‘Let’s split up’, before you leave!”

Horror movies aside, she raises a good point. If she’s here by herself, she’s unprotected, and I won’t be able to get to her in time if something happens. Yet taking her with me divides my concentration. I don’t have time to drop her at Mason’s place to stay with Bella.

“Alright, you can go. But if I say run, get your pretty ass out of there, got it?”

“Yes. I’ll do whatever you say. I won’t get in the way.” She draws a cross over her heart with her finger as she speaks.

Damned adorable.

If she’s with me, then I’m going to need one more person. I go back to the radio.
“Bishop, you copy?”

“Copy,” the rescue leader replies.

“Kendall is with me. Her brother may be the accident victim. I’ve called in Mason and Anson. I need a third to keep her safe. Maybe Boone?”

“Me. I’m five minutes out.”

“Appreciate it.” That gives us just enough time to make it to the accident site.

I end the transmission and look down at Kendall. She's already pulling on her boots, her hair in a bun, and her face tight with focus.

Fuck, I love her.

While she zips her jacket, I grab the extra gear bag and toss in a med kit, headlamp, and a blanket. I hesitate only a second before handing it to her.

She doesn't blink. Just slides the strap over her shoulder and clicks it into place.

I tug her in for a quick, fierce kiss. "Stay close. If we're separated, you hide and wait for me."

"Yes, sir," she murmurs, so fierce, sweet, and totally mine.

As we head for the door, headlights slash across the drive. Anson's truck. Right on time.

And thank God—because if this ends in a firefight, I want the guy with a long gun and short temper on my side.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:07 am

KENDALL

I don't know what's worse. Staying in an empty cabin waiting for the inevitable horror flick outcome or sneaking through the creepy woods at night, knowing the mob is out here.

An owl hoots overhead. In the distance, lightning flashes, briefly lighting up the sky and illuminating the three men in front of me.

I met Bishop, the hot mountain ranger who came to Stone's house earlier.

Seeing him up close, I can think of at least five friends who would willingly get lost in the woods if it meant he'd show up.

Then there was Mason who's as big as a bear but has a soft smile. Especially when Stone asked about his wife, Bella. I don't know how, but he's been following my brother's trail away from the crash site, even though the rain washed most of the tracks away and it's darker than a black hole out here.

Anson hasn't said a word since he joined our little band of rescuers.

He's wearing all black, which means he blends into the surroundings so well, that twice I've jumped when he moved around me to say something to Mason.

He's a little bit scary. Maybe it's the long gun strapped over one shoulder, or his stealth-ninja setting.

Whatever it is, I'm very glad to have Stone at my back.

He's keeping watch in all directions as we follow this trail that is little more than an animal path.

"Here," Mason calls softly, halting our progression. He kneels, pointing to something low. Stone and Anson pass me and flick on flashlights just long enough to see what it is.

"Damn," Stone mutters. "Now we know for sure."

Bishop points. "Six hundred yards that way. Last time I was here, the brush was high, but there should be a clear line of sight from the trees in front."

I squint into the darkness following his direction and spot a low light. It must be the station.

"Anson, take the trees and keep an eye on Kendall. Mason, take the back. Bishop, want to walk in the front door?"

The ranger smiles. "Let's see who's home."

Stone returns to my side. "Stay low and be ready. Your brother might need medical help."

"Got it."

We close the distance to the small cabin, which looks like it hasn't seen life in a decade. Stone has me crouch near a bush that's less than ten feet from the porch. "Anson will be close. If you need help, call."

“I will.”

He presses a hard kiss to my lips, then melts into the night with the other men. Darkness closes around me. I suddenly feel very alone. But I’m not. Stone will keep me safe. I only hope these guys will protect him.

Seconds tick by. Each one feels like an hour. I grip the backpack tight, ready to rush to someone’s aid. It also gives my hands something to clench from the nerves swirling in my belly like a cyclone.

A throat clears nearby.

I freeze, not daring to breathe.

A shadow separates from the darkness, moving around the side of the house. He steps into a patch of moonlight.

I clamp my hand over my mouth to hold in the gasp. It’s Mikhail. He’s not wearing his suit jacket, so the guns in his holsters are visible. If I move an inch, he might spot me. I scan the area, trying to locate Anson, but it’s like finding a black cat in the dark!

Something swishes through the air.

Mikhail freezes, then drops to the ground and doesn’t move. I inch forward just enough to see him. His eyes are open, staring at the starry sky. A round, red wound gapes between his eyes.

Before I can process the dead man, shouts erupt inside, and shots are fired. I duck back to my hiding spot as someone bursts through the door.

Ilya Petrova.

My heart kicks up speed and my brain screams RUN !

Scrambling to my feet, I don't think. Don't even breathe. I just run for the trees.

"Stop!" Ilya shouts. "Grab her."

An arm snakes out of the darkness and snags around my waist. I flail, trying to break free.

The man spins me to face him, and I'm looking up at Mikhail again. Only this time, there's no wound between his eyes.

I scream.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:07 am

STONE

The Russians scatter like bugs, skittering into the darkness. There were six in total. Two are dead from our initial breach. Bishop stayed to free Ryan, while Mason and I tracked the others.

I hear the muffled thwap thwap of a gun discharge in the darkness. That will be Mason. I rush back out the front door and almost trip over a body. There's a hole in his forehead. Anson's handy work. Ilya must be somewhere.

Lightning flashes and I see him scurry toward the trees. I almost miss the shadow shifting in the darkness to his right.

"Grab her!" Ilya orders.

I'm running, tracking the shadow, before I hear Kendall's scream come from the same direction. Oh fuck no. She's not getting hurt. Not on my watch.

Kendall is nearly white as she stares at him. Raising my weapon, I line up the shadow. I have a perfect shot. Squeezing the trigger, I fire twice. He drops, and Kendall staggers away.

"I got you, baby girl." I sweep her against my chest, holding her close, and scan our surroundings. Making damn sure I don't miss anything else. Ilya is on his back ten feet away, not moving.

"He was dead already!" she wails, pointing a shaky finger at the man I shot. "I saw

the hole in his head.”

He’s an exact copy of the one I tripped over. “No, honey. He’s a twin. They’re both dead.”

“Oh my God, I thought I was seeing a ghost.”

I chuckle and press a kiss to her temple. She’s trembling hard. “Not tonight.”

“Ilya?”

“Dead. Ryan is fine. Bishop has him.” She sags in my arms. “Let’s get you home, honey. Ryan’s on his own now.”

She nods. “He’s going to be okay?”

“That’s up to him.” I’m not letting him drag either one of us into his problems anymore.

We make the trip home in twenty minutes. The second we’re in the door, I steer Kendall into the shower and climb in with her, letting the hot water wash away the pain and fear.

Her smile is tremulous.

I wash her hair, then lather the soap and slowly wash her body. Taking special care with every luscious inch.

Kendall kisses me, then takes the soap. Her touch is soft, but as her confidence grows, her strokes become firmer, more arousing.

“I need you, Kendall,” I say against the shell of her ear when I back her against the tiles.

“Yes, Stone.” She wraps one leg around my hip, lining her slick folds up with my hard length.

It’s not enough. Gripping her ass, I lift her and press her to the wall, sliding my cock through her wetness. “You’re soaked for me.”

“Don’t stop,” she whispers, gripping my hair in her hands and yanking my lips to hers for a kiss.

I rub her clit with my thumb until she’s writhing, then push into her hot core. Her walls suck me in, making my hips buck, eager for more. “Oh fuck. I’m not going to last.”

“Then hurry!”

I draw back, then slam home. It’s hot, hard, and dirty. I fuck her against the wall until we’re both moaning, gripping each other tight. Her pussy spasms around me as she orgasms. Her walls clench my dick, milking every fucking drop from me.

I press my head against the tile, trying desperately to drag in air. “I love you, Kendall. Stay with me.”

Her eyes find mine. “For how long?”

“Forever. Marry me. Not because I need to protect you, but because I can’t live without you.”

A wide smile breaks across her face. “Yes! I love you, Stone!”

“Your family won’t be happy,” I remind her.

“I don’t care. I’m finally choosing something for myself. Love and life with you.”

I kiss her, sealing our promise. It’s slow, deep, and utterly perfect. I thought I needed to fix my friendship with Ryan to feel whole. All I needed was Kendall’s love and this place. Derek was right to send me here.

It’s where I found solace.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 9:07 am

KENDALL

Four months later

I hum a Christmas carol as I place another ornament on the Christmas tree.

We found one in the forest, which Stone chopped down.

The squirrel family living inside were not happy about being evicted and showed their displeasure by racing around the living room in different directions.

Watching him try to wrangle them while wearing oven mitts will be a memory I cherish forever. I've never laughed so hard in my life.

Tomorrow, I'm going to the little Christmas shop that opened up in White Falls to see if I can get a squirrel ornament for him.

A truck door slams outside, and a minute later, Stone strides in. My husband is as fine as ever. The grayer he gets, the hotter I get for him. Or maybe it's hormones. I think I'm pregnant.

The week following the incident with Ryan, I quit the job I hated, packed my few belongings, and moved in with Stone. We married a month later. Neither my parents nor Ryan came, which made the day better. I didn't want their negativity on the best day of my life.

Stone means everything to me.

He glares at the tree and shrugs out of his jacket. “You didn’t adopt anymore animals while I was gone, did you?”

“I took applications from a raccoon and a family of deer, but we’re waiting for their references.”

He snorts and pulls me into his arms for a deep kiss. “Maybe we should skip the local wildlife and get a dog?”

“I’d love a dog! I’ve never had one.” My parents didn’t allow pets when we were growing up. Unless they were championship bred, they weren’t worth having.

“We’ll have to fix that.” He strokes the back of his fingers down my cheek. “I brought the mail.”

“Anything interesting?”

“A dozen magazines trying to get you to buy Christmas gifts, and a card from your brother.”

My chest goes tight, and I have to swallow past the sudden lump in my throat.

I haven’t seen Ryan since he stormed out of this cabin last summer, furious that I wouldn’t go with him.

Even when Stone rescued him from Ilya Petrova, I didn’t see him.

Bishop, the local ranger, patched him up, and he left without a backward glance.

This card makes the second time we’ve heard from him. The first was a postcard from Mexico with “Congrats on your wedding” scrawled on it. Nothing else.

Stone kisses my temple, then hands me the red envelope. The return address says Denver, Colorado.

“He went home.”

“Seems like it,” Stone says.

Part of me doesn’t want to open it.

“At least he’s reaching out, baby girl.”

With trembling fingers, I open the envelope and withdraw a Christmas card. Inside is a folded note:

Sorry, Sis. You were right about me. I should have realized it sooner. You always were the smart one.

I’ve had a lot of time to think since that night with Petrova.

I blamed everyone else for my problems—especially Stone.

It took a Russian mobster to finally get through to me.

I don’t expect forgiveness. I just wanted you to know I was trying.

The therapist says that’s important. Anyway, Merry Christmas.

Maybe we’ll see each other again one day. Be happy. —Love, Ryan.

P.S.- I wish I’d been there to walk you down the aisle. You deserved to have family by your side. Tell Stone I still look up to him. He’s the type of man I want to be.

I swipe the tears from my eyes. “I think there’s hope for him.”

“There is. He’s made bad choices, but underneath, he’s still a good man.” Stone smiles tenderly at me. “Now, come with me. I have something for you.”

I lay the card aside, take his hand, and let him lead me outside. There’s a box on the porch, covered by a buffalo check blanket with a red bow on top.

“Go on,” he says when I give him a questioning look.

I lean down to remove the bow and blanket, and hear something move.

Underneath, I find a crate with a sleepy little golden retriever blinking up at me.

It’s snuggled in another blanket, with its fat little belly up and legs sticking in the air and wearing a pink bow.

The puppy yawns and wags its little tail.

“Oh my God.” I scoop her into my arms, pressing my face to warm, fluffy fur. “Stone.”

“She’s yours. You even get to name her.”

“She’s perfect.” I bounce her in my arms. “And she’ll be the perfect companion.”

“Woman’s best friend?”

I shake my head. “Baby’s best friend.”

Stone goes utterly still. “Baby? Are you...?”

I flush. Maybe I should have waited until I knew for sure. “I think so, but I haven’t tested?—”

He takes my shoulders and turns me back to the house, stopping only to grab the dog cage. “Let’s make sure, baby girl.” He gently puts the puppy back in her cage, then lifts me up and carries me to bed.

I laugh when he tosses me down, then climbs in after me and kisses me hard. The stubble of his short beard is soft against my palm when I cup his cheek. We’ve talked about having children, but he wanted to finish fixing up the cabin first. “I didn’t know if you’d be happy about a baby so soon.”

“I’m thrilled, honey.” He kisses me again, longer and deeper until I’m focused on the feel of his body beneath me. “Besides,” he whispers against the shell of my ear. “I thought the squirrel was my present.”

I giggle until he kisses me senseless.

“Merry Christmas, Stone.”

He traces the shape of a heart on my chest. “Merry Christmas, Kendall. Having you is the best gift I could ever ask for.”

I hope you loved Stone and Kendall’s story!