

My Ruthless Mountain Man

Chapter One

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.

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