



Ferocious Mountain Man

(Seduction Summit Trails #6)

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Category: Romance

Description: She came to Seduction Summit to film the “Hardwood Hottie”—not fall for him. But when he catches her camping outside his cabin, everything changes.

Social media cant stop talking about the Hardwood Hottie. In fact, women are flocking to Seduction Summit to get a glimpse of him.

But Im the only one camped out next to his house. My goal is to capture some video of him while also interviewing a few of the women who came to town to see him.

I dont count on him finding my tent while Im away from the campsite. When he takes all my belongings, I have no choice but to talk to him. As I get to know him, though, I dont know how to tell him Im in town to write about him. As I start to fall for him, my lie begins to weigh on me.

Total Pages (Source): 8

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 3:58 am

SAHARA

Eight barstools lined the bar at the restaurant inside Seduction Summit Lodge. On each of those barstools sat a youngish woman, in town to track down the lumberjack who'd lit the internet on fire.

So much for my plan to get to know a few of these women for the story I was writing. I'd planned to hop on one of those stools and strike up a conversation, but not a single barstool was available.

Sighing, I scanned the restaurant. Plenty of empty tables and booths. I could sit alone and have dinner—maybe keep an eye on the bar. Eventually, at least one of them would leave and I'd have my opening. Unless they were all together.

Darn it. This idea might not work. What now?

As I watched the hostess start back in this direction, menus in hand after having seated someone, movement from the bar area caught my eye.

One of the women had spun around on her barstool and stood.

She began walking toward me—well, toward the hostess stand, which was in front of the entrance that led to everything but this bar.

I gauged her level of intoxication as she walked.

Everything about her said she was stone-cold sober.

Not even a sign of tipsiness. She walked in a straight line, her eyes bright as she scanned her surroundings.

Her gaze was heading in my direction when the hostess reached her, pulling her attention away.

“I’m looking for the bathroom,” the woman told the hostess.

That was all I needed to hear. I flipped around and rushed toward the lobby.

I already knew that was where the only bathroom was.

Yes, I’d scoped out this place earlier in the day.

At that time, I hoped to run into one of these women so I could interview them for my story, but everyone was out on the trails looking for the Hardwood Hottie.

That was what the internet had named him. His image, shirtless and chopping wood, had gone viral. It was a prime example of objectifying a guy, and I planned to point that out in my article.

I rushed into the bathroom and locked myself in one of the stalls, waiting for the sounds that signaled someone had entered. It took about a minute, but eventually the door opened, then slammed closed. I watched through the tiny cracks in the stall door, peeking through one eye.

Luckily, the hot pink blouse the woman was wearing made it easy to identify her. She breezed past my stall to one of the stalls to the right.

I turned, flushed the toilet I hadn’t even used, and waited the time it would normally take to get everything back in place. Then I took a deep breath and opened the stall

door, heading out to the mirrors.

I washed my hands so thoroughly, I could probably perform surgery, and still, she hadn't emerged. I could hear her doing her business, but the noises from the stall suddenly stopped. Seconds ticked by.

What if she was on to me? She could see me through the cracks. Maybe she'd spotted me in the bar and identified me as some sort of stalker—or the actual investigative journalist I was.

I'd never been so relieved in my life to hear the flush of a toilet. I'd already shut off the water and dried my hands on the towel I'd thrown away.

How did I look busy? All I had was my smartphone, my car keys, and a stick of lip balm.

Lip balm. That was it. I withdrew it from my purse, uncapped it, and stepped in front of the mirror, pretending that applying it required intense concentration.

"Hi," the woman said as she stepped up to one of the sinks and flipped on the water.

That surprised me. I hadn't expected her to speak first. My mind was racing as I tried to come up with an opening line.

"Hi," I replied. "Are you here looking for the Hardwood Hottie?"

"Yep. We found his house. Are you camping out there too?"

They hadn't found his place. What they'd found was the fake information the guy's friends posted online, claiming he was staying in an empty cabin near the top of the mountain.

No, the Hardwood Hottie's home was the empty cabin near the big campground in town. It was a rental that sat unoccupied this time of year. It belonged to someone who only came here for ski season, so they were staking out an empty building.

"Yep," I said. "Haven't seen him yet. Have you?"

The woman was lathering soap on her hands. She hadn't even turned on the water yet.

"A girl two tents down went and peeked in his windows," she said. "There's a truck in the driveway. I guess that's his, but it's there all the time."

Yeah, that truck was a plant too. Looked like it was fooling the fans.

"How long are you here?" I asked, continuing to apply the lip balm.

I didn't want to stare her down and make her uncomfortable. I was basically going for a polite but disinterested vibe.

"Just until Sunday," she said. "We could only take the weekend off. I'm not really interested in him personally. My friend Andi is sure he'll take one look at her and fall madly in love. She's convinced they're soulmates."

I nearly laughed out loud at that one. Soulmates. She'd based that on seeing a video of him. A video where he wasn't even talking. We knew nothing about him except he looked good without a shirt and he could wield an axe like nobody's business.

"I'm going to shoot some video and post it online," she said. "Kind of like a scavenger hunt."

Except the guy was a human being. I felt a little bad for him, being treated like a

piece of meat.

Okay, so women had been treated that way for centuries.

But there was something about this guy that made it bug me.

A kindness in his features. It sounded ridiculous, even to myself, since his face had been barely visible as he chopped wood, but I saw something in his eyes.

Yeah, maybe I was fangirling a little myself.

“Well, good luck,” the woman said, giving a half wave as she barged out of the bathroom.

I opened my mouth to say, “Wait,” but what exactly was I going to do to keep her here? I had a whole list of questions I’d planned to ask, and I’d blown it. And the bar would be closing soon. It was late as heck.

I was shaking my head as I tried to map out a new plan on the drive back up the mountain. It was Friday night. The woman I’d just met was here until Sunday. That was probably the case with a lot of the groupies who’d come to town looking for him.

I’d get my story. I’d wait until tomorrow and head to the camp, maybe blend in and pretend I was one of them.

I should have stayed there all along. But I’d gotten some good shots earlier today of the Hardwood Hottie doing yard work. It had taken everything in me to keep those pictures to myself. I’d share them with the world soon enough.

My mind was set to climb into the cushy sleeping bag on the air mattress inside my tent, but my heart stopped when I pulled onto the familiar dirt patch.

It was gone. All of it. My gigantic bright red tent and, as far as I could tell, all its internal contents—including my makeup bag and changes of clothes. Someone had stolen it all.

I had to call the police. I'd file a report. But what good would that do? I'd be stuck here with only my purse, phone, wallet, and lip balm. Oh yeah, and my car. I still had my car.

I scanned the area, looking for signs of anyone who might have been a witness. Who was I kidding? There was nothing out here but trees and owls and birds. And maybe a bear somewhere in those woods.

Something else was out here, though. Another person. The man standing on the front porch of his cabin. A man who was very definitely the Hardwood Hottie.

He was staring right at me, holding what I assumed was a bottle of beer in one hand. His other hand was shoved into the front pocket of his jeans. Did he have a smile on his face? I was pretty sure he did.

I took a deep breath, shoved my phone in my back pocket, settled my purse on my hip, and started walking. This guy knew something, and I was going to find out what it was.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 3:58 am

RAFE

Had a trespasser ever been so freaking beautiful?

No. The answer to that was no. There wasn't a woman alive who was this beautiful. Not that I'd seen, anyway.

Her long, thick auburn hair stood out in the moonlight as she walked. Those enormous tits bounced with each step. She probably wore a bra. I was pretty sure she did, despite the bouncing. There was no containing a chest that big.

I took a sip of beer, trying to look cool, calm, and collected. Maybe the cold liquid could help with what was going on inside my body. Things were heating up in a very inconvenient way right now.

"Did you see it?" she asked. "You had to have seen something. Someone stole all my stuff."

I lowered the bottle, swallowing the gulp I'd just taken.

She thought some stranger had come in and stolen all her stuff?

That was a weird way to go, but maybe she had no idea how safe it was.

Since she obviously wasn't from here, that was highly likely.

In fact, she had "city girl" written all over her.

She stopped in front of me, and her expression changed. Her gaze swept my entire body before it returned to my face. Her jaw dropped. She liked what she saw.

Right now, I was exhausted with being treated like a piece of meat. But her appraisal was different. Her opinion of me mattered.

“Someone didn’t take your stuff, darling. Not a thief, anyway.”

I second-guessed my words as soon as they were out of my mouth. Calling her darling...well, that sounded a little condescending, didn’t it? I definitely didn’t mean it that way. It was a term of endearment. And I definitely felt endeared to her, whatever the hell that word meant.

But my cute little pet name was the least of her worries right now. That was clear in the way she narrowed her eyes at me and asked, “What do you mean, by ‘not a thief.’ Someone else took my stuff?” Silence. Then she tilted her head. “Did you take my stuff?”

“You’re on my property. I’m not sure what the laws are on it, but I’d say I have a pretty good argument that if it’s on my property, I have the right to dispose of it.”

Now her eyes widened. Her jaw dropped again, those gorgeous lips of hers parting. They looked soft and smooth, and what I wouldn’t give to kiss them right now. Or maybe feel them wrapped around a certain part of my anatomy.

No. I couldn’t go there. I had to keep my testosterone in check.

I’d already been falsely accused of being a horn dog.

It had gotten me in serious trouble when I was younger.

I'd been raised to go after what I wanted, and as a teenager, I learned the hard way that doing that could get me in trouble—even if I was just trying to convince a girl to go out with me, and not even in a way I considered to be harassment. Apparently, the girl disagreed.

I'd moved past all that, though. I'd gone into the military and atoned for any bad I might have done. After discharge, I'd come back to North Carolina but steered clear of my hometown near Raleigh, instead settling into the mountains.

No one here knew me. No one whispered about me when I walked into a restaurant or rushed to cross the street when they saw me coming. In this town, I was a vet who worked as a logger. That was respected.

"I didn't throw anything away," I said, putting her out of her misery. "It's all in my kitchen. I'll give it back on one condition."

She looked far less combative now, probably because she was depending on me to get her tent and clothes and toiletries back. I was kind of an ass for holding it all hostage, but in my situation, most people wouldn't blame me.

"What's that?" she asked after a long silence in which she probably weighed all her options.

"You get the heck off my property."

Heck? Hell was what I meant to say, but heck popped out. I couldn't bring myself to cuss at this woman. She deserved better.

She probably deserved better than me kicking her off my property too, but these women were getting annoying. I'd luckily managed to misdirect them to a campground near a cabin that sat empty right now, but somehow, this particular

woman had made her way onto my property.

Was she so determined to meet me that she'd tracked down my true location? No, I had a feeling this woman was not here to meet me—not because she was a fan, anyway. That was clear in the way she was looking at me right now. She was far from intimidated or in awe of me.

This woman was some sort of journalist. Or maybe a social media influencer with great research skills. Either way, she was up to no good, and I was putting an end to it here and now.

“I totally understand kicking someone off your property,” she said with a nod. “That’s legit.”

My frown deepened. This was too easy. She'd agreed I was in the right for taking her stuff, so she'd just leave it with me? No, that wouldn't happen.

“There’s just one problem with that,” she said. “That isn’t your land, and you have no right to hold my stuff. So if you’ll just return my belongings to me, I won’t make you put everything back like you found it. Or we could call the police and let them sort it out.”

Police? Ha. This town didn't have a police force, and the sheriff of the next town over wasn't coming all the way up here over a civil dispute.

But that wasn't the point. Especially since I was in the right.

“This is my land,” I said. “I bought all of it so I'd have privacy.”

“You might want to check the property deed,” she said. “That patch over there belongs to someone named Rourke Donovan. He even got a permit to build a cabin

there. Sounds like you're going to have a neighbor in a few months."

She crossed her arms over her chest and smiled, clearly proud of herself. What the fuck was this bombshell of a woman talking about? She was just making stuff up at this point.

But wait. She knew the name of the supposed landowner. A guy who was the closest thing to an enemy I'd ever had. A guy who competed with me for a beautiful tourist at the ski lodge bar when I first came to town—and lost. He'd never gotten over it, even though the tourist left town the next day.

I thought the two-year grudge was ridiculous. But the dude was on my logging crew, so I had to deal with it every day of my life.

And now he'd be my neighbor? That just made no sense.

"So what's it going to be?" she asked, cutting into my thoughts.

The question reminded me that we were in the middle of another issue. I'd have to iron out the Rourke stuff later.

"It's inside," I said, gesturing toward the house. "I'll go get it."

"I'll go with you," she said.

That froze me, mid-turn. She was going with me?

Oh yeah, it was a lot. I'd gone back and forth four times—first pulling everything out, then breaking down her tent. It would be quicker if both of us carried everything. It would be quicker if I helped her set it all back up too—plus it would be the right thing to do.

It would also allow me to spend more time in her company. That was something I found I wanted all too much, whether I liked it or not.

“Come on in,” I said. “I’ll grab you something to drink, and we’ll get started.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 3:58 am

SAHARA

Rafe's cabin was exactly what I expected. It was small, with a wood-burning fireplace and very few windows—all of which had blackout blinds.

The one-room cabin was truly one room. Well, maybe it didn't technically qualify as one room since there was a door toward the back that I assumed concealed the bathroom.

The bed was right out in the open, though.

No wonder he was creeped out with someone popping a tent on his property.

If a fan did find a way to peek through the windows, everything would be visible, including his bedroom.

He walked toward me, holding out a bottle with some sort of pink liquid. "Here you go."

I took it from him, and in the process, my thumb grazed his knuckle. He jerked away like he'd been burned. Did he feel it too?

The minutes ticked by as we looked at each other. Something flickered in his eyes. Yes, he definitely felt it. In his stare was warmth, but it felt almost electrified. Tingles were spreading from my hand to the rest of my body.

What the heck? Had he just hypnotized me somehow?

He stepped back and looked at me. “It’s my mom’s favorite alcoholic drink,” he said. “She visited for Fourth of July with my sister and her family. They were all about the slides at the lodge.”

Slides at a lodge? I didn’t know what he was talking about. The ski lodge? They had slides there?

“Just wanted to explain why I had a drink like that in my fridge,” he said. “Got four more where that came from. My mom only drank one, and my sister’s still nursing.”

He was throwing a lot of information my way. Only now did I glance at the beverage I was holding. It was one of those sweet malt beverages— Cherry Bomb , the label announced, with a stemmed cherry for the O.

“Thanks,” I said.

I uncapped the bottle and took a big swig. Only after the liquid had crossed my tastebuds and made its way down my throat did it occur to me that I was technically on the job. I probably shouldn’t drink.

Was it really unprofessional, though? This wasn’t an ordinary kind of job, so I wasn’t sure what the protocols were.

He uncapped his drink and took a swig too. With his other hand, he gestured toward the couch, only speaking after he downed the big swallow he’d taken.

“Have a seat,” he said. “Relax. You’ll be spending all night outdoors in a tent. May as well enjoy a few minutes of air conditioning.”

I looked at the couch. How long had it been since I’d actually sat down?

Well, aside from the time in my car. I'd driven straight here, set up my tent, and scoured the town looking for him.

I'd been to the shopping center, had lunch at the diner, and dinner at the Mexican restaurant, hoping to happen upon him. No such luck.

That was when I'd gone to the lodge, figuring I could at least find some of the women who were coming to town looking for him. No such luck. The ski lodge was where most of them were staying—that and the campground. But I'd hit so many dead ends, I definitely hadn't really relaxed since I got here.

Besides, I was in Rafe's house. What was the point in rushing to climb into my tent? A tent I'd erected on land adjacent to his property so I could spy on him. Just far enough that he couldn't see me behind some trees, but close enough that I might catch some video of him coming and going.

"I think I will, if you don't mind," I said, heading over to the couch and plopping down. The cushion felt less than cushiony. This sofa had definitely seen better days.

He said nothing as he headed over to his chair and sat. Then he looked down at his beer bottle for a minute or two before speaking.

"So exactly why are you here?" he asked.

With those words, his head snapped up and he stared directly at me.

Exactly why was I here? He was on to me.

He knew I wasn't the type who'd come to this small town to look for some pseudo-celebrity.

For one thing, I was alone. For another, I was the only person resourceful enough to find out where he actually lived.

And lastly, my reaction to him had been somewhat professional.

Not at all how a celebrity stalker would act.

I couldn't tell him the real reason I was here, so I called up the cover story I'd devised before leaving home. "I just wanted footage for my social media. I'm trying to get a thousand followers so I can start making money."

That confession would probably not earn any respect from the guy. When I came up with the idea, I didn't care what he thought of me. Did I care now?

I frowned as I thought about it for a second. Yes, I definitely did. And that could be a problem—especially if it meant I was developing a crush on the guy they'd nicknamed the Hardwood Hottie.

"You came up here for followers?" he asked.

"Yes, there's money in it. A lot. I can't make a dime on my posts right now, but if I can just get to a thousand followers, I can start making money off ads. Maybe even get some sponsorships. It worked for ShelfDestruct."

He'd know who that was. She was the one who posted his clip to start with. There were a bunch of videos of hunky lumberjacks on her feed. Her name had spread far and wide.

I could see why. If I lived to be a hundred, I'd never get rid of the image of him hurling that axe, sunlight bouncing off his muscles.

“Are you talking about Larsen?” he asked.

“I guess.” I shrugged. “I heard she makes twenty thousand dollars a month.”

That had him narrowing his eyes at me. “You sure about that?”

“No. Just something I heard.”

It was a rumor I picked up in my research. I definitely didn’t plan to report it. Although I would love to track down ShelfDestruct while I was in town, and now I had her first name.

“She lives here now, right?” I asked.

He didn’t answer at first. Instead, he took another swig of beer. But his eyes stayed on me.

“She’s dating one of my buddies,” he said. “Moved in together about a week after they met. I don’t even know if they waited that long. Seems to happen a lot around here.”

Interesting. There might be a story in that. I couldn’t help but dig for more information.

“So, women move here and meet someone right away?”

He shook his head. “Women around your age visit and never leave, although I think that ShelfDestruct person you’re talking about actually moved here to work for her uncle before she met my buddy. He’s on our logging crew too.”

Women my age? What exactly did he mean by that? There was a generational vibe I

was getting from it, and he couldn't possibly be that much older than me. I was putting him in his mid-thirties.

"You're in your early twenties, right?" he asked.

"Twenty-three," I said, well aware of the defensiveness in my tone.

"Yep. They were that age when they got here. Twenty-three exactly. Every single one of them."

"How many are we talking?"

"A few dozen." He shrugged. "Maybe more. I haven't met that many of them."

My jaw dropped. "A few dozen? That's a lot."

"Seems like it." He nodded. "Of course, I'm just going on hearsay. But from what I've seen since moving here a few months ago, it happens often enough to be strange."

Suddenly, the whole reason I came here was tossed out the window. This was a much more interesting story. A town full of hot guys who attracted twenty-three-year-old women by accident? Maybe I shouldn't abandon my Hardwood Hottie story, though. I could do both.

"Let's cut to the chase," he said. "What's in it for me?"

The question threw me. I tried to place it in the context of the conversation—not because I didn't understand what he was asking, but because I hadn't expected him to be so blunt. And I wasn't really sure how to answer.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“If I help you with your little project. You’re trying to make money off me, right?”

He was trying to shake me down for money. That was weird. He didn’t seem like the type. Not that I could blame him. I just felt a little disappointed that he’d care about money.

“I could pay you a fee,” I said. “Maybe a percentage. Like royalties?”

His face changed immediately in a way that told me I’d definitely misread the situation. “I don’t want money. You might not have noticed, but I’m not really into material things.”

Had I misheard him? “You asked what was in this for you. I’m not sure...”

I let my voice drift off then, hoping he’d get the point. But he continued to stare at me, saying nothing.

“Let me take you to dinner,” he said. “One date. Tomorrow night. Doesn’t have to be anything fancy. I know you’re sleeping in a tent. You can get ready here if you want. You’re always welcome to stay here if you don’t want to sleep outside.”

I shook my head. “I actually enjoy camping out. If you’ll help me get my tent set up, I’ll be fine. But yeah, I mean, if you want to buy me dinner...”

I gave him a smile and tried for a casual expression. Something that would keep him from knowing just how much his words were affecting me inside.

My heart was pounding. My breaths were coming fast.

It was all business. That was why I was excited by the prospect of going to dinner with him. That was all.

If I told myself that enough, maybe I'd start to believe it.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 3:58 am

RAFE

Was it hot in here, or was it just me?

I kicked off the covers and stared up at the ceiling. I'd been fooling myself if I thought I could go to sleep after thirty minutes of hauling Sahara's stuff and getting it all set up.

We'd introduced ourselves at some point during the process. I gave her my first and last name, hoping she'd do the same. I only had her first name, and I had no idea why that wasn't enough.

Actually, I did know why. I was getting attached.

And that was why I was lying here, staring up at the ceiling instead of sleeping.

It had nothing to do with the endorphins still flowing through my body from the physical activity.

No, this was all mental. Any endorphins were the undeniable buzz of my attraction to her.

With a groan, I finally threw my legs over the side of the bed and stood. So much for sleep. At least it was a Saturday night, so I could sleep in—if I could ever get her out of my mind.

Maybe a cold shower was what I needed. Or maybe I should grab a box of tissues, get

back in that bed, and take care of things myself. It wouldn't take long, and it would probably relax me.

I was heading for the bathroom in search of what I'd need for a good jerk-off session when a scream pierced the silence that surrounded me. A female scream. There was only one person who could be making that noise this time of night.

I bolted to the door, not even bothering to throw on clothes, and rushed across the massive distance between us. She was farther than a football field away. Because of the trees, it took most of that distance to catch a glimpse of her tent.

I had no idea what I expected to see, but a closed, still tent brought a sigh of relief between quick breaths. So it was probably just a nightmare. Or maybe she found a bug in her tent. She seemed like a strong, courageous person, but I'd seen some pretty tough soldiers freak out over a cockroach.

My footsteps slowed as I neared the tent. I never took my eyes off it. I winced at the noise I was making, even though I wasn't sure why I was concerned. Maybe I felt a little like I was sneaking a peek.

But that brought me to my next question. Did I just unzip the tent flap and see what was going on? Or was I supposed to do some sort of canvas-based version of knocking?

"Sahara?" I called out.

"Rafe, is that you?"

In those last three words, her shaky voice gave away her fear. She might have seen a bug, but that sounded like something else. Besides, if it had been a bug, she probably would've been outside the tent. The flap would be open, if only to evict the insect that

had broken in.

“It’s me,” I said. “Is everything okay in there?”

“Someone was outside my tent. Or something.”

That was all I needed to hear. I immediately kicked into protector mode. And that was when I became aware that I wore nothing but a pair of white boxer briefs. I just hoped the massive bulge from a few minutes ago was gone. If not, it would be gone soon enough.

I saw absolutely nothing around the tent. Nowhere near it. Not a sign of anything. I even headed into the woods, barefoot and mostly naked. Nothing came of that but sore feet.

By the time I returned to Sahara’s tent, I expected to find her waiting outside. But no sign of her—just the tent. I hoped like hell she was still inside it.

“You okay in there?” I called out once I was closer.

I scanned the area, prepared to spring into gear if I saw anything the slightest bit out of order. No sign of her...or anyone else.

“I’m in here,” she said. “Did you find anything?”

I rounded the tent and knelt in front of the opening, pulling up the flap so I could see inside. But I stopped myself from lifting it farther just as I started to get a glimpse.

She might be scared, but I couldn’t invade her privacy. She could be naked in there.

That brought the bulge back. So much for getting rid of it.

I had only one question. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No,” she said. “Can you come in, please?”

I’d be excited at the request, but her voice was still shaky and forced. I wanted to wrap my arms around her until she felt safe, but I was in my underwear, and I may or may not have an erection. I was scared to look.

So I knelt and lifted the flap, peering inside. She sat on her sleeping bag, wearing a T-shirt and what looked like nothing else, although she could’ve had short-shorts on. I couldn’t tell, the way her legs were tucked in front of her, arms around them.

Her hair fell in waves around her face. A few tendrils covered her right cheek. It was the sexiest sight I’d ever seen. And I was supposed to be getting my libido under control. Shit.

“You okay in there?” I asked.

My voice sounded strangled too—or maybe it was just my imagination. My throat definitely felt closed up. My heart was pounding. My stomach was doing flip-flops too.

I did not like seeing her like this. In fact, the reaction it brought out of me surprised me. I prided myself on not getting emotionally connected to anyone. Not since childhood. I was a loner in the true sense of the word.

So, what was it about this woman? What was she bringing out in me? I wasn’t sure. It was all so unfamiliar. I was basically a spectator, trying to figure out what was going on inside me. It was as much a mystery to me as it would have been to anyone else.

“I’ll be fine,” she said. “I just need a few minutes. Maybe you could tuck me in.”

She smiled, but it was a tentative smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. Yeah, she was seriously spooked.

"Can I come in?" I asked.

She hesitated, then finally said, "Do you think it'll come back?"

"What?"

"The raccoon or squirrel or whatever it is."

"It might, but I don't think it'll hurt you." I looked down. "I'm in my underwear."

The bulge wasn't all that noticeable from this angle. Hopefully, things had calmed down enough that she wouldn't think I was some sort of pervert if she noticed it.

"That's fine," she said. "I guess I woke you up. I'm so sorry."

I shook my head. "I couldn't sleep."

Should I have given that away? I'd just admitted that she had me tossing and turning.

No, she wouldn't make that connection. Still, I couldn't help but feel self-conscious about it. The last thing I'd want was for a woman to know she was getting to me—even if she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen.

"Yeah, I was having a tough time sleeping too," she said. "It's almost like we did a thirty-minute round of cardio before saying goodnight."

Fuck. Was this woman deliberately trying to do this to me?

I ducked my head and pushed my way through the tent opening. Now I was in an awkward crouch, trying to figure out how to position myself in a structure that wasn't nearly big enough to accommodate my six-foot-five frame.

So I plopped down on the ground, feet in front of me, knees bent, and tried not to think about what kind of cardio we could have done that would've kept us up all night. It wasn't the kind that involved erecting a tent. No, it was another kind of cardio, and it brought a different type of erection.

"Anyway, I closed my eyes, and I swear I'd just drifted off to sleep when...swish, swish, swish," Sahara said.

My eyes popped open just in time to catch her looking at the wall. I couldn't stop staring at her.

"This was moving," she said, pointing to her right. "When I screamed, it stopped."

"I'm sure it was just an animal of some kind. Maybe a raccoon or squirrel or something."

I wasn't going to let her believe a bear had been messing with her tent, even if that was a firm possibility. She'd probably never sleep outdoors again...or anywhere else.

"I don't think it'll hurt you," I said.

"I shouldn't have done this," she whispered. "Any of this. I should be at home. In bed."

That brought an important question to mind. "Where's home?"

I didn't want to think about her regrets. If she'd never come here, she wouldn't have

met me. Correction—I wouldn't have met her. She might not be bothered by that thought at all. It didn't seem like this attraction was one-sided, but it very well could be.

"Savannah," she said. "Georgia. Born and raised. I've never lived anywhere else. I even went to college there."

"So, you went to school to be a social media influencer?"

Did that sound dismissive of her goal? Maybe she had a full-time job and this was on the side.

"I went to art school." Then she laughed. "I guess I thought I was going to be the exception to the rule."

"What rule is that?"

"That you can't really make a living as an artist. Not in the fine arts, anyway. Most of my friends translated their skills into graphic design—logos for businesses, signs, websites...that sort of thing."

"And you didn't?"

She shook her head. "I'm not as good with computers as I should be." She laughed again. "I guess I'm not really sure what I want to be when I grow up. But for now, I'm doing a lot of freelance stuff."

That made sense. But I was surprised to find that what I cared about most was that if she was freelance, she could work anywhere. That was what I assumed, anyway.

"Would you ever leave Savannah to live in a beautiful mountain town like this one?"

I flashed an awkward smile at the end of that question. Confusion flickered across her face. It was brief—just a slight lowering of her brows and a downward twitch of her mouth.

“Absolutely,” she said. “Savannah’s beachfront property. It’s beautiful, but not my kind of thing. I’d love to live somewhere scenic like this. It’s just so expensive.”

“Not up here.”

Was this a sales pitch? Why was I trying to convince this woman to move here?

The answer to that was simple, but I didn’t really want to face it. I wanted her here. The thought of her leaving town—today, tomorrow, or any other day after that—filled me with dread. Would I have to go the rest of my life wondering what might’ve happened if only...?

She narrowed her eyes at me. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were trying to get me to stay in Seduction Summit.”

There was a flirtatiousness in the way she said that, but her words hit close to home. So I asked, “What if I am?”

She just stared at me. No expression. I stared back, not sure what to make of any of this. I wanted to believe she was serious. But what if she was? What was my plan, exactly?

“I’d definitely move for the right guy,” she said. “But it would have to be more than just physical attraction.”

Two could play at this flirtation game. “Are you saying you’re physically attracted to me?”

“I am,” she said. “And that’s weird for me.”

Okay, now I really had to know what she meant. “Why is it weird for you?”

“I’ve never felt this kind of...electricity before. Is it one-sided?”

Hell, no. But I was still puzzling over why she wouldn’t have felt it before. Did that mean all the guys she’d dated were meh? No, that wasn’t the case for me, and even I could say that I’d never felt anything like this before.

“It’s not one-sided,” I said.

“What happens next?”

Now I was staring at her. The tent created a sort of cocoon, shutting us off from the world outside.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“When you’re...you know, sexually attracted to someone. What happens next?”

I frowned. I didn’t get it. Not at all. She couldn’t possibly be asking what happened when a man and a woman got together.

“I guess I should just spit it out,” she said. “I’m a virgin.”

And then, as I tried to process those words, the tent started shaking again. Something was outside.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 3:58 am

SAHARA

I screamed. Not just a little scream, either. A big scream. A scream that would probably carry to the next house...wherever that was.

The only good thing about having something—or someone—shake the tent again? Rafe could see I wasn't making things up. Nope. I had good reason to scream earlier.

But Rafe kicked into hero mode, exiting the tent so fast, it may as well have been on fire. That left me alone inside while everything went very still around me. Nothing but the sound of rustling outside my tent.

Silence was the absolute worst in a situation like this. I couldn't tell what the heck was happening, and I was sick to my stomach at the thought of harm coming to Rafe. Especially if it was because he was saving me.

No, it had very little to do with that. It wasn't guilt. I legit didn't want anything to happen to him because...

I cared about him?

How was that possible? I'd met him only hours ago. Sure, I'd looked at him, shirtless, hurling an axe toward logs, for the last few days, but that didn't count as "knowing someone."

I let the silence stretch on for another few minutes. Or maybe it was just a minute or two. Every second felt like hours right now.

“Rafe?” I asked, surprised by the shakiness in my voice.

Silence. I’d welcome the rustling sounds at this point. Anything to let me know he was still alive out there.

Finally, after what seemed like a lifetime of holding my breath, the tent flap opened. The sight of those black-striped, white sneakers brought the biggest sigh of relief of my life.

“Just a raccoon,” he said. “I chased it off.”

A raccoon. I tried to feel relief, but something held me back. This guy probably wouldn’t tell me if it was a bear or coyote or bobcat.

Bobcat? Was that even possible up here? I didn’t know. What I did know was that this guy would tell me it was nothing even if it was. And then he’d stay here all night to keep me safe. Or stake out the area outside the tent. Or watch from his window with binoculars.

He zipped up the flap and turned to face me.

He was in a squatting position—the only position that would work for him with this short ceiling.

His expression made it clear he wasn’t sure what to do.

Obviously, he’d decided against rushing out of here and retreating to the safety of his cabin, but he wasn’t advancing into the tent, just hanging out by the flap he’d closed.

“We aren’t in danger?” I asked.

I sounded a lot less shaky now. That was a good thing.

But I couldn't help but remember the conversation we'd had before.

I'd confessed my deepest, darkest secret to him and left it at that.

Most guys would've made some excuse and gotten the heck out of here by now, but not Rafe. Did that mean he was okay with it?

"So...about what you said before," he said.

His eyes seemed to blast right through me, going straight to my soul. The skeptical side of me was waiting for him to treat me like some sort of circus sideshow. Step right up. Take a look at the twenty-three-year-old virgin. She's one of the few in the world.

"I went to a private all-girls school," I said. "Most of my friends are virgins too. Well, they were."

I added that last part almost as an afterthought.

I'd lost touch with all of them shortly after graduation.

Seemed they couldn't wait to hightail it out of Savannah, and college was the perfect opportunity.

Savannah's claim to fame was the arts school where I went, and since my friends weren't interested in art or design, it made sense for them to leave while I stayed.

As a result, I'd lost touch with most of them somewhere around sophomore year.

“Got it,” he said. “Does that mean you’re waiting for marriage or something?”

I nearly laughed out loud at that. I had no plans to get married anytime soon.

My mom got married right out of high school and had me soon after.

She spent her twenties and thirties having babies and taking care of the five of us.

I loved her and respected her, but I was not the type who could enjoy a life of mopping floors and driving kids to soccer practice.

I needed a little more. I needed my name on as many bylines as possible. Maybe a few book covers someday if I ever achieved my dream of writing travel guides. That wasn’t to say I didn’t want a husband and kids. I just wanted other things too.

“Not marriage,” I said. “But not a one-night stand, either.”

“Sweetie, if I slept with you, it would be far from a one-time thing.”

I should say something. I should speak. But my body felt frozen, my throat tight. I couldn’t do anything but stare at him.

“I’m only here until Sunday afternoon,” I said. “I have to be back for...”

My voice trailed off. Back for what? I was here to do a job. My original goal had been to grab some interviews and pictures, then head home and write a kickass story that I’d send off to a few editors I’d been dying to write for.

“Do you?” he asked. “You look doubtful about that. Because if you’d be open to sticking around for a while, I’d love to get to know you.”

He was right. I was doubtful. But the truth was, I couldn't tent-camp here another night. Not one. And my funds were limited. I'd come here hoping I could get away with setting up on this hidden property—I'd tracked down pictures of it online—and only having to pay for my meals.

"You can stay with me," he said. "In my bed. If, that is, you want to."

The offer was beyond enticing. Sleep in his cabin...in his bed ?

And even when it was time to return home, I lived just over an hour away from here. It wouldn't be a big deal to drive back and forth—at least until we figured out if this was going to work out long-term.

So, what was the problem? To be honest, I had no idea. It had little to do with distance, though.

"I'm scared."

I blurted that out before I even realized I was going to say it. The words just spilled out of me. But they were the truth, and for some reason, this guy inspired me to tell the truth.

"Of...losing your virginity?" he asked.

I thought about that a long moment. So long, he probably worried I wasn't going to speak at all. But finally, I came to realize exactly what was bugging me.

"My best friend lost her virginity just after high school," I said, thinking through the words even as I spoke them. "Guy named Chase. She met him when she went to the beach with her parents. Don't ask me how she got away from them long enough to do that. But...well, she ended up..."

“STD?”

I held in a gasp. Gosh, no. But I couldn't decide whether the truth was worse than that or not.

“Pregnant,” I said. “Her parents were mortified. They tried to get her to track down the guy and force him to marry her, but of course the dad wasn't interested in that.

He had nothing to do with the child. She had to give up her scholarship, college...

the whole thing. She moved back home and eventually married an older man with young kids. We've lost touch.”

“And you're afraid of that?”

Again, I had to stop and think that through. Was I? Not really. My parents were strict, but my mom snuck me to the doctor to make sure I was on birth control as soon as she heard about Aimee's pregnancy. She said she didn't want to take any chances.

“I'm afraid of the other part,” I said. “The guy who sleeps with me one time and changes his tune completely once it's over.”

Now it was his turn to go quiet. He didn't speak for the longest time. He stared at me for a minute or so, then dropped his gaze to the floor. After a couple of minutes of that, his head suddenly whipped up, his gaze sharp as it homed in on my face.

“I wouldn't do that,” he said.

“Get me pregnant and abandon me?”

“Sleep with you one time and change my tune completely,” he said. “I know all guys

say that, but I mean it. If you want to wait until we've known each other for months or even years, I'm not going to let you get away. Not unless you want to go, that is."

"I don't want to go."

That led to another silence. In this silence, we stared at each other for what seemed like hours. I wanted to ask the same question I'd asked earlier. Now what ?

"I don't want to wait, either," I blurted.

The words surprised me as much as when I'd admitted being scared. But what surprised me even more was that I meant them. I didn't want to wait. Not even one day. Not one hour. He couldn't leave this tent without us taking this to its inevitable conclusion.

"What are you saying?" he asked. "I need to be clear."

Again, I stared at him without speaking. Did I really have to speak the words? And if so, how did I say them? Should I be polite? Direct? Crude? Would he find the latter off-putting or would it only make things sexier?

Finally, I just blurted out the only thing I was comfortable saying. "I want to make love to you. I want to lose my virginity tonight."

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 3:58 am

RAFE

“ I want to make love to you.”

Those words were all I heard. In fact, my other senses may have completely shut off altogether. Well, aside from whatever was controlling my almost painful erection. Was that a sense? That wasn't one of the five senses, but it had to count for something.

“I don't have protection,” I said.

That was for her sake, not mine. This would be her first time, and pregnancy was probably the last thing on her mind at this point in her life. For my part, I suddenly couldn't think about anything but my baby growing inside her.

When did that happen? I'd just met her. But yes, suddenly, I couldn't imagine anything but having a baby with Sahara.

“I'm on birth control,” she said. “Never miss a day.”

That meant very little to me, but if it made her comfortable, I was all for it.

I might want to be a father now, but I'd wait until she was ready, even if it took years.

Even if she didn't want them, this was the woman I was going to spend the rest of my life with.

Although I hoped like hell she wanted a family.

Silence spread between us as we sat, neither of us daring to make the next move. I had no idea what the protocol was with a virgin. It had been a long time since I'd been one, and then, it had been the first time for both of us.

I could tell her to come here, but we weren't going to do anything just inside the entrance to the tent. She had a perfectly good sleeping bag over there. It only made sense to take advantage of that.

I pushed myself to my feet and started walking, wishing I could stand. It was hard to be macho when you had to duck down to avoid hitting your head on the roof of a tent.

Her eyes were wide as I approached. She almost looked scared. If this was frightening her, I definitely would stop. It had to be comfortable for her too—well, as comfortable as a first time could ever be.

“You have a bulge,” she said as I dropped to my knees at the foot of her sleeping bag. I did that more for comfort than anything. Keeping my head ducked wasn't easy.

Her gaze was on my underwear. I glanced down but returned my attention to her face. There was wonder in her stare, like she was checking out something truly amazing. But I knew this was more about her power to turn me on than anything.

If she was surprised by that, I didn't know what to tell her. Most men would be packing some wood after spending even a little time with this redheaded beauty, especially after the conversation we'd been having.

“Looks big,” she said.

Those eyes were still wide. Slightly less so, but still wide. I knew what she was

thinking. It was probably the same thing any woman in this situation would be thinking. Was that going to fit inside her? I was a little worried about the same thing.

“We’ll go slowly,” I said. “If you still want to do this, that is.”

I hated to keep checking in with her, but I wanted to be sure she was sure. As I waited for her to answer, I thought through what I’d do if she said she wasn’t.

It wouldn’t be easy to get this far and not relieve this ache inside that sweet, tight pussy.

I wasn’t sure how I’d handle going the rest of my life without knowing what that would have been like.

I’d always question if I could have done something to convince her that her virginity was safe with me.

While I was debating what to do next, she opened her mouth as though to answer, but nothing came out.

Instead, she looked around, then reached down and grabbed fistfuls of her T-shirt before yanking it up over her head.

I sucked in a breath when I saw she wore absolutely nothing beneath it.

Her large tits were bared for my shocked eyes to take in.

“Your turn,” she said.

“My turn?”

I felt like a moron, but I was too stunned to process what she might be saying. Instead of answering, though, she wiggled out of her shorts, which left her wearing only a pair of panties.

“We’re both wearing one item of clothing,” she said. “You go first.”

Holy fuck. If my erection had been threatening to force its way through the band of my underwear before, it was definitely pressing at the seams now.

But I didn’t know what to do about it. Well, I did know.

But I was afraid the sight of my hard-as-steel cock might have her hiding in that sleeping bag beneath her.

“Are you sure you’re ready?” I asked.

Oh, fuck. That didn’t sound right. It made it seem like I thought I was packing something extraordinary. Something she’d need to prepare herself to see.

She gave a nod, and I decided it was best to just keep moving forward. So with a shrug, I slid my thumbs beneath the waistband on each side and shoved downward, freeing my erection.

Even I was surprised by how stiff I was. Had I ever been that hard before? I couldn’t remember a time.

It seemed like hours ticked by as she stared at me without moving. I was starting to wonder if I should say something to guide this to the next phase.

Finally, she spoke. “I don’t know why I’m so nervous about this part.” She gave a laugh that did, indeed, sound nervous. “It’s not like I’m fully dressed. You’ve already

seen the top half of me.”

“Nobody’s ever seen you naked before?” I asked.

“Not a man.” She shook her head. “I mean, there’ve been sleepovers and stuff. I’ve always been pretty modest, though. Even when I go to the gym, if I have to change into my sports bra, I go into one of the stalls.”

“Sucks for them,” I said. She looked confused at that. I rushed to explain. “All the other men in the world. The ones who don’t get to be with you.”

And I meant that. If I had my say, she’d never be with another man. And since I was her first, that would mean she was mine. All mine. Everyone who’d come before meant nothing. I’d been searching for Sahara. I’d been put on this earth to find her and make a life with her.

“Here goes nothing,” she said.

With a deep breath, she wiggled around until her panties were down around her thighs. She pushed them the rest of the way down and tossed them to the side.

She sat on the sleeping bag, naked, her legs clamped together. I couldn’t see a damn thing, and that was fine. Just knowing I was a heartbeat away from having her pussy bared to me was enough.

“Now what?” she asked.

She kept leaving it up to me. That made perfect sense. But despite having plenty of experience with this, it may as well have been my first time. It was just that important to me.

“Now, you part those pretty legs and let me show you what you’ve been missing.”

I winced at the cheesiness of the statement. I’d said plenty of cringy things in the name of getting laid, but this time, every word mattered.

Because I wasn’t just getting laid. I was mating. For life.

Sahara closed her eyes as she lay back. She hadn’t parted her legs. In fact, she squeezed them together like she was securing what was between them.

I moved until I was squatting at the foot of the sleeping bag. She seemed to get the message. As she bared that perfect pussy to me, I let out a groan.

“You’re so damn beautiful,” I said.

“Oh.”

That one, mostly whispered syllable whooshed from her mouth. She was flat on her back by then, her face pointed up toward the roof of the tent.

Since she wasn’t watching, I felt comfortable moving in between her legs. But I didn’t position myself at her entrance just yet—not my cock, anyway. I propped myself on my arms and moved my head between her legs, keeping an eye on her face as I touched my tongue to her clit.

She let out another “Oh,” but this time, it was filled with surprise.

Her hips jerked upward, and I slipped my forearms under her thighs to hold her hips in place with my hands.

But I didn’t hold them all that firmly, which meant she could move freely, and soon,

that was exactly what she did.

Her hips were gently rocking in time with each slide of my tongue over that swollen nub.

Her breaths came faster, and occasionally, a light, barely perceptible squeak escaped her lips. She was trying to keep her noise to a minimum, probably conscious of the fact that we were outdoors. But nobody was around to hear. In fact, I might just shout to the rooftops when I finally came.

Movement above me caught my eye. It took a few seconds to register that Sahara was touching herself. The fingers of her right hand moved around her nipple. When she pinched it between her thumb and forefinger, I almost lost it.

Suddenly, she proved me wrong by letting out a cry so loud, I was sure they could hear it a half mile away. I just hoped the trees blocked the noise. If not, fuck it. One of my fellow loggers would probably high-five me tomorrow.

Finally, her rocking stopped, and she seemed to relax. Only then did I dare to lift my head.

“How’s that?” I asked, like I was getting feedback from my boss on some work I’d just completed.

She opened her eyes, but she didn’t look at me. She stared up at the roof.

“Oh my God,” she said. “That was...I can’t...words...”

I smiled as I stared down at my beautiful virgin. Okay, so she wasn’t mine yet, but I was definitely hers.

She lowered her gaze and finally made eye contact with me. “That was an orgasm.”

“Yep. Get used to it. I plan to give you multiple orgasms a day for the rest of your life.”

When her eyebrows arched, I realized what I’d just said. It had slipped out like it was nothing more than small talk.

But I meant it. Every word of it. I just hoped she felt the same. I hoped that more than I’d ever hoped for anything in my life.

“That’s unfair,” she said.

I frowned. “What’s unfair?”

“I haven’t even given you one orgasm. Get over here, and let’s do something about that.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 3:58 am

SAHARA

There was no way Rafe was going to fit inside me. He had to know that. He was more experienced than I was, after all.

He'd done this before, but had he ever been with a virgin? My guess was no. Not since he was a virgin himself, probably.

His gaze remained on my face as he moved between my legs, holding himself above me. His hand was around his erection, and the sight of that warmed me for some reason. I felt so secure, so safe. He'd make this as easy as possible. We'd get through this together.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

I nodded. But I realized I was squeezing his forearm so tight, he probably didn't believe it. I made a conscious effort to loosen my grip and relax. It was like when I went to the doctor to get birth control. Being tense during the exam only made it worse, the doctor said.

I took a deep breath, held it, and thrust my hips upward, pushing him in deeper than he would have dared to go. It was like an adhesive bandage. Rip it off. Otherwise, you just prolong the agony.

But "rip" was the right word. It felt like something inside me was tearing. I clenched my jaw and pressed my tongue hard against my teeth to keep from crying out. I didn't want Rafe to know just how tough this was for me.

His eyes went wide as he stared down at me. He definitely hadn't expected that. This probably would have felt good for him if he wasn't so concerned about my well-being.

"Fine," I finally said. "I just want to get the painful part over with."

I thought about giving him my bandage-ripping analogy but decided against it. That would definitely kill the mood.

"I know something that might help with that," he said.

I frowned. "What?"

"You know what I was doing earlier with my tongue?"

I nodded, still not taking my eyes off him. But I didn't really need to hear his next words to know what he was getting at. In fact, I didn't wait for him to say them. I moved my right hand between us, my left still gently gripping his forearm.

I'd never touched myself before, but there was a familiarity to it now, thanks to the experience Rafe had just given me. Still, it felt a little weird, considering the pain that was shooting through my body.

He slowly pulled out, not daring to go nearly as deep as I'd plunged him.

As he inched gently inside me again, I closed my eyes and tried to focus on the good sensations my touch brought.

It was tough at first, but soon I convinced myself that the warmth had overwhelmed the sharp pain his every movement brought.

Maybe it was mind over matter, but for whatever reason, it worked. Gradually, pleasure overtook pain, and I saw that I might very well be able to have a second orgasm. He'd promised multiple orgasms a day for the rest of my life, hadn't he?

That thought filled me with warmth—more warmth than my own touch.

It also helped me relax. I opened my eyes to find him staring down at me, the intensity in his eyes just as sharp as it had been before we'd started.

But the intensity faded a little once he noticed I was looking up at him. Intensity was replaced by warmth.

"I've got you," he said, his voice just above a whisper. "I'm right here. I'll always be here."

I nodded, but I was trembling all over. My grip on his forearm had tightened, but it was looser than when I'd first become aware of it.

I kept my eyes on him as long as I could, but soon enough, the warmth was spreading through me. Since I'd gotten used to the pain, the pleasure was free to take over.

At some point, I became aware in the back of my mind that I was biting my lip, but I didn't bother to stop. Instead, I let myself get carried away.

Soon came something I didn't think was possible.

Heat began in the area where our bodies met, quickly rising until it reached my neck and my cheeks.

And then I was gripping his forearm for a completely different reason as my body transported me to that place.

A place I wanted to stay forever. A place he'd promised to take me often.

I didn't realize I was crying out until his voice joined mine, his roar matching my high-pitched "ahh." Even though I was nearing the end of my orgasm, having him reach his at the same time was even more fulfilling. We were coming together...in every way possible.

When I finally opened my eyes and looked up at him, I knew I had a big, goofy grin on my face. It seemed to be contagious. Slowly, his mouth spread into a smile too.

Was he thinking the same thing I was? I sure hoped so because I wanted to spend forever with him. But suddenly, my smile faded and I gasped as the reality of the situation hit me all at once.

His smile collapsed like a balloon deflating after someone stuck a pin in it. "What's wrong?"

"I can't be a mom right away," I said.

I watched his reaction closely, hoping he was on the same page I was. He remained completely neutral, though.

"You don't want kids?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No. I mean, yes, I do. At least one. Probably two, because all kids need a sibling, right?"

That was silly. I knew plenty of only children, and they were just fine. But I wanted at least two. And I wanted Rafe to be the dad.

We'd do it together. As partners.

“I want kids,” I continued. “But my mom started way too early. I always said I’d get my career going first.”

“Your career? As a designer?”

Oh, shit. That was something else I needed to get out. I closed my eyes and tilted my chin, staring up at the roof. How did I explain this to him? It might scare him away.

“I’m not an artist,” I said. “I’m not a social media influencer, either. I’m a writer. That’s what I’m being paid to do anyway.”

He tensed above me, and that made me aware that he was still inside me. He’d never gone very deep, but now he withdrew, pulling completely out of me and sitting up, hand on each of his thighs, as he stared down at me.

“You lied?” he finally asked.

I shook my head. “I went to school to be an artist, but I did some writing while I was in school. I loved it. When I got out, I couldn’t find work. I started writing essays. I lucked out and sold one, and from there, it just got easier.”

He frowned. “Oh.”

He wasn’t sure what to make of this confession. But that wasn’t the part that worried me.

“I didn’t come here to get more social media followers,” I said.

“You came here to track me down and write an article about me.”

I nodded. It was a good guess. But I knew better than to breathe a sigh of relief. The

worst was no doubt yet to come once it sunk in.

“You’re going to write about me?” he asked. “About this?”

I shook my head. “Never. My goal was just to get some video of you. Maybe interview the people who’d come here hoping to get a glimpse of you.

I was going to write about it as more of a commentary on the silliness of virality.

This week, it’s a hot lumberjack in North Carolina.

Next week, it’s a panda at the zoo giving birth. ”

“You didn’t sleep with me for the story?”

Now I was feeling a little offended, but I shouldn’t. He was the one being caught off guard here.

“I never, in a million years, would have imagined that would happen,” I said.

“I was a virgin, remember? I would have bet every dime in my bank account that this wouldn’t happen.

But I felt this connection. I would have told you the truth earlier, but I kind of forgot why I came here in the first place.

I got so caught up in you, it’s like the rest of my life doesn’t exist. Nothing matters but what’s happening here. ”

And that was the God’s-honest truth. I just hoped he’d believe me. He had to believe me.

He looked around the tent, and I braced myself. He could very easily get up and walk out—after getting dressed, of course. Then I’d never see him again. I’d spend the rest of my life kicking myself for blowing the best thing that had ever happened to me.

“Please believe me,” I said in a desperate effort to keep him in my life.

“I believe you,” Rafe said.

Now I breathed a sigh of relief. “I was sure you’d freak out. I mean, it’s not like I’m going to write the article or anything.”

“Why not?” Now he was smiling. It was a slow smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth, and it was the most beautiful sight I’d ever seen. “It might make for an interesting story. You came here, tracked down Bigfoot, and fell in love with him.”

I tucked my chin and looked at him under raised eyebrows. “Bigfoot?”

He laughed. “I’m not saying I’m some freakish beast. I just feel like a monument.”

“Or one of the seven wonders of the world.”

He made a face, looking upward slightly and pursing his lips. Then, finally, after several long seconds, he spoke.

“More like an oddity on display in a case in a museum. Everyone gathers around and stares. Even takes pictures. Then leaves comments underneath.”

I gasped. “You didn’t read the comments. Tell me you didn’t read the comments.”

There was something odd about picturing some burly lumberjack hanging out on social media, scrolling through moronic comments from keyboard warriors. I

couldn't imagine Rafe doing that no matter how hard I tried.

"When I first saw the video, yeah." He sighed.

"Someone sent me a link. I don't even have an account.

I never looked again." Suddenly, he shifted his attention to me, his gaze sharp.

"You know what? I want you to write that story. Maybe interview a few of the other loggers who've been put on display like that. "

I nodded. "If you're sure."

"I'm one hundred percent sure. Besides, if you're going to be my wife, I want you to do work that makes you happy. That fulfills you. And yes, when you're ready, we'll discuss starting a family. But not until you're sure."

I had a feeling it wouldn't take as long as I'd originally planned. Rafe wasn't like my dad. He'd encourage me to pursue my passion in life, whether that was raising kids, writing, painting, or a combination of all three.

But for now, I was going to enjoy spending time with the man of my dreams. Maybe doing a little traveling too. But mostly just getting to know him one-on-one.

Soon enough, I'd move up here, and we'd probably get engaged and married within the next year. We'd build a life together, and eventually, that life would include growing our family.

I, for one, couldn't wait.

He put on his underwear and settled into bed next to me, pulling me close to him. As

I drifted off to sleep, my cheek nestled against his chest, I couldn't help but review the past twenty-four hours.

I'd come here and set up this tent, hoping to catch a glimpse of the man everyone was talking about. I'd had no idea that by the time the sun rose the next day, I'd be well on my way to falling in love with him. But now that it had happened, I couldn't imagine any other outcome.

The video may have drawn me here, but I'd stay. As it turned out, I was meant to be here all along.

Page 8

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RAFE

Grand opening.

I stopped to take a picture of the large banner hanging above my wife's new store.

I was standing in front of the small souvenir shop that had been part of Seduction Summit for as long as anyone could remember.

Sahara's new shop was across the street in a strip mall that included a café and a cabin rental office.

"Sketch and Sip Lodge," I read aloud as I looked at the sign below the banner.

No one was around to overhear me talking to myself.

No one, that was, except our eight-month-old, Ethan.

Elana was our oldest, and she was at her grandmother's house.

After Sahara's dad died, her mom moved up here to be closer to her grandkids, so we had a built-in babysitter for things like this.

But Ethan was still nursing, so I'd strapped him on my back, and we'd be celebrating his mom's grand opening together.

"Okay, come on," I said as I saw Enzo's truck approaching.

As he pulled into one of the street parking spaces, I looked both ways and rushed across the street.

Enzo and Larsen were early too. I'd better get inside so I could give my wife a kiss before our other friends started arriving.

Hell, I might kiss her in front of God and everyone anyway, but I wanted a moment alone with her.

I found Sahara in the center of her new shop, holding the usual tumbler she carried around, which would be full of fruit-flavored water. Her back was to me.

"Yes, I'm here to see about taking a class," I said.

She spun, her mouth spreading into a big smile when she saw me. That smile would only grow bigger once I turned around and she saw the happy face of our youngest.

"I booked my first bachelorette party," she said, setting her tumbler down and coming toward us. "They're from Wildwood Valley."

Wildwood Valley was a small town just twenty minutes from Seduction Summit. But unlike our town, which had once been full of single mountain men with very few women, Wildwood Valley had a large share of young, single women and no eligible men. At least that was the rumor I'd heard.

That town had made national news when a matchmaker arrived to start her matchmaking service. They seemed to be coming up here regularly to get married or honeymoon or celebrate their anniversaries, so it was no surprise that one of Sahara's first bookings was related to that.

"Yay!" I said in an overly enthusiastic voice.

I knew that would light up Ethan's face. I gave my wife a kiss, then she went around the back to give Ethan some attention.

"I'm so proud of you, honey," I said.

"Thank you."

There was a weight to those two words, and I knew they meant much more than just a response to my congratulatory comment.

She was constantly thanking me for supporting her, which seemed odd.

I couldn't help but be proud of my wife and encourage her to follow her dreams. Her happiness meant everything to me. She was my world.

Running this paint-and-sip shop was Sahara's dream come true.

She still did plenty of writing—she'd written and published so many stories about this town, she'd pretty much made it famous.

But being able to walk people through making artwork of their own had reenergized her.

She woke up every morning, excited for what the rest of the year would bring.

"Enzo and Larsen are here," I said.

And chances were the rest of our friends would follow. Not that we minded. Even though we appreciated every second of alone time we got, we both loved being around our friends.

"It's so nice of the guys to support me," she said, coming around to face me again. "It

means a lot.”

“They’re your friends too,” I said.

And that was beyond the truth. All the wives were close, which was no surprise, considering they were around the same age. As much as I loved my alone time with my wife, I felt a surprising peace when we were all together. Our friends were family.

“Here comes the crowd,” I said, nodding toward the door.

I’d sensed movement behind her, and finally I’d dragged my gaze off her.

We’d been married over a decade, but my desire for her hadn’t cooled in the slightest. It helped that before the kids came, we’d gotten plenty of alone time.

We’d traveled, using my vacation time to hang out on tropical islands and see parts of America I’d never seen.

Once the kids were a little older, we’d probably take a couple of vacations without them, just to get that one-on-one time we needed, but for now, I couldn’t wait to take family trips.

“I love you,” Sahara mouthed as the door opened and our rowdy friends came barreling through.

“Same,” I said.

It was a joke between us. Occasionally, one of us would say “same” when the other said “I love you.” But tonight, it helped us communicate without everyone nearby hearing.

From there, chaos reigned. Our friends poured in, gaping in awe as they took in

Seduction Summit's newest event location.

The group naturally separated, and I ended up with my crew—the guys I worked side by side with every day.

They were my brothers. Some were my fellow soldiers.

Some had served at different times, in different platoons, but we'd built our own base here.

Sahara led us all on a tour. It was a fairly small place, but there were long tables with an easel at each station, along with a section in the back where they'd prepare hors d'oeuvres and wine to serve everyone.

My wife would lead her customers through painting simple pieces of art. Flowers, mostly. She'd be getting some practice next week when the women in our group showed up for friends-and-family night. Enzo and I were joining them, but the rest of the guys had wiggled out of it.

"We have a surprise for the guys," Sahara announced at the end of the tour.

All seven of them stood smiling at us. They were grouped in the area where Sahara would stand when she led sessions here.

Vanessa and Sahara exchanged a nod, and Vanessa led the way to the back room.

All seven women, including Sahara, filed out, leaving us standing there, wondering what was happening.

We'd all gotten here early, and in just a half hour, the official party would begin—townspeople, friends, and relatives streaming through those doors to celebrate Sahara's big night.

But as each woman returned, I remembered their last girls' night at our cabin. Seven easels had been involved. This was what they'd been doing. All seven women were holding gallery- framed photos. As I watched, a smile spread across my face. I knew what was coming.

Starting with Daisy, they each spun their frames around, one at a time.

They revealed paintings of Axel, Ryder, Hayden, Dayton, Ryan, Enzo, and me.

The paintings didn't represent how we looked.

They represented how the women we loved saw us.

They weren't perfect—although Sahara's was the best, thanks to her years of training to hone her natural talent.

Yes, the paintings went beyond showing their love for us.

They represented how the fourteen of us were a bonded family.

We'd all come together around the same time, gotten married, and had kids.

Although Sahara and I were later on that last part than the rest of our friends, it didn't matter.

All of us were all like aunts and uncles to each other's children.

We were the family we had when we couldn't be near our blood relatives.

"Fuck, that's cool," Dayton said.

"Is that the type of painting your customers will learn to do?" Ryan asked.

Gennie laughed. “I’m not sure any of us learned to do this. Sahara walked us through it. I doubt I could repeat it.”

“Me either,” Eve said. “But I’m hanging this somewhere in our house.”

“We’ll be doing things I can walk my customers through,” Sahara said. “Mostly flowers. This was kind of complicated for a first time.”

“It was complicated for someone who took art in high school.” Larsen shook her head and looked down at her painting, which was one of the better ones. “Faces are hard.”

“Especially when it’s someone you know,” Summer said. “We had to get it as close to the picture as possible.”

Hers wasn’t an exact replica of Ryder, but I was pretty sure he didn’t mind. He looked happy—about the happiest I’d seen him since his wedding day. And he was always pretty happy these days.

As the door opened, bringing an early arriver, the women set their paintings on the easels on the table. That would demonstrate the kind of artwork that could be done in a couple of hours while taking generous sips from a wine glass.

I watched Sahara as she headed to greet her guests. I had Larsen to thank, in part, for how perfect my life was today. If she hadn’t posted that clip of me chopping wood, Sahara would’ve never come to town, and I might have gone my entire life without knowing how happy I could be.

When you put your heart on the line, the rewards were so worth the risks. Life was for living, and what I’d been doing before wasn’t even close to living. I’d never forget that.