



# My Grumpy Mountain Man (Summer in the Pines #10)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Camping with the grumpy mountain man these summer nights will be far from cold

I've just arrived on Pepys Island, and my first task on the job seems simple enough: get permission for the kids at my summer school to swim in a little lake up in the Almond Mountains.

Easy, right?

Until I find out everyone's afraid of its owner, a grumpy man who rarely lets anyone near the water.

But I'm always up for a challenge.

Even if the challenge is a big, rough-looking, burly man with arms full of tattoos.

I tell him I'll do anything.

His eyes darken, dragging over every inch of my curves, and I feel it everywhere.

He bets a city girl like me can't survive a weekend camping.

He might be right, but I don't mind sleeping in a tent if he's in it with me

The real question is: can he survive a weekend of my sunshine?

Come join your favorite authors for a collection of steamy summer romances, where the mountain air is cool, and the nights are scorching. These rugged men can handle the wild—but love is the one thing they'll never see coming!

**Total Pages (Source):** 11

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:33 am*

I would've pushed my move to September if I'd known it would be this hot on Pepys Island in July.

But I figured it'd be cooler here, being close to the beach and all, so I decided to move right away.

I hate summer in the city. The air gets thick, there's no breeze, only asphalt and buildings bouncing around light everywhere, making the weather forecast's 'real feel' the only thing I trust.

So, as soon as I had the chance, I packed my bags and came to Aria which is the biggest small town on Pepys Island and seemed the safest place to move to.

I don't know how to live without a supermarket nearby.

I don't know how to function without a supermarket nearby.

My meal planning skills? Honestly, they're terrible.

I swear I have a list when I shop, and yet somehow I never go more than two or three days without needing to run back for something I forgot.

There's always something. And today is no different.

I don't have a snack to bring with me to work.

We can't have that. At least I've made friends with Helena, one of the cashiers, which

makes the errands feel a little less lonely.

As I was saying, summer in the city is the worst. And for some reason, I thought summer would be better here.

Could I have checked the weather forecast? Yes. Did I? Absolutely not.

But with all the open spaces, the mountains and very few glass skyscrapers, I figured there'd at least be a breeze. Nope. None. Nothing. Nada.

Showing up with my armpits drenched in sweat was not the first impression I was hoping to make. It's my first day working at the school here on Pepys Island. Being a teacher has always been my dream and I feel so lucky I get to do that.

In the city, I moved schools again and again due to budget cuts, schools closing as it gets harder and harder to get the financial support they need.

It made being a teacher so much harder, I felt exhausted with the constant bouncing around.

Pepys Island seemed a safe choice, being so far away and living on an isolated island is not for everyone so they're always hiring willing teachers.

Honestly, as long as I get to teach these kids; get to be the mentor they need me to be, I'm okay with living in a more isolated location.

After I grab some snacks, I head to the school.

The school is open all year around to help out parents who work through the summer.

Although they've told me classes are more relaxed at this time of the year, focusing

more on teaching themes that don't fit the school year schedule and making sure the kids have plenty of time to play.

"Okay everyone, here's Bethany, she'll be joining us. She'll be teaching Math and IT."

"Finally someone to help us fix the computers!" one guy wearing a blue plaid shirt says.

She turns to me. "We're all doing more than teaching these days. Ever since the IT guy quit, we haven't been able to find a replacement. So we've been struggling."

"I'll be happy to help," I say truthfully. "Maybe I could teach the kids how to fix them too."

"That's such a great idea Bethany! I knew you'd fit right in.

That's exactly what we need: new ideas, new things going on.

Most of the kids are here because they can't stay home all day while their parents are at work, but it's summer for them, you know?

We don't want them to feel like it's regular school.

It's just the same place where they go all year but it's nothing like that.

There's plenty of freedom here to make sure it feels different for them.

That also gives us plenty of time to prepare for the next school year.

We're lucky to have this incredible staff that gives us teachers time to do that too. "

She looks at them appreciatively and points towards an empty chair and I take the order to sit down with the rest of the team.

It's Thursday morning, an unconventional choice for a first day, but the headmistress wanted me to have a shorter week.

Her words were 'we don't want you to get tired right away.

' I guess today's meeting is part of the reason too.

It seems this is a weekly meeting where everyone on staff gets to share their struggles and their plans for the week ahead.

It's a way to make sure everyone is in sync and it's the perfect environment to learn about the dynamics of the place.

When the headmistress starts talking about needing volunteers, I perk up. I'm eager to feel useful after spending the past hour quietly listening to every single person. I'm ready to help everyone and be part of the team.

"First up, we need someone to talk with Marcus about requesting access to the small lake next to his house. The local pool is closed and I think it'd be good for the kids to swim this summer."

Talk with someone? That seems easy enough. I raise my hand.

I'm feeling very proud of myself until everyone turns to me in surprise and then sly smiles appear on their faces.

"What?"

“No one has been able to get Marcus to give us access to the lake for years.”

Oh. That’s not ideal.

“I’m sure Bethany will be able to do it! This is the first year that we don’t have access to the public pool, so I’m sure he’ll understand!” the headmistress says. I bet she likes to be everyone’s cheerleader.

“If he even answers the door.”

“If he doesn’t kill her.”

“What?” I shriek. That’s a whole other level. I certainly don’t want to die. I didn’t even get a chance to get a plant for my apartment yet!

“Don’t let them scare you. Marcus is inoffensive. He’s just closed off and people like to spread rumors about him. He looks scary, but I promise you he’s not.”

“I bet he hates children,” someone says. “If that’s not it, why doesn’t he let them access the lake?”

They’ve got a point. What’s the harm in letting the kids use the lake?

“Is he the owner of the lake?”

“Not really, no. But the lake is only accessible through his property, so it’s practically the same thing. He lives in the Almond Mountains. And up in the mountains, well, it isn’t like we can build a new road.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll convince him.”

I hope I sound way more confident than I feel.

But one thing I know for certain: I'm not backing down.

I want a chance to prove myself here. It might be something small in the grand scheme of things but it feels important.

Plus, I've a trick up my sleeve. Behind this frilly dress and these Mary Janes, is a very stubborn person.

When the meeting wraps up, the headmistress gives me her car keys—I still don't have a car—and the address.

“Good luck!” People shout as they see me go.

He can't be that bad, can he?

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:33 am*

It takes me longer than I expected, mostly because I know how small the island is, but the roads up the mountains are twisty, narrow, and I don't want to ruin my boss's car on my first day at the job.

I try to picture the man in my mind with the information I've been given.

I picture him as the protagonist of my favorite horror movie.

If he does look anything like him, I might run to the school and promise to fix all the computers overnight to make up for any inconvenience caused by not keeping my promise.

No. He can't be that bad. That's what I tell myself as I park the car underneath a big tree.

The headmistress told me to park here because it's the easiest place to park near his place.

I get out of the car and a nice breeze hits me right before the warm, suffocating air does.

The breeze is nice, it feels like it's cooler here surrounded by the trees.

Still, there's not enough breeze for me to get comfortable as I head up the hill, following the gravel road leading up to Marcus' house.

Finally, I see it. It's a small cottage, cute, with blue railings and big pots filled with



tiny trees on the porch. It's not the scary villa I was picturing in my mind with hounds guarding the doors.

Feeling more confident with every little detail I see as I take each step, the bowls of water below a walnut tree, the insect hotel on the far right end of the house, I'm sure what everyone said it's a lie.

Probably a prank on my first day. The guy probably has scared first-timers multiple times just for fun.

I knock on the wooden door. I wait for a bit before knocking again.

No answer. The man must be outside. I'll just go to the back. Is that trespassing? Maybe? Definitely.

Now that I've established this was just a well set up prank, I don't think it'll hurt.

I walk around the house, and that's when I start to hear a steady sound: the sound of something hitting wood. Once, twice, three times. I head uphill a bit, toward the noise, until I spot a broad back gripping an axe.

But that's not what I focus on. I focus on every single leaf inked into his back, leaves that seem carefully placed to belong to each trunk that is each vein running across his muscular back. It's like he's part of a tree.

I can't stop staring. And maybe a sigh escapes me, because he suddenly turns to face me.

"Who are you?" he snarls, giving me the first taste of what I've been promised. Definitely not a prank.

“I...I’m Bethany. I’m a teacher at Pepys school.”

“My answer is no.”

“You don’t know what I’m going to ask!”

“I do. You’re going to ask me if the kids can use the lake.”

“Yes!”

I hesitate and then add very softly, “please?”

“No. And get off of my property now.”

“I...” What do I say now? I’ve no idea. He doesn’t even give me time to adjust to him.

Because he’s nothing like I imagined. Yes, he’s rough.

He has more scars on his arms than I have on my whole body, and his scowl has me taking a step back.

But there’s something in his eyes that makes me want to stay instead of leave.

Maybe it’s because of how intimidating he looks that my feet are glued to the ground.

He heads towards me, making my palms sweat.

“I’m sure we can arrange something! I can maybe help you out here?”

He scoffs. “A city girl like you? Sure.”

How... how did he know? Am I that obvious? I look down at my dress, it's one of my fanciest ones because I wanted to make a good first impression, but I don't think that's why he singled me out. I hold my chin up, ready for battle, but before I say a word he talks again.

“Look, I’m not going to change my mind. It’s best for you to use your time somewhere else. I don’t want anyone here, certainly not you. Nor kids messing up my whole place.”

“I swear I’ll make sure they don’t damage anything on their way to the lake.”

“No. Leave.”

He points towards the cottage, towards the road back. I don’t want to leave. But I can tell I've lost this round.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:33 am*

When I come back to the school, no one bats an eyelash when I say he has denied my request. But I already have a plan, I just need to prepare for it tomorrow.

When I tell the headmistress, she's kind, letting me know it's perfectly okay, but I let her know I want to try again.

Just need her consent to go there again tomorrow.

When she does, I'm excited to prove everyone wrong.

A part of me is also excited to see this man again.

He has left an impression. Maybe it's because of his tattooed back, it's one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen.

And... the way his eyes made me forget about everything else, I don't know.

I want to see them again. Even if that means interacting with his mood.

I swear he must have been born with a scowl.

My plan is simple: no one has ever been able to resist my muffins and he's not going to be the first. There's not much time to think about the muffins until I arrive at my apartment, drained with all the new information I had to pick up while trying my best to keep out of everyone's way.

I decide that simple is best for Marcus and get to work on my chocolate chip muffins.

I turn on the music and do a big batch, hoping this amount of sugar will be enough for a sugar rush that will lead to him accepting my request. Perhaps that will soften his face somehow too.

To be fair, I like him like this, rough around the edges.

There's an energy in him that makes me think he's very good in bed. That he'd have no trouble giving me orgasm after orgasm. I know for sure those arms of his would lift me up like I was a feather. He'd have no problem holding me against the wall and... No . I need to focus. It's not the time to lust over a stranger. I know this recipe by heart, I've done it a million times but there's a lot at stake here. It's my first mission in my job here on Pepys Island. I really don't want to mess this up. So I get my head in the game and lean in to figure out how to turn on the oven. It's still unbelievably hot—even this late at night—and I can't believe I'm actually doing this. But bribes must be made. I'll just melt a bit in the process.

The next morning, I immediately grab a cab to take me there.

David, the taxi driver, gives me lots of tips about living here and plenty of ideas for places to visit.

The drive flies by, which is good because it doesn't give me much time for me to think about whether I should have gone with a different flavor.

Before I reach the cottage, I hear a rhythmic thump. Is he chopping wood again? How much time can he spend chopping wood? I feel unprepared after spending so much time last night thinking about his muscled chest and back. I'll probably forget how to talk when I see them again.

But luckily, he's wearing a t-shirt today.

It's unbearably tight, which makes me think of his chest and gives me a good view of his arms, but at least there's some coverage.

He's mending a fence, not chopping wood like I thought, and when he sees me, he stops.

His scowl is even bigger than yesterday, and I almost stop on my way to him.

"Hey."

"I told you not to come again."

"Well, I'm just here to give you some chocolate chip muffins. I've made them myself."

His mouth twitches. Barely, but I catch it. Oh, this man likes chocolate.

"What if I'm allergic to chocolate?"

"I'll just come tomorrow with strawberry muffins."

He sighs, like he knows I'll just find something he'll eat, so might as well get it out of the way.

I open the box and let him take one. He hesitates before taking the first bite. "Does this have poison in it?"

"Well, how could I convince you to give me access to the lake by poisoning you?"

"You could poison me and bring the kids over, fast way to get me out of your way."

"I wish I could have thought of that, but I didn't." I laugh at how nonchalant he sounds about being poisoned. "So you get the real muffins this time."

"Don't stare at me while I'm eating."

I keep laughing because he's snarling at me, but he's clearly shy.

I put the box on a small bench and turn to watch the birds flying over the fields, hiding in the trees from time to time while he eats.

It's quiet, but at the same time it's not really quiet.

There are all these sounds, the trees, the birds, the wind, but there's something more grounding about them than the sounds of the city.

"You can turn around," he says after some time.

I look at the box sitting on the bench with just three muffins left.

"You just ate three muffins?"

He shrugs his shoulders.

"I was hungry. It's been a while since I've had something sweet."

He stares at me, looking straight into my eyes, making my knees wobble in response. I'm surely giving it an extra meaning, but his deep brown eyes do seem to pull me into giving him anything he wants.

It should be the other way around. I want access to that lake.

He hears the question before I have the chance to word it. "My answer is still no."

"Were the muffins bad?"

"No!" He shouts, almost like I'm hurting him for making the question. "They were the best muffins I've had in my entire life. You're a really good baker."

"What if I give you more? Will you let me then?" I take a step towards him but he steps back, in some way I thought we'd be friendlier now but it seems like he still doesn't want me nearby.

I don't want to leave empty-handed.

"I'll do anything!" I beg. For some reason, it feels very important to me to prove myself to the headmistress.

She has been nothing but kind to me, giving me every single bit of information I've needed to move here and allowing me to choose when I'd come.

Truthfully, coming here to Pepys Island would've been so much harder without her help. I need to prove she was right in giving me the chance to work in her school, to prove her time spent helping me wasn't wasted.

"Anything?" His eyebrows quirk up, giving me the first glance of something in him. Until now, all he has given me are nos, and a blank schooled expression. This is something I can work with.

"Are you sure of that?" His eyes roam my body as he clearly tries to intimidate me, but it does something instead, it sends a shiver down my spine, loving the attention he gives me.



This is new to me. I've never once liked to be undressed by someone's eyes.

It always felt gross, invasive. So why doesn't it feel gross now? I want him to keep looking at me.

I must be short-circuiting from the heat. This week's been unbearably warm, and I've been sleeping less and less as the nights get hotter. That's it. Clearly, I'm not thinking straight.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:33 am*

“I bet you can’t survive a weekend camping,” I challenge her.

She had to come again. She could have left yesterday and never come back, but no. She’s here again.

Bringing me chocolate chip muffins so delicious looking I couldn’t resist. Almost as delicious looking as her.

I shooed her away again, but she was not backing down.

So a challenge felt like a good idea. For a split second.

This is a very bad idea. I knew she was trouble the moment I laid eyes on her.

I don’t get involved. Every summer, people from the school come here to ask me if they can use the lake.

I’ve since stopped giving them reasons not to, as they usually don’t listen.

They just want and want without listening to what I’ve got to say.

Usually it works. But not with her. So as soon as the thought of a challenge came up, I let it out. And now I’m thinking of the consequences of my words. Because I know she won’t back down. She’s as stubborn as they come.

And what I’m most afraid of is what time with her will do to me. She’s beautiful and beautiful people don’t usually go for men like me. Grumpy, rough, with no social

skills. I even let my eyes roam her body like a fucking creep, hoping that'd make her run away.

I regret objectifying her that way, it felt wrong even though my mind hasn't erased any of it, I'm pretty sure it's been seared into me instead. Just the little time I've spent with her has made me turn into someone else. What happens if I actually get to know her?

All the times I've been with a woman have been purely physical with a lot of help from my friend Damon, a man who lives close by and is just as isolated as I am.

So, marriage is not on the cards for someone like me.

Even if I yearn for a family, a woman I'd share my life with and kids to run around this cottage. Yes, the big guy who doesn't talk to anyone actually wants a family.

I know it's silly, trust me, I haven't asked for this wish.

I don't even know how I'd be able to raise a person with my lack of tact. So, in a way, it's for the best.

But I can't stop looking at her, now with a bit more decorum. She's perfect. Her long dark hair is thin, framing her face, her eyes almost as dark as her hair. Her thick curves, soft and generous make it impossible not to want to touch her. That ass of hers would look so good on my hands.

"Of course I can!"

She interrupts my thoughts. Which is good because I haven't thought this much in months, she's clearly messing me up.

“Nevermind, it’s not a good idea.”

“What? No take backs!”

I take a deep breath. “It’s a bad idea. Go home. I don’t want to see you again.”

Lying to her is easier than I thought it’d be. That is until I see her smile falter, only to be replaced with a big fake grin. Good you prick, now she’s sad.

“I’ll camp here for a whole weekend and you’ll give access to all the kids who want to come swim at the lake.”

I want to say no but she looks so desperate, so earnest. And a thought occurs to me that I’d give her the world if I could. I don’t want to give her a reason to look this sad. I certainly don’t want to be the reason. But I also don’t want to give her access to the lake.

“I’ll consider giving them access if you do.”

“Consider? No, you have to promise me.”

“No can do.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll take it.”

Am I a shameful dirtbag? Maybe. I’m hoping she’ll understand when I tell her. But for now, keeping her close is everything I want.

And I’m not going to read too much into it. I’m just bored, that’s all.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:33 am*

“Trust me, I got this!” I say as I try to understand how to set up a tent.

It seems so easy in the movies. And the heat is making the structure pieces incredibly slippery and adding to my impatience.

He suggested I’d set up camp on the other side of the hill, it’s very close to the lake but close enough to his place that it doesn’t feel that scary. At least in the light of day.

After Marcus agreed with our terms, I asked him if he’d be okay driving me to get some clothes.

He didn’t look too happy with my proposal, grumbling something about changing the terms of our arrangement, but he did drive me.

It would’ve been nice to have a response to my comments throughout the trip other than nods and grunts, though.

We just need to get to know each other, he likes his privacy so I’m okay with being the over-sharer for now.

What I’m not okay with is not being able to set up the tent.

“Are you sure?” Marcus looks at me with his arms crossed, not convinced by my performance. It’s been thirty minutes and I’m no closer to setting this up than when I first started.

“Okay, I need help.”

I take a step back as I see him set up the tent. It's easy when I'm looking at him, just like in the movies, it's effortless. It makes me envious.

"This is what you were doing wrong, see?" I crouch down to see what he's saying, the way the pieces fit make way more sense than what I was trying to shove them into.

Eager to try, I grab the piece, brushing the back of my hand against his.

He flinches immediately, looking disgusted by the touch.

I, on the other hand, still feel a ghost touch, like he burned me somehow.

I want to touch him again just to see what it'd feel like, but I know I'm being too much. Like I always am. It works great with kids—they love the way I'm teaching them Math but making it fun at the same time. The adults? Not so much.

I'm too much, the person who's always running around doing a million things and over sharing every single thought.

I've come to accept that part of me, but it still hurts from time to time.

And now with Marcus I guess I feel safe enough to feel a bit hurt.

Which is ridiculous, but we can't always feel what we want to feel, can we?

I stand up, helping him but making sure I'm far enough to not repeat the touch. Mostly holding things, but at least doing something.

"If you can't even set up the tent by yourself, doesn't that mean you've already lost?"

His lips still form a thin line, but his tone sounds a bit more playful. I grin.

“I don’t think so. You offered to help me, so that’s on you. I’d get it done, eventually.”

I wouldn’t.

“Well, I will not help you anymore.”

Something tells me that isn’t true. Behind his abrupt words, there’s a sweetheart in this man.

I open my bag full of games. Board games are my usual weapon to make conversation with people. People feel more relaxed when there’s a game around, and I’m hoping Marcus is the same.

“Are you going to play these by yourself?”

“No. I thought it’d be fun to play together.”

“I’m not playing board games with you.”

I bite on my lip. “Why not?”

“I don’t want to make it easy for you to win this bet.”

“Just so you know, I’m very competitive. So you’d have to win at the games to make my mood sour.”

“I’d love to see that, it’s hard to imagine.” There’s a glint in his eyes now. He likes to challenge me. It was the same with the bet.

I grab my enormous beach towel, the one that can fit four people in, and set it up next to the tent.

“You think I have nothing better to do?”

“If you did, you wouldn’t be here, would you?”

He sighs, knowing full well he’s been defeated. My mouth can’t help but curve up at the sight of his resignation.

I set up the easiest game I own, hoping he’ll enjoy it.

It’s still so warm this afternoon that when I finish setting up the game, the towel is already glued to my thighs.

I shift slightly just to position myself better and when I finish, Marcus is looking toward my legs.

He looks a bit disgusted. A blush creeps up on me, hating the fact I brought a short, impractical dress.

To be fair, I didn’t expect I’d be camping when I started my morning.

I don’t need him to find me attractive. All I want is to get access to the lake.

Finding him attractive is normal. He is attractive.

He doesn’t have that conventional attractiveness though, it’s more of the magnetic variety.

If I saw his picture, maybe he’d look like a normal guy but around him, I’m electric.



I want to touch him, I want to check for myself if those muscles seem as taut as they look, I want to trace each leaf tattooed on his back and chest. But yeah, by the looks of it, it's not happening.

That's okay, I didn't come to Pepys Island to find myself a partner.

I came here to teach and make a difference for these kids.

Kids are society's future after all and they deserve that I put in the effort.

I explain the rules, interrupting myself over and over again, swatting the air instead of the mosquitos that linger around me. So many bugs. There are also insects on the towel now. They're tiny, but still. So many . At least the shadow of the trees surrounding us doesn't let me get sunburnt.

Marcus gets up suddenly, right before we start playing and my heart sinks a little. Okay. So he really doesn't want to play with me. Why did he let me explain the rules of the game?

He returns with something in his hand and tosses it to me.

"Put on this bug spray, it'll help with the mosquitos."

I try my best to catch it. I look at it in my hands. "Thank you. You didn't have to."

"You must have sweet blood, the mosquitoes love you."

"They always have. But is that a thing? The sweet blood thing?"

"I have no idea. But they rarely bite me. So perhaps. My grandpa used to say that I was lucky I didn't have sweet blood like him. He always had quite a few mosquito

bites on him during the summer.”

“That’s cute. Were you two close?”

“Yeah. I spent most of my summers here with him. It was fun. When he passed, I decided to keep his place and live here. This,” he circles with his index finger, pointing at the mountains, “is my home.”

“That sounds fun.”

“It was.” And that’s when he shows me his smile, it makes my stomach flop on itself.

Him looking at the mountains with so much love, so much nostalgia.

He’s just awkward, that’s all. It’s clear he’s used to—and enjoys—being alone.

I don’t think a lot of people get to see that side of him.

I’m glad I did. Maybe we could be friends.

He seems to remember he’s with someone else, not just with his memories and quickly goes back to his usual stance. I laugh like crazy but he just mutters a quiet ‘what’ before signaling me to get started on our game.

We’ve been playing for a bit when I lose, again. This time I decide to say something. I warned him I didn’t like losing.

“You’re cheating!”

“How?”

“I don’t know! But I can’t believe you won three times in a row!” I lean in toward him conspiratorially. “Are you secretly a big board game fan?”

He smiles again, it’s a small upward curve on the right side of his mouth but it’s a smile. I’ve been counting the times I’ve seen him smile since I’ve met him. Three so far.

“No. But some of us that live around here get together for dinner once a month and, occasionally, someone brings a game.”

“So you do socialize.” I wiggle my eyebrows.

“Just this dinner. It’s the one time I’m with other people outside of doing errands. I prefer to be alone.”

“Is it annoying for you, having me here? I can be by myself until the end of the weekend.”

“No.” There’s a harshness that wasn’t there before in his tone.

I get back slightly.

“Sorry. I... I don’t know how to say this properly. Without sounding weird.”

“Just tell me.”

“I’d like to spend time with you.”

My chest expands, butterflies flutter all over my body, with the way he looks at me, it’s honest, just like his words.

I know there's not a drop of lie in them.

My cheeks betray me, feeling hot, too hot to hide them.

I'm ridiculous, feeling this connected with a man I don't even know.

But his sincere words are making me catch feelings for a man I know will never want a woman like me.

He's quiet and I'm the opposite of that.

I'd be the concert in his backyard every single day. And I don't want to stop singing.

I utter a very rushed 'I like to spend time with you too' and stand up. "Can we go for a swim in the lake?"

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:33 am*

I made her uncomfortable with my confession.

I knew it was weird, but I didn't know how else to phrase it.

And now she wants to swim in the lake. I don't want that but I'll show her why I refuse the access.

She'll understand and then she'll move on.

Probably leave before the end of the bet.

I don't want her to go. But as soon as she deems the lake unsafe, there's nothing else that binds us. It's probably for the best.

And freezing water sounds nice when it's this hot out. I nod in agreement.

"I'm going to get changed," she says, like she feels safe with me, closing herself in the tent, dressing down right next to me.

I can't handle it. I can't think of her naked without losing my mind.

I want her. There's no question. I want her so much, and in a way I never wanted anyone else.

She's this pool of positivity that I want to plunge into.

And sink into if the tightness of my jeans is anything to go by.

She's humming a song I don't know and I hear the fabric of her dress tumbling to the plastic floor of the tent.

I look down, urging my cock to not react this viscerally to hearing someone undress next to me.

I'm not a boy. Fuck. I want to touch myself right here and make sure she hears what she does to me, make sure she understands how powerless I'm around her, that I'll do anything for her.

But what I want most is go back in time and make an effort learning how to talk to people properly, so she could be mine. But no, I'm just the guy who's standing between her and her goal.

I rush to my cottage before I do something crazy I'll regret and completely drive her away. If I can at least spend this weekend with her, I tell myself, that will be enough to last for the rest of my life.

When I reach the hill, feeling a bit more myself and less like a lusting lunatic, she's wearing the cutest swimsuit, pink, full of frills and ruffles, looks like straight out of a vintage shop.

I bet they've lots of those in the city, not just the few that exist here on Pepys Island.

It suits her; it hugs her generous waist in a way that completely kills my already very weak resolution to keep my distance.

Her hair is in a high ponytail now that I want to undo.

I'm back to being a lusting lunatic. Fuck.

She waves at me like she's excited to see me. It ruins me. Her smile. It's so pure, so brilliant.

She turns towards the lake, not waiting for me to get to her. I speed up my pace. I don't want her to get in without me. It's not common for fear to hit me up like this.

"Be careful!" I shout. She stops and I exhale. Good, she's going to wait for me.

She drops her beach towel right by the margin, or is it a blanket, I can't figure it out, maybe the best way to describe it would be a bedsheet.

But she doesn't wait for me. She gets to the water. Halfway in, she turns, "You're very protective, aren't you?"

" she shouts back, The smile on her face is taunting, almost like she wants me to admit something. But I don't want to admit to anything.

"It's colder than I expected."

"Just be careful! I'm serious, there's a big—"

One second I'm seeing her, the next I'm not. I run and jump in the lake, finding her waist and pulling her towards me and the shallowest part of the lake.

"Are you okay?"

"There's a big drop there. I couldn't tell," she says, shakering. "But I know how to swim. It was just unexpected. It was too sudden."

"You don't have to play strong for me. You can tell me you were scared."

Her eyes lock onto mine, cloudy, her lips tremble, she looks lost. “I was.”

“I know. You scared the shit out of me, sunshine.”

My arms are still wrapped around her waist, our chests touching, but it’s not enough.

I hug her tightly, hoping it’ll be enough to comfort her after the scare.

I don’t know how long we stay like this because I’m physically unable to let go.

I’m never letting her out of sight again.

It was stupid of me to not tell her. What a fucking useless ass!

I know better. I should have made her wait.

She pulls back slightly, just enough to look up at me. Her breath is uneven. Mine too. I’m mesmerized by her.

“I…” I can’t help but brush the strands of hair off her face. I’ve avoided touching her but now it seems it’s urgent that I do. I’m so relieved she’s safe.

“Thank you. For saving me.” She puts her hands on my chest, like she wants to feel how hard my heart is beating.

For a moment, we just stand there, breathing each other in.

I’m not smooth, I’ve never had much luck with the ladies with my awkward self and my awful mood, but she doesn’t seem to care.

She presses her mouth against mine, knowing exactly what she wants, not waiting for



me to make a move.

I like that about her. She doesn't let me hesitate, taking charge, confident.

My sunshine. Mine.

Eventually, I'm the one taking charge. My arms tighten around her, pulling her closer like she belongs with me, right here by my chest. I don't know if she does, but I belong here, with my arms around her.

When she moans, I grip her hair, wanting to hear it again and again.

It's the sexiest sound I've ever listened to.

And she did it because of me. With each brush of our lips, she gives me excuses to obsess more and more over her.

I carry her to the towel, my mouth still pressed to hers, feeling like the luckiest son of a bitch in the world.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:33 am*

The sun's just starting to dip behind the mountains, turning the sky a mixture of oranges, purples, and pinks.

The lake reflects it all, almost like it's a magical lake surrounded by trees.

Kissing Marcus was just as magical, I think it was the fear that made me brave enough to kiss him.

It didn't look as terrifying as the beautiful lake that is dangerously deceptive.

Or maybe it was the way he held me, like I was precious.

One thing I know for certain is that he's just as attracted to me as I am to him.

It didn't feel like before but the way he kissed me, the way his mouth claimed mine, taking all the breath out of me, it wasn't a kiss from someone who's indifferent.

We might not be each other's forever, with our very different personalities, but our bodies want each other.

And my body wants him in a way I've never wanted anyone before.

We've been quiet, contemplating the view. I don't think I ever felt comfortable with silence. But with Marcus, I am.

"Is this the reason why you don't want them to come?" I ask after what seems like a long time.

“Yeah...”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“About the sudden change in height?”

“Yeah. You could have told me.”

“I’m sorry. I should have told you before you went in, not when you were already in the water.”

“No. I mean, yesterday.”

“I’ve told multiple people in the past few years. They never listen.”

He stops, almost like he has to collect himself to talk this much. Am I asking too many questions again? People have told me I ask too many questions before.

“Every time someone asked me to, I explained why. So I got tired. If no one was listening to my explanations, I thought I might as well not waste my time telling them again. A single no is a full sentence and all that.”

“I’d have listened.”

“I know that now but you come here, eager to use the lake, screaming city girl all over. I judged you for it, you know. Figured you wouldn’t listen to someone rough like me.”

I put my hand on top of his, trying to appease him. “And you were right. I wouldn’t have ignored you based on your appearance but I’d just keep pressing because I wanted to give a good first impression to the people I work with. I bet you didn’t

think I'd accept your bet."

He brushes his fingers down my arm, like he's studying me. I can't get enough of the attention he gives me. I'm not used to feeling like I'm someone's main focus, which is exactly how he makes me feel.

"I knew you would. You're stubborn like that."

"Stubborn?"

His eyebrows reach the top of his hairline, waiting for my denial.

"Fine. You're right. I'm very stubborn."

"But I like that about you." He gives me a hint of a smile, it complements his dark beard so well. I swear every time he smiles, my chest beats faster.

I like a lot of things about him. His grumpiness, hiding how sweet he actually is. His tattooed chest that I can't stop staring at. His lips on mine.

"So you understand why I don't want them to come, right?"

"Did—" I start before stopping the question I'm about to ask. I don't want to pressure him, to make him talk about things he doesn't want to.

"Did anyone die here?"

"No, sunshine. But I almost did when I was a kid."

I tighten my hold on his hand and he squeezes mine in return.

“I used to come here with my grandpa during the summer. He never allowed me to go alone, he was always here. But one day, I decided I was grown up, that I didn’t need him to come with me.

After all, I’d come here every day! So when he wasn’t looking, perhaps thinking I was playing inside, I went to the lake.

At first it was great, I was here all by myself, feeling like an adult, very proud of myself.

But I underestimated how tired I got and, as you saw, you can’t really put your feet on the ground unless you’re right near the margin.

I was already very tall back then but the water was too deep.

I knew exactly what I had to do but I just couldn’t.

Somehow I panicked. I could have floated, let myself rest for a while.

I don’t know what happened, I just knew I was lucky enough my grandpa figured out where I was before it was too late. ”

I squeeze hard, I can’t imagine going through something like that. It’s clear he still carries that with him. It’s obvious why he doesn’t want to be responsible for an accident.

“I’m sorry that happened to you.”

We sit quietly for a while, admiring the lake and the various colors that it acquires as the sun gets lower, replacing the oranges with dark purples.

“Here I thought you didn’t like the kids littering the place.”

“I don’t like that either. I don’t understand why some people can’t pick up after themselves. Sometimes I get down on the beach and there are plastic bottles all over the place. Pigs, that’s what they are.”

I laugh loudly at his rant, unable to contain myself. He scowls at me. I just grin back.

“You know what you should do? You should let them see it.”

“Who?”

“The adults at the school.”

“Why? I’ve explained multiple times that I think it’s unsafe. They believe just because it’s a small lake, it’s safe. Dumbasses.”

“You’re frightening, you know that right?”

“You don’t look frightened.”

“I’m special.”

“That you are.” His tone is so intense that my cheeks are once again burning and I look down to our interlaced hands.

“People are afraid of you and just think you’re lying to them to get them out of your way. I think that’s what’s happening.”

“Okay, I can do that. But I’m not saving anyone.”

“Just me?”

“Just you.”

I want to kiss him again, but I can't get the nerve to look him in the eyes again. Him saying I was special it's still echoing all over me.

He leans in, grabs my chin and tilts my head so I can't escape.

Drowning in his dark eyes, I forget how to breathe before his lips are on mine again, demanding, not letting me escape, and it's enough to bring me back to the surface.

When his tongue nudges my mouth to open, I welcome him, eager to feel more of him.

He's rough but caring, just like how he talks to me.

He doesn't touch me anywhere else, and it's infuriating because I need him to touch me everywhere.

I grab one of his hands and put it on my breast.

“Sunshine, are you sure?”

“I'm sure, I need more,” I say desperately as I catch my breath.

“Fuck, sunshine, you can't say it like that. I'm going to lose my mind.”

I scooch closer to let him know I'm not kidding.

He drops his mouth to my breast after freeing it from my swimsuit, licking my nipple,

still sore from the cold water.

“This swimsuit looks absolutely perfect on you but I need it off. Can I eat your pussy?”

I nod, feeling excited about him finally losing his restraints.

When I’m completely naked, a hint of embarrassment hits me. “Will anyone see me?”

“Just me. There’s no one else nearby. It’s just us, sunshine. You’re so beautiful. I don’t even know where to start with you.”

I chuckle. “Start where you promised.”

He gives me one sly smile and drops to his knees in front of me, running his tongue from my breast to my belly and stopping right before it reaches the place that’s aching the most.

“You’re a tease!”

He bites my thigh lightly in response. When his lips and tongue find my clit, I’m already too close. It doesn’t make sense. It never felt this good with anyone else. As he finds the right amount of pressure, I cry out his name, my hips bucking against his face.

I grab his hair, not knowing what to do with the pleasure that’s building up inside me.

I lean in slightly just so I can touch his shoulders, tracing his tattoo so I can last longer, but it doesn’t work.



It makes me shatter completely as his tongue brushes against me.

Marcus doesn't stop until I'm a trembling mess and begging for a rest, wondering if the stars I see coming up in the sky are real or just my imagination.

Marcus' kisses travel to my thighs, belly, breastbone until he's right next to me. "You're amazing, Bethany." He grabs a strand of my still wet hair, playing around with it. He's so gentle, nothing like the man he shows to the world.

We listen to the rustling of the trees as night starts to set completely.

He holds my hand and somehow it feels like being here right now is exactly where I need to be.

Moving here during the summer, raising my hand to get access to the lake, every single action led me here.

And I don't know how it'll go from here, but right now all I want is to appreciate this sunset.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:33 am*

I do a simple stir fry for dinner. It's not much, but I hope she enjoys it.

It was good to see her reaction to this cottage.

I've done my best to keep it up to date while still keeping its history.

She was especially interested in my plant collection.

Nature is as important to me inside as well as outside, so I do have a few houseplants.

She, of course, scolded me, it seems some of these plants should not be as close to each other as I've set them.

She gave me a lecture on all of my plants' major enemies.

I didn't think a city girl like her would know anything about plants.

Wrong again. She quickly rearranged them—giving them enough space to make them forget about the 'whole ordeal' as she put it—making herself at home.

Which I certainly don't mind. As far as I'm concerned, this is her home as much as it is mine.

It sounds delusional to just know. I think I'd laugh if someone ever told me love at first sight is real.

But I'd be wrong because I love this woman.

So much so that I've been avoiding the question that's been nagging at me for the past hour.

Inviting her to the cottage, making dinner for her is much easier than to ask what's next for us.

It's not a question I've ever asked a woman.

The terms of my previous arrangements were always clear: have sex and move on.

But if there's one thing I know is that I don't want to move on from Bethany.

She's the sunshine that's missing from my life.

I bet the houseplants agree, their leaves seem to shift in her direction.

So percolating the question seems exactly the right move, letting my head stir and stir, mimicking my hand movement as I stir our food.

"Thank you for cooking."

"There's no need to thank me. I'm happy to."

She traces her fingers on my arms absently. It's good because I missed her touch. Ever since I started cooking, we haven't touched and I'm losing my mind over it.

"You like my tattoos, don't you? You keep touching them."

Her cheeks turn pink as she pulls her hand back. I grab it and set it down on my arm again.

"I don't mind. I like you touching me."

"I like to touch you too. Not just your tattoos."

She grins like it's normal for us to touch each other. Just not something that has happened today.

"What's the story?" She's just as addicted to tracing my tattoo as I am to her touch.  
"Behind it."

I wish there was one big story, one that would make her fall in love with me right now. But sometimes we do things that aren't as deep as people think, just because they look impressive from where they're standing. My tattoo doesn't have some sad story or life-altering meaning behind it.

"There's not really a story. Is that boring?"

"Oh, certainly not! Why would you think it's boring?"

"I'm pretty sure you like big gestures and grandiose reasons to do things."

"I do, but that doesn't mean I don't find simple things interesting too."

"You must have seen my scars. I got most from working or playing around here."

I'm not a natural, in fact, I'd say I'm the opposite of a natural.

While I've always lived around nature I was never good at manual stuff.

But like everything, I've learned how to do them by being a stubborn bastard.

Every cut, every bruise, every wound taught me something.

One day I decided I'd love to have part of the mountains—the forest specifically—with me at all times.

Nature has been my true love all my life and it felt right to have it with me, to have the leaves, the branches with me.

And covering some of my scars is a bonus.

"You told me there would be no story, but there is!"

"Well, it's not that deep of a story, is it?"

"I disagree," she says with a smile. "Thank you for letting me."

"Let's eat." I nod towards the kitchen table Bethany set up.

I've never bothered to cover it with a towel but she managed to find one, probably embroidered by my grandmother from the looks of it.

My grandpa always said she loved sunflowers and tried to include them everywhere when he spoke about her.

'Did you know she once embroidered one sunflower in my boxer briefs? I called her crazy! But then she made me wear them.' he said once and I remember how much he laughed reminiscing on that time.

I decide to share it with Bethany. It's strange how much I want to share that with her.

"Oh really? She must have been so fun! I'd love to have met her."

"Me too. I did, but I don't really remember, I was too young."

"I'm sorry, Marcus. Thank you for sharing that with me. I bet she'd be proud of you for keeping this house so spotless."

"Thank you."

"You never thought of starting your own family?" she asks as we finish up our plates. We must have been hungry; while we're eating we didn't even utter a word.

"There are not a lot of opportunities when you spend most of your time on your property. And especially when you're someone like me."

"What do you mean?"

"Someone who doesn't know how to speak to people."

"I've been speaking with you perfectly fine."

"As I said before, you're special."

"So you'd like to start your own family, then?"

"Yes. But it's not something I work for. I really don't want to meet new people so it's easier to stay as I am. I'm fine being a single man all my life."

It's the second lie I've told her. Being happy as a single man all my life would've been true if someone had asked me two days ago, but now?

I'll only ever be fine if I get to spend my life with her.

Or at least near her. Close enough that she can keep brushing her leg against mine. That'd be enough.

"I want to have a big family! I'd love to have at least two kids. Working with kids is hard so I imagine how hard parenting can be, but I can't seem to let that deter me from this dream. So I'll probably be that person who is surrounded by kids both at home and at work.

"That sounds nice."

"It does, doesn't it?"

I imagine what our kids would look like. Their mother looking beautiful holding their hands. A familiar pang in my chest reappears with the thought.

I've spent these past few years shoving this dream in the darkest corners of my soul and one conversation with Bethany is enough to send them to the light.

She really is sunshine. And sunshine this bright will surely get me sunburnt.

So I decide it's time to get into the shadow by asking the question I've been holding close to my chest.

"Are you leaving?"

She jumps, turns her face and there's a hint of hurt in them.

"Do you want me to?"

"No. But I figured the bet is off now that you understand how dangerous it'd be for the kids to have access to the lake."

"The bet is off? No way!" She sounds outraged that I'd even consider it. "I'm going to sleep outside in that tent and prove to you I can do it. Unless you want me to leave."

"No." It comes out rough, so I try to articulate what comes next better. "I don't want you to leave. But you don't have to sleep outside. You can sleep here."

She widens her eyes.

"I don't mean it like that, we can sleep in separate bedrooms."

A laugh erupts out of her. "I know! Relax!"

Besides, I wouldn't mind." She winks and I swear it takes everything in me not to get off the chair and bring her to my bedroom.

I settle for a kiss instead, I languish in it, savoring her, loving her for staying.

Even if it's just one extra night. It's good enough for now and our kiss deepens slowly, her in my lap, my hands on her ass. I truly love this woman.

She stops suddenly. "Hey hey! Don't try to get me to back down on my bet."

"What do you want if you win the bet?" I ask, wanting her to make me responsible for her happiness.

"I think you know exactly what I want." She giggles in my ear and it's the only sound I want to hear for the rest of my life.



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:33 am*

I glance out the kitchen window to check if the tent has suddenly disappeared.

Which is crazy because a tent doesn't magically disappear and there's nothing dangerous on these mountains. It doesn't make me less worried about her.

I miss her touch. She's only been gone for twenty minutes and it feels like I can't spend a second more without her touching me. I just know I'd be the kind of guy to walk around without a shirt all winter, just to get her to put her hands on me.

I decide I'm being ridiculous. She's an independent woman who doesn't need me.

I need her. But she's decided to go until the end and I'll respect her wishes.

I sweep the floors before going to sleep.

When my body touches the mattress, I hear an urgent knock. I run quickly to the door.

Bethany's here in a silky little nightgown that clings to every curve, the lace barely covering enough of her breasts.

"Are you okay?" I grab her hands and start checking her body to see where she got hurt.

"I'm okay! But it's not quiet!"

"What do you mean?"

"There are all these sounds, the trees, the crickets, the animals. You'd think sleeping outside would be quieter, but no! It feels like there are too many unknown entities that are awake. I don't like it." She stops, her eyes grow twice their size. "What if a bear kills me?"

"There are no bears here."

"It feels like there could have been bears out there. I'm too young to die!"

"You're not going to die, sunshine, you're safe out there. I wouldn't let you sleep outside if it wasn't safe."

"I know, but I don't think I can do it. Does that confirm I'm a city girl?"

"Yes, but I don't mind. Get in here." She leans into my chest and I sigh in relief, feeling relaxed for the first time since she left.

"Can I sleep with you?"

I take a moment to consider her question. "Just sleep. I'm honestly too exhausted to have sex. Or at least to reciprocate. I wouldn't say no to an orgasm, those help me sleep."

I chuckle, loving how honest this woman is.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of you. As long as I can hold you all night."

I feel her nod on my chest. Good. Maybe being in contact with her skin for a long period of time will be enough to let her leave tomorrow.

\*\*\*

When I woke up this morning, I was still holding her tight. My brain and body seem to agree it's very important that I do everything in my power to touch her. Getting her to come with my fingers right before she fell asleep felt powerful, as much as waking up next to her.

We got up early, so we walked around after eating the rest of her muffins for breakfast. I showed her some of my favorite places around here until it got too warm to be outside.

It has been like this lately and it makes it difficult to do anything outside during the day.

I'm making lunch while Bethany kisses my back.

She started by kissing each one of my leaves, now she's moved on to the branches.

It's making me incredibly hard, but I'm pretty sure it'd just make things harder for me if I ever got inside her.

I'd rather focus on her pleasure instead.

Someone knocks on the door. Fuck. I forgot Damon was going to drop by to get some of the DVDs I borrowed from him. And I might have promised him lunch when he helped me carry a bunch of wood over last week.

"Do you want me to open the door?"

I don't, but this is a very critical phase in the risotto and I don't want to mess it up. I want to make a perfect meal for her. Maybe I can get Damon to leave after he gets his DVDs.

"Yes please, do you mind? It must be Damon."

She leaves the kitchen, still humming the song she was listening to under her breath.  
Don't show him how cute you are, I think to myself.

"Hi, I'm Bethany!" I hear from the kitchen.

"Oh, I didn't know Marcus had someone over. I'm Damon, nice to meet you. I'll come back later."

Yes!

"Oh no need! He's just cooking. I'm sure he doesn't want you to leave."

I do! I don't want him here. Why does she have to be so kind? Tell him to go away!

Damon comes by the kitchen.

"Hey man, you didn't say you'd have company."

"I didn't expect to have company."

"Uh? She seems nice."

I glare at him and scowl. "Don't you dare."

He whistles. "Sounds like someone is protective of her. Don't worry. I'm not interested. But I am interested in knowing how you two met."

"It's very easy to explain." Bethany swoops in, looking like she only heard the last part.

Good. I don't need to sound more like a caveman than I already am.

Threatening one of my best friends is not something I'm proud of.

But she is mine. Or at least as much as she wants to be mine.

And I'll take every single last crumb and I do not share.

She gets him up to speed quickly as I finish preparing our lunch. It's enough food for the three of us, but I don't want to remind him I promised him lunch.

"So you're having lunch with us?" Bethany asks. She turns to me. "You didn't tell me someone would be joining us."

"I forgot." There's no use in denying it. He's come at lunchtime. I can't send him packing even if I want to.

"We can schedule for another time."

"Nonsense! I'll set up an extra plate for you."

And she does. Because my sunshine is kind, so much kinder than I'll ever be.

So we end up eating together. Bethany asks him what it's like to be my friend, what it's like to live in the mountains. Damon answers effortlessly. She tells him about the abuse the plants took with me, living so close to their enemies. Damon laughs.

He does this so well. I can see them together.

I can see how they fit with one another.

He's much more apt to reply to her questions than I am.

I'm awkward and never know how to continue the conversation.

That was always the problem with women. They expected me to continue but I never really knew how to.

I'd ask them follow-up questions that were too personal for a first date, so things only ever got physical.

And maybe that's what's happening with Bethany too.

She's leaving and all she'll remember is the grump on the mountains that gave her two orgasms. I, on the other hand, will remember the warmth in my heart whenever I was around her.

"You live alone too Damon? Are you not interested in settling down?"

"Not really. I don't think I've ever fallen in love and I don't think I ever will. It doesn't seem like I'm built like that. So I'm perfectly fine living by myself."

"Maybe you'll find someone who'll change your mind," she says.

"I doubt it."

When Damon leaves, I'm already wound up. Every single interaction they had just confirmed to me how deeply wrong I am for her.

"So, since it's still so hot out, maybe we can move on to a more difficult game. What do you think?"

"Sure," I say, but my heart's not in it.

She gets all the cards out and does a wonderful job at explaining the new game. I bet she's a great teacher. I can tell by how good she is at simplifying complex game dynamics.

As we play, she talks a bit about life in the city and some of her favorite things about being a teacher.

When we finish the second game, she drops the cards and I sense her gaze on my face. I'm actually looking at her for the first time in a couple of hours. She seems lost. Hurt.

"What's wrong?" She asks.

All my attempts at hiding my insecurities have been fruitless.

How can I say I'm so jealous it hurts? I'm an adult, I should be more in control of my feelings. But no. I've never had to deal with such powerful feelings before and I'm deeply unprepared for it.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:33 am*

He doesn't answer me and I think I know the answer to that question. Because it's always the same answer. I've heard it over and over again.

“I'm being too much, right?”

Marcus seems to hesitate. I shift my eyes to the place where I dropped my bag last night.

I need to go. Before my heart is wrenched from my chest, I need to guarantee I can salvage at least a few pieces.

I grab the cards so I can arrange them in their box, I'm trying to be as fast as I can.

I need to call the taxi too. So I don't spend much time waiting.

“Fuck. No, Bethany. Don't go. What are you saying? You're not being too much. You're never too much for me. What made you think that?”

I'm trying my best to keep my tears in check. My eyes hurt with the strain but I don't want to look even more difficult to handle.

“I can see you're not happy. You're grumpier than usual and I've been here talking way too much. I should go. You don't need me breathing down your neck. There'll be no access to the lake anyway. I thought... I thought I could stay, but I don't want to be a burden.”

“What? You're not a burden.”



Marcus gets closer and I take a step back in response. If he's too close, the tears I'm holding might get out.

“Fuck fuck fuck. I hate that I'm this socially inept guy. I hate failing you.” He rubs his beard too hard, almost like he's punishing himself.

“I'm insecure. And I want you all to myself.

That's all it was. I knew Damon would never hit on you but you were so happy talking with him and he's so much better at talking with people.

He lives an isolated life and enjoys his privacy too but he's not like a stray dog who never talks with anyone.

And fuck I was just imagining you with him and you'd be so much happier. And I can't ever offer that, can I?”

I want to say something, but I know he isn't done.

“I love you Bethany.”

My eyes widen at the unwavering way he says that.

“I'm sorry. I needed to say it. You're going to leave and, for all the time I've spent not saying things, now it feels so important that I do.

I will love you until my last breath. And that makes me such an incredibly insecure person because I want you so much but there's nothing I can offer you.

You're so amazing, there's no way I want to drag you down in some way.

So no, you're not a burden. In fact, you're the opposite of it.

You make me feel light, like you're carrying part of me with your cheerful conversation.

I love how curious you're about everything and how opinionated you're when you know about a subject.

And I also love that you're stubborn. Being the grump that I am, it's the closest quality you have in common with me, so I guess I like how you're also set in your ways when you want to be. ”

“I don't want you to get tired of me,” I confess, starting with what hurts me the most.

“Sunshine, there's nothing you can do for me to get tired of you. I love to see you talk—”

“Even when I'm always talking about something stupid?”

“You're never talking about something stupid. Understanding you, it's an intricate puzzle I will always want to put together.”

“It's just... I always feel people are eager to shut me up. Some people mention that being around me is exhausting.”

I look down at my feet, I've never really talked about this with anyone, it feels incredibly raw.

Marcus gets closer, grabbing my hand and then holding my chin, it's tender and rough at the same time, the way he's holding it. He tilts my chin so I'm looking at those dark eyes of his.

“Those people, sunshine? They didn’t deserve your friendship or your love.

If anything, being around you is intoxicating.

It’s addictive. Can’t you see how wonderful you are? How full of life people become when they’re around you?

" His forehead is full of wrinkles, his eyes soft and kind.

“Tell me you believe me, tell me you’re not exhausting. "

I hesitate and then whisper, “I’m not exhausting.”

“Now say it like you mean it.”

“I’m not exhausting,” I say again and this time I believe it.

I believe his words. My words. I believe that maybe I’m not right for some people but it doesn’t mean I can’t find my tribe too.

I can. It’s just a matter of finding them, of finding the people who will allow me to be who I am. And one of those people is Marcus.

I see him smile, a smile that beats every single one I’ve seen so far.

“Tell me again.”

And I do, once, twice, ten times until he stops holding my chin and wraps his arms around my shoulders, holding me tight.

A few tears leave me, feeling more at home than I ever felt before.

I love this man, he's my safe place, I know that in my heart.

I've known ever since I met him, that certainty but my brain didn't want to believe it.

He interrupts a smile whispering in my ear.

“Don't go today, only tomorrow. I'll drive you to the school. Let me have you for a little while longer.” There's something so desperate in his words and I understand now that he's holding me tight, as much for him as for himself.

He still thinks I'm leaving. There's no chance in hell I ever will.

"I love you too," I say, the sound muffled by his chest.

He pulls back, a pleading expression in him.

"I love you, you didn't hear me say anything else. I love you."

He wraps me in his arms. "I'm still me, I'm never going to be as smooth as Damon."

"I don't care. I love you all the same. And I want a family with you."

"What if I'm not good at being a parent?"

"You'll learn. We'll learn together. How does that sound?"

"So good. Too good to believe it. I want you to be mine so fucking much."

"I'm yours. It's weird for me too, but what I said to Damon, about someone making him change his mind is how I feel about you."

I didn't expect to fall in love here on Pepys, just a few days after I arrived.

But sometimes you just know. And I just know I want you, Marcus. I just know we're meant to be."

"I feel that too. All I want is for you to touch me. It's like I can't breathe if you don't."

"I'm fine with that. In fact, why don't I start now?"

So I kiss him but don't stay on his lips for long as mine start to wander into the deep forest that leads to his hard length.

I've been wanting to touch him but he hasn't let me.

But this time, he's not pushing me away, I'm quick to remove his jeans and finally see what he's been hiding from me.

I feel myself get wet when I see his big, thick length.

I get on my knees and lean forward. He grabs my head.

"Sunshine, are you—"

I don't let him talk, taking him into my mouth.

He groans and then all I hear is "oh my god," over and over again.

I revel in it, it soaks my panties, how much I'm enjoying this.

I've never enjoyed giving head much but with Marcus, everything is better.

There's a deep need within me to make him groan like that, to make him feel desperate.

He pulls my head back. "You need to stop. There's nothing I want more than to be inside you, and I'm not going to do that if you keep going with that perfect mouth of yours.

He pulls me up. "It seems like you were made for me. Were you, sunshine?"

I nod, because it's what I feel. I feel like I was made for him and he was made for me. We exchange rough kisses, full of tongue, full of pure need.

"Your pussy felt so good in my mouth. I don't know what it'll do to me when I've my cock buried inside you."

I moan and cling to his chest in response.

"Tell me you want me."

"I want you so much, Marcus. I want your cock inside me."

He lifts me up and carries me over to his bedroom, which smells so much like him that it heightens the pleasure I'm already feeling.

When he's on top of me, I'm already moaning with the thought of what will happen next.

"Tell me, do you really want this? We don't have to do anything today."

"Marcus! Does it look like I want you to stop?"

He chuckles. "No. In fact, it looks like you want to take my cock right now."

"Yes!"

"But I need to get you ready first."

"I'm ready."

But he doesn't listen and starts working his tongue over my clit. I'm glad he didn't listen because it's even better than yesterday. I don't know how, but after just one time together he's managed to figure out exactly how to make me whimper after a couple of seconds.

He gets on his knees, grabs a condom from the nightstand and gets between my legs. The tip of his cock is right at my entrance. He looks like he wants my consent and all I want to say is to get in already, so I do.

He teases my entrance over and over again until he pushes the head inside.

I gasp, my hands holding on to the mattress.

"Is it too much sunshine? Talk to me." He sounds so worried but all I'm feeling is a deep pleasure.

"No, keep going!"

He does what he's told and starts sliding in and out of me.

"You're so fucking wet. So good. This pussy feels so good. You're so perfect, sunshine."

He slides a hand between us and rubs my clit lightly. One second I'm in control, the next I'm crying out his name, holding on to the leaves that cover his chest. He follows me, groaning and pumping in and out of me until we're both completely wrecked.

"Fuck, I don't think we're going to leave this bed anytime soon."

"Sounds good," I reply. "I love you."

"I love you too sunshine. You're just perfect. I'm so thankful you're stubborn."

My smile is quick. "I don't think you'll be thankful in a few months."

"Oh believe me, I will."



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“She’s perfect.”

“You’ve said that five times over the past couple of minutes.”

“Because she is.”

He’s teary-eyed, totally mesmerized by this tiny human who somehow carries pieces of both of us. I don’t judge him for it, I feel exactly the same.

“She really is.”

I’m holding Soleil, our first child. It’s always been a dream of mine to become a mother, and having Marcus by my side for it...

it made everything more real. More bearable.

I glance down at the scratches on his forearms, marks I left when I was clinging to him during labor, he never even flinched.

I’m not exactly eager to go through that again anytime soon, but I know we will.

We’ve always talked about having at least two.

I like the idea of them being there for each other for the rest of their lives. Perhaps because, as single children ourselves, we never had that.

I’ve gotten used to life in Pepys Island now.

It's very difficult to get my favorite brand of chips, one I craved most of my pregnancy but other than that, I feel incredibly lucky to have moved here.

The staff at my school have been amazing and in August, we all got to experience the lake and its dangers on a sunny Saturday.

It was an amazing day and they've actually come to understand that Marcus didn't refuse the kids access for no reason.

They still like to call themselves the best matchmakers of all time, and they make sure I keep them well-supplied with muffins as a thank-you for introducing me to 'the love of my life'.

And living with Marcus? It's honestly been the best. I moved in after what, a week? Which sounds totally insane—but when you know, you know. We were just so happy to have found each other.

Every day, Marcus picks me up from school, and the drive home has become one of my favorite parts of the day.

We trade stories, me sharing about what the kids did, him filling me in on the latest drama from the guys, like how Damon apparently has a runaway bride living in his cabin.

Who knew Marcus would turn out to be such a gossip? Certainly not me.

Marcus interrupts my reminiscing.

"She's like you, sunshine. She's already smiling. She doesn't know what life will be like for her but she's already smiling," Marcus says proudly. "It fits her name perfectly."

After we learned that Soleil meant sun in French we both knew exactly what would be the name of our baby.

“I’m pretty sure that’s a reflex. You know babies don’t smile until they’re eight weeks old.”

“Who’s the grump now? Just let me say my daughter came into the world smiling.”

Laughter erupts out of me and our child cries out in response.

“Oops.”

“Guess she doesn’t like your laughter as much as I do,” he teases, snickering as he gently strokes her tiny hand.

He’s more playful now. More open. The grumpiness is still there, it’s part of him after all.

But a grumpy man like him has accepted me far better than cheerful people ever did.

He listens when I ramble. He never tells me I’m too loud or too sensitive or too much.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen this man roll his eyes.

With him I feel seen. Important. Safe to take up space.

And slowly, I’ve been learning to lower the volume on all the old voices in my head, the ones that told me I had to be less of myself to be loved. Rearranging mental blocks I put on to protect myself. He too had some hurdles to navigate. But together we’ve made it and grown.

Because sometimes, all it takes is one person in the world who believes you're just right exactly as you are. And I'm looking right at him.