



Wanted by the Mountain Man (Mountain Man Summer #12)

Author: *Lilah Hart*

Category: Romance

Description: She's just a diner girl until one flirty logger turns her world upside down. One summer kiss underwater, and she's falling fast.

Life as a server in my mom's diner has its perks. One of the biggest perks is the gorgeous loggers who come in for breakfast. I don't pay much attention to them until Rourke comes into my life.

He's hot, fun to flirt with, and he looks at me like I'm the only woman in the world.

When he invites me to a summer get-together at Lumberjack Cove, how can I resist? Especially when he takes me up on my idea to go underwater for our first kiss.

I'm already thinking forever, but what if he doesn't feel the same?

Mountain Man Summer is a multi-author series of short, steamy insta-love stories with guaranteed happily-ever-afters.

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PEPPER

The guy was seated at the counter again. The tall, super-hot guy with reddish-brown hair and a strong, stubble-covered jaw.

Dang, he was gorgeous. And he was always watching me. The way he looked at me made me feel like the only woman alive. The only one who mattered, anyway.

His name was Rourke Donovan. I'd grabbed that from his credit card the first time he came in. It was a name I couldn't forget, no matter how hard I tried.

"Do you need a refresh?" I asked.

I held up the carafe. I'd gone out of my way to grab it and bring it over to him, mostly as an excuse to stand in front of him for a few seconds.

He gave a nod and slid his mug toward me. He didn't take his eyes off me as I lifted the carafe to pour. My hand was very visibly trembling, and I kept my eyes on the liquid. Even though there was no danger of the cup tipping over, I worried I'd slosh it over the side and make a big mess.

Somehow, I managed to land all the liquid in the cup. Then I set it on the counter to steady it—and myself—and returned my gaze to his face.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"There's a party at Lumberjack Cove. You ever go there?"

Lumberjack Cove? I'd lived here all my life, and I'd never heard of it. But for some reason, I didn't want to tell him that.

"Never been." I shook my head. "What kind of party?"

I wasn't much of a partier. Never had been. I'd helped out at my mom's diner from the time I was about eight years old—maybe before, if you counted rolling silverware and causing trouble.

When I was growing up, this place had been a tiny tourist town with very few locals. In the past few years, I'd watched it grow as military guys like this one moved to town to work on the logging crews and live in the new cabins being built up and down the mountain.

"Just a bunch of loggers and their wives," he said. "I don't have to bring a date, but pretty much everyone else will have one. I'll definitely be the fifth wheel."

Did that mean only four people would be present? Two couples plus him? No, I had a feeling this would be a big party, and I wasn't a fan of crowds—not after working in the diner all day.

But he hadn't said when this party was. For all I knew, it was on my day off. Besides, no way could I pass up the opportunity to spend time with the man seated in front of me. Especially not if he was asking me on a date.

But wait, he hadn't asked me to go with him yet. I was definitely getting ahead of myself.

"Sounds fun," I said.

"So you'd be up for it?"

My eyebrows arched. Yes, he was definitely asking me. Whether it was an official date or not was anyone's guess.

"Sure," I said. "When is it?"

"Tonight. After work."

It was Friday, and I'd have to be here pretty early in the morning to prepare for the breakfast rush. But I'd give up sleep to spend time with Rourke Donovan.

"Awesome," he said.

And that was when he broke out that smile—the one that made every woman who worked here, including my mom, blush a little.

At first glance, the guy was like the other mountain men around here—quiet, brooding, only opening up to the women they loved.

But this guy could pull out the charm when he needed to. Just a smile did it.

"Why don't I give you my number, and you can text me your address?" he asked. "I'll swing by and pick you up."

Everything in me froze up at that thought.

I didn't want him to see my tiny apartment in the shabbiest complex in the area.

It wasn't even in Seduction Summit. This town was hot property these days, which was why I had to settle for a bargain basement apartment that was a good twenty minutes from work.

I'd lived in my childhood home as long as I could, but I needed my independence. And having my own place had made a big difference, even if it was nothing fancy.

"Why don't I just meet you there?" I said. "What time?"

His expression changed slightly. Nothing dramatic, just a slight flicker. A normal person wouldn't have noticed, but I was pretty tuned in to this guy. Something about him had grabbed me from the beginning, and those brown eyes seemed to haunt my dreams.

"Whenever the workday finishes," Rourke said. "But I think the girlfriends are meeting us at seven. So around seven."

"Do I need to bring anything?"

It seemed like the polite thing to ask. I had no idea if this was a get-together where everyone would just drink and not eat. If so, I'd have to grab some dinner before I went. But even then, it seemed polite to offer to bring something. In Seduction Summit, you always offered to bring something.

"Maybe a gallon of your mom's sweet tea, if you can," he said.

My mom's sweet tea. Everyone thought she made it. She actually had it shipped in from Alabama in an unmarked truck.

We always took the label off. It cost too much extra to get the manufacturer to do it so that any part-time employees didn't realize it wasn't homemade.

Although the fact that there were shelves full of unlabeled plastic gallon jugs should've tipped someone off, even after we perfected the art of removing the label off without leaving any sticker residue.

“We’ll have food,” he blurted.

It took me a second to process what he just said. Food. I wouldn’t need to grab dinner first. That would give me extra time to get ready and pace around my tiny apartment. Maybe even rest a little.

Oh, who was I kidding? I’d be pacing nervously around my apartment until time to leave.

“Bring your swimsuit,” he said as he set his credit card on top of the check I’d placed face down a good twenty minutes ago.

I gave him a confident smile, grabbed the card, and walked away.

But that smile promptly turned to a frown.

Swimsuit. This guy hadn’t even seen me out of my uniform yet, and I’d be wearing nothing more than a swimsuit in front of him?

Sure, men had seen me in a bathing suit before.

But it was a completely different matter when it was your first date.

Was it a date? Maybe not in the traditional sense. But it meant I’d get to spend more time with this gorgeous lumberjack. And no woman in her right mind would pass that up.

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ROURKE

Lumberjack Cove was a small manmade pond in the mountains of Seduction Summit. One of the guys had discovered it and told the rest of us about it, and it quickly became a popular hangout for guys on the logging crew and their families.

Tonight, there were no kids, just couples.

The guys on my crew were newer to town and didn't have wives and kids yet.

"Yet" being the key word. The couples I was hanging with tonight were well on their way to marriage and kids despite the fact that they'd all pretty much just met.

I didn't understand how that had happened.

But then here I was, waiting eagerly for a redheaded server to show up. Pepper was her name, but that was a nickname. Her real name was Penelope. Someone said she went by Penny in high school. I liked Pepper, though. It fit her bright-eyed, perky personality.

"Hey, Donovan!" Ryan called out. "When's your chick showing up?"

My chick. I took offense to Pepper being called a chick, but at the same time, I liked that he was calling her mine. That gorgeous woman was bringing out stuff in me that I didn't even know was there.

"You just worry about yourself and that woman you talked into dating you," I shot

back.

“Ooh,” Dayton said. “Rourke owned your ass.”

I cringed. It was all just playing around, but Rafe was nearby with his new girlfriend, Sahara.

He didn’t care for me much, and he’d probably learned by now that I had bought the property next to his.

He had some beef with me. Thought I was trying to pick up a woman he’d gone home with when he was new to town.

The funny thing was, I wasn’t trying to pick the woman up. I was a flirt—had been all my life. I loved the attention from women. But most of them bored me, and I couldn’t explain why. I’d always assumed I just liked a good challenge. The thrill of the chase and all.

But now I was questioning all that because the woman at the diner—the one I hoped would meet me here—had captured my attention in a way no woman ever had. And that fascinated me. I was basically stalking her more as a way to figure out why I couldn’t stop thinking about her than anything else.

Okay, so maybe that was only partly true.

The fact that I couldn’t stop thinking about her made me want to spend as much time around her as possible.

Night and day, I found myself wondering what she was doing now.

Was she at work? Was she watching TV? Was she eating dinner alone like I was?

Or did she have a full life where she hung out with her friends after working with her mom all day?

I'd just ripped off my shirt and hopped into the pond when something caught my eye.

I glanced toward the parking lot the way I had at least a hundred times in the past twenty minutes or so since arriving.

But unlike all those other times, something new was in the parking lot.

A small sedan that I knew all too well. It was Pepper's.

I should get out and greet her, but I didn't want to look too eager to my buddies.

They'd never let me live that down. So I wiped my eyes and slowly whipped my head around to dislodge excess water.

By the time I reached shore, the women had taken her into their fold, and she was over at the blanket with all the food, sitting with three of them.

"You're dating the girl from the diner?" Dayton asked, sidling up to me.

I cringed at his words. Pepper wasn't "the girl from the diner." She was a woman. She was all woman. And her work at the diner was just that—work. It didn't define who she was. But her mom owned that diner, and it was a safe bet Pepper would take it over when she retired.

She already did a lot around there. She pretty much managed the place. I'd seen her placing orders, and just the other day, she'd been training someone new.

But all I said in response was, "It's new."

“Got it.” Dayton chuckled. “I won’t get too used to having her around.”

Two guys jumped into a game of netless water volleyball while the women cheered from the sidelines with plastic cups full of wine and alcoholic seltzers. But my mind was working through what he’d said. He wouldn’t get used to having her around.

The guys thought of me as some sort of player, even though they’d never seen evidence of it. Pepper was the first woman I’d brought to something like this. Sure, I’d slept with a few women here and there—mostly tourists coming through town. But I was no womanizer.

But I wasn’t bugged because I cared what the guys thought of me. I couldn’t give a damn about that. What did bother me was that Dayton said he wouldn’t get used to having her around. I was shocked to find I didn’t like that.

Did I have a thing for Pepper? Of course, I did. But that didn’t mean I wanted to have her by my side at every function for the rest of my life.

Did I?

“Look sharp, Donovan,” one of the guys called out, snapping me out of my thoughts just in time to turn and find the ball flying straight toward my forehead.

I recovered, but not in time to get my arms into position, which meant the ball bounced off the side of my left forearm, making me look like a total screw-up. My attention immediately went to Pepper, sitting next to the food blanket with a plate on her lap.

I wanted to be over there with her, enjoying some of that cold fried chicken or maybe a couple of the sandwiches Hayden’s girlfriend had picked up from the deli. But instead, here I was, catching the look of smug satisfaction on Rafe’s face as it became

clear their team was going to kick our asses.

Reminding myself Pepper was watching, I put my head solidly back in the game. We still lost, but at least it was by a smaller margin.

“Who’s up for a lumberjack competition next?” Rafe asked. “Give you a chance to earn back your dignity.”

He was looking at me when he said that. Damn it, the two of us were going to have to get this out in the open or come to blows.

I’d assumed since he had a girlfriend now, his dislike of me would end, but it was clear he just didn’t like me in general.

This couldn’t possibly still have to do with him thinking I was after some woman who’d come and gone from our lives faster than that bucket of chicken would.

I wasn’t sure he even remembered her name.

“I’m getting some food first,” Dayton said. “I’m starving.”

Thank God someone said it. I definitely needed to get some food in my stomach. We’d waited until Pepper arrived to start eating, and it was a good thing the women got first dibs on the food before the guys tore through it.

By the time I got to the bucket of chicken, only breasts were left.

I might be a breast man in other areas, but when it came to chicken, I preferred legs and thighs.

I skipped the chicken and grabbed an extra sandwich.

Either the sandwiches weren't as popular, or someone had replenished the supply, because there were two very full, very large trays of them.

"We're going for a swim," the women announced, taking their containers to the large trash can the guys would empty tomorrow.

I saw Pepper lagging behind, lifting off her shirt while still seated. She then moved to the fastening of her shorts.

She looked uncomfortable, and I knew exactly why. She was about to parade in front of these guys wearing a one-piece swimsuit. As much as I wanted to ogle her, I wanted to protect her even more. So I quickly pulled the guys into a conversation about the upcoming football season.

It seemed to work. None of the guys were interested in checking her out, anyway. They were all newly in love. Just as I didn't care anything about their girlfriends, they didn't care about mine.

She wasn't my girlfriend, though. And we weren't in love. So why was I suddenly not interested in looking at any woman in the world but her?

I'd barely cleaned my plate when the guys hopped up to start their pissing match—the one we called a lumberjack contest. Normally, I'd be all over it. I was competitive by nature, and I'd just helped my team lose at water volleyball, after all. But tonight, I was all about Pepper.

The other women had left her sitting in the water alone, but she didn't seem to mind. I glanced over my shoulder at the group that had gathered near the woods before returning my attention to her. She was floating on her back, staring up at the sky like she didn't have a care in the world.

Did she have any idea how beautiful she was? My guess was no. I weighed my options. I could go slam an axe against some wood, or I could spend time with the woman I'd invited. Spending time with her was the right thing to do. It was polite. I couldn't just leave her in there.

I told myself all that, but really, I just wanted to be around her. So I whipped off the T-shirt I'd put back on after swimming and stepped back into the water, wishing it were deep enough that I could show off my diving skills.

At first, she looked down at me without standing. But she soon put her feet on the ground and faced me head-on.

She nodded toward the scene behind me. "You aren't doing that?"

I shook my head. "I'd rather go for a swim with you."

A smile slowly spread across her face. "Really?"

I shrugged. "Does that surprise you?"

"Well, you invited me here, so I guess it makes sense."

The conversation seemed neutral on the surface, but a lot was happening underneath.

We were locked in a stare. The warmth in her eyes told me that my comment had touched her.

She liked that I'd rather spend time with her than hurl an axe toward logs.

Despite the fact that spending time with her was what I should be doing.

It would be a total dick move to invite her here and spend the whole time hanging out with the guys.

“Do you do this stuff often?” she asked.

I crouched in the water to get it all the way up to my shoulders and ran my hands through it in some sort of weird muscle-flexing move. I was showing off for the woman, and yeah, I was a little embarrassed about how obvious I was being. That didn't stop me from doing it.

“We come out here sometimes,” I said. “But usually, we meet at each other's houses.”

“And you're always the only single guy?”

“Now I am.” I looked back over my shoulder. “That part of it's new. At first, it was just a couple of the guys, and then the next thing I knew, everyone but me had a girlfriend. It happened fast.”

“I've noticed that around here lately,” she said. “All these single guys suddenly have girlfriends. Where are they all coming from?”

I shook my head. “I don't know. I guess you grew up here?”

She nodded. “Born and raised. I was working in that diner when I was still in elementary school.”

I hid my surprise at that, what with child labor laws and all, but I had a feeling “work” was a term she was using lightly. I doubted her mom had her waiting tables when she was ten.

“So you’ve seen this place grow?”

“Have I?” She laughed. “You should’ve seen this strip when there were only our diner and a couple of shops and a couple of businesses. The lodge has been there a while, of course. Sometimes I don’t even recognize it.”

“Does it upset you?”

She thought about that a little bit, then finally returned her gaze to me. “I kind of like it. Especially when you started showing up at the diner.”

Oh fuck. She was going straight to it. I hadn’t expected her to be so direct. I was surprised to find I liked it.

“Yeah, I guess you noticed I come into the diner a lot,” I said.

“I have. You must really like our food.”

“It’s not the food.”

Oh, wait. The diner was owned by her mom. That comment could’ve come off as offensive.

“I mean, the food’s great,” I rushed to add. “But that’s not why I show up every morning before work.”

It was an extra effort to get there so early.

I was one of their first customers most days.

I’d suck down some coffee and have an order of eggs and toast. Sometimes I’d add

bacon.

I wasn't even all that hungry most mornings.

Not that early, anyway. But even five seconds of interacting with her woke me up better than ten cups of coffee would.

"You know what?" she asked, glancing at the people behind me again. "We could use some privacy."

I almost groaned as my dick stirred. Yeah, I definitely wanted some alone time with her. First, because I wanted it more than I'd wanted a piece of that delicious chicken earlier—and that was saying a lot. But also because I couldn't return to my friends now. Not with this obvious boner.

"Go underwater," she said.

I frowned. "What?"

But she didn't wait. Before I could ask any questions, she dove underwater. I had no choice but to duck down and see what happened next.

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PEPPER

I 'd never been all that shy. Even when it came to men.

But Seduction Summit had always had a shortage of people my age. Until recently, anyway. Honestly, it had never even occurred to me to date one of the many hot mountain men in town. They'd started showing up once word spread about the logging jobs.

I normally didn't keep my eyes open underwater when I swam, but tonight, I had no choice. Luckily, the water was clear enough that I could easily find Rourke. And I moved toward him, making it clear exactly what I had in mind.

He didn't budge, and it made me doubt whether or not he wanted this, but as I swam closer, he reached for me, our lips meeting as warmth spread through my chilled body. And that was when I wished I could hold my breath underwater longer. One kiss would never be enough.

It wasn't the sexiest kiss ever—we didn't even part our lips. It was surprising just how hard it was to kiss while holding your breath. I'd never tried it before, but then, I'd only kissed one guy, and he'd been horrible at it.

We had to break the kiss all too soon, and even though it was little more than a prolonged peck on the lips, it was still the hottest kiss I'd ever had. We broke the surface, taking in gulps of air. But I was gasping like a fish while he calmly inhaled.

He probably could have held his breath longer, as big and in shape as he was. But all

my exercise came from rushing around the diner ten hours a day, six days a week.

He looked back over his shoulder in time to see one of the guys swinging an axe through the air. It landed with a loud thwack , and everyone cheered. Had they been doing that all along? I'd tuned it out until now.

He turned back to me. "You know, I bet they'd never notice if we took off."

My heart leaped at his words. He wanted alone time with me, and I definitely wanted it with him. And that would mean a real kiss. One that was likely to electrify every cell in my body.

I smiled. "Let's do it."

That was all he needed to hear. He rushed around me, heading toward the opposite side of the pond from where the group stood. I glanced at them, found they weren't paying a bit of attention to us, and took off after him.

"Where are we going?" I asked seconds later as I followed Rourke out of the water.

With another glance at the lumberjack competition, he sped up his pace. "You'll see," he called back.

I started walking faster too. Obviously, he was worried they might notice us. Maybe they were watching by now. If so, I didn't mind. In fact, sneaking off with the most jaw-droppingly gorgeous guy I'd ever seen made me proud. I wanted the world to see this.

The big rock outcropping next to the pond had some steps on the side of it. I pictured them chiseled into the rock, but I wasn't sure. One of the women, Larsen, had told me about it while we were swimming.

I half-expected Rourke to steer us toward those rocks, but he didn't. Instead, he headed straight into the woods. Not even down a trail—just between trees, blasting his way through with his arms.

We were barefoot and in bathing suits, but it wasn't too bad. The grass was high, so it tickled my ankles, but the ground was solid and firm, yet soft enough to provide padding for my feet.

He finally slowed when we reached a little clearing wrapped in thick evergreens. In the center was a ring of boulders that looked like they'd been dropped there on purpose. The fading daylight filtered through the canopy, just enough that the area seemed to have a slight glow.

“This is it,” he said, turning to face me. His voice was low, rough. “We'll hear them coming long before they get close.”

I stepped into the clearing and smiled, looking around. “It's like a secret hideout.”

“Yep. Our hideout.”

Before I could say anything, he closed the space between us and cupped my face in both hands. This time, there was no rushing. No breath-holding. Just his mouth on mine, hot and sure and so devastatingly good I forgot where we were, who I was, what we'd just left behind.

He kissed me like he was starving. Like he'd been waiting for this moment longer than the few weeks he'd been coming into the diner. And I kissed him back the same way, gripping his shoulders, pulling him closer, letting the heat between us melt whatever hesitation had been lingering.

His hands slid down my back, skimming over the damp fabric of my suit. I

shivered—not from the cold, but from the sheer intensity of it all. My body lit up everywhere his fingers touched.

He eased me back against a tree, one hand braced beside my head, the other still tracing lazy paths down my spine.

“Tell me if you want to stop,” he murmured against my mouth.

“I won’t ever want to stop,” I whispered back.

That made him grin, but only for a second. Then his mouth was back on mine, and we stopped pretending this was anything less than inevitable.

He suddenly broke the kiss, then moved toward my jaw. He brushed the hollow of my throat with warm, open-mouthed kisses. I tipped my head back against the tree, giving him access, my breathing turning shallow and quick.

I could feel every place we touched like sparks under my skin—my chest pressed to his, his hips pinning mine gently, not demanding, but possessive in a way that made my knees feel like jelly.

His hand slid around my waist, then up, fingers teasing the knot of my bathing suit top. My breath caught, anticipation rushing through me so fast it almost made me dizzy.

“Is this okay?” he asked, his voice rasping over my ear.

I nodded, a shaky exhale slipping from my lips. “Yeah.”

His lips curved against my collarbone as he pulled at the knot, loosening it. The top dropped down just enough to bare my breasts. He cupped me reverently, his thumbs

brushing lightly over me, sending tremors through my whole body.

I pressed closer, my hands tangled in his damp hair, needing more, wanting all of him—until a sharp pulse of nerves cut through the heat. There was something he didn't know. Something I had to tell him before this went any further.

“I—” My voice cracked, barely more than a whisper. “Wait.”

He pulled back immediately, his brow furrowed, eyes searching mine. “Too fast?”

I shook my head, but my heart was pounding for a whole new reason now. I'd never said the words out loud before. Not to a guy. Not like this.

“I've never...done this,” I said, my voice barely louder than a breath. “I mean—I'm a virgin.”

He stilled completely, his hands still on my waist, his touch suddenly feather-light. But his face didn't go cold. He didn't look ready to run away as I'd expected a guy would.

His gaze held mine. “You're sure you're okay?”

I nodded, feeling heat rush to my cheeks. “I'm not scared. I just thought you should know.”

His expression shifted. Something deeper moved across his face—heat, yes, but also something tender. Something that felt almost like...love.

“Thank you for telling me,” he said, brushing a strand of hair from my face. “That doesn't change how much I want you. But it does mean we go at your pace.”

Tension melted out of me. My whole body softened under his touch—under those words.

“I want this,” I whispered.

His mouth found mine again, but slower than before, as though we had all the time in the world. And in that moment, in that hidden clearing with only the trees as witnesses, it felt like we did.

“I can’t do this here,” he said. “It’s your first time. We should go back to?”

He cut off as I started shaking my head. “I want to do it here. With your friends not far away and the tree against my back.”

Okay, so the tree might be painful. But still, this would be the hottest first time ever. And I wouldn’t be the only one who found it hot. It would probably be memorable for him too.

It wasn’t just an exciting location, but it would be his first time with me. If I had anything to say about it, it would be the first night of an entire lifetime together.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

Something flickered in his eyes. A protectiveness. It wrapped itself around me like a warm blanket. This wasn’t just going to be hot. I was seriously in danger of falling in love with this guy.

I just hoped he wouldn’t break my heart.

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ROURKE

She was a virgin. It blew my mind, but for some reason, it didn't surprise me. I couldn't say why.

I lowered my head to her chest. There was no graceful way to do this, but I didn't give a damn. I had to taste those beautiful berry-colored nipples, and I didn't care what I had to do to get to them.

I knelt and ran my tongue around her left nipple, then her right, savoring the gasps that slipped past her lips. She ran her hands through my hair like she did before, and it almost made my brain short-circuit. What was so freaking sexy about that? I didn't know, but I couldn't get enough of it.

My fingers worked the bathing suit off her as my mouth lavished attention on her nipples. The swimsuit was still wet, which made it nearly impossible to slide off her, but where there was a will, there was a way. And I definitely had the will to get her naked.

Once I had it over her hips, it slid down easily.

She helped kick it the rest of the way off as I straightened, moving my hands over those hips.

I shifted from her chest to her mouth, resuming our previous kiss with renewed hunger.

I slid my tongue between her lips, groaning when her tongue met mine, while at the same time sliding my hand to her thigh.

She surprised me by lifting her leg and wrapping it around me to pull me toward her. I protected her back from the tree, putting my hand between her and the rough bark.

My hand began roaming up the outside of her thigh, but I wasn't ready to slide inside her yet. She had to know that.

She seemed to get it when I moved my hand to her knee. As I ran my fingers over her kneecap, her leg promptly slid down, and I groaned again at the feel of her thigh rubbing the outside of my leg.

I'd never wanted anyone or anything as badly as I wanted her in that very second. I wished I could lay her down on the ground and lick her until she came, but not this time. We'd have plenty of opportunities for that in the future. Right now, I'd work with what I had.

I continued to kiss her as I angled our bodies so I could slide my hand over her thigh and toward her heat. She broke the kiss as my finger gently nudged inside her. She was slick and hot and wet.

Now she was gasping as she tilted her head back against the tree, eyes closed, lips parted.

I suppressed a growl at just how sexy she looked in that moment, but I knew I had to keep my arousal at bay.

The last thing I needed was to lose control.

One of the best ways to keep control was to focus on her.

I moved my finger to her clit. I found it swollen and slick, just as expected. I closed my eyes and centered all my attention on it. As I flicked my finger across it, I tried to think of anything but the sighs and gasps I heard coming from the woman in front of me.

My cock was so hard, it throbbed painfully. No matter how much I tried to unsexy my thoughts—or ignore the sounds she was making—it all seeped in, disrupting my chain of thought over and over.

She arched her back and let out a long, whispered “oh.” I thought that was a sure sign she was coming, but the arched back remained as her hips began moving gently in front of me—subtle moves that I only felt because I was so tuned in to her.

It only lasted a couple of minutes, though.

I knew because I was timing it in my head as a way to distract myself.

One hundred forty-two seconds, to be exact.

She gripped my shoulder as a tiny whimper escaped.

I couldn't wait to get her away from all these people so she'd feel free to make plenty of noise in bed.

Only when her grip on my shoulder released did I straighten, removing my hand. That was when something hit me.

“Please tell me you're on birth control,” I said.

Not that I'd mind impregnating her. In fact, having a baby with this woman was suddenly what I wanted more than anything in the world. But she might not be ready,

and I didn't want to be irresponsible. I couldn't make that decision for both of us.

When her eyes went wide, I knew the answer was no. "It's okay. I mean, if it's okay with you."

She was saying she would be fine with having my baby. I wanted to shout to the tops of the trees, I was so elated by that.

"Or you could pull out," she said. "If, you know, you want to come on my body. That's kind of sexy, right?"

Oh, fuck. That brought another, very vivid image to mind. It was sexy in theory, but now that I cared about this woman, I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

"I could come on the ground," I said, glancing to my left.

"Yes," she said.

When I looked back, I was shocked to find her eyes bright with excitement. "I want to see it. It's kind of hot."

She thought watching me come would be hot. This time, I didn't even bother to suppress my groan. This conversation was doing things to me. If I didn't get inside her soon, I might come on the ground before we even started.

"We should lay down for this," I said.

She shook her head. She was definitely going to be stubborn where this was concerned.

"I want my first time just like this," she said. "I already had my first orgasm against

this tree.”

“That was your first orgasm?”

She nodded. “You’re surprised?”

“That’s something you can do yourself.”

“I never did.” She smiled. “Of course, if I knew how good it felt, I definitely would have been doing it every day.”

She had to move her leg back over my thigh, which couldn’t have been comfortable for her. But I held her up as best I could with one hand, keeping the other between her back and the rough tree bark.

That left no hands available to maneuver my tip toward her entrance. But I made it work, keeping my gaze locked on hers. I had to remind myself not to go too far, too fast.

Her eyes gradually drifted closed, and I missed being locked in a stare with her. But her features weren’t tight. They were still relaxed. That had to be a sign I wasn’t hurting her too much.

“Go deeper,” she said.

That would’ve been sexy as hell if she hadn’t said it through clenched teeth—a clear sign there was at least a little pain. She wanted to get it over with. But I couldn’t bring myself to hurt her, even if she was ordering me to do exactly that.

She sucked in a breath of air when I even dared to go a fraction of an inch deeper. I started to pull out. She used her leg to hold me deep inside.

“Like that,” she said. “Just like that.”

I stared at her. Was she enjoying this? But that was when I took my eyes off her face and realized that I’d been so homed in on watching for pain, I hadn’t noticed she’d snuck her hand between us.

She was touching herself. Damn. She was touching herself.

I had to close my eyes at that point. And once again, I found myself thinking about anything but the sound of her quick, shallow breaths.

I didn’t realize I was going even deeper until she cried out. My eyes flew open as I made sure it was pleasure, not pain. It was definitely pleasure. And besides, she was the one bouncing on me, moving up and down on my stiff cock like it was bringing her toward orgasm rather than her own touch.

Even after I closed my eyes, the sight of those tits bouncing with each of her movements stayed in my head, making it tougher than ever to hold out. It was a sight I’d never be able to erase from my mind.

When she gasped again, I somehow knew this was it. A second orgasm. It was only our first time, and already, I could tell.

I opened my eyes and watched her, taking in all of it and reminding myself of the fact that we were out here in the open where anyone could stumble upon us.

That did it. But I remembered her command. As I neared the end, I pulled out and set her down. She leaned against the tree, watching me as I stroked myself, not taking my eyes off her until finally my eyelids couldn’t stay open.

I bit my tongue to keep from crying out as hot liquid spewed from my tip directly

onto the ground. It was a full load—plenty for her to see, and I was glad I didn't spray cum all over her body, especially since she'd have to get dressed and go down to our friends.

When I finally opened my eyes, she was watching, hands gripping the tree, that gorgeous naked body just about doing me in. She smiled—a lazy smile with heavy lids.

“That was hot,” she said.

I opened my mouth to respond, but that was the very second I heard a snap. That had to be a limb, which meant someone—or something—was out there. Whatever it was, we had to get out of here.

PEPPER

My heart was racing as I followed Rourke through the woods, both of us keeping our eyes out for whatever made that noise. We'd been so busy looking around, we didn't see him straight ahead, standing at the edge of the woods, staring in our direction.

"Everyone is looking for you," he said. "I thought I'd warn you."

Rourke came to a stop several feet from the guy, leaving me wondering where I was supposed to be. I moved to stand next to him, wondering if I needed his protection from whatever was going on here. There was a tension in the air that I didn't quite understand.

"I sent them that way," the guy said. "I saw you head in this direction and figured you wanted some alone time, so I've been standing here while everyone else went every which way."

"I guess everyone's ready to go," I said, looking at Rourke.

He didn't respond—just stared down this guy. It was a full-on stare-off. They might start throwing punches any second now.

"I figured we should bury the hatchet," the guy said.

"The hatchet's been buried for a long time with me, Rafe," Rourke said. "I never even had beef with you. I'm not sure what I did to you."

Rafe shook his head. “You were new to town. I labeled you something you aren’t. You’re a good guy. I realized that tonight.” He glanced over at me, then back to Rourke. “You’re just like the rest of us.”

He was just like the rest of them because he snuck off into the woods with a woman? No, he was just like the rest of them because he was interested in a much younger woman. In fact, I was the same age as all the other women here tonight.

“Truce?” Rafe asked.

He held out his hand. Rourke hesitated a few seconds—just long enough for me to wonder if he was going to refuse to shake it. But then he stepped forward and met the guy’s handshake.

There was still something a little competitive about the way they shook hands. I wondered if they were having a grip-off, seeing who could squeeze tighter. But when they let go, Rafe turned and started back toward the pond.

“Found him!” he called out.

That announcement seemed to draw everyone out of hiding.

Couples came from every direction. I expected everyone to have smug expressions—like they knew what we’d been up to.

But no one paid any more attention to us than they did to the other couples surrounding them.

Heck, they’d all be just as likely to sneak off for a quickie in the woods themselves.

Only in our case, it wasn’t a quickie. It was a first time. The first time of many, many

times to come.

As we helped everyone clean up, I realized I was pretty much holding my breath, waiting to see what would happen when we parted.

I hoped like hell this wouldn't be the end.

I didn't think it would be, but a small part of me was so invested in him that I worried he wasn't as into me as I was into him. What if he wasn't thinking forever?

But as soon as we were in his truck, waiting while everyone else pulled out of the parking lot, I knew that my doubts had been silly. Of course, he felt it too. And I saw that as he looked at me.

"Sorry about all that." He seemed bugged about something, but the warmth in his eyes told me he wanted to protect me from whatever it was.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"That stuff with Rafe." He shook his head. "I don't know what the deal is with him. We got off to a bad start, but I guess everything's okay now. It's a relief. I just wish you didn't have to see all that."

"He was looking out for us," I said. "I'm surprised all your friends came looking for us."

"Yeah, they should have known they might find us in a compromising position."

"We're all adults. I'm sure they've been in plenty of compromising positions in their time together."

“I don’t want to think about that.” He shook his head. “I want to focus on us. I’m going to get you home and kiss every inch of your body. I’ll do all the things I couldn’t do when we were standing against that tree.”

Now my mouth spread into a smile. “I like the sound of that.”

“But first, let’s stop by the grocery store. I want to grab some of that chicken I missed out on.”

“Oh crap.” I gave him a sheepish look. “I ate a couple of pieces. You didn’t get any?”

“There were no legs left when I got there. That’s my favorite.”

“Mine too.”

He smiled. “We’ll just grab some from the store, go back to my place, and have a late-night snack.”

“I have to be at work at five in the morning,” I said. “I hate to bring it up, but it’s necessary. There’s no such thing as a late night in my life these days.”

“Well then, forget the chicken. I’ll get you settled into bed, and you can sleep. We’ll make up for lost time tomorrow night.”

“That’s perfect,” I said. “Tomorrow’s Saturday, and Sunday is my day off.”

“Then tomorrow night is our night,” he said. “There’s even more of a need for you to rest up. I’m going to give you the best night of your life. Or the best morning if you’re too tired.”

“And then...?” I dared to ask.

I had to know where this was going. Yes, it was early, but I didn't want to get in any deeper if he was just going to move on with his life afterward.

“And every night for the rest of our lives together,” he said.

We were on the same page. And as we drove out of the parking lot and toward the main road that would take us to his place, I felt, for the first time in my life, like everything was falling into place. I had a job I liked, new friends, and a man I was falling in love with.

It didn't get better than this.

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PEPPER

The bell above the diner door chimed, making me all too aware that I was no longer alone. Had I forgotten to lock the door when the last customer left? It was looking likely.

“Sorry, we’re closed,” I called, wiping down the counter with one hand while reaching behind me with the other to grab the keys I’d tossed near the register.

“I was hoping you’d make an exception.”

My hand froze, mid-reach. I didn’t have to look up to know that voice. Deep. Familiar. The same one that still gave me goosebumps after ten years of marriage.

I turned slowly, already smiling. “You trying to get me in trouble, sir?”

My husband leaned against the counter like he had all the time in the world, that teasing glint in his eyes. “Your mom’s not here.”

“Still. You want me to get fired?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Fired by your own mother?”

“Don’t test her. She’d do it for the drama.”

Rourke chuckled, reaching across the counter to brush a lock of hair behind my ear. His fingers lingered on my cheek for a moment longer than necessary, sending a

ripple of warmth down my spine.

“You looked cute wiping the counter,” he said. “All bossy and in charge.”

“You’re lucky I didn’t throw this rag at your head.”

“Sounds kinky.”

We stood there smiling at each other like idiots.

He looked like he’d just come from the workshop—his flannel sleeves rolled up, sawdust still clinging to his jeans, stubble shadowing his jaw.

And here I was, in my grease-smeared apron, smelling like coffee and French fries and probably looking like I’d worked a double shift... because I had.

And still, his gaze made me feel like the sexiest woman on Earth.

“You need something?” I asked, trying to sound casual as I walked around the counter toward him.

Rourke’s arms opened without a word. I stepped right into them.

“I needed you,” he murmured against my hair. “Been thinking about you all day.”

I melted, just a little. Okay, maybe a lot.

“Same.” I smiled. “And the past few hours have been brutal.”

He frowned. “That kind of dinner rush?”

I shook my head. “No. Just knowing that the kids are at camp and I could be at home

with you.”

“I would’ve definitely called off my guys’ night for that,” he said. “But as soon as we finished dinner, I figured I’d come here and surprise you.”

“Great idea.” I glanced toward the door. “Let me lock up and close down the place so we can get home.”

“I already locked the door.”

His words made me freeze in place. “Exactly what did you have in mind?”

“Take off that apron and I’ll show you.”

He stepped closer. The counter still separated us, though. There was another wrinkle in his plan—windows all around. It was unlikely anyone would see us, but we couldn’t take that risk, especially since the dinner was on the main road.

“Come to the back room,” I said, flipping around and marching in that direction, my stride determined, my entire body tingling.

As soon as I was through the door to the back room, I was scanning the area for the perfect surface. But nothing looked right. Rourke would have some ideas about that, I was sure, but options were limited.

The flip-door slapped open behind me, and Rourke stepped in. I felt him back there. I didn’t even have to look over my shoulder.

“I think you should clean the prep table,” he said.

He didn’t want me to clean the prep table. He wanted me to pretend to clean the prep table.

I didn't even bother grabbing the spray bottle and towel to wipe it down. I just put both hands on the stainless-steel top and waited as he moved in behind me.

"Yeah, I think the apron adds to it," he said.

I couldn't agree more. It made it feel even naughtier.

We were here all alone, so there was no need to worry that we'd be interrupted. My mom was recovering from hip replacement surgery, so I was running things. It had been a slow night, so I'd let all the employees go home early.

But there was still an element of risk to what we were doing. And that had me ready to rip off his clothes and do him right here on this table.

"I've been thinking about doing this since I met you," he growled into my ear.

It took me a second to realize this was playacting. He was a cook or a line prep. Or maybe the naughty manager of a fictional restaurant. I was the server cleaning up after work.

Warmth spread to my pussy at the thought. I loved when we role-played like this. I lived for it. Although usually, it was in our bedroom, not in a public place. We hadn't done that since the kids were younger.

"Your break's almost over," he said. "But I think we could extend it a little longer."

I shrugged. "If you're up for it, I'm up for it."

My palms remained flattened on the table's surface as his hands wandered to the fastening of my shorts.

That hand worked the button while his other hand tugged at the string holding my

apron in place.

He didn't remove it, though. Instead, he slid his hand under both it and my T-shirt, moving upward toward my breast.

As he lowered the zipper on my shorts, he nudged my bra strap downward, then slid his hand under the left cup. I sighed and leaned into him again.

His thumb finally made contact with my nipple, and I gasped beneath his touch. At the same time, his hand dove under the elastic of my panties, going straight for my clit, and I spread my legs to encourage him.

"Oh," I said, the sound escaping.

I remembered to play it quiet, pressing my lips together to stifle any other sounds. I felt his bulge pressing into my ass and rubbed against him, bringing a moan.

He cupped my breast, then took my nipple between his index and middle finger. At the same time, he began moving his other finger in slow, rhythmic circles over my clit.

I reached back and gripped his arm as he planted a kiss on my cheek, then my jaw. Then he took my earlobe between his teeth.

"You're so wet," he said after releasing my earlobe. "You want me, don't you?"

"Mm-hmm. So badly. I want to feel your hard cock inside me."

He groaned against my skin. He wouldn't do anything until I came first, but that didn't bother me at all. It wouldn't take long.

I closed my eyes and savored the feel of him moving over me, his speed picking up as

my hips began rocking. With every movement, I brushed along his length, getting him even more revved up. That would just mean he'd be extra hard for me.

"Oh fuck," I whispered. "Oh, yes."

I closed my eyes and let the sensations wash over me, warmth spreading through my body. He continued touching me, not letting up until I finally stopped moving.

But that didn't mean this was over. In fact, it had just begun.

I expected him to turn me around and set me on the table. But instead, he pulled my shorts all the way down. I heard the rustling of him unbuttoning his jeans, then unzipping, and looked back in time to see his hard cock springing out.

There would be moisture on his tip, I was sure. I knew his cock all too well. I longed to turn and take him in my mouth and suck him until he came. Sometimes I even made him come on my tits. It seemed dirty, but I found it hot as hell.

But not tonight. Tonight, he'd come inside me.

I leaned forward, and he maneuvered me into place, his jeans still around his ankles. He used his left hand to guide his cock inside me.

Oh God, that felt so good. He filled me up. But I knew what was coming next. As he stepped into place, he moved his hand to my clit, resuming the same strokes he'd made earlier.

I gripped the table. "Harder," I whispered as he slid into me.

He went as deep as he could, then pulled out, moving in slow, deep thrusts as his finger rapidly moved back and forth over my clit. I closed my eyes and focused on his heavy breathing. He was almost panting, and it went straight to my core.

And as always, just when I thought it was impossible to come again so quickly, within seconds my orgasm overtook me, and a cry escaped my lips despite my efforts to be quiet. That cued him to fully enjoy being inside me. He always held back to make sure I finished first.

As I slowly came down from one of the most powerful orgasms of my life, Rourke began moving faster. He didn't even try being quiet, letting out a cry so loud, they probably could've heard it out on the street if anyone had been driving by with their windows down.

But I could only smile. I loved knowing I could bring him so much pleasure that he couldn't contain himself.

I took a deep breath as he withdrew and stepped back. Then I pulled on my shorts and fastened them, not taking my eyes off him as he stuffed himself back into his underwear and then his jeans.

He winced as he tried to zip them. "I may have to wait a few minutes for that."

I laughed and looked around. "Nobody around to see you tonight."

"I'll help you close up," he said. "But first, I'm going to make us a couple of sundaes, and then we can sit and discuss what we're going to do with the rest of our night."

It was Friday, but a few years ago, Mom had hired a crew for mornings. That meant I didn't have to work the godawful hours I'd kept before we had our first kid.

Now that Kerrie and Dane were nine and seven respectively, early mornings weren't such a big deal, and I worked them when I needed to. But tonight, I wanted to stay up late with my man. Maybe all night.

"Don't forget the cherry," I said as he was heading toward the front.

He paused, turned, and looked at me. “I thought I took care of that years ago.”

I groaned. “That doesn’t even qualify as a dad joke.”

“Hey, I never said I was a professional comic.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “You’re great at everything else.”

And he was. He was the love of my life. I always thought it was likely I’d meet my future husband here in the diner. I just never imagined he’d be one of the mountain men that everyone swooned over.

He was my mountain man, and he made me swoon every day. And yeah, I liked it a little that he turned heads wherever he went. It gave me a sense of pride.

And all those people were right. I was the luckiest woman on Earth to have found such a hot guy who was also an amazing dad and husband.

I didn’t take that for granted. Not a single day of it.

Thirty days to catch a fish, lose her v-card...and maybe her heart.