



A Summer to Remember Preview

CHAPTER 1

Approaching Summer Island on the ferry from St. Simon felt like drifting back in time. Trent Fordham stood on the bow watching as the south shore came into view, its lush tree-covered hills sprinkled with picturesque white houses, their eaves and chimneys peeking up through the billowing green. Sails and boat docks lined the waterfront, with a line of quaint storefronts beyond.

He'd forgotten how idyllic the place was. Or maybe he'd just assumed it would have changed more in the ten years he'd been away – as most places do. Back in the real world of his life, ten years left most places looking different. Whether more rundown – or more built up, with new roads, new retail, new high rises. But Summer Island wasn't the real world – never had been. So no wonder it had pulled off the miracle of staying exactly the same.

He'd never expected to come back here – and already, it felt like a mistake. Because there was something magnetic about this little patch of land – something in the pristine storybook charm that drew you in and made you forget anything or anyplace else existed. Once upon a time, he'd never wanted to leave. But then everything had changed and he'd never wanted to return.

And he never would have – if his mother hadn't left him the family's summer house in her will. Trent had assumed the home had been sold years ago, after they'd all stopped coming – but only after both his parents' deaths had he discovered they'd held onto it all this time. Having no need of it himself, he'd put it on the market this past spring and found a buyer quickly. Now papers needed to be signed to finalize the closing.

And he'd concluded that maybe a visit back to Summer Island would give him something else, too – a closing of a different kind, on a piece of the past he'd never put completely behind him. The assault of old memories, rushing over him with the summer breeze, made stepping off the ferry alongside tourists and day trippers all the more surreal.

Turning left onto Harbor Street, he found the thoroughfare bustling with life – bicyclers and pedestrians, and a horse-drawn carriage in the distance. No motorized vehicles were permitted on the tiny island at the northern tip of Michigan's mitten, just west of the Mackinac Bridge and Mackinac Island – Mackinac's quieter little sister, he'd once heard Summer Island called back in the day. Though there was no denying that both destinations came alive during the summer months, even without the convenience of cars. And the restaurants, gift shops, and fudge stands appeared to be doing a brisk business as he maneuvered his rolling duffel around a family of bikers stopped in the center of the street only to then dodge two kids with messy ice cream cones that looked ready to topple at any second.

"Trent Fordham, is that you?"

Surprised to hear his name, he swung his head around to find ... Dahlia? Was he remembering that right? A lively older woman who owned a café he'd eaten at on a regular basis in his youth – she approached him now wearing a pair of heart-shaped sunglasses and a thinly woven fringed vest over a blouse and long flowered skirt. She had to be in her sixties at this point, her once blond hair turned silvery gray, but she still managed to pull off the bohemian look. That was the main thing he remembered about her – that she could pull off whatever she chose because she just didn't seem to give a damn what anyone thought of her. One more thing that clearly hadn't changed.

"Guilty as charged," he quipped as she neared.

"My, my – it's been a long time. Too long." The way she beamed up at him made him feel ... missed. Which he hadn't expected. He'd only summered here, after all, from high school through the end of college – one of many who just passed through without staying.

"Ten years," he told her. Adding, "Nice of you to remember me."

"I couldn't forget that handsome face," she replied, coy and playful.

He laughed softly and recalled out loud, “You always *were* a flatterer.” And *her* face, the longer he looked, served as a reminder that she’d been especially fond of him, and he of her. He’d always suspected she sensed the things he was torn about at the time, that maybe she’d noticed he was a little more down to earth than the rest of the well-to-do Fordham family. And her friendliness had put him at ease in moments when he wasn’t.

“What brings you back?” she asked. “Gonna start summering with us again, I hope?”

He shook his head. “No – the opposite, in fact. Just now getting around to selling the house, and I’m here for the closing.”

She appeared disappointed. “Well, now, that’s a shame. You got my hopes up. But if you won’t be up at the house on East Overlook, where are you staying?”

He pointed toward the west end of Harbor Street. “About to go check in to the Summerbrook Inn.”

She tipped her head back with a smile. “Meg’s place. I guess you remember Meg?”

He did – a pleasant, pretty woman a little older than him. And that pleasantness had been reason enough to choose those particular accommodations.

“She’s a hot item with my nephew, Zack, now,” Dahlia went on. “Though he’s out on his fishing boat this time of year. Anyway, you’ll enjoy your stay at Meg’s inn.”

He smiled politely in response, then caught sight of Dahlia’s restaurant up the way, painted a periwinkle blue and located on the water, just past the bicycle livery. “Still run the café?”

She nodded. “Headed there right now, and I’ll expect to see you for dinner – if not tonight, then tomorrow at the latest.”

“Sounds like an offer I can’t refuse – and wouldn’t want to,” he answered with a grin. Then asked, with a curious tilt of his head, “That same old guy still run the bicycle rental?”

“Jacob?” She pursed her lips. “Keep waiting for him to get the sense to retire before he runs the place into the ground, but yeah, he’s still there.” The man had seemed elderly ten or fifteen years ago, so Trent couldn’t imagine how old he was *now*.

He nodded. “Once I get settled, maybe I’ll rent a bike, get reacquainted with the island.” He’d enjoyed taking in the sights that way when he was young. Maybe he’d ride up to East Overlook – for old time’s sake. Since he’d come all this way, might as well.

“Sounds to me,” Dahlia said, “like a dandy way to fall in love with the place all over again.”

He flinched at the words “fall in love.” There for a second, he’d worried she might say something else. About something that had ended a long time ago.

As they parted ways, though, he realized the unexpected meeting had put him in slightly better spirits about being here. It was a beautiful island – no reason not to soak up the summer charm while also accomplishing his other missions for the trip. After all, closure and real estate transactions aside, God knew he’d needed a vacation from Feltner and Long, the law firm where he’d worked for the past seven years, the last couple of which had been particularly hellish.

That was when his eyes fell on the two connected shops across the way: The Knitting Nook and the Cozy Coffee and Tea Shop. So they were still here, too, side by side – and seeing them felt like a punch in the gut.

Damn, for a guy who’d come looking to shut a door on the past, maybe he should have thought a little more about how to do that. Or the fact that he wouldn’t be able to walk to the Summerbrook Inn without passing the two businesses that shared a building, a color scheme, and even the same curly font on their signage.

One more thing that hadn’t changed.

One more thing that made him glad he wouldn’t be here long.

Dahlia, bicycles, and fudge could only make up for so much.

Soup. It was an afternoon for soup.

It hadn’t started out that way – an hour ago it had been another bright, sunny, late June Summer Island day. But gray clouds had rolled rapidly in from the west and, with little warning, the skies had opened in a deluge.

So Allie Hobbs had gone to the cupboard in her small but quaint mid-century cottage and pulled out a can of Campbell’s vegetable, dumping the contents into a pot on the stovetop. The microwave would be quicker, but growing up on Summer Island had taught her not to be in a hurry. And when she saw what a rush people from the mainland were usually in – even when they came here for rest and relaxation – it always reminded her to take her time. Life wasn’t a race. There was no finish line.

A few minutes later, she poured the soup into a large yellow ceramic soup mug and sat down at her kitchen table, peering out the big window beside it. Normally, it provided a view of the point where Lake Michigan joined Lake Huron, the massive Mackinac Bridge in the far distance creating a thin arc above the horizon. Closer, the picture window looked out on a wooded area and the East Bend Lighthouse down below.

“Why would you want to buy a cabin *here*?” her mother had asked when she’d decided to get her own place eight years ago at the age of twenty-three. “It’s such a long walk into town. It feels so isolated.”

Though it *wasn’t* such a long walk into town – fifteen minutes tops, and only ten to her parents’ big clapboard home near the southeast shore. What her mother had *really* been asking without asking was: *Why would you want to look out at that lighthouse every day, knowing it reminds you of the guy who broke your heart?*

And the answer was that she’d thought it wise to just face those memories, desensitize herself to them. The lighthouse was one of several on the island’s small perimeter – she couldn’t exactly spend the rest of her life avoiding it. So desensitization had seemed the way to go. You look at something long enough, it takes on new and different meanings – it becomes more about the now than the past.

And the plan had worked – her chest no longer ached with abandonment when she she glanced out the window, and she didn’t even think about him at all. The lighthouse had, indeed, resumed just being a lighthouse.

So why, today, did looking out on the lighthouse, its black-and-white diagonal stripes blurred by the wet window pane, put him back on her mind?

It’s the rain. We once ran to the lighthouse in the rain. She’d known the door was unlocked because her father operated and maintained all the island’s lighthouses. They’d escaped a downpour inside and stood laughing and kissing, kissing and laughing, until the storm had passed.

But some storms don’t pass.

Maybe that was a curse of being a life-long resident of a tiny island. It kept your world pretty small. Distractions could be more difficult to come by, the past harder to let go. So she’d had to work at getting over him and moving beyond it. It had taken a long time – longer, she’d always suspected, than if she’d lived a busier mainland life.

Just thank goodness she’d finally put all that behind her – all the pain, all the memories, all the lost love – years ago.

When a crack of thunder shook the small house, she dropped her soup spoon with a rattle – it hit the edge of the big cup, flipped to bounce on the table, and then landed with a clatter on the hardwood floor.

“Geesh,” she murmured.

A believer in the five-second rule, she bent to snatch up the spoon, then grabbed a napkin and commenced wiping up tiny puddles of soup the utensil had left behind on its travels.

Which was when the sky outside flashed with lightning, and still more thunder rumbled in the distance. Most days, she enjoyed the isolation her mother had mentioned when she’d bought the place. Though she preferred to think of it as solitude. But at certain moments, like during raging thunderstorms, it lost some of its charm.

Back to soup. She dipped her spoon into the cup and –

Bang, bang, bang.

– dropped it with another clatter. “What the hell?” she murmured, her heartbeat kicking up as she glanced toward the front door. Someone was actually here? Now? She seldom had visitors, and when she did, she usually knew in advance, so –

Bang, bang, bang.

Her back went rigid. “All right, all right – I’m coming.” Though the words left her in a whisper, spoken more to herself than the person on the other side of the door.

Most people these days probably didn’t open their doors to strangers, but she’d always felt safe here, so she walked briskly toward it and, with a fleeting thought of – *I hope this isn’t an ax murderer* – whisked it open.

Then she blinked. Because surely she was seeing things. Surely the love of her life who’d disappeared without warning ten years ago and who she’d just been thinking about wasn’t standing at her front door dripping wet from head to toe. An ax murderer would have been less of a surprise.

“Trent?” she asked. Just to make sure. Maybe he had a doppelgänger.

His damp brow knit. “Allie?”

No doppelgänger. So she proceeded to, “What the hell are *you* doing here?” Trying not to feel how handsome he still was, once-blond hair now darkened to a sandier shade and eyes just as blue and piercing as ever.

“Riding a bike,” he said, looking as confused as she felt.

“Huh?”

“You, um, live here?” He motioned vaguely toward the house.

She pressed her lips together in a thin, tight line. “Yes.”

“Could I come in?”

No. She didn’t want him in her home. She didn’t want this disruption to her life at all. Where was an ax murderer when you needed one?

He pointed behind him, sideways rain still pummeling him. Despite the awning on her porch, she was starting to get wet, too. “My bike chain broke. And lightning just struck – somewhere close.” He pointed vaguely over his shoulder.

Crap. Rain was one thing – but lightning took away her choices. No matter how badly she did not want Trent Fordham anywhere in her world, let alone in her quiet, safe little house. There was no place else to send him, no other shelter nearby. So much for solitude. And damn her usually welcome isolation.

Rather than say anything that could be construed as even remotely welcoming, however, she just stood back, clearing the path for him to come inside.

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