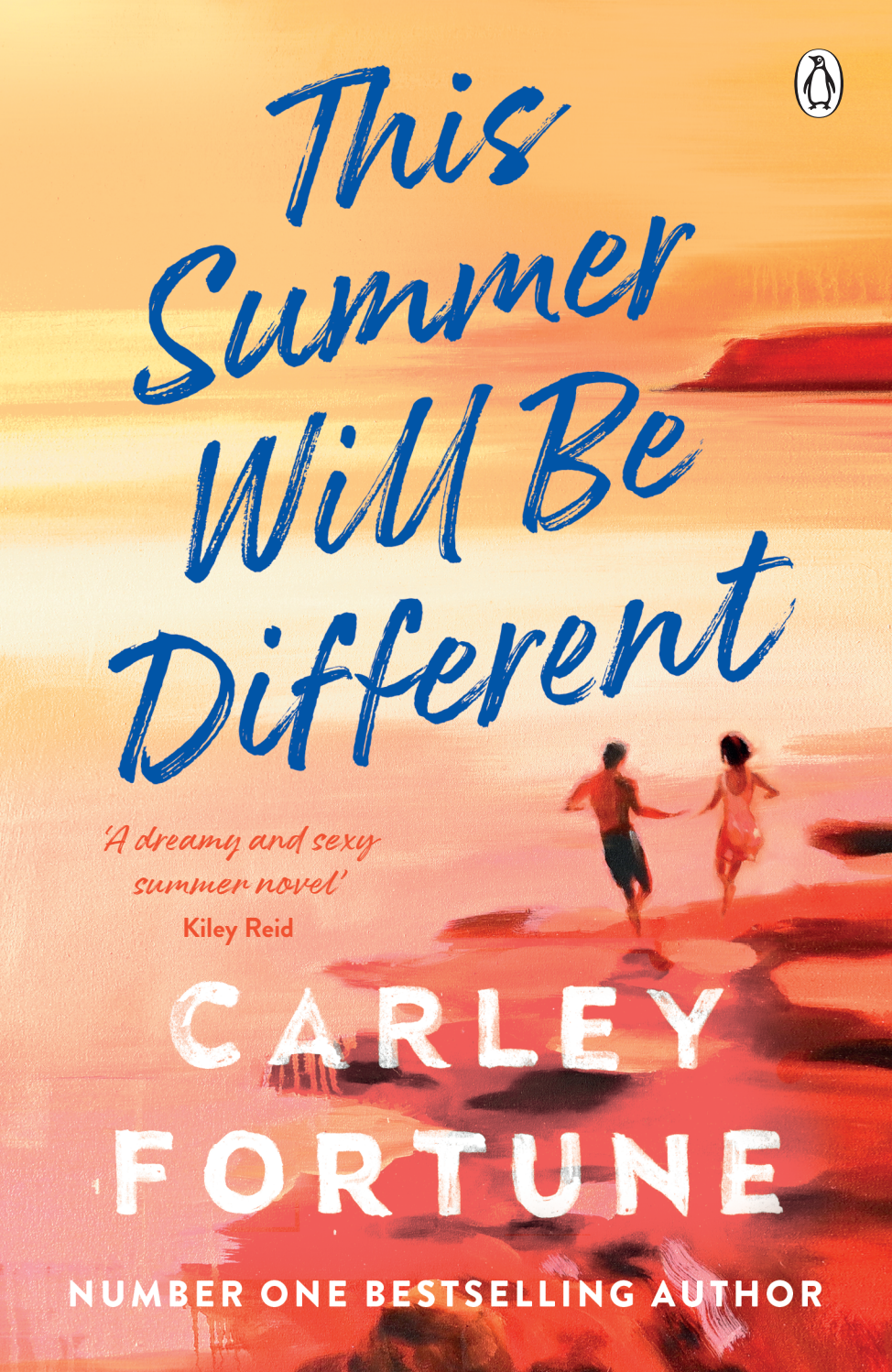
This Summer Will Be Different

'A dreamy and sexy summer novel'
Kiley Reid



CARLEY FORTUNE

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THIS SUMMER WILL BE DIFFERENT

Carley Fortune is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Meet Me at the Lake* and *Every Summer After*. She's also an award-winning Canadian journalist who has worked as an editor for Refinery29, *The Globe and Mail*, *Chatelaine* and *Toronto Life*. She lives in Toronto with her husband and two sons.

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Every Summer After
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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in the United States of America by Berkley,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC 2024
First published in Great Britain by Penguin Books 2024
001

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Book design by Ashley Tucker
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–1–405–96545–3

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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To Meredith, of course.
I shucking love you.

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THIS SUMMER WILL BE DIFFERENT

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PART ONE

Isn't it nice to think that tomorrow is
a new day with no mistakes in it yet?

—L. M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables*

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PROLOGUE

Summer, Five Years Ago

I cupped my hands over my eyes so I could gulp down the view. A sun-drenched bay. Water glittering like sapphires beneath rust-colored cliffs. Seaweed lying in knotty nests on a strip of sandy shoreline. A wood-sided restaurant. Stacks of lobster traps. A man in hip waders.

Sea brine filled my nose and the *putt-putt* of a fishing boat my ears. A salt-kissed breeze sent the skirt of my dress flapping against my calves, and I smiled. It was everything I imagined my first Prince Edward Island vacation would be, minus one crucial detail. Bridget may have missed her flight, but I was here. And I was hungry.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust when I stepped inside Shack Malpeque. My attention went straight to the girl wearing fake red pigtails and a straw hat. She sat at a table by the window, and while her older brother watched the mussel farmers on the water, she plucked a thick French fry from his plate. She popped it into her mouth as she caught me staring, and I gave her a thumbs-up.

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"Your problems will seem smaller once we get to the island," Bridget had promised yesterday. I was slumped at the kitchen counter in our apartment, forehead on the granite. She rubbed my back. "Don't listen to your parents. You've got this, Bee."

Bridget never used my given name. I was Lucy Ashby to most everyone in my life except my best friend. To Bridget, I was Bee.

I stood beside the hostess stand and a hand-painted sign that read SHUCK IT UP, the tang of malt vinegar in the air making my mouth water. The mismatched wooden tables were full, and no one looked close to settling their bills. It was that kind of day.

As I was about to leave, a server with salt-and-pepper hair and three plates of lobster rolls balancing on the length of her arm called over to me.

"Take a seat at the bar, sweetie." I twisted my neck to find a row of empty stools behind me.

And him.

He was on the other side of the counter, head tipped down, shucking oysters. His white T-shirt strained against his arms and shoulders as he worked. His hair was a shade darker than mine—a deep chocolate brown, thick and wavy—short enough that it didn't fall into his eyes but long enough for disorderly conduct, tumbling over his forehead. The urge to dig my fingers in it was sharp.

I watched his forearms flex as he sank a small wood-handled knife into an oyster, watched his wrist twist, prying it open. He wiped his blade on a folded tea towel and then slid it through the middle of the shell. The top was tossed aside. There was another flick of his knife, and then he set the oyster on a bed of crushed ice.

As I walked closer, he cleaned his blade again. Instead of plunging it into the next oyster, he paused and glanced up at me.

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I almost stumbled. His eyes were the most dazzling shade of

iceberg blue, striking against his deep tan. A cleft parted the center of his chin. His face hadn't seen a razor in at least two days, and it was a study in contrasts. Strong jaw. Soft pink lips, the bottom fuller than the top. The bright eyes trimmed in black lashes.

He held my gaze for less than a second. I saw him, and he saw me, and in that blink of time, something passed between us.

A knowing. A need. A want.

Electricity.

My pulse raced, loud and insistent in my eardrums, and the weight of all the worry and fear and shame I'd been carrying since I told my parents about quitting my job slipped from my shoulders like silk.

He went back to work and didn't acknowledge me when I pulled out a stool. I stared at his hands as he undressed one oyster after another with incredible speed. He dismantled a full dozen and set the platter at the end of the bar.

He looked straight at me then, and for a moment we both stared. There was something guarded about his gaze, a wariness that lingered under those bright pools. For a second, I saw a flicker of sadness, but just as I was wondering where it came from, it was gone. Up close I could see that his right iris had the smallest smudge of brown below the pupil. A tiny, perfect flaw. Suddenly it didn't seem tragic that Bridget had missed our flight. It felt like destiny. This was, without question, the sexiest guy I'd ever seen.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"Starving," I replied, and I thought I saw his lip twitch.

"Where are you in from?" His voice was deep and as dry as birch bark. His accent was thicker than Bridget's—his *you* more like a *yah*.

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"How do you know I'm in from anywhere? I could be local."

He held my eyes. Again, an exchange. A current zipping along a live wire. His focus drifted to my hair—copper brown and braided into a crown around my head—and then to my outfit. His brow sketched up. When I planned my holiday wardrobe, I thought the dress was appropriately pastoral—an off-the-shoulder number in oversized red-and-white gingham. Anne Shirley with a modern twist. But maybe the puffed sleeves were a little on the nose.

He shrugged a single shoulder, a gesture that felt familiar. "Most islanders don't dress like tablecloths," he said, deadpan, as the server scooted behind him, batting him on the shoulder with a tut. I smoothed my hands over the cotton, frowning, then straightened the neckline.

He picked up another oyster and, after taking it apart, said, "It's a nice tablecloth."

"It better be. This tablecloth stretched my credit card within an inch of its life."

"Don't mind him, sweetie," the server said as she took two platters of battered haddock from the kitchen pass. "He's rusty. Thinks he can get by on those eyes alone. Women appreciate manners, I keep telling him."

I laughed. His gaze swung to mine at the sound, and I felt it again. Lightning down my spine.

"Is that what women appreciate? Manners?" His voice was low, brushing across my collarbone, my shoulders.

I knew that tone. A flirtation. He was subtler than what I was used to—lacking the blatant pickup line and *you can't resist me* swagger—but it was there. An invitation to play. A scene partner's opening line in an improv. I could flirt. *Flirting*, I was good at. My lips tingled; a grin played on one side of his.

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"I don't know about other women, but this one would appreciate a menu." I leaned in closer. "Please."

"Fair enough."

But he didn't obey my request. Instead, he grated a knob of fresh horseradish, which tickled my nose, and he placed it along with two lemon wedges in the middle of a ring of oysters. He set the plate and a bottle of hot sauce in front of me. Six glossy Malpeques.

"It's on me."

"Really?"

He moved down the bar. He wore jeans, dark denim and cuffed at the bottom, and a pair of black-and-white-checkered Vans. I watched his biceps as he poured a pint. He placed the frosty glass in front of me.

"Here you are . . ." He drifted off.

"Lucy."

"Here you are, Lucy."

"Thank you . . ." I gestured to him.

He wiped his hands on a tea towel, eyes fixed on mine like he needed to decide something before giving me his answer. "Felix," he said after a moment.

"I'm not usually a beer drinker, Felix."

"It's a blueberry ale, made here on the island. Try it."

I took a sip. It was ice cold and slightly tart.

"Thanks." I set the glass down. "And you were right earlier—I'm not from here. I live in Toronto," I said, picking up an oyster.

"Toronto," he repeated, though it sounded more like *Terranah*. He nodded once, solemn. "Sorry about that."

I gave him a crooked smile. "Don't be. I like it. Most of the time. Have you been?"

"Once," he said. "I was only there for a night, but it was long enough."

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I hummed. Toronto could be an acquired taste, and even though I'd lived there for seven years, I wasn't certain I'd entirely acquired it. I topped the oyster with a pinch of horseradish and a squeeze of lemon and lifted it toward Felix in salute before tipping it back with my eyes shut. Fresh ocean salt hit my tongue, and with it a memory.

Bridget and I in our apartment last fall. We'd just moved in together and had spent the weekend unpacking and assessing. How did our stuff fit together? How did *we* fit together? By Sunday evening, we'd determined we had two can openers, no coffee table, a futon with an aggressively uncomfortable frame, and a lifetime supply of IKEA tea lights.

We were covered in dust and lying on our backs on the floor when Bridget jumped up and skated to the kitchen in her socks. She pulled a box of PEI Malpeques from the fridge. Bridget was a rare twentysomething with her own shucking blade, but I'd never had an oyster. She couldn't find the knife in the chaos of newspaper and plastic wrap and cardboard, so she jimmied the whole batch open using a screwdriver she'd dug from her toolbox, face scrunched pink with effort.

"If you ever meet my family," she'd said as I fished out a shard of shell, "swear you'll never tell them what a shit job I did with these."

We'd been friends for a year, and aside from my aunt, she was already my most treasured person in the world, but I fell a little more in love with Bridget that night.

She should be here for this. My first oyster on PEI. I'd seen her just that morning, but I suddenly missed her with such intensity, my throat ached.

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When I opened my eyes, Felix was staring at me. I could have sworn I'd seen a hint of pain—a melancholy swimming beneath

the blue surface. But it vanished again before his mouth hooked up at one corner.

"Good?" he asked.

"Very."

I shifted on my seat, crossing my legs. I could feel the beginnings of a blush. I wore my strongest emotions on my chest in bright red. It started between my breasts and crept its way to my neck. Felix's eyes skated down, landing on the trio of moles below my collarbone.

"So what brings you to the island?"

"Girls' trip."

It had been Bridget's idea. I would finally tell my parents I'd left my PR job, and then we would take a vacation to her family's home on the island. Two weeks of oysters, sand, and sea. Two weeks to unwind, with nothing to worry about. It felt like we'd reached a new level in our relationship. We'd been roommates for a year, and friends for a year before that, but you never really know someone until you meet their family. And I couldn't wait to meet Bridget's. She was the most confident, most capable, most bighearted person I knew, and I wanted to see where she came from.

Felix made a show of looking at the empty seats beside me. "Did you lose your friend along the way?"

Bridget's parents were visiting friends in Nova Scotia until the following week, and her younger brother hadn't responded to her texts or calls about my solo arrival. I was supposed to drive to their place and let myself in. "Go around the house to the deck," Bridget had instructed. "There's a spare key under the ceramic toad."

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I hated being alone as much as sitting still, and I didn't want to spend the rest of the afternoon lounging around the Clark

house by myself, my parents' displeasure reverberating in the quiet. I drove the rental car directly from the Charlottetown Airport to Shack Malpeque.

"My friend's arriving tomorrow," I said, holding Felix's gaze.

He processed this information, head slanted to the side, squinting, and then he picked up his knife. I watched him shuck three dozen oysters in minutes, his hands moving with impressive speed. I was starting to think I'd read him wrong, when he spoke, eyes finding mine from beneath his lashes.

"Do you have any plans before your friend gets here?"

Maybe it was the beer or the buzz of being somewhere new, but I wasn't usually so forward, so sure about what I wanted. "No," I told Felix. "I'm wide open."

His eyes expanded and then he cursed. A ribbon of blood unspooled down his arm. I grabbed a handful of paper serviettes from the dispenser, hurrying around the bar.

"Are you okay?"

He lifted his hand over the wound on his left wrist, and I covered it with napkins.

"I think you might need stitches."

"It's just a nick."

I stepped closer, holding his arm, applying pressure to the cut.

"For the love of Mary," the server called. "Clean that up, then get out of here."

Still clutching his arm, I followed Felix into a tiny office, where he found a first aid kit in the desk drawer.

"Does this happen a lot?" I said as I wrapped his wrist with gauze. I could feel the warmth of his breath on my skin.

"No, Lucy. Beautiful women don't tend to tell me they're wide open while I'm holding a sharp object."

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I smiled. "How about blunt ones?"

"Afraid not."

"That's a shame," I said, not that I fully believed him. His face was the intersection of breathtaking and rugged. Plus, the hair and the biceps. I'd taken a good look at his backside, too, and it was outstanding. I bet Felix had heard one or two pickup lines involving shucking puns. I'd come up with at least five since I'd walked into the restaurant.

I fastened the bandage but couldn't make myself let go of him. "Do you want to get it looked at?" I asked. "I can drive you to a hospital."

"My arm's fine." Felix ducked to meet my eyes.

Spark. Fizz. Crackle.

"How about taking me home instead, Lucy?"

WE HARDLY SPOKE ON THE DRIVE, BUT THE AIR INSIDE the car was buzzing with anticipation. I could feel Felix's attention roaming from my cheek to my shoulders. Lower. I'm sure he could see the pulse in my neck.

I was nervous, my stomach swooping and diving like gulls through an open sky. At twenty-four, I was familiar with no-strings hookups. Flings, dalliances, a night of fun, a few weeks of fooling around—casual was my specialty. But this felt different. Riskier. We hadn't shared a meal, or a drink. I hadn't googled him. I didn't know his last name or how old he was. Early twenties? All I knew about Felix was that he was hot, made shucking oysters look like foreplay, and he wanted to have sex with me.

I turned down his driveway, a red dirt squiggle through a celery-green field. Sprays of pink and purple grew in a fringe along the ditch. I rounded one bend, then another, and a house came into view. It stood proud in the distance, with graying cedar shingles

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and a roof that soared in two dramatic peaks at either end. The trim was fresh white, the front door a happy yellow. The ocean sprawled behind it, a shimmering plain of blue.

"This is where you live?" I asked once I parked. The flower beds were fantastic. Peony season was over in Toronto, but here they were in full bloom. There must have been at least a dozen. Roses galore. Magenta clematis climbing a trellis. Snap dragons. Black-eyed Susans. I turned to Felix. "Is this your garden?" But he was already getting out of the car.

He walked around the hood, opened my door, and held out his hand. Atlantic air filled my lungs as a strong breeze whipped my skirt around my legs. I laughed, trying to hold it in place, but Felix tugged me close. I forgot about the peonies. He was an inch or two taller than me, and we lined up perfectly, nose to nose, chest to chest, hip to hip.

"This is not how I expected today to turn out," I said.

I caught the wink of a dimple in his left cheek as he smiled, no trace of the sorrow I'd sensed at the restaurant.

"No?"

His lips brushed against mine before they trailed down to my neck. I tilted my head back, gazing at a heron that flew above.

"Nuh-uh."

His stubble tickled my skin as his mouth found its way to the triangle of moles. He placed a kiss on top of them, then tasted them with his tongue. I shivered.

"You mustn't have done your research," he said, lips moving to my ear. "This is how we always welcome gorgeous women from away—a traditional islander greeting."

It pulled a laugh from my throat. "If I'd known that, I would have come sooner."

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His hand curved around the back of my head. "I think your timing is impeccable."

There was a thread of air between us, and we watched each other for one charged second, before snapping it closed. I wanted to go fast, but it started slow and soft, tentative, until Felix's tongue slid past my lips. I leaned into him, my fingers migrating to his hair. He sucked my bottom lip, and I let out a moan. And then his teeth were there, dragging over my lip. His bite wasn't hard, but it surprised me enough that I opened my eyes.

He inched back, gaze heavier than it had been moments ago. "Too much?"

I touched my mouth, shaking my head. "More."

Felix led me into the house, and before I had time to gape at the view, we were kissing again. I reached for the hem of his shirt as I heard the metallic *snick* of my zipper, and then we were undressing and tripping over our clothes, climbing upstairs to his bedroom, a frantic tangle of limbs and laughter.

We fell onto his bed together, already naked. Felix's body was all hard lines and shadowed ridges, as if it were designed for aerodynamics. His shoulders were broad, his chest solid and dusted with dark hair. I skated my fingers over his bronzed skin, marveling at the tight packs of muscle covering his stomach.

I didn't notice much about his room, just the worn copy of *Wide Sargasso Sea* on his nightstand that caught my eye as he kissed his way down my body. It struck me, briefly, as unusual reading material for a guy in his twenties, but then his jaw scraped against the inside of my thigh, and I stopped paying attention to the decor.

The sun was setting, stripes of royal blue and orange rippling across the sky, when we decided we needed to refuel. Felix made

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dinner. Thick slices of crusty bread slathered with butter. A plate of juicy tomato rounds, salted and glistening with olive oil. Another of cold rotisserie chicken. Cheddar cheese. Corn on the cob. We assembled open-faced sandwiches with the tomatoes and cheese and demolished the entire plate of chicken on the deck overlooking the gulf, him in a pair of boxer briefs, both of us wearing white T-shirts he'd retrieved from a drawer full of them.

The next time, we didn't make it upstairs. We didn't even make it inside. Felix tasted like the summer-ripe tomatoes we'd eaten at supper—a fresh burst of sun and salt.

More, I kept saying. *More.*

I WOKE IN THE MORNING WITH FELIX'S ARM OVER MY middle, his body wrapped around mine. We must have fallen asleep like that, though I had no memory of it. I lay still, not wanting to rouse him, not wanting to confront the inevitable awkwardness of morning. We had been frenzied last night. We were strangers who'd acted like long-lost lovers. I think Felix had needed to cut loose as much as I had. Surely we'd both be embarrassed in the daylight. But then I felt the rasp of his jaw on my shoulder and the whisper of his lips on my neck. And it wasn't awkward. It was slow and lazy and sweet, like warm caramel sauce sliding down a scoop of ice cream.

When we eventually pried ourselves apart, when I said I better get going, Felix told me I didn't have to rush away.

"Have a shower if you want," he said. "Do you drink coffee or tea?"

So I stayed. I showered. Felix had tea, and I had coffee.

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"When do you need to leave to get your friend from the

airport?" he asked. We were on the deck, he in the armchair and I in the corner of the outdoor sofa where we'd ravished each other the night before.

"Soon, I think. Her flight lands at twelve."

Felix blew into his tea, and steam curled from the mug.

"I had a great time last night," he said, lifting his eyes to mine. "I know you're here for two weeks, but—"

I cut him off. "Felix, last night was . . ." Explosive. Hot as hell. Ruinous, probably. Legitimately the best sex I'd ever had. "It was . . . well, you were there. You know what it was."

His eyes dipped to the flush blooming across my chest, pausing on the trio of moles. "I *was* there."

I wanted him to know that we were on the same page. We didn't have to have *that* talk. "What I'm trying to say is that I agree—it was tremendous. Five stars. But I know it was a one-time thing."

"It was more of a four-time thing." His single dimple flashed.

"Right," I said, my eyes catching on his.

Spark. Fizz. Crackle.

He cleared his throat. "Where are you staying? If you want, I can give you some suggestions for places to check out. I have a list for when someone asks at the restaurant. I left my phone in my buddy's truck the other night, but I'll text it to you when he drops it off today."

"That would be great, actually." I reached for my phone and opened my text chain with Bridget. "My friend grew up here, but she's been living in Toronto for years now." I read off the address she'd given me for Summer Wind, then glanced at Felix.

He watched me, unblinking, his face suddenly pale.

"What?"

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It took him a few seconds to speak. "Are you sure?"

"I think so?" I read the address again. "Why? Do you know it?"

His eyes darted around my face. "You're Bridget's friend," Felix said. "I thought you were coming next week."

I opened my mouth to reply, but then I spotted the green ceramic toad next to the sliding door. My stomach dropped, fast and hard, like an anvil from a cliff's edge.

"Oh my god."

Bridget gave me just three rules for the trip.

Number 1. Eat your weight in oysters.

"You're Bee," Felix said.

I was shaking my head, even though he was right. I was Bee.

Number 2. Leave the city behind.

I tore my sight from the toad, under which I knew was a set of keys.

"You're Wolf," I murmured. "You're Bridget's . . ." The nausea hit me with such dizzying force, I couldn't finish the sentence. I covered my mouth with an unsteady hand.

And *Number 3. Don't fall in love with my brother.*

"Yeah," Felix said. "Bridget's my sister."

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1

Now
Nine Days Until Bridget's Wedding

I study the illustration on the table in front of me, frowning. It's more detailed than my typical sketches. Sometimes, just to show off, I'll whip up a simple line drawing while a client watches. But I've been working with flowers for more than five years, and I don't need to mock up the archways and chuppahs anymore. This time, though, I've carefully rendered each leaf and petal, shaded them in greens and blues and whites. But it's still not right. Floral archways are my specialty, and this one has to be spectacular. Breathtaking. Perfect. Because this is the arch Bridget will stand beneath when she and Miles promise to love and cherish each other, forever, in front of their friends and family. It's where they will share their first kiss as a married couple. Bridget's dad is walking her down the aisle, but I feel like I'm giving her away, too. My best friend, soon to be married.

"I think something's missing. It needs more drama," I say to Farah. She's my second in command at In Bloom and has worked here almost as long as I have. She's a poet with an impeccable eye and a creative soul that was catnip to my aunt. Farah says arranging flowers helps her art. She likes her eyeliner smudgy and black and her clothing bright. Today it's neon orange bike shorts.

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I spin in my stool to face her. "What do you think?"

She hums, then shuffles the papers so that all my sketches of Bridget's flowers—the centerpieces, bouquets, boutonnieres, swags, and various other arrangements—are lined up together. "You've got so much plant material here, there may not be room for the guests."

Farah has a manner that oscillates between indifference and disdain. It took months of working together before I saw her full smile, the cute gap between her front teeth, and months after that to learn the attitude is mostly bluster. Farah brings her black Lab, Sylvia, to work with her, and she's a doting dog mom. Sylvia's sleeping under the table now, her nose on my foot.

"You think it's too much?" I ask.

She slits her espresso eyes my way. "You don't usually overthink the design like this."

It's true. Aunt Stacy showed me how to properly care for flowers, both in the garden and the vase, and she delighted in handing down her tricks. But my sense of balance, of color and form—that's innate. And once I'm flowing, the way my hands take over for my brain is magic. The quick snip of shears against stem is my favorite sound.

"You have an eye, my darling," my aunt used to say. "A gift that cannot be taught." Stacy was an actor before she was a florist. Her claim to fame was a recurring role as a busybody Italian relative on the Canadian teen drama *Ready or Not* and three seasons with the Stratford Festival. She was full of proclamations, and she doled them out with grandeur.

"I know," I say to Farah. "But . . ." I drift off.

"It's Bridget," she finishes.

"Yeah. It's Bridget."

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My best friend has the mouth of a sailor, the heart of a mother

lion, and a frightening passion for lists, label makers, and spreadsheets. And in true Bridget fashion, she's overseen wedding planning with surgical precision. There's a color-coded binder and a shared Google calendar for the myriad appointments—both her fiancé, Miles, and I have access to it, as well as her files with vendor and bridal party contacts, a day-of schedule, and ceremony musical selections.

The flowers are the only thing she's abdicated control of. She's given Farah and me free rein, and we've spent hours scheming about how to make the Gardiner Museum look like the most magnificent greenhouse. Peonies and roses, lilies and ranunculus, trailing ivy and asparagus fern and magnolia leaves.

Bridget will love whatever I do. She's my most vocal advocate, my loudest cheerleader. My only cheerleader now that my aunt is gone. She's the one person in my life whose love and support come freely and without conditions. She believes in me more than I believe in myself. Her wedding day flowers are a chance to say thank you, to pay her back for everything she's done for me. They will surpass anything I've ever done. They're my gift to her. And I want my gift to make her cry.

I give my forehead a gentle, frustrated *bonk* on the table, startling Sylvia. I offer her a scratch behind her ear, and she settles back down.

The bell over the door chimes, and I bolt upright, smiling at the young man who's just walked in. He's dressed nicely and looks nervous. A first date, I'm guessing. Maybe it's an important date. A proposal? I have a nose for this sort of thing, and Farah and I run an unspoken contest to see who guesses right. Maybe he's asking his partner to move in with him?

"Hello," I say. "Can we help you with anything in particular?"

"Yeah. I want to get some flowers."

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I can feel Farah resisting an eye roll.

"Well, you're in the right place. Is it a special occasion? Who are you shopping for?"

"They're for my boyfriend's mom. I don't know what she likes."

"Meeting the parents?" Farah asks.

"Yeah."

She looks at me, smug. I was close.

"We have a reservation at six at a restaurant down the street," he says. "I saw your sign and realized that I should probably bring her something."

I glance at the clock. It's five forty. That's odd. Bridget should be here by now. She's supposed to meet me in five minutes, but she's usually early. Her final gown fitting is this evening, at a boutique a block west. We're walking there together, getting the dress, then grabbing dinner.

"Let me help you," Farah says, standing. She speaks to the customers with a tone that manages to sound both resigned and wise. I could never pull it off the way she does. I'm bubbly, my smile full of teeth.

She leads him to our hand-tied bouquets. There are only three left, but he's lucky he has any to choose from. We're often sold out at the end of the day.

As she helps him pick, I go back to the drawing. I squint one eye, imagining Bridget in ivory, Miles in his suit. Her dress is elegant, simple. It's one of the reasons I feel the archway should make more of a statement. If her gown were extravagant, I would make sure the flowers didn't undermine it. The dress is stunning, but there's not a flourish on it. There's not even a train.

A train.

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I pick up my pencil and begin a rough sketch of an archway that cascades to the floor in a waterfall, extending over the ground. It will be a river of flora. A train of flowers.

I don't notice Farah standing over my shoulder until I hear her say, "Elaborate."

"Perfect."

"Perfect," she agrees.

The next step is figuring out what I need to order, but I've got time. The flower auction, where I do the bulk of my buying every week, is first thing Tuesday morning so I still have five days to decide. And now that I have the archway design nailed, I can turn my attention to tomorrow. I chew on my lip.

As if reading my mind, Farah asks, "Is there anything you want to go over before your meeting?"

I'm having breakfast with Lillian, the events manager of Cena, one of Toronto's poshest hospitality groups. She'd read about the shop in the newspaper and has asked In Bloom to take on florals for all of Cena's restaurants. There are eight of them, one of which is inside the swanky hotel where we're meeting. My Friday will begin with a thirty-dollar omelet and a contract that could change my life.

"I think I'm good," I tell Farah.

I'm certain I'll be signing that piece of paper tomorrow, but I can't deny it makes me uneasy. I'm not sure if I'm having second thoughts because corporate orders don't fill me up—dozens of uniform vases, uninventive, impersonal. Or if I'm worried that I won't be able to handle the increase in volume. Right now, I have Farah and two part-timers, but if I go ahead with Cena, I'll need two or three full-time staffers. And while I love arranging flowers, I do not love being a manager. I find difficult conversations

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difficult. But if self-doubt and fear are holding me back—it's more reason to jump in headfirst. That and taking the contract mean I can give Farah the massive raise she deserves.

"I'm excited," I tell Farah. "I'm also tired. I haven't slept well in weeks." I've been overthinking when I should be sleeping.

"Maybe if you took a day off . . ."

"You know I can't do that." We're already running at full tilt.

She growls. "Then don't stay out late tonight. You're trash when you don't get enough rest."

Farah moves toward the front door and turns the deadbolt. I glance at the clock, surprised to find that it's already six. Bridget is ten minutes late. Bridget is never late. She's the most reliable person I know.

We've been best friends for seven years, and in all that time, she's been late precisely once. That first trip. The time that counted.

"That's strange," I say, trying to keep fear from seeping into my voice. Bridget's fine. She has to be.

"She must have got caught in rush hour," Farah says. But I can hear the uncertainty in her voice.

"Maybe."

Bridget works as the VP of publicity at Sunnybrook Hospital, and she was going to leave right at five so she had plenty of time even if traffic was heinous, which it usually is.

I send her a text, but she doesn't reply.

At ten after six, panic sets in. I unlock the front door and step into the muggy August evening. I look up and down Queen Street East, searching for a head of white-gold corkscrews. I fell in love with Bridget's hair, staring at the back of her head in a company all-staff before we ever spoke. She's dyed it platinum

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for the wedding, but I prefer her natural, softer shade. It reminds me of late summer haystacks.

Like the rest of Toronto, Leslieville flexes its charm on hot nights. I see three red streetcars traveling west in a row, an elderly basset hound in a stroller, and a toddler holding a melting ice cream cone, his face and hands coated in glossy green mint chip. But I don't see Bridget.

When I step back inside, Farah is counting the arrangements for tomorrow's delivery, so I grab the broom from the back and begin sweeping the leaves and flowers and scraps of ribbon.

Farah points a long finger in my direction, its sharp nail tipped with a stripe of acid yellow. "Stop what you're doing. I don't need your help."

"I know you don't, but I'm here . . ." And I need a distraction.

"Sit. Relax for thirty whole seconds. Your stress stresses me out."

I look at the clock again. Six eighteen. My heart is pounding. Bridget wouldn't miss something as monumental as her last gown fitting. "We were supposed to be at the store at six."

I call the boutique. Maybe we got our wires crossed, and I was supposed to meet Bridget there? But no, the aggrieved salesperson who answers the phone tells me, Bridget isn't there. In fact, she is twenty minutes late, they close at seven, and it's a very busy time of year, don't I know? I apologize, assuring her we'll be there soon.

I finish sweeping and pull out a stool. I send Bridget another text, fingers beginning to shake, then check CP24, searching for news of accidents on her route.

"Lucy," Farah chides. I don't like the softness in her tone, either.

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I've already lost my aunt. I can't lose Bridget, too.

Something is very wrong.

I stand again. Begin to pace. Sylvia watches for a moment, then leaves her spot under the table to walk beside me.

The longest five minutes of my life pass, and then my phone vibrates in my palm. The sound that leaves my throat when I see Bridget's name on the screen is guttural, somewhere between a sob and a gasp of relief.

"Bridget, where are you?" I say. "Are you okay?"

Her voice cuts in and out, barely audible over the wind blowing into the microphone.

"I can't hear you. Can you hear me?"

"Bee?"

The line crackles. I hear the *whoosh* of a sliding door, and then the blowing stops.

"Bee?" My best friend's voice comes clear through the other end, but it doesn't sound right. It sounds broken. Small.

"What's going on? Where are you? We were supposed to be at your fitting half an hour ago."

"I'm home," she says. "I'm at Summer Wind."

It takes a second for her words to make sense. "You're . . . what?" My pulse has become a jackhammer in my ears. "Is your family okay? Your parents? Is—" I stop myself from using the wrong name. "Is Wolf okay?"

I hear her sniff, and I hold my breath. "Yeah. They're fine. But I thought they'd be here. They didn't tell me."

"I'm not following, Bridge. They didn't tell you what?"

"They decided to drive to Toronto for the wedding. They're making some kind of vacation out of it," she says, her voice pitching upward. "You know how they are."

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I do know how they are. Bridget's parents are spontaneous,

the opposite of their daughter. It drives her bonkers. Which is why it's not just highly unusual that Bridget has up and left for the island. It's deeply troubling.

"Okay. But, Bridget, why are *you* in PEI? Your wedding is in less than two weeks."

There's the fitting tonight. I'm supposed to go over to her condo tomorrow. Miles was going to make a fancy dinner while I helped Bridget finalize the seating chart and a shot list for the photographer. I'm throwing the bachelorette party this weekend.

"I know. I know. I know. But I needed to get away, Bee. I needed to come home." She's speaking in staccato bursts, fast enough that I almost miss what comes next. "And I need you here with me."

"You need me *there*? On Prince Edward Island?"

Farah's eyebrows reach to her hairline.

"I really, really do. Please come," she says. Another sniff. "There's a flight leaving tomorrow that still has seats. I'm looking at the website now."

"You want me to come to PEI *tomorrow*?" I gape at Farah. Sylvia sits next to her, head cocked.

"Please, Bee. Please come out. I need you."

The list of excuses I have for staying is long. There's the Cena meeting tomorrow. The flower auction Tuesday. I don't know if our part-timers will be able to pick up extra shifts. There's also Bridget's wedding to prep for.

But Bridget never asks for help. She's never had to. She loves me to Neptune and back, but she doesn't need me the way I need her. Until now. I'd travel anywhere if she asked for my help. Saying no isn't an option.

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I look to Farah. "Go," she whispers.

"Okay," I tell Bridget, shaking my head. I can't believe I'm doing this.

"You're coming to PEI?"

I swallow. "Yeah," I tell Bridget. "I'm coming."

Even though there's one very good reason why I should never set foot on Prince Edward Island again.

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2

Now
Eight Days Until Bridget's Wedding

I stare out the oval window at the tarmac, watching as my pink suitcase is thrown onto the conveyer belt. It travels the ramp into the belly of the aircraft. A flutter worries in mine.

"We'll be departing for Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, in a few minutes," the captain says over the speaker, and I twist my fingers in my lap. I wasn't sure whether I'd hear those words again.

As the plane lifts off, I take a long breath. In and out. And then another. I shouldn't be nervous. I'm going because Bridget is in crisis. It has nothing to do with him. I probably won't see him. He's probably in a car with his parents, making his way to Toronto. I didn't have the courage to ask Bridget, but it doesn't matter. I shouldn't be thinking about him at all. Bridget is my only concern.

She was so shaken when we spoke and wouldn't say anything about why she'd gone home. All I know is that she arrived on the island yesterday and that she wants me by her side.

"Bridget is your life's true fairy tale," my aunt Stacy once said, and I agreed.

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I thought I'd make all these amazing connections when I