



Meet Me

at the

a novel

Lake

"Brims with the warmth of summertime... exquisite."

—Jill Santopolo

CARLEY
FORTUNE

New York Times Bestselling Author of Every Summer After

TITLES BY CARLEY FORTUNE

Every Summer After
Meet Me at the Lake



MEET ME
AT THE
LAKE



Carley Fortune

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To Marco

For that first mix CD and all the ones that followed,
but especially for turning the volume down

1



Now

I MAKE IT AS FAR AS THE FRONT DESK WITHOUT ANYONE NOTICING ME. IT'S a striking piece, carved from a large tree trunk— rustic but not shabby, the epitome of Mom's aesthetic—and there's no one behind it. I hurry past, to the office, then shut myself inside and lock the door.

The room is more fishing hut than work space. Pine walls, two ancient desks, a small window trimmed with a flimsy plaid curtain. I doubt it's changed much since the lodge was built in the 1800s. There's nothing to suggest how much time Mom spent here, except for a photo of me as a baby pinned to the timber and a faint whiff of Clinique perfume.

Dropping into one of the worn leather chairs, I switch on the plastic tabletop fan. I'm already sticky, but it's stifling in here, one of the few spots in the building without air-conditioning. I raise my elbows like a scarecrow and swing my hands back and forth. Pit stains are the last thing I need.

While I wait to cool off before changing into heels, I stare at a stack of our brochures. *Brookbanks Resort—Your Muskoka Getaway Awaits*, declares a chipper font above a photo of the beach at sunset, the lodge looming in the background like a country cottage castle. It almost makes me laugh—it's Brookbanks Resort I've failed to get away *from*.

Maybe Jamie will forget I agreed to do this tonight, and I can sneak back to the house, slither into stretchy pants, and douse myself with a bucket of cold white wine.

The door handle rattles.

No such luck.

“Fernie?” Jamie calls. “What’s with the lock? You decent in there?”

“I need five minutes,” I reply, voice pinched.

“You’re not gonna bail, right? You swore you’d do this,” he says. But the reminder is unnecessary. I’ve been dreading it all day. All my life maybe.

“I know, I know. I’m finishing up some paperwork.” I clamp my eyes shut at the mistake. “I’m almost done.”

“What paperwork? Is it the linen order? We have a system for that.”

My mom had a system for everything, and Jamie doesn’t want me messing with any of them.

He’s worried. It’s peak season, but many of the guest rooms are vacant. I’ve been back for six weeks, and Jamie thinks it’s only a matter of time before I shake things up. I’m not sure if he’s right. I’m not even sure if I’m staying.

“You can’t shut me out of my own office. I have a key.”

I curse under my breath. Of course he does.

It’s going to be embarrassing if he has to drag me out of here, and I’m pretty sure he’ll do it. I haven’t made a scene at the resort since my senior year of high school, and I’m not about to start. Being here sometimes makes me feel like I’ve regressed, but I’m not a reckless seventeen-year-old anymore.

Taking a deep breath, I stand and smooth my palms over the front of the dress. It’s too tight, but the ripped jeans I’ve been living in aren’t appropriate for the dining room. I could almost hear Mom when I changed earlier.

I know you'd rather wear pj's all day, but we have to set the tone, sweet pea.

I open the door.

Jamie's flaxen curls are cropped short and styled into obedience, but he has the same baby face from when we were young and he thought deodorant was optional.

"Is it the linen order?" he asks.

"Absolutely not," I say. "You have a system."

Jamie blinks, not sure if I'm teasing. He's been the resort's general manager for three years, and I can't get my head around it. In pressed pants and a tie, he looks like he's playing dress-up. In my mind, he's still a lake rat in swim trunks and a bandanna.

He doesn't know what to make of me anymore, either—he's torn between trying to please me, his new boss, and trying to prevent me from wreaking havoc. There should be a cosmic law against exes working together.

"You used to be fun," I tell him, and he grins. And there, with his deep smile lines and sky blue eyes, is the Jamie who once sang the entirety of Alanis Morissette's *Jagged Little Pill* stoned and wearing a purple caftan he'd nicked from Mrs. Rose's cabin.

The fact that Jamie loved attention as much as he loved going commando was one of my favorite things about him—no one looked at me when Jamie was around. He was a good boyfriend, but he was also the perfect diversion.

"So did you," he says, and then squints. "Is that your mom's dress?"

I nod. "It doesn't fit." I pulled it from her closet earlier this evening. Canary yellow. One of at least two dozen brightly colored sleeveless shifts. Her evening uniform.

There's a beat of silence, and it's all it takes for me to lose my courage. "Listen, I'm not feeling—"

Jamie cuts me off. "Nuh-uh. You're not doing this to me, Fernie. You've been dodging the Hannovers all week, and they check out

tomorrow.”

According to Jamie, the Hannovers have stayed at Brookbanks for seven summers, tip like they’ve got something to prove, and refer a ton of guests. From the way I’ve caught him frowning into his computer screen, I think the resort needs good word of mouth more desperately than Jamie’s let on. Our accountant left another message today asking me to call him.

“They’ve already finished dessert,” Jamie says. “I told them you’d be right out. They want to give you their condolences in person.”

I scrape my nails across my right arm a few times before I catch myself. This shouldn’t be so hard. In my real life, I manage a trio of indie coffee shops in Toronto’s west end called Filtr. I’m overseeing the opening of our fourth and largest location this fall, the first with an on-site roastery. Talking to customers is second nature.

“Okay,” I tell him. “I’m sorry. I can do this.”

Jamie lets out a breath. “Awesome.” He gives me an apologetic look and then adds, “It would be extra awesome if you stopped by a few tables to say hello while you’re there. You know, carried on the tradition.”

I do know. Mom visited the restaurant every single evening, making sure this person liked the rainbow trout and that person had a restful first night. It was bonkers how many details she could recall about the guests, and they loved her for it. She said being a family-run business didn’t mean anything unless you put a face to the Brookbanks Resort name. And for three decades that face was hers. Margaret Brookbanks.

Jamie has been not-so-subtly hinting that I come to the dining room to greet the guests, but I’ve shrugged him off. Because as soon as I go out there, it’s official.

Mom is gone.

And I am here.

Back home at the resort—the last place I planned to end up.

JAMIE AND I MAKE OUR WAY TO THE FRONT DESK. THERE'S STILL NO ONE behind it. Jamie pauses at the same time I do.

"Not again," he mutters.

The desk clerk who's on tonight started a few weeks ago and tends to disappear. Mom would have fired her already.

"Maybe we should cover the desk until she's back," I say. "Just in case anyone comes."

Jamie raises his eyes to the ceiling, considering. Then he narrows them on me. "Nice try, but the Hannovers are more important."

We continue toward the French doors that lead to the restaurant. They're propped open, and the clinking of cutlery and happy hum of conversation drift into the lobby along with the smell of freshly baked sourdough. There are soaring beamed ceilings beyond the entrance and windows that look over the lake in an impressive semicircle. It's a renovation my mom choreographed after she took over from my grandparents. The dining room was her stage. I can't picture it without her walking among the tables.

Taking a quiet breath, I tuck my white-blond bob behind my ears, her voice in my head.

Don't hide behind your hair, pea.

As we're about to pass through the doorway, a couple exits arm in arm. They're in their sixties and swathed almost entirely in beige linen.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hannover," Jamie says, hands spread by his sides. "We were just coming to find you. Let me introduce you to Fern Brookbanks."

The Hannovers give me their kindest smiles, the facial equivalent of a *there, there* pat on the shoulder.

“We were so sorry to hear about your mother’s passing,” says Mrs. Hannover.

Passing.

It’s a strange word to describe what happened.

A dark night. A deer through the windshield. Steel crushed against granite. Ice cubes scattered across the highway.

I’ve been trying not to think about Mom’s last moments. I’ve been trying not to think of her at all. The daily barrage of grief, shock, and anger can make it hard to put weight on my feet in the morning. I feel a bit wobbly now, but I try not to let it show. It’s been more than a month since the accident, and while people want to express their sympathy, there’s a limit on how much suffering others can tolerate.

“Hard to imagine this place without Maggie,” Mr. Hannover says. “Always had that big smile on her face. We loved catching up with her. We even talked her into having a drink with us last summer, didn’t we?” His wife nods enthusiastically, as if I might not believe them. “I told her watching her run around was making me dizzy, and boy, did she laugh.”

My mother’s death and the future of the resort are two topics I’m not prepared to discuss, which is the other reason I’ve avoided the restaurant. The regulars will have something to say about both.

I thank the Hannovers and change the subject to their holiday—the tennis, the beautiful weather, the new beaver dam. The small talk is easy. I’m thirty-two—too old to resent the guests or worry about their judgment. It’s her I’m furious with. I thought she’d accepted that my life was in Toronto. What was she thinking by leaving the resort to me? What was she thinking by dying?

“We’re terribly sorry for your loss,” Mrs. Hannover says again. “You look so much like her.”

“I do,” I agree. Same small stature. Same pale hair. Same gray eyes.

“Well, I’m sure you want to head up to your room to enjoy your last night. You’ll have a great view of the fireworks from your

balcony,” says Jamie, rescuing me. I give him a grateful smile, and he sneaks me back a wink.

We were a good team when we worked together as kids, too. At first, we used a code word when one of us needed rescuing from an annoying or overly needy guest: *Watermelon*. The elderly widower who wouldn’t stop telling me how much I reminded him of his first love: *Watermelon*. The bird-watcher who gave Jamie a detailed description of every species he’d seen in the area: *Watermelon*. But after a summer spending every day together down at the outfitting hut, hauling canoes and kayaks out of the lake, we began communicating silently—a slight widening of the eyes or a curl of the lip.

“Not so bad, was it?” he says once they move toward the elevator bank, but I don’t reply.

Jamie extends his arm to the dining room entrance. Many of the people inside will be guests of the resort, but there’ll be plenty of locals. With my luck, someone I went to high school with will spot me as soon as I step inside. Blood roars in my eardrums like a transport truck on the freeway.

“I don’t think I can do this,” I say. “I’m going to go back to the house. I’m exhausted.”

It’s not a lie. The insomnia began as soon as I got back. Every day, I wake in my childhood bedroom underslept and a bit disoriented. I look at the dense tangle of tree branches out the window, reminding myself where I am and why I’m here. In the beginning, I’d put a pillow over my head and go back to sleep. I’d rise around noon and stumble downstairs, filling the rest of the day with carbohydrates and episodes of *The Good Wife*.

But then Jamie started calling with questions, and Whitney popped by without warning often enough to give me a talk about how much time I was spending in my pajamas—the type of tough love only a best friend can provide—and so I began getting dressed. I began leaving the house, visiting the lodge, wandering down to the

family dock for a swim or to drink my morning coffee, the way Mom used to. I've even gone out in a kayak a few times. It feels good to be on the water, like I have a shred of control, even if it's just steering a small boat.

I'm still greeted by a procession of grief, anger, and panic when I open my eyelids, only now it passes quietly instead of clanging like a marching band.

Over the last couple of weeks, Jamie has patiently updated me on everything that's changed in the many years since I've worked here, but what's wilder is all the stuff that hasn't. The sourdough. The guests. The fact that he still calls me Fernie.

We knew each other long before we started dating. The Pringle cottage is a couple bays down the lake. His grandparents knew my grandparents, and his parents still come to the restaurant for fish and chips every Friday. They spend most of the summer in Muskoka now that they've retired, venturing back to Guelph in September. Jamie rents a place in town, but he bought the vacant lot next to his family's to build a year-round home. He loves the lake more than anything.

"It's Canada Day," Jamie says. "It would mean something to the guests and the staff to see you. It's the start of summer. I'm not asking you to get up on the stage and make a speech before the fireworks begin." He doesn't need to add, *The way your mom did*. "Just go say hello."

I swallow, and Jamie holds my shoulders, looking me in the eyes. "You can do this. You're so close. You're already dressed. You've been in there a million times." He lowers his voice. "We've done it in there, remember? Booth 3."

I let out a huff. "Of course you know what booth it was."

"I could draw you a map of all the spots we desecrated. The outfitting hut alone . . ."

"Stop." I'm laughing now, but it's slightly frantic. Here I am with my ex-boyfriend, talking about the places we've had sex at my recently deceased mother's resort. I've been punked by the universe.

“Fernie, it’s no big deal. That’s all I’m saying.”

I’m about to tell Jamie that he’s wrong, that it’s a very big deal, but then I see an excuse in the corner of my eye. A very tall man is wheeling a silver suitcase up to the front desk, and there’s still no one behind it.

The skyscraper’s back is facing us, but you can tell his suit is expensive. Custom made, probably. The black fabric is cut to his frame in the kind of impeccable manner that requires precise measurements and generous room on a credit card. I doubt an off-the-rack number would be long enough for this guy’s arms, and the cuff of his sleeve is perfect. So is his slicked-back hair. Inky and glossy and as meticulously styled as his jacket is tailored. He’s overdressed, to be honest. This is a beautiful resort, one of the nicest in eastern Muskoka, and the staff is always well put together, but the guests tend to keep things casual, especially in the summer.

“I’m going to go help him,” I tell Jamie. “I need practice with check-ins. Come make sure I do it right.”

There’s no arguing. We can’t just let the fancy man stand there.

As we round the desk, I apologize for making him wait.

“Welcome to Brookbanks Resort,” I say, glancing up quickly—even with me in my heels, he’s got almost a foot on me.

“Did you have any trouble finding us?” I ask, punching a key to wake up the computer. Tall dude still hasn’t said anything. The last stretch of road is unpaved, unlit, and has some wicked turns through the bush. Sometimes city people find it stressful, especially when they arrive after sundown. I’m pegging this guy as a Torontonion, though he could be from Montreal. There’s a medical conference starting next week—some of the doctors are arriving early, making a holiday of the long weekend.

“No.” He runs a hand down his tie. Says nothing more.

“Good.” I type in my passcode. “Are you with the dermatologists?” I navigate to the main menu, and when he doesn’t answer, I clear my throat and try again. “Do you have a reservation with us?”

“I do.” He says the words slowly, like he’s scanning them for errors.

I have no idea what his problem is. Men who wear suits like his usually sound a lot more confident. But then I look up, and I’m met with a very handsome, very chiseled, very tense-looking face. He’s about my age, and he’s strangely familiar. I’m sure I’ve seen this face before. It’s something about the nose. Maybe he’s an actor, although celebrity types don’t usually show up in suits and a fresh shave—or at least they didn’t used to.

“The name?”

His eyebrows rise at my question, like he’s surprised I’ve asked. Then I notice how dark his eyes are, black as a crow’s wing, and my stomach twists. His posture is flawless. My heart races, pounding in the pads of my fingers and balls of my feet. I search for the scar immediately. And there it is: below his lip on the left side of his chin, barely visible unless you know to look for it. I can’t believe I still know to look for it.

But I do.

I know this face.

I know his irises aren’t actually black—in the sunlight, they’re espresso brown.

I know how he got that scar.

Because even though I’ve tried to forget him, I know exactly who this man is.