



Every Summer After

*"A radiant debut."
—Emily Henry*

a novel

CARLEY
FORTUNE

**EVERY
SUMMER
AFTER**

Carley Fortune

Jove
NEW YORK

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To my parents, for taking us to the lake
And to Bob, for letting me go back

1

Now

The fourth cocktail had seemed like a good idea. So did the bangs, come to think of it. But now that I'm struggling to unlock my apartment door, I'm guessing I might regret that last spritz in the morning. Maybe the bangs, too. June told me breakup bangs were almost always a very bad choice when I sat in her chair for a cut today. But June wasn't going to her friend's engagement celebration, newly single, that night. Bangs were in order.

It's not that I'm still in love with my ex; I'm not. I never was. Sebastian is kind of a snob. An up-and-coming corporate lawyer, he wouldn't have lasted one hour at Chantal's party without scoffing at her choice of signature drink and referencing some pretentious article he read in the *New York Times* that declared Aperol spritzes "over." Instead, he would pretend to study the wine list, ask the bartender annoying questions about *terroir* and acidity and, regardless of the answers, go with a glass of the most expensive red. It's not that he has exceptional taste or knows a lot about wine; he doesn't. He just buys expensive stuff to give the impression of being discerning.

Sebastian and I were together for seven months, giving our relationship the distinction of being my longest-lasting one yet. In the end, he said he didn't really know who I was. And he had a point.

Before Sebastian, the guys I picked were up for a good time and didn't seem to mind keeping things casual. By the time I met him, I figured being a serious adult meant I should find someone to get serious about. Sebastian

fit the bill. He was attractive, well read, and successful, and despite being a bit pompous, he could talk to anyone about almost anything. But I still found it hard to share too many pieces of myself. I'd long ago learned to tamp down my tendency to let random thoughts spew unfiltered from my mouth. I thought I was doing a good job of giving the relationship a real chance, but in the end Sebastian recognized my indifference, and he was right. I didn't care about him. I didn't care about any of them.

There was only the one.

And that one is long gone.

So I enjoy spending time with men, and I appreciate how sex gives me an escape ladder out of my mind. I like making men laugh, I like having company, I like taking a break from my vibrator once in a while, but I don't get attached, and I don't go deep.

I'm still fumbling with my key—*seriously, is something wrong with the lock?*—when my phone buzzes in my purse. Which is weird. No one calls me this late. Actually, no one ever calls me, except for Chantal and my parents. But Chantal is still at her party and my parents are touring Prague and won't be awake yet. The buzzing stops just as I get the door open and stumble into my small one-bedroom apartment. I check the mirror by the entrance to find my lipstick mostly smudged off but my bangs looking pretty phenomenal. *Suck it, June.*

I begin to unfasten the strappy gold sandals I'm wearing, a dark sheet of hair falling over my face, when my phone starts up again. I dig it out of my purse and, one shoe off, make my way toward the couch, frowning at the "unknown name" message on the screen. Probably a wrong number.

"Hello?" I ask, bending to take off the second sandal.

"Is this Percy?"

I stand upright so fast I have to hold on to the arm of the couch to steady myself. *Percy.* It's a name nobody calls me anymore. These days I'm Persephone to almost everyone. Sometimes I'm P. But I'm never Percy. I haven't been Percy for years.

"Hello . . . Percy?" The voice is deep and soft. It's one I haven't heard in more than a decade, but so familiar I'm suddenly thirteen years old and

slathered in SPF 45, reading paperbacks on the dock. I'm sixteen and peeling off my clothes to jump into the lake, naked and sticky after a shift at the Tavern. I'm seventeen and lying on Sam's bed in a damp bathing suit, watching his long fingers move across the anatomy textbook he's studying by my feet. Blood rushes hot to my face with a *whoosh*, and the steady, thick pumping of my heart invades my eardrums. I take a shaky breath and sit, stomach muscles seizing.

"Yes," I manage, and he lets out a long, relieved-sounding breath.

"It's Charlie."

Charlie.

Not Sam.

Charlie. The wrong brother.

"Charles Florek," Charlie clarifies, and begins explaining how he tracked down my number—something about a friend of a friend and a connection at the magazine where I work—but I'm barely listening.

"Charlie?" I interrupt. My voice is high-pitched and tight, one part spritz and two parts shock. Or maybe all parts total disappointment. Because *this* voice does not belong to Sam.

But of course it doesn't.

"I know, I know. It's been a long time. God, I don't even know how long," he says, and it sounds like an apology.

But I do. I know exactly how long. I keep count.

It's been twelve years since I've seen Charlie. Twelve years since that catastrophic Thanksgiving weekend when everything between Sam and me fell apart. When I tore everything apart.

I used to count the number of days until my family would head up to the cottage so I could see Sam again. Now he's a painful memory I keep hidden deep beneath my ribs.

I also know I've gone more years without Sam than I spent with him. The Thanksgiving that marked seven years since I'd spoken to him, I had a panic attack, my first in ages, then drank my way through a bottle and a half of rosé. It felt monumental: I'd officially been without him for more years than we'd had together at the lake. I'd cried in ugly, heaving sobs on the

bathroom tiles until I passed out. Chantal came over the next day with greasy takeout and held my hair back as I puked, tears streaming down my face, and I told her everything.

“It’s been forever,” I tell Charlie.

“I know. And I’m sorry to call you so late,” he says. He sounds so much like Sam it hurts, as if there’s a lump of dough lodged in my throat. I remember when we were fourteen and it was almost impossible to tell him apart from Charlie on the phone. I remember noticing other things about Sam that summer, too.

“Listen, Pers. I’m calling with some news,” he says, using the name he used to call me but sounding much more serious than the Charlie I once knew. I hear him breathe in through his nose. “Mom passed away a few days ago, and I . . . well, I thought you’d want to know.”

His words slam into me like a tsunami, and I struggle to fully understand them. Sue’s dead? *Sue was young.*

All I can get out is a ragged-sounding “What?”

Charlie sounds exhausted when he replies. “Cancer. She’d been fighting it for a couple of years. We’re devastated, of course, but she was sick of being sick, you know?”

And not for the first time, it feels like someone stole the script to my life story and wrote it all wrong. It seems impossible that Sue was sick. Sue, with her big smile and her denim cutoffs and her white-blond ponytail. Sue, who made the best pierogies in the universe. Sue, who treated me like a daughter. Sue, who I dreamed one day might be a mother-in-law to me. Sue, who was sick for years without me knowing. I should have known. I should have been there.

“I’m so, so sorry,” I begin. “I . . . I don’t know what to say. Your mom was . . . she was . . .” I sound panicked, I can hear it.

Hold it together, I tell myself. You lost rights to Sue a long time ago. You are not allowed to fall apart right now.

I think about how Sue raised two boys on her own while running the Tavern, and about the first time I met her, when she came over to the cottage to assure my much older parents that Sam was a good kid and that

she would keep an eye on us. I remember when she taught me how to hold three plates at once and the time she told me not to take crap from any boy, including her own two sons.

“She was . . . everything,” I say. “She was such a good mom.”

“She was. And I know she meant a lot to you when we were kids. That’s sort of why I’m calling,” says Charlie, tentative. “Her funeral is on Sunday. I know it’s been a long time, but I think you should be there. Will you come?”

A long time? It’s been twelve years. Twelve years since I’ve made the drive north to the place that was more like home to me than anywhere else has been. Twelve years since I dove, headfirst, into the lake. Twelve years since my life crashed spectacularly off course. Twelve years since I’ve seen Sam.

But there’s only one answer.

“Of course I will.”

2

Summer, Seventeen Years Ago

I don't think my parents knew when they bought the cottage that two adolescent boys lived in the house next door. Mom and Dad wanted to give me an escape from the city, a break from other kids my age, and the Florek boys, who went unsupervised for long stretches of the afternoons and evenings, were probably as big a surprise to them as they were to me.

A few of the kids in my class had summer homes, but they were all in Muskoka, just a short drive north from the city, where the word *cottage* didn't seem quite right for the waterfront mansions that lined the area's rocky shores. Dad flat-out refused to look in Muskoka. He said if we bought a cottage there, we might as well stay in Toronto for the summer—it was too close to the city and too full of Torontonians. So he and Mom focused their search on rural communities further northeast, which Dad declared too developed or too overpriced, and then further still until finally they settled on Barry's Bay, a sleepy, working-class village that transformed into a bustling tourist town in the summer, sidewalks bursting with cottagers and European sightseers on their way to camp or hike in Algonquin Provincial Park. "You'll love it there, kiddo," he promised. "It's the *real* cottage country."

I would eventually look forward to the four-hour drive from our Tudor in midtown Toronto to the lake, but that first trip spanned an eternity. Entire civilizations rose and fell by the time we passed the "Welcome to Barry's Bay" sign, Dad and I in the moving truck and Mom following behind in the Lexus. Unlike Mom's car, the truck had neither a decent sound system nor

air-conditioning, and I was stuck listening to the monotonous hum of CBC Radio, the backs of my thighs glued to the vinyl bench and my bangs plastered to my clammy forehead.

Almost all the girls in my seventh-grade class got bangs after Delilah Mason did, though they didn't suit the rest of us as well. Delilah was the most popular girl in our grade, and I considered myself lucky to be one of her closest friends. Or at least I used to, but that was before the sleepover incident. Her bangs formed a neat red valance over her forehead while mine defied both gravity and styling products, jutting out in odd poufs and angles, making me look every bit the awkward thirteen-year-old I was, rather than the mysterious dark-eyed brunette I wanted to be. My hair was neither straight nor curly and seemed to change its personality based on an unpredictable number of factors, from the day of the week to the weather to the way I slept the night before. Whereas I would do anything I could to make people like me, my hair refused to fall in line.



WINDING DOWN THE bushland on the western shore of Kamaniskeg Lake, Bare Rock Lane was a narrow dirt road that lived up to its name. The drive Dad turned down was so overgrown that branches scraped the sides of the small truck.

“Smell that, kiddo?” Dad asked, rolling down his window as we bumped along in the truck. Together we inhaled deeply, and the scent of long-fallen pine needles filled my nostrils, earthy and medicinal.

We pulled up to the back door of a modest wood A-frame cabin that was dwarfed by the white and red pines that grew around it. Dad shut off the engine and turned to me, a smile below his graying mustache and eyes crinkling under dark-rimmed glasses, and said, “Welcome to the lake, Persephone.”

The cottage had this incredible smoky-wood smell. Somehow it never faded, even after years of Mom burning her expensive Diptyque candles. Each time I returned, I'd stand at the entrance, breathing it in, just like I did

that first day. The main floor was a small open space, covered floor to ceiling in pale planks of knotted wood. Massive windows opened onto an almost obnoxiously stunning view of the lake.

“Wow,” I murmured, spotting a staircase leading from the deck and down a steep hill.

“Not bad, huh?” Dad patted me on the shoulder.

“I’m going to check out the water,” I said, already darting out the side door, which closed behind me with an enthusiastic *thwack*. I fled down dozens of steps until I reached the dock. It was a humid afternoon, every inch of sky carpeted by thick gray clouds that were mirrored in the still, silver water below. I could barely make out the cottages that dotted the far shore. I wondered if I could swim across it. I sat on the edge of the dock, legs dangling in the water, shocked at how quiet it was, until Mom yelled down for me to help unpack.

We were tired and cranky from moving boxes and fighting off mosquitoes by the time we unloaded the truck. I left Mom and Dad to get the kitchen organized and headed upstairs. There were two bedrooms; my parents forfeited the lakeside one to me, saying that since I spent more time in my room, I’d make better use of the view. I unpacked my clothes, made the bed, and folded a Hudson’s Bay blanket at the end. Dad didn’t think we needed such heavy wool blankets in summer, but Mom insisted on having one for each bed.

“It’s Canadiana,” she explained in a tone that said that should have been obvious.

I arranged a perilously high stack of paperbacks on one nightstand and tacked up a *Creature from the Black Lagoon* poster above the bed. I had a thing for horror. I watched a ton of scary movies, my parents having long ago given up on censoring them, and hoovered classic R.L. Stine and Christopher Pike books, as well as newer series about hot teens who turned into werewolves during full moons and hot teens who hunted ghosts after cheerleading practice. Back when I still had friends, I’d bring the books to school and read the good bits (as in anything gory or remotely sexy) aloud. At first, I just loved getting a reaction from the girls, loved being the center

of attention but with the safety net of someone else's words as the entertainment. But the more horror I read, the more I grew to love the writing behind the story—how the authors made impossible situations believable. I liked how each book was both predictable and unique, comforting and unexpected. Safe but never boring.

“Pizza for dinner?” Mom stood at the doorway, eyeing the poster but saying nothing.

“They have pizza?” Barry's Bay hadn't looked big enough to have delivery. And, it turned out, it wasn't, so we drove to the takeout-only Pizza Pizza, located in a corner of one of the town's two grocery stores.

“How many people live here?” I asked Mom. It was seven p.m., and most of the businesses on the main drag looked closed.

“About one thousand two hundred, though I expect it's probably triple that in the summer with all the cottagers,” she said. With the exception of a crowded restaurant patio, the town was pretty much deserted. “The Tavern must be *the* place to be on a Saturday night,” she commented, slowing down as we passed.

“It looks like it's the *only* place to be,” I replied.

By the time we got back, Dad had the small TV set up. There was no cable, but we had packed our family DVD collection.

“I was thinking *The Great Outdoors*,” said Dad. “Seems appropriate, don't you think, kiddo?”

“Hmm . . .” I crouched down to inspect the contents of the cabinet. “*The Blair Witch Project* would also be appropriate.”

“I'm not watching that,” Mom said, setting out plates and napkins next to the pizza boxes on the coffee table.

“*The Great Outdoors* it is,” said Dad, popping it into the player. “Classic John Candy. What could be better?”

The wind had picked up outside, moving through the pine boughs, and waves were now traveling across the lake's surface. The breeze coming through the windows smelled like rain.

“Yeah,” I said, taking a bite of my slice. “This is actually pretty great.”



A BOLT OF lightning zigged through the sky, illuminating the pines and the lake and the hills of the far shore, like someone had taken a flash photo with a giant camera. I watched the storm, transfixed, from my bedroom windows. The view was so much bigger than the wedge of sky I could see from my room in Toronto, the thunder so loud it seemed to be right above the cottage, as though it had been custom ordered for our first night. Eventually the deafening claps faded into distant rumbles, and I slipped back into bed, listening to the rain pelting the windows.

Mom and Dad were already downstairs when I woke the next morning, momentarily confused by the bright sun coming through the windows and ripples of light moving across the ceiling. They sat, coffees at the ready, reading materials in hand—Dad in the armchair with an issue of *The Economist*, scratching his beard absentmindedly, and Mom on a stool at the kitchen counter, flipping through a thick design magazine, her oversized red-framed glasses balancing on the tip of her nose.

“Hear that thunder last night, kiddo?” Dad asked.

“Kinda hard to miss,” I said, grabbing a box of cereal from the still mostly empty cupboards. “I don’t think I got a lot of sleep.”

After breakfast, I filled a canvas tote with supplies—a novel, a couple of magazines, lip balm, and a tube of SPF 45—and headed down to the lake. Though it had poured the night before, the dock was already dry from the morning sun.

I placed my towel down and slathered sunscreen all over my face, then lay on my stomach, face propped on my hands. There wasn’t another dock for maybe another 150 meters on one side, but the one in the other direction was relatively close. There was a rowboat tied to it and a raft floating further out from shore. I pulled out my paperback and picked up from where I left off the night before.

I must have fallen asleep because I was suddenly jerked awake by a loud *splash* and the sound of boys yelling and laughing.

“I’ll get you!” one shouted.

“Like you could!” a deeper voice taunted.

Splash!

Two heads bobbed in the lake next to the neighbor’s raft. Still lying on my belly, I watched them climb onto the raft, taking turns launching themselves off in flips and dives and flops. It was early July, but they were both bronzed already. I guessed they were brothers and that the smaller, skinny one was probably close to my age. The older boy stood a head above him, shadows hinting at lean muscles running along his torso and arms. When he tossed the younger one over his shoulder into the water, I sat up laughing. They hadn’t noticed me until then, but now the older boy stood looking in my direction with a big smile across his face. The smaller one climbed up on the raft beside him.

“Hey!” the older boy shouted with a wave.

“Hi!” I yelled back.

“New neighbor?” he called over.

“Yeah,” I hollered.

The younger boy stood staring until the older one shoved his shoulder.

“Jesus, Sam. Say hi.”

Sam raised his hand and stared at me before the older boy pushed him back into the lake.



IT TOOK EIGHT hours for the Florek boys to find me. I was sitting on the deck with my book after washing the dinner dishes when I heard a knock at the back door. I strained my neck but couldn’t see who Mom was talking to, so I tucked my bookmark into the pages and pushed myself out of the folding chair.

“We saw a girl on your dock earlier today and wanted to come say hi.” The voice belonged to a teenage boy, deepish but young sounding. “My brother doesn’t have anyone his age nearby to play with.”

“Play? I’m not a baby,” a second boy replied, his words cracking in irritation.

Mom looked at me over her shoulder, eyes narrowed in question. “You’ve got visitors, Persephone,” she said, making it clear she wasn’t exactly pleased about that fact.

I stepped outside and closed the screen door behind me, looking up at the tawny-haired boys I’d seen swimming earlier in the day. They were clearly related—both lanky and tanned—but their differences were just as plain. Whereas the older boy was smiling wide, scrubbed clean and clearly knew his way around a bottle of styling gel, the younger one was staring at his feet, a wavy tangle of hair falling haphazardly over his eyes. He wore baggy cargo shorts and a faded Weezer T-shirt that was at least one size too big; the older boy was dressed in jeans, a fitted white crew neck and black Converse, the rubber toes perfectly white.

“Hi, Persephone, I’m Charlie,” the bigger one said, with deep dimples and celery-green eyes dancing across my face. Cute. Boy-band cute. “And this is my brother, Sam.” He put his hand on the younger boy’s shoulder. Sam gave me a reluctant half grin from under a swoosh of hair, then looked down again. I figured he was tall for his age, but all that length made him gangly, his arms and legs twiggy sticks, and his elbows and knees sharp as jagged rocks. His feet looked like tripping hazards.

“Uh . . . hey,” I started, looking between them. “I think I saw you guys down at the lake today.”

“Yup, that was us,” said Charlie while Sam kicked at pine needles. “We live next door.”

“Like, all the time?” I asked, giving oxygen to the first thought that came into my head.

“Year-round,” he confirmed.

“We’re from Toronto, so this,” I said, waving around at the surrounding bush, “is pretty new for me. You’re lucky to live here.”

Sam snorted at that, but Charlie went on, ignoring him.

“Well, Sam and I would be happy to show you around. Wouldn’t we, Sam?” he asked his brother, not pausing for the answer. “And you’re welcome to use our raft anytime. We don’t mind,” he said, still smiling. He spoke with the confidence of an adult.

“Cool. I definitely will, thanks.” I gave him a shy smile back.

“Listen, I have a favor to ask you,” said Charlie conspiratorially. Sam groaned from under his mop of sandy hair. “Some friends of mine are coming by tonight, and I thought Sam could hang out with you here while they’re over. He doesn’t have much of a social life, and you look about the same age,” he said, giving me a once-over.

“I’m thirteen,” I replied, glancing at Sam to see if he had an opinion on this proposal, but he was still examining the ground. Or maybe his submarine-size feet.

“Perrrrfect,” Charlie purred. “Sam’s thirteen, too. I’m fifteen,” he added proudly.

“Congratulations,” Sam muttered.

Charlie continued, “Anyway, Persephone . . .”

“Percy,” I interrupted with a burst. Charlie gave me a funny look. I laughed nervously and spun the friendship bracelet I wore around my wrist, explaining, “It’s Percy. Persephone is . . . too much name. And a bit pretentious.” Sam straightened up and looked at me then, scrunching his eyebrows and nose momentarily. His face was kind of ordinary, no feature especially memorable, except for his eyes, which were a shocking shade of sky blue.

“Percy it is,” Charlie agreed, but my attention was still on Sam, who watched me with his head tilted. Charlie cleared his throat. “So as I was saying, you’d be doing me a huge favor if you’d entertain my little brother for the evening.”

“Jesus,” Sam whispered at the same time I asked, “Entertain?” We blinked at each other. I shifted my weight on my feet, not sure what to say. It had been months since I’d offended Delilah Mason so fantastically that I no longer had any friends, months since I’d spent time with someone my age, but the last thing I wanted was for Sam to be forced to hang out with me. Before I could say so, he spoke up.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want.” He sounded apologetic. “He’s just trying to get rid of me because Mom’s not home.” Charlie belted him across the chest.

The truth was I wanted a friend more than I wanted my bangs to behave. If Sam was willing, I could use the company.

“I don’t mind,” I told him, adding with false confidence, “I mean, it is a huge imposition. So you can show me how to do one of those somersaults off the raft as payback.” He gave me a lopsided grin. It was a quiet smile, but it was a great smile, his blue eyes glinting like sea glass against his sunny skin.

I did that, I thought, a thrill running through me. I wanted to do it again.