

# Summer Rain

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# Chapter One

Summer had a smile as bright as the clear blue sky, and a heart as warm as the season she was named for. I met her on a balmy, Tuesday afternoon just after a pop-up shower had passed. Storms rolled through often, during the brief time we were getting to know each other. Sometimes when I get caught in a downpour it takes me back to those wondrous days, and I can still feel her in my arms.

In early June I took a job as delivery boy for *Blooms and Bouquets*, a small florist on the east side of the sleepy South Georgia town of Heartville. The day after the owner, Loretta, hired me her assistant left town without a word. Since I showed no talent for arranging flowers, Loretta *promoted* me to customer service rep, which meant my duties consisted of answering the phone and working the counter in addition to making deliveries.

The storefront awning mostly protected Loretta's elaborate sidewalk display of daisies and carnations from the sudden storm. Summer stopped in front of the big plate glass window, and plucked a carnation from one of the

containers. She shook off the rain droplets, broke the stem, and stuck the flower over her ear. Her flowy white kurta top and tight, faded blue jeans gave her the look of a free spirit. The yellow bloom in her hair added the perfect accent to her ensemble. I guess she saw me watching her because she hurried inside and strolled straight up to me.

"Hey, how much for this?" She flipped her finger at the carnation with a little twist of her head, making sure I saw the flower.

Staring into the big brown eyes of that creamy skinned beauty, I had no idea of the trouble brewing just beyond the horizon. "We're running an after-shower special for the next five minutes. All you have to do is tell me your name, and it's on me."

"I'm Summer." She stuck out her hand and I shook it.

"I'm Hollis. Nice to meet you."

She grinned, holding onto my hand for an instant longer than necessary. That millisecond of extra contact set the wheels in my mind whirring. A window of opportunity had opened. A world filled with potential lay spread out before me. And it could all be mine, if I worked-up the nerve to ask her for a date. And, if by some miracle, she didn't shoot me down like a rabid dog.

A snort came from the work room. "Sucker. You should have traded it for her phone number."

Summer withdrew her hand from mine, and leaned over the counter trying to peer into the back. "Who's that?"

I rang up the flower, and put my cash into the register. "Just my crabby old boss."

"Hey! Watch your mouth, kid. Delivery boys are a dime a dozen so if you want your point eighty-three cents on payday you'd better show me some respect."

"And she wonders why she can't keep employees?"

Summer snickered at my joke. "Giving you my number wouldn't do you any good. I left my phone at home."

Loretta did me a disservice by putting Summer on the

spot about her number. I didn't expect her to give it to a total stranger, and hadn't planned to ask for it unless she agreed to go out with me.

"So where is home, anyway?"

"St. Petersburg."

"Well, your accent is barely noticeable. I'd have sworn you were American."

She rolled her eyes and flashed me a good-humored smirk. "Florida, not Russia."

"*Ah*, well that explains the lack of accent. I'd be totally lost if my phone were that far away."

"My dad insisted I leave it home. He said I should meet new people and have face to face conversations using my mouth, instead of staring at a screen and talking with my thumbs."

A twinge in my chest interrupted my breath. She had the body and mannerisms of a grown woman. The idea that she could be too young to date a twenty-one year old guy, hadn't occurred to me. "Your dad? *Um*, sorry, I—I shouldn't be flirting. I thought you were my age."

She cut her gaze to the window as several people strolling along the sidewalk, passed the shop. "Thanks for the flower." She hesitated for a moment, looking out toward the street. Admitting I had been flirting probably embarrassed her. Maybe she believed my line about the after-shower special, at first, only to realize I bought her the carnation as an excuse to have a conversation, rather than making a sale and letting her walk away. Before I could think of a way to backpedal out of the awkward situation I'd created, she turned her attention back to me. "I'm nineteen, so it's okay for us to talk."

The urge to pump my fist in the air and shout *yes* hit me without warning, but I managed to contain my unwarranted enthusiasm. "That's good to know. What brings you to Heartville?"

"A funeral, actually."

Orders had been pouring in for a Wednesday afternoon funeral. "Bob Peterson?"

Summer raised an eyebrow as if surprised by my question. "Yeah. I guess it's true that everyone knows everyone's business in small towns."

She would probably be heading back to Florida in a day or two. The odds of having a better opportunity to get a date with her were not good. I needed to ask before she left the flower shop. I didn't want to blurt it out, but I didn't want to catch her leaving with an *oh, by the way*. I said a silent prayer and hoped for miraculous results. "Loretta's been knocking herself out making up arrangements for the service."

Her eyes widened and she quietly huffed. "Yes, of course. That's why I stopped by. My mom called but she didn't get an answer so I volunteered to check."

Loretta warned me not to drag the shop phone to my favorite spot to sit. But I liked having my stool where I could lean against the wall. A little creative rerouting of the cord gave me just enough slack to set it within easy reach. No calls had come in for the last hour.

"She must have dialed the wrong number." I raised the receiver to my ear and heard silence. The plug had come loose from the socket but hadn't fallen completely out. I held it for Summer to see, put my finger to my lips, and tipped my head toward the back room, hoping she wouldn't rat me out. She gave me a wink, and I snapped the wire back into place. "I'm sorry about Bob. Was he a relative?"

"As it turns out, he was my uncle. I've known my dad my whole life, and I just found out he had a brother he never told anyone about. They've known each other for years but they kept things quiet to avoid a scandal. My grandma didn't know Grandpa had a kid by another woman. And Uncle Bob's *dad* didn't know he wasn't Uncle Bob's real dad."

"So, you're not a Peterson?"

"No."

She didn't take the bait and tell me her last name. The bells on the door handle clanged noisily and a tall, muscular, blond guy stormed inside.

"Hey, if you break it, you buy it!" Loretta yelled from the back.

"Summer, how long does it take to find out if the arrangements will be ready on time?" He didn't give her a chance to answer before starting in on me. "You people need to get into the twenty-first century. There's this thing called the internet real businesses use to connect with their customers. You should check it out sometime."

Summer cringed, looking like she wanted to crawl under a rock. The guy presented himself as someone who exerted authority over her, a controlling boyfriend perhaps, but she didn't cozy-up to him. His high-end clothes, perfect hair, and sculpted features fit well with his arrogant attitude.

The condescending gaze he cast down his nose at me made it obvious he didn't have much respect for a small town guy working the register in a one-off florist. I saw an opportunity to make Summer laugh at my expense. I already felt dumb for messing-up the phone so I figured playing a stereotype wouldn't hurt my situation. I screwed up my face, snapped my fingers, and poured on my southern accent as thick as I could manage. "*Aw* shucks, Partner, we just got the telegraph hooked-up yesterday. You're telling me they done gone and cooked-up something fancier than that?"

He glanced at Summer—"Is he mocking me?"—and then back at me. "Are you mocking me?"

I couldn't keep a straight face, and beamed a goofy smile at the guy. Summer didn't laugh but the widening of her eyes and tightening of her cheeks came close enough to the reaction I wanted from her. "Maybe, just a little. If you're checking on the Peterson arrangements, they'll be

delivered on time. You see, we got us one of them fancy horseless carriages out front. It don't take hardly no time to get from here to the church in that thing."

The guy stepped closer to the counter, glaring at me. "You're an asshole, pal."

"You tell him, mister!" Loretta called. "The customer is always right." She must have sensed the situation getting out of hand. Her effort to pacify him turned his attitude right around.

He chuckled, shaking his head. "What kind of crazy, hick town is this?"

I flipped my palms up and shrugged. "You answered your own question."

"Yeah, I suppose I did. Come on, Summer, everyone is waiting for us."

## **A word from the Author**

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