



Secrets of Summer

By

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Dedication

To the family who rented us their cottage, The Red Roost

Pyper gasped as her foot caught the edge of a tree root, nearly dropping the parcels she carried. She switched their precarious weight from one arm to the other, as though she juggled them, nearly dropping them in the process more than once. It was a perilous task getting from the parking lot to the cottage front door, one made more difficult by the fading twilight and the unknown obstacles reaching across the well-worn dirt path.

The cottage was worth the treacherous trek though, especially if this was to be her last trip to her favorite place in the whole, wide world.

The tiny, white, dilapidated bungalow had been her second home for as long as she could remember. It had been in her family for sixty-seven years, and four years ago she'd inherited it. A week ago, she received notice that the community, which consisted of over two hundred cottages, one old fashioned movie theatre, an ice cream concession stand, a bakery, and six beaches that hugged Lake Winnipeg, was due for an upgrade. New bylaws were being implemented that required her to spend a lot of money she didn't have to fix the eyesore her beloved cottage had become.

She didn't have ten grand to throw away on a leaky roof, or another grand to replace the old woodstove. The upgrade bylaw seemed like a money grab to her. Her little bungalow had been good enough up until now. She didn't see why that should change just because the district thought they could get more value for the property. Her summer home was a hazard, but it was her past, and she had hoped it would be her future.

She didn't have a lot of joy in her life. Working in a bank five days a week in the heart of the city didn't offer up much excitement, but she didn't see her career choices changing any time soon either. At least not until she retired. She had big plans for retirement. She was going to move out to the lake permanently, blow all her hard earned cash on trashy romances and chocolate, and then she was going to sit on the beach, sipping mulled wine, and read till her eyes dropped out. She was twenty-six now; only twenty-nine to go.

The cottage loomed ahead of her like a friendly ghost in the growing darkness. She knew her way though. She knew which steps were rotten, where the half sunk boulder was on the path, and that if she could just hang on a couple more steps, she would be able to set her parcels of groceries down on the deck railing as she searched for the keys.

She stumbled, let out a small shriek in her surprise, then cursed herself for getting distracted. She knew that rock was there. Her feet automatically step over it every other time, but tonight she had a lot on her mind.

A light to her left flickered on as she walked past the neighboring cottage, illuminating the building's expensive, cedar siding. It was a sensor light, one she was accustomed to but hated. Compared to Pyper's cottage, the one next door was an architectural monstrosity in size and show of wealth. With its looming two stories and a high deck that took up the entire yard, the Patterson's cabin made her bungalow look like a doll house.

She scowled at it. What was the point of having a cottage if no one was around to use it? She hadn't seen the Patterson's in over thirteen years. Rumor had it, Mr. and Mrs. Patterson divorced, leaving Pyper to wonder who now owned it and where they were after all these years. Not to mention, where was that hotty of a son they'd sired?

The thought of Liam Patterson brought a bloom of heat to her cheeks. For seven years, since she was old enough to recognize the symptoms, she'd had a crush on the golden-haired boy next door. Who wouldn't though? The guy was perfect.

Liam, of course, never had time for a mousey bookworm like her. It

was clear he had other interests. His main distraction appeared to be girls, *easy* girls.

She'd watched him over the years as he strutted his stuff down the beach or stood in the center of a flock of adoring girls. He could take his pick. That had become apparent the night she nearly stumbled into him and a doe-eyed dark-haired girl shaking the branches in the bushes between their two cottages.

Pyper had been running, nearly flying down the paths at top speed, because she was late and expected a lecture from her mother. She took a shortcut through the small bluff of trees and before she knew it, she was nearly on top of them. They hadn't bothered to hide themselves very well either.

She could still remember the sight of their skin glowing under the moonlight, his bare thighs pressed against the backs of hers, the momentary gap that he rushed to close again as he hastened to thrust into her. The look on his face was what she remembered the most. At first it was fear, fear of being caught, and then he seemed to realize it was her and he relaxed, his mouth sliding into an easy grin.

She watched, momentarily mesmerized by his skillful talents as he arrogantly resumed his pleasuring. It struck her odd that he kept his eyes focused on her all the while she stood there and stared.

She watched as though she were dumbstruck, fascinated as he fed his youthful manhood into the other girl's body. Liam's gaze was intent, primal, and spellbinding. Even though he was already imbedded deep between the dark-haired girl's thighs, Pyper was certain there was an offer that he could be ready for more. Perhaps he was even hoping she would join in.

She had run away instead, frightened by the look in his eyes that went beyond the lust he was experiencing at the time. It was a look that invited adventure, full of mischief and wantonness.

Now that look came back to haunt her in a different way, the way a grown woman might feel if she were at all curious about what it might have felt like to have him pushing inside her instead of that girl she knew now to be Susie Hill.

Motion from the deck belonging to the cottage to her left nearly made her drop her bundle. She gasped as Liam Patterson himself stood up out of a chair that rested against the house. His eyes gazed boldly down at her like some demon she'd conjured up just by thinking of him.

He studied her warily. "Pyper?" he inquired softly.

She was tempted to run again. No, she steadied herself. *Grow up.*

"Pyper Caden?" he repeated, using her full name. She detected a hint of alarm in his tone.

"Yes," she finally said, finding her voice.

He stood under the light, and she could see he had changed. He was still as lean as he'd been when he was prowling the beaches, but his white-tipped, sun-bleached unruly mop of curls was now shorter, neatly trimmed, and darker. The adolescent body was gone, replaced by sinewy muscles, broad shoulders, and muscular thighs. He had become a man.

"It has been a long time, Liam." She couldn't hide her astonishment at his metamorphosis.

He visibly relaxed. "I hope I didn't scare you. It's such a nice night, I thought I'd sit out under the stars."

Her gaze dropped to his waistline where she noticed the leather tool belt slung low about his hips. A hammer protruded awkwardly from a loop on his left side.

"I must admit, I'm a little startled. I didn't expect to see anybody over there tonight. There hasn't been anyone for years. In fact, I didn't even know your family still owned the cottage." She laughed nervously, fearing she was running off at the mouth.

He sighed wearily. "I know. What a mess that was." The vehement tone in his voice warned her that the rumors were true and to not push the topic.

A long silence fell between them.

She still couldn't believe he was there and still looked so magnificent. It dawned on her to consider what she looked like. She hadn't expected a rendezvous, so she had worn her frumpiest sundress thrown over top of a ratty, old T-shirt. She intended to do some intense cleaning while at the lake, but she never would have wanted anyone to

see her in such a state.

"I should set these down," she said in a rush, indicating her bulky armful, using that as an excuse to get out of the spotlight.

"Here," he said suddenly. To her surprise, he sprang from the deck to the ground below. "Let me help you." He reached for a paper bag overflowing with a variety of foods she would prefer he didn't see. Such as the bag of cheese puffs poking out the top, or the chocolate chip cookies and the six pack of soda. "How inconsiderate of me to hold you up so long with such a heavy load."

"No, no. It's okay." She winced, trying to dissuade him, but he was already up the steps to her deck and had the screen door propped open with his toe. "Okay," she conceded through gritted teeth.

She fished the keys out of her pocket and slid one into the lock. With a thump from her hip, she opened the door and stumbled inside.

She flicked on the light around the corner with her elbow then moved to the kitchen where she set her bundle down on the table. Then she turned around to take the bag from him.

She smoothed down the folds of her skirt in a self-conscious motion.

"I see you still wear your hair long," he said out of the blue, his gaze fixated on what she assumed was a mess of strawberry-blonde frizz.

Was that a good thing? She raised her hand to her unruly, shoulder-length tresses and patted the top of her head, flattening a few rebellious curls. Her Irish ancestry both blessed and cursed her. With her fine bone structure, moss green eyes, light sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of her nose, and wild light red, curly hair, she might be mistaken for a sprite. But on days like this when it was muggy, her cheeks burned a deep pink with an internal fire, and her hair did a jig, dancing straight up on top of her head as though it had a life of its own.

"I'm too chicken to try any other style," she confessed through a nervous laugh.

He shrugged easily. "I've always liked it."

She was surprised that he was aware she *had* hair, let alone had bothered to have an opinion about how she wore it. He smiled at her

kindly, as though it were an everyday occurrence that they might be chatting in her cottage kitchen. It was then she realized he was still standing in the open doorway. He seemed rather like he anticipated something. Could he be waiting for an invitation to come in? Her eyes widened at the idea.

"Would you like some cocoa?" she blurted then silently scolded herself for not offering something classier like coffee or rum. Around Liam, she still felt like that little fifteen-year-old girl with a crush. She wasn't fifteen, but she still had the crush.

His face lit up as though she'd just told him he'd won the lottery. "I'd love one, thanks." He stepped inside.

She swallowed hard as he closed the door behind him, suddenly aware of the confined space in her kitchen that forced her to be less than three feet away from him from any angle. He didn't seem bothered it the least.

To her relief, he turned his back to her and walked around, openly admiring his surroundings, casually picking up some eccentric item then placing it back where he had found it. She realized that in all the time they had been summertime neighbors, they'd never visited each other's home.

She put the kettle on and cranked the dial on the ancient, nineteen-fifties, teal and chrome stove.

"I'm sorry the place is a bit of a mess right now. I've had to move a bunch of stuff around because a family of raccoons broke in here over the winter. They came up through a hole in the floor under the bed in the bunk room."

His eyes widened at that. "The beggars." He made a *tsk tsk* sound with his mouth, and she had to turn away to hide her smile.

It was the reaction she would expect of someone's grandmother, not a sexy surfer boy.

"You don't have to fret on my account. I don't mind this at all. It feels homey, like what a cottage should be." He returned to the kitchen where she stood over a wooden hutch, stirring cocoa into two chipped, mismatching tea cups.

His fingers traced the diamond pattern of a patchwork quilt draped

over the frayed and moth-eaten couch that divided the two main rooms. "Braided rugs, mismatching furniture, a real fieldstone fireplace, a wicker hanging chair in the corner, family photos on the wall..." His arm swept wide across the room. "This place has a personal touch my cottage lacks. Would you believe my parents put a fake fireplace in?"

Her eyes went wide at the mental image.

"They didn't want the bother of chopping the wood." He shook his head, clearly disgusted. "As a child, I used to have the tedious chore of lighting the fire in the morning. What a hassle to flick that switch on the wall."

She chuckled, appreciating his sarcasm. She had similar sarcastic thoughts about the extravagance of his family retreat.

"Well, everything in here is someone else's cast off. For a long time, I was ashamed of the shabby appearance and dilapidated state, but lately I've found myself dreaming about retiring here."

He nodded his understanding.

A lump formed in her throat, telling her she needed to lighten the subject, and quickly. "You're renovating, I see." She motioned toward the tool belt he still wore.

He looked down as if surprised to see it there. "Oh, I completely forgot." He shook his head and unhooked it.

For the first time, her gaze strayed to his crotch and lingered there. He was a fine specimen of a man. She noted his lean, long legs, his square hips, and the faint outline of a promising bulge beneath his fly. The image of Liam rutting in the bushes filled her mind, and she felt a tightening in her groin that threatened to unravel her.

She looked up to find him grinning at her. She jerked her face away so he wouldn't see her burning cheeks. He must think she was a harlot, she thought, ashamed at her wantonness.

The sound of the heavy tool belt hitting the floor announced, thankfully, that the moment had passed.

"Would you mind if I started a fire the old fashioned way?" he asked casually and walked into the living room.

"Please do." She busied herself with the unpacking of her groceries.

While his back was turned, she hid the cookies, cheese puffs and sodas deep in the recesses of the cupboards. For some reason, she didn't want him to learn of her bad eating habits.

A loud pop followed by the whoosh of flame rushing up the chimney told her he had success. A fire blazed merrily, adding an ambiance to the room she hadn't noticed had been lacking until then.

He returned to the kitchen, a piece of birch bark pinched between his fingers. He peeled it, seeming distracted, perhaps agitated. "So, are you selling or staying?"

She bit her lip. The topic was a sensitive one for her that usually ended in tears. "I still don't know," she answered after she'd mastered her emotions. "My sister isn't interested. She has a cottage of her own where she lives in British Columbia. I desperately want to keep this place, but I can't afford to renovate. I inherited this old girl, accepted the responsibilities of the upkeep, yet I haven't fixed a thing. You?"

"Definitely selling," he said without hesitation. "Both of my brothers agree. None of us want to keep it for ourselves. I don't know about them, but there are too many bad memories for me."

Her heart faltered a beat when she heard his news. She couldn't imagine Victoria Beach without Liam Patterson. Every time she came to the lake, he was the first person she inquired about. She'd ask her Great Aunt Mavis if the Pattersons were there, and her aunt would smile knowingly. Even though he hadn't been there for years, the thought of him never coming back seemed so final.

Memories of a young, shirtless Casanova filled her head, and she smiled slyly. She realized he might be waiting for a response, so she took a deep breath and put on her best passive face. "Really? That is a surprise. I would have thought you had rather enjoyed yourself."

He obviously caught her meaning and smiled at her jest. No doubt his mind could easily conjure up the same erotic image as she often did. His smile didn't last long though, and his expression sobered quickly. He sucked in a big lungful of air and let it out slowly. He was struggling to control his emotions, she mused, recognizing the signs.

"Don't get me wrong," he said after a moment. "Those bushes out

back have very fond memories for me, but I just endured one summer too many, listening to my parents cut each other down.” He scowled at the floor, running his hands restlessly through his hair.

He started pacing as he explained. “I love the area, the concession stand, the late-night bike rides down the trails, that old broken-down projector in the movie theatre and the floor covered in sunflower shells, the beaches, and the bikinis—especially the bikinis—it makes my heart ache to think about leaving.”

She nodded her understanding, and she agreed completely, except for the bikinis. They did nothing for her except remind her how reserved she was compared to those other girls.

The kettle whistled, and she pulled it off the element. When she looked up again, he had moved into the living room. She found him over by the photos, his nose inches away from one in particular. She cleared her throat, interrupting him in order to hand him one steaming mug.

He smiled as he reached for the mug then turned his attention back to the photo he’d been studying so intently. “Is this you?” He pointed to the image of a little girl standing knee deep in water, her mouth caught open mid shriek, her fingers splayed out at her sides, her eyes wide with obvious exhilaration. She wore a dark-colored, two-piece mermaid print bathing suit, and she looked to be about eight years old.

Pyper knew the photo well. It was a picture of her, one she’d intended to take down years ago. “Oh, god.” She slapped her forehead in embarrassment. “Yes.”

“Cute.” He winked. “I remember one very cold windy day when the waves were nearly three feet high, you, your sister, and some other girl I presume was a friend, were out in the water. I thought no one would be fool enough to venture out there on a day like that, but there you three were, leaping and shrieking like it was the best thing in the whole world.” He shook his head, looking amazed. “I was tempted to join you, but then one of you said something about mermaids and what color was your hair or something like that, and I realized this was a girl thing. I decided to just watch you from the top of Pink Rock.”

“You watched us?” The shock and embarrassment of having her

childish fantasies exposed to the last person she wanted to know about her obsession for mermaids was like looking down to discover she was naked.

"You sure were a bossy little thing." He grinned, playfully provoking her.

"I was not." But she knew it was the truth. It was the same criticism her mother always scolded her for.

He grinned and took a sip from his mug. "Mmm. This is real cocoa."

Grateful he changed the subject, she tried to forget he'd ever brought it up. "Nothing but real cocoa around here. Aunty Mavis wouldn't hear of buying that commercial crap, she so lovingly called it."

"After a cup of this, I can see why."

He took another deep swallow. Fascinated, she watched his Adams apple work and experienced a curious urge to touch it.

"Hey," he said, jabbing his finger at another picture, startling her with his outburst. "There's the ice cream parlor." He frowned perplexed. "It looks so different."

Pyper took a sip of her cocoa, savored it a moment, then nodded. "That picture was taken years ago by my Great Uncle Harry. That woman standing out front in the polka dot dress is my Great Aunty Mavis, and the little girl in front of her is my mother. My Uncle Edward is the little boy off to the side, crying over his dropped ice cream cone."

He turned to look at her, a serious, far away expression on his face. "Your family goes way back. They have a history here."

Pyper grimaced. The familiar ache returned, and she had to walk away. Heading for the fire, she preoccupied herself by adding another log. "Yes," she said after a bit. Her chest constricted, but she resigned herself to her melancholy, hoping to master it yet. "And I'm afraid I'll lose it. I don't have the money required to meet the community development demands."

He followed her to the fire. "Can you get a loan?"

She grimaced. "I'm sure I could, but I already have a mortgage on a house in the city. I didn't expect this upgrade thing."

"Well, how expensive could it be?" he asked, looking around.

She was amazed that he couldn't see all the problems like she could. "A contractor estimated it at twenty five grand." She brought her thumb to her mouth, biting nervously at the nail. It was a bad habit she had acquired from a youth spent worrying and doubting herself. She forced her thumb away and found a doily within reach with which she could fidget with instead.

Liam scratched his head thoughtfully for a moment but then shook his head. "Ouch."

What had he been thinking? She felt he'd wanted to say something more but decided against it. She shook her head. Ouch was right. "The building will probably be demolished." A tear rolled to the corner of her eye, and she wiped it away with an irritated swipe. "I'm sorry. I get emotional thinking about it, but I'm not giving up yet either."

He nodded thoughtfully, looked to the floor, then to the fire. It seemed the conversation had taken a dive, and it wasn't going to recover.

When he announced it was getting late, she didn't pressure him to stay.

He lingered in the doorway a moment longer, again seeming as though he were about to say something, but again he closed his mouth against his thoughts. He waved briefly then was gone.

* * * * *

She thought about him all night. After such an unexpected interaction, she discovered her crush was renewed. More than renewed; set ablaze.

Seductive images of him had danced through her dreams the whole night long like Puck through a field of flowers, teasing her with phantom affections then fading with the morning light. In her dreams, he was always pleasantly naked, erect, and with hungry eyes lusting only for her.

She awoke early to discover her legs tangled in her sheets. Her fantasies had been vivid, leaving her with a raging libido and a mind filled with ideas on how to quench her thirst.

Did she really want to go over to her sexy dream man's cottage in nothing but a pair of fuzzy slippers? Yes.

Was she bold enough to pull it off? No.

Pyper Caden had never been able to pull off stunts like that, not even when she was just one girl in a crowd of many. Resigning herself to a sexually frustrating day, she decided a brisk walk would help clear away any lingering urges.

As dawn was just breaking, she found she had the beach to herself, which was exactly the way she liked it. That way she could stroll along the shore, her feet skimming the edge of the water as she read whatever latest romance she'd brought along with her. She was shy about her choice of reading material. It stemmed from criticism from her overly educated father. But he wasn't there, and she felt like indulging.

The sun was barely up, just a small orange glow over the horizon, but thankfully it was enough by which to read.

Sea gulls protested her interruption of their foraging along the shoreline. The sand was cool beneath her bare feet as she padded along the hard, flat surface. The wind was cool, too, but she'd worn a bulky sweater over her T-shirt and jeans.

By nine, the first sounds of other people alerted her that it was probably time to return to her cottage. Soon the beach would be teeming with noisy children and their chatty parents, sunbathers who blasted rock tunes, Sea-Doo riders, and barking dogs. Yes, the comforts of her secluded hovel beckoned her.

She glanced up from her page as another child's playful shriek cut across the water. Her gaze fell across a familiar, solitary figure high up on the deck of the long stairwell leading down to the beach. Liam rested his elbows on the railing, his face obscured because of the distance so she wasn't sure whether he was watching her or just simply enjoying the scenery.

Either way, she shut her book and stuffed it under her arm, knowing it was a ridiculously self-conscious thing to do. He couldn't read the title from so far away. To her surprise, he leaned back from the railing, as though stretching, then turned and walked back down the wooden

path.

Her hope sank into her stomach. Confused, she stood there a short while before shrugging it off as merely a coincidence and went back to her original thought to crawl back into bed and curl up under her blankets.

On her way back, she swung by the bakery and picked up a cinnamon bun for breakfast, getting an extra one just in case she coincidentally bumped into Liam again.

As she walked down the narrow trail between the two cottages, she thought she could hear voices. She stopped and listened a moment, recognizing Liam's low, masculine timbre, followed closely by a feminine voice. Curious, she edged out into the open part of her small yard where there was a gap in the trees, the same spot where she'd seen Liam standing under his porch light last night.

A pair of sleek, tanned legs, bare and crossed at the knee, greeted her eyes. Definitely feminine, Pyper decided, pulling back and hiding behind the bushes. A clink of metal on glass came to her, and the aromatic smell of coffee filled her sinuses.

He had company, she thought, her perky mood crashing. Had she made up all those pleasant things he'd said to her last night? Had she dreamed the whole thing? Was Liam Patterson ever really in her cabin at all? Unsure now of where the dream had started, she began to slink away, tiptoeing backward, toward her deck steps.

"Pyper?" Liam's voice called out, halting her mid stride.

She braced herself.

His face appeared at the edge of the deck. He was smiling and seemed genuinely happy to see her.

"Hi," she said, waving like an idiot.

"Morning. I knocked on your door to invite you over for breakfast, but you were already out."

"Oh. That is nice of you. I went for a walk."

"Yes, I saw you with your nose buried in that book." He chuckled and shook his head.

That book? Was that a disapproving tone she detected in his voice? *Could* he have possibly seen the title from that distance? No, she decided.

She nodded sheepishly.

"How about coffee now?" He waved his arm in a wide, sweeping gesture, inviting her up. It seemed odd to be invited when clearly he already had one companion. She glanced warily at the sculpted legs of the mystery woman. Just then, Susie Hill's unmistakable face peered around the gap in the leaves, and Pyper caught her breath. Susie Hill was not Pyper's favorite person.

Her own jealous insecurities led to her dislike for the attractive, older girl from her past. Susie had always managed to look good, sound good, and charm everyone around her. No, she did not want to have coffee with Susie Hill.

"No," Pyper blurted. "No thanks, but...no," she said lamely, backing up again. She found the edge of the first step with her heel, and she gripped the railing.

Liam's brow crease briefly as he studied her with an expression of curiosity. "All right." He shrugged. "Maybe I'll see you later then?"

"Sure. Later." She waved again, while she fumbled for the door knob with her other hand. Once she found it, she bolted inside, shut the door firmly, and leaned against it.

Why was she acting like such an idiot? She wasn't fifteen anymore. She was twenty-six. It was just coffee. He was just a man. A sexy man. A man she had always yearned for. A man who might have just spent the night with Susie Hill for all she knew. It seemed suspiciously early to be having coffee, and Pyper's thoughts ran wild. Maybe they were even married. He hadn't mentioned a wife. Then again, she hadn't asked him one question about himself, had she?

Susie's sharp laughter brought Pyper's mind back to the present.

"Was that Pyper Caden?" she heard Susie ask. The way Susie drawled her last name made her want to leap around the corner and come back with some spitfire retort. But she wouldn't. She couldn't. She didn't have it in her. She was all talk and no show.

"Yes," Liam answered. He said something more, but she couldn't hear. Then Susie laughed again.

Her face aflame, Pyper squeezed her eyes shut as humiliation

washed through her. Rubbing her hands over her face, she left the door and threw herself down on the couch. A minute later, she got up then threw herself down on the bottom bunk in what used to be called the kids' room. She hadn't lain in that room since her Aunt had passed away, but for some reason she felt like regressing.

* * * * *

A knock at her door woke her up. Snorting, she rose off the pillow and staggered over to the door, smacking her lips. She teetered and caught herself. She wondered what time it was. Her head was still groggy, and it was difficult to think.

She jerked open the door to discover Liam standing there. In one hand he held a shiny chrome thermos. In the other was a fancy tin of mint chocolate covered lace cookies. His smile turned into a grin as his gaze went to her hair, and she realized it must be standing straight up. Reacting quickly, she planted her hands on top of her head to flatten it.

Liam chuckled at her. "I thought you might have been lying earlier and you maybe secretly wanted some of my *to-die-for* coffee, but the thought of spending time chatting with Susie Hill was just too unbearable a sacrifice to make." He plunked the thermos down on the kitchen table. "So, I brought some over. It's fresh." He thrust a mug into her hand then shoved the tin into her other one. Her fingers wrapped around the handle numbly, and she stumbled back, trying to grasp everything he'd just said.

Still grinning, he flipped the top on the carafe and filled her cup. Then he bent down and picked up a small, red, metal toolbox from the doorway sill, along with an armful of boards all odd lengths and widths. Straightening again, he boldly stepped inside, brushing her shoulder as he did.

"So, where exactly is that hole?" he asked, barging straight through into her living room where he peered around the corner to where a short hall branched into two bedrooms.

She chewed her lip, unsure of what to say.

He turned and seemed to study her for a moment, a puzzled frown

on his face. "Never mind. You said the bunkroom, right? I'll find it."

"Liam, wait." But he was already on his way around the corner. She set the pot and tin down and hurried after him.

She found him standing in the middle of the kids' room, his head tilted at an odd angle, and a thoughtful look on his face.

With all the havoc the raccoons had wrought over the winter, Pyper feared he'd just noticed something else that needed to be fixed. Her first reaction was dread. "What is it? What are you doing?"

"Reminiscing," he said cryptically. "Did you know I used to fantasize about sneaking in through that very window?" He pointed to the small four-pane glass next to the top bunk.

"What?" She was too blown over by his comment to worry about sounding rude. She wondered if she'd heard him right.

"That is where you slept, wasn't it?" He turned to look at her, a sly glint in his eyes, which betrayed his thoughts.

Her eyebrows went up in surprise. "My window?" She couldn't help scoff.

"Yeah. Your window." He gave her a funny look. "Why is that such a hard thing to fathom?"

"You and me? You were hoping to get it on with the likes of me? The girl who never lifted her nose out of her book, who fantasized night and day that you would come over to my lawn chair and sweep me off my feet like you did to all the popular girls?"

He grinned, and she wondered if she flattered him.

"I always thought you were more into girls like Susie Hill. No, let me rephrase that. It was *obvious* that you were more into girls like Susie Hill."

"Oh, I was. But don't underestimate your *own* charms." He set his toolkit down on the floor then stepped closer to her. He stared down at her intently, as though he desperately wanted her to understand. "Think about it. You were the good girl. You would come straight from that snooty little private Catholic school still dressed in your uniform. And when you got changed out of that, you just put on the exact same thing only prettier. No, I thought about doing the same things to you that I

frequently did to all those other girls. I just never thought you'd give me the chance."

Her eyes went wide at his confession. She couldn't believe he was there telling her all of this. She suspected she was dreaming again.

He continued with a casual shrug. "But you intimidated me with all your books and class. I admired your innocence, but I really just wanted to spoil it." His grin turned wicked, and his eyes revealed his intent to follow through with his devious thoughts.

A flutter deep in her belly threatened to undo her. A smile pulled at the corner of her mouth, and she shook her head. "Those books you saw me reading..." She reached for a novel sitting on the bedside table and held it up for him to see the cover—a shirtless man embraced a sultry woman who leaned into him, her head tilted back, her cleavage daring to spring free at any moment. "Not exactly innocent." She smiled and shyly bit her lip. "I don't know how many hours I tortured myself with sexual innuendos and imagery. The only thing I learned from these books was how to frustrate myself while I watched you living the dream."

He took the book from her as though he couldn't believe his eyes. Then he laughed. "All this time I had you pegged for a good girl, and I could have been doing this to you?" His finger had pinpointed a racy sentence in the book which he now held up for her to read.

She blushed as she read it.

"I don't know about that. I was still pretty shy."

He smiled wide. "I know." His voice dropped to a seductive, dreamy tone. "I still remember that time you caught me in the act."

She easily pictured the scene in her mind again. "Yeah, that was the first time I ever saw—" She broke off, suddenly aware of what she was about to say.

"Sex?" he asked, stepping closer. She could feel the raw sexual energy rolling off of him. She could feel the heat of his body as he stood so close to her.

She nodded and dropped her gaze to the floor.

His voice sounded closer yet. "Did you like what you saw?"

Her heartbeat pulsed in her ears. Her Great Aunt's familiar lecture

of ladylike conduct echoed in her head, only made louder by the fact that it was her Great Aunt's roof she presently stood under. A wave of guilt washed over her. She didn't want to talk about this with him, yet she did. She was torn, caught between modesty and lust. Finally, she succumbed to her true feelings, met herself halfway, and nodded.

He was silent for a moment, long enough to make her curious enough to risk looking up. When she did, she met his eyes as they stared down into hers.

"I wished you had stayed."

"Stayed?" she blurted. She saw his eyebrows arch up in surprise. "And what, watched you? You've got to be kidding. I was in shock." She frowned as she remembered something else. "Besides, you laughed at me."

"I didn't laugh at you," he countered, sounding confused.

"You sure did. I ran away, but I heard you."

A light seemed to go on in his head. "I admit, okay, I did laugh. I remember now what you're talking about, but you misunderstood *why* I laughed. It wasn't to make you feel bad." He touched her hand, his fingers wrapping around hers.

She fought the urge to shy away again.

"Pyper, you ran away and your skirt flipped up. I could see your panties, your pretty little white panties hidden beneath that same little cotton skirt you always wore. Believe me when I tell you, I forgot all about the girl I was with. From that moment on, all I could think about was the thrill you gave me. After seeing just a hint, a glimpse of you, I wanted more."

She could barely believe what she heard. Here was Liam, the guy she'd pined after since she was a kid, and he was confessing his lust at seeing her panties.

"That girl you were with was Susie Hill," Pyper said slyly.

"Really? See? Gone." He shrugged. "Man, I had fantasy material for years because of that instance. You turned me on in a way I didn't know I had in me."

She was flabbergasted, downright floored. She stood there staring

at him, willing him, daring him to start laughing, to tell her it was all a joke at her expense, but he wasn't. It was real. She looked up at him with new eyes, yet something else nagged at her. Earlier that morning, she'd heard them laughing again.

"What about today, Liam?" She raised her chin defiantly. "I heard you laughing with Susie."

He frowned, shaking his head. "That was just Susie. I don't know what she'd said either, I wasn't listening. She talked on and on about herself, and all I could think about was getting Susie to shut up and leave so I could come over and see you.

He made a face as though in disgust. "You need to understand, seeing Susie wasn't my idea. She spotted me as I was throwing the trash out, and then she just invited herself over. Typical. Apparently they still have a cottage here, and her whole family is up for the weekend. She's married now, three kids, a husband, and a good job. No, I didn't sleep with her, and no, I don't want to, at least not again. I haven't wanted to since that time you caught us together."

He was answering all her unasked questions, snuffing out her fears one by one without her even having to say anything. Instead of happy, it made her sad for thinking so little of him.

"I had no idea you thought of me like that," she said, letting out her breath.

He reached up and traced her cheek with one finger. It was a gentle, loving gesture that made her stomach swirl. "Do you know that I used to spy on you while you sat in your lawn chair in the back yard? You always wore the same skirt, the short blue, cotton one that flared out at the sides, and then you'd sit back in your chair with your knees up." He shook his head. "I would hide in the bushes with my hand on my prick the whole time you read your books. I would be thinking of all the nasty things I wanted to do to you, Pyper, but I was too worried that you would laugh in my face. Or worse yet, tell your father."

"I definitely would not have told my father." She laughed, covering her mouth at the idea of it. She dropped her hand and squinted suspiciously at him. "I thought *I* wasn't *your* type. I wanted you to want

me, but you were always too busy with other girls."

He looked away thoughtfully. "Yes, that's true," he admitted. "I was a busy boy."

She couldn't help but smile at his honesty.

"I've got to say, I am glad I never really got the chance to be with you though."

Her skin went cold at his hurtful words. Here it was, she thought, feeling as though a door had slammed shut in her face.

Liam's eyes widened. "Don't get me wrong." He reached out to touch her shoulder, as if trying to reassure her. "What I mean is, all those other girls were just fun. I had sex anywhere and everywhere I could, but it didn't mean anything. I barely remember one girl from the next."

She rolled her eyes. "I know. I also saw Lana Tucker's head bobbing up and down on your prick, as you so elegantly called it, behind the movie house. You weren't as discreet as you thought you were. If I didn't see you myself, I certainly would have heard about it from the gossip flying about."

"Yeah, and that is exactly what I was getting at. You were never a part of my tarnished past."

He wasn't making sense, and her suspicious nature didn't help. She wanted to protect herself, pull away, but he held her fingers tight.

"You aren't the only one with insecurities. When I saw you standing outside that first night, all those buried feelings resurfaced. You looked just the same; pure, innocent, delicate. And I just wanted to see you in your uniform again. Then when I was inside your house, saw the love and felt the safety that always surrounded you, I felt ashamed. I didn't expect to feel this anxious, but I have a shady reputation, especially around here. Everything was so public, as you already know, but I've changed. Now I fear you'll think I'm just a fling, or worse yet, cheap. I feared you would think I was too experienced, too dirty, and perhaps even too perverse."

Her heart softened, and she smiled at his confession. Yes, she had wondered if he had changed. Yes, she had been tempted to just experience him, have a little fun if he offered, but now, seeing the distress in his eyes,

she ached to reassure him, to tell him how much she wanted him. Besides, he had the wrong impression of her as well. She didn't want to always be thought of as the innocent one. She wanted to explore a little. She wanted to have fun.

"I like you, Liam. I always have. We don't really know each other, but I'd sure like to. There's a wild side to me, too."

The crease across his brow eased, and his fingers loosened their grip.

For a moment, she feared it might get awkward between them, the fire they had ignited seemed to be smoldering and threatening to snuff out.

Tipping her chin down, she looked up at him coyly through her lashes. "You know, I used to sleep on the top bunk, listening to you rutting in the bushes, and I would pretend it was me."

His gaze darted to the window, then back to her. His eyebrows arched up quizzically, and she knew she'd recaptured the moment. Now she was the one initiating, the one with the dirty mind. She ran the tip of her tongue over her upper lip, feeling a surge of adrenalin at the idea of acting so seductive, so naughty.

"I had this urge," she started with a sly look to the window, "to press my ass against the pane in hopes that you would see and maybe..." She trailed off, catching her bottom lip on her teeth. She could see his chest rising and falling faster as she spoke.

"Maybe I'd come over, open the window just a crack, enough to slid just one finger in?" he finished for her, his voice a low rumble as he picked up on her coy little game.

He moved another step closer, his eyes burning bright with lust once again. "That window isn't too high, either. You could have stood on your tip toes, and your mouth might have just reached my poor, tortured pussy." Describing her womanhood in such a way sent a wave of electricity to her groin. "I sure could have used a good tongue lashing. Especially after all of that filth I was reading."

His hands reached along her arms, capturing them by her sides. "Why don't you show me which bunk was yours?" His eyes narrowed,

betraying his wicked intentions.

Her heart fluttered with anticipation. He took her hand and led her to the soft mattress on the bottom bunk. He sat down and pulled her to stand in front of him. His gaze roved all over the length of her, taking her all in with obvious delight.

"Man, do I ever wish you were wearing a skirt right now." His voice sounded thick with lust.

"I do have one," she suggested.

"No. Don't change a thing. I want to take this opportunity right now." He slid his fingers up under her sweater, and she gasped at the contact of his skin against hers. His fingers slid higher, bringing the bottom of the sweater up to expose her waist. She felt his warm breath against her abdomen, followed by the heat of his tongue inside her navel as he teased, tickled, and made small circles around the tiny dint, sending shivers of pleasure along her throat.

Raising her arms, she allowed him to lift her sweater, along with the shirt beneath it, up over her head. He dropped it to the floor. She stood before him in a pale pink bra, her nipples hard and pointing in a telltale sign of her arousal. Her own breathing quickened when his hands went to the small, metal fastener at her waist, his fingers deftly opening it then spreading her jeans apart to reveal her matching panties.

Wasting no time, he tugged her jeans down, off her hips, sliding them to the floor where she stepped out of them. As he brought his head back up, he stopped, his face inches from her groin. He covered the damp spot between her legs with his mouth.

She gasped at the contact, feeling the heat of his mouth through the fabric as his lips caught the delicate folds of her skin and gently tugged at her. Her head rolled along her shoulders, and her hands found a place on each side of his face.

He pulled her panties down, breaking for a moment to clear the fabric then quickly finding the exact place where he'd left off. Now she could feel him more intensely, the wetness of his tongue as it danced and curled and probed her womanly depths. No one had ever done such an act to her before. She groaned at what she'd been missing.

“Feels good, doesn’t it, Pyper?” Liam’s words pulsed against her mound.

She didn’t answer. She couldn’t answer. The sensations she experienced had too strong a hold on her.

He laughed softly. “I had better get a move on then, I guess.” He stood and removed his shirt and jeans.

She took a moment to admire his sculpted chest and abdomen. He was gorgeous. He certainly hadn’t let himself go. But it was the burning desire she saw in his lusty gaze that held the most appeal.

Obviously eager to get things going again, Liam pulled her forward with his hands on her buttocks. Allowing him complete control, she let him bring her down so as sat on his lap. She perched on top of him, wondering how far they would go.

His lips sought hers, timid at first, then enveloping them with lingering caresses that intoxicated her. He claimed her mouth passionately, and she opened herself to him, letting his expertise take control. She could feel the hard bulge of his erection beneath her as she rocked and teetered on his lap. His hands slid the straps of her bra off of her shoulders. He unfastened the clasp in the back, and it fell to the floor, leaving her completely bare and exposed to his admiring eyes.

Under his scrutiny, the familiar sensations of insecurity threatened to resurface. As though he anticipated her response, he reassured her with an encouraging smile. She watched spellbound as his hands reached up to knead and pinch her breasts, felt each cherry bud stroked until she thought she could stand no more. Yet, instead of stopping, he simply lifted each creamy breast and squeezed them together. To her astonishment, he brought both nipples into his mouth, bathing them in warmth and wetness. The sensation was euphoric, sending waves of pleasure over her.

She was only vaguely aware of his hand fumbling at the top of his underwear as he struggled to keep her balanced while he freed his bulging erection. Only when the heat of his ridged shaft brushed against her inner thigh did she realize what was about to happen. The thought of it sent a shiver through her.

Like a fantasy come to life, he entered her, pushing himself up into her resisting walls and pulling her down onto him at the same time. She gasped at the intrusion, loving every bit of it. He thrust upwards expertly with long, even, patient strokes, his eyes open and locked on her the whole time. She, too, kept her eyes open, wanting to witness their lovemaking, wanting to be sure it was truly happening.

He moaned and hesitated, and she saw that he was fighting his urge for release. After the moment of danger had passed, he gathered her up, lifting her into the air momentarily before laying her out across the bottom bunk. In this new position, she could feel the weight of him on top of her and the intensified pressure of him inside her. She watched the bunching of his muscles in his forearms and shoulder with fascination as he hovered over her. He continued to plunge deep, over and over again, eventually pulling her knees up for deeper penetration.

Overcome with desire, she gasped and dug her nails into his shoulders as her climax rocked her body.

Every nerve ending tingled. Her head lolling on the pillow, she couldn't help but laugh, she felt so overjoyed. Never before had she felt such bliss. But when she opened her eyes, she recognized the need was still strong in Liam.

He gazed down at her hungrily, the look in his eyes sending a shiver across her skin.

She admired his ability to remain patient and decided he should be rewarded for that. About to sit up, she was surprised that he stopped her. She brought her head up and looked at him questioningly. Silent, he smiled and motioned for her to roll over onto her stomach. She obliged him, not entirely sure she was comfortable exposing this much of herself to him in broad daylight, but Liam certainly didn't seem to mind.

Letting out a low, lusty growl, he ran the flat of his hands over her rump, caressing her with renewed passion. A sharp slap brought a cry of surprise from her. She turned around quickly, surprised again by the devious look in his eye. He held his palm up with intent to spank, and she realized he was waiting for her approval.

The first time had been a shock, but she hadn't actually minded it.

The thought of such an act tugged at her curiosity, bringing her all at once to a whole new level of Pyper. What other dark and untried experiences might she enjoy with this man?

Giving him the slightest of nods, she braced herself for a second spanking. But it never came. Instead, she felt his hands on her hips, pulling her buttocks higher into the air, adjusting her so she was closer to his hips. The sensation of his finger, drier and smaller, although no less noticeable than his cock had been, parted her silken folds and slid up inside of her. He gave her a few quick thrusts before closing in behind her, squaring his hips against the backs of her thighs. He entered her from behind, hard and fast, slamming into her with less apprehension and far more passion.

Reaching up, she gripped the metal footboard of the bunk bed to keep from sliding forward. His voice came close to her ear, dark and potent.

"Can you imagine this, Pyper? Can you visualize that you are out there in the bushes? Can you see that it's me behind you, pushing up into you, driving my cock between your legs? Can you feel me, Pyper?"

"Yes!" she exclaimed, the pressure building between her thighs again.

"It is you, Pyper. It is you that I am fucking in the bushes. It is you that I want, that I have wanted for such a long time." He struggled to get the words out, his voice gravely and distracted.

Her mind pictured the two of them together under the moonlight. Liam hovered over her, her short blue skirt flipped up over her back, her white panties crudely pulled down, just off her ass. Her hands braced on the arms of the wooden Adirondack chair, she was ready for whatever he was going to give her. Oh, yes, she could picture it.

"Fuck me, Liam," she whispered.

She heard his voice catch, and then there was sudden emptiness as he withdrew. Bewildered, she glanced around to see him struggling, his hand holding his engorged cock, his face tense with concentration. She understood.

Sitting up, she rolled onto her knees facing him, and then she

brought her head down between his thighs where her mouth found his cock. It was slick from their efforts, but she didn't mind. In fact, she realized, it only seemed to turn her on more.

Taking him into her mouth, she swiftly brought him to his limit, her mouth bobbing over his prick as he bowed his head under the roof of the bunk bed above, his fingers entwined in the springs to keep his balance. Tasting the first signs of the eruption that was about to come, she pursued him without mercy, spurred on by his pleas to not stop.

He came with a cry of release and a gush of hot liquid. She hadn't been prepared for such fury. Having moved back at the last moment, she caught his load on her breasts, her skin gleaming, slick and sodden. He opened his eyes to see the mess he had made. Laughing softly, he rubbed his hands over her, rubbing it in. The contact on her nipples sent rivulets of pleasure through her.

"You are ready for more already, aren't you, my sweet?" he asked, looking impressed.

She bit her lip shyly. "Just an FYI, I really liked the spanking."

He laughed and collapsed on the bed beside her. "I'm going to need a minute."

They lay side by side, laughing in astonishment at what they had done.

It seemed ironic. After all that time growing up next to each other, they finally did what they'd always wanted.

He turned to her, his face seeming serious. "I'm sorry about the informality, Pyper, but I didn't know what you do or don't do about birth control. Next time I'll come better prepared," he promised as he nipped gently on her ear lobe.

She shuddered with pleasure. Next time, she thought as a gleeful shiver ran through her. She sighed contentedly.

* * * * *

Pyper heard a shout from the yard in the lot next door. Peering up over the peak of the roof, she spotted two young girls as they ran out onto

the large, high deck. She smiled. The sold sign had been taken down a week ago. It had been up barely twice that.

Seeing Pyper's attention had been diverted from her shingle-laying duty, Liam stretched his neck to see what she looked at so intently. He smiled as well, seeing the happy children playing a game of tag.

He sighed heavily. "I hope it goes better for them," he said, sounding truly hopeful for the small family that had bought his parents' cottage. He had followed through with his goal to leave his bad memories at the lake behind, but he made sure Pyper didn't have to leave her good ones. They'd worked together, reconstructing the foundation, patching the hole in the floor, and now they were applying a layer of brand new shingles to the roof.

The best part of the building process was not the fact that Liam was helping out with the money, the know how, and the physical labor, but that he had done some research and had managed to find her a loophole to proclaim her cottage to be classified as grandfathered. The price of necessary repairs needed for the cottage was now a mere six thousand, and that she could easily manage. Most of that cost was because she had agreed to the water line hookup the municipality was offering. Running water was definitely something she could agree to, especially if it meant hot, steamy showers with a man that made her knees weak.

Liam had made it clear that what ever money he put in to her little cabin was a gift and not to be mistaken with an attempt to crowd in on her territory, but she had been uncomfortable with the very idea. She knew now for certain what kind of man he was. After spending the rest of the summer with him, she'd gotten to know him better than she had known anyone. He was kind and gentle and at times he could be persuaded to be a little rough. She blushed, thinking of how her kinky side had been brought out because of their time together.

As though sensing her train of thoughts, Liam reached over to her and lightly touched her hand. "What are you thinking?"

"We've been up here quite a long time, don't you think?" She leered suggestively.

"You know, I was just thinking the same thing." He smiled,

holding out his hand to help her up.

She placed her hand in his, marveling at the man she had wanted for so long. And now here he was, reaching out for her.

The End

Author Bio

Ever since Tara Nichols was a little girl she had an affinity for romantic adventures. With crushes on the likes of Tarzan and Hans Solo, she grew up looking for the perfect gentleman rogue. When she isn't writing about romance, she can be found tending her garden, keeping bees, or reading a spy novel. Tara roams free on the flat prairie land in Manitoba Canada where she lives with her young son and husband.

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