



The One Who Stays Preview

CHAPTER 1

Her grandmother had always claimed the secret to living on Summer Island was owning a good sweater. “The kind that feels like an old friend when you put it on, warm and comfy. One that always feels a little like ... coming home.”

Meg Sloan had collected a few such sweaters over her fifteen years here and she wore one now – a thick cable-knit cardigan of cornflower blue. She wrapped it tight around her as she stood on the wide front porch of the Summerbrook Inn, looking out over Lake Michigan, watching as a fishing boat named The Emily Ann disappeared into the silvery morning fog like a ghost.

It was cold – but then, mornings here were almost always cold, the small island situated off the northern tip of Michigan’s mitten, near the spot where Lakes Michigan and Huron met. She told people she was used to the cold and didn’t feel it anymore – but sometimes it snuck up on her, surprised her, and today the chill seeped right through the cable-knit and into her bones.

She watched the boat until no trace of it remained in sight, and even though it wasn't much farther away than it had been a moment before, the distance was palpable – and that seeped into her bones, as well. He was gone.

"It doesn't matter," she whispered to herself.

Of course, it did matter – when you have to talk yourself into something, obviously it matters. But she didn't want it to matter, and she knew that if you told yourself something enough times, it started to become true. "It doesn't matter."

It doesn't matter, even if you already thawed the steaks.

It doesn't matter, even if you need help with the shutters.

It doesn't matter, even if the bed feels colder now.

It always did on the first night Zack was gone, no matter how many blankets she added.

She took a deep breath, drawing the brisk morning air into her lungs, letting it wake her up a little more. A glance up Harbor Street revealed just how early it was – no one stirred, every business and home sitting quiet and still. A robin twittered somewhere behind the inn, reminding her spring had come and summer would soon follow. Life went on, with or without Zack, and as the island's name suggested, summer was everything here.

When a bit of movement drew her gaze to the flower shop up the street once run by her Great Aunt Julia, she saw Suzanne Quinlan unlocking the front door. With her dark hair drawn up into a messy bun and wearing a thick sweater of her own, the current owner waved at Meg. "Someone's up and out early!" she called.

Regretting the reason for that, Meg forced a smile. I could have stayed in bed, should have stayed there. Watching him go didn't change anything – it was simply a compulsion, a silent goodbye. "I was thinking of making some pancakes," she called back impulsively. "You should come over – we'll have breakfast before you open."

Suzanne tilted her head, looking pleased by the suggestion. "Yum! Be down in five."

Meg was about to turn and head inside the inn – empty of patrons this early in the season – when she heard a familiar voice. "Is this pancake soiree a private party, or can anyone join?" She leaned forward past the wooden porch railing to see Dahlia Delaney pedaling her lavender bicycle up the street. The older woman owned a quaint lakeside cafe named after herself which

set almost directly across the street from the flower shop – and she also happened to be Zack’s aunt, the person who had introduced them five years ago.

Dahlia was a woman of her own, one who’d perfected the fine art of being both pragmatic and flamboyant at the same time, and Meg never minded spending time with her. “I think we can squeeze a third plate on the table,” she informed Dahlia, this smile coming easier. A pleasant morning with friends would distract her from Zack’s departure – at least for a little while. And as she walked in the door, her heart lifted at simply knowing her kitchen and sunroom would soon be filled with laughter.

The inn had been her home since the age of twenty-four. And it had been her beloved grandmother’s home before that. It got quiet during the long winters. Quieter still it seemed when Zack took to the water, even though she knew it wasn’t really any quieter than before he’d arrived in her life. She just noticed it more now, and maybe she was happy to postpone that quiet a bit longer.

But this is what you signed up for. She’d taken over the inn after her grandma’s unexpected death in her early sixties, and at a dark moment in her own life when isolation had seemed ... safe, and easier than other alternatives. And though it wasn’t the life she’d planned, she’d never regretted the decision. Even if it meant a very particular, secluded sort of existence.

But soon the ferry would begin bringing tourists for the season and the streets would bustle with bike and foot traffic and the house would be filled with guests, old and new. The lilacs and honeysuckle would burst into fragrant bloom, their sweet scents competing with the aroma of fresh corn on the cob and hamburgers from the grill on the back patio.

Trevor Bateman would be back at the Pink Pelican playing his guitar for tips on the little stage above the bar and Cooper Cross would begin making his daily morning runs past the inn. Mr. Hankins would bring his fresh produce over from the mainland on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, selling it at the little wooden stand near the bicycle livery. Now-empty flower boxes would overflow with color, and Adirondack chairs would be filled with people escaping their busy city lives somewhere far away.

Summer brought life of so many kinds back to the island, and if she needed a little more life, summer would bring it back to her, as well.

Just past noon, Meg stood on a small ladder, attempting to unscrew a peeling white shutter from the front of the sunny yellow inn and trying not to be angry. She shouldn’t have waited so late in the season to paint, but she couldn’t put it off any longer. And in fairness to Zack, she’d

only mentioned wanting to start the project once a few weeks ago, in passing, so he had no way of knowing she'd been counting on his help.

Nor had she told him about the steak. She'd bought two New York strips at Koester's Market a week ago to surprise him with a special dinner to celebrate their five-year anniversary.

Anniversary of what?

They weren't in a committed relationship. They were ... undefined. When his fishing boat was docked here, he lived in the apartment above Dahlia's – and he spent a lot of nights in Meg's bed.

Though everyone on the island thought of them as a couple. "Are Meg and Zack coming?" "I saw Meg and Zack at the Pink Pelican." "Meg and Zack put in a gorgeous new fire pit on her patio."

And he'd been there for her when Aunt Julia had gotten sick. And sicker. And then died. He'd been her rock in those days. Maybe that was when they'd become Meg and Zack. So many times during Aunt Julia's illness just over two years ago, she'd wanted to crumble, but he hadn't let her.

"You'll get through this, Maggie May," he would say. He'd long called her that, at first teasingly, from the old Rod Stewart song, but then it had become habit. "You'll get through this because you don't have a choice. That's how these things work. But I'm here. And you don't have to be strong when it's just you and me, honey."

And he'd squeeze her hand and hold her tight and let her cry until his shirt was wet, and it had made all the difference not to have to go through it alone.

So it's almost ironic that here you are now, fretting about being alone.

He was there when it counted, after all.

Or ... doesn't it always count? Being there?

Still, she tried to push down the rise of anger swelling in her chest.

She didn't begrudge him his work. He'd been a commercial fisherman long before he'd been half of Meg and Zack. Despite a serious decline in the Great Lakes fishing industry, he caught boatloads – literally – of lake whitefish, supplying restaurants and seafood distributors all along the lengthy Lake Huron coastline. She just hated when he left with so little warning.

This morning it had come before dawn – with a kiss on the cheek.

At first, she'd thought the kiss was about sex, that he'd woken up wanting it. But then she'd realized she lay in bed alone and opened her eyes to find his ruggedly handsome face above hers, his body bending over her, fully dressed. "I'm heading out, Maggie May," he'd said softly. As if not really wanting to wake her, as if slipping out quietly like a thief in the night would somehow make it better.

"Oh – I ..." She hadn't needed to ask heading out where. Her heart had sunk.

When will you be back? How long will you be gone? She'd wanted to ask – always wanted to ask, because they were reasonable questions – but she knew better. There was a reason he'd become a fisherman. He liked being alone for long periods. It wasn't about her, it was about him. He'd assured her of that many times. And if she'd asked those questions on the tip of her tongue, he'd simply have told her he didn't know.

But this time hurt worse than usual. Because of tonight. Their anniversary. Of ... something. Meeting. Their anniversary of meeting. And it had been ... a memorable meeting. Filled with a palpable chemistry. Which had lasted. Grown. It was powerful still – had never faded.

Perhaps because absence made the heart grow fonder, because reunions kept things feeling somehow new and fresh? Or was it because she loved him? And she did. She loved him like crazy. And she'd wanted this evening to be something special. Even if they were ... undefined. So she'd heard herself saying, "But what about tonight?"

He'd blinked. Let his brow wrinkle, just a little. "What's tonight?"

And something inside her heart died a little. He was a guy – guys didn't remember dates, so she shouldn't be hurt. "Nothing. Never mind."

He'd hesitated. Tilted his head slightly. The first hints of daylight had shone in the window behind him just then, making him look a little ethereal. "You sure?"

She'd swallowed back anything else she might have wanted to say and left it at, "Yeah."

"Bye, honey," he'd said, and then he'd lifted one warm, rough palm to her cheek and lowered a long, slow kiss to her acceptant mouth. Always acceptant, always hungry for a little bit more, even in darker moments like that one. Maybe with a man you know will always eventually leave again, you feel the lack even before it comes. And then he'd walked out the bedroom door.

She'd gotten up behind him, tossed on jeans, a tank, and a cotton blouse, covering it with her blue sweater, and wandered out onto the porch a few minutes later – in time to watch the water carry him away. She still didn't know why she'd bothered. Maybe seeing the Emily Ann drift into a distance that grew greater each second made it more real, made it so that she wouldn't accidentally expect him to be here later.

Even so, she still felt that kiss on her lips – and knew she would miss it tonight when there were none.

She let out a frustrated breath, still struggling with the shutter – then fought down the sudden urge to violently stab her screwdriver into the window frame. Because he left, damn it. Again. And this time did hurt worse. He's thoughtless. Selfish. And somehow managed to arrange things so that, technically, I can't even be mad at him.

But she was anyway. She was mad as hell. Despite the cool temperatures, the work had her sweating.

You took care of this place long before you had Zack's help, though – you're a capable woman and can take down some shutters on your own.

This morning's breakfast in the sunroom had indeed had the desired effect of brightening her spirits – at least for a while. "So what has you up and at the griddle so early today, my dear?" Dahlia had asked as she'd forked a bite of pancakes into her mouth. Her lips had been painted a shade of pink few women in their sixties could pull off, but she managed it fine.

Meg had hated to answer – but it was useless not to. Though she'd tried to smile as she'd said it. "I was watching the Emily Ann ... go." She'd pointed vaguely east.

Suzanne had let out an audible sigh as Dahlia admitted, "Thought it might have something to do with my nephew leaving."

Bristling inside, Meg had attempted not to sound resentful as she asked, "Then you knew? That he was going?"

"Told me yesterday."

Another stab at a tight smile. "Well, he didn't tell me until about thirty seconds before he walked out the door."

"Oh ..." Dahlia said.

“More like – oh my God,” Suzanne added, rolling her eyes, and despite herself, Meg appreciated someone just putting it on the table and acknowledging that it was a crummy thing to do.

“I just ... have to wonder sometimes how much he really cares,” Meg confided in them. Both were good enough friends that she could do that.

But Dahlia was quick to reply as she always did when the topic came up. “He loves you, honey. I know he isn’t always the steadiest sort, but trust me, he’s steadier with you than he’s ever been with anyone in his life.”

This time, though, Meg lifted her gaze and met the older woman’s. “Are you saying this is as good as it gets with him?”

Dahlia peered back at her through tiny silver spectacles. “I’m saying he’s a work in progress, so give him more time to be the man you want him to be.”

Meg took that in. She knew Zack had grown up in a troubled environment and left home young. She knew he had commitment issues. She knew that Dahlia was putting it lightly – he was more than a work in progress; he was ... broken in ways Meg had never quite gotten to the bottom of, because he wouldn’t talk to her about it. She’d accepted all that because she loved him and did believe he could grow and change.

And he always came back. He always left again, too, but ... he always came back. Always. That was the flip side to a man who was always leaving – when he came back, you knew it was because he wanted to be there.

But Suzanne was rolling her eyes again. “No offense to Zack, Dahlia, but sometimes waiting is overrated. If I wanted a man around all the time – and I don’t, mind you, which is why I came here – but if I did, I’d ... want him around. Not just coming and going without warning.”

“His job is on the water,” Dahlia pointed out.

“And I knew that from the start,” Meg had added – even as she wondered why she was defending him. Maybe because it defends me, too. Defends my staying in this situation.

Yet Suzanne had shrugged. One of the things Meg loved about her friend was that she never pulled any punches. “I just want Meg to be happy, and I’m not sure Zack is making her that way. I mean, he’s a great guy in a lot of respects – but ...”

She hadn't finished. And so Meg had concluded, "He is who he is. And it's ... fine. And I invited you two over to get my mind off the big lug, and yet here we are talking about him, so let's chat about something else, okay?"

And so they had. They'd speculated on the coming tourist season. They'd agreed that one afternoon soon they'd take the ferry to the mainland and see a movie at the old theater in St. Simon. Suzanne had updated them on her current project of refurbishing several of the little greenhouses on the hill behind the shop that had always allowed Aunt Julia to grow her own flowers despite the long winters here. And Meg had never once mentioned that there were two steaks in the fridge, and that today was an anniversary no one would celebrate, ever.

After a lot more concentration, perspiration, and the fresh fury she'd apparently tired of pushing down, she finally succeeded in getting some of the screws out of the first shutter. Oh, how she regretted not keeping the electric screwdriver in the toolshed charged. How she regretted not having done this when Zack was still here. And she refused to think about the fact that there were over thirty more shutters on the inn.

Drawing the ladder away from the house since the last screw could be reached from the ground, she wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand, then struggled out of her shirt to the plain tank underneath. A little sun plus some exertion had her drenched and exhausted already.

But also determined. Maybe the anger was good for that part.

Because sure, there were people around town she could ask for help and they'd gladly give it. Only right now she needed to prove something to herself. Simply that she could do this. That she was no less strong or capable than she'd been before Zack had entered her life. That she didn't need to depend on anyone. She'd gotten in the habit of counting on him, a mistake she intended to rectify. There'd been a very long time, after all, when she'd counted on no one but herself – and she'd done just fine that way. I don't need you, Zack. I don't need you, I don't need you, I don't need you.

Drying her palms on the thighs of her blue jeans, she took another look at the task before her and approached it, screwdriver in hand.

As the last screw in the shutter loosened, though, she realized just how large her shutters were, and that she didn't exactly have a grand plan to keep this one from slamming to the ground when the last screw was removed. So she began trying to support its weight with one hand while still awkwardly freeing the last screw with the other.

But it was heavy, and trying to keep control of it challenged her – she was only just now realizing that each shutter was as tall as her, and awkward to manage. The truth was, when the shutters had been painted in the past, it had been more of a family project, with her father taking them down – and he'd made it look much easier than this, so she'd just assumed she could do it.

Damn you, Zack Sheppard. This wasn't his fault – and yet somehow it was. Misplaced anger – maybe. But anger just the same, making her want to drop the stupid thing, send it crashing onto the lawn, kick it, stomp on it, rip it to pieces with her bare hands.

Only she was far too practical of a woman for that – like it or not, she couldn't afford a damaged shutter. Not only financially, but she didn't think her ego could handle it today, either. She felt stuck in place, her body lodged against the massive old shutter, wondering how much longer she could hold it up, but fearing the result if she let go.

She let out a growl of frustration.

And that was when a smooth, deep voice came from directly in back of her, saying, "Whoa now – looks like you need a little help with that, darlin'," just as the warmth of an unfamiliar male body pressed into her from behind.

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