

First Page Rodeo – Summer House by Deni Cary Phillips

The sun approached the horizon, laying one gilded stripe on mirror-still Silver Lake. Laura Davis counted the years since she stood on this spot. How could it be thirty? Time slid by as quickly as clouds scudding across Northern Michigan skies.

Laura's fondest memory of the place began to play in her mind as dazzling gold shards of light illuminated the scene.

She was swimming to the floating dock with a boy, their strokes mirroring each other, tan, wet arms flashing in the mid-day sun. They clambered up the swim ladder, laughing. She was fourteen; he two years older. She sat with him on the dock, their feet in the water, shoulders and thighs nearly touching. Nervous, yet energized by each other's presence. Only during water-play did they touch—and those brief encounters gave her shivers, right now, remembering. But only his first name came to her. Brad. And with it, the visual memory of a boy blonde and tan, thin-limbed, but broad shouldered. Not quite a man, but moving that direction.

The lake seemed lost in time, exactly as she remembered. Slim docks stretched from open water back to the shore marking each cottage's beach. Simple one and two-story houses ringed the water. Their gables reached to the sky. It felt private and secluded. All around the lake, tall pines and birch trees shaded the yards where golden daylilies, bright as the sun, displayed the last blooms of summer.

She turned from the lake to the cottage she remembered so well. The end-of-day light reflected off the windows; its pearl-gray time-worn clapboard gleamed like silver. The pristine feeling it conveyed in the waning light was an illusion. The cottage needed work. She was heiress to a money-pit.

Pulling her cell phone from the rear pocket of blue jeans she thumbed through contacts seeking the attorney's phone number. The key she expected to find in the mailbox wasn't there.

His phone rang, three, four, five times, then clicked to voicemail. Perfect. She hung up without leaving a message. After the long drive from Chicago, she needed a soft bed, a decent meal, and a good night's sleep more than answers. She needed wifi to connect to work. And in the morning, coffee. It wasn't like her to leave home without arrangements, but the letter threw her off. Now, at dusk, her anxiousness gave way to reality. She could see the house tomorrow in better light.

Her phone chimed like Big Ben. "Hello."

"Laura?"

"Yes, Mr. Sutton." B. Sutton, Attorney at Law.

"Good. I'm five minutes from the house. Sorry about the key. Are you there?"

"I am, but I was about to head into town to find a hotel."

"If you can wait, I'll come straight there. And my sis's b-and-b can put you up. Much nicer than our hotel."

As they talked, Laura made her way from the beach to the back door. "Okay. I'll wait for you."

She studied the screen door and the forest-green arched wooden slab door that separated her from the interior; they seemed old but solid. The cedar shake siding looked to be in pretty good shape, but the window sills were rotting; their single glass panes were old and wavy. The creak of a gutter hanging by a slim metal strip caught her attention. It swayed in the gentle breeze.

The house's condition concerned her, but a bigger question hung in the air—why was she the one to inherit the cottage. She had cousins, though she didn't know them. Was she the last alive? Were there other pieces of the estate and this was her lot? And why was this Sutton character the one to contact her and not a family member?

She sifted through her memory—why was the name Sutton there? A family name in the area. Perhaps that was the only reason.

But it wasn't. Rounding the corner, she heard gravel crunch as Bradley Sutton stepped from his Escalade, pushing Ray-Bans onto a thick wave of blonde hair. He was older, more mature, but totally recognizable as the sixteen-year-old boy she knew so long ago. She stepped back for a beat to calm her surprise. Then leaving the shadow, she hailed him. "Mr. Sutton, how nice to see you again."