

Under the Summer Sun - Additional Chapter 1

*U*nder the Summer Sun is told by only Poppy's point of view, and who Nate is (and why he is at Kiki and Luke's) is not revealed until halfway through the book. This is a small section told in Nate's point of view, before Poppy arrives. This contains spoilers to the overall story, so best read after Under the Summer Sun. As usual, additional chapters are unedited so expect the odd typo.

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It isn't even nine in the morning, but the sun is bright in the sky and I'm already sweating. I walk across the grounds of Luke and Kiera's house, their voices getting a little louder as I get close to the kitchen door.

"What time is Poppy arriving?" Luke asks. There is a small silence. "Kiera?"

"Sorry, I was daydreaming. What did you say?"

"I asked when Poppy was arriving."

"Late this afternoon," Kiera replies.

"Are you still planning on being at home all day? You don't want to come to the beach this morning?" he asks.

"I'm going to stay here."

"Would you like me to stay with you?"

"No, Luke. I'm sure Poppy and I will just bore you when we start chatting."

"You could never bore me, my darling."

There's a lull in the conversation, so I wait a moment and knock on the kitchen door before entering.

"Morning, Nate," Kiera calls. "Breakfast?" She gestures at the table where there are little pots of jams and marmalades, slices of seeded bread and toast in a silver rack. There's a teapot in the centre of the table.

"Looks lovely, Kiera," I say. I sink into the nearest chair, opposite from Luke.

"Kiera is going to be home today until my sister arrives. What are your plans?" Luke stares at me from across the table.

I know what the plans are, as well as he does. There's an unspoken synergy. If Kiera is staying at the house, I am also staying at the house. There are plenty of jobs for me to do, things to keep me busy as I keep one watchful eye on Kiera and make sure that she is okay. Days when

Kiera chooses to go with Luke, depending on what they're doing, dictates my plans. If she decides to accompany him to the beach when he's surfing, off I go. If they're off for a romantic work, behind I stay. Days when he has to travel to London and she remains here, I'm by her side, keeping her company as we both do various renovation works.

Sometimes I wonder if Kiera knows what I'm really here for. When Luke proposed the idea to me, calling me back to his office for a follow up meeting after I delivered a seminar on mental health at his workplace, it sounded preposterous. A free holiday for the summer, in exchange for labour and watching over his wife.

She seems unsettled. I hate leaving her, but she hates the idea I'm keeping an eye on her. I'm... worried.

Those words, uttered by a man who by every definition of the words was a man in control, made him seem unsettled. He reminded me of Evie the last time I saw her before Gabriel died. Sure that *something* was wrong, but not able to fully articulate why there was an unsettled air or what was causing the knot of tension in the stomach.

Thoughts now about Evie make me feel unsettled. I'm not looking forward to meeting up. I know our conversation will be all about Gabriel. I know there will be tears.

"I'm going to do some of the plants in the garden. I won't be in your way, will I, Kiera?" I ask. I pick up the clean mug at my place setting and pour some tea from the teapot.

She shakes her head. "No, I'll just be straightening up before Poppy arrives."

I watch as she glances around the kitchen, her eyes seemingly taking in the surroundings, checking for mess or things out of place. There isn't anything besides the breakfast pots. From the moment I arrived, the house has been spotless, but Kiera doesn't seem to know how to rest. It took me three days to convince her she didn't need to fuss over

me, that I didn't need her to come into the summer house I'm staying in to tidy up.

"Are you sure you don't want to come to the beach this morning? The fresh air may do you good," Luke comments.

"You go and enjoy the surf, Luke, without having to worry about if I'm staying entertained. Besides, I wouldn't want to pull you out of the water early, and I know you've been itching to surf, so go enjoy that. I want to be here when Poppy arrives," Kiera replies.

"I'll be home early, so I can spend time with my favourite girls." He gives her a smile.

I watch as she seems to flourish under it, like her emotions are tied to how he feels, her moods dictated by his. I've noticed it a few times since I joined them, how the bigger his smile, the more she seems to light up, some of the gloominess that sometimes touches her disappears. She almost makes it look like the gloominess wasn't there in the first place. Almost.

Luke pushes his chair back, rising up. He leans over and kisses Kiera on the forehead. She gets up from her own chair, holding his hand as they walk out of the kitchen. I know they'll be by the front door, exchanging declarations of love and affection. I prefer being out of earshot for that.

Kiera comes back into the kitchen as I'm finishing a slice of toast. She picks up her mug, finishes her drink of tea before wandering to the dishwasher, putting the mug inside.

"I'll help you clean up," I call to her.

"You don't need to do that, Nate. You're a guest."

"It's no bother." I wave off her concerns.

"Okay. Thank you."

I get up from the table and start clearing the pots from the table. We work in silence to clear the kitchen, putting everything away. I watch

as she walks around the room, wiping countertops that already looked clean, repositioning the ceramic canisters she has of tea, coffee and sugar, things that were perfectly positioned anyway.

“What do I need to know about Poppy?” I ask.

Kiera smiles. It’s almost as bright and genuine as the smiles she gets around Luke when he’s in a good mood.

“She’s wonderful.”

“Your sister-in-law, right?”

“She’s more than that. We’ve been friends since we were babies. Our mothers are best friends. We were actually born in the same year, so we were friends and classmates and family and... everything, really,” she explains.

I’m surprised. “You grew up with Luke?”

Kiera shakes her head. “No. Luke’s actually her stepbrother. Poppy was almost a teenager when Luke’s father married her mother. Luke never lived with her. We barely saw Luke, not until Poppy and I were eighteen and at university. We went to university where Luke lived, so we’d see of him more then.”

“So, what you’re telling me is that technically, Poppy belongs to you?” I tease.

“Poppy’s a free spirit who belongs to nobody.” Kiera grins. “But she’s the best. She’s had a tough year but I know she’ll feel better when she’s had some rest here. I’m sure you’ll love her.”

I put the last jar away. “Right, I’m going to get started in the garden. Are you joining me?”

She nods. “Yep. I’m going to clean outside. Poppy will want to sunbathe later.”

“I’ll see you outside.” I smile at her. I walk to the kitchen door and glance behind me. Kiera is looking around the kitchen, a frown on her face. “Coming?”

She nods and then walks towards me. We step outside into the glorious day and take separate paths, Kiera heading to the pool, me heading to the plants and potting soil.

We work in the garden, not necessarily together but in the same area. Kiera puts some music on early in the day, but she doesn't sing along, nor does she seem like she's really paying attention to it. Her focus is on scrubbing already clean sun loungers, using the long net to pull random leaves from the pool, sweeping little stones that appear to have moved an inch past their border back into their correct place, repositioning the tables and chairs. She washes the already clean kitchen window, even washes down the door to the house. She's a constant blur of movement, never once taking a second to rest.

The only time I see her pause is when her phone beeps. I watch as she glances at the screen, smiling. For the next fifteen minutes or so, she keeps returning to her phone screen. I walk to the front of the house, starting to dig a row for the border for the flowers to be planted. Kiera walks to the front of the garden, leaning against the side of the house, still staring at her phone. When she straightens up, it's almost synchronised by the sounds of tyres on the driveway.

The taxi stops on the driveway. The back door of the taxi opens, and I watch as a pair of long, slim legs emerge. I watch the rest of the person emerges. Clearly Poppy, based on the way Kiera reacts. The woman is tall and slender, with auburn hair, but I barely get chance to see her properly before Kiera has her in a tight embrace.

I focus back on the flowers in front of me, watching as Kiera twirls Poppy around on the driveway.

"Come on, meet Nate," Kiera says to Poppy. She pulls her in my direction so I stand, wiping my dirty hands on my shorts before offering it to her to shake.

"Hi, I'm Nate Buckley," I say.

“Poppy Stanton.” She shakes my hand. She doesn’t look completely disgusted that my hands are still dirty.

“Nice to meet you.” I smile at her. She keeps her eyes on mine. She has lovely eyes. They’re such a beautiful colour.

“Nate’s doing a load of jobs around the house and garden this summer. He’s helping us get everything ready for the build,” Kiera explains to Poppy.

“So, you’re one of Luke’s friends, and you get lumbered with the jobs, not having fun surfing all summer?” Poppy continues to stare at me.

“I’m not a fan of surfing.” I shrug as I lie, then run my hand through my hair. The lie feels uncomfortable. I’m grateful when Kiera suggests taking Poppy’s suitcases into the house, so I don’t have to add anything else.

I watch as they walk into the house, dragging the suitcases behind them. I should offer to take one for them, but I’m sure they wouldn’t want my dirty hands over the cases. I plant a few more of the bedding flowers that Luke has selected. He told me they’re all flowers that remind him of his wife. They’re bright and colourful, flowers that can withstand harsh environments. They should thrive in this soil. I finish planting at the front of the driveway and carry a tray towards the back garden.

Kiera and Poppy are in the garden by the pool. They’ve both changed. Kiera’s wearing a swimsuit and has a pair of sunglasses on her head, but it’s Poppy that has me staring. She’s wearing a bright pink, tiny bikini, sitting on the sun lounge next to Kiera, chatting away.

I walk past them, heading to the boundary line of the back garden, trying not to look at them as I pass, failing miserably.

If she’s going to spend her entire summer visit here in a tiny bikini, I’m going to be in trouble.

I work for a few minutes at the edge of the garden, digging into the soil. I work until Kiera calls me to take a break, telling me I'm making Poppy feel bad. I grab a bottle of water from the cooler, kick off my trainers and then sit at the side of the pool, my legs in the water, cooling off. I may not feel completely at ease for the reason I'm staying with Luke and Kiera, but the pool is a big plus. I've swum every day at some point, usually when Kiera and Luke are having dinner, before I'm getting ready to go out to see Gabriel's friends.

I sit at the side of the pool, enjoying the heat of both the sun and the water, listening to their conversation, being pulled in even if I didn't want to. I listen to Poppy's witty quips, her sparkling laughter, her scorn and hilarious admissions. I'm surprised to find that any apprehension I felt about seeing Evie tonight disappears, like I'm much lighter than I was this morning, suddenly buoyant by one conversation with this amusing stranger.

When I eventually get back up to start more work in the garden, I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. I glance back at Poppy, watching as she stretches out on the lounger.

Yeah. I'm definitely going to be in trouble.