

FOLLOW YOUR HEART • BOOK 1

Once Upon a Summertime

*A New York City
Romance*

MELODY CARLSON



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It had never been Anna Gordon's dream to work for a motel—certainly not the Value Lodge. And most definitely not in the same sleepy town she'd grown up in. But as her grandma had reminded her just that morning, “A job is a job, and I'm sure there are plenty of unemployed folks who would be grateful to trade places.” Even so, as Anna walked the six blocks from her grandmother's apartment to her place of employment, she longed for something more.

As Anna came to Lou's Café, someone backed out the front door with a watering can in hand, nearly knocking Anna down. “Excuse *me!*” the careless woman cried as she slopped cold water onto Anna's good Nine West pumps.

As Anna caught her balance, she recognized the offender. “Marley Ferris!” she cried out. “What on earth are you doing here in Springville?”

Marley blinked in surprise. “*Anna?*”

“I can't believe it's you.” Anna stared at her old friend in wonder.

Marley set aside the watering can and the two hugged—

long and hard—exclaiming joyfully over this unexpected meeting.

“It’s been so long,” Marley said as they stepped apart.

“Way too long.” Anna slowly shook her head.

“And look at you.” Marley studied Anna closely, from her shoulder-length strawberry blonde hair to her shoes. “So professional in your stylish suit. And still looking way too much like Nicole Kidman’s little sister.”

Anna smiled. “Thanks.”

“What’re you doing in these parts anyway?”

“I was about to ask you the same thing.” Anna adjusted her purse strap.

“I’m just home for a few days.” She jerked her thumb over her shoulder. “Helping out with my parents’ café. My mom’s laid up after back surgery.”

“Oh dear. Is she okay?”

“Yeah. It was a ruptured disc, but sounds like they got it cleaned up. She just needs to take it easy for a few days.” Marley pointed at Anna. “Seriously, what’re you doing back in Springville, and looking all uptown too?”

Anna grimaced, wishing for a better answer. “I’m, uh, I’m managing the, uh, the motel,” she mumbled.

“Oh?” Marley’s brow creased. “A motel? In *this* town?”

Anna tipped her head down the street with a somber expression.

“The Value Lodge?”

“Uh-huh.” Anna glanced at her watch. “And I should probably get going.”

“Oh yeah, sure.” Marley looked doubtful, as if she was still processing this bit of news.

“It’s great seeing you,” Anna said. “You look fantastic.”

“Hey, why don’t you come back over here for lunch?” Marley said quickly. “Give us time to catch up. The Value Lodge does give you a lunch break, doesn’t it?”

“Absolutely.” Anna nodded eagerly. “At 1:00.”

“I’ll be right here.” Marley picked up the can and began to water the large terra-cotta pot by the front door, which was overflowing with colorful pansies and red geraniums. “I promised Mom I’d keep her plants alive until she gets back. Can you believe how hot it’s been? And it’s only May!” She plucked off a dried bloom, tossing it into the gutter.

“I adore your mom’s flowers. So pretty and cheerful.” Anna waved as she continued on her way. And it was true—she did love seeing the café’s flowers. It was a bright spot in her day. The blooms reminded her of the small hotel she’d worked at during her college years. Some students in the hospitality management program had disparaged the old Pomonte Hotel by calling it the *Podunk* Hotel. But compared to the Value Lodge, the thirty-six-room Pomonte was quite chic, from its cast iron flowerpots by the door to the bubbling fountain in the lobby. It was true what they said: you don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone.

Anna felt a familiar wave of disappointment wash over as her destination came into view. The boring two-story motel had been built in the early eighties, and most Springville residents agreed it was an eyesore. Some more motivated citizens had even gone to the city council demanding improvements. Anna couldn’t blame them. When she’d accepted the managerial job, she had convinced herself that she could make a difference in the humdrum lodgings—or she could move on after a year. Unfortunately, she’d been wrong on both accounts.

As she got closer to the building, her general dismay was

replaced by some ironic gratitude—she was thankful that none of her college chums could see her now. It was bad enough having to confess her lackluster vocation to a childhood friend this morning. But if her college acquaintances knew—like her ex-roommate who now worked in Paris, or the ex-boyfriend who managed a Caribbean Ritz—Anna would feel thoroughly humiliated.

She wasn't a big fan of social networking, but she occasionally sneaked a peek at friends' Facebook pages—not for long, lest she feed any jealous green demons festering inside of her. Naturally, she never posted a single word about her own personal or professional life. Occasionally she was tempted to fake some exotic photos and falsify her whereabouts, just for fun, but really that wasn't her style. Better to remain honest and simply suffer in silence.

From across the street, she frowned at the garishly painted Value Lodge. Not for the first time, she wondered what idiot picked out those colors. The bright yellow and red stripes had always reminded her of a fast-food restaurant; they looked like mustard and ketchup, but much less appetizing. In Anna's opinion, almost everything about this motel was unappealing, from the “free continental breakfast,” which consisted of small cardboard boxes of cereal and cartons of milk and juice, to the kidney-shaped swimming pool in its varying shades of blue and sometimes green, to the lumpy queen beds topped with bedspreads with a texture akin to fiberglass. For the life of her, she could not understand why anyone would stay here on purpose. Well, except that the Value Lodge boasted the “lowest rates in town.” She would give the motel that much—it was definitely cheap.

It was, in fact, the general frugality of this establishment

that was the very bane of her existence. She'd suggested improvements to the owners, a semi-retired couple who were friends of her grandmother: relatively inexpensive perks like fresh floral arrangements in the lobby, upgraded linens, quality toiletries, or even a bowl of fresh fruit to accompany the continental breakfast. Every time, her ideas were politely but firmly declined. "Not in the budget," Rich Morgan would tell her. "Not in the budget," his wife Sharon would repeat like a trained parrot. And off they'd go on their merry little way.

As Anna walked across the motel's narrow parking lot, which had trash in it as usual, she made a mental note to herself to send Mickey out for litter patrol—again. Taking a deep breath, Anna forced a pleasant smile as an elderly couple exited the motel. They had checked in with her yesterday afternoon, for just one night, but they'd gotten her attention because they seemed like such sweet people. They were taking a cross-country car trip to mark their fiftieth anniversary.

"I hope you enjoyed your stay with us," she said cheerfully as the gentleman politely held the outer door for her and his wife.

"Yes, uh, thank you." He sounded hesitant as he followed his wife out. Almost as if something was wrong. Well, why should she be surprised? And why bother to inquire, except that was what a manager said to guests who were checking out. Still standing in the vestibule between the two sets of doors, Anna watched them hurry to their car. Wrinkling her nose, she peered curiously around the small space. Why did it always smell so doggone nasty in here? And even worse on warm days. It was as if someone had gotten sick and no one had bothered to properly clean it up.

She held her breath as she propped the exterior door open, wedging it in place with the rubber doorstop. Fresh air couldn't hurt! Second note to self: *Remind housekeeping to give this room a good disinfectant scrub during the night shift tonight.* With temps heading for the high nineties this week, this entryway needed to smell fresh—or at least not quite so disgusting.

As she continued into the shabby lobby with its faux marble vinyl floor and eighties wallpaper, she vaguely wondered why guests never complained about that wretched smell as they entered. Maybe she should put in a suggestions box. But as she stooped down to smooth a wrinkle from a worn area rug with a curling corner that would soon be a tripping hazard, she realized if guests ever paused to complain, there would be no stopping them.

“Morning, Anna.” Jacob, the night manager, waved sleepily from the reception area.

“Good morning, Jacob.”

He made a relieved smile. “You’re early as usual.” He’d already gathered his belongings, as if he planned to make a fast getaway. “Refreshing to see someone who takes her job seriously.”

She heard the teasing tone in his voice but forced a smile. “A good manager is punctual, preemptive, and positive.” She grimaced to think she had just quoted the three Ps from one of her least favorite college instructors. What a joke.

Jacob simply laughed. “Well, then I’ll be preemptive and punctual by making a positively swift exit. If I get home in time, I might have a chance to see Maizie before Kendra carts her off for the day. See ya—wouldn’t wanna be ya!”

“Not so fast.” Anna held up a hand. Jacob had worked

here longer than she had and was well aware that management was expected to “communicate between shifts.” They were supposed to fill each other in about the goings-on of the motel. “You haven’t even given me your update—”

“Nothing to report.” He dropped his manager name tag into the top drawer. “Well, except a little excitement in Room 213 last night.” He tugged off his tie, dropping it in the drawer as well.

“What happened?” She stashed her purse in the storage cabinet, locking it since they suspected someone in house-keeping had sticky fingers.

“Just the same old same old.” He tossed the morning mail into the “In” box, then slipped his cell phone into his shirt pocket. “Some teenagers had an adult register a room for them last night. He slipped them in a back door, and of course, they decided to party a little too hearty. The family in 212 called to complain around midnight. Mickey had mentioned something about the kids partying down by the pool earlier but not that they had alcohol or were underage. Anyway, when I checked in on them, it was pretty obvious someone had pulled a fast one on me. So I called the cops. They found alcohol and weed in the room. Hauled all six kids down to the station. End of story.”

She shook her head. “And it’s not even the weekend yet.”

“Yeah, but they feel summer in the air. And you know how kids in small towns can be when the weather gets hot.” With his nylon lunch bag in hand, Jacob was on his way out of the reception area. “After all, you grew up here.” He winked. “Bet you were trouble too, back then.”

“That’s a bet you’d lose,” she called as he headed for the front door.

“See ya tomorrow, Anna. Same bat-place. Same bat-time. Same bat-channel.”

Then he was gone and the lobby was quiet. As Anna shuffled through some checkout receipts that Jacob had already printed, she wondered about Jacob and his young family. He and Kendra had their hands full with eight-year-old Maizie and three dogs. Jacob was supposed to be finishing his business degree with an online university, but he was nearly forty now, and Anna wondered if he would really pull it off. Even if he did, would he look for other employment or, like her, would he settle here? And did that mean she had settled?

Anna sighed as she pinned the plastic name tag onto the lapel of her dark blue blazer, careful not to snag the fabric. It was a nicely cut Ralph Lauren suit and something the saleswoman had called an “investment” piece. “You should dress for the job you want,” she’d told Anna with authority that seemed convincing, even if the young woman was simply working as a Nordstrom sales clerk. For her first year at the Value Lodge, Anna had been reluctant to wear the expensive suit. Into her second year, it no longer seemed to matter. At least she’d looked impressive when she’d bumped into Marley, she remembered. That was lucky.

After sorting the mail and tending to the usual reception chores, Anna noticed a mom with two small children exiting from the nearby breakfast area. Since she hadn’t seen Shawna around yet and it was Shawna’s responsibility to maintain “complimentary continental breakfast,” Anna ventured over to check on the condition of the food area. As usual, the counter was messy and sticky and the glass coffeepot of regular coffee was empty and scorching on the bottom. She turned off the element and considered calling

Shawna to remedy this situation, but seeing a young couple headed her way, she decided to do it herself.

After all, she knew a good manager was willing to do any or all of the tasks that she expected of her staff. Of course, she also knew that a truly good manager made sure that she never needed to. Grabbing paper towels and a fresh coffeepot from the storage cabinet, she quickly put the kitchen to order. As she gave the final swipe to the counter, she imagined how inviting a big bowl of fresh fruit would look. It didn't have to be extravagant or expensive—just oranges, apples, and bananas.

“Good morning,” Anna said to the couple as they studied the selection of boxed cereals. They looked about as impressed as she felt.

“Good morning.” The woman held up a box of toasted flakes with a creased brow. “Are we too late?”

“Too late?” Anna considered playing stupid but couldn't. “Oh, you mean for the continental breakfast? No, this is what we have to offer—cereal, juice, milk, coffee, and tea—that's about it on this particular *continent*.” She smiled stiffly. “Have a great day.” She grabbed a few more paper towels to use in the reception area. When was the last time someone had dusted in there anyway?

As she cleaned the dark green plastic laminate countertop, she remembered how she used to bring a small bouquet of flowers with her every Monday. She'd pick them up at the Safeway store the night before and arrange them in a vase at Grandma's, and in the morning, feeling optimistic about the upcoming week, she'd place her perky blooms on the corner of the reception desk. She realized she probably appreciated the flowers more than anyone else. But after a few months,

and after both the vase and flowers went missing one time too many, she gave up that habit.

With her regular chores done and the reception area tidier than usual, Anna was bored. Drumming her fingers, she stared at the clock. Because checkout time was 11:00, she didn't expect to be very busy until a quarter till when a few guests would trickle down to check out. It would pick up around 11:00, and sometimes there would even be a short line by 11:30. It amused Anna how guests seemed intent to stretch their stays at the Value Lodge to the very last minute, as if they couldn't bear to part with such luxurious accommodations.

Eventually the guests began checking out. She didn't feel too surprised when the dad from room 212 complained about the disruptive noise from the rowdies last night. She had expected this. Smiling, she pointed to his receipt—the one she'd already reprinted and adjusted earlier.

"I'm so sorry for your inconvenience, Mr. Ramsay," she said with a look of sincere concern. "As you can see, I've discounted your bill by twenty percent and included a discount coupon for your next visit with us. I hope that will help." She pointed to his kids, who were waiting with his wife. "Count your blessings that your children aren't teenagers yet." She smiled. "I'm sure they'd never be like that anyway." She slid the papers to him, and just as she expected, he simply nodded and thanked her. *Preemptive*, she thought as she told them all to have a great day. Now if she could only be preemptive when it came to her own life. Was there no action to take, nothing she could do, no way to change this dead-end route her life had taken?