

A Wedding Transpires on Mackinac Island
by Cara Putman

(EXCERPT)

Don't do it. Don't do it. Don't do it.

The refrain beat a steady tempo through Alanna Stone's mind as she dragged up the gangplank to the ferry where it rocked in the early morning light at the St. Ignace's dock. She avoided gazing to her right in the direction of Mackinac Island. A place of beauty and peace to many, it symbolized all the harshness that could shimmer beneath the surface in a small town. She'd sworn never to return and honored that vow for eleven years.

Now? Now she abandoned her firmly held avoidance to help her parents. A wave rocked the boat, and she bobbed as she struggled to stay steady on more than her feet.

A man in the green polo that bore the Arnold Transport Company logo steadied her with a smile. "You'll find your sea legs in no time."

"Good thing, since the trip's so short."

He laughed and nodded. "About fifteen minutes."

How could she tell him she wished it lasted fifteen months or years? That time would freeze, and she'd stay on this side of the lake?

Seagulls cawed as they took to the air and swooped around the boat.

Fifteen minutes. That's all it took to start a new life.

Diesel fumes rolled around her as the ferry's engines roared into gear. With a grinding stop and jerk, the boat eased away from the dock and powered across the lake. Alanna sucked in a deep breath then coughed as fumes settled in her lungs. She clenched her jaw and pivoted until she faced east as the boat pushed through the water toward the sun. She needed to face her new reality and the hidden embarrassment. All represented by one tiny spot on the map.

Mackinac Island.

In the morning light, it looked like a deep emerald emerging from the lake with the Victorian cottages and Grand Hotel popping out like embellishments against the forest backdrop.

The wind blew across Alanna's face, misting it with a fine spray as it tangled her hair. The strands whipped around her neck, but she let the wind do its worst. Even then, it couldn't reflect the chaos churning inside her. Tension tightened her body again. It had been her constant companion during the Menendez murder trial. The case had faded from the front page of the newspapers, and the reporters had finally abandoned their posts at her home and the office. The second time media had hounded her, but this time it involved a client rather than her brother. She'd thought she had shed the constant headache, but now it roared back to full strength in her temples.

Going home did that to her.

The catamaran shifted beneath her, the engines grinding.

When Mother had called begging for help after Daddy's stroke, Alanna had two choices: return to the island to keep her parents' art shop open or let their lives' work close.

Maybe things had changed in the time she'd been away. Memories shortened. Ugly innuendo against her brother faded. If only the island could transform into an oasis for her. One she needed after the lengthy, brutal civil trial tied to a murder between feuding neighbors. She still felt the fatigue from a hard-fought victory, one that consumed almost as many of her nights as days.

Her jaw clenched as the boat shifted further and the engines reversed direction. The shuttle chugged toward the island, slowing as it approached. The Arnold dock bustled with activity, but it was the kind propelled by men pushing caddies and horses stamping their

hooves. Alanna collected her thoughts and softened her knees to rock with the ferry as it slid next to the dock.

At first glance nothing had changed. Bicycles and horse-drawn taxis lined Huron Street at the end of the dock. Men wearing hotel-logo-embellished polos wove between groups of tourists. Their intent gazes focused on destinations while the tourists ambled from fudge shops to knickknack stores.

Alanna stumbled against the railing as the boat stopped. Her feet anchored in place. The other passengers disembarked. She needed to move. Tackle whatever waited for her.

It's just a few weeks, two months at most. She could do anything for that long. Get the store open again. Find someone to run the shop. Return to Grand Rapids before the partners missed her too much. That's all she had to do. Grabbing her briefcase, Alanna hiked over the short gangplank. A taxi could take her to the cottage first. No, if she did that, she might not make an appearance at the shop today.

She marched to the trolley lined with suitcases, handed over her claim ticket, and took the handle on hers. It was big, but she could maneuver it the few blocks to the store. She slipped into the flow of visitors pouring off the dock. With her suitcase rolling behind her, maybe no one would recognize her. Even with that hope, her sunglasses stayed firmly in place. If any of her opposing counsel spotted her hiding behind the glasses, they'd laugh. Her reputation as a tiger in the courtroom would lay shredded at her feet.

She ducked behind a group and followed them up the street. She crashed off a hard surface—no. . . somebody—and fell.

“Are you okay?” A rich baritone, eerily familiar, spoke the words.

Alanna nodded from her position on the sidewalk, but kept her chin tucked. She couldn't let him get a good glimpse at her or her embarrassment. What if he remembered her? Eleven years might not be long enough to make her anonymous to the man who first claimed her heart.

“There are too many people on the sidewalks to not pay attention. Can I help you up?” The man offered her a hand.

Alanna peeked up then tilted her head back farther and saw the man she'd hoped most to avoid on the island. Her pulse picked up speed, a nod to their long-ago high school summer romance. Her gaze slipped to his mouth, and she jerked it back up as heat flashed up her neck at the thought of their twilight kisses on the dock by her parents' home years earlier. In an instant the memory morphed into the panicked thought Jonathan might recognize her. She longed for something—anything—more substantial than glasses to hide behind.

His face had matured. The jaw squared, the nose bent like he'd broken it, the eyes green with a tinge of blue—matching the calm waters of Lake Huron. He still towered over her a good six inches or more. Her gaze traveled down his fit form, but he waved his hand in front of her face.

“Help you up?” Mischief danced in his sea-green eyes as if he knew she'd stared at him from behind the glasses.

Alanna hesitated a moment then accepted his hand, finding hers dwarfed in his. A shock raced up her arm. He pulled her to her feet, and she two-stepped backward. “Th—thank you.”

“Sure you're okay?”

“Yes.” She had to get away before he recognized her. Of all the people to run into! She hadn't prepared for the memories and what-ifs to assault her the moment she stepped on Mackinac Island. Her breath hitched, and she tightened her grip on the suitcase. “Thank you again.”

Alanna skirted around him and hurried down Huron, gaze fixed in front of her. She knew he must think her ridiculous, but she couldn't look back. If she did, she'd be lost in his gaze, and he'd recognize her in an instant. If Spencer hadn't ended their year long relationship, she'd have some defense to Jonathan. Instead she felt vulnerable to the memories.

If the first moments together, when he didn't know her, were any indication, her long-buried attraction to him would chase her right off the island.