



The Best Summer of Our Lives

a novel

New York Times Bestselling Author

RACHEL HAUCK

The Best
Summer
of Our
Lives

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To all the friends I've loved before, today, and tomorrow.
You've enriched my life. Thank you.

1

Turn, Turn, Turn

Summer

JUNE '97

The second Summer tumbled into Tumbleweed, Oklahoma, she'd arrived in the middle of the end. The beginning started three hours ago, when her manager, Clark, showed up at her Route 66 motel.

"The band left in the middle of the night," he'd said. "The Sparrows flitted. And I might as well tell you, I'm moving to LA. Got a job with the Bergman Agency. So, here." He handed her the keys to his '87 Ford F-150 as some sort of redneck consolation prize. "To get you home. And you can have it. Pink slip's in the glove box."

Sure enough, the minibus Summer had rented for her band, the Sparrows Fly, was gone, and her gear was piled up outside her Shady Rest Motor Court door.

Son of a gun. So it'd come to this? Her bandmates escaping in the night? At least her previous bands respected her enough to tell her to her face "*we're done.*"

“Am I so horrible? So mean? That they sneak off in the night?” She’d tried to live “all for one, one for all,” but she was really about herself. Besides, she should’ve let that phrase die twenty years ago. She could never recapture what had once been.

“Mean? No, I prefer terse,” Clark had confessed. “Look, Summer, you *are* the show—the heart and soul of every band you’ve created. Why don’t you just go it alone?”

Because she didn’t want to go it alone. She’d grown up with best friends, the Four Seasons, and being part of a team was in her blood.

She also didn’t want to be a one-hit wonder. But she was, even though technically “The Preacher” was Tracey Blue’s. The country great heard the demo Summer recorded and turned it into a hit of Bobbie Gentry proportions, winning Song of the Year and Artist of the Year. Summer got a nod in the songwriter category but lost to Lori McKenna.

Four years after Tracey’s release, country queen Aubrey James covered “The Preacher” because “she loved it,” and the song rode Billboard’s Top Ten once again.

Summer wrote fifteen new songs, formed Sparrows Fly, and hit the road again. At thirty-eight, dillydallying over *any* success was wasted success. But she failed, didn’t she?

Then, as a parting gift, along with his truck keys, Clark handed her a coffee and the morning newspaper.

“Did you see the headline? Twenty years since the Girl Scouts at Camp Scott were murdered. Wasn’t Tumbleweed near there? Where you were a camp counselor?”

Summer glanced at the headline and handed back the paper. Yeah, she was a camp counselor the year those girls were killed. Scared the heck out of the entire state.

After Clark said his good-byes, she sat on the edge of her bed and sipped the coffee. This was it. She quit. No more girl bands. No more this-is-my-shot-and-I-know-it business.

Face it, she couldn’t make it in country music if Chet Atkins

himself took her into the studio and laid down his classic Nashville Sound licks.

She'd gone eighteen years and over a million miles only to find herself driving from Tulsa to Tumbleweed. The last town she ever wanted to see again.

Up ahead, a sign came into view. *Tumbleweed. Population 2,883.* The 3 was hand-painted on the sign above a crossed-out 2. A new millennium on the horizon and the folks of Tumbleweed were still adding their newborns one by one.

Tumbleweed, what am I doing here?

Except for in the theme of "The Preacher," Summer didn't even visit Tumbleweed in her memories or dreams.

It's just that when Clark dropped all his bombs, then took a taxi to the airport, she didn't know what to do besides stand in the motor court parking lot and look pitiful.

She'd hauled her stuff inside, called Bryson at the Broken Barrel to tell him she'd be a solo act for the night's gig, and to keep occupied, she hopped into the white Ford and headed northwest. Her head did not want to return to Tumbleweed, but maybe, sort of, kind of her heart did.

Was she looking for *him*? Or the pieces of herself she left at Camp Tumbleweed on Skiatook Lake?

Arriving in town, Summer eased down the brick-laden Main Street and ached for the girl she used to be. The one who didn't need a drink to fall asleep. The one who hadn't had more lovers than she had fingers and toes. The one who didn't believe a record contract and an Academy of Country Music Award would give her life meaning. The one who didn't secretly yearn to impress people she'd left behind long, long ago.

She wanted to be the girl who loved her parents, who had three of the best friends in the world. A girl with hope, promise, and a future. A girl whose worst decision was a bad movie or crazy haircut. A girl who laughed at the memory of dumping concentrated car wash soap into the Florida State pool. A girl who spent

a court-mandated summer with her friends as camp counselors at Camp Tumbleweed.

She missed the girl who'd so easily, so truly, fallen in love.

But it was too late, too late, too late. The emotional effort to even remember those days cost more than she wanted to pay.

Summer angled the truck into an open parking spot on Main Street and cut the engine. In the quiet cab, she glanced down the street. Tumbleweed had not changed in twenty years, except for new signs on the storefronts and a little more color on the façades.

At eleven in the morning, the town was alive with business. The pole at the old barber shop spun red, white, and blue, and a young man walked out, settling a hat on his newly shorn hair.

The hardware store advertised a sale, and Sue's Cut-n-Curl—Sue *had* to be going on eighty—displayed a row of wigs on a sidewalk table with the sign *Free to a Good Home*.

The door to the laundromat—oh, good ol' Tumble Time—was propped open, and a woman went in with her young son.

"Wellllll, you get the soap, I'll get the washer, honey. You get the soap, I'll get the washer, babe."

The song played from way back in Summer's memories. A sound from a time gone by. Eight weeks, eight Saturdays, and the summer of '77 still defined her. Maybe because the summer of '77 had broken her.

Had broken all of them.

Maybe she should just head back to the Shady Rest, get a nap—what a luxury—and redo her set list for the Broken Barrel.

Still, she was here, wasn't she? Might as well grab some lunch from the best diner ever, O'Sullivan's Diner & Drugstore.

If God cared about her one wit, O'Sullivan's would still have the Number Five on the menu and Tank Tilly would be behind the counter. He'd be, what, in his sixties?

Summer jerked at the call of her cell phone. She'd never get used to the beck and call of a personal phone. She pulled the device from the truck's console.

It was Clark. “You okay?”

“I’m sitting in Tumbleweed. You tell me.”

“Come on, Summer, it’s not that bad.”

“Yet here I am. After my life fell apart this morning, I thought Tumbleweed might be a step up.”

“Summer, don’t be so dramatic—”

“I had a hankering for a good burger, fries, and a shake. I’ve been all over the country, and nothing beats O’Sullivan’s.”

“I’m sorry, all right?” he said, his voice cracking from a weak connection. “But I had to take this opportunity with the Bergman Agency.”

“And you couldn’t take me with you?”

“I tried, but—”

“They don’t want me.”

“It’s just . . .” He sighed to the soundtrack of the airport. “No one doubts your talent. Everyone I talk to tells me you should write another ‘The Preacher.’”

“That song was special, Clark. The lyrics were raw and personal, birthed from a place I didn’t go to often.” In fact, she’d not revisited *that* place since the night she wrote “The Preacher.” The tune was simple but melodic with minor-seventh chords. “But after eighteen years in the biz with nothing to show for it but one song, I’m more of a liability than a possibility. Is that right?”

“You had more than a hit, Summer. You penned a future classic.”

“Never feel guilty for going for your dreams, Clark. I should’ve said this at the Shady Rest, but thanks for everything you did for me. You stuck around when everyone else left.”

She should be used to people leaving her. But the pain of it always felt fresh and sharp.

“I talked to Lucy Carter at Music Bomb. She said to give her a call and—”

“We’d kill each other. She’s lightning, and I’m thunder. She only said to call her out of pity. Or because she likes you.”

“Can I give you some advice, Summer?” She teared up at the tenderness in his voice. “Find a way to fix what broke you all those years ago. I have a feeling *that* girl will know exactly what to do with her life.”

“I have a feeling that girl is more confused than this one.”

“Trust yourself, that’s all I’m saying. You’ll be all right. You’ve got ‘The Preacher’ royalties, so there’s no need to rush into something else. Take the summer off. You’ve been touring nonstop for eons. Whatever you’re looking for ain’t out there, Summer. It’s in you. Sit still and listen.”

It wasn’t like her manager and friend to wax sentimental or personal, so his words hit hard and sank deep.

“I’ve got to go, Clark.” Summer ended the call and popped open the truck door. She’d driven to Tumbleweed for a good burger, not to rehash what went wrong in the past. She knew what went wrong. Lies and betrayal, like all good tragedies.

A car horn sounded as a late-model Cadillac pulled into a parking spot next to her. An older gentleman in a ten-gallon hat rose out of the car like a cowboy superhero. He wore a bolo tie under his button-down collar, crisp blue jeans, and a pair of dark, shiny boots that came to a sharp point at the toe. His blue gaze lingered on Summer for a nanosecond before someone called hello to him.

Levi? Levi Foley? Of course not. This man was her father’s age. Without a second glance, he disappeared through a glass door labeled *Life, Health, Home, and Auto Insurance*.

Is this what you’re doing here, Summer Wilde? Looking for Levi?

Because if she was, she’d best hop into the truck right now and head back to Tulsa. Besides, the cute cowboy from the summer of ’77 lived in California.

Hurrying across Main, she pushed her way inside O’Sullivan’s and stepped into the past. A piece of her burden lifted.

Built in the early 1900s, when the Dalton gang ran through the territory, O’Sullivan’s used to be the place where cowboys gath-

ered. The decor of saddles, saddlebags, bullhorns, worn-out boots, spurs, cowboy hats, and a row of wagon-wheel chandeliers spoke of pioneers, of courage, of people not afraid to face the unknown to make a better life. She could use a bit of their courage and blind hope.

On her left was the drugstore. In front of her were the diner's red leather booths with red-checked Formica tables and the eat-in counter with no fewer than twenty stools. Behind the counter, the kitchen.

A man in a white chef's hat, black shirt, and large apron polished the countertop while Garth Brooks sang from the jukebox about a river of dreams. Tank Tilly. He was still here. A bit of gray showed from under his beanie, and Summer hoped for her sake he still dispensed unsolicited wisdom. She needed a dose.

She picked a stool and, without looking up, the man asked, "What'll it be?"

"I'd love the Number Five, Tank." She leaned back to review the chalkboard menu suspended above her on two fat chains. It'd been a while; the order of things might have changed. But no, the Number Five was still a cheeseburger with the works, fries, and a milkshake.

Tank scribbled on a pad of paper, then gave her a quick look before turning toward the kitchen. Summer sat up. *Remember me?*

He clipped the order ticket to the wheel at the service window, then slapped the bell. "Sooner, step lively, we got a special guest. Summer Wilde, famous country singer." He greeted her with a warm smile and took her hand in his. "I knew it was you. Pretty as ever."

"Ha. I don't know about that, Tank." The road life took a toll.

"I do. Know what I see? Some wisdom, some humility in those eyes." Add stupidity and hurt and he'd have her whole number. "I bought your record when you were with Wilde, Heart, and Landon. Keep the CD in my truck for long drives. You got a voice, girl, you do."

Wilde, Heart, and Landon was her second band, the one before the Sparrows. She tried to capitalize on her first success of “The Preacher” and drove the band hard. Toured nonstop. They almost strung her up and left her for the coyotes.

“So, your friends, what’d y’all call yourselves?”

“The Four Seasons.”

“That’s right.” He rapped the counter with his fist. “Summer, Autumn, Winter, and Spring.”

“Snow. Not Winter. Margaret Snowden, but everyone called her Snow.” Snow’s name felt weird on her tongue. She’d not spoken of her, or any of them, in ages. Eight, ten years?

“That’s right, that’s right. You’d think I’d remember that one. Anyway, I remember she had pale blue eyes. Y’all keep in touch?” He turned to the service window. “Sooner, how’s the Number Five coming? Don’t take all day, and give this girl your best.”

Sooner’s frowning face appeared in the window. “What in the world are you talking about? I always give my best.”

“Just checking, simmer down.” Tank turned back to Summer. “Can I get you a soda while you wait?”

“Diet Coke?”

Tank grabbed a glass and filled it with ice and soda. “So, you gals still in touch?”

“Um, yes, we, um, are.” So she fibbed a little. That was the least of her sins. It was what Tank wanted to hear. He seemed pleased to have remembered them. “Tumbleweed hasn’t changed much,” she said.

“Girl, we’ll go into the new millennium same way as we went into the last. A one-horse town. Folks like it that way.”

“Some things have changed from 1900. O’Sullivan’s has electricity and indoor plumbing.” Summer tipped her head toward the jukebox. “If I’m not mistaken, that’s Trisha Yearwood singing, not Kitty Wells.”

Tank’s laughter caused her to drop another one of her morning burdens. She’d not felt like pleasant company in a long time. She

might have treated the Sparrows like her employees. Or servants. It's just she—no, they—were so close to a record deal.

"You got me there, Summer. But we do like to stay the same 'round here. We only got rid of all party lines two years ago, and some folks fought that, especially those out a ways on the ranches and farms. Said listening in on other people's conversations was the only way to keep up with the news."

"More like keep up with the gossip."

"Gossip, news . . ." He shrugged his big shoulders. "Six of one."

Sooner appeared at the window. "Phone for you, Tank."

When he'd gone, Summer glanced toward the phone booth in the front left corner between the drugstore and the diner. The same one she'd ducked into twenty years ago to call Dad. His assistant, Sandy, had answered. *Sandee*, who Summer hoped snorted like a pig when she laughed. She didn't. She was beautiful, ambitious, smart, and cunning, but not the reason her parents' marriage fell apart.

"Here we are, and as they say in France, 'Good eating.'" Tank set a plate heaped with a burger and fries in front of her. The aroma was pure heaven. She shoved the soda aside for the chocolate shake, which was so thick the straw stood up and saluted.

She was three bites into her burger, five bites into the crispy golden pile of fries, and one cold, creamy, delicious sip into her shake when the bells on the front door clattered against the cloudy glass pane. Soft footsteps skipped over the hardwood toward the counter.

"Summer? Summer Wilde?" A pretty face peered around at her. The woman wore pink scrubs, and her chestnut hair was pulled back into a neat ponytail.

Summer choked down her bite. "Yes?" Did she have a fan in Tumbleweed? Tank aside.

"It is you. I can't believe it. When I called Tank to place my lunch order, he said, 'You'll never guess what the cat dragged in.'" The woman lunged at her, wrapping her in an affectionate hug. "I never thought I'd see you again. It's been twenty years."

Okay, who was this beauty from 1977?

She moved back to let Summer study her, holding her smile wide.

“Oh my gosh, Greta? Greta Henderson?” Summer grabbed her into a tight hug, as if to fill herself with everything sweet and wonderful about the girls she met that long-ago summer. “Look at you. You’re a nurse or—”

“A doctor, actually.” Well, that deserved a high five. “My husband and I have a general practice over on Fifth Street. We’re cradle-to-grave, so we put Band-Aids on boo-boos, deliver babies, and take care of the aging. And I’m a Yeager now. My husband is Darrian.”

“Girl, I’m so stinking proud of you.” Summer sat back on her stool. Greta, a doctor. “Weren’t you the doctor in the camp play?”

“I was, and I still have the cheap plastic stethoscope Snow found in the drugstore toy aisle. It hangs in my office.”

“I knew you’d do great things, Greta. I knew it.” Summer squeezed her hand and tried not to feel like a complete and utter failure. Riding the self-pity train rattled her bones.

But honestly, what had she done to help her fellow man? Written a bunch of sappy, crappy country songs so a room full of drunks could cry in their beers?

“I owe it all to the Four Seasons, Summer.”

“You owe it all to Spring. She was your counselor.” Greta got dropped off by her parents on their way to Europe. She was the only Camp Tumbleweed Tumbler who didn’t rotate out every weekend. In fact, they’d inducted her into their unique friendship, dubbing her Baby Season.

“It was all of you.” Greta’s eyes brimmed with emotion. “First, you made me feel loved and accepted. Second, you showed me how to be a friend. I was a Tumbler until I was sixteen, then became a counselor. Lily did a great job running the camp. She was—”

“The best,” Summer said. Mom restarted the camp she’d attended as a girl that summer of ’77 and went on to run it for ten years. Summer would have to give her a call sometime. Soon.

“Yeah, the best.” Greta held her gaze. “I’m sorry about your parents’ divorce. I know how much you loved your dad.”

“It was a long time ago.”

The beat of silence held them for a moment, the past and present connecting with memories and affection.

“Here you go, Doctor.” Tank set down two brown paper bags and a drink carrier.

“Thanks, Tank.” Greta dropped a couple of bills on the counter, then turned to Summer. “I’d stay and eat with you, but I left Ned Banks on the exam table in a paper gown.” She pulled a pen from her scrubs pocket and reached for a napkin. “You have to come to dinner.” She scribbled her address and phone number on the napkin and slid the info to Summer. “Please. Darrian would love to meet you, and I really, really want to catch up.”

A bit of dew collected in the corners of her eyes. “I can’t tell you how much y’all impacted my life. I think of you all the time. Especially when I listen to your music or watch one of Snow’s movies. I still hear from Spring. She’s married, and a partner in a large law firm. Happy.” Greta gathered her lunch. “Please, Summer, come to dinner. We have a lovely place on the lake. Tank here sold us a tract of land so we could build our dream house.”

“Greta, go, you’ve got an important job.” Summer held up the napkin. “I’ll see what I can do.” Lie. She was leaving town in an hour for one last gig. Then where? She didn’t really know, but not here.

“Ain’t it great to see her again?” Tank set another lunch box on the counter with the name *Foley* on the side. “Thanks to you gals and Camp Tumbleweed, we got two of the best doctors. Everybody says so.”

“She’s amazing. Seems content, happy, successful.”

She and the Four Seasons had felt sorry for Greta the summer of ’77 when her parents dropped her off at Camp Tumbleweed while they headed to Europe. The camp was run-down and overgrown, abandoned for twenty years. Who knew then how impactful those eight weeks would turn out to be?

“You hanging around long enough to take her up on dinner?” Tank said, giving the counter a wipe. “She’s sincere in wanting to see you. I’ve heard her mention you girls around town. And I’m sure you know Camp Tumbleweed has taken another long nap. Going on ten years now.”

“I’d heard.” Summer peered up at him. She’d been here one summer twenty years ago, yet she felt like he knew her. “But I can’t stay. I’ve got a gig in Tulsa tonight at the Broken Barrel.”

“Then what? Going back to Nashville? Maybe you could come back here, hang around for a while,” Tank said. “I always thought you fit with Tumbleweed. You’re one of us.”

“I’m not sure whether to laugh or cry, Tank.”

“I know, I know. You got your dreams, your music, but life can be good here in Tumbleweed.”

“And what would I do in Tumbleweed? Wait tables?”

“You could sing. I’ve been meaning to take out that old phone booth, put it in the front corner with the jukebox. Just never had anything put a fire under me to do it.”

“Tank, I done told you to do it a thousand times.” Sooner’s voice boomed from the back. “If I ain’t fire, don’t know what is.”

“Hush up, old man.” Tank winked at Summer. “I could put a stage where the phone booth is now.”

“Good luck with that, Tank. I mean it. It’s a great idea.” She pulled a twenty from her pocket. “I should get going. You still have the best burgers anywhere.”

“On the house.” He pushed back her money. “I’m happy to see you again.”

Summer hesitated, then tucked the money into her pocket. “You reminded me life is full of good people, Tank.”

He reached for her hands. “Sweet darling, I don’t know what’s happened between then and now, but—”

“An extreme lack of sleep.”

“Then get you some rest. Tumbleweed is a good town for sleep-

ing. Just saying . . .” He released her hands. “One more thing, Summer.” Tank lowered his voice. “He’s back, you know.”

“Who’s back?”

“Levi Foley. Took over his daddy’s ranch. Mac Foley runs the insurance biz across the street.”

“Levi’s running the ranch? I thought he was a CPA in an air-conditioned office in L.A.”

“Found out he weren’t built for the office, or for California. He’s built for the ranch life. Ain’t married, neither. And no kids.”

“Well, good for him.” Summer backed toward the door. “I’ll see you around. Thanks for lunch. Best I’ve had in a long, long time.”

“Should I tell him I saw you? Tell him about your show tonight?”

“No, Tank, do *not* tell Levi Foley you saw me.”

Please don’t tell him. She’d drown herself in someone’s beer if Levi saw her at the Broken Barrel. The place was a dive. Where bands, or singers, went to die.

“Summer,” Tank said, coming around the counter. “Whatever it is, you can—”

“I don’t know what you mean.” But her weak smile gave her away. “See ya.”

Summer stepped outside and gazed west, toward the camp, to where she’d left chunks of her heart. It was amazing she had any left to live on.

What am I doing here?

The answer came, so clear, as if announced by the town crier. *Coming home.*