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Summer in Columbus

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Table of Contents

- **Chapter 1** The Scioto Mile Serendipity
- **Chapter 2** First Coffee at North Market
- **Chapter 3** A Stroll Through German Village
- **Chapter 4** Art, Whispers, and Wonder at COSI
- **Chapter 5** Dinner at The Pearl
- **Chapter 6** A Buckeyes Game and Shared Cheers
- **Chapter 7** Exploring the Short North Arts District
- **Chapter 8** A Picnic in Franklin Park Conservatory
- **Chapter 9** Rainy Day Revelations at the Columbus Museum of Art
- **Chapter 10** The Book Loft and Lingering Gazes
- **Chapter 11** Discovering Old Worthington
- **Chapter 12** A Night at the Lincoln Theatre
- **Chapter 13** Confessions on the Olentangy Trail
- **Chapter 14** The Grandview Heights Getaway
- **Chapter 15** A Visit to the Columbus Zoo
- **Chapter 16** Brewing Romance at a Local Craft Brewery
- **Chapter 17** The Heart of Ohio State's Campus
- **Chapter 18** Fireworks Over the River
- **Chapter 19** Shared Dreams at a Gallery Hop
- **Chapter 20** An Unexpected Challenge
- **Chapter 21** Reaffirming Bonds at Schiller Park
- **Chapter 22** The Promise of Tomorrow at the Park of Roses
- **Chapter 23** A Weekend in Hocking Hills (Columbus Outskirts)
- **Chapter 24** Preparing for a Future Together
- **Chapter 25** A Columbus Sunset, A New Beginning
- **Chapter 26** Our Summer, Our Story

CHAPTER ONE: The Scioto Mile Serendipity

The humidity in Columbus during early June has a way of clinging to the skin like a damp wool blanket, yet there is an undeniable energy that pulses through the city as the solstice approaches. For Clara Vance, the heat was merely a backdrop to the more pressing concern of her malfunctioning camera lens. She stood on the edge of the Rich Street Bridge, the white arches framing a skyline that was rapidly catching the amber hues of the sinking sun. Below her, the Scioto River moved with a sluggish grace, reflecting the glass towers of downtown. Clara was a freelance architectural photographer, and she had been commissioned to capture the "reborn riverfront" for a regional travel magazine. Usually, she was invisible behind her equipment, a silent observer of steel and stone, but today, the universe seemed intent on dragging her into the foreground.

She sighed, twisting the focus ring of her Nikon with a frustration that was beginning to manifest as a slight tremor in her hands. The motor whined—a high-pitched, metallic protest that signaled a gear stripping deep within the housing. It was the golden hour, that fleeting window where the light turns the world into a masterpiece, and she was stuck with a piece of expensive glass that refused to see the world clearly. She lowered the camera, leaning her elbows against the cool concrete railing of the bridge. The Scioto Mile stretched out before her, a lush ribbon of green parkland that had transformed the city's heart from a concrete ditch into a vibrant urban oasis. Families were strolling along the promenade, and the distant sounds of children shrieking in the fountains at Bicentennial Park drifted toward her on the breeze.

"That sounds like a very expensive paperweight," a voice remarked from a few feet away.

Clara turned, squinting against the glare of the sun. A man was leaning against the same railing, though he looked significantly more relaxed than she felt. He was dressed in a light linen shirt with the sleeves rolled up, revealing forearms tanned by a summer already well underway. He had a sketchbook tucked under one arm and a charcoal pencil behind his ear, looking every bit the quintessential urban artist. His eyes, a shade of hazel that seemed to catch the green of the surrounding parks, were fixed on her camera with a look of genuine sympathy.

"It's a very expensive heartbreaker," Clara corrected, her voice tinged with a weary laugh. "I have forty-five minutes of light left, a deadline on Monday, and a lens that thinks it's a kaleidoscope. I've tried the manual override, I've cleaned the contacts, and I've even tried light physical intimidation. Nothing is working."

The man straightened up, closing the distance between them with an easy, unhurried stride. "I'm Julian. And while I'm more of a low-tech guy—charcoal doesn't usually crash—I've spent enough time around gear-heads to know that sometimes the internal sensor just needs a reset. Mind if I take a look? I promise not to drop it into the river."

Clara hesitated for a split second. Normally, she was protective of her gear to the point of paranoia, but there was something disarming about Julian's presence. He lacked the frantic edge that most people in the city seemed to carry. She handed the camera over, watching as his long fingers moved over the buttons with surprising dexterity. He didn't just poke at it; he listened to the motor, tilting his head as he triggered the shutter.

"It's the aperture blades," he diagnosed after a moment, looking up at her. "They're sticking. If you stop it down to f/11, it might jam, but if you keep it wide open at f/2.8, you might be able to trick it into staying functional for the rest of the evening. It won't be perfect for architectural depth, but you'll get your shots."

Clara took the camera back, adjusted the settings as he suggested, and peered through the viewfinder. The blur vanished. The sharp lines of the LeVeque Tower snapped into focus against the deepening blue of the sky. She took a breath, the tightness in her chest finally loosening. "You're a lifesaver, Julian. Seriously. I was about two minutes away from a very unprofessional meltdown."

"Happy to help. It would be a tragedy to waste this light," Julian said, gesturing toward the horizon. "The way the shadows hit the COSI building from this angle is one of the best sights in the Midwest. It looks like a giant silver ship docked in the middle of Ohio."

As Clara began to work, Julian didn't leave. He returned to his spot a few feet away, but instead of sketching, he watched the city alongside her. They worked in a comfortable silence for a while, the only sounds being the rhythmic click of her shutter and the distant hum of traffic on Front Street. There was a peculiar synchronicity to the moment. Columbus is a city of hidden pockets—places where the urban grind softens into something more personal—and the Scioto Mile at dusk was perhaps its most effective transformation.

"Do you live downtown?" Clara asked, breaking the silence as she paused to check her digital display. She found herself curious about the man who knew the internal mechanics of a Nikon and the aesthetic merits of local shadows.

"Over in the Short North," Julian replied, pointing northward toward the glowing arches of High Street. "I have a small studio there. I spend most of my days drawing buildings that haven't been built yet for an architecture firm, so I come down here in the

evenings to draw the ones that have been here forever. It keeps the soul from getting too rectangular, if that makes sense."

Clara laughed, leaning back against the rail. "I get that. I spend my life trying to make buildings look perfect for magazines, but usually, it's the cracks and the weathered brick that actually tell the story. I moved here from Chicago six months ago, and I'm still trying to find the 'soul' of Columbus. Everyone told me it was just a college town, but it feels... bigger than that. More complicated."

"Columbus is a slow burn," Julian said, his expression turning thoughtful. "It doesn't hit you over the head with its identity like New York or Chicago. It's a collection of neighborhoods that are all trying to figure out who they are. You have to seek it out. You have to walk the Mile, eat at the Market, and get lost in the Brick District. It's a city of serendipity."

They walked together along the promenade as the streetlamps began to hum to life, casting circular pools of yellow light on the pavement. The fountains at the Scioto Mile were in full swing now, the water jets dancing in choreographed patterns, illuminated by color-changing LEDs. Children ran through the mist, their laughter echoing off the stone benches. It was a scene of pure, unadulterated summer joy, the kind that feels fleeting even as it's happening.

As they approached the main plaza, the smell of blooming lilies and damp earth rose from the carefully manicured gardens. Clara felt a strange reluctance to end the evening. Usually, she was a creature of habit, heading straight home to upload her files and order takeout, but the warm air and the easy conversation were a potent distraction.

"I should probably get these files onto a hard drive before the lens decides to die permanently," she said, though her feet didn't move toward the parking garage.

Julian nodded, tucking his sketchbook more firmly under his arm. "And I should probably get some dinner. But listen, since you're still looking for the soul of the city, there's a place in the North Market that makes the best coffee in the state. If you're not too busy tomorrow morning, I could show you. It's a different kind of architectural study—mostly involving people-watching and caffeine."

Clara looked at him, searching for any sign of a hidden agenda, but found only a quiet, genuine invitation. The serendipity he had mentioned seemed to be at work. A broken lens had led to a fix, and a fix had led to a walk, and now, a walk was leading toward a second act.

"The North Market," Clara repeated, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "I think I can manage that. As long as you don't judge me if I bring a backup camera just

in case."

"Bring three backups if you want," Julian joked as they reached the point where the path diverged toward the street. "I'll be the one by the red clock tower, likely looking for a way to draw the smell of roasting coffee."

They exchanged numbers quickly, the digital glow of their phones a stark contrast to the soft moonlight beginning to dominate the sky. As Clara walked toward her car, she looked back once. Julian was standing near the fountain, his silhouette sharp against the spray of water. The Scioto Mile had done its job; it had provided the space for two strangers to collide in a city that was suddenly feeling a lot smaller, and a lot warmer, than it had two hours ago.

The drive back to her apartment in Grandview was a blur of neon signs and green traffic lights. She felt a buzzing energy that had nothing to do with the humidity or the deadline. It was the thrill of a new connection, the kind that happens in the quiet corners of a summer night when the world feels wide open. She thought about the way the light had hit the river, and the way Julian had known exactly what was wrong with her camera without her having to say a word. In a city of nearly a million people, the odds of meeting someone who looked at the world through the same lens were slim, yet the Scioto Mile had narrowed those odds to zero.

When she finally reached her apartment, she didn't immediately go to her computer. Instead, she sat on her small balcony, listening to the crickets and the distant sound of the freeway. The air was still thick, but it didn't feel oppressive anymore. It felt like a beginning. She picked up her camera, pointing it at the moon, and pressed the shutter. It clicked—sharp, clean, and perfectly in focus. The "serendipity" Julian spoke of seemed to be holding steady, and as she looked at the calendar on her phone, the word 'Summer' finally started to mean something more than just a season of heat. It meant a season of possibility.

CHAPTER TWO: First Coffee at North Market

The morning sun over Columbus was less of a gentle wake-up call and more of a bright, insistent demand. By eight o'clock, the cool breeze of the previous evening had been replaced by a shimmering haze that rose from the asphalt of High Street. Clara woke with a sense of anticipation she hadn't felt since her move to Ohio. She spent the better part of an hour checking her backup camera bodies and ensuring her lenses were meticulously cleaned, though she purposefully left the temperamental Nikon from the night before at the top of her bag. It was her conversation piece, her bridge to a man who seemed to understand the specific language of light and shadow. She dressed in a light cotton sundress and sturdy sneakers—the uniform of a woman who expected to be on her feet—and drove toward the downtown core.

Parking near the North Market on a Saturday morning was a task that required either immense patience or a stroke of divine intervention. The streets of the Short North were already bustling with joggers, dog-walkers, and early-bird shoppers. After circling a few blocks, Clara finally found a spot in a nearby garage and stepped out into the thick, humid air. The scent of the city in summer was a complex bouquet of exhaust, blooming flowers, and the unmistakable aroma of yeast and sugar wafting from the local bakeries. As she walked toward the iconic red-brick building of the North Market, she felt the familiar hum of the urban landscape. It was a historic public market that had stood as a cornerstone of the community for over a century, a place where the city's diverse flavors and cultures collided under one roof.

She spotted Julian immediately. He was standing near the red clock tower, just as he had promised. He looked slightly different in the daylight—more grounded, perhaps, but no less relaxed. He was wearing a dark t-shirt and jeans, with his ever-present sketchbook tucked into the back of his waistband. He was watching a street performer across the way, a young man playing a soulful tune on a saxophone, but he turned and smiled the moment Clara approached. The recognition in his eyes was instant, and it brought a flush to Clara's cheeks that had nothing to do with the Ohio heat.

"You found it," Julian said, his voice carrying easily over the din of the morning crowd. "And you didn't bring a tripod for self-defense, which I take as a sign of trust."

Clara laughed, adjusting the strap of her camera bag. "I decided to give you the benefit of the doubt. Besides, if you were going to steal my gear, you probably would have done it while I was distracted by the sunset yesterday. This morning, I'm much more alert. It's the threat of a caffeine withdrawal."

"Then we should remedy that immediately," Julian replied, gesturing toward the

entrance of the market. "Follow me. There's a specific ritual to the Saturday morning Market run. It involves navigating the crowds like a professional athlete and knowing exactly which stall has the shortest line and the strongest brew."

Entering the North Market was like stepping into a sensory overload. The building was a cavernous space filled with the sounds of shouting vendors, the clinking of silverware, and the low roar of hundreds of simultaneous conversations. The air was a thick tapestry of smells: fresh flowers from the florist near the door, spicy curries, smoked meats, and the sweet, buttery scent of pastries. It was a microcosm of Columbus, a place where people from every walk of life came to graze and gather. Julian moved through the crowd with an easy familiarity, nodding to a few of the vendors as they passed.

They reached a coffee stall tucked into a corner, where the line was long but moving with impressive efficiency. The baristas were a blur of motion, tamping espresso and steaming milk with practiced precision. While they waited, Julian pointed out the architectural details of the building—the exposed timber beams, the industrial piping, and the way the light filtered through the high windows. He spoke about the history of the place, how it had survived fires and urban renewal projects, remaining a steadfast anchor for the neighborhood. Clara found herself listening more than talking, captivated by the way he saw the world not just as a collection of shapes, but as a living, breathing history.

"Two black coffees, please," Julian said when they reached the front, though he looked at Clara for confirmation.

"Actually, make one of those a double espresso," Clara corrected with a smirk. "I have a lot of editing to do later, and I need the chemical encouragement."

Julian grinned. "A woman after my own heart. I usually take mine black to appreciate the roasting profile, but on Saturdays, I think the extra kick is mandatory."

With their drinks in hand, they navigated the stairs to the second-floor mezzanine. It was a balcony level that overlooked the entire market floor, providing a bird's-eye view of the organized chaos below. They found a small table near the railing, tucked away from the main flow of traffic. From this vantage point, the market looked like a living painting. Clara instinctively reached for her camera, but then paused, looking at Julian.

"Go ahead," he encouraged, leaning back in his chair and taking a sip of his coffee. "I know the feeling. Sometimes a scene is so perfect you feel like you're losing it every second you don't capture it. I'll just sit here and be your silent witness."

Clara took a few shots, focusing on the way the morning light caught the steam rising

from the various food stalls. She captured a young couple sharing a box of donuts, an elderly man reading a newspaper amidst the noise, and the vibrant colors of the produce stands. The lens Julian had 'fixed' the night before held steady, its focus sharp and true. When she finally set the camera down, she felt a sense of satisfaction.

"I think I'm starting to see what you meant," Clara said, taking her first sip of the espresso. It was rich, dark, and slightly fruity, exactly what she needed. "About the soul of the city. This place doesn't feel like a tourist trap. It feels like... a kitchen. A really big, loud, communal kitchen."

"That's exactly what it is," Julian agreed. "Columbus isn't a city of monuments; it's a city of experiences. People here don't stand on ceremony. They just want good food, good music, and a place to belong. When I first moved here to study architecture at OSU, I thought I'd stay for four years and head to a coast. But I got caught in the gravity of it. There's a kindness here that's hard to find in bigger metros."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, watching the ebb and flow of the crowd. Clara felt a strange sense of comfort in Julian's presence. He didn't feel the need to fill every silence with small talk, yet when he did speak, it was with a thoughtfulness that invited her to share her own stories. She told him about her childhood in the suburbs of Chicago, her early fascination with her father's old film cameras, and the terrifying leap of faith she took when she decided to go freelance. Julian, in turn, spoke of his love for draftsmanship, the meditative quality of drawing by hand in an increasingly digital world, and his dreams of one day designing a public space that would mean as much to the city as the North Market did.

"Do you ever feel like you're just capturing the surface of things?" Clara asked, tracing the rim of her cup. "As a photographer, I mean. Sometimes I worry that I'm so busy looking for the perfect angle that I'm missing the actual moment."

Julian leaned forward, his expression serious. "I think that's the struggle for any artist. But I don't think you're just capturing the surface. If you were, your photos would look like real estate listings. The fact that you were so upset about your lens yesterday tells me you care about the truth of the image. You're not looking for perfection; you're looking for the 'click'—that moment when the light and the subject finally agree on something."

The conversation drifted to their favorite spots in the city. Julian spoke of the quiet beauty of German Village, which they were scheduled to explore soon according to their rough plan, and the hidden gems of the Short North. He described the Gallery Hop, a monthly event where the streets became a massive outdoor party, and the way the city changed when the Buckeyes played at home. Clara found herself making mental notes, her list of things to photograph growing with every minute.

As they finished their coffee, the heat outside began to seep into the building. The fans overhead hummed loudly, trying to move the humid air. Julian checked his watch, a vintage analog piece that looked like it had seen a lot of history.

"I should probably let you get back to those edits," he said, though there was a hint of reluctance in his voice. "The Saturday morning crowd is about to peak, and it's going to get a lot louder in here."

"I suppose so," Clara said, standing up. "But thank you, Julian. For the coffee, and for the perspective. I think I would have just walked through here like a tourist if I hadn't been sitting up here with you."

"We're all tourists until we find a reason to stay," Julian replied.

They walked back down to the main floor, the crowd now so dense they had to walk single file. At the exit, Julian paused, turning back to her. The sunlight from the street was behind him, silhouetting him in a way that made Clara wish she had her camera ready again.

"Same time next week for a walk through German Village?" he asked. "I know a place there that makes a cream puff the size of a human head. It's an architectural marvel in its own right."

Clara smiled, a genuine, wide smile that felt like it reached all the way to her eyes. "It's a date. I mean—it's a plan. A German Village plan."

Julian laughed, a warm, easy sound. "It's both, Clara. I'll see you then."

As she walked back to her car, the weight of the camera bag on her shoulder felt lighter. The city of Columbus, which had felt so vast and anonymous only a few days ago, was starting to take on a shape. It was a shape defined by the arches of the Scioto Mile, the red bricks of the North Market, and the steady, hazel-eyed gaze of a man named Julian. She drove home with the windows down, the warm air rushing past, feeling for the first time that this summer might be more than just a season of work. It was becoming a story, and she was eager to see what the next chapter would bring.

Back in her apartment, she sat at her desk and began uploading the photos from the morning. The images of the market were vibrant and full of life, but her favorite was a candid shot she had taken of Julian while he was explaining the history of the building. He was mid-sentence, his hand gestured toward the rafters, a look of pure passion on his face. It wasn't a perfect architectural study, but it had that 'click' he had described. It was a moment of truth, captured in the heart of a Columbus summer, and as she

looked at it, she knew that the coffee at North Market was only the beginning.

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