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First Time in Forever

Written by Sarah Morgan

Published by Mills & Boon

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First Time
in
Forever



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Published in Great Britain 2015
by Mills & Boon, an imprint of Harlequin (UK) Limited,
Eton House, 18-24 Paradise Road, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 1SR

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ISBN: 978-0-263-25338-2

097-0315

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Printed and bound by
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Dear Reader,

Friendships have always been important to me. Good friends enhance the happy times and cushion the bad ones, which is why, when it came to planning my new contemporary romance series, I decided to write about three friends.

Emily, Brittany and Skylar have been best friends for more than ten years and made a vow to help each other if they were ever in trouble. Their sanctuary when life gets tough? Castaway Cottage on beautiful Puffin Island, Maine.

I first saw puffins in the north of England many years ago and they are the most amazing and beautiful seabirds. One detail that fascinated me was that they usually return to breed on the same island where they hatched. Although they are not an endangered species, they are rare now in Maine and there are projects to reintroduce them to some of the islands.

The theme of returning home was one that I used as a thread throughout the stories. In this case the home is Castaway Cottage, a beachside retreat left to Brittany by her grandmother.

When Emily's circumstances change dramatically and she finds herself guardian to her sister's child, she turns to the sanctuary of Puffin Island. But life by the sea brings its own challenges for Emily, whose life choices were shaped by an incident in her past. She's hiding secrets, but it isn't easy keeping secrets in a close-knit community, especially when sexy yacht club owner Ryan Cooper makes it his personal mission to break down every barrier she's ever built. Soon she isn't just protecting her niece, she's protecting her heart.

These stories are about love, friendship and community. I hope you fall in love with the characters and also with the windswept beauty of Puffin Island. Head over to my website, www.sarahmorgan.com, to see some of my photographs of Maine and puffins, and sign up to my newsletter to be informed of future book releases. If you enjoy *First Time in Forever*, look out for Brittany's story, *Some Kind of Wonderful*, coming in the summer.

Thank you for reading.

Love,
Sarah
xxx

For Laura Reeth,
make-up expert, style guru and dear friend

CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS THE perfect place for someone who didn't want to be found. A dream destination for people who loved the sea.

Emily Donovan hated the sea.

She stopped the car at the top of the hill and turned off the headlights. Darkness wrapped itself around her, smothering her like a heavy blanket. She was used to the city, with its shimmering skyline and the dazzle of lights that turned night into day. Here, on this craggy island in coastal Maine, there was only the moon and the stars. No crowds, no car horns, no high-rise buildings. Nothing but wave-pounded cliffs, the shriek of gulls and the smell of the ocean.

She would have drugged herself on the short ferry crossing if it hadn't been for the child strapped into the seat in the back of the car.

The little girl's eyes were still closed, her head tilted to one side and her arms locked in a stranglehold around a battered teddy bear. Emily retrieved her phone and opened the car door quietly.

Please don't wake up.

She walked a few steps away from the car and dialed. The call went to voice mail.

"Brittany? Hope you're having a good time in Greece. Just wanted to let you know I've arrived. Thanks again for letting me use the cottage. I'm really...

I'm—" *Grateful*. That was the word she was looking for. Grateful. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "I'm panicking. What the hell am I doing here? There's water everywhere and I hate water. This is— Well, it's hard." She glanced toward the sleeping child and lowered her voice. "She wanted to get out of the car on the ferry, but I kept her strapped in because there was *no way* I was doing that. That scary harbor guy with the big eyebrows probably thinks I'm insane, by the way, so you'd better pretend you don't know me next time you're home. I'll stay until tomorrow because there's no choice, but then I'm taking the first ferry out of here. I'm going somewhere else. Somewhere landlocked like... like... Wyoming or Nebraska."

As she ended the call the breeze lifted her hair, and she could smell salt and sea in the air.

She dialed again, a different number this time, and felt a rush of relief as the call was answered and she heard Skylar's breathy voice.

"Skylar Tempest."

"Sky? It's me."

"Em? What's happening? This isn't your number."

"I changed my cell phone."

"You're worried someone might trace the call? Holy crap, this is exciting."

"It's not exciting. It's a nightmare."

"How are you feeling?"

"Like I want to throw up, but I know I won't because I haven't eaten for two days. The only thing in my stomach is a knot of nervous tension."

"Have the press tracked you down?"

"I don't think so. I paid cash for everything and drove from New York." She glanced back at the road, but there was only darkness. "How do people live like this? I feel

like a criminal. I've never hidden from anyone in my life before."

"Have you been switching cars to confuse them? Did you dye your hair purple and buy a pair of glasses?"

"No. Have you been drinking?"

"I watch a lot of movies. You can't trust anyone. You need a disguise. Something that will help you blend in."

"I will never blend in anywhere with a coastline. I'll be the one wearing a life jacket in the middle of Main Street."

"You're going to be fine." Skylar's extrafirm tone suggested she wasn't at all convinced by what she was saying.

"I'm leaving first thing tomorrow."

"You can't do that! We agreed the cottage would be the safest place to hide. No one is going to notice you on an island crowded with tourists. It's a dream place for a vacation."

"It's not a dream place when the sight of water makes you hyperventilate."

"You're not going to do that. You're going to breathe in the sea air and relax."

"I don't need to be here. This whole thing is an over-reaction. No one is looking for me."

"You're the half sister of one of the biggest movie stars in Hollywood, and you're guardian to her child. If that little fact gets out, the whole press pack will be hunting you. You need somewhere to hide, and Puffin Island is perfect."

Emily shivered under a cold drench of panic. "Why would they know about me? Lana spent her entire life pretending I don't exist." And that had suited her perfectly. At no point had she aspired to be caught in the beam of Lana's spotlight. Emily was fiercely private.

Lana, on the other hand, had demanded attention from the day she was born.

It occurred to Emily that her half sister would have enjoyed the fact she was still making headlines even though it had been over a month since the plane crash that had killed her and the man reputed to have been her lover.

“Journalists can find out anything. This is like a plot for a movie.”

“No, it isn’t! It’s my *life*. I don’t want it ripped open and exposed for the world to see and I don’t—” Emily broke off and then said the words aloud for the first time. “I don’t want to be responsible for a child.” Memories from the past drifted from the dark corners of her brain like smoke under a closed door. “I can’t be.”

It wasn’t fair to the girl.

And it wasn’t fair to her.

Why had Lana done this to her? Was it malice? Lack of thought? Some twisted desire to seek revenge for a childhood where they’d shared nothing except living space?

“I know you think that, and I understand your reasons, but you can do this. You have to. Right now you’re all she has.”

“I shouldn’t be all anyone has. That’s a raw deal. I shouldn’t be looking after a child for five minutes, let alone the whole summer.”

No matter that in her old life people deferred to her, recognized her expertise and valued her judgment; in this she was incompetent. She had no qualifications that equipped her for this role. Her childhood had been about surviving. About learning to nurture herself and protect herself while she lived with a mother who was mostly absent—sometimes physically, always emotion-

ally. And after she'd left home, her life had been about studying and working long, punishing hours to silence men determined to prove she was less than they were.

And now here she was, thrown into a life where what she'd learned counted for nothing. A life that required the one set of skills she *knew* she didn't possess. She didn't know how to be this. She didn't know how to *do* this. And she'd never had ambitions to do it. It felt like an injustice to find herself in a situation she'd worked hard to avoid all her life.

Beads of sweat formed on her forehead, and she heard Skylar's voice through a mist of anxiety.

"If having her stops you thinking that, this will turn out to be the best thing that ever happened to you. You weren't to blame for what happened when you were a child, Em."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Doesn't change the fact you weren't to blame. And you don't need to talk about it because the way you feel is evident in the way you've chosen to live your life."

Emily glanced back at the child sleeping in the car. "I can't take care of her. I can't be what she needs."

"You mean you don't want to be."

"My life is adult-focused. I work sixteen-hour days and have business lunches."

"Your life sucks. I've been telling you that for a long time."

"I liked my life! I want it back."

"That was the life where you were working like a machine and living with a man with the emotional compass of a rock?"

"I liked my job. I knew what I was doing. I was competent. And Neil and I may not have had a grand passion, but we shared a lot of interests."

“Name one.”

“I— We liked eating out.”

“That’s not an interest. That’s an indication that you were both too tired to cook.”

“We both enjoyed reading.”

“Wow, that must have made the bedroom an exciting place.”

Emily struggled to come up with something else and failed. “Why are we talking about Neil? That’s over. My whole life now revolves around a six-year-old girl. There is a pair of fairy wings in her bag. I don’t know anything about fairy wings.”

Her childhood had been a barren desert, an exercise in endurance rather than growth, with no room for anything as fragile and destructible as gossamer-thin fairy wings.

“I have a vivid memory of being six. I wanted to be a ballerina.”

Emily stared straight ahead, remembering how she’d felt at the age of six. Broken. Even after she’d eventually stuck herself back together, she’d known she wasn’t the same.

“I’m mad at Lana. I’m mad at her for dying and for putting me in this position. How screwed up is that?”

“It’s not screwed up. It’s human. What do you expect, Em? You haven’t spoken to Lana in over a decade—” Skylar broke off, and Emily heard voices in the background.

“Do you have company? Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“Richard and I are off to a fund-raiser at The Plaza, but he can wait.”

From what she knew of Richard’s ruthless political ambitions and impatient nature, Emily doubted he’d be

prepared to wait. She could imagine Skylar, her blond hair secured in an elegant twist on top of her head, her narrow body sheathed in a breathtaking designer creation. She suspected Richard's attraction to Sky lay in her family's powerful connections rather than her sunny optimism or her beauty. "I shouldn't have called you. I tried Brittany, but she's not answering. She's still on that archaeological dig in Crete. I guess it's the middle of the night over there."

"She seems to be having a good time. Did you see her Facebook update? She's up to her elbows in dirt and hot Greek men. She's working with that lovely ceramics expert, Lily, who gave me all those ideas for my latest collection. And if you hadn't called me I would have called you. I've been so worried. First Neil dumped you, then you had to leave your job, and now this! They say trouble comes in threes."

Emily eyed the child, still sleeping in the car. "I wish the third thing had been a broken toaster."

"You're going through a bad time, but you have to remember that everything happens for a reason. For a start, it has stopped you wallowing in bed eating cereal from the box. You needed a focus and now you have one."

"I didn't need a dependent six-year-old who dresses in pink and wears fairy wings."

"Wait a minute—" There was a pause and then the sound of a door clicking. "Richard is talking to his campaign manager, and I don't want them listening. I'm hiding in the bathroom. The things I do in the name of friendship. You still there, Em?"

"Where would I go? I'm surrounded by water." She shuddered. "I'm trapped."

“Honey, people pay good money to be ‘trapped’ on Puffin Island.”

“I’m not one of them. What if I can’t keep her safe, Sky?”

There was a brief silence. “Are we talking about safe from the press or safe from other stuff?”

Her mouth felt dry. “All of it. I don’t want the responsibility. I don’t want children.”

“Because you’re afraid to give anything of yourself.”

There was no point in arguing with the truth.

“That’s why Neil ended it. He said he was tired of living with a robot.”

“I guess he used his own antennae to work that out. Bastard. Are you brokenhearted?”

“No. I’m not as emotional as you and Brittany. I don’t feel deeply.” But she should feel *something*, shouldn’t she? The truth was that after two years of living with a man, she’d felt no closer to him than she had the day she’d moved in. Love wrecked people, and she didn’t want to be wrecked. And now she had a child. “Why do you think Lana did it?”

“Made you guardian? God knows. But knowing Lana, it was because there wasn’t anyone else. She’d pissed off half of Hollywood and slept with the other half, so I guess she didn’t have any friends who would help. Just you.”

“But she and I—”

“I know. Look, if you want my honest opinion, it was probably because she knew you would put your life on hold and do the best for her child despite the way she treated you. Whatever you think about yourself, you have a deep sense of responsibility. She took advantage of the fact you’re a good, decent person. Em, I am *so* sorry, but I have to go. The car is outside and Richard

is pacing. Patience isn't one of his good qualities and he has to watch his blood pressure."

"Of course." Privately Emily thought if Richard worked harder at controlling his temper, his blood pressure might follow, but she didn't say anything. She wasn't in a position to give relationship advice to anyone. "Thanks for listening. Have fun tonight."

"I'll call you later. No, wait—I have a better idea. Richard is busy this weekend, and I was going to escape to my studio, but why don't I come to you instead?"

"Here? To Puffin Island?"

"Why not? We can have some serious girl time. Hang out in our pajamas and watch movies like we did when Kathleen was alive. We can talk through everything and make a plan. I'll bring everything I can find that is pink. Get through to the weekend. Take this a day at a time."

"I am not qualified to take care of a child for five minutes, let alone five days." But the thought of getting back on that ferry in the morning made her feel almost as sick as the thought of being responsible for another human being.

"Listen to me." Skylar lowered her voice. "I feel bad speaking ill of the dead, but you know a lot more than Lana did. She left the kid alone in a house the size of France and hardly ever saw her. Just be there. Seeing the same person for two consecutive days will be a novelty. How is she, anyway? Does she understand what has happened? Is she traumatized?"

Emily thought about the child, silent and solemn-eyed. Trauma, she knew, wore different faces. "She's quiet. Scared of anyone with a camera."

"Probably overwhelmed by the crowds of paparazzi outside the house."

“The psychologist said the most important thing is to show her she’s secure.”

“You need to cut off her hair and change her name or something. A six-year-old girl with long blond hair called Juliet is a giveaway. You might as well hang a sign on her saying ‘Made in Hollywood’”

“You think so?” Panic sank sharp claws into her flesh. “I thought coming out here to the middle of nowhere would be enough. The name isn’t that unusual.”

“Maybe not in isolation, but attached to a six-year-old everyone is talking about? Trust me, you need to change it. Puffin Island may be remote geographically, but it has the internet. Now go and hide out and I’ll see you Friday night. Do you still have your key to the cottage?”

“Yes.” She’d felt the weight of it in her pocket all the way from New York. Brittany had presented them both with a key on their last day of college. “And thanks.”

“Hey.” Sky’s voice softened. “We made a promise, remember? We are always here for each other. Speak to you later!”

In the moment before she hung up, Emily heard a hard male voice in the background and wondered again what free-spirited Skylar saw in Richard Everson.

As she slid back into the car the child stirred. “Are we there yet?”

Emily turned to look at her. She had Lana’s eyes, that beautiful rain-washed green that had captivated movie audiences everywhere. “Almost there.” She tightened her grip on the wheel and felt the past rush at her like a rogue wave threatening to swamp a vulnerable boat.

She wasn’t the right person for this. The right person would be soothing the girl and producing endless supplies of age-appropriate entertainment, healthy drinks and nutritious food. Emily wanted to open the car door

and bolt into that soupy darkness, but she could feel those eyes fixed on her.

Wounded. Lost. Trusting.

And she knew she wasn't worthy of that trust.

And Lana had known it, too. So why had she done this?

"Have you always been my aunt?" The sleepy voice dragged her back into the present, and she remembered that this *was* her future. It didn't matter that she wasn't equipped for it, that she didn't have a clue—she had to do it. There was no one else.

"Always."

"So why didn't I know?"

"I— Your mom probably forgot to mention it. And we lived on opposite sides of the country. You lived in LA and I lived in New York." Somehow she formed the words, although she knew the tone wasn't right. Adults used different voices when they talked to children, didn't they? Soft, soothing voices. Emily didn't know how to soothe. She knew numbers. Shapes. Patterns. Numbers were controllable and logical, unlike emotions. "We'll be able to see the cottage soon. Just one more bend in the road."

There was always one more bend in the road. Just when you thought life had hit a safe, straight section and you could hit "cruise," you ended up steering around a hairpin with a lethal tumble into a dark void as your reward for complacency.

The little girl shifted in her seat, craning her neck to see in the dark. "I don't see the sea. You said we'd be living in a cottage on a beach. You promised." The sleepy voice wobbled, and Emily felt her head throb.

Please, don't cry.

Tears hadn't featured in her life for twenty years.

She'd made sure she didn't care about anything enough to cry about it. "You can't see it, but it's there. The sea is everywhere." Hands shaking, she fumbled with the buttons, and the windows slid down with a soft purr. "Close your eyes and listen. Tell me what you hear."

The child screwed up her face and held her breath as the cool night air seeped into the car. "I hear crashing."

"The crashing is the sound of the waves on the rocks." She managed to subdue the urge to put her hands over her ears. "The sea has been pounding away at those rocks for centuries."

"Is the beach sandy?"

"I don't remember. It's a beach." And she couldn't imagine herself going there. She hadn't set foot on a beach since that day when her life had changed.

Nothing short of deep friendship would have brought her to this island in the first place, and even when she'd come she'd stayed indoors, curled up on Brittany's colorful patchwork bedcover with her friends, keeping her back to the ocean.

Kathleen, Brittany's grandmother, had known something was wrong, and when her friends had sprinted down the sandy path to the beach to swim, she'd invited Emily to help her in the sunny country kitchen that overlooked the tumbling color of the garden. There, with the gentle hiss of the kettle drowning out the sound of waves, it had been possible to pretend the sea wasn't almost lapping at the porch.

They'd made pancakes and cooked them on the skillet that had once belonged to Kathleen's mother. By the time her friends returned, trailing sand and laughter, the pancakes had been piled on a plate in the center of the table—mounds of fluffy deliciousness with raggedy edges and golden warmth. They'd eaten them drizzled

with maple syrup and fresh blueberries harvested from the bushes in Kathleen's pretty coastal garden.

Emily could still remember the tangy sweet flavor as they'd burst in her mouth.

"Will I have to hide indoors?" The little girl's voice cut through the memories.

"I— No. I don't think so." The questions were never-ending, feeding her own sense of inadequacy until, bloated with doubt, she could no longer find her confident self.

She wanted to run, but she couldn't.

There was no one else.

She fumbled in her bag for a bottle of water, but it made no difference. Her mouth was still dry. It had been dry since the moment the phone on her desk had rung with the news that had changed her life. "We'll have to think about school."

"I've never been to school."

Emily reminded herself that this child's life had never been close to normal. She was the daughter of a movie star, conceived during an acclaimed Broadway production of *Romeo and Juliet*. There had been rumors that the father was Lana's co-star, but as he'd been married with two children at the time, that had been vehemently denied by all concerned. They'd recently been reunited on their latest project, and now he was dead, too, killed in the same crash that had taken Lana, along with the director and members of the production team.

Juliet.

Emily closed her eyes. *Thanks, Lana*. Sky was right. She was going to have to do something about the name. "We're just going to take this a day at a time."

"Will he find us?"

"He?"

“The man with the camera. The tall one who follows me everywhere. I don’t like him.”

Cold oozed through the open windows, and Emily closed them quickly, checking that the doors were locked.

“He won’t find us here. None of them will.”

“They climbed into my house.”

Emily felt a rush of outrage. “That won’t happen again. They don’t know where you live.”

“What if they find out?”

“I’ll protect you.”

“Do you promise?” The childish request made her think of Skylar and Brittany.

Let’s make a promise. When one of us is in trouble, the others help, no questions.

Friendship.

For Emily, friendship had proven the one unbreakable bond in her life.

Panic was replaced by another emotion so powerful it shook her. “I promise.” She might not know anything about being a mother and she might not be able to love, but she *could* stand between this child and the rest of the world.

She’d keep that promise, even if it meant dying her hair purple.

“I SAW LIGHTS in Castaway Cottage.” Ryan pulled the bow line tight to prevent the boat moving backward in the slip. From up above, the lights from the Ocean Club sent fingers of gold dancing across the surface of the water. Strains of laughter and music floated on the wind, mingling with the call of seagulls. “Know anything about that?”

“No, but I don’t pay attention to my neighbors the

way you do. I mind my own business. Did you try calling Brittany?"

"Voice mail. She's somewhere in Greece on an archaeological dig. I'm guessing the sun isn't even up there yet."

The sea slapped the sides of the boat as Alec set the inshore stern line. "Probably a summer rental."

"Brittany doesn't usually rent the cottage." Together they finished securing the boat, and Ryan winced as his shoulder protested.

Alec glanced at him. "Bad day?"

"No worse than usual." The pain reminded him he was alive and should make the most of every moment. A piece of his past that forced him to pay attention to the present. "I'll go over to the cottage in the morning and check it out."

"Or you could mind your own business."

Ryan shrugged. "Small island. I like to know what's going on."

"You can't help yourself, can you?"

"Just being friendly."

"You're like Brittany, always digging."

"Except she digs in the past, and I dig in the present. Are you in a rush to get back to sanding planks of wood or do you want a beer?"

"I could force one down if you're paying."

"You should be the one paying. You're the rich Brit."

"That was before my divorce. And you're the one who owns a bar."

"I'm living the dream." Ryan paused to greet one of the sailing club coaches, glanced at the times for high and low tides scrawled on the whiteboard by the dockside and then walked with Alec up the ramp that led from the marina to the bar and restaurant. Despite the

fact it was only early summer, it was alive with activity. Ryan absorbed the lights and the crowds, remembering how the old disused boatyard had looked three years earlier. “So, how is the book going? It’s unlike you to stay in one place this long. Those muscles will waste away if you spend too much time staring at computer screens and flicking through dusty books. You’re looking puny.”

“Puny?” Alec rolled powerful shoulders. “Do I need to remind you who stepped in to help you finish off the Ocean Club when your shoulder was bothering you? And I spent last summer building a replica Viking ship in Denmark and then sailing it to Scotland, which involved more rowing hours than I want to remember. So you can keep your judgmental comments about dusty books to yourself.”

“You do know you’re sounding defensive? Like I said. Puny.” Ryan’s phone beeped, and he pulled it out of his pocket and checked the text. “Interesting.”

“If you’re waiting for me to ask, you’ll wait forever.”

“It’s Brittany. She’s loaned Castaway Cottage to a friend in trouble, which explains the lights. She wants me to watch over her.”

“You?” Alec doubled up with soundless laughter. “That’s like giving a lamb to a wolf and saying ‘Don’t eat this’”

“Thank you. And who says she’s a lamb? If the friend is anything like Brittany, she might be a wolf, too. I still have a scar where Brittany shot me in the butt with one of her arrows two summers ago.”

“I thought she had perfect aim. She missed her target?”

“No. I *was* her target.” Ryan texted a reply.

“You’re telling her you have better things to do than babysit the friend.”

“I’m telling her I’ll do it. How hard can it be? I drop by, offer a shoulder to cry on, comfort her—”

“—take advantage of a vulnerable woman.”

“No, because I don’t want to be shot in the butt a second time.”

“Why don’t you say no?”

“Because I owe Brit, and this is payback.” He thought about their history and felt a twinge of guilt. “She’s calling it in.”

Alec shook his head. “Again, I’m not asking.”

“Good.” Pocketing the phone, Ryan took the steps to the club two at a time. “So again, how’s your book going? Have you reached the exciting part? Anyone died yet?”

“I’m writing a naval history of the American Revolution. Plenty of people die.”

“Any sex in it?”

“Of course. They regularly stopped in the middle of a battle to have sex with each other.” Alec stepped to one side as a group of women approached, arm in arm. “I’m flying back to London next week, so you’re going to have to find a new drinking partner.”

“Business or pleasure?”

“Both. I need to pay a visit to the Caird Library in Greenwich.”

“Why would anyone need to go *there*?”

“It has the most extensive maritime archive in the world.”

One of the women glanced at Alec idly and then stopped, her eyes widening. “I know you.” She gave a delighted smile. “You’re the *Shipwreck Hunter*. I’ve watched every series you’ve made, and I have the lat-

est one on pre-order. This is *so* cool. The crazy thing is, history was my least favorite subject in school, but you actually manage to make it sexy. Loads of us follow you on Twitter, not that you'd notice us because I know you have, like, one hundred thousand followers."

Alec answered politely, and when they finally walked away, Ryan slapped him on the shoulder.

"Hey, that should be your tag line. *I make history sexy.*"

"Do you want to end up in the water?"

"Do you seriously have a hundred thousand followers? I guess that's what happens when you kayak half-naked through the Amazon jungle. Someone saw your anaconda."

Alec rolled his eyes. "Remind me why I spend time with you?"

"I own a bar. And on top of that, I keep you grounded and protect you from the droves of adoring females. So—you were telling me you're flying across the ocean to visit a library." Ryan walked through the bar, exchanging greetings as he went. "What's the pleasure part of the trip?"

"The library is the pleasure. Business is my ex-wife."

"Ouch. I'm beginning to see why a library might look like a party."

"It will happen to you one day."

"Never. To be divorced you have to be married, and I was inoculated against that at an early age. A white picket fence can look a lot like a prison when you're trapped behind it."

"You looked after your siblings. That's different."

"Trust me, there is no better lesson in contraception to a thirteen-year-old boy than looking after his four-year-old sister."

“If you’ve avoided all ties, why are you back home on the island where you grew up?”

Because he’d stared death in the face and crawled back home to heal.

“I’m here through choice, not obligation. And that choice was driven by lobster and the three-and-a-half-thousand miles of coastline. I can leave anytime it suits me.”

“I promise not to repeat that to your sister.”

“Good. Because if there is one thing scarier than an ex-wife, it’s having a sister who teaches first grade. What is it about teachers? They perfect a look that can freeze bad behavior at a thousand paces.” Ryan picked a table that looked over the water. Even though it was dark, he liked knowing it was close by. He reached for a menu and raised his brows as Tom, the barman, walked past with two large cocktails complete with sparklers. “Do you want one of those?”

“No, thanks. I prefer my drinks unadorned. Fireworks remind me of my marriage, and umbrellas remind me of the weather in London.” Alec braced himself as a young woman bounced across the bar, blond hair flying, but this time it was Ryan who was the focus of attention.

She kissed him soundly on both cheeks. “Good to see you. Today was amazing. We saw seals. Will you be at the lobster bake?”

They exchanged light banter until her friends at the bar called her over, and she vanished in a cloud of fresh, lemony-scented perfume.

Alec stirred. “Who was that?”

“Her name is Anna Gibson. When she isn’t helping out as a deckhand on the *Alice Rose*, she’s working as an intern for the puffin conservation project. Why? Are you interested?” Ryan gestured to Tom behind the bar.

“I haven’t finished paying off the last woman yet, and anyway, I’m not the one she was smiling at. From the way she was looking at you, I’d say she’s setting her sat nav for the end of the rainbow. Never forget that the end of the rainbow leads to marriage, and marriage is the first step to divorce.”

“We’ve established that I’m the last person who needs that lecture.” Ryan slung his jacket over the back of the chair.

“So, what’s a girl like that doing so far from civilization?”

“Apart from the fact that the *Alice Rose* is one of the most beautiful schooners in the whole of Maine? She probably heard the rumor that only real men can survive here.” Ryan stretched out his legs. “And do I need to remind you that my marina has full hookups including phone, electricity, water, cable and Wi-Fi? I’m introducing civilization to Puffin Island.”

“Most people come to a place like this to avoid those things. Including me.”

“You’re wrong. They like the illusion of escaping, but not the reality. The commercial world being what it is, they need to be able to stay in touch. If they can’t, they’ll go elsewhere, and this island can’t afford to let them go elsewhere. That’s my business model. We get them here, we charm them, we give them Wi-Fi.”

“There’s more to life than Wi-Fi, and there’s a lot to be said for not being able to receive emails.”

“Just because you receive them doesn’t mean you have to reply. That’s why spam filters were invented.” Ryan glanced up as Tom delivered a couple of beers. He pushed one across the table to Alec. “Unless this is too civilized for you?”

“There are written records of beer being used by the Ancient Egyptians.”

“Which proves man has always had his priorities right.”

“And talking of priorities, this place is busy.” Alec reached for the beer. “So you don’t miss your old life? You’re not bored, living in one place?”

Ryan’s old life was something he tried not to think about.

The ache in his shoulder had faded to a dull throb, but other wounds, darker and deeper, would never heal. And perhaps that was a good thing. It reminded him to drag the most from every moment. “I’m here to stay. It’s my civic duty to drag Puffin Island into the twenty-first century.”

“MOMMY, MOMMY.”

The next morning, devoured by the dream, Emily rolled over and buried her face in the pillow. The scent was unfamiliar, and through her half-open eyes she saw a strange pattern of tiny roses woven into white linen. This wasn’t her bed. Her bed linen was crisp, contemporary and plain. This was like falling asleep with her face in a garden.

Through the fog of slumber she could hear a child’s voice calling, but she knew it wasn’t calling her, because she wasn’t anyone’s mommy. She would never be anyone’s mommy. She’d made that decision a long time ago when her heart had been ripped from her chest.

“Aunt Emily?” The voice was closer this time. In the same room. And it was real. “There’s a man at the door.”

Not a dream.

It was like being woken by a shower of icy water.

Emily was out of bed in a flash, heart pounding. It

was only when she went to pull on a robe that she realized she'd fallen asleep on top of the bed in her clothes, something she'd never done in her life before. She'd been afraid to sleep. Too overwhelmed by the responsibility to take her eyes off the child even for a moment. She'd lain on top of the bed and kept both doors open so that she'd hear any sounds; but at some point exhaustion had clearly defeated anxiety and she'd slept. As a result, her pristine black pants were no longer pristine, her businesslike shirt was creased, and her hair had escaped from its restraining clip.

But it wasn't her appearance that worried her.

"A man?" She slid her feet into her shoes, comfortable flats purchased to negotiate street and subway. "Did he see you? Is he on his own or are there lots of them?"

"I saw him from my bedroom. It isn't the man with the camera." The little girl's eyes were wide and frightened, and Emily felt a flash of guilt. She was meant to be calm and dependable. A parent figure, not a walking ball of hysteria.

She stared down at green eyes and innocence. At golden hair, tumbled and curling like a fairy-tale princess.

Get me out of here.

"It won't be him. He doesn't know we're here. Everything is going to be fine." She recited the words without feeling them and tried not to remember that if everything were fine they wouldn't be here. "Hide in the bedroom. I'll handle it."

"Why do I have to hide?"

"Because I need to see who it is." They'd caught the last ferry from the mainland and arrived late. The cottage was on the far side of the island, nestled on the

edge of Shell Bay. A beach hideaway. A haven from the pressures of life. Except that in her case she'd brought the pressures with her.

No one should know they were here.

She contemplated peeping out of the window, through those filmy romantic curtains that had no place in a life as practical as hers, but decided that would raise suspicions.

Grabbing her phone and preparing herself to draw blood if necessary, Emily dragged open the heavy door of the cottage and immediately smelled the sea. The salty freshness of the air knocked her off balance, as did her first glimpse of their visitor.

To describe him as striking would have been an understatement. She recognized the type immediately. His masculinity was welded deep into his DNA, his strength and physical appeal part of nature's master plan to ensure the earth remained populated. The running shoes, black sweat pants and soft T-shirt proclaimed him as the outdoor type, capable of dealing with whatever physical challenge the elements presented, but she knew it wouldn't have made a difference if he were naked or dressed in a killer suit. The clothing didn't change the facts. And the facts were that he was the sort of man who could tempt a sensible woman to do stupid things.

His gaze swept over her in an unapologetically male appraisal, and she found herself thinking about Neil, who believed strongly that men should cultivate their feminine side.

This man didn't have a feminine side.

He stood in the doorway, all pumped muscle and hard strength, dominating her with both his height and the width of his shoulders. His jaw was dark with stub-

ble and his throat gleamed with the healthy sweat of physical exertion.

Not even under the threat of torture would Neil have presented himself in public without shaving.

A strange sensation spread over her skin and burrowed deep in her body.

“Is something wrong?” She could have answered her own question.

There was plenty wrong, and that was without even beginning to interpret her physical reaction.

A stranger was standing at her door only a few hours after she’d arrived, which could surely only mean one thing.

They’d found her.

She’d been warned about the press. Journalists were like rain on a roof. They found every crack, every weakness. But how had they done it so quickly? The authorities and the lawyers handling Lana’s affairs had assured her that no one knew of her existence. The plan had been to keep it quiet and hope the story died.

“I was about to ask you the same question.” His voice was a low, deep drawl, perfectly matched to the man. “You have a look of panic on your face. Things are mostly slow around here. We don’t see much panic on Puffin Island.”

He was a local?

Not in a million years would she have expected a man like him to be satisfied with life on a rural island. Despite the casual clothes there was an air of sophistication about him that suggested a life experience that extended well beyond the Maine coast.

His hair was dark and ruffled by the wind, and his eyes were sharply intelligent. He watched her for a moment, as if making up his mind about something, be-

fore his gaze shifted over her shoulder. Instinctively she closed the door slightly, blocking his view, hoping Juliet stayed out of sight.

If she hadn't felt so sick she would have laughed.

Was she really going to live like this?

She was the sober, sensible one. This was the sort of drama she would have expected from Lana.

"You live here?" she asked.

"Does that surprise you?"

It did, but she reminded herself that all that mattered was that he wasn't one of the media pack. He couldn't be. Apart from an island newsletter and a few closed Facebook groups, there was no media on Puffin Island.

Emily decided she was jumpy because of the briefing she'd had from Lana's lawyers. She was seeing journalists in her sleep. She was forgetting there were normal people out there. People whose job wasn't to delve into the business of others.

"I wasn't expecting visitors. But I appreciate you checking on us. Me. I mean me." She could see from the faint narrowing of those eyes that her slip hadn't gone unnoticed, and she wondered if he'd seen the little girl peeping from the window. "It's a lovely island."

"It is. Which makes me wonder why you're viewing it around a half-closed door. Unless you're Red Riding Hood." The amusement in his eyes was unsettling.

Looking at that wide, sensual mouth, she had no doubt he could be a wolf when it suited him. In fact, she was willing to bet that if you laid down the hearts he'd broken end-to-end across the bay, you'd be able to walk the fourteen miles to the mainland without getting your feet wet.

"Tell me what's wrong."

His question confirmed that she didn't share Lana's acting ability.

His gaze lingered on hers, and her heart rate jumped another level. She reminded herself that a stressed out ex-management consultant who could freeze water without the help of an electrical appliance was unlikely to be to his taste.

"There's nothing wrong."

"Are you sure? Because I can slay a dragon if that would help."

The warmth and the humor shook her more than the lazy, speculative look.

"This cottage is isolated, and I wasn't expecting visitors, that's all. I have a cautious nature." Especially since she'd inherited her half sister's child.

"Brittany asked me to check on you. She didn't tell you?"

"You're a friend of Brittany's?" That knowledge added intimacy to a situation that should have had none. Now, instead of being strangers, they were connected. She wondered why Brittany would have made that request, and then remembered the panicky message she'd left on her friend's voice mail the night before. She obviously hadn't wasted a moment before calling in help.

Her heart lurched and then settled because she knew Brittany would never expose her secret. If she'd involved this man, then it was because she trusted him.

"We both grew up here. She was at school with one of my sisters. They used to spend their summers at Camp Puffin—sailing, kayaking and roasting marshmallows."

It sounded both blissful and alien. She tried to imagine a childhood that had included summer camp.

“It was kind of you to drop by. I’ll let Brittany know you called and fulfilled your duty.”

His smile was slow and sexy. “Believe me, duty has never looked so good.”

Something about the way he said it stirred her senses, as did his wholly appreciative glance. Brief but thorough enough to give her the feeling he could have confirmed every one of her measurements if pressed to do so.

It surprised her.

Men usually found her unapproachable. Neil had once accused her of being like the polar ice cap without the global warming.

“If I married you I’d spend my whole life shivering and wearing thermal underwear.”

He thought her problem lay in her inability to show emotion.

To Emily it wasn’t a problem. It was an active decision. Love terrified her. It terrified her so much she’d decided at an early age that she’d rather live without it than put herself through the pain. She couldn’t understand why people craved it. She now lived a safe protected life. A life in which she could exist secure in the knowledge that no one was going to explode a bomb inside her heart.

She didn’t want the things most people wanted.

Flustered by the look in his eyes, she pushed her hair back from her face in a self-conscious gesture. “I’m sure you have a million things you could be doing with your day. I’m also sure babysitting isn’t on your list of desirable activities.”

“I’ll have you know I’m an accomplished babysitter. Tell me how you know Brittany. College friend? You don’t look like an archaeologist.” He had the innate self-confidence of someone who had never met a situation

he couldn't handle, and now he was handling *her*, teasing out information she didn't want to give.

"Yes, we met in college."

"So, how is she doing?"

"She didn't tell you that when she called to ask you to babysit?"

"It was a text, and, no, she didn't tell me anything. Is she still digging in Corfu?"

"Crete." Emily's mouth felt dry. "She's in Western Crete." There was something about those hooded dark eyes that encouraged a woman to part with confidences. "So you've known Brittany all your life?"

"I rescued her from a fight when she was in first grade. She'd brought a piece of Kathleen's sea glass into school for show-and-tell and some kid stole it. She exploded like a human firecracker. I'm willing to bet they could see the sparks as far south as Port Elizabeth."

It sounded so much like Brittany, she didn't bother questioning the veracity of his story.

Relaxing slightly, she took a deep breath and saw his gaze drop fleetingly to her chest.

Brittany had once teased her that God had taken six inches off her height and added it to her breasts. Given the choice, Emily would have chosen height.

"You knew Kathleen?"

"Yeah, I knew Kathleen. Does that mean you're going to open the door to me?" His voice was husky and amused. "Puffin Island is a close community. Islanders don't just know each other, we rely on each other. Especially in winter after the summer tourists have gone. A place like this brings people together. Added to that, Kathleen was a close friend of my grandmother."

"You have a grandmother?" She tried to imagine him being young and vulnerable, and failed.

"I do. She's a fine woman who hasn't given up hope of curing me of my wicked ways. So, how long are you staying?" His question caught her off guard. It made her realize how unprepared she was. She had no story. No explanation for her presence.

"I haven't decided. Look Mr.—"

"Ryan Cooper." He stepped forward and held out his hand, giving her no choice but to take it.

Warm strong fingers closed around hers, and she felt something shoot through her. The intense sexual charge was new to her, but that didn't mean she didn't recognize it for what it was. It shimmered in the air, spread along her skin and sank into her bones. She imagined those hands on her body and that mouth on hers. Unsettled, she snatched her hand away, but the low hum of awareness remained. It was as if touching him had triggered something she had no idea how to switch off.

Shaken by a connection she hadn't expected, she stepped back. "I'm sure Brittany will appreciate you dropping by to check on the cottage, but as you can see, everything is fine, so—"

"I wasn't checking on the cottage. I was checking on you. I'm guessing Eleanor. Or maybe, Alison." He stood without budging an inch, legs spread. It was obvious he wasn't going to move until he was ready. "Rebecca?"

"What?"

"Your name. Puffin Island is a friendly place. Around here the name is the first thing we learn about someone. Then we go deeper."

Her breath caught. Was that sexual innuendo? Something in that dark, velvety voice made her think it might have been, except that she didn't need to look in the mirror to know that a man like him was unlikely to waste time on someone like her. He was the type who liked

his women thawed, not deep-frozen. “I don’t think I’ll be seeing much of people.”

“You won’t be able to help it. It’s a small island. You’ll need to shop, eat and play, and doing those things will mean meeting people. Stay for a winter, and you’ll really learn the meaning of community. There’s nothing like enduring hurricane-force winds and smothering fog to bring you close to your neighbors. If you’re going to be living here, you’ll have to get used to it.”

She couldn’t get used to it. She was responsible for the safety of a child, and no matter how much she doubted she was up to the task, she took that responsibility seriously.

“Mr. Cooper—”

“Ryan. Maybe your mother ignored the traditional and went for something more exotic. Amber? Arabella?”

Should she give him a false name? But what was the point of that if he already knew Brittany so well? She was out of her depth. Her life was about order, and suddenly all around her was chaos. Instead of being safe and predictable, the future suddenly seemed filled with deep holes just waiting to swallow her.

And now she didn’t only have herself to worry about.

“Emily,” she said finally. “I’m Emily.”

“Emily.” He said it slowly and then gave a smile that seemed to elevate the temperature of the air by a couple of degrees. “Welcome to Puffin Island.”