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Some Kind of Wonderful

Written by Sarah Morgan

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Some kind
of
Wonderful



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CHAPTER ONE

ZACHARY FLYNN SHOULD never have been born.

His conception, as his mother was fond of telling him, had been the result of an excess of alcohol and a burst condom. She'd spent the first eight years of his life blaming him for everything from poverty to bed bugs. Who she'd blamed after that he had no idea because at the age of eight someone had asked questions about the recurring bruises and broken bones and he'd been sent to live with a foster family. As churchgoing, God-fearing Christians, they'd deserved better than a messed-up reject from a rough neighborhood of Boston who'd been raised to believe the only way to stop someone from screwing you was to screw them first. He'd had the distinction of being the first foster kid to snap the patience of these good, kind folk. After that he'd been handed from family to family like a baton in a relay race, everyone eager to pass him on.

He'd been on the fast track to a life on the wrong side of the law when he'd discovered flying.

Twenty years later he still had a clear memory of the exact moment everything had changed.

It had been an unbearably hot day at Camp Puffin, the air in the forest thick with the scents of summer and the hum of insects. Zach had committed mass murder as he'd chased mosquitoes the size of small birds around

the airless cabin he'd shared with seven other kids. Seven kids whose families cared enough to send them to camp with enough food and gear to smooth the rough edges of parting.

Zach had been given his place as part of a scholarship program and they'd made sure it was something he didn't forget. He'd taken revenge for their endless taunting by dumping their stuff in a tide pool. Most of it had been washed away and furious parents had demanded the culprit be duly punished.

Zach couldn't imagine having a parent who gave a damn, least of all about stolen candy and a few sweat-shirts with fancy logos.

His punishment had been a date with Philip Law, the director of Camp Puffin.

Zach, who viewed all authority with suspicion and was never going to be comfortable around a man whose name was "Law," had expected to be sent on his way. He'd pretended not to care, but in truth he would have endured being bitten by a thousand mosquitoes if it had meant living on an island where the forest met the sea. Anything was better than having to spend his days looking over his shoulder in the sweltering city and although he wouldn't have admitted it, Puffin Island was a cool place. There was something about the clean air and the way the ocean melted into the horizon that made him feel less like killing his neighbor.

He'd stood, braced, ready for another door to slam shut in his face, practicing his "I don't give a fuck" look, but instead of telling him to pack up his things, Philip had driven him to the small airfield on the far side of the island.

Twelve-year-old Zach had slumped, sulky and rebel-

lions, in the front of the Cessna, waiting for the ax to fall, wondering what was so bad that he had to be flown out of here and not take the crowded ferry like everyone else. Maybe Philip Law was planning to take him up high and then push him into the ocean.

Yeah, do it. Why not?

Who the hell would care?

He knew no one would miss him.

He wasn't even sure he'd miss himself.

As Philip had put his hands on the controls and taxied along the short runway, Zach had wondered whether he'd die when he hit the water or drown slowly. And then the small plane had lifted into the air and Zach, who had lived with fear all his life, had known a moment of breath-stealing terror closely followed by soaring excitement as the sparkling sea and the emerald green of the island shrank beneath him.

His stomach had swooped and his eyes had almost popped out of his head.

"Holy shit." He'd watched hungrily, dazzled by the complexity of the instrument panel, absorbing every move of Philip's hands, envious of the knowledge that gave them flight. He'd wanted that knowledge and skill more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life. In a blinding flash he realized there was a world outside the one he inhabited.

Years later Philip had told him that was the moment he'd known he'd made the right decision in offering what some might have viewed as a reward for bad behavior. He could have delivered a lecture, sanctions, even expulsion, but all that would have done was harden a boy who was already solid steel. At twelve years old, Zachary Flynn had seen more than most people saw in a lifetime.

Authority slid off him, instructions and orders bounced back like a ball from concrete. Nothing penetrated.

Until they reached six thousand feet.

There, up in the clouds, the mask of indifference had slipped away, revealing an excitement too raw and real to be contained.

For Philip it had been a way of giving a jaded, disillusioned boy a glimpse of another life.

For Zach, it had been love at first flight.

They'd flown over the island of Vinalhaven and towards Bar Harbor, over forest, lakes and the glittering expanse of Penobscot Bay, where yachts peppered the ocean. Absorbed by a different view of a world that had so far delivered nothing but bitter blows, Zach had fought to stop himself from whooping like a little kid.

Look up, look up, he'd yelled inside his head as he saw cars the size of matchboxes winding along the noodle-thin coast road. *Look up and see who's bigger now*.

By the time they'd landed, his whole body had been shaking.

He'd felt like the king of the world.

"Oh, man—can we do it again? I want you to take me up again. I'll do anything." He'd all but begged and hadn't cared. Not even when he'd seen the look of satisfaction on Philip's face.

"You want to learn one day?"

Zach had dragged his palm over his sweaty brow, feeling like an addict shown a whole new way of getting a fix. "To fly? Yeah." What sort of a stupid question was that? Who the hell wouldn't want to? It was the coolest thing ever.

"Then stop dicking around." Philip had pinned him with his gaze. "Stop wasting your brain, stop living down

to everyone's expectations and do something with your life."

Zach almost swallowed his tongue. He didn't know which had shocked him most. The fact that someone had noticed he had a brain, or that the camp director had used the word *dick*.

Confused, he'd responded in the only way he'd known. By attacking.

"I didn't ask for my life to suck. It's not like I walked into a place and ordered a supersized misery burger served with a side of crap."

"Just because someone serves you something, doesn't mean you have to eat it. People can dish it up and hand it to you, but you don't have to swallow it. Folks can tell you you're useless and nothing, and you can believe them or you can prove them wrong. What happened in the past wasn't your fault. What happens in the future is your decision. You can make good ones, or you can watch it all slip away and spend the rest of your life blaming everyone else for the things that happened to you."

He'd made it sound so easy, as if all Zach had to do was pull an Abercrombie sweatshirt over the scars and the cigarette burns to become one of the cool crowd.

Zach knew it didn't work that way. He could have dressed in Armani and it wouldn't have changed the facts. He came from nowhere and he was going nowhere.

Except now he wanted to get there by plane.

He'd stared ahead, mutinous, conflicted, the urge to kick and defend himself deeply ingrained. Against his will, his gaze had slid to the instrument panel of the Cessna and he'd almost purred with longing. He'd wanted to reach out, stroke and touch. He'd wanted to take her

soaring high above the water and bank into the clouds. It was more than want. It was need.

And because he knew people, and loved flying, Philip had seen that need and understood it.

“I have an instructor qualification. I can teach you.”

It was like holding out a freshly baked loaf to a starving man.

Zach had all but drooled, but years of mistrust had held him back. “What’s the catch?”

Philip’s gaze hadn’t wavered. “Does there have to be a catch?”

“There’s always a catch.” The cynicism was entrenched, cold hard layers of *fuck you* protecting him from do-gooders who eventually gave up on him when “doing good” proved unrewarding. Zach didn’t see why he should help anyone feel good about themselves when most of them went out of their way to make sure he knew he was worthless.

“The catch is that you have to clean up your act. No more skipping classes. It’s a shame to waste a brain like yours. You come back here every summer and when the time is right, I’ll teach you. And you can pay me.”

There, right there, was the catch.

“I don’t have money.” But he’d get it. He was figuring out the best way of stealing what he needed without getting caught when Philip shook his head.

“I don’t want your money. I want your commitment.”

Zach had looked at him blankly. He had no idea what the word meant. “Sure. Whatever.”

“I want you to help out at camp. Every summer for the whole summer. Start taking some responsibility.”

Help out at camp?

It had taken a moment for the words to sink in and

Zach reflected that it was just as well they were inside a plane or a million insects would have flown into his open mouth while he'd been gawping. He tried to imagine how Mr. and Mrs. More-Money-Than-Sense would react to the news that Zach would be helping.

“You’re kidding me.”

“I’m not kidding. And just in case you don’t recognize it, I’m giving you something life hasn’t given you before—a chance. Up to you whether you take it.”

“So it’s not going to cost me?” Life had taught Zach that good things didn’t happen for free. In his experience, good things didn’t happen at all. Had he been wrong about Philip? Maybe the smiling wife was a front. Maybe he liked young boys and was planning to fly Zach somewhere they wouldn’t be caught.

Panic drenched him as various hideous scenarios played through his head, none of them worth the thrill of a plane ride.

One of the many disadvantages of being worthless was that when you disappeared, no one cared or asked questions.

Philip had looked at him steadily. “It’s going to cost you. You’re going to scrub out toilets and clean up boats until you’re old enough to take on more responsibility. After that you’re going to train to be a camp counselor. You like the forest, so I’d suggest wilderness training. You’ll learn survival skills. Not the sort you’ve learned so far, but how to live alongside nature. There’s no catch, Zach. No one is trying to screw you over. I’m offering to teach you to fly, that’s all. At your age my dad took me up. I wanted to do the same for you.”

“Why?” The suspicion refused to die.

“Because everyone needs a break now and then, and no one needs it more than you.”

The one thing he'd never been given in life was a break. Black eyes, swollen lips, broken bones—he'd been given all those things several times over, but this—this was something else.

For a horrible moment he'd thought he was going to break down right there and howl like a baby. It was years of practice at burying his feelings that saved him from humiliation.

“Right.” His throat had felt swollen and thick, as if he'd been caught in the neck by an insect with a big fat stinger. “Whatever makes you feel good.”

“There are rules.”

Rules had never stopped him doing anything. Mostly he stepped over them. Sometimes he kicked them in the teeth, but they never got in his way. Noticing Philip's serious expression, he'd decided the least he could do was look as if he cared. “I'm listening.”

“No more taking things that don't belong to you, no more being a badass. Flying a plane is serious business.”

Flying. The word made his mouth dry and his heart pound.

The guy was serious. He really was offering to teach him to fly. He probably thought it would change his life or something, which meant here was another do-good jerk he was going to disappoint, but who cared?

Zach figured that wasn't his problem. To fly he would have promised anything.

How hard would it be to clean up his act?

So he had to stop stealing. Most of the kids here didn't have shit worth taking anyway. Zach stole to ward off boredom and because it was his way of hitting back at

them, not because he wanted what they had. He wouldn't have been seen dead in a fancy sweatshirt.

"Sure." He'd kept his tone casual. "I guess I can do that."

And he had.

From that moment on, his life had a purpose and that purpose was flying.

Everything he did, he did for that one reason.

Math and physics had seemed pointless and boring taught in a classroom to thirty kids with glazed expressions, but math and physics applied to the science of flying gripped him. Hungry for knowledge, he'd studied it all and his brain had come alive.

But what he loved most of all was the plane.

Philip had taken him up every summer until he was finally old enough to learn. The first time he'd been allowed to take the controls his hands had shaken so much he'd been sure he was going to ditch the thing in the ocean.

When Philip had told him he was a natural he swelled with something he'd never felt before.

Pride.

The praise had fed him, nurtured him and ultimately freed him.

On the ground his life was a dead end with no way out, but in the air he saw more than sunshine and fluffy clouds beyond the horizon. He saw a world without limits, full of possibilities.

He saw hope.

With the aircraft he achieved a depth of understanding he'd never reached with another human being.

A social worker had once told him the only thing he was good at was screwing up. Given that she'd caught

him breaking into her office to make his own additions to the case file she had on him, he hadn't disagreed. He would even have considered it a fair summary of his talents. Until he'd put his hands on the controls of a plane. Then he'd known immediately there was something else he was good at.

From that moment on, flying was the only thing that mattered.

Flying satisfied his need for adventure and excitement and it leveled the field. Up in the air, he was equal to anyone. Not just equal, superior. Most times passengers didn't speak to the pilot so he did what he loved and some stupid fucker with more money than sense paid him to do it.

For the first time in his life, he'd pushed himself. Challenged himself.

He'd dragged all the information he could from Philip and thirsted for more. Even when Philip had taken him in and given him a home, he'd still thirsted. After spending his formative years trapped and helpless, something in him needed to be free. Why stay in Maine when there was a whole world out there waiting to be discovered?

He'd flown in places most pilots chose to avoid, places with more land than people, including remote parts of Alaska with no runway and enough ice to freeze a plane out of the sky, until finally he'd returned to the island that on a good day he almost regarded as home.

His reputation as a pilot was such that he'd immediately been offered a job by Maine Island Air, the company that flew freight and passengers around the islands.

Zach didn't want that life.

To him, flying was freedom. He didn't want his days dictated by someone else's schedule and demands and

anyway, thanks to a stroke of luck and his instinct to live life closer to the edge than most people, he now owned his own plane.

So instead of taking the job, he'd used that sharp brain Philip had identified and noticed the number of super-wealthy individuals who owned property around Penobscot Bay. Those people flew into Boston on their Citation or Gulfstream and then needed something private and personal to transport them onward to their beach house or yacht. They needed a pilot skilled enough to land anywhere, on land or sea.

For a fee that made him laugh out loud, Zach offered that service.

Personal?

Yeah, he made it personal. Hell, he offered bottles of chilled champagne and caviar on silver platters if that's what they wanted, although he didn't recommend it because with the crosswinds across the bay the one thing he couldn't guarantee was a bump-free ride.

It never ceased to amaze him how much people were willing to pay for the privilege of picking the time, the place and, most importantly of all, exclusivity. For one flight ferrying a rich banker and his family from their private jet to their private island, he made enough to ensure he didn't have to work for the next month.

It was robbery, but for once he was on the right side of the law.

He picked and chose the jobs he took and had sufficient funds to play with projects that interested him.

If all the people who had written him off could see him now, they'd choke on their good intentions.

Looking back, he always divided his life into two parts. Before flying and after flying. Before flying was

a time he chose to forget, a time when his world had been small and terrifying with no escape. After flying—after flying was the world he chose to live in now, and it was a world he loved.

Zach smiled as he completed his preflight check.

It was a bright sunny summer morning in Maine and today the man bankrolling his lifestyle was Nik Zervakis, a Greek-American billionaire who was landing in Logan and wanted one of his female guests flown direct to Puffin Island. Which meant that in exchange for flying one rich pampered princess across the bay, Zach was going to make an obscene amount of money.

The businessman in him was satisfied.

The badass was laughing his head off.

“I WANT TO fly this way for the rest of my life.” Cocooned by the feather-soft leather seat of the Gulfstream, Brittany closed her eyes. “No more tedious queues, no more screaming toddlers wriggling in the seat next to me, no more lost baggage and no more trying not to breathe while strangers cough all over you. Push Lily out of the window, Nik, and marry me instead. We can make it work, I know we can. You own four properties—we don’t even need to see each other. You can live in San Francisco. I can live in New York.”

Bronzed, handsome and filthy rich, Nik Zervakis was scrolling through his emails with one hand while with the other he kept a possessive hold on Lily.

It made Brittany smile to see them together.

She was sharp enough to know that her own laughably brief experience of marriage colored her judgment and careful enough not to apply that judgment to others. Even she had to admit she’d never met two people more

perfect for each other than Nik and Lily. And if a small part of her felt wistful, she chose to ignore it.

Lily almost hummed with contentment. “You love your independence.”

“You’re right, I do. And even a Greek-American billionaire with a private jet isn’t going to persuade me to give it up. All the same—” She glanced around at luxury living and shook her head in disbelief. “You’ve won the lottery, Lil.”

“I know.” Her friend smiled up at the man who had swept her off her feet and he lowered his head and delivered a lingering kiss to her mouth.

Brittany was fascinated by the sight of the notoriously ruthless business tycoon softened to the consistency of butter by her sweet-natured friend. There was no doubt in her mind that they shared something deep and special.

“Hey, you need to watch out—you’ve turned into a pushover, Zervakis. If your competitors find out, your shares will plummet. Economies will shatter.”

Without shifting his attention from Lily’s mouth, Nik made a rude gesture in her direction and Brittany grinned.

“Don’t mind me. You guys go ahead and make a baby right here and now. I’ll look the other way.”

Lily pulled away with a murmur of embarrassment. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. It was decent of you to give me a lift. The good news is I’m getting off at this stop and the two of you can rip each other’s clothes off all the way to New York.”

“We’re spending a few days in Boston first. Nik’s meeting isn’t until Tuesday, so if you need anything, call. Then we’ll be in New York for a few days and I’ve ar-

ranged to meet up with Skylar.” Lily touched her fingers to the necklace at her throat and her gaze slid briefly to Nik’s. “We’re going to her exhibition in London in December. Will you be there?”

Brittany knew that the necklace, one of Skylar’s exclusive pieces, retailed for more than she’d earn in a year as an archaeologist.

She opened her mouth to remind her friend that not everyone had access to a private jet and a bottomless bank account, but then remembered that such a response was likely to illicit all sorts of generous offers from Lily and Nik, and they’d already done more than enough for her. “Not sure. I have some big decisions to make. Life plans.” Which was a more impressive way of saying she didn’t have a clue what she was going to do next. “But I’ll be in touch. That’s if you can stop kissing for long enough to pick up a text.”

As the plane taxied to a stop, Lily eased herself out of Nik’s possessive grasp and gathered together Brittany’s belongings. “No, don’t move. It’s important that you don’t use your hand. You have to rest that wrist. Doctor’s orders.”

“I’m not good with orders.”

“We’ve been roommates all summer. I know exactly how bad you are with orders, but, Brittany, it was a nasty break. You fell awkwardly.”

“Yeah, I know. So embarrassing. I’d kick myself, except with my current luck I’d probably break an ankle doing it.”

Lily gave her a hug. “You’re injured. You have to look after yourself.”

“I can look after myself.” Not for a moment did she reveal how much it cost her simply to drag her purse

from under the seat and slide it over her shoulder. Her left shoulder. The movement felt awkward and unnatural. It wasn't until she'd lost the use of her right hand that she'd realized how much she depended on it. Apparently she didn't do much with the left side of her body.

Why hadn't she looked where she was going? She'd been on archaeological digs all over the world and never gotten so much as a scratch and now she had a broken wrist, and all because she'd been laughing so hard she'd fallen into the trench she'd been excavating moments earlier.

Living that one down was going to take her through to the next ice age.

Rolling her eyes, she reached for her backpack only to find Nik had already placed it on the seat.

"My staff will unload your case. Your onward flight is all arranged. If you encounter any problems, call my cell. I'll have my people sort it out."

My people.

She smiled at him, this man who ran a small empire and was responsible for the employment of so many. He was sophisticated and intelligent. She'd enjoyed spending time with him. If he hadn't fallen in love with her friend, she might have been tempted to sample more than the delights of his conversation. She was sure the hard, honed physique beneath the expensive clothes would be well worth exploring. But unlike Lily, she would have handed him back at the end of the encounter.

She wasn't interested in permanence, either in her relationships or where she lived. Better to move on, as humans had done for centuries.

She took the card he handed her. "Are you sure this flight to Puffin Island is all arranged? I can easily get

a cab and take the ferry. It's what I usually do. Cram in with the rest of humanity."

"With a broken wrist? No." Nik was polite but firm. "A friend of mine owns a place in Bar Harbor and he has a pilot he uses for transfers to his yacht."

"Of course he does. Because how else would you get from your beach home to your yacht? It's a problem I've often pondered." She made a joke of it, and wondered if he even realized how different his world was from most people's. "Just as long as your pilot isn't expecting to drop me at *my* yacht. I do own a kayak, but I'm guessing that doesn't count."

Lily handed her the hat she'd tucked under the seat. "You have a beach house. Castaway Cottage. After everything you've told me about it, I'm determined that Nik and I are going to visit one day."

"I hope you do." Brittany wondered what Nik, who owned homes in San Francisco, New York, London and Greece, would make of her simple beach house and then shrugged away the thought. It was home and she loved it. And simple or not, it was worth a lot of money. She'd had numerous offers from people willing to pay for the privilege of living in the relative seclusion of Shell Bay on the much-sought-after Puffin Island.

But Brittany had never considered selling.

Castaway Cottage was special to her.

True, there had been times growing up when the community on Puffin Island had felt suffocating, but whenever she returned home after long absences she discovered how much she missed it. After the relentless summer heat of Greece it would be bliss to feel the cool breeze on her face and fall asleep listening to the crash

of the surf. She wanted to taste lobster and pick blueberries. Most of all she wanted to see her two closest friends.

Emily was now living on the island and Skylar was only a short flight away in Manhattan.

“How will you manage?” Lily was still fussing. “How are you going to cook and care for yourself? You struggled when you tried to change midflight.”

Halfway across the Atlantic Brittany had roused herself enough to use the sleek bathroom in the Gulfstream and change into clean shorts and a simple strap top. Lily, ever sensitive, had appeared and offered to brush and braid her hair. It drove Brittany crazy that she couldn’t do it herself and she was forced to admit that Lily had a point.

How *was* she going to manage with just one hand? Cook? Shower?

For someone as independent as her, the next few weeks were going to be frustrating.

“I’ll be fine. I can eat cereal from the packet with my left hand.”

“Do you need me to come and stay for a while?” Lily’s warmth and generosity was one of the many reasons Brittany loved her. They’d been working together on the same project for several months in Greece, sharing a small airless bedroom. Brittany knew that, living in such close quarters, it was Lily’s patience that had prevented irritation arising. And it was that sweet nature that had snared the notoriously tough Nik Zervakis, who had the sense to know when he’d struck gold and put an enormous diamond on Lily’s finger before anyone else could.

“You need to start your new life. And if there’s one thing there’s plenty of on Puffin Island, it’s help. My

friend Emily is living in the cottage right now so I'll be fine. Go and have fun. But invite me to the wedding."

Lily's face lit up like a lightbulb. "Of course. We were thinking we might get married next summer in Greece. I want Nik's family to be there. I don't have family of my own so I've adopted his."

Brittany smiled. Of all the benefits that came from marrying a shockingly wealthy man, the thing her friend coveted most was not the size of his wallet or his powerful connections but his family.

"I might be there next summer," she said. "I haven't decided. My research post has finished so I need to think about next steps. And whatever step I take, I need to do it without breaking my wrist again. Stay in touch." She moved to the front of the plane. A small part of her envied her friend. Not the wealth, although money was always useful of course. No, what she envied was the connection Lily had with Nik. The closeness. Their relationship had been a whirlwind, but no one who saw them could possibly believe what they shared was anything other than deep, genuine and long lasting. Already their depth of understanding and mutual appreciation was rooted deep.

She'd never had that.

Even in her short, ill-fated marriage, she'd never had emotional intimacy.

Giving her friends a final farewell hug, she left the luxury of the plane and made her way to the Cessna seaplane that would take her direct to Puffin Island.

She was relieved to have been spared the ferry. At this time of year it would be crowded with day-trippers and summer visitors keen to enjoy all that Puffin Island had to offer. In recent years the island had attracted a colorful crowd—artists, musicians, wealthy folk look-

ing for an exclusive retreat that still offered the trappings of civilization.

Brittany was happy to use Wi-Fi when it was available, but equally happy when it wasn't. To her, *luxury* was a word that could as easily be applied to a night sleeping in the desert under a canopy of stars as it could to a night in a five-star hotel sleeping in silk sheets. Luxury was the freedom to explore and indulge her adventurous spirit.

In pursuit of that adventure, she'd traveled the world. After leaving the United States, she'd moved to the UK and done her masters and then her doctorate. During her time she'd followed in the footsteps of Hiram Bingham and trekked the Inca trail to the lost city of Machu Picchu, joined excavations in Egypt and virtually adopted Greece as her second home. But Maine—Maine was her first home and always would be.

Her heart was here. Her roots. Her history.

As an archaeologist, she was someone who knew the importance of roots and history.

With a smile of anticipation, she pulled out her phone and sent a quick text to Emily, who had been using Castaway Cottage over the summer.

I'm at Logan. Can't wait to catch up.

It was ironic that she'd offered Emily the sanctuary of the cottage when Emily was in trouble, and now Brittany was in trouble herself.

That turn of events had been unexpected.

Brittany slid her phone back into her pocket and glanced at her wrist. The plaster felt hot and heavy against her skin. The restriction of movement frustrated

her. Still, it could be worse. It was nothing a few weeks of rest wouldn't heal, and it would give her time to work out what she wanted to do next. Should she apply for a tenure-track faculty job in the United States? Or maybe return to Cambridge where she'd spent so many happy years, or even Greece? She loved everything about the island of Crete. The history, the climate, the food, the people.

She'd spent the early part of the summer flirting with Spyros, a local archaeologist who had been part of the team from Athens. He'd made it clear he was up for more than flirtation, but at the time she'd chosen to keep their relationship platonic. Now she was wondering if that had been a mistake. She'd enjoyed their friendship. He was attractive and charming.

Maybe she should invite him over for a few weeks. Maybe she'd take their relationship a step beyond flirtation. No further, of course. She never went further.

She was pondering her options as she walked to the Cessna that was to be her transport to the island.

Usually when she returned home she took the *Captain Hook*, the ferry that did the trip between Puffin Island and the mainland three times a day. She'd grown up listening to the boom of the horn and the clatter of cars as they drove off the ramp onto the road that led from the harbor. Once or twice over the years she'd used the services of Maine Island Air, the company that flew cargo, locals and tourists between the islands of Penobscot Bay. On those occasions she often found herself wedged between the mail and several grocery orders.

This experience was going to be different.

For once, she was arriving in style.

Imagining what the residents of Puffin Island would

say when word got around that she'd arrived on a private plane, Brittany smiled to herself. Dan, who worked up at the airstrip, would tell his wife, Angie, who would mention it in Harbor Stores or the Ocean Club, the favorite watering hole of the locals. From there it would travel across the island faster than the wind blew. It was a joke on Puffin Island that gossip traveled faster than the internet. It was certainly more reliable. There were times when the lack of privacy drove her insane but other times when it had proved useful, like recently when the islanders had closed ranks to protect Emily from trouble.

She felt a rush of affection for them. True, they occasionally drove her crazy with their interfering ways, but there was no doubting the strength of the community.

Suddenly eager to get home, she hoisted her backpack onto her shoulder, dragged her single suitcase behind her and strolled the last few steps towards the plane, thinking that she wasn't dressed for such an upmarket mode of transport.

The pilot was probably more used to matching Louis Vuitton luggage than the tough outdoor gear she hauled around the world on her archaeological digs and she was pretty sure Manolo Blahnick would have cried if he'd seen her favored footwear. Her boots were scuffed and sturdy, built for hiking across rough, unforgiving terrain, although even they hadn't been able to prevent her falling in Greece.

Thanks to her carelessness she was facing a summer of inactivity. She had regular appointments at the hospital scheduled, all of which would require a tedious trip to the mainland. To be sure of regaining full mobility in her right wrist, they'd told her she needed to be patient.

As she walked up to the Cessna, the pilot appeared at the top of the steps.

Dark glasses shielded his eyes, but she felt a jolt of instant recognition followed by a strange flutter in her stomach and an alarming shake of her knees.

It had been ten years, but she would have known him anywhere.

The shoulders under the crisp white shirt were broader and thickened with hard muscle, the glossy black hair cropped shorter, but he had that same “don’t fuck with me” attitude that had drawn her adventure-seeking eighteen-year-old self all those years before. A million times since then she’d wished she’d looked for another way of enjoying an adrenaline rush, like bungee jumping or white-water rafting.

Instead she’d gone after bad boy Zachary Flynn. On an island bursting with fresh fruit, he’d been the one bad apple.

In the first dizzying weeks of their relationship she’d thought there could be no bigger adventure than love. Her feelings for him had overwhelmed her and made her vulnerable, open and exposed. She’d spent the entire summer walking around the island on legs the consistency of jelly, her stomach clenched in nervous knots. Her ability to sleep had vanished along with her appetite. Overnight, her vision for her future had changed.

She’d had plans and ambitions, but for Zachary Flynn she’d thrown them all away. Her life and her future had taken a different shape. Faced with a choice, she’d chosen him. And when she’d given him everything, all of herself, he’d walked away with a shattering disregard for her and she’d crashed so hard she still had the bruises.

She'd often thought the damage would have been less had she jumped from a plane without a parachute.

"One female passenger, and it's you." His handsome face was inscrutable. "What are the chances?"

"Given that I live here, I'd say the chances are pretty high." She held herself together, whipped up the control and calm she'd mastered over the years. Despite the turmoil inside she refused to give him any clues about her emotions, nor did she need to study his face for clues as to how he was feeling. She already knew he felt nothing.

"I thought you were living in Greece. Rumor has it you're the female Indiana Jones."

She'd heard it all before, all the jokes about whips, hats, snakes and rolling boulders. Usually she made a flippant response, but not today.

He strolled onto the tarmac and lifted her case before she could stop him. The luggage label flipped over and caught his eye. "Dr. Forrest?" He studied it, and then her. "So you lived up to everyone's expectations?"

His statement made her feel dull and boring, as if her whole life had been mapped out in front of her. Which of course it had, apart from a brief diversion when she'd met him.

"I studied archaeology because it was what I wanted to do. My choice was my own. And Puffin Island is my home. Always has been." And it had been her relationship with him that had driven her from it. She couldn't stand the sympathy, the pitying glances, the *I told you sos* every time she'd ventured into town. Stewing in her own mistake, it had been impossible to forget and move on while she was living on the island. "What are you doing here, Zach? Last thing I heard you were flying in the wilds of Alaska." And from time to time she'd

hoped he had developed frostbite in certain vital parts of his anatomy.

Irritation and a touch of outrage merged with something that felt disturbingly close to panic.

He had no right to be here in her space, her part of the world.

She'd moved on, built a life. She had no wish to be forced to confront the path she hadn't taken.

"I'm flying people with more money than sense to the islands. Today that seems to be you."

"Would you have refused if you'd known?"

The corners of his beautiful mouth hinted at a smile. "I'd fly the devil if he paid me. I don't care who's in the passenger seat as long as the money is in my account." His drawl was deep and dark with hints of sophistication that disguised the truth about his background.

When she'd first met him he'd been damaged, bitter and rebellious. He'd cared for no one. Trusted no one.

She'd thought she could change all that. She'd made that classic mistake of thinking she could be the one to tame the wild in him.

Her brain had gone missing in action the day she'd decided to go after Zachary Flynn. To someone who had spent her life on a small island where she knew almost every face she saw in the street, he'd proved fascinating. She'd always striven to exceed people's expectations. Zach, it seemed, had lived to smash them into the ground.

He'd been the forbidden fruit. The boy every good girl avoided.

He was black to her white, dark to her light, hard to her soft.

Her one big mistake.

In a wild attempt to prove everyone wrong, she'd proved them right.

They'd warned that he'd break her heart and he had. And he'd done it in the most humiliating way possible.

She transferred her attention to the plane. "So this is what you do now?"

"If you mean I target people with too much money and help myself to some of it then yeah, this is what I do. And it seems I'm your ride." He removed his sunglasses and stood to one side. "Climb aboard, princess."

She didn't want to climb aboard. She wanted to run.

Panic nailed her feet to the ground, but pride drove her forward. If she turned away now he'd know it was because of him. And anyway, if she did that, how was she going to get to the island? In this case practicality had to take precedence over emotions. Alternative transport would be expensive and uncomfortable. Her wrist was already hurting and her head was fuzzy from a combination of lack of sleep and the long flight. The hospital had suggested she remain in Greece for another week to recuperate before traveling. Lily had insisted that private travel would make the journey a thousand times easier and Brittany had agreed.

The one thing she hadn't done was ask questions about her onward transfer to the island.

Why would she? It would never have crossed her mind the pilot could be Zach.

And how pathetic would she be if she let a joke marriage that had lasted barely five minutes affect her after a whole decade? She was bigger than that.

Telling herself it was only a twenty-minute hop at most and that Zach was going to be too busy flying the plane to take any notice of her, Brittany walked up the

steps. She was careful to avoid eye contact. He was strikingly good-looking, but it was those eyes that had been her downfall. They were so dark they seemed black, the hard gleam radiating his deep suspicion of mankind. He'd had a way of watching her, his hooded gaze brooding and dangerous, as if daring her to stop wondering and fantasizing, and take the leap.

Never one to turn down a challenge, she'd taken the dare.

It had been like trying to tame a feral beast that was inevitably going to turn on her.

She brushed past him and felt the hard swell of his biceps brush against her bare arm. She jerked back, but not before a rush of awareness had burned through her body.

Her gaze slid to his shadowed jaw and from there to the hard lines of his mouth.

She still remembered how it had felt to be kissed by him, and remembering kicked her heart rate up a notch.

"Nice plane." Her voice was as cold as a Maine winter. "Did you steal it?"

Her question drew a flicker of a smile. "No, this time I was the one who was robbed. You have no idea what price they pin on this baby."

She wanted to ask how he could afford it, but didn't want to show that much interest, so instead she slid into one of the large leather seats. She wished now she'd chosen to wear something less casual than shorts. They were the practical choice for the life she led, and her favorite product was high-factor sunscreen. She'd learned that any makeup she applied was quickly sweated off in the heat, so she restricted herself to a lip balm that protected against the sun.

As a result, her selection of cosmetics remained

mostly unused, but she was woman enough that if she'd known she was going to meet Zachary Flynn after a gap of ten years, she would have raided the makeup counter. Maybe even worn a dress and heels, though her wardrobe contained few examples of either. With enough advance warning she would have called Skylar, who had a talent for color and dressing people.

With the help of her friends, she would have planned the meeting carefully, deciding how she was going to handle it and what she was going to say so that she controlled every moment of the reunion. And she wouldn't have chosen to do it this way.

Knowing that he was studying her, Brittany resisted the temptation to shift in her seat.

Yeah, that's right, take a good look at what you gave up. Are you sorry now?

Finally she looked at him, looked into those flinty eyes framed by lashes as dark as coal. Her heart started to pound and her head spun. *Tired*, she thought. *I'm tired, that's all*. But she knew it wasn't the long flight or the time change that was responsible for the shift in her heart rate. It was seeing him. Panic ripped through her because she didn't want to feel anything and she was feeling—everything.

Damn him.

Damn every supersexy inch of him.

Maybe flying private wasn't so great after all. Right now she would even have embraced a bunch of screaming toddlers. Anything to dilute the tension. "So who are we waiting for? Am I your only passenger?"

"The rich don't share. I'm exclusively yours."

He'd never been exclusively hers, not even when he'd slid that cheap, hastily purchased gift-store ring onto her

finger and spoken words that had almost jammed in his throat. Their marriage had been the shortest exclusive deal on record. He'd lasted ten days before walking out of her life. Brittany had been raised to believe that people kept their promises but had learned that words, at least when they were uttered by Zachary Flynn, were meaningless. It had been a devastating betrayal of her trust. Hadn't she believed in him when no one else had? Hadn't she defended and excused him? *He's had a bad childhood, it's not surprising he doesn't trust people when they've always let him down.* She'd said those things to anyone and everyone who would listen and ignored warnings and dire prophecies. She'd been a true friend to him and he'd cast that friendship aside as if it were nothing.

"Let's go. If I'm the only passenger, then there's nothing keeping us from taking off."

"Sit down and strap in. There's a strong crosswind today. You're going to be shaken up some."

She was already shaken up, and it had nothing to do with the crosswind.

Relieved it was a short flight, Brittany reached for the seat belt but he was there before her. Those strong fingers tangled with hers and she flattened herself to the seat.

"I can do it." Being helpless brought out the worst in her and she snatched her good hand away just as he eased back, a gleam in his eyes.

"Still the same old Brittany. So who did you punch?"

"What do you mean?" She wasn't the same Brittany. The girl who had danced willingly into that reckless, short-lived marriage wasn't the same girl who had limped out.

"Unless you're wearing that cast for show, you've bro-

ken your wrist.” He straightened his shoulders. Shoulders she’d once explored with her fingers and mouth. She knew he had a scar at the top of his right shoulder blade and another under his ribs on the left. He’d refused to discuss either. To her knowledge, apart from the social workers who had removed him from his abusive home, the only person who knew the details of his past was Philip Law and she suspected even he only knew a small part of the story. The rest Zach buried deep inside, allowing no one access. “Just wondered what happened to the other person. Knowing you, they came off worse.”

“You don’t know me.” And she didn’t want to think about how well he’d once known her. She didn’t want to think about the way he’d touched her, kissed her and made her feel alive. “So why are you back in the area?” Brittany tried to remember what Nik had said about his friend. “You’re living in Bar Harbor?”

“No. I have a client who has a place at Bar Harbor. I’m living on Puffin Island.”

It was the worst news possible. “You’re *living* here now?”

“Is that going to give you a problem?”

It was going to give her a big problem.

After their relationship had gone south, she’d retreated to Castaway Cottage and watched the sun rise and set over beautiful Shell Bay. With the help of her grandmother, and later her friends, she’d pieced herself back together. She’d traveled the world, but still regarded Puffin Island as her home.

Her home, not his.

Finding him here was like discovering a fly on your food. It felt contaminated.

“We haven’t seen each other in ten years, Zach. You’re

not part of my life and I'm not part of yours. I don't give a damn where you live."

As long as it's not on my island.

"You're sure?" His gaze was steady on hers. "Plenty of women would be bearing a grudge."

"Because you walked out on me ten days after our wedding?" She managed a laugh. "You did us both a favor by ending it when you did. Instead of throwing my whole life away, I threw away a few weeks. I don't begrudge you a few weeks, Zach."

"It was a whole summer."

"I wasn't counting." She'd counted every day. Every hour. "And talking of counting, my friend is paying you big bucks to fly me to the island so let's do it. I'd hate for him to fire you."

"I don't work for him, I work for myself. I decide when I fly. I pick the jobs and the people." Something flickered in his eyes. "Taking orders isn't one of my strengths. You should know that."

She did know that. And she no longer cared enough to make excuses for his bad behavior.

The details of his past were hazy, and that haze had succeeded in fueling the rumors. Rumors of an abusive childhood, of a life where the law turned up at the door more often than the mailman, of a boy who had moved from one place to another, never sticking. Those rumors had flown around the island and a few people who had never before locked their doors had started locking them whenever Zach had shown up as part of the scholarship program at Camp Puffin.

He'd come back every summer and stayed the whole time. As a result he became a familiar figure on the island.

His background had made him a suspect for every crime committed, something that had outraged teenage Brittany, who had a strong sense of justice and believed everyone was innocent until proven guilty. It had frustrated her that he'd been indifferent to people's unflattering assumptions.

Even when he'd finally moved in with Philip and Celia Law, he still hadn't been entirely free of suspicion.

"I'm tired," she croaked. "It's been a long journey, so why don't you do whatever it is you do to make this thing fly and take me to Puffin Island."

For a brief, unsettling moment she thought he was going to say something else. Then he handed her a headset, turned and strolled to the pilot's seat, casual and relaxed.

Brittany tried to relax, too.

The sooner he took the controls, the sooner this whole awkward encounter would be over.

Except that now her life was in his hands. As someone who liked to be in control of her own destiny, it didn't feel good. It was hard to forget what he'd done with her heart when she'd trusted him with that.

She remembered overhearing Philip telling her grandmother that Zach was the most gifted pilot he'd ever taught, but that his brilliance could easily slip over the line into reckless and wild. He was fearless, or maybe it was just that an unspeakable childhood had set his bar for fear higher than most people's.

Exhausted, her wrist throbbing, Brittany swallowed. She knew all about reckless and wild. She'd been both those things when she'd been with him.

Watching him slide into the pilot's seat, she felt her heart bump hard against her ribs.

He'd said he'd fly the devil as long as he was paid, but she knew the devil was already in the plane.

And he had his hands on the controls.