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Opening Extract from...

Love & Freedom

Written by Sue Moorcroft

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Love & Freedom

Sue Moorcroft



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Chapter One

‘Excuse me, you’re burning.’

The man in Honor’s dream, whoever he was, was right – her face, arm and thigh felt as if they were on fire. She’d been dreaming of falling asleep too close to a furnace. Could it be on a boat? Because she could hear seagulls, too. And feel the seasickness.

‘Quit yanking on my arm, you’re making me queasy,’ she tried to protest. But the words clung thick and sticky to her lips.

The voice grew louder. ‘Wakey, wakey. Come on, lady! You’re burning.’

Waves of nausea swelled sweatily up her body as she tried to prise up her heavy eyelids. The sun blazed into her eyes and she scrunched them shut again. ‘Please don’t,’ she whimpered.

The voice was deep, coaxing. ‘Just help me to help you inside.’

She squinted one eye open again as the dark figure of a man bending over her moved around to block the sun. ‘I think I’m sick,’ she whispered as sweat trickled between her breasts. ‘Real sick.’

‘If you weren’t before, you are now,’ the silhouette agreed, cheerfully. He had a cute English accent. She was familiar with the English way of making jokes about serious stuff but she hoped he realised that she really was sick. Desperately. Colours-melting, brain-whirring sick.

What was a great, tall Englishman doing filling her vision, anyway? She groped through her memory.

She was in England ...

The whirring in her head became the hiss of the ocean and the furnace became the sun. She was lying on a wooden lounge on a patio overlooking a road and the ocean beyond,

with a stranger crouching beside her. And she felt bad.

‘Get up,’ the stranger persisted. ‘You’re being barbecued.’

‘Right.’ It halfway made sense. She made to sit up but cried out. Parts of her *had* fallen into a furnace! The patio swooshed alarmingly and she clamped a hand to her mouth.

The man jumped up and retreated. ‘Do you need a bathroom?’

She scrunched her eyes and hoped that he would understand that she meant, *Yes! Quick! I dare not nod my head or remove my hand to speak.*

‘Can you stand?’

‘Mmm ...’ Maybe. But when she attempted to drag her feet to the ground black spots danced behind her closed eyelids. She froze.

‘OK, I’ll carry you. You try and keep it all in until we reach the bathroom and I’ll try not to hurt you.’

‘Ah-ah-ah-WOOOH!’ Honor’s eyes flew open as her side burst into flames, taking her mind off her nausea. ‘Careful, for Chrissake, I’m on fire!’

‘I’ll bet. I’m trying not to touch your burns but you’ve got to get indoors.’

She shut her eyes again as the man surged to his feet beneath her with an impressive expulsion of breath, just like a weightlifter. A door opened and the furnace receded. She unscrewed her eyes, almost expecting to see long, white hospital corridors instead of a vaguely familiar house interior. ‘Have I been in a fire?’

She felt a rumble of laughter in his chest. ‘It’s not that bad. I found you asleep in the sun and it looks as if you’ve been there way too long. Even the English sun can burn you once in a while, you know.’

Fresh sweat flooded down her face. She gulped. ‘Bathroom—’

‘Got it. We’re here.’

Just in time.

‘The doctor’s just arrived.’ His voice came muffled through the bathroom door.

So the man was still here. During the misery and pain of delivering her innards to the toilet, Honor had kind of forgotten about him. She held back her hair, sweat leaking down her forehead and behind her ears. And despite flames licking her skin whenever she moved, she was shivering like a frightened puppy. ‘OK,’ she managed.

Cautiously, she inched to her feet, ran water in the basin and washed her face with the tiniest little pats, then swilled out her mouth.

Another rap at the door. ‘Hello? This is Dr Zoë Mayfair. Can you let me in?’

‘It’s not locked.’ Honor hung over the basin, breathing hard. She couldn’t straighten; her right side had been set in hot glue.

And then there was a neat woman in the tiny room with her, flushing the toilet, looking into her face, turning her cautiously to frown sympathetically at her skin. ‘Let’s see if we can get you out of here so that I can examine you. Have you stopped vomiting?’

‘For now.’

‘Martyn, the bedroom’s at the back, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, through here.’

Allowing herself to lean on the dark-jacketed arm of the doctor on one side and – gingerly – the bare arm of the man on the other, which struck almost as hot as her own miserably scarlet limb, Honor weaved to the blue bedroom with white furniture, like a doll’s house, that would be hers for the next four months and where most of her cases stood waiting to be

unpacked.

Scared her skin might split, she sort of oozed down on to the edge of the bed.

Dr Mayfair was coolly efficient. 'Right, Martyn, I don't think we need you in here. See if you can find a jug to fill with cold water and bring a glass. She needs fluids.' The door clicked. 'Poor you.' Dr Mayfair was all sympathy. 'The first hot spell of the summer and you have to go and fall asleep in it. The sea breeze makes the sun deadly.'

'Jetlagged, I think. I didn't set out to sleep.'

'No doubt you're sore.' Doctorly understatement, like when they said, 'There will be a scratch,' and then thrust a massive needle into the heart of one of your joints. 'Your skin's quite inflamed and you'll be feeling dehydrated. Let's get some fluids into you and something on that blistered skin.'

'You bet,' Honor murmured, watching Dr Mayfair open the door to take from manly hands a jug and glass, suddenly realising that all she wanted in the world was to feel that cold clear liquid easing down her throat.

'Just sip,' the doctor cautioned. 'Or you won't keep it down.' She pulled up a bedroom chair and watched with a little furrow between her eyes as Honor sipped. She'd discarded her jacket around the back of the chair and her white blouse looked crisp and cool, her short mousey hair neatly bobbed, making Honor aware of her own sweat-dragged clothes and hair frizzing around her face.

Dr Mayfair turned to the fat black bag at her feet. 'So you're here on holiday? From America?'

Honor began to nod, but stopped when pain jabbed its fingernails into the backs of her eyes. 'I live in Connecticut. I've rented this house for the summer.'

The doctor turned back, her hands full of sachets of white cream. 'You've rented it from my sister, Clarissa, in fact.'

Martyn, who found you, is our brother. She'd sent him down to do the welcome thing and check that the place was in full working order because you caught her on the hop. She'd hardly put it on the market as a holiday rental when you booked it for four months.' She wriggled her hands expertly into surgical gloves and snipped open the first sachet. 'Pity you weren't wearing sleeves because the burn's extended behind your shoulder. Can we get the top off ...? Ah, I see, the straps loosen.'

'This is an antibiotic cream, for mild burns. It'll take away some of the pain, cool the inflammation and help you heal. I'm afraid you're going to be sore but Martyn caught you before you got to the hospitalisation stage.'

'That's goo – ow! OW!'

'I know.' The doctor might be sympathetic but she wasn't to be deflected from her aim of slathering the thick white cream over Honor's puffy red skin. 'Keep drinking water. Cool baths might help but don't put any oils or salts or foams in. And stay out of the sun, obviously. You're pale skinned and freckly so you'll probably need to be careful for the next month. Get yourself some high-protection sun lotion or sun block – and use it so that this doesn't happen again. You can expect to feel better in a week or so, but you'll have skin loss. Do you have any medication for pain or inflammation?'

Wincing miserably, Honor shook her head.

'I can leave you half-a-dozen of these – ibuprofen. Take two now, two at bedtime and two in the morning, then you'll need to get more. Do you have any family in the area?'

'Probably not the way you mean.' And as the doctor hesitated, Honor added, 'I think I do, through my English mother, around Brighton. While I'm over here I hope to look them up.'

'Sounds interesting. Have you registered with a local

doctor?’

‘I hadn’t planned on getting sick.’

Dr Mayfair smiled. ‘I presume you have your health insurance card? I suggest you do register – I’ll give you a list of the local practices in Rottingdean and Brighton. Most patients from Eastingdean and Saltdean register in Rottingdean, as it’s between here and Brighton. And you might need to see a practice nurse because you’re going to have trouble reaching around to those blisters on your shoulder. Do you think you’ll be all right alone?’

‘I think so. Maybe I’ll call a cab in the morning and get taken to a local drug store.’ Honor paused, focusing her fuzzy mind on all the information she’d absorbed on her annual vacations in England. ‘You call it a pharmacy, right? Where I can get Tylenol or something? And I need a supermarket. I don’t have food, yet. I really just landed.’

‘They won’t know what Tylenol is, you’d better ask for ibuprofen.’ The doctor snipped open a fresh sachet. ‘Or maybe it would be better if I lent you Martyn for an hour. I’ll send him in and you can give him a list.’

Honor felt her face – the rest of her face that wasn’t scarlet already – flood with colour. ‘I can’t give your brother a list of errands.’

The doctor began on Honor’s neck. ‘We all do. It’s not as if he has a full-time job. And what else are little brothers for?’ She raised her voice. ‘Martyn?’

He must have been waiting in the hallway because it was only a moment before Honor’s rescuer took a step into the room. It was hard to think of him as anyone’s ‘little’ brother as he had to duck his head to get through the doorway. His stubble was as dark as the straight hair that fell either side of his face and flicked across his forehead above near-black eyes, like a Manga character. Exotic cheekbones and a sculpted jaw;

he didn't look remotely like his mousey, middle-sized, middle-aged sister. 'I can go now,' he said, 'but tomorrow I start a job that will last five days.'

Dr Mayfair pretended amazement. 'Five whole days? All at once?'

The eyes glistened with amusement. 'Three, really. The other two are for travelling.'

'I thought five was a lot, for you.'

Honor was shocked. A guy only being able to get three days of work? It seemed mean to tease him about it. But Martyn seemed able to shrug off his sister's barbs and his dark gaze shifted to Honor. 'So, what sort of thing do you want apart from the ibuprofen? Bread? Tea? Milk? Maybe some ready meals?'

A new wave of nausea swelled Honor's ribcage and, as Dr Mayfair had finished with the cream, she began to shift herself carefully towards the pillows, desperate to drop her head on to their cool, clean softness. 'That is so great of you. Maybe some plain cookies. I don't feel like real food.'

He hesitated.

She thought back to all the summers she'd spent around London with her dad, Karen, Zachary and Jessamine and the cookie/biscuit confusion in which they always found themselves. 'McVitie's Digestive Biscuits,' she specified. And, with a sigh of relief, closed the eyes that felt hung with ten-pound weights.

She must have flickered into sleep for a few moments because Honor was alone in her room when next she heard the doctor's calm, clear voice. It was coming from the other side of the door. And she was teasing her baby brother again. 'I thought you were calling me out to minister to a girlfriend – so I'd finally get to meet one.'

Martyn gave a deep, incredulous laugh. ‘Yeah, right. I invite a girlfriend over from America and *let her rent Clarissa’s place*? You think that’s going to end well, Clarissa having the perfect excuse to turn up at the door at will?’

Dr Zoë gave a theatrically regretful sigh. ‘I can see the disaster potential. But we all think it would be nice to meet one or two of your personal beauty parade of women.’

‘Clarissa met Rosie.’ Martyn sounded as if he were trying not to laugh.

‘Ouch. There’s something that really didn’t end well. When Clarissa—!’

‘Exactly.’ A pause, as if they were both reflecting on the situation, whatever it could be, between Clarissa and the unknown Rosie. Then Martyn returned to the subject of Honor. ‘No, I just found the American quietly cooking. Clarissa asked me to come down. Like you, she gives me a list of jobs every time she sees me.’

Dr Mayfair’s laugh was warm and sisterly, making Honor think suddenly of her Jessamine and Zachary; she hoped that her own big-sister-act was a little heavier on the sensitivity. ‘I know, we put on you. But you don’t mind helping Clarissa’s tenant out, do you? I know you get fed up with the tourists, but she needs a hand.’

‘I don’t mind.’ His voice began to move away, down the hall. ‘She’s pretty. At least, the bits of her that haven’t been fried extra crispy are.’

Chapter Two

Morning. The sun glared through the window. Inch by painful inch, Honor peeled herself from the sheets. The skin of her right arm, shoulder, neck and cheek felt as if it had shrunk to fit someone two sizes smaller, stinging viciously. ‘*Son of a bitch!*’ she hissed.

Glugging down the last of the cold water from the white bedside table, she eased from the bed and tottered along the hall to the bathroom. The shower unit, the kind that hung over the bath, provided a deluge of water. It took a bit of experimentation to make it bearable because anything the warm side of lukewarm made her feel as if she were being basted like a Thanksgiving turkey, but then she stood for a long time, letting the flood soothe her savaged skin and trying not to wish she was at home in Hamilton Drives, where Jess would have clucked and sighed then taken care of her.

Dabbing herself dry and spreading more of Dr Mayfair’s magic cream over her boiling scarlet patches, she wondered how to dress. Certainly nothing that had to be hauled over her head – ooh, ow. No.

Sorting through a suitcase, she was able to locate a loose, pale green shirt to ease cautiously up her burned arm, ‘Ow ... ow ... ow ...’ so that it burst none of the water-filled bubbles clustered as ugly as frogspawn on the crest of her shoulder. A bra was out of the question. It would be torture.

On her way to the kitchen she noticed a key glinting on the doormat by the front door. Martyn must have posted it through after letting himself out. She’d tackle bending over to retrieve it later.

The kitchen was large for a compact home, meant for

eating in as well as for the preparation of food. At the side of the single-storey house – she must remember to refer to it as a bungalow – it gave a close-up view of the fence that ran between this property and the next, yet light danced through it on to yellow walls and white counters.

In the fridge, she discovered milk, cheese, eggs, pineapple juice, sunflower spread, a pre-packed salad and a cooked breast of chicken. In a cupboard: tea bags, instant coffee, wholemeal bread, sugar, McVitie's Digestive Biscuits, crackers, several tins of soup and a box of cereal.

Best of all, on the kitchen counter along with the ibuprofen and the receipts, stood a giant container of green aloe aftersun gel – spray on. 'What a guy,' she marvelled. 'Brains as well as looks.' She unbuttoned and carefully slid down her shirt, closing her eyes as she sprayed the pulsing area that she hadn't been able to reach with the cream. Bliss.

Buttoning up, she picked up the receipt and saw it came attached to a note in a spiky hand.

Honor,

Hope what I brought will keep you going until you can shop. Clarissa says that if you need anything else, to ring her. Hope you're OK soon.

Martyn Mayfair.

Having consumed a bowl of cereal and three cups of coffee, wincing whenever the steam brushed its cruel fingers across her tight red cheek, Honor was in the middle of revising the plans she'd had for the day – unpack, shop, get her laptop online, explore – and postponing most of them until she'd recovered from her sunburn, when she heard the front doorbell.

On the doorstep was a woman wearing pink-and-blue gym

clothes and an impatient expression. She did manage a smile, though. ‘Hello, I’m Clarissa, you’re renting the bungalow from me.’

‘Oh, hi!’ began Honor, stepping back, because it was unreasonable to keep somebody standing on the doorstep of her own house. Bungalow. Clarissa evidently needed no invitation, anyway, because by the time Honor closed the door behind her, she was already in the living room that fronted the bungalow, had dropped into a pink swivel chair and was spreading paperwork on the seat of the small cream sofa.

She opened the conversation with a corresponding lack of ceremony. ‘Thought I’d check you’re OK. Are you OK? Martyn realised you weren’t up to signing the tenancy agreement when he found you getting sunburned, so he left it with me.’ She selected a set of papers and a pen.

Honor lowered herself gently on to the vacant half of the sofa. ‘Sure, I’ll sign it now. I was so stupid to fall asleep in the sun and was lucky your brother found me and called the doctor. She’s your sister, right?’ The resemblance was clear. Both women were small and stocky, their hair identical shades of mouse. Maybe it was just the men in their family that got the dark, brooding movie-star looks.

‘Right. Zoë. If you’re sure you’re up to this?’ Clarissa held out the pen. ‘It’s exactly the agreement that I emailed to you to read over, so you just need to sign ... and I’ll sign ... I’ve dated it from when you moved in. That’s good, thanks.’ Then she added, ingenuously, ‘I just got the agreement off the internet, so I hope it’s OK. But you feel trustworthy, to me.’ Her smile flashed again, a glimpse of a softer side under her brisk manner.

The daughter of a lawyer and until lately an employee in an industry in which every agreement was a shrine to proper procedure, Honor was bemused. But she just said, politely,

‘Sure, I’m good for it. Ouch!’ Extending her arm too far to pass the paperwork back, her shoulder burned as if a Band Aid had been ripped from her skin.

Clarissa made a sympathetic face. ‘Will you be all right? I can call Zoë again–’ But she glanced at her watch as if checking she could spare the time.

‘I’ll be fine. I just need time to recover. Zoë fixed me up and Martyn helped me out with food and medication. It was so great of him to do that because he doesn’t look exactly–’ she searched for something to adequately encapsulate why Martyn Mayfair didn’t look like anybody’s personal shopper – ‘domesticated.’

Her choice surprised a laugh from Clarissa. ‘The only thing domesticated about Martyn is that he lives indoors. Although, I suppose, he does know how to open tins or buy food that doesn’t need much cooking.

‘It’s good to know he uses his time for something more useful than seeing how attractive he can make himself to women.’ And then she shrugged and softened the words. ‘Martyn’s one of the good guys, if you don’t mind his lifestyle and his occasional explosions.’ Her kid brother so dismissed, she returned to the purpose of her visit. ‘We have a small information point for visitors at the community hall so I picked up some things I thought might be useful to you – timetables for the buses and for the trains from Brighton, and a couple of maps, so you can find your way around. It’s only a few minutes’ walk to the local shops – I’ve marked them in red.’

‘Thank you!’ Honor was touched. ‘Between you, your family has provided almost a welcome wagon. The bus schedule will be really useful because I need to look for temp jobs and driving here is damned scary.’ Then, as Clarissa rose, ‘Wait, I need to pay Martyn for the things he bought for me.’

Making no sudden movements, she fetched her bag from the bedroom, glad she'd stopped at the airport ATM for currency.

Clarissa hung around only long enough to take the money. 'Thanks – but I have to go. My contact details are on your copy of the tenancy agreement. Call if you have a problem.'

'Thanks again–' Honor began. But Clarissa was already halfway out of the door. After watching through the window as her landlady ran down to her car and reversed neatly out of the gravel drive, Honor stood looking out at the patio with its white-painted concrete balustrade and the concrete steps dropping to the drive and front lawn. Built on an incline, the bungalow was the top step of a kind of giant stairway with its own garage tucked niftily beneath it; then down to the lawn, down again to the coast road with its growling traffic and the grassy cliff top beyond and, one last giant step over the cliff to the blue ocean dancing with jewels from the morning sun. She was going to like it here, she decided. She hadn't moved home often but she knew familiarity was just a question of finding new habits to get into.

Of letting go of the idea that Hamilton Drives, either her town-centre apartment or her dad's blue clapboard house, was 'home'.

If she hadn't let herself get burned she could have run across the road – there was a crossing right outside – and found the way down to the beach.

But, she sighed, there were some boring necessities to take care of, even if she felt like crap and her sunburn throbbed like a dragon's roar. Firing up her laptop on the mobile internet signal, which would do until she could get properly hooked up, she trawled through her credit card and bank accounts, clicking on *change details* and tapping in her new address in Marine Drive, Eastingdean, Brighton, East Sussex, United Kingdom, with a sense of adventure.

Switching to a sense of guilt, she opened her email account and selected *Stef, Jess, Zach* and *Dad* from her address book for the *To:* line.

Subject: A little space

Hi,

With everything that's happened, recently, I'm sure you're not too surprised that I've decided to take some time out, away from Hamilton Drives. You don't have to worry about me. I've rented a little house and I have my severance pay so I'm all set.

She reread the last line and wondered whether to say something about being back soon. Then she shrugged – which made the dragon roar harder – and simply added:

Lots of love

Honor x

And pressed 'send'. There. That ought to reassure everyone at home in Connecticut. She wasn't sure whether Stef had internet access in his new place but someone was bound to pass the message on.