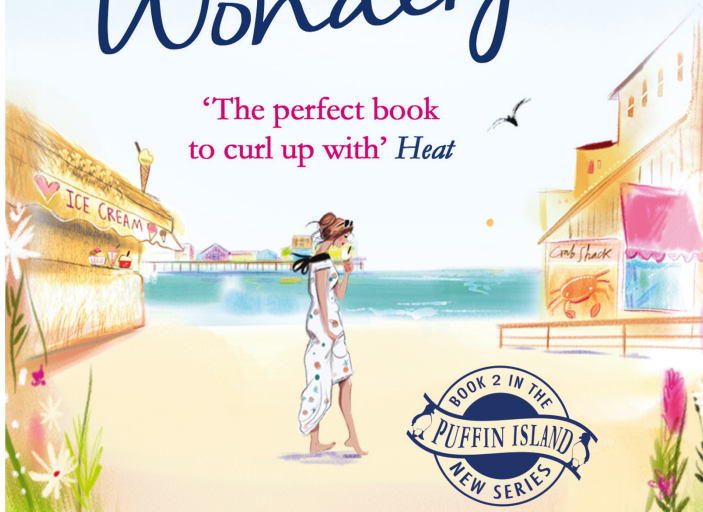


The No.1 bestselling author

# Sarah Morgan

## Some kind of Wonderful

'The perfect book  
to curl up with' *Heat*



# **Sarah Morgan**

## **Some Kind of Wonderful**

### **Аннотация**

Her whole life, Puffin Islander Brittany Forrest has dreamed of adventure. And at the age of eighteen, she thought she'd found it in bad boy Zachary Flynn. But after just ten tempestuous, smouldering days, their whirlwind marriage went up in smoke, and Brittany resolved to put him out of her mind forever. Zach knows he let Brittany down, but being back on Puffin Island and seeing Brittany again stirs up long-buried emotions. This daredevil pilot has never felt worthy of her, yet he can't stay away—even when he knows the chemistry between them will only complicate his life. As long, hot summer days on the beach dissolve into sultry, starry nights, Brittany and Zach find that the sparks between them are more powerful than ever. Could it be that the second time around, their dreams of a happy-ever-after will finally come true? Fall in love with the all new Puffin Island series from Sarah Morgan, the bestselling author who brought you *Sleigh Bells in the Snow*: Book 1 - *First Time in Forever* - Out Now! Book 2 - *Some Kind of Wonderful* - Out Now! Book 3 - *Christmas Ever After* - October 2015

# Содержание

Copyright	7
Dear Reader,	9
Table of Contents	11
CHAPTER ONE	13
CHAPTER TWO	48
CHAPTER THREE	70
CHAPTER FOUR	87
CHAPTER FIVE	102
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	111

The No.1 bestselling author

Sarah  
Morgan

Some kind  
of  
Wonderful

'The perfect book  
to curl up with' *Heat*



**Praise for**  
**Sarah Morgan**

'The perfect book to curl up with'  
—*Heat*

‘Full of romance and sparkle’

—*Lovereading*

‘I’ve found an author I adore—must hunt down everything she’s published.’

—*Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*

‘Morgan is a magician with words.’

—*RT Book Reviews*

‘Dear Ms Morgan, I’m always on the lookout for a new book by you ...’

—*Dear Author* blog

**SARAH MORGAN** is the bestselling author of *Sleigh Bells in the Snow*. As a child Sarah dreamed of being a writer and, although she took a few interesting detours on the way, she is now living that dream. With her writing career she has successfully combined business with pleasure and she firmly believes that reading romance is one of the most satisfying and fat-free escapist pleasures available. Her stories are unashamedly optimistic and she is always pleased when she receives letters from readers saying that her books have helped them through hard times.

Sarah lives near London with her husband and two children, who innocently provide an endless supply of authentic dialogue. When she isn’t writing or reading, Sarah enjoys music, movies and any activity that takes her outdoors.

Readers can find out more about Sarah and her books from her website: [www.sarahmorgan.com](http://www.sarahmorgan.com). She can also be found on

Facebook and Twitter.

Sarah  
Morgan

Some kind  
*of*  
Wonderful



# Copyright

HQ

An imprint of HarperCollins *Publishers* Ltd 1 London Bridge Street London SE1 9GF

First published in Great Britain by HQ in 2015

Copyright © Sarah Morgan 2015

Sarah Morgan asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins.

Ebook Edition © July 2015 ISBN: 9781474030915  
Version: 2018-04-11

## Dear Reader,

Thank you for choosing *Some Kind of Wonderful*! I hope these characters find a place in your heart and the book a place on your keeper shelf.

This is a story about second chances. Most of us have had a relationship that didn't work out. We move on, maybe a little bruised and battered, but determined to put it behind us. But this approach isn't for everyone and the alternative is something I've often pondered. If you weren't right for each other the first time, why would you be right a second time? What has changed?

The answer of course is that people change and love isn't so easily controlled. Brittany, heroine of *Some Kind of Wonderful*, fell in love with Zachary Flynn when she was a teenager. When he left her after ten days of marriage, she was crushed. She hasn't seen or heard from him in ten years, so returning to the island home she loves and finding him there is a bitter blow. But ten years is a long time. Their relationship takes a direction neither has anticipated, but, before they can consider a future, they first have to confront their past.

*Some Kind of Wonderful* is a romance, but it also celebrates friendship. Brittany is the sort of friend we'd all be lucky to have in our lives. She is fiercely loyal and caring to those she loves. Her bond with Emily and Skylar is as strong as ever and no matter what hurdles these three women encounter in life, you know they

will be side by side supporting each other.

I hope you enjoy this story! I love hearing from readers, so if you're on Facebook (find me at [www.facebook.com/AuthorSarahMorgan](http://www.facebook.com/AuthorSarahMorgan)) or Twitter (@SarahMorgan\_ —don't forget the underscore) I hope you'll join me there for chats and giveaways and sign up to my newsletter to be sure of hearing about my next release.

Thank you for being the best readers ever!

Love,

*Sarah*

xxx

To Dianne Moggy, for making my dreams a reality and for allowing her adorable dog Maple to play a starring role in my O'Neil Brothers series. Thank you. x

*Friendship is a sheltering tree*

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge

# Table of Contents

Cover

Praise for Sarah Morgan

About the Author

Title Page

Copyright

Dear Reader

Dedication

Epigraph

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[Extract](#)

[Endpage](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

## *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 sweatshirts 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 rebellious, 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 fucking 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 arranged 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 looking 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 broken 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.

## CHAPTER TWO

“I SHOULD HAVE warned you.” Emily hauled Brittany’s suitcase into the cottage, maneuvering it over the blue-and-white-striped rug that welcomed visitors to the beach hideaway. The colors had faded over the years but the familiarity of it was as soothing as hot soup on a cold day.

“How could you have warned me?”

“Sky and I saw him a few weeks ago. We decided as you weren’t here you didn’t need to know. We assumed he’d be long gone before you came home. If you hadn’t broken your wrist, you wouldn’t have known.”

“Don’t you believe it. This is Puffin Island. I would have heard about it the moment I stepped off the ferry. There are no secrets in this place. Although somehow I missed the fact you’ve moved out of the cottage. Tell me the details.”

“Later. Let’s unload the car first.”

Brittany walked through to the kitchen. The sun flooded in from the garden, bouncing light across the room. For a moment she saw her grandmother, standing in front of the stove, humming as she stirred and tasted.

One blink and the image vanished, but the ache in her chest remained.

Everything looked the same. The jars of brightly colored sea glass collected on trips to the beach, the hurricane lamp and

strangely shaped piece of driftwood Brittany had found washed up on the shore as a child. Everything was as it should be, each piece part of the jigsaw that created a picture of her childhood.

The only gap was the one left by her grandmother.

She missed her all the time, but never more so than now. *He's back, Grams, and I don't know what to do.*

Emily followed her into the room. "I put your case in the bedroom. It weighs a ton. Please tell me it's not full of Bronze Age weapons."

"That case contains my life. A bit sad that I can cram it all into one suitcase." But she knew her grandmother wouldn't have agreed. *People, experiences, those are the things of real value, Brittany.*

She slumped on the kitchen chair, exhausted from the journey and the stress of keeping up the pretense of indifference in front of Zach. The worst thing was that she didn't want it to be pretense. She wanted to feel indifference and it worried her that she didn't.

How could seeing a man who had walked out on her without a backward glance make her feel weak at the knees? "Do you know what's crazy about all this? I'm over him. I really am. I know people say that, but I mean it. So why am I feeling like this?" She ran her hand over her face and Emily walked across and gave her a hug.

"Anyone would be unsettled to meet their ex after such a long time, especially after the relationship ended the way yours did.

And on top of that you're jet-lagged and in pain. What you're feeling is totally normal. Don't overthink it, Brittany."

"I'm not." It was a lie and both of them knew it. "My relationship with him was the one big failure of my life and I hate failing. Seeing him back here is like finding someone spray painted 'you screwed up' on a wall."

"If you'd given us more notice we could have killed him and hidden his body before you arrived home."

"How did you even recognize him? You never met him."

"The first thing you did when you arrived at college was stick a picture of him on your wall and ask us to decorate it."

"I remember. I met my two best friends because of him. I suppose I should be grateful."

"I was responsible for the warts on his nose. The three of us stared at his face every night for three months. Skylar gave him a skin condition with her paints and you pushed pins into him. By the time you stopped crying yourself to sleep he had multiple piercings that weren't of his choosing. It was kind of a shock to come face-to-face with him and not see a face riddled full of holes. And it's a memorable face. Not hard to see why you fell for him."

"Take a good look. His face won't be so memorable once I've rearranged those perfect features. It's amazing how much damage a girl can do with a plaster cast." Brittany closed her eyes briefly, trying to calm the pool of emotion simmering inside her, but even with her eyes shut all she saw were strong features and

dark masculinity. “Thanks for the ride. I should have called a cab but I couldn’t face handling the questions Pete would throw at me. Did I drag you away from something important?”

“No. And whatever I was doing would have been less important than meeting my best friend at the airport after a long flight. Wait there.” Emily vanished to the car and returned moments later with her arms loaded up with bags. “I stocked up at the store after I got your text. I assumed you wouldn’t have anything in so I bought the basics.”

“As long as the basics include soda, I’m happy.” Brittany eyed the bags gratefully, hoping they were full of food that didn’t require two hands to prepare. “You’re a friend in a million.”

“So are you.” Emily piled the bags on the table. “I can’t ever repay you for letting me use this place. You saved me. And Lizzy. We owe you so much.”

“You don’t owe me anything. And talking of friends, I’m guessing Ryan knows Zach is back?”

“Yes.” Emily pushed milk and cheese into the fridge. “Like I said, you weren’t here and it’s not as if Zach has a habit of sticking around.”

“You’re talking to the woman he married and then left less than two weeks after so I know exactly how long he generally sticks around.” It annoyed her that she felt so unsettled. So what if he was back? She’d hurt and healed. It was in the past. And although the past fascinated her so much she’d made it her career, that fascination didn’t extend to her own history.

“Are you mad with us for not telling you?”

“I’m so churned up inside I don’t know what I’m feeling.”

Brittany sighed and shook her head. “No, of course I’m not mad. In your position I wouldn’t have told me, either.”

“It seemed like the right decision at the time, but it seems like the wrong one now.”

“Yeah, well, I know all about that, too. I married Zach thinking it was the right decision and look how that turned out.”

Emily was still unloading food. “Did you eat on the flight? I can cook you something. I bought eggs, and a fresh loaf from the bakery.”

“Thanks, but I’m not hungry.” She felt as if her stomach was doing gymnastics.

“You have to eat something.” Emily handed her a bag. “Here. Blueberry muffins I baked fresh this morning.”

“Seriously?” Brittany peered into the bag and sniffed. “Since when do you cook?”

“Since I inherited a six-year-old girl. I have also learned to braid hair, make pasta necklaces and fix torn fairy wings. And before you accuse me of gender bias, I should tell you I’m also skilled at making pirate maps complete with tea stains and authentically burned edges, and last weekend I bought her a bow and arrow. A child’s version, obviously.”

Brittany felt a flash of guilt. “I haven’t even asked how you’re both doing. Your life went to hell and I wasn’t here and now I *am* here I’m talking about myself. I’m the most selfish friend in the

world. Skylar updated me on your recent crisis. The journalist? Bastard. Why would they go after a child?"

"Because the whereabouts of the daughter of a dead movie star are apparently of public interest."

Brittany nibbled the corner of the muffin. "So they came here and tried to trick the islanders into revealing information."

"Which they didn't, of course, because the islanders were amazing. Ryan was amazing." Emily's cheeks turned a deep shade of rose and Brittany looked at her closely.

"I can't believe you're saying that. The first night you arrived you left me a message saying you were on the first ferry out of here. You were threatening to head somewhere landlocked like Wyoming or Nebraska. I know you hate the sea. What happened?"

"I didn't hate it as much as I thought I would."

"There's something different about you."

"This red shirt is new. Sky chose it."

"It's flattering. Better than your usual black. But that's not what I'm seeing. You mentioned you had something to tell me. So tell me."

"Today is about you, not me."

"I need to be distracted from the pain in my wrist and my compelling need to kill my ex. Talk. And I want detail, including the brilliant sex I'm fairly sure you're getting."

Emily gave a choked laugh. "What makes you think that?"

"You're glowing and happy. You've lost that white, pinched

look you always had when you were with miserable Neil. I didn't see it immediately, mostly because I was focused on escaping from Zach, but you've changed."

"That's ridiculous. It's just a shirt."

"I'm not talking about the shirt. Your hair is different. A little shorter and you're wearing it loose."

"There's a new hairdresser up at the harbor. Her name is Hanna. Lisa and I wanted to give her some business, that's all."

"She's good. Maybe I'll book myself in. I believe in supporting new businesses on the island." Brittany studied her friend. "You look happy. I'm relieved. I was worried. I felt helpless being so far away when you were going through hell. And Sky was stuck in Manhattan with the soon-to-be senator who suffered a sense-of-humor failure at birth. I didn't know what to do, so I called Ryan."

"I'm glad you did."

"I didn't give him details, just asked him to keep an eye on you." Contemplating her friend's dreamy expression, Brittany laughed. "I'm guessing he kept a very, very close eye on you. Next time I need to be more specific in my brief. I asked him to support you, not seduce you. Not that there's anything wrong with comfort sex and I'm sure Ryan was very good at that side of things."

Emily placed fruit in the bowl in the center of the table. "It's a bit more than comfort sex."

"How much more?"

“We like each other.”

“Of course. You went to bed with him. You’d never go to bed with a man you didn’t like.”

“Love.” Emily stumbled over the word. “I love him. He loves me. And if there was a seduction, it was mutual.”

Brittany hid her surprise. “Love terrifies you.” And she understood why. She, like Skylar, knew all of Emily’s secrets. “It always has.”

“Yes. But that was before Ryan.”

“Well—wow.” Brittany felt warmth burn out the chill inside her. Love wasn’t something that had worked out for her, nor had it worked out for her parents, but it was great seeing it work out for her friends, especially Emily who had avoided that emotion since childhood. “Seems like we have a *lot* of catching up to do. We should invite Sky for the weekend. Bottle of chilled wine, pajamas and full confessions all round. It will be just like old times.”

“Sounds good.”

Brittany watched as her friend pushed her hair back—hair she’d habitually worn secured to the back of her head but which now swung loose around her shoulders. “So is Ryan the reason you’re no longer living in my cottage?”

“He asked us to move in with him. We’re living in Harbor House.”

“His old family home? I love that place. The high ceilings, the views—it’s incredible. So this isn’t just love, it’s serious.” She

caught sight of the ring on Emily's finger for the first time and gasped. "Is that—? Holy crap, Em. How could I not have noticed that? And why didn't you wave it under my nose?"

"Because you have enough to think about and anyway, it's all been very sudden—"

"But if you know, then why wait, right?" She grabbed Emily's hand and took a closer look and felt her eyes fill. "Em, oh, Em!" She hugged her friend with her good arm and felt tears spill onto her cheeks. "I'm so happy for you both. Two of my favorite people getting married and to each other! I expect to be invited every Thanksgiving and Christmas. This calls for a major celebration."

"I wasn't going to mention it yet. I thought it might be tactless with Zach back on the island."

"Just because my own love life is in a coma and I'm tripping over my ex, doesn't mean I can't be thrilled for my friend. And I *am* thrilled." She released Emily and wiped her hand over her cheek. "Look at me. I'm a sentimental mess. Where did he find that ring?"

"We went to Boston for the weekend."

Examining the glittering stone, Brittany felt something stir inside her. Zach hadn't given her a ring. At the time she hadn't cared. Their impulsive wedding had seemed the ultimate in romantic gestures and she'd told herself that Zachary Flynn wasn't the sort of man to buy a girl a diamond. It had taken her a while to realize it was just another sign that he couldn't be tamed.

She'd tried to create a bond with a man who didn't understand the meaning of the word.

Letting go of Emily's hand, she reminded herself that a diamond wouldn't have sealed a relationship that was already cracked beyond repair.

"So if you've moved into Harbor House, where is Ryan's grandmother living?" Agnes Cooper had been her grandmother's closest friend. "Much as I love her, having her as a housemate would be seriously restrictive. No spontaneous sex on the kitchen table."

"Agnes has already moved into one of the retirement cottages."

"Leaving you free to have sex anywhere you like. Well—" Pondering, Brittany sat back in her chair and picked up her soda. "Everything changes. I turn my back for five minutes and my childless, water-hating friend has a child and is living by the water. And in love."

"Not just living by the water. I've learned to swim."

Knowing her friend's phobia of the water and the reasons for it, Brittany choked on her drink. "You went into the water voluntarily?"

"Ryan taught me. I don't love it, but I don't panic. And talking of panic—" Emily helped herself to a tiny piece of muffin. "You didn't know Zach would be flying you today?"

"No. The whole thing was arranged by a friend." Brittany lowered her drink. "Do we know why he's here?"

“Zach? No. Ryan hadn’t heard from him in a while and then suddenly he showed up at the Ocean Club a couple of months ago. He owns his own plane and he hires himself out for megabucks which, Ryan says, basically means he gets paid a year’s salary for doing a week’s work.”

“Sounds like Zach.”

Emily hesitated. “He isn’t entirely mercenary. When Lizzy was sick and needed to go to the hospital on the mainland, he was the one who flew me. No one else would do it because the weather was so wild. It was scary and he was—”

“Reckless?”

“I was going to say brave. And skilled.” Emily sent her an awkward glance. “I felt disloyal getting in the plane with him.”

“No need. It was a long time ago. I don’t have any feelings for him.” At least, none she was going to admit to. “And if Lizzy was sick, he should have flown you for free.”

“He did.”

“Oh.” That news jarred with the negative images she was nurturing in her mind. “Well, that’s—great. Doesn’t sound like Zach, but I still think it’s great.”

“I guess he charges so much the rest of the time he can afford to be generous occasionally.”

“The second part of that sentence doesn’t sound like him at all.”

The Zach she’d known hadn’t wanted to give anything to a society who had given him nothing.

“I’ve heard that sometimes he’ll fly for Maine Island Air if they’re overbooked. That’s why he flew Sky that day. It depends on his mood.”

“Now that *does* sound like him. A moody opportunist.” Keeping her voice casual, Brittany stood up. “I’m grateful for the ride, but now you need to get back to Ryan and Lizzy.” *And stop talking about Zach.*

“I’ll stay and help. It isn’t going to be easy with your wrist in a cast.”

“No. I want you to go and have wild monkey sex and make up for all those years you were stuck with boring Neil.”

“I’m getting that you didn’t like Neil.”

“He wasn’t right for you.” Brittany started to help Emily unpack the last of the shopping, but with one hand it wasn’t easy. “Let me pay you. My wallet is in my backpack.” She glanced across the bags towards her case. “Must still be in your car.”

“I don’t want your money, but I don’t think your backpack is in my car. Are you sure you brought it with you?”

“I had it with me on the flight over. I was so damn desperate to get away from Zach I must have left it on the plane. Crap. It has everything. My passport and my purse. Which means I have no money.” Annoyed, Brittany paced across the kitchen. “How could I have been so careless?”

“You’re tired, in pain and you met your ex-husband for the first time in years. I’d say you had reason to be distracted. I’ll fetch it.”

“You’ve done enough. I’ll sort it out tomorrow.”

“What if he brings it over?”

The thought unnerved her more than she wanted it to. “He won’t. He’ll probably hand the bag to Ryan.”

“How did he react when he saw you were his passenger?”

“He didn’t, but Zach isn’t exactly big on showing his feelings.” And she’d wanted him to. Once upon a time, she’d wanted him to say those three little words. How many nights had she spent waiting, hoping? “Probably because he didn’t feel anything.”

“I don’t believe that.” Emily looked worried. “I don’t want to leave you on your own.”

“I’m fine.” Her smile was bright, swift and totally false. “It was a bit of a shock seeing him, but only because I haven’t thought about Zachary Flynn in years. Hearts heal. Bruised feelings heal. And in a way he did me a favor.”

“You mean by making your first time unforgettable?”

Brittany felt her whole body heat. “No, I do not mean that. I mean by walking out on me, leaving me free to take up my college place. Can you imagine what my life would have been if he hadn’t left me? I wouldn’t have done any of the things I’ve done. Thanks for the lift, Em, but now I need to go to bed and sleep off that journey.”

Emily gave her a long look. “You’re not going to cry, are you?”

“Are you kidding? The only time I cry is when I’m peeling onions and I can’t do that one-handed.”

“In that case I’ll see you tomorrow.” Emily picked up her purse

and her keys. “Ryan is treating Lizzy to breakfast at the Ocean Club. Ten o’clock. Join us?”

Her wrist throbbed and her head throbbed. Worse still was the way she felt inside. Wounds, long covered, lay exposed and smarting. She felt weak and vulnerable and she hated feeling that way. “I’ll be sleeping.”

Emily refused to budge. “You won’t. You’ll be waking up early and grumpy with jet lag. We’ll fix that with coffee. I’ll drive over here just before ten.”

“You don’t give up, do you?”

“I know you’re hurting and I’m not going to let you hurt alone. For now you need sleep, but on the weekend we’re going to talk about this. Things always seem better when the three of us are together.”

Friends. They laughed with you through the good times and hugged you during the bad. They cheered your successes and bandaged the wounds from falls.

Men came and went from her life, but her friends always had her back.

It made her feel better knowing that. “Thanks for the lift and the shopping. I’ll see you at breakfast, but I’ll walk. It will do me good. Now go back to your man and your child.”

“And my dog.”

“*Dog?* Who are you and what have you done with my friend?”

Emily smiled. “Agnes can’t cope with Cocoa so we’ve inherited her. Lizzy is thrilled.”

“Man, child, dog and swimming.” Brittany shook her head in disbelief. “I’ve been away too long.”

ZACH STROLLED INTO the busy bar of the Ocean Club and dumped the backpack on the seat next to Ryan, who was deep in conversation with Alec Hunter.

“Can you drop that off next time you’re passing?”

“Passing where?”

“Castaway Cottage.”

Ryan raised his eyebrows. “Do I look like I work for FedEx? And since when does anyone ‘pass’ Castaway Cottage? The clue is in the name. It’s at the end of the road to nowhere.”

“You’ve been passing it often enough the last month so that you can have sex with the pretty blonde who moved in with the kid who looks like Goldilocks.”

“Has someone installed a webcam I don’t know about?”

Alec suppressed a yawn. “This is Puffin Island. The most secure place in the whole of the North America. If a caterpillar lifts its head, people can tell you how high. The reason we don’t have an island newspaper is because there is nothing anyone could write that the population don’t already know.” Pushing a beer towards Zach, he said, “Sit down. We bought you a drink in case you joined us.” After a moment’s hesitation, Zach slid into the vacant seat.

The summer after he’d turned sixteen, he hadn’t returned to Boston. Instead, Philip and Celia had taken him in with the approval of the authorities. For months, Zach had lived on a knife

edge, waiting for them to tell him they'd made a mistake and that other plans had been made for him, but they never did. Instead of throwing him out, they'd given him a key to their home.

Carrying that key, he'd felt like a fake and a fraud. He knew a hundred different ways to break into a house. He didn't need a key.

Philip had arranged for him to attend the local school and it was there he'd met Ryan.

His closest brush with happiness had been on the days he'd been sucked into Ryan's noisy, disorganized family life.

"How's Rachel? I saw her with Jared."

"Who my little sister dates is her business."

Zach eyed Ryan's fingers, white on the bottle, and knew how hard he was struggling not to make it his business. Knowing that Ryan had all but raised his younger sister after the death of their parents, the protective streak didn't surprise him.

"You could do her hair at the wedding." Knowing that humor always worked better than sympathy, he went with that. "You always were good with bows and braids."

Ryan shot him a black look. "She's not marrying the guy."

Alec stretched out his legs, a gleam of humor in his eyes. "So it's just sex?"

Ryan cursed softly and ran his hand over the back of his neck. "Why do I feel this way? I'm not her father."

"You care," Alec said mildly, "and caring is the first step towards psychological trauma. Buckle up. It's going to get worse

before it gets better.”

And sometimes, Zach thought, it never got better.

Sometimes, the trauma was so great you learned how to stop caring.

Ryan drained his beer and looked at Zach. “So how did you end up with Brittany’s backpack?”

“She left it in my plane. Your blonde friend gave Brittany a lift home but they managed to leave the backpack.” And he’d stared at it for the best part of thirty minutes, weighing up his options, annoyed that he’d been so distracted by seeing her again he hadn’t noticed it. “She’s back.”

“Brittany? Yeah, I know. As you say, I’m having sex with the friend who gave her a lift whose name, by the way, is Emily. For the sake of accuracy I should tell you that her hair is more caramel than blond and we’ve never actually had sex in Castaway Cottage. Her choice, not mine.” Ryan jerked his head towards the beer. “Drink. Given that you just flew your ex-wife in, I’m guessing you’re going to need several of these. Or maybe something stronger.”

Something stronger sounded tempting, but Zach didn’t want to fight the crowd at the bar. “How do you know I flew her in?”

“Same reason you knew I was having sex with the woman living in her cottage. Nothing travels faster than gossip, especially when it’s juicy. And because I’m a man and have no tact or sensitivity, I’m going to ask the question everyone wants to ask. How hard did she punch you?”

Zach reached for the beer. “There was no physical contact.” He didn’t mention the solid thump in his gut that had come from seeing her again. “It was a civilized encounter.”

“Civilized?” Ryan’s brows rose. “That doesn’t sound like Brittany, especially since the last time she saw you was when you walked out days after your wedding.”

“Thanks for the reminder.”

Knowing how protective the islanders were of Brittany and how suspicious they were of him, Zach hadn’t expected a warm welcome on his return to the island, but Ryan had immediately invited him for a drink at the Ocean Club, sending a clear message to the locals that whatever had happened in the past had no bearing on the present. “For that she didn’t black your eye? Are you sure you picked up the right passenger? Fierce brunette who once shot me in the butt with an arrow? I’ve got money on her taking a swing at you within five minutes of laying eyes on you.”

Zach gave a grim smile. “Pay up. Seems like she didn’t care enough to take a swing at me.”

But it was true he’d expected a greater response from her.

Guilt, an unfamiliar emotion, nagged at him like an old wound.

He’d broken hearts before, right along with rules and property, and it had never bothered him until Brittany.

Unlike everyone else he’d ever met in his life, she’d believed in him.

Turned out living up to someone's expectations had been more of a pressure than living down to them. He knew he'd done her a favor by disappointing her sooner rather than later, but he should have found a less brutal way of doing it.

"Ten years is a long time," Alec said easily. "You were both young. It's history, long forgotten."

Ryan finished his drink. "That's a strange statement from someone who makes a living ensuring history isn't forgotten."

Alec Hunter, a naval historian, had carved out a successful career as a TV presenter and explorer. "That's different. I'm talking about relationship history."

"So am I." Ryan shrugged. "In my experience women don't forget. They nurture the mad and then produce it when you least expect it. Either way, you're doomed, Zach."

"She wasn't mad," Zach said flatly. "She was indifferent."

She'd sat with casual poise, those endless legs bronzed from the Greek sun, her response to seeing him again approaching boredom.

Why should that bother him?

Alec finished his beer. "Last time I checked, archaeologists didn't earn enough to fly private. How could she afford your services?"

Zach thought about the phone call from the Greek offices of ZervaCo. "Seems she's keeping rich company these days."

Ryan gestured across the bar for Tom to bring them more drinks. "You're not exactly struggling yourself."

“My bank account is healthy enough, although I’m a long way off from owning a Gulfstream.”

“Would you want to?”

“No.” Zach took a mouthful of beer. “It has to be landed on a strip of tarmac.”

“Whereas you’d rather land where no sane man would ever venture. So if the reunion was civilized, what’s stopping you from delivering the backpack yourself?”

Evading the question, Zach looked across the crowded bar and caught the eye of a young woman who’d been watching him since he’d walked in.

She gave him a shy smile and he immediately looked away.

All his relationships were short-term but he couldn’t contemplate even short-term while his ex-wife was jammed in his head.

And shy didn’t work for him. He made it a rule not to let himself touch anything breakable or vulnerable.

“I haven’t set foot in Castaway Cottage for over a decade.” Not since that day Kathleen Forrest had gone to the mainland with her knitting friends, leaving her granddaughter alone in the secluded house on the beach.

The first thing Brittany had done was phone Zach and invite him over.

He’d figured that if the good girl wanted to try her hand at being bad it wasn’t his business to talk her out of it.

Remembering what had happened next brought sweat to his

forehead. It had been the beginning of a long vacation for his judgment.

He was doing better these days, but barely a day passed without him encountering someone who wanted to punch him for past offenses.

He'd assumed today was Brittany's turn and no one, least of all himself, would argue that he didn't deserve a hell of a punch for what he'd done to her.

He'd weighed that fact carefully before returning to the island, then decided that since she mostly spent her time traveling and had all the support of the islanders, he was the one who would suffer. Despite his relationship with Philip and his friendship with Ryan, most of the locals still viewed him with suspicion. He figured he'd earned that and anyway, he was used to being on the receiving end of disappointment and disapproval. It didn't bother him. He didn't live his life to please others. He did what felt right to him. Made choices that felt right to him. As long as he could live with himself, that was all that mattered.

But in the end it hadn't been hatred or anger he'd seen in her eyes.

It had been—nothing.

His ex-wife really didn't give a damn that he was occupying her space.

In which case he should just return the bag and have done with it.

She needed it. He had it. It was as simple as that.

Maybe then the two of them could make a go of living side by side.

With a rough curse he snatched up the backpack, ignoring Ryan's curious look.

"I'll take it over there in the morning."

"Why not now?"

"Long flight. She'll be asleep." And there was no way he wanted to risk seeing her in her pajamas or, worse, naked.

He'd knock on the door, hand it over and leave. No words needed to be exchanged. No emotions, although if she wanted to yell at him he would stand there and take it. He wouldn't even defend himself because how did you defend the indefensible? But in any case, it was clear Brittany no longer had any feelings she wanted to express.

She wasn't looking for closure.

The door between them had been closed a long time.

## *CHAPTER THREE*

CASTAWAY COTTAGE HAD stood at the edge of the curve of sand known as Shell Bay for over half a century. Built of clapboard and surrounded by a pretty coastal garden, it had been purchased by Brittany's grandparents just after their marriage.

Brittany's mother, Linda, had been born there and spent the next twenty years longing to escape the confines of island life. At that time the sole economy of the island, like so many in the area, had been fishing. It wasn't until years later that a wealthy Bostonian had discovered the island by chance on a sailing trip and proceeded to build a home. Others had followed and, together with tax breaks encouraging people to live and work there, the fortunes and population of the island had been boosted. But for Linda, life had been all about the lobster and the never-ending cycle of worry that went with the business.

Marriage had been a way out. Brittany's father had worked as an engineer for an oil company and was often away, leaving Linda alone on an island she couldn't wait to escape.

Brittany was ten when her parents had divorced. Her mother had immediately remarried and moved south to Florida. Brittany, settled on the island, had stayed with her grandmother.

Occasionally her mother would visit, more to confirm her life choices than to spend time with her daughter. Her father she'd rarely seen. Wrapped in the warm cocoon of her grandmother's

love, Brittany had barely noticed their absence. She'd grown up knowing that families came in different shapes and sizes, and the island community was so small and close-knit, she'd taken for granted the support of a wider group of people who knew and loved her. She'd been taught to swim by Kathleen, her grandmother, but it had been John Harris, the harbormaster, who had settled her down on the edge of the quay one day and shown her how to tie a bowline. John was the first to take her sailing and Dave Brown, who had lobstered the waters around Puffin Island for three decades, had been the one to teach her about the business that had been a mainstay of the island's economy for longer than anyone could remember. Along with other islanders, she'd spent time helping him get ready for the season. She'd scraped the buoys, pressure washed the hull of his boat and painted the side where the surface had chipped from hauling traps. In return he'd taken her out on the water. From him she'd learned about hydraulic haulers and bottom sounders, that the temperature of the water changes with the seasons and that lobsters migrate from shallow waters to deeper ones. And from her grandmother she'd learned how to cook the lobster in a fish kettle and eat it fresh, dripping with butter. Raising a child on Puffin Island was a communal activity, especially during the long winters when so much of the time was spent indoors, often without power. Brittany had understood that the fortunes of the island were linked with the waters that surrounded it, and she also understood why people were working to change that.

A thriving island needed people, and people needed work.

Some of the older islanders resented the large influx of visitors that swelled the population over the summer months, many of them wealthy Northeasterners from Boston, New York and Philadelphia, but most accepted them as necessary for the survival of the community.

It wasn't until her late teens that the warm embrace of the community began to feel more like constriction and interest became intrusion. Instead of feeling soothed by island life she'd felt smothered, unable to breathe without at least ten people knowing the depth of each breath she took. She'd started to wonder what it would be like to live in a place where the whole population didn't know what you had on your report card.

And then she'd fallen in love with Zachary Flynn.

*Zachary Flynn.*

With a groan, Brittany rolled over and opened her eyes, remembering the events of the night before. It hadn't been a dream. He was really here, invading her home.

Outside dawn had barely broken and a quick check of her phone told her it was only 6:00 a.m.

Thanks to the time change, her body thought it was already after midday and as a result she was awake. Exhausted, but definitely awake.

After Emily had left the night before, she'd stumbled up the stairs and collapsed onto the bed, too tired to undress let alone wrap her mind around the problem of Zach. She hadn't even

bothered sliding into the bed her friend had made up with clean sheets. Instead she'd covered herself with the pretty patchwork quilt lovingly stitched by her grandmother as another layer of protection against the cold months and taken refuge in sleep.

Now, with sleep evading her and the gradual dawn lighting the gunmetal gray of the sea, she had no choice but to think about the events of the day before.

Her head still heavy from the journey and the time change, she sat up and scooped her hair away from her face.

The quilt lay on the floor by the bed where she'd kicked it during the night. Probably a result of dreaming about Zach.

*Crap.*

When she'd made her decision to return home to heal, she hadn't planned on finding him here. If she'd known, she would have stayed in Greece. In a moment of wild panic she contemplated flying back to Europe but dismissed the idea instantly. If she left now he'd know she was running away. And she didn't run from anything. Her grandmother had taught her that.

You stood and faced things. You dealt with them.

So how should she deal with this?

Indifference. That was the way to go.

Whenever she saw him, which hopefully would be infrequently, she'd pretend indifference. She'd deal with this situation with quiet dignity.

How hard could it be?

Through the open windows she could hear the rhythmic crash of the surf on the rocks, and the pretty muslin curtains billowed in the breeze. Not for the first time she was grateful that Castaway Cottage was away from the main hub of the island. It meant that he would have no reason to come here.

She flopped onto her back and stared up at the same ceiling she'd stared at growing up.

No matter how conflicted her emotions about Zach, it felt good to be home.

And Castaway Cottage wasn't just home, it was a haven. Despite the fact she was alone in the house, the feeling of security wrapped itself around her.

How many times had she lain here, listening to her grandmother clattering beneath her in the kitchen? She'd sung as she'd cooked, humming to herself as she'd whipped up pancakes to go with blueberries freshly harvested from the bushes outside the cottage door.

Pushing aside the pang of sadness, Brittany gave herself a little longer in bed, and then sat up.

Self-pity wasn't going to help and as her grandmother wasn't there to kick her butt, she'd kick her own.

But first she had to find a way of managing everyday tasks with a broken wrist, starting with a shower.

After that, she'd walk across the fields to the Ocean Club and meet Emily and Ryan for breakfast. The sea air would wake her up.

Turned out that undressing with her wrist in a plaster cast wasn't easy.

Inside the bathroom she pulled her T-shirt over her head and lost her balance. Steadying herself against the wall, she dropped it on the floor, followed by her shorts and underwear. Who would have thought that stripping one-handed could be so hard? Or that taking a shower while trying to keep her cast dry required something close to gymnastics. Making a mental note to buy more shampoo on her trip to the harbor, she was congratulating herself on how well she'd managed and was about to reach for a towel when she noticed something on the floor of the bathroom.

And screamed.

ZACH HAD KNOCKED on the door, prowled around the house and had reached the conclusion Brittany wasn't home when he heard the scream. It was like something from the most gruesome horror movie and it froze his blood.

Cursing under his breath, he vaulted over the fence and used skills he wasn't supposed to have to open her back door.

It took him a matter of seconds, and he wondered not for the first time why islanders were so lax about their security. She might as well have left the door open with a notice saying All Welcome.

His heart was pumping, his hands clammy as he anticipated what he might find.

Fire?

A masked intruder?

For Brittany to be scared it must be something truly threatening.

He strode through the kitchen, noticing with a frown that it looked as if an intruder had been having a party. A couple of unwashed dishes were stacked on the counter and the table was covered in bags. Following the direction of the scream, he took the stairs two at a time and reached her in under a minute.

She was flattened against the wall of the shower, naked and shivering. Her body was gleaming wet, droplets of water clinging to the rosy tip of her breasts.

“Christ.” Distracted by the lean lines of her glorious body, Zach banged his head on the low door frame and saw stars. He remembered too late that he’d done the same thing the last time he’d set foot in Castaway Cottage.

She’d been naked then, too. At the time he’d taken the blow to the head as punishment for his sins, which had been considerable.

This time the sin was all in his head, but the pain was real enough.

Her gaze connected with his as she finally registered the identity of her rescuer.

“Zach! What the hell are you doing here?”

“You screamed.” It took effort, but he hauled his gaze up to her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

Shivering, she pointed to the corner of the bathroom.

“That.”

He turned his head from smooth, golden limbs and raw

temptation and saw the thong on the floor. He'd seen more substantial dental floss. Heat uncurled inside him. "You dropped your underwear?" And then something moved and he saw the problem. An intruder, but the not the sort he'd been expecting. "It's a spider."

"I know what it is." She spoke through her teeth. "Get rid of it. Please."

If he hadn't been trying to will his libido into sudden death, he would have laughed. He'd never met a woman more capable of looking after herself than Brittany. If a man had broken into her house, she probably would have knocked him unconscious with the nearest heavy object, but a large insect left her quivering and helpless.

Forgetting his intention not to look at her again, he shifted his gaze back to her. "So it's still spiders." He noticed that her hair was longer. Or maybe it just seemed that way because it was wet. It lay over one shoulder in a dark heavy mass, leaving the other bare. "You always were scared of them. Nothing else. Just spiders."

"If you don't stop talking and catch the damn thing it will run away and then I'll have to move out because there isn't room in this house for both of us."

It wouldn't make any difference if he looked away because the image of Brittany's naked body was imprinted on his mind.

He wasn't quite sure how he'd managed to end up in a small, steamy bathroom with his naked ex-wife but he was sure he

deserved every moment of the punishment.

That brief glance had been enough to show him that she'd lost the angular lines of girlhood, the awkwardness of inhabiting a body that developed at its own time and pace. It had been right here in this house that he'd taught her what her body could do, used his skill and experience to extend her education into areas not covered by school.

As in everything, she'd proved a quick study.

She'd been an eager pupil, lying on the bed with her hair spilling over her naked body, doing everything he'd demanded of her and more.

If he'd been filling out her report card, he would have given her top grades.

Her reward had been a broken heart.

He dragged his eyes from sun-kissed skin and lean muscle and focused on the spider. To be fair it was too big to fit comfortably under a teacup, which he knew to be the favored way of dealing with anything born with more than four legs. "Probably thinks it's a good place to raise a family."

"You're not funny. *Please* get rid of it."

The fact that she hadn't even reached for a towel told him how freaked out she was.

For his own sake, he grabbed the nearest towel, threw it to her and dealt with the spider.

When he returned to the bathroom, she was still in the same place, the towel clutched to her chest with her good hand.

Turned out it was a hand towel, and she didn't seem to realize that clutching it across her breasts left most of the lower half of her bare. Or maybe her priorities were elsewhere.

Her teeth were chattering. "Is it dead?"

"No." There were plenty of humans he would happily have flattened under his boot, but when it came to animals and insects he preferred a more sympathetic approach. "Didn't see the point in killing it. I relocated it somewhere it might be more welcome and comfortable."

"That means it's going to find its way back into the house." She took a step back, and he turned his head, desperately searching for a bigger towel.

"Last time I looked, spiders didn't come equipped with GPS. They don't have spiders in Greece?"

"Not ones that size. Or maybe I managed to avoid them." Distracted, she pushed damp hair back from her face. "What are you doing here anyway?"

Finally, now the crisis was averted, she was registering exactly who had come to her rescue. He had a feeling that up until that point he could have been anyone. "You left your backpack. Thought you might need it."

"But how did you get in? I locked the doors—" Her voice faded and her eyes widened. "You *broke* in? Why would you break in?"

"You screamed."

And he was trying not to examine the reason he'd felt the

fierce need to protect something that wasn't even his to protect.

She stared at him, lips parted, breathing shallow. "Right." Her mouth closed and she swallowed hard. "I guess I should be grateful breaking and entering is still one of your party tricks."

It had been years since he'd used anything other than a key to open a door, but he knew there were many who would have shared her assumption. Usually it didn't bother him. People could believe what they wanted to believe; the only difference was that in the past she'd been the first one to defend him.

He could hardly blame her for recalibrating her expectations.

And if part of him was unsettled by how quickly he'd been driven to gain access to a locked property once she'd screamed, he ignored it. He'd believed her to be in trouble. Any man would have done the same.

Silence, tense and awkward, spread between them.

Her body was lightly tanned, the bronze glow of her shoulders intersected by paler strap marks. The uneven marks told him she'd gained that color while doing the job she loved, not by lying on a beach, soaking up the sun.

Now that the spider had gone, there was nothing between them but the past and the electricity that shimmered and crackled in the air. The way she stayed flattened to the bathroom wall made him wonder if she saw him as a threat worse than the spider.

She lifted a shaky hand to her damp hair. "I'm grateful for the whole knight-in-shining-armor routine. You said you came to return my bag. Where is it?"

“Kitchen.” And he knew she wasn’t grateful. She was livid that she’d needed help and that he’d been the one to give it.

“Thanks. Do I need to count the money?”

It was a question she never would have asked before, and he stared at her for a long moment, watching the flush build in her cheeks.

Although that was one crime he wasn’t guilty of, he knew he was guilty of plenty of others so he didn’t bother defending himself.

Instead, he looked at the clothes strewn haphazardly on the floor of the bathroom where she’d obviously struggled to strip them off. He was no detective, but it seemed to him that she’d slept in the clothes she’d traveled in.

Dragging his eyes from the thong, he eyed her plaster cast. “You having trouble managing with that thing on your arm?”

“No. No trouble.”

It was her right hand. She was right-handed. It had to be a problem, but he guessed she would rather have faced another spider than admit to him that she was struggling.

He glanced from the mess on the floor to the cast on her wrist and told himself it wasn’t his business.

“You’ve got people you can call if you need help?”

“I don’t need help. Goodbye, Zach.”

His legs refused to move. “You need to think about getting a new bolt on your back door.” The cottage was isolated. Her nearest neighbor was a mile away. The thought sent his tension

levels rocketing.

“My lock is fine. This is Puffin Island.”

“Last time I looked there was nothing stopping the criminal element stepping aboard the ferry.”

“I guess you’re proof of that.”

Zach’s eyes met hers. He’d always assumed that his less-than-clean-cut past had been part of the attraction for her, at least initially. At the time it had amused him that a few nasty secrets had the upside of making him more interesting to the opposite sex. He’d milked it for all it was worth. Why wouldn’t he? If the gutter had a silver lining, then he figured he might as well wrap himself in it.

Those days were long behind him, but clearly not forgotten. Not by him and not by the residents of Puffin Island. And, it seemed, not by his ex-wife.

With a brief nod, he turned and walked out of the house, this time leaving by the front door.

If she chose not to buy a better lock for the back door, that was her business. At any rate, he was willing to lay bets that there wasn’t a decent lock to be had in any of the stores since he’d landed back on the island.

“HOLY CRAP, he saw me naked. Could it *be* any more humiliating?” Brittany lay on her back on the bed, talking to Skylar on the phone.

“He heard you scream and broke in to save you. That’s so romantic.”

“It’s not romantic, it’s the sign of a misspent youth. Would *you* know how to break through a door without damaging the lock?”

“No, but we all have different skills and you’re missing the most important point. All these years you thought he didn’t care, but he obviously does.”

“I don’t know how you draw that conclusion.”

“He thought you were in trouble, Brit! You screamed and he came. A knight in shining armor.”

“He was wearing black jeans.” An old pair of Levi’s and a black T-shirt that had fitted him perfectly, molding to every contour of his muscular frame. “He looked like a ninja not a knight.”

“Yum.”

“Not yum! I don’t want him.”

Sky chuckled. “You mean you don’t *want* to want him.”

Remembering the sizzle of awareness when their eyes had met, Brittany bit her lip. “Why did this have to happen? Why did he have to pick this moment to come back here?”

“It’s fate.”

“I hate it when you say that.”

“Finish the story. You saw the spider, screamed and then he appeared. And you weren’t wearing anything at all. Not even a teeny tiny thong?”

“I was wearing a teeny tiny thong fifteen minutes before he arrived. It was on the floor.” She heard a sound and frowned. “Are you laughing?”

“I might be. Look, maybe he didn’t notice.”

“He noticed. He smacked his head into the door frame.”

“Oh, poor him. That must have hurt. I always said that door was too low. I can’t walk into that bathroom in heels.”

Brittany gave a murmur of exasperation. “Whose side are you on?”

“Yours, of course, but I do sympathize that he banged his head and I’m not going to be angry with him for looking out for you. So he saw you naked—then what?”

“He threw me a towel and got rid of the spider.” With those big, calloused hands that could break down a door or the defenses of a woman with equal ease.

“Well, there you go. The actions of a perfect gentleman.”

“It was a hand towel. And I can think of lots of different ways of describing Zachary Flynn, but ‘perfect gentleman’ isn’t one of them.”

“Did he, or did he not, get rid of the spider?”

“He did, but—”

“And he came back to check you were okay?”

“Yes, but—”

“It wasn’t his fault the closest thing was a hand towel. So then what? You stood there looking at each other and all you were wearing was a plaster cast. That must have been awkward.”

“It was a little more than awkward.” And hadn’t been made less so by the fact the incident had played out on the same stage as their intense affair. They’d had sex in that bathroom. They’d

had sex in almost every room of the house.

“Just awkward? Not sexy? He didn’t push you up against the wall and press his heated body against yours?”

“No! And you need to rein in your imagination.” And she needed to rein in hers.

“Can’t do that, I need it for my job.”

“So keep it for your art and don’t get creative with my sex life, especially not where Zach is concerned.”

“I always thought he’d be the kind of guy to take what he wanted without asking permission.”

“I think we’ve already established he didn’t want me.” And it shouldn’t bother her. It really shouldn’t bother her.

“It must have been hard for him to commit to someone, given he’d been alone all his life.”

“You sound as if you’d like to adopt him.”

“Now you mention it, he’s like one of those stray dogs who have been badly treated and no one ever wants to give a home to because they’re afraid of being bitten.”

“Not every stray dog can be tamed.”

“Agreed. So what happened after he’d performed epic spider removal? He left?”

“Right after I virtually accused him of stealing from my purse.”

“You didn’t! Brit? Why would you do that?”

“Because—because—I don’t know.” She was upset with herself. “I was feeling vulnerable. And he *had* just broken into

my house.”

“To save you! Do you want to know what I think?”

“No.”

“I think seeing him really messed with your head and you wanted to see the worst in him.”

“Of course it messed with my head. I was naked! And I have no idea what I’m going to say next time I see him.”

“You say ‘thank you for removing my spider.’ What are you doing this morning?”

“I’m supposed to be meeting Em for breakfast. She’s in love.”

“I know. Can you believe it? And Ryan is gorgeous. How come we never met him when we came to stay?”

“Bad timing, I guess. Up until four years ago, he was always traveling. How do I handle the fact that Zach is here?”

“How do you think you should handle it?”

She went through the options. “Anger would imply I still care, happy would be too hard to play, so I was going with indifference.”

“Indifference sounds perfect to me.”

“But he saw me naked.”

Sky laughed. “Honey, it’s not the first time.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

BRITTANY TOOK THE PRETTIEST route to the harbor and the Ocean Club, walking up the coast path and then cutting across the fields that skirted the wooded interior of the island.

With the sun shining and the air filled with the scent of grass and wildflowers, it was impossible to feel anything other than pleased to be home.

The spectacular coastline of Maine matched anything she'd seen in the Mediterranean. From the lush, emerald perfection of Acadia National Park to the granite islands inhabited only by puffins and cormorants, Penobscot Bay was a wild, unspoiled paradise.

From high up on the bluff she could see fishing boats bobbing in the sheltered harbor and yachts and windjammers dotted across the bay.

It took her a little over an hour to walk to the Ocean Club. She arrived to find Ryan and Emily already sitting on the deck along with Lizzy, Emily's six-year-old niece who was now living with her. The little girl was clutching a wooden boat to her chest and the moment she saw Brittany she moved closer to Emily.

Brittany watched as her friend scooped the child onto her lap and murmured words of reassurance.

She knew how hard the past few months must have been for Lizzy, but she also knew how hard it had been for her friend who

had always vowed never to have children.

“That boat,” she said slowly, “looks *exactly* like the *Captain Hook*. Can I take a look? Where did you get it?”

Lizzy hesitated and then handed it across the table. “John made it for me.”

“He did? I’ve never known him to make anything like this for anyone before.” She turned it in her hands and read the words on the side. “The *Captain Lizzy*. This is beautiful. You’re lucky. John must think you’re very special to have made you this.”

“It floats.”

“You’ll have to show me.” She handed the boat back. “John taught me to sail when I was your age.”

“I’m learning. Ryan is teaching me.”

Brittany had known Ryan Cooper her whole life. She’d spent her summers with his sister Helen at Camp Puffin and babysat his younger sister, Rachel, to earn money.

She greeted him with a quick kiss on the cheek and then settled down in the vacant seat.

“Good to have you home.” Ryan tilted his chair back and reached for Emily’s hand. “I hear you’ve already seen Zach and the two of you managed to keep it civilized. You didn’t kill him.”

Civilized?

There was nothing civilized about the chemistry between them. Never had been. Being with Zach had been the most dizzying and exciting time of her life.

Until he’d dumped her.

“Why would I kill him? It doesn’t bother me whether he’s here or not.” Ignoring Emily’s raised eyebrows, she sat back while Kirsti delivered food and drinks to the table.

“A special welcome home, Brittany! Fresh blueberries, our homemade cinnamon-and-honey granola, Greek yogurt in case you’re missing Crete, coffee and pancakes. I’m pretty sure they don’t make those in Greece. And I added a side of bacon to your order because I know it’s your favorite. Enjoy.”

Brittany’s stomach purred. Apart from a mouthful of the muffin Emily had produced, she hadn’t eaten since the flight. “If I eat this I’ll be the size of a small yacht.”

“You’re tired. Fuel will help that. And diet soda isn’t fuel.” Kirsti gave her a knowing look and Brittany returned it with a sheepish grin.

“It was my breakfast of choice in Greece.”

Kirsti shuddered. “I know nothing about Greek history but I’m fairly sure that isn’t part of the traditional Mediterranean diet. Eat your granola.”

As she walked away, Brittany glanced around the crowded terrace. “Business is good? I don’t see many empty seats.”

“Business is good.” Ryan reached across and rescued the soft toy Lizzy had dropped.

Looking at the plush puffin, Brittany knew instantly where it had come from. “Rachel had a million of those when she was little.”

“Because she kept losing them and couldn’t sleep without

one.”

Knowing that Ryan’s experience of raising his younger siblings had left him with a thirst for a child-free existence, Brittany was surprised by the change in him. “How is Alec? Is he in London at the moment?”

“No, he’s back. Had a drink with him last night. Zach joined us.” Ryan picked up his coffee. “He has your backpack. He’s going to return it.”

“He already did.” Not wanting to dwell on the fact she’d screamed like a baby and then stood in front of him naked, Brittany picked up her spoon and dug it into the granola and yogurt. “There’s no need to look so worried. Our relationship was over a long time ago. I can barely remember it.”

Ryan gave her a steady look but said nothing and she felt a rush of gratitude.

He’d been a good friend to her.

In those few initial weeks after Zach had deserted her, he’d been the one to pick up the pieces.

With his help and the help of her friends and grandmother, she’d healed.

And gradually she’d forced herself to accept the truth.

Zach had never loved her.

He wasn’t capable of it. He wasn’t capable of intimacy or sharing or any of the things that went hand in hand with love.

Brittany looked down at her plate and realized she’d eaten the food without noticing it. “Maybe I was hungrier than I thought.”

She looked up just as Ryan reached out and stroked Emily's cheek with his fingers.

They shared a look that reminded Brittany of Nik and Lily.

Everyone was in love, she thought numbly. Everyone was holding hands and exchanging long looks.

Unsettled, she finished her coffee and stood up. "Thanks for breakfast. I need to pick up a few things at the harbor. See you later."

She walked out of the Ocean Club, enjoying the view of the bay. After the sweltering heat of Greece in August she was grateful for the sea breeze. High above, the gulls circled, hopeful of an impromptu meal delivered by careless tourists.

The *Captain Hook* was leaving on its late-morning trip to the mainland, its squat bulk and red paint making it instantly recognizable. Knowing that this was the busiest time of the year for John, the harbormaster, she didn't pause to talk to him and was surprised when he came striding across to her.

"Hi, John! I saw the boat you made Lizzy. It's beautiful! It's good to see you after— Oh." She staggered as he pulled her into a giant bear hug. She'd known him since before she could walk, but this was the first time she could ever remember him hugging her. "That's nice." The words were muffled against his shoulder and then he released her, his eyes fierce.

"You've been away too long. I hope this time you'll stay awhile. No more of those flying visits."

"I was working, John. I was on a dig in Greece, and before

that I was studying.”

“I know. Oxford and Cambridge. *Doctor Forrest*. The night Ryan and Alec told us, we all raised a glass up at the Ocean Club.”

“You did?” Surprised and touched, Brittany felt a rush of affection for the islanders.

“We always knew you’d do great things. Kathleen would have been proud of you.” His voice was gruff. “And all I can say is I’m sorry. A good girl like you deserves better.”

Confused, Brittany looked at him blankly. “Er—better than what?”

“Better than coming home with so many achievements to celebrate and finding that cheating ex-husband of yours living on your island.”

Her stomach lurched.

“He didn’t cheat, John, and it’s not my island. He has a perfect right to be here.”

“You were here first. And you’re local. You belong here.”

As a child it had both fascinated and offended her principles that people had to “earn” the right to be accepted on Puffin Island. As far as she was concerned, people had a right to come and go as they pleased and the place would be all the better for the variety.

“There’s room for both of us.”

“I hear he was the one who flew you from the mainland.”

It was inevitable that the manner of her arrival would have

been the subject of local gossip, but still the thought of it grated over her skin like sandpaper. “He did.”

“That must have shaken you up some.”

She chose to deliberately misunderstand. “Not at all. The weather was smooth and Zach is an excellent pilot.” He’d been a lousy excuse for a friend and an even worse husband but she didn’t intend to discuss that with anyone, no matter how much they probed and how much she loved them. She tried to turn the conversation. “How are you, John?”

“I’m good, considering. Must have been awkward for you, seeing him again. By my calculation you haven’t laid eyes on the man since he left you all those years ago.”

“That’s why it wasn’t awkward. It was so long ago I barely remember it. I appreciate how much you all care, but no one needs to worry about me. Good to see you, John. I have to pick up a few things from Harbor Stores before I go back to the cottage.” She extracted herself from the inquisition, crossed the road and bumped into Hilda, who had been a close friend of her grandmother’s.

“Hilda!” Genuinely pleased to see her, she gave the old lady a warm hug. “How are you doing? I hear Agnes has moved near you. I bet the two of you never stop talking.”

“Talking with friends is one of life’s pleasures, especially now that my hips won’t let me rush anywhere. Can’t even run away from a handsome man, not that there are too many chasing me these days.” Hilda patted her arm. “And on that topic, I just want

you to know we're all watching him so you don't need to worry."

"Watching him?"

"After the way he treated you last time—" Hilda gave her a fierce look that would have repelled the most determined invader. "If he puts a foot out of line, we're going to deal with him. There are some who have forgiven him everything because he flew that child to the hospital when no one else would, but as far as I'm concerned, he still has to prove himself. And if you ask me, Ryan should be a bit more careful in picking his friends."

There was no need to ask who she was talking about and Brittany sighed. "Hilda—"

"Don't you worry yourself. You live your life and leave it to us. We've got your back, honey."

"I'm trying to live my life, Hilda, but people keep—"

"Caring." Hilda patted her hand. "It's the least we can do. Protecting our own is one of the perks of island life. Welcome home, pumpkin. Your grandmother would be proud."

Feeling eight years old, Brittany gave a weak smile. "Thanks, Hilda. You take care now. And please don't worry about me. It was a long time ago and I have no feelings for him." She fled and took refuge inside Harbor Stores.

*Holy crap.*

No wonder so many people left and moved to the mainland. If it carried on like this, she'd be joining them.

If there was one thing she hated it was pity. She'd all but drowned in it after Zach had left her. And what did Hilda mean

when she said they were watching him?

She had visions of the islanders setting up a roster to monitor the exact movements of her ex-husband. If it hadn't been so frustrating it would be funny.

Dropping soap into her basket, she glanced into the street to check no one she knew was about to come into the store.

“Well, if it isn't Brittany Forrest Flynn.”

Recognizing the female voice, Brittany closed her eyes.

She should have stayed in bed.

Pinning a smile on her face, she turned. “It's just Forrest these days. I dropped the Flynn.”

“No one would blame you for that, seeing as he dropped you first.”

Definitely should have stayed in bed.

“Hello, Mel. How are you?”

“Better than you, I should think.” Mel Parker, who had been at school with her and now ran Harbor Stores with her parents, eyed her wrist. “I heard you were injured. I'm guessing that's what happens when you do a dangerous job. I saw *Raiders of the Lost Ark* a while back. And *Lara Croft*. Looks like an exciting way to earn a living, archaeology. And dangerous.”

“Well, those are both movies, obviously, and movies remove most of the boring parts. Weeks of people excavating the same piece of earth and finding nothing doesn't make for gripping viewing.”

“But you broke your wrist.” Mel looked at Brittany's cast in

awe and admiration and Brittany decided she'd better spell out the detail or the next time she came into town she'd be hearing stories about how she'd been chased by natives with a massive boulder rolling towards her.

"I was talking to someone and tripped." In fact she'd been laughing so hard at one of Spyros's jokes, she hadn't looked where she was putting her feet. "I fell into the trench."

Mel's eyes went round. "That sounds awful. Were there snakes?"

"No. No snakes. And no angry natives." Just Spy, also laughing so hard that it had taken him a moment to realize she'd actually broken something. "Sorry to disappoint. And anyway, I don't mind snakes. Just spiders."

"We were all real sorry to hear the news."

"That's kind of you, Mel, but it will heal."

"I wasn't talking about *that* news. I was talking about Zachary." The girl's voice lowered and she glanced around the empty store, even though both of them knew that a store crowded with people wouldn't have stopped her gossiping.

Deciding it was time to move this reunion on, Brittany dropped several cans of tomatoes that she didn't need into her basket. "Everything is fine, Mel."

"Can't see how it can be fine when you're living with your cheating ex under your nose."

Brittany frowned. "He didn't cheat."

*Why did everyone keep saying that?*

“Oh, that’s right, he just upped and left. I guess that’s almost worse.” Clearly not in any hurry to return to the demands of her job, Mel pondered the severity of the crime. “Mom always says that when a man leaves you for another woman, then all it means is he met someone he liked more and you weren’t right for each other, but when a man leaves you for no one in particular, it means he didn’t like being with you enough to stay. That’s got to hurt.”

Brittany contemplated swinging her good arm and decided she didn’t want to be arrested on her first proper day back on the island. “Or it means we were both too young to be married.”

“You *were* young.” Mel leaned against the aisle, settling in for a long chat. “And to think we were all jealous, because you were the one who caught his eye. We all wanted Zach to be our first. Who wouldn’t? The man was sex on a stick. I still remember the rumors about just how good he was in the bedroom.” She looked at Brittany expectantly, clearly waiting for confirmation and juicy details.

“Nice meeting up with you again, Mel.” She snatched toothpaste and shampoo without looking at the brand and headed to the checkout.

“I’ll ring those up for you.” Suddenly efficient, Mel walked behind the counter. “Zach comes in here sometimes so if you’re looking to avoid him, just send me a text and I can warn you if he’s here. You won’t want to be anywhere near the man.”

“I don’t need warning and I’m not trying to avoid him. I’m just

trying to live my life.” And that was turning out to be a thousand times harder than she’d expected. She was tempted to abandon her purchases and run. “But thank you for caring.”

“Thought it might be awkward, what with you making such a giant fool of yourself and all. Throwing in college, marrying the man. You always were a romantic, and so in love with him. Which just goes to prove that even smart people can be stupid when it comes to love.”

“I don’t think—”

“If it were me, I might have forgiven the fact he hadn’t bought me a ring.” Mel bagged up the purchases. “I’m not sure I’d have been so forgiving if a man had left me after my wedding night.”

Great. No doubt the whole island had been speculating that Brittany Forrest was bad in bed.

“It wasn’t my wedding night.”

“Oh, that’s right, he waited ten nights.” She gave Brittany a knowing look and Brittany waited for her to voice the implication hovering in the air.

Ten nights to see if she would improve and when she hadn’t, he’d walked.

Was that what they were all saying?

It horrified her to think of people talking about it and speculating about something so personal.

“I appreciate your concern and deep interest in my life, Mel, but it was a long time ago.”

“He’s still sexy as hell, though. And now he has money. No

one knows exactly how he came by it, of course, but who cares?" Mel sighed and stared dreamily out the window, her feelings for Zach visible on her face.

Brittany frowned. "I would care, but I don't think for a moment that he—"

"The way he flew that little girl through that storm when she was sick and no one else would? There's a touch of a hero inside him. I've always said that what he needs is the right woman." It was obvious she thought she might be that woman. "I mean, he's single and all, and I'm guessing you're not interested." She eyed Brittany closely, looking for visual signs of inner trauma, and Brittany held her gaze and her temper.

"I'm not interested, Mel. He's all yours. I moved on a long time ago."

But it seemed no one else had.

Apparently it wasn't just with Zach that she had to keep up the pretense that she didn't care, it was with most of the island.

"If you change your mind about me texting you when he's in town, just let me know. He's living over at Camp Puffin, but I expect you already know that."

No, she hadn't known that. She hadn't got as far as wondering where he was living.

As long as it wasn't next door to her, she didn't care.

She was already exhausted and she'd been home less than twenty-four hours.

Ignoring Brittany's silence, Mel decided this was information

that needed to be disclosed. “Seems Philip Law is helping him out again, like he always does. Zach showed up here a couple of months ago, bold as brass. Flew his plane in, didn’t explain himself to anyone.”

“Why would he need to explain? He’s like a son to them.”

“Molly Noakes told me they hadn’t heard from him in months. Then one day he just shows up like he has a perfect right to be here.”

“He does have a perfect right to be here. Puffin Island isn’t private.”

“Folks were speculating on why he was back. Last thing we all heard, he was flying in Alaska. And now he has his own plane.” Mel leaned forward and lowered her voice. “I heard a rumor he might have stolen it, but I’m guessing not.”

Brittany stared at the girl who had sat across from her in the classroom and paid more attention to the boys than the teacher. “I’m guessing you’re right.”

She ignored the niggle of guilt that came from knowing she’d also wondered how he’d come to own a plane.

“He’s flying people with money. *Real* money. Charging a fortune. If you’d waited to divorce him, you might be a rich woman now. Could have bought yourself that diamond ring he never gave you.”

Brittany had studied weapons through the ages and found none more effective for inducing pain than the barb of the female tongue.

“Thanks, Mel. Great to see you again.”

*Get me out of here.*

Desperate to escape before any more locals came in to do their shopping and gossip, she strode through the store, her eyes fixed on the exit.

The doors slid open at her approach and she quickened her pace, her strides just short of running.

Determined not to catch anyone's eye she kept her head down. And collided with the solid wall of muscle that was Zach.

## CHAPTER FIVE

GROCERIES TUMBLED OUT of the bag and Zach caught Brittany's shoulders and steadied her. He felt the smoothness of bare skin, and breathed in the faint smell of summer roses. Heat ripped through him.

He was no stranger to sexual attraction, on the contrary, it formed the basis for every relationship he'd ever had, but nothing came close to the desire he felt for this woman.

He half expected to see flames licking around his ankles.

In the circumstances his response was beyond inappropriate.

He tried to work out what had happened to send her almost sprinting out of the store. It was true that shopping bored the hell out of him and he felt like running whenever he had to buy groceries, but he assumed it had to be more than that. She'd been so desperate to escape, she'd slammed right into him.

He tried to let her go, but his hands refused to cooperate with his brain. Instead he tightened his grip and stroked his thumbs soothingly over her bare arms. "What happened?"

She gave a soft gasp of dismay as she registered who was holding her and immediately stepped back.

"Sorry about that. Didn't see you."

He was about to demand the reason for her rapid exit when Mel appeared from the front of the store, her mouth gleaming with a coat of freshly applied lipstick.

Whenever he appeared, so did the makeup.

On one occasion he'd seen her crouched behind the counter, using her phone as a mirror as she'd checked her reflection.

Her barely concealed infatuation didn't bother Zach, who believed a person's feelings were their own. He'd done nothing to encourage her and as far as he was concerned his responsibility ended there. He'd been careful never to give Mel a single reason to think it was worth her while depleting the world's makeup stores in his honor. If she wanted to go to the trouble, that was her choice.

And today she'd definitely made that choice.

"Well, that was quite the reunion." She was giggling and fluttering lashes weighed down by a thick layer of mascara. Watching the effort Mel took made him glad he wasn't a woman. As far as he could see, the number of hours spent applying and then removing makeup could amount to a whole year over the course of a lifetime.

He knew he was looking at the reason Brittany had run. Gossip was Mel's favorite hobby and judging from the expression on her face, he'd been the subject.

He had no interest in whether his actions pleased or displeased others, but he knew it would bother Brittany.

Without looking at him, she bent to rescue cans, shampoo and toothpaste from the bag she'd dropped, an endeavor hampered by the fact she only had use of one hand.

He stooped to help her, brushed against her and saw her scoot

away.

“I can manage.”

He saw Mel’s eyes narrow as she registered the tension and put her own spin on it.

“I’ll help,” she cooed and stooped, too, an elaborately choreographed maneuver that gave him an eyeful of carefully constructed cleavage contained by a froth of black lace as unsubtle as the red lipstick.

Zach, who was as shallow as the next guy, wondered why all that voluptuous flesh on display failed to distract him from Brittany.

She was wearing her usual trademark cutoffs and a bright top that showed the contrasting strap of her sports bra. Her outfit displayed limbs that were toned, strong and golden.

He wondered if she was wearing a thong under those shorts and then decided he was better off not knowing. He dragged his eyes from the taut curve of her butt to her hair, which fell in a thick braid between her shoulder blades.

The color on her cheeks was natural and there was no gloss on her lips, yet of the two women there was no doubt in his mind who was the sexier.

He clenched his jaw, wondering why Brittany’s soft, bare lips should be so much more kissable than Mel’s glossy pout.

Ten years and a whole lot of bad feeling lay between them, but still all he wanted to do was shove her back against the wall and bury himself in her.

Tension made his voice rough. “How are you getting home?” She straightened, clutching the bag awkwardly with her good arm. “I’m walking.”

“That bag won’t survive. I’ll give you a ride.”

Mel clearly had her own ideas about that. “No need to go out of your way, Zach. I’ll give her another bag. All part of the service. You just wait right there, Brittany.” She vanished to do whatever she had to do to keep the two of them apart and Zach looked down at Brittany and raised his eyebrows in question.

“It’s your call. Do you want to go another round with her?”

“Is that a serious question?” She spoke between her teeth and he almost smiled because he suspected he was the lesser of two evils, which was a refreshing change for a man who usually found himself the greater of the two.

“I should probably warn you that at least ten locals currently have eyes on us, including Rita Fisher. She spreads gossip like butter on dinner rolls. You climb into my car and you know what they’ll be saying.”

“I don’t care if the whole damn island is lining up for front-row seats for whatever it is we’re supposed to be doing,” she said. “Get me out of here.”

They made it to the SUV he’d left unlocked and there was still no sign of Mel.

Brittany shot in so fast she almost scratched the paintwork and he gave a faint smile as he strolled around the car and slid into the driver’s seat.

“So it’s not just spiders. Never thought you’d be afraid of Mel.”

“I’m not afraid, but I don’t want to kill her on my first day home. I’ll alienate the islanders.”

He’d lived that way his whole life and she must have been thinking the same thing because she sent him a glance and sighed.

“I didn’t mean—”

“I know what you meant.”

“It’s been a hard morning, that’s all. I’m a little tired of people sympathizing with me.”

“They’re all sorry about your wrist.”

“It has nothing to do with my wrist.” She muttered the words under her breath but he caught them anyway and wondered why it hadn’t occurred to him that his presence would cause her a problem.

“They’ve said something to you?”

“No.” She answered a little too quickly and he wondered for the millionth time in his life why people couldn’t just attend to their own business and leave others alone.

*I don’t care what anyone thinks. I want you to be the first, Zach. Do anything. All of it.*

The memory came from nowhere and messed with his concentration.

He gave himself a mental shake, trying to delete the image of her naked. He wished he hadn’t broken into her cottage when he’d heard her scream. He should have called the emergency services and gotten the hell out of there. Then he wouldn’t have seen her

wet and gleaming from the shower.

“What are you waiting for? Drive, or I’ll push you out and drive myself.” She spoke through her teeth and he snapped back into the present and glanced at her face.

“I’ll drive, but you need to smile or we’ll have the law on us.”

“Why would the law care whether I’m smiling?”

“Because the good people of Puffin Island will want to be reassured that you came with me of your own free will and that I didn’t kidnap you with the intention of taking you back to my lair so that I can do bad things to you.” The engine roared to life. “Again.”

“Again?”

“They’ve never forgiven me for corrupting you the first time around.”

Her gaze held his for a fraction of a second longer than was necessary and he knew she was remembering exactly what he’d done to her in the dark of her bedroom that first night.

He remembered it, too. Every stroke. Every gasp. The softness of her. The addictive combination of eager and innocent. The breathless exploration of untouched flesh. She’d given and he’d taken. All of it. Everything she’d offered, without hesitation or conscience. Back then he’d seen life as black-and-white, good and bad. She’d said yes and he’d seen no reason to hold back.

It was only with the benefit of maturity he’d begun to see the world in shades of gray.

Almost incinerated by a rush of sexual heat, he shifted in his

seat.

He might have thought he was the only one suffering if it hadn't been for the slight change in her breathing.

Their eyes held and they shared a look that said a thousand times more than words.

Then she turned away and fixed her eyes on the road.

“There was no corruption, just choice. Mine. Let's go.”

He drove away from the busy hub of the harbor and took the forest road that wound upwards through the center of the island. In places the road narrowed to the width of one car and in the winter it was usually impassable except by snowmobile.

It was one of Zach's favorite places. Over a thousand acres of rolling mixed forest, interspersed with rustic trails peppered by roots and rocks, hidden ponds and streams gushing full with silvery water. Here pine, spruce, fir and white cedar grew together along with bunchberry and lowbush blueberry. Summer tourists rarely ventured into the interior of the island unless they were the adventurous type, preferring instead to spend their time on the beaches near the harbor or sailing in the sparkling waters of Penobscot Bay. As far as Zach was concerned, they were missing the best part of the island, but as the peace of the forest was part of the reason he loved it, he wasn't about to broadcast its charms.

He took the bridge over Heron Pond and then steered left down the unmarked track that led down to Shell Bay. A squirrel bounded across the road in front of him and he stepped sharply

on the breaks.

He heard the hiss of indrawn breath and turned to look at Brittany.

“You’re in pain? You taking anything for it?”

“I don’t like swallowing drugs. I’ll be fine.”

“You don’t look fine. You’re the color of an oyster.”

“You’re comparing me to smelly shellfish? You always did know how to compliment a girl.” She watched as the squirrel darted up a tree. “You’ll put a spider outside and do an emergency stop for an animal, but I bet if that had been one of the islanders, you would have run right over them.”

“Depends on the islander. There are a few I’ll slow down for. So what happened to your wrist? You were demonstrating weapons? Accident with a newly discovered Greek ax?”

“Nothing so glamorous. I wasn’t looking where I was putting my feet and fell down a hole I’d been excavating a few minutes earlier.”

One of the things he’d always liked about her was her ability to laugh at herself.

“Anything interesting in the hole?”

“A few things. Cretan arrowheads. Ceramic fragments.”

“But your expertise is weapons?”

She frowned slightly, as if surprised that he knew that. “Bronze Age weapons. Aegean Bronze Age, although I dabbled in Celtic for a while.” She settled her wrist carefully on her lap. “Most of the weapons that dominated Europe until the Middle

Ages—swords, battle-axes, shields—originated in Crete. The place is an archaeologist's paradise.”

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.