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Half-Hitched

Isabel Sharpe

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Аннотация

The Routine-Oriented Girl’s GuideFollow Addie Sewell’s 10-step plan!1. Refuse to be the Scary Cat Lady. Don’t buy a cat.2. Step out of your comfort zone3. Use a friend’s wedding to start your New Spontaneous Life4. Prepare to seduce The One Who Got Away (TOWGA)5. Avoid Derek Bates. Sure, he's hot… but he’s not why you’re here!6. Seriously. Stop looking at Derek like he’s sex-on-a-stick.7. Seduce TOWGA by slipping into his bed naked. (You can do it!)8. Don’t panic… you accidentally ended up in Derek’s bed instead.9. OK, maybe you’re enjoying being in Derek’s bed a little much. But he does feel really, really incredible.10. Abort plan. Just go with it.

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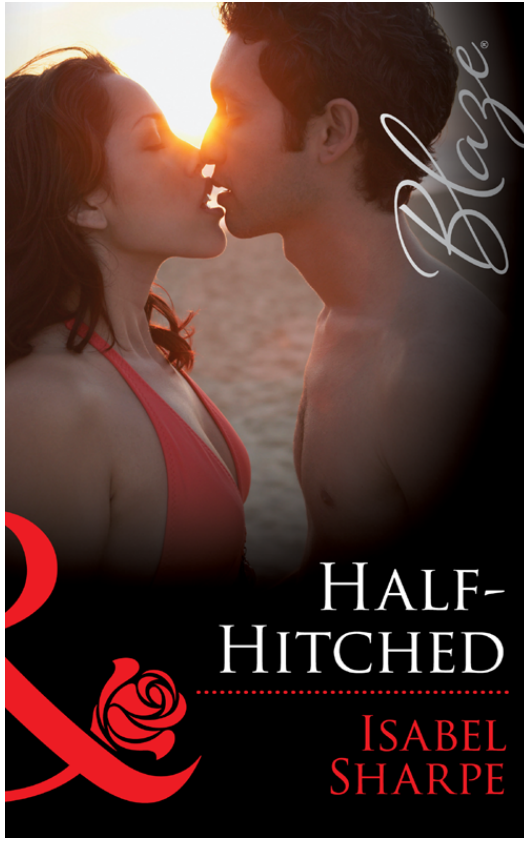

It was unbelievably good…

Now what? Addie was lying half-underneath Derek—instead of Kevin—and Derek was kissing her, sweet, perfect kisses that made her feel as if she was melting into the mattress. She wasn't

exactly objecting.

Addie gasped. Derek had started tasting the curve where her shoulder left off and her neck began, sending shivers… everywhere.

She should either continue the seduction, or she could—and should—be honest: tell Derek she was sorry, but she'd made a terrible mistake. And then he'd stop sending her into orbit.

"Derek."

"Yes, Addie." He sounded amused. What was so funny?

"Um. The thing is."

"Ye-e-s?" He kissed her bare shoulder, a slow, gentle kiss that made her pause, because she wanted to enjoy it.

"I made a mistake."

"Really." He lowered his head to her breast; his mouth took her nipple. Wet heat. Pressure. A shock of pleasure through her.

"I thought you were Kevin."

About the Author

ISABEL SHARPE was not born pen in hand like so many of her fellow writers. After she quit work to stay home with her firstborn son and nearly went out of her mind, she started writing. After more than thirty novels for Harlequin—along with another son—Isabel is more than happy with her choice these days. She loves hearing from readers. Write to her at www.isabelsharpe.com.

Half-Hitched
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To all the world's creatures of habit.

1

THE SOUND OF the ocean swelled through Addie Sewell's bedroom. She stirred in the soft cotton sheets and listened, picturing waves tumbling, sea foam forming lacy patterns that rushed in, then retreated across soft white sand. Somewhere far off a seagull called.

Addie groaned and threw off the covers on her twin bed. "Alarm off."

The ocean stopped. Or rather, the ocean sound stopped, made by her talking alarm clock, which she'd affectionately nicknamed Tick. The real ocean would have to wait until the following week, when she flew north to attend her friend Paul Bosson's wedding on his family's island in Maine.

She should be looking forward to this vacation a lot more. Been a while since she'd been anywhere except her parents' new house in Florida, and it would be great to see high school friends again. But honestly, she could use the time better staying home and going through boxes of old family photos and papers her great-aunt Grace had left behind, and to get serious about looking for a condo.

By living with her elderly aunt for two years before Grace's death, Addie had inherited this rent-controlled apartment a block from Central Park on Manhattan's E. 97th Street. With her actuary's salary, she'd saved enough for a down payment on the

right condo. She just couldn't seem to find time or enthusiasm for the search.

To be honest, she was not a big fan of life changes, and the apartment was not only in a great location, but held lovely memories of Great-Aunt Grace.

Yawning, she stretched and blinked blearily at the freshly painted ceiling, a nice change from the crackling that had progressed for years. Desperate pleas to the landlord had finally been answered.

"Time."

"Seven o'clock," Tick replied.

Seven o'clock. Her eyes fluttered closed, shot open…closed again. Usually she had no trouble jumping out of bed in the morning, especially in the summer when it was so bright out. Lately it had become harder. Maybe she should get her iron checked. Or her vitamin D level. Or work out more.

The chime of an incoming text forced her eyes open again. Pretty early for anyone to be in touch. Mom and Dad were cruising the Mediterranean and her brother, Gabe, was off hiking somewhere in Nepal…

Anxious curiosity got her out of bed; she retrieved her phone from its charger and checked the message.

Oh, my. She was awake now. Wide-awake.

The message, seven words long, was not from her worldtraveling family members, but from her childhood best friend Sarah Bosson, twin sister of Paul, next week's groom.

Kevin Ames will be at the wedding.

Kevin Ames.

Addie gave a short laugh, shaking her head. Look at her, all excited over something so silly. Kevin was two years older than Addie, Paul and Sarah, but he'd been on the cross-country team with Paul since middle school at John Witherspoon in Princeton, New Jersey. Addie and Sarah had seen him constantly at the Bossons' house. Last she heard, Kevin had some work conflict in Philly, where he lived, and couldn't make next week's Maine trip.

Ignoring her responsible side nagging that she should be in the shower by now, Addie texted back.

Since when?

Wow. She headed for the bathroom, still clutching the phone. Kevin Ames was The One That Got Away. Everybody had one. That person you never went out with that you really wanted to, or maybe you almost did, but something went wrong—the timing wasn't right, or, in Addie's case, when finally presented with the opportunity to start something with Kevin the summer before her senior year at Princeton High School, she'd totally messed it up.

Another text from Sarah:

He got someone else to go to his conference. Paul just found out.

Addie pressed her lips together to keep from grinning like a fool. She hadn't seen the guy in eleven years. He was undoubtedly married. In fact, she'd looked him up online several years back and yes, he was.

And guess what…he's single now!

Addie lost the battle with the smile. Okay, not married anymore. But that didn't mean anything. He could have put on four-hundred pounds, lost his hair and…

He's into marathons.

Oh. Four-hundred pounds was unlikely, then.

Well.

Addie shook herself. "Time."

"Seven-twenty."

Argh. She was behind on her morning schedule, which she'd developed specifically to avoid having to rush. From an early age her parents had modeled the importance of routines. Addie had scorned them in her rebellious—mildly rebellious—adolescence and her brother had no use for them at all, but she'd come to realize that routines could save you a lot of time and effort and trouble. You knew what to expect. You didn't have to think or make decisions, everything was already in the works and you simply stepped in and did your part.

Sarah again.

I told you about that jerk playboy Derek Bates being there? I so wish he wasn't coming.

Addie rolled her eyes. Sarah was pretty judgmental, but her anti-Derek rants were over the top, even for her. There was definitely something she wasn't telling.

Yes, you told me. But only about a million times. Gotta go to work. TTYL.

In her tiny apartment's tiny bathroom, Addie turned on the shower spray, counted to seventeen to make sure the water was hot enough and stepped into the iron claw-foot tub where she washed her hair and scrubbed up, thinking about…

Kevin Ames.

Who could help it? Not that he'd been all that remarkable looking. Handsome, sure, but not striking. Bland all American good looks, brown hair and eyes, straight teeth and an athlete's lean body. But he was so magnetic that women went nuts over him as if he were a knockout. Both Sarah and Addie had been smitten.

When Kevin Ames smiled at you, it was like no one else in the world existed.

Of course since Kevin was a really fun, friendly and popular guy, he smiled at a lot of people, including a lot of girls who were more beautiful and more stacked and more whatever-else guys found essential at that age. He'd always been big-brother sweet to Sarah and Addie, so they contented themselves with worshiping from afar.

Then that one August night, almost exactly eleven years ago, when Kevin was about to start his sophomore year at Brown, someone had told Addie that Kevin was interested in her. Addie couldn't remember who. But she sure remembered the feeling when he asked her out. Stunned, then euphoric, then terrified. She and Sarah had immediately started planning: clothes, makeup, attitude, everything he'd be sure to say and

every way she should respond when he said it…

Get going, Addie.

She yanked the water off and dragged her towel briskly over her body. Back in her bedroom, she pulled on the clothes she'd ironed and laid out the previous evening, giving an exasperated groan when her first attempt at pulling on nylons ended in a run—and now she had no precious cushion of time left for disasters.

This was why she got up at the appointed hour every day and had everything prepared. Because she hated this flustered perspiring mess she got herself into when she deviated from the plan.

Great-Aunt Grace, her mother's aunt, had been even worse—or better, depending on your perspective. Since she'd died, sometimes Addie went crazy, like she had cereal on Thursdays when Grace's cereal day was Friday.

She giggled, pulling on her black pumps. Wild woman!

The smile faded. She hadn't felt like a wild woman in a long, long time. Maybe never.

Kevin Ames.

The night of their date he'd picked her up in his gold Nissan sports car. He'd chatted easily with her beaming parents then they'd gone out for pizza on Nassau Street, and driven to Marquand Park, where she'd played as a child. Kevin had switched off the engine and produced a surprise fifth of vodka Addie had felt too intimidated to refuse, ignoring the voice that told her drinking was not a great idea for either of them.

At the fizzy height of her buzz, he'd taken her face in his hands, looked deeply into her eyes and kissed her.

Oh, that kiss…

She relived it until she realized she was standing on one foot, clutching her other shoe, and it was not getting any earlier.

"Time."

"Seven forty-five."

Eek!

Addie raced to the living room and snatched up her briefcase, stomach growling for breakfast she'd have to grab at work, headache demanding coffee. She let herself out of her apartment, snatched up the *New York Times*, which she usually read over breakfast, and ran down the hall, punched the button for the elevator, punched it twice more, as if that would do anything. Slowest elevator in Manhattan. While she waited, she checked her work schedule for the day.

Hey. She grinned at her phone. It was her half birthday. Addie Sewell was now officially twenty-nine and a half. In another six months she'd be thirty. Still at the same job. Still living alone…

No, no, she *liked* living alone, loved the independence and the freedom. Though sometimes she wondered about venturing out to the humane society and adopting a cat. Cats were supposed to be good company, and more suitable for a small apartment or condo than a dog. Dogs were a lot of work.

The elevator doors opened to a good day getting better. *He* was in there, Mr. Gorgeous, the guy from the tenth floor, one of the

most good-looking guys Addie had ever seen. In the three years she'd lived here, she'd never once had the guts to say anything more than hi.

So…she would again. "Hi."

Mr. Gorgeous nodded. "Hey."

The door closed, leaving that peculiarly charged silence in elevators that Addie tolerated with this guy because saying something and then relapsing to silence would be even more charged and peculiar. But if she started a conversation that lasted all the way to the first floor, then what, would they walk together into the street? What if he were talking to her only to be polite? Better not to say anything. So she stayed silent, watching the lighted numbers at the top of the door descend.

Kevin Ames.

He'd kissed her again, and again. His hand had traveled inside her top to stroke her breast, which felt wonderfully intimate and very hot. Except then Addie had started thinking about his last girlfriend, Jessica Menendez, and the size of her you-know-whats, and the girlfriend before that, Isabella Tramontina, and how she had a body that made men fall like dominoes when she walked down the hall.

Addie had compared them to her own pudgy smallchested big-butt body and virgin status, and panic had erupted. Was this all he wanted from her? To make out in a car drunk on vodka in a public park?

Then came the part that still had the power to bring the sick

burn of humiliation to her stomach. Words slurring, she'd told Kevin she *loved* him. She'd told him she wanted their first time to be on a bed. But not just a bed. A bed of *white linen* strewn with *roses*.

Oh, God. She was blushing even now.

Addie would never forget the look of utter bewilderment on Kevin's face. He'd mumbled some kind of apology, said something about a misunderstanding, and had driven her home in a silence even more painful than the one on this slow, slow elevator. Kevin had gone back to Brown. Addie had gone back to high school. She'd heard about him now and then through Sarah or Paul, but hadn't run into him again.

Okay, for a few years, she ran *away* from him so as not to relive that mortification.

But she had enough self-confidence now to laugh about the incident with him when she saw him again next week. She was no longer a virgin and she no longer confused sex with love. Or at least she understood that for most guys they were separate entities.

The elevator door opened and she surged out ahead of Mr. Gorgeous so as not to burden either of them with forced contact.

On E. 53rd street at the offices of Hawthorn Brantley Insurance Company, she grabbed a bran muffin and cup of coffee from the cafeteria then met with teams to design a new life insurance plan and to work on storm damage models, then she formulated spreadsheets dealing with expected drunk driving

deaths in Wisconsin the following year.

At lunchtime, back in the cafeteria, *New York Times* crossword puzzle section tucked securely under her arm, she selected her usual sandwich, carrot sticks and apple, then threw caution to the wind and picked out a cookie. Special occasion! Her half birthday!

Eating the same thing every day meant she knew how many calories she was getting, and that they'd last through her workout and that she'd be healthily hungry for dinner.

Unfortunately she was a little late and her usual single table was taken. Heading for her second choice, Addie noticed Linda Persson, assistant director of Human Resources, seated by herself at a table for four. Linda was a lovely woman, but a little…well, she wasn't very attractive or very funny or very talented or very interesting, and at age sixty wasn't likely to become so.

Addie couldn't bear to see her sitting alone in her beige suit and ivory blouse, forking chef salad into her mouth, trying to look as if she'd chosen to be without a friend in the world because she so enjoyed the experience.

Sigh.

Addie put her tray down on the table. "Hi, Linda."

"Hey, Addie!" She smiled with such obvious relief that Addie banished the doomed feeling and put herself in the Glorious Martyr column.

"May I join you?"

“Of course.” Linda pulled her tray toward herself as if there wasn’t plenty of room already on the large table. “I was just thinking about my plans for the weekend.”

“Fun ones?” Addie hoped they were special and interesting, because then She could think about something other than Kevin.

“I’m getting a new mattress Saturday afternoon. And then I’m going to see a movie.” She pushed her too-large brown glasses up her nose. “I like going to movies by myself, do you?”

Addie nodded reluctantly. She did, but was ashamed not to want a lot in common with Linda. “I don’t mind, either.”

“I like getting there early because I like to sit in the middle of a row, not too close, and because I like to watch the previews, and have popcorn all to myself. And since no one talks to me, I can really disappear into the film.”

“Same here.” Actually…exactly the same.

“And then after the movie I’ll probably go home and organize my kitchen. It’s driving me crazy that the flour and sugar canisters are on the opposite side of the counter from the measuring cups and spoons. I’ve stood it this long, but no more.” She tossed her mousy-brown curls, beaming triumphantly.

Addie took a long sip of skim milk to wash down her suddenly dry sandwich. She’d made similar changes after Great-Aunt Grace died.

“Sunday’s my weekly brunch with my friend Marcy.” Linda finished peeling a banana and took a bite. “We have sesame bagels with whitefish salad and read the *New York Times* travel

section to plan fantasy vacations."

"Have you been on any?"

"No, no, they're just for fun."

"Why don't you go on one?" Addie was as surprised as Linda by the edge to her voice. She read plenty of travel articles, had the money and could take the time, but hadn't been anywhere, either. "Or two, or three or all of them?"

Linda shrugged. "I'm an armchair traveler. Saves me trouble and sunburn and storms and delayed flights."

Oh, dear. She forgot lost luggage.

"I'm a creature of habit I guess." Linda polished off her banana and picked up a brownie. "Like I have the same thing for lunch every day."

Addie stopped with a big bite of apple in her mouth.

"I feel comforted by routines. I like knowing what to expect."

Addie told herself to keep chewing, that she was never going to finish the apple while frozen in horror.

"I was thinking after work today I might stop by the humane society and look at cats."

Steady, Addie. She could panic, or she could take this lunch as a sign that maybe she was a tiny little bit stuck in a very small rut.

"They're supposed to be great company. Perfect for an apartment. And not as much work as a dog."

Large rut. Moon-crater-size rut.

Help.

Be rational. Rationality was one of Addie's best superpowers.

She'd use it now, like this: it was good that Addie was faced with the person she could turn into. Especially today, her half birthday, because she had time to change before she turned thirty.

So she'd change. Starting today. Right after work, instead of going to the gym, then showering and having dinner in her apartment reading whatever parts of the *New York Times* she'd missed at breakfast and lunch like she did every evening—except when she had book group or dinner with a friend, she was going to…do something else. Like…

Well, she'd think of something.

She said a grateful goodbye to Linda and charged off to finish her day. By five-thirty, her plan had been cemented into action. After work she was going to Blackstone's on E. 55th. She'd have two drinks and look available. If nothing happened, one point for going and good for her, it was a start. If she talked to at least one guy, two points and a pat on the back. If she was asked for her phone number, three points and a high five.

Given that it was a hot sunny Thursday in late August, when people were already looking ahead to the weekend, she'd give herself excellent odds on making two points and call it even on three.

Done.

Blackstone's was crowded and noisy, not usually her thing, but today exactly what she was looking for. She pushed her way into a spot at the long bar and managed to get a glass of Chardonnay

from the bartender, thinking it might seem more feminine than the beer she was really in the mood for, and wondering if a navy skirt and cream blouse was any kind of come-on outfit. She was pretty sure it wasn't. But hey, Addie was alive and she was female. That was enough for plenty of guys.

She stood resolutely, sipping. Looking around. Smiling.

And sipping.

And looking around.

And smiling.

"Excuse me."

Addie turned hopefully to look into dynamite blue eyes. *Oh, my*.

"I was wondering." He quirked a dark brow. Even his eyebrows were sexy. "Is this seat next to you taken?"

"No." She tipped her head seductively. *Two points!* "Help yourself."

"Thanks." He didn't sit. But…his *girlfriend* did. Then the guy practically climbed into her lap and the two of them started sucking face.

Okay, then. Time to go.

She exited the bar, staggering into a guy as the alcohol kicked in. Did he catch her and did their eyes meet and did choirs of angels sing?

No. He said, "Hey, watch it, lightweight."

Right. Fine. Whatever. She'd go back home to her rut and stay there.

On the way she stopped into the supermarket on Lexington Avenue for a deli sandwich and a cupcake—chocolate with chocolate frosting.

Girl gone wild.

She made it home, hungry and cranky, managed a halfway nice smile for the doorman and stomped onto the elevator where she turned and saw Mr. Gorgeous coming into the lobby. Oh, just great. She rushed to push the button that would close the doors so she didn't have to face more man-failure, but she hit the wrong one and kept them open.

He got on. "Thanks."

"Sure."

The doors closed. They stood there in their customary silence. Addie took a deep breath. She had nothing to lose. Face it, she couldn't even see over the top of her rut.

"I'm Addie." She stuck out her hand. "I live on eight."

"Oh, yeah, right, hi, Addie." He couldn't have been friendlier, took her hand in his strong warm one. "I'm Mike. On ten."

She grinned. Maybe her rut wasn't quite so deep after all. "Nice to meet you, Mike."

"Same here." He looked her over, but not in a leering way, more polite and appreciative. "My great grandmother was named Addie. Not a name you hear a lot anymore."

"No." She wrinkled her nose. Men never associated her name with hot babes they'd lusted after their whole lives. Always great-aunts and grandmas. Addie's mom had named her after a

Faulkner character in the novel *As I Lay Dying*.

So cheery.

"Any fun plans tonight, Mike?" Ha! Listen to her. No one could accuse her of being boring now. Maybe Mike would even like to split a cupcake.

"Yes." He nodded enthusiastically. "My boyfriend and I are going to make enchiladas and listen to *Madama Butterfly* live from the Met on Sirius radio."

Addie tried as hard as possible to keep her features from freezing in dismay. Boyfriend. Of course. "That'll be great. It's a great opera."

Or so she assumed, not having heard a single note of it.

"How about you?"

"Oh, well. I'm going to…" Sit around and cry until her hangover started. "Meet some friends. Later."

Like next week in Maine. Where Kevin would be. Though at this rate, he'd turn out to be gay, too.

Growl.

She escaped the elevator and let herself into her apartment, stalked to the living room and whapped the bag with the sandwich and cupcake down on the dining room table, not caring if one interfered with the other.

Let the celebration of her half birthday begin—alone with her take-out meal. And hey, after dinner, she'd meet up with Linda at the humane society and they could each buy eight cats and a truckload of kibble and litter and lock themselves into their

apartments for the rest of time.

She got a big glass of water and opened the sandwich, wolfed it down and opened the cupcake to wolf that, too.

Her incoming text signal chimed. Addie put down the cupcake and dug out her phone. She could use good news. Maybe Sarah had some more.

Really glad you'll be there next week. Seems to me we have a lot of catching up to do. Maybe some unfinished business to attend to, as well?

Addie drew in a huge breath. Forget guys in bars. Forget Mr. Gorgeous. And definitely forget the cats.

Next week Addie Sewell was going to blast out of her rut and sail over the moon with The One That Got Away.

After eleven long years she'd finally get a do-over with her first love, Kevin Ames.

2

LAND HO. Derek stood at the front of the Bossons' fortytwo-foot cabin cruiser, *Lucky*, as she made her way from Machias to Storness Island, which Paul's family had owned since the 1940s. First boat Derek had been on besides his own in a long time… seven years? Eight? Being a passenger felt strange. Or maybe it was the jet lag from the fifteen hours of travel, Honolulu to Portland, and the five-hour drive that morning, Portland to Machias, to meet Paul.

Lucky left the chop of open sea and purred into the protected cove on the island's north side, a mile from the mainland. Derek had visited the Bossons here only once, several years earlier, but the place was as picturesque and familiar as if he'd just left. The cove boasted a sand beach—unusual along Down east Maine's rocky coast—with the same driftwood branch he remembered lying across it. The white boathouse still stood among the birch, spruce and firs, its doors padlocked. Birds darted over the rocks on the cove's other side. Peaceful. Remote. Hard to imagine any of the world's constant turmoil still existed. Same way he felt leaving civilization and taking to the sea on *Joie de Vivre*, the eighty-foot yacht in which he'd invested—his parents would say wasted—a good chunk of his inheritance from Grandma and Grandpa Bates.

Paul directed *Lucky's* bow toward the mooring, which Derek

snagged with the boathook, inhaling the cool air's clean pine-salt scent as he tied her on.

"Nice place you got here." He and Paul were the only ones on the boat. Most of the wedding guests had already arrived, but Derek hadn't been able to get a flight out of Hawaii until after his last charter ended yesterday. Or was it the day before? God he was tired. But he wouldn't miss Paul's wedding for anything.

"Yeah, it works for us." Paul grinned and slapped him on the back. He had one of those eternally youthful faces, round cheeks, sandy hair and bright blue eyes. At twenty-nine he didn't look a day older than when Derek found him ten years earlier vomiting up too much summertime fun, lost and disoriented in a not-great part of Miami. Derek lived there at the time, working jobs on whatever boats he could, in the years before he got serious about his maritime career and enrolled at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy. Since Paul had had no idea where his friend Kevin lived, Derek let him crash on his floor in the tiny apartment he'd sublet when he wasn't at sea. Didn't take him long to figure out Paul was a good kid caught in a bad situation—a delayed adolescent rebellion against real and imagined pressures of adulthood.

Derek got Paul a job on a boat for the summer, helped him get off booze and back on track to finish college at Notre Dame. In the ensuing years their friendship surpassed big-brother mentor and younger screw-up, and became close and satisfying. About as close and satisfying as any relationship Derek could have these

days.

He helped Paul load last-minute supplies into the onboard dinghy and lower the boat into the smooth water.

"You won't know a whole lot of people." Paul climbed into the dinghy and manned the oars. "Sarah, of course."

Of course. Derek settled himself in the bow seat. He'd emailed Paul's sister before coming, hoping she'd put aside her grudge against him, but Sarah was a passionate woman prone to the dramatic, and apparently hadn't forgiven him for thinking it was an extremely bad idea for them to sleep together. Her reply had been coldly formal, but at least she'd replied. "How is Sarah?"

"She's Sarah." Paul spoke of his twin with exasperated affection. "Two parts fabulous, two parts crazy-making. She has her best friend Joe here, and her friend from grade school Addie Sewell."

"Addie." Derek frowned, trying to get his tired brain to function. "That's a familiar name, have I met her?"

"Nope." Paul corrected his course with a few strokes of his right oar. "Grade school friend of ours. I was crazy about her for years."

"Oh, right, the woman who walked on water." Derek had been curious about her. Paul was easygoing about pretty much everything—once he stopped drinking—but this Addie had him in knots. As far as Derek knew, Paul had never let on to Addie how he felt.

“Yeah, I had it bad.” Paul shook his head, laughing. “Ellen finally exorcized her completely. Addie’s a great friend now.”

“Okay. Sarah, Addie. Who else?” The boat nudged onto the generous expanse of sand exposed at half tide. Derek jumped out and grabbed the bowline, pulled the dinghy up onto the beach. At high tide, there was barely enough beach to walk on. At low, twelve vertical feet out, there was ample sand, then ample mud, sprinkled with rocks and starfish, clusters of mussels, and a hidden bounty of steamer clams.

“Some friends from college and a few from work in Boston. Nice people. Oh, and Kevin Ames, who can’t make it until tomorrow. I think you met him once.” He gave Derek a sheepish look and started unloading the skiff onto a waiting wheelbarrow. “Maybe not under the best circumstances.”

“Right.” Kevin had been the friend buying Paul booze in Florida in spite of his obvious issues with alcohol, and encouraging him to drop out of college and “find himself.” He’d reminded Derek of his own brothers: wealthy, self-centered and entitled, sure rules were for other people and that they’d automatically rise to the top—like most scum. If it wasn’t for the sea, which had started calling to Derek in middle school and soon after took him away from the life his parents planned for him, he’d probably be that way himself.

Years of hard work clawing up the ranks from deckhand to captain was enough to beat the entitled out of anybody.

They finished loading the wheelbarrow, secured the dinghy

against the rising tide and made their way through the Christmas-tree smelling woods, then up a wide bumpy path through blueberry bushes to the back door of the house, a rambling two-story Victorian with weathered gray shingles and dark green trim and shutters. Pitched in nearby clearings were several colorful tents, obviously for overflow guests, though the house had six or seven bedrooms from what he remembered.

"Hey! Hurry up. Ellen needs the cheese you bought for nachos." Sarah jumped down from the house's back deck and strode to meet them, followed by a tall, dark-haired guy in jeans and a Green Day T-shirt. "Hi, Derek."

"Hey, Sarah." He smiled, relieved when she managed a chilly grin back. Apparently she'd be on good behavior for her brother's wedding. "It's good to see you. You look great."

He wasn't lying. She'd dropped the few extra pounds she'd carried, had shortened and shaped her curly blond hair, and moved with more mature grace, though she still evoked a tall firecracker about to go off.

"Thanks. You look…" She scowled at him. "Like you haven't slept in years."

"Not sure I have. Hi, I'm Derek." He offered his hand to the guy hovering behind her, noting the wary look in his eyes. Was this Joe? Looked like Sarah had shared her I'm-the-victim version of their story with him.

"This is Joe." Sarah pointed.

"Good to meet you." Joe shook Derek's hand then picked up

a grocery bag under each arm. “I’ll take these up to Ellen.”

“Come on in. We’re having drinks, getting organized to take a picnic supper down to the beach.” Sarah turned and charged back up the stairs to the house, throwing Derek an inscrutable look over her shoulder that made him a little nervous. He’d had to put her off gently on that same beach five years ago, and he really didn’t want to go through that drama again.

The pine and faint wood smoke smell inside the house was instantly familiar. Paul’s parents were on the mainland, so instead of Mrs. Bosson at the stove, there was a blonde, attractive woman Derek identified as Ellen by the adoring look she sent Paul, and whom he instantly liked by the bright smile she sent him. The aroma in the kitchen was fantastic.

“Welcome, Derek.” She gave him a sincere hug, Southern accent warming her words. Paul had met her through a mutual friend in Boston two years earlier and his fate was sealed pretty quickly. “It’s good to meet the man who saved Paul’s life.”

“I don’t think it was quite that dramatic.”

“I know it was. He’s still grateful and so am I.” A timer went off; she grabbed lobster oven mitts and peered into the oven.

Derek looked around the large, airy eat-in kitchen, amused and pleased so much of it was exactly the same as the last time he was here. The loon sculpture, the blobby painting of a seal Sarah had done as a girl, sand dollars and sea glass, a tide clock hanging next to an iron candle holder forged by a local blacksmith. He’d only been here a week, but would never forget the strong sense

of love surrounding the Bosson family, and their joy at being together. He hadn't had much of that in his life, still didn't, and he'd unapologetically eaten it up. Paul had invited him back a few times, but their schedules never seemed to mesh.

"Can I help, Ellen?"

"No, no." She set a pan of fragrant rolls onto a cooling rack. "I just got rid of my army of helpers and am finishing in here. Grab a beer and go on outside, I'll join you in a minute."

"Here you go." Paul pulled bottles of beer and lemonade from the old gas refrigerator and tossed the beer to Derek, who was afraid drinking would send him into a coma of exhaustion, but hell, it was a celebration. He'd risk it.

He followed Paul outside, where Paul was immediately pounced on and dragged into conversation. Derek paused on the front stoop, newly entranced by the Bossons' view. The house sat high on a hill. The land in front—you couldn't really call it a yard—was covered by juniper bushes and sloped to a steep cliff with a breathtaking panorama of ocean and islands. More tents were pitched to the west of the house, and a tiny cabin, built for the twins to overnight in, perched to the east. At this hour the sun's full strength had started to wane and colors were deepening—the blue of water, the dark green of firs, graybrown shades of the rocky coastline, and the puffy white of clouds. One of his favorite places on earth. And given that he'd been all over the world and was working out of Hawaii these days, he had plenty of Edens to choose from.

Taking a deep breath of the cool, salty air, he shifted his focus to the other guests, in groups on the front porch and down on the grounds. Fifteen to twenty people. At thirtyfive, he probably had five to ten years on most of them. It had been a long time since he'd been in this type of social situation. On his boat, he was the authority, keeping just enough distance from guests and employees, making the ship's safety and smooth operation his first priority, the comfort of his passengers a close second. Onshore, he was a temporary or occasional friend to whomever he knew or met wherever he was.

He took a bigger slug of beer than he needed. Paul caught his eye and raised a finger, indicating he'd be right back. Derek waved him off and took another drink. He was a grown man; he could introduce himself to—

"Hi." The woman was right under his nose, smiling at him, about to come up the steps as he'd been about to go down.

"I'm Addie." She pointed to her chest, as if he might not know for sure she was talking about herself.

So this was Addie. To put it mildly, she was not what he expected.

The way Paul had described her beauty, wealth, breeding and untouchability in his besotted way had Derek imagining a chilly, elegant brunette dripping sophistication and disdain. The kind who'd show up at a casual island wedding like this one in stiletto heels, linen and pearls. The kind Derek had taken around the world in his boat, the kind with rich older husbands they were

always looking to cheat on.

This woman was wearing soft-looking midthigh black shorts, a casual rose-colored scoop-necked top half covered by a gray hoodie, and flat natural color sandals on slim feet. She had deep coffee eyes and striking dark brows, curling short dark hair—a sexy-schoolgirl fantasy come to life. She reminded him of a down-to-earth version of the French actress Audrey Tautou.

He had major hots for Audrey Tautou.

"You're Addie Sewell."

"Yes." The expressive brows lowered in amused confusion. "How did you know?"

"You're world famous."

"Ha!" Her wide mouth broke into a smile that took away a good deal of his weariness. "You must be a friend of Paul's."

"Derek Bates."

"Oh." Her smile faltered, her eyes clouded over, the temperature around them dropped forty degrees. Brrrrr. "Sarah's told me a lot about you."

"That's funny." He forced himself to chuckle, visualizing a roll of duct tape over Sarah's mouth. "Sarah doesn't know a lot about me."

He expected an insult, an argument, a stinging defense of her friend, and was surprised to find her considering him thoughtfully. "I just know what she told me."

Derek sighed. He'd leave bad enough alone. It was his word versus Sarah's and this was her territory and these were her

people. “I’m pretty sure I’m sorry to hear that. When did you arrive, Addie?”

“Three days ago. Sunday evening.”

“From…?”

“LaGuardia.” She glanced around, apparently not sure she should be talking to him.

“Into Portland?”

“Bangor.”

“Okay.” He nodded too many times, at a loss what to say next, how to act around a lovely woman who’d undoubtedly been told by her best friend that he was something you should avoid stepping in.

“Weather been good here this week?” *Really, Derek?* The weather?

“It’s been okay.” She fidgeted with the zipper on her hoodie. “Not great. But at least no rain.”

“What have I missed so far?”

“Oh. Well. We’ve gone hiking on the mainland. Done a lot of hanging out…” She laughed nervously. “I can’t really remember.”

“It’s okay.”

“Oh, Quoddy Head. We went there. The easternmost point in the U.S.”

“Nice.” He nodded again. This was torture. He wanted to skip the small talk. Go straight to what mattered, how she felt about life, whether she was doing what she loved, whether the

world was a gorgeous place or a disaster, whether she was seeing anyone, and whether she liked kissing all night under the stars…

He nearly hugged Ellen when she clapped her hands from the front stoop.

"Hey, y'all, we're ready. Come through the kitchen, grab something to carry and we'll head down to the beach."

Derek finished his beer and tossed it into the recycling container set up outside. If he wanted to have fun this week he'd need to do better than this socially. Part of his job was chatting with passengers, so making small talk should be second nature. Instead he felt as if he were trying to exercise a muscle atrophied from years of disuse.

After grabbing a cooler, he joined the procession to the beach, aware of Addie's presence in the crowd as if she was lit up in neon. He still couldn't get over how different she was than he expected, or how much she aroused his…curiosity.

The beach was cool and comfortable; a light breeze kept the mosquitoes manageable, though repellent was passed around before everyone settled in. To his relief, Derek eventually got a second—third? fourth?—wind, and was able to relax and enjoy himself. The guests were friendly and easy to talk to, all interesting people with solid views on life and their places in it. The food was simple and abundant: excellent crab rolls, nachos, potato salad and coleslaw, and the beer flowed like…beer.

A few times—more than a few—he glanced over at Addie and caught her just looking away, though she made no move to

approach him. He wasn't sure what to make of her surreptitious inspection. Was she repulsed? Fascinated? Attracted? He was certainly attracted. The more he looked at her, the longer the evening went on, the more he remembered stories Paul told about Addie, the more he was intrigued, and the more beautiful she became. Maybe it was the softening light. Maybe it was the beer. He wanted to talk to her again. Alone.

As the sun lowered, there was a move to light a bonfire and gather around it. Not enough sleep and too much beer, food and conversation propelled Derek to his feet. He could use a break and had a deep need to watch the sunset from a remote corner of the island he remembered as a prime viewing spot. A quick look showed him Addie was missing from the crowd. He'd have liked to invite her along, but that was probably a terrible idea given what she still thought of him, so it was just as well.

Excusing himself from Sarah's friend Joe, who'd turned out to be an interesting and friendly guy, and Carrie, a piece of work who'd settled on Joe after flirting with pretty much every male at the party, Derek left the beach and headed back into the woods up the hill toward the southwest where he could best watch the evening light show.

As he crested the hill, he glanced back at the house; its shingles glowed majestic gray-pink in the evening light, tents providing a festive carnival atmosphere.

Addie Sewell was coming down the front steps.

Derek stopped short. When she caught sight of him, she did

the same. For a few bizarre seconds they stared at each other across the grassy space, then what-the-hell, Derek beckoned to her. She frowned and looked down toward the path to the beach.

This might take some persuading.

"Hey." He spanned the distance between them across the top of the hill, brushing past goldenrod waving in the breeze. Addie held her ground, chin lifted, watching him approach. "I'm going to take a walk, to check out the sunset."

She pressed her lips together. An adorable dimple appeared in her right cheek. "Sounds like a good idea."

"Want to come with me?"

"Oh." She blushed crimson, eyes darting again to the apparent safety of the woods. Poor woman, trapped by the big bad sexual predator Derek wasn't. "I don't know… ."

He'd wait. He swatted a mosquito. Stuffed his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth on his heels. Began whistling.

She giggled. A good sign.

"The sunsets here are breathtaking… ."

"Well." She gave him a cautious sidelong look. "It has been either cloudy or foggy since I've been here."

He grinned. "I'll keep my clothes on and my hands to myself, I promise."

"Oh, no, you don't need to—" Her eyes shot wide. "Wait! No, yes, you do!"

He laughed and she laughed with him, and then bang, the tension was gone, and he felt lighter than he had all day.

“What I meant was, I’m not worried.” She arched a brow at him. “I have a spectacular right hook, three gold medals in track and a black belt.”

“Weaponry?”

She pointed emphatically into his face. “That, too.”

“I’ll remember.” He smiled, trying to look as blandly safe as possible, so she wouldn’t guess the depth of his attraction. After what she’d probably heard from Sarah, he should act like touching her had never occurred to him.

Though it was starting to be all he could think about.

“So you must have been on Storness Island before, Addie?” He gestured her onto the narrow path in front of him, being the perfect gentleman. The perfect gentleman who wasn’t wrong in thinking her rear view would not exactly be a hardship.

“Actually, no. Sarah invited me a few times, but my parents always had me in summer camp or some program, or we were traveling. So this is new to me.”

“Sounds like you were a heavily scheduled kid.”

“Oh, yeah. They played Mozart while I was in utero. I got infant flash cards, only educational toys, organic food before it was mainstream, you name it.” She spoke matter-of-factly. Was she grateful? Resentful? Resigned? He wanted to get at more of her, only barely understanding his fascination.

“How was that?”

She shrugged, keeping her eyes on the path, an obstacle course of rocks and protruding tree roots. “It was all I knew, so it was

fine at the time. Now, it seems a little over the top. They'd lightened up some by the time my brother came along. He's five years younger. What about you?"

"I'm the oldest of four brothers. My parents did the overachiever conditioning on us, too. It worked pretty well on my brothers. I wasn't interested." He reached to touch her shoulder and pointed into the bay where the sunset was gathering force. "Look at that."

"Beautiful." She stopped walking, then smiled rapturously and stretched out her arms, as if wanting to embrace the bay. "Don't you wish all of life was that simple and perfect? After living in the city so long it's like…well, I miss things like this at home."

He knew how she felt. "What city? Wait, near LaGuardia obviously, so I'll guess New York?"

"Manhattan. Where's home for you?"

He quirked an eyebrow. "That's a tough question to answer. I don't have one in the traditional sense."

"Oh, right." She turned and kept walking. "You're the yacht captain."

He expected the slight sneer. Most people had no idea what the job entailed, how serious his responsibilities and how wide his range of duties. "I'm based in Hawaii right now."

"Ooh, *that* must be tough."

He caught up to her as the path widened down a cranberry-covered hillside, red berries a stunning contrast to the carpet of dark, shiny leaves. "It has its moments. What do you do in

Manhattan?"

"I'm an actuary for an insurance company."

"Ah, a numbers woman." And a very smart woman. He was impressed. Maybe she'd like to take over for his bookkeeper, Mary, who was due to go on maternity leave in another month. "How do you cope with Manhattan being Manhattan?"

Her mouth puckered a little while she thought. The sun landed on her cheekbones and lit her eyes. He was hit with a strong urge to kiss her. But since he'd only just met her and was trying to show how wrong Sarah was about him…not a good idea.

"In Manhattan you have to retreat into your head. You can't go out there every day and let the chaos get in your face. At least I can't. It's strange what you get used to. A friend on the phone the other day said she could barely understand me over sirens in the background and I hadn't even heard them."

"Noisy, crowded, sounds perfect."

"Oh, but there's so much culture. So much energy. Anything you want to eat, buy, hear or see, you can find in New York." She smiled mischievously, mouth generous, lips full. "How do you deal with all that total isolation in the middle of the ocean?"

"Ha. Good question. My answer would probably be something along the lines of, 'I retreat into my head. You can't go out there and let the emptiness get in your face.'" He loved the way she laughed, soft and low. "And of course there's so much beauty. So much peace."

"Speaking of which…" They'd arrived on the rocky ledge

he remembered as the best spot for sunset watching. He wasn't wrong. The sight was spectacular. Addie crossed her arms; her breasts rose and nestled against each other. She sighed in pleasure.

Derek swallowed. Lack of sleep, beer, this woman…

He was beginning to understand what had happened to Paul.

"I'm curious." She turned to face him, eyes doe-wide and questioning. The gods were putting his resolve not to touch her to an excruciating test. He wasn't sure he'd pass. "Did you always want to be at sea instead of settled in one place?"

"Yes. Did you always want to be in the same office and house every day?

"Not specifically, no. But it didn't surprise me I ended up there." She tipped her head, mouth spreading again, this time in a troubled smile that was both vulnerable and bewitching.

Derek should step back from her. Derek should stop thinking about her and start thinking about tragedies or trash heaps or tarantulas. Derek needed a good night's sleep. Or twelve. "Why not?"

"I didn't have a childhood dream like yours. I always did what was expected of me. My parents prepared me well for my future, and I felt I owed it to them to be successful."

Ah, a good girl. She was really turning him on now. He wanted to teach her how to be naughty sometimes. "There are all kinds of success."

"True." She brushed a stray lock off her forehead. "I guess I'm

pretty traditional. Not that exciting."

Ha. He wasn't touching that one. Instead he turned her and pointed out into the bay. "Look now."

"Oh." Her face brightened; it was all he could do to make himself watch the sunset he was here for. "Incredible."

"Yes. Beautiful." She could think he was talking about the glorious colors if she wanted. The sun was slipping through a vivid combination of orange and maroon at the horizon. Higher up the clouds had turned baby-girl pink. Seagulls flew overhead; cormorants skimmed the water, heading toward the navy-colored east. The moment was powerful, primal. Addie had him under a spell he barely understood.

He moved up close behind her until he could practically feel the warmth from her body. She tensed and went very still.

"Addie." His voice came out low and husky. She made a small sound, but didn't answer. He barely knew what he was going to say. "Did you…ever meet a guy and know you'd be kissing him very soon?"

She flinched, but didn't move away. "Derek…I don't even know you."

"I'm just asking." Like hell he was.

"Oh. Well. Yes. I mean…I guess so." She cleared her throat. "Have you?"

"I'm not really into kissing guys."

A nervous giggle exploded out of her. "I meant—"

"I know what you meant. Yes, I have."

“Oh.” She sounded carefully neutral. “Why did you ask me that?”

“I wanted to know.”

Addie turned her head to the side, her features darkened by the light behind her. “What happened between you and Sarah?”

“She obviously told you.”

“I want to hear it from you.”

He was absurdly pleased. She was giving him a chance. But since she was already on Sarah’s side, he’d have to choose his words carefully. “Sarah and I…mixed signals one night. When things didn’t work out the way she expected she was angry and hurt. She’s a great person, I respect her and would go back and change that night if I could.”

Addie turned around to look up at him, stopping mere inches away. God help him. “She told me you came on to her.”

“No.” He held still while she examined his face, wanting to touch her so badly he was having trouble breathing, aware that he’d just called her close friend a liar.

“Did you ask me about kissing because you wanted to kiss me?”

“What do you think?”

He expected a giggle. A blush. A coy glance. Instead she looked distraught. “Derek, I’m…I’m here to be with someone.”

A solid kick to his stomach. “Yeah? Who’s that?”

She dropped her gaze. “Someone I’ve known a long time.”

He would have noticed if she’d been hanging around any guy

in particular tonight. As far as he knew all the guests had arrived.

Except…*him*.

Aw, crap. “Kevin Ames.”

“How did you know?” She was blushing.

“He’s world famous.” He kept his voice light, not wanting to sound as disappointed and pissed off as he was. “I’ve met him.”

“Really?” Her voice got all eager, which made Derek even grouchier. “Where?”

“In Florida.” He was not going to comment further. If Kevin was the type she fell for, she wasn’t going to want a man like him.

He shouldn’t care. For God’s sake, he’d only met Addie tonight.

Maybe it was the booze, the loss of sleep, too much loneliness for too long, but there were plenty of attractive women here, many of whom he’d spoken to at dinner— hell there had been plenty of attractive women crawling all over his boat for the last eight years.

It was crazy, it made no sense, he was exhausted, out of his mind, he’d known Addie all of a few hours.

But he’d never wanted any of them the way he wanted her.

3

SARAH LAY ON a grassy patch at the edge of the island's northern beach, where they'd had dinner that evening, listening to the waves lapping, gazing up at the night sky in search of shooting stars. She'd gone inside with everyone else hours ago when the party broke up, but after people headed off to bed she'd come back out here, knowing she wouldn't sleep. Too many emotions, her head spun with them. She hated feeling half-crazy like this.

For whatever reason she'd been born feeling things more intensely than most people, which earned her all kinds of lovely labels: diva, drama queen, yeah, yeah, she knew. She did overreact, she did get more upset, more happy, more…just more. But short of drugging herself, there was nothing she could do about it. She was who she was, for better or worse.

Right now worse.

She swallowed awkwardly over the mild burn of thirst in the back of her throat. One beer too many and not enough water to balance out the alcohol. But it was so lovely lying here watching the sky, indulging her tortured thoughts, that she didn't want to go back up to the house for a drink.

Derek Bates was the most gorgeous, sexiest, most intelligent, incredible man she'd ever met. And Sarah was nothing to him. She always fell for men who didn't want her. Before Derek there'd been Ethan at Vassar, captain of the baseball team, a

great friend. She'd lusted, but he never thought of her "that way" and had dated cheerleaders and dancers and other varieties of perfect—from her perspective perfectly vapid—women, while maintaining a closer relationship with Sarah than with any of them. Before Ethan there'd been Kevin Ames. She'd had it bad for Kevin for a long, long time. But when he finally stopped chasing big-boobed wonders, he'd wanted Addie, not Sarah. Maybe he still did…that would be great, actually. If Sarah couldn't have him, at least one of her best friends could; for Addie's sake Sarah would do whatever it took to bring them together this week. Addie needed someone. She had no idea how fabulous she was.

But back to Sarah's favorite topic: Sarah. What if she never got Derek out of her head or her heart, even knowing he'd never belong to her?

That night five years ago on this beach, she'd been a total brat, which she was still so horribly embarrassed about she could barely look at him.

Although seriously, who could not look at Derek? She still did, just not when he could tell.

Anyway, it had been a cool and moonless night, like this one. They'd sat on this very spot talking for an hour after Paul and their parents had gone to bed. Sarah had been drunk on too much wine and had started bawling over something, she couldn't even remember what. Derek had comforted her, put his arms around her, stroked her hair. She'd thought that was the signal she'd been

dreaming of and had tried her best to make something happen.

Yeah, well, nice fantasy, Sarah.

Then, in an appalling show of immaturity, she'd bolstered her crushed ego by accusing him to Addie and then to Joe, who when she came back to Vassar had been able to tell right away that something was upsetting her. It didn't help that she'd also overheard comments from Paul about Derek's sexploits in harbors around the world. A woman in every port, sometimes two, and in St. Thomas, three, two of whom were apparently twins. So even not caring much who he had in bed at any given time, he still hadn't wanted Sarah.

She coughed. Man, she needed water. Her throat was practically sticking to itself.

Footsteps rustled and snapped in the woods. Sarah lifted onto her elbows. A man's form, stepping onto the beach, well-built, tall. Her heart starting to race. Derek? Coming to finish what they started?

"Sarah?"

Joe. Her heart slowed. She sat up. "Yes, it's me."

"What are you doing out here?"

"Couldn't sleep. How did you know where I was?"

"I heard you leave, didn't hear you come back so I came looking." He plunked down on the grass beside her and handed her something cool.

A can of sparkling water. "Joe, you are a god."

"Wait, you're only realizing that now?"

“No, no, I knew.” She cracked the top to the can and took a long, grateful drink. “Heaven. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. So what are you doing out here besides not sleeping?”

“Watching for shooting stars. Thinking.”

“About what?” He scootched down to lie next to her. His warm side adjacent to her hip made her realize she’d gotten chilly.

“About…how I always fall for guys who don’t want me.”

“No kidding. You’re batting about a thousand on that one.”

“Ha.” Sarah giggled. “Thanks for the vote of support.”

“I mean how can anyone be so clueless?”

“Hey.” She shoved him with her hip. “Your deep empathy is much appreciated.”

“You can’t see what’s right under your nose, Sarah Bosson.” His voice descended to a melodramatic growl.

“Okay, okay. So what do I do?”

“Come to Dr. Joe. He will rewire your brain using everyday household items.”

Sarah’s laughter was interrupted by a horrific burp from the soda bubbles. She laughed harder. “Oh, no! Joe, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry, really. I still have hearing in my other ear.”

“Stop, stop.” She waited for her giggles to die out, loving that she could belch in front of Joe and not feel more than slightly embarrassed. He had no illusions she was perfect. He had no

illusions about her at all. And for some reason he still wanted to be her friend.

They'd met at Vassar and became close right away. After graduating they'd both moved to Boston where she got a job fund-raising for Harvard and he did something with computers she couldn't begin to understand. They saw each other a few times a month and talked and texted often. He was her absolute rock. She'd die without him. "Anyway, so I was thinking about this one unattainable guy who—"

"Derek."

Sarah's jaw dropped. That was psychic, even for him. Or maybe she was pathetically obvious. "How did you know?"

"You mooned over him all night."

"I did not!" Yup. Pathetic.

"Because he's so hunky and sexy and sooo super hot!"

Sarah made a sound of exasperation. "Well, he is."

"I know, I know." Joe's sigh was heavy in the darkness. "Go ahead, Sarah, talk. You know I can take it."

"Well, I have to tell you something." She hunched her shoulders, hugging her knees, hoping he wouldn't be angry. "That night with Derek on the beach."

His body tensed next to her. "Yes?"

"He didn't attack me. I was drunk and I sort of…tried to make something happen."

"I figured it was something like that."

"Wait, what?" She released her knee to whap his shoulder.

“How dare you undermine the power of my dramatic bombshell?”

“Aw, Sarah.” He reached up to push her bangs off her face, let his fingers drift tenderly down her cheek. “I’ve known you for nine years. If you were really attacked by some guy, he wouldn’t live long enough to see the next day, let alone the next five years. The way Paul talks about this guy, the way you talk about him, it didn’t add up. I didn’t know exactly what happened, but I’m not surprised.”

She lay down next to him, throat tight. “You don’t blame me?”

“For what?”

“Lying?”

“I didn’t think of it that way. You just weren’t ready to tell the whole truth.”

Her heart was full to bursting. She had to blink through tears to bring the stars back into focus. “Seriously, Joe, are you perfect or do you just pretend to be?”

“I’m the real deal, Sarah. Maybe someday you’ll realize—”

A white streak blazed across a good portion of the night sky. Sarah shrieked and pointed. “Did you see *that?*”

“Whoa. Yes. I did.” He sounded as awed as she felt. “It means you get to make a wish.”

“Why not you?”

“You saw it first.”

“How do you know?”

“Because.” He reached over and rubbed her head until her

already messy hair was a total disaster, making her shriek again, with laughter this time. “I said so.”

“Stop! My coif! My stunning updo. Ruined!”

“Now.” He let her go. “Make a wish.”

“Okay, okay.” Sarah thought—took her about half a second to decide—then reached up to the sky and wished with all her might that she might love a man who loved her back. It was all she’d ever wanted. So many people managed it. Her parents. Paul and Ellen. Why not her?

“Finished?”

“Yes.”

“Should I check?”

Sarah frowned. “Check what?”

“To see if the six hottest members of the U.S. Navy are waiting naked in your room?”

She giggled. “That’s *not* what I wished for.”

“Then I hope you get whatever it was.” He got to his feet, reached down and pulled her up opposite him as if she weighed nothing. “And I think you need to go to bed.”

“Yes, Dad.” She didn’t resist when his arms came around her. He was such a good friend. So patient with her, so nonthreatening. Why couldn’t she fall in love with him?

“Listen to me.”

“Mmm?” She laid her head on his solid shoulder.

“You are going to sleep really well tonight.” He started stroking her hair, working the tense muscles at the base of her

scalp. “And tomorrow you are going to wake up and realize you’ve put this Derek demon totally to bed.”

“Okay.” She closed her eyes. As if. She’d be happy if she could think about him without getting wet. And talk to him without getting so flustered and guilty she could barely form words.

“And.” Joe rocked her back and forth. “You are going to remind yourself that I love you no matter how insane you get, no matter how completely and insufferably annoying, no matter how—”

“Uh, Joe?” She patted his chest. “Yeah, um, thanks. That’s enough.”

“No problem.” He squeezed her then took her hand. “Let’s go.”

“I’m ready.” She followed him across the beach, fumbling for her flashlight. “Hey, who was that girl you were talking to all night? The cute little one.”

“Carrie?”

“Yeah. Where’s your flashlight?” She tried to remember seeing him use one, still not having any luck extracting hers from her sweatshirt pocket since it was on the side of the hand Joe was holding.

“Don’t need one. Just follow me.”

“Wait, seriously? Through the woods? The path is treacherous and it’s pitch-black. I’ve come here all my life and even I wouldn’t do it.”

“I have cat eyes.”

"Joe…" She hung back, still trying for the flashlight, until he tugged her impatiently forward.

"Just lift your feet so you don't trip. You'll be fine."

"Okay. But if you kill me I'm suing." She followed him a few more steps, getting braver as it became apparent he was navigating nicely. "So…what about Carrie?"

"Nice girl. What do you want to know?"

"I don't know." Her voice came out too high and she had to relax her throat to get it back to normal. "Do you like her?"

He snorted impatiently. "No, I talked to her all night because she repulsed me."

"Okay, okay. Never mind." Sarah's giggle felt forced. What was wrong with her, she was so self-absorbed she couldn't even be happy for her best friend? "I'm glad for you. I hope something comes of it. You deserve someone wonderful."

"I think so, too." He pulled her up unerringly through the trees, finding the path past the blueberry patch and up to the house, supporting her when she stumbled. It was actually kind of mysterious and cool.

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Joe."

He chuckled and opened the back door for her to go inside. "I hope you never have to find out."

She kissed his cheek and crossed through the living room toward the bedroom she shared with Addie, noticing how much calmer and lighter she felt, how much more clear and slow-moving her brain was. Joe was good for her. He always had been.

Knew her inside out, tolerated her worst faults and adored her strengths. What more could a woman want?

Macho alpha sizzle. Daring, adventure, challenge.

Sarah sighed and used the hall bathroom, then climbed into bed, careful not to disturb Addie.

Sometimes she thought she must be the most shallow person alive. But if she was deep-down wired to be attracted to guys like Derek, Ethan and Kevin instead of guys like Joe, there wasn't a single damn thing she could do about it.

4

ADDIE WAS CONFUSED. Standing on the cliff in front of the Bossons' house, drinking champagne punch, keeping an eye out for Kevin's arrival, she was in a thorough state of turmoil. And since confusion didn't visit her very often, thank goodness, she could safely say that she didn't like it. At all. Most of the time her emotional life was, if not under control, then at least comprehensible. She was single or she was in a relationship. She was friends with someone or she wasn't. She had a crush on a guy or she didn't.

She'd come to this island with a head full of Kevin. Her past with him, the promise of intimate time with him this weekend, and the vaguest whisper of possibility that they could continue some relationship into the future—Philadelphia wasn't that far from New York City after all. Over a decade of mooning and fantasy about to come true.

And then she met Derek.

Her love of the simple and the clear—statistics and probabilities and interpretable data—did not prepare her for a man who, during their first-ever meeting unsettled her to the point of blathering, who wanted to watch the sunset alone with her, and who, in a low, dreamy voice, as much as said he wanted to kiss her. Frankly, for a few seconds—okay, many seconds—she'd wanted him to kiss her more than she'd wanted to go on

breathing.

Even if Sarah's story about Derek wasn't one-hundred percent accurate, as Derek claimed, he was still a girl-in-every-port guy in his mid-thirties, while Kevin, at thirtyone, had already been totally committed to one woman in a marriage, faithful until divorce did them part.

Shouldn't that clear everything up? A rational conclusion drawn from the available information, leading to a sensible low-risk recommendation for future action. Derek was a womanizer. Kevin was a sweetheart. Only an idiot would still dream about Derek. Or do something completely foolish like keep peeking over at him on a kayak trip earlier that afternoon. She'd interrupted perfectly wonderful chances to stare into the water, spot orange and purple starfish, waving seaweed that looked nearly floral, blue mussels and splotchy pink growths on underwater reefs by looking up every three seconds to keep track of where he was and with whom. Worse, she'd caught him several times in the act of looking over at her, too.

For a while he'd paddled alongside her kayak, and they'd chatted easily about his extensive travels and her not-so-extensive ones. About movies and books and favorite foods. Through it all, he'd shown no signs of anything more than friendly interest, and then he'd quite naturally steered his kayak over to chat with someone else.

Well, of course, right? He was here to get to know Paul's friends, too. Plus the guy had put himself out there with her last

night and she'd stomped him flat, why *would* he continue to show interest?

And why couldn't she stop wanting him to?

Greedy Addie, wanting her hunk and to eat him, too.

She giggled at her own thought and nearly spit out the sip of punch she'd just taken. The group was assembled after quick-as-possible showers to save the water supply, enjoying a predinner drink or two.

The group minus Paul. Paul was not on the island because Paul had gone to the mainland to pick up *Kevin*.

Eek!

Addie was as light as the champagne, as bubbly as the… champagne, as fizzy as the…um, well…champagne. And clearly not big on similes.

Paul had been gone over an hour, which meant any minute he'd be back. Addie had come down by the cliff here, hoping to catch the first glance of *Lucky's* approach, so she would know exactly when to start freaking out.

Or she could get a head start and do it *now*.

Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply, fighting a sudden deep desire to be home organizing Great-Aunt Grace's papers. So easy. So uncomplicated. This paper goes in this pile. That goes in that one.

"Hello, Addie."

She started at the sound of Derek's voice, luckily not standing close enough to the edge to pitch over. She immediately had to

put the brakes on a fantasy of Derek saving her from certain death by hauling her back into his arms.

Honestly. Addie pulled herself together. "Hey, there, Derek."

Then she made a fatal error. She turned to look at him.

He was breathtaking. A touch more sun on his cheeks made the contrast even sexier between golden skin and his white shirt, and made his vivid eyes practically jump out of his face.

No, no, *Kevin* was coming soon. Once glance at him and everything she'd ever felt for him over so many years would come rushing back again, and this Derek guy would be forgotten.

"Enjoying the view?"

"I am." She put on a casual smile—ho-hum, nice to see you—and concentrated on the view, which she'd just been pretending to look at before. Yes, it was lovely. A sailboat was cruising in toward the bay, sails crisp white in the sunshine. A lobsterman was hauling traps just beyond the next island, his white and green boat bobbing gently in the waves. Breezes ruffled her hair; the air was sweet enough to drink. Why hadn't she been enjoying this all along? "I don't think I'd ever get tired of this view. The sea is always changing, the light, the birds, the boats…"

Derek chuckled. "Well, Ms. Manhattan. You're describing the view I see pretty much every day. Maybe you need to give that life a try."

She snorted, having to suppress yet another picture, this one of herself sunbathing on the deck of his yacht. "Do they pay full-time salary and benefits for someone to project the odds of

running aground or sinking?"

"Um…" He tapped a finger on his very sexy lips as if trying to remember. "Not really, no. But I have an onboard bookkeeping position opening up in a few weeks. Are you interested?"

"Don't think so, but thanks." Addie made another serious mistake. She smiled at him. Then he smiled at her, and it was as if the scene around them wrapped itself up neatly and disappeared, the way backgrounds did sometimes in cartoons, leaving the two of them alone in nothingness.

Worse than how she'd felt the night before when she'd had to force herself to watch one of the most magnificent sunsets she'd ever seen. All she'd wanted to do was gaze into those cinnamon-brown eyes and drool.

Okay, Addie. Engage rational superpowers immediately. Like this: fine to look, fine to appreciate, but no touching.

An upswell of voices by the house made her turn to see what was happening.

Kevin was happening. Somehow she'd missed being first to see the boat, hadn't heard it, either, and now he was right here, standing on the front porch, being hugged by Ellen, two or three others crowding around for their turns, grinning that old familiar straight-toothed grin that could still knock her for a loop.

And just like that, as if she'd been released from a sorcerer's spell, Addie was able to move again, to walk away from The awesome but evil power that was Derek, and into the pure heavenly light of Kevin.

"Ad-*die*." The last syllable of her name came out on a shout. She'd forgotten the special way he said it, and the memory made her legs move even faster. And there he was, disentangling himself from the other woman and sailing down the steps on his strong runner's legs to grab and whirl her around in a joyous embrace that made her laugh and gasp for breath and nearly spill her punch.

Kevin Ames.

"God, look at you." He held her at arm's length, his face glowing. Eleven years later, he looked exactly the same. Maybe his face was thinner, maybe his skin was a bit weathered, and now that she looked, had he lightened his hair? But really, exactly the same. "You've turned into one seriously hot babe, Addie!"

His face might be glowing, hers was on fire. "Thanks, Kevin. You really—"

"Addie all grown up." He shook his head, looking her closely up and down. Somewhat disturbingly, she noticed his eyes were the exact shade of brown as Derek's. Medium caramel. Only for some reason they weren't doing quite the same things to her. "Addie Sewell. I can't believe it. You're a real woman now."

"Oh, well." She was taken aback by his seductive tone then chided herself for being such a prude. Kevin wanting her was the whole point. "I just did the normal grow—"

"What were you, seventeen, eighteen last time I saw you?"

She nodded, unable to blush any harder than she was, or she'd try. "Eighteen."

"I remember that time very well, Addie." His voice lowered, his gaze turned tender. He touched her under the chin, making her shiver. "We never quite got synced up, you and me."

"Uh, no. Not quite." She peeked up at him under her lashes, trying not to be mortified by the memory of her outburst at their last meeting. He certainly didn't seem to hold it against her. "I was a little naive."

"You *were?"* One eyebrow rose suggestively. "So that means you're not anymore?"

Man, her blush mechanism was going to wear out at this rate. But this was what she had come for. No matter how loudly Aunt Grace's boxes were calling to her, no matter how uneasy and rattled she felt around Kevin, she wasn't going to be the shy hide-away girl anymore. "No, Kevin. Not anymore."

"I'm really glad to hear that, Addie." He leaned in close, caught and intertwined her fingers with his, gave them a squeeze. "I've always had a soft spot for you. Actually…sometimes a *hard* spot."

She caught herself just before she cringed, and smiled up at him without shame this time, waiting for the world to disappear around them the way it had around her and Derek.

Waiting…

And…

Hmm.

Well, she felt all warm and melty and sweet, that was something, right?

Plenty.

"Kevin!" A guy Addie barely knew—John, she thought—one of Paul and Kevin's old track buddies charged out of the house and Kevin bolted away for the chest-bumping man-hug.

Addie grinned at the macho ritual then on impulse turned around, feeling eyes burning into her back.

He was still there, feet planted apart, hands on his hips, looking grimmer than she'd ever seen him, or pretty much anyone, look.

Not because of her and Kevin?

No. He didn't look sulky or immature or sour-grapes. He looked…angry. And strong. And nobly determined.

And sexy as hell.

Turning head away, lalala, can't seeeee you!

"Addie." Sarah bounded toward her, drink in hand. "We have *got* to talk."

"Now?" She peered around Sarah at Kevin, relieved to have an excuse not to look back at Derek again. "Can't I have a few more minutes?"

"No." Sarah grabbed her hand and pulled her away from the crowd, across the top of the hill where Addie and Derek had walked the night before.

"What is it, Sarah?"

"I have to tell you something."

"I figured that much." She was used to Sarah's drama, but this time Sarah seemed uncharacteristically uneasy. Usually Addie

had the feeling that underneath the wailing and gnashing of teeth, Sarah was enjoying herself immensely. Not this time. “What’s going on, are you okay?”

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