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Making Marion

Written by Beth Moran

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Making Marion

Where's Robin Hood when you need him?

BETH MORAN



LION FICTION

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Chapter One

"Who are you?"

My first thought was to lie. To not be me. I hesitated.

The girl in front of me, so desperately trying to be an adult with her dark make-up and uneasy piercings looked up for the first time. Her expression from behind the counter said it all. What type of person doesn't know who they are?

A dozen names zipped through my brain. The women I wished I could be. Amelia Earhart. Emmeline Pankhurst. Lady Gaga.

The girl began tapping her biro on the book in front of her, jabbing angry marks on the white page.

"Marion Miller." This is my real name. I was here (and not standing behind my own counter at Ballydown Public Library) to discover what that name meant.

She checked her book. "You aren't on the bookings list. Did you reserve a pitch or a caravan?"

"No. I haven't reserved anything – "

She slammed the book shut, shoving it to one side. Scowled through the inch-long spider legs glued to her eyelids. "It's August. We're full."

I was about to explain that I only wanted directions to the Sherwood Forest visitor centre. But before I could, the outside door opened and a woman *sashayed* in. Apart from her tiny frame, nothing about her appearance said "girlish". All of her, from the top of her platinum blonde chignon to her sleek heels declared her a lady. Her

simple red dress wrapped her perfectly, emphasizing curves where curves are meant to be. I couldn't guess her age. Thirty-five? Forty? Fifty, even? It felt crass even to consider how old she might be. For a woman like this, years and the passing of time are irrelevant. She was breathtaking.

She turned to me and smiled. "Hello. Welcome to the Peace and Pigs. I am so sorry, but an emergency has occurred and I require my daughter's assistance immediately. Have you booked in yet?"

A voice of pure honey. Made with pollen from the sweetest of North American flowers. Deep and rich. A Southern Belle.

As I opened my mouth to reply, the girl who must be her daughter answered. "She hasn't booked."

"I'm not here on holiday. I…"

The woman grabbed my wrist with her French-manicured nails. "You must be Becky Moffitt's niece – Jenna? You made it! I'm Scarlett. You are so very welcome! To be honest I was beginnin' to think you decided not to show up, but better late than never, today of all days. Now please, I don't mean to throw you in at the deep end, but as I mentioned, we are in the grip of an emergency. Would you mind very much taking over from Grace and supervisin' check-in? All you need do is welcome arrivals, find their pitch number in the book, make sure they've paid and hand them the information leaflet."

As she spoke, the woman steered me behind the desk. She patted my arm and turned back to her daughter. "Little Johnny escaped again. Valerie has him cornered with a broom by the bottom wash block, but he is squealin' like a great big baby; we need an extra pair of hands."

For a few beats of silence, Grace didn't move. I could feel tension swinging like a pendulum between them. Scarlett reached up her hand to smooth a non-existent stray hair back into place.

"Please, would you come and help?"

Grace rolled her eyes and plodded out to join her mum. The door slammed shut behind her, leaving me standing on the wrong

side of the counter. A prickle of sweat popped out on my forehead, due to a lot more than the stifling August heat.

For the first few minutes, nothing happened; the only sound my breathless prayer, muttered over and over again, as if saying it more times made any difference. "Please God, let no one turn up. Don't make me have to speak to anyone else."

The problem was this. I knew and God knows that I prayed a bigger prayer only the day before, not formed in a moment of panic but wrung from the very marrow in my bones. God chose to listen to my first prayer.

The bell on top of the door jangled, and my heart accelerated to triple time as a man and woman stepped in. Crumpled and sticky, like the old sweet wrappers inhabiting my car footwells, they barely glanced up as they handed over their reservation details. I checked the name on the piece of paper against the entry in the book.

"Pitch fourteen." My voice had been replaced with that of an elderly toad.

"Excuse me?"

I coughed to clear my throat. "Pitch number fourteen." I pointed out the map on the back of the welcome leaflet I had been memorizing for distractional purposes. "Just here, by the play park."

"That's great." The woman swiped at the hair drooping in her eyes. "The kids have been stuck in the back of the car for five hours. They can play while we put the tent up. You might have genuinely saved us from committing murder. You know what it's like."

Nope.

They had already paid in full and I couldn't think of anything to say, but they stood there expectantly. I fought past the seven-year-old mute who grabs hold of my vocal cords whenever I am forced into making conversation with people I don't know. Remembered to do my mute busters: *breathe out, drop shoulders, pause. Breathe in, open mouth, speak.*

"Um. Have a nice holiday. And if you need anything, feel free to come and ask."

The couple smiled and nodded as they opened the door to leave. I held my breath the whole time and then, as the door swung shut, my mouth opened all by itself and yelled: "I'm not Becky Moffitt's niece!"

The man pushed the door back open and stuck his head around it. "Sorry?"

Shaking my head quickly from side to side, I tried to smile. It might have been more of a grimace. He raised his eyebrows, glancing back at his car impatiently. "You shouted something. I didn't quite catch it."

I swallowed, and managed to mumble, "I'm not Becky Moffitt's niece."

The man stared at me for a second. "Okaaaay. Well. Thanks for letting me know. I'll bear that in mind."

I waited for him to climb back into his car before banging my head a few times on the reception desk.

An hour or so later, Scarlett poked her head around the door. Her eyes swept the room before coming to rest on me. I hadn't yet died of fright or done a runner. This is despite the fact that every time the bell jangled, my central nervous system pumped out an adrenaline rush big enough to send a shuttle into orbit. I could, by now, smell my own body odour and had agonized for a very long forty minutes about whether or not to take a cold drink from the fridge behind me. What on earth was I doing here?

"Y'all okay in here?"

I nodded yes.

"Anybody showed up?"

"Six."

"Helped yourself to a drink and an ice-cream?"

"No!"

"Well then, how can you be all right, sat in this sauna in *jeans* with nothin' to cool you down? Take somethin' quick before you pass out on me. I don't want suin' for maltreatment of my employees."

Tentatively, I pulled a bottle of water out of the fridge and held

it in front of me in both hands, trying to find the courage to own up before the real Jenna walked in the door. Embarrassment won out – I smiled instead.

"Well, just wanted to check you were still here, and managin'. We're chock-a-block busy this weekend, and I could do with Grace stayin' out here with me, so you just carry on here and I'll come by later. Reception closes at seven."

She'd gone. There were three more hours until seven. I hadn't eaten since my emergency lunchtime banana. At six, I plucked up the courage to take a flapjack from the shelf of food items that made up the campsite shop, but I also had nowhere to sleep that night and only seventeen pounds left in my purse. If I confessed to being Jean O'Shay, Maureen Sheehan, Paula Callahan, Aoife Briggs, Danny O'Grady and Liam O'Grady's niece but not Becky Moffitt's, would Scarlett pay me enough to rent one of her caravans? Or report me to the police for impersonation of a holiday park employee?

At five to seven, Scarlett swung in through the door. I don't know what she had been doing all day, but her appearance suggested she spent it being pampered in an air-conditioned beauty salon. Must be something they teach you in Southern Belle School. How not to wilt. In Ballydown, we call it a hot summer's day if it stops raining long enough to dry a load of washing, and if the wind is strong enough to give you chilblains but stops short of frostbite. So I had past my best after a long afternoon in the Peace and Pigs Holiday Park complimentary steam room.

But when she came to stand next to me, I saw that in fact her eyes were creased with tiredness. Opening the book, Scarlett scanned the page. "How'd it go?"

I garbled my answer, wound up so tight my muscles were humming.

"I'm sorry," Scarlett drawled. She looked right at me, emphasizing each word. "I only speak English."

I repeated myself, replicating her slow enunciation. Trying to iron the Irish out of my vowels.

"All the reservations in the book have arrived. There were no problems."

Scarlett narrowed her eyes. Not mean. Suspicious. "Where you from, honey?"

"Northern Ireland."

"Hmmm." She examined me sideways on, starting with my dark, scruffy ponytail and moving right down to my supermarket trainers, via an ill-fitting pair of jeans that I had stolen from my cousin Orla when she put on two stone after having three babies in four years.

It is a rare day that doesn't have me believing I am a little girl trapped in a woman's body. Under Scarlett's gaze I shrank down to even less than that. An adult who has taken neither the time nor the effort to learn how to become a woman. An insult to my gender. A disgrace to females throughout the globe. I felt sure she could see through my "I'd rather be reading!" T-shirt to the body armour of my grey and sagging underwear.

She let out a long, smooth sigh. An iced tea of disappointment.

"I was led to believe the Troubles were over. You are something akin to a war zone, sugar."

About ninety-eight per cent of my red blood cell supply rushed up to my cheeks and neck.

Scarlett's face softened. For one fraction of a second, I glimpsed what it must feel like to be her daughter. To be Grace.

"Well. If you are plannin' on stayin', better start to slow down your words some. And Scarlett's lesson number one: dress that pretty face with a smile once in a while. Peace and Pigs' people do not want to be greeted at the reception desk with your broken heart."

"Are you…" I took a breath. Slowed down my words some. "Are you offering me a job? Because there is something I have to tell – "

"Sugar, I know you ain't Jenna Moffitt. I don't need to know who you are if you don't want to tell me. Although it might make things easier in the long run. I do everything by the book here, but if you want to work for your board and keep, we can work out the rest."

"No! I don't mind telling you my real name. I'm not running away." I became flustered under Scarlett's raised eyebrow. "Well, not from anyone who matters. I mean, everybody matters, of course, but not anybody – um – legal. I mean…"

Scarlett held up her hand. She waited for me to look up and meet her eye, then moved her hand forward to shake mine. A business gesture. To seal a deal. But with one infinitesimal squeeze, Scarlett said much more than that. She told me I was welcome. Even with my awful clothes and clumsy words. My undisclosed past and shattered spirits were invited to rest on the porch swing of her hospitality for as long as they needed. A tiny whisper, faint as a last breath, dared to wonder if I might find a home here, under the oak trees where the sunlight dappled and the air carried a scent of honeysuckle, and with it hope.

My new employer, gracious and charming to a fault, left the room. In her absence, my tears spilled over, carving clear, clean pathways through the grime of my facade.

I managed to calm down after about twenty minutes. Only after I had wiped my face on my T-shirt, blown my nose and stepped outside did I realize Scarlett had been waiting for me the whole time. Sitting on the stylish oak bench outside the reception building, she could have been a classic sculpture. A masterpiece carved from a single block of marble by an impassioned master craftsman. I stood hovering for a few moments until she looked at me.

"Better?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Come on then. I need to eat."

I fetched my bag from the car, introduced myself properly, and we began walking across the site. The whole park had only ten vans for visitors and three for staff, but throughout August it would accommodate one hundred tents. We strolled past the wash blocks, laundry room and playground, locations I had memorized on the map. The pitches were dotted in between the oak trees, clustered in friendly groups around brightly coloured flowerbeds,

tucked away in seclusion by the edge of the forest – nothing regimented into grim rows. On the west side, where the sun would be setting in a couple of hours, Scarlett pointed out Hatherstone Hall. Maybe a quarter of a mile from the park's boundary, beyond a field full of sheep, it rose magnificent on the skyline. Built of eighteenth-century grey stone, it appeared solid and unfussy, but beautiful nonetheless. Though trees shadowed the front of the house, I could make out three storeys, the second complete with balconies in front of the two largest windows. Ivy covered all the ground floor.

"Does anybody live there?"

"The Hall? Oh, yes. Lord and Lady Hatherstone spend most of the year here, with their son. Reuben runs an organic veg box business from produce grown on the estate. And there are two employees living in the annexe behind the main house with their three kids. Still – a big enough place for eight people to be rattlin' around in, if you ask me. More trouble than it's worth. That place positively eats money."

Scarlett continued to fill me in on the details of the estate until we reached a smallish static caravan, set apart on its own at the borders of the woodland, surrounded by a white picket fence. Next to it grew a flourishing vegetable garden, probably three times the size of my ma's yard back home. I recognized lettuce and some raspberry canes. Besides that I was clueless. Ireland might be green, but it rains far too much in Ballydown for anybody I know to consider gardening as a hobby. Not when you can get a tin of peas at Joe's Food and Fancy Goods for twenty-nine pence.

"This is all we have, so I hope you ain't fussy. I kept it back for Jenna Moffitt, but I'm assumin' she won't be requirin' it. It's clean, and there are some basics in the fridge to see you through to next weekend. Payday's Friday. It only takes one eye to see you need some time, honey. But Grace and I are in the blue home. Stop by whenever you're ready for company."

She handed me a key, and turned to go. I had a million

questions, but managed to find the courage to ask just one: "How is Little Johnny?"

"That hunk of ham! I could cook and eat him as soon as spend half my life in swelterin' heat chasing him around the wash block. Don't worry yourself, Marion. That pig will outlive us all."