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A Summer at Sea

Written by Katie Fforde

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Katie Fforde

A Summer at Sea



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Chapter One



Emily regarded her rucksack, currently sitting on top of a vessel that looked like an overgrown bath toy. It had a large funnel and high wheelhouse – which must have its view obscured by the funnel, she realised – and a high bow that went down to the water in a straight line. A mast rose near the bow, painted yellow, with wire rigging coming from it. The rest of the boat was smartly painted in red and black and, had she not been travelling for about six hours, would have made Emily smile. She'd forgotten that Scotland was quite so far away from the South-West of England.

'I shouldn't have come,' she muttered. 'I shouldn't be about to take a summer job – something I might have done when I was a student. I'm thirty-five, with professional qualifications. It's ridiculous!'

But then she looked around her and saw the July sunshine sparkling on the sea, the islands set off against a blue sky, the mountains, and, nearer, a very pretty harbour – Crinan – edged by brightly painted houses and what looked to be a nice hotel. She remembered the

scenery – first from the bus and then the car journey – and thought she might well be in the most beautiful spot in the world. It wasn't raining, and it seemed that currently there were no midges. All good enough reasons to join her rucksack, which had been flung on to the boat by the dark and almost entirely silent man who'd picked her up from Lochgilphead bus station. She'd made this mad decision, she'd better follow through.

She stepped aboard the puffer, described to her by Rebecca as almost a family member. In fact it was an old cargo vessel, one of a fleet built during the Second World War, designed to deliver everything that the Highlands and Islands might need, from farm equipment to groceries, livestock to whisky. Many years ago it had been converted to carry passengers. It was powered by steam and, according to Rebecca, had a lot of character. Emily's job was to cook for the passengers now Rebecca, who owned it with her husband, James, and ran it as a thriving business, was no longer able to, being so pregnant.

Emily had rented out her house, arranged to take all the leave due to her, to be followed by a sabbatical for when her leave ran out. This done, she got the plane and two buses and now was here.

'Hello!' she called. 'Anyone at home?' As a midwife she was used to letting herself into houses where there was a lot else going on but this was different. All was silent.

She stayed on deck for a few moments longer, drinking in the view and letting the stress of the journey fade away, before deciding to go below. There must be someone here.

Rebecca had warned her she would be shopping and James was organising a coal delivery, but had definitely said there'd be at least one crew member on board to greet her.

She found a flight of wooden steps leading down to what would have been the hold but was now the first level of accommodation and descended. 'Anyone in?'

Still no answer, so she looked about her, deciding to make herself at home if there was no else to do it.

There was a long, polished mahogany table, which, going by the brochure Rebecca had sent her, was where everyone ate together, passengers and crew. Now it had a large bowl of fruit on it and a pile of unread newspapers. On one side there was a built-in wooden seat with comfy-looking cushions and, on the other, a bench. Looking at the length of these bits of furniture told Emily she'd be cooking for a lot of people. It had been a long time since she'd worked in a café, producing vegetarian lasagne for twenty, and she hoped she hadn't lost the skills.

The rest of the saloon (described as such in the brochure) consisted of built-in sofas arranged around a huge wood-burning stove. Although it was a warm summer day, it was smouldering gently, giving off a pleasant, aromatic smell as well as warmth. There were paintings on the walls (bulkheads – she mentally corrected herself) and plenty of woven woollen throws and cushion covers, all with a definitely Scottish feel, which added homely style and comfort. There were steps that obviously led down to the guest cabins below and all in all it gave the impression of being a sociable and cosy space.

Although tempted to make herself comfortable beside the wood-burner with a colour supplement, Emily felt she ought to explore the galley, which would be her place of work. After all, if the worst happened and the maternity unit at home was closed, or she had offended too many important people, it might have to be her job next year as well. Goodness knows what she'd do in the winter, when the puffer didn't operate.

On the way to the galley, she allowed herself to be distracted by a painting. As most of them were, it was of the puffer, but in a different setting to the gentle, distant islands and hills where it now lay. In the picture the mountains were nearer, majestic, almost overpowering. The puffer was gallantly under way, steam streaming from its funnel, obviously fighting against a stiff breeze. Emily was just struggling to read the title of the piece, which was in tiny writing underneath, hoping it would give a clue to the location, when there was a loud rustling noise. She jumped. 'Hello?'

There was no reply, just more rustling.

Oh my God, thought Emily, rats! I'm alone on an old boat and there are rats! She had a fear of rats people described as irrational. She didn't think it was irrational at all; they were vile, disease-ridden creatures who urinated as they ran. Rebecca had never said anything about rats. She'd have to spend the night on a rat-infested ship. Well, she couldn't. She'd have to decamp to the hotel.

Movement caught her eye, sending another stab of panic through her. It was in the galley and although she really didn't want to actually see the rat, she found her

gaze drawn to the sound. There was a plastic carrier bag in the sink and it was heaving.

She screamed. Not loudly, but loud enough to make someone laugh. A girl appeared from where the galley turned a corner. She was younger than Emily, and very pretty, with a cloud of dark curls and a curvaceous figure, revealed by jeans and a tight sweater. This girl had obviously been keeping out of sight, waiting for Emily to be alarmed by whatever was making the noise.

'They're prawns,' the girl said scathingly. 'Langoustines. We bought them this morning. Don't say the new cook Rebecca brought in is frightened of shellfish?'

Emily, who was good at people, realised this girl was not happy to see her and wondered why. Had she thought she could do the job and resented Rebecca for bringing in a stranger? She feared she was going to have work hard to get on with her. Well, she'd just have to do it.

'Hi, I'm Emily. No, I'm usually fine with shellfish but mostly they're not still alive when I deal with them.'

'Only the freshest is good enough for us.' The girl spoke possessively, obviously proud of the puffer's high standards of produce.

'And what's your name?'

'Billie,' she said.

Emily nodded. 'I've come to help Rebecca out, as she's quite near to term.'

Billie frowned slightly, and Emily realised she'd used a rather medical expression but she didn't patronise Billie by explaining. She'd work it out.

'Rebecca didn't need to get anyone else in. I could

have managed. I've got loads of energy – I'm not pregnant! Or she could have got someone else to be galley slave.'

Emily winced inwardly at the expression but suspected it was what they called the cook's assistant on the puffer. She didn't need to worry about it being politically correct or not. 'Well, maybe we can work together? Sort of a job-share? So both do both jobs?'

This seemed to soften the expression of resentment on Billie's face. 'That might work. Only of course you won't know how to help out on deck like I do.'

'Is that part of the galley slave's job?'

'There is a deck hand. Drew. But when we're doing a difficult manoeuvre, or coming alongside or something, it's useful to have extra people with fenders.'

Emily smiled inside. Billie was using technical terms that Emily didn't quite understand, but like Billie, she would work it out without having it explained. 'Will I have to learn how to do that?'

'Oh yes.' Billie's expression doubted her ability.

'Would you mind showing me round? As Rebecca and James aren't here.'

'OK.' She wasn't enthusiastic but she'd do it. 'So, this is the galley, obviously.' Billie waved a casual hand. 'It's small but there's a bit of extra space at the back. Quite useful. Two of us can work at the same time. You have to be tidy.'

Emily was a very tidy worker in the kitchen. Rebecca knew this from when they'd worked together. It was one of the reasons Rebecca had wanted her and not someone she didn't know. They'd made a great team.

'I'll show you where we sleep,' said Billie. 'Bring your bag. Have you got any more luggage?'

'No.'

'Cool. There's no room for more than the basics.'

Emily followed Billie up on deck and across to a metal hood that Billie pulled back as if she was opening a tin of sardines.

Underneath was what looked like a dark tunnel but then Emily noticed rungs. There was a vertical ladder downwards.

'You go down backwards, always,' said Billie. 'I'll take your bag.'

With the ease of practice, Billie got hold of Emily's rucksack and swung herself down on to the ladder and disappeared. Emily took a breath and then, trying to remember Billie's technique, somehow got herself on to the ladder and down it.

'Oh God,' she said, before she could stop herself. 'Rebecca didn't sleep here, did she?'

There were two built-in single bunks with lockers underneath. A bank of netting over what was obviously Billie's bunk held toiletries, a bottle of water, magazines, a book. Right at the end of both bunks was a space big enough for a rucksack as long as it wasn't big or full.

'Of course not. She's in the owner's cabin. Although that must be a squash now she's the size of a whale.'

Rebecca was almost seven months pregnant so this might not have been much of an exaggeration but as Emily hadn't seen her yet, she didn't comment. 'So I'm in your space now?' she said instead. 'I am sorry. I can see now why you weren't thrilled to see me.' The cabin

was small for one; for two, the space would be – was – very restricted.

Billie shrugged, acknowledging what Emily said was true. 'Just hope you don't need to get up in the night for a pee.'

'Er – where are the bathrooms?'

'In the hold. There are three. Oh, and one under the wheelhouse but the boys use that usually. Bit pongy.'

'I can see I'm going to love this job,' said Emily seriously. Now she could see why Rebecca had asked her if she still liked camping when they were going through the details together. But actually, she didn't let things like cramped conditions and far-away facilities bother her. If she could get Billie to unbend a bit more, it would all be fine.

'Emily!' roared a familiar female voice. 'Did you get here all right? Alasdair promised he'd picked you up OK.'

Emily set off up the ladder, bursting with joy at the thought of seeing her old friend. 'Becca!'

Both women floundered towards each other clumsily, Emily because she'd tripped over something and Rebecca because she was pregnant. They hugged tightly.

'Oh! It's so lovely to see you!' they both said at once.

'You haven't changed a bit!' said Rebecca, standing back to look at Emily. 'Although you've got highlights now. Your hair was always so dark.'

'When I started going prematurely blonde I decided not to fight it and have a few more streaks put in.'

'Otherwise, you're just the same. Haven't grown or anything.'

Emily laughed. 'The same can't be said for you,

although apart from being the size of a house, you're still the same Becca I was a student with.'

'I am huge, aren't I?'

Emily nodded. 'Are you sure that baby's got a few more weeks in there?' Emily hugged her friend again; any doubts she might have had about coming dispersed.

'Fairly sure!' They both laughed from the joy of being together after so many years.

'So, have you shown her round, Billie?' Rebecca asked as Billie appeared.

'A bit.'

'Well, let's have a cup of tea or something then I'll give you the complete tour.'

'If the tour could start at the loos, I'd be grateful,' said Emily.

A little while later, Emily and Rebecca were sitting in the saloon with mugs of tea and a plate of home-made biscuits. Emily had a notebook and pencil at the ready. Billie had gone off somewhere, to Rebecca's evident relief. Emily suspected her friend wanted to tell her things about Billie she couldn't say in front of her.

'You're sure you don't want lunch?' said Rebecca, picking up a biscuit and taking a bite.

'I had sandwiches on the bus. And at the airport waiting for the bus.'

'That's OK then. Now, let's run through what you need to do. The passengers are arriving at about five. Tea and cakes will be served. Then, dinner at about eight? There's an honesty bar but James will give them the welcome speech and the first drink to get them in

the mood. I've made you two massive lasagnes – enough for twenty—'

'Oh!' Emily felt a stab of nostalgia in among scribbling notes and 'first-day' anxiety. 'Do you remember those ones we used to make at the café? Sold like hot cakes!'

'I use the same recipe for the vegetarian one. We ask people to tell us if they're veggie but sometimes they forget so I always do options on the first night. There are a load of baguettes for garlic bread . . . James'll cook the prawns for the starter – they're his speciality although he doesn't usually cook so don't get used to it . . .'

Rebecca continued talking about how everything worked until Emily had three pages of notes.

'So, tell me about Billie,' said Emily, putting down her pencil. 'Why didn't she get my job? It would have been easier to find an assistant, wouldn't it, and let her be the cook?'

Rebecca exhaled. 'Well, apart from me really wanting you to come . . .'

'I could have been a galley slave.'

'Billie is great in many ways. She's brilliant on deck. She can steer and even humps bags of coal, given half a chance. But she's not so great in the kitchen. She's sloppy and although she makes great cakes and biscuits she can't make bread. Can you make bread?'

Emily shrugged. 'I watch *Bake Off*; I can follow a recipe.'

Rebecca frowned slightly. 'Oh. Oh well, I expect you'll pick it up. Or I could make it at home and bring it in.'

Emily shook her head. 'No, I'll learn to make it. I've looked at the schedule. It'd be a poor show if you have

to drive all over the Highlands and Islands to bring us bread in your condition.'

'And will you be able to cope with Billie? She's tricky! And I'm so sorry you have to share such a tiny space. I didn't mention it on the phone because I thought you wouldn't come and I so wanted you to.'

Emily did her best to hug her friend but was mostly prevented by her bump. 'It's fine. I can manage and, most importantly, I can get through the night without needing a wee.'

'Which is more than I can do,' said Rebecca gloomily. 'No sooner does the baby finally stop kicking and keeping me awake so I can drop off than my bloody bladder wakes me.'

'At least now you can catch up during the day and get some proper rest. Archie and Henry are old enough to understand if you need to fall asleep on the sofa while they watch that thing about dragons.' Emily caught up on children's TV while doing home visits. It was handy.

'Actually, the thought of curling up in front of the TV with my boys is absolute bliss. Not having to worry about the childcare rota is also bliss.'

'And you won't have to worry about me and Billie because we're going to job-share, so I won't be telling her what to do, just making tactful suggestions.'

Again, Rebecca frowned. 'Well, good luck with that.'

They finished going through everything that was expected of Emily and Rebecca gave her a thorough tour of the galley. The langoustines still heaved and rustled in the sink in a worrying way but Emily was used to them now.

'If ever a fishing boat offers to sell you anything wonderful, abandon the menu plans and buy the fish. The petty cash should have enough in it for that but if it doesn't, tell James and he'll sort it.' Rebecca leant against the counter, taking up the entire gangway. 'I love that spontaneity. It wouldn't work for some cooks but although I like having a plan, and I like knowing there are five dishes I could make without having to go shopping, I really prefer it if something lovely comes flapping on to my worktop, demanding something a bit special.'

'I went on a fish course once, with an old boyfriend, so that excites me too.' Emily realised that Rebecca didn't only need her cooking to be left in safe hands, she wanted the ethos to be passed on too. 'This is going to be great. Perfect for me. I'll be so busy I won't have time to brood about what's going on at the maternity unit. I'll have to think about food all the time! And how lovely is that!'

'Lovely,' agreed Rebecca, much less enthusiastically. 'Now bring me up to date on your love life. Have you left behind a broken-hearted lover?'

Emily giggled. 'No! I may have left someone who would like to see himself in that role but he wasn't doing very well.'

'So you don't have a love-life currently?'

'No.'

'That's good. I'd hate to think of you pining while you're up here working.' She paused. 'What did you think of Alasdair?'

'Who?'

'The man who picked you up from the bus station.'

'Oh! Well, he hardly opened his mouth for the entire

trip from the bus station. I assumed he was the local taxi but he wouldn't accept any money so—'

'Did you fancy him?' Rebecca asked before Emily could finish her sentence.

Emily put this down to hormones. Rebecca would never usually have said this about someone Emily had barely met. 'No! I just want to know why he gave me a lift if he's an elective mute. It must have been torture for him. In fact I could tell it was.'

'Don't take it personally.' Rebecca paused, obviously thinking how best to put what she wanted to say. 'He's James's brother. I told him you'd be tired and probably wouldn't want to chat.'

'Really?' Emily was astounded. 'When have you ever known me not want to chat?'

'Well, you'd had a long journey and you know how tiresome it is having to tell people what you do and things.'

'Why on earth should I mind telling people what I do? I'm proud of it.'

'I thought you might have felt a bit awkward, in the circumstances,' Rebecca explained.

Emily wasn't quite convinced by this but as she didn't greatly care, she just said, 'No, I'm cool about it. I didn't do anything wrong, after all.'

'No, well, back to business, I've made a cake for tea today.' Rebecca seemed eager to get off the subject of why Emily had suddenly dropped her career and come up to Scotland. 'The passengers will be here at about five, so they get tea before James's welcome drink at seven. Then, as I said, dinner at eight. That's in case

anyone has difficulty getting here on the first night. We have it at about seven usually.'

'That's fine. And you've cooked that already so I just do garlic bread and make a salad?'

Rebecca nodded. 'There's one guest I must tell you about. She comes every year with her son. He disappears into the engine room for the duration, being a steam buff. She sits and knits and helps with the washing up.'

'So passengers help with washing up? Don't they come away to avoid household chores?'

Rebecca shook her head. 'No, this is different from most holidays. People come because they want to get involved. There's no obligation, of course, but they enjoy it. It's different from doing it at home. And Maisie, who I just mentioned, she loves coming. I worry about her getting about as she's no spring chicken, but there's always someone to chat to, and it's time with her son. At mealtimes, anyway.'

'I look forward to meeting her. I love old people. There's always so much behind the wrinkles and dodgy hairstyles.'

'I'm so glad you said that! Billie gets a bit impatient. She says we should have an age limit. In some ways she's right, getting people on and off is a struggle sometimes, and I do worry about the steepness of the steps going down to the accommodation, but in other ways, this is a perfect holiday for them. And Maisie loves it, so, as long as she can come, I'm happy to have her.'

At last Rebecca managed to tear herself away, almost content that she'd left her beloved puffer galley in safe

hands. Emily familiarised herself further on her own, locating utensils that were her personal essentials, glad that Billie still hadn't come back from wherever she'd gone.

When she did come back, Emily handed her a mug of tea with 'Chief Cook' printed on it. 'So, how are we going to divvy up the chores? I'll do tea so I can practise getting to know the clients—'

'Pazzies. We call them pazzies – short for passengers.'

Emily nodded. 'Cool. And we'll do dinner together? I need to jump in at the deep end, I think.' She smiled. 'Not literally, obviously. I'm not that great a swimmer.'

Billie didn't smile at this feeble attempt at a joke. Emily bit her lip. If her companion in the galley was going to be so taciturn it was going to make for a far from jolly time.

Before she could dwell on this further she heard boots on the steps and looked up to see James, whom she nearly didn't recognise now he had no beard, and a younger man coming down.

She came out of the galley at the same time as Rebecca appeared from the sleeping quarters to do the introductions.

'James! You remember Emily, don't you?'

'Of course! How could I forget? The prettiest of our bridesmaids.' He embraced Emily warmly.

'I was the only bridesmaid, James,' she said, hugging him back. He'd grown a little bit fatter since his wedding but he still had huge charm. It was easy to see why he was so successful at a business involving people.

'But still pretty,' he said. 'I remember your lovely smile. Now, let me introduce the first mate, Drew.'

A young man in jeans and a sweatshirt with 'Puffer Crew' on it stepped forward. 'Hi, pleased to meet you. I'm usually referred to as the deck hand but I'll take the promotion.'

Another man, a bit older, wearing a boiler suit and a big smile, appeared and put out his hand. 'And I'm Bob, chief engineer, often known as McPhail, after the Para Handy stories.'

'Hi, Drew. Here's your coffee, black, two sugars,' said Billie. 'It's how he likes it,' she added to Emily, proprietorially, as if only she would get it right.

'It's instant coffee and I'm very happy to make it myself,' said Drew with a grin that made him very attractive.

Emily intercepted Billie looking at him and diagnosed a bit of a crush. 'That's good to hear.'

'Well, welcome, Emily! It's lovely of you to agree to have a Highland summer with us,' said James. 'Now, is there time for a cuppa before our guests arrive?'

As tea was made and 'crew cake' produced, Emily suddenly remembered that Alasdair, her silent taxi driver, was James's brother. They were very different. James's accent was English and a bit posh and he had an easy, friendly charm. Alasdair was silent, but had had a slightly Scottish burr in the very few words they had exchanged. She had thought that Alasdair was good-looking, in a brooding sort of way, although she wouldn't have dreamt of saying so to Rebecca. It would only have given her ideas. Still, Emily realised she had more important things to think about now than the difference between the two brothers.