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Sunset in Central Park

Written by Sarah Morgan

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Sunset in Central Park

SARAH MORGAN

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Dear Reader

As a child I was always in awe of my mother who could name every plant we ever passed, often by its Latin name. I used to test her, trying to catch her out. I'd tug her arm and point to some obscure leaf or flower, often hidden behind another, and ask 'what's that?' She always knew. I badly wanted to be such an expert, able to impress people with my depth of knowledge. Sadly, that has yet to happen (although I'm confident with 'rose') but one of the great things about writing is that you can create characters who are everything you're not.

The heroine of this story, Frankie, is most definitely an expert. Like my mother, she can take a few stems of greenery and arrange them in such a way as to make a person stop and admire. Frankie is a strong, independent woman who is very good at her job and she is in control of every part of her life except one – her love life. Taking that leap requires her to put aside her tarnished beliefs about love. The one person who might be able to do that is Matt, the older brother of her best friend.

Friends-to-lovers is a theme I love exploring. I enjoyed watching Frankie and Matt's long friendship turn into something deeper, and seeing Frankie learn to trust after years of keeping barriers between herself and the world.

Thank you for picking up this book! I hope you enjoy *Sunset in Central Park*, and that reading it brings some reading sunshine to your day. Don't forget to look out for Eva's story, *Miracle on 5th Avenue*, coming later in the year and if you're on Facebook, I hope you'll join me there. https://www.facebook.com/AuthorSarahMorgan

Love Sarah
Xx

This one is for my dear
friend Dawn, with much love.

The course of true love never did run smooth.

—William Shakespeare

Chapter One

Sleeping Beauty didn't need a prince. She needed strong coffee.

—Frankie

She'd expected hearts, flowers and smiles. Not tears.

"Crisis unfolding, two o'clock." Frankie tapped her earpiece and heard Eva respond.

"It can't unfold at two o'clock. It's already five past three."

"Not the time, the position. Crisis is unfolding ahead of me and to the right."

There was a pause. "You mean by the apple tree?"

"That's what I mean."

"Then why not just say 'by the apple tree'?"

"Because if you're going to make me wear an earpiece and look professional, I'm going to sound professional."

"Frankie, you sound more like the FBI than a floral designer. And how can there be a crisis? Everything is running smoothly. The weather is perfect, the tables are pretty and the cakes are looking stunning if I say so myself. Our

bride-to-be looks radiant and the guests will be arriving any minute."

Frankie stared at the woman crumpled against the tree trunk. "I hate to tell you this but right now the bride-to-be isn't looking radiant. We have tears. I am the last person to make an observation on the psychology of weddings and all the fluff that surrounds them, but I'm guessing that's not the usual response. If they reach this stage, it's because they think marriage is a good thing, am I right?"

"Are you sure they're not happy tears? And how many tears exactly? One tissue or a whole box?"

"Enough to cause a world shortage. She's crying like a waterfall after heavy rain. I'm starting to understand why they call it a bridal shower."

"Oh no! Her makeup will be ruined. Do you know what happened?"

"Maybe she decided she should have gone with the chocolate ganache instead of the orange sugar icing."

"Frankie—"

"Or maybe she saw sense and decided to get out now while there's still time. If I were about to get married, I'd be crying, too, and I'd be crying a hell of a lot harder and louder than she is."

A sigh vibrated in her ear. "You promised to leave your relationship phobias at the door."

"I closed the door, but they must have sneaked in through the keyhole."

"The mood for this event is sunny optimism, remember?"

Frankie stared at the bride-to-be, sobbing under the apple tree. "Not from where I'm standing. It's been a dry summer, though. The apple tree will be pleased to be watered."

"Go and give her a hug, Frankie! Tell her everything will be okay."

"She's getting married. How can everything be okay?" Sweat pricked the back of her neck. There was only one thing she hated more than bridal showers, and that was weddings. "I will not lie."

"It's not a lie! Plenty of people live happily ever after."

"In fairy stories. In real life they sleep around and get divorced, invariably in that order." Frankie made a huge effort to smother her prejudices. "Get out here now. This is your area of expertise. You know I'm no good at the touchy-feely thing."

"I'll handle it." This time it was Paige who spoke and who, moments later, strode across the neatly tended lawn, cool and composed despite the New York heat and humidity. "What was she doing immediately before she started crying?"

"She took a phone call."

"Could you hear any of the conversation?"

"I don't listen to people's conversations. Maybe the markets crashed or something, although judging from the size of this house it would need to be a big crash to make a difference." Frankie pushed her hair away from her sweaty forehead. "Can we do these events indoors from now on? I'm dying." It was the sort of day that made your clothes stick to your skin and made you dream of iced drinks and air-conditioning.

She thought longingly of her small apartment in Brooklyn.

If she were home now she'd be fiddling with cuttings, tending the herbs on her windowsill and watching the bees flirt with the plants in her tiny garden. Or maybe she'd be on the roof terrace with her friends, sharing a bottle of wine as they watched the sun set over the Manhattan skyline.

Weddings would be the last thing on her mind.

She felt a touch on her arm and glanced toward her friend. "What?"

"You're stressed. You hate weddings and all things bridal. I wish I didn't have to ask you to do them, but right now—"

"Our business is in its infancy and we can't afford to turn them down. I know. And I'm fine with it." Well, not *fine* exactly, Frankie thought moodily, but she was here, wasn't she?

And she understood that they couldn't be choosy about their clients.

She, Paige and Eva had started their event-and-concierge business, Urban Genie, only a few months earlier after they'd lost their jobs at a large Manhattan-based events company.

Frankie gave a little smile, remembering the giddy excitement and sweaty fear that had come from starting their own company. It had been terrifying but there had also been a powerful feeling of liberation. They had the control.

It had been Paige's brainchild, and Frankie knew that without her she would very likely be out of a job right now. Which would mean no way to pay her rent. Without the money to pay her rent, she'd have to leave her apartment.

Unease rippled through her, as if someone had thrown a pebble into the quiet, smooth pond that was her life.

Her independence was everything.

And that was why she was here. That and the loyalty she felt toward her friends.

She pushed her glasses back up her nose with the tip of her finger. "I can cope with weddings if that's what comes our way. Don't worry about me. She—" Frankie nodded her head toward the woman under the apple tree "—is your priority."

"I'm going to talk to her. If the guests arrive, stall them. Eva?" Paige adjusted her earpiece. "Don't bring the cakes out yet. I'll let you know what's happening." She walked over to the bride-to-be.

Frankie knew that whatever the problem was, her friend would deal with it. Paige was a born organizer with a gift for saying exactly the right thing at the right time.

And she possessed another gift, crucial to the success of events like these—she believed in happy endings.

As far as Frankie was concerned, people who believed in happy endings were delusional.

Her parents had separated when she was fourteen, when her father, a sales director, had announced that he was leaving her mother for one of his colleagues.

And as for everything that had happened since—

She stared blindly at the ribbons fluttering in the breeze.

How did people do it? How did they manage to ignore all the statistics and facts and convince themselves they could find one person to be with forever?

Forever didn't exist.

She shifted restlessly. Paige was right. There was nothing on earth she hated as much as weddings and all things bridal. They filled her with a sense of foreboding. It was like watching a car driving along the freeway, heading toward a pileup. There was a hideous inevitability to it all. She wanted to cover her eyes or shout out a warning. What she didn't want to be was a witness.

She saw Paige put her arm around the sobbing woman and turned away. She told herself that she was giving them privacy, but truthfully, she didn't want to look. It was too raw. Too real. Looking stirred up memories she preferred to forget. Fortunately, her job wasn't to manage the emotions of the clients; it was to provide a floral display that reflected the tone and mood of the event.

The mood was supposed to be happy, so she'd chosen creams and pastels to complement the beautiful linens. Celosia and sweet pea nestled alongside hydrangea and roses

in glass pitchers chosen to satisfy the bride-to-be's request for simplicity.

Of course, *simplicity* was a relative term, Frankie thought as she surveyed the two long tables. Simplicity could have meant feasting from picnic baskets, but in this case the tables gleamed with silverware and the shimmer of crystal. Charles William Templeton was a lawyer with a famous clientele and sufficient funds at his disposal to ensure that his only daughter, Robyn Rose, could have any wedding she wanted. The Plaza was booked for the following summer. Frankie was relieved Urban Genie wasn't involved with that event.

The brief for the bridal shower had been garden elegance with a touch of romance. Frankie had managed not to wince as Robyn Rose had mentioned Flower Fairies and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Thanks to Eva, who had no trouble turning their clients' romantic visions into reality, they'd more than met the brief.

They'd rented chairs and customized them with ribbon that coordinated with the table setting. Handmade silk butterflies were artfully positioned around the garden, and acres of lace created the feel of a fairy grotto. You could almost believe you were in a fairy tale.

Frankie gave a half smile.

Only Eva could have thought it up.

The only nod to simplicity was the mature apple tree currently sheltering the sobbing bride-to-be.

Frankie was bracing herself to start holding off guests when Eva appeared by her side, her cheeks pink from the sun.

"Do we know what's happening?"

"No, but I can tell you it's not all celebration. Paige needs to work magic."

Eva glanced around wistfully. "It all looks so pretty and

we've worked so hard to make it perfect. Normally I *love* bridal showers. I always think of it as a final celebration before the bride and groom ride off into the sunset."

"Sunset is what happens before darkness, Ev."

"Can you at least *pretend* you believe in what we do?"

"I do believe in what we do. We're a business. We manage events and we're damn good at it. This is just another event."

"You make it sound so clinical, but there's a magical side to it." Eva straightened the wing of a silk butterfly. "Sometimes we make wishes come true."

"My wish was to run a successful business with my two best friends, so I guess you're right about that. There's nothing magical about it, unless managing to function after an eighteen-hour day is magical. And coffee is definitely magical. Fortunately, I don't have to believe in happy endings to do a great job. My responsibility is the flowers, that's all."

And she loved it. Her love affair with plants had begun when she was young. She'd taken refuge in the garden to escape the emotions inside the house. Flowers could be art, or they could be science, and she'd studied each plant carefully, understanding that each had individual needs. There were the shade-loving plants like ferns, ginger and jack-in-the-pulpit, and then there were the sun worshippers, like lilacs and sunflowers. Each needed an optimum environment. Planted in the wrong place, they would wither and die. Each needed the perfect home in order to flourish.

Not so different from humans, she mused.

She loved selecting the right flower for the right event; she enjoyed designing displays of plants but most of all she loved growing them and watching the changing seasons. From the extravagant froth of blossom in the spring to the elegant russets and burnt orange of the fall, each season brought its own gifts.

"The flowers are beautiful." Eva studied the bunch of flowers artfully arranged in the pitcher. "That's pretty. What is it?"

"It's a rose."

"No, the silvery one."

"Centaurea cineraria."

Eva gave her a look. "What do normal people call it?"

"Dusty miller."

"It's pretty. And you used sweet peas." Her friend drew her finger wistfully over the flower. "They were my grandmother's favorite. I used to leave bunches of them by her bed. They reminded her of her wedding. I love the way you've put this together. You're so talented."

Frankie heard the wobble in her friend's voice. Eva had adored her grandmother, and her death the previous year had been devastating. Frankie knew she missed her horribly.

She also knew that Eva wouldn't want to have a wobbly moment at work.

"Did you know the sweet pea was discovered by a Sicilian monk three hundred years ago?"

Eva swallowed hard. "No. You know so much about flowers."

"It's my job. What do you think of this? It's Queen Anne's lace," Frankie spoke quickly. "You'll like it. It's very bridal. Perfect for you."

"Yes." Eva pulled herself together. "When I get married I'm going to have that in my bouquet. Would you make it for me?"

"Sure. I'll make you the best bouquet any bride has ever seen. Just don't cry. You're a mess when you cry."

Eva scrubbed her hand over her face. "So you'd be happy for me? Even though you don't believe in love?"

"If anyone can prove me wrong it's going to be you. And

you deserve it. I'm hoping Mr. Right rides up on his white horse and sweeps you away."

"That would attract some attention on Fifth Avenue." Eva blew her nose. "And I'm allergic to horses."

Frankie tried not to smile. "With you, there's always something."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For making me laugh instead of cry. You're the best."

"Yeah, well, you can return the favor by handling this situation." Frankie saw Paige hand Robyn another tissue. "He's dumped her, hasn't he?"

"You don't know that. It could be anything. Or nothing. Maybe she has dust in her eye."

Frankie glanced at her friend in disbelief. "Next you'll be telling me you still believe in Santa and the tooth fairy."

"And the Easter bunny." Composed again, Eva whipped a tiny mirror from her purse and checked her makeup. "Don't ever forget the Easter bunny."

"What's it like living on Planet Eva?"

"It's lovely. And don't you dare contaminate my little world with your cynical views. A moment ago you were talking about Mr. Right."

"That was to stop you from crying. I don't understand why people put themselves through this when they could just stab themselves through the heart with a kitchen knife and be done with it."

Eva shuddered. "You've been reading too much horror. Why don't you read romance instead?"

"I'd rather stab myself through the heart with a kitchen knife." And it felt as if she'd done just that. She was looking at Robyn Rose, but she was remembering her mother, incoherent with grief on the kitchen floor while her father,

white-faced, had stepped over her heaving body and walked out the door, leaving Frankie to clean up his mess.

She stared straight ahead and then felt Eva slide her arm through hers.

"One day, probably when you least expect it, you're going to fall in love."

It was a remark typical of Eva.

"That's never going to happen." Knowing that her friend was emotionally vulnerable, Frankie tried to be gentle. "Romance has the same effect on me as garlic does on vampires. And besides, I love being single. Don't give me that pitying look. It's my choice, not a sentence. It's not a state that I'm in until something better comes along. Don't feel sorry for me. I love my life."

"Don't you want someone to snuggle up to at night?"

"No. This way I never have to fight for the duvet, I can sleep diagonally across the bed and I can read until four in the morning."

"A book can't take the place of a man!"

"I disagree. A book can give you most things a relationship can. It can make you laugh, it can make you cry, it can transport you to different worlds and teach you things. You can even take it out to dinner. And if it bores you, you can move on. Which is pretty much what happens in real life." Unlike her father, her mother had never married again. Instead, she burned through men as if they were disposable.

"You're going to make me cry again. What about intimacy? A book can't know you."

"I can live without that part." She didn't want people to know her. She'd moved away from the small island where she'd grown up for precisely that reason—people had known too much. Every intimate, deeply embarrassing detail of her private life had been public knowledge.

Paige walked back to them. "The phone call was the groom." Her voice was crisp and businesslike. "He called it off."

Eva made a distressed sound. "Oh no! That's dreadful for her."

"Maybe it isn't." Despite the fact she'd already guessed what had happened, Frankie's stomach churned. "Maybe she had a lucky escape."

"How can you say that?"

"Because sooner or later he'd cheat on her and break her heart. Might as well be now before they have kids and a hundred and one Dalmatian puppies and innocent bystanders are injured in the fallout." Not wanting to admit how gutted she was to have been proved right yet again, Frankie leaned forward and removed the Queen Anne's lace from the pitcher.

"A hundred and one puppies of any breed would put pressure on a marriage, Frankie," Eva said.

"And not all men cheat." Paige checked the time on her phone, and the diamond on her finger caught the sunlight and glinted.

Seeing it, Frankie felt a flash of guilt.

She should keep her mouth shut. Eva loved dreaming and Paige was newly engaged. She needed to keep her thoughts on marriage to herself.

"It will be different for you and Jake," she mumbled. "You're one of those rare couples that are perfect together. Ignore me. I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Paige waved her hand and the diamond glinted again. "You and I don't want the same thing, and that's fine."

"I'm a killjoy."

"You're the child of divorced parents. And it wasn't a

happy divorce. We all have a different perspective on life, depending on our own experience."

"I know I overreact, though. It wasn't even my divorce."

Paige shrugged. "But you lived through the fallout. It would be crazy to think that wouldn't affect you. It's like washing a red sock with a white shirt. Everything ends up tainted."

Frankie gave a half smile. "Am I the white shirt in that analogy? Because I'm not sure I'm white-shirt material."

Eva studied her. "I agree. I'd say you were more of a combat jacket."

"Robyn has gone upstairs to fix her makeup." Paige steered the conversation back to work. "The guests will be arriving any minute. I'm going to talk to them."

"We're canceling?"

"No. We're going ahead, but now it's not a bridal shower—it's a party. A celebration of friendship."

Frankie relaxed slightly. Friendship she could cope with. "Nice. How did you pull that one off?"

"I pointed out that friends are there for the bad times as well as the good. They were invited to share the good, but if they're true friends they'll be right there by her side for the bad."

"And bad times are always improved by champagne, sunshine and strawberries," Eva said. "Here she comes."

Frankie reached for the next pitcher of flowers and Paige put her hand out to stop her.

"Those are beautiful. What are you doing?"

"The flowers are supposed to match the mood of the occasion, and these are too bridal."

Without waiting for Paige's approval, Frankie tossed the bridal Queen Anne's lace into the border and watched as the flowers hit the dirt.

She tried not to think of it as symbolic.

* * *

The three friends arrived home an hour or so before the sun was due to set.

Sweaty, irritable and miserably unsettled by the events of the day, Frankie searched in her purse for her keys.

"If I don't get inside in the next five seconds I'm going to melt right here."

Paige paused by the front door. "Despite everything, it went well."

"He dumped her," Eva murmured, and Paige frowned.

"I know. I was talking about the event. That went well. We should celebrate. Jake's coming over. Why don't we all meet up on the roof terrace for a drink?"

Frankie didn't feel like celebrating. "Not tonight. I have a date with a good book." She wasn't going to think about how Robyn Rose was feeling. She wasn't going to worry about whether she was all right or whether she'd ever have the courage to love again. That wasn't her problem.

Fumbling, she dropped the key and saw Eva exchange a glance with Paige.

"Are you all right?"

"Of course. Just tired. Long day in the heat." And part of that heat had come from being exposed to a boiling cauldron of emotions. Frankie retrieved the key and wiped her forehead with her palm.

"You should wear a skirt," Eva said. "You would have been cooler."

"You know I never wear skirts."

"You should. You have great legs."

Frankie made a blind stab at the door but it wouldn't open. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"All right, but we thought you might need distraction after the bridal shower so we bought you something." Paige dug

her hand into her bag, the bag that held everything from cleanser to duct tape. "Here." She handed over a parcel and Frankie took it, touched by the gesture.

"You bought me a book?" She opened it and felt a thrill of excitement. Her bad mood evaporated. "It's the new Lucas Blade! It's not out for another month. How did you get this?" Almost salivating, she held it against her chest. She wanted to sit down and start reading right away.

"Eva is well connected."

Eva's cheeks dimpled into a smile. "I mentioned to dear Mitzy that you love his work, and she used her power as a grandmother to force him to sign you a copy, although why you want to read a book called *Death Returns* I do not know. I'd be up all night screaming. The only good thing about that book is his photo on the jacket. The guy is insanely hot. Mitzy wants to introduce me to him, but I'm not sure I want to meet a man who writes about murder for a living. I don't think we'd have much in common."

"It's signed?" Frankie opened the book and saw her name in bold black scrawl. "This is *so* cool. I was thinking of pre-ordering it but the price is shocking because he's so successful. I can't believe you did this."

"Your idea of horror is a bridal shower or a wedding, but you did it anyway," Eva said, "so we wanted to treat you tonight. This is our thank-you. If it scares you and you want company, bang on the door."

Frankie felt her throat thicken. This was friendship. Understanding someone. "I hope it does scare me. That's what it's supposed to do."

Eva shook her head, bemused. "I love you, but I will never understand you."

Frankie smiled. Maybe not understanding. Maybe friend-

ship was loving someone even when you didn't always understand them. "Thanks," she muttered. "You guys are the best."

The key finally slid into the lock and she stepped into the sanctuary of her apartment. She closed the door and the first thing she did was pull off her glasses. The frames were heavy and she rubbed her nose gently with her fingers and walked through to her pretty living room. The space was small, but she'd furnished it well, with a few good pieces she'd found on the internet. There was an overstuffed sofa that she'd rescued and covered herself, but what she loved most about her apartment were the plants. They crowded every available surface, a rainbow of greens with splashes of color, leading the eye toward the small garden.

She'd turned the small enclosed space into a leafy refuge.

Gold flame honeysuckle, *Clematis Montana*, and other climbers scrambled over trellises while pots overflowed with a profusion of trailing plants. Vinca and bacopa tangled and tumbled over the small area of cedar decking that caught the sun at certain times of the day, and a Moroccan lamp sat in the center of the small table for those evenings she chose to sit alone rather than join her friends on the roof terrace.

Peace and calm enveloped her. The prospect of an evening reading a book she'd been looking forward to for months lifted her mood.

This was her life and she loved it.

Not for her the stomach-churning roller-coaster ride that was *love*. She didn't need that and she certainly didn't want it. She never wasted an evening staring longingly at her phone, hoping it would ring, and she'd never cried her way through a single tissue, let alone a whole box.

She flipped open the book, but she knew if she read the first page she'd be hooked, and first she needed to shower.

Tomorrow was Sunday and her schedule was clear, so she could read all night if she wanted to, sleep late and no one would care.

One of the many benefits of being single.

She put the book down, wondering why everyone else seemed so eager to give up that precious status.

Much as she loved her friends, she was glad she lived on her own. Paige and Eva had shared the apartment above hers for years and even though Paige was now spending more time at Jake's apartment, she still spent at least half the week in her old room. Frankie suspected that decision was driven as much by her friend's desire not to leave Eva alone as a need to maintain her own space.

Eva's romantic longing for a family was something Frankie understood but didn't share. Her experience was that family was complicated, infuriating, embarrassing, selfish and, on too many occasions, hurtful. And when it was family that hurt you, the wounds were somehow deeper and slower to heal, perhaps because the expectations were different.

Her experiences growing up had influenced so much of who she was and how she chose to live her life.

Her past was the reason she couldn't attend a wedding without wanting to ask the couple if they were sure they wanted to go ahead.

Her past was the reason she never wore red, hated skirts and was incapable of sustaining a relationship with a man.

Her past was the reason she felt unable to go back to the island where she'd grown up.

Puffin Island was a nature-lover's paradise, but for Frankie there were too many memories and too many islanders who bore a grudge against the name of Cole.

And she didn't blame them.

She'd grown up cloaked by the sins of her mother, and

her family's reputation was one of the reasons she'd made the move to New York. At least here when she walked into a store, the other people weren't all talking about her. Here, no one knew or cared that her father had run off with a woman half his age, or that her mother had decided to heal her insecurities with affairs of her own.

She'd left it all behind, until six months earlier when her mother had stopped moving around the country from job to job and man to man and settled in the city.

After years of very little contact with her only child, she'd been keen to bond. Frankie found every interaction excruciating. And woven in between the embarrassment, anger and discomfort was guilt. Guilt that she couldn't find it inside her to be more sympathetic toward her mother. Her mother had been the prime victim of her father's infidelities, not her. She should be more understanding. But they were so *different*.

Had they always been that way? Or was it Frankie's fault for going out of her way to make sure they were different? Because the clearest memory that lingered from her teenage years was her absolute determination to be nothing like her mother.

Stripping off her shirt, she walked into her little kitchen and poured herself a glass of wine. Paige and Eva would no doubt spend the evening chatting, dissecting every moment of the event.

Frankie had no wish to do that. It had been bad enough at the time without going through every detail again, and it wasn't as if they didn't know what had gone wrong. The groom had dumped the bride. The way she saw it, a dead body didn't need a post-mortem if you could see the bullet hole through the skull, and right now she needed to take her mind off everything to do with weddings.