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Miracle on 5th Avenue

Written by Sarah Morgan

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Miracle on 5th Avenue

SARAH MORGAN

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Dear Reader

If you've picked up one of my books before it will come as no surprise to you to learn that I love happy endings. I'm a pretty optimistic person and generally like my cup to be half full (preferably with strong coffee). I read widely, but rarely what might be classed as 'horror' fiction. I'm not good with scary suspense, serial killers or things that go bump in the night, which makes me similar in some ways to the heroine of this book.

Eva is a romantic who always looks on the bright side, so when a work assignment requires her to spend some time with Lucas, a crime writer who explores the darkest side of human nature, she is going to do her best to make it work, even though it's clear to her right away that they are opposites. She might be looking for romance, but Lucas is definitely not her type. Or is he?

Lucas doesn't just write about other people's demons, he has a few of his own, but kind-hearted Eva is determined to shine a light into the dark corners of his life.

This is a book about second chances, but it's also about hope and the power of love. I hope you enjoy *Miracle on 5th Avenue*! If you haven't already done so, don't forget to look out for Paige and Frankie's stories, *Sleepless in Manhattan* and *Sunset in Central Park* and I hope you'll join me on Facebook to chat www.facebook.com/AuthorSarahMorgan

Love Sarah
Xxx

www.sarahmorgan.com

For Sue. I write about fictional friendships, but ours is real. Lucky me.

Give a girl the right shoes and she can conquer the world.

—Marilyn Monroe

One

There are plenty of fish in the sea, but that's no use if you live in New York City.

—Eva

"We cannot send two turtledoves! I know he's proposing at Christmas and he thinks it's romantic, but it won't be romantic when the room is covered in bird droppings. The venue will blacklist us and the love of his life will say no to his question, which will not give us the happy-ever-after we're all hoping for." Moving her phone to a more comfortable position against her ear, Eva Jordan snuggled deeper into her coat. Beyond the windows of the cab the snow was still falling steadily, defying attempts of those who tried to clear it. The more they shoveled the more fell, or so it seemed. In a contest between man and the elements, man was most definitely losing. The snowstorm almost obliterated her view of Fifth Avenue, the glittering shop windows muted and veiled by the falling flakes. "I'll help him reframe his idea of 'romantic,' and it won't include calling birds, hens of any nationality, nor geese, laying or otherwise. And while we're on the subject, one gold ring is more

than enough. Who needs five? He wants exceptional, not excessive, and the two are not the same."

As always, Paige was practical. "Laura has been dreaming about this moment since she was a little girl. He's under pressure to make this perfect."

"I'm pretty sure her dream didn't include a menagerie of wildlife. I'll come up with a plan, and it will be spectacular. No one does romance better than I do."

"Except when it's for yourself."

"Thanks for reminding me my love life is extinct."

"You're welcome. And having agreed on the facts, perhaps you'd like to tell me what you intend to do about it."

"Nothing at all. And we are not having this conversation again." Eva delved into her bag and pulled out her notebook. "Can we get back to business? We have a month until Christmas."

"We don't have enough time to create anything elaborate."

"It doesn't need to be elaborate. It needs to be emotional. She needs to be overwhelmed by his words and the meaning behind them. Wait—" Eva tapped her pen on the page. "They met in Central Park, didn't they? Dog-walking?"

"Yes but, Ev, the park is buried under two feet of snow and it's still falling. A proposal there could end in a trip to the emergency room. That could be memorable for all the wrong reasons."

"Leave it with me. I'll have plenty of time to think about it over the next two days because I'll be on my own in this guy's apartment decorating and filling his freezer ready for his return from the wilds." She made a note to herself and then slid the notebook back into her bag.

"You're working too hard, Ev."

"I cannot believe I'm hearing that from you."

"Even I take time off to chill occasionally."

"I must have missed that. And in case you hadn't noticed, our business is growing fast."

"You taking an evening off to go on a hot date isn't going to stop it growing."

"Thank you, but there is one teeny tiny drawback to your plan. I don't have a hot date. I don't even have a lukewarm date."

"Do you think you should try online dating again?"

"I hate online dating. I prefer meeting people in other ways."

"But you're not meeting people at all! You work. You go to bed with your teddy bear."

"It's a stuffed kangaroo. Grams gave it to me when I was four."

"That explains why it looks exhausted. It's time you replaced it with a flesh-and-blood man, Eva."

"I love that kangaroo. He never lets me down."

"Honey, you need to get out. How about that banker guy? You liked him."

"He never called when he said he was going to call. Life is stressful enough without waiting around wondering if a guy you're not even sure you like is going to call you and invite you on a date you're not even sure you want to go on."

"You could have called him."

"I did. He screened my calls." Eva stared out of the window. "I don't mind chasing after a dream when it's about building our business and our future, but I'm not chasing after a man. And anyway, everyone knows you never find

love when you go looking for it. You have to wait for it to find you."

"What if it can't find you because you never leave your apartment?"

"I've left my apartment! I'm here, on Fifth Avenue."

"Alone. To stay in another apartment. Alone. Think of all the great sex you're missing. At this rate you'll meet Mr. Right when you're eighty and have no teeth and dodgy hips."

"Plenty of people have good sex when they're eighty. You just have to be creative." Ignoring the hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach, Eva leaned forward to talk to the cabdriver. "Can you make a stop at Dean & DeLuca? If this storm is as bad as they're predicting, I need to pick up a few extra things."

Paige was still talking. "I've barely seen you over the past two weeks. It's been crazy busy. I know this is a tough time of year for you. I know you miss your grandmother." Her voice softened. "Do you want me to come by after work and keep you company?"

She was so tempted to say yes.

They'd open a bottle of wine, curl up in their pajamas and talk. She'd confess how bad she felt a lot of the time, and then—

And then what?

Eva looked down at her lap. She didn't want to be that friend. The one who constantly whined and moaned. The burden. And anyway, telling her friends how bad she felt wasn't going to change anything, was it?

Her grandmother would be ashamed.

"You have meetings downtown and then that dinner thing with Jake."

"I know, but I could easily—"

"You're not canceling." She said it quickly, before she could be tempted to change her mind. "I'll be fine."

"If the weather wasn't so bad you could come home and stay here tonight and then go back tomorrow, but they're saying the storm is going to be a big one. Much as I hate to think of you all alone there, I think it's better that you don't travel."

Eva chewed her lip. It didn't matter where she was, her feelings stayed the same. She had no idea if it was normal to feel this way. She'd never lost anyone close to her before, and she and her grandmother had been more than close. She'd been gone a little over a year and the wound was as fresh and painful as if the loss had happened only the day before.

It was because of her that Eva had grown up feeling safe and secure. She owed her grandmother everything, although she knew that there was no way of attaching a value to something so priceless. Her payment, although she knew none had ever been asked for, wanted or expected, was to get out of bed every day and live the life her grandmother had wanted her to live. Make her proud.

If she was here right now, her grandmother wouldn't be proud.

She'd tell her that she was spending far too many nights alone in her apartment with only Netflix and hot chocolate for company.

Her grandmother had loved hearing about Eva's romantic adventures. She would have wanted her to go out and meet people even if she felt sad. To begin with she'd tried to do just that, but lately her social life revolved round her friends and business partners, Paige and Frankie. It was

easy and comfortable, even though both of them were now crazily in love.

It was ironic that she, the romantic one, led the least romantic life.

She stared out of the window through the white swirl of flakes to the darkening sky. She felt disconnected. Lost. She wished she didn't feel everything so deeply.

Still, at least she was busy. This was their first holiday season since the three of them had set up Urban Genie, their event and concierge business, and they were busy.

Her grandmother would have been proud of what she'd achieved in her work.

Celebrate every small thing, Eva, and live in the moment.

Eva blinked to clear her misted vision.

She hadn't been doing that, had she? She lived her life looking forward, planning, juggling. She rarely paused for breath or to appreciate the moment. She'd been running for a year, through a freezing winter, a balmy spring, a sweltering summer and, here now, full circle, to another winter. She'd muscled through, pushing the seasons behind her, moving forward step by step. She hadn't lived in the moment because she hadn't liked the moment she was living in.

She'd done her best to be strong and keep smiling, but it had been the toughest year of her life.

Grief, she thought, was a horrible companion.

"Ev?" Paige's voice echoed down the phone. "Are you still there? I'm worried about you."

Eva closed her eyes and pulled herself together. She didn't want her friends to worry about her. What had her grandmother taught her?

Be the sunshine, Eva, not the rain.

She never, ever, wanted to be the black cloud in anyone's day.

Opening her eyes, she smiled. "Why are you worried about me? It's snowing. If this blizzard eases I'll go across to the park and build a snowman. If I can't find a guy in real life, at least I can build a decent one out of snow."

"You are going to build yourself a sexy guy?"

"I am. With broad shoulders and great abs."

"And no doubt you won't be using the carrot for his nose."

Eva grinned. "I was thinking maybe a cucumber for that part of his anatomy."

Paige was laughing, too. "You're so demanding it's no wonder you're single. And, by the way, you have the sense of humor of a five-year-old."

"It's the reason we've been friends forever."

"It's good to hear you laugh. Christmas used to be your favorite time of year."

It was true. She'd always loved it. Every smiling Santa, every happy note of music that played in the stores and every sparkly snowflake. She especially loved the snowflakes. They made her think of sleigh rides and snowmen.

To Eva, snow had always seemed magical.

Enough, she thought. *Enough*.

"It still is my favorite time of year." She didn't need to wait until New Year's Eve to make a resolution.

She was going to get out there and live every day the way her grandmother would have wanted her to live it. Starting right now.

* * *

Christmas.

He hated it. Every smiling Santa, every discordant note

of music that blared in the stores and every freezing snowflake. He especially hated the snowflakes. They swirled with deceptive innocence, coating trees and cars and landing on the palms of enchanted children who saw falling snow and thought of sleigh rides and snowmen.

Lucas thought of something different.

He sat in darkness in his Fifth Avenue apartment, staring out across the wintry expanse of Central Park. It had been snowing steadily for days, and more was on the way. It was predicted to be the worst blizzard in New York's recent history. As a result, the streets far below him were unusually empty. Everyone who wasn't already home was hurrying there as fast as possible, taking advantage of public transportation while it was still running. No one looked up. No one knew he was there. Not even his well-meaning but interfering family, who thought he was on a writing retreat in Vermont.

If they'd known he was home they would have been fussing over him, checking on him, forcing him to participate in plans for Christmas celebrations.

It was time, they said. *It had been long enough.*

How long was long enough? The answer to that eluded him. All he knew was that he hadn't reached that point.

He had no intention of celebrating the festive season. The best he could hope for was to get through it, as he did every year, and he saw no point in inflicting his misery on others. He hurt. Outside and inside, he hurt. He'd been crushed and mangled in the wreckage of his loss, and crawled away with his life but very little else.

He could have traveled to Vermont, buried himself in a cabin in a snowy forest like he'd told his family, or he

could have gone somewhere hot, somewhere untouched by a single flake of snow, but he knew there was no point because he would still be hurting. It didn't matter what he did, the pain traveled with him. It infected him like a virus that nothing could cure.

And so he stayed home while the temperature swooped low and the world around him turned white, transforming his building into a frozen fortress.

It suited him perfectly.

The only sound that intruded was his phone. It had rung fourteen times in the past few days and he'd ignored each and every one of the calls. Some of those calls had been his grandmother, some had been his brother, most his agent.

Reflecting on what his life would look like if he didn't have his career, Lucas reached for the phone and finally returned the call to his agent.

"Lucas!" Jason's voice came down the phone, jovial and energetic. There were sounds of revelry in the background, laughter and Christmas music. "I was starting to think you were buried under a snowdrift. How are the snowy wastelands of Vermont?"

Lucas stared out across the Manhattan skyline, the sharp edges of the city muted by falling snow. "Vermont is beautiful."

It was the truth. Assuming it hadn't altered since his last visit, which had been a year ago.

"*TIME* magazine has just named you the most exciting crime writer of the decade. Did you see the piece?"

Lucas glanced at the towering pile of unopened mail. "Haven't gotten around to reading it yet."

"That's why you're at the top of your game. No distrac-

tions. With you, it's all about the book. Your fans are excited about this one, Lucas."

The book.

Dread stirred inside him. Dark thoughts were eclipsed by sweaty panic. He hadn't written a word. His mind was empty, but that was something he hadn't confessed to his agent or his publisher. He was still hoping for a miracle, some spark of inspiration that would allow him to wriggle free from the poisonous tentacles of Christmas and lose himself in a fictional world. It was ironic that the twisted, sick minds of his complex characters provided a preferable alternative to the dark reality of his own.

He eyed the knife that lay on the table close by. The blade glinted, taunting him.

He'd been staring at it for the best part of a week, even though he knew it wasn't the answer. He was better than that.

"That's why you've been calling? To ask about the book?"

"I know you hate to be disturbed when you're writing, but production is hounding me. Sales of your last book exceeded even our expectations," Jason said gleefully. "Your publisher is tripling the print run for the next. Are you going to give me any clues about the story?"

"I can't." If he knew what the book was about, he'd be writing it.

Instead, his mind was terrifyingly blank.

He didn't have a crime. Worse, he didn't have a murderer.

For him, every book started with the character. He was known for his unpredictable twists, for being able to deliver a shock that even the most perceptive reader failed to anticipate.

Right now the shock would be the blank page.

It was worse this year than it had been the year before. Then, the process had been long and painful, but he'd managed to somehow drag each word from inside him by November, before memories had paralyzed him. It was like trying to get to the top of Everest before the winds hit. Timing was everything. This year he hadn't managed it and he was beginning to think he'd left it too late. He was going to need an extension on his deadline, something he'd never had to ask for before. That was bad enough, but worse were the questions that would follow. The sympathetic looks and the nods of understanding.

"I'd love to see a few pages. First chapter?"

"I'll let you know," Lucas said, before proffering the season's greetings that were expected of him and ending the call.

Lucas rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. He didn't have a first chapter. He didn't have a first line. So far the only thing that had been murdered was his inspiration. It was lying inert, the life squeezed out of it. Could it be resurrected? He wasn't sure.

He'd sat at his open laptop hour after hour and not a single word had emerged. The only thing in his head was Sallyanne. She filled his head, his thoughts and his heart. *His bruised, damaged heart.*

It was on this day, three years ago, that he'd had the phone call that had derailed his seemingly charmed life. It had been like a scene from one of his books, except this time it had been fact not fiction. He'd been the one identifying the body in the morgue, not one of his characters. He no lon-

ger had to put himself in their shoes and imagine what they were feeling because he was feeling it himself.

Since then he'd struggled through every day, dragging himself from minute to minute, while outwardly doing what was needed to make people believe that he was doing fine. He'd learned early on that people needed to see that. They didn't want to witness his grief. They wanted to believe he'd handled it and "moved on." Mostly, he managed to meet their expectations, except for this time of year, when the anniversary of her death came around.

Eventually he was going to have to confess to his agent and his publisher that he hadn't written a single word of the book his fans so eagerly awaited.

This book wasn't going to make his publisher a fortune. It didn't exist.

He had no idea how to conjure the magic that had sent him soaring to the top of the bestseller charts in more than fifty countries.

All he could do was carry on doing what he'd been doing for the past month. He'd sit in front of the blank screen and hope that somewhere in the depths of his tortured brain an idea might emerge.

He kept hoping for a miracle.

It was the season for it, wasn't it?