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Holiday in the Hamptons

Written by Sarah Morgan

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SARAH MORGAN

Holiday in the Hamptons



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES



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Dear Reader,

I love writing about friendship, especially friendship between sisters. My heroine in *Holiday in the Hamptons*, Fliss, is a twin, but she couldn't be more different from her sister Harriet. What could be more interesting than two people who are identical on the outside and yet totally different on the inside? Fliss is a fighter and protective of her sister, but deep down she has her own vulnerabilities. When her ex-husband appears on the scene, she's forced to confront issues she'd thought she'd left behind. But Fliss isn't the same person she was at eighteen (are any of us?!) and she is about to learn just how much time, and life, alter things.

This book explores how relationships change, not just romantic relationships, but the relationship between grandmother and granddaughter, sister and sister (and woman and dog!), all against the backdrop of ocean and sand dunes.

My first glimpse of the Hamptons was from a plane and I was captivated by the long stretches of sandy beaches, dunes and the yachts studding the sparkling ocean. It's a favourite place for New Yorkers looking to escape the madness of the city and it seemed like the perfect place to set a summer book.

Wherever you are this summer, I hope this book gives you the perfect escape.

Love Sarah
xxxx

To Flo, with love and thanks for all the insight into life as a twin. You're the best.

“The human heart has hidden treasures,
In secret kept, in silence sealed;
The thoughts, the hopes, the dreams, the pleasures,
Whose charms were broken if revealed.”

—Charlotte Brontë

PROLOGUE

AS EIGHTEENTH BIRTHDAYS WENT, it had to be the worst ever.

Fliss ran through the overgrown garden that wrapped itself around three sides of the beach house. She didn't feel the sharp sting of nettles or the whip of the long grass against her bare calves because she was already feeling too many other things. Bigger things.

The old rusty gate scraped her hip as she pushed her way through it. Misery fueled every stride as she took the grassy path that ran through the dunes to the beach. No one could catch her now. She'd find a place away from everyone. Away from *him*. And she wasn't returning home until he'd left. The birthday cake would stay uneaten, the candles unlit, the plates untouched. There would be no singing, no salutations, no celebration. What was there to celebrate?

Fury licked around the edges of her misery, and underneath anger and misery was hurt. A hurt she worked hard never to show. *Never let a bully see you're afraid. Never let yourself be vulnerable.* Wasn't that what her brother

had taught her? And her father, she'd worked out long before, was a bully.

If she'd had to find one word to describe him it would be *angry*. And she'd never understood it. She got mad from time to time, so did her brother, but there was always a cause. With her father, there was no cause for the anger. It was as if he rose in the morning and bathed in it.

Words pounded in her head, matching the rhythm of her strides. *Hate him, hate him, hate him...*

Her feet hit the sand. The wind lifted her hair. She gulped in another breath and tasted sea and salt air. Squeezing her eyes against the tears, she tried to replace the sound of her father's voice with the familiar soundtrack of seagulls and surf.

It should have been a perfect summer's day, but her father had a way of sucking the sunshine out of the sunniest day, and no day was exempt. Not even the day you turned eighteen. He always knew how to make her feel bad.

She tried to outrun her feelings, her breath tearing in her chest and her heart pounding like fists on a punching bag.

You're nothing but trouble. Useless, no good, worthless, stupid—

If she was as worthless as he believed then she should probably run into the ocean, but he'd be pleased to be free of her, and she was damned if she was going to do a single thing that might please him.

Lately she'd made it her life's focus to live down to the low opinion he had of her, not because she wanted to make trouble but because his rules just didn't make sense and pleasing him was impossible.

The cruelest part was that he wasn't even supposed to be here.

The summer months were their oasis of time away from him. Time spent with her siblings, her mother and her grandmother while her father stayed in the city and took his anger to work every day.

She'd grown to love those precious weeks when sunlight burst through the darkness and all she trailed into the house was sand and laughter. They stayed up late and woke in the mornings feeling lighter and happier. Some days they carried their breakfast to the beach and ate it there right by the ocean. This morning's choice, her birthday breakfast, had been a basket of ripe peaches. She'd been wiping the juice from her chin when she'd heard the wheels of her father's car crunch on the gravel of the beach house.

Her twin sister had turned pale. Her peach had slid slowly from her fingers and thudded onto the sand, the fruit instantly transformed from smooth to gritty. *Like life*, Fliss had thought, hiding her dismay.

Her mother had panicked, thrusting her feet into her shoes while trying to tame wind-blown hair with a hand that shook like the branch of a tree in a storm. During the summer she was a different woman. An outsider might have thought the changes were a result of the relaxed pace of beach life, but Fliss knew it was due to being away from their father.

And now he was here. Intruding on their blissful beach idyll.

Her brother, calm as always, had taken control. It was probably just a delivery, he'd said. A neighbor.

But they all knew it wasn't a delivery or a neighbor. Their father drove the same way he did everything, angrily, revving the engine and sending small stones flying. *Angry* was his calling card.

Fliss knew it was him, and the sweet-tasting peach turned bitter in her mouth. She was used to her father ruining every part of her life, but now he was ruining summer, too?

The cloudless blue sky seemed hazed with gloom, and she knew that until he left again she was going to be dragging her bad mood around like a ball and chain.

She was determined to see him as little as possible, which was why she'd chosen the beach over her bedroom.

Her flip-flops hampered her pace, so she slowed and kicked them off. This time when she ran her feet were silent, the sand cool and smooth under her soles. In the distance she could see the white mist of surf erupting over rock, and she could hear the crash and hiss of waves advancing and retreating.

Somewhere in the far distance someone called her name, and she quickened her pace.

She didn't want to see anyone. Not like this, when she was raw and vulnerable. She always kept her feelings inside, but right now there didn't seem to be room for them all. They filled the space around her heart, made her head ache and her eyes sting. She wasn't going to cry. She never cried. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction. If her eyes were watering, it was because of the wind.

"Fliss!"

She heard her name again and almost missed her stride because this time she recognized the voice. Seth Carlyle. Oldest son of Matthew and Catherine Carlyle. Old money. Wealthy, successful, smart and decent. Classy. No skeletons in *that* family. No raised voices or kids quivering in fear. She was willing to bet Catherine Carlyle didn't virtually crawl around the walls in order to prevent herself

drawing the attention of her husband, and she could never in a million years imagine Matthew Carlyle raising his voice. In the Carlyle house, plates would be a vessel for food, not a weapon for throwing. And she was sure Seth had never made his father feel ashamed or disgusted. He was the golden boy.

He was also her brother's friend. If he knew she was upset, he'd tell her brother and Daniel would once again step between her and their father. His protective instincts had put him in the firing line on more occasions than Fliss wanted to count. She didn't mind him doing it for her twin because when Harriet was stressed her stammer got so bad she couldn't always speak for herself, but Fliss didn't want him to do it for her. She could fight her own battles, and right now she felt like fighting to the death.

Ignoring Seth's voice, she kept running. He wouldn't follow her. He'd return to the group and join them in a game of beach volleyball, or maybe they'd surf or swim. Things she'd planned to do today, before her father had arrived unexpectedly for the weekend and ruined it all.

She ran until she reached the rocks. She clambered over jagged edges without pausing, ignored the sharp sting in the palm of her hand and landed on the smooth sand on the other side.

She'd been visiting this part of the Hamptons since she was born, and the summers that she, her twin and her brother had spent with their grandmother had given her the only happy memories of her childhood.

"Fliss?" It was Seth again, and this time his voice was deeper, lower, *closer*.

Damn. "Leave me alone, Seth."

He didn't. Instead, he vaulted down from the rocks, lithe

and athletic, his shoulders blocking out the sun. He was wearing nothing but board shorts. His chest was bare and glistened with droplets of water. He was on the swim team at college, and the four summers he'd spent as a lifeguard had given him muscles in all the right places. Everyone on the island knew about the time Seth Carlyle had risked his own life to save two young kids who had ignored the warnings and stupidly taken an inflatable out onto the ocean. That was the kind of guy Seth was. He did the right thing.

She only ever did the wrong thing.

Fliss had spent the summer listening to the other girls lusting after Seth, and it wasn't hard to understand what they saw in him. He was smart and good-humored, self-assured without being cocky. And sexy. Insanely sexy, with that lean, powerful body and skin that turned golden at the first touch of the sun. His hair and his eyes were dark as jet, a legacy from his grandfather's side of the family, who were Italian. He was the same age as her brother, which made him too old for her. Her father would freak at the five-year age gap. *Girls your age should date boys, not men.*

As she watched Seth stroll toward her, she felt her muscles clench. Clearly her libido hadn't gotten the memo. Either that, or sexual attraction was no respecter of ages.

Or maybe she wanted him *because* she knew her father would freak.

He planted himself in front of her. "What's wrong?"

How could he tell that something was wrong? She'd had years of practice at hiding her feelings, but Seth always seemed to see through the layers of protection that blinded everyone else to the truth.

She'd joked to Harriet that he was like an X-ray machine, or an MRI scanner, but the truth was he was just scarily

perceptive. Or perhaps what she should really say was that he was perceptive, and she was scared.

If she'd wanted people to know how bad she felt most of the time, she would have told them.

"Nothing is wrong." She didn't mention the fight with her father. She never talked about it with anyone. She didn't want people to know. She didn't want sympathy. She didn't want pity. Most of all she didn't want people knowing how bad those fights with her father made her feel, not just because she'd learned to hide her feelings, but because part of her was afraid that saying the words aloud might give them credence. She didn't want to give voice to the niggling thought that maybe her father was right. That she might actually be as worthless and useless as he believed her to be.

But Seth wasn't so easily deflected. "Are you sure? Because you don't look like a woman celebrating her eighteenth birthday."

Woman.

He'd called her a woman.

It made her giddy. Right there and then, she felt the age gap evaporate. Poise and power replaced doubt and insecurity. "I wanted time to myself."

"On your birthday? That doesn't sound right to me. No one should spend their birthday alone, especially not an eighteenth birthday."

She'd known Seth for years, but they'd grown closer than ever this summer. Unlike her father, Seth never seemed outraged by her antics. When she'd gone skinny-dipping in the ocean late at night, her twin, Harriet, had begged her not to go, but Seth had simply laughed. He hadn't joined her, but he'd waited on the rocks until she returned safely. *Because Seth Carlyle always does the right thing.*

Still, he hadn't judged or lectured, simply handed her a towel and sprang down onto the sand as if his job was done. He never touched her, and she'd wished a million times that he would, even though she knew he was watching over her because he was Daniel's friend and a responsible person.

She found herself wishing it again now. Which proved she was anything but a responsible person.

To be sure she didn't give in to temptation and fling her arms around him, she wrapped them around herself.

His gaze dropped. "You've cut your hand. You should be more careful on these rocks. Does it hurt?"

"No." She snatched her hands behind her back, one half of her hoping he'd leave while the other half hoped he'd stay.

"If it doesn't hurt, why are you crying?"

Was she crying? She brushed her cheek with the heel of her hand and discovered that they were wet. "I kicked sand in my eyes when I was running."

He thought she was upset because of the wounds he could see.

He had no idea about the wounds she kept hidden.

"Why were you running?" He closed his hands over her arms and drew them gently in front of her. Then he turned her hands over so he could examine them. His fingers were broad and strong, and her hand looked small in his. Delicate.

She didn't ever want to be delicate. Her mother was delicate. Watching her navigate her stormy marriage was like watching a single daisy struggling to stay upright in a hurricane. Fliss wanted to be hardy, like a thornbush. The sort of plant people treated with respect and care. And she was fiercely determined to earn a good living so that she would

never, ever find herself trapped in the situation her mother had found herself in.

If I leave your father, I'll lose you. He'd make sure I don't get custody, and I don't have the money or influence to fight that.

Seth bent his head, and she watched as strands of dark hair flopped over his forehead. She itched to touch it, to slide her fingers through it, to feel its softness under her hands. And she wanted to touch the thick muscles of his shoulders, even though she already knew they wouldn't be soft. They were everything hard and powerful. She knew that for sure because last summer someone had tossed her in the water and it had been Seth who had hauled her out. Being held by him was something that no woman would forget in a hurry.

Unsettled, she dragged her gaze to his face. His nose had a slight bump in it thanks to a football injury the summer before, and he had a scar on his chin where he'd headbutted a surfboard and needed fourteen stitches.

Fliss didn't care. To her, Seth Carlyle was pretty much the most perfect thing she'd ever laid eyes on.

There was something that set him apart from the others. It wasn't just that he was older, more that he was so *sure*. He knew what he wanted. He was focused. He made doing the right thing sexy. He was studying to be a vet, and she knew he'd be good at it. He was going to make his father proud.

Unlike her.

She'd made her father disdainful, exasperated and angry but never proud.

And she didn't want to drag Seth down with her.

She snatched her hand away from his and curled her fin-

gers into her palm to stop herself from touching him. "You should join the others. You're wasting a perfect beach day."

"I'm not wasting anything. I'm exactly where I want to be." His gaze was focused exclusively on her. And then he gave her that wide, easy smile that made her feel as if she was the only woman on the planet. She didn't know which got to her most—the way his mouth curved, or the way those sleepy dark eyes crinkled slightly at the corners.

Her stomach flipped. After being made to feel unwanted, it was a change to feel the opposite.

What would happen if she put her arms around his neck and kissed him? Would he get carried away and do the wrong thing for the first time in his life? Maybe he'd take her virginity right here on the sand. That would really give her father something to complain about.

The thought made her frown. Not even by virtue of a thought did she want her father to tarnish her relationship with Seth.

"You really shouldn't be here. With me." She leaned her back against the rock and gave him a fierce stare designed to repel, but it didn't work with Seth.

"I saw a car outside your house. Was it your father? He doesn't usually join you in the summer, does he?"

She felt as if she'd plunged naked into the Atlantic. "He arrived this morning. Decided to surprise us."

Seth's gaze didn't shift. "To celebrate your birthday or ruin it?"

He knew.

She squirmed with horror and embarrassment. Why couldn't she have a normal family like everyone else? "I didn't hang around to find out."

"Maybe he wanted to deliver his gift in person."

"That's your father, not mine." The words blurted out of her mouth before she could stop them. "Mine didn't bring a gift."

"No? Then it's a good thing I did." He braced one arm on the rock behind her and reached into the pocket of his board shorts with the other. "Hope you like it."

She dragged her gaze from the swell of his biceps and stared at the cream velvet pouch in his palm. "You bought me a gift?"

"It's not every day a woman turns eighteen."

There it was again, that word. *Woman.* And he'd bought her a gift. Actually *chosen* her something. He wouldn't have done that if he didn't care, would he?

Her parched self-esteem sucked up the much-needed affirmation. She felt dizzy and light-headed, even more so than she had the time she'd smuggled a bottle of vodka to the beach.

"What is it?"

"Open it and see."

She took the bag from him, recognizing the shell logo picked out in silver. She knew that whatever was inside it wouldn't have come cheap. She and Harriet had walked past the exclusive jewelry store when they had occasion to be in town, but the prices had stopped them even staring in through the window. Of course, price wasn't an issue if your name was Carlyle.

She tipped it out of the bag onto her palm, and for a moment she forgot to breathe because she'd never seen anything so pretty. It was a necklace, a silver shell on a silver chain. It was the shiniest, most perfect gift she'd ever been given.

Forgetting about keeping her distance, she flung her

arms around him. He smelled of sunshine, sea salt and man. Hot, sexy man. Too late she remembered that she was wearing only her tiny shorts and a tank top. She might as well have been wearing nothing for all the barrier it created. Her skin slid against his and her fingers closed on those shoulders. Under the silken, sun-bronzed skin she felt the dip and swell of hard muscle and the dangerously delicious pressure of his body.

She knew she should let him go. Her father would freak if he could see her. He hated her hanging out with boys.

But Seth wasn't a boy, was he? Seth was a man. A man who recognized that she was a woman. The first person to see her that way, and she decided that just might be the greatest birthday gift of all time.

Her father made her feel like nothing, but Seth—Seth made her feel like something. Everything.

"Fliss—" His voice was husky and his hands slid to her hips, holding her still. "We shouldn't—you're upset—"

"Not anymore." Before he could say anything else, she pressed her mouth to his. She felt the coolness of his lips and his sudden start of shock, and she thought to herself that if he pulled away she'd die of embarrassment right here on the sand.

But he didn't pull away. Instead he tugged her against him with purposeful hands, trapping her against the solid length of his body. Behind her she could hear the rush of the ocean, but here in the privacy of the dunes there was only Seth and the indescribable magic of that first kiss.

As he angled his head and kissed her back, she thought that her eighteenth birthday had gone from being the worse day of her life to the best. Melting under the erotic slide of his tongue and the intimate stroke of his hands, she stopped

thinking about her father. All she could think about was the way Seth's mouth made her feel. Who would have thought it? Who would have thought that good-boy Seth had such a bad-boy side? Where had he learned to kiss like this?

She told herself that she deserved romance on her eighteenth birthday. She deserved *this*.

Never before had anyone, or anything, made her feel this way.

And never before had doing the wrong thing ever felt so right.