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Holiday Fling to Forever by Ann McIntosh
Second Chance to Sail into Sunset by Annie O'Neil
Love's a Beach! by Heidi Rice
Second Chance in Antigua by Maya Blake
A New Adventure by Sophie Pembroke




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From
**ANTIGUA
WITH LOVE**

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Introducing Romance Month with Mills & Boon
and Antigua and Barbuda Tourism Authority.

To celebrate Romance Month this June, five
Mills & Boon authors have each written a
short story of finding love on the beautiful
island of Antigua, the most romantic island
in the Caribbean. Be transported to an exotic
paradise, from the yachts at Nelson's Dockyard
to the peaks of Shirley Heights lookout point,
via beautiful white and pink sandy beaches
that Antigua and Barbuda are renowned for.

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ANTIGUA
AND
BARBUDA
The beach is just the beginning...



ANTIGUA
AND
BARBUDA

The beach is just the beginning...

With 365 white sand beaches, luxurious secluded hotels and some of the Caribbean's best sunsets, it's no wonder that Antigua is one of the world's leading destinations and widely regarded as the Caribbean's capital of romance.

From watching amazing sunsets at Shirley Heights to intimate picnics on one of the remote offshore islands such as Prickly Pear Island or walking hand in hand along the pink sand beach in Barbuda, there's so many beautiful spots and romantic activities to enjoy.

Antigua's rich history and spectacular topography provide a variety of popular sightseeing opportunities. Nelson's Dockyard, the only remaining example of a Georgian fort commissioned by the British in 1755, is perhaps the most renowned landmark.

Betty's Hope, built in 1674, is the site of one of the first full-scale sugar plantations on Antigua, and offers a chance to step back into time by visiting the restored mills.

Another unique attraction is Devil's Bridge, located at the eastern tip of the island in Indian Town National Park, where Atlantic breakers have carved out a natural limestone arch. Antigua boasts a varied tourism calendar including events such as the World Class Antigua Sailing Week, Classic Yacht Regatta, Antigua Sports Fishing and the annual Carnival; known as the Caribbean's Greatest Summer Festival.

For more information visit
www.visitantiguabarbuda.com



Holiday Fling to Forever

Ann McIntosh



Anyone with a lick of sense knew holiday romances weren't meant to last. They were supposed to be crazy and thrilling. An out-of-this-world experience as beautiful and ephemeral as the sunset she was watching from the perfect vantage point of Shirley Heights. A dazzling flash of colours, a breathless moment of fantastical pleasure, which slowly faded to dark once you got back on the plane and went home.

Being the staid and sober type, Katy hadn't even thought about the possibility of meeting someone during her Antigua trip. Even though it was her dream holiday, one she'd spent two years saving for, romance was never a part of the plan. And yet, romance seemed to whisper on the wind in Antigua, a murmured promise she'd been unable to ignore, or resist.

She'd officially met Lukas, on the day she arrived, having shared a shuttle ride from the hotel. Being Sunday, the receptionist told Katy as she checked in, she just *had* to go to the lookout.

‘Best party on the island,’ she’d said with a grin. ‘Steel band playing, lots of food and drinks. Everyone dancing. If I didn’t have to work, I’d be there myself.’

It might have been better to have a quiet evening by the pool, since she’d just gotten off an eight hour flight from Gatwick. But she’d slept most of the way, and hated the thought of losing even a minute of time on the island. Jet lag be darned!

‘Make sure you get there in time for sunset,’ the receptionist said, as the bellhop came to take Katy’s luggage up to her room. ‘Maybe you’ll see the green flash.’

Not knowing what that was, she’d looked it up on her phone. With all the variables that had to be right for it to occur, she wasn’t surprised when it didn’t happen.

‘Ah, no green flash.’

She’d known the tall, dark-haired man from the shuttle had been standing close beside her in the crush of people, and wasn’t sure he was even talking to her. But the note of disappointment in his voice had her glancing his way.

‘The probability of seeing it is low,’ she’d replied. Then she’d looked away, a little flustered

and annoyed at herself for sounding like the data analyst she was.

‘Yes,’ he’d replied, without even a hint of amusement. ‘But so is the prospect of love at first sight. And yet it happens.’

Startled, she’d looked back at him, and found her gaze snared by his.

And, just like that, a bit of light flirtation had seemed just the ticket to a perfect holiday.

But flirtation turned to something more. Normally reserved and a bit suspicious of strangers, Katy was attracted to Lukas in a way she’d never experienced before. It was something about his eyes, which drew her in with their kindness and charm. Drooping slightly at the corners, they gave the impression of good humour, even when his mouth was solemn. And while he seemed to be in good shape, he wasn’t overly handsome, yet she really liked his clean-cut good looks.

The evening flew by, as they danced and talked and laughed, learning about each other in a rushed, intent way that let Katy know Lukas understood how little time there was.

Holiday romances have to be swift, with the

brilliance of a shooting star, or they never truly reach their full potential.

There was no doubt in her mind that they'd spend the rest of their holidays together. Both had made the trip alone. Neither were so young that they'd expect too much from the situation and although they were very different—he with an artistic sensibility and her with her frank scientific outlook—they meshed perfectly. Smart and funny, laid back but adventurous, Lukas opened Katy's eyes to a different way of seeing things, and there was no one else she'd have preferred to have explore the sultry beauty of Antigua with. Perhaps that was why the days seemed to fly by. A sun-drenched idyll of day trips and swimming, dancing beneath the stars and moonlit strolls along the beach.

On Thursday morning, before leaving her room to meet Lukas for a sunrise trek, Katy looked firmly at her reflection in the mirror and said aloud, 'Don't forget, Katherine Amanda, this is just a holiday fling. Seven days of fun and games, and then he goes back to Vancouver and you head home to London.' Even without all the other impediments, like differences in personality and lifestyles, no

holiday romance, regardless of intensity, could realistically survive *that* distance.

‘Just enjoy it—enjoy him,’ she’d told her reflection stoutly. ‘And don’t worry about afterwards.’

But even that stern pep talk couldn’t stop her from saying later, as they sat on the beach after lunch, ‘I wish every day could be like today.’

Lukas was holding her hand, and squeezed her fingers gently. ‘But then how would we appreciate moments like this?’

He was right, of course. It was time-out-of-time, far away from the workaday world. An instant of perfection which would fade over time, like a favourite photograph from the past.

She pushed her sudden melancholy away, and jumped to her feet.

‘Race you!’ she cried, running toward the waves, laughing at his shout of outrage, fleeing the spectre of the coming goodbyes more-so than his pursuing form.

On the day before his flight home, they’d once more stood side by side at the Shirley Heights Overlook as the sun sank toward the horizon. It was quiet, just a few other people lounging about. Nothing like the crush of the Sunday night party.

They weren't touching, as though putting physical distance between them could help prepare them for the next day's parting.

Mired in sadness, Katy hardly saw the glorious vista spread out before them; the two harbours and rolling hills, the yachts berthed at the Nelson's Dockyard marina. Yet, didn't that very unhappiness herald the end of a very successful holiday romance? If she could blithely get on the plane without a shadow in her heart, then none of what she'd felt would have been real, and she refused to believe that possible. Tomorrow they'd part ways, but she'd always have the memories of her perfect, beautiful holiday fling...

'What are you thinking?' Lukas asks, putting his arm around her shoulders and pulling her in against his side. Below them the sea gleams, waves tipped with gold, and the sky puts on an elaborate show, with rose and amber and purple tinting the clouds, so they look like streamers of joy.

'About how we met,' she tells him. 'Right here. And how holiday romances aren't meant to last.'

He doesn't answer immediately, just tightens his grip, and bends to kiss her temple. A playful

breeze ruffles her skirt, as though teasing her for what she just said, and she reaches down to catch the chiffon, as it flutters around Lukas' legs.

'I love you so much, and I'm thankful,' he whispers in her ear. 'So thankful you allowed me to show you that isn't necessarily true.'

And he had shown her, wooing her for the last two years despite the distance, and time difference, between them. They'd traveled back and forth a few times, but those visits together hadn't truly been necessary to prove they belonged with each other.

'Hey, the sun's going down,' one of his brothers calls from behind them. 'You're going to miss it if you don't hurry.'

As the rest of their guests amble over to find spots along the low stone wall to watch the dazzling display, Katy lifts her lips for a kiss from her new husband.

'I'm thankful too,' she says against his mouth. 'I love you with all my heart.'

When he'd proposed, and she'd said yes, there'd been no real discussion about where the wedding would take place. Shirley Heights held a special place in her heart. Surrounded by friends

and family, they'd pledged their hearts, souls, and bodies to each other in the perfect setting, the tropical splendour enhancing an already fairytale day. With the sun going down in front of them now, Katy recognises the inevitable rightness of the moment. A date with destiny fulfilled.

Not déjà vu, but another amazing point along the continuum of their lives, lived out in the place where it all began.

'I hope we see the green flash,' her youngest cousin says, camera at the ready. 'It's very rare, you know.'

'As rare as love at first sight,' Katy agrees.

'But nowhere as beautiful,' Lukas adds.

And, although everyone *ooo's* and *ah's* as the sun sinks below the horizon, Katy and Lukas miss seeing any of it, too lost in each other's kisses to look up.

Holiday Fling to Forever © Ann McIntosh 2019

Love's a Beach!

Heidi Rice



Melanie Sanders snapped another shot of Ffryes Beach. A butterfly fluttered into view and she laughed and carried on clicking. After posting the best shots to her social media accounts — #Ffryesbeach #solotravel #suffer—she tucked her phone into her rucksack.

Right, no more living behind her lens, this was a holiday, which was why she had deliberately kept her camera in her rucksack all day. And anyway, her social media followers were going to hate her enough already, for being here when they weren't.... Soaking up the rays, breathing in the sweet sultry air of Antigua in June and doing nothing but lying on the beach all day in between trips to Dennis' Restaurant and bouts of snorkeling in water such a pure turquoise it was hard to believe it was real.

Slipping her sunglasses back on, Mel contemplated what to do next.

Should she:

1. Go for another snorkel?

2. Re-dose her sunscreen before she had another doze?
3. Or head to Dennis' to grab a table on the veranda ahead of the supper crowd?

Her stomach grumbled. Dennis' was looking like a winner. But she needed more time to debate her menu options—curried goat or jerk chicken? She fished out her sunscreen, but as she flipped the cap, a sleek yacht, its sails billowing industriously, glided into view. She dropped the sunscreen as the yacht anchored off shore.

There was only one person on board. A guy.

Curious, she broke her own golden rule and fished her camera out, clicked in the telephoto lens, and stared into the viewfinder.

Wow. Not just a guy. A seriously hot guy wearing trunks, a ball cap pulled low over his features and not a lot else.

Voila! Choice 4. Objectify hot guy on boat.

Mel grinned as she settled in for the show.

He worked diligently and efficiently, as if he'd handled the rigging a thousand times. Even with the telephoto lens, though it was impossible to make out his features, it was still a great show.

Until he stopped, his head lifted and he stared directly at her.

Could he see her spying on him? Goosebumps rippled over her skin. Why did he seem vaguely familiar?

She lowered the camera—a bit freaked out. She didn't want to get arrested for leisure stalking.

The guy disappeared below decks. She let out a breath. The tension easing out of her spine.

Show's over.

Mel frowned, surprised by the thrum of disappointment. She had not come on this holiday looking for romance, or even a no-strings hook-up. She was a successful fashion photographer, she didn't need a guy in her life. And sex was overrated.

A flush rippled over her skin.

Okay, maybe not *all* sex was overrated. The first time she'd tried it, she'd enjoyed it, a lot, eventually, after getting past the 'awkward'. But the guy himself had been a total jerk.

Jack.

The name—if that was even his name—echoed across her consciousness unlocking the memories she'd shut away a decade ago.

But for the first time in a long time, she couldn't

seem to lock them down. Suddenly she wasn't on a beach in Antigua but in Edinburgh University's photolab on the Photography BA course's open day.

She could feel his arm brushing against hers as they reached for the same Leica, see Jack's firm sensual lips, his emerald-green eyes lit by that cute, wicked smile.

The lilt of a Calypso tune drifting down the beach was drowned out by the sound of Jack's slow as molasses accent telling her he wasn't a Yank, he was a Southern boy and there was a heap of difference.

She could taste the picnic they'd shared of Scotch Eggs and Iron Bru after killing themselves climbing Castle Rock. And the salty aroma of his skin in the budget motel where she'd been too embarrassed to tell him he was her first, until he'd told her she was his.

Mel shivered despite the June sunshine.

Like a dope, she'd believed him. Only to wake up the following morning next to an empty pillow with a note on it saying 'Call Me' above a fake number. And nothing else... Not even a surname.

Jack.

The guy she'd loved for twenty-four wonderful hours, until he'd broken her heart.

Mel tried to shake the kaleidoscope of memories from her head. Why was she suddenly re-evaluating them now? Maybe she was getting sunstroke? Or relaxation fatigue?

She never thought about 'Jack the Jerk'—or the naïve, too-eager girl she'd been then. That long-ago betrayal certainly had no place in her holiday of a lifetime.

She lifted her camera, staring through the lens to concentrate her wayward thoughts as she searched the boat deck again.

Come on, hot mystery muscle guy, where are you? I'm in dire need of a distraction so I don't take another trip down Fake Memory Lane.

Suddenly the lens went black and a gruff Alabama accent which had every one of Mel's freak-out sensors going from five to ninety in a heartbeat—said:

'Why the heck are you taking pictures of me, ma'am?'

Mel dropped the camera, her fingers numb.

Her heartbeat accelerated into the danger zone

as she blinked at the tall guy dripping onto her towel, his wet hair swept back off handsome features she could see all too clearly now.

‘*Jack?*’ she squealed, as her mind told her she had to be dreaming. Or having some weird out of body experience.

Unfortunately, the hot, glowing weight in her abdomen wasn’t buying it as it exploded across her nerve-endings.

* * *

‘*Melly?*’ Jack was so shocked to see the woman he’d dreamed about pretty much every damn day for a decade—her features as gorgeous as he’d tried not to remember them—her name came out on a girly squeak. He would have been embarrassed about that at another time, in another life, but the reaction battering his body was way too extreme for him to care.

‘Is it actually you?’ he managed at last as he searched her stunned expression.

Damn, but she was still so beautiful—her long limbs and high breasts in that excuse for a bikini having a predictable effect. He struggled to ignore

it, the heat making him feel exposed and needy...
And a damn fool.

He'd dived off the starboard side of the yacht and swum to shore so he could catch his mystery stalker, confiscate her camera equipment, before he threatened her with an injunction. He'd assumed she was a journalist, or paparazzi. Invasions of his privacy were his trigger ever since Travel Trails' stock flotation had turned him into a billionaire five years back.

What he hadn't been prepared for was to have his past slap him in the face.

'I...Yes,' she stuttered. 'Am I dreaming?' she whispered, her voice so low and shaky he wasn't sure she was talking to him.

Okay, she looked more stunned than he did. Her turquoise eyes—which still reminded him of the sea off this very beach—had gone glassy and opaque, as if she were struggling to stay conscious.

'Please tell me I'm dreaming?' she said.

The plea made his heart stumble and his ribs become tight and achy—the same way they had for days, weeks, hell even months ten years back when he'd waited for her call and it had never come.

He rubbed his chest, the ache getting worse.

‘You’re not dreaming, it’s me,’ he said, and forced himself to drop his fist. He didn’t want her to see she could still make him ache.

What was with that anyway? He’d gotten over her, a long time ago.

But even as he tried to persuade himself, she stood up and he noticed the tremble in her fingers as she thrust her wild chestnut hair behind her ear and the tremor in her knees as she straightened. A pang of regret shot through him and he knew it wasn’t true.

Despite everything, despite all this time, he wasn’t over her at all.

Was that why he’d always been compelled to anchor his yacht *The Scottish Lady* off Ffryes Beach in June—around the time they’d met. Why he’d given the boat that name? Because he’d never been able to forget her, or one of the many conversations they’d had that day when he’d told her about this beach, and her eyes—which he’d been too embarrassed to tell her were the exact same colour as the water here—had lit up and she’d told him she’d love to visit.

Had he believed somewhere in his subconscious that when he hadn’t been able to track her down in Edinburgh, he might find her here?

The question that had burned inside him for so long rose to his lips...And he couldn't swallow it down, no matter how exposed it made him feel.

'Why didn't you ever call?'

The glassy look cleared from her eyes, and a sharp frown flattened her brows. Anger, and resentment leapt into the deep blue depths, but behind it was something else. The same crushing hurt he had felt for so long.

'Why didn't I...?' She sputtered, outraged. 'I called you a hundred times. But you gave me a fake number, you jerk!'

* * *

Mel was so upset she could hardly breathe. She was in shock, trying to get her knees to lock and her mind to engage was a major struggle. Given that the only man she had ever loved had just appeared from the Caribbean sea like a merman—the hard muscles and sinews of his body even hotter than before—and accused *her* of not calling *him*, was it any surprise she was hyperventilating?

'What number did I give you?' he said.

She reeled off the number, surprised she still knew it by heart.

‘Oh...Hell.’ His voice broke. ‘That’s...the wrong number.’

‘I *know*,’ she replied, the breathlessness getting worse at the look of horror on his face.

‘Jeeze, Mel I’m so sorry. I screwed up. I was freaking out, because of my dad, my mum had texted me to tell me he’d had a stroke and it was so dark in that room.’ Something was happening to her heart as he spoke, the concrete it had been encased in for so long cracking open, and letting hope flood in. ‘Plus I’ve always been kinda dyslexic.’

‘You didn’t do it deliberately?’ She whispered. ‘...Because you never wanted to see me again?’

‘Are you kidding me? No way!’

At last he touched her, his hands chilled from the sea gripping her upper arms to drag her into his embrace. He tucked her unresisting body against his chest, holding her the way he had that night so long ago.

‘Melly, I’m so sorry. I had to go. I didn’t want to wake you. But when you didn’t call me, I figured I’d imagined the connection between us.’ He was rambling, stumbling over the words.

She wrapped her arms around him, trying to soothe him, not easy when the conflagration in her heart was bursting over her body like fireworks.

He hadn't tricked her. He hadn't used her. Every single thing that had happened that day had been real.

He framed her face in unsteady hands. 'Please tell me, there isn't anyone else?'

She shook her head, too choked to talk.

He flushed. 'You wanna go for a sail? Or to Dennis' — it's the restaurant on the beach, remember I told you about it?'

Good grief, yes he had.

The conversation came flooding back, so raw and real and vivid.

Was that why she'd chosen to come to Antigua? Why she'd gravitated towards Ffryes Beach? It had to be.

'I'd love to go for a sail,' she said.

The grin that spread across his features made her heart sing with the same joyous beat as one of Dennis' Soca tunes.

'Awesome.'



Second
Chances in
Antigua

Maya Blake

Night Before the Wedding

Everything was so beautiful it was almost an illusion.

But Sophie Dillon knew the hard work that went into making magic. It was what she lived for. What she aspired every day to create for the guests who walked through the doors at The Branborough, London.

As hospitality and facilities manager, it was her job to ensure every inch of the hotel was pristine. So was it any surprise that she'd dedicated the same magic-making work ethic towards her own wedding four thousand miles away in Antigua?

Of course not.

But like every special landmark or hotel suite, every magic trick needed an appreciative audience to breathe life into it. Someone to gasp with delight and clap when the magic was unveiled.

Sophie thought she'd found that one person who would appreciate her magic. A partner who would ensure her work ethic was balanced with special moments of magic.

For eighteen months, she'd dreamed.

And it'd all come to...nothing.

She really shouldn't be here. Not until she stepped through the doors tomorrow, not as a bride, but as a guest at the wedding *she'd* organised.

Tears threatened to spill. She swallowed them down.

She'd shed enough already when she'd been yanked from happily ever after to never-gonna-happen courtesy of a five-minute conversation with Matthew, her ex-fiancé, during his coffee break.

Sophie had been too shocked to work out which hurt more, that he'd scheduled the break-up in his diary, knowing everyone in his management team, including her, would see it, or that after three years, an elaborate engagement party, meticulous wedding planning and hours spent planning their future together, he'd allotted a mere five minutes to end it.

Enough.

Hand shaking, she pushed the doors open and like beholding a magic trick, her breath caught.

This was why she'd chosen Antigua as her wedding destination. Besides the breathtaking grounds of the old-world glamour of the Heritage Grande Hotel, the very air smelled like magic.

White sugar-fine beach and crystal clear waters provided the perfect backdrop for lush greens that comprised the tropical paradise she'd fallen head over heels in love with two years ago. She'd known within an hour that this was where she wanted to marry.

'You shouldn't be in here.'

She spun around, ready to supply an excuse for her trespassing. Surely management would take pity on the woman who'd painstakingly planned every table setting and flower petal down to the last—

Every thought fled from her head as she saw the man framed in the doorway.

Tall, lean but muscular, with dark wavy hair and eyes a cross between caramel and dark honey, he was the most breathtakingly handsome man she'd ever seen. His skin was that beautiful golden brown that hinted at a mixed race heritage. But it was his mouth that caught and held her attention. Sinfully full, even though it seemed inclined to be turned down in mild disapproval right that moment as he waited for her response.

'I...it's my niece's wedding tomorrow.'

He glanced at the slim watch circling his wrist.

‘Miss, it’s eleven pm and guests aren’t allowed in private function areas...’ His voice trailed off as he stepped closer, his frown intensifying. ‘Wait, did you say this was your *niece*’s wedding?’

‘Yes. Why?’

‘Pardon me for being presumptuous but you don’t look old enough to have a niece of marrying age.’

A peculiar little tingle trailed down her body at his quick but thorough appraisal. Sophie wanted to be offended but that little look of appreciation was working wonders for the battered ego still healing from being unceremoniously dumped.

I’m the youngest of eight siblings. Melody, the bride, is my oldest sister’s daughter. I’m not going to horrify my sister by telling you her age.’

He frowned. ‘Now I’m definitely confused. According to my brief, this room is booked for the wedding of Sophie Dillon.’

‘It was. I’m Sophie Dillon. But I’m not longer the bride.’

She braced herself for customary pity she’d come to know intimately since the news of her jilting broke out. But she saw none in his face, only growing...interest?

He ventured closer, bringing the scent of exclusive aftershave and virile man with him. ‘You can look around. But on one condition.’

‘Yeah, what’s that?’

‘That you let me buy you a drink after.’

She shook her head. ‘I don’t drink with strangers.’

In the next moment, he held out his hand. ‘Then let’s start our acquaintance. I’m Noah Fitzpatrick. I own this hotel.’

###

Honeymoon Suite for One...Maybe

One drink. Two, tops. Then she would call it a night.

Sophie still wasn’t sure why she’d accepted the invitation. Perhaps it was something to do with not wanting to return to the lavish honeymoon suite with the rose petals strewn on every luxurious surface and everything arranged for two? Where the view of the swaying palm trees and the sweet, exotic flavour scented the air invited a person to lose herself in the sultry beauty of Antigua?

‘Here you are. One Antigua Soul for you,’ Noah’s deep voice interrupted her thoughts, dragging her back to the moment. And the fact that she’d agreed to a drink with this incredible-looking man.

Who just happened to own the hotel of her dreams.

She cradled her blood orange and rum cocktail, suddenly tongue-tied.

When she looked up, he was staring at her as if she was far more exotic than her strawberry blonde hair, run-of-the-mill blue eyes and average height warranted.

‘Aren’t you going to ask me about why I’m no longer the bride? Most people can’t wait to get the gory details.’

He shook his head. ‘I’m not most people. And I see all I need to see in your eyes. I’ll listen if you choose to tell me, of course, but in your own time. Okay?’

Stunned and a little moved, she nodded. ‘Okay.’

‘Shall we propose a toast?’ He raised his own drink.

She shrugged. ‘I guess. To a successful wedding tomorrow?’

He hesitated, then shook his head. ‘Your niece’s wedding will be special because that’s what The Heritage specialises in. I would prefer a more... personal toast.’

Again that tingle returned. Deeper. And lingered longer. ‘Okay. Go for it,’ she murmured, more than intrigued despite herself.

Eyes looking deep into hers, he said, ‘To a chance meeting that somehow seems pre-determined.’

Her hand shook as she clinked glasses with him and took a sip.

One drink turned into three, the last taken as Noah tempted her into a walk on the pristine beach. With the sand between her bare toes and the moon glowing over the still-as-glass sea.

‘So, why Antigua?’ he asked.

She tilted her face up to the night breeze, breathed in the pure air. ‘Would it be corny to say I think this is the most perfect place on earth?’

For the longest time he didn’t answer. When she glanced at him, he was staring intently at her. ‘No. It wouldn’t. I’m half English but this is the place I prefer to call home. This is where I always return to.’

The throb of emotion in his voice reached inside and wrapped itself around Sophie's chest.

And when Noah Fitzpatrick held out his hand, it felt like the most natural thing in the world to slip hers into it.

###

The wedding was magical. Her sister breaking into tears repeatedly over the course of the ceremony. And since Sophie knew every facet of the wedding she'd planned for herself, and knew the sunset would be at its most glorious at the moment Melody stepped out onto the terrace for their first dance, she turned her gaze away, the moment a little too poignant for her.

And met a pair of golden brown eyes staring at her.

He stood a distance away from the crowd, leaning against a colonial pillar with one leg crossed over the other. The cream linen suit and dark orange polo shirt he wore underneath made his vibrant skin even more beautiful, like a living, breathing painting she wanted to explore at length.

Drawn almost magnetically to him, she left

the reception area and approached him. After he'd walked her to her suite last night and left her at her door, she'd wondered whether she'd see him again. 'You were right. The wedding was special.'

He accepted the accolade with a nod. 'Are you leaving?'

She nodded.

'May I walk you back to your room?' he asked.

No. Say no, her brain urged. But her heart disagreed. 'I'd like that,' she murmured.

At her door, she turned to him. Her breath caught as he captured and held her gaze. Maybe it was something in the Antiguan air. Maybe it was the man, but again Sophie found herself reaching for a different kind of magic. 'Would you like to come in?'

'Yes, I would.'

###

The Morning After

For the first time in her adult life, she had no solid research to fall back on. Last night had been

beyond special, a moment out of time. But there was no way to weave magic into this morning after.

Beside her in bed, she felt Noah's gaze on her face. Heard his steady breathing.

'We can allow this to become awkward or you can let me persuade you to trust me just for a little while longer.'

Sophie opened her eyes. Sweet heaven, he looked even better in the morning light.

He smiled. 'Good morning.'

'Hi,' she murmured.

'I have something to show you. Will you give me a few hours of your time?'

Even though she knew she needed to end this, she found herself nodding.

Half an hour later, she stepped out of Noah's Land Rover, her eyes wide as she stared at the most beautiful setting she'd ever seen.

The building held an old-world elegance, the kind found all over Antigua. But the setting was even more spectacular than the Heritage Grande. A private peninsular bordering Mamora Bay with a half-mile stretch of beach abutted scented gardens, private pergolas and swaying palm trees. Pristine chalets offered luxury and privacy and beyond

it, what looked like six large exclusive chalets set on stilts were situated to make the best of every spectacular sunset. It couldn't get more idyllic than that.

When she'd finished taking it all in, she turned to find Noah watching her, with an intense look in his eyes.

'Noah?'

He took a deep breath. 'I know you've had a bad experience. I overheard some of the wedding guests talking yesterday.'

Her heart fell. 'Oh.'

'Sophie, look at me.'

She struggled to meet his gaze.

'You can let it colour the rest of your life or change the picture entirely.'

'You don't strike me as an always-look-on-the-bright-side-of-life kinda guy.'

He shrugged. 'I'm not, usually. I'm a realist. But that doesn't mean I don't know when to capitalise on a good thing when I see it.'

'Oh, and I'm a good thing, am I?'

Expecting him to deliver another one of those blinding smiles that confused her nervous system, she was a little surprised when his face turned

almost solemn. ‘You’re better than a good thing, Sophie. You’re special. Far too special to waste your life looking back.’

‘What are you saying, Noah?’

‘That I want you to look forward, with me. I can’t predict what the future will hold but I know it will be magnificent with you in it.’

‘Why have you brought me here, Noah? Really?’

He stared at her for the longest time, emotions tumbling over in his eyes until he finally let her see the one she’d secretly yearned for.

Her heart began to race, her palms growing clammy as he closed the gap between them.

‘I want to start your new chapter with you, Sophie. Here, now, I want us to strive for our own magic. I know it’s only been a little more than twenty-four hours, but I don’t want to let this go. I don’t want to let *you* go. Even if you chose to get on a plane back to England on Monday, I’ll be right behind you. But I’m hoping you’ll stay. I saw the way you looked when we arrived here. This place affects you just as it did me the first time I saw it. It’s why I bought it. I very much want to find out what we can do with it together.’

Her heart pounded faster. ‘You want me to start a new life here, in Antigua, with you?’

He nodded. ‘As business partners. But more importantly, as more.’ The gruffness in his voice, the pressure of the hands that caught hers and lifted them up to rest on his chest, touched and healed a place inside her she’d thought Matthew had permanently damaged.

But with each second that passed, with each breath that passed between them, hope flared to life. Possibilities bloomed. The promise of magic whipped her heart into a frenzy and made her smile as she began to nod. First hesitantly, then with more conviction, hiking onto her tiptoes to slide her arms around his neck. ‘Yes,’ she mumbled, overcome with emotion.

She felt his smile against her cheek. ‘What was that? Can you please repeat that, Sophie?’

Drawing back, she looked into his beautiful eyes, struggling to hold back tears from hers. ‘I said yes, please. Yesterday, I watched my niece marry her soul mate and for a moment wished my own destiny had been that smooth. But not anymore. I want the mystery and the challenge, the good with the bad. I want to build my magic from the ground up. And I want to do it with you, Noah.’

He let loose that blinding smile, his eyes sparkling bright.

For a single moment in time, Sophie's heart stopped. And knew she would always remember it as the moment she fell in love with Noah Fitzpatrick in the place where their magic would be created.

Second Chances in Antigua © Maya Blake 2019

A New
Adventure

Sophie Pembroke



Kerri eyed up the small, open white boat that sat at the edge of the water, almost upon the perfect sugar-white sand of the beach. Already, eager tourists were climbing the metal ladder to get aboard, claiming their seats and chattering excitedly about everything they hoped to see on the tour.

‘Our turn!’ Jay said, grinning. His strong, tanned hands gripped the ladder and he ascended, leaving Kerri watching the muscles of his broad back moving as he climbed.

Well, if she had to be on her dream holiday in paradise *without* the man she’d confidentially expected to propose while they were there, at least she got to enjoy it with her best friend instead. Her not-at-all-hard-on-the-eyes best friend, at that.

She followed Jay up the ladder—rather less agilely, she suspected—grateful for the full sarong that hid her bikini body wobbles from whichever poor soul had to climb up behind her.

Jay had already found some new friends on

board, and motioned her over to join them. ‘Sara and Phil have done this tour before! They’ve just been telling me how incredible it is.’

‘Fantastic!’ Kerri’s smile was genuine; it was hard not to smile when Jay’s enthusiasm was so infectious.

‘I just still can’t believe I get to be here.’ Jay gave her hand a friendly squeeze, then turned back to pepper his new friends with questions.

Kerri took a seat near them, twisting to look out over the rail of the boat as they cast off. Large enough to hold twenty or so passengers, the middle of the boat was covered by a thin, white roof held up on metal poles, but the rest was left open—all the better to enjoy the glorious sunshine and fantastic scenery, Kerri supposed.

Holidaying in Antigua really was a dream come true for her, and this boat tour of the smaller islands, finishing at Great Bird Island with a barbeque at sunset—was one of the things she and Wayne had been looking forward to most.

Well, she’d *thought* they were. It turned out, that while she’d been planning their dream getaway, he’d been planning how to dump her. Maybe it was actually the trip that had done it. Wayne’s

idea of wild adventure was ordering a different curry from their usual takeaway, not travelling to paradise.

She could have cancelled the holiday of course but why should she miss out just because he was an idiot? She'd intended to go on her own, but then she'd told Jay about the breakup.

'Clearly this man is the stupidest in history,' he'd said, pouring her a very large glass of white wine. 'Not only did he break up with you—which is an obvious sign of idiocy—but he did it *before* you went on the holiday of a lifetime together. Don't suppose you need someone to go with you, do you? I've got some annual leave that needs using up, and the last time you and I went away together was just after graduation! We could recreate our youth in far more exotic and luxurious climes...'

She'd switched the hotel reservation to a twin room and changed the name on the plane ticket the very next day. It had been a brilliant idea Kerri decided, as she let the sun warm her skin and relax her. Jay had been her best friend since fresher's week at university, over a decade ago, and remained one of the few people in the world she could truly relax and be herself with. Plus his enthusiastic

nature meant that she never got the chance to feel down about being here without Wayne—she was far too busy having fun.

Jay was always ready for the next adventure, for a chance to try something new, to leap without even checking if there was a net. Basically the opposite of her, Kerri admitted to herself. Maybe that was what made them such good friends. Perhaps some of that zest for life and adventure would even rub off on her while they were in Antigua.

The boat tour took them around a few of the hidden islands of the North Sound. Kerri, entranced by the blue skies and bird life, and the lush greenness that covered the rocky islands themselves, forgot all about Wayne and the real world for a while. Beside her, Jay had turned his questions on their tour guide, and so they were all learning about the wildlife and ecological projects going on around the islands.

But Kerri was thinking about adventure, not ecology. And remembering the one part of this tour she *hadn't* been so excited about.

Snorkeling.

As the boat cruised to a stop in the bay off Great Bird Island, and other passengers eagerly

donned flippers, masks and snorkels, Kerri hung back.

‘I’ll just stay here with the non-swimmers,’ she said, motioning to one or two other passengers who were staying firmly fully clothed and dry. ‘Maybe paddle a bit along the shore later.’

‘Why?’ Jay’s brow creased with confusion. ‘You’re a great swimmer! Why don’t you want to go snorkeling?’

Kerri bit her lip. ‘I don’t know. I just...I’ve never done this before. I don’t know what’s down there.’

Jay gave her a wicked smile. ‘That’s half the adventure. Come on, I’ll look after you.’

And before Kerri could raise any objections about weird sea creatures or sea grasses getting tangled in her toes, not being able to touch the bottom, or any of the other worries that bubbled up in her chest, she had flippers for feet and a snorkel in her mouth.

‘Ready?’ Jay asked, fixing his own mask and snorkel.

Choose the adventure for once, she told herself, and nodded.

The water was glorious. Clear and blue and

teeming with marine life. Sticking close to their guide, Jay and Kerri saw colourful corals, and a whole rainbow of tropical fish, bright and joyous against the white sand ocean floor.

Bursting up to daylight again, Jay pulled his snorkel from his mouth and laughed, a noise so full of delight that Kerri couldn't help but echo it.

'Didn't I tell you it would be brilliant?' he said.

Kerri just nodded. She couldn't find the words to do the experience justice.

Later, as the scent of barbecuing fish wafted across Bird Island, Kerri stood apart, staring out at the sea and remembering all the wonderful things she'd seen in it. A whole new world—one she might have missed if not for Jay.

'Did you know, this island is the only place in the world that you can see the Antiguan racer snake in the wild?' Jay's voice rang out through the warm evening air as he climbed the rocks to join her.

Kerri turned to watch him, his golden hair gleaming in the setting sun, his bronzed skin peeking out from under his shorts and t-shirt. He looked relaxed, happy, and ready for fun.

And gorgeous. He looked utterly gorgeous—more now than he had at eighteen or even twenty

seven. Or maybe she just hadn't been looking properly before now.

'You must be thinking hard,' he said as he joined her. 'You haven't even asked if the snake is poisonous.'

Because she was always worried about new things, about practicalities, about risk—when all Jay saw was the adventure. But maybe she was starting to come around to his way of seeing the world at last.

'I was just thinking what a brilliant adventure this day—this whole trip—with you has been,' she told him.

Jay beamed. 'Good! I mean, I've loved every minute of it, but I knew it wouldn't be easy for you, coming here without Wayne when you had it all planned. I'm glad you've managed to enjoy it.'

Kerri shook her head. 'I've had more fun with you than I ever would have had with Wayne. He'd definitely never have got me snorkeling, for a start. In fact, it's got me planning my next big adventure.' Her heart beat double time at the risk she was thinking of taking, but she knew that if it worked it would be worth it.

'Oh?' Jay raised an eyebrow at her. 'Tell me about it.'

Kerri took a step closer, and looked up to meet his gaze. Something shifted in expression, his eyes widening, and she knew he understood. But did he feel the same?

‘Well, I’m scared, because it’s something I’ve never done before, and it’s a big risk,’ she said.

‘You felt the same way about snorkeling, and that worked out.’ Jay placed one hand on her waist, and Kerri’s mouth went dry. ‘I say you just go for it. Any good adventure is worth taking a chance on.’

Kerri raised herself up on her tiptoes and slowly, slowly, brought her lips to his, hoping she’d read this right.

And when Jay kissed her back, she knew this might be the start of the best adventure of her whole life.

A New Adventure © Sophie Pembroke 2019

Second Chance
to Sail into
Sunset

Annie O'Neil



‘Ready for your hot date?’ Siobhan’s best friend reached over and fluffed her hair, giggling as if they were still schoolgirls.

‘It’s not a date.’ Siobhan batted the comment out into the tropical sea air. They were hardly school girls anymore. They were grown women. Ellen was less than twenty-four hours away from her dream Antigua beach wedding, and Siobhan? Maid of honour, still very single, and old enough to consign her silly dreams of a holiday romance blossoming into something more to the past. ‘Brett’s sunset tour is for you and your future husband. Nothing to do with me.’

Ellen laughed. ‘You keep telling yourself whatever you like, hon, but fyi you totally blushed when you said his name.’

‘Did not.’ She felt her cheeks colour a deeper shade of crimson.

‘Did too.’ Ellen cheerfully taunted.

Siobhan huffed out a sigh. ‘It’s been over ten

years since I've seen Brett Cooper and I can tell you right now that seeing him again will not make me blush, have butterflies or any other swoony behaviour.'

'That's a shame.'

The slow Australian drawl slipped down her spine like warm honey. And, as if to prove her completely wrong, an entire kaleidoscope of butterflies took flight when Siobhan turned around. Brett was...*oh, mercy...*Brett was every bit as handsome as he'd been the first time they'd met. More so, if possible. His golden blonde hair glistened with hints of sunshine. His skin glowed with the energy of a man who spent most of his time out on that crystal clear Caribbean Sea. Little wonder his dream to rent out dinghy's to tourists had become a reality. She and Ellen had taken the bait ten years ago when he'd offered them a 'paddle' round the idyllic island coves. *From the beach to the bar and back again*, had been his tagline back in the day. *From the beach to her bed and back again* had become his and Siobhan's.

Heavens.

Brett was a far cry from the lanky young man with big dreams she'd met all those years ago. He

was all man and then some. If the scant emails they'd exchanged over the years were anything to go by, he followed summer round the globe to keep up with the tourists. It sounded like a tough life. No base. No home. Her eyes dipped to his left hand. No wife...

'Welcome to Nelson's Dockyard.' Brett leant in to give the bride-to-be a kiss on the cheek. 'Or should I say, welcome back. And congratulations.'

Ellen thanked him with a flutter of her engagement ring.

'Siobhan...' Brett stood back, not even trying to hide the fact he was appraising her. Those clear blue eyes of his she'd always thought matched the sea started at her cork wedge heels. They slowly worked their way up along her pale English legs, then slid up along her wispy skirt, lingered at the off the shoulder top she'd endlessly debated whether or not to wear, skipped past, then returned to, her mouth, before landing on her eyes.

The fact she hadn't received so much as a handshake let alone a kiss on the cheek spoke volumes. He was drawing a line. Showing her he'd moved on from their summer romance back in the day. Sure, he was making good on giving her best friend

a romantic sunset tour, but something gave her the feeling this would be the last time they were in touch.

‘You look well,’ he finally said.

‘You do, too.’ Siobhan squeaked. Then winced. She’d had a plan. A cool, calm, sophisticated woman plan. Not a falling all over herself because he was making her knees wobbly again plan.

‘So, where’s the lucky man? I thought I was taking the two of you out.’

‘You are. I mean,’ Siobhan spluttered, ‘Kev was with his parents. He’ll be here in a minute.’ Then Siobhan could disappear and very possibly drown her sorrows in a strawberry daiquiri or two before shaking it off and getting on with her life.

Ellen looked at her phone then clapped her hand to her forehead in a poor imitation of a woman who’d forgotten something. ‘Oh no! I told Kev I’d meet him and his parents for a cocktail at the harbour’s edge tonight.’ She gave Brett an apologetic smile. ‘You don’t mind taking Siobhan out for a bit of a paddle, do you? Oh, and Brett? I wanted you to know that Siobhan still hasn’t taken advantage of her plus one on the wedding invitation, so...if you’re free tomorrow...?’

Before either of them could protest, she ran off with a wiggly fingered wave and in the blink of an eye it was just Brett, Siobhan, the beautiful sky above them and a dozen island coves just begging to be visited.

‘Well, I don’t know about you, but I feel ambushed.’ Brett’s laugh was good natured.

‘I’m so sorry. I guess this is what they mean by Bridezilla.’ She made a face then shook her head. *How humiliating!*

Her fingers twitched as Brett scrubbed his hand through that gorgeous blonde hair of his.

‘What do you say? Fancy a bit of a paddle?’

‘In your rowboat?’

A hint of mischief mixed with something much more serious flashed across Brett’s features. ‘Your call. I’m easy either way.’

Stuck in a rowboat with Brett at sunset? How was she going to keep her hands off him? A holiday romance was exactly that. Something you shouldn’t return to. The fact she’d sent him an email once or twice a year just to ‘check on his dream’ could go a long way to explaining why none of her other romances had panned out. Brett Cooper had set the bar high.

Not high enough.

The words rang in her ears as clearly as if he'd just said them.

And it wasn't like returning to London to pursue her career in the hotel industry had jettisoned her to the likes of the Ritz. The small tourist hotel she managed in the heart of London was fine, but...she still wondered what would've happened if she'd stayed with Brett. Would she be touting row boat rides or running that seaside boutique hotel they'd dreamed up during those two magical weeks together?

'Let's do it,' She heard herself say through a roar of nerves and pounding heartbeat.

He led her down the wooden jetty past immaculate sailboat after yacht after schooner. Each eclipsing the next in size and beauty. Her heart went out to him. Poor guy. Still renting out tiny little four man rowboats to tourists. Even so, if it made him happy...

'Here we are.'

Siobhan's heart leapt to her throat.

This was Brett's boat?

In front of her was a gleaming, teak-floored, fairy-light lit, yacht that could easily accommodate

her bestie's entire destination wedding party let alone the bride and groom.

If you're going to dream, may as well dream big.

'This is yours?'

He nodded, the hint of pride unmistakable in his smile.

'But I thought—' *Why didn't you tell me?*

'I might've let you think a lot of things.'

She could see it now. As clear as the gleaming yacht in front of her. He'd wanted her to believe in him, not the things he owned.

'It's amazing, Brett.' He'd followed his head *and* his heart and had obviously made a success of himself. 'Why didn't you say?'

He shrugged a loose shouldered response. 'Want to take a look around?' He held out his hand.

She hesitated. If she took it, she knew she'd have to make a decision. Follow her head or her heart.

'C'mon.' His voice lowered an octave. 'Why don't we go and see the sunset properly?'

She knew what that meant. Sail out beyond the coves where they could watch the sun turn a thousand different colours before it dipped below the horizon and then...

'Who knows?' he dropped her an inviting wink.

'If we're back by sunrise I might even be able to take you up on that plus one you're about to offer me.'

She opened her mouth to protest then grinned.

There he was. That confident, amazing man who had once told her if she believed in herself her dreams would come true. She'd thought it was the insanely beautiful surroundings that had made him so believable. In truth, it was the man.

She took his hand and stepped on to the boat. Tingles of frisson zipped between the pair of them as he showed her the deck, the dance floor, the covered outdoor dining area, the bedrooms. *Well*, she thought, as they finally ascended to the crow's nest where the entire Dockyard was aglow in the remains of the daylight, *the beautiful surroundings certainly helped*. Then, as if by unspoken agreement, Brett's arms slipped around her waist and he dipped his head towards hers to take the kiss they'd each been waiting ten years to share.

Second Chance to Sail into Sunset

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