

Also by Sarah Morgan

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The Christmas Sisters
One Summer in Paris
A Wedding in December
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One More for Christmas
The Summer Seekers
The Christmas Escape
Beach House Summer
Snowed in for Christmas
Summer Wedding
The Christmas Book Club
The Summer Swap
The Christmas Cottage
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Sunset in Central Park
Miracle on 5th Avenue
New York, Actually
Holiday in the Hamptons
Moonlight Over Manhattan

Puffin Island series

First Time in Forever
Some Kind of Wonderful
Christmas Ever After

The O'Neil Brothers series

Sleigh Bells in the Snow
Suddenly, Last Summer
Maybe This Christmas

SARAH MORGAN

The Best Christmas Ever



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

Mabel

A fierce storm is bearing down on the East Coast of America, bringing with it record-breaking snowfall, hurricane-force winds and freezing temperatures. Forecasters are predicting this could be the worst storm since records began. A state of emergency has been declared, and people are urged to seek shelter. Not the Christmas gift all of you were hoping for, I know, but stay home and stay safe."

Mabel Anne Miller turned off the radio and looked at the sleek black cat who was watching her from his favourite place by the window. "Did you hear that? That's going to ruin our plans for a last-minute trip to Manhattan to see the Christmas lights and take in a show. I hope you're not disappointed. No partying for us this Christmas, Crumpet."

The cat purred, sprang down from his perch by the window and rubbed himself against her legs. There were days when Mabel was sure he understood every word she said.

She bent down and stroked behind his ears. "I agree. We should stay home in front of the fire with a good book, which is what we would have been doing anyway." It had been at least

a decade since she'd been to Manhattan and even longer since she'd been to a show. It would be as alien as a trip to the moon.

Her world had shrunk to this one small corner of Vermont, her house and her pretty woodland garden with its stream that in summer was home to kingfishers and warblers. The stream was now frozen and the kingfishers long gone in search of less icy climes, but she knew they'd be back. Ice melted and the world kept turning.

And she had her cats, Crumpet, Cupcake, Biscuit and Macaron (she'd always been a fan of afternoon tea). All of them were black, apart from Cupcake, who had a white streak on one paw. They'd been abandoned by their owners a few years earlier and deposited, shivering and frightened, in a local shelter. Mabel, who had been at her lowest ebb, had taken them in. One glance had told her that they were meant to be hers, and now they were a family. She'd saved them, and in turn, they'd saved her. They gave her a reason to get up in the morning.

Cupcake and Biscuit padded into the kitchen and she fussed over them as she would have done a child. For a moment she remembered when she *had* fussed over a child, and she was swamped by a wave of regret so powerful it rocked her on her feet.

She grabbed the edge of the table for support and sat down hard on the nearest chair.

Crumpet immediately sprang onto her lap, pressing against her, kneading her leg with his paws.

She stroked him gratefully. As usual, he sensed when she was having a low moment and offered comfort. Affection was almost always on his own terms, but she willingly took whatever was offered. Cats were complicated creatures, but in her experience far less complicated than humans. Also, more forgiving.

Crumpet looked up at her with eyes that were a startling shade of green. When she'd first seen those eyes, she'd laughed

in disbelief. If she'd been superstitious, she might have thought that their meeting was fate. How many times had she imagined a cat exactly like this one? It was art coming to life.

"I know." She stroked him. "You're right, of course. It doesn't make any difference to us if it's Christmas, does it? It's one day. Only one day. It will pass, the same as every other day."

There was a time when it would have made a difference. A time when she would have been decorating the house, and filling the kitchen with scents of cinnamon and spice, and peering anxiously through the window while she awaited visitors. Walter would have been preparing drinks, wearing the shirt he only wore at Thanksgiving and Christmas. He'd always been more sociable than her. *Welcome, welcome*, he'd say, opening his heart and the door of their home to whoever happened to visit. It was because of Walter that they'd never been short of cheerful company.

But that was a long time ago and many things had changed since then. For a start, there was no Walter.

She blinked several times, bringing herself back to the present.

"It's just us," she told the cats, "but that's the way we like it, isn't it? We're used to spending Christmas on our own. We'll take it hour by hour. It isn't as if we haven't had plenty of practice. And what a relief not to have to do all that baking and decorating, and I've never been good at wrapping presents. All that work for one day—" Her voice gave a little hitch and Crumpet yawned and looked up at her. "I'm fine, really. I'm fine."

Fine, apart from the fact that her house was currently under siege from the weather. The kitchen windows rattled in their frames, and snow swirled beyond the glass. The wind kicked angrily at the building, thumping against the doors and pounding the roof like a toddler in the throes of a tantrum. It screamed and howled, the noise so loud that for a moment she pictured the wind blowing the house clean away.

She reminded herself that the house had survived storms before and would no doubt survive this one. Not that she was one of those people who underestimated the force and power of nature. Far from it. She remembered a winter when tiles had been ripped from the roof by the wind, and another winter when they'd been snowed in for two full weeks. That one had been bad. Bad enough that Walter had questioned their decision to live outside the village, particularly as reaching civilisation would inevitably become more challenging as they aged. But it had also been magical to be snowed in as a family. The laughter and warmth of that time was lodged in her memory. It felt like a different life.

Walter had died before the isolation of the house could become a problem. In theory, it could be a problem for her in the future, but she didn't see it that way.

She had no need to reach the village and she didn't mind storms. They made her aware of how small she was in comparison. How fragile life was against the force of nature and how little control humans had, really. The storm would come when it wanted to come, and it would wreck what it wanted to wreck, and humans would be left to pick up the pieces. Fighting it was a waste of energy. All you could do in the end was protect yourself.

She'd lived long enough to know that not all storms were produced by a collision of cold, dry air with warm, moist air. A low-pressure system drawing air from the northeast. Sometimes a storm could be inside you. A collision of hope, fear and bitter regret.

The wind would huff and puff like something out of a children's story, but it wouldn't blow her house down. And life could huff and puff and threaten to knock her off her feet, but she would stay standing.

Her cats depended on her, and she wasn't going to let them down.

"Black cats are supposed to be lucky, and I have four of you so we'll be fine. We'll make it through Christmas the way we always do," she said. "And we won't be the only ones not travelling anywhere. Everyone with any sense will stay indoors. Only a fool would be on the road on a night like this."

2

Izzy

Izzy fidgeted, her gaze sliding to the windows. The storm was building with frightening speed, obscuring her view of the world outside.

This wasn't good. She needed to get out of here right now. It might already be too late. She loved her job, but not enough to die doing it.

"It's incredible. I never realised it could look like this. Never pictured it." The man gazed at his newly staged home in awe, oblivious to the snow that pirouetted and twirled beyond his windows. He saw only the visible evidence of his success. "I almost want to hold on to it myself. Great job. The place is going to sell for top dollar. Your company said you were the best and you are. And I'm not easy to please."

No kidding.

Izzy kept a polite smile pinned to her face. The man had complained, demanded and changed his mind a thousand times over the past few weeks. She'd been ready to dig a hole and bury him somewhere on the fifty-two acres of land that sur-

rounded his property. But it had also been a challenge, and she loved a challenge. Exceeding expectations gave her a buzz.

"I'm pleased you're pleased."

And she was relieved the job was finally done, not least because the weather was worsening by the second.

Behind her client, a wall of glass should have offered breathtaking views across the Green Mountain Range and the National Forest, but all that was visible was swirling snow. It was like standing in a snow globe after someone had shaken it hard.

Everyone with any sense had already headed home to snuggle safely in the warm. At this rate, Izzy was going to be the last person on the roads.

She eyed the snow uneasily. She was a confident driver, but she was also a sensible person, and she knew that driving in this wasn't sensible.

They'd been predicting this storm for days, which was why Izzy had tried to persuade the client to postpone the final staging of his property until the New Year, but he'd refused to budge. Like so many wealthy people, he wanted what he wanted, and he wanted it right now. And her company wanted to retain him as a client, which was why her boss had also dismissed her suggestion that they postpone until after the holidays.

It's just a little snow and wind, Izzy. You'll be fine.

So here she was, three days before Christmas, in a glass-fronted mansion that would have comfortably housed an entire basketball team and all their supporters, with a man who had more money than he knew what to do with and the storm of the century bearing down on them.

Maybe he could use some of his wealth to pay for her funeral, she thought, because at this rate she was going to need one.

On the positive side, if she was buried in a snowdrift then at least she would be spared the misery of spending Christmas alone in the soulless studio apartment she was renting.

Most of her belongings were still in boxes in the middle of the floor. Since picking up the keys, she'd been too busy to even hang a painting on the wall; not that she was going to admit that to anyone. It was ironic that she staged houses for a living and yet her own apartment had all the charm of the inside of a filing cabinet.

Still, she'd rather be alone in her bare, depressing apartment than here with him. There was something about him that made her uneasy. Yes, he was rich and would probably be considered handsome by some, but he was also a little creepy. Whichever room she was in, he was there, too. He kept looking at her, and every time she started to gather her things together, he engaged her in conversation.

Relieved that she wasn't alone with him, she glanced across the room to where her colleague Jason was carefully packing up his camera and the rest of the equipment. He wasn't technically her colleague because he was freelance, but they'd worked together on the last eight assignments and so she thought of him that way. And freelance or not, she was pleased he was here. He had a quiet confidence that allowed him to deal easily with the most demanding clients, a skill that was particularly useful on projects like the one they were finishing off today. In addition, his photos showed an artistic brilliance that had undoubtedly contributed to the fact that all the properties he photographed sold for more than their original valuation, and she was hoping that would be the case here.

He's expensive, but he's good, her boss had said, and her friend Chloe had muttered that she was sure he was worth every cent and that maybe he was on the wrong end of the camera.

It was true that Jason didn't seem to own a single item of clothing that wasn't fatally flattering, but that wasn't why Izzy liked him. She liked the way he stayed calm when everyone around him was panicking, and she liked the way he paid atten-

tion. This shoot was another example of that. Whichever room Izzy had been in, Jason had been there, too, and now she wondered if that had been intentional on his part—whether he'd also noticed the almost oppressive presence of their demanding client and Izzy's increasing discomfort.

He glanced in her direction and gave a quick nod to indicate he was ready.

The client stepped closer. "How about a Christmas drink to celebrate?"

"Thanks, but it's late and I really should get on the road." This time Izzy was firm. Yes, he was an important client, but it didn't mean she couldn't have boundaries. She'd done the work. As far as she was concerned, that was the end of it.

Unfortunately, he didn't seem to feel the same way.

"One little drink isn't going to hurt."

Jason slung one bag onto his shoulder. "Weather's closing in and we have to stop at the office on the way back." His tone was easy and friendly as he picked up the remaining bags in one hand. "I need to sort through these images and pick the best."

"You go ahead." The client gestured to the door. "Izzy will follow."

Jason didn't budge. "We came together. She's with me."

If only.

Izzy felt a momentary swoop of her stomach and then pulled herself together, horrified by the direction of her own thoughts. No way. She couldn't think of anyone more wrong for her than Jason.

And anyway, he wasn't being romantic or protective. *She's with me* was a statement of fact, that was all. They'd driven up from Boston in the same car the afternoon before and spent the night in a quaint local inn so that they could arrive at the client's house first thing this morning. They'd used his car because it was bigger, and Izzy had filled it with numerous boxes so that

she could make last-minute touches to the house before Jason took the photographs.

And thank goodness they *had* come together, Izzy thought. It gave her the excuse she needed to get out of here.

And then she caught a glimpse of something in the man's eyes, an emotion she recognised, and she realised in that moment that all he really wanted was company. The reason he didn't want her to leave wasn't because he had nefarious intentions, but because he didn't want to be alone. All that money and a big, empty house. But loneliness, she knew, burrowed inside you and chilled you from the inside out. It had nothing to do with where you were living.

She thought about the day she'd experienced the true meaning of loneliness. Her mother had died, and her life had changed shape. She'd had a complicated relationship with her father, and with her mother gone Izzy had found herself pushed out of a space where she'd once belonged. It was only after she'd lost her mother that she'd understood how much her mother had insulated Izzy from her father. Losing that buffer had a profound effect. She no longer felt like part of a family.

Thinking back, she realised that in all the many visits she'd made to this client, the place had either been empty, or he'd been alone. Normally, when she staged a house she had to remove myriad personal items. In this house there had been very few personal items. No photographs, no memorabilia, nothing to suggest this man had a life outside his work. Instead of decluttering, her role had been to inject warmth into a living space that was startlingly sterile.

Maybe that was the reason he now liked the place. She'd turned his huge, silent mausoleum of a house into an inviting home. There were even photographs, chosen by her. Prospective buyers would look at those photographs and picture

themselves raising a family here, celebrating with friends and enjoying all the outdoors had to offer.

He'd accepted those additions as a necessary part of the process, but when she'd offered to add Christmas decorations he'd refused.

She felt a stab of sympathy, thinking of him alone here. When they walked out and closed that enormous front door behind them, what would he do? Would he spend the holidays sitting in an echoey silence? Drink champagne by himself? Maybe she should tell him that being alone was fine. Better than fine. It could be fun. And, best of all, it was safe. When you were alone, you were the one in control. No one could make you feel bad about yourself. No one could hurt you.

She wanted to say something comforting, but what could she say? She knew nothing about his personal circumstances other than the fact he was wealthy. She'd read something about an acrimonious divorce, but she knew better than to trust what she read online.

She could feel her phone buzzing in the pocket of her jacket. She ignored it. It would be her boss, asking her how it was going for the millionth time. It would have gone faster if she hadn't kept having to stop and answer his calls.

"You've turned the place into a home." The client took a slow look round his newly staged living room. "I was planning to spend Christmas at my lodge in Aspen, but now I'm wondering if I might just stay here."

Aspen? How was he planning to get to Aspen? The snow was piling up and at this rate, they wouldn't make it to the end of his driveway.

Unless they started their journey in the next few minutes, they'd all be spending Christmas here. And although she sympathised with the man, her sympathy didn't extend to spending