

# ALL OUR BEAUTIFUL GOODBYES

A NOVEL



JULIANNE  
MACLEAN

*USA Today* bestselling author of *A Storm of Infinite Beauty*

ALL OUR  
BEAUTIFUL  
GOODBYES

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*For my mother, Noel*

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# PROLOGUE

On the night of May 8, 1946, a wild and terrible gale whipped up fifty-foot waves and swept a British merchant ship off course, thrusting her hard and fast toward the dangerous shores of Sable Island.

Crescent shaped, like a narrow sliver of the moon, Sable is remote and desolate—a burial ground for hundreds of wrecked ships, their wave-battered remains concealed beneath the ever-shifting shoals. From time to time—after a storm that leaves the island’s landscape forever changed—a long-forgotten vessel emerges like a skeleton from a shallow grave.

Yet Sable is also a place of rare beauty, an island of sand and grass where wild horses run free and a small, close-knit community of residents maintains two lighthouses, a telegraph station, and a lifesaving establishment to rescue shipwreck survivors from the Atlantic.

The British ship that fought those giant swells on the evening of May 8 was no stranger to turmoil at sea. She and her captain had served heroically in World War II. They’d patrolled trade routes in search of German U-boats and provided rescue support during one of the largest convoy battles of the war.

Why—exactly one year after VE Day celebrations—would wind and water thrust her so cruelly and undeservedly upon such treacherous shores? It’s a question that has no answer—because nature answers to no one. She simply does what she wants.

On the island, however, people fight for some semblance of order amid the chaos of their surroundings. To preserve life and provide an oasis of calm, they willingly go to battle with the waves.

# **PART ONE**

# **THE ISLAND**

# CHAPTER 1

## *Spring 1946* *Superintendent's residence, Sable Island*

The storm had been raging all night, violently, without mercy. At dawn, the wind continued to howl. Waves thundered and pounded onto the beaches.

Emma Clarkson, the superintendent's daughter, sat on a stool in front of the mirror at her vanity. Feet flat on the floor, knees pressed tightly together, she held a letter on her lap and ran the pad of her thumb over her name on the envelope. She felt a mixture of pride and dread, the emotions alternating, taking brief turns. It had been three days since the letter arrived on the supply ship *Argyle*, but she'd told no one of its contents. Not even her father.

Emma, an only child, was now a woman of twenty-one and fully cognizant of the fact that she'd always been doted upon. She and her father were a close pair because her mother had died in childbirth a year into the marriage, which had begun with the adventure of moving to Sable Island during her final trimester. They'd intended to stay five years and save enough money to return to Halifax on the mainland, where their children would receive a proper education. But the death of Emma's mother had been a terrible blow to her father, who had lost all interest in starting over in a new home. Instead, he chose to raise his precious daughter on the island.

Emma could count on one hand the number of times she'd visited the mainland. Three, to be precise. Everything about those trips was imprinted on her brain—the blaring car horns and engines, the crowds that gathered in the Public Gardens for concerts at the bandstand, and the mouthwatering aromas from downtown restaurants. For Emma, it was like traveling into the future or to another planet.

This was why she knew that she needed to cease stalling, go straight downstairs, and tell her father about the letter.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if he could be happy for her?

The windowpanes trembled in a furious gust of wind, and the roof timbers creaked.

Oh, what a dreamer she was.



The wind was still thrashing around the house when Emma finally entered her father's study. He was seated behind his desk under the light of a single lamp, focused on some documents in front of him. She waited until he turned a page before she cleared her throat.

His eyes lifted. "Emma. Sweetheart. What are you doing awake? The sun's barely up."

"Who could sleep in this storm?" she asked.

He removed his glasses, laid them on top of his papers, and sat back in his chair. "At least it's rain and not snow. Summer can't come soon enough."

"Agreed." She moved to the window and drew back the curtain to look out at the ashen sky, the driving rain, and the marram grass on the high dune, whipping wildly in the wind. All of it together mirrored the storm of dread in her belly. For a moment she wanted to slink back upstairs and return to bed, but she'd been putting this off long enough, so she turned and faced her father. "I need to talk to you about something."

He gazed up at her with uncertainty, then stood and switched off the desk lamp. "All right. Let's go sit in the great room."

Emma led the way and chose a spot on the sofa directly across from her father, who took a seat in his big brown leather armchair. She gave him a moment to settle in, then willed herself to speak assertively, because she knew what she wanted. It was time that he knew it too.

"A few months ago," she told him, "I sent an application to Dalhousie University for the psychology program, and I was accepted."

With a sudden look of confusion, he frowned. "I'm sorry?"

Emma pushed on. "I've been accepted to Dalhousie, and I want to go. It starts in September." She paused uneasily. "I'm hoping you'll help me with the tuition."

The wind gusted through the gutters, and the whole house shuddered. Glancing briefly at the ceiling, Emma worried that the roof might blow off at any second.

Meanwhile, her father was tapping his forefinger on the armrest of his chair and quietly mulling over the news she'd just delivered. Emma suspected he was most troubled by the fact that she had taken such action without discussing it with him first and had followed through behind his back. She felt an urgent need to explain.

"I didn't tell you because I knew you wouldn't like the idea and you'd worry about me leaving the island. You'd lose sleep for months about something that might not even happen if I wasn't accepted." She sat up a little straighter and raised her chin. "Besides that, you'd spend the whole time trying to talk me out of it, and I just wanted to see what would happen if I applied."

He spoke with dismay. "You've never said anything about wanting to go to university. Why wouldn't you share that with me?"

"I just told you why."

His expression grew strained. "But I thought you were happy here. This is your home. And you've had a better education than most."

"I am happy," she maintained. "I've loved growing up here, and you've been the best teacher I could ever ask for. But you know how much I enjoy learning . . . and you know that I've always been interested in animal behavior." She'd been studying the wild horses of Sable Island since she was ten years old. "I feel the same way about human behavior, but how can I learn about that when my world is so small? There are never more than forty people living here at a time, and we're spread out across miles. I'm tired of learning everything from books."

Her father scrutinized her expression. "How long have you been thinking about this?"

"About a year, I suppose," she confessed. "But with the war on, it seemed like a pipe dream. I couldn't possibly fathom leaving the island then. But the war is over now, and I want to get away."

Her father exhaled harshly, as if she had sucker punched him in the gut.

"Not from *you*," she quickly amended. "That's the hardest part of this, the one thing that holds me back because . . ."

Emma paused. How could she tell him that she feared he might become lonely or depressed?

"Because you mean everything to me," she said tactfully.

“I’d never want to hold you back,” he insisted. “But I don’t want you to make a mistake either.”

“How would it be a mistake?”

All at once, she felt contentious. It was no surprise that her father was against the idea—she knew he would be—and this was exactly what she’d been dreading since the letter arrived: An argument that would require her to stand up to him, to disregard his wishes, and to disobey him if he laid down the law. And ultimately to disappoint and hurt him.

He pointed at the window. “You have no idea about the world out there, Emma. It’s a dangerous place, even during peacetime. Especially for a young woman alone. You’ve lived a sheltered life here among good people, and you don’t know what evils exist beyond these shores.” His tone was growing increasingly intense.

Emma swallowed hard. “Now you’re just trying to scare me.”

“I’m trying to educate you,” he said, “as I’ve always done—and to help you appreciate the life you have here.”

“I do appreciate it,” she argued, “which is why this decision has been so difficult. And I won’t pretend that I’m not nervous about going away, because I am. What if I get there and I hate living in the city, or I fail in the program? I’ve never gone to a real school before.”

“You’re intelligent and disciplined,” he said. “You won’t fail in the classroom. That’s not what concerns me.”

“What is it, then?” she asked, feeling her confidence wane.

His cheeks reddened. “Like I said, it’s a scary world out there. I don’t want anything bad to happen to you. If you were hurt somehow, in any way, I’d never forgive myself for letting you go.”

There it was. The truth at last.

Emma’s heart softened, and she moved to kneel on the floor in front of him. She took both his hands in hers. “Nothing bad will happen, and I’ll write every day. When the *Argyle* arrives, you’ll have enough letters to keep you reading for a month.”

He looked down at their linked hands. “I don’t want to lose you.”

“I know,” she gently replied, “but I can’t stay here forever. I need to live my own life.”

“But you could have a good life *here*,” he persisted pleadingly. “I don’t know why you won’t consider Frank O’Reilly. He’s obviously in love with you.”

Frank was the chief wireless operator, who had taken up residence on Sable in '44. He was young and handsome, and every woman of every age on the island had developed a crush on him the day he'd leaped out of the surfboat. Even Emma had felt exhilarated at the sight of him. But after a few evenings in his presence during her father's Saturday socials, the infatuation had been short lived.

"I don't like his arrogance," she said.

"He's not arrogant," her father explained. "He only appears that way because he wants to impress you. And you said yourself that you're happy here. Wouldn't you like to start a family and raise your children on this little slice of heaven?"

Emma didn't want to get into an argument with her father about the so-called virtues of Sable Island. It was like banging her head against a wall.

She rose to her feet and returned to the sofa. "Please, Papa. I want to go to university. It's important to me."

Another powerful blast of wind from the north lashed against the house, and when her father offered no reply, Emma sighed in defeat.

"Maybe we should talk about this another time," she said, "after you've had a chance to think about it."

He took a breath to respond when the telephone rang in the kitchen. They were both startled by the interruption, and her father rose to answer it.

"Main Station," he said. He listened for a few seconds and frowned. "Where did you say? The west bar. How far out? I see." He glanced briefly at Emma. "Sound the alarm at all stations, and get the crews out there with the lifeboats. Every minute counts. I'll meet you at the boathouse."

He hung up the phone and crossed the kitchen toward his yellow slicker on the coat-tree by the door.

"There's a ship grounded on the west bar," he said.

"Oh, dear Lord." Emma was instantly engulfed by a sense of panic. "I'll get dressed and help Mrs. McKenna load the cart. We'll bring blankets and hot tea."

With a rush of adrenaline, she dashed up the stairs, leaving all thoughts of her own future behind.