

Happy-ever-after

by Sarah Mahfoudh

'I don't want sunbursts or marble halls. I just want you.'

Anne Shirley in Anne of the Island by L.M. Montgomery

The light flickered into existence on the horizon, and Emerald felt the familiar burn of desire ignite in her chest. It was exhilarating, and frightening and utterly unquenchable.

Quietly, so as not to wake her housemates, she eased the window up, scrambled onto the extension roof outside, and jumped down to the damp grass a few metres below. She set off at a run the moment her feet hit the ground, the glimmer of the distant firelight filling her eyes and her mind, and the allure of its promise racing through her blood like a drug. In the cold, starlit night, she crossed fields and streams, scrambled over hedgerows, and veered around trees.

The autumn wind whipped her hair back from her face so that it could whistle soft words in her ear: *'Not far, my love. Not far to happy-ever-after.'*

She smiled and pushed on.

But a cloud, watching from above chuckled. *'Nothing lasts forever,'* it rumbled.

'Everything changes.'

Fat, heavy raindrops tumbled from the sky. *'T-u-r-n-b-a-c-k,'* they warned as they drummed against her bare arms and face. *'T-u-r-n-b-a-c-k.'*

'You see,' said the diminishing cloud. *'Soon I will be a stream, not a cloud. Nothing is constant. No love will last forever.'*

'Shhh,' hissed the wind.

Emerald merely smiled and kept on running. She took no notice of the water that streamed down her back and plastered her hair to her face. Her heart was light and her soul sang for joy as she came ever closer to her one true love.

After a long while, she reached the bottom of a mountain, and there, way above, burned the fire that had called to her. She started to climb, but the mountain was steep and high, and her legs soon became weary. She climbed and climbed, and climbed some more, as the night grew thicker and a sharp frost crept across the rocky ground. But as hard as she climbed, the fire never seemed any closer. The longing in her heart started to weigh on her mind, and her elation turned to hopeless despair. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she sank to her knees, breathless and exhausted.

The night grew still: the wind had stopped its wishful whispering, and the grumbling cloud had poured itself onto the fields far below.

Up above, the sky sparkled with billions of crystal stars that chimed down at her, telling her she was nearly there. But they were too far away for her to hear. Emerald closed her eyes and wept.

The earth shuddered beneath her. *'Everything worth having must be worked for,'* it reminded her. *'Climb.'*

And after a moment's pause, she did. She climbed and climbed, and climbed some more, but she no longer dared to hope that she would find what she was looking for at the top.

At long last, she hauled herself over the peak of the mountain and there, just a few paces away, burning so brightly the whole mountain-top was stained orange in its glow, was the fire that had called to her from miles away. And all around couples danced to a secret melody that only they could hear.

The people were exquisite: the women's gowns dripped with jewels, whilst their long hair fell to their waists in glorious curls and their animated faces were flushed with the spirit of the party. The men, adorned in silk, were equally divine with their chiselled features and piercing eyes that flashed in the dancing light. Emerald's heart gave a bird-like flutter. She would meet her one true love tonight amongst these lustrous, enchanting dancing folk. How could she have ever doubted it? She could sense him, just beyond her sight, perhaps at the other side of the fire or in the feathery shadows that wavered at the edge of the light.

She took a step forwards into the flurry of dancers. None of them looked at her, but they twisted outwards gracefully, leaving an open space that led into the centre of the circle. She kept on walking, feeling the pull of her life-long dream; and then suddenly, unexpectedly, she was gathered up into an embrace, and before she knew what was happening, she was spinning around and around in time to an invisible orchestra. The music swelled as the mountain-top and the fire vanished to be replaced by the majestic marble arches and polished floor of a Fairy ballroom.

And now the radiant, laughing couples looked at her and beamed as she danced past, but she looked beyond them to the great hall and what she saw made her gasp, for the walls were covered from floor to ceiling in diamonds that shimmered and twinkled in the hypnotic candlelight.

It was all so delicious – so awe-inspiring – and it was some time before it occurred to Emerald that she had not yet looked at her dancing partner. But he, of course, was the reason she was here: it was the beating of his heart and the fire of his passion that had drawn her to this place. Her pulse quickened and her legs trembled. Slowly, she turned her head to look at her one true love and her breath caught in her throat. He was the most divine being she had ever seen: his high cheekbones, his glistening eyes, his wonderfully bowed lips – everything about him was perfect, and yet ... And yet, he was not the one. She did not love him.

Instantly, the room went dark, the music stopped, and Emerald stumbled forwards as the weight of her dancing partner's body was ripped away. She fell to the ground, lost in an impenetrable darkness. There was not a sound; not a gust of wind or a trickle of water. She turned her face upwards, but there were no stars. Beneath her, she could feel the jagged rock of the mountain.

How had it all gone so wrong? How could she have lost everything in just that one glance?

Perhaps there really was no such thing as true love, she thought miserably as she curled into a ball and closed her eyes against the empty blackness. Perhaps she had spent her life wishing for a fairy tale that would never come true. Well, at least she knew now and she would never again waste time wishing and hoping.

She did not know how much time passed in that desolate nowhere, but when the soft thud of footsteps brought her back to her senses, she opened her eyes to find that the world had reappeared in a roseate haze. She was at the edge of a wood that looked out over a lush, green valley. She knew this place well. On the other side of the trees was the dreary little village where she woke up every day and got dressed for work, where she cooked dinner and passed her evenings in front of the telly. It was as far from fairyland and happy-ever-after as anywhere, and yet, as she watched the burning sky on the horizon turn from pink to red to fiery orange, her heart skipped (just once) at the possibility of a new day.

But no: she didn't want to hope anymore, so she turned away just as the sun peeped its head up over the edge of the world and sunlight burst across the valley. She refused to let herself be comforted by the warmth of the sunrise on her back. She stepped towards the

shade of the trees, keen to be swallowed up in the woody gloom, but as she did so another figure stepped out into the light.

'Seb,' she breathed.

Normal, ordinary, good-hearted Seb, who she had known ever since school, grinned at her and her heart leapt.

'Emerald, what are you doing here?'

At the sound of his voice, Emerald found herself smiling. She raised her hand to her mouth, needing to feel the curl of her lips to believe that it was true. And of course, it was! Where the glorious valley and dazzling sunrise had failed to bring her hope, one utterance from Seb had brought the wonder of life flooding back to her. She gazed at him, struck dumb by this revelation, and as she looked into his eyes, her soul stretched its wings and floated up from the depths. Blissful warmth flooded through her and she felt the colour rise in her cheeks. Seb looked back at her with a bemused smile, waiting for her to reply, but she couldn't speak or move; she simply stood and stared and wondered why she had never before noticed how dazzling his smile was or how his eyes glittered with a disarming mischief or how indescribably, irrationally happy he made her feel.

She walked towards him and held out her hands, and he took them without hesitation, looking straight into her eyes. Emerald beamed inside and out.

A light breeze flittered past her ear. *'Well done, my love,'* it sighed. *'I think you've found your happy-ever-after.'*