

THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR—BOOK 4

*if only*

FOREVER

SOPHIE LOVE

The Inn at Sunset Harbor

Sophie Love

**If Only Forever**

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

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## **Love S.**

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"35 year old Emily Mitchell has fled her job, apartment and ex-boyfriend in New York City for her father's historic, abandoned home on the coast of Maine, needing a change in her life and determined to make it a B&B. She had never expected, though, that her relationship with its caretaker, Daniel, would turn her life on its head. Emily is still reeling from Daniel's proposal. As all seems to finally fall into place in her life, she looks forward to an exciting engagement year ahead, from shopping for a venue and a wedding dress, to creating her invite list, to setting a date. But all does not goes as planned. The endless events of the engagement year add more stress than joy, putting pressure on their relationship as they are forced to make hard choices. Adjusting to life as parents doesn't make it any easier, as Chantelle runs into problems at school and as a custody battle looms over them. As Christmas and New Years approach, the stress is only compounded. Meanwhile, as the B&B adds new guests and staff and as they find more priceless antiques, Emily discovers a shocking secret that just may bring her one step closer to finding her father. Will she and Daniel get married? Or will the stress of the engagement break them apart forever?"

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# **Sophie Love**

## **If Only Forever**

**BOOKS BY SOPHIE LOVE**

**THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR**

**FOR NOW AND FOREVER (Book #1)**

**FOREVER AND FOR ALWAYS (Book #2)**

**FOREVER, WITH YOU (Book #3)**

**IF ONLY FOREVER (Book #4)**

**FOREVER AND A DAY (Book #5)**

## CHAPTER ONE

The ring was more beautiful than Emily remembered. A twisting band of silver was interwoven with blue that reminded her of the ocean. A family of pearls nestled together. It was gorgeous, unique, and so utterly perfect.

A snowflake landed on Emily's hand, bringing her back to the moment. She glanced at Daniel, still down on one knee on the beach, black waves crashing behind him, stars twinkling above him, sand clinging to his pant legs. Tears glittered in his eyes and Emily felt her own eyes well up in response. She couldn't move, couldn't stand. The only thing she wanted to do was hold Daniel and never let go.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his body close to hers, kissing the exposed flesh on his neck over and over again and then winding her fingers into his hair.

"I'm so in love with you," she whispered.

"I love you more than words can say," Daniel replied, breathlessly. Then, with a small laugh, he added, "You're shivering."

Emily giggled too, feeling girlish, carefree. "That would be the snow," she said.

They finally pulled apart. Daniel grasped Emily's hand and pulled her to standing.

"Should we head back?" he asked.

Emily thought of the Thanksgiving party taking place in her B&B at this very moment. Practically the whole town was congregated there; surely her and Daniel's absence would have been noted by now. But she didn't want to go back. Not yet. She wanted to stay here with Daniel in this perfect moment for as long as possible.

Emily shook her head and rubbed the goose pimples on her arms. "Can't we stay here a bit longer?"

Daniel smiled tenderly. "Of course." He wrapped her in his arms. Together they rocked back and forth, as though dancing to music only they could hear.

"I can't wait to tell Chantelle," Daniel murmured after a while.

At the mention of Daniel's daughter, Emily felt a sudden surge of excitement. The little girl would be so happy for them. Suddenly, the idea of getting back to the B&B seemed much more appealing. Emily desperately wanted to see Chantelle's face when they broke the news. It would be like a fairytale ending for the child who'd had such a terrible start in life.

"Come on, let's head back," Emily said, moving out of the embrace and taking both of Daniel's hands in hers.

"You sure?" he asked.

She nodded. Breaking the news of their engagement to Chantelle was now Emily's greatest desire. She was feeling suddenly confident and proud, and she wanted the whole world to know it. She wanted to stand on the widow's walk of her inn and shout the news across town so everybody could hear for miles around.

But as they strolled along the beach in the direction of the B&B, Emily felt her nerves begin to creep up on her. Making announcements wasn't exactly her favorite thing to do, and there would surely be no way to sneak in without people questioning their absence. That's not even to mention the ring. It was hardly inconspicuous. Anyone with eyes could see it sparkle from a mile away.

Emily couldn't help but imagine all of those faces gazing at her, some with supportive expressions but others with judgmental ones. Right now, their engagement belonged to her and Daniel and no one else. It was a private thing, a shared state of bliss. But as soon as they broke the news to others they would be inviting opinions into that sacred space.

Perhaps it wouldn't be like that at all, Emily thought as she strolled. Maybe the townsfolk would have been liberal with the mimosas in their absence and would all be so engrossed with their drinking, dancing, and merriment that they wouldn't even notice them return.

They reached the small path that led from the beach up to the street where they lived. Emily climbed up the steep bank first, Daniel following. As she emerged through the trees onto the sidewalk, she could see the lights of the inn glowing and hear the sounds of music and laughter floating through the air. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach.

“Ready?” Daniel asked as he drew up beside her.

Emily took a deep breath. She was nervous but also felt more confident than ever, like she could take on the world.

Hand in hand, they slowly walked along the drive, past the carriage house that was once Daniel’s home, then up the porch steps and in through the front door of the Inn at Sunset Harbor. Immediately, warmth and brightness enveloped them. The comforting smells of Thanksgiving foods – turkey, cranberries, corn, pumpkin pie – permeated the air. Emily instantly felt the love ebbing through the inn.

Just then, a laughing Serena burst out of the dining room and into the hallway. When she saw Daniel and Emily standing there, she smiled at them through her ruby red-painted lips. She was blushing a little, and Emily wondered if it had something to do with an evening of reciprocated flirting with Owen the piano player.

“Oh hey,” Serena said, catching Emily’s eye. “I was wondering where you guys had gone off to.”

Emily and Daniel looked at each other coyly. Caught red-handed.

Emily found that she was suddenly tongue-tied, like a naughty child who must own up to stealing cookies from the jar. She looked at Daniel for help, but he looked worse than her, with a deer-in-the-headlights expression on his face.

Serena frowned. Then she narrowed her eyes suspiciously and a small smirk appeared on her lips. Clearly she could tell they’d been up to something.

“Hmm,” she said, pacing up to them like a detective. “Snow in your hair. Sand on your jeans. My guess is you’ve been to the beach.” She tapped her chin. “But why?” She paused for a moment, and then a look of realization flickered into her eyes. Gasping, she grabbed Emily’s left hand, searching for confirmation for the thought that had hit her. At the sight of the ring, her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open.

“Oh. My. God! You’re engaged!”

Emily felt the heat rising into her cheeks. It was the first time she’d heard someone say the word “engaged” in relation to her and it felt so bizarre. All those years of wishing for it and dreaming about it, and she was finally here, in that abstract state of “engagement.”

She nodded quickly. Serena squealed and pulled them both into a clumsy embrace, elbows and arms flailing.

“Am I the first to know?” Serena asked when she let them go, the excitement in her tone growing.

“Yes,” Daniel confirmed. “But can you get Chantelle? I want her to know before the rest of them.”

“Of course!” Serena exclaimed.

With misted-over eyes, she took one last adoring look at Emily’s ring before bounding away, a giddy spring in her step. Emily let out a noise that was somewhere between a nervous giggle and an embarrassed groan.

Daniel squeezed her hand reassuringly. It felt as though he was simultaneously congratulating her for having survived one person’s reaction while boosting her in anticipation of the next reveal, the one that was far more important.

Emily took a deep breath. Her heart was racing a mile a minute. This was it. The big moment.

The volume of the party grew louder as the dining room door opened a crack. Then Chantelle’s face appeared, peeping timidly around it. Emily heard Serena’s voice from the other side, encouraging Chantelle into the hallway.

“Go on, it’s nothing to worry about!”

Chantelle stepped fully out of the room and Serena closed the door after her, muffling the sound of the party-goers’ merriment once more. Emily found the quietness suddenly stifling.

At one end of the corridor stood Chantelle, looking terrified. At the other end stood Emily and Daniel, their nerves just as palpable. Emily beckoned to the child and Chantelle scurried toward them.

“Am I in trouble?” she said, her little voice quivering. “Serena said you needed to speak to me.”

“Goodness, no!” Emily cried. She reached for Chantelle and pulled her into a bear hug. “You’re not in trouble at all!” She stroked Chantelle’s soft, blond hair. “It was just that Daddy and I want to tell you something. Nothing bad.”

Chantelle pulled out of the embrace and frowned up at Emily, her blue eyes betraying her skepticism. She was only seven years old but had already learned to be suspicious and distrustful of adults.

“Are you sending me back to Tennessee?” Chantelle said boldly, tipping her chin up with fake nonchalance.

“No!” Daniel exclaimed, shaking his head. If it hadn’t been such a sad statement to make, it would have been comical. Seeking to end Chantelle’s sense of doom as immediately as possible, Daniel crouched down so he was eye level with his daughter, took both her hands in his, and then, with a large breath, exclaimed, “Emily and I are getting married.”

There was a moment of hesitation as Chantelle took in the news. Then the fear melted from her expression and her eyes widened with astonishment. A huge grin spread across her face.

“Really?” she squealed, gazing at them in wonder.

“Yes, really,” Emily said.

She held out her hand so Chantelle could see the ring. Chantelle’s eyes grew even wider as she stared as though in disbelief at the beautiful ring sparkling on Emily’s finger. Chantelle held Emily’s hand tightly.

“I thought...” she stammered. “I thought you were getting rid of me. But actually, it came true.”

“What came true?” Emily asked curiously.

“My Thanksgiving wish,” Chantelle said. She was still clutching Emily’s hand, and her grip tightened. “I wished that you would get married so that we could be a family forever.”

At the sound of Chantelle’s earnest revelation, a lump formed in Emily’s throat. She caught Daniel’s eye. By the expression on his face she could tell that his heart was melting just as much as hers was.

In that moment, Emily felt more blessed than ever before in her life. Somehow the stars had aligned and sent her Daniel to be loved by and Chantelle to be humbled by. Everything felt right.

“Can I be the one to tell everyone?” Chantelle asked suddenly.

“You mean everyone in there?” Emily asked, pointing toward the dining room door from where the sounds of laughter and chatter emanated.

“Uh-huh. Is that okay, or did you want to make the announcement yourself?”

“Please go ahead!” Emily exclaimed, relieved that she wouldn’t have to be the one to do it.

“Can I do it right now this second?” Chantelle asked, jumping up and down.

Emily grinned. Chantelle’s reaction had made her more than ready for this moment. Seeing her excitement and joy had nullified Emily’s nerves. As long as Chantelle was happy, then other people’s reactions didn’t matter as much!

“Right now this second,” Emily repeated.

On hearing Emily’s affirmation, Chantelle squealed and rushed off down the corridor. She was so quick, Daniel and Emily had to hop-skip to keep up with her. Then she burst into the dining room so abruptly that everyone turned around in surprise at the sudden intrusion. At the top of her lungs, Chantelle shouted:

“They’re getting married! They’re getting married!”

Standing at the threshold of the door, Emily and Daniel waited through the seconds of shock as people acknowledged Chantelle's shouting.

Then they watched the surprised expressions appear on the faces of their friends and neighbors: from Cynthia's exaggerated gasp, to the flutter of Vanessa's hand to her mouth.

People started to burst into huge grins. Yvonne and Kieran, Suzanna and Wesley, all the people they had grown to love and call friends began to clap.

"Congratulations!" Yvonne cried, the first to run up to Emily and embrace her.

Kieran was just behind. He shook Daniel's hand, then hugged Emily once Yvonne had let her go. Everyone took it in turns, coming up to Daniel and Emily with hugs and kisses, well wishes and exclamations of joy. Emily felt the love of her community surround her. She'd never felt so supported. What on earth had she been worrying about?

"We need to toast the happy couple," Derek Hansen announced in his strong, mayoral voice.

People began filling their glasses with champagne. A glass was thrust into Emily's hand. Beside her, Serena filled a champagne flute with cola so Chantelle could join in. Emily found her mind flitting all over the place, she was so overwhelmed with a sense of euphoria. It felt like she was in a dream.

Then everyone's glasses were high in the air, the light from the chandelier making a thousand spots of light dance across the walls, floor, and ceiling.

"To Emily and Daniel," Mayor Hansen called out. Then to Daniel, he added, "To finding one's soul mate," and to Emily, "And to following one's dream."

Everyone cheered and clinked glasses as Emily wiped the tears of joy from her eyes.

It was the best Thanksgiving she had ever had.

\*

The party stretched on well into the night. It was filled with friendship and joy, and Emily was happier than she'd ever thought possible, not to mention thankful. But finally the party wound down, the guests trickled out into the crisp night, and a hush fell over the inn.

Even when she and Daniel had turned in for bed, Emily felt herself still buzzing with energy. Her head was swimming, and she tossed and turned, unable to shut it down.

"Can't sleep?" Daniel said, half his face concealed by the fluffy pillow it rested upon. Then he grinned. "Me neither."

Emily turned to face him. She ran her fingers across his bare, muscular chest. "I can't stop thinking about the future," she said. "I'm so excited."

Daniel reached out and stroked Emily's cheek. "I know something that might take your mind off things," he said. Then he pressed his lips to hers.

Emily sunk into the kiss, feeling all her thoughts melt away as her body was completely taken over with sensation. She pulled Daniel close to her, feeling his heart beating against her own. Daniel always ignited a fiery passion within her but what she felt now was beyond anything she'd ever felt before.

Just then, their bedroom door flew open. A shard of light from the corridor outside burst into the room like a spotlight. Emily and Daniel sprang apart.

Standing in the doorway was Chantelle.

"I can't sleep!" she declared, running in.

Emily laughed. "Well, that makes all of us, then," she said.

Chantelle leapt into the bed with Emily and Daniel, snuggling right in between them. Emily couldn't help but laugh. Chantelle was the only thing that could interrupt her and Daniel's lovemaking without frustrating her.

“When you and Daddy are married, will that mean you’re my mommy forever?” Chantelle asked.

Emily nodded. But then she wondered. She and Daniel had been speaking to their friend Richard, who was a family attorney, about whether they could officially adopt Chantelle. Would being married strengthen their case against Chantelle’s birth mother? Sheila was a drug user with no fixed abode, two things that already worked in their favor. Would their marriage help her adopt Chantelle?

She looked at Daniel and Chantelle, both now slipping into slumber. The sight overjoyed Emily. In that moment, she doubled her resolve to look into legal proceedings. The sooner the better. She wanted them to be a proper family more than anything she’d ever wanted in the world. With the ring sparkling on her finger, she felt closer than ever to making that dream a reality.

## CHAPTER TWO

Emily woke the morning after Thanksgiving to a feeling of elation. She had never felt so happy. The beautiful winter sunshine was streaming in through the lace curtains, adding to her already amazed, excited state. After a brief second of doubt, Emily concluded that she wasn't dreaming; Daniel had indeed proposed, and they were really getting married.

Suddenly aware of all the things she had to do, she leapt out of bed. She had people to call! How had she forgotten to call Jayne and Amy to break the news? And what about her mom? She'd been so wrapped up in the moment, in her own joy and the celebration of her friends, it hadn't even crossed her mind.

She quickly showered and dressed, then ran down to the porch with her cell phone. Water from her still-wet hair dripped onto her shirt as she scrolled through her contacts. Her thumb hovered over her mom's number and began to tremble. She just couldn't find the courage to dial it. She knew her mom wouldn't give her the sort of response she wanted; she'd been suspicious about Chantelle and would assume that Daniel was only marrying Emily to turn her into a mother to his kid. So she decided to test the water with Jayne. Her best friend always told it to her straight, but it never came with the same air of disappointment her mom exuded.

She dialed Jayne's cell and listened to the ring tone. Then the call connected.

"Em!" Jayne cried. "You're on speaker."

Emily paused. "Why am I on speaker?"

"We're in the conference room. Me and Ames."

"Hi, Emily!" Amy called brightly. "Is this about the job offer?"

It took Emily a moment to work out what they were talking about. The candle business that Amy had started from her bedroom at college was, over a decade later, suddenly flourishing. She'd employed Jayne and had been trying so hard to get Emily into the fold. Neither could really understand why Emily would want to live in a small town rather than New York, why she'd want to run an inn instead of work in a swanky office with her two best friends, and they certainly couldn't work out why she'd want to take on another man's child (a man with a *beard* no less!) without any reassurance that he'd give her her own children one day.

"Actually no," Emily said. "It's about..." She faltered, suddenly losing her resolve. Then she checked herself. She had nothing to be ashamed of. Even if her life was going in a different trajectory to her best friends', it was still valid; her choices were still her own and they should be respected. "Daniel and I are getting married."

There was a moment of silence, followed by shrill screaming. Emily winced. She could imagine her friends with their perfectly manicured nails, their moisturized skin that smelled of rose and camellia, their shiny hair flailing as they jumped up and down in their seats.

Through the noise, Emily made out Jayne shouting, "Oh my god!" and Amy shouting, "Congratulations!"

She let out a sigh of relief. Her friends were on board. Another hurdle had been overcome.

The incomprehensible screeching finally died down.

"He hasn't knocked you up, has he?" Jayne asked, as inappropriate as ever.

"No!" Emily cried, laughing.

"Jayne, shut up," Amy scolded. "Tell us everything. How did he do it? What's the ring like?"

Emily recounted the story of the beach, of the declarations of love in the snow, of the gorgeous pearl ring. Her friends cooed at all the right moments. Emily could tell they were ecstatic for her.

"Are you taking his name?" Jayne probed further. "Or double barreling? Mitchell Morey is a bit of a mouthful. Or would it be Morey Mitchell? Emily Jane Morey Mitchell. Hmm. I don't know if

I like it. Maybe you should stick with your own name, you know? It's the strong, empowered, feminist thing to do, after all."

Emily's mind whirled as Jayne spoke in her characteristically fast over-caffeinated way, barely pausing to give her time to answer any of the questions.

"We're going to be your bridesmaids, right?" Jayne finished, in her typically blunt, straight-talking way.

"I haven't thought about it yet," Emily admitted. Jayne and Amy may indeed be her oldest friends, but she had made so many more since moving to Sunset Harbor; Serena, Yvonne, Suzanna, Karen, Cynthia. And what about Chantelle? It was important to Emily that she played a pivotal role in the whole thing.

"Well, where's the venue, then?" Jayne asked, sounding a little grumpy that Emily was even considering other people as her bridesmaids.

"I don't know that yet either," Emily said.

It suddenly hit her how enormous the task ahead of her was. There was so much to organize. So much to pay for. She suddenly felt very overwhelmed by the whole thing.

"Do you think you'll have a big wedding or small one?" Amy asked. Her questions were less loaded than Jayne's but she still had an air of judgment about her. Emily wondered whether Amy was still upset about her own failed engagement to Fraser. Maybe she resented Emily for having a ring and fiancé when she herself had lost both.

"We haven't worked out any of the details yet," Emily said. "It's brand new."

"But you've been dreaming about this for years," Amy added.

Emily frowned. Marriage, yes. That had been something she'd wanted for a long time. But she'd never pictured the way her life would go. The love she had with Daniel was unique and unexpected. Their wedding ought to be the same. She needed to rethink everything to make it perfect for them, for this specific relationship, this life.

"Can you at least tell us the date?" Jayne asked. "Our calendar is packed."

Emily stammered. "I don't know."

"Just the month will do for now," Jayne pressed.

"I don't know that either."

Jayne sighed with exasperation. "What about the *year*?"

Emily grew frustrated. "I don't know!" she cried. "I haven't worked any of this out yet!"

Silence fell. Emily could just imagine the scene: her friends exchanging a glance, sitting in leather office chairs at a huge glass table, the sound of her outburst emanating from the phone in between them and echoing around the vast conference room. She cringed with embarrassment.

Jayne broke the silence. "Well, just make sure it doesn't turn into one of those engagements that goes on forever," she said in a matter-of-fact way. "You know what some men are like; it's like they didn't realize that once they proposed you'd be expecting an actual *wedding*. They do the whole overblown engagement thing and then once they've lured you in with a fancy ring they think they can rest on their laurels and never actually sign on the dotted line."

"It's not like that," Emily said tersely.

"Sure," Jayne said flippantly. "But to be certain, you should tie him down to an actual date. If it looks like he's going to drag the engagement out, run."

Emily squeezed her hand into a fist. She knew she shouldn't let Jayne – a commitment-phobe who'd never even had a proper long-term relationship – dictate the way she ought to feel about the situation, but her friend had a talent for putting doubt into her mind. As ridiculous as they were, Emily could already tell she was going to ruminate on Jayne's words for days to come.

"I have an idea," Amy broke in, playing the diplomat. "Why don't we come up to toast you? Have a visit? Help you plan a few things?"

Despite her irritation with Jayne, Emily liked the idea of her friends coming to stay and getting involved with the wedding preparations. Once they were here, on her turf and in her domain, they'd be able to see the love she and Daniel shared with their own eyes. They'd see how happy she was and start being a little bit more supportive.

"That would be really great actually," Emily said.

They found a date that worked for everyone and Emily ended the call. But thanks to Jayne, her head was swimming and the flame of excitement inside of her dulled just a little. Her feelings were compounded by the fact she still needed to make the dreaded call to her mom, which would certainly go less well. She'd tried to invite her mom to Thanksgiving but the woman had acted like it was an insult. Nothing Emily did was ever good enough for Patricia Mitchell. If she'd felt grilled by Amy and Jayne, she would feel downright set upon by her mom.

And that was just *her* family! When she added Daniel's into the mix, her niggling fears intensified. Why did the rest of the world have to exist? Everything in Sunset Harbor felt perfect for Emily. But outside there were disapproving friends and problematic moms. There were absent fathers.

For the first time since the proposal, Emily thought of her dad, who'd been missing for twenty years. She'd recently discovered a stash of letters in the home that proved he was still alive. Then Trevor Mann, her next door neighbor, had confirmed seeing Roy at the house just a few years earlier. Her dad was alive, yet even with that knowledge nothing had changed. Emily still had no way of contacting him. The chances of him being there to walk her down the aisle were practically nonexistent.

Emily felt her emotions crowding in on her, threatening to extinguish the joy she'd been feeling. She looked down at the screen of her cell phone, where she'd selected her mom's number but hadn't yet plucked up the courage to dial it.

Before Emily had the chance to take the plunge and call her mom, she heard the sound of footsteps coming from the stairs behind her. She spun around and saw Daniel and Chantelle trotting down toward her. Daniel had dressed the little girl in one of her gorgeous vintage outfits – a rust-colored corduroy pinafore dress with a black-and-white floral print cardigan and matching tights. She looked adorable. He himself was in his usual scruffy jeans and shirt, his dark hair shaggy, his stubble framing his strong jawline.

"We wanted to go out for breakfast," Daniel said. "Do something special. A celebration breakfast."

Emily stashed her cell phone back in her pocket. "Great idea."

Saved by the bell. The call to her mom would have to wait. But Emily knew she wouldn't be able to put it off forever. Sooner or later she would be on the receiving end of the sharp tongue of Patricia Mitchell.

\*

The smell of syrup permeated the warm air in Joe's Diner. The family slid into one of the red plastic booths, noticing the glances and whispers as they did so.

"Everyone already knows," Emily said in a hushed voice to Daniel.

He rolled his eyes. "Of course they do." He added, sarcastically, "In fact, I'm surprised it took so long. We broke the news a whole half day ago, after all, and I'm sure it only takes Cynthia Jones an hour or two to cycle through town and spread her latest bit of gossip."

Chantelle giggled.

At least the whispers and glances were cheery ones, Emily thought. Everyone seemed pleased for them. But Emily felt a little embarrassed to be the center of attention. It wasn't every day you walked into a waffle house and made every head turn. Her own mind was still swimming with

questions following her call with Amy and Jayne and she wondered if now would be an appropriate time to broach some of them with Daniel.

Gray-haired Joe came over to the table, holding his pad in his wizened hands.

“I hear congratulations are in order,” he said, smiling, clapping Daniel on the back. “When’s the big day?”

Emily watched Daniel falter. He seemed just as bemused as she felt. Everyone wanted answers to questions they hadn’t even asked themselves.

“Not sure yet,” Daniel stammered. “We haven’t ironed out any of the specifics.”

They ordered their waffles and pancakes and once Joe had left in order to prepare their breakfasts for them, Emily got her nerve up to ask Daniel some questions.

“When do you think we should set a date for?” Emily asked.

Daniel looked at her with wide eyes. “Oh. I don’t know. You want to do that already?”

Jayne’s warning echoed in Emily’s mind. “We don’t need to fix the specific date but are we thinking of months or next year? Do you want a summer wedding? Or fall, since we are in Maine?”

She smiled but it felt strained. By the look on Daniel’s face, she could tell he hadn’t even thought that far ahead.

“I need to think about it,” he said noncommittally.

“I want a summer wedding,” Chantelle said. “By the harbor. With Daddy’s boat.”

“Think about what?” Emily said, ignoring Chantelle and focusing on Daniel. “There are only four options. Sunshine, blustery wind, snowfall, or warm breezes. Which one do you prefer?”

Daniel looked a little taken aback by Emily’s somewhat snappy tone. Chantelle, too, seemed confused.

“I don’t know,” Daniel stammered. “There are pros and cons to all of them.”

Emily felt her emotions swirling inside of her. Was Jayne right? Had Daniel proposed without even thinking about the fact that there was supposed to be a wedding at the end of it?

“Have you told anyone?” Emily probed further.

Creases of frustration appeared across Daniel’s forehead. “It’s been less than twenty-four hours,” he stated plainly, hiding the irritation Emily knew she’d stoked in him. Between his teeth he added, “Can’t we just enjoy the moment?”

Chantelle looked from Emily to Daniel with concern in her eyes. It wasn’t often they bickered and the sight clearly alarmed her.

Seeing the little girl looking worried struck a chord inside Emily. Whatever concerns she herself may have, it wasn’t fair to let Chantelle get caught up in them. This matter was for her and Daniel to resolve.

“You’re right,” Emily said, exhaling.

She reached out for Chantelle and took her hand for reassurance. Just then, Joe arrived with stacks of pancakes. Everyone began to eat silently.

Emily felt frustrated with herself for letting Jayne’s and Amy’s words ruin her high. It wasn’t fair. Just yesterday she’d been on cloud nine.

“Will you let Bailey be the flower girl?” Chantelle asked. “And me be a bridesmaid?”

“We don’t know yet,” Emily explained, keeping her emotions in check.

“But I want to walk down the aisle with you,” Chantelle added. “There will be an aisle, won’t there? Are you getting married in a church?” The little girl rummaged in her backpack and pulled out a pink notepad and sparkly pen. “Let’s write a list,” she said.

Despite her underlying anguish, Emily couldn’t help but feel cheered by the sight of Chantelle in organizer mode. She always looked so serious, so grown up and beyond her years.

“The first thing you need to arrange is the venue,” Chantelle said in a very efficient voice that made Emily picture her running the inn one day.

“You’re right,” Emily said, looking at Daniel. “Let’s think about the venue first then work from there.” She felt determined not to let her high be ruined. “Let’s not rush any decisions. “

For the first time since she’d pestered him for answers, Daniel seemed to relax. The frown lines on his forehead disappeared. Emily felt relieved.

Out the window of the diner, Emily could see that a tree was being raised in the center of town. In all the excitement she’d completely forgotten about the town Christmas tree; it was raised the day after Thanksgiving every year. She’d gone to watch it as a child whenever the family had been in Sunset Harbor for a winter vacation. She recalled that there was also an annual tree lighting that took place in the evening.

“We should go and see the tree being lit tonight,” Emily said.

Chantelle looked up from her notepad, which was now filled with a long bullet point list written in her scrawling handwriting. “Can we?” She looked excited.

“Of course,” Emily said. “But first we should get our own tree. If the town has one, the inn ought to have one as well. What do you think about that, Chantelle?”

Emily felt her own excitement grow as she realized that the inn would accommodate an enormous Christmas tree. As a child their father had only ever gotten a small one for the living room, since they were only ever vacationing in the house. But now that it was her home she could put an enormous ten-foot tree in the foyer. Maybe even fifteen-foot! She and Chantelle could decorate it together, using a stepladder to reach the top branches. The thought filled her with childish anticipation.

“Can we, Daddy?” Chantelle asked Daniel, who was sitting rather quietly as he munched on his pancakes. “Can we get a Christmas tree?”

Daniel nodded. “Sure.”

“And then go to the tree lighting in town?”

“Uh-huh.”

Emily frowned, wondering what Daniel was thinking, why the thought of such a delightful family outing wasn’t filling him with joy like it did her and Chantelle. Daniel was as much a mystery to her as ever, even though she now had a ring on her finger and was more than ready to commit to him forever. She wondered if she’d ever really know what was going on in his head, or if even, when she became Mrs. Daniel Morey, she’d still be left wondering.

## CHAPTER THREE

Dory's Christmas Tree Farm was a short drive away on the outskirts of Sunset Harbor. The family drove together in Daniel's rusty red pickup truck. There were still patches of Thanksgiving Day's snow on the banks, and as they drove past Emily touched the ring on her finger, remembering the snow that had fallen around her as Daniel proposed.

They pulled up into the makeshift parking lot and all hopped out of the truck. There were many families here; clearly everyone had the same idea. Parents milled around while their children ran excitedly about the place, threading through the lines of trees.

Instead of Dory, it was a young girl on the cusp of teenagehood who greeted them. She introduced herself as Grace, Dory's daughter, and she had the same wispy blond hair as Chantelle. She was wearing a fanny pack stuffed with dollar bills and a paper pad to write receipts.

"These are the trees ready for harvest," she said, smiling confidently, gesturing out to the field of pines. "They've all been growing for about seven to nine years." She grinned down at Chantelle. "So they're about your age, am I right?"

Chantelle nodded shyly.

"Once you find the tree you like," Grace continued, "cut it down and take it to the loading area. My dad will ride you and the tree back in the wagon to the baler, wrap it all up, and then you can pay me. We also sell hot chocolate and toasted chestnuts if you want something to keep you warm while you walk."

Emily bought them each a hot chocolate in a Styrofoam cup and a bag of chestnuts to share, and then they headed for the fields. Chantelle rushed ahead, more excited than Emily had ever seen her.

The smell of pine was powerful, awakening that Christmas feeling inside of Emily. She was excited by the prospect of her first Christmas with Daniel and Chantelle, with her family beside the hearth. It would be the first of many.

She and Daniel walked hand in hand, silently trailing behind Chantelle. Then Emily leaned into Daniel.

"How old do you think Grace is?" she asked.

"Eleven, twelve," Daniel guessed. "Why?"

"No reason," Emily replied. "She just reminds me of Chantelle. Made me think about what she'll be like as she gets older."

Up ahead, Chantelle ran along the paths between the trees, stopping to assess their height, the density of their branches, and the lushness of their color before moving on to the next one. Emily could easily imagine her as an older child, clipboard in hand, working her first job to earn pocket money.

But as she wondered about the future, Emily felt her mind being pulled back into the past. Chantelle, who reminded her so much of Charlotte, also reminded her of the loss of Charlotte, of the fact that her sister never got to grow up, that she never got to have a job during winter vacation. She had skipped through this very farm all those years ago, full of promise and potential, and then without warning her life had been snuffed out in the blink of an eye.

Emily looked ahead at Chantelle, and as she did so, the child morphed into Charlotte. Then Emily felt herself shrinking, until she was inhabiting a child-sized body. Her hands were suddenly swaddled with mittens. Snow began falling around her, clinging to the branches of the pine trees. Emily reached out with her small, mittened hand and shook one of the branches. A snow cloud puffed into the air, and the fine white powder dispersed. Up ahead, Charlotte was laughing, carefree and happy, her warm breath coiling through the air. She was wearing mittens too, and her favorite bright red boots looked stark against the backdrop of white.

Emily watched Charlotte stop beneath the tallest tree in the whole farm and gaze up with wonderment.

“I want this one!” the little girl cried.

Emily rushed toward her, kicking up snow in her haste. When she reached Charlotte’s side, she too gazed up at the enormous tree. It was astounding, so tall she could hardly see the top.

The crunching of footsteps in the snow made Emily tear her gaze from the tree and turn to look over her shoulder. There, stomping through the snow in large strides, was her dad.

“You girls need to slow down,” he panted as he drew up beside them. “I almost lost you.”

“We found the tree!” Emily cried with excitement.

Charlotte joined in, jumping and pointing up.

“That’s a bit big,” Roy said.

He looked tired today. Depressed. There were dark circles beneath his eyes.

“It’s not too big,” Emily said. “The ceilings are very high.”

Charlotte, as always, followed her sister’s lead. “It’s not too big! Please can we get it, Daddy?”

Roy Mitchell rubbed a hand over his face with exasperation. “Don’t test my patience, Charlotte,” he snapped. “Choose something smaller.”

Emily saw Charlotte recoil. Neither of them liked to anger their father and neither could understand how they had. It seemed like the smallest of things annoyed him these days. He was always distracted by something or other, always looking over his shoulder at shadows only he could see.

But Emily’s main concern was Charlotte. Always Charlotte. The little girl looked like she was on the brink of tears. Emily slipped her mittened hand into hers.

“This way,” she cried brightly. “There are smaller trees over here!”

And just like that, Charlotte cheered up, comforted by her older sister. They ran off through the snow together, leaving their frowning, distracted father to chase after them.

Just then, Emily snapped back into the present day. The snow of the past was no longer falling on the present, the Christmas trees of decades earlier felled and replaced with these new, young trees. She was back to the here and now but it took her a moment to reorient herself with her surroundings, to see Chantelle standing before her rather than Charlotte.

During Emily’s blackout, they’d manage to walk deep into the depths of the field. Here, the trees were so tall they cast shadows over everything, blocking out daylight. Emily shuddered, feeling colder now that the winter sun was hidden.

Up ahead, Chantelle was gazing at the tallest tree on the whole farm. It was at least fifteen feet tall.

“This is the one!” she cried, grinning from ear to ear.

Emily smiled. She wasn’t going to be like her father, dashing a child’s spirits. If Chantelle wanted the tallest tree on the farm, she was going to get it.

She walked up beside her and craned her head to see the top of the tree. Just like when she was a child, the tree seemed majestic to her.

“That’s the one,” Emily agreed.

Chantelle clapped in delight. Daniel looked somewhat disapproving of the elaborate choice, Emily thought, but he didn’t challenge them. He leaned down and helped Chantelle make the first cut with the ax. Emily watched them, father and daughter smiling and laughing together, and felt warm joy spread through her.

Daniel passed the ax to Emily so she too could take a turn chopping, and then they went round in circles, taking it in turns, cooperating. When the tree fell they all cheered.

Grace’s dad arrived with the wagon.

“Wow, this is quite a whopper you’ve chosen,” he joked with Chantelle as she attempted to help lift the enormous tree into the wagon.

“It was the tallest one I could find!” Chantelle said, grinning.

The family climbed into the back of the wagon and snuggled up together. The wheels of the wagon turned and they began the slow journey back to the farm entrance.

“I lost you for a moment back there,” Daniel said to Emily as they rode. “You had another flashback?”

Emily nodded. The memory had left her shaken. Seeing Charlotte’s crestfallen expression, hearing the sharpness of her father’s tone. Even then he was a man with a lot on his mind. She wondered if it had been something to do with Antonia, the woman he’d been having an affair with, or their mother, who was back at home in New York, or something else altogether. Though Emily was convinced now that her father was still alive out there, Roy was as much a mystery to her as ever.

“I keep remembering more and more things about my dad,” Emily confessed. “Ever since I found those letters. I wish I knew what made him run away. I always thought that something sudden must have happened when I was a teenager, but I think he was troubled by something way before then. For as far back as my memories go, to be honest. Every time I flash back and see him I can see the trouble in his eyes.”

Daniel held her close. It felt good to be comforted by him, to be close again. He’d seemed so distant back at Joe’s Diner.

“Sorry if I was a bit quiet back there,” Daniel said, as if reading her mind. “The holidays bring back memories for me too.”

“They do?” Emily asked gently. “What kind of memories?”

It was so rare for Daniel to open up to her that she took every opportunity to encourage him.

“This might come as a bit of a surprise to you, but I’m actually Jewish,” Daniel said. “My dad wasn’t, though. He was Christian. We celebrated Christmas and Hanukkah while he was still at home, but when he left he took Christmas with him. Mom would only celebrate Hanukkah. Once me and my dad were back in touch, he would only celebrate Christmas at his house. It was odd. A pretty weird way of growing up, as I’m sure you can imagine.”

“That sounds tough,” Emily soothed, trying to hide her surprise that Daniel was in fact Jewish. She wondered what else she didn’t know about him and was gripped with a sudden anguish over how they would raise the children, if there were to be any children. She would of course love to celebrate both but Daniel seemed to be holding traumatic memories about the holidays that might make it a little harder to approach.

They rode back to the entrance of the farm, where they paid the plucky and cheerful Grace while waiting for their tree to be put through the baling machine.

Emily was glad to be creating new, happy memories with her family. But at the back of her mind, she couldn’t stop wondering about her father, about what was going on with him, what secrets he’d been keeping. But most of all, she wondered where he was now and if there was any way she would ever be able to trace him.

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Back in the B&B, Emily and Daniel maneuvered the tree into position in the foyer. There were a few guests relaxing in the living room and they came out to watch with excitement as the enormous tree was raised.

Emily recalled the heap of boxes containing her dad’s old ornaments stored in the attic and rushed off to fetch them. Then she and Chantelle sat together at the kitchen table, sorting through all the ornaments.

“This is so pretty,” Chantelle said, holding up a glass reindeer.

Emily smiled to herself at the sight of it, recalling how she and Charlotte had pooled together their pocket money to buy it, and how they had then saved up every year to buy more, adding to their collection until they had enough to represent each of one of Santa’s reindeers. Then Charlotte had marked each one so they’d be able to tell them apart.

Emily took the glass reindeer from Chantelle's hands and checked its hoof. There was a little scratch mark that looked like it might have been a D for Donner, though it could just as easily have been a B for Blitzen. She smiled to herself.

"There's a whole set in here," Emily said, looking at the tangle of fairy lights. "Somewhere."

They rummaged around until they'd found every single one of Santa's reindeer, including Rudolph with his red nose painted on by Charlotte with nail polish. Emily felt a tug of emotion as she recalled that they'd never gotten around to buying the Santa and sleigh ornaments – the last on their list and the most expensive – because Charlotte had died before they'd saved up enough money.

"Look at this!" Chantelle cried, breaking into Emily's thoughts by waving a grubby, felt polar bear in front of her face.

"Percy!" Emily cried, taking it from Chantelle's hands. "Percy the polar bear!" She laughed to herself, delighted she could pluck such an obscure memory from her mind. She had lost so many of them, and yet she could retrieve them still. It gave her hope for unraveling the mysteries of her past.

She and Chantelle sorted through all the decorations, selecting all the ones they wanted to use and carefully putting away the others. By the time they were finished and ready to add them to the tree, it had grown dark outside.

Daniel lit a fire in the fireplace and its soft orange glow spilled out into the foyer as the family began decorating the tree. One by one, Chantelle carefully placed each of her selected decorations onto the tree, with the kind of precision and care Emily had grown to recognize in the child. It was like she was savoring every moment, carefully storing a new set of memories to replace the terrible ones from her younger years.

Finally it was time to put the angel on the top. Chantelle had spent a long time choosing which decoration would be given the prime position and had eventually chosen a fabric, hand-knitted angel over a robin, a star, and a fat, cuddly snowman.

"Are you ready?" Daniel asked Chantelle as he stood at the bottom of the stepladder. "I'm going to have to carry you up so you can reach the top."

"I get to put the angel on the top?" Chantelle said, wide-eyed.

Emily laughed. "Of course! The youngest always gets to do it."

She watched Chantelle clamber onto Daniel's back, the angel clutched tightly in her hands so she wouldn't drop it. Then slowly, one step at a time, Daniel carried her to the top. Together they stretched out and Chantelle popped the decoration onto the tall tip of the tree.

The second the angel sat atop the tree, Emily had a sudden flashback. It came on so quickly she began to breathe rapidly, panicked by the abrupt shift from her bright, warm inn to the colder, darker one of thirty years prior.

Emily was looking up at Charlotte as she placed the angel they'd spent all day making onto the tree. Her dad was holding Charlotte aloft, who at this point in time was a chubby toddler, and he wobbled slightly from the numerous sherries he'd drunk that day. Emily remembered a sudden, overwhelming emotion of fear. Fear that her tipsy father would drop Charlotte onto the hard hearth. Emily was five years old and it was the first time she'd really understood the concept of death.

Emily returned to the present day with a gasp to find her hand pressed against the wall as she steadied herself. She was hyperventilating and Daniel was there beside her, his hand on her back.

"Emily?" he asked with concern. "What happened? Another memory?"

She nodded, finding herself unable to speak. The memory had been so vivid and so terrifying, despite her knowledge that no harm had befallen Charlotte that winter evening. She cherished most of her recovered memories but that one had felt sinister, ominous, like a sign of the dark things to come.

Daniel continued rubbing Emily's back as she made a concerted effort to slow her breathing back to normal. Chantelle looked up at her, worried, and it was the child's face that finally brought Emily out of the grips of her memories.

"I'm sorry, it's fine," she said, feeling a little embarrassed to have worried everyone so much.

She looked up at the angel, at the sequined dress she wore. It had taken her and Charlotte hours to glue all those individual sequins onto the fabric. Now, with the ebbing firelight coming from the living room, they sparkled like rainbows. Emily thought it almost looked as though they were winking at her. Not for the first time, she felt Charlotte's presence close by, communicating love, peace, and forgiveness. Emily tried to hold onto the feeling of her spirit, to take comfort from it.

"We should head off to the town square," Emily said, finally. "We don't want to miss the tree lighting."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Daniel asked, looking concerned.

Emily smiled. "I am. I promise."

But her assertions didn't seem to wash with Daniel. She could feel him watching her out of the corner of his eye the whole time they were wrapping up in their warm clothes. But he didn't question or challenge her further, and so the family got into the pickup truck and headed into town.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Despite the biting cold, the whole of Sunset Harbor had congregated in the town square to watch the tree lighting. Even Colin Magnum, the man who was renting the carriage house for the month, was there, enjoying the festivities. Karen from the convenience store handed out freshly baked cinnamon rolls, while Cynthia Jones walked around with flasks of hot chocolate. Emily took the drinks and food gratefully, feeling the warmth seep into her stomach as she consumed them, and watched Chantelle playing happily with her friends.

Amongst the crowds, Emily spotted Trevor Mann. Once, the sight of him would have filled her with dread; they had been enemies the moment Trevor had decided to make it his life's mission to kick Emily out of the inn. But that had all changed over the last month when he'd discovered he had an inoperable brain tumor. Far from being Emily's enemy, Trevor was now her closest ally. He'd paid all of her back taxes – hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth – and now welcomed her into his home on a regular basis for coffee and cake. It pained Emily to see him suffering. Every time she saw him he seemed more frail, more in the grips of illness.

Emily approached him now. When he saw her, his face lit up.

"How are you?" Emily asked, embracing him. He felt thinner, his bones protruding sharply into her as they hugged.

"As well as can be expected," Trevor replied, lowering his gaze.

It shocked Emily to see him this way, to see him looking frail and defeated.

"Is there anything you need help with?" she asked, softly, keeping her voice hushed so as not to embarrass the man's pride.

Trevor shook his head, just as Emily expected him to. It wasn't in his nature to accept help. But it wasn't in her nature to accept no for an answer.

"Chantelle's been making snowflake chain decorations," she said. "They're just bits of glitter paper really but she's really proud and wants all the neighbors to have one. Okay if we come by and drop one off tomorrow?"

It was a sly trick, but Trevor fell for it.

"Well, I suppose we may as well have some tea and cake," he said. "If you're already coming around, that is."

Emily smiled to herself. There were ways through Trevor's armor, and she resolved then to visit her neighbor at the next available opportunity.

"Anyway, I was hoping to see you here," Trevor said, taking her hand in his. He was so cold, Emily noted, and his skin had a clammy feel. There was a sheen of sweat on his brow. "I have something for you," he continued.

"What's that?" Emily asked as he produced a piece of paper from his pocket.

"Blueprints," Trevor said. "Of your house. I was going through my attic, trying to get everything sorted for... well, you know what for." His voice grew quiet. "I'm not sure how they got mixed up in my things but I thought you might want them. They were drawn up by your father and his attorney, you see, and I know how much you want things regarding your father."

"I do," Emily stammered, taking the paper from his hands.

She gazed down at the faded pencil drawing. They were architect's plans. She gasped as she realized that the plans were for entire property, including the swimming pool in the outhouse, the one that Charlotte had drowned in. A lump formed in Emily's throat. She folded the paper quickly and shoved it into her bag.

"Thank you, Trevor," she said. "I'll look at that later."

They parted ways and Emily rejoined Daniel and Chantelle.

"What did Trevor want?" Daniel asked.

“Nothing,” Emily said, shaking her head. She wasn’t ready to talk about it yet; she was still reeling from the experience. The paper seemed to beckon to her in her bag. Could it be another piece of the puzzle that explained her father’s disappearance?

Just then, the countdown for the lights began. Emily’s mind swirled with memories of being here as a child, a preteen, a teenager. She seemed to pass through all those forgotten moments, year on year. Some contained Charlotte, alive and smiling, but many more did not; many were just her and her father, sinking more deeply into depression and distraction.

Then white lights burst from the tree and everyone began to whoop and cheer. Emily was pulled back into the present day, her heart racing.

“Are you okay?” Daniel asked, concerned. “You keep blacking out.”

Emily nodded to reassure him, but she was trembling. Her mind seemed frantic. All these memories were suddenly resurfacing and she wondered if they’d been triggered by the discovery that her father was indeed alive. It was as if her mind had decided that she could now reach back into the past and remember her father because she wouldn’t be consumed with grief in doing so. Perhaps, if Emily were patient enough, she’d recover a memory that would help her in her quest to find him, something that would tell her exactly where he was hiding.

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Exhausted from their evening of fun, Emily and Daniel tucked Chantelle into bed as soon as they arrived home. Chantelle asked for a story to be read to her and Emily obliged. But once the story was over, Chantelle seemed pensive.

“What’s wrong?” Emily asked.

“I was thinking about my mom,” Chantelle said.

“Oh.” Emily felt her stomach tighten at the thought of Sheila, back in Tennessee. “What about her, sweetie?”

Chantelle looked at Emily with her wide, blue eyes. “Will you protect me from her?”

Emily’s heart clenched. “Of course.”

“Promise,” Chantelle said in a desperate, pleading voice. “Promise me she won’t come back.”

Emily held her tight. She couldn’t promise because she didn’t know how the legal challenge to Sheila’s guardianship would go.

“I will do everything I possibly can,” Emily said, hoping her words would be enough to soothe the terrified child.

Chantelle lay back, her head on the pillow, blond hair splayed, and seemed to relax. A few moments later, she fell asleep.

Chantelle asking about her mom had awoken something in Emily. She and Patricia had spoken not that long ago when Emily had tried, and failed, to get her mother to join her in their Thanksgiving celebrations at the inn. Her mom refused to come and visit the house in Sunset Harbor; she viewed it as belonging to Roy, as a place she had been banished from. Even so, Emily thought, Patricia was still a part of her life. It was time to bite the bullet and tell her about the upcoming wedding.

Emily stood from Chantelle’s bed, wrapped herself in a shawl, and went out onto the porch. She sat on the swinging seat, tucked her legs beneath her, and took one look up at the shining moon and stars. Something in their twinkling light gave her courage. She scrolled through the contacts in her cell and dialed her mom’s number.

As always, Patricia answered the phone with a brusque, “Yes?”

“Mom,” Emily said, inhaling, trying to hold onto her courage. “I have something to tell you.”

There was little point in pretending to make polite conversation. Neither of them wanted that. May as well cut to the chase.

“Oh?” Patricia said flatly.

Emily had thrown a few curveballs her mom's way over the last year, from upping and leaving her home in New York, breaking up with Ben after seven years together, running off to Sunset Harbor, opening a B&B, and falling so madly in love with Daniel that she'd agreed to help raise his child. Her mom had, unsurprisingly, disapproved of every single one of Emily's choices. The chances of her accepting the engagement were slim to none.

"Daniel asked me to marry him," Emily finally managed to say. "And I agreed."

There was a pause, one that Emily had predicted. Her mom used silence like a weapon, always providing Emily with enough time to worry about the thoughts that were crossing her mind.

"And you've been dating this man for how long?" Patricia finally said.

"Coming up to a year now," Emily replied.

"One year. When you have fifty or so to spend together."

Emily let out a huge sigh. "I thought you'd be happy I was finally settling down. You always loved rubbing it in my face how long you'd been married by my age." Emily could hear the tone of her voice and cringed. Why did her mom always bring out the belligerent child in her? Why did she care so much about getting her approval when Patricia herself seemed to care so little about her daughter?

"I suppose he needs a mother for that child of his," Patricia said.

Emily spoke between her teeth. "Her name is Chantelle. And that's not why he asked. He asked because he loves me. And I said yes because I love him. We want to spend forever together so you should just get used to it."

"We'll see," Patricia replied in a monotone way.

"I wish you could just be happy for me," Emily said, her voice beginning to waver. "You're going to be the mother of the bride, after all. People will expect to see you proud and cordial."

"Who says I'm coming?" Patricia snapped back.

The words stung Emily like a slap. "What do you mean? Of course you're coming, Mom, it's my wedding!"

"There's no of course about it," Patricia replied. "I'll RSVP to my wedding invitation when I receive it."

"Mom..." Emily stammered.

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Would her mom really not come just to spite her? What would people think? Probably that Emily was an orphan, without her dad there, without her mom. And no sister. In many ways, she was an orphan. It was just her against the world.

"Fine," Emily said, suddenly hot-cheeked. "Do what you want. You always have." Then she ended the call without saying goodbye.

Emily didn't want to cry. In fact, she refused to. Not for her mom, it wasn't worth it. But for her dad, that was another matter altogether. She missed him desperately, and now that she was convinced he was still alive, she wanted to see him badly. But there was no way of reaching him. The woman he'd been cheating on her mom with had passed away several years ago, and anyway, she'd been as stumped as the rest of them about Roy's disappearance. All Emily knew was that while not having her mom at the wedding would be painful, not having her dad there would be devastating. In that moment, Emily doubled her resolve to track him down. Someone somewhere must know something.

Emily went back inside the inn. She was tired from the long day and climbed the stairs to bed. But when she reached her bedroom she saw that Daniel wasn't there. Her momentary panic was quelled when Daniel entered the room, cell phone in hand.

"Where have you been?" Emily asked.

"I just called my mom," Daniel replied. "To tell her about the wedding."

Emily almost laughed with surprise. That they'd both call their moms simultaneously like that was more than a coincidence; it was clearly a sign of their connection to one another.

"How did it go?" Emily asked, though she could tell by Daniel's expression that the answer wasn't going to be good.

“How do you think?” Daniel said, raising an eyebrow. “She played the Chantelle card again, saying she’ll only come to the wedding if we promise to let her spend regular time with Chantelle. I wish she could see what a destructive force she can be and understand why I don’t want her meddling with my kid. Not while she’s still drinking too much. Chantelle needs to be around sober adults after what she went through with her own mom.” He slumped onto the edge of the bed. “She just can’t see my point. She doesn’t get it. ‘Everyone drinks,’ that’s what she always says. ‘I’m no worse than anyone else.’ Maybe she isn’t, but it’s not what Chantelle needs. If she cared about her granddaughter as much as she claims she does, she’d kick the habit for her sake.”

Emily climbed onto the bed behind him and rubbed the tension from his shoulders. Daniel relaxed beneath her soft touch. She pressed a kiss onto his neck.

“I just called my mom too,” she said.

Daniel turned to face her, surprised. “You did? How did that go?”

“Terribly,” Emily said, and suddenly she couldn’t help but laugh. There was something darkly comedic about the whole thing.

Seeing Emily dissolve into laughter made Daniel crack. Soon, they were both laughing hysterically, sharing their commiserations with one another, connected in that moment and rising above it together.

“I was thinking,” Daniel said once his laughter had finally subsided. “Do you remember when Gus came to stay?”

“Yes of course,” Emily replied. The elderly gentleman had been her first real guest at the inn. Thanks to his custom she’d been saved from the brink of bankruptcy. He was also one of the most delightful people she’d ever had the privilege to meet. “How could I ever forget Gus? But what about him?”

Daniel played with the sleeve of her top idly. “Remember how he went to that party out in Aubrey? The town hall?”

Emily nodded, frowning and wondering why Daniel was bringing it up.

“Have you ever been?” Daniel asked.

Emily grew even more curious. “To Aubrey? Or the town hall?” Then she laughed. “Actually, I’ve never been to either.”

Daniel stalled, suddenly falling quiet. Emily waited patiently.

“The town hall does weddings,” he said, finally getting to the point. “I wondered if we should, you know, make an appointment or whatever it’s called? With the wedding planner? That is if you want to get married in Maine rather than New York.”

To say she felt shocked was an understatement! Hearing Daniel suggest something to do with organizing the wedding without her having to pressure him into it was a huge relief to Emily.

“Yes, I want to get married in Maine,” Emily stammered. “It feels more like a home to me than New York ever did. And I have more friends here. I don’t want to make everyone travel all the way there for the sake of tradition.”

“Cool,” Daniel replied, looking away shyly.

“When were you thinking of going?” Emily asked.

“We could head over next weekend,” Daniel suggested, still shy. “Take Chantelle. She’d love it.”

*Next weekend?* Emily wanted to cry. *So soon?*

She felt her excitement grow. What had happened to her reluctant fiancé? What had caused such a sudden change of heart? Maybe Jayne’s warning was completely unfounded after all. Daniel wanted a wedding just as much as she did. She’d been an idiot to doubt him.

But no sooner had Emily considered it than her thoughts flipped on their head. She wondered whether their horrible calls with their moms might have had something to do with Daniel’s sudden interest. Had he been spurred on by Patricia’s skepticism, wanting to prove himself as honorable and

his intentions as honest? Or worse, was he just suggesting it to cheer Emily up, as a way of briefly calming her?

After agreeing to make an appointment for next Saturday, they climbed into bed. Daniel fell asleep quickly. But with concerns niggling in her mind, Emily struggled for a long time to find sleep that night.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Serena walked into the B&B for her shift early Saturday morning, her arms laden with magazines.

“The tree looks great,” she said, eyeing the enormous Christmas tree.

“What are those?” Emily asked from her place behind the foyer desk.

Serena walked over to the desk and dumped the magazines in front of Emily. They were wedding catalogues.

“Oh,” Emily said, a little surprised. She’d been engaged for a whole week and hadn’t yet looked at a single magazine.

“I thought you might need some inspiration,” Serena said.

Emily thumbed through one of them, barely taking in the pictures. “Actually, Chantelle made this whole list of things for us to do. First on her list is the venue.”

Serena laughed. “Yeah, she showed me. I love how involved she is. Have you got anywhere in mind?”

Emily smiled. “Actually, we have an appointment in an hour.”

“You do?” Serena said, her eyes widening with excitement.

For the first time since the proposal, Emily felt a flutter of giddy excitement in her stomach at the thought of arranging the wedding, of walking down the aisle.

“It’s in Aubrey,” Emily continued. “It was Daniel’s suggestion, that town hall that Gus and his friends couldn’t stop gushing about.”

Just then, she heard the sound of Daniel descending the staircase and looked behind her. He’d put on his best plaid shirt and even combed his hair back. Emily smiled to herself, pleased to know he would at least make a bit of effort. Serena wiggled her eyebrows, smirking her approval.

“Chantelle’s just choosing what shoes to wear,” Daniel said as he reached the bottom step.

Emily noticed his gaze fall on the glossy magazine in her hands. It was open on a spread of beautiful wedding gowns. Emily couldn’t be certain, but she thought she saw a flicker of surprise in Daniel’s eyes, and wondered what it meant. Had he not thought about a white wedding, about her in the typical dress and veil, him in a black suit? Had he just thought they’d get married in their usual jeans and shirts? She snapped the magazine shut with sudden irritation.

A moment later Chantelle appeared at the top of the stairs. She’d put on one of her fanciest dresses, white tights, and cute shiny T-bar shoes. She looked like a china doll. Emily couldn’t help her delight at seeing how much this meant to Chantelle. At least someone was getting into the spirit of things.

Emily grabbed her purse and jacket, and, leaving the inn in Serena’s capable hands, herded her family out the door and into the pickup truck.

“Are you excited to see the venue?” Emily asked Chantelle, looking in the rearview mirror at the girl in the backseat as Daniel pulled onto the main street.

“Yes!” Chantelle exclaimed. “And to try the food!”

Emily had forgotten all about the menu tasting. She wondered if she’d be able to try it; she was so nervous about her first meeting with an actual wedding organizer that it was making her nauseous.

After the twenty-minute drive to Aubrey, they arrived at the venue. Chantelle seemed the least nervous of them all. She bounded up the stone steps, exclaiming with delight at the hanging baskets and the stained glass windows. Emily thought the venue looked beautiful from the outside; it was old and very classical looking. There were large swaths of grass surrounding it also, with apple trees which would look lovely in the wedding photos.

They were welcomed at the door by a smartly dressed young woman called Laura. She led them inside.

Emily gasped as she observed the grandeur of the place. She could just picture it now, the ceremony, the guests, the dancing. For the first time she got a mental image of what it might look like to marry Daniel, to wear the beautiful dress and walk the aisle with their loved ones watching on. She felt her breath catch in her lungs.

“Would you like to take a seat?” Laura said, gesturing to where the tasting buffet was laid out.

Everyone sat, apart from Chantelle, who paced around the venue assessing its size and décor, everything from the carpets to the artwork.

“Don’t mind her,” Emily said to Laura with a grin. “She’s our surveyor.”

Emily and Daniel tasted the first set of entrees, which were presented in little bite-sized pieces. Emily couldn’t help but feel very strange in this situation. She couldn’t tell if it was Daniel’s nerves or just her own, but it felt odd to be sitting next to him in this formal setting, taking mouthful after mouthful of different flavored dishes. It was like they didn’t belong here, like they were very out of place. Emily could barely meet his eye as they worked their way through all the food choices.

Thankfully, Chantelle eased some of the pressure with her antics. She was in fine form, striding around like she owned the place, making affirmative statements about which foods she liked and didn’t.

“I think you should have this for starter,” she said decisively, pointing at the tomato and mozzarella bites, “then the fish for main, and for dessert...” She tapped her chin. This clearly took a bit more thought. “Go for the cheesecake.”

Everyone laughed.

“But you’ve picked the three most expensive things on the menu!” Emily pointed out, giggling.

Laura seemed to take that as a cue to touch on the subject of money. “Have you decided on a food budget?” she asked.

“We haven’t even decided on a wedding budget yet,” Daniel joked, but Emily couldn’t quite see the funny side. It felt a little too close to the bone. Why hadn’t they decided that yet? Why hadn’t they decided anything yet? Come to think of it, after deciding to make this appointment, they hadn’t sat down again to discuss anything.

“Well, that’s okay for now,” Laura said, giving them a professionally blank smile. “It does take some time to sort all these things out. I don’t suppose you have any idea about how many guests you’ll be having? The venue can take two hundred.”

“Oh, um...” Emily scratched her neck. If they didn’t know whether their own mothers would come, how on earth were they supposed to know about the other guests! “We’re still finalizing the numbers.”

“No problem at all,” Laura said, tipping her eyes back down to her ring binder, which contained glossy photos of food, flowers, and decorations, along with a list of prices and customizations.

Though she still had that robotically professional smile on her face, Emily could read in her eyes a growing exasperation. She must be wondering how she was going to help them organize anything if they didn’t know even the basics.

“Our suggested layout would be with the head table over there,” Laura explained, gesturing toward the stage area at the back of the room. “That’s usually for the wedding party, so bridesmaids, groomsmen, family. You can have a small table for just six, or a large table for up to sixteen. Do you have a rough idea of the numbers?”

Emily felt her chest constricting. This was a disaster. And Daniel seemed more nervous than her. In fact, he looked downright uncomfortable.

“It’s a bit complicated,” Emily explained. “With our families. Maybe we should move on and come back to that a bit later.”

She couldn’t bear the tension anymore. Laura looked flustered too, clearly realizing she wasn’t dealing with the usual here.

“Yes of course.” She quickly flipped through several pages in her binder. “So we have the large double doors over there. They can be left open if the weather is nice. Are you hoping for a spring or summer wedding, or are you more of an autumn/winter couple? We’re completely booked for spring and summer next year so you’d have to wait, but we have autumn and winter spots available.”

Emily watched Daniel’s reaction to the news that their wedding could take place as early as next September. He went completely pale. The sight of him made Emily even more nervous.

Chantelle seemed to be picking up on the tension. Her goofy confidence was waning. She kept looking from Emily to Daniel, her enthusiasm fading with every passing moment.

“Maybe we should take your card for the time being,” Emily said to Laura. “Rearrange when we know a few more details.” She stood abruptly.

“Oh, oh, okay,” Laura said, taken aback, dropping her binder in her haste to stand and shake Emily’s hand.

Emily did so quickly. Then she rushed out of the venue, leaving Daniel behind to shake Laura’s hand just as swiftly. She burst out of the doors and onto the steps, listening to the sound of Daniel’s distant voice explaining to Laura that they’d be in touch.

Out in the cold, Emily held back her tears. She was shaken to the core. Not just from their lack of plans, or from Daniel’s general quietness over the last few days, but from the micro-expressions he was making and what she inferred from them. Did Daniel actually want to marry her or was the proposal some impulsive moment he’d gotten swept up in? Was the reality of choosing a date in the not too distant future giving him cold feet? What if he took the cowardly approach of pushing the wedding back a few years, leaving her in a state of limbo, dragging out the engagement for as long as possible just as Jayne had warned?

“Emily,” Daniel tried as he and Chantelle joined her.

She felt his fingertips brush her hand but she pulled away, not wanting his touch at this moment in time.

Daniel didn’t try again. She heard him sigh. Then, silently, everyone piled back into the pickup truck.

The mood on the drive home couldn’t have been more different from the mood on the way there. It was almost as if the air was permeated with anxiety. Chantelle’s cute outfit suddenly seemed like a façade, like they’d dressed her up in order to trick Laura into viewing them like any other happy, uncomplicated family when they were in fact anything but. Their pasts – hers, Daniel’s, even Chantelle’s – complicated everything. And worse than that, their pasts complicated their very beings, their personalities, their abilities to deal with pressure and stress, their abilities to relate to one another.

For what felt like the hundredth time since he proposed, Emily wondered what was really going on inside Daniel’s head.

## CHAPTER SIX

When Emily had first told Daniel about her desire to adopt Chantelle, they'd contacted their friend Richard Goldsmith, who was a custody attorney from town. An informal chat had taken place in the inn over coffee and cake. But this time, their meeting was taking place in his office in town. This time it felt serious and very real.

Emily nervously smoothed down her skirt as she and Daniel entered the plush office, which looked like something out of a story book, set in an old red brick building covered with climbing ivy. Emily couldn't help her feelings of apprehension. What if Richard had bad news? What if she would never be able to become Chantelle's real, legal mother like the little girl seemed to desire as much as Emily herself?

The receptionist, a young woman with fiery ginger hair, welcomed them with a sweet, reassuring smile.

"Mr. Goldsmith will be with you shortly," she said, without them even needing to introduce themselves. "He's just been held up with another client."

Emily squirmed and chewed her lip. Client. It felt odd to think of herself in such a way. But that's what she was, and what she must be to achieve her goal. Taking legal custody of Chantelle wasn't just a matter of chatting with an acquaintance on her porch over coffee anymore. It would involve lawyers and courts, judges and legal documentation. This was real and she needed to get used to it.

Emily steeled herself. She could handle this. She had to; she loved Chantelle too much to fail, to wilt under the pressure. But there was another part of Emily that was still reeling from Saturday's failed trip to the wedding venue and the way Daniel had clammed up at the mere suggestion of selecting a season during which they would be wed. If he was changing his mind about this, he needed to be brave and tell her before things got serious, before contracts were signed and hearts were too much on the line to turn back. The words of her family and friends still repeated in Emily's mind, that Daniel was using her because he wanted someone to raise Chantelle for him, that Emily had made it too easy on him. She'd let him live rent free on the grounds of her property, she'd taken his child in without question, and had forgiven him so quickly for those long six weeks during which he'd prioritized his child over her. But what they didn't accept or understand was how all those things made her love him more: his resourcefulness and resilience during the years he'd lived in the carriage house, the care he'd shown the property during the decades it had stood empty, keeping it on life support in case Roy Mitchell returned, and the fact he'd stepped up for Chantelle without question, proving himself to be a real man, the sort that didn't shirk his responsibilities, that put his child's needs over his own.

The door to Richard's office suddenly swung open, making Emily jump out of the thoughts she'd been absorbed in. Richard stood in the doorway as he shook hands with a petite, blond woman sniffing into a tissue. She reminded Emily instantly of Sheila. A wave of guilt crashed over her.

Emily couldn't hear Richard's hushed words but she picked up on his reassuring tone. Then he bid goodbye to the woman and she shuffled past them, heading out the door in a flurry.

Once she was gone, Richard turned to Emily and Daniel. "Please, come in."

"Is she okay?" Emily asked as they followed him into his office.

She was concerned for the woman he'd just shown out, but also curious about the reason for her tears. Perhaps she was about to enter a court battle like them, only she was on the flip side of the coin, the side where she was having her legal guardianship revoked. Was it fair? Had she done anything to deserve it, drugs, abandonment? Did anyone ever deserve it?

But then she remembered Chantelle. No, it wasn't fair. But this wasn't about what was fair, it was about what was right.

“I’m afraid I can’t discuss that,” Richard said, putting an end to Emily’s wild flight of fantasy. He settled into his large leather chair and adjusted the pant legs of his crisp gray suit. “I have to show the same level of confidentiality to all my clients. I’m sure you understand.”

Emily’s unease abruptly returned on hearing that word again. Client. It reminded her how serious this was. They were paying for this meeting, for Richard’s expertise and his time. Everything had become suddenly very formal. Emily wondered whether she should have worn a suit.

Daniel seemed just as uncomfortable beside her. She could tell by the way he kept fidgeting and fiddling with the buttons on his shirt. They were both very much out of their comfort zone in Richard’s plush office.

Richard removed his glasses and looked up from their file. “So there are two options to consider here. It partly comes down to semantics, but there are some crucial differences between the two courses of action we can take.”

“Which are...?” Emily prompted.

“Guardianship or adoption,” Richard concluded. “Guardianship, in its basic form, would simply establish a legal relationship between Chantelle and Emily but it wouldn’t end Sheila’s legal relationship with her child. On the other hand, with adoption, all of Sheila’s rights and obligations over Chantelle would cease and Emily would henceforth be considered her mother. In other words, she would be a substitute for Sheila in every legal sense. Adoption is intended to create a permanent and stable home, so we would need Sheila to relinquish her rights over Chantelle, and to understand that this would be irrevocable.”

Emily nodded, letting his words seep in. She thought of Chantelle in her room asking her to promise Sheila would never come back.

“Chantelle doesn’t want a relationship with her mom,” Emily explained.

“But a guardianship would be much easier to secure,” Richard contested, folding his hands on the desk. “If Sheila isn’t prepared to relinquish her rights over Chantelle, which from what you’ve told me of her thus far she would not want to do, we’ll have to prove that Chantelle would not just be better off with you but that Sheila is unfit to care for her, and that allowing her any kind of contact with her mother would cause her harm.”

“She’s told me time and time again she wants me to be her real mom,” Emily said. “That she never wants to see Sheila again.”

Daniel looked uncomfortable. “I don’t think it would be right to cut Sheila out entirely.”

Richard listened to them quietly. “This isn’t about visitation rights or anything like that. If you become Chantelle’s legal mother, it would be up to you whether she ever sees Sheila again. Unless you’re planning on taking out a restraining order on her. This is just about the legality, about who makes the decisions regarding her care.”

It felt too clinical. How could a child’s life and well-being be considered *just a legality*? This was her heart they were talking about. There was no way of separating out her emotions. It was impossible.

Emily touched Daniel’s hand lightly.

“It needs to be full adoption,” she explained. “Otherwise Sheila might take her away from us one day. Chantelle wakes up screaming in the night about that prospect. She’s asked me over and over again to protect her from Sheila. She’s asked if I can be her mom. I know she’s only seven but that girl knows her own mind.”

Daniel finally relented with a single, sad nod. Emily felt bad for him, but at the same time she was certain that this was the right thing to do for Chantelle’s sake.

“We’re going for adoption,” Daniel confirmed.

Richard nodded. “Each state has a different process,” he explained. “But here in Maine, we’d need to file a petition of relinquishment to Sheila. The courts would serve her with papers, then she’d be entitled to counseling, there’d be a mediation meeting in front of a family law magistrate with the aim of coming to a peaceful resolution. Finally, a court date would be set for a judge to make a

decision. Of course, if Sheila gives consent, things will go more smoothly. If she fights the petition then things will take longer as there will need to be a summary hearing, a jeopardy hearing, a judicial review, and finally a permanency planning hearing.”

“What costs are involved?” Daniel asked.

“Some,” Richard explained. “But they’re not as hefty as you’d expect. We’re talking around two hundred dollars per meeting, so it will be less than a thousand dollars all in.”

One thousand dollars. That’s all it would take to make Chantelle their daughter. One thousand dollars, plus weeks and months of anguish.

“Daniel,” Richard then said somewhat solemnly, “I must make it clear that your prior conviction won’t do you any favors.”

“Prior conviction?” Emily stammered.

“I told you,” Daniel said in a hushed, embarrassed voice. “When I defended Sheila. From her ex-husband. You remember.”

“You went to court over that?” Emily said. She hadn’t realized it had been so serious. She’d assumed Daniel had just gotten a slap on the wrist by the local cops and sent on his way.

She shuffled uncomfortably in her seat, reeling.

Richard coughed and carried on. He didn’t seem fazed. He’d probably seen it all in his office.

“What would really help for you, Daniel, is if you showed you were in paid employment.”

“He is,” Emily said. “He works for me.”

“He’s not on your payroll, though,” Richard explained. “Cash-in-hand work doesn’t look great. It needs to be consistent. A nine-to-five preferably.”

“Okay,” Daniel said, sounding resolved. “I’ll do that if it will help.”

Emily felt suddenly apprehensive. Daniel had always been available to her. Theirs was a fifty-fifty partnership. How would she cope with him out of the house all day? She’d be left to look after Chantelle alone. But the pressure for a full adoption was coming from her. If Daniel had his way, they’d take the less dramatic guardianship route. This was all her doing.

Richard folded up their file and returned his glasses to his nose. “Well, the next steps are for me to prepare the documentation, put the legal request forward to Sheila’s attorney. Then I’ll be in touch with more news. I must warn you, this will stir up bad blood in the short term. You ought to prepare for some drama.”

Daniel squeezed Emily’s arm for reassurance.

“We can handle it,” Emily told Richard. “For Chantelle, we can handle anything.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

With Richard Goldsmith's words still ringing in their ears, Emily and Daniel returned to the inn, hoping for some quiet time to reflect on their situation. Instead, they found that the inn was buzzing with activity.

The several guests who had arrived over the weekend were being served food in the dining room by Matthew, the young chef Emily had taken on full time to help Parker out now they'd started serving lunches and evening meals. Colin, who was still occupying the carriage house and now took most of his meals in the inn, was amongst them, his handsome face attracting stares from the women that he seemed impervious to.

Colin had kept mostly to himself since Thanksgiving. He always disappeared off to the carriage house as soon as he'd finished eating to immerse himself once again in his work. His dashing good looks were the talk of the town (amongst the female residents at least), and his quiet brooding just added to the mystery. Emily knew that he'd recently separated from his wife and wondered whether he'd thrown himself into his work (whatever that may be) in an attempt to take his mind off his troubles. His head was always buried in his laptop. Either that or he'd be scribbling furiously into a notepad, just as he was doing now at his dining table in the corner. Emily was intrigued about what his job may be but of course didn't want to be nosy and actually ask.

As Daniel and Emily walked through the corridor, Emily noticed a young woman in brightly patterned leggings standing at the empty reception desk waiting for service. Serena's shift was over and it was Lois, the new girl who'd only been with them a week or so, who was supposed to be covering reception duties. But she was nowhere to be seen. Emily looked at the rusty bronze antique till she'd purchased from Rico's sitting upon the heavy marble top. Theft wasn't exactly high on her list of concerns in a place like Sunset Harbor but you could never be too careful.

"I'm so sorry," Emily said to the waiting woman, rushing behind the desk in a hurry. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Tracey," the short woman said, beaming brightly and swishing her mousy chin-length hair. "The new yoga teacher."

"Oh!" Emily exclaimed, noticing for the first time the rolled up yoga mat beneath the woman's arm.

It had totally slipped Emily's mind that she'd arranged for yoga classes to be taught in the ballroom as a way of bringing in a tiny bit more income. She and Tracey had agreed on the telephone that twenty percent of the profits would go to the inn, but since Tracey's classes were only \$10 and only Karen and Cynthia had thus far shown any interest, Emily wasn't expecting it to turn into much of a money spinner.

Still, on first meeting, Tracey seemed like she'd be a calming and reassuring presence in the inn. Emily was glad to know there'd be another person around the place since Daniel was soon going to be absent more often.

Emily led Tracey to the ballroom.

"It's so much more wonderful than I expected," Tracey gushed in her floaty voice as she gazed around her, taking in the polished floors and beautiful Tiffany glass windows. "This is a very relaxing environment," she continued. "Inspiring." She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and then released it slowly. "Yes, this will do nicely. The room has a wonderful aura."

Emily managed to contain her smile. Then she left Tracey to set her yoga station up and rushed back to the still unmanned reception desk to grab the ringing phone.

"The Inn at Sunset Harbor," she said, distracted by the fact that Daniel was now nowhere to be seen.

She glanced all around, searching, then noticed him through the partly open door to the living room. He was hunched over a copy of the *Sunset Gazette*. His job hunting had already commenced, Emily realized, and though she admired him for getting right on it, she couldn't help but project her mind into a future where he was never available, and that caused her anguish.

"Sorry, what?" Emily said, realizing she hadn't listened to a word of the voice on the other end of the line. "Oh, no, I'm perfectly happy with my current Wi-Fi provider."

She hung up, her gaze still focused on Daniel and the intensity of his job hunting. Just then Lois emerged, coming down the staircase in a fluster.

"There you are," Emily said.

"I'm so sorry," Lois stammered. "I was helping Marnie fold the bedding."

Marnie was the new housekeeper. Emily loved the fact that her staff were becoming good friends, that they were helping one another out, and in her mind she immediately forgave Lois for straying from her duties.

"That's okay," Emily told the young woman. "Just remember it's important to keep the desk attended whenever possible."

With Lois finally located, Emily clocked off and went into the living room to see Daniel. He was sitting at the table in the bay window, chewing the end of his pen, the newspaper spread out in front of him and covered in red circles.

"Looks like you've had some luck there," Emily said, coming up behind him and wrapping her arms around his shoulders.

"Yeah, I've found a couple of things," Daniel said distractedly. "Handyman jobs mostly. But they're all just the same kind of casual work I do here. Nothing permanent."

Emily thought he sounded a little despondent.

"You can't expect to find the perfect job the first time you open a newspaper," she said. "I'm sure you'll find something soon." She kissed the crown of his head and looked up at the clock. "We need to go and pick Chantelle up from school."

Daniel looked up from the paper, shocked. "It's that time already?" He looked back down at the newspaper and then up at Emily with a slightly pained expression. "I've got a ton of calls to make. Is it okay if I stay here and plow on with the job hunt?"

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