

THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR—BOOK 5

FOREVER

and a

DAY

SOPHIE LOVE

The Inn at Sunset Harbor

Sophie Love

Forever and a Day

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2017

Love S.

Forever and a Day / S. Love — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd», 2017 — (The Inn at Sunset Harbor)

ISBN 978-1-64-029051-8

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 work as a B&B. She had never expected, though, that her relationship with its caretaker, Daniel, would turn her life on its head. In FOREVER AND A DAY, Emily is stunned to finally, after 20 years, meet her missing father—just a week before her wedding. Their reunion changes both of their lives, and unlocks the key to the house's many secrets, and to Emily's missing memories. Spring has finally arrived at Sunset Harbor, and with just a week to go until the big wedding date, the wedding preparations are busier than ever, including Daniel's surprise talk of a honeymoon. Will Emily and Daniel have their dream wedding? Or will someone appear to tear it apart? Meanwhile, Chantelle's custody battle comes to a pitch, and as Memorial Day looms, they must figure out what to do with Trevor's house. Yet amidst all of this, another issue weighs most heavily on Emily's mind: will she herself ever be pregnant?

ISBN 978-1-64-029051-8

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	35

Sophie Love
FOREVER AND A DAY

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)

FOREVER, PLUS ONE (Book #6)

CHAPTER ONE

“Dad?” Emily repeated.

She stared at the man on her porch step, a man she barely recognized anymore. Silver hair where once before it had been black. The shadow of stubble on his chin. Creases and furrows lining his face. But there was no mistaking it. It was her father.

Words failed her. She couldn’t catch her breath.

The crinkles at the sides of Roy’s eyes deepened as he smiled. “Emily Jane,” he replied.

That’s when Emily knew it was real. He was real. It was her dad.

She ran as fast as she could up the porch steps and threw herself into his arms. She’d imagined this moment so many times, wondering how she would behave if he ever came back to her. In her imagination she’d acted cool, been aloof, had risen above it all by not letting him see the pain his disappearance had caused her, nor the utter relief she felt knowing he was safe. But of course the reality was completely different. Instead of being standoffish, she wrapped her arms around his neck and held him like she was a child again.

He was warm, solid. She could feel him breathing hard, each expansion of his lungs betraying his emotions. Her tears came almost immediately. As though in response, she felt his own tears wet her cheeks and neck.

“You came back,” Emily managed to say, her voice cracking as she spoke. She sounded as young and vulnerable as she felt.

“I did,” Roy replied through deep sobs. “I’m – ”

But he stopped short. Emily knew instinctively that the only word to conclude that sentence was “sorry” but that her father wasn’t yet ready to deal with the torrent of emotions such an utterance would unleash. Emily wasn’t either. She didn’t want to go to those painful places yet. She just wanted to stay in this moment. Bask in it.

She lost track of how much time passed as she and her father stood there holding each other, but she felt a sudden change in the way her father held her, a tensing of his muscles, like he was suddenly uncomfortable. She moved away from him and looked over her shoulder to see where Roy’s gaze was now affixed: Chantelle.

She was standing in the open door of the inn, a look of bemusement on her face as though trying to comprehend the strange scene before her. Emily could read all the questions in her eyes. Who is this man? Why is Emily crying? Why is he? What’s going on?

“Chantelle, honey,” Emily said, extending a hand. “Come here.”

Emily saw in Chantelle’s hesitation an uncharacteristic shyness.

“There’s nothing to be scared of,” Emily added.

Chantelle took a few paces toward Emily. “Why is he looking at me like that?” she said in a stage whisper that Roy could clearly hear.

Emily looked at her father. His damp eyes were wide with confusion. He wiped the wetness from his lashes.

“You have a daughter?” he finally stammered, his voice thick with emotion.

“Yes,” Emily said, reaching for Chantelle and pulling the girl to her side, into a half embrace. “Well, she’s Daniel’s daughter. But I’m raising her like a mother would.”

Chantelle clung to Emily. “Is he going to take me away?” she asked.

“Oh no, no, sweetie!” Emily exclaimed. “This is my father. Your grandpa.” She turned her gaze then to meet her dad’s. “Papa Roy?” she suggested.

He nodded immediately. He seemed bewitched by the child, his pale blue eyes sparkling with intrigue.

“She looks so much like her,” he said.

Emily understood immediately what he meant. That Chantelle looked like Charlotte. No wonder he'd assumed she was Emily's child; Emily herself sometimes struggled to believe that those were not Charlotte's genetic characteristics expressed in Chantelle.

"I see it too," she confessed.

"Who do I look like?" Chantelle questioned.

Emily felt like this line of questioning was far too much for the child to handle. She wanted to shut it down right away. Even though she felt like a trembling lamb she knew she had to step up and take command.

"Someone we used to know a long time ago, that's all," she said. "Come on, Papa Roy needs to meet Daddy."

Chantelle brightened suddenly. "I'll get him." She beamed, bounding off back inside.

Emily sighed. She understood why her dad had been so shocked by Chantelle, but having a stranger stare at her like that – like she was a ghost – was the last thing the child needed.

"She's really not biologically yours?" Roy asked the second the child had disappeared.

Emily shook her head. "I know, it's crazy. She's sensitive like her too. And kind. Funny. Creative. I can't wait for you to get to know her." Her voice hitched then, with sudden fear at the thought that Roy wasn't staying, that this was just a flying visit. Perhaps she wasn't even supposed to have known he'd been here. Maybe his plan was to avoid her altogether, to swoop in and out before she'd had a chance to realize he was back, like his covert trips in his beat-up car that Trevor had witnessed from his spying window. She rubbed behind her ear awkwardly. "That is, if you have the time."

"I have the time." Roy nodded, a small flutter of a smile appearing on his lips.

Just then, Chantelle returned, dragging Daniel along behind her. He stopped at the doorway and glanced at Roy.

"Papa Roy?" he said, raising his eyebrows, clearly repeating the name that Chantelle had so innocently relayed to him.

Emily saw the look that crossed between them and remembered how Daniel had told her about that summer back when he was a teenager and had needed a friend, how Roy had been there for him, had helped him get his life back on track. She could tell in that moment that Roy's safe return to Sunset Harbor meant almost as much to Daniel as it did to herself.

Roy offered his hand for Daniel to shake. But to Emily's surprise, Daniel took the hand and pulled Roy into a bear hug. She felt a strange clench in her chest, a peculiar emotion that was somewhere between joy and grief.

"I think you've met Daniel," Emily said, her voice cracking once again.

"I have," Roy replied as he was released by Daniel, taking him instead by the shoulders. He seemed overwhelmed with emotion, treading that fine line between weeping tears of joy and bursting into relieved laughter.

"We're getting married," Emily added, somewhat dumbly.

"I know," Roy said, grinning from ear to ear. "I read your email. I'm so delighted."

"Are you coming inside?" Daniel asked Roy, softly.

"If I may," Roy replied, sounding concerned that he may not be accepted back into Emily's life.

"Of course!" Emily exclaimed. She clutched his hand tightly, trying to tell him that everything was okay, that he was wanted here, accepted here, that his return to her was a joyous occasion.

Roy's face seemed etched with relief. He visibly relaxed, as though a hurdle he'd been worried about jumping had been accomplished.

As they walked toward the door, Emily became suddenly aware of the fact that the house her father had abandoned over twenty years ago in no way resembled its former self. She'd taken over, changed it all, changed its purpose from a family home to an inn. Would he be mad?

"We've made some renovations," she said quickly.

“Emily Jane,” her father replied in a kind, firm voice, “I know you’ve been living here. That it’s an inn now. It’s fine. I’m delighted for you.”

She nodded, but still felt anxious about letting him inside. Chantelle led the way and one by one they filed into the reception hall, Roy taking the tail, his gait slower and stiffer than Emily remembered.

He stopped in the hall and looked around him, his mouth open with surprise and awe. When he saw the reception desk, his eyes widened.

“Is this...?”

“The same one you sold to Rico?” Emily said. “Yes.”

The inn had been a guest house originally before the owners abandoned it. Roy’s story with the home mirrored her own in reverse. He’d wanted this place to be a family home, a haven for summer vacations. Emily had turned it back into a guesthouse, a business.

“I can’t believe he kept it all these years,” Roy said with surprise, still looking at the desk. Then he turned his eyes to Emily. “Do you remember the day I sold it to him?”

Emily shook her head silently.

“You were quite adamant that I shouldn’t sell it,” he said with a chuckle. “You’d put a Barbie in every one of the drawers. Said it was a hospital for your dolls.”

“I think I do remember,” Emily replied, feeling a little melancholy.

“Rico was very kind about it,” Roy added. “Helped you to ‘transfer’ your ‘patients’ to another location. I think you chose the cupboard under the sink.” He, too, became somewhat wistful, and tore his attention away from the reception desk and back to the renovation work. “This really is incredible. You’ve done a fabulous job.”

The sound of pride in his voice made Emily’s heart jolt. This moment was so much more than she could have hoped for. It was perfect.

“Do you want a tour?” she asked.

Roy nodded. Emily led him to the kitchen first. Inside, they could hear the sounds of the dogs barking from the laundry room.

“I don’t know what to take in first,” Roy exclaimed, glancing around him at the fully restored kitchen with its original retro appliances and decorations. “The amazing renovation work or the fact you have pets!”

“This is Mogsy and her puppy Rain!” Chantelle announced, opening up the utility room door and allowing the two to run inside.

They rushed up to Roy, sniffing him and trying to lick his cheeks. Roy laughed, the fine lines around his face becoming more pronounced, and scratched them both behind the ears.

“We don’t usually let them run around the kitchen,” Emily explained. “But since it’s a special occasion – ”

Her voice cracked as that pang of melancholy she’d felt earlier returned. Being with her dad shouldn’t be “special”; it had been made that way by him leaving.

From his crouched position, he looked up at her, his expression filled with regret.

All at once, Emily felt a surge of anger. Some of her deeply buried hurt was beginning to bubble upward.

“Let’s go to the dining room,” she said, hurriedly, not wanting it to surface.

They went into the room with the large oak table. Straightaway Roy noticed that the heavy drape curtain that had once hung over the ballroom door was no longer there.

“You found the ballroom,” he said.

Something about the comment irritated Emily further. This wasn’t a game of hide-and-seek. She felt hotness creep into her cheeks.

“Found it. Restored it. Soon to be getting married in it,” she said, as they passed along the low-ceilinged hallway and emerged into the huge ballroom.

She could hear the snappiness in her voice and took a deep breath to calm herself.

“Well, it looks beautiful,” Roy said, either oblivious to her mounting anger or not yet willing to confront it. “I’m surprised the stained glass looks so good after all this time.”

“Daniel’s friend George renovated it,” Emily explained.

“George?” Roy said, raising his eyebrows. “I remember him when he was this big.” He gestured with his hand to his waist to indicate a child’s height.

It occurred to Emily then that Sunset Harbor was more her father’s town than it ever had been hers, that he knew people from this place better than she did, that in the years he’d lived here he’d planted more roots than she could ever hope to. A new emotion of jealousy wormed its way into the complex mixture of feelings she was already trying to keep at bay. She tried her hardest to keep a neutral expression on her face.

They went upstairs next and Emily showed Roy the master bedroom, the room that had once been his and Patricia’s, then, presumably, his and Antonia’s when she’d visited, before finally becoming hers and Daniel’s.

“This is fantastic,” Roy exclaimed. “The colors are so fresh.”

He’d been far more into his dark colors, the sorts of crimsons and navy hues that she’d decorated the guest bedrooms in. The crisp white and eggshell blue had been far closer to her mother’s tastes, and Emily realized for the first time as she looked at her room that her style was a perfect blend of them both. Roy’s penchant for antiques – seen in the huge bed, the vanity desk, the ottoman – and Patricia’s cleanliness in the white colors. Emily felt like she was looking at the room anew.

“My room is next door,” Chantelle said.

Emily was relieved for the distraction. She guided Roy out of the room and into Chantelle’s, where he took in the delightful animal-themed furniture Emily had purchased for her. Chantelle waltzed around the room, proudly showing off her shelf of books, her wardrobe filled with dresses, her pile of cuddly toys, her wall of artwork.

“Chantelle, you have quite a lovely room,” Roy said kindly, reminding Emily of that soft way he had with children, of the gentleness he’d spoken to her with back when he’d been in her life.

Chantelle beamed with pride.

“You chose not to put her in the room you and Charlotte shared?” he said. “The play room with the mezzanine?”

Emily felt a little jolt of pain in her chest to hear him refer to her childhood room. He’d locked it up after Charlotte’s death, forcing Emily to switch rooms. That had been the first sign, Emily realized now, that her father wasn’t going to process Charlotte’s death, that her dying was going to become the catalyst to him abandoning her.

“That’s the bridal suite,” Daniel explained, taking over while Emily remained mute. “The mezzanine was a great selling point. Plus, we wanted Chantelle close to us.”

The emotion was getting to be too much for Emily. She had no idea it was possible to feel so many conflicting, complex things at once. It suddenly dawned on her that once this tour was over, once they sat down in the living room face to face, she would release an explosion of rage at her father.

She felt her father’s hand on her arm suddenly, steadying her, reassuring her. She looked into his blue eyes, saw the grief and regret within them, mixing with utter relief. He was silently telling her that it was okay, he understood her anger. She didn’t need to keep hiding it.

They traipsed through the rest of the floor, glancing into a few of the guest rooms so that Roy could get a taste of the decor. He hovered briefly beside his study door. The last time he’d been here he was two decades younger, his hair black instead of gray, his body slimmer and more agile instead of the slight paunch that now sat above his waistband.

“It’s the same,” Emily replied. “I haven’t changed it.”

He nodded, but didn’t say a word. She wondered if he was thinking about the myriad of documents he’d locked inside his desk, ones she had now read. The letters and secrets she’d found

of his. Emily knew there was no way of knowing what Roy was thinking. The man was as much a mystery to her now as he always had been.

They went to the third floor and Roy lingered for a while beside the stairs up to the widow's walk. Was that New Year's Eve evening on his mind? Emily wondered. The one where he'd told her not to be scared, to open her eyes and look at the fireworks? Or had he forgotten all those memories like she once had?

Chantelle skipped around, showing him into all of the empty guest rooms. She seemed excited to have him here, and so proud to show him her home. Emily wished she could feel as light as the child clearly did, but there was so much going on in her mind it filled her to the brim with anguish.

"I'm really amazed by the work you've done here," Roy said. "It can't have been easy getting all these en suites in."

"It wasn't," Emily replied. "We only had about twenty-four hours to do it as well. Which is a long story."

"I have time." Roy smiled.

Emily didn't even know how to respond to that. Time was not something she could take for granted with him. She couldn't trust his sentiments.

"Let's head to the living room," she said, stiffly. "Have something to drink?" Then, realizing her slip-up in suggesting alcohol to an alcoholic, she added quickly, "Coffee."

With each step down the staircase, Emily felt her anger growing stronger. She hated the feeling. She wanted this reunion to be a joyful one, but how could it be, really, when she had all this resentment inside? Her father had to hear about the pain he had caused her.

They reached the downstairs hallway. Daniel headed to the kitchen to make the coffee as Chantelle showed Roy into the living room. He gasped when he saw the renovations, the way Emily had blended new styles and old styles, the way she'd incorporated modern art and Kandinsky glassware.

"Is that my old piano?" he asked.

Emily nodded. "I had it restored. The guy who did it, Owen, he plays here sometimes. He'll be playing at our wedding, actually."

For the first time, Emily felt a sense of triumph. Having not lived in Sunset Harbor long, Owen wasn't someone her father had known before her, for longer than her, or knew better than her. There were people here who were her own, who weren't tainted by the unpleasantness of that shared past.

"Owen helps me with my singing," Chantelle said.

"Oh, you sing?" Roy replied. "Can I hear a bit?"

"Maybe later," Emily cut in. "Chantelle promised me she'd tidy up all of her toys today."

"Can't I do it later?" Chantelle wailed.

She clearly wanted to spend more time with Papa Roy and Emily couldn't blame her. On the surface he was like a gentle giant, a Santa Claus of a man. But Emily couldn't keep plastering a pretend smile on her face forever just for Chantelle's sake. It was time for her and her father to talk like grown-ups.

Emily shook her head. "Why don't you get it done right now, then you'll have the whole day to play with Papa Roy, okay?"

Chantelle relented and left the room with a stomp in her step.

"You've opened up the speakeasy," Roy noted, looking at the sparkingly renovated bar. He seemed impressed by the way Emily had kept the period of the place in the same way he had, an homage to a time gone by. "You know it's original."

She nodded. "I figured as much. Except the liquor bottles."

Without Chantelle to buffer the situation, a tenseness rose between them. Emily gestured to the sofa.

"Will you sit?"

Roy nodded and settled himself in. His face had blanched of color as though sensing that the moment of reckoning was upon them.

But before Emily had a chance, Daniel appeared with a tray containing the coffee pot, cream, sugar, and mugs. He set it down on the coffee table. Silence swelled as he poured the drinks.

Roy cleared his throat. "Emily Jane, if you have questions to ask me, you can."

Emily's ability to remain polite and cordial broke. "Why did you leave me?" she blurted out.

Daniel's head snapped up with surprise. His eyes were as wide as saucers. He probably hadn't realized Emily's joy at having Roy back had dragged up her anger as well, that she'd been carrying her emotion with her throughout the whole tour of the house. He stood then.

"I should give you both some time," he said politely.

Emily turned her eyes up to him. He looked so awkward standing there, as though suddenly encroaching on a private matter, and Emily felt a little guilty to have turned the conversation sour so quickly in his presence, without giving him the chance to excuse himself in a more polite manner.

"Thank you," she said as he hurried out of the room.

She turned her gaze back to her father. Roy seemed hurt by her evident pain but he breathed calmly and looked at her with gentle eyes.

"I was broken, Emily Jane," he began. "After losing Charlotte I was a broken man. I drank. I had affairs. I alienated my friends in New York City until I couldn't bear to be there anymore. Your mom and I split, though that was a long time coming. I came here to put my life back together."

"Only you didn't," Emily replied, hotly. "You ran away. You left me."

She could feel tears prickling in her eyes. Her father's were growing red and misty too. He looked down into his lap, his expression one of shame.

"I was ignoring things," he said sadly. "I thought I could pretend everything was okay. Even though it had been years since Charlotte had died, I hadn't really let myself feel anything. I never went in the room you shared, moving you to a different one if you recall."

Emily nodded. She remembered vividly her father blocking access to parts of the house, making certain areas out of bounds for her during her summer visits – the widow's walk, the third floor, the garages, his study, the basement – until she'd all but forgotten they ever existed or what they contained. She remembered his increasingly erratic behavior, his obsession with collecting antiques that seemed to her like less of a hobby and more of a compulsion, his hoarding behavior. But moreover she remembered the diminishing contact, the way she'd spend less and less time with him in Maine until she reached fifteen and, one summer, he just never turned up to collect her. That had been the last time she'd seen him.

Emily wanted to be understanding toward her father's actions. But though one part of her understood he was a broken man who had one day cracked, the torment his actions had caused her could not just be explained away.

"Why didn't you say goodbye?" Emily said, the tears falling down her cheeks in torrents. "How could you just leave like that?"

Roy, too, seemed to be becoming overwhelmed with emotion. Emily noted that his hands were shaking. His lips trembled as he spoke. "I'm so sorry. I've been haunted by that decision."

"You were haunted?" Emily cried. "I didn't know if you were dead or alive! You left me wondering, not knowing. Do you have any idea what that does to a person? My whole life was on pause because of you! Because you were too much of a coward to say goodbye!"

Roy took her words like repeated punches to the face. His expression looked as pained as if they really had been physical blows she'd laid upon him.

"It was inexcusable," he said, barely more than a whisper. "So I won't try to excuse it."

Emily felt her heart racing wildly in her chest. She was so furious she couldn't even see straight. All those years of emotions were flooding out of her with the force of a tsunami.

“Did you even think about how it would hurt me?” she cried, her voice rising in pitch and volume even more.

Roy seemed gripped with anguish, his whole body tensing, his face contorted with regret. Emily was glad to see him that way. She wanted him to hurt just as much as she had.

“Not at first,” he confessed. “Because I wasn’t in my right mind. I couldn’t think of anything or anyone but myself, my own pain. I thought you’d be better off without me.”

He broke down then, sobs juddering through his body until he was shaking from the emotion. Watching him like that was like a stab to the heart. Emily didn’t want to see her father crack and crumble before her eyes, but he needed to know. There would be no moving on, no reparation without getting this all out in the open.

“So you thought leaving would be doing me a favor?” Emily snapped, folding her arms protectively against her chest. “Do you know how messed up that is?”

Roy wept bitterly into his hands. “Yes. I was messed up back then. I stayed messed up for a very long time. When I realized what damage I had done, too much time had passed. I didn’t know how to get back to where it had been, how to undo the hurt.”

“You didn’t even try,” Emily accused him.

“I tried,” Roy said, the pleading in his tone irking Emily even more. “So many times. I came back to the house on a number of occasions but every time the guilt of what I had done overwhelmed me. There were too many memories. Too many ghosts.”

“Don’t say that,” Emily snapped, her mind immediately going to images of Charlotte haunting the house. “Don’t you dare.”

“I’m sorry,” Roy repeated, gasping with anguish.

He looked down into his lap where his old hands were trembling.

On the table in front of them, the undrunk mugs of coffee were turning cold.

Emily took a long, deep breath. She knew her father had been depressed – she’d found the pill prescription amongst his belongings – and that he wasn’t himself, that the grief was making him behave in unforgivable ways. She shouldn’t blame him for that, and yet she couldn’t help it. He’d let her down so badly. Left her with her grief. With her *mother*. There was so much brewing anger inside of Emily’s heart even if she knew that blame had no place there.

“What can I do to make it up to you, Emily Jane?” Roy said, his hands in a prayer position. “How can I even begin to heal the damage I caused?”

“Why don’t you start by filling in the blanks,” Emily replied. “Tell me what happened. Where you went. What you’ve been doing all these years.”

Roy blinked, as though surprised by Emily’s line of questioning.

“It was the wondering that killed me,” Emily explained, sadly. “If I’d just known you were safe somewhere, I could have dealt with it. You have no idea how many scenarios I cooked up in my mind, how many different lives I imagined you were living. I spent years not being able to sleep because of it. It was like my mind wouldn’t stop conjuring up options until it found the correct one, even though there was no way for it to do so. It was an impossible, futile task, but I couldn’t stop. So that’s how you can help. Start by giving me the truth, by telling me what I didn’t know for all those years. *Where were you?*”

Roy’s tears finally slowed. He snuffled, dabbing his eyes with his sleeve. Then he cleared his throat.

“I split my time between Greece and England. I made a home for myself in Falmouth, Cornwall, on the coast of England. It’s a beautiful place. Cliffs and wonderful scenery. There’s a fantastic artists’ scene there.”

How fitting, Emily thought, remembering his obsession with Toni’s artwork, the way in which he’d hung one of her lighthouse paintings up in the New York City home he’d shared with Patricia, and how angry Emily herself had felt when she’d realized how brazen he’d been, how disrespectful.

“How did you afford it?” Emily challenged. “The police said there’d been no activity in your bank accounts. It was one of the reasons I thought you were dead.”

Roy winced at the word. Emily could tell how bad he felt to be confronted by the pain he’d put her through. But he needed to hear this. And she needed to say it. It was the only way they could move forward.

“I didn’t sell any of my antiques, if that’s what you mean,” he began. “I left all of that for you.”

“Am I supposed to thank you?” Emily asked bitterly. “It’s not like a diamond can make up for years of neglect.”

Roy nodded sadly, taking the brunt of her angry words. Emily began to accept that he was acknowledging her, that he was no longer trying to explain his actions but to listen instead to the hurt they had caused her.

“You’re right,” he said quietly. “I didn’t mean to imply that it could.”

Emily tensed her jaw. “Well go on, then,” she said. “Tell me what happened after you left. How you supported yourself.”

“At first I lived from one day to the next,” Roy explained. “I made money doing whatever I could. Odd jobs. Car and bike repairs. Tinkering. I found my feet making and repairing clocks. I still do that now. I’m a horologist. I make ornate clocks with hidden keys and secret compartments.”

“Of course you do,” Emily said, bitterly.

The look of shame returned to Roy’s face.

“What about love?” Emily asked. “Did you ever settle down?”

“I live alone,” Roy replied sadly. “I have since I left. I didn’t want to cause anyone any more pain. I couldn’t bear to be around people.”

For the first time, Emily began to feel sympathy for her father, imagining him lonely, living like a hermit. She started to feel as though she had released as much pain as she needed to, that she had blamed him enough to finally be able to hear his story. A cathartic wave washed over her.

“It’s why I don’t really use any modern technology,” Roy continued. “There’s a phone booth in town that I use to make my calls, which are few and far between. The local post office lets me know if anyone’s responded to my horologist ad. When I’m feeling strong enough, I go to the local library and check my emails to see whether you’ve been in touch.”

Emily paused, frowned. This was surprising to her. “You do?”

Roy nodded. “I’ve been leaving clues for you, Emily Jane. Every time I came back to the house I left another crumb for you to find. The email address was the biggest step I took because I knew as soon as you found it, it would provide a direct line from you to me. But the anticipation, the waiting, it was unbearable. So I limited myself to only a few checks a year. When I got your email I flew right here.”

Emily realized then that this was the reason for those additional months of anguish he’d put her through after she’d learned he was still alive and then had contacted him. He hadn’t been ignoring her or avoiding her, he simply hadn’t seen her email.

“Is that true?” she asked, her voice straining as tears filled her eyes. “Did you really come here as soon as you saw I’d been in touch?”

“Yes,” Roy replied, his voice barely a whisper. His own tears had begun to fall again. “I’ve been hoping and wishing and dreaming for you to get in contact. I figured that one day you would come back to this place, when you were ready. But I also knew you’d be angry with me. I wanted the ball to be in your court. I wanted you to be the one to make contact with me because I didn’t want to intrude on your life. If you’d moved on without me I thought it would be best to keep it that way.”

“Oh, Dad,” Emily gasped.

Something, finally, was released from within Emily. Something about this last, final, heartbreaking admission from her father was what she’d been needing to know all along. That he was waiting on her to make the move. He hadn’t been avoiding her, keeping himself hidden, he’d

been dropping crumbs for her, trusting that once she put all the pieces together she'd make her own decision about whether or not she could forgive him and allow him back into her life.

She stood and hurried to the opposite couch, throwing her arms around her neck. She sobbed against his shoulder, deep sobs racking through her body. Roy clung to her, shaking too from the outpouring of grief.

"I'm so sorry," he choked, his voice muffled by her hair. "I'm so, so sorry."

They stayed like that for a long time, holding each other, shedding every tear they needed to, squeezing out every last drop of pain. Finally the crying ceased. Everything became silent.

"Do you have any more questions?" Roy finally said quietly. "I'm not going to keep secrets from you anymore. I'm not going to hide anything."

Emily felt exhausted, spent with emotion. Her father's chest rose and fell with each deep breath he took. She was so tired she felt as if she could fall asleep right here in his arms. But at the same time, she still had a million questions burning in her mind, but one more than others.

"The night when Charlotte died..." she began. "Mom filled me in with some stuff but she only gave me one side of the story. What happened?"

Roy's arms tightened around her. Emily knew it was hard for him to remember that night but she desperately wanted to know the truth, or at least his version of it. Maybe she'd be able to plaster together the three parts – Patricia's, Roy's, her own – and create something that made sense.

"I'd taken you for Thanksgiving and Christmas," Roy began. "Things weren't going well with your mom so she stayed home. But then you both came down with the flu."

"I think I remember," Emily said. She'd flashed back to some childhood memories of fevers. "Toni's dog, Persephone, was there. I collapsed in the hall."

Roy nodded, but he looked embarrassed. Emily knew why; this had been a turning point in his affair with Toni, the point when he'd been brazen enough to have his mistress's and his children's lives intersect.

"Do you remember your mom turning up unannounced?" Roy said.

Emily shook her head.

"She'd wanted to be there to look after you both since you were so sick."

"That doesn't sound like Mom," Emily said.

Roy laughed. "No, it doesn't. Maybe it was an excuse. She suspected the affair and it was her way of turning up unannounced and catching me in the act."

Emily let out a subdued nod. That was more her mother's style.

"You must have blocked out the argument because I'm sure we were shouting loud enough for them to hear at the harbor." He shrugged. "I don't know if it was that that woke Charlotte up. She was on medicine that made her groggy. You both were. But she woke up and I suppose she got confused looking for us, or was just generally feeling unwell and on medication. She ended up in the outhouse with the pool. I suppose you know the rest."

Emily did. But what she didn't realize was how little of a role she'd had to play in it all. It wasn't her fault for not waking when Charlotte did and stopping her sister wandering away. Nor was it her fault for speaking so enthusiastically about the new pool and planting the excitement in her sister's mind to go and see it. She'd been ill, confused, possibly even terrified by their parents' fight. None of it had been her fault. Not a single bit.

Emily felt a sudden sense of release. Weight she hadn't even realized she'd been carrying lifted from her shoulders. She'd been clinging onto her guilt over Charlotte's death, even after her mom had clarified that it hadn't been her fault. Now she felt as if her father had given her permission to let go of that guilt.

She snuggled in to him, feeling a new sense of peace settle over her.

Just then, the quietness was broken by the sound of soft knocking on the door. Daniel peered around.

“Daniel, come in,” Emily said, beckoning him. She wanted him here now that she and her dad had gotten everything out in the open. She needed his support.

He came and perched on the edge of the couch opposite them. Emily wiped the tears from her lashes, but remained clinging to her father, curled up like a child beside him on the couch.

“Does anyone need anything?” Daniel asked softly. “A tissue? A stiff drink?”

It was just what the moment needed to cut through all the heaviness. Emily hiccupped out a laugh. She felt Roy’s rumbling laugh in his belly.

“I could do with a drink,” she said.

“So could I,” Roy replied. “Is the bar stocked?”

Daniel took the lead. “It is. Come on. It’s so fantastic in there. I’ll make us drinks.”

Emily hesitated. “Dad, is that a good idea?” she said.

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Roy replied, looking confused.

Emily lowered her voice. “Because of your drinking problem.”

Roy looked astounded. “What drinking problem?” Then his face paled. “Did Patricia tell you I was an alcoholic?”

“You *were* an alcoholic,” Emily replied. “I remember you drinking. All the time.”

“I drank heavily,” Roy admitted. “We both did, your mom and I. It’s one of the reasons our relationship was so volatile. But I wasn’t an alcoholic.”

“What about the eggnogs for breakfast on Christmas?” she asked, remembering how testy her father had been when she’d kicked his drink over.

“That was just Christmas!” Roy exclaimed.

Another piece of Emily’s past realigned itself. She’d fallen for Patricia’s bitter, skewed version of events, had allowed them to replace her own memories of her father. She felt a surge of fury at her mother for making Roy into the villain of their most traumatic experience.

They went into the speakeasy and took seats at the bar. Daniel got to work on the cocktails.

“We have a bartender in the evenings to do this,” he explained to Roy. “Alec. He’s fantastic. Better than me anyhow.”

He poured them each a margarita. Roy took a sip.

“That tastes fantastic,” he said. Then, a little coyly, he added, “I must say what a fine young gentleman you’ve turned out to be.”

Emily felt her heart soar. She smiled, elated finally, feeling like everything was how it ought to be.

“I have you to thank for that,” Daniel replied, shyly, not quite looking Roy in the eye. “For introducing me to things I cared about. Fishing. Sailing.”

“You still sailing?” Roy asked.

“I have a boat at the harbor. Restored thanks to Emily. We take it out as a family. Chantelle loves it too. She’s great at fishing.”

“I still sail a lot as well,” Roy said. “When I’m not working on a clock I spend my time out on the boat. Or in the garden.”

“Do you remember that day you taught me how to grow vegetables?” Daniel asked.

“Of course,” Roy replied. He smiled, reminiscing. “I’d never seen such a scruffy punk of a kid work so hard with a trowel.”

Daniel laughed. “I was eager to learn,” he said. “To take the opportunity. Even if on the outside it looked like I hated the world.”

Emily found it strange to see them joking and laughing. There was so much less hurt between them. It was more like a camaraderie. Daniel had been forever thankful for the man who’d given him a chance when he needed it, even if that same man had disappeared on him as well. Maybe it was just a surprise to Emily to realize how close they had been once, knowing, also, that the summer they’d spent together had been a summer she and her father had spent apart.

Her phone buzzed then and she saw a text from Amy about their scheduled arrival that afternoon. She and Jayne had some urgent business stuff to attend to and were making a stop so would be arriving later than planned. Emily realized, guiltily, that she'd completely forgotten they were on their way. She'd been so caught up with her father everything else had gone out of her mind.

She quickly texted back and then returned her attention to her father and Daniel. They were laughing breezily again.

"I'm so glad that the boat managed to hold," Daniel was exclaiming. "Who'd have thought the weather would turn like that? A storm in the middle of summer."

"It was unfortunate timing," Roy replied. "Considering it was your first ever boat ride."

"Well, I had the best teacher so I wasn't that scared." He smiled, his eyes far away in reminiscence. "Thank you for introducing me to boats, to the water and sailing. I can't imagine my life without them now."

Emily watched on as Roy smiled along with Daniel. Now that she had released her anger she felt an overwhelming sense of peace, of rightness. This should always have been how it was. Her dad hanging out with her fiancé, enjoying one another's company, looking forward to soon becoming part of the same family.

It may have come a little late, but she was going to do everything she possibly could now to enjoy it.

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As the evening wore on, Daniel made another batch of cocktails. He set a glass down in front of Emily just as her phone buzzed with an incoming call.

"It's Amy," she explained. "I'd better take it."

"Amy? From high school?" Roy asked, raising an eyebrow.

Emily nodded. "We're still friends," she informed him. "She's a bridesmaid. She's helping with a lot of the wedding preparations."

Emily dashed out of the speakeasy and took the call.

"Em, we're so sorry," Amy began. "The call took ages and now we're both too exhausted to drive. We're going to have to stop here over night. Don't hate us."

"I won't," Emily told her, secretly relieved that her friends weren't going to interrupt the reunion with her father.

"We'll leave first thing in the morning," Amy added.

"Honestly, Amy, it's fine," Emily said. "Some stuff's come up here anyway."

"What stuff? Wedding stuff? Daniel? Sheila?" She sounded concerned.

"It's nothing like that," Emily explained. Then she took a deep breath. "Amy, my dad is here."

There was a long silence. "What? How? Are you okay?"

Emily didn't know how to answer that, and she really didn't want to go into it too much now. She hadn't fully absorbed it yet. She needed time to untangle her emotions and make sense of it all.

"I'm fine. Let's talk about it when you get here."

Amy didn't sound convinced. "Okay. But if you need someone to talk to, call me right away. See you tomorrow."

Emily ended the call and went back to the speakeasy, to the joyful laughter of Roy and Daniel. Old bosom buddies back together again.

"Well," Roy said, draining the last of the liquor from his glass. "I think it's probably time for me to make myself scarce. Looks like you have guests to attend to."

Emily felt panicked at the thought of Roy leaving. "I have staff, they're covering everything. It's fine for us to spend time together. You don't have to go."

Roy noticed her panic-stricken appearance. "I just meant that it might be time to retire. To sleep."

"You mean you're staying?" Emily said, surprised. "Here?"

"If you have space?" Roy said meekly. "I didn't mean to be presumptuous."

"Of course you can stay!" Emily exclaimed. "How long are you planning to be here?"

"Until the wedding if it's not a problem. I could help out a bit with preparations if needed."

Emily was stunned. Not only was her father here, but he was planning on being here for over a week! It really was a dream come true.

"That would be wonderful," she said.

They went upstairs and checked Roy into the room beside his study. Emily knew he'd want to go in there at some point, probably alone.

"Will this room be okay?" she asked.

"Oh yes. It's quite lovely," Roy replied. "And right beside my secret staircase."

Emily frowned. "Your what?"

"Don't tell me you never found it," Roy said. There was a glint of mischief in his eye, one that revealed the brush with madness he'd once had, the spiraling downward that had turned his playful nature for treasure maps into secrecy and locked vaults with hidden combinations.

"Do you mean the staircase to the widow's walk?" Emily asked. "I found that. But it's on the third floor."

Roy clapped loudly then, as though suddenly delighted. "You never found it! The servants' staircase."

Emily shook her head. "But I've seen the schematics of the whole house. Your speakeasy was the last hidden place on there."

"Something's not hidden if it's on schematics!" Roy exclaimed.

"Show us," Daniel said. He seemed excited, like he had been when the bar had been discovered.

Roy led them into his study. "Didn't you wonder why there was a chimney breast against this wall?" He knocked it, and it let out a hollow sound. "All the other chimney breasts are on external walls. This one is internal."

"It didn't even cross my mind," Emily said.

"Well, it's behind here," Roy said. "If you wouldn't mind giving me a hand, Daniel."

Daniel readily obliged. They removed what Emily saw now was a fake wall, papered to be the same as the rest of the room. And there it was. A staircase. Plain, nothing particularly beautiful to look at, but it was its very existence that excited them.

"I can't believe it," Emily said, stepping inside. "Is this why you chose this room as your study?"

"Of course," Roy replied. "The stairs were a shortcut for the servants to get to the sleeping quarters without being seen by the people in the house. It just goes from here down into the basement, which is where the servants would have slept back in the day."

"And this is the only way in," Emily stated, realizing now why she hadn't found it. The basement still contained rooms unexplored to her, and her father's study was the room she'd messed with the least.

Roy nodded. "Surprise."

Emily laughed and shook her head. "So many secrets."

They headed out of the study and Roy went into his bedroom. Emily went to close the door behind him, but he reached out for her and gave her a kiss goodnight.

Emily stopped, stunned. Her father hadn't kissed her for so many years, even well before he'd walked out of her life.

"Good night, Dad," she said hurriedly.

She shut the door and scurried to her room. Once safely inside, Daniel immediately wrapped her up in a much needed hug.

“How are you holding up?” he asked softly, gently rocking her in his arms.

“I can’t believe he’s really here,” she stammered. “I keep thinking this is a dream.”

“What did you guys talk about?”

“Everything. I mean I know I’m still processing everything but it was cathartic. I feel like we can put all the hurt behind us now and start afresh.”

“So those are happy tears making my shoulder wet?” Daniel joked.

Emily drew back and laughed at the dark patch on Daniel’s shirt. “Oops, sorry,” she said. She hadn’t even realized she’d been crying.

Daniel kissed her lightly. “There’s nothing to apologize about. I get that this is going to be tough. If you need to cry or laugh or shout or anything, I’m here. Okay?”

Emily nodded, so grateful to have such a beautiful human in her life. And now with her dad here, she felt like everything was really slotting into place. At last, after so many years living an unfulfilling life, she felt like she was now finally going to get to live the life she deserved.

Her wedding was only a week away. And now, for the first time, with everyone around her whom she loved, she felt truly ready for it.

Now it was time to get married.

CHAPTER TWO

The next morning Emily awoke earlier than usual, feeling elated. She skipped downstairs to make breakfast, cooking up a feast of eggs, toast, bacon, and pancakes, humming happily to herself the whole while. Daniel came down with Chantelle a little while later. Emily looked at the clock as time passed, becoming worried that her father hadn't yet made an appearance.

"Why don't you knock on his door?" Daniel suggested, clearly having picked up on the reasons behind her furtive glances.

"I don't want to disturb him," Emily replied.

"I'll do it," Chantelle said, leaping up from the breakfast bar.

Emily shook her head. "No, you eat. I'll go."

She wasn't sure what it was that was worrying her so much about disturbing her father. Perhaps it was the niggling feeling in the back of her mind that he wouldn't be there when she knocked, that it would all reveal itself to be a dream after all.

She approached his room cautiously, then cleared her throat, feeling silly. She knocked loudly.

"Dad, I made breakfast. Are you ready to come down?"

When there wasn't a reply, Emily felt her first jolt of panic. But she talked herself down from it. Roy might well be in the shower, unable to hear her.

She tried the handle of his door and found it unlocked. She opened it and peered into his room. His bed was empty, but there was no running water sound coming from the open en suite door, no sign of Roy at all.

Emily immediately gave up on trying to contain her fear. All at once it whooshed at her. Had she pushed him too far last night? Made him too uncomfortable to stay?

She rushed out of the room and into the corridor, then flew down the staircase into the kitchen. It was only the sight of Chantelle's bemused blinking from the breakfast bar that prevented her from screaming for Daniel. Instead, she skidded to a halt and managed to compose herself.

"Daniel, could you give me a hand quickly?" Emily said, trying to stop her face from cracking.

Daniel looked up and frowned. Evidently he could see right through her plastered-on smile. "What with?"

"Umm..." Emily floundered. "Heavy lifting."

"Lifting what?" Daniel pressed.

Emily blurted the first word that came into her mind. "Toilet rolls."

Chantelle giggled. "Heavy toilet rolls?"

"Daniel," Emily snapped. "Please. Just help me for a moment."

Daniel sighed and got up from the table. Emily grabbed his arm and pulled him out into the corridor.

"It's Dad," she whispered. "He's not in his room."

By the change in Daniel's expression, Emily knew it had finally sunk in why she was behaving so oddly.

"He won't have left," Daniel reassured her, rubbing her arms. "He's probably wandering the grounds."

"You don't know that," Emily replied. She was fully giving in to her panic now and was starting to tear up.

"I'll check the yard," Daniel said. "You check the house."

Emily nodded, glad to have been given direction. Her own mind had blanked out from fear.

Daniel hurried outside and Emily took the stairs, rushing two at a time. She checked each of the open guest rooms but to no avail. Through the windows in the landing she could see Daniel out in the yard, rushing about. So he hadn't had any luck either.

Then Emily hit on a brain wave. She ran to the end of the corridor and flung open the door to Roy's study.

The room was dark, the curtains drawn, but the desk lamp was on, creating a spotlight effect on the surface of the wood. Hunched behind it was the unmistakable silhouette of Roy Mitchell, bent over something, tinkering.

Emily let out a huge sigh and dropped her shoulder against the door frame, letting it support her weight as the tension left her body.

"Oh, good morning," Roy said innocently, looking up at the sound of her exhalation. "I was just fixing this." He held up a cuckoo clock, its back door hanging open. He closed it gently and the cuckoo sprang out the front. Smiling, he set it back down. "Good as new."

Emily's panic disappeared and was replaced just as swiftly with happiness. Seeing her father tinkering away was odd in its familiarity. It was like he'd always been there. The sight filled her with joy.

"Are you ready for some breakfast?" Emily asked.

Roy nodded and stood up. As they went downstairs together, Emily knocked on the window of the landing where she could spy Daniel rushing around the yard. He looked up at the noise and Emily flashed him a thumbs-up sign. She watched him sag with relief.

They went into the kitchen, where Chantelle was still eating her breakfast, oblivious to the goings-on.

"Looks like you put on a feast," Roy said, chuckling as he slid into the seat beside Chantelle.

"How did you sleep Papa Roy?" Chantelle asked. She had fallen asleep the night before in the process of cleaning her room and was only now seeing him again.

Roy poured himself a glass of juice. "Wonderfully, thank you, my dear. The bed was just as comfortable as the one I used to sleep in when this was my house."

As she heard his words, Emily had a sudden worry. The house still *was* his. She'd taken it on the assumption that he was missing presumed dead, but now that that was no longer the case, he legally had every right to take it back from her.

Daniel came in to rejoin the family breakfast.

"Early morning stroll?" Roy asked him as he took his seat.

Daniel caught Emily's eye knowingly. "Nothing like fresh air first thing in the morning," he said with a hint of sarcasm that Emily knew was for her benefit.

"Papa Roy was just telling me about when this was his house," Chantelle informed Daniel.

"Well, it actually still is," Emily explained. She looked up at her father, worried. "Do you want it back?"

Roy began to laugh then. "Goodness, no! I'm thrilled for you to have it, darling. It's not like I'm planning on moving back to Sunset Harbor."

Emily should have felt happy to hear confirmation her father wasn't planning on taking the house back from her, but instead it was sadness she felt at the confirmation that he was only here temporarily. She wasn't sure what she'd been thinking, whether she had even thought that far ahead at all, but it now felt so stark that he would be leaving her all over again.

She forked her grapefruit glumly and took a bitter bite.

"How long will you be staying with us?" Chantelle asked in her innocent childhood manner.

"Just until after the wedding," Roy explained in a soft voice that he seemed to save just for Chantelle, one that Emily remembered him using with her when she was that age. "That's why I'm here. To help prepare." He looked up at Emily. "Is there anything you'd like me to help with?"

Emily was still trying to wrap her head around the fact that Roy's appearance in her life was to be brief and fleeting, that no sooner had he returned than he would be leaving again. The last thing she could think of now were the things that needed organizing! And anyway, he was a bit late to the game. It was just over one week before the wedding, so pretty much most things had already been done.

“You could keep an eye on Chantelle when I’m rushed off my feet with things,” Emily said. “If she doesn’t mind?”

Chantelle grinned. “We can fix up Trevor’s greenhouse!”

Roy looked interested. “Trevor’s greenhouse?”

“Trevor Mann from next door,” Emily began. Then she shut her mouth. Her grief over Trevor’s death was still raw. She wasn’t quite sure how to explain the situation. “We became friends recently and, well, he passed away. He left me his house in his will.”

Roy’s eyebrows rose. Emily could tell from the expression on his face that his own relationship with Trevor had been bad.

“Trevor Mann left you his house?” Roy asked, surprised.

Emily nodded. “I know. It was an unlikely friendship. I was there for him at the end.”

“How did he die?” Roy asked, softly.

“Perhaps we shouldn’t discuss this at the table,” Daniel interrupted, looking over at Chantelle, who had gone quite pale.

Roy turned his full attention to Chantelle. He dropped his voice into his soothing, paternal one.

“I’d love to fix up the greenhouse with you,” he said. “You can be the boss and tell me what needs doing.”

Chantelle brightened instantly. She’d been desperate to check on the fruit trees ever since Trevor’s passing, but Emily had always held back, not quite ready to open that wound.

“Can I show Papa Roy right now?” Chantelle asked, looking first from Daniel, then to Emily.

Daniel gestured to Emily, leaving the ball in her court. She’d spoken to him so many times about not being ready to set foot inside the house, he clearly thought it best for her to make the decision now rather than promise Chantelle something that they weren’t able to keep.

“Sure, okay,” Emily said.

She was a little reluctant to set foot inside the dead man’s home, but with her father and loved ones by her side supporting her, perhaps it wouldn’t be as painful as she anticipated.

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Emily took a deep breath and turned the key in the lock of Trevor’s front door. It swung open, letting out the stale air that had been cooped up inside for months. The corridor was in darkness and Emily shivered, feeling unnerved.

She went in first, leading the way. Behind her, Daniel held tightly onto Chantelle’s hand, soothing the little girl.

As she walked along the corridor, Emily couldn’t help but recall snippets of the conversations she’d shared with Trevor. Memories flooded back to her as she took in the sight of the table where they’d sat and shared tea, of the plastered up bit of ceiling from when a storm had crashed into the house. This place was filled with memories of Trevor. It was overwhelming to think of one day organizing this place.

“The greenhouse is just through here,” Chantelle said.

Emily stood back and allowed the girl to take command. They all followed her out the back of the house and in through the glass door of the greenhouse.

Though Trevor had enjoyed sitting out here in his final weeks, the greenhouse was in a terrible state. Everyone glanced around, taking in the enormity of the amount of work that would need to be done in order to get this place restored to its former glory.

Chantelle pulled out her notepad and began taking notes. “I think we need a fountain,” she said. “Benches so we can sit and read in the summer. A swing, too. A place where Daddy can grow his vegetables. And a flower garden.”

“I know all about which plants grow in which climates,” Roy told Chantelle. “I can help you pick the right types.”

He was taking Chantelle very seriously, which delighted Emily to see. He was even carrying a matching notepad and pink feathered pen, which he used to write down supplies they needed.

“What color scheme were you thinking of?” Roy asked in a businesslike manner.

“Yellow and pink,” Chantelle said. “Or rainbow.”

“All excellent choices.” He jotted down some notes in his pad. “We’re going to need some new glass,” he added. “To make sure this place is watertight and to keep it warm. Want to go on a trip to the hardware store?”

Chantelle nodded excitedly. “Then we can go to Raj’s and get the seeds for the flowers.”

“Tell me, do you have your own gardening tools? Gloves? Apron?”

Chantelle shook her head.

“Then we’ll have to get all of that as well,” Roy explained. “Every gardener needs their own outfit. You’d look quite splendid in green gingham.”

Chantelle grinned and Emily found that she herself was smiling just as widely. Seeing her dad bonding with the child over the greenhouse was a moment she would treasure forever. She thanked Trevor silently for having given her such a generous gift that had allowed for such a beautiful moment to happen.

Daniel ruffled Chantelle’s hair. “Come on. I’ll drive you and Papa Roy to town.”

They headed back out into Trevor’s garden, then crossed the lawns in the direction of the driveway where Daniel’s pickup truck was parked.

“Are you coming too, Emily?” Chantelle asked as they reached the car.

Emily pulled open the back door and helped her inside. “I can’t,” she explained. “I have guests coming. Amy and Jayne. You remember them.”

Chantelle pulled a face. She hadn’t been so fond of Emily’s New York City friends last time they’d visited. Emily couldn’t blame her. They were hardly cuddly and calm like Papa Roy was.

Emily shut the door and Daniel gunned the truck to life.

“Have fun!” she called out, waving at her family in the truck as it began crawling out of the driveway.

It might not look like the conventional picture of a family, but it was hers and that was what mattered to Emily.

Just as they turned the corner and out of sight, Emily saw Amy’s car appear at the other end. She was struck with the sudden feeling that however crazy things had felt over the last day, the craziness was about to ramp up even more.

CHAPTER THREE

“Sorry we’re late!” Amy cried as she got out of her car. “I really wanted to get the drive done in one day but there was a problem with one of our Japanese suppliers and it took forever to sort out.”

“A PR nightmare,” Jayne added, clambering out from the passenger side. “Compounded by the fact we had to stay in a disgusting roadside motel.”

“I’m just glad you guys are here now,” Emily replied, hugging them both in turn.

Amy opened up the trunk and started pulling out bags. She had brought a lot of luggage, Emily noted.

“What is all this stuff?” Emily asked, heaving a case from the back. It weighed a ton.

“Wedding supplies,” Amy replied. “Swatches for color schemes. Fabrics. Fragrances. All sorts of things.”

“But everything is organized,” Emily protested.

Amy rolled her eyes. “You’ll change your mind about things. Right down to the last second. What kind of friend would I be if I hadn’t brought things to cover every eventuality?”

Emily laughed. She couldn’t see herself changing her mind on anything but she trusted Amy. Plus her friend was always happier when she had a project, hence becoming a successful businesswoman while still a teenager.

“So where is hotcakes?” Jayne asked.

“You mean Daniel?” Emily replied, raising an eyebrow. “He’s in town with Chantelle and my dad. They’re buying some stuff to fix up the greenhouse.”

“Your dad, huh,” Jayne said, shaking her head with what Emily recognized from herself as disbelief. “When Ames told me I couldn’t believe it. I really didn’t see that one coming.”

Amy shot her a daggered look.

“What?” Jayne said, defensively. “I just totally thought he was dead.”

Just then Lois appeared to help them with their cases. She dragged two behind her along the driveway and up the porch steps.

“She’s still here?” Jayne asked loudly out the corner of her mouth. “I thought you were firing her.”

Emily shook her head. “Keep your voice down,” she hissed.

They went inside the inn and Lois checked them in. “I can show you to your rooms and take some of your cases,” she said.

Amy looked impressed. “She can do her job at last!” she whispered to Emily as Lois began lugging some of the cases upstairs.

Emily cringed. She loved her friends but they could be insensitive and rude sometimes.

“I need a shower,” Jayne said. “Get some of that motel grime off my body!”

As they disappeared upstairs to settle in and freshen up, Emily heard the bell ring. She could already tell today was going to be a whirlwind. She trotted down the steps and answered the door.

A young woman with black curly hair and glasses stood there. She had dangly earrings and lots of beaded necklaces hanging over a paisley patterned scarf.

“Hey, I’m Bryony,” she said confidently, holding out a hand covered in rings. “Serena’s friend from Maine U. I’m here to do the marketing for the website.” She grinned, showing off a gap between her teeth.

“Of course,” Emily said. “Come in.”

Bryony swirled inside, bringing the smell of incense with her. She had a laptop case slung over one shoulder.

“Okay if I set up in your reception room?” she asked, nodding toward the guests’ lounge.

“Sure, of course. Whatever you need,” Emily replied.

“Wi-Fi password,” Bryony replied. “Oh, and a coffee would be great. I live off the stuff.”

“You and me both,” Emily replied.

She fetched some coffee for Bryony but didn’t have much of a chance to talk to her further because the bell rang again. She answered the door.

This time it was a slim man in leather pants standing on her doorstep. Beneath his fedora he had long hair, and his eyes were covered by sunglasses. She knew some of Daniel’s friends were supposed to be arriving today but this man didn’t look like the kind she’d expect Daniel to be friends with.

“Can I help you?” Emily asked.

“I have a booking,” the man said. He had a distinct swagger about him, a sort of confidence that oozed from him.

As Emily led him inside and went behind the reception desk, she heard whispering coming from one of the rooms. She looked behind her and saw Marnie, Vanessa, and Tracey peeping out from behind the kitchen door, giggling.

When Emily turned back she saw that the man had removed his sunglasses, and to her surprise, she was staring at a very familiar face. It was the famous singer Roman Westbrook.

“Mr. Westbrook?” Emily said, trying to maintain her composure but freaking out at the same time. To think that her little B&B could be host to someone so famous! She really had come far!

“You can call me Roman.”

Emily felt a bolt of excitement shoot through her.

“You’re booked into our cottage for two weeks,” she noted, reading aloud from the computer screen. She saw that Serena had made the booking and wondered why on earth her friend hadn’t shared the information of a famous singer with her. It was very unlikely that Serena wouldn’t know who Roman Westbrook was. She must have kept it secret specifically to surprise them.

Emily turned around and found her fingers trembling as she unhooked the keys to the cottage. Behind the kitchen door, she caught sight of Marnie, Vanessa, and Tracey still watching, bug-eyed and giggly. Emily flashed them a surprised and excited grin.

Just then Lois appeared at the top of the stairs, having finished settling Amy and Jayne into their rooms. She stopped short on the staircase when she saw Roman Westbrook standing in the hallway and her eyes turned as wide as saucers.

Emily fought hard to keep her composure, turning to Roman and smiling with what she hoped was her professional hostess manner. “If you’d like to come with me, I’ll get you settled in.”

She led him along the corridor and back out the main door, turning to look behind to see whether Lois was still frozen to the spot on the staircase. Vanessa, Marnie, and Tracey had all emerged from the kitchen, tiptoeing as close as they dared behind her, giggling in a huddle like a bunch of school girls. Lois galloped down the stairs and joined them, whispering excitedly behind her hand.

Emily showed Roman along the pathway to the carriage house, her heart fluttering every time she allowed herself to think about just who she was walking beside. When she reached the door, she unlocked it, fumbling a little in her excitement, then gestured for Roman to enter.

“This will do nicely,” Roman said, glancing around at the self-contained apartment with a satisfied nod.

Emily felt a thrill of excitement to know that her little inn was good enough for a pop star of Roman Westbrook’s caliber! It was almost like she was floating along in a dream.

She showed him the bedroom and bathroom, as well as some of the utilities he had at his disposal, pinching herself the whole time, thinking, *Did I really just show Roman Westbrook a washer-dryer / oven / coffee machine? How is this my life?*

When the time came to hand over his key and their fingers brushed, Emily felt as wobbly as a teenager. It wasn’t every day one made skin-to-skin contact with a famous pop star!

“I’ll leave you to settle in,” Emily said. “The big house is always open for guests so please feel free to come in anytime you want. We have a bar and lounge inside for guests.”

Roman flashed her one of his famous smiles.

She twirled out of the carriage house, feeling light, as though walking on air, and hurried back to the inn to rejoice in the experience with her staff.

When she got back to the inn she found the four of them still giggling away.

Lois was beside the computer. "Serena booked him in," she announced. "I bet she didn't say a word because she wanted to surprise us."

"Well, that worked," Marnie laughed, joining Lois at her side. She pointed at the computer enthusiastically. "Oh my god. He's here for TWO WEEKS!"

"That means he'll be here for the wedding!" Lois squealed.

Everyone began to cry and whoop.

"I wonder why he's in town," Tracey said.

"It can't be a vacation," Marnie added. "He could vacation anywhere in the world. I doubt he'd want to come here."

"Perhaps he's recording his new album here?" Tracey guessed.

"In what recording studio?" Vanessa exclaimed.

"Maybe he's shooting a video!" Lois cried, growing even more excited. "And we'll all get to be extras!"

The bell rang yet again but the girls were so lost in their conversation they didn't seem to even hear; at least Emily assumed that was the case because none of them moved. She took it upon herself to get the door.

To the background sound of her gossiping female staff, she pulled open the door and saw three men standing on the step. Burly. Tattooed. Rough-looking, in faded jeans and patched up leather jackets. Emily wondered if they were part of Roman Westwood's entourage. Security guards or something. They certainly didn't look like they were here to soak up the quaint seaside vibes.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"We're here for Daniel," one of them said. "Hear he's marrying some broad from New York City!"

They started laughing.

"We're his friends," one added. "His best men."

Emily felt her face drain of blood. These were Daniel's school friends? The ones she'd pushed for him to invite? The ones who were going to be in the wedding party?

She opened her mouth to tell them to come in but found her voice had completely failed her. All she managed was a shrill squeak and the weakest of smiles.

CHAPTER FOUR

Emily was still standing there gaping like a fish at the tattooed men who would soon be in her wedding party when Daniel's pickup truck trundled up the driveway.

"That must be the groom!" one of the tattooed men said, turning on the spot.

The pickup truck slowed to a stop and Daniel hopped out with a spring in his step that was unfamiliar to Emily. She watched, stunned, as the three men bowled down the porch steps and tackled Daniel.

They'd better not bruise his face, she thought, wincing at the rough-and-tumble of old friends reunited.

Finally, Daniel's face reemerged from the rabble of denim and leather. He was pink-cheeked, grinning widely. By now, Roy had opened up the passenger side door and was halfway out. To Emily's surprise, he was also smiling.

"Well, look, haven't you three grown up," Roy said, laughing.

"Is that Roy?" the first man said.

"I said this was the place!" the second yelled, smacking the third across the chest.

"It was decades ago," the third argued back. "How am I supposed to remember?"

"Because it was the best vacation we ever had!" the first exclaimed.

Roy emerged fully now and extended his hand. "Stuart?"

The man nodded. "Yes. And you remember Clyde and Evan?" He gestured first to the man with the scraggly ginger beard, then to the shorter, overweight man.

"How could I forget that weekend when Daniel invited you all over for fishing?" Roy replied.

"That was great," Evan added. "I don't think we've all been in the same place since that weekend, you know."

"So you're his best men, I presume?" Roy queried.

Stuart beamed widely. "Of course we are. It's only fitting that Daniel's oldest school friends should be in the wedding party."

"Even if it has been over a decade since we all got together," Evan added.

"Have you met my daughter Emily?" Roy said, gesturing to where Emily continued to watch on in disbelief. "I'd never have guessed Daniel would grow up to marry my little princess one day!"

Now it was the three friends' turn to look shocked. They glanced at Emily on the doorstep, mouths open. But rather than appear embarrassed by their mistake, Emily realized they were relishing it. They were clearly the types of men to enjoy embarrassing others. She inwardly cringed.

"*That's* the missus?" Clyde exclaimed. "Well, why didn't she say so?"

He laughed and ran up the porch steps toward Emily. When he reached her he swept her into a bear hug. Predictably, he smelled of stale sweat.

Emily tried to maintain her composure. But really she was panicking inside. She didn't want to judge Daniel too much on his choice of companionship, especially if they were old school friends – kindergarteners tend to pick their friends at random after all – but she just couldn't reconcile the four of them together. This was the closest she'd been to Daniel's bad-boy past. A glimpse of the boy he'd once been and could easily have become had he not left Maine for Tennessee when he did. She should be grateful that he'd chosen these three really, when the other option was Tennessee friends who knew Sheila.

Just then, Chantelle hopped down from the truck and gave a cursory glance in the direction of the three men. She wasn't fazed, however. She was used to random people coming to the inn and had certainly come across hillbilly types in her earlier years in Tennessee.

"Papa Roy, can we start on the greenhouse, please?" she asked.

“Of course,” Roy said. Then, turning his attention to Stuart, Clyde, and Evan, he added, as polite as ever, “If you gentlemen will excuse me.”

Roy and Chantelle busied themselves with unloading the pickup of all the items they’d purchased.

“Let me give you the tour,” Daniel said to his friends.

He led them past Emily and into the B&B.

She watched them go, still stunned, still unable to reconcile Daniel with these three burly men. She turned to follow them inside, in time to see Amy and Jayne walking down the staircase.

Stuart whistled at the two women and Emily grimaced. Neither of her friends was the type to let that kind of thing fly. Not even Jayne, who usually loved male attention. Terrified it was all about to kick off, Emily rushed in to intervene in advance.

“Amy, Jayne,” she called out. “Did you settle into your rooms okay?”

Amy flicked her narrowed eyes away from Stuart and to her friend. “Yes. Thanks, Em. But we have to get to work. There are tons of errands to run.”

“Really?” Emily said with a groan. She felt like all she’d been doing for weeks was planning the wedding. Could there really be that much more to do? But on the other hand, leaving the inn was probably a good idea. The least amount of time spent with Daniel’s friends the better. “Okay,” she accepted. “Let’s get out of here.”

She rushed her friends out the door before Daniel had a chance to introduce his friends. Out the corner of her eye she caught sight of his expression. He seemed annoyed by her behavior, by her rudeness at not allowing everyone to become acquainted. But she couldn’t help it. If he’d prepared her in some way maybe it would have been different. At the very least she could have told him to make sure they didn’t catcall her friends, and warn her friends to expect some rube-like behavior. But just like always, Daniel had kept her in the dark about some of the more unsavory elements of his past. And once again, the blank spaces of his past niggled at her, making her doubt the very foundation their relationship stood upon.

*

Emily and her friends drove to the next town over in order to go to a perfume boutique that Amy had been wanting to visit for years.

“They make the fragrance specifically for you,” Amy explained as she drove. “A bespoke scent for a unique lady.”

“Sounds...” Emily paused. She’d wanted to say unnecessary but caught herself at the last second. Instead she finished with a meek and unconvincing, “...fun.”

“Everyone’s doing it these days,” Jayne added from the back seat. “It would be simply uncouth not to.”

Clearly excited by the trip, Amy parked and then steered Emily by the shoulders into the store, bouncing with every step.

The lady at the counter greeted them with a warm smile. Emily was grateful when Amy took the lead. She didn’t much feel like interacting. Her mind was still stuck on Daniel’s friends.

“Here,” Amy said, shoving a smelling strip under Emily’s nose. “What do you think? Blood orange.”

Emily crinkled her nose. “I don’t think that’s very me.”

“No, I suppose not,” Amy said. She bent her head down and began looking through the other options of smells.

“You seem distracted,” Jayne said to Emily.

“Sorry,” Emily replied. “I’m just... thinking.”

“Not about fragrances, I assume,” Jayne asked. “Come on, Em. You know you can tell me anything.”

Emily shook her head. “I don’t want to say. I don’t want to sound like a bitch.”

Jayne gave her a look. “Honestly, this is *me* you’re talking to. I’m the Queen Bitch. I doubt anything you could say would even come close to sounding bitchy to my ears.”

Just then, Amy rushed over and grabbed Emily’s arms. She dabbed some perfume onto her wrist.

“Smell!” she exclaimed with excitement.

Emily sniffed. The fragrance was fresh and floral. “That’s much better,” she said.

Amy grinned. “Okay. I’ve got it. I’ve got the perfect smell to complement this.” She rushed away again and bowed heads with the girl behind the counter as they sifted excitedly through the samples.

“So?” Jayne pressed Emily. She clearly wasn’t going to let her drop it.

Emily sighed loudly. “It’s just those guys at the inn.”

“The boars who looked like they hadn’t showered in a week?”

“Yup, those ones,” Emily replied. She bit her lip. “Well, they’re Daniel’s friends. His best men.”

“Oh dear God!” Jayne exclaimed with a theatrical gasp. “They’re going to be in the photos?”

Emily felt her cheeks burn. Jayne’s horrified response was making her feel worse.

“It’s just the way that he keeps these things about his past from me,” Emily explained. “Like I would never have imagined in a million years that his best friends would be like that.”

“Me neither,” Jayne replied. “I thought he’d have some hunky lumberjack types.”

Emily sank her head into her hands. “I wish I’d have let him ask his boss now,” she replied glumly. “I’d prefer paint-stained hands over those three any day.”

Amy came over with another scent stick, a look of concentration on her face. Without even speaking she grabbed Emily’s arm and dabbed the new scent inside her wrist, on top of the first one. Amy sniffed. Frowned. Sniffed again. Then grinned.

“I think I’ve got it,” she said.

Emily sniffed. “Yeah, that’s nice,” she replied in a lackluster voice.

“You don’t like it?” Amy asked.

“It’s not that,” Jayne interrupted. “Emily met the groomsmen today.”

Amy raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Daniel’s elusive friends?”

Jayne grabbed Amy’s arm. “You’ll never guess. It was those three in the foyer!”

Amy’s eyes widened. “The ones I almost unleashed all hell upon?”

“The very same.”

Amy looked at Emily then. “Oh, babe. I’m sorry.”

Emily cringed again. Daniel’s friends were oafs, but she was revealing a very nasty side of both her and her friends’ personalities. She knew they were being judgmental and petty. But she couldn’t help it.

“Look,” Amy said, taking charge of the situation as she was often wont to do. “Why don’t we finish up here now we’ve found the scent and head back to the inn? We can have some drinks, get everyone’s tongues loosened up a bit. Then we’ll get to the bottom of it for you. Find out the deal. Who they are, what they do. Find out any juicy gossip.”

“It’s the juicy gossip I’m worried about,” Emily replied glumly. “I just don’t understand how Daniel can be who he is with this mysterious past and these strange friends. None of it matches up. There’s like young Daniel who hated his home life and was flunking school and almost ran away, the one who was friends with those three. Then there’s Tennessee Daniel, the one who fathered a kid and beat a guy to a bloody pulp. Neither of them are my Daniel. It just freaks me out.”

Amy rubbed her shoulder. “You’re just getting wedding jitters. It’s fine. Everyone has pasts.”

“But not everyone hides them like Daniel does.”

“He’s just embarrassed,” Jayne said. “I would be if those were my friends!” She cackled.

Emily wanted to let her friends lift her spirits but it just wasn't helping. The idea of all of them sitting around a table conversing, not to mention with alcohol added to the mix, didn't seem that appealing to her. But it was going to have to happen sooner or later. May as well get it over with.

"Okay, fine," Emily said. "Let's just get it out of the way."

Amy paid for the fragrance, exchanging business cards with the girl behind the counter, and they left the store. Emily's friends linked arms with her, supporting her, like always, through every step of her journey.

"I don't know what I'd do without you guys," Emily said as they strolled together back to Amy's car.

"I do," Amy said with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "You'd smell a whole lot worse!"

CHAPTER FIVE

It was an awkward mix of people, to say the least. The only relief Emily could feel as she looked at the strange array of faces scattered around the porch table was that her father and Chantelle weren't here, since they were too absorbed in their work in the greenhouse to participate.

Conversation was stilted. Even a pitcher of beer didn't seem to help.

"How did you all meet, then?" Amy asked, evidently trying to be as friendly as possible.

"I'm Daniel's oldest friend," Stuart said. "I met him at school, way back. Back when he was still called Dashiell!"

"The less said about that the better, thanks," Daniel replied. He'd changed his name from the one that matched his father's at a young age.

"I joined the gang in middle school," Evan added. "We picked Clyde up in high school."

"We got into mischief from that point onward," Clyde finished. "Then sort of went our separate ways."

"Daniel was the only one who left the state though," Stuart added. "Maybe to get away from us." He laughed.

Emily wondered. Maybe Daniel had wanted a fresh start away from his past when he left for Tennessee.

"There's nothing like a wedding to bring old friends back together," Clyde said.

"And it's great timing, Danny Boy," Stuart said, grabbing Daniel roughly around the neck. "I've only just gotten out on parole."

Emily took a huge swig of her drink. She felt Amy and Jayne shift uncomfortably beside her.

"What were you in for?" Jayne asked.

Amy and Emily shot her daggers. Jayne was clearly just trying to make conversation and, never one to think more than a millisecond before speaking, had asked the question that was on everyone's minds.

"Just a DUI," Stuart said, shrugging like it was absolutely nothing at all.

Emily started to feel very hot. She tugged at the collar of her shirt.

"Oh," Jayne said, exhaling her relief. "I was worried you were going to say murder or something."

Clyde and Evan laughed loudly. Emily kicked Jayne sharply under the table.

"He got off on that charge," Clyde informed Jayne.

Her eyes bulged in disbelief. "Really?"

Clyde and Evan laughed even more loudly this time.

"No!" Clyde exclaimed. "But you should have seen your face."

Jayne wasn't the only one not able to take the joke. Stuart himself looked furious.

"You're one to talk, Clyde," he said. "I'm not the only one sitting around this table who's been inside!"

Emily felt her whole body sag with deflation. These guys were coming across as completely unstable. So much for getting to the bottom of the mystery of these guys; the more they revealed the more she wished she didn't know.

"You guys must have some funny stories about Daniel," Amy said, trying to calm the situation.

Daniel went bright red. "Oh God no, let's not."

But it was too late. His friends' faces were immediately brightening.

"I'm glad you asked," Stuart said. "What would you ladies like to hear? The one where Daniel gets drunk for the first time ever and ends up ripping his pants climbing a chain-link fence or the one where he loses his virginity?"

"Neither," Emily said, shaking her head, feeling the panic begin to set in.

Daniel, too, was looking petrified at the prospect of those two particular stories being relayed. Stuart nudged Emily. “Don’t tell me you haven’t told each other all your dirty secrets yet?”

Emily’s embarrassment grew more and more. Maybe it was because her own past was so difficult and muddy that she hadn’t forced Daniel to open up more about his own, but she was beginning to regret that now. What if both stories were so horrific they put her off marrying him completely?

“There was this girl, Astrid,” Stuart began.

Daniel buried his face in his hands.

“Their eyes met across the room,” Stuart continued. “It was love at first sight. She approached. Daniel couldn’t believe his luck. Then she said the words that struck fire into his heart. ‘Can I borrow your protractor?’”

“Wait,” Emily said, frowning. “What?”

“It was in math class!” came Stuart’s punch line. “Fifth grade.”

Daniel had turned bright red.

Jayne looked confused. “I thought this was a story about when Daniel lost his virginity?”

“I’m getting to that bit,” Stuart said. “So... fast forward, what, five years? Six years? Daniel’s had this pathetic crush on Astrid for our entire lives and finally gets the guts up to ask her to the dance.”

“The rest is history,” Clyde said, winking. “How long did you stay together in the end? Four years?”

Daniel nodded tensely. “Four and a half thereabouts.”

Emily felt a sensation like ice sweep through her. Daniel had never even mentioned the name Astrid. Now it turned out she’d been his first love? A girl he’d pined for, for years? She didn’t want to compare herself to a teenage girl from the past but it sounded like she’d meant more to Daniel than your average first love. It sounded like his relationship with Astrid had been big and important. But he hadn’t mentioned it at all.

“I’m guessing you two didn’t keep in touch?” Stuart asked.

Daniel shook his head.

“Too bad,” Stuart said. “She was great. I kind of thought you two would get back together at some point.”

Emily’s face must have gone pale because she felt a reassuring squeeze under the table coming from Amy’s direction.

“Now what I want to know,” Clyde said, “is what you ladies have planned for the bachelorette party?”

“There isn’t one,” Emily said. “Daniel and I decided against having gendered parties.”

“Uh-oh,” Clyde said, looking at Daniel. “Busted.”

Emily frowned. “What?”

Daniel looked guilty. “I didn’t get a chance to tell you,” he said. “The guys decided to throw me a surprise bachelor party. We’re going away for the weekend.”

Emily couldn’t even speak. All she could do was blink.

“Road trip,” Clyde said. “Visiting all the finest strip joints Maine has to offer.”

Beside Emily, she could see Amy balling her hands into fists of rage. Emily herself could feel all the blood draining from her face. In her peripheral vision she could see Daniel’s worried expression. Suddenly the three men burst into laughter.

“Oh, you should have seen your faces!” Evan cried.

“We’re not really going to strip joints,” Stuart laughed. “We’re going hunting!” He grabbed Daniel around the neck again and pulled him into a rough sort of headlock-embrace. “We leave on Friday morning.”

Emily had heard enough. She couldn't stand it anymore, sitting here listening to this, her thoughts becoming increasingly chaotic, her nerves increasingly frayed. She'd been trying all day not to freak out but she couldn't hold it in anymore. She stood, making the table wobble in her haste, and darted inside.

CHAPTER SIX

“Emily. Emily, wait!”

She drew to a halt in the corridor, hearing Daniel’s pleading tone approaching from behind. He reached her and touched her arm with a tentative hand.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “The stripper joke was one step too far. I’ll have a word with them.”

Emily led him into the living room, away from any prying ears, and closed the door. She faced him, finally, and saw the earnest expression in his eyes. Daniel’s friends weren’t a reflection on him, she knew that, but she also couldn’t help her contradicting feelings, the ones telling her that in some way they were.

“They’re jerks,” she blurted out.

Daniel sighed. “It was a dumb joke. I can only apologize. But you know I never would do that, right?”

“It’s more than just the joke, Daniel. It’s everything. Their whole attitude stinks. How are you even comfortable having felons in the house with Chantelle?”

Daniel’s expression began to change, to grow a little darker. “They’re not dangerous.”

Emily folded her arms. “Sure, as long as we keep them away from the hard liquor and hide all the car keys,” she said sarcastically.

“What’s gotten into you?” Daniel challenged. “I thought you’d be pleased to meet my friends. You know how much I struggle with compartmentalizing my life. Having you all together is stressful for me too.”

“Oh, well I’m so sorry your childish oaf friends are making this difficult for you,” Emily replied bluntly.

Daniel seemed to grow increasingly frustrated. He paced away, his arm folded, then back again, facing Emily down. “Sometimes I can’t win with you. You asked me to invite my old friends and now they’re here you’re somehow angry with me?”

“I didn’t know they’d be so horrible!” Emily wailed.

Daniel shook his head. “I get it. They’re not smart or successful like your friends. But can I remind you that Amy and Jayne aren’t always the easiest people for me to be around either?”

“Come off it, Daniel. Amy and Jayne aren’t even in the same league as those ...” She struggled to find a suitable word, and regretted the one she eventually blurted. “...baboons!”

Daniel grew immediately infuriated. “That’s so unfair. You haven’t even given them a chance.”

“And I don’t want to.” Emily could hear the petulance in her voice but she couldn’t help herself.

“Tough,” Daniel retorted. “You haven’t got a choice. They’re my friends, they’re part of my life.”

“Hardly,” she scoffed. “It’s not like you ever talk about them, or talk on the phone to them. Sounds like you’ve barely even seen each other in the last decade!”

“That’s just life,” Daniel huffed. “Things get in the way. Hence people making the effort for weddings.”

He’d started to sound condescending. Emily felt riled.

“What kind of things?” she snapped. “Prison sentences?”

Daniel seemed to suddenly deflate. He sat down on the couch and let his head drop into his hands. Emily paused, watching him. She’d never seen Daniel look so defeated.

The fight went out of her immediately. She sat tentatively beside him, perching on the edge of the couch.

“I’m sorry,” she said, suddenly filled with remorse. “I’m just freaking out. They weren’t what I was expecting and it’s reminded me how many things I still don’t know about you. I just don’t understand how they fit into your life.”

Daniel shook his head, his hair tousling as he did. “I know they don’t make a good first impression,” he said quietly. “But they’ve helped me through some really tough times. I’m eternally grateful to them for that.”

“What kind of things?” Emily asked.

The conversation had taken on a different tone entirely. Now Daniel was the sad one and Emily in the comforting role.

“After my dad left, there were days when my mom was just out of it. Stuart’s family used to feed me. Sometimes they even let me shower at their house, join in special occasions with them. I mean, they weren’t exactly saints but they were there for me during those times when my mom couldn’t be and my dad didn’t want to be. Clyde has had a hard life, like me, but even though he acts dumb he’s actually super smart. If he hadn’t helped me with my school work I would have flunked out of school, I’m certain. And then Evan helped me get a job at his parents’ mechanics store. We learned to fix up bikes together. That’s where my love for them came from. And it kept us out of trouble. It meant I had a skill I could fall back on, a passion I could occupy myself with. A reason not to give in to the temptations of liquor like all the adults around me had. I owe that guy a lot. I owe all of them a lot.”

Emily touched his arm lightly. Daniel spoke so rarely of his parents’ problems with addiction. She always felt closer to him when he did; it was something they had in common.

“So how come you all fell out of touch?” Emily asked softly, curious. If they’d been so bonded in their youth what had caused them to become such infrequent players in one another’s lives?

Daniel looked guilty. “It was me. My fault. I took off.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t judge me, Emily,” he said, looking at her sadly. “I’m a different person now. I don’t do things the same way I used to. But I had to leave. I’d changed my name and gotten a taste of the freedom I needed from my family and my ties to them. So one day I took one of the bikes Evan and I had fixed up and I left.”

“You stole from your best friend?”

Daniel nodded glumly. “And I didn’t tell any of them what I was doing. When I finally got in touch with Stuart he was so angry, saying the police had been informed and everything. I got him to swear to secrecy, to just let the cops know I was safe, that I’d gone of my own accord. Anyway, when Clyde and Evan found out that Stuart knew I was safe and hadn’t told them, it tore the group apart. And typical me, I just avoided it.”

“When did you make up?”

“Well, I came back to Maine seven years ago and took up the carriage house to look after this place as best I could. Whenever I felt brave I would ride back to our hometown and look around for them. I bumped into Stuart, finally, a couple of years ago. We went for a drink and he filled me in on what I’d missed out on. Who was in prison and why, that sort of thing. He said he’d talk to the others for me, see if we could start patching things back together. So over the last few years, here and there, we’ve met up a few times in various combinations for a bike ride or fishing trip, that kind of thing. But never as a group. Never like this. So really this has brought us all back together. I’m really hoping the trip will help us heal.”

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