

THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR--BOOK 7

FOR YOU,
FOREVER



SOPHIE LOVE

The Inn at Sunset Harbor

Sophie Love

For You, Forever

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Love S.

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FOR YOU, FOREVER is book #7 in the #1 bestselling romance series THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR, which begins with For Now and Forever (book #1)—a free download! Fall has arrived in Sunset Harbor, and as the town clears out, Emily Mitchell enters her second trimester. Their new rooms at Trevor's house open for their first guests, while their new spa and restaurant open for business. All the while, they pursue their bid on the island, hoping to add yet another dimension to their life at Sunset Harbor. Amy insists on throwing Emily a layette in New York City, and Emily returns to her old home, in shock at how much she has changed—and at the unwanted guests who show up. She is mortified to learn that there will be a new resident of Sunset Harbor—a NYC developer who will open a rival inn—and destroy Emily's business. Chantelle goes back to school, but her new grade is an unpleasant surprise, and as things don't work out, the drama puts her into a tailspin. Roy is getting sicker, and as the weather turns cold, he invites them all to a getaway in his home in Greece, and Emily, although worried for her growing baby, cannot refuse. It is a trip that will change all of them forever, culminating in a Thanksgiving none of them will forget. FOR YOU, FOREVER is book #7 in a dazzling new romance series that will make you laugh, cry, keep you turning pages late into the night—and make you fall in love with romance all over again.

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Sophie Love

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#1 bestselling author Sophie Love is author of the romantic comedy series THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR, which includes eight books (and counting), and which begins with FOR NOW AND FOREVER (THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR – BOOK 1).

Sophie Love is also the author of the debut romantic comedy series, THE ROMANCE CHRONICLES, which begins with LOVE LIKE THIS (THE ROMANCE CHRONICLES – BOOK 1).

Sophie would love to hear from you, so please visit www.sophieloveauthor.com to email her, to join the mailing list, to receive free ebooks, to hear the latest news, and to stay in touch!

BOOKS BY SOPHIE LOVE

THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR

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FOREVER AND FOR ALWAYS (Book #2)

FOREVER, WITH YOU (Book #3)

IF ONLY FOREVER (Book #4)

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CHRISTMAS FOREVER (Book #8)

THE ROMANCE CHRONICLES

LOVE LIKE THIS (Book #1)

LOVE LIKE THAT (Book #2)

LOVE LIKE OURS (Book #3)

CHAPTER ONE

The windows in the nursery wide open, their lace curtains billowing in the breeze, Emily folded baby clothes, placing them neatly into the chest of drawers. She sighed with contentment. The beautiful weather – unseasonably warm for post–Labor Day – was most welcome.

Feeling a little tired, Emily sat in the nursing chair and rested a protective hand on her belly. Baby Charlotte was squirming around inside.

“Do you like the Indian summer?” Emily asked her. “Ninety degrees at this time of year isn’t the norm. You’ll have to get used to the cold at some point.”

Baby Charlotte was due in December, on the cusp of winter, in just three short months. Emily could hardly believe how quickly the pregnancy had gone, and how fast the time had flown by. The weather they were enjoying at the moment made winter seem very far away, and Emily certainly wanted to keep it that way. Because with each new season that dawned, Emily thought of her father, of the fact that it would be the last time he’d ever experience that particular season.

She’d tried very hard to keep his terminal illness from her mind. Every time she spoke to him – which was daily – he didn’t mention it, instead telling her of all the fun activities he had planned. And the letters were starting to stack up now. They’d promised to write each other a lifetime’s worth of correspondence. Roy wasn’t wallowing in his impending demise, so Emily wasn’t going to either.

The door flew open then and in waltzed Chantelle. She was carrying a packet of diapers in her arms.

“Where should I put these?” she asked.

“On the changing table, please,” Emily said, smiling at her sweet daughter.

She and Daniel were going out of their way to make Chantelle feel included. At the moment, that took the form of her buying a practical item of her choice from the grocery store on each trip. Today it was diapers. Yesterday had been binkies. She’d also purchased bottles, burp cloths, teething rings, and a rattle. Emily loved the way Chantelle found purpose in her task. She took it *very* seriously.

Chantelle walked over to the changing table and dumped the diapers down. Then she turned and faced Emily.

“Have we had any news yet?” she asked.

Emily knew Chantelle was referring to the island that she and Daniel had put in an offer on. She asked every day.

Emily checked her cell phone for what must have been the millionth time. She saw no missed calls or messages from the real estate agent.

She looked at Chantelle and shook her head. “Not yet.”

Chantelle pouted with disappointment. “When will we find out?” she asked. “Will it be before Charlotte arrives?”

Emily shrugged. “I don’t know, sweetie.” She stroked her soft, blond hair. “You do know we might not definitely get it, right?” She’d been preparing Chantelle for the worst from the get-go but the little girl had a tendency to get carried away at times. She talked about the island as though it were a definite, bringing up in conversation how great it would be once they could go and play on the island, or how pretty it would look once Daniel had finished the construction work there.

“I know,” Chantelle said, a little glumly.

Emily smiled brightly then, seeing that the child needed cheering up. “Come on, let’s go downstairs and have some lunch.”

Chantelle nodded and took her hand. They headed into the kitchen together.

To Emily’s delight, Amy sat at the kitchen island. She’d been in Sunset Harbor for weeks now, staying with her new boyfriend, Harry, dipping her toes in the water of domesticity. Emily loved having her nearby, and Amy was certainly making the most of dropping around whenever she had

time between conference calls and remotely managing her business. She was drinking coffee and chatting with Daniel, who was busy putting away the last of the groceries. He kissed Emily as she entered.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he murmured, fix one of his intense looks of love on her.

Emily smiled and stroked a finger along his firm jaw line. She murmured, “Hey.”

Just then, Amy coughed. Emily tore her gaze from Daniel and looked over her shoulder.

“Hi, Ames,” she added to her friend, rolling her eyes jovially.

It still felt unusual for Emily to have Amy so readily accessible. Her temporary move to Sunset Harbor had been wonderful for them both, bringing back the easy friendship they’d shared before Emily disappeared from New York City without telling her. And Amy’s organizational skills were certainly useful when it came to planning the logistics of Charlotte’s birth.

“I didn’t know you were coming over today,” Emily said to her friend.

“I just came to speak to Dan about the checklist,” Amy replied.

Emily took a seat opposite her, frowning with curiosity. “What checklist?”

“Of baby things,” Amy said in a tone that suggested it should have been obvious. “You need your night bag ready for the hospital, a plan for how to get there, where to park, who to call. We’ve written a communication hierarchy, where Dan calls me and I’m responsible for passing it on to Harry, Jayne, your mom, and Lois. Harry does the announcements for Sunset Harbor folk, Lois tells the rest of the staff at the inn, et cetera. Honestly, Emily, I’m shocked you haven’t gotten this stuff down yet.”

Emily laughed. “In my defense, I’m not due for three months!”

“You have to be prepared,” Amy said, knowingly. “If Charlotte felt like coming tomorrow, that’s a very real possibility.”

Chantelle’s eyes widened. “She could come tomorrow?” she asked, looking thrilled at the prospect. “I could have a sister *tomorrow*?”

Emily touched her stomach protectively, a nagging worry growing in the back of her mind. “I hope not.”

Daniel came and sat next to them. “Don’t give Emily nightmare scenarios to worry about,” he said to Amy. “And don’t get Chantelle’s hopes up, either. She’s desperate to meet her little sister.” He turned to Chantelle. “Charlotte will stay in Mom’s tummy until December. There’s only a very, very small chance she’ll come sooner than that.”

“So you mean she could come on my birthday?” Chantelle asked, grinning from ear to ear at the prospect.

Daniel laughed and shook his head. “Halloween and *two* birthdays?” he joked. “I don’t think so!”

“It would make it easy to remember,” Amy said with a chuckle.

Just then the doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” Emily said, wanting a distraction from the thought of Baby Charlotte being born prematurely.

Out in the foyer, the inn was a flurry of activity. The busy summer period was over but there was always plenty to organize, especially now that the dining room served three meals a day and the speakeasy was open every night. Once the restaurant and spa opened they would never get a moment’s peace, Emily thought.

She hurried past Lois and Marnie, who were busy at the reception desk, then opened the door. A smartly dressed gentleman stood there. He looked to be around fifty years of age, with salt and pepper hair and a smattering of laugh lines around his eyes.

“Paul Knowlson,” he said confidently, holding his hand out for Emily to shake like their meeting was some kind of business transaction.

She took it and shook. “I’m sorry, Paul, I don’t think I know you,” she said.

“I’ve booked an apartment,” he said, pulling a slip of paper from his inner suit jacket pocket. “In Trevor’s House,” he said, reading off it.

“Oh!” Emily exclaimed. He was their first guest in the new apartments! “That’s in the house across the lawn,” she said. “Here, I’ll lead the way.”

“Fantastic,” Paul replied.

Emily led him along the pathway. She felt a thrill of excitement knowing this would be the first time of many she’d be doing this. It was wonderful to see all their hard work on Trevor’s House come to fruition, and to know the gift he’d left them was being utilized rather than left to languish.

“Now, I think I heard a hint of a New York City accent,” Paul said as they walked. “Is that where you’re from?”

“You’re right,” Emily replied, smiling. “Born and bred. Do you know it well?”

Paul nodded. “Yes, I grew up there. But I’m based in Florida now.”

“And you’re in business?” she added.

Paul laughed, gesturing to his expensive-looking suit. “What gave it away?”

They reached Trevor’s House and Emily led him inside. The main area downstairs was now completely open plan, with just a hip-high glass partition between the brand new, sparkling restaurant and the route to the staircase that led up to the apartments. The restaurant hadn’t yet opened its doors but it wouldn’t be long now until that happened, Emily thought with excitement.

“You’re in apartment four,” Emily said, gesturing toward the stairs. “It’s got a lovely balcony looking over the ocean.”

“Sounds perfect,” Paul replied.

Emily led him up the stairs to the mezzanine floor, then gestured to a Parisian-style wrought iron gate with a sign in gold reading *Guests Only*. She showed him the large key that opened the gate, and then they headed along the corridor and stopped outside apartment four.

Emily remembered the excitement she’d felt the first time she’d looked around the new apartments. They’d been masterfully designed by the Erik & Sons triplets. She hoped that Paul would be as impressed on first sight of the apartment as she had been.

She unlocked the door and pushed it open, then gestured for Paul to enter.

“This is fantastic,” Paul said with a nod.

He seemed like a nice man, but Emily could get the sense of a business-savvy sharpness about him. It was the same quality that Amy had, an almost hawk-like ability to sniff out money and quality, to assess one’s surroundings and make an instantaneous judgment. It was a huge compliment that someone like that would want to even book into her humble inn!

Emily handed him the key. “Meals are served in the main house at the moment,” she explained. “So please join us whenever you wish. The restaurant downstairs isn’t open yet so everything will be very quiet.”

They said goodbye and Emily headed back out toward the main house. She caught up with Lois in the foyer.

“I forgot we had a guest in Trevor’s,” she said. “Is everything arranged for him? Clean bedding, bath robe, coffee pods for the machine?”

Lois nodded seriously. “Yes,” she said, sounding a touch insulted by the insinuation she might have forgotten something.

Emily blushed. “Sorry, of course you’re on it.”

It wasn’t always easy for Emily to remember that Lois wasn’t the flustered, over-emotional scatterbrain she’d once been. She’d really flourished recently, probably due in part to her promotion and pay raise, and Emily knew she could trust her to run the inn perfectly. She’d even taken well to dealing with the suppliers and putting in grocery and goods orders. In fact, Emily realized, she could probably leave the country for a month and entrust the inn to Lois’s capable hands; something she’d once have never thought possible!

Emily went back into the kitchen. Daniel, Amy, and Chantelle were still sitting around the kitchen table, chatting animatedly. No doubt Amy was using her business brain to force Daniel into planning every last detail of Charlotte's birth down to a tee, employing the sort of organized precision that babies paid little heed to.

"There she is." Daniel beamed when he saw her enter. "I've got some news."

"You do?" Emily said, taking a seat. "But I was only gone a minute."

"Jack called," Daniel said, referring to his boss at the carpentry workshop where he'd been working for the last year.

"Oh? And what did he say?" Emily asked, curiously.

"It's his back again," Daniel said. Jack had injured himself at work not that long ago and hadn't been back to normal since. "You know how it gives him problems. Well, his wife has finally managed to convince him to reduce his hours at work. She's inherited some money and wants them to take an early retirement, cruise around the Caribbean, that sort of thing."

Emily frowned. "Your exciting news is that Jack and his wife are going on a cruise?"

Daniel laughed. "Yes!"

"I don't get it," she added, looking with bemusement at Chantelle's and Amy's excited expressions. "What's the joke? What am I missing?"

Daniel continued. "Think about it," he encouraged her. "He'll need someone to run the wood store in his absence. Someone to deal with the shop."

Emily gasped. "You mean... you?"

Chantelle couldn't contain it anymore. She burst out her joyful exclamation. "Daddy's getting promoted!"

Emily clapped a hand over her mouth. "That's amazing!" she cried. "You deserve it."

She couldn't believe the good fortune and hopped off her stool, going around behind Daniel and hugging him tightly.

Daniel blushed shyly. He wasn't one to readily take compliments.

"He's going to give me a raise and a new title. It will mean longer hours though," he added, sounding very serious. "I'll need to be the first in to open up and I'll need to be the last there at night to lock everything up properly. There's expensive equipment and products in there and Jack never lets anyone else lock up, so it's kind of a big deal for him to release the reins on that front. My shift pattern will be really odd as a result. Jack never minded driving to and from the woodshop at all hours, but now that I'll be expected to do the same it will be an adjustment."

Emily didn't want to think about any of the possible downsides to the good news yet. Long shifts, extra responsibility over safety and security, and the inevitable stress that would cause him were all things she would deal with at the time. Right now, she wanted to ride the high of the good news.

"I'm so proud of you," she said, pressing a kiss into the crown of his head.

"You should do something to celebrate," Amy said from the other side of the breakfast bar.

"Definitely," Emily agreed.

"I think we should go down to the beach!" Chantelle suggested.

"Well, while the weather's like this, I don't see why not," Emily said. "We shouldn't waste it."

Chantelle punched the air. She loved the beach, the outside in general. Any opportunity to run and sprint in nature she took greedily.

"Amy?" Emily asked. "Are you joining us?"

Amy consulted her watch. "Actually, I'm supposed to be meeting Harry soon so I won't have time."

Emily couldn't be sure, but she thought she heard an undertone in her friend's voice, a kind of exasperation. She wondered if there was an issue between her and Harry.

But there was no time to discuss it now. The Morey family was in full action mode, Chantelle hurrying off in search of the dogs' leashes, Daniel flinging open cupboards and pulling out bags, juice boxes, and snacks.

Emily touched Amy's hand across the counter. "We'll talk later," she said.

Amy nodded, her expression a little downcast. Then Emily was swept up in the chaos of her family, like a tornado spinning around her pulling her in.

"Let's go! To the beach!"

CHAPTER TWO

The beach was stunningly beautiful in the sunshine. Emily could hardly believe it was so sunny at this time of year. It was as warm and bright as any summer day.

They strolled along together, letting both the dogs off their leashes so they could run ahead and bark at the breaking waves.

Once they'd found a good spot to settle, Daniel helped Emily down to the ground. She sat crossed-legged, her pregnant bump nestled comfortably within her legs. Chantelle bounded off, filled with exuberance for what felt like their last chance to enjoy the beach this year.

Daniel reached over for Emily's hand and stroked it tenderly.

"How do you feel about my promotion?" he asked. "Are you worried about the extra hours taking me away from home?"

"Well, how much time are we talking?" Emily asked. She was ready now to know more of the intricacies, to consider the challenges that they may face.

"Jack opens the store at eight," he began. "That's not the issue, really. I'm used to early starts and it will fit in with the school run. It's the woodworking shop that's the bigger issue. There are times when we get a big order and not a lot of time to do it. Before, when I was just a worker, I'd be one among many and at most it would add an extra hour or two to each work day. We could share the burden. But since I'll be the one supervising the equipment use and be solely responsible for quality assurance, I'm going to need to be on site through each order, seeing everything through to completion, just like Jack used to. You know how long the hours could get anyway. Well, now I won't be part of the shift pattern anymore. I'll be in charge of it, and expected to be there during the busy periods."

The more Daniel spoke about it, the more Emily could feel her anxiety increasing. The promotion was pretty bad timing. The thought of Daniel not being there when she went into labor worried her. And what about paternity leave? Would he even be able to get any?

But more than her anxiety, she was bursting with happiness for him. She was also extremely proud of Daniel and didn't want to bring down his mood in any way. He had achieved so much since she'd known him. And besides, she had Amy there to catch the slack.

"I'm just so happy for you," she said. "You deserve it, after all your hard work."

"We could certainly do with the raise," Daniel replied, his spare hand touching Emily's stomach gently. "Since we'll soon have more mouths to feed."

Emily smiled and sighed with contentment. Despite the hardships she was facing, she was still looking forward to the future, to meeting Baby Charlotte.

When Daniel spoke again he sounded a little melancholy. "More responsibility means more stress. I hope I still have enough energy to spend time with the kids."

"You'll do amazingly," Emily encouraged him. "I know you will."

Though able to play the role of supportive spouse on the outside, Emily was still quite anxious about Daniel's changing role. He had a tendency to let stress affect him, or to feel weighed down by perceived expectation. It was something she admired in him. But it could also be to the detriment of the family, because sometimes it felt like he'd put everything else in the world first before them. It wasn't always easy for Emily to remind herself that the very reason he sometimes put other things first *was* for them – for her, and Chantelle, the inn, and of course, Baby Charlotte.

"I do wonder why Jack didn't promote one of the others," Daniel wondered aloud. "I'm relatively new there compared to some of the old hats."

"Probably *because* you're young," Emily said. "Because you'll work hard for your family. Or maybe because he knows that you have the talent to make it on your own."

Daniel frowned. "What do you mean?"

“I mean that you could easily open your own wood shop. It’s not like we don’t have the space for one on site somewhere. We could convert one of the barns, after all. And now you have tons of expertise with making furniture. I mean, you made the crib for Charlotte in your spare time and it’s phenomenal! People would pay loads for something like that, a unique crib for their baby. You only have to look at the price tag on my nursing stool to see that!” She laughed, remembering the thousands of dollars Amy had splashed out on the rocking armchair and footstool for her.

Daniel, on the other hand, was quiet. His expression was sort of dreamy and far away.

“What are you thinking?” Emily asked him.

He snapped back to attention. “I’m just thinking that you might be right about Jack promoting me to keep me there instead of losing me.”

“Might be right?” Emily joked. “I’m definitely right! You could run a bespoke kids’ furniture business. Or you could even make boats if you want. You have the talent to do anything you put your mind to.”

It was so obvious to Emily but Daniel looked stunned, as though the thought had never crossed his mind.

“I never really thought about it that way,” he said. “It’s just a job to me, you know.”

“Just a job! You’re too humble for your own good sometimes,” Emily continued. “How many people do you really think have that kind of skill? You have a talent, Daniel. You just have to think bigger sometimes.”

Instead of her words encouraging him, Daniel seemed to retreat then.

“I do think big,” he mumbled, defensively. “I’m just not as good as you seem to think I am.”

“It’s not just me,” Emily told him, gently. “Jack clearly thinks so, too.”

She hadn’t meant to push so hard. She’d only meant for Daniel to understand he had a talent and that it could take him far. But he seemed to be shrinking, deflating under the weight of her perception.

Quietly, he turned his face down to the sand, picking pebbles up and throwing them across the beach.

Just then Emily’s cell phone began to ring. She sighed, on one hand relieved to have been saved by the bell but on the other frustrated to be robbed of the chance to get to the bottom of Daniel’s apparent mood change.

She rummaged in her purse and plucked her cell phone out. With surprise, she saw that the caller ID was the real estate agent for the island. It flashed at her like a beacon.

“It’s them!” she exclaimed aloud, feeling excitement warble in her chest.

Daniel looked up sharply from where he’d been flinging pebbles. From the shoreline, Chantelle turned at the sound of Emily’s voice.

“It’s the broker!” Emily called across the beach to Chantelle.

The two dogs mirrored Chantelle’s movements, all three pelting across the beach toward Emily, kicking up clouds of sand behind them.

Once Chantelle reached Emily, she skidded to a halt, and the dogs ran around them in circles, salty sea water clinging to their fur, yapping with their instinctive understanding that something exciting was about to happen.

With uneven breath, Emily answered the call and put it straight onto speakerphone. The family crowded forward, looking down at the cell phone expectantly. It was as if the little block of plastic held their entire futures in its power.

“We’re all here,” Emily explained. “On tenterhooks. So, what’s the news?”

Ever since they’d put the offer in, Emily had prepared herself for the worst. In fact, she’d pretty much convinced herself that it wouldn’t come to fruition, that they wouldn’t get the island. It just wasn’t the sort of thing that happened to normal people. But despite telling herself over and over that it just wasn’t going to happen, she’d been unable to dampen the small glimmer of excitement

inside of her, that sliver of hope that challenged the pessimistic part of her mind with the simple mantra, *what if...*

The broker spoke, her voice coming through the line in crackles.

"It's good news," she said. "Your offer was accepted. The island is yours!"

Emily couldn't believe what she'd just heard. Had static on the line made her hear what she wanted? But when she looked up into Daniel's eyes, she saw them sparkling with surprise and elation. When Chantelle leapt up in the air and jumped up and down, waving her arms, Emily knew there was no doubt.

The dogs began barking at Chantelle's commotion, leaping up with soggy paws, making wet sand marks all over her clothes.

"Really?" Emily stammered, straining to hear the crackly line through the din. "We really got it?"

"You really did," the broker replied. Emily could hear the smile in her voice. "Of course there's still some paperwork to sign and file. But you're very welcome to go and visit in the meantime." She finished with a chuckle.

Emily was so stunned she couldn't find her voice. Daniel took over, leaning closer to the cell phone between them.

"You mean we can actually go there now?" he asked, his gaze fixed on Emily rather than on the phone. "As the official owners?"

From the speaker, the broker's voice came, tinny and robotic, "You can indeed."

Chantelle crouched down then and threw her arms around her father's neck, so exuberant she almost knocked him clean to the ground.

"We're going to the island now?" she cried in his ear.

Daniel winced, but he was grinning broadly. Chantelle's arms were wrapped around his neck like an octopus's tentacles and he brought his hands up to loosen her grip as he raised his eyebrows at Emily.

"What do you think? Shall we go and look at it through the eyes of its owners?"

Emily touched her stomach, feeling Baby Charlotte's form inside. She was growing increasingly protective as the weeks passed, not wanting to subject her growing child to any unpleasantness. But the sea was calm today, and she felt certain that she wouldn't experience any seasickness on the ride over.

"Let's do it," she said.

Chantelle screamed with joy.

Daniel leaned down to the phone, almost yelling now over the noise of dogs and children, straining as Chantelle yanked him roughly around with her excitement.

"You've made us extremely happy," he said to the broker. "Thanks for everything."

"You're welcome, Mr. Morey," the broker replied.

They ended the call and Emily and Daniel sat back with matching stunned expressions, both looking as dazed as the other as their new reality began to sink in. Chantelle whizzed around, throwing their things haphazardly into a bag, moving as though on fast forward.

"Come on," she cried. "Let's go!"

Daniel snapped into action, standing and helping Emily to her feet. The harbor was a short walk away but Emily knew she'd have to take it slowly. Chantelle ran on ahead with the dogs, stopping periodically to hurry back, effectively doubling the distance she was covering in comparison to Daniel and Emily.

On the way they passed Cynthia and Jeremy out on a bike ride.

"We bought an island!" Chantelle called out to them as they passed, waving.

Cynthia frowned. "It sounded like you said an island?" she called back.

"I did!" Chantelle cried, jumping up and down.

Emily laughed. No one was going to believe what they'd done, that they'd bought themselves an island off the coast of Maine! She could hardly believe it herself.

"Look, it's Amy and Harry!" Chantelle cried then.

Emily squinted ahead and saw that the loved up couple were sitting together on a bench at the harbor's edge, deep in conversation. It looked as though it might be somewhat intense, with Amy leaning in and gesticulating widely, Harry shaking his head emphatically with what looked like a stern expression on his face. Emily wondered again what was going on with the pair. It really looked to her like they were arguing.

"Do you think they'll want to come and see our island?" Chantelle asked.

Emily was about to tell her to leave them be, but before she had a chance to reply, Chantelle had already hurried off. Chantelle was on a mission and Emily's waddle was too slow to catch up to her.

She saw Chantelle reach them, and watched as they sprang apart, shocked by the interruption. She couldn't hear anything from this distance, but she could see the false smiles on each of their faces, and the strained looks hidden in their expressions.

By the time she and Daniel made it to the trio, Chantelle had already broken the news. Amy turned and hugged Emily.

"You're crazy, you know that?" her friend said. "An *island*?!"

"It's an extension of the inn," Emily tried to explain.

"But you only just fixed up Trevor's House." Amy laughed. "And there's still the spa to open, and the restaurant."

She gestured at Harry, who would be the manager of the new restaurant once it opened. They caught one another's eyes, their smiles clearly put on, then Amy looked away again quickly. Not quick enough for Emily not to perceive it though. She knew her friend inside out. There was definitely something going on between her and Harry. The easiness that usually existed between them felt strained. She wondered what it might be.

Suddenly, Chantelle interrupted the conversation with impassioned cries of, "Come on, come on, come on!" She'd clearly lost patience for the adults' "boring" conversation, and was tugging on Amy's hand. "Please can we go to the island now?"

Daniel addressed Harry. "You're both welcome to come along with us. Since you're pretty much on the payroll now, it makes sense for you to be there!"

Harry grinned. "I can't wait for the grand opening of Trevor's," he said. "I'm ready to sink my teeth in!"

"Glad to hear it," Emily replied, beaming. "So what do you think? Island excursion?"

She wasn't sure the invite would be welcome, especially since she'd deduced that they'd interrupted an argument, that Amy at the least was clearly not in the mood, but Harry spoke first, muting her before she had a chance to turn them down.

"Absolutely," he said. "We've got nothing else to do today, do we, Ames?"

Amy glanced quickly at Harry, and Emily saw the exasperation in her eyes over whatever it was that had been left unresolved between them.

"Sure," Amy replied, her tone overly jovial, like she was acting happy for everyone else's sake. She grinned at Emily, but couldn't hide the trouble in her eyes from her best friend. Her smile faltered as though she'd realized she'd been caught faking. At least her happiness appeared genuine when she slung an arm around Chantelle's shoulders, Emily thought. "May as well see what crazy thing you've gotten yourself into now!" She peered over Chantelle's head at Emily.

"You okay?" Emily mouthed to Amy.

Amy nodded once, decisively, then mouthed back, "Talk later."

Whatever atmosphere Emily had picked up on between Harry and Amy, she'd been right in thinking there was something wrong. She was concerned for her friend and determined to get Amy alone in order to get to the bottom of it.

But for the time being, Emily chose to focus on her own happy moment; a boat trip with friends and family to the island of their dreams.

CHAPTER THREE

The sun sparkled off the surface of the water as the boat cut through the small waves. They bobbed up and down, and Emily held onto her stomach protectively. Luckily, she didn't feel seasick.

"I don't think we've ever had this many people in the boat before," Chantelle remarked. "Four adults, one child, two dogs. And a baby in Mom's tummy, of course."

Emily laughed. "It's quite the adventure," she agreed.

Amy was quiet as they went, her arms crossed about her middle, her face turned out to the ocean. She wore an expression of deep contemplation. She was clearly lost in her thoughts, and Emily wondered again what they were. Being out on the ocean, Emily herself had discovered, invited quiet reflection at the best of times, and could easily lead the mind toward an existential crisis. She watched her friend anxiously.

Harry, on the other hand, either had nothing on his mind or was very good at hiding it. He was chatting openly with Daniel and Chantelle about the types of fish that could be caught in the ocean, about their plans for the island and boating in general.

"Now that we have a destination to boat to this will happen much more often," Daniel was saying. "We'll be ferrying people over here all the time, for parties and picnics."

"Sounds awesome," Harry said in his usual cheery manner.

Chantelle was looking up at her father with rapt attention. "Can we have Thanksgiving here?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"I doubt it," Daniel replied. "It will take a long time to get the well installed, figure out the plumbing and the solar generators for power. It's much more work than a few months, and the winter weather that's coming soon won't help. Sorry, kiddo, there's just too much to do between now and Thanksgiving for it to be a possibility."

Chantelle pouted, looking downcast.

"But we can definitely visit the island as much as the weather allows us," Emily told her. "And since we won't be sailing around in circles anymore, but have a place to head to, I think we'll be able to come out more often than we used to."

Chantelle pondered her words for a moment, then returned her expression back to happy.

Emily smiled at Daniel. He seemed relieved that she'd handled the situation so well and Emily felt a surge of pride. Her maternal instincts seemed to be sharpening as her due date grew closer.

After a while, they reached the island and the ancient jetty that was barely still standing. The faded sign that proclaimed the island was for sale was still there.

"You can start by kicking that down!" Emily told Chantelle.

Chantelle didn't need telling twice. She leapt off the boat, ran at the sign, and yanked it out of the ground.

As he tethered the boat, Daniel gestured to a stack of old, rotting fishing crates. "Put it here. We can have a bonfire."

The idea of a bonfire seemed to thrill Chantelle. She jumped up and down with excitement.

Emily stepped carefully from the boat onto terra firma, trying to absorb the strange reality that she now owned this island, that it was hers. Unlike the inn, which she'd inherited, and Trevor's, which had come into her possession through his will, this was the first thing she'd truly ever bought, she and Daniel together. It was theirs, and the overwhelming relevance of that struck her even more deeply now that she was standing on its shoreline.

Behind her, Amy and Harry stepped off the boat. They were both wearing bemused expressions as they glanced about them at the scraggly, overgrown island, the strewn debris from years past. Amy in particular must have thought Emily had gone crazy buying this deserted plot of land, surrounded

by ocean, filled with squirrels and birds. If she thought Sunset Harbor was uncivilized, what on earth must she think about the island?

“I know it’s not much to look at, at the moment,” Emily confessed. “But there’s so much potential.”

“Of course,” Amy said, looking perturbed as she stepped lightly along the uneven ground. Her high-fashion clothes looked more out of place here than usual.

“Do you guys want the tour?” Emily asked.

Harry nodded enthusiastically, but Amy made only a lackluster noise of confirmation.

“I’ll show you!” Chantelle cried.

She led the way, heading into the trees with Harry and Amy in tow. Their footsteps and noisy voices disrupted the black squirrels that inhabited the island, making them scurry up the trees.

As Emily trekked after them, slower because of her pregnant waddle, she could hear Chantelle excitedly making announcements.

“We’re going to have a tree house here,” Chantelle told them. “It will be a pirate ship for me and Charlotte to play in. And that will be where the magical fairy castle ballroom will be.”

Daniel, having finished securing the boat, came up beside Emily and helped her through the thickets. They drew up beside the others, Emily panting slightly from the effort and exhilaration she felt from being here.

Amy raised her eyebrows as they approached, surprised and interested.

“Are you doing all the work yourself?” she asked Daniel. “It sounds like there’s a lot to do. Too much for one man, especially a soon-to-be father.”

Emily smiled to herself; her friend always had her best interests at heart and knew how difficult Emily found it whenever Daniel was away from home.

“No!” Daniel exclaimed with a chuckle. “We have great contractors for it. Two kids, straight out of college. They’re desperate to add to their portfolio so we’re expecting really great things from them.”

“And other than pirate ships and magic castles,” Harry said, “where will the actual inn parts be?”

“Well, there will be a three-room cabin which we want to start as a sort of writer’s retreat. Tracy is also going to do some yoga workshops on the island, like day-long well-being retreats.”

“It sounds fantastic,” Harry said. “How much do you think you’ll get done over the winter?”

“Depends on the weather,” Daniel said. “It’s a shame it took so long to get the sale through, really. This Indian summer could have given us a head start, but I’m sure it will be over by the time we’ve organized all the machinery and materials.”

Thinking ahead made Emily worry. No longer was the island a fantasy or a dream. It was real. Now everything had to be practical. There was so much to organize and pay for, so many components that had to be in place. They’d barely finished the renovations at Trevor’s. It felt a bit like they’d jumped from the frying pan and into the fire!

But still, Emily was thrilled. She couldn’t quite believe she and Daniel had had the guts to buy the island. Not only had they been brave enough to make a child together, they’d been brave enough to follow their dreams, no matter how crazy they may seem. Emily smiled to herself, knowing that above all else, they were a team, and that together they were indestructible.

“Now, let’s go start a fire,” Daniel said, rubbing his hands eagerly. “Chantelle, can you collect all the pieces of wood on the beach?”

She nodded and hurried off, always in need of a task, always wanting to do her part to help. Then Daniel pulled a package of marshmallows from his jacket pocket. Emily laughed with delight, knowing how happy Chantelle would be when she got back from her trip to the beach to discover Daniel’s plan to toast marshmallows around the bonfire.

“You should have brought your guitar!” Emily said.

But Daniel just smiled and kissed her tenderly. “There will be so many more opportunities for songs around the bonfire,” he said, his eyes going dreamy. “You, me, and the girls.”

Emily gazed at him, awed by the man he was, the gorgeousness of him, and so excited for their future together, for all the adventures that lay ahead.

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Mouths sticky with melted marshmallow, bellies and cheeks aching from laughter, the small party headed back to the boat. Daniel had called it, saying that the light would soon fade. And besides, there was no plumbing on the island yet and Baby Charlotte had a tendency to kick Emily’s bladder on a regular basis, so she’d be relieved to be heading back within the vicinity of a restroom.

When they reached the main lane, Daniel found their spot in the harbor. There were very few vessels in the water now, though many more than usual at this time of year. Everyone was making the most of the warm weather, eking out as many trips on the water as they could before winter came along and robbed them of that pleasure.

“Thanks for that impromptu trip to your island,” Amy said, hugging Emily farewell. “I don’t think I’ll ever get over how crazy that is.”

Emily smiled at her, tucking loose strands of her hair from her eyes. “When can we hang out just the two of us?” she asked.

Though Amy was often around, they were always surrounded by people. Emily couldn’t actually recall the last time the two of them had gotten together for a good chat, and she could tell that Amy needed someone to talk to right now.

“Chantelle’s back at school tomorrow,” Emily added, “so we’ll be able to find some privacy more easily. How about coffee at Joe’s once we’ve dropped her off?”

Amy nodded and Emily noticed the look of relief in her eyes to know she’d finally be able to offload whatever was on her mind.

They parted ways with Amy and Harry, everyone hugging and waving goodbye, then strolled slowly back to the inn, exhausted from the long day. Even the dogs were dragging their paws.

“I’m tired,” Chantelle said through her yawn as they idled up the driveway.

Ahead of them sat the inn, silhouetted against a deepening blue sky. Its windows beamed out yellow light, looking like twinkling stars from this distance. Emily smiled, content. Seeing the inn always gave her a sense of peace, and made her feel like she was home.

“Let’s have some dinner first and then you can head up to your room,” Emily said. “It’s your first day back at school tomorrow so you need a good night’s sleep.”

Chantelle looked a little sad. “The summer’s over already?”

Emily nodded. “I’m afraid so, sweetie. But don’t worry, you love school! You’ll see Bailey and Toby every single day again. And Gail.”

“Will Miss Glass still be my teacher?” Chantelle asked.

Emily shook her head. “You’ll be in a new class with a new teacher. Does that worry you?”

Chantelle paused, her expression showing that she was thinking about it. “No,” she said, eventually. “I’ll still see Miss Glass on the playground sometimes.”

Emily smiled, then caught Daniel’s eye. He was smiling too.

They went inside the inn, the foyer bright, warm, and welcoming. Bryony was in the side lounge on her favorite couch, surrounded by half-drunk coffee mugs as usual. She leapt up when she saw them, her metal bracelets jangling as she did, and hurried over. Her perfume smelled of spices.

“Guys, I can’t believe it!” she gushed. “An island!” She hugged Emily. “Do you know how few islands there are in the hospitality world? This is going to be a gold mine!”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Emily replied. “Or else it might have been a very expensive mistake.”

Daniel and Chantelle went into the kitchen to make food. Emily decided to head up to the nursery while they were cooking. She wanted to look through another one of Charlotte's boxes to see whether there were any toys she could pass on to the baby.

She went inside the nursery and sat on the floor beside one of the many boxes that contained her sister's old toys and clothes, which had been brought down from where they'd been carefully stored in the attic.

This task was always tinged with melancholy. Though Emily felt that Charlotte's spirit was with her in this house, smiling down on her and the family she'd built, it always felt a little bit like she disappeared more with each day that passed. Time was supposed to make pain lessen but for Emily she felt that the more days that went by without her sister the more she missed her, because the last time they spoke was that little bit further in the past.

She opened up the cardboard box, a smell of dust wafting out with it. Like most of the boxes, this one was filled with cuddly toys. It surprised Emily to see that Charlotte had owned so many stuffed toys. She hardly had any memories of her sister playing with bears or dolls. They spent most of their time imagining worlds and acting out plays. Other than their twin rag dolls and Charlotte's favorite bear, Andy Pandy, Emily couldn't recall them ever playing with such toys at all.

But as she reached in and pulled out a faded pink toy, Emily felt a sudden surge of a memory. She turned the toy over in her hands and saw it was a unicorn, its once shimmery sequined horn now dull.

"Sparkles," she muttered aloud, the name of the toy appearing on her tongue before her mind had even kicked into gear.

Then suddenly she felt a familiar swirling sensation, one she had not felt for a very long time. She was slipping back into the past, into her old memories.

The flashbacks had begun once she'd first returned to the inn. They'd been terrifying at first, frightening memories such as the night Charlotte had died, and the raging arguments between her parents. But then as time had passed, as she processed those repressed memories, Emily had started to experience some of the more pleasant ones. Times when she and Charlotte had played together; had been carefree. This memory filled Emily with a sense of calmness, and she knew it was going to be a nice one.

She and Charlotte were in the attic, in one of the rooms her father had filled with antique items. On the floor beside them was a bronze globe, and Charlotte was spinning it idly with a finger. Sitting next to Charlotte was Sparkles, the beautiful unicorn toy. Brand new, fluffy pink, with a sequined horn.

"Sparkles is sad," Charlotte told Emily.

"Why?" Emily asked, curiously, hearing a child's voice coming from her throat.

"Because she's the last unicorn," Charlotte explained. "She doesn't have any other unicorn friends."

"That's sad," Emily replied. "Maybe you should take her on an adventure to cheer her up?"

Charlotte seemed to perk up at the suggestion. "Where do you want to go, Sparkles?" she asked her toy. Then she spun the golden globe and stopped it with a pointed finger. It was a small island to the east of the continent of America. "Sparkles wants to go to an island," Charlotte informed Emily.

Emily nodded. "In that case, we'd better get in the boat."

They pulled out old chairs and coffee tables, disturbing the dust and stirring the smell of mildew, then configured them in such a way that satisfied their imaginations that they'd constructed a boat. Then they used a threadbare curtain as a sail and clambered into their boat with Sparkles.

Emily could almost feel the wind in her hair as they sailed across the ocean to a distant shore. Charlotte used a kaleidoscope as a telescope, scanning the room as if searching.

"Land ahoy!" she suddenly cried.

Emily threw the anchor – which was in fact a wooden coat hanger tied to a curtain cord. Then they leaped from the boat and swam to shore.

Panting from exertion, the two girls began exploring the island, poking through the piles of antiques, pretending it was a volcano.

“Look in here,” Charlotte cried to Emily. “Down in the volcano!”

Emily peered behind the hat stand that Charlotte was pointing at. “I don’t believe it!” she exclaimed, playing along.

Charlotte’s eyes were wide. “It’s the rest of the unicorns,” she said. Then she spoke hurriedly to Sparkles. Her face dropped. “Sparkles wants to go down the volcano to be with them,” she said to Emily.

“Oh,” Emily said, a little sad. “Even though that means leaving us?”

Charlotte looked at her dear unicorn friend and nodded. “She says this is her home island. She misses it a lot, and all her friends. She wants to live here. But we’re allowed to come and visit.”

“That’s okay then,” Emily said.

They tied their cardigan sleeves together to make a sling for Sparkles. Then they lowered the unicorn down the back of the furniture and left her there.

“Are you sad to say goodbye?” Emily asked Charlotte as they climbed back into their makeshift boat.

Charlotte shook her head. “No. Because I know I’ll see her again.”

Emily suddenly snapped back into the present day. She was holding Sparkles tightly against her chest, and the toy’s head was wet with her tears. On one hand she felt desperately sad, because she knew Charlotte had never had the chance to see Sparkles again. But the other part of her felt buoyant with joy. The toy was a sign from Charlotte, Emily was certain. Sparkles had been left on that island, down the back of the furniture, completely forgotten about until this moment, perhaps even specifically for this moment.

She hugged Sparkles tightly, then placed her, poignantly, on the shelf overlooking Baby Charlotte’s crib. She felt the circle of life continuing, and smiled knowing that once Charlotte arrived she would have a guardian angel watching over her as she slept.

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Emily snuggled up into bed beside Daniel. It had been a long and tiring day, and she found herself quickly drifting off to sleep.

“I can’t believe we own an island,” she murmured into the darkness as she began to fall asleep. “My future is looking nothing like I thought it would once.”

Daniel let out a sleepy laugh. “How so?”

“Well, I never thought I’d be married and pregnant. I never thought I’d have Chantelle, or this inn.” She stroked Daniel’s chest as it rose and fell slowly.

“I never thought I’d have Chantelle or the inn either,” he replied.

“But you’re happy you do?”

“Of course.”

“Are you happy we’re having another girl?”

He kissed her forehead. “I’m very happy,” he assured her.

“And that our daughter is going back to school tomorrow where she’s doing fabulously?”

Daniel laughed again. “Yes. I am glad that Chantelle is doing well at school.”

Emily smiled, contented. Sleep seemed ready to take her.

“I’m only sad about one thing,” she said.

“What’s that?”

“That my dad won’t be around to enjoy it all with us.”

Daniel fell quiet then. She felt his arms tighten around her.

“I know,” he said. “I’m sad about that too. But let’s just make the most of the time we have with him now. Let’s make sure every day is as good as it can be. Let’s make each day count.”

Emily nodded with affirmation. “I think we made today count,” she said, yawning. “We bought an island, after all. It’s not every day that happens.”

She felt Daniel’s chest shudder with his laughter. She squeezed herself even more tightly against him, overjoyed and welling with love. Wrapped in one another’s arms, their heartbeats synchronized. They fell asleep in unison, in perfect harmony, two people united by love.

CHAPTER FOUR

Emily took a final sip of her decaf coffee and put the mug down on the kitchen table. She'd slept deeply but had awoken feeling groggy – partly because of the alarm clock being set a whole hour earlier than she'd gotten accustomed to over the summer – and she really could have benefited from some actual caffeine. It was probably the thing she was most looking forward to once Baby Charlotte arrived, the thing she missed the most and yearned for the most. She watched Daniel enviously as he drank his across the table from her.

“Right, darling,” Emily said at last, looking at Chantelle. “It’s time to head to school.”

Chantelle was sitting with her head bowed over a pile of clock pieces, her tongue sticking out the corner of her mouth in concentration. Her empty bowl of cereal was beside her, discarded haphazardly so she could pursue her task.

“Can’t I have five more minutes?” she asked, so absorbed in her task she didn’t even look up. “I just need to work out where to put this cog.”

Since their return from England, Chantelle had been determined to make a clock like Papa Roy. Emily thought it was very sweet that Chantelle was so inspired by her grandfather, but it also broke her heart at the same time. She and Daniel had not yet told Chantelle the news of Papa Roy’s illness; the girl would be utterly crushed when she lost him. They all would.

Daniel took command then. “Nope, sorry, sweetie. You need to get in on time to meet your new teacher and new classmates.”

Chantelle put her screwdriver down with a reluctant sigh. “Fine.”

Emily wished she could convince Chantelle to do her mucky, oily work somewhere more appropriate – the garage, or shed, or just about anywhere that wasn’t the kitchen table, really. But Chantelle wouldn’t hear of it. Papa Roy did his clock fixing at the breakfast table so Chantelle had to as well!

They all headed out to the truck together, Daniel taking the driving seat since Emily was finding it too uncomfortable to fit her growing belly behind the steering wheel. Chantelle hopped in the back into her car seat.

“I can’t wait until Baby Charlotte comes on the ride with us to school,” she said, glancing across at the baby seat they’d recently installed (at Amy’s instance, of course, because you never know when the baby might decide to come and the last thing you’d want to be doing is fiddling with a complicated seat while in the painful grips of contractions).

“Me too,” Emily said, resting her hands against her tight belly. It seemed to be becoming more uncomfortable with each day that passed.

“First she’ll just be coming along for the ride, but it won’t be long before she’ll be walking through those doors with you,” Daniel said with a chuckle. “She’ll be in kindergarten before we even know it.”

Emily felt wistful at the thought. She knew what Daniel meant, that time went by quickly, that they should appreciate every moment because it would disappear from them like sand sifting through a timer. But the future Daniel was alluding to was also one in which her father had long passed. He would not be there when Charlotte started kindergarten. He’d never see the numerous photos that Emily would take of the two girls heading into school together, hand in hand. That future, though she couldn’t wait to be living it on the one hand, would also be fraught with grief on the other. She’d be a different person, changed irreparably by losing Roy.

They drove along the familiar Sunset Harbor roads and turned into the parking lot at the school. It was already very busy with parents eager to deposit their children after the long summer break.

“It’s Bailey!” Chantelle cried, pointing to where her best friend played on the grass. Bailey’s normally unruly auburn hair had been styled into two long plaits. Emily had never seen her look quite so presentable. “But who is she with?” Chantelle added.

Bailey was playing with an unfamiliar child, a very skinny, pale girl with long, straight blonde hair.

“I don’t know,” Emily said. “I’ve never seen her before.”

Daniel parked and they got out of the pickup truck. Emily noticed Yvonne leaning against her four-by-four, chatting with Holly, another one of the moms they were well acquainted with.

“Why don’t you go and say hi,” Daniel told her. “I can supervise Chantelle and do the teacher handover.”

Emily deliberated. She wanted to meet the new teacher but she felt a yearning to reconnect with the friends whose company she’d missed over the summer.

“I’ll be super quick,” she told him, one hand clicking the passenger door catch and pushing it open.

Daniel chuckled and headed off in the direction of the steps where all the teachers were congregated supervising the morning play session.

Emily went up to Yvonne and gave her friend a big hug. Then she hugged Holly as well.

“How was your summer?” Emily asked.

Holly blushed then. Yvonne seemed to be holding back a smirk.

“It was great,” Holly told Emily. “Logan and I took the kids to Vancouver to visit family.”

“And...” Yvonne prompted.

Emily frowned, looking from one woman to the other.

“And...” Holly said, her blush deepening. “We’re pregnant.”

Emily’s eyes pinged open. “You’re kidding!” she exclaimed.

Holly shook her head. She looked shy, but thrilled.

“I’m so happy for you,” Emily cried, hugging her again. “Our babies will be able to have playdates.”

“With Robin,” Holly added, referring to Suzanna’s new son who was just two months old.

“They can be a little gang,” Emily added with a laugh.

Yvonne pouted then. “Ugh, I’m jealous. I wish I was having another.”

“Was it planned?” Emily asked Holly. “You’re blushing like it wasn’t!”

“No,” Holly told her. “It was a surprise. A welcome one, but Minnie’s not even one yet so we didn’t think anything was possible! But in Vancouver the kids were doted on by relatives and we were able to get rest and go on dates and, well, one thing led to another.”

Everyone laughed. Emily felt happy to be back in the company of some of her other school parent friends. Though Yvonne was very much one of her best friends, and Suzanna to a lesser extent, the wider circle of parent friends was very much context dependent. She realized then that she’d missed their company, she’d missed having people to share the trials and tribulations of parenthood with.

“Look at my little Bailey,” Yvonne said then, glancing over at the playground. “She’s taken the new girl under her wing.”

Emily looked over and saw the two of them zipping around the playground. Chantelle, she noticed, was not playing with them. Instead, she was with the boys, Toby, Levi, and Ryan, engaging in a much more rough and tumble kind of game. She wondered why they weren’t all playing together.

Under her breath, Yvonne whispered, “I hope she doesn’t invite her over for playdates though. I met the mom this morning. She’s as sour-faced as her daughter. And the kid’s name is *Laverne*.”

Emily couldn’t help but giggle. It felt so good to be back with her parent friends, back at the school gates. Last time she’d done this it had all been new and strange. Chantelle had appeared out of nowhere and knocked Emily’s life for six. But she wouldn’t change a thing now. Becoming a mom

had been the best experience of her life, and she loved the feeling, the opportunities it had given her, and the people she'd met because of it.

She looked over and saw Suzanna approaching, baby Robin strapped to her chest, his little feet bobbing along with each step she took. That would be Emily soon, she realized, her heart swelling at the thought – both from excitement but also anxiety. Charlotte was going to change everything again, just like Chantelle had. And Roy would not be there to support her through it all. But as she looked from Suzanna to Yvonne to Holly, she knew that she had the best people in the world beside her, watching her back. She could do it. She could do anything with her friends supporting her.

She realized then that she'd gotten so absorbed in catching up with all her friends that she'd lost track of the time.

"I'd better go and meet the new teacher," she told them, turning to head toward the steps.

But at the same moment she did so, she noticed Daniel approaching. He was looking at his watch with an expression of alarm.

"Daniel!" Yvonne cried enthusiastically.

"Hello, everyone," he said, sidling up to the group of moms. "I'm afraid I can't stop to chat, I have to get to work." He turned to Emily. "Am I still dropping you at Joe's?"

"Can I introduce myself to the teacher first?" Emily asked.

Daniel looked tensely at his watch. "Um... well..." he said, sounding a bit flustered.

Emily could sense he was clearly eager to make a good impression in his new elevated position at work. She decided to drop it and not cause a fuss.

"Don't worry," she told him, relenting. "I can meet the new teacher at pickup."

She said goodbye to each of her friends, sad to be torn from their wonderful company, and headed toward the pickup truck with Daniel.

"We'll catch up soon," she called over her shoulder, waving as they climbed back inside.

Slamming the car door, Emily turned to Daniel. "Remind me not to do coffee dates with Amy on school days. At least not until I'm back in the driving seat of my own car!"

She missed the freedom she'd had before her pregnancy. Missing out on meeting the teacher made her feel terrible. She hoped she hadn't made a bad impression because of it. She didn't want to look like an uninterested parent, distracted and self-centered.

Daniel drove out the lot, heading toward town.

"So how was the teacher?" Emily asked him.

"Miss Butler," Daniel informed her. He shrugged, as though he hadn't been paying much attention. "She seemed a bit more stern compared to Miss Glass. A little older, a little less soft around the edges."

"I wonder how Chantelle will take to her," Emily mused. The little girl struggled at times with authority figures. The soft approach worked well with her, but the main thing for Chantelle really was boundaries. As long as she knew what was expected of her she could excel. She just hoped this new, sterner teacher had the patience needed to reach that point.

"Gail was there as well," Daniel said. "She's going to be Chantelle's counselor again this year."

"That's a relief," Emily replied, thinking again of her father. Chantelle would need Gail's help more this year than ever. Not only because of the consistency Gail gave her, but because of the life experiences she'd need to be guided through this year.

"So what are you and Amy chatting about today?" Daniel asked.

His question jolted Emily out of her anguished reverie. "I'm not sure, but I think Harry. Did you notice anything odd between them on the island?"

"Not at all," Daniel said, bemused.

It didn't really surprise Emily that Daniel wouldn't have picked up on the nuances of Amy's behavior. Amy was her best friend after all; she knew her inside and out and could read the smallest signs in her expression.

“They’d better not be breaking up,” Daniel said sternly as he turned into a side road. “We’re about to open the restaurant. I don’t want Harry over-salting the soup with his tears!”

Emily chuckled. “I’m sure it’s not that. It’s probably the opposite, I think. Amy’s ready to marry him but wants me to tell her she’s not moving too fast. You remember what happened with Fraser?”

“How could I forget,” Daniel said with a wince.

They made it to Joe’s diner, and Daniel pulled over. He kissed Emily, and she slid from her seat out of the truck, no longer able to hop sprightly like she’d done before gaining fifteen pounds of pregnancy weight.

“Have a good day at work,” she told him.

He smiled and waved, then drove away. Emily headed inside the diner.

“Well, if it isn’t Emily Mitchell,” Joe exclaimed as she entered. “I haven’t seen you in a long time!”

She hugged him hello. “It’s Emily Morey now, don’t forget,” she told him.

“Of course,” Joe laughed. “And to think you had your first date here.” He beamed. “Coffee?”

Emily patted her stomach. “Decaf please.”

Joe went off to make a fresh batch of coffee while Emily found the booth that Amy was already sitting in.

“This is just like old times, isn’t it?” Amy said as she kissed her friend hello. “Grabbing coffee before work, whenever we could, of course. Breakfasts and lunches and cocktails at night.”

“Cocktails!” Emily exclaimed, patting her stomach. “Don’t remind me.” She laughed. “It is wonderful to have you around more often. And you’re right, it is like the old days, except without the high rises or rows of yellow cabs.” She smiled as she recalled their old lives in New York City. It seemed so long ago now. “So, what’s the deal?” she asked Amy. “How are things?”

Amy chewed her lip as though deliberating opening up. She clearly decided against holding back and launched straight into the heart of the matter. “It’s Harry. We’re arguing.”

“Oh,” Emily said, sadly. “That’s a bummer. I’m sorry.”

Amy shrugged and pushed her sleek blond bob behind her ears. “It’s inevitable, isn’t it? The distance. The fact we’re from different worlds. I mean, I joke about things being like they were back in New York City, but they couldn’t be more different. I just don’t know if I can commit to living here. How did you do it?”

Emily pondered the question. “Honestly, I think New York City didn’t have anything left to offer me.”

“Oh thanks,” Amy said with a pout.

“I don’t mean you!” Emily exclaimed, backtracking. “I mean career wise and relationship wise. Things with Mom were terrible. Then Ben was a jerk and it just felt right to get away. Coming here forced me to confront a lot of things. You know, with my dad and Charlotte’s death. It just made sense that I’d find myself here. Then there was Daniel.” She smiled to herself as she recalled meeting him for the first time. Of the hesitation she’d felt, the resistance at letting herself fall for someone new. But the risks had all paid off.

“So basically you’re saying I need to fix up an old house, start a business, and find myself,” Amy said with a giggle.

“And fall in love,” Emily added. “So you’ve ticked one box.”

Amy sighed. “I know. That just makes it harder. I don’t want to walk away from what I have with Harry but I just don’t know if I can be happy here.”

Emily reached across the table and held her friend’s hand. “Is this because of what happened with Fraser? I really don’t want that one bad experience to taint this. Because I’m sure you can tell it’s completely different. What you and Harry have is a thousand times better than what you and Fraser did.”

“Is it though?” Amy said with a strained voice. “At least Fraser and I were from the same worlds. We wanted similar things. Holidays and careers and property. Kids, but there’d be a nanny to help, obviously. Harry is the opposite of that. He’s ... I don’t know. Rustic? He’s...”

“...he’s Sunset Harbor,” Emily said with a decisive nod. She knew exactly what Amy was getting at. “But need I remind you that Fraser was a cheat? Harry would never do that. He’s honest and kind and loyal. That’s what you get with a Sunset Harbor man.”

Joe arrived with their waffles and Emily’s coffee. The two friends hunkered down, continuing their conversation.

“The thing is,” Amy added, “you never had to worry about this stuff. Like, you and Daniel didn’t have to debate about long distance or who would move where. It was always going to be here. But Harry and I seem to talk about it endlessly. Could we be long distance? Can I really leave my life behind, my *business*, for a man? It’s against everything I stand for!”

Emily smiled and sighed. “Amy, is that really what’s holding you back? Or is it something else?”

Amy chewed her waffle slowly. “I honestly don’t know. I’m so on the fence.”

“Do you think you might just be scared?” Emily asked. “I know you don’t get scared, that you’re a confident, no-nonsense businesswoman, but is there just a small chance that perhaps you’re scared of the fact that Harry adores you and that he might be the One, and that if you move your life here and take that risk you might be happy?”

“I guess,” Amy said. “But it’s not happy I’m scared of. It’s content. It’s... bored.”

She looked at Emily apologetically. Emily knew Amy was suggesting that life in Sunset Harbor was boring, but she didn’t care. She wouldn’t change it for the world. If this was boring she’d take it over exciting any day!

“Maybe I should go back to the city for a bit,” Amy said. “Clear my head. Check in with the business. Remind myself of my roots, you know?”

“If you think it will help,” Emily said. She forked some waffle and put it in her mouth. “Man, I haven’t been back to New York City in ages.”

Amy’s eyes widened then. “Oh my God! Come with me!”

Emily looked at her, surprised. “Um...”

“Please, Em,” Amy added. “We can have a long weekend together. I’ll throw you a layette shower, since the last shower was a bust.”

Emily blushed as she remembered how she’d awkwardly run out on the baby shower Amy had arranged for her. She couldn’t help but hesitate.

“Please, please, please,” Amy continued. “You deserve some time off. And the rush of the summer is over. I’m sure the inn can survive without you for a few days.” Amy snapped her fingers then. “And if we have the shower in New York City, your mom can come!”

Emily instantly recoiled. “Okay, now I definitely don’t want to come,” she said, remembering the huge fight she and Patricia had been in last time they spoke. Indeed, every time they spoke.

“Em,” Amy said with a maternal tone. “She’s about to become a grandmother for the first time. How long is this rift between you going to last?”

“Forever,” Emily said glumly. “You have met my mom, haven’t you?” she added wryly.

But as she thought it over, she realized there was one very important thing she needed to speak to her mom about, something that couldn’t be done over the phone. And that was Roy’s illness. She needed to know.

“Actually,” Emily said, “I am overdue a trip to New York City. Maybe my mom will be less of a handful in her own territory.”

Amy clapped her hands. “Really? This weekend?”

Emily shrugged. “I guess so.”

When was a good time to tell your mom her ex-husband was going to die? There didn’t seem like a solution to Emily, so the approaching weekend was as good a time as any.

Amy bounced up and down in her seat, excited. “This is going to be so much fun. I’m going to tell Harry.”

She grabbed her cell phone and punched in his number. At the same time, Emily’s cell began to ring.

She pulled it from her pocket and answered it at the same time as Amy. It really *was* like their old New York City days!

“Is this Mrs. Morey?” the voice on the other end asked.

“Yes, who’s this?”

“It’s Miss Butler, Chantelle’s teacher. I’m sorry to disturb you but there’s been an incident. I think you should come in.”

Emily leaped up. “What kind? Is Chantelle okay? Is she hurt?”

“She’s fine,” Miss Butler replied. “It’s a behavioral incident.”

Emily frowned. What did that mean?

“I’m on my way,” she said, hanging up and slinging her cell into her purse.

Amy was chatting with Harry on the phone, but she looked up at Emily, using her amazing multitasking abilities to carry on a wordless conversation with her friend without missing a beat in her telephone call.

“Chantelle,” Emily mouthed. “School.” She mimed a driving motion. Daniel had the car so Amy was her only way of getting there.

Amy nodded and pointed at their waffles. They’d barely eaten them. But Emily shook her head. She had to go right now.

Without questioning her at all, Amy stood, collected her purse and, still chatting with Harry, headed out of the restaurant toward her car, Emily in tow.

As they went, Emily hoped everything worked out between Amy and Harry, because it was in moments like this one, when Daniel was busy and life had thrown a spanner in the work, when Emily needed her friends more than ever.

CHAPTER FIVE

As Amy drove Emily back to the school, Emily felt her nerves increasing. She hated it when Chantelle had a behavioral outburst because it felt like a step backward, and reminded her of the terrible start the girl had had to life, the scars that she still carried despite her happy demeanor.

“Do you want me to come in with you?” Amy asked, glancing over at Emily’s pale face in the passenger seat.

Emily didn’t usually bite her nails but the anxiety was making her do so. “No, no, it’s probably best if it’s just me,” she said, feeling flustered, her face stiff with panic.

They reached the parking lot, now empty, and Amy swung into the closest space to the school doors. “Well, I’ll wait here and drive you home when you’re done.”

Emily already had a hand on the door handle, and she shook her head. “Thanks for the offer but I have no idea how long this will take.”

“How will you get home?”

“I’ll figure it out later. Back of Raj’s delivery truck? Handlebars of Cynthia’s bike?” She was cracking jokes, but only as a way to distract herself from her anguish.

Amy smiled tenderly. “Are you sure?”

“I promise,” Emily said, shoving the door open and quickly getting out.

She slammed her door shut and blew Amy a kiss before hurrying as fast as her pregnant belly would allow her up the stone steps. She pressed the intercom button and the receptionist answered, crackling out a greeting.

“Mrs. Morey,” Emily said into the silver speaker. “Chantelle’s mom.”

There was buzz. She heaved the door open and hurried to the desk. It was the same girl as last year, Emily realized, young, freckled, with a sweet smile that showed off a gap between her teeth.

“Hi, Emily,” the receptionist greeted her as she hurried in.

Emily realized – feeling a little distressed at the thought – that she was well known enough at the school for the receptionist to recognize her and remember her name.

“Here’s your visitor badge,” the girl added.

She handed the pass to Emily and Emily saw that she’d written her name in a red marker pen, in cursive, surrounding it with stars. It was a sweet gesture, but Emily was too flustered to appreciate it. Her focus was solely on Chantelle. But she did notice the girl’s name badge: Tilly. She made a point to commit it to memory so that at least the next time she saw the girl, hopefully in less stressful circumstances, she could be kinder.

“They’re down the hall in the counselor’s office,” Tilly said. “Do you know the way?”

“Unfortunately I know it all too well,” Emily replied.

Tilly gave her a sympathetic smile, and Emily hurried off down the hallway to Gail’s office.

Through the small window in the door, Emily saw the familiar bright red couches, the play table, reading nook, dolls house, and art station. She recognized Gail right away, sitting on one of the grown-up-sized chairs with her hair in a neat bun on top of her head. The other two women Emily didn’t know. And Chantelle was nowhere in sight. She could hear her, though, hear her yelling and screaming even through the thick pane of glass in the reinforced fire door.

Emily knocked quickly and saw Gail turn toward the window. Through the glass, she beckoned Emily in.

It was only once she was inside the room that Emily got her first glance of Chantelle. The child was curled up in the corner, crying desperately, surrounded by ripped up pieces of paper.

“What happened?” Emily asked.

“Take a seat,” Gail said. “You’ve met Miss Butler.”

“Actually, no, we didn’t get a chance to meet earlier,” Emily said. She shook the teacher’s hand. It was a terrible way to first meet her, Emily thought. She was a bag of nerves and felt completely frazzled. “You spoke to my husband, Daniel.”

The young teacher smiled politely, giving Emily a glimpse of the sternness that Daniel had noted. “Yes, I remember.”

“And Mrs. Doyle you’ll know,” Gail added.

Emily did a double take then. In her haste, she hadn’t really noticed the third woman in the room, but she realized now that it was the principal. Things must be serious if she was involved!

“So?” Emily said. “Was it the new class that triggered this?”

Gail nodded. “I think we were all aware this might happen. But maybe we should ask Chantelle to explain it to us. Chantelle?” Gail had an incredibly soft, gentle voice. It was the kind of voice that could coax anyone out of a tantrum.

The little girl was sobbing furiously in the corner. “I HATE her!” she yelled.

Emily looked up at Miss Butler, assuming she was the one Chantelle was referring to, and gave her a sympathetic look. She didn’t want the teacher to think it was her fault in any way.

“Who is it that you hate?” Gail continued.

“LAVERNE!” Chantelle screamed.

Emily remembered from Yvonne’s gossiping at the school gate that Laverne was the name of the new girl, the brittle-boned blonde girl whom Bailey had taken under her wing. She’d never heard Chantelle’s voice sound so shrill and piercing, so drenched in hatred. And she’d never seen so much passion in the young girl’s face, so much pain and anguish. Even in her past meltdowns over Sheila, Chantelle had never looked this distressed. Laverne had really gotten to Chantelle. Emily couldn’t begin to fathom what she could have done to cause Chantelle to perceive her to be worse than Sheila.

“Can you explain what happened with Laverne?” Gail asked softly. “We all want to understand why you’re feeling so unhappy.”

Chantelle looked up then, her face red with fury. “She stole Bailey.”

Emily frowned with confusion at the mention of Bailey’s name. She and Chantelle were as thick as thieves.

“What do you mean?” Gail probed.

Chantelle’s expression was one of unfathomable pain and hurt. It upset Emily just to see her that way.

“She said that I have a stupid accent,” Chantelle shouted. “And that Bailey was only allowed one friend with blond hair. Then Bailey told me that Laverne is her new best friend.” Chantelle’s face cracked. Instead of anger, she dissolved into tears, dropping her head onto her knees and weeping bitterly.

Emily’s hand fluttered to her heart. This was too much to bear.

“Can we do something?” Emily asked, looking up at Gail. “You understand how important it is for Chantelle to have consistency in her life.”

“Of course,” Gail replied diplomatically. “You’re good friends with Yvonne, Bailey’s mother, aren’t you? Perhaps you should speak with her about this?”

“I’m not sure how that will help,” Emily replied. “Bailey’s strong-willed. Just because her mother tells her to do something it doesn’t mean she would. Wouldn’t it be easier to just move Laverne into another class so they naturally grow apart?”

Mrs. Doyle looked aghast. “Absolutely not.”

“But look what it’s doing to Chantelle,” Emily exclaimed.

Mrs. Doyle spoke frankly. “Laverne is new here, just like Chantelle was once. She’s made a friend in Bailey and it would be cruel to take that away from her.”

Emily felt her maternal instincts sharpen. “With respect, Laverne doesn’t have the same kind of history as Chantelle. She hasn’t been through the same hardships. Wouldn’t the easiest solution be

to switch their classes now? To nip it in the bud before it gets any worse? If Laverne is this mean now, how much worse will she be tomorrow or the day after?”

“I’m sorry,” Mrs. Doyle said, shaking her head. “But they will have to work through their problems. Gail can guide them, and of course Miss Butler will be overseeing everything in the classroom. There are no quick fixes in these situations, Mrs. Morey. Chantelle’s circumstances don’t come in to it.”

Emily looked appealingly at Gail. “You’re on my side, aren’t you?”

“It’s not about sides,” Gail replied. “I’m here for Chantelle and what’s best for her.”

“Let me guess,” Emily said. “What’s best is for her to come into your office once a week to hash out her feelings? She’s a seven-year-old child. She acts on her emotions, on her feelings. Sitting here talking to you endlessly won’t help with bullying.”

“Our sessions are very valuable,” Gail replied calmly.

“I don’t think we should be so quick to label this bullying,” Mrs. Doyle interjected.

Emily was furious. She felt like everyone was abandoning Chantelle. How was this not bullying?

“Chantelle’s been mocked for her accent. She’s had her best friend taken from her. This new girl has ostracized her. How is that not bullying?”

“Emily,” Gail said softly.

But Emily was exasperated. She felt like no one in the room was prepared to do anything concrete about the situation. All they were offering was more of the same wishy-washy conversations, which felt useless to her right now, like marriage counseling for a couple of kids barely old enough to tie their own shoelaces!

“What?” Emily said furiously to Gail, so close to losing her temper it scared her.

“I have a great deal of experience dealing with these situations,” Gail continued. “I will have Chantelle, Laverne, and Bailey here together. There’s no blame. We just need to work out a way for them all to occupy the same space together.”

Emily had heard enough. “This is absurd. You’re bending over backwards to protect a bully. Come on, Chantelle, we’re leaving.”

Chantelle looked completely surprised. She blinked, her lashes wet with tears, then pulled herself to standing. Emily felt a great sense of relief when the girl rushed to her and wrapped her arms tightly about her middle. She’d done what she was supposed to as a mother; support her child unconditionally. None of this was Chantelle’s fault and the last thing she wanted was for the child to think that she’d done something wrong. Together, they marched out of the office.

“Mommy, you’re shaking,” Chantelle said as they walked along the corridors, passing Tilly at the reception desk and out onto the stone steps.

“I’m sorry,” Emily replied, taking a deep breath. “I didn’t mean to lose my temper.”

But Chantelle seemed to have been entirely distracted from her tantrum. “Don’t say sorry,” she said, her eyes wide. “It was cool!”

Emily couldn’t help but feel a little tug at the corner of her lips. “Well, thanks. But don’t go getting any ideas. Shouting at people is not a good way to behave.”

“Okay, Mommy,” Chantelle replied.

But Emily could see the twinkle of respect in her eye. When Chantelle had needed someone on her side, Emily had been there for her. Though she felt terrible for her outburst, at least Chantelle could see firsthand that this Mama Bear always had her back.

Once standing out on the steps of the school, Emily remembered that they didn’t have any way to get home. She deliberated calling Daniel but knew he was extremely busy today with his work at Jack’s. She wasn’t sure whether she should disturb him over this. Although on the one hand he’d want to know what had happened, she was Chantelle’s mother as much as Daniel was her father, and she felt certain she could handle this situation without him. They could discuss it once he was home from work.

She dialed the inn. Lois answered.

“I don’t suppose Parker is around, is he?” Chantelle asked Lois, an image of Parker’s battered little wholesale truck in her mind’s eye.

“He is,” Lois said. “I’ll fetch him.”

The line went silent. A moment later Parker’s voice sounded through the receiver.

“Boss-lady,” he quipped, “what can I do for you?”

Emily looked down at Chantelle, who was sitting on the step fiddling with her shoelaces. She looked so glum. Emily felt confident that she’d made the right decision in not bothering Daniel. She wanted to be back on safe ground, in the comfort of their home, before the issue of Chantelle’s school day was broached.

Emily spoke into the phone to Parker. “I have a favor to ask of you...”

*

That evening, the family relaxed together in the lounge. Finally, Emily felt like enough time had lapsed and she was ready to tackle the topic of Chantelle’s first day back at school.

“So, Chantelle didn’t have a good day today, did you, sweetie,” Emily said. “Can you tell Daddy what happened?”

Daniel raised his eyebrows and looked at Chantelle. She squirmed in her seat.

“You’re not in trouble,” Emily explained softly. “It’s just that Daddy doesn’t know that I had to come into the office and speak to Miss Butler and Mrs. Doyle.”

Daniel’s surprised expression grew stronger. “Mrs. Doyle, the principal?” he asked.

Emily could tell he was fighting to keep his tone even.

Chantelle nodded with shame.

“I wanted to change class because of a horrible girl,” she said, her gaze fixed on her lap.

“What horrible girl?” Daniel asked.

“She’s new,” Chantelle said. “Her name is Laverne. And she’s Bailey’s best friend.”

Daniel looked over at Emily. She flashed him a sad look.

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Daniel said. “I’m sure Bailey is just trying to be nice to her because she’s new and doesn’t know anyone.”

“It’s not like that,” Chantelle said, hitting her fist against the armrest of the couch. “Laverne told Bailey that she’s only allowed one friend with blond hair and because Laverne’s is blonder than mine, Bailey chose her!”

Emily could see the little girl was in pain, and she was growing irate as she recalled the painful events of the day.

“Have you spoken to Yvonne?” Daniel asked Emily.

She shook her head. At the same time, Chantelle shouted, “No!” She seemed panicked. “Please don’t speak to Yvonne about it. I don’t want her to tell Bailey off or force her to be my friend again. I only want her to be my friend if she wants to, not because her mom told her to.”

Emily felt so bad for Chantelle. The world of seven-year-olds could be just as complicated as the grown-up one. She desperately wished she could take all the hurt away from the little girl, but that wasn’t possible. And it wasn’t right, either. It was her job as a mom to guide Chantelle through these unpleasant experiences, not shield her from them or eradicate them.

“Do you also remember what Laverne said about you?” Emily prompted. She knew Chantelle didn’t want to talk about it but it was important that they worked through her emotions. She was almost eight years old and the people around her would soon lose patience with her tantrums. She had a steep learning curve ahead of her and a lot of time to make up for. She’d already made remarkable progress but there was still so far to go.

“She said I had a stupid accent,” Chantelle said. Then glumly, she added, “She’s right. I wish I had your voice, Daddy. Why do I have to sound like Sheila?”

“There’s nothing wrong with your voice,” Daniel told her. “Your accent is beautiful.”

“But it makes me different. And it makes people think I’m stupid.”

“You’re not stupid,” Daniel said sternly. “Don’t ever let anyone make you feel like you are. You’re perfect the way you are.”

Emily loved the amount of warmth in his voice. His speech was very touching. But Chantelle did not seem to be buying it at all. She looked just as glum as ever.

“May I be excused now?” she said quietly.

Daniel looked at Emily. She shrugged, unsure what the best thing to do was.

“I’d like to watch cartoons in my room,” Chantelle added.

“Sure,” Emily said. Everyone deserves a cheer-up routine, she thought. If cartoons in bed could self-soothe Chantelle then that was better than having her melt down.

Chantelle slid off the couch and left the room. Once she was gone, Daniel looked sadly at Emily.

“You should have told me,” he said with an exasperated sigh. “As soon as it happened. Why didn’t you call?”

Emily frowned. She’d been so sure of her decision to get Parker to pick them up before, but now seeing Daniel’s expression she felt her resolve weaken. “You were at work,” she told him softly. “I didn’t want to disturb you.”

“But this is my little girl,” he said, sternly. “I need to know if she’d being bullied.”

Emily touched Daniel’s hand. She knew him well enough now to understand that it was the stress from his new work that was making him grouchy and short with her. It wasn’t meant to be personal and so she tried not to take it as such.

“Honey, I handled it,” she told him calmly but firmly. “Having you there wouldn’t have helped matters. In fact, having us both show up like that at the school could have been quite intimidating for Chantelle. I don’t know if it’s always the best thing for her to have all these adults peering down at her evaluating her behavior. I dealt with the school, then we came home and spent the rest of the day quietly working on our respective activities. Giving her space is just as important as talking through these things.” She folded her arms triumphantly. “I actually think I did a great job.”

Daniel looked a little pained. “I’m not saying you didn’t do a great job,” he said. “You know I think you’re an awesome mom.” He ran his hands through his hair. “I just hate having responsibilities that pull me away from you, from our family.”

Emily nodded, understanding. She’d been right in thinking it was the stress of the promotion compounding Daniel’s response.

“I’m sure it will settle,” she told him, reassuringly. “Once you’ve adjusted to the new responsibilities and found your feet.”

For the first time, Emily saw a smile return to Daniel’s eyes.

“Thanks, babe,” he told her. “I’m sure you’re right. It’s just so hard, not being there for Chantelle. Especially after missing the first six years, you know?” He sounded wistful.

“I know,” Emily replied meaningfully. “But you would have lost your temper if you’d been there. The school was useless! They wouldn’t even consider switching Laverne into a different class. The principal may as well have just shrugged and said she didn’t care. She actually said they had to figure it out amongst themselves. Seven-year-olds! Like they can sit down and have guidance counseling? I was furious. I unleashed the Mama Bear.”

Daniel laughed. “I would love to have seen that.”

Emily shook her head, recalling the fury she’d felt. “It completely ruined my coffee date with Amy.”

“Oh yeah,” Daniel said, remembering. “How was that? Did you find out what’s going on with her and Harry?”

Emily nodded. "It's the obvious really. Commitment. She's not sure about throwing herself headfirst into the relationship. Especially after Fraser. I can't convince her. You know what she's like, stubborn. I'm just dropping gentle hints that Harry is the One and that she needs to take the plunge."

"It would be wonderful to have her here full time," Daniel said. "For you. And Chantelle, of course. I think it's important she has grown-ups to rely on and look up to."

Emily nodded, but became a little quiet as she thought of Roy. His was the kind of adult relationship that Chantelle needed so badly, but it was going to come to an untimely and unjust end very soon. She and Daniel had agreed not to tell Chantelle her beloved Papa Roy was dying and she was glad of it now. The child clearly wouldn't cope with it. But she'd need to be told at some point.

"I almost forgot," Emily said, trying to force the dark thoughts from her mind. "Amy wants her and I to spend the weekend in New York City. She misses it and needs a bit of space from Harry to get her thoughts in order. Plus the baby shower was a bit of a disaster and she thinks a layette shower in New York City should happen, with Jayne."

"This coming weekend?" Daniel asked, sounding a little surprised. "That's a bit sudden."

"I know," Emily said. "Do you think Chantelle will be okay if I go? I won't if it's going to upset her more."

"You have to," Daniel said, surprising her. "Our baby should have a proper party. And I think Amy's right, it would be good to do it in New York City."

"Really?" Emily asked, surprised.

He nodded. "I want you to be happy and have as many fun experiences as possible, especially with your friends and Jayne. Things will be different once Charlotte's here. You need as many happy moments as possible for when you're exhausted after sleepless nights."

Emily laughed. "Well, okay. If you think it's a good idea. I don't mind postponing until Chantelle's feeling less fragile."

Daniel kissed the top of her head. "By the time this week's over, I'm sure this whole Laverne thing will be over and done with. And anyway, I can cope with Chantelle. You go. Have fun."

They kissed, deeply and tenderly.

"Thank you, sweetheart," Emily said, gazing at her loving husband with adoration.

Just then, the sound of distant piano music interrupted Emily's thought process. She frowned, quirked her head to the side in confusion.

"Am I imagining that, or can you hear a piano too?" she asked Daniel.

"It sounds like one of Owen's pieces," Daniel replied, confirming her suspicion.

They both looked at the piano in the corner. The music definitely wasn't coming from that! It seemed to be floating toward them from a distance.

Daniel stood from the couch and went over to the window, drawing back the curtains.

"Oh!" he exclaimed

"What is it?" Emily asked, getting up as fast as her bump permitted and going over to join him.

To her surprise she saw people walking up the path, not toward the inn, but toward Trevor's house. Light was streaming from the windows. The piano music was emanating from that direction, too.

"The restaurant!" Emily cried.

Daniel looked shocked. "It's opening tonight?" he said. "How did we forget?"

Emily couldn't believe something so important could have slipped her mind.

"Baby brain," she suggested, referring to that well-known phenomenon that caused forgetfulness in pregnancy.

"That explains it for you," Daniel chuckled. "But what about me?"

"Well, you've been focusing on your promotion," she said. "And I guess we did pass all the responsibility over to Harry. He must be so good at managing things he didn't even need to check in with us about anything."

She watched all the people heading toward the house for the opening night. It looked like it was going to be a popular new haunt for the people of Sunset Harbor and Emily was relieved. Missing the Labor Day business had been a worry for Emily but the restaurant just hadn't been ready in time to open then. She'd been certain that local folk would be too tired from all the celebrations to want *another*

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