

A romantic winter scene featuring a man and a woman in a snowy forest. The man, wearing a grey beanie and a blue patterned jacket, is lifting the woman. The woman is wearing a red beanie, a blue puffer jacket, and tan boots. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The background is a soft-focus winter landscape with snow-covered trees and a warm, golden light from the sun.

SOPHIE LOVE

CHRISTMAS
FOREVER

THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR—BOOK 8

Sophie Love
Christmas Forever
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Аннотация

CHRISTMAS FOREVER is book #8 in the #1 bestselling clean romance series THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR.

35 year old Emily Mitchell fled her job, apartment and ex-boyfriend in New York City for her father's historic, abandoned home on the coast of Maine, needing a change in her life and determined to make it work as a B&B. She had never expected, though, that her relationship with its caretaker, Daniel, would turn her life on its head.

Christmas and New Years are fast approaching in Sunset Harbor, and Emily Mitchell is nearing her third trimester. While they continue to develop their new private island, a new business opportunity arises – one Emily had never anticipated, and which could change everything.

Roy's time left to live is running out fast, and as Christmas looms and all are busy preparing, Emily knows that this will be the most meaningful one of her life. It will be an inspirational holiday season, one that changes their lives forever.

CHRISTMAS FOREVER is book #8 in a dazzling, wholesome romance series that will make you laugh, cry, keep you turning pages late into the night – and make you fall in love with the contemporary romance novel all over again.

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Sophie Love

Christmas Forever

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Sophie Love

#1 bestselling author Sophie Love is author of the romantic comedy series **THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR**, which

includes eight books, 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

FOR NOW AND FOREVER (Book #1)

FOREVER AND FOR ALWAYS (Book #2)

FOREVER, WITH YOU (Book #3)

IF ONLY FOREVER (Book #4)

FOREVER AND A DAY (Book #5)

FOREVER, PLUS ONE (Book #6)

FOR YOU, FOREVER (Book #7)

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THE ROMANCE CHRONICLES

LOVE LIKE THIS (Book #1)

LOVE LIKE THAT (Book #2)

LOVE LIKE OURS (Book #3)

LOVE LIKE THEIRS (Book #4)

Chapter One

Doctor Arkwright smiled at Emily and removed the measuring tape from around her belly. “I can confirm your due date will be December 13th,” she said. “You’re 37 weeks now, and officially full term.”

Emily looked at Daniel and grinned. It was so exciting to know that in just three weeks Baby Charlotte would be joining them.

They all sat back down in their seats, and Doctor Arkwright continued.

“No more flying,” she told Emily. “So if you were planning a babymoon, I’m afraid you won’t be able to do so abroad.”

“Babymoon?” Emily laughed. “I’ve never even heard of that.”

The Doctor chuckled back. “It’s all the rage these days. I have mom’s and dad’s to be planning lavish babymoon’s because they know it’s their last chance.”

Emily found the idea amusing. With everything going on at the inn, it was very unlikely they’d even be able to find the time (not to mention the money) should they even want to go on vacation!

The Doctor clapped her hands. “We’re all done here.”

“Great,” Emily said, hopping down from the seat. “Oh, I almost forgot. I have something for you.” She reached in her purse and pulled out Roman’s latest album. He’d been delighted to sign it for the Doctor, though thoroughly amused at that same time.

Doctor Arkwright saw what Emily was holding and turned a shade of crimson. She took it hurriedly. "Thanks so much," she whispered.

Emily and Daniel left her surgery and headed out to the parking lot. For the Monday after Thanksgiving, the weather was remarkably warm.

"What are the chances of us missing snow this year?" Emily asked Daniel as she reached the pickup truck.

"Honestly, I can't imagine a Christmas without it," he said. "I'm sure the weather will turn soon enough."

They both got into the truck.

"It's been kinda useful," Emily added. "Think how much more work we've been able to get done at the island thanks to the weather!"

Daniel turned his key in the ignition and the old truck juddered to life. "I know," he said, as he began reversing out of his parking space. "We're ahead of schedule. And considering we need everything done by April, that is a very good thing."

Emily thought about how the island had already been booked up, months in advance, before even the roof was on the cabins!

"How are Stu, Clyde and Evan getting along?" she asked him.

"Absolutely fine," he told her. "I didn't know they had it in them. I always thought they were lazy."

Emily laughed but kept her own thoughts about Daniel's friends to herself. She'd grown fond of them over the weeks they'd been working for board and food but that initial

impression of them was going to be hard to shake!

“Well I’m glad they’re working hard,” she told Daniel. “We desperately need the income from the island if things carry on the way they’re going.”

Daniel glanced across to her in the passenger seat. “Is it really that bad?”

Emily grimaced. “Yes. Unfortunately. We’ve not had any reservations come in for the winter. In fact, there’s no one coming until March. Not in the carriage house, Trevor’s house, or the main inn. I’ve had to cut everyone’s shifts as well. It’s just Lois and Parker doing some select shifts. Vanessa and Marnie have agreed to take the whole winter off but Matthew’s not thrilled by the cut backs. He’s trying to save up for a new car. I feel awful. Luckily the restaurant’s still getting a lot of bookings so Harry’s giving him some work there. The spa’s still popular so between the tw of them, they should tide us over. But it’s going to be a tight few months.”

The timing was either a blessing or a curse. A blessing because it would give Emily the time to spend with her newborn, but a curse because newborns were expensive and the last thing she wanted to be doing was worrying about money!

“It won’t,” Daniel told her with determination. “I’ll get my woodshop up and running before the new year if I have to. You and Baby Charlotte will get everything you need. I promise you.”

Emily smiled, and rubbed her round stomach. Daniel was so focused on providing them with the best life possible. It made

her so happy. She was so lucky to have him in her life. She just hoped he didn't burn himself out working too hard. It was always a balancing act with Daniel, and he often came down on the wrong side!

"Maybe we should try to get Amy to have her wedding at the inn, like she was planning on with Fraser?" Emily suggested.

Daniel barked out his laughter, as if he'd never heard anything so ludicrous. "I highly doubt she'll want to after last time. It would surely bring up some unpleasant memories? And why would Harry want to get married in the place he worked?" He shook his head, thoroughly amused. "It's a shame though. Maybe you can convince another one of your rich friends to get married this year. What about Jane?"

"Absolutely not!" Emily replied. "Jane is *not* the marrying type."

But his suggestion did get her thinking. As they settled into a comfortable silence, Emily tried to imagine some more creative ways to market the inn over the winter. They'd put so much focus on the island, spa, restaurant and speakeasy that they'd neglected to advertize the inn and everything it had to offer properly. Winter weddings could be a good approach, especially with the ballroom for ceremonies and every bedroom in the inn spare for the guests! She'd have to book in a meeting with Bryony, their web-whizz and marketing-extraordinaire.

Daniel turned off the high street then, heading down the smaller road in the direction of Chantelle's school. Their

appointment with the doctor had overrun and there wasn't time now to go home first before picking her up.

"Have you heard anymore from Raven Kingsley?" he asked as he drove. "When's the next town meeting to decide on whether her inn can go ahead?"

"I don't know yet," Emily said. "I'm waiting to hear. They'll post a bulletin once the zoning board's had its meeting. I'm sure it won't be for a while yet."

"Aren't you worried?" Daniel asked.

"Of course. Competition, especially from someone like Raven, is always a scary prospect. We've had it easy so far. The market was ours."

"*That was easy?*" Daniel joked, referring to the years and months of work they'd put into making the inn a success.

"You know what I mean," Emily said. "We never really had to worry about bankruptcy before."

"And we do now?" Daniel asked, his jokey expression from before having entirely disappeared.

Emily bit her lip. "Maybe a little," she told him. "If things don't pick up soon. But don't worry, I'll come up with something. A Christmas ball. With Roman singing. For a hundred dollars a ticket!"

She was only joking. Using Roman's celebrity status for her own gain was not something she would ever do. But a Christmas ball for the town might be a nice idea.

Daniel still looked concerned.

“Hun,” Emily told him, firmly. “I’ve got this. Don’t worry. Nothing, not even Raven Kingsley’s new inn, will stop us. I promise. We’re too determined to fail now.”

She spoke confidently, but there was also doubt in the back of her mind. What if this was the winter they couldn’t weather? What if her perfect life was about to come crashing down around her?

* * *

Daniel pulled into the school lot. The day was already out and all the kids were playing in the large playground, supervised by their teachers. Emily caught sight of Chantelle, playing with Bailey and Laverne. It was such a relief the girls were friends again.

She got out the pickup truck and waved at Chantelle’s teacher on the steps outside the school. She also waved at Tilly, the school’s receptionist Emily had recently bonded with. Tilly was having her afternoon coffee break out on the steps with the rest of the faculty. She waved warmly at Emily.

Chantelle must have noticed her parents because she came running over.

“Guess what!” she cried. “We’re doing *A Seussified Christmas Carol* for our concert this year!

“What is that?” Emily asked.

“It’s Charles Dicken’s *A Christmas Carol* but all in rhymes like

Doctor Seuss,” Chantelle told her. “And I’m playing The Ghost of Christmas Past!”

Emily knew enough to know that was one of the central parts to the play. After Ebenezer Scrooge, the ghost would surely have the most lines.

“Well done sweetheart!” she said, hugging Chantelle tightly.

Once she’d released her, Daniel swept her up into the air.

“What a cool part!” he exclaimed. “I’m so proud of you!”

He placed her back on her feet, and Chantelle reached for something from her satchel.

“These are my lines,” she said, holding up a thick booklet with a recognizable Seuss-style illustration on the front of it. “The play will be on Friday 18th December.”

Emily looked at Daniel, her eyebrows raised. Baby Charlotte would be born by then! Suddenly it all felt incredibly real. And so, so exciting.

“That’s not very long to learn all your lines,” Daniel said to Chantelle. “Three weeks?”

“I know,” she told him, looking suddenly very serious. “But I can do it.”

“Of course you can,” Emily told her.

They all climbed into the truck and Daniel turned the ignition. It juddered to life with a spluttering noise.

“When I get home, can I start decorating the inn for Christmas?” Chantelle asked from the back seat.

Emily laughed and glanced over her shoulder at her. “We’ve

only just had Thanksgiving.”

“I know,” Chantelle replied. “But I love Christmas so much. I just can’t wait to swap my fall leaves bunting for snowflake bunting.”

Daniel started to chuckle. His gaze flicked up to Chantelle in the rear view mirror.

“You can decorate the inn however you want,” he said.

Emily smiled to herself. She loved Chantelle’s creativity, and she loved the way her home was transformed for every festivity, every season, by the child’s hand. She wouldn’t swap it for the world – not the plastic spiders she kept finding down the back of furniture from Halloween or the tiny American flags between the floorboards from July 4th. Her life was perfect. Fingers crossed, it would stay that way.

* * *

A few minutes later they returned home, and Daniel parked up outside the inn. The vast drive was completely empty now. With no guest cars filling the outside space, the drive looked suddenly enormous.

They went up the porch steps and in through the large door of the inn. As they stepped inside, Emily discovered, to her surprise, that the fall decorations were already gone. She’d only been out the house for a couple of hours, but someone had turned the inn back into a blank canvas. Who could have done so?

She thought of Lois and Marnie using some of their extra time during their slow shift to tidy up, or maybe Vanessa had done it during her cleaning. But then she heard voices coming from the living room and instantly realized who had instigated the tidy up.

She went into the living room, and there sat the culprit: Amy. Amy was so organized it was no surprise she'd immediately put their thanksgiving decorations away.

She wasn't alone though. Sat on the couch beside her, by the lit fireplace, with Mogsy's head resting in her lap, drinking what looked like cocoa with marshmallows in, was Patricia. Not only had Emily's mom gotten a taste for marshmallows ever since her first experience of smores, she'd learned to appreciate the love of a smelly, moulting dog. And, more importantly, she'd stayed for the whole thanksgiving weekend. It was a miracle, as far as Emily was concerned, that she and her mom had spent three whole days together without killing one another. Things really did seem to be changing for the better. In fact, Emily was a little melancholy that her mom would be leaving today.

"Amy!" Chantelle cried when she saw Emily's friend sat on the couch. "We're allowed to decorate the inn for Christmas. Did you get the stuff?"

Emily frowned and looked at Daniel, perplexed. By his expression she could tell he was just as curiously amused as she was.

"Of course I did," Amy replied with a grin.

She grabbed a large carrier bag from down the side of the

couch, where it had been out of view. Emily could see sparkly silver fabric, glittery snowflakes, and plastic icicles poking out the top of the overstuffed bag.

“What’s all that?” she exclaimed. “You’ve been scheming! The two of you!”

She tickled Chantelle in the ribs and the little girl squealed. Then she wriggled away from Emily’s fingers and hurried over to Amy. She grabbed the bag and peered inside.

“This is so cool,” she told Amy. “Can we start now?”

Amy looked at Emily as if for approval.

“Don’t look at me,” Emily laughed, holding her hands up into truce position. “You two have clearly got plans!”

They both scurried into the corridor and began to string fairy lights across the ceiling and spray fake snow on the window panes. Emily watched them from the doorway, her shoulder resting against it. She felt a very strong sense of Christmas cheer.

“My back’s killing me,” Daniel said then, appearing behind her. “I’m going to take a nice long soak.”

“Good idea,” she said. “You rest up.”

Daniel was working so hard at the moment, trying to provide for the family. She didn’t want him getting an injury like his boss Jack had done recently. That would be a disaster. He needed to take care of himself.

He kissed her cheek, then went upstairs, passing Amy and Chantelle on the way.

“Come on, mommy!” Chantelle cried. “You have to help too!”

Emily had started to feel very tired at this late stage of her pregnancy. But she didn't want to let Chantelle down. She looked over at Patricia, who was flicking through a design magazine whilst sipping her chocolate drink.

"Mom? Want to help too?"

Patricia looked surprised. "Oh. Well. I suppose I could."

Emily smirked, quietly very pleased that her mom would join in. She turned back to Chantelle.

"We're coming!"

Then she and Patricia went out into the hallway and searched through Amy's bag of tricks. Emily took out some glittering tinsel and began winding it around the bannister of the staircase, whilst Patricia selected some sparkly material draped it artistically around the picture frames. It was such a wonderful moment for Emily, so full of peace and happiness.

"When are you getting married, Amy?" Chantelle asked as she affixed snowflakes to the walls with sticky tack.

"I haven't set the date yet," Amy told her, smiling to herself. "I can't work out what season I want my wedding to be in. Or even what country."

Chantelle's eyes widened as though the thought of an overseas wedding had never even crossed her mind. "You could get married in Lapland! Reindeers and white snow!"

Amy laughed. "I was thinking more the Bahamas. Turtles... and white beach."

"That sounds nice too," Chantelle conceded.

“If you need any help planning it,” Emily said. “I’d be very happy to help. You were so great with my wedding, I’d love to return the favor.”

Amy looked touched. “Really, Em? That would be the best. But honestly, you’re the one who’s got a ton of stuff to organize before I’m even ready to get married. You’ve got to give birth, for starters! And what about a babymoon? You’re running out of time.”

Emily laughed and shook her head. “Not you too! A babymoon? My doctor asked us if we were going on one. Is this a new thing?”

“What’s a babymoon?” Chantelle chimed in.

Amy looked shocked. “I can’t believe neither of you have heard of it. A babymoon is the last chance for the mom and dad to be to have a holiday before the demands of a newborn take up all their time.”

“I’ve never heard of anything so indulgent,” Patricia said with a snort.

Ignoring her mom, Emily noticed that Chantelle looked a little concerned about the prospect of her and Daniel leaving for a weekend away. She always had a wobble when they left her because her terrible beginning in life had taught her when people left, they didn’t necessarily come back home. It was such hard work trying to undo the destruction Sheila’s parenting had caused.

“Don’t worry, hun,” Emily told her. “I can’t fly anymore, so

there wouldn't really be much point."

"Emily!" Amy cried, sounding incredulous. "The point is that you and Daniel get one last chance for a romantic trip together. Your lives are about to change forever. Don't you want a last hurrah? It's not like you'd have to go far. You could drive up to Quebec City. It's beautiful there at this time of year."

For the first time, Emily really began to consider whether a babymoon would be fun. Just her and Daniel, all the stresses of running their business and all the anxiety over giving birth left behind.

"You don't think it's cutting it a bit fine?" Emily said. "My due date is in three weeks."

"And only, like, twenty percent of babies are born on their due dates," Amy replied.

"You were late, by the way, Emily," Patricia told her. "So was Charlotte. And so was I. If you're anything like I was, she'll be late. I was 42 weeks plus seven days with both of you."

"No way!" Emily cried. She'd never been informed of this. "That sounds extremely uncomfortable."

"Not at all," Patricia replied. "Your body knows what it wants. You have to trust it."

"I didn't even know you could go that late," Amy said.

Patricia nodded. "In my day, you'd avoid being induced if you could, and trust that nature would do its thing. It's more common than people realize. Some babies just take longer to bake."

Amy and Chantelle laughed then, but Emily felt queasy at the

thought. Pregnancy was hard! She didn't want it to last any longer than need be! But maybe her mom had a good point. The older generations were much less pampered and fussy. They didn't have babymoons or anything like that. Sometimes the practical, fuss-free way of doing things was better.

They finished up decorating the hallways and went into the dining room next, where they placed sparkly snowflakes on all the tables and replaced the fall themed centerpieces with winter ones. It looked beautiful, and Emily felt even more excited for Christmas.

But excitement wasn't enough to stop her from yawning. The decorating work was rather strenuous and she just didn't have anywhere near as much energy these days.

"I'm going to have to stop for a bit," she confessed. "If I even attempt the ballroom I might fall asleep!"

She noticed then that Amy and Chantelle were exchanging mischievous looks with one another.

"What's going on?" she asked, placing her hands on her hips.

"Nothing," Amy said in a tone that suggested the opposite.

"Can we show her?" Chantelle asked Amy.

"It's up to you. You're the one who wanted it to be a surprise."

"Show me what?" Emily exclaimed.

But Chantelle and Amy were just talking to each other. She grew impatient.

"Guys, I want to know what the surprise is!" she cried.

"Okay," Chantelle said. "Come with me."

She took her hand and led her into the low-ceilinged corridor that opened out into the ballroom. But instead of walking straight along, she turned right, along the even smaller passageway that weaved all the way to the outhouses and garage. They stopped at one of the doors.

Emily frowned, curious.

“We weren’t sure where we could do this,” Chantelle told her. “Because we didn’t want to take one of the inn rooms. Then Amy suggested one on of the outhouses. So…” She paused for dramatic effects, then threw open the door.

Emily blinked, then gasped. The small room had been completely transformed. Instead of exposed brick walls, it had been plastered and painted yellow. Instead of the cement floor, vinyl had been laid down, and on top of that was a fluffy rug. The room was filled with lights – night lights and fairy lights and spinning musical lights that projected stars onto the walls.

“What is this?” Emily asked, stunned.

“It’s the playroom!” Chantelle exclaimed.

Amy spoke then. “We thought it would be nice for the girls to have a place to play away from the rest of the inn. Somewhere they’re allowed to make as much noise as they want without disturbing any of the guests. And somewhere to keep their toys so they don’t end up all over the place.”

Emily was so touched. The room was lovely. It just needed to be filled with toys now!

“I love it, thank you so much guys,” she said, hugging Amy

and Chantelle in turn.

They went back into the living room so Emily could have a rest before the rest of the decorating commenced. Then, once she felt rejuvenated, they took on the mammoth task of decorating the ballroom.

“You know there’s something missing,” Emily said, once she’d strung up the last of the fairy lights.

“What’s that?” Chantelle asked.

“A Christmas tree!” Emily cried.

Chantelle’s eyes grew round and excited. “Of course. But we need more than one, don’t we? We need one for the ballroom and one for the hallway. And one for Trevor’s. And the spa. And the restaurant.”

“Sounds like you need a whole forest,” Amy joked.

“How about we all go tomorrow?” Emily suggested. “Yvonne was telling me about an amazing Christmas Tree farm out of town. It’s not the one we went to last year, it’s supposed to be really huge. We could make a day of it?”

“Can Nana Patty come too?” Chantelle asked.

Emily shook her head. “She’s leaving today,” she said.

Chantelle’s expression became downcast. Emily hated to see her sad.

“Why don’t you ask her?” she suggested.

Patricia had been surprising her recently. Maybe she’d stick around if they made it clear they wanted her too.

Chantelle bounded out the ballroom and down the corridor,

to where Patricia was relaxing in the living room.

“Nana Patty!” Chantelle cried, her voice loud enough to carry all the way to where Emily was waddling through the house, trying to catch up to her. “Can you come Christmas tree shopping with us tomorrow?”

Emily entered the living room, just as Patricia was shaking her head.

“I have a flight booked to get me home,” Patricia said. “It’s leaving this evening.”

“Please,” Chantelle said. She got onto the couch beside Patricia and wrapped her arms around her neck. “I really, really want you to stay.”

Patricia looked stunned by the affection. She patted Chantelle’s arm and looked up at Emily standing in the doorway. Emily smiled, touched by the sweet scene, by how much love Chantelle had to give, even to those who had behaved in ways that ought to preclude it. Her capacity for forgiveness and kindness always inspired Emily.

“Well, I don’t want to be in the way,” Patricia said, speaking to Chantelle but directing her words at Emily.

“You’re not in the way,” Emily said. “We’ve loved having you here. And it’s not like the inn is busy at the moment. It’s the perfect time to stay. If you want.”

“Please!” Chantelle begged.

Finally, Patricia smiled. “Okay. I will stay and help you pick out a tree.”

Emily could tell that Patricia was touched to be invited, to be welcome in after all her bad behavior and the terrible fights they'd had. Emily felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude then, realizing that life could always change for the better. It seemed that one was never too old to feel Christmas cheer for the first time!

Chapter Two

Chantelle looked overjoyed when Emily and Daniel arrived to pick her up from school the next day, with Patricia sitting patiently in the back seat. She looked very out of place in the truck in her two-piece outfit and blazer combo but Chantelle didn't seem to notice. She leaped into the backseat, beaming, her cheeks pink from the chilly weather.

“Christmas tree time!” she declared.

Daniel drove them. The weather still hadn't fully turned yet, though it was much colder than it had been. There wasn't even any frost, which was common at this time of year. Emily was grateful that the weather had held up so far. It meant that Evan, Clyde and Stu had been able to do their work on the island unimpeded.

The Christmas Tree farm was quite a way out of Sunset Harbor. They could, of course, just go to the depot at Ellsworth, but that was hardly a magical experience for Chantelle! So they went even further, to the one in Taunton Bay.

As they pulled down the small, bumpy, potholed road that lead to the farm, Emily could see the extra journey was well worth it. The Christmas Tree farm was enormous, and thanks to the sloping hillside that ran all the way down from the road to the lake, they had an amazing view of all the trees.

“It's like a whole forest of Christmas,” Chantelle said, in awe.

Daniel pulled up into the makeshift lot, which was really just a patch of flattened ground, covered in hay to stop it becoming too muddy. There was a small wood-panelled house to one side, with a handmade sign proclaiming; Christmas Trees!

Emily looked over at Patricia in the backseat beside Chantelle. She was wearing her typical snooty expression, and peering out the window with a fearful expression for the dirty ground she was about to step on. But she held her tongue and Emily smiled to herself. That, in itself, felt like a small victory.

Everyone climbed out of the pickup truck, just at the same time the front door to the house opened. A man stepped out, waving at them. He seemed very jolly, with a round belly. Emily wondered if he'd ever considered becoming a Santa, he certainly had the look for it.

"Hi folks!" he said, grinning. "I'm Terry. Are you here to cut down your own tree?"

"We certainly are," Daniel said.

Chantelle hurried up to the man. "Actually, we need five trees. We have an inn, you see, and a restaurant and spa and they all need a tree. So does the ballroom."

"How about we just start with one?" Emily suggested, thinking of the fact there were no guests at the inn right now to enjoy the trees. "Then if we need more, we can come back for another day trip."

That seemed to please Chantelle, and she nodded in agreement.

Terry showed them the tools they would need, then they waved goodbye and headed out into the forest of trees. Emily thought of the farm they'd visited last year, which had been very busy, run more like a fare with tractor rides and hot chocolate to purchase. She liked this more back-to-basics experience, especially since the moment they were inside the forest everything became very quiet.

"It's like we're the only people in the world," she said, her hands protectively cradling her bump.

She looked back to see how Patricia was getting on. Despite walking on her tiptoes and wearing a slightly pinched expression, she wasn't complaining at all. Emily wondered if perhaps she might be enjoying herself, though too proud to admit it.

"Nana Patty," Chantelle said, hurrying back and grasping her hand. "I think there's some really, really dark green ones over here. Come on!"

Emily smiled to herself as she watched her daughter pull her mom along. She couldn't recall a time when Patricia had been so compliant, joining in with an activity. Chantelle was clearly rubbing off on her.

Daniel put an arm around Emily's shoulders, bringing her body close to his.

"This is wonderful, isn't it?" he said. "I love how enthusiastic she gets about these sort of things. I can't wait to see how much she enjoys Hanukkah."

"What date does it start this year?" Emily asked him.

“Sixteenth.”

“So after Charlotte has joined us?” she asked, grinning, thinking about having a newborn in the house during this wonderful time of the year, when everyone was celebrating.

“Maybe even on the first day,” he said, smiling. “Wouldn’t that be lovely?”

Emily nodded in agreement. It would certainly be delightful for Daniel to have his daughter born on such a significant day.

Just then, they heard Chantelle calling through the trees.

“Mom! Dad! We’ve got it!”

They smiled at one another then trudge towards her voice. Chantelle was standing next to gorgeous tree, with the darkest pines Emily had ever seen. It was wonderfully symmetrical, too, the sort of perfect tree that would be used in magazines. And of course, it was enormous.

“Nana Patty chose it,” Chantelle said, looking proudly at Patricia.

“Did she now?” Emily asked, pleased to see how well the two were bonding.

Even Patricia looked quietly pleased.

“In that case,” Daniel said, “Nana Patty ought to have the first go.”

“Oh goodness, no,” Patricia said, shaking her hands at the saw Daniel was offering her.

“Yes!” Chantelle cried, jumping up and down, clapping her hands. “Please Nana Patty! It’s really fun. I promise you’ll enjoy

it.”

Patricia hesitated, then finally relented. “Oh, all right then. If you insist.”

She took the saw from Daniel and glared at the tree like it was an enemy. Daniel bent down and moved the large branches out of her way, exposing the truck where she was to cut. Patricia squatted, clearly in an attempt to not let her knee touch the muddy ground. Emily couldn't help but laugh to herself. Her mom looked like a frog!

Patricia reached in and sawed across the trunk of the tree. She squealed, elated, and looked back at the family watching on.

“You're right,” she said to Chantelle. “That *is* fun!”

Emily chuckled aloud. Just a few days in Maine with her family and Patricia had eaten smores and chopped wood!

Terry arrived then with his tractor and put the tree in the back.

“All aboard,” he said.

They all got into the back with the tree, but Patricia didn't move. She looked stunned.

“You want me to ride in that?”

Chantelle bounced up and down on the wooden bench. “It's fun! You have to trust me!”

“Do I have a choice?” Patricia asked.

Chantelle shook her head, still grinning wickedly.

Patricia sighed and climbed into the tractor trailer.

Once everyone was settled, Terry drove them back to their car and helped Daniel secure the very large tree onto the roof

of his truck. Then they paid him and left the farm, all feeling exhilarated.

“I can’t wait to decorate it,” Chantelle said. “Will you help Nana Patty?”

Patricia nodded. “Yes, but then I must leave after that. Okay?”

Chantelle pouted, looking a little sad. “If you have too. But I’ve loved you being here. Will you come back for Christmas?”

Emily watched her mom in the rear-view mirror. She couldn’t even recall the last time they’d spent Christmas together. Even when she was living in New York with Ben, they’d tended to spend Christmas with his family rather than Patricia. It wasn’t like the woman ever particularly got into the Christmas spirit and it seemed like a dumb idea as far as Emily was concerned to put themselves through the misery. She wondered whether the softer side of Patricia she’d seen over the last few days could extend that far.

“Maybe,” she said, evasively. “I think your mother and father might have a lot on at that point in time. The baby will be born by then, won’t she?”

“Even better!” Chantelle pressed. “She needs to meet her Nana Patty.”

Clearly realizing that she’d come up against Patricia’s stubborn side, Chantelle offered another suggestion. “Or if not Christmas, maybe New Years? We have a party at the inn. You can come to that, right?”

Patricia remained evasive in her answers. “We will have to

see,” was all she’d commit to.

Chantelle looked over at Emily next. “Do you think Papa Roy might want to come for Christmas?” she asked.

Emily felt tense. It was even less likely her father would be able to come with his health deteriorating.

“We can ask,” Emily told her, and the conversation died down to silence.

They reached the inn and Daniel parked up. Stu, Clyde and Evan were home, so they came out to help carry the tree inside. Then, together, the four men heaved it up into its position in the foyer.

“That’s one big tree,” Clyde said, whistling. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead and looked down at Chantelle. “How are you going to get the angel on the top? Even on my shoulders I don’t think you’ll make it.”

To iterate his point, he swept a giggling Chantelle up into his strong arms and plonked her on his shoulders. He began parading her around. Emily noticed Patricia wincing. Probably worrying about the hard wooden floor beneath them, a mother’s instinct that even Patricia possessed!

“I’ll go get the ladder,” Stu said, heading off in the direction of the garage.

Evan and Clyde helped, too, by carrying all the boxes of decorations out of the garage. Then the three men headed off into town to watch the game and have a drink after their long day working on the island, leaving just the family to decorate.

“We need to put on Christmas music,” Emily said, heading over to the reception desk where the sound system was set up. She found an old Christmas Crooners CD and put it on. Frank Sinatra’s voice filled the hall.

“And,” Daniel added. “We need to have hot chocolates!”

Chantelle nodded enthusiastically, and they all hurried into the kitchen. Daniel boiled milk on the stove, while Chantelle searched the pantry for leftover marshmallows. She returned with not only marshmallows, but also rainbow sprinkles and whipped cream.

“Excellent,” Daniel said, as he poured them each a mug of hot chocolate, then topped them with cream, marshmallows and sprinkles.

Emily had never seen Patricia consume anything like that in her life! The smores had been a sight enough to behold, but this was a whole other thing. It was like Patricia had been transformed by the spirit of Christmas, at last, after sixty-odd years of resistance!

They headed back into the hall, where the giant Christmas tree stood waiting to be decorated, and got to work. Of course, Chantelle took the lead.

“We need lights over here, Daddy,” she said to Daniel, pointing at a bare patch. “And Nana Patty, those reindeer need to be on this branch.”

Emily leaned in to her mom and said, “Chantelle has a very specific vision.”

Patricia laughed. “Yes, I can tell. She has an eye for detail. She’ll make a wonderful interior designer one day.”

Emily could certainly picture it. Either that, or some kind of events organizer. She touched her bump, wondering what kind of personality Baby Charlotte would have, whether she’d be similar to her sister – a leader, organizer, socializer, performer – or whether she’d have a different way about her. Perhaps she’d take after Emily herself, and be less inclined towards the limelight, more content to read a book and take the dogs on quiet, countryside walks. Or perhaps she’d be like her father, practical and hardworking, prone to moments of broodiness. Or, as Emily tended to think, she might take after the aunt for which she was named; sweet, imaginative, inquisitive, calm. She couldn’t wait to find out.

“Nana Patty,” Chantelle said then, breaking through Emily’s reverie. “What was mommy like when she was my age?”

Patricia was busy stretching a large piece of sparkly tinsel across the branches, weaving it through them so it wouldn’t fall.

“At eight-years-old? Well let me think. Her hair was very curly then, much more than it is now. She used to wear these beautiful plaid dresses. Do you remember darling?”

Emily cast her mind back in time. The plaid dress and itchy tights combo her mom always dressed her up in had been a source of numerous fights. Emily had hated the way she wasn’t allowed to run or climb trees because Patricia didn’t want her to mess up her clothes.

“I remember,” she replied.

Patricia continued. “Her father was teaching her piano then as well. She was quite good at it but lost interest.”

Emily wished now that she hadn’t. That she’d continued to sit beside her dad on that battered piano stool, learning songs from musicals and old classics. Those were precious times and she hadn’t made the most of them. She hadn’t known that she needed to.

“Papa Roy?” Chantelle asked.

“Yes,” Patricia said. She smiled. “He was very gifted at the piano. And he loved it. That’s why he had to have one in this house, even though we were only here a few weeks a year. But he’d light the fire and play us the piano, and Emily would wrap herself up in a blanket and fall asleep.” She let out a melancholy sigh. “There were always wonderful moments in between, weren’t there, sweetheart?”

Emily knew what she meant. In between the pain of losing Charlotte. That after her death, when the silence grew between her parents like an invisible wall of glass, there were some moments of normalcy, of joy, even, when the quietness was filled with beauty and their minds were given a reprieve from grief.

“I love Papa Roy,” Chantelle told Patricia. “Was he a very good husband?”

Patricia looked back at Chantelle. And to Emily’s shock and surprise, she reached out and stroked the girl’s head.

“He was. Not always. But no one is perfect.”

“Did you love him?”

“With all my heart.”

“What about now?” Chantelle asked.

“Hush,” Emily interrupted. “That’s a personal question.”

“I don’t mind,” Patricia said. She looked Chantelle squarely then, and spoke in an undeterred voice. “We spent many years as husband and wife, many good years. But we weren’t happy and the most important thing in life is to be happy. It was very hard to say goodbye to him, but in the end it was for the best. And yes, I still love him now. Once you love someone you can never really stop.”

Emily turned away then, wiping the tear that had formed in the corner of her eye. During her entire lifetime, Patricia had only ever bad-mouthed her father. Never once had she heard her admit that she still loved Roy.

Silence fell then, and the family quietly put the last decorations on the tree. The melancholy air that hovered around them dissipated only when Daniel took the angel statue out of the box.

“It’s time,” he said, handing it to Chantelle.

With an excited smile on her face, Chantelle climbed the ladder, stretched her arm as long as she could, and placed the angel on the top branch of the tree.

“Ta da!” she cried.

Daniel helped her back down the ladder and everyone stepped back to admire their handywork. Emily felt overcome with emotion as it occurred to her that this was the first tree she had

decorated alongside her mom for close to twenty years. Patricia had withdrawn from the ritual shortly after Charlotte's death. But now, with a new family around her, and a new child growing inside Emily, she had come back. The timing felt poignant to Emily, as if the spirit of Charlotte had had a hand in making it happen.

"I think this is the most beautiful tree I've ever seen," she said, looking with gratitude to each of her family members.

* * *

With the tree complete and the hot chocolates drunk, it was time for Patricia to say goodbye.

"I wish you didn't have to leave," Chantelle said, clasping her arms around Patricia's waist.

Emily watched her mom hug the child back, looking significantly less awkward than she usually did with overt displays of affection.

"We can speak on the telephone, if you want to," Patricia told the child.

"Will you Face Time with us?" Chantelle exclaimed, her face breaking into a huge grin.

"Will I what now?" Patricia asked, looking bemused.

"Video messaging, mom," Emily explained. "Chantelle loves it."

"We video message with Papa Roy all the time," Chantelle

told her. “Can we? Can we? Can we?”

Patricia nodded. “Of course. If that’s what you want.”

She looked genuinely touched, Emily thought, that Chantelle would want to keep in contact with her.

“And,” Emily added, “Please do think about coming for Christmas. We would love to have you.”

“I don’t want to get in the way,” Patricia said.

Daniel piped up then. “You wouldn’t be in the way,” he said. “We have no bookings at the moment. If you want a bit of your own space we could even put you in the carriage house.”

“Well,” Patricia said, looking like she was trying to hide her touched expression. “I will certainly consider it.”

Her cab arrived then, coming down the long drive, its tires crunching on the gravel. Daniel picked up Patricia’s case and carried it down the porch steps. The rest of the family followed. Even Mogsy and Rain came out to see her off, wagging their tails in unison as they peered through the posts.

Daniel put the case in the trunk, then hugged Patricia goodbye. Chantelle clung to her.

“I love you Nana Patty,” she exclaimed. “Please come back soon.”

“I will darling,” Patricia said, stroking her head. “It won’t be long at all.”

Then it was Emily’s turn. She hugged her mother, feeling herself filled with gratitude and appreciation. It may have taken years to get to this point – and the horrible, sobering shock of

Roy's illness – but it seemed like things were finally changing for the better between them.

“Please stay in touch,” Emily said to her mom.

“I will,” Patricia replied. “I promise.”

They released one another and Patricia climbed into the cab. Emily joined her family, feeling Daniel's arm reach around her shoulders and Chantelle's hands clinging onto her. She cradled her bump with one hand, and waved goodbye to her mom with the other. They stayed there until the cab had disappeared out of sight.

As they turned back to head into the inn, Emily heard the phone start to ring. She went over to the reception desk and answered it. It was Amy's voice on the other end.

“Em, I just saw the bulletin outside the town hall,” she said.

Emily was still struggling to wrap her head around the fact that Amy was a Sunset Harbor resident, that she paid attention to the goings on of their little town.

“What bulletin?” Emily asked.

“Raven's inn! The meeting is tomorrow. The one they postponed until after Thanksgiving.”

“Tomorrow?” Emily exclaimed. “That's a bit short notice! And hardly much of a postponement!”

“I know. What do you think it means that it's so soon?”

“I can only assume that means the zoning board came to a quick and unanimous decision,” Emily told her, recalling the process of getting her own inn licence.

“A unanimous yes or a unanimous no?”

“We’ll find out soon enough.”

Amy sounded incredibly stressed about the whole thing, which Emily found a little odd considering she was the one who’d be most affected by the outcome.

“We have to go to the meeting,” she said brusquely. “Can you clear your calendar?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure why I need to though. I already said my piece.”

She could hear the impatience in Amy’s voice. “Emily, you have to go. You have to shoot it down! If Raven opens an inn in Sunset Harbor your business will struggle.”

“You should have more faith in me,” Emily told her. “I don’t mind competition.”

“Well you should,” Amy told her. “Especially coming from Raven Kingsley. She’ll crush you.”

Emily thought of the moments she’d spent with Raven. They hadn’t bonded, as such, but they were on friendly terms. Raven had helped her when Daniel was in his boating accident, and she’d even come to the town Thanksgiving dinner Emily had thrown. She perceived Raven’s inn as friendly competition.

“What makes you say that?” Emily said, shaking her head. “Raven’s just like any other business owner. She wants to work hard and make a success of herself. I know she’s been a bit of a vulture in the past, but she wants to settle here. Her husband left her and she just wants the kids to be in one place for some

stability.”

“I think you’re being naive,” Amy said. “A leopard doesn’t change its spots.”

“Amy, my mother just drank hot chocolate with cream and marshmallows and chopped and helped saw down a Christmas tree. Leopards, like dragons, can, indeed, change their spots.”

But Amy wasn’t backing down. “Raven will drive you out of business then head to the next town. It’s what she does. She’s got a history of doing it, destroying local areas with her big, flashy hotels. It’s all corporate, soulless. The last thing the town needs. And she has so many of them, she makes the room prices dirt cheap to start with. Even if she runs a loss for the first five years she’ll do it, just so she can eliminate the competition!”

Emily couldn’t reconcile the Raven Amy was talking about and the one she’d become acquaintances with. But hearing what Amy had to say was starting to rattle her.

“Just come to the meeting,” Amy said.

“Okay,” Emily said.

As she placed the receiver down, she wondered whether Amy was right. Maybe Raven was as ruthless as all that. But if Emily didn’t have the inn, what would become of her? Of her family? Suddenly, she felt as if the ground beneath her was becoming unstable. What if the dream life she was living turned out to be temporary after all...?

Chapter Three

The next day after dropping Chantelle at school, Daniel drove Emily to Harry and Amy's house before heading off to work. When Emily rang the doorbell, Amy answered, beaming from ear to ear.

"Ready?" Emily asked.

Amy's grin only widened. "You bet!"

Today Amy was having a bonanza shopping day, with appointments booked at potential wedding venues and several house viewings with real estate agents. And since Harry was working in the restaurant all day, Emily was on hand to offer support and words of wisdom. She was, of course, thrilled to be helping.

They got into Amy's white Chrysler and set off.

"Where's the first viewing?" Emily asked from the passenger seat.

"Eastern Road," Amy said, as she looked over her steering wheel for traffic. Seeing none, she turned onto the main street.

"Ooh," Emily said. "That's a nice part of town. The other side of the harbor to me, but still close."

"Especially in comparison to New York," Amy joked. "There's a brochure in the glove compartment. Take a look."

Emily reached inside and, finding the glossy folder, opened it up. She browsed through the slips of paper inside. Amongst

the legal information and property details – three bedrooms, Emily noted with a knowing smile – she found a selection of photographs. The house looked gorgeous. If Harry and Amy were indeed planning to start their own family soon, this would be the place to do it! She smiled to herself, but then caught sight of the eye-wateringly huge asking price and almost choked.

“That one has an outside studio space,” Amy informed Emily as she drove. “They’re using it as an art studio at the moment but I’d turn it into an office. If I’m going to be working from home full time I’d like to have a separate space, you know?”

“Sure,” Emily said, thinking of the downsides of living and working in the same space that she faced every day. “This place would be perfect for that.”

They passed the harbor. It was a calm day, so Stuart, Evan and Clyde had gone over to the island to do their reno work. Emily felt very fortunate that the weather had been so mild. They definitely looked set to have everything finished for the April bookings. It was one less thing to worry about!

“Have you thought anymore about the babymoon?” Amy asked.

“Not really,” Emily told her.

“You ought to go,” Amy insisted. “You’re almost out of time!” She nodded her head at Emily’s ballooning stomach. Then she added, “There are some lovely hotels that do great babymoon packages.”

Emily narrowed her eyes in suspicion. “Have you been

researching?”

Amy grinned devilishly. “Just a little. Look in the pocket behind your seat.”

Rolling her eyes jovially, Emily leaned around behind her and found a stack of glossy magazines. She heaved them out. “A little?” she joked.

“Okay, maybe a lot,” Amy confessed. “I just really want you to have a break! My favorite one is on the top there. The spa in Quebec.”

Emily looked at the first of Amy’s selection. Located in the old part of Quebec city, it looked more like a castle than a hotel.

“It’s right in the old center of town,” Amy said. “So there’s loads of culture and stuff. City walls. A citadel. Museums galore.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to go?” Emily joked, raising an eyebrow.

Amy laughed. “Of course I do. When it’s my turn, that is. But my focus right now is the wedding and the house. When it’s babymoon time, I’ll be heading there, I promise.” She leaned over and tapped the top of the magazine.

Emily glanced down again at the stunning castle. Maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea. The babymoon package including a special prenatal massage for the mom’s to be and a stress busting massage for the dad’s to be. Plus all the products were natural, with no harmful chemicals, and all the food was organic. It did seem idyllic. Doctor Arkwright would certainly approve of Emily

reducing her stress levels. Better late than never!

“Daniel will probably come up with a very logical and practical reason why we shouldn’t go,” Emily said. She listed on her fingers. “Chantelle. The island. My impending due date. To name just a few.” But she slipped the magazine in her purse anyway to show him later. Maybe she could convince him.

They pulled onto the drive of the first viewing. Emily loved it immediately. The outside lawn was large with a hedge for them extra privacy, and there was enough space for at least two cars to park outside. The house was even more pretty in real life. There was a cute porch out the front, not quite as grand as the inn’s wraparound one, but there was space for a rocking chair and bistro table with chairs.

“I can already tell I’m going to love it,” Emily said.

But Amy didn’t look so convinced. “It’s a bit underwhelming,” she said.

“Are you crazy?” Emily gasped. “It looks like something from a movie!”

“Yes,” Amy continued, in a distracted sort of voice. “A *boring* movie.”

Emily rolled her eyes at Amy’s perfectionism, but at the same time, she knew she shouldn’t be so harsh. Amy’s life had gone completely differently to Emily’s. Her college dorm room business had succeeded and she’d bought her New York apartment while still in her early twenties. To Amy, home had always meant independence. Now it would mean domesticity.

Emily had to admit that, for Amy's tastes, it was possibly a little too sensible. There was no elevator to negotiate, no traffic hum in the distance. In short, there was no challenge. If Amy was going to be happy in this new stage of her life, Emily realized, she was going to have to find an exceptional house, not just a lovely one.

* * *

After a long day of house viewing and wedding venue gazing, Emily needed a nap back at the inn. She was starting to get incredibly tired in these last few weeks of pregnancy, but knew that she'd just have to get used to it because when Baby Charlotte was born, it would only get worse!

She dozed in bed, drifting in and out of sleep, taking the opportunity of an empty house to let the dogs sleep on the end of the bed – something that was usually forbidden. She perused the brochure for the Quebec spa, mulling over how she would spin the idea to Daniel. Then she remembered a promise she'd made Chantelle; to invite Papa Roy to Christmas.

She hadn't had the heart to tell Chantelle when she'd asked that her father hadn't been in contact for several days and that the voicemails she'd left for him had gone unanswered. In fact, she realized now, she hadn't had the heart to admit it to herself. She'd blanked it entirely, not wanting to even consider for a split second what it might mean; that her father had passed. Even now she refused to allow herself to truly consider it. He had Vladi, his

close friend, to care for him, and she'd made the elderly Greek man promise to call if anything happened. She chose instead to believe that Roy was off on some adventure, having too much fun to notice the days ticking by.

She grabbed her laptop and wrote a quick email. The telephone approach was clearly not working, and even though he was far less responsive with emails, it seemed like a good idea to change tack.

Dear dad,

I called a couple of times but haven't heard back, which I assume means you're making the most of the Greek weather and boating with Vladi! Chantelle's been asking whether you'll come for Christmas. I know you made it clear that you didn't want to fly, especially not to somewhere as cold as Maine, but please do consider it. You know you're her favorite person in the world!

All my love,

Emily.

She hit send and realized her cheeks were wet with tears. She wiped them away.

As she put her laptop away, she heard the sound of the inn door closing. It was probably Lois coming to start her short shift on the reception desk, or Bryony to set herself up in her usual work station in the guest lounge and work on their winter advertisements. But then she heard footsteps coming up the stairs, heavy and fast, and recognized them as Daniel's

immediately.

“Mogsy! Rain! Off the bed!” she said hurriedly, trying to shoo them away.

Too late. The door flew open.

“Hey honey!” Daniel cried, grinning from ear to ear.

“What are you doing home so early?” she asked, happily surprised but also guilty.

As if he hadn’t a care in the world, Daniel waltzed in and sat on the end of the bed, idly petting Rain.

“Jack’s in the woodshop this evening,” he said as he ran his hand across her long ear. “We’ve had a huge order in for a fairy princess staircase for a bar mitzvah and, well you know Jack, any excuse to be at work rather than home.”

“That whole retirement thing isn’t really working out for him, is it?” Emily laughed, her gaze falling to the dog, then snapping back up to Daniel.

“Nope,” Daniel chuckled in response.

Mogsy whined for attention, and he cupped her face in both his hands and kissed the dog on the crown of her head.

“Good thing you’re opening your own shop soon,” Emily said, still a little disconcerted that Daniel hadn’t scolded her for letting the dogs on the bed. “Have you told him yet?”

“Not yet. But I honestly don’t think he’ll mind. It will give him an excuse to tell his wife that he has to go back to work. She might think of me as a villain for a while but Jack will probably be very grateful!”

“Please let’s not be like that after thirty years of marriage.”

Daniel chuckled. “No way. I can’t see either of us ever retiring. Can you?”

“Good point,” Emily said. She narrowed her eyes then, still unsure what was going on. “You’re in a very good mood.”

“Am I?”

“Yes. You haven’t even mentioned the dogs on the bed.”

Daniel startled then as if he hadn’t even realized they were there. “Oh!” But he just shrugged. “It’s time to collect Chantelle. Do you want me to do it? If you’re not feeling so good?”

“No, no, I want to come,” Emily replied. “Who knows how many school pickups I’ll miss once Charlotte’s born. Think of Suzanna and Baby Robin. I hardly ever see her these days. I want to make the most of things right now, as they are.”

He helped her to her feet. Emily felt very groggy, like her nap had achieved nothing.

They headed downstairs, Daniel holding Emily’s hand for her as she took careful steps. It was amazing how much more daunting it felt to negotiate a large staircase now that she was fit to burst. To think not that long ago she’d been trotting up and down these steps with ease! Now they looked very steep.

Outside the weather was even milder than it had been that morning.

“How was the trip with Amy?” Daniel asked as he helped her into her seat.

“Great. She didn’t like any of the three gorgeous houses we

saw now any of the extraordinary wedding venues. But, that reminds me, she's found this babymoon spa for us in Quebec. I know you probably won't want to go but maybe we could think about it."

"What's to think about?" he exclaimed. "Let's do it!"

Now Emily really was surprised. Usually Daniel took a bit of convincing. She'd clearly caught him in a great mood.

"Are you feeling okay?" she asked, only half joking.

"I'm feeling just fine," Daniel replied, laughing. "I'm just happy to have been given a little bit of extra time with my wife this evening, that's all."

"That's very sweet," Emily replied, touched that her presence could cause him such happiness. "So you really want to go on a babymoon?"

"Sure," he said, shrugging. "As long as Chantelle doesn't mind. Hey, how about we take her out on the boat this afternoon to soften the blow? It is 60 degrees after all!"

"I thought Clyde, Stu and Evan were working on the island today. Don't they have it?"

Daniel shook his head. "They're using the hire trawler today. They've taken it along the coast to Beals. There's a great building supply company there but the materials are far too heavy for the cuddy cabin. Which means it's free for us."

"In that case we'll have to," Emily agreed. She loved boat trips, too, and any chance to see the island was welcome considering the weather could turn at any moment. It did seem like a stroke

of luck that the opportunity had presented itself. Emily would be a fool to turn it down!

They made it to the school, parking up in the lot before getting out the truck. A moment later the doors burst open and children hurried down the steps. Chantelle appeared, her eyes scanning the parking lot for Emily's car. But instead she found the pickup truck, and by her expression, it was clear that she was thrilled to see her father unexpectedly picking her up. She ran towards them.

"Daddy," Chantelle cried, barrelling into his open arms. "What are you doing here?"

"Taking my special girl on a boat trip to our island, that's what," Daniel said. "What do you say to that? Want to go on a boat trip?"

"YES!" Chantelle exclaimed, jumping up and down.

She quickly ran back to the playground to say goodbye to her friends, before bolting back to the truck and jumping in.

"Wow, that was quick," Emily commented. She patted her stomach. "I miss being able to run like that!"

"Poor mommy," Chantelle said. "Not too long now. She'll be here before Christmas. Ooh, that reminds me. Did you speak to Papa Roy about coming for Christmas?"

Emily felt a jolt of anguish in her chest. What was the best thing to tell the girl? She didn't want her to worry unnecessarily.

"I sent him an email," Emily told her. "But why don't we try to call him when we're on the island?"

Chantelle nodded and settled down for the rest of the journey to the harbor.

When they arrived, everything was very quiet. In spite of the calm weather, most people had already packed up their boats for the winter. It was only because of the island renovation work that Daniel's boat was still out at all. It had been a stroke of luck, or fate aligning, that meant they'd been able to sail it so regularly.

Daniel jumped down into the boat first, before helping Chantelle and Emily in. Then they set off, cutting through the sparkling water in the direction of the island.

"Chantelle," Emily said, addressing the girl. "How would you feel if daddy and I went on a weekend trip just the two of us?"

Chantelle hesitated, her lips twisting to the side in thought.

"You can be honest," Daniel added. "We want to know how you really feel. Because there have been some times before when you've said okay but it's actually made you very sad."

Emily thought of her previous meltdowns. She hoped Chantelle didn't feel attacked by Daniel's comments and understood they were coming from a place of concern and love.

"I suppose it depends on who babysits me," Chantelle said, thoughtfully.

"Who would you like?" Emily asked.

"I'm happiest when I have a sleepover with my friends," she explained, sounding more mature than ever. "With Bailey and Toby. And also I prefer it to be short. After two nights I start to get worried."

“Okay,” Emily said, nodding, pleased with how well Chantelle was able to articulate her feelings and needs now. “So shall I see if I can arrange a sleepover with either Yvonne or Suzanna? And only stay away for the weekend?”

“I think that would be okay,” Chantelle said with a nod.

To Emily’s great amusement, Chantelle held her hand out to shake Emily’s. Emily took her hand and gave it a hearty shake.

“Deal!”

Just then, they reached the island and Emily saw the trawler Daniel had mentioned moored beside the gorgeous new jetty. Even though it hadn’t been a particularly long time since they’d last been here, Emily was still very excited to see the progress to the cabins. The main structures were now complete, and even some of the landscaping work had started. It was so exciting to see everything coming together. And a relief too, since their income at the moment was relying on the island! Stu, Clyde and Evan had really surpassed her expectations and the company Daniel had employed to manage the project really were fantastic.

“I’d better go and check in with the guys,” Daniel said, looking in the direction of the sound of sawing and hammering. “See how it went today with that new building supplies company. I’ll be back in a minute.”

He went off towards the cabins.

Emily and Chantelle settled down on the rocks, looking out to sea. The water was calm today, and the sight of the Maine coastline looked very beautiful. It was a tranquil moment, a slice

of peace within an otherwise hectic life.

“Can we call Papa Roy now?” Chantelle asked after a moment. “You know we haven’t spoken to him in three days now.”

So Chantelle had noticed, Emily realized. Of course she had. The child was extremely observant, and the fact that she and her father’s daily calls had ceased had not gone unnoticed.

“Do you think he’s okay?” Chantelle asked.

Emily felt a heaviness weigh on her shoulders.

“I think he is,” she told Chantelle. “I just think he’s slipped back into an old habit.”

Though Roy had promised to stay in touch, Emily knew old habits died hard, and there were still times when her efforts would be met by radio silence from him. It stung just as much now as it had when she was younger, when his long, slow disengagement from the family had begun following Charlotte’s death. He’d drifted away from her bit by bit then and as a scared, confused child she’d just let it happen. Not anymore. She had a right to her father, to demand him to be in her life, to share with him her life and expect to hear the same from him.

She took her cell phone out and dialed his number. She listened to it ring and ring. There was no answer. She tried again, aware of Chantelle watching pensively from the corner of her eye. Each new attempt she made to get in touch with him made her stomach twist with anguish. On the fifth attempt, she slung the phone down into her lap.

“Why won’t he answer?” Chantelle asked, her voice sad and

frightened.

Emily knew she had to put on a brave face for the child but it was a real struggle. “He’s asleep a lot,” she said, weakly.

“Not for three days straight,” Chantelle replied. “He should check his phone when he wakes up and see he’s missed your calls.”

“He might not have thought to check,” Emily told him, attempting a reassuring smile. “You know what he’s like with technology.”

But Chantelle was too smart for Emily’s excuses and she didn’t rise to her feeble attempt at humor. Her expression remained serious and sullen.

“Do you think he’s died?” she asked.

“No!” Emily exclaimed, feeling anger take off the edge of her worry. “Why would you say such an awful thing?”

Chantelle seemed surprised by Emily’s outburst. Her eyes were wide with shock.

“Because he’s very ill,” she said meekly. “I just meant...” Her voice faded away.

Emily took a breath to calm herself. “I’m sorry, Chantelle. I didn’t mean to snap like that. I get very worried when I haven’t heard from Papa Roy in a while and what you said would be my worst nightmare.”

Roy. Alone. Dead in bed with no one beside him. She cringed at the thought, her heart clenching.

Chantelle looked tentatively at Emily. She seemed unsure of

herself, as though she was treading on eggshells, worried that Emily would erupt at her again.

“But there’s no way for us to know, is there? Whether he’s still alive?”

Emily forced herself to be the grown up Chantelle needed her to be, even though each question stung like a fresh wound being sluiced. “We know he’s alive because Vladi is taking care of him. And if Vladi hasn’t called then nothing is wrong. That was the deal, remember?”

In her mind she conjured up the weather-beaten tanned face of Vladi, the Greek fisherman her father had struck up a friendship with. Vladi had promised to keep her informed of Roy’s condition, even if Roy himself wanted his deterioration to be kept from her. Whether Vladi kept good on his promise was another thing, though. Who would he be more loyal too, anyway; her, a young woman he’d known for a few days, or his lifelong friend Roy?

“Mommy,” Chantelle said softly. “You’re crying.”

Emily touched her cheek and found it was wet with tears. She wiped them with her sleeve.

“I’m scared,” she told Chantelle. “That’s why. I miss Papa Roy so much. I just wish we could convince him to be here with us.”

“Me too,” Chantelle said. “I want him and Nana Patty to live in the inn. It’s sad that they’re so far away.”

Emily reached her arm around her daughter and held her tightly. She could hear Chantelle gently sobbing and felt awful

for her part in the child's unhappiness. Crying in front of her was never the plan. But in some ways she wondered whether it helped Chantelle to see her mother's emotions, to see that it was okay to be weak sometimes, to be scared and worried. The child had spent so many years of her life having to be strong and brave, perhaps seeing her mom cry would show her it was okay to let go of control sometimes.

"Why do people have to die?" Chantelle said then, her voice muffled by the way her face was pressed into Emily's chest.

"Because..." Emily began, before pausing and thinking very deeply about it. "I think because their spirit has elsewhere to be."

"You mean Heaven?" Chantelle asked.

"It could be Heaven. It could be somewhere else entirely."

"Daddy doesn't believe in that," Chantelle said. "He says no one knows whether you go somewhere after you die, and that in Judaism it's up to God to decide whether you get an afterlife or not."

"That's what daddy believes," Emily told her. "But you can believe whatever you want to. I believe something different. And that's okay too."

Chantelle blinked through her wet eyelashes, her big blue eyes on Emily. "What do you believe?"

Emily paused and took a long time to formulate her answer. Finally she spoke. "I believe there is somewhere that we go to after we pass, not in our bodies, they stay here on earth, but our spirits rise up and go to the next place. When Papa Roy gets

there he will be so, so happy.” She smiled, comforted by her own beliefs. “There’ll be no more pain for him at all or ever again.”

“No pain at all?” Chantelle’s sweet voice sang. “But what will it feel like?”

Emily pondered the question. “I think it will feel like that moment when you take a bite of your favorite food all the time.”

Chantelle looked at her through her tearstained lashes and giggled. Emily continued.

“Like eating chocolate cake forever but never getting sick. Each bite just as great as the last. Or like that feeling you get when you step back from something you’ve been working on for months and see your accomplishment and realize that *you* made it.”

“Like my clock?” the little girl asked.

Emily nodded. “Exactly. And it’s the perfect kind of warm, like being in the jacuzzi at the spa.”

“Does it smell of lavender like the spa?”

“Yes! And there are rainbows.”

“What about animals?” Chantelle asked. “It wouldn’t be any fun if there weren’t any animals to pet and play with.”

“If you think there should be animals,” Emily told her, “Then there are animals.”

Chantelle nodded. But her smile soon faded and she returned to her pensive expression. “That’s just make believe though. We don’t really know.”

Emily hugged her tightly. “No. No one does. No one can. All

we have is what we believe. What we choose to believe. And I believe that that is what's waiting for Papa Roy. And it's what your aunt Charlotte has, too. And she looks down at us whenever she wants to, and sends us little signs so we know she's thinking of us. Papa Roy will do the same when the time comes."

"I'll miss him," Chantelle said. "Even if he does go to somewhere warm and happy, I'll miss him being here."

For all her reassurances about the afterlife, Emily couldn't help what she felt deeply inside. That she would still be left alone, to live out her life without him. He would be gone from her forever and though for him it would be a wondrous step into the unknown, for her it would mean pain and loneliness and misery.

She squeezed Chantelle tightly.

"I'll miss him too."

Chapter Four

Lights from the town hall spilled down the steps as Emily ascended them. Even from here she could hear numerous voices coming from inside. It sounded like the whole town might have turned up to hear the zoning board's decision about Raven's Inn. It shouldn't surprise Emily that every local would come. Even with the late announcement and the scheduling so soon after Thanksgiving, the people of Sunset Harbor cared so much about their town to make the time to attend all meetings.

She opened the door and saw that every available seat was taken. Raven Kingsley was all the way at the front, chatting with Mayor Hansen and his aide, Marcella. That didn't bode well, Emily thought to herself. If Raven had got them on her side it would only be a matter of time before the rest of the town were turned over as well.

She felt a tug on her arm and turned to see Amy and Harry.

"I'm so glad you came," Amy said. "There's been some rumblings in the underground that Raven's going to get the go ahead today. The zoning board aren't going to challenge her tearing down the old house in favor for something more modern. It looks like it will all come down to the residents."

"We have to fight this," Harry said. "A hotel could spell disaster for the inn, and my restaurant. Who's going to want to come all the way to our side of the harbor when there's

somewhere newer and cheaper in a more central location? With ocean views? Think of all those random business bookings we get at the moment. We'd lose *all* that custom, I'm sure."

Harry's concerns made Emily worry even more than she had previously. She didn't want to stand in the way of Raven, especially after she'd confided in her about her bitter divorce. But she couldn't just stand by and have her own livelihood destroyed in such a manner. Raven, from all she'd heard, wasn't the type to take any prisoners. She had that ruthless New York business mentality – kill or be killed. Emily wasn't much of a fighter. She really could've done with Trevor by her side right now!

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do," Emily told them. "I don't want to stop her from doing her job just because I'm scared."

"Then do it for your family," Harry said. "For your friends and town. No one wants an ugly building on our oceanfront, and we don't want our beloved inn to go out of business either. It's not good for anyone."

"How are most people voting?" Emily asked.

Amy pointed to the corner, at the Patels. "Against, of course." Then over to the Bradshaws. "Against." She pointed next to Birk and Bertha. Birk owned the gas station and was the first person Emily had met in Sunset Harbor. "I think they're for. More cars coming in to town means more customers, as far as they're concerned."

Emily chewed her lip in consternation. The reality of a new

rival inn arriving in town was starting to feel very real to her. The way Mayor Hansen was guffawing at something Raven had just said made her feel even worse.

Harry nudged her then. "Look, the meeting's about to start."

She turned towards the stage and the small wooden podium. The room fell silent as Mayor Hansen took his position. He banged his gavel, unnecessarily considering everyone was already paying him their undivided attention.

"Welcome everyone," he said. "We're here for the postponed discussions about Raven Kingsley's proposition to clear the dilapidated ocean side lot and build a new hotel there. You may or may not know already that the zoning board met earlier this week and voted unanimously for the plans to go ahead."

Emily looked at Harry and Amy. They were both grimacing. Emily felt her own face mirroring their expressions.

Mayor Hansen carried on. "Of course, we're a small town and the views of our residents are as equally important as the zoning boards. More so, in fact, now that we've lost our dear friend Trevor Mann."

He pressed a hand to his heart. There was a light-hearted ripple of laughter through the audience as everyone recalled Trevor's fierce, sometimes menacing protectiveness over the town.

"I believe many of you had a chance to speak to Raven over the thanksgiving break," Mayor Hansen finished. "So I'm looking forward to hearing all of your opinions. I suggest we here from

Emily Morey first, since a new inn would have the greatest impact on her. Emily, would you like to take the floor?"

All eyes turned to her. Emily felt that familiar sensation of being put on the spot. And she really was in a bind. She didn't want to trash Raven's dream just because it might make things a little trickier for her. It wasn't in her spirit. But at the same time, Harry and Amy's tense expressions from beside her reminded her that there were people counting on her. All her staff, her family. They'd expanded the inn massively, having the luxury of no competition. At the very least Raven's new venture would mean some cut backs for Emily's inn, including staff reductions.

"I..." Emily began, feeling her throat becoming dry.

She looked over at Raven sitting on the stage beside Marcella. For only the second time since she'd met her, Emily saw a genuine smile on her face. Like Emily when she'd first arrived, Raven had encountered hostility and suspicion from the locals. Emily was probably the one person she counted as a friendly acquaintance.

"I'm for," Emily suddenly blurted. "I think there's a market that Raven's inn could capture. She caters for the business and corporate end of the market, with conferences and the like. I cater more towards familie, weddings and festivities. There's room for the both of us."

She spoke very quickly, trying to get her explanation out before her voice was entirely swallowed by the uproar. But it was useless. Everyone was speaking loudly over one another,

directing frustration towards her, as if she were the one who'd come up with the plan in the first place, rather than the person who was going to be the most affected by it should it come to fruition!

And even worse were the thunderous expressions on Harry and Amy's faces. They looked like she'd just said the worst thing in the world, like she'd let them down terribly. But it just wouldn't be right or fair to sway everyone to her side, to tell Raven no. It would be downright mean spirited.

All she could do now was hope that enough other people voted no so she wouldn't have to deal with the outcome of her generosity.

Emily stepped back, seeking the shadows. But in a small town like Sunset Harbor there was no hiding. She'd made her bed, now she would have to lie in it.

* * *

“What the Hell was that, Emily?” Amy demanded once the town meeting was over. “Anyone would think you wanted to go bankrupt and ruin the town!”

Her friend had let her go less than five paces from the town hall before launching her attack, stopping her on the first step. The weather had grown colder since they'd been inside and Emily shivered from the sudden drop in temperature.

But despite the cold, her cheeks were warm with

embarrassment. Emily hated making a public scene, especially since half of the town were filling out of the hall behind them.

“Can we talk about this later?” Emily said under her breath.

“No!” Amy exclaimed. “I want to know what’s gotten into you. Why are you lying down like a lapdog for Raven Kingsley?”

“That’s hardly what’s happening,” Emily refuted, stung by the ferocity of Amy’s words. “Just because I don’t want to trash her dreams doesn’t mean I’m bending over backwards to accommodate her.”

Amy placed her hands on her hips. “Funny, ‘cos it’s certainly coming across that way. I mean just the other day you were telling me all your woes about laying off staff over winter and not having any bookings. What do you really think will happen when you have a competitor like Raven Kingsley offering cheaper rooms, cheaper food, a better location? You may as well just fire Harry now.”

“Ames, please calm down,” Emily said, softly. She tried to reach for her friend, but Amy pulled away. She wasn’t a crier, never had been, but Emily noticed that her face was red from the strain of holding it together.

“I just don’t understand you,” Amy said, turning her face away. “I don’t understand what you’re doing.”

Emily had no words. It was hard to explain herself, beyond the fact that she wanted to be a decent human being and spread kindness. She’d seen the way Chantelle had resolved her issue with Laverne over Halloween and had been humbled by the

child's capacity for care and forgiveness. The only way she could make sense of it now was that dragging someone wasn't right, no matter what.

"Even the Raven Kingsley's of the world deserve a chance," Emily said. "I'm sorry if you feel like I've betrayed Harry, or even that I'm letting myself and my family down, but I simply cannot stoop to that level, to trash someone's dream like that."

Amy stared at her, still incredulous, like her words just weren't registering. "I think you're going to regret that. Once Raven drives you out of business."

"How about when that happens, you can say 'I told you so,'" Emily said, the comment halfway between a joke and a dismissal.

Amy shook her head, looking beyond disappointed. It was painful for Emily to have her best friend so mad at her, but she wasn't going to back down under the pressure. She knew what was right in her heart and that was the only thing was going to let that guide her actions.

"I'm going home," Amy said.

"No, Ames," Emily said, reaching for. "It's the tree lighting ceremony. Your first one in Sunset Harbor. Come on, let's just put this behind us for the rest of the night, okay?"

Amy shook her head again. "I can't. I'm sorry. I don't feel like watching a stupid tree ceremony when our livelihoods are in danger. Doesn't feel like much to celebrate." She looked around her, searching for Harry.

Emily felt crushed. She and Amy had had their fair share of

spats during their years of friendship but this particular one felt very raw and painful. Amy's rejection hurt.

Harry appeared then, moving away from a very solemn looking conversation with the Bradshaw's who owned a restaurant in town. He came over, his usual boyish grin completely absent, and placed his arm around Amy.

"Shall we go home?" he asked her, his tone morose.

Emily's heart sank. "Harry, come on," she said. "It's the tree lighting. Come over to the Inn for mulled wine, then we can all go together."

But Harry shook his head. He was hardly looking at her. "I think we want a quiet night in."

Amy didn't raise her eyes again either. Instead, the two of them shuffled off, heads bowed, leaving Emily alone on the steps, watching them go with a downturned mouth.

* * *

After her spat with Amy, Emily couldn't help but approach the town tree lighting celebration with an air of trepidation. What if everyone decide to give her a piece of them mind as Amy had? The thought of the tense atmosphere that had built during the meeting spilling onto the streets and poisoning the joyful celebration was a real concern.

But when they arrived and climbed out of Daniel's truck – Chantelle clipping leashes onto the dogs before hopping down

from the back seat – Emily quickly realized she needn't have worried. All she saw were the same old friendly faces, smiles and greetings. Whatever feelings the locals felt about her speech at the meeting, it appeared as if they were going to put them aside for the rest of the evening. Unlike Amy, they seemed willing to leave their animosity towards her within the four walls of the town hall.

In typical Sunset Harbor tradition, the tree lighting wasn't just a tree lighting, but instead a street party, an excuse to celebrate. Emily looked around at all the stalls that had been set up, selling an assortments of winter-themed items from Christmas decorations to candles, flavored liquors and ugly Christmas sweaters. Chantelle, of course, was immediately drawn to the sparkly, garish sweater stall.

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