

THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR—BOOK 2

FOREVER
and for
ALWAYS



SOPHIE LOVE

The Inn at Sunset Harbor

Sophie Love

Forever and For Always

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Love S.

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

ISBN 978-1-63-291879-6

35 year old Emily Mitchell has fled her job, apartment and ex-boyfriend in New York City for her father's abandoned home on the coast of Maine, needing a change in her life. Tapping her life savings to restore the historic home, and with a budding relationship with the caretaker, Daniel, Emily prepares to open the Inn at Sunset Harbor as Memorial Day comes. But all does not go as planned. Emily learns quickly that she has no idea how to run a B&B. The house, despite her efforts, needs new, urgent repairs she cannot afford. Her covetous neighbor is still determined to make trouble for her. And worst of all: just as her relationship with Daniel is blossoming, she learns he has a secret. One which will change everything. With her friends urging her to return to New York City and her ex-boyfriend trying to win her back, Emily has a life-changing decision to make. Will she try to stick it out, to embrace small-town life, her father's old house? Or will she turn her back on her new friends, neighbors and life—and on the man she has fallen in love with? FOREVER AND FOR ALWAYS is book #2 of a dazzling new romance series that will make you laugh, make you cry, will keep you turning pages late into the night—and will make you fall in love with romance all over again.

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Love Sophie

FOREVER AND FOR ALWAYS

Sophie Love

A lifelong fan of the romance genre, Sophie Love is thrilled to release her debut romance series, which begins with FOR NOW AND FOREVER (THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR – BOOK 1)

Sophie would love to hear from you, so please visit www.sophieloveauthor.com 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!

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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)

CHAPTER ONE

“Good morning.”

Emily stirred and opened her eyes. The sight that greeted her was the most beautiful she could ever have hoped for: Daniel, framed by the crisp white bedding, a halo of morning sunshine kissing his tousled hair. She took a deep, satisfied breath, wondering how her life had aligned so perfectly. After so many years of hardship, it felt like fate had finally decided to give her a break.

“Morning.” She smiled back, yawning.

She snuggled back down under the covers, feeling cozy, warm, and more relaxed than ever. The quiet calmness of a Sunset Harbor morning was in such stark contrast to the busy bustle of her old life in New York City. Emily could certainly get used to this, to the sound of breaking waves in the distance, to the smell of the ocean, to the gorgeous man lying beside her in bed.

She got up and went over to the large French doors that led out onto the balcony, opening them so she could feel the warm sunshine on her skin. The ocean sparkled in the distance and rays of light illuminated the master bedroom behind her. It had been a dusty ruin when Emily arrived six months ago. Now it was a beautiful cove of tranquility, with white walls and bedding, soft carpeting, a gorgeous four-poster bed, and carefully restored antique bedside tables. With the sun on her face, Emily felt that for once everything was perfect.

“So are you ready for your big day?” Daniel said from the bed.

Emily frowned, her head still too muggy from sleep to comprehend.

“Big day?”

Daniel smirked.

“First customer. Remember?”

Emily’s thoughts took a moment to click into place. But then she remembered that she had her very first guest, Mr. Kapowski, sleeping in the room down the hall. The house she’d been restoring for six months had been transformed from a home into a business, and that meant she had breakfast to make.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“Eight,” Daniel replied.

Emily froze.

“Eight?”

“Yes.”

“NO! I overslept!” Emily cried, running back inside from the balcony. She grabbed the alarm clock and shook it angrily. “You were supposed to wake me up at six, you stupid thing!”

She slammed it back down on the bedside table, then rushed to the chest of drawers to find some clothes, flinging sweaters and pants all over the place. Nothing looked professional enough; she’d thrown out all of her office wear from her old life in New York, and everything she owned now was practical.

“Calm down,” Daniel chuckled from the bed. “It’s okay.”

“How is it okay?” Emily cried, hopping around with one leg in her pants. “Breakfast started at seven!”

“And it only takes five minutes to poach an egg,” Daniel added.

Emily froze on the spot, half dressed, her face drawn like she’d seen a ghost. “You think he’ll want his eggs poached? I haven’t a clue how to poach an egg!”

Rather than calming her, Daniel’s words only panicked her further. She wrenched a crumpled lilac sweater from the drawer and pulled it over her head, the static making her hair instantly frizz.

“Where’s my mascara?” Emily cried as she rushed around. “And will you stop laughing at me?” she added, glaring angrily at Daniel. “This isn’t funny. I have a guest. A paying guest! And nothing but sneakers to put on my feet. Why did I throw out all my heels?”

Daniel’s stifled chuckles became full-on belly laughs.

“I’m not laughing at you,” he managed to say. “I’m laughing because I’m happy. Because being with you makes me happy.”

Emily paused, his words striking a chord deep inside of her. She looked over at him, lying languorously like a God in her bed. His was a face you couldn’t stay mad at for long.

Daniel broke their gaze. Though Emily was used to it now, to Daniel clamming up whenever he got too close to his own emotions, it still distressed her. Her own feelings were so obvious as to be practically transparent. That she wore her heart on her sleeve, Emily was in no doubt.

But he sometimes left her floundering. She was never certain with him, and it reminded her almost too painfully of her previous relationships, of the unsteadiness she felt within them, like she was standing on the deck of a rocking boat at sea, destined to never find her sea legs. She didn’t want history to repeat itself with Daniel. She wanted it to be different with him. But experience had taught her that getting what you wanted in life was a rare occurrence.

She turned back to the dresser, quiet now, and put two silver studs in her ears.

“That will have to do,” she said, her gaze flicking away from Daniel’s reflection in the mirror and to herself, her expression reconfigured from a panicked girl into a determined businesswoman.

Emily strode purposefully out of her room to find everything silent. The upstairs corridor was stunning now, with beautiful wall sconces and an amazing chandelier that caught the morning sunshine and refracted shards of light everywhere. The wooden floors had been polished to perfection, adding a rustic yet glamorous touch.

Emily looked down at the door at the end, to the room that had previously belonged to her and Charlotte. Restoring that room had been the hardest thing of all because she’d felt like she was erasing her sister. But all of Charlotte’s things were sitting neatly in a special place in the attic, and Emily’s friend Serena, a local artist, had created some amazing artwork out of her sister’s clothes. Still, she felt a squirming sensation in her stomach knowing that there was a stranger sleeping on the other side of that door, a stranger to whom she now needed to serve breakfast. In all Emily’s imaginings about transforming the house into a B&B, she’d never really daydreamed about what that might actually be like, look like, or feel like. She suddenly felt woefully underprepared, like a child pretending to be a grown-up.

Ensuring she was as quiet as possible, Emily padded along the corridor toward the staircase. The new cream carpet felt luxurious beneath her feet. She couldn’t help but gaze at it adoringly. The transformation of the house had been a real wonder to behold. There was still work to be done – the third floor in particular was an absolute mess, with rooms she hadn’t even set foot in yet; not to mention the outbuildings that contained an abandoned swimming pool, along with a whole plethora of boxes to sort. But what she had achieved thus far, with a little help from the friendly Sunset Harbor locals, still amazed her. The house felt like a friend to her now, one that still had secrets to share. In fact, there was one key in particular that was proving to be a mystery to her. No matter how hard she tried, she could not find what it unlocked. She’d checked everything from desk drawers to wardrobe doors but had still not found it.

Emily went down the long staircase, its banisters now polished and glistening, the fluffy carpet looking resplendent, the brass runners setting off the colors perfectly. But just as she was admiring everything, she noticed that there was a blemish on the carpet – a smudgy, muddy footprint. It was clearly from a man’s boot.

Emily paused on the bottom step. *Daniel needs to be more careful when he’s clomping around*, she thought.

But then she realized the footprint was pointing away, heading toward the front door. Which meant it had come from upstairs. But if Daniel was still in bed, then the only way the footprint could have gotten there was from her guest, Mr. Kapowski.

Emily rushed to the front door and flung it open. Just the day before, Mr. Kapowski had driven up the newly formed driveway in his estate car and parked. But now his car was gone.

She couldn't believe it.

He had left.

CHAPTER TWO

Panicking, Emily rushed back into the house.

“Daniel!” she cried up the stairs. “Mr. Kapowski’s gone! He left because I wasn’t up in time to make him breakfast!”

Daniel appeared at the top of the stairs wearing only his pajama bottoms, his broad shoulders and muscular chest on display. His hair was a mess, giving him the air of a hurried schoolboy.

“He probably just went to Joe’s,” he said, trotting down the steps toward her. “You were going on about how amazing the waffles were, if you recall.”

“But *I’m* supposed to make him breakfast!” Emily cried. “It’s a B *and* B, not just a B!”

Daniel reached the landing and swept Emily up into his arms, holding her gently around her waist. “Maybe he didn’t realize what the second B stood for. Thought it stood for bath. Or bananas,” he joked. He pressed a kiss into her neck but Emily batted him away and wriggled out of the embrace.

“Daniel, stop fooling around!” she cried. “This is serious. He’s my first ever guest and I wasn’t awake in time to make him breakfast.”

Daniel shook his head and rolled his eyes with mocking affection.

“It’s no big deal. He’ll just be having breakfast down by the ocean instead. He’s on vacation, remember?”

“But there’s an ocean view from my porch,” Emily stammered, her voice growing thin. She sank down onto the bottom step, feeling small, like a child who’d been put on the naughty step, then dropped her head in her hands. “I’m a horrible host.”

Daniel rubbed her shoulders. “That’s not true. You’re just a little unsteady on your feet right now. Everything’s strange and new. But you’re doing fine. Okay?”

He said the last word sternly, almost paternally. Emily couldn’t help but be comforted. She looked up at him.

“Do you want me poach *you* an egg at least?” she asked.

“That would be delightful.” Daniel smiled. He cupped her face in his hands and pressed a kiss onto her lips.

Together they went into the kitchen. The noise of the door opening stirred Mogsy the dog and her pup, Rain, from their slumber in the utility room, just the other side of the barn doors. Emily knew that keeping the dogs out of the kitchen and any parts of the house she needed as the B&B was an absolute must if she didn’t want to get closed down for health and safety reasons immediately, but she felt bad confining the dogs to such a small portion of the house. She reminded herself that it was a temporary situation. She’d been able to have four of Mogsy’s five pups adopted by her friends in town, but Rain, the weak runt, was a harder sell, and no one seemed even remotely interested in taking the mama, who was, to put it gently, an ugly mutt.

Once the dogs were let outside and fed, Emily went back into the kitchen. In the meantime, Daniel had managed to pop out into the garden to fetch this morning’s eggs from Lola and Lolly, the chickens, and brew a pot of coffee. Emily took a mug gratefully and breathed in the aroma, then went over to the large Arga stove – another relic of her father’s she’d had restored – and got to work practicing making poached eggs.

Of all the rooms in the house, the kitchen was one of Emily’s favorites. The poor room had been ravished by time and abandonment when she’d first arrived, then a storm had whipped through it causing further damage, and *then* the toaster had blown up and caused a fire. The smoke damage had been far more destructive than the actual fire; that had only damaged a shelf and consumed some cookbooks, whereas the smoke had managed to permeate every crack and crevice, leaving streaks of black and the odor of burnt plastic wherever it had touched.

In just six short months, everything that could have gone wrong with the room had. But after some grueling late nights toiling away, it had now finally been re-re-restored and looked charming, with its retro fridge and original white Victorian Belfast basin, and its black marble work surfaces.

“Turns out,” Emily said, plunking her fifth attempt at a poached egg on Daniel’s plate, “that I’m not such a horrible cook after all.”

“See?” Daniel said, cutting into the white of the egg and letting the golden yolk spill across his toast. “I told you. You have to listen to me more often.”

Emily smiled, enjoying Daniel’s gentle humor. Ben, her ex, had never made her laugh like Daniel did. He’d never been able to comfort her in her moments of panic either. With Daniel it was like nothing was ever too big to handle. Be it storm or fire, he always made her feel like everything was okay, was manageable. His steadiness was one of the most appealing things about him. He could calm and soothe her in the same way looking out at the ocean calmed her. But she was still never certain where he stood, whether he was feeling what she was feeling. She felt that their relationship was like a riptide, one they couldn’t control even if they wanted to.

“So,” Daniel said, munching happily on his breakfast, “after we’ve eaten, we should probably start getting ready.”

“Getting ready for what?” Emily asked, sipping on her second mug of steaming black coffee.

“It’s the Memorial Day Parade,” Daniel said.

Emily vaguely remembered attending the parade as a child and wanted to see it again, but she’d already messed up enough today to allow herself a trip.

“I have too much to do here. I need to make up the guest bedroom.”

“Already done,” Daniel replied. “I fixed up the room while you were with the dogs.”

“You did?” Emily asked suspiciously. “Did you replace the towels?”

Daniel nodded.

“And the mini shampoos?”

“Yup.”

“What about the little sachets of coffee and sugar?”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “Everything that needed to be replaced was replaced. I made the bed – and before you say anything, yes, I do know how to make a bed, I’ve lived alone for years. Everything is ready for him when he returns. So, are you coming to the parade?”

Emily shook her head. “I need to be here for when Mr. Kapowski gets back.”

“He doesn’t need babysitting.”

Emily chewed her lip. She was nervous about her first guest and desperate to do a good job. If she couldn’t make this work, she’d be returning to New York with her tail between her legs, probably to sleep on Amy’s couch, or worse, in her mom’s spare room.

“But what if he needs something. More pillows? Or – ”

“ – more bananas?” Daniel interrupted with a smirk.

Emily sighed, defeated. Daniel was right. Mr. Kapowski wouldn’t be expecting her to wait on him hand and foot. If anything, he would probably prefer her not to interfere too much. He was on vacation, after all. Most people wanted some peace and quiet.

“Come on,” Daniel urged. “It will be fun.”

“All right,” Emily said, relenting. “I’ll come.”

*

Everywhere Emily looked she saw American flags. Her vision had become a kaleidoscope of stars and stripes, causing her to gasp in wonder. Flags hung in every store window, in knitted bunting strung from lamppost to lamppost. There were even some pinned to the backs of the benches. And

that was nothing compared to the number of flags being waved by passersby. Everyone who strolled along the sidewalk seemed to have one.

“Daddy,” Emily said, looking up at her father. “Can I have a flag too?”

The tall man smiled down at her. “Of course you can, Emily Jane.”

“And me, and me!” a little voice piped up.

Emily turned to see her sister, Charlotte, her bright purple scarf wrapped around her neck, so mismatched with her ladybug boots. She was just a toddler, barely able to keep her balance.

They followed their father, both girls holding tightly to one of his hands, as they went with him across the street and into a small store that sold homemade pickles and relishes in jars.

“Well, hello, Roy.” The lady behind the counter beamed. Then she grinned at the two little girls. “Up for the holidays?”

“No one does Memorial Day like Sunset Harbor,” her father replied in his easygoing friendliness. “Two flags for the girls, please, Karen.”

The lady fetched some flags from behind the counter. “Why don’t we make it three?” she said. “Don’t forget about yourself!”

“What about four?” Emily said. “We shouldn’t forget about Mommy either.”

Roy’s jaw stiffened and Emily knew right away that she’d said the wrong thing. Mommy wouldn’t want a flag. Mommy hadn’t even come with them to Sunset Harbor for their weekend trip. It was just the three of them. Again. It seemed to be the three of them more and more often these days.

“Two will be plenty,” her dad replied a little stiffly. “It’s just for the kids really.”

The woman behind the counter handed the girls a flag each, her friendliness replaced by an embarrassed kind of awkwardness in her realization that she’d accidentally stepped across some unspoken, invisible line.

Emily watched as her father paid the woman and thanked her, noting how his smile was forced now, how his posture was stiffer. She wished she hadn’t said anything about Mommy. She looked at the flag in her gloved grasp, suddenly feeling less like celebrating.

Emily gasped, finding herself back on the Sunset Harbor high street with Daniel. She shook her head, dislodging the swirling memories. This was not the first time she had experienced a sudden return of a lost memory, but the experience still shook her to the core.

“Are you okay?” Daniel said, touching her arm lightly, his expression concerned.

“Yes,” Emily replied, but her voice sounded stunned. She tried to smile but only managed to weakly raise the corners of her mouth. She hadn’t told Daniel about the way her childhood memories were returning to her in fragments; she didn’t want to scare him away.

Determined not to let the intrusive memories ruin her enjoyment of the day, Emily threw herself into the celebrations. Many years may have passed since she was last here, but Emily was still in awe of the spectacle of it all. She marveled at the way the small town took celebrations and ran with them. One of the things she was growing to love the most about Sunset Harbor was its traditions. She had a feeling Memorial Day was going to become another holiday she loved.

“Hi, Emily!” Raj Patel called from the other side of the street. He was walking along with his wife, Dr. Sunita Patel, two people whom Emily now considered friends.

Emily waved to them and then said to Daniel, “Oh look. There’s Birk and Bertha. And is that baby Katy in the stroller with Jason and Vanessa?” She pointed at the gas station owner and his disabled wife. Beside them stood their son, the firefighter who had saved Emily’s kitchen from a blaze. He and his wife had recently had their first child, a girl called Katy, and had taken one of Emily’s stray puppies as a gift for her. “We should go and say hello,” Emily said, wanting to speak to her friends.

“In a minute,” Daniel said, nudging her with his shoulder. “The parade’s coming.”

Emily looked down the street as the local high school’s marching band lined up, ready to begin the procession. The drum began to beat and was swiftly followed by the sound of the brass instruments

playing “When the Saints Go Marching In.” Emily watched, delighted, as the band marched past. Behind them were cheerleaders in matching red, white, and blue ensembles. They back-flipped and high-kicked their way along the road.

Next came a troop of face-painted kindergarteners, chubby-cheeked and cherubic. Emily felt a small pang watching them. Having children had never been a huge priority for her – she hadn’t exactly been in a rush to become a mother considering how abysmal her relationship with her own was – but now, watching the kids in the parade, Emily realized that something had changed within her. There was a new desire there, a small yearning tugging at her. She looked across at Daniel and wondered whether it was something he felt too, whether the sight of the adorable toddlers made him feel the same way. As always, his expression was unreadable.

The parade continued on. Next up was a group of tough-looking women from the local roller derby jumping and racing around on their skates, followed by a couple of stilt-walkers and a large float carrying a papier-mâché replica of the Abraham Lincoln statue.

“Emily, Daniel,” a voice came from behind. It was Mayor Hansen, flanked by his aide, Marcella, who looked more than a little harried. “Are you enjoying our local festivities?” Mayor Hansen asked. “It’s not your first year if I recall, but perhaps the first you’ll be able to remember.”

He chuckled innocently, but Emily squirmed. She tried to put on a calm and happy demeanor.

“You’re right. Sadly, I don’t recall having come here as a child, but I’m certainly enjoying myself now. What about you, Marcella?” she added, trying to get the attention off of her. “Is this your first year?”

Marcella gave one decisive, efficient nod, then went back to her clipboard.

“Don’t mind her.” Mayor Hansen chuckled. “She’s a workaholic.”

Marcella’s gaze flicked up just briefly, but it was long enough for Emily to read the frustration contained within her eyes. Clearly the mayor’s laidback attitude frustrated her. Emily could empathize with Marcella. She’d been the same just a mere six months ago; too serious, too stressed, fueled by little more than caffeine and a fear of failure. Looking at Marcella was like holding up a mirror to her younger self. Emily’s only hope for her was that she learned to unwind, that Sunset Harbor would help her to uncoil her tightly wound springs, even if only a little.

“Anyway,” Mayor Hansen said, “back to the grindstone. I have medals to give out, don’t I, Marcella? Award ceremony for the egg and spoon race or something.”

“The Under Fives Olympics,” Marcella said with an exhalation.

“That’s the one,” Mayor Hansen replied, and the two of them disappeared into the crowd.

Daniel smiled. “It’s impossible not to fall in love with this crazy town,” he said, slinging his arm around Emily.

She snuggled into him, feeling safe and protected. Together they watched a conga line go by, waving at their friends as they passed: Cynthia from the bookstore with her bright orange hair and mismatched clothing, Charles and Barbara Bradshaw from the fish shop, Parker from the organic fruit and vegetable wholesalers.

Just then, Emily spotted someone amongst the crowds who made her blood run cold. Dressed in checkered golfing pants and a lime green sweater that barely covered his portly belly, stood Trevor Mann.

“Don’t look now,” she grumbled, grabbing Daniel’s hand for security. “But Mr. Sneery Neighbor’s joined the party.”

Daniel, of course, immediately looked over. Like he had some kind of sixth sense, Trevor immediately noticed. He glanced at them both, his dark eyes instantly sparkling with mischief.

Emily grimaced. “I told you not to look!” she chastised Daniel as Trevor walked toward them.

“You know there’s an unwritten law,” Daniel hissed back, “that says if you say ‘don’t look now’ to someone, they’re going to look.”

It was too late to escape. Trevor Mann was upon them, emerging through the crowd like some horrible mustached beast.

“Oh no,” Emily said, groaning.

“Emily,” Trevor said in his pretend friendly voice, “you haven’t forgotten about those back taxes you owe on your house, have you? Because I certainly haven’t.”

“The mayor gave me an extension,” Emily replied. “You were in the meeting, Trevor, I’m surprised you missed it.”

“I don’t care whether Mayor Hansen said there’s no rush in paying them back, it’s not up to him. It’s up to the bank. And I’ve been in touch with them to tell them all about your *illegal* occupation of the house and the *illegal* business you’re now running from it.”

“You’re a jerk,” Daniel said, protectively squaring up to Trevor.

“Leave it,” Emily said, resting a hand on his arm. The last thing she needed was for Daniel to lose his temper.

Trevor smirked. “Mayor Hansen’s extension won’t last forever and certainly won’t hold up in any legal sense. And I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure your B&B sinks and never floats again.”

CHAPTER THREE

Emily watched as Trevor marched away into the throng of people.

As soon as he was gone, Daniel turned to Emily, a look of deep concern on his face. “Are you okay?”

Emily couldn’t help herself. She sank against his broad chest, pressing her face into his shirt. “What am I going to do?” she gasped. “The taxes will ruin my business before it’s even begun.”

“No way,” Daniel said. “I won’t let that happen. Trevor Mann never showed any interest in your property until you showed up and turned it into something covetable. He’s just jealous of how much better your house is than his.”

Emily tried to laugh at his joke but could only manage a weak chortle. The thought of leaving Daniel and moving back to New York as a failure weighed heavily on her mind.

“He’s right, though,” Emily said. “This B&B will never work.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Daniel said. “Everything will be okay. I believe in you.”

“You do?” Emily said. “Because I hardly believe in myself.”

“Well, maybe now is the time to start.”

Emily looked up into Daniel’s eyes. His earnest expression made her feel like maybe she could really do it.

“Hey,” Daniel said, his eyes suddenly twinkling mischievously. “I have something I want to show you.”

Daniel didn’t seem discouraged by her glumness. He grabbed her hand and pulled her through the crowd, leading her in the direction of the marina. Together they went down to the docks.

“Ta-da!” Daniel exclaimed, gesturing to the beautifully restored boat bobbing in the water.

The last time Emily had seen the boat it had been barely seaworthy. Now it was glistening like brand new.

“I can’t believe it,” she stammered. “You fixed the boat?”

Daniel nodded. “Yup. I put a lot of sweat and effort into it.”

“I can tell,” Emily said.

She remembered how Daniel had told her that he’d reached some kind of mental barrier with restoring the boat, that he didn’t know why but he felt unable to work on it. Seeing it now made Emily beyond proud, not just because of how beautifully he’d restored it but because he’d managed to work through whatever issues had been holding him back. She returned his smile, feeling a tingle of happiness inside of her.

But at the same time, she felt tinged with sadness, because here was yet another form of transportation that could take him away from her. From his long motorcycle rides up in the cliffs, to his journeys to neighboring cities in his truck, Daniel was forever on the move. That he wanted to see the world, explore, was so evident to her as to be beyond doubt. She knew that sooner or later, Daniel would need to leave Sunset Harbor. Whether she would leave with him when the time came was something Emily had not yet resolved in her mind.

Daniel gave her a coy nudge. “I should say thank you.”

“Why?” Emily said.

“For the motor.”

It had been Emily who’d bought him the new motor, as a thank-you for all the help he’d given her getting the B&B ready, as well as an attempt to encourage him to restore the boat.

“No problem,” Emily said, wondering now if the gift would backfire on her. If in restoring the boat, Daniel’s itch to up and leave would be ignited.

“So,” Daniel said, gesturing to the boat, “as a thank-you, I think you should accompany me on its maiden voyage.”

“Oh!” Emily said, startled at the proposition. “You want to go on a boat ride? Now?” She didn’t mean to sound so shocked.

“Unless you don’t want to,” Daniel said, rubbing his neck awkwardly. “I just thought we could have a date.”

“Yeah, sure,” Emily said.

Daniel hopped down into the boat and held his hand out. Emily took it and allowed him to guide her down. The vessel rocked beneath her, making her wobble.

Daniel got the motor running and powered the boat out of the harbor. They crossed the glittering ocean. Emily took deep breaths of the ocean air, watching as Daniel steered them across the water. He looked so at home steering the boat, just like how his motorbike seemed to become an extension of himself. Daniel was the kind of man who suited perpetual motion, and as she looked at him now, Emily saw how alive and happy he became while in the pursuit of adventure.

The thought made her even more melancholy. Daniel’s desire to explore the world was more than just a dream; it was a necessity. There was no way he would be able to stay in Sunset Harbor for much longer. She hadn’t decided how long she was sticking around either. Perhaps their relationship was doomed. Maybe it was only ever going to be a fleeting thing, a perfect moment captured in time. The thought made Emily’s stomach roil with despair.

“What’s wrong?” Daniel asked. “You’re not seasick, are you?”

“Maybe a little,” Emily lied.

“Well, we’re nearly there,” he added, pointing ahead.

Emily glanced up and saw that they were heading toward a tiny island upon which sat little other than a couple of trees and an abandoned lighthouse. Emily sat up, suddenly surprised.

“OH MY GOD!” she cried.

“What is it?” Daniel asked, panic in his tone.

“My dad had a painting of this island in our house in New York!”

“Are you sure?”

“One hundred percent! I don’t believe it! I never realized it was a painting of a real place.”

Daniel’s eyes widened. He seemed just as surprised by the coincidence as Emily was.

Her worries washed away by the unexpected surprise, Emily quickly removed her sneakers and socks. She barely waited for the boat to run aground before she hopped out. Waves lapped at her shins. The water was cold but she barely felt it. She ran across the water, onto the wet sandy beach, then a little further still. She stopped and held her hands up to create a rectangle of space between her fingers and thumbs and closed one eye. She maneuvered herself a little so that the lighthouse was to the right, the sun beside it, and the vast ocean stretching away on the other side. That was it! The exact angle of the painting that had been in her family home!

It didn’t surprise Emily that her dad would own such a painting. He was obsessed with antiques – including art pieces – but what did surprise Emily was the fact that the painting had made it to their family home. Her mom had always been very good about keeping their Sunset Harbor life and their New York life separate, as though she could only entertain her husband’s silly hobbies for two weeks of the year, and only as long as it was out of sight, not encroaching in any way on her perfectly clean, crisp home. So how on earth had he managed to get her to agree to put up the painting of the lighthouse in the family home? Maybe because it was camouflaged as an imaginary place she’d never realized the painting was actually depicting a part of Sunset Harbor? Emily smiled to herself, wondering if her father had in fact been so cunning.

“Hey,” Daniel said, pulling her back to the moment. She turned to see him lugging a basket across the wet sand toward her. “You ran off!”

“Sorry,” Emily replied, rushing forward to help him carry it. “What’s in this thing? It weighs a ton.”

Together they brought the hamper onto the beach and Daniel unclasped the buckles holding the lid down. He removed a tartan blanket and laid it across the sand.

“My lady,” he said.

Emily laughed and sat down on the blanket. Daniel began to unload different foods from the hamper, including cheeses and fruits, then a large bottle of champagne and two crystal flutes.

“Champagne!” Emily exclaimed. “What’s the occasion?”

Daniel shrugged. “No occasion in particular. Just thought we should celebrate your first guest.”

“Don’t remind me,” Emily said with a groan.

Daniel popped the cork of the champagne and poured them each a glass.

“To Mr. Kapowski.”

Emily clinked her glass against his, her lips pursed into a smile. “Mr. Kapowski.” She took a sip, letting the bubbles pop on her tongue.

“You’re still not feeling confident about the whole thing, are you?” Daniel said.

Emily shrugged, her eyes focused on the liquid in her glass. She swilled it and watched the trajectory of the bubble streams inside change, disrupted by the motion, before settling again. “I just don’t have much faith in myself,” she finally said, with a large sigh. “I’ve never really achieved anything before.”

“What about your job in New York?”

“I mean nothing I’ve ever wanted.”

Daniel wiggled his eyebrows. “What about me?”

Emily couldn’t help but smirk. “I don’t view you as an achievement as such...”

“You should,” he interjected jovially. “A stoic guy like me. It’s not like I’m the easiest guy to chat with in the whole world.”

Emily laughed, then planted a long, sumptuous kiss on his lips.

“What was that for?” he said once she pulled away.

“A thank-you. For this.” She nodded to the small picnic spread before them. “For being here.”

Daniel seemed to hesitate then and Emily realized why: because being here wasn’t something that Daniel would ever be able to fully commit to. Traveling was in his blood. At some point he’d have to set off.

But what about her? She hadn’t made any fixed plans to stay in Sunset Harbor, either. She’d already been here six months – a long time to be away from New York, away from her home and her friends. And yet, with the sun setting in the distance, casting orange and pink rays into the sky, she couldn’t think of anywhere else she’d rather be. In this exact moment, right now, everything was perfect. She felt like she was living in paradise. Perhaps she really could make Sunset Harbor her home. Perhaps Daniel would want to settle down with her. There was no way of knowing the future; she would just have to take each day as it came. At the very least she could stay here until her money ran dry. And if she put in enough hard work, made the B&B sustainable, then that day might not come for a very long time.

“What are you thinking about?” Daniel asked.

“The future, I guess,” Emily replied.

“Ah,” Daniel replied, looking down at his lap.

“Not a good topic of conversation?” Emily queried.

Daniel shrugged. “Not always. Isn’t it better just to enjoy the moment?”

Emily wasn’t sure how to take that statement. Was it evidence of his desire to leave this place? If the future wasn’t a good topic of conversation, was that because he had visions of future heartbreak?

“I suppose,” she said quietly. “But sometimes it’s impossible not to think ahead. It’s okay to make plans too, don’t you think?” She was trying to gently nudge Daniel, to make him give up just a sliver of information, anything that might make her feel steadier within their relationship.

“Not really,” he said. “I try really hard to keep my mind in the present. Don’t worry about the future. Don’t dwell on the past.”

Emily didn’t like the idea of him worrying about their future, and had to stop herself from demanding to know what exactly there was to worry about. Instead, she asked, “Is there a lot to dwell on?”

Daniel hadn’t revealed too much about his past. She knew he had moved around a lot, that his parents divorced and his dad drank, that he credited her own father for giving him a future.

“Oh yeah,” Daniel said. “A whole lot.”

He fell silent again. Emily wanted him to give more but could tell he wasn’t able to. She wondered if he knew how much she ached to be the person he opened up to.

But with Daniel it was all about patience. He would speak when he was ready, if he was ever ready.

And if that day ever did come, she hoped she’d still be around to listen.

CHAPTER FOUR

The next morning Emily woke early, determined not to miss the breakfast shift again. At seven sharp she heard the sound of the guest's bedroom door opening and closing softly, then the patter of Mr. Kapowski's footsteps as he descended the staircase. Emily stepped out from where she'd been loitering in the corridor and stood at the bottom of the steps looking up at him.

"Good morning, Mr. Kapowski," she said confidently, a pleasant smile on her face.

Mr. Kapowski startled.

"Oh. Good morning. You're awake."

"Yes," Emily said, maintaining her confident tone, though she felt anything but. "I wanted to apologize for yesterday, for not being available to make you breakfast. Did you sleep okay?" She noted the dark rings around his eyes.

Mr. Kapowski hesitated for a moment. He nervously shoved his hands into the pockets of his crumpled suit.

"Um...no, actually," he finally replied.

"Oh no," Emily said, concerned. "Not because of the bedroom, I hope?"

Mr. Kapowski seemed fidgety and awkward, rubbing his neck like he had more to say but didn't know how to.

"Actually," he finally managed, "the pillow was quite lumpy."

"I'm so sorry about that," Emily said, frustrated with herself for not having tested it.

"And um...the towels were scratchy."

"They are?" Emily said, perturbed. "Why don't you come and sit in the dining room," she said, fighting to keep the panic from her voice, "and let me know your concerns."

She guided him into the vast dining room and opened up the curtains, letting the pale morning light filter into the room, showing off her latest display of lilies from Raj, the smell of which permeated the room. The surface of the long mahogany banquet style table glistened. Emily loved this room; it was so opulent, so fancy and ornate. It had been the perfect room to showcase some of her father's antique crockery, and they were kept in a display case made of the same deep mahogany wood as the table.

"That's better," she said, her tone remaining bright and breezy. "Now, would you like to let me know about your room so we can fix it?"

Mr. Kapowski looked uncomfortable, as though he really didn't want to speak.

"It's nothing really. Just the pillow and towels. And also maybe the mattress was very firm and um...a bit on the thin side."

Emily nodded, acting like his words weren't striking a chord of anguish in her heart.

"But really, it's fine," Mr. Kapowski added. "I'm a light sleeper."

"Well, okay," Emily said, realizing that making him speak was a worse course of action than leaving him unsatisfied with his room. "Well, what can I get you for breakfast?"

"Eggs and bacon, if that's not too much trouble," Mr. Kapowski said. "Fried. And toast. With mushrooms. And tomatoes."

"No problem," Emily said, worrying she didn't have all the ingredients he'd listed.

Emily hurried into the kitchen, awakening Mogsy and Rain immediately. Both dogs began yapping for their breakfast, but she ignored their whines as she raced over to the fridge and checked what was inside. She was relieved to see that she had bacon, although there were no mushrooms or tomatoes. At least there was bread in the bread bin, a surplus Karen from the general store had dropped around the other day, and eggs she could source thanks to Lola and Lolly.

Regretting her choice of footwear, Emily rushed out the back door, across the dewy grass, and to the chicken coop. Lola and Lolly were strutting about their pen. They both tipped their heads to the side at the sound of her approaching footsteps, expecting her to supply them with fresh corn.

“Not yet, little chickadees,” she said. “Mr. Kapowski comes first.”

They pecked their frustration at her as Emily rushed over to the hen house where they laid their eggs.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she muttered as she looked inside to discover nothing there. She turned her face down to the chickens, hands on hips. “Of all the days for you two not to lay eggs, you choose today!”

Then she remembered all the poached egg practice she’d undertaken yesterday. She must have used at least five! She threw her hands up in the air. *Why did Daniel make me worry about poaching eggs?* she thought with frustration.

Emily headed back inside, disappointed that she wouldn’t be able to provide the breakfast Mr. Kapowski wanted today either, and began grilling the bacon. Whether it was due to her anxiety or her lack of experience, Emily seemed unable to perform even the most simple of tasks. She spilled coffee all over the counter, then left the bacon under the grill too long so that the edges were crisp and black. The new toaster – a replacement for the one that blew up and ruined the kitchen – seemed to have much more sensitive settings than the last one, and she managed to burn the toast as well.

When she looked at what she’d produced, the final breakfast on the plate, Emily was less than satisfied. She couldn’t serve that mess of a meal. So she went to the utility room and scraped the whole thing into the dogs’ bowls. At least with the dogs fed that was one thing ticked off her to-do list.

Back in the kitchen, Emily tried once again to create the meal that Mr. Kapowski had ordered. This time, it came together better. The bacon wasn’t overdone. The toast wasn’t burned. She just hoped he’d forgive her for the missing ingredients.

She glanced at her watch and saw it had been nearly thirty minutes, and her heart raced.

She rushed back into the room.

“Here we are, Mr. Kapowski,” Emily said, reemerging into the dining room with the breakfast tray. “I’m so sorry for the wait.”

She realized as she approached the table that Mr. Kapowski had fallen asleep. Unsure whether to be relieved or annoyed, Emily put the tray down and began to back silently out of the room.

Mr. Kapowski’s head suddenly sprung up. “Ah,” he said, glancing down at the tray. “Breakfast. Thank you.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have any eggs or tomatoes or mushrooms today,” she said.

Mr. Kapowski looked disappointed.

Emily went out into the corridor and took some deep breaths. The morning had been incredibly labor intensive, considering the amount of money she was ultimately making for her effort. If she wanted to sustain the business, she was going to have to become a little more efficient. And she needed a contingency plan in case Lola and Lolly had another lay-less day.

Just then, he emerged from the dining room. It had been less than a minute since she’d delivered his food.

“Is everything okay?” Emily asked. “Do you need something?”

Once again, Mr. Kapowski seemed reticent to speak.

“Um...the food is a bit cold.”

“Oh,” Emily said, panicking. “Here, let me heat it up for you.”

“Actually, it’s okay,” Mr. Kapowski said. “I need to be getting on really.”

“Okay,” Emily said, feeling deflated. “Do you have anything nice planned for the day?” She was trying to sound like a B&B host rather than a panicking girl, although she felt much more like the latter.

“Oh, no, I meant that I need to be getting home,” Mr. Kapowski corrected.

“You mean you’re checking out?” Emily asked, taken aback.

She felt a cold chill spread over her body.

“But I had you down for three nights.”

Mr. Kapowski looked awkward.

“I, um, just need to get back. I’ll pay in full, though.”

He seemed in a hurry to leave and even when Emily suggested knocking off the price of the two breakfasts he hadn’t eaten he insisted that he just pay the bill in full and leave immediately. Emily stood at the door and watched him drive away, feeling like an utter failure.

She didn’t know how long she stood there, lamenting the disaster that had been her very first guest, but she became aware of the sound of her cell phone ringing from inside. Thanks to the terrible reception she received in the old house, the only place Emily could get a signal was by the front door. She had a special hall table just for her phone – a beautiful antique piece she’d recovered from one of the closed-off bedrooms in the B&B. She paced over to it now, bracing herself to see who it was.

There were not many good options. Her mom hadn’t been in touch since that emotional late-night phone call they’d shared in which they discussed the truth about Charlotte’s death and, more specifically, Emily’s role – or lack of – in it. Amy also hadn’t been in touch since her cavalier attempt to “rescue” Emily from her new life, though they had made peace since. Ben, Emily’s ex, had called numerous times since she’d upped and left but Emily hadn’t answered a single one of his calls and now the frequency of them seemed to be diminishing.

She braced herself as she peered down at the screen. The name blinking up at her was a surprise to see. It was Jayne, an old school friend from New York. She’d known Jayne since she was a very young girl, and over the years they’d developed the kind of friendship whereby months would lapse before they spoke, but the second they got together it was as if no time had passed at all. Jayne had probably heard from Amy, or somewhere on the grapevine, about Emily’s new life and was calling to probe her about the sudden and abrupt change she had made.

Emily answered the call.

“Em?” Jayne said, her voice bumpy and her breath ragged. “I just bumped into Amy during my jog. She said you’d *left* New York!”

Emily blinked, her mind now unaccustomed to the fast-paced style of talking all her New York friends shared. The idea of jogging while having a phone conversation was alien to Emily now.

“Yeah, it was a little while ago now actually,” she said.

“How long ago are we talking?” Jayne asked, the sound of her pummeling footsteps audible over the line.

Emily’s voice was small and apologetic. “Um, well, about six months.”

“Yikes, I need to call you more often!” Jayne panted.

Emily could hear the background traffic, the honking of car horns, the thud of Jayne’s sneakers as she pounded along a sidewalk. It evoked a very familiar image inside Emily’s mind. She had been that person just a few months ago, always busy, never resting, cell phone latched to her ear.

“So what’s the gossip?” Jayne said. “Tell me everything. I’m guessing Ben is out of the picture?”

Jayne, like all of Emily’s friends and family, had never liked Ben. They’d been able to see what Emily had been blind to for seven years – that he was so not right for her.

“Truly out of the picture,” Emily replied.

“And is there anyone new in the picture?” Jayne asked.

“Maybe...” Emily said coyly. “But it’s new and still a bit unsteady so I’d rather not jinx it by talking about it.”

“But I want to know everything!” Jayne cried. “Oh, hold on. I’m getting another call.”

Emily waited while the line went silent. A few moments later, the noises of a New York City morning filled her ears again as Jayne reconnected.

“Sorry, babe,” she said, “I had to take that. Work stuff. So look, Amy said you have a B&B up there or something?”

“Uh-huh,” Emily replied. She felt a little tense talking about the B&B, since Amy had been so vocal about it being a stupid idea, not to mention the whole switch in Emily’s life being ill thought through.

“Have you got any rooms available at the moment?” Jayne asked.

Emily was taken aback. She hadn’t expected such a question. “Yeah,” she said, thinking of Mr. Kapowski’s now abandoned room. “Why?”

“I want to come!” Jayne exclaimed. “It’s Memorial Day weekend, after all. And I desperately need to get out of the city. Can I book it?”

Emily faltered. “You don’t have to do that, you know. You can just come and stay as a visitor.”

“No way,” Jayne replied. “I want the full treatment. Fresh towels every morning. Bacon and eggs for breakfast. I want to see you in action.”

Emily laughed. Of all the people she’d spoken to about her new business venture, Jayne was being the most supportive.

“Well, let me book you in officially then,” Emily said. “How long will your stay be?”

“I dunno, a week?”

“Great,” Emily said, a little ball of joy rolling in her gut. “And when will you be arriving?”

“Tomorrow morning,” Jayne said. “Around ten.”

The ball of joy grew larger still. “Okay, bear with me one moment while I log you in.”

A little giddy with excitement, Emily placed her cell on hold and rushed over to the computer at the reception desk, where she logged into the room-booking program and entered Jayne’s details. She felt proud of herself for having technically filled up the B&B every day since it had opened, even if it only had one room to fill, and had only opened two days ago...

She rushed back to her cell and picked it up. “Okay, you’re all booked in for one week.”

“Very good,” Jayne said. “You sounded very professional.”

“Thanks,” Emily replied shyly. “I’m still coming to grips with it all. My last guest was a disaster.”

“You can tell me all about it tomorrow,” Jayne said. “I’d better go. I’m starting my tenth mile so I need to save my breath. See you tomorrow?”

“I can’t wait,” Emily replied.

The call ended and Emily smiled to herself. She hadn’t realized just how much she missed her old friend until she’d spoken to her. Seeing Jayne tomorrow would be a wonderful antidote to the disaster that had been Mr. Kapowski.

CHAPTER FIVE

Exhausted from her long, disastrous morning, Emily found herself sinking into unhappiness. Everywhere she looked she saw problems and mistakes; a messily painted wall, a poorly affixed light, an ill-fitting piece of furniture. Before, she'd seen them as quirks, but now they bothered her.

She knew she needed some professional help and advice. She was in way over her head, thinking she could just run a B&B.

She decided to call Cynthia, the bookstore owner who had once managed a B&B in her youth, to ask for advice.

"Emily," Cynthia said when she picked up the call. "How are you, my dear?"

"Awful," Emily said. "I'm having the worst day."

"But it's only seven thirty!" Cynthia cried. "How bad can it be really?"

"Really, really bad," Emily replied. "My first guest just left. I missed serving him breakfast on the first day, then on the second day I didn't have enough ingredients and he said the food was cold. He didn't like the pillows or the towels. I don't know what to do. Can you help?"

"I'll be right over," Cynthia said, sounding thrilled at the prospect of imparting some wisdom.

Emily went outside to wait for Cynthia and sat on the porch, hoping the sunshine might cheer her up, or, at the very least, the dose of vitamin D would. Her head felt so heavy she let it drop into her hands.

When she heard the sound of crunching gravel, she looked up to see Cynthia cycling toward her.

Cynthia's rusty bike was a common and somewhat unforgettable sight around Sunset Harbor, mainly because the woman sitting atop it had frizzy dyed orange hair and wore bright and very uncoordinated outfits. To make things even more bizarre, Cynthia had recently affixed a wicker basket to the front of her bike in which she transported Storm, one of Mogsy's puppies that she'd adopted. In many ways, Cynthia Jones was her very own tourist attraction.

Emily was glad to see her, though Cynthia's large red polka-dotted summer hat hurt her weary eyes somewhat. She waved at her friend and waited for the woman to reach her.

They went inside and Cynthia wasted no time. As they ascended the stairs, Cynthia fired questions at Emily, about water pressure, about whether she was serving organic food and who her supplier was. By the time they reached the guest bedroom, Emily's head was spinning.

She took Cynthia inside. The room, as far as Emily was concerned, was beautiful. There was a mezzanine area at one end where she'd put a comfy leather sofa so that guests could sit there and look out at the ocean view. The room was mainly white, but with blue accents, a sheepskin rug, and distressed pine furniture.

"This bed is too small," Cynthia said immediately. "Standard double? Are you crazy? You need something grand and opulent. Something luxurious, beyond anything they'd be able to afford themselves. You've made this room look like a bedroom showroom."

"I thought that was the point," Emily said meekly.

"Absolutely not!" Cynthia cried. "You need it to look like a palace!" She paced around, touching the crumpled bed covers. "Too scratchy," she said. "Your guests deserve to sleep in a bed that feels like silk against their skin." She paced over to the window. "These drapes are far too dark."

"Oh," Emily said. "Anything else?"

"How many rooms do you have?"

"Well, this is the main one that's ready. There are two more that just need some furnishings. Then there's a ton more that I haven't even managed to clear yet. And the whole third floor could be converted too."

Cynthia nodded and tapped her chin. She seemed to be having some ideas, perhaps, Emily wondered, some grand plans for the B&B that would be impossible for her to achieve.

“Show me the dining room,” Cynthia commanded.

“Um...okay...”

They went downstairs and with every step Emily’s dread intensified. She was beginning to regret the decision of asking Cynthia for help. Where Mr. Kapowski had dented her fragile ego, Cynthia was shattering it to pieces with a sledgehammer.

“No, no, no, no, no,” Cynthia said, walking around the dining room.

“I thought you loved this room,” Emily said, perturbed. Cynthia had certainly enjoyed the five-course meal and cocktails – made and paid for by Emily, no less – the last time she’d been here.

“I do. For dinner parties!” Cynthia exclaimed. “But you need to make this a B&B dining room now, with small tables so the guests can eat alone. You can’t put them all on one big table like this!”

“I thought it would foster a sense of community,” Emily stammered defensively. “I was trying to do something different.”

“Darling,” Cynthia said, “don’t even go there. Not now. Maybe ten years down the line when you’re an established business with money to spare, then you can start experimenting. But now you have no choice but to make this the way your guests are expecting. You understand?”

Emily nodded glumly. She didn’t know if there was even going to be a ten years down the line. She’d only ever been thinking in the short term with the B&B and now it sounded like Cynthia wanted her to really invest in this place, turn it into something long term and sustainable. It was starting to sound expensive, and expensive was not something Emily could afford. Still, she listened patiently as Cynthia continued her critique.

“Don’t put lilies in here. It reminds people of funerals. And oh dear God, that will have to move.” Cynthia was looking out the window at the chicken coop. “Everyone loves a free-range egg but they certainly don’t love seeing the dirty little critters that produced them!”

By the time she left, Emily was feeling worse than ever. She went back to sitting on the porch, looking at the to-do list Cynthia had given her. Just then, Daniel arrived home and strolled up the gravel path toward her.

“Boy, am I happy to see you,” Emily said, looking up at him. “My day has literally sucked from the moment I woke up.”

Daniel sat beside her on the porch. “How come?”

Emily regaled him with the tale of Mr. Kapowski, of Lola and Lolly failing in the one thing they were supposed to do, of the pretty shoes she’d ruined scrabbling around in their chicken coop, of the burned bacon, of Mr. Kapowski leaving, and of Cynthia’s criticisms.

“And take a breath,” Daniel said with a smirk as soon as she was finished.

“Don’t laugh at me.” Emily pouted. “It’s been a really trying day and I could do with your support.”

Daniel chuckled. “One day you’ll look back and see the funny side. Once this is in the past and you’re running the most successful B&B in Maine, that is.”

“I doubt that will happen,” Emily said, giving in further to her darkening mood. She couldn’t begin to imagine her B&B becoming a success. She wasn’t even sure if she could keep it going in the short term. “The worst thing is I know they’re both right,” she added. “I’m not good enough at this. I need to get better. And I need to make all the changes that Cynthia suggested. The B&B she managed when she was younger was one of the best in Maine. If I don’t take her advice I’d be an idiot.”

“How much work needs to be done?” Daniel asked.

“A lot. Cynthia says I need to get the other two rooms up to standard pronto. They need to be in different color schemes and have different nightly prices, so that guests feel like they have some kind of choice, to make them feel in control. She said that the chances are people will go for the middle-priced room because they don’t want to look like they’re stingy to their significant other, but that there’ll always be a certain type of person who goes for the cheapest no matter what, and another who always goes for the most expensive.”

“Whoa,” Daniel said. “I never realized there was so much to think about.”

“Neither did I,” Emily replied. “I went into this whole thing blind and naïve. But I want to make this work, I really do.”

“So what do you need to change? How long will it take?”

“Pretty much everything,” Emily said glumly. “And I need to get it done as soon as possible. It’s going to eat into the rest of my savings. I’ve worked out that I’ll only have enough left to keep this place running until the Fourth of July. So one month.”

Immediately, she noted the change in Daniel’s body language, an almost imperceptible shift away from her. She was well aware that she was putting a time limit on their romance, as well as her business, and it seemed as if Daniel was already distancing himself from her, if only by a few centimeters.

“So, what are you going to do?” he asked.

“I’m going to go for it,” she said, decisively.

Daniel smiled and nodded. “Why do anything halfway?” he said.

He put his arm around her and Emily leaned into him, relieved that he had closed the distance between them once again. But that shift wasn’t something she was going to forget easily.

She’d started a stopwatch on their relationship and it was ticking down.

CHAPTER SIX

“This chest of drawers would be perfect for the smaller room,” Emily said, her fingers running along the top of the pine dresser as she looked over at Daniel.

Her heart quickened as she fell in love, as she always did, with the hidden gems in Rico’s antique store. She could see Daniel getting excited, too, as he eyed it; it was an added plus that this also happened to be their favorite place to go on dates together.

Both enjoyed the thrill of discovering rare and exotic items for the B&B, but they also loved the endless source of entertainment the old, forgetful man provided. While Rico’s short-term memory was less than reliable, his ability to recall the past was second to none, and he would often launch into unexpected anecdotes about the townsfolk, or history lessons about Sunset Harbor itself. There was also often the added bonus of Serena, who, despite being fifteen years her junior, was someone Emily now considered to be a good friend.

Emily then looked up and saw an exquisite gold-gilded vanity mirror.

“Oh, and this would work perfectly too.”

She flitted around the shop, Daniel following her as she hopped from one wardrobe to the next. As she went, she jotted down the prices and numbers on the tags of the items she was interested in, so she could give the list to Rico at the end. She was making numerous purchases, after all, and it was best not to confuse the poor man.

“What about this?” Emily asked Daniel, looking at a large four-poster bed. “Cynthia said that the beds need to be bigger. That I need to make my guests feel like royalty.”

Daniel walked across the store from where he’d been examining some stone birdbaths, and stopped beside her.

“Whoa. I mean, yeah, your guests will definitely feel like royalty sleeping in that thing. It’s enormous. Do you definitely have the space?”

Emily pulled out a measuring tape and began jotting down the dimensions of the bed, then consulted the diagram in her pocket. She’d written down all the dimensions to ensure she only purchased furniture that would neatly fit within the rooms. The plan was to stick to renovating the two other main rooms initially, pouring all her spare cash into making them as perfect as possible, then to expand quite rapidly to twenty rooms – the ones that would cater to the cheaper end of the market – once the money from the first three came in.

“It would definitely fit in the bridal suite!” Emily beamed. The beautiful bed frame was making her excited; just the thought of owning it and putting it in one of the bedrooms was a thrill.

Daniel reached out and looked at the price tag. “Have you seen how expensive it is?”

Emily leaned over and read the tag. “It belonged to a fifteenth-century Norwegian aristocrat,” she read. “Of course it’s going to be pricey.”

Daniel gave her a bemused look. “Why are you not that concerned? The Emily I know would be hyperventilating around about now.”

“Ha. Ha,” Emily said wryly, though she knew he was speaking the truth. She was one of life’s eternal fretters, but this time something had shifted. Perhaps it was that ticking clock, that tolling bell, the sand sifting through the timer of their relationship. Something about the finality of it all made her throw caution to the wind. “Spend money to make money, right?” she said, boldly. “If I scrimp now, I’ll pay for it later. The B&B will implode.”

“That’s a little dramatic,” Daniel said, laughing. “But I do know what you mean. You have to put in the investment now, put in the groundwork.”

Emily took a deep breath.

“Okay, good. Now you’re on my side, I’m ready to do this.”

The thought of spending all that money from her savings, of ending up balancing so precariously on the edge of bankruptcy, was not something Emily relished doing. She'd never been that sort of person, the impulsive type. She was usually careful and considered, measuring the pros and cons of every situation before committing – that is, until she'd dramatically left her job, apartment, and boyfriend in New York and run away to Maine. Maybe she was more impulsive than she realized. Or perhaps it was a trait that was creeping up on her as she aged. Was that how Cynthia had become so eccentric – with every year she aged she added another luminous color to her wardrobe, dyed her hair another bizarre shade? As much as she loved her dear friend, Emily shuddered at the thought of becoming her.

Forcing her mind to stop drawing comparisons between herself and the older woman, Emily refocused on the task at hand.

"I suppose I'm buying it," she said to Daniel, almost willing him silently to tell her no, to give her an excuse not to go through with it.

"Cool," was all he said.

Just then Rico came over. "Ellie." He beamed. "So lovely to see you." The elderly man always had trouble remembering Emily's name.

"Hi, Rico," Emily said. "Do you have many more four-poster beds like this one?" She remembered the hidden room that Rico had shown her, the place where he stowed all the larger and often more expensive items he couldn't easily move. It was filled with treasures galore, more so than even her father's sprawling mansion contained.

"Of course," Rico said, patting her arm with a wizened hand. "They're in the back. Do you know where to go?"

Emily nodded. Rico had shown her and Daniel the secret corridor room several days earlier.

"In that case, take a look," Rico said. "I trust you."

Emily smiled to herself, wondering how he trusted her if he couldn't even remember her name. Then she and Daniel went along the unlit, winding corridor and into the expansive back room. Just like the last time she'd been here, Emily was almost winded by the cold, and overwhelmed by the sheer size of the vast room. It was like stepping into a cavern or cave. She shivered and pulled her arms about herself. Daniel noticed her shivering and drew her closely into him. The warmth coming off him comforted Emily.

They went deeper inside the room, passing cupboards and sideboards, desks and wardrobes.

"Narnia, here I come," Emily joked, pulling open the door to a particularly ornate wooden wardrobe, before jotting down its price and number on her list of purchases.

Finally, they located the place where all the beds were stored.

"Here," Emily said, looking at a dark wood, antique four-poster bed frame. Each of the posts was made to look like the tree trunks from which they'd been carved. It was almost otherworldly. "This is exactly what I need. Just one more like this and the high-end rooms will feel pretty darn luxurious, don't you think?"

Daniel seemed particularly impressed with the bed. "This is amazingly well built. I mean you can tell that by how well it's stood the test of time, but also the finish, the way they used a varnish that suited the natural wood effect." He seemed enamored, though no sooner had he said the words than he immediately became distracted by another bed. "Emily, quick, look at this one!"

Emily laughed as he tugged her hand to show her another ornate bed frame. This one had a paler varnish, and it almost looked like it was from an Icelandic log cabin. Patterns had been carved into the headboard and posts. It was gorgeous, a sight to behold.

"I mean, that's a one in a million piece, Emily!" Daniel said enthusiastically. "Hand-carved. Awesome carpentry. You'd pretty much put the B&B on the map if you bought this!"

Emily felt a warmth spread inside of her. It was true. The beds she'd found in Rico's store were amazing and unique. She could see now what Cynthia had been trying to tell her, about treating her guests like royalty. *She'd* certainly feel like a princess sleeping in one of these.

"You know," Emily said, her fingers idling over the wood of one of the posts. "If we buy these beds, there is one stipulation."

"Oh?" Daniel said, his eyebrows drawing together.

Emily pursed her lips and raised an eyebrow. "We'd have to try each one out. For quality assurance purposes, of course."

"You mean... Oh!" Daniel caught on to what Emily was suggestively implying. He wiggled his eyebrows. The prospect of buying the beds suddenly seemed even more enticing. "Oh well, of course..." he murmured, reaching his arms around Emily and pulling her into an embrace. "You wouldn't be able to rest at night if you didn't know, firsthand, the experience your guests were paying for."

He kissed her neck seductively and Emily laughed.

"I'm going to give Rico my list," she said, drawing herself out of the embrace. "And part with all of my money."

Daniel whistled through his teeth. "He's going to be happy. You've probably made him a whole month's profit in one sale!"

"I'm not thinking about that," Emily said, pretending to cover her eyes with her hands to avoid looking at the price labels.

She left Daniel in the large room and found Rico.

"Evie," he said when she reemerged. "Did you find what you wanted?"

"I did," Emily said. "I'd like to buy three wardrobes, a dressing table, two desks, six bedside tables, one tall boy, two chests of drawers, three rugs, and three antique beds."

"Oh," Rico said, a little surprised as she handed him the list of items and prices. "That's quite a lot." He began to add them up slowly on his ancient till.

"I'm furnishing two more rooms in the B&B and redesigning another."

"Ah yes, you're the B&B girl," Rico said, nodding. "Your dad would be so proud of what you've achieved, you know."

Emily couldn't help but squirm. Even though she appreciated his kind words, it made her uncomfortable to think of her dad.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"Now," Rico said in his wizened voice, "since you're such a valued customer and you're doing something that will benefit the whole town, I'll give you a discount." He tapped some buttons and a figure appeared on the dusty display screen.

Emily squinted, not sure if she was seeing it right. "Rico, that's a fifty percent discount." She couldn't tell if the elderly gentleman had mistakenly entered the smaller figure; the last thing she wanted was to accidentally rip him off.

"That's quite right. You get a special Sunset Harbor Memorial Weekend discount." He winked. Emily stammered, handing over her card. She could hardly believe his generosity.

"Are you sure?"

Rico waved a hand to silence her. The sale went through and Emily stood there a little dazed.

"Thank you, Rico," she said, breathlessly, and planted a kiss on the old man's papery cheek. "I don't know how to thank you."

He smiled wide, and that smile said it all.

She felt like a giddy child as she rushed off back through the antique shop to find Daniel.

"Rico gave me a half-price discount!" she exclaimed when she reached him.

He looked stunned.

"That's amazing," Daniel replied.

“Come on,” Emily said, impatient all of a sudden. “Let’s get this stuff out of here and start fixing up the B&B.”

Daniel laughed. “I’ve never seen someone so eager to end a date.”

“I’m sorry,” Emily said with a blush. “It’s just there’s so much to do and prepare for when Jayne gets here.”

“Who’s Jayne?” Daniel asked. “You didn’t tell me you’d booked another guest.” He seemed excited for her, if not a little surprised.

Emily laughed. “Oh, it’s not like that. Jayne’s my old best friend from New York.”

Daniel seemed suddenly awkward. He’d felt judged by Amy when she’d visited and was more than a little reticent to meet any of Emily’s other friends.

“Okay,” he said in a half mumble.

“She’s nice,” Emily reassured him. “And she’ll love you.” She kissed him on the cheek.

“You can’t know that for certain,” Daniel said. “You never know – people rub each other the wrong way all the time. And it’s not like I’m the friendliest guy in the world.”

Emily slung her arms around his neck and nuzzled in. “I promise. She’ll love you because I love you. That’s how it works with best friends.”

Emily realized, after she’d spoken, that she had said the “L” word. She’d told Daniel she loved him. It had just slipped out, but she didn’t feel strange or anxious about it at all. In fact, saying it had felt like the most natural thing in the world. She noted, however, that Daniel did not say it back and wondered whether she’d crossed that line too soon.

The two of them stayed like that for a while, quietly embracing in the dark antique store, as Emily mulled over the meaning of Daniel’s silence in her mind.

*

The sky was dimming as they unloaded the heavy new four-poster beds from the back of Daniel’s truck and carried them up to the rooms. They spent the next few hours putting them together and arranging the rooms, neither commenting on the words that had passed between them back at Rico’s store.

As the sky blackened, Emily began to feel like the house was becoming more like a real B&B, like she’d committed more fully to the idea. In many ways, she had reached the point of no return. Not just with the B&B, but with her feelings for Daniel. She loved him. She loved the B&B. And she had no doubt in her mind about either.

“I think we should stay at mine tonight,” Daniel announced when the clock struck midnight.

“Sure,” Emily said, a little taken aback. She had never stayed the night in Daniel’s carriage house and wondered whether it was some kind of attempt on his behalf to show his commitment to her when he’d failed earlier to say those three little words.

They locked up the B&B and crossed the lawn to where Daniel’s small carriage house stood in darkness. He opened the door and showed Emily inside.

Emily always felt so much younger whenever she went to Daniel’s house. Something about his vast collection of records and books intimidated her. She scanned the shelves now, looking at all the academic texts Daniel owned. Psychology. Photography. He had books on many different subjects. And, much to Emily’s amusement, these intimidating-looking academic texts were all sandwiched between pulpy crime novels.

“No way!” she exclaimed. “You read Agatha Christie?”

Daniel just shrugged. “Nothing wrong with an Agatha now and again. She’s a great storyteller.”

“But aren’t her books for middle-aged women?”

“Why don’t you read one and tell me?” he said cheekily.

Emily smacked him with a pillow. “How dare you. Thirty-five is hardly middle-aged!”

They laughed as Daniel wrestled Emily down onto the couch. He tickled her mercilessly, making her squeal and pummel his back with closed fists. Then they both fell, exhausted from the play-fight, into a tangle of limbs. Emily's giggles died down. She panted, catching her breath, her arms wrapped around Daniel, twining her fingers through his hair. Their silly moods faded away, becoming more serious.

Daniel pulled back so he could see her face. "You're beautiful, you know," he said. "I'm not sure whether I tell you that enough."

Emily could tell the subtext of what he was saying. He was referring to earlier, to his not having told her that he loved her too. He was trying to make up for it now by showering her with compliments. It wasn't really the same thing, but she was happy to hear it nonetheless.

"Thank you," she murmured. "You're not so bad yourself."

Daniel smirked, smiling the crooked smile that Emily loved so much.

"I'm so glad I met you," he went on. "My life now compared to where it was before you, it's almost incomprehensible. You've flipped everything on its head."

"In a good way, I hope," Emily said.

"In the best way," Daniel assured her.

Emily felt her cheeks turning rosy. As much as she enjoyed hearing Daniel speak these words, she was still shy, still a little bit unsure as to where she stood with him, and unsure of how close she should really let herself get considering how up in the air everything was with the B&B.

Daniel seemed to be struggling to say the next words. Emily watched him patiently, her gaze encouraging.

"If you went away, I don't know what I'd do," Daniel said. "Actually, I do. I'd drive to New York to be with you again." He took her hand. "What I'm saying is stay with me. Okay? Wherever that place may be, make it be with me."

Daniel's words touched Emily deeply. There was such sincerity to them, such tenderness. It wasn't love that he was communicating but something else, something similar or at least as significant. It was a desire to be with her no matter what happened with the B&B. He was banishing the ticking clock, saying he didn't care whether she didn't make it work by the Fourth of July, that he would be there with her still.

"I will," Emily said, gazing up at him adoringly. "We can stay together. No matter what."

Daniel leaned down and kissed Emily deeply. She felt her body grow warm in response to him, and the heat between them intensified. Then Daniel stood and extended a hand to her. She bit her lip and took his hand, following him in eager anticipation as he led her to the bedroom.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The date had been exactly what both Emily and Daniel needed. Sometimes they both became so weighed down by all the work at the B&B that it was easy to let such things slide. So it was no surprise when they both slept through their 8 a.m. alarm clocks. Emily in particular had some much needed sleep to catch up on.

When they did both finally wake – at what now felt like an absurdly late hour of 9 a.m. – they decided it would be best to enjoy some more time in bed, since they'd had such a good time between the sheets the night before.

They finally got up at around ten, but even then they enjoyed a long, lazy breakfast before finally admitting that they ought to head back to the main house to continue working on the new rooms.

"Hey, look," Daniel said as he closed the carriage house door and locked it behind them. "There's a car in the drive."

"Another guest?" Emily questioned.

They began to stroll together, hand in hand, up the gravel path. Emily glanced up at the house, where she could see a woman with glossy black hair standing on the porch, several bags beside her, ringing the bell over and over.

"I think you're right," Daniel said.

Emily gasped, suddenly realizing who it was standing there.

"Oh no, I forgot about Jayne!" she cried. She checked her watch. Eleven. Jayne had said she'd be arriving at ten. She hoped her poor friend hadn't been standing there a whole hour ringing the bell.

"Jayne!" she called, racing up the gravel path. "I'm so sorry! I'm here!"

Jayne spun at the sound of her name. "Em!" she cried, waving. When she noticed Daniel pacing toward them just a few steps behind, her eyebrows shot up, as if to say, "Who is this guy?"

Emily reached her and the two women embraced.

"Have you been standing here for an hour?" Emily asked, concerned.

"Oh, come off it, Emily. How well do you know me? Of course I didn't get here on time. I was about forty-five minutes late!"

"Still," Emily said, apologetically. "Fifteen minutes is quite a long time to stand on someone's porch."

Jayne stomped the decking with the heel of her boot. "Sturdy, solid porch. It did a good job."

Emily laughed. Just then, Daniel reached them.

"Jayne, this is Daniel," Emily said hurriedly, knowing she had no choice now but to introduce him.

Daniel courteously shook Jayne's hand, even while she eyed him like a piece of meat.

"Nice to meet you," he said. "Emily's told me all about you."

"She has?" Jayne said, her eyebrows rising up her forehead. "Because she's told me nothing about you. You're a well-kept secret, Daniel."

Emily couldn't help but blush. Jayne wasn't one for subtleties, or keeping her mouth closed when she really ought to. Emily just hoped that Daniel didn't search for meaning in her words and come up with conclusions that really weren't true.

"Want me to help carry your bag?" he asked.

"Yes, please," Jayne replied.

The second Daniel bent over to pick up her bags she craned her head to check out his backside. She caught Emily's eye and nodded her approval. Emily cringed.

"Let me take those," Emily said quickly, nudging Daniel out the way and grabbing the bags.

"Wow, Jayne, these things are heavy! What did you pack?"

“Oh, you know,” Jayne said. “Two outfits a day – daywear and nightwear – plus an extra something for a formal evening, just in case. Lingerie, of course. Facemasks and moisturizers, makeup bag and brushes, nail polish, hair straighteners, curling tongs – ”

“Did you really need to bring straighteners *and* curlers?” Emily queried, lugging the bags over the threshold and into the corridor.

“—*and* crimping irons,” Jayne added. “You never know what mood might strike.” She grinned wickedly at Emily.

“Emily,” Daniel said, “you seem to be struggling. Why don’t you let me take those up to Jayne’s room?”

“Thanks Daniel,” Emily said, making sure she was strategically blocking Jayne’s view of Daniel’s butt as he bent over. “Why don’t you put those in Room One please?”

The original guest room, Room One, was affectionately nicknamed Mr. Kapowski’s room by Daniel and Emily, but right now Emily didn’t feel like delving into that particular story. She knew she sounded weirdly rigid and formal asking him to put the bags in Room One, but at this point in time she didn’t care; her sole focus was getting Daniel safely away from Jayne as quickly as possible, preferably without her ogling his ass as he climbed the stairs. The farthest room in the house seemed to be a good distance.

Emily turned to Jayne. “Let me give you the tour.” She steered her friend into the living room.

“Oh my God!” Jayne squealed before the door had even closed behind them. “Is *that* the new man in your life? Tell me it isn’t so! Really? How did you keep it so quiet? Why aren’t you calling up everyone you’ve ever met, including your kindergarten teacher and the postman, to tell them you’re dating a hot lumberjack?”

Jayne spoke incredibly quickly, and loudly, in a way that could give someone a headache after five minutes in her company.

“He’s not a lumberjack,” Emily whispered, feeling embarrassed. How had she forgotten how brash Jayne could be? What on earth made her think it was a good idea to invite her oldest friend to the B&B when doing so would mean her relationship was scrutinized? She didn’t want her to scare Daniel off; she’d already done a pretty good job of that herself by blurting out that she loved him yesterday.

“But girlfriend,” Jayne added, “he is seriously hot. You can see that, right? I mean I know your tastes have gone all wacky over the last few months but you can still see a hot guy when he’s standing in front of you, right?”

“Yes,” Emily whispered, rolling her eyes. “Please don’t be weird with him. It’s new. Really new.”

“What do you mean weird?”

“Like don’t say anything about babies or marriage. And don’t mention Ben, or any of my exes. Or my mother. Please, God, don’t say anything about how crazy my mother is.”

Jayne laughed. “You really like this guy, don’t you? I haven’t seen you this anxious in a long time.”

Emily squirmed. “Actually, yeah, I do. I think I’m in love.”

“No. Freakin’. Way!” Jayne cried, the volume of her voice rising a thousand notches. “You’re in love?”

Just then, Daniel entered the room. Emily froze and Jayne’s eyes widened in shock. She pressed her lips together.

“Oops,” she said loudly, looking from one mortified face to the other. “So Daniel,” Jayne added, breaking through the wall of tension that had filled the room like a balloon, “tell me all about you.”

Daniel looked from Emily back to Jayne and gulped. “Um, actually, I think I’ll leave you ladies to it. The dogs need walking.” He backed out of the room in a hurry.

Emily sighed, feeling herself deflate. It hurt her that Daniel was acting so awkwardly about the fact she was in love with him. She turned to Jayne.

“Can we get out of here for a bit? I could show you around Sunset Harbor. You’ve never been here and this is where I spent most of my summers as a kid so it would be cool to show you the sights.”

“Babe, tell me what footwear I need and I’m totally on it. Are we talking hiking boots? Jogging sneakers?”

Trust Jayne to have brought every possible type of footwear with her.

“Actually, you know, I haven’t been for a run since I left New York,” Emily said. “It might be fun to do that. It’s too beautiful a day to spend it in the car, and we’d certainly cover more ground than if we walked. We can take the ocean path.”

“Sounds great,” Jayne said. “I got so many calls yesterday after I finished speaking to you that I had to give up on the twelfth mile. I could do with a proper run.”

Emily gulped. A proper run for her had never really gone further than five miles. Right now, after six months of laziness, she’d be happy just to hit two miles.

“I’ll just get changed,” she said.

She rushed upstairs, leaving the B&B at the mercy of Jayne. When she reached the bedroom, she found Daniel lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

“Are you okay?” she asked tentatively. “I thought you were taking the dogs for a walk.”

“I just had to get out of that room,” Daniel said.

“Oh,” Emily replied, glumly. Was the thought of her loving him so repulsive he had to run away?

Daniel sat up, looking dazed. “I mean why does she have to talk so quickly? And loudly? And why does she have to say five words when one will do?”

Emily realized then that the reason Daniel had rushed away so quickly was not because of her but because of Jayne, because of her fast-paced New York way of talking. She laughed, releasing some of the tension that had built inside of her.

“You know I used to be just like her.”

Daniel shook his head. “No way. I don’t believe it.”

“Yes way,” Emily replied, insistent. “Just you wait. By day five you won’t be able to tell us apart.”

“Dear God,” Daniel said, falling back against the mattress.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jayne looked like a supermodel as she jogged beside the glittering waves, her hair flowing behind her, her limbs long and lithe. Unlike Emily, Jayne had hardly even broken a sweat. Everyone they passed checked her out, bowled over by her beauty, by seeing someone so stunningly attractive in their quiet, sleepy town.

"I don't even remember the last time I saw the ocean," Jayne said. "I mean other than during the drive over here. Sometimes New York makes you forget that there's anything other than roads and buildings out there."

"That's true," Emily replied, panting, finding it difficult to form even the shortest of sentences.

Raj was just putting some potted plants outside his shop when they passed.

"Hi, Emily!" he called.

She waved back, conserving her breath. Then she saw Parker Black in his wholesaler's van. Parker was a young man, only around twenty-three or twenty-four years old, with a mop of curly blond hair. He'd inherited the wholesalers at the age of just sixteen when his father passed away and had done a sterling job keeping the operation going. When Emily opened the B&B, she immediately knew she wanted Parker to be her wholesaler.

He honked his horn and waved.

"Get lost, ya creep!" Jayne shouted.

"No, no, he's not honking like that," Emily puffed, shaking her head. "That's Parker, my wholesaler. He's honking to say hello." She waved back.

"Oh," Jayne said. "Does everyone know everyone else here then?"

There was a hint of disdain in her voice. Emily recognized it because she'd shared the same views when she'd first arrived – of Sunset Harbor being a boring small town, filled with busybodies who knew each other's business.

"Pretty much," she panted, only she said it with a grin, because that fact was one of the best things about the town to her now, because she'd made so many friends since she'd gotten here and had changed her opinions of so many things it was almost unfathomable.

They reached the bridge that connected the island to the mainland.

"This is where my car broke down," Emily said, recalling the moment she'd become stranded on the bridge on her way into Sunset Harbor, just as a snowstorm had begun. It had been Birk who'd rescued her that night. Though it had been awful at the time, Emily now remembered that night fondly.

"Uh-huh," Jayne said, seemingly uninterested. Her enthusiasm for the ocean had already seemed to wane. "Oh my God," she said, suddenly brightening. "Did you watch the last season of *Singing Sensations*?"

"Nope," Emily said. "I don't have a TV anymore."

Jayne looked horrified. "Oh. Okay. Well, anyway, there was this one contestant who was literally the hottest human in the entire universe."

Emily listened patiently as Jayne spoke about things she now considered unimportant. Had she sounded so boring to other people once upon a time? Had she really cared about such trivial things? The only good thing about Jayne commanding the conversation was that Emily could focus on breathing, something that was becoming increasingly difficult the further they ran.

"How's life, though?" Emily asked as soon as there was a moment of silence. She wanted to know about actual stuff, not all this pointless TV gossip.

"It's all right," Jayne said. "I split up with Harry. You know that, right? Then I was seeing Brandon for a while. Still am. Kind of. We have a casual thing going on."

Emily nodded and focused on keeping one foot pounding in front of the other. "And work?" she asked when she realized Jayne had finished talking.

“A constant stream of never-ending crap,” Jayne replied. “I’m so envious of you. I would love to have nothing to do all day.”

Emily frowned. “I work,” she said, though her shallow breath didn’t allow her to embellish.

“Oh, come on,” Jayne said. “It’s hardly comparable, is it? Twelve-hour days in a New York office compared to loafing around in an oceanside B&B!”

“I work,” Emily said more forcefully. “And I don’t loaf.”

Jayne looked over at her friend. “Are you red because you’re mad at me or because of the jogging?”

“Both,” Emily stammered.

Jayne drew to a halt. Emily stopped next to her. She bent over and gripped her knees, taking deep breaths.

“I didn’t mean you didn’t work,” Jayne said, her tone sounding like one audible eye roll. “I just meant that there’s clearly a slower pace to life out here. I’m telling you I’m jealous of you. That’s a good thing!”

Emily straightened up. Was that how she and her friends used to express themselves, through being jealous of one another? What was wrong with just supporting each other’s ventures, rather than comparing themselves constantly to work out who was on top at any given moment?

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