

THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR-BOOK 3

FOREVER,
with
YOU



SOPHIE LOVE

The Inn at Sunset Harbor

Sophie Love

Forever, With You

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Love S.

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35 year old Emily Mitchell has fled her job, apartment and ex-boyfriend in New York City for her father's 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, WITH YOU is book #3 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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Sophie Love

Forever, With You (The Inn at Sunset Harbor—Book 3)

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 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)

IF ONLY FOREVER (Book #4)

CHAPTER ONE

Emily looked down at the beautiful girl sleeping peacefully in Daniel's bed. Her blond hair was splayed across the white pillow. Her features were unmistakably Daniel's. She looked angelic.

It was dark outside, the only light in the room a moonbeam creeping through the curtains, turning the room a muted blue. Emily had lost track of the time but judging by the exhaustion she felt deep in her bones it was close to dawn.

She heard the door creak open and glanced over her shoulder to see Daniel standing in the crack, warm light from the carriage house's fireplace illuminating his silhouette. Just the sight of him made her heart skip a beat. He was like a mirage, like a soldier returned home from war.

"She's still sleeping?" he whispered.

Emily nodded. Even though he was back and standing in front of her after a six-week absence, Emily still couldn't quite believe it, couldn't fully let her guard down. It was as though she were anticipating the moment he announced that he was leaving once more, that he was sweeping Chantelle out of her life just as swiftly as he'd brought her into it.

They left the room together, closing the door quietly in order not to wake the sleeping child.

"It must have been a long drive from Tennessee," Emily said, hearing how stilted her voice was, how unnatural she suddenly felt in Daniel's company. "You must be exhausted."

"I think we all are," Daniel replied, acknowledging in one statement the ordeal he had put her through.

As they sat together at the table, Daniel looked at Emily intently, an earnest expression in his eyes.

"Emily," he began, his voice cracking immediately, "I don't know how to say this, how to get the words out. You know I struggle with that sort of thing."

He smiled weakly. Emily returned the smile but felt her heart hammering with anguish. Was it coming? Was he announcing his and Chantelle's departure? Had he just come back to her to tell her to her face that it was over? She felt tears begin to swim in her eyes. Daniel reached across the table and patted her hand. The gesture was all it took to make the tears she was trying to hold back flood from her eyes, down her cheeks, and plop onto the table top.

"I am so sorry," Daniel said. "It's not enough, I know, but it's all I've got, Emily. I am so sorry about what I put you through. About running off like that."

Emily stammered, surprised that the words she'd been braced for hadn't come.

"But you did the right thing," she said. "You went to your daughter. You accepted your responsibility. I wouldn't have expected any different."

Now it was Daniel's turn to look confused, as though the words *he* was expecting from her had not been uttered. "But I left you," he said.

"I know," Emily replied, feeling a stab of pain in her heart that hurt as keenly as it had the moment he'd first left. "And it hurt, I won't lie. But what you did, that makes you a good man in my eyes." Finally, she could see through her tears. "You rose to the occasion. You became a father. Do you really think I would hold that against you?"

"I... I don't know," Daniel said with a gasp.

He was wearing an expression Emily had never seen on his face before. It was a look of utter relief. She realized then that he had been expecting her to be mad at him, to unleash a torrent of anger at him. But Emily had never been mad, she had just been terrified that there would be no way the two of them could forge a life together now that Daniel had a daughter to care for.

Now it was Emily's turn to comfort him, to make it clear that he need not carry any guilt over his actions. She squeezed his hand.

“I’m happy,” she said, smiling in spite of the tear tracks on her cheeks. “I’m more than happy, I’m overjoyed. I never thought this could be a possibility. That you would bring her home with you. Daniel, I couldn’t be any happier at this moment.”

Daniel’s face burst into a grin. He stood from the table in a rush and swooped Emily off her seat and into his arms. He kissed her face, her neck, as though trying to kiss away the tears he’d caused to fall. Emily felt her whole body relax, all the tension melting away from her. Her body had lain dormant for the last six weeks, and now here was Daniel awakening all those parts of her that had been left fallow. She kissed him back, wantonly, with intensifying passion. He was *her* Daniel, with the same woody smell of forest and fresh air, with his rough hands running over her body, with her fingers twisting into his messy hair. He tasted of Daniel, of mint and tea, a taste that worked like Pavlov’s bell in arousing Emily.

When he pulled out of the kiss, Emily felt the enormous absence.

“We can’t,” he said quietly. “Not here. Not with Chantelle sleeping.”

Emily nodded, though her lips were tingling with desire. Daniel was right. They needed to be sensible, to be grown-ups. They had a responsibility now to do the best for the girl. She would have to come first, always.

“Can you hold me?” Emily said.

Daniel gazed at her, and she recognized the look of adoration in his eyes. She had missed that look so much, and yet it seemed like the six weeks away from her had strengthened it more. Emily had never been looked at in that way, and it made her heart skip a beat.

She stood, taking Daniel’s hand, and led him to the couch. Together they sank down onto it, the touch of the green velvet reminding Emily at once of the time they’d made love here beside the fireplace. As Daniel wrapped his arms around her she felt as content as she had that night, listening to his heartbeat, breathing in his scent. There was nowhere else she would want to be right now than here, with Daniel, her Daniel.

“I missed you,” she heard Daniel say. “So much.”

Somehow, with them snuggling in this position, without eye contact, Emily found it easier to discuss her feelings. “If you missed me so much, you could have called.”

“I couldn’t.”

“Why not?”

She heard Daniel sigh.

“It was so intense what was going on there I couldn’t cope with the thought of you giving up on me. If I had called you, you might have confirmed my worst fears, you know? The only way I got through that whole ordeal was by holding onto the hope that you’d still be here for me when I returned.”

Emily swallowed. It hurt to hear him speak this way, but his honesty was so welcome. She knew this whole thing had been incredibly difficult for him and that she would need to be patient. But at the same time, she had gone through an ordeal as well. Six long weeks without word, waiting and wondering what might happen when Daniel returned, or if he would return at all. It hadn’t even occurred to her that he’d bring his daughter home with him. Now she had to begin to imagine in what ways their lives – and their relationship – would change now that they had a child to care for. They were both standing on new, unsteady ground.

“It sounds like you didn’t have much faith in me,” Emily said quietly.

Daniel fell silent. Then his hand began to stroke her hair. “I know,” he said. “I should have trusted you more.”

Emily sighed deeply. For now that was all she needed to hear; affirmation that it was his lack of trust in her that had turned a difficult situation into something far harder than it needed to be.

“What was it like?” Emily asked, curious, but also in an attempt to get Daniel to open up, to help him not suffer in silence. “Your time in Tennessee, I mean.”

Daniel took a deep breath. “I was staying in a motel. I’d visit Chantelle every day, just to try to shield her, just to be a warm, friendly face. They were living with Sheila’s uncle. There was literally nothing there for a child.” His voice became strained. “Chantelle mainly kept out of the way. She’d learned not to bother either of them.”

Emily’s heart clenched. “Did Chantelle see them using drugs?”

“I don’t think so,” came Daniel’s reply. “Sheila’s living a life of complete disarray but she’s not a monster. She cares about Chantelle, I can tell. But not enough to go to rehab.”

“You tried to get her to go?”

Emily heard Daniel suck air between his teeth.

“Every single day,” he said wearily. “I said I’d pay. I said I’d find them a place so they didn’t have to live with the uncle anymore.” In Daniel’s voice, Emily heard his heartbreak, his hopelessness at the wretched state of his daughter’s life. It sounded unbearable. “But you can’t force someone to change if they’re not ready. Eventually, Sheila accepted that Chantelle would be better off with me.”

“Why didn’t she tell you she was pregnant?” Emily asked.

Daniel laughed sadly. “She thought I would be a bad father.”

Emily couldn’t imagine the sort of man Daniel must have once been to make someone think such a thing. To her, Daniel would be the perfect father. She knew he’d had a bad-boy streak, a rebellious few youthful years, but she was certain that couldn’t have been the real reason Sheila had hidden her pregnancy from him, or kept the existence of their daughter a secret. It was an excuse, a lie uttered by a drug user that shifted blame away from their own failures.

“You don’t believe that, do you?” Emily asked.

She felt Daniel’s hand begin stroking her head again. “I don’t know how I would have behaved six years ago when she was born. Or even when Sheila was pregnant. I wasn’t exactly the committed type. I might have run.”

Emily twisted then so that she was facing Daniel, and wrapped her arms around his neck. “No, you wouldn’t have,” she implored him. “You would have become a father to that little girl just like you’re doing now. You would have been a good man, done the right thing.”

Daniel kissed her gently. “Thank you for saying that,” he said, though his tone betrayed his uncertainty.

Emily snuggled back into him, her grip tightening. She didn’t want to see him like this, in pain, filled with self-doubt. He seemed on edge, Emily thought, and wondered if he was struggling with the readjustment of being home, of suddenly being a father. Daniel must have been so focused on Chantelle that he had neglected to pay attention to his own emotions, and it was only now, in the warm, cozy, safe carriage house, that he was able to give himself the space to feel.

“I’m here for you,” she said, gently stroking his chest with her hand. “Always.”

Daniel sighed deeply. “Thank you. That’s all I can say.”

Emily knew it came from his heart. Thank you was certainly enough for her for now. She sunk against him and listened to the sound of his breathing slowing as he fell into a slumber. Shortly after, she felt sleep take hold of her too.

*

They were awoken abruptly by the sound of Chantelle stirring in bed in the room next door. Emily and Daniel leapt up from the couch, disoriented by the sudden brightness in the room. In the fireplace, embers still smoldered.

A moment later, the bedroom door opened a sliver.

“Chantelle?” Daniel said. “You can come out. Don’t be shy.”

The door slowly opened fully. Chantelle stood there, wearing one of Daniel’s oversized shirts, her blond hair tangled across her face. Though she didn’t share Daniel’s dark hair or olive skin, their

resemblance was irrefutable. Especially their eyes. They both had the same shade of piercing blue irises.

“Good morning,” Emily said, realizing how stiff she was from the few hours of sleep she and Daniel had had on the couch. “Do you want me to make you some breakfast?”

Chantelle scratched her chin and looked shyly at Daniel. He nodded his encouragement, signaling to her that it was okay to use her voice here, that she wouldn’t be shouted down or called a nuisance in this place.

“Uh-huh,” Chantelle said in a timid voice.

“What do you like?” Emily asked. “I could do pancakes, toast, eggs. Or do you prefer cereal?”

Chantelle’s eyes widened with astonishment and Emily realized with a painful pang that she’d probably never been given a choice before. Perhaps she hadn’t even been given breakfast.

“I’d like pancakes,” Emily said. “What about you, Chantelle?”

“Pancakes,” she repeated.

“Hey, you know what?” Emily added. “We could go up to the big house and have breakfast there. I have blueberries in my fridge so I could put those in the pancakes. What do you think, Chantelle? Would you like to see the big house?”

This time Chantelle began nodding with excitement. Daniel looked relieved that Emily had taken the lead this morning. Emily could tell how bemused he was by the whole thing just by his facial expressions.

“Hey,” she suggested softly, trying not to tread on his toes. “Why don’t you go help Chantelle get dressed?”

He nodded hurriedly, as though slightly embarrassed that it hadn’t even crossed his mind to do so, then led the little girl in a stilted manner to the bedroom to change. Emily watched them go, noting how uncomfortable Daniel seemed by this simple task of fatherhood. She wondered whether part of the difficulties he’d experienced while in Tennessee had also been in the adjustment to the role of a father, whether he’d been so preoccupied with the practical matters – housing, schooling, feeding – that he’d not yet had a chance to focus on the fact he now had to be a dad.

Once everyone was ready, they left the carriage house and went up the gravel drive toward the B&B. Chantelle kicked the little stones along the driveway, laughing at the noises she could make with her shoes. The whole way she clung to Daniel’s hand, though there was nothing comfortable about the gesture in either of them. Daniel seemed stiff and awkward, like he was desperately trying not to do anything wrong or break the fragile creature now entrusted into his care. Chantelle, on the other hand, looked desperate, as though she never wanted to lose hold of Daniel, as if doing so would cause her enormous grief.

Emily wasn’t entirely sure what the best course of action was. Hesitantly, she took the little girl’s other hand in hers and was pleased and relieved to find that Chantelle didn’t flinch or pull away. Daniel, too, seemed much more comfortable with Emily’s involvement and looked more natural. In turn, Chantelle’s clutching on his arm loosened.

Hand in hand, the three of them walked up the porch steps to the front door, and Emily led them inside.

Chantelle hovered on the doorstep, as though unsure whether she belonged in such a place. She looked back to Daniel for encouragement. He smiled gently and nodded. Hesitantly, Chantelle stepped inside and Emily felt her heart hitch with emotion. She fought back tears.

Immediately, Emily got the sense that Chantelle was astonished by the house she was now standing in. She glanced all around her, at the large, wide staircase with its polished banisters and cream carpeting, at the chandelier and the huge antique reception desk that had been purchased from Rico’s. She even seemed amazed by the artwork and photographs in the hallway. The only thing Emily could compare it to was a child stepping into Santa’s house for the first time.

Emily showed her into the living room and Chantelle made a small gasping noise at the sight of the piano.

“You can play it if you want,” Emily encouraged her.

Chantelle didn’t need telling twice. She went straight to the antique piano, which sat in the alcove of the bay window, and began plunking keys.

Emily smiled at Daniel. “I wonder if we have a budding musician on our hands.”

Daniel watched Chantelle almost with a look of curiosity, like he couldn’t quite believe she existed. Emily wondered whether he’d had any contact with children before her at all. She herself had babysat Ben’s nieces on countless occasions so at least had some semblance of knowledge. Daniel, on the other hand, looked entirely out of his depth.

Just then, Chantelle stopped playing. The noise of her discordant playing had alerted the dogs that someone had returned home, and they’d begun to bark from the utility room.

“Do you like dogs?” Emily asked Chantelle, deciding she’d need to take the lead on this.

Chantelle nodded enthusiastically.

“I have two,” Emily continued. “Rain is the puppy and Mogsy is his mom. Do you want to meet them?”

Chantelle’s grin widened.

As Emily led her into the corridor, she felt Daniel’s hand on her arm.

“Is that a good idea?” he asked in a hushed whisper as they headed toward the kitchen. “They won’t scare her? Bite her?”

“Of course not,” Emily reassured him.

“But you hear about dogs mauling kids all the time,” he muttered.

Emily rolled her eyes. “This is Mogsy and Rain, remember? They’re the silliest, dopiest dogs in the world.”

They’d reached the kitchen and Emily gestured for Chantelle to head toward the utility room. The second she opened the door the dogs were jumping up and yapping away at them. Daniel looked beyond tense as Rain ran in circles around Chantelle while Mogsy pawed at her sweater and tried to lick her. But Chantelle was having the time of her life. She dissolved into a fit of giggles.

Daniel’s eyes widened in surprise. Emily knew instinctively that this was the first time he’d heard Chantelle express so much happiness.

“I think they like you,” Emily said to Chantelle with a smile. “We can take them outside to play if you’d like.”

Chantelle looked up at her with her huge blue eyes. She looked as happy as a kid on Christmas Day.

“Really?” she stammered. “Can I?”

Emily nodded. “Sure.” She handed Chantelle some dog toys. “I’ll watch you all from the window.”

She opened up the back door that led to the backyard and the dogs bounded out. Chantelle hovered a moment as though reticent to step out alone, to make her first small step of independence. But finally she found her confidence, stepped outside, and threw a ball for the dogs to fetch.

When Emily walked back into the kitchen, Daniel was putting on a fresh pot of coffee.

“Are you okay?” she asked gently.

Daniel nodded. “I’m not used to this. My overwhelming concern is that no harm comes to her. I just want to wrap her up in cotton wool.”

“Of course you do,” Emily replied. “But you need to let her have some independence.”

Daniel sighed. “How come you’re such a natural at this?”

Emily shrugged. “I don’t think I am. I’m just playing it by ear. She’s perfectly safe out there as long as we keep an eye on her.”

She leaned against the kitchen sink and looked out the large window to the backyard, where Chantelle was running around, the dogs chasing her with excitement. But as Emily watched, she was suddenly struck by how similar Chantelle looked to Charlotte at that age. The similarities were uncanny, almost eerie. The sight triggered another one of Emily's lost memories to resurface. She'd had many of these spontaneously recovered memories since moving to the house in Sunset Harbor, and though the way they popped into her mind so abruptly startled her, she cherished each and every one. They were like puzzle pieces, each one helping her to piece together an image of her dad and the life they'd shared before his disappearance.

In this memory, Emily remembered having a horrible fever, perhaps even the flu. It was just the three of them again because Mom hadn't wanted to come to Sunset Harbor for the long weekend break, and so her father was doing his best to care for her. She remembered that one of Dad's friends had brought their dogs over and that Charlotte was allowed to play with them, but Emily was too ill and had to stay inside. She'd been so upset about missing out on the dogs that her dad had held her up to the window – the kitchen window she was now gazing out of – in order to watch.

Emily drew back from the window and gasped. She discovered that her cheeks were wet, that she'd been crying as she'd watched Chantelle morph into Charlotte. Not for the first time, Emily had a strong sensation that Charlotte's spirit was communicating with her, that she was somehow living within Chantelle and giving Emily a sign.

Just then, Daniel came up to her from behind and wrapped his arms around her. He was a welcome distraction, so she sunk her head back until it was resting on his chest.

"What's wrong?" he asked gently, his voice soothing.

He must have seen the tears falling from her eyes. Emily shook her head. She didn't want to tell Daniel about her flashback, or how she felt like Charlotte's spirit was in Chantelle; she didn't know how he would take it.

"Just a memory," she said.

Daniel held her tightly, rocking her from side to side. How he handled Emily in these strange moments seemed so different from how he handled Chantelle. He was on familiar ground with Emily, and she could tell how much more confident he was with her in comparison to his daughter. She'd leaned on him so many times. Now it was her turn to give him someone to lean on.

"It's all a bit overwhelming, isn't it?" she said, finally, turning to face him.

Daniel nodded, his expression anguished. "I don't even know where to begin. I need to enroll her at school for starters. The next semester starts on Wednesday. Then I've got to work out sleeping arrangements."

"You'll ruin your back if you keep sleeping on that fold-out couch," Emily agreed. Then she was hit with a moment of inspiration. "Move in here."

Daniel faltered for a moment. "You don't mean that. You've got so much going on there's no way you can accommodate us."

"I want you to," Emily insisted. "I want Chantelle to have space and her own room."

"You don't have to do this," Daniel said, still resisting.

"And you don't have to be alone. I'm here for you. It makes so much more sense than to have you both squashed up in the carriage house." She held onto him tightly.

"But you can't afford to give up one of the guest rooms, can you?"

Emily smiled. "Remember when we talked about turning the carriage house into its own vacation suite, separate from the B&B? Well, wouldn't now be the perfect time? Chantelle can have the room next to the master bedroom so she'll be close to us. She can have her own key so that it's safe. Then you can renovate the carriage house in time for Thanksgiving. I'm sure it will be a great draw for customers."

Daniel gave Emily a worried expression. She wasn't sure where his reticence was coming from. Was the idea of living with her so horrible that he'd prefer to make do in the cramped carriage house instead?

But finally he nodded. "You're right. The carriage house isn't suitable for a kid."

"You'll move in?" Emily said, her eyebrows rising with excitement.

Daniel smiled. "We'll move in."

Emily threw her arms around him and felt his arms tightening against her.

"But I swear to find a way to make money so I can support us," Daniel said.

"We'll think about that another time," Emily said. She was too overwhelmed with joy to think about such details. All that mattered in that moment was that Daniel was going to move in with her, that they had a child to love and care for. They were going to be a family and Emily couldn't be happier.

Then she felt his warm breath as he whispered in her ear. "Thank you. From the bottom of my heart. Thank you."

*

"So how would you like this to be your bedroom?" Emily asked.

She was standing with Chantelle in the doorway of one of the loveliest rooms in the whole B&B. Daniel hovered behind them.

Emily watched as Chantelle's expression turned to astonishment. Then Chantelle dropped Emily's hand and paced slowly into the room, treading carefully as though she didn't want to break or disturb anything. She went over to the large bed with its clean, crimson bedding and touched it with her fingertips, ever so lightly. Then she walked to the window and looked out over the gardens and out at the ocean twinkling over the tree tops. Emily and Daniel watched with bated breath as the little girl padded quietly around the room, gently picking up the lamp before setting it back down, then peering into the empty wardrobes.

"What do you think?" Emily asked. "We can paint the walls if you don't want them white. Change the curtains. Put some of your pictures up on the wall."

Chantelle turned. "I love it just the way it is. I can really have a bedroom?"

Emily felt Daniel stiffen beside her. She knew immediately what he was thinking: that Chantelle, at six years old, had never had her own bedroom before; that the life she had lived up until this moment had been fraught with hardship and tainted by neglect.

"You really can," Emily said, smiling kindly. "Why don't we unpack your stuff? Then it will really start to feel like your room."

Chantelle nodded and they all went together to collect her things from the carriage house. But once there, Emily was shocked to discover that Chantelle had just one measly backpack.

"Where's all her stuff?" she asked Daniel covertly as they headed back to the house.

"That's all there was," Daniel replied. "She had next to nothing at Sheila's uncle's house. I questioned Sheila and she said it had all been left behind when they got evicted."

Emily tutted under her breath. It broke her heart to think about all the terrible things Chantelle had gone through in her short life. More than anything in the world, she wanted to make sure that the little girl now felt safe, that she had a chance to flourish and put the past behind her. Emily hoped that with love, patience, and stability, Chantelle would be able to recover from the awful start to her life.

Up in Chantelle's new room, Emily hung the few items of clothing she owned onto hangers in the wardrobe. She had just two pairs of jeans, five shirts, and three sweaters. She didn't even have enough socks to last a full week.

Chantelle helped unpack her underwear into one of the dresser drawers. "I'm so happy I have parents now," Chantelle said.

Emily went and sat on the corner of the bed, eager to encourage Chantelle to open up. “I’m happy to have a lovely little girl like you to hang out with.”

Chantelle blushed. “Do you really want to hang out with me?”

“Of course!” Emily said, a little taken aback. “I can’t wait to take you down to the beach, to go out on the boat with you, to play board games and ball games together.”

“My mom never wanted to play with me,” Chantelle said, her voice small and meek.

Emily felt her heart breaking. “I’m sorry to hear that,” she said, trying not to let the pain in her heart be audible in her voice. “Well, you’ll be able to play all sorts of things now. What do you like to do?”

Chantelle just shrugged, and it occurred to Emily that her upbringing had been so stifling she couldn’t even think of fun things to do.

“Where did Daddy go?” she asked.

Emily looked over her shoulder and saw that Daniel had disappeared. She, too, was concerned.

“He probably just went to get more coffee,” Emily replied. “Hey, I have an idea. Why don’t we go into the attic to get some stuffed bears for your bedroom?”

She had carefully packed and stored all of her and Charlotte’s old toys from the room that had been boarded up after Charlotte’s death. Chantelle was a similar age to them when the room got closed off so plenty of the toys would be suitable for her.

Chantelle’s face lit up. “You have teddy bears in the attic?”

Emily nodded. “And dolls. They’re all up there having a picnic but I’m pretty sure they’d want another guest. Come on, I’ll show you the way.”

Emily took the little girl up to the third floor and then along the corridor. She pulled down the attic ladder. Chantelle looked up timidly.

“Want me to go first?” Emily asked. “Make sure there aren’t any spiders?”

Chantelle shook her head. “Nope. I’m not scared of spiders.” She sounded proud of herself.

They went up to the attic together and Emily showed her the box of old toys. “You can have anything you want out of there,” she said.

“Will Daddy come and play?” Chantelle asked.

Emily also wanted Daniel around. She wasn’t sure where he’d disappeared to, or why he’d gone. “Let me go ask him. You’ll be okay up here for a bit, right, since you’re not scared of spiders?”

Chantelle nodded and Emily left the little girl playing. She went down through the third and second floors looking for Daniel, then down to the ground floor. She found him in the kitchen standing by the coffee pot motionless.

“Are you okay?” Emily asked.

Daniel startled and then turned. “I’m sorry. I came down for coffee and just got completely overwhelmed by everything.” He looked at Emily and frowned. “I don’t know how to do this. To be a dad. I’m in way over my head.”

Emily walked up to him and lightly rubbed his arm. “We’ll figure it out together.”

“Just hearing her talk kills me. I wish I could have been there for her. Protected her from Sheila.”

Emily wrapped her arms around Daniel. “You can’t look back and worry about the past. All we can do now is make sure we do everything in our power to help her. It’s going to be great, I promise. You’re going to be a great dad.”

She could still feel some resistance in Daniel. She desperately wanted him to soften, to accept her embrace and be comforted from it, but something was stopping him.

“She’s already starting to ask questions,” he said. “She asked me why I never sent her birthday cards. I didn’t know what to say. I mean what can you possibly say to a six-year-old that they can understand?”

“I think we just have to be honest,” Emily said. “Secrets never help anyone.”

She thought of the poignancy of her words. Her father had kept secrets his entire life. Emily had only uncovered the tip of the iceberg since coming here.

Just then, Chantelle rushed into the kitchen. She was holding a large stuffed panda bear in her arms. He was almost as big as she was.

“Look, Daddy! Look!” she said, running up to Daniel.

Emily was shocked. She hadn’t seen the bear while tidying up Charlotte’s old bedroom. It must have been in the attic already. He’d been Charlotte’s favorite. She’d called him Andy the Pandy. Seeing him now sent a shard of pain racing through her body. She wondered how Chantelle had found him amongst all the boxes.

“What’s your bear’s name?” Daniel asked Chantelle, bending down so they were face to face.

“Andy Pandy,” Chantelle said with a grin.

Emily gripped the work surface with shock. Once again, she felt strongly that it was another sign from Charlotte, a reminder not to forget about her, that she was looking down on them from above.

“Hey, I have an idea,” Daniel said, breaking through her reverie. “Do you think Andy would like to go to a parade?”

“Yeah!” Chantelle cried.

Daniel looked up at Emily. “What do you think? Shall we all go to the Labor Day parade? Our first family outing?”

Referring to them as a family snapped Emily out of her stupor.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, I’d like that a lot.”

CHAPTER TWO

The main street was lined with people, some waving flags, others holding balloons. As with most national holiday events, Sunset Harbor was going all out to celebrate Labor Day. The town was decorated beautifully, with bunting and lights strung between lampposts and trees, streamers tied to fences, and a small carnival.

As they walked along the busy streets, Emily held on tightly to Chantelle's hand, sensing that the little girl was overwhelmed. But every time she looked down there was a grin on Chantelle's face. It filled Emily's heart with joy to know she was happy. But it also filled her with much more; a sense of peace, of contentment. She'd wanted children of her own for a while, but she hadn't realized quite how much enjoyment she'd really get from spending time with Chantelle.

Emily couldn't help but notice that Daniel, on the other hand, seemed tense. In the busy crowds he seemed on edge, like a hawk sensing danger on every street corner. He'd certainly taken naturally to his role of protector, but he seemed to be lacking somewhat on the bonding front. Emily hoped it was just teething problems, that he would relax as time went on and learn to enjoy parenthood as much as she was. He needed to learn how to be a *dad*, not just a father.

Through the crowds Emily spotted her Sunset Harbor friend Cynthia Jones from the bookstore. As always, Cynthia had dressed up for the occasion in a sparkly blue skirt, sparkly red shirt, and sparkly white cowboy hat. The whole ensemble clashed horribly with her dyed orange hair.

Seeing Cynthia made Emily feel anguished for the first time in a while. Just a few weeks ago she'd called on the older woman for advice after she and Daniel had discovered that Chantelle existed. Now here she was walking down the road hand in hand with Daniel and his surprise kid, acting like a happy family. Emily couldn't help but fear her judgment.

But when Cynthia caught sight of them all, she grinned widely and waved. Emily could see approval in her eyes.

"Chantelle, let me introduce you to a friend of mine," Emily said.

She and Daniel took Chantelle over to where Cynthia was standing. The older woman embraced Emily immediately.

"I knew it would all work out in the end," she whispered into Emily's ear as she hugged her tightly.

Emily squeezed back. Cynthia had given her so much support and friendship since she'd arrived in Sunset Harbor eight months ago, and she felt a rush of gratitude in that moment.

"This is Chantelle," Emily said finally after their embrace ceased.

Cynthia knelt down so she was eye level with the little girl. "I'm so happy to meet you, Chantelle. I think you're going to really enjoy Sunset Harbor."

Chantelle became shy and clung to Emily's leg. Emily couldn't help herself from stroking the girl's soft blond hair, feeling an overwhelming maternal sensation inside of her. Again she was struck by how quickly and instantaneous her love for Chantelle was. And she noted how the feeling seemed to be mutual. Chantelle had gone from clinging to Daniel last night to clinging to Emily this afternoon.

Just then a young, thin man with tousled mousy hair approached them.

"Owen," Cynthia said to him, "you remember Emily, don't you? From the B&B?"

"Of course," Emily said, holding her hand out to shake. "You came to tune my piano."

Owen nodded in agreement. He seemed like a shy man. "How is everything going there now? If I recall, you were in some kind of hurry to get everything fixed up."

"I was," Emily replied. "Fixing up twenty rooms in twenty-four hours is not an experience I want to repeat any time soon! But thank you for your help tuning the piano. It sounds fantastic now."

Owen smiled. "I'm glad to hear it. It was actually quite a pleasure working on an antique piano like that. I'd love to get the opportunity to play it again some day."

“You’re welcome to come anytime,” Emily said. “Having a resident piano player in the B&B is a future goal of mine. I just don’t have the money at the moment to pay for it.”

“Well,” Owen said, smiling his kind, shy smile, “how about I come and play for free? The exposure would be very useful for me and you’d be doing me a favor.”

Emily was thrilled. “That would be fantastic!”

They exchanged phone numbers and she waved goodbye to Owen. Emily was delighted to have a piano player for the inn.

“Come on, Chantelle,” Emily said, buoyed by her meeting with Owen. “Let’s go to the carnival.”

Taking the lead of the family, Emily directed them to the tents where there were traditional games, a coconut shy, and a shooting range.

“Why don’t you see if you can win Chantelle a toy?” Emily suggested to Daniel.

He gave a sort of lost, helpless look, almost as though he were embarrassed that he hadn’t thought of doing that himself.

“Sure,” he said, smiling in a somewhat forced way. “Just watch this.”

Emily patted Chantelle’s shoulders as they watched Daniel pay the man at the booth and take aim with the pellet gun. Then with three perfect shots he hit the target. Chantelle jumped up and down and started clapping.

“Go on,” Emily encouraged her. “Go and choose a prize.”

Chantelle rushed over to the booth and chose the biggest fluffy teddy bear.

“Why don’t you thank Daddy?” Emily prompted.

Chantelle hugged the bear tightly and looked shyly at her feet as she mumbled her gratitude. Daniel’s tense expression returned. Emily reached out and squeezed his arm reassuringly, as if to tell him he was doing fine. She made a mental note to reinforce Daniel as often as possible, to reward him and comfort him; he was clearly struggling.

Just then they bumped into Serena.

“Oh my God!” Serena cried as she looked from Chantelle to Daniel to Emily. “This is... SO awesome.”

Emily hadn’t had a chance to tell anyone about Daniel’s return, let alone about the fact that he’d brought Chantelle with him. Serena had been one of the people who’d been there for Emily, supporting her through those tough weeks when Daniel had been AWOL. She knew it meant a lot to her young friend to see them all together, happy and united.

Serena bent down to talk to Chantelle. She had such a natural ability to connect with people that Emily could see Chantelle instantly warm to her.

“You know, they sell rainbow cotton candy here,” Serena was saying. “With sparkles in it! Do you want to come and get some with me?”

Chantelle looked up at Daniel and Emily. They both nodded their encouragement. As they watched Serena and Chantelle walk hand in hand over to the cotton candy booth, Emily felt a sudden sense of loss, almost grief. The little girl had only walked to the other side of the street and already Emily felt her absence. *This must be what other moms feel like*, Emily thought to herself with a smile.

Just then, Daniel pulled Emily close to him, as though seeking her comfort and reassurance.

“You’re doing fine,” she told him as she leaned her head against his shoulder.

“I don’t feel like I am,” he replied. “I feel like I’m constantly waiting for a disaster.”

“That makes perfect sense,” Emily reassured. “You’re a dad now. You have dad instincts.”

Daniel laughed. “Dad instincts, huh?” he joked, sounding at ease for the first time since they’d left the inn. “Is that like spidey sense?”

Emily nodded vigorously. “Only a thousand times better.”

As they fell silent and watched Chantelle and Serena at the cotton candy stall, Emily felt content and gloriously happy. Happier, even, than she’d ever thought possible.

Then Serena and Chantelle came bounding back, Chantelle’s face sticky with sugar.

“Try some, Emily!” she cried, showing the sparkly rainbow cotton candy to her.

Emily took a bite, feeling overwhelmed with joy that the little girl wanted to share with her. “Yum!” she said brightly, though she was struggling to hold back her joyful tears.

“Does Daddy want some?” Emily suggested. The last thing she wanted was for Daniel to feel left out, even though a mouthful of sparkly rainbow cotton candy was probably the last thing he’d ever want to consume.

Chantelle shyly held the cotton candy stick up to Daniel. Daniel pulled his mouth open, making it exaggeratedly large, then made a huge chomping noise as he took a pretend bite of the cotton candy, making loud munching noises. Chantelle dissolved into giggles. It was the first time Daniel had let loose, had behaved in a goofy manner with Chantelle. Emily caught Daniel’s eye and wiggled her eyebrows. He flashed her a triumphant smile of accomplishment.

As the parade started, the family stood on the sidewalk and watched the tractors pass. Everyone in Sunset Harbor was out for the day and Emily greeted many of her friends. She no longer felt awkward about appearing in public with Daniel and Chantelle. This was what she wanted and if people disapproved, then that didn’t matter to her.

But just as Emily was feeling her most confident yet, she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned and a sensation like ice washed over her. Trevor Mann was standing there looking smug and toad-like.

He smoothed down his moustache. “I’m surprised to see you here, Emily,” he said.

Emily folded her arms and sighed, knowing instinctively that Trevor was going to try to bring her down. “And why’s that, Trevor?” she said, dryly. “Please tell me. I’m dying to know.”

Trevor smiled in his crooked, horrible way. “I just wanted to remind you that your extension on the back taxes is running out. You have until Thanksgiving to get them all paid up.”

“I’m well aware of that,” Emily replied coolly, but the reminder was less than welcome. Emily still had no idea how she was going to find the money to pay them off.

She watched Trevor turn on his heel and disappear, leaving Emily feeling cold and terrified.

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Chantelle seemed to have taken an instant liking to Serena, so Emily invited her back to the house for dinner. Emily decided to make a massive meal of fajitas. She wanted Chantelle to feel secure and loved, stimulated with activities and nourished with sustenance. So while Serena and Chantelle played on the piano together in the living room, Daniel and Emily cooked up all kinds of different dishes in the kitchen.

“I don’t know if she’s even tried half this stuff,” Daniel said as he mixed up some homemade salsa. “Tomatoes. Avocados. It’s probably all new to her.”

“She didn’t eat well at home?” Emily asked. But she knew the answer. Of course not. Her mom couldn’t even keep a roof over the child’s head or buy her enough pairs of pants to last a week; the chances of her nourishing Chantelle were slim to none.

“It was a chips and Pop-tarts kind of house,” Daniel replied, his jaw stiff. “No routine. Just eat when you’re hungry.”

Emily could see how much pain he carried in the way his shoulders hunched, by the frantic way he smooshed the avocados into guacamole like there was no tomorrow.

Emily walked over and gently ran her hands down his arms, until the tension seemed to melt from his muscles.

“She’s got us now,” Emily soothed him. “She’ll be clean. She’ll be fed. She’ll be safe. Okay?”

Daniel nodded. “I just feel like we have so much time to make up for. Like, can we ever really erase what she went through when I wasn’t there for her?”

Emily’s heart dropped. Did Daniel really feel responsible for the years he couldn’t control? For all those months, weeks, and days he’d been unable to love and care for Chantelle?

“We can,” Emily told him firmly. “You can.”

Daniel sighed and Emily could tell he wasn’t completely buying it, that her words were going in one ear and out the other. It would take time before he felt okay about his absence at the beginning of Chantelle’s life. Emily just hoped his moping wouldn’t push the little girl away from him.

The food was ready so they all went into the dining room to eat. At the huge antique dark oak table, Chantelle looked tiny. Her elbows barely rested on the tabletop. The room hadn’t exactly been designed with children in mind.

“I’ll fetch her a cushion,” Serena said, laughing.

Just then, Emily noticed that Chantelle was crying.

“It’s okay, sweetie,” she said gently. “I know you’re low down but Serena will get a cushion and then you’ll be able to sit as tall as a princess.”

Chantelle shook her head. That wasn’t what had upset her, but she didn’t seem to be able to express in words what had.

“Is it the food?” Daniel worried. “Too spicy? Too much? You don’t have to eat it all. Or any of it. We can get takeout.” He turned to Emily, his words tumbling out with anguish. “Why didn’t we get takeout?”

Emily raised her eyebrows as if to tell him to cool it, to not add any unnecessary emotion to the situation. Then she drew back her chair, stood, went over to Chantelle, and knelt beside her.

“Chantelle, you can speak to us,” she said as gently as possible. “Me and your daddy. We’re here for you and we won’t be angry.”

Chantelle leaned into Emily and whispered. Her voice was so quiet as to be almost inaudible. But Emily just managed to make out the words she’d uttered, and as understanding seeped into Emily’s mind, a bolt of emotion struck her heart.

“She said they’re happy tears,” Emily relayed to Daniel.

She watched the breath of relief rush from Daniel’s chest, and the glitter of tears in his eyes.

*

Later that evening, it was time for Emily and Daniel to put Chantelle to bed.

“I want Emily to do it,” Chantelle requested, taking her hand.

Emily and Daniel exchanged a glance. Emily could tell by the way he shrugged that he was disappointed to be excluded.

“Say goodnight to Daddy then,” Emily prompted.

Chantelle ran over to him and planted a quick kiss on his cheek before returning to Emily, where she clearly seemed more comfortable.

Of all the motherly tasks Emily had had to do in the last twenty-four hours, this was the most nerve-wracking for her. She tucked the little girl into the large four-poster bed in the room next to the master, tucking her teddy from the parade in beside her and Andy Pandey on the other side.

“Would you like a bedtime story?” Emily asked Chantelle. Her father had always read to her at night; she wanted to recreate that magic for Chantelle.

The little girl nodded, her sleepy eyes already beginning to droop.

Emily ran down to the library and found her old copy of *Alice in Wonderland*. It had been a favorite of hers as a kid, and when she’d found the old, dusty copy in the house when she’d first arrived she’d been overwhelmed. It made her happy to know she could give the book a new lease on life and bring the joy contained within its pages to someone new.

She took the book back upstairs and sat in a chair beside the bed, just like her father used to do. As she began to read, Emily felt memories swirl up inside of her. Her own voice transformed into her father’s as she felt herself being transported back in time.

She was tucked in bed, the blankets up to her armpits. The room was lit with candlelight. She could see the banisters of the mezzanine ahead of her and realized she was in the huge room at the back of the house, the room she and Charlotte shared. Though she was fighting to stay awake, to keep listening to the wonderful story her father was reading, her eyelids were beginning to feel heavy and droop. A moment later she became aware of the darkness enveloping her and the sound of her father's footsteps as he climbed down the mezzanine ladder and headed for the door. There was a burst of light from the landing as he opened the door, then a voice saying, "Are they sleeping?" Emily wondered whose voice it was. She didn't recognize it. It wasn't her mom's because she'd stayed in New York. But before she had a chance to mull it over any longer, she fell asleep.

Emily startled back to the present moment. The room was in darkness now, the full moon outside providing a soft light. There was a blanket on her knees. She must have fallen asleep while reading and Daniel had put it there.

In the bed before her, Chantelle was snoring softly. Emily stood, her body aching from being on the chair for so long. She really needed to fall asleep in an actual bed at some point!

As she walked to the door, she wondered about the memory, about the mysterious voice she had heard speaking to her father. Unraveling the mystery of her father's disappearance was something Emily had been working toward since arriving at the house. But now with Chantelle here, her mind was occupied with other things. She wanted to look forward and plan for the future, not backward at a past that had already ceased to be.

As she closed Chantelle's door behind her and wandered down the corridor, Emily wondered what her new life would bring, what it would look like now that she had a family. She'd surprised herself by how much she'd enjoyed the day, by how content it had made her feel, and how accomplished. Each of the little moments when Chantelle had sought out comfort from her felt like a victory. Her only worry was Daniel. He hadn't taken as naturally to the whole thing. He'd need more time.

Just as she was thinking these thoughts, she reached the large window at the top of the staircase. Outside it was very dark, the moon a stark white and the stars twinkling. There was little light to see by, but there was enough for Emily to make out Daniel standing beside his motorbike. Emily watched, her joy quickly turning to anguish as he placed his helmet on, mounted the bike, and sped off along the driveway and out of sight.

CHAPTER THREE

Emily stood on the porch, looking out anxiously for Daniel's return. She twisted her hands as her worst fears swirled in her mind. Daniel had promised not to do this, not to drive off on his motorbike without telling her. If he was breaking that promise, could it be because he was running out on them? Had his day with Chantelle been so difficult on him that he'd decided to abandon her in Emily's care? She didn't want to think such terrible thoughts, she wanted to trust him, but he'd let her down like this before.

Emily held onto the doorframe to steady herself, her breath coming in short pants. When Daniel had first returned it had felt like he was a soldier returning from war. Now, as Emily waited for him with a heavy pit growing in her abdomen, she felt like she was waiting for that soldier once again.

Just then she picked up on the sound of the motorcycle's engine in the distance. She strained to hear, her hope spiking. The sound grew louder and louder until she was convinced that it was indeed Daniel returning home. She squeezed her eyes shut with relief and exhaled the breath she'd been holding.

The motorcycle rounded the corner and drove up the driveway toward her, catching her in its headlights, making her squint. Then it pulled to a halt. The engine cut out and silence enveloped them.

Emily rushed down the steps as Daniel pulled off his helmet. "You're awake," he said with a grin. "I wasn't sure if you were down for the night." Then his smile disappeared as he caught Emily's expression.

"You jerk," she barked. "Where have you been?"

Daniel frowned. "I went to get gas. I've been gone like fifteen minutes."

"You can't do that," Emily shouted. "Take off like that. I had no idea where you were."

"I'm sorry," Daniel stammered. "You'd fallen asleep. I thought I'd just quickly get gas."

Emily took another deep breath, trying to calm herself. She felt Daniel wrap his arms around her shoulders.

"You can't disappear on me like that," Emily gasped. "Okay?"

"Okay," he said into the crown of her head. "I get it. I'm sorry."

They stayed like that, holding one another under the moon and stars, for a long, long time.

"I'm not going to leave you, Emily," Daniel said finally. "You have to trust me."

"You don't always make it easy to," Emily replied, pulling out of his embrace.

"I know," Daniel agreed. "But I'm not going anywhere. I moved in with you, remember?"

Emily nodded. It was proof of his commitment, but it didn't fully comfort her.

Daniel continued. "And while I was on my ride I was thinking about the carriage house, about how we can make it a self-contained vacation house like you wanted. I'll do the work myself, as a thank you for everything you've done for me and Chantelle."

Emily started to feel herself warm up again, the anguish that had built up starting to finally melt away.

"It will be a great source of income for you," Daniel added. "Then when Chantelle's a teenager we could let her use it, give her some space away from her boring mom and dad."

His words struck a chord deep within Emily. Daniel hadn't been able to project their relationship further ahead than a few months at a time. Now he was talking in decades. He was referring to her as the "mom." For the first time, he was truly seeing them as a unit, as two halves of a team.

But as Daniel and Emily lay in one another's arms in bed that night, Emily's fears flickered in her mind over and over again. Daniel's little stunt with the motorcycle had reawakened her long-held fear of abandonment. Just a few weeks ago she was planning on a life without Daniel. Now suddenly he seemed committed to her. Could he really switch like that, so seamlessly, so quickly? And was it really because he'd realized how important their relationship was to him?

Or was he just being pushed along because of Chantelle?

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The next morning, Emily woke early, almost startling herself out of slumber. When she realized Daniel was in bed beside her she relaxed and fell back against the pillow, breathing deeply. She shouldn't have to feel relief at the sight of Daniel beside her. She should feel content.

She gazed at Daniel's sleeping face and felt her anguish melt away. It felt so right to have him here, back with her, to have them all together. She shouldn't have doubted him when he said he was coming back to her. And she shouldn't have overreacted to his bike ride last night.

Daniel was still sleeping deeply so Emily decided to leave him be. He must be exhausted from the long drive and all the emotions and need to catch up on all the missed sleep. She was certain she was capable enough to dress Chantelle and make her breakfast alone. Then she could show the girl the chickens and they could walk the dogs together down to the beach.

Excited by the prospect, Emily quickly showered and put some clothes on. Once ready for the day, she left her bedroom and the still snoring Daniel, and opened the door to the room next door. To her horror, Chantelle's bed was empty.

Emily felt a sick sensation sweep through her. Where could the little girl be?

Panic-stricken, Emily started reeling through a million scenarios in her mind: Chantelle had found the door up to the widow's walk and had plummeted from the roof; she'd found one of the abandoned, dilapidated barns out in back and had become crushed by falling debris; she'd followed the path down to the coast and had been swept out to sea. But before Emily had the chance to scream out Daniel's name, she heard the sound of laughter coming from outside.

Emily rushed to the window and pulled back the curtains. There in the backyard was Chantelle playing with Mogsy and Rain, laughing and screaming as the dogs jumped at her and ran in excited circles around her. Chantelle was still wearing the large T-shirt Emily had put her in for bed. Her feet were completely bare.

Emily ran out the door and downstairs. She didn't want to scare Chantelle but she also didn't think it was a good idea for the little girl to be outside unsupervised and barely dressed. Though she felt like Sunset Harbor was a safe neighborhood, she herself had grown up in New York City and would forever feel a sense of anxiety over the terrible things people could do to one another.

Leaning out the back door, Emily called out to Chantelle. The little girl looked up, grinning widely. Her feet were green from running in the dewy grass.

"Come inside, sweetie," Emily called. "Time for pancakes."

"I want to play!" Chantelle replied.

"In a minute," Emily said, still trying to sound calm and friendly. "First you need some breakfast. Then once you're dressed we can take the dogs to the beach and play there. How does that sound?"

Chantelle frowned at Emily and her face grew red. For the first time, Emily got a sense of the troubles Chantelle had experienced. In her dark face, she saw anger and bitterness. She knew it wasn't directed at her but at this terrible world, the terrible people she'd known and the terrible experiences she'd had the misfortune of experiencing. It was probably only coming out now because Emily and Daniel had provided a safety net in which Chantelle could explore that side of herself without fear of retribution.

Suddenly, Chantelle tipped her head back and began to bawl loudly. Emily took a deep breath. She couldn't help but think of all the thousands of moms she'd seen in her lifetime dealing with a child's tantrum, the weary looks on their faces, the embarrassment mixed with anger. But she knew if she wanted Chantelle to trust her and grow up happy and well adjusted, losing her cool was not an option.

She strolled into the garden and took Chantelle's hand. "Come on, sweetie," she said, as though Chantelle's cries weren't piercing her eardrums.

Just then, Emily noticed someone coming up the drive. Trevor. Of course. How typical he'd pick this moment to come and taunt her.

"What is it, Trevor?" Emily hissed, feeling no qualms about losing her cool with him.

"What do you think it could be?" Trevor mumbled. "It's not yet seven a.m. and this child is making a racket in the yard. She is disturbing my right to peace."

Chantelle immediately went quiet. She reached out and grabbed Emily's hand, almost like an apology for getting her in trouble.

"We're just finding our feet," Emily said with a sigh, amazed by how little she cared about Trevor's quibbles these days. "And Chantelle's starting school tomorrow so it won't happen again."

"There's always the weekend," Trevor sneered.

"We'll make sure not to wake you before seven again." Emily sighed. "Won't we, Chantelle?"

But when she looked down at the little girl, she saw that tears were streaming down her face and she was trembling with fear. Seeing her distressed in that way made something erupt in Emily, a sudden maternal drive to defend her child.

She turned on Trevor, suddenly fuming, feeling the heat rise in her cheeks. "Do you know what, Trevor? Chantelle can play in her yard whenever the hell she wants to. My house, my child, my rules."

Trevor looked a little taken aback at the outburst. But he quickly recovered, his expression turning back into its usual sneer. "She's not your child though, is she?"

"She's in MY care," Emily cried. "I'm her guardian and I will do everything in my power to protect her from vile men like you."

For the first time ever, Trevor looked humbled. Emily wasn't prepared to listen to any more of Trevor, so she grasped Chantelle around the waist and hauled her up into her arms. The little girl was trembling so much it made Emily ache with anguish. She'd been through so much in her short life, the last thing she needed was to experience the monstrosity that was Trevor Mann.

Emily carried Chantelle inside and slammed the back door. She'd never felt such a tremendous explosion of emotion, of a desire to love and protect the little girl in her care.

"I'm sorry!" Chantelle cried immediately as soon as they were inside. She squeezed Emily so hard Emily thought her neck might break.

"Chantelle, it's okay," Emily said, gently. "Trevor gets angry at everything. And you didn't know you were going to wake him up. Let's just make sure you ask permission before you go outside again in the future, huh? Is that a deal?"

Chantelle nodded her head in a manner that seemed to suggest she was desperate to make it up to Emily.

"Mommy always told me to play outside," Chantelle said through her tears. "She never liked me being in her way."

Emily felt her heart ache. The poor girl must have been beyond confused when Emily told her to come inside. She felt bad for mixing the messages.

"Well, Daniel and I want to play with you all the time," Emily said. "Okay?"

Chantelle nodded. At last her tears ran dry and Emily set the little girl back onto her feet.

Emily took her into the kitchen, where Daniel was just entering. "What's happening?" he said. "I heard crying. Did you hurt yourself, Chantelle?"

The little girl shook her head.

"I was just telling Chantelle that you and I want to play with her when she goes outside so she should ask one of us to come with her," Emily said, giving Daniel a look that told him not to push this.

He seemed to understand what she was telling him and nodded. "Well, I'm glad everyone's happy again now," he said. "Shall I make some breakfast?"

Chantelle nodded excitedly and she and Emily went to the table to await their breakfast.

“So,” Daniel said as he sat down a moment later with a stack of pancakes. “What shall we do today since school doesn’t start until tomorrow?”

Emily floundered. She could tell Daniel was at a loss too by his slightly panicked expression. Neither had had to take care of a kid before, and both felt the pressure of making sure Chantelle had as much fun as possible to make up for the terrible start she’d had in life.

“I think Chantelle would like to go somewhere with the dogs,” Emily said, looking over at the little girl for affirmation.

Chantelle nodded.

“I have an idea,” Daniel said. “Didn’t Jason and Vanessa take baby Katy apple picking yesterday over at Fall Farm? How does that sound?”

“I’ve never been to a farm!” Chantelle said with a gasp. “Do they have animals? I love animals! Pigs are my favorite. Do they have pigs?”

Emily’s eyes widened. She’d never heard Chantelle say so many words in one go. The idea of spending time with animals was bringing her out of her shell.

“They have a petting zoo,” Emily said. “With rabbits and guinea pigs.”

“Rabbits!” Chantelle cried. “Rabbits are my even more favoriter favorite!”

“Well then,” Daniel said with a grin. “I guess we’re off to Fall Farm today.”

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Mogsy and Rain yapped with excitement the whole drive over to Fall Farm. It wasn’t often that Emily and Daniel took them anywhere besides the beach and park for walks, so they could tell something exciting was happening. But no matter how happy the dogs seemed, it paled in comparison to Chantelle’s joy. The whole journey she looked out the window wide-eyed, taking in the sight of the beautiful tree-lined streets, the leaves just starting to turn from green to orange. Emily loved watching the little girl stare in wonder at her surroundings. It warmed her heart to know they had plucked her from deprivation, saved her from her awful life, and could now show her how beautiful the world could really be.

Daniel pulled into Fall Farm’s parking lot, which was little more than a muddy field. There were tons of cars here already, despite the early hour; clearly every parent in Sunset Harbor and the local area had decided apple picking would be their last activity with their kids before school.

As Daniel parked, Chantelle was quick to take off her seat belt and grab the door handle.

“Not so fast,” Daniel said. “We need to put the dogs on their leashes first or they’ll run off, never to be seen again.”

“Sorry,” Chantelle said, dipping her head with shame.

Daniel looked over at Emily with an appealing gaze. Emily just shook her head, communicating to him silently that they shouldn’t make a fuss, that there was nothing they could say to make the little girl feel better, and that love, time, and patience were the only things that could teach Chantelle not to feel so ashamed of herself. She felt bad for Daniel, for his seeming lack of intuition in these situations. He seemed so out of his depths at times, and yet Emily felt like she was taking to motherhood like a duck to water.

Emily clipped leashes onto the dogs and then everyone clambered out of the car. Other families milled around, with children laughing and playing, rushing in circles around their parents. As they strolled toward the entrance to Fall Farm, surrounded by other chatting families, Emily felt a surreal moment of realization about just how much her life had transformed over the last year. She’d gone from being a busy marketing assistant in New York to an inn-owning sort-of-mom in Maine. She’d gone from waiting seven long years for a ring from Ben to what she was beginning to feel was the greatest relationship of her life.

“Come on, Emily!” Chantelle cried.

Emily looked up, broken from her reverie, to see Chantelle and Daniel at the kiosk waiting to collect their basket for apple picking. Chantelle was tugging on Daniel's hand, just like how Rain would tug on his leash. Daniel was laughing, smiling in a way Emily had never seen before. He was clearly overjoyed to be with Chantelle, to be here, as a family.

Emily jogged toward them and took Chantelle's other outstretched hand. They reached the kiosk and collected their basket, then headed into the orchard.

"Let's find the juiciest, reddest apples," Emily said to Chantelle in an excited whisper. "I bet you they're further at the back of the field."

Chantelle nodded with wide eyes, excited by Emily's conspiratorial tone.

Emily looked up at Daniel. He was smiling at her broadly, a hint of pride in his eyes. Emily couldn't help but blush.

As they began to fill their baskets with juicy apples, Emily realized she was having more fun than she'd had in years. Daniel, too, was laughing like a gleeful child. He was rushing around, picking Chantelle up and twirling her around, giving her piggybacks so she could reach the highest branches. Emily had never seen Daniel's goofy side. Seeing it now was a joy to behold.

"This is fun, right?" Daniel said breathlessly as he jogged up to Emily.

"I don't think I've had this much fun since I was a kid," Emily replied.

"Me neither," Daniel said.

Emily felt warm all over. Somehow, having Chantelle with them was healing the wounds of their own traumatic lives.

*

After apple picking, Emily decided that Chantelle could do with some new clothes. The little girl couldn't sleep in Daniel's shirts every night, especially as colder weather was approaching. She'd need pajamas, and underwear, a coat and gloves, and clothes for school. She'd brought such a small backpack with her, with so few things in it, Emily would need to buy her practically an entire wardrobe worth of clothes.

"Only girls are allowed to come," Chantelle said as they reached the car.

Emily knew the comment would hurt Daniel, especially after how well their time at the farm had gone. That Chantelle would choose now to exclude him would be confusing and painful. And though Emily could tell he didn't want to miss this bonding opportunity, at the same time he wouldn't want to go against Chantelle's wishes and push the little girl into something she didn't want.

Emily looked down at Chantelle, clutching her hand tightly. "Your daddy doesn't have much of a sense of fashion, does he?" she said, trying to make light of the situation.

Chantelle began to giggle.

"I guess I'll let you two have a girly day out then," Daniel said, an air of resignation in his tone.

"We'll give you a fashion show when we get back home," Emily said, trying to lift his spirits by including him.

Emily and Chantelle waved goodbye to Daniel and the dogs, then began to stroll the streets of Sunset Harbor. There weren't that many children's clothes shops in town, though Emily knew of a good one tucked down a side street that sold vintage clothes and had some children's stuff. She could just picture how beautiful Chantelle would look in a Victorian-style duffle coat, though she worried that Chantelle would find Emily's style old-fashioned. Emily had no idea at all what kids wore these days.

They turned down the side street and Emily led Chantelle into the vintage clothes store.

"Now, if you don't like the stuff I pick out for you, just say," Emily told her. "I don't want you to wear anything you're not comfortable in or don't like."

Emily wanted Chantelle to fit in with the kids she'd meet at school. She was already at a disadvantage, having suffered through a neglectful childhood; the last thing Emily wanted now was for her to be singled out because of her fashion choices!

"Ooh, Chantelle, what do you think of this coat?" Emily said, holding up a navy blue duffle coat with large buttons. She imagined it was the sort of coat Sara Crewe wore in *A Little Princess*.

Chantelle look awestruck. She reached out and held the coat, then rubbed the fabric against her cheek. The lining was a beautiful montage of flowers in pale pinks, greens, and yellows.

"Do you like the lining?" Emily asked.

Chantelle nodded and Emily made a mental note to search for some floral print clothes for her.

Chantelle took the coat off the hanger and put it on. Just as Emily predicted, she looked absolutely delightful in the coat, like she'd stepped off a page of a Dickensian novel. As Chantelle looked at herself in the mirror, tears began to glitter in her eyes.

"We don't have to get it if you don't like it," Emily said, suddenly worried.

Chantelle shook her head. "It's not that. I just didn't know I could look pretty."

For the hundredth time since the little girl had come into her life, Emily felt her heart break. Had Chantelle gone through her entire life not being told by anyone that she was beautiful? There was a lot of lost time to make up if they were going to rebuild Chantelle's confidence.

Emily and Chantelle spent a good hour in the vintage store, trying on dresses and tops, cute pedal-pusher trousers and turtleneck sweaters. Emily couldn't tell whether she was just biased or not, but she thought Chantelle looked amazing in all the outfits, like a child model. It was astounding to see the transformation in her, not just physically, but also in her demeanor, as she became more comfortable, more confident and bold with her choices. For a little kid who'd never had the chance to choose how to dress, she had a real creative flare. By the end of the hour they had five new outfits.

"We'd better head to the department store now," Emily said. "Pick up some underwear, socks, and pajamas."

Together, they left the vintage store, Emily's arms laden with bags, and headed in the direction of the department store. As they went, Emily spotted Vanessa with baby Katy in her stroller. Vanessa had been doing cleaning shifts at the inn for weeks now. Emily waved at her from across the street.

"Chantelle, this is my friend Vanessa," Emily said. "She works at the B&B so you will probably see her some mornings."

Vanessa looked somewhat bemused. "Hi, Chantelle," she said a little stiltedly. Then she looked up at Emily. "Is she your niece?"

Emily grinned and shook her head. "She's Daniel's daughter."

"Emily's my new mom," Chantelle said, squeezing Emily's arm into her body and grinning.

Emily felt her heart melt. But when she looked at Vanessa's face, her friend was looking stony.

"Daniel's daughter from Tennessee?" Vanessa said.

Emily nodded, her mood beginning to sour. Vanessa had been around during the weeks of Daniel's abandonment, during those long six weeks where Emily had been left in turmoil, not knowing whether to stay or to pack the whole thing in and run back to New York, to take up Amy's job offer and accept Ben's proposal and pretend like this whole trip to Maine had been a dream. Along with Serena, Vanessa had supported Emily, offering her comfort and friendship, picking up the slack that Daniel had left behind. She clearly disapproved of Emily having accepted Daniel and his daughter into her life without any hesitation.

"Chantelle, sweetie," Emily said, "why don't you hurry into that store and buy yourself some candy. Here." She handed her some dollar bills. "Daddy likes peanut butter cups the best."

As soon as Chantelle was gone, Emily turned back to Vanessa. "I know what you're thinking," she began. "You think I'm crazy for letting Daniel back into my heart without putting up a fight. You think I'm being a doormat."

Vanessa shook her head. “It’s not that, Emily. I know you love him. Any fool could see that. I never doubted that you two would be together.”

“Then what’s the problem?” Emily asked, feeling herself growing frosty.

“The girl,” Vanessa replied. “Do you really think it’s okay to take her away from her home? From her mom?”

Emily folded her arms. “Her mom relinquished care. She takes drugs and has mental health problems. Daniel tried to help her get clean and get into a treatment program but it didn’t work. She realized Chantelle would be better off with us. But I’m not going to cut Sheila out and pretend like she doesn’t exist. If she wants to be part of Chantelle’s life she can, just as soon as she’s clean. I won’t let a drug addict ruin that little girl’s life.”

Vanessa looked uncertain. “I just don’t know if you realize what you’ve gotten yourself into,” she said. “Chantelle isn’t going to be an easy kid to raise.”

“I’m aware of that,” Emily said testily, though Chantelle had been nothing less than a delight so far. “Of course there are going to be challenges. But Daniel and I are prepared to face them together.”

“What about your own kids? You and Daniel? Will you still be able to have your own family if you’re busy dealing with Chantelle’s issues? And what about the inn? Is that a suitable place for a kid with difficulties?”

“Chantelle doesn’t have difficulties,” Emily shot back, defensive and suddenly protective of the girl she was beginning to view like a daughter. “She needs love and care. Daniel and I are the best people to provide it.”

Vanessa sighed deeply. “I don’t doubt that for a second,” she said with resignation. “I’m just worried that you haven’t thought this through. You’ve seen what a strain Katy has been on my life and she’s my own flesh and blood. I chose to have her. Chantelle’s been thrust upon you. She’s pretty much an ultimatum from Daniel. You never asked for this. I just think you need to step back and take a second to work out if this is what you want.”

She reached out and squeezed Emily’s arm. Just then, Chantelle came back with a grocery bag filled with candy and chocolate bars.

“Wow,” Emily said, “look at all this candy.”

But her voice wasn’t as breezy and carefree as it had been. Vanessa’s words had rattled her, had cut right through her happiness and left a stone of doubt inside of her. Could she really raise Chantelle properly?

CHAPTER FOUR

By the time Emily and Chantelle got back to the B&B, Chantelle was exhausted. She managed to stay awake through the meal that Daniel had prepared while they were out, but she yawned throughout.

“Maybe she should have an early night?” Emily said. “She was up super early. And school starts tomorrow so it won’t hurt her to be rested.”

Daniel agreed and they went upstairs to Chantelle’s room, put her to bed, then read her a story until she was asleep.

As they left her room, shutting the door quietly behind them, Emily thought about the last two days of parenthood. It had been more fun than she’d expected. But Vanessa’s words still swirled in her mind, making her doubt herself.

Daniel and Emily went downstairs very quietly, not wanting the creaking floorboards to wake Chantelle.

“I’d love to take the boat out to see the sunset,” Daniel said. “What do you say? Date night?”

Emily frowned. “We can’t just leave Chantelle.”

Daniel began to laugh. “Good thing Serena’s on her way over.”

Emily’s frown grew deeper. “Huh?”

Daniel just smirked. “Well, while you were out, I took the liberty of arranging a babysitter. She’ll be here at seven.”

Emily’s frown transformed into a grin. “Really?” She couldn’t contain her excitement. It had been so long since she’d been on a proper date with Daniel, she didn’t realize how much she’d been craving it. She threw her arms around him and planted a sumptuous kiss on his lips.

“I’d better get ready,” she said, beaming, and she rushed upstairs to dress.

Serena arrived promptly at seven p.m., bringing her sweet-smelling perfume and arty flare with her.

“Someone’s looking smoking,” she said as she caught sight of Emily’s outfit.

Emily blushed. She’d never been one to take compliments. “Thanks for doing this,” Emily said. “We really appreciate having a night out.”

“No problem,” Serena said. “I’m looking forward to kicking back and reading some trashy romance novels.”

Emily and Daniel headed for the door, but before they got a chance to step out, they bumped into someone on the doorstep. It was Cynthia’s friend Owen, the young, timid piano player who had been to the inn before to tune her dad’s antique grand piano, and whom Emily had offered to come play whenever he so desired.

“Oh, um, sorry, if you’re going out I can come back another time,” Owen said, stumbling over his words and fiddling with the sheet music in his hands.

“Absolutely not,” Emily said. “You come in and play. Serena’s here anyway so you’re welcome to play as long as you want.”

Owen smiled shyly and thanked Emily, then went into the living room.

As Emily and Daniel trotted down the porch steps Owen’s beautiful, haunting piano music floated after them.

*

The water sloshed against the harbor walls as Daniel helped Emily into the boat. The sky was still blue, though dusk was fast approaching.

“Where are we heading then?” Emily asked once she was settled.

“I wanted to explore another island,” Daniel said.

Emily was reminded of the last time they’d done so, when she’d discovered the lighthouse and the paintings that her father had collected. She’d been certain that there might be some clue to her father’s disappearance contained within them, but like most leads she’d followed, that one seemed to have led to a dead end: just the name of an artist who was now deceased.

Daniel started up the motor and the boat lurched away from the dock. The water was calm this evening, and the ride was smooth. The boat cut through the water easily. Emily held on tight, exhilarated by the feel of the wind in her hair, and thankful that she’d set her makeup!

The sky was turning pink as they hit the banks of the island Daniel wanted to explore. He hopped out of the boat and helped Emily clamber down, then the two of them headed hand in hand along the beach. In the distance, Sunset Harbor twinkled.

“It’s so beautiful,” Emily said dreamily. She had fallen in love with the place, with her B&B, and with the little girl sleeping soundly within it.

“Do you think Serena is okay?” Daniel asked.

“As long as Chantelle sleeps straight through there’ll be nothing to worry about,” Emily replied.

Daniel fell silent. “I wanted to say thank you,” he said a little timidly.

“For what?” Emily asked.

“For being so amazing with Chantelle. And about everything. I’ve put you through the wringer, I know that. I wasn’t sure you’d be so forgiving.”

Emily swallowed hard. Remembering those painful weeks without Daniel still hurt her greatly. For him to acknowledge what he’d put her through was restorative.

“I don’t think I really had a choice,” Emily said. She could hear her voice wavering. “As soon as I saw you with her... it was everything I’ve ever wanted, Daniel. I’m so in love with you it hurts.”

They stopped walking then and Daniel turned to face her. He wiped the tear on her cheek away with his thumb, then gently cupped her face.

“I love you too, Emily,” he said.

Then he pressed his lips to hers. Emily melted into them, feeling once again that raw passion that only Daniel could ignite within her. She wrapped her arms around him, feeling his taut muscles beneath his shirt as her hands roved all over his body. Hearing Daniel finally utter those three words she’d been longing to hear had made Emily’s body spring alive in a way it had not in years. The passion had gone from her relationship with Ben years before, and despite the blissful nights she had spent with Daniel, this was the first time she had felt such desire, such yearning.

She broke away from him. His eyes were ablaze with desire. She’d never kissed him like that before.

“I want you, Emily,” Daniel said, breathless. “For now and forever.”

Emily reached out then, pulling Daniel toward her again by the belt hooks of his jeans. She wanted him next to her, close to her. She wanted to feel every inch of him. On this abandoned island, with the sun setting around them, Emily could think of nothing she wanted more than Daniel. All of Daniel.

*

The stars twinkled above. Ocean waves gently broke against the shore. Emily lay in Daniel’s arms, her head resting on his warm, bare chest. She could hear his heartbeat, its rhythm still pounding from their lovemaking. His skin was still searing to the touch beneath her fingertips.

She propped herself back up on her elbow. “We’ve been gone for ages,” she said. “We should probably head back.”

Daniel took a deep breath, as though reluctant to leave this place. Emily knew how he felt. She too wished to stay in this magical moment forever. But she remembered there were more magical moments to share at home, back at the inn. Now that they were part of a family there would be a million moments of fun and happiness to enjoy.

Emily lay back against the sand and watched Daniel dress himself again, feeling overwhelmed with happiness. The stars had truly aligned for her at last.

She dressed too and straightened her hair, hoping that she'd be able to put her disheveled appearance down to the boat ride to the island rather than what she and Daniel had done once there.

Daniel climbed into the boat and helped Emily get in beside him.

“Once Chantelle’s at school, we should go to the antique store down the road,” he said. “I’ve never been and I’ve heard they have excellent jewelry, some really exquisite rings.”

Emily’s heart began to beat faster. Could Daniel be hinting at a proposal? On the island he’d said he wanted to be with her forever; now he was talking about rings. Emily hadn’t even thought about marriage with Daniel yet. There’d been so much upheaval in their relationship already that she’d put such thoughts out of her mind.

But now, as she sat in the boat crossing the ocean and heading toward the town she so adored, she realized just how thrilled she was at the prospect of settling down with Daniel.

For the first time, the idea of Daniel proposing to her lodged in her mind like a seed taking root.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Are you ready for your first day of school?” Emily asked Chantelle as she leaned across the breakfast table and collected the empty, crumb-strewn plates.

Chantelle looked up at her and nodded. Her expression was one of serious contemplation. Emily had never seen such a grown-up expression on such a young face. Of course, a new school would be unsettling for Chantelle, Emily knew that. But for the girl to look so solemn about the whole thing really hurt her heart. She hoped she could help Chantelle become more comfortable and relaxed, help her learn how to enjoy herself in the way a six-year-old ought to.

Just then, Daniel came into the kitchen. He was wearing his plaid shirt tucked into his jeans today, and he’d brushed his hair back and trimmed his beard. Emily swelled with pride at the sight of him, knowing how much effort he’d gone to just to make a good first impression at the school gates.

Daniel walked over to Emily and kissed her.

“Someone’s looking dapper,” Emily told him with a smirk.

Daniel looked over at Chantelle. “Ready for your big day?” he asked.

Chantelle seemed a little more relaxed in Daniel’s presence today, Emily noted. Maybe she was learning to trust him at last. After being uprooted from Tennessee she was starting to settle in and could view him as someone to rely on, someone who wasn’t going to let her down.

“Are you coming with me, Daddy?” she asked.

Emily noticed the look of relief on Daniel’s face.

“Of course” he said.

“Neither of us would miss this for the world,” Emily added.

Chantelle smiled coyly, looking proud and shy in equal parts.

They all left the house and got in Daniel’s pickup truck. As they drove through the tree-lined streets, Chantelle gazed out the window, looking tense and nervous. When they pulled up outside the cute red brick building that would be her new school, she became pale and withdrawn.

“You’re going to be okay,” Emily said, patting her hand. “I know it’s scary at first, but once you get in there and meet all the children and the teachers you’ll be fine.”

Chantelle looked at her with her big blue eyes, clearly overwhelmed.

Emily went around to the back door of the pickup truck and took Chantelle’s hand, squeezing it to reassure her, and helped her hop down onto the ground. There were other children and parents milling around. A group of kids were playing in a pile of fallen leaves, a pair of boys chased each other across the grass. Emily herself felt rather overwhelmed by the whole thing. She’d never spent much time around children, particularly not huge groups of them. The noise was unbelievable, worse even than when Gus and his party of rowdy seventy-year-olds had stayed at the inn.

Emily looked over at Daniel. He, too, seemed at a loss. She couldn’t help but laugh to herself at the sight of the three of them, all wide-eyed and bemused.

Just then a young woman with a welcoming smile walked toward them. She was wearing boot-cut beige pants with a lilac cardigan and flat-heeled shoes, an outfit that Emily thought revealed her to be a teacher immediately. She nudged Daniel and couldn’t help but giggle aloud at his daunted expression, which matched Chantelle’s so perfectly. Coming face to face with teachers was clearly a terrifying experience for Moreys, Emily thought.

“Hi, I’m Miss Glass,” the young woman said, extending her hand.

Emily took the lead and shook her hand. Miss Glass had incredibly soft hands and perfectly manicured nails.

“Is this Chantelle?” Miss Glass asked, turning her attention and super-sweet smile to the little girl.

Chantelle withdrew, clinging to Emily’s pant leg. Emily stroked her head to comfort her.

“You don’t need to be scared, honey,” Miss Glass said. “Everyone is so excited to meet you.” She looked at Emily and Daniel. “They’re really a super-sweet bunch.”

Emily smiled, feeling more comfortable about the idea of letting Chantelle out of her sight, about handing her into the care of someone else. But Daniel seemed to be struggling more with the thought of letting her go.

He crouched down beside Chantelle and took her shoulders in each of his hands. “Have an awesome day,” he said, and Emily heard a hitch of emotion in his voice. “I can’t wait to hear all about it.”

He pulled her into his arms and held her tightly. Emily noticed the way he pressed his lips together, holding back the tears that were trying to escape. Seeing him that way made her emotional as well, and it made her love him even more.

Daniel moved out of the embrace and now it was Emily’s turn to give words of encouragement to the child. She hugged her tightly.

“Be brave,” she said, “and show all the other kids what a kind, caring, generous soul you have.”

Chantelle nodded. She turned to face the school building and took a deep breath. Daniel reached out and grabbed Emily’s hand.

“She’s going to have a really fun day,” Miss Glass assured them as she scooped Chantelle’s semi-reluctant hand into hers. “I promise,” she added, swinging her arm.

Together, Emily and Daniel held their breath as they watched Chantelle walk along the path toward her new school. At the top step, they stopped, and Chantelle turned back. With Miss Glass’s encouragement, she waved goodbye, then disappeared inside.

“Our baby’s first day at school,” Emily whispered.

*

On the drive back to the B&B, Emily wondered what they would do with their day. Chantelle had been in their lives for less than a week and already she couldn’t remember what she’d done with herself before her.

“What shall we do today?” she asked Daniel.

“I think I should move in,” he replied, his gaze still fixed out the windshield.

Emily started. “Today?”

Daniel looked across at her and smirked. “It’s time for us to be a proper family,” he said.

Emily’s stomach somersaulted. Things with Daniel were suddenly moving very fast, and it shocked her just how much she wanted them to.

They reached the inn and Daniel parked outside his carriage house. As they went inside, Emily felt a strange pang of nostalgia. They’d hardly spent any time at Daniel’s but it still felt special to her, a place etched with memories. Already it felt less lived in, transformed by recent events. Daniel had taken a ton of his stuff to Tennessee when he’d left over the summer and hadn’t unpacked any of the boxes or suitcases, so there were already some bare shelves and stacked luggage in the corner.

They got to work right away, boxing up Daniel’s books and records, folding up his clothes and zipping them into suitcases. The kitchen took the longest to clear because Daniel was so fond of his culinary experiments and seemed to own a specific frying pan or pot for every eventuality. But overall, clearing the carriage house took very little time. Daniel had spent so many years living in such a small space, Emily wondered how he would adjust to the sprawling, endless mansion. Not to mention he had been alone for so long and would now have to co-habit not just with his partner and daughter but with a whole host of random guests, as well as the inn’s staff! Emily reminded herself that there would undoubtedly be some teething problems.

On their final trip down the driveway to the carriage house to pick up the last bits, Daniel and Emily stood on the small porch, looking in at the now empty space.

“It looks so strange,” Daniel said, a hint of melancholy in his tone.

Emily hoped he wasn’t regretting his decision.

Back up in the main house, Daniel got to work unpacking his items and finding places for them in the master bedroom. Emily herself became more preoccupied with Chantelle’s room. It wasn’t really suitable for a young girl. The place had been decorated with guests in mind and all the furniture was far too adult. Chantelle needed a kid’s bed rather than this huge king-size antique one. Her teddy bear tucked into the crisp white covers looked lonely and forlorn. She needed toys and a trunk to store them in and a shelf to display them on. And she could have a little desk under the window so she could look out over the backyard rather than the current window seat made of oak and strewn with silk crimson cushions. Then there was the large wardrobe taking up space across an entire wall. Even with all the clothes Emily had purchased for Chantelle it was too big.

Emily decided then to fix the room up for Chantelle. It could be a DIY project they undertook as a whole family. Chantelle could choose the colors she wanted, and they could go to the store and find matching pillows, blankets, curtains, and rugs. In the meantime, however, she wanted to do something to make the room nice for Chantelle right away, and she struck on the idea of getting some of her old toys out of the attic. She’d packed up all of her and Charlotte’s toys when she’d converted their old room into the first guest bedroom all those months ago.

Leaving Daniel absorbed in his own tasks, Emily went up into the attic and searched for the boxes of toys she’d carefully tidied away.

It made her feel quite emotional as she began looking through them all again. Even though she’d spent a lot of time carefully packing them away, something about the fact she was giving them a new lease on life by passing them on to Chantelle made her a little melancholy, as though she were letting go of Charlotte in a way. But it also felt so right that Chantelle would get Charlotte’s old toys since she did feel like her sister’s spirit was living on in Chantelle.

As Emily rummaged around selecting toys she thought would be appropriate for Chantelle, she became distracted by a box of photographs. She remembered them instantly as the ones that Daniel had rescued from the outbuilding during the storm, the ones he’d sacrificed his own photographs to save on her behalf. She’d never had a chance to look through them. She took the first box down off the shelf and settled herself on the floor.

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