

THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR (BOOK 1)

SOPHIE LOVE



FOR NOW
and
FOREVER

The Inn at Sunset Harbor

Sophie Love

For Now and Forever

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Love S.

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Emily Mitchell, 35, living and working in New York City, has struggled through a string of failed relationships. When her boyfriend of 7 years takes her out for their long-awaited anniversary dinner, Emily is sure that this time will be different, that this time she will finally get the ring. When he gives her a small bottle of perfume instead, Emily knows the time has come to break up with him—and for her entire life to have a fresh start. Reeling from her unsatisfying, high-pressure life, Emily decides she needs a change. She decides on a whim to drive to her father's abandoned home on the coast of Maine, a sprawling, historic house where she'd spent magical summers as a child. But the house, long-neglected, is in dire need of repair, and the winter is no time to be in Maine. Emily hasn't been there in 20 years, when a tragic accident changed her sister's life and shattered her family. Her parents divorced, her father disappeared, and Emily was never able to bring herself to step foot in that house again. Now, for some reason, with her life reeling, Emily feels drawn to the only childhood place she ever knew. She plans on going just for a weekend, to clear her head. But something about the house, its numerous secrets, its memories of her father, its oceanfront allure, its small-town setting—and most of all, its gorgeous, mysterious caretaker—doesn't want to let her leave. Can she find the answers she's been looking for here, in the most unexpected place of all? Can a weekend become a lifetime? FOR NOW AND FOREVER is book #1 in the debut of a dazzling new romance series that will make you laugh, make you cry, will keep you turning pages late into the night—and will make you fall in love with romance all over again.

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Love Sophie For Now and Forever

Sophie Love

A lifelong fan of the romance genre, Sophie Love is thrilled to release her debut romance series: FOR NOW AND FOREVER (THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR – BOOK 1). Sophie would love to hear from you, so please visit www.sophieloveauthor.com www.sophieloveauthor.com to email her, to join the mailing list, to receive free ebooks, to hear the latest news, and to stay in touch!

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BOOKS BY SOPHIE LOVE

THE INN AT SUNSET HARBOR

FOR NOW AND FOREVER (Book #1)

FOREVER AND FOR ALWAYS (Book #2)

FOREVER, WITH YOU (Book #3)

Chapter One

Emily ran her hands down the black silky material of her dress, smoothing out the creases for what must have been the hundredth time that night.

"You seem nervous," Ben said. "You've barely touched your food."

Her eyes darted down to the half-eaten chicken on her plate, then back up at Ben, who sat across from her at the beautifully laden dinner table, his face lit by candlelight. For their seven-year anniversary, he'd taken her to the most romantic restaurant in New York.

Of course she was nervous.

Especially since the small Tiffany's box she'd found hidden in his sock drawer weeks before had not been there when she'd checked that evening. She felt certain that tonight was the night he would finally propose.

The thought made her heart hammer with anticipation.

"I'm just not that hungry," she replied.

"Oh," Ben said, looking slightly perturbed. "Does that mean you won't be wanting any dessert? I've had my eye on the salted-butterscotch mousse."

She most certainly didn't want dessert, but she had a sudden fear that perhaps Ben had hidden the ring in the mousse. It would be a corny way to propose, but by now, she would take any way at all. To say Ben was afraid of commitment was an understatement. It had taken two years of dating before he'd even been okay with her leaving her toothbrush at his apartment – and four years before he finally decided she could move in.

If she so much as mentioned children, he turned as white as a sheet.

"Please, order the mousse if you want," she said. "I've still got my glass of wine."

Ben gave a small shrug, then called over the waiter, who swiftly removed his empty plate and her half-eaten chicken.

Ben stretched his hands out and took both of hers in his.

"Did I tell you you look beautiful tonight?" he asked.

"Not yet," she said, smiling slyly.

He smiled in return. "In that case, you look beautiful."

Then he reached into his pocket.

Her heart seemed to stop beating. This was it. It was really happening. All those years of anguish, of Buddhist-monk-level patience, were about to finally pay off. She was about to prove her mother wrong, her mother who seemed to revel in telling Emily that she'd never get a man like Ben down the aisle. Not to mention her best friend, Amy, who had recently developed the tendency after one glass of wine too many to start imploring Emily not to waste any more time on Ben because thirty-five definitely wasn't "too old to find true love."

She swallowed the lump in her throat as Ben pulled the Tiffany's box out of his pocket and slid it across the table toward her.

"What's this?" she managed to say.

"Open it," he replied with a grin.

He wasn't bending down on one knee, Emily noted, but that was fine. She didn't need it to be traditional. She just needed a ring. Any ring would do.

She picked up the box, opened it – then frowned.

"What ... the hell...?" she stammered.

She stared at it in shock. It was a one-ounce bottle of perfume.

Ben grinned, as if thrilled with his handiwork.

"I didn't realize they sold perfume either," Ben replied. "I thought they just sold overpriced jewelry. Want me to spray you?"

Suddenly unable to contain her emotions, Emily broke down in tears. All her hopes came crashing down around her. She felt like an idiot for even letting herself think he might be proposing tonight.

“Why are you crying?” Ben said, frowning, suddenly aggrieved. “People are looking.”

“I thought...” Emily stammered, dabbing her eyes with the table cloth, “with the restaurant, and it being our anniversary...” She was unable to get her words out.

“Yes,” Ben said, coolly. “It’s our anniversary and I bought you a present. I’m sorry if it wasn’t good enough, but you didn’t get me one at all.”

“I thought you were going to propose!” Emily finally cried, throwing her napkin down on the table.

The hum in the room stopped as people stopped eating and turned and stared at her. She no longer cared.

Ben’s eyes widened with fear. He looked even more scared than he did when she mentioned the possibility of starting a family.

“What do you want to get *married* for?” he said.

Emily was hit by a moment of clarity. She looked at him as though seeing him for the first time. Ben would never change. He would never commit. Her mother, Amy, they’d both been right. She’d spent years waiting for something that was so obviously never going to happen, and this miniature bottle of perfume had been the straw to break the camel’s back.

“It’s over,” Emily said, breathlessly, her tears suddenly stopped. “It’s really over.”

“Are you drunk?” Ben cried incredulously. “First you want to get married – and now you want to break up?”

“No,” Emily said. “I’m just not blind anymore. This – you, me – it was never right.” She stood up, discarding her napkin in her seat. “I’m moving out,” she said. “I’ll stay at Amy’s tonight, then fetch my things tomorrow.”

“Emily,” Ben said, reaching for her. “Can we please talk about this?”

“Why?” she shot back. “So you can convince me to wait another seven years before we buy our own home? Another decade before we get a joint bank account? Seventeen years before you so much as consider the thought of getting a cat together?”

“Please,” Ben said under his breath, looking at the approaching waiter carrying his dessert. “You’re making a scene.”

Emily knew she was but she didn’t care. She wasn’t about to change her mind.

“There’s nothing left to talk about,” she said. “It’s over. Enjoy your salted-butterscotch mousse!”

And with those final words, she stormed out of the restaurant.

Chapter Two

Emily stared at her keyboard, willing her fingers to move, to do something, anything. Another email popped into her inbox and she looked at it blankly. The sound of the office chatter around her swirled in one ear and out the other. She couldn't concentrate. She felt like she was in a daze. The complete lack of sleep she'd gotten on Amy's lumpy couch was hardly helping matters.

She'd been at work a whole hour but hadn't achieved anything more than to turn on her computer and drink a cup of coffee. Her mind was completely consumed with memories of last night. Ben's face kept flashing through her head. It made her feel slightly panicked every time she relived the terrible evening.

Her phone began blinking, and she glanced at the screen to see Ben's name flashing at her for the umpteenth time. He was calling, again. She hadn't answered a single one of his calls. What could there possibly be to talk about now? He'd had seven years to work out whether he wanted to be with her or not – a last-minute attempt to save things wasn't going to do anything now.

Her office phone began to ring and she leapt a mile, then grabbed it.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Emily, it's Stacey from the fifteenth floor. I have it down that you were supposed to attend the meeting this morning and wanted to check in to see why you hadn't."

"SHIT!" Emily cried, slamming down the phone. She'd completely forgotten about the meeting.

She leapt up from her desk and ran across the office toward the elevator. Her frantic state seemed to amuse her co-workers, who began whispering like silly children. When she reached the elevator, she slammed her palm against the button.

"Come on, come on, come on!"

It took ages, but at last, the elevator arrived. As the doors slid open, Emily went to rush inside, only to slam straight into someone coming out. As she drew back, winded, she realized the person she'd slammed into was her boss, Izelda.

"I'm so sorry," Emily stammered.

Izelda looked her up and down. "For what, exactly? Slamming into me, or missing the meeting?"

"Both," Emily said. "I was on my way there right now. It completely slipped my mind."

She could feel every eye in the office burning into her back. The last thing she needed right now was a dose of public humiliation, something Izelda took great pleasure in dishing out.

"You have a calendar?" Izelda said coolly, folding her arms.

"Yes."

"And you know how it works? How to write?"

Behind Emily, she could hear people stifling their laughter. Her first instinct was to wilt like a flower. Being made a fool in front of an audience was her idea of a nightmare. But just like in the restaurant last night, a strange sense of clarity overcame her. Izelda wasn't some authority figure she had to look up to and bend to the whims of. She was just a bitter woman taking her anger out on anyone she could. And those colleagues whispering behind her back meant nothing.

A sudden wave of realization washed over Emily. Ben wasn't the only thing she didn't like about her life. She hated her job, too. These people, this office, Izelda. She'd been stuck here for years, just like she'd been stuck with Ben. And she wasn't going to put up with it anymore.

"Izelda," Emily said, addressing her boss by her first name for the first time ever, "I'm going to have to be honest here. I missed the meeting, it slipped my mind. It's not the worst thing in the world."

Izelda glowered.

“How dare you!” she snapped. “I’ll have you working at your desk until midnight for the next month until you learn the value of being prompt!”

With those words Izelda brushed by her, bumping Emily’s shoulder, as if to storm off, the matter clearly settled in her eyes.

But it wasn’t settled in Emily’s.

Emily reached out and grabbed Izelda’s shoulder, stopping her.

Izelda turned and grimaced back, brushing Emily’s hand off as if she’d been bitten by a snake.

But Emily did not give ground.

“I didn’t finish,” Emily continued, keeping her voice completely calm. “The worst thing in the world is this place. It’s *you*. It’s this stupid, petty, soul-destroying job.”

“Excuse me?” Izelda cried, her face turning red with anger.

“You heard me,” Emily replied. “In fact, I’m pretty sure *everyone* heard me.”

Emily glanced over her shoulder at her colleagues, who stared back, dumbfounded. No one had expected quiet, compliant Emily to snap like this. She recalled Ben’s warning that she was “making a scene” last night. And here she was, making another one. Only this time she was enjoying it.

“You can take your job, Izelda,” Emily added, “and stick it up your ass.”

She could practically hear the gasps from behind her.

She shoved past Izelda into the elevator, then spun on her heel. She hit the ground floor button for what, she realized, with absolute relief, would be the last time in her life, then watched the scene of her stunned colleagues staring at her as the doors slid shut and blocked them out. She let out a huge sigh, feeling freer and lighter than she had ever felt.

*

Emily ran up the steps to her apartment, realizing it wasn’t really her apartment – it never really had been. She’d always felt as if she were living in Ben’s space, that she needed to make herself as small and unobtrusive as possible. She fumbled with her keys, grateful that he was at work and she wouldn’t have to deal with him.

She got inside and looked at it with new eyes. Nothing in here was to her taste. Everything seemed to take on a new meaning; the horrible couch that she and Ben had argued over buying (an argument he won); the stupid coffee table that she wanted to throw out because one of the legs was shorter than the others and it always wobbled (but which Ben was attached to for “sentimental reasons” and so it stayed); the oversized TV that had cost far too much and took up too much space (but which Ben had insisted he needed in order to watch sports because it was the “only thing” that could keep him sane). She grabbed a couple of books from the shelf, noting how her romance novels had been relegated to the shadows of the bottom shelf (Ben was always worried their friends would think him less intellectual if they saw romance novels on the shelf – his preferences were academic texts and philosophers, although he never seemed to read any of them).

She glanced over the photos on the mantel to see if there was anything worth taking, when it struck her how every picture that contained her was with Ben’s family. There they were at his niece’s birthday, at his sister’s wedding. There wasn’t a single picture of her with her mom, the only person in her family, let alone of Ben spending any time with them both. It suddenly struck Emily that she had been a stranger in her own life. She’d been following someone else’s path for years rather than forging her own.

She stormed through the apartment and into the bathroom. Here were the only things that really mattered to her – her nice bath products and makeup. But even that was a problem for Ben. He’d constantly complained about how many products she had, lamenting on them being a waste of money.

“It’s my money to waste!” Emily cried at her reflection in the mirror as she threw all her belongings into a tote bag.

She was aware that she looked like a madwoman, rushing around the bathroom throwing half-empty bottles of shampoo in her bag, but she didn’t care. Her life with Ben had been nothing more than a lie, and she wanted to get out of it as quickly as possible.

She ran into the bedroom next and grabbed her suitcase from under the bed. She filled it quickly with all her clothes and shoes. Once she was done collecting her things, she dragged it all out into the street. Then, as a final symbolic gesture, she went back into the apartment and placed her key on Ben’s “sentimental” coffee table, then left, never to return.

It was only as she stood on the curb that it really hit Emily what she had done. She had made herself jobless and homeless in the space of a few hours. Making herself single had been one thing, but chucking in her entire life was quite another.

Little flutters of panic began to race through her. Her hands trembled as she pulled out her cell and dialed Amy’s number.

“Hey, what’s up?” Amy said.

“I’ve done something crazy,” Emily replied.

“Go on...” Amy urged her.

“I quit my job.”

She heard Amy exhale on the other end of the line.

“Oh thank God,” her friend’s voice came. “I thought you were going to tell me you’d got back with Ben.”

“No, no, quite the opposite. I packed my bags and left. I’m standing in the street like a bag lady.”

Amy began to laugh. “I have the best mental image right now.”

“This isn’t funny!” Emily replied, more panicked than ever. “What am I supposed to do now? I quit my job. I won’t be able to get an apartment without a job!”

“You’ve got to admit it’s a bit funny,” Amy replied, chuckling. “Just bring it all over here,” she added, nonchalantly. “You know you can stay with me until you figure things out.”

But Emily didn’t want to. She’d essentially spent years of her life living in someone else’s space, being made to feel like a lodger in her own home, like Ben was doing her a favor just by having her around. She didn’t want that anymore. She needed to forge her own life, to stand on her own two feet.

“I appreciate the offer,” Emily said, “but I need to do my own thing for a while.”

“I get it,” Amy replied. “So what then? Leave town for a bit? Clear your head?”

That got Emily thinking. Her dad owned a house in Maine. They’d stayed in it during the summer when she was a kid, but it had stayed empty ever since he’d disappeared twenty years ago. It was old, filled with character, and had been gorgeous at one point, in a historic sort of way; it had been more like a sprawling B&B that he didn’t know what to do with than a house.

It was barely in passable shape back then, and Emily knew it wouldn’t be in good shape now, after twenty years left derelict; it also wouldn’t feel the same empty – or now that she wasn’t a kid. Not to mention it was hardly summer. It was February!

And yet the idea of spending a few days just sitting on the porch, looking out at the ocean, in a place that was *hers* (sort of) seemed suddenly very romantic. Getting out of New York for the weekend would be a good way to clear her head and try to work out what to do next.

“I’ve got to go,” Emily said.

“Wait,” Amy replied. “Tell me where you’re going first!”

Emily took a deep breath.

“I’m going to Maine.”

Chapter Three

Emily had to take several subways to get to the long-term parking lot in Long Island City where her old, abandoned, beat-up car was parked. It had been years since she'd driven the thing, as Ben had always taken lead driver responsibilities in order to show off his precious Lexus, and as she walked through the massive, shadow-filled parking lot, dragging her suitcase behind her, she wondered whether she'd still be able to drive at all. It was another one of those things she'd let slip over the course of her relationship.

The trip to get only here – to this parking lot on the outskirts of the city – felt endless. As she walked toward her car, her footsteps echoing in the freezing parking lot, she almost felt too tired to go on.

Was she making a mistake? she wondered. Should she turn back?

“There she is.”

Emily turned to see the garage attendant smiling at her beat-up car, as if sympathetically. He reached out and dangled her keys.

The thought of still having an eight-hour drive ahead of her felt overwhelming, impossible. She was already exhausted, physically and emotionally.

“Are you going to take them?” he finally asked.

Emily blinked, not realizing she'd spaced out.

She stood there, knowing this was a pivotal moment somehow. Would she collapse, run back to her old life?

Or would she be strong enough to move on?

Emily finally shook off the dark thoughts and forced herself to be strong. At least for now.

She took the keys and walked triumphantly to her car, trying to show courage and confidence as he walked away, but secretly nervous that it would not even start – and if it did, that she would not even remember how to drive.

She sat in the freezing car, closed her eyes, and turned the ignition. If it started, she told herself, it was a sign. If it was dead, she could turn back.

She hated to admit it to herself, but she secretly hoped it would be dead.

She turned the key.

It started.

*

It came as a great surprise and comfort to Emily that, although a somewhat erratic driver, she still knew the basics of what she was doing. All she had to do was hit the gas and drive.

It was freeing, watching the world fly by, and slowly, she shook off her mood. She even turned on the radio, remembering it.

Radio blaring, windows rolled down, Emily gripped the steering wheel tightly in her hands. In her mind, she looked like a glamorous 1940s siren in a black-and-white film, with the wind tousling her perfectly coiffed hairstyle. In reality, the frigid February air had turned her nose as red as a berry and her hair into a frizzy mess.

She soon left the city, and the farther north she got, the more the roads became lined with evergreens. She gave herself time to admire their beauty as she whooshed past. How easily she'd let herself get caught up in the hustle and bustle of city living. How many years had she really let slide by without stopping to take in the beauty of nature?

Soon, the roads became wider, the number of lanes increasing, and she was on the highway. She revved the engine, pushing her beat-up car faster, feeling alive and enthralled by the speed. All these people in their cars embarking on journeys to elsewhere, and she, Emily, was finally one of them. Excitement pulsed through her as she urged the car onward, increasing her speed as much as she dared.

Her confidence soared as the roads flew by beneath her tires. As she passed through the state border into Connecticut, it really hit home that she was actually leaving. Her job, Ben, she'd finally discarded all that baggage.

The further north she went, the colder it became, and Emily finally had to concede that it was just too cold to have the window open. She buzzed it up and rubbed her hands together, wishing she was wearing something a little more appropriate for the weather. She'd left New York in her uncomfortable work suit, and in another moment of impulsivity, had flung the fitted jacket and stiletto shoes out the window. Now she was just in a thin shirt, and the toes of her bare feet seemed to have turned into frozen blocks of ice. The image of the 1940s movie star shattered in her mind as she glanced at her reflection in the rearview mirror. She looked a state. But she didn't care. She was free, and that was all that mattered.

Hours passed, and before she knew it, Connecticut was behind her, a distant memory, just a place she'd passed through on her way to a better future. The Massachusetts landscape was more open. Rather than the dark green foliage of evergreens, the trees here had shed their summer leaves and stood like spindly skeletons either side of her, revealing hints of snow and ice on the hard ground beneath them. Above Emily, the sky started to change color, from a clear blue to a muggy gray, reminding her that it was going to be dark by the time she reached Maine.

She drove through Worcester, many of the houses here tall, wood-paneled, and painted in various pastel shades. Emily couldn't help but wonder about the people who lived here, about their lives and experiences. She was only a few hours from home but already everything seemed alien to her – all the possibilities, all the different places to live and be and visit. How had she spent seven years living just one version of life, continuing the old, familiar routine, repeating the same day over and over, waiting, waiting, waiting for something more. All that time she'd been waiting for Ben to get his act together so she could begin the next chapter of her life. But all along, *she'd* had the power to be the driving force of her own story.

She found herself driving across a bridge, following Route 290 as it turned into Route 495. Gone were the trees to marvel at, replaced now by steep rock faces. Her stomach began to grumble, reminding her that lunch had come and gone and she'd done nothing about it. She considered stopping at a truck stop but the compulsion to get to Maine was too great. She could eat when she got there.

Hours more passed, and she crossed the state border into New Hampshire. The sky opened out, the roads wide and numerous, the plains stretching out either side of her as far as she could see. Emily couldn't help but think about how wide the world was, how many people it really contained.

Her sense of optimism carried her all the way past Portsmouth, where airplanes swooped over her, their engines rumbling as they approached the runway for landing. She sped on, past the next town, where frost covered the banks either side of the freeway, then onward through Portland, where the road ran alongside the train tracks. Emily took in every little detail, feeling awestruck by the size of the world.

She sped along the bridge that led out of Portland, wanting desperately to stop the car and take in the sight of the ocean. But the sky was growing darker and she knew she had to press on if she wanted to make it to Sunset Harbor before midnight. It was at least another three-hour drive from here, and the clock on her dashboard was already reading 9 p.m. Her stomach protested again, scolding her for having missed dinner as well as lunch.

Of all the things Emily was looking forward to the most when she arrived at the house, it was sleeping the night through. Fatigue was starting to set in; Amy's couch hadn't been particularly comfortable, not to mention the emotional turmoil Emily had been in all night. But waiting for her in the house in Sunset Harbor was the beautiful dark oak, four-poster bed that had been in the master bedroom, the one her parents had shared in happier times. The thought of having the whole thing to herself was compelling.

Despite the sky threatening snow, Emily decided against taking the highway all the way to Sunset Harbor. Her dad had been fond of driving the lesser-used route – a series of bridges spanning the myriad rivers running into the ocean around that part of Maine.

She exited the highway, relieved to at least slow her speed. The roads felt more treacherous, but the scenery was stunning. Emily gazed up at the stars as they blinked over the clear, sparkling water.

She stayed on Route 1 all along the coast, opening her mind to the beauty it had for her. The sky turned from gray to black, the water reflecting its image. It felt like she was driving through space, heading into infinity.

Heading toward the beginning of the rest of her life.

*

Weary from the endless drive, struggling to keep her raw eyes open, she perked up when her headlights finally lit up a sign that told her she was entering Sunset Harbor. Her heart beat quicker in relief and anticipation.

She passed the small airport and drove onto the bridge that would take her onto Mount Desert Island, remembering, with a pang of nostalgia, being in the family car as it raced over this very bridge. She knew it was only ten miles from here to the house, that it would take her no more than twenty minutes to reach her destination. Her heart started to hammer with excitement. Her fatigue and hunger seemed to disappear.

She saw the small wooden sign that welcomed her to Sunset Harbor and smiled to herself. Tall trees lined either side of the road, and Emily felt comforted to know they were the same trees she'd gazed out at as a child as her father drove along this very road.

A few minutes later she drove over a bridge she remembered strolling along as a child on a beautiful autumn evening, with red leaves crunching beneath her feet. The memory was so vivid she could even picture the purple woolen mittens she'd been wearing as she held hands with her father. She couldn't have been more than five at the time but the memory struck her as clearly as if it were yesterday.

More memories made their way into her mind as she passed other features – the restaurant that served awesome pancakes, the campground that would be filled with Scout groups all summer long, the single-track path that led down to Salisbury Cove. When she reached the sign for Acadia National Park she smiled, knowing she was just two miles from her final destination. It looked as though she was going to reach the house in the nick of time; snow was just starting to fall and her beat-up car probably didn't have it in it to get through a blizzard.

As if on cue, her car started emitting a strange grinding noise from somewhere beneath the hood. Emily bit her lip with anguish. Ben had always been the practical one, the tinkerer in the relationship. Her mechanical skills were woeful. She prayed the car would hold out for the last mile.

But the grinding noise got worse, and was soon accompanied by a strange whirr, then an irritating click, and finally a wheeze. Emily slammed her fists against the steering wheel and cursed under her breath. The snow began falling faster and thicker and her car started to complain even more, before it spluttered and finally ground to a halt.

Listening to the hiss of the dead engine, Emily sat there helplessly, trying to work out what to do. The clock told her it was midnight. There was no other traffic, no one out at this time of night. It was deathly quiet and, without her headlights to provide light, spectacularly dark; there were no street lamps on this road and clouds hid the stars and moon. It felt eerie, and Emily thought it was the perfect setting for a horror film.

She grabbed her phone like it was a comforter but saw there was no signal. The sight of those five empty bars of signal made her feel even more worried, even more isolated and alone. For the first time since up and leaving her life behind, Emily began to feel like she'd made a terribly stupid decision.

She got out of the car and shivered as the cold, snowy air bit at her flesh. She walked around to the trunk and took a look at the engine, not knowing what exactly she was even looking for.

Just then, she heard the rumbling of a truck. Her heart leapt with relief as she squinted into the distance and just about made out two headlights trundling along the road toward her. She began waving her arms, flagging the truck down as it approached.

Luckily, it pulled over, drawing to a halt just behind her car, sputtering exhaust fumes into the cold air, its harsh lights illuminating the falling snowflakes.

The driver's door creaked as it swung open, and two heavily booted feet crunched down into the snow. Emily could only see the silhouette of the person before her and had a sudden horrible panic that she'd flagged down the local murderer.

"Got yourself in a bad situation, have you?" she heard an old man's raspy voice say.

Emily rubbed her arms, feeling the goosebumps beneath her shirt, trying to stop herself from shivering – but relieved it was an old man.

"Yes, I don't know what happened," she said. "It started making strange noises then just stopped."

The man stepped closer, his face finally revealed by the lights of his truck. He was very old, with wiry white hair on his wrinkled face. His eyes were dark but sparkling with curiosity as he took in the sight of Emily, then the car.

"Don't know how it happened?" he asked, laughing under his breath. "I'll tell you how it happened. That car there is nothing more than a heap of junk. I'm surprised you even managed to drive it anywhere in the first place! Doesn't look like you've taken any care over it, then you decide to take it out in the snow?"

Emily wasn't in the mood to be mocked, especially since she knew the old man was right.

"Actually, I've come all the way from New York. It's held out fine for eight hours," she replied, failing to keep the dryness out of her tone.

The old man whistled under his breath. "New York? Well, I never... What brings you all this way?"

Emily didn't feel like divulging her story, so she just simply replied, "I'm heading to Sunset Harbor."

The man didn't question her further. Emily stood there watching him, her fingers quickly becoming numb as she waited for him to offer some kind of assistance. But he seemed more interested in pacing around her rusty old car, kicking its tires with the toe of his boot, flecking off the paint with a thumbnail, tutting and shaking his head. He opened the hood and examined the engine for a long, long time, muttering occasionally under his breath.

"So?" Emily said finally, exasperated by his slowness. "What's wrong with it?"

He looked up from the trunk, almost surprised, as though he'd forgotten she was even there, and scratched his head. "It's busted."

"I know that," Emily said, testily. "But can you do anything to fix it?"

"Oh no," the man replied, chuckling. "Not a thing."

Emily felt like screaming. The lack of food and the tiredness caused by the long drive were starting to affect her, making her close to the edge of tears. All she wanted was to get to the house so she could sleep.

“What am I going to do?” she said, feeling desperate.

“Well, you’ve got a couple of options,” the old man replied. “Walk to the mechanic’s, which is a mile or so that way.” He pointed the way she’d come with one of his stubby, wrinkled fingers. “Or I could tow you to wherever it was you were heading.”

“You would do that?” Emily said, surprised by his kindness, something she wasn’t used to experiencing having lived in New York for so long.

“Of course,” the man replied. “I’m not about to leave you out here at midnight in a snowstorm. Heard it was going to get worse in the next hour. Where is it exactly you’re heading towards?”

Emily was overwhelmed with gratitude. “West Street. Number Fifteen.”

The man cocked his head to the side with curiosity. “Fifteen West Street? That old, beat-up house?”

“Yes,” Emily replied. “It belongs to my family. I needed to spend some quiet time to myself.”

The old man shook his head. “I can’t leave you at that place. The house is falling apart. I doubt it’s even watertight. Why don’t you come back to mine? We live above the convenience store, me and my wife, Bertha. We’d be happy to have a guest.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Emily said. “But really I just want to be by myself at the moment. So if you could tow me to West Street I would really appreciate it.”

The old man regarded her for a moment, then finally relented. “All right, missy. If you insist.”

Emily felt a sense of relief as he got back in his truck and drove it in front of hers. She watched as he removed a thick rope from his trunk and tied their two vehicles together.

“Want to ride with me?” he asked. “At the very least I have heat.”

Emily smiled thinly but shook her head. “I’d prefer to – ”

“Be alone,” the old man finished with her. “I get it. I get it.”

Emily got back into her car, wondering what kind of impression she had made on the old man. He must be thinking she was a little mad, turning up underprepared and underdressed at midnight as a snowstorm was about to descend, demanding to be taken to a beat-up, abandoned house so she could be completely alone.

The truck ahead of her rumbled to life and she felt the pull as her car began to be towed. She sat back and glanced out the window as they moved off.

The road that carried her the last couple of miles ran beside the national park on one side and the ocean on the other. Through the darkness and a curtain of falling snow, Emily could see the ocean and the waves crashing against the rocks. Then the ocean disappeared from sight as they headed into the town, past hotels and motels, boat tour companies and golf courses, through the more built up areas, though for Emily it was hardly built up at all compared to New York.

Then they were turning onto West Street and Emily’s heart lurched as they passed the grand red brick, ivy-covered house on the corner. It looked exactly the same as it had the last time she’d been here, twenty years earlier. She passed the blue house, the yellow house, the white house, and then she bit her lip, knowing the next house would be hers, the gray stone house.

As it appeared before her, Emily was struck by an overwhelming sense of nostalgia. The last time she’d been here she was fifteen years old, her body raging with hormones at the prospect of a summer romance. She’d never had one, but remembering the thrill of possibility hit her like a wave.

The truck pulled to a stop, and Emily’s car did too.

Before the wheels had even finished turning, Emily was out, standing breathlessly before the house that had once been her father’s. Her legs were shaking and she couldn’t tell if it was from the relief of having finally arrived or the emotion of being back here after so many years. But where the other houses on the street seemed unchanged, her father’s house was a shadow of

its former glory. The once white window shutters were now streaked with dirt. Where once they'd stood open, all of them were closed up, making the house look far less inviting than it used to. The grass of the sweeping lawn out front where Emily had spent endless summer days reading novels was surprisingly well kept and the small shrubs either side of the front door were trimmed. But the house itself; she understood the old man's bemused expression now when she'd told him this was where she was heading. It looked so uncared for, so unloved, falling into disrepair. It made Emily sad to see how much the beautiful old house had decayed over the years.

"Nice house," the old man said as he drew up beside her.

"Thanks," Emily said, almost trancelike, with her eyes glued to the old building. Snow fluttered around her. "And thank you for getting me here in one piece," she added.

"No problem," the old man replied. "Are you really sure you want to stay here tonight?"

"I'm sure," Emily replied, though really she was starting to worry that coming here had been a huge mistake.

"Let me help you with your bags," the man said.

"No, no," Emily replied. "Honestly, you've done enough. I can take it from here." She rummaged in her pocket and found a crumpled bill. "Here, gas money."

The man looked at the note then back up at her. "I'm not taking that," he said, smiling kindly. "You keep your money. If you really want to pay me back, why don't you come down to mine and Bertha's some time during your stay and have some coffee and pie?"

Emily felt a lump form in her throat as she stashed the bill back in her pocket. This man's kindness was a shock to the system after the hostility of New York.

"How long are you planning on staying here anyway?" he added as he handed her a little slip of paper with a phone number and address scrawled on it.

"Just the weekend," Emily replied, taking the paper from him.

"Well, if you need anything, just give me a call. Or come to the gas station where I work. It's by the convenience store. Can't miss us."

"Thank you," Emily said again, with as much heartfelt gratitude as she could.

As soon as the noisy engine faded to nothing, the stillness descended over her again and Emily felt a sudden sense of peace. The snow was falling even more now, making the world as silent as silent could be.

Emily returned to her car and grabbed her stuff, then waddled up the pathway with her heavy suitcase in her arms, feeling emotion rising in her chest. When she reached the front door she paused, examining the familiar worn doorknob, remembering her hand turning it a hundred times over. Maybe coming here had been a good idea after all. Oddly, she couldn't help but feel that she was exactly where she needed to be.

*

Emily stood in the dim hallway of her father's old house, dust swirling around her, stupidly hoping for warmth but rubbing her shoulders against the cold. She didn't know what she had been thinking. Had she really expected this old house, neglected for twenty years, to be waiting for her, heated?

She tried the light switch and found that nothing happened.

Of course, she realized. How stupid could she be? Did she expect the electricity to be on and running?

It hadn't even occurred to her to bring a flashlight. She chided herself. As usual, she had been too hasty and had not taken a moment to plan ahead.

She placed her suitcase down then paced forward, the floorboards creaking beneath her feet; she ran her fingertips along the swirly wallpaper just like she'd done as a little girl. She could even

see the smudges she'd made over the years through that very motion. She passed the staircase, a long, wide set of steps in dark wood. It was missing part of the banister but she couldn't care less. Being back at the house felt beyond restorative.

She tried another light switch out of habit but again, no luck. Then she reached the door at the end of the hallway, which led into the kitchen, and pushed it open.

She gasped as a blast of freezing cold air hit her. She paced inside, the marble floor in the kitchen icy beneath her bare feet.

Emily tried turning the faucets in the sink but nothing happened. She chewed her lip in consternation. No heat, no electricity, no water. What else did the house have in store for her?

She paced around the house, looking for any switches or levers that might control the water, gas, and electricity. In the cupboard under the stairs she found a fuse box, but flicking the switches did nothing. The boiler, she remembered, was down in the basement – but the idea of going down there without any light to lead the way filled her with trepidation. She needed a flashlight or candle, but knew there'd be nothing of the sort in the abandoned house. Still, she checked the kitchen drawers just in case – but they were just full of cutlery.

Panic began to flutter in Emily's chest and she willed herself to think. She cast her mind back to the times she and her family would spend at the house. She remembered the way her father used to arrange for oil to be delivered to heat the house during the winter months. It drove her mom crazy because it was so expensive and she thought heating an empty house was a waste of money. But Emily's father had insisted the house needed to be kept warm to protect the pipes.

Emily realized she needed to get some oil delivered if she wanted the house to be warm. But without a signal on her cell phone, she had no idea how she would make that happen.

All at once, there came a knock at the door. It was a heavy, steady, considered knock, one that echoed all the way through the empty corridors.

Emily froze, feeling a jolt of anticipation in her chest. Who could be calling, at this hour, in this snow?

She left the kitchen and padded across the hallway floorboards, silent with her bare feet. Her hand hovered over the knob, and after a second's hesitation, she managed to pull herself together and open the door.

Standing before her, wearing a plaid jacket, his dark, jaw-length hair peppered with snowflakes, stood a man who Emily couldn't help but think resembled a lumberjack, or Little Red Riding Hood's Huntsman. Not her usual type, but there was certainly beauty in his cool, blue eyes, in the stubble on his well-defined chin, and Emily was shocked by the power of her attraction toward him.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

The man squinted at her, as though sizing her up. "I'm Daniel," he said. He held out his hand for her to shake. She took it, noting the sensation of the rough skin of his hands. "Who are you?"

"Emily," she replied, suddenly aware of the sensation of her own heartbeat. "My father owns this house. I came for the weekend."

Daniel's squint intensified. "The landlord hasn't been here in twenty years. Did you get permission to just drop by?"

His tone was rough, slightly hostile, and Emily recoiled.

"No," she said, awkwardly, a little uncomfortable to be reminded of the most painful experience of her life – her father's disappearance – while being taken aback by Daniel's gruffness. "But I have his blessing to come and go as I please. What's it to you anyway?" She matched his rough tone with her own.

"I'm the caretaker here," he replied. "I live in the carriage house on the grounds."

"You *live* here?" Emily cried, her image of a peaceful weekend in her father's old home shattering before her. "But I wanted to be alone this weekend."

“Yeah, well, you and me both,” Daniel replied. “I’m not used to people barging in unannounced.” He glanced over her shoulder suspiciously. “And tampering with the property.”

Emily folded her arms. “What makes you think I’ve tampered with the property?”

Daniel raised an eyebrow in response. “Well, unless you were planning on sitting here in the dark and cold all weekend, then I’d expect you to have tampered. Got the boiler running. Drained the pipes. That sort of thing.”

Emily’s gruffness gave way to embarrassment. She blushed.

“You haven’t managed to get the boiler working, have you?” Daniel replied. There was a wry smile on his lips that told Emily he was slightly amused by her predicament.

“I just haven’t had the chance to yet,” she replied, haughtily, trying to save face.

“Want me to show you?” he asked, almost lazily, as though doing so would be no skin off his nose.

“You would?” Emily asked, a little shocked and confused by his offer to help.

He stepped onto the welcome mat. Snowflakes fluttered from his jacket, creating a mini snowstorm in the hallway.

“I’d prefer to do it myself than have you break something,” he said by way of explanation, accompanied by a nonchalant shrug.

Emily noticed that the falling snow outside her open front door had turned into something of a blizzard. As much as she didn’t want to admit it, she was beyond grateful that Daniel had shown up when he did. If not, she probably would have frozen to death overnight.

She shut the door and the two of them paced along the corridor to the door leading down to the basement. Daniel had come prepared. He pulled out a flashlight, lighting a path down the staircase into the basement. Emily followed him down, a little freaked out by the darkness and cobwebs as she descended into the gloom. She’d been terrified of the old basement as a child and had rarely ventured down there. The place was filled with all the old-fashioned machinery and mechanicals that kept the house working. The sight of them overwhelmed her and made her wonder once again whether coming here had been a mistake.

Thankfully, Daniel started the boiler up in a matter of seconds, as if it was the easiest thing in the world. Emily couldn’t help but feel a little put out by the fact she’d needed a man to help her when the very reason she’d come here in the first place was to regain her independence. She realized then that despite Daniel’s rugged hotness and her undeniable attraction toward him, she needed him to leave ASAP. She was hardly going to go on a journey of self-discovery with him in the house. Having him on the grounds was bad enough.

Finished with the boiler, they both left the basement. Emily was relieved to be out of the dank, musty place and back into the main part of the house. She followed Daniel as he went down the hall and into the utility room out the back of the kitchen. Straightaway he got to work draining the pipes.

“Are you prepared to heat the house all winter?” he called to her from his position under the worktop. “Because they’ll freeze otherwise.”

“I’m just staying for the weekend,” Emily replied.

Daniel shuffled out from under the counter and sat up, his hair ruffled and sticking up all over the place. “You shouldn’t mess with an old house like this,” he said, shaking his head.

But he sorted out the water nonetheless.

“So where’s the heat?” Emily asked as soon as he was done. It was still freezing cold, despite the boiler being on and the pipes now unblocked. She rubbed her arms, trying to get the circulation going.

Daniel laughed, cleaning his dirty hands on a towel. “It doesn’t just miraculously start working, you know. You’ll need to call for oil delivery. All I could do is start the thing up.”

Emily sighed with frustration. So Daniel wasn’t quite the Knight in Shining Armor she thought he was.

“Here,” Daniel said, handing her a business card. “That’s Eric’s number. He’ll deliver to you.”

“Thanks,” she mumbled. “But I don’t seem to get service out here.”

She thought of her cell phone, of the empty bars, and remembered how wholly alone she really was.

“There’s a pay phone up the road,” Daniel said. “But I wouldn’t risk going there in the middle of a blizzard. And anyway, they’ll be closed now.”

“Of course,” Emily mumbled, feeling frustrated and completely at a loss.

Daniel must have noticed that Emily was put out and feeling dejected. “I can get a fire going for you,” he offered, nodding toward the living room. His eyebrows rose expectantly, almost shyly, making him look suddenly boyish.

Emily wanted to protest, to tell him to leave her alone in the freezing cold house because that’s the least she deserved, but something made her hesitate. Perhaps it was that having Daniel in the house made her feel suddenly less lonely, less cut off from civilization. She hadn’t expected to have no cell phone service, no ability to communicate with Amy, and the reality of spending her first night alone in the cold, dark house was daunting.

Daniel must have read into her hesitation because he strode out of the room before she got a chance to open her mouth and say anything.

She followed, silently grateful that he’d been able to read the loneliness in her eyes and had offered to remain, even if it was under the guise of starting a fire. She found Daniel in the living room, busy constructing a neat pile of kindling, coal, and logs in the fireplace. She was struck immediately with a memory of her father, of him crouched by the fireplace expertly creating fires, spending as much care and time over them as someone might a great work of art. She’d watched him make a thousand of them, and had always loved them. She found fires hypnotic and would spend hours stretched out on the rug before them, watching the orange and red flames dance, sitting for so long the heat would sting her face.

Emotion began to creep up Emily’s gullet, threatening to choke her. Thinking of her father, seeing so clearly the memory in her mind, made long suppressed tears well in her eyes. She didn’t want to cry in front of Daniel, didn’t want to look like a pathetic, helpless damsel. So she balled her emotions up inside and strode purposefully into the room.

“I actually know how to make a fire,” she said to Daniel.

“Oh, you do?” Daniel replied, looking up at her with a cocked eyebrow. “Be my guest.” He held out the matches.

Emily snatched them up and struck one alight, the little orange flame flickering in her fingers. The truth was, she’d only ever watched her father making fires; she herself had never actually made one. But she could see so vividly in her memory how to do it that she felt confident in her ability. So she knelt down and set fire to the bits of kindling Daniel had placed at the bottom of the fireplace. In a matter of seconds the fire went up, making a familiar *whomp* that felt as comforting and nostalgic to her as anything else the great house contained. She felt very proud of herself as the flames began to grow. But instead of going up the chimney, black smoke started billowing into the room.

“SHIT!” Emily cried as plumes of smoke billowed around her.

Daniel started laughing. “Thought you said you knew how to make a fire,” he said, opening the flue. The plume of smoke was immediately sucked up into the chimney. “Ta-da,” he added with a grin.

As the smoke around them thinned out, Emily gave him a displeased look, too proud to thank him for the help she’d so clearly needed. But she was relieved to finally be warm. She felt her circulation kick in, and the warmth returned to her toes and nose. Her stiff fingers loosened.

In the firelight, the living room was illuminated and bathed in a soft, orange light. Emily could finally see all the old antique furniture her dad had filled the house with. She glanced around her at the shabby, uncared for items. The tall bookcase stood in one corner, once crammed full

of books that she'd spent her endless summer days reading, now with just a few remaining. Then there was the old grand piano by the window. No doubt it would be out of tune by now, but once upon a time, her father would play her songs and she would sing along. Her father had taken such great pride in the house, and seeing it now, the glowing light revealing its unkempt state, upset her.

The two couches were covered with white sheets. Emily thought about removing them but knew it would cause a dust cloud. After the smoke cloud, she wasn't sure her lungs could take it. And anyway, Daniel looked pretty cozy sitting on the floor beside the fireplace, so she just settled down beside him.

"So," Daniel said, warming his hands against the fire. "We've got you some warmth at the very least. But there's no electricity in the house and I'm guessing you didn't think to pack a lantern or candle in that suitcase of yours."

Emily shook her head. Her suitcase was filled with frivolous things, nothing useful, nothing she'd really need to get by here.

"Dad used to always have candles and matches," she said. "He was always prepared. I suppose I expected there to still be a whole cupboard full, but after twenty years..."

She shut her mouth, suddenly aware of having articulated a memory of her father aloud. It wasn't something she did often, usually keeping her feelings about him hidden deeply inside of her. The ease with which she'd spoken of him shocked her.

"We can just stay in here then," Daniel said gently, as though recognizing that Emily was re-experiencing some painful memory. "There's plenty of light to see by with the fire. Want some tea?"

Emily frowned. "Tea? How exactly are you going to do that without any electricity?"

Daniel smiled as though accepting some kind of challenge. "Watch and learn."

He stood up and disappeared from the vast living room, returning a few minutes later with a small round pot that looked like a cauldron.

"What have you got there?" Emily asked, curious.

"Oh, just the best tea you're ever going to drink," he said, placing the cauldron over the flames. "You've never had tea 'til you've had fire-boiled tea."

Emily watched him, the way the firelight danced off his features, accentuating them in a way that made him even more attractive. The way he was so focused on his task added to the appeal. Emily couldn't help but marvel at his practicality, his resourcefulness.

"Here," he said, handing her a cup and breaking through her reverie. He watched expectantly as she took the first sip.

"Oh, that's really good," Emily said, relieved, at last, to be banishing the cold from her bones.

Daniel started to laugh.

"What?" Emily challenged him.

"I just hadn't seen you smile yet, is all," he replied.

Emily looked away, feeling suddenly bashful. Daniel was about as far away from Ben as a man could be, and yet her attraction toward him was powerful. Maybe in another place, another time, she'd give in to her lust. She'd been with no one but Ben for seven years, after all, and she deserved some attention, some excitement.

But now wasn't the right time. Not with everything going on, with her life in complete chaos and upheaval, and with the memories of her father swirling round in her mind. She felt that everywhere she looked, she could see the shadows of him; sitting on the sofa with a young Emily curled into his side, reading to her aloud; bursting in through the door beaming from ear to ear after discovering some precious antique at the flea market, then spending hours carefully cleaning it, restoring it to its former glory. Where were all the antiques now? All the figurines and artwork, the commemorative crockery and Civil War-era cutlery pieces? The house hadn't stood still, frozen in time, like it had in her memory. Time had taken its toll on the property in a way she hadn't even considered.

Another wave of grief crashed over Emily as she glanced around at the dusty, disheveled room that had once been brimming with life and laughter.

“How did this place get into this state?” she suddenly cried, unable to keep the accusatory tone out of her voice. She frowned. “I mean, you’re supposed to be taking care of it, aren’t you?”

Daniel flinched, as though taken aback by her sudden aggressiveness. Just moments earlier they’d shared a gentle, tender moment. Seconds later she was giving him a hard time. Daniel flashed her a cool stare. “I do my best. It’s a big house. There’s only one of me.”

“Sorry,” Emily said, immediately backtracking, not liking to be the cause of Daniel’s darkened expression one bit. “I didn’t mean to take a dig at you. I just mean...” She looked into her cup and swirled the tea leaves. “This place was like something out of a fairytale when I was a kid. It was so awe-inspiring, you know? So beautiful.” She looked up to see Daniel watching her intently. “It’s just sad to see it like this.”

“What were you expecting?” Daniel replied. “It’s been abandoned for twenty years.”

Emily looked away sadly. “I know. I guess I just wanted to imagine that it had been suspended in time.”

Suspended in time, like the image of her father that she had in her mind. He was still forty years old, never having aged a day, looking identical to the last time she’d seen him. But wherever he was, time would have affected him just like it had affected the house. Emily’s resolve to fix up the house over the weekend grew even stronger. She wanted nothing more than to restore the place, if only slightly, back to its old glory. Maybe in doing so, it would be like bringing her father back to her. She could do it in his honor.

Emily took her last sip of tea and set the cup down. “I should get to bed,” she said. “It’s been a long day.”

“Of course,” Daniel replied, standing. He moved quickly, waltzing out of the room and down the corridor toward the front door, leaving Emily to tag along behind. “Just call on me when you find yourself in trouble, okay?” he added. “I’m just in the carriage house over there.”

“I won’t need to,” Emily said indignantly. “I can do it myself.”

Daniel hauled open the front door, letting the bracing snow swirl inside. He hunkered down in his jacket, then looked back over his shoulder. “Pride won’t get you far in this place, Emily. There’s nothing wrong with asking for help.”

She wanted to shout something at him, to argue, to refute his claim that she was too proud, but instead she watched his back as he disappeared into the dark, swirling snow, unable to speak, her tongue completely tied.

Emily closed the door, shutting out the outside world and the fury of the blizzard. She was now completely alone. Light spilled into the hallway from the living room fire but wasn’t strong enough to reach up the stairs. She glanced up the long, wooden staircase as it disappeared into blackness. Unless she was prepared to sleep on one of the dusty couches, she would have to get the nerve to venture upstairs and into the pitch-blackness. She felt like a child again, scared of descending into the shadow-filled basement, inventing all kinds of monsters and ghouls that were waiting down there to get her. Only now she was a grown woman of thirty-five, too scared to go upstairs because she knew the sight of abandonment was worse than any ghoul her mind could create.

Instead, Emily went back into the living room to soak up the last of the warmth from the fire. There were still a few books on the bookshelf — *The Secret Garden*, *Five Children*, *It*— classics her father had read to her. But what of the rest? Where had her father’s belongings gone? They had disappeared into that unknown place just like her father had.

As the embers began to die, darkness settled in around her, matching her somber mood. She could put off the fatigue no longer; the time had come to climb the steps.

Just as she left the living room, she heard a strange scratching noise coming from the front door. Her first thought was some kind of wild creature sniffing around for scraps, but the noise was too precise, too considered.

Heart pounding, she padded along the hall on silent feet and drew up to the front door, pressing her ear against it. Whatever she thought she'd heard, it was gone now. All she could hear was the screaming wind. But something compelled her to open the door.

She pulled it open and saw that placed on the doorstep were candles, a lantern, and matches. Daniel must have come back and left them for her.

She snatched them up, grudgingly accepting his offer of help, her pride stung. But at the same time she was beyond grateful that there was someone looking out for her. She might have given up her life and run away to this place, but she wasn't completely alone here.

Emily lit the lantern and finally felt brave enough to go upstairs. As the soft lantern light led her up the staircase, she took in the sight of the picture frames on the wall, the images inside them faded with time, the cobwebs strung across them covered in dust. Most of the pictures were watercolors of the local area – sailing boats on the ocean, evergreens in the national park – but one was a family portrait. She stopped, staring at the picture, looking at the image of herself as a little girl. She had completely forgotten about this picture, had confined it to some part of her memory and locked it away for twenty years.

Swallowing her emotion, she continued to climb the steps. The old stairs creaked loudly beneath her and she noticed that some of the steps had cracked. They were scuffed from years of footsteps and a memory struck her of running up and down these steps in her red T-bar shoes.

Up in the hallway the lantern light illuminated the long corridor – the numerous dark-oak wood doors, the floor-to-ceiling window at the end that was now boarded up. Her old bedroom was the last on the right, opposite the bathroom. She couldn't bear the thought of looking in either room. Too many memories would be contained in her bedroom, too many for her to unleash right now. And she didn't much fancy finding out what kind of creepy crawlies had made the bathroom their home over the years.

Instead, Emily stumbled along the corridor, weaving past the antique ornament case she'd stubbed her toe on countless times, and into her parents' room.

In the lantern light, Emily could see how dusty the bed was, how moth-bitten the bedding had become over the years. The memory of the beautiful four-poster bed that her parents had shared shattered in her mind as she was confronted with the reality. Twenty years of abandonment had ravaged the room. The curtains were grimy and crumpled, hanging limply beside the boarded up windows. The wall sconces were thick with dust and cobwebs, looking like whole generations of spider families had made them home. A layer of thick dust had settled over everything, including the dressing table beside the window, the little stool her mother had sat upon many years ago as she'd lathered her face with lavender-scented cream in the vanity mirror.

Emily could see it all, all the memories she had buried over the years. She couldn't help the tears from coming. All the emotions she'd felt over the last few days caught up with her, intensified by thoughts of her father, of the sudden shock of how much she missed him.

Outside, the sound of the blizzard intensified. Emily set the lantern down on the bedside table, sending a cloud of dust into the air as she did so, and readied herself for bed. The warmth of the fire hadn't reached this far up and the room was bitingly cold as she removed her clothes. In her suitcase she found her silky camisole and realized it wasn't going to be much use to her here; she would be better off with unflattering long johns and thick bed socks.

Emily pulled back the dusty crimson and gold patchwork cover then slid into the bed. She stared up at the ceiling for a moment, reflecting on everything that had happened over the last few days. Lonely, cold, and feeling helpless, she blew out the flame of the lantern, plunging herself into darkness, and cried herself to sleep.

Chapter Four

Emily woke early the next morning feeling disorientated. There was such little light coming into the room from the boarded-up windows, it took her a moment to realize where she was. Her eyes slowly adjusted to the dimness, the room materialized around her, and she remembered – Sunset Harbor. Her father's home.

A moment went by before she remembered that she was also jobless, homeless, and completely alone.

She dragged her weary body out of bed. The morning air was cold. Her appearance in the dusty vanity mirror alarmed her; her face was puffy from the tears she'd shed the night before, her skin drawn and pale. It suddenly occurred to her that she'd failed to eat sufficiently the previous day. The only thing she'd consumed the night before had been a cup of Daniel's fire-brewed tea.

She hesitated momentarily beside the mirror, looking at her body reflected in the old, grimy glass while her mind played over the night before – of the warming fire, of her sitting by the hearth with Daniel drinking tea, Daniel mocking her inability to care for the house. She remembered the snow flecks in his hair when she'd first opened the door to him, and the way he'd retreated into the blizzard, disappearing into the inky black night as quickly as he'd come.

Her growling stomach dragged her out of her thoughts and back into the moment. She dressed quickly. The crumpled shirt she pulled on was far too thin for the cold air so she wrapped the dusty blanket from the bed around her shoulders. Then she left the bedroom and padded downstairs on bare feet.

Downstairs, all was silent. She peered through the frosted window in the front door and was astonished to see that although the storm had now stopped, snow was piled three feet high, turning the world outside into a smooth, still, endless whiteness. She had never seen that much snow in her life.

Emily could just make out the footprints of a bird as it had hopped around on the path outside, but other than that, nothing had been disturbed. It looked peaceful, but at the same time desolate, reminding Emily of her loneliness.

Realizing that venturing outside wasn't an option, Emily decided to explore the house and see what, if anything, it might hold. The house had been so dark last night she hadn't been able to look around too much, but now in the morning daylight the task was somewhat easier. She went into the kitchen first, driven instinctively by her grumbling stomach.

The kitchen was in more of a state than she'd realized when she'd wandered through here last night. The fridge – an original cream 1950s Prestcold her father had found during a yard sale one summer – wasn't working. She tried to remember whether it ever had, or whether it had been another source of annoyance for her mother, another one of those bits of junk her dad had cluttered the old house up with. Emily had found her dad's collections boring as a kid, but now she treasured those memories, clinging onto them as tightly as she could.

Inside the fridge Emily found nothing but a horrible smell. She shut it quickly, locking the door with the handle, before going over to the cupboards to look inside. Here she found an old can of corn, its label sun-bleached to the point of obscurity, and a bottle of malt vinegar. She briefly considered making some kind of meal out of the items but decided she wasn't yet that desperate. The can opener was rusted completely closed anyway, so there'd be no way to get into the corn even if she was.

She went into the pantry next, where the washer and dryer were located. The room was dark, the small window covered with plywood like many of the others in the house. Emily pressed a button on the washer dryer but wasn't surprised to find that it didn't work. Growing increasingly frustrated with her situation, Emily decided to take action. She clambered up onto the sideboard

and attempted to pry off a piece of plywood. It was harder to do than she'd expected, but she was determined. She pulled and pulled, using all the force in her arms. Finally, the board began to crack. Emily wrenched one last time and the plywood gave, coming away from the window entirely. The force was so great she fell back off the counter, the heavy board falling from her grasp and swinging toward the window. Emily heard the sound of the window smashing at the same time as she landed on a heap on the floor, winding herself.

Frigid air rushed into the pantry. Emily groaned and pulled herself up to sitting before checking her bruised body to make sure nothing was broken. Her back was sore and she rubbed it as she glanced up at the broken window letting in a weak stream of light. It frustrated Emily to realize that in attempting to solve a problem, she'd only made things worse for herself.

She took a deep breath and stood, then carefully picked up the piece of board from the sideboard where it had fallen. Bits of glass fell to the ground and smashed. Emily inspected the board and saw that the nails were completely bent. Even if she were able to find a hammer – something she strongly doubted – the nails would be too bent anyway. Then she saw that she'd managed to split the frame of the window while yanking the board off. The whole thing would need to be replaced.

Emily was far too cold to stand around in the pantry. Through the smashed window she was confronted by the same sight of endless white snow. She snatched her blanket up off the floor and secured it around her shoulders again, then left the pantry and headed into the living room. At least here she'd be able to light a fire and get some warmth into her bones.

In the living room, the comforting smell of burnt wood still lingered in the air. Emily crouched beside the fireplace and began stacking kindling and logs into a pyramid shape. This time, she remembered to open the flue, and was relieved when the first flame crackled to life.

She sat back on her heels and began to warm her cold hands. Then she noticed the pot that Daniel had brewed the tea in sitting next to the fireplace. She hadn't tidied anything up, and the pot and mugs still lay where they'd left them the night before. Memories flashed in her mind of her and Daniel sharing the tea, chatting about the old house. Her stomach growled, reminding her of her hunger, and she decided to brew some tea just like Daniel had shown her, reasoning that it would stave off her hunger for a little while at least.

Just as she had finished setting the pot up over the fire, she heard the sound of her phone ringing from somewhere in the house. Though a familiar noise, it made her jump a mile to hear it now, echoing through the corridors. She'd given up on it when she realized she had no signal, so the sound of its ring was a surprise to her.

Emily leapt up, abandoning the tea, and followed the sound of her phone. She found it on the cabinet in the hallway. An unfamiliar number was calling her and she answered, somewhat bemused.

"Oh, um, hi," the elderly male voice on the other end of the line said. "Are you the lady up at Fifteen West Street?" The line was bad and the man's soft, hesitant voice was almost inaudible.

Emily frowned, confused by the call. "Yes. Who is this?"

"The name's Eric. I, er, I deliver the oil to all the properties in the area. I heard you were staying at that old house so I thought I'd come over with a delivery. I mean, if you, uh, need it."

Emily could hardly believe it. News had certainly gotten around the small community quickly. But wait; how had Eric gotten her cell number? Then she remembered Daniel looking at it the night before when she told him she had spotty service. He must have seen the number and memorized it, planning to give it to Eric. So much for being prideful, she could hardly contain her delight.

"Yes, that would be wonderful," she replied. "When can you come?"

"Well," the man replied in the same nervous, almost embarrassed-sounding voice. "I'm actually in the truck now heading over there."

“You are?” Emily stammered, hardly believing her luck. She peered quickly at the time on her phone. It wasn’t even 8 a.m. yet. Either Eric got to work super early as a matter of course or he’d made the trip especially for her. She wondered whether the man who’d given her a lift last night had gotten in touch with the oil company on her behalf. Either it was him or... Daniel?

She put the thought out of her mind and returned her attention to her telephone conversation. “Will you be able to get here?” she asked. “There’s a lot of snow.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Eric said. “The truck can handle snow. Just make sure a pathway is clear to the pipe.”

Emily wracked her brain, trying to remember whether she’d seen a shovel anywhere in the house. “Okay, I’ll do my best. Thank you.”

The line went dead and Emily sprang into action. She raced back into the kitchen, checking each of the cupboards. There was nothing even close to what she needed, so she tried all the cupboards in the pantry, then on into the utility room. At last, she found a snow shovel propped up against the back door. Emily never thought she’d be so thrilled to see a shovel in all her life, but she grabbed hold of it like a lifeline. She was so excited about the shovel that she almost forgot to put any shoes on. But just as her hand hovered over the latch to open the back door, she saw her running sneakers sticking out of a bag she’d left there. She put them on quickly then yanked the door open, her precious shovel in her grasp.

Immediately, the depth and scale of the snowstorm became apparent to her. Looking out at the snow from her window had been one thing, but seeing it piled up three feet deep ahead of her like a wall of ice was another.

Emily wasted no time. She slammed the shovel into the wall of snow and ice and began to carve a path out of the house. It was hard going; within a matter of minutes she could feel the sweat dripping down her back, her arms ached, and she was certain that she’d have blisters on her palms once she was done.

After getting through three feet of snow, Emily began to find her rhythm. There was something cathartic about the task, about the momentum needed to shovel the snow. Even the physical unpleasantness seemed to matter less when she could begin to see how her efforts were being rewarded. Back in New York her favorite form of exercise was running on the treadmill, but this was more of a workout than any she’d had before.

Emily managed to carve out a ten-foot-long path through the grounds at the back of the house.

But she looked up in despair to see the pipe outlet was a good forty feet away – and she was already spent.

Trying not to despair too much, she decided to rest for a moment to catch her breath. As she did so, she caught sight of the caretaker’s house farther along the garden, hidden beside evergreens. A small plume of smoke rose from the chimney and warm light spilled from the windows. Emily couldn’t help but think of Daniel inside, drinking his tea, staying toasty warm. He would help her, she had no doubt about that, but she wanted to prove herself. He’d mocked her mercilessly the evening before, and had in all likelihood been the one to call Eric in the first place. He must have perceived her to be a damsel in distress, and Emily didn’t want him to have the satisfaction of being proved right.

But her stomach was complaining again and she was exhausted. Far too exhausted to carry on. Emily stood in the river she’d created, suddenly overwhelmed by her predicament, too proud to call for the help she needed, too weak to do what needed to be done herself. Frustration mounted inside of her until it turned to hot tears. Her tears made her even more angry, angry at herself for being useless. In her frustrated mind, she berated herself and, like a petulant and stubborn child, resolved to return home as soon as the snow had melted.

Discarding the shovel, Emily stomped back into the house, her sneakers soaked through. She kicked them off by the door then went back into the living room to warm up by the fire.

She slumped down onto the dusty couch and grabbed her phone, preparing herself to call Amy and tell her the oh-so-expected news that she'd failed her first and only attempt at being self-sufficient. But the phone was out of battery. Stifling a screech, Emily threw her useless cell back onto the couch, then flopped onto her side, utterly defeated.

Through her sobbing, Emily heard a scraping noise coming from outside. She sat up, dried her eyes, then ran to the window and looked out. Right away she saw that Daniel was there, her discarded shovel in his grasp, digging through the snow and continuing what she had failed to complete. She could hardly believe how quickly he was able to clear the snow, how adept he was, how well suited to the task at hand, like he had been born to work the land. But her admiration was short-lived. Instead of feeling grateful toward Daniel or pleased to see that he had managed to clear a path all the way to the outlet pipe, she felt angry with him, directing her own impotence at him instead of inwardly.

Without even thinking about what she was doing, Emily grabbed her soggy sneakers and heaved them back on. Her mind was racing with thoughts; memories of all her useless ex-boyfriends who hadn't listened to her, who'd stepped in and tried to "save" her. It wasn't just Ben; before him had been Adrian, who was so overprotective he was stifling, and then there was Mark before him, who treated her like a fragile ornament. Each of them had learned of her past – her father's mysterious disappearance being just the tip of the iceberg – and had treated her like something that needed protecting. It was all those men in her past who had made her this way and she wasn't going to stand for it anymore.

She stormed out into the snow.

"Hey!" she cried. "What are you doing?"

Daniel paused only briefly. He didn't even look back over his shoulder at her, just kept on shoveling, before calmly saying, "I'm clearing a path."

"I can see that," Emily shot back. "What I mean is why, when I told you I didn't need your help?"

"Because otherwise you'd freeze," Daniel replied simply, still not looking at her. "And so would the water, now that I've turned it on."

"So?" Emily retorted. "What's it to you if I freeze? It's my life. I can freeze if I want to."

Daniel was in no hurry to interact with Emily, or feed into the argument she was so clearly trying to start. He just kept on shoveling, calmly, methodically, as unrattled by her presence as he would have been if she hadn't been there at all.

"I'm not prepared to sit back and let you die," Daniel replied.

Emily folded her arms. "I think that's a little bit melodramatic, don't you? There's a big difference between getting a bit cold and dying!"

Finally, Daniel rammed the shovel into the snow and straightened up. He met her eyes, his expression unreadable. "That snow was piled so high it was covering the exhaust. You manage to get that boiler on, it would go right back into the house. You'd be dead of carbon poisoning in about twenty minutes." He said it so matter-of-factly it took Emily aback. "If you want to die, do it on your own time. But it's not happening on my watch." Then he threw the shovel to the ground and headed back to the carriage house.

Emily stood there, watching him go, feeling her anger melt away only to be replaced with shame. She felt terrible for the way she'd spoken to Daniel. He was only trying to help and she'd thrown it all back in his face like a bratty child.

She was tempted to run to him, to apologize, but at that moment the oil truck appeared at the end of the street. Emily felt her heart soar, surprised at how happy she felt by the mere fact that she was getting oil delivered. Being in the house in Maine was about as different from her life in New York as it could be.

Emily watched as Eric leapt down from the truck, surprisingly agile for someone so old. He was dressed in oil-stained overalls like a character from a cartoon. His face was weather-beaten but kindly.

“Hi,” he said in the same unsure manner he’d had on the phone.

“I’m Emily,” Emily said, offering her hand to shake his. “I’m really glad you’re here.”

Eric just nodded, and got straight to work setting up the oil pump. He clearly wasn’t one for talking, and Emily stood there uncomfortably watching him work, smiling weakly every time she noticed his gaze flick briefly to her as though confused by the fact she was even there.

“Can you show me to the boiler?” he said once everything was in place.

Emily thought of the basement, of her hatred of the huge machines within it that powered the house, of the thousands of spiders who’d strung their webs there throughout the years.

“Yes, this way,” she replied in a small, thin voice.

Eric got out his flashlight and together they went down into the creepy, dark basement. Just like Daniel, Eric seemed to have a skilled hand with the mechanical stuff. Within seconds, the enormous boiler kicked into life. Emily couldn’t help herself; she threw her arms around the elderly man.

“It works! I can’t believe it works!”

Eric stiffened at her touch. “Well, you shouldn’t be messing with an old house like this,” he replied.

Emily loosened her grip. She didn’t even care that yet another person was telling her to stop, to give up, that she wasn’t good enough. The house now had heat along with water, and that meant she didn’t need to return to New York as a failure.

“Here,” Emily said, grabbing her purse. “How much do I owe you?”

Eric just shook his head. “It’s all covered,” he replied.

“Covered by who?” Emily asked.

“Just someone,” Eric replied evasively. He clearly felt uncomfortable being caught up in the unusual situation. Whoever had paid him to come over and stock up her oil supply must have asked him to keep it quiet and the whole situation was making him awkward.

“Well, okay,” Emily said. “If you say so.”

Inwardly she resolved to find out who had done it, and to pay him back.

Eric just nodded once, sharply, then headed back up out of the basement. Emily quickly followed, not wanting to be in the basement alone. As she climbed the steps, she noticed she had a renewed spring in her step.

She showed Eric to the door.

“Thank you, really,” she said as meaningfully as she could.

Eric said nothing, just gave her a parting look, then headed outside to pack up his things.

Emily shut the door. Feeling elated, she rushed upstairs to the master bedroom and put her hand against the radiator. Sure enough, warmth was beginning to spread through the pipes. She was so happy she didn’t even mind the way they banged and clanked, the noise echoing through the house.

*

As the day wore on, Emily reveled in the sensation of being warm. She hadn’t fully realized how uncomfortable she’d been ever since leaving New York, and hoped that some of the crabbiness she’d thrown at Daniel had been in part because of that discomfort.

No longer needing the dusty blanket from the master bedroom for warmth, Emily draped it over the broken window in the pantry before setting about cleaning up the glass fragments. She hung her wet clothes over the radiators, beat the dust out of the rug in the living room, and dusted all

the shelves before setting the books up neatly. Already the room felt cozier, and more like the place she remembered. She took down her old, well-read copy of *Alice Through The Looking Glass*, then set about reading it by the hearth. But she couldn't concentrate. Her mind continually wandered back to Daniel. She felt so ashamed of the way she'd treated him. Though he acted as though he didn't care, the way he'd thrown the shovel and stormed back to the house was evidence enough that her words had frustrated him.

The guilt gnawed at her until she couldn't take it anymore. She abandoned the book, put on her now toasty warm sneakers, and headed out toward the carriage house.

She knocked on the door and waited as the sound of someone moving about came from inside. Then the door swung open and there was Daniel, backlit by the glow of a warm fire. A delicious smell wafted out of the house, reminding Emily again that she hadn't eaten. She began to salivate.

"What's up?" Daniel asked, his tone as measured as always.

Emily couldn't help but peer over his shoulder, taking in the sight of the roaring fire, the varnished floorboards and crammed bookshelves, the guitar propped up beside a piano. She hadn't known what to expect from Daniel's home, but it hadn't been this. The incongruity of the place in which Daniel lived and the person she'd assumed him to be surprised her.

"I was..." she stammered. "Just here to..." Her voice trailed away.

"Here to ask for some soup?" Daniel suggested.

Emily snapped to attention. "No. Why would you think that?"

Daniel gave her a look that was a cross between amused and reproachful. "Because you look half starved."

"Well, I'm not," Emily replied brusquely, once again infuriated by Daniel's assumption that she was weak and unable to care for herself, no matter how right he really was. She hated the way Daniel made her feel, like she was some kind of stupid child. "I was actually here to ask you about the electricity," she said. It was only a half-lie; she *did* need electricity at some point.

She wasn't sure but she thought she saw a flicker of disappointment in Daniel's eyes.

"I can get that fixed up for you tomorrow," he said, in a dismissive kind of tone, one that told her he wanted her off his doorstep and out of his hair.

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