

A woman with blonde hair is lying on her back on a sandy beach, her arms and legs spread wide in a relaxed pose. She is wearing a dark, patterned bikini top and several gold bangles on her right wrist. The background features a calm ocean reflecting the warm, golden light of a setting sun. The sky transitions from a deep blue at the top to a bright yellow near the horizon.

Summer's **END**

Harper Bliss

HARPER BLISS

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Preview

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Warning: This title contains graphic language and f/f sex.

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PART ONE

EMILY

The Red Lodge looked much tidier than Emily had envisioned, not that she had high expectations after three months on the road. The house felt a bit out of place, perched in between resorts along the beach, as if someone had forgotten to tear it down while developing the rest of the coast. She'd been scouring the internet on her phone while in Bangkok, looking for a decent place to stay in Samui. Somewhere cheap enough so that she didn't have to ask her parents for money again, but comfortable enough to meet her not-so-modest standards. She blamed her family for surrounding her with too much luxury because the only hotels she liked were well above her fifteen-quid-a-night budget while the ones that fit into it nicely appeared way too shabby—even the pictures on their website—for a girl brought up in Holland Park.

She'd asked her parents for extra cash twice. The first time when she had run out of funds one third into her three-month journey. The second—and last, she had sworn—after she'd bought a series of paintings from an extremely talented Vietnamese artist for quite a bargain, but the shipping costs had set her back half a month in lodging. She could hardly drag three forty-eight by sixty inch canvasses with her on the rest of her trip. Determined to make it on her own for one last week—because wasn't that what this trip was all about?—she'd looked away from her phone and her gaze had landed on a pile of red flyers stacked on the nearby window sill.

The Red Lodge - Beachside B&B - Koh Samui
Only 3 rooms available at any time. Not for party people.
25 USD per night.

Tired of looking for a decent place to stay, Emily converted the amount in her head and opened the e-mail application on her phone. A few hours later she had written confirmation and a bed—although she had no idea of the state it would be in—for the last five days of her three-month sabbatical in Asia. The next day she boarded a plane to the island.

“Emily Kane?” A woman with the exact same upper-crust accent as her mother appeared in the doorway.

“That's me.” It was hard to pin an age on her, but Emily guessed, based on nothing else but the similarity in tone of voice, that the woman must have been about the same age as her mother.

“Welcome to The Red Lodge. My name is Marianne.” She extended her hand, which took Emily by surprise as she wasn't used to being greeted with a firm handshake anymore. “Please, come inside.”

Emily quite liked the personable approach and figured that, as she was flying back to London soon, she might as well get used to British people again. Not that she hadn't encountered way too many on her travels, but she'd become rather good at avoiding them.

“Is it just you?” Marianne asked.

I’m not hiding a small person in my backpack. Emily just smiled and nodded. “Yep.” Six months ago, when she was still engaged, she and Jasper had considered Thailand a viable honeymoon destination. Surely they would have visited one of the islands, but they would never have picked a low-key place like this for accommodation.

But Jasper wasn’t here, and that was exactly how she wanted it. Wasn’t it?

“Absolutely nothing wrong with that.” Marianne flashed her a smile before proceeding to check her in.

Emily ran her eyes over the faded Ramones t-shirt—so tight around the shoulders—the woman wore and considered it quite age-inappropriate.

“Things are pretty relaxed around here. There’s no set breakfast time so feel free to sleep as long as you like.” Marianne handed her an old-fashioned key. “The kitchen,” she curled her fingers into air quotes, “closes at ten p.m. and silence is appreciated at night.”

“Thanks.” Emily took the key into possession and made a mental note to store her valuables in the safe—if her room even had one.

“Let me show you to your quarters.” Marianne arched her eyebrows up in mock anticipation. “You’re on the ground floor, overlooking the garden.”

Emily didn’t quite know what to make of Marianne. The ultra-posh accent didn’t seem to fit with her surroundings—nor with the t-shirt. She slung her backpack over her shoulder and followed Marianne from the hallway to the back of the house. Of all the places she’d stayed at, this one appeared the most at odds. The decoration was Asian, but the house felt thoroughly European. As though it had been transported here from Holland Park.

“Here we are.” The door to the room was open and when Marianne showed her in, Emily couldn’t believe what she saw. It was bright and the water from the pool outside reflected blue onto the wardrobe mirror through a large French window.

Stumped for words, Emily turned to her hostess.

“Quite a common reaction.” A satisfied grin tugged at the corners of the woman’s mouth. “But what can I say, I like my surroundings well-finished and pretty.”

“But... twenty-five dollars?”

“I’m not in this business for the money,” Marianne said matter-of-factly. “Why don’t you freshen up and I’ll see you later. I’ll be outside.”

Before Emily had a chance to reply, Marianne had turned on her heels and closed the door behind her. Emily couldn’t help but wonder if she’d just had an enormous bout of luck or whether there was a catch to this lush room she had just ventured into.

MARIANNE

Another one who’s trying to find herself. In the five years since Marianne had opened the Lodge to the public, she’d seen too many of them pass. She walked up the stairs to her own room on the top floor. The third step creaked, as it had been doing for the past three weeks.

Emily reminded her of a previous life—the life she had led before her self-chosen exile to Thailand. Marianne had no idea how long the girl had been travelling, but even the dark complexion of her skin and the natural highlights in her hair—both the result of hours of exposure to the hot South-East Asian sun, no doubt—couldn't hide her airs and graces.

If she's lucky, she'll learn. Marianne drew her t-shirt over her head and scanned the room for her bikini. Emily was the only guest today and a swim in the ocean was long overdue. Before swapping her undies for swimwear, Marianne dropped to the floor in front of the mirror and performed twenty-five pushups. She'd only recently started working out again and they left her puffing on the carpet for a few minutes. Despite the sudden fatigue, which she knew would pass, she felt stronger. A word she hadn't associated with herself in a long time.

After slipping into a black bikini and covering the rest of her skin with a t-shirt and pair of shorts, she descended the stairs. The house was too empty today. Even at full capacity, it was never loud or exceptionally cheerful, but at least there was some noise. Some signs of life. A pipe gurgling to life or water spattering in the pool outside. A reminder that she wasn't alone.

She trudged through the garden, along the stone path by the pool, until she reached the beach. Outside, the sun beat down mercilessly, but the sky was a blue you couldn't imagine if it wasn't staring you in the face. So deep and pristine, it should grace many a touristic pamphlet, but a picture could never fully capture its essence. The sense of freedom and joy it provoked. The healing quality of a blue sky you could always count on during certain times of year was invaluable.

The sand was hot beneath her feet, but Marianne was used to that by now. She walked a bit quicker until she reached the moist part of the beach and stood overlooking the ocean, as she did every day. The waves in August were usually lazier than this.

This was a quiet beach, with only two medium-sized resorts spread out across the strip. Marianne would never have chosen it otherwise. Not a lot of swimmers ventured into the ocean at this time of the day, preferring the shadow provided by their hotel pool gazebos over the unflinching heat of the Thai afternoon sun.

"Is the water too cold for you?"

The voice that came from behind Marianne startled her. She spun around and looked into Emily's grinning face.

"That was quick." She returned Emily's smile. "Room too small and stuffy for you?"

"Not in the least." Emily winked and ran past her with the enthusiasm of a child who's never seen the sea in her life. She wore a skimpy bikini with a flower pattern. Marianne followed her with her eyes as Emily waded into the water. Her skin was nut brown and contrasted heavily with the lightness of her hair that had grown unruly. Marianne checked herself for any signs of sudden arousal—for any inkling that some day this would pass—but as usual, she felt nothing. Hadn't done so in five years.

She wondered what Emily's story was—because they all had one. The ones who turned up alone despite the fact that they looked as if they'd never been anywhere on their own in their life. She looked a bit too old to be on a post-university gap year, but these days, you just never knew.

Marianne let her shorts drop onto the sand, stripped off her t-shirt and walked into the waves.

It struck her again how different it was to cross from land to ocean in different parts of the world. Brighton had its charms—and she'd owned a holiday house there for ten years for a reason—but, when put in perspective, the North Sea really had nothing on the Pacific Ocean. Having it at her disposal whenever she wanted was a big plus, but it wasn't the main reason she had fled Britain. If only.

With strong strokes—at least she swam every day and swimming in waves does so much more for the upper body than counting laps in the pool—she quickly made up the distance between Emily and her. If she'd had a romantic bone left in her body, Marianne could have almost considered it a romantic moment—swimming towards another woman in the shimmering ocean. She shook off the thought and engaged in what had become her specialty since opening the Lodge. Small talk. Fleeting moments, people passing through, enough superficial connections to get through the day and feel human but not enough to ever feel deserted again. This was her life now, and it was exactly how she wanted it.

Facing Emily, Marianne treaded water. Her feet could reach the ocean floor, but she really did want to get stronger.

“How long have you been travelling?” Marianne always found it interesting to discover how people ended up here. All these people passing by, occupying a room in her house—all momentarily in the same situation, but always a different tale to tell.

EMILY

“Three months. This is my last stop. After this, I'm flying home.” After the turmoil of Bangkok, this place felt like paradise. Emily didn't wait for her words to register with Marianne, who had probably heard a similar story a million times before. She let her head sink back into the water and let it cool her glowing scalp.

“And where's that?” Marianne asked as soon as Emily's ears breached the surface again. *Excellent question.* Could she just go back after having burned so many bridges? Could London ever be home again? It was a big enough city for a transformation, to change your life and move on. For something different.

“London, I guess.” She shrugged, her shoulders hidden under water.

“You guess? That doesn't sound very convincing.” The expression on Marianne's face changed from displaying casual interest into something more intense. *Oh great, a shrink.*

“Stuff happened before I left.” Before she'd packed her bags in a hurry—in a frenzied daze, a state of emotional distress leading to tunnel vision until all she wanted to do was leave.

“I can't do it,” she'd said to Jasper's flabbergasted face. “I can't marry you and have your perfect Holland Park children, one boy and one girl. One with your dark hair and one with my blonde curls. I can't see it, Jasper. It's not what I want.”

“But...” Jasper, usually not stumped for words, had no recourse. “The wedding's next month.”

By the time she was expected to walk down the aisle, Emily was drinking cheap beer in Hanoi,

too busy avoiding the crazy traffic attacking her from all sides to think much about the significance of the day.

“It usually does.” Marianne shot her a smile and ducked away from her. It didn’t look as if she was going to press Emily on the subject. Emily couldn’t decide if that was good or bad. She’d have to start talking about it some time. First, though, she had a few more lazy days in the sun to enjoy. She scanned the horizon—blue on blue—and understood why Marianne would choose to live here.

Marianne was making good progress against the waves. Emily watched her body transform into a small dot in the distance. Impressive, she thought, because despite loving the water, and having had the privilege of being taught by the best swimming instructors money could buy, she knew she just didn’t have it in her. She didn’t possess a swimmer’s physique or mindset.

Emily let her body drift in the water for a while, squinting against the sun. To empty her mind of the looming journey home, she tried to recite all the titles of the books she’d read since she left. It was an ever-growing list that helped her fall asleep in noisy hostels. Not that she stayed in too many of those. It had been the initial plan—low-budget, back-to-basics living—but when push had come to shove, Emily didn’t have it in her and she knew full well that, no matter what happened, her father would, in the end, always pick up her credit card bill. It’s hard to live dangerously with an ever-present safety net.

After cooling off her body, Emily padded back to shore. When she looked back, she spotted Marianne swimming in her direction with swift freestyle strokes. Perhaps she had guessed wrong when she’d placed her in the same age bracket as her mother, because her mother surely couldn’t do that. She had other qualities though, like looking down her nose at people. And judging by appearances.

Emily made her way back to the Lodge’s garden. There was just enough room for a small pool and a patio with some lounge and regular chairs. Every single piece of furniture looked expensive, as if belonging in a five-star hotel instead of a modest guesthouse.

Marianne had been adamant about not being in the hotel service industry for the money, and by the look of things at the Red Lodge, she was hardly strapped for cash.

Before sitting down in one of the chairs under the beige sun shield, Emily grabbed a towel from a small stack next to the pool and wrapped it around her dripping body. She’d only just sat down when she heard Marianne’s footsteps slap against the flat stones of the garden path. Marianne had put her t-shirt back on and it clung to her sun-bronzed flesh in wet patches. Not for the first time on this three-month trip, Emily felt a glowing heat flare somewhere in an undefinable spot beneath her skin.

First she had wanted to get away from everything, and she had, the only further place she could have gone was Australia.

“Would you like a drink?” Marianne asked, and Emily had to consciously lift her gaze from Marianne’s body to her face.

“I could murder a beer.” She looked up into Marianne’s face. When it was backlit by the sun she could clearly make out the small wrinkles around her sparkling brown eyes.

“Coming right up.” Marianne shot her a wink and Emily felt it again. It’s not that she couldn’t explain it—she hadn’t lived that sheltered a life—it was more that she was afraid what it might do to her if she gave in.

She straightened her back and pushed the sensation away—she’d become really good at that.

MARIANNE

“If you don’t mind me asking...” Marianne sat opposite Emily on the patio. “How old are you?” She’d brought an ice bucket from the kitchen holding a six-pack of Singha. They each sipped one from the bottle.

“Still young enough not to mind the question.” Despite them sitting under the sun shield, a shiny glimmer caught Emily’s hair. “I’m twenty-four and, as of recently, officially the black sheep of the Kane family.” Emily opened her palms to the sky as if presenting herself.

“Plenty of time to turn that around then.” Marianne took a swig from her beer, but kept her eyes on Emily.

Emily chuckled. “Maybe I don’t want to turn it around. Maybe I’ve just had enough.”

Marianne arched up her eyebrows in response.

“How very dramatic of me.” Emily pulled one leg up onto her chair. “But people do say it’s easier to talk to a stranger.”

“We’ve seen each other in bikinis. We’re hardly strangers anymore.” Marianne was taken aback by the words exiting her mouth. She looked away for an instant before facing Emily again. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s quite all right.” Emily brushed a stray strand of hair away from her forehead. “If I could look like you when I’m your age—” Emily brought her hand to her mouth. “Gosh, now it’s my turn to apologise, I mean, I don’t even know how old you are,” she stuttered.

Marianne wondered if the blush creeping up her cheeks was visible. She hoped not. “Forty-one on Saturday.”

“Saturday?” Emily’s eyes grew a little wider. “Really?” She seemed to have recovered from her earlier slip-up. “Are you having a party?”

Marianne relaxed back into her chair. “I’m not really one for celebrating anymore.”

“Oh.” Emily looked at her through squinted eyes.

“Besides, I’m working.”

“Are you always working?” Emily placed her empty bottle on the table. “Is it just you here?”

“I employ two people to clean the rooms and do the dishes, but I manage all the rest.” Not that there was so much to manage. Marianne didn’t feel as if she was running a business. She considered the people who came to stay at the lodge more houseguests than customers. Sometimes, a few days went by without visitors, and that was fine by her as well. She didn’t advertise The Red Lodge on the internet. Everyone who stayed here, arrived either by chance, by word-of-mouth, or because of the flyers she had delivered to a few choice establishments in Bangkok and Chiang Mai.

“What if someone has a special request?” Emily reached for another bottle of beer, uncapped

it with the beer opener tied to the bucket and handed it to Marianne.

“Like what?” Marianne accepted the beer.

“A birthday cake delivery.” Emily grinned at her and only now did Marianne notice how her smile dimpled her cheeks.

“I’m always very upfront with my guests about what’s possible and what’s not.” She placed the cool bottom of the bottle on her thigh. “But if someone wants to celebrate their birthday here, they’re very welcome and I will make some calls.”

“God, you really are British, aren’t you?” Emily mock-sighed.

“How can you possibly tell?” Marianne made an extra effort to sound as stiff and posh as possible.

Emily burst out in a little giggle before a silence fell between them.

“You must be hungry?” Marianne’s caring instinct kicked in. “Shall I fix us some dinner?”

“You do the cooking as well?” Emily had drawn up both her legs and slung her arms around them, her chin resting on her knees. She looked ten years younger than her age in that position.

“You make it sound like a chore.” Marianne stood up. “A full house means six guests, and that’s a rarity. It’s really no trouble.”

“Do you have a menu?”

“No.” Marianne was surprised at the sudden harshness that had crept into her voice—it rarely happened that guests had that effect on her. She quickly corrected herself. “Do you have any allergies I should know about?” She recognised her reaction, though. But she knew how to be careful.

“None. Thanks.” Emily was still looking up at her.

“Dinner in about an hour?”

“Sounds great.”

“There’s no dress code by the way.” She only mentioned it because Emily—even when wet from swimming in the ocean and relaxed with a beer in her hand—looked like the kind of girl who was used to dressing up for dinner.

“Do you need help?”

Marianne wasn’t expecting that question.

“Can you cook?” She felt a smile tug at her lips. *The girl is full of surprises.*

“A little. I took some classes back home and a chef with a name so long I can’t possibly remember it taught me how to make a mean curry when I was up north.”

“If you can chop a vegetable without losing a finger, you’re very welcome in my kitchen.” Cooking was always such a solitary, meditative time for Marianne, but she didn’t mind the intrusion. “I’m just going to freshen up first. Get out of this bikini.”

“If you must.” Emily winked at her and Marianne felt the blush rise again. She quickly made her way inside and pretended she hadn’t heard.

Maybe Emily wasn’t the spoiled little brat she had—admittedly—first taken her for. Even so, Marianne made a mental note to make it absolutely clear that her birthday was not an event to be celebrated.

EMILY

Had she been flirting with the Lodge owner? What on earth had possessed her? Emily looked at herself in the mirror in her room. She hardly still resembled the girl who had boarded a plane for Singapore three months ago. Her hair was so long and light in colour. The blue of her eyes popped out against the brown of her skin. She'd always believed that, just like her mother, she had no talent for tanning, but look at her now. Persistence really did help. Not always though. She'd tried long enough with Jasper. She had persisted. It still hadn't worked.

She looked skinnier as well. Maybe even too skinny, although her mother would certainly not agree with that. What would she do when she got back? Take the position at her father's company that had been reserved for her since she was born? She hadn't excelled academically like her two brothers, hadn't breezed through university like everyone else in the family—even her mother in her day, if she was to be believed.

Here she stood, three months older but none the wiser. Maybe a real conversation with a non-judgmental stranger was exactly what she needed. Someone far removed from the situation, but with enough knowledge of social pressure and family ties to understand. Marianne seemed to fit that bill quite perfectly.

And she was younger than her mother—by ten years even. The confirmation hadn't just come from Marianne announcing the number. It was as if Emily had seen her grow younger before her very eyes. Obviously, something had happened in the woman's life. Something devastating enough to chase her out of her home country and make her hate her birthday, but Emily had seen her perk up. She had noticed the laughter lines crinkle around her temples, and she'd been amazed at how Marianne's biceps curved from under the wet sleeve of her t-shirt when she brought the bottle of beer to her mouth.

By god. She had been flirting. What should she wear for dinner? She tore herself away from the mirror and rummaged through her backpack. Every single item of her clothing was either severely wrinkled or plain dirty. She fished out a white tank top that had seen brighter days, but at this stage of her trip, it was the best she could come up with. She finished her casual outfit with a pair of skimpy jean shorts. Not that she was trying to dress to impress. The utter foolishness of it.

Emily found Marianne in the kitchen downstairs. She inadvertently blinked when she walked in. Should women over forty not always wear a bra? Even merely to counter the laws of gravity? Marianne obviously didn't think so. Maybe she was one of those wild chicks her mother sometimes talked about with a wrinkle of disgust curling under her nose. The ones who burned their bra and regarded them as a symbol of female oppression.

"Hey," Marianne greeted her.

She'd been so absorbed with stealing glances at Marianne's chest that she hadn't even taken in the kitchen yet. It looked as if it had been designed by Nigella Lawson herself.

Emily whistled between her teeth. A cat call the old her would never have dared to utter. Then again, this wolf whistle was only aimed at the stainless steel of the kitchen and the pots and pans

suspended from hooks along the walls. “Jesus. I’m not a psychologist, but could there be some overcompensation going on here? You know, like middle-aged men with flashy sports cars?”

Marianne looked her over. It was hard for Emily to keep her gaze fixed on her face because the chef’s nipples clearly had a life of their own and poked pointedly through the flimsy fabric of the faded The Cure t-shirt she now had on.

“But no chef’s whites, huh?” Emily couldn’t help herself.

Marianne flushed bright red. A typical British complexion. Emily knew all about that herself and she instantly felt sorry for her host.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to be untoward.” The conservatively raised girl in her—the one she’d been trying to escape the grips of on this trip—bubbled to the surface.

“My fault entirely,” Marianne said with slightly bowed head. “They’re not usually so... disobedient.”

They both burst out laughing at the same time. Not just giggles, but loud cackles that served more to release the tension than to mark the comic quality of the situation.

“What’s cooking?” Emily asked after the waves of laughter had subsided.

“Pad Thai all right? It’s not very original, but I make my own version and it’s not too shabby.”

“Sounds wonderful. What can I do?”

“If you could chop those, that would be wonderful.” Marianne pointed at a bunch of green onions.

They seemed to have been left there for the sole purpose of audience participation as Marianne visibly had everything else under control. She worked quickly and methodically—like the chefs in professional kitchens on TV—and by the time Emily had sliced the onions the kitchen smelled like the essence of Thai food: fiery peppers, garlic and a delicious mix of spices. Emily suddenly felt quite hungry.

For the next twenty minutes she watched Marianne assemble the dish. Almost entranced by her graceful movements around the designer kitchen, Emily hardly noticed Marianne’s bra-less state anymore—except when she reached up to grab something from a cabinet above the cooker.

“Dinner’s ready,” Marianne said, with a smile so bright it stirred something in the pit of Emily’s stomach. Or maybe it was just hunger.

MARIANNE

They ate dinner while staring out into the fleeting light of dusk. Marianne loved the time of day—because it was hardly evening yet—when the ocean seemed to disappear and all that remained was the spot she created for herself with candles and discreet lighting.

“It’s so quiet here,” Emily said. If she was enjoying the food, she hadn’t said so yet, which was terribly un-upper class of her. Marianne suppressed a smile at the thought.

“That’s why I love it.” She chewed on some noodles while contemplating if she should continue, but then didn’t hesitate. As if, for some reason on this evening, it needed to be said. “It’s the only place where I can find some sort of peace.”

Marianne could tell Emily didn't immediately know how to respond to that. She fidgeted with a piece of chicken on her plate and avoided her gaze. When she finally did look up, Marianne was surprised by the intensity in her eyes.

"I gathered as much." She put her fork down. "Hey, I'm running from something too." Emily's voice had gone soft, barely a whisper against the light breeze sweeping in from the sea. "And if you can't be at home, this place isn't half bad."

An opening. Marianne took it. "What are you running from?"

The corners of Emily's mouth curled into a tight smile, as if she'd been waiting for the question and the right time for it to be asked.

"A terribly expensive wedding and a subsequent life I stopped being able to imagine, I guess."

Marianne couldn't hold back a grin at being subjected to more dramatic vagueness. "Did you leave him at the altar?"

"As good as." She reached for her beer. "It broke my heart as much as it did his, you know. But of course no one could see that. He was my best friend for five years, my life really, and I loved him—I still love him, I always will—but as our wedding day approached, an uneasiness kept building inside of me. First, I brushed it off as nerves because I simply couldn't stop lying to myself. I'd been doing it for so long by then. And it was so easy with him." She took a breath before continuing. "But I knew in my heart that it wasn't right to promise eternity when I couldn't even face the next day." Emily fell silent, but Marianne didn't press her. She was starting to put the pieces together and, oddly, despite the sadness creeping into Emily's expression, Marianne grew excited about the words she suspected to hear next.

"All throughout planning the wedding, which was to be a momentous occasion for both of our families, I'd fooled myself into believing that the love I felt was enough. That it was based on a solid, deeply-rooted friendship and what could possibly be more important than that?" She shook her head. "But one day I looked at myself in the mirror and asked my reflection how on earth I had become a twenty-four-year-old who didn't allow herself any passion. I mean, my family's not very big on passion and I've always been taught that getting along well with your partner is so much more valuable and sustainable than that 'short bout of foolishness'—my mother's words—at the beginning of a relationship." Emily's fingers seemed about to strangle the neck of the bottle she was holding. "That's when I realised my idea of love had been wrong all along. And that I didn't want to end up twenty-five years later giving the same advice to my daughter."

She took a long gulp from her beer and some of it ran down her chin. She wiped it off with such a sweet, almost child-like gesture.

"It's like when you make a puzzle and the last pieces just won't fit and you cram them in anyway. As if that's what I'd been doing with my life. Well, one day, they're going to come loose and nothing clicks anymore."

Marianne was amazed by the sudden clarity in Emily's words and by the eloquence she displayed in explaining something so personal and complex. "Wow." She didn't really know if she should speak yet, but the need to acknowledge Emily's confession as something big and valid and true was too great. "That must have taken a lot of courage." Marianne had no trouble picturing

Emily's family. She had one just like it of her own.

"It wasn't even courage. It was just... need. An undeniable desire for something else." Emily drew her eyes into slits. Marianne noticed the sparkle of the first tear that gathered in the corner of her eye.

"I mean... I know what I want, I've known all along, really. I just..." She paused. "I just haven't allowed myself to give in to these feelings ever, which is silly and stupid in so many ways, but I always had Jasper and I thought I always had to give it at least one more try..." She wiped away the lone tear running down her cheek. "And I would never have cheated on him, not on anyone."

Poor girl. All of this had been bottled up inside of her for years. For some it was so easy, while others just found it so difficult. Marianne briefly reflected on her own life and how simple love had been before it had become cruel and nearly destroyed her. "Have you ever told anyone about this before?"

Slowly, Emily shook her head. The tears started streaming rapidly now, painting tracks on her cheeks that reflected in the flicker of the candlelight.

Marianne moved out of her chair to give Emily a hug.

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