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Love & Devotion

Written by Erica James

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Love & Devotion

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Prologue

Christmas Eve. The night sky was patchy with clouds racing across the moon and stars, and the wind was gusting. Harriet and her sister were in the Wendy house. It was quite a squash; they were no longer the size they'd been when their father had made it for them more than twenty years ago. Felicity, six months pregnant with her second child, was having trouble getting comfortable on the small wooden chair.

It had been Felicity's idea for them to sneak out here in the freezing cold and the dark. But she was known for her impetuosity. It was what everyone loved about Felicity – her spontaneity and sense of fun. Harriet watched her sister light the candles they'd brought with them and once shadows were dancing across the panelled walls, they switched off their torches.

'So why are we here,' Harriet asked, 'when we could be in the warm, wrapping presents and bingeing on Mum's mince pies and marzipan dates?'

In the flickering candlelight, Felicity's face was suddenly solemn, her eyes large and luminous. 'I have something I want to ask you,' she said. 'I want you to make me a promise, Harriet. If anything happens to Jeff and me, I want you to look after our children.'

The wind gusted outside and the flimsy door rattled in its frame. A shiver went through Harriet. 'Nothing's going to happen to you, Felicity,' she said. 'I'm always going to be the eccentric aunt who makes it her business to turn up with embarrassingly inappropriate presents for your children.'

'I'm being serious, Harriet. You have to promise that if

anything happens to me, you'll take care of them. I wouldn't trust anyone but you. Please say you'd take my place. I need you to say yes for my peace of mind.'

Putting her sister's irrational insistence down to cranked-up hormone levels – that and Felicity's famously temperamental nature – Harriet said, 'Of course I will. Providing you don't have more than two. Two I think I could handle. Any more and I'd turn into the Child Catcher from *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.'

'You promise?'

'I promise.'

'Hand on heart?'

'That too.'

Smiling once more, Felicity said, 'Good. That's settled then. Now I have nothing to worry about.'

The promise was never referred to again. Not until four years later, when it dominated Harriet's every waking thought.

August

'Song'

*When I am dead, my dearest,
Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head,
Nor shady cypress tree
Be the green grass above me
With showers and dewdrops wet;
And if thou wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.*

*I shall not see the shadows,
I shall not feel the rain;
I shall not hear the nightingale
Sing on, as if in pain:
And dreaming through the twilight
That doth not rise nor set,
Haply I may remember,
And haply may forget.*

Christina Rossetti

Chapter One

Swift by name and swift by nature, Harriet shut the door after her and marched quickly down the drive, her arms swinging, her shoes tappety-tap-tapping in the still August air. Hand in hand, the children trailed silently behind her. She was often told that for someone so small, she walked remarkably fast. Those who knew her well knew that it was a side-effect of a restless mind, of a mind on the run.

For what felt like for ever, Harriet had been plagued with a sense of permanently running on the spot, of getting nowhere fast. There had been so much to do, and far too much to come to terms with. She doubted the latter was ever going to happen. But that was something she kept to herself. It was better to let people think that she had it all under control, that she believed them when they said time would heal, and as one door closed, another would open, and, oh, this was a good one, apparently we are never given more than we can handle. What was that supposed to mean? That this was deliberate? That she and her family had been picked out especially for this particular assignment, that of all the families around them, theirs was considered the safest bet. Oh, the Swifts – they'll handle this one; they'll cope just fine with the death of their eldest daughter and son-in-law.

Anyone observing them would think that Harriet and her parents were coping admirably, but Harriet knew all too well that Bob and Eileen Swift had their brave public faces for neighbours and friends. Once the front door was closed, the masks would drop. But only so far. There were the children, Carrie and Joel, to think of.

'Oh, those poor little ones!' had been the cry when news

of the accident had spread. 'To lose both their parents – what a heartbreakingly cruel thing.'

Tappety-tap-tap went Harriet's shoes as she walked faster, her head lowered, her gaze to the ground so there would be no risk of catching the eye of a neighbour who, given the chance, would seize the opportunity to console or advise and smother her with sympathy. She wanted none of it. All she wanted was for their lives to be the way they were four months ago, before a joyriding kid high on God knew what smashed into her brother-in-law's car killing him and Felicity instantly.

Harriet had been called many things in her life – aloof, pig-headed, obsessively independent, opinionated, analytical, quick to judge, reliable, insular, logical, quick-tempered, cynical, pragmatic, even too loyal for her own good – but not once had she been described as motherly. And yet here she was, at the age of thirty-two, the legal guardian to her sister's orphaned children. Some days she wanted to scream and kick against the unfairness of it all. Some days she woke up terrified she didn't have the strength to do what was expected of her. Other days she had to fight the urge to walk away.

'Auntie Harriet, please can we slow down?'

Harriet stopped abruptly. She turned. 'Carrie, I've told you before, it's Harriet. Just plain old Harriet.' She was convinced her niece was doing it deliberately. Carrie had never called her 'auntie' when her mother had been alive.

The nine-year-old girl stared back at her, a frown just forming around her blue-grey eyes. Harriet didn't find it easy looking at her niece; it was too much like looking in a mirror. They had the same pale complexion that tended to freckle across the bridge of the nose, the same cool, wide-set eyes and neat chin (the Swift Chin as it was called), and the same dark brown, almost black hair – the only difference being that Harriet's was shoulder-length and loose today, and Carrie's was plaited in a single rope that hung down her back to her waist. At nine years old, as if possessed of some kind of superior X-ray vision, Carrie had

already perfected the art of being able to see right through a half-truth. Harriet knew she would have to play it straight with her niece; she was one smart cookie.

'You always walk too fast,' Carrie said. 'It's not fair to Joel. He can't keep up; he's only little.'

Joel, four years old, vulnerably sweet-natured and unbearably anxious, was as dark-eyed as his mother had been. Moreover he was the spitting image of Felicity, with the same mousy hair streaked through with sun-lightened gold. Sometimes, when Harriet's heart was heavy with the rawness of grief, she couldn't trust herself to look at him. 'If he can't keep up, then we're going to have to stretch his legs,' she said matter-of-factly.

The little boy bent his head and peered doubtfully at the crumpled material of his trousers, which were several inches too long. 'Will I be as tall as Carrie then?'

Harriet eyed him thoughtfully. 'Maybe.' She straightened his hair – she must have forgotten to brush it before leaving the house. At what age did they start doing it for themselves? Taking his hand and moving on, trying not to react to the soft warmth of his fingers wrapped in hers, she said, 'If you really want to be as tall as your sister you should eat more.' She hoped her voice held the merest hint of a reprimand.

Since their parents' death neither child had eaten properly and it was driving their grandmother to distraction. 'They need to eat more,' Eileen said after every meal, when yet again she was scraping their barely touched plates into the kitchen bin and the children had melted away to their bedrooms. 'It's not healthy for them to eat so little.' Harriet didn't argue with her. While Eileen was fussing over her grandchildren's eating habits, it meant she wasn't quizzing Harriet on hers. She could quite understand why her niece and nephew didn't want to eat. If they felt anything like she did they'd be scared nothing would stay down.

Harriet doubted there was anyone less suited or more ill-equipped to take care of her sister's children, but she'd loved Felicity and a promise was a promise. Even if that

promise had been made in the sure knowledge that she would never have to keep it. After all, sisters didn't die, did they? Especially not when they were only thirty-three. Tragedy happened to other families, not to ordinary people like the Swifts.

When her father had telephoned Harriet to break the awful news to her, his voice had been so choked with tears it was scarcely recognisable. Harriet had heard his words all too clearly, but a part of her had refused to take them in. She and Felicity had been talking on the phone earlier that week; Harriet had been trying to encourage her to come and stay in Oxford but Felicity had cried off, saying she was too busy sorting out the house she and Jeff had recently moved into in Newcastle.

The days that followed were a blur of confusion and shock, and it was a while before the full extent of what lay ahead hit Harriet. Her brain was conveniently numbed; it fooled her into thinking that the upheaval they were facing was only temporary. That just as soon as they had all recovered from the worst of their grief, they would pick up the broken pieces of their lives and carry on. Carrie and Joel would now live with their grandparents, while Harriet would spend Monday to Friday working in Oxford and the weekends in Cheshire looking after the children so that her parents could have a break.

For more than three months this was the structure of their lives, but Harriet had known that it could only ever be a short-term measure. Every Friday night she would battle through the traffic on the M6 up to Cheshire and arrive in Kings Melford to find that her mother looked more tired than she had the week before. The strain of taking care of the children was clearly taking its toll, and not just because Bob and Eileen weren't young any more. Five years ago Eileen had been diagnosed as suffering from ME and while she never uttered a word of complaint, Harriet knew that as much as Eileen wanted to cope – she was one of life's serial copers – there was a limit to what she could do. And always in the back of Harriet's mind was the promise she

had made: *You have to promise that if anything happens to me, you'll take care of them. I wouldn't trust anyone but you.* Another person might have conveniently forgotten those words, but not Harriet. They kept her awake night after night. In the end she knew she had only one realistic option. But it was such a costly sacrifice and she tried every which way to avoid it. For a while she managed to convince herself that the children should move down to Oxford and live with her. But it was out of the question; her one-bedroomed flat was far too small for them all. And even if she found a larger place and paid for childcare, the thought of being solely responsible for Carrie and Joel, without her parents on hand, panicked her. The truth, and she hated to admit it, was that she was completely out of her depth and needed Bob and Eileen there as a permanent safety net. The answer, then, was to resign from her job as a computer programmer, sell her flat and return to Cheshire.

This she had done and she'd been living back in Maple Drive, her childhood home, for a fortnight now. It was far from ideal, even nightmarish at times, and every morning she woke up with a sense of sick dread, reminding herself that it was only a stopgap. Just as soon as she'd found a new job and could afford to buy or maybe rent a house – near her parents so they could help with the children – she wouldn't feel as if her sacrifice had sucked the life out of her.

But it was proving harder than she'd imagined. She missed her old life, her job and of course her boyfriend, Spencer. Often the only thing that got her out of bed in the morning was the thought that the following day had to be easier. She almost believed it, too.

Chapter Two

At the end of Maple Drive they turned right at the postbox and, holding hands, one child either side of Harriet, they continued along the busy street that was the main road into Kings Melford. Rush-hour traffic had petered out, but the centre of town, less than a mile away, wasn't their destination.

Edna Gannet's corner shop was not for the faint-hearted. The caustic old woman who had run Gannet Stores for more than thirty years had terrorised generations of children with her meanness and breathtaking rudeness; grown men had been known to quake in her presence. Harriet searched the shelves for a product she wasn't sure still existed (but if it did, Edna Gannet would be sure to sell it) and listened to an elderly man lodging a complaint that the pot of single cream he'd bought the day before yesterday was off. He nudged it across the counter towards Edna. Slipping on her half-moon glasses, which she wore round her neck on a chain held together with sticky tape, Edna said, 'It's still within its sell-by date. Which means it must be all right.' She pushed it back towards the customer and removed her glasses: *case dismissed!*

The man used his thumbnail to lift a segment of the foil lid. 'Please, if you'd take the trouble to smell it, you'll see what—'

'And if you took the trouble to store it at the correct temperature you wouldn't be wasting my time. You have to be very careful during August, everyone knows that. Young man, kindly stop poking those Jelly Babies!'

Across the shop, over by the shelves of sweets, Harriet saw Joel nearly jump out of his skin. She went to him.

'Take no notice of the silly old dragon,' she murmured in his ear. 'She only breathes fire to attract attention.'

Back at the counter the disgruntled man was proving a stayer. 'A full return is what I'm entitled to,' he persisted. Harriet noticed his polished shoes were firmly together as he spoke, as if this was the only way he could stand firm.

Edna Gannet surveyed him through sharp, narrow eyes, her arms folded across her chest, her lips pursed.

The man swallowed. 'I'm only asking for what the law says I'm entitled to.'

Edna leaned forward, the palms of her hands flat on the counter. 'Here's what I'll do for you. I'll do you an exchange. How's that?'

The man looked unsure. 'I'd prefer a full refund.'

'And I'd prefer to be lying on a beach with Sean Connery at my beck and call. Take it or leave it.' By the time he'd made up his mind, Edna was already riffling through the cabinet of chilled dairy products. 'Here,' she said. 'And to show what a generous woman I am, this is a more expensive pot of cream and I won't even charge you the difference.'

He was almost out of the door when he turned round.

Edna glared at him. 'Now what?'

He hovered uncertainly. 'Um . . . the sell-by date on this, it . . . it says it's tomorrow.'

Edna stretched her lips into what Harriet knew passed for a smile. 'Well then, you'd best hurry home and use it up fast.'

The man quietly closed the door after him.

With a hand on Joel's shoulder, Harriet approached the counter. 'Mrs Gannet,' she said, 'I wonder if you have—'

Edna cut her dead. 'I'll be with you in a minute.' Harriet watched her tidy away the returned pot of cream and smiled to herself when, just before Edna disappeared into the back of the shop through a beaded curtain, she caught sight of her lifting the foil lid and grimacing.

'Why is she so rude?' asked Carrie in a foghorn whisper. 'She's like it every time we come in.'

'She's not rude, Carrie; she's honest and direct. She just says what she thinks, which is more than most of us do.'

'She frightens me,' Joel whispered.

'Rule Number One kiddo: don't let anyone scare you.' Harriet bent down so that she was face to face with her nephew. 'Do you want to know what I do if I think anyone might have the power to frighten me?'

He nodded solemnly.

'I imagine them with no clothes on. It works every time.'

He stared at her wide-eyed. But Carrie let out a loud, horrified cry. 'Yuck! That's disgusting.'

'What's disgusting?'

Edna was staring at them from behind the counter. Harriet had forgotten how quietly Edna moved about the shop. Her father had nicknamed her the Stealth Bomber, so adept was she at creeping up on would-be shoplifters.

Ignoring the question, Harriet said, 'Mrs Gannet, do you have any large blocks of salt like my mother used to buy when . . .' Her voice trailed off. She was about to say, 'when Felicity and I were little'.

Not missing a beat, Edna said, 'And what would you be wanting with blocks of salt?'

'Sculpture classes for the children. Michelangelo worked with marble, but I'm prepared to make do with salt. Do you have any?'

'I've not sold blocks of salt for many a year. Not much call for it these days.' Forever the consummate shopkeeper, Edna added, 'Why not use lard? I've plenty of that. Or margarine.'

'It wouldn't be quite the same thing.'

'Suit yourself.' The old woman shrugged and pulled a tatty yellow duster out of her overall pocket. She began flicking it over the glass jars of sweets on the shelves behind her.

Standing by the comics now, Carrie said, 'Could I have this, please?'

With the scent of a sale in her nostrils, Edna whipped round, the duster back in her pocket.

Harriet said, 'Whoa there, little miss. I bought you one the other day. Do you think I'm made of money?' She saw a determined expression settle on Carrie's face, and knew that the girl was too much like herself to beg. She just stood there silently staring Harriet out, her gaze unnervingly level for one so young. She was not a child who would willingly endure a moment's loss of dignity.

'Surely you wouldn't deprive the girl of a bit of reading matter?' chipped in Edna. 'They're educational these days. Not like the rubbish you used to read.'

Harriet shot her a sharp look. She wasn't going to be emotionally blackmailed by anyone. Especially not by Edna Gannet. 'If Carrie wants to read, she has plenty of educational books at home to enjoy.' She felt a tug at her sleeve. 'Yes, Joel, what is it?'

'Can I have one too? *Please?*'

Heaven help her, but Harriet gave in. She handed her money over to Edna, who was openly smirking, and the children thanked her. Then the wretched woman slid two small paper bags over the counter. Carrie and Joel looked inside the bags and, suddenly shy, they smiled awkwardly at the old woman. Edna brushed away their mumbled words of thanks and not quite meeting Harriet's gaze, said, 'Just something to keep them from dwelling on . . . well, you know, just to stop them brooding.'

With unspoken sympathy quivering in the air, Harriet hustled her niece and nephew outside. In all the years she had known Edna Gannet, she had never seen her act so out of character. Not a word about Felicity's death had passed her lips in Harriet's presence, even though everyone in the neighbourhood was talking about little else, but here she was giving sweets to two children she hardly knew. She took a deep, steadying breath to fight back a wave of tearful panic. With Joel on her hip and Carrie running to keep up, she headed for home. Only when they'd turned the corner into Maple Drive did she slow down.

Maple Drive was the archetypal suburban cul-de-sac, flanked either side with tidy gardens and rows of fascia-

boarded houses. Harriet's parents had bought number twenty in 1969 when they had been expecting Felicity – Harriet had followed on only a year later. They'd paid three thousand pounds for it then and it was now, according to her father, who kept his eye on such things, worth two hundred and fifty thousand pounds. 'The best investment we ever made,' he used to joke. Harriet suspected he'd dispute this now. Compared to having Felicity, it was worthless.

The only people who had lived in the neighbourhood as long as the Swifts were the McKendricks: Dr Harvey McKendrick and his wife, Freda. They lived at number fourteen and Harriet knew their house as well as her parents'. She and her sister had been more or less the same age as the McKendrick boys, Dominic and Miles, and they had all grown up together. Passing the recently decorated house with its integral garage, where ten-year-old Harriet had slapped Dominic's face for trying to look at her knickers one rainy Sunday afternoon, she kept her gaze firmly on the pavement. Freda never went out but she was sure to be watching the world go by. Freda was agoraphobic, but everyone pretended she wasn't. It maddened Harriet that they all carried on as though it was the most natural thing in the world that Freda was too terrified to set foot outside her own front door. 'Why doesn't Harvey do something about it?' Harriet had often asked her mother. 'He's a doctor, after all.'

'These things aren't so cut and dried,' Eileen would say.

'Yes they are,' she'd argue. 'If there's something wrong with you, you get it sorted. It's as easy as that.'

Several years ago, at the McKendricks' New Year's Day drinks party, after one too many glasses of mulled wine, Harriet had said as much to Dominic and Miles. Dominic, who lived in Cambridge and rarely honoured his parents with his presence, had agreed with her. But Miles, who lived in nearby Maywood, had disagreed and suggested that maybe his brother should spend more time with their mother before he offered an opinion.

Both Miles and his father had attended Felicity and Jeff's funeral; Freda, not surprisingly, had made her apologies. Dominic hadn't even bothered to send flowers or a card. Harriet didn't think she would ever forgive him for that.

Walking up the drive of number twenty, Harriet could hear her father mowing the lawn in the back garden. It was a comforting sound. The sound of a normal family going about its normal everyday business.

If only.