

DUTY OF CARE

EXCERPT

For the next two days Emily stayed at Rita's bed side. She read to her during the day and prayed for her at night, making God all kinds of promises if he just let her live.

After a forty-eight hour vigil, Emily woke to the sound of a little voice. "Where am I, Em?"

Emily raised her weary head to see two bright blue eyes; eyes she feared she might never get to gaze upon again. She yawned and stretched away the stiffness in her arms and legs. "You're in hospital."

"Why? Did I fall over?" Rita wiggled her toes.

Emily reached for her hand and shook her head. "No. You had a cough."

Rita forced a cough. "I don't have a cough now, just a tickle."

"That's good. I'm glad you feel better." Emily's eyes watered and she smiled.

Rita followed the line of the intravenous drip attached by a cannula into her hand. "I've got a tube in my hand."

"It's to make you better. It's got medicine in it. Don't touch."

Rita removed her fingers from the cannula. "Is it dinner time?" she asked noticing the darkening sky outside.

Emily shook her head. "I don't know what time it is. I'll go and find out." She poured Rita a glass of water. "Sip this slowly and I'll go find you something to eat. What do you feel like?"

Rita thought hard. "A big cake with sprinkles."

"Little Miss Sprinkles really is back," Emily announced tearfully. Given half a chance, she would have begged, borrowed or stolen such a cake for her sister. Having her back was cause for celebration. "I'll see what I can do."

"Em?" Rita called. "Guess what?"

Emily turned to face her. "What?"

"I saw Mummy last night." Rita smiled innocently and pushed back her hair from her face.

Emily took an unsteady step back in Rita's direction. Maintaining an even tone, she asked, "You did? What did she look like?" She slid onto the side of the bed.

"She looked like Mummy. She had a pretty white dress and no shoes!"

Emily wanted to laugh at the startled intonation. "No shoes?"

Rita nodded. "She talked to me and said, 'Don't be scared, I'm with you.'"

The muscles in Emily's throat tightened. "That was nice of her."

“But I wasn’t scared. I’m never scared.” Emily stood to leave. “Because I have you. You always take care of me, Em.” She blew Emily a kiss the way she used to when she barely had a vocabulary of twenty words.

Emily pretended to catch it and blew one back. “I always try to, Reet, but maybe Mum was saying not to be scared of being in hospital...”

Rita appeared stunned. “I’m not scared of being in hospital.” She patted the sheets. “These feel nice and I’m not cold.”

Those innocuous remarks almost brought Emily to her knees—two stark reminders of what their lives had become; a series a bitterly cold nights with them wrapped in blankets, coats and starched sheets. She caught a tear before it fell from her eye and sniffed. “You’ll be all right then while I go and fetch some food?”

Rita nodded. “Love you, Em.”

“Love you too, Sprinkles. I won’t be long.”

To the sounds of a girlish chuckle, Emily closed the door quietly behind her and leaned against it. She bowed her head and cried for the mother they had lost and for the sister she had come so close to losing. Drawing on her twelve years of experience, she dried her eyes on a shredded tissue, brushed out some of the creases on her T-shirt, and approached the nurses’ counter with a hopeful smile.