

HANNAH
ELLIS

*Riding
the Waves*

A fun and flirty
small town romance



RIDING THE WAVES

SINGLE DADS CLUB

BOOK TWO



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CHAPTER 1



Sitting in the beer garden of the Anchor Inn with his two best friends, Damian couldn't think of a better way to spend a Friday evening. He had a baby sleeping peacefully in the crook of his arm and a pint in the other hand. Even better, the baby wasn't his, so when he left in an hour he'd pass sweet little Alice back and go home for a full night's sleep.

"I feel as though I'll never get a good night's sleep again," Leo said beside him, continuing his rant about his daughter's tendency to keep him awake all night.

"I thought she'd started sleeping better," Hugh remarked across the picnic table.

"We had a few decent nights, then she started teething." Leo yawned widely. "Why didn't you tell me how difficult being a single parent is?"

"I can tell you why Hugh didn't mention it," Damian said, then looked to the end of the table where Hugh's eleven-year-old daughter sat with her eyes sweeping back and forth over the pages of the thick novel in her hands. "Emmy's never given him a moment's trouble in her life. She slept like a champ from day one, eats whatever you put in front of her, she decided to forego toddler tantrums—"

"They're childish," Emmy said, without looking up from her book and despite the fact she hadn't shown any hint that she'd been listening to the conversation.

Damian raised an eyebrow at Hugh. "You got lucky."

“I agree,” Emmy said, one corner of her mouth quirking to a shadow of a grin.

“I won’t deny that,” Hugh said. “But having things *relatively* easy doesn’t make it easy. I had a fair few sleepless nights and there have definitely been tantrums over the years.”

Emmy eyed him with contempt before going back to her book.

Damian pushed his sunglasses up onto his head as the late afternoon sun headed for the horizon. Gently, he rocked Alice back and forth. “I’m fairly sure I warned you about the nightmare that is being a single parent.”

The look that Hugh and Leo exchanged didn’t go unnoticed.

“You also have it pretty easy, by the way,” Damian went on, ignoring them. “Imagine doing all this with two babies.”

Again, his friends exchanged a look, but neither said anything as they both took long swigs of their drinks.

“What?” Damian demanded. “If you’ve got something to say, just say it.”

“They don’t think you’re really a single parent.” Emmy rolled her eyes and set her book down in her lap. “The longest you ever look after Billy and Marty is a couple of weeks. You have fun with them and then their mum takes them back. It’s not the same as having a kid all the time.”

“Thank you for your honesty,” he said to Emmy, then glared at his friends. Hugh and Leo only looked amused.

“When do the brats arrive?” Emmy asked.

“Sunday,” he said tersely. It probably wasn’t worth pulling her up on the whole “brat” thing. He liked to think it was affectionate.

“Do you reckon you’ll manage six weeks of them?” Leo asked. “I’d put my money on it being three weeks before you call Amy and beg her to come and take them.”

“Two and a half,” Emmy said at the same time that Hugh offered three and a half.

“Thanks for your confidence,” Damian said blithely. “There’s no way I’d call Amy to pick them up.” Partly because he was excited to have his boys for a longer stretch and partly because he’d never give Amy the satisfaction. She already thought he was useless.

“Maybe you won’t need her to pick them up, but you’ll be tearing your hair out.”

Damian raised his glass at Leo’s comment. “Now *that* I can agree with you on.”

“Agree about what?” a monotone voice asked as a shadow fell over him. Scarlett lived above the local cafe and babysat for a few families in the area, alongside being part owner of a small publishing house with two other local women. Her hair fell around her face as she bent to look at Alice.

“That my children are angels,” Damian told her.

“Not what I heard,” she said. “Emmy says they’re brats.”

“She means it affectionately.” Damian glared at Emmy. “Don’t you?”

Shrugging, Emmy put the book aside and scooted along the bench to make space for Scarlett while looking up at her as though she were some kind of goddess. “Hi.”

“Hello.” Scarlett didn’t sit but picked up the book to inspect it. “It’s good, isn’t it?”

“So good.” Emmy beamed. “Thanks for recommending it.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Do you want a drink?” Hugh asked Scarlet when she hovered awkwardly.

“No. I’m not staying long. I just needed to talk to Damian about the brats.”

“They’re not brats!” he said forcefully.

Scarlett looked mildly confused. “I meant it affectionately.”

“You may need to work on your tone,” he told her.

“Okay. I will. Anyway, I know we agreed you’d pay me for looking after them at the end of every week, but I decided I’d rather have half the money upfront and half at the end of the holidays. I emailed you an invoice and a basic working agreement an hour ago. I don’t know if you saw it.”

“I haven’t, but thanks.” Getting Scarlett to help with the boys for the summer had seemed like a good idea previously, but he was wondering if he might end up regretting it.

“I should also tell you I decided the price we originally agreed on wasn’t enough, so I’ve increased the hourly rate.”

He squeezed his eyes closed and shook his head. “Why?”

“Because the boys arrive on Monday. It’s too late for you to find someone else to look after them, so it puts me in a good position to negotiate.”

While Hugh and Leo stifled their laughter, Emmy was quite open in her amusement.

“I thought we’d already agreed on a fair price,” Damian said to Scarlett.

“It seemed okay before our washing machine broke,” Scarlett said. “Now I need to earn a bit more over the summer.”

“You can’t really say no to that,” Leo said, looking highly amused.

“I’ve also got a meeting on Monday morning,” Scarlett said. “So I’ll only be able to come and meet the brats for an hour. You said you wouldn’t really need me on that first morning anyway.”

He definitely wasn’t about to palm the boys off on someone else the first day they were with him and hadn’t actually anticipated Scarlett being around at all on Monday.

As it was, he only needed her to watch them three mornings a week when he was out giving surf lessons. The rest of the time they'd be in surf school themselves or Damian would be available for them. He had good staff at his surf business, which freed him up to spend the summer with his boys.

"That's fine," he said to Scarlett, who was looking at him expectantly.

"Good. That's all I needed to talk to you about."

"You could have called me," Damian said.

"I don't like calling people. Besides, you're easy to find on a Friday evening."

"Should we be offended by that?" Damian asked.

"Probably," Scarlett said, then looked to Emmy. "You can come to my place for a bit if you're bored here."

"Yes, please." Emmy twisted to face her dad. "Can I?"

"Yeah. I'll pick you up on the way home." He checked his watch. "Half an hour."

They watched the two of them leave, then Leo rested his elbow on the table and propped his head on his hand. "Scarlett's extorting you, you know?"

"It's starting to feel like it." Damian pulled his phone out to find the email from Scarlett. His eyes bulged as he read how much money she wanted for the first instalment. "Definitely seems like extortion," he said, holding his phone out to show his friends. They nodded in response and Hugh winced at the sum.

"What did she put in the contract?" Leo asked.

Damian opened the attached file and scanned the document. "Just the hours she'll work and ..." He squinted at the screen. "This is actually pretty good. She's listed all the things she'll do with them: fun and educational craft activities; indoor and outdoor sports activities to promote fitness, coordination and social skills; she'll provide healthy and

nutritional snacks ... the list goes on. It sounds like it might be worth the money.”

Hugh frowned. “It also sounds a lot like the kids’ programme at the community centre over in Totnes. Emmy’s signed up for it. We have the flyer hanging on our fridge.”

“Do you think she’s just signed the boys up for that?” Damian asked, fairly sure he knew the answer. Scarlett’s husband, Fraser, worked at the community centre, so it all added up.

“It sounds like something Scarlett would do,” Leo said. “That way she can still write her books and do her usual work while also getting paid by you. To be fair, it’s pretty ingenious.”

Hugh smiled lightly. “If she *has* got them a place in the kids’ club, the boys will love it. Emmy always has a great time.”

“So long as I don’t get a bill from the community centre on top of paying Scarlett for babysitting.”

“It’s a free programme,” Hugh told him. “They run on donations.”

“That’s definitely Scarlett’s plan then, isn’t it?” Damian rolled his eyes. “I suppose you’re right; the boys will enjoy it. It’ll be nice for them to be with Emmy too.”

“You must be looking forward to the boys arriving?” Hugh said, stretching his neck and angling his face to the sun.

“Can’t wait.” Damian took a swig of his pint. “Here’s a weird thing though... when I spoke to Amy I mentioned I was teaching on Sunday afternoon when they were planning on arriving, so she said they’d come and meet me at the beach if I wasn’t home yet.”

“Why’s that weird?” Hugh asked.

“Because she never comes to the beach. Not once since we broke up. If she comes to Hope Cove, she comes to the house.” He stroked his thumb over the sole of Alice’s bare

foot. “I always had the impression it was intentional ... that she refused to go to the beach.”

Hugh’s eyebrows drew together. “Why?”

“Because that’s where we met. The place is full of memories.” He blew out a breath. “Most of our good memories are from Thurley beach and hanging out around the surf shack.”

“So you think she didn’t want to revisit that before ... but now that she’s split up with Anthony ...?”

“That’s what I’m thinking.”

“It kind of assumes you think she still has feelings for you,” Leo said with a hint of a smirk.

Damian pursed his lips. “I think she’s probably scared of her feelings for me. I don’t think she ever stopped being physically attracted to me.”

“Some might say you sound a bit cocky,” Hugh said.

Damian grinned. “She also didn’t outright say no when I asked if she wanted to stay at my place before she drives home on Monday. I probably shouldn’t have invited her to stay.”

“Because you’ll try something with her?” Leo asked.

“The only thing that stopped me from trying something with her for the past six years was the fact that she was married. Now she’s single, everything is complicated.”

“Or arguably pretty straightforward,” Hugh countered.

Damian gave his friend a look. “She still can’t stand me and still thinks I’m a useless lump.”

“Ah yes ... she fancies you, but she also hates you. I forgot that bit.”

“Hopefully she’s made other arrangements for Sunday night. If she’s hanging around my place in her skimpy pyjamas, there’s zero chance I won’t try to stick my tongue down her throat.”

“I suppose that would complicate things slightly,” Leo said.

If there was one thing Damian couldn't stand, it was drama. He'd do whatever it took to keep his life as uncomplicated as possible.

Then again, if there was someone worth complicating things for, it was Amy.

CHAPTER 2



After suffering four hours of chattering and squabbling from the back of the car, Amy's nerves felt well and truly frayed. Her seven-year-old twin boys fell eerily silent as she pulled into the car park at Thurley beach. The long stretch of sand was located about a mile along the coast from the picturesque village of Hope Cove.

Amy hadn't been back there since before the boys were born. Returning now felt significant. While she was married, there was so much she couldn't let herself think about. An entire section of her heart that she'd closed off in order to keep her marriage intact. But her marriage wasn't intact any more. Everything felt different.

The car park at Thurley beach was exactly as she remembered it, and a rush of nostalgia sucked the breath from her lungs. Beside the expanse of gravel, scattered picnic benches adorned the patch of grass, which was dappled white and yellow from clusters of daisies and dandelions.

At the far corner of the car park, Amy's gaze was drawn to a blue and white VW van. Surely that wasn't the same one. She pulled up beside it and her eyes fixed on the blue polka dot curtains in the back window that she'd installed herself. A cool tingle crept up her spine and made her slightly lightheaded as she continued to stare.

When she'd met Damian, his business was operating out of the van and a trailer. She knew he'd since upgraded his premises and she'd assumed that had meant the van had gone.

His love nest, he'd jokingly called it. The two of them had spent many nights sleeping in the back of it.

"Where's Daddy?" Billy asked, unbuckling his seatbelt and leaning between the front seats.

"On the beach, I guess." Stepping outside, the salty air whipped at her cheeks. Marty took her hand while Billy rushed ahead. "I used to work up there," she said, pointing out the golf club, which was just visible up on the headland.

"What did you do?" Marty asked as the breeze caught his blonde hair and swept it onto his face.

"I was a waitress in the restaurant."

She'd worked the summer job alongside a friend from university. The best thing about it had been the proximity to the beach. She could still recall the buzz of excitement she'd felt when the lunch shift was over and she'd have three hours off to surf and sunbathe ... and ogle the owner of the surf shack. She'd fallen for Damian immediately and couldn't believe her luck that he'd liked her back.

"I can't see Daddy," Billy said when they caught up to him on the coastal path at the top of the beach.

"He might still be out surfing," Amy said, her eyes flicking between a few surfers out in the bay. The business had grown from renting equipment to a surf school too. She felt a warm glow every time she thought about Damian accomplishing his dream.

"There he is!" Marty shouted excitedly.

The boys ran towards the modified shipping container at the top of the beach. In front of it, the deck was cluttered with rows of surfboards, a hanging rack full of wetsuits, a few tables and chairs and a collection of people mingling around. A tall blue flag flapped in the breeze, advertising the surf shack.

Amy's heart fluttered as the boys tore along the beach and called out for their daddy. She spotted him at the exact moment he turned. His face lit up at the sight of his two boys

charging towards him, and he opened his arms to sweep them up as though they weighed nothing at all.

Amy's feet seemed to move on autopilot, taking her in his direction. In the years since they broke up, Damian had hardly changed a bit. In fact, she could've been looking at him on the day they'd met. Just like then, he wore a black wetsuit peeled down to his hips, revealing his broad, tanned shoulders which tapered to his sculpted abs and hips. His sandy hair had been bleached by the sun and tousled by the wind and salt water.

When their eyes met, his lips curved slowly to a playful smile. His eyes sparkled as he looked at her in that way that made her feel as though there was no one else in the world.

Instantly, her cheeks heated, and she told herself not to get all doe-eyed over a guy who was absolutely no good for her. She might still feel the physical pull of him, but lust and romantic notions would only get you so far. It definitely hadn't been enough for them – not once there were two demanding babies in the mix.

He kept his gaze on her while the boys clamoured around his legs, vying for his attention.

“Hey,” he said in that lazy lilt of his that did peculiar things to her insides. “How was the drive?”

“Good, thanks.”

A woman appeared from behind the rack of wetsuits and casually slung a T-shirt at Damian. He responded with a wink that made Amy ponder the nature of their relationship. She was your typical surfer chick, with denim hot pants and T-shirt tied in a knot above her navel. Amy guessed she'd be a fair bit younger than Damian – maybe early twenties to his early thirties. Not enough of a gap for it to be shocking.

“It's been a while since you were here, hasn't it?” Damian commented, lifting a lively Billy on to his hip. “I don't think it's changed much.”

“No,” she murmured, gazing out at the beautiful stretch of sandy beach and the waves that rolled violently onto the shore, spitting out foam as they went.

“Did you find a place to stay tonight?” Damian asked. “Like I said, you’re welcome to crash at my place.”

The offer to stay had been a new thing. That would never have happened when she was still happily married. Or appeared to be.

“Thanks,” she said. “I actually found a cottage to rent.”

Marty leaned his head against Damian’s stomach and looked up at him with such adoration it made Amy’s heart swell. At least until he opened his mouth.

“Mummy’s staying here, too,” he said in an excited rush. “She’s got a job, so she’s going to stay for the whole holidays. We’ll all be here together.”

Amy cringed, wishing she’d broken the news to Damian herself.

“What’s that?” Damian asked.

“I’ll be staying in Hope Cove for the summer,” she told him with a nervous smile. “I got a job offer and it seemed perfect.”

“You got a job offer in Hope Cove for the summer?” A part of Amy had expected him to be happy at the idea of her being around, but the suspicion and disbelief in his eyes told a different story.

“Hey, boys.” He spoke to Marty and Billy with an excited edge to his voice. “Why don’t you run over to Callie and see if she’s got a lollipop for you?” He craned his neck and raised a hand to get the attention of the woman who’d supplied him with a T-shirt. Then he pointed the boys in her direction. Billy took off without hesitation, and Marty ambled after him in his usual timid style.

“What’s going on?” he asked Amy, all friendliness gone from his voice. “You’re not seriously staying for the entire summer?”

“I just had this opportunity ...”

“For a job? In Hope Cove? There are only about four businesses. What on earth are you going to be doing?”

“It’s not right in Hope Cove,” she said. “The company are actually based in Salcombe.”

“But you already have a job.” His eyes widened. “You didn’t lose your job?”

“I took a sabbatical,” she told him. “I’ve been thinking about a change of direction, but I wanted to try something new before I decide for definite.”

“Are you supposed to take other employment while you’re on sabbatical?” he asked. “Shouldn’t you be taking time out and relaxing or something?”

It was a valid point, one which she hadn’t even looked into since she wasn’t actually going to be earning any money. She’d begged the small publishing house to let her help for the summer under the premise that she wanted to know more about publishing. Essentially, she was an unpaid intern for a company she knew hardly anything about. It was quite a sidestep from her role as human resources manager at an international accounting firm.

“I knew this was too good to be true,” Damian said, not even bothering to hide his irritation.

“What?”

“You letting me have the boys for six weeks. I should have known there’d be a catch.”

His words stung. She’d definitely expected him to be surprised by her plans, but not completely unhappy. “I didn’t think it would be a problem. I thought you’d appreciate the help.”

“Yeah, of course.” His eyes, which had been so welcoming, turned as cold as ice. “Because I couldn’t possibly look after the boys on my own.” He shook his head. “I can’t believe you feel the need to hang around and check up on me. Do you really not trust me to take care of our children?”

“It’s not that ... of course I trust you with the boys.”

He folded his arms across his broad chest. “I thought things might be different now. I thought you letting me have

the boys for longer was a good sign, but I guess I was wrong.”

It had actually been the boys’ nagging that had convinced her to let them spend the entire summer holidays with Damian. That and the fact that it would be either very expensive or completely exhausting to keep them entertained at home without Anthony to help.

Given the way Damian was scowling at her, she was tempted to confess the real reason she wanted to be around for the summer. Not because she didn’t trust him with the boys, but because she couldn’t stand the thought of spending the summer alone.

“I’m sorry,” she said, hating the way he was glaring at her. “I should have discussed it with you first, but it was a last-minute thing and it seemed like too good of an opportunity to miss.”

He let out a long breath as he turned away from her.

“Damian,” she whispered, putting a hand on his arm. His tanned skin was warm from the sunshine and gravelly with the sand and salt caught in the bleached hairs of his forearm. Touching him sent her nerve endings into a frenzy, and it was an effort to form a coherent sentence. “It’s not the worst thing in the world, is it?” she managed. “I promise I won’t interfere. But wouldn’t it also be helpful for me to take the boys when you’re giving surf lessons?”

When he looked back at her he had that defeated look in his eyes that she knew so well. “I suppose I can’t tell you where to spend the summer. I already arranged childcare for the boys though. Did you think I wouldn’t have thought about that?”

“I didn’t know if they’d just hang around the beach while you were working.”

“They’ll be well looked after at all times and not left to roam the streets like urchins.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she said, tilting her head and wishing things could be easier between them.

“I know.” He licked the corner of his mouth, then dropped his gaze to her hand, which still rested on his arm.

Her brain, which had never functioned at full capacity around Damian, seemed to power down entirely. Slowly, she dropped her fingers to his wrist. With her heart thumping against her ribs, she came to her senses and started to move her hand away, but his fingers curled, hooking hers.

There was only a second before the moment was broken by the boys’ excited shouts as they ran back over to them.

But that second was long enough for her to know that her first love was one she’d never recover from.

Though she supposed it was something she’d known for a long time.

CHAPTER 3



Luck had definitely been on Amy's side when she'd searched for accommodation in Hope Cove for the summer. She'd been certain there must be something wrong with the bungalow she'd found to rent at the last minute. The owners had told her there'd been a cancellation, but she'd still been expecting some ramshackle abode which bore no resemblance to the photographs.

Thankfully, it was exactly as described, and she spent a pleasant evening with a glass of wine on the patio on Sunday evening once she'd unpacked and got settled. From its elevated position, the property offered a perfect view of the craggy coast and the English Channel. Watching the sun set over the sea soothed Amy and left her more relaxed than she'd felt in a very long time.

It might have been the relaxed state that made her oversleep the following morning and subsequently had her rushing for her appointment at Hope Cove Press.

When she'd found the small company online she'd been impressed. It was owned and run by three women, and the website described their backgrounds in the writing and publishing industry that had led them to set up their own publishing house. They weren't taking over the world, but they appeared to be a professional outfit, doing good things. It was a team Amy was looking forward to being a part of, even if it was only on a voluntary, part-time basis.

With a bit of hustle, Amy arrived at the office block in Salcombe exactly on time.

The woman who answered the door was dressed in a pair of well-fitting jeans and a bright white shirt, open at the collar to show off an expensive-looking necklace in a teardrop shape.

“I’m Lizzie,” she said, smiling as she offered her hand. “You must be Amy. It’s great to meet you.”

Another woman appeared in a soft, cotton summer dress that emphasised her rounded belly. She introduced herself as Emily. “We’re really excited to have you here,” she said brightly.

Automatically, Amy wiped her shoes on the mat before moving further inside. “When are you due?” she asked, then felt a momentary panic that she’d misjudged her belly.

“I’ve still got ten weeks to go,” Emily said.

Relieved that she hadn’t made a massive faux pas, Amy offered her congratulations while following Emily down the hall.

“I’m afraid we’re slightly short on space,” Lizzie said, opening the door on the left to reveal a light and airy room with two large desks. “That’s the only proper office space, but we also use the living space, depending on who is working on what and who needs quiet. We’re also flexible about working from home, so this works fine for us.”

Continuing along the hall, they came to a casual living/working space. At one end of the room was a kitchenette with a coffee machine, a kettle and a small fridge. At the opposite end was another desk with computer monitor and a stack of papers beside it.

“Make yourself at home,” Emily said, gesturing to the two yellow couches in the centre of the room.

“It looks like a great setup,” Amy remarked, smoothing her skirt at the back of her legs as she took a seat.

“Ideally, we could do with something bigger,” Emily said, sitting opposite her, while Lizzie headed to the kitchen area. “But the location is convenient, and we’re trying to keep the costs low while we’re still starting out.”

“How long have you been up and running?”

“Just over three years,” Lizzie said, “but only in these premises for a few months.” She moved to the kitchen area and asked what Amy wanted to drink.

She opted for a black coffee, definitely needing a caffeine fix after her rushed morning. “There are three of you who own the business, is that right?” She was certain that’s what she’d read on the website and had thought she’d meet all three of them that morning.

“Scarlett should be here any time,” Emily said, with a nervous glance in Lizzie’s direction. “She tends to run on her own schedule. Which in no way reflects her dedication to the job and the company.”

“She probably works more than the two of us put together,” Lizzie said. “She just has a chaotic way about her sometimes.”

“Anyway,” Emily said, apparently keen to move the conversation on. “We were really excited to get your email. We haven’t had anyone working with us before, except for freelancers. We have a couple of regular cover designers and graphic designers who we work with. That’s always been piecework and all online, so this is new for us.”

“I’m really interested to see how a small press works,” Amy said. “I had some time this summer and you’re in such a beautiful spot, so I thought why not combine a holiday with some work experience?”

Lizzie handed her a coffee. “Did you say in your email that you’ve spent some time in the area?”

“Yes.” She lowered her gaze. “Years ago. When I was a student, I spent a couple of summers around here. I’ve always had fond memories.”

She took a sip of the hot coffee and stifled a wince as it scalded her tongue.

“And you live in Oxford?” Emily asked.

“Yes.”

Emily's eyes brightened. "I'm from Oxford. Whereabouts do you—" She stopped at a clatter along the hallway, then smiled tightly as a teenager with long brown hair wandered in.

"Sorry I'm late," she said breathlessly.

"This is Amy," Emily said. "You remember we have a meeting with her this morning? To get to know each other and make plans for her time with us."

"Of course I remember," the girl said, flopping beside Emily on the couch. "Why do you think I'm out of breath? I was rushing to get here." She tipped her chin at Amy and introduced herself as Scarlett, then returned her attention to Emily. "I was meeting the two brats. I did message to tell you."

"It's fine." Lizzie took a seat along the couch from Amy. "We expected you might be a bit late."

Taking another sip of her still-too-hot coffee, Amy tried to figure out what was going on. If she remembered correctly, Scarlett was the name of the third owner of the business. Except this couldn't be her because she looked about seventeen and definitely wasn't a businesswoman.

Scarlett's head lolled from side to side on the couch cushion. "Is anybody gonna ask how my morning was?"

"We were about to tell Amy about the business," Emily said.

"Okay," Scarlett said, "but in case you're wondering, the brats seem to like me. And even if the job is annoying, it's only for the school holidays. Also, I told Damian he needs to pay me more. He hasn't actually transferred the money yet. I think he will though. It's also very easy money because I'll take the boys to the community centre two mornings a week, so someone else will look after them while I sit in the office with my laptop. Fraser said that's fine." Finally, she paused for breath and looked up in Amy's direction. "Fraser is my husband."

Amy's mouth hung open as she tried to digest what she was hearing. Surely this slip of a girl couldn't be talking about

her Damian. *Her* children. “And the brats?” she asked weakly.

“Scarlett is doing some babysitting over the summer,” Emily said. “Why don’t you tell us more about it later,” she said to Scarlett.

“*Two* brats?” Amy asked, keeping her gaze locked on Scarlett, who suddenly seemed unable to look her in the eyes.

“Twin boys,” she said, smoothing a hand along her leggings. “Seven-year-olds. I don’t usually look after kids during the day. I prefer to do babysitting in the evening so I can do my other work while they’re in bed. But I need some extra money because Fraser doesn’t earn very much at the community centre. And we’re saving up. The washing machine just broke too, which is why I told the kids’ dad he has to pay me more.”

“Damian?” Amy asked, wanting to be sure she had everything straight.

“Yes,” Scarlett said with a curt nod.

“Those boys don’t happen to be called Marty and Billy, do they?”

“Yes,” Scarlett said happily. “They’re the brats. Billy seems lively, and Marty was quieter.”

Clearly, it hadn’t occurred to Scarlett to question how Amy knew the children, but from the look of horror on Emily’s face she gathered *she’d* connected the dots.

“My twins are staying with their dad for the summer,” Amy stated, setting her coffee on the table in front of her.

“That’s nice,” Scarlett said. “That’s why you have time to volunteer with us then?”

Lizzie re-crossed her legs and leaned forward in her seat. “You’re Damian’s ex?”

Amy nodded. “I don’t think this is going to work out.”

“Oh,” Scarlett said, the only one who seemed to be unperturbed by the whole situation. “I thought you lived

somewhere else. Why don't *you* look after the brats for the summer if you're here?"

"I guess I probably will." Amy stood and smoothed her dress.

"Please don't go," Emily said. "I know this all seems terrible, but I think Scarlett was being affectionate when she was using the term brats."

"Yeah," Scarlett said. "I totally was."

Amy glared at her. "I don't appreciate anything you've said, but especially not the sarcasm."

"She wasn't being sarcastic," Lizzie said with a dramatic sigh.

"I don't even know how to be sarcastic," Scarlett said.

"You seem pretty good at it from where I'm standing," Amy shot at her.

"Really?" Scarlett asked.

Beside her, Emily winced and shrank into herself.

"I won't be spending the summer working here," Amy said, taking steps towards the door. She turned back to glare at Scarlett. "And you certainly won't be looking after my children."

CHAPTER 4



Introducing the boys to Scarlett had gone way better than Damian had imagined. It often took Marty a while to warm up to people, but he seemed at ease with her almost immediately. By the time she had to leave, he'd timidly given her a hug, which seemed like a great sign.

After she'd left for a meeting with Lizzie and Emily, Damian took the boys for a swim in the sea, then over to the beach cafe for takeaway burgers. They were eating them in the shade of an umbrella beside the surf shack when Amy arrived. So much for her keeping her distance and not interfering with him looking after the boys.

Not that it was really a big deal. It was the shock of her plans that had got to him more than anything. A bit of time to mentally prepare for having her around would have made the situation easier.

His heart beat erratically when he waved to get her attention. This was the real problem of having her around – he felt like a lovesick teenager in her presence. But when she caught sight of him, her glare was so full of contempt it was like a bucket of ice water to his libido. Which probably wasn't a bad thing.

"Everything okay?" he asked, walking over to her.

"No," she hissed. "Everything isn't okay." She forced a smile for the benefit of the boys before pulling Damian away from them.

"What's going on?" he asked.

“I’ve just come from meeting the people who I was supposed to be working with in Salcombe.”

“Did it go well?”

“Not really. I take it you know the owners of Hope Cove Press?”

“You’re working at Hope Cove Press?” His eyebrows shot up, then he let out a sigh as it all clicked into place. It was Amy who Scarlett had been rushing off to meet. They were such a small outfit that he was surprised they’d be taking on more staff. Actually, it didn’t make any sense that they were taking on someone just for the summer, but given the anger radiating from Amy, it didn’t seem a good time to question it. “What happened?”

“It went terribly,” she retorted. “I won’t be working for them after all.”

“How come? They’re a great bunch.”

“That’s not the impression I got.”

He squinted in confusion, because Lizzie and Emily were two of the warmest people he knew. “So you’re not going to work there?” he asked, deciding the why of it wasn’t overly important. “Are you going back to Oxford then?”

“No.” Her hands were balled to fists at her sides. “I’m going to stay here and look after our children.”

“I already told you I have childcare lined up.”

“Not any more you don’t,” she said through clenched teeth. “There’s no way in the world I’d let that rude teenager look after the boys. What were you even thinking when you asked her to look after the boys?”

“Scarlett?” He gave a quick shake of the head. “She isn’t a teenager. She’s a married woman with a degree and her own business. I asked her to look after the boys because I know she’s great with kids.”

The skin at Amy’s neck had gone all blotchy. “I spent five minutes with her, and in that time she referred to our children as brats approximately ten times.”

“Oh,” he said as it dawned on him what was going on. “Scarlett doesn’t make a good first impression.”

“She thinks the boys are brats.”

“I’m fairly sure she meant it affectionately.”

“I’m telling you for a fact that she didn’t. She also had the cheek to be sarcastic to me when I pulled her up on it.”

“I don’t think Scarlett even knows how to be sarcastic,” he said wearily. “Look, I swear to you she’ll be great with the kids. I wouldn’t leave them with her if I had any reservations. It’s also only three mornings a week.”

Amy barked out a humourless laugh. “Oh yeah, about that! She’s planning on putting them in some community centre, so someone else will look after them while she does her own thing.”

“There you go then. She really won’t be looking after them much, so there’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“Are you serious? You’re fine with her farming them off onto strangers.”

“It’s a holiday programme at the community centre. A friend of mine works there. Emmy will be there too. The boys will love it.”

“She’s also ripping you off, this Scarlett girl. Did you know that?”

He shrugged. “Yeah. It’s been brought to my attention. It’s worth it though, isn’t it? To know the boys are well looked after.”

“She’s not going to look after them.” Amy’s eyes shone with determination. “It’s not happening.”

“Look,” Damian said, planting his hands on his hips. “You’re not even supposed to be here. You were supposed to drop the boys off, then leave again. I’d bring them back to you at the end of the holidays. The way I choose to take care of them between now and then isn’t really anything to do with you. As long as they’re safe and happy.”

“I’m their mother,” she said, mirroring his stance. “It’s got everything to do with me.”

“Have I ever interfered with the way you take care of the boys?” He softened his voice as he appealed to her compassionate side. “No,” he said, when she refused to answer. “I don’t interfere because I trust that you’ll look after them. What you’re saying now is that doesn’t work both ways. Which isn’t a massive surprise, is it? We both know you always thought I was a useless father.” A lump rose in his throat as he spoke the words, and he turned away from her. He couldn’t even blame her for thinking he was useless. Even he could admit he’d let her and their kids down.

“I’ve *never* thought you’re a useless father,” she said, the catch in her voice giving the impression she might actually mean it.

He gave her a sidelong look and managed a small smile. “Can you please trust me with my choice of babysitter?”

Amy chewed her bottom lip. “Scarlett seemed awful. She thinks the boys are brats.”

“She doesn’t,” he said. “She hung out with them for an hour this morning, and she was great with them. Ask the boys if you don’t believe me. Even Marty took to her.”

The twitch of her eyebrow told him she might be coming around. “I don’t know,” she said with a sigh. “She was rude and brash and came across like a stroppy teenager. I can’t even gauge how you think she’s a suitable babysitter.”

“Okay. Here’s the truth of it.” Damian rubbed at the space between his eyebrows. “Scarlett is autistic. She has terrible social skills. But she’s way better with kids than she is with adults.”

Amy closed her eyes, as though she couldn’t quite believe what she was hearing. “I don’t know whether that makes it better or worse,” she said, shaking her head. “Is she even competent enough to look after children?”

“Yes,” he said confidently. “She has some challenges, but I have every faith in her when it comes to looking after Billy

and Marty. She's been babysitting Emmy for a while. And Lizzie's kids," he added in a rush. "Lizzie who you met today ... she has three little livewires. Scarlett's been babysitting them for years and there's never been any problem."

"I'm going to be here anyway," Amy said. "It probably makes more sense for me to look after them when you're working. That will save you some money too."

"The money isn't an issue," he said. "I don't have a problem providing for my children financially. I never have." It was the only way he'd consistently done his part, and he wasn't about to let her suggest otherwise.

"That's not what I meant," she said.

He took a deep breath. "You're going to be too busy with your holiday job to look after the boys anyway."

"I already told you, I'm not doing that any more," she said.

"I suspect I know the answer to this, but why not? What exactly happened?"

"Scarlett was going on about how the children are brats and how she was scamming you for money. I told them I didn't think me working for them was going to work out and left in a rush."

"Okay, we can straighten all that out. Lizzie and Emily are great. You'll really like them when you get to know them. Scarlett too."

Amy looked sceptical, but said nothing. Damian turned to check on the boys, who'd moved to dig a hole in the sand. His phone vibrated and he pulled it from his pocket. "That's Lizzie now," he said, then swiped his finger across the screen and greeted her cheerfully.

"Just a small problem," she said in that unflappable tone of hers. "There's been an issue with Scarlett and Amy. Your ex."

"I've just been hearing about that," he told her. "It seems there was a bit of a misunderstanding."

"You can say that again," Lizzie said. "I feel terrible for Amy. She must wonder what on earth she walked into. But for

now I'm more concerned about Scarlett. She's freaking out and we can't calm her down. She thinks she can't look after the boys for the summer. Which she's genuinely upset about, because she really liked them. You know she doesn't actually think they're brats."

"Yeah, I know."

"She's stressed about the money," Lizzie went on. "But she's more concerned you're going to be upset with her. And that she's upset Amy. She's going down her usual route of thinking she never does anything right."

"She can still look after the boys," Damian said, his heart sinking as he thought about how upset Scarlett would be. "Tell her I've explained everything to Amy and that me and the boys are really excited to see her on Wednesday and that I'm transferring the money now."

Lizzie's relief was evident even over the phone. "Thank you so much. Please apologise to Amy for us. We really would like to work with her still, but we also completely understand if she doesn't want to. Hopefully I'll get to speak to her again, but I really need to deal with Scarlett now."

"Of course," Damian said. "Tell her everything is fine."

Ending the call, he looked pleadingly at Amy. "Don't be mad at me," he said. "Scarlett is mortified about what happened. She's really a great person and I promise she'll be brilliant with Marty and Billy. Just trust me on this, please."

She cocked her head. "It doesn't seem as though I have much choice."

CHAPTER 5



Aside from Damian, no one knew where Amy was staying, so when the doorbell rang early that evening, she vaguely expected it to be him. Which meant that her heart rate was elevated before she even reached the door. Even the thought of him had that effect on her.

A pang of disappointment twitched in her stomach when she found Lizzie on the doorstep. She was still wearing the jeans and shirt she'd had on earlier, which reminded Amy that it had only been that morning when they'd met. After her argument with Damian, and then a long afternoon sitting on the patio, telling herself she was enjoying the sea view while really contemplating her life choices, it now felt like a long time.

"Hi," Lizzie said, smiling apologetically. "Is there any chance we could have a quick chat?"

Amy hesitated for a moment before opening the door wider and stepping aside. She gestured along the hall which led to the open-plan kitchen-diner with floor-to-ceiling windows and breath-taking sea views.

"It turns out you met my husband yesterday," Lizzie said. "Max let you into this place. He takes care of a lot of the holiday accommodation in the area. He and Jack do it as a job share." She stopped by the dining table. "Jack is Emily's husband. He works in the pub as well, so you'll no doubt meet him at some point."

Amy smiled benignly, recalling the guy who'd shown her into the house. He'd been professional, but friendly and welcoming.

"You have an amazing view up here," Lizzie said.

"Yes," Amy agreed.

"I should stop waffling." Lizzie offered another apologetic smile. "Obviously, I wanted to talk to you about this morning. We must've looked so unprofessional."

"We can sit down," Amy said, tipping her head towards the patio. She almost offered Lizzie a drink before deciding she didn't want her to feel too comfortable.

"Damian explained about Scarlett," Amy said once they'd settled themselves opposite each other at the small, round table. Further along the patio were two wicker sun loungers, one of which probably already had an Amy-shaped dent in the cushion.

"He told you she's autistic?" Lizzie asked.

"Yes, but I'm not sure that excuses her sitting there referring to my children as brats." Her jaw tightened as anger coursed through her veins.

"Of course it doesn't," Lizzie said. "In her defence, she'd heard someone else saying it in a jokey way. Stuff like that confuses her. But of course it's not okay, and of course you're angry and upset. I would be too." Her lips twisted to one side. "Emily and I spoke to Scarlett after you left and explained why her behaviour was inappropriate. She feels terrible."

Amy craned her neck, inhaling a lungful of warm, salty air and watching a gull glide on the breeze.

"I've had a really strange couple of days," she said. "I'm not sure I can think clearly about anything at this moment. But Damian has insisted on Scarlett looking after my children. And I'm trying very hard to trust his judgement." Pausing, she drew in another deep breath. Having only met Lizzie that morning, she had no particular reason to trust her, but there was something about her calm demeanour that Amy found

reassuring. “Damian said Scarlett looks after your children sometimes?”

“Yes,” Lizzie said. “I can absolutely understand your concerns. But she really is brilliant with kids.”

“After this morning, that’s hard to imagine.”

“I’m sure,” Lizzie said. “But I promise you caught her at a bad moment today. I bet your boys will have a great time with her. If it makes you feel any better, I know she plans to take them along to the kids’ club at the community centre. My girls are going too. It’s very well run and the staff are great.”

“That makes me feel a little better,” Amy said.

“I have twins as well.” Lizzie smiled gently. “The girls are just a bit younger than your boys. We also have a little boy. Nathan.”

“Wow. You’ve got your hands full.”

“Things are getting easier now,” Lizzie said. “We definitely had a few years of complete and utter chaos.”

Amy gave her a knowing smile. “That’s exactly the right word. It’s absolute chaos with twins, isn’t it?”

Lizzie nodded slowly but firmly. “I hope you don’t mind me saying, but you must’ve been very young when you had the boys.”

“I was pregnant when I was finishing university,” she told her. “It wasn’t planned. I was twenty-two when the boys were born.”

“That must’ve been hard.” Lizzie’s voice was so full of understanding that it sent a surge of emotions bubbling up in Amy’s chest.

“Yes.” Her throat constricted around a barrage of pent-up sadness and stress.

Lizzie shifted to sit up straighter. “Are you okay?”

Nodding madly, Amy tried to hold back the tears, but her eyeballs stung and her chest felt so tight she could barely catch her breath. “Sorry,” she said, her strangled voice making her

words barely discernible. “It was *really* hard ...” Her throat tightened further, and she felt as though she was losing control as tears streamed down her face.

“It’s okay,” Lizzie said, the sympathetic cadence of her voice causing Amy to cry even more. “We all have those days when everything feels too much.”

Unable to get control of herself, and mortified by her outburst, Amy stood, muttering about needing a minute before she rushed inside. In the bathroom, she pulled a wad of tissues from the box beside the sink and did her best to staunch the flow of tears. When they wouldn’t stop, she closed the toilet lid and sat down.

She wasn’t someone who cried easily, and she felt completely embarrassed at losing it in front of Lizzie. Her attempts to stop the tears failed, and in the end she dropped her head to her hands and let them come.

The stupid thing was, she didn’t even know what she was crying about. Or maybe she did, but she couldn’t narrow it down to one thing.

There were several different ways that she’d made a mess of her life.

CHAPTER 6



“I’m so sorry,” Amy said when she finally ventured out of the bathroom to find Lizzie standing by the kettle.

“Don’t be.” Lizzie tilted her head. “I just wasn’t sure whether to stay or go. I don’t want to intrude, but I thought I could make us a cuppa. Or if you want me to go, that’s fine too.”

“A cuppa sounds great,” Amy said, leaving Lizzie to navigate the kitchen since she didn’t know where things were yet herself. “I must seem like a disaster,” she said, pushing her hip against the corner of the table. “I swear I hardly ever cry.”

“Sometimes it sneaks up on you,” Lizzie said kindly while she poured hot water into two mugs.

“I’m probably more stressed than I realised. I split up with my husband six months ago, and I feel as though I’ve been moving on autopilot ever since. I wanted to make things as easy as possible for the kids, which means putting on a brave face and ignoring my own feelings most of the time.”

“How long were you together?” Lizzie handed her a mug of tea and they moved back outside.

“We were married for six years. We got together when the boys were six months old and were married before they turned one.”

Lizzie raised her eyebrows but refrained from commenting.

“I know. It was fast.”

“How long were you and Damian together?”

Amy pursed her lips. “On and off for about three years. I met him after my first year of uni when I was in Hope Cove with a friend for the summer. We had jobs at the golf club.” She smiled to herself. “I thought it would just be a holiday romance, but we kept in touch. He came to visit me at uni a few times. The next summer I came back to Hope Cove again.” She shrugged. “It was all a bit of a whirlwind.”

“Did you split up before the boys were born?” Lizzie asked cautiously.

Sadly, Amy shook her head. “I’m surprised he hasn’t told you all about how I left him for someone else, with no warning.”

“I don’t know anything about it. I only recently got to know Damian since the girls have been getting into surfing. Max has known him since they were young, but I think they were more acquaintances than friends.”

“We were together when they were born,” Amy said, not sure why she was confiding in a virtual stranger, but feeling the urge to talk. “I’d decided it would be good to live near my parents so we had some support.” She tried not to dwell on how unhelpful her parents had turned out to be. “So Damian moved to Oxford with me a couple of months before my due date. He got a job at the local supermarket, which he hated and didn’t pay well. We lived in a horrible bedsit and could barely even afford that.” She pressed her lips together. “Everything was stressful ... and then we had two babies who constantly demanded attention. We were both sleep deprived and stressed.”

“It’s such a difficult time when they’re babies,” Lizzie said. “I suppose the advantage of having kids later in life was that Max and I had both had good careers. We were financially sound, but it was still incredibly hard. I can’t imagine having money worries on top of everything else.”

Amy took a sip of her tea before continuing. “Damian and I were both approaching breaking point. All we seemed to do was argue. Then he said he wanted to go back to Hope Cove

for the summer. He could work during tourist season and make good money. I said no. I didn't want to up and move with two babies. Plus, the price of renting anywhere around here was astronomical.

“Damian still had his van here and all his surf equipment for rentals. He said he'd live in the van for the summer, that way he could send me all the money he earned.” She grimaced. “I know it was killing him that we were struggling financially. He wanted to provide for us. In the end, I told him that if he left then we were over.” She paused again, watching a sparrow hop along the edge of the patio. “I think Damian took it as an idle threat. He came back here. I was furious, partly because he'd left me alone with the boys and partly because he got to spend the summer surfing and doing what he loved.”

“That's when you met someone else?” Lizzie asked.

She nodded. “I'd actually known Anthony since secondary school. We dated for a while when we were teenagers. I bumped into him when I was out walking the boys in their buggy and we got chatting. He was a couple of years older than me and had already established his career. He'd just bought a gorgeous house and he seemed so together.” She shook her head, hearing how she sounded.

“Apparently, he'd been carrying a torch for me since we'd dated. He started coming over now and then and did a few jobs around the flat. He'd help me with the kids in the evenings. Everything felt a little more manageable with him around. Pretty quickly he asked me to marry him. He said he'd raise the kids as his own ... it felt as though he'd thrown me a life raft when I was drowning.” She puffed out a humourless laugh. “You must think I'm awful.”

“No,” Lizzie said. “I think you were young and stressed and did what you thought was best at the time.”

“I did love Anthony, in a way. He was a nice guy, and fun and dependable. That's what I needed – someone dependable.” She took another sip of her tea. “I look back and can't believe I did that to Damian. As far as he was concerned, we were still

together, and then one evening when he called I told him I was marrying another guy. And from then on that guy was living with his kids and *he* was raising them instead of Damian.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “I can’t even imagine how much he must have hated me.”

“How have things been with you and Damian since?”

Amy bobbed her head and curled her lip. “For the first couple of years it was hard. There were a lot of angry phone calls, and the odd time when Damian turned up on the doorstep, which never went down well with Anthony. But after a while we settled into our own lives and everything felt pretty amicable and easy. I don’t think Damian would ever have been happy living away from the beach. It’s in his blood. I also don’t think I’d ever have been happy with his haphazard lifestyle. He’s one of those people who assumes everything will work out fine and doesn’t worry about the details.”

“I take it you’re someone who worries about the details?”

“Yes.” She smiled. “You’d think we might balance each other out but in reality we drive each other crazy.”

Lizzie tilted her head. “Was your marriage happy?”

“I’m not sure,” she mused. “On the surface it was, but ...” She trailed off, unsure how to explain.

“What happened for you to break up?”

Amy chuckled. “That’s another long story and I think I’ve probably offloaded on you enough for one day.” She looked gratefully at Lizzie. “I don’t usually tell my life story to people I’ve just met.” In fact, that was probably the most open she’d been with anyone in a long time.

“It’s good to get to know people if you’re going to be working with them.” Lizzie’s eyes sparkled as her lips spread to a hopeful grin. “That’s if you still want to work with us. I know it’s just a voluntary thing, but we were excited about having another voice to weigh in. Emily, Scarlett and I know each other so well that we can usually predict what the others will say when it comes to business decisions and ideas.”

“I suppose this would be a good time for me to be honest with you.” Amy inwardly cringed. “I wasn’t especially looking to get experience in a publishing company ... all I was looking for was a vaguely believable reason to spend the summer here.”

“It was so you could keep an eye on the boys?” Lizzie asked.

“That’s exactly what Damian thought. He thinks I don’t trust him to look after them.”

“Is it true?”

She tipped her head from one shoulder to the other while she figured out how to respond. “Maybe it was part of the reason. But I also couldn’t face spending the summer at home on my own. Coming home from work to an empty house every day really wouldn’t be good for me at the moment.” There was also more to it than that, but she didn’t like to dwell too much on her other reason for being there ... that even the idea of spending time with Damian again felt like a breath of fresh air.

“It sounds as though you need a holiday. Why don’t you spend a bit of time relaxing and exploring? Then, if you feel like checking out what we’re up to with the publishing stuff, you’re very welcome to.”

“That sounds good.” Amy dropped her head to her hands. “I told Damian it was a paid thing.”

“We can’t really afford to pay you, I’m afraid ... though we also weren’t really planning on putting you to work, just showing you how we do things and maybe giving you a couple of tasks if there was something that interested you.”

“It sounds great. And I wasn’t hinting that you should pay me ... I was actually wondering if you could just not mention to Damian that it’s a voluntary position that I pretty much begged for. I really want him to think there’s an actual reason for me to be here other than checking up on him.”

“That’s fine. I don’t think any of us would have mentioned it anyway.”

“Thank you. It would be interesting to learn about your business.” The fact that Lizzie and Emily seemed lovely made it more appealing. “It’s going to be awkward with Scarlett though, I suppose.”

“It’ll be fine. But like I say, take some time to have a holiday.”

“I will,” Amy said, standing when Lizzie did. “Judging by my emotional breakdown today, I guess I need it.”

They walked back through the house, making small talk about the furnishings and decor.

“Thank you for coming over,” Amy said, then surprised herself by opening her arms to hug Lizzie.

“I’ll see you soon,” Lizzie said. “Give me a message whenever you want to come to the office again. Or if you just feel like company. I’m always up for a drink and a natter.”

Closing the door on Lizzie, Amy felt much more positive about her decision to spend the summer in Hope Cove.

CHAPTER 7



Despite it being a while since Amy had spent any time in the area, it all felt very familiar as she wandered the tight roads and rugged paths on Tuesday. A day of aimless wandering and a stint of sunbathing on a quiet little cove left her feeling much more level-headed and ready to face Damian again on Wednesday morning.

A smattering of clouds gave respite from the intensity of the sun as she walked the coastal path from Hope Cove to Thurley beach.

The picnic tables outside the rustic cafe near the beach were all occupied when Amy passed, and the queue for ice creams was long. Beside the path, bees hovered around pink and yellow wildflowers, the scent of which permeated the air.

Distracted by all the sights and smells, Amy only noticed Damian when she was almost at the shack. He stood off to the side, looking out into the bay where a few surfers sat on their boards, bobbing with the waves. At his side was the woman from the other day, again dressed in hot pants, with the neckline of her loose T-shirt hanging off her shoulder to reveal the string of her bikini. A smile lit up her face as she chatted to Damian. When she rested her head on his shoulder, Amy felt as though all the breath had been sucked out of her.

Of course he'd be seeing someone. Why wouldn't he be? But they were supposed to tell each other stuff like that. It had been their rule: to tell each other anything that was likely to impact the kids, such as a significant other.

Damian was completely oblivious to Amy's presence, and she was almost tempted to retreat. Not that there was any reason to slink away. Except that her jealousy was probably written all over her face and she'd rather Damian didn't see it.

The decision was taken from her when Damian shifted to look in her direction. Her feet moved automatically, and she hoped it wasn't obvious she'd been standing gawping at them.

"Hey," Damian said. "The kids aren't back from the holiday programme yet, but they should be back any time now."

"Great. I only wanted to say a quick hello. I won't hang around long."

Damian subtly stepped away from the girl, who seemed to think she might be some sort of human shawl. "This is Callie," he said.

"You're the twins' mum? Amy, right?" She beamed – her big blue eyes all wide and fresh. "You have the cutest kids." She clasped her hands to her heart, the action pulling on her T-shirt to reveal more flawless skin. "They're so adorable."

"Thanks," Amy mumbled.

"Go on then." Damian gave a flick of his head. "Get back to work."

"But it's definitely cool about the weekend?" She fluttered her eyelashes in a way that made Amy want to step between her and Damian and shout at her to back the heck off. There was a small chance that would draw more attention to her jealousy than she'd like.

"It's fine," Damian said. "You owe me, though."

"You're the best!" It was a little embarrassing the way Callie squealed as she ambushed Damian with a kiss on his cheek. "I'll make it up to you, I promise."

"Just get back to work." Damian folded his arms across his chest as his eyes followed Callie, who skipped away to the customers who'd just approached.

"She seems nice," Amy said politely.

“Yeah. She’s kind of high-pitched, but she’s a good worker.”

“Are you and she together?”

He coughed and his cheeks pinked. “No. She works for me.”

“Yeah, I know, but I thought maybe ... I mean you looked pretty close, so I just wondered.”

“I don’t date women who work for me.” He glanced back at Callie. “Also, she’s practically a kid.”

Amy swallowed hard. “Are you seeing anyone at the moment?”

His eyes slid back to hers, full of suspicion. “I’d tell you if I was seeing someone. Anything that affects the kids we tell each other, right?”

“Yes.” She swallowed again, suddenly parched. “That’s why I was asking. In case the boys mentioned something ... it’s just easier to know ...” She trailed off as he eyed her intently. She could swear he could read her mind; though given the way she was wittering like an idiot, he probably wouldn’t need to have particularly honed senses to figure out how much she hated the idea of him dating.

“Did you decide what you’re doing for the summer?”

The change of subject was a relief. “I had a good chat with Lizzie, so I’m still going to work with them. From next week. I’ll just relax this week.”

“The break will be good for you. I bet you’ll love working with Lizzie and Emily though. What sort of hours will you be doing?”

“Not too many,” she said. “It’s just part-time, and it’ll be pretty flexible.”

He nodded, his gaze pensive as he stared towards the horizon.

“I’ll try not to interfere too much with the boys,” she said. “I’m really not trying to tread on your toes.”

“It’s fine,” he said, creases appearing across his forehead. “It’s not as though I expect you to stay away and not see them.”

“I don’t want to encroach on your time with them.”

The left side of his mouth twitched to a smile. “Look, I might have been annoyed about the idea of you being here for the summer, but it was mostly because you sprung it on me. It’s fine. We’ll figure it out.”

“Thank you,” Amy murmured.

“Daddy!” Billy called, running full pelt towards them.

“Hey!” Damian grinned and caught Billy when he launched himself at him. “How was the kids’ club?”

“So cool. I played football and scored two goals and Fraser can throw a basketball from the other end of the room and get it in the basket. He’s married to Scarlett and he’s really good at football. Even better than you, Dad.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Damian said. “How can he be better than me?”

“He is, Dad!”

“It sounds as though you had fun,” Amy said.

“Yes. I made a friend, but I don’t know his name. Emmy was there too, but she had a friend from school so she didn’t talk to us much. But she did give Marty a hug when he was sad.”

“Why was Marty sad?” Amy asked, instantly on high alert.

“Because he didn’t want to leave Scarlett.”

Looking around, Amy spotted Marty ambling slowly along the sand, clutching Scarlett’s hand. She whipped her head back to Damian. “I knew this was a bad idea. You know how sensitive he is ... It was never going to work for him to be taken somewhere and left with people he doesn’t know ...” She switched her attention to Marty, smiling as he approached. “Hey,” she said, adopting her most soothing tone as she

crouched to his level. “If you didn’t like it at the kids’ club you don’t have to go again. You can stay with me instead.”

“It was okay,” he said. “I think it will be better next time.”

“Oh.” She frowned. “Billy said you didn’t like it.”

“I didn’t want to join in the games, but Scarlett said it’s fine to watch and then next time I might feel like joining in.”

“Oh,” she said again. “So you weren’t sad?”

His chin wobbled then. “I only cried because Billy called me a big baby because I was sitting on Scarlett’s knee.”

“Billy!” Amy snapped, catching the sly grin on Billy’s face before he buried his head in Damian’s shoulder.

“That’s not cool.” Damian peeled him off him and set him down. “What do you say to your brother?”

“Sorry!” Billy shouted insincerely. “Can I go and build sandcastles now?”

Damian sighed. “Get a drink first. You’re all sweaty.” He reached over and ruffled Marty’s hair. “Do you want to get a drink too?”

After a moment’s hesitation, he released Scarlett’s hand and followed his brother.

“How did it go?” Damian asked Scarlett.

“Good.” She’d dropped her gaze to her feet.

“Dad,” Marty said, appearing beside Damian and taking his hand. “Can you come with me to get a drink? Billy says he’s going to spray me with the tap.”

“I’ll be back in a sec,” Damian said, flashing Scarlett a reassuring smile even though she was still staring at the sand.

Left alone, the silence between the two women was intense. At least now that Amy knew Scarlett was autistic it helped to understand her better.

She also suspected she’d seriously misjudged her. Especially when it came to her ability to look after her children.

“Did Marty stay with you the whole time?” Amy asked, breaking the silence.

“Yeah.” Scarlett dug the toe of her shoe into the sand. “Next time I’ll encourage him to join in more. It was only because it was the first time and everything was new. He’ll probably feel better about joining in next time.”

“I think you’re right.”

Scarlett lifted her chin a fraction. “Sorry about the other day.”

“Maybe we should just forget about it,” Amy suggested.

“That’d be nice.” Briefly, Scarlett met her gaze. “I’m not good at forgetting the times I say something wrong or do something stupid. It sticks in my head.”

“I know that feeling,” Amy said wistfully. “It happens to me a lot. Like my own brain hates me and wants to torture me.”

“Exactly!” Scarlett’s whole demeanour changed when she smiled. “By the way, I won’t say anything to Damian about you not getting paid at the publishing company. Lizzie told me not to mention it.”

“Thank you.”

They fell silent again as Damian approached with Marty still holding his hand.

“I’ve got a surf lesson today,” Marty told Scarlett.

“That’ll be fun,” she said.

His eyes narrowed as he edged away from Damian and closer to Scarlett. “I don’t think I want to do it.”

Amy was about to jump in with some words of encouragement, but Scarlett crouched to Marty before she could open her mouth.

“Why not?” she asked.

“I don’t think I’ll be very good at it.”

“Nobody’s good at anything to start with. That’s why you have lessons.”

“I might fall off, though.”

“You probably will, but it’ll still be fun.”

“Can you stay and watch me?”

“I have to go to work now. But I’ll come another time and you can show me how good you are.”

“Okay.” He beamed at her. “I’m going to dig with Billy now.”

The three of them watched him run along the sand to join his brother.

“Do you surf?” Amy asked Scarlett.

“No.” A shadow of a smile played at her lips. “I don’t think I’d be any good and I’m scared of falling off.”

Damian chuckled. “I’ve told you before I can give you lessons.”

“No, thanks. I’ll see you on Friday.”

“Thanks!” Damian and Amy called at once.

With Scarlett retreating up the beach, Amy felt a burst of self-consciousness at being alone with Damian.

“I should probably get going,” she said when the silence stretched too long.

Damian nodded, then came with her when she went to tell the boys she was leaving.

“Can you stay and watch us surf?” Marty asked, abandoning his digging to hug Amy’s leg.

There wasn’t any reason not to stay and watch them, aside from the fact that she was supposed to be keeping a low profile and letting Damian have his time with the boys. She glanced at him, trying to gauge his thoughts.

He shrugged. “Doesn’t make any difference to me.”

“Please, Mum,” Billy said, sand flying all around, as he continued with his digging.

“I suppose I could.”

“It’ll be nice for the boys to have you watching,” Damian said, then crouched beside the boys. “Callie will be over in five minutes to help you get into your wetsuits. Okay?”

“Where will you be?” Billy asked.

“I’ll be out surfing with the bigger kids,” he told them. “You’ll do your lessons with Sara. Remember we talked about this yesterday?”

“It’d be better if we were with you,” Marty said.

“Don’t worry. We’ll have plenty of time surfing together this summer.”

Billy looked up at Damian eagerly. “Can we do that thing where I ride on the board with you? And we go really fast on the big waves?”

Damian winced as he caught Amy’s eye. “Maybe we’ll do that sometime when your mum isn’t around to see.” He flashed her a mischievous smile and made a quick getaway.

Her eyes followed him as he went back up to the shack and greeted a group of teenagers who were getting into wetsuits. A few minutes later she watched him walk down to the water with them and felt an unexpected ripple of anticipation at the thought of watching him surf again.

CHAPTER 8



Watching seven-year-olds learn to surf wasn't the most thrilling thing in the world. From her spot on the sand, just above the tide line, Amy really tried to focus her attention on her children, but it was difficult with Damian teaching his group just a little further over in the water.

She'd never watched him teach before. The way he encouraged the group of five teenagers held her attention easily. Mostly, he observed and gave feedback, offering tips and direction, but occasionally he gave demonstrations. Or maybe there were just some waves he couldn't resist riding himself. That was when Amy couldn't take her eyes off him.

She was straight back to being a naïve twenty-year-old whose stomach tumbled in much the same way as the waves as she watched him do his thing. The way the board twisted and turned on the waves seemed so effortless.

At one point, while zipping along on a wave, he crouched low and tipped his head, pushing his head into the water. When he withdrew, he flicked his wet hair, making Amy laugh. There was no way he could've heard her, but his eyes shifted in her direction. Did he remember her saying how sexy she found that move? Had he done it because he knew she was watching?

A shout got her attention and she looked over in time to see Billy standing on his board and grinning proudly as he rode all the way in on the gentle waves closer to the shore. She gave him a thumbs up in acknowledgement and kept her attention on him as her heart rate came back to normal.

The boys' lesson ended at the same time as Damian's, and they all trudged back up the beach together. Billy refused any help with getting out of his wetsuit, while Marty stood shivering as Amy stripped him off and wrapped him in a towel.

"Who's hungry?" Damian asked and received an enthusiastic response from Billy.

"Are you having dinner with us?" Marty asked Amy.

"No. I'm going home now."

"Aren't you having dinner?"

"I am," she said, rubbing Marty to warm him up. "But I'll have it at my house."

"Can you have dinner at Dad's house instead? Then we can show you the toys Dad bought us."

"Maybe another day."

"Please come today," Marty said.

Damian came and scooped him up. "Mum's got to go now, but we'll see her soon."

After struggling to get his arms free of his towel, Marty lurched in Amy's direction, just like he used to do when he was a toddler. Now that he was bigger, Damian almost dropped him. Between the two of them, they kept him from crashing to the ground.

"Careful," Amy chastised him gently.

"Can I sleep at your house?" Marty asked, pushing his bottom lip out.

"No. You're staying with Daddy for the holidays. You get to stay with me the rest of the time."

"But I want to stay with you today."

Amy looked at Damian. "He's tired. I think he just needs an early night. It's been a busy day for them."

"Why don't you come up and have dinner with us?" Damian suggested.

She smiled gratefully. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Why not?”

“Can you stay until I go to sleep?” Marty asked.

Amy gave him a reassuring smile. “Let’s get some dinner and go from there.”

In his usual style, Billy led the way for the five-minute walk to Damian’s house. Marty walked between Damian and Amy, holding each of their hands.

“You seem to have the business running well,” Amy remarked to Damian as they left the beach. “If you can leave before the place closes.”

“I have good staff. Sara and Jared have both been working for me for the past couple of summers and I trust them completely. I’ve given them both a lot more hours this summer so I have time for the boys.”

“That’s great.” She was pleased that he was doing so well for himself.

Marty squeezed Amy’s hand. “Why do you have to stay in a different house? Can’t you stay at Daddy’s house too?”

“No, sweetheart. There isn’t enough room.”

“You could sleep in Daddy’s bed,” Marty suggested.

While her cheeks heated, Billy shouted over his shoulder. “Men and women can’t sleep in a bed together unless they’re married. Don’t you even know that?”

Amy was panicking over how to respond to that little nugget when Damian leaned close. “What’s this nonsense you’ve been teaching Billy?” he asked in her ear.

At the sight of his flirty grin, she broke into a smile and automatically gave his bicep a playful shove, noticing as she did so how firm his muscles were.

“Can’t you and Daddy sleep in a bed together?” Marty asked innocently.

“We *could*,” Amy began, then stifled a laugh at the look of mock surprise and then delight on Damian’s features. “We don’t though.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Marty replied.

“It’s my bed,” Damian said in a silly voice. “I don’t want to share it, and your mum has a perfectly good bed at her place.” He scooped Marty up and deposited him on his shoulders.

Without having to go at Marty’s slow speed, they reached the house quickly. It was a middle house in a row of cottages, all with tiny front gardens bordered by a low stone wall. Opening the front door with its shiny blue paint, Damian smiled nervously at Amy.

“We were in a rush to get out of the door this morning. Ignore the mess.”

She nodded her agreement and followed the boys inside.

“Can you come up and see our room?” Billy asked, pulling on her hand.

“Give me a minute. I’ve seen it before anyway. Lots of times.” She’d never stayed for long, but of course she’d hung around for a little while whenever she’d been picking up or dropping off the boys over the years.

“We’ve got bunk beds now!” Billy told her giddily. “And Daddy painted the walls so it looks like the sea with surfers on it. And there are clouds at the top and seagulls too.”

“That makes it sound way more arty than it is,” Damian told her. “I painted it blue and added some of those wall sticker things.”

“It’s really cool,” Marty said.

“Sounds as though you’ve been busy,” Amy said to Damian.

“I thought bunk beds would be better now they’re bigger. Gives them more space to play up there.”

“Good idea.”

“Anyway.” He clapped his hands together. “You have a look at that and I’ll see what I can find for dinner.”

“You said we could have pizza,” Billy told him.

Damian grimaced. “I think I said we could have pizza *one* day. I don’t think I meant tonight.”

“You said tonight!” Billy insisted.

“You did, Daddy.” Marty looked up at him with big eyes. “When we were having breakfast you asked what we wanted for dinner tonight and we said pizza.”

“I was probably only half awake.” Damian looked like a deer in the headlights. “I think it would be good to have something healthier than pizza.”

“Dad!” both boys complained at once.

“Pizza sounds good to me,” Amy said.

“Fine.” Damian flashed the boys a stern look. “But you can’t eat junk food every day.”

The boys let out triumphant cheers and thundered up the stairs.

“Come on,” Marty called to Amy from the top. “You have to see our room. It’s so cool.”

He was right; it did look cool. All bright and fresh with much more floor space for them to play. Amy hovered by the window, looking out towards the beach and the sea – the place where she’d first met Damian.

“Look at all our new toys,” Billy said, snapping her from her trance. She sank onto the carpet with the two of them, noticing the suitcase at the side of the room. It was overflowing with the clothes that she’d neatly folded and packed for the boys.

Marty shoved some sort of Transformer toy under her nose just as Damian arrived in the doorway.

“Pizza will be ready in fifteen minutes,” he said, leaning against the doorjamb.

“Mummy, look,” Billy said, scrabbling up the ladder to the top bunk. “We got new bedding. It’s got the sea on it and boats.”

“That’s lovely,” she said, getting up to peer into his bed, where the covers lay scrunched at one end. “Where are *your* covers?” she asked Marty after glancing at the empty bottom bunk.

“In Daddy’s room,” Billy answered for him. “Marty slept in Daddy’s bed like a baby.”

“I’m not a baby,” Marty replied without conviction.

Amy gave Billy a steely look. “Don’t say unkind things. Be nice to your brother.” Her eyes drifted back to the suitcase. “I could unpack that, if you want?” she said to Damian, then wished she could take it back when he clenched his jaw.

This was what had always annoyed him about her: the way she needed order, and for things to be done in a particular way. It was no doubt part of the reason he’d been so keen to get away from her when the boys were tiny, and definitely a contributing factor for him not wanting her around for the summer. He thought she’d spend the summer criticising him, and she was already proving him right.

What did it even matter if the clothes didn’t get put in the wardrobe straight away?

“I’ll do it tomorrow,” Damian said.

She nodded. “Okay.”

“Daddy got me another Harry Potter wand,” Billy said, wafting it under her nose and pressing the button to start the annoying zinging noise that she knew too well.

“I didn’t realise Anthony had already bought them for the boys,” Damian said.

“That’s okay. These can stay here and you can have the pleasure of that annoying sound as well.”

His lips quirked to a hint of a smile. “I also didn’t realise how obnoxious they were when I bought them.”

“No one would buy them if they realised that.”

Damian shoved his hands into his pockets. “I’ll give you a shout when dinner’s ready,” he said before leaving them to explore the array of toys scattered on the carpet.

CHAPTER 9



The evening at Damian's place felt very domesticated. Amy had the feeling their lives were playing out in an alternate universe in which she hadn't married Anthony, and she and Damian had raised their family the way they should have done. It was easy to get lost in the daydream while the boys chatted away over pizza and as they all ate ice cream together out on the patio with the lingering sunshine casting everything in a golden glow.

Amy knew she should be getting back to the bungalow. There was no reason to hang around, other than the fact that she didn't want to go. She told herself it would cause an issue if she left before bedtime.

At story time, Marty and Billy insisted she do the honours, dragging her into Damian's room to read on his bed, as had apparently become the routine. The bed was unmade, with Damian's duvet crumpled and hanging off one side and Marty's at the other. A few items of clothing were scattered on the floor but it was tidier than she'd imagined.

"You have to sit in the middle of the bed," Billy said, pulling on her hand. "Then we can both see the pictures."

The scent of Damian hung in the air and suddenly it all felt stifling. Taking a step backwards, Amy stepped on Damian's foot and would have collided with him completely if he hadn't caught her with his hands at her shoulders.

"Sorry," she said, feeling an immediate tingle on her skin from his touch.

“I was just going to say it’s probably a bit of a mess in here.” Stepping around her, he plucked a T-shirt from the floor and slung it in the washing basket in the corner before setting about making the bed.

“Why don’t we read on the bunk bed?” Amy suggested, a manic edge to her voice that she couldn’t control. “It’ll be like being in a cave if we sit on the bottom bunk. Won’t that be fun? Let’s put Marty’s bedding back on there so it’s cosy.”

“But I want to sleep with Daddy again,” Marty complained.

“You should at least start in your own bed.” Hastily, she scooped up his bedding and left Damian’s room, not leaving any more room for discussion.

Only when she heard Damian’s footsteps descending the stairs did she feel she could breathe again. Her heart settled back into a gentler rhythm as she read the story. With drooping eyelids, the boys were easy to settle once Amy reached the end of the story. Billy sleepily climbed up the ladder, and Marty lay down with no mention of moving to Daddy’s bed – which Amy was happy about since she was sure going back in there would overwhelm her once again.

Leaving them with a goodnight kiss each, she crept downstairs, where Damian was relaxing on the couch with a bottle of beer in his hand and his bare feet propped on the coffee table.

“They’re so tired,” Amy said, hovering beside the armchair. “I think they’ll both go straight to sleep.”

“Busy day for them,” Damian remarked, then chewed on his bottom lip. “I’ll unpack their things tomorrow. And I promise not to let them eat junk food for every meal. It’s just hard when they first arrive ... I don’t like to say no to them and I’d rather spend my time with them than unpacking and making sure the house is neat and tidy.”

Amy sank onto the arm of the chair. “It’s fine. You don’t need to sound so defensive about it. I didn’t actually make any comment.”

“Maybe not.” He took a swig of his beer. “But I detected a lot of repressed eye-rolling.”

She tried to smile, but it died on her lips. “That’s not fair. I didn’t think anything of it, and I only offered to unpack to be helpful. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“I take it you don’t want Marty sleeping in with me, though?” He removed his feet from the coffee table and set the beer bottle down. “I know that’s something you’ve been working on with him, but it’s different when he’s just arrived here and is settling into a new routine.”

“I didn’t say anything about it,” she said softly. “I’m actually fine with it. It was an issue for a while, but it was mainly Anthony who had a problem with him sleeping in our bed.” She caught the way Damian’s eyes narrowed and felt instantly defensive. “He just worried about us babying Marty. We were both worried ... he’s so small, and Anthony especially worried about him not being able to stick up for himself. It was only because he was concerned.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Damian pointed out.

Amy took a deep breath. “Anyway, after Anthony moved out I gave up on trying to keep Marty out of my bed. I didn’t really see the point since there wasn’t a space issue any more. Besides, Anthony leaving was hard on the boys. I probably let them get away with too much, but I think they need some leeway at the moment.”

Reaching for his bottle, Damian turned it in his hands and picked at the label. “How are things with Anthony?” he asked without making eye contact.

It was hard to know how to answer – things were a mess, but a surprisingly calm and drama-free mess, which seemed to be Amy’s forte.

“He’s been taking the boys every other weekend. Sometimes he picks them up from school too, if I can’t get out of work in time. It’s obviously not ideal for the boys, but I guess it works okay.”

Damian twisted his lips to one side. “Do you think you’ll sort things out with him? You said it was a trial separation, right?”

That’s what they’d agreed to start with, but realistically that was just a way of making everything a bit more manageable – of easing their way out of the marriage, even though they knew it was broken beyond repair.

“We still need to talk some things through, but I expect we’ll set the ball rolling on a divorce soon. The boys don’t know that yet. I’m not sure they really know what’s going on, so at least a divorce will make things clearer for them. I just hope they’re not too traumatised by it all.”

“I’m sure they’ll be all right. You always make everything all right for them.”

She couldn’t decide if that was a dig. Was he saying she put herself first and figured out how to make that okay for the boys later? Catching his eye, she realised that wasn’t what he meant at all. It was only the way she saw herself, whereas he was much more generous in his assessment of her.

“How are you doing?” he asked, his voice so smooth and concerned that her eyes pricked with tears.

“I’ll survive,” she said, then inhaled deeply.

“There are more beers if you want one?”

She licked her bottom lip, contemplating the offer. Staying and sharing her problems with Damian over a cold beer felt about the most appealing thing in the world. Not at all fair to him, though.

“Thanks, but I should get going.” She stood decisively. “Have you got much planned for the next few days?” It sounded as though she wanted to tag along with whatever they were doing, but she genuinely hadn’t meant it that way. “I’ll stay away, of course. I really don’t want to be in your way.”

He walked to the door with her. “It’s okay. Like you said, it’s a strange time for the boys. Having you around is probably a good thing. We’ll have a lazy day tomorrow – probably at

the beach. Then Scarlett will have them again on Friday morning while I'm teaching."

She nodded. "It sounds like a nice week. Maybe I'll catch up with you guys at the weekend for a little bit?"

"Sure." He gave a quick shake of the head. "My parents will also be around at the weekend. They're desperate to see the boys."

"Ah." She gave a knowing smile. "Maybe I'll stay away for the weekend then. Thanks for the heads up."

His eyes sparkled as he chuckled. "I know you'll never believe me, but my parents don't actually hate you."

"I almost believe you ... only because I'm not sure your parents are capable of hating anyone. But if they did, it would be me."

How could they not after the way she'd treated their son? Of course they hated her. She was only lucky they were polite enough to never show it. Now and again they came and stayed at a hotel in Oxford so they could see the boys. They'd either take Marty and Billy to stay with them for a few nights or take them out for day trips.

That was probably why they were so polite to Amy – so there wouldn't be any issue with her letting them take their grandchildren. Not that she'd ever say no to them. They were their grandparents and lovely people to boot. She definitely wanted the boys to have a relationship with them.

"They like you," Damian said firmly.

She quirked an eyebrow. "I thought we said we'd always be honest with each other."

He gave an amused shake of the head in reply.

Given the ease of the conversation, saying goodbye with a kiss on the cheek felt so natural that her lips were against his skin with no thought at all.

Only then did her heart stutter and her lungs forget their job.

She moved away and called goodnight over her shoulder, hoping she'd turned away quickly enough that he hadn't noticed how flustered a simple kiss on the cheek made her.

CHAPTER 10



From their table in front of the Anchor Inn, Damian had a clear view of the kids playing on the beach. Emmy had offered to go with the boys when Marty had been reluctant to join his brother in searching for shells. Now the three of them had their heads together, crouched in a tight circle on the sand.

“If she’d accepted a beer we’d probably have ended up sleeping together,” Damian announced to Hugh and Leo, continuing their conversation about how it was to have Amy around. He hadn’t seen her since Wednesday, but he also hadn’t stopped thinking about her.

Leo grinned at him while bouncing Alice on his knee. “You sound incredibly confident that she wants to sleep with you.”

“You would too if you’d seen the way she looks at me. I swear, it’s pure lust in her eyes.”

“I wish I had your confidence with women,” Hugh said. “It does sound slightly deluded though, to think she’s come here purely to jump your bones. She only split up with her husband a few months ago.”

“Seven months actually,” Damian corrected him. “And I never said she came just to jump me. I mostly think she can’t stand the thought of being away from the boys for so long. But I also know her well enough to know she has a certain ... appetite, shall we say? And I presume her appetite hasn’t been sated for quite a while now. She’s like a coiled spring, all wound up and in need of release.”

Leo looked decidedly sceptical. “Surely there’d be less complicated ways to scratch that itch. Sleeping with your ex who is also the father of your children is obviously going to get messy.”

“Or maybe not?” Hugh suggested. “Maybe the four of you would live happily ever after.”

Damian shook his head, terrified of letting those kind of thoughts in. “It didn’t work out for us before. Why would it work now?”

“Because things are different now,” Hugh said. “*You’re* different.”

“Hang on a minute,” Leo said. “Speaking of coiled springs ... we haven’t heard about any of your evening entertainments for a while now.” He raised an eyebrow. “How long has it been?”

“I dunno,” Damian said, hoping that his friends wouldn’t dig much further, but suspecting from the glint in Leo’s eye that he’d already got him sussed.

“Is it approximately the same amount of time that Amy has been broken up with Anthony?” Leo asked.

Hugh sat forward, leaning on the table. “It is, isn’t it? Are you actually thinking that now she’s single ...”

“I’m not thinking anything,” Damian said forcefully. “Even if we forget the fact that she’s still currently married, it makes no difference. I’m the same old chaotic me and she’s still all sensible and organised. Our personalities clash.”

“You’d think you might just balance each other out,” Leo suggested.

“Yeah,” Damian mused, wishing that was true. “Unfortunately, we don’t work like that. Anyway, one week down, four and a half to go. I can manage this.”

“I thought you’d had a good week with the boys,” Hugh said.

“I did. It’s been great. I’m not counting down to them leaving. I was commenting on how much longer I have of

resisting the temptation that is Amy. It's possible, though, right?"

Leo lifted Alice to his face, rubbing his nose against hers and making her giggle – an adorable sound. "I don't think I really get it," he remarked. "If you want to sleep with her, and she wants to sleep with you, maybe you should just go for it."

"As you pointed out before, it's a terrible idea. Not only would it be a complete mess when she leaves again in a month, there's also the fact that she's still technically married. And I don't even know for certain if that's going to change."

"They've been separated for seven months," Hugh said. "And I thought there was talk of divorce?"

"There's talk of it," Damian said. "That doesn't mean it's going to happen. They might still get back together for all I know." The thought hit him like a blow to the chest. "My parents are visiting this weekend," he said. "So that will keep Amy and her lusty eyes away from me."

"Does she still think they hate her?" Hugh asked.

"Yeah. I can't convince her otherwise."

"It's hard to imagine your parents thinking badly of anyone," Leo said.

"Amy says the same," Damian remarked. "But despite that, she's still sure they harbour some kind of grudge against her. I gave up trying to figure it out."



AMY WAS WALKING out of the local shop on Sunday morning when a familiar baritone wished her good morning.

"Hi, Martin," she said, immediately filled with nerves even though Damian's dad was one of the friendliest people she'd ever met.

"It's great to see you, love." He pulled her into a bear hug so tight it was almost painful.

“Nice to see you too,” she said. “How are you?”

“Absolutely smashing.” His wide grin filled his face. “It’s a beautiful day and I get to spend it with my grandkids. What could be better than that?”

“I’ll bet the boys were over the moon to see you?”

“We’ve been having a grand old time. Full of energy, aren’t they? It’s hard to keep up with them. Fantastic kids, though,” he said affectionately. “Lovely for them to have you around for the summer too. Damian said you were doing some work in the area.”

She nodded. “For a local publishing company.”

“It sounds very glamorous.”

“I don’t think it is really, but it’ll be interesting. Always good to learn something new.”

“Definitely.” He gave her shoulder a squeeze. “Listen, I need to nip in and buy some eggs, but why don’t you come back with me and have breakfast with us? I’m sure Wendy would love to see you. You could tell us more about this publishing work.”

“That’s very kind,” she told him, with a pang of guilt for thinking they were only nice to her because she was the mother of their grandchildren. It would make them excellent actors, but it just didn’t make sense that they actually liked her. “I’ve got a lot on today,” she told him, not sure Damian would be thrilled at her descending on their family time. “It’s my first day at the job tomorrow, so I want to do some research and make sure I’m in the right headspace.”

“Of course,” he said. “You’ll want to make sure you’re prepared. Always a diligent one, aren’t you? Anyway, I hope the first day goes brilliantly.”

“Hopefully I’ll see you again soon,” she said politely.

“I’m sure you will. We can’t stay long this time. We’re heading up to Cardiff tomorrow to visit Marissa. She just had another baby last week. Did Damian tell you?”

“No, he didn’t. Congratulations! That’s four grandchildren for you now, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. She had another little girl. Faith, they’re calling her.”

“That’s lovely. Tell her congratulations from me.” She’d only met Damian’s sister a couple of times, years ago, but she sent the odd message asking about the boys and always sent them gifts for birthdays and Christmas.

“I’ll do that,” Martin said. “And we’ll be back to see the boys again in a few weeks. We’ll be able to spend a bit longer then.”

“That’ll be good.”

“Won’t it just.” He gave her another big hug. “We’ll catch up properly then. I’ll look forward to hearing how it’s going with the publishing job.”

Smiling, she told him to give Wendy her best, then set off back up the hill while he went on with his shopping. She hadn’t actually planned on doing any research for the next day, assuming that it would be an informal afternoon of listening in on whatever Lizzie, Emily and Scarlett were discussing in their meeting. But having told Martin that was what she was doing for the day, it suddenly seemed like a good idea.

Back at the bungalow, she took her laptop and a coffee onto the patio. To start with, she went onto the website for Hope Cove Press, familiarising herself with the books they’d published and the authors they worked with. Following that, she trawled an online bookshop to see which books were currently popular, then followed several social media accounts about books and publishing. Once she’d finished, she’d been tempted into several new book purchases, which were instantly downloaded onto her Kindle. Among them were books by both Emily and Scarlett.

After a quick lunch of a sandwich and salad, she settled herself on a sun lounger and opened up Scarlett’s book – the first in a trilogy of fantasy novels. If she were honest, she had

low expectations for the book, but after only a couple of pages she'd completely forgotten it was Scarlett who'd written it.

Reaching the end of the third chapter, she paused and marvelled at how well written it was and how the story already had her hooked. Not what she'd expected at all. She felt an odd tingle of pride on Scarlett's behalf.

In recent years she'd only read for pleasure on holidays, and then it was with the constant interruption of her children. She was surprised by just how much she enjoyed getting lost in a book. Time seemed to go far quicker while she had her head buried in the pages. Only her rumbling stomach forced her to have a break, but it was a short one.

By the time she settled down to sleep that evening, she was more than halfway through Scarlett's book and annoyed that her eyes refused to stay open any longer for her to continue.

CHAPTER 11



Lizzie messaged Amy on Monday morning to let her know of a change of location for their afternoon meeting. The cafe was easy to find in the heart of Hope Cove, and from there the friendly owner directed her to a staircase at the back of the building which would apparently take her to a flat above. It all felt a little cloak and dagger to Amy as she hesitated at the top of the stairs. She'd just raised her hand to knock when the door opened and she came face to face with a young guy with striking blue eyes, luscious blonde hair and an absolutely perfect build.

“Hey!” He smiled widely. “You must be Amy.”

“Yes.” She stared at him in confusion.

“Your boys are great,” he said. “Such cute kids.”

She squinted as her brain tried to catch up. “Excuse me?”

“Sorry.” His smile stretched even wider. “I work at the community centre in Totnes.”

“You’re Fraser?”

“That’s me.”

“Fraser, who’s brilliant at football?”

He chuckled. “I like to think so, but I usually only play with little kids these days, so it’s pretty easy to look like a pro.”

“So you’re Scarlett’s husband?”

“Yes.” He took a couple of steps towards the stairs. “I’m also late for work, so I better run, but go in ... Emily and Lizzie are already here.”

“Thanks,” she called as he took off down the stairs. “Nice to meet you.”

He raised a hand to wave and was gone in a flash.

After knocking on the door, Amy called hello and wandered along the short hall, following the sound of voices.

“I just met Fraser,” she said to Scarlett, who was sitting in the cosy living room with Lizzie and Emily. “He seems lovely.”

“I imagine you’re now thinking what everyone thinks,” Scarlett said dryly. “Which is how on earth me and him ended up together ...”

As Emily and Lizzie chuckled into their coffee mugs, Amy wasn’t sure how to respond. “I wasn’t thinking ...” It was a lie; she’d been wondering exactly that. “I mean, if anything I’m surprised you’re married when you’re so young, but I suppose I wasn’t much older than you when I got married. I also had two kids at that point. Anyway, how long have you been married?”

“Four years.”

Amy coughed as she sat down. “*Four years?*”

“We’ve been legally married for four years. We weren’t really in a relationship to start with.”

“What?” Amy asked, feeling utterly lost.

“I married him for money,” Scarlett went on. “It was like a marriage of convenience. It’s actually a really long story.”

“I’d love to hear it.”

Scarlett frowned. “It’s a *really* long story. I could probably fill a book with it. I’ll tell you another time, when we haven’t got work to get on with.”

“Yes. Of course,” Amy muttered, though her curiosity was well and truly piqued.

“Sorry about the change of venue,” Emily said. “This used to be our base before Scarlett kicked us out so she and Fraser could live here. Sometimes we still meet here anyway. Scarlett’s got a busy day today, so it was easier for her if we came here.”

“How were my brats this morning?” Amy asked Scarlett.

Scarlett looked blankly at her.

“It was a joke,” Amy said, unsettled by the silence.

“I know it was a joke,” Scarlett said. “I just don’t understand why I don’t sound jokey when I say stuff. People never know if I’m joking or not. Which is kind of handy occasionally, but other times it doesn’t work out so well.” She rested her elbow on the arm of the couch. “The boys were great. I organised a private tour of the lifeboat station for them and they loved it.”

Amy’s eyes widened. “That’s great.”

“I have friends in high places,” Scarlett said with a grin.

“My husband volunteers on the lifeboats,” Emily explained.

“The boys loved Jack,” Scarlett said.

“All kids love Jack,” Lizzie said. “Because he acts like a kid half of the time.”

“Anyway, I want to get some writing done later.” Scarlett retrieved her laptop from the coffee table. “Let’s get on with whatever we need to discuss ... Christmas books, right?”

“Have you got the cover concepts?” Emily asked Scarlett.

“Sorry,” Lizzie said to Amy. “I assume you’re happy to go along with everything. Feel free to ask questions if you have any.”

“Thanks. I’m very happy to just observe and see what you do.”

“Here we go.” Scarlett turned her laptop screen to reveal the front cover of a book with an illustration of a woman walking her dog in snow and the title *Winter Wishes* written in

a swirling handwritten font. “What genre would you think it is?”

Amy poked a finger to her chest when she registered Scarlett was looking at her. “Are you asking me?”

“Yeah. We all know already.”

“The cover should mostly convey the genre and tone of the book,” Emily said, eyes shifting from the screen to Amy. “What would you expect if you bought this?”

“Oh. Umm ...” She leaned forwards to get a better look at the cover. “I guess I’d expect something warm and cosy ... with some romance. I’d imagine with a female protagonist.”

“Good,” Lizzie said. “That’s spot on. Do we have more options for it?”

Scarlett turned the laptop back to her. “Yes. But that’s the best, so you don’t need to see the other possibility.”

“Why don’t you want us to see the other one?” Lizzie asked.

“Because you’ll like it. So we’ll have a big, time-consuming discussion before I convince you to go with this cover. It’ll save us time if I don’t show you the other design.”

“So the designer sends you multiple designs for a book?” Amy asked, checking she was keeping up.

“Yes.” Emily nodded. “These aren’t final. They’d still be tweaked, but first we decide on the general concept. For romance there’s always the choice of an illustrated design or a photographic image. We weren’t sure what to go with for this one, so we asked for both.”

“Show us the photo one,” Lizzie urged Scarlett.

“Fine.” She turned the screen around for the next reveal.

Amy’s jaw went slack and Lizzie and Emily gasped in unison.

“Well, I’d buy that,” Lizzie said.

“Duh!” Scarlett set the laptop on the coffee table. “You’d buy anything with a hot guy on the cover.”

“It’s a really strong cover,” Emily said, eyes glued to the screen.

“What would you expect from the book?” Scarlett asked Amy.

“Well ...” She peeled her eyes away from the guy staring out from the cover with his piercing green eyes and flirty smile. His shirt was open, giving a pleasant view of his chest despite the fact that he was standing in snow. Presumably his rippling muscles were keeping him warm.

“I think we’re talking about a whole different kind of winter wishes now,” she said with a smile. “I’d expect a grittier story. Steamier. I don’t know whether he’s supposed to be a nice guy or not, and I don’t think I care.”

“I’m with you there,” Lizzie said with a smirk.

“It’s a good cover, but it doesn’t fit the book.” Scarlett took the laptop back and closed the lid. “We’ll go with the illustrated one.”

“I think the hot man cover will sell,” Lizzie said. “Since we’re in the business of selling books, this needs to be more of a discussion.”

“The story is too sweet,” Scarlett said.

“What about if we talk to Tricia about possibly tweaking the story?” Emily suggested. “Because that’s a really strong cover.”

“No.” Scarlett rolled her eyes. “We’re not doing that.”

“I don’t think she’d even go for it,” Lizzie mused.

“I knew I shouldn’t have shown you the man chest. You two can’t think clearly if there’s an attractive guy around.” Scarlett packed her laptop into her bag as though she were about to leave. “How about I get an expert to weigh in? I can drive over to Tara and see what she thinks. Tara owns a bookshop in Newton Abbott,” Scarlett explained to Amy.

“Sometimes if we can’t agree on something, we get her opinion.”

“I guess if you really think the illustrated cover is strong enough, I’m happy to go with it,” Emily said.

“I’ll see what Tara thinks anyway,” Scarlett said, standing.

Lizzie’s brow wrinkled. “I thought you had a lot to do today.”

“I do, which is why I should go now. We don’t have much else to discuss, do we? I haven’t finished going through the shortlist yet.”

“Me neither,” Emily said, then turned to Amy. “Lizzie curates a shortlist from all the manuscripts we receive, then we decide which of those we want to publish.”

“I could send them to you, if you want?” Lizzie offered. “It might be interesting for you to look through the submissions. It’s always good to have another opinion when we’re trying to decide.”

Scarlett huffed. “You just think she’ll have similar opinions to you because she was also taken by the cute guy.”

“I have no idea of Amy’s taste in books,” Lizzie said.

Amy wasn’t even sure of her own taste in books, since reading hadn’t been something she had much time for in recent years. “I’d love to have a look through them. If you’re sure that’s okay.”

“You won’t have time to read through them all,” Emily said. “But you only really need to skim read the first chapters and see which appeal to you. It would be good to know which ones make you want to read more.”

“It sounds like fun.” It didn’t sound remotely like work, and Amy could definitely imagine spending her days doing more reading.

“So we’ll meet on Friday after lunch to discuss the books?” Scarlett asked, tapping her foot impatiently.

“Yes. We can message about the cover for *Winter Wishes* later.” Lizzie recrossed her legs. “Also, if you’re going over to Tara, Amy might like to go with you. It’s a gorgeous bookshop.”

“A field trip sounds good.” Amy smiled at Scarlett, who looked suddenly like a deer in the headlights.

She swallowed hard. “I’m going right now.”

“I’m ready,” Amy said. “How far is it?”

“A long way,” Scarlett said. “Almost an hour’s drive.”

Amy shrugged. She didn’t have anything else to do. “You don’t mind me tagging along, do you?”

“It’s fine,” Scarlett said flippantly.

As Amy picked up her bag, she said goodbye to Lizzie and Emily. Lizzie told her she’d email her a link to the shared folder for the manuscripts and would see her on Friday, if not before.

CHAPTER 12



Amy had to hurry to keep up as Scarlett strode down the stairs and out through the cafe.

“Please don’t talk to me on the drive,” she said, stopping beside a blue Micra. “It distracts me.”

“Oh, okay.” That foiled Amy’s plan to quiz Scarlett on her marriage. “I also have my car here if you want me to drive?” She indicated her car, which was parked behind Scarlett’s.

“That would be better.” Scarlett gave a curt nod. “Then I can work on the drive. It’s not wasted time.”

“I was thinking we could get to know each other better.”

“I’d rather work.” Slipping into the car, Scarlett shifted the passenger seat as far back as it would go, then put her seat belt on and got her laptop out.

“What sort of work are you going to do?”

“I’ll be writing my novel.”

Amy turned the key in the ignition. “You can do that in the car?”

“I can if you don’t talk to me.”

“Right.” She smiled at Scarlett’s bluntness. “You’re going to have to tell me where to go.”

Sighing loudly, Scarlett programmed it into the navigation system.

Amy didn't get another peep out of her until they arrived at their destination. On the main street in Newton Abbott, The Reading Room stood out with its freshly painted sign above the door and eye-catching window displays. One display had moving cuddly toys, arranged as though they were reading a gorgeous selection of children's books.

"It's so cute," Amy said, lingering on the pavement.

"We don't need to stay for long." Scarlett headed straight inside with her laptop tucked under her arm.

A bell tinkled above the door and Scarlett made a beeline for the tall, dark-haired woman who was rearranging books on the shelves in the centre of the room.

"I need to get your opinion on a book cover," Scarlett announced.

"Hi, Scarlett," the woman said with a wry smile. "How are you?"

"In a rush."

"I told you not to take on too much over the summer. Everyone needs time to rest too."

"Yeah, I know. After you answer my questions, I'm going home for a nap. I'm tired."

"Good." The woman glanced over her head and caught Amy's eye. "Hello!" she said brightly.

Scarlett introduced them, sounding decidedly weary.

"You're Damian's ex?" Tara asked with a warm smile.

"Yes. You know him?"

She nodded, a glint of private amusement in her eyes. "We go way back. I had some wild nights out with Damo back in the day."

Amy tensed, immediately wondering whether Tara's relationship with Damian had been purely platonic, or something more.

“I don’t see much of him these days,” Tara added. “I have my hands full here. We’re probably due a beach trip, so I may pay him a visit. He’s made a great go of the surf shack, hasn’t he? I would never have pegged him as an entrepreneur, but he’s done well for himself.”

“He has,” Amy replied, her smile fixed as she considered how Tara was probably exactly Damian’s type with her glossy dark hair and model-like looks.

Amy had been fully aware of Damian’s reputation as a bit of a playboy when she got together with him and suspected he’d fallen straight back into his old ways after they’d broken up. Not that she had any right to an opinion on it.

Hating her surge of irrational jealousy, she did her best to push it aside as she glanced around the shelves.

“It’s a gorgeous place,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“Can we get down to business?” Scarlett asked, foisting her open laptop into Tara’s arms. “What do you think?”

Tara pursed her lips at the bare-chested guy on the cover. “I think I’d like to do naughty things with that man. It’s a fantastic cover. What’s the problem?”

“It’s a sweet romance.”

“Oh.” Tara tilted her head. “If I bought this and there weren’t at least three open-door sex scenes I’d be demanding a refund.”

“Exactly.” Scarlett looked fairly smug. “There are two fade-to-black sex scenes.”

“Oh, no,” Tara said. “That won’t do. Not for this guy. Keep him for something spicier. What else have you got?”

Scarlett tapped the keyboard and the quaint illustrated cover appeared.

“That’s also good. For a completely different market.”

“That’s what we’ll go with,” Scarlett said, taking the laptop back. “Thank you.”

“What are you really here for?” Tara asked. “You clearly didn’t need my input on the cover.”

“I wanted to talk to you about something else.” Scarlett shifted from foot to foot. “But then Lizzie said I should bring Amy.”

“Ah.” Tara flashed Amy a smile. “It’s a private conversation?” she asked Scarlett.

“Yes.”

“I can browse,” Amy suggested, pointing across the room as she backed away.

While Tara and Scarlett retreated for a hushed conversation at the back of the room, Amy happily wandered the rows of books, pulling some out to look at the covers with a more critical eye.

“We can go now!” Scarlett called after five minutes.

Amy stepped out from the shelves and aimed her gaze at Tara. “It really is a gorgeous shop. How long have you had it?”

“Quite a while now,” she said, squinting as though trying to think how long it had been. “My husband inherited it from his uncle. It was rundown, so we renovated it together ...” She looked over her shoulder when the door behind the counter opened. “Speak of the devil.”

The guy who wandered out was classically good-looking, with a strong jaw and smiling eyes. He had a little girl perched on his arm.

He said a collective hello before passing the child to Tara. “Are you all right to have her while I go for a jog?”

“Of course,” Tara replied, then smothered the little cutie with kisses, making her giggle.

Apparently, Amy had jumped to a lot of false assumptions about Tara. The husband and child changed her opinion of her in an instant, and she was even more annoyed with herself for worrying about the nature of Tara’s relationship with Damian.

“She looks like you,” Amy remarked as the bell tinkled behind Tara’s husband.

“Lots of people say that. It’s the hair, I suppose.” Tara ran a hand over the girl’s dark curls. “She’s not biologically mine. We’re just looking after her for a little while until her mum gets back on her feet.”

“Oh,” Amy said, confused.

“We’re her foster parents,” Tara explained. “She’s been with us for two months now.”

“Wow. Have you been fostering for long?”

“We were approved to be foster parents a year ago. Polly is our third child. The other two were short-term emergency placements, so only a few days each.”

“Do you know how long Polly will be with you?” Amy asked, reaching out to take the toddler’s hand.

“No. It was supposed to be two weeks, but it keeps getting extended.” She pressed a kiss to Polly’s forehead. “Which is fine by us.”

A lump rose in Amy’s throat at the thought of getting attached to a child, then having to give them up.

“It must be very rewarding,” she said, forcing positivity to her voice. “To know you’re helping children when they need it.”

“It is,” Tara said. “We’re still getting used to the whole thing, but it’s definitely rewarding.”

“I need to go,” Scarlett said. “Thank you for the advice.”

“You’re welcome.” Tara walked to the door with them. “Nice to meet you, Amy. Tell Damian I said hello.”

“Will do,” Amy said, tickling little Polly’s tummy before they left.

“Tara’s very nice,” she said to Scarlett in the car. “You two seem to be close.”

“She gives me good advice,” Scarlett said, immediately opening her laptop again.

“That’s nice.” Curiosity niggled at Amy. “Was it more opinions about covers? Or other work stuff?”

“No,” Scarlett muttered, then sighed heavily. “It was sex advice.”

Amy’s eyes widened. “Oh.”

“There’s some stuff I don’t like to ask Fraser about. It’s easier to talk to other women, but Emily and Lizzie can be a bit ...” She shook her head. “They get a bit embarrassed and awkward about it all. And, I’ll be honest, I don’t actually think they know that much. Tara’s much easier to speak to about that stuff.”

“Right.” Amy wondered if Scarlett would ever stop surprising her. “It’s good to have friends who you can be open with and get advice from.” Honestly, it was something she’d like to have in her life. She hadn’t had a lot of significant female friendship since she’d had the boys. The other mums tended to be older than her, whereas at work she had different priorities than the women in her age bracket. They were career-focused during the day and party-focused in their free time, which was a foreign concept to Amy.

“Any more questions, or can I get back to work?” Scarlett asked in the brusque tone that Amy was becoming accustomed to.

Fine raindrops dappled the windscreen as they set off, and it had turned to a downpour by the time they reached Hope Cove.

One of the great things about reading was how it seemed to lend itself perfectly to any weather. It had felt wonderful to sit in the sunshine with a book, and it was equally appealing to curl up under a blanket in the armchair while rain thrashed against the windows.

Amy set herself the task of reading through the opening chapters of five of the books in the file Lizzie had sent her.

Then she'd let herself read more of Scarlett's novel, which she was desperate to continue with.

Only one book from the submissions caught her interest – a memoir by a young woman writing about her disastrous dating experiences. She'd just put it aside to pick up Scarlett's book when her phone rang.

Damian's name on the screen had an instant effect on her. Automatically, she corrected her posture, as though he could somehow see her.

His voice as he greeted her sent the hairs on the back of her neck standing to attention, and it occurred to her that she'd love to sink back into the chair and idly chat with him. They didn't do that any more though. They spoke about the kids and not much else.

"The boys keep asking when they'll see you," he said, proving her point.

"When's good for you? I'm pretty flexible. I'm just meeting with Lizzie and Emily and Scarlett again on Friday afternoon."

"How about you come over tomorrow evening? You could have dinner with us and hang around for bedtime again."

"That sounds good. Are you okay? You sound stressed."

"I'm fine. I just think it would be good to have some sort of plan for when the boys will see you, so I have a definite answer when they ask. Marty seems unsettled, knowing you're nearby but not seeing you."

Amy felt instantly guilty, which seemed to be her default when it came to her children. Actually, with most of her relationships these days.

"Sorry," Damian said. "I didn't mean that to sound like a dig. It's been a long day."

"That's okay." It occurred to her just how demanding Billy and Marty could be and felt yet another stab of guilt that she'd been enjoying a really lovely day while Damian had been

dealing with the boys. The fact that she did it the vast majority of the time didn't ease her guilt about taking time for herself.

"I'll see you tomorrow then," Damian said.

"Yes. I'm looking forward to it."

Ending the call, she felt a tingle of anticipation deep in her gut and pushed down thoughts of just how much she was looking forward to it.

CHAPTER 13



Given the warm weather, it was only natural that Amy shower and change before going to Damian's place on Tuesday afternoon. The soft denim dress that fell halfway down her thighs was comfortable. That was why she chose it. If it was incredibly flattering and showed off a little extra skin, that was incidental.

The sun had given her skin a healthy glow, so she didn't bother with a lot of makeup – just a flicker of mascara and a smidge of lip gloss. She styled her hair into loose curls, ruffling them to look more natural. She was on holiday so it was nice to make a bit of effort, but it was only because it made her feel good and not because she was trying to impress her ex.

She might have convinced herself of that sentiment if it weren't for her sweaty palms and racing pulse when she stood on Damian's doorstep. Excitement or nerves or a combination of the two caused a quiver in her stomach when she rang the bell.

A mixture of shouts and thuds on the stairs hit her ears before the door was yanked open.

"It's Mummy!" Billy shouted loudly. Marty shot along the hall and straight into her arms.

"Let her get in the door," Damian called from the kitchen doorway, a wooden spoon poised in his hand.

"Something smells good," she told him.

“Thanks.” He gave her a quick, appreciative once-over that made her glad she’d made the effort. Obviously it hadn’t only been about feeling good. She wanted to feel desired by Damian. And she’d got what she wanted immediately.

When she moved to kiss his cheek in greeting, she caught a waft of aftershave so familiar and intoxicating that it made her stomach flip. His hand lingered on her hip as she pulled away. Taking a reluctant step back, she clocked his jet-black T-shirt and stonewashed jeans. Normally, she only ever saw him in shorts and faded T-shirts, the logos of which were usually too worn to discern.

“Mummy!” Marty pulled on her hand, demanding her attention. “I stood up on the surf board two times today.”

“Wow. That’s amazing.”

He nodded. “Daddy took us today, not Sara, and it was just us. No other kids.”

“That sounds great,” she said, already missing the feel of Damian’s hand at her hip.

“Yesterday we got to sit in a lifeboat,” Billy said.

“Not in the water,” Marty informed her. “It was just in the shed. Jack showed us. He works there and he’s friends with Scarlett.”

“You’re very lucky boys,” she told them, her gaze fixed on Damian, who’d moved back to stir whatever was on the hob. “What is it that smells so good?” she asked.

“Sweet and sour pork with rice and veg.”

Amy spotted the array of ingredients sitting on the sideboard. “Have you made it from scratch?”

“Yep,” he said casually over his shoulder.

“Even the sauce?”

“Even the sauce,” he confirmed. “Don’t be too impressed until you’ve tried it.”

“If it tastes as good as it smells, I’ll be very impressed.”

“Sweet and sour sauce is actually really easy to make,” he said, sounding oddly unsure of himself as he kept his back to her.

“Should I set the table?”

“I knew I’d forgotten something,” he said.

She’d just laid out plates and cutlery and the boys had climbed up onto their seats when she looked up to find Damian staring at her.

“Everything okay?” she asked when he didn’t look away.

He nodded and his Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. “Actually, I was thinking ... if you don’t mind ... I might just nip out.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Now?”

“Yes. You know how it is with the kids around ... the social life slips a bit. I was thinking since you’re here, I could head out. There’s a friend I wanted to catch up with. Is that all right?”

“Yes.” Her heart felt as though it plummeted down her ribcage as she realised he hadn’t got dressed up for her after all. “Of course.”

“Aren’t you going to eat with us, Daddy?” Billy asked.

“No. But Mummy’s here to have dinner with you. Make sure you eat your veg,” he told them, dropping a kiss on each of their heads before flicking his hand to wave at Amy. “I won’t be late.”

“It’s fine,” she murmured, which couldn’t really have been further from the truth.



LEO LOOKED Damian up and down as he crossed the threshold into his house. “You know I have a girlfriend, right?”

“What?” Squinting, Damian eased Alice out of his friend’s arms and dotted kisses over her plump cheeks.

“I’m just trying to figure out why you’ve turned up at my door looking all ...” His eyes roved over Damian again. “Clean. Is that a new T-shirt?”

“Maybe.”

“You never buy new clothes.”

“That’s not entirely true.”

“Even if I didn’t have a girlfriend, you’re not my type I’m afraid. I appreciate the effort, though.”

“How is Caitlin?” Damian asked. “She hasn’t been around much recently.”

“She was here yesterday,” Leo said. “She’s fine. Don’t change the subject. Why are you all dressed up?”

“It was for Amy,” he said, picking up a cuddly bunny for Alice as he sat on the couch with her.

“The T-shirt?”

“The effort.” He rolled his eyes. “Amy was coming over, so I cooked dinner and bought new clothes.”

“And doused yourself in aftershave?”

“Yes. Thanks for noticing.”

“She was coming over for dinner this evening?”

“Yes.”

“So you got all dressed up and came to my place? I’m going to need more information, because I’m fairly sure that would be confusing even if I wasn’t sleep deprived.”

“She came over for dinner, but she had this dress on that made it very hard for me not to grope her in the kitchen in front of the children.” He bounced Alice on his knee and stretched his neck. “I panicked and got out of there as fast as possible.”

“Because you were worried you were going to sexually harass her?” Leo scratched his eyebrow. “If that’s the case, I think there were better places for you to take yourself than my house ... the nearest police station perhaps.”

Damian shook his head, not remotely in the mood for jokes. “I got freaked out about having her there with the kids for dinner. As though we’re some happy little family.”

“I thought that’s what you always wanted.”

“It is. I just can’t stand the idea of getting used to having them all there and then being alone again at the end of the summer. It’s hard enough when the kids leave, but this time it’ll be Amy as well. So I reckon the less time I spend with her, the better. Family dinners can’t be something we do.”

Leo looked thoughtful and opened his mouth to say something before closing it again.

“It would never work,” Damian said. “We have amazing physical chemistry, but I was never enough for her in the ways that mattered.”

“I’d love to see everything work out for you,” Leo said after a pause. “But I’m also nervous about you ending up heartbroken again.”

“You and me both. Which is why I came to hang out with you two for the evening.” Alice pumped her legs until Damian supported her to stand on his lap. Happily, she bounced up and down while grabbing at his hair.

“Sorry,” Leo said. “She’s a hair puller.”

Jerking forwards, Alice opened her mouth wide over Damian’s nose, making him laugh as she slobbered all over his face.

“You’re disgusting,” he told her affectionately.

“That really is gross,” Leo agreed.

It took a moment for Damian to untangle his hair from her tiny fists. When he sat her back on his lap, she proceeded to hiccup and follow it through with a mouthful of milky vomit all down his T-shirt.

“Lovely,” he said. “This is why I don’t bother with nice clothes.”

CHAPTER 14



Despite attempting to distract herself with the reading material for Hope Cove Press, the week dragged for Amy. She'd agreed to have dinner with Damian and the boys again on Friday evening, but wasn't sure if it was really with Damian or if he was going to take the opportunity to go out on a date again.

Not that he'd admitted to going on a date. He'd coyly told her he'd been out with a friend, but he'd come home in different clothes and with his hair sticking up in tufts, as though someone had been sinking their fingers into it, so Amy had drawn her own conclusions. Spending the summer in Hope Cove wasn't feeling like the best idea she'd ever had.

At least she had her meeting with Lizzie, Emily and Scarlett on Friday afternoon. It kept her mind from the evening at Damian's place. They met in the offices again and launched straight into a lively discussion about a crime thriller, which Emily and Lizzie both loved and Scarlett was decidedly lukewarm about.

Amy had her laptop balanced on her knees with her notes about the various books open in a document. Since crime wasn't a genre she enjoyed, her only comment was that it was well written. She'd put it aside after the first three chapters. With the discussion whirling around her, she wished she'd read it in its entirety so she could offer more input.

"We already agreed we should be on the lookout for a new crime author to take on," Lizzie finally said. "This is the best we've seen by far."

“Let’s put it in the maybe pile,” Scarlett said, her fingers flying over the keyboard of her laptop. “What next?”

Emily turned to Amy with an encouraging smile. “Was there anything that stood out for you?”

“There were two that really grabbed me.” Amy scanned the file in front of her. “Firstly, the memoir by Charlene Motberry. I absolutely loved it. It sucked me straight in and I couldn’t put it down until I’d finished.”

“I loved it too,” Emily said without enthusiasm.

“Me too,” Scarlett agreed. “It totally cracked me up.”

Amy smiled, thinking about it. “It’s hilarious.”

“The bit about the guy and the spicy nuts!” Scarlett said, eyes lighting up.

“I laughed so much at that bit.” Amy beamed, thinking of the outlandish incident in the book. “I was worried the neighbours would think I’m bonkers because I was laughing away to myself on the patio.”

Lizzie nodded solemnly. “It’s a great book.”

“That’s easy then, isn’t it?” Amy asked. “If everyone likes it, is it a definite yes?”

Emily rubbed at her belly. “It would be if it was fiction and not a memoir.”

“Memoirs are difficult to sell,” Scarlet explained to Amy. “There’s not much of a market for them.”

“That explains why I couldn’t find much to compare it to online then. But isn’t there an advantage to that? Like you could start a trend? It’s fresh and new and different?”

“It’s a nice idea in theory,” Lizzie said. “But when it comes to reading, people tend to stick to what they know and love. The safe bet is always the tried and tested genres.”

Emily let out weary sigh. “Except we always said we wouldn’t be like the big publishing houses who only look at profit margins. We agreed that if there was something we thought just deserved to be published, we’d do it. Even if it

would be a tough sell.” She glanced at Scarlett. “Besides, if anyone can get it to sell, it’s you.”

“That’s true,” Scarlett agreed.

“Scarlett takes care of the bulk of our marketing and advertising campaigns,” Emily said for Amy’s benefit.

“What kind of cover would we even put on it?” Scarlett said thoughtfully.

Amy clicked on a link in her document. “That’s actually why I was looking for comparative titles. I wanted to see what covers other memoirs had. I pulled up the ones I liked and made a kind of vision board with ideas.” She turned the laptop to show them her ideas, then felt a rush of self-consciousness at the ensuing silence. “Sorry, I might have got a bit carried away.”

“This is great,” Lizzie said. “I like the concept of the bold blocks of colour in the background with maybe a simple serif font. It’s effective.”

Emily flashed Amy a quizzical smile. “How many of the submissions did you read?”

“I managed the first three chapters of all of them. A lot of it was just skim-reading though. I made notes for all of them based on the first chapters. The ones that grabbed me I continued with. It was only four books that I read completely.”

“And you also did this?” Lizzie asked, pointing at the screen.

“Yeah.” She shrank into herself as three pairs of eyes gazed at her.

“I feel as though it’s too late to clarify this,” Emily said. “But we weren’t expecting you to do all that. We only sent you the file so you could get a feel for what we’d be talking about.”

“Sorry if that wasn’t clear.” Lizzie winced. “Did we ruin your week?”

“Not at all,” Amy said quickly. “I really enjoyed it.”

“You must have only sat and read all week,” Emily said with wide eyes. “We give ourselves a couple of months to go through them ... even then we sometimes need longer.”

“You have other work to do as well,” Amy pointed out.

Emily nodded. “Even so.”

“I think I’m a speed reader.” Amy wasn’t trying to play down her efforts, just clarify that it hadn’t felt like a lot of effort since it was so enjoyable. “I’ve also spent time with my boys and had some lovely walks on the beach this week.”

“That’s impressive,” Emily said.

“Thank you,” Lizzie said. “It’s actually really helpful.”

“Which other books did you like?” Scarlett asked.

She scrutinised her list again, inwardly cringing at her other top choice. “Don’t judge me, but I absolutely flew through *My Millionaire Fiancé* – I’m not sold on the title, but the book was a page-turner.”

At the other end of the couch, Scarlett clapped her hands together and grinned widely. “I like your taste in books.”

Emily pressed a hand to her forehead. “We don’t publish erotic titles.”

“We should!” Scarlett said firmly.

“I’m confused,” Amy admitted. “If there are certain genres that you don’t publish, how do those books make it onto the shortlist?”

Lizzie lifted an eyebrow. “The memoir got in because I didn’t read the cover letter carefully enough and thought it was a romantic comedy. When I started reading it I decided it should go to a vote. As for Mr Millionaire, I’m not sure how he slipped through. Any ideas on that one, Scarlett?”

She cracked up laughing. “Okay! I looked through all the submissions to find the best erotic title and added it to the shortlist for consideration.”

“We’re spreading ourselves too thin with such an array of genres,” Lizzie said. “There’s also the issue of possibly

alienating our sweet romance readers if they stumble into sexy books by mistake.”

“People shouldn’t be such prudes,” Scarlett grumbled. “What’s wrong with sex in a book?”

Emily beamed. “This is coming from the person who asked me to write the sex scenes for her books not so long ago!”

“That was before,” Scarlett said, exasperated.

“Can we keep on track here?” Lizzie said lightly. “I would like to get home sometime today.”

Amy tapped her fingers on the arm of the couch. “Surely the cover and description would indicate the heat level of a book.” She looked to Scarlett. “That guy from the *Winter Wishes* cover would fit really well for Mr Millionaire. Put a different scenery behind him, or even just some kind of blurred lights or an abstract background. Keep the focus on him.”

“It would look amazing,” Scarlett said. “And it would be an easy sell. We’d have to change him to a billionaire, though ... nobody wants a lowly millionaire in their romance novel.”

“*Scarlett*,” Emily said. “Can you please not get carried away? Erotica is a no at the moment.”

“I have another idea,” Scarlett said eagerly, at which point Lizzie and Emily both seemed to deflate. “How about we set up an imprint ... so it would look like the steamy romance titles were being published by a different company altogether.”

“Could you do that?” Amy asked.

Scarlett nodded. “All the big publishing houses do it. Plus I have a great idea for a name.”

“Here we go again,” Emily said.

Ignoring her completely, Scarlett shifted to direct her attention solely at Amy. “I want to call it Scarlett Ink ... Ink like the printing material, but it sounds like inc as in incorporated.”

“That’s good,” Amy said, impressed.

“It’s perfect for publishing erotic books,” Scarlett added.

“Yes! It makes me think of a scarlet woman or The Scarlet Letter. I think it’s a great idea.” Her smile faded as she looked around. “Sorry,” she said to Lizzie and Emily. “I might be getting carried away again.”

“No, no,” Scarlett said, her tone part smug and part amused. “All opinions are welcome!”

“Maybe you’re not so helpful after all,” Lizzie said, her eyes sparkling with amusement. “When our discussions ended in two votes to one, it was pretty easy.”

“Let’s get coffees and continue this conversation,” Scarlett said, jumping up and moving to the kitchen area.

Another hour later, Amy left the office feeling thoroughly exhilarated – and more than a little envious that the women of Hope Cove Press got to do that for their job.

CHAPTER 15



Leaving the meeting on a bit of a high, Amy went straight to Damian's place. It meant she didn't have to face the temptation of getting changed and making an effort for him. After last time, she'd also mentally prepared herself for the possibility that he might walk out of the door as soon as she walked in it.

She couldn't even begrudge him going out and having fun. If he was dating, good for him. He deserved to be happy.

When the door to Damian's place was opened by a tall, lithe girl with striking green eyes, Amy was momentarily confused. Then she inhaled a quick breath. "Emmy?"

"Hi," she said shyly.

"You got so big," Amy said. "Do you even remember me?"

She nodded. "You made daisy chains with me one time when you came to collect the boys."

"Yes." It was hard to fathom how that angelic seven-year-old looked so grown up. "I suppose you're a bit big for daisy chains now."

A flicker of delight flashed in Emmy's eyes. "Most of the time."

"Come through!" Damian shouted from the back door. "We're all outside."

The smell of smoke and cooked meat hit her as she followed Emmy through the house. Through the kitchen

window, she caught sight of the back of a male head. Hugh presumably. A flash of nerves hit – similar to how she always felt around Damian’s parents.

Amy had got on great with Damian’s two best friends when they were together, but a lot had happened since then. In the intervening years she’d seen both Hugh and Leo in passing, but actually sitting down and spending time with them felt daunting. At least it seemed to be only Hugh, so it wasn’t a total ambush.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said to Damian. “I got caught up. Did you see my message?”

“Yes. It’s no problem.” He smiled a greeting and swigged at the can of Sprite in his hand.

“It’s been a while,” Hugh said, standing to hug her. “You haven’t aged, which seems unfair.” With a grimace, he ran his finger through the dark hair at his temples which was peppered with grey. “I suppose I’ve got a few years on you though.”

“You look great,” Amy replied, thinking he was one of those guys who grew into their looks. “It’s really good to see you.” It was true as well – he’d instantly erased any concerns she’d had.

“How’s your summer going?” Hugh asked as they sat around the patio table.

“Boys!” Damian shouted down the garden to where Billy and Marty were having a whale of a time with a hosepipe and a slide leading into a paddling pool. “Come and say hi to your mum.”

“Hi, Mum!” they shouted in unison, only giving her a cursory glance before going back to their fun.

“Leave them to it,” she told Damian, before opening her mouth to answer Hugh’s question.

“We already ate,” Damian said, hovering over her. “The kids were starving. I saved a couple of burgers for you, if you want?”

“That would be great.” Again, she went to speak to Hugh, but Damian turned back halfway to the kitchen.

“What do you want to drink?” he asked.

“Water’s fine, thanks.” She smiled at how flustered he looked.

“Sorry.” He scratched at his jaw. “You can chat to Hugh now.”

“Thanks.” She chuckled and launched into telling Hugh all about her time with Lizzie, Emily and Scarlett. While she ate, Damian asked her questions about the job, and she found herself hardly able to stop talking. She only really paused when her phone buzzed in her pocket.

At the sight of Anthony’s name flashing on the screen, she felt instantly uneasy. He’d messaged that morning, wanting to arrange a time to talk to the boys, but she’d completely forgotten to reply. She wasn’t sure how to go about navigating a call between him and the kids while they were at Damian’s place. Even if she could get the boys to concentrate, it would feel awkward around Damian. Sending the call to voicemail, she sent him a message saying they were in the middle of dinner with friends but she’d try calling him later.

“Look what I found,” Emmy said, breaking her thoughts as she sat beside her and deposited a handful of daisies onto the table.

The distraction was welcome, and the action of threading the flowers into chains felt therapeutic while she continued to chat with Hugh and Damian, then switched to asking Emmy about school and her hobbies.

“She mostly likes to read,” Hugh said, tipping his head to a book on the table next to Emmy’s arm.

“I love that cover.” Amy smiled as she reached for it, amused at how she looked at books in a whole new light now. “I didn’t think I liked fantasy books, but I’ve read two this week and loved them. One of them was Scarlett’s.”

“I love her books,” Emmy said. “I read the first two, but she says I’m too young for the third book. Actually, she just

didn't know if it was okay for me to read it or not. Dad was going to read it and check, but he still hasn't."

"I don't get a lot of time for reading," Hugh said. "But I assume if Scarlett thinks it might not be appropriate for you, it probably isn't."

"You could always ask Lizzie or Emily," Amy suggested. "But I don't think it will take me long to get to book three, so I can also give you my opinion when I've read it."

"Just tell Dad it's fine, please." Emmy grinned as she deposited a ring of daisies on Hugh's head. "I really want to read it. I need to know if Alissa and Matteo get together. I'm guessing they do, and that's why Scarlett thinks it's unsuitable. I can't imagine it gets any more violent or anything."

"Book one was already pretty gruesome in parts." Amy tied off her ring of flowers and held it out to Emmy. "Would you like a necklace?"

"Damian needs it," she replied immediately. "It'll make him pretty."

"I'm not sure I like what you're implying there." Reluctantly, Damian leaned forward and bowed his head for Amy to loop the daisies over his neck. Her fingers brushed his ear, and her mouth felt suddenly dry as his eyes locked with hers.

"There you go," she said, trying to keep her breathing even. "All pretty now." She cringed at the words and was relieved that Marty chose that moment to run over and climb onto her lap. His swim shorts were sopping wet, so she removed him again immediately and pulled the towel from the back of Damian's chair to wrap around him.

"I think you boys might need a shower before bed," Damian suggested, wrapping a shivering Billy in a towel and pulling him onto his lap.

Hugh raised his arms above his head, his back cracking as he stretched. "We'll head off and leave you to get the boys settled."

"No rush," Damian said. "Stay for another drink."

“That’s all right. Emmy’s got some TV show she wants to watch, anyway.”

Emmy cracked up laughing. “It’s Grey’s Anatomy and Dad enjoys it as much as I do!”

“It’s very informative.” Hugh gave Emmy a playful glare as he stood and walked around the table. “I’m gaining a lot of medical knowledge.”

“Yeah, right. He likes it for the romance and he has a big crush on Izzie Stevens.”

“I think she’s a talented doctor, that’s all!” Hugh put an arm around Amy and gave her a squeeze. “It was great to catch up with you.”

“You too.” She hugged him back, then moved to do the same to Emmy.

“Can you read Scarlett’s book quickly and tell Dad it’s fine?” she murmured in her ear.

“I’ll get on it,” Amy said happily. Not that she needed an excuse to delve back into it. It would have been her evening entertainment even without Emmy’s request.

First, she had to get the boys on a video call with Anthony and hope it wouldn’t raise issues with Damian.

CHAPTER 16



Once Hugh and Emmy had left, Amy helped Damian get the boys showered and ready for bed. When she was cuddled up in bed with them and Damian had gone downstairs, she pulled her phone out.

“How about we see if Anthony would like to tell you a bedtime story tonight?” she whispered, feeling as though she was luring them to something illicit.

“Yes!” the boys cried.

“Can we ask him to tell us one about dragons?” Billy said.

“Let’s see ...” Amy hit dial on a video call, hoping she could reach him now that the boys were excited about it.

The next moment his face filled the screen, and Amy had to tighten her grip on the phone so she didn’t drop it while the boys scrabbled to see Anthony.

“What are you eating there?” Anthony said happily. “You’ve grown already! You look like little surfer dudes too with your tanned skin.”

That got the boys telling him all about their surfing adventures. A lot of it was completely unintelligible as they excitedly shouted over each other. Anthony nodded along and threw a question in when he could. Ten minutes went by with their chaotic conversation before Amy finally shushed the boys and shifted the phone so she could see Anthony.

“Sorry,” she said. “They’re excited to speak to you.”

“It sounds like they’re having a brilliant time there,” he said, looking relaxed as he reclined on a leather couch in his new flat. Amy had looked around it once when she’d dropped the boys off and had been surprised by how differently he’d chosen to furnish it than their house. It was all brown leather and dark wood and had a decidedly masculine vibe. “Are you having a good time too?” he asked.

“I am actually. Everything’s going well.”

He ran his tongue over his lower lip. “You look as though you’ve caught the sun too. All three of you have a healthy glow.”

She smiled. “The weather’s been great.”

“I guess I should let you get those rascals to bed.”

“They’re actually hoping you might tell them a story ...”

“Please,” Marty crooned, leaning into the frame.

“Can it be about dragons and pirates?” Billy asked.

“And surfing!” Marty added.

“That’s an interesting combination. Let me have a think ...” It was something Amy had always been impressed by – Anthony’s ability to come up with wonderfully elaborate stories off the top of his head.

He did it again now – only hesitating for a moment before launching into his tale about a group of surfing dragons, living on a remote island, with pirates who tried to steal their surfboards. The ensuing sea battle had the boys utterly enthralled. Amy held the phone at an angle, allowing both boys to see Anthony, but they grew sleepier and snuggled down on the pillows as the story went on.

A creak on the stairs drew Amy’s attention and she felt her stomach twist with guilt as Damian quietly put his head around the door. He opened his mouth, then closed it again when he realised Anthony was on the phone. His eyebrows twitched together, but he made an effort to smile at Amy before retreating downstairs.

It would have been better if she'd mentioned to Damian about getting Anthony on the phone. That way, she wouldn't have felt as though she was sneaking around.

Ten more minutes went by before she ended the call with Anthony, and it took another five minutes for her to settle the boys in their beds.

"Sorry," she said to Damian when she finally made it downstairs and lingered in the living room doorway. "Anthony had been wanting to do a video call with the boys. I should have mentioned it to you before."

"It's fine," he said. "I bet the boys enjoyed chatting with him."

"They did." She shifted her weight. "Thanks for dinner."

"No worries. When do you want to come over next?"

"I don't mind, but I know Marty is keen for me to come to the beach again one day so he can show off his surf skills."

"He's doing really well with it," Damian said, a hint of pride in his voice. "I thought he might decide it wasn't for him and give up, but he's really got into it."

"I'm glad. It'll be nice to see how he's improved."

"You're welcome to come along any time, but I was planning on taking them to the beach tomorrow morning. Judging by the weather forecast we might have some bigger waves, which would be fun for them."

Amy pulled a face. "That sounds treacherous."

"Not really big." Damian grinned. "Just a bit bigger. It'll be fun."

"Tomorrow sounds good. Will you go early?"

"Yeah. I want to be around to help Callie open the shack. I'd also like to be there before the beach gets busy."

"Okay." She told him to message her when they were heading out in the morning and she'd see them there.

“Amy!” He called to her, just as she was about to leave. “I’m glad everything is going well with the publishing gig.”

She pursed her lips, confused by the comment.

“It was nice to hear you so enthusiastic about work,” he said. “You always seemed a bit flat when it came to your other job.”

“Did I?” she asked, surprised that he’d ever paid that much attention. “I guess I just always worked to pay the bills. Whether or not I liked it was irrelevant.” Though she supposed if she’d hated it, it would have been more of an issue. She was pretty ambivalent about it.

“That’s a shame,” Damian said, a depth to his words that made her pause.

“It’s fine,” she said. “But it’s definitely fun working with Emily, Lizzie and Scarlett. It doesn’t even feel like work. I just read books and discuss them. It’s like a book club!”

“Not a bad way to earn money,” he said.

She nodded, thinking it was ridiculous now that she continued to let him think it was a paid position. It wouldn’t matter to him one way or the other what the arrangement was, but lying to him felt weird, even if it wasn’t about anything important.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” she said, then made a quick getaway before she could find anything else to feel guilty about.

CHAPTER 17



The sun had already warmed the air when Amy set off for the beach the following morning. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and she was sure Damian's information about the weather must be wrong. At least until she reached the clifftop path and was hit by a gust of wind so strong that it stopped her in her tracks. At the beach, the waves were definitely bigger, and she felt a jolt of concern about whether it was safe for the boys to be out there.

Just as the thought came to her, she spotted Billy with a look of concentration on his face as he rode a wave all the way onto the beach. It was only a week since she'd last watched them, but his improvement was noticeable. He seemed much more in control of the board.

Damian stood waist deep in the water, holding Marty's board for him while he lay on his stomach and waited for a wave. She happily noted that Damian didn't have a board himself and was completely focused on the boys. It had been silly of her to worry about safety, as though Damian wouldn't have considered it.

Marty had just popped up onto his board when he caught sight of her. For a moment, it seemed the distraction would cause him to fall, but he found his balance again and stayed standing all the way in.

"You two are amazing!" Amy told them as she paddled her bare feet into the shallow water. "Are you going again?"

They both nodded, and she raised an arm to wave at Damian before finding a patch of dry sand to set her towel on. A few families were spread along the beach, but it remained reasonably quiet as she watched the boys repeatedly splashing out to Damian, then catching the waves back in.

Half an hour passed before they left the water to come and sit with her. After peeling their wetsuits off, Marty plonked himself on the edge of her towel while Billy happily sat on the sand and immediately began clawing at it as though digging was an automatic action.

“What do you think of our little surfer dudes?” Damian asked happily.

“They’re getting really good.” She pushed a lock of wet hair from Marty’s face. “You’ll be as good as Daddy soon, won’t you?”

“No. Daddy’s the best in the world at surfing,” Marty said, his voice betraying no doubt whatsoever.

A slow smile spread over Amy’s face. “You only think that because you haven’t seen me on a surfboard.”

Both Marty and Billy whipped around to her, the look on their faces reminding her that sarcasm was lost on them.

“I was joking,” she said, laughing at how trusting they were.

“Can you surf?” Billy asked.

“No.”

“That’s a lie,” Damian said, his eyes sparkling.

“You shouldn’t lie, Mummy,” Marty announced seriously.

“I didn’t lie. I’m no good at surfing.”

“You used to be,” Damian argued.

“No, I didn’t.” She laughed. “Ignore Daddy,” she told the boys. “He obviously has a bad memory.”

“I have a great memory.” He looked at her intently. “You were good.”

“Hardly.”

Damian’s eyes narrowed and he had that look as though he was about to do something annoying – like the way he used to look before he’d pick her up and throw her into the sea, usually right after she’d dried off or had just got dressed.

“Who’d like to find out if Mummy can surf?” he asked loudly.

“No!” she hissed at him.

“I’m afraid you’re outnumbered,” Damian declared over the noise of the boys cheering. “And don’t say you don’t have your swimsuit, because I can see it from here.”

Too late, she pulled her T-shirt onto her shoulder to cover her bikini string. Her protests were also pointless because Damian was already halfway up the beach. Since resistance was obviously futile, she was standing in her bikini when Damian returned with a surfboard under each arm and a wetsuit slung over his shoulder.

The thought of giving surfing a go was actually pretty appealing. It had been so long since she’d been on a board, but her memories were strong in her mind. Naturally, they all involved Damian.

“Do I need that?” she asked when he held the wetsuit out to her.

“You’ll be more comfortable in it,” he said.

“You’re going to have to give me a refresher course,” she said, while battling to get the suit on.

“I was planning on it.” He helped with the wetsuit when she struggled, then gave the boys quick instructions about staying on the sand.

“I’m nervous,” Amy said as they set off into the water together. Wondering whether this was actually a good idea, her heart rate increased, and she felt a flutter deep in her stomach.

“Don’t be. You’ll be great.”

“That seems unlikely. I can’t imagine I’ll manage to stand up. I’m not as nimble as I used to be. Or as brave,” she mused, dropping her board on the surface of the water to walk it out the rest of the way. “I used to jump in and try anything, and now I have to weigh everything carefully.”

“That’s the problem with growing up.” Damian gave her a sidelong glance. “I think you’re still pretty adventurous though, or you wouldn’t be here.”

She couldn’t decide whether he was talking about her being in the water or her trip to Hope Cove. Neither of which currently felt very daring. It probably would have been braver to stay in Oxford and go to work every day and learn to be alone.

Pushing the thought aside, she braced against a wave which swept against her thighs.

“How come *you* never lost your sense of adventure?” she asked.

Damian’s lips curved into a mischievous smile. “I think we both know I was never destined to grow up.”

“I don’t know,” she replied lightly. “You look like you’re doing pretty well at this adulting thing.”

“What have I done to fool you into thinking that?”

“You have staff running your business so you can spend the summer hanging out with your kids.”

His shoulders lifted as though shrugging off the comment.

“That’s pretty good adulting,” she told him, since he seemed reluctant to take the compliment.

He avoided responding and gazed out at the horizon instead. “How far out do you want to go?”

“I think this is probably far enough.”

He shook his head. “Even the boys were further out than this. There are some decent waves rolling in out there.”

“That’s why I think here would be a better option.” She was thankful for the wetsuit as the water washed around her

hips.

“What were you just saying about your sense of adventure?” Damian asked, then sank under the water. He popped up immediately and flicked his hair in an action that covered her with drips and made her laugh.

They moved to where the water tickled her ribs and the larger waves rose around her shoulders. She moved rhythmically with them.

“This seems like a good starting point.” Damian glanced around, his instincts no doubt registering things that weren’t even on her radar. “How much do you remember?” He had a hand on his board and another on hers to keep them steady.

She thought back. “Paddle hard to get up speed with the wave, then pop up onto my feet and ride the wave all the way in.”

“I hope you can make it look as easy as you just made it sound.” He grinned at her, then launched into giving her a few more tips about foot positioning and staying low on the board.

“I think I’ve got it,” she said, eager to get on and give it a go.

“Remember not to look at your feet,” he told her as she caught sight of a wave forming behind them.

“Look at the shore, right?”

“No. Look where you want to go – down the wave.”

She nodded, but her focus was already on positioning her hands on the board. After wriggling to position herself better, she began to drag her hands through the water. Adrenaline flooded her body as she felt the force of the water beneath the board. A smile hit her face and she paddled madly.

“Have fun!” Damian called after her.

Fun, she thought to herself. That was something that had been sadly lacking in her life recently.

With the water rushing around her she felt as though she had no choice *but* to have fun.

CHAPTER 18



After paddling as hard as she could, Amy shifted her hands and attempted to pop up onto her feet, but lost her balance and flopped back onto her stomach. She managed to stay on the board at least.

“Mummy!” Billy shouted from the beach. “You’re supposed to try and stand up.”

“Thanks for the tip,” she called back, with a hint of an eye roll. “I’m going to try again.”

Damian was sitting on his board, legs dangling at either side of it while he waited for her to make her way back out to him.

“That was some good advice from Billy,” he told her with a grin.

“I felt completely off balance. If I’d have stood up, I’d have fallen straight in.”

“You were too close to the nose,” he explained while she manoeuvred herself to sit on her board, managing it reasonably gracefully. “You need to keep your weight further to the back. Are you ready to try again? This looks like a good wave ...”

“I’ll give it a go.”

“Let’s do it,” he said, shifting to lie on his board too.

While they paddled in unison, he shouted encouragement to her, but she could barely hear him over the rush of the water and the sound of her internal chatter as she tried to remember

where her hands were supposed to be and what she should be doing.

As she moved into position to stand up, she lost speed and the wave rolled on without her. Pouting, she slipped off her board, into the waist-deep water. She watched Damian make a few twists and turns on the wave, looking as though he was born to be on a surfboard.

“At least I get to say I told you so,” she called to him when he headed back out to her.

“How so?”

“I can’t surf!”

“You *can* surf,” he said, turning her board and pushing both of them further out as he waded through the water. “You were always a natural.”

“*Were* might be the crucial word there.”

“It’s kind of like life,” he said without looking at her. “You used to have no fear and would just dive in and assume everything would be fine. Now you weigh everything too carefully.”

“I’m trying to figure out where the practical surfing advice is in that little nugget.”

A dimple popped in his cheek. “Stop overthinking it. Follow your instincts instead of thinking about where your hands should be. If they’re in the wrong place, you’ll automatically correct it.”

Amy hauled herself onto her board and paddled out a little further before turning towards the shore. “You’re saying my problem is thinking?”

“Yeah. There’s no place for brain power in surfing. And no, you don’t need to crack a joke about that being why I’m so good at it.”

Grinning at him, she clamped her lips shut. “Okay. No thinking this time.” She was vaguely aware of Damian beginning to paddle beside her as her arms worked furiously to get speed up. This time she didn’t hesitate – as soon as it felt

right she hopped up to her feet. Keeping her body low, her legs worked to steer the board.

“I’m doing it!” she called happily when Damian cheered from somewhere over her left shoulder. A breeze lifted her hair from her shoulders and a mist of sea spray tickled her cheeks.

Losing speed as the wave fizzled out, she jumped into the shallow water. “That was amazing!” she called to Damian. “I did it!”

“You were awesome,” he said, raising his hand to high-five her. “I believe it’s me who gets to say I told you so.”

“Maybe,” she conceded as she looked over at the beach. “Boys! Did you see me?”

They shook their heads, only briefly looking up from the hole they were digging.

“I stood up!” She looked back at Damian. “I guess I need to go again, since my audience got distracted.” After taking a couple of steps she noticed he wasn’t following her and flicked water at him. “Come on!”

“I can see what’s going to happen here.” He strode after her. “You didn’t want to get in the water and now you’re never going to want to get out.”

“I forgot how much fun it is,” she said, feeling the tingle of sunshine on her face. “I knew I used to love it, but I’d completely forgotten why. It’s such an amazing feeling to ride on a wave.”

“It really is,” he said wistfully.

“Let’s go further this time. The waves are bigger out there.”

“You’re going to get over-confident on me very quickly, aren’t you?”

“I just realised you were right – I *can* surf. I might even be really good at it.”

“Cocky too,” he said and sprayed her with water.

“Remember how we used to race each other in?”

“Yeah.” He shifted to lie on his board and they paddled out side by side, then turned to face the shore together.

“This one then?” Amy watched the wave gathering behind them. “Last one to the shore is a loser.”

Damian grinned. “I can see where Billy gets his mean streak from.”

“Hey!” She tried to look outraged, but Damian warned her that the wave was coming and she followed his lead in windmilling her arms through the water.

He beat her in, of course, but she managed to stand up again and felt pretty confident doing so. She was fairly proud of how it was all coming back to her.

“Dad!” Marty called, standing in the shallows. “Can you help us dig a trench from our hole to the water?”

“Okay.” He looked at Amy. “Are you coming out?”

“I might have a couple more goes. I’m just getting the hang of it.”

It was total bliss being out in the wonderfully cool water with the sun warming her cheeks. The breeze was perfect and the waves were plentiful. Each time she rode a wave in she told herself she’d just go out one more time. It was addictive and utterly thrilling.

“Did you see me?” she asked Damian and Marty when she caught them watching her ride a wave into the shallows. They stood side by side, ankle deep in the water. “I’m actually not bad.”

“You’re good,” Marty said. “I saw you standing up lots of times.”

“The kids are keen for ice creams,” Damian told her. “Do you want to come with us?”

“Yes.” She glanced out at the sunlight sparkling on the rippling water behind her. “I’ll just go one last time.” She beamed at Damian. “Is that okay?”

“Yeah.” His hands rested casually at his hips. “Make it a good one. You have an audience.”

“I know you’re trying to get in my head so you can watch me wipe out!”

He wagged his eyebrows. “Just hurry up. We want ice cream.”

Each time she’d been going a little further out – her confidence building steadily. As the wind picked up, the waves were coming in stronger and faster, and there were way more surfers in the water now than when they’d arrived an hour ago. Presumably that meant a lot of trade at the surf shack, which equated to a good day for Damian.

Adrenaline pulsed in Amy’s veins as soon as she spotted the wave she wanted to catch. There were two or three building one behind the other and a couple of guys readied their boards at the same time as she did. Her arms were beginning to ache from all the paddling, but she mustered all her remaining energy, aware that it was her last ride for the day, and also that Damian’s eyes would be on her.

Hurling along with the wave she was energised and exhilarated. Hopping up to stand felt natural now, and she smiled to herself as she adjusted her centre of gravity to ride up and down the wave. It was the perfect last wave and she felt pretty smug when she sought out Damian on the sand. A warm glow spread out from her chest at the way his eyes were fixed on her.

Since she’d been on such a roll, looking towards the shore was a stupid move. Of course she wobbled and wiped out, but she laughed as she crashed sideways into the water. She’d done well until then, so it wasn’t completely embarrassing. She emerged from the waist-deep water smiling at the thought of Damian teasing her over it.

Except when she caught his gaze he looked anything but amused. His mouth was moving, but she couldn’t make out what he was saying over the rush of waves hitting the shore.

Some part of her brain told her there was probably another wave about to wash over her, but that didn't warrant the fear in Damian's features.

The roar of the water increased and she braced as she turned to look over her shoulder.

Someone shouted something she couldn't make out.

Damian was shouting too.

A wave slammed into her upper body at the same moment something hard crashed against the side of her head.

Then she was underwater, her body tumbling while her throat flooded with salty water.

CHAPTER 19



The water wasn't even that deep. That's what Amy told herself as she thrashed and searched for the surface. Her lungs burned and she needed air, but she couldn't even figure out which way was up. It felt like full minutes before her feet finally found the seabed. At the same moment, pressure squeezed her upper arm. Fingers wrapped around her bicep and pulled her up above the water.

Face to face with Damian, she saw the same stricken look he'd had right before she went under.

"Breathe," he growled at her, and she turned her head to cough up a mouthful of water. Her throat and nose burned from the salt and she struggled to suck in enough air. She spluttered and coughed while her body demanded oxygen. Her legs turned to jelly, and she clutched at Damian's arm, sure she was going to fall.

"I've got you," he said, a strong arm reaching around her back to support her. "Are you okay?"

"Mmhmm." The world came back into focus and a lanky teenage boy with a surfboard grimaced in front of her.

"I'm really sorry," he said. "I didn't see you until the last minute."

"It's okay." She managed a pathetic attempt at a smile. "I'm fine."

"Are you okay, Mum?" Marty tipped his head back to look up at her.

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

Billy giggled beside his brother. “It was funny when you fell off.”

“Happy to entertain you,” she mumbled as he ran back up the beach with Marty trailing behind him.

“You might have a concussion,” Damian said, pushing her hair from her face to examine her head.

She coughed again to clear her windpipe of the remaining water and salt. “I’m fine. I just need a drink and a sit down.” She didn’t move though, and happily let Damian run his fingers over her hair.

“Does it hurt?” He moved his finger from her temple to the back of her head, and she winced. “You’ve got a bump already.”

“I just need to sit down while I catch my breath.” She tried to take a step but was hampered by the surfboard which was still connected to her leg by a rope. The fastening around her ankle crackled loudly when Damian bent to remove it. He dragged the board onto the beach then returned to Amy’s side, a hand at the small of her back as she walked up the beach on jelly-like legs.

She barely registered Damian peeling her wetsuit off and had just lowered herself down on her towel when Callie appeared in front of her with a bottle of water. “Thought you might need that,” she said. “I brought an ice pack too. It looked like a pretty decent whack to your head.”

“I think it’s fine.” Gratefully, she took the water and gulped at it.

“You need the ice pack,” Damian said, taking it from Callie and kneeling beside Amy to gently press it against her head.

“Need anything else?” Callie asked.

Damian smiled up at her. “Do me a massive favour and take the boys to get ice creams if you’re not too busy.”

“Sure. I’ll put a sign up saying back in five.”

He thanked her and she happily challenged the boys to a race up the beach.

“I could’ve gone with the boys for ice creams,” Amy said, attempting to nudge Damian’s hand and the ice pack away. “That’s freezing.”

“That’s the point. You need to keep it on for a bit. You’ve got a massive lump on your head.”

She pushed her fingers into her hair, feeling at her scalp. “It’s not so bad.”

“Do you feel all right?” Damian asked, ignoring her. “Are you dizzy or nauseous?”

“No.”

“You scared the heck out of me,” he said, peeling away strands of wet hair that were plastered to her face.

“I was pretty freaked out too.” She could feel the adrenaline wearing off, and every ounce of energy seemed to evaporate out of her.

Instinctively, she leaned and rested the uninjured side of her head on Damian’s shoulder. She savoured the warmth of his bare skin and the unique scent of him.

“I did pretty well at surfing,” she whispered, deciding not to contemplate whether her current proximity to Damian was a good idea. It felt good. Did she really need to analyse it more than that?

“You did great,” he told her. “I totally forgot to tell you to look out for reckless teenagers.”

“That would’ve been good advice. I’ll bear it in mind next time.”

He chuckled. “Are you planning a next time already?”

“Yes. I loved it.”

“Good.”

In the ensuing silence, moving her head from his shoulder would probably have been appropriate, but she couldn’t bring

herself to do it. Just a few more seconds, she kept telling herself.

Finally, the boys returned, plonking themselves on the towel with ice creams dripping down the cones. Sitting up straighter, Amy moved the ice pack from her head and insisted she was fine.

“I might head home and chill out,” she announced. She didn’t want to outstay her welcome, and she was keen to get stuck into Scarlett’s third novel.

“Not on your own, you’re not,” Damian said.

She gave him a watery smile. “Why not?”

“Because you just had a nasty blow to the head. You might have a concussion.”

“I haven’t.” She tilted her head. “I appreciate the concern, but I feel fine. I was mostly just shocked by it.”

“I saw how hard that surfboard hit you and there’s no way I’m letting you spend the day alone.”

She put a hand on his arm and softly said his name.

“It would be completely irresponsible,” he said fiercely. “We had nothing planned, anyway. Just hang out with us today to put my mind at ease.”

“I don’t know ...”

“What were you planning on doing for the day?”

“Reading.”

“Great. You can do that at my place.”

She shook her head. Given how much willpower it took to remove her head from his shoulder, she wasn’t sure spending an entire day with Damian was the best idea. “You’re fussing over nothing. I’m going home.”

He dragged his teeth along his bottom lip, and she saw the defiance flicker out of his eyes. “Will you at least let me drive you?”

“Okay.” That felt like a reasonable compromise.

It took a while for them to get the kids organised and off the beach. By the time they were back at Damian's house and climbing into his car, the boys seemed pretty excited about going over to her place. It only occurred to Amy when they arrived at the bungalow – and the boys insisted on looking around – that Damian had tricked her.

“You knew this would happen, didn't you?” She folded her arms across her chest once she'd opened the front door and the kids had dashed inside to explore.

“What?” Damian asked, totally innocent.

“You knew the kids would want to come inside. I guess you're betting they find something to play with and insist on hanging around.”

“Mum!” Billy shouted. “Are these your games?”

“No.” She rolled her eyes as she called back along the hallway. “They belong to the people who own the house.”

“Are we allowed to play them?”

“Yes.” She fired her most indignant stare at Damian, who tried and failed to stifle a grin. “I can't believe you tricked me,” she mock hissed.

His features turned serious. “You had a bang on the head. Let me hang around for a couple of hours to check you're okay. Then we'll leave you alone.”

When he looked at her like that she'd agree to anything, but since she didn't actually want him to go anywhere it wasn't a difficult decision to agree to him staying.

The four of them played Monopoly Junior on the living room floor, then Amy went to make sandwiches while the boys packed the game away.

“Does the TV work here?” Marty asked, dropping a crust of bread onto his plate at the kitchen table.

Amy swallowed her mouthful. “Yes. Why wouldn't it work?”

“Daddy's TV is broken,” Billy told her.

“What did you do to it?” she asked, assuming it would have been Billy who’d broken an appliance already.

“Nothing. It was broken before we came.”

Amy looked at Damian, confused. “It was on the other night.”

Damian looked fairly sheepish when he opened his mouth to speak, but Marty got in first.

“It just works at night-time,” he told Amy solemnly. “And only with TV programmes for grown-ups.”

“Really?” She tried not to laugh when she caught Damian’s eye. “That’s an unusual problem.”

“It’s very expensive to fix,” Billy said.

“Can we watch TV here?” Marty asked.

“I suppose so,” Amy said. “But not for too long. And when it’s time to turn it off, I don’t want any arguments.” They probably didn’t even hear the last part, since they’d already dashed away to the living room. “What exactly is the problem with your TV?” she asked Damian.

He quirked an eyebrow. “Obviously, there isn’t a problem with it.” Smiling, he collected up the dishes and took them to the dishwasher.

“Do you really have that much of an issue with them watching TV?” she asked, surprised that he’d be so strongly against it, and a little sad that she hadn’t known that.

“I don’t have an issue with them watching a bit of TV,” he said, the dishes clinking together as he loaded them into the rack. “What I don’t like is the way Billy has a tantrum when I ask them to turn it off. Or that they spend so much time when they’re not watching asking when they can watch. It drove me crazy the last time they visited, so I thought I’d eliminate the problem. If they don’t think there’s a possibility of TV they don’t ask for it.”

She nodded and stared at the glass of water in front of her.

“Obviously it’s easier to do stuff like that since I don’t spend that much time with them. I’m not making any comment about how you choose to do things.”

“I’m just surprised,” she told him.

He closed the door of the dishwasher. “How’s the head?”

“Fine,” she said smugly, pushing her seat back to stand up. “I think I might sit outside and dive into Scarlett’s next book.”

“She’s a brilliant writer, isn’t she?”

“Have you read them?” she asked, wondering exactly how many times he was planning on surprising her in one day.

“Just the first one. More out of curiosity than anything. I enjoyed it though.”

“Dad!” Billy shouted. “We don’t know which remote to use.”

“I’m not sure why they automatically ask you for help with it,” Amy joked. “The man who can only get his TV to work at certain times of the day!”

Chuckling, he went to help them. Amy was smiling too as she wandered out of the patio doors, intent on settling herself on a sun lounger with Scarlett’s book.

She just wasn’t sure how she’d be able to concentrate with Damian in such close proximity.

CHAPTER 20



Amy lifted her gaze from her book to catch Damian whipping his eyes away from her. “Stop watching me,” she said, smiling.

“I wasn’t.”

“I could feel you.” Putting the book down, she re-crossed her ankles on the sun lounger. “It’s very distracting.”

When he’d joined her on the patio, he’d sat quietly looking out over the garden for a while, then he’d switched to messaging someone on his phone, and after five minutes of that, he’d switched to watching her read. His mere presence had made it difficult to focus on the words in front of her, never mind when she could feel his eyes on her.

“You never were very good at doing nothing,” she remarked.

“I may have looked as though I was doing nothing, but I was actually monitoring you carefully for signs of concussion.”

“Apart from when you were busy messaging someone. Not so concerned about me then,” she teased. That had probably been the most distracting of all. How was she supposed to concentrate when she couldn’t stop wondering who he was messaging?

“I was asking Hugh’s advice on head injuries. What with him having such a vast medical knowledge these days.” He grinned when she laughed. “Not really,” he went on. “I was

actually looking up signs of concussion. Do you have a headache?"

"No. I feel fine."

"Good. Symptoms can take hours to come on though, so we should be cautious."

"And by cautious, you mean you're going to sit and stare at me?"

"I prefer to call it monitoring your condition."

"Because it sounds creepy otherwise?"

"Yep." He beamed at her. "But since you seem to be fine, I'll hang out with the boys for a bit."

Alone on the patio, she quickly wished she hadn't teased him. The ache in her chest reminded her why she shouldn't be spending so much time around him. The more she was with him, the more she missed him when he wasn't around. Even if he was only a room away.

An hour went by before she heard the commotion of Damian turning the TV off and reminding the boys they'd promised not to make a fuss about it. They ran outside a moment later and headed straight for the old apple tree in the centre of the garden. The low, gnarly branches made it perfect for climbing.

Damian wandered onto the patio, yawning widely.

"Did you fall asleep in there?" Amy asked, swinging her legs off the sun lounger and arching her back to stretch her spine.

"No. I may have got a bit too relaxed though. I could easily have nodded off." He tapped the back of the chair he was standing behind. "I suppose I should get these rascals home and leave you in peace. If you're sure you're okay."

If she said she had a headache he'd stay for longer. That would be silly though. She was absolutely fine. She just didn't want him to leave.

"I'm fine, thank you."

“Sure?”

No, she wasn't sure at all, but she couldn't fake a concussion just to keep him around.

“Are we staying here for dinner?” Billy called loudly.

Damian looked at her, eyes filled with uncertainty. “I think we should probably go home now,” he finally replied.

“Can't we eat here?” Billy asked.

“You said we have to stay and look after Mummy,” Marty put in.

Damian pushed his hands into his pockets and moved to the edge of the patio. “She's all better now.”

“You could stay for dinner,” Amy said hesitantly. Three pairs of eyes looked hopefully at her. “It seems like the least I can do since you hung around to look after me all afternoon.”

“Okay,” Damian said.

“I don't have any food, though.” She glanced towards the kitchen as though a solution might jump out at her. “I can walk down to the shop. Or get fish and chips.”

That got everyone's approval.

“I'll go for them,” Damian said, touching her elbow lightly as he passed her. “You stay here and relax.”

She thanked him and sat down to watch the boys tear around the garden.

Taking advantage of the gorgeous weather, they ate their fish and chip dinner outside, the boys keeping up a constant stream of chatter, most of which was absolute nonsense from Billy, but which kept them all entertained.

“Can we stay here for a film night?” Billy asked, shovelling the last couple of chips from his plate into his mouth. “We can't have film nights at Daddy's house but we could have one here.”

“It's almost bedtime,” Damian told them, checking his watch. “You'll have no energy tomorrow if you stay up too

late.”

“We always have energy,” Billy pointed out. “We’ll still have energy even if we have a film night.”

“We will,” Marty agreed. “I promise.”

“Oh, you promise!” Damian echoed, his mocking tone making the boys laugh.

“Please can we have a film night?” Marty leaned against Amy and squeezed her arm. “Please!”

“It’s up to Dad,” she said, passing the buck and hoping Damian would relent to their request.

He gave her a look of mock contempt. “It’s your place.”

She shrugged. “It’s fine by me.”

The boys looked pleadingly up at Damian, their wide eyes so pathetic that he chuckled. “Fine. Film night it is!”

CHAPTER 21



Amy cleared up the dinner things while Damian took the boys to choose a film. When she joined them, Billy was perched on the arm of the couch while Marty sat close beside Damian.

“Sit next to me.” Marty reached out to grab her hand and pulled her down beside him. He kept hold of her hand as though she might try to escape.

Damian pressed play on the film – something involving talking dogs – then turned his head to Billy and told him to sit properly on the couch.

“Shh!” Billy dropped into the space beside Damian and pushed his chin to get him to look forwards. “It’s starting. You’ve got to be quiet.”

Ten minutes later, Billy had curled into Damian’s side and Marty shuffled into his lap, wriggling to get comfy against his chest before reaching for Amy’s hand again. With his fingers curled around hers, their hands automatically rested on Damian’s thigh. Damian kept his eyes on the screen, not even seeming to notice. Amy felt as though her hand was on fire where it connected with his leg. The warmth of his skin seeped through his cargo shorts, and she was hyperaware of every micro movement she made.

When Damian shifted position, slouching down into the cushions, Amy did the same. She forced her muscles to unwind, aware of the fact that there was another hour and a half of the film and keeping her muscles tense for that time

wasn't going to feel good. As it turned out, relaxing meant leaning slightly into Damian. A waft of his scent filled her nostrils, and she realised it was the first time since the boys were tiny that they'd all cuddled up together. Once she let herself settle into it, she felt utterly content. For the first time in a long time, it felt as though all was right with the world.

She was vaguely aware of her eyelids growing heavy, and a couple of times she jerked awake after nodding off briefly. Then Billy was loudly asking if they could watch another film, his voice pulling her from a peaceful slumber.

She felt as though she'd only blinked, but the credits were rolling on the film and she cursed herself for sleeping instead of savouring the time.

"It's time to go home to bed," Damian said.

Amy peeled her cheek away from his bicep and clocked Marty fast asleep in his lap.

"Do you want to put him in my bed?" she asked.

"It's probably easier if I take him home. They've got kids' club tomorrow and Scarlett will be at my place early to pick them up."

Amy's mind whirred, looking for excuses to keep them there, but she stopped herself from voicing any of them. It wasn't as though she could keep them all together indefinitely.

"I had a really good day," Damian said, pausing at the front door and shifting Marty's sleeping form from one arm to the other.

"Me too." Crouching, she kissed Billy's cheek, then straightened up to face Damian. "Apart from almost getting a traumatic brain injury."

He beamed. "Apart from that, of course. We'll see you soon."

"Yes." Pressure built in her chest at the thought of closing the door behind them and being left alone. "I'll call you."

"Great." He took a step, then inched back to her. "You're sure your head's okay?"

“Yes.” She nodded and swallowed hard as his intense gaze bored into her. “I’m fine.”

“Can we go now?” Billy shouted impatiently from beside the car.

“One second!” Damian raised his hand, gently touching her hair above her ear. “The lump has gone down at least. Call me if you don’t feel well or anything.”

“Thank you.” Her fingers lightly stroked his palm as she pulled his hand away from her head.

“Dad!” Billy shouted.

While hoisting Marty higher on his arm, Damian dropped a kiss on Amy’s cheek so quickly she barely had time to register it.

All she knew was she was watching them get into the car and feeling like a balloon that was deflating fast.

She waited, waving until the car was out of sight. Her phone rang the moment she walked back inside and she almost silenced the call from Anthony.

For the first time, she felt a surge of anger at him. If it weren’t for him, she might have spent the past six and a half years with Damian. Her life might have turned out completely differently if it weren’t for Anthony.

Guilt hit her almost immediately. The last person who deserved her anger was Anthony. In reality, the only person she could be genuinely angry with about her situation was herself.

“Hi,” she said, injecting lightness into her voice as she answered the phone. Rather than sit, she leaned against the kitchen counter. “How are you?”

“Fine, thanks. How’s everything there?”

“Good.”

“Glad to hear it.”

The brief silence unnerved Amy and she hurried to fill it. “Sorry about the call the other night. It was kind of chaotic.”

“It’s fine. It was just good to see the boys. That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Oh?”

“I really miss them,” he said slowly. “Not seeing them for another few weeks seems like so long.”

“We can try to do video calls more regularly,” she suggested.

“That would be good, but I’m actually going to be in Bristol at the end of the week. I wondered if I could drive down and see you guys for the day next Saturday.”

“Saturday,” she echoed, since her brain had apparently shut down.

“If that would be convenient, and if Damian wouldn’t mind.”

“I don’t think he’d mind. I’d just have to check he doesn’t have anything planned. Were you thinking you’d pick the boys up and take them off somewhere for the day?”

“I guess so. I was also thinking we might get a chance to talk.” He sounded hesitant as though he was expecting a hostile response. “I know we agreed we’d wait until after the summer to make any decisions about the future, but I’ve had some thoughts that I’d like to run by you ... that way you can mull it over while you’re away.”

“That makes sense, I suppose.” Except, she couldn’t imagine it would be an easy conversation. It would force her to face up to the realities of their situation, which was something she’d been burying her head in the sand about. There was really no question that she was going to have to find somewhere else to live, since she couldn’t afford to buy Anthony out of the house.

“Okay,” Anthony said. “Do you want to speak to Damian about it and get back to me?”

She promised to call him back soon, then ended the call. Standing in the middle of the room, staring at the phone, she contemplated calling Damian.

She decided to wait, not wanting to put a dampener on their day together.

CHAPTER 22



Leo was waiting outside the surf shack when Damian finished his lesson on Monday morning. He was pacing with Alice in his arms and looked completely wiped out.

“What’s wrong?” Damian asked, propping his board in the rack and peeling down the top half of his wetsuit.

“She’s teething. I barely slept all weekend. Also, I think Caitlin is pissed off with me.” His shoulders slumped. “My life is chaos and I don’t know if I’ll survive the day.”

Damian grabbed a towel and rubbed at his hair and then his torso. “Give her to me,” he said, reaching for Alice once he’d draped his towel around his shoulders. “Why don’t you go and have a nap at my place? I’ll entertain her for an hour or so then bring her up to you.”

“Are you sure? Where are the boys?”

“Off out with Scarlett. They’ll be back soon, but we can hang out here for a while.” He nipped into the shack, jiggling Alice on his arm as he went. When he returned, it was with his house keys, which he handed to Leo. “Where’s her stuff?”

“Her buggy and changing bag are in the car.”

“Cool. Give me the car keys.”

“You’re the best.” Leo scrutinised Damian as he gave him the keys. “You’re also looking pretty pleased with yourself. Did you sleep with Amy?”

“No!” The thought made his lips pull upwards. “I just had a good weekend.”

“Involving Amy?”

He adjusted his hold on Alice, who squirmed in his arms. “Yes, it involved Amy.”

Leo nodded. “Let me get some kip, then I want to hear all about it.”

“See you soon.” He lifted Alice’s arm for her to wave at Leo, then cursed himself when she realised what was going on and wailed loudly.

Leo sighed and stepped towards her which did nothing to help the situation. “Maybe I should ...”

“No—” Damian retreated a little. “Just go. She’ll be fine.”

After a moment of hesitation, Leo turned and left. Alice calmed down again quickly and even gave Damian a hint of a smile when he blew a raspberry on her neck.

He grabbed a blanket and a couple of beach toys and took her down to play on the sand. She was happily wriggling on her back and chewing on a blue sand toy when his phone rang. He’d been planning on calling Amy later to arrange when they’d see her next, but seeing her name on the screen gave him a thrill. If she was keen to set something up that was even better.

He stared down at Alice while enjoying the timbre of Amy’s voice as she greeted him.

“I was thinking we could just arrange regular days to meet,” he told her, his blood pumping harder at the thought. “Dinner twice a week,” he suggested. “Or whatever you want. We’re easy.”

“That sounds good,” she said, her voice flat, as though she wasn’t concentrating on the conversation. “There was something else I wanted to ask you. Anthony wants to visit at the weekend and take the boys out for the day. I wanted to see if that would be okay with you.”

The mention of her husband felt like a bucket of cold water over his head. He wasn’t even her *ex*-husband. They were having a trial separation, that was all.

“Obviously you can say no if it’s not okay for you.”

“Right.” What did that mean? Did she want him to say no? Expect him to? Anthony had been raising his kids for the vast majority of their lives ... telling him he couldn’t see them would be a pretty pathetic move. “When did he want to come?”

“Saturday. He’ll be in Bristol so he could drive down. I feel kind of bad ... he misses them.”

“Yeah.” He swallowed his emotions, rubbing circles on Alice’s stomach to soothe himself as much as her. “It’s fine with me. So he’ll pick them up and take them out? Just for the day?” What he really wanted to know was if it was just the boys he was taking. Or was Amy going too, like some cosy family day out?

“Yes. Just for the day.”

That was something, at least. He didn’t have to think about him staying over with Amy. The thought made his stomach turn, which was fairly absurd considering he was Amy’s husband and had been sharing a house and a life and a bed with her for years.

“Sorry,” she said. “I feel weird about it ... are you sure it’s okay with you?”

He bit down on his lip so hard it was painful. There wasn’t really much else he could say other than it was okay. “It’s fine. The boys will love it.”

“Yeah.” Amy paused. “Thank you. You always make this stuff easy. I know it’s not the easiest of situations.”

“If the kids are happy, I’m happy,” he said brightly, wondering if his lie sounded at all believable.

“I’ll confirm it with Anthony and see what time he’ll arrive. I guess he’ll just pick them up from your place, if that’s all right?”

“Fine by me. Just let me know what time.” Desperately, he wanted to get off the phone. “I’ll talk to you soon, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

He was about to hang up when she spoke again.

“When will I see you this week? The boys, I mean.”

He closed his eyes briefly. That had completely slipped his mind. “Whenever you want,” he said.

“Wednesday?”

“Okay.” His voice came out an odd squeak. “I’ll make dinner.”

And maybe he’d disappear off to Leo’s house again, like he’d done the other time. Or maybe there was no point in keeping his distance. He was too far gone, anyway. He was going to get his heart crushed all over again, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

CHAPTER 23



Trying to get the boys to enter the house quietly was pretty much impossible. Leo stirred on the couch as they ran inside, discarding their sandals in the hallway and pounding the stairs to go and play in their room.

“I tried to keep them out as long as possible,” Damian said, passing Alice to Leo as he sat up on the couch. “She drank a bottle, had a nappy change and was completely enthralled by the boys pulling faces at her. I’ll send you the videos of her laughing at them. It’s adorable.”

“Thank you.” Leo kissed Alice’s head, then checked his watch. “I slept for ages.”

“Are you doing okay?” Damian asked him seriously, lowering himself into the armchair.

“It’s bloody hard,” he said. “I’m supposed to go back to work soon and I don’t know how I’m going to juggle that. They’ve said I can work from home, but it’s not realistic that I’ll get any work done with Alice with me.”

“I thought you were going to get a nursery place.”

“I have a place for her. When I booked her in, six months seemed like a long time away. I thought I’d be ready to hand her over to someone else, but I’m absolutely not.”

“What are your options? Can you take more time off?”

“Maybe a little, but not indefinitely. My neighbour offered to look after Alice but I’m not sure ... it seems like a big ask.”

“It would be if you were asking. If she’s offering it’s very different.”

“That’s her argument too.”

“And she’s right next door, so that’s pretty perfect.”

“She’s also pointed that out.”

“It would give Judith some purpose too. That’ll be part of the reason she offered.”

Leo rolled his eyes. “Did she have a word with you?”

“It just seems like the perfect solution.”

“Maybe.” He kissed Alice again then moved onto the floor with her so she could wriggle around on the carpet.

“Are things okay with Caitlin?”

“Yes.” Leo wrinkled his nose, looking thoughtful. “She’s great. But she’s annoyed that I won’t let her help with Alice more. She sees it as me not trusting her or something.”

“Is it?”

“No. I just don’t want her to feel she has to. It’s not an easy situation.”

“It sounds as though you have trouble accepting help. Which is strange considering how you were so quick to thrust your child on me today.”

“It’s different with you. We’re like family. You won’t feel used because you look after my child from time to time.”

“I don’t think Caitlin would feel used either.”

“Probably not, but *I’d* feel like I was using her.” Leo dragged his hands through his hair, but it still stuck out at an odd angle where he’d slept on it. “Anyway, what happened with you and Amy to make you all cheerful?”

Damian puffed out a humourless laugh. “What happened was I forgot she was married for a day. But I’ve just been reminded, so that’s a bit of a downer.”

“I think you’re going to need to explain that better,” Leo said with a frown.

He gave him a quick rundown of their day together and how enjoyable it had been, then told him about the earlier phone call.

“So now you’re feeling guilty about wanting to sleep with another guy’s wife?” Leo asked.

“Not really.” Damian flopped back in the chair, pushing his head into the cushion. “It’s not just that I want to sleep with her. I want all of it. I want to hang out at the beach with her and sit around the house playing board games with her and the kids and I want her to fall asleep on my shoulder while we’re cuddled up on the couch watching TV with the boys.”

“Sorry if I’m missing something, but isn’t that a possibility? From what you said, it seems she enjoyed Saturday as much as you did. She asked you to stay for dinner, didn’t she? She agreed to watching a film together?”

“Yeah. But what happens when her husband turns up at the weekend and she realises she wants to fix things with him? And even if they’re not together, there’s also the slight problem of her living in Oxford. She’s not going to take the boys out of school and give up her job to come and live by the sea in my cramped house.”

Leo nodded solemnly. “Hypothetically speaking ... if she told you she wanted to be with you, would you consider moving there?”

“I’d move in a heartbeat. Anywhere. But we tried that before and it didn’t work. There’s also the problem that I’m qualified for nothing. I’m pretty much unemployable.”

“I don’t think that’s true. There’s a good chance you’d end up doing a job you hate though.”

“If I got to go home to Amy and the boys, I wouldn’t care. But she’s used to a certain lifestyle that I can’t provide.”

“Does she actually care about the lifestyle?”

Damian eyed him warily, not sure how to respond.

“It just seems weird,” Leo said, “that you’d fall for someone who’s so hung up on material stuff. Maybe she

doesn't care about that stuff as much as you think."

"She definitely likes her big house with all its bathrooms and fancy kitchen appliances."

Leo smiled lightly. "She has a good job. Maybe she can pay for her own lifestyle choices."

"We just aren't compatible on a lot of fundamental issues. Not that it matters anyway," he said, defeatedly. "Anthony's about to swoop back in and sweep her off her feet again."

"If she's been enjoying spending time with you, she might not be so easily swept."

Damian wished his friend was right, but in the back of his mind he was sure Anthony's visit was about to cause a monumental shift in his summer.

CHAPTER 24



In the end, Amy picked the kids up from Damian on Saturday morning and told Anthony to come to her place. She couldn't face the idea of spending time with the two of them together. Especially given how quiet Damian had been with her that week. She told herself he was probably tired. Even if he'd cut down on his working hours, overseeing the running of the shack still took time and energy. Dealing with that on top of taking care of the boys would be tiring for anyone.

That's what she chose to believe was going on. She couldn't let herself think there was more to his change in mood than that. If she entertained the notion that it was to do with Anthony's visit, she also had to face the idea that Damian's feelings for her were as strong as hers were for him. She didn't know what she'd do with that information, and she had too much to worry about over Anthony's visit as it was.

When he arrived, the boys jumped down from their spot on the windowsill and made a noisy dash for the door.

Emotions clogged in Amy's throat as she stood in the doorway, watching Anthony and the boys engage in a playful greeting filled with hugs and kisses and tickling. In his denim shorts and navy-blue polo shirt, Anthony looked relaxed and casual. He was clean shaven, and as he approached her, she could see that his smooth brown hair had been recently cut.

"They've missed you," she said, leaning into his embrace, surprised by the comfort in the familiarity of him.

“I missed them too.” He laughed as they battled for his attention around his legs. “It’s really great to see you all.”

“You too.” She extended her arm in a sweeping gesture to invite him inside. With the weather in full summer mode, she made him a coffee and they sat out on the patio. It was a while before the kids calmed down enough for her to get a word in, but once Anthony presented them with Lego sets they disappeared to the kitchen table to assemble them.

“How’s your summer going?” he asked, relaxing back in the chair and stretching his legs out in front of him. “Are you enjoying the work at the publishing company?”

“It’s only a voluntary thing,” she said, fairly sure he knew that. “I helped Lizzie out with a few things this week, but I’m doing it because I’m interested, not because there’s any pressure.” Also because she liked Lizzie and Emily and Scarlett so much that she was keen to do a good job if there was anything she could help with. That week she’d spent several hours in Tara’s bookshop reading the descriptions on the backs of books so she could help with tweaking some for Hope Cove Press.

“You enjoy it, though?” Anthony asked.

“I love it, actually. I’m learning a lot and it’s really interesting stuff. Plus, I have a newfound love of reading fiction.” She tipped her head towards the other end of the patio. “I’d hate to think how many hours I’ve spent on that sun lounger, lost in a book.”

“That’s great.” He looked at her fondly and with an intensity that made her shift in her seat. “I’m glad you found a way to relax.”

Amy opened her mouth to question him. Did he think she’d been incapable of relaxing before? That she was some kind of highly strung suburban mother? Deciding she probably didn’t want answers to her questions, she closed her mouth again.

Anthony sipped his coffee, keeping his gaze fixed on her. “How are things with Damian?”

“Fine.” Her voice came out a little too high-pitched. “The kids are loving their surf lessons and spending so much time with him. He also hired a local woman to help with them while he’s teaching. She’s young and autistic. I thought it was going to be a disaster, but it turned out brilliantly. She’s great with the boys. Especially Marty. He adores her.” She smiled gently and lowered her voice. “Oh, and Damian convinced the boys that his TV doesn’t work for kids’ programmes. They’re having a screen-free summer and they don’t even seem to care.”

“That’s great,” Anthony said, his features completely neutral. “But I was really asking how things are with *you* and Damian ...”

She squinted and cocked her head.

“Come on,” Anthony said. “I know you trust Damian with the boys. There was no need for you to be here for the summer. The thing about you wanting to experience the workings of a publishing company was crap. Even if it wasn’t, you could have done it anywhere.”

“I did it here so I could be close to the boys,” she said firmly.

He smiled condescendingly. “You did it here to be close to Damian.”

Swallowing hard, she pushed her chair back and went to the door under the pretence of checking on the boys.

“What did you have planned for today?” she asked, folding her arms over her chest when she turned back to Anthony.

For a moment it seemed as though he might not let the subject drop, then he let out a resigned sigh. “I’ve got beach things. I thought about going for a drive and finding a nice beach. But if they’re sick of the beach I can do something else. I don’t mind. I just want to spend time with them.” He looked at her sorrowfully. “You too. We need to have a proper conversation about what happens after the summer.”

“Can we do that later? The boys are almost finished building.”

He nodded and went inside to see if they needed help.

As Amy had suspected might happen, the boys pleaded for her to come out with them. Anthony also thought it would be good for the boys if they all spent time together.

She relented, partly because he probably had a point, but also because she was reasonably certain a day alone with her thoughts wouldn't be the best thing for her.

CHAPTER 25



They drove east with no particular destination in mind and ended up strolling around Dartmouth, looking at the boats in the harbour and enjoying a pub lunch. Billy saw a flyer for Dartmouth Castle, so that ended up being their next stop before they headed to Blackpool Sands for a swim and some sandcastle building.

When the sun disappeared behind thick clouds and a chill permeated the air, they moseyed back up the beach towards the car park. The boys enticed Anthony into a game of chase on the way, leaving Amy to shift into a daydream.

It had been an oddly peaceful day, though she wasn't sure why she was surprised given that they'd had plenty of practice at family days out. It was the first time since they'd separated though and probably the first time that their time together had been truly authentic. They'd felt like two friends hanging out, which was probably all they should ever have been. She only hoped Anthony agreed on that matter when they had their talk later, presumably after Billy and Marty were back with Damian.

"Why did we come to the beach on a rainy day?" Anthony asked, running over to her with the boys close behind.

Only then did she notice the fat drops of rain that were falling. After a few more metres the heavens opened and the four of them made a mad dash for the car, the boys squealing and shouting unintelligible remarks as they went.

“How did the weather change so quickly?” Amy asked, shaking drops from her hair in the passenger seat. “This really is terrible weather for the beach.”

In the back of the car, the boys giggled gleefully.

“I thought it was the summer holidays,” Anthony told them in a jokey voice. “This isn’t summer holiday weather, is it? Especially not in Devon. I thought it never rained in Devon.”

“Sometimes it does,” Marty told him, leaning between the seats and staring at the raindrops bouncing from the windscreen.

“Like today!” Billy shouted. “Can we still get ice creams?”

Amy argued it was more like hot chocolate weather but Anthony drove around to the kiosk at the far end of the car park and hopped out to let the boys choose ice creams. It kept them quiet for the first half of the drive home, and the sound of the rain soothed them the rest of the way.

They’d just turned onto her road when a message came through from Damian. Staring at the phone screen, Amy thought of Anthony’s comment about her spending the summer in Hope Cove to be close to him. As far as she could tell, there didn’t seem to be much judgement in his words, just curiosity. Unless she’d got that totally wrong.

“Everything okay?” Anthony asked, breaking her thoughts.

“Yeah. Damian was just asking about picking the boys up. He’s going over to a friend’s place and would pick them up on the way.”

“Which friend?” Billy asked loudly.

“Hugh. You can have dinner over there with Emmy.” She looked at Anthony. “He also said he can pick them up later if you want longer with the boys.”

“It’s fine.” He checked his watch. “I should probably head off soon.”

Given the way the wind was driving rain violently against the windscreen she should probably offer for him to stay. She

didn't want to though. Things were complicated enough. "How long is your drive?" she asked.

"I'm actually staying in a hotel nearby. It seemed easier. Maybe I could come over tomorrow and see the boys before I leave."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Dad's making us pancakes for breakfast tomorrow," Marty said. "Then we're going surfing. Do you want to come and watch us surf?"

Anthony frowned. "I don't know ..."

"Why not?" Billy demanded. "I'm very good at it."

"I didn't mean I don't know if I want to," Anthony clarified. "I just don't know if I can."

"Mummy can tell you where the beach is," Marty said, as though that could be the only obstacle. It was actually a good thing the boys were oblivious to the slightly awkward dynamics between the adults in their lives.

"You could just come and watch for half an hour," Amy suggested. "I'm sure Damian won't mind."

"It would actually be fun to see them surfing, if you really think it would be all right with Damian."

"Dad won't mind," Billy said confidently.

"I'll ask him when he picks the boys up." Amy rooted in her handbag for the door keys, wanting to have them ready when they finally made a dash for the house. "Are you coming in for a bit or getting straight off?"

"I'll come in for a minute."

Anthony had seemed to only be intending to use the bathroom, but Marty and Billy dragged him into a game of cards and he was still there when Damian arrived an hour later.

Damian didn't come in but shook Anthony's hand on the doorstep, keeping his hoodie pulled up against the rain. The boys didn't seem to register it when they ran to the car. Damian shouted them back again to say goodbye.

“You won’t see Anthony for a while.” He ruffled Billy’s hair. “Give him a big hug before we go.”

“We’ll see him tomorrow.” Marty swung on Damian’s hand. “He’s going to come and watch us surf.”

“Really?” Damian asked, brows drawing together.

“If that’s all right with you?” Anthony said.

“It’s fine,” Damian said, eyes bouncing from Anthony to Amy. “I just didn’t know. I thought you had to drive back tonight.”

“He decided to stay,” Amy said. “Just for tonight.”

“Oh.” Damian’s eyes dropped to Marty, and he lifted his arm to pull him off the ground. “Okay. We’ll see you in the morning then.” He encouraged the boys to say goodbye and coaxed them towards the car. “Have a good evening,” he called over his shoulder.

The hint of irritation in his tone clued Amy into the conclusion he’d jumped to: that Anthony was spending the night with her and not in a hotel elsewhere.

CHAPTER 26



“That was awkward,” Anthony said when he closed the front door.

“What was?” Amy asked, biting on the corner of her thumbnail as she walked along the hallway, heading for the kitchen.

“Damian clearly thinks I’m staying here and he didn’t seem happy about it.” He pulled out a chair and sat at the kitchen table.

The flicker of amusement that passed over his eyes sent a rush of anger coursing through Amy’s veins. She’d never have believed Anthony capable of being spiteful, but she supposed it wasn’t that surprising given the circumstances. It didn’t mean she had to put up with it, though.

“The smug look doesn’t suit you,” she said, venom in her words.

His eyes met hers and his features morphed immediately. “I wasn’t being smug,” he said. “I’m just quite surprised. I didn’t think he’d waste so much time with me out of the picture. So you and him didn’t get back together?”

She shook her head. “Did you think I’d get back with Damian the moment we broke up?”

“No. But it’s been several months.”

He was strangely calm, given the conversation. Amy opened her mouth to comment that he didn’t seem overly perturbed by the idea of her and Damian being together but his

phone rang, cutting her off. He didn't answer it but the moment was broken.

“Do you want a drink?” she asked, getting herself a glass of water.

He tapped out a message on his phone and didn't look up. “I actually need to get going. I need to return that call.”

“Okay.” Her eyebrows pulled together. “I thought you wanted to talk?”

“Is it okay if we wait until tomorrow? I could come back here first thing, then go over to the beach to watch the boys surf before I leave.”

She agreed, feeling a rush of relief that she could just relax and enjoy the evening. At least until she closed the door behind him and was immediately tortured by the thought of Damian assuming Anthony was staying at her place.

Flopping onto the couch, she hit dial on his number – she could use the pretence of asking what time they'd be at the beach tomorrow and subtly slip into the conversation that Anthony had gone back to his hotel.

He didn't answer though, so she tapped out a message asking him to give her a quick call. She could see that he hadn't even seen the message and after fifteen minutes she tried calling him again. Still no answer.

She should probably leave it, but knew it was going to niggle at her. She also knew Damian had been heading to Hugh's place and she could easily track him down there.

With the hood of her raincoat pulled up, she made a run for the car then set the wipers on full speed for the five-minute drive. Only when she pulled up in front of the house did she wonder if Hugh might have moved in the years since she'd last been there. Presumably, she'd have heard about it if that was the case.

Still, it was a relief when Hugh answered the door. She could hear the boys playing upstairs and tilted her head to look around Hugh as she greeted him.

“Damian isn’t answering his phone and I just need to speak to him quickly.”

It was slightly uncomfortable that he didn’t invite her in, especially since the rain was still coming down hard. It reinforced her notion that Damian’s friends probably weren’t her biggest fans.

“It’ll only take a minute,” she said when Hugh just stared at her.

“He’s not here,” he said.

“The boys are here.” She pointed in the direction of the noise. “He told me he was coming here. It’ll really only take a minute.”

“He *was* here.” Hugh gave a subtle shake of his head. “He just nipped out.”

“Oh.” She imagined he’d gone to fetch pizzas or something. “Is it all right if I wait for him?”

“I don’t know how long he’s going to be.” His gaze dropped to the ground. “I can get him to call you when he gets back, if you want?”

“Where is he?” She pulled her hood back up, annoyed at being left on the doorstep and also that Hugh was being so cagey.

He looked past her, frowning. Amy’s chest ached as she realised what was going on. She also felt bad for Hugh getting stuck in the middle of things.

“He’s on a date, isn’t he?”

“What?” Hugh’s eyebrows shot up.

“You can just say so.” She really didn’t want to hear it but she’d rather know.

“I ... um ... no. He’s not on a date.”

“Oh, forget it,” Amy huffed, losing patience with him. If he wouldn’t tell her the truth, there was little point in standing there getting drenched. She called goodbye over her shoulder,

ignoring Hugh when he shouted for her to wait. She'd just reached the car when he stopped her with a hand on her elbow.

“He’s not on a date,” he said wearily. “He’s at the beach. He didn’t leave that long ago, so you might be able to catch him before he kills himself.”

“Why would he be at the beach in this weather?” Her quiet words got lost in the wind and the rain, not that it mattered since she’d figured out the answer for herself. Damian had always liked to go surfing when the sea was rough and the waves intense. It had been a subject of contention between them when they’d been together, but she’d assumed it was something he’d have outgrown.

“Please tell me he doesn’t still do that,” she said to Hugh.

“I told him not to. I *always* tell him not to.”

Amy felt a shiver of dread creep up her spine as the wind picked up. “He’ll kill himself if he’s out in this.”

“He’s usually pretty good at weighing the risk. He wouldn’t go out if it was too crazy – but given the mood he was in when he got here, I’m not sure he’s thinking straight.”

“Great.” She threw her hands up. “So when he gets himself killed it’s going to be my fault.”

“If you can catch him, you’ll probably be able to talk some sense into him.”

She blew out a breath and got in the car while Hugh called after her to keep him updated.

CHAPTER 27



Rain drove against the windscreen in a steady rhythm and Amy's heartbeat increased to match the ticking of the wipers. Pulling into the deserted carpark by the beach, she spotted Damian's car parked close to the VW van. The sight of it made her stomach clench as a rush of fear washed over her. Parking by Damian's car, she hopped straight out, fuelled by an intense rush of adrenaline.

Her lungs felt tight as she braced against the elements and hurried onto the beach. Waves hammered the rocks at the far end of the bay, sending spray rushing into the air like a geyser. The frenzied gusts of wind slowed her down and she hunched her shoulders as she crossed the sand. Her heart was in her mouth as she scanned the water. Waves battered the shore, creating bright white foam which lit up under a flash of lightning. A low rumble of thunder made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

While her eyes searched the angry water, Amy's brain told her no one would survive being out in that. If it weren't for his car in the car park, she might be able to convince herself that Hugh had got it wrong and Damian was just sitting at home. At that moment she'd even be okay with him being on a date. So long as he hadn't risked his neck for an adrenaline rush.

Tears stung her eyes as she debated what to do. Standing in the rain wasn't doing her any good, and there was no sign of him. Turning, she contemplated returning to the car before her gaze landed on the surf shack. The rental equipment which was usually on display was all packed up inside, leaving the

large patio area empty and giving the place an abandoned feel. Except the glow at the window told a different story.

Her heart was in overdrive as she dashed up the beach. Opening the door, relief washed through her at the sight of Damian fastening his jeans beside a rack of wetsuits. He grabbed his T-shirt from the back of a chair and pulled it over his head. Beside him, water dripped from the legs of a black wetsuit hanging on the rack. The sight of it turned her relief to anger in an instant.

“What is wrong with you?” she shouted over the noise of the rain pummelling the roof.

He swung around, surprise written all over his features.

“I can’t believe you’re still pulling this crap,” she snarled, drawing up in front of him. “You have two children and you’ll risk your neck just to catch a wave?” Emotions gathered in her throat at the thought of what could’ve happened while he was out riding waves in a storm. “Do you ever stop to think about Marty and Billy when you’re off pulling your stupid stunts?” *And her*, she wanted to ask. Did he ever stop to think about her?

Calmly, Damian reached for his hoodie and pulled it on. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to make sure you didn’t kill yourself,” she said through gritted teeth.

“I didn’t go in the water,” he said.

“Your wetsuit’s dripping,” she pointed out.

He held her gaze. “I went in up to my knees, then came to my senses and realised I don’t actually have a death wish.”

“What were you thinking getting that far?” she demanded.

His lips twitched to one side as he sank onto the chair and reached for his trainers. “If you must know, I was thinking about you and Anthony and our boys off on your cosy family day out.”

Roughly, he shoved one foot into a shoe and then the other. “I spent all day feeling sick thinking about the four of you

together. And I realise he's your husband, and it's good for him to spend time with the boys, but it makes me feel like crap. It always has done and it always will. And then when I came to your place and saw you with him ...” He trailed off and took a deep breath.

“We're separated,” she said sadly. “He's staying at a hotel, not at my place.”

Damian's gaze flicked up to meet hers. “Really?”

“Yes.” She felt the skin of her forehead wrinkle as she frowned. “I need you to promise you'll stop being reckless. You can't go out surfing in storms.” She shook her head as her throat tightened. “Our boys would be lost if something happened to you.”

He cast his eyes down and rubbed the back of his hand against his forehead. “They have another dad so I reckon they'd be fine.”

Amy couldn't believe what she was hearing. He couldn't really think that. “That's absolutely not true,” she said, her voice brittle.

He didn't look at her but stood and started across the room towards the door.

“What about me?” she called over the noise of the rain thundering on the roof. He stopped then, turning to give her a quizzical look. “What would *I* do if something happened to you?”

“You'd be fine,” he said, quietly enough that she had to read his lips to make out the words.

“No.” She shook her head as she went to him. “I wouldn't be fine.” Lightly, she rested her hands at his chest and looked him right in the eyes. “If you weren't in the world, I wouldn't want to be in it either.”

“Amy,” he breathed, refusing to meet her eyes.

“I mean it,” she said, bunching his top in her clenched fists. “When I thought you were out there on the water, I was so scared.”

His forehead came to touch hers and his breath swept tantalisingly over her lips. Closing her eyes, she savoured the closeness of him and the feel of his hands as they softly landed at her waist. The wind shook the walls around them, but everything seemed to still as the sweet, intoxicating scent of surf wax filled her nostrils.

Amy's breath hitched as Damian's hands trailed a path over her ribs. When his palm caressed her jaw, tilting her face upwards, she opened her eyes. He gazed down at her adoringly and she tipped her head, brushing her nose against his before laying a gentle kiss on his soft lips.

Pulling back a fraction, her eyes darted to his, then to his lips. Her nerves endings sparked like the lightning that flooded the room with light. Thunder growled in the distance at the exact moment his lips crashed against hers. This time the kiss was desperate and greedy – a clash of bodies and lips and lust.

When they collided with the rack of hanging wetsuits, Amy could feel his lips curl to a smile but he didn't stop kissing her, just circled his arms tighter around her waist and walked her backwards until she was pleasantly wedged between him and a wall. His hands strayed under her top, crawling over her lower back before working their way up and gripping her shoulder blades. Panting, she tugged at his hoodie as her need for skin contact increased.

“Wait,” he said, pulling back and breathing hard.

“What?” She pulled his hips flush against hers. “Please don't say we should stop. I don't want to stop.”

“Just not here,” he said, tilting her chin to tease her lips between his teeth. “Let's go back to my place.”

Taking her hand he didn't leave room for argument, and pulled her quickly out into the stormy evening. With the rain and wind lashing at them, Amy ducked her head and stuck close to Damian's side. They were both laughing when they piled into her car.

Damian reached across the console to push a strand of dripping hair off her face, then kissed her in a movement so

natural it made Amy's stomach flutter.

"I missed you," he whispered against her ear.

She inhaled his distinct scent – a heady blend of salt and sand and sunshine that was so uniquely him. "I missed you too."

"Let's go home and get warm," he murmured, then pressed a kiss to her jaw that made her skin tingle.

Not needing any more encouragement, she went to turn the engine on but stopped as a flash of lightning hit, illuminating everything around them. Amy's attention went to the VW van in the next parking spot.

"How come you kept it?" she asked.

"What?"

"The van? I thought you'd have got rid of it."

"No chance," he said with a frown. "I'd never get rid of her."

Amy chewed on her lip, remembering all the nights they'd spent there together. "Can I see?"

"The van?"

"Yes. I want to see inside."

Damian blew out a breath. "Let's just go home. I'm freezing."

"Just a quick look." She reached for the door handle, ready to brave the elements again.

"I don't have the key," Damian said in a rush.

"Isn't it with your house key?" She raised a quizzical eyebrow. "What exactly don't you want me to see in there?"

"Nothing. I'm just not keen to leave this car unless it's to move into a warm house."

"Give me the key then." She held her palm out and entered a staring competition with him.

Finally, he reached for his door handle. “Just a quick look, then we’re going home to get warm.”

CHAPTER 28



The van door whirred on its tracks when Damian slid it open, then again when he closed it behind them. Another flash of lightning lit the van. At one end of the cosy space, the bed was made up with a small set of drawers beside it that held a lamp, a scuffed beer mat and a collection of shells and sea glass.

Plunged into darkness again, Amy turned on the torch on her phone. Damian stayed hunched by the door as she moved further inside. She refrained from asking why he was being so cagey about her being there. Something was off though – the place was so neat and homely. It felt lived in.

“Does this work?” she asked, picking up the small lamp.

“It should do, if the batteries haven’t run out.” He took it from her, clicking the switch, then setting it back down.

The glow of light was dim, but enough for Amy to switch off her torch. “It’s cute in here,” she said, as the noise of the rain decreased to a gentle tapping.

“Yeah.” Damian inched back, his head bent to avoid hitting the roof. “Can we go and get warm and dry now?”

“Hang on a minute. There’s no rush, is there?”

“To get you back to my place and get our wet clothes off?” He lifted an eyebrow. “Yes, I’d like us to hurry that up.”

Beaming, she moved in front of him, her stomach quivering as she kissed him lightly. “We could warm each other up here,” she suggested, moving slowly to lift his hoodie

over his head. The sliver of fear that he might reject her was quashed when he emerged from his jumper to immediately find her lips again.

Amy shrugged off her raincoat, then briefly broke their kiss to whip off her T-shirt while he did the same with his own. His arms circled her tightly, and she savoured the delicious feel of his skin against hers. When he lowered her back onto the bed, she pulled him right down on top of her, loving the weight of his body pressing down on her.

She didn't know if it was the cold that made her shiver or the wonderful sense of anticipation, but Damian caught it and manoeuvred the covers from beneath her so they were snuggled underneath. His lips were on her neck when a low buzzing sound made him stop.

"I'd ignore it," he said, his voice slightly hoarse as he delved into his pocket. "But I guess it's Hugh. I told him I wouldn't be long."

"I was supposed to let him know when I found you," Amy said.

"So that's how you knew where I was." Damian retrieved his phone from his pocket and sat up. While he focused on the phone screen, Amy's eyes roamed the van.

She thought back to Damian's jokes about it being his love nest and couldn't help but wonder if that was why he'd kept it. Was that why it looked so lived in? Because it was actually well used and not just sitting abandoned in the car park?

Shaking the thought away, she reached over and plucked a shell from the low table. "Since when do you collect sea shells?" she asked, feeling Damian's eyes on her.

"I don't." His voice was loud in the small space. "You collected them."

A flutter erupted in her chest and she turned the shell over in her hand – her mind's eye showing her a day when she'd insisted he needed some decorations for the van to soften the feel. He'd told her to stop leaving knickknacks around that would only collect dust.

When she turned, he switched his attention to his phone. “I guess I need to either go and pick the boys up or ...” His brow furrowed and she ran a hand down his arm until he pulled her close, grasping the back of her neck as he softly kissed her.

“Or what?” Her nose was touching his as she trailed her fingers through his hair.

“I could ask Hugh if they can have a sleepover there.” His voice was soft and uncertain.

“Yes,” she said, brushing her lips across his. “Do that.”

He pressed a heavy kiss onto her lips, then grinned and tapped on his phone while she snuggled under the covers.

“It’s cosy in here,” she said, filled with unease again at the thought of Damian bringing other women back there. It would explain why he’d kept it so nice, with the bed all made up for any unexpected liaisons which may arise.

Damian set his phone by the lamp and slid into the bed beside her, propping his elbow on the pillow and his head on his hand. “I sleep in here sometimes,” he said, pushing a lock of hair from her face. “When I feel like being close to the sea and falling asleep to the sound of the waves.”

It sounded pretty idyllic, but something in her gut told her it wasn’t the whole truth.

“You must be able to hear the waves from the house,” she said.

A muscle twitched in his neck. “Only just.” He dropped his head onto the pillow beside her. “Besides, being here always reminds me of you.”

“Yeah?”

“A lot of my favourite memories of you are from here. I like to reminisce now and again.”

He smiled lazily, and when his lips touched hers, she stroked the taut skin of his upper arm and felt all of her nerve endings fire up again.

“Hang on,” Damian said, reaching for his phone. His eyes darted over the screen. “Okay. Hugh’s happy to keep the boys for the night.” He flashed her a flirty smile. “Carry on.”



DAYLIGHT STUNG Amy’s eyes when she came slowly to consciousness. She shivered and snuggled closer to Damian’s side to squeeze every ounce of body heat from him.

His hand stroked her hair, signalling he was awake too. He started to say something, then cleared his throat to dispel the coarseness of his voice.

“What happened with you and Anthony?” he asked, taking her by surprise.

It took her a moment to figure out how to respond, then decided honesty was probably best. She inhaled deeply before she spoke.

“There was this one evening,” she said, thinking back on it. “There wasn’t anything out of the ordinary about it. We’d put the kids to bed and sat down in front of the TV. It was one of those mini crime series. Anthony was really into it. I wasn’t paying attention.” Just like so many other evenings in their married life, she’d sat in front of the TV and registered absolutely nothing. “I forgot to even pretend to watch and was looking at the flames in the fireplace instead.” She paused, drawing patterns on Damian’s chest. “Anthony asked me what I was thinking about. I’m not sure why I told him the truth. Maybe because I felt as though he knew anyway.”

Damian pressed a gentle kiss to the top of her head. “What did you say?”

“That I was thinking about you.” She shifted to look at him. “I told him I was wondering what my life would be like if I’d ended up with you and not him. That I never really stopped wondering about that.”

Damian’s lips parted as though he was about to speak, but when no words came out, Amy settled her head on his chest

again, telling herself his lack of response meant absolutely nothing. It was quite a bombshell to drop on him, so it was natural that he'd need time to process it. His fingers trailed through her hair, catching on her ear. His heart thudded beneath her and she let herself inhale the heady scent that was all him.

Soon, her brain clicked into gear and she cursed loudly as she shot up, breaking the moment.

“What’s wrong?” Damian asked.

“What time is it?” She pressed the screen of his phone to check, then almost fell out of the bed in her haste. “I’m supposed to be meeting Anthony. He’s coming to my place before he leaves. So we can talk properly. He’s also going to come and watch the boys surf.”

“I forgot about that.”

“It’s going to be awkward, isn’t it?” She scrambled around for her clothes and almost fell over trying to get her jeans on in the confined space.

Damian moved to the end of the bed, reaching around her legs to grab his own clothes from the floor. “Yep. I reckon hanging out with the guy whose wife I just slept with is going to be exceptionally awkward.”

“That sounds way worse than it is.”

“Does it? I think it sounds bad because it is bad.”

“We’re separated. Soon we’ll be divorced.”

“Are you sure about that?” He pushed his arms into his T-shirt and tugged it into place. “How do you know he’s not coming over this morning to beg you to get back with him?”

Amy shook her head. “Did you hear my story about telling him I’d spent our entire marriage thinking about another man? Do you really think he still wants to be with me?”

“I have no idea.” The nip of irritation to his voice wasn’t subtle.

“We’re discussing the divorce,” she said firmly. “Even if he wanted to get back together – which I really don’t think he does – I don’t want to.”

Damian avoided eye contact until Amy sank onto his lap and forced him to engage with her.

“I don’t want to be with Anthony.” She didn’t know what the future held for her and Damian, but she refused to spend any more time in a relationship she didn’t want to be in. She closed her eyes and swept her lips over Damian’s. “I have to go, but I’ll see you later.”

“Okay.” He pressed his lips to hers one last time and released her.

CHAPTER 29



Anthony was standing on the doorstep when Amy pulled up, his phone in his hand as he stepped from the path to peer in the front window before noticing the car pulling up.

“Sorry,” Amy said, conscious of the fact that she was wearing yesterday’s clothes and no doubt looked like someone who’d spent most of the night having sex rather than sleeping.

“I tried calling you.” His eyes roamed over her, but the only trace of judgement was a twitch of his eyebrow.

“Sorry,” she said again, bustling to get in the door without giving him an opportunity to get too close. She needed to brush her teeth and have a shower.

“It’s fine.” He stepped inside behind her and she headed straight for the bedroom.

“Make yourself at home. I’ll be five minutes.” Not even brave enough to look at him, she fled into her room feeling absolutely wretched.

Being with Damian had felt so wonderful, but now all she could think about was his comment about her being married. It wasn’t as though she’d forgotten, it just hadn’t seemed relevant. She didn’t feel married. But faced with Anthony, it all felt different. Guilt flooded her. No matter how she felt, they were still legally married.

As though she hadn’t hurt the poor man enough, she’d now slept with her ex while she was still married to him.

“Oh, good,” she said on a sigh when she came back into the kitchen after the quickest shower ever. “You found coffee.”

“I made a pot,” he told her from the kitchen table. “I thought you might need caffeine.”

“Yes.” She grabbed a mug, choosing not to dwell on the reason she desperately needed caffeine.

“I wanted to give you the house.”

The shock of Anthony’s words made Amy’s hand unsteady and she splashed hot coffee onto her finger.

“What?” She shook the drips from her index finger and stuck it in her mouth.

“I was thinking about how we should split everything for the divorce and I thought it would make sense for you to have the house.”

“I can’t afford to buy you out. You know that. Even if I could, I wouldn’t manage the mortgage repayments on my own.”

“I’m not saying you should buy me out. You can just have it. Take my share of the house and the furniture. Everything else we’ll split, bank accounts and whatever.”

Slumping against the sideboard, Amy put a hand across her eyes and massaged her temples.

“It makes sense,” he went on. “It’s the only home the boys have ever known. I don’t want to oust you from it.”

Amy tried to speak but he cut her off.

“Obviously, I’m assuming you want to stay in Oxford. But maybe you don’t. Maybe you and Damian have other plans.” His voice was flat, but not bitter. Just matter of fact.

“Damian and I don’t have any plans. I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

Anthony bowed his head and stared at his coffee. “I guess I just need you to know that however things play out I want things to be amicable. If you want to stay in the house, you can.”

“I can’t,” she said, joining him at the table. “Even if you gave me the house – which I couldn’t let you – I still couldn’t manage the mortgage payments alone.” She wouldn’t even want to try, she realised in a flash of clarity. No matter what happened, she didn’t want to stay in the house where she’d never truly been happy. Even if her future didn’t involve Damian, she needed a fresh start.

“You could use the money Damian gives you,” Anthony said, tilting his head. “You could easily make the payments then.”

She pressed the space between her eyebrows, thinking of the money Damian had insisted on giving her for the boys. Since she hadn’t needed it and hadn’t felt entitled to it, she’d never touched it, just left it in a savings account, intending to pass it onto the boys eventually.

It was a decent amount too, he’d never just given it as a token gesture. No matter how many times she’d told Damian she didn’t need it he’d always insisted. Anthony had pointed out that it was probably a point of pride and she should accept it gracefully, which she had in the end, but never without a sprinkling of guilt. After all, it hadn’t been his choice not to live with his children. She’d taken his choice away.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” she said, registering that Anthony was waiting for her to respond.

“The boys will be back in school in three weeks so I guess you won’t be making any big changes soon. I only wanted you to know that you can stay in the house if you want to. And if you want to move, there’s no rush. I want things to be as easy as possible for the boys.” He flashed a nervous smile. “And I’d really like to continue to see them as often as possible.”

Amy’s gaze snapped up to meet his. “Is that what this is about? You’re trying to bribe me with the house because you’re worried I won’t let you see the boys otherwise?”

“No.” His Adam’s apple bobbed. “That’s not why I want you to have the house, but I am very aware of the fact that I have no legal right to see Billy and Marty.”

Amy couldn't even be sure if that was true. He was their stepdad and had raised them since they were six months old. It didn't seem fair that he wouldn't have any rights. "I'd never stop you from seeing them," she said, holding back tears. "I wouldn't do that to you or to them. And I'd like to think you know that."

"Who knows what's going to happen," he said.

A headache threatened behind Amy's eyes and she pressed her palm to her forehead. "I wish you'd shout at me," she said.

"What?"

"Sometimes I can't help but think I'd feel better if you'd shout at me. After all I've put you through, you're still so bloody nice to me." She lifted her shoulders in a shrug. "Why not shout at me and tell me what a horrible person I am?"

"Because you're not a horrible person. Far from it."

She dipped her chin to her chest, cradling her head in her hands and wondering how on earth he didn't hate her guts.

"You really don't see it, do you?" he asked after a brief silence.

"See what?"

"That you're not the only one at fault for the state of our marriage."

Tears sprung to her eyes. "I've been in love with Damian for the entire time you and I were married." She hoped the harsh reality might raise a sliver of anger in him but he only smiled sadly.

"I know. I knew all along and I married you anyway. I even pushed you to get married quickly because I knew that if we waited you'd realise you were with the wrong person."

"What are you talking about?"

"I've been in love with you for so long," he told her slowly. "I thought you'd fall in love with me later. Sometimes I thought maybe you did love me."

“I did,” she jumped in, swiping a tear from the corner of her eye. “I just wasn’t *in* love with you.”

“There were a few times when I was sure you were going to pack your things and leave. Usually when we’d dropped the boys off with Damian or picked them up.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“Don’t be. I always felt bad for taking advantage of the situation. When we started seeing each other you were so grateful for anything I did to help you. I took advantage of that.”

As much as she tried not to cry, the tears came anyway, and the next thing she knew Anthony had his arms around her and she cried quietly into his shoulder.

“What a mess,” she finally said, sniffing as she wiped at her cheeks.

“It wasn’t all bad,” Anthony said, lowering himself into the chair beside her. “The boys were always happy, even if we were only ever pretending.”

“True.” Her children’s happiness had been her motivation all along. She’d wanted the best for them and had happily sacrificed her own happiness for that. “I need to eat,” she said, her stomach suddenly complaining and reminding her how long it was since she’d last eaten. “Do you want some toast? It will probably be an hour before Damian and the boys are at the beach.”

He accepted happily and they were munching on buttery toast when he spoke again.

“There’s something else I wanted to mention.” He licked a drip of melted butter from his thumb and seemed to debate whether to go on. “I’m seeing someone,” he said eventually.

A surge of emotions pulsed through Amy: shock, disbelief, anger ... even a touch of jealousy. “Who?” she asked.

“Her name is Christina. We work together ... not really together ... different departments, but I met her through work.”

“How long have you been seeing her for?”

He placed his slice of toast back on his plate. “A little while.”

Amy pressed her lips tightly together. “When we were still together?” The idea of it shouldn’t have felt like such a betrayal, considering she’d spent their entire marriage wishing she was with someone else. Having an affair in your head was very different to having one in real life though.

“No.” He didn’t sound convincing as he stared at his plate. “We went out for coffee a couple of times. Lunch once or twice. It was all very innocent.”

“Not that innocent or you’d have told me.”

“True.” Irritation flared in his eyes. “But at that point you were so distant it was like living with a zombie.” He inhaled deeply. “Sorry, that wasn’t fair.”

She had a feeling it was probably very fair. In the months before they separated she’d definitely shut down. If the kids weren’t around she barely gave Anthony the time of day.

“Is it serious?” she asked. “With Christina?”

He nodded. “We were in Bristol so I could meet her parents.”

“She’s here with you? At the hotel?”

“Yes. I’d like Marty and Billy to meet her. Not right now, but sometime soon.”

“Right.” Amy chewed on the inside of her cheek, unsure what to say.

Her marriage really was over. And she had no idea what her future held.

CHAPTER 30



Hugh's expression was all smirk when he answered the door to Damian. "How was the storm surfing yesterday?" he asked.

"I didn't go." Damian wiped his shoes on the mat as he stepped inside.

"I'm assuming Amy caught up with you and offered some alternative evening entertainment?"

He rolled his eyes. "Were the boys okay?"

"Fine. No problems at all."

Damian paused at the living room doorway to say hello to Billy and Marty, who were kneeling at the coffee table with bowls of cereal in front of them, eyes fixed on the TV. Emmy sat behind them, on the couch, the only one who acknowledged him before he continued to the kitchen.

"So what happened with Amy?" Hugh asked, closing the kitchen door behind him.

"I slept with her." Damian dropped into a chair and sank his head into his hands.

"Isn't that a good thing?" Hugh asked, confusion wrinkling his brow.

"It was great at the time." He dragged his hands through his hair and stretched his neck.

"How did you leave things?"

“She’s gone to have a conversation with Anthony. I imagine he’s currently trying to convince her they should give things another go.”

“If she slept with you it doesn’t seem as though she’s thinking about fixing her marriage.”

“No.” But he just couldn’t let himself go near the idea that he might actually get to be with Amy and have his family under one roof like he dreamed of. “She said the reason they split up is that she’s been in love with me the whole time, and she finally told him that.”

“That seems very clear cut. What did you say to that?”

He winced as he thought back on it. Mostly he’d been shocked by the admission, but that hadn’t been the entire reason he’d been lost for words. He also wasn’t sure how much difference it made to their current situation. “I didn’t say anything.”

“You must have said something. How could she drop that on you and you not reply?”

“I don’t know. I just didn’t.”

“I’d have thought you’d have been over the moon.”

“It doesn’t really change a lot.”

“It changes everything,” Hugh argued.

“Not really. She lives in Oxford, I live here.”

“People move all the time.”

“True,” he said unenthusiastically.

“I don’t get it.” Hugh rested his forearms on the table. “She loves you, you love her. What’s the problem?”

“She loved me back then as well. It didn’t mean she liked living with me. She hated it.”

“Did she?” Hugh asked in earnest. “Or was she sleep-deprived and stressed? She was twenty-two and instead of starting a career like she’d planned, she was taking care of two babies. Things have changed a lot since then.”

“I don’t think I have. I’m still a beach bum whose only real skill is surfing.”

“You have a business, a house ... and you’re way more mature now. Trust me.”

“My life is still disorganised. Which is the complete opposite of Amy’s.”

“I can’t believe you’re being so cautious about this.”

“I have to be.” He glanced pointedly at the door. “It’s not just about me and Amy. There’s Marty and Billy to consider.”

“Surely it would be good for them to have their parents back together.”

“Not if it all falls apart again a few months down the line. They’ve been through enough upheaval recently with Anthony moving out.” He grimaced, remembering the plans for the morning and relaying them to Hugh.

“You’re going surfing with Amy’s husband?” Hugh said, disbelief shining in his eyes.

“He’s coming to watch the boys surf. That’s all. Then he’s going home.”

“You and Amy and Anthony at the beach with the kids like some weird modern family unit?”

“Exactly. Except it’s not weird.”

“It’s very weird,” Hugh declared. “Especially considering the events of yesterday evening. Isn’t that going to be incredibly awkward?”

Damian conceded it might be awkward. Actually, he was dreading it and lingered over the coffee Hugh made him, putting off heading to the beach for as long as possible. Finally, he couldn’t avoid it any longer and herded the boys into the car, hoping to get the family beach trip over and done with as quickly as possible.

“Can Anthony come surfing with us?” Billy asked from the back of the car when they were turning into the beach car park.

“He’s just going to watch to see how good you are.”

“You could teach him to surf,” Marty suggested.

Damian couldn’t help but smile at the suggestion and the boys’ complete lack of awareness at the inappropriateness of the idea.

“I’ll ask him if he wants to,” Billy said, opening the car door the second they came to a stop.

Damian clocked Anthony and Amy then – standing at the top of the beach. Anthony’s hand rested on Amy’s shoulder, their heads close together as though they were deep in conversation. They drew apart when Billy approached them, shouting for their attention as he went.

The sight of them together made Damian’s stomach twist. All he could hope was that Anthony left quickly. Smiling and pretending everything was fine was doable as long as he didn’t have to keep the act up for too long.

“Morning.” Damian lifted a hand to wave as he got close, then decided it was an odd, unnatural gesture. “How are you?”

“Good, thanks.” Anthony held out his hand and Damian smiled tightly as he shook it. “Looking forward to seeing what these two can do on surfboards.”

Marty pressed his head against Damian’s hip. “Please can Anthony come too?”

“I’ve never been on a surfboard in my life,” Anthony said lightly. “I’m sure it’d be very embarrassing.”

“You’re welcome to give it a go,” Damian said automatically.

“Really?” Anthony asked.

Damian stared at him. *No, not really.* He’d said it to be polite and hadn’t even considered the possibility of Anthony taking him up on it. “Yep,” he said, since there didn’t seem to be any other socially acceptable reply.

“I wasn’t going to stay long,” Anthony said. “But I’ve got swim shorts in the car and it’s kind of appealing.”

“Yes!” Billy swung on his arm. “It’s so much fun.”

“Okay.” Anthony looked at Amy. “I guess I’ll give it a go. I’ll get my swim shorts on.”

He set off across the car park and Amy told the boys to go into the shack and look for their swim shorts. Damian told them where to find them, near their wetsuits, and promised to come and help them in a minute.

“I had no idea he’d take me up on it,” he said to Amy when they were alone. “Am I seriously supposed to give your husband a surf lesson now?”

“Sorry.” Amy stepped closer, hooking her little finger around his, the tiny gesture unbelievably reassuring. “He just wants to have a try. He won’t stay long.”

“Okay.” Damian studied her face, noticing how red her eyes were. “How did it go, by the way? Have you been crying?”

“It was all quite emotional, but it was fine.”

“So does he want you two to work things out?”

“No.” Her eyes were full of sympathy. “I already told you that. And it turns out he’s already seeing someone else.”

Damian’s mouth lifted to a slow smile as relief flooded his body.

“Do you believe me now that things really are over?” Amy asked.

He looked lovingly into her eyes, trying to believe the previous evening hadn’t merely been a heat of the moment, one-off occurrence. “I’m starting to,” he said, wishing he could kiss her but aware of Anthony in his peripheral vision, wandering back over to them.

Suddenly, he felt much better about giving Anthony a surf lesson. The boys would no doubt love having both the men in their life doing something with them.

And, with any luck, there’d be time for kissing Amy later.

CHAPTER 31



Sitting on the sand watching Damian and Anthony play around in the sea with Billy and Marty was a surreal experience. Surreal but incredibly heart-warming.

Amy still wasn't sure how she felt about Anthony seeing someone else. The thought of him spending time with his new girlfriend before they'd even split up didn't sit well with her, but she also knew it was so out of character for Anthony that he really must have been miserable.

Billy's loud cheers broke her thoughts. Anthony was standing up on the board, riding a small and fairly slow wave. He wobbled and crashed feet first into the water, laughing as he went.

"I think I'll call it a day after that show-stopper," he said, walking up the beach to Amy. "End on a high and all that."

"You did well." She brushed sand from her hands and threw him his towel.

"Thanks. I don't think I have any natural surfing talent, but it was fun to give it a go." He rubbed the towel across his face. "I'll take the board back and get showered and changed. I'll come back and say goodbye after that."

Amy watched him go, then turned her attention to the water, returning Damian's smile when she caught his eye from where he sat bobbing on his surfboard. He'd just got out of the water when Anthony returned. Marty and Billy stood shivering in their towels when Anthony gave them big hugs. Then he

reached for Damian's hand and thanked him for the surf lesson as he shook it.

"Look after them, won't you?" he added.

"We'll see you in a few weeks," Amy told him, wrapping him in a hug. "No need to get all sentimental. There's also this thing called a phone."

He kissed her cheek, smiling. Amy smiled too. Their farewell felt exactly right – a kiss on the cheek as though they were old friends, which was all they should ever have been. Watching him go, she only hoped he'd found someone who would love him the way he deserved, and a relationship which would make him truly happy.

Billy and Marty stood and waved to Anthony until he was out of sight, then they spotted a friend from their surf lessons and ran off to play with him.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Amy asked, shielding her eyes from the sun as she looked up at Damian.

"No." He sat down beside her on the sand. "It was actually very entertaining. He has no sense of balance."

"No need to look so pleased about the fact that Anthony can't surf. He was hardly going to show you up out there, was he?"

"I don't know, you hadn't been on a surfboard for years but you gave me a run for my money."

"Now you're just trying to flatter me."

"Maybe." He cast a furtive glance in the direction of the boys before catching her lips in a soft kiss that made her thoughts flick back to the previous night, and caused butterflies to take flight in her stomach.

"What else did you and he talk about this morning?" he asked.

Amy wrinkled her nose. "He wants to give me the house."

"What, you buy him out?"

“No. He says I should just have it. There’s still the mortgage to pay off, of course, but he wants me to stay in the house with the boys. He thinks that will be easier for them.”

“Right.” Damian sounded utterly shocked. “That was very generous of him.”

“He’s worried about not being able to see Billy and Marty. He swears he’s not just being generous to keep me on side, but it all feels a bit uncomfortable.”

“You wouldn’t stop him from seeing them, would you?”

“No. But you can see how he’d be concerned. He has no legal right to see them once we’re divorced.”

“As much as I find the whole situation slightly uncomfortable, I think it’s good for Billy and Marty to see him.”

“I do too. But I’m glad you think so. It makes everything easier if we’re all on the same page.”

“So will you stay in the house in Oxford? I guess that makes sense for you. Like Anthony says, it’s less upheaval for the boys.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do. But the boys go back to school in a few weeks and I have no other plans, so I suppose we’ll stay where we are for the time being. I need to figure out what I do next in my life.”

The more she thought about it, the more she hated the idea of staying in that house. It had always felt too big, and even more so with just the three of them.

Besides, it had always felt more like Anthony’s house than hers. He’d had an interior designer before she’d moved in, so it was impeccably furnished, but it had always felt a bit too perfect to her. As though she messed the place up just by being there, and despite the cleaner who came twice a week, it still felt like a constant battle to keep the house looking nice.

It was one of those problems that brokered sympathy from absolutely no one. Poor her, with her gorgeous big house.

“Daddy!” Billy called, stomping over to them. “When will Gran and Grandpa be here?”

“Tomorrow,” Damian replied.

Amy had forgotten they were coming to visit again. “How long are they staying?” she asked.

“The whole week,” Damian replied.

“They’re staying at your place?”

“Yes.”

Billy dropped onto the sand between Damian’s bent legs. “Grandpa said he’ll show me how to carve wood with a special knife so I can make whatever I want. I’m going to make a spear.”

“That’s a great idea,” Damian said mockingly. “A weapon is exactly what you need.”

Billy’s eyes narrowed. “Are you doing sarcasm, Daddy?”

“Yes, Billy. That was definitely sarcasm.”

“I’m hungry,” he said. “Can we get burgers for lunch?”

“No. We’ll go home and see what’s in the fridge. Then we need to do some tidying up this afternoon so Gran and Grandpa don’t think we’re slobs.”

“Boring!” Billy said.

“I can take them out for the afternoon,” Amy offered. “If you’d rather get things done without them under your feet.”

“Thanks, but since it’s mostly their mess, I think they should help me tidy up.”

Amy nodded. “Need another volunteer?”

Damian trailed a hand over Billy’s hair. “That’s okay, thanks.”

She felt a pang of rejection and had to force her features to remain neutral. It wasn’t as though she thought they’d jump straight into a relationship. She really wasn’t sure what she’d expected after last night, but when she said goodbye to them

and set off back to her bungalow, it was with a sense of disappointment that she couldn't shake.

It didn't help that they'd made no plans to meet up again.

With Damian's parents around for the week, there was a chance she wouldn't see him properly until the following weekend, and she didn't like the thought at all.

CHAPTER 32



To keep her mind occupied on Sunday afternoon, Amy got stuck back into playing around with the book descriptions Lizzie had asked her to look at. Firing them off in an email that evening, she was happy to get a reply saying Lizzie, Emily and Scarlett would be in the office the following morning and were hoping Amy could join them. They also mentioned going for lunch afterwards, which Amy was keen for.

The busier she was, the less time she had to sit around wondering about her future.

Emily arrived in the carpark beside the office at the same time as Amy, and they walked in together, chatting about Emily's pregnancy as they went. She was seven weeks from her due date and was impatient for it to be over.

Inside, Lizzie was pottering in the kitchen while Scarlett slouched on the couch.

"Damian's parents are helping with your brats this week," she told Amy. "So I get some time off from them." She grinned. "How did I do? Did that sound affectionate?"

"No!" Amy and Emily said at once.

"You sound as though you hate my children," Amy said fondly.

"I give up then," Scarlett said. "Anyway, I was just reading the book descriptions you rewrote and they're really good. You don't mind us using them, do you?"

“Of course not.” A warm burst of pride grew in her chest.

“Good.” Scarlett sat up, making room on the couch. “Because I’ve already uploaded one of them onto online retailers.” She rested her laptop on her knees, then showed Amy the sales page for a crime thriller with her description beside the cover.

“We’ll test them online to start with,” Lizzie said, handing Amy a coffee.

“That’s amazing. Thank you.”

“We should be the ones thanking you.” Emily looked uncomfortable as she lowered herself onto the couch. “It’s really helpful. When you first got in touch we weren’t sure if it would be more of a learning experience for you or help for us, but I think it’s working both ways, which is perfect.”

“I’m definitely learning a lot,” Amy said.

“That’s great.” Emily looked up at Lizzie. “Do you mind if we jump straight in with things? I don’t know how long I can sit comfortably.”

The conversation moved quickly as they each discussed where they were at with their various projects. Emily filled them in on a conversation she’d had with one of their authors about an upcoming release and then told them about the press release she’d been putting together for it.

Lizzie mentioned changes she wanted to make to their contract with the authors and talked about the editing project she was in the middle of. There was more to tackle than Amy had imagined, and when Scarlett talked at length about marketing and advertising, she found her mind wandering.

“Sorry,” Lizzie finally said, catching her eye. “This isn’t very exciting for you, is it?”

“It’s fine.” She felt bad for being caught daydreaming. “Sorry. I had a busy weekend. I’m not sure I’m fully alert, and a lot of this goes over my head.”

“I think we probably forget that this is actually quite specialised knowledge,” Emily said. “We probably talk in our

own version of shorthand too.”

“Is there anything I could do to be helpful this week?” Amy asked. “I could use a distraction.”

“Is that because your in-laws are around?” Lizzie asked. “Are you looking for an excuse to hide?”

“No. Damian’s parents are lovely. But they’re not really my in-laws. And I don’t think they like me.”

“Families are complicated,” Emily mused. “How was it with your ex, by the way?”

Amy had told them the previous week about Anthony’s visit. She wasn’t sure what to say about it now.

“It was okay,” she ventured. “A bit of an odd weekend, to be honest.”

“Things are definitely over between the two of you, right?” Lizzie asked. “Or is there a chance you’ll reconcile?”

“It’s definitely over. He’s even seeing someone else, which was a bit of a shock, but I think it’s a good thing.”

“What was the problem with the weekend, then?” Emily asked, shifting her weight and rubbing at the top of her bump.

“It wasn’t anything to do with Anthony ... things are actually a little weird between Damian and me.”

“How so?” Scarlett leaned forwards, curiosity sparking in her eyes.

Realising who she was talking to, Amy shook her head. “Sorry, this is a really inappropriate conversation. We’re at work. You don’t want to hear my relationship drama.”

Lizzie smiled widely. “You’re totally wrong there.”

“Tell us the drama,” Emily said, rubbing her hands together. “Did something happen between you and Damian?”

Amy cast Scarlett a wary gaze, dying to talk everything through but also concerned that Scarlett regularly saw Damian.

“I won’t say anything,” she said. “Promise!”

“You have to tell us,” Lizzie said. “Quick, before the suspense kills us!”

Amy smiled, then inhaled deeply. “I slept with him,” she said. The collective gasp in reply made her crack up laughing. “It’s not that shocking, is it?”

“We don’t get a lot of real-life drama around here,” Emily said gleefully.

“Tell us more,” Lizzie insisted. “How did that come about? Was it a drunken thing? Was it a one-off, or will it be repeated? How do you feel about him?”

“That’s a lot of questions,” Amy said.

“Just four actually,” Scarlett said dryly.

“It wasn’t a drunken thing.” Amy briefly told them about how she thought he’d gone surfing in the storm and how terrified she’d been, then walked them through the whole thing, minus the sordid details.

“That’s so sweet,” Emily cooed when Amy finally finished the story.

“What’s going to happen now?” Lizzie asked, elbows propped on her knees.

“I don’t know. Damian seemed a little standoffish yesterday so I’m not sure what’s going on. I think I expected him to be a bit more ...” She paused, searching for the right word. “Eager, I guess.”

“Maybe it was just sex for him,” Scarlett said in her dull monotone. She cringed when all eyes turned on her. “Sorry. Is that the sort of thing you’re not supposed to say?”

“It’s all right,” Amy said, feeling a pressure beneath her sternum. “You could be right.”

“It’s just ...” Scarlett paused, looking thoughtful, as though trying to figure out if whatever she was thinking was going to offend.

“Just say what you’re thinking,” Amy prompted her. “I can take it.” That might not be true, but she wanted to hear

Scarlett's thoughts.

"I think Damian is kind of a womaniser," Scarlett said. "He and Fraser go running together sometimes, and one time Fraser made this joke to me about how Damian needed to keep his fitness levels up so he has enough stamina for all the women he's ..." She chewed her lower lip. "*Having relations with* – that's not what he actually said, but I don't want to offend Emily's ears with his exact words. Also, I don't think Fraser was really joking. But I don't know."

Amy's chest clenched. "I know he's no angel," she said. "And I know that when I met him he had a reputation. He's a surf instructor, of course he has women throwing themselves at him, but I kind of hoped he'd given that up. Or maybe I just refused to think about it. I also never put myself in the category of women who he'd just use for sex. Obviously." She pressed a hand to her forehead. "Crap. Is that what I am?"

"No," Emily said with absolutely no authority. "I'm sure that's not it. It sounded as though he really likes you ... All that stuff about the shells and what he said about the van being special because it reminded him of you."

"Stuff he said when he wanted to sleep with you," Scarlett pointed out, then hid behind her hands when Emily glared at her. "Sorry," she murmured.

"You're right," Amy said.

Lizzie shook her head. "I don't think he'd sleep with you and it only be about sex. You have kids together – it's too messy and has the potential for too many problems."

"But maybe when I was throwing myself at him, he wasn't thinking that far ahead."

"He was probably just thinking about sex," Scarlett added needlessly.

At least her tactlessness lightened the atmosphere since Amy couldn't help but crack up laughing. Lizzie and Emily joined in too, until Emily complained that laughing was entirely uncomfortable and might cause her to wet herself.

“I suppose the only way to know for sure what’s going on is to ask him,” Lizzie said as she calmed down.

“I think you’re probably right. Except that feels very grown-up and rational. Also, if he tells me he was just scratching an itch, I don’t know how I’m going to deal with that.”

“Call us if you need anything,” Emily said. “Advice or a good rant.”

“Or help to start rumours about his tiny little thing,” Lizzie suggested. “We’re good for anything really.”

“Maybe he’s just being cautious because of the boys.” Emily hauled herself off the couch and rubbed at her lower back. “I’m sure everything will work out perfectly.”

“Just remember she writes romance novels,” Scarlett said. “Emily’s never surer of anything than a happily ever after.”

CHAPTER 33



Amy supposed she could have just called Damian, but she told herself it would be better to speak to him in person. Which meant she'd have to wait until his parents left. He'd messaged and invited her to dinner with all of them on Wednesday evening, but she'd claimed she had work to do.

It wasn't entirely untrue – Lizzie had asked her if she could go through a bunch of submissions and see if anything jumped out at her and to set aside anything that was definitely unpublishable. Initially, she'd been horrified by the idea of crushing people's dreams, but Scarlett had pointed out that there weren't so many barriers to being a published author these days since anyone could self-publish. That meant she wasn't taking away anyone's dreams of publishing, just the specific dream of publishing with Hope Cove Press. Lizzie had joked that she should definitely feel bad about that.

It kept her occupied anyway. That and working her way through all her newly purchased books and some lovely long walks along the coast and a couple of visits to Verity's cafe for her famous scones.

She was actually quite surprised by how pleasantly the week was passing. Of course, her thoughts drifted to Damian frequently, but she was trying not to panic about the situation. All she could do was wait and see how things developed.

On Friday afternoon, she arrived back at the bungalow after a long walk. Her feet were aching and she kicked off her shoes before heading to the kitchen. Halfway to the sink, she registered her feet were wet. It took another moment for her

brain to process that the entire kitchen was swimming in an inch of water.

Panic hit her at the thought that she'd left a tap running or done something else to cause the problem. There was nothing obvious though. Automatically, she opened the cupboard under the sink but wasn't even sure what she was looking for amid the dirty water under there.

Ignoring her instinct to call Damian, she made the more sensible decision to call the person in charge of the holiday let instead. Lizzie's husband, Max, answered the phone after a couple of rings, and she quickly filled him in on the situation while escaping out onto the patio.

She was still out there when he arrived ten minutes later and had to wade back through the kitchen to let him in.

"I think it's mostly contained in the kitchen," she told him, showing him in. "I didn't even know where to start with cleaning it up."

"No worries." He stopped at the doorway, scanning the area before splashing through to the sink in his flip-flops. "There was a problem with the pipe under here last year. It was supposed to have been fixed, but it doesn't look like they did a very good job.

"Hello!" another male voice called from the front door.

"Kitchen!" Max called back.

"Reinforcements are here," Jack said, frowning at the water. Amy had met Emily's husband earlier in the week when they'd had lunch in the pub. He'd been serving at the bar.

Behind him, Damian wandered in. "I was having a drink with Jack," he said, tipping his chin in greeting. "Heard you'd sprung a leak."

Her heart went wild at the sight of Damian. "I went out for the afternoon and came back to this."

Jack crouched to look under the sink with Max. "It's not that long since they replaced the entire plumbing system. The owners won't be happy if it was a botched job."

“Do you have any idea how long it might take to fix?” Amy asked.

“Not really,” Max replied, straightening up and dusting off his hands. “Hopefully just a couple of days. We’ll need to find you somewhere else to stay. The cost will be covered, but I’ll have to call round hotels and see where there’s availability.”

“Okay.” Amy sighed and looked at Damian. “Not the end of the world.”

He had his hands in his pockets as he shrugged. “You could also stay with us.”

“Your parents are there,” she reminded him. “There’s no room.”

He shrugged again. “You can bunk in with Marty or sleep on the couch and I’ll go in with the kids.”

“I don’t know.” If his parents hadn’t been there, she’d have jumped at the offer. She might finally get a chance to speak to Damian. Though that thought was followed by a pang of nerves over what he might say.

“Up to you,” Damian said casually. “It’s totally fine with me.” There was something in his voice that gave her the impression he’d like her to stay. That was probably wishful thinking, but she couldn’t ignore the spark of hope.

“Okay. Thanks. that would be good.”

“No hotel then?” Max asked.

“No.” She smiled at him. “Thanks, though.”

“We’ll sweet talk the plumber and try to get him to fix it quickly,” Jack said. “Hopefully it won’t be more than a couple of nights and then you can get back in and enjoy the rest of your holiday.”

She thanked them again, then went and packed her things. Damian appeared in the bedroom doorway after a few minutes and asked if she needed any help.

“I’m okay,” she told him, pausing in putting clothes in her case. “Are you sure it’s okay for me to stay at your place?”

“Yes.” His eyebrows twitched. “Absolutely. As long as you don’t mind a fight for the bathroom.”

“I’m sure I’ll manage that. I’m just concerned it’ll be awkward with your mum and dad.”

He leaned against the doorframe and Amy had a sudden and almost overwhelming desire to kiss him. “I suppose me reassuring you again that they don’t hate you won’t help.”

“I don’t think they hate me,” she said, deciding she’d get more done if she took her eyes off Damian. “I just think they don’t like me. Which is fine, but kind of awkward if we’re staying in a tiny house together.” Glancing up at him, she caught the way his cheek twitched and felt bad for complaining when he’d offered her a place to stay. “I’m sure it’ll be okay for a couple of nights,” she added quickly. “I can ask Lizzie if I can go into the office to work tomorrow. That way we won’t be under each other’s feet.”

“They work you hard with the publishing stuff,” he remarked, reminding her that he still thought it was a paid job.

“There’s a lot to do,” she said ambiguously.

He shifted his weight, then stepped into the room when she hefted the case from the bed. Their hands brushed when he went to take it from her and she felt a frisson of desire shoot through her.

“We also need to talk,” she blurted out.

“I know.” He nodded solemnly. “I’ve been trying to figure out what to say. Everything just feels ... I don’t even know, but I keep thinking about what’s best for the kids and—” Max interrupted him, shouting something along the hall. “Just a sec,” Damian called back.

“We should talk about it later,” Amy suggested. Clearly now wasn’t a good time, and it was obvious Damian didn’t really know what he wanted to say.

Before they left, Jack promised he or Max would call when everything was fixed and the house straightened up again.

It was with a sense of foreboding that Amy drove to Damian's house. At least the kids would be a good buffer.

She made a quick mental plan to fall asleep when putting the kids to bed later to avoid having to sit around making small talk with Damian's parents.

CHAPTER 34



The boys were out for a walk with their grandpa when Amy arrived at Damian's place. She dumped her bag in the kids' room then went to see if Wendy needed help to get dinner ready. Conversation flowed easily, but Amy was happy when Damian wandered in and grabbed a beer from the fridge. He offered Amy one and she accepted gratefully.

It wasn't long before the boys arrived back, filling the kitchen with chatter and bustle. Getting the six of them around the kitchen table was a squeeze, but they managed it. Amy sat beside Damian and her arm brushed against his just about every time she moved.

"Are you going to sleep here?" Marty asked her with a mouth full of chicken.

"Yes," she told him. "Just until the sink is fixed at the bungalow."

Billy squirted ketchup onto his plate. "Where will you sleep?"

"In Marty's bed," she said, then looked at Marty. "If that's all right with you?"

He nodded and grinned at her.

"We'll be out of the way tomorrow," Wendy said. "Then you'll have more space."

"I thought you were staying for the weekend too," Amy remarked.

"No." Wendy smiled at her. "We need to get back home."

Amy wondered if they'd always planned on leaving the following day or if they'd decided to get out of the way because she was there.

She didn't have much time to dwell on it since Martin asked her how she was enjoying working at the publishing company and then peppered her with questions about it. Beside her, Damian discreetly pulled his phone from his pocket, keeping it by his hip as he replied to a message. It distracted her enough that she finally looked down to see who he was messaging.

"Sorry," he said, catching her looking. "It's work."

"No phones at the table," Wendy said, tilting her head.

He rolled his eyes in reply. "It's my house. And I'm an adult. You can't confiscate my phone. Plus, it's work. I only need to tell Callie one more thing ..." He tapped away on his phone, then pushed it back into his pocket.

"You'll set a bad example for the boys," Wendy said lightly.

"Leave him alone," Martin put in, stabbing a piece of chicken with his fork. "He's running a thriving business. Sometimes that means having your phone at the dinner table. Is everything okay down at the shack?"

"Yeah. Just some confusion about a drinks delivery."

"It's amazing how he's built up the business, isn't it?" Martin asked, looking at Amy. "Who'd have thought he'd have expanded it like he has?"

"All right, Dad," Damian said. "It's a surf shack. I'm not exactly taking over the world."

"He's right though." Amy knocked her elbow against his. "You have done very well for yourself."

"One of Devon's great entrepreneurs," Wendy said, then set her cutlery on her empty plate. "I always knew he'd do well."

"What's an entrepreneur?" Marty asked, taking care with his pronunciation.

“A businessperson,” his grandpa replied proudly. “And your dad is a very successful one.”

“He doesn’t wear a suit,” Billy said. “Anthony wears a suit and goes to business meetings. Dad doesn’t do that.”

Martin leaned on the table and looked at Billy intently. “Your dad doesn’t need to go to business meetings because he’s the boss. He owns his own business. That means he can do what he wants.”

“Anyway,” Damian said, sighing as he pushed his chair away from the table. “Let’s get tidied up so we can find something for dessert.”

“Anthony has a great job, as well,” Wendy said, aiming a gentle smile at Amy.

“*Mum,*” Damian hissed. “Can we please change the subject?”

“We’re just very proud of you,” she replied. “You should be proud of yourself too.”

Damian’s cheeks had coloured when he picked up his plate and Amy’s. “Who wants ice cream?”

The boy’s enthusiasm for sugar lightened the atmosphere, but Amy couldn’t help but think the entire conversation had been aimed at her. It wasn’t as though she needed anyone to tell her how well Damian had done with his business. It was quite clear. If she’d have trusted him when the kids were tiny she’d have been right there beside him while he’d grown his business.

“Who’s reading the story tonight?” Billy asked once he’d devoured a bowl of chocolate ice cream.

“Mummy,” Marty declared, much to Amy’s relief.

“Maybe Mummy would like to go out with Daddy,” Wendy said, from where she was loading the dishwasher. “I can read your story. Or Grandpa.”

“Are you going out?” Amy asked Damian.

“Just meeting Hugh and Leo for a couple of drinks.” He stood abruptly. “I might jump in the shower and get going.” He thanked his mum for dinner and made for the stairs.

“You should go with him,” Martin said to Amy. “We’re very happy to babysit.”

“That’s okay, thanks.” She managed a weak smile. Drinks in the pub actually sounded great, but there was the minor point that she hadn’t been invited. Maybe she should invite herself when Damian came back down. They could walk into Hope Cove and use the time to talk.

Except when Damian came down after his shower he rushed out of the door in such a hurry that she didn’t even get time to hint that she’d like to go with him. Instead, she stuck to her original plan of snuggling down with the boys when she put them to bed and not making it out of the room again.

Sitting around with Martin and Wendy probably wouldn’t be too bad, but she didn’t want to risk having to listen to them trying to convince her of how great their son was, as though she didn’t already know.

Lying squashed beside Marty, she listened to his rhythmic breathing, hoping it might soothe her to sleep too. Her brain wouldn’t switch off though. It wasn’t long before she heard Wendy and Martin going up to bed, and an hour after that the sound of the front door opening and then closing again.

Sure she wouldn’t get much sleep if she didn’t speak to Damian, she waited a few minutes before creeping down the stairs.

Damian was already settled on the couch, a blanket draped loosely over him, leaving part of his chest and one leg visible in the dim light cast by the streetlight outside. His face was serene, eyes closed and his chest rising and falling as though he might already be asleep.

“Hey,” she whispered.

His eyes snapped open and a rush of relief washed through Amy when he immediately reached for her hand. At least until

he seemed to realise what he'd done and discreetly released it as he shifted to prop himself on his arm.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Sorry for disappearing this evening. Leo was stressed and —”

She cut him off. “And you wanted to get away from me?”

“What?” He tilted his head. “No. Leo is having a rough time with Alice not sleeping well and not having time for his girlfriend. I promise you I didn't go out for the evening to get away from you.” He looked at her seriously. “I even told Leo I'd have Alice tomorrow evening to give him a break.”

“Okay,” Amy said. “Maybe tonight you genuinely had stuff going on, but you've been avoiding me all week.”

“Hardly. I invited you for dinner on Wednesday, then I invited you to stay at my house. If I wanted to avoid you, that would be a pretty ineffective way to go about it.”

“You're not talking to me and you're stressed and weird around me.”

“If I'm stressed it's because I'm on day five of having my parents staying with me.”

“Are we ever going to speak about what happened last weekend?” She perched on the edge of the couch. “If it was just sex, you can say so.” Except given the tightness in her chest, she was sure she'd turn into a blubbering mess if he said that.

“It wasn't just sex.” He sat up, his legs stretched out on the couch beside her.

“I don't know if I believe you,” she said. “I think there's something going on that you're not telling me. Like you're seeing someone, or sleeping with someone ...”

“I'm not.”

She looked at him sadly. “Something feels off. You having a bed made up in the van – that's weird. And the time you

went out that evening and you were cagey about who you were meeting. I know it's none of my business, but I really need to know if what happened last weekend was a one-off or if it's something more."

His features screwed up in confusion. "When was I cagey about who I was meeting?"

"You'd made dinner for me and the boys, then you went out. When you came back it was in different clothes and with your hair sticking up as though someone had been dragging their hands through it."

"Oh." His lips twitched into a small smile. "That was Alice."

"Who's Alice?" she asked, hating the tremor in her voice.

"Leo's Alice. You know, the five-month-old? She was pulling my hair and puked on my T-shirt. I was at Leo's place all evening."

"Oh." She ran a hand down her face.

"And I already told you I sometimes sleep in the van. *Alone.*"

"Sorry." She wasn't a hundred per cent reassured, but at least he hadn't outright told her that their little tryst had been a mistake. "I realise I have no right to question you about who you're hanging out with and what you're doing. I definitely have no right to be jealous."

"You have no *reason* to be jealous." Tentatively, he reached for her hand again, eyeing her palm as he ran his fingers over it in a way that made her stomach quiver. "It feels kind of nice though. To think you'd be jealous if I was seeing someone."

"It doesn't feel very nice to me," she said, with a sigh.

He hooked her hair behind her ear. "There's no one else."

She nodded, believing him but still not sure where that left them.

“Last weekend was amazing,” he said softly. “I just don’t know what happens next. You only recently split up with your husband ...”

“Can you not call him that?” Irrational as it was, the word went straight through her and on Damian’s lips it sounded accusatory.

“*Your husband?* That’s what he is.”

“I know. I just hate it when you say it.”

He looked at her as though she was a puzzle he couldn’t figure out. “I’m also concerned about the boys. They’ve had a lot of changes in their lives recently.”

She nodded, a pit in her stomach as she listened to his excuses for not wanting to be with her. “Okay.” She stood, wanting to leave before she got emotional. “I think I get it.”

“Hey.” He grasped her hand and pulled her back to sit on the couch. “I just don’t know. I feel as though I spend most of my life not knowing what to do, but mostly I don’t want to rush into something and end up hurting you and the boys.”

She took a calming breath. “I don’t know what to do either.”

“We don’t need to make any big decisions yet.” Gently, he brushed a kiss across her lips. Lying down again, he shuffled to press himself against the back of the couch, then pulled the blanket back and patted the space for her.

She lay down beside him and they snuggled into each other.

“We’ll figure things out,” he whispered in her ear.

CHAPTER 35



Wrapped in Damian's arms, sleep felt like a thief, stealing that blissful feeling of being exactly where she wanted to be. Amy woke frequently, each time wallowing in the comfort of their entwined bodies before she'd peacefully drift off again. Daylight was lightening the room when some small noise made her eyes flicker open. Expecting to see one of the boys, she inwardly grimaced at the sight of Damian's dad in the doorway. Martin flashed her a quick smile before retreating.

Feeling like a teenager caught in an illicit tryst, she pulled the blanket over her face and hid from the world before plucking up the courage to move. Damian didn't stir as she extricated her limbs from his. With no sign of Martin in the kitchen, she wondered if he'd gone back up to bed before spotting him out in the early morning rays on the patio. She slipped on Damian's hoodie which hung on the back of the chair, dragging up the zip as she stepped barefoot outside. The ground was pleasantly cool and dew glistened on the grass like scattered jewels.

"Morning," she whispered, the patio chair scraping loudly as she pulled it out from the table.

"Good morning." Martin smiled softly. "Sleep well?"

Amy squeezed her eyes tight shut, hoping the ground might just gobble her up and put her out of her misery.

"Sorry." Martin chuckled. "I didn't mean to embarrass you."

“I feel as though I should explain,” she began.

“I don’t think that’s necessary. You’re adults. Whatever’s going on between you and Damian is none of my business.”

“I don’t know what’s going on between us,” she said. “But I’d like to clarify that I’ve split up from Anthony. We’re getting a divorce.”

“I heard about that. Although, again, it’s really none of my business. You don’t owe me any explanations.”

“I *want* to explain,” she said, hating that she’d always come off so badly in Damian’s parents’ eyes. “I at least want you to know that whatever is going on, I’m not intending to hurt him again. I’d never hurt him intentionally.”

He nodded, while giving her a baffled smile. “Okay, hun.”

“It must worry you,” she said. “That I’ll hurt him like I did last time.”

Martin’s eyebrows drew together. “He’s a grown man. If you and he are thinking of getting back together I assume he knows what he’s getting into.”

“I know it must have seemed terrible to you,” she said, so caught up in her own thoughts that she barely registered his words. “But—”

“What must have seemed terrible?” he said, cutting her off.

“What I did. Marrying Anthony and abandoning Damian like that. It was wrong, but—”

“Hang on.” He interrupted her again, shaking his head. “You think we were upset about you marrying Anthony?”

“Yes.”

He continued shaking his head in a slow movement. “Sweetheart, he left you.”

“What?”

“Damian. He left you on your own with two babies to look after.” Martin puffed out an exasperated breath. “He’s my son and I love him. I didn’t think he could ever do anything to

make me disappointed in him, but when he left you with those babies ...” He paused and swallowed hard. “*That* was wrong.”

“It wasn’t his fault,” Amy said defensively. “Everything was so stressful and I was horrible to live with. I was so worried about money ... he only left because he knew he could make better money back here over the summer.”

“It was still the wrong thing to do.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you’d seen what a nightmare I was to live with.” She thought back to one particular argument a few days before Damian had left to go back to Hope Cove. “I took everything out on him. One time I screamed at him so badly. Like a madwoman. He hadn’t even done anything. I just hadn’t slept and Marty had colic. I took it all out on Damian.”

Martin reached for her hand and squeezed it gently. “When it comes to being in a relationship, shouting at your partner when you’re stressed is entirely forgivable. Leaving them when they need you ... that isn’t okay.”

“He just felt helpless,” she said, tears pooling on her eyelids. “The only thing he could think to do was to go where he knew he could earn money. He wanted me and the boys to come too. It was me who refused.”

“Of course you did. You had nowhere to live here. It was a completely unrealistic plan.”

“Damian would have found us somewhere. Or I could have just waited for him. He was sending me money immediately after he got back here. I could have waited, not married the first guy who offered to help me.”

“You did what you thought was best for those babies,” Martin said kindly. “There’s no sense in beating yourself up over it now.”

She wiped tears from her cheeks with one hand and squeezed Martin’s hand with the other. “I always thought you and Wendy hated me.”

“What a ridiculous thought. How could we hate a sweet thing like you? We couldn’t have hoped for a better mother for our grandchildren.”

“Now you’re being too nice,” she said, more tears spilling down her cheeks.

“Come here.” Martin got up to wrap her in a hug.

“What have you done?” Wendy called accusingly from the back door. “Have you upset her?”

“No,” Martin said, amusement rattling his voice.

“They’re happy tears,” Amy told Wendy.

“That’s all right then.” She walked over and hugged Amy from the other side. “Can’t beat an early morning cuddle, can you?”

Amy chuckled. “I always thought you hated me.”

The gasp from Wendy was genuine. “Who could hate you?”

“That’s what I said,” Martin put in.

Damian appeared in the doorway, shaking his head. “What on earth is going on?”

“They don’t hate me,” Amy said, smiling through tears.

“Right. Exactly what I told you about three million times.” He rolled his eyes and went back inside, muttering about needing coffee.

CHAPTER 36



Amy had never felt as relaxed around Damian's parents as she did that day. After breakfast they hung out at the beach for a couple of hours, then walked up to the restaurant at the golf club where Amy reminisced about her time working there over a delicious lunch.

It was the middle of the afternoon when Wendy and Martin left. Apparently they had plans to celebrate a friend's sixtieth birthday that evening, so they really weren't leaving just to get away from Amy.

Marty and Billy stood at the front of the house to wave their grandparents off, then made a dash back into the house as soon as the car pulled away down the road.

"That was nice," Amy said, then cast a sidelong glance at Damian when he failed to reply. "Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked, propping her hands on her hips.

"Like what?" he asked innocently.

"Like you find something hilarious."

"It's funny. You have to admit."

She shook her head but failed to hide her grin. "I genuinely thought they didn't like me."

"You were wrong." He smirked and stepped into her personal space, slipping his hands casually around her waist.

Amy felt a warm fizz in her stomach as she brought her hands to loop around his shoulders. "I'm okay with being wrong on this occasion."

“Dad!” Billy shouted, rushing back out to them. “Can we have a water fight in the garden?”

Damian moved quickly away from Amy, looking ridiculously guilty. “Yeah. I don’t see why not.”

“Will you play with us?”

“Yes.” He glanced at his watch. “But not for too long. We need to get the place tidied up before our next visitor arrives.”

“When is Leo bringing Alice over?” Amy asked.

“In a couple of hours.” Damian scrunched his features. “Did I tell you she’s sleeping here?”

“No.” Amy chuckled. “You didn’t mention that.”



HAVING Alice to stay meant Damian could continue to avoid the conversation he’d been dodging with Amy. Clearly, she wanted to know how things stood between the two of them. If he had an answer he’d give it to her, but he had no idea what would happen between them. Like he’d told Hugh and Leo the previous evening, if it was just the two of them he wouldn’t need to think at all. He wanted to be with her and that would be all that mattered. There were the boys to consider, though.

Last time he’d messed up, his children were too young to know what was going on. If he did it again now, he’d hurt them, and he couldn’t bear the thought of that. Besides, if he was going to be with Amy he needed to tell her the whole truth.

She was already suspicious about his trusty old VW van, so he may as well just come clean. If she didn’t like what he had to say, that would make things easier. If she didn’t want to be with him, he could stop pondering whether they should give it another go. Problem solved.

Except he’d let himself imagine things working out between them too often now. Any other scenario was going to

absolutely gut him. Especially now that they'd been spending time together at his house like some cosy little family.

Quickly, it became clear that adding a baby into that mix only made matters worse. Watching Amy bounce Alice on her lap while Damian grappled with erecting the travel cot in the living room gave him a glow of affection.

"Do you need help?" Amy asked, watching him with amusement.

"No." He'd already turned down Leo's offer to help him set it up, declaring it wasn't rocket science. It turned out to be more hassle than he anticipated, but he got there in the end.

"Did you hear anything from Jack or Max about the house?" he asked, settling himself on the couch beside Amy.

"No." She dragged her attention from Alice for a moment. "Why, are you trying to get rid of me?"

He gave a small shake of the head. "I just thought you might like to escape if possible, because there's a vicious rumour that this little angel likes to howl through the night. Though I find it very hard to believe. Look at her gorgeous chubby cheeks."

Amy ran the back of her finger over Alice's cheek. "It is very hard to believe. Leo's probably making it all up."

"That's my theory too," Damian said, then looked towards the ceiling when a dramatic thump sounded overhead.

Marty and Billy were jumping on his bed, and apparently one of them had fallen off. They waited a beat but there was no crying so it seemed all was well.

"I guess I should go up and put them to bed," Amy said, handing Alice over.

Damian got Alice into her pyjamas and made her a bottle. She was halfway down it and her eyes were drooping when Amy wandered back into the living room.

"Are you sure you'll be okay sleeping down here?" she asked quietly.

He nodded and smiled at her. They'd already had this conversation, and he'd told her it would be easier for him to sleep downstairs with Alice in case she needed a bottle in the night. Also, if she screamed the place down there'd be less chance of her waking the boys.

"I feel bad taking your bed when you're on the couch," Amy remarked.

"It's fine," he said, not letting his mind linger on thoughts of her sleeping in his bed. Spending the previous night curled up on the couch had been bliss, but it didn't exactly leave his mind clear to figure out what was going to happen between them.

Slowly, Amy lowered herself to sit beside him, leaning close to peer down at Alice. "She's so cute," she whispered.

Damian kept his eyes on Alice as she sucked at the bottle. "I'm surprised you didn't have another baby," he said before he could stop himself.

The comment drew a surprised laugh from Amy but otherwise she didn't respond.

"I think I was always on edge waiting for that announcement," Damian went on. Since he'd raised the subject, there seemed little point in holding back now. "You being married to someone else was ..." He inhaled deeply, trying to figure out a way to describe his feelings succinctly and politely. "It was pretty shit actually, but I lived in fear of you and Anthony having a baby. I don't know how I'd have coped with that."

Still she didn't say anything but gazed at him intently. Then she lowered her head to rest it on his shoulder. Her lack of response only increased his curiosity.

"Did you ever think about it?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No. I think Anthony joked about it once and I shot the idea down. Now that I think about it, that was probably his way of testing the waters. I didn't want another baby." She twisted her lips. "Not with Anthony," she whispered.

Damian's blood pulsed harder in his veins. What was that supposed to mean? That she'd have another with him? Was that how she saw their future? Could *he* imagine that?

The answer was an instant yes. He could absolutely imagine it, and the thought gave him a warm glow.

"You're really great with Alice," she said, switching her attention to the baby, whose eyes closed as she finished her milk.

Damian set the empty bottle aside and reached for Amy's hand, twisting his fingers together with hers. "Having Alice here reminds me of when the boys were little. The good moments, when we weren't at each other's throats."

Amy's smile came quickly and lit up her face. It was a relief to Damian that she remembered the good times too. It hadn't been all bad when the boys were babies. He had photos to prove it – him holding two tiny babies and grinning into the camera like the proudest man in the world. And his favourite photo of him and Amy slumped against each other on the couch, each with a sleeping baby on their chest. It had been one of those rare exhausted but happy days, and they'd sat whispering away to each other, making each other laugh but trying to stifle it so they didn't wake the boys.

Alice jolted awake, looking slightly startled as she stared up at Damian. Easing his fingers from Amy's, he lifted her up, rubbing his nose against hers and drawing a smile, before he sat her upright on his lap and rubbed circles on her back.

"I love looking after her," he told Amy. "But I guess that's mostly because I'm not sleep deprived, and I get to give her back after a while."

"I'd say that makes quite a difference." Amy kissed Alice's cheek. "I'll leave you to get her settled."

"Wish me luck!" Damian said, then caught her hand and gently pulled her back to him.

"Good luck," she murmured before he pressed a sweet and swift kiss to her lips.

CHAPTER 37



Sleeping in Damian's bed surrounded by his things felt more than a little surreal. It would definitely have been better if Damian were there with her, but it felt as though things were moving in the right direction, and Amy woke up with a smile on her face the following morning. Sunlight sliced through a gap in the curtains, and as she sat up she admired the way the dust motes floated and glistened in the slab of light.

Music reached her and she followed it to the kitchen. Damian was oblivious to her presence and twirled around with Alice on his hip while the boys boogied around his legs. He lifted Marty's arm for him to spin under, then did the same for Billy.

"Are early morning dance parties a regular thing around here?" Amy asked over the music.

Damian's eyes twinkled as he hit her with a smile so dazzling it set butterflies whirling in her stomach.

"They might be," he said, jiggling Alice and making her beam. Looking a little dizzy, she leaned into him, face-planting his chest and grabbing his T-shirt.

"How was your night?" Amy asked when Damian came to a stop in front of her.

"Easy. She woke at midnight for a bottle, then slept until seven. I don't know what Leo complains about."

"Maybe you shouldn't tell him that." She tickled Alice's cheek while Damian instructed the boys to go upstairs and get dressed.

“Are you okay if I leave the boys with you while I drop Alice home?” he asked Amy.

“Of course.” It felt odd that he asked.

He held her gaze and she felt momentarily self-conscious in her skimpy pyjamas. But only until Damian leaned in and kissed her.

“I haven’t brushed my teeth yet,” she told him when he pulled away again.

“Yep. I noticed that.” He grinned mischievously and went to strap Alice into her car seat, which was waiting on the kitchen table.

Amy watched as he gently adjusted the straps and made sure she was snug.

“You’re so relaxed with her,” she said, standing close beside him. “It makes me sad that we were always so fraught when the boys were little. I feel as though I didn’t really get to enjoy the time.”

“Having two definitely made things hectic.” Damian placed a hand at the small of Amy’s back and she leaned into him. “Marty was also a very demanding baby.”

“Maybe if I’d have been more chilled, he would have been too.”

“It’s difficult to be chilled when you haven’t slept properly in months.”

“True,” she conceded. “The money issues didn’t help my stress levels either. I think if we’d been financially secure, everything would have been different.” She realised immediately that she’d said the wrong thing. The way Damian tensed was further evidence of that. “I didn’t mean that as a dig at you,” she said. “We just weren’t ready to have kids. It was too much too soon.” As she babbled away, she only felt she was digging the hole deeper. “Sorry,” she said again.

“No. You’re right. If we hadn’t had money worries everything would have been easier.” He inhaled deeply and

went to lift the car seat, but Amy placed a hand on his arm to stop him.

“Everything’s different now. We’re at completely different places in our lives ... we can figure out a way to be together, can’t we?”

“I want to.” He swallowed hard and pressed his forehead to hers. “But I’m concerned things aren’t that straightforward.”

“I know.” She smiled gently. “You’re here and we’re in Oxford, but I was thinking we could start with visiting each other. We can take it slow and see how things go.”

He sucked in his bottom lip and the uncertainty in his eyes put her on edge.

“There’s some stuff I haven’t told you,” he said quietly. “I need to tell you everything before we make plans.”

“What?” she asked, her heart galloping.

“It’s kind of a long story.” He placed a hand on Alice’s tummy. “Let me drop her back to Leo, then we can talk.”

“It sounds as though you’re just avoiding talking to me,” she said nervously.

“I’m not.” He picked up Alice in the car seat. “I’ll be back soon and I’ll tell you everything. I promise.” He kissed her forehead and left her with a feeling of dread.



AS SHE SHOWERED, Amy’s mind ran through the possibilities of what Damian wanted to tell her and it always came back to the same thing. There was another woman in his life. The excuses for having the bed in the van were too convenient, and she’d never completely believed that he just enjoyed sleeping there.

Once she was dressed, she gave Marty and Billy a pile of sheets and blankets from the cupboard on the landing so they could expand the den they’d been building on the bottom

bunk. It would keep them occupied while she spoke to Damian.

The front door opened just as she was walking down the stairs and Damian smiled sheepishly up at her. They went out to the patio, not stopping to get drinks even though Amy was craving caffeine. Mostly, she wanted the conversation over and done with.

“Tell me,” she said as soon as they sat. “I’ve been imagining worst-case scenarios for what it is you want to say, so I need you to tell me quick so I can stop concocting things in my head.”

He chewed the inside of his cheek. “I don’t have any money,” he said after a pause.

Amy blinked a few times, confused.

“That’s not quite true,” he said. “I have some money, but the business probably isn’t as thriving as it appears.”

“I thought it was doing well.”

He shrugged. “For a surf shack I think it does all right, but it’s not the most lucrative business setup.”

“You have three employees,” Amy pointed out, certain he was being humble.

“Yeah. But the income generated from them doesn’t do much more than cover their wages. If the business did well consistently throughout the year things would be different, but the winter months are dead.” His eyes were full of regret when he continued. “I make enough to pay my mortgage and my bills, but there’s not a lot left after that.”

Now she knew he was being humble because he’d forgotten some significant costs. “You also make enough to send money for the boys every month. That’s quite a chunk of money.”

Sadly, he shook his head. “That doesn’t come from the business.”

“I don’t understand,” she said when he didn’t expand.

“The house is in a desirable location, right by the beach. I rent it out to holidaymakers. Just short-term lets here and there throughout the year. That’s the only reason I have the money for you. For the boys,” he corrected.

“Oh.” She wasn’t sure what to make of that, except to feel a little miffed that he’d never mentioned it. It was actually a good idea. Except—

“Where do you sleep? With Hugh or Leo?” She knew by his face that wasn’t the answer, and her heart sank as she connected the dots. “You sleep in the van?”

“I don’t like to put Hugh or Leo out, not when the van is perfectly comfortable.”

Amy closed her eyes, trying to digest the information. A bolt of anger hit her and she snapped them open again. “I didn’t even need the money,” she said. “I told you it was too much. How many times did I tell you I didn’t need all that? I didn’t need any of it.”

“They’re my kids. There was no way I wasn’t going to support them financially.”

“If I’d have known you were living in a van with no electricity or running water there’s no way I’d have accepted it.”

“It wasn’t your choice to accept it or not. The money was for the boys.”

A fresh bolt of anger hit her. “I didn’t even use it. I never touched a penny of it, and all that time you were living in a van!”

“What?” His quiet tone unnerved her and a trickle of dread sneaked up her spine. “What do you mean, you didn’t use it?”

“It’s in a savings account,” she said blithely. “I didn’t need it. I told you that so many times.”

His cold, hard stare made her heart beat faster.

“You should have told me you were living in the van,” she shot at him, hating the silence.

“You just kept the money?” he asked levelly.

“I kept it for the boys. It’s not like I was taking it for myself.”

“That’s not the point.” Damian slammed his hands into the arms of the chair and stood up. “I always thought I was at least helping financially.”

“You knew we didn’t need the money,” she argued.

“I don’t care if you needed it. The only way I was a father to them was through financial support.” He glared at her. “But you even took that away from me.”

The kitchen door banged behind him when he went inside. Hurriedly, Amy followed but only caught him storming out of the front door. This time, he didn’t stop to ask if it was okay to leave the boys with her.

CHAPTER 38



Damian's blood pulsed violently through his veins as he made a quick exit. He should have stopped to get Billy and Marty to come with him, but he just couldn't stand to be around Amy a moment longer. On autopilot, he turned down the lane and headed for the shack.

At the end of the car park his gaze travelled along the beach, checking his business from afar. Callie was chatting to a young couple by the paddle boards and Jared was there too – rinsing off wetsuits. They didn't need Damian to interfere. Besides, he didn't trust himself not to bite someone's head off. He turned left onto the coastal path.

Walking along the cliffs was usually a good way to clear his head, but his thoughts whirred frantically. He'd never cared about his time sleeping in the van. Especially since it was always interspersed with stints back at the house. Only when the weather was bad had it felt like an inconvenience, but if the bad weather persisted too long he stayed with Hugh.

The thought of providing for Billy and Marty had always outweighed any inconvenience. Except all his scraping around to get money had been for nothing. It had always felt like a decent amount to him, but Amy and Anthony had probably rolled their eyes at his measly contribution. Once again, Anthony had outdone him in the role of father.

A dog barrelled past him on the path and he stepped aside to avoid collision. The interruption to his thoughts made him stop and look out over the sea. The rugged coastline with the churning white water around the rocks calmed him a little.

As his heart rate settled, his anger subsided, leaving him with the crushing realisation that he'd never be enough. Even without Anthony in the picture, he'd never be enough for Amy.

Sucking in a lungful of salty air, he continued along the path at a slower pace. In a week and a half, Amy and the boys would be back in Oxford. The thought was as comforting as it was terrifying. Having a quiet house again would be depressing and he'd miss the boys. Amy too. But what he wouldn't miss was the daily reminder of what his life could have been if he hadn't panicked all those years ago and left Amy alone.

Since he'd almost reached Hope Cove he decided to loop back through the village and walk back along the roads. On the steep slope of the path descending into the bay, he spotted Jack and Emily sitting on the harbour wall, eating a bag of chips.

"Don't judge me," Emily said, pointing her wooden fork at Damian as he approached. "Jack has already pointed out that it's not even lunchtime yet, but we were passing the chippy and the smell set off a craving."

"Just doing it for the little one, right?" Damian nodded at her enormous belly.

"Exactly." She grinned widely and gave Jack's arm a nudge. "See! Damian gets it."

Chuckling, Jack slung an arm around her shoulders.

With a jolt, Damian was reminded of when Amy was pregnant and they were so full of hope and excitement. It felt like a lifetime ago.

"Any news on the plumber?" he asked Jack. "Do you know when Amy might be able to get back to the bungalow?"

"That sort of depends," Jack replied.

"On what?"

Jack made a noise as though he was mulling it over. "When would you like it to be ready?"

It took a second for Damian to decipher the comment and he inwardly groaned. “It’s ready?” he asked, a bite to his words.

“It turned out to be an easy fix. Max and I managed it ourselves.”

“But you didn’t think to let Amy know?”

“There may have been a crossed wire somewhere about which of us was going to let her know.”

“Oh my god.” Damian blew out a breath.

“I know,” Jack said lightly. “We should ditch the property management gig and become professional matchmakers instead.”

“You didn’t mess with the plumbing, did you?”

“No.” Jack looked shocked enough by the suggestion that it was clearly the truth. “We draw the line at damaging property. We only thought that you two might need a little push together after we’d heard stories from Lizzie and Emily.”

“Great!” Damian uttered sarcastically. “Village gossip at its best.”

“It wasn’t a problem though,” Emily said, with a nervous edge to her voice. “Having Amy to stay for a couple of nights?”

He sighed, not sure how to answer.

“Hey.” Jack’s features morphed to concern. “We didn’t mean to cause issues. You were quick to offer for her to stay ... and then we figured if Amy was keen to get back into the bungalow she’d have called one of us for an update.”

Damian shook his head. “It’s fine. Don’t worry about it. The place is ready for her to go back to though?”

“Yeah. Whenever she wants.”

“Thanks.” He didn’t bother saying goodbye. Walking away, he felt a pang of guilt for bringing their mood down. Especially since it wasn’t their matchmaking attempts that had annoyed him, but the state of his life.

By the time he reached the house he'd thought he'd calmed down, but the sight of Amy looking all sad and concerned made his head spin again. Part of him wanted to tell her he loved her and nothing mattered except being together, but he knew it wasn't true. He'd mess up again, and this time it would be way worse.

"Hi," she said quietly, not shifting from the kitchen table. "The boys are in the garden."

He nodded, spotting them through the window, kicking a ball around on the grass.

"Are you okay?" She didn't get up but reached for his hand. He tensed when she curled her fingers around his. "What you said before about financial support being the only way you're a father isn't true at all. You're Billy and Marty's dad. They idolise you."

He pulled his hand away, moving to stand near the window and look out at his boys. "I bumped into Jack. The bungalow is ready again." He didn't look at Amy, sure he didn't want to see the look on her face.

"You want me to leave?" she asked, a quiver to her voice that tore at his heart.

When he didn't reply, her chair scraped on the floor. "I'll pack my stuff."

He only remembered to breathe again after she'd left, but he felt as though he was glued to the spot. He hadn't moved an inch when she came back downstairs just a couple of minutes later.

"You're a great dad," she said to his back, her voice thick with emotion. "If you think otherwise, you're wrong. And I always intended for Billy and Marty to know about the money. I thought I'd give it to them later and they could use it to buy a car or a deposit for a house. They'd know it came from you. But it wouldn't matter because they love you and that's got nothing to do with money."

Tears clouded his vision as he continued to stare straight ahead. Amy moved to the back door, clearing her throat and

sounding almost normal as she called out to tell the boys she was leaving.

“Where are you going?” Marty asked, dashing over to her.

“Back to the bungalow. The leak is fixed now.”

“Can’t you stay here?” Billy asked.

“No. I need to go.”

It killed Damian not to jump in and tell her to stay. She should stay and they should all be together, like they were supposed to be. Life wasn’t that straightforward though. Wanting something didn’t mean you should get it. Some people were better off apart and that was all there was to it.

Amy gave hurried cuddles to Marty and Billy, promising to see them soon, then leaving without a backwards glance at him.

“What’s wrong, Daddy?” Marty asked when the front door closed behind Amy and Damian sank onto a chair.

He shook his head, trying to figure out how to reply while Marty crawled onto his lap.

“I didn’t want Mummy to go,” Damian said sadly. “I’ll miss her. And next week you’ll be going home and I’ll miss you too.”

“We’ll get to play PlayStation again,” Billy said. “And the TV works at home.”

“There is that,” Damian said, a hint of a smile pulling at his lips.

“We’ll see you again next school holidays,” Marty said, squeezing him tightly. “That won’t be very long.”

“Far too long for my liking,” Damian told him, then covered him in kisses that made him squirm and shout to Billy to help him escape. It ended in a wrestling match on the kitchen floor, which took Damian’s mind off Amy for all of about three minutes.

Then he was back to feeling like the world was ending.

CHAPTER 39



Amy refused to cry, though it was a battle for the entire afternoon once she'd left Damian's place. It was hard enough to think about leaving in just over a week, but leaving while Damian was angry with her was unimaginable. Sadly, it wasn't only leaving him that bothered her. There was also the fact that she was going back to live in a house that had never truly felt like home.

At least there was something she could do about that. If she and Anthony sold the house and split the money she'd have plenty for something smaller – a little house or a flat. She didn't care, as long as it was a place she could make homely for her and the boys. Her kind of homely, not Anthony's.

Trawling through the property listings to get some idea of her options felt both scary and exhilarating. Her fresh start wouldn't be everything she wanted if it didn't include Damian, but it was a fresh start all the same. Finally, she was going to start putting herself first.

For so many years she'd told herself that if Billy and Marty were happy then she was happy, but it turned out not to be true. Not deep down anyway. And the kids' happiness was probably much easier to achieve than she'd thought. In Oxford they had a house rammed full of the latest gadgets and computer games but seemed to be constantly complaining that they were bored. At Damian's house, they happily played for hours in a den they built with a few old sheets.

Walking into the offices of Hope Cove Press on Monday afternoon, Amy was immediately struck by the worry in

Emily's features.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, perching on the arm of the couch.

Emily grimaced. "Jack's worried he upset Damian with the whole bungalow situation. His heart was in the right place, and I'll be honest, I may have encouraged him."

"Matchmaking is never a good idea," Scarlett said, leaning against the desk across the room. "People should mind their own business."

Lizzie laughed loudly. "You're always meddling in other people's business."

"Only when it affects me," Scarlett retorted. Lizzie looked thoughtful and didn't respond.

"Sorry," Amy said. "I don't have any clue what you're talking about."

Emily blinked rapidly. "Jack not telling you that the leak was fixed. We just thought a bit more time in a confined space with Damian might be good for you ..."

"Oh." She grimaced. "Damian didn't tell me about that."

"What happened?" Lizzie asked. "Wasn't staying at his place a good thing?"

Amy breathed deeply and dropped onto the couch. "Staying at his place was fine." She swallowed hard, her smile feeling painful. "It might actually have been good for us. It helped us figure things out."

"And?" Emily asked cautiously.

"And Damian is never going to forgive me for marrying someone else and taking his kids away from him." His voice echoed in her head. *The only way I was a father to them was through financial support. But you even took that away from me.* "I can't exactly blame him, I just ..." Her chin wobbled madly. "I feel pretty crap, if I'm honest."

Lizzie scooted over and rubbed her shoulder. "Sorry."

She shook her head, feeling foolish for bringing her personal problems to them yet again. “I’m sorry. We’re supposed to be here to work and not only am I distracting you with non-work issues but I’m being depressing too.” She swiped a tear from the corner of her eye. “Can you please distract me with work stuff? What’s on the agenda for today?”

The silence that fell made her feel even more foolish and she apologised yet again. “I’m really embarrassed now,” she added.

“Don’t be,” Emily said. “We actually had one main topic on the agenda for today, but I’m not sure how appropriate it is now ...” She looked questioningly at Lizzie.

“It’s about you,” Lizzie said, smiling warmly at Amy. “We wanted to let you know how impressed we’ve been with you and how much we enjoyed having you on the team.”

“Okay.” She managed a small smile. “Now I see why you question whether this was a good time to have this conversation. I’ve just been very unprofessional.”

“Don’t be silly. We’re always telling each other our problems.” Emily shared a secret smile with Lizzie. “We actually wanted to share one of our problems with you.”

“What is it?”

“We’re short-staffed,” Lizzie said. “We’re looking to take on an editorial assistant and we’d really love it to be you.”

“I ... um ... what?”

“You’d basically be doing what you’ve been doing this summer,” Emily said. “We need help with reading and responding to submissions. But we also want someone willing to jump in and help with other tasks, and you’ve already shown us you can do that.”

Amy opened and closed her mouth a few times but couldn’t find words.

“We know you’re going back to Oxford soon,” Lizzie said. “But there’s no reason you couldn’t work from there and join

us through video calls. There might be the odd time we'd need you here in person, but it would probably be rare."

"I'm kind of speechless," Amy said. "I have to go back to work in two weeks."

Lizzie nodded. "We know it's probably a long shot, but we wanted to ask. Full disclosure – we probably wouldn't be able to match your current salary, but we wanted to get your reaction and see if it's something you'd be open to discussing further."

"Wow." Her eyes were fixed wide open. "I'm shocked." It occurred to her that Scarlett hadn't said a word about it and looked to get her reaction.

"It was my idea," Scarlett said, showing no emotion as she hovered in the kitchen area. "There's too much work for the three of us, especially when I move forward with the imprint. Emily's also going to be taking time off with the baby. We need someone else, and I think you'd be the best person for the job."

"Thank you. I'm really honoured to be asked and I love working with you. I'm not at all sure it's realistic for me at the moment, but if it's okay, I'd love to mull it over."

"Of course," Emily said. "That's why we wanted to ask you now and not wait until you were leaving."

CHAPTER 40



If Amy's mind wasn't whirring enough before, the offer to work for Hope Cove Press left her in a tailspin. It shouldn't really. Since she absolutely couldn't do it, there was nothing to think about. Except now when she thought about going back to her uninspiring office job in a huge, impersonal company, she felt a sliver of dread that she'd never had before.

It had always been something she was fairly indifferent about, but it was also the only proper job she'd ever had. Now that she had something to compare it to, she wondered if she'd ever feel content with her work again.

Even if she couldn't accept the job offer, it was flattering. It also provided a slight distraction from the situation with Damian. She should really get in touch with him, but she suspected he'd say she could just pick the boys up when they left the following week, and she wasn't sure she could handle the rejection. Maybe if she gave him a few days to cool off, he'd be ready to talk to her again.

On Tuesday morning, she'd just got out of the shower when the doorbell rang. Scarlett's eyes were fixed on the ground when Amy opened the door.

"Hi," Amy said, pursing her lips as she tried to figure out what would have brought her there.

"Hello." She shifted her weight from foot to foot. After a momentary silence, she opened her mouth to say something, but closed it again quickly.

"Are you okay?" Amy asked.

“Yeah.”

“Do you want to come in?”

“Yes, please.”

“How did you know where I was staying?” she asked, leading the way along the hall.

“It’s a village,” Scarlett said, as though that was explanation enough.

“Do you want a drink?” Amy asked in the kitchen.

“No, thanks.” Scarlett pulled out a chair and sat down while Amy looked at her in confusion.

“Is there something I can help you with?” Amy asked.

“Yes.” Scarlett slid her laptop out of her bag. “Can you look over the adverts I’ve made for social media?”

“Okay.” Amy pursed her lips as she sat beside Scarlett. “What do you want me to look at exactly?”

“Just look for spelling mistakes and stuff like that. I’m dyslexic so I always get Lizzie or Emily to look over them before I post stuff, but they were both busy today.”

“This is a lot of adverts,” Amy said, as her eyes roamed the page.

“I do them in batches and schedule them to post over the next month. It’s easier that way.”

“Makes sense.” Pulling the laptop in front of her, Amy concentrated on the texts, making adjustments here and there. It didn’t take long, and since it didn’t seem like an urgent task, she assumed Scarlett had only been using it as an excuse to visit. “Are you sure you don’t want a drink?” she asked, when she’d been over everything.

“No.” Scarlett packed her computer away. “Did you think any more about working with us?”

“I’ve been thinking about it a lot,” Amy said.

“And?”

“I’d like to.” She dragged a hand through her hair, which was still damp from the shower. “I’d *really* like to. It feels unrealistic though.”

“Why?”

Amy sighed heavily.

“Sometimes people think things are unrealistic when they’re not,” Scarlett said. “Everyone thought it was unrealistic that I’d start my own publishing company, but if you really want something, you can usually make it happen.”

“If I only had myself to think about, I could definitely make it happen,” Amy mused. “But I have Billy and Marty to think about. And Damian.”

“What’s Damian got to do with it?”

Amy shrugged. “Things are such a mess between us. Taking the job would mean attaching myself to Hope Cove, and I’m not sure that’s a great idea at the moment.”

“I don’t think you’d ever need to physically be here for the job. Not if you didn’t want to.”

“No, but I’ll be on the phone with you and Lizzie and Emily all the time, while knowing that you’d probably seen Damian. I’d want to ask about him. It just feels weird.”

“And you’d really walk away from a job you want just because of that?” Scarlett asked, a hint of irritation in her voice.

“No. I told you there are other reasons. I don’t know if it would work out financially, and I’m about to move house, so I have a lot of change at the moment. It’s probably good to keep some things stable.”

“Okay.” Scarlett stood abruptly. “I think it all sounds like excuses, but it’s your life.”

Amy decided not to let Scarlett’s impatient tone rile her. “I told you I’m still thinking about it. Everything is just a bit complicated.”

“Thanks for the help with the adverts,” Scarlett said at the door.

“You’re welcome,” Amy muttered, watching Scarlett stride to her car.

Wearily, she made a coffee and curled up on the couch with it. Her thoughts were such a jumble, but in the end Amy couldn’t help but think that Scarlett had a point.

If she really wanted the job, she could figure out a way to take it.



IT WAS grey and overcast for Damian’s surf lesson on Wednesday morning. He did his best to concentrate, offering his group of four teenagers tips and advice here and there, but his mind was elsewhere for the majority of the time on the water.

Back on dry land, he rinsed off the boards and wetsuits on autopilot, then left Callie dealing with a group wanting to rent body boards and slipped into the back of the surf shack and the dimly lit office.

Considering his life was still exactly the same, it seemed illogical to feel so down. He’d mourned his relationship with Amy a long time ago, but now he felt he was going through it all over again.

With his feet propped on the desk, he stared into space until Scarlett wandered in, rapping her knuckles across the doorjamb as she did.

“I helped Billy and Marty get into their wetsuits and they’ve gone out surfing with Jared.”

“Great. Thanks.”

“They want you to watch them.”

“Okay. I’ll go in a minute. See you Friday?”

“Yes. It’s the last time I’ll be looking after them.”

He nodded, the reminder that the boys would be leaving next week making his mood plummet further. He'd cleared all his surf lessons for the beginning of next week so he could spend as much time with them as possible.

"You haven't paid me everything yet. You still owe me half the money."

"I'll transfer it this week," he said idly.

She didn't move, just lingered in the doorway. Finally, he glanced up at her, raising a questioning eyebrow.

"I wanted to say something," she started. "But I'm worried that if you don't like what I say you won't pay me the rest of the money, and I really need the money."

He shifted his feet off the desk and leaned his forearms on it instead. "What did you want to say?"

"Are you still going to pay me? You have to really, because I did the work."

"Yes. I'll still pay you." He rubbed at his temples.

"Okay." She pursed her lips. "I think you're an idiot."

He wanted to laugh, but it felt like too much effort. "Thanks," he muttered instead.

"Would you like to know why?"

"Sure." He continued rubbing circles at his temples. "Why not?"

"I think you're an idiot because Amy loves you and you're too stubborn to forgive her. And usually I don't like to interfere in other people's business but she's nice to me, so I don't like that she's upset. Also I think if you forgive her there's more chance that she'll come and work for us ..."

"She already works for you," Damian pointed out, slightly dazed by the speed of the conversation.

"Just for the summer, and just voluntarily." She winced. "I wasn't supposed to tell you that." It wasn't exactly shocking news. It'd seemed fishy all along, her getting a job at Hope Cove Press, especially since he'd been fairly sure they weren't

hiring. “Anyway, we want her to work for us from now on. Remotely, because she’ll be in Oxford, but she doesn’t know if she will, and my point is that I think you should stop being stubborn and sort things out with her.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Do you love her?”

He buried his head in his hands.

“I’ll take that as a yes. So you just need to forgive her.”

“I already told you it’s not that simple.”

“It is though. You’re angry with her for taking the boys away from you, but it was a long time ago and—”

“What?” He wrinkled his brow. “I’m not angry with her for taking the boys.”

“Why are you angry with her then?”

“I’m not.” He screwed his face up as a jolt of guilt hit him. “Is that what she thinks? That I’m angry with her for marrying Anthony and taking the boys from me?”

“Yes.” Scarlett looked vaguely confused. “I thought you knew that.”

He stood and almost knocked into her as he walked out of the door. In the middle of the shack, he paused and turned back. “Can you do me a favour and watch the boys for longer today? Wait until they finish their lesson and stay with them until I get back.”

“Yeah but I’ll have to add the overtime to your bill.”

He chuckled. “I wouldn’t expect otherwise.”

“I’ll probably charge you per minute, so you should hurry.” Her voice was deadpan but he caught the sparkle in her eyes before he dashed away.

CHAPTER 41



At Amy's place, Damian paced on the doorstep and had just rung the bell for the second time when he heard the click of flip-flops approaching the door.

Amy's smile seemed forced. "I was just thinking about you," she said, then turned on her heel and walked back along the hall. "I've made some plans and I need to fill you in before I can tell Billy and Marty." She stopped in the kitchen. "Do you want a drink?"

"No. Thanks. I wanted to speak to you too. Obviously. That's why I'm here."

"If it's about the child support money, I promise I'll be using it from now on. Hopefully I won't need to touch what you've given me so far and I can still keep that to give to the boys later." She leaned against the sideboard, arms folded over her chest. "I've decided to move."

"Oh?" It came to him that maybe she was taking the job Scarlett had mentioned and was moving to Hope Cove. He couldn't even contemplate whether that would be a good thing or not, but there was no time to think about it before she continued.

"It doesn't make sense for us to stay in the house. It's too big for the three of us. There are a few places in the same area that look good. With the money I get from the divorce and your child support payments I should manage fine."

"Right." Damian had his hands in his back pockets as he listened, noting the edge to her voice as she laid out her plans

and realising how much he'd wanted her to say she was moving to Hope Cove.

"I've also decided to work for Hope Cove Press. It'll mean a pay cut but I still think I can manage it, and I'll be working from home which will be easier with the boys. There'll be a lot of flexibility too. Plus, I really love the work."

"That's great," he said, bunching his shoulders up and releasing them again.

"Yeah." She pursed her lips, looking at him expectantly.

He tapped the table beside him, trying to recall what he'd wanted to say when all he could think of was telling her he loved her and that he wanted her to include him in his plans in more than just a financial way.

"I'm not angry with you for marrying Anthony," he finally said. The flicker of surprise in her eyes made him wonder if she'd even thought that or if Scarlett had got her wires crossed. "Scarlett told me you think I'm resentful of you for taking the boys from me."

She swallowed hard and pulled out a chair at the table. "I took the boys and let another man raise them. It's not something I imagine you can easily forgive."

He stared at her, struggling to fathom that she felt that way. That she saw things that way.

"I forgave you a long time ago." He shook his head. "That's not true ... I don't think I really saw it as something I needed to forgive. Admittedly, I was hurt and pissed off for a long time, but most of my anger was directed at myself not you." He paused but she only looked at him as though she'd lost the thread of the conversation. "I left you," he said firmly. "I left you with two babies when I knew you weren't coping. What kind of person does that?"

"You left so you could earn more money." Her defensive tone shocked him. "And you wanted us to go with you."

"And live *where*? I had no plan. Of course you couldn't go with me."

“It doesn’t mean it was okay for me to go off with someone else.”

Damian took a chair and moved it right beside hers before he sat, facing her. “Did you marry Anthony to get back at me for leaving?”

“No.” She chewed her bottom lip. “I was just scared, and he was there. I thought I was doing the best thing for Billy and Marty.”

“Okay, so can we just agree that we both made well-intentioned bad decisions and stop beating ourselves up about it?”

“It’s not so easy, given how things turned out. My decision hurt you *and* Anthony.” Tears pooled on her lower lids. “And myself too.”

He reached for her hand, cradling her fingers while trailing his thumb over her palm. “I love you,” he whispered. “I loved you from approximately the first day I met you and I never stopped.”

“You love me, but you don’t want to be with me?” She blinked away tears. “That’s the vibe I’ve been getting. I just don’t understand it.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to be with you. Of course I want to be with you.”

“But?”

“But I don’t think I’ll ever be enough for you.”

“Why on earth not?”

“Because I’m disorganised and unreliable. And you’re the exact opposite.”

“I don’t think you’re unreliable. Not at all. I can’t even imagine why you’d think that. I also don’t think you’re particularly disorganised.”

“Compared to you, I am.”

“Maybe,” she agreed with a small smile. “But my need to control certain aspects of my life isn’t something I particularly

like about myself. And you being disorganised sometimes doesn't bother me."

"It probably would if we were together."

She looked at him sternly. "You know that everything you say just sounds as though you don't want to be with me."

"I do want to be with you," he said. "I'm just scared of messing things up. I don't want to hurt you, and I don't want things to be any more confusing for the boys than they already are."

"The boys wouldn't need to know anything for now. We can take things slowly and see how it goes."

His chest fluttered with hope, but he dropped his chin to his chest, wondering if things really could work out.

"I love you," Amy said, squeezing his hand. "And I want to be with you. I don't know exactly how that will look, but I want us to try. If you want to."

His eyes met hers and he nodded. "We could start with me visiting you in Oxford sometimes. Maybe in the winter, when things are quiet for me here, I could come and spend more time with you."

She shifted to sit on his lap and ran her hand through his hair. "I think that would be a nice start."

His entire body fizzed with desire when her lips brushed against his.

"Where are the boys?" she asked, barely taking her lips from his.

"With Scarlett."

"How long for?"

"I don't know, but she's charging me by the minute."

Her hands trailed down his neck and over his shoulders while she eyed him seductively. "We should probably make the most of every minute then."



AMY'S final few days in Hope Cove went at lightning speed. When she wasn't with Lizzie, Emily and Scarlett, making plans for her new role in the business, she was snatching every spare minute she could with Damian and the boys. There were surfing sessions and beach time, and a lot of time spent hanging out at Damian's house. That was probably what Amy enjoyed the most – the relaxed moments of just being in each other's company and feeling completely at home.

The only frustrating thing was keeping their relationship from Marty and Billy. It put a limit on Amy and Damian's physical affection, which felt like a slow building torture for Amy. By the time the boys were in bed in the evenings, she practically pounced on Damian.

"Maybe we should just tell the boys," she said, on their final evening in Hope Cove. At just after midnight Damian was untangling his naked body from hers to go and sleep on the couch. Being left to sleep alone in his bed was something she'd endured the previous four evenings too.

"I thought we decided it was best to wait," he said, sitting on the edge of the bed and reaching for his boxer shorts.

"We did, but I didn't realise that would involve you sleeping on the couch."

"I don't want them to find us in bed together and be confused."

"I know," she said, unable to hide the disappointment in her voice. "I'd just really like to sleep beside you. After all those years of missing you it seems like such a waste."

"We'll tell them soon," Damian said, lifting the duvet and snuggling back down beside her. "Once we've figured everything out for ourselves. If we tell them now they'll have loads of questions that we won't be able to answer."

He made a good point. She couldn't deny that. Maybe it was unfair to tell the boys now when they didn't know how

exactly they were going to manage their relationship. Essentially it would be a long-distance relationship, and it was hard to imagine how that would look in the long run. Even the thought of it made her weary.

“I don’t want to leave tomorrow,” she whispered into his shoulder. “The summer has gone way too fast.”

“Tell me about it,” he replied, holding her tighter. “I’ll see you soon though.”

“The next three weeks will go too slowly.”

That’s when Damian planned to come and visit. His work would slow down then, and he also had people lined up to stay in his house for a few weeks, so it seemed like the perfect time. Amy would have worked her notice and the kids would be settled back into their school routine.

“You’ll be too busy for it to go slowly.” Gently, Damian stroked her hair, which made her immediately sleepy. “On top of finishing one job and starting another, you’ll also be house-hunting.”

She groaned quietly. “I forgot about that.”

“If you haven’t found anything before I get there, I can help you look.”

“Thanks. I’m hoping I find somewhere really quickly.” The thought of house-hunting didn’t appeal at all. Everyone knew moving was stressful, and she could do without extra stress at the moment. Damian didn’t respond but continued to lazily stroke her hair, apparently having forgotten about his plan to move to the couch. As her eyelids grew heavy, she murmured his name and asked if he’d sleep there with her.

“Yeah,” he said, shifting his weight and repositioning his head on the pillow.

She smiled into his chest. “Are you just waiting for me to fall asleep before you sneak out?”

“No,” he said, his smile evident in the soft lilt of his voice. “I’m too comfortable. I’ll get up early, or make up some story for the kids if they ask questions.”

Every muscle in her body relaxed and she fell quickly into a blissful slumber.

CHAPTER 42



Returning to Oxford wasn't quite the wrench Amy had built it up to be. Diving straight back into the school and work routines was busy enough, and she also had a few house viewings as well as embarking on decluttering the house to prepare for downsizing. With all that on her plate she barely had time to contemplate much else.

Missing Damian also wasn't as heart-wrenching as she'd expected. After spending years missing him, a few weeks apart felt relatively easy, and her excitement about seeing him again overshadowed any negative feelings about the situation.

"Is Daddy here yet?" Marty asked, dashing out of school on Monday afternoon, three weeks after they'd returned to Oxford.

"Not yet, but he's on his way." Amy gave Marty a quick hug and he slipped his hand into hers as they set off on the walk home.

"What time will he get here?" Billy asked eagerly, falling into step at her other side.

"Soon, I hope." She'd felt impatient for his arrival all day, which was annoying since it was her first official day working for Hope Cove Press. The bulk of her morning had been spent on a video call with her new colleagues, which had left her feeling inspired and motivated to jump straight into the tasks she'd been given. It was difficult to concentrate, though, when Damian popped into her head every five minutes.

“How long is he going to stay at our house?” Marty asked, pulling on her hand.

Amy frowned, bracing herself to supply vague replies to their questions. “Maybe a few weeks,” she said. “He doesn’t have much work on in Hope Cove now, so he can stay for a little while.”

Billy’s eyes held a hint of suspicion. “But he’s not going to live with us forever?”

“No.” Apparently her attempts to explain the situation hadn’t been effective so far. Possibly because she wasn’t clear on the situation herself. “But he’ll be at our house a lot more now.”

“Because Anthony doesn’t live with us any more?” Marty asked.

“Partly,” she said.

“So you need someone else to help you?” Billy said innocently.

“Not really, no. I don’t *need* help.”

Marty dragged his feet as usual, a weight on Amy’s arm. “When I talked to Daddy on the phone, he said he was coming to help you because you’ve got a new job and you need some help for a while.”

“Yes.” Internally, she groaned, wishing they’d just told the boys the truth. “It’s always good to have help and support, isn’t it? Anyway, shall we hurry up in case Daddy is already waiting for us?”

She’d only said it to change the subject and get Marty to move faster, but when they rounded the last corner onto their road, a figure was perched on their garden wall.

Amy’s heart sped up as the boys dashed away from her, crying out in delight as they ran.

It was an effort not to fling herself at Damian as the boys did, and once again she wished they’d told the boys the truth about what was going on. That way, she’d have been able to greet him as affectionately as she wanted to, instead of settling

for the tight embrace he gave her. After being impatient to see him, it felt anticlimactic.

“How was the drive?” Amy asked, sounding stilted as she opened the door.

“Fine,” he replied, grinning down at the boys who bustled around him and his bag, making it hard to move in the hallway.

“Why don’t you go and wash your hands?” Amy instructed the boys. “Then you can have a snack and play with Daddy. Off you go.”

As soon as they were out of sight, Amy stepped into Damian’s personal space and pushed her lips to his. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her eagerly against him.

“I missed you,” he murmured against her lips.

“I missed you too.” She didn’t want to talk, she just wanted to kiss him and was aware that she probably only had seconds before the boys returned.

Damian must have been thinking the same as he discreetly drew back.

“I was thinking we should just tell them,” Amy said in a rush. “It seems daft not to. I don’t want us to have to sneak around.”

“It’s not really sneaking around.”

She frowned. “I’d like to be able to kiss you when I feel like it without checking the coast is clear. And it’d be nice not to have to restrain myself every time I want to touch you.”

The corner of Damian’s lip twitched in sync with his left eyebrow and Amy knew exactly where his mind had gone. She swatted at his arm and mock-scowled.

“What?” He laughed. “Not my fault you have problems restraining yourself around me. Maybe this will be a good lesson in self-control.”

She sneered at him playfully. “Maybe that’s not a lesson I want.”

His hand slipped around her waist, pulling her back to him. “We’ll tell them soon, okay?”

“Okay.” She draped her arms around his shoulders. “Does this mean you’ll be sleeping in the spare room instead of my bed?”

He crinkled his nose. “I was thinking about that. They don’t understand about sex anyway. I can just tell them I’m sleeping with you because it’s the comfiest bed or something. I don’t think they’ll question it.”

“They’ll definitely agree with you that it’s the comfiest bed.”

Happy that she wouldn’t have to endure sleeping in a separate bed to him, she swept a kiss over his lips then moved away at the sound of Billy’s heavy footfalls. He grabbed at Damian’s hand and dragged him off to play.

With Damian there, the whole atmosphere in the house changed, removing the empty feeling that had lingered for so long.

Having Damian there for the morning routine and school run the following day felt pretty surreal too. Once they were back home and alone, Amy made coffees and took them through to the living room, intent on having a proper chat with Damian before she hid away in the office to get some work done. Standing in his denim shorts and faded blue T-shirt with the logo for the surf shack, he looked utterly out of place amid the elegant decor in varying shades of cream and beige.

His eyes were on the painting hanging above the fireplace. “Interesting artwork,” he remarked, tilting his head.

“Hmm.” She’d always hated it and wasn’t even sure what there was to say about a tangle of green vines depicted on canvas.

“Anthony didn’t want it?” Damian asked, turning and taking a mug from her.

She shook her head, really not interested in discussing the picture. "It's mine." A gift from Anthony which he'd somehow got into his head that she'd love. She hadn't the heart to tell him otherwise.

"It suits the room," Damian said, then sat down on the plush cream couch.

Amy's eyes swept the room, wondering what his comment meant. "I've been thinking," she said, taking a seat beside him and deciding to move the conversation on. "Why don't we just tell the kids what's really going on between us?"

He set his mug on the low coffee table. "We agreed we'd wait and tell them when everything is a bit more settled. So they're not confused."

"I think they're confused now. You being here for apparently no reason is confusing for them."

Damian shrugged. "Then why don't you tell them you're moving house and I'm here to help you look for somewhere, and to help you move. They wouldn't question that."

He'd suggested the same thing before, but Amy hadn't been keen. "I don't want to tell them about the house until I've actually found somewhere. There's so much uncertainty with buying a house. I don't want the kids on that rollercoaster with me." She felt a jolt in her stomach as a thought occurred to her. "Is that the same reason you don't want to tell the boys about us? Are you waiting to see if it actually works out?"

"Don't be daft," he said, decimating her fears with a look. "Of course it's going to work out. I'm just not sure about the details. Will I move to Oxford permanently or split my time between here and Hope Cove?"

"I guess you'll split your time, won't you?" Amy couldn't imagine him giving up his life in Hope Cove entirely.

"I don't know." He reached for his coffee again. "I want to be with you and the boys. All the time. Not just on a part-time basis."

"What about your business?"

“I’d have to find a job here.”

“You can’t give up the surf shack.”

“Maybe Jared or Sara would go into business with me. They could run the place most of the time and you, me and the kids can go down there for school holidays, and I can work then. I could find a job here for the rest of the time. Maybe just something part-time to keep me out of mischief. I’ll be able to rent out my house whenever I’m here, which will take the pressure off financially.”

“It all sounds a bit messy.” Ripples shuddered over Amy’s coffee when she sighed. “If it weren’t for the boys being so settled in school, I’d say it made more sense for us to live in Hope Cove.”

Damian cocked an eyebrow.

“It would be such an upheaval for Marty and Billy,” she said in a rush. “Marty really isn’t good with change. Besides, it would also mean taking them away from Anthony. I don’t think it would be good for them.”

Damian offered his palms defensively. “I never even considered it. I know the boys are settled here. Moving would be unfair to them.”

Amy ignored the voice in her head that said moving them from the city to an idyllic coastal village probably didn’t really fall under the category of unfair. It would be an adjustment, there was no doubt about that, but in the long term it wouldn’t necessarily be a bad thing.

That kind of thinking was entirely selfish, though. Moving to Hope Cove would be great for Amy. A fresh start in a place where she already had a job and friends was very appealing. The sea views weren’t something to turn her nose up at either.

No, it was definitely selfish. The best thing for Marty and Billy would be to stay in the school they love with their friends around them and with Anthony nearby. Her fresh start would take the form of a new house, a new job, and best of all with Damian beside her.

Damian scooted over, taking her coffee and setting it aside so he could take her hands in his. "I'm going to be here a lot," he said. "That's the main thing. I'll start looking at jobs this week and make decisions about the surf shack later. Sara and Jared will keep everything ticking over for now."

"Everything feels so uncertain," Amy said.

"Which is why it's best to hold off on telling the boys anything before we really know what's going on."

"I suppose you have a point, but I think they'd just be happy at us being together. They wouldn't care about the details."

"Let's just wait a little while," he said, inching closer and slipping his arms around her waist. "I'll look at the job market and we'll look at more houses. In a week or two, we'll probably have firmer plans, then we can tell the boys."

"Okay," she relented, as his mouth closed in on hers and he pushed her back onto the couch. She let herself enjoy his languid kisses for a couple of minutes before bringing things to a halt. "It's my first week of a new job," she told him, fighting her way out from under him. "I can't spend my time kissing you on the couch."

"How about having sex with me in a bed?"

She grabbed the nearest cushion and smacked it against his head, laughing. "I don't think that's what Hope Cove Press is paying me for."

"Which is a real shame," Damian said mockingly. "You should see if they'll tweak your job description."

"I'm going to hide away in the office," she said, picking up her coffee to take with her.

"You have an office?" Damian asked, his eyes darting around as though he'd missed it.

"Anthony's old office," she said, tipping her chin towards the door at the other end of the living room.

His eyes flickered with realisation. "I put my head in there and thought it was a library, but Marty referred to it as

Anthony's den."

"Yes." Amy cringed, having always hated that Anthony referred to it as the den. "It's a library slash office, I guess. He always called it his den."

"Essentially, it's a posh man cave."

"I guess," she said, making a mental note to remind Anthony to come and sort through his books. "Anyway," she said decisively. "I'm going to work, so you'll need to find something to occupy yourself. Also Bernadette will be here in half an hour, so try not to get in her way."

"Bernadette?"

"The cleaner. She's lovely but quite fierce if you get in her way."

"I might take myself off out for a walk," he said.

"Good idea." She gave him a quick peck. "I'll see you later."

CHAPTER 43



Setting off from Amy's house, Damian's vague plan was to walk the mile and a half into the centre and familiarise himself with Oxford again. Apparently, his subconscious mind had other ideas, and it didn't take long for him to stray off course.

Before he knew it, he was standing outside the block of flats he'd lived in with Amy seven years ago. He frowned as he looked up at the dingy concrete building. A middle-aged guy sat on the front steps with a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other, making the difference between Amy's current residence and this place even more stark.

Damian moved a little, to stand under the window of the first-floor flat that had been Marty and Billy's first home. Memories came back to him in a rush, and he could almost hear Amy screaming at him while he paced with a crying Marty. Often, the neighbours would bang on the walls to add to the din. It had felt like constant noise, and the only respite he'd got was going to the job he loathed.

Inhaling a steady breath, he decided that dwelling on the past wouldn't do him any good. Things would be different this time. He and Amy and the boys would be a family again and it would be good. They'd be happy and not living in a haze of stress as they'd done before.

He set off again, pulling out his phone as he realised he really didn't know Oxford very well any more and could do with some pointers for how to kill the time until the boys got

out of school. After firing off a quick message to Jack, his phone rang almost immediately.

“You’re in Oxford!” Jack said excitedly. “I can tell you all the best places to go.”

“More like he can tell you all the best bars,” Emily called in the background.

“I can definitely tell you the best bars,” Jack agreed. “But I know other places too. First, you need to visit my uncle, Clive. He has a café by the river, near Folly Bridge. They make the most amazing toasted paninis. Tell him I sent you.”

“You need to go to the castle as well,” Emily said, then told Damian all about her time working there as a tour guide.

By the time he got off the phone, Damian was armed with a list of places to visit and a smile on his face from Jack and Emily’s infectious enthusiasm. In fact, he had enough sightseeing suggestions to last him a week, which ended up being what he did when he wasn’t scouring the internet for jobs or viewing houses with Amy. He was nervous about getting under her feet when she was working, so he tried to be out of the house as much as possible when the boys were at school.

On Friday, he walked Billy and Marty to school, then crept back into the house as quietly as he could, only to find Amy standing in the middle of the kitchen with her hands on her hips.

“You don’t have to tiptoe around,” she said. “It’s your home too.”

He almost choked as he stifled a laugh. It was absolutely not his home. He’d never felt less at home anywhere in his life.

“I mean, you’re living here,” Amy said awkwardly. “You can make yourself at home.”

He slid onto one of the high stools at the huge kitchen island. “I just don’t want to disturb you when you’re working.”

“It’s fine.” She picked her phone from the counter and clicked into the property website. “A house just came up today,” she said, passing him the phone. “It looks good, and it’s close to the school.”

Swiping through the photos, Damian nodded approvingly.

“What do you think?” Amy asked, her brows drawing together. “It looks good, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.” He squinted at the phone and the three-bedroom semi-detached, which looked very similar to one of the houses they’d looked at the previous morning, and which Amy had taken an instant dislike to. Since there hadn’t seemed to be anything wrong with it, Damian suspected Amy’s standards were just too high. To be fair, given the house she currently lived in, anything was going to seem like a hefty step down.

“I’ve just emailed the estate agent,” Amy said and took her phone back.

“Did you think any more about the places we saw yesterday?” he asked. “They were both pretty nice.”

“They didn’t feel right,” she said.

He swivelled on the stool. “We’ll find somewhere.”

He tried not to dwell on his inkling that Amy didn’t actually want to move and that in the end she’d take Anthony up on his offer to let her stay in the house. His eyes darted, telling himself that it was just a house and if Amy was happy there he could probably get used to it if necessary. Hopefully, it wouldn’t come to that.

“Jack’s uncle just called me while I was walking back from dropping the kids off,” he said, happy to change the subject. He’d fallen into an easy rapport with Clive when he’d met him at The Old Boathouse, the quaint little cafe by the river. He’d been back a couple of times during the week to sample his delicious sandwiches and pass the time of day with him.

“How come?” Amy asked.

“He offered me a job.”

“At his cafe?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh.” Amy smiled weakly and turned away to put a mug under the coffee machine.

“The only other job I’ve seen which interested me was in a sports shop.”

She bobbed her head but didn’t turn around.

“Amy?”

“Yeah.” She glanced over her shoulder for long enough for him to catch the gleam of disappointment in her eyes.

“I don’t have any qualifications,” he said earnestly. “What sort of job did you think I was going to get?”

“I don’t know.” She waited for the coffee to finish whirring into the mug, then stirred in the milk.

“Sorry,” Damian said. “But surely you knew I wouldn’t be getting some fancy office job where I have to wear a suit and that pays decent money. Anyway, I already told you I’ll rent my house out so I’ll get money that way.”

The teaspoon clattered on the counter before Amy swung around. “I don’t care about the money.”

“You’re clearly not impressed by the idea of me working in a shop or a cafe.”

“I don’t care where you work.” She crossed the room and stood directly in front of him. “All I care about is whether or not you’re happy.”

“I think working in the cafe will be fine,” he said. “Clive seems like a good bloke, and I reckon there’d be a lot of flexibility. Plus, it’s really sociable which will suit me.”

“Okay,” she said, trying to smile before her chin wobbled and tears filled her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” He shifted on the stool and pulled her between his legs.

“Nothing.” She shook her head. “I honestly don’t have anything against you working in the cafe if you think you’ll enjoy it.” Pausing, she sucked in a shuddering breath. “I just feel bad that you worked so hard to build up the surf shack and now I’m taking you away from it.”

“You’re not.” He pulled back and took her face in his hands. “I want to be here with you and the boys. You’re not taking anything from me. You’re giving me everything.”

She nodded and licked a tear from her upper lip. “Okay,” she whispered. After giving him a lingering kiss she went to fetch her coffee.

“I should get some work done,” she said. “Then I can finish early today. We can do something with the boys after school.”

“Sounds good.” His eyes were drawn to her phone that began to buzz around the island. “It’s Anthony,” he told her.

“Oh.” She winced. “I forgot. He messaged me earlier asking if he can pick the boys up today and have them for the night. He’d bring them back tomorrow evening. I wanted to check with you before I replied.”

“Fine by me,” he said with a shrug.

She flashed him a smile then swiped her finger across the phone screen and wandered into the living room as she greeted Anthony.

Damian listened in on the conversation but couldn’t make out much since he couldn’t hear Anthony’s side of it. When Amy said goodbye he waited for her to come back and relay the conversation but he could see her fixed to the spot in the centre of the living room.

Wandering over he caught her staring pensively at the hideous painting above the fireplace.

“Everything all right?” he asked.

“Yeah.” Her smile was part grimace as she met his gaze. “Anthony is going to introduce the boys to Christina tomorrow and he wondered if they could come over here for a bit ...”

“Who?”

“All of them. Anthony, Christina and the boys.”

Damian took a moment to digest the information.

“Anthony suggested a barbecue since the weather should be good.”

“Oh.” Damian’s eyes widened. “So like a whole meal together?”

“Yeah.” Amy scratched at her forehead. “He thinks it would be good for Billy and Marty to see us all spending time together.”

“Right.” Damian grinned widely.

“What’s so funny?”

“The idea of having dinner with your ex-husband and his new girlfriend. That’s what’s funny. It’s the weirdest double date ever.”

“It’s not a double date,” Amy insisted. “It’s the four of us having dinner together for the sake of the kids.”

“It’s still kind of funny.” He slipped his arms around her waist.

“You’re okay with it?” She asked, frowning.

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “Why not? It might be interesting to see who he’s replaced you with.”

“Damian!” she growled while giving him a playful shove.

He clamped his arms around her so she couldn’t wriggle away. “It was a joke.”

“You have a very inappropriate sense of humour,” she told him, but relaxed into his embrace. “So, I’ll tell Anthony that’s fine.”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.” She gave him a quick peck, then raised her phone as she moved away from him. “Oh, I also have a reply from the estate agent. We can look at the house tomorrow.”

“So that’s two houses we’re viewing tomorrow?”

“Yes. Is that okay for you?” She went to retrieve her coffee then headed for her office.

“That’s great for me,” he replied as his gaze snagged on the world’s worst painting once again.

As far as he was concerned the sooner they found somewhere else the better. Then maybe he’d stop feeling as though he was living in another man’s space.

CHAPTER 44



It was a long time since Amy had felt so content with her life. Having Damian around was wonderful, and her new job left her feeling utterly refreshed. With Emily now officially on maternity leave, there were an increasing number of tasks assigned to her, and she felt like a necessary cog in the business.

Her only niggling concern was that Damian was the one making all the sacrifices for their relationship. He swore he'd be happy working at the cafe so she supposed she just needed to accept that.

There was also the house issue hanging over them but she tried to think positively. All she had to do was find a place that she vaguely liked and make the leap.

But the first place they looked around on Saturday left her feeling utterly flat. Which meant she really had to like the place they were viewing late that afternoon.

In terms of layout, the end-of-terrace house wasn't dissimilar to Damian's house in Hope Cove. But it was a little bigger, with three bedrooms, an extra bathroom and a more spacious kitchen, so that should all have been positives for Amy. The vibe was nothing like Damian's house, though. The current owners were either minimalists or had done a great job of hiding their knickknacks.

Following the estate agent around, Amy nodded frequently and made the odd noise of approval. She wasn't really listening. What was the point when she'd had a bad feeling

about the house before she'd even stepped inside? The vibe was all wrong, and if the vibe was wrong how could she live there? It had been the same with all the other houses.

"This room would be good for Billy and Marty," Damian said when they entered the second bedroom.

Amy drifted to the window, checking out the view of other people's gardens. Not as good as a sea view, that was for sure, but she supposed it wasn't terrible.

"What do you think?" Damian asked, slipping an arm around her waist while the estate agent wandered back to the landing.

Amy scrunched her nose up. "I don't know." Except, she did know. She hated it. She just didn't want to say that since Damian seemed quite taken with it.

"The boys could have their own rooms eventually," Damian said. "Though I guess there'll be some arguments over who gets the bigger one."

Stepping away from him, Amy shook her head, hating the way he spoke as though it was a done deal. "I don't think it's right," she said, quietly but firmly. Then she thanked the estate agent for showing them round and made a hasty exit.

"What was wrong with that one?" Damian asked, as they walked towards the car.

"I just didn't get a good vibe," she said.

"It's close to the school," Damian said. "And it's within our budget. I think it's the best we've seen."

He was right there – it was the best of the bunch. But she still didn't like it. "I'll think about it."

"I guess it won't be on the market for long." They stopped at the car, and Damian took her hand. "Even if it doesn't feel quite right, we can redecorate it and make it nice."

She tried to smile, and gave him a quick kiss before walking around to the driver's side. His eyes were on her, and she knew he was waiting for a response.

“We need to hurry up,” she said. “Anthony and the boys will be coming soon and I need to do some food prep before they arrive.”

They stayed silent for the drive home. Amy went straight to the kitchen to make a start on dinner. After pulling out the salad bowl, she got to work cutting veg.

“Need me to do anything?” Damian asked, hovering behind her.

Amy shook her head. “No. I only need to make the salad. Anthony is bringing the meat. I’ve got drinks in. I think everything is under control.”

“Why are you so stressed then?” He planted his hands on her shoulders but she failed to relax into his massage.

“I’m not stressed.”

Gently he kneaded her muscles. “All this tension in your shoulders says otherwise.”

She stopped chopping the cucumber and tipped her head to rest against his hand. “Do you think this is going to be really awkward?”

“Having Anthony and Christina here?”

“Yes. It’s weird, isn’t it?”

“It’ll be fine.”

“But what if we don’t get on or something? What if Christina’s a complete bitch?”

“I doubt it.” Damian lowered his head to plant a kiss at the side of her neck. “Anthony’s always had good taste in women, I’m sure she’s nice.”

Amy rolled her eyes and gave him a gentle nudge in the ribs with her elbow.

“She must also be a nice person to agree to come over here. If you’re worried it’s going to be weird, imagine how she must feel. It must be more uncomfortable for her than anyone. At least we all know each other.”

“But maybe she’s a weirdo, because I can’t figure out why she’d agree to it.”

“Maybe because she loves Anthony,” Damian suggested. “And it’s clearly important to him that we all get along.”

“What if we don’t though? You and Anthony have never really spent time together. Not properly.”

“We were fine when we went surfing.”

“That’s true.” She took a calming breath. “Why am I freaking out about this so much?”

“I don’t know.” He gave her shoulders another squeeze. “Are you sure you don’t want me to take over the salad? Or shall I get you a glass of wine? That might help.”

The doorbell rang before she could respond and her heart rate went through the roof. Being so nervous about the evening seemed silly, but she just couldn’t shake the feeling that somehow it would end up an unmitigated disaster.

CHAPTER 45



The few deep breaths Amy took while Damian went to open the door, didn't do much to calm her down.

"Hello!" Anthony's voice boomed along the hallway as she walked out from the kitchen island.

"Hi!" Amy pasted on a smile and ruffled Marty's hair as he sidled up to her.

"We went to the river and went on a boat."

"That sounds fun," Amy said, her lips fixed in a tight line as she cast her gaze at the dark-haired woman walking towards her.

She extended her hand to Amy. "It's lovely to meet you," she said.

Billy jumped between them. "Christina is Anthony's girlfriend," he practically shouted. "They work together. Sometimes she sleeps at his house, but not all the time." He paused for breath. "She's really good at rowing. Way better than Anthony."

"Hey!" Anthony said affectionately.

"She is!" Billy said.

"She was better at steering the boat," Marty agreed, before he and Billy made a bolt for the living room.

"You took the boys on a rowing boat?" Amy's smile felt entirely unnatural. "That was brave."

“I’m surprised you’re not all soaked,” Damian remarked. “Billy and a rowing boat sounds like a recipe for disaster.”

“They were actually very well behaved on the boat,” Anthony said, then grimaced. “Apart from when Billy wanted to simulate a storm.”

“They were very good,” Christina said kindly. “You’ve got lovely kids. They’re great fun.”

Damian raised an eyebrow. “If by great fun you mean hyperactive and exhausting, you’ve got them pretty well summed up.”

Amy migrated back into the kitchen. “Can I get anyone a drink?”

“I can sort drinks,” Damian said at the same time as Anthony volunteered for the job. They both looked slightly awkward.

“I brought the meat,” Anthony said, setting a bag on the counter. “The boys have been complaining they’re hungry for a while now.”

“That’s nothing new.” Damian wandered towards the patio doors. “I should have got the barbecue started already. I didn’t think about it.”

“It’s gas,” Anthony told him, picking up the bag of meat. “We’ll be cooking in no time.”

Damian shook his head. “You can’t beat an actual fire.”

“There is fire,” Anthony said, casting a playful glance over his shoulder as he passed Damian. “And once you’ve seen this grill, you’ll soon change your mind about gas barbecues. It’s the best thing I’ve ever bought.”

With a snort of derision, Damian followed him outside, leaving Amy wondering if she needed to go out and act as a buffer between them.

“Can I help with anything?” Christina asked when Amy went back to making the salad.

“I don’t think there’s much to do.” She scraped chopped tomatoes from the cutting board into the salad bowl, then glanced around the kitchen, wondering what she’d forgotten and feeling suddenly self-conscious. As her gaze snagged on the table outside, she moved to get plates. “I’d intended to have everything ready when you got here. But we ended up in a rush after house-hunting this afternoon.”

“We’re also a bit early,” Christina said, pushing her hip into the countertop. “How did the house-hunting go?”

“It was fine,” Amy said vaguely. “The place today was okay, but nothing I instantly fell in love with.”

“These things can take time.” Christina’s eyes roamed the room. “It must be hard to leave this place. It’s beautiful.”

“Thanks,” Amy said, feeling fraudulent for taking credit for it. She busied herself getting cutlery while Christina drifted over to the living room in response to Billy calling out to her.

Watching the boys chat easily with her, Amy paused in what she was doing. A feeling of unease wound its way around her spine. If things between Christina and Anthony were serious, the boys would probably spend a fair amount of time with her. Amy’s ribs tightened at the thought. Was this how Damian felt watching Anthony with Billy and Marty?

Burying her emotions, she moved outside and focused on setting the table until the conversation by the grill drew her attention. Anthony was exhorting the advantages of a gas barbecue to Damian, whose frown had softened dramatically. Rather than rolling his eyes while Anthony discussed the environmental impact of both coal and gas cooking, he looked quietly intrigued.

“It definitely heats up quicker,” Damian said, holding a hand above the grill plate.

“The heat is more even too,” Anthony told him.

Damian nodded appreciatively then talked about getting drinks and moved back inside.

“The boys really took to Christina,” Anthony said, once they were alone on the terrace.

“That’s good.” Pausing, in laying out cutlery she took another fortifying breath. It really *was* good that the boys liked Christina and Amy should definitely be happy about it.

“I tried to explain that she’s my girlfriend,” Anthony said. “I think they were pretty accepting of that, but it’s hard to know what’s going on in their heads, isn’t it?”

“Hmm.” She continued arranging cutlery and didn’t look up.

“You still haven’t talked to them about you and Damian?”

“No.” Her shoulders tensed. “Not yet.”

“Aren’t they confused about why he’s here? What do they think is going on between the two of you?”

“They think he’s here for a visit while things are quiet with his job. We wanted to wait until our plans were firmer with the house and everything, but we’ll tell them soon.” At least she hoped they would. She just needed Damian to get over whatever reservations he had about telling them.

“Are you okay?” Anthony asked gently, making her realise she’d stopped what she was doing again.

“Yes. House-hunting is frustrating, that’s all.”

“You didn’t see anything you liked?”

She gave a one-shouldered shrug. “Nothing I loved. Do you think I’m being fussy, wanting to wait and find somewhere that I love?”

“No.” His gaze drifted to the upstairs windows at the back of the house. “You can still stay here if you want. I know you think the mortgage would be too much for you, but we’d figure something out if that’s what you want.”

Amy tensed again. Partly because she definitely didn’t want to stay there, and partly because she found his offer to help a little condescending. “We’ll find somewhere,” she said tightly and in a tone that signalled she didn’t want to discuss it further.

Laughter drifted out from the kitchen and she went back in to find Damian popping the tops of beer bottles while grinning at Christina across the counter. He was always so at ease with people and Amy had never been more jealous of that particular trait as she was now.

He slid a beer over to Christina, then leaned his forearms on the counter and punctuated whatever he was saying with a series of sharp taps on the work surface as he continued smiling animatedly.

“Hey,” he said, straightening when he caught sight of Amy. “I was just telling Christina about me losing the boys yesterday while we played hide and seek.” He shook his head, but his amused expression remained. “I finally found them in the back of a cupboard playing on their iPads.” He tipped his head towards Christina. “So don’t be fooled by the boys being on their best behaviour for one day.”

He turned to Amy. “Beer?” he asked, holding one out to her.

She took it and drank a few gulps, while Damian went back outside to bring Anthony a beer.

Left alone with Christina, Amy took another swig of her beer while searching for conversation. After an awkward pause they both started to speak at once, but were also interrupted by Billy who ran in and pulled on Amy’s hand.

“Can I have mustard on my hot dog?” he asked cheerfully.

She squeezed his hand. “You don’t like mustard.”

“Christina said the best way to eat hot dogs is with mustard and ketchup.”

“Oh.” Amy shrugged. “You can try it if you want.”

Billy’s eyes darted to Christina. “Can I have a bite of your hotdog first to see if I like it?”

“Yes,” Christina said, while Amy simultaneously said “no.”

With wide eyes, Billy looked between the two of them.

“Sorry,” Christina said in a rush. “That’s probably bad table manners. How about you try some mustard on a little bit of your hot dog, and then decide if you like it?”

“Okay,” Billy said, then bounded away again.

“Sorry.” Christina grimaced. “I promise I have good table manners really.”

“I wasn’t at all worried about manners,” Amy said. “I was more concerned about you ending up with Billy’s drool all over your dinner.”

“It’s fine. I have two little nieces so I’m used to drool.”

“How old are they?” Amy asked, thankful for the neutral topic of conversation.

“Six and three. And my sister is pregnant with her third so I try and help her out as much as possible at the moment.”

Amy smiled, grateful that Christina seemed to be a nice person. It seemed silly now that she’d even considered Anthony might have chosen someone with more of an evil witch vibe.

After a few gulps of her beer, Christina let out a long breath, then seemed to catch herself and looked at Amy sheepishly. “Sorry. That was like the world’s most dramatic sigh. I’ve just been quite stressed about meeting you, but you seem nice which is a relief. Anthony said you were nice, but I just wasn’t sure how this meeting was going to go.”

“I’ve been really stressed about it too,” Amy confided.

“Really?” Christina’s shoulders visibly relaxed. “I had it in my head that you might hate me, because Anthony mentioned that he’d told you that we went out a few times while you and he were still together.” She slapped a hand across her forehead. “Oh, god. Why did I say that? We weren’t seeing each other or anything. We were just friends. We really were.”

“It’s okay,” Amy said, feeling pretty sorry for Christina as she floundered. “Things weren’t good between Anthony and I for a long time before you came along.”

“I’m glad you don’t hate me on sight.” Christina smiled awkwardly. “And it is nice to meet you even though I was terrified by the prospect.”

Amy picked at the label on her bottle. “When I was freaking out earlier, Damian pointed out that this evening would be way more daunting for you. I’m not sure I’d have agreed to it if I were in your position.”

“I did think about chickening out a few times,” she said. “But it was important to Anthony. He absolutely adores Billy and Marty. He really thinks of them as his own kids... you know that, of course. But the past six months have been so hard for him.” She stopped abruptly and her cheeks flushed bright red. “Sorry, that wasn’t meant as a dig at you. I just wanted to support him, that’s why I’m here.”

“I know it’s been hard on him,” Amy replied kindly. “And I’m glad he’s had you to support him.”

This time it was Marty who interrupted them, complaining about Billy taking the toy he’d been playing with. Once she’d dealt with that mini drama they all moved outside to enjoy the mild weather.

Apparently, Damian and Anthony had bonded over the barbecue and were more relaxed around each other over dinner than Amy had ever imagined them being. Damian also had Christina enthralled as he told her about the surf shack. In return, she told him about her experience of learning to surf while she was backpacking in Australia.

Smiling widely as Anthony recounted his recent surfing experience to Christina, Amy felt utterly relaxed. All her worry had apparently been for nothing and the dinner was a resounding success.

Anthony and Christina didn’t linger after they’d eaten, seemingly wary of overstaying their welcome, but as they said their farewells at the front door, Amy could absolutely imagine more dinners together.

Once they’d left, Damian shooed the boys upstairs to get ready for bed, promising he’d be up soon to read to them.

Then he followed Amy into the kitchen and swept his arms around her as he nuzzled her neck, making her laugh.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” he said.

“No, it was surprisingly easy.”

“Christina seems nice.”

“I really like her.”

“I told you Anthony has good taste in women.” Extracting himself from her, he hopped up to sit on the kitchen counter.

“It’s weird seeing Anthony with someone else,” Amy blurted out without thought. She grimaced as soon as the words left her lips.

“How do you mean?” Damian asked.

“Nothing.” She shook her head and moved to begin loading the huge pile of dishes into the dishwasher. “Never mind. Ignore me.”

“Tell me,” Damian coaxed.

“No, I don’t even know what I meant.”

“Yes, you did. You’re just worried about upsetting me.”

“No.” She shook her head again.

“Were you jealous?” he asked, his features scrunching slightly. “You can tell me if you were.”

“It’s not really that I was jealous.” She abandoned the tidying up and went and parked herself between Damian’s thighs. “I love you,” she said, needing to iterate that before she went on. “I’ve always loved you. But...”

“But you loved him too?”

“Yes.” She felt her brows pull together. “Never in the same way that I loved you, but he was my husband. He was a huge part of my life and seeing him with someone else is...” She paused, searching for the right way to explain. “It’ll take some getting used to, that’s all.”

Damian nodded sagely. “You can tell me this stuff. It’s okay. I want us to be open with each other.”

“I want that too.” She took a deep breath, deciding it was as good a time as any to mention that she wanted them to also be honest and open with Billy and Marty about what was going on.

“Daddy!” Billy bellowed from upstairs. “We brushed our teeth and are ready for a story.”

“Coming!” he shouted back, then dropped a kiss on Amy’s forehead and slipped off the counter.

“Don’t fall asleep while you’re reading,” she said. “I still need to talk to you about something.”

“I’ll be right back,” he called over his shoulder as he took the stairs two at a time.

CHAPTER 46



The stairs creaked when Damian came down from putting the boys to bed. Amy was finishing off the tidying up and waited for him to appear in the kitchen. When he didn't, she wandered into the living room in search of him.

She didn't bother to question why he was standing staring at the painting above the mantelpiece and instead blurted out exactly what was on her mind.

"I need to tell the boys about us," she said.

Damian turned to look at her but didn't react.

"I know you think we should wait," she added quickly. "But I can't wait any longer. I need them to know we're together and that you're going to be living with us from now on. Partly because I hate the secrecy and partly because I'm terrified that the reason you don't want them to know is because you don't think this is going to work out."

Damian chewed on his bottom lip and eyed her intently.

"Is that what you think?" she demanded. "Do you think this isn't going to work out between us? Are you going to leave me again?"

"No." He shook his head and stepped into her personal space. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Why don't you want us to tell the boys then?"

He blew out a breath. "I wanted to wait because I thought you might get sick of me and decide you don't want me around."

“Don’t be silly.” She took his face in her hands, trying to figure out how he could ever think that.

“We can tell the boys,” he said. “But I need to talk to you about something first.”

“What?” Nerves tugged at her stomach and she felt slightly sick as Damian led her to sit on the couch.

“I hate that painting,” he said, tipping his head at it.

Her eyes roamed to the green vines in the picture while confusion wrinkled her forehead. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“I hate the painting and I also hate a lot of the furniture and furnishings in this house.”

Amy tilted her head. “But we’re looking for a new house.”

“Do you actually want to move though?”

“Yes,” she said slowly. “That’s why we’ve been house-hunting.”

“I know, but I get the feeling you’d rather stay here.”

“I don’t want to stay here,” she said, entirely confused by the conversation.

“Because it’s too expensive,” Damian said. “But I thought about it and if I sold my house—”

“No,” she said, cutting him off.

“I could also sell the surf shack—”

“Definitely not!”

“It’s fine. I don’t mind. I’d just need us to redecorate, that’s all.”

Tears filled Amy’s eyes and she wiped them away. “You’re not selling your house or the shack. And we’re not going to live here.”

“It’s honestly okay with me.” He took her hand and squeezed it gently. “I just want you to be happy.”

“I won’t be happy if we stay here.”

His eyebrows drew together. “I saw the way you looked at all the houses we looked around. Like you were comparing them to this place and finding everything lacking.”

“I did find them lacking,” she admitted, trying to smile. “But it wasn’t because I was comparing them to this place. I was comparing them to your house.”

“What?”

“If I could choose where to live I’d choose your house. Then I wouldn’t have to worry about making you miserable.”

“Moving to Oxford won’t make me miserable.”

“I think it will,” she said. “Not because I think you don’t love us enough. I just think the sea and surfing is a part of who you are. I love that about you. I always have.”

“I’ll still be in Hope Cove for the summers.”

Amy frowned. “It’s not only that I think *you’d* be happier there. I loved being in Hope Cove over the summer. When the four of us were at your house it just felt right. Like that’s where we’re supposed to be.”

Damian opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. “We talked about this ... about how a move would be too disruptive for the boys.”

“I know and I still don’t know if it’s the right thing for the boys. Could I really take them away from their school and their friends ... from Anthony?”

Damian’s thoughtful gaze was fixed on the floor. “There are schools in Devon,” he said with a shrug. “And they’d make new friends.”

“Yeah,” Amy said, her voice merely a whisper.

“I don’t think I can give impartial advice when it comes to Anthony.”

“I know.” She tilted her head back and sighed. “I don’t know what the best thing for Billy and Marty is. I wish...” She stopped, realising she’d almost said something utterly stupid.

“You wish what?”

“Nothing. I just wish I knew what to do for the best.”

Damian gave her one of his looks – as though he were reading her mind. “What were you going to say?”

“Nothing.” She couldn’t help but smile at the way he glared at her. “It’s just still a bit weird sometimes. Whenever there were any big decisions regarding the kids ...”

“You discussed it with Anthony?”

“Yes.” She swallowed hard. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” He pursed his lips. “Talk to him if you want.”

Amy studied his features, checking if he was being genuine.

“I’m serious,” he said. “Talk to Anthony about it. See what he thinks. Let’s face it, he probably knows Billy and Marty better than I do. And I don’t think he’d be vindictive. He’ll give you his honest opinion.”

Amy leaned in to plant a kiss on Damian’s cheek. “I love you,” she told him firmly. “And I don’t think Anthony does know Marty and Billy better than you, but I think I’ll feel better if I discuss it with him.”

“What happens if he’s against it?”

“He won’t be.” She was sure of it. “He’ll be upset, which will make me feel terrible, but he’ll tell me to do whatever makes me happy.”

Damian rolled his eyes dramatically. “You always have to pick the nice guys, don’t you?”

“Obviously not always.” With a smirk, she looked him up and down.

“You think you’re hilarious!” He slipped his arms around her waist to tickle her.

She laughed delightedly, not only from his fingers digging under her ribs but from relief at the conversation.

“Are you really thinking about moving to my place?” he asked when she relaxed into him.

“Yes. It sort of feels inevitable.”

He drew back and looked at her uncertainly. “That sounds as though you have no choice.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” She sagged against his chest. “More like that’s where we should have been all along.”

Damian tightened his arms around her and dropped a gentle kiss on her head. “I didn’t even think you liked my house. It’s a little different to what you’re used to.”

“That’s true,” she agreed, relaxing into his embrace. “But I don’t like this house. Not so much because of the furnishings, but because I’ve never been truly happy here.” She squeezed his hand. “I want something different.”

They fell into a thoughtful silence.

“Can I ask you a question?” Damian murmured after a moment.

“Mmm?”

“Is that picture supposed to be snakes or ropes?”

Amy drew back, shifting her gaze above the fireplace. “It’s vines.”

“Really?” He cocked his head, clearly unconvinced. “I thought it was snakes hiding in leaves. But from the stairs it looks like a pile of ropes with leaves on them.”

Amy frowned. “I always thought it was vines,” she said, moving to the centre of the room and gazing up at it. “But maybe you’re right about it being snakes.”

“Sorry.” Standing beside her, Damian draped an arm around her shoulders. “I didn’t mean to ruin it for you.”

“To be honest, you might have redeemed it a little. If I look at it as snakes, I might hate it slightly less. Which is odd because I’m not a fan of snakes.”

“You hate the painting?” Damian asked.

“With a passion.”

“I thought it was yours.”

“It is. Anthony bought it for me. I had to pretend to like it so I wouldn’t offend him.”

Damian’s shoulders collapsed forwards. “Thank god for that.”

“Why?” she asked, chuckling at his expression.

“Because I love you,” he said casually. “But I don’t know if I love you enough to live with that monstrosity hanging in my house.”

Grinning, Amy gave his hip a hard shove with her own. “I’m sorry to tell you it’s going to have to come with us anyway.”

“Really? You’re going to hang that at my place to avoid offending Anthony?”

“Yes.”

“Surely he won’t know if we hang it or not.”

“He might ask about it. Or the kids might mention it.”

“Maybe it could have an accident?” Damian suggested. “Get damaged in transit or fall into a fire or the sea or something.”

Amy gave his hip another nudge but couldn’t help but smile. “Sorry. You’re going to have to figure out a way to hate the painting less, or love me more.”

“I suppose I could get the kids to draw eyes on the snakes. That might improve it.”

“Don’t you dare!”

Damian stepped behind her, circling his arms tightly around her middle and resting his chin on her shoulder. “We’re going to have to figure out some way to make the picture more bearable,” he whispered against her cheek. “Because there’s no way I could love you more than I already do.”

CHAPTER 47



The following four weeks were an absolute whirlwind. Amy couldn't recall being as busy or as happy in her life. Once Anthony had given his seal of approval to the Hope Cove plans, Amy wanted to move forward as quickly as possible. When they got confirmation that the boys could move schools after the half-term break, it was all systems go with packing up the house and their life in Oxford.

Damian made several trips to Hope Cove to move their things, as well as many trips to the local tip to offload a lot of accumulated junk. He also enthusiastically organised selling many unwanted items online.

Anthony helped too, and more often than not he had Christina with him. She was keen to lend a hand, whether by helping Amy sort and box things, or by taking the boys out of the way.

It didn't take long for Amy to see that she would be a permanent fixture in Anthony's life. Not only was it a relief that Christina was the sort of person who would be good for Anthony, but also someone who Amy got along with, which would make life much easier.

When moving day came around Amy was exhausted. It was the end of the half-term holiday and she woke to an empty house. Void not just of most of the furniture and furnishings, but of people too. Billy and Marty had spent the last couple of nights at Anthony's place, and Damian had gone back to Hope Cove the previous weekend. He had surf lessons lined up for the school holidays, and Amy had reassured him she was fine

to finish up the remainder of the packing, then drive down with the boys at the end of the week.

With only a few items of furniture left, the house felt cold and echoey when Amy waited for Anthony to bring the boys over. Her car was all packed up ready for them to head to Hope Cove, but first she had to tackle her farewells. Saying goodbye to Anthony would be emotional, she knew that. But she'd see him again.

Leaving the house was a goodbye that she hadn't expected to be so sentimental about. She was closing the door on an entire chapter of her life, and despite it not always being what she'd wanted, there'd been a lot of happy times, and memories that she'd cherish.

When Anthony arrived with the boys in the middle of the morning, Amy was thankful that Christina wasn't with him. It felt right that their final moments in the house should be just the four of them. They didn't linger, Anthony seeming even more emotional than Amy and keen to get the goodbyes over with.

Among prolonged hugs and kisses, they promised to see each other soon. Anthony suggested taking the boys for a few days during the Christmas holidays, which Amy didn't feel she could say no to.

Having a plan seemed to make the parting easier for Marty and Billy as well as for Anthony, so Amy decided not to worry about the fact that she should probably have run it by Damian before agreeing.

They managed the journey with only one rest stop, so they arrived earlier than Amy had anticipated. Knowing that Damian would still be down at the shack, she bypassed the house and continued along the lane to the carpark at Thurley beach. Billy and Marty had their heads bent over their iPads and didn't even register they'd arrived. Which meant Amy got a moment to admire her favourite view.

The sky was a piercing shade of blue and the sand seemed a brighter yellow under the intense sunlight. Waves churned white on the shore and the only signs that it wasn't a hot

summer's day were the coats and fleeces on the people on the beach.

Amy's blood pulsed harder as her gaze shifted to the surf shack. In front of the container, Damian stood with his hands nestled in the pocket of his hoodie, his hair billowing in the wind. He shifted his weight and she waited to see if he'd turn and catch her watching, but he only pulled his phone from his pocket. Seconds later, her phone buzzed with a message from him, instructing her to hurry up and get there. Another followed immediately saying he couldn't wait to see her.

"Boys!" she said. "We're here." *We're home*, she added quietly to herself while they tossed their iPads into the middle seat and flung open the doors.

Damian turned at the shouts of "Daddy", his face lighting up as he opened his arms to Billy and Marty.

With a silly smile stretched wide over her face, Amy followed the boys. Damian set the boys down when she got near and pulled her into an embrace while pressing his lips to hers.

"That is disgusting!" Billy announced.

"You'd better get used to it." Damian ruffled his hair. "I'm going to be kissing Mummy all the time."

Dancing around them, Billy stuck his tongue out and laughed. "Can I go inside and get a lollipop?"

Damian nodded. "You know where they are."

Marty lingered with his head pressed against Damian's hip. "Anthony's taking us to Disneyland for Christmas," he said, before wandering after his brother.

Damian raised an eyebrow. "Is he?"

"Sorry." Amy winced. "I should have asked you first. It was so hard for him to say goodbye to them this morning. He asked if he could take them and I said I thought it would be fine. After Christmas, obviously. Not *for* Christmas. And just for a few days."

“It’s fine by me,” Damian said, his hands resting casually on her hips.

“Really?”

“Yes. The boys get a treat and so do we – time to ourselves.” His eyes flashed with lust before his lips met hers again.

“I didn’t even think about that.” In the years she’d been married to Anthony, she’d never looked forward to the time they had as a couple when the boys were with Damian. She’d usually spent more time in the office. “That actually sounds like a very nice Christmas present.”

Damian kissed her again, cupping her face and making butterflies flutter in her stomach. She did a quick mental calculation on how long it would be until the boys were all tucked in bed and they’d get some time alone.

From the way Damian grumbled as he pulled away from her, she deduced he was having similar thoughts.

“Let’s get you home and unpacked,” he said, before going in search of the boys.

They’d just arrived at Damian’s place when Scarlett’s car pulled up behind Amy’s. The boys bounded straight over to her, and she crouched to hug them both.

“Hi,” Amy said, leaving Damian to unload the car while she greeted Scarlett. “It’s so good to see you.”

“You too.” Scarlett gave her a quick hug but was less enthusiastic than she was with the boys. “I’ve got loads of things to do today, but I wanted to come and see my favourite brats for a bit.”

“Hey!” Amy beamed. “You got it!”

Scarlett’s eyes widened. “Seriously? Did I sound affectionate?”

“Yes!” Amy chuckled at how pleased Scarlett looked.

“We’re going to Disneyland at Christmas,” Marty told her, gingerly taking her hand.

“We live here now,” Billy informed her.

“I know.” She started up the path with them. “I’ll be able to babysit for you whenever your mum and dad go out.”

“Can you go out soon?” Marty looked hopefully at Amy.

“No!” Damian called, lugging a large suitcase past them. “With what Scarlett charges, we’ll hardly be able to go out at all.”

Amy tried to help with unloading the car, but Damian shooed her away, telling her to relax and catch up with Scarlett.

Taking advantage of the mild weather, they sat out on the patio, the boys kicking a football around the garden while Scarlett chatted to Amy about her writing. She stopped abruptly and pulled her phone from her pocket, then frowned at the message.

“Verity needs me to go and help with the cafe.”

“That’s okay,” Amy said. “We’ll have plenty of time to hang out now that I live here.”

“It’s not that,” Scarlett said. “I was going to visit Tara at the bookshop, but I won’t have time now.”

“Oh.” Amy paused, hoping Scarlett might say more. When she didn’t, curiosity got the better of her. “Was it a work thing you needed to speak to Tara about?”

“No.” Scarlett hesitated. “A sex question. I’ll ask her another time.”

“Anything I might be able to help with?” Amy asked, intrigued, but also not at all sure she knew what she was getting herself into.

Scarlett looked momentarily surprised, then the creases in her brow softened. “Maybe.” Her gaze fell to her lap before coming back to Amy. “I read this thing in a book ... in a sex scene ... I’m not sure if it’s a regular thing that a lot of people do ... or ...”

“If it’s a weird kink?”

“Yes. And I don’t want to ask Fraser in case it’s a really weird thing and I freak him out.”

“Okay, tell me what it is,” Amy said.

Scarlett opened her mouth, then clamped it shut again as her eyes flicked to the door where Damian was standing with his jaw hanging open. “Were you eavesdropping?” Scarlett snapped.

“No!” He held his hands up. “You were talking loudly ... and I heard someone mention sex, so of course my ears pricked up.”

“Go away!” Scarlett made a shooing motion.

He laughed. “I’ll go, but can I mention that you’re talking loudly and there are innocent children not far from you.”

“Oh.” Scarlett swept her gaze down the garden and grimaced. “Maybe I should wait and ask Tara.”

“Whisper it,” Amy said, leaning close.

Scarlett’s words tickled her ear and she tried to keep a straight face and not react too strongly. Over Scarlett’s shoulder, Amy watched Damian cover his face with his hand – an action that did nothing to hide his amusement.

“What do you think?” Scarlett asked, straightening up. “Is it a weird kink or normal sex stuff?”

Amy nodded slowly. “Definitely fine to discuss that one with Fraser. I imagine he’d be quite happy about it.” She paused and twisted her lips to one side. “Could you send me the link to the book? I might like to check it out.”

“Yeah.” She flashed a grin and smoothed her dress over her leggings as she stood. “I need to go to the cafe now.” She shouted goodbye to Billy and Marty before leaving.

Damian’s eyes looked like they might fall out of his head when he sat beside Amy. “What obscenities was Scarlett just whispering in your ear?”

“That was a private conversation.”

“Please tell me.”

“I’m not telling you.” Amy cocked an eyebrow. “But if you’re very good, I might show you later.”

He blew out a long breath. “What time do these kids go to bed again?” He checked his watch. “Is four o’clock too early?”

“A little bit, yes.” She moved onto his lap, a rush of joy hitting her as she kissed him.

“Disgusting!” a cheeky voice interrupted them. Billy stood beside them, grinning from ear to ear. He stuck his tongue out, then ran away.

“Right!” Damian shifted Amy off his lap and took off down the garden. “I’m coming to get you,” he shouted after Billy.

Joyful squeals rang out as Damian teared around after the two of them. Then they were a tangle of writhing limbs on the grass as they wrestled and tickled each other.

Amy couldn’t keep the smile from her face as she watched them play.

With the last of the sun’s rays beating down to bathe everything in a warm glow, she could have sworn she’d never felt happier.



*If you’re wondering why exactly Scarlett married Fraser, you can find out in *There’s Something About Scarlett*. It’s the final book in the *Hope Cove* series but can be read as a standalone novel. Or go and read the entire *Hope Cove* series!*

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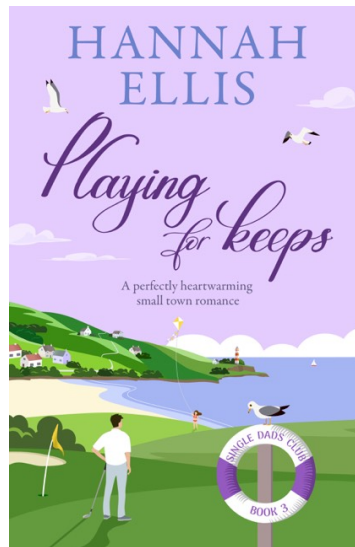
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All of Hannah's books can be found here:

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Hannah has also written a series of children's books aimed at 5-9 year olds under the pen name, Hannah Sparks. You can find the first book in that series here:

<https://mybook.to/WhereDragonsFly>

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