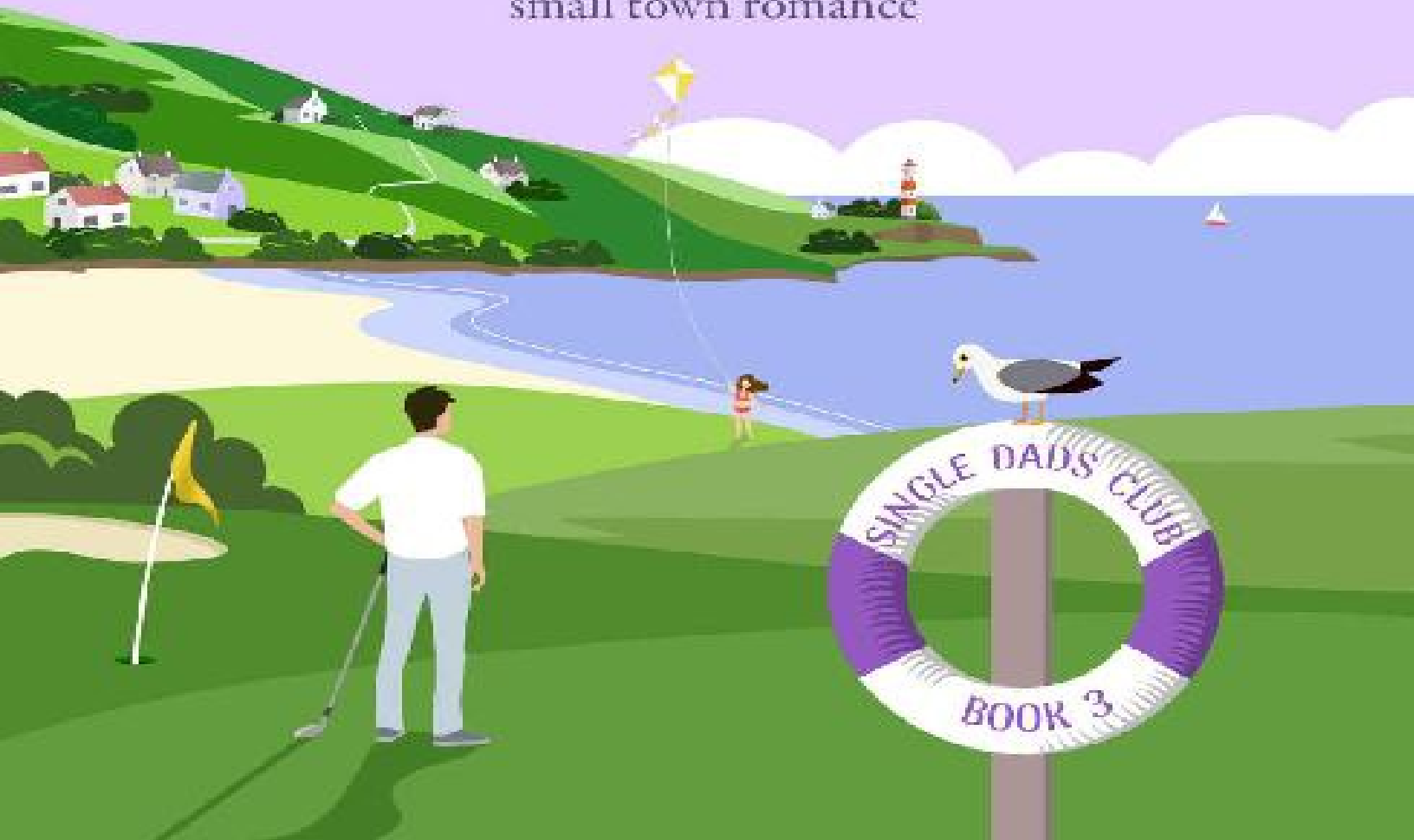


HANNAH
ELLIS

*Playing
for keeps*

A perfectly heartwarming
small town romance



PLAYING FOR KEEPS

SINGLE DADS CLUB

BOOK THREE



HANNAH ELLIS

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CHAPTER 1



The message Hugh had sent to his two best friends in their group chat had gone unanswered for almost a quarter of an hour. It didn't require an urgent response, but he'd expected a flurry of questions and opinions. Usually he was a fan of quiet, but as he sat at the kitchen table, staring at his phone, this particular silence made him nervous.

The way he jumped at the sound of the doorbell was fairly dramatic, and he was thankful there was no one to witness his overreaction.

"I'll get it," he called up the stairs as he moved along the hallway.

The door opened before he reached it, and Damian sauntered in with Leo behind him.

"I just messaged you two," Hugh said.

"We know." Damian patted him on the shoulder and made a beeline for the kitchen. "It's not really the kind of thing we can discuss properly in messages."

Leo gave Hugh an enthusiastic slap on the back. "The big moments in life deserve in-person conversations."

"Where's Alice?" he asked, following them to the kitchen. Leo's daughter was approaching her first birthday and was absolutely adorable.

"With Caitlin," Leo replied over his shoulder.

"You really thought my message warranted you ditching your girlfriend and child?"

"I'm intending to go back to them at some point." Leo opened the fridge and took out three bottles of beer. "This is big news. It definitely warrants ditching them for a while. Caitlin agreed I needed to get over here."

"It's not big news," Hugh protested.

Damian took the bottle opener from the drawer and popped the tops off the beers. "It's huge," he said, moving to sit at the table with Leo when they all had a drink. "Tell us everything."

Hugh leaned against the counter. "There's not much to say. You really didn't need to come over here."

Damian rolled his eyes. "You have to make everything difficult, don't you? I'll point out that you've brought this on yourself ..."

Before Hugh could question what Damian was talking about, his friend tipped his head back and shouted for Emmy.

"What?" Em called back from upstairs.

"Come down and talk to us," Damian bellowed, then offered Hugh a smug look.

"Why are you involving Emmy in this?" Hugh asked huffily. He'd really rather keep his twelve-year-old daughter out of it.

"We'll get better information from her," Damian said as the sound of footsteps thudded down the stairs.

Emmy entered the kitchen in a rush, sliding on her fluffy socks over to the table. "Dad's got a date on Saturday!" she declared gleefully. "Did he already tell you? Her name's Rebecca and she sounds really cool in her messages." Without looking at him, she extended her arm in Hugh's direction and made a grabbing action. "Give me your phone."

"Why?"

She whipped around to him. "Because I want to show them her picture. Give it to me."

Since he was certain resistance would be futile, he handed it over. Emmy typed in his passcode, then tapped into the dating app she'd downloaded for him a few weeks previously.

"She looks really nice," she said as she tapped away.

"They always do in their profile pictures," Leo muttered.

"Look!" Emmy plonked herself in a chair as she turned the phone to Leo and Damian. "She looks good, doesn't she?"

Damian leaned closer to the screen and gave an approving nod. "How old is she?"

"Thirty-six," Em answered.

"Ooh." Leo wiggled his eyebrows. "A younger woman."

"I'm thirty-four!" Hugh threw his hands up, then picked up his beer to take another well-needed swig. "She's older than me," he went on, despite

knowing that Leo had only been winding him up. “You know how old I am.”

“I wasn’t referring to your biological age,” Leo said, smirking. “I was talking about your maturity level.”

“Someone’s got to be mature around here,” Hugh said.

“What else do we know about her?” Damian aimed the question at Emmy.

“She’s a single parent with a seven-year-old daughter.”

“No,” Leo groaned, while Damian dropped his chin to his chest and grumbled his disdain.

“What’s wrong with that?” Hugh asked.

“Single parents are the worst people to date,” Damian said.

Beside him, Leo nodded along. “They really are. All that baggage.”

“Hello!” Emmy said, glaring at them. “He’s a single parent too. So were you two until recently.”

“Yeah, but that’s different,” Damian said. “We all have awesome kids. What are the chances her kid is as cool as ours?”

“You make a good point,” Em agreed. “I’m pretty amazing.”

“Exactly,” Damian said. “But this woman’s kid will probably be a brat, and she’ll probably have issues with her ex. It’s a disaster waiting to happen.”

Leo rested his forearms on the table and fixed Emmy with an intense glare. “Have you considered how you feel about having a sibling? Is that really okay with you?”

“He’s just going on a date,” Emmy said, grinning. “It took long enough to talk him into it. You’re not allowed to talk him out of it.”

“This is true,” Damian said. “Plus, it’s never going to work out with the first woman you find on a dating app, so we’ll just consider this target practice and not worry about her suitability.”

“It’s probably actually a good thing if she’s not entirely suitable,” Leo mused.

Hugh pulled out the chair beside Emmy. “How do you figure that?”

“It’s your first date in a very long time.” Leo raised an eyebrow. “It’s highly likely that you’ll mess it up and scare her away, so it’s better not to waste your warm-up on a great candidate.”

“You’re filling me with confidence,” Hugh said dryly.

“Where are you taking her?” Leo asked.

“The restaurant at the golf club.”

Damian looked thoughtful. “Interesting choice.”

“Bad choice,” Leo corrected.

“It was *her* choice,” Hugh said. “And I was quite happy with it since it’s only up the road. And as you’re both convinced it’s going to go terribly, I don’t suppose it matters where we go.”

“I think it’s going to go brilliantly.” Emmy rested her head on his shoulder. “And it’s great that you’re giving dating a go.”

“I’m not even sure how you talked me into it,” Hugh remarked.

“Because secretly you think it’s a good idea, too.” She gazed up at him with her bright green eyes, and he grunted in reply.

He wasn’t about to admit that she was right and that maybe, deep down, he had a small spark of hope about the whole dating thing.

CHAPTER 2



The opulent cast-iron gates at the entrance to Fox Hill Golf and Country Club were so familiar that Alegra rarely registered them. Today was different. Today, she felt intensely alert as she arrived at work. Slowing her car by the gates, she took the time to really look at the twisted ironwork and then the large decorative boulder engraved with the name of the golf club.

Through the gates, she crawled along the long driveway, flanked on either side by immaculate lawns which sparkled with morning dew. Mist rose to meet a bright blue sky, and the sight of it sent goosebumps rippling along the back of her neck.

A quick glance to the left gave her a view of the red-brick cottage which had been her childhood home. Her dad would be there now – recovering from a bout of illness. She'd go in and check on him shortly, but first she had a meeting with her cousin, Bella, who'd be taking over the running of the golf club for the next couple of weeks.

Given her dad's poor health, it didn't feel like the best time for Alegra to be going away. Once again, it crossed her mind to back out, but her bags were all packed, and she didn't suppose her dad would let her back down at this point.

At least she knew the business would be safe in Bella's hands. Her cousin had been working at the golf course since she was a teenager and knew the place as well as Alegra did. She'd also be diligent in keeping an eye on her dad, Alegra reminded herself, so she really shouldn't worry. At least not about what she was leaving behind here in Surrey.

What she was getting into was another matter entirely.

Bypassing the customer parking, she circled around to the back of the

elegant clubhouse and parked by the staff entrance. On a normal working day, she made a point of going in through the main entrance and chatting with staff and customers. Today wasn't a day for small talk, though. She wanted to be on her way as soon as possible if she was really going to do this.

Stepping out of the car, her bright white trainers crunched on the gravel. She pulled her chunky-knit maroon cardigan on over her black polo neck T-shirt and grabbed her handbag from the passenger seat. After closing the car door, she let her gaze linger on the midnight-blue Porsche.

She rolled her eyes as another flaw in her dad's ridiculous scheme came to her. Muttering a few choice words, she hurried inside through the door marked *staff only*.

"I drive an electric Porsche," she announced loudly to her bemused cousin as she waltzed into the office at the back of the building. "A Porsche! Explain to me how driving a ridiculously expensive sports car fits in with Dad's insane plan. And then please explain what he said to you to convince you it was a good plan."

"Hi." Bella's bright red hair looked extra glossy as she sat behind the large mahogany desk. It had been her dad's desk until a couple of years ago, when Alegra had taken over most of the running of the place.

Remaining in the doorway, Alegra followed Bella's gaze to the leather armchair where her dad sat looking back at her. His eyes twinkled with amusement.

"Hi, Dad." She crossed the room and kissed his cheek. "I wasn't expecting you to be here."

He squeezed her upper arm. "Clearly."

"What's the problem with your car?" Bella asked.

Alegra took the chair across the desk from her cousin. "It stands out a bit, don't you think?"

"It'll be fine," her dad said, swatting the air dismissively.

"Really?" Alegra leaned onto her knees. "So you're expecting me to work as a waitress at a golf club you own—"

"We own," he interrupted her. "You're part owner of the Thurley Beach Club."

"Whatever," she said with a subtle head shake. While she'd always been proud of the Fox Hill Club, she'd tended to pretend their golf club in Devon didn't exist. The day-to-day running of it was left to the general manager and her dad dealt with any issues that came up. "Don't you think people might

question how a waitress can afford to drive a Porsche? Or, more to the point, why someone who drives a Porsche would *need* to take a job as a waitress.”

“Just don’t drive it around the village unless you have to,” her dad said, leaning back in his chair. “You won’t need to drive much in Hope Cove, though. You can take bracing walks along the coastal path from the golf club to the village. Do you remember it?”

“Not really, Dad. It’s been a while. We left when I was eight.”

“Nine,” he corrected. “And I’m sure it will all come back to you.”

That was exactly what Alegra was worried about. She’d spent almost twenty years refusing to think about her life before they moved to Surrey, but now her dad was finally getting his way and making her revisit it.

“I spoke to Kevin,” her dad went on, referring to the manager of the Thurley Beach Club. “As far as he’s concerned, you’re the daughter of a friend of mine and we’re giving you the job as a favour. I’ve hinted that you’re a bit of a princess who needs to learn what it’s like to work for a living and warned him you probably won’t stick it out for long.”

“Oh my god!” Alegra shrunk down in her chair and put a hand over her face, ignoring the amusement brightening Bella’s face. “I can’t believe I agreed to this ridiculous scheme.”

“I think it’ll be fun,” Bella said excitedly. “You’ll be like a spy, working undercover.”

“I’m just not sure why the undercover thing is necessary.” Alegra rubbed at the space between her eyes. “If you want to know how to increase profits, I don’t need to work in the restaurant to figure that out. It’d take me two days to get the measure of the place.”

“I think it’d be better if the staff don’t know who you are,” her dad said vaguely. “You’ll get to the root of the problems that way.”

“I don’t even understand why you’re suddenly so bothered about profits. The place has been ticking along fine for years. You’ve always said it’s profitable enough, given how little effort you invest in it.”

“I’d just like to get a better picture of what’s going on there,” her dad said evenly. “All I really know is what Kevin tells me, and I’m not sure how accurate his assessments of the business are. Plus, whenever I venture out there, the staff are all on their best behaviour, and I’m never there for long enough to figure out what’s really going on.”

“But why *now*?” Alegra complained, hoping she was wrong with her theory that his health problems were worse than he was letting on. She had a

horrible feeling this was him getting his affairs in order.

Her dad stared at his shoes, his silence making her nervous. “Maybe it’s time to sell the place. This little health scare got me thinking, and ... maybe it’s time.”

“Okay.” Alegra swallowed her emotions. “That’s fine.” Actually, it was more than fine. She’d been nagging him to sell the place for years. “But why are you so concerned about profits if we’re going to sell it?”

“It makes sense really.” Bella rocked back in her chair. “You’ll get a better price if revenue is increasing and the books are in good shape.”

Alegra mulled it over and quickly concluded that wasn’t the real reason. Especially given the way her cousin was avoiding eye contact with her dad. The two of them were in cahoots. Alegra was sure of it.

“Look,” she said after a prolonged silence. “I’ll go to Devon and check things out. If you insist on it, I’ll even pretend to be a waitress for a week or two ...”

“A month,” her dad said forcefully, making her roll her eyes before continuing.

“I’m not agreeing to that,” she said, “but I will go. I’ll go because it’s clearly important to you. But I need you to respect me enough to tell me *why* I’m going.”

Keeping her eyes locked on her dad, Alegra rudely hissed at Bella when she tried to speak. If she was going, her dad needed to give her more than his flimsy reasons.

“Fine,” he said after a moment. “Wanting to find out how that place ticks is only part of it ...” Alegra had a good idea of what he was going to say next and was suddenly unsure if she wanted to hear it.

“I think it would do you good to go back there. Ever since your mum died, you’ve acted as though the place didn’t exist. It can’t be healthy to shut out an entire chapter of your life. You had a good childhood in Hope Cove and I don’t understand why you always refused to go back there.”

Because it would hurt too much, she thought, while releasing a frustrated sigh. “Are you really thinking of selling it?”

“You know I’ve only hung onto it for sentimental reasons. I am thinking of selling it, but I don’t want to do that without giving you a chance to take a proper look around the place. Which is another reason I think working in the restaurant will be good. You can get a real feel for the place without people falling over themselves because you own the place and because ...” He

trailed off.

“Because I’m Alegra Harris?” she asked, her left eyebrow twitching. “How’s that going to work, by the way? Even if people don’t recognise my face, my name is fairly distinctive.”

Again, her dad waved a hand dismissively. “I told Kevin your name is Allie. I also said you’re just there on a trial basis to start with and that I’d deal with the paperwork. He shouldn’t ask too many questions.”

“It’s also not as though you’re mega famous,” Bella put in. “Famous golfers aren’t really proper celebrities.”

“Thanks,” Alegra said mockingly. “But I did get quite a lot of publicity if you recall.”

“That was ages ago. You’re overestimating people’s attention spans.” Bella winced. “Sorry.”

Instinctively, Alegra’s hand went to massage her shoulder. The painkiller she’d taken with breakfast had taken the edge off, but the pain was still there – a dull ache which was her constant companion.

“I’ll be spending my time at a golf club,” she said. “I think the chances of nobody recognising me are slim.”

“Just give it a go,” her dad said wearily. “If the incognito thing doesn’t work out, so be it, but go and spend a bit of time there.”

“I’ll go for two weeks and then we sell the place. That’s my offer.”

Her dad chuckled. “You’ll go for a month and then we’ll *discuss* selling.”

She moved to kiss his cheek, noticing that he made no move to stand, just as he hadn’t when she’d arrived. “Take care of yourself while I’m gone.”

“Love you,” he said.

“You too.” She tipped her head at Bella, indicating she should follow her.

“And have fun!” her dad called as she left the office with Bella behind her.

“You’ll keep an eye on him, won’t you?” Alegra said as the two of them headed for the back door. “Let me know if there’s any change in his health. I’m not convinced his blood pressure tablets are working properly. If he’s unsteady on his feet or has any more dizzy spells, let me know straight away. And insist on him seeing the doctor again if you think he needs it.”

“You don’t have to worry.” Bella slipped an arm around Alegra’s shoulders as they stepped outside. “I’ll look after him, and this place too.”

“I know you will.” Grinning, Alegra turned and wrapped her arms around Bella. “You’re the best, and I love you.”

“I *am* the best,” Bella agreed cockily. “Thank you for finally admitting it!”

When they reached her car, Alegra inhaled deeply. “I can’t believe I actually agreed to this stupid plan.”

“I’m glad you’re going.” Bella’s eyes shone with kindness. “I agree with Uncle Richard – it will be good for you to see the place you spent the first nine years of your life. And even if you’re not keen on reliving the past, you can have a holiday. Devon is beautiful and you’ll be right by the beach. After the stress of the last two years, a holiday is just what you need.”

“Except I’ll be working as a waitress, remember?” Alegra said with an amused pout.

“I’m sure there’ll be plenty of time to relax too.”

Alegra gave Bella one last hug, then got into the car. “Wish me luck,” she said through the open window.

“Good luck, *Allie*.” Bella beamed. “You’re going to have to lose the scowl when people call you that.”

“I don’t like it,” she complained. People had tried shortening her name over the years, but she found that the scowl usually got her point across quickly. She liked her slightly unique name and insisted on people using it.

“You don’t have to like it,” Bella said. “And it’s only for a month.”

“Two weeks,” Alegra corrected her.

“However long it ends up being, it’s only temporary. Make the most of it.”

Alegra smiled and backed out of her parking spot, calling goodbye through the window and promising to keep Bella updated. Driving down the long driveway, she sighed loudly.

She supposed Bella might have a point; if she was going to be Allie The Waitress for a little while, she may as well try to enjoy herself.

CHAPTER 3



Alegra felt completely on edge at the start of her journey, but her heart rate eventually settled into a normal rhythm.

As she crossed into Devon, the roads didn't suddenly become familiar and she wasn't hit by a rush of nostalgia or overwhelmed by memories of her mother. That's what she'd been afraid of, that she'd unlock a flood of childhood memories and grief.

Only when she slowed the car at the gates of Thurley Beach Golf Club did she feel a stirring of nostalgia. Bringing the car to a stop, she waited for the onslaught of memories, but nothing came. She knew the place, though. Deep in her bones, she knew the place. Not in a scary, overwhelming way. It was like the way she knew the back of her hand.

She simply knew the way the driveway would curve when she set off again. And how the car park and clubhouse would look when she reached them.

Suddenly keen to see her old childhood home, she pressed on the accelerator and crawled along the driveway to pull into a parking space beside the entrance.

Exiting the car, she moved instinctively around the building until she had a view of the first tee. A group of three older men stood around their push carts and carry bags, chatting away while they selected their clubs.

Bolstered by the lack of emotional overwhelm, Alegra walked back through the car park. She only hesitated for a moment before pulling on the heavy main door and stepping inside the clubhouse.

It actually felt kind of nice to be back, which was frustrating since she could immediately hear her dad's voice saying "I told you so" in an annoying

smug tone.

“Hello!” A young woman at the reception desk beamed at her. She wore a crisp white shirt with a name badge, as did the lanky young guy leaning on the end of the desk. “Can I help you?” the young woman asked.

Having her hair scraped back in a ponytail did little to disguise the purple streaks interwoven with the mousy brown. Not the most professional look, Alegra thought. Immediately, she chastised herself for judging a person by the colour of their hair and the fact that they looked barely old enough to drink alcohol.

“Hi,” Alegra said, approaching them and reading the girl’s name tag.

“Are you here to play?” Daisy asked. “Or is it just the restaurant today?”

With a quick shake of her head, Alegra pondered how to introduce herself. Even without using her proper first name, she was sure her last name would give the game away. And if that didn’t, there was a photo of Alegra on the wall behind Daisy, making the whole undercover thing feel even more ridiculous than it had before.

The picture wasn’t exactly a closeup, but even so, there was surely no chance she could go any length of time without people realising.

“Sorry,” she said, catching Daisy exchange a discreet look with the guy a couple of metres away from them. “I had a long drive. I’m Allie.” *Allie*, she repeated in her head, thinking that her most likely obstacle could simply be forgetting her name when introducing herself.

“Hi,” Daisy said with a wonderfully professional smile. “What can I help you with?”

“I work here,” she said in a rush. “I mean, I just arrived, but I’m going to be working here.”

“The new waitress?” Daisy said, her professional smile slipping away. “It’s good to meet you. I’m Daisy.” She pointed to her name badge. “I work on reception. This is Freddie.” She cast a glance at the young guy with acne scars, who also appeared to be barely more than a teenager. “He’s a waiter and general dogsbody.”

“Hey!” His eyes sparkled affectionately. “I just brought you a coffee.”

“Exactly,” Daisy said cheekily. “*Dogsbody*.”

“Bringing coffee falls under a waiter’s job description,” he pointed out smugly.

“True.” Daisy smiled at him. “Can you see if you can find Kevin and tell him Allie’s here?”

Freddie tilted his head and gave her a knowing look.

“Go on,” Daisy said through a gentle laugh. “I’d find him myself, but that means you’ll have to answer the phone if it rings.”

Freddie gave a wide-eyed look of mock horror, then extended his hand to Allie. “Nice to meet you,” he said, before turning to leave.

“*Dogsbody*,” Daisy murmured, making him turn back briefly and sneer at her.

He continued through the casual but stylish lounge and through the archway which Allie knew led to a spacious restaurant and bar area. At the other side of the restaurant was a beautiful patio with gorgeous sea views.

“He likes the teasing really,” Daisy said, pulling Allie from her trance.

The flirting more like, Allie thought but refrained from saying. Hopefully the two of them weren’t that casual when customers were around.

It was barely a minute before Kevin arrived. For reasons unbeknown to her, Allie had been expecting an out-of-shape middle-aged guy with a combover. Which made it fairly surprising that he was a very well-put-together man – probably in his mid-forties – with a full head of hair and a rather charming smile.

His handshake was limp and his palm clammy, but Allie reminded herself again not to judge people on first impressions, and especially not on superficial details.

“How was your drive?” Kevin asked.

“Good.”

“Glad to hear it. I presume Daisy introduced herself?”

“Yes.” Allie smiled benignly.

“Well then.” Kevin extended an arm towards the main door. “How about I show you to our staff accommodation? Once you’re settled I can give you a tour of the clubhouse.”

Allie cocked her head to one side in confusion. Why was Kevin gesturing outside when the entrance to the flat was via the stairs at the back of the building?

Maybe there was also a back door she didn’t remember. That made sense. Better to use that, rather than coming and going through the clubhouse.

Kevin looked momentarily unsure of himself. “You were planning on staying on site? Richard said so, but if you’ve found yourself an alternative ...”

“No,” Allie said. “I was planning on staying here.”

“Great. Follow me then.” He led the way out to the car park. “Shall I help with your bags?”

“That’s okay. I can grab them later.” She forced a smile while feeling uncomfortable at the thought of him seeing her car.

“We may as well take some stuff while we’re going,” he said cheerfully.

“Right. Okay. I guess we may as well.” She supposed he was going to find out she drove a Porsche anyway, and if it was going to raise questions, sooner was probably better than later. She could put the whole notion of sneaking around to bed and get on with running the place overtly.

Kevin gave an appreciative nod when she took steps towards the car, pressing the fob as she went.

“Nice car,” he said, still nodding.

“Thank you.” She opened the boot, then waited for him to say more, but he only stepped around her to retrieve the suitcase.

“If you need to charge it, we have a couple of stations down the end there.”

“Perfect.” She waited for questions, but he only asked if she had any more stuff.

“That’s all,” she said, and they set off across the car park. It didn’t take long for her to figure out that they weren’t aiming for the back entrance to the flat. They walked past the two electric charging stations to the sound of the suitcase wheels dragging on the loose gravel. From there, they headed for a large shed with two sets of double doors at the front.

To Allie’s immense relief, they bypassed that and rounded the corner.

“This is the accommodation?”

She failed to hide her surprise as her eyes landed on the single-storey brick building behind the shed. The two white doors and windows indicated it was two flats. But unless the building was utterly deceptive, they’d be more like single rooms than flats.

In a panic, Allie’s eyes swept back to the clubhouse and snagged on the windows of the first floor.

“It’s not exactly luxury. If you intend to stay longer, I’m sure you’ll want to look for something else. But Richard said you weren’t sure of your plans yet?”

“No.” This was the part where she should probably give some hint about why she’d taken a waitressing job in rural Devon. “I just felt like a change of scenery, and I heard Devon was nice.”

Kevin's eyes sparkled. "Not on the run or anything, are you?"

"No." She smiled. "Nothing like that."

"I'm only messing. It was a bit out of the blue, though, and Richard was a little vague. He's friends with your dad, is that right?"

"Yes." She pressed her lips together. "They go way back." Once again, her eyes drifted to her childhood home above the clubhouse. "I thought the accommodation was directly in the clubhouse."

"No." He pulled a keyring from his pocket and twirled the single key around his finger. "Sorry, but you're going to have to cope with a thirty-second commute to work."

Allie felt heat hit her cheeks. Not that it really mattered if Kevin thought she was a princess, since that was apparently the impression they were aiming for. "I'm just surprised, that's all."

Kevin's gaze went to the clubhouse. "There's a flat on the first floor, but that's Richard's space. He stays there when he visits."

"Oh. I see." Except she wasn't sure she *did* see. Had her dad kept the place homely? She'd assumed he'd cleared out the flat. She'd also assumed he stayed in a hotel when he visited. It irked her now that she'd never asked him about his visits. She'd even gone a step further and shot down his attempts to talk about it.

"This place isn't too bad." Kevin unlocked the door in front of him and pushed at it to reveal a space slightly bigger than Allie had expected.

There was a double bed and a desk, wardrobe and chest of drawers. In the back corner was a tiny kitchenette with sink and stovetop and cupboards above and below. "There's an en suite, of course." Kevin pointed to the door on the left. "I think you'll find it has everything you need. There's a kettle and a coffee machine. If there's anything else you need, just let me know."

"Thank you." She pointed to the other door in the building. "Is someone staying there?"

"Not at the moment. The accommodation is only really used in the height of the summer when we need a couple of extra staff for the restaurant. Offering accommodation usually sweetens the deal. Especially as it's usually hard to find the extra staff locally."

"That makes sense."

"I'll leave you to unpack." Kevin took a couple of steps away but kept his gaze on her. "I've put you in for your first restaurant shift on Saturday evening. If you come over tomorrow morning, I'll give you a tour and show

you the ropes.”

“How many shifts will I be working per week?” she asked, hoping her dad had clarified that she’d only be working part time. The last thing she wanted was to work five shifts a week in the restaurant, even if it was only for a couple of weeks.

“I’d already made up the schedule when Richard talked to me about you needing a job, so for the next few weeks I’ll just be slotting you in as an extra. It might only be three shifts a week. Is that a problem?”

“No. That’s what I was expecting.”

“Perfect.” He continued on his way. “Give me a shout if you need anything.”

“Thanks,” she called after him.

Hesitantly, she stepped inside to investigate her new home while fervently reminding herself it was only temporary.

CHAPTER 4



It soon became clear that Allie's concerns about returning to Hope Cove were unfounded. When she walked into the village to pick up supplies from the local shop, she felt the odd spark of nostalgia but nothing more. There was certainly none of the overwhelm she'd expected when faced with her past.

It was the same when Kevin gave her a tour of the clubhouse and driving range on Friday morning. Following the tour, he spent a long time explaining how everything worked in the restaurant. The food ordering and payment systems were the same as at Fox Hill, so she spent an hour feigning ignorance and asking unnecessary questions.

Maybe she shouldn't have tried so hard to be convincing. After all, making Kevin suspicious wouldn't be the worst thing. She could abandon the undercover operation before she properly got into it. That would have the benefit of being able to stay in the upstairs flat for the duration of her stay rather than in the pokey staff accommodation.

Arriving for her first restaurant shift on Saturday evening, she found Kevin busy pouring drinks behind the bar. He flashed Allie a smile and handed over the tray of drinks to a waiter. The tall, fresh-faced young guy beamed at her.

"I'm Dean," he said.

"Allie," she replied.

"I haven't worked here that long," he told her. "But if you need any help with anything, just ask."

Kevin's eyebrows lifted. "Don't let the customers die of thirst, Dean."

"Oh, yeah." Smiling, he walked away.

“Do you need me to talk you through everything again?” Kevin asked Allie.

“No.” She managed to keep a straight face. “I think I remember everything.”

“That’s great. If you have any problems, just ask. We’re all very friendly.” He pulled out a clipboard and set it on the bar between them. On it was the floor plan for the restaurant, with the tables sectioned off in blue biro and a few scribbles around it. “I’ve put you on this section for this evening.” He pointed to a group of tables with her name by them. “We’ll keep your section quiet so you can find your footing without too much stress.”

“Thanks.” So far, he seemed to be a decent manager despite his subpar handshake.

“This guy just arrived,” Kevin said, tipping his head. She turned and spotted the middle-aged guy poring over the menu. “He’s waiting for someone, but you could ask if he wants a drink while he waits.”

Confidently, she strode over to the only person currently in her section. “Hi,” she said brightly.

The guy was off his feet in an instant. “Sorry,” he said, wiping his palms on his jeans. “I was miles away. You must be Rebecca? I’m Hugh.”

“Hi, Hugh.” She backed up a step since they’d ended up standing incredibly close. “I’m Allie.”

“Oh.” His brow crinkled. “So not my date?”

Her lips twitched in amusement. “Your *waitress*.”

“Right.” He sat down again. “Sorry.”

Now that she looked at him properly, he was younger than she’d first thought. Maybe forty, possibly even younger. The grey flecks at his temples gave him a mature air that matched his dress sense. She couldn’t help but cringe at his ill-fitting navy-blue shirt.

“I take it you’re on some kind of blind date?” she asked.

He nodded. “It’s the first time I’ve been on a date for a while.” That was pretty clear from the way his leg was jiggling.

She wondered how he’d got her confused for his date. “Haven’t you even seen a picture of her?” she asked, as curiosity niggled at her.

“Yeah, I have. On her dating profile.”

“And she looks like me?”

His leg stilled as he looked her up and down. “Not really. She’s in her mid-thirties, so you’re about the right age. Kind of ...” He tilted his head and

wincing as though he might have said the wrong thing.

“I’m twenty-nine,” she said, trying not to feel offended. A huffy waitress was probably the last thing he needed.

“Sorry. I only meant that in very general terms you’re about the right age. To be honest, I hadn’t even looked at you. You appeared and I panicked.”

“I saw that.” She smiled softly.

“Dating is horrible,” he said. “And my date isn’t even here yet. I don’t know why I’m doing this.”

His openness was endearing and made Allie want to continue the conversation when she probably should just take his order and move away.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” she said, aiming for a soothing tone.

“What if she’s way older than she said she is? She *said* she’s thirty-six, but my friends say people lie on dating apps all the same.”

“Usually men though,” Allie said, then wondered if that were true. Maybe women were just as bad.

The sound of stilettos clicking on the tiled floor had them both turning to the sophisticated older woman entering the restaurant.

Hugh let out a strangled hum as the woman walked in their direction. When she was almost at the table, she waved at a group near the window and veered in their direction.

“Oh my god,” Hugh muttered on a long exhale.

“Did you think that was your date?”

“My heart is going crazy.”

Allie couldn’t help but smile as her gaze followed the mature woman who greeted her friends with air kisses. “That would have been funny.”

“No, it wouldn’t.”

“She’s very attractive.” Allie dragged her gaze back to Hugh.

“Also old enough to be my mother.” He squeezed the bridge of his nose. “Why on earth am I putting myself through this?”

“You’ll be fine,” Allie said blithely. “Have you got an exit strategy?”

His eyes widened. “A *what?*”

“You know, like a friend who you can message if things aren’t going well. They’ll call you with some fake emergency to give you an excuse to leave quickly.”

“Do people really do that?”

She chuckled. “I’m winding you up. Look, I’m sure you’ll have a lovely evening. If it doesn’t go well, it’s only a couple of hours out of your life.”

Relax and enjoy it.”

“That’s difficult when you’ve just told me I should have devised a way to escape from my date.”

“I might be a bit cynical. Ignore me.”

“It’s exactly the sort of comments my friends were making.”

“Because people prefer to talk about disastrous dating experiences than the mediocre ones. Most dates are just mediocre.”

“So I should settle in for a boring evening?”

Gentle laughter rumbled through her. “I feel as though I should stop talking and get you a drink.”

“Yes …” He trailed off as another woman walked into the restaurant.

This one appeared to be in her mid-thirties and looked about as nervous as Hugh. Her eyes darted around the room until they settled on him and she gave a shy, questioning smile.

“I’ll come back to take your drink order in a minute,” Allie said quietly as Hugh got to his feet.

“Rebecca?” he said to the woman, sounding more confident now.

“You must be Hugh?” the woman said, her shoulders relaxing as she moved to greet him.

As Allie went back behind the bar, she kept her eyes on them for a moment, thinking that Hugh and Rebecca looked like a well-matched pair. Maybe his date wouldn’t be the mediocre variety after all.

And perhaps being a fly on the wall for their first date might make it an entertaining shift.

CHAPTER 5



After an initial barrage of nerves, Hugh settled quickly into his evening with Rebecca. She looked even better than her profile picture, her glossy auburn hair and sprinkling of freckles more vibrant in the flesh.

They spent the first few minutes discussing how nervous they'd both been about the evening, which broke the ice perfectly. From there, the conversation flowed easily as they talked about their kids and careers.

"It's years since I've been here," Rebecca said as she finished her ravioli. "The food's great, isn't it?"

"No complaints from me," he said, scrunching his napkin into a ball. "How are you feeling about dessert?"

She made a show of pretending to mull it over before nodding eagerly. "I'm game if you are."

It was a relief that she wasn't itching to get away, and he looked for the waitress only to find her busy taking a food order from a party of four at the next table.

"Oh god, sorry," Rebecca said as her handbag erupted with a loud ringtone. She lifted her bag onto her lap and rummaged inside it. "It's usually on silent, but I turned the ringer on in case the babysitter needed to get hold of me. Sorry." She looked at him apologetically. "It is the babysitter."

Since he was only a metre away, it was impossible for Hugh not to listen in on the conversation. He could even hear the frantic voice on the other end telling her that the child was ill and asking her to come home.

"I can't believe it," Rebecca said as she ended the call. "I hardly ever go out in the evenings. And Jenna almost never gets sick. I'm sorry, I'm going to have to go."

“Of course,” Hugh said, slightly stunned as Rebecca stood.

She pulled her handbag onto her shoulder, then dropped it onto the table and opened it up. “I’ll pay for dinner.”

“No, it’s fine,” he said automatically. “I’ll get it.”

“Are you sure? I feel terrible, but you know how it is when your child is ill. You just want to be there.”

Hugh stood up. “Don’t worry about anything. Just get home.”

“I was having a really lovely time.” She cocked her head. “I’m so sorry. Can I call you? Maybe we could meet up again sometime.”

“That would be great.”

She gave him a quick peck on the cheek before she headed for the door.

Sinking back into his chair, he looked for the waitress. He tried to catch her eye, but she was chatting at another table, then she headed behind the bar. He picked up his almost-full pint and headed over to her instead.

“Can I get the bill when you have a minute?” He searched his brain for the waitress’s name, since she’d introduced herself earlier. *Allie*.

Startled, she swung around to him. “Sorry, I’d have come to you. Is everything okay?”

“Yes. My date’s daughter is ill. She had to head off.”

“Oh, no.” She grimaced. “That’s awkward. I should really learn not to make jokes like that.”

He blinked a couple of times, trying to figure out what she meant.

“You know the whole exit strategy thing.” She grimaced again. “Sorry the date didn’t go well.”

“Wait...” He looked from the waitress to the table, then back to her. “You think that was a set-up? That her kid isn’t really ill?”

“You *didn’t* think that?” she asked.

“No. I thought ...” He covered his face with both of his hands. “Bloody hell. Is that what happened? I sort of thought it was going well.”

“Maybe her kid really is ill,” Allie said doubtfully as she went back to pouring drinks.

Hugh peeled his hands from his face and took a long swig of his pint. “What do you think went wrong?”

“Maybe it was your shirt,” she said flatly.

“What’s wrong with my shirt?” His voice came out louder than he intended as he looked down at himself.

“I was joking,” she said, glancing over her shoulder and looking

thoroughly amused. She shook her head. "I really shouldn't make jokes like that. It's my first day on the job, and if my boss hears me, it might be my last."

Hugh smiled as she set off to deliver the drinks to the table closest to him. He took another swig of his drink, then looked down at his shirt again.

"It was a joke," Allie said, when she returned and caught him frowning down at his clothes.

"Was it though?" He ran a hand over his chest. "Because you've made me really paranoid that there's something wrong with my shirt?"

"There's nothing wrong with your shirt," she said, the corners of her lips twitching upwards. "I was teasing."

"Really?" He looked her right in her bright blue eyes. "Be honest. Is there something wrong with it?"

"No." Her eyes sparkled with mischief. "There's nothing wrong with your shirt."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Why do I think you've answered in the most diplomatic, ambiguous way possible?"

"I was honest," she said. "Which is what you asked for."

He pursed his lips, then glanced down at the shirt again. "Does it look good?" When she didn't answer, his head shot up. "Please just tell me what's wrong with it?"

"We already established there's nothing *wrong* with it." Allie walked around the bar and gestured for him to stand up.

He adjusted his jeans, then smoothed down his shirt before holding his arms out to the sides. When she raised her hand and made a circling motion with her finger, he sighed and did a slow turn.

"Not bad." She smoothed the navy cotton at his shoulders, then ran her hands down his arms. Her hands stopped to squeeze his biceps. "Ooh," she said with a grin.

Chuckling, he took a step back, effectively brushing her away with the action.

"Wait!" She reached for his arms again. "I wasn't teasing then. You have muscles hidden under there."

"Movement would be difficult without them," he said dryly.

She arched an eyebrow. "You know what I mean. Do you work out?"

"Yeah." His heart rate increased as she ran her hands over his pecs and down the front of his shirt. "Not obsessively or anything. A bit of cardio,

some weights.”

A whiff of her perfume hit him, making him conscious of how close she was standing. She seemed to notice at the same time and took a pointed step back.

“Maybe for the future of your dating career, you might consider wearing something that hints at what’s going on underneath,” she suggested.

“I can tell you one thing.” He smirked. “I’m never wearing this shirt again. Thanks for that.”

Her face burst into a smile. “Sorry. You asked me to be honest. And it’s really not that bad, it’s just not the best fit and ...”

“And what?” he asked indignantly.

Her eyes went to his waist. “Having your shirt tucked into your jeans isn’t the best look.”

Hugh’s hand went to his waistband, but all he managed was to stammer unintelligibly.

“I’m so sorry.” Allie slapped a hand over her mouth. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me today. It’s like I’ve lost my filter.”

The way her cheeks flushed made him feel marginally better, and he blew out a breath as he tugged his shirt free from his belt.

“Better?” he asked, then snorted a laugh when she grimaced. “I’ll take that as a no.”

“Here...” She reached for his left arm, undid the button at his cuff and turned the sleeve back while he watched in amusement. “There,” she said after rolling back the right sleeve. “That’s better.”

“If I’d have known how open the staff are in this place, I’d have arrived earlier so you could have spruced me up before my date arrived.” He beamed at her.

As the blush faded on her cheeks, she gave him a quick pat on the shoulder. “Fashion advice is all part of the service. No need to tip extra or anything.”

Hugh settled back on his stool. “Is it really so bad to tuck shirts in?”

“No.” She walked back behind the bar. “It just gives a certain vibe.”

“What kind of vibe?”

She shrugged. “Like an academic or an architect or something.”

“I *am* an architect!”

Her eyes flashed with teasing. “*Really?*”

“You’ve spent the evening eavesdropping on my conversations, haven’t

you?”

“I’m a waitress. It’s a hazard of the job.”

“Okay.” He sat up straighter. “Since you had a front-row seat to the date, tell me what went wrong ... aside from my poor choice of clothing.”

“I really don’t want to do this.” She glanced around as though checking if anyone was listening and whether she was about to jeopardise her job.

“Come on,” he prompted. “Don’t get all shy now ... you already groped me.”

“I did not grope you.”

“You had a pretty good feel at my upper body,” he pointed out. “Anyway, tell me where you think I went wrong.”

“You may have talked a little too much about your job,” she said hesitantly.

“Really?”

“There’s only so much anyone wants to hear about scale rulers and T-squares and drafting tape.”

“Oh my god!” Hugh buried his head in his hands.

“Hey.” Allie reached over and patted his shoulder. “It wasn’t so bad.”

“I don’t think I talked about my job that much. You must have just overheard at the wrong moments.” He straightened up, buoyed by the idea. “Because I don’t even use those tools any more—”

“I know,” she said, cutting him off. “It’s all digitalised these days, which has its pros and cons. I can tell you all about them if you’d like?”

He hid his face again. “Kill me ...”

“That seems drastic. How about I pour you another drink instead?”

He contemplated hanging around since he was enjoying the banter with Allie. “I’ll just get the bill, thanks,” he said in the end. Probably better to call it a night.

She handed over the bill along with the card reader. “I have another thought about your date,” she mused.

“Enlighten me,” he said as the machine spat out his receipt.

“Going for a meal on a first date is a lot of pressure. People often start with going for a drink or coffee.”

“Right, so I even got that wrong?” He sighed. “Is that why Rebecca suddenly had to leave? An entire meal in my company was too much?”

“It’s a toss-up between that and the shirt, isn’t it?” She bit down on her lip. “Sorry, I’ll stop teasing now.”

“You’ll have to find someone else to tease anyway, since I need to go home and burn my shirt.” He grinned at her as he stood.

“It was nice to meet you,” she said.

“You too.” He raised his hand to wave, then left with a smile on his face.

CHAPTER 6



Used to organising her own schedule, it took a bit of restraint for Allie to stick to someone else's. She had to force herself to wait in her room until it was time for her shift on Sunday morning.

In the foyer, Daisy was behind the reception desk, engrossed in a call. She smiled at Allie and continued talking in a friendly but professional tone.

"Good morning," she said to Allie when she ended the call. "How are you?"

"Fine, thanks." Automatically, Allie leaned on the front desk, peering over it. "Is there any post?"

"Post?"

Allie's heart rate increased as she realised she'd slipped into her usual routine back at the Fox Hill Club.

"Are you expecting something?" Daisy asked.

In a panic, Allie's mind raced. "Not the actual post," she said with a nervous smile. "I just meant is there anything I need to know ..." Oh, god, where was she going with this? "News or gossip," she said, a little too loudly. "I meant, is there any news?"

"Oh." Daisy cocked her head. "Is that a London expression or something?"

"Something we say in Surrey. It's probably really colloquial."

"I've never heard it before. I kind of like it, though. How are you settling in, by the way?"

"Good." Allie breathed a sigh of relief at the subject change. "I worked my first restaurant shift last night and I think it went well."

"That's great. The staff are mostly nice, just don't get on the wrong side

of the chef.” She lowered her voice. “He can cook really well, but he’s prickly.”

“In my experience chefs often are,” Allie said.

“I guess so.”

“Anyone else I should be wary of?” Allie leaned a little closer. “What’s Kevin like?”

“He’s great,” Daisy said, while reaching for the phone as it rang. “He’s a lovely boss. You’ll like him.”

While Daisy dealt with a membership enquiry over the phone, Allie moved through to the empty restaurant. Kevin appeared from the back almost immediately and greeted her cheerfully.

“The mornings are quiet in the restaurant,” he told her. “We don’t offer a full breakfast, just pastries and drinks, so you’ll manage the restaurant by yourself. Try not to bother the kitchen while they’re busy with lunch prep.”

“Okay.” She pushed her tongue into her cheek, reminding herself to tread lightly and not slip into manager mode. “I’m surprised there isn’t a demand for cooked breakfasts. You’d think people might want a good hearty feed before they set off on the course. Or when they get back, if they’ve been out early.”

“We used to offer it but the chef got annoyed with having too much to do in the mornings. Plus, some days we wouldn’t even get any breakfast orders so it didn’t make sense to have the extra staff for it. It wasn’t worth the hassle.” He glanced at the window and frowned at the figure on the patio. “This guy’s here for his morning coffee. I’ll duck out of the way or he’ll talk my ear off and I won’t get anything done for the next half hour.”

While Kevin slipped away, Allie took a couple of steps towards the patio doors, squinting out at the older gentleman in a wax jacket and walking boots.

With an overwhelming sense of *deja vu*, she opened the patio door for him.

Bill.

The name rang in her head so clearly she was tempted to call it out. Except her mind was doing odd things. She didn’t know the man. His limp grey hair lifted in the breeze and the skin around his eyes crinkled deeply as he smiled. The brown Labrador at his side trotted straight over to Allie, stopping in front of the door and wagging his tail madly.

“Hello,” she said, crouching to stroke him and feeling slightly dizzy with

the notion that she'd done the same thing before.

"Morning!" the man called, as he ambled across the patio.

"Hi." Allie straightened up, shaking her head slightly to dispel the distracting thoughts.

"You must be the new waitress?"

"That's me," she said, her mind whirring with the unshakable thought that she knew this man with kind eyes.

"Beautiful morning," he said, stepping inside. "Chilly though. I'll be glad of a coffee to warm me through."

Allie remained holding the door open, but the lovely old Labrador didn't budge from his spot outside the door.

"He's fine out there." The man aimed a single nod at the dog. "Perry knows the drill. He'll wait for me."

"It's cold out," Allie said. "The fire's lit in the lounge. He'll be much more comfortable there."

"I'd be inclined to agree, but dogs aren't allowed inside."

"Of course they are," she said without thinking, then paused and blinked slowly. "I mean they should be. Why aren't they allowed?"

The man's eyes narrowed as he regarded her. "Something to do with the cleaners and dog hair. You'd need to ask Kevin."

"Oh." That was ridiculous. "It's a silly rule," she said lightly. "Let him come in out of the cold. I'll deal with Kevin." She switched her gaze to the dog, patting her thigh as she told him to come in.

"Don't lose your job on our account," the man said. "Perry will be fine outside."

"But you'll be much happier inside, won't you?" Allie adopted a sing-song tone as she ruffled the fur on Perry's head.

She led the way to the roaring fire and gestured to the wingback chair for the man while Perry happily stretched himself out before the heat of the crackling logs.

From the reception desk, Daisy caught her eye. "Kevin doesn't like dogs inside."

"So I heard," Allie replied with a conspiratorial smirk.

"Told you she's nice," Daisy called to the man before going back to the computer.

"She did say that." He reached down and patted the dog. "Sorry. Daisy told me your name, but my memory isn't what it used to be ..."

“Allie.”

“I’m Bill,” he told her with a twinkle in his eyes.

Her breath caught in her throat. “It’s nice to meet you,” she muttered.

“You too. I heard you’re new to the area as well as the job.”

“Yes.” Her heart was galloping. It seemed ridiculous now that she’d never considered whether there might still be people around who’d known her as a child. How had that not occurred to her? She supposed she’d been too busy assuming she’d be recognised for her career achievements instead of worrying about people who might know her in real life.

“How do you like your coffee?” she asked, desperate for a moment to compose herself.

“Just black, thanks.”

Waiting by the coffee machine, she took a couple of deep breaths, then glanced through the arch at Bill, who scratched behind Perry’s ear.

The memory came to Allie in a rush. Her mum telling her to sit and wait with Bill and Cooper. The dog back then had been a golden retriever with gorgeous big eyes and Allie had absolutely adored him. Bill too. She’d loved sitting in front of the fire with the two of them for a chat before school.

The coffee machine stopped, snapping her from her trance.

She still felt slightly dazed as she handed it to Bill.

“I went to school with Daisy’s grandad, you know,” he said. “Though he was a few years behind me.”

Allie smiled at the unexpected comment. “That’s nice.”

“Have you met him?”

“Daisy’s grandad?”

“Aye. Ron.” He paused for long enough for Allie to shake her head in confusion. “The greenkeeper,” he added.

“Oh.” She tilted her head back as the conversation started to make more sense. “No, I haven’t met him yet.” Which was a little odd. The greenkeeper at Fox Hill was the heart of the club. It often seemed impossible to go anywhere without bumping into him.

“You’ll probably meet him soon,” Bill said. “Ron’s a great bloke. All but raised Daisy himself,” he added quietly.

Questions danced in Allie’s mind, but she had no chance to ask any since she caught sight of Kevin walking into the lounge.

“Uh oh!” Bill said, casting his eyes down at his coffee.

“Dogs aren’t allowed in the clubhouse,” Kevin said, stopping at the other

side of the room as his eyes landed on Perry. “You know that, Bill.”

“It must have slipped my mind,” Bill said, aiming a discreet wink at Allie that took her back twenty years in an instant. Back then, he’d wink at her as he slipped her sweets when her parents weren’t looking.

“My fault,” Allie said, crouching to stroke Perry. “I didn’t see the harm in it.”

“It’s just policy.” Kevin hung back, looking as limp as his handshake. “The cleaning crew get shirty about it. And some of our members don’t like dogs around the place. You can finish your coffee, but after that the dog needs to be out of here.” He turned and walked back towards the bar. “Next time stick to the rules, please.”

Allie stared after Kevin while continuing to stroke Perry. It took a lot of willpower to keep from revealing her identity and asserting that Perry could remain beside the fire for as long as Bill wanted to stay.

“Sorry about that,” she said quietly to Bill. “It’s a pointless rule. Especially at this time when there’s no one else in the place.” Though that niggled her as well, since they ought to be doing a good breakfast trade.

“Don’t you worry,” Bill said. “I knew we wouldn’t be allowed to stay. Sometimes it’s fun to break the rules though.”

“I’ll talk to Kevin,” Allie said. “See if I can overturn the ‘no dog’ rule.”

“Good luck with that,” Bill said. “I reckon you’ll need it.”

She smiled slowly. “At the risk of sounding like a princess, I can tell you I have a way of getting what I want.”

“I like your spirit.” Bill finished his coffee and stood up, shooting Allie another charming wink before he left.

CHAPTER 7



When Allie had gently probed Kevin on the subject of dogs in the clubhouse, he stuck to his story that it was an issue with the cleaning crew. Apparently, muddy paws and shedding fur had caused issues in the past. His tone was firm and his argument just about sound enough that Allie didn't feel she could counter it without suspicion.

Honestly though, all it would take was an old towel for wet days, but most people were considerate enough to not bring their dogs in on those sorts of days. At least that had been her experience at the Fox Hill Club.

Once the lunch rush was over, she wasn't needed for the rest of the day. In fact, Kevin gave her a working schedule which was a lot fewer hours than she'd expected. Back in her room, she flopped onto the bed and contemplated what she was going to do with all her free time. It occurred to her she was going to have to do as her dad had suggested and make a holiday of it.

With thoughts of her dad in her head, she pulled out her phone to call him. Among other things, she wanted to ask about Bill, and if there was anyone else locally who might remember her. Not that Bill had shown any flicker of recognition.

When her dad didn't answer the phone, she considered calling her cousin to check everything was okay but told herself she was being silly. Bella would get in touch if there were any problems.

Bright blue skies beckoned to her through the window and she got changed out of her work clothes and into a pair of jeans and T-shirt. Knowing that the colour of the sky was entirely deceptive, she pulled on a jumper and a gilet, too.

The salty gusts on the clifftops were invigorating on her walk to Hope

Cove, and she marvelled at the craggy shoreline interspersed with gorgeous golden beaches. Instinctively, she ducked into the cafe in the village, then joined the queue for takeaways when the place was busier than she expected. It seemed it was the place to be on a Sunday afternoon. She'd just reached the counter and had ordered a coffee from the middle-aged waitress when an older woman walked out from the kitchen with plates in her hands.

With a similar sense of *deja vu* as she'd felt on seeing Bill, Allie's eyes followed the woman, who walked to a table in the corner occupied by a young couple.

A tap on her shoulder broke her from her trance and the smiley woman behind her pointed at the waitress holding a coffee out to her.

"Sorry." Allie took the cup. "Thank you."

Stepping away from the queue, she moved slowly to the door while keeping her eyes on the chatty, jolly lady who she assumed was the owner.

At the table to her right, a guy was calling out to someone. It pulled her from her thoughts and, with her mind back in the real world, she recognised the man.

"Allie!" he said again.

She glanced behind her, confused, then inwardly grimaced as she realised he was talking to her. She bit her tongue to keep from insisting it was Alegra.

"Hi," she said, drifting closer to his table. "Hugh, right?"

"Yes." The skin around his eyes crinkled as he smiled. "You looked as though you were several million miles away."

She nodded. Not only had she been lost in thought, she also hadn't recognised her name. Registering the girl across from Hugh, she remembered him telling his date about his daughter. She was older than Allie had imagined, probably in her early teens.

"How are you?" Hugh asked.

"I'm good. Using my afternoon off to explore the area."

"You're not from around here, then?"

"No." She paused, realising that was a lie. But she really didn't consider herself to be from Devon despite spending her early years there. "Surrey," she told him.

"That's a bit of a change." Hugh's eyes flicked across the table. "Sorry, this is my daughter, Emmy. This is Allie."

"Hi," Emmy said, with a bemused smile.

"I met your dad at the golf club last night," Allie said. "I've just started

working there.” She looked to Hugh. “Did you hear anything from ...” She searched her brain but came up blank.

“Rebecca?” He rolled his eyes. “No word from her.”

“Did you message her?” Allie asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

He shifted in his seat, eyes darting to Emmy.

“Sorry,” Allie said quickly. “None of my business.” She was about to leave, but Emmy spoke, stopping her in her tracks.

“I said he should message and ask how her daughter is ... but his friends told him to wait a while and play it cool. He took their advice instead of mine.”

“I didn’t take anyone’s advice,” Hugh said. “*Unwanted advice*, by the way.” He tried to scowl, but the attempt only made Emmy giggle.

“What’s the plan, then?” Allie asked.

“I decided you were probably right.” Hugh looked her right in the eyes. “The sick kid thing was an excuse to leave, and me messaging her is just going to seem desperate. Besides, she said she’d call me, so I’ll wait to hear from her.”

Allie pursed her lips. “You’re right. If she’s interested, she’ll be in touch.”

“I’m not holding my breath.”

Pressing her lips together, Allie stifled a grin. “That’s probably also a good idea.” She raised a hand to wave as she backed away. “Enjoy the rest of your Sunday.”

“You too,” they said in unison.



“SHE’S PRETTY,” Emmy said.

“Hmm.” Hugh dragged his gaze from Allie as she crossed the road and wandered towards the beach. “What?” he asked, catching Emmy’s smirk.

“I said, do you think she’s pretty?”

“Allie?” He looked through the window again, but she’d disappeared from view. “I guess so. I didn’t really notice.”

That was a lie. *Pretty* wasn’t the word he’d choose, though. Mesmerising was more like it. In the golf club he hadn’t noticed it – maybe it was the staff uniform or maybe he’d been focused on Rebecca. Anyway, today he’d

noticed her in an entirely different way. Her glossy brown hair hung down to her shoulders and her lips and eyes seemed constantly on the verge of laughter.

“I think she’s pretty,” Emmy stated. “She seemed nice, too. Very normal.”

“Yeah.”

Emmy’s eyebrow twitched as she stared at him.

“What?” he asked.

“You should ask her out.”

“Allie?”

“Yes. Of course, Allie.”

“I don’t think so.” He shifted in his seat.

“You already said you don’t think Rebecca is going to get in touch. Wouldn’t it be better to ask Allie out than go back to the dating app?”

“I think the best thing would be to not date anyone.” Admittedly, the thought of going on a date with Allie was actually quite appealing. He couldn’t imagine for a second she’d agree to go out with him, though.

“Dad!” Emmy complained.

“What? I went on a date. Now you have to leave me alone.”

“I think you should go on another date. It’s like Leo and Damian said: the first date was just a warm-up.”

“And I think we should ignore dating advice from Damian and Leo.”

“They both have girlfriends,” Emmy said with a shrug. “Don’t you want a girlfriend?”

“I’m perfectly content as I am. Thank you.”

“You always say that, but Mum says—”

“Your mum thinks I’m pathetic, I realise that.”

“She just thinks it would be good for you to date again.”

“It’s none of Nancy’s business,” he muttered.

Over the years, he’d maintained a pretty good relationship with his ex-wife. Though that could probably change if she continued to make unhelpful comments about his personal life.

“I think it’d be good for you too,” Emmy said, then reached for her phone, her attention shifting in an instant. “Can I go upstairs and hang out with Scarlett?”

“Aren’t you meeting up with your friends this afternoon?” Hugh frowned. “I thought you were going over to Charlotte’s house with the rest of the

girls.”

“Scarlett invited me over and I’d rather hang out with her.”

Personally, he’d rather Emmy hung out with friends of her own age instead of the young woman who babysat for Emmy and who lived above the cafe.

“It’s fine, isn’t it?” Emmy asked as she stood.

“I suppose so.” Now that she was getting older, he couldn’t exactly dictate who she spent her time with. Especially since there was no particular reason she shouldn’t hang out with Scarlett. “You’ll be off to your mum’s next weekend,” he reminded her. “So you won’t be able to hang out with your friends then.” She’d spend two weeks at her mum’s house in Paris for the school holidays, and Hugh was already dreading the empty house.

“I know,” she said testily. “I’d just rather hang out with Scarlett today. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing. It’s fine.”

“See you later.” She kissed his cheek and darted away.

Left alone, Hugh stared out of the window. Boats and buoys occupied the crescent beach across the road. Several children scurried around them while a group of adults watched from a distance. Closer to the water, a sandpiper darted around and a woman walked slowly along, seemingly on the phone. She was too far away to make out properly, but Hugh had an inkling it was Allie.

On impulse, he moved to the door and left the cafe, feeling a brief tug of guilt for not saying goodbye to the owner, Verity. Wind whipped at him as he crossed the road and stepped onto the sand.

It was definitely Allie down by the shore.

And he had the overwhelming urge to talk to her.

CHAPTER 8



With her coffee still too hot to drink, Allie wandered down to the beach and pulled out her phone. This time her dad answered quickly and she felt tension leave her shoulders at the sound of his voice.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “Why didn’t you answer when I called earlier?”

“I was having a nap.”

“A nap?” The tension returned immediately. “Since when do you take naps?”

“Since you left me with your bossy cousin. Bella’s worse than you. It seemed easier to go and lie down than to argue with her.”

Allie smiled. “That’s all right then. You’re feeling okay?”

“I feel fine. How’s everything with you?”

She neared the shore and changed course to avoid getting her shoes wet. “So far, so good. I saw someone I knew today. An older gentleman. Bill. Do you know him?”

“Yes, of course. You know I usually catch up with Bill whenever I’m back there. He always asks after you.”

“You could have warned me that there are still people here who might know me from when I was a kid.”

“I didn’t think about it. I’m surprised Bill recognised you though. He hasn’t seen you since you were nine.”

“He didn’t recognise me.” She neared the end of the beach and turned back to continue wandering along the water’s edge. “He came up to the clubhouse with his dog and I remembered him.”

“So you do have memories from living there?”

“Apparently so.”

“And ... how are you feeling about that?”

“Fine, actually.”

“Why do you sound annoyed?”

“Because you’re going to tell me I should have come back a long time ago ... like you wanted me to.”

He chuckled. “Amusing as it is to hear you admit your clueless old dad might be right about something, maybe you just weren’t ready to go back before now.”

“Hmm.” She wasn’t in the mood to get into a deep conversation with her dad. She was never in the mood for that. “It feels a little weird with Bill. Not being honest about who I am.”

“You could always tell him. Oh, and Verity would remember you too.”

“Does she work in the cafe, by any chance?”

“She owns it. Have you already bumped into her?”

“I went to get a coffee and she seemed very familiar.”

He paused for a moment. “I’m glad you’ve finally made it back there.”

Allie stopped and dug the toe of her shoe into the wet sand.

“How’s it going at the golf club?” he asked, switching to a more neutral topic. “What do you make of Kevin?”

“I don’t think he’s the worst manager in the world. I’d make a few changes around the place, though. For a start, they don’t offer breakfast.”

“Kevin said it’s not worth it.”

“He said the same to me, but I got the impression he might just be pandering to a lazy chef. Oh, and do you know dogs aren’t allowed in the clubhouse?”

“Yes.”

“You should have overturned that rule. Bill has a lovely old Labrador who has to wait outside in the cold when there’s a perfectly good fire for him to snooze in front of.”

“Kevin knows my thoughts on that rule. When I’m there Perry comes inside, but it’s not easy to micro-manage from 200 miles away.”

“I suppose not.” Allie rubbed at her brow and gazed out to the horizon where a speedboat whizzed along. “So far there doesn’t seem to be any major issues, which means I shouldn’t need to be here for very long.”

“You’re there now, you may as well hang around a while.”

“I will.” Not only because the idea of a holiday felt suddenly appealing,

but also because she had a niggling feeling there must be more she could do to improve the golf club. “By the way,” she said, as a thought occurred to her. “What do you know of the greenkeeper?”

“Ron’s a good guy,” her dad said immediately. “Getting close to retirement though, I think.”

“I haven’t met him yet. That’s not a great sign, is it?”

“You’ve only been there a couple of days.”

She smiled gently. “Can you imagine being at Fox Hill for two days without seeing Joe?”

Laughter hit her ear. “Sometimes it feels as though I can’t go two minutes without seeing Joe.”

“Exactly.”

“Do you think there’s a problem with the upkeep of the course?”

“Not that I’ve noticed. I just thought it was odd that I haven’t seen him.”

“He had a period where his arthritis was flaring up and he had to keep taking time off. That was when Kevin started talking about replacing him, but as far as I know, everything settled down again.”

“An arthritic greenkeeper?” Allie said, brow wrinkling as she imagined someone who wasn’t physically fit managing the upkeep of an entire golf course.

“If he wasn’t up to the job, I’d have heard about it from Kevin. Anyway, I’m sure you’ll meet him soon. He lives in the house just outside the gates. I think his granddaughter lives there with him. She certainly used to.”

“Daisy. She seems like a good worker.”

“Kevin only ever has good things to say about her and she always seems to be working hard when I visit. But then they all do.”

Allie nodded. “Apart from a couple of minor issues, I suspect this is one of the most efficiently run clubs in the country that you’ve sent me to spy on.”

“In which case, you just get a holiday.”

The wind rushed through Allie’s hair, and she turned to brush the strands from her face while she wrapped up the call and told her dad she’d speak to him again soon.

She’d just pushed her phone into her pocket when a low voice said “hello”, startling her. Her hand shot to her chest and she yelped at the figure, who seemed to have appeared from nowhere.

“Sorry.” Hugh held up his hands in a defensive gesture. “I didn’t mean to

scare you.”

“What are you doing creeping up on me?” she asked, her tone not overly polite. “How long have you been standing there?” She tried to think of the last things she’d been saying to her dad, contemplating what he might have overheard.

“Oh, no ... I haven’t ... I mean I wasn’t ...” His cheeks pinked as he stammered. “I just walked up to you. I wasn’t loitering or anything.”

She took a deep breath. “I didn’t hear you coming.”

“That’s the trouble with sand.” His lips pulled into an awkward smile. “I really wasn’t trying to creep up on you.”

Allie relaxed as her heart rate began to settle. “Your daughter seems very sweet.”

“Yeah. She is.” He twisted his lips and glanced along the beach. “I was wondering if you want to go out for a drink sometime?”

Completely taken aback, it took Allie a moment to register what he’d said. She opened her mouth to respond, then closed it again when no words came. “A drink?” she finally managed.

“Yeah.”

For a simple question, she was really struggling with it. “Like a date?” Surely he wasn’t asking her on a date when she’d witnessed him crash and burn on his last date.

“Maybe.” Uncertainty wrinkled his brow. “I thought since you’re new around here and you probably don’t know many people ...” He winced and shook his head. “Not just that. I enjoyed talking to you the other night ... so I thought it would be nice to hang out again. As a date, or as friends ... whatever you’d prefer.”

“I just moved here,” she said. “I’m really not looking to date anyone.” There wasn’t any point since she wasn’t intending to be there for long, but even if she was planning on hanging around, Hugh wasn’t her type. Though given her dating history, perhaps that wouldn’t be a bad thing.

“Just a drink then?” His voice was tinged with a combination of desperation and hope that was entirely unappealing. “I’m not suggesting a meal or anything crazy like that,” he added lightly. “I’ve learned my lesson there.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “Okay,” she said, deciding it couldn’t do much harm. Especially given that all she had on her agenda was a few shifts at the restaurant. Having something on her social calendar wasn’t the worst

thing. As long as she was clear about her expectations. “A drink. As friends. That’s all.”

“Great. When are you free?”

“I have nothing planned for this evening ...”

He looked vaguely thoughtful before he nodded. “Tonight’s good.”

“What’s the Anchor Inn like?” She tipped her head towards the local pub. It had tempted her when she passed earlier, but she hadn’t been keen to sit alone.

“It’s nice. The staff are friendly and there’s a good vibe.”

“How about I meet you there at 8pm?”

Laughter lines appeared around his eyes when he smiled, making Allie briefly wonder how old he was. “Perfect.”

As she said goodbye and walked away, she hoped she’d made it clear it wasn’t a date.

She didn’t have space in her life for romantic entanglements. Not even a holiday romance.

CHAPTER 9



“Does this T-shirt look weird?” Hugh asked, walking into the living room where Emmy was tapping away on her phone.

She only spared him a cursory glance. “It looks fine.”

He smoothed it down. “Should I tuck it in?”

“If you want.” She didn’t even look at him now.

“It feels strange wearing it untucked, but probably because I’m just not used to it. Or does it look weird?”

“It’s a T-shirt,” she said with a sigh. “Why are you going on about it?”

Ignoring the question, he began to tuck it in. He had a belt on, so tucking it in was fine. Wasn’t it?

“I thought you said it wasn’t a date?” Emmy said. “Why are you stressing so much?”

“Allie said she wasn’t looking to date anyone, but that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t make an effort.”

Emmy twisted to look at him. “Do you really like her?”

“I ... um ... I don’t really know her, but she seems nice.” He looked down at his T-shirt and frowned, then tugged it free from his waistband. “It’s definitely not a proper date. I think she just agreed to go for a drink with me because she doesn’t know anyone around here.” He shifted his gaze to his shoulder and pulled at the sleeve of his T-shirt, thinking it could probably be a little tighter.

“If she’s told you she doesn’t want to date anyone, this seems like a lot of effort for nothing.” She propped her arm on the end of the couch. “I still think you should message Rebecca. What if her kid genuinely was ill and you haven’t even messaged to ask if everything is okay?”

“If her kid was ill, and she actually enjoyed my company, she would have messaged me, wouldn’t she? She was the one who ran away from our date.”

Emmy made a noise that seemed to suggest he might have a point. “I wish you could find someone really nice. It all seems a bit unfair.”

“How so?”

“I just think you should go out with someone who really wants to go out with you, not someone who’s using you because she doesn’t have any friends around here.”

“At least she was honest,” he said. “And maybe once she gets to know me she’ll want to go on an actual date with me.”

“Maybe.” Emmy sighed dramatically. “Where are you taking her?”

“Just to the Anchor Inn.”

Her eyes raked over him. “You should tuck the T-shirt in.”

“Do you think so?” His eyes darted down again. “I think I’m going to put a different one on.” He moved to leave the room, but turned back in the doorway. “Are you sure you’re okay alone this evening? I could still call Scarlett and see if she’ll come over. Or Damian or Amy. I’m sure one of them would come over and hang out with you.”

“I’m fine,” she said, a slight whine to her voice.

“Right. If you’re sure.” He’d expected parenting to get easier as Emmy got older, but he was starting to think it might be the other way. Trying to figure out how much independence to let her have was a nightmare. “I’ll only be at the pub,” he said. “So you can call if there’s a problem, and I won’t be late back.”

“Dad,” she said impatiently. “Just go. I’ll be fine.”



ARRIVING at the pub exactly on time, Allie found Hugh waiting for her on one of the picnic tables on the patio.

“Hi,” she said, feeling slightly windswept after her walk along the cliffs. “You could have gone in already.”

He stood and took a step towards her. “I only just got here.” The uncertainty in his tone made her think he might have been waiting ages. He leaned forwards, as though he was going to kiss her cheek, then stopped at the last minute and rocked back on the balls of his feet. “Also, I wanted to

offer to pick you up but I don't have your number."

"It's a nice walk along the cliffs," she said, ignoring the comment about the phone number.

"Have you come from the golf club?"

"Yes." She smiled at his confusion. "I'm living up there. They have staff accommodation."

"Oh, right." He shifted his weight, then extended his arm towards the door, seeming painfully nervous as they walked inside.

The young barman greeted them cheerfully and Hugh seemed to relax as he introduced them.

Jack wiped his hand on his jeans before offering it to Allie across the bar. "We'll probably be seeing a lot of each other if you're working up at the golf club."

"You golf?" she asked, pleasantly surprised.

Jack's eyes widened. "No. Sorry, I was being sarcastic. I thought it would be obvious from looking at me that I don't play golf."

Allie felt her brow crease as she tried to decipher the comment.

"The only reason I could afford a house around here was due to a compensation claim after I had an accident," Jack told her. "And I only got that because I have a friend who's a lawyer." He glanced along the bar to where a guy had his head in his laptop. Briefly, he looked over the lid to offer Jack a quick salute of acknowledgement, then tipped his chin at Hugh.

"You kind of lost me somewhere," Allie said with a polite smile.

"Yes." Jack rocked on the balls of his feet. "That was confusing. My point was I don't have a lot of money."

Allie's lips pulled to one side. "Right. Okay."

"That's why you won't catch me playing golf."

She nodded as things clicked into place. "You think only rich people play golf?"

"Yeah."

"It's a common misconception," Allie told him. "But really anyone can play."

"Not really." He leaned forwards as though he had more to say on the subject, but Hugh interrupted the conversation, asking what Allie wanted to drink.

She ordered a gin and tonic and wondered how weird it would be if she brought the conversation back to golf. In the end, she couldn't help herself.

Besides, it seemed natural since Jack was making drinks right in front of them.

“Golf really isn’t just for rich people, you know,” she said.

He smiled broadly. “Now *that’s* a common misconception held by rich people.”

“It’s not,” she insisted, endeared by his sense of humour. “Have you ever even been to a golf club?”

“Yes,” he replied excitedly, while pouring the tonic. “I’ve been to Thurley Beach. But only once because I can’t afford it.”

Allie didn’t actually have a clue how much they charged for a round. She’d assumed it would be an average rate but perhaps they were overpriced. “Is it really that much?”

“No, it’s not,” the guy at the end of the bar piped up. “Jack just has a chip on his shoulder because one of the staff was rude to him.”

“It’s not just that,” Jack argued. “I can afford the price of a round of golf, but there’s also the price of renting clubs and buying ridiculous golf clothes.”

“You can wear whatever you want,” Allie said adamantly.

“Maybe at some clubs, but not at Thurley Beach.” Jack placed the drinks on the bar. “Max took me up there one time. I wasn’t even wearing jeans,” he said enthusiastically. “I’d put my best khaki combats on specially.”

“And that wasn’t okay?” Allie asked.

“Kevin looked me up and down, then suggested I might want to start with the driving range. Tucked us away at the far end, out of sight.”

Max looked up. “To be fair, it might not have been the worst suggestion.”

“True,” Jack agreed. “Because it turned out Max is a terrible teacher and I have no natural abilities for hitting a tiny ball with a metal stick.” He grinned at Max. “How embarrassing would it have been if we’d been out on the course where people could see me?”

“I’d say it would have taken us quite a while to get round,” Max replied.

“I’d still be there.” Jack’s eyes sparkled with amusement.

Allie had more questions, but was aware of Hugh’s eyes on her.

“Shall we find a table?” he asked.

She smiled as she nodded. Really, she’d like to chat to the locals and continue finding out what they thought of the golf club. That would be rude, though. She’d agreed to a drink with Hugh, so she really should sit down and have a drink with him.

“Do you ever play golf?” she asked him as they sat at a small table close

to the fireplace.

“I’ve never swung a golf club in my life. I’m sure it’d be embarrassing if I tried.”

“That’s a shame.”

He shrugged. “I take it you’re a fan?”

“Yeah.” She bit back a grin. “You could say that. My dad was into golf, so I grew up around it.”

“Is that how you ended up working at Thurley Beach?”

“Kind of ...”

“What were you doing back in Surrey?”

She took a sip of her drink to give her time to decide how to reply. “Also working at a golf club,” she said, deciding that sticking as close to the truth as possible would be a good move.

“Waitressing?” Hugh asked.

“I did a bit of everything.” She paused. “I had more responsibility.”

“So what made you decide to leave?”

“Just fancied a change,” she said, eyeing her drink as though it had all the answers. “My dad has contacts at a lot of golf clubs. I thought a stint by the sea might be a pleasant change.”

Hugh nodded, apparently accepting her reasons without question. But then he had no reason to be suspicious. Which meant there was no need for her to feel so nervous.

“What about you?” she asked, angling for a change of subject. “Have you always worked in architecture?”

“Yes. I was working for a small firm straight after uni. I set up on my own when Emmy was little to give me more flexibility.”

“So you’re self-employed?”

He nodded. “I specialise in loft conversions. It’s not exactly glamorous, but there’s quite a demand for it so I’m never short of work.”

“That’s good,” she murmured, losing interest in the conversation as the sound of laughter drifted from the bar. Something was clearly entertaining Jack and Max, and she had the urge to talk with them again. She had the impression that Max was a golfer, and it sounded as though he played up at Thurley.

She tuned back into the conversation in front of her. “How long does it take to train to be an architect?” she asked, not in any way curious but keen to keep the conversation away from herself.

“I got a degree in four years,” he told her. “But that’s only really the basics. There’s constantly more to learn, so I’ve done various extra courses alongside working.”

Allie managed a polite smile. “How did you decide to become an architect in the first place?”

Allie tried hard to focus as Hugh rambled away about his childhood obsession with building sites and his brief idea of going into construction. It was difficult to feign interest, so she ended up drinking her gin too fast. It didn’t make the conversation any more interesting, but when Hugh ran out of steam, she had an excuse to go back to the bar.

“Do you want another?” she asked, standing with her empty glass in hand.

He eyed his pint glass, which was still half full. “No. I can get yours, though,” he offered.

“That’s fine.” She waved the offer away and walked over to the bar.

While Jack set about pouring her drink, Allie sidestepped towards the guy with his laptop. Max was focused on whatever he was doing, but glanced up at Allie.

“I take it you’re a golfer?” she asked.

“I used to be. I haven’t played in a long time.”

That wasn’t the answer she’d been expecting. “You’re not a fan of the Thurley course either?”

“I really like it up there. It’s a beautiful course.”

“So why don’t you play any more?” Allie asked.

He glanced at his laptop, then back at her. “I can’t play any more because I have three demons at home. *Children*,” he corrected himself loudly, making Allie laugh. “Three *children*. That’s what I meant. Delightful little things. Not at all demonic. Angelic actually ...” He smiled wickedly. “At least when they’re sleeping.”

Allie smiled through her confusion. “What’s that got to do with golf?”

“I just don’t have time,” he said seriously. “Which is a shame because my wife and I used to love going up to Thurley. We had our first date up there.” He grimaced. “Not an official date because we were both seeing other people, but we had lunch and she completely showed me up at the driving range.”

“Does she still play?”

He shook his head. “I think we’d both feel bad leaving the other alone with the kids for such a chunk of time at the weekends. And it’s something

we liked to do together, but it'd feel weird to get a babysitter while we spent the whole afternoon on the golf course."

"You could just make it nine holes," she suggested.

"We could, but Thurley is set up in such a way that by the time you've done nine you're so far away from the clubhouse that you may as well play the whole course."

Allie nodded. It was a good point. Ten years ago, her dad had redesigned Fox Hill for that very reason. "That's a shame."

"Anyway, how are you enjoying working there?"

"Um ... it's okay."

Jack set her drink in front of her. "Are you planning on staying around long term?"

"I'm not sure yet," she said. "I'll see how things go." She handed over cash and waited for her change.

"Are you going to come and look at this or what?" Max said, gesturing to his laptop.

For a moment, Allie thought he was talking to her before she realised he was talking to Jack.

Jack moved closer. "If you want to hold a business meeting while I'm working, you're going to have to wait while I serve customers sometimes."

"It'll only take a few minutes." He turned the laptop so they could both see what looked to be a spreadsheet.

Jack's gaze went to Allie. "Max and I work for a property management company. It's a job share."

"So you're not actually a lawyer?" she asked Max, trying to keep up.

"I was."

She suppressed a smirk. "Did you get disbarred for dodgy compensation claims?"

Max laughed loudly. "There was nothing dodgy about it. It was a legitimate claim." He looked up at Jack. "Can you hurry so I don't get in trouble with Lizzie for leaving her alone with the demons for too long?"

"He loves his children," Jack said. "Just in case that's not clear."

"I do," Max agreed. "Especially when they're asleep," he added under his breath.

"I'll leave you to it."

She hadn't expected her evening in the pub to be so useful in gathering information about the golf club. There were clearly a few issues to be

addressed, but it was still all pretty minor. Except for the overall layout of the course, but she couldn't imagine her dad would be interested in redesigning it when he was contemplating selling.

Crossing the room, she caught Hugh's eye. He was sweet really, even if he was incredibly dull. She shook the uncharitable thought from her head. At least he was trying. She was the one giving him leading questions about architecture, so she couldn't really complain.

It was just easier than trying to navigate questions about herself.

Twenty more minutes, she told herself. By then she'd have stayed for a sufficient amount of time that making an excuse to leave wouldn't seem rude.

Especially given that it wasn't a date.

CHAPTER 10



The downstairs was in darkness when Hugh arrived home. Upstairs, the landing light was on and he went straight up, squinting in the darkness when he pushed at the door to Emmy's room.

"Hi," she said, her voice slightly hoarse.

"You're still awake?" he asked unnecessarily.

"Yeah." She lifted her head from the pillow. "How was it?"

He braced a hand on the doorframe. "It was okay."

"Is she nice?"

"Yeah." He lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "You should get to sleep. I'll tell you about it in the morning. Was everything okay here?"

"Fine. Mum called, so I was mostly chatting to her."

"Did you tell her I was on a date?"

"Yeah." Her smile was evident in the lilt of her voice. "She was happy about it."

"I still can't believe she told you she thought I was pathetic."

"She didn't! I overheard her talking, but she didn't say you were pathetic. I already told you: I think she just worries you're not happy or something." She sighed heavily and propped herself up on her elbows. "If you're going to keep me awake, can you at least come in and tell me about your date instead of complaining about Mum?"

He stepped into the room, staying in the shaft of light from the landing. "There's not much to say."

"Didn't it go well?"

"It was fine, I think."

"But not great, or you wouldn't be home so early."

He checked his watch. "Allie has to be up early for work. That's what she said, anyway."

"Don't you believe her?"

"I think it was probably an excuse." He walked over to Emmy and she shuffled over to make room for him. Propping a pillow against the headboard, he got comfy with his legs stretched out on the bed. "I don't think she had a great time."

"Why not?"

"I think she had more fun chatting with Jack and Max at the bar than she did with me. And ..." He paused and blew out a breath.

"What?" Emmy asked.

He sank lower on the bed. "I didn't know what to talk about. No offence but I try not to talk about you too much." He grimaced, but she only grinned in reply. "She asked me about my job so I talked about that ... I think she got a bit bored, and I couldn't think of much else to talk about."

Emmy hugged her pillow as she gazed up at him in the dim light. "Girls like it if you ask about them and not just talk about yourself."

He gave her a playful shove. "I know that! I asked about her, but she wasn't that chatty so it was difficult. She seemed a bit guarded, like she didn't want to talk about herself."

"Are you going to go out with her again?"

"I don't think so."

"Did you ask her?"

"Yeah. Just casually said we could go out again sometime if she wanted. She vaguely said she'd be in touch."

"Okay, maybe it will be easier if you go out again."

"No. There definitely won't be a repeat."

"But she said she'd be in touch."

"She was being polite."

"You don't know that."

"She doesn't have my number." He smiled to himself. "She said she'd be in touch but didn't ask for my number. That seems like a very definite brush-off."

"Oh," Emmy said sympathetically. "Didn't you ask if she wanted your number?"

"No. She wasn't interested. It was pretty obvious." He looked down at Emmy and pulled the duvet further up her shoulder. "You can't say I didn't

try.”

“You could try again. Two dates is nothing really.”

“No. I don’t think so. I’m happy being single.” He decided a change of subject was in order. “Are you looking forward to seeing your mum next week?”

A deep crease formed across her forehead. “I guess so.”

“Are you okay?” he asked, uneasy at her hesitation.

“Yeah.”

“Do you need anything before you go?”

“No.” She shifted her head on the pillow. “Mum will take me shopping.”

“With all these shopping sprees in Paris, you’re going to end up with very expensive tastes.”

“What will you do when I’m away?” Emmy asked.

“Probably just work and watch Grey’s Anatomy.”

She pulled her arm out from under the covers to give him a shove. “You better not watch it without me.”

“I won’t.” He smiled and tucked her in again. “I promise.” He dropped a kiss on her head and went to stand up, but she put a hand on his arm.

“Can you stay until I fall asleep?” she asked quietly.

“Yes.” That was a request he hadn’t heard in years. While part of his brain immediately wondered whether everything was okay with her, another part was just happy that she still needed him. Given how quickly she was growing up, he sometimes worried about the day she’d be completely independent and wouldn’t need him any more.

But as she snuggled against his chest, it didn’t feel like something he needed to panic about just yet.

CHAPTER 11



Taking Emmy to the airport was one of Hugh's least favourite things. When she'd been younger, the travelling had included either him or Nancy, but in the last couple of years she'd started making the trip on her own. It had been an area of contention between him and Nancy for a long time: whether one of them really needed to be with her or if she could travel as an unaccompanied minor.

Regardless of how much Nancy had argued that Emmy would be fine – and pointed out that the airline staff would look after her – Hugh always hated the idea of it.

He'd only relented when Emmy had got in on the discussion. With Emmy insisting she was fine to go alone, he'd run out of arguments. Which meant he was now standing by the security gates with his stomach twisted in an agonising knot.

"Are you sure you're okay alone?" he asked, not for the first time.

"Yeah." Emmy pulled the straps of her backpack tighter. "It's only an hour and a half on the plane."

"I know that, but there's a lot of waiting time, and airports can be confusing."

"I've done this so many times," she said, glancing around and looking suddenly uncertain.

"I know you have. And I know you're capable of getting a flight alone, but if you don't want to ..."

"What?" She jutted her chin out obnoxiously. "You'll buy a ticket to come with me?"

"Yes. I could do that." He'd have to reschedule a call with a client in the

afternoon, but that wasn't a big deal.

"Dad!" Emmy rolled her eyes and wrapped her arms around his waist to hug him. "I'll be okay. Stop worrying."

He squeezed her tightly and planted a kiss on the top of her head. "I'll hang around the airport until the plane takes off. If you need me, just call."

"You can go home." She kissed his cheek. "I'll be fine."

"Call me as soon as you land, won't you?"

"Yeah." She took a step away.

"Have you got everything? Passport, ticket, phone, money ..." He pulled his wallet out. "Did I give you money?"

"Yes." She laughed, but hugged him again before turning on her heel and walking confidently away. Once she'd joined the queue for security, she turned and waved while tilting her head and going cross-eyed to make him laugh. He lingered, the two of them pulling faces at each other until she rounded the corner, out of sight.

In the nearest cafe, he bought a coffee and a sandwich and found a quiet spot in the corner. Once he'd polished off his sandwich, he pulled his laptop out to reply to a few emails. His phone rang before he'd got much done.

Thinking it might be Emmy, he pounced on it, then paused when he saw it was Nancy.

Generally, they'd had an easy-going relationship over the past decade. Once he'd got over her leaving, he tried to keep things amicable for Emmy's sake. On the whole, that had been easy enough. He may even have gone so far as saying they were friends. But recently he found that many of their conversations involved him biting his tongue and often ended with him in a bad mood.

He swiped at the phone and moved it to his ear. "Hi."

"Are you at the airport?" Nancy asked.

"Yes. Emmy went through security half an hour ago."

"And you're hanging around until the plane leaves the tarmac?" she asked, the amusement in her tone immediately annoying him.

He closed the lid of his laptop. "I'm doing some work in the cafe before I drive back."

"You'll have to let her grow up one day, you know?"

"I just sent her off into an airport alone," he said through gritted teeth. "I don't see how you can complain that I baby her."

"I wasn't complaining," she said wearily. "I just think it would be better

for your stress levels if you trust her when she says she can do something instead of constantly worrying. She's a young woman and—"

"She's twelve," Hugh growled. "She's a child."

"She's mature for her age. And she's a very confident person."

"She *acts* confident." Hugh picked up his mug to swill the cold dregs. "Which is different to her actually being confident."

"I just don't think you need to worry about her flying alone. She knows the drill, and the independence is good for her."

"Good for *you*, more like," Hugh said, before he could stop himself. "Now you don't have to fly over here to collect her or drop her off."

"I told her I was happy to come if she needed me to, but she said she's fine. I know you offered to bring her, so it's not as though the option wasn't there if she wanted an escort."

"I know." He rubbed at his temple. "Can you please just let me know as soon as you've got her?"

"Sure. I told her to get a taxi from the airport, so I'll let you know when she gets to my place."

Hugh's heart rate shot up so quickly that he felt mildly dizzy. "She's getting a taxi? Why can't you or Louise pick her up? And why are you only telling me this now? You can't just decide stuff like that without—"

"Oh, Hugh," Nancy giggled. "That was too easy."

His shoulders dropped immediately. "You're winding me up?"

"Yes. Even though I think she'd be fine getting a taxi. Lou and I are both going to collect her. We do like having her here, you know? I'm excited to see my daughter."

"Good." His breathing felt slightly uneven and he wanted to get off the phone. "Just let me know when you have her."

"I will. I also needed to talk to you about something." She went silent for a moment. "Actually, I'll call you another time. I have to leave for the airport soon and I've got a couple of things to do first."

"Okay. I'll talk to you later."

"Have you got anything planned for your child-free time?" she asked before he could end the call. "Emmy said you were out on a date the other night. How's that going?"

"Good," he said automatically.

"Glad to hear it. It'll do you good to have something to focus on that isn't Emmy or work."

He opened his mouth to argue that he did have a life aside from work and Emmy, then stopped himself. His mind whirred back to his evening with Allie and how he'd struggled for other topics of conversation. There was more to his life than Emmy and work though. He also had good friends and was perfectly content with his life.

"So is it serious?" Nancy asked. "Between you and ... what was her name?"

"Allie." He should probably confess that they'd only been on one date that wasn't even really a date, but decided not to get into it. He was fine with Nancy thinking there was more to it.

"I presume it's serious," she remarked. "I can't imagine anything else with you."

His jaw tensed. "I don't know what it is," he said, trying not to get riled up. "We're just having fun and seeing where it goes." He grimaced at the lies.

"That's great. So you'll be making the most of the time while Emmy's away?"

"Yes," he said firmly. "I'll be having fun, going on dates and stuff. Why are you so interested?"

"Because," she said lightly. "I worry about you."

"You don't need to. I'm perfectly happy."

"I have to go," she said. "I'll message you when I have eyes on Emmy. You enjoy the time for yourself."

"I will," he said more gruffly than he'd intended.

After ending the call, the conversation swirled in his mind, making it impossible to focus on work. He lingered for another hour, drinking more coffee and waiting until Emmy messaged to say she was on the plane and everything was fine. Only then did he venture to his car and settle in for the two-hour journey back to Hope Cove.

It seemed like no time at all until he pulled up outside of the house. His phone showed messages from both Emmy and Nancy to say she'd arrived safely in Paris. He felt as though he could breathe easier, but the conversation with Nancy continued to niggle at him for the rest of the afternoon. Work was only a moderate distraction, and when he powered down his computer for the day, he pondered how he was going to kill the time without Emmy.

Then he cursed himself, because that was exactly the reason Nancy thought he was pathetic. Because his life revolved around Emmy and work. Not that it mattered what Nancy thought.

Remaining in his office, he picked up his phone, then set it aside again. Even if he wanted to call Allie, he didn't have her number.

It didn't even matter, since he had no desire to put himself through another disastrous date. Not that it would be disastrous. If he went on another date, he'd up his game and it would go a lot smoother than the other ones.

He reached for his phone again and sighed heavily. Sod it, he'd go on another date just to prove he could be charming and fun. In fact, it just needed to be fun. One fun date, just to prove to himself he could, then he'd give up the dating game for good.

First, he needed to track Allie down.

He couldn't imagine that would be too difficult. It was convincing her to go out with him again that would take a little more effort.

And all the charm he could muster.

CHAPTER 12



For as long as Allie could remember, her life had been busy. Her teenage years and most of her twenties had been dedicated to chasing her career goals. She'd done so wholeheartedly and had loved every minute. Then, when injury had caused her dreams to come crashing down two years ago, she'd thrown herself into running the golf course with her dad.

She'd swapped one obsession for another and had told herself that everything was fine. Both her dad and her cousin had encouraged her to take time off, but she'd waved away their concerns. Mostly because giving her mind the space to dwell on what had happened scared the life out of her. In the same way as she'd avoided mourning the loss of her mother, she avoided dwelling on the loss of the career that she'd loved.

In Hope Cove, her long days with nothing much to do gave her mind the space to process everything, whether or not she wanted to. Except, as she settled into new routines and a slower pace of life, she found that the pain wasn't anything like as bad as she'd anticipated.

One blustery afternoon, she wandered along the coastal path while pondering everything that had happened over the past few years. Admittedly, she shed a few tears along the way, but it hadn't been the gut-wrenching misery she'd expected to feel if she let her mind wander.

It wasn't only the lack of emotional pain that surprised her, either. The pain in her shoulder was easing too.

Generally, she relied on a combination of ibuprofen and paracetamol to take the edge off, but she'd definitely been taking less. On Saturday she hesitated over taking a pill before her shift, deciding in the end to see if she could manage without.

Walking over to the clubhouse, she rubbed at her shoulder, smiling at the thought of how her cousin would react when she found out that the pain had improved. Bella had spent the last year telling Allie that if she just slowed down, it would give her shoulder a chance to heal. Allie had argued that she'd rested it quite enough. Not just rest either. She'd also worked with a physiotherapist and a chiropractor before reaching the conclusion that it would never fully heal.

Her cheerful mood dissipated as she crossed the car park and caught sight of Hugh stepping out of a silver Volkswagen. After their evening in the pub the previous weekend, she'd hoped to avoid bumping into him again.

"Hey!" He strode towards her, looking way too confident for a guy she'd told she'd call and then hadn't. She hadn't even bothered to get his number, which was a fairly blunt brush-off.

"Hi," she said, aiming for a purely polite smile. "How are you?"

"Fine."

"Have you got another date?" she asked, glancing at the door.

"No," he said, amusement softening his features. "I wanted to call you, but I didn't have your number."

"I guess I'm easy to track down. What did you want to call me about?"

"I think I might be bad at first dates," he said.

She tilted her head. "And you felt the sudden need to tell me that?"

"Yes." His gentle chuckle made Allie smile. "No. I just thought maybe you could help me test the theory."

"What sort of experiment do you have in mind?" She rolled her eyes but couldn't help but find his confidence annoyingly attractive.

"I need someone to go on a second date with me. So I can see if it's just a first date issue."

She shook her head. "We haven't even been on a first date. We went for a drink as friends, that's all."

"It kind of felt like a date."

"A pretty bad one," she said, then winced.

"See! You agree it was a date of sorts ... a first date ... and it was bad ..."

"Okay. I walked into that."

His smile faded and he dragged his teeth along his bottom lip. "Look, I know you're not looking for a relationship or anything, but I just want one fun date. I want to prove I have it in me."

“You really think you’ll be better at a second date?” She couldn’t quite believe she was considering going out with him again, but there was something in her gut telling her to go for it. Maybe it was the mention of fun, which had been lacking in her life in recent times.

“I’m fairly sure of it.” Hugh’s left eyebrow twitched. “Let’s be honest, it couldn’t be much worse.”

That got a laugh from her. “And was Rebecca also considered for this experiment of yours?”

“No. You’re my top pick.”

“I’m not sure I even want to know why.”

“Rebecca’s got a kid. It’s a lot of baggage. Very off-putting.”

She laughed again. “Maybe I should be put off by *your* child.”

“No. My kid is awesome. She’s not off-putting at all.”

Allie released a long breath, trying to gather her thoughts. “I have to go to work,” she said.

Hugh squinted questioningly. “I don’t know if that’s a yes, or a no, or if you’re dodging the question entirely.”

“It’s ...” She took a few steps backwards, tempted to agree to a date even though it felt like going against her better judgement. “Are you free tomorrow evening?” she asked eventually.

“Yes.”

“Pick me up at seven?”

Surprise flashed in his eyes. “Where do you want to go?”

“You decide. I really need to get to work now.” She started towards the entrance, then looked back at Hugh wandering to his car. “Hey!” she shouted after him.

He turned back, looking thoroughly pleased with himself. “Yeah?”

“It’s only fun,” she said, mock sternly. “You’re not allowed to fall in love with me or anything ...”

“That’s slightly arrogant,” he said, eyes sparkling. “But yeah, sure, I promise not to fall in love with you. In return, you’re not allowed to get any grand ideas about a relationship.”

“It’s a deal,” she called across the car park.

“Good.” He opened the car door without taking his eyes off her. “See you tomorrow.”

This time, when she turned away from him, she was positively beaming.

CHAPTER 13



The emergency shopping trip on Sunday afternoon was a last-minute idea, but Leo and Damian had been keen to join. Hugh needed all the help he could get to choose something new to wear for his date. Currently, his friends were chatting away on the low grey couch outside of the men's fitting rooms while little Alice snoozed in her buggy beside them.

Within the confines of the cramped cubicle, Hugh shrugged a green T-shirt into place and frowned at his reflection in the full-length mirror. Turning, he snatched the curtain aside and stepped out.

"I don't like it," he said, interrupting Leo and Damian's conversation.

"Something's weird about it," Leo mused.

"Clothes never look good on me." Irritated, Hugh smoothed down the front and turned to look sideways in the mirror.

"It looks like what you usually wear," Damian said. "Why do you have a problem with that?"

"I don't know." That wasn't entirely true. "Allie made a comment the other night about me wearing my shirt tucked in."

"Oh!" Leo snapped his fingers. "That's why it looks weird. You haven't tucked it in. You should tuck it in."

He did as instructed. "Allie said I dressed like an architect. She was joking," he added, sucking his stomach in to push the T-shirt into his waistband. "But she probably wasn't really joking. Also, she said something about my shirt not fitting well."

"That looks better," Damian said when Hugh turned from side to side in front of the mirror. "I'm so used to seeing you tucked in that it's weird when you're not."

Hugh frowned at his reflection. "It doesn't suit me though, does it?"

"Maybe try a smaller size," Leo suggested.

"I did, but it felt odd."

Damian rolled his eyes. "Try it again and show us this time."

He stepped back into the cubicle to swap T-shirts.

"That looks way better," Leo said when he walked out again.

Hugh puffed his chest out, then raised his arms a little. "It feels restrictive."

"Only because you're not used to it," Damian told him. "That definitely looks better."

"It really does," another voice said.

The young woman standing between a counter and a rack of discarded clothes was staring at him.

"Sorry," she said when he quirked an eyebrow at her. "But if you're looking for opinions, that one looks a million times better."

"Thanks." He turned to the mirror. "I'm still not sure."

The woman drew a deep breath and made it look like a great effort to move from her slouched position at the counter to stand behind Hugh.

"I think the problem now," she said, "is your jeans."

"What's wrong with my jeans?" he asked, prickling with annoyance.

"Well ..." Moving closer, she took the back of his T-shirt and lifted it above his waistline. While she quite blatantly checked out his arse, Hugh shot a look of mock horror at Leo and Damian. The pair of them grinned widely.

"They could do with being tighter too," the shop assistant went on. "Everything is a bit loose. Your clothes, I mean. Do you want me to get you some jeans to try?"

He agreed, and after a quick discussion about sizing, she scuttled away.

"Should we leave you and her alone?" Damian joked.

Leo rocked the buggy as Alice stirred. "She's totally into you."

"Definitely don't leave me alone with her," Hugh said.

Damian relaxed back on the couch. "I can't decide what's more bizarre, you giving yourself a makeover or you having the nerve to go to the golf club and ask Allie out."

"I'm buying a new T-shirt, not having a makeover," Hugh said.

"Why did you decide to ask her out again?" Leo asked. "I thought the first date went so badly that you'd given up on dating."

"I had, but then I spoke to Nancy and she annoyed me ..." He paused as

his friends tilted their heads at the same time and let out near-identical hums of understanding. “Don’t look like that,” he told them. “Why are you looking like that?”

“It just makes more sense now,” Damian said.

“It makes no sense,” Hugh argued. “I don’t even care what Nancy thinks, so I don’t know why I let it get to me. But she made some comment implying that I don’t have fun. Like I have a completely boring life.”

“Hmm,” Damian said, in an annoying know-it-all sort of tone.

“What?” Hugh demanded.

“It all seems pretty clear to me,” Damian said. “But I’m not sure I want to explain it in case I do irreparable damage to our friendship dynamic.”

Hugh gave him a stern, questioning look.

“You usually give us advice,” Leo answered for Damian. “It’s going to throw things off if Damian starts being all wise and grown up.”

“You realise I’m only two years older than you?” Hugh said. “How come you always act like we’re a different generation or something?”

“You just seem older than us,” Leo replied. “You’re sensible and grown up. You always have been.”

“You’re an old soul,” Damian added.

Hugh didn’t think that was true; he’d just had responsibilities for longer than they had. He’d *had* to be sensible.

“Anyway,” Damian said. “Here are my thoughts on the matter. I don’t think your issue is really to do with Nancy.”

“Really?” He rolled his eyes. “You don’t think my annoyance is justified when she’s making comments about me needing to get a life?”

“I think you’re probably annoyed because you agree with her.”

Hugh’s forehead creased to a frown. “What?”

“Deep down, you must think she has a point, otherwise it wouldn’t bother you.”

“I ...” Hugh opened his mouth to argue but couldn’t think of anything to say. “I like my life,” he said weakly.

“We know,” Leo said. “Because you say it often. But maybe you say it so much because you’re trying to convince yourself.”

“It’s fine to want more from life,” Damian said. “It’s never going to be a reflection on Emmy.”

“Now what are you talking about?” Hugh snapped.

Damian shrugged. “I feel as though you think it might somehow offend

Emmy if you wanted more from life.”

“I don’t think that.” Hugh shook his head, then smiled as the shop assistant returned with a stack of jeans.

“Start trying those,” she said, handing them over. “I’m going to grab one or two more things.”

As she rushed away, Leo muttered “makeover” under his breath.

Five minutes later Hugh was standing in front of the mirror in a pair of stone-washed jeans and a bright white T-shirt. He had to admit that the cut was more flattering.

“That looks all right, doesn’t it?” he said without taking his eyes off his reflection.

“It looks great,” the shop assistant replied from her place beside him. Zara, according to her name badge. “Your date’s going to love it. Ooh, hang on a minute ...” She was off again in a rush.

“You look about ten years younger,” Leo said.

“Yeah.” Damian grinned. “You look our age now.”

“I *am* your age,” he huffed, but couldn’t quite tear his eyes from himself. He really did look younger. “Shame I can’t do anything about my hair,” he said, dragging his fingers through the dark-brown hair at his temple which was close-cropped and peppered with grey.

“If it bothers you that much, you could dye it,” Leo said.

“No way I’m dying my hair.” No matter how self-conscious it made him, he couldn’t get to grips with the idea of covering it up.

“You should stop getting it cut so often,” Damian said.

“You think that’s going to fix the grey?”

“No, you’ll just look more relaxed and less business-like. Being neat and tidy all the time can look stuffy.”

“Something Damian has never had a problem with,” Leo quipped. “How often do you get your hair cut, anyway?”

“Every two weeks,” Hugh said, then felt slightly uncomfortable at his friend’s shocked faces. “It starts to curl otherwise.”

“Women love men with curly hair,” Damian said.

“Mine just looks unruly.”

Leo rubbed Alice’s knee as she stirred. “You should definitely let it grow a bit. Women like something to sink their fingers into.”

Before Hugh could answer, Zara reappeared. “Here,” she said, handing him a plain, short-sleeved navy shirt. “Try that.”

After slipping his arms in, he reached for the buttons, only to be chastised by Zara.

“Leave it open,” she said.

“It feels weird wearing a shirt and not buttoning it up.”

“It’s called fashion,” Leo said, unstrapping a blinking Alice to lift her from the buggy.

“It looks great,” Zara said, brushing her hands along Hugh’s shoulders. “You should try this as well.” She held out a cap.

“No chance.” He eyed it as though it was utterly offensive. “As much as I’d like to disguise my grey hairs, I’m just not a hat person.”

“Try it,” she said, a touch of menace to her tone that had him doing as he was told.

With his eyes on his friends, he pulled it firmly onto his head. “Try not to laugh.”

Damian pouted dramatically. “That’s taken another few years off.”

“I kind of fancy you myself now,” Leo teased.

“No way the hat looks good,” Hugh said, then turned to the mirror. “Oh! I do look good.”

“You do,” Zara agreed emphatically.

“I’d feel weird wearing a cap on a date.”

“Save the cap for the beach or something casual,” Zara said.

He adjusted the peak. “Maybe.”

Zara wandered away to help another customer, leaving Hugh staring at himself in the mirror. He pushed his hands into his pockets and turned sideways, impressed by the transformation.

Leo stood up with Alice when she fussed. “You need to stop checking yourself out and decide how much of this stuff you’re going to buy.”

It ended up being three bags that he shoved into the boot of Leo’s car, wedged in alongside the buggy. Damian sat in the back with Alice for the drive home, and Hugh took the passenger seat.

“Thanks for coming,” he said as they pulled out of the underground car park. He checked his watch. “I don’t have too long until I need to pick Allie up, so I’ve got less time to stress now too.”

“Where are you taking her?” Damian asked, taking a break from babbling at Alice.

“I’ve reserved a table at the restaurant on Sometimes Island.”

The silence made him question his choice.

“Is that bad?” he asked. “Allie said dinner was a bad choice for a first date, but this is a second date, so I thought it would be fine.”

“Dinner’s fine for a second date,” Leo said as he slowed at a junction.

“I’ll give you my top dating tip,” Damian said from the back. “Surfing.”

“We can hardly go surfing in the evening,” Hugh argued.

“True,” Damian said. “But keep it in mind for future. It’s a great daytime date.”

Leo tapped the steering wheel as he followed the line of traffic. “Daytime dates are way better. When I met Caitlin we went on a lot of hikes and picnics.”

Hugh frowned. “You had a baby. Your dates were different by necessity.”

“Yeah, but it made it all easier. It felt more natural.”

“So you think taking her to a restaurant is a bad move?” Hugh huffed.

“A restaurant’s fine,” Damian said. “That’s what she’ll be expecting. I’m just not sure about Sometimes Island.”

Panic crept in. “I thought it was a good choice because it’s a bit different.”

“It’s *a bit* different and *a lot* romantic,” Damian said. “It’s like a tenth date kind of place.”

Leo nodded. “There’s something about that place that makes people starry-eyed. I went on a date there once and almost ended up marrying the woman.”

“When?” Hugh demanded. “Who?”

“I can’t remember her name now. But I dated her for like four months or something, which was pretty epic for me at the time.”

“I remember that.” Damian leaned between the seats. “She got really obsessed with you.”

“Yes.”

“And you attribute this to Sometimes Island?” Hugh asked, amused.

“Yep.” Leo’s voice didn’t waver. “There’s something in the air there. Or...” He trailed off, looking suddenly sheepish.

“What?” Hugh asked.

“You’ll laugh at me. But the woman who owns the hotel and restaurant ... that eccentric old lady ... she made a joke about putting a love spell on us ...”

“No!” Damian cracked up laughing. “You think she put a spell on you? That’s brilliant. Why didn’t you tell us this before?”

“Well, clearly *this* is why.” Leo swatted at Hugh as he spluttered out a laugh. “It’s not that funny.”

“You can’t seriously believe that?” Hugh asked.

“I don’t know. Something weird happened.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Damian said, flopping back in the seat when his laughter subsided. “Are you really going to take Allie to Sometimes Island?”

“Yeah. Oddly enough, I won’t change my plans just because Leo reckons I’m in danger from an old woman with a magic wand.”

“I didn’t say she had a wand,” Leo huffed. “That would be ridiculous.”

Hugh’s mouth stretched to a teasing grin. “Even so, I think I’ll take my chances.”

CHAPTER 14



After working in the restaurant for eight hours on Sunday, all Allie wanted to do was take a long shower and slob out in front of the TV for the evening. Going on a date wasn't particularly appealing and she couldn't help but question why she'd agreed to it.

Trying hard not to dwell on the negatives, she had a quick shower and pulled on a comfortable jersey dress with sheer tights and Chelsea boots. It didn't feel like a lot of effort, but she was happy with the overall effect as she pushed a pair of teardrop earrings through her lobes.

At the sound of a loud rap on the door, she almost jumped out of her skin.

"Just a minute," she shouted, presuming it was Hugh, but not entirely convinced since she'd assumed he'd wait for her in the car park.

After one last glance in the mirror and a final adjustment to her hair, she pulled her coat on, plucked her handbag from the bed and opened the door.

"Hi," she said to the figure just along the path.

When he turned and smiled, it took her brain a moment to process that it was in fact Hugh. Only when he spoke was she really sure.

"Hi," he said, his eyes sparkling and his mouth twitching madly as though he was struggling not to laugh.

Him being on the verge of hysterics was as confusing as his appearance.

"You look ..." She searched for the right words. *Younger*, sprang to mind. As did *hot* and *slightly buff*, but she decided not to voice any of those. "Second dates suit you," she said diplomatically.

"Oh, thanks." His eyes shot downwards as though only just figuring out what she was referring to. "I went shopping."

"You look good." The dark jeans fit him perfectly, as did the navy

pullover, which gave glimpses of the bright white shirt beneath.

“Thank you.” He swallowed hard, still beaming. “So do you.”

“Do I?” She glanced down. “Because I feel as though you’re laughing at me. Do I have toothpaste down myself or something?” She shifted her coat but couldn’t see anything obviously out of place. In a fit of self-consciousness, she ran her hands over the back of her thighs. “My dress isn’t caught in my knickers, is it?”

“No.” He pressed his lips together but his eyes still shone with mirth. “I’m sorry, it’s not you. I just thought of something funny right when you opened the door. Ignore me. Are you ready to go?”

“Um ...” She was intrigued about what had got him looking so entertained and had a horrible feeling that he might be amused by her accommodation. You couldn’t even call it a flat, it was so small. A bedsit maybe, but even that made it sound more than it was.

“Where are we going?” she asked as they wandered back towards the car park.

“Have you heard of Sometimes Island?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

He stopped on the path and turned around. “Come here,” he said with a tilt of his head.

“Where are we going now?” she asked, hurrying to keep up as they followed the path in the opposite direction. It took a steep uphill turn before levelling out and continuing to the clifftops.

“There,” he said, stopping after a couple of minutes and pointing along the coastline.

She’d walked along that path several times in the last week, so she wasn’t sure how she’d failed to spot the small island a little further around the coast. From this distance – and in the fading daylight – the well-lit building at one side of the island looked like a fancy little doll’s house.

“That’s where we’re going?” she asked.

“That building is an old art déco-style hotel. The restaurant is stunning. I think you’ll like it.” He checked his watch. “We should get going. It’s further than it looks since we have to drive around the estuary.”

She followed him back the way they’d come and caught his quiet snort of laughter when her accommodation came back into view.

“It’s not that funny,” she said with a stab of irritation.

Hugh looked puzzled. “What?”

“I realise it’s not a very grown-up place to live, but it’s only temporary.”

His eyes roamed her features, lips parted in confusion. “I wasn’t laughing at you,” he said finally.

“You should probably share the joke then, because it feels as though you’re laughing at me.”

“It’s actually quite embarrassing, but I had a really stupid night there ... years ago.”

Now it was her turn to be confused. “Where?”

“At the place you’re staying.” He paused on the path, looking along the paved area at the front of the two rooms. “One of my best friends was dating a woman who was working at the golf club for the summer. She was staying in that room where you’re staying.”

His eyes danced with mirth. “I think it must have been Damian’s birthday because his parents were around and offered to look after Emmy for the night. It wasn’t long after Emmy’s mum had left, and I guess I was pretty stressed. That was probably the most drunk I’ve ever been. You know those nights where it’s one silly incident after another.”

“I can’t imagine you being wild,” she remarked as they ambled along.

“I generally wasn’t. Maybe that’s why that night sticks out so much.” His head fell backwards as he laughed again. “We ended up skinny dipping.”

“You live by the sea. That can’t be that unusual.”

“No.” His entire face radiated warmth. “But there’s a chance we might have also been surfing.”

Her eyes bulged. “You were surfing naked while drunk?”

“I told you it was a crazy night.”

“It’s just really hard to imagine you doing that.”

“Please don’t imagine it.” He accidentally knocked into her as the path narrowed. “And if you must imagine it, remember this was about ten years ago. I was young.”

“How young?”

He sidestepped away from her as the path widened at the car park. “Is that your subtle way of finding out how old I am?”

“Yes.”

He rubbed at his forehead. “Ten years ago I would have been twenty-four.”

She nodded slowly.

“How old did you think I was?” When she grimaced, he shook his head.

“Don’t answer that. I don’t think I want to know. My friends are always teasing me about how I seem way older than I am.”

Allie was saved from commenting as they reached Hugh’s car. Slipping into the passenger seat, her eyes lingered on his profile. He looked way younger today than she’d previously thought. It wasn’t just the clothes, but his whole demeanour. He seemed more relaxed and at ease with himself.

She clicked her seatbelt into place. “I’ll be honest, the thought of someone naked on a surfboard is a little disturbing. It’s quite an ungainly mental image.”

“Yeah, you really shouldn’t be imagining that. Erase the thought.”

“I wish I could,” she said, pressing her head back into the headrest. “It’s etched into my brain. I’m sure it’s going to keep popping into my mind at inappropriate moments.”

“I’m not convinced there’s an appropriate moment for that,” he said. “Sorry if I’ve scarred you for life.”

Her lips pulled into a small smile as they set off down the driveway. “I’m kind of looking forward to this little island adventure. I haven’t been on a boat in years.” She paused, thinking. “I hope I don’t get seasick.”

“Don’t worry. There’s no boat involved.”

“How do we get there?” She turned in her seat to face him, noticing the sharp angle of his clean-shaven jawline.

“It’s a tidal island,” he explained. “Hence the name. *Sometimes* Island, because it’s only an island sometimes.”

“That’s cute.” It also sounded totally made up. “It’s really called *Sometimes* Island?”

“No, it’s not really called that.” Hugh chuckled again and Allie felt utterly lost. “It’s not its official name,” he finally explained. “But it’s what everyone calls it.”

“What’s its official name?”

He pursed his lips as though deep in thought. “I think it starts with a B. Or maybe a P.”

“You don’t know what it’s called?”

“I could take a stab at it ... but I won’t.” His smirk was adorable and Allie found herself unable to drag her gaze from his face.

“Why not?” she demanded playfully.

“It’s a point of pride that no one locally will say its real name. There’s this unspoken understanding that we’ll phase out the official name until no

one even remembers it.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“It is, but it’s also kind of cool, don’t you think?”

She raised an eyebrow. “I think there’s a flaw to the plan of phasing out its actual name. Surely there are signposts to the island.”

“There are, yes. But due to some impressive acts of vandalism, all the signs point to Sometimes Island.”

“Are you serious?”

He nodded. “The local council tried changing the signs back a few times over the years, but the vandals always painted over them. They look just like the official street signs, so in the end they were left as they are.”

“Was this by any chance you and your friends on one of your wild nights out?”

“No.” He laughed. “It was before our time.”

Ten minutes later, they passed the first sign for Sometimes Island. It really looked like an official sign.

They fell into a companionable silence for the last ten minutes of the drive. Allie gazed out at the little villages they passed, and the coast when it came back into view.

“The tide’s in,” she said when they arrived. The car park overlooked the stretch of water between them and the pretty little island, which was dotted with lights from the hotel and a few other buildings.

“Yeah.” Hugh stepped out of the car and she followed his lead.

“So we need to get a boat?”

“No. There’s a sea tractor at high tide.”

“A sea tractor? That sounds like something you just made up.”

“It’s not, I promise. Come on and I’ll show you.” They walked through the car park and down a short lane that led to a boat ramp onto a thin strip of beach. On the sand stood a strange-looking vehicle which made Allie stop abruptly.

“It’s weird, isn’t it?” Hugh said, turning back to her. “I promise it’s safer than it looks.”

Allie stared at the platform with a canopy and seats, raised above tractor tyres by some kind of hydraulic construction. It was absolutely a weird sight. But that wasn’t what made her breath catch in her throat.

“I’ve been here before,” she said as a warm rush of memories swept through her. Her smile came automatically. “My parents brought me when I

was a kid. I didn't remember it until I saw that tractor thing."

"Did you spend a lot of time in Devon when you were younger?"

"Yes," she said, only then remembering that she'd only told Hugh half truths about why she was in Hope Cove.

For a moment, she stood rooted to the spot, staring down at the beach and the quirky vehicle that looked as though it was from an entirely different era.

"Are you okay?" Hugh said after a moment.

"Yes." She inhaled a lungful of salty air. "My mum died when I was nine and I don't have many memories of her. Or I didn't think I did, but things keep coming back to me recently."

Hugh kept quiet for a moment, gazing out to sea. Allie had the strangest feeling that he was thinking about his own mum. When he opened his mouth again, she expected him to say that he'd lost his mum, too.

"Sorry about your mum," he whispered. "It must have been really hard to lose her when you were so young."

Her instinct was to brush off his sympathy but she thought better of it. "I think I buried my head in the sand and refused to think about it, but ... it wasn't easy. I miss her." It wasn't something she ever recalled saying out loud. She'd probably never even let herself think it. "Sorry," she said, catching a tear at the corner of her eye. "You wanted a fun night out and I'm ..." She trailed off, not sure how to articulate it.

"You're ruining it?" he suggested. The teasing in his smile was countered by the sympathy in his eyes. He shifted his weight and angled his body back towards the car park. "Let's go somewhere else instead."

"No." She shook her head. "I was just having a moment. I'm fine now."

"Are you sure?" He tipped his head towards the island. "I don't want to get stuck out there with you blubbing away."

Laughter made Allie's shoulders shake and took all her tension away. "I promise there'll be no more tears."

"Thank god for that." They set off again and Hugh dipped his head close to hers. "I was only joking. You can cry all you want."

"Good to know. I'd rather not though."

A cool wind whipped up the beach, lifting Allie's hair from her shoulders. Hugh pushed his hands into his jacket pockets and jutted his elbow out in a subtle invitation.

Slipping her hand into the crook of his arm, Allie immediately felt the warmth of his body heat along with an accompanying warmth deep in her

belly.

She had the unshakable feeling that Hugh's theory was right.
He was way better at second dates than first dates.

CHAPTER 15



With its 1930s decor, the hotel on Sometimes Island was distinctive and memorable. The sight of the huge glass dome ceiling in the reception area transported Allie back twenty years. There'd been music playing the last time she'd been there and her eight-year-old self had extended her arms at either side as she'd spun in a circle. Her mum had taken her hand to twirl her under her arm, then danced with her while her dad had rolled his eyes and joked about them embarrassing him.

Back in the present, a wiry older lady eyed them over the brim of her glasses before walking out from behind the reception desk. Beads and sequins shimmered on her green flapper dress, while tassels swayed over her knees with every movement. The single feather rising out of her glitzy Gatsby headband quivered as she strode across the marble floor, her eyes locking on Hugh as she approached.

"Darling!" she said. "How wonderful to see you!"

Hugh's eyebrows pulled tightly together. "Hi," he said, with the questioning lilt of someone who'd been mistaken for someone else.

"Where's that gorgeous little girl of yours?" The woman ran her hand down Hugh's arm. "Probably not so little now, I suppose."

"No," Hugh said, his puzzled expression deepening.

"How's her French coming on?" the woman asked.

"Fine." Hugh's eyes widened. "She's in France at the moment."

"Lucky girl. It's so wonderful for her young mind to be exposed to different places and cultures." Her gaze shifted to Allie and she sucked in a gasp. "We've met before too."

"No," Allie said with a condescending smile.

“Yes.” The woman wagged a finger at Allie. “You’ve definitely been here before.”

“When I was eight,” Allie said, not sure what game the woman was playing or why, but already losing patience for it.

“Of course. I remember now.”

Of course you do, Allie thought with an internal eye-roll.

“You confused me for a moment,” the woman went on, “Because you look so much like your mother did then, but of course you were just a little girl. Nine though, not eight.” She positively beamed as she reached out and squeezed Allie’s hand. “It was your birthday. Your parents had bought you a silver bracelet and you were so proud of it.” Her eyes sparkled with delight as she squeezed Allie’s hand a little tighter. “After dinner you and your mum kept dragging your dad up to dance. He grumbled about it, but everyone could see that he loved every minute really.”

Allie’s heart felt as though it had lodged itself somewhere in her throat.

“How can you possibly remember that?”

“I never forget a face.” She dropped Allie’s hand and waved to a young woman at the other side of the room. “Now, you two are going to have a wonderful evening. Lottie will take great care of you.”

“Hello,” the young woman said, smiling brightly as she reached them.

“Lottie, sweetheart,” the woman said. “These two are old friends. Look after them and make sure they have everything they need.”

“Of course,” Lottie said. “Do you want to follow me and I’ll show you to your table?”

In a daze, Allie trailed Lottie into the vast conservatory. The centre of the room was a large dance floor with elegant tables set with white linens around the edge. In the corner a jazz band played softly.

“This place is stunning,” Allie murmured to Hugh, glancing back at him. “I’m not sure what just happened with that woman, though.” At the table she looked questioningly at Lottie. “Is she the owner?”

“Yes. Arietta’s a hoot, isn’t she?”

“That’s one word,” Allie said, taking a seat.

“It must be three years since I brought Emmy,” Hugh said, drawing his chair in as he sat. “It’s crazy that she remembers.”

“It’s twenty years since I was here,” Allie said. “I don’t even know how it’s possible for her to remember that.”

Hugh began to say something, then stopped and laughed before trying

again. “This will sound ridiculous, but one of my friends claims that when he was here, she cast some kind of love spell on him.”

“Is she some sort of witch?” Allie looked questioningly at Lottie who was smiling down at them with amusement. “I can’t believe I just seriously asked that question.”

“Arietta isn’t a witch,” Lottie said. “She’s a super-recogniser.”

“A what?” Hugh asked.

“It’s the opposite of face blindness,” Lottie said, deadly serious. “She remembers faces. Once she sees a person, she never forgets them. It’s a bit mind-boggling if you think about it too much. But it’s supposed to affect one percent of the population to some extent. Personally, I imagine most people learn to keep it hidden because it can come off as very creepy.”

“Are you serious?” Allie asked. “That’s a real thing?”

Lottie nodded solemnly.

“What about the love spells?” Hugh asked.

“That’s not a real thing,” Lottie beamed. “That’s just Arietta having fun. Also, she says you should never underestimate the power of suggestion. You put an idea in someone’s head that they’re destined to be with a certain person and you might just look at that person differently.”

“Makes sense, I suppose,” Hugh said.

Lottie asked what they wanted to drink, then left them to peruse the menu before coming back to take their food order.

“Why is Emmy in France?” Allie asked, when they were alone again.

“Her mum lives in Paris,” Hugh said. “So she goes there for most of the school holidays.”

“Oh.” Allie’s brows rose in surprise. “So Emmy lives with you full-time in term time?”

“Yes. Which I think has worked out well overall. It definitely works well for me. I can’t imagine only seeing her at weekends or every other week or something.”

“Doesn’t it feel as though you do all the serious parenting and your ex-wife gets the fun bits?” Allie pressed her lips together. “Sorry, that sounded harsh. Also was she your wife? That was presumptuous of me.”

“Yeah, we were married. And the way we split custody works fine. I like having Emmy the majority of the time. It seems to work for all of us.”

“That’s good then,” Allie mused.

“How are you enjoying living in Devon?” he asked. “It must be a lot

different to what you're used to." He smiled gently. "Is it really weird to live at the golf course?"

"No." She laughed. "Living by the sea is new for me – and I'm loving that – but living on a golf course is very familiar."

He pinched his lips together. "You really are a golf enthusiast, then?"

"Yes." She beamed. "But my dad owns a couple of golf courses, so I literally grew up on one."

"No way." Hugh's eyes shone with fascination. "That must have been so cool when you were a kid. What an amazing back garden."

"Yeah. I guess it was a bit different, but I never knew anything else."

"So that's how your dad knows the owner of Thurley Beach? I guess there's like a club for golf course owners or something?"

"Something like that," she said, her smile slipping as she considered telling him the truth – that her dad owned Thurley Beach club. That *she* was also part owner.

Except that was quite the can of worms to open, and would mean her telling him she wasn't going to be staying around for long. She just didn't feel like bringing that up.

They continued to chat easily over the meal. Without leading questions about architecture, the conversation was much more stimulating. Though Allie guessed from the way Hugh glanced frequently around the room that he was in architecture heaven anyway.

Allie was also mesmerised by their surroundings, not only by the impressive amount of glass around them and the ambience created by the music and the flickering candlelight, but also by the other diners, some of whom wore elaborate cocktail dresses and tuxedos. Many took to the dance floor once they'd eaten and others arrived just to dance the evening away, presumably guests of the hotel.

With her main course long gone and her dessert plate adorned by only a last smudge of raspberry coulis, Allie relaxed back in her chair. Watching the couples dancing felt slightly hypnotic and made her mind wander. After a few peaceful moments, she shifted in her seat and caught Hugh gazing at her.

"Sorry," she said. "I was miles away."

"What were you thinking about?" he asked gently.

"My parents." She released a quick sigh. "I remember them dancing here. I think they were really happy."

"Good memories then?"

“Yes.” She sat up straighter. “It makes me a bit annoyed with myself.”

“In what way?”

“That I spent so much time refusing to think about my mum. I guess it was some sort of coping mechanism – not letting myself think about her. I thought ...” She paused and inhaled deeply.

“That it would hurt too much?” Hugh asked.

“Yes. I thought if I didn’t think about her I wouldn’t miss her, but it doesn’t work like that, does it? And it feels mean that I’d try to erase her from my memories.”

“Does your dad talk about her?”

“Yes.” Tears stung the back of her eyes. “He tries to. I change the subject. It annoyed me that he wanted to talk about her so much. I always thought it was stupid to dwell on the past. But recently when I’ve thought about her ... it doesn’t actually hurt that much. It’s sad, of course, but it’s also kind of nice, remembering her. Almost like she’s still here.”

Hugh’s eyes glazed over again as though he were lost in his own thoughts.

“Are you close to your parents?” she asked.

“Not especially.”

“Are they ...”

“They’re still alive,” he said. “I just don’t see a lot of them.”

The song ended and the saxophone player announced the last song of the evening.

Impulsively, Allie stood up.

“I’m hoping you’re off to the bathroom,” Hugh said, raising a questioning eyebrow. “Not that you’ve got ideas about dancing.”

“I have the urge to dance.” She extended her hand to him. “I’m afraid you’re going to have to be a gentleman and oblige me, since I don’t seem to have any other options.”

“I don’t know.” Hugh’s lips twitched in amusement. “That old guy in the corner has been checking you out all night. I’m sure he’d happily take you for a spin around the dance floor.”

“True.” She lowered her hand. “But that would leave you as easy prey for his wife. She’s been checking you out all evening, too.”

Hugh stood up comically fast, then held his hand out to Allie with an expression of mock panic.

“Do you think they’re swingers?” Allie asked, as Hugh slid his arm

around her back on the dance floor.

He grinned. "It's a disturbing thought."

She nodded, enjoying the feel of Hugh's hand in hers as they moved with the gentle rhythm of the enchanting music. "*Would you?*"

He spluttered out a laugh. "They've got to be in their eighties."

"I meant swinging in general! Not with them. Interesting that your mind went there."

"It's a no anyway," he said, pulling her slightly closer.

"Not your thing?" Her temple rested naturally against his cheek and the sensation made her skin tingle.

"Call me old-fashioned," he murmured. "But I think if you're with the right person, they'll be enough for you."

Allie's fingers crept along his shoulder until they reached the warm skin at his neck. "I see you brought all your charm on the second date."

"I did." His words were smooth and seductive. "How's it going, by the way?"

"Definitely better than the first date."

"Which isn't necessarily a glowing review."

"I don't want to draw a conclusion about the evening prematurely. It might jinx it." Allie pulled back slightly, lifted her chin to look him in the eyes. "I will say that I'm very impressed with your choice of venue. I love it here."

"You'll be even happier with my choice when I tell you that one of my friends suggested I take you surfing."

She scrunched up her nose. "*Naked* surfing?"

"No." His fingers tightened around hers as he laughed. "Just the regular kind."

"Not really an evening activity, is it?"

"That's what I said to Damian."

"Can you surf?" she asked.

"Yes." He looked at her as though it was a ridiculous question, and she supposed for someone who'd grown up by the sea it probably seemed like a silly question. Maybe if she hadn't left when she had, she'd be able to surf too.

"I've never been," she said.

He shifted closer so their faces were softly touching again. "You should."

"Maybe I will." Briefly, she closed her eyes, focusing on the musky smell

of Hugh's aftershave and the tingling of her skin in every place their bodies touched.

The song ended too soon, but neither of them moved to draw apart as the band lingered over the last few chords.

"I suppose we should finish our drinks and head off," Hugh said, while the other couples moved from the dance floor.

"I suppose we should." Reluctantly, she removed her arm from his shoulder, wondering what time the sea tractor ran until. The evening had gone by so quickly, and she'd given no thought to how they'd get back. Walking back to the table, she imagined having to stay the night in the hotel and felt a sliver of excitement at the thought.

"Darlings!" Arietta arrived with her hands raised to shoulder level as though perpetually ready to make a jazz hands gesture. "Lottie is preparing your bill. She'll be over in a moment, but take your time and finish your drinks. Ernie tells me the tide is out, but the sand is still damp, so if you'd prefer he can get the Range Rover out and drive you back. Lovely evening for a stroll though, if you ask me."

"I'm happy to walk," Allie said, pushing down her disappointment at not being stranded for the night.

"Me too," Hugh agreed.

"It's been marvellous to see you both again," Arietta said, wriggling her fingers and shimmying her hips a little. "Don't leave it so long next time." Seemingly from nowhere, she produced a business card and set it on the table in front of Hugh. "We do weddings, you know?"

Hugh had just taken a sip of water and put a hand to his mouth as he appeared to choke on it. "Excuse me?" he said, eyes watering.

"Just putting it out there." Her eyes sparkled mischievously. "In case you're ever looking for a place for a celebration." Her gaze swept around the room. "Imagine it. Can you think of a more perfect setting for a wedding?"

Allie stifled a laugh at the panic in Hugh's features. "It's our second date," she said.

"Never too early to start planning." Arietta winked at Allie before sweeping away without another word.

Hugh slapped a hand across his forehead. "She's nuts," he whispered.

"Yes," Allie agreed, her gaze following the older lady.

"I know I'm not an expert on dating," Hugh said, "but just to be clear, most people would consider the second date a little early to start wedding

planning, right?”

“Yes.” Allie grinned from ear to ear. “You have to admit, though – it’s a brilliant marketing strategy. If she goes around whispering to couples about weddings, the chances are any who do get married will remember what she said and at least consider getting married here.”

“That’s a good point.”

“I can see it now,” Allie said, a lightness spreading through her whole body. “One day you’ll propose and right after I say yes, I’ll tell you I already know where I want to get married ...”

Hugh locked eyes with her. “And I’ll pull that business card from my wallet and you’ll be utterly charmed that I kept it.”

“Oh, I’ll be absolutely charmed,” she said dreamily. “We’ll laugh and kiss and then we’ll plan the perfect wedding here with a band and dancing and twinkling fairy lights filling the room.”

Hugh leaned on the table and his features turned serious. “I’m going to be honest with you, I’m worried I might be *too good* at second dates.” His teasing grin made Allie’s stomach flutter, and she was glad of the interruption when the waitress appeared with the bill. Allie made some vague noise about paying, but Hugh insisted he was getting it.

When he picked up the receipt, he took the business card with it.

“Hanging on to that, are you?” she teased. “Just in case?”

His cheeks flushed as he shook his head. “I can’t leave it. Arietta would be offended or disappointed or something. I’ll let her have her little delusion.”

“How very thoughtful of you,” Allie said as they stood. Halfway across the room an idea came to her and she snatched at Hugh’s hand.

He looked at her quizzically, while his fingers locked snugly with hers.

“It would make Arietta happy to think we’re leaving in a haze of romance.”

With a twinkle in his eyes, he raised their interlocked hands and aimed a triumphant thumbs up in Arietta’s direction.

“Don’t overdo it,” Allie hissed mildly, but at the look of delight from Arietta, she joined in with the ridiculous thumbs up gesture. She kept her laughter at bay while they dashed through the hotel lobby, but they both erupted into fits of giggles when they burst outside.

As their laughter subsided, she was conscious of their joined hands and had a mental battle over whether she should be the one to pull away. When

Hugh wriggled his fingers from hers, she hoped the dim light of the moon would mean he couldn't see her disappointment.

His zip whirred loudly as he did his jacket up, then his hand took hers again, giving her a rush of absolute joy. He grasped her hand tighter this time, his palm pressing firmly against hers as they set off on the slope down to the beach.

"That's pretty amazing," Allie whispered, her gaze snagging on the causeway across to the mainland. Silver light from the moon shone on the wet sand, giving the appearance of a shiny path that was utterly magical.

Hugh's voice was a soft caress in the still night air. "That's the sort of view you could imagine in an advert for a wedding venue."

He flashed her a flirty smile and she laughed freely.

As they set off for a slow walk back to the car, all Allie could think was that it had been the most perfect date she'd ever been on.

And it wasn't over yet.

CHAPTER 16



On the drive back to the golf course, a sense of calm settled over Allie. For a person who generally approached life at a hundred miles an hour, it was a novel feeling. The silence in the car felt therapeutic, and she wished the drive was a little longer.

Back at the golf club, Hugh stepped out of the car with her, apparently intent on walking her to her door. It felt completely natural to curl her fingers around his for the short walk and then completely unnatural to unfurl them again outside of her door.

While she unlocked the door, Hugh leaned casually with his shoulder resting against the doorframe.

“Moment of truth,” he said, his features shadowy under the security light. He was standing close enough that he wouldn’t have to lean far to kiss her. Her stomach flipped at the thought and her gaze dropped to his lips.

“Did you have fun?” he asked, not moving an inch.

“I did,” she said wistfully, wondering if she should take the initiative and kiss him. Not kissing him felt like a slow-building torture.

“So you think I’m just bad at first dates?”

“That seems to be the case,” she agreed, barely focusing on her words.

He pushed his hands into his pockets. “I can’t decide if that’s a good thing or not.”

“Why?” she asked, amused by his playful tone.

“Because if the second date hadn’t gone well, I could have claimed I was a third date kind of person and tried to convince you to go out with me again.”

“That’s a good point.” Her heart rate increased with a mixture of

excitement and nerves as she waited for him to make a move – kiss her or ask her out again. Either would be fine. Both would be better. “What do you think would be a good third date activity?” she asked, sensing that he needed a nudge.

“I haven’t got a clue. Apparently second dates are my speciality.”

Okay, maybe he needed more than a nudge. Maybe he wanted her to be the one to make a move.

“How about surfing?” she suggested.

“I feel as though that’s at least a sixth date activity.” There was the briefest pause before his eyes widened. “Sorry, did you mean regular surfing? I was thinking of the naked kind, which definitely isn’t a third date activity.”

“I reckon six dates would also be way too soon for naked surfing,” she said, her cheeks beginning to ache from smiling.

“You’re probably right.” He straightened up. “So would you like to go surfing with me sometime? With swimsuits and wetsuits and all that.”

“I’d like that.”

“Great. When are you free?”

She wondered whether she should play it cool before deciding she didn’t have the willpower. She wanted to see him again soon, and she didn’t care if he knew it.

“I’m working from lunchtime tomorrow, but we could go in the morning.” Surely morning was a good time to surf.

Hugh’s features fell serious. “I have to work tomorrow.”

“I thought you were self-employed. Doesn’t that mean you make your own schedule?”

“Yes.” He shifted his weight from foot to foot and Allie wished she’d played it cool after all. “It’s just that I ... um ...”

“We can wait until the weekend,” Allie said, trying not to think about how far away that felt.

“Yeah, maybe ...” He winced. “No, tomorrow’s fine. Let’s go tomorrow.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Tomorrow’s great. Shall we meet at the surf shack down on Thurley Beach? Do you know it? It’s only like a five-minute walk from here.”

“Yes, I’ve seen it on my walks.”

After a quick discussion about timing, Hugh made a discreet move

towards her. Allie's heart stuttered and her throat went dry, but then he took a step away, leaving her wondering what on earth was happening. And why he wasn't kissing her.

"See you tomorrow then," he said, backing away quickly.

"Yeah. Goodnight."

"Night," he called over his shoulder.

Inside, Allie closed the door behind her, telling herself that she'd had a great evening, even if the end of it had been disappointing.

Besides, she'd see him again tomorrow.



DECIDING what to wear for a date at the beach really shouldn't have been too challenging. Especially considering she'd be changing into a wetsuit as soon as she got there. Still, it took her longer than it should have to get ready. There was an unwelcome tingle of nerves in her stomach too.

She was about to leave when a notification popped up on her phone with a message from her cousin. For a moment, she considered not even looking at it before her brain conjured a bevy of reasons for the message, which she couldn't ignore. Her dad's health, a problem at Fox Hill, a bunch of emergencies that she'd kick herself later for ignoring.

Clicking into the message, her worries dissolved immediately. Bella was only asking how Allie was.

Great, she replied and hit send. *How are you?*

Her eyes stayed on her phone as she pulled her beach bag onto her shoulder. Dots skittered across the screen, then stopped, then started again.

"Hurry up," Allie growled. "I need to go."

She almost jumped out of her skin when the phone rang.

"What the heck is going on?" Bella demanded, not bothering with a greeting.

"How do you mean?"

"I mean you said you're great. What kind of reply is that?"

"The kind that says I'm great." She frowned in confusion.

"But you're never great. You're stressed, or busy, or in a rush ..."

"I am actually in a bit of a rush," Allie said, but Bella spoke over her.

"I've been avoiding getting in touch because I didn't want to give you the

chance to complain about what a terrible time you're having, but ... everything is great?"

"Yeah. It's all good."

"So you're not planning on packing up and coming home anytime soon?"

"Not immediately." She sank onto the bed. If she was a few minutes late, it wasn't a big deal. "Is everything okay there?"

"Yes. I'm keeping a beady eye on Uncle Richard. He's fine."

"And Fox Hill? How's the club?"

"I love being the boss," she said excitedly. "Everyone does what I say. It's great."

"Don't let the power go to your head."

"I'll try not to. So how's life by the beach? Are you really having a good time?"

"Yes. I feel as though I'm on holiday."

"And you're okay with that?"

"Yes." She laughed. "Now, I need to go. I was about to walk out of the door."

"Off to work? How is it being a lowly waitress rather than running the place?"

"It's fine. I'm not on my way to work, though. I have a date."

The squeal that she expected didn't come and she moved the phone from her ear, checking the connection.

"Bella? Did I lose you?"

"No. I'm here. Fairly sure I misheard you ... I could've sworn you said you have a date."

Allie beamed. "I did."

"That's very confusing. You don't date."

"That's not true ... This will be my third date in a week."

That got the squeal she'd been waiting for.

"Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"Is it someone who works at the golf club?"

"No. He's an architect called Hugh."

"Oh, wow. He sounds very grown up."

"That's because he is a grown-up."

"This is mad. It's been so long since you dated anyone."

"I've had a lot going on the last couple of years. When would I have had

time to date?”

“You could have found time, but that’s beside the point. Hugh sounds lovely. I’m really pleased.”

“He sounds lovely? I haven’t told you anything about him.”

“He has a normal name and a stable job. That’s a big step for you. That’s growth.”

Allie grinned as she stood. “What are you talking about?”

“Back when you did date, it was always guys with weird names who didn’t have proper jobs.”

“I haven’t dated anyone who didn’t have a job,” Allie countered.

“DJ-ing isn’t a proper job, neither is professional poker player.”

“I have to go.” She grabbed her keys and opened the door. “I’ll call you back later.”

“Wait ... where are you going? Who goes on a date at nine o’clock in the morning?”

“We’re going surfing.”

“You’re really settling into life at the beach. That’s cute. Can you surf though?”

“I’ve never tried, but I’m sure it’ll be fine.” She closed the door behind her and wandered along the path, which was strewn with a fine layer of sand. “Also, Hugh’s not the sort of guy I’d be embarrassed around if I’m not good at something. He’s sweet and down to earth. Not pretentious or anything like that.”

“Glad to hear it,” Bella said, a sudden seriousness in her tone. “But I wasn’t questioning your surf skills. I was thinking about your shoulder. Won’t surfing aggravate it?”

Allie stopped dead. Instinctively, she thought of returning for a painkiller before her brain clicked into gear.

“It doesn’t hurt,” she said, continuing on the path that led to the clifftops and then wound steeply down to the beach. She rolled her shoulder to test it, but didn’t even feel a twinge. That was fairly remarkable considering she hadn’t taken a painkiller the previous evening either. In fact, she’d gone days without.

“What do you mean, it doesn’t hurt?”

“I guess it’s finally getting better.” She tried to sound nonchalant but knew that she wouldn’t escape without some kind of “I told you so” from Bella.

“I knew it!” she said. “How many times have I told you that you need a holiday, that if you rest and give your body time to heal, it will?”

“I think it’s more a case of giving it time. It’s not as though I didn’t rest before.”

“I didn’t mean physical rest.”

“Here we go,” Allie muttered, watching her footing on the uneven path.

“Your problem was stress.”

“Fairly sure torn rotator cuffs aren’t generally considered to be caused by stress. Especially not when your job involves swinging a golf club all day, every day.”

“Obviously, it was also the golfing, but it was stress too. All that emotional weight on your shoulders. As soon as you let go of some of it, you got better. Surely you can see that.”

“What I can see is a guy waiting for me to surf with him.” At least she was fairly sure the figure down on the beach was Hugh. He was wearing a cap, which seemed out of character.

“You’re so lucky, spending your morning at the beach. Send me photos and make me jealous.”

“Will do.”

“Take a sneaky pic of Hugh. I want to see what he looks like.”

“I’ll try.”

“And call me back later to tell me all about it. I want to hear about the golf club there, too.”

Allie was grinning as she ended the call, not just from Bella’s infectious enthusiasm, but also because of her own positivity. It would be hard not to be cheerful, though. In front of her was a stunning golden beach and a beautiful stretch of bright blue sea.

Not to mention the sweet guy waiting for her.

CHAPTER 17



Damian's eyebrows scrunched together as he stared at Hugh on the sand outside of the surf shack.

"I don't get it," he said. "The date went well, but you left without so much as a goodnight kiss?"

"I held her hand," Hugh said, realising how he sounded as soon as the words were out.

Damian's eyes bulged slightly before his chest convulsed with laughter.

"It's not that funny," Hugh said dryly.

"It is! You act like such a grown-up all the time." Damian pulled his phone out and tapped away at the screen. "Why do you act like a twelve-year-old when you go on a date?"

"I didn't ..." His eyes flicked to Damian's phone. "Have you just messaged Leo?"

"Yes. Of course. *You held her hand!*"

"Shut up." Hugh dropped into the stainless-steel patio chair. "The date went well. That's the main thing."

"So why didn't you kiss her?"

He'd been asking himself the same question since the moment he'd walked away from Allie the previous evening.

"I thought about it." He'd definitely wanted to. "But then I kind of freaked out. Everything had gone so well and I didn't want to mess it up."

"Are you really that bad at kissing?" Damian chuckled at his own joke.

"I just didn't know if I should. We had a really great time, but she also made it very clear before that she's not interested in a relationship or anything. Just fun."

“Oh, dear.” Damian shook his head. “Do I really need to explain to you how consenting adults can have fun?”

Hugh dropped his chin to his chest. “There’s no point in talking to you about this if you can’t be serious.”

“I’m sorry,” Damian said, not quite losing the edge of amusement in his voice. “So the date went well and Allie liked Sometimes Island?”

“Yeah, that place really is very romantic.”

“Did you bump into Leo’s witch?”

“I did. She’s a very quirky old lady with an incredible memory and a penchant for matchmaking.”

Damian went suspiciously quiet. “Do you think it would be a good place to propose?”

“What?” All Hugh could think of was the business card Arietta had given him, which was tucked away in his wallet. There was no way Damian could know about that. “I’ve been on two dates with her. I’m not thinking about proposing.”

“I wouldn’t imagine you were,” Damian said slowly, an air of suspicion in his tone. “I was thinking about me.”

“Oh!” That made way more sense. “You’re going to ask Amy to marry you?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I keep thinking about it, but I’ll probably wait a while. She only just got divorced. And everything is going so well with us. I don’t really see a need to change anything.” He didn’t look as though he was convincing himself, never mind Hugh.

Damian’s gaze went to his phone and he cracked up laughing.

“Is that Leo?”

“Yeah. Check your phone. It’s on the group chat.”

Warily, Hugh went into his phone, scanning the messages. After Damian had announced that Hugh had held hands with a girl last night, Leo had replied to say he hoped he’d worn a glove.

“That’s not even funny,” Hugh said, glancing around and catching sight of Allie arriving at the top of the beach.

“It is funny,” Damian insisted. “Because—”

“No!” Hugh glared at him. “Please don’t explain to me. I know why you’re giggling like an adolescent. I just don’t think it’s very funny.”

“Is that her?” Damian said, his gaze drifting beyond Hugh.

“Yes. Do I look okay?”

“Yep.”

“What about the cap?” His hand went up to adjust the peak. “Does it look stupid?”

“No, you look hot. I reckon she might even want to hold your hand again.”

Snatching the hat from his head, Hugh swatted at Damian with it.

“Put it back on,” Damian said. “It looks good.”

Hugh shook his head, wishing he’d left the cap at home, or better still, never bought it. “Can you go away?” he said to Damian.

“Now?”

“Yes. Just while I say hello to her. Come back in a minute ... and please be cool. Don’t embarrass me with your immature jokes.”

“I’ll go,” Damian said, backing away. “But stop panicking so much. She obviously likes you or she wouldn’t have suggested surfing today.”

Hugh didn’t have the chance to reply as Damian slipped inside the converted container, leaving him alone. He stepped towards Allie and attempted to relax his shoulders before he called hello.

“Hi.” She breezed over to him, looking radiant but casual in a pair of jeans and a jumper.

When she kissed his cheek, the scent of her took him back to the previous evening. If anyone had told him there’d be dancing involved, he’d have reconsidered his choice of venue. But those three minutes of closeness had left him a firm convert to the idea of dancing.

“Great weather today,” she said, her cheeks flushed and her hair slightly tousled by the breeze.

“Yes.” He glanced up at the smattering of fluffy clouds in the otherwise blue sky. “Perfect for surfing. Just enough of a breeze for some decent waves, but nothing too wild.”

“I’m nervous,” she said, her chest heaving as she inhaled deeply. “I might make a complete fool of myself.”

“You won’t,” he said, desperate to reassure her for fear of her changing her mind. “You’ll enjoy it when you’re out there.”

“It’s not just the surfing that has me worried.” She leaned closer and lowered her voice. “I’ve never worn a wetsuit before. How do you even get them on?”

He chewed on his lower lip, then smiled. “Okay, I’ve changed my mind ... you might make a fool of yourself.”

“There must be a way to get into them elegantly. Give me your best tips.”

“I don’t think the words elegant and wetsuit go together. But we’ll look stupid together.” He tilted his head to the shack and they ambled over to the patio with the racks of wetsuits and surfboards.

Damian wandered out, and Hugh made quick introductions before Damian picked out a wetsuit for Allie.

“I’ll be around if you need anything,” he remarked, giving Hugh a subtle punch on the shoulder and then moving to go back inside.

“I might actually need some sort of lesson,” Allie said. “I’ve never surfed before in my life.”

“Hugh will teach you,” Damian said, tapping on the doorframe. “He’s practically a pro.” The teasing had vanished from his tone and he gave Hugh an affectionate nod, then made himself scarce.

“Is he the friend you mentioned last night?”

“Yeah. We’ve been friends since we were kids.”

“That’s nice,” Allie commented while looking dubiously at the neoprene suit in her hands.

“I’ll help you with it,” Hugh said, before realising that would involve her revealing a lot more skin to him. “Or, if you’d rather, you can go around the corner and I won’t look. Whatever you want.”

“I think I’ll need help,” she said and pulled her jumper over her head, then followed it with her vest so she was standing in her jeans and bikini top. She gave him a rueful smile. “I feel as though I’ll feel way less awkward if you take some clothes off, too.”

“Oh, yep.”

Had he been gawping at her? Mortified, he turned away and quickly stripped down to his swim shorts. He didn’t dare check to see if she was looking at him, but had the distinct feeling of being watched as he eased his wetsuit on. Presumably she was just watching how he did it rather than checking him out. Not that he felt particularly self-conscious about his body. He ate healthily and worked out a few times a week. It was more the fact that he wasn’t used to women looking at him.

“How are you doing?” he asked, once he’d zipped himself into the suit.

“Okay, I think.” She had her legs in but was struggling to get the suit over her hips.

“Here.” He yanked at the material, which was bunched at her thighs, then pulled the front up and helped her get her arms in.

She wriggled as he pulled up the zip for her. “I’m exhausted already,” she said, sighing happily. “I hope it’s worth all the effort.”

“It is.” He felt the usual buzz he got when he was gearing up to surf.

“How old were you when you started surfing?” Allie asked as they set off down the beach with surfboards under their arms.

“Not as young as most kids around here,” he said, feeling a pang of unpleasant emotions stir in his chest. “I didn’t really start until I was a teenager, and then only sporadically.”

“Your friend seemed to think you’re very good at it.”

“That’s because Damian taught me.” He smiled fondly. “His parents bought me my first board. Which I had to keep hidden at their place,” he added without thinking.

“How come?”

He shook his head. “My parents didn’t really approve.”

“Of surfing?”

Of most things, he wanted to say but didn’t. Instead, he stopped and set his board on the wet sand. “I should give you a few pointers before we get into the water. It’s easier for me to talk you through everything out here.” It was also a convenient way to change the subject.

Allie looked adorably studious while Hugh walked her through the basics – as though she wanted to remember every detail. Once he’d finished with his instructions, they waded out into the water.

“Are you one of those people who needs to be good at everything?” Hugh asked, flashing her a sidelong glance.

Her cheeks flushed. “Maybe. Why?”

“Because you took my lesson very seriously.”

“If someone’s teaching you something, it’s only polite to listen.” Her lips twitched upwards. “But I suppose I am hoping to be immediately good at surfing.”

“You might be better off aiming to fall off the board a lot and ingest a lot of salt water. Less likely to be disappointed that way.”

She didn’t seem in the least put off as she pushed her board out deeper. Hugh found her eagerness to give it a go entirely endearing.

CHAPTER 18



Allie needed more help to get out of the wetsuit than she did getting into it. Her cold fingers and tired arms were no match for the thick neoprene. She barely even tried to pull it off before aiming her best helpless look at Hugh, who peeled it off her with what appeared to be no effort at all.

Damian stepped out to join them on the patio just as she was wrapping her towel around herself. “How did you get on?”

“I was terrible,” Allie said happily.

“You really weren’t bad for your first attempt,” Hugh argued.

“Not bad, no. *Terrible.*” She met Damian’s eyes. “But I enjoyed it.”

“That’s the main thing,” he said.

Hugh peeled his wetsuit down to his waist. “I really thought you did okay.”

“Stop being nice!” She laughed loudly. “I’m terrible at surfing. You may as well just say it.”

“Maybe you don’t have the best sense of balance,” he admitted.

Allie jutted her chin out. “There’s nothing wrong with my balance. It was all the waves that were the problem.”

She caught Hugh’s eye and they grinned at each other in much the same way as they’d been grinning at each other for the past hour out on the water. She’d found it oddly liberating to be so bad at something.

It didn’t matter at all that she couldn’t get the hang of popping up to stand on the board. In fact, being so utterly hopeless meant she’d spent almost the entire hour laughing, which had felt as invigorating as the cold water around her.

“Maybe next time you should try paddleboarding,” Damian suggested.

“That might be more your thing.”

“I’d love to,” she said eagerly, then turned to Hugh. “Are you good at paddleboarding?”

“Yeah.” He lifted one shoulder in a modest shrug. “Emmy enjoys it so we go out quite a bit.”

Allie pursed her lips. “I need to find something you’re not so good at, so you don’t show me up. Level the playing field a bit.”

“You may have to move away from water sports then.” Damian’s eyes travelled over Allie as she attempted to wrap the towel tighter around herself. “You can go inside to get changed if you want.”

“Thank you.” She picked up her tote bag and her clothes. “I’m freezing.”

While she changed, she could hear the low hum of conversation between Hugh and Damian but couldn’t make out what they were saying. When she joined them Hugh had also changed back into his jeans and jumper. He had a light jacket on too and she wished she’d been that sensible. The blue skies had been deceptive when she’d been getting ready, and she hadn’t stopped to consider that the walk back would entail wet hair.

“It was nice to meet you,” Damian said, smiling warmly as he passed her to go inside. He tipped his chin at Hugh. “Don’t forget your cap.”

Hugh plucked the cap from the table, but didn’t put it on. “You look freezing,” he remarked as they set off along the beach. “Do you want my jacket?”

“No. I’m fine, thank you. Luckily, it’s a quick walk home.”

“I was going to ask if you fancied a coffee.” His eyes went to the little cafe on the coastal path whose picnic benches overlooked the bay. “But I guess you want to get back and warm before work.”

Allie checked her watch, torn between the thought of a warm shower and spending a little more time with Hugh.

“Coffee sounds good.” A warm drink wasn’t as good as a warm shower, but since it meant longer in Hugh’s company it was more tempting.

They ambled along the gentle incline to the cafe. The tables were all empty so they had their pick. Wrapping her hands around the steaming mug, Allie bunched her shoulders up and hoped her teeth wouldn’t chatter.

With an amused look, Hugh shrugged his jacket off. “You need to put this on because it’s making me cold looking at you.”

She slipped her arms into the sleeves when he draped it on her shoulders. The extra barrier against the wind made an immediate difference.

“Thank you,” she said, then blew on her coffee.

“So did you really enjoy surfing?”

“I had a great time. Which is surprising because I really do like to be good at things.” Automatically, her hand went to her shoulder and she gave the muscle a quick massage.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. Old injury, but it’s been much better recently.”

“That’s good.”

She sipped her coffee and smiled to herself. “My cousin says it’s because I have less stress now and therefore less metaphorical weight on my shoulders.”

“She probably has a point.”

“You think so? I always think she’s a bit nuts. I mean, she’s my best friend and I love her, but she can be airy fairy about some stuff.”

He tilted his head. “Surely you don’t debate that stress causes physical symptoms in the body?”

“No.” Her smile faltered. “But not a torn rotator cuff.”

“But maybe stress causes tense muscles, which over a long period could make a person more prone to that kind of injury.” His lip twitched. “I don’t know, I’m just guessing.”

“Maybe,” she said cautiously. “But would it prevent an injury from healing?”

He gave another nonchalant shrug. “I guess if your body is under chronic stress, it won’t function at its optimal level. Which might mean healing takes longer.”

Allie looked out at the sea, spitting up white foam as it rolled onto the shore. Hugh was only saying what Bella had been saying for ages, but somehow it sounded much more convincing coming from him. A knot formed under her sternum at the thought that maybe all the time she’d spent on physical therapy might have been better spent taking care of herself in different ways.

“I wasn’t even that stressed,” she said, but knew that probably wasn’t true.

“Sorry,” Hugh said. “I shouldn’t give my medical opinion, but it’s difficult not to weigh in given how much Grey’s Anatomy I’ve watched in the last year.”

Allie’s face broke into a wide smile. “With Emmy?”

“Yes.”

She frowned. “Isn’t there a load of sex in that show?”

“Not really. A bit, but whenever anyone starts kissing, I cover Emmy’s eyes with a cushion and she does the same for me. We take it in turns to peek until the scene’s over.”

“That’s cute.”

His phone buzzed and he pulled it from his pocket. “Sorry. With Emmy away, I always have my phone on loud in case she calls.”

“It’s fine. Do you speak to her a lot when she’s with her mum?”

“We message quite a bit and speak every few days. Although, she hasn’t been in touch as much this time. Hopefully, that means she’s having fun.” A shadow fell over his eyes and he chewed his bottom lip.

“Something wrong?” she asked.

“No. Em was just acting a little strange before she left. Wanted me to sit with her at bedtime, which she hasn’t done for years. It was probably nothing.”

Allie smiled. “I meant in her message ...”

“It’s not her.” His eyes darted to the phone screen. “It’s Leo giving his recommendation for a date.”

“What?” she asked, amused despite her confusion.

“Because I took Damian’s advice about surfing, Leo is now trying to convince me of his idea.”

“Which is?”

“A walk and a picnic on Dartmoor.” His eyes flicked from left to right over the screen as he read the message. “He says Caitlin has a specific spot that is the perfect place for a date.”

“Caitlin?”

“Leo’s girlfriend.” His head snapped up. “Is this really weird ... them talking about where I should take you on a date?”

“No.” She beamed. “They’re talking about me specifically?”

His eyes narrowed and he looked thoughtful, like he was trying to figure out what the right answer was. “Not you, no,” he said coyly. “Any woman ...”

She gave him a playful nudge with her shoulder. “I think I’d like to go to Dartmoor sometime ... if you can’t find anyone else to go with.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.” His eyes sparkled. “Which reminds me. There’s something I wanted to ask you ... I know this might seem forward since

we've only been on three dates, but ...” He paused. “Could I get your phone number?”

Allie tried to rein in her smile. “How did we get to three dates without exchanging phone numbers?”

“I don't know. It's probably some kind of record in the modern world.”

“It probably is.” She got her phone out to programme his number in, which drew her attention to the time. Once they'd swapped numbers, she drank the last of her coffee. “I need to get going,” she said reluctantly.

“I should get back to work, too.”

“*Back to it?*”

He grimaced. “I got up at five to get a couple of extra hours in before I met you.”

“Very conscientious.” She was about to get up, but paused. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

“Okay,” he said hesitantly.

Her gaze slid to his hat on the table. “Why have you been carrying around a cap?”

With a bashful smile, he pressed his palm to his forehead. “It's new, but I don't know if I'm really a hat person and I was kind of self-conscious about it.”

“Show me,” she said eagerly.

“No. I don't think it suits me.”

“Let me be the judge of that.” She set it firmly on his head, then adjusted it a little before drawing back for a better look at him.

With the shadow cast over the top half of his face, his eyes appeared darker and gave him a hint of brooding.

“It's awful, isn't it?” Misreading her silent contemplation, he reached to remove it.

“No.” She grabbed at his hand before he could snatch the hat away. “I like it.”

“Really?” He looked entirely sceptical, and her stomach fluttered lightly as she felt the urge to show him just how much she liked it.

With her eyes locked on his, she touched the peak of the cap, lifting it ever so slightly as she inched closer to him. Still, she had to tilt her face to avoid the brim. Her fingers crept around the back of his neck, and a gentle tug closed the space between them.

His lips were soft and she tasted the subtle tang of sea salt beneath a hit of

bitter coffee. For a moment he didn't respond, and she felt the muscles of his shoulders and neck tighten. Only when she went to pull away did she feel him relax, then lean into her and catch her lips in a soft kiss. His hand came up to cup her face and his tongue darted deliciously against hers.

When they finally broke apart her breathing was uneven and her heartbeat felt erratic against her ribs.

"Maybe I'll wear the cap more often," Hugh murmured, his lips still close enough to hers that his breath tickled her lips.

"You should." Playfully, she pulled the peak back down to shade his face, then forced herself up from the bench. "I have to go to work."

"Do you want to have dinner with me tonight?" he asked.

"I'd love to." His eagerness to see her again made her insides tingle. "I have to work until the restaurant closes though. I don't know what time that will be, but too late for dinner."

"Another night then?" He didn't quite hide his disappointment.

"Yes." Except she also didn't want to wait until another day. "Or you could come up to the restaurant and prop up the bar. I could have a drink with you whenever I finish."

"That sounds good."

She took a step away, then remembered she was wearing his coat and began to shrug it off. "Keep it," Hugh said. "I'll get it back later."

Gratefully, she smiled at him and told him she'd see him later.

She had to rush to get showered before work, so she didn't have time to call Bella. Which was a shame, because she desperately wanted to talk to someone and relive her morning. And probably squeal a little as she recalled her kiss with Hugh.

As it was, she was sure the thought of kissing him would keep her smiling until she saw him again.

CHAPTER 19



Only working three shifts a week meant Allie was still getting to know the staff, but as far as she could tell, they were professional and efficient. There was a friendly vibe around the clubhouse, and the members appeared to enjoy the relaxed atmosphere.

After his initial elusiveness, Allie had seen the greenkeeper, Ron, a couple of times now, but only for long enough to exchange pleasantries. Unlike the maintenance team at Fox Hill, they kept a low profile here, but the course was well kept regardless.

Wandering over to the clubhouse for her shift that morning, she spotted Daisy and Ron outside the equipment shed and greeted them warmly. Daisy had been talking animatedly with her grandad but stopped abruptly at the sight of Allie.

“Hi,” she muttered before hurrying back to the clubhouse.

“Is she okay?”

“Yes.” Ron ambled over to Allie. “She’s just been working too hard, and she’s shy around new people. Don’t pay her any mind if it takes some time for her to warm up to you.”

Allie hadn’t particularly noticed Daisy being shy, but she also seemed to be constantly busy so Allie hadn’t had much chance to chat to her.

“You must have your hands full, keeping the course up to snuff,” Allie remarked.

“I do.” He grinned. “No rest for the wicked.”

“How long have you worked here?”

“Fifteen years. That’s flown, I can tell you.”

“And you enjoy it?”

“I love it. Best job in the world. I get a gorgeous little cottage thrown in with the job too. That’s one heck of a perk, isn’t it?”

“Did I hear right that Daisy lives with you?”

“Yes. Since she was little. She keeps me on my toes, that one.”

“Grandad!” Daisy’s voice called out. “I thought you had work to get on with?”

“See what I mean,” Ron whispered out of the side of his mouth, while raising his hand to wave at Daisy in the club's entranceway.

“Kevin’s looking for you,” she told Allie before disappearing back inside.

When Allie went into the restaurant it didn’t seem that Kevin had been looking for her at all, but she got straight to work alongside Freddie. She was happy to find they had several tables occupied for lunch, not just for her own business interest but because it made time go faster.

Not fast enough though, especially as the afternoon drew on and she wondered what time Hugh might appear.

As it was, he timed it perfectly and arrived when she’d cashed up her last table. At the other side of the restaurant, Kevin was chatting with a group of men he seemed to know well. Since Freddie was clearing up the last of his tables, and the rest of the tidying up was already done, Allie felt comfortable joining Hugh for a drink at the bar.

“My feet are killing me,” she told him, rotating her foot at the ankle. “I can’t wait to get these shoes off.”

“Feel free,” Hugh said, shifting so his thigh rested softly against her knee.

“I don’t think Kevin would appreciate me being that casual in the restaurant.” She took a long swig of the refreshingly cold beer. “How was your day? Did you get a lot of work done?”

“Not as much as I hoped. I was a bit distracted.”

“Really?” she asked coyly. “What had you so distracted?”

He scrunched his face up. “Just my wandering thoughts.”

“What kind of thoughts?” She rested an elbow on the bar, her body angled towards him.

“Mostly I was thinking about what a good purchase that cap was.”

Allie felt her cheeks heat as she smiled.

“It had never really occurred to me before how practical it would be to keep the sun off my face,” he teased.

“Very practical,” she said, rolling her eyes.

His hand moved to brush her knee and she could almost feel the tension

in the air as their eyes locked. She wanted to kiss him again, but a quick glance in Kevin's direction not only quashed that idea but also had her moving quickly but discreetly away from Hugh.

"You can get going if you want," Kevin said, striding behind the bar.

"It's okay. We've still got drinks."

Kevin said goodnight to his friends before he addressed Allie again. "I'm locking up shortly, so I'm afraid I need to kick you out. You can take your drinks with you though."

It crossed Allie's mind how daft it was that she was being asked to leave a place she owned. Also, if they had to leave now, Hugh might take it as his cue to go home and she didn't want that.

"I could lock up," she suggested.

Kevin's smile was irritatingly condescending. Though she supposed it was unrealistic to think he'd agree to her locking up given that she'd only worked there for a week and a half. From a business perspective, she should be glad he hadn't agreed to that.

"Or we could just go," she said quickly, feeling as though she'd made the most ridiculous suggestion ever.

Kevin looked pointedly at their drinks. "Like I said you can take those with you."

"Right." Allie slipped off the stool, an itch of irritation prickling along her spine. "Goodnight," she said to Kevin.

Hugh sounded much chirpier when he said goodbye.

In the foyer, Daisy had her head propped on her hand as she tapped away on the computer.

"Are you still working?" Allie asked, taking in Daisy's drooping lids.

"No rest for the wicked," she replied, barely looking up from the computer monitor as she echoed her grandad's earlier words.

"Do you ever lock up?" Allie asked, curious as to just how much responsibility Daisy had.

"Sometimes," she said flatly. "If Kevin isn't here. Usually he does it though."

"Right."

Daisy gave her an impatient look, then switched her attention back to her computer. Allie reminded herself of what Ron had said about her being slow to warm to people.

She and Hugh wished Daisy goodnight and continued outside. Short

stumpy lights dotted around the car park created puddles of orange light while the full moon cast silvery shadows.

“Shall we finish these at your place?” Hugh asked, indicating his beer.

“Yes.” Allie glanced behind her as they walked away from the clubhouse. “Daisy seems to be there around the clock.”

“What do you make of Kevin?” Hugh asked.

“I don’t know.” She cast her eyes down, wary of the uneven gravel underfoot. “I’m not sure I like him, but it’s hard to put my finger on why, since he always seems nice enough.”

“He doesn’t have the best reputation locally,” Hugh said.

“How come?”

“No particular reason. He’s just not that well liked. Possibly because Verity isn’t a fan of his. Around here, if you don’t have Verity’s seal of approval, you have a problem.”

“Verity?” She searched her brain, sure she knew the name. “From the cafe?”

“Have you met her yet?”

“No.” Not as an adult, anyway.

“I think her main gripe with Kevin is that he doesn’t let dogs into the clubhouse. Her partner, Bill, comes up regularly while he’s walking his dog. Verity’s always telling him that if the place isn’t good enough for Perry, then Bill shouldn’t set foot inside either.”

“I’ve met Bill and Perry.”

“Anyway . . .” Hugh slowed at the turn to her place. “I think most people are like you. Not overly fond of Kevin, but without any particular reason to dislike him.”

Allie turned onto the paved path that ran outside of her place, then looked quizzically at Hugh when he didn’t follow.

“Come here for a minute.” He extended his hand and she automatically slipped her fingers into his and followed him in the direction of the clifftops.

“Where are we going?” She felt completely at ease with Hugh, but there was still the tiniest prickle of a warning deep in her gut. “Should I be concerned that I’m being led down a dark path by a guy I don’t actually know that well?”

Hugh stopped abruptly. “Sorry. I just wanted to show you the view. It’ll be pretty with the full moon, but . . .”

“That’s good then. Carry on.” She set off, pulling on his arm to get him

moving again.

They didn't go much further, but stopped just before the coastal path. Overhead, the perfectly round moon glowed brightly, spilling moonbeams down to sparkle on the dark water below.

"That's an amazing view," Allie said, her voice quiet and filled with awe.

For a moment everything felt utterly still as she took in the silver shimmers on the water. Instinctively, she tipped her head back to catch sight of the moon just before it slipped behind a cloud.

When her gaze came back to Hugh, he was staring right at her. The intensity of his features did something strange to her insides, and with barely any thought, she took a step and pressed her lips against his.

Closing her eyes, she focused on the scent of his aftershave and the way her nose rested against his while she savoured the slow kisses that made her heart rate soar. His arm curled around her waist, the beer bottle in his hand pressing against her back when he eased her against him. Her breath caught at their closeness.

Too soon, Hugh broke the kiss. Softly, he pushed her hair from her face.

"Do you want to go and get your feet out of those shoes?" he whispered.

"Yes," she breathed, entwining her fingers with his again.

On the short walk back to her place, her stomach fizzed with anticipation that had very little to do with her poor aching feet.

CHAPTER 20



The bright overhead light in Allie's room didn't provide quite the same romantic ambience as the moon achieved. Despite being desperate to resume kissing Hugh, she felt suddenly self-conscious. Not only because of the sudden dazzling light but also because of how much of a mess her place was.

"I was in a bit of a rush this morning after surfing."

Every fibre of Allie told her to quickly tidy the place up, but she wasn't sure where to start. She shifted a collection of discarded clothes from the floor to the back of the chair, then tried her best to straighten up the mess of papers on the small desk. "Also, there's barely any storage space, so I don't have much hope of keeping the place tidy."

Turning, her eyes went to the tiny kitchen area where the sink and draining board were littered with dirty mugs and plates. She really should try to keep the place nicer.

"Don't worry about it." Hugh didn't seem at all perturbed as he took a seat on the one and only chair, which doubled as a clothes horse. "Did you say it's just temporary?"

"Yes."

"Are you looking for somewhere else?" He took a swig of his beer, then set the bottle down on the desk.

Allie sank onto the bed, deciding to do her best to ignore the state of the place. "Not yet. Just getting settled and getting to know the area."

Hugh nodded, but his attention was on the wooden surface of the desk. "Alegra Harris," he said, a hint of puzzlement to his voice.

She blinked rapidly. "What?"

“That’s your full name?” He plucked her driver’s licence from her purse, which was lying open in front of him.

She sucked in her bottom lip. That would teach her to tidy up after herself. She waited for him to react, while thinking maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing that she got everything out in the open.

“It’s a pretty name,” he said. “For some reason, I’d assumed Allie was short for Alison.”

“Right.” But he must have more to say about her name than that. It was a distinctive name. Surely he’d heard of her.

“Not a bad photo either,” he said, before returning her driving licence to the desk and flashing her a boyish grin. “How are your feet?”

Her feet? Why was he asking about her feet and not about the fact that not so long ago she’d been headline news on just about every media outlet? Had he really not recognised her name?

Even if he hadn’t, this would probably be a good time to tell him who she really was. Except he was asking about her bloody feet.

“Still hurting?” he prompted.

“Yes.” She stared down at them, then started to slip her left foot from her shoe before stopping abruptly. “They probably stink,” she said in a panic. “It might be better to keep them encased for now.” Except, now that she thought about it, they really were incredibly uncomfortable. She stood up before Hugh could comment. “Would you mind if I have a quick shower?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll be like two minutes.” She backed across the room, noticing that Hugh wasn’t even looking at her.

“What’s this?” He lifted a piece of paper from the desk.

Oh god. What had he found now? She could barely even complain about him snooping when she had everything spread out like that. As far as spies went, they probably didn’t come much less competent than her.

“What is it?” She craned her neck until he flicked the paper around to show her. “Oh, that.” She winced.

“Do you draw?”

“Kind of ...”

“It’s part of the golf course, right?”

“Yes.” Her brain whirred, trying to come up with a plausible reason for redesigning the golf course.

“Have you been sketching for long, or is this a new hobby?”

She laughed loudly and the sound reverberated around the small space. “It’s not a hobby. I mean, clearly I can’t draw for toffee.”

Hugh let out a quick breath and slumped in the chair. “Thank goodness. I was concerned I was going to have to politely tell you it was good.”

“Thanks a lot!” She beamed. “It’s not that bad.”

“It’s pretty bad,” he said, an eyebrow twitching upwards.

“Yeah, okay, it’s bad. But it wasn’t supposed to be a work of art.” She decided honestly was the best policy and if that led to further questions, so be it. “Do you remember when I was talking to the guy in the pub the other night? The one sitting at the bar?”

“Max?”

“Yeah. He was telling me how he and his wife don’t play golf any more because the course is designed so the only option is to play the entire course. They have kids so they don’t have time ...”

Hugh’s eyes dropped back to the paper in his hand. “So you decided to redesign the course?”

“I just got thinking about other possibilities and did a bit of research into golf course designs.” She shrugged. “I was bored and it was playing on my mind.”

“That’s actually pretty cool,” Hugh said. “Will you mention your ideas to Kevin?”

“It’s nothing to do with Kevin.” The words were out before she had time to think. “I mean, he’s just the manager. It’s above his pay grade.”

“The owners then? Could you make your suggestions to them?”

“Maybe.” She racked her brain, trying to think if there was any reason why she couldn’t be honest with Hugh. What would it matter if he knew the truth about why she was really in Hope Cove?

“Go have your shower,” he said, snapping her out of her thoughts. “I promise to stop snooping through your stuff.”

“I’d appreciate that.” She grabbed fresh clothes and slipped into the bathroom for a hasty shower, while pondering her reluctance to tell Hugh the truth. There didn’t seem to be any good reason not to, but she couldn’t shake the vague sense that she should keep it to herself for now.

“Better?” Hugh asked when she reappeared, feeling fresher and more comfortable.

“So much better.” She perched on the bed at the corner closest to Hugh’s chair. Lifting a foot onto her knee, she massaged the arch. “They’re still kind

of throbbing, but being out of those shoes feels great.” She put her foot down again, realising she’d like to shift things back to a more romantic vibe, and that probably didn’t involve her feet.

“Sit back,” Hugh said, waving his hand in a shooing gesture.

“What?”

Hugh walked to the head of the bed and piled up the pillows before patting them in invitation. Apparently his way of shifting the vibes was very far less subtle than anything she’d have dreamed up. Deciding she was fine with him being forward, she settled her head on the mound of pillows.

Fully expecting Hugh to lie beside her, she was taken aback when he sat on the middle of the bed and lifted her feet into his lap.

She opened her mouth to say something, but as Hugh’s thumbs worked their way over the sole of her left foot, all that came out was a soft moan.

“That feel good?” Hugh’s lips curled to a smirk.

Allie clamped a hand over her mouth. “Yes,” she mumbled through her fingers, only momentarily self-conscious before she got lost in the utter bliss of the foot rub. Taking a deep breath, she let herself sink into the pillows and felt her muscles unwind.

She closed her eyes to savour the sensation, while already feeling some anticipatory disappointment about the inevitable moment when the massage would end. Although ... maybe Hugh would just shift to massaging other parts of her. Every time he reached her ankle, she wondered if his hands might continue up her calves. And every time he paused, she wondered if he’d shift to lie beside her.

But he’d just switch to the other foot and continue with the delicious massage. After ten minutes, she decided she should take the initiative. All she had to do was reach for his arm and guide him up beside her.

In a moment, though.

She’d just enjoy one more minute of this ...

One more minute ...

When she woke, she blinked in confusion. The room was dark, but her eyes gradually adjusted and she realised it must be the first hint of daylight seeping into the room. Fully clothed, she lay atop the blankets and felt a shiver run through her at the cool air in the room.

Hugh was fast asleep, propped up against the wall, his legs stretched out on the bed and his hands cradling her feet in his lap.

“Hey.” Allie tugged at his sleeve, while simultaneously edging the

blanket out from under her.

“Hmm?” Hugh grunted.

“Get under the covers,” she said, snuggling down herself. “It’s freezing.” Definitely an exaggeration, but it was chilly.

With bleary eyes, Hugh crawled in beside her and she automatically moved close to him. His arms wrapped around her, enveloping her at his chest.

“Sorry,” she whispered into his neck. “I think your foot rubs are a bit too good.”

He let out a gentle laugh. “I’m going to have to work on lessening my skills there.” He sighed and forced his eyes open. “I didn’t know whether to leave. I thought I’d wait for five minutes to see if you woke up, then I guess I fell asleep too.”

She shuffled so her face was on a level with his. “I’m glad you stayed.”

He arched his back. “I may need a back massage at some point.”

“I suppose I owe you that, at least.” She licked her lips when he moved his face closer still and had just felt his breath sweep over her lips when a loud crash startled them both.

Allie sat bolt upright, listening intently.

“What was that?” Hugh asked.

“Someone’s in the shed,” she whispered, her heart pounding.

“The shed?”

“For the golf course. Where they keep the maintenance equipment. Lawnmowers and that stuff.”

“Ah.” Hugh sat up beside her. “Should there be someone in there?”

“Not at this time.” Her eyes flickered to the window, the first hint of dawn reminding her it might be morning and not the middle of the night.

“What time is it?”

“Just before six.”

“It’ll probably be Ron then. It’s a bit early, though.” Creeping across the room, Allie opened the door a crack.

“What are you doing?” Hugh asked quietly.

“Checking if it’s the greenkeeper or burglars.” She stuck her head outside, trying to listen without triggering the security light. She was about to retreat again when there was another clatter and a female voice which sounded decidedly angry despite the hushed tones.

“That’s Daisy,” Allie remarked, closing the door again.

“The girl from the front desk?”

“Yes. What on earth is she doing in the shed at six o’clock in the morning?” She sank back onto the bed.

“Stealing stuff?” Hugh suggested lightly.

“No. I’ll bet she’s helping her grandad. It’s blooming early though, and the other voice didn’t sound like Ron.”

“As long as the place isn’t being robbed, does it matter?”

“No.” She tilted her head. “There’s something weird going on here though.”

“How do you mean?”

“There aren’t enough staff to maintain the golf course,” she mused, more to herself than anything. At Fox Hill they had half a dozen people helping their head greenkeeper. Admittedly, the grounds there were much more extensive, but even so, one greenkeeper was nothing. She’d assumed there were more staff that she just hadn’t seen, but she hadn’t even heard mention of anyone else. “Who’s doing all the work?”

Hugh gave her a small smile and a bemused shrug.

“Sorry. I’m waffling. I just don’t quite understand the running of this place.”

“Do you need to?”

“No ... I just ... Never mind.”

Looking at Hugh sitting up in her bed reminded her that their intimate atmosphere had been broken yet again. But now, when she considered kissing him, all she could think about was the fact that she hadn’t brushed her teeth.

“Do you want to follow them?” Hugh asked.

“Follow them?”

“Daisy ... find out who she’s with and what they’re up to?”

“Um ... like spy on them?”

His eyebrow twitched mischievously. “Seems like a fun early morning mission to me.”

She only had to consider it for a moment. “I really want to,” she told him eagerly.

CHAPTER 21



They were somewhere near the sixth hole when Allie and Hugh ducked behind the wide trunk of a solid oak tree. Around them, bushes and dense foliage kept them hidden.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” Allie whispered, feeling her stomach muscles tense in her effort to hold laughter in.

“I always thought I’d make a great secret agent.” Hugh leaned around the tree to look out, then popped quickly back, shifting Allie with his hands at her waist.

“What are you doing?” Again, laughter threatened to take over.

“They’re coming this way. At least the guy is.”

“Freddie,” Allie said. They’d crept through the woodland at the edge of the golf course, tracking Daisy and Freddie until they parked the small supply truck by the green.

From their lookout, they’d watched Freddie rake the sand trap while Daisy trimmed the grass on the green. Now, Freddie was heading their way and Allie’s heart thudded while she waited to see if they’d be discovered. Maybe it was also the fact that Hugh had her pinned against the rough tree trunk that had her heart working in overdrive.

“Is he still there?” Allie asked, her voice barely audible.

Hugh placed a finger softly on her lips, not-so-subtly telling her to shut up. The sound of a motor starting up was close and loud. It also indicated that their cover hadn’t been blown.

Leaning forwards, Allie put her mouth besides Hugh’s ear. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” She could hear the excitement in his voice. “This is the most fun

I've had in a long time."

"That's a bit sad—" Allie stopped talking as the noise of the strimmer cut out. She held her breath, hoping she'd shut up quickly enough.

"What's wrong with it?" Freddie asked loudly.

"You're doing it wrong," Daisy replied.

"I'm cutting the edges. How on earth can I be doing it wrong?"

"You have to be precise." There was a bite to Daisy's words that Allie hadn't heard before. "It's a golf course, not a back garden."

"I am being precise."

"No, you're not. Look! You missed a bit."

Laughter rattled Freddie's words. "Like three blades of grass."

"Exactly. You have to be more precise. If I have to go after you and do it again, I may as well do it all myself."

"You can't do it all yourself," Freddie said wearily.

"Just do it properly," Daisy snapped. "I'm not paying you to mess around."

"I told you, you don't need to pay me."

"We agreed I'll pay you. Now please just cut the grass, and don't miss any."

"Yes, boss." Freddie's words were low and with a hint of anger.

Silence fell for a moment and Allie imagined Daisy walking away so was surprised to hear her speak again.

"Sorry," she said softly. "I'm tired."

"I know you are. Let's hurry up. Maybe you'll have time for a nap before work."

A moment later, the sound of the strimmer started up again, drowning out everything else.

"Let's go," Allie mouthed.

Hugh was quite theatrical in peeking around the tree. He directed Allie to wait until Freddie was far enough away for them to pick their way quietly through the bushes and back through the wooded area. They stayed quiet until they hit the coastal path, then paused to brush stray leaves and detritus from their clothes.

"I'm still none the wiser," Allie said, sweeping a pine needle from Hugh's hair. "Why is Daisy doing greenkeeping work and why is she paying Freddie to help her?"

"It's kind of weird," Hugh admitted.

“Very.” Allie stared out at the English Channel for a moment before catching the wide grin on Hugh’s face. “You really did enjoy that, didn’t you?”

“So much.” His joy was infectious. “It was such an adrenaline rush. That moment when I thought we might get caught was intense.” He blew out a breath. “I’m seriously considering a career change.”

“International spy?”

He took her hand as they set off along the path, pressing his palm firmly against hers. “I’ll settle for local private investigator. At least to start with.”

“It’s probably better not to be too ambitious.” Her smile faltered as she once again considered telling him everything. This time she made the conscious decision not to share her secret with him. Everything felt so perfect that she didn’t want to risk ruining it.

Plus, she was too wrapped up in the sun rising over the water to embark on any deep conversations. All she wanted to focus on was the feel of Hugh’s hand in hers, the salty air in her lungs and the stunning colours appearing at the horizon.

It was a good mile back to her place, but it seemed to take no time at all.

“I should go home and get on with some work,” Hugh said, when they arrived back at the clubhouse.

“I’ll walk to your car with you,” she said, glancing suspiciously at the doors to the shed, which were wide open.

Hugh’s gaze went in the same direction. He raised his eyebrows and released her hand as they wandered towards the car park.

“Morning!” Allie called to Ron, stopping to let him pass as he rode the lawnmower out of the shed.

“Morning, love! You’re up early.”

She felt her cheeks heat slightly, not having thought about the fact that she was walking from her place with Hugh at the crack of dawn, both looking fairly dishevelled.

“We had a little sunrise walk,” she said.

He tipped his chin at Hugh, then set off again before Allie could question him about Daisy.

“I guess he just needs some help,” Hugh remarked by his car.

“But if he needs help, why aren’t we ...” Allie frowned at her slip. “Why don’t they employ more help? Daisy must be running herself ragged doing two jobs. I’m fairly sure she isn’t being paid for the greenkeeping work.”

“Ask her?” Hugh said, opening the driver's door.

“Some undercover detective you are.” She rolled her eyes, before her thoughts shifted to when she'd see Hugh again.

“Shall I message you later?” he asked.

“Yeah.” She stepped closer to him and smiled. “Maybe we can go for that picnic on Dartmoor sometime.”

“I'd like that.” His hand landed at her hip as he gave her a soft kiss. “Talk to you later,” he said casually.

Allie couldn't stop grinning as she wandered back up to her place. Flopping onto her bed, she was tempted to call Bella and fill her in on her recent adventures, but decided not to run the risk of anyone putting a dampener on her mood. Instead, she lazily replayed her time with Hugh in her head.

It shouldn't have been surprising that she drifted back to sleep, but when she woke three hours later, it took Allie a while to get her bearings. In Surrey, she worked much longer hours and generally survived on a cocktail of caffeine, painkillers and adrenaline. She managed a hectic work schedule without ever taking naps.

She supposed it must be the sea air and the slower pace of life that left her in a permanent state of relaxation.

Even after her extended nap, it was still only midmorning. The day stretched before her. Her mind returned to Daisy and the puzzle of the greenkeeping work. Hugh's advice about being direct came back to her and she shoved her feet into a pair of trainers. Plucking her cardigan from the back of the door, she was drawn to Hugh's coat which hung there too. It felt slightly foolish to bring it to her face, but the scent which filled her nostrils was worth it.

Outside, she was nearing the entrance when she caught sight of Ron driving through the car park in the small vehicle that Daisy had taken out early that morning.

“You're busy today,” she remarked.

“A greenkeeper's work is never done.” He smiled at her and continued to the shed, leaving Allie to resume her search for Daisy.

“You don't half work hard,” Allie remarked, leaning on the front desk.

Daisy glanced up at her, but didn't comment.

“How many days do you work?” Allie asked.

“Six days at the moment.”

“At the moment?”

“It used to be five, but ...” She blew out a breath. “There have been a few staffing issues, so I do an extra day to cover.”

“So, you’re the only receptionist?”

Daisy nodded. “On my day off, the rest of the staff take it in turns to cover the front desk.”

“What about holidays?” Allie should probably try harder to hide her shock, but she wasn’t great at concealing her emotions.

“Ha.” Daisy’s shoulders twitched as she laughed. “I’ll worry about that when I can afford a holiday.”

“But ...” Allie wanted to dig deeper – because surely Daisy must be making decent money with the overtime and the greenkeeping work too, though she was suddenly certain that was unpaid. “Is it difficult to get staff around here or something?” She changed her tone to something more curious and less probing. “I was thinking just now when I saw Ron hard at work that he must have a huge amount of work. Does he have anyone helping him?”

“There are contractors who do a lot of the heavy lifting ... cutting back the trees and bushes, that kind of thing. But Grandad manages the rest of it himself. He’s been doing it for fifteen years, so he’s well practised.”

“There’s a huge amount of ground to maintain though.”

“He’s very good at his job,” Daisy said, her attention on the computer screen. “Are you working today?”

“No. I just wanted to talk to Kevin.”

“He’s in the restaurant,” Daisy said, bringing the conversation to an end.

Taking the hint, Allie strolled through the archway and into the empty restaurant. Behind the bar, Kevin was restocking a fridge with bottles of beer.

His lips pulled to one side as he looked up. “You’re not down to work today, are you?”

“No.” Allie should really have thought of an excuse for being there to avoid the momentary panic. Why on earth had her dad thought she was capable of spying? She was hopeless at it. “I wondered if I could grab a coffee? I only have instant at my place and it doesn’t quite do the trick.”

“Help yourself.” There was a final clink of bottles before he stood. “You’re welcome to grab food here, too. Get yourself on chef’s good side and he’ll happily whip you up something if the place isn’t busy.”

“Thanks.” She set a mug under the machine. “Coffee’s good for now.”

“How are you finding village life?” Kevin asked, leaning against the bar.

“It must be different from what you’re used to. You’re from Surrey, right?”

“It’s very different,” she said tentatively. “I like it, though. The slower pace of life is refreshing.” She smiled, realising she was telling the truth.

“Do you think you’ll stick around?”

“I don’t know.” She took her coffee and sat at the bar, pondering the question. Sticking around had never been in her plan, but she was certainly in no hurry to leave.

“When Richard told me you’d be coming here, it sounded as though you were just looking to try something different for a while?”

“Yes. Honestly, I thought it would just be for a short time, but now I’m not so sure.”

She thought of the sketches she’d made of the golf course. If she wanted to stay and take over running the place, she probably wouldn’t have a tough time convincing her dad. Besides, she had majority shares in the club, so she technically didn’t even need her dad’s permission. If she wanted to, she could stay and implement any changes she wanted – including redesigning the entire course if she felt so inclined.

“Daisy works hard,” she remarked, changing the subject. “She seems to be a permanent fixture on the front desk.”

“She’s a good worker,” he said breezily.

“I was just saying to her how incredible it is that her grandad works on the whole course on his own.” She kept her focus on her coffee, hoping she sounded innocent and unassuming. “I always imagined it would take loads of people to keep the course looking so good.”

“He has help with some of it. The bigger jobs, like cutting back the trees.”

Allie shrugged. “Is it normal, though, to just have one person doing the bulk of the work?” She glanced up to find Kevin’s gaze boring into her and knew she was pushing it too far. Hopefully, her sweet smile would limit the damage.

“I wouldn’t say it’s normal. It always depends on the size of the course and the experience of the greenkeeper. We’re very lucky to have Ron.”

Allie kept her smile fixed, despite Kevin spouting absolute rubbish. Experience had little bearing on how much work a person could physically get done in a day. The fact was, there was too much work here for one person. Daisy and Freddie secretly helping Ron out was a testament to that.

But it made no sense. If Ron needed extra help, why would Daisy keep it a secret? And why didn’t Kevin know what was going on in the club that he

was supposed to be managing?

Concerned that her questions were making Kevin suspicious, she finished her coffee and wandered back to her place, intent on tidying up.

She'd get to the bottom of the staffing issues another time.

CHAPTER 22



Hugh released Allie's hand to check the directions on his phone.

"Apparently, we should reach a stone wall soon."

"There." Allie pointed, enjoying how the walk felt like some kind of scavenger hunt. She didn't know what they were looking for, but Hugh's friend Caitlin had insisted they follow her instructions and not ask questions.

"At the wall we have to stop and look to the east." Hugh frowned at the phone. "That's the end of her directions."

"Exciting," Allie said, upping her pace to reach the crumbling stone wall. "Do you know which way east is?"

Hugh appeared beside her, extending his hand to point into the valley. "I'm guessing that way."

Grazing by a cluster of small trees and scattered rocks was a herd of ponies. "They're gorgeous," Allie said. "Do you think we can get closer, or will we scare them off?"

"I don't know." Hugh looked suspiciously at his phone. "How did Caitlin know they'd be here?"

"Maybe they always stay around the same area."

Hugh looked dubious as he tapped on his phone. Peering over his shoulder, Allie watched him type a message to Caitlin.

Are they always here? he asked.

No, Came the instant reply. *Just in spring.*

Hugh glanced up at Allie and they exchanged a baffled look before he began typing again.

Ponies have seasonal homes?

Where are you?

Near the wall. Looking at the ponies.

Are you looking to your left?

Hugh caught Allie's eye before they both whipped their heads around.

"Oh!" Allie said, then paused. "Wait. What is that?"

"Water," Hugh said slowly, then changed his mind. "No, not water."

They stood side by side, staring across the valley at the hill opposite which was entirely blue.

"Flowers," they said at once.

Hugh's phone buzzed and they both glanced down at the message from Caitlin.

I love that you got to see ponies as well as the bluebells. Enjoy!

"That's so pretty," Allie said, her gaze sweeping back to the sea of bluebells. "I've never seen so many in one place before. At first glance, it really looked like water."

"It's fairly spectacular," Hugh agreed.

Allie scanned the area, searching for the perfect picnic spot. Somewhere with a view of both the bluebells and the ponies would be ideal.

Half an hour later, she was utterly full and wonderfully content, stretched out on the blanket beside Hugh. The ponies had moved on, but every time she looked over at the bluebells she was stunned by the sight of them swaying in the breeze like rippling water.

"Sorry," Hugh said as he replied to yet another message from Emmy. He'd been having a back and forth with her for the last few minutes and had apologised several times already.

"I told you it's fine." Dragging her eyes from the bluebells, Allie rolled onto her back. "What's Emmy short for?"

"Emma."

"Not actually shorter then."

"No." He finished writing a message, then settled beside her, propping himself on his elbow. "She hates Emma. It's Emmy or Em."

"Emma's a beautiful name."

"I think so. She disagrees."

"Did you choose it?"

His eyes narrowed as though it was a stupid question. "Yeah."

"I meant was it you or your wife?" She chuckled. "Whose suggestion was it?"

He looked thoughtful for a moment. "I think it was mine. We drew up a

list ... I guess we ended up with about ten possibilities. Then we took it in turns to cross out a name. Eventually, there was only Emma left.”

“That’s a good way to decide.” Allie looked right into Hugh’s hazel eyes. “How old were you when you had Emmy?”

“Twenty-two when she was born.”

“Wow. Was she planned?”

“Yes. Although everyone always assumes she must have been an accident.”

“You were really young.” She searched his features while she waited for him to go on but he didn’t say any more on the subject. “Tell me about it,” she finally said with an encouraging look.

His eyebrows inched together and for an unnerving moment she thought he was going to clam up. It hit her just how much she wanted to know.

“Nancy and I got together in secondary school. She was my first girlfriend.” His gaze went overhead. “We both went to university in Exeter. I proposed in the third year. We got married quickly, and we both knew we wanted kids ...” He turned on his side to face Allie. “I think I wanted a family more than Nancy. I was desperate to have kids and I think maybe she just got caught up in my enthusiasm for it.”

“I can’t imagine someone agreeing to have a baby unless they really want it too.”

“I guess. After she left, I started to see everything differently. With hindsight everything is a little clearer. She’d suggested a few times that we wait to have a baby ... I think in the end she agreed to it to please me.”

Allie offered what she hoped was a comforting smile. “When did you and Nancy split up?”

“When Emmy was two and a half.” A muscle in his cheek twitched and his eyes flashed with pain. “We were living in Exeter and Nancy was commuting to London three days a week for work. She’d been doing that since Emmy started childcare when she was nine months. Nancy was offered a transfer to the Paris office and wanted to take it.”

“You didn’t want to go with her?”

“I would have,” he said. “Nancy suggested she go alone to start with, to see if she liked the job and scout things out. We kept talking about Emmy and I joining her.” He tucked a lock of Allie’s hair behind her ear. “It took me quite a while to figure out that she didn’t want us to join her. When I finally confronted her, she told me we’d got married too young and she

hadn't really known what she'd wanted then. But now she had this life in Paris and she knew exactly what she wanted." His eyes were shadowed, with a vacant look. "Then she told me she'd met someone. Louise."

"That must have been a shock."

"Yep." His eyes met hers again and he smiled. "But it all worked out okay in the end."

Allie rested her hand against his cheek. "I feel as though you just skipped part of the story."

"I did." He licked his lips before kissing her.

Allie was tempted to pull back and get him to tell her the story properly. Because she didn't want the broad strokes of his life story. She wanted it all.

But Hugh's deep, probing kisses were entirely distracting and she couldn't bring herself to put a stop to them.

Finally, his phone vibrated. He ignored it the first time, but pulled back when it went off again, giving her an apologetic grimace as he sat up.

Quietly, Allie studied his profile and caught the way his brows drew together as he read the message.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He glanced over at her. "Hmm?"

"Is Emmy okay? You look worried."

He shook his head. "It's not Em."

"Who's got you looking so worried then?"

"No one." His attention went back to his phone. "It's nothing."

"Very mysterious."

"No ... I just ... it's um ... no one."

Allie wrinkled her forehead. "Now you're making it more intriguing."

"Sorry." He rubbed at his forehead with the back of his hand. "It's Rebecca."

"You say that as though I should know who Rebecca is."

"She was there when we first met."

Allie's brain whirred until she remembered he'd been on a date the first time they'd met. "*Rebecca?*"

He nodded. "Apparently her little girl really was ill. Quite seriously by the sound of it. She ended up in hospital. Rebecca was just explaining and apologising for not being in touch sooner."

"I don't know if you're messing with me," Allie said, sitting up.

Hugh handed the phone over. "I feel a bit crap now that I didn't message

her to check everything was okay.”

With a feeling of disbelief, Allie read the message. She also felt quite sorry for Rebecca, who’d obviously had a rough time of it since that night in the restaurant.

“So it really wasn’t an excuse,” she said, reaching the end of the long message. “And she wants to see you again.”

“Yeah.” Hugh took the phone back. “How do I reply to that?”

Allie spat out a laugh. “Really? You’re on a date with me, asking how you should respond to another woman who wants to date you?”

He winced. “Obviously I’ll tell her I can’t see her ... I was just wondering how exactly I would do that, but I also wasn’t asking your advice, just thinking aloud.”

“You’re not interested in seeing her again?” Allie chastised herself for being so insecure. They’d been on a few dates, that was all. The thought of him going out with Rebecca again really shouldn’t affect her so much.

“No.” Hugh tossed his phone aside and leaned back on his hand, angling his body to Allie. “I know some people enjoy dating multiple people at once, but I have no interest in that.”

“Good to know.” Allie did a poor job of trying to contain her smile.

“What about you?” he asked. “Are you dating anyone else?”

“No.”

“Are you planning to?”

“No.” She beamed. “But then again, I wasn’t planning on dating anyone at all.”

“I see.” Hugh’s eyebrows rose slowly upwards. “So if someone crops up and entices you with the promise of fun, you might be tempted.”

“Maybe,” she said, then laughed at his comically wounded expression. Tilting her head, she draped an arm around his shoulders. “On second thoughts I think I’ll just stick to having fun with you.”

“Good,” he whispered before their lips met.

CHAPTER 23



On Friday, Allie got straight out of bed and went for an early morning stroll along the clifftops. She'd done the same the previous day and had concluded it was the perfect way to start the day. This time she stopped on a deserted beach to sit and stare at the waves for an hour, then consulted her phone to find the closest cafe for lunch.

There was nothing on her schedule for the day apart from dinner with Hugh that evening. He was cooking for her at his place, and she felt a flutter of anticipation every time she thought about it.

Exiting the cafe, she set off back in the vague direction of the golf course, while pulling out her phone and scrolling to her cousin's number. It took Bella a while to answer. Long enough that Allie was almost ready to give up on her.

"Hi," she said wearily.

"Hi." Allie slowed her pace. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. How's everything there?"

"Really good, actually." She emphasised her words and expected an enthusiastic response from Bella, but all she got was silence for a moment.

"Not ready to come home yet, then?"

"I'm not in any rush," Allie said, trying to decipher Bella's sombre tone. "Are you sure you're okay? You sound stressed or something."

"I'm surprised you're not dying to get home, that's all." The solemn note to her voice wasn't like Bella at all.

"I like it here," Allie said. "Also, I suspect Dad might have been right about me keeping my identity a secret at the club. I think there's something odd going on."

Bella snorted a humourless laugh. "I doubt it."

"Why?"

"I didn't think you really believed Uncle Richard's excuse about the club profits. He just wanted you to go back and revisit the place."

Allie paused before crossing the road, hoping she was going in the right direction for the coastal path. "You've changed your tune. I thought you were on Dad's side before. Encouraging me to go."

"I was never on any side. I thought it might be good for you, but I also didn't imagine you being gone for so long."

Allie felt a stab of guilt that she'd been enjoying a leisurely lifestyle while poor Bella was left to take care of everything back home. At the same time she was slightly confused; she'd only been gone for two weeks, which was still two weeks less than her dad had wanted her to go for. Bella shouldn't really have been expecting her home just yet.

"How are you finding it at the club?" Allie asked gently. "Is it stressful?"

"It's fine," Bella replied.

"Sorry. I've hardly even checked in with you to see how things are. I forget how exhausting it is to run that place."

"It's not that," Bella said. "You had the place running like clockwork. And Uncle Richard's here to help as well."

"Is that why you sound so fed up? Is Dad hindering more than helping?"

"No." Her voice sounded slightly lighter. "I just miss you."

"I miss you too."

"Do you? Or are you too busy going on dates?"

Allie bit down on her lip to contain her smile. "I really like him."

"Is he the reason you're in no rush to come home?"

"Partly. Though I really do think there might be something strange going on at the club."

"Just be honest," Bella huffed. "If you want to stay for a guy, you can say so. Don't make up excuses, not for me."

"I wasn't. I'm also not denying that Hugh's part of the reason I'm having such a good time. It's also nice to relax." She smiled to herself. "He even agreed with your theory about stress affecting my shoulder."

"Oh right!" Bella's voice was laced with mirth. "When I say it, you dismiss it, but when Hugh says it, the suggestion suddenly has merit."

Allie laughed since she had no argument.

"Have you told Hugh the truth about why you're there?"

“Not yet.”

“Isn’t that awkward? If you really like him, you can’t lie to him.”

“I’m not lying, I’m just not telling him the whole truth.”

“Most people consider that lying, you know?”

“I will tell him ...”

“What’s stopping you? Are you afraid he can’t keep a secret?”

“No.” She drew in a deep breath. “Honestly, I’m just enjoying being myself. Hugh likes me for who I am, not for how much money I have or for my career achievements. It feels kind of freeing.”

“Except you’re not actually being yourself.”

Allie glanced overhead as a seagull screeched loudly. She wasn’t sure how to argue with Bella. Logically, if she wasn’t being honest with Hugh about her background, then she wasn’t really being herself. But she also *felt* more herself around him.

“I’m going to tell him, but for now, I’m just enjoying spending time with him. His daughter is away for the school holidays, so everything feels pretty carefree.”

“He has a daughter?”

“Yeah. She’s twelve.”

“How old is this guy?”

“Thirty-four.”

“That’s a lot of baggage.”

“Maybe, but it also feels pretty straightforward.”

“Because his daughter’s not currently there! I feel as though things will be different when he suddenly can’t hang out with you because he has his kid for the weekend.”

“She lives with him full time. His ex-wife lives in Paris.”

“That doesn’t sound as though it’s going to be an uncomplicated relationship for long. Do you really want to get into a relationship with a guy who has a kid? Or are you just having a fling? Is that why you’re not bothering to tell him the truth ... because it’ll just be a short-lived thing between you?”

“I don’t know.” But given the discomfort Allie felt in her gut, she definitely saw it developing to more than a fling. “I really like spending time with him. That’s all I know for now. I think that’s all I need to know at the moment.”

“You really are very chilled out there, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I’m happy you’re enjoying yourself.” Her voice had taken that flat quality again, and it set alarm bells ringing in Allie.

“At the risk of sounding like a broken record, are you sure everything is okay there? You sound fed up.”

“Just a bit tired, I guess. Ignore me.”

“Okay. I’ll let you go.”

“Hang on,” Bella said, with sudden urgency. “There’s something I wanted to tell you ... but ...”

“What is it?” There was a noise in the background and then muffled voices. “Is that my dad?”

“Yeah. I’ll just talk to you another time.”

“Call me back later if you want ...”

“It’s not important. I’ll call you another day.”

Allie instructed her to say hi to her dad, then ended the call.

She checked her watch, counting down the time until her dinner with Hugh and feeling yet another rush of anticipation.

CHAPTER 24



S pending time with Allie sparked something in Hugh that he hadn't felt in a long time – the buzz he felt when he thought about seeing her, and the constant prickle of desire he felt around her.

She'd also sparked something else in him – an excitement about his job that he'd lost a long time ago. Her sketches of the golf course had inspired him, and he'd found himself researching golf course design from an architectural perspective.

When his phone rang late on Friday afternoon, he was up in his office, standing over the large sketch he'd been working on in every spare minute since that night at Allie's place. He'd had a stab of guilt over setting aside his paid work that afternoon to add a few finishing touches to it.

"Hi," he said to Leo over the phone.

"Hey. How's it going? Big date tonight, right?"

"Yeah."

"Are you nervous?"

Hugh rubbed lightly at a tiny smudge at the edge of his drawing. "I wasn't, but now you've made me think I should be."

"It'll be the first time you've had sex for a while, won't it?"

"I don't know if there'll be sex." He was hoping so, but certainly didn't want to presume.

"You're cooking for her. I'm sure she'll be expecting sex."

"I decided to order takeaway instead."

"Either way, if she's coming to your place for dinner, it seems likely you'll end up in bed together."

"I'm not nervous, anyway." Maybe he should be, but he felt so at ease

around Allie that all he felt was excitement at seeing her. “And if I am, it’s not about the possibility of sleeping with her.” His gaze travelled over the design in front of him, searching out any flaws. “I thought I’d show her the design I came up with for the golf course ... but do you think it’s weird?”

“No. Women love it when you take an interest in their interests.”

He nodded slowly. “I’m worried it’ll seem a bit intense.”

“No,” Leo said again. “And I think it’s great that you’ve been working on that. Damian and I were chatting about it – it’s good for you to get out of your comfort zone and try something different.” His friends had been telling him for years that he was wasting his potential with loft conversions, but it had always felt comfortable and secure. Since he’d become a father, security had been his priority.

“I’ve been enjoying working on it,” he told Leo. “I’m not sure I can actually do anything with it, but it’s a fun project.”

“If nothing else, it might help you get laid.” Leo chuckled while Hugh shook his head. The doorbell had him moving to look out of the window.

“Allie’s here,” he said. “I have to go.”

Opening the door to her, she looked so pleased to see him, that he didn’t hesitate over kissing her as soon as she stepped inside.

When she pulled back, it was with a satisfied smile. “Did you have a hectic day?” she asked.

“No. It was pretty chilled out.”

A wrinkle appeared across her forehead. “I assumed when you messaged about the change of dinner plans, you must have had a busy day.”

“Time got away from me, but not in a stressful way. You don’t mind takeaway, do you?”

“Not at all.” She glanced along the hallway, but since she’d asked about his day, all he could think about was the golf course designs.

“I want to show you something,” he said, backing away from her. “It’s upstairs.” He made it to the fifth step before noticing that she wasn’t following.

“That is incredibly forward,” she said, her features emitting an odd mixture of suspicion and amusement. “Aren’t you even going to offer me a drink first?”

It took Hugh longer than it should have to figure out what she meant. “Oh!” His gaze darted up the stairs, then back down to her. “I didn’t mean... I wasn’t...” Mortified, he backtracked quickly to stand beside her. “I just

wanted to show you something, but let's get a drink."

Allie bit down on her lip. "I was only messing, but you kissing me and inviting me straight upstairs gives off a certain signal. I presume that wasn't actually what you were intending."

"No." He shook his head and made for the kitchen, feeling like an absolute idiot. "I'm really bad at dating, aren't I?"

She caught up to him and took his arm, turning him to face her. "What did you want to show me?"

"Just something I was working on this afternoon. I was kind of nervous about showing you, so I thought I'd show you straightaway." He swallowed hard. "I should really have made it clear why I wanted to go upstairs." Stepping away from her he took two bottles of beer from the fridge and popped the tops off them.

"Why would you be nervous about showing me your work?" Allie asked when he handed her one.

He scratched at his neck. "Because I drew up your design for the golf course. To scale. A proper blueprint."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. I took a photo of your sketch. I kept thinking about it and I did a bit of research into golf course architecture."

"Wow."

He chewed on his bottom lip. "I don't know what kind of wow that was ... but I suspect I've just impressed you with what a geek I am."

"I'm impressed that you went to that effort."

"I did a couple of landscape architecture courses after uni, but I've never put it to use." He shrugged. "It was just a bit of fun."

"You have an interesting idea of fun." She took a long swig of her drink. "I'm going to need to see it."

"Really?"

She didn't respond but took her beer and wandered back along the hall. Stopping abruptly at the foot of the stairs, she turned back to him. "This isn't all an elaborate ploy to get me up to your sex dungeon, is it?"

His face cracked into a wide grin. "If I had a sex dungeon, surely it would be in the basement."

CHAPTER 25



On the upstairs landing, Allie stood aside to let Hugh lead the way.

“That’s Emmy’s room.” He pointed to a door to the right, which was slightly ajar. The walls were a soft lavender with a matching bedspread. Every available space seemed to be littered with clutter. Knickknacks covered her shelves and desk, while the spines of the books on the bookcase were only partially visible behind the collection of ornaments and trinkets.

“Bathroom,” Hugh said, pointing again as he continued. “My sex dungeon ...” Indicating a closed door, his lips twitched to a smirk. “And in here is my office.”

“Hopefully with some golf drawings or things are about to get awkward.” Allie followed him into the neat and ordered space where there were no ornaments to block the spines of the thick architecture tomes on the bookcase.

“Golf drawings,” Hugh announced, bringing her attention to an imposing standing desk at the side of the room. The top of it was angled and displaying a large sheet of paper with a sketch of a fairway and a green. “One golf drawing anyway. I just recreated your sketch, but to scale.”

“I think you’re playing down your skills a bit there.” She moved closer to get a better look. She’d never really thought of architects as artists, but the sketch was stunning. “I thought everything was digital these days?”

“Most architects work digitally. It makes the process a lot easier.” He took a swig of his beer while she continued to take in the details of his drawing. “Seeing your sketch inspired me.”

“That’s probably the nicest thing anyone could ever say about my scribbles.”

“I created a version on the computer, too.” Moving to a second desk, he set his bottle on a coaster and sat down. From a drawer, he retrieved a wireless keyboard.

“You keep a very tidy desk,” Allie told him, hovering beside him as the monitor came to life.

He pulled out an ergonomic mouse and opened a file on the screen. “Clutter distracts me,” he said idly.

“There definitely aren’t many distractions in here.” Her eyes roamed the bland, uninspiring room.

“Here we go,” Hugh said.

Allie’s gaze shifted back to the screen. “Wow,” she said, surprised by the 3D picture on the screen. “That’s great. Much easier to imagine it that way.”

“Yeah. Hang on ... I can also ...” He trailed off, concentrating on manoeuvring the mouse and clicking buttons. A moment later, the picture on the screen changed. It took Allie a moment to figure out what she was looking at.

“Wait ...” She set her bottle down as she leaned closer. “That’s the course? In real life?” Everything was suddenly entirely lifelike, as though she was looking at a video of an actual place. The leaves even quivered in the trees.

“I imported satellite images of the course as it is now, then made some tweaks. It’s pretty cool what you can do with AI software.”

“*Pretty cool?*” Allie’s eyes felt as though they might bulge all the way out of the sockets. “It’s incredible. It feels as though I’m there on the course.”

“I threw in an avatar.” He clicked some more until a man with a golf bag appeared on the screen. “I can set him to take a walk around, then you get even more of a feel for it.”

“That’s insane,” Allie said, watching in delight. Immediately, she imagined how impressed her dad would be. One of his irritations when they’d redone Fox Hill was that he couldn’t visualise it properly from 2D renderings. It was amazing how far technology had come in the intervening years. “How long did all of this take you?” she finally asked.

Hugh lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “The computer images took a lot less time than the drawing.”

“It’s brilliant,” she whispered, keeping her eyes on the screen for a moment longer, then wandering back to his hand-drawn version. “You’re so talented.”

“I was just playing around.” He stood close behind her as she stared at the sketch.

It seemed ridiculous now that she’d found Hugh’s architecture talk boring when they’d first met. Standing in front of his intricate drawing made her view his work entirely differently. It struck her how much her opinion of *him* had altered too. When they’d first met she’d thought him a little dull, when in reality he was sweet and kind and slightly awkward. But also focused and talented. And good looking to boot, she thought.

A pang of desire hit her core as she turned to look at him square on.

He shifted his weight. “Is this weird?”

“How do you mean?”

“I wasn’t sure if you’d think it odd, me taking so much interest in your hobbies. That’s why I was nervous about showing you.”

“I don’t find it weird,” she said, tilting her head as it hit her just how quickly she was falling for him. “I think it’s amazing.”

“It made a pleasant change from loft conversions.”

“Don’t you enjoy that?”

He pursed his lips. “It pays the bills, and it’s actually not as boring as it sounds.”

“It doesn’t sound boring.” She reached for his hand, lightly curling her fingers around his in an action that made him inch closer to her. “I’m not convinced loft conversions would truly fulfil your potential, but I wouldn’t call it boring.”

“Leo and Damian are always telling me I should broaden my horizons, but with Emmy I always needed to play it safe career-wise.”

She nodded, but struggled to fully concentrate on his words while the feel of his fingers stroking hers caused another tug of desire to shoot through her. “You’re kind of amazing, you know?”

His shoulders bunched up and his whole body seemed to reject her words as he took an almost imperceptible step away from her.

“You are,” she said, tightening her grip on his hand. “It’s amazing that you sacrificed so much for Emmy, an—”

“I didn’t sacrifice anything for Emmy,” he said firmly.

She smiled. “That’s a lie. But not only that, you’re brilliant at what you do ...” Her gaze swept to the computer and then to the sketch on the desk. “This is really brilliant.”

“It looks impressive,” he said, eyes darting all around. “But ...”

“No buts!” She cut him off and positioned herself squarely in his personal space. “Stop playing it down. You’re amazing. Why is it so difficult for you to take a compliment?”

“It’s not,” he said awkwardly.

She laughed. “You look as though you want to crawl out of your skin and slither away.”

“That’s not true.” He gave a quick, decisive shake of the head as his hands went to her hips. “I definitely don’t want to get away from you.”

“Glad to hear it.”

She slid her hands up his arms and hooked them around his neck, her fingers creeping up into the short hair at the back of his head. When she kissed him, the intensity of it was immediate. He let out a hum of a moan, then moved against her, pushing her back until she connected with the desk. The kisses were rushed and greedy, sending delicious waves of desire crashing through Allie’s whole body.

Feeling light-headed, she put a hand beside her on the desk. The rustle of paper made Hugh stop. In unison, they looked down at the now slightly crinkled corner of the paper with his sketch.

“Sorry,” Allie said without a lot of conviction.

“It’s fine,” Hugh muttered right before their lips met again. He broke the kiss almost immediately and his hand went to smooth out the crinkle in the paper.

“Not fine?” she asked, wrinkling her nose.

“It’s fine ... but it took me several hours so perhaps we could ...” He moved her gently to the side, then walked her back against the wall. “I don’t think we’ll damage anything here,” he murmured, his breath sweeping tantalisingly over her lips. He looked her right in the eyes before he covered her mouth with his. When his tongue swept into her mouth, she pressed her body against his and got lost in an overwhelming rush of lust.

The ache for him was so strong that she had to restrain herself from tugging off his clothes. They should probably move out of his office if they were going to take things further.

“You okay?” Hugh whispered, drawing back slightly.

“Yes.” Apart from the fact that she now missed the feel of his lips on hers. “I was only thinking ... I mean, I was wondering ...” It wasn’t like her to get tongue tied, but nerves had hit her and she felt utterly unsure of herself. “I wondered if you might want to show me your sex dungeon,” she blurted,

then cringed as she waited for his response.

“Aren’t you even going to let me buy you a takeaway first?” His eyes darkened and she couldn’t work out if he was teasing or serious.

“We could get food if you’re hungry,” she said, her voice coming out slightly off-pitch.

His eyes bored into hers before he kissed her so softly that it sent butterflies fluttering from her stomach to her chest. “Come on,” he said, taking her hand.

Her brain was several steps behind as she followed him across the room, but she felt a whoosh of relief when he crossed the landing and opened the door opposite.

“I’m afraid it’s not actually very dungeon-like.” He stopped in the centre of his bedroom, turning to face her and slipping his arms around her waist. “If that’s your thing.”

“Not really,” she said, relaxing into his embrace. Her nerves were mostly overtaken by anticipation as he brought a hand to her face and tilted her chin. Except, something felt off. Her eyes darted around the room, which bore no resemblance to a dungeon, but—

His lips landed on hers and the sweet taste of his mouth briefly distracted her.

“Hugh?” she said, forcing herself to break away.

“Mmm?” He kissed her jaw and pushed his fingers up into her hair.

“Where’s all your stuff?”

“What stuff?”

She pulled right away to look properly around the room. The bed was neatly made with a dark blue bedspread, and built-in wardrobes took over the far wall. Other than that, there was only a bedside table with a lamp, and a chest of drawers — the surface of which contained absolutely nothing.

“You don’t have any stuff,” she said.

“What kind of stuff?”

“Just ... things ... people usually have *things* ... pens and coins and clothes and ... You don’t have any things.”

“I don’t like clutter,” he said casually.

“Yeah, but ...” Being neat and tidy was one thing, but this was something else. “Were you in the army or something?”

“No,” he said, eyes twinkling with amusement.

“Do you have OCD?”

“No.” The light disappeared from his eyes as though someone had blown a candle out.

“Sorry.” Allie ran her hand over his shoulder. “That was really insensitive.” She glanced around the sparse room again.

“I don’t have OCD and I’m not obsessive about clutter. I just prefer not to have a lot of stuff lying around.”

Realising she’d killed the mood, she nodded and gave a small smile while moving closer to him. He’d just tilted his head and brushed his nose against hers when she spoke again.

“It must have killed you being at my place,” she said, unable to get past just how impeccable his room was. “Did it freak you out how much crap I have everywhere?”

“No!” He laughed, relaxing again. “I don’t have a problem with stuff around the place. Personally, I just always put my things away, but it’s not like it bothers me.”

“Are you sure?” She eyed the room suspiciously. He must really think she was a slob.

“I can prove it if you want,” he said, raising his eyebrows mischievously.

“How are you going to prove it? I don’t need you emptying the contents of your wardrobe just to prove a point.”

“I wasn’t thinking of my wardrobe.”

Without hesitating, he took a decisive step away from her and pulled his T-shirt over his head. He slung it on the floor with a cocky twitch of his eyebrow. Next, he took off a sock and threw it onto the chest of drawers. The other sock went in the opposite direction. Standing in his jeans, he propped his hands on his hips. “How much more proof do you need that I’m fine with having stuff around the place?”

“A little bit more,” she said cheekily.

He held her gaze as he unbuckled his belt. Slowly, he removed his jeans. Allie’s insides quivered as she watched him undress.

“I’m running out of clothes,” he said, standing before her in only a pair of tight black boxers.

“If it helps you prove your point, I suppose I could donate my T-shirt to the cause.” Taking a slow step towards him, she raised her arms and let him peel her top off.

Dropping the T-shirt to pool beside their feet, he put a hand to her cheek and tilted her face, catching her lips lightly with his own.

“I might need more of your clothes,” he murmured, his voice silky smooth.

The feel of his bare skin against hers gave Allie goosebumps and her breath caught in her throat as he kissed her below her earlobe.

“You’re welcome to them all,” she said while her heart thudded in anticipation.

CHAPTER 26



Waking in a daze, Allie's lips immediately twitched to a smile. The last thing she remembered was being curled up with Hugh, their warm bodies tangled. They'd abandoned the idea of a takeaway in favour of eating cheese on toast in bed. Then, with their heads heavy on the pillows, they'd whispered silly irrelevant conversations while the daylight in the room slowly faded. He'd been stroking her hair and she'd been aware of every place where their bodies touched.

Now, she was alone and checked her watch. Despite the feeling she'd slept the whole night, it had only been a couple of hours. The door was open and light from the landing spilled into the room. Her clothes were slung across the end of the bed, and she felt slightly relieved that Hugh hadn't neatly folded them. She was still a little stunned by how ordered he kept his things.

Lazily, she pulled on her underwear and T-shirt, then ventured into the hall and across to Hugh's office.

"I fell asleep," she said from the doorway.

Hugh's eyes shifted from his computer screen. "I noticed. You have a habit of doing that."

He held a hand out and she crossed the room to take it. As he pulled her onto his lap, she noticed his soft grey sport shorts and casual T-shirt. He looked more relaxed than she'd ever seen him. Automatically, she kissed the side of his head, then ran her fingers through the short hair at his temple, which made him squirm slightly.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing. It tickles."

She suspected he was self-conscious about his smattering of grey hairs but decided not to comment on it. “Do you ever let your hair grow longer?”

“No.” He shook his head. “It starts to curl and it drives me mad.”

“I bet it looks good.”

He pushed his hand over the slightly longer hair at the top of his head. “It constantly looks a mess if it gets longer.”

“Oh.” She smiled. “I see.”

“You see what?” he asked suspiciously.

“Nothing.”

His hand, which had been resting at her hip, crept up to dig into her ribs.

“Hey.” Laughing, she pulled his hand away. “I was only thinking about how your need to have things neat and tidy goes beyond household clutter.”

He rolled his eyes dramatically. “You can’t look at me as though I’m a weirdo because I like my hair short and have a tidy bedroom.”

“I wasn’t looking at you like you’re a weirdo.” She trailed her hand through his hair again, hating that he’d think that. “It’s interesting getting to know you better, that’s all. I’m allowed to be amused by your foibles, aren’t I?”

“Not really, no. You can keep your amusement to yourself.” With his hand on the back of her neck he drew her closer and laid a soft kiss on her lips. At the same time, his other hand caressed her bare thigh, making her stomach erupt with butterflies. “I’m kind of wishing I hadn’t got out of bed now,” he muttered against her lips.

“Why did you?” She drew back. “Surely you don’t really need to work at eleven o’clock at night?”

“I wasn’t working. Not really.”

Intrigued, she cast a quick look at the computer. A photo of a golf green accompanied the large block of text on the screen.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Research.”

“Golf research?”

He nodded slowly. “I was thinking about how much I enjoyed working on your golf design. I had this idea ...” He winced. “It’s probably kind of stupid and you might think I’m crazy.”

“Try me.”

“I thought we could redesign Thurley golf course. You have all the ideas, and I know how to draw them up into blueprints.”

Allie opened her mouth but couldn't find words.

"You have brilliant ideas for the course," Hugh went on. "We could create the designs and then you could present them to the owners of the golf club. Maybe they'd want to implement them."

Again, Allie tried to formulate a response but came up blank. All she could think was that he didn't know that she was one of the owners. The deceit made her insides twist.

"Even if the owners aren't interested," Hugh went on, "it'll be a fun project, and something for my portfolio if I ever decide to branch out in my career."

"It's a good idea," she murmured.

Hugh's shoulders sank as he sighed. "You can say if you think I'm being ridiculous."

"I don't think that," she said flatly. "I'd really like to work on the designs with you." She'd just like to do it with him knowing the truth about her. At the same time, she didn't feel ready to tell him everything.

"Really?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes. It would definitely be fun."

"I'll tell you what else would be cool. If the owners did want to use the designs, you'd be the designer. Do you know how many women design golf courses?"

"Not many," she replied thoughtfully. "I think Annika Sorenstam is one of the only women to be listed as the main designer for a golf course."

"You've been researching too," he said, amused. "How did you remember her name?"

"Annika Sorenstam?"

"Yeah."

"How do I remember Annika Sorenstam's name?"

"It's kind of a random thing to commit to memory."

Forgetting herself momentarily, Allie choked on a laugh. "Sorenstam is one of the best golf players in the world. She's pretty famous. You've never heard of her?"

"I can't say I have. I forgot you grew up around golf."

"Sorenstam's brilliant," Allie said.

"If you say so. This is why you'd be the designer. You have all the golf knowledge."

"You seriously want to design the course with me?"

“Yes. If you want to.”

“It’s a lot of work,” she pointed out.

“I know. I thought we could figure out a general overview of the course and then draw up detailed plans for a few of the holes. Enough for you to present to the owners and give them a good feel for it.” He smiled cheekily. “They’d have to give us money if they wanted more.”

“I’m sure they’d want more.” Her dad had wanted her to figure out how to make the club more profitable and she suddenly felt sure that a complete revamp was a fantastic idea. It would mean she’d probably need to take over the running of Thurley Beach. Which would mean her moving to Hope Cove. Her chest fluttered at the thought of it.

“So we’ll do it?” Hugh asked.

“Yes.” Her eyes locked with his and her mouth pulled to a slow smile. “Let’s do it.”

CHAPTER 27



A part from a quick trip home for fresh clothes, Allie spent the entire weekend at Hugh's place. More than once, she opened her mouth to tell him that she owned the golf club. Each time she stopped herself, knowing that as soon as she told him, everything would change.

Instead of them designing the course for fun, it would become a business transaction, because she was fairly sure she would use the designs, which meant Hugh's architectural skills would be something she'd pay him for. Or at least the company would.

If he knew it was a paid gig it would change the dynamic between them. Most likely, he'd stop challenging her ideas and arguing for his own – about fifty per cent of which she ended up agreeing with him on. He'd probably also take the project a little more seriously, meaning there'd be way less laughter. Considerably less kissing, too, she supposed.

It wasn't as though she thought she could keep it from him forever, but for now she wanted to enjoy things between them exactly as they were. Real life could keep out of it for a little while longer.

Unfortunately, she couldn't ignore real life altogether. Not once Monday morning arrived and work beckoned.

She'd been trying to leave Hugh's place for the last hour. At the first mention of her going, he'd distracted her with questions about the design of the eighth hole, and at the second mention he'd set about kissing her until they'd ended up back in bed.

"Are you sure you need to leave?" Hugh asked, pouting at her while she stood beside the bed, pulling her jeans on.

"Yes." She grinned at his petulance. "There's this thing called work ... I

believe it's something you need to get on with today as well."

"Such a killjoy," he said, while his lazy smile made her insides feel all warm and fuzzy.

After putting her T-shirt on and then her jumper, she worked her way around the room to collect her clutter and deposit it into her tote bag. Her hairbrush and keys from the chest of drawers, a cardigan from the end of the bed, her phone and charger from the bedside table.

"It didn't take me long to mess up your room, did it?"

"No." When he lay back, she wasn't discreet in letting her gaze linger over his naked body, only partially covered by the duvet. "And I hope you noticed it didn't bother me one bit."

"I noticed," she said, while Hugh's phone buzzed around the chest of drawers. Allie reached for it automatically. "It's Nancy," she said, handing it to him. "That's Emmy's mum, right?"

"Yeah." He frowned at the phone.

"Answer it," Allie said. "I'm going."

"I wouldn't answer it anyway." He tapped at the phone screen. "It won't be anything important – just one of her random chats about Emmy."

Allie sat on the bed and watched him type a message, telling Nancy he was busy with work and asking if the call was urgent.

"I think you've fibbed a little there," Allie remarked as he hit send.

"You don't think I'm busy with work?" He lolled his head on the pillow. "I'll have you know that trying to find the motivation to leave this bed is incredibly hard work."

"I'm not sure that's the sort of work you implied you were busy with."

"I can't help how she interprets the message, can I?" His adorable smile was utterly infectious. "Anyway, she says it's not important and she'll call again later." He showed her the phone when the response came through, and Allie felt an odd satisfaction at the way he was so open with her.

"I really have to go." She leaned down to kiss him. "I'll message you later."

"I'll probably message you first," he said cheekily.

Grinning all the way down the stairs, she was determined to prove him wrong. Her smile widened even further when she took out her phone on the front path, only to find he'd beaten her to it and had messaged to tell her he missed her.

A cold breeze whipped at her as she set off for the twenty-minute walk to

the golf club. It surprised her how quickly she'd got used to walking everywhere. Of course, back in her golfing days, her daily step counts had been incredibly high, but in the past couple of years she'd got out of the habit.

After spending the weekend in a romantic bubble, she had a vague feeling of guilt for not checking in on her dad. To rectify it, she called him, only to have her guilt intensify when he didn't answer. A gnawing worry added to her discomfort.

It was a relief when Bella answered her phone almost immediately.

"Is my dad okay?" Allie asked.

"Yes." There was a questioning ring to her voice. "Why?"

"Because I just tried calling him and he didn't answer."

"Oh, right. He's fine. I called in on him before work and he's fine."

"Okay." Allie wasn't exactly filled with confidence. "Hasn't he been coming into work?" It was rare for him to even go a day without being in the clubhouse. Even when he claimed to be having a day off, he'd struggle to not call in and mingle in the lounge for a little while.

"He has," Bella said in a rush. "Sometimes. I've been trying to get him to stay away and have a break. I told him not to come in today at all, that's why I called in on him on the way here ... to remind him to stay away ..."

"Right. Well it sounds as though you're doing a good job of getting him to take it easy." It really wasn't an easy feat with her dad. "How's everything at the club?"

"Fine."

Allie frowned. The number of "fines" she was getting from her cousin was slightly worrying. "And everything's okay with you? You don't need me to come rushing back?"

"Um ..."

The pause was worrying on several levels, not least because Allie had absolutely no desire to go back.

"I don't need you to rush back," Bella finally answered. "It'd be great to see you though. Why don't you pop back for a little visit? We could go for lunch, you could see your dad ... you could just make it a day trip if you wanted ..."

Quite a long drive for a day trip, Allie thought. "Maybe."

"Brill," Bella said, a note of relief in her voice. "How about this week? Wednesday would be good for me ... you could surprise your dad ..."

“Oh.” That had escalated quickly. “The next few days might be a little difficult. I’m working today and tomorrow and Wednesday.” And after that, she planned to spend as much time as possible with Hugh before his daughter returned.

“Thursday then?” Bella mused, a faraway quality to her words as though she were thinking out loud. “Thursday would work ...”

“Maybe.” Allie rounded the bend and spotted the entrance to the golf course at the end of the long, narrow lane. “Let me have a think about it and get back to you. I’m just about to start work, but I’ll be in touch again soon and let you know about a visit.”

“That would be great.”

The phone call left Allie slightly flat, which was an annoying comedown after her perfect weekend. Thankfully, the restaurant was quiet that afternoon and evening, meaning she had plenty of time to exchange messages with Hugh. When Kevin caught her, he only rolled his eyes. He told her in a friendly tone that he didn’t have a problem with staff messaging when things were quiet as long as they were discreet and it didn’t interfere with customer service.

At the end of her shift, she messaged Hugh while she walked back to her room.

Are you still awake? she asked.

No, he replied. *Fast asleep.*

She chuckled as she opened her door, then sent him an eye-roll emoji to let him know what she thought of his joke.

How was work? he asked. *Did it get any busier?*

Not really.

No clueless guys needing a dating guru?

Smiling, she sat on the bed. *Sadly not. Just your standard waitressing stuff.*

Boring! There was a pause and she debated whether to invite him over, but she wasn’t quick enough. *I should let you get to bed,* he wrote. *I’ll talk to you tomorrow.*

With a slightly unnerving sense of disappointment she wished him goodnight.

CHAPTER 28



Hugh couldn't remember the last time he'd had such a carefree weekend. He told himself it had been back in his university days, then decided it probably hadn't even happened back then.

Anyway, he'd definitely succeeded in his mission to have fun. The weekend with Allie had been glorious. Working on the golf course designs with her had felt exhilarating. That alone would have made for a fantastic weekend, but there'd also been the sex. A lot of sex...

On Monday, he found it difficult to concentrate on work since his mind constantly wandered to the intimate moments he'd shared with Allie. Not just the sex, but also being curled up together and chatting into the early hours of the morning. Or the way she'd casually kissed him in the middle of a discussion about the design of the course. She'd only done it as a distraction technique, but it had worked perfectly. After only a few seconds of her lips on his, he'd been ready to concede her point. Mostly because his brain had turned to mush and partly because it no longer seemed important.

It was slightly disconcerting how much space she was now occupying in his mind. The only minor break he had from thinking about her was his phone call with Emmy on Monday evening, but it didn't last long since she wasn't overly chatty.

Nervous of stifling Allie, he resisted the urge to invite himself over to her place after she finished work on Monday evening. He also refrained from messaging her on Tuesday, though it took a lot of self-restraint. Then he panicked. She might think he'd just been using her for sex and be upset by his lack of contact.

He was tempted to message Damian and Leo to get their opinion but

decided he'd rather figure this one out himself. Plus, he'd run out of steam when it came to playing it cool. He waited until he thought her shift would be ending, then drove up to the golf course. After sitting in the well-lit car park for a few minutes, he gathered his confidence and exited the car.

Chatter erupted from the main entrance as he approached and a small group walked out.

A young guy caught his eye. "Sorry, we're just closing."

Hugh spotted Allie wandering out behind the other three staff members. "I was actually just ..." He waited for Allie to notice him, but her eyes were cast down and she appeared to be miles away until Daisy gave her a gentle nudge with her elbow.

"What?" Allie said in a daze.

Daisy pointed at Hugh and Allie finally spotted him. Her lips lifted gently at the corners, but her smile didn't come close to meeting her eyes. Maybe he was coming on too strong. He should have messaged instead of just showing up.

"Hi," she said, breaking away from the group.

Her colleagues called goodnight before striding across the car park amid hushed conversations and gentle laughter.

"They're going out for a drink but didn't invite me," Allie said.

Hugh raised his eyebrows. "Because of my bad timing?"

"No." Her eyes darted to his. "I wish that was why. I overheard them talking about it, then they all stopped talking when they saw me."

"Ah." He wasn't sure what to say. The people she worked with were barely past their teenage years, so it surprised him she'd be concerned about the lack of invitation. "Did you want to go?"

"No." She blew out a breath. "It's not only that they didn't invite me. I feel as though this happens a lot ... conversations stopping when I arrive."

"I thought you liked working here?"

"I do. And they're all lovely, which makes it harder."

"They don't sound lovely, they sound cliquey."

"If we're talking about work or anything light-hearted, they're great, but it's like they don't really want to get to know me properly." She sighed heavily. "Do you think it's because I'm still new?"

"I don't know," he said vaguely. This wasn't the greeting he'd expected, and he felt a little lost in the conversation.

"I feel as though if I could get Daisy on side it'd be easier. They all seem

to follow her lead. I might be overthinking it.” She blew out a breath. “Sorry.”

Taking a step closer, she pushed up onto her toes to kiss him. That was more like the greeting he’d been hoping for. “I wasn’t expecting to see you tonight,” she said. “Did you message and I missed it?”

He shook his head and twined his fingers with hers. “Just thought I could walk you home after work.”

“Back to my place?” She indicated over her shoulder with her thumb.

“Yeah.”

“You thought I might need an escort for those thirty metres? How very chivalrous of you.”

They asked about their respective days as they ambled over there. Hugh leaned against the doorframe while she unlocked the door.

“I’m assuming you’re coming in?” she said. “Not that you really drove over here just to see me safely to my room.”

He stifled a grin. “Personally, I don’t like to assume anything.”

“I do.” With a twinkle in her eyes, she grabbed his hand and pulled him inside. “And I’m assuming you’re staying the night.”



WATCHING Hugh doze on her bed gave Allie a warm fuzzy feeling and she was loath to wake him. It would have been easier if she was going to work at her actual job rather than the undercover waitressing gig. Although she had to admit the job itself was perfectly pleasant.

Plus, after today she had a few days off. Which reminded her of the messages from Bella that she’d been ignoring. Presumably her cousin was finding the running of the club stressful, which in no way encouraged Allie to return for a visit. It was stressful, and she hadn’t realised how much so until she’d left.

All the tension had left Hugh’s features while he slept soundly with his head on her pillow. Allie nudged his arm, then put in a little more force when he didn’t stir.

He blinked his eyes open. “What time is it?”

“Half nine.”

He sat up in a rush. “Are you serious?”

“Yep.”

“I have to get to work.”

“Me too.”

He pressed a hand on the top of his head to flatten his hair. “I never sleep this late.”

“We had a pretty late night,” she reminded him, then leaned in to kiss him as the memory of it made her stomach flutter.

He moaned against her lips and pulled her with him as he lay down again.

“I really have to get to work,” she said through gentle laughter.

“Why didn’t you wake me half an hour ago?” he asked, keeping her pinned against him.

“I was still asleep half an hour ago.” She wriggled but failed to escape his clutches. “And then you looked too peaceful to wake.”

“Have you been watching me sleep?”

“Yes.” She beamed.

“That’s creepy.” He grinned back at her and kissed her so slowly and seductively that it was a wrench to pull back.

“I really have to get to work,” she told him.

“Do you, though?” he asked. “How much do you really need the job?”

Despite his jokey tone, Allie’s insides tightened. How would he react if she said she didn’t need the job at all?

“We could quit our jobs and spend all our time in bed instead,” Hugh suggested, eyes twinkling.

“It’s a nice idea,” she said. “But I’m not convinced you’ve thought that one through.” With a hand on his chest, she pushed herself up to sitting. “As much as it pains me to say it, I really need you to get up and get dressed.”

“Spoilsport,” he said, but dropped a gentle kiss at the side of her neck as he got up.

Allie waited for him to get dressed and gather his things, then they walked outside together.

“You’re off tonight, right?” Hugh asked while she locked the door behind her.

“Yes. Do you want to do something?”

“Why don’t you come over to my place after work? I’ll cook, and I can show you how I’m getting on with the design for hole three.”

“Sounds great.”

As they fell into step together, he took her hand, pressing his palm firmly

against hers as though he couldn't get enough of her. They'd only gone a few metres when Allie's phone rang.

She pulled it from her pocket, intent on sending it to voicemail until she saw it was Bella. Tempting as it was to ignore her, she couldn't bring herself to do it.

"I'll just tell her I'll call her back," she mumbled, mostly to herself. "I'm just about to start a shift," she said into the phone. "Can I call you back later?"

"Alegra." It wasn't only the use of her proper name, but also the gravity of her cousin's tone that made her heart rate soar. "I'm sorry. I need to tell you something."

With a feeling of dread, Allie stopped and released Hugh's hand. "Is my dad all right?" she said as her throat clenched around the words.

"He had a heart attack," Bella said. "He made me promise not to tell you but he's in surgery and I'm freaking out and I couldn't keep it from you any longer."

It took Allie a second to process Bella's words. "What do you mean *any longer*? When did it happen?"

"A while ago," she said wearily. "That funny turn he told you he had ..."

Nausea swept through Allie and she felt utterly disorientated. "That was just an issue with his blood pressure ..."

"It was a heart attack. He's had a bunch of tests since then and they decided it would be best for him to have this surgery. He's getting a stent placed to lower the risk of him having another heart attack."

"Oh my god." Allie pushed her palm to her forehead, only vaguely aware of Hugh hovering in front of her with a quizzical expression. "I don't understand ... why did he let me come here if he knew he was ill?"

"He wanted you there *because* he was ill ... he didn't want you to worry ..."

"Because of Mum," Allie murmured. That at least made some sense, although she assumed her dad having a heart attack would worry her even if that hadn't been how her mum had died.

"Yeah."

Allie shook her head as anger edged out her panic. "You knew all along and didn't tell me?" she snapped.

"I'm sorry," Bella said tearfully.

A few more things clicked into place. "That's why you were trying to get

me to visit?”

“I promised Uncle Richard I wouldn’t tell you anything, but I thought if I could just get you to turn up ...”

“You should have just told me,” she said angrily. “I can’t believe you didn’t.” She’d always trusted Bella completely. It stung that she’d kept this from her.

“I’m sorry,” Bella said again.

“How long has he been in surgery?”

“About half an hour. He should be out soon. They say it’s a routine procedure.”

“Are you at the hospital?”

“Yes. Will you come?”

“Of course. I’m coming now. Message me the details of the hospital. And keep me updated,” she said in a rush before ending the call.

“What’s happened?” Hugh asked.

“My dad had a heart attack,” she said, feeling a burst of adrenaline and immediately heading back to her room while trying to focus enough to figure out what she needed. Car keys and her purse. She could figure anything else out later.

“Is he okay?” Hugh asked, following her.

“Apparently it was a few weeks ago, but no one told me. He’s in surgery now. I just need to get there.”

“Of course. What do you need?” He took the key to open the door when she fumbled over the lock.

“I don’t know. My car key.” She opened the desk drawer and grabbed the fob. Then she picked up her handbag and checked inside it. Her purse was there, that was all she really needed. “I think that’s all,” she said, then rushed back out of the door, letting Hugh lock up for her. “I can’t believe he didn’t tell me he’d had a heart attack,” she muttered, striding towards the car park. “How could he not tell me that? He told me it was just a blood pressure issue and he had it under control.”

“He probably didn’t want to worry you.”

“I’m going to kill him.” She picked up her pace once she had her car in her sights.

“That’s your car?” Hugh asked, as she pressed the fob and the lights flashed with the lock mechanism.

Inwardly, she cringed but didn’t have the bandwidth to either explain or

worry about what he thought about her affording a Porsche on a waitress's salary. "Yeah," she said.

Hugh's eyebrows dipped. "Nice."

"I should tell Kevin I won't be working today," she said, pausing at the car. Another thought hit her, and she cursed loudly.

"I can tell Kevin," Hugh said, looking at her with concern.

"Thanks but I have another problem. It isn't charged." She paced beside the car. "Not enough to get me to Surrey."

Hugh only looked more confused.

"The car's electric," she explained. "I wasn't expecting to make any long journeys, so it's not fully charged." She swore again and pulled out her phone while her brain considered and rejected the idea of a two-hundred-mile taxi ride. "Where's the nearest train station?"

"Ivybridge," Hugh said. "But the trains aren't frequent or particularly reliable."

"I don't have much choice," she said, while going into her phone to figure out train times. "Why didn't I charge the stupid car?"

"Hey," Hugh said, putting a hand on her arm. "Calm down for a minute."

"I can't calm down," she growled. "My dad's currently in surgery and I don't know if he's going to be okay. If the most help you can give me is to tell me to calm down, you should just go."

She didn't take her eyes off her phone so didn't see his reaction, but snapping at him only made her feel worse than she already did. "Sorry," she said. "I just can't calm down. Don't tell me to calm down."

"I know, I'm sorry. Here," he said, but she was too focused on figuring out the train schedule to pay any attention. "Allie," he said firmly.

"What?" She glanced up for long enough to notice he was holding something out to her.

"Here," he said again and thrust a key into her hand.

She looked at him in confusion.

"Take my car."

"I need to go to Surrey."

"I know. Take my car."

Tears filled her eyes then. "I can't take your car."

"Why not?"

"For one thing, I've just bitten your head off for no reason. Also, I don't know how long I'll be gone. You'll need your car."

“I’ll manage.” He shrugged. “Just take it. It’s fine.”

She hesitated, then thought of her dad lying on an operating table. “You can use mine,” she said, giving him her car key. “Thank you so much,” she said over her shoulder, rushing to his car.

“Just drive safely, okay?”

“I will, I promise. I’ll get your car back to you without a scratch.”

He gave a gentle smile when she turned back to him. “I wasn’t worried about the car.”

A rush of emotions hit her and she moved to hug him. “Thank you,” she said again.

“I hope your dad’s okay. Call me when you know anything.”

“I will.” She gave his hand a squeeze and got into the car, adjusting the seat as she started the engine.

CHAPTER 29



After staring at the sporty-looking Porsche for a few minutes, Hugh's lips twitched upwards. Given how upset Allie had been it seemed wrong to take any pleasure from the situation but he just couldn't resist.

He took a step back, feeling slightly idiotic as he took a selfie in front of the car. Immediately, he sent the photo to Leo and Damian on their group message.

Dots ran across the screen and stopped. The pause made Hugh wonder if he'd managed to leave them speechless. Finally, a message from Leo appeared on the screen.

Mid-life crisis?

Hugh grinned, keeping his eyes on the phone.

That's not yours, is it? Damian asked.

No, he typed in reply. *Allie's. She borrowed my car and lent me hers.*

She drives a Porsche?! Leo wrote.

Apparently so. It was a little strange that he was only finding this out now, but she'd mentioned her dad owned multiple golf courses. Presumably that meant she came from a wealthy family.

Where are you? Damian asked.

Up at the golf course.

Damian sent a thumbs up symbol and instructions for Hugh to stay put.

"I'm not going anywhere in this thing," he said aloud, moving to peer in the driver's window.

"Everything all right?" a low voice called out, an unmistakable edge of warning to it.

The way Hugh startled probably didn't do anything to make him look less

suspicious. “Hi,” he said, registering the manager. He knew Kevin by sight, but that was about it.

Recognition dawned in Kevin’s eyes. “If you’re looking for Allie, you can join the club.” He propped his hands on his hips. “She’s late for work, which isn’t like her. I’m on my way up to check on her.”

Hugh grimaced. “I was supposed to come and let you know she won’t be able to work today.”

“Is she okay?”

“She got a phone call about a family emergency and had to dash back to Surrey. Her car wasn’t charged so she borrowed mine ...”

“And left you this pretty little thing?” Kevin said, moving closer to the car, casting an appreciative eye over it.

“Yeah.”

“There’s a chance we overpay the staff,” he said, then cracked into a broad smile when he caught Hugh’s eye. “Not really. And I have to say I’ve been pleasantly surprised by Allie.”

“In what way?” Hugh asked.

“I was led to believe she was some spoiled rich kid who’d never worked a day in her life, but she’s great at her job.”

Hugh made a vague noise of acknowledgement. Allie didn’t come across as shallow and entitled. He’d got the impression that she’d worked at her dad’s golf club, so presumably she hadn’t had the sort of upbringing where she’d just been given things without having to work for them.

With a tip of his chin, Kevin took a few steps backwards. “I’d better see if I can find someone to cover Allie’s shift. I’ll message her later and see how she’s getting on.”

Hugh watched him go. Something about Kevin annoyed him. He couldn’t figure out if the guy was a little smarmy or if it was Hugh being possessive of Allie and not liking the thought of other guys messaging her. He told himself it was the former since he didn’t consider himself the jealous type.

Kevin hadn’t been gone long when Leo’s car turned into the car park. Pulling into the next parking spot, both Damian and Leo hopped out, ignoring Hugh as they circled the Porsche.

“Why has Allie borrowed your car?” Damian asked, peering in the back window.

“Her dad’s in the hospital and her car wasn’t charged enough to get her all the way to Surrey.”

Leo turned slowly to Hugh, a glint in his eyes that made Hugh immediately nervous. “How much charge does it have, exactly?”

“How far will it get us?” Damian asked, rubbing his hands together gleefully.

“We’re not going anywhere in it,” Hugh said.

“Don’t be a spoilsport,” Leo complained. “How many opportunities are we going to get to drive a Porsche?”

Hugh arched an eyebrow. “Certainly none today.”

“Ah, come on,” Damian said. “Just a quick spin.” He drummed his fingers on the top of the car. “By quick, I don’t mean fast. Just, not very far. Let us have a go.”

“You can’t drive Allie’s car.” Hugh shook his head, amused that they seriously thought it was a possibility.

“Why not?” Leo asked. “You said she lent it to you. Surely she expects you to drive it, not just look at it.”

“I don’t think she expects anything. She was stressed and panicking and concerned about leaving me without a car. But I’m fine without a car for a few days.”

“Or you could drive a Porsche for a few days,” Leo pointed out.

Glancing at the car, Hugh felt his friends’ enthusiasm rubbing off on him. It would be fun to take it for a drive. And Allie had said he could use it.

“Come on,” Damian coaxed, apparently sensing him considering it.

“I’m just going to drive it to the charging station,” Hugh said, pressing the fob to unlock the car. Leo and Damian groaned as they got into the car. Slipping into the driver’s seat, Hugh spent a moment adjusting the seat, then pulled the seatbelt around him. He glanced at Leo in the rearview mirror. “I suppose we could take the long way to the charging station ... Like go via Salcombe or something.”

“Yes!” Leo gave his shoulder a squeeze while Damian slapped his arm affectionately. Their excitement was palpable as they peered at the control panels across the dashboard, trying to decide what everything did. The three of them fell silent as Hugh finally manoeuvred out of the parking spot and then out of the car park.

“I take it things went well with your date on Friday?” Leo finally said as they crawled down the driveway.

Hugh had messaged them on Saturday, but he’d been coy in response to their questions. Now, he gave them a proper account of his weekend with

Allie, grinning as he recalled it. They fired questions at him while he got used to the car. Being so low to the ground was disconcerting, but he had to admit it felt great to drive a Porsche.

Nearing Salcombe, he switched the conversation from himself to ask how Damian and Leo were doing.

"I've been thinking about asking Caitlin to officially move in," Leo said. "She's at my place most of the time anyway, so it seems a bit daft that she still pays for her own place."

"Makes sense," Damian said.

"Yeah. Except she still stays at her place a couple of times a week and I get the feeling she likes having that option. Especially if Alice hasn't been sleeping well. I'm always kind of envious of her actually."

"Just ask her," Damian said.

Leo rolled his eyes. "*Just ask her?* As though it's that simple. Have you decided if you're going to ask Amy to marry you?"

"No."

Craning his neck to look into the back seat, Leo shot Damian a smug look. "Just ask her!"

"It's not that simple. I'm talking about marriage. It's a big deal."

"So is asking Caitlin to move in with me. If she doesn't want to, things could get awkward."

"Maybe she wants to and is just waiting for you to ask," Hugh suggested.

Leo rubbed at his chin. "I feel as though there's only one way for me to figure it out and that's by you letting me drive this car."

"How's that going to help?" Hugh asked, amused.

"I don't know, but I think it will."

Hugh pursed his lips, then pulled the car over and opened the door.

"Are you serious?" Leo said. "You're letting me drive?"

"Yes. It's awesome. But be careful, okay?"

As Leo and Damian each took a turn driving on the way back to the club, the three of them chatted and teased each other in their usual way.

Once or twice, Hugh caught himself laughing and felt slightly uneasy at the situation, as though he was having a good time at Allie's expense. He reminded himself that he'd done a good thing in lending her his car.

Also, any bad feeling he had was quickly overshadowed by Leo and Damian's joy at getting to drive a Porsche.

CHAPTER 30



An hour into the drive to Surrey, a message came through from Bella to let Allie know her dad was out of surgery. She felt she could breathe again, knowing the operation had gone smoothly and he was okay. Arriving at the hospital, she spotted Bella by the main entrance with her phone at her ear. As Allie approached she ended the call.

“He’s fine,” she said, looking close to tears. “He’s awake and talking.”

“Thank goodness for that.” Allie drew Bella into a tight embrace.

“I was just checking in with Fox Hill. Everything’s fine at the club too.” Bella drew back, her brow wrinkled. “I’m so sorry for not telling you what was going on. I don’t know how he convinced me it was a good idea to persuade you to go away for a while. It honestly seemed like the right thing at the time, but as soon as you left, I felt terrible. I convinced myself you’d get fed up after a week and come back. When I realised you weren’t in any rush, I tried to persuade you to visit at least.” She shook her head. “I should have told you the truth, but Uncle Richard ...”

“He’s manipulative,” Allie finished for her.

“I was going to put it much more kindly than that. The poor man’s in a hospital bed, after all. And we both know he means well.”

“He always thinks he knows best.” Allie linked her arm with her cousin’s and set off inside. “Did you tell him I was on my way?”

“Yes. So he’ll probably pretend to be asleep.”

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” Allie said while they waited for the lift. “I’m sorry you’ve had to deal with him on top of the stress of the club.”

“I’ve really been enjoying running the club. It’s Uncle Richard who caused me stress.” The lift pinged and they stepped inside. “You made good

time, by the way. I didn't expect you to get here so soon."

"I panicked and needed to get here as quickly as possible. I thought it might take me a lot longer since my car wasn't charged, but Hugh lent me his." She slumped against the side of the lift. "He just handed over his car key as though it was nothing."

"He must really like you."

Allie felt a warm glow in her belly as she thought about him. "Things progressed pretty quickly."

"How do you mean?"

"I've been spending all of my spare time with him," she said with a coy shrug. "I was at his place for the entire weekend. Yesterday he showed up at the clubhouse after my shift and stayed at my place. He was with me when you called. And lent me his car."

Bella blinked rapidly. "So this is serious between you?"

"I'm not sure what it is." The lift doors opened and they stepped into the brightly lit corridor. "I really like him."

"Have you told him who you really are? That you own the club?"

"Not yet, but I'm going to tell him as soon as I get back." She'd realised the moment he'd handed over his car key without hesitation that she wanted to tell him everything. Things would change, she was sure of that. That was fine, though. Once Emmy was back, they'd lose that carefree element to their relationship anyway. Not that she cared – she didn't want their relationship to only be about having fun.

"This way," Bella said, pointing at a door on the left before slowly opening it.

Seeing her dad lying in a hospital gown made Allie's insides twist. It was a stark contrast to his usual well-put-together appearance. In her head he was so strong, but now he looked anything but. For a moment, she could understand why he didn't want her to see him going through this. She even felt a pinch of gratitude to him for sparing her the worry.

"You can't avoid the lecture forever," she said, quietly enough that she wouldn't wake him if he truly was sleeping.

He let out a sigh as he opened his eyes. "I don't know why I thought Bella could keep a secret."

With a small shake of the head, Allie bent down to hug him. "You scared the life out of me."

"I'm fine," he said.

“You should have told me what was going on.”

“Why? So you could worry?” His mouth was set in a hard line. “You worry enough as it is. Besides, having Bella fussing over me was quite enough. The two of you would’ve been unbearable.” His eyes flicked from Allie to Bella, but neither of them responded to his jokey tone.

“I’ll see if I can find coffee,” Bella said before slipping from the room.

Allie let the silence linger for a moment. “You owe Bella an apology,” she finally said. “You put her in a horrible position.”

“I know,” he said, then blew out a breath. “I already apologised. She was really upset earlier, panicking that you were angry with her.”

“I snapped at her on the phone.” Allie perched on the side of the bed and gave her dad’s hand a squeeze. “You could have just told me the truth from the start.”

He nodded slowly, but she knew he was unrepentant on that score.

“Are you all fixed now?” she asked with a nod toward his chest.

“Yes. The stent widens the artery to lower the risk of another heart attack. I’d say I’m fit as a fiddle now.”

“And I’d say you need to take it easy for a while. Presumably there’ll be some lifestyle changes? How many times have I told you to eat more salad and fewer chips?”

He rolled his eyes. “Why don’t you pull up a chair and fill me in on life in Hope Cove?”

“I’ll allow the change of subject,” she told him, pulling up a chair beside the bed. “But we’re coming back to it later.”

“I knew you’d like Hope Cove if you’d just spend some time there.”

“I do like it,” she said, sinking back into the chair as best she could given how uncomfortable it was.

“What are your thoughts on the club?”

“It’s not as elegant or imposing as Fox Hill,” she said, stating the obvious. “But the sea views are gorgeous and the clubhouse has its own unique charm.” She launched into her opinions of the staff and the way the place is run, only pausing briefly when Bella returned and handed her a coffee.

“What’s the manager like?” Bella asked between sips of her coffee.

“He’s fine,” Allie said.

Bella lifted a perfectly rounded eyebrow. “Not exactly a glowing report.”

“He’s a nice guy,” she went on, twisting her lips as she attempted to

gather her thoughts on Kevin. "I guess he's lacking some charisma ... and backbone," she said, realising that was what really annoyed her about him. "It's as though he needs everyone to like him. Which isn't a great quality in a manager, is it? For example, the cleaners complained about dog hairs, so instead of telling them to deal with it, he stopped letting dogs in the clubhouse. That's a bit pathetic."

Bella smiled lightly. "I wouldn't want to get on the bad side of the cleaners, and I'm not saying they don't deserve respect, but they're also employed to do a job. It seems odd that they'd make such a fuss about a few dog hairs."

"Exactly," Allie said. "I get the impression he can't stand confrontation, so he just agreed to whatever they wanted. He seems to have a similar relationship with the kitchen staff. They tell him what's happening rather than the other way around."

"Don't be too hard on him," her dad said. "He might not be perfect, but he's done a decent job keeping things ticking along without much support."

"The rest of the staff are great," she said, her mind drifting to Daisy who she had a lot of respect for, even though she was slow to warm to Allie. "They're dedicated and hard workers. I should probably check how much we're paying them. I suspect some of them have earned a pay rise."

"Steady on." Her dad chuckled. "I thought you intended to maximise profits. I'm not sure giving all the staff a pay rise is going to achieve that. Also, has the sea air made you soft? Staff pay rises without them having to grovel for it?"

Allie reined in a grin, thinking that he was right; she'd softened in the last few weeks. While she'd like to think she'd always been a fair boss at Fox Hill, she hadn't always been overly warm. The line between boss and staff had been a clear one.

"Anyway," she said. "I think there can be a few improvements to Thurley Beach." Her mind went to Hugh's designs for the new course and she pondered whether to mention it. Could they really become a reality? Did she definitely want to take it on? Either way, now wasn't the time to bring it up. Her dad needed rest, not work distractions. "We can talk about my ideas properly when you're feeling better."

Her dad's brow creased as he cast a bemused look at her. Bella wore a similar expression.

"Why are you both looking at me like that?" Allie asked.

“The club doesn’t need improvements,” her dad said slowly.

“There are definitely a few areas that we could work on ...” She looked to Bella, wondering what she was missing.

“It was all a ruse to get you away for a little while,” Bella said. “I told you that earlier ...”

“Yeah, but ...” But she’d thought there’d at least been a modicum of truth to it. “You really only sent me there to get rid of me while you dealt with your health issues?” She looked to her dad for confirmation. “You weren’t concerned about profits at all?”

“Sorry,” he said. “I also thought it would be good for you to have a break, and you know I’ve wanted you to go back to Hope Cove for a long time.”

Allie wasn’t even angry at the deceit; she was just struggling to get it straight in her head. “Why did you insist on me working as a waitress? It would have been far easier if you’d just sent me over there to check up on the place without lying to everyone.”

“You always take on so much responsibility,” he said, looking suddenly weary. “I thought it would do you good to get a break from that. You wouldn’t have got a holiday if you’d walked in there as the boss.”

Tears stung the back of Allie’s eyes and she pressed her teeth into her bottom lip when her chin wobbled.

“Sorry,” her dad said, reaching for her hand.

“It’s fine.” She pulled away from him, caught a tear from the corner of her eye, and took a steadying breath.

“Alegra,” he said, reaching for her again.

The use of her proper name made her insides twist. “I guess we should let you rest,” she said with a fake smile. “How long do you need to stay in hospital?”

“Just tonight. They’ll discharge me first thing in the morning.”

“Good.” She kissed his cheek. “Do you need anything?” Desperately, she wanted him to say no, since all she wanted was to get out of the stuffy room. She needed fresh air and a few minutes alone, and she needed it immediately.

“I’m fine.” Her dad searched her face, but she refused to meet his gaze.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” she said, then offered Bella an apologetic smile and left.

It felt as though the walls were closing in on her as she dashed along the corridor, and she had to close her eyes in the lift to subdue the claustrophobic feelings. Only when she was out in the cool air did she feel as though she

could breathe more easily. The tears that had threatened spilled down her cheeks now, and she let them fall as she stood with her hands on her hips, drawing in deep breaths.

Finally, she headed for the nearest bench. Her breathing evened out as she stared across the bleak car park. It wasn't long before Bella took a seat beside her.

"Alegra," she said, resting a hand between Allie's shoulder blades.

"That's so weird," Allie murmured.

"What is?"

"People calling me Alegra. I've got used to Allie."

"Really?"

"Yes. I kind of like it."

Bella's eyebrows rose but she didn't comment, just gave Allie a sympathetic smile. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Sorry for dashing out of there. I just needed a minute to myself."

"You know your dad meant well," Bella said. "Which isn't to say you shouldn't be angry with him. But his heart really was in the right place."

"I know." Allie wiped more tears from her face. "I'm not angry with him." She puffed out a laugh. "Well, I am, but it's not him tricking me into going to Hope Cove that upset me."

"What then?"

Allie took a moment to compose herself enough to say what was bothering her. "I'm upset because he was right," she said eventually. "Which is partly annoying just because I hate it when he's right." She tipped her head back and stared at the dark clouds overhead. "But also because I really did enjoy the lack of responsibility."

"What's so bad about that?" Bella asked. "Surely you taking a break and enjoying yourself is a good thing?"

Allie wasn't sure that was true. "It was great while it lasted. But what do I do now?"

"What do you want to do?"

The images that flicked through her mind were mostly of her time with Hugh over the last few weeks, but not only that. There were also her early morning walks along the coast, and the moments of utter peace when she sat in a deserted cove watching the ebb and flow of the sea. Even the waitressing had been pleasant. She'd enjoyed the time with customers and getting to know the staff, even if some of them were a little hard to crack.

“I don’t want to come back to Surrey.” She felt a cool flutter of dread at the thought of it. “After my injury, I threw myself into running Fox Hill because I didn’t know what else to do. It felt like my only option.”

“It’s definitely not your only option,” Bella said.

“I should come back, though.” Her insides twisted and she pushed down a barrage of tears that threatened behind her eyes. “Dad needs me, and you need help with the club.”

“I’m fine with the club. Your dad will be back to help me in a few days.” She raised an eyebrow. “Whether I like it or not.”

“Doesn’t he need to take more time off?”

“Taking time off and resting is probably more stressful for him than working.” She took Allie’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “His initial heart attack was scary, but with the surgery he really should be good again now.”

Allie put an arm around her cousin’s shoulders and pulled her in for a side hug. “Thank you for looking after him. And I’m sorry for snapping at you on the phone earlier.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m just relieved you don’t hate me.”

“Not possible.” Allie dipped her head to rest her forehead against Bella’s.

“I should go and check on the club,” Bella said eventually.

Allie felt a heaviness descend on her chest. “Do you want me to come with you?”

“Do you want to?” Bella asked as she stood.

“No.” Allie’s hand went to massage her shoulder. As irrational as it was, she was convinced her pain would return if she set foot back in Fox Hill. “I’m kind of exhausted.”

“Don’t come if you don’t want to. Go home and rest.”

“Thanks.” She remained on the bench as Bella walked away. Even going back to her house felt unappealing.

The only thing that finally got her moving was the thought that she could call Hugh once she got there.

The sound of his voice was bound to soothe her.

CHAPTER 31



When Allie had bought her semi-detached house in Surrey, she'd been absolutely head over heels with the place. It was her sanctuary to return to after being away at a tournament or after a long day at work. She'd thought it cosy and welcoming.

This time, returning to the house didn't feel the same. She didn't get the rush of relief that she'd had before, nor the feeling of contentment. After setting her keys on the granite counter, she turned in a circle, wondering why the homely kitchen no longer inspired the sense of comfort that it had before.

The only thing that made her smile about the room was Hugh's car key lying beside her house keys. Absently, she ran a finger over it, then delved in her bag in search of her phone. A message had come through from Hugh a couple of hours ago, asking how everything was and letting her know he was thinking of her.

In the front room, she kicked her shoes off and deposited herself onto the cream armchair as she pressed dial on his number.

"Hey," he said, answering quickly. "How are you?"

"I'm good, thank you." She sank further into the deep cushions. "Dad's doing well."

"Glad to hear it. What happened exactly?"

"Apparently he had a heart attack a month ago, and to save me some worrying he decided to not tell me and instead suggested I spend some time in Devon. He claims it was for my benefit, but I guess he also didn't want me fussing over him."

"I thought it was you who wanted a change of scenery," Hugh said, questioningly.

“Yeah.” She sighed, thinking she needed to unravel all the untruths she’d told, but not sure where to start. “Mostly it was my dad’s suggestion for me to go to Devon. He thought a change of scenery would be good for me. Turns out he was probably right, but I won’t tell him that. He’s unbearably smug sometimes.”

“How long do you think you’ll stay in Surrey?” Hugh asked.

“Oh! You need your car back. Thank you so much for lending it to me, and I really am sorry for snapping at you this morning.”

“You were stressed. It was understandable. And there’s no rush for the car. I’ll only really need to drive to pick Emmy up from the airport on Sunday, but I can borrow Damian’s car if you’re not back.”

“You’re also welcome to use mine, but I’ll bring your car back before then anyway.” She had to think hard to remember what day it was. Wednesday. “Dad will be out of the hospital tomorrow. I’d just like to hang around for a day or two to check he’s settled. Then I’ll return your car.”

“There’s really no rush.”

Maybe there wasn’t any rush regarding his car, but she felt a tug to get back to Devon. It wasn’t only the beautiful beaches and breath-taking views that had her itching to get back. She couldn’t quite fathom how she’d got so attached to Hugh in such a short space of time, but she already missed him and it hadn’t even been twelve hours since she’d seen him.

Hugh cleared his throat. “You have a really nice car, by the way.”

“Thanks.” She felt exhausted at the mere thought of explaining everything. “I love it. It’s just slightly unpractical on the days when you need to drive a couple of hundred miles without warning.”

“Yeah.” She waited for more questions about the car, but it was Hugh who changed the subject. “I’m glad your dad’s okay anyway. It must have been a stressful day.”

“Yes. Parents can be a nightmare,” she said lightly. “You said you’re not close to yours?”

“Not really, no.”

“How often do you see them?” she ventured when he failed to expand on the subject.

“I see my dad now and again, my mum less so.”

“Are they separated?”

“Yeah.”

She got the distinct impression he’d like to change the subject, but

curiosity drove her on. “Did they split up when you were a kid?”

He hesitated. “No, like ten years ago or something.”

“I would have put money on you being a total mummy’s boy,” she said to lighten the atmosphere.

“Why?” he asked quietly.

“Why?” She laughed. “Because you’re so sweet and sensible. Totally the type of guy who’d dote on their ridiculously proud mum.”

“Wrong on all fronts,” he said flatly.

Allie screwed her face up, wanting to know more but increasingly feeling as though she’d strayed into a minefield. “You don’t get on with her at all?” she asked cautiously.

“No.”

“Does Emmy see much of her?” Surely she’d at least want to be in contact with her grandchild, even if she and Hugh weren’t on good terms.

“Nope,” Hugh said curtly.

“Sorry.” Allie sat up straighter. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

“It’s fine,” he said, his tone contradicting his words. “Listen, I have some work to get on with and I haven’t eaten dinner yet ...”

“Right.” Her heart was pounding and her mouth went dry. “Sorry,” she said again. “Have I upset you?”

“No. It’s fine. I just have a few things to do.”

“Okay.” Except it didn’t feel okay. “I feel as though I said the wrong thing.”

“You didn’t. Can I call you tomorrow?”

“Of course,” she whispered before the line went dead. He hadn’t even said goodbye.

With a hand pushed to her forehead, Allie felt utterly stupid. Clearly, he hadn’t wanted to talk about his parents, but she’d pushed him as though she was entitled to all the details of his life.

The worst of it was how hurt she felt that he hadn’t wanted to share it with her.

The irony of it wasn’t lost on her, given how much she’d been keeping from him.



FEELING the need to get out of the house, Hugh asked Leo and Damian out for a drink in the pub on Thursday evening. He was hoping they could help him out with his dilemma. Not that he really needed help. He knew what he should do – call Allie and apologise for being so abrupt with her on the phone the previous evening.

Easy enough in theory, but he suspected she'd start asking questions again, and he still hadn't figured out how to hold a conversation about his mum while remaining calm and rational. Generally he just avoided the subject.

Pulling his phone from his pocket as he walked to the pub, he was all set to call her before chickening out again. What did it matter if he didn't call her today, anyway? It wasn't as though they were in some serious relationship where they couldn't go for a day without speaking to each other. He let out a long sigh, irritated with himself.

To distract himself, he tried calling Nancy instead but only got her voicemail. He knew she was keen to speak to him, but they'd kept missing each other all week, or catching each other at a bad time.

At the Anchor Inn, he went straight to the bar for a pint before joining Leo and Damian at the table towards the back. They were deep in conversation about jet skis.

“Are you finally going to buy one?” Hugh asked Damian when he could get a word in. It was something Damian had been thinking about to expand the business, but after years of contemplating it, Hugh had concluded it would probably never happen.

“Amy thinks I should get one. *Two* actually. Reckons renting them out would be a great move for the business.”

“It would,” Hugh agreed.

“We've been telling you to go for it for years,” Leo added. “You'll make the money back in no time.”

“They're not exactly cheap,” Damian said. “Not just the initial cost, but the insurance.”

Leo shrugged. “Even so.”

“Amy's reaction surprised me.” Damian propped his chin on his hand. “I was expecting her to tell me it's a crazy idea, but she was really encouraging. She also pointed out that it would be less risky for me now that we're a two-income household.”

“Do you think you'll go for it?” Hugh asked.

“I might have to.” His features relaxed. “For one thing, Amy mentioned it to the boys. I don’t think Billy is ever going to shut up about it.”

“I assume that was a strategic move on Amy’s part,” Hugh said.

“Yeah. She’s also pretty excited by the idea of us racing jet skis along the coast.”

“That’s why she’s gunning for two.” Leo gave an appreciative curl of his lip. “It does sound like a laugh. I’d be up for races.”

“We’ll see.” Damian took a swig of his pint, looking thoughtful.

“Where’s Alice?” Hugh asked Leo.

“At home with Caitlin.”

“Any developments there?”

“No. I really think she likes having her own place and I don’t want her to feel pressured to give it up.” Leo indicated Hugh’s pint. “I take it you didn’t come in the Porsche?”

“No.” He rolled his eyes. “It’s still up at the club.”

“When’s Allie getting back?” Damian asked.

“She thinks probably at the weekend. She’s not sure.”

“And Emmy’s back on Sunday, right?” Leo asked. “I suppose that’s going to burst your romantic bubble somewhat.”

“I already managed to do that myself,” he replied.

“How come?” Damian asked.

“Allie called me last night and the conversation ended up a little awkward.” He twisted his lips. “We were talking about her dad, and then she asked about my parents ...”

“Did you bite her head off?” Damian asked, wincing slightly as he shrunk back into his seat.

“No.” He tried to recall exactly how bad the conversation had been. “I was fairly monosyllabic and then I ended the call abruptly.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Leo ventured. “Have you spoken to her today?”

“No.” He sighed. “I don’t know what to say.”

Damian leaned back and interlocked his fingers at his chest. “How about you tell her the truth? That your mum is a narcissistic maniac who you have nothing to do with and who you’d rather not talk about.” From the way Damian’s body jerked and the look he shot at Leo, Hugh deduced he’d just got kicked under the table. “It’s true,” he insisted with that look he always got on the rare occasion that Hugh’s mum came into the conversation.

There was something mildly comforting about the way Damian hated Hugh's mum so much. Especially when contrasted with Leo's more measured, diplomatic responses. No doubt he didn't think any more highly of her but was sensitive to the fact that she was Hugh's mum, no matter what they all thought of her.

"I should have just calmly changed the subject," Hugh said. "But Allie kept asking questions and I got stressed."

"Just explain that it's hard for you to talk about and apologise for being grumpy."

Hugh shot Leo a hard stare. "I never said I'd been grumpy."

"Yeah. No. Well just apologise for whatever..." He trailed off, shifting in his seat.

Hugh stared at his pint for a moment, then decided he was an idiot and stood up again. "You're right, I need to apologise."

"Now?" Damian asked. "You only just got here."

"I'll be back," he said, knowing he wouldn't be able to focus on anything until he'd spoken to Allie. He pressed dial on her number as he headed for the door and she answered at the exact moment he stepped outside.

"Hi," she said, sounding decidedly less bubbly than usual.

"How's your dad?" he asked, panicking that things might have taken a downhill turn.

"He's back home and driving me crazy."

"That's good, I guess. Good that he's home, anyway."

"Yeah. How's everything with you?"

"Fine." The patio was deserted and he sank onto the nearest bench. "I should have called you earlier. I wanted to apologise for yesterday."

Her silence wasn't exactly reassuring.

"I just don't get on well with my mum," he went on. "And I don't like talking about her."

"Okay," Allie said slowly. "I had the feeling I annoyed you. I didn't mean to."

"You didn't. It wasn't you. I don't like talking about her with anyone. She's not in my life any more so there really isn't any reason to talk about her. I shouldn't have been so grumpy with you though. Especially when you're having such a stressful time."

"It's fine," she said, not sounding overly convincing.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "I wish I could give you a big hug."

“Me too.” She sounded instantly brighter. “That sounds like exactly what I need.”

“Are you still thinking you’ll be back at the weekend?” Selfishly, he hoped it wouldn’t be longer. He was already missing her.

“Yes. I want to stay and take care of my dad for a couple of days, but I don’t think I need to be here for longer than that.”

“Good.”

Considering he hadn’t known her long, it was a little disconcerting how much he missed her. He was already wishing the time away until he’d see her again.

CHAPTER 32



When Hugh's phone rang on Friday afternoon, vibrating on his desk in front of him, he was glad of the distraction. He'd been staring blankly at the computer screen for a good half hour, unable to concentrate due to thoughts of Allie and of the golf project, which he seemed to be constantly drawn to in favour of his paid projects.

Automatically, he smiled when he saw it was Emmy calling.

"Hello," he said with the phone to his ear. "How is everything?" He waited a beat but there was no response. "Emmy?" he said, then looked at his phone, checking they were connected before returning his phone to his ear. "I can't hear you. I'm not sure if you meant to call but I'll hang up and try calling you back." He'd just started to move the phone when a noise stopped him. A sniff, as though she was crying.

"Daddy," she said, her voice breaking on the word which she'd stopped using when she was around four.

"Em?" Fear gripped his insides and made his heart beat faster. "Sweetheart? What's wrong?"

"I don't know," she said, her voice garbled as she cried.

"Are you hurt?"

"No," she managed.

"Is Mum okay? And Louise?"

"Yes." She took a shuddering breath. "I want to come home."

"What's happened?" he said, his tone soothing despite the panic that made his chest tight.

"I just want to come home. I miss you and I want to come home." Again, she paused for breath. "Can you come and get me?"

“Sweetheart, I don’t understand what’s going on. Why are you crying? Where are you?”

“At Mum’s house.”

“Where’s Mum?”

“Downstairs with Louise. Can I come home?” Her voice didn’t even sound like her. “Please.”

“You’re coming home on Sunday. The flight’s all booked ...”

“I know, but I want to come now. Right now.”

He switched his phone to speaker so he had his hands free for the computer keyboard. “I’ll have a look at flights, but you need to tell me why you’re upset. Did something happen?”

“I just want to come home,” she said desperately.

He focused on the screen. “I’m looking to see when I can get a flight.” Emmy stayed quiet while he navigated the website. “I can get a flight this evening,” he said, then checked his watch. “I’ll need to leave for the airport now but I could be with you in a few hours.” He had no idea if they could get a flight back that evening or if they’d have to wait until tomorrow, but he’d worry about that later. “Em?” he said when she didn’t respond.

“Yeah,” she said, sounding slightly calmer.

“Did you hear me? I can be there in a few hours. Are you okay?”

“Yes. Sorry.” Her voice went all brittle again and it felt as though someone was stabbing Hugh in the heart.

“What are you sorry for?”

“Calling you.”

He moved across the room to the filing cabinet to look for his passport. “Don’t be silly. Of course you should call me if you’re upset. Can you tell me what’s going on? You’re worrying me.”

“Sorry,” she said again, quietly.

Hugh paused in front of the filing cabinet. “Tell me what’s going on, Em. I don’t know what to do if I don’t know what the problem is.”

“I just wanted to come home, but I’m being silly.”

“You’re not being silly.” He knew his daughter and she didn’t get upset unless something was really bothering her. She was level-headed and easy-going. She never made a fuss without reason. “If you want to come home, you can.”

“Mum wouldn’t like it.”

“It doesn’t matter what Mum wants. If you don’t want to stay there you

don't have to."

"She's my mum. She'll be upset if I leave early."

"Did you two have an argument or something?"

"No. It's fine. I shouldn't have called you. I just wanted to talk to you and then ... I don't know, I just miss you, but I'll be coming home soon anyway."

"I miss you too," he said, through the lump in his throat.

A flash of guilt hit him over all the time he'd been spending with Allie. Usually, the time when Emmy was away seemed to crawl by, but this time it had flown and it made him feel disloyal. Especially now he knew that Emmy had been upset while he'd been having a whale of a time with Allie.

"I should go," Emmy whispered. "I love you."

"I love you too." It killed him not to be there when she was upset. All he wanted to do was hug her tightly and make everything okay. "Call me if you need me. Or if you change your mind about me coming to get you. Maybe I should just come anyway. Shall I?"

"No." There was a hint of tearful laughter and he could imagine her rolling her eyes. "I told you I'm okay. Just homesick."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah." He waited for her to say goodbye and hang up. "Dad?" she said after a moment.

"Yeah?"

"You're the best dad in the world, you know."

The lump in his throat swelled further. "I have to be, because I have the best kid in the world."

"That's true," she said, sounding a little more like herself. "Bye, Dad."

"Love you," he said again before the line went dead.

He took a few deep breaths before calling Nancy. She answered almost immediately and didn't bother with a greeting.

"I've been trying to get in touch with you," she said impatiently. "Why don't you answer your phone?"

"I was busy. And I've tried calling you back a few times."

"Emmy was always around. I wanted to speak to you before I spoke to her, but you didn't answer ... it's fine anyway. I talked to her and it's fine." There was a vacant quality to her voice, as though she was talking to herself rather than Hugh.

"What's fine?" he asked, a jolt of anger hitting him as he waited to hear what had upset Emmy.

“We’re having a baby,” she said. “Louise is pregnant.”

He huffed out a surprised breath. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks. Louise is carrying it. She’s three months along. Biologically, it’s my baby.”

After a quick shake of his head, Hugh massaged his temple. “You’ve lost me.”

“My egg and donor sperm, implanted into Louise.”

“Oh, right.”

“Louise tried sperm insemination but it didn’t work. It turned out she couldn’t have a baby, but she wanted to be the one to carry it so ... well, anyway, she’s pregnant. I was worried about Em’s reaction so I wanted to talk to you about how I break the news. But you didn’t answer so I just told her yesterday evening. I was probably making a big deal of it in my head because she was fine with it.”

“Was she?” he said, an undertone of aggression in his voice.

“I think she was surprised. She didn’t really say much, but I think once it sinks in she’ll be excited about having a sibling.”

“She’s not okay with it.” Hugh peered out of the window at the quiet street below. “She just called me in floods of tears, asking me to pick her up. She didn’t mention the baby, but that seems like a clue. If she was fine with it, she’d have told me.”

Nancy muttered a string of swear words, then Louise’s voice came in the background, asking what was wrong. Hugh rubbed the bridge of his nose while Nancy filled her in. Immediately, Louise went to check on Em, which Hugh appreciated, but he was also irked that it wasn’t Nancy who’d drop everything to check on their daughter.

“She’ll probably just need time to get used to it,” Nancy said defensively. “I reassured her I’ll still have time for her. I even told her she can visit more often.”

“She can’t though, can she?” Hugh snapped. “She has school.”

“Yes, but she can spend more of the holidays here. And in the summer, before the baby arrives, I can plan a trip somewhere just for Emmy and me. I thought she’d like that.”

Hugh scratched at the back of his head. “I’m not sure the amount of time she spends with you is the issue. Did it ever occur to you that she might be upset that you didn’t want to be a mother to her, but now you want to be a mother to another baby?”

He knew as soon as the words left his mouth that they were overly harsh and that the situation wasn't as clear cut as that. Surely that was why Emmy was upset though. And he was far more concerned with Emmy's feelings than Nancy's.

"That's not fair," Nancy said with bite. "I *have* been a mother to Emmy. I love her and she knows that, but I wasn't ready to be a mother back then. It wasn't the life I wanted. I'm a different person now and the situation is different."

"Because you're not with *me*," he said bitterly, surprised by the old hurt which returned.

"Hugh," she said, sounding as though she was holding back tears. "It wasn't you that was the problem. I loved you. You were an amazing husband."

"Just not amazing enough for you to hang around."

"I'm sorry," she said sadly. "I really am. I feel guilty every day, but if I'd have stayed I'd have made you and Emmy miserable."

Hugh shook his head, refusing to be dragged back into the pain of old wounds. That was in the past. They'd all moved on.

"Shall I come over there?" he asked. "Emmy calmed down after I spoke to her, but maybe I should come over anyway. I don't like thinking of her upset."

"It's not as though she's alone," Nancy said archly. "I'm her mother. I'll look after her. And Louise loves her like her own child. Let us discuss the situation with her some more. We'll reassure her that we want her to be included in our family."

"I'll give you half an hour," he said gruffly. "Then I'm calling Emmy again and if she's still upset, I'll hop on a plane."

"You're infuriating, you realise that?"

"She's my daughter. If she's upset, I'm coming over there. That's all there is to it."

"That's why you're so infuriating," Nancy said, the lightness of her tone contrasting against his gruffness. "You're annoying me, but you're a really great dad, so it's hard to stay annoyed with you."

The warmth to her words made his features relax. "Just make sure she's all right, will you?"

CHAPTER 33



Driving into Hope Cove on Sunday lunchtime was an entirely different experience to when Allie had arrived a few weeks before. Back then, it had been with a feeling of resentment mixed with a load of anxiety and a desire to leave again as soon as possible. Now, she was brimming with excitement and the only negative feelings were some niggling guilt at having left her dad.

He really seemed to be fine though, and Allie wasn't sure another day in each other's company would do either of them any good. As usual, he wasn't particularly cheerful about her attempts to look after him, and she didn't especially enjoy the way he fought her on every single issue.

Briefly, she'd discussed her thoughts about Thurley Beach with him, but in the end only made very hypothetical suggestions about how the overall course design might be improved. Until she really made the decision to go ahead with it, she wasn't sure it was worth getting into. Especially since her dad was supposed to be taking things easy.

Pulling up outside of Hugh's house she felt almost giddy. Her insides fluttered excitedly as she walked along the front path and even more so when she rang the doorbell. A flash of nerves hit her as the door began to open but faded when Hugh's face broke into a smile.

"You're here," he said, taking a step back and beckoning her inside. "I thought you wouldn't be back until later. I told you there was no rush for the car."

"I know, but I wanted to get it back before you picked up Emmy. Also because ..."

Her hands felt suddenly clammy and she turned her attention to closing the door behind her.

“What?” Hugh asked.

Discreetly, she wiped her palms on her jeans. “I missed you,” she said, the quiver in her voice making her nerves obvious.

“I missed you too.” He took her hand and pulled her close, his other hand coming to her cheek as he kissed her.

Her body melted against his as her senses were overwhelmed by the taste and smell and feel of him.

“When do you need to leave for the airport?” she asked, barely breaking the kiss.

“Not for a little while.” After another lingering kiss he led her to the living room. “How’s your dad?” he asked, draping an arm around her shoulders as they sat side by side on the couch.

“He seems to be all right.” She let out a breath, realising how much worse the situation could have been. “My cousin has promised to let me know if there’s any change. She’s close to my dad, so she’ll make sure he takes it easy.”

“That’s good.” His brows pulled together. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

“What?” The tension in his features bothered her and she braced for bad news.

“It’s about your car.”

Relief hit her immediately. She wasn’t sure what she imagined he was about to say, but given the events of the last few days, a scratch on her car would barely even register on her stress radar.

“This is really stupid.” He turned to face her and rubbed at his jaw. “When Leo and Damian heard you had a Porsche they wanted to drive it. And ... well they’re kind of immature sometimes. But they were really excited about the car...”

Allie wrinkled her nose, trying to figure out why Hugh was so stressed. “Did someone crash my car?”

“No. The car’s fine. We just took it for a drive. Not very far.”

“That’s what you’re nervous about telling me?”

“Yeah. Sorry.”

Her lips pulled to a bemused smile. “It’s a car. It’s designed to be driven. Also, it’s a really cool car.”

“Yeah.” He tilted his head. “You’re not annoyed?”

“No. Were you really worried about telling me that?”

Hugh flopped back against the couch. “I think I spend half of my life worrying about things I don’t need to worry about.”

“It’s kind of sweet that you were worried about that.” She trailed her fingers down the side of his face, and he rolled his head to look at her. “I actually wanted to talk to you about my car too,” she said hesitantly.

“What about it?”

She took a deep breath. “I imagine you were wondering how I could afford a car like that on a waitress’s wage and I wanted to explain. It was actually given to me ...”

Hugh didn’t look at all surprised, only mildly curious. “I kind of guessed that, since you said your dad owns golf courses. Also, Kevin suggested the waitressing job is just to prove some kind of point or something?” He raised an eyebrow. “I’m guessing your dad bought you the car?”

Allie screwed her features up and shook her head. “My dad didn’t buy me the car,” she said, deciding to tackle one matter at a time.

Hugh’s eyes narrowed. “An ex?”

“No!” She glared at him. “Why do you assume there must be a man who bought me the car? Maybe I worked hard for it.”

“You just said it was given to you. It sounded like a gift ...”

“Sorry.” She frowned. “I’m not explaining well. The car was given to me as kind of a sponsorship deal.” She grimaced, realising she needed to get to the point. “I used to play golf professionally.”

Hugh looked thoughtful. “That’s cool.”

“Yes. It was.”

“And Porsche sponsored you?”

“Kind of ... Actually, not really. I did have some great sponsorship deals over the years, but I also had a huge social media following.”

“I’m a bit lost,” Hugh said, puffing his cheeks out.

“Alongside my golfing career, I studied Digital and Social Media. I built a huge social media following for my golf career. It wasn’t just about golf. There was also lifestyle and fashion.”

“On social media?” He blinked a few times. “So you were like an influencer or something?”

“Exactly. It got to the point where I could just mention that I needed a new coffee machine and I’d have five companies offering to send me one.”

“And you posted that you wanted a Porsche?” He looked dubious.

“Pretty much.” She grinned. “There was a little more to it than that. It was

the height of my golfing career and I had a huge tournament coming up. There'd been a lot of publicity around it, so I thought I'd try my luck. I wrote a post saying I was researching environmentally friendly ways to get to the tournament. I tagged a few car companies about their electric cars, not really expecting much from it."

"But Porsche sent you a free car?"

"I worked hard for my free car," she said with a sly smile. "You have to be doing really well to make it worthwhile for companies to give you expensive gifts. It's also not really a gift. It's part of their marketing."

"It does sound impressive," he agreed, then ran his hand over her shoulder. "But you don't play professionally any more."

She shook her head. "I don't play at all. That big tournament I was in ..."

"The one that scored you a Porsche?"

"Yes, that one. It was just a one-day event ... We were almost done and I was all set to win." She paused, expecting the usual rush of emotions as she recalled that day, but she found herself perfectly calm. "I went to take my shot and felt this crack in my shoulder, and then a lot of pain. I had to stop playing. It turned out I'd torn my rotator cuff and it ended my golf career."

Hugh winced. "I'm sorry."

"It was kind of a crappy time," she said, understating it somewhat. "At first I thought I'd recover and get back to golfing. In the meantime, I went to help my dad out with running the golf club. I did that anyway between golf tournaments so it was a natural transition. It was only supposed to be temporary, but eventually it became clear that my shoulder wouldn't heal well enough for me to get back to playing golf professionally."

"So you just stuck to working at the golf club and doing the social media thing?"

"I gave up the social media stuff. My heart wasn't in it and I didn't have the right energy for it."

"Is that why your dad encouraged you to come here for a change of scenery?"

"Partly ..." She leaned her head on his shoulder, considering how good it felt to share her past with him. Which instantly made her think of the phone call when he'd refused to open up to her. "There's more to it," she said, then turned to look him square on. "I wanted to get something straight first ... about us ... our relationship ..." Inwardly, she winced and waited for his reaction, but she didn't get one. "I know originally we said we were only

looking for fun—”

“As I recall, it was mostly you who insisted you weren’t looking for a relationship. I’m fairly sure you made me promise not to fall in love with you.”

She felt heat flood her cheeks. That seemed pretty arrogant now, as though there was no way it would be her who’d fall in love. It was made more amusing by the fact that she was definitely falling in love with him.

“Anyway.” She sucked in a breath. “I wanted to be clear that I don’t see things that way now. We haven’t known each other for very long, but I don’t just see this as fun.”

“Me neither.”

Tension left her shoulders. “That’s good to hear.”

“Did you really need to clarify that with me? I’d have thought it was obvious.”

“I thought we were on the same page but ...” Pausing, she pressed her lips together. “I keep thinking about how you reacted when I asked you about your mum. You not wanting to tell me about it stung a little.”

He visibly tensed and a muscle in his jaw worked. “I told you I don’t like to talk about my mum with anyone.”

“Yeah.” She nodded slowly. “That’s fine. Except you’ve just lumped me into the category of *anyone*. And I don’t want to be just anyone. I want to be the person who you *can* talk to about this stuff. If not now, then eventually.”

“Oh.” His features softened.

“I want us to be honest with each other. About everything.”

“Okay.” He visibly swallowed.

“Have I freaked you out?” she asked.

“No.” He tilted his head from side to side. “Maybe a little. I’m so used to not speaking about my mum that I’m not even sure where to start.” For a moment, he looked thoughtful, then his brows drew together. “I haven’t seen you in days, and I need to leave in about two minutes. Is it okay if we don’t talk about my mum now?”

“Yes.” She frowned. “I thought you had some time before you needed to pick Emmy up.”

“I don’t need to leave for the airport yet, but it’s Alice’s birthday. There’s a little party at Leo’s place.”

She felt a rush of disappointment. “Are you going straight to the airport from there?”

“Yes.” Dipping his head, he brushed a soft kiss against her lips. He began to withdraw, then seemed to think better of it and clamped his hand at the back of her neck to deepen the kiss.

A couple of minutes passed before Allie pulled back, breathless. “Are you sure you need to leave so soon?”

“No.” Frantically, his lips found hers again and the hunger in his kiss made her head spin. Then he stopped abruptly. “Actually, yes. I need to go. It’s Alice’s first birthday. I can’t miss it.”

Allie rested her forehead against Hugh’s while she caught her breath.

“Sorry,” Hugh said.

“That’s okay.” Except she was sure she wasn’t doing a great job of hiding her disappointment. With Emmy arriving home, she couldn’t even catch up with him that evening. In fact, she wasn’t sure when she’d see him again, and the thought made her anxious.

“Why don’t you come with me?”

She frowned. “To the birthday party?”

“Yeah. I’ll only be staying for an hour anyway. You can meet my friends and eat cake.”

“Won’t it be weird?”

“No. You should come.”

“I don’t have a present.”

Hugh gave her a lop-sided smile. “She’s one-year-old. I don’t think she’ll care. But if that’s really an issue ...” He reached for the gift bag on the coffee table. “I can put your name on this.” Before she could say anything he scribbled her name on the tag and grinned at her.

She rolled her eyes. “I suppose I have to come now.”

CHAPTER 34



At Leo's house, a young woman opened the door with a dark-haired child on her hip.

"Hi," she said to Hugh before her eyes darted questioningly to Allie.

"It's all right to bring a plus one, isn't it?" Hugh asked.

"Of course." She beckoned them inside. "I assume you're Allie?"

"Yes."

"This is Caitlin and Alice," Hugh told her, tickling the toddler's cheek.

"We're all out in the garden," Caitlin said. "Leo decided it was barbecue weather. Come through." As she led the way, she glanced back at Allie. "What did you think of Dartmoor?"

"I loved it. Thanks for the directions. I still can't get over all those bluebells."

"Spring is my favourite season," Caitlin said. "I need to get out and do more hiking." In the kitchen, she paused and picked up a sippy cup for Alice.

"That looks fantastic," Allie commented, catching sight of the cake on the sideboard which was simply but artfully decorated with a number one on the top and colourful balloons around the sides.

"Verity baked it. I can't take any credit for it."

"It's gorgeous." Allie reached for Alice's hand. "And so is she. I'll bet her first year has flown by."

Caitlin's smile faltered. "Unfortunately, I can't take credit for her either."

Allie felt as though her brain stuttered with her confusion. "Sorry. You're Leo's girlfriend?"

"Yes." She looked about as uncomfortable as Allie felt. "Alice is Leo's daughter. Not mine."

“Right. I see.” She had no idea what to say.

Caitlin cast Hugh a rueful look. “I feel as though you could have given Allie a heads up there.”

“Yep.” His smile was part grimace. “I see that now.”

“Help yourselves to drinks.” Caitlin tipped her head to the selection of glasses on the counter while Alice squirmed in her arms. “I need to check Leo has the food under control.”

“I feel as though I just put my foot in it,” Allie whispered once she was alone with Hugh.

Shifting closer to her, he rested a hand at the small of her back. “Sorry. I should have explained. Leo was never together with Alice’s mother.” He twisted his lips to one side. “Well, he was, obviously, but they were never in a proper relationship. He met Caitlin right after Alice was born. I’ll tell you the whole story another time. Let’s get drinks and I’ll introduce you to people.”

They didn’t make it out of the kitchen before a smiley older lady walked in. “I didn’t know you were here,” she said, eyes lighting up as she moved to embrace Hugh. Allie recognised her immediately as the owner of the cafe.

“We just arrived,” Hugh said, as he hugged her. “The cake looks amazing.”

“I can’t believe a year has gone by ...” Her voice trailed off as she looked at Allie.

“You two haven’t met yet, have you?” Hugh said. “Allie just started working up at the golf club.”

Verity opened her mouth but was interrupted by Bill walking in through the back door.

“Oh, hello, love,” he said jovially. He dropped a hand on Verity’s shoulder. “I told you about Allie – the new waitress up at the golf club. Perry has a soft spot for her.”

“Perry has a soft spot for everyone,” Verity said, then smiled mildly as she extended her hand to Allie. “I’m Verity. I own the cafe in Hope Cove.”

“It’s a lovely place,” Allie said while her heart pummelled her rib cage. “I’ve only been in for a coffee so far, but I’ve heard great things about your cakes.”

“We’ll have to go in for scones one day,” Hugh said. “They’re the best.”

“I’d like that,” Allie said, feeling like a fraud and knowing without a doubt that she needed to put an end to her lies. And soon.

“I was just going to put the kettle on,” Verity said. “Anyone want a cuppa?”

They politely declined and moved outside. Even though Verity hadn’t recognised her, Allie still felt as though she was on high alert and couldn’t quite relax as she met Hugh’s friends.

Having already met Damian, she felt comfortable around him and spent most of the next hour chatting with him and his girlfriend, Amy. Occasionally they were interrupted by their lively twin boys. Leo came over to introduce himself but then spent most of his time either mingling or manning the barbecue alongside his dad.

The two guys Allie had met in the pub were there with their families, and there were enough kids running around the garden that Allie didn’t even bother trying to figure out who they all belonged to.

After an hour, the cake was brought out to the outside table to a chorus of “happy birthday”. Alice looked a little bemused, more interested in the balloons tied to her high chair than the cake.

“I need to get going in a few minutes,” Hugh told Allie. He’d checked his watch several times over the last half hour, clearly anxious to leave in plenty of time to get to the airport. “We’ll eat cake and then go.”

He excused himself and ducked inside to the bathroom, leaving Allie hanging back, watching a bunch of parents distributing cake to their kids.

She didn’t register Verity approaching until she was right beside her.

“How are you enjoying working up at the golf club?” she asked, eyes on the long table where the children devoured large slices of cake.

“I really like it,” she said happily.

Verity nodded. “And it’s always Allie these days? Not Alegra?”

“I ... umm ...” Allie’s eyes darted to Verity whose features remained entirely neutral.

“Your mum hated it when anyone tried to shorten your name. She said she hadn’t chosen a beautiful name for it only to be used on official documents.”

Allie had always thought her insistence on people using her full name was her own preference. She hadn’t known it had come from her mum. Her brain felt as though it had stuttered again, and she swallowed hard before she found words. “I didn’t think anyone would recognise me,” she said quietly, sounding pathetic even to her own ears.

“I was close to your mum,” Verity said sadly. “When you started to do

well with your golfing, I followed your career. Your dad kept me updated too when I saw him, but I wouldn't have known your face if I hadn't seen you on social media. And regular media for a while there."

"Right." Allie glanced around, keeping an eye out for Hugh returning.

"I take it no one knows you own the golf club? They think you're just waitressing?"

"Yes." Allie's cheeks felt as though they were on fire. "It's a long story. Dad's idea."

"What about Hugh?" Verity's voice remained quiet but her tone was tinged with anger. "Does he know the truth? Or are you just stringing him along?"

"No," Allie spluttered, not quite sure which question she was answering. "I'm not ... I mean ..."

"Does he know the truth?" Verity asked through gritted teeth.

"Not yet. But ..." She trailed off as she spotted Hugh walking over to them. "Please don't say anything. I need to speak to him and explain everything."

They fell quiet as Hugh reached them. "Have you had cake?" he asked.

"No," Allie said, feeling as though her lungs weren't getting enough oxygen. "I'm fine though, if you want to leave now."

"We can't go without eating cake." He smiled warmly as he moved away. "I'll get us a piece to share if you're not very hungry."

"Okay," she murmured as he approached the table.

Verity turned to face Allie, speaking quietly enough that she wouldn't be overheard. "I don't know what you're playing at, but Hugh's a good man and he doesn't deserve to be lied to."

Allie tried to speak, but couldn't find words. Verity wasn't hanging around to listen anyway. She sauntered over to ruffle the hair of one of the kids at the end of the table.

"It's delicious," Hugh said, arriving back with a slice of cake balanced on a napkin. "You have to try this." He held it out and she took a bite, then held her hand in front of her mouth as she chewed.

"It's great," she agreed, despite the clenching of her stomach which had nothing to do with the cake.



INVITING Allie to the birthday party had been entirely impulsive, but Hugh was glad he had. It had felt good to have her by his side and, as cliché as it was, it felt good to feel part of a couple, especially now that his friends were in relationships.

“Sorry we had to rush off,” he said, pulling the car away from Leo’s house. He’d need to drop Allie back at the golf club and go straight to the airport from there.

“It’s fine,” she said, staring out of the window.

“It wasn’t too overwhelming, was it?” He changed gear, then reached for her hand.

“No. I enjoyed it. I’m just a bit tired. I left Surrey pretty early.”

“I forgot you’ve had a long drive today. A stressful few days as well.”

“Yeah.” She squeezed his hand and turned to him, a look of sorrow flashing in her eyes.

“Are you still worried about your dad?”

“A bit. I have a lot on my mind, I guess.”

He slipped his hand from hers to gear down at the junction, then glanced at his watch.

“You’re not running late for Emmy, are you?” Allie asked.

“No. I should be fine.” He still had plenty of time, just without the extra allowance for hold ups.

“Are you excited to see her?”

“Yes.” He frowned. He’d missed Emmy, and he *was* excited to have her back, but everything felt a little different to normal. “I actually wanted to talk to you about Em. Well about us really ...” He struggled to find the right words and cursed himself for not having the foresight to get his thoughts in order.

“Things will be different with Emmy around,” Allie stated, helping him out.

“Yes.” He turned into the lane which led to the golf course. “This is all new, to be honest. It’s just been Emmy and me for so long ... it was her who encouraged me to date, so I think she’ll be fine with it, but I also need to be sensitive. Especially as she’s having a difficult time with her mum at the moment.”

“Oh?” Allie’s questioning lilt reminded him he hadn’t told her about that.

“Her mum and her partner are having a baby,” he said, slowing on the long driveway. “Emmy just found out and it’s unsettled her. It’ll probably

just take her some time to get her head around the idea and process it all.”

Allie nodded but seemed a little distant as he pulled into the car park. “Do you have ten minutes to come in before you leave for the airport?”

“Oh ...” He thought she’d realised he was in a rush. Needlessly, he looked at his watch again. “Not really.”

“*Five* minutes?” she said. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

“Okay.” He tapped on the steering wheel. “Can you make it quick though? I hate the thought of not being there when Em arrives.”

“Yes.” She squeezed her eyes shut and gave a quick shake of the head. “Never mind. I’ll tell you next time I see you.”

“Sorry.” To be honest, he wasn’t that sorry, since he was sure she was still itching to hear about his mum or have some other deep, probing conversation which he’d happily put off.

“No worries,” she said, leaning across to him.

He met her halfway, and the soft touch of her lips against his made him wish he wasn’t in such a rush.

“It’s really good to have you back,” he said, then gave her another quick peck before she got out of the car. “I’ll see you soon,” he told her, hating that he didn’t know exactly when it would be.

With Emmy coming back, his relationship with Allie felt suddenly unstable.

CHAPTER 35



Seeing Emmy walk through the sliding doors into the arrivals hall brought an instant smile to Hugh's lips. He stood on his toes when a tall man hindered his view, then stepped to the side so he was in Emmy's line of sight. Her lips curled when she saw him, but it wasn't her high-voltage smile. The sadness in her eyes was a jolt to his solar plexus, and he wove his way quickly through the crowd. By the time he reached her, her chin was twitching madly and she crashed straight into him, her arms circling his waist as she buried her face in his chest.

"It's okay," he murmured, embracing her tightly as her slight body shuddered with quiet sobs. His heart felt as though it was being squeezed while he stroked her hair and waited for her to calm down.

"What's going on?" he asked when she finally pulled away from him.

She tugged her sleeve over her hand to wipe tears from her cheeks. "Nothing. I'm fine." She sniffed, then leaned to hug him again when more tears came.

"What's wrong?" he asked softly.

"Nothing." She sniffed again. "Can we go home?"

After a quick nod, he led the way, and they walked in silence until they reached the car.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Hugh asked, hefting her suitcase into the boot. Clearly she wasn't okay, but he didn't want to push her into talking about it if she didn't want to.

"I'm okay," she said uncertainly. "I'm tired and—" She looked him up and down. "You look different."

He dropped his gaze to his grey jeans and black T-shirt. Less than two

weeks ago he'd been sure he wouldn't get used to the fit of the jeans. They weren't exactly tight, but definitely more snug than his previous style. He suspected his old ones would feel all wrong now.

"I went shopping," he told Emmy.

"I can see that."

He held his arms out to the sides. "What do you think?"

It would have been nice if she hadn't taken so long to reach a verdict. Now he knew why women liked a knee-jerk "You look great" rather than an honest opinion.

"You look good," she finally said.

"Yeah?"

She nodded firmly. "Definitely less embarrassing."

"Em," he hissed.

She moved to the passenger door, shooting him an amused look over her shoulder.

"Were you really embarrassed by the way I dressed?" he asked, sliding into the passenger seat.

"No." She pursed her lips. "Well, maybe a bit. But most kids are embarrassed by their parents so it's not as though it was a big deal." She brushed her fingers over the sleeve of his T-shirt. "You look younger now. Less dad-like."

He closed his eyes briefly, glad that his new look had provided a distraction for Em, even if the conversation wasn't doing much for his self-esteem. When he looked at Emmy again, her features had turned serious.

"Is this because of her?" she asked.

"What? Who?"

"Allie. Did she tell you to change your clothes?"

"No. Of course not. I just thought maybe I'd try something different."

"Did Allie go shopping with you?"

"No. Leo and Damian came with me and bullied me into a whole new look."

She let out an ambiguous hum.

"I like it," Hugh said truthfully. "I wasn't sure at first, but now I really like it."

"That's good." She licked her lower lip. "If you need more new clothes, I can go shopping with you."

"That would be good," he told her as he turned the engine on.

He focused on getting out of the multi-storey and had just joined the main road when Emmy spoke again.

“How’s the dating going?”

“Fine,” he said, not wanting to be too effusive and not sure how much to say on the subject.

“Do you really like Allie? It sounded as though you’ve been out with her a lot.”

“We’ve been spending quite a bit of time together,” he said. “I like her.”

“That’s nice.” Her gaze shifted out of the window as they met slow-moving traffic.

“How was Paris?” Hugh said to shift the conversation away from him. “How are you feeling about Mum’s news?”

She shrugged. “I guess it won’t really affect me that much. Except Mum made some comment about me babysitting, which annoyed me.”

“Yeah?” He waited for her to elaborate.

“I told her I’ll happily babysit if they pay me. She didn’t seem very happy about that, but Louise laughed. Why should I babysit for free, though? It’s not as though I asked for a sibling.”

“Does it bother you?” he asked, as traffic began to move faster.

“No,” she said after a pause. “I can’t really imagine it. It seems weird ... What was Mum like when I was a baby?”

“How do you mean?”

“I just can’t imagine Mum with a baby. I can’t imagine her doing normal, day-to-day parenting stuff. It’s mostly Louise who looks after me when I’m with them. Mum’s always there, but Louise is the practical one.”

Hugh thought back to the time when they’d been a family of three. Emmy’s assessment seemed fairly accurate.

“Your mum was never really comfortable around you,” he finally said. “Not in an awful way. She loved you, but she worried she was getting everything wrong. When she dressed you she panicked that she was going to dislocate a limb. Or she worried you’d choke while she was feeding you.” He imagined how exhausting it must have been for Nancy to constantly feel like a failure. Maybe it was her lack of confidence that had made him feel as though he knew what he was doing. Looking after Emmy was his comfort zone, and being a parent was an area of his life where he’d always felt confident.

“I guess it was really Louise who wanted a baby,” Emmy said. “I don’t

think Mum's changed that much since I was a baby."

"Are you sure you're okay with it?" Hugh asked. "Your mum was worried it had upset you."

"No. It wasn't that. Not really. It's just ... I don't know, sometimes it's hard being with Mum." She turned to him with a sad smile. "I like it when it's just you and me. Everything is easier then."

Hugh's mind raced. During their phone calls he'd been quite open about the fact that he'd been spending time with Allie. Emmy hadn't been overly inquisitive, which only now occurred to him as being odd.

While he'd been single-mindedly assuming it was Nancy's news which had upset Emmy, he hadn't considered that it could be something else entirely.

Like him dating.

CHAPTER 36



Arriving at the cafe before it opened on Monday morning was intentional. Allie was hoping to catch Verity for a private chat, but it occurred to her as she knocked on the door that she might have staff with her.

The speech that Allie had practised fell out of her head the minute she laid eyes on Verity crossing the cafe to let her in. It was the sympathy and warmth in her eyes that threw Allie. She'd been expecting a hostile reception.

"I'm glad you're here," Verity said, tilting her head as she opened the door. "I was going to try and get in touch with you later."

Allie only mumbled random noises.

"Come in." Verity opened the door wider. "Let's go into the kitchen for a chat."

"Thanks," Allie said and followed Verity behind the counter and into the kitchen beyond. At Verity's insistence, she took a seat at the small table at the side of the square room. "I wanted to explain," she said while Verity filled the kettle. She took a deep breath, trying to recall what she'd intended to say.

"Dad has been trying to get me to come back here for years," she said, staring at the grooves in the wooden tabletop as she got straight to the point. "I never wanted to. Then Dad got insistent. He claimed the business wasn't doing well and he wanted me to come and figure out why. He said it would be easier for me to see how the business was running if no one knew who I was."

Verity snorted a laugh.

"It was pretty ridiculous." Allie felt her muscles relax.

"But nobody suspected anything?" Verity asked.

“No.”

“Why would they, I suppose.”

“I actually thought someone would recognise me.” A smile played at Allie’s lips. “I was even a bit offended at first that they didn’t. I know that being a celebrity in the golfing world isn’t like being a film star or anything, but when things were going well I was recognised a lot and I felt kind of famous for a while.”

“I was sorry to read about your injury,” Verity said kindly.

“Thank you.” Automatically she rolled her shoulder. “It felt like the end of the world for a while, but recently I’ve started to think things work out just as they’re supposed to, even if it doesn’t always feel like it at the time.” She thanked Verity when she set a mug of tea in front of her and joined her at the table. “Dad said the real reason he wanted me to come here as a waitress was so that I could have a more normal life for once, without so much responsibility.”

“That makes sense.” Verity blew on her tea. “It was a ridiculous way to go about it though.”

“I’m not sure he was thinking clearly. He’d just had a heart attack and was trying to devise a way to get me out of the way so he could avoid telling me.”

Verity’s eyes widened and she set her mug down. “Goodness. Is he okay?”

“Yes. I only found out this week. My cousin called me to say he was having surgery so I dashed back for a few days, but he seems to be doing well now.”

“That’s a relief. You must have been worried sick. What with your mum as well ...”

“I think that’s why he tried to avoid telling me.” She picked up her mug, then put it down again. “About Hugh ... what you said yesterday ... I understand why you’d be angry but I swear I wasn’t deliberately misleading him.” She grimaced, not sure that was the truth. Of course she’d been misleading him. “I met him up at the club and at first it was just a bit of fun so it didn’t seem necessary to tell him everything. I *am* going to tell him the truth though. He knows I was a professional golfer ... I just haven’t managed to tell him the truth about the waitressing and everything. I’ve been trying to, but then I had to rush back to Surrey. I’d intended to tell him yesterday but there was the party and after that he had to pick Emmy up from the airport.”

Verity put a stop to her wittering by placing a hand over Allie's. "I shouldn't have snapped at you yesterday without knowing the whole story. I'm a bit protective of Hugh ..."

"I think you had every right to snap at me."

Verity squeezed her hand. "It wasn't only about Hugh," she said then withdrew her hand and drew in a deep breath. "I was hurt ..."

Allie felt her forehead crease as she waited for Verity to continue.

"Your mum was a good friend," she said, then paused when her chin trembled. "I was already sad when you left to go to Surrey, but then to hear what happened ... and so soon after you'd moved." She put a hand over her heart and blinked back tears. "It was so very sad. I often thought about you. Your dad explained that you weren't keen to come back, but I always asked after you and then I kept an eye on you on social media. Always with a touch of second-hand pride."

Pausing, she swiped a tear from her cheek. "I always imagined that if you ever did come back you'd come in the cafe to say hello, and I'd tell you stories about when you used to come in the cafe with your mum."

Allie took a moment before she replied. "When Mum died," she began, then paused as a lump swelled in her throat. "It was so sudden, I didn't know how to deal with it."

"You were nine years old," Verity pointed out. "As adults, grief is impossible, so of course you'd have been lost."

"Every time I thought about Mum it was agony," Allie said, her throat burning with emotion. "Eventually, I figured out it was easier not to think about her. I focused on school and golf and helping Dad with the club. Anything to avoid thinking about her and feeling that horrible pain." She pressed her lips together and tasted the salt from a stray tear. "I guess my brain got good at shutting out those memories until I honestly couldn't recall much about living in Hope Cove. Of course I still remembered bits and pieces of my mum, but not much. And I was fine with that."

"That all makes sense," Verity said, eyes shining with sympathy.

"When I came back a few weeks ago, things started to come back to me. I remembered the golf club." She smiled gently. "I remembered Bill when I saw him. Then when I was in the cafe I saw you and you felt very familiar." She stopped and took a sip of her tea. "I still don't remember all that much, but the memories I have aren't as painful as I expected them to be."

"I'm glad you finally decided to come back."

“I’m not sure *decided* is the right word. Dad finally wore me down.”

“Maybe it was just the right time.” The oven timer began to beep and Verity stood up.

Allie took another sip of tea. “I should probably let you get on with your work.”

“Nonsense,” Verity said, pulling a tray of scones from the oven and filling the room with a delicious aroma. “You’re not going anywhere until you’ve had one of these.”

Allie’s mouth watered. “If you insist.”

“I do.” Verity put one directly on a plate for her, then took a jar of strawberry jam from the fridge. “How do you feel about cream these days?”

“I’m not a huge fan,” Allie said, while aiming a questioning look at Verity. “Why?”

“You didn’t like it when you were a kid. Do you remember your mum trying to coax you into eating it?”

“Not really ...” Allie squinted as her mind whirred. “Wait, I have a vague memory of Mum trying to force her scone on me. It was loaded with cream and she was insisting I try a bite.”

Verity chuckled as she sat back down. “She used to joke that when you were born she was sure you could never ever do anything to disappoint her ... but she’d never considered you might like to eat scones only with jam and not cream!”

Allie couldn’t help but laugh as she cut the scone in two to release a puff of steam. “I’m afraid I haven’t changed.” She left the scone to cool down for a moment. “I hadn’t realised until you said it yesterday that my mum had always insisted on people calling me Alegra. I always insisted on it too, but hadn’t known the preference had come from her.”

“Yes.” Verity smiled. “She was so proud of your name.”

“I almost wish I didn’t know that,” Allie said, blinking back tears.

Verity shot her a questioning look.

“I’ve been using Allie while I’ve been in Hope Cove,” she explained. “And now I quite like it. It feels right somehow. I thought I’d probably stick with it once I told everyone the truth, but now I don’t know. Mum wanted me to be Alegra.”

“Yes.”

Surprised by Verity’s bluntness, Allie wasn’t sure how to react.

“What does it mean?” Verity asked, her features crinkling as she smiled.

“What does what mean?”

“Alegra. What does the name mean?”

“Oh.” Allie frowned. “Joyful. It’s Italian.”

Verity nodded. “That’s what your mum wanted for you. Joy. Deep down she wouldn’t care what you called yourself if you were happy. The same as she didn’t actually care about you not liking cream.”

“Do you think so?”

“Yes. I do.”

Allie took a deep breath and set about lathering jam onto her scone. “It’s so strange to think that I was coming here as a child and eating your yummy treats back then as well.”

“One of the lovely things about the cafe is watching the local kids grow up.” She gave Allie a pointed look. “Hugh has been coming in the cafe since he was a little boy as well.”

Allie winced. “Is this where you give me a lecture?”

“To start with, I’d like to know your intentions.”

“My intentions?” Allie beamed.

“Yes.” Verity looked thoroughly amused. “What’s going on between you and him. Give me the gossip!”

Allie felt her cheeks heat up. “I really like him,” she said. “We just seemed to click. I wasn’t planning on being around for long, so I never imagined getting involved with anyone, but it just kind of happened. The more time I spend with him, the more time I *want* to spend with him.”

“Are you still thinking you won’t be staying around for very long?”

“No.” Allie puffed out a breath. “Now I can’t stand the thought of leaving.”

“You need to tell Hugh the truth about the golf club.”

“I know.”

Verity’s features turned serious. “There was a couple of years – before Bill and I were a thing, and when I didn’t see much of my family – that Hugh invited me to spend Christmas with them. He’s that type of person, always concerned about others. I’d have a soft spot for him for that reason alone, but I also watched him grow up, and with everything he’s had to put up with it amazes me that he is the way he is and not bitter and cynical.”

“Because of his wife leaving him?” Allie asked.

“That was a kick in the teeth that no one needs, but even before that he had his mother to contend with ...”

“He said they’re not in touch.”

Verity shook her head. “Honestly, you could never imagine such a sweet, easy child as Hugh. He was so polite and never gave anyone a moment’s trouble. Unfortunately, his mother was the most miserable, critical person I’ve ever known. As far as she was concerned, Hugh couldn’t do anything right. The only times I saw her speak to him was to berate him for something. And over the most trivial things – a few spilled crumbs, or not sitting properly on his chair. She was on at him constantly.” Verity sighed heavily. “There were many times I wanted to shake her and let her know how easy she had it with that sweet little boy.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ve seen my fair share of ill-behaved kids in the cafe – Hugh’s friends included. Goodness, if Hugh’s mum had had a child like Damian or Leo she’d never have coped. Little rascals they were, the pair of them.”

Allie smiled at that, trying not to dwell on Hugh’s difficult childhood. “How did they end up friends, then?”

Verity beamed. “Because Damian was sort of a loveable rogue. Still is really. He’s got a heart of gold. I think he was about six or seven when he overheard his mum saying how sad it was that Hugh didn’t have any friends. Hugh’s mum worked at the school and most of the kids were terrified of her so never wanted to play with Hugh. Damian couldn’t stand the thought of any kid not having friends, so he decided to rectify the situation. Leo went along with whatever Damian did, even back then. The three of them have been inseparable ever since.”

Allie chewed on her scone. “Hugh mentioned something about Damian’s parents buying him a surfboard.”

“Hugh’s mum told him he wasn’t allowed to surf because it was just for hooligans.” Verity rolled her eyes again. “Awful woman. Anyway, Damian’s parents let him keep a board at their place. He used to have to sneak off to go surfing. That was Hugh being rebellious.”

“What’s his dad like?” Allie asked.

Verity scratched at her forehead. “I suppose you could describe him as quiet and mild-mannered. Personally, I’d call him a wet blanket.” She smiled briefly. “Speaking of wet blankets ... please tell me you’re going to do something about Kevin.”

“Kevin?” Allie had lost the thread of the conversation altogether.

“The manager at the golf club.” Verity shook her head. “That man needs

a good shake. I realise he's concerned about getting on your dad's bad side, but he's the manager. He should be advocating for the staff."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean poor old Ron is overworked and underpaid. Same goes for Daisy. You can't just let staff go and not replace them."

"I don't think we've let any staff go recently," Allie said defensively.

"Not recently, no. A year ago. I understand that sometimes you have to make tough decisions in business, but Kevin should have made it clear to your dad that the current situation doesn't work. Instead, he tries to keep everyone happy. Pathetic little man."

"I didn't know we'd let people go." Allie continued to chew on her scone, feeling slightly sideswiped by Verity's thoughts on Kevin and the way the club was run. "I agree there needs to be some changes. And I'm not saying Kevin doesn't have his faults as a manager, but in his defence he's been running the place alone. Overall I think he does a decent job."

"Only because he has great staff," Verity huffed, then raised her hands. "Ignore me. I probably mostly have a bee in my bonnet because he doesn't let Perry in the clubhouse. How anyone can be scared of Perry is beyond me. He's the most docile dog in the world."

Allie frowned, bemused. "Apparently there's some issue with the cleaning crew ..."

"There's no problem with the cleaning crew. I know one of them and they never complained about dog hair as Kevin claimed. He's scared of dogs ... which is fine, but he should admit that instead of blaming the cleaners."

"I plan to make the clubhouse dog-friendly," Allie said vaguely. "I'll be looking into hiring more staff too."

Verity gave a small smile. "I'm sure you'll improve things up there quickly. Once you let people know who you really are, anyway."

"I plan on letting the staff know this week." Allie was itching to start implementing changes, so she couldn't put it off much longer.

But first, she needed to tell Hugh.

CHAPTER 37



After spending longer than she'd expected at the cafe, Allie walked briskly back along the coastal path. She'd agreed to work an extra shift to cover for a waiter who was ill but was already regretting it. She needed to tell Hugh everything, and she wanted to get the conversation out of the way, but wanted to do it in person.

The wind blew wildly as she followed the steep path away from Hope Cove. When the ground levelled out, she stopped to catch her breath and took a moment to look back at the bay. From a distance it looked like a scene straight from a postcard, with the golden sand vibrant beneath the dazzling blue sky. Gentle waves rolled rhythmically onto the shore and the boats in the bay bobbed in a soothing motion.

Conscious of the time, she didn't linger for long. As she set off again, she took out her phone, deciding that at the very least she could arrange a time to speak to Hugh.

Except he sounded hesitant when she asked if they could meet up after her shift.

"It's difficult with Emmy," he said.

"Could you just leave her for an hour?" Allie asked, not wanting to postpone the conversation for another day.

"Normally I could," Hugh said slowly. "But I'm concerned she's feeling insecure about me dating, so I don't really want to disappear on her first day back home."

Allie moved to the side of the path and smiled at the hikers she passed. "Did she say she has a problem with you dating?"

"Not in so many words. I thought she was upset about the situation with

her mum and the baby, but she made a couple of comments about how she likes it being just the two of us. And when she thought you'd been clothes shopping with me, she sounded a bit jealous or something. I'm not sure what's going on, but something is bothering her, and until I figure out what it is I need to tread carefully."

"Right." Allie felt the muscles in her jaw tighten. "So do you have any idea when we can see each other?"

"Soon. I just need to give Emmy a bit of time, and I need to talk to her properly."

"Okay," she replied tightly.

"Sorry. I want to see you."

Allie felt a pang of guilt for getting annoyed. She'd brought the whole situation on herself by not being honest with him sooner.

"How about we have lunch together tomorrow?" she suggested. "When Emmy's at school."

"Yeah." He sounded much more positive. "That would be great."



ON HIS WAY TO pick Emmy up from school, it occurred to Hugh that telling her about his lunch plans with Allie the next day would be a good way to bring up the subject of him dating.

The car would be a good place for a chat too. Or it would have been if she didn't climb into the passenger seat, put her headphones on and stare out of the window. Apparently she wasn't in the mood for chatting.

At home she went straight upstairs and didn't reappear until he called her down for dinner.

"Was it good to see your friends again today?" he asked, while she pushed vegetables around her plate.

"Yep."

Hugh chewed his mouthful while working up the courage to say what was really on his mind. "I was talking to Allie earlier ..." He waited for a reaction but got nothing. "I'm going to have lunch with her tomorrow."

"Nice," she mumbled.

Hugh nodded while loading up his fork again. "I thought you'd like to know," he said, injecting a lightness to his tone that he didn't feel. "Since you

were the one who told me dating would be good for me. You're welcome to be all smug about being right ...” Still no response. In fact, she was acting as though she wasn't even listening.

“I'm not hungry,” she announced. “Can I go and finish my homework?”

“Yeah,” he said automatically.

She hurried out of the room, leaving him feeling like the world's most insensitive person. He'd pretty much told her it wasn't okay for her to have feelings about him dating since she'd been the one to suggest it in the first place.

And she clearly *did* have feelings on the matter. If he could figure out a way to get her to open up it would help, but she clammed up when he tried to talk to her later that evening and was her usual monosyllabic self at breakfast the next morning.

She'd never been a morning person, and he knew better than to try and get anything out of her in the hour after she'd woken up.

“We have to go soon,” he said as she lingered over her cereal with her phone in her hand, messaging her friends on their group chat. “You'll see the girls in half an hour. Maybe you can put the phone aside and get ready to go.”

She did as she was told and put the phone aside, but she didn't make any move from the table.

“I don't feel great,” she said.

He tilted his head as he looked at her. “How do you mean?”

“I've got a stomach ache.”

Automatically, he put a hand across her forehead, but she ducked away from him and stood up.

“I don't think I can go to school today.”

“It's your second day back,” he said, following her when she headed for the hallway and then the stairs. “You need to go to school, Em.”

“I can't.” She trudged up the stairs. “I'm going back to bed.”

Hugh stood at the foot of the stairs, stunned. Apparently she didn't even think it worthy of a discussion. It took him a second to get his brain in gear, then he bounded up the stairs and strode into her room.

“You can't just decide you're not going to school.”

“I can.” She pulled the covers back and got into bed. “You can't force me to go to school when I'm ill.”

“Are you really ill though?”

“Yes.” Her chin quivered and she started to cry before turning away from

him.

“Em.” He walked around the bed and crouched beside her. “What’s going on?”

“I feel ill,” she cried. “And you don’t believe me.”

He sighed, not sure what to say since she was right – he didn’t believe she was ill. Clearly she was upset though, and he couldn’t exactly force her to go to school.

“Okay,” he said on a sigh. “I’ll call the school.”

She nodded and wiped at her tear-soaked cheeks with the corner of her duvet.

“Do you need anything?” Hugh asked.

She shook her head. “I just want to sleep.”

WITH WORK increasingly feeling like the only part of Hugh’s life that he was in control of, he closed the door to Emmy’s room and made for his office. After a quick call to the school to say that Em wouldn’t be in for the day, he pulled his keyboard out of the drawer and switched the monitor on. It sprang to life with the design for the golf course open, reminding Hugh of his lunch plans with Allie, which he’d have to cancel.

With his phone to his ear, he rubbed at the creases on his forehead as he told her they’d need to postpone.

“It can’t be helped,” she said, but the disappointment was evident in her voice. “I hope she feels better soon.”

“I don’t think she’s really ill.” Hugh leaned back in the chair, arching his back until he felt his spine crack. “I told her I was having lunch with you. I think that’s the real problem.”

“She was trying to sabotage our date?” Allie asked dubiously.

“I don’t know.” He really didn’t want to think the worst of his daughter, but his gut told him that was the issue. He only wished he knew how to deal with it.

“Did you try asking her?” Allie said a touch impatiently.

“She doesn’t seem to want to talk.”

“You should ask her outright. Everything is easier to deal with when it’s out in the open ...” She paused and growled a curse.

“Are you okay?” Hugh asked.

“Yes. I just realised I need to take my own advice about getting things out

in the open.” She paused again. “This is really awkward, and I really wanted to tell you in person, but I just need to tell you.”

“You’re making me nervous.” The ensuing silence made him even more nervous. “What’s going on?” he asked cautiously.

“My dad owns the golf course,” she said in a rush.

“Yeah.” Hugh pressed his fingers to his forehead. “You already told me he owns a golf course.”

“Not *a* golf course. He owns Thurley Beach Golf Club. We lived here when I was little. Then Dad had this idea of a chain of golf courses, so they bought one in Surrey. Mum died a few weeks after we moved there. We stayed in Surrey but he held onto Thurley Beach club. Dad put shares in my name so technically I own it. I’m the majority shareholder.”

“Of Thurley Beach?” He closed his eyes, not entirely sure he’d understood correctly.

“Yes. I should have told you ages ago ...”

“Wait ... how come everyone thinks you’re just a waitress?”

“Because I let everyone believe that. We wanted to get a proper picture of how the club was being run, so my dad had this idea of me working there as a waitress.”

“You’ve been working undercover in a place you own?”

“Yes.”

“Right.”

“It was a stupid idea to start with – especially since the club seems to be running well. Mostly it was just my dad scheming to get me to take a break. But that’s not even the point. The point is, I wanted you to know the truth ...”

“Okay.” He couldn’t quite take the information in, so he was struggling to come up with any comment.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t want to keep it from you. To start with, we agreed it was just fun between us, so it didn’t seem like a big deal to not mention it.” She released a long breath. “I’ve been trying to tell you, but there never seemed to be time ...”

“Okay,” he said again.

“You’re not saying much.”

“I’m not sure what to say.” He had no idea what to think. “The staff don’t know you own the place?”

“No. I’m going to tell them, I just really wanted to tell you first. Are you angry with me?”

“I don’t know,” he said honestly, then shook his head. “I don’t think so. I’m pretty stunned, to be honest.”

“It’s a lot to take in.”

He shifted in his seat. “I should probably check on Emmy. Can we talk about this later?”

“Yes. Of course. Call me later and we can chat it all through.”

He didn’t need to check on Emmy at all; he just wanted to get off the phone so he could gather his thoughts.

Resting his elbows on the desk, he massaged his temples. A quick nudge of the computer mouse lit up the screen in front of him, and he was once again confronted with the golf course design. His chest tightened as he recalled telling Allie they could show them to the owners of the club.

That might have been a nice time for her to mention that *she* was the owner of the club.

CHAPTER 38



Spilling her guts to Hugh over the phone hadn't been ideal, but at least everything was finally out in the open. Of course he'd need time to digest the information, but Allie spent the morning feeling as though she was on tenterhooks waiting for him to take it in and react.

To distract herself, she went for a long, rambling walk, which involved a break to sit on a quiet beach and stare out at the water as she contemplated her future.

Back at home, she felt a rush of determination and picked up her phone to call her dad. They spent a few minutes chatting about his health before Allie steered the conversation to work.

"I've been thinking some more about changes I'd like to make here," she told him.

"Hmm. I wondered when you'd get to that. Why do I get the feeling my plan to get you to take a break has backfired somewhat?"

"How do you mean?" she asked, surveying the mess in the room as she sank onto the bed.

"I just wanted you to go back and take a look at the place, and now it seems as though you don't want to come home."

"Well. I would like to stay longer. I feel there are changes I can implement at the club, and ..."

"And there's a certain architect you're not keen to leave behind?"

She couldn't argue with that, but she'd been doing her best to keep her mind away from Hugh. "There are lots of reasons I want to stay longer," she said. "At this particular moment, I'm focusing on changes to the club."

"You don't want to discuss your love life?"

“Nope. Let’s stick to business.”

“Okay. Tell me your ideas.”

“I want to implement the changes to the course. The ones I mentioned to you before.”

“You want to redo the entire golf course?”

“Yes. The way I’ve been working on it with Hugh would mean impactful changes to the course with minimal work, to keep the costs down.”

“Right.” Her dad didn’t sound convinced.

“It will make a difference to profits. It would give me entirely new angles for marketing, which would attract a whole new clientele.”

“I suspect you’re right. It’s just hard to get my head around you wanting to put so much effort into a club that you’ve wanted nothing to do with until now.”

“Because you gave it to me,” she said, her accusing tone surprising herself as much as her dad.

“Excuse me?”

“I never wanted to be someone who just got things for free...”

Her dad spluttered a laugh. “I don’t recall you ever complaining about all the freebies from the likes of Porsche.”

“That’s different, I had to work hard for that. The same with my shares in Fox Hill and the deposit for my house. I worked hard, but you just signed over the shares in Thurley Beach. I didn’t want something I hadn’t earned. Also, I just didn’t want it.”

“And that’s changed now?”

“Yes.” She pushed her head back into the headboard. “And if I work to make the club more profitable, then maybe I’ll have earned the shares.”

“It’s a big undertaking to redesign the course.”

“I know. It will obviously involve some investment, but the one-off costs don’t concern me. I’m more hesitant about the smaller changes.”

“Such as?”

“We need to hire more staff.”

“In the restaurant?”

“No. The restaurant is fine. We need someone else on front of house. And the greenkeeping staff.”

“Really?”

“Don’t you think it’s ridiculous that Ron is taking care of the grounds alone? Even with the contractors doing the heavy lifting, it’s a heck of a lot

of work for one person. And Daisy might manage the front desk brilliantly, but there should be a second person running the front of house with her.”

“There are two receptionists,” her dad said. “And Ron doesn’t work alone. There are two guys working with him.”

“Until we let them go a year ago. Why were they let go?”

“They quit. The receptionist left around the same time.”

“Verity made it sound as though they were fired. I thought that didn’t make sense.”

“They left of their own accord. And they were replaced.” Her dad’s voice sounded suddenly weak, reminding her that he should be resting. “I’m sure they were replaced. I had a conversation with Kevin about it.”

They definitely hadn’t been replaced. Allie felt a spark of annoyance at her dad for not keeping a proper eye on the club, but she supposed she was guilty of the same.

“You sound tired,” she said, feeling bad for bothering him with work issues.

“I’m fine. If you want to hire more staff I’ll need to go over the finances with Phil. I’m not sure your suggestions are viable from a business standpoint.”

“I can talk to Phil. I also wanted to check how much we’re paying the staff. Verity made some comment about Ron being underpaid.”

“Great.” He sighed. “The locals are saying we’re terrible employers, is that it?”

“No.” She tilted her head, wishing she’d thought to go straight to discussing things with the accountant rather than causing her dad unnecessary stress. “I just need to know these details if I’m going to stick around.” She waited a beat. “Are you okay with me sticking around?”

“Yes. If that’s what you want.”

“What about Fox Hill?”

“I’ll ask Bella if she’d like to continue as general manager. I think she’ll be happy about it.”

“I think so too.” She hoped so, since that would make everything a million times easier. Allie wouldn’t have to worry about leaving her dad to run Fox Hill alone, or finding a replacement.

After ending the call, she fired off an email to the accountant asking when he had time to go through the books with her. It didn’t take long for Phil to respond, suggesting they have a video call the following morning.

She didn't hear anything from Hugh that evening. He didn't call like he'd said he would, and he didn't reply to Allie's messages. A feeling of dread settled in the depths of her stomach and refused to budge. Telling herself that she'd dropped a bombshell on him and it was natural that he'd need time to mull it over did little to help.

Even though she was expecting the call from Phil on Wednesday morning, she still had a moment of hoping it would be Hugh when the phone rang. Then a rush of disappointment that it wasn't.

In his usual brisk way, Phil politely asked how she was before getting down to business.

"Your dad told me you've been spending time in Devon to get a feel for the club there."

"I've been looking for ways to increase profits," she said, deciding there was no need to tell him more than that.

"I've been having another look over the books," he said. "And I have to say that it's not doing badly. Given the lack of input from you and your dad, I think you're lucky it's doing as well as it is. You got lucky with Kevin. Admittedly, he's well compensated financially, but it's rare to find someone with so much dedication to a business which isn't their own."

Allie felt oddly reluctant to agree. On paper it might appear that Kevin was doing a stellar job, but in real life she found it difficult to be enthusiastic about him. "For now, the main thing I want to discuss is staff wages, and the possibility of hiring new staff."

"Mostly, the pay rates are pretty standard for the industry and their roles." He leaned closer to the screen and tapped away. "I'll share my screen with you, though you already have access to all this information."

She nodded. "I wanted to go through it with someone who knows the ins and outs of it."

He clicked again, until the relevant files appeared on Allie's screen. "I don't see any issues with staff wages," he said, indicating the appropriate section with his cursor. "Has there been a specific request for a pay rise?"

"No." Allie gazed at the document in front of her. "Is Daisy only on minimum wage?"

"Yes. She's young and not as experienced as the main receptionist. But she's been there a few years now so if she's a good worker, a pay rise might be in order."

Allie frowned. "She's the *only* receptionist..."

“No.” The cursor moved down the screen. “There are two. The other one is Stephanie Michaels.”

“There’s no Stephanie working here,” Allie said, staring at the screen. “That must be a mistake. But according to these files she’s well paid.”

“Yes, she is well paid. It’s not a mistake.”

Allie shook her head, annoyed that Phil wasn’t better prepared. “She must be the receptionist who was let go about a year ago.”

“No. We didn’t let anyone go. There was another woman who left. Stephanie took over from her.”

“Well, that’s wrong. I’ve been here for over a month. I think I’d have noticed if there was a second receptionist.”

“I think it would be very hard to run the place with only one. What happens on her days off or when she takes holidays?”

“Daisy doesn’t take holidays,” Allie muttered, while her stomach churned with a vague feeling of trepidation. “Something’s not right ...” She squeezed her eyes closed for a moment, then tried to make sense of the information on the screen in front of her. “What about the greenkeeper? How much is he paid?”

“Here’s the head greenkeeper, Ron.” Phil scrolled down the screen and indicated with the cursor. “Then there’s the other guy, Jacob Mills ... Honestly, if you were to take on someone else for the greenkeeping team that wouldn’t be an issue. Maybe someone part-time.”

“What?” Allie was completely confused. “I’ve never heard of anyone called Jacob. And why would he be paid more than the head greenkeeper?”

“The head greenkeeper job comes with the cottage, so the pay takes that into account.”

“Right. That makes sense. What doesn’t make sense is why I’ve spent so much time here and have never seen another greenkeeper. There’s only Ron. This must be the one who left. This file isn’t up to date.”

“It’s definitely up to date.”

“It can’t be. These people don’t work at the club.”

“They should,” Phil said lightly. “We pay them enough. They’re the top earners after Kevin.”

“Phil,” she growled. “You’re looking at me as though I’ve overlooked a couple of staff, but I’m telling you those people don’t work here. Who the heck are we paying?”

“You’re serious?” he asked, brows drawing together. “You can’t be

serious?”

“I’m very serious.” She pushed her hair back from her face. “What the heck is going on here?”

“I have no idea.”

Allie’s jaw tightened at the thought that someone at the club had been playing them for absolute fools.

“Leave it with me,” she said tersely. “I’ll get to the bottom of whatever is going on here.”

CHAPTER 39



When Emmy refused to go to school again on Wednesday, Hugh barely even bothered discussing it with her. The situation with Allie plagued him, and part of him wanted to follow Emmy's lead and curl up in bed to shut out the world. Logically, he didn't see why he should have a problem with Allie. She might have kept things from him when they were getting to know each other, but she was being honest now. Also, when he thought back over their conversations, he suspected she hadn't outright lied to him. She'd just kept some details to herself.

On Wednesday afternoon, he stared at his phone, fingers hovering over the keypad as he tried to conjure words. He'd ignored two messages from Allie now and it felt petty, but he had a niggling sense of unease that he couldn't shake. As irrational as it may be, he felt betrayed.

"Can I get something to eat?" Emmy asked, appearing in the doorway of his office.

"Yes," he said tightly. He was annoyed with Emmy too but knew that deep down his annoyance was not knowing how to handle the situation.

After five minutes of alternating between staring at his phone and his computer screen, he decided he needed to make progress in at least one area of his life. Since he had no idea what to say to Allie and zero headspace for work, it seemed Emmy was going to bear the brunt of his attention.

Determinedly, he headed downstairs and joined her in the living room where a plate strewn with crumbs lay abandoned on the coffee table.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked, sitting beside her.

"Not really. I think I'll go back to bed."

Hugh put a hand on her shoulder to stop her. "Not so fast. We need to

have a conversation.”

“Why?”

He cocked an eyebrow. “You’re going to have to go back to school tomorrow, you know.”

“What if I’m still ill?”

“Em. You’re not ill.”

“I’ve got a headache,” she said adamantly. “And my stomach doesn’t feel great.”

“Should I take you to the doctor?” he asked.

“No, I’ll be okay.” Her eyes cast down. “It would be nice if you believed I don’t feel well.”

Trying to keep his composure, Hugh inhaled deeply. “I believe there’s something wrong, but I don’t think you’re ill.

“I don’t want to go to school tomorrow,” she said sadly.

“Em,” he said, turning to face her. “If something is bothering you, you can talk to me about it. Then you’ll feel better.”

“I can’t,” she said weakly.

“You can. Tell me what’s on your mind and we’ll figure it out together.”

She shook her head as tears welled in her eyes. “I’ll only tell you if you promise not to tell Mum.”

Confused, his forehead scrunched up. He’d been sure the issue was him dating. “This is about your mum?” he asked.

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“If you’re too upset to go to school, I’m afraid you’re going to have to talk about it.” He took her hand and gave it a squeeze. “If you’re upset about the baby, it’s okay.”

“I’m not upset about the baby. That’s not why I don’t want to go to school.”

“Why then?”

“Because ...” She folded her arms across her chest and slammed her head back against the couch as tears spilled down her cheeks. “Because Eva and Sophie and Charlotte are always talking about stuff I don’t know about and they send messages with jokes I don’t understand and it’s not fair and I don’t want to go to school.”

Anger tightened every muscle in Hugh’s body. He knew girls her age had a reputation for being mean, but he’d been confident that Emmy’s little clique was a good group.

“I don’t understand what this has got to do with your mum,” he said, trying to get everything straight.

“It doesn’t matter.” She wiped furiously at her cheeks. “I don’t want to talk about it. Just don’t make me go to school please.”

“If the girls are being mean we need to sort that out. I’ll come into school with you and we can talk to your teachers.” His blood felt as though it pulsed hotter. “I’ll speak to their parents as well. If they’re upsetting you, we need to figure this out.”

“They’re not upsetting me,” she sobbed. “It’s not them.”

“Em.” He shook his head. “I don’t understand what’s going on.”

“They do stuff together in the school holidays,” she said tearfully. “They have sleepovers and do cool stuff. Last week they went to a Ghost Moon concert. All three of them together with their mums. And they asked if I wanted to go, but I can’t because I have to visit Mum in the holidays. Now they’re talking about everything they did in the holidays and laughing at stuff that happened, and it’s not fair because I don’t even want to visit Mum every holidays, but now Mum wants me to visit her more and stay for longer so I can spend time with the baby. But I don’t want to.” Finally, she stopped talking and flung herself into Hugh’s arms.

While she sobbed and repeatedly declared that it wasn’t fair, Hugh held her tight and felt a rush of relief. Because this problem felt much easier to deal with than what he thought was going on. *This* he could fix.

“You can’t tell Mum,” she said, when she began to calm down.

Hugh pulled back to look at her. “Your mum won’t mind if you don’t want to visit every holidays.”

“She will mind. She’ll make a big deal of it like she made a big deal of me getting the plane on my own.”

“How do you mean?” Hugh asked, narrowing his eyes.

Emmy tugged her sleeve over her hand to wipe at her cheeks while more tears came. “I hate flying alone,” she said. “But Mum really wanted me to and then she was saying how great it is that I’m so independent and how much easier it makes everything.”

“I asked you so many times,” Hugh grumbled. “You always told me you’re happy going on your own.”

“Because otherwise you have to take me and pick me up. Mum hardly ever did it and it’s not fair to you.”

“But if you’re not comfortable flying alone, I’d rather come with you.”

“It’s really annoying for you. And you have to pay for the flight.”

His stomach clenched at the thought that she’d been pretending she was fine travelling alone because she was worried about inconveniencing him.

“It’s not annoying,” he told her seriously. “It’s actually less stress for me to take you because then I don’t need to spend that time worrying about you. Also, I can drink a beer on the flight and feel as though I’m on holiday.”

That drew a sliver of a smile. “Sorry,” she whispered.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for.” He put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her to his chest. “I’ll talk to your mum about you not going over there every school holiday.”

“She’ll be annoyed. She wants me to go more, not less.”

He shook his head. “She’ll understand that you want to spend time with your friends. And the main reason she wants you to go over more is because she’s worried about you feeling left out when the baby arrives.”

“So it’s not because she loves me and wants to spend more time with me?”

Hugh winced. “Of course she loves you.”

“I was joking,” Emmy said.

“Were you?”

She shrugged. “Sometimes I think Louise likes to see me more than Mum does.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“It doesn’t matter anyway. It’s fine. I’m quite happy when I’m here with you.”

“When it’s just the two of us?” he asked.

“Yeah.” She rested her head against his chest.

“Em,” he said hesitantly. Part of him wanted to keep quiet and not risk raising any more issues, but it was probably better to get everything out in the open.

“What?” She pulled away and looked at him questioningly.

“Is me dating really okay with you?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Because you keep saying you like it just being the two of us ...”

“I meant I’m glad I live here with you and only see Mum at school holidays.”

“Okay.” He wasn’t convinced and wasn’t sure how to delve deeper.

“I’m the one who told you to go on dates,” she pointed out.

“I thought you might have changed your mind.”

“No.” Her nose crinkled. “You are still seeing Allie, aren’t you?”

He twisted his lips to one side. “Yeah. Kind of.”

“Dad!” She stretched the word into two syllables while glaring at him.

“What do you mean kind of?”

“It’s sort of complicated.”

“I thought you really liked her?”

“I did. I *do*, I suppose.”

“When are you seeing her again?”

“I don’t know. I need to message her.”

She gave his arm a shove. “Message her then. Don’t let her think you’re not interested.” Emmy’s smiling eyes made everything feel better, and he had to admit he did miss Allie, even if things felt more complicated now. “Why don’t you see if she wants to go out for dinner tonight?” Emmy suggested.

“What will you do?”

“I’m fine on my own.”

“I don’t think I can really leave you alone if you’re ill,” he said pointedly.

“I’ll go to school tomorrow,” she said, her lips twitching nervously.

“How about I call Eva’s mum and have a chat with her about everything ...”

“No way.” Her eyes widened. “You can’t do that. It’s so embarrassing.”

“But she could talk to Eva. I’m sure if the girls know their messages upset you, they’d be more sensitive ...”

“No!” She glared at him. “Promise me you won’t call anyone’s mum.”

“Okay. But why don’t you talk to the girls yourself? That might help.”

“Maybe,” she said. “I’ll think about it.”

“Maybe we can think of something fun for you to do with them too. Make up for the stuff you missed out on.”

“Like what?” she asked suspiciously.

“I don’t know. The cinema? Bowling?”

“Sounds like an eight-year-old’s birthday party.”

“Speaking of birthdays,” he said, “what do you want to do for yours?” It was less than two weeks away and usually she’d have been excitedly planning by now.

“I’ll just have a sleepover.”

“You could also do something with your friends in the afternoon.”

“A sleepover is fine.”

“Okay.” He patted her leg. “Whatever you want. In the meantime, I’ll talk to your mum and sort everything out. Don’t worry about it. You talk to your friends about your birthday. Maybe they have ideas about what you could do as well as a sleepover.”

“Thanks, Dad.” A hint of a smile played at her lips. “So will you see if Allie’s free tonight?”

He got his phone out and felt horribly guilty at the sight of another message from Allie. She wrote that she had a shift at the restaurant but hoped to speak to him later.

“She’s working,” he told Emmy, feeling a rush of disappointment. Having solved one problem in his life, he was suddenly keen to tackle others.

“I’m feeling much better,” Emmy stated with a mischievous grin.

“That’s good.”

She nodded eagerly. “I feel so much better that I’d really like to go out for dinner.”

“Would you now?” He raised an eyebrow. “Would you like to go to the restaurant at the golf club, by any chance?”

“You have the best ideas,” she said mockingly.

CHAPTER 40



In the time that Allie had been in Hope Cove, she hadn't worked a shift where Kevin wasn't at the golf club. Of course, on the day she wanted to speak to him, he was nowhere to be found. Apparently he wouldn't be in at all on Wednesday, which left Allie getting on with her restaurant shift while her brain whirred over her conversation with Phil.

Who on earth were Stephanie Michaels and Jacob Mills? And why were they being paid so much without working? It had crossed her mind that Kevin could be funnelling money out of the business by way of fake employees, but she didn't see him as a likely candidate for embezzlement. Gross incompetence, maybe, but not fraud. But surely he wasn't incompetent enough that he could have accidentally added two employees to the payroll.

The restaurant was quiet, and with Freddie working too, there was far too much downtime for Allie's liking. In a particularly vulnerable moment she messaged Hugh again, then cursed herself. As though two unanswered messages didn't look desperate enough, she'd added a third.

Why wouldn't he reply?

An hour later, she was pouring drinks when her phone lit up with a new message. Seeing it was from Hugh, her heart leaped. Even if he was angry, it would be better than the silent treatment.

The message wasn't angry. He apologised for not being in touch sooner and told her they'd speak soon. It was a little vague but it was better than nothing, and she felt instantly lighter. She'd try calling him after her shift. Hopefully they could chat things through and she'd be reassured that everything was okay between them.

An hour later, she'd just delivered dinner to a couple by the window

when she caught sight of more customers arriving. Turning to greet them, she gave a pleasant smile, before seeing who it was and breaking into an uncontrolled grin.

“Hello!” She strode towards Hugh, then resisted the urge to fling her arms around him and kiss him. It probably wouldn’t be appropriate at work, even if Emmy wasn’t standing beside him. Plus, she still wasn’t sure how things stood between them. He was here though, so that was a good sign. “What are you doing here?”

“We’ve come for dinner,” Emmy said brightly.

“That’s great.” Feeling an uncontrollable rush of joy, Allie beamed at Emmy. “It’s lovely to see you again.”

“You too. Dad said you were working tonight. He thought maybe we should only come for a drink so we don’t annoy you at work, but I thought you might not mind us annoying you.”

“I don’t mind at all.” She caught Hugh’s eye and he smiled sheepishly before she led them to a table near the window. A pang of nerves hit her as they took their seats. “How was Paris?” she asked Emmy.

“It was okay.” She shrugged and opened the menu. “My friends are always jealous that I get to go to Paris so often, but sometimes it gets a bit boring.”

“Going away can be an effort.” She thought back on all the golf tournaments she’d been to as a teenager. While she’d loved the time away and was grateful that she got to do it, it could also be exhausting. “Sometimes it’s nice to chill out at home and not have to do anything.”

“Exactly.” Emmy’s eyes sparkled as she grinned up at Allie.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” Allie said, when a woman at the table nearby waved to get her attention. Having Hugh and Emmy in the restaurant left her slightly self-conscious as she took the dessert order for the woman and the rest of the table, then brought it to the kitchen.

“How’s everything with you?” Hugh asked when she returned to take their food order.

“Fine.” Her brain flashed to her conversation with Phil and she smiled tightly, thinking how much she’d like to chat it through with Hugh.

Not that she could have in front of Emmy, even if she didn’t suddenly have all her tables demanding her attention at once. Things only really quietened down again after Hugh and Emmy had finished eating. Taking the opportunity for a break, she made a beeline for their table and pulled out a

chair.

“Finally, I can sit for a minute,” she said.

“What was your favourite thing to do when you were my age?” Emmy asked.

The question took Allie by surprise. “How do you mean?”

“What did you do with your friends? I’m trying to think of something cool we can do, but everything around here is boring.”

“It’s her birthday next week,” Hugh put in. “It looks as though it’s going to be a sleepover party since all my ideas are boring.”

“I didn’t say they were *all* boring,” Emmy countered. “I’d like to go ice skating, but it takes an hour and a half to drive there. Spending three hours in the car is boring.” She looked to Allie. “What did you do with your friends when you were my age.”

“I was mostly on the golf course,” she said.

Emmy leaned onto the table. “Really?”

“Yeah. My dad owns a golf course in Surrey, so that’s where I grew up. We lived in a cottage on the grounds.”

“So you’re really good at golf?” Emmy asked eagerly.

“I used to be, but I injured my shoulder so I haven’t played for ages.”

“I played golf once,” Emmy said. “Louise took me with her friends in France.”

“Her mum’s partner,” Hugh explained.

“It was really good fun,” Emmy said. “Do you think I could play here one day?”

Allie glanced around. “There’s currently an over-eighteen policy, but I suspect that might change soon.”

“Sounds like you have some inside knowledge,” Hugh said with a flicker of humour in his eyes that immediately made Allie feel better.

“I might,” she agreed coyly.

Emmy rested her elbows on the table. “It’s stupid that you have to be eighteen.”

“I agree,” Allie said.

Hugh screwed his nose up. “I guess for some people part of the appeal of golf is to get away from kids.”

“I’m not saying we should let toddlers run around on the course,” Allie said. “It would be kind of a safety hazard. But young people like Emmy should be able to play. Otherwise how do people even get into golf?”

“Okay,” Hugh said, grinning. “I see I’ve touched a nerve.”

She felt a blush hit her cheeks. “I may have strong opinions on this, but it makes a difference to people’s lives. Emmy already said there isn’t a lot for her and her friends to do around here. It’s not good if young people don’t have productive ways to fill their time.”

“I’m not arguing,” Hugh replied, holding up his hands defensively. “Why do I feel attacked?”

“Sorry.” The gentle amusement in his eyes left her fighting an urge to lean over and kiss him. Instead, she stood up abruptly. “I have an idea. I’ll be right back.”

Before she offered to let Emmy have a go on the driving range, she wanted to check the equipment hadn’t been cleared away and locked up for the night.

In the reception area, Daisy startled at the sight of her. “You made me jump,” she said accusingly.

“What are you doing?” Allie asked. “Why do you look so guilty?”

“I don’t.” Her gaze slid to her computer screen and she quickly minimised the document she’d been working on.

“Was that the greenkeeping schedule?” Allie asked. It held all the information about the work that was being done on the course and wasn’t exactly a confidential document. There shouldn’t be any reason for Daisy to be so cagey about it.

“I was just adding something for Grandad. He asked me to do it before he left today, but I forgot about it until now.” She was talking way too fast and looked increasingly guilty.

“I’m not surprised Ron needs help,” Allie said, keeping her features neutral. “It’s a heck of a lot of work for just one person.”

Daisy scratched at her collarbone. “He manages it fine.”

“Is it normal, though?” she pushed. “For a golf course to have just one greenkeeper?”

“No,” Daisy replied through gritted teeth. “It’s not normal, but my grandad is very good at his job. Why are you asking so many questions?”

Allie felt as though she was on high alert. “I’m only curious,” she said, certain that Daisy was hiding something.

“Don’t you have work to do in the restaurant?”

“It’s quiet now. There are only a few people left and Freddie is getting their bill. I was wondering if I could take Emmy out to hit a few balls on the

driving range.”

“Who?”

“Hugh’s daughter.”

“Oh. Kids aren’t really allowed.”

“It doesn’t really matter though, does it?”

Daisy looked torn. “I guess not. As soon as the restaurant is empty I’ll be locking up though, so don’t be long.”

“We won’t.” Back in the restaurant, she told Freddie her plans before beckoning for Hugh and Emmy to come with her.

“Where are we going?” Emmy asked, striding along beside Allie.

“I thought you might like to hit a few balls.”

“Really? Can I?”

“Yes.” She caught Daisy watching them warily as they walked back through reception, then out the back door to the driving range.

“It’s so cool out here,” Emmy said, taking a club from Allie and looking in awe at the floodlit stretch of grass.

“I think so,” Allie agreed, pausing to take it in herself before grabbing a bucket of balls and heading for the nearest mat. “If you wanted to, you could bring your friends up here on your birthday. Hit some balls and have dinner in the restaurant.”

“Really?” Emmy asked.

Allie smiled at her enthusiasm. “Have a think about it, but I could definitely organise that for you if you want.”

“That might be fun.” Emmy looked to Hugh and then down at the ball that Allie had placed on the tee. “Can I just hit it?”

“Go for it,” Allie said. “Do you know how to stand?”

“I think I remember.” She stood squarely, placing her feet apart, then carefully positioning her hands before looking to Allie for approval.

“It seems as though you had a good teacher.”

“Louise is really good at golf.” Emmy’s features morphed in concentration as she looked down at the ball. She swung hard and missed.

“Give it another try,” Allie said. “Keep your eyes on the ball.”

While Emmy positioned herself for another swing, Allie took a few steps over to Hugh. “Are you okay?” she asked. “You’re very quiet.”

“I’m fine. It’s just been a weird couple of days.”

Allie moved closer again but paused to watch Emmy swing. This time she hit the ball, albeit at an odd angle, sending it off to the left. She looked

pleased with herself all the same. “Can I try again?” she asked.

“There’s a whole bucket of balls,” Allie pointed out. “Help yourself.”

She watched quietly for a moment, then shifted her weight, leaning until the back of her hand brushed against the back of Hugh’s hand. “I’m really glad you came,” she said quietly. “It kind of feels as though you’re annoyed with me though.”

“I’m ... um ...” He paused to smile at Emmy when she sent a ball flying. “You surprised me,” he finally said. “I think I’m still trying to get my head around it.”

Allie nodded.

“I wish you’d told me earlier,” Hugh said.

“I wasn’t trying to be deceitful,” she whispered out of the side of her mouth. “But if I’m honest, it also felt nice to keep things simple for a while. I enjoyed spending time with you and just being me.”

“Except you weren’t being you,” he said flatly.

Allie cast him a sidelong look. “I felt more like me than I have in a long time.”

He didn’t reply as another thwack rang out. “This is fun,” Emmy exclaimed loudly, then caught Hugh’s eye. “Do you want a turn?” When he hesitated, Emmy thrust the club at him. “Go on.”

Reluctantly, he moved to the mat. “I don’t mean to brag,” he said. “But I’ve played mini golf about three times in my life, so don’t be shocked by my golf skills.” He shuffled his feet around, then looked at his grip on the club. “I have no idea what I’m doing,” he said to Allie.

She shrugged. “Swing the club and try to hit the ball.”

“That sounds very easy,” he said, then wasted no time in drawing the club back and swinging it clumsily. It connected with a thwack that sent the ball in a long arc. “I hit it!” His face transformed with childlike enthusiasm.

“I think that’s called beginner’s luck,” Allie said, but couldn’t help but grin at Hugh’s excitement.

“I thought I did well.” He leaned on the club and eyed her cockily. “But I suppose you’re about to show us how it’s really done.”

“No.” Her smile stretched wider at the teasing in his eyes. “I don’t play any more.”

“Surely one shot won’t hurt,” he coaxed.

Her hand went to her shoulder.

“Go on,” Emmy said. “Have a go.”

Hugh's gaze shifted to his daughter. "Allie used to play professionally."

"Really?" Emmy beamed. "You have to show us then."

With a sigh, Allie took the club from Hugh, enjoying the way his fingers brushed hers as she did so. "One shot," she said with a reproachful look.

"Make it a good one then," Hugh replied as he retreated to stand with Emmy.

Allie got herself into position, then frowned down at the club. "These need replacing," she said. "The grip's horrible."

"Worked fine for me," Hugh said smugly.

Allie shook her head, then inhaled deeply as she looked out at the grass then down at the ball. Having fully expected pain, the ease of her swing came as a surprise as she clipped the ball in a perfect arc. Vaguely, she was aware of Hugh and Emmy exclaiming behind her, but she couldn't take her eyes from the ball as it plopped down in the distance.

"Not bad," Hugh said, his hand landing on her shoulder to break Allie's trance.

"It was a really good hit," she said, her voice sounding strange in her ears.

"You didn't hurt your shoulder, did you?" Hugh eyed her with concern.

"No." She shook her head. "It's fine." Totally fine. Which felt very strange.

"Your turn again," she said, swallowing hard as she handed the club to Emmy.

"Is everything all right?" Hugh asked as they gave Emmy some space.

"Yes." She scratched at her temple. "I just wasn't sure I'd ever be able to do that again. It was my favourite thing in the world and now ..." She forced a smile. "I mean, one swing doesn't mean anything but ... it felt good. That's all." Actually, that wasn't all. She felt a lot better than just good.

The door swung open and Daisy stuck her head out. "You've got like five minutes, okay?"

"Yeah, thanks." Allie kept her eyes on the door after it swung closed behind Daisy.

"How long are you going to keep your secret from everyone here?" Hugh asked quietly.

"Not long," she said, her eyes not leaving the door. "I'll tell everyone soon."

First, she needed to figure out which member of staff had been stealing money from them for the last year. And how on earth they'd been getting

away with it.

CHAPTER 41



Confronting Daisy that evening wasn't something Allie had planned. But when she said goodnight to Hugh and Emmy and found the rest of the staff had left, she had the urge to seize the opportunity for a chat.

Still, she wasn't entirely sure how to go about it.

"You can go," Daisy said impatiently while Allie loitered by the reception desk. "I just need to do a quick walk around and make sure all the lights are off and everything is in order."

"Do you often lock up on your own?" Allie asked, wondering just how much access Daisy had to the business. Could she let herself into the office and have access to Kevin's computer? His email account? It seemed unlikely that Daisy could get away with emailing Phil as Kevin without ever getting caught out ... but also not impossible.

"Sometimes," Daisy said with a sigh. "I'm really tired. Could you do me a favour and let me get on instead of holding me up with questions?"

Allie locked eyes with Daisy, as though she might find the truth there.

"I have another question," she said just as Daisy began to walk away.

With a sigh, Daisy slowly turned back to Allie.

"Do you know who that is?" Allie asked, pointing at the picture of herself on the back wall.

"Yeah," Daisy said slowly. "It's Alegra Harris. Her dad owns this place."

Allie's heart began to beat faster at the thought of outing herself. "She's part owner too," she murmured.

"And a friend of yours, I guess?"

Allie frowned. "What?"

"Your dad and her dad are friends, right?"

“Oh. Um ...”

“Everyone thinks I’m being paranoid, thinking you came to spy on us, but it was pretty obvious to me. If not outright spy, then I knew you’d be reporting back.”

“Because I know the owner,” Allie said, kicking herself for not figuring out sooner why Daisy was so cagey around her. It made even more sense now ... of course Daisy would be paranoid. She had something to hide.

“I hope you’ve been telling them that the staff work hard and are good at their jobs,” Daisy all but snarled.

“I ...” This would be a good time for Allie to take control of the conversation, but she still wasn’t sure how to navigate the situation. “Look closer at the picture,” she said, moving around the counter to stand beside it.

It took Daisy a moment to move. “What am I looking for?” she asked as she stared at it.

“It’s me,” Allie said, confused that Daisy couldn’t see that.

“What?” Daisy tilted her head and shuffled closer. “That’s ...” She straightened up, looked at Allie, then back at the photo. “You’re Alegra Harris?”

“Yes. I own the golf club. With my dad.”

Daisy edged backwards, and Allie could almost see the cogs of her mind whirring. “So you *were* outright spying?”

“Yes. And it’s a good thing I was.”

“Is that even legal?” Daisy asked, her voice rising in both volume and pitch.

“You can’t seriously be worried about whether what I did was legal?”

“It definitely wasn’t moral,” Daisy said sternly.

Allie couldn’t help but laugh. “I don’t think you get to judge anyone’s morals, not given what’s going on here.”

Daisy’s eyes snapped to hers and flashed with panic. “You know?”

“You must have known you’d get found out eventually.”

“Don’t act as though I’m the problem here. If you were running your business properly, things would never have got to this.”

“That’s not really a good enough excuse ...”

“Well you would say that,” Daisy snapped. “You drive a Porsche while you pay hardworking staff minimum wage.” She shook her head, a look of disgust on her face that made Allie concerned she might be some kind of psychopath. Surely she couldn’t genuinely think that what she did was okay,

under any circumstances. “I guess I’ll leave you to lock up.” With a long cold glare, Daisy slammed her keys on the counter then stalked out of the front door.

For a moment, Allie stayed rooted to the spot, then finally released a long breath and tried to get her brain to process what had just happened and figure out what she needed to do next. For the sake of her dad’s stress levels she’d like to keep him out of it, but knew that wouldn’t be possible. There was no way she could keep it from him. Apart from anything else she wasn’t at all sure what the process was for something like this. Embezzling money was a crime, so she supposed she’d need to involve the police.

Her phone rang, putting a stop to her racing thoughts.

“Your timing is perfect,” Allie told Bella through the phone. “You won’t believe the day I’ve had.”

“I’d like to say you won’t believe my day either, but I imagine you know why I’m calling.”

Allie could hear the edge of excitement in her cousin’s voice and racked her brain for what she could be talking about. “You may need to give me a clue,” she said after a moment of loaded silence.

“Alegra!” Bella giggled delightedly. “I’ve been offered the permanent position of general manager at Fox Hill Golf Club.”

“Oh! Right, yes! Congratulations.”

“Thank you. What did you think I was talking about?”

“My head is all over the place,” she said, resting her elbows on the desk.

“What’s going on? Have you told everyone that you own the club?”

“A couple of people know. Not everyone. I found out a member of staff has been embezzling significant amounts of money.”

“No way. Are you serious?”

As Allie gave Bella a rundown of the situation, she paced the foyer. Then she wandered back out to the driving range where the powerful lights illuminated the balls that Emmy had hit out onto the grass. Absently, she grabbed a bucket of balls while continuing to chat with Bella, who listened with awe and the occasional murmur of disbelief.

“Are you sure it was just Daisy?” Bella finally asked. “Maybe Kevin is in on it too, and they’re splitting the money.”

“It’s possible. Logistically, it seems much more plausible if Kevin was involved. But it’s also hard to imagine him going along with it. Verity called him a wet blanket, which sums him up perfectly.”

“You need to tell your dad. There’ll need to be some sort of official investigation, right?”

“I guess so. I’ll call Dad in the morning and see how we should proceed. I’ll also speak to Kevin tomorrow and get his reaction on it all.”

“Is that wise?”

Allie was distracted for a moment as she switched her phone to speaker and set it aside. Then she set a ball on the tee and lined herself up for a shot, loving the feel of the club in her hands.

“How do you mean?” she asked.

“I mean is it really safe for you to be questioning people alone?”

“I think so. I’d say Daisy’s more an opportunistic thief than anything else. I don’t think she’s dangerous. Besides, she made a somewhat valid point about how much we pay her. She’s great at her job, and she works hard for minimum wage.”

“Please don’t be sympathetic. If she felt hard done by, she could have asked for a raise, not stolen from the business.”

“For all I know, she did ask for a raise, and I’m not saying what she did was excusable. I guess I’m just kicking myself for turning a blind eye to a business that I own. Whether I wanted it or not, this place was partly my responsibility.”

“You’re there now,” Bella said. “That’s the main thing. This is all crazy stressful, but it will be okay in the end. I’m worried about you being alone there though.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Where are you now?”

“In the clubhouse.”

“Your accommodation is separate from the clubhouse, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. But I guess there’s no reason I can’t move into the flat above the clubhouse now.”

“Don’t,” Bella said, a warning note to her voice.

“Why not?”

“What if Daisy comes back later intent on burning the place to the ground?”

Allie took a practice swing. “That seems a little melodramatic.”

“How did she seem when she left you?”

Allie winced. “Pretty angry.”

“Angry people are unpredictable. Don’t sleep at the clubhouse. In fact,

could you stay somewhere else altogether? What about Hugh's place?"

"No," she said automatically. "His daughter's there. Plus, we still haven't worked through the whole thing about me not telling him I own the club."

"So he knows now?"

"Yes, but with Emmy coming home and all this business with the club we haven't had a chance to talk it over properly."

"But he's okay about it?"

"I think he will be, yeah. But I need to give him space, so I can't stay there. I really think you're overreacting anyway. I'll be fine here."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Also, I wanted to tell you something else that happened today."

"What?"

"Hang on a sec ... listen to this ..." Allie drew the golf club back and this time put more power behind her swing. The crack of the club against the ball was wholly satisfying.

"What was that?" Bella asked, while Allie balanced another ball on the tee.

"That ..." She paused and swung again, then watched the ball fly. "That was the sound of me at the driving range."

"Who are you with?"

"Just me."

"That was you hitting the ball?"

"Yes," she said, then sent another bright white ball out into the green expanse. "That was me hitting the ball with no pain."

"No way!" Bella sounded genuinely delighted. "That's amazing."

"It feels pretty great," Allie agreed.

They continued to chat about how brilliant it was until Allie had gone through all the balls in the bucket. She was tempted to fetch another until Bella gently suggested she shouldn't overdo it. As enjoyable as it was, she decided there'd be plenty of time for it later. The thought of walking the course and playing a full eighteen holes popped into her head, and she felt a spark of hope.

That was quickly overtaken by a sense of foreboding once she'd got off the phone and walked around the building, turning off lights and trying not to let her imagination run wild. Her cousin was prone to blowing things out of proportion, so she really shouldn't take any heed of her worries about Allie being alone there.

That's what she told herself as she locked the front door and set off across the car park. Previously, it had never felt even remotely eerie, but tonight she kept glancing over her shoulder and looking closely at every shadow that caught her eye. She felt like a nervous wreck by the time she reached her door.

Scuttling inside, she locked the door behind her and sank onto her bed. She suspected she wasn't going to get much sleep that night.

CHAPTER 42



After tossing and turning for most of the night, Allie had finally slipped into a deep sleep when the banging on her door started. Given how twitchy she'd been at the slightest sound, it was surprising how the noise seemed to drift through a fog of sleep to reach her ears in a muffled state.

Sleep had taken all her apprehension with it, and she moved to peer out of the window without hesitation.

"I need to speak to you," Daisy called, catching sight of her.

Allie moved to open the door. "I need to wake up and get dressed, then I can meet you over at the clubhouse ..."

"No," Daisy said, stepping inside. "I need to speak to you now."

Registering Daisy's red, puffy eyes, Allie nodded, then tipped her head towards the chair.

Instead of sitting, Daisy paced the room while Allie remained standing near the door.

"Grandad can't lose his job," Daisy blurted. "It's not fair. He's worked here for so long and he really is great at his job. Maybe he's not as physically fit as he used to be, but even if you replace him, no one person can manage the golf course alone. No offence, but you're clueless to think that."

She paused, whipping her eyes to Allie. "Anyway, my point is that if you want to fire me, go ahead, but please let Grandad keep his job. Because if he loses his job, he loses his house, which I realise is probably what you want, but it's not fair. He's lived there for fifteen years. It's his home. He doesn't have anywhere else to live, and he doesn't have savings because he spent all his money looking after me. So I'm begging you not to take his house away."

"Wait ..." Allie pushed her fingers into her temples. "I only just woke up

and you're talking really fast."

"Sorry, but I just can't stand the thought of you kicking Grandad out of his house."

"Does Ron know about the embezzling? Was he involved?"

"The what?"

"The money you stole."

Daisy looked blank for a moment, then her eyes bulged. "You're not serious ... you're accusing me of stealing?"

"Technically, it's embezzlement," Allie said, trying to get her brain to wake up and function properly.

"Like sneaking money out of the business?" Daisy stared at Allie, then her face cracked into a smile. "Two small points," she said mockingly. "When the heck would I have time to do that? And don't you think if I was stealing money, I might actually *have* some money?"

Since Daisy clearly wasn't going to sit, Allie sank onto the chair. "I'm confused. Last night you said ..." She racked her brain. "What did you think we were talking about last night?"

"About me helping Grandad with the greenkeeping."

"Why would I be bothered by that? I mean, you shouldn't have to do it, but there's no reason you'd be in trouble for it."

Daisy stood dead still, pinning Allie with her gaze. "Because when the other greenkeepers were let go, Grandad was told he should be able to manage the work himself and if he couldn't he was out of a job. Same for me on reception."

"Who said that?" Allie asked. Presumably it would be the same person who was funnelling money out for phantom employees.

"The owners said so." Daisy glared at her. "You."

"I would never say that. It's ridiculous to think that one person could do those jobs."

"Maybe it wasn't you directly, but your dad. He said the business wasn't doing well and they needed to make cuts." Her eyes darted wildly around the room. "I felt terrible when Cynthia got fired. She was so good at the job, and she'd trained me up and was lovely to work with."

Allie looked at her sadly. "As far as my dad's concerned, the staff quit and were then replaced. We've been paying salaries for those positions. The top salaries after Kevin," she said pointedly.

"I don't understand," Daisy said, worrying at her bottom lip.

“Me neither.” Allie squeezed the bridge of her nose. “It must have been Kevin,” she mumbled. “It can’t have been though. Maybe it was a mistake. Maybe we just never stopped paying the old members of staff.” It didn’t explain the confusion over whether they’d quit or were fired, but it seemed more likely than Kevin stealing from them.

“What was the name of the receptionist who left?” she asked, before realising that Daisy had already mentioned her. “Cynthia?”

“Yes,” Daisy said, then moved closer when Allie slid her laptop along the desk. “I have the names of the people we’ve been paying, but I don’t think it was Cynthia ...” She brought up the file. “Stephanie Michaels and Jacob Mills. Do those names ring any bells with you?”

“No.” Daisy’s brow wrinkled. “Except ... No that can’t be right ... it must be a coincidence.”

“What?” Allie asked, swivelling in her seat.

“Kevin wouldn’t steal from the business,” Daisy said with a faraway look. “He’s so nice. He’s lovely to me and Grandad so there’s no way—”

“Daisy!” Allie snapped. “Do you know the names?”

“I don’t know. It’s just that Kevin’s girlfriend was called Steph. They broke up though, I think. She used to hang out here a bit. I couldn’t stand her. But she also had a son ... he was around eighteen or nineteen. He’d hang out at the bar sometimes and he always made leery comments at me. He’s called Jake, but that’s probably just a coincidence, right?”

Allie patted the edge of the bed and Daisy sat down. “I’m guessing it’s probably not a coincidence.”

“I can find out,” Daisy said. “I think Jake friended me on social media. I accepted the request before I realised how awful he was.” She fell quiet as she searched on her phone. “Jake Mills.” Her head shot up to Allie. “Oh my god.”

“Maybe he’s not such a wet blanket after all,” Allie muttered, still not quite able to process the fact that Kevin could be so devious.

“Oh my god,” Daisy whispered again as tears began to slip down her cheeks.

“Hey,” Allie said, taking Daisy’s hand. “Everything will be okay.”

“But I trusted him,” Daisy said desperately. “I thought he was a nice guy. He was always saying how terrible the owners are, and he was so grateful to me for working so hard ... but all that time he was lying? And profiting from my hard work?”

“It seems like it.” Certainly, all the signs pointed to Kevin.

“So I’m not going to lose my job?” Daisy asked, her shoulders shuddering as she cried.

“No,” Allie said, squeezing her hand. “You’re going to get a pay rise and a colleague to share your workload.”

She cried harder at that. “And Grandad can keep his house?”

“Yes.”

She sniffed. “Even though he struggles with all the physical work?”

“We’ll figure something out. I promise.”

Daisy dropped her head into her hands and sobbed. All Allie could think, as she rubbed Daisy’s shoulder, was that if she’d have taken an interest in the business sooner, they wouldn’t be in this position.

“I’m sorry,” Daisy said, sitting up straight and using her sleeve to mop up her tears. “I’ve been so scared of losing my job and of Grandad losing the house.”

“I promise neither of those things will happen,” Allie told her. “I’m sorry you’ve been under all that pressure.”

“You really think Kevin did this?” Daisy asked. “I can’t believe it.”

“I think he did.” Allie wanted to seem completely in control of the situation to put Daisy at ease, but her mind was racing with what she needed to do. “What time would Kevin normally get to work today?”

Daisy checked her watch. “Between nine and ten.”

“That gives us a bit of time, at least ...”

“I don’t think I can face him,” Daisy said.

“I’m hoping you won’t need to. Do you think you can work today? Or do you need some time off?”

“I can work,” she said defiantly.

“Good.” Allie patted her arm. “I’m going to need you for a little while, if you can manage it. But I promise that as soon as we have everything straightened out and have a full staff again, you’re taking some holiday time. We owe you money for all the extra hours you’ve worked too. Did you also pay Freddie to help you?”

“No. He helped me but he wouldn’t take any money for it.”

“At some point we’ll sit down and figure out how much you’re both owed for the extra hours.”

“You don’t need to do that.”

“It’s only what you’re owed. You’re not allowed to argue with me about

it.”

“Thank you.” She sniffed.

“It’s me who should be thanking you. You’re amazing at your job, by the way.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good thing,” Daisy said. “If I wasn’t so good at my job, Kevin would never have got away with this.”

Allie shook her head. “None of this is your fault. The only person really at fault here is Kevin. And probably his girlfriend and her son.” She opened her arms to give Daisy a hug, and they embraced tightly.

“I need to go and tell Grandad all of this before I open the club,” Daisy said. “At least it’s raining, so it shouldn’t be too busy today.”

Allie nodded. “Go and tell Ron. Then why don’t the two of you meet me in the office over at the clubhouse in an hour?”

“What are you going to do about Kevin?”

“I’m going to tell him not to come into work today, then I guess I’ll need to call the police and speak to our lawyer. And talk to my dad. Once we know for definite what’s happened, I’ll need to let the rest of the staff know. And I’ll also need to get in touch with the employees who were let go.”

“Will you offer them their jobs back?” Daisy’s eyes brightened.

“I guess so. They were good workers?”

“Yes. Can I message Cynthia already? She’ll be over the moon.”

Allie nodded. “Tell her she’s welcome to come in and speak to me, otherwise she can expect to hear from me later.”

After closing the door on Daisy, Allie let out a long breath.

She had the feeling it was going to be a very long day.

CHAPTER 43



Several times over the course of the day, Allie longed to be out in the restaurant taking orders and chatting with customers. The phone calls and messages had been constant throughout the day, and she wouldn't even have found time to eat if it weren't for Daisy depositing a plate of food on the desk in front of her at lunchtime.

She was on the phone to the local police officer for the third time that day when a quiet knock came and the door eased open. If it was Daisy with a coffee, Allie would struggle not to kiss her.

Even better, it was Hugh with a coffee, and her whole body sagged at the sight of him.

"I can go again," he mouthed, setting the mug on the desk when he saw she was on the phone.

Shaking her head, Allie walked around the desk and took his hand, making certain he didn't go anywhere. It only took a minute for her to finish the call, then she set her phone aside and slumped against Hugh's chest.

"I'm so happy to see you," she said. The feel of his arms around her was exactly the comfort she needed.

"Your messages seemed a little frantic earlier and then I tried calling a couple of times but the line was always busy. Daisy just filled me in on everything. It's crazy."

With a sigh, Allie led him to the couch at the side of the room and they sat close together.

"My day has been insane," she said. "One phone call after another ... police and lawyers and ex-employees."

"But Kevin's admitted to everything?" Hugh asked, draping an arm

around her shoulders.

“Yes. He admitted it as soon as I spoke to him. He said it had been his girlfriend’s idea and he’d gone along with it to help her pay off some debts. Apparently he wanted to put a stop to it, but his girlfriend insisted they continue. I’ve also had an angry phone call from her saying it was all Kevin.”

“Wow,” Hugh said. “So what happens now?”

Allie shrugged. “There’ll be an investigation and a court case. They’re probably looking at prison time.”

Hugh looked utterly speechless, which was pretty much how Allie felt. She couldn’t comprehend it was real.

“You look exhausted,” he said, when she rested her head on his shoulder.

“I am. I feel as though I could sleep for about a week, but I still have about a million things to do.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t even know. I need to take over the running of the club for a start. Although Daisy seems to have everything in hand for now.” She shook her head. “Poor Daisy. She’s had a rough time of it.”

“She seemed pretty relaxed just now,” Hugh remarked.

“She’s relieved she’s not losing her job,” Allie said. “Which isn’t something she’d ever have had to worry about if I’d kept an eye on things.”

“You can’t blame yourself,” Hugh said.

“The business belongs to me, which means it’s my responsibility. The employees were my responsibility, and I looked the other way like some spoiled little princess.”

“I think you’re being too hard on yourself,” he said, holding her tighter.

Allie untangled herself from his embrace to look him in the eyes. “We still need to talk properly. I haven’t forgotten that. If you’re annoyed with me you have every right.”

“I’m not so much annoyed as ...” He sucked in a deep breath. “Yeah, okay I was annoyed. It felt as though you’d lied to me, and even if you didn’t outright lie, I keep looking back on our conversations and thinking that everything was a bit ... not quite how I thought it was.”

Allie wanted to jump in and argue but held back, knowing that her being defensive wasn’t going to help matters. Plus, it was difficult to argue with him when he was right.

“I keep thinking about conversations we had ... like when we were making the plans for the golf course, and I suggested that you could show the

plans to the owners ...”

“I almost told you then,” she said weakly. “But I knew it would change things, and I was just enjoying being with you too much.”

“I kind of get it,” he said, forehead wrinkling. “I don’t suppose it matters, as long as you’re not hiding any other deep dark secrets?”

“Nothing. I promise.” She ran her finger through his hair, which was perfectly neat as always. “Did you get a haircut?”

“Yes.” He ducked away self-consciously.

“It looks good,” she said. “I also think it would look good longer ...” She grimaced. “I have a confession to make ...”

“You just promised there were no more secrets,” he said with a hint of an eye roll.

“It’s not a secret, only that I was talking to Verity and she mentioned some stuff about your mum.”

“Ah.” He sighed. “What did she say?”

Allie took a moment, trying to figure out how to be diplomatic. “That your mum was controlling and ...”

“Mean?” Hugh suggested.

“She didn’t say that.” Not so succinctly anyway.

“She’s not in my life any more,” Hugh said, lifting a shoulder in a shrug. “And it’s better that way.”

“I guess after hearing about your mum, it made more sense that you need to have things just so.”

His brows drew together. “How do you mean?”

“The way you like everything to be neat and tidy – in your house, and also with your appearance ...”

The blank look he gave her made her nervous and she wished she hadn’t said anything.

“You think I’m the way I am because of how my mum was?” Hugh asked.

“Maybe.” She swallowed hard. “But also maybe not. I don’t know.”

Hugh held her gaze for a moment then leaned forwards, propping his elbows on his knees as he rubbed at his temples. “Oh my god,” he said. “How did I never see that?”

For lack of anything helpful to say, she rubbed gently between his shoulder blades.

“Why did it never occur to me that all that crap might have left a lasting

impression?” With his eyes fixed on the floor, he stayed silent for a moment before huffing out a laugh. “I kind of thought that cutting her out of my life meant she was out of my life, but I guess she’s been here all along – telling me to get my hair cut and make sure my clothes are ironed and my shirts tucked in and my house is spotless and that I’m clean-shaven at all times and god knows what else.” He scrubbed his hands over his face. “Bloody hell.”

“Sorry,” Allie whispered in his ear.

“You will be when I send you the bill for all the therapy I’m going to need. You just pulled on a thread that might unravel my entire adult life. I was blissfully ignorant, and now I don’t even know who I am.”

“I can help you out there,” Allie said, pressing her cheek into his shoulder. “You’re a wonderfully kind and compassionate man with great hair and a gorgeous smile.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” he said, straightening up and stretching his neck with a low groan.

“Are we okay?” she asked seriously.

“I don’t know about you,” he said, cocking an eyebrow. “I’m not sure *I* am at this moment.”

She gave him a sympathetic smile. “I meant is everything okay between us? Everything felt so easy and perfect and then the last couple of weeks have been chaos.”

“They have been pretty eventful,” he said, slouching back on the couch and taking her hand in his. “I guess things won’t be so straightforward from now on, what with Emmy home and you having a company to run. But I think we’ll be all right ...” The uncertainty in his eyes wasn’t overly reassuring.

“You don’t sound too sure,” she said, trying to keep her tone light.

“I guess I just worry ...” He looked down at their intertwined fingers. “Are you planning on sticking around?”

Her chin jutted out and she blinked a couple of times as she waited for his words to sink in.

“When we first met,” he said, “you weren’t sure of your plans, which didn’t seem to matter when we were just having fun so I didn’t really think about it. But now I realise that you really weren’t planning on staying for long, were you?”

“I wasn’t,” she said. “But my plans changed. I’m staying here. At least for now. I told my dad I’m not going back to Surrey. He’s already arranged

for my cousin to take over my role at the golf club there. I can't say what will happen long term, but for now I'm exactly where I want to be."

Hugh's lips pulled to a slow smile as his hand slipped to the back of her neck and drew her to him. She'd just caught the hint of coffee on his lips when a knock came at the door.

"Sorry," Allie said, pulling away as the door slowly opened and a blonde-haired woman stepped hesitantly into view.

"Hi," she said. "Daisy told me I should come back here. I'm Cynthia. We spoke on the phone earlier."

"Yes." Allie stood up in a rush, extending her hand as she approached the woman. "Thanks so much for coming in."

"Is it a bad time?" she asked.

"I was just going," Hugh said, smiling at her as he passed.

"Take a seat," Allie told Cynthia. "I'll be with you in one minute." In the hallway, her fingers curled around Hugh's. "She used to work on reception," she whispered. "We fired her. Kevin did," she corrected. "I'm hoping she'll be keen to come back. This shouldn't take long. You can hang out in the bar and wait if you want."

"I need to go anyway. I'm picking Emmy up, then we're meeting Leo and Damian for dinner in the pub." He stepped into her personal space. "Can we find some time for ourselves sometime soon, though?"

"I'd really like that." She winced, knowing that the golf club was going to demand most of her attention for a while.

"Emmy's staying at a friend's place tomorrow," Hugh said, hands resting casually at her hips. "I could come over here and we can hang out when you've finished working."

"That would be perfect." She pushed up on her toes to give him a quick peck. "I can't wait."

CHAPTER 44



Hugh messaged Emmy to say he was on his way, so she was waiting for him when he pulled up at Eva's house.

"How was your day?" he asked.

She shoved her schoolbag in the footwell of the passenger seat. "Did you know that Allie owns the golf club?" she asked, eyes sparkling eagerly.

He frowned. "Yes."

"Did you know that her full name is Alegra Harris and that she's famous?"

"I don't think she's famous. She used to be a professional golf player. I told you that the other night."

"She's totally famous." Emmy thrust her phone at him and he raised an eyebrow at a picture of Allie with a young, brown-haired guy.

"What's that?" Hugh asked, pulling out of the cul-de-sac.

Emmy's eyes bulged. "It's Allie with Alasdair King."

Slowly, he shook his head. "He's a singer, right?"

"Yes! Dad! He's amazing." She turned the phone, holding it at an angle so they could both see the screen. "There are more celebrities. She plays golf with them. Her Instagram account is full of photos of her with famous people." Trailing her finger up the screen, she scrolled through the photos.

"She was a social media influencer," Hugh said.

"I know." Emmy kept her eyes on the screen. "She has like two million followers. How crazy is that?"

"Pretty crazy," he agreed vaguely. "How did you know all of this?"

"I just looked her up."

"Why?"

“Oh!” She looked up as though remembering something. “Eva’s mum is friends with Jenny who works in the kitchen at the golf club.”

“Right.” Hugh sighed. Village gossip at its finest. Not that he could really blame anyone for spreading the story around. If he wasn’t so embroiled in it, he’d find it fascinating too.

Emmy smiled delightedly. “Do you know that the manager of the golf course was stealing money? Allie was pretending to be a waitress and she uncovered it.”

“I know,” he said wearily.

“Eva’s mum said it’s unethical that she pretended to be a waitress so she could spy on the staff, but I think it’s cool ...” Finally, she shifted her eyes from the phone and looked up at Hugh. “You could have told me, you know? I guess you’d promised to keep Allie’s secret but I wouldn’t have told anyone.” She grimaced. “Actually, I’m not sure I could have kept it from the girls. It’s so cool.”

“Yeah,” Hugh muttered.

“Do you think Allie can invite Alasdair King to be at the golf club for my birthday party?”

Hugh shook his head. “I doubt it.”

“I’ll ask her. I can’t wait for my birthday now. The girls are super excited about the golf, especially now we know who Allie really is. Should we call her Alegra from now on?”

“I don’t know.” He sighed as he pulled into a parking spot near the pub.

“I’ll ask her that as well.” Emmy continued chatting away as they walked inside, then gained volume once she had a captive audience. “Do you know Allie’s famous?” she asked, plonking herself on a chair between Leo and Damian. Amy was there too, her head resting on Damian’s shoulder as she snuggled at his side.

Leo bounced Alice on his knee. “We seem to have been hearing all about Allie today, but no one has mentioned her being famous.”

“She’s not,” Hugh said, wishing he knew for a fact that was true. She’d sworn there were no more secrets, but he was beginning to feel doubtful about that.

“She has a lot of famous friends, anyway.” Emmy held up her phone as proof.

“Is that Josh Bane?” Amy asked, leaning forwards. “From Ghost Moon?”

“Yes,” Emmy replied excitedly. “There’s also a picture of her with

Alasdair King. I love him.”

“He’s very cute,” Amy agreed, then grinned when Damian raised his eyebrows. “Brilliant musician, is what I meant to say!”

“Where’s Caitlin?” Hugh asked, sitting beside Leo and taking Alice from him for a cuddle.

“Staying at her place tonight.”

Hugh nodded, deciding not to add anything more. Clearly he still hadn’t got round to asking her to move in. “And the boys?” he asked, looking to Amy and Damian.

“My parents have taken them for the weekend,” Damian said, his lips twitching at the corners.

Hugh grinned. “You’re missing them already, I take it?”

“We’re not quite sure how we’ll survive the weekend,” Amy joked.

Damian’s features turned serious. “How’s everything with Allie?”

Hugh had kept them up to date via messages, so they knew all the major points. “Okay, I think.” Though he was currently itching to run a quick internet search to see what else he might find out about her. “I went up to the golf club earlier. She seemed pretty stressed but working her way through everything.”

Amy leaned on the table. “I can’t believe the manager got away with stealing money for a year. It’s nuts.”

“Yep,” Hugh agreed, then tilted his head as Jack arrived and hovered over him.

“I’ll trade you a baby for a pint,” he said, setting a beer in front of Hugh.

Hugh looked at Alice, then at the condensation running down the side of the glass. “Sorry,” he said, nuzzling Alice’s cheek with his nose. “It’s been a long week.” He raised his arms and handed her to Jack, who jiggled her until she squealed in delight.

“Just taking her to say hello to her bestie.”

Emmy turned in her seat and waved at Jack’s wife, who stood at the end of the bar with their baby boy in her arms. “Emily’s here,” she said, standing up. “I’m going to say hi.”

“She could have sat with us,” Hugh said, raising a hand to wave across the room.

“She reckons she’s not staying long,” Jack said. “Just came to flirt with the barman, apparently.” He tickled Alice’s tummy and wandered away.

“I might go and say hi to Emily too,” Amy said.

“Haven’t you spent like half the week with her?” Damian asked.

“Yes.” She paused with a hand on his shoulder. “But we were working.”

“That’s what you tell me,” he replied, shooting her a playful look.

Once it was just the three of them, Leo turned to Hugh. “So how’s everything really?”

“I have no idea.” Hugh pulled his phone out and tapped Allie’s full name into a search engine. “Bloody hell,” he said, sighing at the sheer number of results it generated. “Maybe Emmy’s right about her being famous. She told me she was a professional golfer and a social media influencer.”

“And it didn’t occur to you to look her up?” Damian asked.

“Obviously not.”

“It’s cool that she owns the golf club,” Leo said. “I reckon having a rich girlfriend will suit you.”

Hugh ignored him entirely as he clicked into an article about Alegra Harris. His eyes skimmed over the headline and the accompanying text.

“Oh, wow,” he said flatly.

“What now?” Damian asked.

“She’s not just a professional golfer,” he said. “She’s like the best golfer in the world. Or she was.”

“She didn’t mention that?” Leo asked, then tilted his head. “To be fair, it would probably have sounded a bit braggy.”

Again, Hugh was too engrossed in the article to pay his friends much attention. Finally, his head snapped up. “According to this, her and a few other female golfers challenged the top male golfers to a tournament. It sounds as though it started as a bit of a joke on social media, but the men accepted and the media got wind of it. They set up this friendly tournament with a selection of the world’s best ranked players. Male and female. That’s when Allie got Porsche to give her a car. There was a lot of media around it.”

“I think I remember that,” Damian said. “It rings a vague bell.”

“It was also the tournament when she injured her shoulder.” Hugh swore quietly. “No wonder she was so upset. She wasn’t just at the height of her career, she was about to be crowned the world’s best golfer. Unofficially, at least.”

“Yeah. That would be gutting,” Leo said.

“And now she might be able to play again,” Hugh murmured to himself, then caught his friend’s quizzical looks. “The other night we were messing around at the driving range. I didn’t realise what a big deal it was for her to

be able to make a shot without pain.”

“That’s cool,” Leo said. “It would be great if you were dating a sports star. Way better if she were a footballer or an athlete competing in the Olympics, but a golfer would be all right. Not quite so much fun to watch golf though, is it? Don’t the tournaments go on for days?”

“I don’t know,” Hugh said quietly. He shifted his pint on the beer mat. “You won’t believe what else she said to me ... She reckons I have a whole bunch of issues because of my mum.”

“How do you mean?” Damian asked.

“Stuff like how I like things neat and tidy, and how I get my hair cut so frequently ... she thinks it’s because my mum was so strict and controlling.”

Panic flashed in Leo’s eyes and he looked quickly to Damian.

“You’ve never thought that yourself?” Damian said bluntly.

“No.” Hugh’s eyes darted wildly between his friends. “You thought that too?”

“Yeah,” Damian said. “It was pretty obvious.”

“You could have told me.” Hugh picked up his beer, then set it down again.

“You tend to growl at us if we mention your mum,” Leo said with a nervous twitch of his lips.

“What difference does it make anyway?” Damian asked. “It’s not like they’re terrible character flaws or anything.”

“No, but ...” He wasn’t sure what difference it made, except that things felt a little clearer now. “I might stop getting my hair cut so often.” And maybe he could be a little messier in some areas of his life and not be so highly strung.

He was guessing that was his mum’s influence too.

CHAPTER 45



After dropping Emmy at her friend's house on Saturday afternoon, Hugh went back home and made himself a sandwich. He ate it at the kitchen table while trying to resist the urge to get his phone out.

At this point he must have read almost all there was to read about Alegra Harris on the internet, but he couldn't seem to resist putting her name in the search bar once again. He reread several articles then forced himself to stop as the feeling of unease intensified in his stomach.

He reminded himself that she'd told him she was a professional golfer. What did it matter that she'd neglected to mention she was a minor celebrity?

The restaurant at the golf club was unusually busy when he arrived later that evening. Parking himself at the bar, he glanced around, deciding that the increase in trade was likely a result of people's curiosity about the situation with Kevin.

"Hey!" Allie said, smiling as she wandered over to him. With a hand on his shoulder she lowered her voice. "I've spent half the evening fielding questions about Kevin."

"I thought that might be the case. I guess it's true what they say about no publicity being bad publicity."

"I'm not sure about that, but a little bit of a scandal certainly hasn't done us any harm so far." She smiled at the group at the nearest table. "I need to get their bill," she said to Hugh. "Things should quieten down shortly."

"That's fine," he said. "Go do your thing."

For the next half hour, he watched her in her new role – confidently dealing with both customers and staff as though it was second nature. But then it was, he supposed. This was the environment she'd grown up in, and

she'd been managing a golf club in Surrey for years. This was both her comfort zone and the place where she thrived. It was eye-opening to see.

"Being manager suits you," he told her when they were down to only a few guests left in the restaurant and Allie came to sit beside him.

"Thanks. I forgot how much I enjoy it. There's an adrenaline buzz to being the person in charge." She tilted her head. "For a while, when I was just waitressing here, I thought how nice it would be to do that all the time and not have to deal with all the stress of running the place, but maybe it was just a pleasant break."

Hugh nodded slowly. "I looked you up," he blurted out, since he knew it would play on his mind otherwise. "Actually Emmy did to start with. She came home last night all excited about finding that you're friends with celebrities."

"Ah." Allie smiled softly. "I think she'd probably be disappointed that my only famous friends are golfers and they're only really famous in golfing circles."

"Right." Hugh tapped on the bar. "And the pictures of you with musicians and actors ..."

"That's mainly just marketing," Allie told him. "I invited them to play at the golf course for free, then we take photos for social media. It's good for the golf club."

"So you're not friends with any of them? Because Emmy has her hopes pinned on you inviting Alasdair King here for her birthday."

Allie's smile widened. "He's a really nice guy, but he lives all the way up on the Isle of Skye. I don't think I'd have much chance of coaxing him to Devon for a round of golf and a kid's birthday party. No offence to Emmy."

"So you do actually know him?" Hugh asked.

"He was on tour with Ghost Moon. I'd gone through a phase of inviting any celebrities I could think of to the club. I never expected Ghost Moon would even respond, but one day Josh Bane called me out of the blue and said he'd never played golf before and was surprised to get my invitation. He also asked if we had a bar, which should have been a red flag."

She pressed her lips together. "I'm not sure my dad has forgiven me. They played golf for about half an hour – in which time they tore up the first tee off quite spectacularly – then they spent several hours in the clubhouse with a bunch of their friends and groupies. Pretty much drank the bar dry and left the place in a bit of a state. We got some great publicity shots though. I

spent a lot of the evening hanging out with Alasdair and his girlfriend, who were much more down to earth than the members of Ghost Moon.”

“Sounds fun,” Hugh said, for lack of anything else to say.

Allie drew her chin back. “Are you annoyed with me?”

He shook his head, but couldn’t manage an outright no. “It just would have been nice if you’d mentioned it ...”

“I told you I played golf at the professional level and about the social media stuff.”

“Yeah, I know. I just didn’t realise it was such a big deal.”

“It’s not,” she said gruffly. “Especially not now.”

Hugh was saved from the conversation by a waiter needing to talk to Allie. She told Hugh she’d be right back but only returned once all the customers had left and the staff were trickling out too.

“Sorry,” she said, appearing with her jacket over one arm and her handbag hooked over her shoulder. “Shall we go back to mine? I’d suggest we go to yours, but I need to be back here again at the crack of dawn.”

“Sure,” he said, slipping off the stool. He was miles away while Allie switched off lights and locked up the club. As they ambled across the car park she murmured about how tired she was, but Hugh was too caught up in his own thoughts to give her his full attention.

He struggled to get his head around how much had changed in the last couple of weeks. Their carefree relationship now felt weighed down by the stresses of everyday life, not to mention all the new information about Allie, which left his head spinning whenever he thought about it.

“Do people usually call you Alegra?” he asked as they neared her door.

“Yes.” Under the dazzling security light she chewed her lip sheepishly. “I never liked having my name shortened. Verity told me the other day that my mum had also insisted on people using my proper name. I’d never known that.”

“Verity knew your mum?” he asked while she rooted in her bag for her key.

“Yes. Apparently they were friends. She remembers me from when I was little which is nice.” She paused and looked up. “Weird, but nice.”

Again, Hugh felt at a loss for words. It seemed as though every time Allie spoke, he learned something new about her. “Should I start calling you Alegra?”

She opened the door. “No I don’t think so. Allie has kind of grown on

me.”

“It would feel odd to start calling you something different now.” He heard the edge of irritation to his voice, and given the look Allie gave him, she’d noticed it too. Closing his eyes briefly, he tried to clear his thoughts. “I mean, it would take some getting used to, that’s all, but ...”

“I was a little hesitant when I found out my mum insisted on Alegra, but Verity pointed out that my mum would mostly be concerned about me being happy.” She stepped towards him and draped her arms around his shoulders. “I’ve been much happier these last weeks while I’ve been Allie. It feels almost as though I have a different life as Allie, and it’s the life I want. I don’t want to go back to being Alegra.”

She sighed and drew closer to him. “It’s so good to finally have you to myself. The last weeks have been such a whirlwind. I still can’t quite wrap my brain around the events of the past forty-eight hours.”

It hit Hugh then just how much he’d been caught up in his own thoughts. With all his worries, he’d barely considered how Allie was coping with everything.

“You must be pretty stressed,” he remarked.

“I’m okay. If there’s one thing I can say about Kevin, it’s that he had the place running efficiently. He hired great staff.” She winced. “The ones who actually worked here anyway.”

“Are you going to stay here?” He tightened his arms around her back.

“Yes.” She frowned. “I told you that. I’m happy here. I don’t have any plans to leave.”

Not yet, he thought, recalling the conversation. She’d said she wanted to stay around for now but wasn’t sure of her long-term plans. “I meant *here*,” he told her, brushing the thoughts aside. “Will you continue to live *here*?”

“Oh.” She glanced around the small space. “There’s a flat above the clubhouse. I could move up there eventually, but I don’t have the headspace to think about it now.”

Or maybe she was just waiting until she’d decided how long she was likely to hang around for, Hugh thought.

“Besides,” she said cheerfully, “this place has grown on me.” She leaned in so her nose brushed against his. “Is my clutter making you nervous?”

“No.” He raised his hand to push her hair from her face, wishing he could silence his racing thoughts and just enjoy being there with her without panicking about the future.

The feel of her lips lightly caressing his stilled his thoughts entirely. But only for the briefest moment.

“I forgot to tell you what I did this morning,” she said in a rush, pulling back abruptly.

“What?” he said, while his lips yearned for more contact.

“I got up really early and played nine holes.” She sagged in his arms. “It was the best thing. The sun was just rising and the dew was glistening on the grass. Everything was silent and I could hear the sound of waves in the distance.”

“You played golf?” he said dumbly.

“Yes. Without needing painkillers, or ice packs, and with absolutely no pain.”

“That’s great.” Automatically, Hugh untangled himself from her and took a seat on the chair at the end of the bed, not bothering about the array of clothes which adorned it.

“It was so great.” Allie perched on the end of the bed. “My trainer called me yesterday—”

“Your trainer?”

“My golf trainer ... from when I was competing. It seems that Bella had mentioned that my shoulder was finally healing, so she got in touch. It’s a little annoying that she doesn’t bother to contact me until she thinks there’s a chance I might resume my golf career, but whatever.”

“Do you think you will?” Hugh asked, his mind spinning once again.

“I don’t know, but she got me thinking about it, hence why I was out on the course this morning. It just felt so brilliant. Golf was such a massive part of who I was, and I’d honestly given up on being able to play.”

“That’s good.” He frowned at how unenthusiastic he sounded. “I’m happy for you.”

She reached for his hand. “Sorry, I must sound completely self-involved. I haven’t even asked how you’re doing. How’s everything with Emmy now?”

“Better,” he said, but couldn’t think of anything more to say on the subject. All he could think about was all the articles about Allie online, and all the photos of her with celebrities. What were the chances she’d stay in Hope Cove long term? How would she be satisfied with a quiet life after the jet-set lifestyle she’d had before? As the small room seemed to shrink further, he got up and paced to the kitchen units in the far corner.

“Hugh,” Allie said, straightening her spine. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know.” He stopped his pacing and folded his arms across his chest, then unfolded them and shoved his hands into his pockets. “I’m just not sure ... I mean I keep thinking about us .”

“What about us?”

“I’m trying to figure out how things are going to work out.” He shifted his weight from foot to foot, ignoring his instinct to flee without even bothering to attempt to explain what was going on his head. “It was just supposed to be fun,” he went on. “And now you’re so busy with your job and I have Emmy to think about . . .”

Allie tilted her head. “Things are a little more complicated now, but everyone has jobs and kids. Those aren’t reasons not to be in a relationship.” She shook her head. “Not everyone has kids. Obviously. I just mean that you having a child isn’t that big of a deal.”

“Maybe not for you.”

“That’s not what I meant. Of course Emmy is a big deal, but in terms of our relationship.”

“She’s got a lot to deal with at the moment, with her mum, and with a sibling on the way. I don’t want to add to her stress.”

Allie shook her head, looking utterly bewildered. “What exactly are you saying?”

“I’m saying I don’t know whether this is a good time for me to be in a relationship, and with all you’ve got going on it’s probably not a good time for you either.”

Allie stared at him, the combination of hurt and anger in her eyes making his heart pound even more than it already was. “Is this your attempt to break up with me?”

“I just think it might be for the best. Don’t you think?”

“No,” she shouted, her cheeks flashing bright red. “I don’t think so. Especially not on the grounds of your flimsy excuses. Unless you’ve suddenly decided you don’t like me, none of this makes any sense.” Her eyes were full of sadness as she waited for him to respond.

He turned away from her, trying to figure out what to say while his brain battled with the notion that he’d be a complete idiot to break up with her. On the other hand, he couldn’t see how things could work out between them, so surely he’d be better off putting a stop to things now rather than letting himself get even more involved.

“I don’t even know you,” he said, turning back to her. “The person I got

to know had a different job and a different name and was an entirely different person.”

“That’s not true.” The tear which ran down her cheek almost broke him. “You know me. Maybe you got to know a slightly different version of me, but it was still me.”

He fought the urge to sit beside her and put his arms around her. “You got to know a different version of me too,” he said calmly. “One where Emmy wasn’t around and I pretended I didn’t have responsibilities for a little while, but it wasn’t really me. I need to focus on Emmy and work. I can’t cope with drama in my life.”

She let out a humourless laugh. “I’m drama, am I? I see.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“You can be as sorry as you want, but I don’t actually believe what you’re saying.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re stressed because you found out all this new stuff about me. I can understand you being annoyed, and you definitely need time to take it all in, but you can’t just end things between us.” She gave a nonchalant shrug. “I don’t accept it.”

“You don’t accept it?” he parroted.

“No. I don’t. We can cool things off for a little while. When everything has calmed down for me at the golf course and you’ve had time to digest everything, then we’ll see how things stand between us.” She looked at him desperately. “Okay?”

No, it wasn’t okay. She couldn’t just say no when he broke up with her. As far as he was aware, that wasn’t the way dating worked.

“I just can’t, Hugh,” she said sadly. “I’m tired and the last couple of weeks have been so stressful. I can’t cope with anything else. Just don’t do this. Please. Go away and think about it at least.”

“Okay,” he muttered, confused as to the turn of the conversation.

But as he turned his back on her and left, he felt a tiny hint of relief that she hadn’t let him end things for definite.

She’d given him breathing room, and maybe that was all he needed.

CHAPTER 46



Daisy had been giving Allie odd looks since she arrived at work on Monday morning. Or maybe she hadn't. Allie hadn't slept well since her conversation with Hugh on Saturday evening, and there was a chance she was seeing things that weren't there.

"What's wrong?" she finally asked, when she walked out into the restaurant in the middle of the afternoon to find Daisy getting herself a coffee behind the bar and looking at Allie with that vaguely questioning, slightly nervous glint in her eyes.

"Nothing," Daisy said brightly.

"You look as though you want to say something but are scared to." Allie joined her behind the bar and glanced around the quiet restaurant where only a couple of tables were occupied.

Daisy chewed her lip and kept her eyes on the coffee machine as it deposited coffee into her mug.

"Given what we've been through in the last week, I don't think we need to be shy around each other do we?"

Daisy sighed. "I only wanted to ask if you're okay?"

"Me?" Allie's eyebrows dipped. "I'm fine. Why?"

"You've just seemed a little distracted yesterday and today ... and kind of sad."

"Oh." Despite the constant ache in her chest and the incessant need to check her phone to see if Hugh had been in touch, Allie had thought she'd done a good job of hiding her feelings.

Apparently not.

"I'm okay," she said, not sounding convincing even to her own ears,

“It must be stressful for you with the whole thing with Kevin and taking over the running of this place. Your dad was ill too, wasn’t he? Is he all right?”

“Yes. He seems to have recovered well.” That was at least one thing to be thankful for.

“It’s not the easiest time for you though?” Daisy prompted.

“Hugh broke up with me,” she said, her chest tightening around the words. She also felt a little foolish for confiding in Daisy. Given her ridiculous reaction on Saturday night, she hadn’t even told Bella what had happened. It felt too humiliating to discuss.

Daisy gave her a sad smile. “I thought something was going on with you two, but I wasn’t sure and I didn’t like to ask.”

“I met him right when I arrived and we’ve been dating. It felt pretty serious, but then on Saturday he ended things ...” She paused and covered her face with a hand. “At least he tried to.”

“How do you mean?”

“It’s so embarrassing.” She pushed her hip against the counter. “He said he didn’t think things would work out between us and I essentially told him he couldn’t end things ... that I didn’t accept that.”

“Oh. Well.” Daisy pressed her lips together.

“You’re not supposed to laugh at me!” Allie said, keeping her voice low so the customers couldn’t overhear.

“Sorry,” Daisy giggled. “That’s pretty funny though. What did Hugh say?”

“Not much. I said he needed to go away and think about it properly, so he did. He must think I’m a complete nutcase.” She drew in a breath. “In my defence, I do think he might just have been having a temporary freak-out.”

“How so?” Daisy asked, then sipped her coffee.

“Because everything was so easy between us to start with. His daughter was away for the school holidays and I was only working part time with the waitressing. Now everything has changed and I suspect he’s just not good with change. He likes things to be neat and ordered, so it kind of makes sense that he’d panic. Especially since he looked me up on the internet.”

“Oh!” Daisy’s eyes lit up. “I wanted to ask you about that. I saw a photo of you with Alasdair King. Is he as good looking in real life as he is in photos?”

“Yeah, he pretty much is.”

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to get off topic. What are you going to do about Hugh? Have you heard from him since his attempt at breaking up with you?”

“I haven’t heard from him.” She pouted. “I’m not sure what to do. I was hoping he’d get in touch.”

“Yes,” Daisy said. “Wait to hear from him. I’m sure he’ll call you.”

“I hope so.”

“There’s something else I wanted to ask you about,” Daisy said, eyebrows pulling together. “I was sort of waiting for a good time.”

“What is it?”

“I was just wondering how things will be when Cynthia comes back to work. How we’ll split the workload and responsibilities.”

“I’ve been thinking about that too,” Allie said. “To be honest, I’m not sure how it will work considering you both now have the same level of experience. You possibly have more than her now. I was hoping the three of us could sit down together and chat it through sometime. I’m sure we’ll figure it out.”

“I have an idea, but I’m not sure you’ll go for it.”

Allie tilted her head. “Try me.”

“I was thinking I could drop down to working part-time on reception ...”

“No,” Allie said slowly. “After all the work you’ve put in this last year —”

“I also did a lot of greenkeeping work,” Daisy said, interrupting her.

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“I really enjoy it. I know I don’t have any official training but I’ve been helping Grandad for years. He’s taught me all about it. I’ve even thought about taking a course, but I’m not sure when I’d have time.”

Allie’s eyes widened. “You want to continue doing greenkeeping work?”

“Ideally, I’d like to do both. Greenkeeping and reception. I also had this idea that if Grandad had me all trained up by the time he’s ready to retire, then I could take over from him. That way I could maybe take over the cottage too and he’d get to keep living there.”

It took Allie a moment to process everything Daisy was saying. “Ron can stay in the house as long as he wants to,” Allie said. “We’d never just kick him out.” She shook her head. “Do you really want to work on the grounds?”

“Yes. I know it’s traditionally a job for a man, but I can do it as well as anyone. I swear.”

“I believe you,” Allie said. “Of course you can do that if it’s what you

want.”

Daisy glanced towards reception where the phone had started ringing. “Seriously?”

“Yes. Of course. And I really don’t think you need any formal training given your experience, but if there’s a course you want to take we’d fully support you to do that.”

“Oh my goodness.” Daisy put a hand to her heart. “I was so nervous about asking.”

“Why? I think it’s a great idea.”

Daisy’s eyes flicked in the direction of the ringing phone. “I need to get that,” she said excitedly. “But thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome.” Allie smiled as she was enveloped in a big hug.

“And don’t worry about Hugh,” Daisy said, breaking away. “I’m sure he’s going to call soon, and you’ll sort everything out.”

Allie didn’t quite have Daisy’s optimism and had begun to lose all hope of him getting in touch when her phone finally flashed with a call from him on Wednesday afternoon.

Sitting in her new office at the back of the clubhouse, she took a steadying breath before she answered.

Her heart was pounding but she managed to keep her voice even to ask how he was.

“Um ...” He hesitated, which seemed like it could be a good sign. He missed her and was doing terribly. “I’m okay,” he continued. “I just have this ... I mean, what I called for ...” He growled slightly, sounding annoyed at himself for his lack of coherence. “I wanted to ask about Emmy’s birthday.”

“Right.” Allie had forgotten all about it. “Does she still want to have it here?”

“I tried to convince her to do something else, but she’s got her heart set on it. I know things are a bit weird between us, so if it’s not okay, I understand.”

“It’s fine,” Allie said, stubbornly ignoring the voice in her head that said it wasn’t fine in favour of the thought of seeing him again. “Which day? Saturday?”

“Yes.”

“That’s fine. Would she be happy to make it an early dinner so the place isn’t so busy?”

“That would be great.”

“Okay. I’ll speak to the chef and we’ll set something up. I’d say an hour on the driving range, and then food. I think that would work well.” It would also be a good trial to see if it was something they might offer generally.

“Thanks so much,” Hugh said. “Emmy’s really excited about it.”

“No problem.” Allie leaned back in her chair and winced. Talking business was all very easy, but she wasn’t sure what to say now. Should she mention Saturday night or just ignore it? “How’s your week going?” Apparently she was ignoring their previous embarrassing conversation. He could bring it up if he wanted to.

“It’s okay. How about you?”

It had been terrible, but only because she couldn’t stop thinking about him, so she couldn’t exactly mention that. “Also okay,” she said.

“Busy?” he asked.

She leaned on the desk, scratched at her forehead. “A bit. Not too bad. You?”

“I had to go and meet with a client in Exeter, and I had a deadline to finish another project, so pretty busy.”

Allie smiled, happy that he didn’t seem to be in a massive rush to get her off the phone. “Was it a *new* client you met with?” It amused her to think that when she’d first met Hugh, she’d found talk about his job entirely uninteresting. Whereas now she’d happily listen to him talk about his job all day. She’d listen to him talk about anything. As long as he was talking to her, there was hope that things might work out between them.

“Yeah a new client,” he said. “They were nice and I think they were impressed with my ideas.”

“That’s great,” she said, possibly with a little too much enthusiasm.

“Yeah.” He paused. “Listen, I should let you get back to work, but it was good to talk to you.”

“You too. I can make a plan for Saturday and email you about it. And if Emmy wants to chat about it she can give me a call. Oh and if there’s any dietary requirements or anything just let me know.” She was waffling now but couldn’t help it.

“Yes. I will. That all sounds great. Thanks again.”

After ending the call, Allie slumped back into the chair. It didn’t take long for her to tie herself in knots trying to unpick the conversation. Ten minutes later, she went in search of help, hoping Daisy had time to chat.



IF BEING busy with work wasn't enough to distract Hugh from thoughts of Allie, he also had to prepare for Emmy's birthday at the weekend. Shopping for gifts and decorations, as well as snacks for her friends who were staying over on Saturday night, meant that he barely had a spare moment all week.

Given the way things stood between him and Allie, he'd gently made a couple of different suggestions for Emmy's party while knowing they wouldn't be acceptable. It gave him a reason to call Allie without having to get into any deep conversation at least. Although once he'd got over his nerves on the phone, he was half tempted to switch to more important subjects.

He could have just apologised for being an idiot on Saturday night and asked if they could pretend he hadn't said anything. That wouldn't be very fair though; they needed to at least discuss it. Except he had no idea what to say, and he couldn't fully silence the voice in his head that said things would never work out between them.

As was tradition, Emmy got to plan the entire day on Saturday, and she chose to start her birthday at the beach. The two of them went out on paddleboards for an hour and were just getting out of the water when the rest of the gang began to arrive. Damian was already at the shack, of course, but Amy turned up with the twins, and Leo and Caitlin were only a few minutes behind them. Alice only wanted to crawl around on the sand while everyone else greeted each other.

Emmy accepted gifts while shivering in her wetsuit.

"Why don't you get warm and dry before you open them?" Hugh suggested.

Emmy shook her head. "I'll open them later. I'm going to surf with Billy and Marty."

"And me!" Amy declared, then ushered the boys away to get into their wetsuits.

"I'm surfing too," Leo said.

Caitlin gave him a quick kiss. "Alice and I are going to put our feet in the water and watch you."

"You can go too," Damian offered. "I'll watch Alice."

"Or I can," Hugh put in. "I just need to get changed quickly."

Caitlin insisted she was happy staying out of the water and was down by

the shore when Hugh walked out of the shack after getting changed. The rest of them were in the shallows with their surfboards, and Damian stood on the patio looking out at them.

“Thirteen,” he said when Hugh stood beside him. “How the heck did she get to be thirteen?”

“No idea. It doesn’t feel like any time since she was crawling around like Alice.”

“Time flies.” Damian moved to sit at the table nearby, a slow smile creeping over his features as he continued to watch Amy and the twins playing around with Leo and Emmy. “I bought a ring,” he said, eyes darting to Hugh.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.” He shifted in the chair to stuff his hand in his pockets. “But then I changed my mind.”

“You don’t want to marry her?” Hugh arched an eyebrow as he sat beside Damian.

“I want to, I just don’t want to risk rocking the boat when things are so good between us.”

“You’d think that would make it the perfect time to propose,” Hugh said.

Damian shrugged. “We’re all happy. Why change that?”

“Some people would argue that getting married wouldn’t change that.”

Damian chuckled. “You know what I mean. Anyway, how’s things with you? I’ve hardly heard from you all week. Does that mean you’ve been seeing a lot of Allie?”

“No.” He linked his fingers at his chest, sliding down in his seat. “I broke up with her. Tried to anyway. I wasn’t overly successful.”

“What does that mean? And why would you want to split up with her?”

“I’m just not sure how compatible we are. When things were easy and fun it was fine, but things got complicated.”

“So you broke up with her?”

“Yeah.” His gaze was fixed on the water, but he was barely registering anything in his view. “But she said she didn’t accept it. That I should go and think it over and we could talk again.”

Damian smiled widely. “I like her a lot.”

“Me too,” Hugh said sadly.

“I don’t understand why you’d break up with her.”

He tilted his head. “She was only supposed to be here short-term. I guess

she'll want to go off and chase her golfing career eventually."

"What?" Damian screwed his face up. "You're breaking up with her because you're worried she might leave someday?"

"She had an amazing career. It makes sense that she'd want to get back to it."

"Maybe, but it's golf. Even if she wanted to get back into it, she could do it from here, right? How long do golf tournaments last?"

"I dunno."

"Just a few days, surely." He stared at Hugh. "You also seem to be making a lot of assumptions here."

"Yeah. Maybe." Hugh leaned forwards in his chair and scrubbed his hands over his face. "Part of me thinks I'm just freaking out for no reason, but I can't seem to help it. I guess Nancy leaving might have made me insecure about this stuff."

Damian shook his head, then pressed his lips together as though trying to keep his thoughts to himself.

"It's all right," Hugh said. "When Emmy isn't around you can say what you want about Nancy."

Damian massaged the back of his neck. "It pisses me off so much," he said quietly.

"To be fair to Nancy—"

"It's not Nancy who pissed me off," Damian said, a quiet anger to his tone that surprised Hugh. "She left you and it was shit, but relationships don't always work out, couples don't always stay together."

"Why do you look like you want to punch someone then?" Hugh asked, wondering if they'd switched to an entirely different conversation without him noticing.

"I don't know if I'd go as far as punching her ... maybe I would though."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your mum. She's the problem. Because people leave and move on with their lives, but not your mum! She just left and it's not okay."

Hugh sat up straighter. "I told her to go."

"Yeah, but she didn't call or message ... she didn't come back to check you were okay. You asked her to leave and she left without ever trying to sort things out. That's not okay."

A lump rose in Hugh's throat.

"Sorry," Damian said, through gritted teeth. "But she's the one who

screwed you over. If you're freaking out about people leaving you, I'd argue that's mainly down to her."

CHAPTER 47



To stop herself from chewing her fingernails, Allie shoved her hands into her pockets.

“How come it feels like *my* birthday party?” she asked Daisy across the reception desk. “I have that feeling like I’m panicking about whether people are going to turn up or not.”

“Because you’re in lurve,” Daisy said, eyes sparkling delightedly. “And he’s definitely showing up, by the way.”

“This is going to be awkward, isn’t it? I should’ve said no.”

Daisy rested her elbows on the counter. “From what you told me about the phone conversation, I think everything is going to be fine. It’s like you said, he freaked out for a minute. Men are prone to that. You were right to give him some time to consider his options properly.”

“Or I’ve just spent a week torturing myself, when I could’ve been busy getting over him. I’ve probably only delayed the inevitable.”

“I don’t think anything is inevitable. It really seems like a moment of madness on his part.”

Allie pulled her hands from her pockets and rubbed them together as her nerves made her jittery. She tapped the screen of her phone on the counter to activate the display. A growl of frustration escaped.

“Still no word?” Daisy asked.

“No, of course I haven’t heard anything. I think I spent so many years getting exactly what I wanted just by asking for it that I’ve become a little bit presumptuous. Of course there was no way Alasdair King was going to throw me some tickets for his next tour just because I messaged him on social media and reminded him about the time we had drinks together ages ago.”

“You said he was a nice guy,” Daisy pointed out. “I bet he’ll still reply. And he probably has tickets to give away.”

“He’s not gonna message back,” Allie said defeatedly. “Which means I also don’t have a present for Emmy. That looks bad, doesn’t it?”

“Kind of depends. If she’s your boyfriend’s daughter, then yeah you probably should’ve got her a present. If she’s a kid having a birthday party at the golf course you own, I don’t think a gift is expected.”

“Well, I’d really like to know which of those categories I fall into. Either way, I still think I should’ve got her a gift.”

“In fairness, you did try. It’s the thought that counts.”

“Oh yeah sure, I’ll tell her I tried to get her awesome concert tickets. I didn’t manage it, but she should thank me for the thought?”

“I got her a gift”, Daisy said smugly.

“What? Why? You don’t even know her.”

“It’s only chocolates. From the golf club, really. The receipt’s on your desk.”

The sound of gravel crunching under tyres had Allie swinging around to look out at the car park. “They’re here,” she said while her heart rate skyrocketed. Nausea swept through her as she watched Hugh and four young girls exit the car and cross the car park.

Straightening up, Allie wiped her palms on her trousers and pasted on a smile.

“It’ll be fine.” Daisy gave her a reassuring smile. “Stop stressing, you’re making me nervous.”

Allie didn’t respond but focused on the door, which Hugh had pulled open and was holding for the girls. His jeans and T-shirt combo was simple but stylish, and his lazy smile when he met her gaze had her insides fluttering.

Swallowing her emotions, she switched her gaze to Emmy. “Happy birthday!” She said, stepping forwards to give her a hug before deciding that might be too much and giving her arm a squeeze instead. “How’s your day so far?”

“Really good. We went to the beach this morning. I went paddleboarding and surfing.”

“You’ve gone for an action-packed day, haven’t you?” She swept her gaze over Emmy’s friends, smiling at them as she introduced herself and asked their names.

“Do you really know loads of celebrities?” Eva asked, pushing her long dark hair over her shoulder as she eyed Allie with a look of awe.

“I’ve met a lot of celebrities,” Allie told her. “I don’t really know them.” She thought of how fun it would have been to see Emmy’s face if she’d managed to get the concert tickets. “Anyway,” she said clapping her palms together. “Who’s ready for some golf?” She was met with eager nods. “Daisy’s going to take you through to the driving range and get you all set up out there.” She moved around the girls to Hugh, eyeing the cake box in his hands. “I can take that for later.”

“Thanks.” Their fingers brushed as she took it, only for the briefest moment but his touch felt like pure joy.

“Have fun,” she said, smiling at the girls.

Emmy stepped towards her. “Aren’t you going to hang out with us?”

“Oh ... I ...”

“I thought you could give us some golf tips and stuff,” Emmy said, her eyebrows raising pleadingly. “Show us what to do.”

Allie nodded automatically. “I can do that. I just have to check on a few things, then I’ll come and join you.”

“Thank you.” Emmy beamed at her, then turned back to her friends, who were already following Daisy.

Hugh caught Allie’s eye and she felt horribly self-conscious.

“I’d better put the cake in the kitchen. Go through with the girls. Daisy will bring drinks out to you if you want.”

He gave her a quick smile, then headed for the driving range, leaving Allie to draw in a deep breath before forcing her feet into action.

She waited a quarter of an hour before joining the party in the driving range. Daisy had set them up at the end of the row and Hugh sat at the table on the back wall, which held a selection of drinks.

“How’s everything going?” she asked, standing beside him and following his gaze to the girls, who were giggling away as the short-haired one swung and missed repeatedly.

“They seem to be enjoying themselves,” Hugh said, smiling crookedly.

“Can you help us?” Emmy asked. “We’re not doing very well, and Charlotte can barely hit the ball at all.”

“I’m so bad at it,” Charlotte said. “I can only hit the ball if I don’t really swing the club, but then it doesn’t really go anywhere. What am I doing wrong?”

“It takes practice,” Allie said, grabbing herself a club and moving to stand among the girls. After giving them a quick lesson on hand-positioning, she gave them tips on stance and how to swing the club. Following that, she gave a couple of demonstrations, then gave feedback on their attempts before subtly slipping away to let them practice.

“You seem to know what you’re talking about,” Hugh said teasingly.

Allie had intended to head back to her office but took a seat instead. “I always thought I’d like to coach one day,” she said. “I think I’d really like to teach young people.”

“You’re very natural with them,” he said, tipping his chin to the girls. “You had them hanging off your every word.”

Allie avoided his gaze as she felt her cheeks warming up. “Golf is definitely my comfort zone,” she said, then slipped her phone from her pocket as it began to buzz against her hip.

It took a few seconds of staring at the screen for her to register who was calling. “No way,” she whispered. “You’re not seriously calling me.” As her brain caught up, she swiped her finger over the phone, hoping she hadn’t stalled for so long that she’d miss the call. When Alasdair King’s face filled the screen, she couldn’t quite believe it. Instinctively, she stood and wandered a little away from Hugh and the girls.

“Hi,” she said into the phone.

“How are you?” Alasdair replied.

“Fine.” She grinned at him. “How are you?”

“I’m good. Sorry I didn’t get back to you sooner. I only just saw the message. And then I was gonna reply, but it’s the party now, right? I thought I could call and wish her happy birthday.”

Allie couldn’t make out the muffled voice in the background, but whatever they were saying had Alasdair rolling his eyes.

“The tickets for the show are also no problem,” he said. “You just need to let me know where to send them.”

“Oh my gosh. You’re the best. Thank you so much.”

“It’s really no problem.”

This time, the voice in the background came loud and clear. “*No problem?*” the female voice said. “As though I didn’t just spend fifteen minutes talking you into making a simple phone call.”

Alasdair groaned. “Ignore that. I recently bought a parrot that talks absolute nonsense.”

Allie chuckled. "Is that Leana?"

"Hello." Leana's face appeared beside Alasdair's. "Honestly, you won't believe this guy. He'll stand up on a stage in front of 50,000 people and sing his heart out, no problem at all. But ask him to call a thirteen-year-old to wish her happy birthday and he has a crisis of confidence."

"Bigger crowds are easier," Alasdair said, amused. "I feed off their energy. Anyway, I'm happy to have a quick chat with the birthday girl."

"He'll be absolutely charming," Leana said. "I just wish we could skip the bit where I have to nag him to do these things." She lifted a hand to wave at Allie, then disappeared from view.

"What's the birthday girl's name again?" Alasdair asked.

"Emmy."

"Okay. Got it. Is she there now?"

"Yes. She's busy playing golf with her friends. I'll go and pass you over."

"How are things at the golf club?" he asked.

"Good. I'm not in Surrey any more though. We have a club in Devon, and I've just taken over the running of the place."

"Devon's on Leana's list of places she wants to visit. Is that a permanent gig for you?"

Allie had moved back towards Hugh and was conscious of his eyes on her. "Possibly," she said. "We'll see how things go." She smiled mischievously. "Give me a shout if you're ever down this way... you can come and trash the place."

He laughed loudly. "It wasn't me!"

"Yeah yeah, blame your delinquent friends." She wiggled her eyebrows. "I'm going to hand you over to Emmy, but thanks again for doing this."

"You're welcome."

Allie called out to Emmy, then held up the phone. "There's someone to talk to you."

"Who is it?" Emmy set her golf club aside and squinted at the phone. Her eyes widened as she moved closer, but she didn't say a word.

"Hey!" Alasdair said exuberantly. "Emmy, right?"

"Yeah." Reluctantly, Emmy took the phone from Allie. "Hi."

"Happy birthday! How's the golfing going?"

"Good," she mumbled while her friends gathered around her, looking at the phone in disbelief.

"Allie told me you might be interested in some tickets to come and see

me on tour ...”

“Yes.” Emmy’s face went red. “That would be amazing.”

“Do you want to bring your friends with you?”

“Oh my god! Yes, please.”

While the girls all leaned in to say hello and Alasdair chatted away to them, Allie slunk back to sit with Hugh.

“Is that Alasdair King?” he asked.

Allie nodded. “I only wanted to see if I could get concert tickets for Emmy. I never expected he’d call.”

“That’s ...” He looked her right in the eyes. “Did I tell you how upset Em was about missing out on the concert with her friends in the school holidays?”

“No,” Allie said.

Hugh didn’t say any more, just turned to watch Emmy and her friends excitedly crowding around the phone.

Leana had been right about Alasdair being charming. The guy was a natural showman, even if his current performance was chatting with a bunch of excitable adolescents.

A few minutes later, the call ended, and Emmy and her friends stared at each other for a moment before bursting into shrill squeals and hugging each other tightly.

“That was so amazing,” Emmy said when she brought Allie’s phone back. “Did you hear? He said we can all have VIP passes and we can bring our mums too.”

“I heard,” Allie said.

“Thank you so much.” Emmy hovered in front of Allie before reaching down to give her a hug. “This is the best birthday ever,” she said into Allie’s shoulder.

They were interrupted by Eva knocking into Allie’s legs in her scramble for one of the collection of bags under the table. “I can’t believe this,” she said. “My mum’s going to freak out. Is it okay if I call her now and tell her?” She looked to Hugh who nodded.

The rest of Emmy’s friends followed Eva’s lead and called their mums too.

“Is your mum a fan of Alasdair King?” Allie asked, catching the way Emmy’s eyes darted over her friends while they chatted animatedly on their phones.

“I doubt she knows who he is.” Emmy shrugged and Allie felt a jolt of pain for her, knowing exactly how it felt to not have your mum around and being envious of your friend’s relationships with their mothers.

“Do you want to come to the concert with us?” Emmy asked.

Allie had the urge to look behind her, as though Emmy might be directing the question at someone else.

“Alasdair said we can all bring someone,” Emmy went on. “Mum won’t want to go, and it’d be embarrassing to bring Dad when everyone else has their mum with them.”

“Thanks,” Hugh muttered.

“I’d like to,” Allie said, at a loss for how to respond. “Maybe your mum will want to go though ...”

“Or Louise,” Hugh suggested.

Emmy shook her head. “She’ll have had the baby by then, so I guess she won’t be able to.”

“It’s still several months away,” Allie said. “Maybe you’ll think of someone else you want to go with. Otherwise I’d love to go.” She wasn’t sure if that was the right thing to say, but it got a smile from Emmy.

She dropped onto her dad’s lap and draped her arm around his shoulders. “This is the best birthday ever. I’m so happy the girls were with me when Alasdair called, otherwise no one at school would believe it.” She looked guiltily at Allie. “When we were talking to him I took a screenshot on your phone. Can you send it to me?”

“Of course.” Allie found it on her phone and sent it to Hugh. “I better go and check on the food,” she said as Emmy’s friends migrated back to them. “Why don’t you hit another bucket of balls each and then it should be about ready.”

Once she’d given the kitchen a ten-minute warning, she ducked back into her office and hid out there for half an hour. She used the time to try and figure out what vibes Hugh had been giving off, but only managed to tie herself in knots again without reaching any conclusions.

But she could have sworn the look he gave her when she walked back into the restaurant was one of pleasure to see her. In fact, she’d even say he’d been looking out for her.

He smiled at her across the bar. “I decided to prop up the bar and leave Em and her friends to eat without her embarrassing dad sitting with them.”

“I don’t think she thinks you’re embarrassing really.”

He twisted his lips to one side. “We saved you a slice of cake,” he said, tipping his head to the plate beside the till.

“Thank you. I hope Emmy had a good time.”

“She did. Thank you again.”

“You’re welcome. I don’t know if I mentioned that celebrity phone calls aren’t included in the standard party package. That’ll be an extra on the bill.”

His eyes brightened as he beamed at her. “I already sorted out the bill with Daisy and she must’ve forgotten to add it on.”

“I’ll have a word with her,” Allie joked. “We can’t have that kind of incompetence.”

Some of Allie’s tension left her at the lightness of their conversation.

“Could we talk properly sometime?” Hugh asked, features turning serious.

“That would be good.”

“The girls are coming back to our place for a sleepover,” he said. “Can I give you a call tomorrow when all the birthday celebrations are over?”

“Yeah.” She searched his face, again trying to gauge how the conversation might go and wondering if the spark of hope she felt was nothing more than her eternal optimism.

She supposed she’d just have to wait and see.

CHAPTER 48



Hugh decided the conversation with Allie would be better in person. Arriving at the golf club, he was surprised when Daisy directed him to the flat above the clubhouse. He followed her directions to reach it – up a flight of stairs at the back of the building. The door was wide open, giving him a straight view into the kitchen, where Allie was unpacking food from shopping bags on the counter.

Nervously, Hugh gave a quick tap on the doorframe and she swung around to him.

“Hi,” she said, pausing with a carton of milk in her hand. “I thought you were going to call.”

“I decided it would be easier to talk in person.” Wandering into the kitchen, he stopped a couple of metres from her. “Daisy told me I’d find you up here.”

She put the milk away and swept her gaze over the large open-plan living and dining room. “I just moved my stuff up here this morning. I’d been putting it off because I thought it might be difficult to be up here ... memories of my mum.” She waved her hand dismissively. “Do you want a drink or something?” She moved to fill the kettle without waiting for a reply.

“Are you okay?” Hugh asked, sensing that she wasn’t.

“Yes,” she told him over her shoulder. “Just feeling a bit emotional about being up here, but I’m fine.”

Hugh shoved his hands into his pockets. “I sort of thought you were putting off moving up here until you decided whether you were definitely staying long term.”

Turning, she gave a subtle shake of the head. “I told you I planned on

sticking around.”

“I know, but then I saw all that stuff about you online. I figured that given how successful you’d been, you’d want to get back to that.”

She tilted her head. “I might. At the moment I have no idea if I want to go back to playing golf professionally, but even if I decide to, I can do it while living here.”

Hugh nodded, knowing he needed to be completely honest with her but struggling with his feelings about everything. “It wasn’t just your career, it was your whole lifestyle. You had such an exciting, adventurous life that it didn’t seem likely that you’d really want to stay around here.”

Allie looked at him sadly. “You didn’t think I’d want to be with you?”

He held her gaze for a moment, feeling that she’d hit the proverbial nail straight through his heart. It was exactly what he’d thought, and a part of him was still certain she’d get bored with him – probably sooner rather than later.

Needing to move, he walked to the living room, then lowered himself to the couch. “I didn’t tell you everything about what happened with my mum,” he said eventually. “About why we don’t speak.”

Allie moved to sit in the armchair and gave him a nod to continue.

“Emmy was almost three,” Hugh said eventually. “It wasn’t that long since Nancy had left and my parents were looking after Em for the afternoon. I arrived home to hear my mum telling Emmy off for colouring outside the lines.” His chest tightened as he remembered the incident, which could easily have slid by without any drama. “She gave her a lecture about being messy and how she should always do her best. As soon as I caught the look on Emmy’s face, I lost it. Told Mum to get out and never come back.”

“From what I’ve heard it sounds as though that had been building for a while,” Allie said hesitantly.

“Yes.” He nodded. “For about a week I was adamant I’d done the right thing. I had no remorse whatsoever.” He shrugged. “I still don’t actually.”

“But?” Allie prompted when he fell silent.

A wave of sadness swept through him. “*But* she’s still my mum, and we still don’t speak. And she wasn’t all bad, so even though I think I’m better off without her in my life, I still miss her sometimes.” He pushed his head into the back of the couch, looking up at the dark beams which crossed the white ceiling. “What really gets to me is that she didn’t try to fix things between us. She sent me an email, telling me I should get in touch when I was ready to apologise, but other than that I haven’t heard from her since.”

“I’m sorry,” Allie whispered.

“I think she blames me for my dad leaving her.”

“Why?”

“Because two days after I told her to leave, my dad turned up on my doorstep, asking if he could stay with us for a while.”

“That was when he left her?”

“Yes.” Hugh rubbed at his forehead. “He apologised to me, saying he should have stuck up for me the way I’d stuck up for Emmy. He said he’d wanted to leave Mum for a long time but had been too much of a coward to do it.”

“You said you don’t see much of your dad either?” Allie asked.

“No. He was right – he should have stuck up for me. Mum was cruel, and he just stood by and watched it happen. Sometimes I think I’m as angry with him as I am her.”

“I’m sorry,” she said again. “I can’t imagine how that feels.”

“It doesn’t really matter that much any more.” He forced himself to look at Allie, offering her a small smile. “Except that I have this voice in my head that keeps telling me that my wife left and my mum left, so the chances are you’ll do the same.”

He hated how pathetic he sounded but also knew that if they stood any chance of having a relationship, she needed to know what was going on in his head.

“I guess it felt easier to end things before I got even more attached,” he told her.

She moved to sit beside him, taking his hand. “I can’t promise anything,” she said. “I don’t know what’s going to happen in the future, but I can tell you that I’m happy here, and part of the reason I’m so happy is because of you. It only took a couple of dates with you to know that I wanted this to be a long-term thing.”

“Me too.” He pulled his hand back and stood briefly to retrieve his wallet from his back pocket. As he sat back beside Allie, he pulled out the card Arietta had given him when they’d spent the evening on Sometimes Island.

“You’re not going to propose, are you?” Allie asked, her lips twitching upwards.

“No.” He chuckled. “I was only going to say that I didn’t take it just so Arietta wouldn’t be offended. I took it because I could absolutely see a future for us. Even then.”

A slow smile spread over Allie's face as she took the card and let her gaze linger on it. "That was a really great night."

"Yeah," he agreed, while she returned the card to its place in his wallet. "I'm sorry I freaked out on you. I do want to be with you."

Her eyes radiated joy as she turned to face him. "Did you think I was a complete nutcase when you tried to break up with me and I wouldn't let you?"

"A little bit." Smiling, he leaned closer and brought a hand up to caress her cheek. "But I was also glad you didn't let me."



AFTER ALL THE stress and emotions of the past week, Allie could have happily sat there kissing Hugh indefinitely. She could stay in that little bubble of contentment and never leave. Maybe that wasn't particularly realistic though, she decided when he pulled gently back.

"I have a question," she said while he gazed at her lovingly. "Did you tell Emmy you'd tried to break up with me?"

"No." He beamed. "I knew she'd shout at me and tell me I was an idiot, so I thought I'd skip the lecture."

"She's very sensible, that daughter of yours."

"Yes, she is." He slipped an arm around Allie's back and pulled her close.

"There's something else I've been thinking about," she said, resting her head on his shoulder and avoiding eye contact until she gauged his reaction. "About the designs for the golf course."

"The ones I thought we might be able to get the owners to give us money for?"

"Yes." She felt her shoulders tense. "It turns out the owners are keen to pay you for those." When he didn't say anything, Allie was forced to look at him. "I really want to make changes to the course. I loved working with you, and I really want to *keep* working with you. We'd obviously draw up a contract and you'd be paid the going rate."

He looked thoughtful as he nodded slowly. "I have done a lot of research on golf course design, and since a good chunk of the work is already done it would make sense for us to continue ..."

Allie trailed her fingers over the back of his hand. "Why do I feel there's

a but coming on?”

“I’m just concerned it might be awkward now.”

“It won’t be. I promise.” She wanted to keep working with him so badly that she was pretty sure she’d resort to begging if necessary. “Last time we worked on it together it was fun, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.” The tiny twitch of his eyebrow was the only crack in his serious features. “But last time we were working on the designs together we also had a lot of sex. Which was great, but is probably going to make me a little uncomfortable if you’re paying me.”

“I wasn’t planning on paying you for sex!” She laughed loudly. “Do you want me to promise not to have sex with you while we’re working?”

“Absolutely not. So you can see my dilemma.”

She rested a hand on his chest as she grinned at him. “How about you get paid for your work and not your breaks?”

“Yep. That should work.” His eyes sparkled. “Will there be any limit on how many breaks I can take?”

“No. Breaks will be encouraged.”

“Then you have yourself an architect.”

CHAPTER 49



The months that followed were one big happy blur for Allie. Once she had Hugh on board to redesign the course with her, she was keen to get ahead with it. Having the clubhouse fully staffed and running smoothly meant she had plenty of time for that, but she decided to go the whole hog and refurbish not only the course but the clubhouse too.

During the last two weeks of August the club was closed to the public while teams of workers came in to give the place its makeover. Most of the work to the clubhouse was cosmetic, the most substantial change being the addition of a playroom at the back of the restaurant. Allie had employed two qualified childcare workers who would be available for anyone wanting to leave their children while they played a round of golf. They already had bookings for the upcoming school holidays, so Allie was confident it was a good idea. Hopefully the play area would also encourage more families into the restaurant.

The painters had given the flat upstairs a fresh coat too, since they were doing the rest of the building. Allie had stayed at Hugh's place for a few nights to escape the worst of the fumes, but now her dad had come to visit she'd reluctantly gone back to the flat to keep him company.

"I feel as though I'll never get the smell of paint out of my nose," she said, opening the living room window a little further.

"It's not so bad," her dad replied, leaning forwards on the couch and straightening up a piece on the chessboard on the coffee table. "What time are Emmy and Hugh coming over?"

"Soon, I guess." A knock drew her gaze in the vague direction of the door, but she didn't bother moving to answer it.

“Hello!” Hugh called along the hallway.

“Your ears must have been burning,” Richard said.

Emmy burst into the room with her usual joyful energy. “You already have the board set up,” she remarked, immediately taking up position on her knees across the coffee table from Richard.

“I’m not going easy on you this time,” he told her.

Emmy grinned. “I won’t be going easy on you either.”

The two of them had hit it off when Richard had been to visit a couple of months earlier and had fallen back into their easy rapport at dinner the previous evening.

Hugh wandered over and casually slipped an arm around Allie’s waist while dropping a kiss on her forehead. “How are your stress levels?”

“She’s been wearing the floors out with her pacing,” Richard answered.

“I tried to check everything was okay in the kitchen but I got kicked out.” She leaned her head on Hugh’s shoulder. “Then I wanted to help set up the patio, but Daisy and the rest of the staff told me to go away.”

“I’m sure they have it all under control,” Hugh said. “The food smells amazing at any rate.”

“It’s your party,” Emmy said. “You should chill out until it’s time for people to arrive.”

“It’s not my party,” Allie told her. “It’s a party to celebrate the reopening of the club.” She’d invited members of the local community and had her fingers crossed for a good turnout. Hopefully the free food and drinks would be a good lure.

As though sensing her nerves, Hugh softly massaged her shoulders.

“You look good, by the way,” she told him, glancing back at him. His white shirt highlighted his tan, and his hair had a gentle wave to it now that he’d let it grow a little.

The sound of Daisy’s voice drifting up from the patio drew her attention to the open window, and she smiled at the distinctive banter between Daisy and Freddie. “Daisy wasn’t even supposed to be working today,” Allie remarked.

“Didn’t you say she’s just had two weeks off?” her dad asked.

“She was supposed to, except she came back after a week, insisting on overseeing the work and bossing the workmen around.”

“Sounds a little bit like someone else I know,” her dad said with his eyes fixed on the chessboard. “Can’t think who.”

“I’m going to get changed and do something about my hair.” Allie gave Hugh a quick kiss, then moved to stand beside the coffee table, taking a moment to survey the chessboard. “She’s got you cornered already.”

“No.” Her dad shook his head as he scrutinised the board. Finally, he looked up at Allie. “I realise you’re trying to get in my head, but it’s not going to work. You can’t rattle me.”

Emmy confidently moved her rook to take Richard’s bishop. “If you’re not rattled, you clearly haven’t figured out my plan. So that’s good.”

Richard looked from Allie to Emmy. “Now you’re just ganging up on me. That’s not fair.”

“Welcome to my world,” Hugh said, smiling at Allie as she wandered away to get ready for the party.



ALLIE’S SILVER dress hugged her upper body, then flowed gracefully to her ankles. As she spent the afternoon mingling with the party guests, Hugh struggled to keep his eyes off her.

The time they’d spent working on the golf course together had been perfect, and as she celebrated the cumulation of all her hard work over the past months, Hugh tried very hard to keep himself from wondering what was next for her. After the excitement of refurbishing the club, would she get bored of living a quiet life in rural Devon? Every time he considered the possibility of her leaving, panic gripped his chest and squeezed.

Watching her float around the party, he batted his fears aside, reminding himself that she’d not given him any reason to think she was going anywhere.

“You’re obsessed.” Damian’s voice pulled Hugh from his thoughts and he returned his attention to his friends around the table.

“Yes.” There didn’t seem to be any point in denying it. Especially not when he’d been caught staring at her yet again. He was absolutely smitten and swung between loving and hating the feeling. “She’s amazing though, isn’t she?”

“She’s pretty amazing,” Amy agreed, and the rest of them nodded along.

Little Alice slipped down from Caitlin’s lap and toddled over to Hugh, who attempted to scoop her up for a cuddle, but she squirmed away and continued waddling around the table.

“I should get going soon,” Caitlin said, checking her watch.

“Stay for longer,” Leo said. “I’ll get you a drink.”

“I can’t drink when I need to drive home later,” she pointed out.

“Stay at my place,” he said.

Caitlin curled her lip. “I need to go home.”

“Why?” Damian asked, giving her a searching look.

“I just do.”

“I don’t know how you can be bothered with a forty-minute drive home,” Damian said. “Not when you could just stay at Leo’s place.” He glared at Leo when he kicked him under the table. “What?” he shot at him.

“If she wants to stay at her place she can,” Leo said.

Turning in her seat, Caitlin glared at Leo. “I stayed at home for the last three nights,” she said, through gritted teeth.

“I know. It’s fine if you want to do that. Whatever you want.”

She punched him on the arm hard enough to make everyone around the table flinch.

“What was that for?” Leo rubbed his bicep, looking pathetic.

“I’ve been staying at home so that you might miss me enough to finally ask me to move in.”

Hugh caught Damian’s eye and they exchanged an amused look.

“You want to move in?” Leo asked.

She shook her head. “Ah, forget it.”

Leo turned to look her square on. “I want you to move in.”

“Then why the heck do you always seem so happy about me staying at my own place?”

“I don’t ... I mean, I’m not. I thought maybe you needed a break from Alice sometimes.”

“*Alice?*” Caitlin looked as though steam might start rising from her soon. “If I need a break from anyone it’s you telling me it’s a good thing I still have my own place.”

Leo closed his eyes briefly. “I really want you to move in,” he said.

“Well you *would* say that now.” Caitlin glanced around the table. “Sorry,” she said to no one in particular. “I didn’t mean to share our relationship problems with you all.”

Hugh wasn’t keen to involve himself into other people’s issues but also felt someone should help Leo out. “He’s been saying for ages he wants you to move in,” he told Caitlin.

“Really?” Caitlin looked to Leo.

“Yes. I swear. I just didn’t want you to feel pressured.”

Caitlin raised a sceptical eyebrow.

“It’s true,” Damian said. “He’s been saying this to us for a while.”

“Please will you move in with me?” Leo said, then scooped Alice up when she toddled over to him. “With *us*. We really hate it when you stay at your place. We want you with us all the time, don’t we, Alice?” He tickled her and she beamed from ear to ear. “See, she really wants you to move in.”

“Okay, then.” Caitlin took Alice from Leo and gave her a squeeze, then gave Leo a quick kiss.

“Thank goodness for that,” Damian said. “Things were a bit awkward there for a minute.”

“I should have just asked ages ago.” Leo shot a pointed look at Damian. “Instead of overthinking it.”

Damian gave him a dismissive look and took a swig of his beer.

A hand on Hugh’s shoulder made him look up. He half expected it to be Emmy since he hadn’t seen her for a while. Her friends were at the party so she was off with them somewhere.

“Hi,” he said while Allie slid her hand affectionately over his shoulders.

Casually, she took a seat on his left knee. “I’m exhausted,” she said quietly.

“I’m not surprised,” Caitlin said. “Just watching you mingle has worn me out.”

Allie smiled lightly. “I may have broken records for the amount of small talk a person can make in one afternoon.”

“You must be really proud though.” Amy said. “Not about the small talk! It’s impressive how much you’ve accomplished here.”

“I’ve been busy,” Allie agreed.

“What’s next?” Leo asked. “You know we really like the idea of being friends with a sporting star.”

Allie flashed him a mischievous look. “Obviously you’d prefer it if I was a footballer.”

“Did I say that?” Leo grimaced. “I might have been drunk.”

“You were definitely drunk,” Caitlin told him with a playful glare.

“I don’t think I’m going to get back to playing professionally anyway,” Allie said. “I have too many other ideas for my career.”

“I love that you’re offering golf lessons for kids,” Amy said. “I’ll bet

there's a huge demand for that."

Allie nodded. "My coaching courses in the summer holidays are all full and so are the classes for the autumn."

That meant she was at least staying until the end of the year, Hugh told himself before berating himself and focusing instead on the feel of Allie's fingers trailing through his hair at the back of his neck.

"I didn't really mean the coaching, though," Allie said, giving him a nervous smile before looking again at his friends. "I have more business ideas."

Hugh's heart pounded.

"You're very inspiring," Caitlin said. "You make me think about a change of career. Something I really love. Maybe something that doesn't require driving to Totnes, since I'm going to be living here now." Her eyes sparkled as she reached for Leo's hand, then she looked back up at Allie. "Anyway, what's your idea?"

"It's probably a bit daft." She chewed her bottom lip, looking unsure of herself in a way that was completely out of character.

"What is it?" Hugh asked, as his brain decided whatever she said would probably take her far away from him.

"I keep thinking how much I loved redesigning the course," she said, her quiet words holding everyone's attention. "I realised that my knowledge of golf courses is specialised. Having grown up on a course and playing professionally and just spending all this time in the golfing world gives me really unique insights. I could go into business redesigning golf courses. I have connections with courses all across Europe. Plus, I know there's a demand for it."

When her passionate monologue reached its end, Allie looked sheepish.

"Wow," Caitlin said. "I really need to rethink my career."

"It's only a thought," Allie said bashfully.

"It sounds like an amazing idea," Amy put in.

"I'd need a business partner," Allie said. "If anyone knows an architect with experience in golf courses, let me know." She gave Hugh a sidelong look that was questioning and uncertain.

He blinked a few times. "Are you serious?"

"I seriously think we'd make an unstoppable team. And working together was so much fun."

Damian leaned onto the table. "Would you need to travel a lot?"

“No,” Allie replied. “We’d need to visit the golf courses once or twice, but we wouldn’t take on more than a few projects a year. I’d still have the club to run here and my coaching sessions, and Hugh would have his own work. We could pick and choose the projects and arrange travel to suit us. We could go at weekends or school holidays so we could bring Emmy with us. I’ll bet she’d love it.”

Leo chuckled. “It seems as though you have it all planned out already.”

“No,” she said defensively, then sighed. “When I get an idea in my head, I tend to explore it. What do you think?” she asked Hugh.

“I have no idea.” He twisted in his chair to look at Alice, who was patting him on the back and demanding his attention. “Hey,” he said to her. “What are you up to?”

She waddled around and tugged on his hand, babbling something unintelligible at him.

“You can have my seat,” he told Allie, nudging her off his lap to be dragged away by Alice. “I’ll be right back.”

He followed Alice across the patio and through various groups of people until he eventually picked her up. “Thanks for that,” he said, rubbing his nose against hers. “Your timing was perfect.”

She giggled and patted him on the head, then wriggled to get down as they reached the grass. A little further along, Emmy sat with her friends but called out to Alice and opened her arms to her as she toddled away in her direction.

Hugh watched until Alice made it to Emmy, then pushed his hands into his pockets and wandered away from the party for a better view of the cliffs and the endless expanse of water.

A gust blew through his hair and made his shirt billow at the back.

“Hugh!”

Turning, his heart stuttered at the sight of Allie striding towards him with that determined look on her face that he was starting to know all too well. She was annoyed with him but also concerned and apologetic.

“Sorry,” she said, sighing when she reached him.

“What for?” His hands slipped over her hips and around her back.

“For springing all that on you in front of your friends. I should have talked to you about it privately, but I couldn’t find the right moment. If you don’t like the sound of it you can just say so.”

He drew his hands up to push her hair from her face when the wind

seemed determined to blow it in every direction. "I like the sound of it."

"You do?" Hope flickered in her eyes. "Really?"

"It sounds perfect."

She held his face and kissed him in a way that was borderline aggressive. "Why did you get up and walk away as though you couldn't hate the idea more?"

"I didn't. You sprang it on me and I was surprised, that's all."

"Do you really think we could go into business together?"

"Yes." He beamed. "And I think we'll be really successful."

"You could have said that before." She glared at him playfully. "In front of everyone."

"Sorry." He pressed his forehead against hers and they stood quietly for a moment. "I love that you include me in your plans," he said eventually. "And Emmy too."

"Of course." Her fingers tightened at the back of his neck and her gaze was fierce. "I only want us to make plans together from now on. Okay?"

"Yes." He'd tried to sound confident, but given the way she tilted her head he suspected he hadn't managed it.

"I'm not going anywhere," she said in her calm, reassuring tone. "I have everything I want right here."

His eyes darted to the golf club, then out to the perfect view of the sea below the cliffs.

"I mostly meant you," she told him. "Though I am pretty fond of the golf club, and I can't complain about that view."

She gave him a soft kiss, then turned to look out at the sea, resting her back against his chest.

Tightening his arms around her, Hugh dropped his chin to her shoulder. "We should go for dinner on Sometimes Island one of these days," he said, catching sight of it in the distance.

"You keep saying that but we never get around to it."

"Maybe we should wait for a special occasion."

She tilted her face to catch his eye. "I hear they do weddings, you know."

"I've heard that too." Softly he kissed her cheek.

"I love you," she murmured.

Hugh smiled. "I'll bet you're wishing you never made me promise not to fall in love with you." That earned him a gentle elbow to the ribs, but he only tightened his hold on her. "You know I broke that promise the day after I

made it, right?”

“I blame Arietta and her love spells.”

“Exactly,” he replied, amused. “You’re stuck with me forever thanks to her.”

“I hope so,” she said on a sigh.

Hugh hoped so too. With his cheek pressed against Allie’s, he gazed along the coast to the little island that seemed to beckon to him.

He dipped his head and laid a kiss on Allie’s neck before whispering in her ear, “I’m sure we’ll make it back there one day.”

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thanks so much for reading *Playing for Keeps*. I had intended for this to series to just be three books, but I changed my mind about that!

When I finished writing book three I felt I still had more to say about these characters and what happens to them next.

Book four is entitled *Rules of Engagement* and is the story of what comes next for all three of the previous couples. I hope you'll enjoy it. More info about it on the next page...

For those of you who have read my Loch Lannick series, I hope you enjoyed the glimpse of Alasdair and Leana in this book. I love writing the little crossovers!

If you haven't read those books yet and would like to find out more about Alasdair and Leana, you'll find their story in *Coming Home to the Loch* (<https://mybook.to/HomeToTheLoch>)

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All of Hannah's books can be found here:

<http://Author.to/HannahEllis>

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>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When she's not writing, Hannah enjoys spending time with her husband and kids. She loves to read, do jigsaw puzzles and go for long walks. She also enjoys yoga and drinks a lot of tea!

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