

(THE AU PAIR-BOOK TWO)

ALMOST LOST

BLAKE
PIERCE

The Au Pair

Blake Pierce

Almost Lost

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Pierce B.

Almost Lost / B. Pierce — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,
— (The Au Pair)

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“A MASTERPIECE OF THRILLER AND MYSTERY. Blake Pierce did a magnificent job developing characters with a psychological side so well described that we feel inside their minds, follow their fears and cheer for their success. Full of twists, this book will keep you awake until the turn of the last page.” -- Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos (re Once Gone) ALMOST LOST is book #2 in a new psychological thriller series by USA Today bestselling author Blake Pierce, whose #1 bestseller Once Gone (Book #1) (a free download) has received over 1,000 five star reviews. When a divorcee vacationing in the British countryside puts out an ad for an au pair, Cassandra Vale, 23, broke, still reeling from the ruins of her last placement in France, takes the job without hesitation. Wealthy, handsome and generous, with two sweet children, she feels nothing can go wrong. But can it? Treated to the best England has to offer, and with France out of sight, Cassandra dares to believe she finally has a moment to catch her breath—until a startling revelation forces her to question the truths of her tumultuous past, her employer, and her very own sanity. A riveting mystery replete with complex characters, layers of secrets, dramatic twists and turns and heart-pounding suspense, ALMOST LOST is book #2 in a psychological suspense series that will have you turning pages late into the night. Book #3 in the series--ALMOST DEAD—is available for pre-order!

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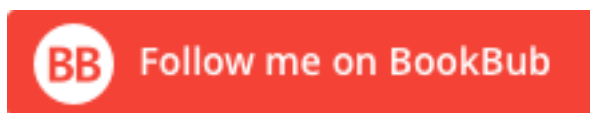
Blake Pierce

Almost Lost (The Au Pair—Book Two)

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes sixteen books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising thirteen books (and counting); of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising six books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising five books (and counting); of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising five books (and counting); of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising two books (and counting); and of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising two books (and counting).

An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.blakepierceauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.



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AUTHOR NOTE:

You may have noticed that this book was first published with the author name “Ophelia Night.” Occasionally I like to experiment and try new genres, and when doing so, I might use a pen name to keep it separate and prevent confusion for my fans. I initially published this book with the Ophelia Night pen name. Soon after publishing it, I was happily surprised by the reception and reader feedback, and I realized that this book and series would indeed be a good fit for all Blake Pierce fans. So I’ve changed the author name back to Blake Pierce. If this is your first time reading one of my books, welcome to the Blake Pierce universe! Feel free to discover my other series. I have made the first books—and audiobooks—in most of my series free to enjoy!

CHAPTER ONE

Cassandra Vale stood in the long, slow-moving queue for the London Eye. After half an hour's wait, she was close enough to see the giant wheel looming above her, its steel span arching into the overcast sky. The aerial view of London was a major attraction even on this gloomy November day.

She was on her own, although it seemed everyone else was here with friends or family. In front of her was a nervous blonde woman who looked to be in her mid-twenties, about Cassie's age. She was in charge of three unruly, dark-haired boys. Bored with the wait, they had started shouting and squabbling, jostling each other and breaking away from the line. They were causing such a disruption that people were starting to complain. The elderly man ahead of her turned and glared.

"Could you please tell your boys to be quiet?" he asked the blonde in exasperated, upper-class British tones.

"I'm so sorry. I'll try," the young woman apologized, looking on the point of tears.

Cassie had already identified the stressed blonde woman as an au pair. Watching this confrontation took her straight back to where she'd been a month ago. She knew exactly how helpless the woman felt, trapped between unmanageable children who'd begun acting out, and disapproving onlookers who'd started to criticize. This could only end badly.

Be glad you're not in her situation, Cassie told herself. You have the chance to enjoy your freedom and explore this city.

The problem was that she didn't feel free. She felt exposed and vulnerable.

Her ex-employer was about to stand trial for murder and she was the only person who knew the whole truth about what had happened. Worse still, by now, he would have learned that she'd destroyed some of the evidence he was hoping to use against her.

She felt sick with fear that he would be hunting for her.

Who knew how far the reach of a wealthy, desperate man extended? In a city of millions, she'd thought it would be easy to hide, but the French newspapers were all over the place. Headlines shrieked at her from every corner shop. She was aware of the intensive camera monitoring, especially at tourist attractions—and central London was basically one huge tourist attraction.

Glancing up, Cassie saw a dark-haired man standing on the platform by the wheel. She'd felt his gaze a while ago, and saw he was staring in her direction again. She tried to reassure herself that he was probably a security guard or a plainclothes police officer, but that gave her no comfort. She was doing her best to avoid the police, whether they were plainclothes, or private detectives, or even ex-cops who'd taken up a more lucrative line of work as paid thugs.

Cassie froze as she saw the watching man pick up his phone, or maybe it was a walkie-talkie, and speak urgently into it. The next moment he left the platform and strode purposefully in her direction.

Cassie decided she didn't need to see an aerial view of London today. Never mind she'd already paid the entrance fee—she was getting out. She'd come back another time.

She turned to go, ready to push her way through the line of people as fast as she could, but saw to her horror that two more police officers were approaching from behind.

The teenage girls who'd been standing behind her had also decided to leave. They had already turned and were shoving through the line toward the exit. Cassie followed, grateful that they were clearing the way for her, but panic surged inside her as the officers followed.

"Wait, ma'am! Stop now!" the man behind her shouted.

She wasn't turning around. She wasn't. She'd scream, she'd grab onto the other people in the line, she'd beg and plead and say that they had the wrong person, that she didn't know anything about the suspected murderer Pierre Dubois and had never worked for him. Whatever it took to get away, she would do.

But as she tensed for the fight, the man shouldered past her and grabbed the two teenagers ahead of her.

The teen girls started shouting and struggling just as she'd planned to do. Another two plainclothes police converged, pushing the bystanders aside, grasping the girls' arms while one of the uniformed police opened their bags.

To Cassie's astonishment, she saw the cop take three cell phones and two wallets from the taller girl's neon pink rucksack.

"Pickpockets. Check your purses, ladies and gentlemen. Please inform us if any of your possessions are missing," the officer said.

Cassie grabbed her jacket, relieved to feel her phone safely stashed away in the inside pocket. Then she looked down at her purse and her heart plummeted as she saw the zip was open.

"My wallet's missing," she said. "Someone's stolen it."

Breathless with anxiety, she followed the police out of the line and around the corner to the small security office. The two pickpockets were already waiting there, both in tears, as the police unpacked their bags.

"Are any of these yours, ma'am?" the plainclothes officer asked, pointing to the phones and wallets placed on the counter.

"No, none of them."

Cassie felt like bursting into tears herself. She watched as one of the officers upended the rucksack, hoping she would see her scuffed leather wallet fall out, but the bag was empty.

The officer shook his head, annoyed.

"They pass them down the line, get them out of sight very fast. You were in front of the thieves, so yours was probably taken a while ago."

Cassie turned and stared at the thieves. She hoped that everything she felt and thought about them showed in her face. If the officer hadn't been standing there, she would have sworn at them, asked them what right they had to ruin her life. They weren't starving; she could see their new shoes and brand-name jackets. They must be doing this for cheap thrills, or to buy alcohol or drugs.

"Apologies, ma'am," the police officer continued. "If you don't mind waiting a few minutes, we'll need you to make a statement."

A statement. Cassie knew that wouldn't work for her.

She didn't want to be the focus of any police attention at all. She didn't want to give them her address, or say who she was, or have her details noted down on any official report here in the UK.

"I'm just going to tell my sister that I'm here," she lied to the officer.

"No problem."

He turned away, speaking on his walkie-talkie, and Cassie hurried out of the office.

Her wallet was history, it was gone. There was no way she could get it back, even if she wrote a hundred police reports. So she decided to do the next best thing, which was to walk away from the London Eye, and never come back.

What a disaster this outing had been. She'd drawn a lot of cash that morning, and her bank cards were also gone. She couldn't go into a bank to withdraw money because she had no ID with her—her passport was at the guesthouse and there was no time to fetch it, because she'd planned to go straight from the London Eye to join her friend Jess for lunch.

Half an hour later, feeling shaken by the crime, appalled by the amount of money she'd lost, and thoroughly annoyed with London, Cassie walked into the pub where they were meeting. She was ahead of the lunchtime rush, and asked the waitress to reserve a corner table for them while she went to the bathroom.

Staring at herself in the mirror, she smoothed down her wavy auburn hair and tried a cheerful smile. The expression felt unfamiliar. She was sure she'd lost weight since she and Jess had last met,

and she thought critically that she looked too pale and too stressed—and this wasn't only due to the trauma she'd been through earlier today.

Exiting the restroom, she was just in time to see Jess walk into the pub.

Jess was wearing the same jacket she'd had on when they'd first met more than a month ago, both on their way to au pair jobs in France. Seeing her brought the memories flooding back. Cassie remembered how she'd felt as she boarded the plane. Frightened, uncertain, and with serious misgivings about the family she'd been assigned to. These had proven to be well founded.

In contrast, Jess had been employed by a lovely, friendly family and Cassie thought she looked very happy.

"It's good to see you," Jess said, hugging Cassie hard. "What fun this is."

"It's so exciting. But I have a crisis on my hands," Cassie confessed.

She explained about being pickpocketed earlier.

"No! That's awful. What bad luck that they found other wallets, but not yours."

"Could you loan me some money for lunch and bus fare to get back to my guesthouse? I can't even withdraw cash at a bank without my passport. I'll transfer it back to you as soon as I can get online."

"Of course. It's not a loan, it's a gift. The family I'm working for has come to London for a wedding, and they're all in Winchester with the bride's mother today, so they threw money at me to enjoy London for the day. After this, I'm going to Harrods."

Jess shook back her blonde hair, laughing as she shared the cash with Cassie.

"Hey, shall we take a selfie?" she suggested, but Cassie declined.

"I have absolutely zero makeup on," she explained, and Jess laughed and put her phone away.

The lack of makeup wasn't the real reason, of course; she was trying her best to stay under the radar. The first thing she'd done after arriving in London was to change her social media settings, turning them fully private. Well-meaning friends might say something, and the path could be traced. She didn't want anyone knowing where she was. Not her ex-boyfriend back in the States, and certainly not her ex-employer and his legal team in France.

She had thought she would feel safe once she'd left France, but she hadn't realized how accessible, and interconnected, the whole of Europe was. Going straight back to the States would have been a more sensible choice.

"You're looking amazing—have you lost weight?" Jess asked. "And are things going well with the family who employed you? You said you were worried about them."

"It didn't work out, so I'm no longer with them," she said carefully, glossing over the ugly details that she couldn't bring herself to think about.

"Oh dear. What went wrong?"

"The children moved to the South of France, and the family didn't need an au pair anymore."

Cassie kept it as simple as possible, hoping a dull explanation would prevent any further questions, because she didn't want to have to lie to her friend.

"I guess that happens. It could have been worse. You could have worked for that family everyone's talking about where the husband is standing trial for murdering his fiancée."

Cassie looked down hurriedly, worried that her expression would give her away.

Fortunately they were distracted by the arrival of the wine, and after they'd ordered food, Jess had moved on from that juicy morsel of gossip.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked Cassie.

Cassie felt ashamed by the question, because she had no coherent answer. She wished she could tell Jess that she had a plan and wasn't just living day to day, knowing that she should make the most of her time in Europe, but feeling increasingly uncertain about her situation here.

"I'm not sure. I was thinking of going back to the States, finding work somewhere warmer. Florida, perhaps. It's expensive to stay here."

Jess nodded in understanding.

"I bought a car when I arrived. Someone at the guesthouse was selling it. That took a lot of my cash."

"So you have a car?" Jess asked. "How awesome!"

"It has been wonderful. I've gone on some amazing drives out of the city, but using the car with the gas and everything, and even day-to-day living, is costing more than I expected."

Hemorrhaging money without any prospect of earning income was stressing her out and it was reminding her of the battles she'd gone through when she was younger.

She'd left home at sixteen to escape her violent and abusive father, and ever since then she'd had to look after herself. She'd had no security and no savings and no family to fall back on, because her mother was dead and her older sister, Jacqui, had run away a few years earlier and had never been in touch again.

Living on her own had been a case of month-to-month survival for Cassie. She'd sometimes only made it by the skin of her teeth. Never mind having peanut butter at month's end; it had been her staple diet when times were tough, and she'd gotten into the habit of taking restaurant or bartender work, partly because the jobs came with a free staff meal.

Now she was panicking about living off a dwindling nest egg that was all she possessed in the world, and thanks to the cash that had been stolen today, that nest egg was even smaller.

"You could look for a temporary job to tide you over," Jess advised, as if reading her mind.

"I have. I've approached a few restaurants, and even applied for bartending work at some of the pubs, but I got turned down right away. Everyone here's a stickler for the correct paperwork and all I have is a visitor's visa."

"Restaurant work? Why not au pairing?" Jess asked curiously.

"No," Cassie shot back, before remembering that Jess knew nothing about the circumstances of her previous job. She continued.

"If I can't work I can't work. No visa means no visa, and au pairing is a longer commitment."

"Not necessarily," Jess countered. "It doesn't have to be. And I have personal experience of doing it without a visa."

"You do?"

Cassie knew her mind was made up. She wasn't going to au pair again. All the same, what Jess was saying sounded interesting.

"You see, all the restaurants and pubs get checked regularly. There's no way they can hire anyone without the right visa. But working for a family is different. It's such a gray area. After all, you could be a family friend. Who's to say you're actually working? I stayed with a friend in Devon for a while last year, and ended up doing a few babysitting and temporary childcare jobs for neighbors and people in the area."

"That's good to know," Cassie said, but she didn't have any intention of exploring that option further. Talking to Jess was cementing her decision to head back to the States. If she sold the car, she would have enough money to support herself there until she got back on her feet.

On the other hand, she'd expected to spend much longer traveling. She'd been looking forward to a full year abroad, hoping it would give her the time she needed to move on from her past. This was her chance to make a fresh start in life, and to return as a changed person. Arriving back home so soon after leaving would feel like giving up. Never mind that other people would think she hadn't made a go of it—she would personally believe that she'd failed.

The waiter arrived, bringing plates piled high with nachos. Hungry, because she'd skipped breakfast, Cassie dug into the food.

But Jess paused, frowning, and took her phone out of her purse.

"Talking of part-time jobs, one of the people I worked for called me yesterday to see if I could help him again."

“Really?” Cassie asked, but her attention was focused on the food.

“Ryan Ellis. I worked for him last year. His wife’s parents were moving house, and they needed someone to look after the kids while they were away. They were lovely people, and the kids weren’t bad either—they have a boy and a girl. We did lots of fun stuff. They live in a beautiful seaside village.”

“What is the job?”

“He’s looking for somebody for about three weeks, urgently, to live in. Cassie, this could be just what you need. He paid very well, gave me cash, and didn’t mind about the visa at all. He said if I had been accepted by an au pair agency I was clearly a trustworthy person. Why not call him and find out more?”

Cassie was tempted by the prospect of cash in her pocket. But another au pair assignment? She didn’t feel ready. Perhaps she never would be.

“I’m not sure it’s for me.”

Jess, however, seemed determined to sort out Cassie’s future for her. She tapped keys on her phone.

“Let me send you his number anyway. And I’ll message him now and say you might get in touch, and that I recommend you highly. You never know, even if you don’t work for him, he might know someone who needs a house sitter. Or a dog walker. Or something.”

Cassie couldn’t argue with her logic, and a moment later her phone buzzed with the arrival of Jess’s message.

“How’s your work going?” she asked, once Jess had finished her messaging.

“It couldn’t be better.” Jess piled guacamole onto a tortilla chip.

“The family is lovely. They’re very generous with time off and keep giving me bonuses. The kids can be naughty but they’re never nasty and I think they enjoy me, too.”

She lowered her voice.

“Last week, with everyone arriving for the wedding, I was introduced to one of the cousins. He’s twenty-eight and gorgeous and he runs an IT support business. I think he likes me, and let’s just say it’s fun to be flirting again.”

Even though she was glad for her friend, Cassie couldn’t help feeling a pang of envy. This dream job was what she had secretly hoped for. Why had everything gone wrong for her? Had it only been bad luck or was it, in some way, because of the decisions she had made?

Cassie suddenly remembered what Jess had said to her on the plane to France. She’d shared with Cassie that her first assignment hadn’t worked out, so she’d ditched it and tried again.

Jess had only gotten lucky on the second try, and that made Cassie wonder if she was giving up too soon.

When they had finished their nachos, Jess checked the time.

“I’d better run. Harrods is waiting,” she said. “I’ll have to buy gifts for everyone back home, and for the children, and for the gorgeous Jacques. What should I get him? What do you give someone you’re having a flirtation with? It may take me a while to decide!”

Cassie hugged Jess goodbye, feeling sad their lunch was over. The friendly chat had been a welcome distraction. Jess seemed so happy, and Cassie could see why. She was needed and valued, she was earning money, she had a purpose in life and was secure.

Jess wasn’t drifting around on her own, lonely and jobless and paranoid about being hunted down because a murder trial was starting.

A few weeks in a remote village might be exactly what she needed right now, in more ways than one. And Jess was right. The phone call could lead to other opportunities. She’d never find them if she didn’t keep trying.

Cassie headed out of the crowded pub to find a quiet corner, glancing around in case any pickpockets or phone grabbers were passing by.

She took a deep breath, and before she could think too hard about it and lose her nerve, she dialed the number.

CHAPTER TWO

Holding her phone tightly, Cassie moved closer to the wall to shelter from the drizzle. Now that she'd dialed Ryan Ellis, she was feeling more and more nervous.

She had to earn money somehow if she wanted to stay in the UK for longer, but after what she'd been through in France, was *au pairing* the right decision? Even if the job sounded ideal, would he be prepared to accept her with so little experience and no real qualifications?

Cassie imagined gathering her courage to ask if she could take the job, only to be given a shameful "No" in response.

The call rang for so long she feared it would go to voicemail. At the last possible moment, a man picked up and answered.

"Ryan speaking," he said.

He sounded out of breath, as if he'd had to run for the phone.

"Hello, is this Ryan Ellis?" Cassie asked.

She cringed at the obviousness of her question, but she didn't know him at all and it felt wrong to say, "Hi, Ryan."

"Yes, that's me. Who's calling, please?" He didn't sound irritated, but rather curious.

"My name's Cassie Vale and I got your number from my friend Jess, who worked for you last year. She mentioned you were looking for someone to help out with your children for a while."

"Jess, Jess, Jess," Ryan repeated, as if trying to place the name, and then, "Oh, yes, Jess from America! I see she's just sent me a message. What a lovely lady. Did she recommend you? Is that why you're calling? I haven't read the message yet."

Cassie hesitated. Was she going to say yes? To do so would be making a commitment, and she wasn't sure she wanted to take that step yet.

"I'd like to know more about the job," she said. "I was *au pairing* in France but my assignment's ended. I've been thinking of doing something short term, but I'm not sure at this stage."

There was a short silence.

"Let me fill you in. I'm desperate at this moment. I've just been through a divorce, which has left me pretty shell-shocked. The kids won't even speak about what's happened and need someone to cheer them up and have fun with them. On top of it all, I have a massive work project, with a deadline that's taking up all my time."

Cassie was shocked by Ryan's words. She hadn't expected him to be in such a serious predicament. No wonder he was desperate for somebody to help out.

The divorce must have been traumatic if it had affected the children so badly. She guessed if Ryan was looking after them, his wife must have left him, probably for somebody else.

She had no idea what the right response would be.

"That sounds very stressful," she said eventually, to fill the short silence.

"I've been phoning around, because I haven't had a chance to advertise the job, and I'm feeling so muddled I don't think I'd be especially good at screening anybody new. Everyone who's worked for me before has been unavailable. I don't mind telling you, I'm stuck for help. I'm prepared to pay triple the usual rate, and the job will be for maximum three weeks."

"Well—" Cassie began.

She couldn't bring herself to say no. It would be callous when this man was in such dire circumstances. She felt sorry for him and felt it would be selfish to refuse the job outright. They were clearly desperate for help, and the good money, combined with the short timeframe, was tempting.

"Why not come and meet us?" Ryan suggested. "Do you have a car? If not, I can fetch you at the station. I'll pay for your ticket, of course."

"I have a car," Cassie said.

“That makes it very easy and it should take around five hours if traffic cooperates. I’ll message you the address now, and refund you for the trip if you don’t like us.”

“All right. I’ll leave tomorrow morning. I should be there by lunch time,” Cassie said.

She disconnected, relieved that she would have a chance to spend time with the family before making up her mind. If she liked them, she might have an opportunity to make a real difference in their lives, offering help and support during a difficult time.

When Ryan had told her that he was recently divorced, she hadn’t expected to feel so much sympathy for him. Growing up in a home filled with conflict, and losing her mother at a young age, she understood what it was like. This was a situation where she knew she could be valuable to the family.

Leaving home as a desperate, scarred sixteen-year-old, she had been determined to follow in her sister’s footsteps and get away from her father’s abuse forever. But after escaping from his angry dominance, she’d ended up in a damaging relationship with her toxic boyfriend, Zane. Then, traveling to France to get away from Zane had landed her in the biggest nightmare of all.

Out of town, in a remote coastal village, she’d be safely tucked away and would be able to experience a family environment where she felt needed, which was one of the main reasons she’d wanted to au pair in the first place.

Cassie hoped she could use her time there to heal.

CHAPTER THREE

The trip to Ryan Ellis's house took Cassie longer than she'd expected. It seemed impossible to avoid the heavy traffic that clogged up the highways on the drive south, and there were two sections of road works where she had to take a lengthy detour.

The extra time on the road meant she almost ran out of gas. She had to use the last of the money Jess had loaned her to top up her tank. Worried that Ryan would think she had changed her mind, she messaged him to apologize and say she'd be late. He'd replied immediately saying, "No problem, take your time, drive safe."

Once she'd left the highway and headed into the countryside, the views were idyllic. She craned her neck, staring over the trimmed hedgerows at the sloping vistas of patchwork fields in every shade from deep green to golden brown, scenic farmhouses, and winding rivers. The orderly landscape gave her a sense of peace, although she knew the gathering clouds meant afternoon rain, and she hoped she would reach her destination before it set in.

More than six hours after leaving London, she arrived at the quaint seaside village. Even in the dull light, the village was enchanting. The car rattled over cobbled streets, where gaps in the rows of houses gave her glimpses of the picturesque harbor beyond. Ryan had directed her to drive through the village and along the cliff side road. The house was a couple of miles further, overlooking the sea.

Pulling up outside the open gate, Cassie stared in amazement, because the house beyond was almost too perfect to be true. It felt like a place she'd always dreamed of living in. A simple yet gorgeous home, with sloping lines and wooden detail that blended harmoniously with its surroundings and reminded her of a ship moored in the harbor—only this building was nestled on a cliff, with an incredible view of the ocean beyond. The well-tended yard housed a swing and see-saw. Both were slightly rusty, and Cassie guessed the state of the equipment provided a clue about the children's ages.

Cassie glanced into the car's mirror and checked her hair—the waves were sleek and shiny from her efforts early this morning, and her coral lipstick was immaculate.

She parked on the cobblestone driveway and walked to the house along a pathway bordered by flower beds. Even at this time of year the beds were bright with yellow blossoms, and she recognized flowering honeysuckle planted beyond. In summer she guessed they would be a riot of color.

The front door opened before she reached it.

"Afternoon, Cassie. Good to meet you. I'm Ryan."

The man who greeted her was a head taller than her, fit-looking and surprisingly young, with tousled, sandy-brown hair and piercing blue eyes. He was smiling, looking genuinely happy to see her, and he was wearing a faded Eminem T-shirt and a worn pair of jeans. She noticed a dishcloth was hooked into their waistband.

"Hi, Ryan."

She took his outstretched hand. His grip was warm and firm.

"You caught me in the middle of cleaning the kitchen, preparing for your arrival. The kettle's boiled—are you a tea drinker? It's such an English habit, I know, but there's also coffee if you'd prefer."

"I'd love some tea," Cassie said, reassured by his down to earth welcome.

As he closed the front door and led the way to the kitchen, she thought to herself that Ryan Ellis was very different from what she'd expected. He was friendlier than she'd thought he'd be, and she loved that he was prepared to clean the kitchen.

Cassie remembered her arrival at her last au pairing assignment. As soon as she'd walked into the French chateau, she'd sensed the charged, ugly atmosphere of conflict. In this house, she didn't pick that up at all.

Walking over polished wooden floorboards, she was impressed by how tidy it looked. There were even fresh flowers on the hall table.

“We spruced the place up for you,” Ryan said, as if reading her mind. “It hasn’t looked this good for months.”

To her right, Cassie saw a family room with huge sliding doors leading onto a verandah. With comfortable-looking leather furniture and paintings of ships on the walls, the room appeared welcoming and tasteful. She couldn’t help but compare it with the ostentatious showroom décor of the chateau where she’d previously worked. It felt like a real family lived in this home.

The kitchen was neat and clean, and Cassie noticed the quality of the appliances. The kettle, toaster, and food processor were a top brand. She recognized their bright designer patterns from an article she’d read in the in-flight magazine, and she remembered having been astonished by their price.

“Have you eaten lunch?” Ryan asked after pouring the tea.

“No, but it’s fine—”

Ignoring her protests, he opened the fridge and took out a plate piled high with fruit, muffins, and sandwiches.

“On the weekend I like to have a stash of snacks available. I wish I could say this was especially for you, but it’s standard fare for the children. Dylan is twelve and starting to eat like a teenager, Madison is nine and plays a lot of sports, and I’d rather they gorged on this than junk food or sweets.”

“Where are the children?” Cassie asked, feeling another stab of nerves at the thought of meeting them. With such a fun, genuine dad they would probably be just as Jess had described them, but she needed to be sure.

“They cycled down the road after lunch to visit a friend. I told them to make the most of the afternoon before the weather turned. They should be back any minute—if not, I might have to take the Land Rover to pick them up.”

Ryan glanced out the window at the darkening sky.

“Anyway, as I explained to you, I’m stuck for help over the next while. I’m a single parent now, the kids need as much distraction as they can get, and my work deadline is unbreakable.”

“What do you do?” Cassie asked.

“I own a fleet of fishing and leisure boats which operates from the port in town. This time of year is when the boats get maintained, and I have a repair crew on site at the moment. They are hellishly busy, and the first storms of the season are almost here. That’s why time’s so tight, and my present circumstances aren’t helping.”

“It must be terrible to have gone through a divorce, especially now.”

“It’s been a very difficult time.”

As Ryan turned away from the window, in the changing light, Cassie realized he wasn’t just attractive, but exceptionally good-looking. His face was strong and chiseled, and from the defined muscles in his arms, she thought he looked to be extremely fit.

Cassie chastised herself for ogling this poor man’s appearance when he was going through emotional hell. All the same, she had to admit he was compellingly handsome, so much so that she had to stop herself from staring.

“Ryan, the only problem is that I don’t have a valid work visa at this point. I have one for France, and I’ve been fully cleared by the au pair agency, but I didn’t realize it works differently here.”

“You were referred to me by a friend,” Ryan said, smiling. “That means you can stay with us as a guest. I will pay you cash, completely off the books, so you will receive it tax-free, if that works for you.”

Cassie felt a surge of relief. Ryan understood her situation and was willing to accommodate it without any issues. This was a huge weight off her shoulders. She realized it might even be the deciding factor, and had to stop herself from accepting the job on the spot. She reminded herself to be careful, and to wait until she’d met the children before committing.

“How long would you need me for?”

“A maximum of three weeks. That will give me time to get this project done, and we’ll be heading for the school holidays by then so we’ll have a chance to bond as a family. Rebound, I should say, as a new family. They say divorce is the most stressful life experience, and I think the children and I can confirm that.”

Cassie nodded in sympathy. She was sure his children would have suffered. She wondered how much Ryan and his wife had fought. Inevitably there would have been fights. It just depended whether they’d ended in shouting and recriminations, or in tense, smoldering silence.

Having experienced both as a child, she wasn’t sure which was worse.

While Cassie’s mother was alive she’d managed to keep the lid on the worst of her father’s temper. Cassie remembered the tense silences from when she was younger, and it had allowed her to develop a finely tuned sense for conflict. She could walk into a room and pick up instantly if the people had been fighting. The silences were toxic and they wore you out emotionally because there was never an end to them.

If there was one thing you could say in favor of loud fighting, it was that eventually it ended, even if it was with glass being broken or emergency services being called. But that caused other trauma and lasting scars. It also brought a sense of fear, because shouting and physical violence showed that you could lose self-control and therefore could not be trusted.

That, in summary, had been her father after her mother had died.

Cassie looked around the cheerful, tidy kitchen and tried to imagine what might have happened there between Ryan and his wife. The worst fights, in her experience, took place in the kitchen and the bedroom.

“I’m so sorry you had to go through this,” she said softly.

Ryan was looking at her closely and she returned his gaze, staring into pale, piercing blue eyes.

“Cassie, you seem to understand,” he said.

She thought he was going to ask her something else, but at that moment the front door opened.

“The children are home, just in time.” He sounded relieved.

Cassie glanced out the window. Raindrops were spattering the glass, and as the door slammed, a cold winter shower started pouring down.

“Hey, Dad!”

Footsteps thudded along the wooden floor and a slim young girl wearing cycle shorts and a green tracksuit top came sprinting into the kitchen. She stopped when she saw Cassie, looked her up and down, and then marched over and shook her hand.

“Hello. Are you the lady who’ll be looking after us?”

“My name’s Cassie. Are you Madison?” Cassie asked.

Madison nodded, and Ryan ruffled his daughter’s shiny brown hair.

“Cassie is still deciding whether she wants to work for us. What do you think? Will you promise to be on your best behavior?”

Madison shrugged.

“You always tell us not to make promises we can’t keep. But I’ll try.”

Ryan laughed and Cassie found herself smiling at the cheeky honesty of Madison’s response.

“Where’s Dylan?” Ryan asked.

“He’s in the garage, oiling his bicycle. It was squeaking on the way up the hill and then the chain fell off.” Madison took a deep breath and walked to the kitchen door.

“Dylan!” she yelled. “Come here!”

Cassie heard a distant shout. “Coming!”

“He’ll take forever,” Madison said. “Once he starts fussing with the bikes he doesn’t stop.”

Noticing the plate of snacks, she made a bee-line for them, her eyes lighting up. Then, looking down at the contents, she gave an exasperated sigh.

“Dad, you made egg sandwiches.”

“Is that a problem?” Ryan asked, his eyebrows raised.

“You know my views on egg. It’s like having sick in a sandwich.”

She carefully selected a muffin from the opposite side of the plate.

“Sick in a sandwich?” Ryan’s voice combined outrage and amusement. “Maddie, you shouldn’t say that kind of thing in front of a visitor.”

“Watch out, Cassie, that egg stuff sticks to everything,” Madison warned, making an unrepentant face at her father.

Cassie suddenly felt a weird sense of belonging. This banter was exactly what she’d hoped for. So far, this seemed to be a normal, happy family, teasing each other, looking out for each other, even though she was sure each of them had their own quirks and difficulties. She realized how tense she’d been, anticipating that something would go wrong.

She hadn’t yet taken any food because she had felt self-conscious about eating in front of Ryan. Now, she realized how hungry she was, and decided she’d better have something before her stomach embarrassed her by growling audibly.

“I’ll be brave and try a sandwich,” she volunteered.

“Thank you. I’m relieved somebody appreciates my culinary excellence,” Ryan said.

“Egg-cellence,” Madison added, making Cassie laugh.

Turning to Cassie she said, “Dad does all the cooking. He just hates to clean.”

“That I do,” Ryan said.

Madison took another deep breath and faced the kitchen door.

“Dylan,” she yelled.

Then she added, in a normal voice, “Oh, there you are.”

A tall, lanky boy strolled in. He had the same brown, shiny hair as his sister and Cassie wondered if he’d just had a growth spurt, because he looked to be all limbs and sinew.

“Hi, pleased to meet you,” he said to Cassie, somewhat absently.

In his boyish features, she could see a similarity to Ryan. They shared the same strong jaw and well-defined cheekbones. In Madison’s pretty, oval face she saw less of Ryan and wondered what the children’s mother looked like. Were there family photos anywhere in the house? Or had the divorce been so acrimonious that these had been removed?

“You must shake hands,” Ryan reminded his son, but Dylan turned his hands outward and Cassie saw the palms were black with oil.

“Uh-oh. Come over here.”

Ryan hurried over to the sink, turned on the tap, and poured a generous amount of dishwashing liquid into his son’s hands.

While Ryan was distracted, Cassie took another sandwich.

“What was wrong with the bike?” Ryan asked.

“The chain was skipping when I changed up the gears,” Dylan explained.

“Did you fix it?” Ryan was monitoring the progress of the handwashing with some concern.

“Yes,” Dylan said.

Cassie expected him to elaborate further but he didn’t. Ryan passed him a towel and he dried his hands, grasped Cassie’s hand briefly in a formal hello, and then turned his attention to the snacks.

Dylan didn’t say much while he ate but Cassie was impressed by how much food he managed to put away in a few minutes. The plate was nearly empty by the time Ryan returned it to the fridge.

“You’re not going to have an appetite for dinner if you keep eating, and I’m about to make spaghetti Bolognese,” he said.

“I’ll eat all the spag bol too,” Dylan promised.

Ryan closed the fridge.

“Right, kids, I need you to go and change out of your cycling clothes now, or you’ll catch a chill.”

When they had gone, he turned back to Cassie and she noticed that he sounded anxious.

“What do you think? Are the children what you expected? They’re good kids, although they can have their moments.”

Cassie had liked the children immediately. Madison, in particular, seemed like an easy child and she couldn’t imagine there being any shortage of conversation around the talkative young girl. Dylan seemed more complex, a quieter, more introverted person. But it could also be that he was older, heading into his teens. It made sense that he wouldn’t have very much to say to a twenty-three-year-old au pair.

Ryan was right, they seemed like easy children, and more importantly, he came across as a supportive father who would help with any problems if they occurred.

Decision made, then. She would take this job.

“They seem lovely. I’ll be happy to work for you for the next three weeks.”

Ryan’s face lit up.

“Oh, that’s great. You know, Cassie, from the time I saw you—no, from the time I first spoke to you, I was hoping you’d agree. There’s something about your energy that intrigues me. I would love to know what you’ve been through, what has shaped you, because you seem—I don’t know how to describe it. Wise. Mature. At any rate, I feel my children will be in excellent hands.”

Cassie didn’t know what to say. Ryan’s praise was making her feel awkward.

Ryan added, “The kids are going to be thrilled; I can see they like you already. Let’s get you settled in and I’ll give you a quick tour of the house. Do you have your bags with you?”

“Yes, I do.”

Taking advantage of a lull in the rain, Ryan walked with her to the car and picked up her heavy bags with ease, carrying them into the hallway.

“We only have one garage, which is the Land Rover’s domain, but parking on the street is totally safe. The house is simple. We have the living room on the right, the kitchen ahead, and on the left is a dining room we hardly ever use, so it’s turned into a jigsaw puzzle, reading, and games room. As you can see.”

Peering in, he sighed.

“Who’s the puzzle enthusiast?”

“Madison. She loves working with her hands, crafts, anything she can get busy and do.”

“And she’s sporty?” Cassie asked. “She’s multi-talented.”

“I’m afraid with Maddie, schoolwork is the weak point. She needs help academically, especially in math. So any assistance you’re able to offer, or even just moral support, will be great.”

“What about Dylan?”

“He’s a passionate cyclist, but can’t be bothered with any other sport. He’s very mechanically minded, and a straight A student. He’s not sociable, though, and it’s a fine balance with him because he can be a moody boy if he feels pressured.”

Cassie nodded, grateful for the input on her new charges.

“Here’s your room. Let’s put these bags down.”

The small room had a beautiful sea view. It was decorated in turquoise and white, and looked neat and welcoming. Ryan placed her larger bag by the foot of the bed, and the smaller one on the striped armchair.

“The guest bathroom is down the passage. We have Madison’s room on the right, Dylan’s room on the left, and finally mine. Then there’s one other place I must show you.”

He accompanied her back down the hall and they headed into the family room. Beyond it, through the glass doors, Cassie saw a covered balcony with wrought-iron furniture.

“Wow,” she breathed. The sea view from this vantage point was exquisite. There was a dramatic drop to the ocean below, and she could hear the waves crashing against the rocks.

“This is my peaceful place. I sit here every evening after dinner to unwind, usually with a glass of wine. You’re very welcome to join me any evening you choose—wine’s optional, but warm,

windproof clothing is compulsory. The balcony is solidly roofed, but not glassed in. I considered doing it but found I couldn't. Out there, with the sound of the sea and even an occasional gust of spray on stormy nights, you feel so connected to the ocean. Take a look."

He opened the sliding door.

Cassie walked out onto the balcony and headed to the edge, grasping the steel railing.

As she did so, dizziness flooded her, and suddenly, she wasn't looking down onto a Devon beach.

She was leaning over a stone parapet, staring in horror at the crumpled body far below, flooded with panic and confusion.

She could feel the stone, cold against her fingers.

She remembered the hint of perfume that had still lingered in the opulent bedroom, and the way that nausea had boiled inside her and her legs had gone so weak that she'd thought she would collapse. How she'd been unable to remember how the events of the previous night had played out. Her nightmares, always bad, had become far worse and more vivid after that shocking sight, so she'd been unable to tell where dreams ended and memories began.

Cassie thought she'd left that terrified person behind, but now, as the darkness rushed up to swallow her, she understood that the memories, and the fear, had become a part of her.

"No," she tried to scream, but her own voice seemed to come from a distant, faraway place and all that came out was a ragged, inaudible whisper.

CHAPTER FOUR

“There, take it easy. Just breathe. In, out, in, out.”

Cassie opened her eyes and found herself looking at the deck’s solid wooden floorboards.

She was seated on the soft cushion of one of the wrought-iron chairs, with her head on her knees. Firm hands were grasping her shoulders, supporting her.

It was Ryan, her new employer. His hands, his voice.

What had she done? She’d panicked and made a complete fool of herself. Hastily she struggled upright.

“Easy, take it slow.”

Cassie gasped. Her head was whirling and she felt as if she was having an out-of-body experience.

“You had a serious attack of vertigo there. For a minute I thought you were going to fall over the railing,” Ryan said. “I managed to grab you before you blacked out. How are you feeling?”

How was she feeling?

Icy cold, lightheaded, and mortified by what had happened. She’d been desperate to make a good impression and to live up to Ryan’s praise of her. Instead, she’d screwed up badly and should explain why.

How could she, though? If he knew the horrors she’d been through, and that her ex-employer was facing trial for murder at this very moment, he might change his mind about her and feel that she was too unstable to care for his children at a time when they needed stability. Even a panic attack might be cause for concern.

It would be better to go along with what he’d assumed—that she’d suffered a bout of vertigo.

“I’m feeling much better,” she answered him. “I’m so sorry. I should have remembered that I get severe vertigo if I haven’t been around heights for a while. It does improve. In a day or two I’ll be fine out here.”

“That’s good to know, but you must be careful in the meantime. Are you OK to stand up now? Keep holding my arm.”

Cassie got up, leaning on Ryan until she was sure her legs would support her, and then he slowly walked her back into the family room.

“I’m good now.”

“You sure?” He held her arm a moment longer before letting go.

“Take some time now to unpack, rest up, settle in, and I’ll have supper ready by six-thirty.”

*

Cassie took her time unpacking, making sure her belongings were neatly packed in the quaint white wardrobe, and that her meds were stashed at the back of the desk drawer. She didn’t think this family would go through her stuff when she wasn’t there, but she didn’t want to field any embarrassing questions about the anxiety medications she took, especially after the panic attack she’d had earlier.

At least she’d recovered from the episode quickly, and that must be a sign that her anxiety was under control. She made a mental note to take her nighttime tablets before joining the family for dinner, just in case.

The delicious aroma of cooking garlic and browning meat wafted through the house long before six-thirty. Cassie waited until a quarter past six and then put on one of her prettiest tops, with beadwork around the neck, lip gloss, and a touch of mascara. She wanted Ryan to see her at her best. She told herself it was important to give a good impression because of the earlier panic attack, but

when she thought back to those moments on the porch, she found what she remembered most clearly was the feel of Ryan's toned, muscular arms as he'd held her.

She felt lightheaded all over again when she remembered how strong, yet gentle with her he'd been.

Leaving her room, Cassie nearly bumped into Madison, who was heading eagerly for the kitchen.

"This food smells so good," Madison told Cassie.

"Is it your favorite dinner?"

"Well, I love spag bol the way Dad makes it, but not when we eat out in restaurants. They don't do it the same. So I'd say this is my favorite home food, and my second favorite is roast chicken, and my third favorite is toad in the hole. Then when we go out, I love fish and chips, which you get all over the place here, and I love pizza, and I hate hamburgers, which happen to be Dylan's favorite, but I think restaurant burgers are yuck."

"What's toad in the hole?" Cassie asked curiously, guessing it must be a traditional English dish.

"Have you never eaten it? It's sausages baked in a sort of pie, made with eggs and flour and milk. You have to have it with lots of gravy. I mean, lots. And peas and carrots."

The conversation had taken them all the way into the kitchen. The wooden table was laid for four, and Dylan was already sitting in his place, pouring a glass of orange juice.

"Burgers are not yuck. They're the food of the gods," he countered.

"My teacher at school said they're mostly cereal and bits of the animals you wouldn't eat otherwise, ground up finely."

"Your teacher is wrong."

"How can she be wrong? You're stupid to say that."

Cassie was about to intervene, thinking Madison's insult too personal, but Dylan got his comeback in first.

"Hey, Maddie." Dylan pointed a warning finger at her. "You're either with me or you're against me."

Cassie couldn't work out what he meant by that, but Madison rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue at him before sitting down.

"Can I help you, Ryan?"

Cassie walked over to the stove, where Ryan was lifting a boiling pot of pasta off the heat.

He glanced at her and smiled.

"Everything's under control, I hope. Dinner time is T minus thirty seconds. Come on, kids. Grab your plates and let's dish up."

"I like your top, Cassie," Madison said.

"Thank you. I bought it in New York City."

"New York City. Wow. I'd love to go there," Madison said, wide-eyed.

"The sixth form economics students went in June on a school trip," Dylan said. "Study economics, and you might go, too."

"Does that involve math?" Madison asked.

Dylan nodded.

"I hate math. It's boring and difficult."

"Well then, you won't go."

Dylan turned his attention to his plate, piling it high with food, while Ryan rinsed the cooking utensils at the sink.

Seeing Madison was looking mutinous, Cassie changed the subject.

"Your dad told me you love sports. What's your favorite?"

"Running and gymnastics. I quite like tennis, we started it this summer."

"And you're a cyclist?" Cassie asked Dylan.

He nodded, piling grated cheese onto his food.

"Dylan wants to be a professional and win the Tour de France one day," Madison said.

Ryan sat down at the table.

"You're more than likely going to discover some obscure mathematical formula and get a full scholarship to Cambridge University," he said, gazing affectionately at his son.

Dylan shook his head.

"Tour de France all the way, Dad," he insisted.

"University first," Ryan retorted, his voice firm, and Dylan scowled in response. Madison interjected, asking for more juice, and Cassie poured it for her while the brief moment of discord passed.

Letting their conversation wash over her, Cassie ate her food, which was delicious. She'd never known anyone quite like Ryan, she decided. He was so capable and so caring. She wondered if the children knew how lucky they were, having a father who cooked for his family.

After dinner, she volunteered to do the cleaning up, which mainly involved loading the large, state-of-the-art dishwasher. Ryan explained that the children were allowed an hour of TV after dinner if their homework was finished, and that he turned off the Wi-Fi at bedtime.

"It's harmful for these screenagers to text on their phones all night," he said. "And they will, if the opportunity is there. Bedtime is sleep time."

When eight-thirty arrived, the two children went to bed obediently.

Dylan gave her a brief "Good night" and told her he'd be up very early in the morning to cycle around the village with his friends.

"Do you want me to wake you?" Cassie asked.

He shook his head.

"I'm good, thanks," he said, before closing his bedroom door.

Madison was chattier, and Cassie spent some time sitting on her bed, listening to her ideas of what they might do tomorrow and what the weather would be like.

"There's a sweet shop in the village and they sell the most beautiful striped candy bars that are like small walking sticks and taste of peppermint. Dad doesn't often let us go there, but maybe he'll let us go tomorrow."

"I'll ask," Cassie promised, before making sure the young girl was settled for the night, bringing her a glass of water, and turning out her light.

As she closed Madison's door gently, she remembered her first night at the previous job. How she'd fallen into an exhausted sleep, and had been late to respond when the youngest child had experienced a nightmare. She could still feel the pain and shock of the stinging slap she'd earned as a result. She should have walked out right then, but she hadn't.

Cassie was confident that Ryan would never do such a thing to her. She couldn't imagine him even giving a verbal admonishment.

Thinking of Ryan, she remembered about the glass of wine on the outside verandah, and she hesitated. She was tempted to spend more time with him but not sure if she should.

Had he meant it when he said she would be welcome to join him? Or had he offered out of politeness?

With indecision still churning in her mind, she found herself pulling on her thickest jacket. She could test the waters, see how he responded. If he didn't seem to want company, she could stay for a quick drink and then go to bed.

She headed down the hallway, still agonizing over her decision. As an employee, it wasn't right to have a glass of wine with her employer after working hours—or was it? If she wanted to be totally professional, she should go to bed. However, with Ryan being so accommodating about her lack of a visa, and promising to pay her cash, the lines of professionalism were already blurred.

She was a family friend, that's what Ryan had said. And sharing a glass of wine after dinner was exactly what a friend would do.

Ryan seemed delighted to see her. Relief and excitement uncoiled inside her as she saw his warm, genuine smile.

He stood up and took her arm and walked her across the verandah, making sure she was safely settled in a chair.

She saw with a skip of her heart that he'd set an extra wineglass out on the tray.

"Do you like Chardonnay?"

Cassie nodded. "I love it."

"Truth be told, I don't have a good palate for wine and my favorite is an ordinary rough red, but this excellent case was gifted to me by a grateful client after a successful fishing trip. I've been enjoying working my way through it. Cheers."

He leaned over and touched his glass to hers.

"Tell me more about your business," Cassie said.

"I started South Winds Sailing twelve years ago, just after Dylan was born. Having him come into the world made me rethink my purpose, and what I could offer my children. I spent three years in the Royal Navy after school, eventually becoming a merchant navy deck officer. The sea's in my blood and I've never imagined living or working inland."

Cassie nodded as he continued.

"When Dylan was born, tourism in this area was starting to boom, so I handed in my notice—at that stage I was the site manager at a shipyard in Cornwall—and bought my first boat. The second followed soon, and today I own a fleet of sixteen boats of various shapes and sizes. Motorboats, sailboats, paddleboards—and the jewel in my crown is a new charter yacht which is popular with corporate clients."

"That's amazing," Cassie said.

"It's been a fantastic journey. The business has given me so much. A comfortable income, a wonderful life, and a beautiful home, which I designed according to a dream I'd always had—although thankfully the architect toned down the wilder elements, or the house would probably have fallen over the cliff by now."

Cassie laughed.

"Your business must take a lot of hard work," she observed.

"Oh, yes." Putting his glass down, Ryan stared out at the sea. "As a business owner, you make constant sacrifices. You work extremely long hours. I seldom have a weekend off; today I asked my manager to stand in for me because I was meeting you. I think that's why—"

He turned toward her and met her gaze, his face serious.

"I think that's why my marriage eventually failed."

Cassie felt a tingle of anticipation that he was opening up to her about it. She nodded in sympathy, hoping he would keep on talking, and after a while, he did.

"When the children were younger, it was easier for Trish, my wife, to understand that I had to put work first. But as they grew older and became more independent, she started wanting me to—well, to replace their presence in her life, I guess. She demanded emotional support, time, and attention from me at an excessive level. I found it draining, and it started causing conflict. She was a strong woman. That was what first drew me to her, but people can change, and I think she did."

"That sounds very sad," Cassie said.

Her glass was almost empty, and Ryan refilled it before topping off his own.

"It was devastating. I can't explain what a tumultuous time it's been. When you love someone, you don't let go easily, and when love goes, you search nonstop for it. Hoping, praying, that you can get back what you valued so highly. I tried, Cassie. I tried with everything I had, and when it became clear it wasn't working, it felt like a defeat."

Cassie found herself leaning toward him.

“How scary that can happen.”

“You picked the right word. It’s terrifying. It left me feeling inadequate, and very much adrift. I don’t take commitment lightly. To me, it means forever. When Trish left, I had to redefine my own impression of who I was.”

Cassie blinked hard. She could hear the anguish in his voice. The pain he was going through sounded fresh and raw. It must take immense courage, she thought, to hide it under a joking and lighthearted exterior.

She was about to tell Ryan how much she admired him for the strength he was showing in adversity, but stopped herself just in time, realizing that this comment was far too forward. She barely knew Ryan, and had no right to make such personal observations to an employer after only a couple of hours in his company.

What was she thinking—if she was thinking at all?

She decided that the wine was going to her head and that she must choose her words carefully. Just because Ryan was so good-looking, intelligent, and kind was no reason to behave like a star-struck teenager around him. It had to stop, because she would only end up embarrassing herself dreadfully, or worse.

“I guess I’d better let you go to bed now,” Ryan said, putting his empty glass down. “You must be exhausted after the drive, and meeting my two hooligans. Thank you for joining me out here. It means a lot to be able to speak to you like this.”

“It’s been an enjoyable end to the day, and such a lovely way to relax,” Cassie agreed.

She didn’t feel relaxed at all. She felt amped up by the intimacy of their conversation. As they stood up and headed inside, she couldn’t stop thinking about what he had shared with her.

Back in her room, she took a quick look at her messages, feeling grateful that this house was connected to the Internet. At her last workplace, there had been no cell signal, and it had led to her becoming completely isolated. Until it happened, she hadn’t realized how scary it was not to be able to communicate with the outside world when she needed to.

On her phone, Cassie saw there were a couple of hellos, and one or two memes from friends back in the US.

Then she saw one other message had been sent earlier in the evening. This one was from an unfamiliar UK cell phone number, which raised alarm bells when she saw it, and as she opened it, she felt cold fear clench her stomach.

“Be careful,” the short message read.

CHAPTER FIVE

Cassie had expected to sleep well in her cozy room with the only sound the wash of surf outside. She was sure she would have, if it hadn't been for that disconcerting message, sent from an unknown number while she had been sitting out on the verandah with Ryan.

Her first panicked thought was that it concerned her ex-employer's murder trial; that somehow she'd been implicated and people were hunting for her. She tried to check the latest news, but found to her frustration that Ryan had turned the Wi-Fi off already.

She tossed and turned, worrying about what it could mean and who had sent it, trying to reassure herself that it was probably a wrong number and had been meant for somebody else.

*

After a restless night, she managed to drift into an uneasy sleep, and was woken by the sound of her alarm. She grabbed her phone and found to her relief that the signal was back.

Before she got out of bed, she searched for news on the trial.

Cassie learned that a postponement had been requested and it was due to resume in two weeks. Researching more carefully, she discovered this was because the defense team needed more time to contact additional witnesses.

That made her feel sick with fear.

She looked again at the strange message, "Be careful," wondering if she should reply to it and ask what it meant, but sometime during the night the sender must have blocked her because she found she couldn't send a message back.

In desperation, she tried to call the number.

It cut off immediately. Her calls had clearly been blocked, too.

Cassie sighed in frustration. Cutting off communication felt more like harassment than a genuine warning. She was going to go with it being a wrong number, which the sender had realized too late and blocked her as a result.

Feeling marginally comforted, she got out of bed and went to wake the children.

Dylan was already up—Cassie guessed he must have gone cycling. Hoping he wouldn't think it an intrusion, she went in, straightened up his duvet and pillows, and collected his discarded clothes.

His shelves were crammed with a huge variety of books, including quite a few on cycling. Two goldfish swam in a tank on top of the bookcase, and on a big table near the window was a rabbit hutch. A gray rabbit was eating a breakfast of lettuce and Cassie watched it happily for a minute.

Leaving his room, she tapped on Madison's door.

"Give me ten minutes," the young girl replied sleepily, so Cassie headed for the kitchen to get a start on breakfast.

There, she saw that Ryan had left a wad of money under the salt shaker with a handwritten note, "I've gone to work. Take the kids out and have fun! I'll be back this evening."

Cassie put a round of bread in the pretty floral toaster and filled the kettle. As she was busy making coffee, Madison walked in, wrapped in a pink robe and yawning.

"Good morning," Cassie greeted her.

"Morning. I'm glad you're here. Everyone else in this house gets up so early," she complained.

"Can I get you coffee? Tea? Juice?"

"Tea, please."

"Toast?"

Madison shook her head. "I'm not hungry yet, thanks."

“What would you like to do today? Your dad told us to go out somewhere,” Cassie said, pouring tea as Madison requested it, with a splash of milk and no sugar.

“Let’s go into town,” Madison said. It’s fun on the weekend. There’s lots to do.”

“Good idea. Do you know when Dylan will be back?”

“He usually goes for an hour.” Madison cupped her hands around her mug and blew onto the steamy liquid.

Cassie was impressed by how independent the children seemed to be. Clearly, they were not used to being overprotected. She guessed the village was small and safe enough for them to treat it as an extension of their home.

Dylan arrived back soon afterward, and by nine they were dressed and ready to depart on their outing. Cassie assumed they’d take the car, but Dylan warned her against it.

“It’s difficult to find parking on the weekend. We usually walk down—it’s only a mile and a half—and take the bus back. It runs every two hours so you just have to time it right.”

The walk down to the village could not have been more scenic. Cassie was charmed by the shifting views of the sea and the picturesque houses along the way. From somewhere in the distance she could hear church bells. The air was fresh and cool, and breathing in the smell of the sea was pure pleasure.

Madison skipped ahead, pointing out the houses of people she knew, which seemed to be almost everybody.

A few of the people driving past waved at them, and one woman stopped her Range Rover to offer them a ride.

“No thanks, Mrs. O’Donoghue, we’re happy walking,” Madison called. “We might need you on the way back though!”

“I’ll look out for you!” the woman promised with a smile before pulling away. Madison explained that the woman and her husband lived further inland and ran a small organic farm.

“There’s a shop selling their produce in town, and they sometimes have homemade fudge, too,” Madison said.

“We’ll definitely go there,” Cassie promised.

“Her kids are lucky. They go to boarding school in Cornwall. I wish I could do that,” Madison said.

Cassie frowned, wondering why Madison would want to spend any time away from such a perfect life. Unless, perhaps, the divorce had left her feeling insecure and she wanted a bigger community around her.

“Are you happy at your current school?” she asked, just in case.

“Oh, yes, it’s great apart from that I have to study,” Madison said.

Cassie was relieved that there didn’t seem to be a hidden problem, such as bullying.

The shops were as quaint as she’d hoped. There were a few stores selling fishing tackle, warm clothing, and sports gear. Remembering her hands had been cold while drinking with Ryan the previous night, Cassie tried on a beautiful pair of gloves, but decided in view of her finances and her lack of available money, it would be better to wait and buy a cheaper pair.

The smell of baking bread drew them across the road to a cake shop. After some discussion with the children, she bought a sourdough loaf and a pecan pie to take home.

The only disappointment of the morning was the sweet shop.

When Madison marched expectantly up to the door she stopped, looking crestfallen.

The store was closed, with a handwritten note taped to the glass which read, “Dear Customers—we’re out of town this weekend for a family birthday! We’ll be back to serve you your favorite delicacies on Tuesday.”

Madison sighed sadly.

“Their daughter usually runs the shop when they’re away. I guess everyone went to this stupid party.”

“I guess so. Never mind. We can come back next week.”

“That’s so far away.” Head lowered, Madison turned away and Cassie bit her lip anxiously. She was desperate for this outing to be a success. She had been imagining how Ryan’s face would light up as they spoke about their happy day, and how he might look at her with gratitude, or even give her a compliment.

“We’ll come in next week,” she repeated, knowing that this was little consolation to a nine-year-old who’d believed peppermint candy sticks were in her immediate future.

“And we might find sweets in other shops,” she added.

“Come on, Maddie,” Dylan said impatiently, and took her hand, marching her away from the shop. Ahead, Cassie noticed the store that Madison had told her about, owned by the woman who’d offered them a ride.

“One last stop there, and then we decide where to have lunch,” she said.

Thinking of healthy suppers and snacks ahead, Cassie chose a few bags of chopped vegetables, a bag of pears, and some dried fruit.

“Can we buy chestnuts?” Madison asked. “They’re delicious roasted on the fire. We did that last winter, with my mum.”

It was the first time either of them had made mention of their mother and Cassie waited anxiously, watching Madison to see if the memory would cause her to become upset, or if this was a sign she wanted to talk about the divorce. To her relief, the young girl seemed calm.

“Of course we can. That’s a lovely idea.” Cassie added a bag to her basket.

“Look, there’s the fudge!”

Madison pointed excitedly and Cassie guessed the moment was over. But having mentioned her mother once, she had broken the ice and might want to talk more about it later. Cassie reminded herself to be responsive to any signals. She didn’t want to miss out on the opportunity to help either of the children through this difficult time.

The bags were displayed on a counter near the till, together with other sweet treats. There were toffee apples, fudge, mint humbugs, small bags of Turkish delight, and even miniature candy sticks.

“What would you like, Dylan and Madison?” she asked.

“A toffee apple, please. And fudge, and one of those candy sticks,” Madison said.

“A toffee apple, two candy sticks, fudge, and Turkish delight,” Dylan added.

“I think maybe just two sweets each for you will be enough or it’ll spoil your lunch,” Cassie said, remembering that excessive sugary treats were discouraged in this family. She took two toffee apples and two packets of fudge from the display.

“Do you think your father would like anything?” She felt a rush of warmth inside her as she spoke about Ryan.

“He likes nuts,” Madison said, and pointed to a display of roasted cashews. “Those are his favorite.”

Cassie added a bag to her basket and headed for the till.

“Afternoon,” she greeted the shop assistant, a plump, blonde young lady with a name tag that read “Tina,” who smiled at her and greeted Madison by name.

“Hello, Madison. How’s your dad? Is he out of hospital yet?”

Cassie glanced in concern at Madison. Was this something she hadn’t been told about? But Madison was frowning, confused.

“He hasn’t been in hospital.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I must have misunderstood. When he was last here, he said—” Tina began.

Madison interrupted her, staring at the cashier curiously as she rang up the purchases.

“You’ve got fat.”

Horried by the tactlessness of this comment, Cassie felt her face going as crimson as Tina's was doing.

"I'm so sorry," she mumbled in apology.

"That's all right,"

Cassie saw Tina looked crestfallen at the comment. What had gotten into Madison? Had she never been taught not to say such things? Was she too young to realize how hurtful those words were?

Perceiving that no more apologies would redeem the situation, she grabbed her change and hustled the young girl out of the shop before she could think of anything else tactless and personal to announce.

"It's not polite to say things like that," she explained, when they were out of earshot.

"Why?" Madison asked. "It's the truth. She's much fatter than when I saw her in the August holidays."

"It's always better not to say anything if you notice something like that, especially if other people are listening. She might have a—a glandular problem or be taking medication that makes her fat, like cortisone. Or she could be expecting a baby and not want anyone to know yet."

She glanced at Dylan on her left, to see if he was listening, but he was rummaging in his pockets and seemed preoccupied.

Madison frowned as she thought this over.

"OK," she said. "I'll remember for next time."

Cassie let out a deep breath of relief that her logic had been understood.

"Would you like a toffee apple?"

Cassie passed Madison her toffee apple, which she put into her pocket, and handed the other to Dylan. But when she gave it to him, he waved it away.

Looking at him in disbelief, Cassie saw he was unwrapping one of the candy sticks from the store they'd just visited.

"Dylan—" she began.

"Ah, no, I wanted one of those," Madison complained.

"I got you one." Dylan reached into the deep pocket of his coat and to Cassie's horror, pulled out several more.

"Here," he said, and passed her one.

"Dylan!" Cassie felt suddenly short of breath and her voice sounded high and stressed. Her mind was racing as she struggled to take in what had just happened. Had she misread the situation?

No. There was no way Dylan could have bought the candy. After Madison's embarrassing comment, she'd hustled them straight out of the store. There hadn't been time for Dylan to have paid, especially since the assistant hadn't been very adept at working the old-fashioned till.

"Yeah?" he asked, looking at her inquiringly, and Cassie felt chilled by the fact that there was no trace of emotion in his pale blue eyes.

"I think—I think you might have forgotten to pay for that."

"I didn't pay," he said casually.

Cassie stared at him, shocked beyond words.

Dylan had just coolly admitted to having shoplifted goods.

She'd never imagined that Ryan's son would do such a thing. This was beyond the scope of her experience and she was at a loss to know how she should react. She felt shaken that her impression of a perfect family, which she'd believed in, was far from reality. How could she have been so wrong?

Ryan's son had just committed a criminal act. Worse still, he was showing no remorse, no shame, nor even any sign that he understood the enormity of his action. He stared back at her calmly, seeming unconcerned by what he had done.

CHAPTER SIX

While Cassie stood, frozen in shock and clueless as to how she should handle Dylan's theft, she realized that Madison had already made up her mind.

"I'm not eating stolen goods," the young girl announced. "You can have it back."

She held out the candy stick to Dylan.

"Why are you giving it back? I took it for you because you wanted a candy stick, and the first shop didn't have them, and then Cassie was being stingy and wouldn't buy you one."

Dylan spoke in aggrieved tones, as if he'd expected thanks for saving the day.

"Yes, but I don't want a stolen one."

Shoving it into his hand, Madison folded her arms.

"If you don't take it, I won't offer it again."

"I said no."

Chin jutting, Madison marched away.

"You're with me or you're against me. You know what Mum always says," Dylan shouted after her. With worry surging inside her at another mention of their mother, Cassie detected more than a hint of menace in his tone.

"OK, enough now."

In a few fast steps, Cassie grabbed Madison's arm and turned her around, bringing her back so that they all stood facing each other on the cobbled sidewalk. She felt cold with dread. The situation was spiraling out of control, the children were starting to fight, and she hadn't even addressed the issue of the theft. No matter how traumatized they were, or what emotions they were suppressing, this was a criminal act.

She was all the more appalled that this store belonged to someone who was friendly with the family. The owner had even offered them a ride to town! You shouldn't steal from a person who'd offered you a ride. Well, you shouldn't steal from anybody, but particularly not from a woman who had generously tried to help that very morning.

"Let's go and sit down."

There was a tearoom on her left which looked full, but, spotting a couple getting up from a booth, she hustled the children to the door.

A minute later they were seated in the warm interior that smelled deliciously of coffee and crisp, buttery pastry.

Cassie stared down at the menu, feeling helpless, because every second that passed was proving to the children that she had no idea how to handle this.

Ideally, she supposed Dylan should be made to go back in and pay for what he'd taken, but what if he refused? She also wasn't clear what the penalties were for shoplifting here in the UK. He might end up in trouble if the store policy dictated that the clerk had to report it to the police.

Then Cassie thought back to the timeline of events and realized there might be a different perspective.

She remembered that Madison had mentioned roasting chestnuts with their mother just before Dylan had stolen the sweets. Perhaps this quiet boy had heard his sister's words and been reminded of the trauma the family had been through.

He might have been acting out his repressed emotions over the divorce by deliberately doing something forbidden. The more Cassie thought about it, the more the explanation made sense.

In which case, it would be better to handle this in a more sensitive way.

She glanced at Dylan, who was paging through his menu, looking completely unconcerned.

Madison also seemed to have gotten over her flare-up of temper. Having refused the stolen sweet and given Dylan a piece of her mind, the matter seemed to have been handled to her satisfaction. She was now engrossed in reading the descriptions of the various milkshakes.

“All right,” Cassie said. “Dylan, please give me all the sweets you took. Clean out your pockets.”

Dylan rummaged in his jacket and took out four candy sticks and a packet of Turkish delight. Cassie stared down at the small pile.

He hadn’t taken a lot. This wasn’t theft on a grand scale. It was the fact he’d taken them at all that was the problem—and that he didn’t think it was wrong.

“I’m going to confiscate those sweets because it’s not right to take something without paying. That shop assistant could get into trouble if the money in the till doesn’t match up with the stock. And you could have landed in bigger trouble. All these stores have cameras.”

“OK,” he said, looking bored.

“I’m going to have to tell your father, and we’ll see what he decides to do. Please don’t do this again, no matter how much you’re trying to help, or how unfair you think the world is being to you, or how upset you are feeling about family issues. It could lead to serious consequences. Understand?”

She took the sweets and stashed them in her purse.

Watching the children, she saw that Madison, who didn’t need the warning, was looking far more worried than Dylan was. He was staring at her with what she could only interpret as puzzlement. He gave a small nod, and she guessed that was all she was going to get.

She’d done what she could. All she could do now was pass the information on to Ryan and let him take it further.

“Are you thinking of a milkshake, Madison?” she asked.

“You can’t go wrong with chocolate,” Dylan advised, and just like that, the tension was broken and they were back to normal again.

Cassie was relieved beyond measure that she’d been able to manage the situation. She realized her hands were shaking and she put them under the table so the children wouldn’t see.

She’d always avoided fights because it brought back memories of the times when she’d been an unwilling, helpless participant. She recalled fragmented scenes of bellowing voices and screams of pure rage. Smashing of dishes—hiding under the dining room table, she’d felt the shards sting her hands and face.

Given the choice, in any fight, she usually ended up doing the equivalent of hiding away.

Now, she was glad that she’d managed to assert her authority calmly but firmly, and that the day hadn’t turned into a disaster as a result.

The tearoom manager hurried over to take their orders and Cassie started to realize how small this town was, because she also knew the family.

“Hello, Dylan and Madison. How are your parents?”

Cassie cringed, realizing the manager obviously didn’t know the latest news, and she hadn’t discussed with Ryan what she should say. As she was fumbling for the correct words, Dylan spoke.

“They’re fine, thank you, Martha.”

Cassie was grateful for Dylan’s brief response, although she was surprised by how normal he’d sounded. She had thought he and Madison would be upset by the mention of their parents. Perhaps Ryan had told them not to discuss it if people didn’t know. That was probably the reason, she decided, especially since the woman seemed to be in a rush and the question had only been a polite formality.

“Hello, Martha. I’m Cassie Vale,” she said.

“You sound like you’re from America. Are you working for the Ellises?”

Again, Cassie winced at their collective mention.

“Just helping out,” she said, remembering that despite her informal agreement with Ryan, she needed to be careful.

“So difficult to find good help. We’re very short-staffed at this time. One of our waitresses was deported yesterday, due to not having the correct paperwork.”

She glanced at Cassie, who looked down hurriedly. What did the woman mean by this? Did she suspect from Cassie’s accent that she didn’t have a working visa?

Was this a hint that authorities in the neighborhood were clamping down?

Quickly, she and the children placed their orders and to Cassie’s relief, the manager hurried away.

A short while later, a stressed-looking waitress, who was obviously a local, brought them their pies and chips.

Cassie didn’t want to linger over her food and risk another round of chitchat, as the restaurant was starting to empty out. As soon as they’d finished, she went up to the front desk and paid.

Leaving the tearoom, they walked back the way they had come. They stopped off at a pet supplies store where she bought more food for Dylan’s fish, which he told her were named Orange and Lemon, and a bag of bedding for his rabbit, Benjamin Bunny.

As they were heading toward the bus stop, Cassie heard music and noticed a crowd of people had gathered in the cobblestone town square.

“What do you think they’re doing?” Madison noticed the activity at the same moment Cassie’s head turned.

“Can we have a look, Cassie?” Dylan asked.

They headed across the road to find that there was a pop-up entertainment show in progress.

In the north corner of the square, a three-piece live band was playing. In the opposite corner, an artist was creating balloon animals. Already a line of parents with young children had formed.

In the center, a magician, formally dressed in a smart suit with a top hat, was performing tricks.

“Oh, wow. I absolutely love magic tricks,” Madison breathed.

“Me, too,” Dylan agreed. “I would like to study it. I want to know how it works.”

Madison rolled her eyes.

“Easy. It’s magic!”

Just as they arrived, the magician completed his trick, to gasps and applause, and then as the crowd dispersed, he turned to face them.

“Welcome, good people. Thank you for being here on this lovely afternoon. What a fine day it is. But tell me, little lady, are you not a bit cold?”

He beckoned Madison forward.

“Cold? Me? No.” She stepped forward, half smiling in wary amusement.

He held out his empty hands and then moved forward and clapped them close to Madison’s head.

She gasped. As he lowered his cupped hands, in them was a small toy snowman.

“How did you do that?” she asked.

He handed her the toy.

“It was on your shoulder all along, traveling with you,” he explained, and Madison laughed in amazed disbelief.

“So now, let’s see how quick your eyes are. This is how it works. You bet me—any amount you like, as I move four cards around. If you can guess where the queen lands, you double your money. If you can’t, you leave empty-handed. So, would you like to place your bet?”

“I’ll bet! Can I have some money?” Dylan asked.

“Sure. How much do you want to lose?” Cassie rummaged in her jacket pocket.

“I want to lose five pounds, please. Or win ten, of course.”

Aware that a new crowd was gathering behind her, Cassie handed Dylan the money and he paid it over.

“This should be easy for you, young gentleman, I can see you have a quick eye, but remember, the queen is a wily lady and she has won many battles.

“Watch carefully as I deal four cards. See, I am placing them face up, for total disclosure. This is almost too easy. It’s like giving the money away. The queen of hearts, the ace of spades, the nine of clubs, and the jack of diamonds. After all, as they say about marriage, it starts off with hearts and diamonds, but by the end all you need is a club and a spade.”

There were roars of laughter from the audience.

The magician’s allusion to marriage going bad had Cassie glancing nervously at the children, but Madison didn’t seem to have understood the joke, and Dylan’s attention was fixed on the cards.

“Now, I turn them over.”

One by one he deliberately flipped the cards face down.

“And now, I move them.”

Swiftly, but not too fast, he shuffled the four cards. It was a challenge to follow but by the time he stopped, Cassie was fairly sure that the queen was on the extreme right.

“Where is our lady queen?” the magician asked.

Dylan paused, then pointed to the card on the right.

“Are you sure, young sir?”

“I’m sure.” Dylan nodded.

“You have one chance to change your mind.”

“No, I’ll stick with that one. She’s got to be there.”

“She’s got to be there. Well, let us see if the queen agrees, or if one of her consorts has managed to spirit her away into hiding.”

He flipped the card over and Dylan let out an audible groan.

It was the jack of diamonds.

“Dammit,” he said.

“The jack. Always ready to cover for his queen. Loyal to the end. But our queen of hearts, the emblem of love, still eludes us.”

“So where’s the queen?”

“Where indeed?”

Cassie had noticed, while he shuffled the cards around, that there was one he hadn’t touched at all—the one on the far left. That had been the ace of spades.

“I think she’s there,” she guessed, pointing to the card.

“Ah, so here we have a clever lady, pointing to the one card she knows it couldn’t possibly be. But you know what? Miracles happen.”

With a flourish, he uncovered the card—and there was the queen.

Laughter and applause rang through the square and Cassie felt a surge of delight as Dylan and Madison high-fived her.

“What a pity you didn’t put money on it, my lady. You would have been richer now, but that’s the way it goes. Who needs money, when love has chosen you?”

Cassie felt her cheeks redden. If only, she hoped.

“As a memento, you may have the card itself.”

He dropped it into a paper bag and sealed it with a sticker before handing it to Cassie, who put it in the side pocket of her purse.

“I wonder what would have happened if I’d chosen that card,” Dylan remarked as they walked away.

“I’m sure it would have been the jack of diamonds,” Cassie said. “That’s how he makes his money, by switching the cards when people bet.”

“His hands were so fast,” Dylan said, shaking his head.

“They must be naturally good and then train for years on top,” Cassie guessed.

“I suppose they would have to,” Dylan agreed, as they reached the bus stop.

“It’s also misdirection, but I’m not sure how that applies when there are four cards so close together. But it must work somehow.”

“OK, let’s practice. Try and misdirect me, Cassie,” Madison asked.

“I will, but the bus is coming. Let’s get on it first.”

Madison turned to look and while her attention was distracted, Cassie snatched the toffee apple out of her jacket pocket.

“Hey! What did you do? I felt something. And there’s no bus.” Madison turned back, saw Dylan burst out laughing, paused for a moment as she replayed what had happened, and started giggling herself.

“You got me!”

“It’s not always that easy. I was just lucky.”

“The bus is coming, Madison,” Dylan said.

“I’m not looking. You can’t trick me twice.” Still snorting with laughter she folded her arms.

“Then you’ll get left behind,” Dylan told her as the sleek single-decker country bus pulled up at the stop.

During the short ride home they all did their best to misdirect each other. By the time they reached their stop, Cassie’s stomach felt sore from laughing and she was warm with happiness that the day had been a success.

As they unlocked the front door, her cell phone buzzed. It was a message from Ryan, telling her he’d be bringing pizzas home, and were there any toppings she didn’t like?

She typed back, “I’m easy, thanks,” and then realized the connotations as she was about to press Send.

Her face felt hot as she erased the words and replaced them with, “Any toppings are good. Thank you.”

A minute later her phone buzzed again and she grabbed it, eager for Ryan’s next message.

This text wasn’t from him. It was from Renee, one of her old school friends from back home.

“Hey, Cassie, someone was looking for you this morning. A woman, calling from France. She was trying to find you but she wouldn’t say more. Can I give her your number?”

Cassie reread the message and suddenly the village didn’t feel remote or safe anymore.

With her ex-employer’s trial upcoming in Paris, and the defense team searching for more witnesses, she was terrified that the net was closing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As she helped the children with their evening routine of bath time and pajamas, Cassie couldn't get the disturbing message out of her mind. She tried to convince herself that Pierre Dubois's legal team could have called her directly, without needing to track down an old school friend, but the fact remained that someone was looking for her.

She urgently needed to find out who that person was.

After she'd tidied the bathroom, she messaged Renee back.

"Do you have a number for the lady? Did she give you her name?"

Leaving her phone behind, she headed through to the kitchen and helped Madison set the table with all the extras that accompanied pizza—salt and pepper, crushed garlic, Tabasco sauce, and mayonnaise.

"Dylan likes the mayo," she explained. "I think it's yuck."

"I do, too," Cassie confessed, and her heart leaped as she heard the front door open.

Madison rushed out of the kitchen, with Cassie close behind.

"Pizza delivery!" Ryan called, handing Madison the pile of boxes. "It's good to be indoors. It was getting icy out there, and dark, too."

He saw Cassie and just as she'd hoped, his face broke into that wickedly attractive grin.

"Hello, Cassie! You're looking beautiful. I see you have some color in your cheeks after all our seaside air. I can't wait to hear about your day."

Cassie smiled back at him, grateful that he'd assumed her flushed face was caused by the fresh air, and not by the fact that she'd started feeling excited and strangely self-conscious as soon as he'd walked in.

As she took the boxes from him, she told herself it would be a good thing when this crush on her boss calmed down.

A few minutes later, Ryan joined them in the kitchen, and Cassie saw he was holding a brown paper bag.

"I bought gifts for everyone," he announced.

"What did you get me?" Madison asked.

"Patience, sweetheart. Let's all sit down first."

When the children were seated at the table, he opened the bag.

"Maddie, I bought you this."

It was a black, fitted top with a pink glittery slogan that was written upside down.

"This is my Handstand Shirt," the slogan read.

"Oh, that's so pretty. I can't wait to wear it to gym," Madison said, beaming in delight as she turned the shirt, watching the light catch the sparkles.

"For you, Dylan, this."

His gift was a neon yellow, long-sleeved cycling top.

"Cool, Dad. Thanks."

"I hope it keeps you safe, now that the mornings are getting so dark. And for you, Cassie, I bought these."

To Cassie's amazement, Ryan took a pair of elegant, warm gloves from the bag. Her eyes widened as she realized they were almost identical to the ones she'd tried on in town.

"Oh, they're absolutely beautiful, and they will be so useful."

To her consternation, Cassie realized she was in the throes of her crush once again and was imagining herself wearing them while sitting outside and sipping wine with him.

"I hope they're the right size. I tried my best to picture your hands while I was buying them," Ryan said.

For a moment Cassie couldn't breathe as she wondered if he was thinking the same way she was.

"So, did you enjoy yourselves today?" Ryan asked.

"We had such fun. There was a magician in town. He gave me a snowman, and he tricked Dylan and took five pounds off him, but then Cassie guessed where the card was and won the card, although no money."

"What card did she win?" Ryan asked his daughter.

"The queen of hearts, so the magician said love is coming her way."

Cassie took a drink of orange juice because she didn't know where to look and was shy about meeting Ryan's gaze.

"Well, I think Cassie deserves that card and all it brings," Ryan said, and she nearly spilled her juice as she put the glass down.

"What did you do after that?" he asked.

"We started talking all about misdirection on the way to the bus, and Cassie misdirected me and stole my toffee apple!"

The words burst out of Madison, and although Dylan was too busy eating pizza to say much, he nodded enthusiastically.

"We bought you something as well," Cassie said, and shyly handed over the cashew nuts.

"My favorite! I have a busy day tomorrow and I'm going to take these with me and have them for lunch. What a treat. Thank you for such a thoughtful gift."

As he said the last words, he looked directly at Cassie and his blue gaze held hers for several moments.

After the pizzas had been devoured—Cassie hadn't had much of an appetite but the others had made up for it and finished every slice—she took the children through to the family room for their allotted TV time, and after watching a talent show they all enjoyed, she put them to bed.

Madison was still excited by the day's adventures and by the talent show, which had featured two groups of school gymnasts.

"I think I want to be a gymnast one day," she said.

"It takes hard work, but if it's your dream, you must follow it," Cassie advised.

"I feel like I can't sleep."

"Do you want to talk some more? Or should I read you a story?"

Cassie tried not to feel impatient at the thought of Ryan, sitting outside with his wine, waiting for her. Or perhaps he wouldn't wait, but would have an early night instead. In which case, she'd miss the opportunity to tell him about Dylan's shoplifting.

The memory jolted her. In her happiness over the thoughtful gift, and the chatter at the dinner table, she'd forgotten about that unpleasant incident. It was her duty to tell Ryan, even if it ended up spoiling what had been a wonderful day.

"I'd like to read for a while."

Madison scrambled out from between the sheets, headed for the shelf, and selected a book she had obviously read many times, because its spine was creased and its pages dog-eared.

"This is the story of an ordinary girl who becomes a ballet dancer. I really enjoy it, it's exciting. Every time I read it, it's exciting. Don't you think that's strange?"

"No, not at all. The best stories always make you feel that way," Cassie said.

"Cassie, do you think they teach gymnastics at boarding school?"

That mention of boarding again. Cassie paused.

"Yes, especially since boarding schools are usually bigger schools. They'll have lots of sports facilities there I should think."

Madison seemed satisfied with that answer, but then she had another thought.

"Do boarding schools let you stay there during the holidays?"

"No, you have to come home for the holidays. Why would you want to stay at school?"

Cassie hoped Madison would answer, but she pulled the duvet up to her chin and opened her book.

"I just wondered. Good night. I'll turn my light out later."

"I'll check on you," Cassie promised, before closing the door.

She sprinted to her room, grabbed her coat and pulled on the beautiful new gloves, and rushed to the balcony.

To her relief, Ryan was still there. In fact, she saw with a thrill of happiness that he'd waited for her before pouring the wine. As soon as he saw her he got to his feet, moved her chair closer to his, and plumped up the cushion before she sat down.

"Cheers. Thank you so much for today. It's the best feeling in the world to see the kids so happy."

"Cheers."

As she touched her wineglass to his, she remembered that it hadn't been a perfect day. There had been a serious incident. How was she going to tell him? What if he criticized her and said she should have handled it differently?

It would be better to ease into it, she decided, and to bring the topic up in a conversational way. She hoped Ryan might mention his divorce again, because that would provide the perfect opening for her to say, "You know, I think this divorce might have been troubling Dylan more than we've been realizing, because just after Madison mentioned her mother, he stole some sweets from the store."

They spoke for a while about the weather—tomorrow was supposed to be a fine day—and the children's schedule. Ryan explained that the school bus would pick them up at seven-thirty in the morning, by which time he would already be gone, and that the children would tell her what time school ended, and if they needed to be taken to any activities.

"There's a timetable on the inside of my cupboard door, if you want to check," he said. "I update it whenever there's a change in timing."

"Thank you so much. I'll check it if I need to," Cassie said.

"You know," Ryan said, and Cassie tensed, draining the last of her wine, because the tone of his voice had changed, becoming more serious. She was sure he was going to mention his divorce, and that meant it would be time for her to bring up the difficult topic of Dylan's shoplifting.

He refilled their glasses before continuing.

"You know, you were very much on my mind today. As soon as I saw those gloves I thought of you and I realized how much I enjoyed our chat outside yesterday. The gloves were really a way of saying that I would love you to spend every evening out here with me."

For a moment Cassie didn't know what to say. She couldn't believe what Ryan had just said. Then, as his words sank in, she felt happiness fill her.

"I'll be glad to. I loved the time we spent together last night."

She wanted to add more, but stopped herself. She must be careful of spilling out the emotions that were rising inside her, because Ryan's comment might just have been politeness.

"Do they fit well?" He took her left hand in his cupped palm and ran his thumb gently over her fingers.

"Yes, they are a perfect fit. And I can't feel the cold in them at all."

Her heart was beating so fast she wondered if he'd be able to feel her pulse pounding as he gently stroked his fingers over her wrist, before releasing his grasp.

"I admire you so much, taking such a big step to travel overseas. Did you decide to do this all on your own? Or with a friend?"

"All on my own," Cassie said, glad that he appreciated what it took.

"That's incredible. What do your family think?"

Cassie didn't want to lie, so she did her best to skirt the issue.

“Everyone was supportive. Friends, family, and my previous employers. I did have a few friends tell me I would be homesick and would come back soon, but that hasn’t happened.”

“And did you leave anyone special behind? A boyfriend, perhaps?”

Cassie could hardly breathe as she realized what this question might imply. Was Ryan hinting at something? Or was it just a conversational question, finding out more about her? She needed to be cautious because she was so star-struck by him that she could easily babble out something inappropriate.

“I don’t have a boyfriend. I dated a guy earlier this year, back in the States, but we broke up a while before I left.”

That wasn’t true. She’d broken up with her abusive ex only a couple of weeks before leaving, and one of her main reasons for traveling overseas had been to get so far away that he couldn’t follow and she couldn’t change her mind.

Cassie couldn’t give Ryan the correct version. Right here and now, watching the white crests of the distant waves roll to shore, she wanted him to think that her last relationship was far in her past. That she was serene and unscarred and ready for a new one.

“I’m glad you shared that with me. It would be wrong of me not to make sure,” Ryan said softly. “And I assume you must have ended things, because I can’t see it being the other way round.”

Cassie stared at him, hypnotized by his pale blue eyes, feeling as if she were in a dream.

“Yes, I did. It wasn’t working out and I had to make a hard decision.”

He nodded.

“That’s what I sensed about you from the first time we spoke. Your inner strength. That ability to know what you want, and to strive for it, and yet you have this amazing empathy and gentleness and wisdom.”

“Well, I don’t know about wise. I don’t feel very wise most of the time.”

Ryan laughed. “That’s because you’re too busy living life to be overly introspective. Another great quality.”

“Hey, I feel that while I’m here, I might learn from an expert in that regard,” she countered.

“Isn’t life the most fun when you spend it with somebody who makes it worth living?”

His words were teasing, but his face was serious, and she found she couldn’t look away.

“Yes, definitely,” she whispered.

This didn’t feel like a normal conversation. It meant something more. It must.

Ryan put his glass down and took her hand, helping her out of the deep cushion. His arm slid round her waist, casually, for a few moments as she turned to go back inside.

“I hope you sleep well,” he said, when they reached her bedroom door.

His hand brushed the small of her back as he leaned toward her and for a moment her amazed eyes took in the shape of his mouth, sensual and firm, framed by a soft outline of stubble.

Then his lips touched hers for just a moment before he drew away and said, softly, “Good night.”

Cassie watched until he’d closed his bedroom door and then, feeling as if she were floating on air, she checked that Madison’s light was out and returned to her room.

With a jolt, she realized she’d forgotten to tell Ryan about the shoplifting.

There hadn’t been the opportunity. The evening had not turned out that way. It had gone in a completely different direction, an unexpected one that had left her feeling amazed and hopeful and expectant. With that kiss, she felt as if a door had opened, and beyond it she’d glimpsed something that might change her entire world.

Had he meant it in a friendly way? Or had he meant something more by it? She wasn’t sure, but thought it had. The uncertainty made her feel nervous and excited, but in a good way.

Back in her room, she checked her messages again and found Renee had texted her back.

“The woman said she was calling from a pay phone. So no number. If she calls again I’ll ask her name.”

As she read the message, Cassie had a sudden idea.

This mystery woman had called from a pay phone, fearful to leave her details, and had contacted a school friend who was one of Cassie's only friends who still lived in her old hometown.

Cassie's father had moved away from where they'd grown up. He'd moved several times, changing jobs, changing girlfriends, and losing his phone just about every time he went on a drunken rampage. She hadn't been in touch with him for ages and never wanted to see him again. He was aging, his health was broken, and he'd created the life he deserved for himself. However, this meant he was no longer contactable by family looking to get in touch. Even she wouldn't know how to get hold of her dad now.

There was a chance—a chance that seemed stronger the more she thought about it—that this caller was her sister, Jacqui, doing her best to trace Cassie again. An old school friend would be the only connection if you weren't on social media, and Jacqui wasn't. Cassie looked for her often, searching whenever she had the time, hopeful that her detective work might uncover a clue to her sister's whereabouts.

Goosebumps prickled Cassie's spine as she considered the possibility that it had been Jacqui who'd called.

It didn't mean Jacqui was in a good situation, but then, she'd never thought she was. If Jacqui had been settled down, with a stable job and an apartment, she would have been in touch long ago.

When Cassie thought of Jacqui she always imagined uncertainty, precariousness. She visualized a life teetering on a fragile balance—between money and poverty, drugs and rehab, boyfriends and abusers, who knew the details? The more uncertain Jacqui's life was, the harder it would be for her to make contact with family she'd left long ago. Perhaps her circumstances didn't allow it, or she was ashamed of the situation she was in. She might be spending weeks and months on the road or off the grid, high out of her mind, or begging for food, or who knew what?

Cassie decided she was going to have faith, and take the chance this was Jacqui reaching out.

Quickly, knowing that Ryan might turn off the Wi-Fi at any moment, she messaged Renee back.

"It could be my sister. If she calls again, please give her my number."

Hoping that her hunch was right, Cassie closed her eyes, feeling she'd done what she could to reestablish contact with the only family she still cared about.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The next morning was organized chaos, as Cassie tried to help the children dress for school. School uniform items were missing, shoes were muddy, socks were mismatched. She found herself running back and forth between the kitchen and the bedrooms, juggling breakfast with everything else.

The children wolfed down tea, toast, and jam before resuming the search for school items that seemed to have migrated to an alternate universe over the weekend.

"I've lost my badge!" Madison announced, pulling on her blazer.

"What does it look like?" Cassie asked, her heart sinking. She'd thought that they were finally done.

"It's round in shape and bright green. I can't go to school without it, I was last week's class captain and someone else has to get the button today."

In a flat panic, Cassie got on her hands and knees and searched the whole room, eventually finding the badge on the closet floor.

After this crisis had been averted, Dylan shouted that his pencil case had vanished. It was only after the children had left that Cassie found it behind the rabbit's cage, and rushed down the road to the bus stop where they were waiting.

When they'd safely boarded the bus, she took a deep breath, and the happy thoughts from the previous night bubbled up inside her again.

As she tidied the house, she replayed the interaction between her and Ryan in her head.

He'd been flirting, she was certain of it.

The way he'd touched her, taken her hand, asked her if she had a boyfriend. That on its own was an innocent enough question, but it was what else he'd said.

"It's wrong of me not to make sure."

That indicated he was asking for a reason. Making sure.

And that kiss. She closed her eyes as she thought of it, feeling warmth bloom inside her. It had been so unexpected, so perfect.

It had felt friendly, but as if he might have meant more by it. It was impossible to say. She felt filled with uncertainty, but in a positive way.

The morning flew by and since Ryan had said he would be arriving home late, she decided to get a start on supper. She had a very limited repertoire of dishes, but there was a kitchen shelf full of recipe books.

Cassie chose the one on family dinners. She'd assumed it was Ryan's book but was surprised to find a handwritten message on the first page—Happy Birthday Trish.

So this was Trish's book. It must have been gifted to her by a friend; perhaps a friend who didn't realize Ryan did most of the cooking. At any rate, she hadn't taken it with her.

Cassie's thoughts were interrupted by a loud knocking on the front door.

She hurried to answer it.

A man in black leathers was standing outside. A large motorbike was parked on the sidewalk behind him.

As soon as Cassie opened the door, he stepped forward so he was halfway in, and very much in her space. He was tall, broad-shouldered, with dark spiky hair and a mustache. She sensed a low level of aggression in the way he pushed inside and his expression as he looked down at her.

She stepped back, flustered by his invading presence. She wished she had put the inside chain on the door before opening it, but she hadn't thought it necessary in this small, quiet village.

"This the Ellis residence?" the man asked.

"Yes, it is," Cassie said, wondering what this was all about.

“Mr. Ryan Ellis in today?”

“No, he’s at work. Can I help you?”

Cassie was panicking inwardly. For her own safety, she should have said Ryan had gone next door for a minute. She didn’t know who this man was. He was pushy and entitled, and this was not how a delivery person would interact with a customer.

“And you are?” The man smiled slightly, leaning a hand on the doorframe.

“I’m the au pair,” Cassie said defensively, remembering too late she should have said she was a family friend.

“Ah, so he’s hired you? He’s paying you, eh? Where you from? The States?”

Cassie felt breathless. She hadn’t expected this at all, and thought immediately of the deported waitress that the tearoom manager had spoken about yesterday.

She didn’t answer him. Instead, she repeated, “How can I help you?”

She hoped he couldn’t sense how frightened he was.

“I’ve got a special delivery for Mr. Ryan Ellis.”

The man handed her a large manila envelope with Ryan’s name and address handwritten on it. She placed it on the hall table and he passed her a clipboard.

“Sign here. Your full name, time of delivery, and your phone number.”

So it was just a delivery after all. Cassie felt relieved, but she wasn’t going to relax until this creepy guy was out of the door.

“And your passport, please.”

“My what?”

She stared at him in horror.

“I have to photograph it. If you don’t mind.”

His tone of voice told her that he didn’t care if she minded. He leaned against the wall and checked his watch.

Cassie felt thoroughly flustered. What was this all about? She dreaded it was some sort of illegal worker clampdown.

She couldn’t tell him to get out, although she wanted to. Was photographing this document even legal, or an infringement of her rights? It felt like an attempt at intimidation, but she couldn’t think of a way out without landing herself in even bigger trouble.

“Would you wait outside while I fetch it?” she asked.

He took his time moving onto the porch. Arms folded and that half smile on his round, pale face, he stood and watched.

She closed the front door, wishing she didn’t have to open it again, and rushed to her bedroom to get her passport, with its incriminating visitor’s visa.

Then she went back, opened the door, and handed it to him.

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