

The Difference a Day Makes

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Extract

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Chapter 1

Out of the corner of my eye, I see William's face crease in pain. I look up from my Harlan Coben novel which has, up until now, been keeping me gripped. 'Will? What's wrong?'

'Funny pain,' my husband says tightly as he rubs at his chest.

'Indigestion,' is my diagnosis. 'Your toast was burned this morning. And you ate it in three mouthfuls. That'll always do it.'

I sip my take-away latte that I grabbed at the entrance to the station. This morning, the time to eat breakfast eluded me. The rush-hour Tube is packed, as usual. Damp bodies crush together, everyone steaming gently due to the heavy rain out on the street. It's a filthy day out there even though summer is just around the corner and, for once, I'm glad to be squashed on the Underground, pressed up against my husband. I move closer to him and we sway with the movement of the train which is rattling along apace. I'm struggling to hold my book high enough or steady enough to read it, so I abandon it and juggle my coffee into my other hand in an attempt to take another sip.

William rubs at his shoulder and down his arm, muttering to himself as he does so. Beads of sweat form on his forehead and his face has gone pale.

'Are you all right?'

'Hot,' he gasps. 'Very hot.' His fingers fumble with his tie, loosening it, and he lets out a wobbly breath.

'We've only one more stop,' I say. He could probably do with

sitting down for a minute, but no one is likely to give up their seat for him. My husband looks clammy and is sweating profusely. ‘You’ll feel better when you’re out in the fresh air.’

I brush his thick, dark hair from his forehead and blow a cool breath on it through pursed lips. Must nag him to get a haircut this weekend – it’s long overdue. We’ve both been so manic that it’s simply slipped off the grid. ‘Have you got a busy morning?’

William nods. Silly question, really. We’re always busy. Last night we were both out late at cocktail parties. It was gone midnight when we fell into bed, too tired for anything more strenuous than a cursory peck on the cheek. I don’t think that Will’s been home before eleven o’clock all week and we’re fast approaching the age where you can only do that so many times in a row without it having a detrimental effect. It would have been lovely to have had a lie-in this morning, but it wasn’t to be.

My husband and I work together at the British Television Company. I’m Amy Ashurst, the Executive Producer of a popular sports quiz programme – imaginatively named *Sports Quiz* – that’s been running for years. I have a formidable reputation that I don’t think I deserve. I’m a pussy cat really, I just have high standards. I adore my work and the buzz around such a successful programme and would probably do it for free if they didn’t pay me handsomely for it.

William is Head of Comedy Development and works with a lot of the up-and-coming comedians to provide showcase programmes for them. He’s the life and soul of the party and is responsible for giving breaks to some of the biggest names in entertainment on the small screen today. He doesn’t like to brag, but you’d know them all.

There are advantages and disadvantages of working together – although we hardly see each other during the day unless we manage to snatch a rare lunch together in the staff canteen. The difficulty is in the evenings when neither of us can switch off our BTC heads and all we talk about is work. But, as I said, we both love our jobs, so that’s no great hardship.

‘Try to grab a cup of tea and take five before you launch into the day.’ I squeeze his arm. William’s never ill. He’s a complete fitness freak and runs every day, hail, rain or shine. Not like me who has to be coaxed to the gym once a year. My husband has the constitution of an ox and will declare it to anyone prepared to listen.

‘Yes.’ His face has an odd waxen look.

‘Do you want a sip of this?’ I offer my latte, but he shakes his head.

It’s about time we had a holiday, I think. We’ve both been so stretched, with one thing and another, that we haven’t had a proper break for ages. Perhaps Will has been working too hard. Maybe I’ll have a look at my diary when I get into the office, see if we can squeeze something in.

‘You do look a bit peaky,’ I tell him, frowning with concern. With that he sags forward and my book and my coffee fall to the floor as I try to catch him. ‘William?’

Alarmed commuters step backwards, forming a small circle of space around him. My husband drops to his knees, clutching at his chest and gasping.

‘Help me!’ I shout, panicking, my eyes scanning the crowd. ‘Help me! Is there a doctor in here?’

Everyone looks at me blankly. Fear grips my stomach. I don’t know what to do. What *can* I do? ‘William. William.’ My husband’s fighting for breath.

‘I’m a nurse,’ a voice says, and a young man pushes his way forward to crouch down beside William, heedless of the spreading puddle of coffee at his feet.

The Tube pulls up at White City. ‘This is our stop,’ I say hurriedly.

‘Let’s get him off here.’

We haul William to the door and then half-carry him, shoulders under his arms, to the platform where we lay him down. He continues to gasp, his face turning the colour of putty.

‘It’s his heart,’ the nurse says, opening William’s coat and jacket.

His heart? I want to laugh. It can’t be. Will’s not yet forty-two. Doesn’t he know how fit my husband is? He’s thinking of doing

the London Marathon again next year. William would be the last person in the world to have a heart-attack. He must have got it wrong.

‘We need an ambulance,’ the nurse barks at me. *‘Now.’*

As I fumble for my mobile, I realise that it won’t work down here. I scan the platform, looking for a member of the station staff and then I break into a run, pushing through the commuters, searching for help while behind me Will lies unmoving on the platform.

Chapter 2

I pace the hospital room, hours later, still in a state of shock. Then I hear a noise from the bed behind me and I turn to see that my husband has stirred. My own heart contracts again as I stare at him. He looks like a snowman, his eyes like black coals that gaze at me from a too-white face. This man, who's normally so strong and solid, looks as weak as a kitten. I can't get used to seeing him like this. It's just not right.

Going to the bed, I squeeze his hand, mindful of the tubes that enter the back of it. His chest is bared, his hospital gown open, and he's wired up to a heart monitor that beeps steadily now – thank God. 'You gave me quite a scare there, you silly sod.'

'Scared myself too,' William admits. His lips look dry and, as a reflex reaction, I wet my own. 'I thought the Grim Reaper was knocking at the door.'

'I know.' For a while I'd thought that too.

William lets his eyes close again, momentarily. 'Us Ashursts are renowned for our dodgy hearts, Amy.' He tries a laugh. 'Never thought it would bother me though. Assumed mine was as solid as a rock.'

'It might not be your heart. The doctors say that they're going to run all kinds of tests on you to see what caused it.' My husband was whisked straight into hospital and given an initial assessment. They've told us that Will didn't have a heart-attack, that it was simply pain that made him pass out. But we still don't know what

caused the pain in the first place. ‘You’ll be in for a few days yet. But you’re out of danger now.’ I stroke his hair.

‘The consultant asked if I was stressed.’

We both laugh tiredly at that. We’re in television. We juggle two careers, two children and a sprawling house. Of course Will’s stressed. We both are.

‘Have you phoned home?’ he wants to know.

‘I called Maya.’ Maya’s our Bulgarian nanny. She’s been with us for four years now and, frankly, I have no idea what I’d do without her. My life would fall apart in about ten minutes flat. She’s not only fantastic with the kids, but she cooks, cleans, shops, berates tradesmen on our behalf and, generally, assures that our lives run like a well-oiled machine. In return we pay her a king’s ransom, give her a top-of-the-range Audi to drive and constantly beg her not to find a nice man, settle down and have children of her own. ‘I’ve told her not to mention anything to the children yet. I’ll tell them myself when I get home.’

‘You’re not going into work today, surely?’

I raise my eyebrows. ‘Gav’s been on the phone already.’ Gavin Morrison – that’s my boss. He’s a BTC man through and through. The show must go on whatever’s happening in your personal life. He wouldn’t let a little thing like a suspected heart-attack stand in the way of his ratings war. Sick staff just don’t feature on his radar. ‘I rang in to say what had happened and that I’d be back tomorrow if all was well. We’re recording three shows back-to-back today. He’s begged me to go in just to make sure everything’s on track.’

‘Can no one else do it?’

I shrug. ‘You know what it’s like.’ We don’t have enough people to do the jobs that are required already.

Will puffs out his agreement. ‘Only too well.’

‘I’ve got so much to do.’

‘That’s nothing new.’

‘No.’

The host of *Sports Quiz* is an ex-footballer who now runs a hotel with fishing rights in Scotland and we have to make the most

of him when he reluctantly tears himself away from his country pile and comes down to London to record the programme. He's the ultimate professional and is a joy to work with, but it means a crazily busy day for everyone concerned – including me.

'You look all in,' my husband says. 'It's been a shock for you too. Why don't you go straight home and put your feet up for the day? Tell them to stick it.'

Stick it? That's not like Will at all.

'Or you could jump in the bed next to me?' he suggests.

Smiling, I tease, 'There's nothing much wrong with you.'

'Bravado, I'm afraid,' he admits with a sigh.

The thought of going home and putting my feet up for a couple of hours is very tempting, but how can I possibly leave Will like this? I do feel shaken, all sort of shivery and uncertain inside.

My phone rings again and I grab for it before the nurse hears it as I'm not supposed to have it on in here. It's my boss again. 'An hour,' he pleads. 'Just come in for an hour.'

If there's any day that I really can't afford to miss work, then it's today. I chew at my lip. I know how pushed my staff will be without me. 'I'll do my best,' I say. 'But I can't promise.' Gavin will just have to put up with that. I hang up.

William catches me glancing at my watch. 'Go on,' he says with an unsteady exhalation of breath. 'Go and give the good old BTC their pound of flesh. You know that Gavin won't let you rest until you do.'

I'm torn with concern for my husband and concern that a dozen other people are depending on me. I called my assistant, Jocelyn, right away this morning to let her know the score and she'll be holding the fort. And she's great. But she's not me. I'd hate for anything to go wrong while I'm not there. My boss wouldn't have called if he wasn't worried too. I check my watch again. If I rush, then I could just get there in time for the first recording. 'I don't want to leave you.'

'There's nothing much you can do here.' My husband takes in his tubes and the array of wires attached to his chest. He appreciates the

pressure of my job as his is exactly the same. 'I'll just go back to sleep. I'm very tired.' I hear the catch in his voice.

I lay my head on his shoulder. 'I hate to see you like this. Just a few days of being poked and prodded about and you'll be as right as rain, I'm sure.'

He looks at me bleakly. 'What if I'm not, Amy?'

I laugh at him softly. 'You will be. Of course you will. You're the fittest person I know. This is just a wobble. Nothing more.' I run my thumb over his cheek and he catches my hand and squeezes it. 'You'll be fine. You'll be back at work next week, terrifying all that young talent whose careers you hold in the palm of your hand,' I joke.

Will's gaze goes to the ceiling and I can tell that tears are forming which is so unlike him.

'Close your eyes, darling,' I tell him tenderly. 'Get some sleep. The more you can rest, the better.' I feel terrible for doing this, but I should pop into the studio. Just for a couple of hours, then I'll come back. 'I called into the office for you and everything's under control.'

'I had a dinner organised for tonight with Marty Moran.' The new hot stuff on the comedy scene. 'Can you make sure it's rescheduled for next week?'

I nod. 'Is there anything else I can do for you?'

Will takes my hand and kisses it. 'Just keep loving me,' he says.

'Always,' I assure him. Then he closes his eyes and I wait until his breathing relaxes and he's asleep. Then, giving a last glance to check that his monitor is still beeping steadily and feeling as guilty as hell, I steal away.

Chapter 3

‘He works too hard,’ my assistant tells me. ‘You both do.’

‘We love our jobs.’

‘You shouldn’t be here,’ Jocelyn chides, gripping her clipboard tighter as she moves out of my rightful place at the production desk. It seems as if none of the team expected me to turn up today, just my boss. ‘You should be at the hospital.’

‘I know. I know. Gavin phoned and begged me to come in.’

Jocelyn purses her lips. Her look says that he should have left me alone. Perhaps he should, but we’re all under pressure here.

‘Go back,’ she says.

‘I’m here now. Besides, I can’t do anything there,’ I insist. ‘Will was fast asleep when I left. That’s all he needs – some rest. He’s going to be fine. Really, he is. He’s as fit as a flea. They think it might just be stress or something.’ I try to console myself with the fact that my husband has a team of experts on hand to jump to attention should one of the myriad machines he’s attached to utter a single bleep in the wrong place.

‘This is a warning,’ Jocelyn continues, warming to her theme. ‘Look at the hours you both put in. It’s ridiculous. Perhaps you need to slow down.’

If Jocelyn is trying to make me feel old and inadequate then it’s not working. Both Will and I thrive on pressure. Or at least I thought we did.

I look out from the gallery. The studio audience are currently

taking their seats ready for the warm-up comedian to work his magic on them. ‘Shall I send this lot away then?’ I wave my arm towards the crowd of people for my assistant’s benefit. ‘Just say I’m sorry, can’t do this today – other, more pressing things on my mind.’

Jocelyn scowls at me. The two opposing panels of famous sports people are currently enjoying the hospitality of the BTC in its most salubrious green room. My very next job is to check on them all. Make sure that they’re happy. Some of them enjoy their celebrity status more than others and we see our fair share of diva-like behaviour.

‘I can manage,’ Jocelyn says.

I’m sure she could. My assistant is a very ambitious woman and would love the chance to prove herself in my job. But Gavin made it very clear that it was me he wanted at the helm today and like a fool, here I am.

‘Good grief, Amy, people would understand. I know we all like to think that we’re irreplaceable, but we can cope without you for a few days. Your husband’s ill.’

‘He’s fine. The doctor said it was just a wobble. A minor wobble.’ The doctor didn’t *actually* say that, but I’m sure that’s what he really meant.

She huffs at me. Neither of us are ever ill. I can’t think of the last time either Will or I took a day off work due to sickness. Even if the kids are unwell, Maya deals with it. That’s how it has to be. Both Will and I are at the top of our tree – and we didn’t get here by taking a day off when we had a cold. We have to be single-minded and focused. William understands why I have to be here even if, in my heart of hearts, I’d rather be sitting next to his bedside watching him sleep, making sure that he really is all right. This place is in our blood. We don’t have any choice. We’re dedicated professionals. He’d be mortified if he thought I was letting people down because of him. That’s just how we are.

‘Let’s get on with it, shall we?’ I smooth back my hair. ‘The sooner we finish recording, the sooner I can get back to the hospital.’ Today I have to squash down all of my problems and get on with

the job in hand. My stomach starts to clench with nerves as the clock ticks down, but that's part of the buzz that I love. That's what keeps me coming back for more. I might be a wife and mother, but I'm also Amy Ashurst, television producer and adrenalin junkie. That's me too.

Chapter 4

We finally wrap the last of the three shows at about ten o'clock and I can leave for the night. All three programmes, apart from the usual minor retakes for fluffed lines, have gone without a hitch. Would that have happened if I hadn't been here?

We do have nights where the guests forget to turn up, turn up two hours late or, even worse, turn up drunk – but thankfully, this wasn't one of them. Despite being here physically, my mind wasn't entirely on the job and I snatched a phone call to the hospital every time I could, just to make sure that Will was still okay. According to the nurses, he's slept most of the day away, which I'm sure has done him the power of good. He'll be back to his old self before we know it.

'We're all going to Bar Oscar,' Jocelyn tells me. 'Don't suppose you're coming?'

Shaking my head, I say, 'Not tonight.' Ordinarily, I wouldn't miss a chance to socialise with my team. They're a good bunch, fun to be with. We like to hit the hot spots together at least once a week. It's one of the reasons we all work so well together. 'I'm going straight back to see how Will is.'

'Give him my love,' my assistant says.

I make sure that I say my goodbyes to our star presenter and the guest athletes, then I phone a driver and get the car to take me to the hospital.

In the car on the way, I call Maya.

‘I put the children in bed at their usual time, Amy,’ she says. ‘I didn’t think that you’d want them to wait up for you.’

‘No, no, you did the right thing,’ I reassure her, pushing down a pang of longing for my babies. Tom is eight now and Jessica is six, but they’re still babies to me. Tom looks just like his daddy, sturdy and solid with a mop of thick, dark hair and midnight-blue eyes. He has his father’s competitive streak too and has to excel in everything he does. Jessica favours me – she’s slight, elfin-faced and her blue eyes are pale like mine though she seems too laid back to be one of my offspring and excels in absolutely nothing. ‘Are they both okay?’

‘They’re fine.’ Now it’s Maya’s turn to be reassuring.

‘I’ll see them in the morning.’ I feel guilty that once again I’ve missed their bedtime. They both love it when I’m home in time to read their stories to them, and Will and I try to work it that one of us is around every night of the week even though the co-ordinating of our diaries every Sunday night is a bit like a military operation. I wish I could spend more time with them. But then a paucity of time is the scourge of every working mum.

‘I’ve left your supper ready to be microwaved,’ Maya informs me.

‘Thank you,’ I say. ‘You are so good to us. I don’t know how I’d cope without you.’

‘How’s William?’

‘I’m just about to find out,’ I tell her. ‘Don’t wait up though.’ I know what she’s like, she’ll force herself to stay awake until I’m home just to make sure that I’m okay. ‘We’ll talk about it in the morning.’

‘Goodnight, Amy,’ she says and I hang up, so grateful that I have someone who watches my back.

The ward is in darkness when I arrive and a nurse scuttles out from behind the reception desk to meet me. I give her my name and she says, ‘I think that Mr Ashurst is asleep. I’ll check his room for you.’

‘I won’t wake him,’ I promise. ‘I only want to say goodnight.’

Actually, just looking at him would be enough. I've missed him so much today. Now that I'm not pumped up on my adrenalin high from work, my fears for his health flood back.

After a moment's indecision, she takes me along to my husband's room.

Will is asleep. His covers are thrown back as the room is unbearably hot and he likes a lot of fresh air in the room. Despite the stifling temperature, he's still looking pale and vulnerable.

The nurse goes through a few cursory checks of the machinery that's monitoring Will, then she creeps out and leaves me alone with my husband.

I stand and watch him, wanting to smooth away the slight frown on his forehead. I love this man so much. We met twelve years ago when I was just twenty-six, and I can quite easily say that they've been the happiest twelve years of my life. I'd been at the BTC since graduating, working my way steadily through the ranks, when Will – already a successful producer at the age of thirty – joined the corporation. We met at a Christmas drinks party for one of the programmes – bizarrely, a dating gameshow. I'd bought a new dress and killer heels as I wanted to dress to impress, make an arrival. The killer heels were so high that I tripped up as I walked into the party and turned my ankle. Will was on hand to break my fall. He got me a drink and put some ice in his handkerchief which relieved my bruised ankle if not my ego. We found a cosy corner where I could hide my shame and put my foot up and, left to our own devices, instead of working the room, we hit it off immediately. That was pretty much that. We dated for a few weeks, decided that we'd both found our soulmate and would look no more. Then, without further ado, I moved lock, stock and two dozen handbags into his spacious flat in Notting Hill. We still live in the same area today, though home is now a three-storey Georgian villa with an enormous private garden and a good line in graffiti on the front wall.

While I'm musing, Will has opened his eyes.

'Hey,' I say. 'You'll get me into trouble with the nurse. I said I wouldn't wake you.'

‘It’s good to see you,’ my husband tells me with a stifled yawn. I pull a chair next to his bed and lean my elbows on it, gazing at him. ‘I was just thinking how much I love you.’

‘I love you too,’ he whispers in return.

‘How are you feeling?’

‘Okay,’ he says hesitantly. ‘This has frightened me, you know.’

‘You’ll be fine.’

‘My father died of a heart-attack at the ripe old age of forty-two,’ he reminds me. ‘I’d kind of planned on outliving him.’

‘You will,’ I assure him.

‘It makes you think though.’ He lets out a shuddering sigh.

‘Next week you’ll be back at work and will have forgotten all about this.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘You will. Two weeks max.’

‘No,’ he says flatly. Will’s eyes are troubled as he looks deep into mine. ‘You see, Amy, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking today and I’m not planning on going back to work.’

‘Not next week?’

‘Not next week, nor the week after,’ he says. ‘In fact, not ever.’