

Extract from “The Difference a Day Makes”

Chapter 1

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

‘Funny pain,’ my husband says tightly with another wince as he rubs at his chest.

‘Indigestion,’ is my diagnosis. ‘Your toast was burnt 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. Moving closer to him, 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.

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

‘Are you alright?’

‘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. He could do with 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?’

Jeremy 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 Jem’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. We probably both could have done with 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.

Jeremy 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, I guess.

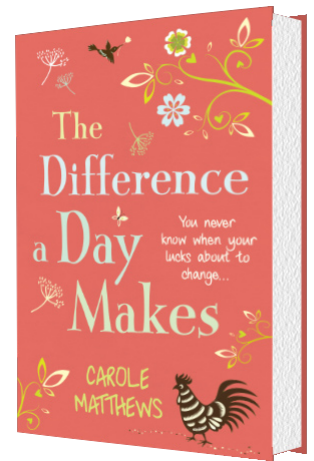
‘Try to grab a cup of tea and take five before you launch into the day.’ I squeeze his arm. Jeremy’s never ill. He’s a complete fitness freak and runs every day, hail, rain or shine. Not like me who has to be coaxed to the gym once a year. My husband has the constitution of an ox and will declare it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

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 on here?’

Everyone looks at me blankly. Fear grips my stomach. I don’t know what to do. What can I do? ‘Jeremy. Jeremy.’ 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 Jeremy, 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 Jeremy 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 Jeremy’s coat and jacket.

His heart? I want to laugh. It can’t be. Jem’s not yet forty-two. Doesn’t he know how fit my husband is? He’s thinking of doing the London Marathon next year. Jeremy 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 Jem lies still, 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,’ Jeremy 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.

Jeremy lets his eyes close again, momentarily. ‘Us Ashurts 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 says 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 Jem 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, Jem’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 in to 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.

Jem 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 Jem 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 Jem 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.

Jeremy 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.

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

'Close your eyes, darling. 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?'

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

'Always,' I assure him. Then as 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.