

Somewhere Beyond the Sea

Amanda James

Extract



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Chapter One

I folded my clothes neatly and placed them with the precision of a drill-sergeant on a flat rock by the shore. I positioned the letter in its blue envelope carefully on top and weighed it down with a round white pebble. Standing before the moonlit water, I felt the caress of the breeze like salt kisses over my naked skin.

I walked nearer to the sea. Firm sand cushioned my steps and, despite my weight, each footfall barely left an imprint. Surf foamed in, tickled my toes, and encouraged me further. Out on the island, the glass eye of the lighthouse winked as if it knew my secret, and a gull wheeled above in day-bright moonshine. I spread my arms wide, tilted my head to the dazzling stars and inhaled. I belonged to the universe. I relished the sense of freedom, the oneness with nature.

Ironically, I had never felt so alive.

Lowering my arms again, I turned to have a last look at the clifftops. In my mind's eye, beyond them I could see the Cornish village where I had lived for the past sixteen years. I could see every little street and lane, every little country garden. Most of the buildings were now in darkness, of course, apart from the light of a lamp or two.

There was no light in my mother's house.

Turning back towards the waves I stepped forward. One, two, three long strides. No hint of hesitation fettered, nor apprehension restrained.

This was it. This was what came next.

The weight of the incoming tide was my only barrier, but even as a breath caught in my throat, I gritted my teeth against the cold and plunged headlong.

I would tire of course ... soon. But for now, with adrenaline pumping in my veins, legs and arms powering my body through the waves, for now I was strong, free and in control of my destiny.

Chapter Two

Tristan stopped in the cobbled high street and scratched his head. Sweat beaded his brow and he jabbed his new glasses back up the bridge of his nose for the umpteenth time. It occurred to him to pop into the opticians on the way back from the shops and ask about alterations. They were far too loose, and now in this heat they were practically impossible to keep on. The trouble was he never seemed to have time to do anything apart from work. And run errands for his wife. Thinking of which, he couldn't for the life of him remember what he had to get from the damned shops.

He scratched his head again, partly because he was thinking, and partly because he'd managed to get some bloody insect bite when he'd taken a short cut across the meadow. The midges at this time of year were relentless, homing in like tiny Junker bombers, emitting that high-pitched screech until they found a meaty target. Tristan wet his finger, dabbed at the little lump that felt like a mountain, and loosened his tie. He'd heard about the new variety of bloodsuckers migrating here from the Continent due to global warming. Well, it was certainly warm today.

A few more steps took him to the high street and, shrugging out of his jacket, Tristan found himself under the stripy awning of Jackson's butcher shop and blessedly in the shade. Harold Jackson, round, ruddy and robust waved through the window, wiggling his sausage-like fingers at Tristan. Tristan raised his hand briefly in response and then prodded his glasses up his nose again.

The image reflecting back at him in the shop window did lift his mood a little. With his heavy, square, black-rimmed glasses – already on their downward slide – perched on his nose, he thought he resembled a film star that he'd seen in a romantic comedy recently. Karen had it on DVD ... now what was he

called? He looked at himself in profile. Hmm, the guy's hair in that film had been dark, much darker than his messy tawny mane. His chin sported a covering of Tristan's 'I was too late to shave this morning' look, rather than designer stubble, but if folk thought it was the latter, who was he to argue? Nope he couldn't remember the name of the actor or the film, but what did that matter? The main thing was that he looked, dare he say it in this heat, *cool*.

Wrinkling his brow, Tristan peered mole-like at the glass and pushed his fingers through his heat-induced floppy fringe in an effort to tame the mane. He sighed. Dear God, stop preening and put your thinking cap on. What exactly was he supposed to pick up for Karen?

A tray of steak thrust at him by Harold at the other side of the window startled him out of his contemplation. Harold mouthed something, pointed at the steak and grinned. Tristan sighed and shook his head indicating he didn't understand, so Harold beckoned him inside.

Having no wish to be bored stupid by yet another story of how no finer cut of meat could be found in the whole of Cornwall, Tristan shook his head and pointed at his watch.

Harold shook his head in return and hustled out of the doorway, just as Tristan was making his escape. 'Are you popping in here later then, Doc?' Harold asked, frowning.

'No, not today, Harold. I have to run an errand for Karen and then get back for afternoon surgery.' Tristan smiled apologetically and set off again.

Harold's voice stopped him again after only a few steps. 'Oh, so you don't want this steak that she ordered?'

A Homer Simpson type 'D'oh!' sounded in Tristan's brain. He only just managed to avoid slapping his forehead to complete the picture. That's what he'd come into town for – steak! Steak for the barbecue, the very same barbecue that seemed to be taking

over his wife's every waking hour this past week.

The number of times she'd asked him whether the Prestons would be comfortable eating out on the patio because even though it was June there might be a nip in the air, didn't bear thinking about. Or, did he think that the best china at a barbecue might look as if they were trying too hard? And, was her homemade coleslaw too cabbagey? Too cabbagey? What was he supposed to say to that? What he *had* said was 'stop fussing about it all, Karen, it will be grand!' She had replied that it was all right for *him* to say, but it wasn't *his* cooking that was going to be judged by the vicar and his wife.

Tristan had wished at least half a dozen times that he hadn't asked Reverend Michael to dinner sometime. He hadn't really meant it, just said it in passing when he was examining the vicar's injured knee a few weeks ago. In fact, he should have known better given Karen's condition, but he'd blurted it out and that was that.

Michael had snatched his hand off. 'We'd be delighted, Tristan,' he'd said with a beaming smile, tucking his long wavy blond hair behind his ears. With his tanned skin, cool blue eyes and white smile, he looked more like an A-list celebrity than a vicar. The congregation had doubled its female intake since he took over St Mary's.

He surfed every morning too – that's how he'd got the injured knee – and he always had an audience. This audience was exclusively female, a few ladies who 'just happened' to be walking their dogs along the beach.

'In fact, we are free Friday week if that's any good?' Michael continued, pulling his trousers back up. 'And a barbecue would be just the thing for this weather.'

Tristan had little choice but to say that would be fine. He hadn't suggested a barbecue but Michael seemed set on it, so a barbecue it would be. But now, he had almost sent the entire plan into free fall by forgetting the main part of the meal. Karen would

have murdered him, marinated him in the new herb dressing she'd raved about and put *him* on the barbecue instead.

Outside the butcher's shop, Harold was still looking at Tristan as if he'd suddenly sprouted another head.

He took a deep breath and painted on his tried and tested 'trust me I'm a doctor' smile. 'Of course I want the steak, Harold. Just joking with you!' he said, stepping forward and ushering Harold back into the shop.

Harold looked a bit nonplussed, but grinned in return. He went to the other side of the counter and busied himself weighing and packing up the steak. 'How are the babes?' he said.

'They're grand thanks. Sebastian is hardly a baby though, he's nearly two and a half, and Bella's walking now.'

'Is she really? How time flies. And the good lady wife? I've only seen her from a distance the once and you've been in Kelerston, what, about a year now haven't you, Doc?'

Tristan nodded. 'She's feeling a bit stressed at the moment, Harold, as we're having guests over for a barbecue tonight. But she's much better in general. I'm trying to get her to agree to come down to the Rose and Crown one evening for a drink.'

'That would be nice.' Harold laughed heartily. Harold was one of those people who laughed heartily for no apparent reason. Tristan would never get used to it. It made him feel uncomfortable. Apparently it was a sign of insecurity, but Tristan had a sneaky suspicion it was a sign of a vacuous brain. He tipped the butcher a weak smile and rummaged in his wallet.

Harold stopped laughing. 'Being an agorapheebric can't be much fun,' he said and arranged his face into a suitably sympathetic expression. Slapping the bag of steak on the counter, he held out his meaty paw. 'That'll be twenty pounds to you, Doctor Tristan.'

Tristan handed over the money and wondered why people said that 'to you' nonsense. 'Thanks, Harold. And like I said, her

agoraphobia is much better, just a matter of time before she's out shopping for herself.'

'Well, I wish her all the best. Make sure you pass on my best wishes, mind. And while you're here,' Harold said, disappearing under the counter, 'take this chicken for her. I'm sure she could make use of it on the barbecue with perhaps a nice marinade?'

Tristan nodded and smiled. 'Oh, that's very kind of you, Harold, and I know just the marinade she'll use.'

As he made his way back to the surgery he felt a little sheepish. Even though Harold seemed a bit disingenuous with the hyena laugh and all, he was good at heart. In fact most people in Kelerston were. Perhaps he needed to be a little less on his guard about his wife and more accepting of their concern. That aside, it was in his nature to keep his private life private – he was a public figure after all. It didn't do to let folks know too much about his personal affairs.

A doctor needed to be friendly yet professional; too much information could lead some people to assume they could call on him day or night just to look at a boil on their arse. He hadn't hidden the reason for his wife's absence, however. Tristan was a firm believer that awareness of mental health conditions was the key to understanding.

He had to admit to himself though that it wasn't true that she was better. She had *been* getting better, but over the past few weeks she'd retreated back into her shell. Karen's agoraphobia had started when they moved here from Swindon a year ago. She'd never been an outgoing person at the best of times, but living here had triggered the first anxiety attacks. Karen had been dead set against the move ever since he'd told her of his desire to return to his Cornish roots.

Tristan had grown up in Porthcothan, the next village to Kelerston, and when a post came up at the local surgery, he'd leapt at the chance. He'd been surprised at Karen's less than

lukewarm response, what was not to like? Tristan thought that she would warm to the idea once she saw how much better it would be for the kids to grow up in a small friendly village by the Atlantic Ocean, with its windswept coastline, open spaces and sense of freedom, rather than trapped in the pollution and confines of a city. But he had been sadly mistaken. Once or twice he'd seen glimpses of the old Karen, but mostly she had remained withdrawn and pale, like a snowdrop under the winter frosts.

Upon reaching the meadow, Tristan's arms waved about like a demented windmill to deter the Junker bombers, while his head ran through the discussion he'd had with his wife that morning. It wasn't like him to say things to her about her condition without thinking, but his throwaway remark about her trying to get out of the house more, had resulted in hostilities.

'I'll come out when I'm good and ready, Tristan. Even though you're a doctor, you don't seem to understand how I feel. You say you do, but you don't, not really,' Karen had said, trying to wipe jam from Sebastian's mouth as he toddled towards his father.

Tristan picked up his son and stuck his tongue out at him. Sebastian's solemn little face lit up and he returned the gesture, pointing a finger at his father's mouth as if to say 'do it again, Daddy'.

'I do understand, Karen, it's just that you seemed a lot better a few weeks ago. You even came off the medication ... but now you've gone back to where you were a few months ago. And I don't really understand why. I mean, what's happened to set you back?'

Karen pushed her honey-blond hair out of her eyes and lifted their daughter Bella from her highchair. 'There doesn't have to be anything in particular, it just happens,' she snapped, balancing Bella on her hip and busying herself collecting the breakfast dishes.

Tristan noticed that she avoided looking at him. She always

did this when she felt unsure. Perhaps she wasn't telling him what was really on her mind. He knew better than to push it though and he was late for surgery. He walked over to her and Sebastian put his tongue out at Bella and then the children started to pull at each other's curly chestnut hair. 'There normally is a trigger, hon,' Tristan said softly and stroked her cheek. 'But if you don't want to say, then let's just leave it.'

Karen moved her head away impatiently and set Bella down. 'Yes, let's just leave it. You go to work and leave me to get on. The only thing that would help is for us to go back to Swindon, but that won't be happening will it? No, as long as Doctor Ainsworth is happy, that's all that matters.'

That last comment had really hurt. Everything he ever did, he did for her and the children. And it wasn't like Karen to be quite so nasty. Yes, she was always on edge lately, and often snapping at him, but that comment had been the worst yet. If being in Kelerston was damaging her that much, perhaps it was time to throw in the towel and go back to the city.

Tristan turned into a narrow street and the welcome shade. The surgery was only a few yards away so he needed to get his orderly head on, as he called his professional persona. Then a picture of Karen's anguished eyes surfaced in his mind. Perhaps he was as selfish as she'd indicated, ploughing ahead regardless, imagining he knew what was best for all of them. His past had taught him some hard lessons – never give up and never rely on others. But was this both a strength and a weakness?

Tristan wished with all his heart that Karen would sing again. She had an incredible voice, but only sang when she was happy and mostly when she thought nobody was listening. She did sing in front of him sometimes, but always got embarrassed when he praised her. To save her blushes, he had crept up to the bathroom to listen at the door while she sang in the shower. Her soaring notes held his heart captive and brought a knot of raw emotion to his throat. Since moving to Kelerston, however, her

voice had been solely reserved for barbed comments hurled in his direction.

Stepping through the surgery door and hanging his jacket in the lobby, Tristan resolved to entice his songbird back to the nest. And, he thought for the second time that day, if that meant a retreat to the city away from his beloved Cornwall, then so be it.

To be continued ...

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About the Author



Amanda James was born in Sheffield and now lives in Cornwall with her husband and two cats. In her spare time, she enjoys gardening, singing and spending lots of time with her grandchildren. She also admits to spending far too much time chatting on Twitter and Facebook! Amanda recently left her teaching role (teaching history to sixth form pupils) to follow her ambition to live her life doing what she most enjoys—writing.

Amanda is a published author of short stories and her first novel with Choc Lit, *A Stitch in Time* was chosen as a *Top Pick* in *RT Book Reviews* magazine in the US in July 2013. *Somewhere Beyond the Sea* is her second novel with Choc Lit.

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A Stitch in Time

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