

Extract from “Summer Daydreams”

Chapter 1

‘Two cod and chips?’ I look up from the counter.

‘Yes please, love.’ The man gives me a welcome smile.

It’s lunchtime, Friday, and we should be busier than this.

Much busier. There’s been a steady trickle, but the usual queue at Live and Let Fry has been noticeably missing for some weeks now, maybe even months. I dish out the chips, golden and hot, and top them with two cod, freshly cooked, with crisp batter sizzling.

‘Salt? Vinegar?’

‘Just as they are,’ the customer says. He’s licking his lips already. It’s certainly not Phil’s fish and chips that are putting off the customers.

Wrapping them in white paper, I hand over his package and with a spring in his step, the customer leaves.

Phil Preston, my boss and fish-fryer extraordinaire, looks at his watch. ‘How many have been in today, Nell?’

‘Not many.’ I give a sympathetic grimace. A handful at best.

‘The cold weather normally brings in people in droves.’ Phil rubs his hands together even though it’s as warm as always in here.

As well as the takeaway counter, we also have a small eatin café too, which is normally very popular. Today, there are just two people enjoying their lunch. Jenny, my co-worker, who is the waitress today, has spent most of her time flicking through Heat magazine.

‘I could stand outside and waft some chips about,’ Jenny offers helpfully as she drags her attention away from the latest celebrity dramas.

‘It’s going to take a bit more than that.’ Phil shakes his head. ‘We can’t keep blaming everything on the credit crunch.’

‘What about up-selling?’ Jen continues. ‘Like they do in coffee shops. Do you want a pie with that? Mushy peas? Pickled egg? Gherkin?’

We all laugh.

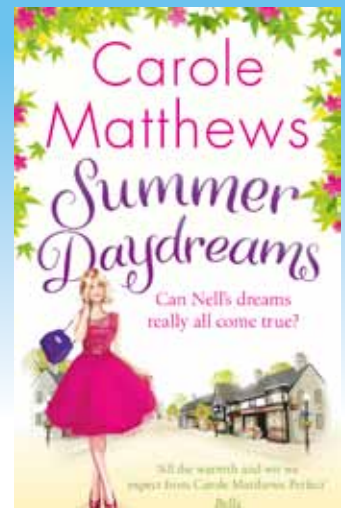
‘You have that down to a fine art, Jen,’ I tell her.

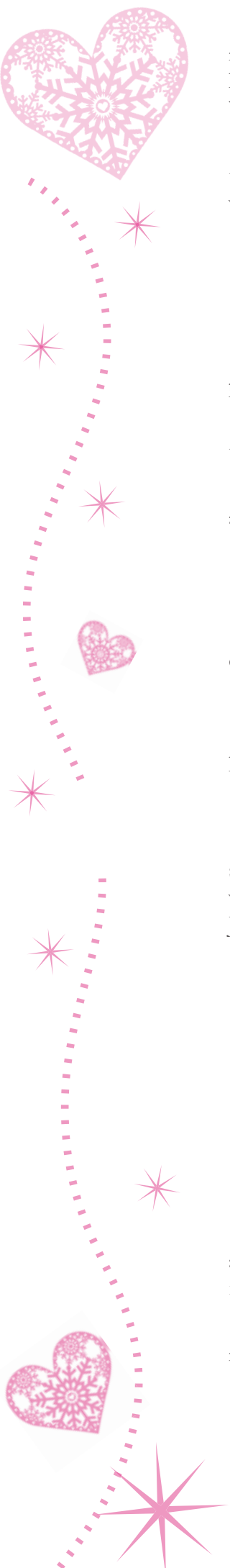
‘I’m going to try it tonight,’ she insists. ‘You watch me.’

Pinching a chip from the warmer, I nibble it absently. I’ve worked at the chippy now for well over a year. I do shifts at lunchtime – twelve until two – and then I’m back again in the evening – six through to ten. It means that my boyfriend, Olly, and I can share childcare for our daughter, Petal. I’m not saying it’s easy – we could probably both get jobs in the circus with the amount of juggling we have to do to get through the week – but needs must. We’re not alone in having to keep a lot of plates in the air these days. Everyone has to do it. Right? Petal’s just four years old and as much as I don’t want to wish her life away, I can’t wait for her to start school. I’m hoping that once she does, life won’t be quite as frantic as it is now.

‘What am I going to do?’ Phil asks, running his hand through his hair. ‘This is getting dire.’

The unspoken thought is that if it goes on like this then he won’t need to keep on so





many staff. It's probably only because Jenny, our other colleague, Constance, and I have been here for so long and the fact that we all get on so well that Phil hasn't let one or more of us go before now. It's a worrying time.

I look round at the café. The tables are glossy orange pine, the walls are painted peach and there's a flowery border at waist-height that's curling up in more places than it's stuck to the wall. 'It does look a bit tired in here, Phil,' I venture. 'If you don't mind me saying'

'You think so?'

'You're a bloke,' I remind him. 'You never notice these things.'

'It is a bit of an eighties throwback look,' Jenny adds.

'Really?' Phil looks round as if he's seeing the café with new eyes. 'I'm useless with a paintbrush. I could get a decorator in to give us a quote if you think it needs a spruce up.'

'They call it a makeover these days, Phil. It probably wouldn't hurt,' I say. It's fair to say that it's been a long time since Phil spent any money on the interior of this place.

Phil tuts. 'What do reckon it would cost? Cash is the one thing I haven't got to splash about.'

'Give me some money,' I say before my brain has fully engaged. 'I'll do it for you.'

Phil laughs.

'You said yourself that you can't afford to bring in the pros. I could do it a lot cheaper. We can all muck in to help. After all, it's our jobs that are on the line if this place sinks.'

'Yes, but—'

'I'm a great decorator,' I protest before he lays out his objections. 'You've been to my house.'

'I know. It's . . . what's the word?'

'Unique,' I supply, 'and fun. And all my own work.' My living room has pink candy-stripe wallpaper with matching spotty chairs. I sanded and stained the floorboards myself and whizzed up some cushions that look like big cupcakes. 'We could do something like that here. Jazz the place up.'

Phil brightens. 'You think so?'

I shrug. 'Why not? I'll make a mood board tonight.'

'Mood board?' Jenny and Phil exchange a puzzled look.

'I can start tomorrow after we close up.'

Now Phil looks surprised – and not a little terrified. 'Tomorrow?'

'No time like the present.'

'I'm not doing anything tomorrow night – more's the pity,' Jenny offers.

She is currently man-free – a fairly rare occurrence. My friend is a curvy brunette with ample comely charms and, as such, is a big hit with the gentlemen. Though cads and bounders feature heavily on the menu and none of them ever stay around for long.

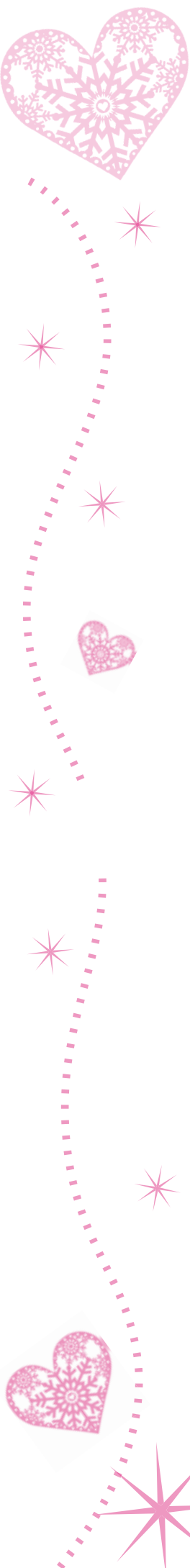
'I'm not exactly a dab hand with a paintbrush,' she admits, 'but I can do labouring and make tea.'

'Sounds good to me,' I say.

We both look at Phil expectantly.

'I'm not doing anything either,' he confesses with a shrug.

Phil is in his early sixties, I would think, and his wife left him about five years ago for a



younger man who's been giving her the runaround ever since. He doesn't get out much unless we drag him to the pub or for a pizza. Live and Let Fry is pretty much his life. But he looks good for his age. Dapper, you could say. He's a bit portly due to his largely chip-based diet, and we all tease him about his hair being a bit thin on top. But bald isn't a bad thing now, is it? Jenny is always trying to fix him up with sundry women, but he doesn't seem very interested. I think secretly he's probably worried that he'd end up with someone just like Jenny. And she's way too much woman for him to handle.

Phil purses his lips in thought. 'How much do you think it would cost?'

'No idea.' I normally have to beg, steal or borrow paint if the decorating urge comes upon me, so I'm somewhat out of touch with B&Q's current price list. Most of our house is painted with leftover half-tins purloined from my parents' garage and all mixed together. I'm thinking that Phil might want a slightly more upmarket approach than this. 'But say you stump up three hundred pounds and see what we can get with that?' I know that paint's expensive now – what isn't? – but the café is only small. 'If we start on Saturday night, we could work all day Sunday and be open for business again on Monday.'

Phil looks a bit teary. 'Did anyone ever tell you that you're a little treasure, Nell McNamara?'

'All the time,' I say, lightly batting the compliment away before Phil gets into full blub-mode and starts me off too.

'You lot might get on my nerves most of the time,' he jokes, 'but you're all like family to me. I don't know what I'd do without you.'

'If we don't get some more customers through the doors you might well be finding out,' I remind him. And I, for one, need this job. So if it means spending my precious weekend slapping a bit of paint on, then that works for me.

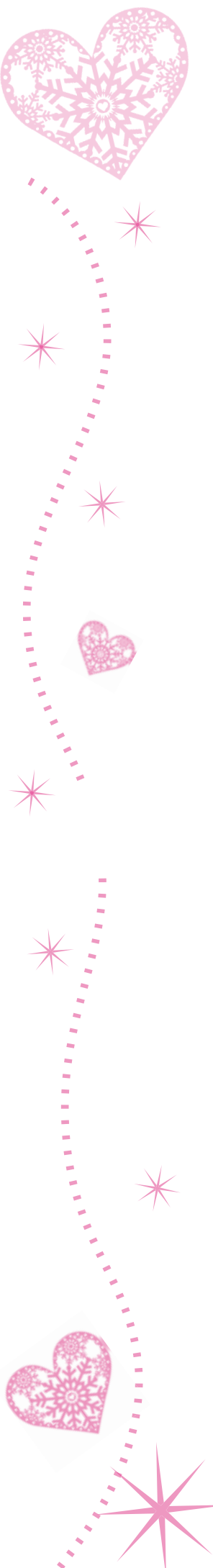
Chapter 2

As always when we shut up the chippy, I take great pleasure in liberating my long blonde bob from beneath my utilitarian cap, and then I always steal ten minutes for myself and walk a circuitous route home, passing my favourite shop. Today, the crackle of autumn is in the air and I enjoy being outside, breathing in the scent of coffee that drifts from a dozen different cafés that I pass.

We live in the small market town of Hitchin, in the heart of the beautiful county of Hertfordshire. It's a nice enough place to live, though I'm sure some of its charms have been lost on me after living here for so many years. You take things like that for granted, don't you? I think if you came here as a visitor you'd love it, but for me, well, it's just where I live. You don't really stop to look around and think how fab it is.

My love, Olly Meyers, and I were both born and brought up here and sometimes I think we should move somewhere more obviously cool, more creative, like Brighton or . . . well, wherever else is more happening. Petal would like it by the sea too. Though this place isn't exactly a cultural desert when it comes to style. There are some trendy independent boutiques selling weird, wacky and wonderful stuff which I love. Olly and I are both mad keen fans of the sixties – music, films, clothes – and one thing I can say about Hitchin is that we're well served here when it comes to our passion.

There's a great market that has been here since time began. I get a lot of clothes cheaply from the vintage stall that's always there, and the rest I run up on my trusty sewing machine. There are also a couple of fantastic haberdashery stalls that are brilliant for picking up cheap ribbons, buttons and the like. Olly's favourite pit stop is the second-hand record stall and we have a mountain of vinyl in our spare room. There's a scooter shop run by one of Olly's mates – my dearly beloved's other obsession – and a couple of great retro lifestyle shops that keep us supplied with cheap furnishings.



The chippy is located in one of the small shopping arcades that radiate off from the Market Place. It might be Victorian – I have no idea – but it’s decorated with pretty ironwork and has an arched glass roof. Marvellous for pigeons to settle in, but it’s quaint and full of character. The place isn’t without its fair share of the unsightly 1960s carbuncles that most English towns now harbour, but there’s actually a lot of the centre that’s managed to survive untrammelled by council insanity.

I wander away from the Market Place, turning from the rash of chain stores and down through the old part of town where the shops are in small alleys, still packed tightly together in quaint, timbered buildings, all higgledy-piggledy. This is where my favourite shop is tucked away. Betty the Bag Lady is an oasis for me. When people are stressed they might go to yoga classes or take a swim or down a good glass of Pinot Grigio. Me, I head for Betty the Bag Lady.

The Betty in question isn’t an ageing lady with a blue rinse as her name might suggest. This Betty is young and trendy. She’s even smaller than me and I’m not exactly an Amazonian woman. My mum bought me a school blazer with ‘room to grow’ when I was eleven and it was still way too big for me when I hit sixteen. My mother was clearly overly optimistic about the size I would eventually attain. Betty has her immaculately straightened hair dyed white, whereas mine is a golden blonde and is often tied up so someone doesn’t enjoy a portion of it with their chips. Betty is probably about twenty-five, I’m fast approaching thirty: it’s fair to say that I’m hideously jealous of her. Fancy having your own shop! Oh, I’d think I’d died and gone to heaven.

Clearly Betty paid attention at school and did her homework and went on to do ‘good things’. I stared out of the window and daydreamed and wondered how much better our uniform would have been if it wasn’t fashioned from nylon and had been in luscious shades of pink instead of bottlegreen. I lost my homework on the way home, hung round with boys in the park and, so, never amounted to much. I wanted to learn – I really did – I just didn’t want to learn about Pythagoras’s Theorem or Ox-bow lakes or the Tolpuddle Martyrs. I wanted to learn about ‘interesting’ things, even though I had no clue what they might be. I just know that I felt like a very square peg in a very round hole. So I left school at sixteen, ignoring my parents’ despairing pleas and cries of ‘university!’, and drifted. I worked in Tesco and a shoe shop and a dozen other dead-end jobs before I rocked up at Live and Let Fry. Some days I wish I’d tried harder. Some days I love my work. Let’s face it, how many jobs come with free chips?

Betty also runs with the London crowd, whereas I married young and settled down. She ‘knows’ people in the ‘know’. I know no one. If I get another turn at life, I think I’d like to come back as Betty.

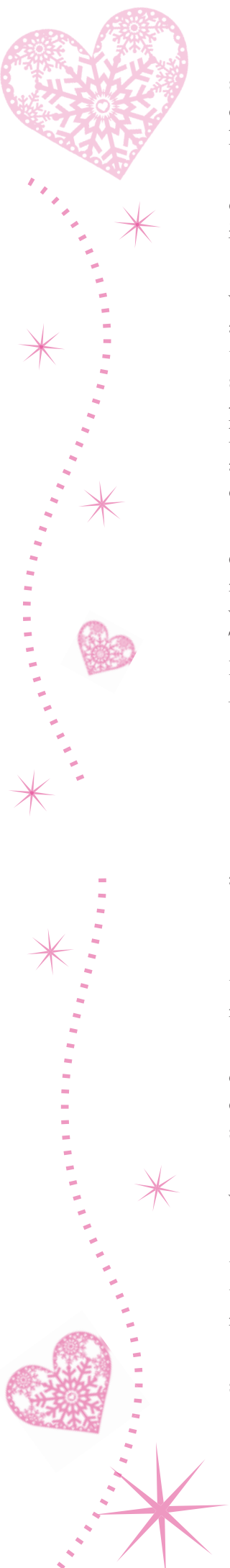
This afternoon, Betty the Bag Lady is open for business. The shop has been here for about a year and in my humble opinion, it’s a welcome addition to the Hitchin shopping experience. At night, when I’ve finished my shift and the shop is closed, I actually press my nose against the window and dream of things that might have been.

Betty’s handbags are not mere bags but are veritable works of art and, as such, are completely beyond my price range. I might be a regular visitor here but I’m not a very good customer. I’m purely a window-shopper, but Betty doesn’t seem to mind too much. I come in to coo and purr at the bags, but I always have to put them back on the shelf.

‘Hi, Nell,’ Betty says as I push through the door. ‘All right?’

‘Fine.’ The shop is a calm oasis. If I could ever have my own shop one day, this is the atmosphere I’d like to create. It’s done out like someone’s living room and I can feel myself unwind as soon as I’m over the threshold. The only thing that I’m conscious of is that until I’ve been in the shower, I bring with me the lingering odour of cod and chips. ‘What’s new?’

‘Get a load of these,’ she moons as she strokes a bag I’ve not seen before. ‘New in today. Bought them from a designer up in Manchester.’



The bags are all handmade in felt, vintage-style, and smothered in buttons of all different shapes, sizes and colours. They are luscious and I'm instantly in love. I pick up an oversized one in differing, shimmering rainbow tones – red, yellow, green, blue, orange, purple – and hook it over my arm. It's mesmerising. And it fits me perfectly.

Ever since I was a child, I've loved handbags. My earliest memory is taking my mother's out of her cupboard and parading round the house with each of them in turn. Looks like I inherited the handbag-fiend gene from her. I am hoping to pass it on to my own daughter, too.

My mum's responsible for my interest in fashion – compared to my friends' parents, mine were a tiny bit bohemian and fun. Every Saturday when I was growing up, we'd go into town and look at what was new in the shops. Even if we couldn't buy anything, we'd spend hours trying stuff on. She often made my clothes for me so I didn't look like all the other kids and she taught me how to sew and knit, do patchwork and crochet. We'd spend hours together painting in our old, lean-to conservatory – something I'd like to do with Petal if she didn't have the patience of Attila the Hun. It's a shame that I hardly see my mum now that I'm older and she's moved away. Retirement to a small town in Norfolk was something that I hadn't seen on the cards for her, but she loves it.

My own extensive collection of handbags is in a wardrobe in our spare room, which drives Olly mad as he'd like to take over the entire space for his precious collection of vinyl records. Sometimes I take all the bags out just to look at them. Occasionally I let Petal play with them, just as my mum did with me. Men just don't get the whole handbag thing, do they? Though they come in surprisingly useful when they want us to carry all their stuff in them. Right? All my handbags are in their own dust bags, each one with happy memories attached. A woman can never have too many handbags.

'I love it,' I breathe, admiring myself this way and that in the full-length mirror.

'Suits you,' Betty agrees.

'I can't even bring myself to ask how much.'

'A hundred,' she says. Then, at my sharp intake of breath, 'I could do you a discount. As a regular.'

I don't point out that I'm a regular who buys nothing.

'Even with a discount, I can't consider it,' I say reluctantly. Even though it's much cheaper than many of her bags, Betty might as well have asked me for a million quid. 'Olly would kill me.' In a particularly painful manner.

My handbag-buying has been severely curtailed in recent years. Frankly, I can't even think of the last time I bought one. But I can all too easily bring to mind the mountain of bills sitting on our sideboard: gas, electricity, council tax. The rent is due and as always, Petal needs more shoes. The very last thing on earth that I can afford to splash money on is a fancy handbag.

'Want me to put it to one side for you?' Betty cajoles. 'I could keep it for a couple of weeks if you put a small deposit on it. A tenner would do it.'

I can feel myself weakening. In my purse is a tenner. My last one. In my wardrobe there is the perfect outfit to go with this bag. If there's a greater temptation than the perfect handbag, then I certainly can't think of it. Running my fingers over the buttons, I chew at my lip. Surely my child wouldn't mind wearing scuffed shoes for a while longer for the greater good?

Then I come to my senses. 'I can't, Betty. Much as I'd love to.' Taking the handbag off my shoulder, I reluctantly hand it back to her.

'Another time,' she says.

'Yeah.' I leave the shop, crestfallen. Another time. Another life.



Chapter 3

When I finally get home, Olly is playing tea party with Petal.

They're both sitting on the lounge floor, picnic rug spread out, surrounded by dolls. Petal is pouring pretend tea out of an orange plastic teapot and Olly is humouring her by eating a Jammie Dodger in the style of the Queen from a child-size plate. Even our dog, Dude – the least walked dog on the planet – is in tea party mood, with a checked napkin tied round his neck. He is looking longingly at the biscuits.

'Daddy, share your biscuit with Dude,' Petal instructs as I come through the door.

Olly does as he is told and Dude whines with relief. He's very fond of food, our dog, and treats every meal as his last after having been dumped at a rescue centre, half-starved. The kennel girl described him to us as 'the most minging dog she'd ever seen'. Of course, that made us fall in love with him instantly. He's a black something or other with a white patch on his chest and a face that looks like it has seen the hard side of life. Happily, those sad days are behind him and apart from in the walkies department, he lives a life of comfort, ease, regular meals and occasional Jammie Dodgers.

'Hey,' I say. 'The worker returns.'

'I was just about to call,' Olly says when he sees me. 'Thought you'd got lost, hun.'

'Needed a bit of therapy,' I tell him.

'Ah, Betty's handbag emporium.'

I throw myself onto a beanbag. 'Yes.' Said with a yearning sigh.

'Petal and I had pasta and pesto for lunch,' he tells me. 'I've left a bowl for you to put in the microwave later.'

'Daddy's cooking is nicer than yours,' Petal tells me.

That is because everything I give her to eat comes out of a packet. 'That's why I'm very kind and let Daddy do it so much.'

'Thanks,' Olly says. 'You're all heart.' We both laugh and, although we've been together now for over ten years, I never tire of the sound of it. 'I'm just going to finish this delicious Jammie Dodger that Petal has prepared for me and then I've got to see a man about a disco.'

'Don't forget I'm back on at six.'

'Eat a biscuit, Mummy.' Petal presses one on me. 'They're good for you.'

I do hope she hasn't gleaned this slightly flawed nutritional titbit from me.

'I won't,' Olly says. 'I'll be back in time. There might be a new residency at a punk bar that's opening.'

'In Hitchin?'



‘Don’t knock it. We’re a very diverse community.’

‘Isn’t it a little bit late for punk?’

‘I’m told there’s a resurgence.’ Olly shrugs his bewilderment at the ways of the world. But then, to be fair, we do still have an unhealthy attachment to all things sixties. I guess some people have never been able to throw away their dog collars and bondage trousers.

‘Do you actually know anything about punk music?’ I take in Olly’s crisp white button-down shirt and cords.

‘Sex Pistols. Clash. Buzzcocks. Er . . . ‘

‘Bob the Builder,’ Petal chimes in.

‘Bob the Builder,’ Olly agrees. ‘That well-known pogoer.’

‘What’s a pogoer, Daddy?’

‘It’s someone who jumps up and down a lot.’

So, of course, my daughter has to try it. As does the dog.

‘I’m outta here,’ Olly says.

‘Sure,’ I say. ‘Thanks for leaving me with an overexcited child and dog. Go and knock them dead with your extensive knowledge of punk.’

‘We need the money, Nell. If that means I have to become a latter-day expert on punk rock, then so be it.’

‘I know. I’m only teasing.’ I lean over and kiss Olly. ‘You’re wonderful. Are you on shift tonight?’

‘Yeah. I’ll be ready to leave as soon as you get home.’

And that sums up our life really. Ships that pass in the night, handing over our child as we do. I know that money isn’t everything, but life is certainly a lot harder if you don’t have any.

Olly works the night shift in a pizza factory, which fits in with him looking after Petal and shoehorns round my shifts too, though it means his sleep is generally random and insufficient. It pays the bills but it’s not exactly living the life. Like my job, it does come with free food. There is, however, only so much pizza one can eat in a lifetime.

Olly picks up Petal – which does momentarily stop her from bouncing, although Dude does it more to compensate – and squeezes her. ‘Be good for Mummy.’

She looks at him as if that’s never in any doubt.

‘Come and give me a cuddle,’ I say, and my wriggly daughter joins me on the beanbag. As does the dog.

Petal’s hair smells of strawberry shampoo – Olly must have washed it for her today – and I kiss it softly. My baby looks just like her dad. Dark unruly hair, chocolate brown eyes, rugby player’s legs. ‘Do you know that you’re the best little



girl in the whole wide world?’

‘Yes,’ Petal says. ‘Can I have another Jammie Dodger?’

Might as well try to push it while you’re in favour, I think.

‘Yes. Then you can help Mummy to do a mood board. She’s going to decorate Uncle Phil’s chip shop.’ I remember that I’ve completely forgotten to mention this to Olly or the fact that he will, as a result, be in charge of childcare for the whole weekend. I hope he’s not arranged extra work as he quite often does.

‘Pink,’ Petal suggests. ‘Do the chip shop pink.’

And do you know, I might well do.