

## Extract from “With Love at Christmas”

### Chapter 1

You can tell that Christmas is just around the corner. Slade’s ‘Merry Christmas Everybody’ is belting out of the speakers, filling the busy supermarket aisles with festive cheer. That’s a pension-fund song if ever there was one, and it never fails to get me humming along. I ask you: what would Christmas be without the dulcet tones of Noddy Holder?

I love this time of year. Even something as mundane as the weekly food shop is transformed into a magical experience. I’m at the bread counter in Tesco, squeezing the loaves to check their freshness. Cheery Santas hang above my head. Silver tinsel and colour-coordinated balls spiral down from the ceiling. I wish it could look as jolly all year round. Someone at head office has put a lot of effort into planning this. Perhaps I could borrow their theme and refresh my decorations this year. My husband, Rick, would have a fit. He’s considerably more ‘bah humbug’ than I am when it comes to Christmas – the original Scrooge. Every year the expense of it all nearly gives him a heart attack. Every year I vow to cut back. And every year, I don’t. Maybe, for the sake of marital harmony, I’d better get out the ‘old faithfuls’ one more time.

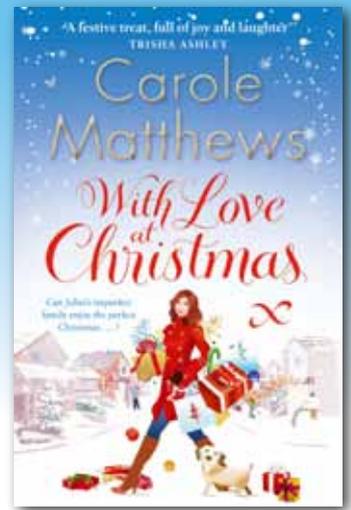
I’m happy to say for the record that I’m the complete opposite of my husband. My name is Juliet Joyce. I’m a forty-five-year-old woman with one gorgeous grandchild, two troublesome, supposedly grown-up children, an annoying mother, a gay father, a very grumbly husband and a rather stinky dog. I am also a shameless Christmas addict. And I’m not the slightest bit interested in a twelve-step plan to cure me of it.

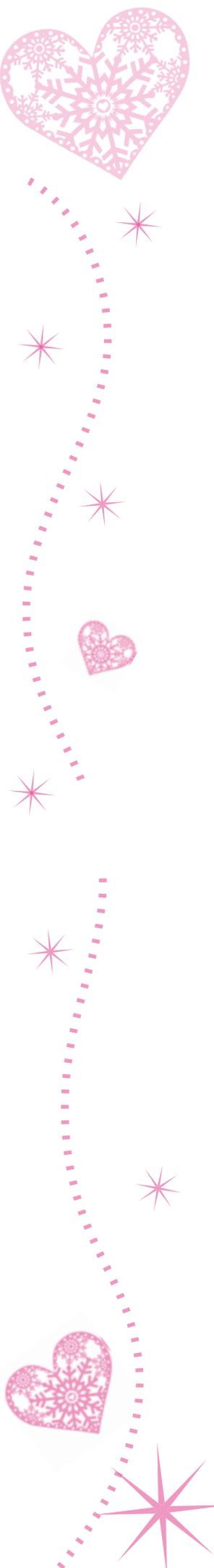
Slade slides seamlessly into Wizzard and ‘I Wish It Could Be Christmas Every Day’. Heartily agree with that! We all need a bit of escapism from the daily grind of life, don’t we? Jesus picked a lovely time of year to be born into the world, as it really cheers up the long winter months. It just wouldn’t be the same if he’d been born, say, in July.

Skipping down the ‘seasonal produce’ aisle, I slip a Christmas pudding into my trolley, rapidly followed by some mince pies and a panettone, which has somehow become a must-have. None of the family is that keen on it really, but, like Brussels sprouts, Christmas just isn’t Christmas without it. I put in an extra box of mince pies – just in case. You can never have too many mince pies, can you? I don’t like to be caught out without some nibbles in case people drop in. I’d better get some Eat Me dates, too, and some assorted nuts.

I’d like to tell you that I make my own pudding, Christmas cake and all that – but I don’t. I’m working full-time now in the office of a busy estate agent, and with that and the demands of the family, I hardly get time to breathe, let alone anything else. I aspire to producing a completely home-made Christmas, but every year it seems to slip further beyond my reach. I love the thought of creating a decadent Nigella-style celebration, with a bit of Kirstie Allsopp thrown in for good measure but, at this rate, that will have to wait – possibly until I retire. Even for a modest Tesco-based affair like my own, you have to start early. That’s the key. I was very organised and bought my Christmas cards in the January sales. What’s the point in paying full price when you don’t have to? I picked up a couple of great presents at craft fairs in the summer. It’s nice to find the perfect gift, isn’t it? And, of course, you never do when you’re looking too hard. Like middle age, perfect presents just sneak up on you. The special napkins were safely secured in August, as were the crackers for the table. The only thing I have to do now is find the ‘safe place’ where I can put them all. It will mean a trip into the loft for Rick, which he’ll be cross about.

Since the first week of September I’ve been putting a few seasonal bits and bobs of food in the back of the cupboard but now, at the beginning of December, the Christmas food-shopping





must start in earnest. I've got a few things in here for Dad and his partner, Samuel, too, just to help out, as I know how busy they are. Queuing at the checkout, I close my eyes and listen to the sounds of 'Do They Know It's Christmas?'. In front of me, a harassed-looking woman is berating her child, who's whining for sweets.

'I've no money for naffing sweets, Beyoncé,' she shrieks as she shakes her little girl by the arm more roughly than is right. 'If you don't start bloody behaving right now, Santa won't come to visit. He'll throw your Wii out of the sleigh and it will break into a million pieces. Then what will you do?'

The child screams. I think I would too. I should step in and remind them both about the true message of Christmas but, before I can, she's through the till and out, dragging the sweetless and still screaming Beyoncé behind her.

Would they both think I was mad if I'd told them that at Beyoncé's age I was given one of my dad's old knitted socks – washed, I hope – filled with an orange and some nuts? That was it. Sum total of Christmas present exchange. I couldn't eat the nuts because Mum could never find the ancient pair of nutcrackers needed to open them, and the orange went straight back into the fruit bowl where it had come from. I couldn't ever buy presents myself because I was never given pocket money. But I was given some paper, glitter and some Gloy glue with which to make Christmas cards.

Times were different then. We had so little. Our family Christmases were always cheerless, meagre affairs. We never had any visitors calling. My mother put the moth-eaten tree up for as short a time as possible. Sometimes it didn't appear until Christmas Eve, late in the afternoon when I was almost beside myself with longing, and only then with much sighing. It was usually gone again shortly after Boxing Day. My dad used to do his best to liven things up. He'd laugh too heartily at the Christmas shows – Morecambe and Wise was his favourite. Tears would roll down his cheeks, and I used to find that funnier than the programme. But Mum was never a Christmas person. To her, it was absolute torture every year and, consequently, we all had to suffer. Perhaps that's why I like to make Christmas so special now. I like my home filled with laughter and love, overflowing with presents and food. If you can't go completely over the top at Christmas, when can you?

'One hundred and forty-seven pounds and thirty-two pence,' the checkout girl says when she's rung through my shopping. Even I wince as I hand over the money. It's going to be yet another bill that I'll hide from Rick.

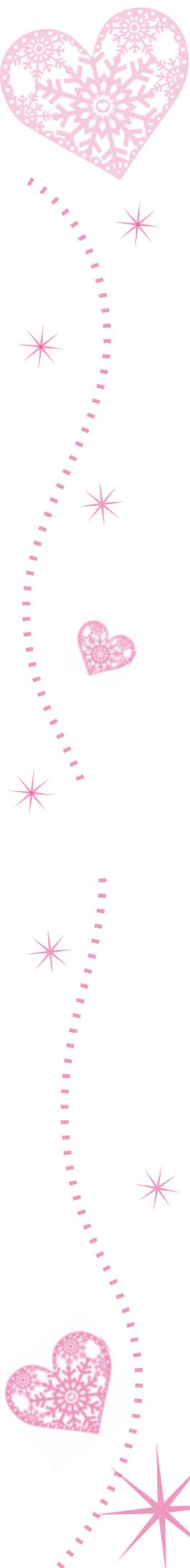
Outside, the sky is white and heavy. A few flakes of snow are starting to fall, drifting, drifting down into the car park. The first this year. I smile inside. I love snow, too. Though I realise that I'm in the minority, as everyone else grumbles about how difficult it is to get around. And it's fair to say that the country does usually grind to a halt once there's anything more than a sprinkling on the ground. Me, I'd be happy to be trapped indoors and let it cascade down until it was three feet deep. Holding out my hands, I let the flakes settle. They're delicate, lacy and land on my upturned palms like filigree butterflies before instantly melting away. I shake snow from my short brown bob and remember that I need to wear my hat. It would be lovely if we had a white Christmas this year. A bit of snow makes everything look so much better, the icing on the cake.

Someone honks their horn in a bad-tempered manner. I glance up from the joy of snow on my hands. The car park is heaving now, and it looks like there's a dispute over a parking space. One driver winds down his window. A carol blares out: Peace on earth, goodwill to all men.

'Oi, arsehole,' he shouts at the other man, 'I was here first.'

The other driver, who has a sticker stating that 'Santa Does It With Reindeer' in his back window, clearly doesn't agree with his opinion and shouts back: 'Fuck off. This space is mine.'

I push my heavily laden trolley, which wants to go in the other direction, towards my trusty little Corsa. Heaving out the bags, I load them into the boot.



Both drivers jump out of their cars and shake their fists at each other. One has an aerial with a star and some tinsel on it. The other driver snaps it off and stamps it into the sprinkling of snow.

I sigh to myself. Not everyone, it seems, enjoys Christmas as much as me.

## Chapter 2

I pull into the drive of number ten, Chadwick Close and kill the engine. What I need now is a restorative cup of tea and perhaps my first mince pie of the season. They're possibly my most favourite festive food. I know that the shops start selling them in earnest in July now, but I like to put off the moment for as long as is humanly possible so that I can really savour it. This year I have excelled myself. I hope it also means that I won't have to spend as long on a diet after Christmas as I usually do.

My family and I live in a lovely part of Stony Stratford, a pretty market town in the heart of Buckinghamshire, a stone's throw away from the ever-encroaching city of Milton Keynes. We've been here for years, and have brought up our two children in this solid 1970s home. I suspect this is where we'll see out our days.

Rick is up the ladder, busy draping the front of the house with Christmas lights. That's good: I like to have them up nice and early to make the most of them. All my husband's abhorrence of Christmas disappears when – and only when – it comes to decorating the house with lights. It's a job he relishes. Every year Rick likes to adorn the place until it looks like Santa's grotto. It's the one trip of the year that he doesn't mind making up to the loft. He disappears in there for hours, searching out and sorting, and then he lifts down the lights gently, like treasured children.

We now have LED icicles with changing patterns dangling down from the rafters. We have a string of coloured bulbs across the garage that flash on and off at regular intervals. The front of the house has a sleigh and reindeer in white above the porch. The big cherry blossom in the front garden has its own string of lanterns. On the lawn, we have a wire reindeer covered in tiny lights. The rest of our neighbours don't bother much at all. Though number two do, on alternate years, throw a sparkling net of lights over their cotoneaster bush. We're the one and only house in the close that attempts to create a Christmassy spectacle. I don't quite know when or why this started, but I'm glad that Rick enters into the spirit at least in this one small area.

I climb out of the car. Rick comes down the ladder. My husband is one of those men who's grown more attractive as he's aged. At least he has to me and, I guess, that's all that matters. His long, lean frame is all knees and elbows – always has been. We seem to have so little quality time together now and, somehow, it seems even harder to find time for ourselves once the Christmas frenzy is upon us. Every year I vow that it will be different, and every year it isn't. I smile as he comes towards me, but he seems to be in a hurry and somewhat red in the face.

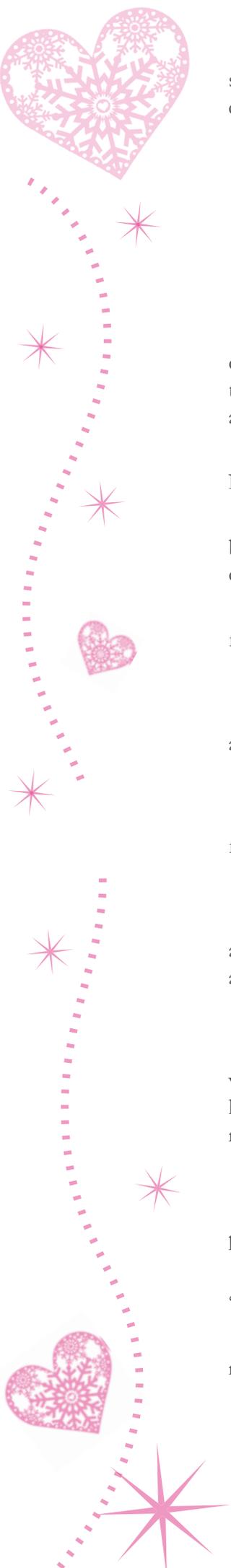
'Have you seen that?' he rages without preamble. A finger shoots out and points in an accusatory fashion at the house opposite.

Chadwick Close is a very staid neighbourhood, quiet. There's never any excitement to be had. That's why we like it here. Any scandal that there has been has in the past mostly emanated from the Joyce household anyway.

'Look,' he reiterates.

I look.

Across the close, directly opposite our house, is the sight that's offending him so much. Our good friend, Stacey Lovejoy, used to live at number five, but last summer she moved out. Now she's in Gran Canaria living the high life with Rick's old boss, Hal, and they're both having a lovely time according to the intermittent email updates she sends. The new people weren't here last Christmas, so Rick could hardly have expected to see this.



Our new neighbours, it seems, also like Christmas lights on their house. There's no one in sight, but it's clear that, like Rick, Neil Harrison has been very busy this morning. They have a display that far outshines ours.

'How nice,' I say. 'It's lovely.'

'Lovely?' Rick has gone quite purple in the face now.

'What's the matter?'

'We're the house that has lights up,' he points out.

I shrug. 'Now we're one of the houses that has lights up. I think it looks pretty.'

'Typical female response,' he snorts. Rick runs a hand through his hair, mussing it into his customary Stan Laurel do. He's never been able to tame his hair, and now it's sticking out all over the place. I know that's the fashion for seventeen-year-old boys, but in a gentleman of a certain age it just looks like mad hair.

'You don't have to view it as a challenge to your supremacy.' Clearly Rick thinks that this is Neil banging his chest and roaring in his face. 'Maybe Neil just likes Christmas lights.'

Further snorting from Rick. 'I'll have to get some more,' he mutters. 'I want ours to be the best house.' He casts an envious glance at the giant-sized blow-up Santa, complete with his own chimney, that's fixed to Neil's roof.

'Ours look great, Rick. Especially with a little bit of snow on them. Very festive. Already I feel quite in the Christmas mood.'

My husband tuts. I'm disappointed that all this pointless willy-waving has soured his mood.

'Come on,' I say. 'Help me in with the shopping and I'll make you a cuppa and you can have a mince pie with it.'

With an exaggerated sigh, Rick puts down his screwdriver. I flick open the boot.

'Good God, woman!' He recoils in horror. 'What the hell have you got in here? It's not the feeding of the five thousand, you know.'

'It's Christmas,' I say. 'We have to have a little bit extra in. Just in case.'

'Just in case what?' Rick looks perplexed. 'You've got enough for the Joyce clan to survive a nuclear holocaust. The shops barely shut for ten minutes these days. We can always run out and get a loaf if we're stuck.'

'Oh, Rick,' I chide, 'you know you always enjoy it.'

'You know I always want to go away to the Bahamas, just the two of us, and ignore the whole bloody thing.' He heaves two carrier bags out of the boot, making a big show of how heavy they are. 'Instead we'll stay at home, suffer your mother, the Queen's speech and eat too much and drink nowhere near enough to ease the pain.'

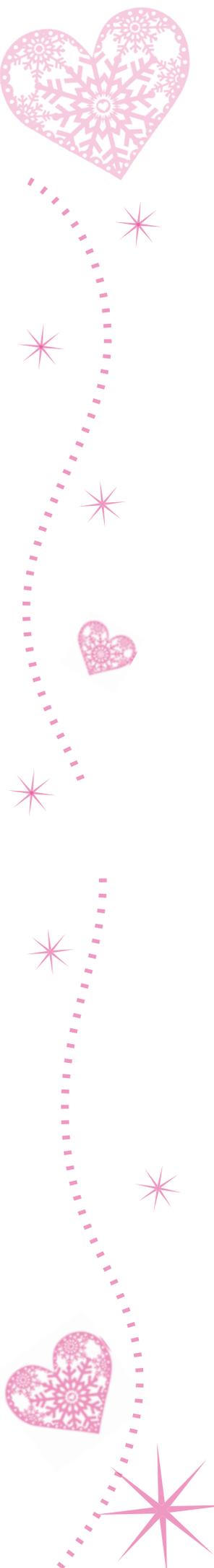
'It's not that bad.'

Again he casts a dark glance at our neighbour's display. 'Putting up the lights was the only pleasure I had,' he complains. 'Now even that's been taken away from me.'

'You could go down to Homebase and buy a few more bits if you want to,' I suggest. 'They've got some very pretty things in.'

Rick rubs his chin. 'I need something with more impact,' he says under his breath. 'Much more impact.'

With that, he brightens considerably.



## Chapter 3

My mother, Rita Britten, is sitting in the kitchen when Rick and I struggle in with the shopping. She's wearing a cardigan that's buttoned up all wrong, and it doesn't look as if she's combed her hair since getting up.

'Get the kettle on, Rita, love,' Rick says.

She looks at him, perplexed. 'Why would I want to do that?'

'We'll all have a cup of tea, Mum.'

'Oh.'

'Here, you're done up all higgledy-piggledy.' I go to her and she tries to stare me down while I rebutton her cardigan.

'You do fuss, Juliet.'

'That's better.' I resist the urge to untangle her hair.

Rick rolls his eyes at me and I shrug back. My mum's not herself. I blame her trip to Australia. She's never been quite the same since. When she turned seventy, she dumped my true and faithful father, who had stood by her stoically despite her being a fairly miserably and demanding wife. She moved in with me and Rick, uninvited. My husband was not impressed, but what could I do? She had to live somewhere and, no matter how we tried to cajole her, she wouldn't go home to Dad. Then, to make matters worse, she took up with a pensioner toy boy, Arnold. We had to endure weeks of them 'doing it' in our back bedroom, which our daughter had been required to vacate to accommodate her. It was horrendous. The only way I could get any sleep was to clamp a pillow over my head. They'd only been together for five minutes when she and Arnold decided that they wanted to see the world. At the age of seventy, I ask you. Before you could say hip replacement they went out, booked two tickets to Australia, rented a camper van and set off touring in the outback.

I was beside myself. She'd never even been abroad before; now she was going to Australia for the foreseeable future with a man she barely knew. I thought it was children who were supposed to give their parents problems! Isn't that the way it happens? Rick was delighted, as he thought we'd seen the back of her for good. He was sure that in Australia, being the continent with the most venomous and lethal animals, she'd come to some great harm. No such luck. He hadn't reckoned on my mother's tenacity. After six months she was back, bronzed and broke, and poor Arnold had disappeared into the wilderness never to be seen again. I am distraught that Arnold, an elderly and rather pleasant gentleman, is missing in a strange land. My mother, however, doesn't seem too bothered by this turn of events. Rick thinks that the hapless Arnold most likely threw himself to a pack of wild dingos in an attempt to get away from my mother. He has a point. After spending six months in a glorified caravan with her, I'm sure anyone would feel the same.

Rick is rooting through the carrier bags. 'Panettone?' he says. 'What is it?'

'It's like a cake or bread. A bit of both. You've had it before.'

'Really? I don't remember.'

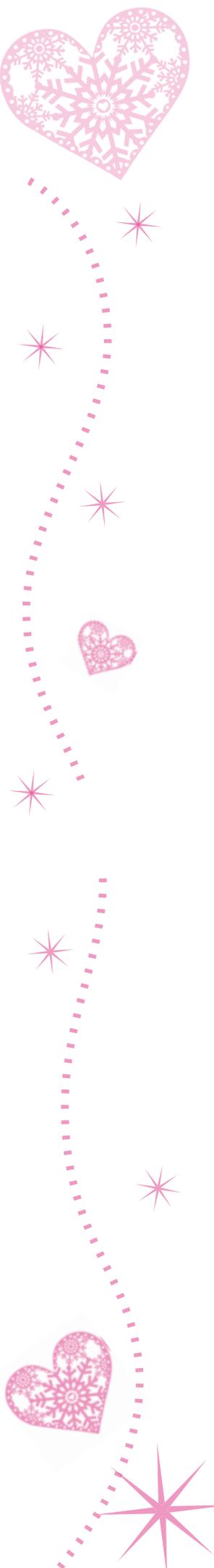
'We all like it,' I assure him.

'I don't,' my mum adds helpfully.

'Dad does.'

'Your father has gone all foreign,' she counters.

Which, I have to say, is partly true. Frank Britten was, until my mother abandoned him, the most unadventurous man on the planet. His comfort zone was never more than a foot away from his armchair. My dad, a man who, until he was seventy-two, thought that anything other than a half of bitter was for 'nancy boys', decided he'd been gay all along. Then he met Samuel, a



charming bookseller who is younger than both myself and Rick, who has made his life infinitely more colourful. No one was more surprised than me when they moved in together. Well, except perhaps for my mother. I'm still not sure that she fully grasps the nature of their relationship. Anyway, now that Dad is a fully paid-up and enthusiastic member of the 'nancy boys' club, thanks to Samuel, his tastes have become distinctly more adventurous – and not just in 'that' department. He loves foreign food, foreign travel, enjoys good wine, speaks a smattering of several languages, plays chess, knocks up meals from Jamie Oliver and Nigel Slater cookbooks and is generally very lovely to be around. It's taken him a long time to discover domestic bliss, but I'm so pleased that he has.

'Your dad phoned to say that he's coming round later with Samuel,' Rick says.

'Oh, that's nice. There are some bits for them in one of the other carrier bags. They can take them home with them.'

'I thought they were coming here for Christmas?'

'They are.'

'So why are you buying them Christmas food?'

'Christmas isn't just one day, Rick.'

'No,' he mutters. 'It's from bloody August onwards.' He stamps out to get the other bags.

'Are we having a cup of tea, or what?' Mum asks.

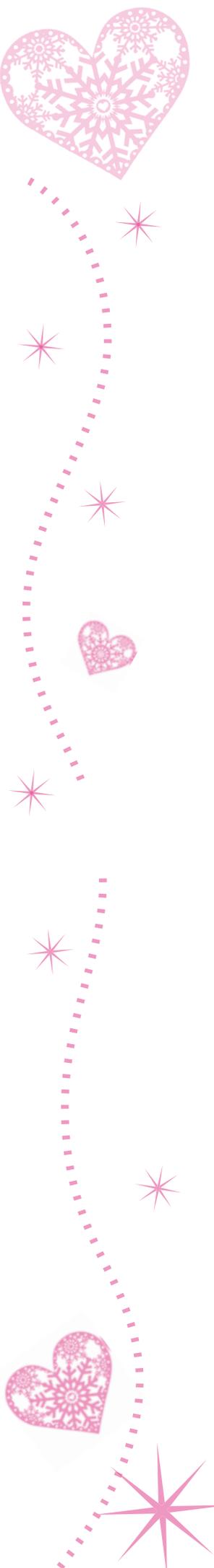
Now Mum is back for good, and is currently ensconced in Chloe's bedroom once again, much to the consternation of my daughter. Chloe had moved out when she accidentally fell pregnant with her first child and was renting a flat with her partner, Mitch – the father of baby Jaden and a man she barely knew. Not surprisingly, they've now split up and she's also back at home with Jaden in tow. But I can hardly wag my finger at her as, all those years ago, Rick and I tied the knot rather hastily when I fell pregnant with Tom.

Chloe won't ever really say what went wrong in their relationship. I guess it comes from having a baby with someone whose favourite drink, film and holiday destination are a total mystery to you. The pressure on them both was enormous. Right from the start she was coming home every two weeks over some row or other. Rick said we should have turned her round and sent her straight back to deal with it, but I couldn't. That's what my mother would have done to me, and I couldn't watch Chloe suffer. I know she found it hard that Mitch was working long hours and, instead of being out partying, she was sitting at home every night with a baby. Then last month, with no justifiable explanation, she flounced home, supposedly for good. Mitch appeared on the doorstep every night for two weeks begging her to go back to him, but she wouldn't listen.

She's just had difficulty adjusting to being a responsible adult with a young child to care for. The fact that responsibility has been thrust on her rather than it being of her choosing must have something to do with it too, a case of too much too soon. Chloe has always been selfish, and still tends to think only of what she wants. Mitch, on the other hand, seems saintly. I know it's different when you live with someone – you see all their little foibles in sharp relief. But I don't know what else she could want in a man. Yet only Chloe can decide that. I can only be here for her, help her and hope that one day she'll realise what she might lose and she'll grow up, and sooner rather than later.

As if she's reading my thoughts, on cue Chloe waddles in. 'What's to eat?'

Oh, and the worst thing is that she's expecting again. Another little 'accident'. This time it is the same father, though, so I should be grateful for small mercies, I suppose. Maybe the imminent birth has triggered her flight home; I don't know. I have no idea how we'll all manage with another tot in the house. Jaden's a lovely boy, but he is a handful. I don't remember Tom being quite so boisterous at his age. I think it's something they put in the food now – all those 'E' numbers. The new baby is due in the middle of January and, already, Chloe is huge. She's



certainly taking the whole ‘eating for two’ thing to heart.

‘Who are you?’ my mother asks.

‘Don’t be soft, Gran,’ Chloe says. ‘Put your specs on.’ She flops down into the chair next to her grandmother. ‘Hello, Buster, baby,’ she coos at the dog. ‘Didn’t anyone give you your advent calendar choccy-woccy today?’

The dog barks that they didn’t. Chloe, despite her concern, doesn’t move to rectify the situation. So I get up and open the Simpsons advent calendar and pop the little chocolate Bart in Buster’s mouth.

‘What exactly do the Simpsons have to do with Christmas?’ Rick asks as he heaves in two more bags. ‘Aren’t advent calendars supposed to be religious?’

‘Get a life, Dad,’ Chloe advises. ‘Christmas is about fun and presents. What’s God got to do with it?’

I do wonder sometimes if my Christmas excesses have given out the wrong message.

## Chapter 4

Rick mutters under his breath and stomps straight out again to get the remainder of the shopping. That should be about it. Even I’m concerned about the amount of bags. I’m sure it looks more than it really is. Everything is in such big boxes now.

I’m worried about Mum. Even for her she’s acting a bit strangely, and it’s not just the usual things. Since she’s been living here we’ve had to get used to her penchant for wearing clothing more suited to a seventeen-year-old, dyeing her hair inappropriate colours, bringing strange men home from nightclubs and smoking marijuana on the sly when she thinks Rick and I aren’t watching. All those things we are, unfortunately, well accustomed to. But now she seems to be developing a whole new range of troubling habits. When she goes into the bathroom, she often leaves the taps running – once with the plug still in, which flooded the place. She’s prone to leaving the rings of the cooker on and wandering off into the garden. More often than not she puts her cardigan on inside out or, like today, buttons it up all skew-whiff. Last week she went out wearing odd shoes, and not in a Helena Bonham Carter way. Perhaps it’s just an age thing. She’s always been, at best, eccentric. Maybe, as she gets older, it’s just ratcheting up a few notches. I’m concerned, though, that these little incidents are happening on a more regular basis.

‘I’ll put the kettle on, shall I?’ Rick asks loudly as he dumps down the last two carrier bags. I think his blood pressure is getting the better of him.

‘Let me,’ I say soothingly. ‘You sit down.’

‘I’m going to the shed,’ Rick says darkly. It’s probably just as well, as he currently looks as if he’d like to break something.

‘I’ll bring your tea down there for you.’ The shed is his retreat, his sanctuary, the only place where Rick manages to get any peace these days, as the house seems to be bursting at the seams.

Flicking on the kettle, I lift out the mince pies, which have been strategically placed at the top of one of the carriers.

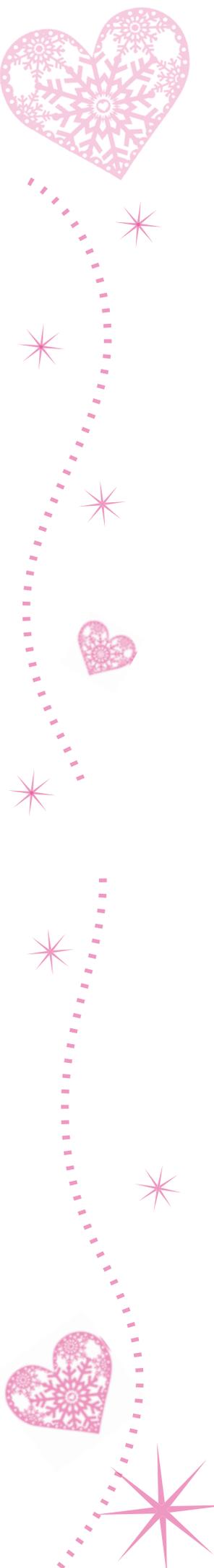
My son Tom comes in. ‘Did I hear the kettle go on?’

‘Sit down, Frank, love,’ my mother says. ‘I’ll put your tea on in a minute.’ It’s not yet three o’clock.

‘This is Tom,’ I gently remind Mum. ‘Your grandson.’

‘Oh.’ She looks at him blankly.

‘Wotcha, Gran,’ Tom says. He gives her a hug and kisses her dry, wrinkled cheek. It sometimes surprises me that my own mother could have become so old. ‘Got any good weed going spare?’



‘Don’t encourage her,’ I implore.

‘Break out the mince pies, Mum,’ my son instructs. ‘I’m starving.’

Tom has been perpetually hungry since he popped out of my womb.

‘That boy’s got hollow legs,’ my mother notes.

He does.

‘You wouldn’t eat so much if you had to pay for it,’ Rick grumbles as he goes out of the door.

‘Chill, Dad,’ Tom says. ‘I’ll get a job.’ Then, when Rick is just out of earshot: ‘Eventually.’

This is a frequent refrain from Tom. It’s fair to say that he has had a lot more girlfriends – and boyfriends – than he has had jobs. We can’t quite keep up with Tom’s sexuality. Sometimes there’s a trail of random young men through the house. Sometimes it’s a string of unsuitable women. Sometimes both on one day. We try to ignore it as best we can. I don’t want to think of my children having sex at all, frankly. And, at the end of the day, all we want is for him to be settled and happy. Well, actually all Rick wants is for him to be out of our house and earning his own living.

‘Where have you been all day?’

‘In bed,’ he says, in a tone that queries why he would ever have been anywhere else.

‘Lazy bastard,’ Chloe notes.

‘You’ve been in the bathroom all morning,’ he complains. ‘What was I supposed to do?’

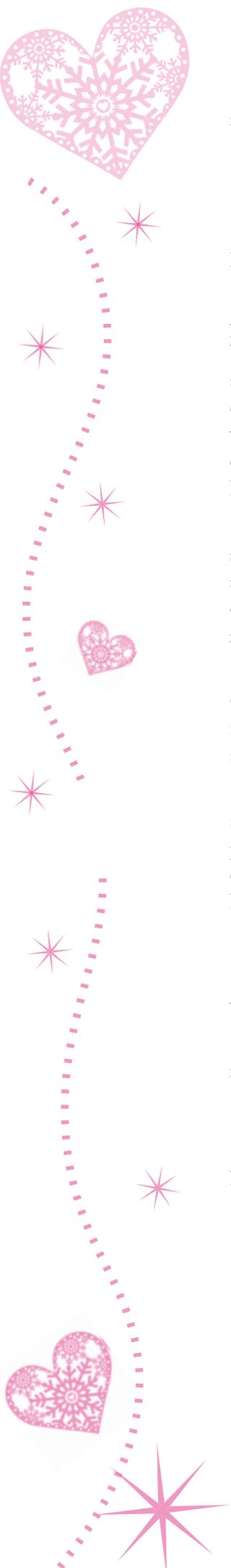
My heart’s desire is to have a house with two bathrooms. With six of us living here, and Chloe using the bath like her personal office, toilet visits have to be timed very carefully. We would live more harmoniously as a family if we had two bathrooms.

Tom has also just moved back home. Thankfully, he is less fond of washing than my daughter. My son is a twenty-six-year-old university graduate with a degree in nothing remotely useful, it seems. Since graduating, he’s never held down a proper job, and his £30,000-worth of student loan shows no sign of ever being repaid. He’s been away in China, supposedly teaching English as a foreign language. He lasted about a month doing that, then he split up with the girlfriend he went to China with – I can’t even remember her name now, and I suspect Tom would struggle. When they parted company he moved on to Australia and someone new. The bar work he did there failed to keep pace with his bar bill and, eventually, he was forced by his financial circumstances to come home again. We had to book his flight online and pay for it, which Rick was not happy about. Understatement. I do sometimes wonder whether our son will ever willingly leave home. We make it too easy for him, Rick says. He may well have a point.

With all the bedrooms occupied, Tom’s sleeping in the dining room on a futon that we bought from eBay. I don’t like Tom sleeping in the dining room because I am never sure who – male or female – will wander through the kitchen in the morning wearing nothing but their underwear. We think he’s bisexual, but you don’t like to ask outright, do you? It’s not really our business what his particular orientation is now that he’s an adult. We try to be accepting of his many and varied relationships but, in all honesty, we just do our best to ignore it. It seems pointless to say that as a guest in someone’s house I would never have behaved like that, but they just don’t care now. The fact that we rarely see the same face twice doesn’t help. I’m sure that Rick’s blood pressure will slide down a few notches when Tom does leave for good. It’s not the girls in their undies he finds so distressing, obviously, but a few weeks ago there was a man in pink underpants, and I thought Rick was going to have heart failure. No one needs to see that at breakfast-time.

‘Be a love and put the kettle on again,’ I ask him.

‘Aw, Mum! Why can’t she do it?’ He flicks a finger at Chloe, who sticks her tongue out at him.



‘Because I asked you, love,’ I say.

He hauls himself out of his chair as if he’s preparing to scale the north face of the Eiger, not make a brew. He helps himself to a mince pie as he passes.

‘Give one of those to your gran.’

‘Scuse fingers,’ he says as he hands her one.

I nearly remark that we do have plates in the house, but that’s exactly the sort of thing that Rick would say, so I bite my lip.

I want to move Jaden from the little bedroom to share with Chloe so that Tom can have a proper bedroom, but Rick says it will only encourage him to stay. However, there is only a single bed in there, so it would be trickier for him to entertain overnight guests, which I can only view as a good thing. I am well aware that both of my children have sex, I just never envisaged I’d end up having it rubbed in my face morning, noon and night. To have sex when we were young, we had to avail ourselves of the back of Rick’s car or get our own home. There was never any question of having carnal knowledge under our parents’ roof. It simply wasn’t the done thing. I’m just sorry that those standards have gone.

To fit in the futon, the dining-room table was dismantled – I’d fallen out of love with it anyway – shortly after we found Tom bonking one of his numerous conquests on it some time ago. No mother needs to see her son’s bare bottom bobbing up and down in that manner. The offending table is covered in plastic and resides in the garage, but it’s going to have to be pressed into service again soon otherwise we’ll have nowhere to eat our Christmas lunch en masse.

I worry about my children. We tried to do our best by them, but I wonder if we really did. Chloe is twenty-four, but seems so young. I’m sure I was more mature than she is when I was fifteen. Yet she’s a single mum with a son of her own and another child on the way. When will she ever grow up and stand on her own two feet?

Tom, too, is the eternal teenager. He has no drive, no ambition and is quite content to spend his days playing computer games and hanging out with mates, who all seem similarly juvenile. Not one of them is married or has their own place. They all seem happy just to go out drinking or stay at home and play on the Wii. Is that normal behaviour for a man his age? Perhaps it is. None of them seems to have a desire to get on and provide for themselves.

I never set out to spoil them, but I think somehow we have.

Tom, distracted by the newspaper on top of one of my carrier bags, has failed to work his way towards the kettle. As no one else is likely to do it, I make the promised tea.

‘Think I’ll ask Santa for a Porsche this Christmas,’ Tom says as he flicks through the newspaper.

‘Well sick,’ Chloe agrees. ‘Could I get a baby seat in one of those?’

See what I mean? No wonder, some days, I feel so old. My family are ageing me in dog years. Soon Buster and I will be a hundred and ten years old, and who will care for us all then?