

## Sequel to Summer Daydreams: What Happens Next?

### Chapter 1

‘Everything I do, I do it for you,’ drifts across the dance floor. Phil and Constance, locked in a warm embrace, gazed into each other’s eyes and swayed in time to Bryan Adams.

Jen swigged her wine. ‘Do you know that this is the most played song at any wedding?’

‘We didn’t have it at ours,’ Nell pointed out.

‘Well you two are hardly conventional, are you? We rocked up to your wedding in a stretch Mini and had the do at the chippy.’

‘It was a good day though.’

‘The best,’ Jen agreed. She looked wistfully at the happy couple. That was over a year ago now and Nell and Olly had both had the most amazing time since then. Their business was going from strength to strength and Nell’s handbags increasingly featured in the pages of up-market magazines and on the arms of celebrities. They were always nipping off to Paris or Milan or somewhere glamorous. If she didn’t love Nell so much, she could really hate her. There was a new collection coming out soon that was hotly anticipated and Jen knew that she’d be called on to step in and help whenever she could. Whether it was babysitting or sticking on sparkles with the glue gun or whipping up a quick dinner when they were both



too busy to stop, she didn't mind. She loved to be involved and couldn't wait.

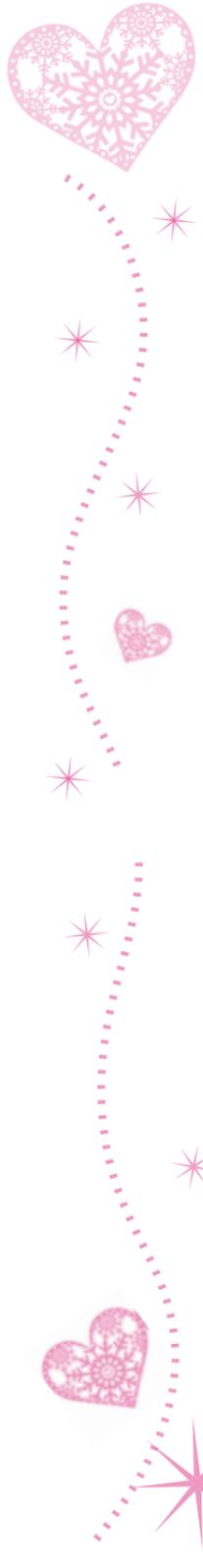
Jen wondered where the time had gone and what exactly she'd done with it. Nothing was the simple answer to that. Her life was exactly the same as it had been. And most depressingly, would probably be the same another year on. 'I'd have this song at my wedding. All I have to do is find a flipping groom.'

Nell gave her a sympathetic smile. 'There's someone out there waiting just for you.'

'I wish he'd bloody hurry up then. I want to settle down, Nell. I'm fed up of one-night stands and waking up next to losers. I want to be like you and Olly.' There was a time when Jen had wanted to steal Olly away from Nell but now, thankfully, they were all the best of friends again.

'No one here taken your eye?'

'Phil's nephew is quite fit,' she admitted. Alex, the nephew under discussion, was tall, dark and classically handsome. Yeah, who was interested in that? He was also currently taking a turn on the dance floor with one of the other bridesmaids. She'd been delighted when Phil and Constance had asked her to be one of the bridesmaids at their wedding. Nell, of course, was a bridesmaid too and the one currently dancing with Phil's nephew was Constance's sister's girl, Ava. Nice name. A lot more glamorous than Jenny. Alex and Ava. Sweet. Very sweet. Ava was also younger and pretty and slimmer than Jen. Wasn't it the job of the best man to chat up the bridesmaids?



But then Alex hadn't been Phil's best man, his dad had and he was knocking sixty. She sighed to herself.

'You know that he's going to be my boss?' She nodded towards Alex again. 'He's taking over the running of the chip shop while Phil and Constance are away.'

'I didn't,' Nell admitted. 'I thought you'd be doing that.'

'Me too.' She shrugged. 'But Alex has been made redundant or something, so Phil's put him in charge.'

The newlyweds had decided to really push the boat out with their honeymoon – literally. When Constance had agreed to be his wife, Phil had quickly come to the conclusion that five years without a holiday or a proper break from the business was long enough and had decided to make up for it with a vengeance. Tomorrow morning they were heading off on a world cruise that would take them to places that Jen had never even heard of, let alone hankered after. They were going to visit Barbados, Mexico, Hawaii, Fiji and Australia. And those were just the places that Jen could remember off the top of her head. The cruise was a full six months long and Phil had never even left his business for more than a week before. For such a momentous decision, he didn't seem unduly bothered by the prospect. During lulls in frying, Phil and Constance would pour over the pages of the glossy brochure like excited children, planning where they were going to go, what they were going to see. It was going to be the trip of a lifetime



and they both really deserved it.

‘They look really happy together, don’t they?’ Jen said. ‘Who knew that Phil was filled with such lust while he was shaking vinegar on those chips.’

‘I’m so pleased for them that they’ve both found love. I’m sure they’ll be really happy together.’

‘I just need my own happy ending now and then the crew at Live and Let Fry are all sorted.’

‘It’ll happen,’ Nell assured her again.

‘I’d better not hold my breath.’

Petal marched up and tugged at Jen’s hand. ‘Come and dance, Aunty Jen. This song is *boring*. The way you dance is funny.’

Jen rolled her eyes. ‘Perhaps that’s why I haven’t got a boyfriend.’

Petal had been a flower girl at the church and had behaved impeccably, executing her role with serious-faced concentration. Now she looked like a street urchin. The pretty shoes were nowhere in sight. Her hair was madness itself and it looked like there was chocolate smeared on her cheeks and round her mouth.

‘Just one more dance, Petalmeister and then we have to go.’ Olly walked up, pint in hand, looking flushed in the face. Clearly he’d been enjoying Phil and Constance’s wedding to the full.

‘Aw, Daddy,’ Petal complained. ‘You’re no fun. We can leave Alice alone *all* the time, she won’t mind.’



She's a *baby*.'

He looked at Jen. 'Back-up babysitter. We've left her with her boyfriend and pizza and a DVD of *Twilight*. I don't want to be too late back as I'm terrified of what I might find when we get home.'

'What are you going to do when number one babysitter is gallivanting around the world thinking about nothing but where her next cocktail is coming from?'

'We will rely heavily on number two babysitter, who is an excellent substitute. She was just a bit busy today.' Olly winked at her. Both Nell and Olly knew full well that she would drop anything to babysit for Petal and Alice who she couldn't have adored more. Nell's second little girl was like a living doll, all pink cheeks and smiles and sleeping when you needed her to.

Olly swallowed his drink. 'Phil and Constance are leaving after this song, apparently.' They were spending tonight in a nearby posh hotel and then a limo was coming to pick them up to whisk them to Southampton to board their liner. A lovely way to start their new life together, Jen thought. 'One last dance with the missus and then we'll hit the road?'

'Sounds good to me,' Nell said.

'Did I tell you that you both look great today?' Olly offered.

Thankfully, Constance had reined in her usual taste in fashion and they weren't sporting leopard-



skin bridesmaid dresses teamed with scarlet stilettos. She'd gone for simple strapless dresses in a mink shade that suited them all and co-ordinated with her own lovely, honey-coloured, understated shift dress. She looked elegant and sophisticated and quite the blushing bride. But you could bet your bottom dollar that Constance would be wearing leopard-skin underwear though. She could only hope that Phil wasn't.

So they all headed to the dance floor together. Nell and Olly smooched together to Van Morrison's 'Have I Told You Lately That I Love You', while Phil and Constance were like teenagers again and looked like they might never let each other go. Jen held Petal's hands and they swayed together, Petal's jaw set in determination as she followed the music.

'Jig me up and down, Auntie Jenny,' Petal insisted. 'Jig me up.'

Jigging ensued or she'd never hear the end of it. Van the Man would die of embarrassment if he could see them. She glanced over at Alex and he was still firmly wrapped around Ava. Story of her bloody life.



## Chapter 2

Phil and Constance hugged them all. Their car was waiting to whisk them to the hotel and, of course, someone had been out to decorate it. There were balloons and streamers all over it. And shaving foam too by the look of it. There was a Just Married sign in the back window.

All the guests had gathered outside in the car park. Jen noted that Alex and Ava were still glued together.

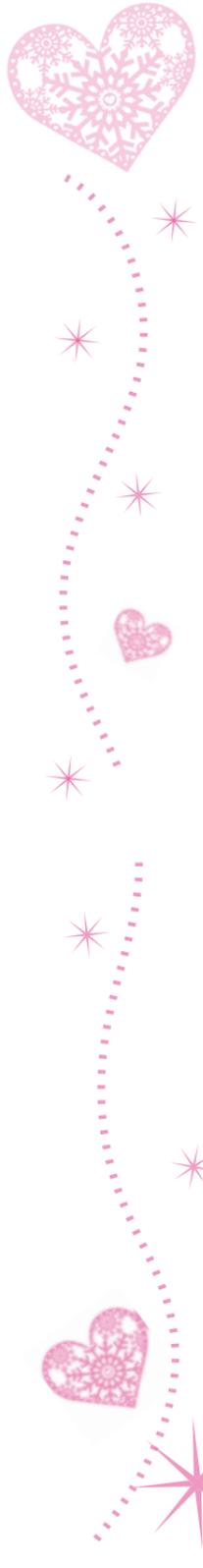
Constance looked teary and she hugged Jen tightly. 'No crying,' Jen said. 'This is the happiest day of your life.'

'It is,' Constance agreed. 'Thank you for being here.'

'Durr,' Jen said. 'As if you'd keep me away.'

'Look after that nephew of mine,' Phil instructed. 'Show him the ropes.'

'I will.' But she couldn't help but feel a little bit piqued that Phil had felt the need to put a manager above her at all. She could have run that chippy blindfolded with one arm tied behind her back. Which was a scary thought in itself. Is that what she really wanted to be doing for the rest of her life? Shouldn't she be wanting to do something fabulous like Nell that took her all round the world and had her hob-nobbing with people who were important. Something that made people sit up and take notice of her. Jen sighed. Truth of the matter was that she



liked it at Live and Let Fry. She liked the regular customers. She liked the fact that one of the perks of the job was fresh, hot chips. She was comfortable there. But there was still the nagging thought that she shouldn't be.

Phil and Constance kissed Nell and Olly goodbye. Constance hoisted Petal into her arms.

'Take me with you, Nana Connie,' Petal said, leaning her head on Constance's shoulder. 'Mummy wouldn't mind.'

'Mummy would be delighted,' Nell said.

'See,' Petal said. 'Told you.'

'You be a good girl,' Constance said. 'I'll be back soon.' She lowered Petal to the ground and sniffed away a tear. 'Time to go, I guess.'

'Come on, love,' Phil said. 'There's a cup of tea waiting for me at that hotel.'

'You old romantic,' Constance teased.

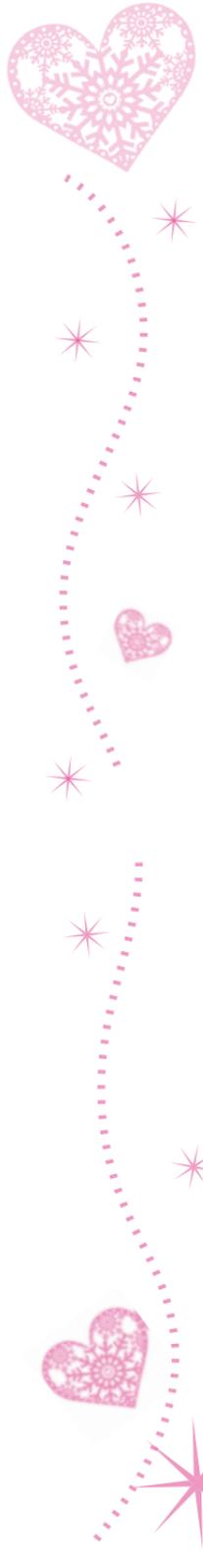
'You've one job left to do,' Nell reminded her, and indicated the bouquet of white Singapore orchids clasped in her hand.

'Oh,' Constance said. 'How could I forget?' She handed the bouquet to Jen.

'For me?'

'I hope it brings you luck and the man of your dreams.'

'It doesn't work like that, Constance,' Jen said.



‘You’re supposed to lob it and then all the single girls grapple for it. Besides, where am I going to find the man of my dreams?’

‘I found mine in a chip shop, Jen. Right under my nose all the time.’

‘Oh, go on,’ Jen chided. ‘Get gone or you’ll have me blubbing.’

‘Come back safely,’ Nell said. ‘Email, send us postcards, keep in touch.’

‘I’m going to miss you all.’ Constance was crying now.

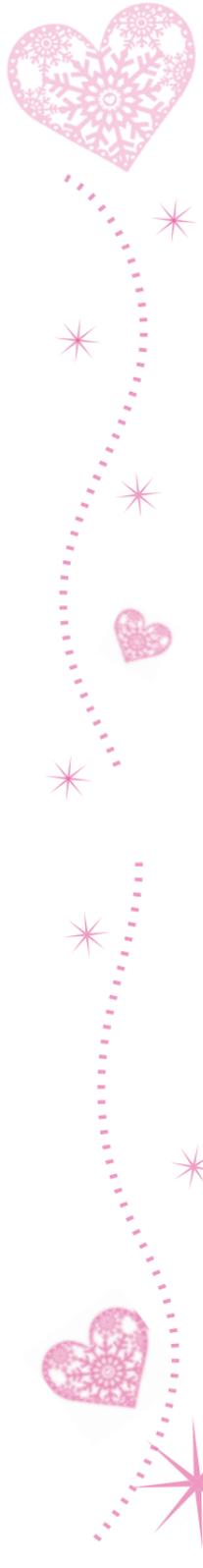
‘Like heck you will,’ Jen assured her, a tear running down her own cheek. Her own mum had gone years ago and now Constance was the closest to a mum that she had. Jen’s throat closed tightly. ‘That first pina colada will hit your neck and you won’t give us lot a second thought.’

Constance held onto her tightly, until Phil came and ushered her gently to their waiting car. They all waved like mad as the bride and groom were driven away.

‘I’m going to miss them like crazy,’ Jen said with a heartfelt sigh.

Nell slipped her hand into hers. ‘Me too.’

Jen wiped away her tears with the back of her hand. ‘The chip shop just isn’t going to be the same without them.’



## Chapter 3

Monday. Jen's hangover had just about subsided. After Phil and Constance had left, it just seemed fitting, somehow, to get completely lashed on vodka. Sunday had been spent snuggled up in bed with Mr Nurofen for company, while resisting the urge to watch Bridget Jones on DVD and join in with her heartfelt rendition of 'All By Myself'.

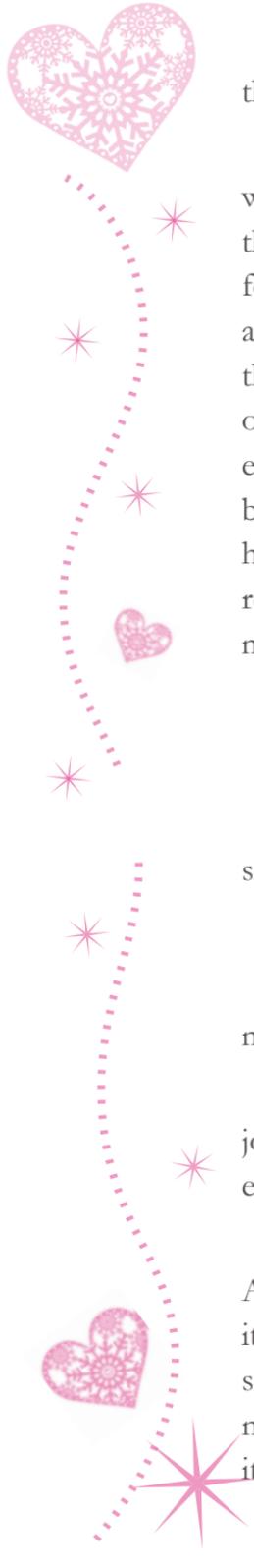
Alex had been waiting for her when she arrived. 'Morning, Jen,' he boomed, and she tried not to wince. She hoped he wasn't going to be this cheerful every morning or she might have to kill him. 'Feeling bright-eyed and bushy-tailed?'

'Not really.' What on earth was he on?

'Nice wedding, eh?'

'Hmm,' she muttered and bit her lip rather than adding, 'Well, you certainly seemed to enjoy yourself.' She wondered if he'd taken Ava back to Phil's place where he was living while they were away and then she wondered why she was wondering about that. It was nothing to do with her. Annoyingly, he didn't seem to be suffering from the excesses of the wedding as she was. In fact he looked unnervingly healthy. His hair was freshly washed and curled over his forehead. He'd obviously shaved this morning as his skin still bore a healthy bloom. She, on the other hand, had scraped her hair back into a ponytail and had eschewed the disguising delights of make-up in favour of an extra ten minutes in bed.

'Right,' Alex clapped his hands together. 'What's



the plan?’

Jen shrugged. ‘We normally have a cup of tea when everyone gets in, catch up on the gossip and then we get ready to open at eleven.’ There were now four part-time women who worked with Jen at Live and Let Fry. Since Nell had revamped the look of the shop, business had never slackened off and they opened from eleven in the morning right through to eleven at night. They still closed all day on Sunday but, in fact, they could probably open then too if Phil had a mind to recruit some extra staff. And then Jen remembered that Phil wasn’t the one in charge at the moment.

Alex looked vaguely horrified.

‘What?’

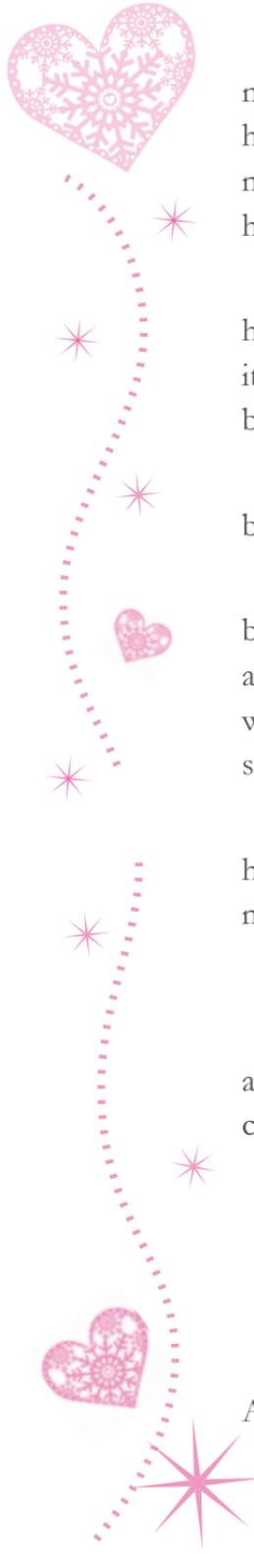
He scratched his head. ‘It all seems a bit, well, slack . . .’

‘It’s a chippy,’ Jen bridled. ‘Not bloody NASA.’

‘In my last job we had a team briefing every morning. It was very motivational.’

‘But this isn’t your last job. It’s your current job. And we sell fish and chips. If we don’t do it fast enough our customers motivate us, believe me.’

‘Don’t you think it’s looking a bit tired in here?’ Alex looked around him. So did Jen. It was true that it had been some time since Nell had performed small miracles with her makeover of the place and now it was a bit scuffed around the edges. After all, it had seen heavy through traffic ever since. But all it



needed was a bit of freshening up. A few retouches here and there. ‘It’s all a bit pretty for a chip shop,’ he mused. ‘Perhaps I should think of something more hard-edged, masculine. I like chrome, don’t you?’

‘Our customers like it just as it is,’ she informed him crisply. ‘This place was on its knees until Nell did it up. It transformed your uncle’s business. I wouldn’t be in too much of a hurry to mess with that.’

‘Uncle Phil said I should treat it like my own business.’

Trust Phil, Jen thought sourly. He was too bloody nice to tell Alex to just keep his head down and make sure that Live and Let Fry didn’t go bust while he was away. Which is what she’d have done if she’d been given the chance.

‘I might just jot some ideas down,’ Alex said, ‘of how we can improve this place. I could do a mind map.’

‘What’s that when it’s at home?’

‘It’s a diagram used to link ideas, words and tasks around a central theme or idea. I find it enhances my creativity greatly.’

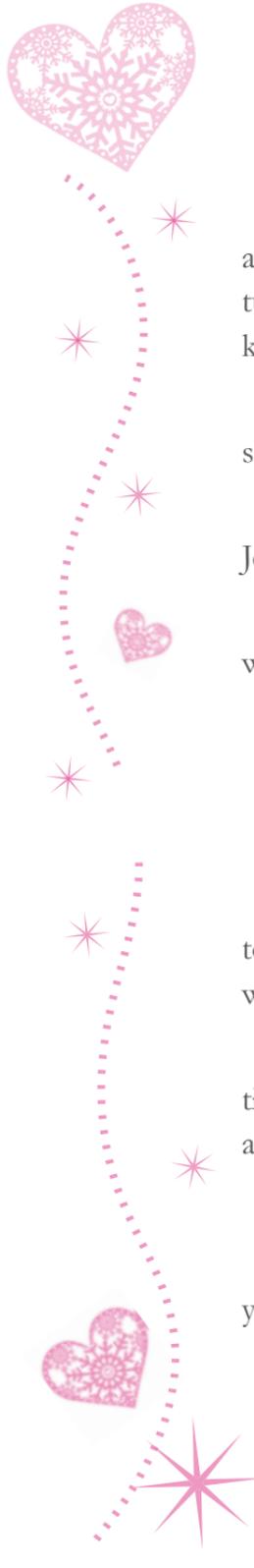
‘Really?’

‘You should try it.’

‘And why would I want to do that?’

‘In business, it pays to think out of the box,’ Alex informed her.

‘I didn’t realise I was in a box.’



‘Ha, ha, ha,’ Alex said.

‘Ha, ha, ha,’ she echoed weakly.

Thankfully, before he had the chance to tell her anything more of his enterprise theories, Yvonne turned up, and Jen took the chance to go and put the kettle on.

‘Hi,’ Alex said. ‘I’m going to be running the show while Uncle Phil . . . Phil . . . is away.’

‘Right,’ Yvonne said. She raised her eyebrows at Jen who studiously ignored her.

‘I’m hoping to introduce some new methods of working. Something to invigorate the team.’

‘Right.’ Now Yvonne just looked confused.

‘I hope you’ll buy into that,’ Alex said.

‘Yeah.’

He grinned. It was a very winning grin. ‘Glad to hear it. If anyone needs me I’ll be in the back working on my mind map.’

‘We’ll need you out on the counter for the lunch-time rush,’ Jen told him. He looked slightly alarmed at that. ‘Ever fried fish before?’

‘Er . . . no,’ he admitted.

‘Then when you’ve finished your “mind map”, you’d better come out here and I’ll teach you.’

‘Yes, of course.’

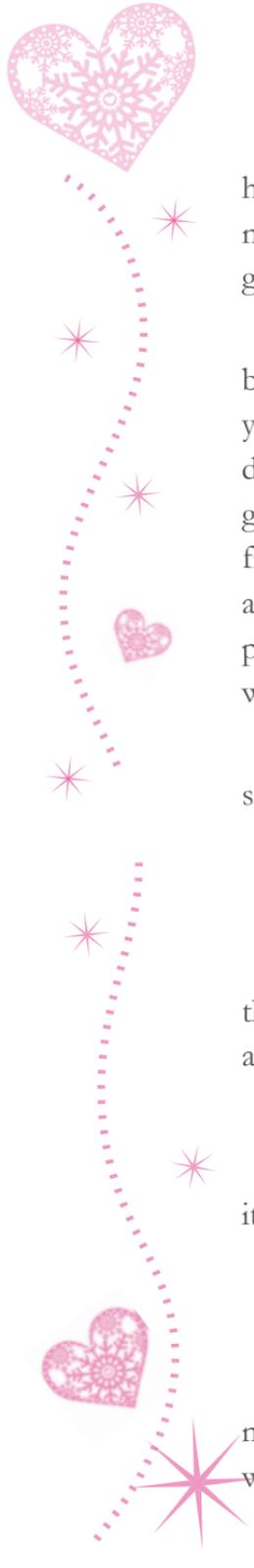
When he’d gone, Jen smirked at Yvonne.



‘I didn’t understand one word that came out of his mouth,’

Yvonne said as she nursed her tea.

‘Me neither,’ Jen agreed. ‘He’s as fit as you like, but a total knob.’



## Chapter 4

The lunch-time rush had been ridiculous and hadn't died down until nearly three o'clock. At least now there was a lull in the proceedings and Jen was gasping for a drink.

'Tea?' she asked Alex. He hesitated. 'We've been on our feet for the last four hours, mate. Even you must need a break.' The man was like a human dynamo. He didn't like to stop for a second. But, to give credit where credit was due, he could certainly fry fish and was a demon at doling out the chips. Plus all the regular women customers loved him. He was particularly popular with middle-aged women who went all silly when he served them.

Jen brought out the tea and said, 'We normally sit down for five minutes and take a breather.'

'Right,' Alex said uncertainly.

'Even Phil used to,' she assured him.

So they sat together at one of the tables. And then she didn't know what to say to him, so that sat awkwardly in silence.

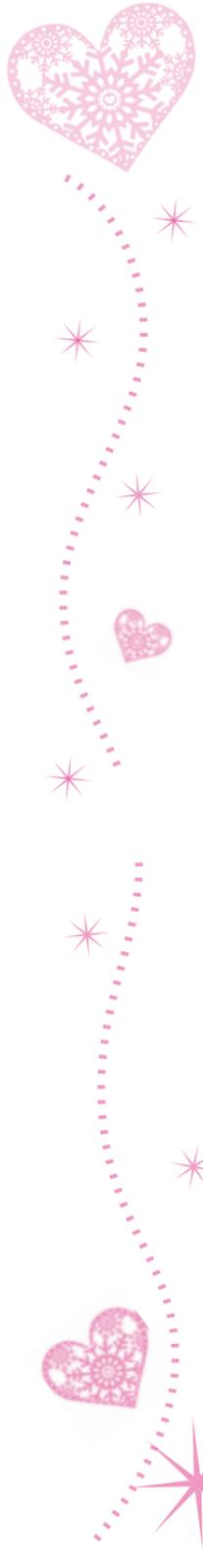
Eventually, Alex said, 'This is nice.'

'Yeah,' Jen agreed, wishing she hadn't suggested it. 'How are you settling in then?'

'Fine,' he said. 'Really fine.'

'Good.' More silence.

'I'm thinking of introducing some team-bonding measures,' he leaned in towards her. 'I wondered what you thought.'



‘Team bonding?’

‘We used to do it in my old job.’

‘Were your team not bonded then?’

‘You can always do more, can’t you?’

Jen shrugged. ‘We get along all right here. Sometimes we go to the pub together. And Phil used to take us all out for a pizza occasionally.’

‘I’m not sure that counts,’ Alex said loftily. ‘I was thinking more like we could all go bowling together or maybe meet up before work for a run.’

‘A run?’

‘I start every day with an invigorating run.’

Jen looked down at her figure which had been fuelled for years by fish and chips. ‘Do I look like a woman who runs?’

‘Bowling then? That’s not really like exercise.’

‘Yvonne has four kids at home. When is she going to find time to team bond? She has trouble finding time to come into work. Sylvia has a mum with dementia to look after and I’m sure Moira would find a great excuse not to do it either.’

‘Oh.’ He looked crest-fallen.

And now Jen felt bad. He was only trying to . . . what? Well, she didn’t quite know, but she hated to see the look of disappointment on his face.

‘I could do something with you,’ she said. ‘If you think it would help.’



## Chapter 5

Which is how she came to find herself in the car park behind the market square at eight o'clock in the morning. She'd had to go to Peacocks and buy herself a cheap tracksuit as exercise gear was something that she didn't possess. Alex was already there and, even from a distance she could see that he was checking his watch. How on earth had she managed to get herself roped in for this?

The day was bright, the air warm, and she had to admit that it was nice to be out and about rather than lying in bed. As she walked towards him, Alex started to warm up – stretching his calves and his back. Jen felt exhausted just watching him. Would it be wrong to slump away now and retreat to her sofa to watch Jeremy Kyle? Just as she was contemplating doing a runner, Alex looked up. His face brightened into a sunny smile when he saw her. It stopped Jen momentarily in her tracks. No one had ever smiled like that at her before and, suddenly, she had a warm glow in her stomach as if she'd eaten Ready Brek for breakfast rather than two chocolate croissants. Well, there was no way that she wanted to run out of energy.

'Hi,' Alex said and he sounded ridiculously shy. 'I didn't know if you'd come.'

'I didn't know if I'd come myself,' she admitted.

'I'm glad you're here.'

'I don't know if I am,' she said. 'I'm not big on exercise.' She patted her rump affectionately. 'As you



might have guessed.

‘It looks fine,’ he said. ‘*You* look fine.’

‘Yeah?’ She’d tried to dead-pan it, but felt herself flush. It wasn’t often that she was on the receiving end of compliments. But then she remembered that this was supposed to be team bonding, it was supposed to be about making her feel good. He was hardly going to slag her off for being a lump of lard, was he? ‘Well, any minute now I’m going to be red and sweating.’

‘We’ll take it easy,’ he assured her.

‘You’d better,’ she warned. ‘Killing your staff on their first team-bonding outing is never a good thing.’

‘Have you warmed up?’

‘Yeah. Never felt warmer.’

Alex laughed at that. It was a nice laugh. At work he was too serious, his face set in a constant frown. ‘Then let’s get started.’

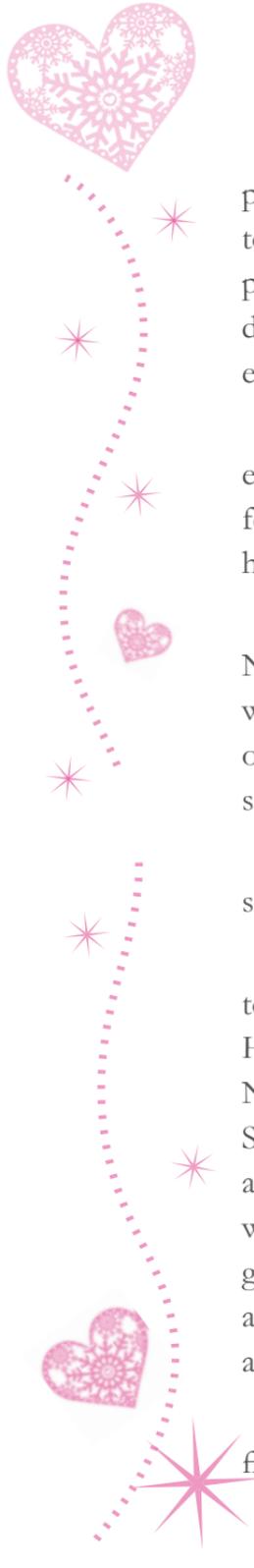
‘I don’t want to run where people will see me,’ she said anxiously.

‘We’ll keep to the back streets if you want.’

‘Yeah. Let’s do that.’

He set off and Jen fell into step behind him. Puffing. After jogging across to the back of the churchyard, she already had the makings of a stitch. Oh, this was not good.

Alex looked over his shoulder. He’d not even broken sweat. ‘All right?’



‘Yeah.’ She gasped the word out. ‘Fine.’

Sodding hell. She felt like she was having a real proper heart attack. Just how far was he planning to go? She plodded after him, thumping on the pavement. For two pins, she could have just laid down where she was and let the birds peck out her eyes. This wasn’t team bonding, it was team torture.

‘You’re doing really well.’ Alex shouted his encouragement. He seemed to have stopped moving forwards and was running on the spot waiting for her. How humiliating.

They cut down the back streets as he’d promised. Now she was reduced to jogging three steps and then walking three. Even doing that she wanted to hold onto the walls of the houses that they passed for support.

‘Let me know when you’ve had enough,’ Alex said.

‘I’ve had enough,’ Jen admitted and they came to a halt. She bent double trying to catch her breath. How had she managed to get so out of condition? Not that, actually, she had ever been in condition. She’d been a fat child, a fat teenager and was now a fat adult. And, to be honest, she wasn’t all that worried about it. If being as thin as a rake meant giving up chocolate, then she’d opt for well-padded any day. ‘Paula Radcliffe’s not got much to worry about, has she?’

Alex laughed at that. ‘You did very well for your first time.’



He was a very bad liar. ‘I could do with going back to my flat for a shower.’

‘Shall we run that way together?’

‘Phil’s place is in the other direction.’

‘I don’t mind going out of my way.’

‘Oh, I wouldn’t dream of you doing that,’ Jen said. ‘I’ll just catch my breath here for a minute before I jog back.’

‘Right,’ Alex said. ‘I’ll see you at the shop later.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Jen panted. She didn’t want to go to work now. She wanted to go straight back to bed for a nice lie down. Exercise, she thought, was vastly overrated.

‘Thanks for doing this.’ His eyes were soft, brown. She’d never noticed that before. There were crinkles round them when he smiled.

‘Wouldn’t have missed it for the world.’

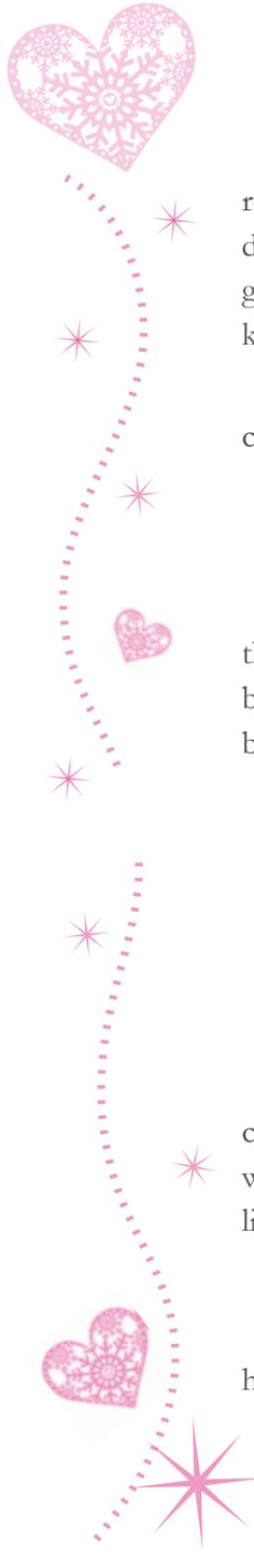
‘See you later.’ He waved to her and set out in the opposite direction.

Jen staggered forward. There was only one place she was headed. Round the corner was a lovely French-style bakery that did amazing pastries and shots of espresso that would raise the dead. It was just what she needed.

She limped round the corner and sat at a pavement table in the morning sunshine. Hmm. Maybe there was a benefit to exercise after all, she thought, as she sipped her coffee and wiped crumbs



from her mouth. Then she punched a number into her mobile and ordered a taxi to come and take her home. ‘Team huddle,’ Alex ordered. Yvonne and



## Chapter 6

‘Team huddle,’ Alex ordered. Yvonne and Sylvia rolled their eyes. It was five minutes before they were due to open and Alex had decided that this was a good idea to set them up for the day. Goodness only knows why.

‘He thinks he’s bloody Madonna,’ Sylvia complained.

‘Sssh,’ Jen said. ‘It will be over soon.’

‘I can’t wait for Phil to come back.’

They all shuffled together reluctantly and Alex threw his arms round them. ‘Let’s be the best we can be today, ladies,’ he intoned. ‘What do we want to be?’

‘The best we can be,’ they all mumbled.

‘High-five.’

They all high-fived each other.

‘Let’s sell chips,’ Alex shouted joyfully.

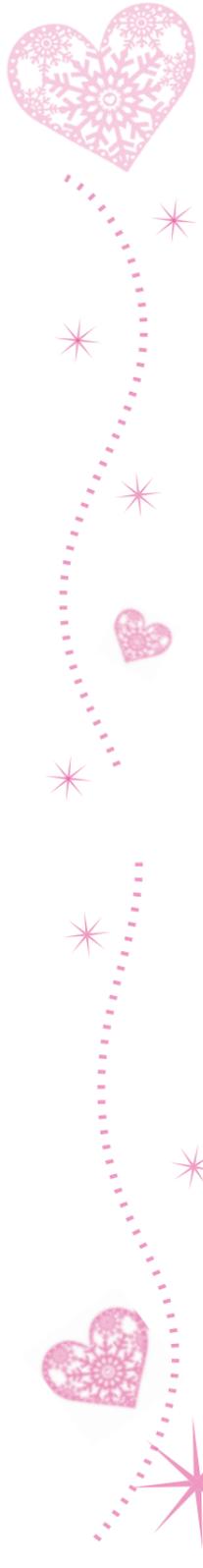
‘Yeah,’ Jen muttered. ‘Let’s.’

‘I’m actually quite starting to like this,’ Sylvia confessed in a whisper. ‘I particularly like the bit where Alex puts his arm round me. Makes me feel like bonding with him a lot.’

She and Jen giggled together.

‘That’s what I like,’ Alex said. ‘The sound of a happy team.’

‘Oh, do fuck off,’ Yvonne grumbled.



They were busy, as always and they hardly had a chance to exchange a word all day. Yvonne had to run home to pick up the youngest of her kids and Sylvia called into her mum's nursing home every day to see how she was even though her poor mum never actually recognised her daughter any more.

Jen made the tea. She'd finally bludgeoned Alex into relaxing for ten minutes after their lunch-time rush and they sat with their tea together just as she'd always done with Phil. They'd had their first postcard from Phil and Constance. From Portugal. Apparently, all was marvellous. She looked at the card every day, missing them both more than she'd ever imagined she would. She couldn't wait until they both got back and it was nothing to do with Alex being in charge. As the weeks had gone by he'd mellowed. After the first time, he very wisely hadn't asked her to go running with him again and, even though he'd suggested bowling, go-karting, clay pigeon shooting and canoeing, he'd come to realise that he was trying to push water uphill and that he had been landed with a team who were terminally uninterested in being one. He had spoken to Phil about the business on a weekly basis, but all was well at Live and Let Fry. Despite Alex's best efforts the business hadn't accelerated into the stratosphere, but had continued to go along on the same pleasant trajectory.

'What did you do in your old job?' Jen ventured. It was getting easier to talk to Alex. When he wasn't being a wannabe Donald Trump, he seemed like he was a pretty decent bloke. She'd found out that



they liked the same kind of music, more or less. He was into Coldplay, Snow Patrol and the Ting-Tings. Which she was too. Though she didn't mention her penchant for the songs of Barry Manilow. Something that she'd caught from Constance.

'I was in a bank. On the investment side. Doing well.'

'Phil said that you were made redundant.'

His face clouded and Jen felt sorry that she'd mentioned it. 'Yes,' he said. 'Out of the blue. As I said, I was doing well. Really well. I don't know why the axe fell on me. I didn't see it coming at all.'

'When it comes to big business, you're just a number on a page,' she said, as if she'd had some experience of it. 'You shouldn't take it personally.'

'It's hard not to.' His voice thickened. 'I was popular.'

Jen shrugged. 'You're popular now.'

He laughed at that.

'You all think I'm a twat, don't you?'

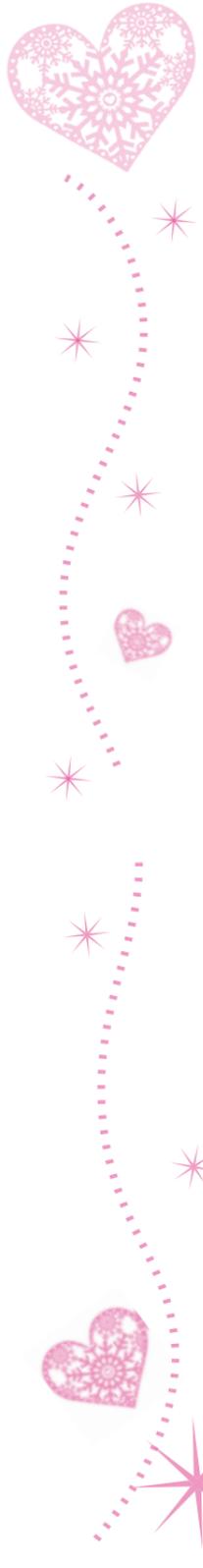
'Oh,' Jen tried to look coy. 'I wouldn't say that.'

They laughed together.

Alex sighed. 'It's just that Uncle Phil threw me a lifeline. It really hit me hard, the redundancy. One minute I was the golden boy, the next I was out on my ear.'

'Harsh.'

'Yeah. I had my own flat, flashy car. Thought I



was the best thing since sliced bread. They both had to go. I felt cut adrift. I don't mind admitting that it really knocked my self-esteem.'

'I know all about that,' she empathised.

'Then Uncle Phil said I should come here and stand in for him while he was away. Do you know how that made me feel?'

Jen shrugged again.

'Valued,' he admitted. 'It felt like someone cared. Someone thought I could be of use.'

'I didn't realise,' she confessed.

'Then I came in here like a bull in a china shop and pissed everyone off.'

'Well,' Jen said. 'Not really.'

'All that team-building bollocks.'

'The jogging was a low point,' Jen teased, and he had the good grace to laugh.

'All I wanted to do was prove to Uncle Phil that he'd done the right thing. I wanted to give him his business back with the bank account bursting.'

'Phil doesn't care about stuff like that.' Jen remembered when he gave Nell a loan to get her started in her business and it was a loan that he might never have had repaid, but he hadn't cared about that. He just wanted to see Nell do well. Now Nell had given him some shares in her business so that he could enjoy the rewards of her success. It had helped him to pay for his honeymoon cruise. 'He'd just want



to be sure that you were okay.'

'I know. You must think I'm an idiot.'

'No.' Jen reached across the table and squeezed his hand. 'I think you're a nice bloke just trying to make your uncle proud of you.' He looked so lost, like a little boy and she liked this more vulnerable side to him. Then she realised that half of it was probably down to the fact that he'd moved to a new area and didn't know anyone. Her heart went out to him. He was lonely. Like she was sometimes. 'What about we do some team bonding my way?'

He smiled up at her and her heart melted some more.

'Up for a pizza tonight?'

'Yes,' he said. 'I'd like that.'

'Sure you're not busy washing your hair or something?'

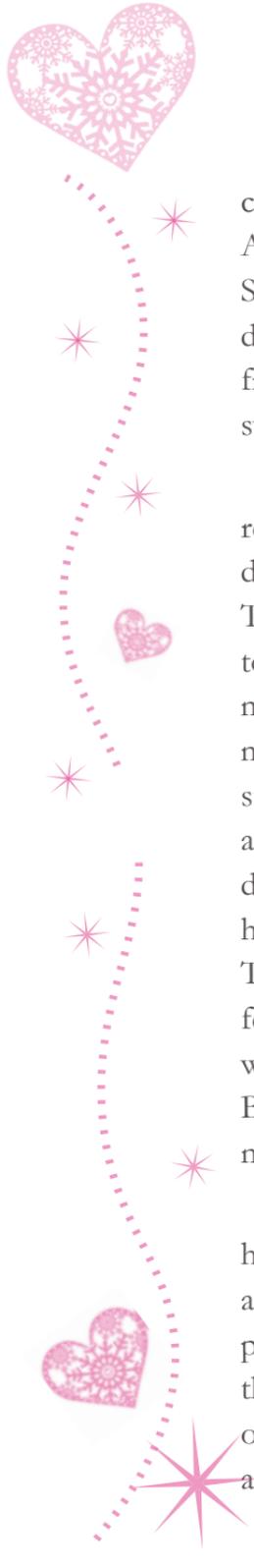
'No,' he laughed. 'I've got nothing arranged.'

'Okay,' she said. 'And, as we're doing it my way, we'll go to the pub first and we don't have to jog there.'

'No jogging?'

'None at all.'

Alex grinned at her. 'It's a deal.'

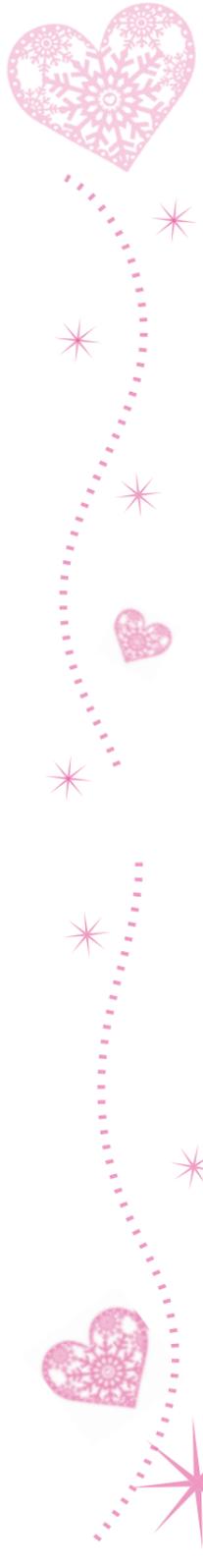


## Chapter 7

It was just a chain restaurant. The one that you could find on every high street. Nothing special. And it wasn't like this was a date. Not a proper one. She was just being friendly and Alex was just being desperate. So why was she so nervous? Despite the frigid, air-conditioned atmosphere, Jen's palms were sweating.

She'd made An Effort too. When she hadn't really meant to. But, somehow, she'd found herself doing her hair, picking out her nicest dress. A dress! That said it all really. Jeans said that you didn't give a toss. A dress – well, that gave out a totally different message. Alex had texted her to say that he couldn't make it to the pub which perhaps wasn't an auspicious start. He'd arranged to meet her here instead. She'd arrived at the restaurant first and now pulled said dress down towards her knees. The jeans would have been better. Alex would rock up in jeans and a T-shirt, probably a Snow Patrol one and then she'd feel stupid, overdressed. Jen poured herself more wine and was alarmed to see her fingers trembling. Bugger. Trembling of the fingers was always bad news.

She checked her watch – it was quarter of an hour past the time she'd arranged to meet Alex and he'd struck her as a person who cared about punctuality. Well, she'd give him until half past, finish this wine and, if he wasn't here by then, would clear off. Though she couldn't quite imagine what the atmosphere at work would be like between them.



But, seconds later, he came rushing breathlessly through the door. He looked as if he'd been jogging. 'Sorry,' he said. 'Sorry, I'm late. I had to take a call earlier and then I got another one just as I was about to leave.'

'Nice to be in demand.'

'Sorry.' He looked as though he was. 'I couldn't ignore it.'

'That's okay,' Jen said. 'I hadn't noticed the time.'

He flopped into the seat opposite her. 'Good. I would have hated for us to get off on the wrong foot.'

'Oh, no. No chance of that. Wine?'

'Love some.'

Jen poured him some wine and was pleased to see that Alex too had made An Effort. He was wearing black trousers – no jeans – and a smart shirt that smacked of a designer label or at least a good fake. Though if he'd worked in a bank maybe it was the real deal. Like him, she wondered? Was Alex the real deal?

'Was your call important?'

'Yes. No. I'm not sure.' He shook his head. 'I need time to think about it.'

She hoped it wasn't from some old ex-girlfriend that had popped up. What if he'd exchanged numbers with Ava from the wedding and she'd just deigned to call him? God, this felt like a bloody date and she had to keep reminding herself that it wasn't.



‘Shall we order?’ Alex said. ‘I’m famished. Have you had time to look at the menu?’

She could have recited it off by heart. ‘I’ll have a quick glance.’

He ordered for both of them, which she liked. Men with manners were hard to find these days.

It crossed her mind to order salad so that she’d look better, but pizza was what she wanted and, after all, it was only Alex. Not like she was trying to impress him. He knew what she was like at work when she had on no make-up and was up to her elbows in chip fat. He was under no illusions what she was really like.

Their pizzas came and another bottle of wine. There was lots of laughter and Jen felt witty and bright. Too soon the staff had not only cleared their table but were clearing up for the night. She knew what it felt like when customers lingered too long and all you wanted to do was go home. For the first time since he’d arrived, she glanced at her watch. It was gone eleven.

‘Have you seen the time?’ she said to Alex.

‘Wow,’ Alex said. ‘Who knew? Where did the night go?’

He was a little slurry. They hadn’t stopped talking all night; she’d learned about where he grew up, about his family, about how much he adored his Uncle Phil. She’d told him things that she’d never told anyone before – how difficult her mum used to be, how much she loved Nell’s girls. Personal stuff.



Yet she felt that there was so much more she wanted to say to him.

‘Thanks,’ he said to her. ‘This is my first real night out since I’ve been here. I didn’t realise how much I missed it. This has been fun.’

‘I’ve really enjoyed it.’

‘Me too.’

Alex paid the bill.

‘Let’s split it,’ Jen said.

‘No, no. I wouldn’t dream of it.’ He was insistent. ‘My pleasure.’

‘Thanks. It’ll be my treat next time.’

They looked into each other’s eyes. Next time. The words hung in the air between them.

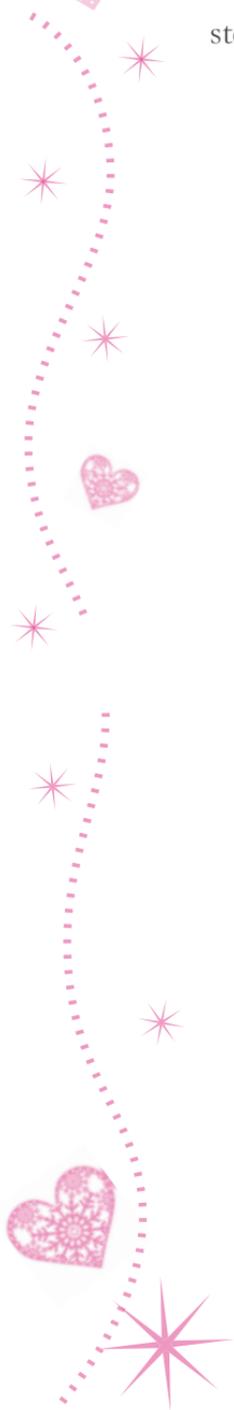
‘I know it’s late,’ Jen said, ‘but do you want to come back to my place. For coffee. We could carry on talking for a bit.’ She was not going to sleep with him. Whatever happened, that was right off the agenda. If there was something starting between them – and she wasn’t sure that there was – she was going to take it slowly this time. She’d lost count of the amount of blokes that she’d taken home only to find them long gone in the morning and avoiding her next time she’d seen them down the pub. Oh, no. She wasn’t going to make that mistake again. No siree! This time she was going to play it cool. If he wanted to see her again, then she would. And she really hoped that there would be a next time. But there would be a strict no-touching, notongues policy.

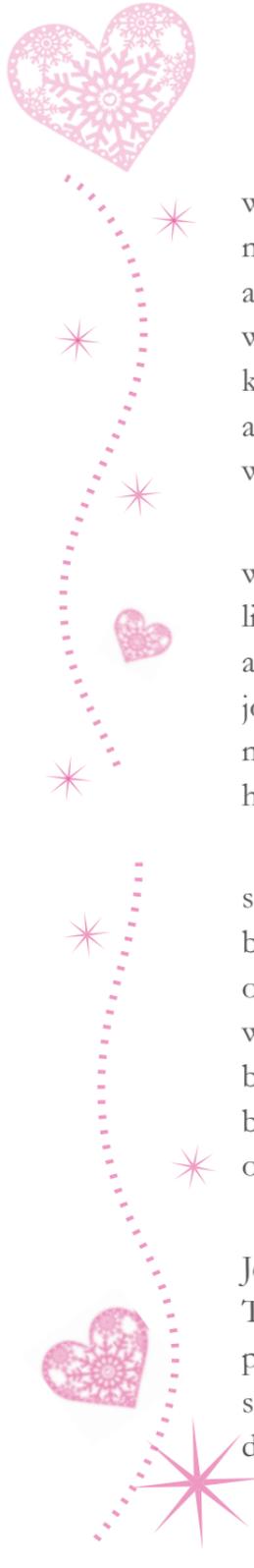




‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I’d like that.’

And, putting his hand round her waist, he steered her to the door.





## Chapter 8

Jen lay in her bed eyes closed tight. She still wasn't entirely sure how it had happened but one minute she was spooning Nescafé into two mugs and next there was kissing, kissing, kissing. There were clothes being tugged, ripped, torn. Shoes being kicked off. Chairs going over. She might have heard a plant pot crash. Then they were in bed. And it was wonderful. So wonderful.

Alex had been a tender but enthusiastic lover. It was a drunken grapple, but it wasn't. It was nothing like that at all. It was lovely. Now she was pleasantly aching all over and you could keep your flipping jogging, this was the best kind of exercise known to man. She couldn't bear to open her eyes and look at him yet, she just wanted this moment to last for ever.

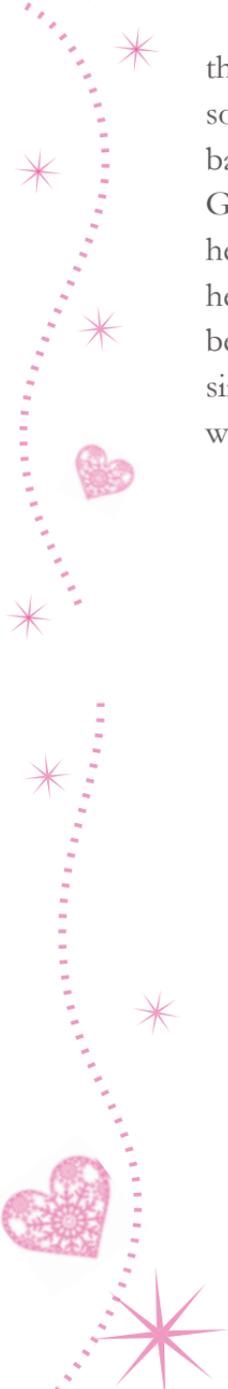
When she did open her eyes, the first thing she saw on her bedside table was Constance's wedding bouquet. There wasn't much left of it now. The orchids had long since died, but the lovely ribbon was still there and some pretty silk flowers that had been woven through it. Constance had wanted it to bring her good luck and Jen hoped that it was an omen.

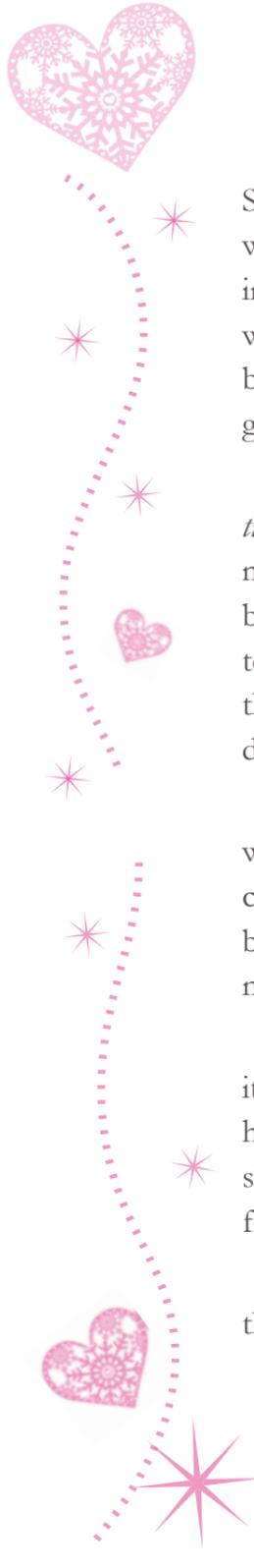
Also hoping that her bed hair wasn't too scary, Jen turned over, smiling, and reached out her arm. The smile died on her lips. He wasn't there. At some point in the proceedings Alex had got up and left. She sat up in bed, disappointment crushing her. When did he do that? She hadn't even heard him leave. Fat



lot of good that manky wedding bouquet had done for her.

Did he in the wee small hours realise that this had been a terrible mistake, that sleeping with someone who was, essentially, his staff was a really bad idea? Team building that had gone too far. Oh, God, she was an idiot. This time, she had sworn to herself, would be different. This time, she promised herself, there would be no crying on Nell's shoulder, bemoaning some bastard who she'd really liked who'd simply shagged and run. She wasn't going to be that woman. And now look what had happened.





## Chapter 9

Jen felt heavy, leaden as she walked to work. She'd liked him. *Really* liked him. She hadn't wanted to admit it, but she did. Her weight wasn't inconsiderable, but she should have known that she was punching above it. A bloke like Alex wouldn't be interested in someone like her. And now she was going to have to face him at work. Bollocks.

He'd left a note on the kitchen table. *Had a great time*, it said. *See you at work*. Which, she supposed, was more than most of the men she'd entertained would bother with. It wasn't much though. She didn't want to sound all American, but she'd really thought that there had been a connection between them. How deluded can you be?

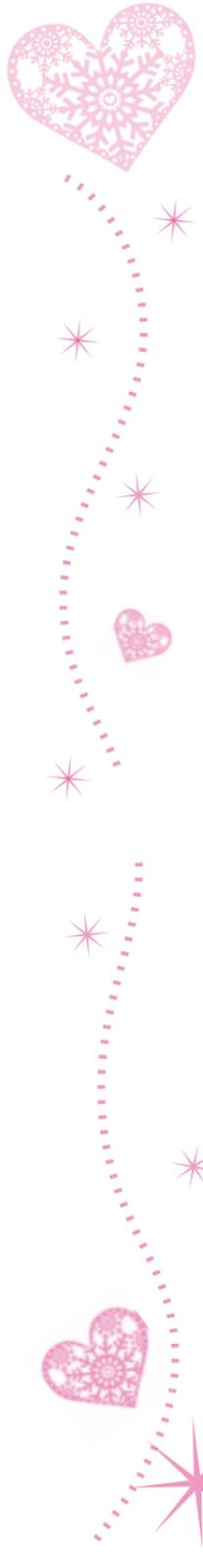
She pushed open the door at Live and Let Fry with a heavy heart. She'd tell Nell about this over a cuppa and they'd laugh at how stupid, how silly she'd been. Again. Tears sprang to her eyes. Would she never learn?

There was no sign of Alex, thank goodness. But it wasn't like she could avoid him all day. Jen hung up her coat, put on her jaunty apron and thought that she'd rather eat her own spleen with a teaspoon than face this day.

'Jen?' Alex's voice came from the back office. 'Is that you?'

'Yeah.'

'Can you come through, please?'



This didn't sound good. Not good, at all. Then a cold chill settled in her stomach. Could he sack her? Was doing the horizontal tango with your boss — even a temporary one — enough to warrant dismissal. This job was her life. Alex knew what it was like to be dumped, surely he wouldn't do that to her?

Heart pumping, mouth dry with trepidation, she made her way towards the office that used to be Phil's and that she heartily wished still was.

'Come in,' Alex said. His head was in his hands and he looked exhausted. 'Sit down.'

Jen sat down in front of him. Best not to say anything until she'd heard what he had to say. If he told her it had all been a terrible mistake then she could laugh it off, tell him that it meant nothing to her, he was one in a long line. She'd had enough practice at that to make it sound convincing.

'There's something I need to tell you,' he said, his face serious.

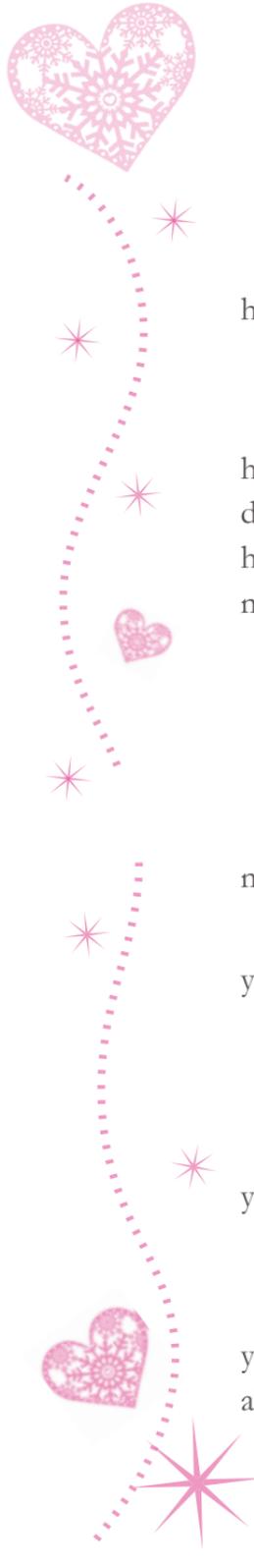
Alex let out a wavering sigh. 'A lot has happened since last night.'

Had he remembered a long-lost wife that he'd momentarily forgotten? She didn't think Phil had ever said that his nephew was hitched, but nothing would surprise her.

'I've been on Skype to Phil this morning'

That surprised her. 'Is everything all right?'

'Yes and no,' he said. Alex stood up and paced. 'I feel terrible about this, Jen. Truly I do.'



Silence, she decided, was still the best policy.

‘The phone call I had last night, remember?’

Definitely a long-lost wife.

‘It was from a recruitment company. A head-hunter. I’ve been offered a job,’ he said. ‘A great job.’

‘Oh.’ That was a surprise too.

‘It’s an opportunity that I can’t afford to miss,’ he continued. ‘I had to talk to Phil about it. I really don’t want to let him down, but I feel torn. If I stay here until he comes back and I miss this job, there may not be another one as good.’

‘What did Phil say?’

‘Take it,’ he said, frankly. ‘He didn’t hesitate.’

‘He wouldn’t.’

He smiled at her, ruefully. ‘You know him so much better than me.’

‘I’ve worked with the bloke every day for more years than I care to remember.’

‘And that’s where you come in,’ he said sheepishly.

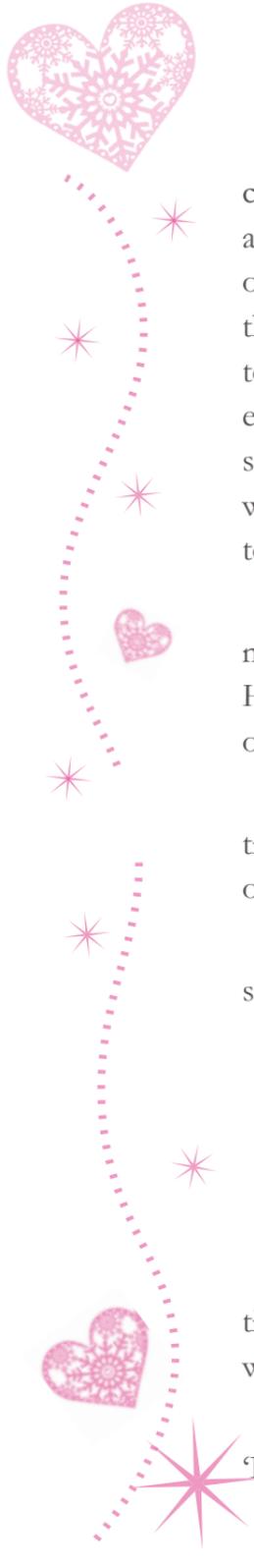
‘What?’ Now she was worried.

‘Phil says he’s happy for me to leave, if you say you’ll be the manager until he comes back.’

‘Me?’

‘You can do it,’ Alex encouraged. ‘You know you can. It’s more money too. You can talk to Phil about it, if you want to.’

‘I’ll do it,’ Jen said. ‘Of course, I’ll do it.’



‘You will?’

She felt her face break into a wide grin. Alex came round the desk, scooped her up into his arms and twirled her round. Even the small grunt he gave out as he did couldn’t dent her happiness. He was the first man who’d ever attempted it. She was going to be manager! Wait until she told Nell! She could even forgive Alex running out on her this morning if she had this job as a consolation prize. And to think, when she’d come in here she was sure he was going to sack her.

‘So where’s the job?’ she said, realising that it meant she wouldn’t be seeing him again. That was it. He was going to be saddling up his horse and riding out of town.

‘Back in London,’ he said. ‘But there’s no travelling involved, so I can come up every weekend or I could commute.’

‘Why would you come back every weekend?’ she said. ‘I’ll be able to manage.’

‘Not the job, you plum,’ he said. ‘To see you.’

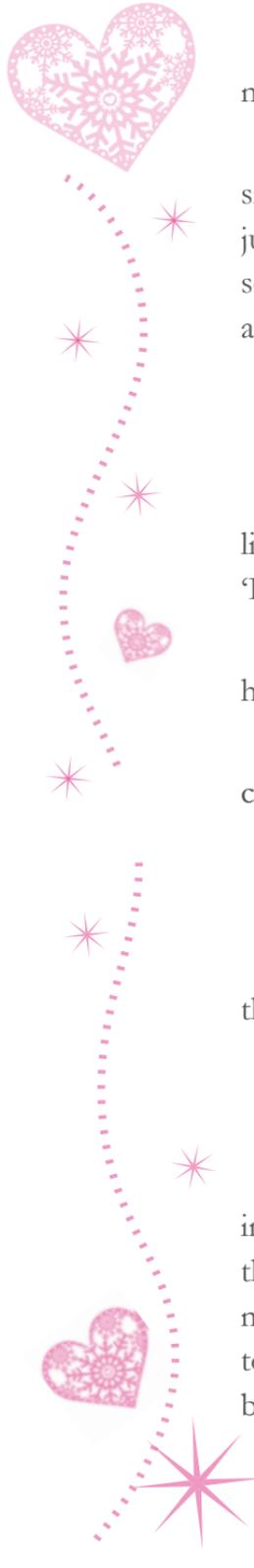
‘Oh.’ Jen didn’t know what to say to that.

Alex’s face fell. ‘You do want me to?’

‘Of course I do.’

‘Then that’s settled.’ He squeezed her to him tightly. ‘This will be brilliant for us. I don’t think I was ever cut out to be in this chip shop long-term.’

Whereas I am, Jen thought. I’m happy here. ‘I thought you’d cleared off,’ she admitted. ‘In the



night. It wouldn't be the first time.'

He kissed her cheek. 'Crazy lady.' She heard him sigh. 'Last night was brilliant. More than brilliant. I just couldn't sleep, I needed to get up and get things sorted in my head. So I got up at four and went for a run.'

'Do you do that often?'

'Yeah,' he said.

'Just so I know. For the future.' *The future.* She liked the sound of that. Jen relaxed into his embrace. 'It was horrible waking up and finding you'd gone.'

'Well, we'll just have to make sure that it doesn't happen too often then.'

'Are you being serious?' It was always worth checking.

'Of course. Why wouldn't I be?'

'I guess it's that self-esteem thing again.'

'Jen, you're funny, warm, fabulous-looking and I think you're fantastic.'

Jen felt herself blush. 'Really?'

'Really.'

She couldn't wait to tell Nell! As he pulled her into his arms again, Jen remembered the first thing that she had seen when she'd opened her eyes that morning – Constance's wedding bouquet. She smiled to herself. Perhaps in some silly, wonderful way it had brought her good luck after all.