



Extract from “Calling Mrs Christmas”

Chapter 1

Perfume ads on the telly. First it's Charlize Theron, strutting and tripping her way through some mansion until she's wearing nothing but J'Adore and an alluring smile. Next it's Keira Knightley overacting 'fun' for Coco Mademoiselle. Finally, for hanel No. 5, it's the stylised Red Riding Hood advert that's been doing the rounds for years with the best-looking wolf you've ever seen. It's only when these luscious advertisements grace our screens that you know the giddy, helter-skelter rundown towards Christmas has finally begun in earnest.

All three advertisements have been screened in a row and it's barely mid-morning. I missed most of the ads last year. At least, the daytime ones. I hear myself sigh. It's a bad habit and I've been doing it a lot lately. This year, as I am an unemployed, redundant couch potato, I am running the entire gamut of Christmas commercialism. It's the first week of October and already Stacey and Jason are extolling the virtues of Iceland's pre-prepared party food.

There is much laughter, much over-indulgence in these adverts, much that is red and glittering. Which is all very lovely. I'd usually buy right into it. Except there'll not be much partying at our house this Christmas. Very little, if any, party food from Iceland – or elsewhere – will be bought. Our table will not be replete with festive delights. Our Christmas tree will not be surrounded by half a ton of presents. It will be a big contrast to last year. I stop the next sigh that threatens to escape.

'Budget' is the watchword of the moment. Closely followed by 'cutbacks'. Last Christmas we had a great time. As is expected, the table groaned with food, the booze flowed, we forced ourselves an excess of Quality Street. All the usual things. Wonderful. But last year I had a job. This year I don't. And there's the rub.

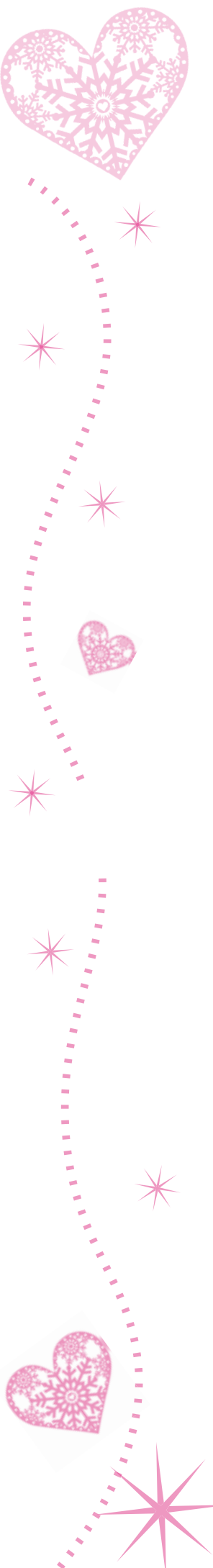
This Christmas, any tightening of the belt will be entirely down to our dwindling finances and not, for once, caused by the calorie overload of the festivities. I have now been out of work for a grand total of eight months, four days and, checks watch, three hours. It's fair to say that no one seems to be missing the great contribution that Ms Cassie Smith, age thirty-five, of Hemel Hempstead in the fair county of Hertfordshire has made to the cut-throat world of commerce.

I switch off the television and stare at the walls of the flat. This place has become my prison and my refuge all at once. I hate being trapped in here all day with nowhere to go. Yet now when I get the chance to go out, spread my wings, I'm frightened. My heart pounds, my mouth goes dry and my palms sweat at the thought of stepping out of my comfort zone. Do you think that's how budgies feel? Do they desperately want to fly free, but as soon as that cage door is open, they freeze? If it is, then I feel so sorry for them. I used to be sure of my place in life, but my selfconfidence has dwindled just as fast as our meagre savings.

My job, I have to admit, wasn't fantastic. I grumbled about it a lot. To anyone who would listen, really. But, my goodness, how I miss it. I would give anything to be complaining about hauling myself out of bed on a frosty morning, scraping the car windscreen, blowing on my fingers to keep warm, muttering about the crap office coffee. Instead, when Jim gets up for work, I simply turn over and go back to sleep. No need to get up. No need to rush. No need to do anything. No need to be here at all.

I worked as a secretary and general dogsbody for a small engineering company specialising in component design and fabrication. The price I paid for daydreaming in school. But I was good at my job, efficient. People liked me. I was a dedicated and diligent dogsbody. I could





turn my hand to anything and frequently did. Sometimes it felt as if I was running the flipping place. Jim and I went to my boss's house for dinner. Three times. He opened champagne. I always went that extra mile, my boss said. He said I was indispensable. In fact he said it the very morning before he called me into his office and told me that, from the end of the week, I would be surplus to requirements. Not enough people, it seemed, needed components designed or fabricated.

I push my misery aside and phone Jim. Just the sound of his voice can pull me out of a downward spiral. His mobile rings and rings. My other half, for his sins, is a prison officer based in the Young Offenders' Unit at Bovingdale Prison. He can't have his phone with him when he's on duty, but I'm hoping that I might catch him on a break when he tries to go out to his locker if he can, snatching a few minutes to listen to his messages and look at his texts. He never used to go out to his locker during his shift when I was at work because I never had time to phone him during the day. We did all our catching up on the evenings when Jim's shifts allowed us to fall exhausted onto the sofa together. Now I spend my entire life on the sofa – primarily alone – and Jim is conscious that he's my lifeline to the world, so he checks his phone as often as he can.

As I think it's about to go to voicemail, Jim picks up. 'Hi, love,' he says, sounding harassed. 'A bit busy right now. Just got a call on the radio. Can I ring you back later?'

'Yeah.'

'Was it anything important?'

'No. I'm just bored.'

'OK. Catch you when I've got a spare mo. Love you.' He hangs up.

'Love you,' I say to the handset.

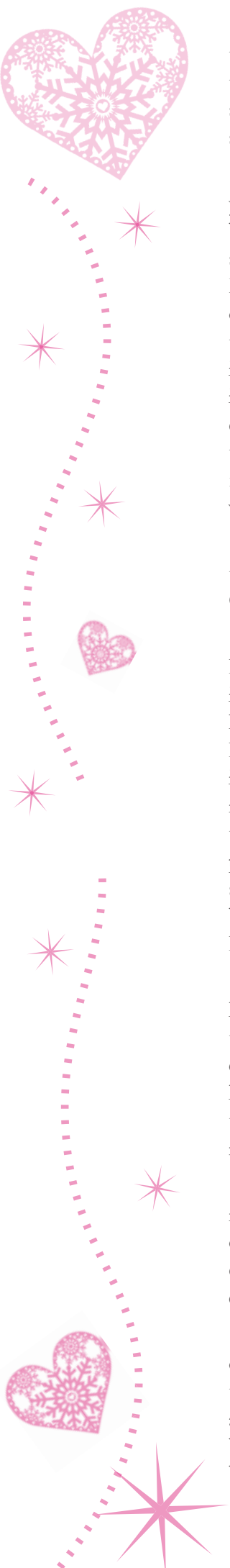
And that's the trouble when you're not busy. Everyone else is. I switch the television back on. The John Lewis advert. Something sentimental to have you reaching for the tissues as usual. The Argos ad. Then Boots who seem to be trying to guilt mothers into excess present buying. No wonder vulnerable heartstrings are stretched to breaking point. Soon everyone but me will be wrapped up in Christmas. A time when all sensible spending goes out of the window and everyone racks up the debt on their credit cards to pay another day. Well, we can't do that this year.

To be honest, I didn't particularly worry when I was made redundant although, equally, I wasn't exactly overjoyed, as in my view I'd done my best for the company and I believed they were happy with me. But then I thought I'd get a job really easily. I'd waltz straight into another company who'd love me and appreciate me more. Who doesn't need secretaries? What sort of company doesn't have a dogsbody on which to dump all their most depressing and unwanted tasks? Who doesn't want someone to mollycoddle and care for all the staff and their various crises? An office angel. I assumed that the local paper would be filled with opportunities for someone with my skills and experience. It seems that I was wrong.

Chapter 2

I stare at the clock. Nearly ten minutes have passed since I last looked at it. Jim still hasn't called me back. In fairness, he has a very busy job. Unlike me, he works in a growth industry. No shortage of customers in Jim's company. No chance of anyone saying that there isn't enough demand for *his* skill set. The Young Offenders' Unit at Bovingdale is already overflowing and there's a steady stream of thieving, drug-dealing, car-nicking, housebreaking kids that they can't even begin to accommodate

But no matter how much I hate being unemployed, I couldn't for all the money in the world, for all the tea in China, do a job like that. My Jim is a saint among men We've been



together for five years now, meeting in a less than salubrious bar in Watford just after my thirtieth birthday and just after I'd decided that true love would never find me. There he was, standing with a pint of Magners in his hand, and for me – for both of us – it was love at first sight.

Sometimes, you just can't put your finger on what causes that strength of attraction, but you know that it's there. It's not that Jim Maddison's an oil painting. I wasn't bowled over because he's a dead ringer for Matthew McConaughey. He doesn't have that kind of movie-star looks. His hair is cropped close, which makes him look a lot scarier than he actually is. From his time in the army, he's got tattoos on his toned biceps. A heart and a rose entwined on one side. A skull with flowers growing through it on the other. Between his shoulder blades there's a colourful phoenix and I love to trace the outline of them on his skin when we're lying in bed. He's stocky, not that tall, has a face that's too pale as he spends his working days locked indoors and we haven't had a holiday in the sun in years. But my Jim has the kindest eyes you'll ever see. They're soft, grey and always have a twinkle in them. He smiles much, much more than he frowns. When it comes down to it, Jim's just an uncommonly nice guy and it radiates from every pore he possesses. Everyone adores him. Me included. Jim is the epitome of the word 'solid' and, since the day I met him, I know what it is to be loved, to be cared for.

By the end of our first week – a week when we saw each other every night – we'd decided to move in together. Just like that. No ifs, no buts. I knew instantly, instinctively, he was 'The One.'

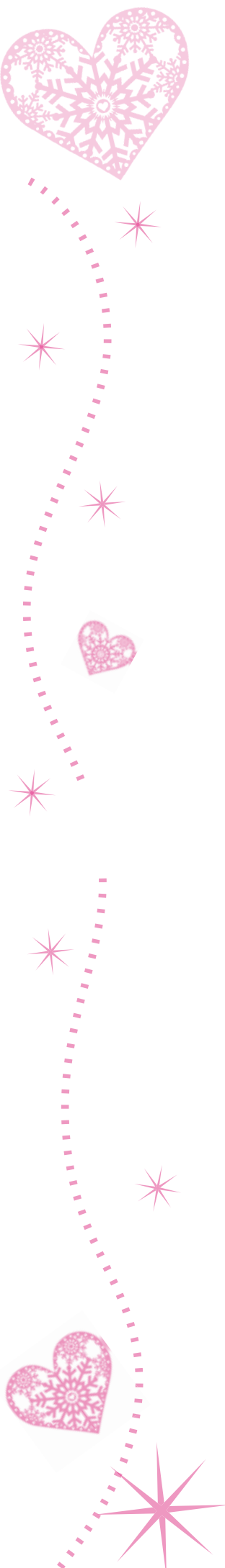
I'd had a few relationships in the past, but no one had ever made me feel the way Jim did. It wasn't that he showered me with flowers or diamonds. Quite the opposite. Present buying isn't Jim's forte. He isn't romantic in a showy way at all, but I watch him sometimes when he's making me some toast or a cup of tea. I see how much care he takes. He knows that I like my toast well done with loads of butter right up to the edges of the bread. He frowns in concentration as he makes sure that the jam is spread really thinly, exactly the way I do it myself, and that it's cut in triangles, not sliced straight across. He puts his feet on my side of the bed to warm it before I get in. He opens doors for me, walks on the traffic side of the pavement and pulls out my chair in restaurants. To me, that's love. It's not roaring down the street in a Ferrari, it's not skydiving out of a plane with an 'I LOVE CASSIE!' banner trailing behind you. I think it's the constant, quiet things that tell you that it's real love. And I feel that I am very loved.

My dad cleared off when I was young. I barely remember him, but something like that leaves its mark and I've always felt wary about getting too involved with men. I always expected them to let me down and, invariably, they did. It got to the point where I hardly dated at all, didn't really trust men. With Jim it was completely different. This might sound mad, but it was like finding the other half of myself. From day one, I knew that I could trust him with my life, that my heart would never be mashed by him. If that sounds corny, then so be it. He is truly my soulmate.

We can spend hours just sitting reading together or walking through the woods. There's never any drama with Jim, I don't have to worry about where he is or who he's with. Jim isn't one for nights out on the lash with the lads; he'd rather be at home with me than anywhere else. And that's all I want too. Just to be with Jim. We're content in each other's company. We don't need the high life, we're happy exactly as we are.

If it wasn't for Jim, I don't know how I would have survived the last year. He's been my only brightness, always there with the right words to cheer me up or knowing when a well-timed bar of chocolate would lift my spirits. When I was made redundant, I thought I'd take a couple of weeks off, have a bit of a rest. A 'career break' I laughingly called it. After all, I'd been in work constantly since I was sixteen and there was no rush to find something else. I'd been given a month's salary as a pay-off. Yeah, thanks for that.

Then, when I'd caught up on the ironing, and the flat was so spick and span that it looked



as if Anthea Turner had been through it, and I'd watched all the films I'd been meaning to watch but hadn't got around to, I applied for jobs. There weren't as many of them as I'd expected and some, I felt, just weren't right for me. I was surprised when, having sent off a rash of my splendid CVs, I got only one interview. I was even more surprised when I didn't get the job. I thought the interview had gone so well. Seems I was wrong about that too. After that setback, a little bit of panic set in. I catalogued all our DVDs and old CDs alphabetically and then applied for more jobs. This time I was less choosy. Got one interview. Got no job. And so it went on.

I signed on. Was given Jobseekers' Allowance, went to a workshop that showed me how to present my CV properly and then applied frantically for anything with the word 'vacancy' attached to it. Still no luck.

When the spring morphed into summer and I was still terminally unemployed, I began to lose my nerve. The few interviews I did have went badly. A lot of firms that would normally employ secretaries seemed to have embraced an age where managers did their own donkey work or made use of university graduates who had a degree, thirty grand's worth of debt and were desperate. Instead of 'unpaid slaves', they called them 'interns' and insisted the posts were great and necessary work experience for their CVs. But whatever it was, it meant that people like me – who actually wanted paying – went down to the bottom of the pile.

I don't mean to sound sorry for myself. But I am. Very sorry. I don't want to be like this. I look at the television, at the snowy scenes, at the promises of unfettered festive happiness, at the excessive consumerism, and I want to be part of it. I love Christmas. I want to embrace all of its tacky indulgence. It's my time of year. Perhaps sometimes I let myself get a bit carried away – Jim said the flat looked like a flipping winter wonderland last year – but it's supposed to be like that. I don't want to be thinking of getting a meagre Tesco Value chicken rather than a big, fat Kelly Bronze turkey. We can cut back on presents, that's no hardship. It's the little things that make Christmas special. But I don't want to miss out on the atmosphere.

This is the only difficult part of my relationship with Jim. We never have enough money. We might not aspire to the high life, but we've never actually had the money to try it. Funds are always tight. Even when I was gainfully employed we didn't have a lot left to splash around, and now my not working is a terrible drain on us. Our desires are fairly modest, but I feel as if I've been on a budget since the day I was born. We don't want for much but, sometimes – just sometimes – it would be nice to treat ourselves without having to count every penny. Surely Christmas is one of those times?

I don't catch what the advert is for, but there's a mother on television, dressing the Christmas tree, two mop-haired children and a dog from Central Casting at her feet. Presents are piled around the tree, which sparkles brilliantly. A beautifully set dining room table replete with ravishing food is in the background. Carols soar to a crescendo and Daddy comes through the door to his perfect family and his perfect Christmas. A sigh rises to my throat. Surely there must be someone who needs extra help at Christmas? Doesn't everyone try to run round doing ten times more than they normally do? There *must* be a role for me out there. My ideal job, my *raison d'être*, is organising stuff. What a shame that I can't get paid for celebrating Christmas!

Then something inside me clicks and the most brilliant idea hits me like a bolt out of the blue. A grin spreads over my face. I could be a part of this. I don't have to sit here on the sidelines and let the joy of Christmas pass me by. I can embrace the commercialism and bring in some much needed extra cash. I can do something about it.

My mind is whirring with the kernel of an unfocussed plan when the phone rings. Jim's at the other end. That means it must be his lunchtime and here's me still in my pyjamas. Well, all that's about to change. No more slobbing around the house feeling sorry for myself, I'm going to launch myself back into the world with a vengeance.

'Hey,' he says. 'Sorry I couldn't speak earlier. I was on my break, but something kicked off.'



It's total madness here today?

It's total madness where Jim works *every* day. While we're talking about money, they don't pay him nearly enough for the stress he has and what he has to put up with. That's another one of the reasons why we're still renting this tiny flat and both drive clapped-out cars. I want to do my bit. It's not fair on him. I want to get out there again in the big, bad world of paid work. I don't want our life to be like this, constantly living from hand to mouth. I hate having to accept benefits from the government just to get by. We're young, we're resourceful. We shouldn't be in this situation. I know I can do more. And I might just have a plan as to how.

'Are you OK, Cassie? Still bored?'

'No,' I say.

I can feel myself beaming widely. It's as if a terrible fog has suddenly cleared from my head. A light bulb has gone pingdiddy-ping in my brain and it's burning brightly. I let out a bubbly laugh, a sound that I'd forgotten I could make.

'You'll never believe this,' I tell him. 'But I have just come up with *the* most brilliant idea.'

Chapter 3

By the time Jim comes home in the evening, I'm buzzing. I pounce on him the minute he swings through the door of the flat, twine my arms around him and give him a big kiss.

'Hey,' he says. 'I like a welcome home like this.' Even though he looks weary, he takes me in his arms and returns my kisses.

'What have I done to deserve it?'

'You've just been you,' I say. 'All these months I've been a terrible moody cow and you've stood by me.'

'You've lost your confidence, Cassie,' he says softly. 'That's all.

You'll get it back.'

'I have,' I babble. 'I'm just so excited about this idea.'

'Tell me about it again. I couldn't concentrate properly at work,' he admits.

When I talked to Jim on the phone I rushed through my explanation of my plan, babbling like a loon. To be honest, it was all just forming in my brain as I was speaking and I must have sounded like a mad thing. As always, when he's at work, I could tell that Jim had only one ear to the conversation. Now that I've had time to mull it over properly and put some thoughts down on paper, I still think it's a great idea.

Jim drops his bag to the floor and I help him take off his jacket.

'I was watching television this morning.' As I always do. 'It was nothing but Christmas ads.'

'Already?' Jim looks as if he has a heart-sink moment.

'It'll be upon us before we know it,' I remind him. 'That's why I have to act fast.'

'It seems to come round more quickly every year.' He puffs out a tired breath. 'So what's the master plan, Dr Evil?'

'I want to offer a complete Christmas planning service,' I remind him.

Jim untangles himself and we go through to our titchy kitchen where I've got dinner on the go. It's Wednesday and we've got tuna risotto, which, if humanly possible, is even less glamorous than it sounds. Just think, if I could get this business off the ground, we could upgrade to prawns! We could eat meat more than once a week.



‘What on earth does that involve?’

‘Everything,’ I say, excitedly. ‘Putting up trees, writing cards, baking mince pies. I could buy presents and gift wrap them. I could put Christmas lights up outside houses. Well, maybe you could do that bit.’

He raises his eyebrows at that.

‘A lot of people are into that whole over-the-top decoration now and it’s a total pain, putting lights up and taking them down every year. That would be a great service. I could do their food shopping, organise parties. That’s just for starters. I’m sure there’s a lot of things that I could do that I haven’t even thought about yet.’

‘Hmm . . .’ He rubs at the shadow of stubble on his chin.

‘You know what it’s like,’ I rush on. ‘Everyone has eight million things to do before Christmas. If you’re not careful, then it just becomes a lot of hassle rather than being the most wonderful time of the year.’ I remember to pause for breath. ‘If I could take the pressure off people, for a small fee, then it’s a win-win situation. Some people will pay anything for the perfect Christmas.’

Jim looks thoughtful. ‘You love doing all that stuff anyway.’

‘I do.’ I used to adore getting ready for Christmas. My favourite job in the world is wrapping presents. And I think I’m good at it. Good enough, with a bit of polishing, to provide a professional service. ‘I’d try to offer everything to take the stress out of Christmas. So all the client has to do is pay up and have fun.’

‘It sounds like an awful lot to take on, Cassie.’ There’s a concerned frown on his brow.

‘I know. But I have to act fast. People lose all sense when it comes to money at Christmas. If I’d ever had the cash to spare I’d have bought in help myself. I’ve just never seen anyone offer it. Certainly not round here.’

Jim purses his lips. ‘That’s true enough.’

‘It’s a niche market that I think I can explore.’

‘Are you sure you wouldn’t just be better off looking for another office job?’

‘I’ve tried that, Jim. There’s nothing out there.’ I stir the risotto and add some more herbs to try to inject some excitement into it.

‘I’ve got my name down for seasonal work at a dozen different shops, but I’ve heard nothing yet. Even retail outlets are cutting back. Where there are vacancies they’re filling them from a list of regulars. No one even wants me as a shelf-stacker.’ He knows how hard it’s been. ‘At least I could try this. If it doesn’t work out, I’ve not lost anything but my time.’

‘Starting your own business is always tricky. You know what it’s like out there at the moment. The current climate is hard for everyone.’

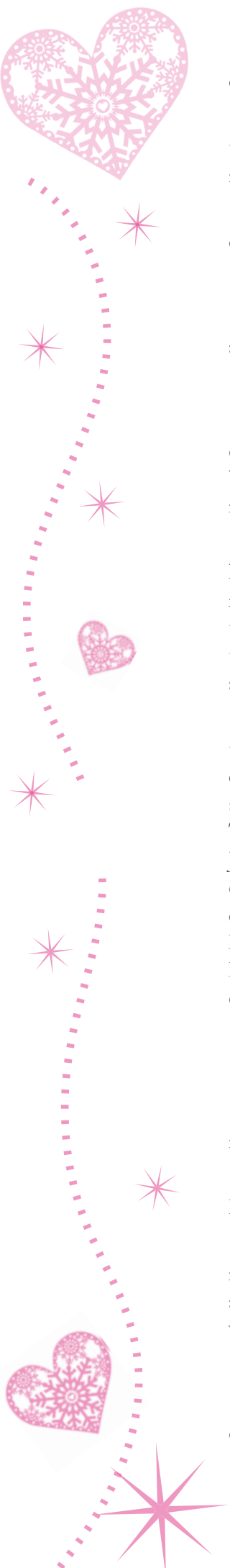
‘This will be for a short period only. It’s purely a seasonal thing. Everyone goes raving mad at Christmas. We all like a bit of festive escapism. Buy now, pay later. Batter the credit card. We’ve done it ourselves. That’s what it’s all about.’

Not to put too fine a point on it, I’d like a bit of that action too. I can’t sit here on my bottom all through the winter, eking out our measly income and feeling miserable. If I can work hard for the next couple of months, cash in on Christmas, then we’ll at least have a little bit more money behind us to start the new year.

If it goes well, I could maybe think of another business idea or, at worst, go back to the Job Centre with my head held high.

‘You could look at commuting into London,’ Jim suggests.

‘There must be jobs up in town.’



'I'd have to leave at some ungodly hour in the morning, get home late at night. The cost of the rail ticket is extortionate now.

With your shifts, we'd never see each other.' Plus, from what I've heard, I think that the city of London is probably suffering from intern overload too. 'I'm also frightened of rejection again,' I admit to Jim. 'At least with this, I sink or swim on my own merits.'

'That's what I'm worried about. You've had a tough time, Cassie. I don't want you to take on too much.'

I chew my fingernail. My first doubt creeps in. 'You don't think I can do it?'

He wraps his arms around me and hugs me tightly. 'Of course you can do it. It's simply a question of whether there's the business out there.'

'I'd like to try.'

'Let me go and have a quick shower, then we can talk some more about it.' Jim is always conscious that he smells of the Young Offenders' Unit, which is a pungent mix of teenage boys, institutional food and despair. I think he also likes to wash work out of his hair the minute he comes home. I don't care what he smells like, I just feel safe in his arms.

While he hits the bathroom, I fiddle about, pulling the table out from the corner of our living room that doubles as a dining room, and then set it. One thing about my being at home is that we do now eat together at the table rather than slum it with a tray on our laps, watching the telly in a stupor. The only downside is that by the time Jim comes home I'm usually pacing the floor with anxiety. Waiting for someone seems so much worse when you haven't been anywhere yourself.

Catching sight of myself in the full-length mirror in the hall as I bustle about, I realise that the last few months haven't been kind to my appearance either. I've let myself go, no doubt. I've never been slim, but now I'm definitely curvier than I should be. Too many hours spent on the sofa. No visits to the gym. To economise I gave up my membership months ago. To save money I've also not had my hair cut since January and it now graces my shoulders. Jim says he likes it longer, but I can see that it's out of condition and, at the very least, the ends need trimming. Thankfully, there's no grey showing in my brunette hair – not like my dear sister who's been dyeing hers for years – so I don't feel the need to have it coloured yet. My complexion is usually good – very peaches and cream – but now my skin looks dull, tired. My green eyes have lost their sparkle. I felt pretty once, but not any more. I huff sadly at my own reflection.

Jim's standing behind me. 'You still look beautiful to me.'

'I feel old and fat and forgotten.'

'You're none of those things,' he insists. 'You're my gorgeous girl.' He hugs me and I rest my head against his shoulder. What would I do without him?

'You must be starving.' Jim gets a free meal at lunchtime and he tries to fill up then, but I know the food is not all that it might be. 'Sit yourself down. I'll get dinner.'

I shoot into the kitchen to sort out the risotto. When I had my brainwave, I was actually motivated to go to the supermarket and buy the tiniest piece of Parmesan cheese I could find as a treat to liven it up. I grate some on top and make the dish look as respectable as possible with a sprinkling of parsley.

'Hmm. Looks lovely,' Jim says as I put it down in front of him.

It doesn't, not really. It looks exactly like what it is – a dish knocked up quickly and on the cheap. But he's always so incredibly kind and encouraging.

'It won't always be like this,' I say and tears spring to my eyes.

Jim takes my hand. 'Do you think I'll love you any more if we have steak for dinner every



night?’

‘Yes.’

‘Mmm. Maybe you’re right.’ I kick him under the table and he laughs. After he’s said, ‘Ouch.’

The flat’s OK really. The block’s a bit tired. Built with all the style the 1970s could muster, it looks like the sort of square, grey lump that you’d imagine more akin to Stalingrad or somewhere Communist and depressing. The windows need replacing as a howling gale comes in around the edges and our communal stairwell could best be described as functional. I’m sure we could make a bit on the side by renting it out as a set for slasher movies. It would be perfect.

We’ve lived here for two years now. The landlord’s a bit of a twat too and, as is the way, we have to make two dozen phone calls before he’ll deign to come out and fix anything. Usually, Jim just ends up doing it. We try to make the best of it and have the place as nice as we can. But it’s not home, is it? Not when you’re renting. It’s still always like living somewhere you don’t really belong. I didn’t think this was where I’d be at this stage in my life.

I thought I’d be happily married, have my own home, maybe even a couple of kids. I didn’t think that I’d still be scratching an existence in rented accommodation with a baby about as distant a prospect as a trip to the moon. I want to marry Jim. I want to marry him on a tropical beach with colourful flowers in my hair and white sand and waving palm trees. That’s my dream. I don’t want a massive church bash with three hundred guests and a disco. I just want me and Jim and the sand beneath our feet. But how am I ever going to achieve that if I can’t even get a job as a secretary? Which turns me back to the plan in hand.

‘So, do you think I should give this business a go?’ I desperately need Jim’s approval, otherwise it’s dead in the water. I don’t have the nerve to do this without his backing.

He plays with his fork in the risotto. Today he seems more wound up than normal when he comes home from work, as if he could do with a good glass of red. But, for reasons that you’re now well aware of, there won’t be one. ‘We’ve nothing put away now, Cassie. It’s all gone and the credit cards are maxed out.’

‘I’m well aware of that, Jim,’ I say more crisply than I mean to. ‘Surely that makes it even more critical that I do something? I’d try to keep the outgoings to a bare minimum. A lot of the services I’m going to offer won’t need any outlay at all.’

He doesn’t look convinced. ‘Even if it takes off, it would more than likely stop dead in January.’

‘I know. But if it goes *really* well, then maybe I could carry on doing a similar sort of thing for the rest of the year. Event planning or something. There’s always Valentine’s Day and Easter. Mother’s Day too. It’s just that Christmas is The Big One.’ I touch his hand. ‘I feel that I have to try. It would get me out of the house. Get me involved in life again. I’m going mad being at home all the time. I feel worse than useless.’

‘I can tell that it’s got you all fired up again.’ He smiles at me.

‘That’s good to see.’

‘Can I go for it? Will you support me?’

‘Of course I will. You know that I’ll do all I can. Whatever you do, you’ll be brilliant at it.’

‘I love you.’ I reach across the table and squeeze his hand. ‘Thank you for your faith in me.’

‘So,’ he says, ‘have you got a name for your brilliant new venture?’

‘Yes, I have,’ I say proudly. ‘Calling Mrs Christmas!’



Chapter 4

The next morning, I get up when Jim's alarm goes off. While he shaves and potters about, I make him coffee and toast. He's very surprised by all this. But I hate to disappoint him: it's not just my desire to make breakfast for my dearly beloved that's motivated me out of bed today. The truth is that I can't wait to get to the computer and start doing some work on my business plan. I could hardly sleep last night for thinking about it.

I kiss Jim goodbye and wave through the window to him as he drives away. Then I take my coffee through to the spare bedroom, which, apart from the desk in the corner, is our general dumping ground, ironing room, gym (unused exercise bike in the corner, which doubles as extra wardrobe space) and computer room.

Ignoring the mounting pile of ironing, I hit the desk, put down my mug and settle myself in front of the screen. I'm so keen to get started that I haven't even bothered to get showered or dressed yet. I start to search the internet to see what I can find – decorations, invitations, cards, Christmas cake, mince pies – and I'm not disappointed. Five minutes later, I'm on YouTube and a whole world of previously unexplored festive delights opens up before me. I click, click, click on a multitude of clips and gorge myself on an array of Christmas goodies.

It's eleven o'clock when I come up for breath, in which time I have learned how to wrap a present in luxurious style, make a bow for it, dress a tree/table/mantelpiece, create a spectacular centrepiece, do Christmas calligraphy, decorate cupcakes, make and ice snowflake biscuits and knock out my own mince pies. I'm positively brimming over with inspiration and I haven't even left the flat. I always thought that I was pretty good at doing these things, anyway, but now I've taken my Christmas skill set to a whole new level.

Surfing some more, I then make a list of all the things I think I can offer. It makes me smile when I realise that the list is quite extensive. I have talents that I've hidden even from myself. Surely *someone* will need my services?

The next time I glance at my watch it's nearly lunchtime. It's my sister's half-day today. Gaby works as a receptionist at a dental practice not far from her home in Leverstock Green. If I get a wriggle on, I can be round at her house just after she gets in and we can have a sandwich together. I can't wait to tell her my plans as she's been very worried about me over the last few months and she'll be delighted that, at last, I've found something that I can really get my teeth into.

I print off my list, run round the shower, throw on some clothes and sprint out of the door. It is a long time since I've done sprinting and my smile widens to a grin. Outside, the day is cold, damp and the sky hangs down to the trees, but I have never felt better. My feet fly over the pavement. My heart hammers with happiness. I feel as if I could walk all the way to Gaby's house on the clouds but sense prevails and I jump into my clapped-out car and drive down instead.

Five minutes later, I pull up outside her door. 'Hiya, sis,' she says as she lets me in. 'Didn't expect to see you today. Everything OK?'

'More than OK,' I tell her as I follow her into the kitchen. 'I've come up with a *brilliant* plan.'

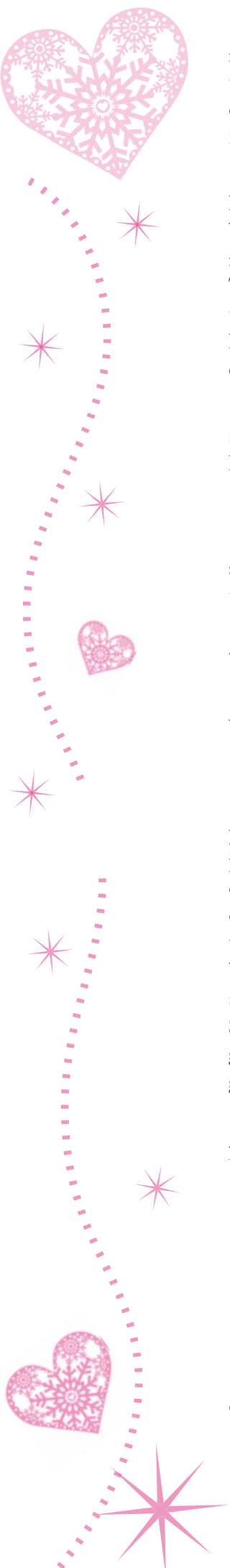
'I like the sound of that,' she says. 'Want something to eat?'

'I wouldn't mind.' I love my sis. She never fails to deliver on the food front. Anyone who walks through her front door is instantly fed.

'Cheese on toast?'

'Perfect.'

She and I have always had a close relationship and, in many ways, she's more like a mum to me than my sister. Gaby's the one I've always turned to when I've been in need. My own



mother – my real mother – has always been somewhat neglectful of her maternal duties. All the time we were growing up, she was fairly hands off in her nurturing. She kept a roof over our heads, just about, and paid the bills, sporadically, but other than that, she did little more for us than she absolutely had to.

Dad left us years ago – I was five and Gaby was eight – and we haven't seen hide nor hair of him since. We woke up one day to find him gone and Mum never spoke of him again. We were a single-parent family when they weren't all that fashionable. The sad thing is that I really don't remember my dad all that much. We don't talk about him often now, Gaby and I. The truth is that we don't even know if he's dead or alive. When we were younger, Gaby used to tell me things about him. He liked cars and country music. He had yellow fingers because he smoked a lot. And he danced very badly, Gaby said, but that could apply to any dad. She doesn't talk about him now. Hasn't referred to him for years and neither have I.

When he pushed off, my mum went a bit mental. She didn't get out of her dressing gown for weeks on end, despite Gaby doing her best to coax her. When she finally did, she put on her lipstick and high heels and then we didn't see her for dust.

Sometimes she didn't come home until the middle of the night.

Sometimes not at all. It was Gaby who, red-eyed through lack of sleep, would get us up and dressed for school. It was Gaby who scoured the cupboards, looking for something for us to eat. I shake the image away. It's just too painful to dwell on.

So, as she makes our lunch, I sit on one of her kitchen stools and fill her in on my new business idea.

'Wow,' she says as she takes it all in. 'I'm impressed. This sounds like your perfect job. Why did we not think of it before?'

Since we were kids, you've always been the one who loved Christmas.'

Did I love it? I remember it being just Gaby, me and Mum. It was the one time of the year that we had a lavish meal on the table as Gaby used to put money away from her Saturday job into a Christmas Hamper Club run by one of our neighbours. That was the highlight of the year, that hamper arriving, laden with its luscious Christmas pudding, a tin of ham, cranberry sauce, fancy biscuits and jams and always a tin of Walkers shortbread. Gaby and I used to get all the contents out on our bedroom floor and admire them in awe. Mum would buy us presents – a doll, a book, one year roller skates. We used to meticulously cut out paper shapes to make Mum a card. Quite often on Christmas Day, Mum would get drunk and teary. She would hug us to her and weep into our hair when we just wanted to watch television and gorge ourselves on the contents of the hamper. But it was the one day of the year we could guarantee her being around and, perhaps, I loved it for that reason alone.

'You'll be brilliant at it. You've always put me to shame with your decorations. And you pick the best presents. I don't know how you do it. You always manage to find the right thing.'

'Hours spent surfing the internet,' I confess. 'You think I could do it?'

'No one better,' she confirms.

'I'm going to get on to it right away,' I say. 'No time to lose.'

'Only sixty shopping days to Christmas. '

'Really? '

Gaby laughs. 'Give or take a few. I don't know. Thankfully, I haven't *actually* started counting yet.'

'I'm panicking slightly about the timescale,' I tell her. 'But I'm trying to see it as a challenge.'

'I'm just glad to see you've got your spark back. I've missed it.'



‘Me too.’

‘You know that I’ll do anything that I can to help.’

‘I might hold you to that. You could come in very handy for my mince pie and Christmas cake baking service.’ Gaby is an excellent cook. Her cakes are held in high esteem in this family and she produces them with unfailing regularity. ‘Fancy giving cupcakes a go? They’re still all the rage.’

She shrugs in acquiescence. ‘Sure.’

I’m certain she could easily turn her hand to them. Or, at the very least, help me to improve mine. She’s a stickler for perfection. I’m more the slap-it-about merchant. However, I realise that if I’m offering a professional service, that is going to have to change.

‘I’ve fussed about with them a bit already. I’ve got plenty of icing nozzles and stuff that you can borrow.’

‘You have?’

‘I’ll dig them out after we’ve eaten.’

‘That’s great.’

‘If you do get this going, you’ll be absolutely knackered by Christmas,’ Gaby observes. ‘You are both coming to me for lunch again?’

It’s a habit that we’ve got into over the years since she’s had her own family. I guess that on Christmas Day it’s easier for Gaby to be at home with the kids where they’ve got all their new toys, rather than for us all to be squashed in our flat. This year, though, I feel we’ll need it more than ever. ‘Don’t think that you always have to invite us. Your husband might want you all to himself for once.’

She guffaws at that. ‘As if!’

‘You know what I mean. I don’t like to presume.’

Jim and I love being with Gaby and Ryan on Christmas Day and we normally try to get here in time to see the kids open their presents. Even though it does mean a ridiculously early start. Last year we actually slept over on Christmas Eve so that we were already here when they woke up. At four o’clock. Maybe we’ll stay in our own bed this year and try to catch the tail end of the paper tearing at about seven.

‘It’s a time for family,’ Gaby insists. ‘All of us. Besides, I know that money’s tight this year. Come to us. If this business does take off, you could well be a gibbering wreck by then.’

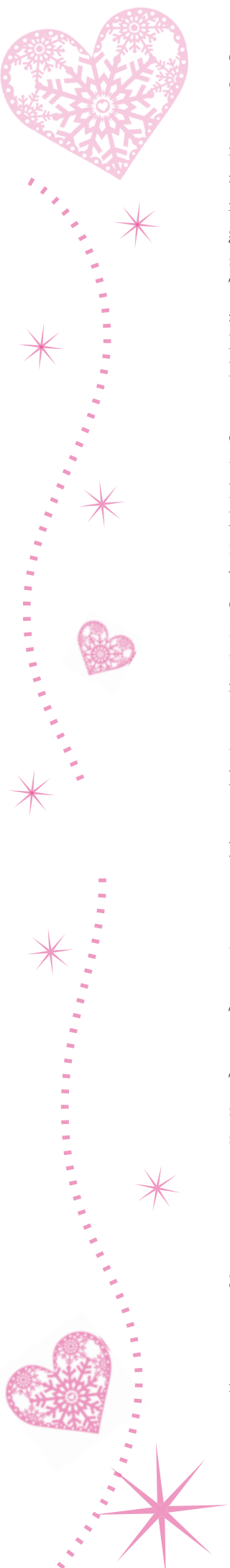
I look over at my sister as she’s checking on our cheese under the grill.

The question has to be asked and I dread it. ‘Is Mum coming?’

‘I’ll ask her. But you know what she’s like, Cassie.’ My sister smiles ruefully. ‘She’ll wait to see if she gets a better offer.’

Mum had us both when she was still a teenager and maybe that was part of the problem. Being a mother when you’re still a child yourself is never going to be easy, is it? I think her family must have ostracised her as there never seemed to be any aunties around and I’ve never met my own grandma. It’s another subject that’s taboo.

Mum’s only seventeen years older than Gaby and is, therefore, not your typical granny. She’s in her mid-fifties now and wears her clothes too tight, still drinks too much, smokes and has inappropriate boyfriends. Lots of them. If one of her men offers to take her to Spain for the holiday, she’s on a plane quicker than you can say easyJet. If, on the other hand, all of her boyfriends are with their wives, then she’ll be here complaining loudly about her lot and how little she sees of us. I wish she’d take up knitting and sip sherry instead of knocking back vodka shots, and realise, late in life, that she should have been there for us more. But she



does none of these things. I know that she's my mother but, most of the time, I could joyfully choke her. My sister has a lot more patience with her than I do.

Gaby is still the first person I'd turn to for advice. We're a lot alike and neither of us is remotely like our mum, so I'm assuming that we took our genes from our dad. My sister is also curvy. Her hair is long and dark, currently dyed borderline black as she started going grey in her late teens. I'm not surprised with all that rested on her shoulders. Thankfully, she struck gold when it came to men and she's married to a lovely guy, Ryan Healy. He's cut from the same cloth as Jim and is as steady as the day is long. Ryan works as a train driver for Virgin Trains on the main line into Euston and his family is his life. He's got a sunny, affable nature and makes my sister laugh a lot. They've got two lovely children, George who's seven and Molly, five. The same sort of age that Gaby and I were when Dad left. I can no more imagine Ryan walking out on his kids than I can see him on stage with Lady Gaga.

My sister, in spite of our flaky upbringing – or because of it – could write a handbook on perfect parenting. She does everything for her children. I love my niece and nephew more than life itself. They are the children I've never had and I see them nearly every day. When I don't, I miss them dearly. My sister's house is a small, terraced place just off the green in Leverstock Green. She's terribly house-proud and has done it out fashionably with that big-flowered wallpaper that's so popular now in shades of brown and duck-egg blue. They both work hard to keep it nice. Their lawn might be the size of a postage stamp, but Ryan mows it every weekend and the garden's always full of colourful flowers. The dentist that Gaby works for is just round the corner at the parade of shops. It's a job that she enjoys but which doesn't take her away too much from her family, who are her total priority. She has all that I want for myself.

Gaby puts my cheese on toast down in front of me. 'You're a star,' I say. 'Thanks.' She takes the stool next to me and I root in my handbag to find my printout. I push it across to her. 'Calling Mrs Christmas!'

'Wow,' she says between mouthfuls. 'Like the name.' She scans my list of services. 'Can you really do all this?'

'Not yet,' I confess. 'But I'm a fast learner.'

'It looks like great fun. I know a few people who'd book you to do stuff. I bet you're going to be busy.'

'I hope so.' Then I turn to her. Suddenly, my euphoria deserts me. 'I'm frightened, Gaby. This is the first time I've ever had a business idea. What if it doesn't work?'

'Nothing lost,' Gaby assures me. 'The only loss would be if you didn't bother to try it. This is a great idea and, for most things, you can ask for payment in advance. For a lot of the services you're offering there'll be only a small layout and if you ask for a deposit, that would secure most things.'

'Excellent idea.' I find a pen in my bag and write 'Deposit!' at the bottom of my list.

'What does Jim think?'

'You know what Jim's like. He thinks that anything I want to do is just fine. He's Mr Supportive.'

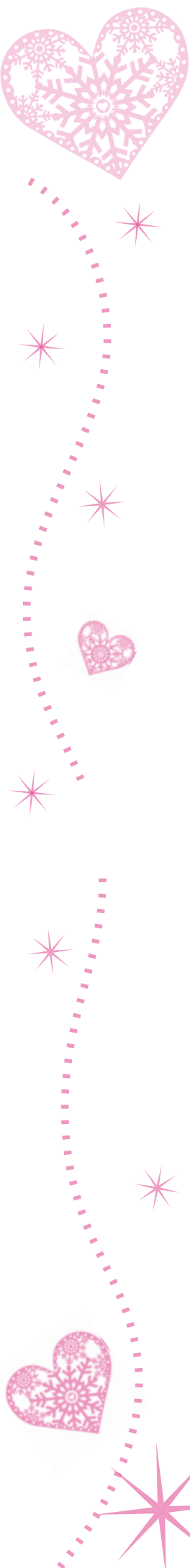
'You've got a good one there.'

'I know it.' Then I feel a pinch of melancholy nip at me. 'I hope that I do make some money at this. I'd love for us to get married next year.'

'You could just pop down to the register office and get married next week.'

'Jim keeps saying that.'

'Maybe he's right.'



‘I’ve nothing against Hemel Register Office, but I’ve always dreamed of having a lovely wedding, Gaby. You know that.’ We used to lie in our bunk beds at night, talking about it often enough. ‘I don’t want a big marquee and a meringue dress, but I do want it to be something that I’ll remember for ever.’ Cue video of white sand, sunset, sparkling sea, Jim and me hand in hand. ‘Before I have children I want to be married and have our own home.’

Unlike Mum, is the unspoken tag. I didn’t find out until I was in my twenties that Mum and Dad were never married. Gaby and I had Mum’s surname – Smith. I can’t even remember my own father’s surname. That’s not unusual these days, I guess, but there’s part of me that doesn’t want that for my own family. He went and left us with nothing. As Mum was regularly late with the rent, there was the constant threat that we might lose our home. Even at the age of ten I understood that it was a bad thing. Gaby was the one who was pushed forward to explain to the landlord why we couldn’t pay while Mum ran down the back alley to hide in a neighbour’s house until he’d gone. It makes me go cold to remember it.

‘I need to be secure.’

‘You are secure, Cassie. You have a man who would do anything for you.’

‘But we’re always struggling for money. We have nothing behind us.’ Jim does a fantastic job. A worthy job. The problem is that worthy is never going to make us rich. ‘I don’t want to be like that.’

‘I have to work,’ Gaby points out. ‘We weren’t born with a silver spoon in our mouths, sweetheart. We have to get out there and earn it. It’s not the end of the world. At times it feels as if Ryan and I are trying to keep a dozen different balls in the air, but somehow we manage. You should stop over-analysing it. Just get on and do it.’

‘I know.’ My eyes fill with tears. ‘I’m thirty-five, Gabs. My ovaries are on a slippery slope. I do want children. A matching pair, preferably. I’m running out of time.’

‘It’ll happen. You’ll see.’

I don’t like to remind my sister that I’ve had numerous ‘accidents’ in the contraception department and times when we’ve briefly thrown caution to the wind despite our rickety finances – none of which has led to the patter of baby feet. It took Gaby an age to get pregnant the first time. What if I’m the same? I never wanted to be a teen mum. Even the thought of it utterly terrified me, so I kept my legs firmly crossed for years. Now, ironically, my worry is that I don’t want to be an old mum.

‘What if I can’t afford to give my kids the little luxuries in life? What if I do have a baby now and then can’t get back into the world of work? I don’t want to be the sort of mum who gives her kids cereal for dinner.’

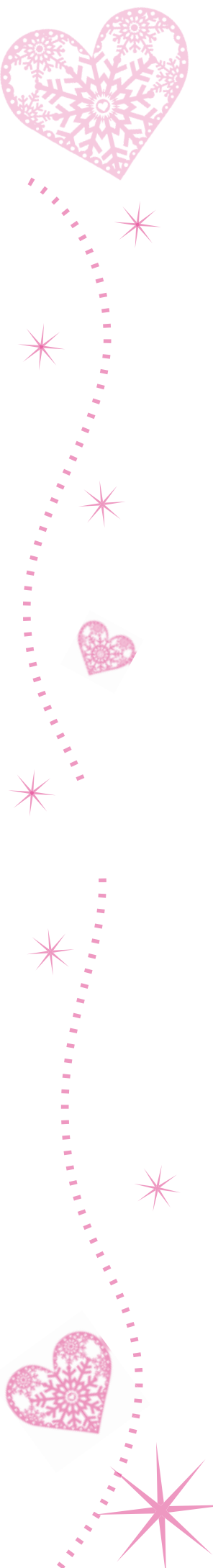
‘You wouldn’t do that,’ Gaby says softly. Again the unspoken sentence is that our mum did. Sometimes, when her pleas for Mum to replenish our empty cupboards fell on deaf ears, Gaby used to steal money from her purse so that we could sneak to the local Co-op and buy food. We never mention that now either. ‘You’ve got to move on, Cassie. You and Mum are totally different people. Besides, do you think I’d ever let that happen to you?’

‘No.’ I shake my head. Even though I’ve just eaten, my stomach growls as I think of the nights that Gaby and I went to bed hungry.

My sister puts her arm around my shoulders. ‘Let’s hope you make a flipping fortune, then, and can have that Caribbean island wedding that you so want. I’d better start saving up for a hat.’

‘I’m at the point where I probably would be happy just to go to the local register office. Should I do that?’ I sound despondent even saying it.

She hugs me. ‘Don’t give up too easily. If this idea flies, that dream could come true sooner than you think.’



I push my plate aside and get up from the table. ‘I’d better get a move on with my grand plan then.’

‘When you print those brochures, do a leaflet too and I’ll stick it up in the reception at work.’

‘Thanks. I’m going to go straight home and crack on this afternoon.’

My sister pinches my cheek affectionately. ‘Stick at it, kid. I have every faith in you. You’re the most organised person on the planet. If you put your mind to it, you’ll get there.’

I can only hope that she’s right.

Chapter 5

When Jim comes home the flat is a complete disaster zone. I’ve been baking. My first ever batch of Christmas cupcakes is sitting proudly on the work surface. They look fantastic – even though I say so myself. All those hours of sitting watching daytime television while I’ve been unemployed haven’t been entirely wasted. Without realising, I’ve obviously been unconsciously improving my baking skills by absorbing a surfeit of cooking programmes through the ether. *The Hairy Bikers*, *Baking Made Easy* and *The Great British Bake-off* have clearly left their mark on me. I wonder whether I have also now subconsciously become a whizz with antiques or could renovate a dilapidated property with my eyes closed.

My solo bake-off hasn’t been entirely without incident, though. There was much swearing as I tried to wrestle Gaby’s Wilton Mr Whippy nozzle into submission for the buttercream icing. These cakes haven’t so much been made by love as born of frustration and grim determination. Plus I had to run backwards and forwards to and from the computer, watching clips of tuition on YouTube. Thank the Lord and all that is holy for the internet! How did people ever manage without it?

Jim stands there looking dazed. ‘Oh my goodness me.’

I did drop a bag of icing sugar too and it’s still liberally scattered over the floor. I’d forgotten the finer points of cake making and also lifted the electric beaters out of the batter before I’d turned the mixer off. There is cake mix up the walls and tiles. Buttery fingerprints make a trail across my cupboards. It feels as if there’s a festive snowstorm of flour in my hair.

In the bag of goodies that my sister rustled up for me, there was also sugar paste and several different shades of food colouring. I’d forgotten that Gaby is the kind of mum who knocks together some sort of novelty birthday cake for each of her children and, therefore, has a lot more wherewithal and equipment than I do.

Following Connie Rosenblatt from Boise, Idaho, I’ve learned how to make a fondant sugar paste figure of Santa and a snowman. My reindeer was a bit of a disaster, so I ate him. And my Santa looks more than a little tipsy. His head is so heavy that it’s slowly sinking into his neck. But I will know better next time. I’ve also made little cone-shaped Christmas trees studded with silver dragées to decorate my cakes and I’m quite pleased with how they’ve turned out. Not bad at all for my initial efforts. I’ll need to acquaint myself with the local cookshop and stock up on sprinkles and the like. Though I have actually no idea what ‘the like’ might be.

The red colour from my Santa, however, is daubed liberally throughout the flat and has dyed my hands a lovely shade of scarlet. Very festive. It does look, ever so slightly, as if there’s been a murder in here.

Jim is quite clearly horrified. Due to my having a lot of time on my hands, the flat is normally as shiny as a new pin. ‘You’ve been very, er . . . enthusiastic.’

‘Thought I’d better get started. Gaby gave me a load of baking stuff.’ Despite the mess, the flat smells all homely, filled with the scents of baking. I’m glad I’ve done it. I feel as if I’m



on my way.

‘Good.’ He sounds as if he’s not sure if it is good.

‘Cupcake?’ I offer him my wares.

‘Later,’ he says. ‘Although they do look delicious. And very tempting. Don’t want to spoil my appetite. What’s for dinner?’

‘Ah.’ In my flour frenzy I have singularly failed to remember to make anything for us to eat tonight.

‘No dinner?’

‘I didn’t realise the time.’ Jim just grins at me. ‘I’m glad to see that you were so absorbed.’ He comes and winds his arms round my waist.

‘You’ll get covered in flour.’

‘See if I care. What say we go a little crazy and get a takeaway? We could see what old films we’ve got on DVD and snuggle down on the sofa.’

‘I love the sound of the takeaway and the snuggling, but I’m going to learn calligraphy tonight.’

‘You are?’ He looks a bit wide-eyed at that.

‘No time to lose. Gaby also gave me a bag of calligraphy pens that she had lying in the back of her wardrobe. She said they were Mum’s.’

‘I can’t imagine your mother having the patience to sit and do ornate writing.’

‘Me neither,’ I agree. ‘Maybe the tutor was her fancy man.’ It is the only possible reason why my mother would buy calligraphy pens and attend classes. But buy them she did and now they’re in my hot little hands. ‘Phone up for a takeaway and then have your shower while I clear up this little lot. After we’ve eaten, we could try to do calligraphy together.’

‘Really?’ Jim doesn’t look enthralled by this. ‘The couple who write together, stay together?’

‘It could be fun.’

He looks as if he thinks that slumping on the sofa in a post-Chinese coma might be more fun.

‘If the business takes off, then I might need you to lend a hand.’

‘You’ve really thought this through, haven’t you?’

‘I’ve been working on it all day.’ Then I chew my lip anxiously. ‘This is a big risk, Jim. I’ve never had the courage to do anything like this before. I think I always stayed in a job that was well within my comfort zone because I’ve liked the security. This is all down to me.’

‘Not such a risk,’ he counters. ‘You gave everything to your last company only to have the rug pulled from under you. How can this be worse? At least this *will* be down to you. Until you try, you won’t know what you’ll be able to achieve. And you couldn’t have come up with anything better. This business will use all your fabulous organisational skills and Christmas is right up your street.’


‘I know. One minute I have a really good feeling about it and the next I’m full of jitters.’

‘That’s only natural.’ He pulls me in close and I rest my head on his chest. ‘I’m proud of you.’

‘I haven’t done anything yet.’

‘You will. The fact is you’ve got your mojo back. That’s all that matters to me. You rock my world, Cassie Smith.’

‘And you keep mine steady.’



He rubs his hands together. ‘Now, what are we going to have from the Kam ‘Tong? Shall we have exactly the same thing we have every single time we order or shall we go off piste?’

‘Same as usual.’

If I’m having such a radical change in my career direction, I’m not sure I could handle a change in our choice of Chinese food too. My stomach flutters at the thought of what I’m embarking on. Baby steps, I think. Baby steps.