

Extract from “The Christmas Party”

Chapter 1

‘You need to have eyes in the back of your head with that one, Louise Young. You mark my words.’ Karen from Customer Accounts gives me a meaningful look and inclines her head towards my dear boss’s office. ‘There was a scandal involving his last personal assistant, you know?’

I didn’t.

She leans forward and checks that no one’s listening. Quite unlikely when there are only the two of us here.

‘There was talk all over the office about *an affair*.’ The last bit is whispered, feigning discretion while she clearly relishes sharing the gossip. ‘She was a nice girl too. By all accounts.’

I’m sure she was.

‘Everyone called her Knicker-Dropper Debbie after what happened.’

‘Wow.’

‘Oh, yeah.’ Karen flicks the tinsel she’s wearing as a feather boa and examines her nails. Her reputation as the office oracle is a source of great pride to her. I only met her a few weeks ago, when she kindly helped me with a query about one of Tyler’s clients, but I already feel as if she’s been a good friend to me. She’s been showing me the ropes at Fossil Oil and I’m glad of her insights. There’s nothing she doesn’t know.

So I’m also hoping that Karen is my best bet in relieving my current plight. It’s fair to say that I’m experiencing certain difficulties at Fossil Oil, and up to now I’ve been trying to handle them by myself, but I can’t hold it in any longer. Anyway, I’ve finally taken my courage in both hands and spilled the beans, confiding my woes to Karen. She doesn’t look surprised at all, which worries me even more.

Deep breath. Here goes. I hate to admit it but my boss, Tyler Benson, takes every opportunity to touch, grope or brush against me. I’ve never encountered anything like this before and I’m at a loss. I just don’t know how to deal with it. He’s my boss, my senior here. I should be looking up to him, learning from him. He should be mentoring me, teaching me. I shouldn’t spend my days running round my desk to keep away from him like I’m in a Benny Hill comedy. It’s got to stop and I’m hoping that Karen, as she clearly knows the score here at Fossil Oil, might have some bright ideas.

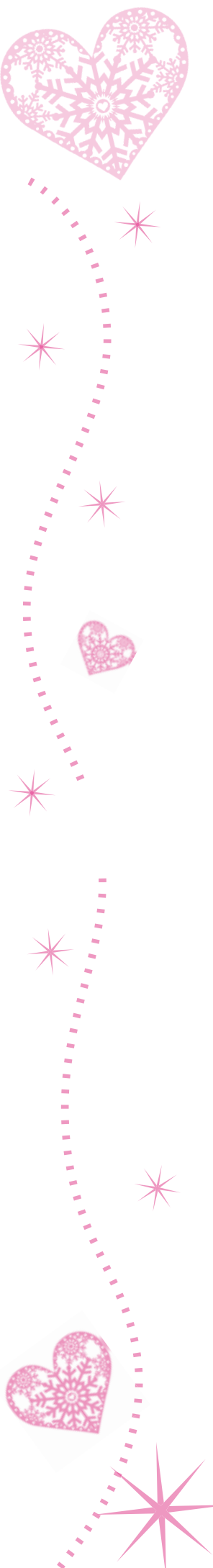
Besides, who else can I tell? I’m the new girl and I don’t feel I can go running straight to Human Resources the minute something goes wrong. What would that look like? They might think I’m too weak to manage my job. I’m a responsible grown-up and have to show that I can stand up to Tyler and sort this out myself. But, believe me, I think I’ve done all I can to communicate to him that I’d rather he kept his distance and didn’t paw me. However, it seems to be like water off a duck’s back to Tyler. Which is tricky, because on the one hand I love my new job and really need to maintain a good relationship with him. But on the other hand I don’t want things to carry on like this.

‘You need to tread carefully with Tyler,’ Karen warns. ‘He’s such a slimy toad, everyone knows that, yet he can do no wrong in this place.’

‘Why?’

‘Brilliant salesman. That’s all this company is bothered about.’ Karen deals with the tea she’s brought from the vending machine for us both, stirring this way and that with a plastic





spoon in a ponderous manner. ‘I can’t stand him, but you can’t deny that he knows how to play the corporate game.’

I think I realised that on day one.

‘When it all blew up, poor Debbie was the one who was squeezed out, not Golden Balls.’ Tea dispensed, Karen continues to play with her tinsel adornment. ‘You don’t want that.’

I most certainly don’t.

Karen and I had a tea-break date to meet up in the staff canteen but at my request she’s come to my office instead. If I don’t use this short time to put up some Christmas decorations in here, there won’t be any at all. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve and I need to get a move on or I’ll miss the boat completely. There are some fabulous, outsize baubles hanging in the main atrium of the building, but the rest of the place is bare. I’d hate it if I didn’t mark Christmas at all in my own office. How miserable would that be?

‘I don’t know why you’re bothering,’ Karen says, nodding towards my stash of decorations as I blow up yet another balloon.

I pinch the top closed and take a breather. ‘It’s Christmas. I want it to look pretty.’

Karen waves a hand at my decorations. ‘Christmas a-go-go.’

‘Likey?’

‘Lovey.’

‘They’re too good for this place.’ They’re actually mostly bits and bobs that I brought from home. Mum and Dad have boxes and boxes of the stuff in the loft, lovingly gathered over the years. They are the king and queen of Christmas junk and they didn’t mind me pinching a few bits to liven this place up. I think Mum was quite relieved that I was taking some of it off her hands. Our loft must be like the Tardis. She’s accumulated so much Christmas stuff over the years, there’s barely room for the humans once she gets it all out. Still, I have to say that they don’t look too bad at all.

‘It’ll be nice,’ I assure Karen.

My friend shrugs her indifference to my attempts to be festive. I’ve not been here at the Fossil Oil Corporation for very long – just a few months – and now Karen has taken me under her wing, and for that I’m very grateful. This is a massive, fastmoving, glamorous company and I so want to get everything right.

‘Tyler Benson is *far* too important for them to lose him, Louise. It’s the likes of us – the oppressed masses – who get the boot when things go pear-shaped.’

I sigh. ‘How very depressing.’

‘Better to keep your tits covered and your gob shut and hold him at arm’s length for as long as you possibly can. He might get bored and leave you alone.’

‘But he’ll only do it to someone else. It’s sexual harassment or something. He shouldn’t be allowed to get away with it.’

She shrugs again. ‘You can try to fight it if you want to, but don’t say I didn’t warn you when they’re handing you your P45.’

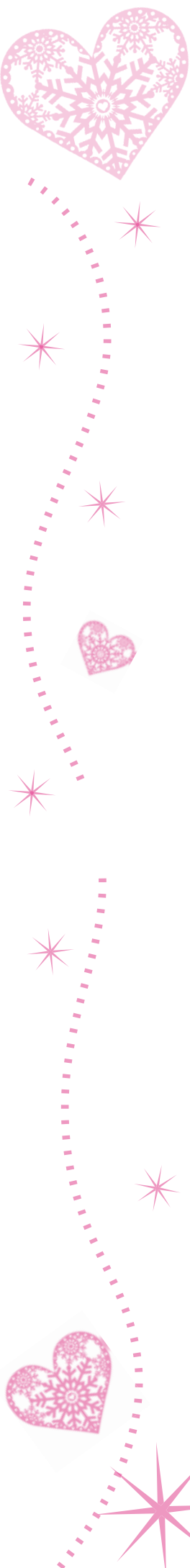
‘That’s something I can’t risk. This is the first decent job that I’ve had since Mia was born.’

‘She’s four now?’

I nod. ‘Not long before she’s five.’

Karen looks at the picture I have on my desk. ‘Pretty like her mum.’

Mia is a pretty girl, and I don’t think I’m saying that just because I’m her mum. She’s got my brown hair and deep blue eyes, my creamy colouring. A chip off the old block, but with a



sprinkle of extra cuteness. There's very little of her father in her, which I'm always thankful for. Mia is definitely her mother's daughter. My heart warms just to think of her and I miss her every minute of the day when I'm away from her. 'She started school in September, which freed me up to rush back to the big bad world of work.' And, by some divine miracle, I've bagged myself a really great job.

'What did you do before you had her?'

'I was behind the counter in a bank. Being a cashier wasn't the best job in the world. You've seen those uniforms. But I didn't mind it. The hours were OK, the pay all right, and there were even prospects for advancement. At least, there were when I started.'

'So why leave?'

'By the time I was due to return from maternity leave, my branch had been closed, and they wanted me to go over to Bedford, which would have meant travelling miles to work every day – a good hour each way in rush hour. With a new baby, I didn't think I could manage that.'

'Bummer.'

'Tell me about it.'

I've bought a pretty Christmas tree for the office, which stands on top of the low filing cabinet as if it were tailored for the space. It's the only thing I've splashed out on. It was cheap and cheerful in Home Bargains but it glows with different colours and there's a sweet star on the top. I bought one for Mia too, in pink, for her bedroom. I abandon the balloons for the moment and climb on to my desk to pin another pretty goldcoloured garland into the corner.

'I was struggling enough just trying to get through the day at home,' I tell Karen as I drive my drawing pin home, hoping it holds. 'I had no idea how much work a baby was until I had Mia.' I smile at my own naïvety.

'Why do you think I haven't got any kids?' Karen shudders at the thought.

'The bank couldn't – or wouldn't – offer me part-time hours either, which, apart from the inevitable drop in money, might have helped a bit.'

If I'm honest, my life was a total mess then. Looking back, I think I had a touch of the baby blues, but you never really want to acknowledge that, do you? So I was trying to soldier on when I just felt exhausted and overwhelmed by it all.

I jump down, cross the office trailing the garland in my wake and, using a chair as a ladder, fix it diagonally across the ceiling. Maybe I should have got my mum to come in for an hour after work to do this. That would have been a plan. She'd have been in her element and I'd love to show off my posh office to her. She's been so supportive while I've been out of work and I want to make her proud of me. I want her to see that I'm getting my act back together.

'Was there a Mr Young on the scene?' Karen asks. 'Couldn't he have helped?'

'Mia was a good baby, but Steve and I were going through a really difficult time. We'd never had the easiest of relationships, and after Mia was born he just got worse and worse.' I shrug, as if the pain isn't still there when I talk about this. 'Mum and Dad were trying to help, but they were having to tiptoe round Steve too as he didn't like them in our house too much. He said that they invaded our privacy. They fuss, my parents, but they have hearts of gold. Steve could never see that side of them: they just irritated him beyond belief.'

'Sounds like a twat.'

'Yeah.' I can't disagree with her succinct assessment. I still wonder now what I saw in him. He was a bad boy and I should have run a mile in the opposite direction when we first met.

To shift the image, I turn my attention back to the balloons, tying them into bunches with elastic bands. I'd like to say that there's some sort of colour scheme, but there isn't. This is a party pack of assorted colours, so I'm having to take pot luck and lump it. Besides, when it



comes to Christmas, colour coordination is vastly overrated.

‘With all that going on, I really don’t know if I could have coped with the stresses and strains of modern-day banking anyway,’ I confess. My confidence in myself was at an all-time low. If anyone had snapped at me, there would have been tears. ‘There are hardly any front-line staff left now, just rows of cash machines and lots of grumpy customers who, quite rightly, complain that there aren’t any staff. I didn’t have the strength to face going back to that, so I gave in my notice, hoping I’d find another job quickly. Turns out I was way too optimistic. I hadn’t bargained on how hard the recession had made it to move around in the job market.’

‘It’s tough out there,’ Karen agrees. ‘My sister’s been out of work for ages, and she went to university and everything.’

That’s another reason why I feel so lucky to have got this position. How many kids have gone through university, only to find themselves doing menial jobs on minimum wage? Or, worse, not employed at all.

‘So where’s Mia’s dad now? I assume you’re not together any more.’

Shaking my head, I pin the balloons so that they blossom out from the corners. ‘He walked out on me and Mia while all that was going on and we haven’t seen hide nor hair of him since. Last I heard, he was running a bar in Spain, ducking and diving, which would suit Steve down to the ground.’

Good riddance too. He was so controlling that, when he went, it was the first time in years that I felt I could breathe freely without asking anyone’s permission.

‘You could give me a hand instead of sitting there on your bum,’ I say to Karen.

‘Nah. Christmas is not my bag. Can’t stand it. You’re making a great job of it. Knock yourself out.’

The only problem – and it was quite a major one – was that he stopped paying his half of the mortgage on our tiny house the day he left.

My debts, of course, started racking up instantly. I wasn’t working and was struggling to get another job. Spending all day at home alone with Mia had me slowly tearing my hair out. I tried to manage on my own but it was just so hard. When I contacted the mortgage company to tell them of my situation, they foreclosed on the loan and I had no option but to sell the house.

It went for less than Steve and I had paid for it, so I was instantly in negative equity. Yet it still broke my heart to leave. It was just a tiny, terraced place with a garden the size of a handkerchief, but it was in a good area and it was home. My home. Mine and Mia’s. I kept it spick and span as I’ve inherited the house-proud gene from my mum.

‘We had to move back in with my mum and dad,’ I tell Karen. ‘That was the only downside.’

What could I do? There was no way I could downsize: there’s nowhere smaller to go than minuscule. To rent somewhere was even more expensive than the mortgage had been, so that was out of the question too. Eventually, and with much soulsearching, the only option was to go home to Mum and Dad. Thank goodness they were more than willing to take me in. Bless their hearts.

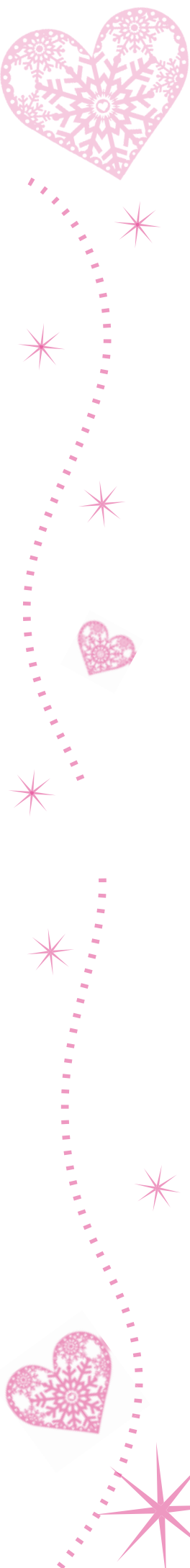
But Karen doesn’t need to know all this. Some things are better kept to myself.

‘If I had to live with my parents we’d all kill each other within a week,’ she chips in.

‘To be honest, it was such a relief. Mum and Dad swept in and looked after us both, as I knew they would.’

‘They sound great.’

‘They are.’ Throughout my life, they’ve just taken everything I throw at them with stoic



supportiveness. ‘Mum looked after Mia and I got a job in Boots, mainly stacking shelves. It wasn’t great, but it brought some money in.’ Not enough to pay off the twenty grand I still owe on the house though. At least my sanity slowly returned. With my parents helping me, I got back on my feet and my confidence started to come back too. ‘That was fine for a while. I was doing a job that wasn’t very demanding and I could concentrate on giving Mia a good start. With my mum and dad’s financial support, I could spend more time with her, but I couldn’t rely on them for ever. It wasn’t fair.’

To be honest, they’ve never uttered a word of complaint. But I got to a point where I began to believe that I had so much more to offer the world than making sure its favourite brand of toothpaste was always to hand. Not that there’s anything wrong with that. I just wanted to find something with a bit of a challenge and with more opportunities to progress.

‘So now Mia’s at school all day and it’s time for you to strike out again,’ Karen says.

‘Yeah. Just because I’m a single mum, it doesn’t mean I’m on the scrapheap. I’ve got so much to offer, and doing it for my daughter has given me the drive I need. I’d love to have the cash to buy Mia little treats and make her proud of me.’

I want to turn my life around. I want to be someone who’s going places. I want to pay off all of my debts. I want to make sure I’ve got a good, steady income and our own home.

Standing back, I admire my handiwork. ‘Do you think I’ve put enough up?’

‘Depends what you’re aiming for. You passed the bounds of good taste with those balloons, but you’ve not yet achieved Santa’s-grotto level.’

‘Then we need more.’ I delve into Mum’s boxes. A trio of white glittery reindeer statues that we bought together in Next a few years ago. Perfect.

That’s why I feel so very fortunate to have landed this position at Fossil Oil after such a long gap. Despite my parents’ assurances that any company would be lucky to have me, I’d been bruised by too many rejections and was terrified that my skills were just too rusty. Yet, despite my worst fears and insecurities, this time round I got a job quite quickly.

‘I only had five other interviews before I landed this job.’

‘Result!’

‘It’s been a steep learning curve, but I feel I’m holding my own here.’

‘Everyone likes you,’ Karen says.

Which is nice to hear.

‘The money’s good, the job’s fantastic. I’ve no complaints on that score . . .’

‘The only problem is that Tyler is very free with his hands and his smutty comments,’ she concludes.

‘Yes.’ I hug the biggest reindeer to me. ‘Now I’ve been given this chance, I want to really make something of myself.’ The last few years have been hell. Absolute hell. If it wasn’t for the love of my mum and dad and my darling daughter, I don’t know how I’d have survived.

It’s not been easy though. Who wants to go home to their parents at the age of twenty-nine, a single mum with a daughter in tow? They’ve been great though. The best. They’ve never once been judgemental about my poor choice of partner or the debts that are haunting me. And they’re the most perfect grandparents anyone could have. They’ve done nothing but lavish love on Mia. She, in turn, absolutely adores them. I know I’m lucky – incredibly lucky – to have their love and support. But there’s no escaping the fact that I’m back in the room I last inhabited when I was eighteen.

That’s why there’s no way on God’s earth I’m going to let some jumped-up little toad like Tyler Benson spoil it for me.



Chapter 2

The Fossil Oil offices are fabulous, befitting a company with money pouring out of its ears. When I first started working here, I felt intimidated just walking through the doors. The central glass-walled atrium is enough to take your breath away. It towers right the way through the building and there's a bit in the middle that's filled with an profusion of exotic plants. Splodgy artwork abounds – though most of it looks as if it has been daubed by Mia. There's a lovely coffee shop in reception just for employees, and glass elevators whisk you up to the offices. Mine's on the third floor, with a fab view over the cityscape of Milton Keynes. It's wonderful. There's a white desk and lime-green filing cabinets and I have it all to myself.

Yet, in truth I'd rather be out in the department with everyone else, where they have open-plan cubicles. Then Tyler Benson would have less opportunity to touch me up.

'Is all this festive bling getting you in the mood for the Christmas party tonight?' Karen asks, eyeing the reindeers suspiciously.

'Yes. Deffo.'

Despite her disdainful glance, I deploy the trio of reindeers in a line along the windowsill and then look out over the city. The vast expanse of sky is heavy with the threat of snow. I wonder, will we have a white Christmas this year? Mia would love it. Last time there was really heavy snow at Christmas she was too small to enjoy it. This year we could be out there building snowmen together. No doubt her indulgent grandad will buy her a little pink plastic sledge – I've seen him eyeing them up in Homebase for weeks. It's sad really, as that should be a job for her own dad; he has no idea what he's missing out on by not having his child in his life.

The offices are stark, though, very minimalist, and didn't feel very Christmassy. I do like to get a bit festive. I'm all for Christmas, despite the extra expense, which everyone could do without. It's even more lovely now that I do it all for Mia to make it special for her. My mum and dad used to go all out for me and my brother at Christmas and I've sort of carried on the tradition.

'I've never been to a posh do like this before,' I confide to Karen. The Christmas party is being held at Wadestone Manor. I had a quick Google of it a few days ago and the place looks amazing. A big stately home in the middle of nowhere. 'I'm not sure what to expect.'

'The party's usually OK. A bit boring. All the top bosses rock up so everyone has to mind their manners. Hopefully they'll all go home early and we can let our hair down. It livens it up if you can cop off with someone in another department,' Karen continues, even though I've only got half an ear on her chatter. 'There's no way I'm going home on my own tonight.'

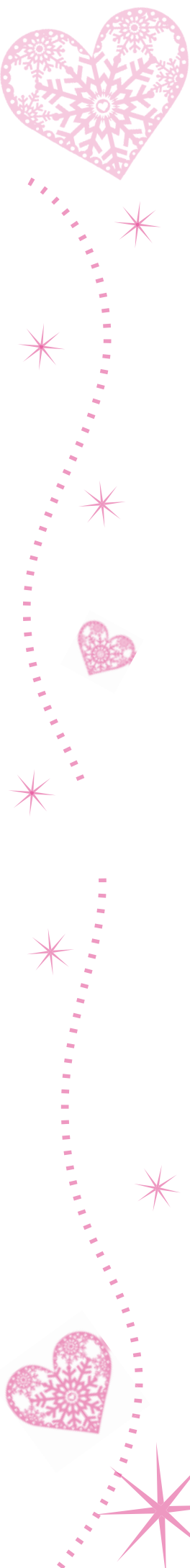
I roll my eyes at her.

'This year should be a bit better. We've all been nice little employees and made them lots of money so they're putting on a big show for us. There's a free bar too. Yay! It'll make a change getting something back for once.' Karen claps her hands together excitedly. 'Look, I've had my nails done.' She holds them out for me to admire. 'I'm having my hair done later and I've got a new dress. It's very A-list. I wouldn't look out of place on a red carpet.'

'I haven't got a new dress.' My old faithful LBD will be pulled out of the cupboard and pressed into service once more. 'I'm having my hair done though.' A rare treat.

'You should get an up-do,' she advises, piling her own mass of blonde hair on to her head and striking a pose. 'Sexy.'

I'm not sure that 'sexy' is the look I'm going for. 'Moderately attractive yet definitely unavailable' is my goal, and I hope my hairdresser can do something with me. It might be an ask too far. The last time I bought conditioner it was from Poundland, and I can't even remember when it ran out. Consequently I have the hair of Kate Middleton but without the gloss, bounce or insanely expensive celebrity cut.



‘I could give you the name of the woman who does my nails,’ Karen offers. ‘She’s a wonder. She might be able to squeeze you in later.’

I shake my head. ‘Can’t afford it.’

There’s no way I’d ever tell Karen the truth about the parlous state of my bank account. That’s my problem and mine alone. The nearest I’m going to get to a manicure is, if I’ve got five minutes to spare later, I’ll see if I can squeeze a bit out of one of the half-dozen used bottles of nail polish that are tucked away at the back of my drawer, supposedly out of Mia’s reach. Though I did recently come home to find Gramps sporting neon-pink nails and I’m sure it wasn’t because he has a secret side to him and likes to be called Geraldine at weekends. It had Mia’s stamp all over it.

To me, the office still seems under-garlanded and so I pull two more out of the box. Perhaps I should put some decorations in Tyler’s office as a sign of peace, but then I think he might take it as a sign of something else and decide against it. If anyone could misconstrue festive decorations as foreplay then it would be Tyler Benson. These concertina garlands are taking a bit of untangling and I suspect that’s because they’ve been in the loft since I was in nappies. Maybe longer. But vintage is the new contemporary, right?

Karen doesn’t seem to mind that I’m slightly distracted by my task and finally abandons her chair to stand and hand me drawing pins. I’ve obviously guilted her into being festive.

‘I got off with Kelvin Smith from Business Management last year,’ she says. ‘We had a high old time. Shagged me ragged for weeks. It was bliss. And, then, well . . .’ She twiddles her hair in her fingers. ‘You know what it’s like.’

I tut my sympathy, even though I haven’t a clue what it’s like. I can’t remember the last time I was shagged ragged – or even dated anyone for more than a couple of nights. I’ve been resolutely celibate since Steve left.

I stretch up to pin my second tranche of garlands, on tiptoe on my desk. I want them criss-crossing the office, dipping nearly to head height in the middle. To make sure it exceeds all bounds of good taste, I add even more balloons. I must try to get a bit fitter. Clearly, running round after a four-year-old doesn’t count as cardiovascular exercise as I’d hoped. I’m out of breath after blowing up a dozen of these babies. They look nice though.

‘Retro tat’ is Karen’s considered verdict.

‘I don’t think you can be too tacky when it comes to Christmas decorations.’

Karen grimaces. ‘If you say so.’

I stand back on my desk, pleased as Punch with my handiwork. Now it’s starting to look a lot like Christmas. I wonder if Tyler would object to me playing a few Christmas songs in the office.

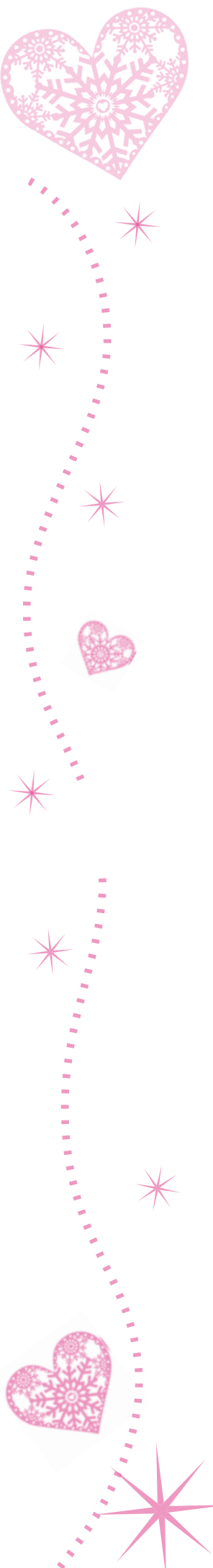
Then the man himself, my octopus boss Mr Tyler Benson, sales director of Fossil Oil, sweeps into the office and I feel myself automatically tense.

‘Good Christ!’ he exclaims. ‘What’s all this crap? Anyone would think it was Christmas.’

He’s a good-looking man, there’s no denying it. He’s in his early forties, I’d say. Always immaculately groomed. I bet his watch cost more than I earn in six months. He’s got closely cropped hair, which may be an attempt to disguise a burgeoning bald spot, and I suspect he really, really hates the sprinkling of grey that graces his temples. His eyes are steely grey like polished pewter and, try as I might, I can see no warmth in them. They are the eyes of a ruthless go-getter, a shark. Eyes that say ‘No one will stand in my way.’

‘Still, nice view,’ he quips and I can see him trying to get a sneaky look up my skirt.

I’ve taken to dressing like a frump since I’ve been working here. I’m usually all polo-neck jumpers and loose-fitting trousers, and I’m already regretting my choice of a skirt today. Any



clothes that are remotely tight-fitting seem to push Tyler into overdrive. I wore a blouse once that showed a modicum of cleavage – we’re not talking Holly Willoughby here, just a smidge – but he drooled over me all day. I couldn’t wait to get home and change. Anything that has a hint of lace, even black tights, ankle boots – all of these things start Tyler dribbling. I’m learning fast. I used to have a maths teacher at school who’d go round all the girls, furtively stroking their backs as he pretended to help with a tricky bit of Pythagoras’ Theorem while surreptitiously trying to see who was wearing a bra and who wasn’t. I think it’s scarred me for life. And Tyler Benson just reminds me of him.

One day I’d like to come into work in a bustier, leather miniskirt, fishnet stockings and dominatrix stilettos. I think Tyler would spontaneously self-combust, and that would be an end to that. All I’d have to do was scrape the goo that remained of him from his desk and continue life gloriously ungropped.

Wherever I go, he seems to be right behind me, trying to cop a feel. It’s as tedious as it is intimidating. I spent too many years living with a control freak to let the same thing happen to me at work. Yet here I am, dressing not to please myself but to try to avoid Tyler’s roving eye. Today’s skirt is sensible tweed and down to my knee, but that doesn’t stop my boss from ogling.

I pull it down, embarrassed. He gives me a wink before turning to my colleague. ‘Hello, Karen. Chatting again? Haven’t you got any work to do?’

‘I’m discussing future strategy for outstanding accounts with Louise,’ she counters effortlessly, and I wish I could be so crisp with Tyler.

‘Looks like it,’ he says as he heads to his own office.

‘Tosser,’ Karen mouths and holds up her middle finger to his retreating back.

‘You’ve got Josh Wallace coming to see you,’ I say after him. But his door slams shut.

Karen and I both roll our eyes. I bury myself in decorations again. Would one of my mum’s singing Santas be too much?

‘He married Linda from Lubricants in September.’ Karen gives a wistful little puff of breath.

‘Josh Wallace?’

‘Nooo,’ she says, now annoyed by my lack of attention. ‘Keep up, Louise. Kelvin Smith.’ Karen brushes the end of her tinsel boa across her lips. ‘Mind you, I’ve got my eye on bigger fish. I don’t mind telling you, I wouldn’t say no to Josh Wallace. He’d better watch himself.’

Josh is Tyler’s right-hand man and, as Karen has informed me, one of Fossil Oil’s hottest men.

‘He’s definitely the blue-eyed boy of Fossil. He’s single, sexy and going places. Much like my good self.’ She polishes her nails on her tinsel. ‘If he stays in favour with Tyler – and that’s no mean feat – that man is destined for Great Things.’

And, at that very moment, the man we’re talking about arrives.

‘Hello, ladies,’ he says as he breezes in.

‘Josh.’ Karen flushes and smiles at him in a simpering manner. Her eyelashes go berserk, fluttering like a bat’s wings.

I can see why she finds him attractive. Of course I can – I might be celibate but I’m not blind. Josh Wallace has that rugged, rugby-player handsomeness. Big shoulders, bigger thighs. He looks sharp in his grey business suit and crisp white shirt, but that doesn’t disguise that underneath it he’s all muscle. His hair is fair and is swept back, curling slightly at his collar, totally against the grain of current fashion. His eyes are brown and warm and look compassionate. Certainly in comparison to Tyler Benson’s, anyway. He instantly gets extra



Brownie points for not trying to peer up my skirt.

‘The decorations look great,’ he says. ‘They should let you loose on the rest of the offices, Louise.’

‘Thanks.’ I give Karen an I-told-you-so look.

‘Hi,’ he says, turning to my friend. ‘How are you, Karen?’

She pouts slightly. ‘I’m lovely thanks, Josh. How are you?’

‘Good.’

I climb down from my desk and he turns his attention to me once more. ‘I’ve got a meeting with Tyler.’

‘I’ll let him know you’re here.’ I buzz Tyler and inform him.

Josh is always on the road and I haven’t really got to know him properly yet. There have been any number of brisk, businesslike phone calls, but we’ve never had the time to do anything more than exchange polite pleasantries in passing. In the couple of months I’ve been here, I’ve done little more than see him whisking in and out of a meeting, or dashing along a corridor. The man seems to be in perpetual motion. This is the first social event I’ll have been to, so I haven’t seen him at any of the other things that have been organised. To be honest, bowling isn’t my bag.

Sometimes, he pops his head round my office door just to say hello and he seems nice enough. Once, in my first week, he brought me a chocolate-chip muffin from the canteen. What’s not to love? We’ve never found time for a proper chat though. In contrast to my boss, I only hear good things about Josh Wallace.

Karen twiddles her hair again as she coyly asks him, ‘Are you going to the Christmas party then?’

‘Oh, yes.’ Josh claps his hands together. ‘Big night out. Wouldn’t miss it for the world.’

‘Perhaps we can find time to have a drink together?’ Karen suggests.

‘I’d like that,’ he says. ‘What about you, Louise? Up for a drink at the party?’

‘Yes,’ I shrug. ‘Why not?’

Then Tyler flings open his door and comes to slap his deputy on the back.

‘Good to see you, Josh,’ Tyler says, all beaming smiles and bonhomie. ‘Good to see you.’

Josh glances back at us as he’s ushered away. ‘See you later, ladies.’

‘Wow.’ Karen lowers her voice even though they’re both now safely closeted in Tyler’s office. ‘A drink with Josh Wallace on the cards, hey? I haven’t even left the building and reckon I’ve scored.’ She pulls her fist to her waist in a hammer motion. ‘Get in there, girl! Woo-hoo! He is so at the top of my Must Have list. I’ve had a *mega*-crush on him for yonks.’

I’ve already come to know that this means about two weeks in Karen’s fickle book of office flirtations.

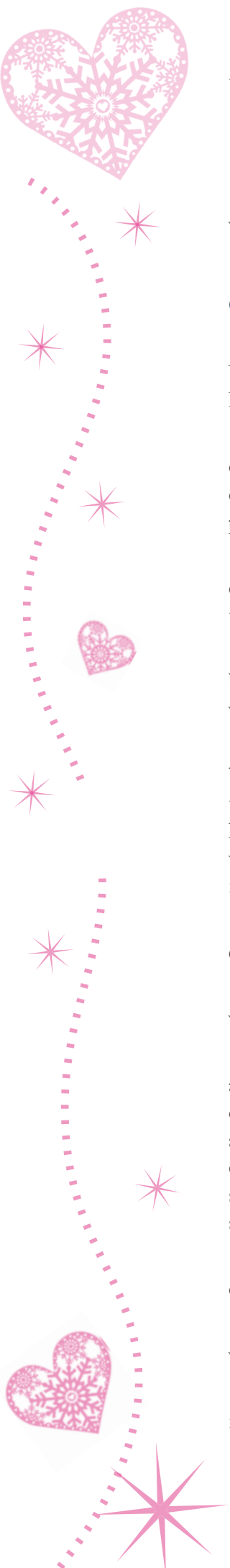
‘Fit or what?’ She fans herself theatrically. ‘I am so going to get me some of that at the Christmas party.’

I laugh. ‘Really?’

‘You just watch me.’

‘I don’t think I’d ever mix business with pleasure. You know what they say: “Don’t get your honey where you get your money.”’

She’s aghast. ‘What miserable bugger said that? There’s nothing better than a little work-based affair.’



‘What happens when it all goes horribly wrong?’ I caution. ‘You’ve got to face them in the office every day. Look what happened to Knicker-Dropper Debbie.’

‘She was playing *way* above her pay grade,’ Karen counters.

‘Don’t do anything too reckless.’

‘Reckless?’ Karen gives me a look. ‘Chance would be a fine thing. If I were a betting woman, I’d have a pound on tonight being as dull as ditchwater.’

Chapter 3

Kirsten was going to make an effort this year. A big effort. She swore it to herself. Again. Yet the truth was that she’d attended far too many of these functions to enjoy them any more. But for Tyler’s sake she’d do her wifely duty and put on a good show.

She always dreaded corporate functions now, and the office parties were the very worst of the worst. They were usually so stilted: the staff couldn’t relax as they felt they should be on their best behaviour with all the bosses around. She could only hope tonight’s Christmas party would be a bit more fun and would get her in the festive mood.

She hated Christmas. It never felt like a time of celebration. For her, it marked the end of another year of her life. A life that, no matter what she did, felt as if it no longer belonged to her.

Kirsten sat in front of her dressing-table mirror. Tonight, she’d pin on a smile and be bright and vivacious. It was something that used to come naturally to her, she thought, and she was determined to find that person again before she lost all sight of her.

She’d been at the salon for hours and as a result she was freshly highlighted in honey blonde and her glossy locks hung in loose curls to her shoulders. Her nails had been sculpted too. A whole day had slipped away, never to be seen again, just on making herself pretty. She hoped it was worth it. Perhaps even Tyler would notice. Though, in fairness to him, he’d been very solicitous in recent months. But that made her anxious too. There was usually a reason for Tyler being attentive to her. And it was never an edifying one.

Picking up her blusher brush, she flicked it over her high cheekbones with studied determination.

‘Are you nearly ready, darling?’ Tyler said as he came in from the adjoining bathroom. He was freshly showered and he rubbed at his damp hair.

She looked at his reflection in her mirror. The white towel, slung low on his hips, accentuated his toned stomach. Despite a surfeit of business lunches and functions like this over the years, he still kept himself in reasonably good shape. He spent hours at the gym. Or, at least, he told her that was where he was going. She did sometimes wonder. He certainly came home from his ‘workouts’ looking flushed in the face and pleased with himself, but sometimes he smelled just a little too fragrant. Not the wholesome scent of shower gel or soap, but a whisper of another woman’s perfume still clinging to him.

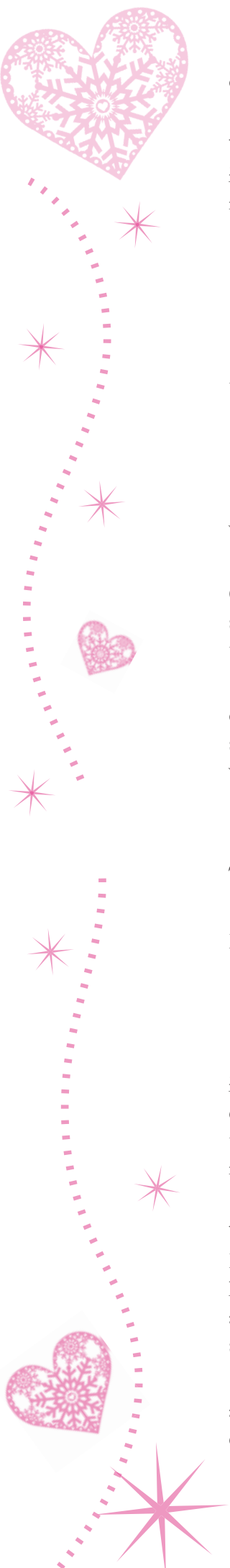
He planted a kiss on her shoulder. ‘It’s quite a drive to Wadestone Manor. We should be on the road soon.’

‘Yes, nearly there.’ Kirsten slipped in her diamond earrings. An anniversary present. Or was it birthday?

‘I do love a Christmas party.’ He rubbed his hands together with glee. Tyler was obviously feeling very jolly. ‘It’ll get us in the festive mood.’

‘I want this year to be different,’ Kirsten said.

‘Different?’



It probably wasn't the best time to raise this, but when was? They never talked to each other any more.

'You know how it is, Tyler. Because of the stupid way Fossil Oil works, we've never been able to put down roots anywhere. We have no friends, no social life. Which means that, invariably, on Christmas Day it's always just the two of us staring at each other over the dining-room table.'

'I like it quiet.'

'I get so bored. I want us to do things. Together.'

Her husband looked slightly worried by the prospect. 'Like what?'

You'd think after ten years he might know the things she liked. It seemed not. 'I'd like us to curl up in front of the fire, or go for a long walk in the snow.'

'How do you know it will snow?'

'If there is any. We can walk with or without snow. It's fun. Romantic.'

Despite years of her trying to persuade him otherwise, Tyler felt there was no point in a walk unless he was following a little white ball with a golf club in his hand.

She remembered a time – before Tyler – when those small pleasures had been hers. Country pubs, long walks through rustling autumn leaves, romance, contentment. All when she was young, wide-eyed, filled with optimism and spirit. And with no idea what life would throw at her.

'All we do is sit unspeaking, watching terrible television.' Late afternoon, Tyler normally cracked and shut himself away in the study for a few hours, leaving her to the terrible telly until she could no longer stand it. Normally, she couldn't wait for Christmas Day to end. 'I don't want you to work.'

'Last year was a one-off,' he insisted. 'We'd only just arrived back from Paris.'

Ah, yes. A six-month stint in Fossil Oil's French headquarters. Executive Development. They were big on that.

'Before this, in one year alone you've been posted to the USA, Greece, Belgium *and* France.'

'It's excellent experience,' Tyler reminded her.

'For you, perhaps,' she countered. 'Less so for me.'

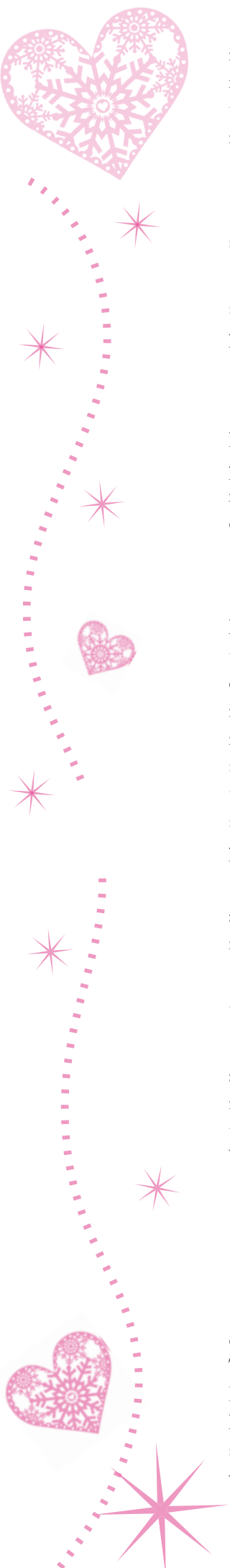
The Executive Development Programme was as exhausting as it was unnecessary, in Kirsten's opinion. Fossil Oil were well known for placing impossible demands on their employees, often relocating them at a moment's notice for no good reason other than the fact that they could. Even families with schoolage kids were dragged all over the globe for scant reason. Without children, the Bensons were cannon fodder for the corporate machine.

They'd landed back from Paris the week before Christmas. Her husband, keen to get back up to speed in the UK, had spent most of Christmas Day taking phone calls from other Fossil Oil executives who failed to understand the concept of a work/life balance. Kirsten had locked herself in the hall closet and cried, only emerging an hour later with eyes red-rimmed and raw. Tyler hadn't noticed that either. If Christmas had come round every five years, say, she might have been able to stomach it.

However, this year would be different. That was her solemn vow. This year she'd make an effort. There was no way they could go on like this. Their marriage was teetering on a knife edge and she wanted to do all she could to pull it back from the brink.

'We should be settled back in England for a while this time,' Tyler said, his tone placatory.

'Fingers crossed.' Though, if she was honest, even England didn't feel like home any



more. Nowhere did. It was as if she was rootless, floating. It was no way to live. ‘It would be nice if you could ease back on your workload, Tyler. It would be good for us to spend some time together. And I don’t just mean sitting watching television. We should concentrate on our relationship—’

‘There’s nothing wrong with our relationship.’

‘—make some friends, perhaps even establish a role in the local community. Perhaps even stay long enough to find out if there is one.’

She turned from the mirror and looked up at him. ‘I’m fortytwo, Tyler. It feels as if I’ve spent the best years of my life trailing after you as you’ve scrambled your way up the corporate ladder with Fossil Oil.’

‘You’ve done all right out of it.’

‘Maybe I should have stayed at home while you roamed the offices of the world.’ Kirsten had trained as a teacher and, at one point, had a nice post in a primary school and quite a promising future. She’d enjoyed her job and been good at it. ‘All I’ve got to show for my career is, somewhere in among all the packing cases that have moved across continents with us, a cardboard box full of the sweetest letters from my pupils.’

‘That’s nice though.’

She’d loved children then. Adored them. It was their open curiosity and capacity for learning that filled her with enthusiasm. Now she didn’t see any children, other than to pass them in the street, from one end of the year to the next. They didn’t even broach the subject of having their own family any more. With Tyler it had always been next year when he earned more, next year when he’d reached this or that level, next year when it was quieter at work, next year when they’d stopped travelling. And, of course, next year never came. Then suddenly she’d turned forty and she felt that ‘next year’ had passed her by. Tyler earned more, reached the next level, got busier and busier and travelled endlessly. But many people in this situation still managed to have children. For Tyler it felt as if Fossil Oil was all the family he needed, but perhaps it wasn’t enough for her.

‘If it hadn’t been for Fossil, I could have done a lot of things. I could have forged myself a successful career. I might have made headteacher. I could have found some friends, had a normal life. Whatever that might be.’

‘Hindsight is a wonderful gift, Kirsten. We’re still young. Relatively. It’s not too late to do those things, if that’s what you want.’

‘I wanted to be with you.’ It was what wives did, wasn’t it? Sacrificed themselves on the altar of their husband’s career. How very foolish it sounded now. Here she was, a decade later, relying on Tyler for her income, for her life. ‘I know no one outside of the beauty salon and the gym. I thought about throwing a party at home this Christmas and then realised that, beyond the employees of Fossil Oil, I don’t actually know anyone who I could invite.’

Tyler went to speak.

She held up a hand.

‘Don’t say we can invite Lance and Melissa. That’s exactly what I mean.’

This was the only time they’d actually spent two consecutive Christmases in the same country. The last ten years had been marked by fleeting acquaintances and empty hours. The only people she had long-term relationships with were the women in the Relocations Department at Fossil Oil who engineered her tediously regular home moves. ‘We’ve spent so little time in one place and have always lived in rented homes that it makes me feel like some sort of nomad.’ ‘Look at this place,’ Tyler said, holding out his arms. ‘It’s stunning. People would cut off both their arms to live somewhere like this.’

‘We’ve had some beautiful homes, of course. I can’t deny that. It’s always someone else’s



choice of furniture though, never my own.'

This place *was* amazing: a four-bedroom Georgian townhouse in Hampstead. Handy for both the London office and the M1. It was all chandeliers and original windows in a quiet, leafy street, slap bang in the middle of a conservation area. No one could argue with its pedigree.

'I've reached a stage in my life where having the biggest or shiniest home on the road just isn't enough. Nothing in this house is ours. I don't clean it, don't decorate it, don't plant a single flower in the garden. When we move – as we will – there'll be nothing in it to show that we've ever been here. All I do is stare at the four walls.'

'We can move somewhere else,' Tyler said, frowning. 'If that's what you want.'

'No,' she said. 'That's not what I want at all. You're missing my point entirely.'

'But this is a great place, and you didn't want to live near the office.'

Fossil Oil's latest venture had been to build a shiny new head office in Milton Keynes and the company had now moved, lock, stock and barrel, out of its base in central London, which was deemed too expensive.

Another reason she'd taken to travelling with Tyler was that she hadn't been able to trust him unless he was right under her nose. In her holidays from university she'd worked as an office temp and had endured a number of bosses who were just like Tyler, as libidinous as they were ambitious. Not that her being hot on his heels had ever actually stopped him from playing away. It was just that she had endless hours in which to be suspicious of him. She really should have kept up a job. Or had children. Or both. Perhaps she *should* have worked hard and climbed the greasy pole to the top of her own profession. Or maybe she would have been more content to spend her time at home if it had been somewhere filled with kids of their own. Then again, no doubt Tyler had the dominant genes and all their offspring would have ended up just like him. She'd have had no chance then. One Tyler Benson was more than enough.

'I've promised you I'll take a few days off over the holidays,' Tyler soothed.

After she'd nagged him incessantly. He never usually took time off and always dashed back to the comfort of Fossil Oil as soon as Boxing Day was over. He'd probably go in even earlier if the offices actually opened. But, with the few days at home that he'd promised her, perhaps he was going to try his best this year too.

'We'll talk about these things then.'

'Promise?'

'Cross my heart and hope to die.'

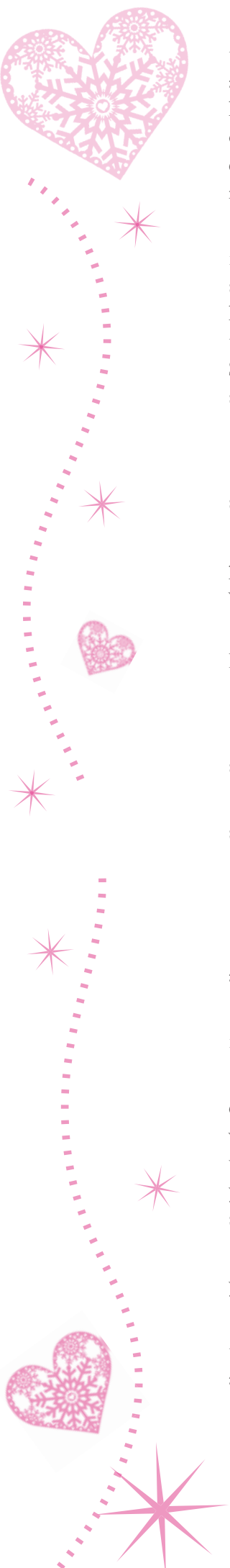
He crossed his bare chest and she lifted her hand to caress the spot.

'I'm going to do my very best, using fair means or foul, to make sure you don't sneak off to the study for a few hours.'

'I'd rather you use fair means.' Her husband traced his thumb over her cheek. 'This Christmas can be fun, Kirsten. If you want it to be.'

The Christmas tree was up, and that wasn't always a given. It depended on her mood or whether their belongings were still in transit from somewhere or another. For a change, she'd bitten the bullet and brought in Christmas planners to do it for her. It was a small and viciously expensive company who had been recommended by the chairman's wife, Melissa Harvey. They'd gone to town on the place and, she had to say, it looked marvellous. Far better than when Kirsten ever did it herself. Even Tyler had commented on the decorations, and Tyler very rarely noticed anything. Though he'd certainly notice the cost when the bill came in.

After much consultation and the presentation of mood boards, the planners had decorated the house in a rather traditional theme in gold and silver. The real tree that they'd put in



the living room was absolutely breathtaking when the lights were on. It could be a cold room and this brought a much-needed degree of warmth to it. The scent from the pine needles was heavenly. On a few evenings she'd even come to sit in here, rather than watch the television over the breakfast bar in the kitchen where she often spent her time. Kirsten decided that she'd definitely use them again next year. If, of course, they *were* still in England. And there was the rub. She simply never knew.

'I want to make Christmas a happy time for us.' She wanted to be a person who looked forward to it, embraced it, as she once had many years ago. There'd been too many filled with sadness, emptiness, dwelling on things that might have been rather than appreciating what she had. This year, she'd thrown herself into Christmas shopping and, whereas she normally hated the crowds, she'd quite enjoyed the whirlwind. Both Kensington High Street and Regent Street looked fabulous in their festive garb, and that had helped. As a result, there was a selection of carefully chosen and beautifully gift-wrapped presents for Tyler under the tree.

'Then let's start tonight.'

She felt herself brighten. 'Do you think we could? At the Christmas party?' They're always so dull.'

'We can liven it up. A few drinks, a bit of dancing. Could be just what we need.' He pulled her to her feet and held her tightly, swaying in time to non-existent music. 'It's the most wonderful time of the year,' he sang tunelessly as they danced.

She laughed. Kirsten didn't think Tyler really enjoyed Christmas, any more than she did. It was something to get through rather than to be enjoyed.

'I've had your suit cleaned,' she told him. 'It's hanging in the dressing room.'

'That's why you're my favourite wife,' he teased. Putting his hands gently on her bare shoulders, he kissed her neck. 'Let's have fun tonight.'

It seemed like a long time since they'd had fun together. Maybe Tyler was right: she should just let her hundred-and-fifty-pound-plus-tip hair down tonight.

'Let's,' she said. Her hand covered his. 'If we both try, it could be like old times.'

'Yes. It will be. Definitely.' Another kiss and he moved away from her.

'Just promise me you won't abandon me the minute you get there and talk about work all night.'

'Of course I won't.' But Tyler was already searching in the drawer for his cufflinks. He found them with a cry of 'Ah-ha!' and disappeared in search of his dinner suit.

Kirsten sat down again and put on her necklace. A thin gold strand with a single one-carat diamond hanging from it. Christmas present from two years ago? Quite possibly. Idly, she wondered what Tyler might have bought her this year. The value of his presents always went up in direct proportion to the amount of bad behaviour that he had to apologise for. Most years it meant something sparkly with diamonds. At the very least, this last twelve months should secure her an extravagant bracelet under the tree.

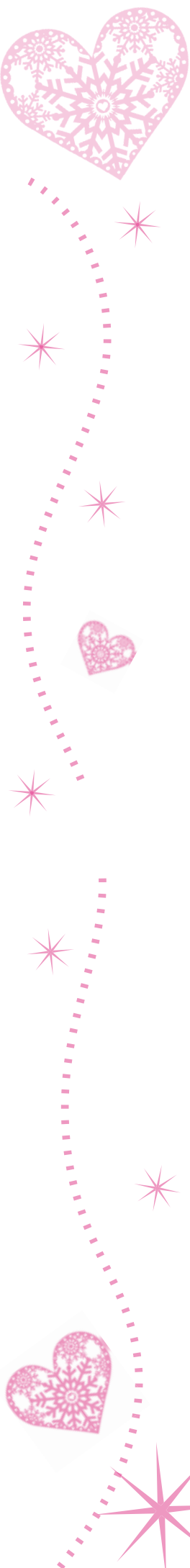
Tyler came out of the dressing room, in his shirt now and fiddling with his cufflinks. 'Can you fasten these, darling?'

She didn't remember buying him these ones, but had never had the nerve to ask where they'd come from. Some questions you really didn't want answered. He proffered his wrists and she fastened them for him.

He slipped on his jacket and tugged the cuffs into place. 'That's me ready.'

'You look very handsome,' she told him truthfully.

'We'd better get a move on.'



Throughout their marriage, Tyler had very much lived his own life. Half the time, she never knew where he was. There seemed to have been a little less gadding about since he'd been at the office in Milton Keynes, but she wondered how long it would last. Not long, if she was reading the signs right – and she was a past master at that.

'Louise offered to book us a hotel overnight,' he said over his shoulder. 'I thought you'd want to come home, but I left it open. I know you rarely drink at these things, anyway.'

That was true enough. She felt ridiculously superior when everyone else was falling about paralytic, saying the most stupid things, and she was the only one stone-cold sober. Perhaps that was the flaw in her plan. A couple of well-aimed glasses of champagne could cheer her up considerably.

'If we're going to have fun, party-party and all that, then you might fancy a glass or two. Lance has laid on a free bar for the staff. Madness. That will ensure everyone's pissed out of their head within an hour.'

'Including Lance?'

Tyler shrugged. 'As always.'

'I'll see how it goes,' Kirsten said.

'Hotel or cab home, either suits me. Put a few things in a bag. You don't have to drive. Louise can fix something up if you change your mind.'

Tyler talked about his new secretary too often. He dropped her name into the conversation too casually and at every opportunity. That was always a warning sign. The last secretary had been Debbie and he'd done the very same with her. Debbie this, Debbie that and, quite obviously, Debbie the other.

When he spoke of Louise, she imagined her young and beautiful. Louise wouldn't have lines round her eyes or grooves that ran from her nose to her mouth. 'Puppet lines', they called them, and sometimes that was exactly what she felt like. Tyler's puppet. Whatever Tyler wanted her to do, she did.

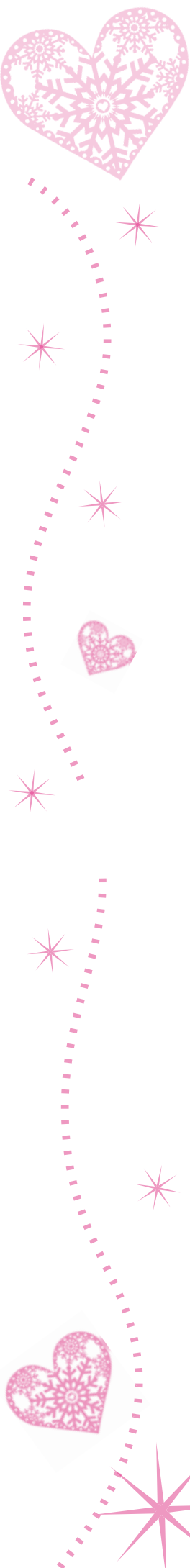
She was still in her prime. Forty was the new thirty, wasn't it? And yet, some days she felt older than time itself. How old was this Louise? she wondered. Well, she guessed she'd find out soon enough. She'd be there tonight and they'd come face to face for the first time. She'd chosen her favourite dress for the occasion, a white Armani number. It was halter-neck with a plunging neckline and a low back. The material clung to her curves and showed off her toned body. She looked as good as she possibly could. Let's see how this Louise competed with that. At least the hours spent in the gym proved useful sometimes.

This could be her moment to reassert her claim to Tyler. It was time to fight for her man. If only they could both throw off the weight that had insidiously settled on their shoulders and find the people they once used to be, maybe there was hope for them. Perhaps, if she could be the woman he used to love, then he wouldn't look elsewhere. If he could be the man she thought she'd married, then perhaps she could look at him with love in her eyes once more.

Tonight, she was going to try her best to love her husband again and to make him love her back. It was the best reason she could think of for enduring the Christmas party.

Chapter 4

Melissa reached up to fasten the silk bow tie that hung limply and expectantly on Lance's dinner shirt. Her nimble fingers deftly twisted and twiddled it into the desired shape. It was a deed she'd performed for more years than she cared to remember now, and she stood back to admire it. Years of practice had, in this case, made perfect. She patted it into place affectionately.



Lance Harvey checked his reflection in the stridently lit mirror in the hall. Her husband was older than her by eleven years, sixty-six to her fifty-five. Which hadn't seemed so very much at one time, but now she thought the age difference was starting to show.

'What would I do without you, angel?' Lance said as he sucked in his stomach and lifted his chin.

'Oh, I'm sure you'd manage.' She kissed his cheek.

'Never. You're the light of my life.' Her husband glanced at his watch. 'Do we have time for a small bourbon before we leave?'

She shook her head. 'Martin will be here any moment. You can have one in the car.'

He looked content with that idea.

There'd come a time, perhaps soon, when he'd stop working and it would be just the two of them together all day. How would she cope then?

'Has Bud made any more noises about you retiring?'

Lance shook his head. 'No. That's definitely on the back burner for now.'

Bud Harman, who headed everything up in the USA, liked his executives to hang up their corporate hats early, but Lance wasn't buying into that. So far, he'd soundly ignored all hints to that effect. Fossil Oil was his life. It always had been. He'd stick it out until the bitter end, until someone forced him to go.

'Besides, you know me, honey. What would I do if I retired?'

That was the burning question. How *would* Lance fill his days? He knew nothing but work, had no friends, no real interest in anything other than the oil business. He lived and breathed Fossil Oil. But surely there must come a time when he simply couldn't carry on?

'If you do, would you like to stay in England?'

'I haven't thought about it,' her husband admitted.

'It would be nice to have a home that I could truly call our own. Perhaps we could get a little cottage somewhere and settle down?'

Due to Lance's work, Melissa rarely went out of London. He didn't like to have her too far away from him as he often used her as a sounding-board for some new proposal or initiative that had been mooted and which he, increasingly, struggled to understand.

'There are some very beautiful parts of the country – Hampshire, Devon, Cornwall. It would be nice to take some trips.'

Lance laughed. 'Can you see me whiling away my days in a twee little cottage with a thatched roof?'

Melissa too laughed at the very thought. 'No, honey. I can't.'

'There are a few good years left in me yet.'

'I know that, sweetheart.' She smoothed the collar of his dinner jacket. 'We should think about it though. You know how time rushes by. It pays to start making plans. We could retire to Florida, spend our twilight years soaking up the sun. You could even take up golf again if you had the time.'

Lance used to play once, but only because work had required it. Now, like everything else, it was difficult to find the spare hours.

'Do you think we'd see the boys more if we were retired?' he asked.

It was always a difficult subject between them. She was much closer to their sons than Lance was and she felt that, not too far below the surface, he resented that. 'Oh, yes. I'm sure



we would. Or we could visit them.'

What she meant was that she could visit them alone. Lance would never bother, even if he was retired. And that was why he wasn't closer to the boys.

His 'Harrumph' was the only answer she needed.

The children were grown-up now, men not boys, both nearing thirty, and they had lives of their own. Rich and interesting lives. It was a great sadness in her life that they rarely saw them.

'Are they coming for Christmas this year?' he asked.

'No, no,' Melissa said. 'But I'm sure they'll Skype us.' It might be Christmas, but the only time she'd have with her children would be a rushed five-minute phone or video call from some distant part of the world.

Drew and Kyle had spent most of their young lives in boarding school. A good one in England, all funded by Fossil Oil. At least it had given them some stability at the time, but she regretted that now. She had tried to keep them at home with her as they followed Lance to his different postings around the globe. It gave Melissa a home life too, a life outside Fossil Oil. She loved doing the school run, waiting for the boys to come home so that she could read with them, play games. It gave an otherwise shallow existence some meaning. But it wasn't ideal for the boys. They had to change schools so often that their education suffered. They'd just start to settle in, make friends with their classmates, there'd be tentative and awkward play-dates or they might start to get invites to birthday parties at burger bars, and then Lance would announce that they were off again. They were always the outsiders and that was never a good feeling. She knew that only too well. It had been a terribly painful decision to leave them behind as she trailed after Lance. And she wondered now how she could have packed them off so young. Boys needed their mother's love. They needed a father who was there for them and Lance had never been. Yet, despite their parents' failings, thankfully they'd turned out to be decent, caring young men.

'They should have come into the oil business with me,' Lance said. 'That's a proper career. They're both layabouts.'

'They're so not,' Melissa chided. 'They just want different things to you. There's nothing wrong with that. They want to be their own people. Money doesn't matter to them.'

They don't mind taking ours,' Lance grumbled.

Melissa had done her very best to steer them away from the corporate game and it seemed to have worked. She'd never wanted them to grow up to be their father's sons. She and Lance might have all the trappings of wealth, but the truth was they had no life.

The opposite was true of their sons.

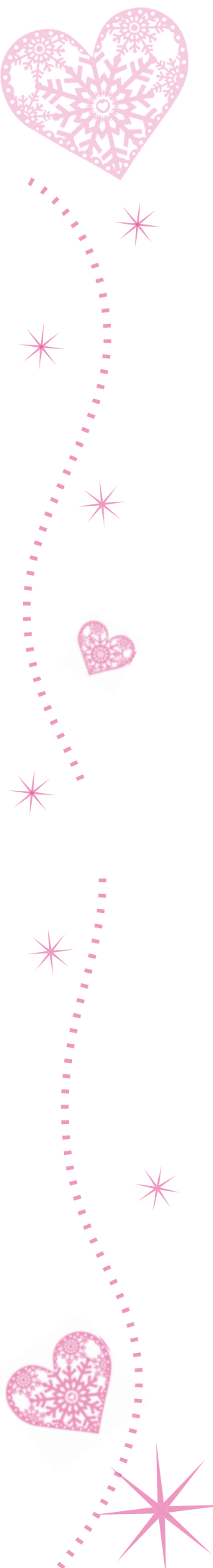
'Drew does great work,' she said. 'You know that. You should be proud of what he's achieved.'

'Huh,' Lance said.

Their eldest was in Nepal, working as the manager of a small orphanage. They had thirty children in the home and he sometimes sent her photographs of them, all beautiful smiles and shiny faces. It was a hand-to-mouth existence and, largely without Lance's knowledge, Melissa regularly wired him money. One day she hoped to visit him, even though he assured her that she'd be horrified by the conditions in which he lived.

Lance snorted. 'At least he's doing better than Kyle.'

It was true that their youngest boy had never really grown up and had a very hippy lifestyle that Lance totally disapproved of. He had piercings everywhere – nose, ears, lips, you name it. He had those big black earrings that made holes in your ears. Lance couldn't even look at them. In the summer he'd work teaching surfing or, last year, with a company that offered



bungee jumps off a bridge in South Africa. In the winter he headed to ski resorts in California or Europe and taught snowboarding and worked in bars. One year he'd been a chalet 'girl', and it felt strange to know that her son could bake a great cake whereas, due to usually having staff, she could barely boil an egg.

'He's doing fine,' Melissa insisted. 'He's young yet and he's having fun. How can we begrudge him that?'

She could see Lance's frown deepening and, in an effort to steer him from his favourite subject to complain about, she said, 'How do you like the house decorations this year? Haven't they done a great job?'

Lance looked around him and nodded.

The vast hall in their latest house was decorated beautifully for the festive season. She'd used the same company she'd employed last year and they hadn't disappointed her. She was so pleased that she'd recommended them to Kirsten Benson too.

The tree was over ten feet tall and dressed with traditional baubles in red and gold. The banister of the sweeping stairs had a holly garland weaving through it that went right up to the first floor. All the mirrors were decked with holly arrangements topped with red velvet bows. There was another tree in the living room that was just as sparkling, just as lavish.

'They look great, honey. Good enough to eat.'

'Speaking of which,' Melissa said, 'I've decided to cook myself this year.' It was some time since she'd made the effort and now, at the last minute, she was wondering if she should have arranged for a chef to come in.

'You don't have to do that.'

'Most of it's being sent pre-prepared from Fortnum's, so there's no need to worry. Whatever we have, it will be edible.'

Cooking was definitely not her forte. Even with a little help from her favourite store, there was still the potential for disaster and a sandwich for Christmas lunch.

'The dining-room table has already been set. That looks pretty too.' It glittered with crystal and golden charger plates – both sourced by the Christmas planners. 'I hired all the crockery and glasses. Our china and crystal is somewhere in a storage facility, it was too much effort to retrieve it.'

If only the boys had come home they might have had a lovely time with the family all together. As it stood, amid all this festive loveliness, she and Lance would be here alone. Lance's career had provided for all this opulence, but it had certainly come at a high price.

'We could have gone to a hotel again,' he said. 'Then you don't have to do anything.'

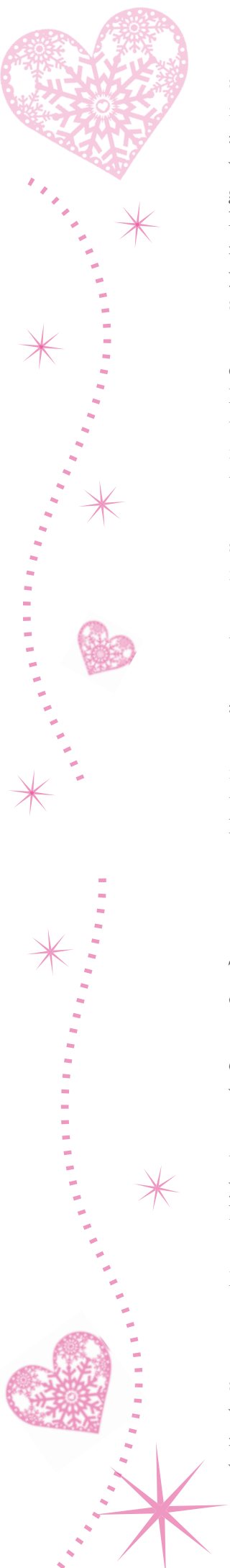
Frankly, she'd seen enough of hotel rooms in her lifetime. 'That's a lovely idea, but I would just like for us to be in our own place.'

'You're such a home bird,' he said and hugged her tightly. 'Now we'd better get to this Christmas party as we're the star turn. Ready when you are, honey.'

He held up her fur coat for her and she slipped her arms into it. Picking up her diamanté clutch bag, she sighed inside. Yet another Christmas party. She was a veteran of them now. Thirty years a corporate wife had seen to that.

'You look lovely tonight, Mrs Harvey,' Lance said. 'As always.'

'Thank you, sweetheart.' The truth was that it was all smoke and mirrors. Beneath the emerald-green sheath dress she wore, there was shapewear that was nearly cutting her in two. Eating would be a trial too far. Staying a size eight – in British sizes – didn't come easily these days.



The glaring brightness in here was condemnably harsh. If it had been her own home she would have changed it to something more subtle, more flattering. The light showed the fine etching of laughter lines much too clearly. Laughter lines. That was the biggest laugh of all: it wasn't an overdose of jollity that had caused these babies, it was the years slipping by with alarming regularity that had left these blots on her facial landscape. She was like a tree, a gnarled old oak. You could count the summers she had sweltered through and the winters she had weathered by the number of lines on her face. Since she'd turned fifty, she'd embraced the miracle of Botox as you would a lover, in the hope that it would keep her looking younger. But you could only fight it for so long. Once your body hit a certain number, everything drooped, sagged and dried up. It didn't stop her from trying to hold back the sands of time though.

In the ten years since they'd been rudely plucked by Fossil Oil from the cosmopolitan delights of New York, they'd wandered like executive vagabonds through various offices in Europe. Then Lance had been promoted to chairman of Fossil Oil UK and they were posted to London, where the dampness of the summers had merged inextricably with the slightly fuller dampness of the winters. Mind you, at least her skin had enjoyed a brief respite from the penalties of ultraviolet overindulgence.

They'd now been based here for longer than usual, almost two years. Finally, she was starting to enjoy it. She liked this house well enough and it certainly looked beautiful dressed for Christmas.

'I want to get there early to do the rounds and press some flesh.' Lance glanced out of the window by the door and clapped his hands together. 'Martin's waiting outside with the car.'

'I'm all yours,' she said and he took her arm. Lance closed the front door behind them and, his step still sprightly, they crossed the gravel as he escorted her to the car.

By the fountain in their sweep-round driveway, Martin held open the door of the Bentley for her while she slid into the luxurious warmth of the car. Martin had been with them since they'd been in England, which could be considered long-term. He was a nice man. Loyal. Reliable.

She nodded to him. 'Good evening, Martin.'

'Evening, Mrs Harvey.'

It was a bitterly cold night and snow threatened. A white Christmas was looking likely. That would be nice. All the previous times she'd spent Christmas in England it was, so very often, grey and raining.

Lance got in beside her and the car purred away, heading towards Wadestone Manor. She didn't think she'd been to this venue before, so that was something to look forward to. There was something else to look forward to as well, but that was her secret.

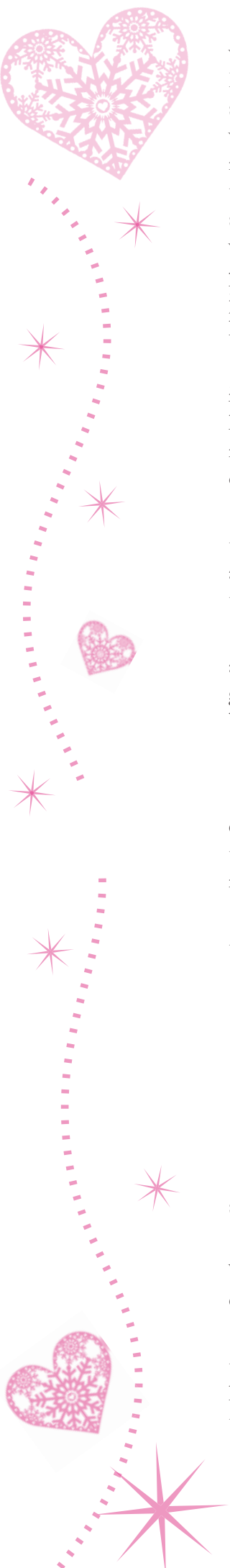
'Will tonight be insufferably boring, honey?' she asked. It was always more taxing when the party was for the whole of Fossil Oil. When it was just the executives you knew where you stood. Introduce even the most junior of staff and, so often, it descended into mayhem. People didn't know how to behave these days.

'Probably, my sweet.' Lancelot Harvey smoothed his fingers through his wavy silver hair. He noticed Melissa scrutinising him and smiled back at her.

'You look very handsome, Lance.' And he did.

She knew that it was a constant marvel and source of pride to Lance that, despite having seen the wrong side of sixty, his hair was no thinner than when he was still a fine young buck, wowing the girls as the rising star on the college football team. Now it was silver-white and it made him look very distinguished. Though he hated it and complained constantly that there was no goddamn colour left in it.

But then both she and Lance knew full well that you could never have everything you



wanted in life. Over thirty years of marriage and virtually the same length of service with Fossil Oil had proved that, on more than one occasion. He was so different now from the swaggering young man who'd swept her off her feet with his enthusiasm and ambition. She was still green, just out of college herself, when they met, and they'd married after a whirlwind romance, much to her parents' displeasure. Though they were mightily relieved that she had tied the knot when her first son was born just six months after the wedding. That hadn't stopped her own quest for a fulfilling career though and even with two toddlers she'd been working her way up to be a tax specialist in a respected company. She'd enjoyed it too – the power, the adrenalin buzz of meetings. They'd managed quite well when Lance was a relatively junior sales manager at Fossil and had only travelled inside the USA. He could manage to be at home most weekends and a full-time nanny had taken up the slack in the week for her.

When her husband had been promoted and burst on to the global scene, it had been impossible for her to continue her own career. Another regret. If she wanted to climb the ladder, it would have meant more time away from home, longer hours, later nights, earlier mornings. The boys were already spending too much time with hired help and it was unfair on them.

When he was offered his first overseas posting, a big step up, together they agreed that they'd put everything into Lance's career. She'd give up her job, take the boys out of school, and they'd travel with him. They were so in love, the world was in the palm of their hands and they wanted to embrace it wholeheartedly. It was to be a big adventure. And it was. For a while.

Lance poured himself a neat bourbon from the small cocktail cabinet in the car and took an unhealthy gulp. He smacked his lips in appreciation, even though he'd only just finished a glass in the bedroom while he was getting ready. He was probably most of the way through a bottle or even more by this time of the day.

'Anything for you, honey?'

'No, thank you.' It wasn't that she didn't drink, but it always served her well to be less drunk than Lance. 'Is there anything we need to discuss before we get there? Are you going to talk to Tom Davidson about the refinery proposals tonight? I can run through my ideas again, make sure they're fresh in your mind.'

He patted her knee. 'Not now, sweetheart. Tonight is purely fun. I have a few announcements to make, but that's all.'

'What about?'

'This and that,' he said cagily.

It was unlike him not to discuss the ins and outs of Fossil Oil dealings with her.

'The rest of the business can wait until tomorrow.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'Really?'

He shrugged. Lance must be mellowing in his old age. That was probably the first time she'd ever heard him say that.

The car hit the edge of the city and headed out into the rolling countryside towards Wadestone Manor, taking the twisting bends and the narrow lanes smoothly. Martin was an excellent driver.

The Christmas party was always the highlight of the social calendar for the staff. Whenever there was a free bar provided by Fossil Oil, they usually took as much advantage of it as humanly possible. It was always total chaos and, in years gone by, she'd tried to persuade Lance to leave as early as was deemed polite.

'Tyler and Kirsten will be on our table, that should liven things up a bit,' Lance said.

'Oh, are they?' Melissa feigned surprise. She knew they would be. Of course they would.



‘You always enjoy their company.’

‘Yes. That’ll make the evening more entertaining.’

In the glass that separated them from Martin, Melissa’s reflection wore a sceptical expression. Lance patted her hand affectionately. She turned to gaze out of the window at the passing countryside, unable to meet her husband’s eye.

The truth was that she enjoyed Tyler Benson’s company much more than she should.

Chapter 5

The hairdresser is tipsy. And she’s dressed as Snow White. The other stylists in the salon are kitted out as the seven dwarves and it looks as if they’ve all started on the festive spirit a bit too early. Consequently it takes her an age to put up my hair and I’m nearly frantic by the time she’s finished. I show my displeasure by just giving her my usual tip and not something more generous as I normally would at Christmas. Being three sheets to the wind, I don’t think she actually notices anyway. I’m only glad that I haven’t booked in for a short-back-and-sides. In fact, I should probably count my blessings that I didn’t get one.

Now, of course, I’m running late. Back at home and in the privacy of my room, I wriggle into my little black dress, which, sadly, is just that bit tighter than the last time I wore it. When I’ve managed to zip myself up, I admire my hair in the mirror. It’s swept up in a very Audrey Hepburn, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* way and, given the circumstances of its creation, I’m somewhat relieved to say that it looks great.

Mum has lent me her favourite necklace – a triple string of pearls with a pendant in the middle – which adds to the sixtiesicon vibe, and I’m wearing pointy black stilettos. It’s so long since I dressed up that I’d actually forgotten I could look like this. Miss Holly Golightly would be proud of me.

Goodness knows what Tyler will think of my outfit, but tonight I don’t care. I want to look glamorous. You can’t go to the Christmas party dressed like a frump. After all, I have Karen from Customer Accounts to compete with. I don’t want to be totally overshadowed by her. Hopefully there will be enough people around that Tyler won’t be a problem.

‘Mummy!’ Mia’s voice comes from her bedroom. It has just the right level of whine in it to tug at my heartstrings. As well she knows. ‘Mummy!’

Grabbing my black patent handbag, I go through to see her. She’s sitting up in her little bed, looking beyond adorable in her pink pyjamas with bunny rabbits on them. Her similarly pink Home Bargains Christmas tree sparkles on top of the tallboy.

‘You must be a good girl and go to sleep now,’ I say. ‘Mummy won’t be gone for long.’

‘Don’t go out.’ A little tear runs down her cheek and I brush it away with my thumb. ‘Stay with me.’

‘Don’t be a silly-billy,’ I chide gently. ‘Gramps and Granny will look after you. Promise me that you’ll be a good girl, or Santa won’t come.’

‘He will,’ she wails. ‘Santa always brings me lots of toys even if I’ve been really naughty. He loves me.’

I can’t help but smile. ‘He does, and so do I, but this is my office Christmas party. It’s work and I have to go. It’s very important for Mummy to be there. I’ll tell you all about it in the morning.’

I know why she’s being like this. I hardly ever go out without her now and she doesn’t want to be left behind. She’s also taken to sneaking into my bed in the middle of the night and when I feel her tiny, warm body snuggle in next to mine, I’m not hardhearted enough to take her back to her own room. It’s a rod I’ve made for my own back.



‘I’ve got a headache,’ she complains.

‘No, you haven’t.’ I stroke her hair which frames her perfect, heart-shaped face.

‘Lie down next to me,’ she says.

‘For five minutes.’ I try to sound stern but in truth I’d rather be staying at home too. My eyes are heavy and I’m so tired after a long day at work.

I never seem to have enough time with Mia now. Tyler likes to keep me there till all hours, so it’s often six-thirty or even later by the time I leave the office. Thanks to my dear parents, when I get home Mia has already eaten her tea and is usually ready for bed. Then I’ve just got half an hour to read her a bedtime story and the rest of the evening is spent flaking out in front of the television with my folks.

I’m now an expert on *Midsomer Murders* and *Flog It!*, which they record for me every day because, for some inexplicable reason, they’ve decided I like them. I don’t have the heart to tell them otherwise. So I endure watching people being killed by giant cheeses falling on them and others trying to auction off the most terrible tat that has been hiding in their loft since time began, and smile gratefully because my parents are such very, very kind people. Without their constant support, I don’t know where Mia and I would be.

My childhood home has been decorated for Christmas since the middle of November. My dad likes to grumble about it, but I know he enjoys it too. Now that they’ve got Mia here, they’re like big kids themselves. Some of the Christmas decorations they have were probably among the first invented.

I remember them getting their current tree when I was Mia’s age, so they’ve certainly had their money’s worth out of it. I suspect it came from the long-defunct Woolworths in its heyday. It’s looking a bit moth-eaten and ragged now, but even if they won the lottery I don’t think they’d replace it. ‘Sentimental value’, my mother says. Which usually means it’s fit for the skip. But once it’s all done up in its festive finery – some of the more dubious decorations hand-knitted by Mum – I have to admit that it doesn’t look half bad. Mia certainly doesn’t seem to notice that it’s seen better days. We have to go through a weekly ritual of standing in awe before the tree while Granny tells her where each and every one of the decorations has come from. I’m surprised that my mum even remembers. No, actually, I’m not.

‘Lie down, Mummy,’ Mia cajoles.

‘For two minutes.’ I try to sound stern, but Mia knows she’s on to a winner.

So I turn off her bedside light and the room is filled with a soft golden glow. I risk damaging my fabulous hairdo and snuggle down next to my daughter. Softly I sing her favourite lullaby, ‘Hush Little Baby’. It’s the one I’ve sung to her since she was a baby, the same one my mother used to sing to me at bedtime when I was Mia’s age. Slowly, she drifts off.

It seems like seconds later when my dad is gently shaking my arm. I blink my eyes open, not knowing, for a split second, where I am. It appears, however, that I’ve drooled on the pillow.

‘I don’t like to disturb you, love, but what time are you going to this party?’

That makes me sit bolt upright and, of course, I wake Mia too. Next to me she rubs her eyes.

‘It’s nearly half-past seven,’ he adds.

‘Oh, no.’

‘Should I have woken you earlier, love? I didn’t realise the time.’

‘I’ve missed the coach,’ I tell him, my shoulders sagging.

‘Not to worry, Lou-Lou. If you still want to go, I’ll run you in the car.’



‘You can’t do that, Dad.’

‘It’s no trouble.’

‘But it’s miles.’

‘No, no,’ he says. ‘Not that far.’

‘Don’t go!’ Mia starts again, and she wraps her arms round my waist, clinging like a limpet.

The temptation is very strong to shrug off my dress and Mum’s jewels, ignore the money I’ve spent on my hairdo, mark it down to experience and just stay here with my deliciously cosy daughter. But then I think it would look bad if I didn’t show. I’m sure Tyler Benson would hold it against me and I can’t risk doing anything that would cost me this job.

‘I *have* to go,’ I tell her. To Dad, I say, ‘Duty calls.’

Which is why, ten minutes later, with my hair only slightly askew, my dear dad is backing his Ford Focus out of the garage.

‘Is Mia warm enough?’ Mum says as we stand at the front door waiting for him.

‘Yes. She’ll be fine.’ Of course, my dear child won’t stay in bed and insists on coming with us. I’ve caved in because I’m now in too much of a rush to face a full-on tantrum. She was immediately placated when I agreed that she could come along for the ride. I’m worried that at four years old she knows exactly how to play me. What hope is there for me when she reaches fifteen?

‘You should be in your bed, Little Miss Young. Why don’t you stay here with Granny? It’s cold out here.’ Mum rubs at her arms to convey Arctic temperatures. ‘Brrrr.’

My daughter is immovable. All she does is cling to me more tightly. She’s in my arms, wrapped in her fluffy pink dressing gown and bunny slippers. Her favourite teddy, Eric, is coming too and we had to find him a scarf to wear as it’s cold. In fact, Mum’s right, it is bitterly cold. There are slight flakes of snow blowing in the air – nothing substantial yet, but the threat of more is there. Another reason why my dad shouldn’t be getting the car out.

I kiss Mum’s cheek. ‘See you in the morning. *Don’t* wait up.’

‘Be careful, Louise,’ she says. ‘Don’t do anything silly.’

I laugh. ‘Like what?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘This job is important to me, Mum. Really important.’ I haven’t told my parents that my boss is a randy old goat. Dad would be marching down to the Fossil Oil offices and demanding to see the person in charge, as he would have done with the headmaster when I was at school. ‘I’m not going to do *anything* to jeopardise that.’

Putting Mia in the back of the car in her booster seat, I get in the front next to Dad. I suspect that my darling daughter will force herself to stay awake until we reach Wadestone Manor even though her head is lolling with tiredness. I’m equally sure that she’ll be fast asleep the minute Dad turns for home.

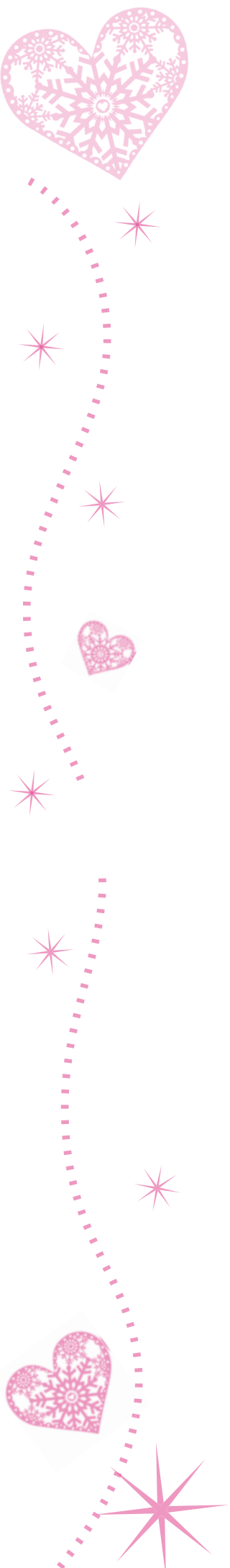
Mia loves all the show tunes from the musicals, so we’re all singing along to ‘These Are a Few of My Favourite Things’ when, half an hour later, Dad pulls in at the very grand and imposing gates of Wadestone Manor.

‘Oh my word, Lou,’ he breathes. ‘This is a fancy place.’

It is. And that makes me nervous. ‘Are you sure it’s the right one, Dad?’

We’ve only just driven through the gates and already I feel intimidated.

‘I think so, love. Better check your invitation.’ Dad pulls over to the grass verge of the sweeping driveway.



Hurriedly I get the invitation out of my bag and scan the details. I turn to him and nod. 'This is it.'

'Good job you had your hair done,' says my father, who usually notices nothing.

I'm now wishing I'd gone the whole hog and bought a new dress.

Dad puts the Focus into gear again and we make our way towards the house along a driveway lined by beautiful specimen trees.

'Look, Mia,' I say, pointing into the trees. 'Deer.'

She peers out of the car window. 'Bambi,' she says.

'That's right. Clever girl.'

'What a sight,' Dad says, awestruck.

They bound across the road in front of us, an impressive herd with a stag at the head. Dad proceeds even more carefully. 'You don't want one of those through your windscreen,' he says in a doom-laden voice.

We wind through the trees until ahead of us is the most spectacular fountain, all lit up in the darkness. It's a sea god, surrounded by nymphs and all kinds of mythical creatures.

'Look at that, Mummy!' Mia gapes wide-eyed.

'I wish the neighbours could see this, Lou-Lou, then they'd know my little girl has gone up in the world.'

I think my parents were embarrassed, worried about what the residents of Clonmel Close would think about me coming home, up to the eyeballs in debt, tail between my legs, daughter in tow and one spectacularly failed relationship chalked up. They have something to brag about again, now that I have a fab job and am getting back on my feet.

Dad trundles up to the house, which looms magnificently ahead of us, clearly still uncertain whether we should be here or not. The long, straight gravel drive is flanked by two immense lawns dotted with statues illuminated in the dark. Twinkling lights are strung in the trees around us. Dad's little car feels somewhat dwarfed by it all. The crunching of his tyres sounds loud and vulgar. The house itself looks as if it's been modelled on a French chateau, complete with ornate stonework and pretty towers. Lights blaze out from every window and there are two enormous Christmas trees either side of the wide steps that lead up to the front door. Who could possibly own a place such as this?

'What a place for a party!' is Dad's verdict. 'I've never seen the like.'

Me neither. I'm slightly terrified now. 'Shall I see if you can both come in and have a sneaky peek?'

'No, no.' Dad shakes his head so much that it might fall off. 'I'm in my cardigan. You can't go in a place like that in your cardigan.'

'I want to come in,' Mia chimes.

'Oh, no,' Dad says. 'You stay here with Gramps.'

I think we're both having the same vision, of a place stuffed with eminently breakable and priceless antiques.

'Gramps is right,' I tell Mia. 'I promise I'll take lots of photos.'

'You have a lovely time, Lou-Lou,' he says. I can see his eyes filling up with tears. 'You'll knock them dead looking like that.'

'Dad,' I say. 'You'll start me off.'

'I'll come and pick you up. What time do you want me?' I laugh. 'I'm not fifteen, Dad. I



can get the coach back. The company have laid it on. No need for you to turn out.'

'I don't mind. I'd rather you were safe and sound.'

'It might snow later.'

'I'll leave the car out in case you change your mind.'

'Put it in the garage. And go to bed. I don't want you waiting up for me. I'll be late.'

'How late?' Mia wants to know.

'Will you both stop fussing!' I tell them. 'Now I'm here, I'm going to make sure I enjoy myself.'

'Ring me if you need me to come out,' Dad says, obviously not having listened to a word I've said.

I kiss his cheek. 'I won't ring. I'm a big girl. Don't worry about me.'

He grips the steering wheel. 'You're still my little girl,' he says, voice husky. 'No matter how old you are.'

'Thanks, Dad.' I get out of the car and open Mia's door so that I can kiss her too. 'Be good for Gramps and straight to bed when you get home. No fuss.'

'I love you, Mummy.'

'You can go into my bed, so that you know when I come home.' I hug her tightly. Everything I do, I do for her.

'It'll be over by the time you get in there,' Dad says.

'I'm going. I'm going.' I close the door and wave goodbye to them.

Dad starts the engine and slowly turns away. I take a deep breath and walk up to the fabulous mansion with butterflies in my tummy.