

Extract from “The Cake Shop in the Garden”

Chapter 1

I sit on the edge of my mum’s bed and take a deep breath. ‘I’ve booked you in for a week’s respite care,’ I tell her.

She stares at me, aghast. ‘But I don’t want you to have any respite from me.’

‘Things are quite difficult at the moment, Mum. You know how it is. The year’s marching on and I need some time to get the café ready for the season.’

She folds her arms across her chest, unconvinced.

I’ve already brought her a cup of tea and a slice of the new coffee cake that I’m trying out, in the hope of softening her up, but my dear mother has turned up her nose at them.

‘I’m not leaving here.’ Mum’s chin juts defiantly. ‘No way, lady.’

For someone who is supposed to be an invalid, my mother has the strongest constitution and will of anyone I’ve ever met. I knew even as I was making the booking that it was overly optimistic. Even a cake fresh from the oven won’t warm my mother’s heart.

‘There are loads of things I need to do, Mum. I could just do with a couple of days. That’s all.’ A couple of days without her banging on the ceiling every five minutes, wanting this or that or something and nothing. She has a walking stick by the bed especially for the purpose.

My family have been blessed enough to be able to live in a beautiful home alongside the Grand Union Canal since my parents, Miranda and Victor Merryweather, were first married. Both my sister, Edie, and I were born and brought up here. One of us is more pleased about it than the other. The house is in the pretty village of Whittan, at one time on the outskirts of Milton Keynes, but now being nudged in the ribs by the thrusting city as it engulfs everything in its path.

When I became Mum’s full-time carer, I gave up my paid job and, out of necessity, started a small cake shop cum café and tearoom – Fay’s Cakes. I’d already started selling cakes from our dilapidated narrowboat, the *Maid of Merryweather*, which is moored at the bottom of the garden. It was a sort of hobby, I suppose, a bit of an ad hoc affair, but it gave me something to do with all the cakes and jam that I so liked to make. Now I run it full-time and it’s grown to take over the dining room, veranda and garden of our house. The only problem with running a business that’s based in our home is that half of my days disappear with me running up and down the stairs fetching and carrying for Mum while trying to keep things going with the café downstairs. Not that I really mind . . . it’s just that sometimes I don’t need a break from my caring duties so that I can concentrate on actually bringing in some much-needed money.

‘They’ll sit me in the corner with the dribblers and shakers,’ Mum complains.

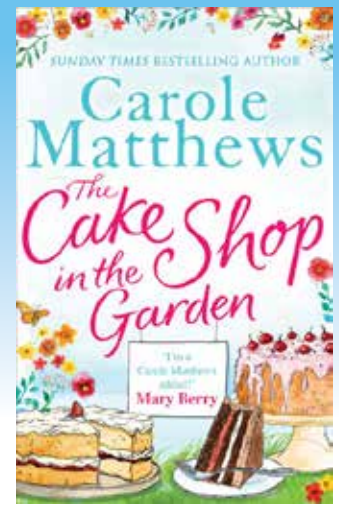
‘They won’t. This is a nice place.’ I hold up the cheery Sunnyside Respite Care Home brochure encouragingly, but she averts her gaze, refusing to even look at it. ‘It’s not a hospital,’ I press on. ‘You get your own room. I researched it really carefully on the internet.’

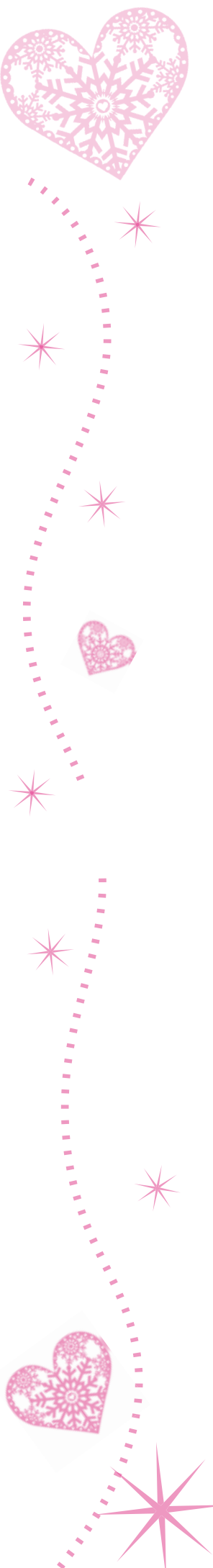
‘Pah.’

‘It’s more like a hotel – *exactly* like a hotel – but with care. They’ll look after you.’

‘Just say if I’m too much trouble for you, Miss Fay Merryweather.’ There’s a sob in Mum’s voice and she dabs theatrically at her eyes beneath the rims of her reading glasses.

‘You’re not too much trouble.’ Once again, she makes me feel like the worst daughter in the world. ‘Of course you’re not.’ She pushes the plate of cake away from her, apparently too overwhelmed to eat.





'I love you. You know that. It's only that I have such a lot to do in the café.' The list is endless. Even the thought of it is making me feel quite dizzy.

'Oh.' She rolls her eyes. 'The café this, the café that. It's all you ever think about. It's all I ever hear about.'

'It pays the bills, Mum.' Just about. The ones that don't go away just because I'm at home and caring for you, I add to myself but dare not say out loud.

My mum took to her bed with a bad bout of flu, four winters ago now. The flu became pneumonia and there's no doubt that she was very poorly at the time. But, several courses of antibiotics later and when the pneumonia had run its course, she was still in no hurry to get up. Then she slipped in the bathroom and broke her hip. When she came back from hospital, she eschewed the physiotherapy programme that she'd been advised to follow and took to her bed again to convalesce. She made herself very comfortable there and, since then, she's simply refused to get up.

Mum has decided that she's still ill and infirm, no matter how many times the doctor tells her that she's just fine. She's stayed exactly where she is and no one can persuade her otherwise. I've coaxed and encouraged her. Doctors come and cajole her. Mental-health professionals turn up, try to counsel her and are duly rebuffed. Antidepressants were prescribed, dispensed and found, by me, hidden down the back of the headboard. In short, my mother has decided she will be permanently bedridden and, quite frankly, she loves it.

Now, every day Miranda Merryweather sits in her bed, snuggled in a duvet, surrounded by fluffy pillows, holding court like the queen of a very small country. These days, she refuses to let most people enter her domain. Occasionally, our lovely GP, Dr Ahmed, is reluctantly allowed an audience. I think at first she liked the attention. Then, as the months went on, she simply became entrenched until, finally, she was frightened to get up and go out at all. Now it's simply become a way of life.

The friends she once had have all gradually fallen away until, now, I'm the sole person at her beck and call. I cook, clean and run the café. While Mum can still get herself back and forth across the landing to the bathroom, she needs my help to shower, and I wash her hair for her too when she requires it. Though some days I don't have time to wash my own hair. There's an ever-growing cache of tablets that have to be administered at regular intervals – blood-pressure pills, water tablets, sleeping potions, statins. The list goes on. The longer she stays in bed, the more medicines she needs. I change her nightdress every day and her sheets once a week.

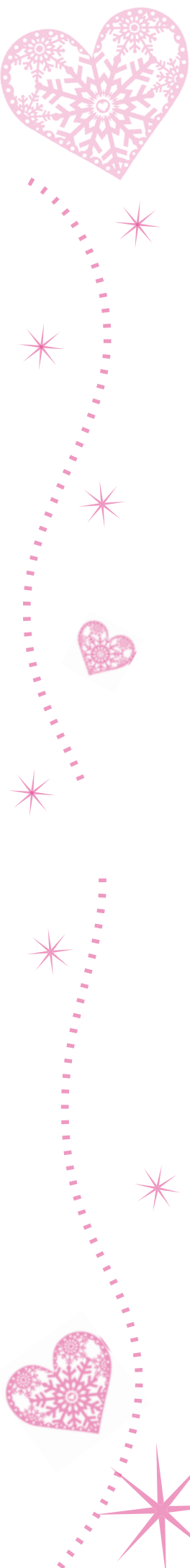
'Your sister would never treat me like this,' Mum says.

'She wouldn't,' I agree. 'You'd starve before you got tea and cake from Edie.'

Mum recoils as if I've slapped her, then turns her head to stare resolutely out of the window at the garden and beyond at the canal which meanders past. The trees along the bank are coming into full bud and soon the hawthorn will be in glorious blossom. It's so beautiful out there. Yet she'll stay in this room and miss it all.

'Edie could teach you a thing or two about caring, madam.' She couldn't. Believe me, she really couldn't. Edie, my younger and only sibling, is the shining girl of the family. Edie, the unemployed, heavy-drinking, recreational-drug user who is currently kept by a married man, can do no wrong in Mum's eyes. As she lives in New York, my mother is unaware that any of this actually goes on. As far as she's concerned, Edie is busily working away at a wonderful career and has a boyfriend who is a fabulously wealthy lawyer. As such, she is a far better daughter than I am. My sister is very scant on detail when she speaks to our mother, and Mum only sees Edie through rose tinted spectacles. Whereas I am so very often cast as the Wicked Daughter.

The truth of the matter is that Edie rarely rings unless she wants something and never comes



home now. She hasn't been back at all since Mum took to her bed – even when she was actually quite ill. And, let's face it, New York is just around the corner these days. You can go there for the weekend. It's not as if Edie's in Australia or New Zealand or somewhere on the other side of the world.

Even though Edie can be a complete pain in the backside, I do miss her terribly. I wish she was here, and not just because I could do with some help with Mum. Though being the sole carer for your parent can be an onerous and thankless task, it would be nice to have Edie here just as a friend who'd know what I'm going through, so that we could, perhaps, share the emotional burden.

I press on, even though I'm beginning to realise that my mission is fruitless. 'I thought I could decorate your room while you're away.'

'I'm not going away, Little Miss Cloth Ears. I told you.'

Goodness only knows this room needs a bit of a makeover. I don't think it's been decorated since about 1972. Some of the pastel-pink, flower-sprigged wallpaper is curling and there's a damp patch on the ceiling that says we may well have a leak in the roof. Not the first. I don't even dare to go into the loft these days. To be honest, the whole of Canal House could do with a bit of tender loving care. It hasn't had any money spent on it in years, simply because there hasn't been any to spare.

I am forty-one years young and this is the only home I've ever known. I was born here, in this very room, and, at the rate I'm going, I will more than likely die here.

'I could bring in some wallpaper samples.'

'Not listening.' My mum puts her fingers in her ears. 'La, la, la. Not listening.'

I wouldn't mind if Mum was actually really ancient, but she's only seventy years old. That's all. Surely seventy is the new fifty. She should be out there having the time of her life. Yet the concept of the University of the Third Age has, unfortunately, passed her by. It's so frustrating that she seems to have given upon life and is content just to lie here. Even more frustrating is the fact that she seems to revel in it: she spends her day languishing, watching soap operas and quizzes. Or home-renovation programmes which are never destined to help this particular home.

Before I can remonstrate with her any further, I hear the back door open, and a voice travels up the stairs from the hall.

'Is me!'

That's my assistant, Lija. The café isn't open for a few hours yet but Lija has come in early today to help me scrub down the tables and chairs that have over-wintered in the garden. The first thing on a long list of glamorous tasks that we need to do before we start heading into the busy summer season. Then we won't get a minute to do anything.

'I have to go,' I say.

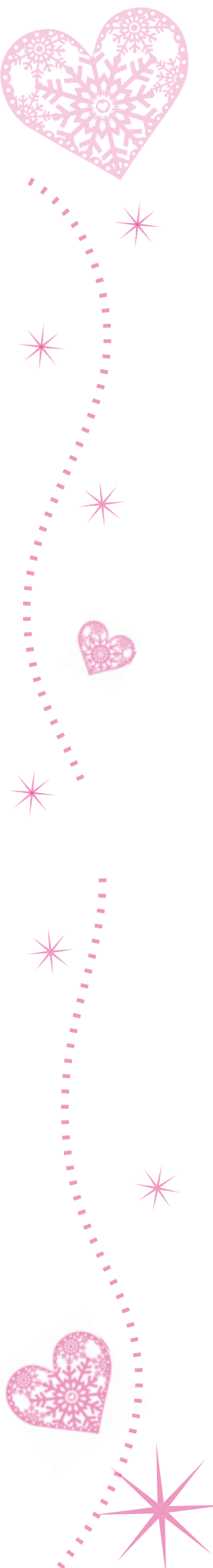
'My tea's gone cold,' Mum grumbles.

There are times when I'd swear she spends all day thinking up small ways in which to torture me. If she's woken up in a particularly belligerent mood, she often waits until I'm at the bottom of the stairs to call me back for some little instruction she might have forgotten, or to plump up her pillows.

I take her cup. 'I'll bring you a nice fresh one.'

'Not as much milk this time. It tastes like rice pudding when you make it.'

I could suggest that she's perfectly capable of getting up and making her own tea and then she'd have no cause to complain, but I don't. It would be a total waste of my breath as, sadly, I lost that argument quite some time ago. Instead, I scoop up the laundry – the sheets I changed



yesterday, the nightdress that was swapped for a fresh one this morning – and head back downstairs. ^This is my life, like it or lump it. And I simply have to man up and get on with it.

Chapter 2

When I go into the kitchen, Lija has already stripped off her coat and is taking some eggs from the fridge.

‘Morning,’ I say as I go to shove the washing in the machine and set it going. I can iron it tonight when I’m watching the episode of *Escape to the Country* that I’ve recorded. My guilty pleasure. ‘Shall we go out and clean the furniture now while it’s fine? It’s forecast to rain later and we can come in and bake then.’

This afternoon, if all goes to plan, we’re going to try out some new recipes.

‘Is always bloody raining,’ my assistant grumbles. ‘Rain, rain, rain.’

Lija Vilks is young, lithe and Latvian. She’s not really an ideal assistant for a customer-facing business as she’s quite spiky. Particularly with the customers. On the other hand, she’s a great and loyal worker who can turn her hand to pretty much anything. She bakes the most wonderful cakes, which, if I’m honest, are far better than mine. You’ve never had carrot cake until you’ve tasted Lija’s, and I’d swear that her chocolate brownies could win awards. She is a swearsy, Goth version of the goddess Mary Berry.

‘How is Old Bag today?’ Lija throws a disdainful glance at the ceiling, above which my dear mother reposes.

‘Not great,’ I admit. ‘She won’t go to the respite-care place, no matter what I say. I’m going to have to ring and cancel it.’

Lija tuts. She’s not my mother’s biggest fan. But then my mother isn’t hers either.

‘I’ve tried,’ I say. ‘I don’t know what else I can do. We’ll just have to work round her.’

‘Can you get nurse in?’

‘I can’t afford it, Lija. There’s just not enough cash in the pot.’ I let out a heartfelt sigh. ‘I wish Edie would come back and help. Even if it’s for a week or two. Perhaps I’ll have another talk with her later.’

‘Good luck with that.’ Lija gives me a black look.

My assistant’s usual colour of choice is black – both for withering stares and for clothing. Today is no different: she’s wearing black jeans with a skin-tight black T-shirt and she has her poker-straight black hair yanked back in a ponytail. Only her skin is as white as the driven snow.

Lija seldom wears a scrap of make-up, but she doesn’t need it as she’s stunningly beautiful without it, despite a slightly vampiric look. Her fringe hangs like a curtain skimming her big blue eyes, and sometimes I wonder how she actually sees through it. She eats cake morning, noon and night and has the skinniest, most sharply angled body I’ve ever seen. I’m most envious of her tiny frame. She has no breasts, no bottom, no hips, no thighs, no cellulite to contend with. Despite being up and down stairs all day looking after my mother, I run towards curves and only have to look at a cake to form another one.

The other thing I like about Lija is that she’s as reliable as the town-hall clock. She lives in the city, not far from our village, and cycles to work along the towpath come rain, hail or snow. Lija has a room in a rented house that she shares with three other Latvian girls. Collectively, they drink like fish and party all night, but she’s never once been late in the two years or more that she’s worked for me. On the rare occasions that she takes a day off, one of her friends always steps up to the plate to stand in for her, so I never have to worry about cover. The other



girls are all similarly black and spiky, but slightly less abrasive than Lija.

I boil the kettle again. ‘Mum’s tea’s gone cold,’ I say. ‘Do you want one?’

She nods. ‘I will take the tea to Old Bag. She won’t bangbangbang on ceiling all day if she thinks it will be me.’

That’s another thing in Lija’s favour. Despite her grumbles, she really doesn’t mind helping out with my mother either. I’m not saying that she’s a rival for Florence Nightingale or anything. Far from it: Dr Crippen was probably more charming than Lija. Her bedside manner is somewhat unconventional but she’s right, my mother is suddenly a lot less trouble when Lija is looking after her. Lija stands no messing from Miranda. Which is fine by me.

While Lija stomps upstairs with Mum’s tea, I fill a bucket with hot, soapy water and find two scrubbing brushes. I slip on my comfy old cardigan, pop the brushes into my pockets and go out into the garden.

This is a large house, strong and sturdy. It was built of serviceable red brick in the 1920s and is hugely proportioned compared to today’s modern boxes. We’re lucky to have a kitchen big enough to convert into a working one.

We keep Fay’s Cakes open during the winter months, but business pretty much only limps along. We still continue to sell cakes from the *Maid of Merryweather* and direct from the kitchen, but it’s only when we have a bright and sunny weekend that we see a steady stream of customers. We have a few tables in the spacious dining room, which is done up prettily with pink gingham cloths and bunting, that I made myself, draped around the picture rails. It’s a comfortable space that meets the current trend for retro chic, but only because most of the things have actually been here since they were first in fashion. My mother’s collection of pink glassware is definitely enjoying a new lease of life.

The back of the house has a pretty ironwork veranda which runs the full length of it. Now it’s covered in wisteria, whose blooms will soon be hanging heavily like clusters of grapes. Later in the summer a purple clematis takes over. It’s a lovely, sheltered spot and we have a few tables out here too.

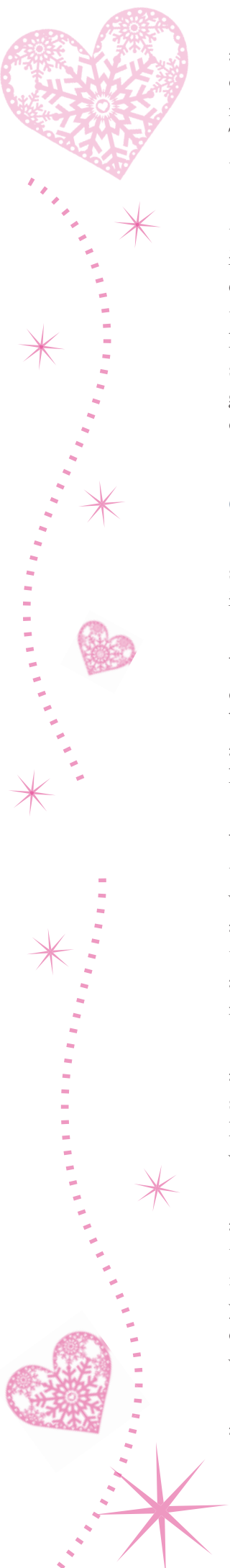
I have to say that the main attraction of the cake shop, apart from Lija’s cakes, is the stunning garden. It’s a generous plot by any standards. Broad and long, it sweeps right down to the edge of the Grand Union Canal.

It’s bounded on both sides by tall, red-brick walls which screen it from our immediate neighbour. We don’t get a lot of passing trade here as Canal House is situated at the very end of an unmade lane and is generally only discovered by those who are determined to find it. Not exactly the ideal place for a cake shop-cum-café, but then needs must. If I were to try to find premises like this elsewhere, it would cost me a small fortune. A small fortune that I don’t have.

As I look down the garden towards the canal, there’s a modest orchard of gnarled apple trees. This is protected by the high wall behind it, which is currently smothered with pink clematis that will, later in the season, be followed by climbing roses. On the right, just beyond the veranda, there’s an old magnolia which is quite magnificent if the early frost doesn’t get it. The wall is hugged by a variety of flowering shrubs, all of which are in desperate need of pruning now.

We’ve had a terrible year, so far, for weather. This is England. It’s been unseasonably cold and has done nothing but rain since January. The garden has certainly suffered for it. Though today is dry, the heads of the shrubs are mostly bowed, sodden and heavy with moisture. Further towards the canal, the beautiful cherry trees with their delicate pink blossom have taken a battering from the wind and rain of the last week. But it’s still an idyllic spot.

Before Mum took to her bed, she used to love the garden – though all the hard work was down to my dad. He was the one who made the garden so pretty. This was, once upon



a time, a humbly priced family home – until several property booms took it to the realms of astronomical. I feel so fortunate that my parents were able to buy it when they were first married, as I wouldn't have a hope of living somewhere like this otherwise. And I love it here. Truly I do. This is my family home and is filled with my memories. Call me unadventurous, but this is my own little slice of paradise and I'd never want to live anywhere else.

There's no denying that I could do with an extra pair of hands to help me maintain it though. It's an overwhelming amount of work for one person. The high winds we had back in February have brought down several big branches and there are mounds of leaves a foot deep against the boundary walls. Thankfully, the cherry blossoms have survived. If I'm honest though, all the paintwork around the place could do with a freshen-up. In the last few years the house has progressed from charmingly weathered to just plain tatty. Today is the first properly sunny day for absolutely ages, even though it's still chilly and rain is predicted later, and I'm so glad to be out in the fresh air. Easter is late this year, at the end of April, and we usually fully open the cake shop that weekend. If we want to be ready for then, we need to get a move on.

Chapter 3

Depositing the bucket by the waiting tables, I wander down the garden to my favourite spot of all on our small jetty at the edge of the canal. My dad loved to be either by water or on it in some shape or form, and this was his preferred place to come and sit too.

Victor Merryweather was born by the seaside in Pembrokeshire and, though his work brought him to this part of the country – which is possibly the furthest away from any coastline – it never quite left his soul. I didn't ever ask him, but I think that's why he and Mum bought this particular property when they married. OK, so it's not exactly the wild beaches and crashing waves that he so loved, but there's a quiet, gentle charm to an English canal that has an irresistible lure all of its own.

I miss my dad. He's been dead for nearly twenty years now, but there isn't a day that goes by when I don't think of him. He hand-built the wooden jetty that runs along the width of the garden overlooking the canal, and I try to come down here every day to sit and look at the water for five minutes if I can. Just as we did together when I was a girl. My earliest memories are of the times when we used to settle down here together, me with my legs dangling over the water, and watch the colourful narrowboats go by, or the families of ducks that are always a feature. Dad taught me to recognise the many birds that live along the canal – terns, herons, moorhens and, if you're lucky, the rare flash of blue from a kingfisher.

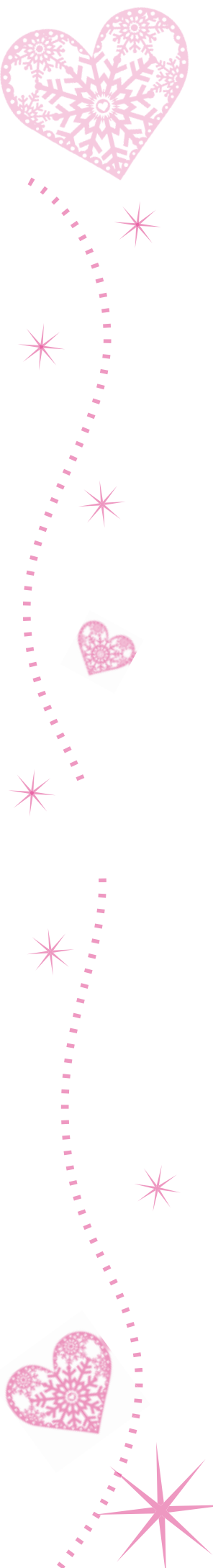
Where my mother is difficult, Dad was a gentle soul. Mum's always been demanding and Dad was generous, giving. I don't know how their relationship worked, but somehow it seemed to. Whatever Mum wanted, he agreed to. He was never one for confrontation of any kind. He was the yin to her yang, I suppose. After he died, unexpectedly of a heart attack, she was never quite the same. None of us was.

I pull up one of the wooden garden seats and take the weight off my feet while I watch a timid moorhen dash back and forth to marshal her tiny, fluffball chicks along the bank. On the towpath opposite there's a heron, motionless, eyes fixed on the water, hoping for a hapless fishy snack to swim by. Nothing much ever happens here. Life goes on unchanging, year after year. The canal is always so still and peaceful that it's easy to believe there's no other world outside of this. Two ducks jump out of the water and fluff their feathers on the jetty before waddling in step up the garden. This is my own little universe.

A brightly painted narrowboat putters by. It's one of our local boats – *Floating Paradise* – and the couple who live on it, Mr and Mrs Fenson, often pop in for a sandwich or cream tea.

'Hi, Fay!' Ralph, steering at the back, holds up a hand.

I wave back.



‘Open for business?’

‘Always,’ I call. ‘Look forward to seeing you.’

‘Get the kettle on! We’ll be in later,’ he shouts back. ‘We need to enjoy this sunshine while we can.’

Ralph and Miriam bought their narrowboat a few years ago when they gave up work. They have a residential mooring at the nearby marina and an apartment in the city that they can retreat to when the weather is too cold. What a lovely way to spend your retirement. It’s a shame Dad didn’t live long enough to do the same. He would have loved every minute of it.

Unfortunately, their boat is also known along this stretch of the canal as the *Floating Disaster*. I don’t think Ralph and Miriam have ever fully grasped the etiquette or the skills required for canal life. They are frequently muttered about as people who leave the sluices open and drain the pound. Or leave the lock gates open. Or rock everyone else’s boats as they zoom along the waterways above the usual speed limit, Ralph in his peaked captain’s cap and Miriam in one of her many blue-and-white-striped jumpers or T-shirts. Once they had a huge party on board for all of their friends and nearly scuttled their own boat, it was so overloaded. I don’t think they go very far in Floating Paradise as they’re usually moored somewhere close to the marina, which is probably just as well. Lots of the hardened canal folk grumble about them, but they’re a delightfully dotty pair and are always welcome in the cake shop as they cheer the day up no end.

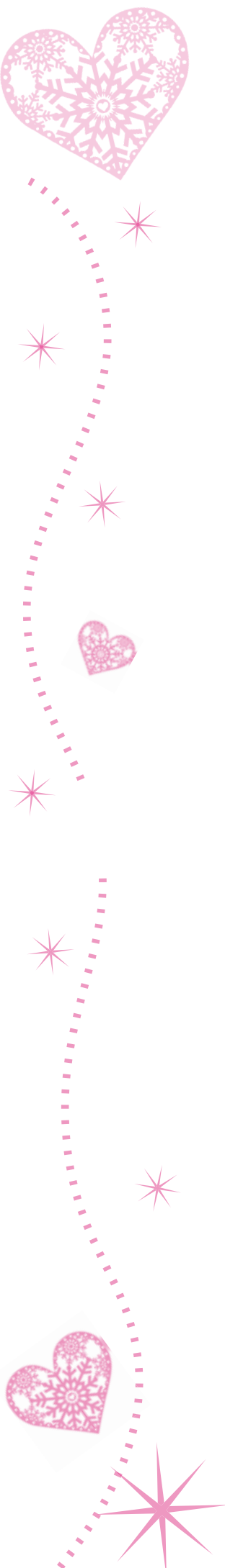
The *Maid of Merryweather* is moored here at the bottom of the garden. She’s a sixty-foot traditional boat. Dad’s pride and joy. He absolutely loved her. There wasn’t a day that went by when he didn’t come down to see her at some point. It was always his plan to spend more time on her when he’d stopped working.

Mum, of course, hated the narrowboat. She was as jealous of her as she would have been a mistress. (I’m pretty sure that sometimes Mum did have to compete with the *Maid of Merryweather* for top spot in Dad’s affections.) Much like the Fensons, my parents never went very far in her – though Dad always wanted to. He’d have been quite happy to give up his job and spend his time travelling the canals of England. Mum had other ideas though. She didn’t even like to sleep on board overnight as she said it was cramped and she only ever did it under sufferance. With all the delights of the waterways on offer, we only ever used to go as far as Berkhamsted in one direction and Stoke Bruerne on the way to Northampton in the other. That must have driven Dad mad, but he never said so. He just relished every moment he spent on the boat.

Those family holidays were the highlight of my year too. I loved the *Maid* just as much as Dad did and preferred to think of her as cosy rather than cramped. Though being confined to the cabin with Edie when she was little – especially if it was raining – could make it feel like a much smaller space. My sister would be stir-crazy after an hour or two, bouncing off the walls. I’ve always been the one who could sit quietly with a book.

The narrowboat was Dad’s project, a labour of love. He was never happier than when he was on the canal, tinkering away. He was a clerical worker by day in one of the many new firms that settled in Milton Keynes in the 1980s and yet, the minute he came home, he’d strip off his suit and tie to rush down to the canal. Every evening and weekend he was always in his work jeans and a navy sweater, oil on his hands, a smile on his face. Since he died, the *Maid of Merryweather* hasn’t moved at all, which makes me feel very guilty. I don’t even think the engine works any more. Last time I tried to start it, I couldn’t get a peep out of her. Dad would hate that.

The outside of the barge is painted in the traditional colours of the canal – dark green and red embellished with the roses that historically decorate narrowboats. She might look a little bit ragged and worn around the edges now, but I’ve kept the inside spick and span. It would take a lot of work to make her habitable but, superficially, she’s faring quite well. The



main living-room cabin and galley are furnished with oak cupboards and a log-burning stove that now stands unlit. There are crocheted lace covers at the windows.

Though the *Maid of Merryweather* might stand idle, she certainly earns her keep. Now she's a vital part of Fay's Cakes. People come to the house to buy our produce, but I think they like the quirkiness of the canal boat and it's a great draw for tourists and the regulars on the canal alike. I stock a nice range of home-made cakes, pies, biscuits and jam. In the summer I make my own lemonade too, which is always popular. A chap in the village, Graham Lovett, paints nice watercolour pictures of the area and I sell them as postcards and small prints as we get a lot of holiday traffic along this part of the canal. The big marina nearby hires out rental boats and we're often their first port of call.

As I've said it was from that humble beginning that the idea of Fay's Cakes gradually grew. I'd see all the boats going by, the people who live on the canal, the tourists on the holiday boats, and watch the families walking or cycling on the towpaths, and realised that they couldn't get a cup of tea or a piece of cake unless they went to one of the pubs dotted along this stretch of water. And you don't always want a pub, do you?

My job as a senior administration co-ordinator wasn't exactly keeping me enthralled. It paid well enough, but it hardly made my days zing with excitement. I'd been mulling over a change of direction for a while, though nothing came to mind that would require only my limited skill set. Then, when Mum decided she was an invalid and was going to stay that way, I simply couldn't carry on working full-time and look after her as well. I'd have ended up in the bed right next to her. I tried having paid help to come in and take some of the strain, but Mum wouldn't let them near her. Plus it was so expensive. Yet to do it all myself was exhausting. In the end I had to give in my notice, and that's when I thought that perhaps I could use the house and garden to expand the business.

So Fay's Cakes and the *Maid of Merryweather* are now both my sanity and my full-time job. I look fondly at the pretty narrowboat and don't know why my mother has always been so set against her. What's not to love? Even now, when the boat at least brings in some money, Mum's always keen to have a dig at her.

If it was up to Mum the *Maid of Merryweather* would have gone years ago, but it's the one thing I've put my foot down about. The *Maid of Merryweather* is all I have left of Dad and, as long as I have breath in my body, she's going nowhere without me.

Chapter 4

Lija comes to join me in the garden. She stomps up to the jetty wearing yellow rubber gloves and a dark scowl.

'She is evil old witch,' she says. 'If she was my mother, I would put pillow over her face.'

'Sometimes I feel like it,' I concur.

'Next tea I take her, I will spit in it.'

I don't think I'm necessarily a natural carer, but compared to Lija I am Mother Teresa.

'Shall we get started on the tables?' I've sat here musing for too long and now we should get a move on before the forecast rain comes. I brandish the scrubbing brushes in a hopeful manner.

Unfortunately, we don't have a lot of storage space here, so the tables and chairs have to stay out all winter. I stack them and throw over an old tarpaulin to protect them from the worst of the weather, but by the time I uncover them again every spring they're still stained with dirt and green mould.

Lija and I head to the tables. The water in the bucket has gone a bit cold now, but it will



have to do as I can't waste time going to boil some more. Together we start to scrub.

The tables out here are pretty, all different pastel shades. I bought them cheaply at IKEA when I started and they were called 'TWORK or SPLAT' or some such. I officially launched Fay's Cakes about three years ago and the first one went in a blur as I learned the ropes. So this summer season I feel as if I'm really getting into my stride. To be honest, as the café sort of evolved rather than came from some kind of cunning master plan, I feel very lucky that it went better than I could have imagined in that first year, particularly in the summer months. I started to have regular customers, people who'd walk along the canal or come by narrowboat. They'd buy something from the *Maid of Merryweather* – a cake, a pot of jam, a bottle of lemonade – and then stay for a cup of tea. The only downside was that being here all day with my mum could not only be testing, but lonely too. I did miss the office environment as I had no one else to talk to, and those customers were my lifeline. In the second year, flushed with moderate success, I added some more tables in the garden and, just because they are my own favourite, started to specialise in afternoon teas. They proved to be so popular that I soon had to take on an extra pair of hands. I put an advert in the local paper, had fifty people phone me to apply, and interviewed three. I liked Lija instantly. I don't know why, as the other two seemed much more amenable. But she was the only one who brought a home-made cake along with her – a coffee and walnut sponge – and it was simply the best cake I'd ever tasted. So Lija joined me and she's been here ever since.

That year, I turned the dining room into a little indoor space – to many complaints from my mother, who still objects to having the house used for the general public. I keep telling her: if it's good enough for the Queen, then it's good enough for us.

The dining room is a useful addition in bad weather, even though it only fits four small tables. In the summer we can open the French doors which look out on to the garden. Apart from the few tables under the veranda, the rest of them are at the mercy of the elements. It means that business is very weatherdependent and, as such, a bit erratic, but somehow it works and, just about, keeps the wolf from the door.

I bought two new sunshades at the end of last year which will also provide shelter from a shower, but haven't got round to putting them up yet. I need a man with a screwdriver, and my partner, Anthony, may be a lot of things, but a handyman certainly isn't one of them.

Lija is scrubbing away – with more enthusiasm than me, it has to be said. The sun peeps out from behind the clouds and it feels warm on my back. I hope this year will be a good one and that I can put some money away. I'm trying to save up to renovate the *Maid of Merryweather*, as I know Dad would have liked that. I think, at the very least, she needs a new engine, and that's not going to come cheap.

As I stand up and stretch, I see a narrowboat coming towards our mooring. It's not one that I recognise and it's always nice to have a new customer. Last summer I put up a sign on the canalside, which attracts a lot of passing trade from the boating community. But this boat I don't know.

Putting up my hand to shade my eyes, I watch it pulling in behind Dad's barge. 'Who's this then?'

The Dreamcatcher. Possibly the most common name for a canal boat, so no surprises there. The boat's a traditional style and, much like the *Maid of Merryweather*, old and a little bit worn around the edges too. But, from this distance at least, the owner of the boat looks to be a young man. He jumps off the stern on to the jetty, mooring rope in hand, in a very athletic manner.

'Looks like we might have a customer,' I say to Lija. I haven't even opened up yet. All the fresh cakes for sale today are still sitting in the kitchen in their cellophane wrappings. It's normally in the afternoon, when people are thinking about what to have as a teatime treat or for their dinner, that we're at our busiest. Though, if I'm honest, we're never really going to



trouble Tesco with our sales figures.

‘Humph,’ Lija grumbles, still dashing backwards and forwards with her scrubbing brush. ‘Tell him we are busy.’

‘Nonsense. We need the business, and it won’t take a minute to put the kettle on.’ I could actually do with a cup of tea myself. ‘He can sit on the veranda, if he doesn’t mind. The tables there are nice and clean.’

Putting down my scrubbing brush, I make an attempt to look businesslike. Never easy in knitwear products. Efficiently, the man ties up his boat behind the *Maid of Merryweather* and, a few minutes later, is moored alongside the jetty. A little dog, possibly a Jack Russell cross, pops its head over the side of the boat. It’s white with brown and black patches and is wearing a red neckerchief which looks unbearably cute.

‘Come on, Diggery.’ The man clicks his fingers and the dog jumps off the boat, dropping obediently into step behind him.

Canal people tend to fall pretty much into two camps: pensioners and hippies. This man is neither. As he strides purposefully up into the garden, I note that he’s tall, very much so, and rangy. Not that I know much about men’s fashion these days, but I think he looks quite edgy. He’s wearing black skinny jeans and big army boots. These are topped with a black T-shirt and a faded grey denim jacket. His hair is also jet-black, cut short at the sides but a riot on top, going every which way, and ending in some sort of quiff that flops forward.

I would like some sort of statement hair, like Lija’s or, indeed, this man’s. Instead I have a blonde pixie crop, essentially because it’s easy to maintain rather than the mass of bohemian curls tumbling to my waist that I secretly long for. As if I’d ever have the time to look after those.

As he gets closer, I can tell that the sum of the parts adds up to a rather pleasing whole. Without even thinking, I say, ‘Oh my.’

Even Lija stands up and stops what she’s doing. ‘Denim on denim,’ is her scornful assessment.

When he’s right in front of us, he says ‘Hi, ladies,’ and treats us to the warmest smile I’ve seen in a long time. Possibly ever. That is a smile that would break hearts. Many of them. ‘Hi,’ I manage.

He takes in the fact that the garden is still very much in winter mode and that we’re currently busy scrubbing tables.

‘Are you open?’

His accent is soft, Irish and rather sexy.

‘Oh yes,’ I say and realise that, for the first time in my life, my heart has gone all of a-flutter.

Chapter 5

So I find this rather handsome man a table on the veranda and he sits down, stretching out his long legs. I’m normally quite chatty with my customers, but I feel all flustered and can’t think of a word to say. I think he’s young, possibly early thirties – a full ten years or more younger than I am. Then I realise that I’m staring.

Perhaps he’s used to being stared at, as he seems completely unaware of it.

‘I’m Danny,’ he offers when it becomes clear that I’m tongue-tied. ‘Danny Wilde.’ With his big Doc Martens boots and his tatty T-shirt he looks a bit rough and ready, but his voice



is cultured, polite.

He gestures to the little dog, which is making itself comfortable at his feet. ‘This is Diggery.’

Finally, I find my voice. ‘Hello, Diggery.’ I bend down to scratch the dog’s neck and he leans into my hand, delighted by the attention. ‘I’m Fay. I’ll get you a menu.’

‘I don’t need one. All I’d love is a bacon buttie,’ he says with a grin. ‘A great big one. I’ve been dreaming of it all morning. I’ve run out of bread and bacon on the boat, so I’ve been torturing myself.’

‘It’s not something we usually offer, but I’ve got some bacon in the fridge. Do you want it on brown or white?’

‘White. With lots of ketchup. If you’re going to be bad, you might as well be really bad.’ His eyes twinkle.

‘Tea or coffee?’

‘A good mug of builder’s tea.’

I don’t tell him that our signature crockery is mismatched, delicate vintage china. If this guy wants a mug, he can have exactly that. I can see Lija watching closely, her steady gaze never leaving me.

‘It’ll be ready in a few minutes.’

As I move away, he kicks back, closing his eyes and letting the sun play on his face. My heart has stopped fluttering now, thank goodness. Unfortunately, it’s moved into full-on pounding.

Ridiculously, my hands are actually shaking when I put the bacon under the grill. It’s fair to say that we don’t get many handsome strangers through our doors. Our day is normally filled with curmudgeonly pensioners or families with hyper - active children who try to pull the heads off all my flowers. Any day of the week, Danny Whateverhesaidhisnamewas makes a welcome change.

I make a mug of strong tea and find a bowl to take some water out for the little dog.

Danny takes his tea with a smile and I put down the bowl of water. Diggery wags his tail in thanks.

‘That’s kind,’ he says.

‘I’d love a dog,’ I say. ‘But, well . . .’

I don’t tell him that my mum can’t stand pets in any shape or form and that I wasn’t even allowed a goldfish as a child. Anthony, too, hates dogs, cats and kids. Not necessarily in that order.

‘I wouldn’t be without him,’ Danny says. ‘Would I, Digs?’ At that, the little dog abandons his drink and launches himself to sit on Danny’s lap, and gets a big hug for his trouble. When the dog is sufficiently cuddled – lucky dog – he looks up at me again with those dark, mischievous eyes. ‘Are you the owner of this place?’

‘Yes – well, no . . . sort of.’ Stop gabbling, woman, you sound like a gibbering idiot. I take a breath. ‘My mother owns the house, but I run the cake shop and café.’

‘Pretty,’ he says, taking in the garden. His gaze settles on me again and he smiles like a naughty schoolboy. ‘And the garden.’

I flush to my hair roots. No one ever flirts with me. Especially not young, handsome men. Especially not when I’m wearing a big cardy.

His face softens when he sees my discomfiture. ‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel



uncomfortable.’

‘I’m fine,’ I say. ‘Absolutely fine.’ Then I realise that I’m fanning my face with the menu.

‘You’ve got a lot on here,’ he notes. ‘This is a big garden to manage. Do you have help?’

‘No,’ I admit. ‘Not really. I do most of it myself.’ Occasionally, if pushed, Anthony will run round with the lawnmower. But more often than not it has to be done on Monday, when we’re usually closed all day, and Anthony is at work. Alternatively, it’s done in the evenings when, invariably, Anthony is playing golf. ‘We’re just gearing up for the season,’ I explain. ‘And we’re a bit behind with our tasks, so we’ve got our work cut out.’

‘Do you need a spare pair of hands?’

‘Always,’ I laugh.

‘I’m serious,’ he says. ‘I’m looking for some casual work. I can turn my hand to most things. I’m not great with plants and flowers, but I can wield a hammer and a paintbrush. I can work a lawnmower and a strimmer.’

‘Really?’ Then I remember the bacon under the grill and go into a blind panic. ‘Oh my God, the bacon! Let me get your sandwich, then we can talk about it more.’

As I’m dashing back to the kitchen, I think of all the little jobs that are stacking up. Danny could come in really useful for a few days. For a start, he could clear the leaves and branches. The lawn needs mowing, as always, though it’s too wet at the moment, and perhaps he could put up those sunshades for me. I bought some nice, retro enamel signs last year too, adorned with catchy sayings, you know the kind of thing: *I don’t want to fall in love, I want to fall in chocolate and keep calm and eat a cupcake*. Well, they’ve been sitting in a box ever since. He could put those up too. And there are a few bits of the fence that need repairing. Days could actually be weeks, if I can find the money. I could certainly keep his hands busy for a while. I don’t mean that. Of course I don’t. You know what I mean. There’s plenty of work here to keep him occupied. That’s what I mean.

As requested, I put lots of ketchup on his sandwich and take it back outside. Danny, obviously ravenous, bites into it. Diggery whimpers his desire for bacon too, and Danny tears off a morsel and feeds it to him.

‘I could do with someone to do the heavier work in the garden,’ I say. ‘But I’m afraid I can’t pay a lot.’

‘Perhaps you could make up my wages in bacon butties,’ he grins. ‘This is great.’

‘I certainly don’t mind feeding you while you’re here.’ ‘Sounds like a deal. When do I start?’

‘Could you possibly stay around now to give us a hand? Lija and I have got a long list of things to do.’ None of which is being done while I’m standing chatting. ‘We want to do some baking later on if we can, so it would be great to leave you to it.’

‘Baking? Hmm. I’ll work for cake too,’ he adds. I see him eyeing Lija up and down. Why wouldn’t he? She’s young and beautiful. And, let’s not beat about the bush here, so is he.

‘That’s Lija,’ I tell him, following his gaze. ‘She works here full-time too. Her cakes are beyond compare.’

He laughs at that. ‘Then that’s settled. You have a new handyman, Fay.’

‘Great.’ I’m still stunned at the speed of this. He seems to have morphed very quickly from customer into staff, but I don’t think I should look a gift horse in the mouth. ‘When you’ve finished your sandwich, perhaps you could help us finish cleaning down the tables.’

‘I’m on it.’ Danny wipes ketchup from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘What do I owe you for this?’



‘Have this one on the house,’ I tell him. Then I risk a smile. ‘I’ll make sure you earn it.’

‘Thanks. I like the sound of that, Fay,’ he says. ‘I like the sound of it very much.’

Then he looks at me with those eyes that are so brown that they’re almost black. They shine with sincerity and sparkle with mischief at the same time. My breath is in very great danger of being taken again.

‘You won’t regret this,’ Danny says.

But, somewhere deep in the convoluted recesses of my very sensible mind, I wonder if I might.