

## Extract from “The Chocolate Lovers’ Christmas”

### Chapter 1

It’s a well-known fact that if you break chocolate outwards, all the calories fall out. Fabulous. I put this theory to the test and snap a piece off a chunky bar of 70 per cent Madagascar chocolate to set myself up for the day. Hmm. Certainly looks lower in calories to me already. Popping it into my mouth I enjoy the intense, dark sensation of paradise on my tongue. I, Lucy Lombard, manager of Chocolate Heaven and self-confessed chocolate addict, sigh happily into the ether.

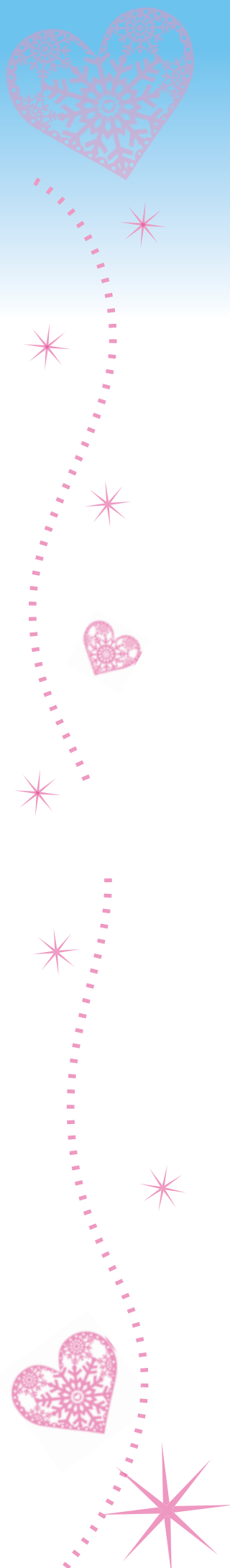
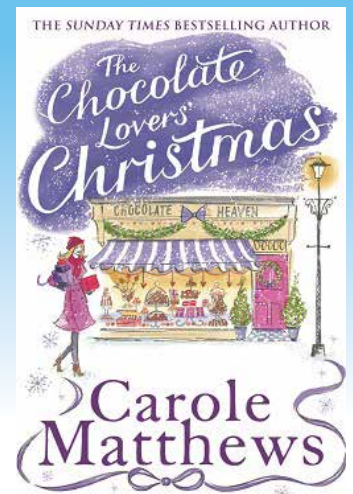
It’s coming up to Christmas and, due to an unfeasibly early morning start on my part, Chocolate Heaven is now decorated in its finest festive garb. Designed by me and sourced entirely from the bargain basement of eBay, I’ve tried to aim for tasteful instead of Santa’s grotto. I think I may have nailed it. Now the busy café and emporium of all things chocolatey is dressed in a most restrained theme of silver, white, chocolate brown and Dairy Milk purple. Perfect.

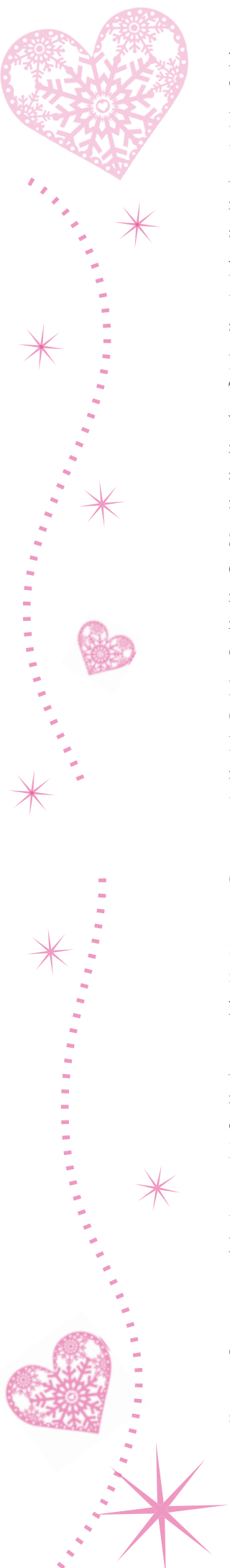
Groups of baubles in co-ordinating colours dangle attractively from the wall lights and there are pretty, blinking fairy lights across the wall behind the counter. I’ve changed the usual brown velvet cushions on our leather sofas for white felt ones adorned with a sprinkling of glittery, sequined snow-flakes. Classy. Flanking the front door there are two beautiful, tall Christmas trees, also dressed in what I’m calling my ‘signature’ festive theme. There’s a wreath on the door made of baubles too – bought rather than fashioned by my own fair hand. It’s possibly more restrained in colour palette than in sheer volume of decorations which, I think, is straying towards the outer reaches of excessive.

It’s nearly opening time now and so I stop fiddling with the decorations and take my station. Checking the counter in front of me, I make minor adjustments to the trays of hand-baked brownies, chunky chocolate-chip cookies, and rows of colourful melt-in-the-mouth macaroons sandwiched together with a rich chocolate ganache. I’m proud to say that I’ve introduced several new ranges since I took over – more cake-based than the straightforward chocolate selection that the owners, Clive and Tristan, favoured – and they’re all flying out of the door. Cake is the new sex, isn’t it? And chocolate cake is, of course, the best of all. I don’t think it’s bragging to say that the dark chocolate and pistachio rocky road has already become a legend throughout the land. Well, north London. I fuss with my devil’s food cake, turning it so that it’s showing its best side to the world. With a last proprietorial glance at my goodies, I go to the door of the café, flick the sign to ‘open’ and wait for the day to begin.

I’m coming to the end of my ninth month of running Chocolate Heaven and it’s fair to say that I’m totally exhausted. Despite the excitement of putting up the Christmas decorations, today my eyes are gritty from lack of sleep as – in addition to my early start – I was also burning the midnight oil last night trying to keep up with the paperwork. Who knew there’d be so much? It’s endless – logging the sales, making sure the orders are being fulfilled, ordering the ingredients, doing tax returns. I am a woman who is more intimate with the art of the spreadsheet than I ever thought I would be. My previous experience with chocolate has been entirely based on consumption rather than the administration thereof. When I was a mere customer of Chocolate Heaven – albeit one of the most fervent ones – I never knew how much work went into simply putting wonderful chocolate yummys on the counter. It’s a lot, I can tell you. *A lot.*

My vision of running this – my ideal business – involved me standing languidly savouring my chocolate products in the smugly pouting style of Nigella Lawson, overseeing my newfound empire with a loving eye while retaining a comely size twelve/fourteen figure through the





power of positive thinking rather than anything as tawdry or time-consuming as exercise. Fat chance.

Reality check. I'm run off my feet from morning until night and my waistband is getting ever tighter. And I know I'm not pregnant because, frankly, I couldn't tell you the last time Mr Aiden 'Crush' Holby – the love of my life – and I had carnal knowledge of each other. This is due to the fact that I fall into bed every night absolutely knackered and am snoring within about three seconds. He might well have sex with me, but if he does, I don't actually notice.

Nor am I languidly savouring my chocolates in the manner of my fantasy. No, I'm stuffing them in morning, noon and night because I don't have the time or inclination to make myself any other food. Some might say, no change there then.

Perhaps I've got an underactive thyroid. It happens. I'm over thirty now and heading towards That Age. It's a well-known fact that women's bodies start to have minds of their own once we hit middle age. We lay down fat on our hips, tums and bums in case we ever find ourselves in danger of starvation or something. Clearly, I have started already. I could live off my hips alone for weeks. I have another chocolate as now I've depressed myself and chocolate is a most excellent cure for depression. True fact.

Still, I'm not complaining. Not at all. This is my dream gig. All those years of wandering disastrously through the world of temporary office work are behind me now. I've arrived. This is what I was predestined to do. It's my calling. Like becoming a nun or something. Chocolate is my vocation and, for the good of others, I have entered into this life selflessly. I eat another chocolate to celebrate. Yum. Pay's not great, but the perks are unrivalled.

I should point out that it's in my contract that I'm allowed to eat all the chocolate that I want. Oh yes. I think Clive and Tristan thought that after being let loose – literally – in a sweet shop, I'd eventually run out of steam and my consumption would soon wane to the seemingly side of moderation. Not a hope. No let up yet. I still can't wait to get here every morning and inhale that heady vanilla scent. Ah, bliss.

## Chapter 2

I'm sticking just a few more strategically placed stars and snowflakes on the glass display for good measure when the bell above the shop door dings the arrival of a customer. The first member of my four-strong chocoholic gang – the Chocolate Lovers' Club – lumbers in, puffing heavily.

Our club of chocoholics is formed of my good self – founder member – Nadia Stone, Autumn Fielding and Chantal Hamilton. We're a disparate bunch of women who all met here many moons ago due to our mutual appreciation of all things chocolatey and it still sustains our relationship to this day. We are the best of friends, a family of chocoholics and Chocolate Heaven is our sanctuary, our headquarters.

It's Chantal who's the first to arrive today, wrestling her über-trendy baby carriage through the doorway in her wake. 'My word.' Her mouth drops open. 'This is all a bit Santa's grotto, Lucy.'

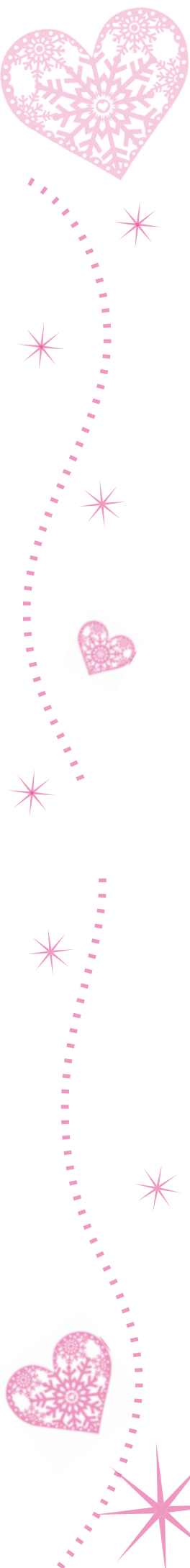
'Is it? I thought it was quite restrained.'

Chantal laughs. 'I assumed you were embracing the concept that *more* is more when it comes to Christmas decorations – as it is with chocolate.'

I cast a more critical eye over my efforts. I still don't think it's too bad. 'Do you think I should take some of them down?'

'No.' Chantal kisses me. 'It's perfect. So very you.'

'Let me help you.' I grab the buggy from her and beam at the baby cuddled in its depths.



‘It’s freezing out there,’ my friend complains with a shiver. ‘I think it could snow heavily again. There’s a smattering in the air.’

‘Hurrah!’

She shoots me a black look.

‘It’s Christmas,’ I say apologetically. ‘Nearly. It *should* snow.’

Chantal rolls her eyes at me and shakes a few flakes of snow from her bobbed dark hair. ‘I think slush. I think treach-erous pavements. While you’re probably fantasising about building a cheery snowman with your loved one and snowball fights that turn into foreplay.’

‘I hadn’t *actually* thought of that,’ I confess, ‘but what a lovely idea.’ Makes mental note. Snowball fight/foreplay scenario. Excellent.

Chantal’s death glare intensifies, so I quickly park the buggy for her while she flops into the nearest sofa with a heartfelt *ouff*. ‘Couldn’t quite make it to the counter,’ she apologises.

I’m not sure that my friend’s waddle is entirely down to the fact she’s never managed to shift her baby weight – more that she is, in time-honoured tradition, eating enough chocolate for two – or possibly even three. I don’t have the heart to tell her that she should probably stop now that dear baby Lana is about five months old. Once she was all designer chic and sharp angles. Now she’s more mumsy, gently rounded and into elasticated waists. I think it suits her, but I’m not sure that my friend would agree.

At nearly forty, Chantal is the oldest member of the Chocolate Lovers’ Club and I don’t think she’d ever really planned on being a mum. Lana was what we might call ‘a little surprise’. But now that she has a child, Chantal has taken to the whole motherhood thing like a duck to water.

‘The decorations do look lovely.’ Chantal takes them in. ‘You’re right. You can never have enough festive bling. You’ve been very busy.’

‘I was in here at six o’clock this morning.’

‘Ha,’ Chantal says. ‘I should have joined you then. Madam had me up at four. Again. I *long* for the days when I could lie in bed until six o’clock.’ Chantal rubs her temples. ‘Baby Lana is still working on the theory that night-time is for kicking your heels up and daytime is for sleeping.’

Lana is a little cherub and I coo at her in the manner of a woman besotted. We all adore her. This child has more surrogate aunties than you can shake a stick at and we have all vowed to bring her up to embrace the ethos of the Chocolate Lovers’ Club.

‘I’m exhausted,’ Chantal admits.

‘You do look a bit worn out.’

‘I think I need a double choc hit. I went down the chamomile tea and boiled egg route, but it didn’t even touch my tiredness. Be a love.’

‘Can I have a quick cuddle with Lana first? I can’t wait.’

‘Be my guest.’

Lovely little Lana is swaddled from head to toe against the cold in an adorable pink suit. I lift her up, grunting slightly as I do. Wow, she’s a weight. ‘Baby Hamilton is getting very big.’

‘Tell me about it. Lana is taking after her mummy. I don’t think I’m ever going to be able to see my feet again.’

‘I thought the weight was supposed to drop off you when you start breastfeeding,’ I offer. ‘All the celebs say that it does.’

‘Yeah? The celebs are liars. Bet they all pay personal trainers to torture them every day and



live on nothing but lettuce. I'm permanently hungry, as is this little one.'

Giving Lana a good, squishy cuddle, I goo-goo-gah-gah some more before I reluctantly part with her and head off to make Chantal her drink.

When I'm behind the counter again, I grab some milk and froth it in my whizzy new coffee machine. It looks like the flight deck of some retro spacecraft and I had to go on a course for a whole day just to learn how to drive it. I am a woman who knows her way round a flat white and a hazelnut latte. My caramel macchiato is a thing of beauty.

'How's that chocolate coming along?'

'Be right with you.' There's no packet hot chocolate here. It's all made with real chocolate flakes and I stir plenty in until it's rich and dark just as I know Chantal likes it. Then with a flourish, also learned on my day course, I dust the froth on the top to make a heart in cocoa powder. *Et voila!* I deliver it to Chantal. 'To produce something so wonderful takes a while.'

'Sorry, Lucy,' she sighs. 'I'm sure that time is moving at half its normal pace. The days are stretching out before me interminably. All I do is look after this little one. I love it, but sometimes I do feel like an indentured servant.'

'I think it stops when they get to twenty-one,' I say with a grin.

'I'm not so sure these days. Half of my friends still have children at home in their late twenties. Still, I'm never going to let Lana leave home. I'm going to keep her all to myself for ever.'

With the chocolate, there's a brownie that's so fresh it's still slightly warm from the oven and I've put an extra dollop of whipped cream on the side.

She eyes it longingly. 'What calories?'

I shrug. 'There'll be time enough for dieting. If you can't over-indulge yourself when you're in the initial stages of moth-erhood, when can you? If you restrict yourself it might even be dangerous.'

'As if I need any encouragement.' Chantal pats her tummy and bites into the brownie with a grateful sigh. 'Remember the days when I was a groomed, glossy magazine journalist and as thin as a pin?'

'I certainly do.'

'Good. Because I don't. I feel like that was a different person. One that I'm never likely to see again.'

'Don't beat yourself up. It's early days yet. Lana is your priority now. You can't do everything.'

'See this?' Chantal pulls a handful of her short bob. 'I used to get it cut every four weeks without fail at a high-end salon. I did it last night with the kitchen scissors in front of the bathroom mirror. What's happened to me?'

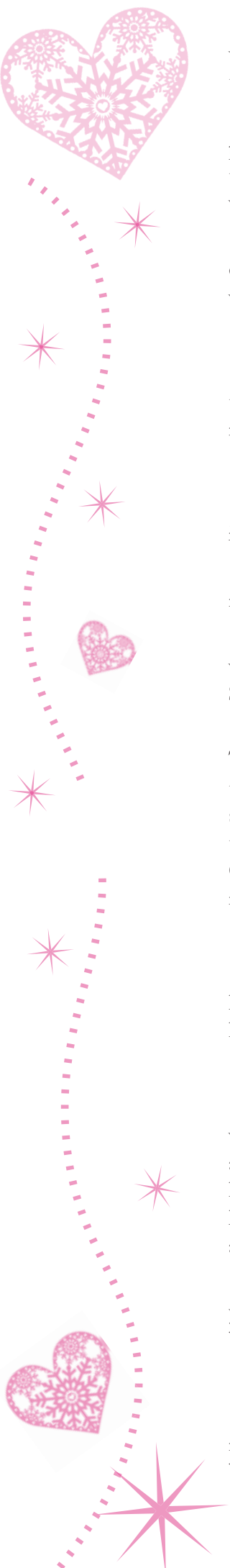
'Your hair looks fine.' Though, if I'm honest, her fringe does look a little bit ragged, now she's pointed it out. 'There's more to life than having the perfect haircut and manicured nails.'

'I'm glad to hear it.' She looks in dismay at the nibbled, varnish-free nails she holds out to me for inspection.

'You'll get back on track. There's no hurry. Just enjoy this little one for now. You're being a great mum to Lana. That's the best job in the world. You have a healthy and happy baby. The cut and thrust of glossy magazines can wait a while.'

'Part of me misses work,' she admits. 'Being at home all the time does make me kind of crazy, but I do love spending my days with Lana, too.' Chantal smiles lovingly at her child.

To me, Chantal still looks amazing, even though – admittedly – she's a slightly larger



version of her previous self. Designer tracksuits – loose fitting – have replaced the tight Joseph trousers and fitted Ghost blouses of pre-baby days.

Where once Chantal would never have a hair out of place and her manicure would be perfect in the latest on-trend colour, she definitely now takes a more . . . er . . . casual approach to her appearance. And nothing wrong with that. If she is packing a few extra pounds, so what? Her smile is warm and contented. What more should we ask of ourselves?

‘Some days it does feel as if I’m going out of my mind with boredom.’ She tucks into her cream with a spoon. ‘On other days I feel that I never want to work again and will spend my whole life just gazing at my little girl.’

‘That might be awkward when she gets a boyfriend.’

‘She’s never going to have one,’ Chantal counters. ‘We’re going to keep you away from all those nasty men, aren’t we? We are. You’re not going to make the same mistakes that Momma made, are you?’

Lana gurgles happily and we both grin at her, completely smitten.

‘How’s Ted?’ I ask. Chantal and her husband have never had the best of relationships, but it seems to have been very strained of late.

‘He’s fine. Busy at work. Loving Lana. He’s trying very hard to be a good father.’ She raises an eyebrow. ‘To *both* of his girls.’

I hate to bring this up, but there was a question over the paternity of little Lana when she was born as Chantal enjoyed a fling with our dear friend Jacob Lawson – among others. Ahem. She classes it as her Wild Period.

She wasn’t the only one sowing her oats at the time, either. While Chantal was seeing Jacob, Ted fathered another Baby Hamilton too. So now their family arrangements are complicated to say the least. Enough to drive a woman to chocolate. But whose aren’t tricky in some way, shape or form these days? This is the age of the extended family. But a swift DNA test proved that Lana is, indeed, one hundred per cent Hamilton baby and, after a shaky time, Ted and Chantal are trying to make things work for the sake of the baby. Which we’re all relieved about, not least of all Chantal.

‘He adores Lana.’

‘Of course he does. She’s so cute.’ I want to kiss her chubby, pink cheeks. Just looking at her pulls at my heartstrings. Nearly as much as for my beloved Crush and they get pulled for him quite a lot too. ‘What’s not to love?’

‘Think you’d like to join me?’ Chantal nods at Lana.

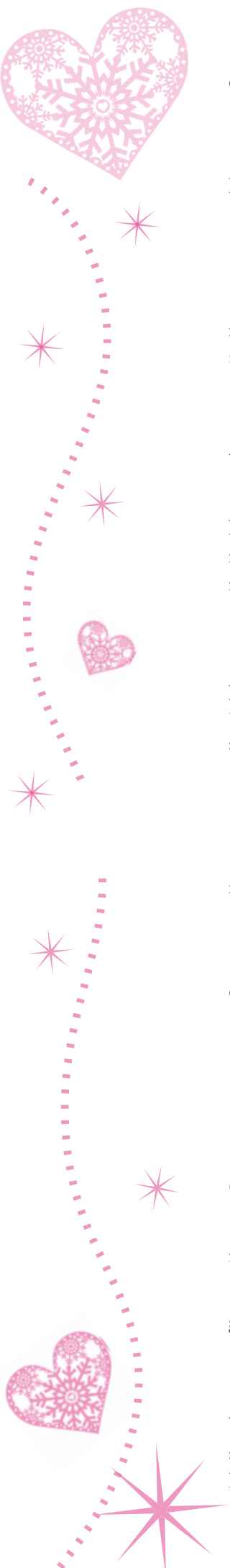
‘Me? Have a baby? I don’t know. Maybe one day.’ I feel a pang of longing. It happens a lot when I look at Lana. I think I would like a baby with Crush as he’d make a wonderful dad. It’s all very well being a thrusting, ambitious business-woman, but I have to put everything else on hold for now. I shrug off the question, not trusting my own emotions. ‘You know what I’m like. I have trouble keeping my own body and soul together. How could I ever hope to look after someone else without breaking them?’

‘Don’t leave it as late as me. I’d pretty much accepted that I’d never have children. Once you’re over forty and on the downward slide in the fertility stakes, it’s not exactly impos-sible, but it’s not that easy either. You’re young.’

‘I’m in the fresh flush of my thirties. I thought I had years yet.’

‘Not necessarily. You need to think about getting on with it.’ She gives me a sage stare to reinforce the message. ‘I can’t say that Lana was actually planned, as you know, but I wouldn’t be without her now. I’d love to have another baby, but it needs to be sooner rather than later.’

‘What’s stopping you?’



‘There is the slight issue that Ted and I are not, well . . . you know. *Close* in the bedroom department.’

‘Still not?’

Chantal shakes her head. ‘No action at all since Lana was born. We’ve not even held hands.’

We both laugh at that.

‘The only thing I want to do in bed now is *sleep*,’ she adds.

It’s fair to say that Chantal has had a colourful love life. At one point it was the other way round. She was sex-starved and couldn’t get Ted interested. How times change! ‘It would have saved you a lot of trouble if you’d discovered that some years ago.’

‘Ain’t that the truth, sister,’ she agrees and we have a giggle together.

‘You’re going to have to do more than *sleep* with Ted if you want Lana to have a sister or brother.’

‘I can’t keep using Lana as an excuse.’ Chantal looks away and sighs. ‘Our relationship has changed. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but we’re not the same together anymore. In many ways we get on better now as we have Lana to focus on, but there’s definitely something missing.’

I put my hand on her arm. ‘This should be a happy time for you both.’

‘Perhaps it just happens when you have a child to consider. The dynamics change. If you’re strong, it pulls you together, but if you’re on shaky ground, well, maybe the cracks start to show. I keep trying to remember that we’re both in uncharted territory and are experiencing a whole new level of exhaustion and commitment.’

‘If there’s anything I can do, you only have to ask.’

‘Thanks. I’m sure we’ll work it out,’ she says. ‘Given time.’

‘Pass that delicious baby to me again while you concentrate on your brownie,’ I say. ‘She needs another cuddle with her Auntie Lucy.’

‘She might need her nappy changed too.’ Chantal wrinkles her nose.

‘Above my pay grade,’ I tell my friend. ‘Aunties are for playing, talking about boys and educating the next generation in the mysterious ways of chocolate.’

‘Are the other Chocolate Lovers’ girls coming today?’

‘They should be here any minute.’

And, on cue, the door chimes again.

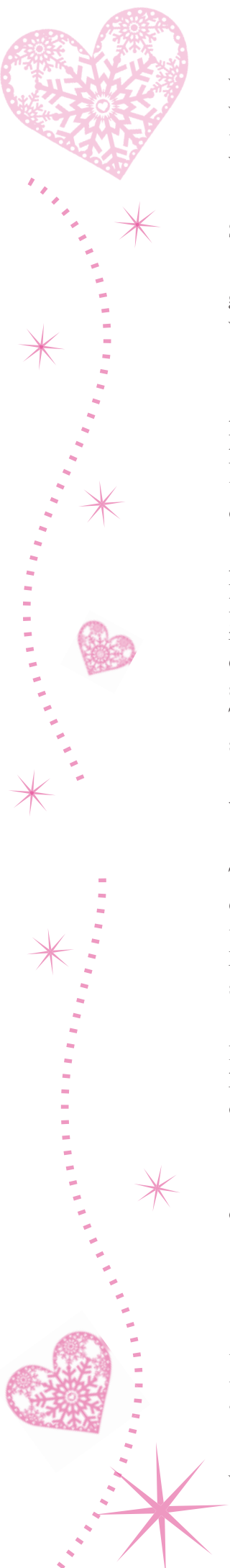
### Chapter 3

Nadia Stone and Autumn Fielding sweep in together and, Lana still nestled in my arms, I rush to greet them. ‘Hey. Good to see you both.’

Chantal goes to stand to say hello to them and gives up. ‘I so need to get down to the gym,’ she mutters darkly.

‘I’ll swear this baby gets more beautiful every day,’ Autumn says. ‘Hand her over.’

I duly give her Lana, who has quickly become accustomed to being passed like a parcel between us. Autumn snuggles her. The baby grabs a fistful of Autumn’s flowing auburn curls and sticks it straight into her mouth. My friend’s gorgeous green eyes are dull though, and she looks like she needs a cuddle as much as the baby.



Autumn is the youngest of us – a mere twenty-nine years old – but, in some ways, the wisest. She is the one who likes to commune with the earth, can meditate in yoga classes without shouting ‘get on with it’ – which got me thrown out of mine – and, generally, likes to help make the world a better place. She is the optimist, the glass-half-full person among us. Whereas I am the wine-glass-frequently-half-empty person.

‘Congratulate me!’ Nadia says, clapping her hands together. ‘I’ve only got a job interview!’ She does a little happy dance. ‘Yay!’

It makes me smile to see my friend so excited. It’s about time that she had something good happen to her as she’s had a truly terrible year. ‘That’s great news. I wondered why you were looking so spruce.’

‘Like the suit?’ She gives us a twirl.

‘You look beautiful. Even more than normal, if that’s possible.’ Nadia has an Indian heritage, but has lived in England all her life. She’s dark-skinned with long, glossy hair that hangs heavily down her back and she regularly turns heads. Until Chantal had Lana, she was the only one who was a mum. Her little boy, Lewis, is four now – a sturdy and demanding chap.

Nadia’s been having a tough time recently – understatement. Only a short while ago, her husband died and she’s still grieving. Terrible for anyone, but she’s only in her early thirties. I know she’s trying to hold it all together for Lewis’s sake, but it’s never going to be easy. I think it’s too soon for her, but she’s trying to get back to work. Breaking down at interviews, as she did at first, isn’t going to go a long way to convince potential employers that she can cope. Yet she needs a job and fast. She’s got Lewis to bring up and she’s been left by her dear departed Toby in what might be classed as ‘difficult circumstances’. Up shit creek, *sans* paddle and with some serious bills to pay.

I give her a hug. ‘I’m sure you’ll get this one. Have confidence in yourself. You’re brilliant, bright and sassy. They’d be mad not to snap you up.’

‘Thanks, Lucy,’ she says. ‘I feel much better, but I could do with a bit of bolstering up. The competition out there is fierce. This is a bit of a McJob in an office and one that I could easily manage, but I’m so nervous. How can I convince them that they need my services more than anyone else’s? There are people out there with a dozen degrees doing basic admin work. Lots of them are working as unpaid interns. How can I compete when I actually want a decent salary? It scares me just to think of it. This calls for chocolate, Lucy, and fast.’

I turn up my hands. ‘Why is everyone in such a rush today?’ ‘This is in lieu of breakfast. It took me all of my time to get Lewis ready for nursery.’ Nadia scans the counter, homing in like a missile. ‘I’ll have a cappuccino and a slice of that fabulous-looking coffee and chocolate cake.’

‘Coming up.’

‘Good grief,’ she says with a giggle. ‘It still seems really weird that you’re on the other side of the counter now. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to it.’

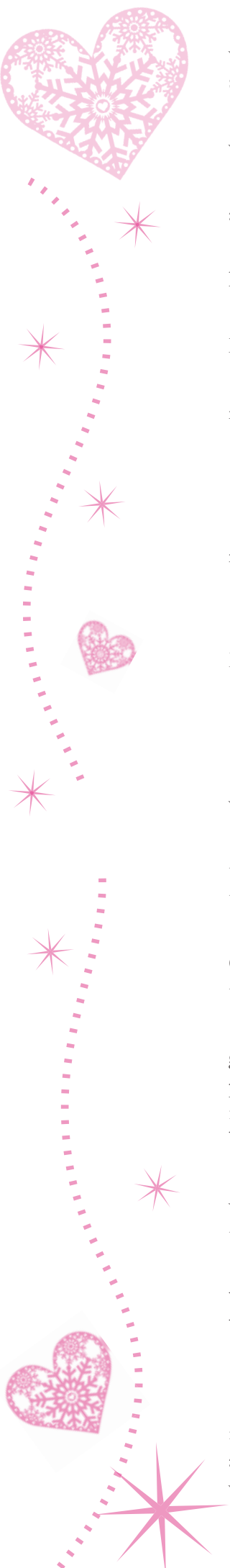
‘Weird in a good way?’

‘Yes,’ she agrees. ‘Poacher turned gamekeeper. Still enjoying it?’

‘Loving it.’ I stifle an unbidden yawn. ‘I’m worn out, though. I feel I have a responsibility to keep the business healthy for when Tristan and Clive return. I’d be mortified if their profits took a nosedive.’ I look guiltily at the chocolate that I’ve just picked up and put it down again. ‘Thankfully, you lot are still keeping me busy.’

‘The Christmas decorations look great,’ she says. ‘But that’s another thing I could do without.’

‘Your first Christmas without Toby is never going to be easy.’ She nods in agreement. ‘It



will be weird, just me and Lewis.’ ‘Well, we won’t let that happen,’ I tell her. We must organise something to take your mind off it. What do you say, Autumn?’

‘Of course we must. Addison and I haven’t decided what to do either. I know he won’t want to go to Mummy and Daddy’s house again. Last year was a total disaster.’

If I remember rightly, Autumn’s wild-child brother, Richard, turned up drunk and high and did unspeakable things with the turkey.

‘Whatever we do, it won’t involve my parents.’ She shudders at the memory. ‘Besides, it’s hardly likely that they’ll miss me.’

Autumn, at best, has a ‘remote’ relationship with her folks. ‘We’ll sort something out. Don’t fret. Now, what can I get for you?’

Scanning my lovely range of delights on the counter, she comes to the conclusion, ‘I’ve no idea what I want.’ She gives a weary sigh. ‘I’ll have the same as Nadia.’

Someone else who’s too tired to think. ‘How are you doing?’

Autumn sighs. ‘I’m hanging on.’

She’s also still mourning the death of Richard who, tragically, had an addiction to drugs much stronger than chocolate.

Forcing a smile, she juggles taking off her coat while still holding Lana.

‘Be kind to yourself.’ I look at her with concern. Autumn’s fiery hair looks dry and lifeless. Her face looks completely washed out. Even her lovely freckles look faded.

‘I’m trying,’ she says.

‘You need time. It’s a great healer.’

‘Time and chocolate,’ she tries to joke. ‘I was going mad staring at my four walls. That’s why I desperately need this moment of escape.’

Chocolate Heaven is still a place of refuge to all of us in times of need. A little corner of this earth that wraps us in cosiness, comforts us and feeds us chocolate. Hurrah! Long may it thrive.

I hug Autumn again, and then go to start their order while my friends kiss and fuss over Chantal and Lana. Eventually, they sit themselves down in a huddle around her while I tend to business.

Two more regular customers come in for takeaway orders and I load them up with goodies. Kick-starting the coffee machine into life again, I set about slicing up the cake. Then I pour the boiling milk onto shots of espresso, sprinkle them with a liberal dusting of chocolate flakes, plate up the cake, add napkins, little forks and, as an extra, take one of those warm brownies for myself. Hmm.

‘Here you go,’ I say as I cross the floor, tray held high. My waitressing skills have improved vastly in the last few months and I rarely trip over or spill anything on the customers now. ‘Let the meeting of the Chocolate Lovers’ Club commence.’

I set the tray down on the coffee table in front of my friends and dish out their drinks before sitting myself. I’ll have to keep one eye on the counter – as always – but, for now, my best girls are the only customers here.

‘News,’ I say. ‘Tell me *all* the news. Quickly. How are the wedding plans going, Autumn?’

‘They’ve come to a bit of a grinding halt.’ Pensively, she twirls one of her curls round her finger. ‘I haven’t felt much in the mood since Rich died. The last thing I want to do is organise a wedding. I’m not in the right frame of mind. Besides, neither Addison nor I can agree what we want to do.’





‘Choices?’ Chantal says.

‘Addison just wants a quiet register office do. Close friends only. I’m happy with something small, but I want it a little more meaningful than that. I’ve been looking at something that gets us back to nature. Maybe a beach or woodland wedding.’

‘Why on earth you live in London is a mystery,’ Chantal says.

Autumn laughs. ‘I’ve never really thought about it. Family ties, I guess. I’m here because that’s where Rich is.’ She falters slightly as she realises that’s no longer the case. ‘Was,’ she corrects sadly.

I squeeze her hand.

‘My boarding school was in the country,’ she adds, ‘and I did love it.’

My dearest Autumn will always be a tree-hugger at heart. That’s why she’s still attached to tie-dyed material, eats meals involving Quorn and probably should have been a surfer chick in California or a hippy. I think this is why she’s also the most socially responsible one among us and works with disadvantaged kids who are trying to get off drugs.

‘Why don’t you rope in Jacob to help you?’ Chantal suggests. ‘He made a fabulous job of planning Lucy’s wedding.’

‘Non-wedding,’ I correct.

Let me fill you in. My troublesome ex-fiancé Marcus and I were due to tie the knot on Valentine’s Day, but by the time I got to the church, barely a few minutes late, Marcus had changed his mind and done a runner. But all’s well that ends well. I consider myself to have had a lucky escape. If Marcus had held his nerve and had waited just five minutes more, I could now have been Mrs Marcus Canning and would be lumbered with Marcus and his Many Women rather than lovely Aiden ‘Crush’ Holby and his loyalty only to me.

Nadia checks her watch. ‘I’d better go. My interview is soon and I’ve got to get across to Fenchurch Street.’

‘Don’t worry about rushing back for Lewis,’ Autumn says. ‘I’ll pick him up from nursery for you and take him home.’

‘You’re an angel.’ She kisses Autumn and then stands up. ‘Wish me luck, ladies.’

‘You don’t need it,’ Chantal says. ‘You’ll knock them dead.’

‘I’ve been for a dozen interviews already and I haven’t got one offer yet,’ she reminds us.

‘Don’t think about that now,’ I tell her. ‘Just give it your best shot. You can do no more.’

‘I’d better get going too,’ Autumn says. ‘I said that I’d drop into work for an hour or two today.’ Reluctantly, she hands Lana back to Chantal.

‘Well, I’m not going anywhere in a rush,’ Chantal says. ‘I’ll have another of your fabulous brownies please, Lucy.’

‘Coming right up, madam.’ Though I’d like nothing more than to sit with Chantal and have a gossip and another cuddle with Lana, I yawn and heave myself out of an oh-so-comfortable chair which seems intent on dragging me back down. At the risk of being lynched by Chantal, I think I’ll put on some Christmas music to get me going.

## Chapter 4

It’s late when I leave Chocolate Heaven, turning off the Christmas lights as I do. After the girls went, I had a rush of customers for the rest of the day that kept me busy. We’re doing some special Christmas cakes to order, decorated with gilded, chocolate holly leaves which are really beautiful. As everyone seems to be getting into the festive mood, they’re going great



guns. I make sure that I've got all the orders from today collated.

Thankfully, I don't have to make all these delights myself, as my culinary skills lie in the gutter. I don't know what to do with food unless it comes frozen. Very sensibly, Clive and Tristan have employed one of their oldest friends, Alexandra, to do all the baking for me. She's the one who keeps me supplied with all my customers' confectionary requirements and very good she is too. In previous incarnations, she's been a chocolatier and pastry chef at some of the top hotels in the world, but now she has three ankle-biters and has downsized to work from home.

Occasionally, when it all gets too much at her own place, she comes to work in the kitchen here, but mostly she delivers on a daily basis and, conveniently, lives only a few streets away. She's here first thing most mornings to drop off a fresh batch of cakes, cookies, muffins and brownies.

Alexandra is also trialling some mince pies with a sliver of brownie topping for us to sell. I'm hoping they're going to be ready soon. Perhaps she could do us a festive version of the rocky road too, with cranberries, almonds and white choc-olate. Christmas is hurtling towards us now like a speeding train and I'd like it to slow down so that I can enjoy it.

Last year my Christmas was totally rubbish. Crush was AWOL in the Australian outback, lost and near death. And, fool that I am, I thought he'd dumped me. Given my history, an easy assumption to make. But, no, he was actually stumbling round the desert without food or water or mobile phone, barely clinging to life. So I spent Christmas Day at a homeless shelter dishing out turkey dinners. Then, to my eternal shame, out of sheer loneliness – nothing else – I shagged my bastard ex-fiancé, Marcus, beneath my Christmas tree. Something I'll regret to the end of my days. I know. Kill me.

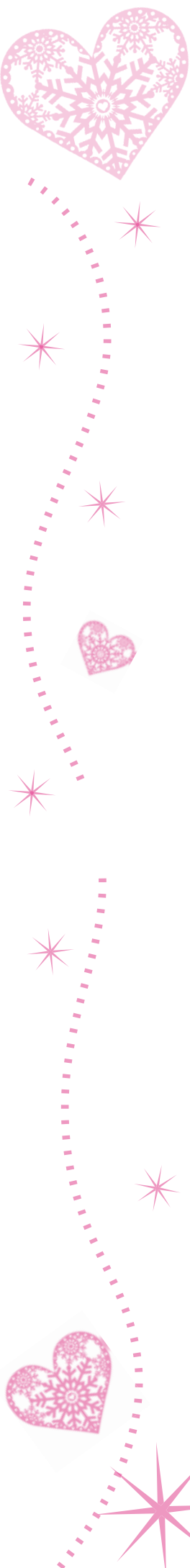
Well, this year it's going to be different. This year I am a woman in love and am fully on message with the peace, love, goodwill to all men thing. Except Marcus. Who will never again be getting goodwill from me. Particularly not under a Christmas tree. So there.

I text my darling Crush to tell him I'm leaving. My eyes are heavy with tiredness and I nearly fall asleep on the Tube on the way home. When I get back, jostled and jogged by fellow commuters, I push open the door and go up the stairs to my flat. I haul myself up each one as if I'm climbing a mountain. Slipping my key into the front door lock, I still can hardly believe that Crush will be waiting here for me. We have been living together as grown-up boyfriend and girlfriend in a real, proper relationship for nine months now and it's been more than I could ever have expected. I just wish that we had more quality time together.

There's a wonderful smell wafting from the kitchen and soothing music floats out of the iPod. Home, sweet home. My flat is small, a bit scuffed around the edges. I like to say that I live in Camden High Street as it makes me sound a bit trendy. In reality, it's above a slightly grungy hairdressing salon and I can only afford it because my mum owns the premises and, out of guilt, gives me a cheap deal on the rent. But it's mine and it is a *great* address. I love it even more now that it's full of Crush's man stuff. I hang my coat next to his on the rack and put my shoes neatly alongside his too. There's a car mag discarded on the sofa and a stack of books – mainly crime and thrillers – that he might or might not one day get round to reading. In the bathroom cabinet all my cosmetics are squashed into half the space they used to have. My underarm deodorant nestles side-by-side against Crush's. Our toothbrushes share the same mug. I love it all. Some days I go round and touch all of his possessions, just to make sure that he really is here.

'Perfect timing, Gorgeous,' Crush shouts from the kitchen. 'Supper's just about ready.'

If I'd still been living on my own I would have had a Mars Bar for dinner. Maybe two. Or, if I was on a health kick, a Cup-a-Soup. Now there's something wonderful bubbling on the stove cooked by my lovely partner and I suddenly feel very cared for.



I never get tired of looking at this man. He's tall, as handsome as anyone on telly, and I always feel as if I'm punching above my weight having bagged him for myself. His hair is brown, tousled and his eyes, the colour of chocolate buttons, are permanently warm and smiling. He's kind beyond measure and has the patience of a saint. And he's mine. Mine.

'I love you,' I say as I drop my handbag and go to slip my arms round his slim waist while he stirs something in a saucepan. I lay my head on his shoulder and breathe in his scent. 'Do I tell you enough?'

'At least ten times a day.'

'I should say it more. Much more.' Then I burst into tears.

'Whoa. Whoa. Where did that come from?' Crush abandons our dinner and turns round to hold me in his strong arms. 'Lucy, what's wrong?'

'I feel a bit tired and emotional,' I sniff.

'You're working way too hard.' He coos as he strokes my hair. 'You're overtired,' he says, as if I'm five.

'I expect so,' I snivel. 'Chantal brought Lana in to see us today.'

'She brings her in pretty much every day,' he points out. 'This felt different.' I gulp back some tears. 'Because I think I might want a baby too.'

'That's fine. Absolutely fine.' Crush pats my back lovingly. 'We can work on that. In fact, we can work on it right after dinner if you like.'

I whack him. 'Not now. One day.' Then I blurt out, 'I realise that we haven't had much . . . you know . . . recently. I've been very busy. You've been busy too. But I'll make it up to you.'

Crush frowns. 'We need to have a talk about that.'

'Really, I'll make it up to you. I promise.' When Crush and I first got together we made love all the time. Daily. More than daily. Now we're lucky if we manage to find time to sleep together once a week and I don't want him to get fed up and start looking elsewhere. Years of being scarred by Marcus's roving eye and wandering hands have left me feeling very insecure. If I don't keep Crush happy in that department then there's always some willing cow who doesn't believe in the sisterhood ready to step into my shoes. 'We can do it with the pink fluffy handcuffs, the nurse's outfit. Whatever you like.'

'It's not about that, you crazy fool.' He chucks me under the chin. 'You're busy, Lucy. Too busy. I know that you love running Chocolate Heaven, but you can't do it single-handedly.'

'I can manage.'

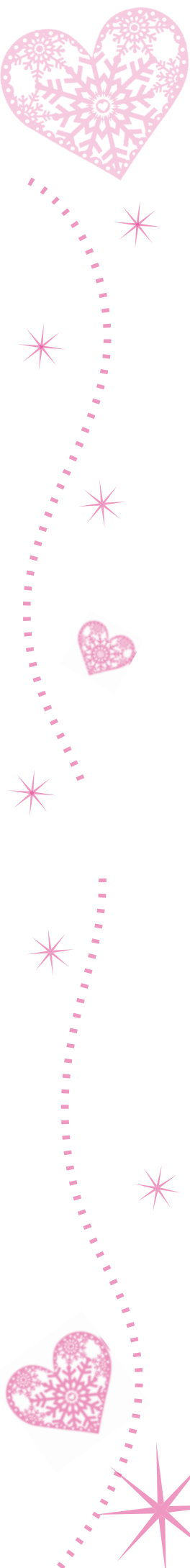
'Barely.'

'I don't want Clive and Tristan to think that I'm not coping.' 'When they were running Chocolate Heaven, they had each other,' Crush points out. 'You haven't got anyone. You've got to take on an extra pair of hands. Someone you can rely on. You've said the business is doing well. They can afford it.'

'I know, I know.' And I do know. I hate to admit this, but I can't limp along by myself. I wanted to prove that I was some sort of chocolate-dealing Superwoman and I am failing. I look up at Crush's concerned countenance. I love this man right down to my fingertips and I'm neglecting him. 'I don't want it to affect our relationship.'

'Neither do I, Gorgeous. But we have to face facts, it's not exactly helping at the moment. I'm working hard to keep my head above water at Targa too. We don't have much quality time.'

'I'm sorry. I've spent too long wishing for a relationship like this to want to mess it up.' Though I have to admit that I've also spent too long wishing for a great job and I don't want to mess that up either.



When I worked as a temporary secretary at Targa all I had to do was sit and look wistfully at my boss all day long – one Mr Aiden Holby – and eat chocolate. Not exactly taxing. Though sometimes my elbows used to hurt from all that leaning on the desk with my chin cupped in my hands. My eyes used to go dry from staring at him. And my cheeks used to ache with longing. Now he's here, I'm in his arms, and I'm too bloody busy and knackered to enjoy it.

'I love you,' he says. 'I'm never going to hurt you. I'm just concerned for you.'

'Thank you.' I cling to him again, grateful.

'I think we should disentangle ourselves, Gorgeous,' Crush suggests as he eases himself gently from my grip. 'The carbonara is starting to burn.'

'It smells divine. You're wonderful.' I am not the one who is the domestic goddess in this partnership. 'I brought a couple of slices of the devil's food cake home as my contribution. Thought that would cheer us up.'

'Perfect.' He kisses me again. 'But I'm not sad, I'm worried about you. That's different.'

I watch Crush dish out our dinner, doing it all with tender attention, and know that I am loved. Truly loved. How many people can say that with absolute certainty? It makes me want to cry again. I spent too long with my ex-boyfriend, Marcus, being treated like dirt to take Crush's love for granted. I'm cherished and I must make Crush feel that he's cherished too. Mr Aiden Holby is absolutely right. He is everything to me. And something has to change.

## Chapter 5

Nadia didn't feel that the interview had gone well. She could hear it in her own voice as she answered the questions – she sounded too needy, too desperate, too nervous. They had asked her about childcare arrangements, which she wasn't even sure if they were legally allowed to do, and she'd answered in too much detail, anxiously, making it sound as if it would be a breeze to abandon her son all day to the tender ministrations of other people. Perhaps they could see through her bluster. She didn't necessarily want to work, but she certainly had to. Nadia didn't expect the phone to ring. All in all, another one that would be chalked down to experience.

'Mummy,' Lewis said, exasperated. 'You've read the same sentence *two times*.'

'Sorry, sweetheart.' Nadia smiled at his admonishment. She was, indeed, guilty of conducting his nightly bedtime story without concentrating on the job in hand.

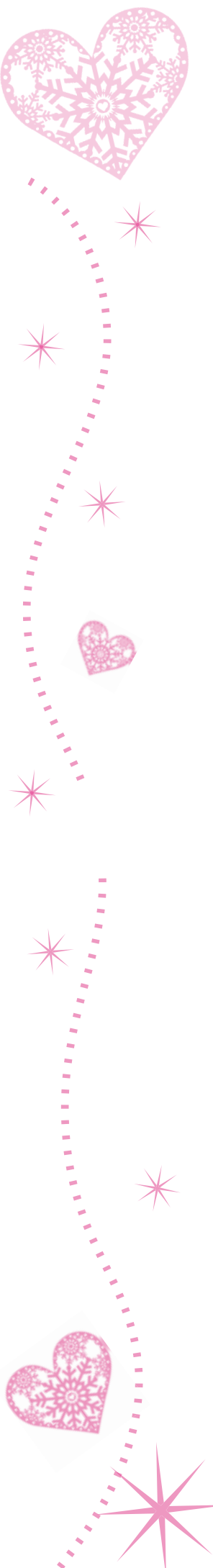
'Why are you sad?'

'I'm not sad,' she said. 'I was just thinking.'

Lewis snuggled into her. 'Think *after* you read. When I'm asleep.'

'Yes, of course.' Sensible advice, as it was the evenings that she struggled with. They seemed long, interminably so, now that Toby was gone. During the day she could keep busy. There was housework, Lewis to play with, shopping to be done and, if she was lonely, she could always count on Chocolate Heaven for some solace. When Lewis had gone to bed there was nothing much for her to do but watch television. She couldn't go out or run the Hoover round. Sometimes, she was tempted to keep him up too late just for the company. Other times she went to bed at the same time as Lewis. Better to be asleep than to be alone. But the downside was that she was then wide awake by four in the morning. She'd used to love reading, curled up on the sofa or in bed while Toby was engrossed on the computer – the more romantic the story the better. But she couldn't read a book now as they invariably ended happily and that was a total fairy tale. In real life, shit happened and it stayed shitty.

She was about to regroup and take up the story of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* once more, when Lewis said, 'Is Jacob coming to our house?'



Ah, Jacob. There were evenings when she was very grateful for his company. They never did very much – perhaps watched a film together. He seemed to have a never-ending supply of DVDs at his disposal, which was useful. Plus he was easy company. Jacob was articulate and amusing. He was laid back and kind. And he was as happy to sit quietly as to chat. Being with him was infinitely better than sitting alone.

‘No,’ she told him. ‘Not tonight, sweetheart. He’s busy with work.’ Quite often Jacob’s job as an events organiser kept him occupied in the evenings.

Lewis cuddled his teddy to him and his thumb slipped into his mouth – a sure sign that, in a few more pages, he’d be fast asleep. ‘I like Jacob.’

‘Me too.’ He was a good friend and she was very fond of him. Sometimes she wondered whether there would be more between them in the future, but she’d been badly hurt by Toby and it was far too soon to even consider another relationship. She couldn’t afford – emotionally or financially – to be burned again.

‘Is he going to be my new daddy?’

She laughed. There was nothing like a question from a four-year-old to cut to the chase. ‘No, darling. Jacob is just a friend.’

He pondered on that for a moment. ‘Like Pasha is my friend?’

‘Yes. Exactly like that.’

‘Will I ever get a new daddy?’

‘I don’t know, darling.’ She stroked his dark hair. He was changing, looking more and more like Toby as he grew. His mannerisms the same as his father’s, down to a T. Sometimes it was difficult to watch. ‘Good daddies aren’t easy to find.’

‘Oh.’

‘Do you miss Daddy?’

‘Yes,’ Lewis said, giving it serious consideration. ‘But not so much now.’

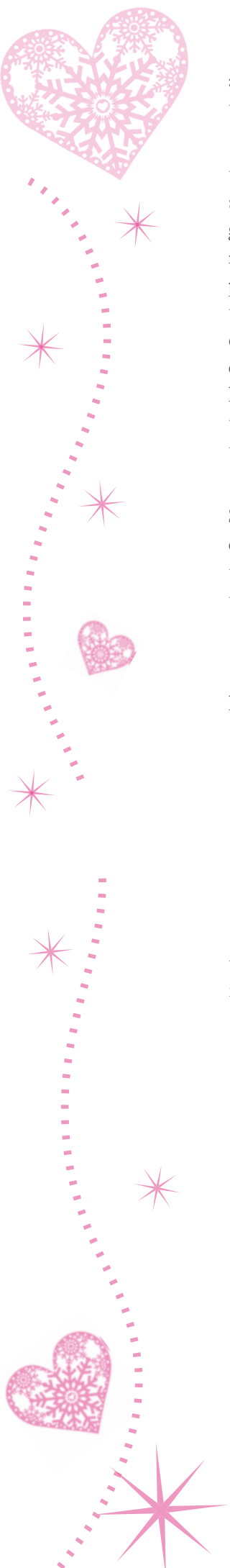
She wondered if he could still picture Toby’s face, remember what he was like. When he was older would memories of his father remain? They were struggling through it together and Lewis was doing well – better, it seemed, than Nadia was. There were days when she still missed Toby so much, despite the mess he’d left her in. And there was no doubt that she was in a terrible mess. Most of it due to her husband’s addiction to online gambling.

It had been an awful time for her – for Lewis too. Even as she was grieving, it was still the betrayal that hurt the most. Toby had been gambling for years but, before his death, it had spiralled out of control and turned him into a man she didn’t know.

Perhaps foolishly, she thought that her husband had kicked his habit, but all the time he was sinking them deeper and deeper into debt. Crazy, he went to Vegas for one last make-or-break play – the act of a desperate man. When Nadia found out what he’d done, she’d spent the last of their cash on a plane ticket to follow him out there. She’d hoped that she could find him and stop him from losing all of their money, their future. In the end, she’d got there just too late and, tragically, helplessly, had to watch her husband fall from the top of the Stratosphere Tower to his death. It was heart-breaking.

There were nights when she dared’t close her eyes or risk sleep as she’d dream endlessly of his fall through the air, hear his anguished shout. It was something she would never get over.

Needless to say, he’d gambled away everything. She wondered how he’d been able to do that, not only to her, but to Lewis too. Hadn’t the thought of leaving their lovely, innocent son without a stable future made any difference to him? Clearly not. She’d forgiven Toby a lot of things over the years, but she could never forgive him that.



To make matters worse, the insurance company were still wrangling over whether it was an accident or intentional and were refusing to pay out on their life insurance policy until they'd made their decision. How long that would take, God only knew.

When the money came through, she wanted to spend it wisely as it would have to last them a long time. But she would spend some of it repairing the house – the one that they'd so nearly lost - it was certainly in need of it. The place looked shabby now and it wasn't in a great area. Perhaps it would be a good time for her and Lewis to move away completely and make a new start somewhere else. She'd love to move out of London, even go to the seaside perhaps. The city was no place to bring up a child. But would she ever have the nerve to leave the friendship of the Chocolate Lovers' Club behind? She relied so heavily on the girls for emotional support that it was hard to envisage. She saw or spoke to one or all of them on a daily basis. At the moment, she couldn't manage without the help that Autumn freely gave to her. Her family had cut her off when she'd married Toby against their wishes. She thought that his death would help to reconcile them, but she'd heard nothing. They hadn't even sent their condolences.

Then, this morning, completely out of the blue, a letter had arrived from her sister, Anita. She wanted them to meet up. Nadia had read the note, in Anita's once-familiar, neat writing, a dozen times. She'd wanted to stay cross at her but, unde-niably, there was a chink of happiness that this simple note had created that she couldn't ignore. Anita wanted to see her again and that made Nadia so glad.

'Mummy,' Lewis prompted.

'Sorry, darling.' She pulled her attention back to her son. 'You said that before.' He tucked his teddy under the duvet.

'I'm sleepy now.'

'Can Charlie wait for tomorrow?'

Lewis nodded. So she kissed him and, reluctantly, levered herself from his bed.

'Sleep tight, sweetheart.'

'Night, night, Mummy.'

She turned off the bedside light and, as he settled down and his breathing deepened, tiptoed out of his room. Now she'd sit and watch television, read the letter from Anita again, fret about her interview technique and worry about how she was going to pay the bills.