

Extract from “The Chocolate Lovers’ Wedding”

Chapter 1

In London you are never more than ten feet away from a Twix. True fact. There is one, right now, in my desk with my name on it. Third drawer down. Back left-hand corner. It’s now twelve thirty and its siren song has been calling me for the last hour.

I’m holding strong. And there’s a very good reason for it. I, Lucy Lombard, aficionado of all things chocolate-based, am a recently engaged person and, as such, am of course on a diet. No one wants to sashay down the aisle at their wedding with the congregation sniggering ‘lard arse’ into their hands, do they?

I sigh with happiness. Not about the diet. I’m not a weirdo. I’m happy because I’m actually to be married to the love of my life, Mr Aiden ‘Crush’ Holby. After years of unsuitable boyfriends – Marcus Canning in particular springs to mind – and one previous abandonment at the altar – due to Marcus Canning – I am betrothed to someone who is not only undeniably handsome, but is kind, loving, can cook, likes small animals and, most importantly, is willing to overlook my various foibles and flaws to make me his wife. To the point that he wouldn’t *actually* mind if I was packing a little more punch in my wedding frock. Hmm.

Right. That’s it. The Twix gets it.

‘Lucy?’

Guiltily, my fingers snap back from the drawer. My boss.

Wearing his usual expression of harried disdain. How did he know I was about to eat The Forbidden Twix?

‘Did you get those figures for me from the finance department?’ he growls.

Oh, right. That. ‘Ah, no.’

‘I’m sorry to interrupt your daydreaming. Again. But they are quite important.’

In the short time I have worked here at Green Information Technology, or GIT as the employees call it, I have found that Mr Robert Simmonds gives great sarcasm. Sometimes – quite often – he does have a point.

‘Sorry. Sorry.’ In fairness, he asked me ages ago to get his figures or whatever and I’ve completely forgotten. I got a bit sidetracked Googling wedding favours and such on the internet. I’m thinking of heart-shaped chocolates or personalised chocolate lollies. It’s tough. What would you do?

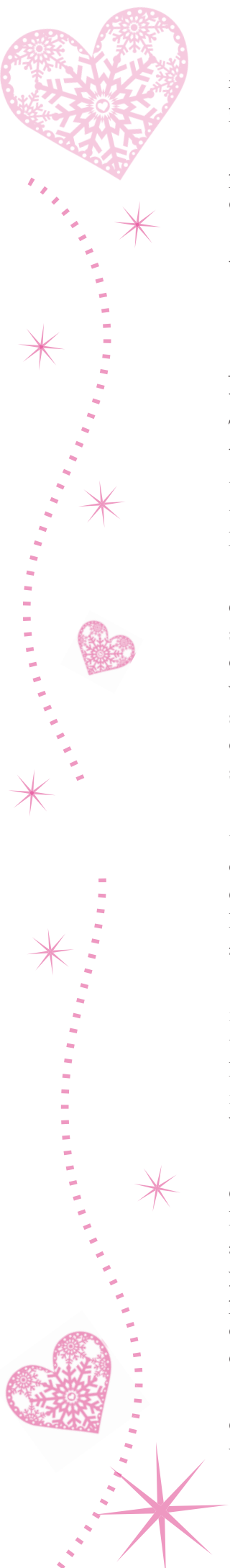
My boss drums his fingers on the filing cabinet. Mr Simmonds likes to make out that he’s a laid-back hippy. He brings a quinoa salad in for his lunch, for heaven’s sake. But he’s so not a hippy. He’s old, grumpy and a total stress bunny. He wears a suit and tie when everyone else in this office favours faded jeans and open-necked shirts. My easy-going approach to my job is totally at odds with his uptight, starchy nature. We are terminally unsuited and I should discuss this with my temp agency.

My eyes slide back towards the chocolate bridal favours.

More drumming. ‘And you’re waiting for?’

‘Right. Right.’ Must. Stop. Thinking. About. My. Wedding. And. Chocolate. ‘I’m on my way.’





With a theatrical tut that's not even necessary, Mr Simmonds – never Rob – slams back into his office. This is a company that is supposed to care about the environment and the planet and all that but, frankly, doesn't give a toss about its employees.

Wearily, I push myself from my desk and head towards the finance department. I could probably just call them, but this will help to fill my endlessly dull day and also burn off some calories to balance out the imminent Twix consumption.

Before I depart, I ease open the desk drawer and take a sneaky peek at it. 'Wait for me, baby,' I coo. 'Mummy won't be long.'

Then I head off to . . . where was it again? Finance. Finance. That's where I'm going.

I've been working here at Green IT for three months. Three months since Marcus Canning – dastardly ex-fiancé and serial cheat whom I may have already mentioned – only went out and bought the best café and chocolate emporium in the whole of London: Chocolate Heaven. This was my sanctuary, my home from home, my life. Beyond my wildest dreams, I had become the manager. And I was good at it. Bloody good. Then, beyond my worst nightmare, the owners sold it to said ex-fiancé, the lowdown dirty dog, and I had no choice but to leave. I thought I'd be serving behind the counter of Chocolate Heaven until I was old and grey. But Marcus spoiled it all.

I vowed then and there, as long as Marcus was calling the shots, that I'd never darken the door of that blessed place again. True to my word, I haven't entered its hallowed halls ever since. Three months. It makes me feel quite dizzy to say it. In all that time, the good ladies of the Chocolate Lovers' Club – Chantal, Nadia, Autumn and my good self – have been wandering the hinterlands of north London like nomads. Having our favourite haunt cruelly snatched from us, we've been meeting at a variety of inferior, less chocolatey cafés across the capital city to indulge our cravings and finding that nothing really floats our boat in quite the same way. No wonder I'm depressed.

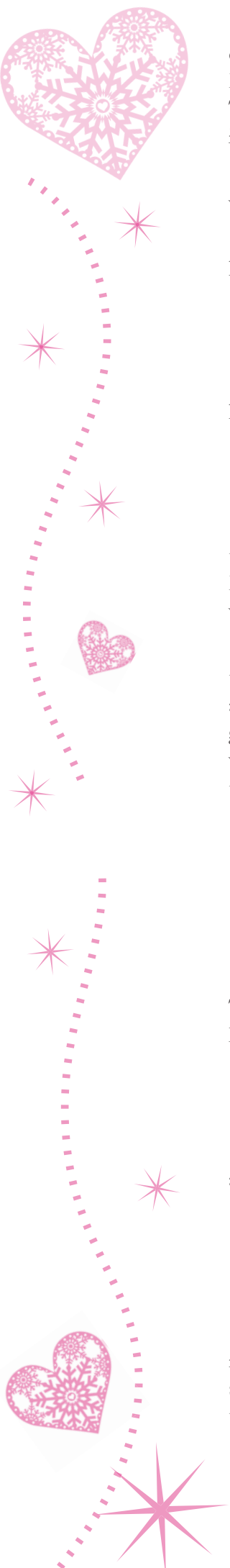
These same long months I have also been back in the dreary, dead-end world of office temping. And, to tell you the truth, I feel as if I'm hanging onto even this poxy job by the skin of my teeth. This could, potentially, be a great company to work for. Saving the planet and everything is very fashionable, right? But the other problem is that, as a temp, I'm given No Responsibility. Therefore, I turn off my brain the minute I arrive at my desk. Then, when I am actually given something to do, I usually make a total cock of it. Vicious circle.

I think I'm skating on thin ice after putting together an important PowerPoint presentation for my boss on the Anthropogenic Effects on the Natural Environment, which he was giving to some bigwigs in the industry and which, somehow, mainly featured wedding dresses. Gah! I have no idea how that happened. Still, a lot of people found it amusing. Well, some people found it amusing. One in particular didn't, though. Ahem. The proper presentation was *really* boring, anyway.

There are some upsides to being at GIT. This is a great building to work in. It's an enormous, contemporary office block right on the river by Blackfriars bridge – prime location. It's stuffed full of bright artworks and multi-coloured chairs. It has floor-to-ceiling windows and, because that makes it like an oven, we have the air conditioning pumping out all day. If you ask me – and no one does – that doesn't seem all that green. Clearly, we prefer to tell other people how to cut back on their energy use rather than have the inconvenience of doing it ourselves. I have, however, connived to surreptitiously manoeuvre my desk further towards one of said windows so that I can admire the splendid view of the Thames at my convenience.

Before Mr Simmonds can come and chase me again, I scuttle out of the office. Normally, even in the face of adversity I'm a cheerful soul but I'm out of sorts today, restless and unsettled.

Out in the main corridor, where I'm alone, I hold up my hands and lean against one



of the windows, resting my cheek against the cold glass. It's March and it's chilly outside. However, it's one of those days that make you hopeful that spring is just around the corner. The Thames is a shimmering silver ribbon and trees along the Embankment are shyly coming into bud. The sky is a quite promising shade of blue.

I look down over the river and, on a bench, three floors below me, a figure looks up and waves.

'Marcus?' I jump back from the window and press myself against the wall. I'm sure it was him. Could I be hallucinating due to lack of chocolate?

My phone pings with a text and I glance at it, warily.

Hi, Lucy! Surprise, surprise. M xx

I summon up the courage to look again. Sure enough, it's Marcus who's down there and he's waving at me again.

Go *away*, I text back.

No, he answers. *Come and talk to me.*

As I watch, he pulls his coat round him and lies down on the bench. He'll freeze out there. When he sets his mind on something, he doesn't falter until he gets the result he wants. He could be out there for days waiting for me to crack. I know Marcus only too well; I will not win this staring contest. I am always the one who blinks first.

With an exasperated sigh, I head downstairs and, after getting my security pass all in a tangle at the gate, flounce outside and into the cold. Marcus sits up, smiling triumphantly as I approach. His blond hair is tousled by the breeze coming from the river. He's wearing a sharp grey suit and a black cashmere coat. As always, he looks devastatingly suave. This is the man who has broken my heart into a thousand pieces time and time again. I should never forget that.

'I have nothing to say to you,' I tell him firmly.

'Shall we do it over a coffee?' he asks. 'Or I could buy you lunch?'

Lunch. My stomach growls. I check my watch. It is, technically, my lunch time. Sort of.

'Just hear what I've got to say,' Marcus pleads.

He turns those devastating china-blue eyes on me. The ones that I have loved so much. The ones he thinks always reduce me to a quivering wreck of compliance. Ha. Not today, Marcus Canning. Today, I am braced against your wily ways.

'There's nothing you can say that I want to hear.' I hold up a hand. Talk to that.

'I love you,' Marcus offers.

'Don't be silly. You haven't sat out here in the freezing cold just to tell me that.' I shiver and Marcus, as quick as a flash, whips off his coat and wraps it gently round my shoulders.

'I can't manage without you,' he tells me.


I purse my lips. 'Emotionally or physically?'

'Both,' he admits, boyish smile giving it all it's got.

'Stop it, Marcus. I'm immune to your charms these days.' But still my stupid heart remembers how much it once loved him. It's like a favourite white blouse with a chocolate stain that always remains no matter how much Vanish you scrub it with; yet you still can't bear to part with it.

'Half an hour,' he cajoles. 'You owe me that.'

'I don't *owe* you anything.'



Despite my protestations, Marcus takes my hand in his and starts to walk in a determined manner towards the bridge. ‘This could change your life.’

‘It won’t.’

‘Just hear me out.’

I make some show of resistance, pulling against him. But it’s futile. I so desperately want to know how things are going at Chocolate Heaven without me. I want to hear him beg me to go back.

I won’t. Obviously.

But I want to hear it all the same.

‘Oh, Marcus.’ I fall into step beside him. I’ll hate myself for this. I know I will.

Chapter 2

‘I thought we’d eat at the OXO Tower,’ Marcus says.

‘No.’ I stop stock-still. ‘No OXO Tower.’

‘It’s fabulous there,’ he insists.

‘And that’s exactly why.’ Plus it was the scene of my first proper date with Crush and I don’t want to sully that memory. Well, no more than falling down the stairs and breaking my leg afterwards did. ‘You think you can ply me with fine food and wine and I’ll be putty in your hands. Well, it’s not going to happen.’

Marcus’s face falls. ‘I’ve already booked us a table.’

I tut. ‘Then ring them and cancel.’ Does he really think that I’m so malleable?

‘OK. Whatever you say, Lucy.’

He looks so miserable, but I hold my ground. ‘We’ll grab a sandwich. A quick one, mind you. I have things to do.’ Which reminds me that I should be on my way to the finance department right now.

Reluctantly, Marcus calls and cancels the table. He thinks I’m a pushover, I know. Well, I’ll show you, Marcus Canning.

We walk further down the South Bank until we come to a small chain café. Perfect. Scruffy enough and grubby enough not to impress me. Inside, every table is strewn with the detritus of the previous customers’ meals.

‘You really want to eat here?’

‘Yes.’

Marcus sighs in resignation. ‘Grab a table, then. I’ll queue up. Coffee?’

I nod. ‘Get me something low calorie to eat. I’m on a diet.’

He laughs out loud at that.

‘I am!’

I shrug off Marcus’s coat so that I can load up a tray swimming in tea with empty sandwich wrappers and crisp packets and move them onto the next table. Then I wait, twiddling my thumbs, until he returns.

He puts a latte and a plate with a giant slice of chocolate cake in front of me. ‘I said low calorie.’ ‘Just inhale it then.’

‘I’m *seriously* on a diet.’



‘You look sensational exactly as you are. I like a woman with curves.’

‘You like a woman who *breathes*,’ I counter. As many and as varied as possible all the time we were in a relationship together, if I remember rightly. ‘Anything else is a bonus.’

He laughs. ‘Oh, Lucy. You can be so very cruel.’

Not cruel enough, I think.

While Marcus faffs with our coffee and sets the cake in front of me, I catch sight of my reflection in the window. I thought I’d melt away to a size eight after leaving the temptations of Chocolate Heaven behind. Truly, I did. But no. I’m curvier than ever. I think I’ve been comfort eating since I was cast adrift at Christmas. And who wouldn’t in my circumstances?

When Marcus bought Chocolate Heaven, I lost the best job in the world and nothing, not even a Wispa and a Bounty combo can make up for that. So I’m not just curvy, I’m heading towards the positively rotund. And no one wants to be a fat bride, right? No one wants to waddle down the aisle next to the man of her dreams. I want to be a sliver of my former self at my wedding and must keep this, at all times, at the forefront of my mind.

‘I’m losing weight for my *wedding*,’ I remind him.

‘Ah.’ He stirs his coffee thoughtfully. ‘To whatshisname? Still going ahead then?’

‘Yes, Marcus. Of course it is.’

‘No sudden change of heart?’

‘No. I *love* Aiden and he *loves* me. The date is booked. The venue decided. The invitations have gone out.’ Not strictly true, I admit.

‘I didn’t get mine.’

‘As if.’

He does his cutest lost-little-boy look. ‘Not for old times’ sake?’

‘No. You’re the last person I’d want there.’

‘You didn’t say that last time we were at a wedding together.’

‘That’s because you were the groom, Marcus. And I was the bride. This is probably a good time to remind you that you didn’t actually stay around for the ceremony.’

He frowns. ‘You’re never going to forget that, are you?’

I laugh, because what else is there to do? ‘No. I’m never going to forget that. Or forgive you.’ I get an unwanted flash-back to the day Marcus jilted me and feel sick to my stomach all over again. It was the worst moment of my life and, frankly, there are a lot of worst moments to choose from. This time it will be different. I know it. Crush is not Marcus. And thank the heavens for that.

Picking up my fork, I toy with the chocolate cake Marcus has bought me. If I eat this and forgo the Twix then I’m really no worse off than I would have been. I could just eat half. That’s all. I’m thinking that I should order my wedding dress a size too small so that I can slim into it. All brides lose weight, right? I have about three months to shed a stone or so. Doable? Tomorrow, I’ll really get a grip on it.

Hmm. This chocolate cake is delicious. A moist, light sponge filled with rich ganache – even though we are in a place where I might have expected inferior quality chocolate treats. Marcus grins at me as I eat it.

‘What?’

‘Come back, Lucy,’ he says, earnestly. ‘Chocolate Heaven needs you. I need you. It’s not the same without you. It’s where you’re meant to be.’



That, if I'm brutally honest, is music to my ears.

'I bought it for you. So that you could run it. That was the whole point of me owning it.'

He did. I have to give him that. But he bought it so that he could own me, too. I'm not a fool. 'Who's running it now?'

'I've got a manager in.'

'A woman?' As if I need to ask.

'Er . . . yes.'

'Is she pretty?'

'No, she's French. A double bagger. Awful woman.'

A likely story.

His eyes go all gooey and he reaches out to curl a lock of my blonde hair round his finger. 'Come back,' he pleads. 'Come back to me.'

'Don't do that.' I slap his hand away.

Marcus is unperturbed. 'She doesn't have your way with the customers, Lucy. She doesn't have the vision or the passion for Chocolate Heaven. Without you, it's nothing. You know the business like no one else. You were born for it.'

All of these things are true. There is chocolate flowing in my veins. I wasn't cut out to be a temporary secretary to a bad-tempered, not very green IT director.

That pulls me up short. Yikes! The finance department! All this banter with Marcus may have slightly sidetracked me.

As the realisation dawns, my phone rings. It's my Mr Simmonds.

'Hello.' I try to sound as if I am in the quiet of the finance department and not in a noisy café on the Embankment.

'Where exactly are you, Lucy?' my boss asks somewhat tightly. 'I have been down to the finance department to get the figures for myself and they say that they haven't seen hide nor hair of you.'

'I had to pop out. Urgently. I'll be back in five minutes,' I promise. Then I remember that I'm on the wrong side of the river and will have to run. 'Make that ten.'

'Make it that you don't bother to come back at all,' he hisses. 'I'll call the agency and get someone else who's actually interested in doing this job. You're fired.'

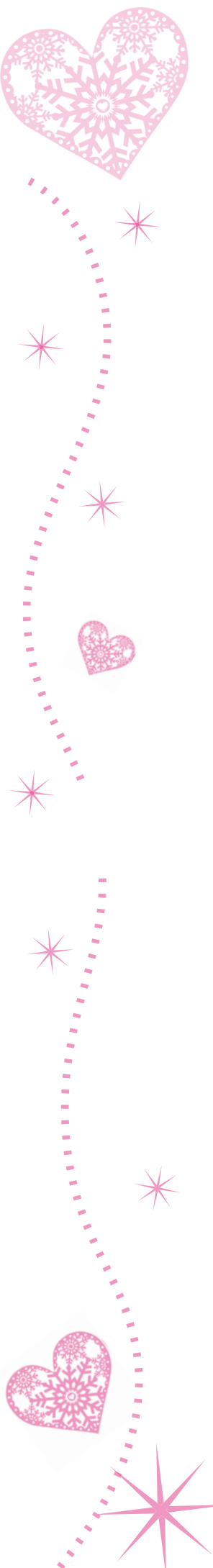
He hangs up. I'm left staring open-mouthed at the phone. When I look up, I see that Marcus is grinning.

Chapter 3

We, the members of the Chocolate Lovers' Club, are sitting in a boring little café just off the Strand. I have a plastic-looking ham sandwich, Nadia is staring forlornly at a limp chicken wrap, Autumn is gingerly dipping a biscotti in a not-quite-hot cappuccino and, horror upon horror, Chantal is eating a salad. I feel faint looking at it.

'Look at us,' I say. 'We are the good ladies of the Chocolate Lovers' Club and there's not a morsel of chocolate in sight. What's happening to us? We are failing in our mission to embrace all things chocolatey in our lives.'

'It's just not the same without Chocolate Heaven,' Autumn muses sadly.



‘But it’s our *raison d’être*.’

Nadia shrugs. ‘Lucy has a point.’

I’m on a roll now. ‘What, I ask, is the reason for lettuce?’

Chantal prods at her bowl of shrubbery and grimaces.

‘It is the most pointless foodstuff on the planet,’ I pontificate. ‘Even rabbits don’t really like it.’

‘It isn’t the lettuce that’s the issue, Lucy, is it?’ Chantal points out. ‘You’re just disenchanting with yet another substandard café.’

‘You’re right,’ I admit, sagging. ‘It’s not Chocolate Heaven.’

‘This is OK,’ Nadia says. We all look around. It is a McCafé. We could be anywhere. Magnolia walls, wooden chairs, grubby vinyl floor. Not a comfy brown velvet sofa in sight. And, more importantly, very little in the way of chocolate goodies on offer. None, in fact. Not even a measly brownie for succour.

They have *plain* flapjack. What’s the thinking behind that?

To console myself, I look round at my lovely companions. These are my dearest friends. Friendships that were born out of our mutual love of chocolate. We used to meet at Chocolate Heaven, the finest of fine chocolate emporiums, every single day. We laughed, cried, gossiped, ate chocolate. Now we are homeless.

In spite of everything that has happened between us, Marcus, somehow, thought that I could carry on working there as if nothing had happened. Worse, he thought I’d be *pleased!* But I couldn’t, not in a million years, work for Marcus. He would have had me in his thrall again and there’s no way that I’d ever want that. It has taken me a long time – longer than I’d care to admit – to be Not in Love with Marcus anymore. And I don’t want prolonged close contact with him to threaten that.


Thus, it has left us ladies all wandering aimlessly through inferior cafés and, in my particular case, inferior jobs too. But, in times of darkness, I don’t know what I’d do without these girls in my life. They have gone from being mere friends to the sisters I never had.

Chantal Hamilton is the oldest among us and, more often than not, the wisest too. She’s currently in the throes of divorcing her husband, Ted – which, despite being reasonably amicable, is still taking its toll. She also has a delicious baby, Lana, who we all adore. She was previously a journalist on a magazine featuring stunning homes throughout the UK, though she’s not working at the moment as she can’t bear to leave Lana every day. I guess, after the divorce is finalised, that might have to change. Lana must be coming up to a year old soon and I have no idea where that time has gone.

Autumn Fielding is the youngest member, the earth mother among us. She is optimistic, idealistic and would have been far better working at Green IT than I ever was. She would have made them turn off the air conditioning. She would have made Mr Simmonds smile. Probably. Usually she’s the calm and laid-back one but, at the moment, she’s got a lot on her plate too. She fluffs her unruly mop of auburn curls and my heart goes out to her.

What can I tell you about, Nadia Stone? She’s curvaceous, a real beauty with gorgeous caramel skin and a skein of dark hair. Her son, Lewis, is four now and she’s had a struggle bringing him up alone after the death of her husband, but I think she’s finally met someone to put a glimmer back into those stunning hazel eyes of hers.

Last, and maybe least, there’s me. I’m Lucy Lombard. I’m the wrong side of thirty, still a spinster – but not for much longer. I’m overweight, overwrought and if I can mess something up, then I invariably will. But I’m loyal and steadfast and I’m loved by the loveliest man on earth. And I may get a lot wrong – an awful lot – but I was good at running Chocolate Heaven. I really was.



Staring down at my sandwich, I'm disconsolate. 'Look at what we're eating.' I cast another particularly withering glare at Chantal's salad. 'This is not the stuff of life.'

'I've lost *pounds* since we stopped going to Chocolate Heaven,' she remarks. 'This is the first time I've been pre-baby weight.' She strokes her admirably flat stomach lovingly.

It's true that Chantal is slowly regaining her pre-pregnancy glossiness. Now that Lana is a little bit older, she's no longer cutting her own fringe with the kitchen scissors or nibbling her nails off instead of getting expensive manicures. Her hair is groomed and shiny once more, her nails slicked with pink pearl varnish. I think this has more than a little to do with the fact that she now has the lovely Jacob Lawson in her life on a more permanent basis. 'I don't like to remind you, but you're supposed to be losing a little bit of bootilicious too, Lucy.'

'Yes, but this is all wrong,' I protest. 'I'm having to comfort eat. This is not our spiritual home.' I gesture inadequately at the equally inadequate café. 'We are *meant* to be at Chocolate Heaven.'

'But we are boycotting it because of Marcus,' Nadia says.

'It *was* your idea,' Autumn chips in. 'And we fully back you,' she adds hastily.

'We are wandering from unsuitable café to unsuitable café trying to find somewhere that you do like because you never want to clap eyes on him again,' Chantal adds. 'Remember?'

'Ah.' All heads swivel to look at me. I hesitate to tell them. I really do. Because I know what they'll say.

They wait, mouths pursed, for the revelation.

'I sort of saw him at lunchtime,' I confess.

'Oh, Lucy.' Collective voice.

'What? I didn't mean to. He turned up outside my office and begged me, *really begged me*, to go back and run it for him.'

'You didn't agree?'

'Weeeeeeell.'

'Lucy!' More group gasping.

'I got sacked today. Again.' I sigh as the overwhelming knowledge that I'm once more unemployed hits me low in the stomach. I bite into my unlovely ham sandwich and it tastes like sawdust in my mouth. What comfort does that provide, for heaven's sake? I could lie on the floor and weep.

'What for this time?'

'It was Marcus's fault. I should have been doing important things in the finance department and he persuaded me to go out to lunch with him instead.'

They all look at me, aghast.

'He offered me my job back.'

Shaking of heads.

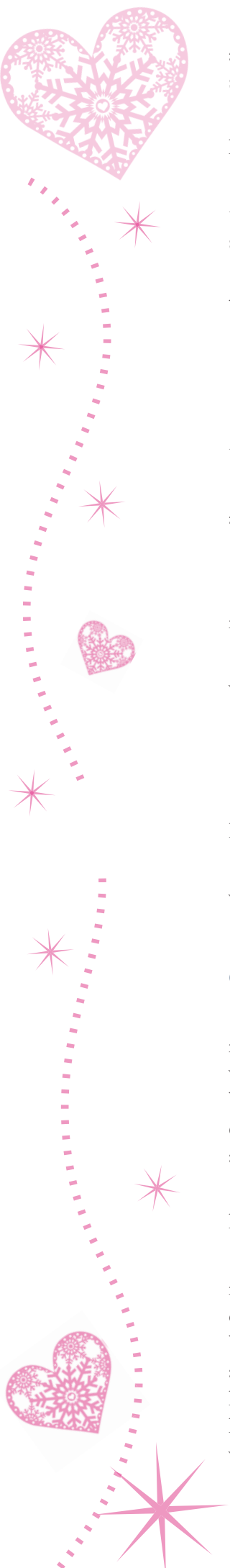
'I didn't say I'd go back to Chocolate Heaven.'

They don't look convinced.

'I did say I'd think about it, though.' And, if I'm honest, every fibre of my being is yearning to say yes.

'Could you handle seeing Marcus every day?' Chantal asks. 'He'd be all over you like a rash. It wouldn't stop at Chocolate Heaven, Lucy. You know what he's like.'

'I need the money.' I gnaw my fingernails a bit. 'This wedding is rushing up and Crush



and I are trying to do it on a budget, but the bills are mounting already and we've hardly started. How will I manage without a salary coming in?'

They all exchange anxious looks, as well they might. They know I am a snowflake in a fan heater when it comes to Marcus.

'There would be a plus side of me going back to Chocolate Heaven. We won't have to try out any more rubbish cafés. We could re-stake our claim there, go back to the old faithful sofas.'

'I can see the attraction,' Nadia says. 'I know you're desperate to get back, but there will be a price to pay.'

I sigh. 'I'll have to chat to Crush about it. See what he thinks.'

'Let's hope he can talk some sense into you,' says Chantal.

'Go back to the agency,' Nadia says. 'Tell them to find you another job. Or I could ask if there are any vacancies at the call centre where I work. There's a high turnover of staff.'

'That's because it's hideous,' I remind her. Nadia has only been there a short while and already she hates it.

'Yes,' Nadia agrees. 'It is.'

'Let's not be too hasty,' Autumn says. 'Lucy loves Chocolate Heaven. We all do. Is there not a way that she could manage to make this work?'

'That way danger lies,' says Chantal. 'You need to keep your distance, Lucy. Part of you will always be in love with Marcus.'

'I'm not,' I protest. 'I'm over him. Truly.'

No one looks as if they believe me.

'That might be so.' The look she gives me is sceptical. 'But Marcus can't be trusted. We all know that. No one more than you, Lucy.'

And she's right. He still knows exactly how to wind me round his little finger. There's no way that I could ever consider working for him. Could I?

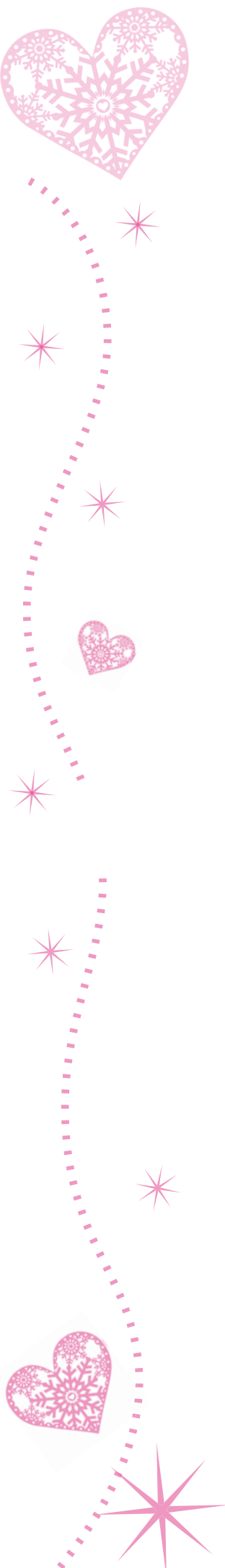
Chapter 4

When I leave Unsuitable Café number nineteen, I jump onto the Tube and head off to meet Crush at the wedding venue I've got in my sights. We've made a preliminary appointment with the wedding organiser there to discuss our requirements. Even though I'm squashed and bashed on the Underground and people stand on my feet and poke their copy of *Metro* in my eye, I get a thrill of excitement as I think that, very soon, Crush and I will become husband and wife. I love him so much, I just hope I don't do anything to mess it up.

Oh. Momentarily forgot that I have yet to tell Crush that I've lost my job. Again. I just hope I don't do anything *else* to mess it up.

I skip off the Tube and, with wings on my feet, fly to the park entrance where I'm to meet Crush. Golders Hill Park is one of my favourite places in London. Its leafy green spaces offer a calm oasis away from the hurly burly of the metropolis. When we come here, it's like being transported to another world. Our poky flat in Camden doesn't have any outside space at all, so we try to come here as often as we can to enjoy watching it change with the seasons, having brisk, wrapped-up walks in the winter with a hot chocolate to finish, and long leisurely hours reading and listening to music with an ice-cream in the summer. It would be lovely if we could get married here.

Crush is leaning against the wall by the entrance gate, arms folded, eyes closed, making



the most of a glimpse of cool afternoon sunshine. My heart lifts whenever I see him. As he's come straight from the office at Targa, he's still wearing his sharp work suit and looks so smart. He's classically tall, dark and handsome and every time I look at him I feel as if I'm punching above my weight. Not only is he good looking, but I know that I can lay my heart at his feet and be certain that he'll never trample on it. Not even by mistake. Not like some I could mention.

I tiptoe up to him and kiss his cheek. He opens his eyes and smiles as he sees me. 'Hi, Gorgeous. Good day?'

'In parts.' I try not to sound too cagey. I want to break the news of my newly unemployed state gently. My heart melts further and I slip my hand into his warm, strong fingers. 'Ready to do this?'

'Of course,' he says with a twinkle in his eye. 'You?'

'I've truly never been happier.' I take the opportunity to kiss him again and we go together into the park.

We meet Yvette, the wedding organiser, and she's a lovely lady who efficiently takes us to the areas where we could hold our marriage service. I grip Crush's hand tighter. We pass through the walled garden where the spring flowers are waving their cheerful heads in the breeze. We could be married by the pond in the Hill Garden Shelter, a more formal area, or in the Rotunda – an elevated pavilion. Both are gorgeous in their own way.

Yvette is clearly used to dealing with gushing, giggling brides-to-be as she lets me dart about, cooing over each feature while Crush stands patiently, smiling indulgently. She points out the pluses and minuses of each area; where we would stand to take our vows, where our guests would sit. All the while she takes details on an iPad. We're keeping the wedding small – close family and friends. That's all. I went for the big church wedding and meringue dress with Marcus and don't want to go down that route again. At least if Crush abandons me, there won't be over a hundred guests to witness my pain.

Not that he will. Crush is cut from better cloth. Cashmere to Marcus's polyester.

Then, finally, Yvette takes us to the last area, the Belvedere – a temple in a slightly overgrown area of gothic columns and gardens which takes my breath away. It looks like something out of a fairy tale and is surrounded by wisteria, jasmine and roses that are just in bud. Lush greenery winds itself round slender stone pillars and embraces wrought-iron gates. The vista over the rest of the park is breathtaking.

'Oh, Aiden,' I breathe. 'What do you think?'

'It's great. I love it,' he says.

'Really?'

'Better than I could have imagined. But it's what you want that matters, Gorgeous.'


It's so much better than I could have dreamed, too. 'I feel that this is 'The Place.'

It looks like a film set. It's classical, elegant and wild all at the same time. There's a stone balcony where tendrils of clematis and ivy hang down. The stone is worn, mellow and looks like it holds stories. Each area is beautiful in its own way and I'd be happy with any of them, but this one has stolen my heart. I think Autumn would be proud of me – it's quite bohemian.

'Is it horribly expensive?' I ask.

The wedding organiser tells us and it seems quite reasonable too, compared to other places I've considered. But it's still worryingly high for our meagre budget.

'I've had a cancellation for June in the Belvedere,' Yvette says. 'You need to make your minds up quickly though, as I'm seeing another couple who are interested tomorrow morning.'



Oh, I couldn't bear it if this went to someone else. I know that it's not all about the venue. It's what comes afterwards that's important – and I don't even mean the cake. But this is perfect and I want our special day to be wonderful. I'm doing this once and I want to get it right.

Then Yvette gives us her card, wishes us well and leaves us to think on it.

When she's gone, Crush and I stand looking at the area for a few minutes longer.

'You like it?' he says.

'I do.'

'That comes later,' he teases.

I slip into the comfort of his arms.

'It's beautiful. I could just imagine us getting married here. Can we really afford it, though?'

'Just about.'

'If we have a picnic afterwards, that will really keep the costs down.'

'Are you sure you don't want a sit-down meal in a hotel?'

I shake my head. 'This will be different. Fun. We can make up some hampers, sit on picnic blankets. Get someone to play a guitar or something.'

'It sounds lovely,' he agrees. 'But what if it rains?'

'There's some shelter here,' I point out. 'Besides, it won't rain on our wedding day. Even the clouds will be happy for us.'

'I would opt for telling our guests to bring umbrellas.' He grins and then kisses me deeply. 'You are the eternal optimist. That's why I love you.'

'There's just one little thing I need to talk to you about.'

Crush frowns at me. 'Should I be worried?'

'A bit,' I concede.

'I thought everything was going too well.' He stifles a sigh. 'You haven't accidentally photographed yourself naked with any strangers recently?'

He's never going to let me forget that. In my defence, I was wearing some underwear and I was only trying to help Nadia get rid of her sleazy brother-in-law by posing for incriminating photographs with him. Perfect plan. Slightly backfired. Never meant for Crush to see them on the computer. Obvs. But he did.

'You haven't swallowed any diamond rings, either?'

That too was a low point in our relationship and not entirely unrelated to the first one. It's fair to say that Crush's first proposal to me didn't go all that smoothly. I ate the ring that was hidden in a chocolate. What was he thinking? Of course I was going to eat the chocolate! Still, they were very nice in Accident and Emergency. Maybe I should invite the nurse to the wedding?

'You haven't broken the company you're working for? Yet.'

'Ah,' I say, in as enigmatic a way as I can muster. 'Maybe we need coffee and cake.'

'Oh, Lucy,' he says with resignation and I lead him down towards the café, while I think exactly how I'm going to word this.

We sit opposite each other on the terrace even though the sun has more or less given up the ghost. When I've plied him with a frothy cappuccino and a slice of paradise cake and he's looking reasonably content, I pull my coat tightly around me and begin. 'It wasn't really my fault . . .'



He laughs, but it sounds a bit forced. ‘It never is, Gorgeous.’

I met Crush when he was my boss at Targa, so he is well aware of my deficiencies in the workforce department.

‘I’m not cut out to be in an office.’

‘Many businesses across London have discovered that to their detriment.’

I flick froth at him, but I can’t actually argue my case. I am not a born employee.

He reaches out and takes my hands. ‘I know you’re missing Chocolate Heaven.’

My mouth goes dry with anxiety. ‘I wanted to talk to you about that, too.’

Crush’s face darkens and he shakes his head. ‘Please don’t tell me Marcus is behind this.’

‘Er . . . only slightly.’ Let’s face facts, it was only a matter of time before I got the bullet. One misdemeanour or another would have had me out of the door before long. Marcus just expedited it.

‘I hoped we’d seen the back of him. It’s been months now, Lucy, and you can’t say that our life hasn’t been a lot quieter without him in it.’

‘I know.’ Can’t argue with that. But here he is again. The bad penny. ‘He came to see me at lunchtime today,’ I confess. ‘He asked me to go back to Chocolate Heaven.’

‘And you, of course, told him no.’

‘I did . . .’

‘Now you’re having second thoughts.’

‘I was good at running Chocolate Heaven. It’s the only thing I’ve ever done well in my life. His current manager is rubbish.’

Crush looks unconvinced.

‘Completely unsuitable,’ I reiterate. ‘He offered me the chance to work there again.’

‘It would cost you dearly, Lucy,’ Crush points out. ‘Marcus would be right there in the middle of our relationship again. Exactly where he wants to be.’

‘I think he’s changed.’

Crush guffaws at that. As well he might. Marcus will never change. Even I know that and I am blind when it comes to Marcus.

‘Shouldn’t I consider it? We’re getting married. Weddings are expensive – even on a budget. How can we go ahead with our plans if I’m not working?’

‘We’ll manage,’ Crush says tightly.

‘We could postpone it,’ I offer. Even though it’s the last thing I want. ‘Get married later in the year.’

‘No,’ he insists. ‘We should book it now. We’ll find the money. Call your temp agency tomorrow. I’m sure you’ll find something.’ He looks at me earnestly. ‘I know that you once loved Marcus . . .’

‘But not anymore.’

‘I know that you love Chocolate Heaven, too. I also know that you feel cut loose without it, but there are other jobs. Jobs that don’t involve you being under Marcus’s thumb again. You *can’t* do it, Lucy.’

‘I know.’ I know that in my head. I do. But my heart is telling a very different story.



Chapter 5

Chantal opened the post. Before she slit the large brown manila envelope she knew what was in it, but she still had to steady herself against the kitchen counter. So that was it. The first batch of divorce papers had come through from Ted. Suddenly, it felt more real.

The speed of it all was quite shocking. They'd paid some fancy lawyer a lot of money to fast-track the process and they were carving up their assets with alarming alacrity. Yet why not do this as quickly as possible? The only thing that bound them together now was their daughter, Lana. For her sake, they would have to maintain a civilised relationship and, if she was honest, she might have fallen out of love with Ted but had never really reached the point of disliking him. There was still affection there between them and they should, if at all possible, hang on to that. If they tried hard, it should be feasible to keep things amicable. It didn't seem to happen often once lawyers and custody issues became involved, but they were trying to pick their way through it carefully. She wasn't yet sure if it helped or hindered their relationship that he was now several thousand miles away in New York.

He'd moved there to start a new job and a new life with his lover and her former friend, Stacey, and their daughter, Elsie. Theirs had been a very complicated setup. Ted had fathered Elsie when he and Chantal had been briefly separated and she'd done her best to assimilate the little girl into their family. Perhaps she'd done too much. She'd befriended Stacey, too, and it seemed that while they were friends, the woman had continued her affair with Ted behind her back when they'd both insisted it was over.

In some ways she still missed Stacey, as they were so similar in many ways. Elsie was adorable too. The girls were half-sisters and she'd wanted them to grow up together, have fun together, enjoy a stable family together. She realised now that was probably pie in the sky. Occasionally she spoke to Stacey when she called Ted for something to do with Lana or, more usually, the divorce proceedings. When Stacey picked up the phone instead of her ex-husband they were always pleasant with each other, but the warmth and closeness they'd once shared had all but gone. She wondered how Stacey was really settling in New York. On the phone she told Chantal that she enjoyed it, but the truth of the matter was that she probably hardly ever saw Ted and was on her own in a strange and busy city with a small baby. That was never going to be a bed of roses.

Still, that was Stacey's problem now. She'd chosen that situation and there was too much distance between them – emotionally and physically – for Chantal to be able to help her as she'd once tried. She couldn't quite forgive her – not so much for taking Ted, but for not being straight with her about her feelings for him. It was clear that Stacey also felt guilty about the situation and kept her at arm's length. Because of it, Stacey would be very much alone.

Turning to Lana in her high chair, Chantal said, 'Hey, baby girl. What have you done there? Have you given yourself a new hairdo?'

Lana had been left to her own devices with a small pot of yoghurt for a few minutes, but it was amazing to see just how much it had contained. She'd barely taken her eyes off her child to read the decree nisi, but now most of the yoghurt was in Lana's hair, which stood up in clumps. It was also in her ears, up her nose and all over the highchair. She gently took the spoon from her daughter's chubby fingers before she could do any more damage. Her daughter grinned at her proudly, clearly pleased with her efforts.

'What are we going to do about that, missy?' Thankfully, it wasn't very long until her bedtime.

It was tough bringing up a baby alone. Luckily, she and Ted had been well-placed financially, so that was one less thing to worry about. They were in the process of selling the properties they owned and Ted had been very fair in their settlement. It wasn't often that she heard that from friends. Usually there was a terrible embittered battle over money, but Ted hadn't indulged in that. Perhaps it was guilt that was motivating him. He had, after all, not just



left Chantal but had essentially put his career ahead of seeing his daughter.

Looking at her baby contentedly gurgling and talking nonsense to herself, Chantal wondered whether there'd come a day when Lana would be unhappy about the situation her parents had left her in, due to their inability to get along. All she wanted was for her child to be happy.

Soon, she'd look for a job, but the settlement and a general downsizing in lifestyle meant that she had enough money for it not to be a pressing issue. She'd take her time, enjoy Lana and find something she'd like to do that could work round her daughter. The world of magazines might be too demanding. She'd had to travel a lot with her last job and there was no way she wanted to do that now. Maybe something online would be the answer. Perhaps Autumn's partner, Miles, who was a website wizard, could give her some ideas.

Plus, at the moment, she seemed to be so tired all the time, and though she'd been trying to lose a few pounds, the weight seemed to be dropping off her. Not that she was complaining about that, but perhaps she needed some vitamins or a herbal tonic to give her a boost. It had been niggling her for a few weeks now.

Jacob came into the room. His hair was still damp from the shower and her stomach flipped. He was a beautiful man from head to toe, inside and out.

'Feel better?'

He nodded. 'It's nice to wash the day away.' She handed him a glass of wine and he sipped it gratefully. 'Just what the doctor ordered.' Then he twined his arm round her waist and nuzzled her neck. It always felt so good to be held by him. Lana and Jacob gave the best cuddles. 'Speaking of which. How are you feeling today?'

'Still a bit tired,' she admitted. 'I managed to have a nap this afternoon when Lana did.' It wasn't often she managed synchronised sleeping with her daughter, but recently she'd become so fatigued that she'd tried to catnap when Lana did, rather than trying to race round to achieve something useful in her day. Achieving something useful, she hoped, would come later. 'I feel a bit better now.'

'Did you call the doctor?'

'I don't think it's anything to bother the GP with. I expect all mums with young babies are permanently exhausted.'


'I'd be happier if you made an appointment. You don't seem yourself at the moment.' Jacob frowned with concern. 'Maybe the stresses and strains of life have piled up a bit. Don't they say that divorce is one of the most stressful life events?'

'Moving house is up there too and we'll be doing that soon,' she said.

When the family home was sold, she and Jacob were going to move in together. She'd bought a small terraced house in a nice, quiet mews street not far from where she currently lived. This part of north London was nice and trendy with lots going on – not that she availed herself of it now that she had Lana, but it was still good to know that it was close to hand. She sometimes wondered whether Jacob minded being thrust into the full flow of parenthood, but he didn't seem to. He'd made a fantastic surrogate father to Lana, who was too young to have noticed the transition from Ted to another man; that in itself was so sad.

They'd got together at Christmas when she'd rented a huge farmhouse in the Lake District for everyone to stay in. It had taken some organising, but all the members of the Chocolate Lovers' Club had come along. The cottage had been fabulous and they'd all enjoyed the snow, the roaring fires and spending a relaxing time together. After she and Ted had broken up, Nadia had invited Jacob to come along too as a surprise. The truth was that she'd loved Jacob for a long time, which had never helped her marriage. Now it was their chance to be together.

Despite the pain of the looming divorce, Christmas had been a great success. If anything,



it had helped her to fall in love more deeply with Jacob. All their previous time together had been snatched moments. In the seclusion of the cottage, they'd been able to spend time together as a couple.

'I'll start dinner,' Chantal said.

'I'm famished. Lunch was a quick espresso.' Jacob's event-planning business was keeping him very busy. He was quite often out a couple of evenings in the week and at the weekends, though he did his best to delegate those.

'I have no idea what's lurking in the depths of the fridge, but I'm hoping there's something edible.' As she turned away, she felt a sharp pain, high on her chest, that took her breath away.

'Are you sure you're OK?'

'Just a twinge,' she said, rubbing the area. 'Lana's getting very heavy to lift now. Perhaps I've pulled a muscle. I'm sure it's something and nothing.'

'Promise me that you'll phone the doctor tomorrow.'

'It's impossible to get an appointment. You have to be on the phone from eight o'clock in the morning and sit in a holding queue of a dozen people. I'll either be cured or dead by the time I get through.'

'Try. Promise me.'

'I will.' She had no intention of doing so, but when the pain seared through her again, she thought that Jacob might have a point.