

## Extract from “Paper Hearts and Summer Kisses”

### Chapter 1

‘No. No. No.’ Much groaning. It’s five o’clock in the morning and my wake-up alarm is ringing its head off. My dear son, Finn, has set it to play an altogether too cheerful ‘How D’Ya Like Your Eggs in the Morning?’. Right now, I’d opt for served on a silver salver by a butler at an infinitely more civilised hour of the day. This getting up at the crack of dawn every day is too cruel. I put out a hand and fumble to turn it off, knocking my phone to the floor and out of reach. Which is just as well as the temptation to smash it is overwhelming. I flop back and pull my pillow over my head. I hate five o’clock in the morning. Hate it. With a passion. Yet it comes round far too quickly every day.

I’d really love to stay here and have a much-needed duvet day, but I catch my commuter coach into London in less than an hour and any thought of dilly-dallying in bed is out of the question. Though I might be a reluctant getter-upper, I’m actually quite a loyal employee. To my eternal credit, I’ve rarely had a day off sick in the eighteen years I’ve worked for the same company. Impressive, eh? Well, I think so.

Another reason I can’t delay any longer is that Dean Martin is still crooning into the carpet and the dog is starting to whine along too. The only way I can shut them both up is to get out of bed. I am resigning myself to my fate, but I still do it with much groaning.

‘Come on, Christie Chapman,’ I mutter to no one but myself. ‘Let’s be having you.’

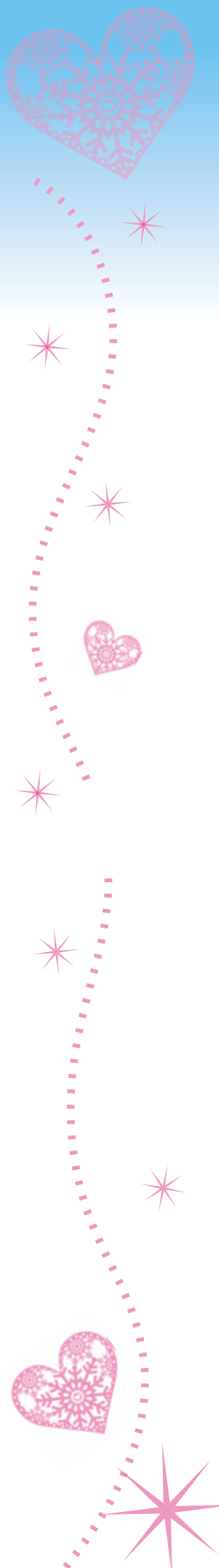
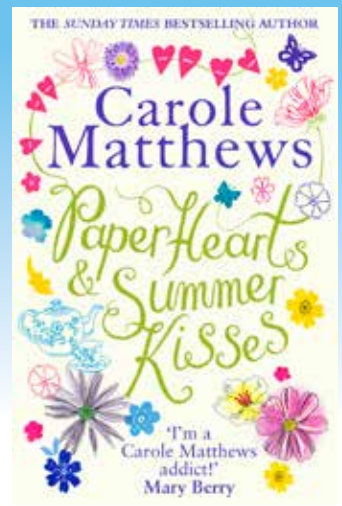
I move my bedfellows as kindly as I can – two cats and the aforementioned dog. Eric wags his tail, does a full circle of the bed and settles down again. How I envy him. The cats – Lily and Pixel – reluctantly rouse themselves from sleep and both eye me with a depth of loathing that only our feline friends can convey. It’s the same every day. They hate the alarm too but, like me, you think they’d be used to it by now.

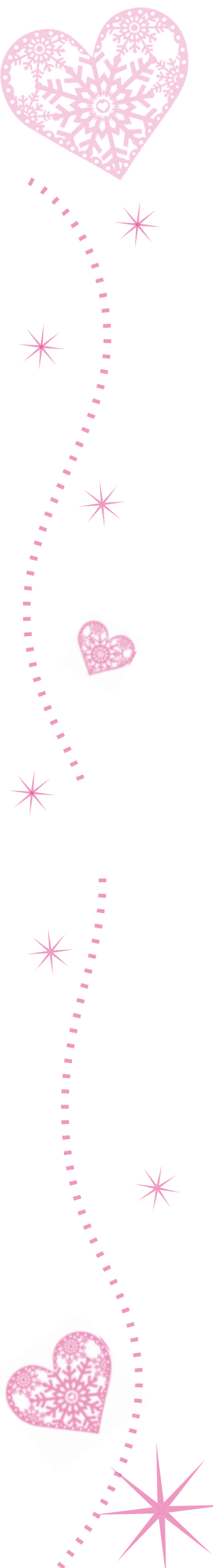
Quietening the chirpy Dean en route, I stagger towards the bathroom. If they ever need any extras on *The Walking Dead*, I could do it. Without the need for a costume. Or make-up.

I didn’t really get enough sleep last night as I went to bed way too late. I wasn’t out partying or anything. I don’t want to give you the impression that I actually have a life. Oh no. Sad single that I am, I spend my sad single evenings paper crafting while watching rubbish on telly. To pass the hours, I make cards, gift tags, scrapbooks, that kind of thing. I’m currently in the throes of making a birthday card for a friend. My lovely mate, Sarah Plimmer, is about to turn forty and she’s really special to me, so I want to do something totally fab for her. The perfect design is eluding me. Consequently, I spent aeons on Pinterest – as you do – and fell into bed at midnight when I really like to be tucked up at half past ten. Latest.

The sight of my morning self in the mirror is truly scary. My forty-odd-year-old face takes quite a lot of time to reassemble itself into the right symmetry after being reshaped by the pillow all night. Seriously, it’s a good half-hour these days before the creases go. I keep thinking I should get some decent eye cream to slather onto the puffy bags that greet me pre-dawn, but I never quite manage that level of beauty routine. I’m a sort of soap and water kinda gal. But I’m getting to the age where I need considerably more help than that.

In my sleepy state, I get on the scales. That always scares me as well. I don’t know why I do it. I like to think that a daily weigh-in will help me to keep my middle-aged spread in check. In reality, it just depresses me and has me reaching for a comforting chocolate bar instead. If I had any sense, I should just throw them in the bin.





I rely on the power of hot water to bring me back to life and prepare me for the long day ahead. I put on my frog shower cap. I bought it because it's green and yellow and has those big white eyes where the black bits rotate. I thought it would cheer me up at the start of my day. It doesn't.

I'm hoping that I can get away without washing my hair for another day. It's long and brown – as my plug hole can attest to – and I keep meaning to get it cut short so that it will be more manageable, but never quite find the time. I'd like one of those styles that you wash and go in three minutes, even though I think they might be an urban myth. There are a few grey hairs showing too, but I'm trying to put off dyeing as it will not only require even more time, but also additional expense that I can well do without. Currently, I'm just pulling them out as I see them and hoping that they don't start coming through so thick and fast that I go bald.

I keep my eyes closed in the shower so that I can hold onto the pretence of sleep for just a little while longer. I don't mind commuting. Actually, yes I do. It's four precious hours out of my day that I could, surely, utilise in a much better way. It's mind-numbing, expensive and exhausting. On the plus side, I avoid the hideous crush of the train and travel by comfortable coach which picks me up at the end of my road and deposits me right outside my office on the Embankment. There is a train station in Wolverton, where I live, but it's at the other end of the town and the journey would cost twice as much *plus* involve a long walk, a train and a tube. Hideous. On the coach I sit still for two hours each way and they serve me coffee. I think that last bit was the deal clincher.

I'm a PA in a legal firm specialising in civil, criminal and family law. We have an unwritten dress code of dark suit and blouse, which is fine by me. It takes the decision of what to wear every day pretty much out of my hands. I lay my outfit out before I go to bed each night in an effort to shave a few minutes off my routine and give me more pillow time. On autopilot, I pull on my clothes, brush my hair into some sort of top knot – the success of which varies daily – and I'm ready to rock. I never wear make-up. That would involve too much complication at this time of day and I'd probably go out looking like a pantomime dame. I try to convince myself that natural is best and that in years to come I'll be reaping the benefits for not having put all that stuff on my face. That's my theory, anyway.

On my way downstairs, I pass Finn's bedroom and poke my head inside. In the gloom, all I can see is a heap in the middle of the bed. My darling boy has never been a tidy sleeper. He's fifteen now, but I still think of him as my baby. You always do, don't you?

Braving the ripe fug of a teenage boy's bedroom, I tiptoe in, crossing the minefield of discarded clothes, trainers and PlayStation games. Despite my best efforts Finn's bedroom has remained steadfastly untidy since he was about seven. In all other ways, he's been a model child, so I cut him some slack and only insist on a quarterly fumigation. I go to sit beside him on the bed. His mop of dark hair is just visible above the duvet. I plant a kiss on it.

'Muuuum,' he complains sleepily.

'I'm just leaving, sweetheart. I'll see you tonight.'

'OK.'

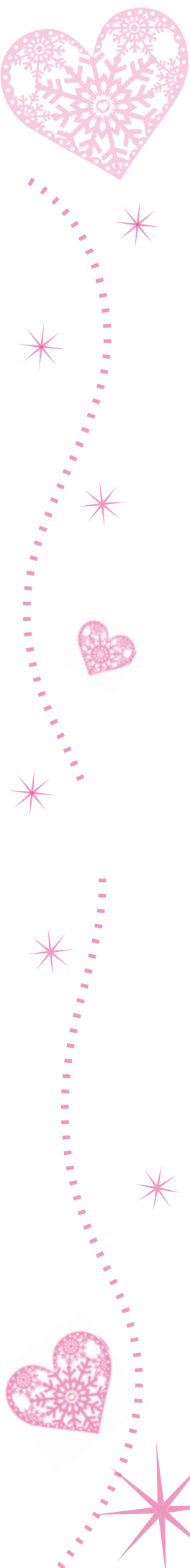
'Don't be late for school.'

'I've had a headache all night,' he says, still drowsy. 'Can I stay off today?'

'Come on,' I urge. 'You've had so much time off, Finn. I had a letter from the headmaster about it last week. You need to get yourself up and out. You'll feel better after a shower and I'll leave a couple of paracetamol on the table for you. Pops will come round at eight to do your breakfast.'

'He doesn't need to.'

'I know. But he likes it. And it makes me feel better too. Deal?'



Finn nods and snuggles down again. I stroke his hair. Sometimes I worry about him. He's not a robust child. He's not one of these hulking great teenagers with shoulders like prop forwards that you see at the school gates towering over the teachers. Finn is small, slender and never has much appetite. He seems to be plagued by a constant stream of minor infections and headaches. If he catches a cold, he never seems to shrug it off and it can last up to a month. He seems to live on antibiotics and, surely, that can't be right. Recently, he's had so many days off that the school are getting quite grumpy about it. I've asked him if he's being bullied or if there's another reason why he doesn't want to go in, but he says not.

'I've got to go.'

'Have a good day,' he murmurs.

'You too. You've done all your homework?'

'Sort of.'

'Oh, Finn. I'm hoping you're going to become a brain surgeon or something and keep your old mum in the style she'd like to become accustomed to.'

'I'm not sure some half- completed course work on the Rise of the Roman Empire is going to make any difference to me getting me there.' He looks up at me from beneath the covers and grins.

My heart melts. It's been just me and Finn for a long time now and we're a tight little unit of two. I probably should be more strict as a parent but he knows and I know that I'm a complete pushover when it comes to him.

'Besides, we're just going over old stuff now for the exams. We're not learning anything new.'

'At least try. Don't ever regret not doing your best.'

'OK.'

'I'll feed the fiends before I go. Don't let them do the starving animal routine on you and get two breakfasts.'

'I'll do it. You'll miss your coach.'

I glance at my watch. He's right.


'Thanks, love. You're a star. Be ready for when Pops comes.' And, with a final kiss, I head out to face another day.

## Chapter 2

The coach stops at the corner of my road and, as I get there, I see it trundling towards me. It's big, shiny, blue and very comfortable, but I loathe the sight of it nevertheless. My fellow commuters are waiting here too, huddled on the pavement, and I nod hello to them. Despite some of us having commuted together for several years, we don't generally speak to each other. Well, only in times of crisis. If the bus is late or the weather is particularly bad, we all have a good moan then.

At ten to six there aren't many other people about and the usually busy street has a pleasant stillness about it. As it's the tail end of March, it's also about half an hour before sunrise but it's heartening to know that the dark days of winter are behind us and the mornings are getting a little bit lighter with every passing day. Soon I won't be leaving in the dark and coming home in it too.

This is not the best area, but it's not the worst either. I live in a nice Victorian terraced house. Not one of the ones with original sash windows and a slate roof – no one thought to make this a conservation area – but rather one which has been modernised with UPVC windows from Zenith or someone and has had all the fireplaces taken out. It's not one with



huge rooms and high ceilings either, but is a small, modest abode. However, the kitchen is big enough to fit a table in, which is its saving grace and a boon for an addictive crafter like me, as the dining room table is usually swamped with paper, glitter and stuff. At least we have somewhere else to eat our meals rather than on our knees with trays in front of the telly – though I do favour a bit of that sometimes.

The bus pulls up and we all file on. Despite not having allocated seats, we all sit in the same place every day and God help anyone who goes off piste and decides to try another seat. The looks! They say that they can't kill, but I think they can come pretty close. My personal Seat of Choice is left- hand side at the back just in front of the gap for the rear emergency door. That way nobody is sitting directly behind me. No knees in the back. No snoring if someone nods off. There's only one stop before mine, so it's more often than not free but, if someone else tries to make a bid for it and is already sitting there, I am totally screwed for the entire day. Nothing else goes right.

'Morning, Christie,' Toni says as I take my seat. She's been the morning assistant on this coach for nearly as long as I've been travelling. 'Usual for you?'

She hardly needs to ask. I prefer an extra five minutes in bed to breakfast at home, so I always have two strong cups of coffee on my journey to kick- start my engine. As soon as we set off, she bustles about serving us all our warm drinks with a cheery smile.

'No Susan?' she adds as she pours.

'No.' My new morning run coach companion hasn't turned up today and there's an empty seat beside me. 'She said she had a sore throat yesterday. Maybe she's come down with a cold.'

'Seems like a nice lady.' She hands me my coffee and I tip up my two quid. But that does include a free refill.

'Yes.' Susan has already demonstrated admirably that she understands commuting etiquette and keeps chat to a minimum, respecting the need for peace and quiet. The only time that a buzz of whispers goes round the bus is when Toni checks the tickets and someone is caught on the fiddle. Thankfully, she has the sense to give us all coffee before she checks the tickets. The good ladies and gentlemen of the commuter coach couldn't cope with a scandal with low caffeine levels.

'Ted in the office told me that she's just bought an annual season ticket, so it looks as if we'll be seeing more of her,' Toni confides.

'That's good.'

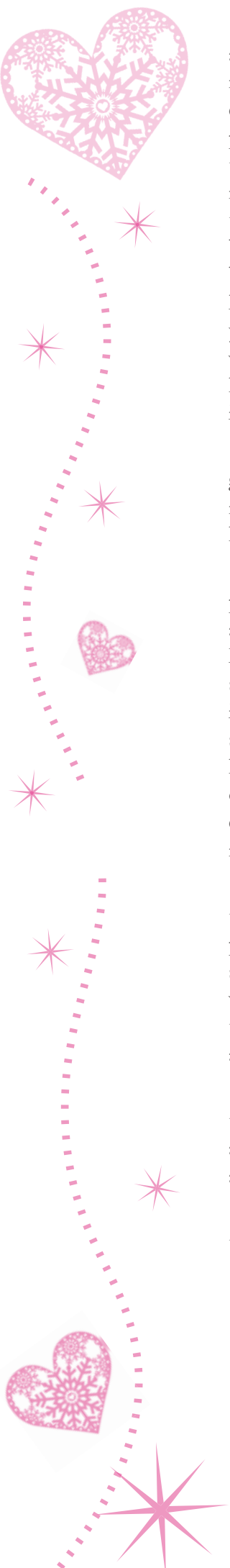
Toni nods at my cup. 'Give me a shout when you're ready for your top- up.' Then she moves onto the next seat.

The coach is always cosy and warm and sometimes, if I'm lucky or particularly knackered, I manage to catch up on another hour or so of sleep before we hit London. I nurse my cup with its cardboard jacket and pop in my earphones. I'm listening to an audio book. Chick lit. It's the closest I ever get to romance these days.

We swing onto the A5 and head towards Hockliffe, our next passenger pick- up point. I settle down and close my eyes and let the words of the narrator wash over me.

My ex- husband Liam Chapman and I divorced five years ago now. It sounds strange to say this, but there was nothing really wrong with our relationship. Our only crime was to marry too young. There was no big drama, no other person on the side-lines, it was just that I don't believe we'd ever really been in love. Not properly. We liked each other well enough and we'd been together since we were fifteen, so we didn't really know any different. We were so comfortable together that we just assumed that the next step was to get married and so we did. Yet, even on my wedding day, I didn't feel any great rush of love and that's not right, is it?

Liam worked in the hospitality industry – managing a chain hotel in Milton Keynes –



and, eventually, was offered a job overseas. A new hotel complex in Dubai needed a general manager. It was at that point we both stopped to question where we were going. He was desperate to take it. The job was a big promotion and came with a nice, fat salary – tax- free – paid- for accommodation and a dozen other perks that I can't even remember now. The very thought made my blood run cold. I was as reluctant as Liam was keen. It just seemed like too much upheaval. Finn would have been starting secondary school within the year. It would have taken me away from my parents who are, and have always been, my lifeline. Liam would have been working long hours and it wasn't guaranteed that I'd get a work permit, so I could have been stuck at home all day. Liam wanted to get out of Wolverton and see more of the world. I liked the fact that I knew everyone in the local shops – still do – and a week in Cornwall every year is enough of the world for me. The more he pleaded, the more I could see it wouldn't work. When it came down to it I realised that, although I really liked him a lot, I didn't love him enough to turn my world upside down for him. I didn't want to go to Dubai. And, more importantly, I didn't really want to go to Dubai with Liam.

We both cried a lot when we reached our final decision. I would stay here and Liam would go. There were lots of promises about him coming home regularly and talk that Finn wouldn't miss out as he'd Skype him every day and we could both fly out to the hotel for regular holidays. And I'm sure we both meant it.

I went to my parents' house and drank tea and talked about the weather while my husband packed up and left our lives. Within a month of him going, he'd met someone else who adored him. Of course he did. Essentially, he's a nice man. We divorced without fuss and Liam remarried. He has a lovely wife called Jodie and, now, five years or so later, they have two small children of their own. He sends us money regularly. Not that much, if I'm honest, but it all helps. I can't fault him for that. However, though they do keep in touch, the daily Skype sessions with Finn never quite materialised and, to date, he's never been there on holiday. Liam has made a few flying visits home, but it's not really enough. He never forgets Finn's birthday or Christmas, so that's some small comfort. It doesn't seem to bother my son – my dear old dad has seamlessly stepped into the parenting role for him – but I do wonder if it plays on his mind.

The coach draws into the coach stop at Hockliffe, just before we turn towards Toddington to hit the motorway and join the endless stream of traffic heading south into the city. I clear a patch in the condensation on the window and scan the people who are waiting without really seeing them. In this day and age, you do think that it would be possible for more people to work from home than join this tedious daily exodus to the big smoke. What's the point of all these advances in technology if it can't even achieve that? Toni comes and lifts her coffee pot and an enquiring eyebrow. I take the lid off my cup and hold it out for a refill.

When she moves off to the next passenger, a man flops down into the seat next me. He throws his bag on the floor. Clearly he doesn't realise that this is now Susan's seat. Although, admittedly, she still has quite a slim claim on it. I haven't seen his face before and I have to admit that it's quite a nice face. Even at this hour in the morning, I register that.

'Phew,' he says. 'That was a bit of a rush. I cut it too fine today. I can see that I'm going to have to get up earlier in the morning. Snatching that last five minutes was a mistake.'

A man after my own heart,' I quip.

The doors close and we set off again towards the M1.

'I'm Henry,' he says holding out a hand. 'Henry Jackson.'

'Pleased to meet you. Christie Chapman.'

'First day at a new job,' he tells me. 'Bit nervous. First- time commuter too. Is it hideous?'

'Yes.'

He laughs at that, as if I'm joking. People are looking round to see who, other than Toni,



has the temerity to be quite so chirpy at this hour.

As I noted, Henry Jackson is not a bad-looking bloke. Not that I'm any kind of judge of these things. He's a bit dishevelled, but then he did say that he got ready in a rush. One side of his shirt collar is turned up and his tie's not quite straight. His hair is dark and wavy and looks as if he hasn't got round to combing it yet. And it needs a cut. But when he turns to smile at me again, I see that he's got nice teeth and rather kind grey eyes. Hmm. It's a long time since I've noticed the colour of anyone's eyes.

'Tea or coffee, love?' Toni asks.

'Tea, please.' His accent is northern. Manchester or somewhere. Flat vowels. 'This is very civilised.'

She pours him a cup and moves on to bring joy in the way of beverages to the new arrivals.

'Have you been doing this for years?' he asks.

It doesn't seem the right time to tell him that the first rule of commuting is minimal conversation.

'It's quite exciting,' he adds without waiting for my reply. He takes in his surroundings. 'Where did you get on?'

Giving up with my audio book, I pull out my earphones and say, 'Wolverton.'

'I'm new to the area,' Henry Jackson tells me. 'Where's that?' This one's obviously going to be a talker. I hope we're not on the same coach home otherwise I'll never find out if the dappy heroine falls into bed with a man who is quite clearly unsuitable.

### Chapter 3

My office is on the Embankment and the firm I work for is ancient – started in the year dot or something. On the other hand, our offices are bright and contemporary and are full of fancy artworks. The old guard has pretty much been pensioned off and are probably now spending their cossetted retirement at the second homes in Spain, so all the partners in the firm are currently younger than me. Such is the way of the world. The new bunch are all kindness itself though. Maybe because they are hotshot lawyers and realise they could get their arses sued off if they were mean to their employees.

I work for five lawyers, all men except for Robyn Reynolds who has been at the firm almost as long as I have. Robyn joined straight from university as an intern, then did her training here and has, over the course of the last eighteen years or so, worked her way up to being a senior partner. Whereas, in the same space of time, I have worked my way up from being a secretary to a PA. Hmm.

For my sins, I organise their travel, conferences and meetings, talk to counsels' clerks, sort out billing and put together trial bundles for hearings. I also have the world's most complex telephone with so many buttons that I still haven't managed to work out what they all do. We have a big television screen in the office too that's always, quite depressingly, set to Sky news.

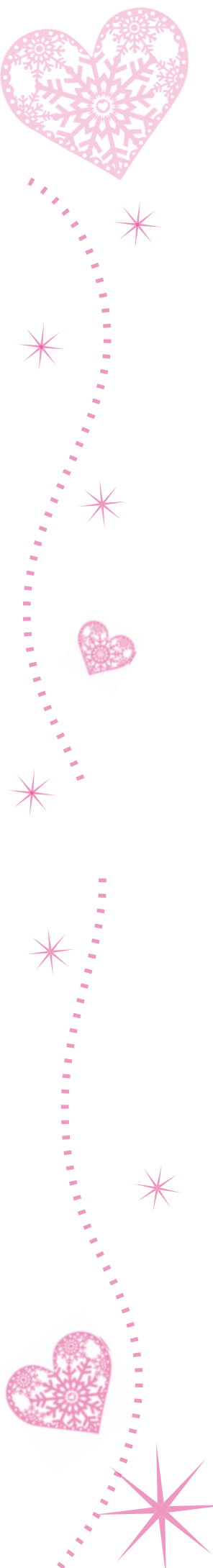
'Morning, Christie.' Robyn is already lurking by my work-station. 'You're looking frazzled. Traffic bad?'

'No.' I strip off my coat. 'I had a talker on the coach. Missed two hours of beauty sleep.'

'A talker. How rude.'

'He's northern. Doesn't understand that people in the south don't speak to each other on public transport.'

'He'll learn.'



'It felt mean to tell him to shut up. So I now know that he's divorced. Recently. Moved down here from Manchester for a new start.' Go me on spotting the accent. 'He's starting a new job today in publishing.'

'Hot?'

I shrug.

'That's not an absolute no.'

'Quite handsome, I'd say. But I didn't really look that much. I just wanted him to shut up so I could go back to my book.'

'Wild night on the tiles?'

'Yes. Went to a rave, popped a load of e's and got shit-faced. Didn't bother going to bed, just came straight here.'

We both roll our eyes at the ludicrous nature of my answer. I don't even know if those are the right terms these days.

'I was up late, making a nice birthday card for my friend.' 'Ah. Crazy fool.' Robyn is well aware that my life is one long trip to the fun palace. 'Sit. I'll get you a coffee.' She heads off to the machine.

This is no time to remind her that, generally, the PA gets the coffee for the boss. But this is why I love Robyn so much. She's not afraid to get her hands dirty in the coffee department. She's also smart, savvy and is a player. Whereas I am not. I don't have a law degree either, but that's by the by. Some days, I feel as if I do.

Although we're pretty much the same age, we couldn't be more different. She is tall, athletic, blonde. I am not. She has one of those sharp, chippy haircuts that I so desire. Robyn spends hours in the gym working out. I do not. At lunchtime she eats alfalfa sprouts or some such from our posh restaurant on the thirteenth floor. I nip to Tesco and get their three quid meal deal. I have a cheese sandwich, a bag of crisps and a diet Pepsi. She drinks Phresh Greens to keep the pH of her body in balance or some swamp- coloured smoothie she makes herself which she calls Warrior Juice, which – quite frankly – just sounds pervy. I prefer to go down the vodka and Red Bull route. Robyn also has a lesbian lover and I definitely do not. Though she often tries to persuade me that going over to the pink side was the best thing she ever did.

The Robster puts my coffee down and perches on the corner of my desk. I move papers about and try to remember what I was doing yesterday. 'Have you ever considered green tea?'

'No.'

'I worry about your caffeine intake.'

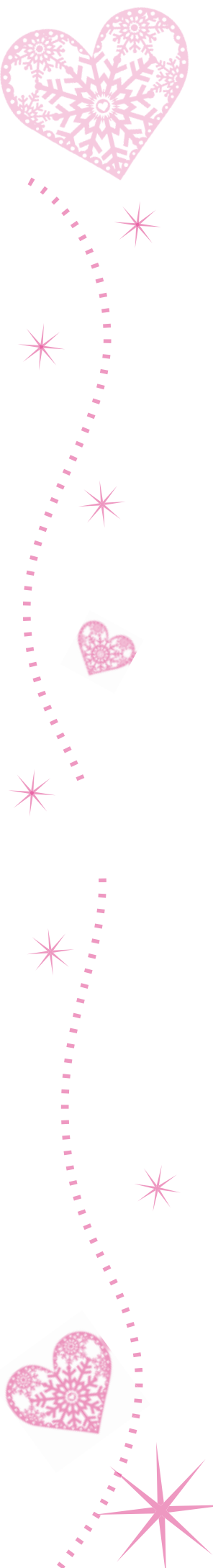
'So do I,' I say. 'I don't get nearly enough to keep me focused.' She rolls her eyes. 'Imogen said thank you for the anniversary card, by the way.'

'I can't believe it's a year.'

'Me neither.'

Robyn married her partner, Imogen, in a lovely ceremony in the Westminster register office and then had a reception on a boat on the Thames. I organised most of it for her. When I say organised it, that might be bigging up my part. I was the go-between with her uber efficient and slightly scary wedding planner, Cressida – who we all nicknamed Cruella. When she barked orders, I did her bidding. At Robyn and Imogen's request, I did make the invitations, place cards and more than my fair share of decorations – miles of personalised bunting and the like. I was so pleased – and relieved – how well they came out.

It was a glorious day. No expense spared. Imogen – now Mrs Reynolds – is also tall and blonde. She's a fêted interior designer and is as rich as Croesus. They live together in the



swankiest house I've ever seen in Hampstead and throw an annual star-studded garden party for Imo's clients who are mainly people from the reality soaps and footballers' wives who I never recognise.

I might be small, on the curvy side due to never letting an alfalfa sprout pass my lips, and be somewhat challenged in the climbing the career ladder area, but I do have a fantastic son, a tiny house that would benefit from Imogen's attentions, and a great family. Robyn does not. She's desperate for kids, but it's just not happening for them despite half a dozen different attempts at IVF. One has no eggs left at all, the other is starting an early menopause – which just seems like too much bad luck. I keep trying to get them to consider pets, but they find the thought of pet hair in their minimalist home abhorrent. Quite how they'd cope with kids running around is another matter.

'Imo says that you're wasted here,' Robyn says as she sips her brew. 'You should be doing something artistic.'

'I take that as a compliment.'

'Imogen is A Woman Who Knows.'

She is. There's a long list of eminent and upcoming artists who are among their friends. Even after the success of their wedding decorations, I was slightly terrified when Robyn asked me to make her an anniversary card. It's never just a card for either of them. It took me three nights to get it right. Robyn even took a snip of each of their Alice Temperley wedding dresses – inside the hem – so that I could use it in the design. Despite the angst, I have to say that I was rather pleased with the result.

'She says that you don't charge enough.'

To be honest, if I had to charge by the hour it would be the most expensive anniversary card on the planet. 'It's not about the money,' I say. 'I didn't want to charge you anything at all. You know that.'

'Nonsense,' Robyn says. 'Don't underestimate your talent.'

'It's just hard to make any serious dosh from arts and crafts. Not unless you're Kirsty Allsopp and are all over the telly.'

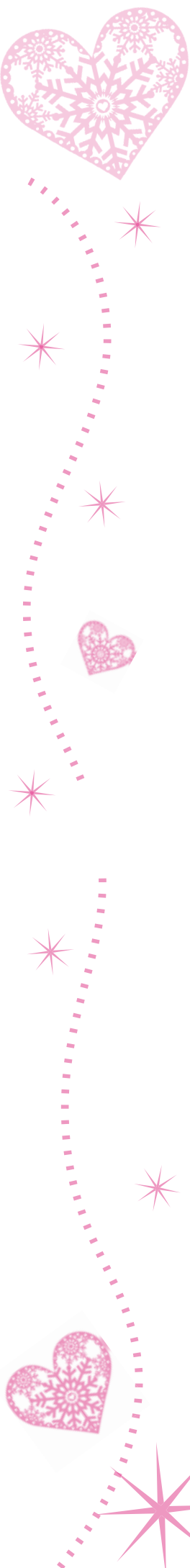
I spend my entire lunchtime at work online looking at craft bits and bobs – while eating my unhealthy cheese sandwich and bag of crisps and avoiding Robyn's sideways glances. Sometimes she mouths 'NutriBullet' at me and I mouth back 'Sod off.'

Mostly, I make cards for friends and colleagues. It's hardly going to buy me a Learjet or a top-of-the-range Merc, but it brings in a bit of pin money and covers – mostly – the cost of my crafting addiction. Unless I have a particularly mad splurge on eBay, of course. Frankly, you can never have too many crystals or decorative mini-clothes pegs.

I'd always dabbled with crafts, but I guess I started doing it in earnest when Liam first left. What can you do at night on your own when you've got a child upstairs in bed? You can't go out gallivanting. You can't crank the music up. I could only prevail on my dear parents to babysit for Finn every so often while I had a wild night on two glasses of wine at the local pub with my girlfriends. Finn never much cared for me leaving him. My son liked it best when we were snuggled up on the sofa together with the fur babies, even when he hit his teens, and, frankly, I did nothing to discourage it. There was never really the spare money either. We're not exactly on the bread-line, but by the time I've paid for all the household bills, Finn's school stuff, my crafting addiction and food for several more animals than is strictly necessary, there's not much left to splash around.

Plus – dare I say it – I quite like being at home on my own sofa. I'm not a natural goer-outer. However, I'm not the sort of person who can sit still just watching soaps. I like to be doing something with my hands. Over the years, I've knitted, crocheted, embroidered and





cross-stitched. I get it all from my mum. She's always been keen on home-made crafts. I don't think I had one school uniform which Mum hadn't run up on her Singer sewing machine. She had a few little craft businesses herself over the years too. When Care Bears were all the rage, our dining room was wall-to-wall fur fabric as Mum fashioned Birthday Bear, Bedtime Bear, Funshine Bear *et al.* When I got home from school, I was paid a very poor piece-work rate to stuff them with kapok filling and put their eyes in. If you wanted pocket money in our house, you had to earn it.

I do a bit of a craft blog too. Nothing much. I put up my projects and a bit of blah-blah. I don't do it every day either – just as and when I can. I'm amazed that anyone follows me, but they do. I keep thinking that I could do some videos and maybe become an internet sensation like PewDiePie or Zoella or Pointless Alfie. Maybe not. For a start, I'm sort of twenty years too old. I don't think there are that many middle-aged internet sensations. Certainly not in the craft world.

While I'm thinking about all this, Robyn drains her cup. 'Well, we've got work to do, Christie. What shall we start on first? Do you fancy typing up some affidavits or tackling the month end billing?'

'Your call. You're the boss.'

'Oh, yeah,' she says. 'You can do the next coffee run.'

'Now?'

'Why not?' she agrees. 'Let's not be too hasty about these things. We should *ease* ourselves into the day.'

I'm seeing nothing to argue with here.

## Chapter 4

I sneak out of the office ten minutes before I'm supposed to so that I can catch the early coach home. The stop is right by Cleopatra's Needle and I have to bounce off the tourists as I walk down the Embankment. Some days I don't mind, but other days – particularly if there's a boisterous group of French students around – I can't bear that they're all wandering about taking photos in a leisurely manner and generally enjoying themselves while I'm on a mission to get home.

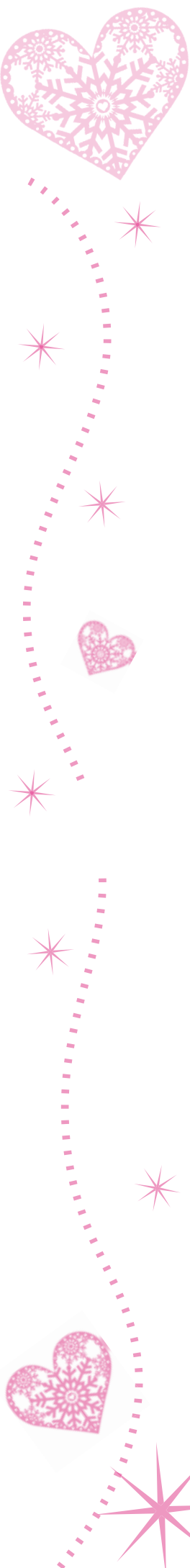
Mr Chatty isn't on the bus home and, weirdly, I'm not sure if I'm relieved or disappointed. I put in my earphones and think I must have dozed off as soon we're pulling onto the M1 as a whole chunk of my book doesn't seem to make sense.

The traffic is quite light today and I text my dad as we hit the outskirts of Milton Keynes. Three nights a week – minimum – I have dinner at my parents' house. My dad picks me up from the coach stop and, even though it's right outside my own house, he spirits me to the home of my childhood. With some uncannily eerie timing, my mum is usually dishing up as we walk in the door. Finn goes to them straight from school and, in theory at least, in those few hours he does his homework or, currently, revising for his exams.

'All right, Christie, love?' Dad says as I get into his battered old Skoda. 'Good day?'

'Fine, Dad.' I kiss his cheek.

My dad, Ray Barker, is nearly seventy now and long retired. When he worked he was a security guard on armoured vehicles that delivered money to banks. Mum and I hated him doing it, but he always said that it wasn't dangerous. Then, over the years, the number of attacks on the vans started to increase, the ferocity of them got worse. Dad was badly beaten up a few times, once with a baseball bat which has left him with a damaged shoulder, and he was also sprayed in the eyes with CS gas. Finally, he was threatened with a gun and is only



here to tell the tale as it didn't go off when the robber tried to fire it. He lost his nerve after that – not surprisingly – and was retired early on the grounds of ill health. The company gave him a generous payout and a bit of a party as a send-off. I can't tell you how relieved Mum and I were.

Since then, Dad spends his days pottering in his workshop in the garden. He's always got some sort of project on the go. In the past he's made a scale model of the Stephenson's Rocket steam engine and then a two-inch scale Clayton lorry. I can only apologise for knowing so much detail about this. The lorry was huge and then Dad didn't quite know what to do with it and Mum wouldn't give it house room, so he put it on eBay. A man came to collect it with a trailer and Mum wept tears of joy when she saw the back of it. Perhaps she thought that Dad wouldn't spend hours locked away, humming to himself and buying magazines with 'steam' and 'model' in the title. Some hope. I think she'd probably have even been delighted if the magazines had featured the other kind of 'model' – you know? It wasn't to be. Dad is one of life's tinkerers. Now he's got the love of his life to fuss over. This steam engine has been a long-standing feature in Dad's workshop. He calls her Big Bertha and Mum calls her his fancy piece. If Big Bertha wasn't enough to keep him busy, there's a whole host of antique radios lined up on his bench that he's trying to coax back into life. He's never happier than when he's mooching about in junk shops.

Despite his penchant for fixing and fiddling with broken things, he's always been the kindest of fathers. I have nothing but good memories of my childhood. His disposition is relentlessly cheerful, which sometimes drives my mum to distraction. He never sees the bad in anyone. I look at him with his handsome face now craggy and the head of hair that he's always been so proud of white and thinning and I don't know how I'd manage without him. Unexpected tears fill my eyes and I stare out of the window and, surreptitiously, wipe them away with my sleeve.

'Sausage and mash tonight,' he says, as if he's offering me the finest of champagnes and caviar.

'My stomach's rumbling already.' It obliges by filling the space in our conversation with a heartfelt groan. Just imagine how hungry I'd be on nothing but alfalfa sprouts and naffing NutriBullet. I don't know how Robyn copes. 'Has Finn done any revising?'

'He had a bit of a lie-down when he came in.' Dad shoots me a worried glance. 'He doesn't look all that well.'

'He was complaining of a headache this morning.'

'He's still got it. Mum gave him some more paracetamol when he came home.'

'Perhaps he's getting migraines or something. This is happening too often. I'll make an appointment at the doctor's for him.' Another one. It's so hard to do these things when I'm working in London as our local surgery doesn't open until eight o'clock in the morning and closes very promptly at five – no Saturday or Sunday surgery either, of course. I'll have to have a whole day of holiday for a flipping five-minute appointment or pay extra to take the train in to work for half a day. Either way, it's not great. But if Finn's got to go to the doctor, then he's got to go. And, as his mother, I have to be the one to go with him.

Dad pulls into the drive. My parents' house is in a nice, quiet street in Stony Stratford. They've been there since they first got married nearly fifty years ago. Which is just as well as they'd never be able to afford somewhere like this now. I'm not far away from them – five minutes by car – but I'd really love to live round the corner. However, there's no way that I can afford the silly prices they ask for houses here. They live in a semi-detached on a development of 1960s houses at the top end of the small market town and it was brand new when they bought it. Their long, narrow garden runs right the way down to the River Ouse. My dad always fancied having a little rowing boat moored at the bottom of the garden, but never quite got round to it.



‘We’re home, Jenny,’ Dad shouts as we go into the hall.

Their dog, Trigger, goes crazy, flying out of the kitchen, skittering across the laminate floor. He’s a hyperactive and slightly unhinged border collie and tries to round us up by nipping at our heels. We’ve had a dozen different dogs since I was a child. So many that I struggle now to remember them all. Dad was always a sucker for a rescue sob story and, when I was growing up, there was always a steady parade of moth-eaten rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters, cats and dogs being nursed to health at our house. Occasionally, when the menagerie got too big, Mum would put her foot down, but Dad always managed to sneak another one in. Peter the pygmy goat was a step too far for my mum, but she did like that he kept the lawn short. Still, it’s nice that I’ve inherited my love of animals from them. It’s not a proper home without a pet – or two. Maybe three.

‘Quiet, Trig,’ Dad says. The dog ignores him.

Eric, our dear little dog – some sort of beagle/collie cross with a permanently anxious expression – trots in behind Trigger. They’ve become brother dogs and happily spend their days together as Mum and Dad babysit Eric while I’m out at work. Another small task that my parents selflessly perform for me. Dog walking duties. It’s not right to leave a dog shut up all day alone. Well, alone except for the cats, and they just terrorise him. Lily and Pixel, they couldn’t care less if you were there or not as long as someone puts food in their bowls. Dogs are different. Eric pines if we go out without him for ten minutes. No such worries here, Mum and Dad fuss him to the nth degree and he gets three good walks a day which means that his waistline just about keeps pace with all the forbidden treats that Dad slips him.

‘Just dishing up,’ Mum calls back. ‘Wash your hands.’ Dad nips into the downstairs loo while I take off my coat and hang it over the newel post of the banister. ‘Hi, Mum. Dinner smells lovely.’

‘Dad’s favourite,’ she shouts back. ‘By request.’

I go in to the kitchen and give her a kiss. The brown hair that I inherited from her has now turned white and is cropped short as she ‘can’t bear a lot of fuss’.

‘I’m starving.’

‘Can’t you have something proper to eat in that canteen of yours? It can’t be good for you eating lunch at your desk every day.’

‘It’s too expensive.’ The prices are supposed to be reduced for staff, but they’re still out of my meagre reach. ‘And we don’t have desks any more, they’re workstations.’

Mum rolls her eyes.

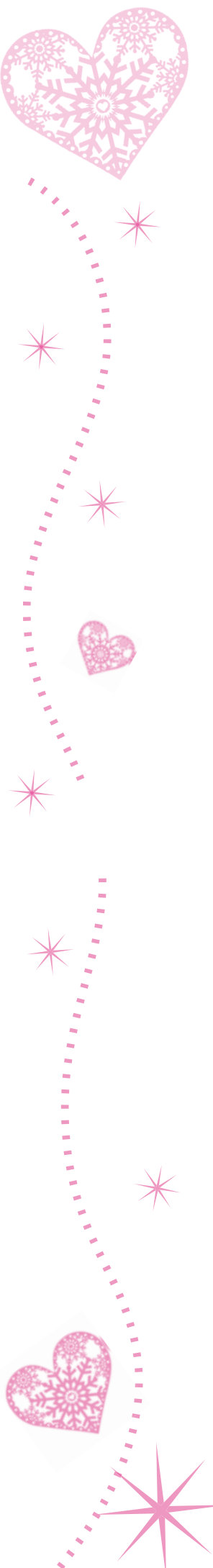
It’s been a long time since Mum worked in a proper office. As far back as I remember, she’s always had little businesses and has been her own boss. She doesn’t do so much work now, but still manages to teach two evening classes a week. One on Tuesday night at the adult education centre – Crocheting for Beginners – and, on Thursday, a Knit and Natter session at a local wool shop which I keep meaning to get to and never quite do. On those days, Finn and I have our dinner at home. Even that’s courtesy of my mother though. She takes a casserole across during the day in her slow cooker and switches it on for us. Mum also does my ironing and even hangs it back in the wardrobe for me. Dad cuts my bit of lawn and keeps my garden tidy too. I know, I’m completely spoiled. But, if it wasn’t for them looking out for me, I simply couldn’t manage to hold down my job. I kid myself that they love doing it for me.

Finn comes into the kitchen. As Dad flagged up, he’s not looking too well.

‘Hey.’ He leans against me and I stroke his fringe away from his face.

‘Still not feeling too good?’

My son shakes his head. ‘Like shit.’



‘Finlay Chapman, mind your language,’ my mum snaps. He looks up at me and grins. I give him my sternest look.

What Nana said.’

‘Can I stay off school tomorrow?’

‘We’ll see. You’ve got your exams coming up. You can’t afford to miss any more time, Finn. Shall I make a doctor’s appointment for you?’

Finn shrugs.

‘Dinner’s ready.’ Mum puts plates of steaming pork sausages, most likely from her favourite butcher, and creamy mash on the table. It’s followed by a big bowl of green beans too as Mum likes us to get at least one of our five a day if she can manage it. She is a seriously good cook if you like your food home-made and plentiful.

We all tuck in and, between mouthfuls, I offer, ‘This is gorgeous, Mum.’

But I can’t help noticing that Finn does nothing but pick at his.

## Chapter 5

After he’s walked the dogs, Dad drops us off home at about eight-thirty. I get into my PJs and plonk myself in front of the telly with a glass of red wine. I try not to drink wine during the week but, if I’m honest with you, I don’t try that hard. My son is snuggled down with me on our sofa that is serviceable rather than sophisticated. The living room is so small that the sofa takes up most of the room, but this is the hub of our life. We have a packet of Percy Pigs between us that are taking a battering. They are the smack of sweets. Normally, I don’t like Finn to have too much sugar, but I make an exception for these.

Finn is playing *Call of the Assassin* on his PS4 while I’m watching the Creative World channel on television. I’d like to watch a film every night but, by this hour, my concentration is poor and I have trouble staying awake. If I ever went on *Mastermind* my specialist subject would be the first half of any film. My son has his legs stretched across mine. Eric is wedged between us and the cats, Lily and Pixel, have taken up residence in the radiator hammocks. They’re both moggies – one overweight ginger, one disdainful tabby – who we adopted from the local rescue centre about five years ago. I thought it would help Finn after his dad went. I don’t know what I was thinking. If you want unbridled affection and fun, don’t get a cat. Not ones like these, anyway. They are the laziest of animals and will only budge themselves now to move up to the comfort of my bed when the central heating goes off.

This is my favourite part of the day. The fire is roaring away – this room is the only place where a real fire survived, even though it now has an oak surround from B&Q rather than the original Victorian one. The curtains are drawn, shutting out the world. It’s just Finn and me, plus our furry family. I usually head to bed at ten and often leave Finn still down here watching television or, more often than not, playing some sort of evil shoot ’em up game that all the kids are into.

But I worry sometimes that this is all there will be to our lives. It’s cosy, comfortable, but I feel as if we’re living in a cocoon. Finn rarely wants to go out with his friends. Me neither, if I’m perfectly honest. Maybe we are too settled together. I know that some of my friends are having all kinds of trouble with their teenagers – sex, drugs, rock ’n’ roll. They stay out late, drink when they shouldn’t, smoke dope, look at unsuitable stuff on the internet. Yet Finn never gives me any grief at all. He seems content to be at home with me. Should that give me cause for concern? What happens when he grows up and leaves home? Will I be able to pick up with all the friendships I’ve so woefully neglected while I’ve been so wrapped up in my family? Will my life involve me sitting watching the Creative World channel from morning to night under one of those heated slankets with nothing but the cats and Eric for company?



God, that's all sounding too possible. Best not to dwell on it.

Instead, I take a picture of Sarah's completed birthday card with my iPhone and upload it to my blog with a few words explaining what I did to create it – which I should do far more regularly. As Sarah is more experienced in the way of cocktails, she is my trusted drinks advisor on our rare nights out. So, for her card, I cut a die in the shape of a cocktail glass in pink glitter paper and decorated it with more self-adhesive Swarovski crystals than is strictly necessary. Sarah likes bling, what can I say? I mounted it on white shimmer card, then die-cut a 'Happy Birthday' sentiment and then found a lovely verse about friendship on the internet which I glued inside. If it hasn't got a decent verse, then it's not a card to me. I embossed the flap of the envelope and then decorated that too with more crystals. Job done.

I'm typing up what products I used, when Finn says, 'You should get yourself a bloke, Mum.'

'What a marvellous idea. I'll put one on my shopping list for the next time I pop down to Aldi.'

'At least aim for Waitrose,' Finn says and we both laugh. But he's not finished yet. 'You should. I mean it. All you do is sit in every night making cards and stuff.'

'It's therapeutic.'

'But a bloke could take you out for dinner or to the cinema.'

'So not interested,' I reply.

'You could join a dating agency or something. They must have them for older people.'

I give him the evil eye. 'Thank you, son.'

'You know what I mean.'

'I do. And I'm still not interested. Besides, I like crafting.'

You can rely on paper hearts much more than love-struck ones.'

Finn snorts.

'It's true. The internet sites are full of psychos and bogus Nigerian gentlemen who want to relieve you of your money.' And sleazy men who want nothing more than a quick shag. I don't share that with Finn.

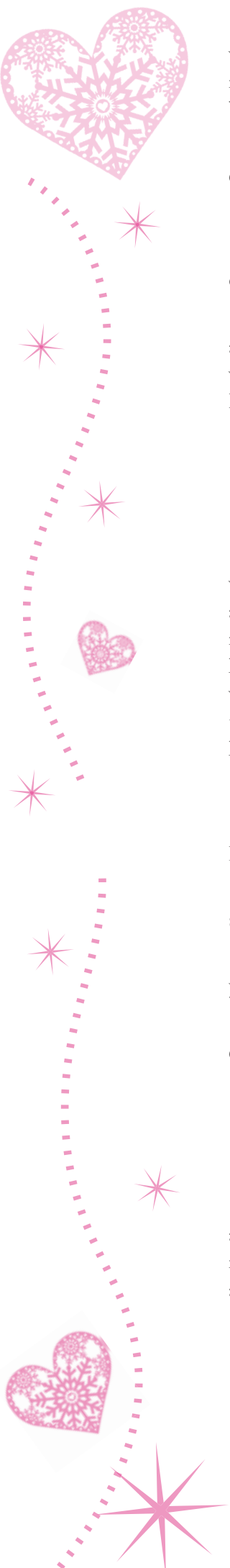
'Says the woman who knows absolutely nothing about it.'

'I read the newspapers.' I don't actually, they're too depressing. But I read magazines and they're full of gullible women who fall for men on the other side of the world who they've never met and get their hearts broken into tiny little pieces. That's not going to be me. Crafting will never leave me high and dry. 'Besides,' I say to Finn, 'I'm happy as I am. Really.'

But I wonder, even as I say it, whether I actually am. Somewhere in my soul there's a small knot of discontentment. It speaks of things done that I shouldn't have and things that I want to do but probably never will. Finn doesn't need to know that though. Neither does anyone else.

Finn nods at the television. 'Your favourite's on.'

I look up to see the glossiest of all glossy television presenters on the screen. The Diamante Diva is in da house. Sheridan Singleton is all that I would like to be and all that I am not. She's younger than me, shinier than me, more successful than me. She sashays to centre stage and takes her rightful place at the spotlight craft bench. This is a woman who is queen of all she surveys. Her long, auburn hair shines in the studio lights. It's a look that I could achieve if only I spent hours applying conditioner and went regularly for haircuts instead of once a year. Her make-up is immaculate. Her clothes expensive and jewel-coloured. A dozen diamond rings adorn her manicured fingers. Her neck is draped with a heavy gold necklace. She's the



walking embodiment of a treasure trove. Her voice is silky smooth. Her diction perfect. You'll never find Sheridan Singleton stumbling over her words. I daren't ever mention it to Robyn, but I *definitely* have a girl crush on her.

She beams out of the television screen. 'Hello, everyone. Today, I'm going to be demonstrating new paper-cutting dies from my own range, Simply Sheridan.'

It sounds as if she's offering a night of illicit and unbridled pleasure.

'She has her own range,' I mutter enviously. Fancy being important enough to create your own range. And have people queuing up to buy it.

Then Sheridan goes about presenting her project with shining smiles and sleek demos and I'm transfixed. Her hands move effortlessly over her work, she smiles as she holds up her wares for sale and gets those phones ringing. Usually, mine included. What this woman doesn't know about crafting – and selling, for that matter – isn't worth knowing.

My son puts down his games' controller. 'She's no better than you, Mum.'

'Oh, she is,' I protest. 'Look at her. She could have wandered in off the set of *Dynasty*.'

'What's *Dynasty*?'

I ignore that comment. 'She's fabulous. I'd give anything to be like that.' I follow this woman's blog. Sheridan jets around the world to crafting conventions and the like, pops up on all the TV shows sharing her crafting genius. She has two children who look as if they've been rented from a modelling agency. Previously, she had a husband who's a dentist or something like that and earned pots of cash, but she's divorced now according to the gossip magazines – which I only read when I go on my annual outing to the hairdresser, so I'm generally behind the news. She's quite often pictured with some hot man or another, so not quite a sad single like me.

'You could be anything you want to, Mum,' Finn says. 'You're the best.'

'Well, thank you for your faith in me. I just need my big break. Maybe I could do that if I got my big, fat bottom off the sofa.'

'Don't say that.' Finn frowns at me. 'You do so much for us. I hate that you have to work so hard.'

'That's life, Finn.' I sigh. 'I don't mind it. Really. I don't like it that I'm not always here for you and that you have to rely on Nana and Pops.'

'They love fussing over me,' Finn says. 'What else would they do with their time if we didn't need them?'

I laugh at that because he's probably right.

'I'll just watch Sheridan finish this project, then I have to go to bed.'

'I'll go too,' Finn says. 'This headache still hasn't gone.'

I set an alarm on my phone to remind me to call the doctor tomorrow. Then I turn my attention back to Sheridan Singleton, who is smiling warmly at me. I sigh inwardly. I bet she's not up at five o'clock every morning to catch a coach to London. I bet she doesn't sleep with a cat's bottom in her face. I bet when her dog farts it smells of lily of the valley.