

Caroline Roberts

The
Cosy
Christmas
Chocolate
Shop



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**The Cosy Christmas Chocolate
Shop: The perfect, feel good
romantic comedy to curl
up with this Christmas!**

«HarperCollins»

Roberts C.

The Cosy Christmas Chocolate Shop: The perfect, feel good romantic comedy to curl up with this Christmas! / C. Roberts — «HarperCollins»,

*The new, deliciously festive ‘Cosy’ novel from Caroline Roberts is available to pre-order now!*The snow is falling, the hot chocolate’s warming, and hearts are melting . . . Emma is the proud owner of The Chocolate Shop by the Sea, nestled in the heart of the cosy seaside village that’s become her home. With Christmas right around the corner, she and her assistant Holly are busy cooking up the locals’ festive favourites. From cinnamon hot chocolates to reindeer lollipops, Christmas wouldn’t taste the same without a little cocoa magic. And for Emma it’s the perfect distraction from her romantic pains of the past. So when the shop’s miserly landlord threatens to hike up the rent, Emma’s Christmas and New Year suddenly look a lot less cheerful. With the whole village rallying behind her – and loyal spaniel Alfie by her side – Emma’s determined to hold onto her chocolate-box dream. The chocolate calendar countdown is on. Can Emma rescue her business and her broken heart?

Содержание

Copyright	6
Dedication	7
1	9
2	13
3	16
4	17
5	19
6	21
7	24
8	27
9	30
10	33
11	37
12	42
13	44
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	47

The Cosy Christmas Chocolate Shop

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Copyright



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Dedication

For Richard

'All you need is love.

But a little chocolate now and then doesn't hurt.'

Charles M. Schulz

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Part One](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Part Two](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Keep Reading ...](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Caroline Roberts](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

Part One

1

Silver baubles, dangly stars, fairy lights and chocolates, hundreds of chocolates, filled the shop.
‘Hi, how can I help?’

‘I’ve been put in charge of the sweets for the children’s Christmas stockings – any ideas?’ The thirty-something gentleman smiled hopefully.

‘Of course. We have reindeers, Santas, and angels in chocolate lollipops – great stocking fillers. There are figures of Father Christmas, too. Also, we have snowy stars in a pretty bag – little girls love those, I can vouch for my nieces – and packs of chocolate-dipped fudge.’

‘Well, there’s three kids to cater for, two boys and a girl, so can I have a selection? Oh, and I’d better get a nice box of chocolates for the wife.’

Emma pointed to the three sizes of gold boxes, positioned on the top of the truffle and ganache refrigerated display. ‘Large, medium or small?’

With a queue listening in behind him, and thoughts of fulfilling Christmas wishes on his mind, he went for the large.

‘Any particular favourites for your wife?’

‘Umm, she likes champagne truffles and caramels, I think, but a variety would be good.’

‘Great, I’ll pop a couple of champagne truffles in, and some caramels, with a lovely selection alongside that. Just give me a few moments and I’ll get them all ready for you.’ Emma set to work with boxes, bows and silver and gold ribbon, turning the gifts into works of art.

‘Wow, that all looks great. Thank you. So, how much do I owe you?’

Emma tallied it up on the till. ‘A total of fifteen pounds thirty, please.’ She popped one of her Chocolate Shop by the Sea business cards into the package.

‘Thanks.’

‘You’re welcome, and have a really lovely Christmas,’ Emma smiled.

Four o’clock, Christmas Eve afternoon, the till was pinging, the shop door chiming, and still the queue of last-minute shoppers continued to grow. Emma, proud owner of this gorgeous little chocolate shop in the harbour village of Warkton-by-the-Sea, Northumberland, and her assistant, Holly, were buzzing about like Christmas elves. In fact, they looked very like elves, dressed as they were in their festive jumpers, Holly with a Christmas pudding across her chest and Emma a red-nosed reindeer. Emma was also sporting dangly red-bauble earrings. She wished she had put some lighter clothing on now, though, something like a T-shirt: it was bloody warm dashing around, the two of them cramped in the serving space behind the counter, dressed in winter woollens.

Holly was serving an elderly chap from the village.

‘Hello, Stan. How’s Hilda?’ Emma asked him.

‘Not too bad thanks, Emma. Getting over the cough she had last week. But I thought it best she stayed home today. I’ve just been getting a few last-minute groceries in – we were low on milk and teabags – and then I thought it might be nice to cheer her up with some of those lovely coffee creams you do.’

‘Sounds a good idea. I’m sure she’ll appreciate it.’

Holly passed him over a prettily tied cellophane bag with his chocolates in. ‘There you go, Stan. I popped an extra one in for luck.’

Emma gave her assistant a mock-shocked look, and then smiled.

‘Well, take care then, lassies, have a good Christmas.’

‘You too, Stan – and give my best wishes to Hilda. Happy Christmas!’

Emma had a chance for a breather for a few seconds as Holly began to serve the last customer waiting. Her feet were throbbing, despite being in her comfiest trainers, and her fingers were aching from all the delicate tying of ribbons and making up of boxes and gift bags – as well as having been

up from 6.00 a.m. making more batches of truffles and chocolate lollipops to see them through. She gazed past the window display of baubles and dangling snowflakes that reflected the twinkle of the fairy lights in the shop, and out to the street. It was dark already out there, these short December days, but from the glow of the street lights she could tell it was still dry and a touch of frost was glinting on the pavements. She might get a chance to take Alfie, her springer spaniel and best friend, out for a quick walk down to the harbour once they'd closed. He'd been cooped up upstairs all afternoon with them being so busy.

A figure dashed past the window and came in, clanging the door. It was Danny who worked as the bar supervisor in The Fisherman's Arms, the pub down the road.

'Afternoon, ladies. I need a box of chocolates for my girlfriend. Something fancy-looking.'

'Hi, Danny,' Emma greeted him.

'Which one's this, then?' Holly chipped in cheekily. To be fair, he'd had about six different girlfriends in the past six months.

'The lovely Helen – and less of your cheek, young lady,' he quipped back.

'Large box then, Danny? I'll giftwrap it for you, shall I?' Em didn't bother asking which flavours she liked as he probably didn't know her that well yet.

'Perfect. How's tricks, Holly?'

'Been busy, hasn't it, Em? Just a little lull for now.' With that, a family came in, seemingly a dad and his two kids, who started to browse the shelves. 'Oh, and there we go again,' Holly added.

'Yeah, I think we'll be having a busy night down at the Fisherman's too. Christmas Eve usually gets cracking. You coming down, girls?'

'No, quiet night in for me,' said Emma. She couldn't imagine being in a big noisy crowd, not tonight.

'What about you, Hols?'

'Nah, my mum and dad want me home tonight. Family day tomorrow and all that.'

'Ah well, see you around then. Maybe over New Year.' He paid, taking a box beautifully wrapped in star-patterned paper with a big pink ribbon around it from Holly.

'Maybe.' Em left her answer deliberately vague. 'Cheers, Danny. Oh, and there's a gift tag for you to fill in on that box,' she added as he turned to leave.

'I'll try and remember,' he grinned.

'Merry Christmas!' the girls chanted.

'And to you too!'

Five o'clock, their usual closing time, came and passed. There were still customers milling about in the shop and Emma didn't want to lose any business – she needed all the income she could get – so kept going. She offered Holly the chance to leave but her assistant said she'd stay and help until the last customer had gone, bless her. Holly was nearly seventeen, eager, bubbly, and friendly with the customers. Since she'd started a few weeks ago, on Saturdays and the odd day in the holidays as she was still in the Sixth Form at school, the young girl had proved to be a bit of a godsend. Emma had been managing on her own up until that point, trying to keep to a budget and do everything herself, but as her chocolates were becoming more popular, and the shop better known, it was hard to keep up with the chocolate-making as well as serving behind the counter. It was lovely to have some company in the shop too.

The Christmas Eve queue continued. It was always a bit crazy, this last-minute Christmas Eve rush, as though no one was going to be able to buy chocolates ever again, or that the Christmas break would last a month. But she'd be open again in a few days' time! Oh well, she certainly wasn't going to complain; though it was tiring working all hours, Emma enjoyed the buzz and the build-up to Christmas, loved crafting the chocolates and thinking of new festive flavours to mix up with the traditional favourites, and she needed every last penny. It had been a bit of a poor year, profit-wise, even with the shop getting busier, as costs seemed to be going up all the time, and January

was a desperately slow month, so December's takings were going to have to see her through until Valentine's Day at least.

It was twenty to six when the last customer, a woman in her twenties who was on holiday with friends, picked up her bag of festive goodies, thanked Holly and Emma very much, and wished them goodnight and a Merry Christmas.

'Have a great break and Merry Christmas!' Holly sang.

Emma followed the lady to the exit, thanked her, then popped her head out to check there was no one else on their way. The street was clear, and the winter chill swept in. She shut the door, turning its little wooden sign to 'Closed'. *Phew* – she rested her back against the door for a second.

'Well done, Hols. That was one busy shift. Thank you. I'd never have managed without you.'

She took the young girl's wages for the day out of the till and gave her an extra twenty-pound note.

'Oh, thank you so much!' Holly gave her boss a little hug.

'And hang on.' She dashed to the back kitchen to find her assistant's Christmas gift, some special bubble bath and matching body lotion, with a hand-picked box of Holly's favourite chocolates.

'Aw, Emma, thanks. I didn't expect anything as I've not been working here that long. I feel awful now as I haven't bought anything for you.'

'Hey, no worries. There's no need. It's a thank you for working so hard for me. You've settled in really well.'

'Thanks, Em, and honestly I am *soo* happy to be here. It's the best thing I ever did, leaving that horrible chip shop in Seahouses. I smelt of chip fat all day and my hair was always greasy. This is like working in heaven. Chocolate heaven. It's like my all-time ideal job.'

All was quiet. Holly had gone and Emma cashed up and just stood for a few moments taking in her little shop in all its twinkly, cosy Christmas glory: the two bay windows that looked out over the quaint village street of stone cottages, the wooden shelving stacked so prettily, the reassuring hum of the refrigerated counter, the rows of chocolates she had worked so hard to create ... And to think, seven years ago she wouldn't have even known how to make a truffle or how to temper chocolate – hah, back then she'd have thought that meant getting mad with it, which in fact did happen very occasionally!

She loved her little chocolate shop, her business, her life here. It really had saved her, given her back a purpose in life, when things were at rock bottom.

Right, then, she shook herself from her thoughts; she mustn't dwell on that for there was one very eager spaniel upstairs no doubt desperate to get out.

Emma leaned on the stone harbour wall, watching the street lights catch on the water, the gentle waves lapping the sides of the boats that were moored up. It was a small harbour that had been used for centuries for fishing. There weren't as many boats now, she'd been told, but some still went out daily, weather permitting, for their catch of herring to take to the smokehouse to turn them into kippers, a local speciality, or maybe some cod, or crabs. From July to September they'd be out checking the lobster pots which were now stacked on the shoreline next to an old coble-style boat, along with colourful buoys and thick rope and nets.

A small group of people walked past; Alfie perked up to greet them and Emma smiled. They were heading up the small rise, seemingly to the pub. Soon afterwards its heavy wooden door opened as they went in and she could hear its noisy chatter spill out along with the beat of music as the light spilled across the pavement. She could sense its vibrancy: the log fires would be lit, the Christmas decorations up, and several of the villagers as well as holidaymakers would be gathered noisily. She loved the community feel there, but it was not for her tonight.

'Come on then, Alfie.' They headed the opposite way, past a row of cottages, and then down to the beach. It was dark, but there was enough moonlight to make her way through the dunes, to stand and hear the hush of the sea as it lapped against the shore. She wasn't afraid of the dark, she'd

been there many an evening like this. She couldn't stop the memories, but that was fine. In a way, that was what she was here for. It didn't matter if she needed to cry, or write his name in the sand, or to scream at the seagulls that life was bloody unfair. Alfie just loved the freedom of the beach, where he could run his loopy circles and make leaps at seaweed sticks of kelp. But it was chilly; Emma could see her breath misting and she was glad of her thick woollen coat and her hat and gloves. She wouldn't stay too long; it had been a hard day and she was ready for an easy supper, would find herself some Christmas film on the TV to settle in front of and then an early night – she'd just let Alfie have five more minutes.

They wandered back towards the harbour, passing a couple, arm in arm, who nodded a friendly hello at them. She climbed the small hill, reaching the front of The Chocolate Shop, which was an end-of-row, sand-coloured stone cottage, converted many years ago into a shop. There were two bay windows with a wooden door in the middle. Emma stood staring at her little shop for a few seconds. She had left the fairy lights on, and with all the festive decorations it looked rather enchanting at night. "Twas the night before Christmas ...' Her mind wandered back to the magical stories and that bubbling feeling of excitement of the Christmas Eves of her childhood, which seemed so far away right now.

Tomorrow was Christmas Day and she was heading over to her brother James's house to spend time with his family, as they'd kindly invited her for Christmas dinner. Of course it would be lovely to see her twin nieces opening their gifts, and enjoy the magic of the day with them. Chloe, her sister-in-law, was going to cook a traditional roast turkey meal with all the trimmings, and Emma's parents were coming across too. It would be great to catch up with them all, especially after having been so busy in the shop of late.

But it was always another year where someone was missing.

2

Boxing Day

Emma pulled her coat tight around her and snuggled into her red tartan scarf.

Waves crashed to shore in a white froth, an overnight wind having whipped them up, and sea-salt spray hit her face every now and then. It was refreshing, enlivening. She hadn't slept that well. She'd needed to get out, feel the wind in her hair, and the beach was calling her once again.

She was the only one on this whole stretch of the bay. Well, her and Alfie, who was pacing the sands beside her. Everyone else was probably still tucked up in bed, snoozing off their Christmas dinners and hangovers. Emma picked up a leathery strand of brown seaweed with a thick root that made a great stick, launching it into the air and away. Alfie leapt up animatedly and was off on the chase. It made her smile.

All the what-ifs, the might-have-beens and if-onlys were still there, *always* there, in her mind. But they didn't change anything. A whole future wiped away. *Their* future. Seven years ago. And she missed him still, so very much ...

Yes, she'd got on, made a life for herself. You didn't get much choice. She'd moved here to Warkton-by-the-Sea six years ago, to a whole new venture with the chocolate shop, and a massive change from her role as a teacher specialising in food technology at a secondary school on the outskirts of Durham city. When the big stuff happens, it shifts your axis, makes you think about what you really want out of your life. She had gone back to visit one of her favourite holiday haunts, spotted the cute, slightly derelict-looking stone cottage on the little main street with its For Rent sign, and never looked back. And so The Chocolate Shop by the Sea was born.

It had once been a toy shop, apparently, but had been closed down for several years, and was in need of a little TLC. Inside, it was small but quaint and very cosy, the original front room being the shop area. Her dad, a keen DIYer and her brother, James, had helped her to do it up.

She had living quarters upstairs for her and Alfie, using the kitchen downstairs as her chocolate creating zone. Life had got better. Time had softened the blow, if not healed it. She wasn't sure she wanted to heal, really; she certainly didn't want to forget. Why would she ever want to forget someone so special? Anyhow, her new life was fine, and she had made some lovely friends in the area.

A movement up in the dunes caught her eye. Someone in a dark jacket, a man; he seemed to be alone. He was up early. So, it was just the two of them on the beach now. She felt a little irked that someone else had invaded her space. Okay, so there was about a mile of beach here, she admitted to herself, and it was a public space.

She strolled on, playing with Alfie and relaunching the seaweed stick. The dog looked up, alert, ears pricked, as he saw the man too. Emma took a brief glance along the beach. Damn, the guy was heading her way, walking behind her at a reasonable pace. Why couldn't he have gone the other bloody way?

A sudden gust of wind blew up. As she bent low to pick up the stick for Alfie, it somehow peeled off her scarf, unravelling it and sending it twirling down the sands. She started to run after it, had nearly got to it, when another gust took it from her reach and away. The scarf then cartwheeled down the beach and she gave chase. She *really* liked that scarf; it was fine wool, cosy, she'd had it for years ... Luke had given it to her on their first Christmas together. But as soon as she got anywhere near it, the damn wind whipped it up again and it would relaunch.

The man on the beach must have spotted her dilemma and started jogging towards the errant item. He diverted, made a quick dash, and soon had it trapped under his boot.

He grinned across at Emma as he picked it up, shaking it a little to loosen the sand from it. She waited as he caught up with her. He was tall, and broad-shouldered under his coat with a friendly face, dark hair, and a nice smile.

‘Thank you.’

‘You’re welcome. It’s a bit blustery, isn’t it?’

‘Just a bit.’ Her tone was ironic. ‘So, you’re out early too.’

‘Yes.’

‘We must be mad.’ It wasn’t yet 8.00 a.m. and had only just got light.

‘Probably.’ He smiled softly.

Or sad ... or lonely, Emma mused.

They began to fall into pace beside each other.

Alfie then nudged in between them, wanting his share of the limelight.

‘And who’s this, then?’ The guy rubbed the spaniel’s head, making the dog’s tail wag even more.

‘Alfie. He’s good company. Gets me out and about.’ Oh great, she was sounding like she lived a hermetic, spinsterish existence with her dog. Actually, it wasn’t so far from the truth. Well, she’d nearly been married, would’ve been if fate hadn’t stuck its big bloody nose in.

‘Right.’

‘Are you local?’ She hadn’t seen him about before. She’d have remembered him for sure. Those big hazel-green eyes, fixed on her right now, wouldn’t easily be forgotten. He had cropped dark-brown hair and a stubbly beard that kind of suited him. Nice, even, white teeth when he spoke. ‘No, just staying for a few days in a holiday cottage along the road there.’ *Nice* eyes.

‘Ah, okay.’

‘You?’

‘Me?’

‘Local?’

‘Oh yeah, I live in the village. Been here about six years now.’

‘You’re lucky. It’s a really scenic place. Bit wild here today, mind, but I kind of like that.’

She was trying to place his accent. A hint of the local North Eastern Geordie, but well spoken.

‘Yeah, Winter’s launched itself with a vengeance,’ she replied. ‘But I like that too, when the sea’s all wild, and the clouds are inky-grey and stormy.’

Alfie went off to investigate some clumps of seaweed on the tideline. They were nearly back at the dunes below the village that she usually walked back through. ‘I’m heading this way.’

‘Me too – I’ve got the car parked there,’ he clarified.

They smiled politely at each other, his smile reaching his intense dark eyes. If she wasn’t mistaken there was a slight frisson between them. But she wasn’t quite sure. She hadn’t actually fancied anyone since Luke. Was that what this was? Did she fancy him? Oh, wow.

‘Clearing your head this morning?’ she asked.

‘Yeah, you could say that.’ He looked thoughtful, as if there was more to it than he wanted to divulge.

The spikey marram grass of the dunes began and Emma started to climb the sandy track. She was aware that he was close behind, coming to a level with her as the path widened when they approached the beach car park. She sneaked a sideways look. He was, in fact, rather gorgeous with a tall, athletic frame, as much as she could tell under his Barbour-style jacket and jeans. All too soon they were at the car park in the dunes and he was saying that it had been nice meeting her and that he had to go.

Weirdly, she realised that she didn’t want that, as if there was already some connection between them. He stood and just looked at her for a few significant seconds and she guessed he might be feeling the same way too.

Then he stepped towards her, took her hand in his. His grasp was warm, smooth, gentle.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘I think you’ve helped me make my decision.’

And then he moved closer again, looked right at her with those deep, dark green eyes, and leant in to kiss her delicately on the mouth. He smelt gorgeous, all cool-citrus aftershave, his body next

to hers, warm and strong and real. She hadn't been this near to a man in a long, long while. It was a surprise, yet it felt so very natural. The kiss became passionate, his arms around her now. One of her hands reaching up to his neck, stroking his hairline, as she pressed her lips firmly against his, finding his open mouth, his tongue. Oh boy.

Then he stopped, stepped back, with a surprised smile, 'I'm sorry, I hope ...'

'It's fine. It was nice.' She suddenly felt shy.

'Look, sorry, but I really do have to go.' He started to move towards his vehicle, a jeep type, pausing as he got there. 'How can I find you?'

'The chocolate shop in the village. You'll find me there.'

'Okay. Right.' He processed the information, smiled at her, then ducked into the driver's seat.

'Your name ... I don't even know your name,' Emma called. But the words were lost on the wind as he closed the vehicle's door.

She watched, stunned, as he waved from behind the windscreen, and then drove off.

3

So, what do you do after a rather handsome man has kissed you quite out-of-the-blue in a car park in the dunes? Well, you walk back, in a bit of a daze admittedly, wondering a) if that really did just happen and b) is he a nutter, possibly high on drugs, or a bit of a madman with an axe in his car boot? And then you head back home and go and make some chocolate bars.

Well, that's what you do if you run a chocolate shop. Emma wandered back along The Wynding, a narrow lane that led from the beach, past the small harbour, where the coble fishing boats were moored, along to the stone cottages of the main street and The Chocolate Shop by the Sea.

She passed the first window which had the Christmas display she had so carefully set out several weeks before. There was a small, real pine Christmas tree with red and gold baubles and matching coloured tinsel, with little sparkly white lights. A wicker basket of her best chocolate gifts took pride of place, filled with chocolate snowmen and Santas, all handcrafted, alcohol-infused truffles, candied orange slices dipped in dark chocolate, and more. She'd soon have to empty it and come up with a fresh idea for January, she realised. Why did that make her feel rather glum?

Emma headed past the shop front and in through the adjacent alleyway to the back of the row of cottages, to keep a very sandy, wet Alfie away from the main shop. She unlocked the door, went on in, and headed straight up the stairs, as the downstairs kitchen was for chocolatier use only, and was a pet-free zone for health and hygiene reasons. She gave Alfie a rub-down with his old towel once they reached the top landing and settled him in his dog basket in the tiny kitchen she had in her cottage flat. Then, she carefully washed her hands, popped her hair up in a ponytail, and headed down to the shop's kitchen to set about making a batch of chilli and lime dark-chocolate bars. She also made a batch of the latest flavour she'd created just before Christmas, ginger and cinnamon; perfect for a cold winter's day.

Christmas was the busiest time of The Chocolate Shop's year, and supplies were depleted. Naturally, the New Year period would be quieter. There would, of course, be that couple of weeks' lull, where chocolate was the enemy and gym memberships were eagerly signed up to. She'd spot more people jogging on the beach for a while – and then they'd realise that what they *really* wanted to do on a cold, grey January day was to cosy up on the sofa, by the fire, with a chocolate treat and a good book.

She had taken a few days off for Christmas and closed the shop, giving Holly the week off too. The young girl had been chatting about her plans to go socialising with her friends, no doubt sporting her new iPhone she *sooo* hoped her parents had got her for Christmas, and the new outfits and shoes her Saturday job money was going to buy – a trip with her girlfriends to the Metro Centre and the sales was lined up for today.

The day passed quickly and quietly for Emma, working away, radio on, crafting her chocolates. Her mind drifted to the strange incident on the beach whilst she rolled a truffle centre between her palms. She wondered if that guy might appear at the shop ... might he be staying locally? And what decision was it that she'd helped him to make? She kept an ear out for a knock on the door, but no, no sign of him. She decided to put it down to experience and get on with her working day, crafting truffles, boxing others up, making the displays look good, making a list of supplies to order. There was always something to keep her busy, to keep her mind focussed. Her little chocolate shop and Alfie were more than enough in her life.

After all, that guy could be anyone. In fact, who on earth went and kissed a complete stranger in a car park?

4

New Year's Eve loomed on the horizon – not Emma's favourite night. She felt pressured to be out having a 'great' time, when all she really wanted to do was to stay at home, treat herself to a shot of Baileys in her hot chocolate, whilst watching a movie in her PJs and slippers, cuddled up with Alfie on the sofa. That way she could have an early night, so she didn't have to see midnight in and didn't have to think about facing another year alone.

Instead, she'd had her arm twisted by Bev, her closest friend, and Joanne, both from the village, so here she was in The Fisherman's Arms, having beer slopped down her back, party poppers thrust into her hands and any minute some strange guy's lips would be thrust on hers in an attempt at wishing her a Happy New Year! Her mind slipped to the man on the beach again – he kept popping up in her thoughts, uninvited. She wondered what he was doing for New Year? She'd rather it was The Kiss, as she'd named him to herself, lined up next to her; that might not be too bad at all, rather than the portly middle-aged fisherman, reeking of a mix of lager and stale kippers, who seemed to be purposely edging into her zone. She downed a big gulp of white wine as Big Ben started to chime on the TV screen they had blaring out, and managed a swift side-cheek manoeuvre as the fisherman moved in for the inevitable kiss.

'Happy New Year, pet!' he slurred.

'Happy New Year,' she replied with a pasted-on smile.

Then Bev and her hubbie, Pete, found her, congratulating her with hugs and kisses.

'Have a good one, Em.' Bev hugged an arm around her.

'Hope so. You too, my lovely friend.'

Even though Bev was nearly ten years older than Emma, the age gap just didn't seem apparent. They had first met a few weeks after Emma had come to Warkton at a summer fete down by the harbour. Bev had said hello, then introduced her to several new faces in the village. Later they had chatted away, Bev intrigued by the opening of a chocolate shop in their village. She always joked that it was the talk of chocolate, not Emma herself, that first captured her attention and sealed their friendship.

Joanne and a few more acquaintances from the village moved to be beside her, pushing through the throng of revellers that were crammed in like sardines, with shouts of 'Yay! Happy New Year, darling!' whilst topping up Emma's glass with bubbly. Danny came out from behind the bar to make the most of kissing a whole bunch of ladies at once, giving Emma a warm, friendly peck on the cheek, then moving along the row. 'Happy New Year, gorgeous ladies.'

'Hey, Em, my fab-ul-ous boss. Happy New Year, hunnn!'

There was Holly, in a bright red dress, brown wavy hair bouncing around her shoulders, with a slight slur to her voice, tottering beside her in high heels. 'New shoes – aren't they brilliant?' She raised a leg, showing a bit too much thigh, which, judging by the grin on his face, Danny didn't seem to mind, and indeed, her new black stiletto killer-heels.

'Amazing – I don't think I could even walk in them,' Emma commented with a smile. 'Happy New Year to you too, Hols.'

'Have a good one, Em. Wonder what this year will bring? I'm looking for the man of my dreams ... well, Tom will do.' She laughed giddily, full of hope, and expectation, which was just how it should be at sixteen and three-quarters.

'Well, I hope it's a special year for you, Holly.'

There were more hugs and introductions to Holly's group of young, vibrant friends.

New Year: a new chapter, a time for hopes and dreams, wishes and resolutions. Emma could only think about getting through tonight; tomorrow, a whole year, too much to take on. She still felt stuck. Yes, of course she'd find moments of happiness where she could; she had great friends,

a wonderful family, and her very special chocolate shop, and for all of that she was thankful, but beneath it, her heart still felt sore.

Smile, chat, mingle some more, another round of drinks, one more glass of bubbly, and at last, just after 1.00 a.m., the chance for Emma to get back to her little cottage and her bed.

The next evening all was quiet in Emma's small living room. New Year's Eve had been survived and another New Year's Day was over – well, nearly. Phew, she'd made it through another festive season and she could chill out a bit now with a slower few weeks in the shop, but it never lasted. Who would want to live in a world without chocolate, for heaven's sake?!

Em snuggled up on the sofa, with Alfie content beside her.

For a second her mind flashed to the man on the beach on Boxing Day. Might he come back yet? Come and find her there in her little chocolate shop? A week had now passed since they'd met, but it was all a bit too bizarre. And, how would she feel if he really did? Wouldn't it seem a bit stalkerish? He might have that axe lurking in the back of his pick-up, or perhaps she'd just imagined he was handsome, and he'd walk in with a crooked nose, squinty eyes, and yellow-stained teeth. But the image she had fixed in her mind was far from that. Anyhow, strangers just didn't kiss you in a car park like that. Certainly not *like that!* Oh yes, it was all coming back vividly now. Boy, talk about making your toes tingle.

She smiled, remembering one of her Great-Aunt Emily's phrases which she'd chided her with when she was a teenager: 'Just because he makes your toes tingle, it doesn't mean he's right for you.'

Luke had made her toes tingle, mind you. Many times.

She sighed and stroked the soft fur of Alfie's head. Though he'd been asleep, his tail responded instantly, thwacking down happily on to the sofa cushion.

'We're okay, aren't we, Alfie?'

It was meant to be a statement, but it came out sounding like a question.

5

Though the shop was closed for another day over the New Year break, Emma was in the kitchen early making up a batch of whisky truffles. She liked to keep herself busy, would spend the time off preparing for the next few weeks, and warming whisky truffles were always a good seller through the winter months.

She melted the dark chocolate, then warmed the whisky just to the point where a little vapour was coming off it, next she'd whisk them together. The smell was rather delicious, even this early in the morning. She'd look forward to trying one with a cup of rich coffee later. The ganache mix she'd made had to refrigerate for at least four hours before it would be ready to roll into the circular centres, ready to dip in melted dark chocolate. Bliss.

There was a knock at the back door, footsteps, then a head popped round, all dark-brown curls and a cheery smile.

'Oh, hi, Holly. Good to see you.'

'Hey, Em. Happy New Year! I was just in the village fetching some milk and the papers for Mum. Thought I'd pop in and say hello.'

'Happy New Year. But we did see each other on New Year's Eve.'

'Ah yes, so we did – it's coming back to me now. I was slightly squiffy at that point. Soz. Anyway, I wanted to find out when you'll need me back in next.'

'Well, it's going to be pretty quiet for a few weeks ...' She saw Holly's face drop. No doubt she'd spent all her recent wages on her New Year's Eve outfit. 'But you could maybe help out for a couple of hours each Saturday afternoon. It'll give me the chance to do some crafting. I'm sorry, Holly, I really do wish I could give you more hours, but January's just not a great time.' She'd be counting the pennies as it was. 'We'll be busier in Feb for Valentine's Day, though. I'll need you loads more then, and on the build-up to Easter, of course.'

'Okay. No worries.' The young girl smiled, though she still looked a little disappointed.

Emma felt awful; she so wished she could give her more work. Holly was a great help and lovely with the customers, chatty and friendly behind the counter. She was nice company for Emma too. But the business *really* wasn't making enough for her to keep paying for extra hours. As it was, she probably could have managed without Holly for the whole of January. She could craft the chocolates in the evenings – she had enough time on her hands – but she wanted to help the young girl and she'd really need her to stay on for when it got busier in the spring. Some other business might snap her up otherwise, and that would be such a shame, both for Emma and The Chocolate Shop.

'Making more supplies, I see.'

'Yes, dark choc whisky truffles.'

'Mmm, I love those.'

'Actually, I'll only be two more minutes making the mix for these. Do you fancy staying for a coffee?' Em realised the company would be great. She hadn't seen a soul yesterday.

They were soon settled on stools in Emma's kitchen with cups of coffee in front of them. The whisky truffles weren't quite ready, but she did have a few chocolate-orange ones left that she'd made just before the New Year.

'Aw, thanks, Em, this is so nice. I always used to love coming in here, even before I got the job. It's such a magical little shop. I used to stand there, browsing the shelves, choosing my favourites, or sometimes trying something new because you have such *gorgeous* flavours. And the smell ...' Holly smiled. 'All that cocoa scrumminess; just amazing.'

She'd spotted the sign that Emma had put in the shop window one day, saying a part-time assistant was required and had walked right in and introduced herself there and then, not wanting to

miss the opportunity. The work was ideal for Holly, fitting in with school times, study, and exams, yet a welcome break from that too.

Emma had tried to make her feel welcome and they got on well despite the age gap. She took time to train her on how best to deal with the customers and let her watch and learn the chocolate-creating process, even asking for Holly's advice on new flavours and chatting about ideas. They'd come up with a cranberry and pistachio truffle in the run-up to Christmas which was a real hit with the customers. Holly's confidence had grown so much since starting here and it was lovely that the two of them got on so well. There was a big age difference, nearly twenty years, she found out, so Em felt a bit like a mum-figure and friend all rolled into one.

'So, looks like you had a good night on New Year's Eve?' Emma commented.

'Yeah, The Fisherman's Arms was buzzing, wasn't it? We were at a party before that, at my mate Laura's house.'

'Was Tom there?'

Tom had been Holly's crush for years and she'd spilled out all her romantic hopes and dreams to Emma. The pair had been school friends for years but, for Holly, something had changed at around sixteen. She felt they could be more than friends. As yet, Tom had been slow to catch up, or lately even notice her.

'Ye-es.' Her answer was noncommittal. '*He* was there, but *I* might as well have not been, for all the time he spent chatting and canoodling with bloody Kirsty Chase. Okay, so she is the best netball player in the school. And she's tall and leggy, with silky, long blonde hair. But she can be a bit dim, sometimes.'

'Ah, I see. Sorry, petal. Doesn't sound like it was your night.'

'Not really. But hey-ho ... Did you have a nice night? I thought it might have been just you and Alfie and a night in before I saw you?' Holly looked at her in horror, though that didn't sound a bad option to Emma really.

'No, I do have some friends, you know,' Emma laughed.

'Oh, I didn't mean it like that!'

'I know. Well, I had an early supper with Bev and Pete, and then we met Joanne and a few others for drinks out in the village and then ended up in the Fisherman's like you lot, of course. It was nice.'

Fine, pleasant, amusing. It didn't make your toes curl.

'Yeah, it was a pretty good night. Didn't feel so hot the next day, mind.'

'Hah, no, I bet.'

'So, I'll come in next Saturday then. What time?'

'About one-ish.' Emma pulled a sorry face; frustrated that she couldn't give Holly more hours. 'Say one till three. We can sort out the window display if it's quiet, think of something bright to cheer January up a bit.'

'Oh yes, I'll have a think on it. I like being creative.'

'Fancy a chocolate-orange truffle, Hols? They're like a posh version of the Terry's.'

'Ooh, don't mind if I do.'

'We have to check for quality control, naturally,' Em grinned.

'Of course.'

One became three each, just to triple-check the product. They ended up with chocolate-smearred lips, grinning like loons.

'That definitely passes the taste test. Wow!' Holly was beaming.

Oh, yes. This was one of the best parts of the job – the chocolate tasting!

6

‘January’s doing my head in.’

‘Hello, Bev,’ Emma recognised the voice of her best friend. ‘What’s up?’

‘It’s just so dull and grey. Christmas is over and I have no money left, and no parties to look forward to.’

‘Ah, and we’re only a week in to it, too.’

‘I know, and that’s even more depressing.’

‘We could have a girlie night in. Needn’t cost more than a bottle of Prosecco.’ In fact, she’d been given a bottle as a Christmas gift – even better.

‘Now you’re talking.’

‘Yes, a movie night. I can get something up on Netflix. Funny or sad?’

‘Not sure. I need some cheering up, I think, but then I do like a good sloppy romance that makes you get the tissues out.’

‘Well, I’ll have a think on it. I’ll get some popcorn in too. We’ll do it properly.’ It sounded fun. They could chat and cosy up. It might just be what Emma needed too.

‘You don’t have any chocolate, do you?’ She could hear the smile in Bev’s tone.

‘Nah, never keep it in.’

They both laughed.

‘I’ve just about finished my Christmas supplies, Em. Well, to be honest, let’s say *Pete* has just about finished *my* Christmas supplies. The gorgeous ones you gave us were gone within the day, the Heroes tin has a couple of mini Milky Ways left, and that’s about it.’

‘Do you want a goody bag to go down to the shop with, before the movie? A bit like a pick ‘n’ mix?’

‘Oh my, you know me too well, Emma Carter. Can I really? That would be heaven. I get to raid a chocolate shop, drink Prosecco and watch some hunk in a movie, all in one night. That is *such* a plan. I feel cheerier already, just thinking about it. Thanks, Em.’

‘You’re welcome. That’s what friends are for.’

She could spare a few chocolates from the shop; yes, funds would be a little tight for the next couple of months for sure, but right now she had her Christmas takings safely banked, and she could always steer her friend towards the last of the festive favourites. After all, no one would be looking to buy Rudolph chocolate lollipops or Santas for another year now.

‘So, when shall we do it?’ Bev asked.

‘Are you free Friday?’ That was two days away.

‘Yep. I’m sure that’ll be fine. As I say, I have no other plans.’

‘Well then, let’s make it a date.’

‘Definitely. You’re on.’

Friday morning, Emma set to work removing the shop’s Christmas window display. Down came the tinsel, the baubles, and the little Christmas tree, which she decided to repot out at the back. She stood the last chocolate Father Christmas moulded figure on the counter, ready to discount, along with some of the Rudolph lollipops, some white-choc stars and Christmas pud truffles, but decided to leave the fairy lights that ran along the counter and shelves. They would give the place a little welcoming glow.

She had found some pretty yellow witch-hazel blossom flowering on a small tree in her back yard – a sign of spring to come – and put it in an old jam jar which she’d tied a green silk ribbon around and added snowdrops. As customers would be feeling the pinch from Christmas on their waistlines *and* their pockets, she started to make up mini packs of fudge and truffles to display along with the flowers. Ideal little pick-me-ups and gifts. There were still the occasional holidaymakers

about at this time of year, including those hardy ramblers who persevered in all weathers, as well as couples taking shelter at the hotel at the top end of the street.

It had been a quiet day. She'd only seen two people in the shop all day, when a familiar face called in.

'Hi there! So, the Christmas decs are coming down.' It was Holly, looking a little morose.

'Yeah, I always hate this bit ... but look, I'm putting some bright yellow blossom out with snowdrops. What do you think? You can help me some more with ideas tomorrow.'

'That's really pretty. Do you want me to carry on bagging up the chocolates here? I've got a spare half hour. Well, it's either that or heading back to face my homework. And to be honest, I need a little break. I'm only just off the school bus.'

'That'd be great ... thanks, Holly. How's school going?'

'It's okay. Busy, especially now it's Sixth Form and you just feel that pressure, you know, to get good A-level results next year. The grades are so important for uni or whatever I decide to do afterwards ... agh, I don't even know what I want to do afterwards.'

'Just keep working hard, Holly, and you'll be fine – that's all you can do.' That was pretty much her mantra in life at the moment.

'Yeah. S'pose.'

Em thought back to when she was eighteen. She'd quite enjoyed school, but wasn't totally sure what she had wanted to do as a career either; teaching had seemed a sensible option, so she had gone off to uni in Durham, enjoyed student life, passed her degree, then taken a PGCE for a year and got herself a teaching post. She'd always loved cooking and specialised in food technology, but not all of her secondary students were that committed, and thought of it as a bit of a 'dossy' subject, which could be frustrating. It was fine, though; she got paid pretty well. And she had met Luke when he had started work at the same school a year after her. She probably would have stayed in that line of work had everything not veered off course spectacularly. But then ... it really made you think that life was too short to be working away at something you didn't love.

She wondered for the umpteenth time how Luke would have felt about her becoming a chocolatier.

'You okay?'

'Ooh, yep, just in a little world of my own for a minute there. Cuppa?'

'Sounds good.'

'Tea okay? I feel quite thirsty.'

'Great.'

'I'll just pop the kettle on.'

She left Holly bagging up packs of truffles and fudge. The young girl was busy tying on ribbons in shades of bright pink, yellow and green, as Emma came back carrying two mugs. 'Here.'

'Thanks.'

'They look pretty.'

Holly was scraping scissors along the ribbons to make the ends curl.

'The colours will go really well with the blossom in the display. Give it a cheery feel. You really are a ray of sunshine here, Holly,' Emma added.

Just then the dinging chime of the door went. They both looked up. Holly was already positioned behind the counter, so Emma stood back as a blond-haired young man wandered in. He looked about twenty and she saw him glance at her assistant with a shy smile, before perusing the shelves.

'Can I help you?' Holly said, her face blushing pink, nearly matching the bright ribbon in her hand.

'Umm, well, I'm looking for a gift.'

'Okay, well, what kind of a gift? Birthday?'

'No, no, not a birthday, just a general thank you. More of an everyday gift, I suppose.'

‘Okay ... well, we can tailor-make gift boxes. You can choose any favourite flavours and then we can put in the number of chocolates you’d like.’

‘Right, yes.’

‘For a lady?’

‘Yes.’

‘Okay then. Well, there are truffles, ganaches, fruit flavours, alcohol, nuts – it’s up to you, really. Have a look in the counter here.’

‘Just a mixture would be great. I don’t mind. I’ll let you choose.’

Holly took a medium-sized gold-coloured gift box and a pair of tongs and started taking various chocolates from the counter display, placing them on to the scales. She stopped at eight, saying that would cost just less than five pounds, including the box and wrapping.

‘That’s fine. Can you pop a couple more on, then? Thanks.’ He pulled out his wallet from his trouser pocket.

‘Okay, so that’ll be five pounds eighty altogether. And, if you just give me a second I’ll wrap them properly for you ... pink, red, or gold ribbon?’

‘I don’t mind. You choose.’

Emma saw him give Holly another smile.

‘Pink then.’ That was Holly’s favourite colour. Bright, bold and bubbly, just like she was. Holly did her magic with bows and curls, and popped the gift box into a crisp, white paper bag, tucking in one of their Chocolate Shop business cards.

There was a moment as Holly handed back his change when their eyes met. Holly seemed to go a shade pinker. Emma had to smile, though she pretended to be busy with her window display again.

The young man left with a polite, ‘Thank you’.

As the shop door closed with a ding, Emma said, ‘Now *he* was a nice-looking lad.’

‘Yes,’ Holly answered, her tone a pitch higher than normal. She watched the young man walk past the window, gave him a brief, friendly smile, and went back to packing up the gift bags once more.

Emma grinned across at her. It might be a good thing that someone other than the apparently offhand Tom at school had taken her assistant’s attention.

7

There was a knock at the back door of the cottage and Emma went to answer it and seeing who it was or, more exactly, *who* it was and *what* she was wearing, burst out laughing.

‘I’m all set,’ Bev grinned, making her way into Em’s back kitchen.

‘I can’t believe you’ve actually walked around here like that.’

Bev lived a ten-minute walk away across the far side of the village.

‘Yep, well, why not? I drew the line at coming across in my slippers, mind – they’re in the bag, along with a bottle of Prosecco and some cheesy nibbles.’ She offered up her carrier bag to Emma.

‘You look like some crazy bag lady.’

‘Well, thanks.’

Bev stood before her in a full-on zebra-print onesie.

‘Right, well I suppose I’d better go and get mine on, then. Don’t want to be outdone. There’s two glasses ready there on the side so you get the Prosecco popped and poured. I’ll just be one minute.’

‘Can I still raid the chocolate shop like you promised?’

‘Yes,’ Emma shouted from halfway up the stairs. ‘But wait until I get back.’

‘Meanie.’

Em found her giraffe-print onesie on the chair in her bedroom, where she’d left it last night, and stripped off her jeans and jumper combo and pulled it on. She felt cosy straight away. Right, slippers on. So, she was ready for their ‘big night in’.

She arrived back down in the kitchen.

‘Can I fill my goodie bag now?’ Bev’s eyes lit up.

‘Yes, go on then.’ Emma led the way through the door from the back hallway to the shop, and switched on the lights.

‘Yippee!’ came a squeal from behind her.

‘Bev, anyone would think you were four, not forty-odd.’ But Emma was smiling as she spoke.

‘I know, I know. I still can’t quite get over the fact that my best friend actually has a chocolate shop. How did I get that lucky in life?!’

This evening, with it being especially dark outside, Em had to admit it did look rather like a chocolate version of Aladdin’s cave, with neatly piled truffle and ganache gems, gold and silver foil boxes, trails of ribbons and coloured packaging.

‘Here.’ Emma passed her friend a cellophane bag. ‘Go on, fill it. But, if you wouldn’t mind, take a few of those Christmas pud truffles and snowy stars that are left on the counter; that’ll help my stock situation. They’ve got to be eaten in the next week or so before they go out of date.’

‘No worries. I’ll gladly take them off your hands. What do you fancy, Em?’

To be honest, Emma had seen and handled so much chocolate in the past few weeks, she wasn’t sure. But she was always partial to a soft-centred caramel.

‘Just a couple of the chocolate salted caramels – those ones over there. That’ll do me.’

They were soon settled upstairs with a glass of Prosecco in hand, the chocolate goodie bag nestled between them, and their slippers feet propped up on the coffee table.

They’d laughed their way through *Bridget Jones’s Baby* and cried their way through *The Notebook* – a classic romantic film and novel that Emma always loved. And, hey-ho, despite the tears, a couple of hours spent with Ryan Gosling was never a bad thing.

‘Blimey, that ending just makes me want to go home and snuggle right up with Pete. But, wouldn’t it be awful for someone to just disappear from your life so suddenly?’ Bev stopped talking and looked across at Emma. ‘Oh balls! Sorry, Em. Films like this must be pretty hard for you, yeah? Like, I know it’s a long time ago and all that, but ...’

‘It’s all right.’ Emma smiled sadly, unable to really voice what she felt inside.

‘You must miss that, though, that closeness. Don’t you ever want to go out and find someone? Go on a date? You haven’t been out like that in ages. And well, to put it bluntly, have a good shag.’ The Prosecco had certainly loosened Bev’s tongue. They’d had nearly a bottle each by now. ‘Or maybe you have been, and you’re keeping it all quiet.’ Bev arched her eyebrows.

Emma thought of the hunky man on the beach, but said nothing. That was better kept to herself. Chances were she’d never see him again, and maybe that was for the best. It was probably all illusory. No one had ever come near ...

‘Hah, it’s Alan in the village, isn’t it?’

Em put her head in her hands. Then they both howled with laughter, until the tears were streaming again. Alan, bless him, had to be over seventy, with teeth stained brown from years of smoking roll-ups, and a tendency to be a bit of a letch, to say the least. He was no doubt lonely, having lost his wife several years before. But he would always stand just a bit too close in the post office queue, touching your shoulder as he asked how you were, and letting his hand linger just a bit too long, and Em was sure that one time he’d actually patted her arse. But it was so surreptitious, and when she looked round he was already two steps away at the newspaper stand, his head deep in the *Northumberland Gazette*.

Emma let out a sigh. Would she end up like that? Lonely, desperate for a fondle, watching Ryan Gosling films or *The Time Traveller’s Wife* on repeat?

‘Pete’s got a mate coming up the weekend after next. Why don’t you come out with us?’

‘What? A blind date? No way! I remember the last time you tried to fix me up with someone. All he could talk about was bloody computer programming and his gym weights. Didn’t mean a thing to me. I couldn’t have given a monkey’s whether he could lift a bloody ten-kilo weight or a car.’

‘Yes, well, he wasn’t the most interesting of Pete’s friends, I must say. But I’ve met Nigel before and he’s nice.’

‘Nigel? Are there still people called Nigel around? You’ve got to be kidding.’

‘Just get yourself out socialising again.’

‘I was out. At New Year.’

‘And before that?’

Emma couldn’t quite remember. ‘Look, I don’t need you meddling, trying to fix me up with someone.’ She could feel herself getting edgy. ‘I’m fine. I *like* being on my own. Why do we all have to be in loved-up couples? It’s just a myth.’

‘There’s nothing wrong in trying to be happy. Finding someone to love.’

‘I had it. I had all that, okay.’ Emma’s tone was taut.

‘Well, don’t you want it again?’

‘No, I’m fine. It won’t be the same. It couldn’t be.’

‘So, you’re never going to go out with anyone ever again? That’s just crazy.’

‘No, it’s not.’

‘It’s like saying you don’t want to ever eat chocolate again.’ Bev dug into the goody bag, pulled out a truffle and popped it in her mouth all in one go. There was a pause, as she ate it, then she carried on. ‘One day, it’ll sneak up on you and you’ll eat a whole bar.’ Trust Bev to think of a chocolate analogy. ‘And you might just like it!’

‘No.’

‘What’s that for an answer? Come on, Em. What is it, are you afraid or what?’

‘Okay, all right!’ Her voice was raised now, and she felt her neck flushing with heat. ‘Yes, I am bloody afraid ... afraid no one will ever match up. How can they? And if, in some fantasy universe, they ever did? What the fuck then! What if something happened to *them*? I don’t want to go back to that place, Bev. I don’t want to *ever* go near those feelings again! So yes, I am bloody afraid ... You happy now?’

‘No. Oh, Em ...’ She placed her arm around her friend. ‘Hey, I’m sorry, hun. So sorry. I didn’t realise it was still so raw for you. I know you’ve told me about Luke, what happened. But seven years, Em. It’s *seven* years.’

‘I know.’

‘But hey, jeez, I didn’t know you then. I never saw how much it must have hurt at the time, did I? I see you now, strong and independent and beautiful.’ She stroked her friend’s red wavy hair. ‘And it just seems such a waste. But forgive me, I’m just a silly bloody woman who’s had too much Prosecco and hasn’t got a clue how hard it must be. How do I know how that might feel seven years on?’

‘Yes, you are a silly bloody woman.’ The edge of Emma’s lip started to sneak up into the trace of a smile. ‘A silly bloody woman in a zebra-print onesie.’

And they slung their arms round each other in a hug.

Two days later, Emma picked up the phone and dialled.

‘Okay, so I’ll go.’

‘Is that you, Em? Um, what are you talking about? Go where?’

‘On that date thing that’s not a date, that cinema trip or whatever you’re planning with Pete’s mate in a couple of weeks’ time. What did you say his name was?’

‘You will? That’s great! Well, that’s a bit of a turnaround ... well done you! And he’s called Nigel.’

‘*Ni-gel*, how could I have forgotten? Can I back out already?’

‘Hah, don’t judge by a name. He looks more like a Brent.’

‘And what does a Brent look like?’

‘Blond, American?’ Bev suggested.

‘Well, I’m conjuring up Brent from that TV programme, *The Office*. And it’s not doing anything for me.’

‘Hah, he’s fine; not bad-looking, in fact. Easy to chat with.’

‘Okay, that’ll do. I’ve said I’ll go, so I’ll go. But don’t expect too much from me. Just friends, on a normal night out. Okay?’

‘O-kay. It’ll be fun.’

Emma wasn’t quite so sure. But even she could see it was about time she got herself out and about a bit more. She couldn’t hide behind the chocolate forever.

8

Emma had muddled through January, blowing off the cobwebs on some beach walks with Alfie. But three weeks of daily walks and yet there was never any sign of Mr Kiss. Perhaps he *was* just an illusion. A very warm, sensual figment of her imagination.

She spent some time visiting her family, catching up with her twin nieces and her brother James and his wife Chloe on a Sunday when the shop was closed with it being the winter, and she'd made a trip down to her mum and dad. She had restocked the chocolate shop supplies, but hadn't needed to make too much. January demand was, as per usual, at its annual lowest. Holly came in for the Saturday afternoons although Emma hardly needed her as there was only a handful of customers, but it was nice to have someone to chat with.

Soon it would be February, so the two of them could jazz up the window display ready for Valentine's Day. They could let loose with lots of pink, red love hearts, trails of ribbons, tempting boxes of ganaches and fudge. And she could hopefully look forward to a rise in income again. Christmas had been good, and she had managed to save most of that money, but there were bills to pay, rent and business rates, supplies to buy in. And the high-quality cocoa she bought from Belgium seemed to be creeping up in price all the time.

Emma was in the kitchen pouring chocolate ganache into love-heart shaped moulds. It was Saturday, so Holly was covering the counter, though Em had heard the door and its bell go only the once in the last hour. The jangle made her look up, and then she heard the voice of old Mrs Clark, one of their regulars, no doubt in for her bag of chocolate brazils, her weekly treat. Emma finished filling the moulds then popped through to the shop to say a quick hello.

By the disappointed look on Holly's face, much as they both got on well with Mrs Clark, the girl had been hoping that the young man who had called at The Chocolate Shop last Friday might call back in – he'd been in during the week, but of course Holly hadn't been there.

'Why, hello, Emma dear. What are you busy making today?' Mrs Clark was shrouded in a heavy woollen coat, a plastic rain cap covering her grey curls.

'Chocolate love hearts for Valentine's Day.'

'Oh yes, that's lovely for the young ones, isn't it?' She nodded towards Holly. Emma had the feeling *she* was being banded with the *old* ones.

'You could do with getting a little chair in here, Emma. Be nice to sit and have a chat and get my breath back a bit. That hill's a bit of a bugger.'

The girls smiled. Mrs Clark used the term 'bugger' freely and easily, as anyone else might use the word 'devil'. It was the only swear word she did use, which made it seem humorous rather than offensive. She was certainly a character, having lived in the village all of her life, and her parents and grandparents before her. She'd often stay for a while in the shop and chat, telling them tales of life in the olden days in the village and the fishing community here. One of Emma's favourite stories was the one about the fisherwomen who used to rock their cradles with their feet, so they could keep their hands free to bait the lines at the same time. It sounded a hard life, though, with poverty and disease rife in the village, but there was always mention of the happier times, too: the dances, celebrations, weddings, christenings. Emma could still recognise that community spirit since moving here to Warkton-by-the-Sea.

'Yes, that might be a thought,' Emma agreed. Some of her elderly customers would be glad of that, the chance to have a sit-down, before heading back down the village hill again.

They watched the old lady slowly pack her chocolate brazils into her large navy blue handbag, which reminded Em of something the queen might have, then set herself away. 'Back home for a nice cup of coffee now. Better wrap myse'n up a bit first, mind.' She tightened the scarf around her neck. 'There's a chill wind out there today. And still a chance of rain. Take care, me dears.'

‘Thanks, and you too, Mrs Clark.’

‘Bye.’

‘Bye, dears.’

And all was quiet once more. Holly gave a little sigh.

‘What’s up?’

‘Do you think he might come back?’

There was no doubt who Holly was mooning over. Funny, those words had been flitting through Emma’s head these past few weeks too. Not over the same guy, of course.

‘Ah, I expect so. He’s been in twice. Seems like he might be local or a regular visitor at least.’

‘Or maybe just a holidaymaker on a two-week holiday, and that was it.’ Holly looked dejected.

‘Maybe. You’ll just have to wait and see, Hols.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Time for a cuppa?’

‘Yeah, why not. Thanks.’

Emma went to click the kettle on.

They had their tea sat on stools in the kitchen. They’d soon pop through if they heard the shop door go.

‘So, what’s the latest with that Tom lad at school?’ Em asked.

‘Hah, nothing – exactly nothing. It’s like I don’t exist.’

‘Aw, sorry to hear it, Hols. He doesn’t know what he’s missing.’

‘It’s all right. It’s just we were such good friends when we were little. His mum and mine are still big buddies. We were too. It’s like he’s changed, totally. It’s all football, and flirting with the pretty, sporty girls. It’s like I’m just not important or interesting any more.’

‘I suppose we all change, life changes,’ Emma mused. ‘But that does sound a bit mean of him. There’s nothing to stop you being friends.’

‘I think he might have guessed that I fancied him and it’s probably frightened him right off. Oh, Em. I feel such an idiot. So now, I don’t feel I can even say hello. I go bright red and get a bit panicky.’

‘Oh dear.’ Young love, crushes. Why did relationships have to be so bloody complicated? ‘It’ll all work out somehow in the end, Holly. Just you wait and see.’ And as she said the words, she hoped to God that Holly never had to face what she’d had to. She’d learnt the hard way that there weren’t always happy-ever-afters. But why spoil the young girl’s hopes and dreams?

After their cuppa and chat, next up for Em was making a batch of choc-dipped fudge. She was busy melting butter and sugar together when she heard the jangle of the door again. She hoped it might be Holly’s dream man, but the door closed very soon after it opened.

‘The post’s here.’ Holly popped in the back and handed over a few envelopes that Emma placed to one side as she went to fetch cream for her fudge mix from the fridge.

Emma was soon pouring the mixture into a large metal tray to set and cool.

‘Mmm, that smells divine!’

‘Even better after the chunks get dunked in chocolate.’

‘I’d love it if someone brought me home a pack of that.’

‘Well, I think we can both think of a certain someone who you’d like to do that – and I’m not talking Tom now,’ Emma grinned.

‘Hmm. Do you think he’s got a girlfriend?’

They both knew exactly who Holly was referring to.

‘I don’t know. Why don’t you ask him the next time he calls in?’

‘Nooo. I couldn’t!’

‘Why not?’

‘I’d look a right idiot if he has. After all, who’s he buying the chocolate for?’

‘But, if he hasn’t?’

‘Then I’d just feel daft and not know what to say next. I’d look too keen, apart from anything else.’

Emma smiled. This girl had another huge crush by the looks of it.

‘What about you then, anyway?’ Holly was blushing furiously now, and was keen to divert the attention from herself.

Hah, not another one trying to fix her up. She’d had enough of Bev’s meddling of late. The foursome with Nigel was looming ominously.

‘No one special in your life, then?’ Holly pursued.

‘Now stop getting cheeky, you. It’s none of your business, madam.’ Emma was still smiling, but *sooo* not prepared to divulge any information. Not that there was anything at all to divulge.

Twenty minutes later Holly was out in the shop, keeping herself occupied dusting the shelves and the glass counter as it was that quiet, and Emma got around to opening the post. There was the usual junk mail, a bank letter, the quarterly electric bill – ooh, now that was a bit high. Oh well, it was the winter months, she mused. The fourth letter was handwritten on a thick white envelope. Emma opened it, drawing out a sheet of typed A4. It looked very formal. She recognised the name and address of her landlord.

‘I am writing to inform you ...’ Emma stood there stock-still, the letter quivering in her hand.

She was still staring into space when Holly popped back through to put the polish and duster back in the kitchen cupboard.

‘Everything okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost or something.’

Emma wished it *had* been a ghost. It would be far less trouble than the contents of the letter.

‘Ah, no, just a bit of a shock.’ She wondered whether to share the news, no point worrying the girl unnecessarily, but oh, she needed someone to talk it over with.

As Emma began to read the words aloud, she felt like her heart was being squeezed. ‘*I am writing to inform you that as from 1 March 2017 your monthly rent payment for 5 Main Street, Warkton-by-the-Sea, is to increase to the sum of £900.* Nine hundred pounds! That’s a further one hundred and fifty pounds a month. I really don’t know where I’m going to find that, Holly.’

‘Oh no. That’s so not fair, Em.’

It might not be fair, but it looked like she had no choice. Either pay it or get out; the landlord was giving her one month’s notice. Bollocks! She started reading again, her hand trembling: ‘This is due to the desirable nature of the village properties, and the increase in holiday trade.’ Basically, her landlord could turn this into a holiday cottage and make a mint, no doubt.

‘It’s not just my business, it’s my home too, Holly.’

‘Oh Em, it’ll work out somehow. It has to. Warkton just wouldn’t be the same without your gorgeous little chocolate shop, or you. It’s our little chocolate heaven – all my mates love popping in here. And, you’ve become a real friend to me. No, The Chocolate Shop can’t possibly go – nor you. There has to be a way.’

But the massive implications were starting to sink in. Emma began to feel sick.

For the rest of the afternoon Emma’s stomach was churning and her mind was on fast-spin. She could see all the dreams she had had, the business she had grown, her home and her new life here in this lovely village by the sea, all come crashing down. If she couldn’t meet the new rent payments, what then?

9

As soon as the shop closed that day, despite it turning dusky outside, Emma headed down for her usual walk past the harbour and towards the dunes to the sea. There was no one else on the beach, just a few terns who would soon be ready to go home to roost. *Home* ... That thought, that word, made her heart sink even more. Where would home be, if it couldn't be here?

She could try and rent a new cottage locally, she supposed, but without the business, or a job, where would that leave her? And where else could she lease new premises that would work as a chocolate shop, have the kitchen space she'd need and offer accommodation; somewhere where the tourists would flow and she wouldn't have to pay more rent than now? That seemed a challenge too far, and veered towards looking for a miracle.

But she wasn't a quitter, and she wasn't ready to hand in her notice on The Chocolate Shop by the Sea just yet. There *had* to be a way.

She strolled along the sands, Alfie trotting by her side. She wasn't afraid of the dark, or the beach, or of being on her own – she'd done that for long enough, after all. But she *was* afraid of losing all the things she had built here, and that she knew, by the desperate, sinking feeling in her heart and soul right now, she had grown to love.

She needed someone to talk all this over with. Someone she trusted, who knew her well, but who would also have a business sense, and be able to give sound advice. Her brother, James, was just that person.

'Right, what's up, sis?' James confronted her as they sat in his kitchen.

He knew her so well. She tried to keep her emotions in check in her daily life. In fact, some people might say she came across as slightly cool at times – but that had been a preservation instinct from those toughest of times when she had to try and carry on and keep a brave face. But with James it was different. She was his big sister, and as well as he knew her, she knew him inside out too – his moods, his light, his shade, which exact buttons to press to wind him up within seconds. She'd mastered that at the age of five! And he'd seen her through the very worst of times; held her as she sobbed, provided a sofa, chili con carne – the only meal he could cook back then – bottles of lager and empathy in his shared Newcastle flat when he was starting out as an accountant. He'd helped to bring her back from the brink when she was at rock bottom.

Now he lived in a three-bedroomed house in a hamlet just outside of the market town of Alnwick. Her five-year-old nieces, Lucy and Olivia, had still been up when Emma had got there, so Emma hadn't felt it was right to start chatting about her troubles straight away. Chloe, James's wife, was upstairs with the girls now, settling them in bed as they had to be up for school in the morning. They'd loved the chocolate cat and dog figures Emma had brought for them. Just a small gift, but the hugs Emma had received in return were mammoth. It was nice that something so simple could make them so happy. She loved living near to them, being close enough to drop in. Would that still be possible in the coming months?

'It's not like you to phone and then want to come across straight away. So ...?'

'You're right. I need to talk something over with you.' Emma was sitting at their large wooden kitchen table. This room was definitely the heart of the house. James sat opposite her. They were similar in looks, with their red hair and striking green-grey eyes. Emma's hair was a lot curlier, though she styled it to a more manageable wave nowadays. James's was more of a sandy colour, going towards a strawberry-blonde. They'd both used to get teased for their red locks at school but James had just laughed it off; being good at sport, tall, and good-looking, he countered the taunts of 'Ginga' with his own 'Ninja Ginga', and being very good at taikwondo, he used to frighten them off with an air kick.

Emma had been less confident as a younger teenager, soldiering on in the face of the comments. But then, the bullies would pick on you for anything really – being too tall, too short, wearing glasses,

being clever, not being clever. Children could be cruel, and teenage peer pressure seemed to bring out the worst in the bullies. Since when did we all have to fit the same mould? Like chocolates, it was the variety that was so lovely.

But suddenly it all changed: at the age of sixteen her hair began drawing lots more attention, *positive* attention, and later, when she met Luke, he told her he absolutely loved it. She was taken aback by that after years of taunts, and in their early, sensual days she remembered him running his hands through her long locks. He used to love it falling over him when they were making love.

‘Em? So, what is it you need to talk about?’

‘Ah, right, sorry. Yes, me coming here ... I really needed to chat something over with someone. Someone I trusted.’

James raised his eyebrows, interested and concerned. ‘So?’

‘Oh, James, the bloody landlord is hiking up the rent on the shop and the cottage, big time. There’s no way I’ll be able to afford it. I’m only just making ends meet as it is. And I can’t just whack all my prices up, I’m pretty sure I’d lose my regular customers if I did. But the thought of having to leave, my business, my home, everything ...’

‘Oh, bloody hell, Em. That’s such a tough one. What’s the price rise? Do you think there’s any room for negotiation?’

‘A hundred and fifty pounds *extra* each month. And I doubt he’ll negotiate. He’s a miserable sod at the best of times. I’m sure he’s hoping I’ll leave. Nine hundred pounds a month he wants and he’s asked for me to give my notice, if that’s out of my budget, which he bloody knows it will be.’ She started to chew at a hangnail on her index finger. ‘I probably do pay a fair price at the moment, and it’s not risen for three years, but last time it only rose by fifty pounds per month. He says he could ask for even more with a new tenant, and I reckon he’s looking at a holiday cottage option too. Warkton is getting far more popular with the tourists now.’

‘But surely that will help your business in the future?’

‘Maybe, yes, but even with a slight rise in trade this coming year, I still don’t think I can cover costs like that.’

‘No.’ James rubbed his chin, thinking. He angled his long legs out under the table. ‘What about trying to expand the business a bit to source some extra income – going along to local markets, craft fairs, things like that?’

‘Well, I suppose I could give it a try. The run-up to Christmas might be good for that, but that’s a long way off for now. And then I’d need cover at the shop, or at least to send someone else out to do that for me, so I’d have to pay extra wages. But, it’s certainly food for thought. Might be problematic in the summertime, a stall, that is – you couldn’t keep the chocolate chilled enough. How do I temperature-control a market stand without having to pay out on a load of equipment?’

‘Not sure ... Hmm, might be tricky. Just thinking out loud. Perhaps that’s not one of my better ideas.’

‘No, no. It’s good brainstorming like this, and you’re trying to think practically. I’ve been wracking my brains since the letter landed, and I’ve not come up with any magic answers yet.’ She very much doubted there was a magic answer.

‘Right, right, bear with me.’ James tapped his fingers down on the table top. ‘This one’s a bit better. What about local hotels, restaurants, small shops and delis? Approach them to stock your goods, give them a percentage, and you get to keep the rest. Sale or return might be more attractive at first, but then you should get some regular orders from it.’

‘Hmm, yeah. I already do that with The Fisherman’s Arms. They have a mini box of two of my truffles as a welcome gift in their B & B rooms.’

‘Well then, there you go, just think bigger. What about the country house hotel at Renford, The Swan in Alnwick, the deli in Seahouses, the shop in Bamburgh? There must be several places near Warkton. Take some samples, be brave, and just go and ask. The worst they can say is no.’

‘Yes, and there’s the hotel in Warkton, just up the hill from the shop. That has to be worth a try.’ It was a good starting point. She’d have some late nights crafting chocolate if some of them took her on, mind, but it would be *so* worth it to keep her shop and her home, and she was never one to be afraid of hard work.

‘That’s the girls settled finally.’ Chloe walked back in, dark air swinging to her shoulders, effortlessly stylish in loungewear that looked like something out of the White Company. She always made Emma feel under-dressed, but she was lovely, had been a real friend over the years. ‘Cup of tea?’

Emma was about to say yes, when James cut in, ‘I think I’ll open a bottle of red, actually. We can brainstorm this together. We’re thinking of ways to increase Em’s turnover, possible outlets that might sell Emma’s chocolate, Chlo. Think this needs a bit of teamwork and a glass of something a bit stronger than tea.’

‘Okay.’

‘Just a small one for me then, James. I’ll be driving back, remember,’ Emma said.

‘Of course.’ He got up to find a bottle of Merlot from the rack, and a corkscrew.

Chloe took the seat beside Emma. ‘What’s happening then, Em?’

Emma retold the story of the landlord’s letter and imminent price hike.

‘Oh no, so sorry to hear that, Emma. That must put you in such a difficult position.’

They chatted the situation over further. Emma knew it had been right to come here. It was great to have the support of her family, who were always there for her. No problem seemed quite as bad with them onside. By the time she left at 10.00 p.m., she was armed with an A4 sheet of ideas, a list of companies to approach, a realistic price increase to consider for the shop’s goods, and a slightly woozy head from all the thinking. She felt a little more hopeful. It certainly wasn’t going to be easy; approaching all these businesses was different to them agreeing to take her goods, and she’d still have to make a decent profit after paying them a cut. And there would be many long nights ahead making the numbers of chocolates required to fulfil any orders as well as keep the shop going.

There was still a long road ahead, but the horizon looked that little bit brighter.

10

It was the night of the non-date date. Emma was filled with a sense of impending doom, but at least it was keeping her mind off the troubles her chocolate shop was facing.

Why exactly had she agreed to this?

It was all Bev's fault, twisting her arm on that girlie night. Now, in the cold light of a late-January day, with a slash of red lipstick, an attempt at mascara, and a cinema ticket reserved for her, she felt she couldn't back out. She looked longingly at the comfy sofa and her TV as she passed by her living room, on the way to the stairs. Even Alfie gave a sad little whimper from his basket.

'Won't be long, Alfie.' Hopefully, not long at all. See the film out, have a quick bite of supper, and then make a quick exit. She'd said she'd take her own car and meet them at the cinema in Berwick-upon-Tweed. Exit strategy firmly in place!

She pulled up her black-and-white Fiat 500 in the car park outside the Maltings Theatre. She usually really enjoyed her evenings here, watching the latest chick flick or thriller with Bev, or sometimes a matinee with her nieces. It had a nice cosy feel. Tonight was going to be different.

They were to meet at the Stage Door Bar within the theatre building.

Well, here goes, Em. Best foot forward and all that. She poked a boot out of the car door, and stepped out. She had chosen a plain black shift dress and a pair of to-the-knee black leather boots. Luckily, she had paired it all with an emerald-green scarf that her mum had bought her for Christmas, or she might have looked as if she was going to a funeral. Oh well, that was a little how she felt.

Right, find some enthusiasm, Em, she rallied herself. It was a night out, after all. It might end up being fabulous fun. This Nigel, who looks like a Brent, might be a bit of a hunk and his conversation could be scintillating. At worst, she'd just keep the chat with this guy polite and friendly and then she could always fall back on her trusted friend, Bev, for a good natter and leave the boys to it. It'd be fine.

Emma collected her ticket at the main desk and treated herself to a share-bag of Maltesers to nibble away at during the film, popping them in her handbag for now. She was to meet the others in the bar which was downstairs, so headed there. She swung open the door on to an old-fashioned room of plush red velvet and an unusual night-and-stars painted ceiling. The theatre bar was cosy and quirky, and she'd enjoyed several glasses of rosé here with Bev over time.

She spotted the three of them ordering, and suddenly felt a little nervous – like she'd fallen back into her insecure teenage years. She smiled across at Bev, and walked over, taking in the outline of the third person. He looked tall, slim – on the side of skinny, actually – as she approached. Blond hair starting to thin on top, a nice smile, phew, and yes, nice grey-blue eyes. Definitely okay at first glance.

'Hey, hello, Emma.' Bev greeted her warmly, giving her a hug. 'Nigel, this is Emma. Emma, Nigel.'

Emma went to shake hands, just as he moved in for a kiss on the cheek, which was fine but slightly out of kilter.

'Nice to meet you, Nigel.'

Pete kissed her then too, and offered to get her a drink.

'Gin and tonic please, Pete. That'd be lovely, thank you.' She'd just have the one, and stick to the plain tonic thereafter. She was driving, after all.

'Busy day?' Bev asked.

'Yes, I'm building up supplies for Valentine's Day now, so I've been busy crafting.'

'Emma is a chocolatier,' Bev announced proudly for the sake of Nigel.

'Great,' he replied.

'Bev makes it sound very grand. I make chocolates and sell them,' Emma explained.

'She has her own business, in Warkton-by-the-Sea. It's gorgeous.' Bev was obviously keen to make her sound fabulous.

Emma smiled. 'It's just a small shop. But I do enjoy it.'

'Good. I have to admit, I don't generally eat chocolate, though. I do a lot of running, marathons, trails – have to keep an eye on my dietary requirements. Stock up on the healthy carbs and proteins, you know.'

'Right. Well, it's good to eat healthy.' She smiled stiffly. And *boring*. So, he doesn't like chocolate. It wasn't the best of starts.

'I suppose you have to do a lot of training?' She tried to make conversation.

'Yes, a lot of it's in the gym at this time of year. Half-hour to an hour running sessions, and I try and do a bit up in the hills at weekends. The odd twenty-miler.'

Twenty miles.

'Do you run at all?' he continued.

That was like asking Emma if she'd ever been to the moon. Emma would have trouble running twenty metres. In fact, she hated running. Cross-country at school was always a disaster.

'Ah, no, not really. I walk a lot, on the beach, with Alfie, my dog,' she explained.

'Ah, I see. Well, no dogs for me, I have a pet allergy.'

Oh my, this was going to be harder than she'd even imagined. Emma gave a sideways glance at Bev, who quickly diverted the conversation with, 'Right, well who's looking forward to the film? I've heard some great reviews of it.'

Pete handed Emma her gin, whilst Nigel sipped his pint of real ale. 'Yes,' Pete added chirpily, 'I think the theme tune is up for a BAFTA.'

'Great.' Emma then took a large slurp of G & T; she had a feeling she was going to need it.

'So, where's home for you?' She persevered with the polite conversation, hoping he wasn't going to say that he'd just moved up to the Warkton area.

'Newcastle way, Gosforth. I moved in to a new flat about six weeks ago. Used to have a country pad, Corbridge way.'

Recent divorcee was clanging like an alarm bell in Emma's mind. Messy divorce? Still in the horrible post-relationship throes? She felt a little sorry for him, if so. He was probably missing his wife and kids. Not wanting to quiz him any further on what might be a difficult subject she just said, 'That's a nice area, Gosforth.' Playing it safe.

'Yes, I'm finding my feet.'

It was a relief when the bell sounded to announce there were just five minutes to the start of the movie. They made their way through to the small theatre and found their seats. Pete filed in first, then Bev. Nigel stood back to allow Emma to sit next to her friend, and then he followed. The seats were fairly close and quite small, traditional pull-down plush red velvet pads, with wooden armrests, and there was the usual shuffling as the audience settled down.

Emma took off her jacket, and then got out her bag of Maltesers at the ready. She opened the pack as quietly as she could, as the intro music of the movie started up, passed them around amongst their group, then carefully wedged the pack between her knees to avoid any spillage.

Ten minutes into the film, she felt a nudge at her knee-cap, and acknowledged Nigel about to dip in to the pack. She hadn't time to lift the pack out, so nodded as if to say help yourself. She felt a slight rummage as he took a couple, smiled at her, then they both carried on watching the film. It was the latest Bond, action-packed as you would expect – there was a high-speed car chase whizzing on noisily at the moment. At least they didn't have to make conversation any more.

Ten minutes or so later, she felt another little dig between her knees. Bloody hell, he was dipping in again. So much for not liking chocolate! This time, as his hand slid out of the pack, it brushed lightly across her knee. *Was that on purpose?* But she couldn't be quite sure. She lifted the pack up a bit to rest on the top of her leg. She felt slightly uneasy – but it was probably her imagination getting the better of her. She settled back to watch the film, taking a few more sweets for herself, enjoying that initial chocolate melt then the malty-sweet crispiness.

Fifteen minutes on and Bev smiled across at her, mouthing, ‘Good film.’

She smiled back, yes, at least the film was okay. She needn’t be rude about the company; they just didn’t have much in common, that was all, but she could just muddle on and see out the evening.

She jumped in her seat as an armed criminal leapt out at Bond from a sidestreet. And then the Maltesers bag started to go again. Nigel was staring straight at the screen whilst rummaging a little more than was strictly necessary, then his hand tracked slowly up her thigh. Okay, this was no accident. She’d moved the bag on purpose, so no physical contact need be made between them. She darted him a stern look, as if to say: I know what you’re up to, matey, and it stops here!

He gave a small, weaselly smile in return, and then popped a Malteser slowly into his mouth. The leech! She might as well have been on a date with Alan Fondle Fingers from the village at this rate!

Emma stiffened, trying to avoid any bodily contact at all, which was hard considering how narrow the seats were, *and* they had shared armrests. She folded the sweet packet down, pushed her knees tightly together and propped her hands on top of both legs protectively. That should stop him. But was she being paranoid?

Bev gave her an odd look as if to say, what are you doing? Whilst Pete was completely oblivious, transfixed as he was on the film. Another fifteen minutes must have passed, and Emma began to relax a little. The sweets were still held fast on top of her knees and were probably melting by now.

Then, just as she was concentrating on the film again, she felt another small tug at the bag, and his hand slid down *beneath* the bag to the inside of her kneecap as he gave her a wink. Oh, for Christ’s sake. It certainly wasn’t the chocolate he was after, was it? Thank goodness she’d put her thick tights on. He seemed the sort who’d be up and under your knicker elastic in under thirty seconds. Jeez!

‘Right,’ she fumed, in a strained whisper. ‘Take the bloody pack.’ She slammed them at him and got up, excusing herself to a middle-aged couple who had to stand up from their seats to let her pass. ‘Sorry, sorry. Trip to the ladies needed.’ She fumbled out of the row in the near dark. An usher then guided her to the rear of the cinema with a torch.

She hadn’t needed the loo, but sat down in a cubicle anyhow, still fuming and scheming her exit plan. Go right now? That seemed a bit rude to Bev and Pete. But could she suffer the rest of the film? Possibly, but there was absolutely *no way* she was going out for a meal with old Fondle Fingers now. He’d be trying to pleasure her with a poppadum or something.

She texted her brother: *Ring me at nine o’clock sharp. Please x* There must only be twenty minutes or so left of the film. They’d be on their way out by then. *Say the dog’s been sick and I need to come home straight away. You’d be my hero x*

I hope I’m your hero already ;) bounced back. Will do. What on earth are you up to?

Tell you later. Thanks, you’re a star. X

Then she texted Bev: *He’s a right leech. Soz, but I’m gonna have to dash.*

Emma hung about a bit, washed her hands, checked her lip gloss in the mirror, and made it back to her seat for the final minutes of the film. This was the last time she was going to be persuaded to go on a blind date, possibly any kind of date at all. She didn’t care if she ended up as some mad cat or spaniel lady, living on her own.

Bev gave her a quizzical look, her phone being safely on silent mode in her bag for now. She was probably wondering if Emma had a touch of food poisoning or something, the amount of time she’d spent in the loo. Emma sat bolt upright with knees tight, body tense. She couldn’t give out any more ‘keep off’ signals if she tried. It seemed to work, thank heavens. They got to the final credits and she realised she had no idea what had gone on in the film since halfway through. She was just glad to be getting out from there. They stood up and shuffled out along the row, Emma leaving a good space between her and Nigel, allowing Pete to move up next to him as they reached the aisle.

‘Great film. Loved the bit where they water-skied up over the speed boat,’ Bev commented.

‘Yeah.’ Emma had no recollection of that part whatsoever.

Just as they reached the welcome light and space of the foyer, Emma's phone buzzed into action. Perfect timing. *Thank you, bro.* She'd gladly do some extra baby-sitting for them one night. She held her mobile ready in her palm.

'Hel-lo? Oh, oh *really?!*' She overdramatised her voice, giving Bev then Nigel a concerned look. 'What a shame ... Okay, no worries, I'll come right away.'

James was laughing down the phone.

'Okay, bye.' She turned off her mobile.

'I'm so sorry,' she said to the three of them. 'I'm going to have to go. The dog's been sick. James, my brother,' she added for Nigel's benefit, 'has been dog sitting for me. Took him for a walk, and now he's seems really poorly. Poor Alfie.'

Bev gave her a curious look. She'd have known Emma never usually got a dog sitter in for an evening at the cinema. Alfie was fine in on his own for several hours.

'Oh, right.' Bev's tone was sceptical and her eyebrows raised.

Emma then saw her friend digging in to her bag for her own phone. The text would soon clarify things.

'Lovely to meet you.' Emma didn't even bother to extend her hand to Nigel who was already moving in towards her, no doubt for a farewell kiss. She ducked away, saying, 'I really have to dash. Catch you soon, Bev. Sorry again. Bye, Pete. Bye, all.'

And she was off like a whippet to the car park and straight back home to the comfort of her little cottage. She was soon sitting stroking her best boy's spaniel head. This was all the company she needed, right now, not some letchy Malteser-man. She wasn't that desperate.

'We're just fine, aren't we, Alfie? Just fine.'

11

It was Friday afternoon, the first week in February, and Holly had called in after being dropped off by the school bus. It was becoming quite a habit on a Friday, even though she wasn't officially working, *and* interestingly so were the visits of a certain blond-haired gentleman, who had a very nice smile.

The door of The Chocolate Shop chimed as it opened.

Emma and Holly both looked up.

'Hi,' said Emma. So, he was back.

The young man approached. 'Hi, could I have the medium gift box with half coffee creams and half orange, please?' the young man asked.

'Certainly.' Emma was already positioned behind the counter.

'So, who's the lucky lady, then?' Emma asked with a smile. 'This is becoming quite a regular visit.' She could feel the heat rising from Holly who stood beside her, and was now shooting her boss a warning glance.

'For someone special?' Emma persevered.

'Yeah, you could say that.' The young man flashed his trademark grin.

So, there was a 'she' involved. Emma could almost sense Holly's shoulders sink. Her assistant stayed silent.

'Yes, I've just finished work,' he continued. 'I started at the Seaview Hotel, just up the street, about a month ago. Trainee assistant manager.' He seemed proud of his new position. It was nice to see the young ones getting on.

'Well done. That must be an interesting job.'

'Yeah, I'm just finding my feet. It's going okay so far, though.' He darted a shy glance across at Holly.

Emma hoped Holly might join in the conversation here, but her assistant seemed to have lost the ability to speak. Emma placed the chocolates in their tiny petit four wrappers in a gold box and began tying it with a purple satin ribbon. 'This colour ribbon okay?'

'Yes, that looks great.'

'Well, that's five pounds and twenty pence, please. Is that everything we can help you with today?'

'Yes, that's it, thanks.'

He paid the money, took the gift box, and turned to go. Holly just managed to find her voice at the last, with a shy 'Bye' and he turned to say 'Goodbye' back. Emma was sure there was some frisson in the air. The chocolates would be melting at this rate! After he was safely away down the street, Emma announced, 'Well, if he doesn't fancy you, Holly, I'll eat my hat.'

'Nah, don't be daft. He can't do. Who's he buying chocolates for? He said it was a she – the lucky thing.' She pouted. 'Aw, but he just seems so nice. Why do I always like the ones who are taken or just not interested?' Holly sighed, and then picked up a duster and started flicking away at the shelves, even though she wasn't officially working, obviously needing to keep busy.

Young love, hey? All that angst.

Emma thought back to her own recent dating disaster. There certainly hadn't been any chemistry or frisson with Fondle Fingers the Malteser Man, just the bloody angst. Her thoughts jumped to the man on the beach at Boxing Day, all those weeks ago now. She couldn't quite shake off the memory of him and felt a tug in the pit of her stomach, like she missed him, yet she didn't really even know him. She wondered if he ever thought of her, too.

A figure dressed in a black raincoat was hunched outside the shop window under an umbrella. It had been a drizzly damp afternoon and it seemed to have been dark for hours out there, so Emma

was glad that Holly had dropped by – the weather today had kept all but the hardiest of ramblers at bay. A couple in matching red cagoules had called earlier admitting they'd been hoping for a café, but had settled for a bar of milk chocolate for their coastal walk, and that was the last customers she'd seen until the young man Holly fancied.

Holly went out to the kitchen to make them a cup of tea and the dark-clad figure moved to the doorway. Once his umbrella was let down, Emma had a sinking moment of recognition. It was Mr Neil, her landlord.

He strolled in, dripping rain on to her wooden floorboards.

'Good afternoon, Emma.' The greeting came out in a flat tone. 'How's business?' He looked around at the empty shop.

'Afternoon.' She took a slow breath. 'Good, thanks.' She smiled. She was never going to tell him otherwise.

'I was just calling to check you have received my letter.'

'Yes.'

'And to remind you that I need your reply by the end of next week, as per its contents. Obviously, you do need to give me a month's notice of your leaving, though I'm sure I could make arrangements if you'd like to vacate earlier.' He gave her a cold smile, pretending to be helpful.

So, he was evidently counting on her leaving the shop. That made Emma even more determined to do everything in her power to raise enough funds to keep it going and make the new rent payments. He couldn't just chuck her out of her home, her business.

Holly wandered through at that point with two cups of steaming tea. She said 'Hello' cheerily to the gentleman in the shop, to be answered with a very cool 'Hello' back. She looked at Emma with raised eyebrows as she passed over her cup, as if to say, who on earth is that misery?

'Oh yes, I'll be sure to answer you within the week, Mr Neil,' Emma replied, giving away nothing about her intentions to stay. But what would happen if she couldn't make these new payments and fell into default? He'd have her out of there soon enough anyhow, and she'd then be disgraced, having brought her business to its knees. Would it be better to leave of her own accord now, look for other premises, start again? But her heart and soul were here in this shop, in this village, with the community that had sheltered her. No, she wasn't going to give up that easily.

'Well then, I look forward to receiving your reply.'

I bet you do, thought Em, but you might not be so damned complacent when you read it.

'And the next rent is due this Thursday.'

She was fully aware of that. Thank heavens for the Christmas takings she'd saved, but that was going to take the last of those funds. She'd be at rock bottom then, her bank account empty.

'Yep. That's fine,' she replied.

'Quiet in here, isn't it?' He cast his beady eyes over the shop pointedly, then out to the empty street.

'At the moment, yes.' Crikey, he'd be enough to frighten any customers off anyhow, she mused. 'But it was much busier early on today, before the rain set in.' She pasted on a smile.

'Hmm.' He looked around again, as though he didn't believe it. 'This'd make a lovely living area, open plan right through to the kitchen space.'

He was already planning the renovations to make this into a holiday cottage!

'Maybe. But it does make a lovely shop,' Emma persevered. *Keep calm, don't rise to his bait.*

'Oh yes, it's a fabulous little shop, very popular.' Holly rallied by her side behind the counter.

'Well then, good afternoon, ladies.' With that, he left, dripping water in his wake.

'Yuck!' Holly spat out the word as soon as he'd closed the door. 'He's like a slug.'

Emma had to laugh.

Holly continued, 'What did you say his name was?'

'Mr Neil.'

‘More like Eel, all slimy and a right wriggly character. That has to be the landlord, huh? The guy that sent that horrid rent letter. I don’t know how you put up with him.’

‘A case of having to, Hols. I could never afford to buy this place. Dammit, he is so looking forward to chucking me out.’

‘Nooo, that can’t happen!’

‘I really don’t know how I’m going to finance the new rent payments. But I’m going to bloody well try.’

‘Go, Em, that’s the spirit. You’ll find a way. We can’t lose The Chocolate Shop by the Sea, or you. How awful would that be? The shop is such a special place. And there’s no way I’m going back to the greasy chippie to work.’

Emma let out a sigh. ‘Thanks, Holly. I’ll just have to make sure I give it my damned best shot then. Time for the masterplan to swing into action.’

‘Wow, have you got one?’

‘Well, let’s just say I have some ideas up my sleeve to get started with.’

‘Brilliant.’ Holly beamed. ‘And me and the whole village will be right there beside you.’

Deep breath ... just walk in ... shoulders up ... smile. The worst they can say is no.

She *so* didn’t want them to say no.

Emma was about to try her first sales pitch, and was loitering nervously outside the main entrance to the Seaview Hotel, two hundred metres up from her chocolate shop. She was armed with a bag of goodies, including a selection of mini truffle boxes and some packs of fudge and raspberry white-chocolate hearts. She was pitching that they take her chocolates to trial as a turndown gift for their guests. It could work as a lovely gesture from the hotel, hopefully getting them good reviews and repeat custom, as well as raising awareness of her little shop down the road, where they might come to buy more.

She’d done some research and the hotel had twenty-four guest rooms. She had worked out her costs and was going to ask what she felt was a fair price (reduced from the normal shop retail) at 95p per box of two chocolates, all wrapped and tied with thin ribbon, and the hotel could choose either a white or gold box. Emma had even matched the shade of ribbon to the royal blue of the hotel’s logo. Fingers crossed that they’d like the idea.

Maybe she should have phoned or e-mailed before she just turned up like this. But she was here now. All she could do was give it her best shot. Right, enough dilly-dallying around, Em. If they had a security camera on the front door they’d wonder what the hell she was up to, loitering there.

Go girl! You can do this thing.

She pushed open the hotel’s swing door and found the reception desk, recognising the girl there as being from the village.

‘Hi, Emma.’

‘Oh, hi, Laura.’ She was the daughter of the lady who ran an art gallery in the village.

‘How can I help?’

‘Would it be possible to have a word with the manager?’ Em asked.

‘Ah, sorry, she’s not in this morning. I could ask the assistant manager, if you’d like? Is there a problem?’

‘No, no problem. Just an idea I’ve had. Something to put forward. I’ve come to see if the hotel might be interested in me supplying them with turndown chocolates, actually.’

‘Oh yum. Now that *is* a good idea. Give me a second and I’ll just try and locate Adam, our assistant manager. Take a seat if you like.’

‘Thanks.’ As she sat down she realised her heart was racing. This order might just help to save The Chocolate Shop, or at least be a major step in the right direction. She still had to answer Mr Neil’s letter, but if she secured some new business she’d have more hope of managing to pay the increased rent.

After a minute or two, who should arrive but the young man who'd been calling in lately. Of course, he'd said he had started working here recently!

'Adam, this is Emma from the gorgeous chocolate shop down the road.' Laura was obviously keen to help.

'Hi, yes, hello, Emma, of course we've already met.' He offered an outstretched hand to shake hers.

'Hello.'

His handshake was warm and friendly, and though he was evidently young he seemed more assured here in the hotel than he had in the shop.

'So, you have an idea for our hotel, I hear. Come on through and we can have a chat about it.'

'Thanks.'

Emma followed him to the hotel's lounge area – all duck-egg blue and cream sofas, some stripy, some plain – where he had organised coffee to be served for them.

'Well, I'm open to new ideas, so what are you thinking?'

'Obviously, I run a local chocolate shop, and I was thinking that a chocolate gift at turndown for your valued guests might prove popular. It could improve things like your hotel reviews on TripAdvisor and the like, and also make that difference between you and your competitors so as to draw repeat bookings and recommendations.'

'Hmm, sounds interesting.' Adam was nodding.

Emma began to relax a little. 'I've brought along a selection of mini boxes filled with two high quality truffles – they aren't too expensive and they would look lovely popped on a bedside table at turndown. These are just suggestions and you could choose what flavours you felt worked best for your clients.' She lifted out all the boxes and the samples of fudge and chocolate hearts. 'With Valentine's Day coming up soon too we could theme the gifts – say raspberry chocolate love hearts with a champagne truffle.'

Adam smiled as he picked up one of the filled boxes in white.

'I have tried to colour theme the ribbon to your logo too,' Emma added chirpily. This wasn't as difficult as she had feared, though actually getting a yes would be the hard bit.

'So, how much are we actually talking price-wise?' Adam asked.

'Well, looking at all my costs. and hoping for an order of at least fifty boxes to start, I could price at ninety-five pence per box.'

He did that hmm, thoughtful noise, giving nothing away.

'It is twenty-five pence cheaper than I sell them for in the shop,' Emma tried.

She took a sip of coffee, trying to divert the tension that was now creeping up inside her.

'I like the idea,' Adam started with a small smile, 'but ...'

Why was there always a 'but'?

'I'd need to discuss it with our manager, Helen. Especially with the costs involved. But the chocolate boxes do look great and, having sampled your truffles myself, I know just how good they are.' His smile broadened. 'Leave it with me. Do you have a card or anything with the number to call you?'

'Yes.' She dug a business card from her handbag and handed it across. 'Thanks for considering this, and if you or Helen need any more information, or want to talk further just let me know.'

'We'll let you know one way or the other soon.'

'Thank you.' She finished her coffee, then they both stood and shook hands once more.

'Oh, and say hello to your assistant from me – the dark-haired young lady. I didn't catch her name?'

Emma could have sworn Adam's cheeks were reddening.

'Holly.'

'Ah, Holly. Okay. Thanks.'

‘I will do. Thanks for your time this morning, and the coffee.’

‘You’re welcome. I think it’s important for local businesses to try and support each other. On that note, would you mind popping a few of our flyers in the shop?’ He took a batch from a coffee table in the corner.

‘That’s no problem at all. Of course.’

With that, she turned to leave. The hotel seemed lovely – comfy, friendly, airy and light. Perfect for a holiday by the sea. She’d gladly put some brochures out for them on her countertop. She waved goodbye to Laura as she passed. Once Em got outside the cool air struck her and she felt a bit wobbly at the knees.

She had tried her best. Now all she could do was wait.

12

What a week it had been! The run-up to Valentine's Day, the landlord's visit, and pitching for the hotel business. It had been all go, go, go, making chocolate hearts – dark choc with mint chips and white chocolate with mini strawberry pieces – assorted truffles, with an extra batch of the Irish Cream and champagne flavours, fudge bags, and her new mini 'hat boxes' made of chocolate and filled with truffles. They were so pretty, and proving popular.

And, *yes!* Adam had phoned her yesterday to say the hotel manager had loved the samples and the idea. They were willing to try an initial fifty boxes, if she could just get them there for Valentine's Day as that would be a perfect time to start. So it had been a very late night indeed.

Emma's hands were sore from tempering all the chocolate she needed (she did have a machine that was a great help, but she had so much to make she was hand-tempering too) and her fingers ached from the intricate work – the piping, filling, mixing – and on top of that her feet were sore. Last night, even though it had been well after midnight when she'd finished the last batch of the day, she'd soaked in a huge bubbly bath for a full hour until the water had gone cold. But she'd been up early at 6.00 a.m. this morning as it was Valentine's Day tomorrow, so she was making more of the chocolate 'hat boxes', as over half of them had already sold. It was hard work, but also lovely seeing everyone come in to choose their special gifts on the lead up to the big day: young lads of about twelve years old up to elderly gents, women, little girls wanting something for Daddy, a flow of customers looking for just the right thing, or sometimes needing a little inspiration. Emma enjoyed suggesting some of the current favourites or a new flavour she was trying out. It was so nice to think her chocolate creations were going to be gifted and hopefully make someone smile – that was one of the best things about being a chocolatier.

Holly had helped her yesterday afternoon, being a Sunday, and was coming in again today straight from the school bus, which was a godsend. It was hard to make the chocolates *and* serve, so if Emma needed to make up any last-minute batches she could. Or, if (fingers crossed) there was a busy run of customers, at least there were two of them to keep the queue down.

This week's sales so far, along with the fabulous hotel order – hopefully the first of many – had thankfully lifted the finances, and she had now saved nearly enough for next month's rent hike – *yes!* So she was going to write that letter tonight, as soon as the shop closed, and send it off to her landlord first thing tomorrow.

Of course, her supplies were now low, so she'd have to put in another online order for the high quality Belgian chocolate callets she used as the base for all her creations. She could cover her bills for now, but it would still be a juggle, and there was never much left for any luxuries (or indeed some of the necessities) for herself. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she had bought any new clothes, but it wasn't as though she was off anywhere glamorous. The beach for walks with Alfie and the cottage, kitchen, and shop were her main bases. At work she always wore a black apron (to hide the inevitable chocolate smears), teamed with black trousers and a plain white T-shirt; it didn't really matter what was underneath as long as it was clean.

Five o'clock rolled around so quickly. It had been another hectic day, with a rush over the lunch hour. Emma had managed a bite of Marmite on toast at around 2.30 p.m. for her lunch with a quick cup of coffee. She loved good coffee, and when she had time would grind her own beans. It was one of the few things she spent a little more on – having a really lovely cup of coffee from her cafetière really perked her up, especially on hectic days like this. She had been so glad when Holly arrived about an hour ago.

The door chimed and in dashed the young man from the hotel. He was checking his watch. 'Sorry, are you about to close?'

‘Oh, hi, Adam. No, you’re fine. We’re opening a little later tonight, with it being Valentine’s Day tomorrow.’ Emma smiled.

She could swear she could feel the heat rise in the room. Holly was blushing furiously beside her.

‘How’s the hotel order going?’ he asked. He looked slightly uncomfortable.

‘Oh, you didn’t need the mini boxes for the hotel today, did you?’ She felt her heart race. She was sure they’d said for Valentine’s Day, and had planned to get them finished and delivered first thing in the morning. She felt a little anxious – she couldn’t afford to screw this up already.

‘Oh no, tomorrow is fine. Helen said for Valentine’s Day.’

‘So, how can we help today?’ Emma asked brightly, feeling relieved, as she shifted slightly out of the counter area. ‘Holly, would you mind helping here? I have another batch of dark chocolate hearts to make.’

‘Of course ... so, what would you like? The usual, is it, coffee creams and the orange creams?’

‘Aah, yes, please ...’

Emma couldn’t help but listen in as she walked slowly towards the inner door of the shop. He sounded uncertain, as though that wasn’t what he was in here for at all. She paused just in the doorway, curious.

Holly got the box out ready, four of each flavour as per usual. Wrapped them up, did the purple gift bow, and then weighed and priced them, which came to the normal five pounds twenty.

‘Um ...’ He sounded a little uncomfortable. ‘I’d like something else. Another gift box, one like that, but a bit bigger this time.’

Emma could imagine Holly’s shoulders sinking at that point, though she’d be trying her best to disguise it.

‘And what would you like in this one, some truffles and ganaches from the counter, maybe?’

‘Yes, a selection, please. I’m not sure which – what kind of things would *you* recommend?’

‘Well, I love these Baileys truffles, so definitely a couple of those, and Emma has just been making a new passion fruit filling, so you could try that. The raspberry and white choc is very good too, as is the hazelnut praline.’

‘Any more favourites?’ he prompted.

‘Yes, there’s the salted caramel, better not miss that. They really are delicious.’

‘Two of them as well, in that case.’

She had filled all twelve cases now. ‘Done?’

‘Yes, that’s fine. Thank you.’

‘What kind of gift-wrapping?’ Holly asked, still managing to sound cheerful.

‘I’ll let you decide.’

So she went for a bright pink bow and ribbon, which she tied beautifully.

Emma was now spying subtly from the inner doorway. Bless her, Holly was being so helpful, even though she was probably feeling gutted inside. The tension in her assistant’s fingers was apparent, however, as she struggled to tie the bow.

‘Right, so together that’ll be twelve pounds fifty, please.’

She popped the two boxes in one of their crisp white paper bags.

The young man paid, then gave Holly a smile, which she returned wistfully.

‘Bye, then,’ she said.

‘Thanks. Bye.’ He turned at the last, with a nod.

After the door to the shop closed, Emma heard Holly let out a long, low sigh. As she peered further around the door frame, she saw the young girl’s head drop and her hand lift to sweep away a stray tear. ‘Life is *sooo* not fair.’

She just had to go and give her assistant a hug.

13

The big day had arrived, Valentine's Day, and Emma was awake before her six o'clock alarm.

Luke would have brought her flowers, no doubt have planned to take her out for supper. They'd only had five Valentine's Days when they were meant to have a whole lifetime of them. It was two months before it happened that they had got engaged. They had been so full of hope. It was their future together that had been taken away: Christmases, wedding anniversaries, a wedding day, their children ... grandchildren.

It still hit her hard, every now and again. The years didn't seem to dim the pain, they just spread out the time when it jolted through her. She turned on the lamplight. Being February, it was still dark at this time of the morning, and she looked at Luke's photo there next to her bed.

Right then, time to get up. There was one more batch of salted caramel truffles to make. *Come on, Em, last big push, you can do this thing,* she chivvied herself on as she raised her weary limbs from the comfy mattress.

First, she let Alfie out into the yard and fed him his breakfast in the little kitchen upstairs, grabbing herself a piece of wholemeal toast and butter and a large mug of tea. Her morning wake-up routine.

Down to the main working kitchen at the back of the shop, hands washed, thin hygienic gloves on, stainless-steel board in place on the work surface, chocolate callets ready to melt in a bowl – the dark 70% cocoa today, and the moulds in place. The kitchen window overlooked the back yard of the cottage. It was paved with flagstones with a high stone wall around it. She kept pots of herbs and daffodils that were only just poking a green tip up. In summer, there were colourful geraniums and petunias, but for now the courtyard was still rather bare. In the half light, a little robin sat at the water trough cheering things up, singing away. The early-flowering clematis that scaled the wall to one side would be out soon too; it would soon become a mass of pale pink blossom. Roll on March and the spring! She popped the radio on, listening to the music and chat of Radio 2, Chris Evans and the gang keeping her company until 8.30 a.m. when she took Alfie for a quick walk down to the beach, a brief reward, before the long day ahead.

The fresh sea air with its tang of salt perked her up with the white-crested waves rolling to shore. She found it calming down here, loved the sweeping arc of the bay, the ever-changing light and colours of blues, greys, ochre-blond sands and the peachy hint of sunrise or sunset, depending on what time of the day or year she was there. Alfie enjoyed his runabout this morning, doing his classic spaniel loop in joyful circles around her as his grand finale.

'Right, let's get back, Alfie. I have one busy day ahead.'

As soon as she got back she completed the hotel order, sealing the bases of the raspberry ganaches with more chocolate. She had a small production line going. Next, she needed to make up the pretty gold boxes ready to fill and hand-tie with blue ribbon. She managed to deliver them all to the hotel before opening the shop at 10.00 a.m., when her 'official' working day started. Phew!

Then it was all go again, with customers waiting at the door for bang-on opening time, and there were telephone orders, and a constant stream of business all day. Her shelves were looking rather depleted by lunchtime as she'd been busy for the last two days as well. But that was all for the good for her finances, if not her feet!

That afternoon, Emma found herself stifling a yawn. It was only 3.30 p.m. – at least two hours to go. Her early start – in fact, a whole week of early starts and late finishes – was catching up on her. A momentary lull in the shop made her realise how shattered she was.

She served a gentleman who looked in his fifties, whom she recognised as being a regular visitor to the village. He said how much his wife loved her chocolates and he'd diverted off the A1 main

road especially on his way back from working in Edinburgh for a few days to take her a box back for Valentine's Day. Aw, how sweet.

A few minutes later, the shop door chimed and in breezed Holly, who'd agreed to help after school again.

'Hi, Em!'

'Afternoon, Holly. It's good to see you, it's been really busy.'

'Ah yes, the big day! Happy Valentine's.'

'Thanks! Have you had any surprises? Cards from secret admirers, or the like?' Em asked her assistant.

'No, sadly not, but there's still time. I can live in hope.' She laughed. 'And you? Any cards?'

'Now come on, Holly, don't be daft.'

'Not even Malteser Man?'

Emma had shared the disastrous-date tale with Holly to cheer her up one day.

'Hah, I think I'd burn a card from him.'

Jeez, just imagine if he actually did call in to surprise her with a Valentine's gift – maybe another grab bag of Maltesers? Hah, what a nightmare!

'I think I'll go and make us a coffee, Holly. I was flagging a bit there. It might keep us going.'

'Good idea. Actually, would it be a pain if I had a hot chocolate? I really fancy that.'

'Of course you can. You deserve it for helping me out so much this week. And I shall put on that swirly cream you like and mini marshmallows.' She remembered there were some left from making the Rocky Road chocolate bars.

'Okay, yes, that'd be fab. Delish.'

Emma was turning to go, when she spotted Holly's head shoot up. The door chimed, and in walked the young man from the hotel.

'Hello,' Holly said rather cautiously from her position behind the counter.

'Hi.'

'I'll just head out back, make our drinks,' Emma said loudly, to give them a little space. She had seen what he was carrying and was smiling to herself, hoping. She couldn't help but hover by the door to listen in, though.

Adam stood at the far side of the counter, looking slightly awkward.

Em could almost sense Holly holding her breath.

'Umm ... these are for you ...' he spoke softly.

'Oh, how lovely!' There was a little quiver in Holly's voice. At just seventeen, she had never been given flowers before.

Emma gave a little air punch in the back hallway. Her instincts had been right all along.

Out in the shop, the young man was handing over a huge bouquet of beautiful pink and white flowers, with roses and carnations and lilies, all tied up with a large pink bow, the exact colour Holly had suggested for the box of custom-picked chocolates the day before.

'Oh, and these, of course.' He passed her the very same box of chocolates, grinning. 'I'm sure you'll like them, seeing as you chose them all yourself.'

Holly seemed lost for words. But the huge grin across her face echoed his. Then her smile dropped a little, and she looked concerned. 'But the other chocolates ... every week. Who ...?' She sounded as though she hardly dared ask.

'Oh, right, yes – I get them for my gran.'

'Your gran?'

'Yep. I've been staying with her since I got this new job. I couldn't have afforded to rent somewhere on my own – I'm on trainee wages at the moment – and Gran lives just down the road in Seahouses. She's let me have her spare room, so the chocolates are a bit of a thank you.'

‘Oh, I see.’ All those weeks of thinking he was seeing someone else. Holly could hardly believe it.

Emma was still listening in, and smiling widely at this point, out of sight in the corridor to the kitchen. *Aw, that’s so lovely.*

‘Thank you *so* much.’ Emma could hear the lump that must have formed in Holly’s throat.

‘And ...’ he started. There was a brief nervous pause. ‘I wondered if you might like to go out with me sometime? I was thinking maybe a coffee or something, perhaps at the hotel? Oh, I’m Adam, by the way.’

Yes, Emma had said. ‘I’m Holly.’

Emma couldn’t help but peek through the doorway at this point, to see Holly lay the bouquet down carefully on the counter to take the hand Adam was offering in a handshake.

‘Actually,’ Holly leaned across the bouquet and the countertop, ‘I think I need to do this.’ And with that she gave him a peck on the cheek, which made the colour soar in his face.

‘Thank you for the flowers and the chocolates. And yes, I would love to come for a coffee.’

‘Great!’ He seemed to relax. ‘So, maybe this week? When’s a good time? I get a Wednesday off generally.’

‘Oh, I’m at school – Sixth Form,’ she quickly added. ‘But I get back by quarter to four, so maybe around then.’

‘That’s fine. Well then, call up at the hotel at a quarter to four next Wednesday and head for the lounge area. We could have some Afternoon Tea. Do you like that?’

‘Ooh yes. Sounds lovely ... Oops, hang on.’ There was a moment of panic when she realised she’d still be in her school clothes. ‘I’ll just need five minutes more.’ She darted a look at Emma, who was now hovering at the inner doorway. ‘Need to get changed,’ Holly mouthed across to her. ‘Can I do that here?’

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