

# *Flowers and Feathers*

*By*

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## **BOOK DESCRIPTION**

Chrissie is everyone's best friend, caring and liked by all, but without that special someone in her life. When her mother and best friend decide to do something about her situation Chrissie is mortified...but will they be the ones to lead her to the man of her dreams, or are other forces playing their part? Enjoy wit and humour and surprises galore as Chrissie makes her way through the dating maze looking for love.

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## DEDICATION AND THANKS

With thanks to everyone who has read my previous book. To my little team of draft readers, Steph and Holly in particular, who have advised and made suggestions for improvements, you have earned my utmost thanks.

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## CHAPTER 1

‘What a Rat,’ groaned Chrissie, ‘what an absolute complete Rat,’ she repeated. Lauren could only nod in agreement. ‘So how long have you known?’ she asked.

‘I found out just last night, his wife came and told me herself,’ sobbed Lauren, her eyes red rimmed and swollen, and her cheeks blotchy from the constant dabbing of a now sodden handkerchief.

‘So all the time he was seeing you, telling you he loved you, he had a wife waiting in the wings?’ asked Chrissie incredulously.

‘I can’t believe he has a pregnant wife who is due to give birth any day, and a second girlfriend to boot! It turns out that I am apparently not his first girlfriend either. To add even further insult his other girlfriend has only just left school. She was a former pupil of his and she is the reason that he is now leaving his wife and me, presumably so they can go and play mummies and daddies for real. He says she’s pregnant, or at least she claims to be.’

‘Well, you’re better off without him,’ said Chrissie with no apology, ‘just be grateful that he didn’t get you pregnant too.’

‘But I wanted to be pregnant, I wanted his baby. He always insisted that he wasn’t ready for a family; that’s what makes it harder to take. He didn’t want a baby with me but he was happy to sow his seeds everywhere else!’ stormed Lauren, sobbing louder than ever.

‘Like I said, complete and utter rat,’ responded Chrissie, gently soothing the damp hair from the face of her best, but entirely gullible female friend.

Chrissie and Lauren had been friends since they were sixteen and were in Sixth Form College together. Lauren only lasted one term but such was the relationship that she and

Chrissie had developed in this short time that their friendship continued and flourished outside of the study environment. Chrissie had stayed on, worked hard and ultimately came out with top grades as a reward for all the effort she put in.

It was Chrissie who was the sensible one of them; determined, reliable, loyal, and hardly ever had a boyfriend to speak of. It wasn't that she wasn't attractive; she was quite beautiful, in a natural girl-next-door way, rather than the sexy siren looks of Lauren. With her thick honey-gold hair, chocolate brown eyes and slim and graceful figure, she could turn plenty of heads. She was however, a girl who didn't put what she had on display. She had a pretty and expressive face, and the sort of personality that made her everyone's best friend. And that was the problem, she spent so much time being a friend that she often didn't make enough time for herself and get out and meet the sort of man that would meet her exacting requirements. Coupled with the fact that Lauren dictated where they went when she did venture out, and the fact that she was choosy, the outcome was that she had a poor romance rating. She wanted nothing more than to eventually be a wife and mother to a man she loved and who would love her equally in turn.

Chrissie was more than capable of turning on the glamour when she was persuaded to, although she preferred to stay natural. On such occasions she could rival Lauren, who was a sexy sultry beauty with dark hair and almost black eyes, with a figure that men would die to get their hands on. Lauren was stunning and sensual and a walking sex bomb. Having a friend as beautiful, and importantly, so sexually alluring, didn't do Chrissie many favours as Lauren got most of the attention when they were out together. Chrissie would never describe Lauren as easy, but she wasn't difficult to seduce either. In contrast she saw herself as a semi-virgin, which equated to the fact that the couple of sexual conquests she had didn't really count in the overall scheme of things, although at

the time she had persuaded herself that she could was almost in love with them. She had known in her heart that her boyfriends were really of the passing fancy variety with no substance. The fact was that she was caught up in taking leftovers from amongst the motley crew of men who always gravitated towards Lauren like moths to a flame, knowing that they would get burnt and relishing the prospect.

Chrissie sometimes felt she was the consolation prize next to Lauren and men would quickly learn there would be no one-night stands issuing forth from her direction. There was the odd nice man of course, but they weren't heading in her direction, perhaps because she was in Lauren's company it was assumed that she wasn't the nice girl they were looking for. Mostly though, the men she met were not right for her and Chrissie knew it but didn't actually do anything to correct the situation. Lauren was almost her only single friend, the rest of her previously large group had partnered off and were in long-term relationships and some were married with children. Most of her invitations out recently were to babysit in other people's homes where she would feel wistful and dejected.

Lauren definitely had her pick of the good looking bad boys but had not yet discovered that beauty needs to be on the inside as well as the outside. Consequently, most of her dalliances were unmitigated disasters. Her most recent troublesome relationship, with Sam, had lasted longer than most at four months. Chrissie had tried to warn her at the onset that Sam was not long-term material, and it gave her no pleasure at all to know that she had been correct in her assessment of him. Prior to Sam there had been Joe who went back to his former girlfriend and then Sean who "borrowed" her credit card and left her with hundreds of pounds worth of debt, and Jack who left her because she was disinclined to indulge in his erotic fantasies of threesomes and girl on girl action.



In contrast, Chrissie's only seriously long-term relationship had been with Justin whom she dated for well over a year from the age of 18 in what turned out to be an entirely sexless liaison. He was tall and darkly handsome with Mediterranean looks and an athletic build. He had a megawatt smile that could melt the hardest of hearts and he was kind and considerate. There had been lots of hand-holding, cuddling and kissing but nothing more and Justin finally admitted to himself, and to her, that he thought he was gay. This was a surprise to no-one except Chrissie.

Fortunately, she and Justin had managed to retain their friendship and Justin was the closest of all her friends. It had been him who had comforted her when she had, regularly, bemoaned the fact that there just didn't seem to be anyone special for her. He was always on hand even when he was involved in other relationships. If only she could find a non-gay version of him that liked her, she would be in heaven.

Looking at her weeping friend now, it was difficult not to feel sorry for her. However, Chrissie knew from past experience that she was very likely wasting her sympathy. Within a week she was certain that Lauren would have fallen in love with someone new.

'Come on then Lauren; let's start getting this into perspective. You dated a selfish, unadulterated catastrophe of a man who's got two women up the duff at the same time. There is only one thing for you to do now and that is to say good riddance.'

'But I love him, how can I let him go? I know he loves me, he tells me so every day,' snivelled Lauren.

'Yes, I'm sure that in his own way that he did love you but he can't love you any more as he now has two babies to provide for and two mothers to support, one of whom is his legal wife. I'm sorry to sound harsh but it's time to let him go; have a good cry, dry your tears and then obliterate him out of your life.'

Lauren started blubbering again.

'Good Lord, give me strength,' muttered Chrissie, as she passed her a rapidly depleting box of tissues.

On top of losing her boyfriend Lauren was about to be evicted as she had failed to pay her rent on time, in fact for several weeks in succession. Consequently, Chrissie was put in the position of having to deal with that aspect of Lauren's catastrophic life too. On a temporary basis, Chrissie agreed that she could come and stay with her and her mum for a week or two. Knowing Lauren's track record a further plan was that on Friday, two days from now they would hit the local night spots and go out on the pull together. This was clearly for Lauren's benefit alone as Chrissie felt that it was a waste of time for her and the likelihood of pulling anyone even half decent with Lauren beside her equated to stories about flying pigs.

Further pressure was piled on when she was left to telephone Lauren's boss and explain that she wouldn't be in work for a few days.

'Who is it this time?' Mario asked sceptically as Chrissie attempted to explain away the planned absence of a few days as being due to a family bereavement. Too late Chrissie remembered that she had given this excuse the last time Lauren had needed time off after a spat with Sam.

'Oh, it's her grandfather,' stumbled Chrissie, trying to recall who it was last time that had shuffled off from this mortal coil.

'Dad's father or Mother's father?' asked Mario with more than a hint of suspicion in his voice.

'Mother's father,' said Chrissie positively.

'Called Lazarus is he?' said Mario sarcastically, 'only I seem to remember that he died just a few weeks ago.'

‘When I say mother’s father, what I mean to say is stepmother’s father,’ said Chrissie trying desperately to correct her mistake,’ you know what it’s like with extended dysfunctional families. They were very close,’ she added as embellishment.

‘I don’t know about dysfunctional families but I do know about dysfunctional employees Chrissie. Listen, I know Lauren is your friend, and you are only trying to help, so here’s what I’m prepared to do. Tell Lauren that she can have time off to grieve for her step grandfather, as much time as she wants. Tell her I’ll be writing to her to offer my condolences and that I’ll enclose her P45 in the envelope as well if she’s not back to work tomorrow morning at 9am.’ The final words claimed by Mario, Chrissie could only put the phone down and prepare to inform her friend of the discussion.

Chrissie sometimes despaired of Lauren who seemed to lurch from one job to the next without any career path design. She somehow managed to pick up one job after another and yet rarely held on to anything for more than a few weeks. She didn’t have any problem finding work as long as the criteria was correct, i.e. that the interviewer was male. If she could ascertain that the recruiter was female, she wouldn’t even attend. She knew that another female would suss her immediately she walked into a room.

Lauren was invariably getting sacked or being asked to resign as a result of her irregular attendance and general incompetence, or in one case where she was discovered getting up to no good in the copier room with the photocopy engineer. In her defence, she had claimed that she was helping him to adjust the duplex. Lauren’s calamities always ended up in Chrissie’s lap and Chrissie often wondered why she put up with it and didn’t go and find herself a dowdy little pal next to whom she would actually be the main event and not the interval entertainment. Despite all this however, she couldn’t deny how much fun Lauren could be and how supportive she was capable of being. Chrissie’s career had been moderately successful to date and, in no small

measure, had been helped along by some of Lauren's ideas and her unstinting faith in Chrissie.

It had taken a while to get there but Chrissie was now the proud owner of 'Blooming Lovely' a successful florist shop in the centre of Leicester. Being city based and virtually opposite the local Registry Office, it had proved to be popular with bridal parties wanting to add a touch of the traditional to the civil ceremonies conducted inside the old Town Hall. Photographs were often taken in front of the large brass fountain in the Town Hall Square. Chrissie had a blatant dislike for the fountain which comprised of a number of enormous brass lions that periodically spewed water from their mouths, much like the regular evening drunks that spewed alcohol from the same orifices.

The premises that she had acquired were small but perfectly adequate for purpose. She had designed the layout of her shop itself, getting the shop fitters to install a bespoke creation that gave her business a professional and classy image with its green lacquered shelving and countertops. Her large cottage style windows had painted shutters and she had window boxes which were always stocked with seasonal plants. In between the two windows she had installed a solid green door. The look was indicative of stepping into someone's home and finding a magical world of flowers inside.

Her floral displays were regularly renewed so the shop always had a fresh look which appealed to her regular customers and helped her to maintain her well-earned reputation as a first class florist. The shop had been acquired due to an early tip off from Lauren. The site had formerly been a mini-market that sold what turned out to be somewhat dodgy pies that were heated in a microwave that had managed to grow its own experimental organisms. Inevitably, the shop was closed down by Environmental Health. Lauren had played a significant part in this event. She had been working there for a few weeks and was responsible for overseeing of the keeping of the premises clean

as well as serving office workers and shoppers with the delights of cardboard pastry with baked entrails stuffed inside. Unfortunately, she and a colleague failed to read the instructions on how long to cook the pies for and how long they could be stored before they were deemed unsafe for human consumption. Inevitably, there was a severe outbreak of food poisoning. It made headlines in the Leicester Mercury at the time. Consequently, the business was no longer able to survive the onslaught following the media stories and the insurance claims. By some miracle, or perhaps it was deceit, Lauren managed to extricate herself from charges.

Suffice to say that the premises came onto the market rather quickly and with an unenviable reputation which meant that there was less interest than could have been expected. With Chrissie having advance notice, it had meant that she was able to put in a well prepared and successful bid for the property.

It was a decision that she had never regretted, and though the work was often fast-paced and occupied almost all her waking hours she loved it. Her success meant that she had enough regular business to expand when the time was right. The shop had its interesting moments, largely because of her popularity with her male customers who came to her for flowers for wives, girlfriends and mistresses, sometimes at the same time, and she had quickly learned how to recognise them, and yet not comment.

One regular was a presentable, middle-aged man who came in weekly to send flowers to half a dozen women on a rotational basis. The messages that went with the flowers were indicative of the relationships he was having with them. It was no-one's business but his of course but it presented endless speculative gossip with her staff, Bex and Heidi and which she would later enjoy sharing further with Lauren and Justin.

## CHAPTER 2

Chrissie was fortunate to have her own home, albeit on a mortgage. It was only a two story apartment but was in a good location and was spacious enough for herself and her mother Carole who lived with her. She had furnished the home on a budget, buying used but quality items as often as money became available. The result was that eventually she got the stylish and comfortable home that she had worked towards. It was traditional without being stuffy and full of colour without being garish.

She got ready to face Carole with the news about Lauren.

'Why Chrissie, Why?' scolded her mother, 'you know I love Lauren like my own but why do we always get to pick up the pieces of her life? Isn't it time she started looking after herself and left you to find yourself someone. After all you're not getting any younger are you?'

Chrissie groaned. 'Mum, I'm 26, not pensionable age yet, there's plenty of time for me to find someone.'

'Your eggs are running out, you were at your most fertile at least 5 years ago, who knows what's happening with each passing month. Your eggs could be scrambling inside of you. If you want to have children, and healthy children, then you need to start soon, before it's too late,' advised Carole.

'Oh Mum, not everyone is like you, pregnant at 19 and planning on grandchildren at the age of 35. I am not drying out, shrivelling up or generally going to waste, as you perceive me to be doing. I'm sure I'll meet someone one day and you'll get the grandchildren that you want. But in the meantime, will you please shut up.'

'Thank you Chrissie for your most charming response, I have tried to bring you up to be a nice young lady and all I get is abuse,' sulked Carole.

'You know I'm not abusing you mother,' called Chrissie, getting no response. 'Not half as much as you deserve anyway!' she added.

Great, thought Chrissie, I've lost my spare room for the immediately foreseeable future, mum's upset because I've not started breeding and nobody loves me! She decided to ring Justin and have a good old moan.

'Hiya, what's up?' answered a sleepy Justin picking up Chrissie's call after half a dozen rings.

'Have you just got up Justin? Or have you not been to bed yet?'

'Half right. Long story – didn't get to bed until 5 this morning, work at 9 and just got back in and must have dozed off. What's your story, you sound a bit miffed?'

'Lauren!' said Chrissie, without further explanation.

'Okay, say no more. What is it this time? She's been dumped again?'

'Exactly that,' answered Chrissie, filling him in on the details.

'You know I like Lauren, but why don't you think about getting a new friend, your life would be so much easier. Lauren is always going to be like this as long as she knows she can keep coming to you to pick up the pieces. I guess if you want to keep the friendship you have to decide whether you want to continue doing this or force some changes in Lauren's behaviour.'

'I know Justin, and I do need to be able to have a life that doesn't revolve around me attempting to vet all her sexual contacts. I want to be able to meet someone and get married, have kids – all the hearts and flowers stuff. It doesn't look like happening any time soon. It seems that all the available men seem to have lorry loads of baggage. I'm not afraid of some but there's a limit! I can't remember the last time I had a really nice date, in fact, I can't remember the last time I went out with anyone. I've always believed that I would know instinctively when the right man came along and I'd be seeing

rockets and hearing harps etc. but so far, I'd be lucky to hear an out of tune piano, no-one seems to want to play a tune for me. Am I expecting too much? Perhaps I should lower my sights and settle for a companionable relationship.'

'Two points, firstly, how could you forget your last date Chrissie – dirty Harry, remember?' prompted Justin.

'Oh yes, how could I forget? Harry, with the body odour, hairy face and bad breath? That was my mother's idea if I remember. Told me she had met this lovely bloke, and to be fair he was a lovely bloke as long as you were not sitting down wind of him or in a room with no open windows. She said he would be perfect for me and arranged a date without my knowledge. She threatened to run naked through the streets if I didn't go and meet him. Wish I'd called her bluff now! I have to remember in future that she has no sense of smell!

'I don't need to highlight point 2 then do I Chrissie? The response to your suggestion about lowering standards? You know you can't do that, and in any case why should you? Hold out, your Prince Charming is out there somewhere.

Your mum means well. You're the nicest person I know and you deserve to be happy. Just remember that when you do meet someone that you must alert me immediately so that I can vet him for you. I'll tell you immediately if they are a closet gay for a start – remember Gordon?'

'Ahh yes, lovely Gordon, hitherto known as Gay Gordon, he just wanted to talk, sent me lovely little gifts but was only interested in kissing in the dark – had no inclination to go any further, exactly like you and me all those years ago. Really, I should have known straightaway. I certainly didn't hear any violins playing in the distance, but I wanted to give him a chance and I needed someone to hug me. I'm glad you had that little talk with him though, I hear he's now happily involved with Luigi, that bloke who used to do my



hair in the salon in Francis Street. He and Luigi are together now; caused quite a scandal at the time as Luigi was supposed to be dating the manageress, poor cow.'

Justin interrupted. 'Anyway, we diversify, what are you doing about Lauren? You know if she gets a foot in the door, she'll be impossible to shift? My advice would be to pack her into a crate bound for the Amazon...'

'Now there's a thought! Over the past 4 years, my life has become all work and no play, except as a viewer of Lauren's exciting life, and as much as I love my work, I want and have earned some playtime and I need a playmate. Justin why are you gay? Can't you forget that you are, and then you and me could get married? You would only have to do it with me a couple of times, just enough to get me pregnant, or in fact you could just leave me a sample in the fridge and I'll get myself a turkey baster. That way I get me a husband and kids and you can do whatever you want as long as it's discrete.'

Justin laughed. 'I can think of worse things that could happen, and in all honesty, if I'm single in a few years I might well agree to your plan. I'd love kids and I can't think of anyone who would be a better mum to them than you. But, and it's a big but, you deserve better. I might not, but you certainly do. I'll make a pact with you. If in 5 years neither of us has found anyone, we'll do exactly what you suggest and I'll promise to be a good father to our kids and a good husband to you as long as I'm allowed to stray now and then!'

## CHAPTER 3

The following morning Lauren was reluctant to go to work and Chrissie practically had to push her out of the door.

'Just apologise profusely, offer to work unlimited overtime, explain how you needed to take time off and now you're ready to put your heart and soul into your job,' advised Chrissie.

'I hate my job, I hate Mario and most of all I hate Sam. Can't I come and work for you?' pleaded Lauren.

'No, you can't work for me' replied Chrissie, rather too quickly. 'What I mean is that I don't have a job to give you, but also I don't think it would work with us being under each other's feet all day.'

Lauren failed to note the relief on Chrissie's face as she accepted this statement. Chrissie thought that Lauren would probably bankrupt her within the month. Plus, her work was her sanctuary. It was the place where she was judged for being herself and not unfavourably compared as Lauren's friend.

'Tonight, we'll sit down and come up with a plan of action to help us move you forward. We'll start by working on getting you a proper boyfriend; someone who will not be interested only in getting you into bed but rather someone who sees the better qualities that you have,' coaxed Chrissie.

'Oh, okay, what better qualities shall we be focusing on?' asked Lauren enthusiastically.

Caught on the hop Chrissie had to think fast. 'Well, I was thinking that maybe we could make a list and then we'll come up with a sort of advertisement for you, not one

that would get published anywhere but one that you can see for yourself as a visual prompt.'

'Like an internet dating profile?' asked Lauren half-heartedly.

'Well yes, I suppose so, except as I say we won't be doing that, just sorting out what's good about you and working to emphasise those features.'

'Why not internet dating, that might work, mightn't it?' enthused Lauren.

Oh, God preserve us thought Chrissie.

'Let's talk about all this later. You have to go to work; I have to go to work so let's agree to sort this at the end of the day. We'll have a girly night in, maybe get Mum to dig out the tarot cards or the tealeaves and give you one of her heebie-jeebies readings!'

'Fantastic, your mum's really good. She told me I'd meet a tall dark handsome stranger once, and I did, the very same night. Perhaps she could tell me if THE Mr Right is on his way.'

Chrissie groaned inwardly, remembering that Lauren met tall dark handsome men almost every day; they came to her like magnets. 'Perhaps, Lauren, perhaps. Now go, please just go to work.'

Chrissie made her way to her shop and opened up 'Blooming Lovely', noting that one of her assistants, Bex, was just coming out of the newsagents up the road. She waved to her and got a cheery wave back. Chrissie had taken her on just over 2 years ago when she had walked into the shop, a pretty curly haired blonde with a neat figure and the largest blue eyes you would ever see. She asked for work and she had such a sweet nature that Chrissie offered her a job that she didn't know she had. At the time she wasn't sure whether she had needed anyone extra but she agreed to a one month trial. A week later and her previously unreliable helper had disappeared, taking with her a good handful of notes out of the till. Bex took on the responsibility and proved to be

worth her weight in gold. She was cheerful, efficient, exceptionally keen to please and had a good eye for colour and design which Chrissie was starting to utilise. Before she worked with Chrissie, she had apparently worked in administration, but had wanted a change. She was now 22 and doing fantastically well at what Chrissie felt was her true vocation. She was an absolute natural and easily picked up everything she was taught. Chrissie had high ambitions for her.

'What are we doing today then?' asked Bex, 'I know we have a delivery expected, so assume Jamie, our nurseryman, will be bringing this over shortly?'

'Yes, we have the retirement dinner flowers to do, shouldn't take long as the order specified that they wanted lots of colour. It will be a good opportunity to use up some odd blooms, so long as they lend themselves to the arrangement. Jamie has promised us all that we asked for. I'm so glad we found him as he always manages to get me everything I need and he saves me having to go to the flower market each morning before 5am. Just soak me a dozen oases while I sort out pretty baskets and bowls. It's a lovely bright day so we'll likely get more walk in trade so we'd better be prepared.'

Bex nodded her understanding and set off to work leaving Chrissie mentally designing the retirement arrangements. Just then came a cheery whistling at the rear of the shop.

Chrissie turned and smiled as Jamie made his way through with his paperwork ready for Chrissie to sign.

'How's my favourite florist today then?' he asked chirpily, his bright blue eyes twinkling with constrained mischief. 'Hope business is good as we've got more growth than we can handle at the nursery. If you want anything extra over the next week or two I can certainly supply it, and at a good discount for special customers, such as yourself.'

Chrissie grinned and thanked him.

'You know that I only bring you the best quality stuff, and I know that you wouldn't be using us if I didn't. Have a look at what I've brought for you today and you tell me if it's not exactly what you asked for.'

With his nearly black, thick and shiny hair which flicked up over his collar and those disarming blue eyes of his, Chrissie knew the look he was giving her. He was very good looking, but could look as adorable as a small child when he turned on his natural charm; like a small boy eager to please and wanting her approval. She knew he was only a couple of years or so older than herself, and he was every inch a man, but he certainly knew how to use the little boy lost look.

Chrissie laughed, she knew Jamie was extremely proud of the work that he did and she had never had cause for complaint. She had an almost exclusive relationship with the nursery which provided almost everything she ever needed. She followed Jamie through to the back of the shop where he had already unloaded the delivery into her cold room, He opened up the first of the boxes and proudly displayed a beautiful selection of gerberas. As expected, they were of the highest quality. 'Oh these are lovely. One day, God willing, I will have them at my own wedding where all the guests will wear them as buttonholes, no boring carnations and roses for me!'

'You're not planning on getting married soon are you?' asked Jamie a little surprised.

'God no, no-one will have me, but I live in hope,' she laughed back.

'You'll make a lovely bride one day I'm sure, but don't rush into it, you've got plenty of time on your hands before you need to settle down.'

'Tell my mother that,' laughed Chrissie, 'if a man even smiles at me she's got the church booked and the vicar on standby.'

'I think I'd like to meet your mother, she sounds like quite a character from what you've said about her previously,'

‘Oh she’s that all right. Actually, I think she would like you, and that’s saying something, as she’s a fussy madam on occasion and can take instant dislikes to some people. One of these days, I’ll have to invite you for a coffee and you can get to meet her. I guarantee she’ll invite you to have a tarot reading.’

‘Tarot reading did you say?’ asked Jamie with some surprise.

‘Tarot, tealeaves, psychic reading, crystal ball, reiki healing – you name it my mother does it!’ groaned Chrissie.

‘Is she any good then?’

‘Well, people keep coming to her so I suppose she must be.’

‘I take it you don’t have readings yourself then?’

‘Not for years, not since I was 16 and she told me that the man I was in love with was about to dump me.’

‘And did he?’ laughed Jamie.

‘Oh yes, and how, told me he was gay and didn’t really fancy me that way, although he had tried hard to,’ responded Chrissie.

‘Ouch!’ grinned Jamie. ‘But your mother was right then?’

‘I’m not convinced she was. It seems everyone but me thought he was gay so it could just have been that she was seeing what I wasn’t.’

‘Well I’d like to give it a try. Anytime you fancy inviting me I will make myself available.’ With a smile, he turned and unloaded the rest of the boxes onto Chrissie’s workbench.

The bell in the shop rang and Chrissie rushed off leaving Jamie to finish unloading. Being over six feet tall and with a muscular frame, at least what Chrissie could see of it covered in his regulatory but unflattering uniform of blue polo shirt and combos, Jamie easily stacked the boxes on the top of the shelves as Chrissie requested.

She dealt with a customer and when she returned Jamie had finished and left.

'Have you heard anything from Heidi, Bex?' called Chrissie, 'she was supposed to be here by now.'

'No, nothing yet, perhaps she's missed her bus again. She does have to come from Knighton and she's always saying how full the bus gets.'

'She's late too often is all I know and I may well have to have words if it continues,' frowned Chrissie.

Just then, the door opened and in walked Heidi, looking much the worse for wear from what Chrissie presumed must have been a heavy night out. She was pretty in a delicate way, small framed with elfin features that showed off a delicate pink mouth and green eyes. She had clearly had a bad start and her face was smudged with mascara and her make-up was streaked. Chrissie groaned inwardly. Why did everyone's crises land on her doorstep, when was it going to be her turn to be looked after?

An hour later and she had heard of Heidi's problems, in full this time. Chrissie was made aware that Heidi's mother had recently moved in a new boyfriend who insisted that Heidi refer to him as her 'stepfather'. He had discovered she was dating someone he didn't approve of, although it was none of his business. He had started reading her the riot act about suitable boyfriends, making threats as to what would happen if she didn't comply. Her mother was no support and actually sided with him, saying that he was trying to be a father to Heidi. Heidi reported that he was not that many years older than herself but was very controlling. Her mother no longer had a voice in her own home but didn't see this as a problem. Chrissie heard alarm bells ringing but couldn't be sure what was triggering the thought. Instead, she decided to keep a sisterly eye on Heidi and try to give her more support. She was much more sympathetic now that she had

background detail. To distract her she got Heidi to deal with the customers whilst she and Bex made up the pre-orders.

The day busily passed by; all the contractual materials were finished and delivered by their regular driver and there were only a handful of phone calls from Lauren. 'Mario's a git; Mario is the worst boss ever; How deep a hole do I need to dig to bury someone six foot tall?' was the general tone of the messages. Chrissie was quite pleased to hear this. It meant that she was focusing her anger on someone other than Sam. Perhaps tonight might not be the ordeal she had anticipated.

When arriving home she noted that Lauren had already beaten her back. Her still to be paid for designer coat and bag were slung over her recently installed oak banisters in the hallway which matched the waxed yellow oak floors throughout the ground floor. Chrissie removed the coat, and hung it properly on a coat hook in the hallway cupboard, carried in Lauren's bag and threw it onto the sofa where Lauren was sat munching a packet of biscuits. Her biscuits! The crumbs were scattered over her favourite Aztec designed rug.

'Are you enjoying my biscuits Lauren? I hope you are intending on leaving me one or two,' she said caustically.

'Sorry, I've eaten a few but there are, well, there is one left. Here you have it,' she said generously.

'Thanks very much Lauren,' replied a resigned Chrissie, dropping her handbag onto the polished coffee table which was covered with Lauren's magazines. 'Where's mum?'

'She's gone to get loose tea from the delicatessen in Allandale Road, she wants to give us both a reading.'

'Oh no, she's not giving me a reading. I'll drink the tea but she's not looking at my teacup. She's bad enough trying to direct my life when she doesn't know what's



happening, if she thought she could control what I think and do by giving me silly messages from so-called spirits then she'd turn me into a basket case,' asserted Chrissie.

'Oh go on, have a reading, maybe not the tea leaves but perhaps the tarot cards, or maybe we can get her to do her psychic thing?' said Lauren with too much enthusiasm for her own good.

'No, no, no, she's not bringing Great Aunt Mary back into this house; I despised the miserable old crone when she was alive so I certainly don't want her rotting carcass in here. You have the readings, I'm going to have dinner and then get into the bath for the evening. Later we'll start making plans to get you onto the straight and narrow again. How are you feeling anyway?' she added as an afterthought, although privately she was thinking she looked pretty good.

'Not as bad as I was yesterday, Mario being his usual vile self actually helped a lot and made me realise that Sam wasn't so bad....' She started.

Chrissie looked at her in amazement.' You're surely not serious!'

'Sam made a mistake; I know that he loves me. His wife didn't understand him and as for that little tart he got mixed up with, well how many men can resist the attentions of a virginal schoolgirl?'

'Lauren?'

'Yes Chrissie?'

'Do grow up!' And with that parting comment, Chrissie stomped off to the kitchen to investigate whether dinner had been started. It had, and she was grateful that once eaten she would be able to escape to the bathroom for a couple of hours.

Soon Carole was back with a shopping bag heaving at the seams. Whilst Chrissie was serving up dinner, Carole was retrieving goods from inside a bag of Mary Poppins'

proportions. She pulled out boxes of loose tea, packets of biscuits, cartons of milk, scented candles, chocolate bars and one very large, very rich, very creamy carrot cake.

'Hide the cake,' whispered Chrissie urgently. 'Put it in the garage, in the airing cupboard or in the laundry basket, anywhere you can think of, but hide it!'

'Don't be ridiculous, I'm not hiding it, we'll all have a slice this evening and it will last for at least a couple more days after that,' said Carole dismissively.

'Not if Lauren sees it, she's a human dustbin,' spat Chrissie.

'What with her figure? I bet she doesn't eat more than 500 calories a day.'

'Don't be fooled, she eats like a Sumo wrestler but has some sort of miraculous internal disposal system that lets her get away with it. Do what you like Mum but remember I warned you, and if there's not a slice left for me after I've had my bath I'll have you put in a nursing home at the first opportunity,' hissed Chrissie.

'They wouldn't have me, you forget I'm only 45!' retorted Carole,

'I'll get you sectioned instead then!' threatened Chrissie.

'You have to be mad to get sectioned' started Carole, realising immediately that she had just given Chrissie ammunition.

'I rest my case!' smirked Chrissie as she retreated to her room to change out of her work clothes.

Following dinner, which they ate in the dining room on Chrissie's Ebay purchased refectory table from which Lauren ate the lion's share and somehow managed to turn the whole evening and all conversation entirely over to herself. She also managed to get Carole to constantly refresh her cake portions until she had scoffed near enough three quarters of the cake. As usual, she managed to steer things to her advantage. Not for the first time Chrissie questioned whether whatever it was that Lauren had could be bottled and sold for profit.

'Oh don't go and have a bath Chrissie, stay and listen to your mum give me a reading and have one yourself. You can remind me what she said if I forget.'

'Lauren you have a brain of your own, just use it or better still get a pen and paper and make notes. I shall be in the bath if there's an emergency, otherwise I do not exist.'

There were several more requests of this nature, some of which continued as Chrissie attempted to enjoy her lovely scented bubble bath, sticking her toes up the taps and making patterns on the black and white tiled walls with her fingers. Lauren banged on the bathroom door with further dictates as to what she should be doing instead. Finally, she gave up, shrugged on her bunny patterned pyjamas, slapped on a face pack and wrapped herself in her fluffy white bathrobe to go downstairs to participate in the show for which she would now have a starring part.

The teacups started first. 'Drink your tea and when you've got just a tiny bit left at the bottom swirl it round and round and then slowly tip it upside down on to the saucer. Let it drain for five minutes,' instructed Carole and both Lauren and Chrissie did as they were told, although Chrissie left a lot of liquid in hers, deliberately, on the assumption that it would likely wash all the tea leaves out and there would be nothing left to see.

As with all clever ideas and the best laid plans of mice and men they never really work out, as Chrissie discovered. Lauren's cup was the first to be examined.

'Let me see what we have here; oh yes, a new man is in the wings.' Chrissie laughed. 'When was there not a man waiting in the wings for Lauren?'

She was shushed by Carole. 'You've got to take this seriously otherwise you'll anger the spirits,' said Carole sharply. Chrissie suppressed a giggle but Lauren was all ears.

'What does he look like? Can you tell what his name is? She begged.

'I can only tell you that he's very tall, he's quite fair and he's very good looking!' announced Carole triumphantly. 'He'll be coming your way very soon, I can tell because

he's at the top of the cup and he's smiling at me.' She laughed. 'I can't yet tell whether he's 'the one' but he'll certainly be the 'right one' for now.'

'I can't wait' squealed Lauren, all excited, making Chrissie groan. 'Is that it then Mum? Lauren, who has never been without a man in her entire life, is going to get another one? What a surprise!' Carole looked daggers at her.

'I'm only telling you what's there, I don't make it up and that's all there is for Lauren, presumably because nothing else of significance is about to happen.'

Chrissie looked at her in a way that said she couldn't believe that anyone would believe such claptrap.

'Your turn now, give me your cup,' instructed Carole, adjusting her spectacles ready to undertake a reading of the Royal Albert Roses china cup currently sitting upside down in its matching saucer. Apparently, only real china cups produce good results according to tea leaf reading professionals.

Chrissie handed the cup over, noting that the tea leaves had not done as they were instructed and there were little patterns of leaves dotted all over the cup.

'Now this is interesting; this is very interesting Chrissie.'

'Just get on with it Mum, tell me I'm going to be selling some bunches of flowers and that I'm going to meet a nice man that will prefer Lauren to me,' said Chrissie derisively.

'Well, here's a surprise, you will be meeting a man, in fact more than one but the man that is meant for you is at the bottom of the cup and you're not going to discover him for a while yet. There's a number 6 in the middle of the cup. That could mean 6 days, 6 weeks or 6 months before this starts to happen.'

'Or 6 years,' muttered Chrissie.

'What your cup is saying is that there is about to start a whole hive of activity and you will be meeting several men and will have choices to make. The choices may be difficult

but the spirits will guide you to know what is the right path. This is a time of learning for you and you have to learn how to trust. There's a lovely heart here which tells me that you will find true love,'

'Does it say whether he's tall, dark and handsome Carole?' queried Lauren who was now more interested in Chrissie's cup than her own.

'Not really, because he's at the bottom of the cup and it's only showing him to me in lighter colours, which usually means he's not yet ready to show himself. But he will, and relatively soon,' crowed Carole, 'he most definitely will show himself.'

'I hope by that you don't mean he's a flasher,' provoked Chrissie, but Carole ignored her.

'Tell me more about your Guides Carole,' implored Lauren, now clearly lapping up every statement uttered from Carole's desert sunrise painted lips.

'Well everyone has a guide, or a guardian angel, whatever you want to call it. It can be the same thing really and people have their own preference for who they think is helping them from the spirit world to live their lives. I have two guides and a guardian angel. One of my guides, 'Masambula' is an African Chief and he helps me when I conduct psychic readings, he acts as a channel between me and the sitters loved ones in spirit. My second guide is a red Indian who helps me with the tea leaves and tarot and I also have a guardian angel who is called Gloria and she helps me find parking spaces and normal every day stuff like that.'

Chrissie burst out laughing. 'Gloria? Why would an angelic being want to spend her time helping you find a parking space? Surely if she is spiritually evolved she would be helping the diseased and dying or at least doing something more valuable than directing you around Tesco's on a Friday afternoon!'

'Now you're taking me too literally Chrissie. Gloria helps me in all sorts of ways. If I ask her to help me get you a man, she'll do that, but it would be a whole lot easier if you asked your own angel for help on that score.'

Chrissie scoffed but Lauren interrupted. 'What, you mean we can ask our guardian angels for things?' she shrieked excitedly.

Carole was now in her element with an enthralled client to perform to. 'Oh yes, if you don't know who they are, then this is how you find out. Tonight, when you get into bed, just as you think you're about to fall asleep, say out loud, 'Guardian Angel, I want you to work with me and it would help me to know you better if you would reveal your name to me.' Then lay quietly for a moment and with a bit of luck you'll hear their name in your head, or maybe even hear them say it out loud.'

'Lord give me strength!' muttered Chrissie, who by now was beginning to feel that waxing your lady bits and ripping it off quickly would be infinitely more pleasurable than what she was currently party to.

'I can't wait to go to bed tonight and try it out,' screeched Lauren who, thought Chrissie, was now almost delirious at the prospect at having some strange ethereal being wandering around the bedroom in the middle of the night. If this carried on she would have to call in the social workers to section both Lauren and her mother; which when she briefly considered it, was actually a good idea.

'And Guides? How do you know who your guides are?' threw in Chrissie cynically. 'Only I seem to remember hearing that there are an awful lot of Red Indian guides around, probably more guides in fact than ever could have lived as American Indians in the first place.'

'Chrissie, I've told you before, don't mock!' scolded Carole. 'There are a lot of Red Indian guides because they were a very spiritual people, but then there are also a lot of

African guides too because their ancient people were also very spiritual, as were the Chinese and Japanese.....'

'Oh mum, it's just a load of old tosh, why do you never hear about a guide called Dave who was a builder from the Braunstone Estate?'

'Well now you're just being silly,' said Carole sulkily. 'You're making fun of the very beings that spend their eternities helping us to make the most of our lives here. If you would only just let me give you a psychic reading I can tell you for certain who your guides are, although I have seen them once or twice when you were a little girl and were very ill.'

Lauren was now positively bouncing up and down on the sofa, 'What did they look like? Are they always around? When do we get our guides?' she wanted to know.

Well into her stride now Carole continued.' Your main guide is assigned before birth and he or she organises other help throughout your life with other guides coming into your lives for short periods according to what you need at any one time. For example, Chrissie will scoff at this but I know that when she is working at her floral arrangements she has a Japanese guide who helps her to put the delicate finishing touches to her work. She's been with her since well before she opened the shop. She also has a Chinese guide; a former Tibetan Monk whom I think, but don't know for sure, is her main guide. I saw him with his hands over her head when she was a small baby and was very ill with pneumonia. She got better the day after I saw him,' said Carole in a somewhat gloating manner. It's likely that she has other guides as well but unless she lets me read for her I can't tell her more.'

'Oh tell me who my guides are Carole, I really want to know. Can you do me a psychic reading so I can find out?' asked Lauren.

Carole agreed that she could. At this Chrissie said the excitement was all too much for her and she had to go and remove the face pack whilst Lauren got reacquainted with her dead grannies, especially her recently departed step grandfather.

Sometime later Chrissie re-emerged with a face glowing red from the face-pack treatment because of its overdue removal. It had set to rock-hard proportions and removal of it had amounted to a sand-blasting exercise. Lauren and Carole were in quiet mood and Chrissie could see that whatever drivel Lauren had received she had certainly enjoyed the telling of it.

'We've just been chatting with our guides and, knowing you won't have a reading yourself we've engaged them to sort you out so expect to see a lot of activity over the coming days and weeks!' said Carole in victorious mood.

'The guides are going to help me to help you for once and so Lauren and I are devising a plan for you, and for her, to find the men that you deserve.'

'Oh how grateful I am for your kind concern and how nice that all these dead people are going to be interfering in my life,' said Chrissie acidly. 'Not that I'd likely know the difference as there's been no real action going on for years, and even that was extremely minimal. I can't remember the last time I even came close to a leg-over!'

'Ah, well, that is where we can now help you out. We think we know how to put this right for you. First of all we're going to go speed dating!' said Lauren enthusiastically.

'Over my dead body!' responded Chrissie horrified.

'Don't be difficult Chrissie, I've already rung and put our names down for the 'Corn Exchange' speed-dating on Thursday. It will be great!'

'Do either of you know how many years I could get for putting both of you under the patio? And how it would be so worth it?' challenged Chrissie.



## CHAPTER 4

The following day Chrissie drove into work contemplating on the events of the night before. Why, she asked herself, had she finally agreed to go on this crazy speed dating event? What had possessed her?

'Morning Chrissie,' beamed Bex who was already busy arranging a bouquet of dried flowers. She noted Chrissie's dejected expression.

'Something wrong Chrissie?' asked Bex, her lovely face wreathed in softness.

'I've been set up Bex, screwed good and proper and I've only myself to blame,' responded Chrissie without a note of irony.

'Want to talk about it? I'm a very good listener,' coaxed Bex.

Chrissie looked at her assistant and recognised the wisdom this beautiful young woman radiated from her soft grey eyes.

'You know, I think I do. When Heidi gets in perhaps, you and I could take off for a coffee. They do a nice cappuccino in Market Street and the chocolate chip muffins are to die for. My treat.'

'You're on, I shall put on my guardian angel guise and see if my inner goddess will come forward with insight to help you through your troubles,' offered Bex with a grin.

'You know what Bex, I could well believe that you are a guardian angel!' grinned Chrissie.

Bex gave her an enigmatic smile.

It was half an hour before Heidi arrived and Chrissie was concerned that she looked a little upset.

'Everything okay Heidi?' asked Chrissie.

‘It’s okay, more of the same, but at the moment it’s just about under control,’ answered Heidi.

‘You will tell me if anything changes won’t you?’

Heidi nodded that she would. Chrissie took in her troubled face and her own relatively minor problems began to shrink into insignificance. Once again, she made a mental note to more closely monitor Heidi’s situation.

‘Right, if everything really is okay I’m going to leave you in charge for half an hour. Bex and I need to go out for just a little while. I promise to bring you a gooey muffin back.’

‘No problem, if it doesn’t get too busy can I have a look at re-arranging the window display, I’ve got some ideas that might just work?’

‘Feel free. Jot your ideas down on paper first and we’ll have a look at it when I get back, if it looks workable then you’ve got yourself a new duty!’ Chrissie smiled at the huge grin of pleasure on Heidi’s face, delighted at the opportunity to show what she could do.

In the coffee shop, Chrissie ordered drinks and muffins and Bex found them a comfortable sofa that looked out onto the street.

‘Okay, Chrissie, tell me how you’ve been set up and how you got yourself into the situation?’

Chrissie began the tale of what had happened the previous night, including the background story of how Chrissie was fed up being single. Once she finished she added that there would be no point in speed-dating with Lauren when the outcome would inevitably mean Lauren would get dates and she wouldn’t.

‘Why are you so hard on yourself Chrissie? You’re truly lovely, both inside and out and any decent man would be mad not to see it. You’re not looking inwards Chrissie but

looking from the outside. You're judging from a group of men that are not meant for you. You assume that because these guys make a beeline for Lauren, that you're being rejected but you're not meant to find your someone special in the places that Lauren gets you to go. Those places attract guys who are too shallow for someone like you. Lauren, and I'm sure she is lovely, does sound somewhat superficial, and many guys will see that, and relish it, because all they want is a bit of fun. You can't blame them.'

Chrissie nodded her understanding of what Bex was saying and let her continue.

'It's your time now. Start having some fun yourself but start seeing things differently. For once, go with the flow and let others do things for you. Go to the speed dating with an open mind and you may well be pleasantly surprised. You never know, maybe your friend will get herself fixed up with a man that's right for her. I don't think it's so much that she has to be out of the picture but rather that you need to learn how to seek and recognise the person whom you are meant to be with when he comes along. There is someone out there that you deserve and who will care for you as much as you care for them. Your energies are too focused on Lauren, leave her to sort herself out and I promise that things will start happening for you.'

'I wish it was that simple but Lauren has been a big part of my life for so long and I don't know if I can break the habit. You may be right though in that we tend to do what Lauren wants to do. I get caught up with guys that wouldn't be my first choice but I don't seem to get a choice! She likes the bad boys and the bad boys get her into trouble and are not my type at all. If she could meet a nice guy I'd be delighted for her, and if he had a nice friend that would be better still!'

'I'm going to suggest something that you will laugh at, but I'm very serious, so don't switch off from me.....' cautioned Bex, her face earnest with sincerity.

Chrissie couldn't help but listen, finding herself trusting Bex absolutely.

'Do what your mother advises, find out who your guardian angel is and ask them for help,' instructed Bex, watching Chrissie's face for the expected groan. It didn't come.

'Did your mother tell you how to connect with your angel?' queried Bex.

'Yes she did but I confess that I had no intention of doing it. However, you're more persuasive and I feel more inclined to try it out. I don't know why but I trust you. I would certainly trust your advice more than my mother's,' laughed Chrissie.

Bex laughed. 'I've always known I had an angel watching over me. My mother told me that I used to talk to someone when I first learned to speak and I apparently told her of the nice lady that shone brightly. It's just always been part of my life and I have always asked for help and got it. I now find myself being inspired to help others and I'm certain that I am pushed towards some people with the sole intention of getting them to believe. Maybe it's their way of getting me to repay them a little.'

'Oh Bex, you're so lovely; if I didn't know better I would say you were an angel dropped straight from heaven. You light up my little shop and I swear you calm down even the most difficult customers just by being there.'

'Well Chrissie, Guardian Angels come in all guises!' laughed Bex. 'I think that sometimes, as well as angels in the sense that we typically understand them, we as ordinary people are often empowered by them to do things for others too, so you never know you could well be someone else's angel on occasion – perhaps you're Lauren's?'

'I hope not, I wouldn't want the responsibility, but you've convinced me to at least try to explore this further. For now though, we'd better go and rescue Heidi – I've just remembered that Jamie is making a delivery this morning for some hanging baskets we've been asked to put together for that new pub in Church Gate.'

They rose to leave and Bex smiled inwardly, making herself a promise to do what she could to help Chrissie find the happiness she felt she so richly deserved.

Back at the shop, it was obvious that Chrissie's fears had been realised and poor Heidi looked frazzled.

'Heidi I'm so sorry, I can't promise it will never happen again but I'll try not to let it. You're a star though and I appreciate how well you've handled everything. Go and have a break, eat your muffin and have a think about how you envisage the window displays.'

Heidi was delighted. 'I'll take some paper with me and draw a plan out as you suggested. By the way, Jamie said to say Hi, he was asking where you were,' said Heidi cheerfully.

'He's a good man is Jamie; I just wish everyone we had to deal with was as reliable and good natured as him, life would be a whole lot easier. I often wish he was single but unfortunately, I know for a fact he has at least a couple of kids, he talks about them a lot. If he was unattached, I'd be killing myself to get him to be interested in me! I'd probably be disappointed though and he wouldn't be interested.'

Heidi shook her head as Chrissie turned her back to deal with a customer who had just entered the shop. Like Bex, Heidi was of the opinion that Chrissie had no idea how lovely she was.

## CHAPTER 5

Arriving home that evening Chrissie noted that Carole was acting as if she had something to hide. The laptop computer on the dining table was too quickly shut down and she wore a guilty expression on her face.

‘What’s going on Mum?’

‘Nothing,’ replied Carole nervously.

‘What are you trying to hide? Come on spit it out, I know you’re up to something.’

‘It’s nothing to worry about,’ said Carole looking as if she was about to run and hide.

‘WHAT IS GOING ON!’ yelled Chrissie, ‘tell me now or I promise I’ll run amok and you will be battered to death!’

‘Well, how can I say this without you going crazy?..... You know how we promised to help you find a man?’ offered Carole.

‘I never asked for any help in that quarter,’ said Chrissie angrily.

‘Okay, well, perhaps you didn’t, but you do need our help and so Lauren and I have got together and we’ve solved your problem for you,’ responded Carole brightly.

‘Mother?’ questioned Chrissie grimly, her stance indicating that she might well pick up the bread knife any moment. Carole tried to run from the room claiming she had to urgently visit the toilet but she was blocked in the attempt and told to reveal all.

‘Well, there are some plans afoot. Of course, there is the speed-dating event that you do know about. Lauren said something about a profile on the internet but I’m not sure I know what she meant by that,’ said Carole dismissively waving her hands around.

‘Listen mother, if ever you hear the word internet and my name mentioned in the same sentence, you scream. You scream so loudly that you can be heard 5 miles away. If Lauren has done what I suspect, then she is going to die a long, slow, horrible death and

you, as an accomplice will shortly follow. In any case, she needs to find someone and shouldn't be focusing on me! If you value your life tell me what has been going on.'

'You need to talk to Lauren, she has had to go back to work though, that horrible boss of hers rang up and asked her to go back in. She left with the keys or something and he couldn't lock up, or she locked him in or some such, I can't remember the details. As for the profile thing, I don't know about that either. I just remember that she wanted a photograph and I gave her one,' replied Carole extremely nervously.

'You are so dead mother!' responded Chrissie, almost beside herself with anger. 'I'm going out to find her, if I miss her and she gets back before I do, do not tell her about this discussion, do not tell her that she has less than 24 hours to live, in fact go out, do not come back until bedtime and don't speak to anyone until you see me again.

Understood?'

'Understood,' said Carole evidencing more than a little fear from Chrissie's outburst.

Chrissie jumped in her car, a battered old, but reliable Red Ford Mondeo, and set off to go to Lauren's place of work, a bistro in Belvoir Street in the centre of Leicester, quite close to Chrissie's shop. With a bit of luck she thought she would be able to park close by. Fortunately, she didn't have to park as she saw Lauren running away from the bistro 'Angelo's', where she had been working for the past few weeks. She beeped on the horn and Lauren instinctively turned with a seductive smile on her face, so used to getting attention this way. There was a definite disappointment on her face when she saw it was Chrissie and not a new admirer.

'Get in!' ordered Chrissie. Lauren obediently obeyed. Chrissie steered the car away back in the direction of home.

'What have you done with my photograph Lauren?'

'I don't know what you mean Chrissie....' stammered Lauren.

‘Don’t play the innocent Lauren. I know mum gave you a photograph and she mentioned the words internet and profile alongside the same statement. If you’ve put my photograph on the internet, for whatever purpose, I WILL KILL YOU!’

‘Oh that! It’s just a bit of fun Chrissie; do lighten up. You take yourself far too seriously.’

Chrissie was outraged and her anger was on the verge of getting helplessly out of control as she suddenly swerved across three lanes of the ring road to pull up sharp on the inside line. Fortunately, it was a quiet night on the roads and she avoided killing anyone.

‘I’m going to ask you just once Lauren and you better tell me the truth or I swear I’ll rev up the engine, hit the accelerator and once we’re at the top of the flyover I will kick you out of the car as we hit 90 miles per hour. When the police come to investigate I will turn on the tears and claim that you were suicidal and wanted to end it all because of being jilted by Sam.’

Lauren was now looking genuinely terrified.

‘Okay, okay, there’s no need to get so angry, it’s really nothing to worry about. I just created a profile for you, a nice one, added your photo, and well, all we have to do is wait for all the good looking guys within 50 miles to make contact. It’s a very reputable site, has loads of good reviews, lots of people have got married as a result of meeting up on there.....’

‘Get my profile removed! Get it removed as soon as we get home, as soon as we walk through the door in fact!’ instructed Chrissie.

‘Well it’s not that simple. We ...’

Chrissie interrupted. ‘We?’

‘Me and your mum.’



'You and my mum have done what...?'

'I created the profile and your mum paid for the membership. It's only for one month but you can't take yourself off the site during that time....' answered Lauren looking more and more nervous with each word she spoke.

'So you have posted information about me, with my photograph, advertising the fact that I don't have a man and am so desperate I have to sell myself on the internet. I now learn that I have to suffer this indignity for a whole month?'

'It will pass really quickly Chrissie,' said Lauren cheerfully, 'and we're sure to find you at least one person who is perfect for you!'

'Oh that's all right then,' said Chrissie sarcastically. 'So all I have to do is just sit back and wait for Prince Charming to come riding by on his white charger. Or is the plan for Superman to come into my shop in his red knickers and fly off with me in his arms. I can hardly contain myself with excitement, when can I expect to start to be inundated with responses?'

'Oh we've already had some emails...' began Lauren before she realised that she had said totally the wrong thing. Chrissie carefully reached down with her left hand to pick up a bottle of cola that had been rolling around the foot well of the car, she shook it madly, placed it between her knees and twisted off the top. She then aimed it at Lauren, letting the contents wash all over her.

'Chrissie, stop it, stop it, you're ruining my hair and my make up.'

'Oh I'm sorry Lauren. I'll stop right away. After all, it's only my life that you're ruining. Can't possibly compare to a few ounces of slap and a half ton of hair extensions can it?' said Chrissie furiously. 'I'm now going to drive us home as calmly as I can. When we get there you will show me exactly what you have done and then you and I will contact the site and get the profile removed.'

‘But Chrissie, you can’t remove....’ Started Lauren and then realised there was no contest here. If she spoke without being asked Chrissie may well carry out her threat at the top of the flyover. The journey home was tense.

Back home Chrissie frogmarched Lauren to the dining room where her laptop had been left. Pulling out one of the matching balloon back chairs that she had upholstered herself in teal velvet, she ordered Lauren to sit down and log onto the site.

‘Okay, let me see what you’ve written about me,’ ordered Chrissie and Lauren did as she was asked.

‘Okay, username, flowergirl, password daffodil, murmured Lauren as she tapped at the keys. Up came the profile of flowergirl.

‘Are you sad and lonely? If so, I could be the answer to your dreams. I’m successful with my own business, house and car, very attractive, warm and funny and up for a laugh. What do I want in return? A guy who is equal in every way! Contact me, you won’t be disappointed.’

The photograph was taken about two years ago at a party. She looked slightly the worse for wear. It couldn’t have been more unflattering and in no way reflected the person that she was. Anyone seeing this and reading the profile would get the impression that she was a party girl out for a good time with pretty much anyone that was available.

‘So you think this is me do you?’ thundered Chrissie. ‘I’m wearing probably my most hideous dress ever, have had one drink too many, largely as a result of having my drinks laced. I am attempting to dance to music I don’t like, with people I don’t like and just wanting to pass the time quickly so I can leave at a time that is decent enough not to offend the host. Who was the host anyway?’ she mumbled to herself.

Lauren started to tell her but Chrissie stopped her mid-flow.

'Delete it all!' she barked. 'Now!'

'I can't delete it Chrissie, as I said once you're on here, you're on here for the duration of the membership. I did read all the small print. The only way you can get yourself off here is to wait for the membership to expire or behave so badly that they throw you off.'

Chrissie was not someone who routinely swore, other than the odd cuss word when she ripped her hands on thorns at work or an arrangement failed to produce the expected results. However, there were exceptions to this and Lauren was privileged to hear the entire range of Anglo-Saxon vocabulary that Chrissie had learned over the years.

Once the anger was released, Chrissie did feel a little better and managed to think straight enough to come up with Plan B, damage limitation.

'Okay, it seems I have two options. Either I produce a true representation and or I produce something that is so way out that no-one will look at it. I favour option 2.'

'Come on Chrissie, why waste the membership money? You've got a month and it might just work. Mr Right could be out there right now looking for you, his perfect Miss Right. Let's work on the first option. We can rewrite the profile your way, reflecting yourself how you want and we'll put up a photograph that you like.'

'Lauren, you know how unhappy I am about this and if you ever do anything like this again I swear I'll.... Well you know what will happen to you. Better get yourself some insurance just in case or else you'll find yourself leaving this world in a wheelie bin headed for the council tip!'

'Okay, Chrissie, I get the message, but truly, Carole and I were only trying to help. We thought if we could get you a really nice bloke that you would come to think it was a good thing we were doing. We want you to have some fun,' said Lauren apologetically.

'All right, I agree that your intentions were probably good. Let's just get this thing re-written.'

An hour later and Chrissie was as happy as she was ever going to be. She discovered she didn't have to have her photograph showing to all and sundry but could password it. If she liked the sound of someone then she could give her code to him and he could look at her photo and decide if he liked the look of her.

'Now what happens? She asked Lauren quizzically.

'Well now all we have to do is wait for messages to come through. The earlier messages responding to the previous profile were not particularly promising so I've deleted them all. You can also look to see who has been looking at your profile and how many times they look at it. If you see someone is interested, you can check their profile and message them yourself if you like them. Some guys are shy about making contact so you might want to take the initiative. Oh look, you've got a message already!'

'What does it say, who is it? Cried Chrissie now getting quite excited that someone out there might actually like her.

'It's from 'RobertPattinsonlookalike' and he says he likes your profile and wonders if you can swap photo passwords. Let's look at his profile.

'You're very knowledgeable about all this Lauren, have you ever been on this site yourself?' asked Chrissie somewhat suspiciously.

'No, of course not, this is just for people who can't.....' and she stopped before she really incriminated herself.

'You were going to say that this site is just for people who can't get someone in the normal way, weren't you Lauren?' said Chrissie with false sweetness. 'People like me, sad and lonely people, Billy No Mates sort of people, is that right Lauren?'

'No, that's not what I meant at all. What I was trying to say is that this site is for people who can't find someone as easily as I do. There are lots of advantages in being able to window shop like this. You can weed out all those who don't share the same interests, make contact with anyone you like with no fear that they'll come knocking on your door, and maybe, just maybe, you'll meet some really great guys. Do please stop putting the site down until you've given it a chance. Let's read what 'RobertPattinsonlookalike' has to say, God if he does look like Robert Pattinson I may answer this one myself!'

'Hands off, he's contacted me, not you!' said Chrissie excitedly, 'Let's see what he has to say.' Lauren clicked on the mail icon and the message popped open. 'HI, liked your profile. I live within your preferred region and think that we might be a good match. Can I have your photo password? Mine is 'dropdeadgorgeous'.'

'Ooh get him' laughed Lauren. 'He's on line at the moment, it says so here on this icon. That's good because it means if he's interested you can go on line and 'chat' with him.'

'Go on then, put his password in!' urged Chrissie, suddenly very keen to learn more. Lauren obliged and up popped a photograph.

'Well, not sure he looks like Robert Pattinson but he does look nice. What do you think Chrissie?'

'Mmmm, yes he's cute, not quite in the same league as gorgeous Robert but still cute. Send him my password and see what he says when he gets it.'

Lauren tapped the keys and off went the message.

10 minutes later and there was no response. 30 minutes later, there was still no response.

Lauren explained to Chrissie that sometimes, when photos are exchanged it can be that the requester doesn't feel that the person sending is the right match after all.

'Oh brilliant, the first message I get and he runs a mile when he sees my photo! I only need one more like him and my ego will disappear into the ether. I thought you said this would be good for me; I have to tell you Lauren I'm not feeling good at the moment!'

'Don't worry about him, he's clearly up his own backside. There'll be others, lots of them. You're lovely Chrissie and your photograph is a good one, someone out there will be beating a path to your door when he sees it.'

'That is not reassuring Lauren. The chances of Mr Right beating a path to my door are slightly less than the chances of the local nutter or pervert choosing the same route,' stated Chrissie emphatically. 'I'm going to have a bath and if anyone gorgeous sends me a message send him a photograph of someone else, anyone else, a photograph of you maybe. I can't deal with this Lauren; it feels sordid and akin to shopping in a catalogue for a mate.' And with that, Chrissie went off to run a long hot bath in which to soak all her troubles away.

It took her twenty minutes to run the bath and grab towels, lotions, manicure tools and loofah. She had been in the bath for five minutes when a frantic knocking came on the door.' Go away,' yelled Chrissie. 'If you want to use the loo try any of the neighbours in the street, I'm not coming out of here unless the house is on fire, and if the house is on fire I'm probably safest in here anyway.'

'Chrissie you have to come and see the messages that you are getting! We've had half a dozen in the last few minutes alone, you're proving very popular! Two of them I reckon could turn out to be really good, certainly their profiles match really well with yours – and they like your photo!'

'Lauren! I asked you not to send my photograph to anyone, I don't want to play!'

'Chrissie, stop being such a baby and come and have a look!' shouted Lauren irritated.

'No Lauren, tell them I've just decided to take holy vows.'

'Okay, Okay, I hear you. One of these guys looks like an older version of Taylor Lautner, Jacob in the Twilight Films, and you know how much you love him!, said Lauren enticingly.

'I'll be out in five minutes.'

Lauren chuckled as she headed back to the computer. Chrissie followed a few minutes later.

Lauren pointed to the open communication on the screen and the very attractive man who was showing in the message.

'Wow, he does look rather gorgeous doesn't he?' breathed Chrissie, 'and he's seen my photo and not been taken to Accident and Emergency yet?'

'Don't be silly Chrissie. He thinks you look lovely. He wants to chat and find out more about you. Why don't you sit down and start asking him some questions?'

Chrissie looked bemused. 'What sort of questions can I ask? I've no idea how this sort of thing works. I really just want to know if he is as nice as he looks.'

At this, Lauren decided to take charge. 'Why don't you start off by asking what he likes to do in his spare time, then you can ask him about his tastes in music, whether he has seen any good films lately and then take it from there. You're never stuck for words in normal conversation. This is conversation too but you have the advantage of being able to really consider what you want to say before you say it.'

Chrissie felt slightly more relieved to hear this and sat down at the keyboard to start tapping out the first of her questions.

The first answer to the question of what he did in his spare time came back within just a couple of minutes. He liked to keep fit, loved to read, liked the cinema, theatre and listening to music. All of that was fine with Chrissie who felt there was a lot of common ground there.

Feeling somewhat heartened Chrissie got into her stride and started sending and responding to questions like a game of ping pong. She learned that his name was Ryan, he was 28, was a professional photographer, mostly weddings. She was relieved to know that he was single and had been for some months.

After about half an hour of messaging, he asked if perhaps they could meet up, just for coffee for starters, and get to know each other better.

'What do I do Lauren, he wants to meet me!' wailed Chrissie getting slightly frantic.

'Say yes, you idiot. Agree to meet him in some very public place, like a pub or a coffee shop, and just see how it goes!'

Chrissie tapped out a reply and found that she had agreed to meet Ryan on Friday, the day after the speed-dating that she was caught up in.

'Well done Chrissie! You have a date with a real life gorgeous guy that finds you attractive, interesting and who wants to get you know better. Great result!'

'Well, we'll have to wait and see won't we? I haven't forgiven you but you may yet redeem yourself a little if this works out, especially if you agree to lend me your green Radley bag for my date!'

Lauren laughed and agreed that the loan of her bag was a small price to pay if it restored their friendship. They decided to look at the other messages, if only to be polite. They rejected Jack because at only 5'6' Chrissie would tower over him if she wore heels; Tom was rejected as he sounded a little nerdy and boring; Christian had too much baggage with two ex-wives and 6 children with 4 different partners. Only one appealed and it was decided to keep him on hold for now.

When Carole came back home a little later she was waving a white handkerchief at the doorway. She was relieved to see both girls getting on again. Lauren was giving



Chrissie a pedicure; a pretty shade of coral pink was being liberally and expertly applied.

'You should take that up as a career,' advised Carole. 'You're very precise with a brush and are doing a really good job.' Chrissie agreed.

'You know that's not a bad idea Lauren. Why don't you investigate taking a beauticians course? Don't Leicester College do courses like that? You could ask Mario if he would agree to let you have the same day or half day off each week and take a few short courses, perhaps manicure first and then you could build on that with other programmes.' Once you've got some qualifications you could set up a mobile business visiting clients in their own homes and doing hen party nights or similar events.'

'I'm enjoying the sound of this,' enthused Lauren, 'but I'm not sure that Mario would be particularly agreeable, he can be very difficult as you know.'

'Well, it won't hurt to find out more about what's on offer and then we'll think of how best to approach Mario. I don't think he's that bad really, he's actually been very patient and tolerant with you Lauren!'

Lauren looked a little shamefaced. 'I suppose so, I do sound an ungrateful cow don't I? It's just that he's so straight laced sometimes; impossible to flirt with, no response whatsoever and tears mean nothing to him. Sometimes I think he's a robot.'

'He actually seems like a pretty decent guy to me Lauren, and I'm impressed that he doesn't fall for your womanly ruses. I'm guessing that if you're upfront with him he'll treat you fairly.'

Carole interrupted. 'As wonderful as all this sounds can I assume that you have sorted out the internet dating thing? I'm not going to have to call in the police to protect either of us tonight; I'll be able to sleep safely in my own bed?'

'You're safe for the moment but I wouldn't keep your eyes closed for too long,' threatened Chrissie, only half-joking.

'Okay, things are pretty much back to normal then,' said Carole with a wink.

## CHAPTER 6

The next morning Chrissie set off for work in a much lighter mood. She was looking forward to sharing her news with Bex.

Bex was in the shop when she arrived and had made coffee, the aroma of which mingled with fragrant blooms was a sensual delight to Chrissie.

'You look very happy this morning, anything you would like to share with me?' asked a smiling Bex.

'Well... You know my friend Lauren, the beautiful one.... well, not only has she set me up with a speed dating night but she has also set me up on an internet dating site.....' began Chrissie.

'Okay, I'm getting slightly confused as to why you appear to be so happy, when as you say, she's set you up?'

'I was furious when I found out but the thing is one of the guys who messaged me is gorgeous. He liked my photograph and my profile and I'm going to meet him tomorrow; providing of course I can get through the speed-dating she's booked us into tonight!'

'Ooh tell me more, what's this guy's name and what does he look like?'

'He's called Ryan and from his photograph he looks rather like an older Taylor Lautner, he likes the same music as me, the same films, we seem to share a similar taste in books and theatre and, well, he sounds almost perfect.'

'I guess you'll have to meet him to be sure that's the case. Be sure to ask your angel for guidance on this' she urged.

'Yes, I should shouldn't I? I'll try to remember to when I get a few minutes on my own when I'm at home. I could certainly do with any help I can get!'

‘It won’t really matter; your angel will be looking out for you anyway and knows that you have at least acknowledged she is out there. Things would be a lot clearer if you asked her specifically to help, so find time to do so. I’ve asked my angel to talk to your angel to help you find someone special, and I trust my angel implicitly.’ replied Bex. Chrissie looked at her a little bewildered and Bex continued to explain. ‘I know it sounds mad Chrissie but that’s how it works. Sometimes, when someone you care about needs help, you can ask angels to communicate with each other to provide support. Heidi’s a believer too and she’s asked the same. We both want you to find the happiness you deserve, Heidi thinks the world of you, and she told me she wished she had a sister just like you. Do you remember what I said about ordinary people often becoming angels to others?’

Chrissie nodded that she did indeed remember the conversation.

‘Well, I think you are probably Heidi’s, at least for now, in the sense that she has been directed to you because she needs you in her life at the moment, but equally she may turn out to be an angel to you.’

‘Oh bless her, and you, I feel very touched by both of you. Even if I’m not entirely a convert I will try and put what you say into practice.’

‘Do that, I promise you won’t be sorry. Anyway, what about this date, you are meeting somewhere safe aren’t you? Asked Bex seriously.

Chrissie laughed. ‘Yes, we’re meeting for a drink in that little coffee shop in Granby Street. I’ve texted Justin and he says he’ll hang around there, just in case. So you see I have my bodyguard ready. It’s very public so I’ll be perfectly safe. It’s really just a question of whether he likes me as much in the flesh as he seems to do in cyberspace, and vice versa.’

'Well he's an idiot if he doesn't.' said Bex patting Chrissie's arm. Just then, Heidi arrived. Chrissie noted that she appeared fine today so judged that there had been no more incidents with her errant stepfather.

'Heidi, those ideas you came up with yesterday – they look really good, do you want to have a go at putting them into practice? No promises that I won't step in and make changes if necessary but for now you have free rein with your idea,' smiled Chrissie.

Heidi was thrilled and her face said all that was needed.

'You have two hours to get everything done – okay? It is a bit of a test and you will definitely have to work fast to make it work. If you need help, Bex or myself will come over and do whatever you ask. Don't waste too many materials!

Heidi shot off like a rocket and minutes later was busy assembling the basics of her plan.

Bex and Chrissie worked on the day's orders of which the first were funeral wreaths. These sorts of arrangements were always difficult to do and it was impossible not to consider the person for whom the wreath was intended. Children and young people were the worst to do with and often tears flowed whilst working such an arrangement. Today the tributes were for grandparents which weren't quite such an emotional tug to deal with. It did remind Chrissie that she had no relationship with grandparents. She had never known her father and therefore had no paternal grandparents, and her mother's parents died when she was very young. There had always been just herself and Mum. She had sometimes wondered who her father might have been but knew only that he was a very good looking man whom Chrissie took after, but who wasn't husband material. Carole had claimed it was a very brief relationship and could no longer even remember his name. There was no option but to accept the explanation, but it didn't stop her occasionally considering what the truth was.

‘So how are you going to deal with the speed-dating tonight then Chrissie? Any idea how many people might be involved?’

‘I hardly know anything about it and am dreading it. The one thing I do know is that it’s likely to be a relatively short experience, just 5 minutes with each person. I think about 20 pairs maximum are allowed so it should be over in a couple of hours. As Lauren is also attending, with a bit of luck all the attention will be on her and I can leave her to swap numbers and have an early night. Actually a night without Lauren around is very appealing, she can be very draining sometimes.’

‘I’m very intuitive and a great believer in things happening in ways that are often surprising. I have a very strong feeling that Lauren’s tangled love life is now moving into a phase where untangling is about to begin. Did I tell you that I’m the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter?’ said Bex with one eyebrow raised quizzically.

‘I’ve heard the stories about seventh sons of seventh sons – are you telling me it applies to daughters as well?’ queried Chrissie.

‘Of course, possibly even more so as the lineage of a maternal line is much stronger than the male ancestral line. Jews and Red Indians place great emphasis on maternal lineage. My mother was clairvoyant before she could speak. She used to see spirit children and would talk with them. Only her mother understood what she was about. She was treated by others as an oddity until she learned to accept that what she had was a gift, and one not understood by everyone else.

She never cashed in on her skill, preferring to use it as and when needed, prompted to offer help rather than advertise her services. She’s guided me to develop my skills because she knew I was the only daughter that has inherited her gift. I see spirit people too but I’m more clairsentient than clairvoyant, that is, I sense things, and usually very strongly. I can tell you Chrissie that I sense powerfully that I was drawn to you for a

purpose, that Heidi is also drawn to you for a specific reason. I'm strongly feeling that your life will change significantly over the next few weeks and months, and not necessarily via the route you might imagine. There are external forces that are guiding and steering things for you. You are a special person Chrissie – you just haven't learned about yourself yet.'

Chrissie felt as if she had been literally bowled over. 'I knew there was something different about you Bex but couldn't put my finger on what it was. I should have picked it up sooner but now you've told me what you are capable of I can see it clearly now. My mother is a psychic, although I admit that I sometimes scoff at her talents. I can't take her seriously with respect to what she tells me, although she has a whole host of fans who think she is marvellous. She's constantly asking me to let her do a reading for me but I won't go there. Do you do that sort of stuff?'

Bex laughed. 'I'm not a psychic in the sense that I think your mother is but I can do things like reading tarot cards. I'm rather good at it but they're really just a tool to allow me to focus on the person who's with me. I don't think you need a reading at the moment but I'd be happy to do one for you sometime in the future if you'd like?'

'You are on – I would really like that. I've been brought up with tarot cards around the house since I was small. I used to take mum's cards to play with as a kid, annoying mum no end. She has this ritual with them, wrapping them in silk and placing them in a special box; it's something to do with auras or something according to her. To me they were just pretty pictures but I remember telling her one day that there was a story in the pictures. She has always made the claim that I gave her predictions which came true but I honestly don't recall doing any such thing.'

'Then you may well be denying yourself a talent that is worth developing. It sounds to me as if you have at least a germ of a gift. Once you open yourself up to the possibilities

of spiritual helpers then you will start to see things changing in your life, subtly at first but then becoming much clearer. It's a bit daunting at first but will eventually seem normal to you to ask for help, expect to receive it and don't be surprised when you get it, but remember to be thankful.' explained Bex.

'You know what? I keep promising this but I'm going to try it for myself. What should I ask for about tonight? Should I ask for the strength to get through it without getting wound up or should I ask for the ability to become invisible?' laughed Chrissie.

Bex returned the laugh. 'I think you should just ask that if there's someone there that's right for you, even if it's not necessarily right for the long-term, that you will both recognise it immediately and act upon the knowledge. That's really all you need to be thinking about.'

'You're so wise Bex, do you believe in reincarnation? Maybe you've lived before? You seem to have the sense of generations before you!'

'Who knows? I have no firm conviction about whether I have or not, but I'm open-minded enough to believe it's possible and the idea of living many lives certainly makes the most sense to me. You just never know!'

Two hours later and Chrissie went to have a look at how Heidi was doing and found her busily giving a quick coat of paint to a couple of ancient cracked plant pots.

'Hey these look really pretty. You've been working hard. Don't wear yourself out though and don't let me interrupt the flow.'

'No, of course not, I just want to make some final touches, about 10 minutes I think, and then I'll put the display together in the window.'

'Well in that case I'll get on with something else and wait for my cue to return,' responded Chrissie with a smile.



The next hour passed in a whirl of activity and Heidi was busy in the window whilst Chrissie and Bex dealt with customers and orders. Eventually things quietened down sufficiently for Heidi to call a halt and have Chrissie come and have a look at her display.

Chrissie was led with hands over her eyes until she was outside in front of her window. Chrissie opened her eyes and gasped in surprise.

'Heidi, this is wonderful! I liked your ideas on paper but you have surpassed my expectations by miles. I absolutely love it!' Bex joined them and echoed everything that Chrissie had said.

The window had been decorated entirely in ice-cream colours; pinks, blues, creams, yellows, whites – everything complimented everything else. Lots of silk butterflies fluttered above the blooms. In theory, it broke all the rules and shouldn't have worked, but it did. The window was already attracting attention and by the end of the afternoon, they had worked one of their busiest Thursdays ever. If this continued, she would have to consider getting more staff as they were rushed off their feet. Heidi was duly put in charge of displays for the foreseeable future and Chrissie made a note to give her a small pay rise for the increased responsibility.

Taking her aside before the end of the day Chrissie confirmed once again how pleased she was with Heidi's efforts. She also asked how things were going at home.

'It's not great Chrissie, but I'm coping. My stepfather, Dick, is getting more out of control lately. He's on a power trip and abusing what he considers are his entitlements. I get questioned about what I wear, who I speak to, who I see and even what I read. He has completely dominated my mother. I have a suspicion he checks my phone when I leave it around; I'm trying to be more careful but sometimes I just forget. I'm also sure he checks my mail and I know he's deleted messages for me from our landline phone. I'm just about keeping things at arm's length but I can't help thinking that things are

going to kick off soon. I'd leave but I've nowhere to go and can't afford a place of my own yet.'

'It would be the best solution though wouldn't it Heidi, to find you somewhere else to live? I can't increase your wages by much now but if business continues to grow then I have longer-term plans for expansion that would include you taking on more responsibility. In the meantime, promise me that you will keep me informed if things get worse. I guarantee I won't see you on the street. If things get really bad you can come and stay at my place, it will be cramped but you would be safe,' offered Chrissie.

'Thanks Chrissie, that's so reassuring to know, I really appreciate your offer,' replied Heidi gratefully.

The rest of the day passed quickly and soon it was time to lock up the shop and for Chrissie to go home and get ready for speed-dating. She remembered what Bex had said and on the way home, she offered up a little request to whoever was listening that things would indeed work in her favour if something was meant to happen. She asked that she would not be intimidated or humiliated and that the same request apply to Lauren too. Her friend often infuriated her but she had a good heart and all she really wanted out of life was to have fun with someone who would stay loyal to her. Chrissie wanted more than that; she wanted a mutual deeply loving relationship and to have a family one day.

Back home and preparations were in place for the night's activity. Lauren had showered and washed her hair and was now carefully applying makeup, a little too much if Chrissie was honest, but then Chrissie wasn't a huge fan of painted faces. Lauren had laid out her own outfit but had also carefully selected clothes and shoes for Chrissie too.

'I thought you might not have too much time when you got back so I tried to help. What do you think about the red 'Stella McCartney' dress and shoes I put out for you?'

Chrissie laughed at the designer reference. It was indeed a Stella McCartney design which a friend of Chrissie's had 'stolen' from a magazine photograph and made up as an almost exact copy, including the fake label. Chrissie had paid about £100 for it, which she had thought was terribly expensive at the time. It had proved to be worth the money thought as it been a hit on the occasions she had worn it and no-one had yet sussed that it was a fake.

'I'm almost ready so will do your hair and make up for you when you get out the shower if you like,' offered Lauren.

It was at times like this that Chrissie knew why she and Lauren were still friends; despite the fact that it was Lauren who had got her into this in the first place and she didn't want to participate. She had decided on her way home that she was going to try and take on a more positive persona and reach out for what life had to offer. She realised that she often feared the worst and thought that perhaps if she could take a chance now and then perhaps some of the frogs out there might turn into princes. She thought she might have to kiss a lot of frogs though.

Just then, Carole popped her head round the door. 'Okay, what's going on? Where's my daughter? Who is this strange woman that looks like her, sounds like her but is definitely not her. My daughter must have been abducted by aliens because this pretender standing in front of me sounds nice, reasonable, calm, collected and even slightly grateful, so tell me who are you and what have you done with my daughter?'

'Ha bloody ha mother. Very funny, have you thought of applying to go on Britain's Got Talent? I mean as a singer or a dancer or the back half of a pantomime horse, but certainly not as a comedian.'

‘Ha ha yourself. I had expected you to come home spitting fire at the prospect of your evening out. Glad to see you’ve seen the light and are taking the whole thing in the spirit in which it was intended.’

‘You see before you a new woman; one who will accept life’s challenges as stepping stones to a better future. I will not admit defeat until knocked down, stamped upon and generally messed upon, for I am a warrior woman who will take on life’s problems headlong and massacre each one that decides to attack me. Okay, understood everyone?’

‘Yes, Chrissie,’ chorused Lauren and Carole in sing-song voices.’

Preened and perfumed, Lauren and Chrissie set out for their first speed-dating experience, clambering into Chrissie’s car and heading off to the Corn Exchange in the middle of Leicester’s renowned market, the largest of its kind in Europe.

At the door, they were greeted by the organisers who took their names, gave them a label with their first names on, a seat number, and paper and a pen. Scrutinising the bit of paper it became clear that you were meant to mark each of the ‘dates’ during the night.

There were a number of giggly girls already set up for the event and several sheepish looking men lurking in the background, eyeing up the talent and competition.

‘So far so good,’ said Lauren. ‘I don’t see any girls here that we can’t compete with, and in fact, I’m confident that we’re front runners. Chrissie was far less confident and was a little uncomfortable wearing, what for her was quite heavy makeup which she felt had had given her a different face. Carole and Lauren had disagreed and said her makeup was natural looking and she looked stunning, but she felt awkward. She was however, aware of the glances directed towards her and Lauren.’

'Come on, let's get a drink to steady the nerves,' said Chrissie with feigned bravado. They walked to the bar and ordered white wine spritzers. At the bar, they were in a good vantage position and could assess possible matches as they arrived. Thus far, there were more girls than guys, although Lauren said this was entirely normal. Girls arrived early to check out guys as they arrived whilst guys preferred to have a few glasses of Dutch courage elsewhere before stepping up. Chrissie felt daunted at having to make small talk with strange men and then having her looks and conversation judged for the effort. She consoled herself with the fact that the guys must surely be feeling the same. She offered up a repeat of the earlier silent request that she had made in the shower at home, reminding the angels that she wanted their help so please ensure she wouldn't make a spectacle of herself.

More girls arrived, mostly appearing to head straight for the ladies to put final touches to hair and makeup. Lauren whispered that they were just a couple of minutes away from starting and to watch the door for an influx of guys. She was spot on.

A voice boomed over the speaker system and the organiser of the event began to speak.

'Welcome ladies and gentleman to the Corn Exchange. In five minutes I will ask all you beautiful girls to be seated according to the number you have been allocated. Girls will stay seated and guys will move round in a clockwise position a table at a time and meet our lovely ladies. We have our full quota of dates registered so we're good to go. To remind you that you have comments sheets and each of you will get 5 minutes with each participant and then a bell will sound and you have one minute to fill in your sheet before meeting your next date. Are you all ready to begin? A loud chorus of 'yes' went up. Then ladies, please be seated!'

There was a lot of shuffling about and the girls made their way to their seats. There was a lot of hip swivelling and wiggling going on with some of the girls intent on making an impression from the onset. Chrissie noted how Lauren moved across the floor and decided to adopt the same approach.

A bell sounded and suddenly the event was on. Chrissie looked across her table to see her first date. He opened up the conversation by giving his name, Neil. He asked for hers and then progressed to general chitchat about whether she was a regular. He was pleasant looking, easy to talk to and clearly a seasoned speed-dater. Having ascertained that Chrissie was a novice he advised her to just treat it as a bit of fun, not to take any rejection seriously and to act quickly on deciding who she liked and who she didn't. If she didn't make good notes as she went, she would forget who she had spoken to and whom she hadn't. As the bell went, Chrissie ticked him as a possible on her score sheet.

Date number two stepped forward. Chrissie thought he was passably good looking, quite intelligent, but rather boring. Not her type so she ticked the reject box on her score sheet.

Date three and four were definitely players, and well-oiled to boot. Date three hadn't been able to take his eyes from Chrissie's breasts, even though her dress made sure she was modestly covered. He hardly looked her in the eye during his 5 minute, very one-sided conversation, in which he told Chrissie everything about himself without once giving her the opportunity to reply or talk about herself. She rejected him. Date Four was quite similar and kept stroking her hand like some old-fashioned movie star of the fifties. Chrissie didn't fancy him one little bit, despite his telling her of his very well paid job, nice house and fabulous car waiting outside to whisk her away, another reject.

Date five: 'How are you gel'? Not seen you 'ere before – nice to see some fresh meat and you ain't 'arf bad, not as sexy as the one sitting behind you (Lauren, of course,

Chrissie noted), but not arf bad. Hey, din't you come in with 'er, wouldn't be up for a bit of girl on girl action wudya?' Chrissie remained stony faced throughout and breathed a sigh of relief when he had gone. A big fat cross was put on the score sheet.

Date six: Very, very nice looking guy – said his name was Sasha. He spoke perfect English in an incredibly sexy French accent.

'So why are you here tonight?' asked Chrissie.

'I am a postgraduate student at the University of Leicester and I have been working on my dissertation so have not had much of a social life for a while. I thought this would be a good opportunity to get to know some people and hopefully find someone special. So far I'm impressed – I hope you are going to tick my sheet with a yes?'

Chrissie laughed at his cheek and told him that she would tick his box if he would tick hers. He kissed her cheek as the bell rang to move on. It was then that she remembered that Lauren was his next date and her brief moment of euphoria evaporated.

Date seven: Called himself Pete, claimed to be 30, looked more like 45, had a beard that looked as if it might be harbouring some small furry animals and his shirt looked as if it was borrowed from a cross-dresser. Reject.

Date eight: Aftab, aged 28, nice enough but at about 5'6' and around 8 stone soaking wet, just not the right physical make up for Chrissie. Reject.

Date nine: Curtis, aged 29, nice looking black guy with the physique of Will Smith but the arrogance and manners of Liam Gallagher. Reject.

Date ten: Ching-Ching! Chrissie felt an instant attraction for Miles, who was tall, had a good physique which was clearly outlined in his close fitting tee-shirt worn over stylish jeans. He had beautiful deep brown eyes and blonde tousled hair. He was another English postgraduate student and said he was Sasha's flatmate. His purpose was the same as Sasha in that he was now ready to let his studies relax and wanted to meet

someone nice. He told Chrissie he was definitely going to tick her box yes. It briefly crossed Chrissie's mind that possibly, she could get ticks from two flatmates and she wondered how that would work out. If it meant that she had to decide between two gorgeous guys then that would be tough but something she would just have to live with!

Miles was the final date and the event was now finished. Chrissie and Lauren headed for the bar which seemed to be what most of the other participants were heading towards.

'What did you think Chrissie, did you tick anyone's score card?' asked Lauren enthusiastically.

'I ticked three, the two postgrads Sasha and Miles and the first guy I met, Neil, although I have to say that my favourite was Miles.

'I ticked two – the postgrads that you ticked! My favourite was Sasha though; I just loved his accent. Let's hope they ticked our boxes as well and that their preferences are in the same order!' She glanced across the room. 'Don't be too obvious, but they're heading our way.

'What should we do?' asked Chrissie nervously.

'Just smile and chat Chrissie, what else?' said Lauren confidently. 'Bags I get first choice!' she added cheekily.

'Hello again, Chrissie and Lauren isn't it?' said Miles, directing his comments to Chrissie who could feel herself beginning to blush.

Lauren stepped in closer but focused her attention on Sasha.

'Can we buy you both a drink?' asked Sasha, gazing into Lauren's eyes.

'Yes, thank you very much,' said Chrissie, 'that would be really nice,' and she kept her gaze on Miles feeling her confidence grow as it was looking, incredibly, as if their first choices were being matched. She couldn't quite believe that this gorgeous guy in front of



her was seemingly more interested in her than in Lauren but it certainly looked like it and she hoped she was right.

Miles ordered drinks whilst Sasha steered Lauren over to an empty table, leaving Chrissie to help Miles with carrying back the drinks from the bar.

'I ticked your box, yes,' said Miles.

'I ticked your box, yes too,' said Chrissie.

'I ticked your friend's box yes too,' said Miles.

'I thought you might have, I ticked your friend's box too,'

'I thought you might have,' said Miles laughing. 'Your friend is beautiful, but not as beautiful as you, and I like you much more,' he grinned meaningfully at Chrissie, who could only smile back in response and whisper, 'Ditto!'

The drinks were served and with Miles right behind her, they headed over to Lauren and Sasha who were deep in conversation and oblivious to the fact that they were no longer alone.

'Okay, Chrissie, we've had five minutes conversation and I did learn quite a lot about you in that time but not nearly enough. Can we do it all properly now? Tell me more about yourself; you said you had a floristry shop?' quizzed Miles.

'You have a good memory!' said Chrissie, clearly impressed.

'I only needed to remember you. There were only two of you that I liked enough to tick boxes for, and I've already said that you were my firm favourite. I liked your naturalness and your warmth and humour and I've already mentioned how beautiful you are. I'd really like to take you out for dinner and get to know you better.'

'Well thank you for your very kind reference. I'd love to go out for dinner with you.'

She and Miles then spent the next couple of hours chatting, with the occasional interaction from Lauren and Sasha who seemed to be having an equally good time.

Finally, it became evident that it was getting late and it was time to leave. Miles and Sasha offered to walk the girls to their car and the offer was accepted. The car was parked in a well-lit and public place so, in the unlikely event that either guy was not the gentleman he seemed to be, there was little likelihood of anything untoward happening.

Whilst the guys visited the toilets, Lauren and Chrissie did the same, taking the opportunity to quickly update each other on progress.

‘Sasha’s gorgeous Chrissie! He’s already asked me out for a date, wants to go to the cinema and for a drink afterwards on Saturday. I’ve said yes and I can’t wait. Has Miles asked you out yet?’ asked Lauren all excited.

‘Same progress as you, I have to keep pinching myself to make sure it’s really happening. Have we two just met two drop dead gorgeous guys who actually do seem genuine and decent to boot. I don’t get any bad vibes about either of them. Is something wrong with my radar or is this actually as perfect as it seems?’ responded Chrissie.

‘For now Chrissie, it is perfect, don’t analyse, don’t question, just enjoy!’

Outside Sasha and Miles were waiting for them and Chrissie considered that they had probably compared their own notes too.

Miles offered Chrissie his arm and she accepted, enjoying the sensation of slipping her arm through his and feeling his muscles flex. He pulled her arm through further so that she was hip to hip with him. She liked feeling his body next to hers. Chrissie thought the feeling of intimacy was so very nice and she couldn’t remember the last time she had been so close to someone, Justin excepted, she was always getting hugs from him. Somewhere along the way, the gap between her and Lauren who was in front with Sasha, grew longer. Miles suddenly stopped outside a shop window where he gently removed a feather that had blown into Chrissie’s hair.

'An angel's wing for an angel,' he said as he handed her the feather. Chrissie smiled and wondered if the angelic kingdom really had sent her the feather, and had they also sent her Miles?'

As she took the feather from his fingers, he put his arm around her waist and pulled her closer to him.' Would it be out of order if I asked for a kiss to keep me going until our dinner date?'

In response, Chrissie reached up and slid her arms slowly around his neck. 'Well it would be useful research to see if we are compatible on that score,' she said cheekily. He quickly responded and she happily received his mouth upon hers. His lips were full, warm and soft and very, very nice. Several minutes later and they parted just long enough to gaze at each other before going back in for a second more ardent kiss.

'You passed the test Chrissie,' he whispered softly. 'That was better than I could ever have imagined it to be, and I do have a great imagination.' He kissed Chrissie on the lips between each spoken syllable.

'Mmmmm,' was all Chrissie could muster in response. 'Thank you Angels!' she thought.

'We'd better catch up with Sasha and your friend. He likes her by the way, just in case you're wondering, he liked you too but I got first choice and he's been told to lay off or else he won't get in the flat tonight,' joked Miles.

'You're really boosting my ego here, I may not be able to get through my own door if my head grows any bigger,' laughed Chrissie, 'but I do appreciate the flattery, It's been a while since I've been complimented so completely.'

'I find that hard to believe. You should have guys beating down your door. I know we've only just met but I really like you and want to get to know you a lot better.'

'Well, I think you can take that as read. I want to get to know you better too and I look forward to our date on Saturday.'

Both were relaxed after the kisses and it was with arms around each other that they caught up with Sasha and Lauren who were playing a hot game of tonsil hockey themselves.

Miles tapped Sasha on the shoulder and he and Lauren then pulled apart, without a hint of embarrassment. Say goodbye Sasha!' Miles instructed.

'Bon soir Lauren, see you tomorrow night!' Miles took Chrissie's keys and opened the door of her car for her. He whispered that he couldn't wait to see her again on Saturday, and please would she wear the same perfume she was wearing tonight, as it was as enticing as she was. Chrissie smiled in response.

Somewhat reluctantly, Chrissie urged the car away, waving at Miles as she did, Lauren doing the same to Sasha.

'Wow, wow, and double wow...!' said Chrissie breathlessly, 'Lauren you are forgiven your sins, you will go to Heaven and you will be my best friend for ever. Thank you, thank you and thank you again for having that really stupid idea.....'

Lauren giggled, agreeing that it was definitely one of her better ideas. Chrissie's phone beeped with a text message and she asked Lauren to read it.

'It says 'thanks for a lovely evening, can't wait until Saturday. Miles xx,' laughed Lauren. Chrissie glowed. 'Send him a message back, say, counting the minutes.... Chrissie xx.'

In her bed that night, Chrissie offered up silent thanks and asked for the name of her Guardian Angel so that she could thank her personally. She hadn't, if she was completely honest, expected to get any sort of response but just as she began to close her eyes, she clearly heard the name 'Serafina'. She switched on the light, convinced that someone

was in the room with her and she was surprised when she realised that of course she was alone. Serafina, she muttered to herself, did I just imagine that I heard that or did I get an answer to my question? She fell asleep before working out the answer to this.

## CHAPTER 7

The following morning heading for work Chrissie couldn't wait to tell the girls what had happened. She didn't have to wait long.

'Someone looks very happy today. Can we assume that last night was a success?' asked Bex, grinning widely.

'Oh do tell,' coaxed Heidi, 'New man I hope?'

'I still haven't come back down from cloud nine yet,' admitted Chrissie. 'I met a fantastic guy last night, his name's Miles, he's gorgeous and he's taking me out on Saturday for a meal. He told me he actually preferred me to Lauren! Preferred me to Lauren, can you believe it? I'm not sure which means the most to me, knowing that he liked me better or the fact that he was just fabulous, is a lovely kisser, has a lovely body ... Strike that last question I know which means the most to me!'

'I think we both know too,' laughed Heidi.

'I'm so pleased for you Chrissie and I really hope it works out for you but what will you do about your date tonight, will you still go?' asked Bex.

'Oh gosh, I'd almost forgotten about that. I don't know. What do you think I should do? It's just a coffee, perhaps I can get away with thirty minutes, would that be really rude?'

'Yes it would Chrissie, unless he's not very nice in which case thirty minutes might well seem like a lifetime. If however he is as nice as he sounds then you're not giving him a chance. It does sound like he now has a lot to live up to, but you never know, you might like him better,' proposed Heidi, with Bex agreeing with every word. Chrissie doubted it very much – how could anyone be better than Miles – he was fab!

The day passed relatively uneventfully. Jamie popped in, albeit he wasn't making a delivery but was in town on business and thought he'd just say hello and see if he could blag a coffee, which of course he knew he would get. As always he was happy and chatty and Chrissie once again thought what a lovely guy he was and how lucky was his wife. She was mentally reminded though that she may have found her own Mr Right.

'So what are you doing with your evening then Chrissie?' asked Jamie, 'Got any plans?'

Chrissie laughed. 'I do have plans, which could get complicated if they work out as my two assistants here to seem to think.'

'Oh, I'm intrigued. Can you divulge these plans or would that complicate things too?' asked Jamie bemused.

'Suffice to say that I have a date tonight, and a different one tomorrow night and obviously I can't date two people at once, or at least I could, but I wouldn't.'

'It does sound complicated Chrissie but I believe you're a sensible girl and I'm sure you will do the right thing, both for yourself and your very lucky dates,' responded Jamie seriously. 'I hope you have a great time.' And with that parting comment he quickly finished his coffee and left before Chrissie had a chance to hear what his weekend plans were. She noted that Jamie talked about his children a lot, but never really said much else about his private life. She knew he had a twin girl and boy who were about 5 or 6 years old but he also mentioned another boy who was obviously older. She thought it would be nice to have children of her own and how nice to have a boy and girl in one fell swoop, although she imagined they must be a handful at times.

Back home that night, Chrissie prepared for her date with Ryan. She felt it was like waiting for a bus, you wait for ages and then two come along at once. She logged onto the dating site just to check out again the photograph and the personal details and was

once again reassured that he sounded lovely. Her date was at 7pm and at 6.30, she was dressed and ready, having made as much effort for Ryan as she had for the speed-dating event. She telephoned Justin who confirmed he would hang out at the coffee shop and would be heavily disguised as a little old lady sitting in the corner knitting. With Justin, you just never knew when he was being serious. Lauren loaned her the Radley handbag as promised and Chrissie was ready to go.

‘Don’t forget Lauren, you ring in me in one hour and if I don’t like him I will pretend you are calling me out for an emergency – a daffodil has died or something, or another of your grandparents has suddenly expired. Remind me where we’re up to on that? How many are left, should we start moving onto Aunts and Uncles yet?’

Lauren laughed, ‘I think we should set up a chart with names and dates etc. so that excuses can be ready when necessary. By the way, I did mention to Mario about doing a beauty course and he thought I should have a go; said he’d re-arrange my hours to fit in as long as I could still complete the number of hours he paid me for. I can’t say he was deliriously happy with the suggestion but he wasn’t too bad about it either.’

‘Told you! I’ve yet to meet him but he sounds as if he would play fair as long as you’re fair with him. Have you made any enquiries yet about a suitable course?’ asked Chrissie.

‘Yes, I’ve registered and am starting very soon. Hopefully, I may pick up some hints to improve my chances with Sasha. He’s been texting me all day today!’

‘That sounds really promising, he seems really nice so you never know – he could be the one! For once, you’re actually going to be seeing someone with a brain, which has to be a first. I have a good feeling about the beauty business, it should suit you right down to the ground and you never know we might be able to get you some work through our wedding contacts.’



With a chorus of well wishes, Chrissie set off for her date. With an image of Ryan in her head, she drove to the City Centre and parked close by. She felt as confident as it was possible to feel but was really rather hoping he wouldn't turn up or be absolutely vile. Just as she was within yards of the coffee shop, she saw him walking towards her. He was easily identifiable from his photograph, only better, much better.

'Serafina, if you really are helping me out, then step in now and make it clear to me what I should do? He's just as gorgeous looking as Miles – what do I do if we like each other, how can I not say yes to seeing him again? Help me to sort out what I am getting myself into,' asked Chrissie in silent prayer.

'Chrissie?' asked Ryan stepping forward to greet her. 'You have to be Ryan,' smiled Chrissie taking in Ryan's handsome face with his beautiful white teeth, almost black hair and lovely chocolate brown eyes.

'Shall we?' asked Ryan, taking Chrissie's arm and steering her to the coffee shop. 'I've been looking forward to meeting you. I really liked your profile and felt that we could have a real connection. I am so pleased that you are even lovelier than your photo. Your photograph does not do you justice. I'm sure we're going to get on really well.'

'I think you may well be right,' replied Chrissie, trying hard not to think of the consequences of having two fabulous men interested in her. She couldn't remember the last time she had received any attention from anyone. She acknowledged that she had barely done anything but work in the past couple of years. Had she really changed that much in such a relatively short time? Was she more attractive than she had thought herself to be? Or was this something to do with all this angel malarkey?

Over in the corner sat Justin, trying to be inconspicuous by reading the Sun Newspaper, upside down. Chrissie groaned inwardly and tried to signal to him what he was doing but he didn't catch the meaning of the eye rolls, raised eyebrows and subtle

pointing. As subtle as a brick he gave a thumbs up sign and a mouthed 'phwoar' and Chrissie groaned inwardly. Ryan got them drinks whilst she found a table not too far from Justin's vantage point and waited for Ryan to bring over two cappuccinos on a tray.

He was very easy to talk to and chatted about his work as a photographer. He carefully listened to Chrissie's responses and her own explanation about what she did for a living. Before long, they had spent a couple of hours together which had just flown by.

Justin had left about a half hour after they arrived giving her a wink which she took as assurance that he approved. Lauren rang as they had set up for her to do and she spoke in code that gave Lauren the clear message that all was going really well. Eventually they got round to talking about their ambitions for their respective businesses.

'We should join forces' suggested Ryan, 'perhaps we could get into the wedding business. We both have contacts and organisational skills, there might just be something useful to work on together.'

Chrissie kept her thoughts to herself on this suggestion but privately was amazed at what he had said as it formed part of an ambition that she had held for some time.

Soon it became apparent that the coffee shop was intent on closing and that they would have to leave. 'Would you like to go somewhere else Chrissie? I know a nice little bar that does tapas that's nearby? Chrissie didn't hesitate in saying yes and Ryan took her hand and led her out of the coffee shop, thanking the staff as he went. He really was very polite thought Chrissie as well as being very good looking. She was feeling torn, extremely flattered and confused. Once again, she offered up silent thanks to whoever was listening, whether it really was a guardian angel called Serafina, or a spirit guide in the form of a Tibetan monk as her mother had sagely informed her. It didn't really

matter, she just knew that things were happening in her life that were totally unexpected and whilst she was enjoying it she knew she was creating dilemmas that she would never have believed could occur. She didn't know whether she preferred Ryan or Miles, although she hadn't yet sampled Ryan's kisses so maybe, just maybe that might decide it. Stealing a glance at his full sensuous mouth, she decided that should she be lucky enough to find out later it was unlikely to be a negative experience.

At the tapas bar Ryan continued to be attentive and great company. She was unfamiliar with tapas, which made her feel a little awkward, but Ryan, sensing her cautiousness, explained exactly what everything was and steered her into choosing some delicious food. Ryan was obviously well educated, well-travelled and a very good conversationalist. Nothing so far between him and Miles; but surely there must be something thought Chrissie. She considered what it would be like to date two men and dismissed the idea as totally unworkable and against all her principles; but then again, could she afford to let the wrong man slip through her fingers by dismissing him too soon?' She wondered if Ryan liked her as much as she was beginning to like him. That question was soon answered.

'Chrissie, I would really like to see you again, would you like to come out with me on a proper date? I think we get on really well and I'd like to see much more of you,' said Ryan seriously.

Ignoring the consequences, Chrissie found herself agreeing and they set up a date for Sunday evening, provisionally to go the cinema. As soon as she had committed herself she began to panic internally and wondered how on earth she was going to pull this off, and how long would it take to make a choice as to who she really wanted to see? She knew she was free to be with as many people as she chose, she didn't have to commit to anyone, but her moral code told her that she couldn't date both for long and stay sane.

She had no idea what was going to happen and whilst on one hand she was very happy, on the other she was feeling anxious and guilty.

A glass of wine later, with both being sensible as they were driving, and having consumed some lovely food, they were now sat comfortably on a sofa. Ryan had casually thrown his arm along the back of the sofa. Reading the signals Chrissie adjusted her position so that she was just a little closer and Ryan took his cue and dropped his arm around her shoulder.

‘This is very nice,’ he said simply, looking at Chrissie intently. Chrissie could only smile and echo back what he had said. It was indeed very nice. Just the one thing missing to make it perfect she thought. Right on cue Ryan leaned in towards her and cupped her chin with his hand directing her mouth to his. Chrissie only had one thought as his lips met hers; Wow, wow, and double wow, this man knew how to kiss and how. His kisses were deep and with a hint of passion to come but respectable enough to be seen in public, although they were not actually overlooked. Inevitably, there was a comparison between him and Miles and she decided that Ryan might have the edge, but it was a close call. What a dilemma Chrissie thought. When the kiss stopped, Chrissie felt almost disappointed, almost.

The night was drawing to a close and soon it was time to say goodbye. Ryan, being the gentleman that Chrissie took him to be, walked her to her car, holding her hand on the way. At the car Chrissie was treated to another wonderful kiss which was every bit as gratifying as the earlier one.

‘I look forward to seeing you again on Sunday Chrissie, I’ve had a lovely time and have every reason to believe that this could be the start of something special, I certainly hope so anyway,’ breathed Ryan as he held Chrissie close in his arms. Chrissie thought he smelled as wonderful as he looked and she agreed with what he had said and said so.

In a daze, Chrissie got into her car and pulled away, carefully watching Ryan from her rear window as he disappeared into the distance.

‘Thank you, thank you, thank you!’ muttered Chrissie, ‘whoever you are, thank you! But now what do I do? Help me to sort this out before it becomes a mess. I can’t date two men at the same time, much as it appeals, I’m not deceitful and I would hate to be deceived if it was the other way round. Let the two dates I’ve arranged make it quickly possible for me to know if one or other of them is meant for me.’

Back home Lauren was waiting for all the details and Chrissie happily filled her in and explained how confused she now was and how she had no comprehension of what was happening.

‘Oh Chrissie, just enjoy it, have a couple of dates with both; get a sense of whether either of them is likely to be a long-term prospect and if so you can develop that relationship whilst knocking back the second. You will soon know which one to choose, remember both are on their best behaviour at the moment and this will change as they reveal their most natural selves. Maybe neither of them is right but you can still enjoy the experience whilst you find out. And in any case, realistically what are the odds of finding two truly perfect matches at the same time? Sooner or later you will probably find that you prefer one over the other’ said Lauren sagely.

‘Normally, the odds would be zilch, nil, not a chance in hell, but I’m telling you Lauren, at the moment I couldn’t separate them; they both seem really lovely and they both seem to like me as much as I like them. Am I dreaming or something? I half expect to wake up with one of those white jackets on, the ones with the extra-long arms that wrap around your middle; you know what I mean, and you usually get a room with padded walls as part of the package!’

Lauren laughed. 'Be happy Chrissie! I reckon there are forces making these things happen and they must be happening for a reason. Leave it to just develop and live with it; just enjoy. I for one have every confidence that it will work out for you.'

'Why Lauren?' Said Chrissie puzzled, 'why are you so sure it will work out?'

Lauren didn't hesitate in her response. 'I just know Chrissie. Your mum feels exactly the same too. Since I've been doing this 'angel' thing everything just seems to be slotting together and I feel a real sense of direction now, a sort of conviction of what's right and what's right for now. Take Sasha for example; he's lovely but I know he preferred you to me, and honestly I don't mind that. I hope I can persuade him to change his mind but really, I guess I'm just a stop-gap. He's French, he won't stay around in Leicester. He's also far too clever for me and I'll get sussed sooner or later. He's a student of literature and I have to pretend to understand what he is talking about but I have no idea what he meant when he was talking about classic books; something about 'Wuthering Heights' which I think is something about mountains somewhere and 'A portrait of Doris Green,' or something like that,'

Chrissie interrupted, 'I think you mean 'a portrait of Dorian Gray' it's about a portrait in an attic, and it's 'Wuthering Heights' which is a love story.'

'Don't like the sound of the attic story Chrissie, sounds really boring, who wants to read about a picture in an attic? Might try Wuthering Heights though, is it like the stuff that Jackie Collins writes? I might enjoy that.'

Chrissie just laughed, she knew Lauren was not stupid but she had never wanted to learn and therefore had not reached her potential as far as education was concerned.

'Anyway, you see what I mean, I don't know what I'm talking about and I won't be able to keep it up, but it doesn't matter. I get to snog a gorgeous guy for a while and then one day I won't, as he'll leave. It's fine, but this time I know in advance how it will be and

I'm prepared. I see this as a stepping stone and a learning experience to prepare me for the relationship that's just waiting to be found. I don't think it will be long before I do find it.'

Chrissie was taken aback. 'Lauren, sometimes you really amaze me, that little speech was really insightful and I totally believe you have finally understood a valuable life lesson. Your philosophy is sound, although your knowledge of English Literature does need some work. Why don't we do a little cramming and maybe we can keep you snogging Sasha for a while longer. Now, have you read 'Of Mice and Men' by John Steinbeck?'

Lauren's face clearly told her she had not.

'Okay, well Mice and Men is basically about two characters and one of them, George.' and Chrissie filled her in on the plot. When she'd finished she thought Lauren would be able to blag her way through at least one of the modern classics.

'Tomorrow we'll try another book, one of Jane Austen's perhaps?'

'Ah now I do know about Jane Austen, she wrote that film, the one with Keira Knightly, now what was the name of it? Something about a prize and a pressure disc?'

'Yes Lauren, Pride and Prejudice does sound something like that,' groaned Chrissie incredulously, wondering what exactly she had let herself in for and how long Lauren would be able to converse with Sasha without him cracking up.

## CHAPTER 8

The following day at work and Chrissie was once again in a very happy mood which was picked up immediately by Bex and Heidi who wanted all the details. Chrissie was happy to fill them in but explained her fears about dating two guys at once, it just didn't feel right to her.

Bex came up with an idea to help Chrissie choose. 'Maybe Heidi and I could watch you with your dates for a while, discretely of course, and then give you feedback. We could text you with our conclusions while you're on your date!'

Chrissie burst out laughing. 'It's a very interesting idea but how would you make this work as my date with Ryan is at the cinema? My date with Miles is for dinner and I've no idea where he's taking me.'

'Not a problem. It should be obvious by your reaction to when you meet them. We'll just observe you when you meet and comment on how we interpret your reaction,' said Bex seriously.

'Yes, we would observe you from different angles as we wouldn't be together but we'd get together afterwards and compare notes,' joined in Heidi grinning.

'You're both completely crazy but somehow I don't think I'm going to be able to stop you from playing your little social experiment on me. But if you dare make yourselves known to either of my dates I will not let you forget it!' joked Chrissie. She doubted very much that either of them would be able to solve her dilemma but just because it was so crazy, and a bit of fun, she gave them details of where she was meeting each of them.

'We'll text you with our conclusions as soon as we have made them,' said Bex. 'I'm sure we can work out who is right for you, even if it is only right for now, and help you out with your dilemma.'



Chrissie could only laugh but disputed that they would be any wiser than she with their plan. Heidi saw a customer and went off to serve in front of shop.

'Remember that tarot card reading I promised you, it's still on if you want it!' said Bex enticingly.

'I will definitely be taking you up on that but it will have to wait a bit longer. Let's try and book a time when there's a slot free for both of us somewhere. Do you want to come to my apartment? You'd probably end up having to read for Lauren as well, possibly even my mother, and we can't leave Heidi out. We could have a tarot party. I'll get my mother to dress as Gipsy Rose and persuade her to read the tea leaves. She may wheel out Great Aunt Mary or Granddad Percy or whoever it is that she's currently getting her information from.'

Bex laughed but thought it was a great idea, even if only for a laugh, and so it was arranged that they would have an evening together the following week, after Chrissie's dates.

Another very busy morning passed very quickly and soon it was time to shut up shop and hit the shopping centre. Chrissie wanted to treat herself to a new outfit and thought she would go to the Highcross for inspiration, in particular to John Lewis where she could find ideas but not usually the money to make purchases. She concluded that she had champagne tastes but a lemonade income and thus far her budget was definitely more Primark than Prada. However, she knew how to make a cheap outfit look expensive and she definitely had style. She had not really indulged herself lately and knew she should be more adventurous but had got out of the habit of dressing to impress. She was guilty of playing too safe and knew she should shake herself out of this. She made the fatal mistake of telling Bex and Heidi and they insisted on coming along with her to shop.

In John Lewis, they ran around gathering up armfuls of clothes in Chrissie's size – some of which looked decidedly unsuitable to Chrissie's eye.

'I am NOT going to wear that!' screeched Chrissie as Heidi pushed her towards a changing room whilst clutching something brownish.

'Trust me Chrissie; this will look much better on than off. Now get in there and prove me wrong if you dare!' said Heidi with a level of confidence Chrissie found intimidating.

Reluctantly Chrissie took the dress to a changing cubicle to try on.

Brown? She thought, brown? And look at the price! Admittedly for a 'Planet' dress it was very reasonable, as it had been reduced in the sale, but honestly, brown?

She pulled the dress over her head and slid it down over her hips. It did feel as if it fitted rather well and she rather liked the feel of the fabric. She glanced at herself in the mirror and was blown away! Even if she did say so herself, she looked damn hot! She rang the bell for the assistant.

'Would it be all right if my two friends outside came in to give me a perspective on this dress – they're the ones with armfuls of clothes and big grins on their faces,' she offered. The assistant knew who they were straight away and said she would call them in.

'OMG,' breathed Bex, 'you look amazing, good choice Heidi!'

'I knew it would look great – buy it! We now need to get you new shoes and some bits of jewellery – come on Bex let's go find what she needs,' and off they both sped like a couple of rockets in orbit.

Chrissie looked at the price label again and groaned. It was way beyond what she normally paid for a dress, even in the sale, but then it did look fabulous and she noted that it wasn't really brown, it could more accurately be described as bronze. She hesitated. Just for a moment, and then headed off to the tills to pay.

She could see Bex and Heidi in the distance. Bex had what appeared to be several pairs of shoes in her hands and Heidi was clutching handfuls of necklaces.

As soon as her credit card was put away, she found herself being dragged to the shoe department where her comfy shoes were being pulled off her feet and she found her feet being squeezed into a very beautiful pair of gold and bronze leather shoes. Heidi draped a string of beads around her neck and held up matching earrings against her face to establish the effect.

'Get the beads and the earrings, they look great and match the dress and your colouring perfectly. Get the shoes too they're a perfect match and it won't matter if they're a bit uncomfortable, you won't be walking far in them,' urged Bex.

Chrissie got up and walked around thinking that the shoes were actually very comfortable, probably because they only consisted of a few straps on a padded sole and with a manageable heel height. Not exactly killer heels but certainly ones of murderous intent!

Chrissie had been in the store for 20 minutes and had bought a dress, shoes, jewellery and tights. She had deferred on the exquisite bra and pants that Bex had selected on grounds that it would be some time before she needed to think of new underwear, although shortage of cash had been the real reason. A bag had called her name and as it was a match for the shoes this added to the mammoth bill she was knocking up.

Shopping complete and with time to spare Chrissie offered to buy lunch. Instead, Bex insisted that she would pay. The offer was accepted and they decided to go and visit Lauren in the little bistro where she worked.

Lauren was delighted to see Chrissie and seemed equally pleased to finally meet up with Bex and Heidi whom she had heard so much about. Chrissie wanted to meet

Lauren's boss Mario but unfortunately, he didn't seem to be around. She asked Lauren where he was.

'He's off at some wine convention or some such high-falluting event,' said Lauren dismissively. 'He goes off several times a month attending food festivals and wine-sampling and such like, he believes he has to stay on top of the market, takes it very seriously.'

'That sounds like good business practice to me Lauren,' said Chrissie, clearly impressed. 'I wish I had the time to go to exhibitions to look at the latest ideas, it would be very useful and could really pay dividends. I'm disappointed he's not here, I would have liked to have at least put a face to the voice.'

'His face is like the rest of him, old, dull and boring. I'm glad he's not here for you to meet, it would have spoilt your day,' said Lauren with venom.

All the girls laughed out loud and Lauren began to take their orders. Bex asked if she was able to join them and Lauren said she could probably manage half an hour and would love to eat with them all. And so it was that all four girls sat down to eat the most delicious meal. Chrissie remonstrated with Lauren for not telling her how fabulous was the food that was served here but Lauren just shrugged and said that she didn't think it was anything extraordinary. Chrissie despaired of Lauren who was clearly a Philistine; the food was so divine it could have been fed to the Gods.

'Chrissie is going to arrange for us to have a night at her place with tarot readings and stuff from Bex,' said Heidi conspiratorially to Lauren, whom she seemed to be getting on with like a house on fire.

'Well I hope it's not on a night that I hope to be seeing Sasha,' said Lauren laughing, 'I love all this stuff and I've been really impressed with what Carole has been telling me in the tea cups. There's definitely something in it and I wish I could do it for myself. I have

been calling on the angels for guidance and they sent me, Sasha, who I'm seeing tonight.' She gushed. 'He's really clever, about to get his PhD, reads all the classics and stuff like that,'

Heidi interrupted, 'Does he intimidate you Lauren?'

Lauren blushed a little. 'No, not intimidate exactly, but it's made me realise how lacking I am in education. I really like him but I suspect it won't be long before he gets fed up with me. I can't match his intelligence and he won't want to stay with someone who can't discuss his passions with him.'

'Why would you think that Lauren? Don't you think that because he discusses these things with academics all day that he might actually like to spend time with someone who is uncomplicated and non-academic? Someone who is fun, beautiful and knows how to have a good time? Not every man measures equality by brain power Lauren, some just like to be with someone who makes them laugh, you might just be lucky with Sasha,' stated Heidi simply. Lauren nodded that she hoped that would turn out to be the case.

'Anyway,' began Bex, 'It looks like we could have a good time at Chrissie's so we'll need to get this arranged as soon as possible.'

Lauren agreed. 'Let's make it Monday – no-one goes on a date on Monday so neither of us will be out –let's do Monday!' Chrissie had wanted to keep her options open but agreed that it would be good to have a real 'girlie' night that was promising to be fun.

'Monday it is,' said Chrissie. 'I'll get some wine and maybe we could get the chocolate fountain going and dip marshmallows into it.' The three drooling faces looking back at her said she was on to a winner.

Lunch finished, the girls sat and drank coffee for a little while, enjoying each other's company and Chrissie was heartened to see how alive Heidi came when in a group. She

was such good company, very funny, and had really made a connection with Lauren. Soon it was time to leave and get back home in order to ready herself for her date with Miles, which she was looking forward to. She was also looking forward to Monday night as well as Sunday night too. She pinched her arm to reassure herself that she was actually living this life. She silently thanked her angel, or whoever it was that was weaving the magic that she was experiencing.

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