

CAROLE
MATTHEWS



*Paper Hearts
and
Summer
Kisses*



Chapter One



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

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

Another reason I can’t delay any longer is that Dean Martin

is still crooning into the carpet and the dog is starting to whine along too. The only way I can shut them both up is to get out of bed. I am resigning myself to my fate, but I still do it with much groaning.

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

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

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

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

The sight of my morning self in the mirror is truly scary. My forty-odd-year-old face takes quite a lot of time to reassemble itself into the right symmetry after being reshaped by the pillow all night. Seriously, it’s a good half-hour these days before the creases go. I keep thinking I should get some decent eye cream

to slather onto the puffy bags that greet me pre-dawn, but I never quite manage that level of beauty routine. I'm a sort of soap and water kinda gal. But I'm getting to the age where I need considerably more help than that.

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

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

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

I keep my eyes closed in the shower so that I can hold onto the pretence of sleep for just a little while longer. I don't mind commuting. Actually, yes I do. It's four precious hours out of my day that I could, surely, utilise in a much better way. It's mind-numbing, expensive and exhausting. On the plus side, I avoid the hideous crush of the train and travel by comfortable coach which picks me up at the end of my road and deposits

me right outside my office on the Embankment. There is a train station in Wolverton, where I live, but it's at the other end of the town and the journey would cost twice as much *plus* involve a long walk, a train and a tube. Hideous. On the coach I sit still for two hours each way and they serve me coffee. I think that last bit was the deal clincher.

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

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

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

‘Muuuuuum,’ he complains sleepily.

‘I’m just leaving, sweetheart. I’ll see you tonight.’

‘OK.’

‘Don’t be late for school.’

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

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

‘He doesn’t need to.’

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

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

‘I’ve got to go.’

‘Have a good day,’ he murmurs.

‘You too. You’ve done all your homework?’

‘Sort of.’

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

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

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

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

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

‘OK.’

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

‘I’ll do it. You’ll miss your coach.’

I glance at my watch. He’s right.

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

Chapter Two



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

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

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

has had all the fireplaces taken out. It's not one with huge rooms and high ceilings either, but is a small, modest abode. However, the kitchen is big enough to fit a table in, which is its saving grace and a boon for an addictive crafter like me, as the dining room table is usually swamped with paper, glitter and stuff. At least we have somewhere else to eat our meals rather than on our knees with trays in front of the telly – though I do favour a bit of that sometimes.

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

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

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

'No Susan?' she adds as she pours.

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

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

'Yes.' Susan has already demonstrated admirably that she

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

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

'That's good.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

I went to my parents' house and drank tea and talked about the weather while my husband packed up and left our lives. Within a month of him going, he'd met someone else who adored him. Of course he did. Essentially, he's a nice man. We divorced without fuss and Liam remarried. He has a lovely wife called

Jodie and, now, five years or so later, they have two small children of their own. He sends us money regularly. Not that much, if I'm honest, but it all helps. I can't fault him for that. However, though they do keep in touch, the daily Skype sessions with Finn never quite materialised and, to date, he's never been there on holiday. Liam has made a few flying visits home, but it's not really enough. He never forgets Finn's birthday or Christmas, so that's some small comfort. It doesn't seem to bother my son – my dear old dad has seamlessly stepped into the parenting role for him – but I do wonder if it plays on his mind.

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

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

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

'A man after my own heart,' I quip.

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

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

‘Pleased to meet you. Christie Chapman.’

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

‘Yes.’

He laughs at that, as if I’m joking. People are looking round to see who, other than Toni, has the temerity to be quite so chirpy at this hour.

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

‘Tea or coffee, love?’ Toni asks.

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

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

‘Have you been doing this for years?’ he asks.

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

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

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

‘I’m new to the area,’ Henry Jackson tells me. ‘Where’s that?’

This one’s obviously going to be a talker. I hope we’re not on the same coach home otherwise I’ll never find out if the dappy heroine falls into bed with a man who is quite clearly unsuitable.