

Extract from “All You Need is Love”

Chapter 1

Sally Freeman, single mum and superwoman to the rescue once again. ‘Let me take those for you, love.’ Mrs Kapur is struggling up the stairs, a heavy bag of shopping from the local Save-It supermarket in each hand.

‘Lift’s out again, Sally,’ she mutters at me. ‘Little buggers. It’s the third time this week they’ve stuck up those buttons with chewy. I’ll give them a bloody clip round the ear if I catch them.’

It would probably be the last thing that she did. Mrs Kapur’s a tiny woman – all wrinkles and sinew – no match for the hulky great youths that hang around the flats looking for trouble and, invariably, finding it. I’m about a foot taller than her and I’m a little shorty myself.

Living on the tenth floor isn’t easy at any age – I’m out of puff when I get up there. When you’re well past pensionable age, as my lovely neighbour is, it must be a nightmare. The old lady stops and leans against the wall while she catches her breath. It’s about eighty degrees out there. The sun’s cracking the flags – those that haven’t already been cracked for years because the Council never get round to fixing them. Despite the heat, Mrs Kapur’s still wearing a thick coat and a headscarf over her sari.

Super Sal takes the bags from her. ‘Stocking up?’

‘I’m out of everything,’ she says with a shake of her head. ‘No bog roll. No cat food.’

Technically, we not supposed to have cats in our tower block but no one minds Mrs Kapur’s big ginger moggy, Ghandi – apart from the Council, of course. That cat’s the only company she has these days. He was originally called something else, something more cat-like – tiddles or puss-puss - but all the residents rechristened him and it kind of stuck. Now even Mrs Kapur calls him Ghandi. ‘Got my pension today, though.’ She gives me a gappy smile.

‘I hope you’ve treated yourself to a nice, big cream cake.’

‘I have that,’ she chuckles. ‘Got Ghandi a bit of fresh fish too as well as his tins. Probably why my bags are so heavy.’

‘I’ve told you before,’ I remind her. ‘I’ll do your shopping for you. All you have to do is give me a knock and tell me what you want. I’m up there every day.’

‘I don’t like to bother you, doll.’

‘I’ve got naff all else to do, Mrs K. It’s no trouble.’

‘You’re a sound girl, Sally Freeman. What would I do without you?’

Get one of your lazy, good for nothing sons to look after you, I want to say – but I don’t. She adores them all – lazy bastards that they are – and wouldn’t have a word said against them. They deign to pop in for five minutes once in a blue moon and then, strangely, she never seems to be able to find her pension money when they’ve gone. And I thought Indian families were supposed to be close?

Hoisting up the Save-It bags, I say, ‘Ready for assault on the north face?’

She laughs at that.

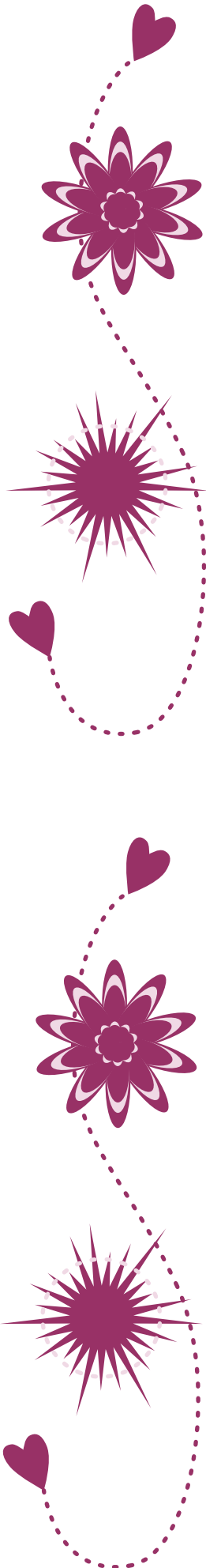
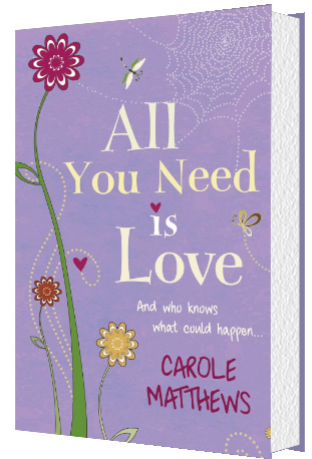
Unlike other superheroes, I don’t have my own cape or Lycra outfit emblazoned with an eye-catching flash of lightning. No. All I’ve got is a Matalan tee-shirt, charity shop jeans – very last season - and cheap shoes off one of the stalls on Kirberly market. No silky, padded knickers and star-spangled corset for this Wonder Woman.

‘Come on, Mrs K. You can make me a quick cup of tea when we get to the top.’ Most superheroes get to save the world, all I do is stop frail old biddies from having heart attacks because some bored senseless little shite thought it was fun to vandalise the lifts.

I put my hand under Mrs Kapur’s elbow and give her a bit of encouragement up the stairs. ‘Ever thought of applying to the Council for a bungalow, Mrs K? Or what about sheltered housing?’ Even if she lived on the second or third floor it would have to be better than this.

She takes the steps painfully slowly, lifting one tiny foot to the next stair then a mammoth effort until the other joins it. My son, Charlie, walked like this when he was two years old. Now he’s ten and he runs up here like a wildebeest with a hungry lion at its bum.

Mrs Kapur stops and takes a few laboured breaths. ‘I’ve lived here all my life, doll. I can’t move now. This is all I know. Where would I go?’ She shakes her head again and her scarf falls



over her eyes. I put down one of the bags and push it back for her. 'I'll be going out of here in a wooden box.'

Sooner than she'd like if she has to keep using these stairs. The Council has given up bothering to come and fix the lift, no matter how many times I ring and complain. It works for about three days – sometimes not even that long – then someone kicks in the door or pulls off the control panel. Once there was a big pile of poo in there and, frankly, I couldn't swear that it was from a dog. In my role as superwoman, I had to clean it up, of course. I'm on first name terms with everyone in the housing department – not that it does me any good. You'd think they'd be nicer to one of their regulars. Frankly, their customer service isn't what it should be.

While we catch our breath, I'll tell you a bit more about where I live. It's what's commonly called a 'sink estate' on the outskirts of Liverpool. Our tower block – one of three on the estate – is bordered by a rag-tag of run-down Council houses and prefabs which probably should be condemned by now. Row upon row of grey, box-like houses that were built as a temporary measure during the second world war with nothing more substantial than Lego bricks, still manage defy the elements and stay standing to this day. William Shankly House – named for the legendary manager of Liverpool football club – was built in the late 1960's and should have been knocked down in the early 1970's. Why some bright spark thought this would be a fitting tribute to the great man, I'll never know. Bill Shankly would never have put up with this crap. He'd be spinning in his grave now, bless him, if he could see this. It's a concrete monument to all that was bad about British architecture at that time. Who ever decided that high-rise city living was desirable? Some over-paid architect living in a low-rise cottage surrounded by rolling countryside and nothing but the sound of skylarks, no doubt.

The outside of the building is unpainted pebbledash stained with dark streaks of damp that meander down its pock-marked sides. Inside isn't any better. The stairwells are dark and dingy. The lights are always on the blink and after dark they're a muggers paradise. As there aren't any public lavatories around here and the youths of today clearly have very weak bladders, the entrance hall is frequently used as a toilet. I wedge the front door open every day, but no amount of fresh air can get rid of the all-pervading putrid smell. When it's hot, like today, it makes you want to heave.

While Mrs K and I tackle the steps to the next floor, I'll tell you a bit about me too – other than the fact that I'm an unpaid superwoman. I'm twenty-seven years old, but I feel as if I've lived three lifetimes already. I've got lots of 'smile' lines for my age – even though, sometimes, there's not been a lot to smile about. I'm as fit as a flea from climbing ten flights of stairs a dozen times a day. Think of all the money I save on expensive gym membership! You have to look on the positive side, don't you? My friend, Debs, highlights my hair every few weeks for nothing which I like to think makes me look younger. I've got one of those trendy, short bobs – also courtesy of Debs – which is borne mainly out of a need to have low-maintenance hair because, despite being unemployed, I never seem to have time to do it. Most of my life is devoted to my ten-year-old son, Charlie, who's the best thing that's ever happened to me. I might be crap at most things in life, but I'm a bloody good mum. Despite what the Daily Mail might have you believe, not all single mums are slappers, sponging off the state and spending our benefit on Smirnoff Ice.

Having vented that, I have to take a deep breath and say, perhaps needlessly, that Charlie's dad isn't around. What a charmer he turned out to be. Left me when I was six month's pregnant and panicking for a Mrs Robinson type from that hot bed of sin, St Helens. Thank goodness that we never married. I reckon that I had a lucky escape. He did suggest that he do the decent thing but, to be honest, he wouldn't have known the decent thing if it had bopped him on the nose. To prove my point, I can tell you that the one time love of my life is now a permanent guest of Her Majesty's – spending his days in Walton Prison for armed robbery. In my book, that means that he's given up any rights to see me or Charlie ever again. Plus I left the space for the father's name blank on Charlie's birth certificate. Very wisely, as it turns out. But it's something which the Child Support Agency are a bit put out about. They probably imagined that I'd had a different fella every night and didn't know which of the lucky souls was the dad. I wish. I'd been with Charlie's dad for three years – not exactly a flash in the pan. To call him my childhood sweetheart might be pushing it a bit, but we met at school when we were fourteen. He'd been my only proper boyfriend. The only person I'd ever slept with. I wasn't like my mates either, crossing their fingers as their favoured method of contraception. Charlie was the result of a dodgy condom – must have been. In my mind I was being really careful. We never, ever did it without protection. And look what happens? I wonder one day will all single mums rally together to sue condom manufacturers? If I'd known about the morning-after pill – or if it even existed then – my life could have turned out very different.

All my big career plans – such as they were – went out of the window once my squawking bundle of joy was born. I had to abandon my childcare course at the local Technical College which I'd only just started. But what little I did learn certainly came in handy. Now I feel older –

much older – and wiser. And I wouldn't change a thing as Charlie – now a ten-year-old grunting bundle of pre-teen angst - has brought me nothing but happiness. He's my sole reason for getting out of bed in the morning.

Now we're at the top landing and we both stop and puff for a bit. Even if you're fit and a superhero, this is a long way up. My flat's opposite Mrs Kapur's on the top floor and just a bit further down the landing. I got the flat when I was seventeen when I'd just had Charlie and, believe me, I was so grateful at the time. I didn't know where else I was going to go. Mum had not long died and I knew that I couldn't stay in the house with Dad. You don't want to bring up a baby around a raging drunk, do you? I could never have left Charlie alone with him. The man just wasn't safe. He'd always had a drink problem, but with mum gone he went completely to pieces. One minute he'd be sober and all smiles, the next – when he'd had a few too many bevvies – he'd be crashing round the place, cursing fit to make Gordon Ramsey blush and trying to pick a fight with the telly. Anyway, he's gone too now. I know it sounds harsh, but good riddance, I say. He never was a father to me.

I look round at the peeling paint and listen to Mrs Kapur's breathless wheezing. This place felt like a sanctuary when I first moved in, my own little oasis, somewhere I could call home. I didn't even mind lugging the pram up ten flights of stairs. Funny how your opinion changes over the years.

Chapter 2

I unpacked Mrs Kapur's shopping for her too. Not that she had much, bless her. There's hardly anything in her cupboards. I felt guilty taking a cuppa from her and she wanted to share her cream cake. She's such a love. Turns out she'd only bought the cake because today was its sell-by date and she'd got it half-price. Is this what our poor bloody pensioners are reduced to? Buying about-to-go-off cream cakes? Makes you proud to be British, eh?

Now I'm back in my flat, I go to see what's lurking in my own kitchen cupboards. It's not exactly a treasure trove of gourmet delights in here either, but Charlie and I never go hungry – that's one thing I'm very particular about. The rest of the kids round here seem to exist on nothing but pizza and turkey twizzlers. I'd rather not pay my leccy bill than go without food. I'm sure my power company don't feel quite the same. They'd rather see us starve. Bastards. I make sure that Charlie gets fresh veg every day – at the worst, when times are hard, frozen peas. He can only have cola once a day. And I buy the cheap crap from Save-It, so he actually doesn't like it that much. He just complains about it because that's what kids do. No doubt he thinks I'm a mingy old bat, but I tell him it's for his own good. One day when he's big and strong and has all his own teeth and isn't dying of obesity or heart disease, he'll thank me.

Glancing at my watch, I realise that I'd better get moving if I'm going to get to my computer course on time. Getting Mrs Kapur sorted has taken much longer than I bargained for, so now food will have to wait. Unfortunately, my exemplary dietary habits only extend to when my son's here.

Probably couldn't eat, anyway. This is only the third week of my course and I'm still feeling very nervous about the whole thing. It's the first time that I've ever done anything for myself – just for me – and there's a certain amount of anxiety involved in that as I'm so determined not to fail. I was completely useless at school – mainly because I used to spend half my nights up and looking after Mum when she was ill, so all that I wanted to do during the day was put my head down on the desk and go to sleep. Often, I did. Then I ditched my college course when I got knocked up. So, this is the first time I've ventured back into any form of education since then and, frankly, I'm bricking it.

There's a knock at the door and I know who it is. I also know that I don't have time for this. I sigh inwardly and go to open it. As I suspected, Johnny's standing there. His little dog Ringo's at his feet, as always.

'I've got five minutes and then I've got to go,' I tell him as I walk away from the door.

Johnny and Ringo follow me into the living room, where I start to check whether I've got my phone, my purse, my notebook, my pen.

'I came to see if you wanted me to pick Charlie up from school,' he says to my back.

'You could have phoned me.'

Johnny shrugs apologetically. 'I was out and about.' He stands awkwardly, filling the small room.

Softening, I smile at him. I've nothing to be cross with Johnny about, for goodness sake. Plus it's actually very hard to stay mad when he's around. He grins back at me, running his

hands through his shock of dark hair which always looks as if it's been styled by a Saturday girl. 'Thanks, Johnny. You're a mate.'

At that, his smile fades. Even Ringo looks at me with limpid eyes, tail tucked between his legs. I guess the worse thing that you can tell someone who's in love with you is that he's a mate. Even their dog gets pissed off.

Okay, so this is how it is. Not too long ago Johnny and I were more than just mates. John Paul George Jones – even his Dad, the world's biggest Beatles fan balked at adding Ringo to his son's commemorative names - and I were together for about five years. On-off. Off-on. It was always me that called it off and always me that asked him to come back. Johnny might be irritatingly laid-back, but he's also a hard person to live without.

I finally split with him about six months ago. This time for good. Honestly. It was horrible and really hard, because – essentially – there's nothing really wrong with Johnny. Apart from the dodgy name, of course. He's handsome, funny and, to be honest, pretty fab in bed. He's great at remembering to take the bins out. He knows what to do with the working end of a Black & Decker. He can work the washing machine. What more could I want in a fella, you might ask. It's just that he and I have different ideas about how we should live our lives. I'm trying to better myself. I don't want Charlie to spend all his life here. I want to get out of this dead-end place, make a nicer life for us. I'm not sure where yet, but I know that the universe doesn't begin in and end in Liverpool. I'm going places. I have ambition.

Johnny on the other hand has none. He's a dreamer, drifting through his life, being buffeted along by the current, going where it takes him. Which doesn't seem to be any further than the end of his street. I can't do that. And I can't be with someone who thinks like that. It's dragging me down, keeping me under, pinning me to this place. He's happy here, happy with his lot. He loves the place. Johnny doesn't have a full-time job because he's the primary carer for his Mum and that doesn't really bother him – and I think it should. He's young, fit, bright - he should want more. He doesn't think what else might be out there, just waiting around the corner, if only he'd try to stretch himself. I'm sure my former lover thinks that people like us shouldn't have ambition. That we should be content with our given place down in the gutter of the planet. But I can't do piss poor for the rest of my life. I've had enough of it. I want more. And that's what's driven us apart. Simple as that.

The Government have started up a 'Back to Work' programme round here – or, as I like to put it, a 'Get Off Fucking Benefits and Earn Your Own Way, You Miserable Scroungers' programme. Because it's free and held just down the road from me, I've signed on for 'Computing for Beginners' – proof that I've moved on and have begun to build the kind of life that I want for me and Charlie. Okay, so I'm never going to be the next Bill Gates, but it's a step in the right direction, yeah? I'm twenty-seven for goodness sake – positively a raddled, old bird to be thinking of taking on the world of work for the first time – and I'll admit that there's a panic welling inside me that if I don't do something now to break away then I never will. I'll be stuck here forever like Mrs Kapur, grunting up the stairs with my meagre shopping and my cream cakes that are on the turn until the grim reaper comes for me.

To be honest, I'm not sure that computing is entirely my bag. I don't really see myself as nine to five office material, but it's a start. Everyone needs to know about computers, right? Even the telly seems to be a complicated beast these days with its digital and analogue and terrestrial and Freeview and all that stuff. You need a flipping degree to get it to record Who Wants To Be A Millionaire? And at least I'm doing something.

'Shall I go and get Charlie then?'

'What?' I'd forgotten that Johnny was still waiting patiently for my answer.

'I remembered that you were at your course today and wondered if I should meet Charlie. I'm sure he'd like to see Ringo.'

'Oh,' I say, all thoughts of doom and gloom receding. 'That's nice. Thanks, Johnny.' Charlie's being bullied at the moment – probably because I can't afford the latest trainers for him. You know what kids are like. Little bastards. Every one of them except my own, of course.

'I miss him,' Johnny says quietly.

The hardest part about this break-up is that Johnny adores Charlie and, for better, for worse, Charlie adores Johnny. But am I supposed to stay with a man simply because my son loves him more than I do? I've spent many nights lying awake at three o'clock worrying about this. If I could get air miles for my guilt trip, I'd be in the Bahamas now.

When he was younger and Johnny and I broke up, it didn't really matter to Charlie – a day, a week or even a month, as a child you just don't register the passing of time - it could be ages before he'd cotton on to the fact that Johnny wasn't around. Now, of course, it's very different. Charlie, unfortunately, has his own opinions on the matter. Frequently, they seem to differ from

mine.

'I know you miss him. I know. He misses you too.' I sling my bag on my shoulder, indicating that it's time for me to leave as I try to ignore those nipping guilty feelings again. 'You know that you can come round to see him anytime you want. Why don't you stay for your tea tonight? We're only having pasta. I can throw a bit more in. Stretch the mince between the three of us.' Thanks Guilt!

'I'd like that,' Johnny says and I can't look at him because his voice sounds choked.

Johnny hasn't moved on. As I said, Johnny, I'm sure, is still in love with me. What can I do?

I give a little tsk at my watch. 'I've got to go,' I say. Avoid the issue, that's what.

