

Extract from “That Loving Feeling”

Chapter 1

Good morning, me. I smile at my reflection. Sometimes I don't think that I look too bad when I catch sight of myself in the mirror. Then I put my glasses on. When I'm no longer in flattering soft focus I can see all too clearly the fine lines that radiate from the corners of my eyes, the deepening tracks that score my once flawless skin from my nose to my mouth, the unwelcome puckering of my once full and pouting lips. Now that I know life begins at forty, my mouth is turning into a cat's bottom. I try to relax it and fail. I used to call them my laughter lines, but there's been precious little to laugh about recently – and still the lines deepen.

Pulling the skin taut, I see what I'd look like if ever I found the courage or the cash to have a facelift. A more surprised-looking me stares back and I let the skin fall into place again with an unhappy little huff.

I wish that I was one of those women that people describe as 'feisty'. But I'm not. I wish I had an edgy, swishy haircut that says I'm a woman with my own style, my own mind. But I don't have the nerve to go into the hairdresser's and ask for one of those either – all those stick-thin women in black scare the life out of me. Am I the only person who finds the very thought of Gok Wan getting me naked terrifying? I would rather saw off my own arms than let someone like him tell me all that's wrong with me. I'm forty-five years old, a mother, a wife and a librarian to boot. None of that really adds up to sex-on-legs, does it? Meet Juliet Joyce. Mrs Average.

'Breakfast's ready!' my husband shouts up the stairs. I'd already heard the steady clattering of breakfast preparation coming to a head in the kitchen, but I was ignoring it, putting off the moment when I'd have to face another day. Now I'm going to be late for work if I don't get a move on.

Rubbing foundation over my skin with a heavier hand than normal, I have a last glance in the mirror and sigh. Then, before I forget, I grab the pile of books from my bedside table that are due

back at the library today. It wouldn't do for a librarian to be paying overdue fines, would it? The words of Tracy Chevalier, Philippa Gregory and Kate Atkinson have spent the last few weeks soothing me to sleep. Giving them a thankful pat, I tuck them under my arm, then snatch up my bag and head downstairs.

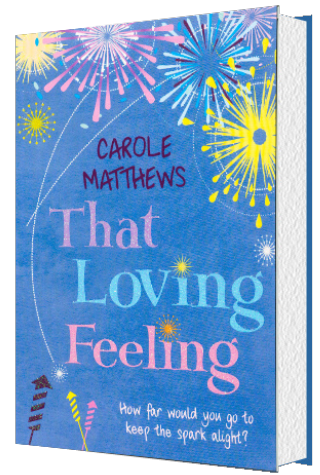
'Bit burned,' Rick says apologetically as I come into the kitchen.

My husband burns the toast every morning because our toaster is old and knackered and Rick is too tight to replace it. I see this as the most important meal of the day and don't appreciate the element of risk that our temperamental appliance brings to it. Rick doesn't share my concerns. He seems to think that, miraculously, one day our toaster will be restored to its former glory and will be able to produce crisp, golden toast once more and not charcoal frisbees. I think we should go to Argos and shell out twenty-odd quid for a new one, but I constantly lose that battle. We had the toaster as a wedding present nearly twenty-five years ago from Ricky's Aunty Gladys – the one who died of a heart attack on a Ryanair flight on her way to Dublin for a salsa-dancing weekend.

My husband insists that he's sentimentally attached to the toaster, whereas I am not. I would like a shiny new one, with variable toasting options and maybe a four-slice facility. Sometimes, in my bleaker moments, I fantasise about it. Rick seems to think that the toaster embodies all that our marriage is about – solid, steadfast, struggling on stoically, standing the test of time. I think it's just not working very well.

At least I don't have to make my own breakfast – Rick does that every morning, regular as clockwork. His intentions are very good. And I should be grateful. Instead, I am considering heartlessly switching to Bran Flakes as a form of silent protest. See what my husband and our toaster would think of that.

I elbow my way in next to my dearly-beloved and, scraping lurid yellow I Can't Believe It's Not Butter over the blackened I Can't Believe It's Toast, I cast a sideways glance at my husband as he busies himself making tea. Rick looks as if he's permanently in soft focus these days. He's always been quirky-looking rather than classically handsome. A bit like Hugh Laurie, who used to be a geek but is now, mysteriously, a heart-throb. Rick's thatch of hair, which was always spiky long before spiky became trendy, is now thinning. His grey-green eyes are kind rather than smouldering and have soft folds of skin beneath them that make him look tired – the tribulations of family life having been stored there. The once chiselled jawline has slackened somewhat and is now threatening to turn into a duet. His tall, gangly frame was all angles and awkwardness when I first knew him. Now



the six-pack he used to sport, although we didn't have a particular name for it way back then, has eased into the comfort zone and makes only a vague attempt at a twopack. Though he's still in great shape for his forty-five years, he looks like he could do with a little tightening all over. But then

who am I to talk? Cate Blanchett is never going to feel threatened by my presence on the planet, whereas I'm constantly concerned about hers.

'What?' he says, as he realises that I'm staring at him.

Nothing.' I risk breaking my teeth on the toast. The dog sidles up to me. Buster doesn't care what state his food comes in as long as it's plentiful. In fact, as long as he gets toast at all, he doesn't care if it's blackened. He's a hound of indeterminate parentage, a black and white bundle of adoring faithfulness. I snap off a piece of toast for him and he chomps it with delight, his tail battering an ecstatic tattoo against the kitchen cupboards. If only I were so easily pleased.

'I thought we could go out tonight,' Rick suggests. 'There's that new film you said that you wanted to see.'

I can't even recall mentioning one.

'We could eat out afterwards.'

'How could I leave my mother alone for so long?' I ask. 'She'd probably burn the house down.'

'I heard that.' On cue, my aged parent arrives. She has pink curlers in her sparse hair – the hair that she's recently had dyed an alarming shade of red. I should sue her hairdresser for crime by Clairol for giving her locks the colour of a ginger biscuit. Her dressing-gown is buttoned up all wrong, but at least it's quilted and flowery, the sort of dressing-gown a mother past the age of seventy should wear. I've hidden her short, black silk kimono with the shocking pink dragon embroidered on the back. She had taken to wearing nothing underneath it and I just couldn't cope with that over breakfast.

'I told you when you invited me to live here that I didn't want to be under your feet, that I wouldn't be any trouble,' she says.

For the record, I didn't 'invite' my mother to live here. A couple of months ago, she decided that she'd had enough of my father and left him. She arrived at my door with a battered suitcase, all the gnomes from her garden in two carrier bags and tears in her eyes. What could I do? Rick said I should tell her not to be so stupid, turn her round and send her home again. But I didn't. I couldn't. She's been nothing but trouble ever since.

My mother sits down at the table and waits to be served. I wish she'd stay out of the way until we've left for work and then she could have the kitchen all to herself and we wouldn't have to make nice but, of course, I don't say that to her. She eyes my pile of books and wrinkles her nose.

'You read things that are too posh,' she says. 'Can you get me some of those romances? I like the racy ones. Plenty of sex.' Mum makes a leery face at me.

My mother's literary tastes have turned away from Rosamunde Pilcher and Maeve Binchy to embrace a more salacious, semipornographical read. Now she's left my father, she's decided she likes books that feature leather bondage wear on the covers. It's not a trend I'm keen to encourage. You don't want to think of your mother reading that kind of thing. 'I'll see what there is,' I promise, knowing that I'll come home with an armful of Rosamunde Pilcher and Maeve Binchy. People might see me stamping the other books out and think they are mine, for heaven's sake. If she wants to read smut, she can go and get it herself.

Rick pours out some more tea and places it in front of her.

'Bit strong.' She scowls at it in lieu of a thank you.

'Can you get babysitters for senile old bats?' my husband whispers in my ear. I smile.

'I'm not deaf,' my mother says. 'I know what you said.'

'Rita,' Rick cajoles. 'I'd just like a bit of time alone with my wife.'

'I'll go out,' she offers. 'I've just met a lovely lad on that interval.'

'Internet,' I correct automatically.

'He's twenty-nine. Says he likes older women. He says he'd like to meet me.'

'Have you told him you've turned seventy?'

My mother folds her arms across her bust defensively. 'I could pass for a much younger woman, I'll have you know.'

Last week I caught her pasting one of Chloe's more provocative photographs on her dating profile. I had to make her remove it. Part of me wishes she wouldn't spend so much time on the internet – heaven only knows what she gets up to – but if she wasn't on the computer half the night, then she'd be in the living room with us and that would be worse. She talks non-stop through all

the

television programmes. It drives Rick to distraction.

Anyway, I've stopped checking my mum's history on the net because I know she looks at porn sites. She goes online to chat at saucysilver surfers.com, where there seem to be a wide range of greyhaired gents making very saucy suggestions. We should make her keep the computer in the kitchen like we used to when the kids were younger. I shake my head. Pensioners surfing porn – whatever next!

'Seventy is the new fifty,' my mother informs me.

What can I say to that? Other than that on some days, I feel as if forty-five is the new ninety.

Chapter 2

Outside the house, an AA transporter van pulls up. From the kitchen, we all crane our necks to see what unfortunate household might be in need of its services.

Chadwick Close is a cosy little street of houses built in the 1970s. We've lived at this same address in Stony Stratford near Milton Keynes for years and, from our prime position, we can see all the comings and goings in the Close. And there have been a few over the years, I can tell you.

Most of our neighbours have lived here for ages too. Houses don't come up here very often and they're sought-after when they do. We often get those estate agent's leaflets posted through our door asking us if we're considering selling, as even in these difficult times they have buyers queuing up to part with their money to move here.

The houses may not be anything special, architecturally speaking, but they're sturdy, square homes with good-sized rooms and gardens big enough for a growing brood. Ideal family homes. In fact, number 10 seemed like our dream home when we moved in twenty years ago. OK, we could do with some modernisation now – the house as well as the people who own it. And its look isn't really enhanced by the group of grinning, fishing, foppish gnomes in the front garden that my mother has foisted on us. But one day Rick will get round to doing the list of jobs that keeps growing. I live in hope.

Then we hear Chloe's key in the lock. I didn't realise that she wasn't yet home. Has she been out all night? I need my car for work. How did she think I was going to get there? The deal is that she can borrow it, but has to be back in time for when I need it. The fact that she also uses it as an overflow shoe cupboard as she's run out of space in her wardrobe for her extensive collection is another contentious issue between us. I think it's a quiet protest as she's been ousted out of the biggest room to make way for her gran and is now relegated to the rather 'cosy' box room.

My daughter bursts in through the front door wearing a white crop-top that struggles to contain her breasts and a skirt that barely skims her bottom. Her legs are bare and she's wearing knee-high white boots. The young seem to have got the message 'less is more' somewhat confused.

'I've got some great news,' she says, grinning wildly as she bounces in. 'Your air bags work brilliantly, Mum.'

Ricky and I rush back to the kitchen window for a better view, and offer up a simultaneous gasp as we take in the crumpled front of what used to be my pride and joy atop the vehicle transporter. My little Corsa is the only new car I've ever owned and I chewed my fingernails to the quick before I reconciled myself to paying out all that money for it. I've always been used to making do, having second-hand. The kids' needs always came first – that's just what you did then.

Now I look at my cheerful daughter and wonder if I did the right thing. Chloe is home from university for the summer after finishing the second year of her Fashion and Media course. She's also nearly eight thousand pounds in debt and is showing no signs of getting a job for the holidays. Instead, she's been out every night partying and spending money that she doesn't have and lying in bed all day.

'What the hell happened?' Rick wants to know. His face is a shade of puce that can't be good for his blood pressure.

'Bit of a fight with a bollard.' My daughter shrugs. 'Got the pedal thingies mixed up. I hit go when I meant to hit stop.'

'Are you hurt?' Rick asks tightly. His tone implies that she might be very soon if she doesn't think to apologise.

'Right as rain,' she says, then flicks a thumb towards the front door. 'You need to see the bloke about the paperwork.'

Rick, fists in tight balls, goes out to see the man from the AA.

'All right, Gran?' Chloe flops down next to my mother. 'I'm shagged.'

'Language, Chloe.' My daughter has the mouth of a sewer rat.

'I love that outfit,' my mother says, eyeing the minuscule crop top. 'Can I borrow it? I've got a date with a toy boy tonight.'

Chloe giggles. 'You crack me up, Gran.' They high-five each other. I shudder. If my mother's thinking about going out in that, I hope it's under the cover of darkness. I don't think that Chadwick Close is quite ready to be exposed to acres of crinkly flesh.

'I'm going to be late for work,' I say to no one in particular, which is just as well as no one's listening. Only Buster cocks an ear and that's simply because he lives in hope of hearing the word 'food'.

Rick comes back in carrying a bundle of paperwork, black cloud fully formed above his brow. 'He's taking it to Auto Repairs. I've just phoned them.' He shoots a glance at Chloe. 'This is going to be expensive.'

My daughter is blissfully unaware that the comment is aimed at her.

'Can you give me a lift to work?' I ask.

My husband nods. 'Give me five,' he says, and disappears upstairs.

Buster is crossing his legs because no one has had the time to walk him. I turn to Chloe. 'Can you take the dog out for us, please?'

'No way,' my daughter protests. 'I'm knackered.'

I think to argue, but can't summon the strength. 'Come on, Doggers,' I say with a tut. 'A quick run round the garden again.' I open the door and our aging mongrel bolts out and heads for his favourite tree.

Chloe is finishing the rest of my toast, oblivious to the disruption she's caused and the fact that I am seething quietly behind her.

My daughter is blonde, bubbly, bright and utterly self-centred. Have I made her like that, I wonder as I pull on my jacket. Why does she think that she can treat me and her father with complete disregard and we'll still just be there to pick up the pieces? I've got a headache already and my day hasn't even begun. All I ever wanted was a family of my own. Now I can't imagine why.

