

Extract from “Welcome to the Real World”

Chapter 1

‘I need more money.’ Tilting the glass in my hand, I pull yet another pint of beer.

‘Don’t we all, man.’ My dear friend Carl looks at me through the fog of his cigarette smoke, eyes barely slits. He’s propping up the bar opposite me and I smile across at him, mainly because the hubbub of noise in the pub makes it difficult to be heard and I want to save my voice.

Carl is a man out of his time – I’m sure he would have been much happier as a 1970s rock god. His battered denim jacket, shoulder-length hair and tendency to say, ‘Yeah, man,’ don’t sit comfortably with current ideas of personal styling. But Carl and I go back a long way. A long, long way.

‘No. I really need money,’ I say. ‘This time it’s bad.’

‘It always is,’ Carl remarks.

‘Joe’s swimming in a sea of unpaid bills. I have to do something.’ Joe is my older brother, but somehow I’ve become responsible for him. I don’t mind at all. He needs all the help he can get.

‘You work two jobs already, Fern.’

‘Tell me something I don’t know.’ The till does its digital equivalent of ker-ching again and, grinning insanely at the next punter, I reach for another glass.

‘How much more can you do?’

Win the lottery? Put on my shortest skirt, strike a pose outside King’s Cross station and hope for a bit of business? Get a third job that requires minimum effort, yet doles out maximum pay? I’ll fill you in quickly on what I like to call my ‘situation’.

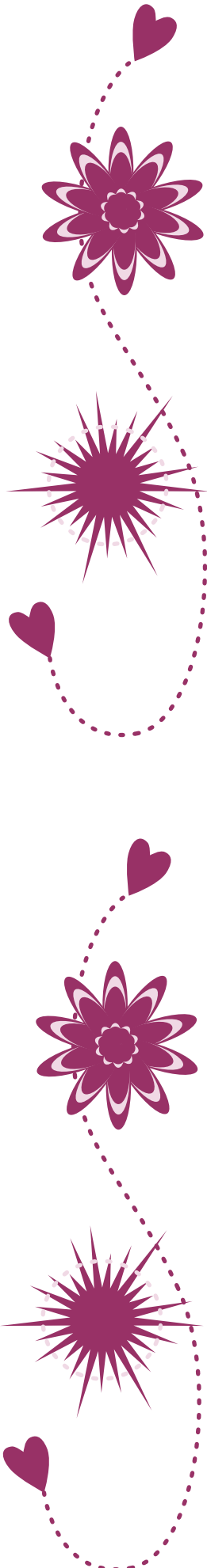
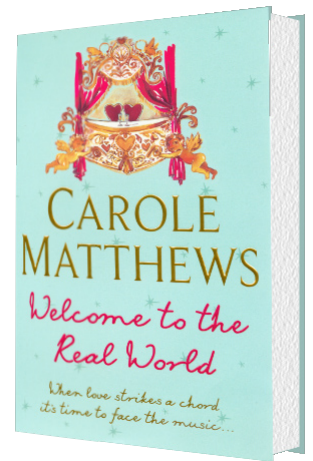
Bro’ Joe lives on benefits and is constantly robbing Peter to pay Paul. Now Peter has been robbed so much he has nothing left. My brother isn’t, however, the media version of a person living on the dole – workshy, feckless or lazy. Joe can’t work because he has a sick son, Nathan. My beloved nephew is a five-year-old blond-haired heartbreaker and has severe asthma – and when I say severe, I mean severe. He needs constant attention. Constant attention that his mother - the beautiful and brittle Carolyn - wasn’t prepared to give him as she left my lovely brother and their only child when Nathan was barely a year old. And, call me a bitter old bat, but I don’t think that could be considered as giving it a fair crack of the whip.

If anyone thinks it’s easy to manage on measly government handouts, then think again. If anyone thinks it’s easy being the single parent of a sickly child, then ditto. Joe had a promising career in a bank – okay, he wasn’t setting the world alight. My brother was never destined to appear on Newsnight in a pinstripe suit giving his opinion on the world money market, but he was getting great appraisals, regular promotions, small pay rises - and a pension to die for. He gave it all up the moment Carolyn departed to stay at home and care for Nathan. And, for that alone, he deserves all the support I can give him.

‘You’re on in a minute,’ Ken the Landlord shouts over at me, giving a pointed glance at the clock.

As well as pulling pints behind the beer-stained bar of the King’s Head public house, I am also ‘the turn’. I do two half-hour sets every evening Monday through Saturday – Sunday is quiz night – singing middle-of-the road pop songs for a terminally disinterested crowd. I finish serving the round of drinks and then nod my head towards Carl. ‘Ready?’

Carl is my pianist. Again, I think he’d be happier as lead guitarist – which he also plays brilliantly - for Deep Purple or someone of that ilk, leaping around the stage, doing ten-minute solos, head-banging to his heart’s content. But Carl has bills to pay too. He jumps down off his bar-stool and we head for the small, raised platform that is our stage. A once-spangly curtain is attached by a row of drawing pins to the wall behind us. Despite Carl’s rebel, drop-out appearance he is the most reliable person I’ve ever met. He’s very low-key rock and roll, really. Okay, he smokes the occasional joint and puts ‘Jedi Knight’ as his religion on Electoral Roll forms, but I don’t think he’s every been moved to bite the head off a live chicken on stage or any such thing. And he’s never smashed up a guitar as a display of artistic expression, because he’s far too aware of how much they cost. He is also patience personified, spending every evening on that bar-stool waiting for our two brief periods of respite when we can do what we truly love doing.



‘We could do a couple of extra hours busking in the Tube,’ my friend suggests as we make our way to the stage. ‘That usually pulls in a few quid.’

I grab Carl’s hand and squeeze it.

He looks at me in surprise. ‘What’s that for?’

‘I love you,’ I say.

‘Cupboard love,’ he replies. ‘Would you still love me if I wasn’t the world’s best ivory tinkler?’

‘Yes.’

This is a confession now. Carl and I used to be an ‘item’. We never did the horizontal tango together – something for which I’m truly grateful. But we used to spend hours necking and I used to let him feel my top parts – occasionally even under my jumper. In my defence, however, this was when I was fifteen and we were at school together. And it was a much more innocent era.

Now that I’m thirty-two I have no boyfriend and no time for one. Not even Carl, who I think still holds a torch for me. Well, not just a torch, a bloody great flashlight, a beacon, whatever type of light it is they have on lighthouses. I feel sorry that I don’t love Carl in the way that he loves me, but I got him out of my system years ago and, basically, he’s still sporting the same jacket and hairdo that he wore then. Need I say more?

We take our places on the stage, Carl behind his keyboard. Me at the temperamental microphone. I wish I had more presence, more va-va-voom, but I always feel so insignificant on stage – partly because I’m only fractionally taller than the microphone stand. There’s a slight hiatus in the hullabaloo of conversation and a smattering of disjointed clapping. Without preamble – no ‘one, two, one, two’ as I test the mike, no shout of ‘Good evening, London!’ – we launch into our performance. As this is a predominantly Irish pub, U2 hits feature heavily in our repertoire, as do those of The Corrs and Sinéad O’Connor. We usually also knock out a few 1960s favourites and some classic ballads at the end to keep the maudlin drunks happy.

I spill my heart and soul, sliding flawlessly from one song to another and at the end I take my bow and, in return, receive some muted applause. Is this what I do it for? For a few meagre crumbs of appreciation and an equally few extra quid in my pay packet at the end of the week?

When I’m back at the bar and serving pints again, one of the customers leans towards me and says with beery breath, ‘You’ve got a great voice, darlin’. It’s bloody wasted here.’

‘Thanks.’

‘You want to get on that Fame Game programme. You’d beat the pants off most of them.’

This isn’t the first time I’ve been told that. Usually by men with beery breath and no knowledge whatsoever of the music industry.

‘That’s a great idea!’ I don’t point out to him that to take part in any of these talent-spotting fiascos, you need to be under the age of twenty-two and possess a belly flatter than your average pancake – neither of which applies to me.

My admirer lurches away clutching his drink.

I give Carl another pint of lager. ‘That went well,’ he says. ‘I thought “With or Without You” was really heavy, man.’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ll come round tomorrow and we can go through the running order. Maybe try out a few new songs.’

‘Sure.’ We analyse all our performances as if we’ve just come off the stage at Wembley Arena and, sometimes, it makes my heart break.

Once I was asked for my autograph at the end of the night by a young guy, but I’m not sure if he was taking the piss. All his friends laughed when he showed them the beer mat with my name scrawled on it in marker pen. It still made me walk on air for a week afterwards. I stifle a sigh. Don’t think I don’t have ambitions beyond being a badly-paid barmaid-cum-pub singer. I too would like to be Joss Stone, Jamelia and Janet Jackson rolled into one. But, tell me, how on earth do I get my big break when all my days and nights are spent just trying to earn a crust?

Chapter 2

When you roll into bed at about one o’clock every morning, the next day comes around very quickly I find. I force my eyes to open. Eventually the blurry mist settles and I think about getting up. Slipping my feet into my cow-patterned slippers, I try to pretend that my flat is not the skankiest place imaginable. Even Shrek would turn up his nose at living here – and that guy’s at

home in a swamp. My rising damp hit the ceiling years ago and, as is hugely beneficial for someone partly reliant on their voice for their earnings, I have developed a slight asthmatic cough due to the number of spores that live here with me. But it's cheap. I bet you couldn't guess that.

Shuffling into the bathroom, I stand in the bath while the warmish trickle of water from what I laughingly call my shower does its darnedest to revive me. My poor throat. Every morning, I feel as if I've swallowed a dozen razor blades. I put it down to the effects of passive smoking in the pub and spend the day drinking gallons of water to try to counteract it. I rub the scrag end of a bar of soap over my weary body.

My sense of smell is the next thing to wake up. The flat is situated above an Indian restaurant – The Spice Emporium. Their advertising says 'as featured on BBC television', but what it fails to mention is that the only time it hit the TV screens was when it made the local news programme because of a salmonella outbreak when thirty of its diners went down with food poisoning. The owner, Ali, obviously hopes that his customers have very short memories. My main problem with The Spice Emporium is that the chef there has the frying pan on the go at about six in the morning. Everything I do during my waking hours at home is accompanied by the smell of cooking spices. My tummy constantly growls from the minute I'm awake as it's convinced that onion bhajees are the thing to have for breakfast – whereas I am not.

I stay here because Ali, also my landlord, is lovely. The flat may not be a shrine to domestic elegance or even pass any basic health and safety regulations, but Ali takes a relaxed attitude when it comes to paying my rent. If I'm really strapped, he'll let me work a few shifts washing up in the restaurant until I've paid off my debt. That's the sort of landlord I need, not some ogre with a slobbering Rottweiler.

I'm still getting dressed when the doorbell rings and I know that it can only be Carl. He will have brought me something wonderful to eat because he knows that I never have enough money to buy food. I often wonder if I'd simply cease to exist if Carl ever abandoned me. My friend has a degree in Social Anthropology – whatever that is - from Oxford, no less. I'm not sure how useful that is for swindling the Department of Health and Society Security, but it means that Carl is able to live on benefits and work most of the week cash-in-hand, so he's relatively flush – particularly when compared to me. I pull on my jeans and rush to the door while dragging my jumper over my head.

'Peace,' he says as I open the door, and does the accompanying sign.

'You are so seventies,' I tell him as I eye his bag of goodies.

'Bagels,' he says. 'From the new deli down the road. I thought we'd road test it.'

'Groovy.'

'Now who's being seventies?'

'I was being ironic,' I say as I relieve him of his delicious-smelling package.

'How's Blonde Ambition this morning?'

'I'm fine – if you discount the fact that I'm tired, broke and my voice has been destroyed by passive inhalation of eight thousand Benson & Hedges. And you?'

Carl smiles. 'Groovy.'

In the kitchen, complete with its one cupboard and death-trap gas boiler, I dole a couple of spoonfuls of cheap instant coffee into our cups while the kettle takes an aeon to boil. Carl starts to spread the bagels with the cream cheese that he also brought from the deli. It pains me to see how much care and attention he puts into preparing my breakfast. Life would be so much easier if I could love Carl as he loves me.

'Don't forget to do a bit for Squeaky.'

Carl rolls his eyes heavenward.

'Apart from you,' I say, 'he's the only friend I have in the world.'

'He's a mouse who's eaten through your skirting board and the wire of your toaster. I'm not sure I'm happy to share the same category as him.'

'He's my pet.' I don't share everyone else's view that Squeaky is a dirty, feral mouse who should be exterminated as soon as possible. He's fun and he's feisty and he doesn't cost much to feed. What I would really like is a cat – yes, I'm at that stage in my life – but I don't have the wherewithal to keep one. Despite being an excellent companion, it would simply be another drain on my meagre resources. Anyway, I console myself with the fact that it might not help my asthmatic cough or Nathan's.

Carl passes me a tiny bit of bagel spread with cheese which I lovingly place beside the mouse bolt-hole in my kitchen. Squeaky used to dash out, steal everything I put down for him and rush away with it into his lair. Now when he appears, he just sits in the kitchen and nibbles away happily. If

he could chat, I'm sure he'd join in with the conversation, such as it is. The downside of this is that I have to clean up more mouse poo. The upside is that Squeaky has stopped chewing through my box of breakfast cereal. Or maybe he doesn't like this brand. It was horribly cheap and perhaps even mice have their limits.

Carl sits on the work surface which makes me frown; nothing to do with hygiene, I just don't think it will hold his weight. 'I had an idea that might help your financial situation,' my friend tells me as he tucks into his breakfast.

'Rob a bank?'

'More legal,' he says. 'My sister's working at a temp agency at the moment. She could get you some regular work during the day.'

'Cool.' I'm up for anything. I've even been cutting ads out of the paper with a view to doing phone-sex. I know. I'm desperate. But I can pant and talk dirty if required.

'Can you type?'

'No.'

'Okay. We won't tell her that.' Carl rubs his chin thoughtfully. 'What other skills do you have?'

'None.'

'We'll miss that bit out too.' He pulls out his mobile phone. 'Shall I call her?'

Before I have a chance to answer, Carl says, 'Hey, Julia. Yo. Bro.' And then they talk to each other for a bit in this gibberish sibling language that only they understand. 'I'm trying to help out Fern,' he continues when he reverts to English. 'Do you have any great jobs on your books that pay shitloads of cash?'

I can hear a faint muttering from the other end.

Carl turns to me. 'Do you know anything about opera?'

I shake my head. 'No.'

'Yes,' Carl says into his phone. 'She's a big, big fan.'

'I am not!'

'Shut up,' he tells me, hand protecting his sister's sensibilities again. 'Do you want to work or not?'

'I want to work.'

'We'll rent some DVDs of operas,' he says.

'Neither of us has a DVD player,' I remind him.

'Pen. Pen,' Carl orders. I duly pass him one and he scribbles down an address. 'I owe you,' he says to his sister. 'Ciao, baby.' Then he hangs up and turns to me. 'You have an interview this afternoon.'

'Wow.'

'Personal assistant to some opera bod.'

I take the piece of paper from him. Looks like I'm going to be headed for an apartment in the Docklands later today. 'I'll never get it,' I say. 'I can't do anything.'

'You're a very resourceful woman.'

'I am.'

'And you need the money.'

'I do.'

'So go for it.'

'I will.'

'Now,' Carl instructs. 'Eat those bagels, then you've got some serious singing to do.'

Squeaky comes out to join us for breakfast, turning his tiny piece of bagel and cream cheese delicately as he nibbles. Carl has long since lost the urge to scream every time my pet appears, but inches casually away from him.

'I want to put a few new songs in the act,' my friend tells me between chews.

'For the ever-demanding audience at the King's Head?'

'We won't always be playing pub venues,' Carl assures me.

'Oh. I keep forgetting the booking at Carnegie Hall,' I say.

'Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, Fern.'

Laughing, we take our coffee through to the lounge and I kiss Carl on the cheek. 'Thanks,' I say. 'You're a pal.'

'Does this qualify me for a sympathy shag?'

'No.' I slip the piece of paper with the address on it into the pocket of my jeans. 'But I promise I'll buy the bagels from my first pay cheque.'

I try not to think how tight my finances are and how much I need this extra money. Personal assistant to an opera singer? That's got to be well-paid, hasn't it. Sounds as if it might be fun too. I can't imagine that it would involve an awful lot of graft. I am a resourceful woman. I am a desperate woman. Joe needs my help, I mustn't forget that. If I don't want to be washing up at The Spice Emporium, I have to get this job. How hard can it be?

