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CHAPTERS

- 1 Love is patient
- 2 Love is kind
- 3 It does not envy
- 4 It does not boast
- 5 It is not proud
- 6 It is not rude
- 7 It is not self-seeking
- 8 It is not easily angered
- 9 It keeps no record of wrongs
- 10 Love does not delight in evil
- 11 But rejoices with the truth
- 12 It always protects
- 13 It always trusts
- 14 It always hopes
- 15 It always perseveres
- 16 Love never fails
- 17 Love is...

Chapter 1

Love is patient

Charlie was seething. It had been a dreadful Christmas with his in-laws and he had counted the hours to departure, longing to be back home in London where he could sit and grieve in the silence of his house.

It wasn't that his in-laws were a difficult or irritating couple. On the contrary, Harry was widely read and could talk interestingly on any topic you threw at him. Elspeth was the classic 'bosom of the family' mother, endlessly producing an array of lovingly prepared food whilst maintaining a clean, tidy yet cosy house. The problem was that she no longer had a family to be the bosom to, and this clearly pained her. Her lack of purpose was palpable.

For Elspeth's only child was dead.

Lucy. Wife to Charlie. Mother to Josh and Sadie. Only child to Elspeth and Harry. Dead.

Their sadness was often too much for Charlie to bear at a time when he had not accepted his own grief. Elspeth had tried so hard to make Christmas perfect for her two grandchildren, but Charlie could see that she was reliving the past, remembering when Lucy was Sadie's age. And, so poignantly, little eight year old Sadie was the spitting image of Lucy at the same age. Charlie observed Elspeth's not-so-covert gaze upon Sadie and her crucified looks of pain as Sadie did something that brought back memories of a past time. He noticed each time she swiftly left a room to shed some tears in the privacy of her kitchen, over her Aga.

Inbetween her tears, Elspeth had tried to make it a lovely Christmas for the children – their first Christmas without their mother. But the forced gaiety resonated amongst the sad silences as the whole household struggled to come to terms with the fact that Lucy was now only a memory.

Charlie felt the bolt of pain sear through his heart every time he remembered that Lucy was dead.

He had escaped Elspeth and Harry as late as he dared, struggling not to appear keen to leave, gracefully bowing out to their chorus of 'don't be a stranger' in their heavy Scottish accent. He promised he would bring the children back up to visit them up in the large family house in which they now rattled around. Charlie had made this promise through well-concealed gritted teeth, knowing that his private thoughts were uncharitable. Elspeth's cloying motherliness and endless fussing made him feel claustrophobic, and emphasised how trapped he felt in his misery.

The eight hour drive from their small village on the border of Scotland back down to London was gradually becoming a twelve hour drive as the M1 became a car park of cars, inching along at a stop/start of ten miles an hour. Accident? Roadworks? Who knew? Charlie just wanted to be moving, which meant coming off the motorway but he didn't care. Forward motion was better than the stop start of the motorway, even if the forward motion was heading in the wrong direction. Indecision at the next junction quickly became decision as he chose to go cross country, planning to rejoin the M1 further down. Anything was better than the frustrating crawl in traffic with a moody, judgemental teenager beside him and an impatient eight year old female in his ear.

His fifteen year old, know-it-all son, Josh, had intermittently expressed his disagreement with his father's choice to come off the motorway, pointing out that the detour they were on was as

wide as it was long, and they may as well have stayed on the motorway. Eight year old Sadie had expressed her disagreement by repetitively asking were they nearly there, could she go to the toilet, when could they stop for sweets and regularly pointing out that she was thirsty.

Charlie had been near to snapping point long before the accident actually happened. He had been driving far too fast, throwing the expensive, powerful BMW round corners despite the freezing conditions which had finally become swirling snow. He had slowed down marginally as the snow had begun to settle, but the navigation system was sending them down roads that were getting smaller, narrower and more and more local – with increasingly more snow.

“This is a dumb decision,” Josh had repeated each time the GPS advised them to plough on despite the awful road conditions. “The GPS just sees the roads, not the snow,” he had pointed out.

The accident had therefore been inevitable – the wrong road, in the wrong conditions and driving with the wrong attitude. To make matters even worse, just to ensure Charlie could really beat himself up, Sadie had banged her head hard as they slid down a ditch, smacking sharply into a tree. Aside from the emerging bruise on her forehead, blood spurted from her nose which prompted the most god-awful screams. Both father and son had fought their way out of the now-sideways car before working together to free the screaming child. Charlie then held handfuls of snow, scooped from the freezing road, onto her nose as Josh leant back into the car to get tissues from the glove box. After sorting out the nose bleed, father and son grabbed mobile phones, wallets, coats, scarves, gloves and hats, all of which was all completed in superficial harmony. Deciding which direction to head in, towards the only light

source across the fields, was equally by a feigned mutual agreement.

And here they were, trudging across snow-covered fields in trainers. Bitterly cold. Totally lost. And dependent on the house across the field. Who was in there? Would it be safe? Could they even help? Charlie did not know, but he knew that he had royally screwed up and now had to sort things out. Beside him, Charlie could feel Josh’s dissent simmering as he allowed the ensuing silence to hang heavily in the air. Josh never needed words to express his moods, Charlie thought savagely, because he was like a skunk that could let a bad aura settle around him, affecting anyone who dared to get too close to him.

Had he always been like that? Charlie wondered as they wearily walked on, listening to Josh pretend to Sadie that this was a fun and enviable experience that she could boast about back at school next week.

Charlie cast his mind back over the years in an effort to remember the growth of these two offspring for whom he now had sole responsibility. But he had missed so much of their childhood, having spent much of the last fifteen years on film sets around the world. He had no real understanding of his own children – Josh’s powerful moods and Sadie’s stringent demands. He had only seen glimpses of two emerging little characters as he paused at home between filming.

He remembered the time he made a surprise visit home as they had postponed filming for a few days. Little five year old Josh had run away, not allowing his father to hug him. “It’s just tiredness,” Lucy had rationalised. He remembered the time he tried to take them on a family day out, but had planned it badly, not knowing to table events around rigid eating times. “It’s just hunger,” she tried to explain as Sadie screamed her way through the day.

At the time, Charlie had attributed this all to the fact that Lucy was an earth mother, the type who excuses their child's bad behaviour, preferring to call it a 'phase' rather than an attitude. But maybe this was *them*, their characters, who they were. Anyway, Lucy was no longer around to rally round and find a good excuse for the children's behaviour. Charlie was on his own and struggling. He realised he did not know his children at all. He did not know their foibles, how to win them round, how to solve their problems. Hell, he didn't even know if he wanted to. Why had all their problems suddenly become his? In the last ten months since her death, the relationship between father and son had deteriorated considerably, and Sadie's dissatisfaction had trebled – and never more so than now.

"My feet are wet... my hands are cold... my head hurts where I banged it..." Sadie's voice kept up a constant chorus of whining. Charlie zoned the noise out, because otherwise he knew he would turn around and shout at her. But he couldn't because this was his fault. His natural impatience had led them off the motorway and down that little lane. It was his impatience that kept his foot harder down on the accelerator than was sensible. And this same impatience that would make him snap and make the situation a hundred times worse.

He glanced up, blinking away the snow that swirled around his head. The small square of light was getting closer. This would hopefully be their salvation tonight.

In contrast to Sadie's whining, Josh was triumphantly silent. No doubt, Charlie thought crossly to himself, magnanimously enjoying the sheer awfulness of the walk because he had told his father not to turn down that little lane. In the last twenty minutes since the crash, Josh had not reminded his father of his wise prediction. Not in words anyway. But there was a

challenging look in his eye and Charlie knew the words were busting to get out.

So he guiltily tolerated Sadie's howls of pain, biting his lip and holding back the words of irritation. Instead he allowed himself to wallow in a combination of angry thoughts about how much Josh wound him up and how much he missed his dear, beautiful but now departed wife.

Life was such rubbish at the moment. Rubbish, rubbish, rubbish. Everything was going wrong. Life was shit. Ever since Lucy died.

Deep down he knew he had always lived a fairly charmed life; he knew that he had been very lucky. He had been blessed with good looks, a sporting physique and a natural charm, all of which when combined together, provided an endless supply of friends and popularity. Teachers and parents forgave him many things, bending to his wishes, endorsing his whims. Success had come easy, after quitting school in a storm of disinterest. A couple of fun years at drama college had resulted in one audition for one big, block-buster Hollywood film – even if the part was a small, supporting role. The lead actor had noticed him on the set and had taken him under his wing, as a result they had a good chemistry on screen and the rest, as they say, was history. The film had resulted in recognition and provided a constant and steady stream of offers. Great parts came thick and fast, and many auditions ended up with him being able to pick and choose.

But now it seemed that all his bad luck had come at once. In bucket loads. He felt as though he was out of control of his life. All of his judgements seemed to be bad. As Lucy's illness became terminal, his life had understandably gone on hold as he spent every passing minute with her. Everyone gave him time and space. In the months that followed her death, he was treated with kid gloves as he came to terms with it. Despite

Charlie's efforts, he had to accept that it did not matter how much money he had thrown at cancer, its aggressive march through Lucy's body continued unflinchingly to its inevitable conclusion. The money, ultimately, became purely palliative.

The pain rose up within him now as he thought about her final weeks again, and again and again. It tightened his chest and increased his fury. He missed her so badly, and every second was filled with grief for her. He thought angrily about all those friends who said that he needed to pick up his life again, to live again, and to take another role in order to distract himself. Distract? Distract? Is that what her life amounted to? For him to distract himself away from his memories of her? Christ! Lucy was dead. The love of his life. Gone.

He felt trapped in a bubble of misery, unable to find a way out. Everything was still awful, made worse by the fact that his friends were tired of his unhappiness, telling him it was time to start moving on.

Move on! It was only ten months since she died. Nothing at all. But they said that it was quite a while; they said that most people begin to find a level of acceptance after six months. He saw their eyes were glazing over now as he talked about his grief, and knew they thought he had said everything there was to say. He knew he had stopped being interested in their lives and happy for them when something good happened. They didn't want to listen to him anymore, instead telling him that he had to do something positive – move house, take on his next film. After all, they said, fame is a fickle friend and Hollywood will forget you quickly. As quickly as they accepted him.

Anyway. What would he do? Acting just wasn't doing it for him any more.

The house loomed up life-size in front of them as they approached from the side. Childishly Charlie crossed his

fingers, hoping that this was indeed going to be salvation. At best he would end up in some nice middle class house. He would undoubtedly be recognised and would have to make polite conversation for a few hours until the RAC arrived to tow them out of the ditch and take them somewhere. Home? London was 200 miles away.

He heaved a sigh as the house was finally within their grasp.

"You might as well get it off your chest before I knock on the door of this house," Charlie said, breaking the Mexican stand-off between him and Josh.

"What's that?" Josh asked his father neutrally.

"I told you so." Charlie said the words mockingly.

"I don't need to," Josh replied equably.

Charlie swallowed the anger that engulfed him and knocked on the oak door of the large family home, wondering who was on the other side.

Chapter 2

Love is kind

Janey had been feeling achy and detached all day, her head was swimming as she tried to make turkey curry from the Christmas Day's left-overs. Pausing over her task every now and again to lean against the kitchen counter as exhaustion overwhelmed her, she noticed the grey sky turn an ominous yellow.

"It's going to snow, isn't it?" Beth, her fourteen year old daughter, said excitedly as she came into the kitchen and peered out of the window.

Janey nodded, putting a lid on the curry and switching the gas off underneath. She double-checked her actions, knowing that when she as soon as she lay down on the sofa, she would cave in and give herself over to the tiredness in her bones.

"Can I do anything to help?" Beth asked, noticing her mother's white face and slumped body.

"I've finished," Janey said, injecting a tone of kindness to convey appreciation for the offer. Beth was the kindest and loveliest daughter a mother could wish for.

"I'll make you a coffee," Beth volunteered, knowing her mother liked a coffee mid-afternoon. She always said that three o'clock was her real low point in the day.

"Thanks. I'll be in the snug." Janey dragged herself out of the room, just in time to miss Beth's shriek of excitement as she noticed that the snow had started falling. Janey winced, her throbbing head sensitive to loud sounds, then ducked sideways as Ben, her twelve year old son, was roused from his computer game and came running down the hallway.

"Yippee! It's snowing! How long will it take to settle?" Ben asked, pressing his face against the hallway window.

Janey smiled at his pre-occupied back but didn't have the energy to answer. The large, old sofa in the snug looked warm, cosy and inviting, albeit very far away. Giddy with exhaustion, Janey dragged herself across the yawning distance to the sofa and half-collapsed onto its large, squashy cushions. Chilled to the bone, she pulled a pile of travel blankets and fleecy blankets on top of her. She was freezing although her face felt hot and her eyes burned.

As she sank into oblivion, guilt knocked at her brain. How could she allow herself to sink into unconsciousness as the only adult in the house? Was she allowed to be ill? Surely she had to hold it together, to feed her children, ensure their safety? This was the hardest thing about being a single parent, as she had been discovering over the last eight months since the death of her husband. You are completely and utterly on your own, with no-one to turn to in the moments of your deepest need. Particularly not when you are only holidaying in a house in the North country for the Christmas holidays in a desperate bid to run away from home and all the truths that echo around the rooms of your own house.

They knew nobody up here. It was Great Aunt Tilly's house, left to Janey and her brothers and sisters five years ago when she died. All married with children, they had decided to keep it for holidays and weekends away. It was a lovely rambling five bedroom house on the edge of the Yorkshire moors, outside Settle, set back from the road and without another house in sight.

Her family had spent many happy Christmases, Easters and summers up here during their childhood. To keep the family returning, Great Aunt Tilly had the annexe to the left of the house converted into a large games room, housing a full size

pool table and a table-tennis table. The house itself was not huge – five bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs and various reception rooms downstairs. It was well laid out with the sitting room, dining room and office facing the large front garden, and a large family kitchen facing the back garden; just off the kitchen was a cosy sitting room they called the snug on one side, and a laundry room on the other, which lead out to the annexe and back door. All the rooms were spacious and featured original fire places and servants’ bells that had long stopped working. Here and there was evidence of a rich history – the over-size front door key, the old-fashioned bulbous light switches, wood panelling and lift-the-latch door handles that clunked as people entered and left a room. Whilst Great Aunt Tilly had preserved the house’s past history, she had chosen not to exist with its historic hardships. Instead she had installed the creature comforts of central heating, thick-pile carpet throughout, top of the range bathrooms and a well-kitted kitchen. A perfect blend of yesterday and today. Janey and her brothers and sisters had been unanimous in wanting to keep the house.

Janey was vaguely aware of Beth coming in with a coffee and chatting happily as she cleared a space on the overcrowded coffee table. Janey’s bones ached and she begged her daughter for some soft pillows. The guilt rang around her head again and again she searched her fevered mind for who she could call to come up here and rescue her from her parental responsibility. True, Beth was a very adult fourteen year old and was more than capable of seeing that her and her twelve year old brother did not go hungry or cold, and there was plenty of food in the house, but still... she felt she could not succumb to the fever that was slowly claiming her.

“It’s snowing really heavily and it is freezing outside so the snow is settling really quickly,” Beth was saying. “It looks about an inch thick already.”

Hope died within her. She couldn’t ask anyone to get in their car in snowy, icy conditions. They would have an accident...

BANG! Squealing tires, the bang of a car crash, the shocked silence that screamed death... her body jolted involuntarily as the sounds of a car crash reverberated around her head. She whimpered and put her hands over her ears.

“Does your head hurt?” Beth asked gently.

“Tablets,” Janey whispered.

“Here they are, mummy,” she heard her daughter’s soothing voice penetrate the swirling fog of her mind. She sat up gingerly and took the tablets. The coffee was already only luke-warm but she didn’t care. Ben was loitering behind Beth, clutching pillows from Janey’s bed. Beth took them off him, much as a Matron impatiently bullies her underlings. Ben was disinterested, switched off to his older sister’s naturally bossy ways. Again, she sank into the darkness that enveloped her.

“Mummy, there’s someone at the door. Shall I answer it?” Beth’s voice interrupted the heavy numbness of her mind.

“Huh?”

“There’s someone knocking at the door...” Beth began.

“So?” Janey mumbled.

Ben came in. “It’s a man and his two children,” he interrupted.

Beth turned on him. “Did you answer the door?” she asked incredulously. “Have you left the door open? You stupid boy, you know the rules. Christ, he could be anyone...”

She flounced out to deal with the unknown dangers of strangers standing at their open front door whilst Ben just shrugged dismissively. Janey's head swam.

"They've had a car crash in the snow and need to make a phone call. The man's cell phone doesn't work up here," Ben informed her.

"No, tell them to walk to the village," Janey muttered woozily.

Beth re-entered the room. "I already told her," Ben said to Beth. "They have to go to the village to get help."

"Actually, mummy, the little girl has blood on her face and needs some first aid," Beth said. Janey could hear the pleading note in Beth's voice. She was such a kind-hearted person that it pained her to turn away a person in need.

"They must go to the village. I'm not up to having strangers around... I'm ill..." Janey argued feebly.

"That's a long way away, and it's late, and dark... and they look like nice, kind people," Beth begged. "And they need help, mummy."

If Janey had the energy, she would have launched into her tirade about nasty men not looking like the Childcatcher in Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.

"Who are they?" she asked instead.

"I don't know, but he looks familiar..." Ben said, squinting as he racked his mind.

"It is a father with two children – a boy about my age and a girl a bit younger than Ben," Beth said perfunctorily. "And the little girl banged her head when they skidded down a ditch and into a tree. They've walked across the fields..."

Janey paused, wishing she could ignore the knocking of her conscience. Was Beth's natural kindness impairing her judgement? Could she, Janey, really turn away a little girl who needed first aid? What if her own daughter...?

"He looks like the guy who played Zak in Dogstar," Ben added, still thinking of where he had seen the man's face before.

"Oh Ben! Everyone looks like Zak in Dogstar to you. Stop being so obsessive," Beth rolled her eyes impatiently.

Janey's head pounded. She wished everyone would just be quiet. "Okay, I'll come to the door," she said finally, pushing the layers of blankets back. Christ, it was freezing in here. She wondered if the central heating broken down, which was all she needed right now!

Janey made her way to the front door which was open a crack, through which Janey could see three freezing people huddled on the front step. The snow swirled around him. In Janey's befuddled mind, they looked like a Christmas card scene of carollers standing in the yellow porch-light against a cold blue panorama of snow-laden trees and white fields. She did not have the energy to make a joke, which would have been in poor taste anyway.

"Hi," she said weakly. The man on the doorstep looked at her hopefully, clutching a young girl close to his body. Beth was right. He had a kind face and certainly didn't look like he intended anyone any harm. A boy about Beth's age stood shoulder to shoulder with his father, with a guarded look on his face. He shot her a look of contempt, and Janey guessed it was because she had left them for so long in the cold. It made her feel worse.

"Thanks for coming to the door. I completely understand your caution," the man began. "We had an accident in the lane and my phone isn't working... Sadie's hurt herself... I wondered if I could use your phone." He pleaded handsomely and he reminded Janey of someone she had once known, but the memory escaped her.

Janey stepped back. "Of course," she smiled, feeling guilty for leaving them out on the doorstep. No wonder the children had felt they couldn't turn this freezing family away. "I'm sorry I was slow coming to the door... you must be freezing... come in and get warm."

"I really appreciate it," the man said, pushing his daughter gently forward and Beth, seeing the girl's reluctance, waved an arm entreatingly. They stepped into the warmly lit hallway, and Josh shut the front door behind him.

"Come in," Janey muttered feebly again, resting her body against the hallway cupboard.

"I'm Charlie, by the way..." the man began and Ben did a double-take.

"You *are* Charlie Miller, aren't you?!" he yelled. "It *is* Zak from Dogstar! I *told* you!" he turned to Beth triumphantly. Beth looked both irritated that Ben was right and impressed that Charlie Miller was standing in her front hallway.

"I am," Charlie said apologetically, "and these are my kids, Josh and Sadie," he put his hand out. Janey shook it. It was freezing, particularly in contrast to her burning hand.

"Janey," she said.

"And I'm Beth and this is Ben," added Beth before saying chirpily, "come into the kitchen and I'll make you a hot drink. There's a phone in there, and a first aid box."

She took charge, for which Janey was grateful. Janey propped herself subtly against the doorframe to the sitting room as Beth showed them where to put their coats, scarves, gloves and shoes, then led everyone through into the kitchen.

"I'm not feeling so good..." Janey muttered as they entered the kitchen, excusing her feebleness.

Charlie Miller looked at her. "You look a bit feverish," he said, a note of sympathy in his voice.

"It's very cold in the house... we'll get the heating back on soon," Janey apologised.

He glanced at her sideways. "It's warm as toast in here," he countered with a smile in his voice. "You must have a temperature."

Janey caught sight of Sadie with evidence of blood around her nose and a bruise forming on her forehead where the graze was. "There's first aid stuff in the cupboard... I hope she's okay," Janey said, feeling as though her voice was coming from a long way away. Sadie peered warily back at her, making Janey feel even further away.

"I'm sure it's only superficial," Charlie said uncertainly, looking at the congealed blood. "We were going down the lane and I think we must have hit a massive hole. The car lurched and I swerved, but it is so icy that I then over-corrected and promptly lost control."

Janey nodded at him through the fog in her head.

"Beth will help you... coffee, tea... there's turkey curry which I made earlier. Please eat. Sorry if I seem rude, but I just need to lie down." Janey felt she should be being hospitable. Instead she was merely grateful for her foresight in making the turkey curry earlier, not to mention the microwaveable rice which Beth was more than capable of heating and serving up. She pulled several packets of rice out of the larder and put them on the side, gesturing at Beth who nodded.

"I'll just be in here..." Jane drifted out, hearing Beth showing them the phone and urging everyone to sit down and have a drink and some food.

From the snug, Janey vaguely heard the rumble of the man's voice as he tried to make a phone call and commenting that the phone lines were down. She fought the waves of sleep that embraced her, wanting to listen to the conversation so if... if

maybe he wasn't... if the car... turkey curry was a good idea... no need to worry...

"Mum, can they stay the night?" Beth asked.

"Mmm?" Janey asked.

"The phone lines are down..."

"I don't know... they're strangers," Janey muttered.

"Doesn't being a famous Hollywood actor offer some form of endorsement? I would have thought we could trust him."

Janey's head swirled. She did not want to have to think.

"I've said they can stay," Beth said, making her mind up. "I will sort out all the bedding. Charlie has said that Sadie can sleep in with him as she is feeling frightened, and the boy will sleep in the room next door to them. I've shown them the rooms and they're happy."

"Okay," she muttered. There was plenty of space. One little part of her was bizarrely relieved that there was an adult in the house, and Beth was right. They knew *of* him, and he would at least play a part in ensuring they got out of a blazing house should the need arise.

The sofa became unbearably uncomfortable and the snug was boiling hot. Throwing off all the blankets, Janey made her way through the kitchen towards the staircase. The man, Jamie? Johnny? Charlie? Whatever, was sitting in the kitchen thumbing through a fashion glossy magazine that Beth had brought with her. He started slightly as she came in.

"It's very kind of you to say we can stay here; I don't know what we'd have done, other than freeze outside in the snow and ice."

Janey fumbled with some cups beside the sink and turned the tap on. Lovely ice-cold water splashed over the sides,

cooling her hands. Her throat burned and her head was fit to burst. "It's fine," she mustered.

"Are you alright?" he asked, standing up at the same moment that she turned from the sink. They nearly collided.

"Sorry." He stepped back.

"I really feel awful," she admitted. "I'm going up to bed... I'll be better in the morning."

She picked up the Nurofen on the table and popped two more out.

"Sorry to be an awful host... please make yourself at home," she said distantly.

"Don't worry about us. We're honestly so grateful to not be in the car right now."

Janey crossed the small space from kitchen sink to doorway, feeling like she would collapse.

"Goodnight. I hope you feel better in the morning," he added as she opened the door.

"Thanks," Janey said automatically, virtually crawling up the stairs.