Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Christmas for One

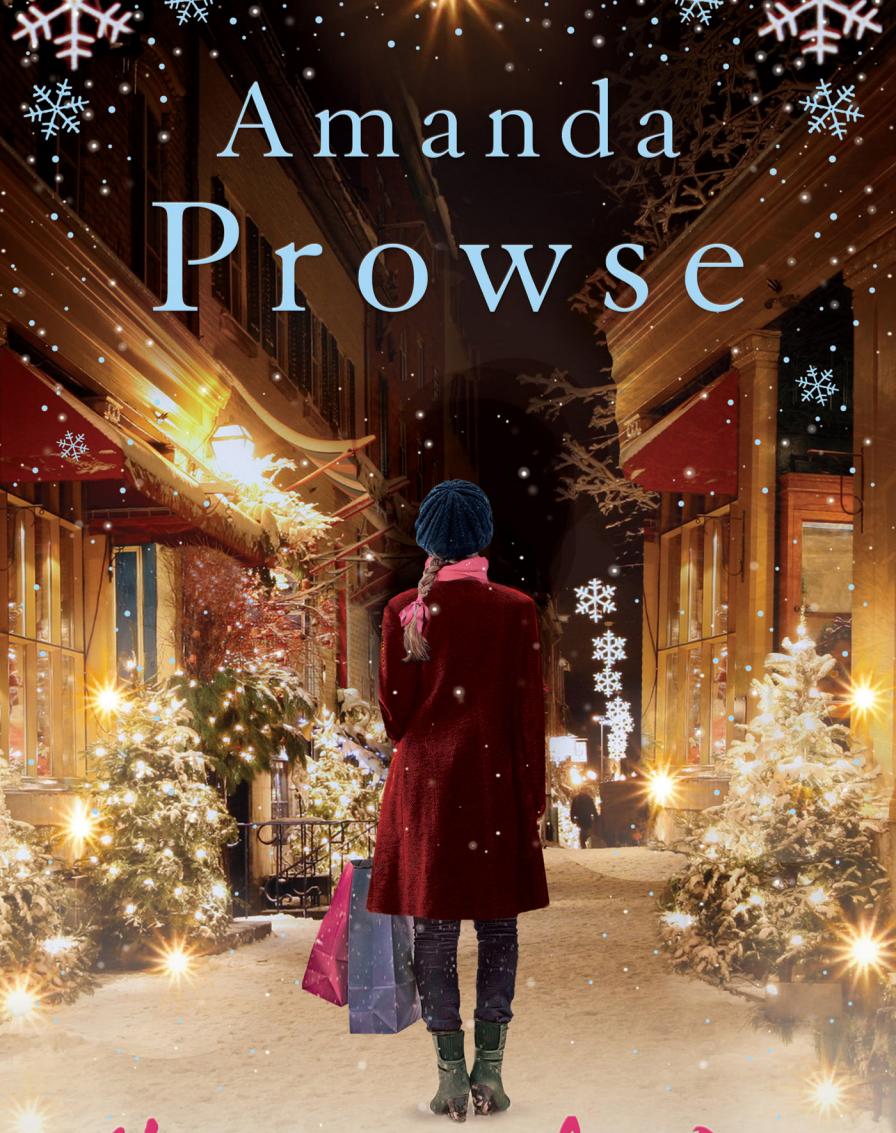
Written by Amanda Prowse

Published by Head of Zeus

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Amanda Prowse



Christmas for One

'A modern-day love story' *Daily Mail*

First published in the UK in 2014 by Head of Zeus, Ltd.

Copyright © Amanda Prowse, 2014

The moral right of Amanda Prowse to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (PB): 9781781856567
ISBN (E): 9781781856536

Typeset by Ed Pickford

Printed in the UK by Clays Ltd, St Ives PLC

Head of Zeus Ltd
Clerkenwell House
45-47 Clerkenwell Green
London EC1R 0HT

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

Prologue

Megan woke to the sound of squealing coming from the landing. It was Kirsty, the daughter of the foster family she was staying with.

Today was a special day: Christmas.

'I got a Sylvanian Families tree-house! I love it! I love it! Thank you, Mummy and Daddy!' Kirsty screamed, her excitement pushing her voice up an octave higher than usual.

Megan pulled the duvet up over her shoulders and swallowed, unsure if she should get up or stay put. It was the same way she felt every morning in Tall Trees Avenue. Sometimes she got up early, put her school uniform on and slid back under the duvet, waiting for Pam, Kirsty's mum, to knock on the door and invite her down to the kitchen for her Frosties.

What was the right thing to do today? Should she stay silently in the bedroom trying to be as little bother as possible or should she go and join in? Megan knew that Christmas morning was a big deal and, despite being only seven, she was smart enough to realise that if the Bartram

family were opening gifts without her, they probably wanted some time to themselves.

She laid her cheek on the pillow and tried to imagine what her mum was doing right that moment. Then she thought about each of her brothers and sisters: Janey, Mel, Jason and Robbie. She blinked. Her heart was beating very fast between her ribs. Like a little bird trapped inside a cage, that was how she always pictured it. Patting her chest, she whispered, 'Sssssshhh…', as though it were a living thing that she could calm.

There was a tap on the bedroom door and Megan sat up. Pam came in, wearing her sweatshirt with huskies on the front. Megan thought Pam might have dressed up today, maybe in a red sequined dress like the one she had seen a lady on the telly wearing. The sight of the huskies with their real googly eyes that moved when Pam jumped was a bit disappointing.

'Morning, Megan. Looks like Santa's been! There's a little pile of presents under the tree with your name on them.'

Megan felt her tummy flutter with excitement. Pam walked briskly to the window and drew the curtains, lifting the catch to let the breeze whip around the room. Megan wondered, as she did every time Pam performed this little ritual, if she smelt. She had been living with the Bartrams for three months, but she still didn't really know if they liked having her there.

Suddenly the door burst open and Kirsty rushed in. 'Come on, Megan! It's Christmas!' She smiled, reaching for Megan's hand, pulling her from the warmth of the bed.

Megan understood that today there was to be a truce. No hair-pulling or pinching, no stealing her chips when the adults were out of the room.

She sat on the floral-patterned carpet in her nightie and slowly removed the paper from her gifts: some new white socks, a small pink stuffed unicorn with a furry mane and big eyes, and a Blockbusters board game. She beamed. Nice presents!

Two hours later, Megan sat on the sofa in Kirsty's old bridesmaid's dress, running her hands over the layers of lilac tulle that reached her ankles. She felt like a princess. Delicious smells wafted from the kitchen – roast potatoes, Christmas pudding and brandy butter. Her mouth watered, even though she knew that she wouldn't get to eat any of it.

When Kirsty's dad, Len, reached for the car keys, she started quivering with nerves. Out of sight of the others, she placed her small hand against her chest and whispered, 'Sssssshhh.'

'Come on then, flower.' Len waved the keys in her direction.

She liked Len. She liked being called 'flower'.

Megan zipped her navy school coat over her fancy frock and waved goodbye to the family, who were all sitting round the Christmas tree. Megan blushed with guilt. She knew she should be excited about going to see *her* family, but part of her wanted to stay there, among strangers, and eat proper turkey and gravy, followed by Christmas pudding, brandy butter and charades.

‘Take these with you!’ Kirsty removed the seal from the tin of Quality Street that had sat so temptingly under the tree for the last week and shoved four sweets into Megan’s palm. Two were flat gold circles, one was a green triangle and the other an orange bon-bon shape.

‘Thank you,’ Megan whispered as she placed the sweets in her coat pocket.

Len was a man of few words. Rather than make Megan feel even more awkward, the thirty-minute drive in comfortable silence helped her relax a little.

As Megan stepped through the front door of her mum’s flat, she was met by laughter. ‘What the bloody hell have you got on?’ her mum asked, leaning on the kitchen door frame, her cigarette held up to her mouth between two long red nails. She was in vest and jeans, despite the season.

‘Kirsty said I could wear it.’ Megan bunched the skirt in her fists and let it fall. She felt sick, like she had done something wrong.

Her mum shook her head and narrowed her eyes against the yellow wisps of smoke. ‘Everyone’s in the front room.’ She nodded her head towards the sound of the telly and went into the kitchen.

Megan unzipped her coat and followed her in. Her mum was standing in front of the sink. A man she had never seen before stood by her side. He wasn’t wearing a top and had a tattoo of a big ugly dog on his bicep. Megan stared at it until he flexed his arm and barked, making it look like the dog was jumping in her direction. Megan gasped and swallowed. She noticed that neither of them

was wearing shoes or socks and that their hair was messy, like they had just got up.

'I got you a present,' she whispered as she stepped forward.

Her mum turned around and gathered the pink unicorn into her hands. 'Oh.' She looked at the man with the messy hair and gave a crooked smile. 'That's just what I always wanted. Thanks, Meggy.' She bent down and kissed her daughter's head.

Megan inhaled the scent of cigarettes and something else that she couldn't identify, but it made her tummy flip nonetheless.

'And I got you these.' She unclenched her fingers and placed the four sweets on the sticky work surface where they shone like brightly wrapped jewels.

'Ooh, my favourite!' The man dived forward and took one of the gold circles into his big hands. Megan instantly wished that she had saved them for herself. They weren't meant for him.

She wandered along the hallway to the lounge. Hovering in the doorway, she gazed at the room, which looked just like it did on any other day. No Christmas tree, no decorations, no presents. Her brothers, sisters and cousins sat flopped and sagged against the stained sofa cushions and greasy chair arms. They were eating crisps and watching the big telly, which was showing a gravy advert. A smiling mum in an apron ferried steaming plates of home-cooked goodies to a table spread with a clean white tablecloth. A dad, wearing a tie, sat at the head, beaming at his handsome

offspring. Megan stared at their own lounge with its curtains that didn't quite fit the windows and were held shut by clothes pegs, and the rusty Calor gas heater pumping out warmth. It was a world away from Tall Trees Avenue.

'Fuck me, it's Cinderella!' Jason wheezed as he winked at his little sister.

'It's not mine,' she whispered, embarrassed, no longer feeling like a princess.

She sat on the floor next to Mel and watched the last hour of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, wondering how long it would be until Len came to fetch her.

'Did your mum get you a present?' Len asked casually as she clicked her seat belt.

'She got me lots of presents, too many for me to carry and so I left them all there.' Megan felt her cheeks flame as the lie slipped from her lips.

'Probably best.' Len winked at her.

Back at Tall Trees Avenue, Megan hung up her coat and walked into the dining room. The table still gleamed with tinsel and candles, and Christmas carols were playing on the stereo. Megan closed her eyes and made a promise that when she was grown up she would be just like the gravy advert lady. She would serve a lovely Christmas dinner to her family, carrying the plates to the table and putting them on a clean white cloth. She would buy everyone the presents they had always wanted and after lunch they would play charades and laugh as they passed around the tin of Quality Street.

She sat down by the tree in the lounge and fanned her princess dress out on the floor around her, feeling both happy and sad. Happy to be able to run her hands over the shiny baubles and to sit watching the twinkling lights, but sad for her mum, Janey, Mel, Jason and Robbie, that their home didn't have any magic in it. None at all.

One

Meg stood in the middle of the pavement and stared at the display in the tall glass window. She had been with Plum Patisserie, working for cousins Pru and Milly Plum, for four years, yet continued to be wonderstruck by the incredible confections that creative director Guy Baudin and his team produced.

She beamed and held her scarf against her throat. It was December the first and the window conjured thoughts of snow and sparkle. The single-tier cake sat on a silver and glass podium within a vast glass snow globe. Long shards of crystal hung from invisible wires and caught the light, sending dazzling miniature rainbows out into the grey December day. The cake itself was a foot wide and two feet deep, its sides and edges shaped into a brilliant white snowscape of jagged icing and fondant peaks. In the crevices and dips there was the faintest tinge of grey. On top of the cake, glistening inside this snowy crater, was a frozen pond of the palest blue, made from the smoothest, most blemish-free icing that Meg had ever seen. It was glass-like in its perfection, complete with tiny ice fissures at the edges where a slightly darker blue icing shone

through from below. Atop this perfect pond skated a male and female figure. Dressed in silver lamé and white fur, they swirled and glided in intricate animatronic loops around each other, their arms outstretched, missing each other by a hair's breadth. Where their skates had touched the ice there were left the tiniest scratches, fine flecks of icing sitting like dust to either side of the needle-like tracks, as if kicked up by a flashing blade. Delicate snowflakes danced and fluttered around the two, hitting the roof of the snow globe then falling to the floor before being lifted once again by a gentle wave of air.

Guy's 'Winter Fiesta' was nothing short of magical and Meg found herself instantly transported into Christmas. She pictured roaring fires and warm mulled wine held between chilly palms; thick socks and brisk walks; hot buttery toast; the smell of pine and cinnamon; and beautifully wrapped presents nestling under a fat Norway spruce. She saw herself in her beautiful Mayfair flat, serving a lovely Christmas dinner to her family, carrying the plates to the table and putting them on a clean white cloth.

A little girl shouted, 'Look! Mummy, look!' as she dragged her mother by the hand to stand next to Meg. 'Wow!' she mouthed as she placed her mittened palms on the glass and stared, transfixed. Meg smiled at her; this was exactly the reaction it deserved. It was a full minute before her mother, promising to bring her back another day, yanked her arm and they continued on their way.

Meg looked at the two miniature skaters and felt a familiar pang of loneliness. She bent low, peered into the

faces of the little figures and began whispering to them. 'I envy you two. Nothing to worry about and nothing to do all day apart from smile at each other and skate around in your little boots. Must be nice. I shall call you Dimitri and Anna. I think you are madly in love, but your families disapprove and so you meet on the ice every day to conduct your romance.'

She shook her head. *What's got into you, Meg? You've been reading too many stories.* She leant closer to the window. 'Careful you don't fall, Dimitri and Anna,' she murmured. 'It looks bloody freezing in there – I hope you've both got your thermals on, my loves.'

Even though Meg had seen at least a dozen of Guy's showstopping display cakes, the feeling of wonder as she peered through the glass never diminished. She thought back to the first time she had seen one of his famous Plum Patisserie windows. She could still picture the cake perfectly: eight tiers of white icing, with one side covered in tiny red sugar-paste rosebuds and petals. The flowers had looked so real she could almost smell them. Pregnant with Lucas at the time, and raw with grief over the infidelity and death of her fiancé Bill, Meg had been in a terrible state. She had nowhere else to go. She had stood gazing at the dozens of candle bulbs that flickered around the display, wondering how much a cake like that might cost and how long it had taken to make. It had seemed like something from a different universe. With only a couple of quid in her pocket and no idea where she was going to lay her head that night, she had questioned the point of such

a fanciful creation. What sort of life could possibly fit that sort of cake?

Four years on, Meg still pinched herself at the direction things had taken. Exquisite cakes had become the stuff of her daily life. All thanks to Pru and Milly Plum, who had taken her in and made her feel like family. They had been grieving too – it was their niece, Bobby Plum, who'd been Bill's other woman, and she'd died alongside Bill in the car crash. But instead of chucking Meg out, the Plum cousins had all but adopted her, giving her a home and a job in their fancy bakery. At the time, the extent of Meg's cake knowledge was limited to rustling up a flat Victoria sponge and on occasion treating herself to a fondant fancy. But with hard work, a keen eye and patient guidance from Pru, Milly and Guy, she had learnt fast, becoming very skilled at sugarwork and decoration. Since then, though, she had moved into a managerial role at Plum's, which left her little time to practise and improve. More often than not her fingers danced across pages of figures and spreadsheets rather than dough and sugar paste.

She smiled ruefully at the memory of that first day as she let herself in at the front door next to the café. Guy waved briefly at her from the window. It looked busy in there, which was good.

Meg climbed the stairs and opened the door to her flat. 'Only me!' she called as she kicked off her boots and shrugged her arms from her coat.

'Mummy!' Lucas came hurtling down the hallway on his red truck, powering it with his bare feet, Flintstones

style, thumping against the marble floor. He steered with his right hand and in his left gripped a large plastic dagger.

'Hello, mate! How are you? Have you had fun?'

Lucas gave an exaggerated nod. Meg bent down and kissed her son on the face, smoothing his long, dark hair from his forehead. He gave her his signature smile, through eyes half closed and with his lips pursed, looking exactly like his dad. It fascinated Meg that even though Bill had died before Lucas was born, their little boy shared many of his habits and mannerisms. It was both comforting and heartbreaking to see this little reminder of the man she had loved. When she saw him asleep, sprawled face down with his arms above his head, in the favourite pose of his father, it made her ache with longing for the man that had left them too soon.

'Milly's stuck in the pirate ship!' He excitedly executed a three-point turn and scooted back the way he'd come. Meg followed him and poked her head into the beautiful Georgian sitting room. It looked like a burglary had taken place. The two wingback armchairs that usually sat either side of the fireplace had been tipped onto their sides and were covered with a large white sheet. A broom handle had been stuck through the middle of the sheet, and from it hung a rather limp skull and crossbones. A pile of 'treasure' consisting of mismatched buttons and beads was spilling from an old cardboard box and several blue towels had been placed around the 'ship' with plastic fish scattered on top of them.

'Mills? Are you in there?' Meg crouched down and peeked beneath the sheet.

Milly was lying on the floor between the two chairs. Her head was crooked at a rather unnatural angle and she was wearing a pirate bandana and a patch over her left eye. She tilted her neck back and peered at Meg. 'It's Cap'n Mills to you and I can't come out, I am surrounded by shark-infested waters.'

Meg looked down at her feet, which were on a blue towel. 'Oh dear, I think I must be shark bait.'

Milly scrabbled her way out from under the sheet. In the light, Meg could see she had drawn a natty cavalier-style beard on her chin and a matching moustache.

'Nice tash!' Meg said.

'Urgh, thanks! We have a slight problem with my facial hair.'

'Oh?' Meg watched as Milly rubbed at her face with her cutlass-free hand.

'I picked up the wrong pen and accidentally used this.' Milly pulled from her pocket a black marker with the words 'INDELIBLE INK' stamped on the side.

Meg laughed loudly. 'You nutter!'

'I'm supposed to be playing bridge tonight,' Milly huffed. 'How can I turn up looking like the love child of Charles the bloody First?'

Meg snorted her laughter.

'Lucas, I've been rescued, I'm going to have a tea break with Mum and then we can go back to pirating, okay?'

‘Aye aye, Captain!’ Lucas shouted from his truck. Milly had him well trained in pirate-speak.

‘You’re early!’ Milly moaned. ‘We’ve still got a damsel in distress to rescue and a dragon to slay.’

Meg grinned. ‘Aren’t you confusing knights’ tales with pirate adventures?’

‘Blimey, who are you, the fairy-tale police?’ Milly tutted. ‘I think you’ll find we can be whoever we want to be, isn’t that right, Spiderman-Pirate?’ she called into the hallway.

‘Aye aye, Captain!’ Lucas replied.

‘We weren’t expecting you until after tea. Not that I’m complaining – you can be the dragon.’

‘Can’t I be the princess?’ Meg asked.

Milly shook her head as she filled the kettle. ‘Definitely not. You don’t just turn up at the eleventh hour and get the best role of the day. I need commitment! We’ve been playing for four hours and Lucas started off as cabin boy and has only recently been appointed first mate.’

Meg’s eyes began to well up with tears. Milly set the kettle on the side and put her arm across her back. ‘All right, all right, no need to go all wobbly on me. I didn’t realise it meant that much to you. You can be the princess if you like!’

Meg shook her head. ‘It’s not that. I’ve had a shitty day. Piers and I have finished.’ She looked up in time to see Milly placing her palms together in a silent prayer of thanks, her eyes skyward.

‘I know you didn’t like him, Mills, but I did.’

'No you didn't, not really,' Milly said matter-of-factly. 'And it's not that I didn't like him; I liked him very much actually. I just didn't like how you became when you were with him. I hated seeing you having to try so hard; it shouldn't be like that. You weren't yourself and that's no good, love.'

'Oh God, I know!' Meg covered her eyes with her palms and sighed. 'I know. You're right.'

'Come and sit down.' Milly removed her bandana and led Meg by the hand until the two slumped down on the soft sofa. 'Here you go.' She handed her a tissue.

'Thank you.' Meg sniffed and blew her nose.

'Darling, you can't beat yourself up. You were still properly grieving for Bill when you met him. I reckon you weren't firing on all cylinders and if he in some small way helped you move forward, then it wasn't all bad, was it?' Milly tried to be serious, but her beard and moustache were quite distracting.

'I guess not.' Meg considered. 'I just hate the idea that I've upset him. Piers didn't deserve that. He was busy making plans for Christmas and wondering how to make it perfect for Lucas—'

Milly tutted. 'What were you supposed to do, marry him because you didn't want to hurt his feelings? Now that would be bonkers!'

Meg bit her lip and didn't confess that she had actually considered this. 'I know you're right and at the end of the day it boils down to one thing. I didn't love him, Mills, and I don't think he really loved me, not the real me.'

Meg closed her eyes briefly and replayed the previous evening in her head. They had been about to walk into the restaurant to meet Piers' school friend and his new fiancée when Piers had turned to her and casually remarked, 'By the way, I told them you're an orphan – thought that would be easier than mentioning the whole being in care thing.' He'd then grimaced. Meg had stood in front of him and it was as if a veil had been lifted. 'Easier for who, Piers?' she'd asked.

'Oh, Mills, I feel so stupid for letting it go on so long.'

Milly sighed. 'Well, you've found the courage now and I bet Piers will be hooked up with some suitable young filly before the New Year's invites go out.'

Meg ignored the churn to her stomach, unable to explain that even though she didn't want him, she didn't want him hooking up with someone else quite so soon either, especially not someone from the right background, with the right contacts. Someone his mother would adore and fawn over, someone that wasn't like her.

'I guess.' She fiddled with the fringe of the scarf that lay in her lap. 'And what about Christmas?' she groaned. 'We were supposed to be staying in town together and going up to his parents' house on Boxing Day.'

'Well at least you don't have to endure that now!' Milly grinned.

Meg smiled. Piers' parents hardly approved of her single-parent status or the fact that their son was smitten with someone who had gone to a comprehensive school.

'Why don't I look at flights for you both to come out to Barbados? The villa sounds plenty big enough; Pru and

Christopher would love it! Just think,' Milly chirped, 'Christmas by the pool, a fancy lunch – lobster, the works – and a large cocktail. It'll be fab.'

'Barbarbados!' Lucas shouted as he scooted by the open door.

Meg shook her head. 'Thanks, Mills, but I'd like to stay here. I love him waking up in his own bed on Christmas morning…' Meg let this trail, unable to explain that it was the aspect of her childhood that irked her the most: no warm memories of Christmas morning with presents and a glowing fire. No afternoons on the sofa with full tummies and charades. She was determined to give Lucas a bucketful of traditional festive memories to last him a lifetime. She also wanted to take him to see Bill's mother, Isabel, in Oxford. It was important that he retained links to his dad's family.

'The offer's there if you change your mind.' Milly smacked the arm of the sofa.

Meg looked at Milly. 'Truth is, Mills, I'm scared of being lonely.'

'Lonely? Don't be ridiculous. How can you be lonely when you've got Lucas? And besides, you're at the threshold of life, about to jump in. Take it from one who knows about loneliness, you're just starting out.' Milly folded her arms across her chest as if to emphasise her sixty-nine years on the planet as a single woman. 'There would be nothing more 'orrible than being saddled with someone you didn't love or who didn't love you exactly the way you were.'

Milly let this point linger. Meg cringed a little. Had it been that obvious that Piers had tried to mould Meg into his ideal woman?

Milly continued. 'It wouldn't have been fair on either of you. If you had stayed with Piers it would have been a half life and that is no life at all, not for you or the boy.'

Lucas, having abandoned his scooter, ran into the room on cue. Meg smiled at her son.

'I know you're right. I keep telling myself to man up and get on with things, but I quite liked being someone's girlfriend. It wasn't like it was with Bill, not cosy or special, but it made me feel good nonetheless.'

'And you will feel like that again.' Milly patted her leg. 'But next time, don't settle for someone just because he makes all the right noises and is perfect on paper. Go for someone who knocks your socks off and gets your knickers in a spin.'

'A bit like Dimitri and Anna,' Meg muttered to herself.

'Knocks your socks off!' Lucas shouted loudly as he charged around the room with his dagger held high.

Meg looked at Milly and laughed, relieved that Lucas had chosen that part of the phrase to repeat.