



# LOVE SONG

CHARLOTTE BINGHAM

TRANSWORLD  
BOOKS

# Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Acknowledgements

Prologue

## Part One

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

## Interim

## Part Two

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

## Part Three

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Part Four

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Epilogue

About the Author

Also by Charlotte Bingham

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## About the Book

Hope Merriott has always thought of herself as truly blessed; her three daughters, Melinda, Rose and Claire bring her much joy. But when Hope's fourth daughter Letty arrives, her birth coincides with the failure of her husband Alexander's newest business venture. And although Alexander's Great Aunt Rosabel offers to solve the family's financial worries by gifting Alexander her large, elegant house, Hatcombe, in Wiltshire, Hope is full of seemingly unreasonable foreboding.

Overnight, the family moves from their cosy suburban life to the isolation of Wiltshire's rolling acres. All too soon, many of Hope's premonitions seem about to be realized when Jack Tomm, a neighbour, comes to call on her. Before long Jack and Hope fall passionately in love only to be faced with the ultimate tragedy. It is then that Melinda, Rose and Claire recognize that it is up to them to realize their very individual gifts, and that in so doing, they may well hold the key to bringing their adored mother back to them.

Award-winning novelist Charlotte Bingham has dazzled readers with an array of spellbinding bestsellers, including the highly acclaimed *To Hear A Nightingale*, *Debutantes*, and *Grand Affair*. In this gloriously romantic novel, she presents an irresistible and heart-rending tale that once more demonstrates her unique storytelling gift.

Love Song

Charlotte Bingham

For Terence my favourite singer of my favourite songs



**A special thank you to:**

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The lyrics of “Love Song (Don’t Leave Me)” featured in  
Chapter 20 appear by kind permission of Rive Droite  
Music.

The action of this novel takes place in the late nineteen  
eighties



## PROLOGUE

Their voices came towards her on the quiet afternoon air, across a garden bathed in a golden sunlight. It was a light that seemed to her to be painting everything with a tender glow - touching the trees and the lawn with strokes of warmth, the kind of warmth that seems unimaginable when winter comes.

It was, too, the kind of day that she had once thought might never come again, when a dog shifts itself lazily, a baby sleeps, and someone, somewhere, calls out to someone else to 'come and see'. A day filled with those sublimely unimportant tasks that make up the best of life.

In this mood of contentment she turned, feeling someone behind her, smiling. She found no-one there, yet she knew just who it might be.

## PART ONE

When you were there, and you, and you,  
Happiness crowned the night.

Rupert Brooke, 'Dining Room Tea'

## Chapter One

Hope had thought she was doing the right thing having a spring baby until she stepped into the hospital and saw how many other women were also doing the right thing. It was April and there seemed to be dozens of women arriving with their suitcases, all having babies. Hope had no suitcase. Everything had started to happen too quickly, in the Café Firenze of all places, right in the middle of a tea to celebrate Claire's birthday, just as the tall glasses with the frothy milk shakes had arrived and Donna Maria the café owner was discreetly lighting all the candles on the freshly made chocolate gateau which was not just the café's speciality but Hope's youngest daughter's birthday cake.

'I'm so sorry, Claire. What a time for it to happen!'

'Don't worry, Mums. If you hang on until after midnight,' her third daughter had said as cheerfully as she could, 'at least I'll have no trouble remembering its birthday!'

Hope checked in at the maternity wing and then, the pains having stopped as abruptly as they had arrived, she called her neighbour to ask her to bring round the suitcase whenever she could.

'Fingers crossed!' said Imogen.

Hope moved away from the phone booth and was surrounded once more by the chaos on the maternity ward, more like a station in wartime than a hospital. Husbands and grandfathers, boyfriends and sons, small children who would have to be left with neighbours, neighbours arriving with small children who had already been left. And so many pregnant women coming and going, some with suitcases, some like Hope who had not had time to go home and were

now queuing for one of the telephones to ask someone at home to bring in the carefully packed case with the talcum powder and the fresh nightdress, the bedroom slippers and the teddy bear.

The ward sister beckoned to her, and then, seeing Hope lean forward and give an involuntary gasp, caught her by the arm.

'Follow me, Mrs Merriott,' she said, looking back and smiling at the eternally moving but strangely quiet *mêlée* behind them. 'Spring bulge,' she added with a laugh. 'But Mr Macleod is here today, so you're in luck.'

Hope gasped. Luck. Of course. That was just what she needed.

In another five minutes she would be born.

Claire checked her last birthday present from her father to make sure. Five past two and counting. Another four minutes fifty-two seconds and - *wow!* - she would be coming into this world, exactly fourteen years ago.

'Claire?' her sister Rose groaned from under her duvet. 'Put out the light, OK?'

'No.' Four minutes and forty-seven.

'Put the light *out!*' Rose pulled her duvet higher over her mane of long dark hair and groaned again. 'Every year it's the same,' she complained. 'As if you were the only person in the whole world ever to have been born, for heaven's sake.'

'Three minutes.'

'Think of poor Mums.'

'She can do it in her sleep now.'

'I remember Mellie saying you nearly killed her.'

Melinda put her head round the door. 'You did, Claire, you nearly killed her.'

'Two minutes forty-eight seconds.'

'You arrived feet first.'

'I turned round at the last minute - just in time - two and a half minutes ...'

Rose stood up. A tall, dark-haired girl with long legs and dark eyes, she made a terrific sight with a duvet wrapped around her. Even Claire, in the middle of her counting, could appreciate that.

'I'm going to sleep in Mellie's room, Claire. It's like sharing a room with the speaking clock being in here with you.'

'It's where you should be sleeping anyway.' Claire prepared to get out of bed to commemorate her arrival into the world. 'I don't mind if you want to go and sleep with Mellie.'

'You wanted me to sleep in here! You were the one having bad dreams!'

'Shush.'

But it was not another interruption from Rose that broke the silence but the sudden ringing of the telephone.

'God!' Rose, who had climbed back into bed, now sat bolt upright again. 'That might be Dads!'

'You go and see,' Claire suggested. 'I've still got just over a minute.'

'Verna will answer it.'

'Verna never hears anything.'

'God.' Rose sighed dramatically, jumped out of bed pulling her duvet around her, and staggered off to answer the telephone. 'Mums's probably nearly died again or something.'

'Forty-three seconds!' Claire's eyes narrowed. 'Forty-two forty-one forty!'

'Hello? Two six three oh?'

Melinda was by Rose's side. 'I'll take it—'

'Shhhh. It's Dads.'

'I'm born!' Claire yelled joyously from behind them both. 'Happy birthday to me! And not only am I born but I am fourteen at last, goodbye thirteen. Wow!'

‘Shush! I can’t hear Dads!’ Rose turned to Melinda. ‘He wants to speak to you.’

‘Happy birthday to me! Happy birthday to me!’ Claire sang, dancing round the landing.

‘Shut it, Claire, OK?’ Rose insisted, frowning hard. ‘I’m trying to hear.’

‘What is it? A boy or a girl?’ Claire asked, coming to her sister’s side and adjusting her wire-sided spectacles.

‘Neither,’ Rose replied, staring at Melinda who had lost all colour from her face. ‘Yet. It’s turned itself and got stuck.’

‘It’s nothing to worry about, darlings, really,’ their father assured them on his end of the line, running a hand back through his thick dark hair. ‘Really. Just remember, darlings, Mums’s had one before. No, sorry, two before – or is it three?’ he added, joking. ‘Anyway, much better to give her another Caesarean, Alistair Macleod said. I’ll explain it all when I come home, my angels. So. Really, there’s nothing at all to worry about – nothing at all. They’re doing it first thing in the morning, so go back to bed, and I’ll wake you up with the good news.’

Alexander replaced the telephone and smiled wanly at the man, obviously yet another father, standing behind him. He hoped to God he had reassured them at home. He knew how much they worried, bless their cotton socks. They had all been knitting and sewing – in careful primrose or aquamarine, or navy blue – baby clothes for months. None of them minded in the least if it was a boy or a girl, *just so long as Mums’s all right*. Nowadays fathers and children knew all about the risks of childbirth, not like in the old days, when it was all kept a mystery, and babies arriving seemed simply a matter for midwives and boiling kettles.

‘I’ve never been able to understand that Catholic thing,’ Alistair Macleod said the following morning to his

anaesthetist, as the surgeon cut his way neatly across Hope's abdomen. 'Saving the baby and not the mother. It just doesn't make sense.'

Hope heard nothing of this. She was far away flying over beautiful green meadows filled with wild flowers while the medical staff drained off her amniotic fluid through a suction tube and began to ease the baby out through the eight-inch incision in her flesh.

A minute later the surgeon handed the newborn infant, still attached to its mother by the umbilical cord, to the nurse. They both looked down at the baby, registering its presence in this world, and wondering.

'Number four,' Alistair Macleod told Hope, an hour later, making sure to sound as cheerful as possible, as he placed her newest daughter in her arms, while Alexander stood with his back to her, staring out of the window.

'She has a beautiful face,' said Hope, at pains to sound as cheerful as the surgeon, yet in reality appalled at herself, at how she felt as she looked at her newest daughter. It was ridiculous. She felt as if she had done something terribly wrong, as if it was her fault that she had given birth to another one of her own sex.

'Wonderful to have a perfect baby ...'

Hope nodded. 'She has a beautiful face,' she said again, and after a while, because there really was not much more to say, the surgeon left the three of them together. 'Hasn't she a beautiful face, Alex?'

'Absolutely beautiful, just like her mum.' Alexander leaned over and kissed his wife's oddly cold forehead. 'And, darling, you are not to worry about a single thing. Verna, the new Australian girl - she's a real goodie. So really, there's nothing to worry about at home. Nothing.'

Hope smiled, feeling that she wanted to go back nine months and start again.

She looked up at her absurdly handsome husband who was smiling down at her with such sweetness and warmth

while he brushed some strands of her long blond hair away from her face. Alexander was so comforting. She was so lucky in him. Even so she stared out of the window, past him, unable to stop looking back. Before the baby everything had seemed so simple, but now it seemed suddenly far from so.

‘Darling, all that matters at this moment is that the baby thrives and you get better.’ This time Alexander leaned over and kissed Hope on the mouth. ‘I’m just going to pop home and tell the girls – I think it’s important that they don’t hear from anyone else. Then I’ll come back and look in on you before I toddle off to work.’

Hope nodded and then stared once more out of the window as Alexander went. It was so different for men. They could ‘toddle off’. She thought of the girls at home, all waiting to look after the new baby, and the thought of them comforted her. It seemed to her that she could already hear them squabbling over who should feed their new sister. Everything would go on just as it had before – they would all just go on being as happy as they had been before, surely?

‘Mr Merriott?’ Alistair Macleod hailed Alexander as he walked across Reception. ‘I was waiting in the hope of catching you.’ The consultant gynaecologist smiled. He already knew Alexander by sight since they played tennis at the same club. He also knew he was what was known by other men’s wives as ‘quite a dish’. ‘You already have, what is it? Three children, I believe?’

‘Why?’

‘Why indeed.’ The surgeon took Alexander by the elbow to draw him aside. ‘I’m sorry, Alexander – you don’t mind if I call you Alexander?’

Alexander shook his head and smiled. Macleod was a nice man. Decent.

‘In a way this should wait, but then it’s going to have to be said some time, and the facts aren’t going to alter in any



meantime. The fact is, I doubt very much whether your wife – whether Hope – I would say, it would be – let us say *inadvisable* for her, in my view, to have any more babies after this. I mean, put it this way, if she was my wife, I would say, really, that this would be the time to stop. I'm sorry, but previous scars et cetera would make it quite unwise. I know you were both really longing for a boy, she told me, but really ...' He tailed off.

Alexander tilted his head to one side and stared at the surgeon, only vaguely hearing him. 'When will you be certain?'

The surgeon stared at him. 'Not when, Mr Merriott, I *am* certain. I think you would find that anyone else you consulted would say exactly the same.' He cleared his throat and smiled. 'I mean., I know there is a woman in Ireland who holds the record at the Rotunda of thirteen Caesareans, and my wife has a cousin who has had six, but I would not swear to the poor creatures' quality of life, I really would not. Quite honestly, I would say that your wife, if she was my wife, deserves a rest now. Even though,' he ended with an attempt at a joke, 'it's not in my own interests to tell you so.'

That evening Alexander drove home in a hail-storm which he barely noticed. Poor, poor Hope, what a thing to happen. After such a long wait since Claire they had pinned so much on the baby's being a boy. Everything suddenly seemed to have gone pear-shaped.

'It doesn't matter, Dads, another girl doesn't matter,' Melinda said later, sensing her father's sadness and hugging one of his arms. 'Come on. You know we shall love the baby anyway. Even more, probably.'

'Poor Mums.' Rose frowned. 'She is all right, isn't she?'

'She's fine. Just fine.'

'I don't think I shall bother having babies,' Claire said, taking her glasses off to clean the lenses on the hem of her

nightgown. 'I really don't think I shall.'

'I shouldn't,' Alexander joked, suddenly smiling. 'I mean, look at you lot.'

With his arms round Claire and Melinda and Rose leading the way, they proceeded into the warmth of the long narrow kitchen where Melinda offered to make them all a hot drink. Alexander kissed her on the top of her head and demurred, fetching down a bottle of brandy instead.

'It's the man's fault if it's a girl, isn't it? The men determine the sex, don't they?' Rose asked her father.

'It isn't anyone's *fault*, darling,' Alexander smiled, pouring himself a glass of brandy. 'It's just what happens, that's all.'

'You know it's my birthday?' Claire asked him suddenly. 'You realize I am fourteen and baby is twelve hours or something, all at the same time? That means always sharing a cake with her - but I don't mind.'

'Really, Claire? Your birthday? I thought it was last week.'

'You are rotten, Dads.' Claire pushed her spectacles up her nose, and then said with a happy smile, 'Aren't you going to wish me happy birthday?'

'No.'

'Oh. Why not?'

'Because I don't want to, Kipper.'

'Dads ...' Melinda cajoled, because it seemed to her that Claire was about to take their father seriously, 'Claire is fourteen today.'

'I don't want to wish you happy anything, because I hate you.' Alexander growled like a dog, but opening his arms he hugged Claire to him. 'Happy birthday, Kipper.'

Melinda found Claire's presents and cards where Hope always put them once they were wrapped and written.

As Alexander piled the six parcels one on top of the other to carry them downstairs he felt a twinge of

conscience that although he had signed the labels when Hope gave them to him, he had no idea what was inside.

Claire threw her arms round her father's neck to hug and kiss him while her sisters examined the book on Renoir and his paintings that he had apparently bought for her.

'It's just the book I wanted – absolutely.'

'That's two books on Renoir you've got now, Claire,' Rose said, starting to plait her dark hair rather tightly. 'You should be on "Mastermind" any day. Imagine, you may be the first really brainy blonde in this family.'

Melinda glanced at Rose. It was an old joke between them all that Claire was so bright and Melinda a bit of a plodder, but since it was her birthday she smiled at Claire before holding up her own present to her and urging her to open it.

It was a beautiful red blouson jacket from *Cache*, a shop in the high road, with a zip up the front and a fabulous padded black lining.

'How did you know, Mellie? How did you know I wanted this more than anything in the world?'

'Perhaps because you kept stopping in front of the shop and staring at it about a thousand times a day? It really is cool, though, right?'

'Cool, Mellie? It is *super-superior*-cool—'

'*And* super-expensive.'

Alexander's daughters were so close in age that they often reacted as one person. Now they all stared at him, frowning as one.

'You know I've been working at the café at the weekends, Dads.'

'Here's mine—' Rose quickly offered Claire her present to cover their embarrassment at Alexander's remarking on the cost of Mellie's gift.

At once Claire ripped off the wrapping to reveal a cap to match the jacket.

‘Oh yes, Rose! Brilliant. Really brilliant! Thank you – thank you!’

She sprang up and down the kitchen to show off how she looked, pretending to model the jacket and cap to the music on the radio.

As he sat drinking and watching his daughters, it occurred to Alexander that there was nothing they liked better than to make each other laugh. It was a charming sight. When all was said and done, he was very lucky, really.

‘I’m off to bed, my darlings,’ he announced with a sudden yawn and another look at his watch. ‘Just the idea of being father to four beautiful daughters can tire a chap out, you know!’

They stopped laughing at this and kissed him goodnight, each in turn.

‘My angels.’

The following morning as Hope lay still attached to drips and trying to get to grips with the pain of her latest Caesarean, Verna, their newly hired Australian nanny, cooked Alexander and the girls a perfect breakfast, and Hope’s friend and neighbour Imogen paid her an early visit.

‘Do they always give Caesareans a private room?’ Imogen asked wonderingly, at the same time looking round for something to tidy in the already immaculate cubicle. ‘Mind you, it’s only sensible, I suppose. I say, love, do you think that drip should actually be like that? Half out of your arm? I’ll ring for a nurse. I was reading some stats in the paper about how many accidents – fatal most of them – occur in hospital due to exactly this sort of thing.’

Before Hope could protest, Imogen had rung the bell for a nurse.

‘It’s only a saline drip, Imogen,’ she muttered, trying to fix the wayward needle herself.

‘How do you know?’

‘Previous experience let’s say,’ Hope said, staring down at her newest baby in her cot, and making up her mind to love her as much as, if not more than, the others.

‘Yes, well, you would know *rather* more than me about such things, Hope.’ Imogen laughed, showing immaculate and healthy white teeth. ‘Hope four, Imogen nil.’

‘You don’t want babies, do you, Imogen?’

‘Not yet I don’t. I don’t even want to get married until you can predetermine the sex of babies. Any minute, though, they say, and we shall all be choosing. Alexander was longing for a boy, wasn’t he?’ She stopped, and seeing Hope’s face she reddened and turned her attention to the small bunch of freesias she had brought in for the patient.

‘What I mean was having babies needn’t be – shouldn’t be – such a lottery. Not nowadays. Not given the amount of engineering and mucking about they can do. Working mothers should be able to say – OK. What I want is two m one f, or one m one f – or whatever – and go for it. Rather than playing Russian roulette. Do you want a drink or anything? Some more juice? You’re looking a little peaky, sweetie – ah, and here’s the nurse. Nurse—’

Imogen pointed out what she considered to be the ill-fitting drip, only for the nurse to demonstrate that the drip was still properly in place and that it was only the sticking plaster that had come off.

While the two women fussed over her, Hope turned her head away and stared at the wall, thinking about her new unnamed child, yet another little girl. She remembered Alexander’s words – *Darling sweetheart. Just this once – this time let’s find out the sex – it’s not as if it’s going to spoil anything? Please?*

But Hope had refused to have the baby’s gender disclosed. After so many miscarriages, after all those years of trying between Claire’s birth and this one, it had seemed utterly wrong to care a jot what sex the baby was! All that had mattered to her was that it should be well, and whole,

and be born with all its fingers and toes, and have a happy, healthy life.

It was only when she was well into her pregnancy that she had discovered just how much it meant to Alexander that this baby should be a male. For some reason, perhaps because she herself had just been so pleased to be healthily pregnant at last, she simply had not seen what she could now see, all too clearly, in retrospect. Alexander had not, as she had, longed for another *baby*, he had quite simply wanted a boy.

‘Hope?’

She felt Imogen’s hand on her shoulder and turned back to her.

‘It was OK. At least the nurse said it was OK, but she still had to check the drip. Don’t worry, your proto-feminist friend is on the case, OK?’

Hope smiled weakly at her neighbour, finding herself wondering idly what on earth *proto-feminist* actually meant, just as she sometimes wondered, admittedly without a great deal of interest, what on earth *post-modernism* could possibly mean. Then she told Mogs – as Alexander liked to call Imogen behind her back – that she was feeling a little tired and would like to rest.

‘I haven’t really seen baby, have I?’ Imogen protested into her huge leather sack of a bag as she double-checked her belongings. ‘Can I just have one proper peek before I go, Hope?’

Hope smiled her assent and, leaning over to the crib close by her bed, took a look for herself at the peacefully sleeping infant.

‘Pretty, pretty – no, not just pretty – *beautiful*,’ Imogen whispered as she stared into the cot.

‘Goodness, I am tired. I think I’m getting too old for this lark.’

‘Of course you’re tired, Hope darling. Still,’ Imogen straightened up, ‘not as tired as if you’d had it normally, of

course. None of that awful pushing and shoving, just a nice slice and out for the count, and all better now.'

Hope nodded, wondering how anyone who had not had a Caesarean could possibly say *all better now*. This was her fourth Caesarean, and just at that moment it felt like four too many.

'I'll look in again later if I can,' Imogen said, straightening Hope's sheets. 'And I'll pop in and say hi to the children. Meanwhile I'll say 'bye, love.'

As she went clattering out of the room Hope found herself fleetingly envying Imogen her independence, her smart clothes, her career, no operations. Really, when she thought about it, Imogen did not have to be a boy, nor did she have to give birth to them – she had it all.

Rose too had often thought that she was meant to have been a boy. Not from anything either of her parents had ever said, but because it just seemed so obvious. Melinda was the first-born and their parents would have accepted the fact that she was a girl with a good grace – but when their mother had become pregnant again it was obvious that she and their father would have been hoping for a boy. It was only natural. She and Mellie had often talked about it, wondering what difference it would have made.

Not that they minded about it or anything, and not that their parents seemed to mind either, and not that they thought their life needed changing in any way since they were so loved by both their parents, but every now and again they couldn't help wondering exactly what it might have meant had Rose been born *Robert*, which was the name they had found underlined in the baby book Hope had bought before she was born. Robert. Rose was tall. She would have been a tall Robert. And dark like their father; and he would have taught her to play cricket, not taken her to dancing class.

'I feel so sorry for Dads,' Melinda sometimes said. 'I'm sure he'd like a boy – someone to kick a football around with, or whatever.'

'Except Dads doesn't like football,' Rose always reminded her.

'That's true,' Melinda had replied. 'And now I think about it, girls play football now. Do you still want to be a ballerina?'

'Yes. Why?'

'Nothing. Just that the other night Dads said Mums wasn't all that keen. She thinks it's a very demanding and difficult world, and she's not sure she wants you growing up in it.'

'Doesn't sound like Mums.' Rose pulled a face. 'I mean, it's because Mums was a dancer herself that I was so interested in the first place. That can't be right, surely?'

'I'm only telling you what I heard Dads saying.'

'But Mums only gave up dancing for us. To have us, rather. She loved dancing at Covent Garden.'

'I know.' Melinda shrugged. 'But people change.'

'But I've got my audition coming up for the school. If Mums wasn't keen, surely she wouldn't be putting me through all this – auditioning and getting my hopes up and everything, not if she's planning on turning round later and saying *I don't think I want you dancing after all, Rose*. I mean – you know me, Mellie! It's like you and horses! Dancing's everything to me – it's all I've ever wanted to do. And just the thought of not being allowed to do it – I'd kill myself.'

'Of course you wouldn't, Rose,' Melinda sighed. 'But I know just what you mean.'

'Perhaps it was Dads?'

'Dads?' Melinda stared in astonishment at her sister. '*Dads*? If you wanted to – I don't know – what's the worst thing in the world to want to be?'

'A prostitute?'



‘No,’ Melinda said slowly with a smile. ‘No, I don’t think even Dads would wear that – but you know what I mean. Dads wouldn’t stop any of us from doing something we *really* wanted to do. I mean Dads is brilliant like that.’

Imogen had asked Alexander next door for a ‘kitchen supper’ and plenty of wine and sympathy. Hope knew all about it, Alexander knew all about it, they had all planned that Imogen would ‘look after’ Alexander when Hope was ‘taken in’.

‘I suppose you mind dreadfully, you poor sweetie? About having yet another girl?’

Imogen had always fancied – a very Imogen word – Alexander. Ever since she had moved in next door to the charming Merriott family she had kept a firm eye on him. Tall, ridiculously handsome, and in the habit of smiling at the world as if he was a lazy tiger and the planet his basket, he had been earmarked, all along, for what she thought of as ‘her moment’, and once she saw Hope pregnant, nine long months ago, she had planned that moment. And tonight, thank God, was it.

Different, of course, if Hope had given birth to a boy – in that case the outcome of this evening would be far from a foregone conclusion. But, bless her cotton socks, Hope was now out of the picture, lying in hospital half a mile away, all doped up after her operation, while Imogen was lying across her Victorian chaise longue in a crushed velvet dress with a thick black ribbon round her throat and soaked in *Heartless* by Ramona Lacache. There was simply no contest, but even so she had to be at pains to look sympathetic and loving, most of all towards Hope.

‘And I suppose Hope, although she is being *so* brave about it, I suppose she minds too dreadfully too, though she won’t say, because, let’s face it, that’s Hope.’

‘What difference does minding make, Imogen?’ Alexander wondered, smiling. ‘Minding hardly ever

changed the course of history.'

'Even so, I remember you saying that you were praying for a boy, you told me yourself.'

'There was always a fifty-fifty chance it would be one or the other, and it turned out to be the other. Still, we can always try again.'

Alexander looked across at their neighbour. Imogen – so opinionated, at times horrendously so – had always rather bored him, but this evening, what with Hope in hospital and yet another girl to bring up, he somehow could not remember how irritating he had always found her. Particularly not after two martinis.

'I've cooked your favourite supper – chilli con carne with sour cream and grated cheese. Hope gave me the recipe months ago, and I've been practising.'

Imogen's scent floated across to Alexander. It was exquisite, musky and subtle.

'What is that perfume you're wearing?'

'*Heartless*.' Imogen looked down at her victim for a few seconds, and then threw back her head and laughed.

As she did so Alexander could not help noticing the little bumps under her velvet dress where her suspenders were, doubtless, holding up her stockings.

'*Heartless*,' he murmured, after she had left the room. And he too laughed, the martinis and the fire making the name of the perfume seem strangely amusing, like an 'in joke' that only Imogen and himself could appreciate. '*Heartless*', he repeated, and once more the name appealed as being inordinately funny.

Imogen's kitchen, like the Merriotts', was at the back of her semi-detached house, but unlike the Merriotts' it was spanking new, brimful of the latest magazine ideas. Following her from her all-white drawing room, Alexander appreciated all the more the tasteful pale aqua paint and the units especially carved by Selward and Brimley, the

most modish of all kitchen designers. The basket drawers, the old Victorian clock above the small cream Aga, and the array of gleaming copper pots on the shelves above – her kitchen was utterly devoid of homework, nannies, cats and ringing telephones. It was also, thankfully, devoid of girls. Here Alexander could speak and be heard, and goodness Imogen listened. She listened not just with her ears, but with her whole face and body, and Alexander felt grateful to her.

She *understood* him, she really understood him. She understood what it was like to get out there and really, really have to struggle – something Hope could not truly understand, because she had never had to do it. She had never had to *get out there*.

Imogen kept using the phrase as she poured wine into Alexander's very tall, very large glass. They both knew what it was like to *get out there*. The supper was quite excellent. Despite having cooked it, even Imogen was enjoying it, and what was more, in the candlelight, Alexander was looking even more handsome than usual, so handsome that whatever he was feeling for her, she was melting.

'Oh, but should we?'

'Oh, yes, yes, yes!'

It was the moment that Imogen had imagined for nine whole months, and now it was upon her. Alexander and she were kissing, and then they were undressing, all the way up the stairs and into her incredibly sexy bedroom with its black iron-work four-poster bed, its white drapes – she loved white because it showed up your clothes so beautifully – and its polished Italian tiled floor which had been so expensive, but worth it.

Just as Alexander's love-making was worth it. Every single second was just as she had hoped, and feared. He was fantastic. He made love as if it was the first time for him, and for her, and she knew that she would never meet

another man with so much to give. She would never have believed it possible, but it was true.

Imogen lay back against her pillows.

It had been worth waiting for this. Every single solitary day of the nine months Hope had been pregnant had been worth it.

Out of the darkness of her satiated state she heard Alexander saying as he started to dress once more, 'My God, Imogen, I should never, ever, have done this!'

Imogen could not have agreed with him less.

Hope returned home with her new baby after a week in the hospital, collected by Imogen in her immaculately clean black VW Golf GTI. She sat in the back with the baby in her arms, trying not to breathe in her overpowering scent – *Restless* or whatever it was called – a passion for which Hope could not share.

'Decided on a name yet?' Imogen asked, never taking her eyes off the road in front.

'Oh, the girls and I will do that,' Hope replied, closing her eyes so as not to see the risks Imogen was taking. 'And Alexander, of course.'

'I hear Alexander was thinking of "Letitia",' Imogen said thoughtlessly, then glanced quickly in her driving mirror, seeing Hope catching the look. 'At least, when I popped in to see the girls the other night, that's what they said.'

'I like "Letitia",' Hope said, and she smiled, knowing that Alexander must have been at her book of baby names, since Letitia had been one of the many names three-starred for Claire, the last time. 'I had a great friend at—an old friend of mine was called "Letitia".'

'At where?' Imogen persisted, on to the fact that Hope was covering up. 'School, you mean? A school friend, was she?'

'Yes.'

'Which school did you go to?'

‘Royal Lodge.’

‘God – the ballet school, of course. I keep forgetting. You were at Royal Lodge.’

‘That’s right.’

‘I’d forgotten you were going to be a dancer.’

‘No, I actually was a dancer, actually!’

Hope saw Imogen glance up again into her driving mirror.

‘Bus,’ Hope called, holding her newborn tight. ‘Turning out in front.’

‘It’s OK – I saw it. No panic. Thanks. No problem. How long – how long did you dance? For?’

‘Long enough.’

‘I’d just forgotten you used to dance, that’s all.’

‘Of course – why should you remember?’ She yawned, putting her hand in front of her mouth. ‘Sorry!’

‘Hope, darling, please! You’ve just had a baby!’

*No I haven’t*, Hope thought. *I’ve just had yet another little girl.*

## Chapter Two

‘Everything in its own time, darling.’ Alexander smiled at his wife, who had just asked whether ‘Letitia’ should be christened ‘Letitia’ or ‘Daisy’, the corners of his eyes creasing as he spoke.

Like most things about Alexander, his even-featured face, white teeth, and slim figure, Alexander’s smile was perfect – a mix of lazy charm, sweet good nature, and beguiling humour.

When he had first smiled his perfect smile at Hope – eyes first, then a slow widening of that perfect mouth, finally showing a set of perfectly even snow-white teeth – Hope had fallen instantly in love. She worshipped smiles, probably because when she was growing up her father had rarely smiled and her mother never, at least not at her. And of course her ballet training had encouraged such a serious attitude, while at home her father, once her mother had run off with a publican, had never smiled again; small wonder, therefore, that when she met the handsome, charming and above all laughing Alexander Merriott she had fallen immediately and hopelessly in love.

Alexander leaned over and kissed Hope long and lingeringly, feeling, if anything, more passionately affectionate towards her than ever, suddenly wondering whether his male friends were not after all right in their frequent assertion that a ‘little fling’, as they always called it, made them feel even more loving towards their wives.

‘I’ll leave all that to you, darling. You’re wonderful with the girls, really you are.’