

LBRIS

We know  
books

# Cathy Bramley

A Merry Little  
Christmas



ORION

## Prologue

*April*

Nell held her phone, watching as the timer dragged its way towards zero; how could three short minutes feel like a lifetime? Perched on the edge of the bath with the door firmly closed, her heart was racing. Her gaze shifted to the pregnancy test in her other hand, turned face down so that she wouldn't look at the result until the three minutes were up.

*Please, please, please be positive this time.*

Oh, how she hoped that April would be the month when she'd cry happy tears instead of the other kind. She'd shout for Olek and the two of them would dance around the bathroom, eyes alight, talking over each other about how exciting it was, how wonderful it was going to be to have a child together. She'd show him how to work out her due date (even though she'd been keeping a mental note as to when the soonest she'd be a mum could be – January, currently) and they'd make an appointment with the doctor to have her pregnancy confirmed.

Officially, she and Olek had only just started trying for a baby. But, secretly, Nell had been a bit *que sera, sera* with her birth control tablets for a long time. She hadn't even told her best friend, Merry, which was unheard of, because she normally never kept anything from her.

Nor was it like her not to be honest with Olek. It hadn't been done with malicious intent, more that she'd

had a niggling doubt about her abilities to conceive these days. At thirty-six, there had been so many times over the years when she'd been careless and could easily have got pregnant by accident but hadn't. Not since . . . She swiftly halted her thought processes and tucked that particular memory back into the dark corner of her mind where it had remained blissfully undisturbed for years.

Besides, she knew that Olek would have been happy even if she'd had a surprise pregnancy. He was already a devoted dad to sixteen-year-old Max and missed him when he was with his mother. And besides, Olek was happy when Nell was happy, and vice versa.

She and Olek had a wonderful marriage, she knew how lucky she was to be loved by him. And if she could be a mum, if they could have a child of their own to love, well, her life would be complete. But the months had ticked by without a pregnancy, confirming Nell's fears. She'd wanted to know what was going on with her body and the only way that was going to happen was to talk to Olek about it.

The timer on her phone was down to the last thirty seconds, but she still didn't peek, wanting to give the test the full three minutes to work. At least the delay in her pregnancy plans meant that by January, she'd have been a partner at Merry and Bright, Merry's candle business, for a whole year. So she wouldn't feel too bad about taking some maternity leave. Unless, of course, Merry got pregnant at the same time, that might be a bit tricky.

Nell's face softened into a smile. The two best friends, now business partners, were on the same motherhood journey and trying for a family. It would be crazy and chaotic if they both had babies next year, but what fun too. Their babies would be best friends from birth, she and Merry could do all the baby classes together and the

bond between the two women would grow even stronger as they entered a new era at the same time.

The timer went off in Nell's hand, making her jump. With her heart in her mouth, she turned off the ringer, took a deep breath and flipped over the test stick.

*Negative. Damn.*

Of course it was. Just like every other month.

The disappointment was almost physical. A heavy curtain of sadness fell over her and she felt her shoulders start to shake.

'Darling?' Olek called, his Polish accent somehow imbuing that one word with extra love. He knocked softly on the bathroom door. 'Are you OK?'

Her heart twisted. He was so thoughtful, avoiding asking the burning question of whether the test was positive or not, merely asking how she was, instinctively putting her first, over his eagerness to know the outcome.

'Come in,' she replied. At least that was what she tried to say; her voice was strangled with sorrow.

Olek opened the door and knelt beside her, wrapping her in his love, his strong arms taking the place of words. Still clutching the negative test in her hand, she leaned into him and allowed the tears to fall.

'No baby,' she said, with a sad smile. 'Not this time.'

'Oh, sweetheart.' Olek kissed the tears from her cheeks and kissed her. 'Don't be sad. It's completely normal for it to take a few months and we've only just started trying.'

Except that they hadn't, thought Nell guiltily. She'd done the research; most couples conceived within a year. It had been longer than that. Plus, her age was starting to work against her.

She leaned her forehead against his. 'If I don't get pregnant next month, can we go and have some tests done to see if there's a problem?'

Olek pulled back from her, brushing her auburn curls off her face. 'How about waiting six months? Give it some time. And then I promise to do anything you ask.' He kissed her again. 'But I'm sure there won't be anything wrong.'

It wasn't as fast as she'd have liked, but it was a step forward. With every passing month, she became more convinced that she wasn't ever going to conceive. It was bad enough having a hunch, but how she'd be able to cope when a doctor confirmed that she was the problem, she had no idea.

'I hope you're right, my love.' She accepted a tissue from him and dried her eyes. 'I really do.'

★

Merry was itching to get a move on, but Cole, in true Cole fashion, was being extremely methodical.

'I bought three types,' he said, carefully unpacking the first from its box and smoothing the accompanying leaflet to remove the folds. 'This is my preferred starting point. Apparently, it's ninety-nine per cent accurate and has the best reviews on Google.'

'Trust you, Mr Belt and Braces. Just pass it to me and let me get on with it.' She took it out of her husband's hands and suppressed a giggle. She'd have just picked the cheapest, or the one which gave the quickest result. They had such a different approach to life; where Merry was always racing from one thing to another making snap decisions as she went, Cole was calm and considered, but despite their differences, as a couple, they just worked.

'I haven't read the instructions yet,' he complained. 'We need to do this properly, it's important.'

She looked at him now, an earnest frown on his handsome face, one hand ruffling his russet-brown hair distractedly, and felt a wave of love so strong that, for a second, she forgot why they were both squashed into the tiny bathroom at Holly Cottage.

'It is important.' She wriggled out of her jeans and sat down on the loo. 'But I'm dying for a wee, and everyone knows all you need to do is pee on the stick.'

He grinned at her. 'Never change, Mrs Robinson. I'm sure you're right.'

She gave him a prim look. 'Excuse me, Mr Robinson, can't a girl have a little privacy while she's indisposed?'

'You didn't give me a chance!' he blustered, turning away.

'Too late, my work here is done,' she said with a snort, holding up the stick. 'Ta-dah.'

'Now we wait.' He tore off some tissue paper for her to lay the pregnancy test onto, covered it over so they couldn't see the results window and set a timer on his watch for three minutes while she washed and dried her hands. 'Come here.'

He held his arm out to her, and she snuggled into him, resting her head under his chin, listening to the steady beat of his heart and wishing she was as calm.

Despite her laughter and impatience, deep down, Merry was a bag of nerves. She had wanted a baby for as long as she could remember. At school when other girls had been dreaming of going to university and having careers and travelling the world, her biggest wish was to start a family, a baby to love, her own flesh and blood to make up for growing up without a family. Last Christmas, she'd discovered that not only was her father alive, but that she had a half-sister, Emily, so she wasn't without family

anymore. Even so, the chance to be a mother to her and Cole's child would be a dream come true.

Her childhood had been unconventional, to say the least. Her mum had been living rough before having her at seventeen, and while she had happy memories of being in their little bedsit, those memories had been overshadowed by her mum's suicide when Merry was only eleven. Her experience of a mother-child bond was sketchy at best. But Cole was a good dad to Freya and Harley. She could learn from him, couldn't she?

The timer on Cole's watch went off. He stopped the beeping and gave her a squeeze.

'Ready to find out?' he placed a soft kiss on her lips.

She nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat. 'Ready.'

He pushed aside the tissue paper and they both leaned forward to read the word which had appeared in the window.

'Pregnant!' they exclaimed together.

'I don't believe it,' Merry gasped.

Instinctively, she pressed a hand to her stomach. It would be months before anything was noticeable, but her baby – *their* baby – was already living and growing and moving around inside her. And then suddenly she was in the air as Cole picked her up and swung her around.

'You'd better believe it!' Cole cried triumphantly. 'Because we're having a baby! You clever, clever girl.'

Merry laughed at his exuberance, clinging on tightly around his neck. 'I think you might have had a part in it too.'

He set her down gently and kissed her. 'I did. And you've just made me the happiest man on the planet. I love you, darling, and I promise to be the husband and the dad that you and our baby deserve.'

'I know you will,' she replied, 'because you already are.'

A wave of emotion enveloped her and it was all she could do to stay on her feet. Excitement and gratitude, but something else too, a sense of peace that she'd been searching for her whole life.

She was married to the most wonderful man she could wish for, had two stepchildren she adored and now she was pregnant with a baby of her own. All she had ever wanted was within her grasp, and her future could not have looked rosier.

## Chapter 1

*Merry*

Giant Christmas tree: check.

The market square festooned with fairy lights: check.

Wizzard singing that they wished it could be Christmas every day from speakers blasting out from the stage: check.

Standing in a crowd in the cold and dark with almost all of her loved ones, wearing a Christmas jumper: check.

Merry Robinson smiled to herself. It was official, it was the first of December and the countdown to the annual Christmas lights switch-on in her home town was about to begin.

'Are we ready to get this party started, Wetherley?' cried this year's celebrity a little too loudly into the microphone from the stage.

'Yes!' roared the crowd of excited residents, all of whom were wrapped in thick layers to combat the biting Derbyshire air. The night sky was clear, stars were out in their legions, and while incredibly pretty, it was bitterly cold. Merry was glad that Freya had insisted they all wear Christmas hats and jumpers. Her sister-in-law, Hester, and Hester's husband, Paul, had brought hot mulled wine to warm them up, but at almost eight months pregnant, Merry would be having an alcohol-free Christmas this year and had opted for the hot chocolate Olek had supplied.

As had Nell, who wasn't pregnant but wanted to be. Merry studied her best friend's face, noticing the dark

circles under her eyes. Nell was almost evangelical in her determination not to let her own situation take the shine off Merry's pregnancy, and it broke Merry's heart to see it. If she could have one wish this Christmas it would be for Nell and Olek to conceive. Life could be very unfair sometimes.

'OK?' Merry asked Nell, tucking an arm through hers.

'A bit nervous,' Nell replied. 'We get our test results tomorrow.'

'I'll keep everything crossed for you,' she promised.

Nell glanced sideways at her husband. 'It's pretty obvious who's the one with the problem, seeing as he's already got a son, and I hate to be letting the side down. But at least once we know what we're dealing with, we can move forward and make a plan.'

'You don't know anything yet. But if anyone can work it out, it's you two,' said Merry. 'You've been such an inspirational couple to me since the day you met. You'll deal with this together, just like always.'

'Thank you, you're a good friend, and I hope so.' Nell chewed her lip nervously.

'I know so,' Merry said firmly.

'Who is that woman again?' Ten-year-old Freya tugged on her granddad's sleeve. 'I don't think she's a celebrity at all.'

She'd cut her hair on her birthday to mark reaching double digits. Gone were the plaits and the pink clothes. Now she wore her hair short, her jeans baggy and her boots chunky. Cole confessed to Merry that he missed his sunny little girl, but Merry was secretly impressed with this new confident young lady who wasn't afraid to try out a new look.

'Suzannah Merryweather,' Fred supplied, picking up his little dog, Otto, who'd started to tremble in the cold

despite being dressed in a fleecy elf outfit. 'Presenter of a gardening TV show.'

Freya was unimpressed and went back to her hot chocolate.

'They should have asked you, Auntie Hester,' said Harley.

At fourteen, he was already taller than Merry and liked to boast to Cole that it wouldn't be long before he outgrew his dad too. He'd agreed to wear one of his dad's Christmas jumpers but was keeping his coat zipped right up to the neck and the white furry pom-pom on the end of his Santa hat was just visible, peeping out of his coat pocket.

'I did it two years ago, darling, remember, when you were in Whistler?' Hester held out her mug to her husband Paul, who was topping up the mulled wine.

'Oh yeah, Dad sent us photos,' he replied with a grin.

Merry watched Harley while, presumably, the memories of his year in Canada ran through his head. He'd had a tough time readjusting to life in the UK, but now seemed to be thriving. A Saturday job working at Merry and Bright, a very sweet girlfriend and singing in a band with his mates all seemed to have helped him find his feet.

'And we've kept our Christmas plans low-key this year because of our trip to Australia,' added Paul.

'In two days!' Hester squeezed his arm excitedly.

Cole was envious of his sister and brother-in-law's month-long road trip around Australia. But it wasn't for Merry – barbecues on the beach didn't appeal; for her, Christmas was about traditions and home and being with her loved ones.

'You wore a red cape,' said Nell to Hester. 'And I completely fan-girled over you.'

Everyone started talking about their memories from previous Christmas lights switch-ons until Suzannah's voice rang out from the stage again.

'Ten, nine, eight . . .' she chanted, gesturing for everyone to join in with her.

And as she lifted her hands to hover dramatically over the big button, everyone did.

Everyone except Merry. From nowhere, a lump appeared in her throat, preventing any words from passing her lips as her emotions overwhelmed her. Christmas always did this to her. But this year, there were more factors at play: the baby would be here soon; they still didn't have a moving-in date for the new house; the busiest few weeks of the retail calendar were upon her; she was worried about her best friend's fertility problems; and she had swollen ankles and a husband approximately a thousand miles away.

'Three, two, one . . . Merry Christmas, everyone!' Suzannah cried, putting all her weight onto the button.

Instantly, the tall Norwegian spruce which towered over the square sparkled into colourful life, illuminating the giant star at the top and every single one of the glittering baubles hanging from the branches. At the same time, the Christmas decorations strung around the perimeter of the square came on and the people of Wetherley cheered and whistled.

'Wow!' Freya clapped her hands. 'That was magic. Everywhere is so beautiful.'

'Technically speaking, it's electricity,' her brother corrected her. 'Not magic.'

Freya stuck her tongue out and Merry hid her amusement. Harley loved to display his superior knowledge where his sister was concerned. 'I think Christmas lights are magical too, Freya.'

This event was always popular, signalling as it did the start of the festive season, and Merry wouldn't have skipped it for the world. Cole had been disappointed not to be there,

and she was missing him very much. Hopefully, next year, the whole family would be here together, her half-sister Emily and Emily's boyfriend, Will, too.

Merry, having never known her father's name or whereabouts after her mother's suicide, had assumed that she didn't have any living relatives. When Emily had got in touch last year with her suspicions that they might possibly be related, Merry had been overjoyed. She'd gained a much-loved younger sister, whom she was now close to, despite Emily living in Jersey, and the father she had always wondered about. He suffered with dementia, which had worsened this year, but he was her sole source of information about her mother. Every so often, he'd come out with a tiny snippet about the young woman he'd been in love with and whom Merry had had so briefly in her life. And when he did, she felt as if she was discovering priceless treasure every time.

The thought of all being together warmed her. She slipped a hand inside her coat and felt her bump.

*Less than seven weeks until you're due, little one. My life has changed so much in the last two years, and once you arrive, it'll change all over again. I hope . . . well, I hope I'm up to the job, that's all.*

What sort of mother would she be? She wanted to be laid-back and fluster-free, but she had a sneaking suspicion that she might be the sort to be perpetually on the phone to the doctors' surgery, needing constant reassurance that all was well, holding her face to the baby's to check it was still breathing, fretting that she was making a bad job of it all.

She felt a tap on her arm and turned to see Fred beside her, looking concerned.

'OK, love?' he asked.

She blinked back any telltale tears and mustered up a smile for her beloved father-in-law.

'Absolutely fine!' She pulled her hand out from her coat and reached to stroke Otto's curly head. 'Wish Cole was here.'

'Hmm,' Fred grunted, 'so do I. He shouldn't be gadding about overseas, not with you in this condition.'

Merry suppressed her amusement. Fred's objection was mostly down to the fact that his partner, Astrid, was also 'gadding about' with Cole, in Germany. Astrid had recently inherited a *Bauernhof* – a small farmhouse with land attached – from a distant cousin of her father's. The letter from the Bavarian solicitor had come so completely out of the blue that Astrid had ignored it, assuming it to be a scam, but after two more had followed, she'd called the office and was told that she had an inheritance in her home town of Schongau, an hour south-west of Munich. It had taken a while for everything to be registered in Astrid's name and now that it was, she had absolutely no idea what she was going to do with it. Cole had suggested that they go over there together and he'd give her the benefit of his two decades of construction experience and help her decide.

'Cole's working, remember,' she pointed out. 'And Astrid's reason for going is valid too. Also, I'm not ill, I'm pregnant.'

'I don't know why she doesn't just sell it,' Fred grumbled to himself. 'Wetherley is her home now. Take the money and enjoy it, I say.'

Merry was inclined to agree. She was proud of Cole for offering to advise her oldest friend and mentor, but the timing couldn't be worse. His own building company was as busy as ever and he was project managing the renovation

of their new house, which – as far as Merry was concerned – should be his top priority.

‘Dad was always working when we were little,’ said Harley. ‘He said he regrets that now. So, don’t worry, Merry, I think he’ll be around more for this child.’

Merry marvelled at how mature he was these days. ‘Good to know, but I’m not worried. He’s already a great dad, you two are great kids.’ She nudged him playfully. ‘Most of the time.’

‘I think it’s a boy,’ Freya said sagely. ‘My teacher had a baby boy, and she was always grumpy too.’

Nell gave a snort. ‘Out of the mouths of babes.’

‘I’m not always grumpy, am I?’ Merry asked, mildly offended.

‘Not always. But you do this a lot.’ Freya rolled her eyes comically and let out a huff of exasperation.

‘And you swore at work on Saturday,’ Harley said slyly under his breath.

Merry feigned a gasp. ‘Only a tiny one, and in my defence, I was provoked.’ A customer had entered the shop with three dogs, one of which had cocked its leg against the counter. Not the ideal aroma for a scented candle shop, and bending down to clean it up had not been the ideal job for Merry now that her body resembled a bowling ball.

Harley grinned. ‘Your secret’s safe with me. I might be looking for a pay rise soon, though. If you get my drift.’

‘Cheeky,’ Merry muttered. Not a bad idea actually; it was coming up to twelve months since he’d started working for them, and he was a big help. He’d be needed even more once the baby came, and she didn’t want to lose him to a better-paid job. She made a mental note to chat to Nell about it; they made staffing decisions together.

‘I thought Ray was coming this evening?’ Hester said.

Merry winced. ‘Dad’s got a nasty cough. I popped round to see him in the home earlier. His carer and I agreed it wasn’t a good idea for him to be out in the cold.’

‘And you don’t want to be exposed to any germs either,’ Nell put in. ‘The last thing you need is to catch something.’

‘Quite,’ she agreed. ‘There’s too much to do, I haven’t got time to be ill.’

This time last year, she’d been planning their last-minute wedding. The year before that, she’d taken on the organisation of the town’s Christmas celebrations. She’d hoped that this year would be quieter, but, if anything, life was even busier, especially now her sister was living in Jersey and Merry was the main contact for their father’s care home. His dementia had worsened over the last couple of months; the last two times she’d seen him, he hadn’t known who she was. If she thought about everything too much, she could literally feel her blood pressure spiking.

‘I’m going to take some photos to send Dad,’ said Harley, ‘like he did for us when we were in Whistler.’

‘FaceTime him!’ said Freya excitedly, waving her mug of hot chocolate precariously. ‘Then I can tell him about the magic lights.’

Harley pulled out his phone and the two of them bent over it while he called Cole.

‘When are the property tycoons back in the country?’ Hester asked.

‘Two more sleeps,’ Merry told her.

‘Thank goodness,’ Fred said wistfully. ‘Otto misses Astrid like mad. He sits in her place on the sofa and whines all through the six-o’clock evening news.’

Merry, Nell and Hester exchanged looks. The dog wasn’t the only one pining for Astrid. They might be in their

seventies, but there was no mistaking how in love Fred and Astrid were. Love knew nothing about age, thought Merry; the colour of its flame may change over time, but its power to warm hearts never did.

'Hey, Dad,' Harley shouted, holding the phone high above his sister's reach. 'Thought you'd like to see the Christmas lights.'

Merry strained to see Cole, but the image of him on Harley's screen was too small from where she was standing. 'Hello, darling,' she called, waving a hand in case he could see her.

'Let me see him!' Freya jumped up to grab the phone. 'Dad, the tree's got a massive star on the top. Can we have one like that?'

'Just wait a minute,' Harley grumbled, blocking her with his arm.

Freya leapt up again and this time stumbled back into Merry, knocking into Merry. It didn't hurt, but all the same, Merry's arm flew to her stomach protectively.

'Careful, darling,' Hester chided. 'You need to be gentle with Merry now, especially her tummy.'

'Oh dear,' said Merry as a warm sensation soaked through her maternity jeans. 'You didn't hurt me, but I think you just spilled your hot chocolate on me.'

'Sorry about bumping you. But it wasn't my drink, I'd finished it all.' Freya looked round at her and giggled. 'Oops. It looks like you've wet yourself.'

'But you must have done . . .' Merry reached a hand to the top of her legs and froze. For a second, her mind went blank, until a shudder of dread ran through her. 'Oh no.'

Nell and Hester picked up on her reaction straight away.

'What's happened?' Nell asked, grabbing her arm.

'Could that be what I think it is?' Hester's eyes were wide.

Merry's heart thudded. 'I don't know. Possibly?'

'Dad!' Freya pulled Harley's arm towards her to get closer to his phone. 'Merry's weed!'

'Stop yanking me, you idiot,' Harley said with a scowl.

'At the risk of stating the obvious,' Fred cleared his throat, 'I think your waters may have broken, my dear.'

'I'm not even thirty-four weeks.' Merry could feel a sob forming in her throat. 'It's too early.'

'What's happening?' She heard Cole's alarmed voice in the distance. 'Merry?'

'Harley, may I?' Paul reached for the phone and Harley surrendered it straight away. 'Cole, looks as if you might need to come home, pronto, mate. We've got a situation here.'

Merry felt hot and panicky as everyone started talking at her, asking questions, making suggestions, and her head began to spin. She gripped Nell's hand tightly; Hester took her other arm as her knees went weak beneath her. Suddenly, Cole's face appeared in front of her as Paul held the phone out.

'Darling, I'll be there as soon as I can.' His brown eyes were huge with worry.

'I'm scared,' she whispered. 'I wish you were here.'

Why was this happening now? She hadn't had any contractions, no warning signs.

'I'm packing now, and I'll be on the first flight,' he promised.

'Me too,' Astrid piped up somewhere in the background.

'I love you,' said Cole.

'I love you too. Please hurry.' Merry's lip trembled before the screen went blank.

Olek put a hand on her back. 'I think we should take you to the hospital.'

'Agreed,' said Nell.