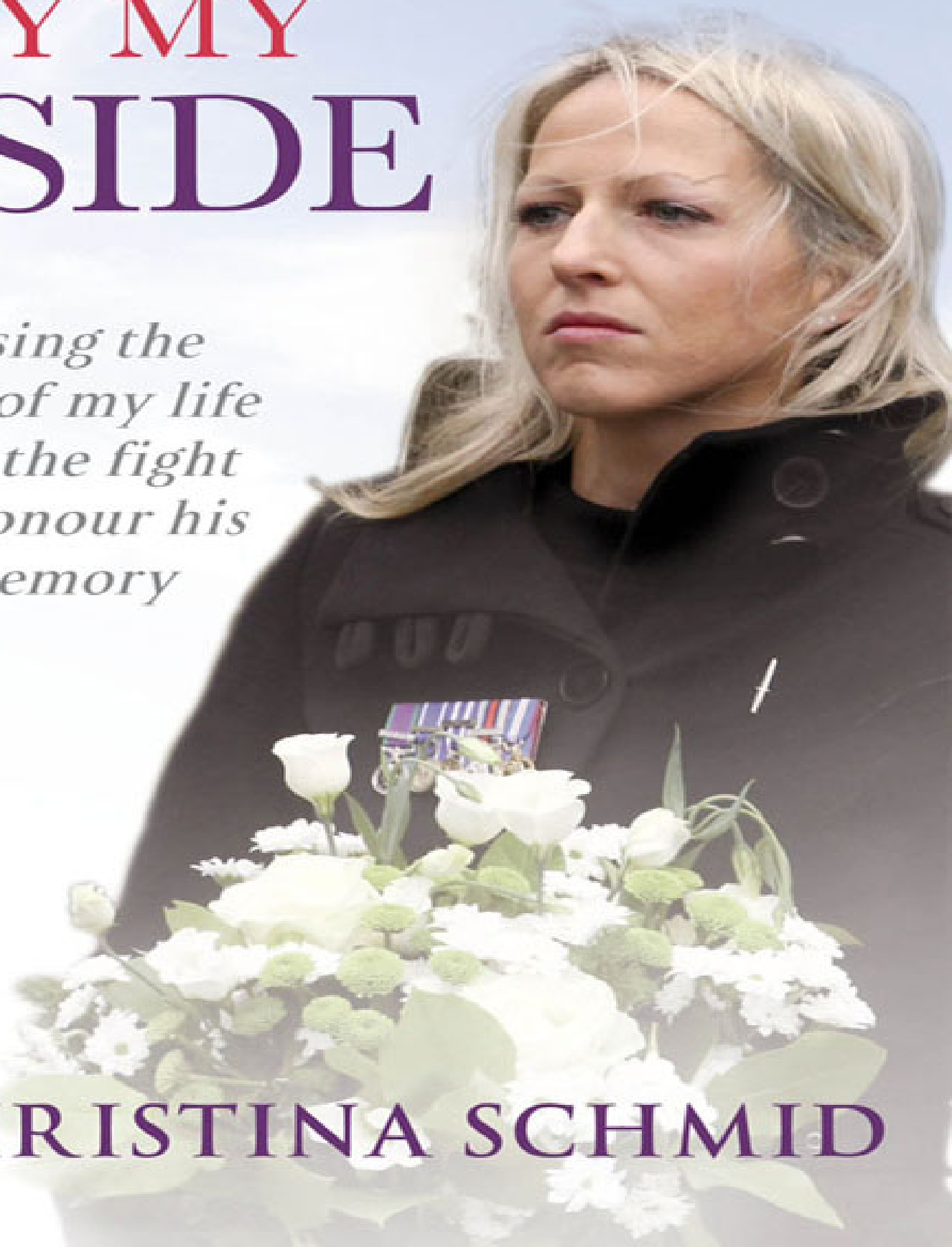


# ALWAYS BY MY SIDE

*Losing the  
love of my life  
and the fight  
to honour his  
memory*

CHRISTINA SCHMID



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## About the Book

### **A LIFE LOST.**

### **A LOVE CUT SHORT.**

‘From the moment I set eyes on him I adored him. The connection between us was so strong it went beyond everything else. His job, my job, everything else. All that fell away ...’

Christina and Oz had their whole lives ahead of them. Oz was one of only a handful of bomb disposal experts serving in the British Army, but to Christina he was a loving and devoted husband and father – the one person she could never live without.

They had always tried to stay positive throughout their time apart, counting the days until Oz could take his next leave. Until one day Christina’s worst nightmare came true when she heard the knock at the door ...

Christina and Oz’s is a deeply moving story of love and loss, hope and despair, and of living in constant fear. Christina’s extraordinary bravery and composure in the face of her husband’s death is an inspiration to anyone who has ever lost someone they love.

## About the Author

Christina is the widow of Staff Sergeant Olaf 'Oz' Schmid GC, of 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment, who, aged thirty, was killed trying to disarm a suspected Improvised Explosive Device (IED) in Afghanistan on 31 October 2009.

Since the death of her husband, Christina has spoken powerfully about a number of issues surrounding the Armed Forces and has presented her own BBC One *Panorama* investigation into the work of High Threat Bomb Disposal Officers. In May 2010 Christina received the Elizabeth Cross from the Princess Royal, and in June she attended Buckingham Palace and received the George Cross, awarded posthumously to her husband, in a private ceremony with Her Majesty, The Queen.

Christina is a patron of Tickets For Troops and lives in Hampshire with her son Laird.

# Always By My Side

Christina Schmid



Century · London

I would like to dedicate this book to my awesome husband and best friend, my 'hoofin'' son Lairdster and my mother and Nanna for passing on to me the rare gift to be calm, unique, positive, principled, loyal and strong, and to overcome chaos and adversity even in the face of sheer hell.

# QUIET HERO

by Kathleen Mills

She wakes very early, he's leaving today  
She will stand tall and proud as he's walking away.  
He glances back warmly at his children and wife,  
Knowing they will bravely carry on with their life.  
Her strength and her courage only one understands,  
He is walking away with her heart in his hands.  
For he knows that without it he would be lost,  
But they both know freedom comes at a cost.  
She walks away holding her children so close,  
Swallowing tears for the one she loves most.  
This quiet hero does not walk into war,  
She soldiers on behind her front door.  
She will move through her life the wind at her back,  
Determined to keep her family on track.  
Her tears fall in silence while she lies in her bed,  
Her fear is right there but nothing is said.  
She will ask that no medals be pinned to her chest,  
Her husband's safe return her only request.  
Few understand her commitment, her life,  
She is the quiet hero, the brave Soldier's wife.



## INTRODUCTION

Saturday 31 October 2009, 9pm

I OPENED THE fridge and got out the bottle of wine. Oz had put it in there the week before he was suddenly sent to Afghanistan. It hadn't felt right to enjoy it by myself, especially when he often didn't have enough to drink whilst he was working - he often went out with less than two litres of water a day as they had so much kit to carry and water was heavy - so I'd saved it. It was after midnight in Afghanistan by then and Oz would have finished for the day; he'd be on his way to Camp Bastion to catch a flight home for his break. It would be his first day off in just shy of six months. Only hours to go and he'd be back with us, safe in our arms.

Yet all day I'd had an uneasy, heavy feeling that I'd never had before. I'd woken early after dreaming about a colleague of Oz's, Gaz O'Donnell, who'd died in an explosion a year earlier. Oz had been so cut up about it; he adored Gaz, looked up to him. In the dream Gaz was looking at me, smiling. 'Don't worry, Chris, I'm here to get him when he comes over,' he'd said, 'I'll hold him. I won't let go.'

I'd woken early, gripped by confusion and dread.

I'd spoken to Oz two days earlier, on the Thursday evening. He was exhausted after months working in blistering fifty-degree heat, defusing one IED - Improvised Explosive Device - after another. Bomb after bomb after bomb. Oz had told me once that there were too many to

accurately record so they were classed loosely as 'jobs'. Vehicles were few and far between or simply couldn't be used as the terrain was unsuitable.

Oz was almost always upbeat, despite the fear and the fatigue and the constant pressure. But this time he sounded different, low. 'I'm hammered, honey, I'm hanging out,' he said. It was the expression he used when he was at rock bottom, drained, wasted. 'The lads need to see I'm strong, they trust me and I won't let them down, but I've been away too long, worked too much, and if it's too much for me, it's too much for anyone.' He was mentally and physically drained. 'Come and get me. I just want to be home,' he was saying to me.

The hours had ticked by slowly that last day. 'Just let him come home safe today,' I whispered. 'Let him come home.' But the heavy, odd feeling wouldn't go away, despite the fact I was trying to be positive as I had been on the phone, joking with him that he was probably worried over nothing and was most likely just to stub his toe getting the hell out of there.

Laird was so excited, his dad was coming back, it was a Saturday, Halloween. He couldn't wait to go trick-or-treating with his friends. I didn't take him swimming that morning, but let him get dressed as a little wizard. We went out to knock on the neighbours' doors, along with other mums and children from the married quarters in Winchester that we had just moved into a couple of weeks before. By eight we were home, Laird with a bag full of sweets and cakes. I bathed him, put him to bed and read him a story. With every hour that passed, I felt a little better. Surely if anything had happened, I'd have heard? Oz, my beloved Oz, would be home soon. The heartache of months without seeing him would soon be over.

By nine Laird was asleep and I was in the kitchen, getting out the wine and a plate for the Chinese food I'd ordered in. I was marking the last day on the ground for

him. We loved Chinese, it was a treat; it was what Oz chose to eat the evening before he left. Afghanistan was a few hours ahead so it would be gone midnight there. I was so proud of Oz, and chuffed that he'd soon be home with us, but was also annoyed with myself that after months of him being on tour I had allowed myself to feel wobbly and silly that day. I was going to eat, and have a glass of wine, and think of him on the plane home. Life had been suspended while he'd been away, but once Oz was back we could move forward with our plans and live out his dreams of a simple family life in Cornwall.

Laird's voice called down the stairs. 'I can't sleep, Mummy.'

I went back up. He was too excited to sleep. I looked beside his bed at the chart Oz had sent him; he'd carefully ticked off the days his dad had been gone. To a five-year-old, five and a half months had been a long time. He'd put a tick next to the last one that evening.

'Why don't you get into my bed, Lairdy, and I'll read you another story.' He loved that, it was a treat. He scrambled out of his bed and went into my room, while I picked up his favourite book and followed. He snuggled down and I sat beside him and started to read. Still excited after trick-or-treating and all those sweets!

A knock at the door.

I looked at the clock. 9.20. I wasn't expecting anyone.

Laird's face lit up. 'It's Daddy,' he said. 'He's come early as a surprise.'

It would have been just like him. Oz loved surprising us. But not this time.

'He's not coming till tomorrow, Lairdy.'

Our bed was under the window. I leaned over, pulled the curtain back and looked outside. The front door was directly below. Two men in Army uniform. I saw their hats - green lids, they call them. But they weren't Commando

green lids like Oz's, they were just officers – clerks from the local camp.

I suddenly felt frozen in time – please, no.

I opened the window. They looked up and one spoke.

'Can you confirm that you are the wife of Staff Sergeant Olaf Schmid?'

'No,' I said. 'I won't. Can I talk to him?'

'Can you please come down and open the door and confirm that you are—'

'No.'

I felt dizzy now. 'Tell me I can still talk to him. I don't care if he's lost his arms and his legs, just tell me he's not dead.'

'I'm sorry, but you need to come down and let us in.'

'Tell me I can talk to him. Get him on the phone for me.'

'Please come down and let us in.'

I shut the window and drew the curtain. But there was no denying the truth or the gut feeling that I had had all day. I knew.

Laird looked at me.

'Mummy, they've got green lids. Daddy's home?'

'Yes, but they're not the same. That's not Daddy's green lid, his is Commando, and theirs is a different kind.'

He was silent for a moment. Then he looked at me, and I could see from his small, solemn face, and the pain in his eyes, that he knew, too.

'I think we should let them in, Mummy.'

## CHAPTER ONE

June 2003

'WHERE ARE YOU? How are you getting on? I've been here for ten minutes.'

'I'm on the way. And you're early. We said two o'clock, Lofty!'

I was smiling to myself at the silly names we called each other. I parked in the centre of Winchester by the cathedral and walked hurriedly towards the Market Inn, trying to avoid getting my work heels caught in the gaps in the stone cobbles.

That's military training for you, I thought. Always bloody early and then wondering why the other person isn't there yet.

I'd slipped away from work to meet Oz for a coffee. He'd called that morning to say he'd be passing through. Despite gassing on the phone regularly and emailing, we hadn't seen each other for ages and I'd thought, why not? It would be good to catch up with him.

He'd been texting me through the day. 'Are you coming? Cause you always cancel.' It was true. He'd suggested meeting a few times whilst he was nearby, based at Tidworth. I was working in the same area, but we'd never managed it. I was always too busy working, at the gym, or spending evenings with family and girlfriends. And if I had any time left over, he was on courses or mucking about seeing mates or off seeing girls.

This time, though, it was good to have an excuse to escape. I had a stand at a pharmaceutical sales conference in the science museum just outside Winchester. As always at these events, there were endless meetings, sales pitches and talks, and after a few hours like that it was good to get some fresh air. So when the GP delegates went in to an after-lunch training session, I whispered to a friend to mind my stall and promised I'd be back in an hour.

As I walked up the path beside the cathedral, wearing a smart black shift dress and jacket, I was thinking, this is nutty, what am I doing? Why am I meeting this man? I haven't got time to sit around in the day having coffee. I had a list of customers I had to record, sales to confirm and then the stand to pack up. With that thought, I stopped and phoned my colleague, a friend who was also working that day with a stand, albeit from a rival pharmaceutical company, to let her know I had gone off site and into town.

\*

I stepped into the Market Inn. The place was quiet. I saw Oz immediately in front of me and he turned around, grinned, bounded over and grabbed a kiss on my cheek. His face was warm. 'About time, chick. What were you doing, sightseeing on the way?'

I laughed. 'I'm two minutes late - give me a break.'

We ordered drinks and sat beside the open doors to the terrace. The waitress told Oz he could smoke, as there was almost no one else there. He reached into the pocket of his battered green gilet, got out a pack of liquorice Rizla papers, baccy and a menthol tip and rolled himself a ciggie. He looked up at me and smiled and I smiled back. Same old Oz, I thought. Except that he wasn't. Something had changed.

I first met Oz in Cornwall when we were teenagers, mucking about on boats. My family had sailed down from Southampton on Avocet, Dad's boat. Oz's parents kept a boat at Mylor on the Roseland Peninsula, where we and many others moored, especially during holidays. There was a crowd of kids down there, all of us hanging around the boats and the water. I was thinking about school and exams – about growing up. Oz was just a big kid, around thirteen, but I liked him. He was funny, made everyone laugh. He was a local. He asked for my number and I gave it to him. I didn't think that much about it at the time: teenagers always meet other teenagers when they're away, but few keep in touch.

But he'd called me a few weeks later, to see if I'd got home all right and if I was OK. I'd been surprised, but I didn't mind. We had a chat, swapped news. After that we'd meet up from time to time, or talk on the phone. I had a friend, Nicky, who moved to the West Country, and I used to drive across to see her and sometimes we'd end up Cornwall way, so we often went down there for weekends. She pretended she was at my house, and I told my parents I was at hers, and we took off. Typical teenagers. I told her I knew someone in Cornwall, and I used to call Oz when we got there, and he would come and meet us for a pasty and a Coke in Truro. He was younger and a bit goofy, but he was always easy-going and made me laugh.

Over the years our lives had taken us in different directions. Months would go by without either of us getting in touch, but then I would email, or he'd phone, out of the blue, and we'd talk for ages.

I thought he was mad when he called to say he'd joined the Army, at just sixteen. No thanks, I thought. He's going to be one of those fighting, drinking squad dies. Not my thing at all. However, looking back I can see there was nothing keeping him in Cornwall – he was bigger than that. There was very little work and the recession had hit. It had

been great to have been brought up there and would be brilliant to retire to, but the pace was too slow and quiet for him. I was at university in Portsmouth by then, studying policy and economics and nursing three nights a week to pay the rent on my shared house. Studying and working hard, but still sailing at the weekends and going out clubbing too. But Oz and I found a rhythm despite our different lives, and he went on calling. He was always interested in what I was doing, he loved hearing about university, he'd ask lots of questions, sound wistful, say it must be great being with other students; then he'd crack a joke and make me laugh. When I graduated he called to congratulate me. He was always good at remembering milestones or important dates.

I liked him, we got on, but I was never interested in being more than friends at that point. I still thought of him as the gangly kid he'd been when we first met. He was quite lost and chaotic, drinking a lot, mucking about and dating girls who had a thing for military blokes. I couldn't see the attraction.

Now, though, sitting opposite him that day at the Market Inn, sipping my drink, I realised that Oz had changed. He had grown up. He was tanned, muscular; he looked older than me. He was wearing a white T-shirt and jeans with a rip in the back; the gilet, with its enamel poppy pin, was now slung over his chair-back. But it was more than that. I'd always thought of him as playful, but he was quiet and calm; there was a presence about him. He sat and smoked and asked me how life was, and I asked him what he was up to, and as we talked, both of us became aware that something extraordinary was happening between us.

I breathed in sharply, thinking I suddenly felt tired. A bit of a chill came over me, despite the sun. Oz leaned over and took my hands between his and held them instinctively. 'Cold.'



I looked at his hands. They were perfect. Tanned, square fingers, clean but very masculine. The veins on the backs stood out and I could see he was tired.

He asked where I was in my life. I said I was moving nearer my parents and wanted to settle down a little. He said, 'That's great.' I told him Dad was still a regional manager of a large catering business and at the same time doing a lot more sailing, delivering boats to people all over the world. Mum was a manager at Winchester School of Art, but wasn't so well after a series of strokes and a heart attack. Dad ploughed himself into work, as we all did in our family.

'What about you?' I asked, changing the subject. It was clear from his body language that Oz didn't like the feeling of getting older and putting our childhoods firmly behind us. 'How's military life?'

Oz said very little about his work, just that he was doing lots of courses, as an ammunition technician. He was about to start another. 'Sorry if I'm a little edgy,' he said, 'got to be there in a couple of hours, so it's on my mind.'

'Ammunition technician? What's that?'

He was vague. 'Oh, boring stuff. Most of the time I'm just up and down the country, ticking boxes or blowing stuff up.'

He played it down so much that I didn't even twig, then, that it was about bombs. That was typical of him; he seldom talked about what he did in detail to anyone. Even people within the Forces found it hard to completely understand his work, so how could his family or a civvie he didn't really know? Plus when he was off duty he wanted to forget about it.

Every now and then we lapsed into silence, grinning at one another. We were playful and had lots of banter, both comfortable and happy in each other's company. We both had somewhere to be, but neither of us wanted to get up and go - it was as if there was a magnet connecting us,

holding us there. I asked the time – he just laughed and looked at his watch. ‘This is weird, look at us, what are we doing here? We should both be out of here.’

But we stalled for time. He had a pint, I had another drink, I told him a bit about work. But we didn’t really want to chat about everyday things.

He turned his head, looking out of the windows. He had a small mole on his left cheek, a strong nose, a striking profile.

I didn’t want to leave him.

‘Do you want to go for a walk, get some air?’

He smiled. ‘No, do you?’

I smiled back. ‘No, not really.’

He got more drinks and sat down closer, next to me for another half-hour or so, before I reluctantly got up. I was conscious that my phone had been ringing in my bag and knew I had to go. He grabbed his gilet from the back of the chair, kissed my cheek, held my hand for a moment, and then gave me a big bear hug when we stepped outside. We were parked in different directions. I noticed how dark blue and intense his eyes were as he held my gaze. He said he’d call me.

When I got back to my car it was after four. My phone was ringing. It was my friend at the conference. ‘Where are you?’

‘Sorry, got held up.’ I raced back, switched into work mode, chased up the contacts I needed, sorted my sales and packed up my stand.

That evening I felt different. Seeing Oz had changed everything. It was as if the ground had shifted under me. Like going through the sound barrier. I hadn’t expected it, hadn’t looked for it, and now I didn’t know what to do.

He called. It was five hours since I’d seen him, but we talked for an hour, maybe two. About anything and everything, just to stay on the end of the phone, hear one another’s voices.

When I finally got to bed, I lay awake. What on earth was going on? I had loosely known a kid, a boy who joked around, played the fool. But this was someone else: a man, who was very independent, with a serious job and a big life of his own. And he'd touched something in me.

The timing was strange, because I was at a crossroads in my life. At twenty-eight I had been working in pharmaceuticals for a few years, doing well as a trainer and account manager, making good money, and putting in crazy hours, driving all over the south of England, selling to doctors, nurses and consultants in medical practices, hospitals, pharmacies and NHS Trusts. But I was weary of the shallowness of the corporate, competitive world I was in, and worn out by the busy social life I had with my old university friends and sailing crowd. It didn't seem to fit any more. Especially as Mum was ill. I decided to sell my flat in Southampton and move back to a village called Otterbourne in Winchester, to be close to her, so that I could help out.

I'd got a plan - I always had a plan. A quieter life, a home with a garden, more time in nature, walking in the woods, popping in to check on Mum, especially when Dad was away delivering boats.

The last thing I needed, or expected, was a man. I'd just finished a long relationship and I wanted a bit of space; time to think and take stock. Because there was something else - something I hadn't told Oz.

I was four months pregnant.

I had barely told anyone. I was still coming to terms with it myself. It had happened whilst on a holiday with Malc, the boyfriend I'd been seeing for several years. We'd headed off in February with a bunch of friends for a trip to the Dominican Republic - we both liked to travel and be outdoors. We'd decided to get a cheap deal and then kite- and windsurf for a week. Malc was a lovely guy, but it was never really serious between us; he was a surf dude,

travelling the world in search of the next big wave, and I was a career girl, knuckling down to work, with a mortgage and a family to keep me rooted. We had friends in common and we got on well. We saw each other a fair bit, but it was never really going to go anywhere, like many relationships don't when you're in your early twenties, based as they often are on shared interests alone and not on the practical things that begin to matter as you get older.

It was just after my birthday, in early April, that I started to feel strange. I went off coffee and tea. It took a while for the penny to drop, and when I discovered I was pregnant, it was a shock.

Abortion was never an option. I absolutely understand why some women choose to go that route, but it just didn't feel right for me. I hadn't planned on being a single parent – who does? But I knew that's how it would be, because I wasn't about to get married just for the sake of convention either. I'd seen too many marriages that looked perfect to the outside world but were unhappy underneath. I preferred to cope alone than settle for that. Besides, my mum nearly dying after her strokes and a heart attack had made me realise that life was too short and precious to settle for something that wasn't perfect.

I knew my parents would be worried when I told them – perhaps even a bit embarrassed by my single status – but I also knew that they would love having a grandchild and would help me in any way they could.

I was a little bit ashamed. It wasn't going to be easy telling all my friends, most of whom had married and settled down and were busy working at their careers or buying their first houses. I knew that eyebrows would be raised, that some people would think I was irresponsible or, God forbid, even pity me, but I hoped my real friends would be there for me.

When I told Malc he did offer to marry me and support me, as I knew he would. We cared about one another, but I

wasn't tempted - we just didn't have enough in common any more, and were coming to the end of a stage in both our lives. I loved him, but I wasn't in love with him. He was a genuinely nice guy - friendly, kind, good-hearted - but he was the eternal boy; he lived for adventures on the waves. When I told him about the pregnancy he was warm and sincere, truly a salt-of-the-earth kind of guy. But he wasn't ready to settle down; our lives were at different stages. Malc accepted my decision, and if he was relieved, he didn't show it. He said he'd like to see the baby and support me. But I made it clear to him that keeping our baby was my decision and I would be responsible - financially and otherwise. However, Malc did help with some practicalities, even signing as guarantor for my bigger mortgage on a Victorian two-up two-down cottage I wanted to buy within walking distance of Mum and Dad's place.

So I was on my own. I knew it would mean huge changes in my lifestyle and there were times when I felt scared and lonely, but I was convinced I could do it. I had to do it.

I started to change my work habits. It was going to be difficult to be on the road all the time and making trips up to the head office in Leicester for training with a new baby. So I told my boss I'd like to concentrate on marketing just one or two products instead of four or five, and work a smaller territory. David, my boss at the time, had agreed and made it happen for me. He'd been really supportive - his wife worked in nursing and they had two young children also, so he knew how important it was for me to be able to work from home a bit more.

The cottage I'd moved to from my flat was a sweet little place: turn of the century, old and lovely, looking out over the village green and a big old oak tree in Otterbourne, just outside the city and less than a mile from my parents' home. The owner had recently renovated it. My offer had been accepted quickly and it was ready around September

for me to move into. My baby was due in mid-November. Malc and I had grown to be good friends and accepted the idea of being parents, and Mum was thrilled to have me nearby, despite the challenge of me being a single parent, so all the pieces were in place.

Until Oz came along.

I told myself I was crazy to even think of another relationship at this stage. Especially with a man whose job took him away for weeks, sometimes months at a time. My life had become about serious responsibility. Was he ready for it? He had just turned twenty-four. He had no mortgage, lots of different girlfriends and no really strong roots anywhere. I got the impression that the life he'd lived up until this point was hard living, hard drinking, partying and racking up debts, like a typical bloke in his twenties. Despite the seriousness of the conflict he had seen, the travelling he had done and the promotions he had been given, he was shocking with money and making long-term plans.

And yet I couldn't stop thinking about him. He'd shaken my world to its foundations. Because from the moment I set eyes on him again in the Market Inn, I adored him. The connection between us was so strong that it went beyond everything else. His job, my job, his lifestyle, my lifestyle. All that fell away in the hours we spent together and on the phone.

Did he feel the same? I wondered. Would the strength of his feelings survive the differences between us? And how would a baby fit into things? I wasn't looking for a father for my child, far from it – I had Malc, my dad (granddad) and my brother around. But whatever happened, my baby was now part of the story. And some men would run a mile at the prospect of getting involved with a woman who was about to have a baby. I had to tell him the truth, before we went any further.

We had arranged to meet at the Market Inn a few days later, when Oz came through town on his way back to base. This time we met after I finished work, so I'd swapped the black suit I associated with work for a yellow dress. But Oz looked exactly the same – T-shirt, jeans, brown hiking boots and the green gilet.

'Out of your work boots for a change then?' I joked.

'Yup, pretty much,' he said. 'I change the T-shirt sometimes.'

He giggled and asked me what I wanted to drink.

'I'll have an orange juice.'

'Really? You're not working now – let's get on it!' as he ordered a pint and some food.

'No, but I am pregnant.'

He looked at me, looked at his pint and took a sip as he took the change from the barman, shrugged and said, 'Cool, I love kids. It is what it is, I love you and how you make me feel – I've not felt that before and I am not going to walk away from that, or listen to people who say things should be this way or that.'

And that was it. I realised then, Oz was unflappable. Nothing was ever a problem to him. His attitude was, 'It's a child, we can deal with that.'

Later he used to say, 'If you wake up in the morning with your health, and money in your pocket, then life is good.' It was that simple – you're alive, so you're lucky. He had already seen conflict in Northern Ireland, uprisings in Sierra Leone and unimaginable death and destruction in the Kosovo war, all by his mid-twenties. All he wanted in life was peace and to be loved. The Army had become his family since he joined straight after school, but he said something was missing. He'd already decided that he wanted to be with me. If that meant a baby was part of the deal, it was fine with him.

'I know it's surreal, Chrissy, but I want us to be together,' he said. 'I don't know how it's all going to work,

but let's just do it. If you want it too, we can make it work. Do you?'

I did, deep down, I really did. But I was cautious. 'Give me time,' I said. I had lots on with family and work and I was aware that I was settled financially and he wasn't. I also knew my friends wouldn't approve.

'Fine,' he smiled. 'I can deal with that.'



## CHAPTER TWO

FOR A LONG time I kept Oz at arm's length. Especially with a new baby, I wasn't about to let anyone just walk into my life. If he wanted to be with me, and around my child, he had to be someone I could totally trust. For me that meant going slowly, one step at a time.

'Love's not enough,' I told him. 'There's more to being together than that.'

Oz was patient and understanding. He would have hurled himself into the relationship, body and soul, because that's how he did things, but I was a bit freaked out.

So we stayed just friends. I dated people casually during that time, but no one stuck like my best pal and soulmate, so I mainly concentrated on my house and work. Mostly Oz and I would talk on the phone, but sometimes we would meet up during the day when I was working. Winchester was our special place. Oz would meet me there, as it was the place where I liked to go and light a candle for my mum and wish for her health.

I knew Oz wasn't a saint and that he'd been partying, drinking, dating girls and spending his money as fast as he earned it. And even though he swore he was, I still wasn't sure he was ready to give all that up for family life. So I told him to get it all out of his system first, and if that meant waiting to be together properly, then we would wait. He had seen women with children before and it had always been complicated, so he agreed to take my lead this time. Like any bloke in his twenties, he had typically laddish friends who he felt didn't understand him at the best of

times, let alone why he was making a decision like this, to be with me and Laird.

So we continued to spend hours on our mobiles to each other, often two or three hours at a time, sometimes not even talking much. We'd be in front of the TV, him at his end, me at mine. He'd be saying, 'Did you see that?' and I'd be saying, 'Yeah, funny wasn't it?' We'd comment, chat, swap stories, laugh. He'd tell me he was in his pit (bed) in his grot (room), and he'd describe it - small, basic, kit all around, just a bed, chair, wardrobe and TV. He would tell me about all the antics he and his mates would get up to. I would advise him about sensible things, like cars and finances.

Sometimes we'd talk about places and people we'd known in Cornwall, and we filled each other in on our roots, our families, and where we'd been in our lives so far. I told him about growing up with my brother Jamie, who is two years older, my mum Gill and my dad, John; how they had met and their history. Oz wanted to know everything - he asked a lot of questions and wanted all the stories. So I told him.

Dad grew up in Windsor and went to a good school. He always said he used to deliver newspapers to Windsor Castle when he was a child. He loved the Great Park and I remember walking through it with him when I was small - he knew all the gates and where they led, and all the best hiding places. He used to find me antlers which had been shed by the deer, and I'd take them home and hang them everywhere. Oz thought that was really cool; he loved nature, and his Scandinavian roots meant he loved the autumn and winters, as I did.

Dad had been a bit of a rebellious teenager, playing truant to bike-ride all the way to Heathrow and watch the planes taking off and landing. Later, he graduated from bikes to scooters and being a mod. Dad was full of energy and ambition, a real fighter. He was born only four pounds

in weight after his mum had struggled to have children. When he was still quite young he started a catering company and deli with his friend George Halliday. They did well, branching out to cater for businesses in London. That's where Dad met Mum. She had grown up in Manchester and had been to catering college, then later she moved to London. She went on to cook for the London Clinic, the Royal Garden Hotel and the BBC.

When Jamie and I were born, Mum always made sure we ate incredibly healthy food. It was a bit of a thing with her: she always said that all you needed in life was good food, good shoes and something to read. She believed in the power of food so much that she made her own cosmetics and hand-scrubs with ingredients like honey, salt, lemon juice, cucumber and yoghurt.

As for me, I was a tiny kid with blonde ringlets, but the girly look was deceptive. I was definitely a tomboy, always climbing trees or racing around on my bike. My brother Jamie and I were incredibly close. I felt very protective of him, because at times he found life quite overwhelming and struggled to fit in with the world around him. He is a talented artist and, like many gifted people, he found a lot of situations in life daunting. The family always kept him close and looked out for him.

We had moved a number of times when Jamie and I were young. We moved from Tilehurst, Reading, to Winchester for our teenage years. Dad wanted to build a yacht in his spare time, and our family boat, *Avocet*, the place we often retreated to, was moored in Southampton Water. But we stayed in contact with friends from Berkshire. It was originally only meant to be a temporary move – Dad's company had won a big catering contract with Esso, the refinery on the coast near the New Forest, and Dad had loved the idea of moving near the sea. He thought we'd only be there for a year or two at most, but then George died of a heart attack and everything changed. Dad missed

George terribly and he no longer had his heart in the business, so he scaled it down and we stayed in Winchester. Dad semi-retired and spent the majority of his time commissioning, delivering and maintaining yachts.

Dad's passion in life had always been boats, and so, after George passed away, he realised his dream and built his own, in the back garden. It was a big boat, a forty-eight-foot steel-hulled cutter, and he put his heart and soul into it, spending every spare hour on it. He called it *Magari*. The project took him ten years to finish and I was seventeen by the time he launched it in the Solent. That was a proud day for all of us.

His business ticked over while he took off for days, sometimes weeks at a time, flying out to some far-flung destination to collect a boat or do a course, or spending time pottering about with his like-minded friends at the boat club.

We had always spent a lot of our time sailing; as kids, Jamie and I had sailed all Easter and summer long. Dad taught us to handle boats, kayaks and canoes. He used to get cross because I wasn't competitive enough about it – I just liked messing about and capsizing. But Dad and I adored each other. He and Mum called me Swissy as a nickname. The whole family call me Swiss.

Oz loved that – he started calling me Swiss too. He told me his own nickname came from a rugby master at his school who used his initials – OS – and it evolved into Oz.

He had grown up in Cornwall, where his German mother, Barbara, and Swedish father, Hans, settled after they met in Germany. Hans already had a son, Greg, from an earlier marriage, who was fifteen when Oz was born. A year later Oz's younger brother, Torben, arrived.

Barbara and Hans ran a hotel, The Peacock, just outside Truro. It was an excellent hotel and they worked long hours. The food was lovingly home-cooked by Barbara, and Hans did front of house and took care of the guests. So

from the start Oz was used to mucking in and was very self-sufficient due to his parents working long hours and being busy managing the hotel. He went to a private prep school in Truro, Polwhele House, where he made friends with Andrew Stevens, whose family ran The Old Ship Hotel at Padstow and who remained a friend throughout his life. 'He stood out,' Andrew said. 'Not just because his name was different, but because he was so full of energy and always trying something new.'

'I used to get fish fingers at home,' Andrew said, 'but when I went home with Oz we'd get Wiener schnitzel or, on one occasion, steak tartare. I remember looking at this raw meat and whispering to Oz, "Your mum's forgotten to cook it," and he said, "I know, but we'd better just eat it."'

Oz even became a chorister at Truro Cathedral – something he got a lot of ribbing about from his mates – and was eventually made head chorister. He was also a good rugby player.

'I was team captain,' Andrew says, 'so when we had the official team photo taken, I was holding the ball. But a second before the camera clicked, Oz slipped his hand across and rested it on the ball. I used to say to him, "You couldn't even let me have the ball for the photo, could you?"'

In the summers Oz and Torben used to go and stay with Hans's brother Nicolai in Stockholm. Oz liked his uncle and had such happy memories of those visits and of Sweden, where there's a small population and a lot of the great outdoors, which Oz loved.

When he was thirteen, things changed for his family. It was the recession of the early nineties, their business was under pressure, and eventually they had to let it go, so Oz was sent to the local comprehensive, Penair. It was a good school but still quite a change for a prep-school kid who had been used to private education. His friend Andrew went off to boarding school, so for the next three years they

saw less of one another, though they always stayed in touch.

Oz made a new crowd of friends at Penair, and became wild. He started smoking and was always over-sleeping and having to be shaken to get out of bed for school. He was always a clown, the one who made the others laugh, the life and soul of any crowd, and he and his mates would spend their time on their skateboards or bikes, or camping on the beach. He was good friends with three boys whose mother, Margaret, ran the post office in Veryan, a village on the Roseland Peninsula. Oz would sometimes stay the night there. Later I met Margaret, and she told me that, though Oz could be exuberant, he was always polite; he would ask before taking something from the fridge, and offer to wash up. He was part of the furniture and was a bit of a kindred spirit, she said. Like another son.

Our families, though different in many ways, had big things in common – home cooking, working and boats. My parents had made their living feeding other people good food, and his did the same. And, like me, Oz had worked from the age of thirteen. I used to help out in a care home, first in the laundry, then as an auxiliary nurse, working long hours for the British Nursing Agency. Oz did all kinds of jobs – delivering papers and washing up, or waiting tables in local cafés. By the age of fifteen he was working several evenings a week helping out in The Nare Hotel in Veryan, a beautiful hotel overlooking a beach, where his mum also worked.

Though Oz loved Cornwall, he had itchy feet and couldn't wait to leave and see more of the world. He didn't want to stay on at school and there weren't many jobs open to sixteen-year-olds. He had a friend, Tim Willetts, who was a few years older and who was in the Territorial Army. Oz saw Tim going off on exercises in his kit and liked the sound of what he was doing. So one day, in January 1996,