

Extract from “A Whiff of Scandal”

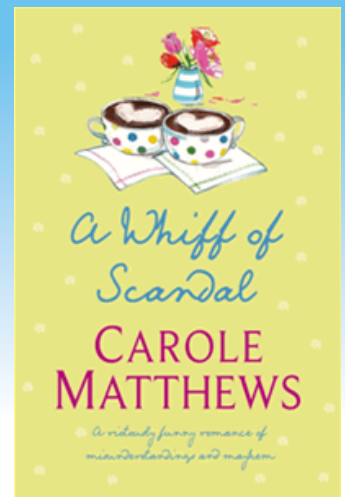
Chapter 1

ANISE

A pale yellow oil with a sweet spicy fragrance reminiscent of liquorice. In large doses it has a narcotic effect. It should be used with extreme caution and in moderation only. Anise is good for aches and pains, particularly in the neck.

From: The Complete Encyclopaedia of Aromatherapy Oils

by Jessamine Lovage



‘She’s had men popping in and out of there all day,’ Anise said over her shoulder. ‘They’re more regular than our cuckoo clock.’

There was a sharp edge to the winter morning, complementing perfectly the tone in Anise’s voice. Outside, cobwebs, rigid with frost, hung along the hedge like starched doilies bereft of fairy cakes, flung there with careless abandon after some wild tea party. The chill sun bounced off the ice crystals and glinted in her face, making it difficult to see. In her sitting room, Anise squinted and lifted the binoculars up to her eyes, her reading glasses clinking as they knocked against them. The binoculars were heavy and her arms were aching already.

She watched the postman puffing up the hill, his breath making more steam than Thomas the Tank Engine. Shifting her position, she took her weight on her good leg and pointed the binoculars at the house across the road, whizzing them fuzzily across the barrier of leylandii and the spindly skeletal trees before focusing on the front door of number five Lavender Hill.

‘Nine fifteen.’ She glared at her younger sister who was reclining in an armchair, apparently staring into space. ‘Write it down!’

Angelica sighed and picked up her notepad.

‘First one of the day. Tall. Caucasian. Male,’ Anise barked.

Angelica paused with her pencil. She looked up at her sister. ‘What does Caucasian mean?’

Anise turned and glared at her. ‘White, Angelica. White. Tall, white male. Don’t you ever watch NYPD or Hill Street Blues?’

‘No.’ Angelica shrugged and her face took on a ponderous look. ‘I’ve seen The Bill and the repeats of Heartbeat and I don’t remember them saying it on either of those.’ She put the pencil back to her notebook. ‘How do you spell Caucasian?’

‘Just put white,’ Anise snapped, returning to her binoculars. ‘Just put white.’

‘I’ve never seen a black man in Great Brayford. Do you think you need to specify white?’

‘The world is changing, Angelica,’ her sister replied crisply. ‘We could soon be overrun by foreigners. Vietnamese boat people or a tribe of South American Indians with wooden plates in their lips. There are thirty-five thousand Hong Kong Chinese moving into Milton Keynes. I read it in Buckinghamshire on Sunday. A few of them are bound to find their way to Great Brayford. She balanced the binoculars on her hip and wished fervently that the pins and needles would go out of her hands. It would hardly be on to rub them in front of Angelica and lose face. ‘And what about Mr Patel at the post office?’

‘He’s not black. He’s Asian. I don’t think that counts. But I suppose it just depends what the Cauc bit means really.’ She put her pencil in her mouth and chewed the end of it thought-



fully. ‘And he doesn’t have a wooden plate anywhere about his person, as far as I can tell.’

Her sister glared at her again. ‘Are you deliberately being obtuse, Angelica?’

‘I just think you’re being rude about Mr Patel. He’s a very nice man. You should get to know him better. He always helps to tear the page out of my pension book. They don’t make perforations like they used to.’

Anise tutted. ‘Let’s get on with it, shall we? I only have so long left to live.’ She raised the binoculars again. ‘Tall, white male. Light-grey pinstripe suit. White shirt. Not tailored. Loud, flashy tie. Too vulgar by half.’

‘Is it absolutely necessary to write down what he’s wearing?’

Anise turned to glare at her sister for a third time. ‘How will we know if he comes out wearing the same clothes?’

Angelica sat back in the armchair and languorously crossed her legs. ‘How will we know if he comes out at all unless you’re planning to keep watch all day?’

‘I thought I’d draw up a rota.’

‘Oh no, Anise.’ Angelica waved her hand emphatically. ‘You can count me out of that one. If you want to do this, you can do it by yourself. I don’t mind taking a few notes but you’re not getting me up there doing your dirty work. You know I don’t like heights.’

‘It’s four steps, Angelica. Four steps. I’m not asking you to scale the Eiffel Tower without a safety harness.’ She craned forward with her binoculars. ‘He looks suspiciously like Melvyn Bragg.’ She turned and snapped at her sister’s inertia. ‘Quick, quick – write it down. Write it down!’

‘Does he look like Melvyn Bragg now or before he grew his hair too long?’

‘What does that matter, for heaven’s sake?’

‘I would have thought it was quite important.’ Angelica brushed her hair from her forehead with a languid movement. She had seen the young Grace Kelly do it years ago in *Dial M For Murder* and it was an affectation she had practised ever since. She had it down to a fine art after all these years. Not that anyone ever appreciated it. It drove Anise insane. Partly because it drew attention to the fact that her hair was still generously flecked with soft honey tones rather than the harsh ice-grey that Anise’s had gone just after she turned sixty. She had looked remarkably like Catherine Deneuve until then – everyone used to say so. Fifteen years later, Anise’s skin was also grey but she hid it skilfully with a liberal application of Max Factor, but people no longer made the Deneuve comparison. Her seventies had turned Anise old, cold and as hard as a boiled sweet.

‘If we’re noting down everything including the colour of his socks, the length of his hair seems quite pertinent. You could be a bit more specific, Anise. You haven’t said how old he is either.’

‘It’s hard to tell. He’s looking shifty, moving his head from side to side. Bugger. This hedge is in the way, we’ll have to get Basil to top the leylandii again.’

‘I think he’s getting too old for it.’ A look of concern crossed Angelica’s face. ‘Perhaps we need to get someone else in.’

‘We’re getting too old for it, that’s why we pay the lazy blighter to do it for us. Although the only thing I ever see him doing is leaning on his blasted spade watching the grass grow.’

‘Every time I see that Yellow Pages advertisement on television where they’re looking for a replacement lawnmower for their dodderly old gardener, I think of Basil. I know he’s not been with us for very long, but I’d hate to see him move on.’

‘I’d love to see him move, full stop! I’ve seen garden gnomes that are more animated than



Basil.'

'Why don't you speak to him then?'

'You know what he's like, Angelica. He can be so difficult.'

'I would have thought you'd have a lot in common,' Angelica said pleasantly.

Anise eyed her sister, checking for any hint of sarcasm. Angelica stared innocently at her notebook, pencil still poised.

'I must say though, I thought it was a tad out of order that he took a double-barrelled shotgun to the squirrel. After all, we put the nuts out specially for him. I miss his fluffy little tail.'

'So do I, but unfortunately Basil didn't.' Angelica felt moved to find her lace handkerchief, but dared not leave her notebook unmanned while Anise was still looking at her.

'I know, but what can we do? We need help and help is very hard to find. Good help is a myth perpetuated by the romanticism of Upstairs, Downstairs. It simply doesn't exist. The BBC have a lot to answer for.' She adjusted the binoculars. 'Anyway, never mind Basil or the Beeb, that woman at number five has opened the door at last. She probably just fell out of bed. It looks like it.'

'Do you want me to write down what she's wearing or should I just stick to Melvyn Bragg?'

'She's got that same skimpy little white thing on again.' Anise curled her lip in distaste. 'I don't know when it sees the washing machine. It seems to be permanently welded to her back.'

'She could have more than one,' Angelica pointed out helpfully.

'Spendthrift!'

'Anyway, it's not skimpy. It looks like a uniform. All the hygienists at the dentist's wear them. I think it's quite smart.'

'How can she be in uniform with hair that untidy? If she was a professional she'd have it tied back in a neat ponytail.'

'That's the fashion these days, Anise. The tousled look. It's only the men that wear neat little ponytails. If you went to a hairdresser that had trained after the Great War, then you would know these things.'

Anise resented Angelica's snubbing the delights of Suzette's Tuesday Pensioners' Special, a five pound fright of rolled curls, barely combed out to a Mrs Merton-esque bouffant and lacquered rigidly into place so that it would last a week. 'All I know is that I don't want a haircut that means I have to re-mortgage the house,' she retorted.

To be fair, Anise came off quite well, Angelica thought. Suzette swept her hair into a sort of side chignon which, although it looked harsh, didn't look stupid. For herself, she much preferred to go to one of those trendy salons in Milton Keynes where she was more likely to come out looking like Anthea Turner – despite the fact that the music was too loud and all the stylists wore black clothes and make-up like Morticia Addams.

'And when did you last see a professional showing her knees?' Anise went on. 'That skirt barely covers her bottom.' She put the binoculars down. 'Damn! I've missed it! They've gone in now. I don't know whether she kissed him or not.' She pointed at Angelica's notepad. 'Just put, erotic contact unknown.'

'You said she normally kisses them on the way out.'

'She does. But she makes it look all innocent. Nothing more than a chaste peck. I'd like to know what she does to them while they're in there.'

'Mr Patel said she's an aromatherapist.'



‘Mr Patel talks out of his jolly bottom.’

Angelica found it hard to imagine Mr Patel’s bottom as jolly. ‘Why don’t we simply ask her what she does?’

‘Do you think she’d come clean? And, besides, if you were running a . . . a . . . bordello, would you want the world to know?’

‘I think it would be useful for attracting business.’

‘Attracting business!’ Anise made a humming noise. ‘She’s the sort of woman that advertises in phone boxes.’

‘You seem to know an awful lot about running a bordello, Anise.’ Angelica closed her notepad and pushed the pencil through the spiral binding at the top. ‘I thought you’d led such a sheltered life.’

‘I know something suspicious when I see it,’ she said, wagging a malevolent finger. ‘And I will get to the bottom of this, Angelica, with or without your help!’ She snapped the binoculars closed decisively.

‘Would you like a hand getting down?’ Angelica offered. ‘That stepladder’s awfully high.’

‘Yes, dear.’ Anise had already held out her hand before she saw the smile that twitched her sister’s lips.

Chapter 2

ROSE

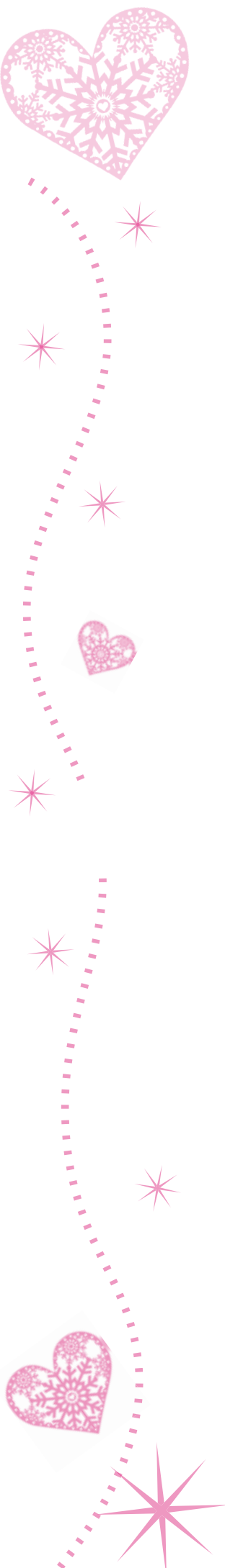
A pale oil with a rich, sweet, floral and slightly spicy aroma. Rose is well-known for its healing properties and as the symbol of Venus – the goddess of love and beauty – often inducing feelings of wellbeing and tolerance in its user. Emotionally, it will bring out your deepest feelings and gladden an aching heart. Physically, it is good for cooling inflammations and swellings.

From: *The Complete Encyclopaedia of Aromatherapy Oils* by Jessamine Lovage

Unlike Sinead O’Connor, it had been considerably more than seven hours and fifteen days since he had taken his love away. It was actually getting on for three months now. But at least Sinead was right in one respect. Nothing Compares 2 U. Or 2 Hugh, in this case. Rose wondered if Sinead had shaved her head as an act of retribution. If so, it seemed a much stronger statement than simply moving out of London into a pleasant little village just south of Milton Keynes. Perhaps she should shave her head too. Hugh would have hated that. But that might just serve to make the locals even more suspicious of her than they seemed to be already. Goodness knows why. They were hardly all straw-chewers. There were only a couple of born and bred Great Brayforders left. In fact, most of the residents seemed to have been ‘Lunnuners’ themselves before they forsook their roots and became pseudo-country folk. So they really had no right to treat her like a two-headed intruder.

Head-shaving did seem a bit drastic though. Besides, her mother had told her she had a head full of tiny bald spots where, as a child, chickenpox scabs had pulled her hair out and it had never regrown. Whenever her mother saw her, which was mercifully little these days, she examined her head for evidence and the doleful tutting told Rose that she was never disappointed.

Rose had never managed to find one herself. She had persuaded various hairdressers to look for these corn circles in her hair but no trace had ever been found. In fact, they had gone



as far as to tell her that she had nice hair. Hair to be envied. It was blonde and was best left to do its own thing rather than have fruitless hours spent on it trying to tame it. Generally, all things considered, it was quite reasonably behaved.

Perhaps Sinead should have waited a bit longer before taking the BIC razor to her bonce. The pain of longing certainly did get less. Out of nowhere tiny gaps would appear in the seemingly endless queue of pain, allowing healing to squeeze in almost unnoticed until suddenly one day you realised that you had gone for a few hours without feeling hollow and sick. Rose could now go for days – well, one day – without her stomach lurching every time the phone rang. Or wishing that he was here with her rather than who knows where. But these things hadn't just happened since Hugh left. They had happened all the time he was supposed to be with her as well. And to be fair, he hadn't exactly jumped out of their relationship, he had been given an almighty shove over the edge. She knew full well that it was impossible to expect everything in life to be as reliable as a Volkswagen but Hugh took the biscuit. In fact, he took the whole packet. There were limits even to the bounds of unreliability. Surely.

Okay, so he was devastatingly handsome, intelligent, charming, witty, the life and soul of the party. He was successful, rich, powerful and even influential. And, of course, he was great in bed. He had to be, didn't he? When have you ever met a man who scores so highly in every other area and then is lousy between the sheets? It goes with the turf. But was he reliable? No. It was not a quality that you could attribute to Hugh. He was about as reliable as a British Rail timetable.

Rose moved a row of small brown bottles to one end of her shelf. The smear of oil was thick and sticky and would need large amounts of Jif and elbow grease to shift it. She should have mopped it up as soon as it was spilt. A whoosh of surgical spirit and that would have been it. But, no, she had been too busy; it had congealed and now she would pay the price of coaxing it away, hoping that it hadn't left a telltale yellow ring on the white Formica shelf. Still, she shouldn't complain about being busy. She had thought that business might tail off when she moved from London, but she had been lucky enough to have a steady stream of clients virtually from day one, mainly thanks to her established clients recommending her services to outlying friends and relatives.

The doorbell rang and she put down her J-cloth, frowning at the clock as she did so. No one was due yet according to her diary; she had a gap of about an hour after Mr Sommerfield – who she always thought looked suspiciously like Melvyn Bragg – unless she'd made a cock-up with her appointments. She took her apron off and smoothed her white cotton uniform over her hips as she headed for the door.

There was a man – well, more of a guy – standing there, leaning on her doorframe, smiling at her. Lopsidedly. 'I've come to look at your fireplace,' he said, smile widening. 'I understand you want it opening up.'

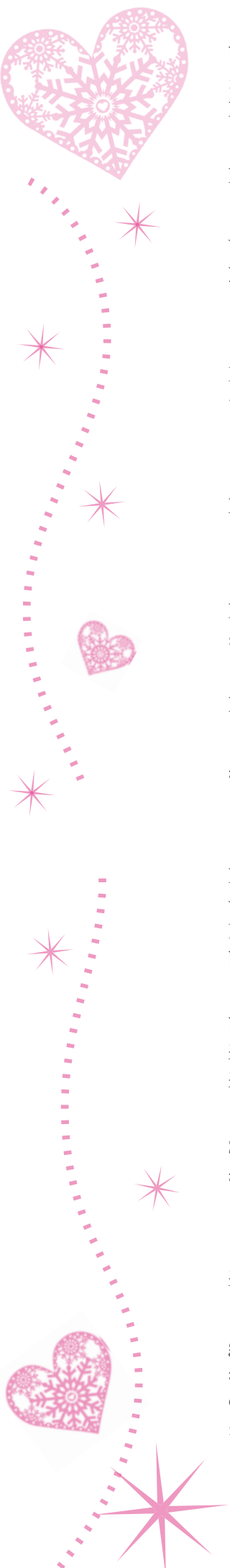
It was certainly an original chat-up line. Her eyebrows headed for the bridge of her nose in an involuntary frown. 'I'm sorry. I don't think I know who you are.'

He cocked his head in the general direction of up-the-hill. 'Dan Spikenard. Number fifteen. Builder's Bottom.'

'Oh! You're the builder?'

'Got it in one.'

She looked at him critically. He didn't look much like a builder. If he did, he was the Hollywood version. Crisp, clean, checked shirt, possibly Gap – definitely not Mister Byrite. His jeans had just the right amount of stone-washed fade and no rips in the knees. His hair had just the right amount of golden flecks that caught the light as he moved, his eyes the right amount of mischievous twinkle. The designer stubble had grown to perfection. And if there had been a camera present, it would have been catching his best side. He wasn't like other



builders she had met, who all had bald pates – not à la Sinead – one eye, two earrings, four fading tattoos and a beer belly that had been expensive to acquire. There was also a distinct lack of greasy donkey jacket and mud-caked Dr Marten boots.

‘Have we met before?’ Rose asked politely. She would have definitely remembered if she had met him.

‘No. But if you’re wondering why I know all about your fireplace, you haven’t lived in the village long enough.’ He pushed himself away from the doorframe. He was tall, too. Very. ‘Did you mention it to anyone?’

A puzzled look crossed her face. ‘Only in passing, at the post office.’

‘Ah, Mr Patel.’ The smile widened. ‘Our village telegraph. Well, let’s see. He probably told Mrs Devises, who probably told Mrs Took, who probably told Cassia Wales, who probably told the Lavender Hill mob, who probably told Gardenia – who definitely told me.’

Rose returned his smile. ‘Who on earth are the Lavender Hill mob?’

‘The snoop sisters.’ He gesticulated backwards with his head. ‘Anise and Angelica. They live just across the lane. You must have met them.’

She nodded. ‘We’re on nodding terms.’

‘They’re Great Brayford’s answer to Hinge and Brackett. They don’t miss a trick. MI5 have a lot to learn from those two. It’s fair to say that they’ve been a bit slow with you. You’re still known in the village as that nice young lady at number five.’

‘I am a name, not a number!’ She wished he would stop smiling like that, it was stopping her brain from functioning properly.

‘Unless you do something scandalous to outrage the residents, like paint your front door a different colour, you’ll remain the nice young lady at number five for ever.’

‘I think I might resent that!’

‘I wouldn’t if I were you.’ He shrugged and she noticed how wide his shoulders were under his pristine checked shirt. ‘Don’t take it personally. It just takes a long time to be accepted into village life. Look at Mr Patel. They treat him as if he’s just come over on a banana boat from Bombay, despite the fact that he’s had the post office for over five years, is one of the nicest blokes round here and, by all accounts, is third generation Slough.’

Rose laughed. It sounded strange. How long had it been since she had spontaneously burst into giggles? It was probably easier to remember when she had last spontaneously burst into flames. It certainly wasn’t in the last three months. And before that there was the bit where it was all going horribly wrong and there hadn’t been many laughs then either.

‘Anyway, back to your fireplace,’ he continued. ‘Do you want it opening up or not? Sometimes the messages passed along are a bit like Chinese whispers – you know, bring three and fourpence we’re going to a dance.’

‘What?’

‘Bring reinforcements we’re going to advance.’ He grinned. ‘Something usually gets lost in translation.’

She laughed again. This was ridiculous. She was starting to sound like a hyena on laughing gas. It was probably because she had been using her namesake Rose oil this morning, which always made her feel slightly euphoric. Thankfully, given the price of it, it hadn’t been the one she’d spilt. She tried to calm herself down. ‘Well, they were right this time. I do want my fireplace looked at.’

‘Good to see that the jungle drums aren’t failing.’

‘Come on in.’ She held the door open for him and he suddenly made the hall seem very



small. 'Through here.'

'Phew,' he said, following her into the room. 'It smells like a tart's handbag in here.'

'I'll take that as a compliment, shall I?'

He picked up one of the small brown bottles and examined it carefully. She took it from him, fearing that in those large hands it would soon be heading towards the floor with an unhealthy crash. 'What do you do?' he asked.

'I'm an aromatherapist.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'Ah, one of these new-fangled, New Agers?'

'Something like that.'

'We go for that sort of thing round here. This isn't your typical farming community – we like to play it it, green wellies and Barbour's, preferably without the farmyard smells and mud.'

'I've noticed.' She laughed again. Why couldn't she think of something intelligent and witty to say?

'Will you have enough business to keep you going here?'

'I hope so. I've had some good contacts from the clients I left behind in London and I've started to advertise in the local paper.'

His face darkened momentarily. 'You want to be careful. This might not be the big city smoke, but there are still plenty of cranks about. You're here on your own – you ought to think twice about having strangers trekking through your house.'

'You sound like my mother.'

'Sensible woman, is she?'

Rose groaned.

'Seriously,' he continued. 'Gone are the days when you could leave your back door open all night.'

Rose gave an involuntary shiver. 'I know, but there are pluses to being out in the sticks.' She walked to the window and looked out. 'The garden's wonderful. I lived in a poky flat in London.' Executive apartment complex with roof terrace and underground parking. And Hugh. 'I've got birds, foxes, badgers and deer. And the view across the vale is stunning.'

'These are the things that remind us we live in the country.'

She turned back to him. 'I must admit it's not quite as rural as I had expected.'

'Not so much milking maids and cow pats as advertising executives and bullshit.'

'Well, yes.' She felt a bubble of laughter again. 'There certainly seems to be a larger percentage of Mercs than moo-cows. And everyone looks like they've just walked off the set of Dynasty. Apart from Melissa, the girl that cleans for the vicar. You can tell she's a country lass through and through. She's still got that fresh-faced, tumble-in-the-hay sort of look.'

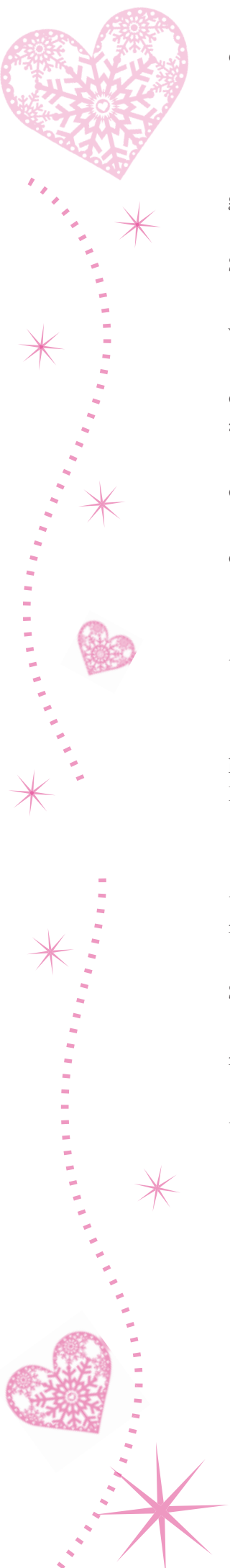
'Mel's probably one of the few true villagers left. Certainly the youngest. If you cut her in half she'd probably have, "Welcome to Great Brayford" stamped right through her middle.'

'We've had coffee together a couple of times. She's been very friendly,' Rose said.

'Oh, and the sisters grim,' Dan continued. 'They were born and bred just down the road in the manor – the one that's the golf course clubhouse now. Their father was a big landowner round here. Owned half the vale, and had his eye on the rest of it.'

'So there are a few country folk still left.'

'A few.' He shook his head sadly. 'Not many though.' He hooked his fingers through the belt loops of his jeans and his smile broadened again. 'Well, I'm sorry we don't live up to your



expectations. Would you be happier if I went to get some straw to chew?’

‘No, but I’d be happy if you looked at my fireplace.’ She smiled sweetly.

He nodded solemnly. ‘I’m a builder, that’s my job.’

She walked over to the fireplace. ‘I’m afraid the Philistine who lived here last obviously got some cowboy firm in to brick it up.’

‘Sure did, ma’am.’ He twirled imaginary guns from his imaginary holster. ‘A and D Spikenard. A is my brother Alan.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry!’ A flush spread over her cheeks and Rose put her face in her hands. ‘That was so thoughtless!’

He winked at her. ‘Well, as long as the Philistines pay the bills, I do what’s required.’ He crouched down and nodded at the offending fireplace. ‘This won’t take long. Can I come back at the weekend and do it for you?’

‘Well, yes. That’ll be fine. What sort of price are we talking about? I’m a bit strapped for cash after the move and everything.’

He pushed up again. ‘Well, just to be neighbourly and prove that we’re not a cowboy outfit, you can have it on me.’

‘Oh, I couldn’t possibly do that!’

‘Well, I can’t bake apple pies or make jam with bits in but I can knock a hole in your wall to say welcome.’

‘That would be very nice of you.’

‘I’m a nice sort of guy.’ He winked at her again. ‘But don’t tell everyone. They’ll all want holes knocked in things.’ He headed for the door. ‘I’d better be going. I’ll see you Saturday. Early. Early-ish.’

She followed him. ‘Thanks. I really appreciate it.’

He turned at the door and leaned on the doorframe again. ‘By the way, are you going to tell me your name or do you want me to call you that nice young lady at number five like the rest of them?’

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t introduce myself, did I?’ She held out her hand. ‘I’m Rose. Rose Stevens.’

He took her hand. Was it her imagination or did he hold it longer than was absolutely respectable for a first meeting?

‘Dan,’ he said again. He pushed back the stetson that he wasn’t wearing with the butt of the six-shooter he didn’t have either. ‘Me and my horse Trigger will see you on Saturday.’