

Extract from “Wrapped up in You”

Chapter 1

Mrs Norman comes in to see me at Cutting Edge at ten o'clock every Friday morning without fail. She likes to look nice for the weekend as she goes ballroom dancing on Friday and Saturday nights at the Conservative club and, since Mr Norman died two years ago, she's on the lookout for a new man. Someone neat. Someone who doesn't drink. Someone exactly like Mr Norman. Life alone, she reminds me every week, is not all it's cracked up to be. Tell me about it.

Methodically, I comb her age-thinned hair into neat sections and put the last of the rollers into her old-fashioned, brick-set hairdo. I'd like to do something radical to her hair that would take a few years off her and maybe help her snare that elusive man. Put on a bit of honey-coloured mousse to warm the silver grey perhaps, or cut it so that it sweeps forward and feathers onto her face. But Mrs Norman will not be swayed. She knows what she likes – tight sausages of curls and a can of lacquer to hold it in place – and has had the same immovable hairstyle for the last ten years that I've been doing it.

Mind you, if I didn't work in a hairdressing salon, perhaps I'd stick to the same cut too. As it is, I let the juniors practise on me with varying degrees of success. Now I am a block-coloured brunette, a rich chocolate brown the colour of my eyes, with a chippy pixie cut. But I have had many incarnations in the past twenty years. I think this suits me more than some of my other styles (the curly perm was a memorable mistake) as my face is small, heart-shaped and my skin pale. I haven't embraced the whole fake tan thing – way too much trouble. Plus, who wants to smell like a rotting apple every time you apply it?

'How's your love life then, young Janie?' Mrs Norman asks as she breaks into my musings. She asks me the same question every single time I do her hair. I'm constantly disappointed that I have nothing to report.

I raise my eyebrows at her. 'I could ask you the same.' My client is seventy-five and, frankly, sees a lot more action than I do at forty years her junior.

She giggles at that. 'Men these days.' She shakes her head in despair and I narrowly avoid stabbing her with the sharp end of my tail comb. 'All they want is sex, sex, sex!'

I do hope not at Mrs Norman's age.

'That Viagra has a lot to answer for. There used to be a natural time when interest in "things like that",' she mouths that bit into the mirror, 'used to wane. But not now. Oh no. They expect to still be doing it until they're ninety. Twice a night.' More head shaking. 'All I want is someone to take a turn around the dance floor with me and perhaps share a nice meal or two. I don't want the Last Tango in Paris.'

She makes me smile. I hope when I'm her age I have as much go in me. Come to think of it, I wish I had as much now. Finishing off the set, I tie a pink hairnet over the top. 'Let's get you under the dryer.'

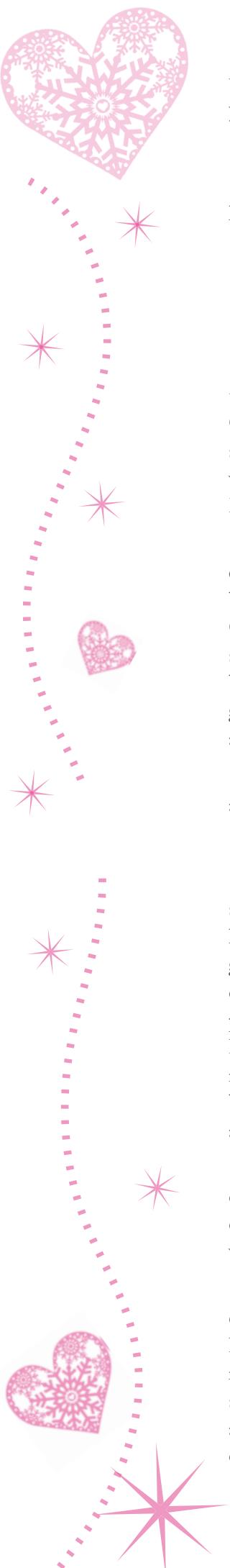
Mrs Norman picks up her handbag and follows me towards the back of the salon to where our two dryers are. I sit her down and find some magazines for her. She likes the more lurid ones, chock full of gossip: Closer, Heat and Now.

'Are you all right?' I ask as I lower the hood towards her.

She nods.

'Cup of tea?'





‘I’d love one.’ Then, as I turn to go to the staffroom to find a junior to make it, my client unexpectedly takes my hand and squeezes it. ‘You’ll find someone,’ she says. ‘A lovely lass like you.’

Yeah, right.

‘You should come ballroom dancing with me. It’s not all old fogeys, you know. They’d be like bees around a honey pot with a young thing like you.’

‘Are there any spare men then?’

‘Mostly spare women,’ she concedes sadly.

The story of my life. ‘I’ll get you that tea.’

In the staffroom, I can’t find any of the juniors. They’re probably all out at the back of the salon having a sly smoke, as Nina and I once would have been, so I make the tea myself. Our staffroom is not glamorous. There are row upon row of hair dyes and supplies, stacks and stacks of towels, piles of coats mouldering damply now that the weather has turned cold and wet, and the usual amount of tat and paraphernalia associated with teenage girls. Our owner, Kelly, keeps threatening to make us clean it all up but, thankfully, she never follows through.

Kelly only bought the shop a couple of years ago or, more accurately, her rich boyfriend did. I think Phil Fuller thought it would give her something to play with while he was busy being an ‘entrepreneur’. For that, I read ‘small-time crook’ or something else similarly dodgy. Our boss is only twenty-seven while her boyfriend is thirty years older than her. I wonder if she would still be with him if he wasn’t a millionaire with cash to flash. She’s tiny, pretty and blonde. He’s a portly, red-faced bloke with a beer belly like a bowling ball and a penchant for gold chains and bracelets. Would I content myself with a man like that? I wonder. How is that a perfect match? Yet they seem to get along well enough.

Nina follows me in, plonks herself down next to a pile of towels waiting to be folded and picks up a magazine to flick through. ‘Mrs Norman trying to sort out your love life again?’

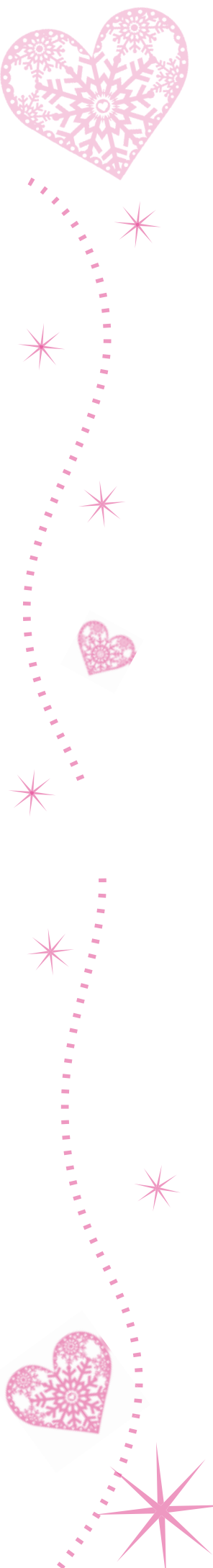
I laugh. ‘Of course.’

Nina Dalton is my best friend. She and I go back a long way. We were friends all through senior school from the age of eleven and it was no coincidence that we both went into hairdressing. All those hours we spent doing each other’s hair in my bedroom didn’t entirely go to waste as my parents had feared. We’ve worked here together since we were both starting out as juniors many years ago. I had a Saturday job to start with and when I went full-time, I persuaded the then owner to take Nina on too. Now I’m sure she’s one of the main reasons I’ve stayed here so long. My friend is the polar opposite to me and has gone down the high-maintenance, white-blond road and has to have her roots done every couple of weeks, usually by me. She’s a blue-eyed beauty with an enviably curvy figure whereas I’m boyish, straight up and down.

Nina reaches into her bag and pulls out an apple. Since she gave up smoking, my friend chain-eats fruit in an attempt to keep her curves in control. But then she also embraces chardonnay wholeheartedly as a fruit-based drink and immediately undoes a lot of the good work.

Despite its optimistic moniker, our salon certainly isn’t the most cutting-edge one you’ll ever come across. We’re based in a lovely little courtyard of shops just off the High Street in Buckingham, a middle-of-the-road place that is the county town of this area. Very charming in its own way but, admittedly, not Beverly Hills. We compete with another much more trendy salon here that should be called Cutting Edge, but isn’t. We do our fair share of hair extensions and celebrity lookalike cuts for the younger crowd, but our main clientele are the Mrs Normans of the world with their wash-and-sets and their regular perms.

It’s nice enough in here. We had a much needed makeover not long ago and now we’re all



matt mocha walls with chocolate chairs and silver-gilt-framed mirrors at each station. Instead of the scruffy lino, a new marble-effect floor was put down and all our towels are coordinated in shades of brown and cream. The clients seem to like it.

Perhaps it shows a lack of ambition that I'm still here after all this time and haven't thought to go chasing fame and fortune in one of the London salons. But it wouldn't do if we were all like that, would it? I might not be setting the world alight, but I'm happy. Ish.

'She does have a point, Janie,' Nina says, munching her apple as I clatter about with cups. 'You've been on your own for a while now.'

'I like being on my own.' I don't really. I hate it. But my longterm partner, Paul, and I split up nearly a year ago and, I don't know, I just can't face that whole dating scene again. I'm thirtyfive and I'd just feel bloody silly starting all over with someone new. You sort of get past it, don't you? I'd hoped that once I was into my twenties, 'dating' would be a word that wouldn't trouble my vocabulary again. It's not as though anyone has asked me either. There are no hordes of attractive, available men beating a track to my door so the problem has never arisen.

I lay out Mrs Norman's tray (white china cup and saucer, stainless-steel pot and tiny milk jug) and pop on a few of those individually wrapped caramel biscuits that she likes so much. Kelly says the clients are only to have one each – portion control – but to me, customer service isn't always about balancing the books. I remember a time when Mrs Norman had very little joy in her life and those few biscuits managed to bring a smile to her face every week. You can't put a price on that, can you?

'We need to do something about it, Janie Johnson,' Nina says decisively and I turn my attention away from caramel biscuits and back to my friend. 'Get you out a bit more. Find you a hot lover with pots of cash and a Ferrari.'

'Yes,' I say without enthusiasm.

'Gerry must be able to lay his hands on a spare bloke somewhere.'

The last person on earth I'd want meddling in my affairs of the heart is Nina's husband, Gerry. Mrs Norman, bless her, is bad enough.

I wish everyone would realise that I'm OK like this. I don't want excitement. I don't want change. I certainly, absolutely, most definitely don't want another man in my life.

Chapter 2

Mrs Silverton is next on my list. She is the Barbara Windsor of Cutting Edge. A glamorous woman of a certain age who adds a bit of colour to our lives by wearing fake fur coats, copious costume jewellery that jingles as she walks and a mahogany-hued perma-tan. This is a lady who's independently wealthy as she owns a chain of racy lingerie shops in the area. Her husband is ten years younger than her. Mrs Silverton is a 'cup full' sort of person and not just in the underwear department. Today she's in for a full head of highlights and a blow-dry. I've already mixed her colours.

'You're looking well,' I say as she shrugs off her coat and sits down.

'Just got back from safari, love,' she tells me. 'The Maasai Mara in Kenya. Bloody marvellous.'

I don't know what hairdressers would do without holidays to talk about half of the time. It's the standard opener with new clients, a fail-safe for those awkward quiet moments when the conversation dries up. Christmas is a godsend on that front too, although this year, it's rushing up far too quickly for my liking. It's October already, which means that the festive season is just around the corner. People love to talk about their plans. It'll keep me going with



inane chit-chat for weeks.

With Mrs Silverton there's never a shortage of conversation, whatever the time of year. She's always just been on holiday, whether it's Marbella, Mexico or the Maldives, or she's just about to go on one. Mrs S and toy boy spouse have travelled the world in luxury.

Cristal, the youngest and most hip of our juniors, comes and lounges next to me, handing me the foils in a state of trendy tedium.

'Africa should definitely be on the list of the one hundred places you have to go before you die,' Mrs Silverton expounds.

'Hmm,' I say and take another foil from Cristal. 'It sounds wonderful. I'd love to go there.'

'You should do it.'

'I've got two weeks' holiday left and I have to take it by January or I lose it.' Frankly, I'd rather forgo the holiday and take the money but Kelly doesn't work like that. Use it or lose it is the company policy here so I haven't even bothered to ask. I'll probably just take a few days off here and there, do some bits on the house that desperately need attention and get on top of my Christmas shopping.

'It's lovely and warm at this time of year. The perfect time to go.'

Just as Mrs Norman tries to sort out my love life, Mrs Silverton tries to encourage me to travel the world. Travel expands the mind, she says. I should open myself up to different cultures. It's very liberating, she says.

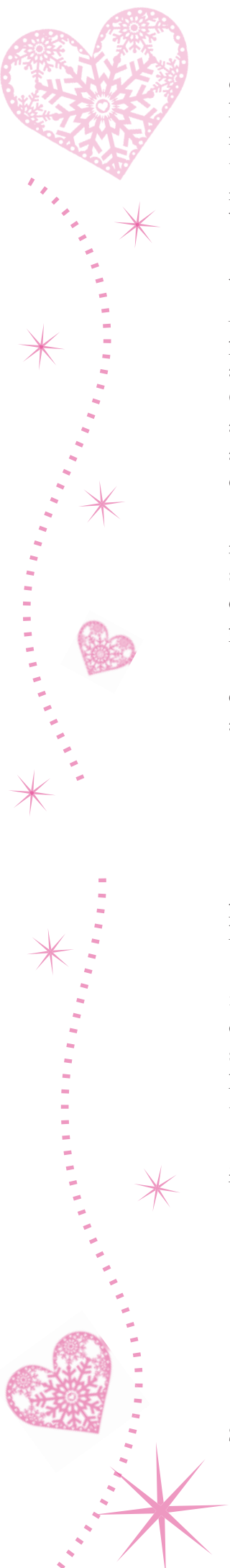
The trouble is wherever I've been has turned out to be exactly like England with sunshine. To be fair, I haven't been abroad all that much. Paul only liked to travel spontaneously when football matches were involved. Like everyone else, we went for our obligatory two weeks to the Costa del Sol, Ibiza, Majorca, Lanzarote – where everyone speaks English and eats egg and chips and drinks British beer. I never went abroad because I particularly liked it, just because it's what people do.

Paul and I were together for seven years. The seven-year itch we used to laugh, until, of course, he left me for someone else just as we were about to slide comfortably into eight years. A divorcée, older than me with two small children to boot. I think that's what hurts the most. If he'd gone off with some taut and high-octane youngster like Cristal, I could have understood it more. Perhaps. As it was, I thought we were in it for the longterm. Marriage had been mentioned. More than once. Though we'd never quite got around to it. We'd even talked about having a family together but Paul had never been keen and it didn't seem all that important to me either.

Were we happy together? I don't know. We rubbed along well enough. Paul worked hard as a self-employed plumber and liked to play hard too. Most nights he went to the pub and at the weekends he played rugby for the local team. I did aerobic classes if I couldn't think of any way to avoid them, saw Nina sometimes for a drink or a pizza and watched a lot of soaps on television. There was no floating on clouds, but no major fireworks either. We didn't argue, we didn't make love all that much. When he left, life continued pretty much as it had.

'We took a balloon flight across the African plains,' Mrs Silverton continues. 'I'm telling you, if you want romance, that is the thing to do.'

Do most people live in a state of heightened romance? I don't think I ever did with Paul. He wasn't that sort of bloke. Who is? Other than Mrs Silverton's husband who is always surprising her with something marvellous. There was never any impromptu whisking me away to Paris or Rome. It would have had to coincide with some football match or other to make it worthwhile in his book. But did I miss that? Not really. To be honest, I never did anything romantic or spontaneous for him either. We weren't that sort of couple. My experience of loving and living with someone was pleasant, but not overly so.



My experience of living without him is pretty much the same. I wonder sometimes if I've ever really been in love. Did I move in with Paul because I truly loved him or simply because he was the only person who had asked me and I thought 'why not?'. I read in these slushy novels about passions that have never touched me. I watch romantic films and can't relate to them at all. My heart has never fluttered, my knees have never gone weak, my appetite has never deserted me in the face of love. Perhaps they're all just selling us a myth that keeps us borderline discontent with the men in our lives.

Before I settled down with Paul, I'd dated some nice guys – not that many, I suppose – but no one really set my heart on fire. I could have quite happily lived without any of them. And did. When I think of my friends, of the girls and boys in the salon, none of them seem particularly overjoyed with their partners either. Nina and her husband Gerry are hanging by a thread most of the time and she's getting to the point where she can hardly move without Gerry's say so. Kelly and Phil rarely socialise with anyone else as he seems to like to keep her all to himself. The boys, Tyrone and Clinton, are always having a major blow-up at the drop of a hat and while Cristal and Steph are single, their lives are far more complicated than I could ever cope with.

Also, I see all of life beneath my scissors in here. The wannabe marrieds, the happily marrieds, the unhappily marrieds, the adulterers, those hoping to be adulterers, the resolutely single, the reluctantly single, the still looking for Mr Rights, the just divorced, the many times divorced, the ones who vow to never marry again and then do. Is there really such a thing as perfect love?

I realise that Mrs Silverton is still talking about the wonders of her holiday and that I've drifted away. Snapping my attention back to her, I smooth bleach along the final strand of hair and wrap it neatly in foil.

'All done.'

'Things we go through to look beautiful.'

It's worth it, I think. It's worth it for Mrs Silverton as she seems to be greatly loved.

'Here.' She hands me her iPod touch. 'Have a look at these. There are just a few photographs on it. My husband took over a thousand pictures! A thousand! Everywhere you looked there was something spectacular to snap. The light is perfect for photographers.'

So, not wishing to offend her, I take the gadget and slip it into my pocket. I set the timer for half an hour and retreat into the staffroom for a well-earned break during a gap between clients. It's mad busy today but I shouldn't complain as business has been slow over the last six months, recession and everything, and Kelly thought, at one point, that she might have to lay one or two of us off or get rid of a couple of the juniors. Now that the amount of clients through the doors has once again picked up, we're all hanging on in there.

In the staffroom, all I want is peace and quiet for a few minutes. Instead I find that Cristal is crying loudly. Nina has her arms around her and is shushing her softly.

'What's wrong?' I whisper.

'He hasn't phoned yet?'

'Who?'

'The man she slept with at the weekend.'

'Oh. How long has she been going out with him?'

Nina gives me an old-fashioned look and says over Cristal's head, 'She only met him on Saturday. They spent the night together. She thought he was 'The One.'

'And now she hasn't seen him for dust?'

Renewed sobbing from Cristal. 'I thought he loved me.'



‘Can’t you call him?’ That’s what modern women are supposed to do, right?

‘I can’t remember his name,’ she sobs again.

I shrug at Nina and she shrugs back. I don’t dare point out that in my day we used to call that a one-night stand and if you were stupid enough to do it, you knew that you’d never hear from him again.

Nina reads my mind. ‘It was different in our day.’

Too right, I think, even though ‘our day’ didn’t seem all that long ago. Things change too quickly, if you ask me. How would I fare now? I didn’t sleep with Paul for months when we first met and there wasn’t any pressure to. What would I do if someone I didn’t know wanted to get me into bed on the first date? Even the thought of it makes me shudder.

‘I need to look at these,’ I say, showing Nina the iPod. ‘Photos from Mrs Silverton’s latest trip.’

‘Lucky bitch,’ Nina concludes. ‘Who does she think she is? Bloody Judith Chalmers?’

‘Who?’ Cristal wants to know as she sucks in another sob.

I flick to Mrs Silverton’s photos. Stunning scenes of immense, cloudless blue skies flood the small screen and take my breath away. I don’t think that I’ve ever seen colours so vivid. Scanning with my finger, I take in shots of lakes pink with the wings of thousands of flamingos, wildlife so close that you feel you could reach out and touch it, the dazzling monochrome madness of zebras, the sad soulful eyes of lions, plains stretching as far as the eye can see, dotted with artistically sparse trees.

‘Wow,’ I say, half out loud.

‘Let’s have a look,’ Cristal says, sniffing now.

I show her the screen.

‘Where is it?’

‘The Maasai Mara.’

Her face registers boredom. Perhaps not enough discos. ‘Where’s that then?’

‘Kenya,’ I say. ‘Africa. Mrs Silverton’s just been on a safari.’

‘I’ve always fancied going there,’ Nina says, ‘but Gerry says he’d be bored.’

In my humble opinion, way too much of Nina’s life is influenced by what Gerry wants and doesn’t want. Greedily, I scan more of the photographs. I don’t think I’d be bored. I think that I’ve never seen anywhere quite as beautiful.

Then a pinger goes. ‘That’s Mrs Silverton cooked,’ I say and go to take out her foils.

Chapter 3

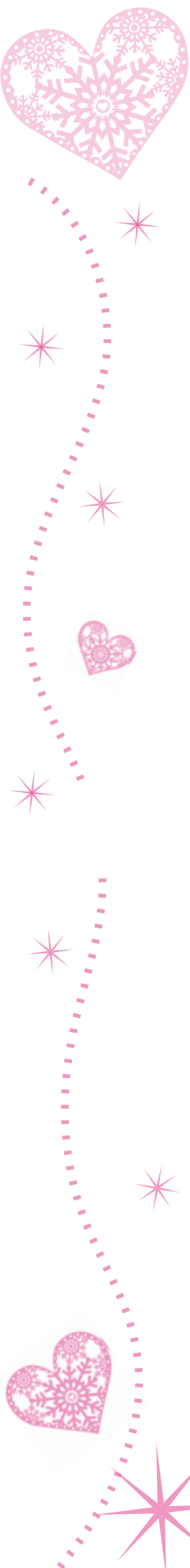
‘Come to ours for dinner,’ Nina begs. ‘I knocked up a spag bol before I came to work this morning. It’ll only need reheating and there’s plenty to go around. We can open a nice bottle of plonk too.’

‘I’m fine,’ I say. ‘I just want to go home and put my feet up.’ My legs are throbbing from being on my feet for hours and I keep trying to put off the day when support tights begin to sound like a fine idea.

‘You shouldn’t spend so much time alone,’ she insists.

‘I have a wild night in front of the telly planned.’

My friend tuts at me.



The truth is that I'm not very keen on Nina's husband and try to spend as little time with him as possible. Sometimes Nina's not very keen on him either. If I want to see Nina out of work, then I try to make sure that we go out on our own. Whenever Gerry's around, Nina can't get a word in edgeways and he's the world's best at ignoring everyone else's viewpoint. He's too much like hard work in my book. I don't say anything though, what friend would? I just try to support her as much as I can when the going gets tough. They've been together since they were teenagers and have been married for about fifteen years. They've no children – needless to say, Gerry's choice. Nina would have loved to be a mum. Instead they have two dogs of indeterminate breed, Daisy and Buttons, who are the apple of Nina's eye.

Frankly, I don't know what she sees in Gerry any more. He's always been loud, opinionated and he's not getting better as he grows older. What happens to middle-aged men to turn them into grumpy old buggers? When he was a teenager, I have to say that he was quite a looker, the heartthrob of our year. Nina was a much-envied young lady when she caught his eye. Now the same Gerry, while still a handsome man who can turn on the charm like a tap when he wants to, more often than not has the personality of a bad-tempered wasp when it comes to Nina. Their marriage is not exactly the stuff that dreams are made of. He seems to give out just enough to keep her hanging on in there. Which is not what it should be about, surely? But then Paul and I were hardly Burton and Taylor so I'm not one to talk. So for the sake of our friendship I've never mentioned my misgivings to Nina and, even though I might have given up on the idea of ever warming to Gerry years ago, I tolerate him as best I can.

'I'm definitely going to get him to fix you up with someone,' Nina warns. 'This can't go on.'

'Please don't,' I beg. I know what Nina's like when she gets a bee in her bonnet.

The other thing about Gerry is that he constantly leads Nina a merry dance. Twice she's caught him out having affairs with other women and twice she's taken him back, but I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him. In all honesty, I'm not sure that Nina does any more. It's a mystery why she sticks with him at all. She says she doesn't want to fail but I don't think it's her that's doing the failing.

'I'm fine. Really,' I assure her. 'Absolutely fine. A quiet night in is just what I need.'

'You have too many quiet nights in, woman.' With that, she tuts, but lets me pack my bag and go home on my own.

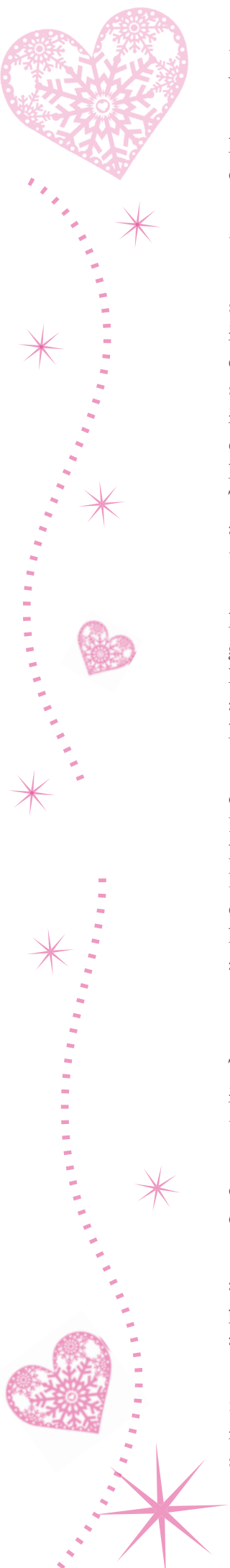
I kiss her on the cheek. 'See you tomorrow, hun.'

'Yeah. Unless I win the lottery,' she mutters. 'Then I'll be outta here.'

Funny, it's the only way I can see myself getting out of here too.

My drive home takes me about fifteen minutes. When Paul and I split, I bought myself a little cottage called, enterprisingly, Little Cottage, in one of the villages that's halfway between Buckingham and the encroaching metropolis of Milton Keynes. When I say little, I mean little. But it's mine. All mine. Paul and I had rented a furnished place all the time we were together, which made parting quite painless. There was no home to sell, no valued possessions to bicker over, but suddenly on my own again, I wanted to feel settled, put down some roots.

We'd always lived in the town but I decided I wanted something different, more rural. After much trawling around the area, I picked out Nashley as top of my list of ideal villages. A month later and this house came onto the agent's books. It took all of my meagre savings to put a deposit down on this place and I have a mammoth mortgage which is quite daunting to face on my own. Still, every night when I turn the corner or, like on this cold October night, the beams of my headlights illuminate Little Cottage, my heart squeezes. The village is as tiny as my home. There's a quaint pub, a much-used village hall, one shop-cum-post-office that's always under threat of closing and, well, not much else. There's a scattering of twee thatched houses around the green, a small duck pond with suitably pretty ducks, and on the outskirts



there are a few bigger houses – one that used to be the rectory to the medieval church and a very stately Manor House.

A lot of the people who live here were born and bred in the village, the rest are incomers like myself. A few are city types who commute to London every day and are rarely seen, especially in the winter months.

I park up outside the house and breathe a sigh of relief. Now it's just me, my cat, Archibald the Aggressive, and no one else to worry about.

My cottage is on the far left, the end one of a terrace of three. The front door opens straight into a minuscule living room with low, low beams. Original. I'm only five feet, three inches tall and yet I feel as if I permanently have to duck. There's not a straight wall, floor, door or ceiling in the whole place. The fireplace, complete with a gorgeous wood-burning stove, takes up most of one wall. A sofa, a comfy armchair and my telly are shoehorned into the rest of the space. There's a separate dining room, also small, that was added as an extension some time during the seventies. I couldn't hold a banquet in there but you can at least stand upright. The kitchen is slightly bigger and higher too, with room for a small table. There's a utility room that was originally the outside loo, but someone knocked the wall down and now it houses my washer and dryer as well as doubling up as a bit of an office. Upstairs there's one bedroom and a bathroom. That's it. But it suits my needs and I adore living here.

Opening the door, Archie winds around my feet mewing pathetically. Don't let that cute look fool you though. My cat would have your arm off as soon as look at you. Very few people get through his door and don't lose some flesh to Archibald. He likes nothing better than lurk on top of the kitchen cabinets and then pounce on the shoulder of unsuspecting visitors and sink his teeth into their neck. I'm thinking that he might have been a vampire in a former life or is currently training to be one.

He was a feral cat when I met him. Perhaps he was once someone's pampered pet who, out of choice or out of necessity, was living rough in the fields at the back of my cottage. Perhaps he simply sank his fangs into soft skin once too often and was banished. I got used to him prowling my small garden, deftly and stealthily picking off the sparrow population. When I started to put down food for him in an attempt to keep the birds off the menu, he tentatively edged nearer to my back door. A few months later and he was brave enough to come into the house. Now he lives here and happily curls up on my bed at night but it's not a joke that I have a 'Beware of the Cat' sign on my front door. Strangers send him into a hissing, spitting frenzy.

'What's up, puss?' I bend down to stroke him. 'Been bored at home all day?'

I bet he's hardly moved from the side of the radiator where his basket is now installed. This cottage may have set me back a fortune to buy it, but due to its inordinately small size, it costs very little to run. Relatively. There still always seem to be more bills than there is cash to pay them.

Before I think to feed myself, I tend to Archie's needs. I have learned that any delay in can-opening leads to severe lacerations to the lower leg. Sometimes I wonder whether he is entirely grateful for my unconditional love and hospitality.

In the freezer, there's a macaroni cheese ready meal and I slide it into the microwave. As a token nod towards healthy eating, I fling together a salad. Even though it's a weeknight, I pour myself a glass of red wine. I was ridiculously busy at the salon today and think I deserve a treat.

After I've finished my meal, Archie takes up residence on my lap and we're settling down for an exciting night's viewing when there's a knock at my door. Instantly, I know who it is. My neighbour has developed his own 'signature' knock, so that I don't have to peer through the spyhole to see who it is.

I open the door and, sure enough, Mike is standing there. Miserable Mike, Nina calls him.



But he isn't miserable, he's sad and I think there's a world of difference.

'Come on in, Mike.' He does so and instantly fills the living room.

Mike Perry lives in the house next door to mine. Not the one joined to me, but a slightly bigger, detached cottage to the left. Six months ago, his wife just up and left him. No reasons given, no explanations, no build-up to it. He thought they were perfectly happy. She clearly didn't. One night he came home from work to find their suitcases were gone, along with all of Tania's clothes and the contents of their bank account. Five years of marriage down the pan, just like that. A 'Dear John' letter on the coffee table told him that she'd never really loved him and was leaving 'to find herself'. I hope one day that she finds out that she's a selfish cow. In my book, Mike is one of the nicest men you could hope to meet.

He was great when I moved in here alone, helping out with small DIY jobs that needed doing, fixing leaking taps, oiling squeaking doors, carrying heavy objects, doing the kind of things that men do best. Since Tania's been gone, I've tried to return the kindness by being a shoulder to cry on for him.

'You said you'd cut my hair,' Mike reminds me.

'Ah. Yes, of course.' That's my telly watching up the spout for now. Archie glowers at Mike, now that his rest has been disturbed, and skulks off to the bedroom in a mood.

'If you're busy, it doesn't matter.'

'Do I look busy?' I chide. 'It'll take me two minutes to get my stuff together.'

You have to help out a friend in need, don't you? Otherwise, what's the point?