SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE LIDO*

This Book Made Me Think of You



THE BOOK CLUB
BBC RADIO 2

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LIBBY PAGE

READERS LOVE

This Book Made Me Think of You

'Sometimes the book you need just finds you. I sobbed, I laughed and I cheered. I'm sure everyone who reads it will love it!'

★★★★★

'One of the most precious and moving stories I've read in a long time. From the very beginning, Libby Page's writing swept me away. This is a book I will return to often, and I can't recommend it highly enough'

★★★★★

'I love, love, loved this book. It was charming, heartwarming, soul-crushing and cosy, but most of all it was a beautifully told story'

★★★★★

'How can I possibly sum up my feelings for this book? Utterly gorgeous . . . The exact tonic I needed without knowing I needed it'

★★★★★

'If you're looking for a story that captures your heart, sparks your imagination, and even offers up some fantastic literary treasures along the way, you really need to pick this one up'

★★★★★

'Is *This Book Made Me Think of You* Libby Page's best novel yet? Absolutely yes'

★★★★★

'I was wholly unprepared for how this book was going to hit me'

★★★★★

'I was completely drawn into the emotional journey, not just Tilly's, but the lives of everyone around her. Moving, uplifting and impossible to put down'

★★★★★

'This book made me want to tell everyone to go out and get a copy and READ IT!'

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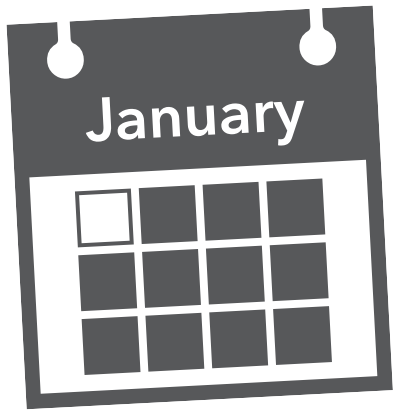


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In memory of Fred Cutting and Sally Lane,
who both loved books

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Book Lane Recommends

Books to read when you don't feel like reading

 *Dear Reader: The Comfort and Joy of Books* by Cathy Rentzenbrink

 *Cold Comfort Farm* by Stella Gibbons

 *Tilly and the Bookwanderers* by Anna James

 *The Very Secret Society of Irregular Witches* by Sangu Mandanna

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1

The right book in the hands of the right person at exactly the right moment can change their life forever. At least, that's what Alfie has always believed. It's hard not to when you spend six days a week in a bookshop and have witnessed more times than you can count the magic of someone entering your shop as one person and leaving with the possibility of becoming another held in paper between their hands.

But Alfie isn't thinking about changing lives when he pulls up outside Book Lane on his battered red bicycle early one January morning. He's thinking about the fact that his glasses are misted with rain, his trousers are drenched and there are three enormous and very soggy cardboard boxes waiting for him on the doorstep.

'Bloody books,' he mumbles under his breath as he digs about in the pockets of his bottle-green duffel coat for his keys.

'Bloody door.' The key sticks as it always does before finally creaking open, letting a gust of cold wind and the dishevelled bookseller into the shop.

Alfie drags the deliveries out of the rain and scoops up the post, flicking through the assortment of bills and dumping them on his desk with a sigh. Closing the shop in the quiet period between Christmas and New Year had felt like a good idea at the time. But now Alfie has only an hour to go until opening, and a whole carpet of pine needles to sweep, several boxes of books to unpack and a window display to change,

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swapping festive romances and comforting cookbooks for healthy recipe books and self-help manuals.

People are always telling Alfie that he has the best job in the world. But what they think being a bookseller entails – reading all day – and what it actually involves are quite different. They'd be surprised by just how much heavy lifting and dusting is involved.

A scratching sound draws Alfie's attention to the back door.

'Happy New Year. It's just us this morning, Georgie,' he says as the cat flap swings open and the furry, mottled grey face of the neighbourhood's stray appears in the opening.

Georgette shakes the rain from her fur and hops on to a pile of special edition Jane Austens on the counter, settling herself and watching with a faintly judgemental expression as Alfie gets to work.

Eventually, with the display refreshed, the radiators clicking, lamps glowing cosily and the nutty smell of fresh coffee in the air, Alfie looks around, satisfied. Even after all this time he can't help but feel a stirring of anticipation as the shop awaits its customers, books waiting patiently for covers to be stroked, pages to be flicked through and selections to be made.

Just as he is about to open up, his attention falls on the Book Lover's Calendar that was a Christmas gift from a customer and is pinned to the shop noticeboard, open on the new year and illustrated with an image of a woman reading in a pool of lamplight. Today's date is circled in red, the words 'PHONE NIGHTINGALE' written in capital letters. He glances at the shelf that is reserved for books awaiting collection. For once it is empty apart from one solitary book wrapped in brown paper and tied with ribbon. It has sat there for a long time, unmoving as a rotation of titles came and went around it.

'What a way to start the year.'

Sweeping a scattering of paperwork to one side on his desk

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unearths a leather-bound book the size of a particularly comprehensive dictionary. Alfie flicks through the crinkled pages until he finds the number he needs. As he picks up the phone he thinks back to the promise he made over a year ago. He had almost forgotten that this day would eventually arrive. That he'd have to make this call.

He pauses for a moment, his finger hovering over the dial button. Because he's worked as a bookseller long enough to know how transformational books can be. But he also knows from personal experience that some people don't want their lives to suddenly change. And he has a feeling that the call he is about to make will turn this customer's life completely upside down.



The dentist's hand looms above Tilly's face and she tries to focus on the shade of the dentist's deep aubergine manicure instead of the glimmering silver instrument delving inside her mouth.

'Had a nice Christmas?' Dr Jafari asks as she rummages amongst Tilly's molars.

Tilly attempts to mumble a non-committal response.

'Mouth open nice and wide, please.'

She opens wider, grateful for the excuse not to have to explain that she spent Christmas Day at home with a tub of Quality Street to herself.

'Of course, Christmas is a terrible time of year for dental care,' Dr Jafari continues brightly. 'All that sugar and red wine. It's good that you're getting your check-up in now because we'll get pretty busy soon. Chipped fillings. Ulcers. Root canals. Abscesses.'

The dentist rolls off each malady as cheerfully as if she were listing the names of her grandchildren.

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‘Everything seems fine for you, though,’ she adds wistfully, withdrawing her hand from Tilly’s mouth.

‘Well, that’s a relief.’ Tilly swings her legs off the chair, her brown leather boots with the red laces touching down on the shiny floor.

She tucks her long ginger hair behind her ears and shrugs on her tweed coat with the mismatched colourful buttons, thinking as she does that it’s strange that this woman has just been so close that Tilly noticed her chapped lips and could smell her violet-scented perfume and yet they likely won’t see each other again for at least a year. She doesn’t even know Dr Jafari’s first name.

‘Excuse me,’ says Dr Jafari, ‘I think your phone is ringing.’

She points at Tilly’s satchel which is steadily vibrating.

The number is not one she recognizes but as she steps out into the waiting room she answers with a polite, ‘Hello?’

At first there’s silence, then a cough followed by a low and unfamiliar male voice.

‘Um, hello. Is that Matilda Nightingale?’

‘Who is this, please?’

There is a child sat nearby with her head bowed over the pages of a book, forehead furrowed in concentration and teeth biting down on her bottom lip. It’s an expression Tilly knows well and for a moment the memory of reading like that, totally absorbed, is so all-consuming that when the man on the other end of the phone speaks again she wonders if she has perhaps imagined the words.

‘I’m Alfie Lane, the manager of Book Lane. The bookshop in Primrose Hill. I’m calling as we have an order here for you to collect.’

‘But I haven’t placed an order.’

Not only has she not set foot inside her local bookshop for a long time, but it has been over a year since Tilly picked up

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a book – unless you count the manuscripts she edits at work, which she doesn't.

'The order was placed for you by Joe Carter,' comes the voice on the other end of the line at the exact moment that the woman ahead of Tilly in the queue steps aside and the receptionist calls, 'Next, please.'

'Did you say Joe Carter?'

She can feel her chest tightening and she is suddenly very aware of the smell of mint mouthwash and latex gloves. Despite the concrete-grey day outside, the waiting room feels cloyingly, oppressively hot.

The receptionist drums her nails on the desk. 'Can I *help* you?'

Tilly stumbles forward, holding the phone away from her face as she tells the receptionist her name.

'That will be sixty-five pounds, please.' Tilly fumbles for her card and hands it wordlessly over as the gravelly voice on the other end of the phone says, 'Yes. I have an order here for Matilda Nightingale, placed by Joe Carter.'

'But that's impossible.' The edges of her words catch like sandpaper against Tilly's throat.

In an instant she sees Joe in her mind, his wide, open smile, his short blond hair covered by a baseball cap in the summer and a beanie in the winter. Average height but broad shoulders and an athletic physique from growing up on the baseball field and, in later years, from playing softball in Regent's Park with his colleagues. The bump on the middle of his nose where he broke it as a kid, trying to win a bet with his brothers that he could climb to the top of their garage roof. The sound of his voice, cheerfully teasing as Tilly arrived home with a bulky paper bag, asking if she'd really bought more books and whether he'd soon have to move out to make room for her collection. Or soft and croaky in the mornings, reaching out for her and telling her that he loved her.

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'I think it would be best if you came into the shop so I can explain,' says the man on the other end of the line. 'I think I would find it easier than doing this over the phone, if you don't mind.'

Tilly had a plan for her last day off that involved restocking her empty fridge, catching up on her inbox and maybe treating herself to a good cry in the bathtub. But the pull of Joe's name is too strong to resist.

'OK. I can be at the shop in five minutes. But I'm telling you now, there's no way Joe could have ordered a book from you.'

The shop manager offers no further explanation. He simply says that he will see her soon, before hanging up.

Tilly steps out on to the cold London street just as the thick grey clouds part for a moment and a solitary beam of sunlight shines down on the damp pavements, making them glitter. Tilly hugs her coat tightly and glances up at the sky.

'This has to be a mistake, right, Joe?'

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2

The bookshop stands in the middle of the parade of enticing boutiques, delis and cafés that feels more like a village high street than a neighbourhood within walking distance of the busy streets of Camden and the iconic buildings of central London. There's a bicycle chained up outside the dark red shopfront, the words 'Book Lane' written in bold white letters.

As Tilly steps inside she is immediately met by the familiar onslaught of bookshop sensations. The smell of the paper, the respectful hush, the stacks of books with titles that would once have called out to her. The shop is small but packed with books, unsteady-looking piles crammed between the top of the bookshelves and the ceiling. There's a ladder propped up near the back and tiny paper cranes hang from the ceiling, their bodies printed with the pages from old books. Tilly does her best to block it all out as she walks straight to the counter.

A man wearing an oversized cable-knit jumper and navy chinos leans over a box of books, eyebrows furrowed and thick dark hair sticking up wildly. He pauses to push a pair of tortoiseshell glasses up his nose, and as he does he looks up at Tilly for the first time, warm brown eyes meeting hers.

'Hi, sorry, I didn't see you there,' he says as he straightens, his mouth set in a neutral expression and framed by scruffy facial hair that sits halfway between stubble and a beard. 'I'm just getting the shop back in order after the holidays. Can I help you?'

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There's a somewhat overweight tabby asleep on the counter and the man reaches out to run a hand through its fur, the cat letting out a deep purr. Both of them look so at home in here that it makes Tilly shuffle awkwardly on the spot. She used to feel the same way in bookshops but now it feels as if she's wandered into a shop that sells fishing equipment or scuba gear.

'I'm not sure. I'm Matilda Nightingale. Are you Alfie Lane? I just received a phone call . . .'

'Oh, right. Of course. Yes, that was me. Thanks for coming in.' Tilly recognizes the gravelly voice from the phone but she'd imagined someone older when she spoke to him. Although it's hard to guess his exact age. While his eyes are bright there is a deep crease between his eyebrows and a few more at the corners of his eyes. If she had to guess his profession from his outfit alone she would have said someone who restores old manuscripts or works in the archives of a museum. He looks like he might own both a typewriter and the knowledge to keep it running smoothly.

'As I said on the phone, it must be a mix-up. Joe can't possibly have ordered a book.'

The bookshop manager runs a hand along his jaw, his fingers scraping against coarse hair. 'I'll be honest, it was one of my more unusual order requests,' he says, nudging his glasses up his nose again with his thumb. 'And we've had some pretty weird orders. Like the nice old ladies who came in looking for books about Satan, or the middle-aged male barrister who pre-orders every Colleen Hoover.' He clears his throat and adjusts his face as if grabbing hold of his train of thought like the tail of a kite. 'Your husband came into the bookshop about a year ago –'

'A year ago?' Tilly interrupts, her heart catching on memories like splinters.

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'Yes. He came in and explained his situation and placed this order. He said that if he hadn't come in before the following Christmas I was to know what that meant and should call you on the second of January. I kept hoping he would come in. I'm so sorry for your loss.'

Tilly nods, accepting the words like someone mindlessly taking a leaflet for something they have no interest in but are too polite or simply too exhausted to refuse.

'Not that those words mean much, do they?' the bookseller adds, fixing her with a steady gaze. 'But it's hard to come up with an alternative, isn't it? I make my living out of words and I still haven't come up with anything better.'

Tilly falters, surprised to hear someone express the thing she has thought so often over recent months. 'That's true . . .'

'I should also say happy birthday,' the bookseller adds, making Tilly wince slightly.

Before she can say anything in reply he turns to search for something on a nearby shelf, returning with a parcel wrapped neatly in brown paper and tied with a white ribbon.

'This is the book I called you about. Joe wanted you to have this today. And there will be another book next month. It's his gift to you. A year of books.'

Tilly's heart squeezes. She has spent the day determinedly trying to forget the date. When the postman rang the doorbell and handed over a parcel from her parents, she tried not to think of the huge bouquet of flowers Joe had sent to her office on her birthday the first year they were dating, and every year after that. She knew that there would be no flowers this year but now here she is, staring at a parcel from Joe containing a *book* of all things, feeling as if her world has just been shaken like a snow globe. As she is about to reach for the parcel it hits her that there isn't just *one* parcel for her to collect.

'Can I have the other books now too?'

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Alfie Lane's face twists. 'I'm afraid I can't do that.'

'What do you mean? I'm here now, and you said Joe placed an order for twelve books. I don't see why I can't just collect them all now.'

Because despite the cosy atmosphere in the shop and the soft purr of the cat asleep on the counter, Tilly doesn't see herself coming back here any time soon.

'Joe wanted it to be one book per month,' responds the bookshop manager. 'That was the gift.'

'Are you serious? So, I have to wait a whole month to find out what the second book will be? And *twelve months* to receive them all? Even though you know what they are and could easily just give them to me right now?'

'That was what I agreed with Mr Carter.'

'But Joe is dead! He's not here any more!'

The cat startles, leaping off the counter and darting to hide in a half-empty box of books. The bookseller glances in the cat's direction then back at Tilly. His expression is soft but when he speaks his words are surprisingly firm.

'I'm really sorry. But I made a promise.'

'Right. Fine, then. Thanks for your *help*.'

Tilly snatches the book from his hand, grabbing it so forcefully that he flinches. But she doesn't care. If he's not going to help then she at least needs to get home *right now* so she can open the parcel. Without saying anything else she spins around and storms out of the bookshop, letting the door blow closed behind her.

As Tilly pushes open the front door she immediately trips over a pair of Joe's running shoes. She nudges them to one side then hangs her coat on the peg alongside Joe's favourite grey hoody, dull and threadbare now. She recognizes her mother-in-law's handwriting on what must be a birthday card, but leaves it on

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the mat to deal with later, and climbs the stairs up to the open-plan living space in the tiny mews cottage.

The matchbox size of the flat was the compromise for them living in a neighbourhood they both loved, and it overspills messily with their joint belongings: Joe's workout gear piled in a corner, a desk littered with his paperwork, her half-finished craft projects on any spare surface and, in shelves spanning the entire height and length of one wall, her books. The rest of the flat might be messy but these shelves are meticulously organized, their spines lined up neatly and small printed labels signposting sections for different genres. Except for the past year her books have been gathering dust.

Tilly places the brown paper parcel on the coffee table and stares at it.

Six months have passed but it is still hard to accept that Joe is really gone. Every day she wakes up expecting to feel his presence in their bed. Sometimes, she likes to turn the shower on in the bathroom and sit in the living room for a while, pretending that he's just in the room next door taking a shower and will be in soon. The rest of the world keeps telling her it is time to move on. The funeral flowers have long since withered and been thrown out, the calls from people checking in have become less frequent, and work is busier than ever. But Tilly is still *here* in a flat that was once her sanctuary, surrounded by her dead husband's things, with no idea what she is supposed to do with herself now.

Opening this parcel will scratch at the wound she keeps being told will heal, over time. Maybe it would be better to put it in a drawer and try to forget about it. No book can bring Joe back. But even as she thinks it, she knows that while she might struggle to deal with whatever is inside the parcel, she does not have the strength to resist opening it.

She unties the ribbon and tears open the paper.

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3

They met in a bookshop . . .

It is a rainy day in August and while the rest of London might have been disappointed with the turn in the weather, Tilly doesn't mind. Because it is the perfect weather for spending an entire day in a bookshop, which is exactly how she intends to spend her Saturday. She heads for 'the big Foyles' at Charing Cross with a plan to start on the ground floor and meticulously work her way up to the fifth.

Stepping out of the rain, she lets out a contented sigh as she looks up at the words spelt out in greeting: *Welcome, book lover, you are among friends*. Tilly has always thought of bookshops as a gathering place: all those books lined up neatly on the shelves like potential friends she just hasn't met yet.

She is browsing the fiction section on the ground floor, her head tilted in the 'book browsing pose' that will give her a stiff neck by the end of the day, when she collides with something solid.

'Oh! Sorry!' she says, meeting the face of a blond-haired man around her age, wearing a grey hoody, a pair of shorts and damp trainers. His eyes are smiling and a piercing shade of blue.

'Hi there,' he replies in a deep American accent. When he smiles his teeth are white and straight, except his front left tooth which has the very slightest chip.

'I should have been looking where I was going,' she replies,

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realizing she is still close enough to smell the woody scent of his cologne mixed with dampness from the rain. 'I always get a bit blinkered when I'm looking at books.' She steps swiftly backwards, feeling her cheeks flush like they always do when she is nervous.

'Would you recommend that one?'

He points at the book tucked under Tilly's arm – the first of many she plans to 'rehome'.

'Oh yes, I love Fredrik Backman. Have you read any of his other books?'

The man glances at Tilly's copy of *Britt-Marie Was Here* and shakes his head. 'I don't think I have.'

'Well, you should definitely start with *A Man Called Ove*, then.' She checks the shelves. 'Although they don't seem to have it here. It's probably upstairs on the bigger fiction floor.'

'It's a bit of a maze in here, isn't it?' he says, his voice containing a laugh as he looks around him.

It is one of the things Tilly loves the most about the shop. Because what better place to get lost than amongst shelves of stories? She glances around, trying to find a staff member to help, but they are all busy with customers.

'I could show you, if you like?'

His face relaxes into a wide, infectious smile. 'That would be great, thanks! I'm Joe, by the way.' He thrusts out his hand and she stifles a laugh as she shakes it, young enough to still think of shaking hands as playing at being a grown-up. His grip is warm and firm.

'I'm Matilda. Although most people call me Tilly.'

'Matilda. Like the film?'

That should be an alarm bell but she is too busy looking at his forearms to notice.

They climb the stairs side by side, Tilly walking and Joe practically bouncing.

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'So are you on holiday,' she asks, 'or . . .'

'I live here,' he replies and Tilly realizes with a jolt how disappointed she would have been if he'd revealed he was a tourist. 'I moved here for work. It's a great city. I love how green it is. And all the old buildings . . . I can't get over how old everything is! You Brits have no idea. Are you from London?'

'I live here but I'm not *from* here. I grew up in Wales.'

'I thought I heard something in your voice. It's lovely.'

His eyes sparkle as he fixes them on her in a way that makes her cheeks turn an even deeper shade of red.

'Well, I say Wales, but the border with England runs through my hometown. I grew up in Hay-on-Wye.'

'I've heard about that place. Isn't every shop there a bookshop?'

'Not every shop. But yes, there are a lot of bookshops.'

'Do your family run one, then? No wonder you know your way around a bookshop.'

'No, my parents are both teachers. But they do love books. My sister is called Harper after Harper Lee. And then there's me . . . I guess it was inevitable that I was going to love books too.'

'What's your favourite book? Or is that like asking a parent to choose their favourite child?'

He flashes her a grin and Tilly finds herself grinning back at him.

'A bit. My favourite book changes all the time depending on the latest thing I've loved. But I think if I had to choose my *favourite* favourite I'd say *Madeline* by Ludwig Bemelmans. I was obsessed with it when I was little.'

'What did you love about it?'

Despite all the books in her bedroom growing up, *Madeline* was the one she always came back to, wanting to read it again

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and again. If she closes her eyes she can see its distinctive cover as though recalling the face of a beloved relative.

'I think it helped that the main character, Madeline Fogg, had red hair like me. She was the only girl in her class who did, just like I always was. But aside from that we were completely different. She lived in a boarding school in Paris and I have still never been to Paris, despite having dreamt about it ever since reading those books. And Madeline was so feisty and brave.'

'You don't think you're like that?'

Tilly laughs out loud, but the expectant expression on his face makes her remember that she's only just met him. He doesn't know that her idea of brave is trying a book in a new genre or opting for a different brand of tea on her weekly shop.

'No, not exactly. And I definitely can't ice-skate as well as Madeline could.'

They have reached the fiction floor by now and, not knowing what else to say, Tilly reaches for a copy of *A Man Called Ove* and hands it to him. Their fingers brush as he takes it, her skin tingling at the touch. She is relieved when he examines the cover as it gives her time to smooth down her hair which is frizzy from the rain.

'If you enjoy it, I'd recommend reading *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* by Rachel Joyce, or *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout. If you haven't read them already, that is.'

'You really do know your books.'

'Well, I do work in publishing. Although in non-fiction right now. I edit celeb memoirs.' She says it with a roll of her eyes that belies the five interviews, grammar test and the weeks she spent preparing the presentation that secured her the job. 'It's just temporary, to get my foot on the ladder. What I really want to do is edit novels.'

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'I bet you'd be great at that.'

She lets out a laugh. 'How do you know that? You've only just met me!'

'And you've already given me a ton of recommendations. You're clearly passionate about books. If I were ever going to write a book, that's the kind of editor I'd want. A real bookworm like you.'

Their eyes meet and Tilly feels her face flushing. He doesn't look away.

'Did you know that the Italian translation for bookworm is *topo di biblioteca*,' Tilly blurts, wishing that she could get her mouth to close before the first thing in her head comes out. But it is too late for that. 'I read it in a book about idioms from around the world,' she explains. 'It means "library mouse". I've always thought I'd rather be a mouse than a worm.'

'Library mouse,' he repeats, his nose wrinkling in pleasure. 'I like that.' He looks at her for a beat longer, then says, 'I really want to ask for your number. But there's something you need to know about me first.'

She glances at his left hand. No ring. But maybe he is married but doesn't wear one. Or perhaps he is into some really niche kink that is so specific he feels he has to divulge it before even going on a date.

'So, here's the thing. I don't read. I only came in here because it was raining. I haven't read a book since high school and, even then, only because I had to. I can understand if someone like you isn't at all interested in someone like me. But I'd really like to see you again.'

At first it feels like an even more shocking revelation than a foot fetish would have been. How can anyone not read? What do they do with their evenings? All of her (not many) previous boyfriends have been readers. Her most recent ex was a writer

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too, who liked to read her his terrible poems as a form of foreplay.

Maybe it is time for a change.

'I'd really like to see you again too.'



The brown paper falls away to reveal a book that Tilly knows well. There's a note too and her heart aches as she recognizes Joe's familiar handwriting – the letters large and wide-spaced – and begins to read.

Dear Tilly,

Happy Birthday! By now you'll know about my gift for you. A book a month for a whole year. Great idea, huh? I was pretty pleased with it anyway.

I wish I could be making you pancakes and wishing you Happy Birthday in person, but I hope this will count as the next best thing.

I know you stopped reading when I got my diagnosis. You told me you just couldn't concentrate on reading any more, and I got it, but it still made me really sad. For as long as I've known you (and long before that) you've been a reader. It's who you are. You need books, my library mouse. And I suspect you need them now more than ever.

I remember asking you once why you loved reading so much and you said that books can change lives. I am determined that these will change yours.

I've started with a book that always makes me think of you. How could your first book not be this one? I hope

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that reading the book that is your namesake might remind you of how and why you became a reader. And that Roald Dahl's Matilda might make mine smile again.

I love you.

Joe x

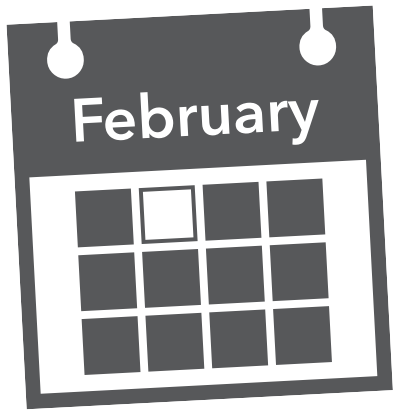
The illustrated cover showing a little girl surrounded by books is so familiar and she runs a hand over it, trying to imagine opening it and beginning to read. But as she does, she thinks about all the times she has tried reading since Joe's diagnosis, the words jumbling and her attention never making it beyond a few sentences. Since Joe's death she's lost the ability to escape into a book. The stories she used to love all seem so . . . pointless now.

'Oh, Joe,' she says out loud, her eyes flicking to the blue ceramic urn that rests on one of the bookshelves. It's a deep shade of indigo, dappled with flecks of a paler blue that reminded Tilly of Joe's eyes when she chose it. The silence is so full of his absence that for a moment she almost expects to hear his voice. The room seems to grow darker, grief shrouding her like a cloak. She waits for a beat longer and then folds the letter and tucks it carefully back into the book.

'I love you for this idea. In the past, a year of books would have been my dream gift. But it's just not who I am any more.'

She places her copy of *Matilda* firmly back on the coffee table where it will remain for weeks, unread.

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Book Lane Recommends
Books to make you hungry

 *Chocolat* by Joanne Harris

 *The Kamogawa Food Detectives* by Hisashi Kashiwai

 *One More Croissant for the Road* by Felicity Cloake

 *A Thousand Feasts* by Nigel Slater

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4

The man in the green anorak is growing increasingly red in the face.

'You know the book,' he says to Alfie, gesturing in the air with one hand. 'It was in this weekend's *Sunday Times*. You know. Blue cover.'

Alfie tries his best to remain calm and not to tell the customer that the book having a blue cover doesn't exactly narrow things down.

'You know. Written by that posh bloke on the telly,' the man adds.

Which doesn't especially help either.

'Just give me a moment, sir, and I'll see what I can do.'

As Alfie turns to the computer he tries to focus on what he is doing and not let his attention wander to the door, looking out for a flash of ginger hair. It's the first of February and Matilda Nightingale's next book is waiting on the shelf. Every time the doorbell jangles today he has found himself looking up, wondering if it might be her. But she hasn't stepped inside the shop since that day back in January.

The fingers of one hand dart across the keyboard, then he flicks through the weekend papers and a copy of the *London Review of Books*, which he keeps on his desk for moments like this. Five minutes later, the customer leaves with a copy of a recently published historical biography under his arm, Alfie having just managed to stop himself from pointing out

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that the book was actually featured in the *Telegraph*, not the *Sunday Times*.

For the rest of the day he unloads books, rearranges shelves and deals with online orders and emails from publishers. But the customer in the tweed coat with the colourful buttons, and with the bright orange hair, never appears.

'Sorry I'm late, I had some invoices to finish dealing with,' he says later that evening as he unclips his bicycle helmet, his hair springing up in defiance of having been constrained for the fifteen-minute ride.

'You work too hard,' says the five-foot-one woman in the doorway, dressed in jeans, slippers and an orange jumper, greying hair in a messy bun. 'Just like your father,' she adds as she reaches up and he stoops down so he can kiss her on the cheek.

'Hi, Mum.'

Alfie can distinctly remember the moment he surpassed his mother in height and how disorientating it had felt. As a child, she'd always seemed so reassuringly big to him: the place to run to when he came off his bike and grazed his knees, or if his older sister, Tash, hid one of his favourite rocks to annoy him, or later teased him for having a rock collection at all. But before he knew it he had grown gangly limbs and people kept telling him how much he looked like his father. And then one day he was leaning down to hug his mother rather than the other way around and it felt like he was no longer allowed to be a little boy, even though sometimes he still very much felt like one on the inside.

As she holds on, Alfie rests his chin on the top of her head, catching her familiar Nivea face cream and Imperial Leather soap smell. The smell of home.

'So, what needs doing, then?' he asks, heading straight for the cupboard in the hall, reaching for the toolbox.

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'Just a few pictures that I picked up at a flea market this week. I want to hang them before Andrew gets back from his work trip.'

'So he has no choice if he hates them?' Alfie teases, following his mother into a living room filled with knick-knacks.

'You know Andrew doesn't care about things like that,' she says, waving a hand as Alfie gets the drill ready.

She's right. While Andrew might pretend to grumble occasionally about their flat resembling a second-hand shop, thanks to Emylia's car boot sale addiction, in reality his mother could fill the place to the ceiling or paint it neon pink and Alfie's stepfather wouldn't care, as long as Emylia was there when he came home.

Once the pictures are hung Alfie suggests a takeaway.

'Are you sure? I don't want to drag you away from friends. Or a date . . .' she adds hopefully.

'There's nowhere I'd rather be. Pizza or Indian?'

Her face brightens. Because Alfie knows she doesn't like being alone in the evenings. It brings back bad memories.

He lets her pick what they watch. It's not until the third episode of a house makeover programme that he lets himself question how he's ended up at this place: sat with his mother on a Friday evening watching couples discuss wallpaper choices and knowing that this is preferable to his alternative plans for the evening – getting intimate with an Excel spreadsheet.

As he watches, his thoughts drift to Matilda Nightingale and the day Joe Carter visited Book Lane. He looked around Alfie's age but was unsteady on his feet, his face pale and eyes sunken. Alfie immediately offered him a seat, which he took with a, 'Thanks, mate.' When he told Alfie about the order he wanted to place, it knocked the air out of him but he did his best to remain professional.

And now it's hard not to feel personally invested in this

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particular order. He made a promise that all twelve books would reach their intended recipient, no matter what. But what if Matilda Nightingale never comes back?



'. . . and we're seeing an uptick in the youth market, driven by some TikTok success stories . . .'

Tilly looks down at her notebook, aware that she agreed to take notes for today's editorial team meeting but that so far she has written nothing. She writes 'TikTok' then scribbles it out.

'Now, we've just acquired a big new book,' says her boss, Sade, a copper-skinned Black woman dressed in her signature crisp white shirt, colourful acrylic jewellery and slim-fit trousers. 'Esmerelda Love's first memoir.'

She clicks a button and a montage of photos appears on the screen. Last night Tilly put off going to bed alone by staying up late working on this newest presentation, using the social media account she has for work – but very rarely uses herself – scrolling through endless photos of Esmerelda Love. A neatly arranged montage of photos showing a young, slim, blonde white woman posing in a variety of beautiful locations in a variety of expensive-looking neutral-shade outfits floods the screen.

'Tilly, you're Esmerelda's editor, do you want to say a few words about the book?'

The eyes of the entire editorial team swivel to face her. They are sat in one of the office's glass-fronted meeting rooms. It gives Tilly a view of the bookcases that line the corridor, books turned cover out and bearing the faces of the celebrities whose memoirs they have published over the years. There's a brief silence as her colleagues and boss wait for her to speak. Sleep deprivation fills her mind with fog.

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After a moment her brain kicks in and the facts and figures from the proposal that kept her company last night, along with a bowl of pesto pasta and half a bottle of wine, come out of her mouth. She speaks with the confidence and experience that, combined with years of late nights and weekend working, have earned her the position of senior editor at Splash Books. At her last appraisal, a potential promotion to deputy publishing director was dangled – that is, if her projects this year pan out well.

'And she has a combined social media following of around a million,' Tilly finishes. 'So, we're hoping this will be a big book for us.'

'That's brilliant, thank you, Tilly. Will Esmerelda be writing the book herself or do we need to secure a ghostwriter?'

'She's asked for a ghostwriter.' Most of the celebrities Tilly works with do, although very few are upfront about the fact. 'I'm going to start compiling a potential list today.'

Sade slips her glasses off and twirls them in her hand the way she always does when she's thinking. 'How about Rachel Harding? She could be perfect for this project. I get the impression from Esmerelda's agent that Esmerelda can be exacting . . .' Code for *a nightmare*. 'Rachel is level-headed and pretty unflappable. Plus, she has the experience to go with it.'

'Rachel Harding?' says Tilly, looking up from her notebook.

'Yes, isn't she a friend of yours? Can you call her to see if she has availability?'

'Um, sure . . .'

Tilly returns to her desk after the meeting, the space cluttered with teetering piles of advance copies of books. She stares at her computer screen and writes and rewrites an email to Rachel several times, before finally settling on something that is brief and to the point.

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From: matilda.nightingale@splashbooks.co.uk
To: rachelhardingwrites@gmail.com
Subject: Proposal

Hi Rachel,

I hope you're well. I know we haven't seen each other in a while but I have recently acquired a new author – social media influencer Esmerelda Love. She has requested a ghostwriter and we all thought you would be the perfect fit. The book proposal is attached. Could you please let me know if you are interested and have availability over the next few months?

Tilly

To her surprise a reply comes in, just minutes later.

From: rachelhardingwrites@gmail.com
To: matilda.nightingale@splashbooks.co.uk
Subject: Re: Proposal

Hi Tilly,

It's lovely to hear from you! That sounds great. Shall we meet up soon to discuss? It would be good to see you. I've missed our pub nights.

Rachel xx

*

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From: matilda.nightingale@splashbooks.co.uk
To: rachelhardingwrites@gmail.com
Subject: Re: Proposal

Hi Rachel,

That's brilliant news. Esmerelda and her agent will be thrilled, as are we. I'm sending you over a draft contract and some potential dates for a meeting with Esmerelda. Do let me know if any of these suit you.

Tilly

It will be the first time seeing Rachel in months, and Tilly's chest tightens at the thought.

Rachel was the ghostwriter for the very first memoir Tilly edited, and they clicked instantly. Tilly had been nervous about working on her first book, but as soon as Rachel came on board as the writer she felt more relaxed. In contrast to the highly strung celebrity chef whose memoir it was, Rachel was relaxed and down to earth. In the first meeting between the three of them, Tilly got stuck on a broken-down Tube and arrived at the restaurant ten minutes late, frazzled and apologetic. But Rachel had ordered drinks and was chatting away to the chef, who seemed surprisingly at ease. Rachel flashed Tilly a supportive smile that made her feel as if Rachel had her back.

Over the years they grew closer, meeting regularly at their favourite pub in Camden to catch up on industry gossip and the projects they'd been working on. Joe was a great listener but with Rachel she could talk in minute detail about the intricacies of the industry, knowing her friend understood and was just as invested. She shared Tilly's taste in books too, and whenever they met up they'd each arrive with a tote bag full of books to swap.

It will be strange working together again but Tilly is a

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professional. If she can handle working with some of the celebrities she has to deal with, then surely she can handle working with her old friend.

'Rachel is on board for the Esmerelda Love book,' she tells Sade, popping her head around her boss's door.

'Brilliant news. I have a good feeling about this book. You're on a good path right now, Tilly. Well done.'

Tilly knows the words of praise should boost her but she can't escape the uneasy feeling about the email exchange with Rachel. And if she does get the promotion, she already knows that the first person she will want to tell is no longer here.

She pictures the copy of *Matilda* on the coffee table at home, and the package waiting for her at Book Lane – which she hasn't summoned the courage to collect yet. She isn't sure she can face the bookseller after the way she acted last time. And despite her curiosity at what Joe might have picked for her next, does she really deserve another book when she still hasn't read the first?

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5

'I come bearing pad thai,' comes a familiar voice as Tilly answers the flat's buzzer and presses the button to let her sister in later that evening.

Harper looks even more tanned than usual and Tilly wonders yet again how they are related. While Tilly's own skin is so pale it often looks translucent, Harper has their father's tanned complexion and hair that is more conker than Tilly's carrot, cut in a messy bob that shows off the gold hoop earrings dangling at her neck, a souvenir from one of her many travels. As she shrugs off her coat Tilly clocks the pink-and-green woollen monstrosity that Harper is wearing.

'I can't believe you're actually wearing that jumper.'

Tilly knitted it when she was in hospital visiting Joe. After reading, crafting has always been her way of relaxing, but what she has in enthusiasm, she does not possess in skill. The pink creature on the front of the jumper was supposed to be a rabbit but looks much more like a pig wearing an Easter Bunny costume.

'Hey, I love this jumper!'

Tilly had a lot of time for crafting during those hospital visits so her family have ended up with a lot of handmade knitwear. She doesn't expect them to actually *wear* any of it, though.

She gives her sister a hug, catching a whiff of her citrusy perfume.

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'It's nice to see you. I didn't know you were coming over. No Raj?' Tilly braces herself for the sound of footsteps lumbering up the stairs. Not that she doesn't love Harper's boyfriend, but since Joe's death her small-talk game is seriously lacking.

'Just me. I just got back from my trip,' replies Harper as she plonks the takeaway bag down on the table and starts helping herself to plates and cutlery from the cupboards. 'And I wanted to come see you, especially as I missed your birthday, which I'm still gutted about.'

'It's fine, I told you all I didn't want to do anything.'

It had been hard enough to convince her parents that she really wouldn't be coming back to Hay-on-Wye for Christmas, so they were disappointed when she said she also didn't want to make plans for her birthday. For a while she worried they were going to turn up anyway but then she played the widow card, and they thankfully backed down. Ever since Joe's death her parents have treated her like a fragile vase, tiptoeing around her and being especially gentle. Harper's approach, on the other hand, has been to treat her like a *broken* vase that needs fixing.

'You didn't have to bring food again. I could have ordered us something.'

'Well, I'm here now and I figured you could probably do with a proper meal.'

'I eat proper meals.' Tilly thinks of the pesto pasta she'd planned to make later.

'Pesto pasta is not a proper meal, Tilly.'

A memory enters her mind of Harper calling her when she first left home to go to university, two years after Tilly, freaking out because her jacket potato had exploded in the microwave and covered the inside in molten cheese. Back then, Tilly managed to calm her down and talk her through how to clean it before her new housemates found the mess, but the

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jacket potato days seem a long time ago for Harper. Since Joe's death Harper has kept Tilly's freezer well stocked with Tupperwares of home-cooked stews and curries, made using recipes picked up on her travels.

'Well, this does smell great. Thank you. Remind me where you were this time?' Tilly asks as she helps Harper peel back the lids from the takeaway cartons, the satisfying smell of spices filling the air.

'Phang Nga. So this takeaway was probably a terrible idea, because there's no way it will be as good as the real thing, but I've been missing Thai food since I got back.'

Harper's job at luxury online travel magazine *Voyageur* takes her all around the world. Growing up, Harper was adamant that she was one day going to see the whole world, whereas Tilly was always more comfortable reading about places than actually visiting them. Harper stopped travelling as much for a while when Joe died, but she's back to her usual workload now – a workload that can see her in several different countries in the same week.

When Harper asks what's new with her, Tilly tells her about work, then hesitates for a moment. 'And I actually received an unexpected gift on my birthday. Something Joe arranged for me before he died.'

'Wow, that's amazing,' Harper says, once Tilly has explained the gift. 'And *Matilda* is the perfect choice. I remember you obsessing over that book when we were kids and becoming convinced you *were* Matilda. Do you remember when we tried to master telekinesis?'

'Oh god, I'd forgotten about that,' replies Tilly, a smile breaking across her face. 'We broke so many mugs.'

'So, have you reread it yet?' Harper asks as she munches on a prawn cracker.

'Not yet.'

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