

LIBBY PAGE



*This Book
Made Me
Think of You*



LIBBY PAGE

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

January

BOOK LANE RECOMMENDS

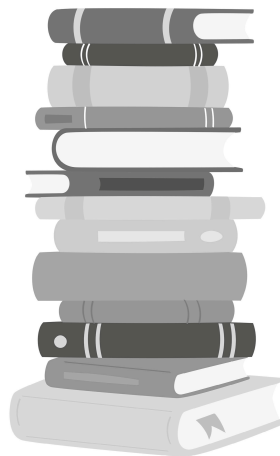
BOOKS TO READ WHEN YOU DON'T FEEL LIKE READING

Dear Reader: The Comfort and Joy of Books, Cathy Rentzenbrink

Cold Comfort Farm, Stella Gibbons

Tilly and the Bookwanderers, Anna James

The Very Secret Society of Irregular Witches, Sangu Mandanna



One



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 bookstore 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 palms.

But Alfie isn't thinking about changing lives when he pulls up outside Book Lane on his battered red bicycle early that 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 duffle 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 disheveled 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 the 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, 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 gray face of the neighborhood's stray appears in the opening.

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

Eventually, with the display refreshed, the radiators clicking, lamps glowing cozily, 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 ready for 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 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 Tilly tries to focus on the shade of Dr. Jafari's deep aubergine manicure instead of the glimmering silver instrument delving inside her mouth.

"Had a nice Christmas?" the dentist asks as she rummages among Tilly's molars.

Tilly attempts to mumble a noncommittal 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 sweets 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 checkup 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.

"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 colorful 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 sitting 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 stepped foot inside her local bookshop for a long time, but it has been over a year since Tilly picked up 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-gray 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 light 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.

“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. Before hanging up, he simply says that he will see her soon.

Tilly steps out onto the cold London street just as the thick gray 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?”

Two



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 neighborhood 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 shop front, 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 shelves 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 oversize cable-knit sweater 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?"

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 bookstores, 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 preorders every Colleen Hoover." He clears his throat and adjusts his face as if grabbing back on to 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.

"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 fifth 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 slightly, 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?”

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 cozy atmosphere in the shop and the soft purr of the cat asleep on the counter, Tilly doesn’t see herself coming back here anytime 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 anymore!”

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 let her have the rest of the books, 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 favorite gray hoodie, dull and threadbare now. She recognizes her mother-in-law’s handwriting on what must be a birthday card but leaves it on 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 to their living in a neighborhood they both loved, and it overflows 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,