

# Bloom

## Hayley Lockhart

**Published and available from**  
TheEndlessBookcase.com

**This book is available in both paper and electronic format.**  
Available in multiple e-book formats.

**The Endless Bookcase Ltd**  
Suite 14 Stanta Business Centre, 3 Soothouse Spring  
St Albans, Hertfordshire, AL3 6PF, England

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ISBN: 978-1-914151-28-6

## Reviews

*With characters you care about and a story that carries an important message, Bloom had me laughing and crying and rooting for a happy ending.*

Annette Johnson

*Hugely enjoyable, if you like reading books full of warmth and feeling, this one is for you. I would recommend this book to anyone looking for likeable characters and a great story.*

Juliette Vaughan

*Engaging characters and an unusual theme, I thoroughly recommend Bloom to anyone who enjoys well written stories that depict village life and the ups and downs of the inhabitants.*

Pamela Phillips

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## **About the Author – Hayley Lockhart**

I can usually be found with my head in a book, or my hands covered in soil! My passion - apart from writing - is gardening, whatever the weather, in my overflowing cottage garden. My parents have always kept a beautiful garden and without realising for many years, I picked up most of what I know about plants from watching them pottering.

I am married to a man who apart from being the love of my life, is also a gardener. We live in a rural village and share our home with a very fluffy, old and sometimes feisty cat.

I have always found joy in reading fiction, since I fell in love with Noel Streatfield as a child. I devoured books and the escapism they provided. I was a bookworm whose favourite presents were always the tokens I received and clutched excitedly as I spent hours perusing the shelves of my local bookshop. To this day the thrill of entering a bookshop is still as magical to me as it was when I was a young girl.

These days I enjoy reading contemporary romances, family sagas, and the occasional psychological thrillers. I love a story that has characters I can empathise with and a plot that transports me to another time or place. I aspire to authors such as Lisa Jewel, Marian Keyes, Freya North, Kate Morton and Jojo Moyles, although the list is endless.

I have always found that gardening is good for the mind, body and soul. I am a great believer in horticultural therapy and have researched the proven benefits it has for those suffering with poor mental health. For a short time I volunteered at a community garden supporting adults with disabilities and the rewards were invaluable. Following many years working in the early years sector (another form of nurturing), I landed my dream job working in a local garden centre. This was where the seed for Bloom was sown.

I hope that my story contains all the elements of a good read, engaging characters, several plot twists and a life affirming ending. I would love readers to discover the healing power of horticultural and maybe encourage them to experience it for themselves.

To the gardeners out there, I hope that my descriptions of the seasons and the plants are accurate, and to the allotment keepers, forgive me if Lydia has dug up potatoes when she should have been chitting them – I am still learning!

Bloom is my first novel. I hope you enjoy it and love the characters as much as I do.

I am currently writing my second book, The Little Library.

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## **Acknowledgements & Dedication**

First thank you to my husband David for your encouragement and belief in Bloom. Your support and patience were unwavering and when at times I felt like giving up you gently cajoled me into having faith in myself.

Thank you to my son Dan for being ever so clever and helping to make my jumbled manuscript readable.

Huge thanks to my family, and the good friends who rooted for me; Bloom took a while, but I got there in the end – your love and enthusiasm was no small part in this.

I would like to mention Thrive, a brilliant charity who use social and therapeutic horticulture to bring about positive change and help those with ill health to discover the benefits of gardening. Their website [www.thrive.org.uk](http://www.thrive.org.uk) is full of information and inspiration and I urge everyone to look it up.

Special thanks to the very talented Natasha Vaughan for providing the beautiful artwork for the cover of Bloom.

Thank you to Carl at The Endless Bookcase for giving me the opportunity to see my story in print, and to make the process so enjoyable.

Bloom is dedicated to my Daddy.

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## 1. Winter – Lydia

She awoke to the sound of rain beating against the bedroom window one Sunday morning early in December. Lydia Cole opened her eyes and blinked several times in the darkness, cosy beneath her feather filled duvet. Glancing at the small, illuminated alarm clock on the bedside cabinet she noted that it was only six thirty. Gently stretching and unfurling Lydia turned over slowly from her side to her back. Wiggling her toes, she felt the solid weight of Bailey grudgingly shift. Her ageing and slightly overweight cat habitually took up a nightly position at the foot of the bed. Bailey mirrored Lydia's movements, although stretching herself more gracefully than Lydia, despite her plumpness, and she exercised her razor-sharp claws adding yet more pulls to the worn fabric of Lydia's vintage floral bed cover. The toffee coloured tabby jumped down from the bed and landed with a thump on the floor. Lydia yawned loudly and satisfyingly, "Morning Bailey," she mumbled, her voice croaky with sleep. Bailey meowed loudly in response, a demand for food, Lydia knew, rather than a friendly greeting. Lydia inhaled and attempted to practice some deep breathing techniques, she had endeavoured to convert to yoga but was yet to be convinced that her entire wellbeing was based on her ability to downward dog or lie in a corpse pose. Exhaling loudly, she gave up the deep breathing and contemplated her day. She listened to the steady sound of the rain lashing against the windowpane, enjoying the sensation of being safely cocooned whilst the elements outside raged. The wind was building now, the bare branches of the old apple tree in the garden were creaking slightly as they were bowed and buffeted. Lydia became aware of a repetitive, rhythmic banging coming from outside and she realised with a sinking feeling that it was her own back gate, yet another job to add to her "to do" list. She rolled onto her side and reached out to her bedside table, narrowly missing knocking over a glass of water. She flicked the bedside lamp on. "Replace broken latch!!", she scrawled in her beautiful moleskin notebook. Each year she

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treated herself to a new book, filling it with little reminders, thoughts, and musings. It was not a diary, or one of the thankfulness journals that were so popular now, rather something that Lydia had enjoyed doing since she was a teenager. Angst, anxiety, and insecurities somehow became less overwhelming when she wrote them down. Nana Rose had often warned her never to make decisions in the middle of the night, but to jot any worries down, sleep on them and reconsider with fresh eyes in the morning. Her words of wisdom had, as always stayed with her and Lydia was grateful for her little bedside notebooks. She placed the book back on the bedside table and hauled herself out of her warm bed.

The dark mornings of the winter months made it harder to rise as early and eagerly as she did in the spring and summer but with the lamp light softly illuminating the room Lydia felt more awake now. Surveying the walls and ceiling of her bedroom she felt a wave of pleasure, she loved this room. It was described by all who visited the cottage as either very romantic or a boudoir, depending on whether they knew Lydia enough to joke; neither romantic nor boudoir were words that fitted into her life these days. It was however extremely pretty. The walls were painted antique rose pink, the sloping ceiling was rose white and appeared to almost glow, and the leaded windows were clothed with full length curtains that were made from a floral fabric that had cost a small fortune to have made, but cheered Lydia every time she walked into the room. Two small prints of wildflowers that she had found when clearing Rose's belongings from the attic hung on the wall over the brass bed. Lydia had upcycled some old bedroom furniture, chalk painting it a rich cream. She had placed scented candles and antique perfume bottles on the dressing table. Her bedside cabinets were piled with books and framed photographs of Joe. Lydia peered at a photograph of Joe and smiled. "Hey how're you doing sweetheart?" she said softly. Joe, her beautiful boy, almost a man now at eighteen, was spending the seemingly ubiquitous gap year in Oz. He had left

home for the sights and sunshine of Sydney in October, having decided to delay going to university to study for a degree in architecture, following in his Father's footsteps. Lydia had given him her blessing, not least because Joe's Father, Michael had emigrated to Australia five years previously. Michael and Lydia had been happily divorced seven years ago. Fortunately for everyone concerned the divorce had been amicable and when Michael announced he had been offered a job at a top firm of architects and was going to start a new life in Sydney with his very lovely antipodean new wife Cath, who was missing her native country, Lydia was happy for them. Michael was a good man and he had been a reliable, dependable, and decent husband. Unfortunately, these positive virtues resulted in a stifling and emotionally stagnant existence for Lydia. She had craved more. She wanted to live life to the full, and to share it with her soul mate, whom she knew would never be Michael. After several years of soul searching and filled with gut-wrenching guilt, it was she who initiated the separation. Michael had protested and claimed that she wanted a life that only existed in the novels she read, that she was searching for greener grass that she would never find. Perhaps this was true Lydia had concurred, but by this time her feelings towards Michael had become apathetic, and she remained impassive when he had remonstrated with her that the comfortable life he provided her with should be enough. She had Joe, she need not work, she could spend her days homemaking Michael had yelled in frustration, what woman, he fumed would not want such a life? Lydia had wearily tried to explain that the life he described was exactly the one she wanted to escape from. She adored being a mother to Joe, he was her world, but she also wanted to work and had never yearned to be a "lady who lunched," or to keep house for the rest of her life, as the rest of life passed her by. It was not Michael's fault that they had found themselves so at odds with each other Lydia knew. They had virtually been thrown together. Lydia had rather carelessly fallen pregnant at the age of nineteen after a year of dating Michael, who at twenty

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five had seemed so worldly, educated and not to mention financially secure, already working his way up the ladder at the small firm of architects that employed him. When with trembling nerves Lydia had announced that she was pregnant Michael had immediately proposed, and despite the little voice in her head with its nagging doubts, Lydia had accepted. Michael had swept her off her dainty feet and installed her in a pristine new build in an exclusive development of executive houses on the outskirts of Hertfordshire. Thrilled and terrified in equal measures at the thought of becoming a wife and mother Lydia had imagined her life was truly beginning. Ten years later she was emotionally parched and deeply unhappy. Joe was her pride and joy, and she had found herself a part time job as a copy writer for a magazine, but she had an aching void inside her. She was lonely and empty. Physical contact between herself and Michael had fizzled out, the odd time that either of them initiated sex, there was no intimacy, just a perfunctory fumble, and in those last cold years, Lydia had simply laid back and thought of nothing, her mind detached from the motions of her body. Tempted once by an indecent proposal from a handsome young journalist at the magazine, Lydia had refused to be unfaithful and with resolute determination she ignored the intense stirrings of lust she felt. Eventually, summoning up every ounce of courage she possessed she had sat down with Michael and explained as gently as she could that the marriage was over. She was no martyr, and she knew she must take the lion's share of blame for the failure of the marriage, and she did so stoically; she listened to her parents admonish her for being wilful and ungrateful to Michael who was apparently providing her with a wonderful life. Some of her so called friends had tried not to take sides but they insisted that Michael was a nice, decent man, and that she was crazy to want more. He was, Lydia concurred, both adjectives, and more, and she was quite possibly crazy, but ultimately, he was not the man with whom she could happily or would unhappily spend her life with. Her guilt and blameworthiness were exacerbated by her concern for their

young son Joe. At eleven years old, however Joe had a happy and placid nature, he knew he was loved by both his parents' and with gentle nurturing and honest explanations from both Lydia and Michael, he had accepted that like many of his peers at school, he would adapt to spending alternating weekends and holidays with just one parent.

Lydia and Michael had subsequently divorced, whilst maintaining a civil relationship that over time had become warmer, and each would always support the other and endeavour to provide stability and consistency for Joe. When Michael met Cath, Lydia was happy for him, and when they announced they planned to live in Australia any fears that Joe would be devastated were short lived. With incredible maturity and acceptance Joe announced that he thought it sounded like a great adventure and that knew he would have some amazing holidays. Joe was an easy going, resilient, and secure child; he knew he was adored by both of his parents, he adored them in return and had not experienced the agony that some of his friends had endured when feuding parents split and determined to make life as unhappy for each other and those around them as possible. Joe had missed his dad in the beginning, but with Face Time and Skype he had spent more quality time talking to him than when he had lived the thirty-minute train ride away from the village that he and Lydia had moved to after the divorce.

Lydia smiled again at the photo of Joe and looked forward to an animated video call soon. Joe was working with Michael in Sydney for six months to gain work experience, and then he planned to travel around the country with friends who were joining him in a few months, to have some fun ahead of the hard work of gaining a degree began. Lydia was secure in the knowledge that Joe was not alone and that he was happy, which was always her priority as a parent, to ensure the wellbeing of her child as best as she could.

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Sunday was always a precious day for Lydia, and she considered it not so much as a day of rest, but as a day to seek pleasure. She relished little more than the realisation that the day ahead was hers, to make of as she chose and to do the things that she enjoyed. She believed that life was for making the most of, for squeezing every drop of pleasure out of each day. She sometimes wavered, at times she felt sad at the state of the world, or despondent or just downright fed up, but mostly she endeavoured to make her own happiness and fuelled by this attitude, she determined to live her best life.

She worked hard, splitting her week between two jobs, both of which gave her satisfaction and enjoyment. The fact that she was employed to do something she was passionate about made her feel incredibly lucky. She was fortunate, and she appreciated her good fortune. She earned a decent income, had no debts and no credit cards, and wanted extraordinarily little in term of materialistic trappings. She was forever grateful that she had been helped along the way by the generous gift left to her by her beloved Nana Rose. Rose had lived in and owned the cottage that was now Lydia's home. When she had died eight years ago following a short, cruel, but bravely fought battle against cancer, she had left the cottage to Lydia. Lydia had been shocked and delighted in equal measures and had no hesitation in making the cottage her own home after the divorce. In memory of her, Lydia named the small house Rose Cottage. Lydia's own parents' Susan and John had moved to Spain fifteen years previously, where they were now well and truly embroiled in the ex-pat community in Puerto Banus. Lydia spoke to her parents roughly once a month, a telephone call made from guilty duty, although in her defence she would argue that her mother or father rarely contacted her. When they did speak, they discussed the weather, in Spain mostly, her mother unfailingly bemoaning British weather and declaring how glad they were to have emigrated. The only other topic of conversation was equally one sided and revolved around television box sets that Lydia had never heard

of. The relationship was polite but distant, in terms of both miles and affection. Lydia had somehow always felt that her presence in her parents' life had been rather inconvenient; she wondered now as an adult if she had been what one might have described as an "accident". Whilst never cruel or unkind towards her, as a lonely child Lydia could only describe her parent's attitude towards her as ambivalent. As a result of her parents' seeming indifference towards her, and the strong and loving bond that grew between Rose and herself, Lydia had spent her formative years sharing the highs and lows, heartaches and joys, successes, and failures in her life with her, thus it came as no surprise to anyone that knew them that Rose would leave the cottage and her inheritance to Lydia. Lydia's mother Susan had merely clicked her tongue, her own relationship with Rose had been strained and she and Lydia's father John had barely kept in touch once they had emigrated. Lydia had asked Rose why the relationship was not a typical mother daughter one and Rose had gently explained that although she loved her daughter deeply, they were quite different, that even as a young girl Susan had craved wealth and the trappings this could bring, far removed from that of her parents' simple village one. The young Susan had left home as soon as she could and when she met John who was already climbing the ranks at the bank he worked at in London, she set her sights on a life of keeping up with the Jones's. Consequently, she had little time for Rose who had become a widow in her sixties, and over the years any residual closeness that she felt for her mother had appeared to diminish. Susan observed the deep fondness develop between Rose and Lydia and used every opportunity to encourage her daughter to visit and stay at the cottage with her grandmother. This arrangement suited all of them perfectly, Susan was able to hold extravagant dinner parties and have nights away with John, and this eventually evolved into taking holidays abroad without their only child tagging along, encumbering them. Rose on the other hand welcomed Lydia to her home with open arms and provided her with the happiest times of her childhood, a world of warmth

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and security, smiles and hugs, a million miles away from the lukewarm and sparse affection she received from her own parents. Lydia loved Nana Rose with all her heart, and she was never happier than when she spent time with her. She adored the old stone cottage and spent endless days there, and by the time she reached adolescence she was desperate to escape her dull and lonely life with her parents in their pristine home in North London. The three bedroom semi-detached house with its spectacularly dull exterior consisting of pebble dash walls, a block paved driveway and row of bedding plants dotted neatly in the border providing a nod to the summer months and bare soil in the winter. The interior was decorated in beige and furnished with minimal flair. Lydia could not as a child put her finger on what was missing from the house, but as she matured, she realised it lacked homeliness. When she was at home Lydia had spent hours curled up on the bed in her own room, gazing at books and dreaming of being a character from one of her favourite stories, especially someone like Mary in *The Secret Garden*. She would imagine the garden Mary discovered was exactly like the slightly overgrown one at Nana Rose's. Lydia would countdown the days until she could visit her grandmother and slowly, she began to flourish under her warm, loving, life affirming guidance. Together they would bake, read books, watch old films, and explore the wilderness of the garden and learn the names of the flowers and plants that grew in a tangled and gloriously informal sprawl. Lydia had decided at the age of ten that when she grew up, she was going to be a "garden person".

Twenty-five years later that ideal meant working from home as a part time copy editor for *Grow* magazine, a glossy monthly gardening journal. She was also employed at the local plant nursery, *Yeoman's*, working alongside the delightful owners by doing the jobs they no longer had the energy, backs, or knees for. Lydia had met Janet and Jim whose names reminded her of characters from an Enid Blyton book, nine years ago. They were

approaching retirement and desperately worried about the fate of their beloved nursery, which relied on loyal local trade and customers that enjoyed the friendly and helpful atmosphere they could be assured of. They had employed Lydia after striking up a friendship and discovering that Lydia held a horticultural qualification and a passion for plants. The nursery was beginning to struggle to compete with larger garden centres, those that lured customers in with their cafes and gift shops as much as the plants. Lydia knew that Janet and Jim feared that when they did retire the nursery would have to close as no one would be prepared to take on such an old-fashioned business without being able to totally modernise it. Lydia reassured them that would never be the case, but deep inside she carried the same fear.

After Rose's death and her generous gift, Lydia had thought hard for about five seconds whether to remain living with Joe in their two-bedroom semi in the nearby market town of Hitchin, with its cafes and bars and trendy shops and good schools, or to sell up and move into the cottage that held so many happy memories for her. The village of Longford was not far from town, a twenty minute drive at most. It was classically pretty, cottages rubbed shoulders with larger detached properties, all yellow and gold brickwork which gave them a charm and picture perfect attractiveness. There was a lively high street, a large playing field, and an infant school. An old church and village hall were prominent buildings and the tight knit community gathered for weekly services and annual events. The outskirts of Longford were surrounded by farmland, fields and meadows and the winding river Mim. There was also a thriving allotment community and a plot that had been Rose's, which Lydia had gladly continued to nurture.

The cottage itself was smaller than the house in Hitchin, it had thick stone walls and was often cold even in the summer, and there was always a problem lurking; a leaky tap, or a hole in the

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roof, but it was chocolate box pretty, brimming with quirky character and Lydia adored it.

A white picket fence surrounded the garden, the fact that the fence was somewhat dilapidated only added to the old-fashioned charm in Lydia's opinion, although she knew she must at some point repair and repaint it.

The front garden itself was the very essence of a quintessential cottage garden. Three silver birch trees formed the backbone of the garden, their bright white trunks lighting it up throughout the year. Lydia spent endless hours lovingly tending the garden; the flowering shrub border that formed the structure, with billowing spiraeas, lilacs, and viburnums. Herbaceous beds overflowed with lupins, delphiniums, phlox, and sweet rocket, jostling with lavenders and rosemary, old English climbing roses and ramblers that tangled and covered the trunks of old fruit trees, the Cox apple, and Victoria plum. With equal amounts of trial and error and self-sown happy chances, the garden wrapped around the cottage and was a riot of colour throughout the year. To some it gave the impression of a garden growing in wild abandonment, but for Lydia it provided a deep sense of well-being and calmness.

A crunchy gravel footpath meandered through the middle of the garden to the front door and in the summer months, Californian poppies, nasturtiums, and geraniums spilled over the edges. The front door was painted soft sage green, and ivy, honeysuckle, and Virginia creeper, scrambled over the trellised porch walls and around the window frames. Richly scented climbing roses adorned the walls and large terracotta pots tumbled with annuals and self-sown wildflowers.

Once inside the cottage a small entrance led directly into the kitchen. The room was just big enough for a large oak dining table and chairs, a rather tatty but perfectly functioning Aga stove that kept the room warm all year round, a dresser clothed

with battered cookery books, some passed on from Rose, photographs in frames and mismatched pieces of chinaware, and a small settle above which coats, and hats hung from a cast iron rack. The floor was laid with flagstones, but a thick coir mat kept the chill at bay and Lydia thoughtfully kept several pairs of slippers for guests' comfort, along with several brightly coloured wool throws for additional warmth. What Lydia loved most about the kitchen was the light through the window, which somehow at whatever the time of year ensured a cosy hue was ever present. A solid oak door led to the living room; previously rather dark and sombre, and in need of an update after Rose had died, but when Lydia had painted the wonky walls with bright oranges and green shades, added two squashy sofas in richly coloured fabrics, it became cosy and warm, and everyone that entered commented that it was a hard room to leave. An open fire and hearth were the focal point of the room, and Lydia was happy to light a fire to keep the room snug whatever time of year it was, she absolutely refused to be cold in her own home. A large bookcase dominated one wall, crammed with Lydia's favourite novels, the tatty dog eared copies of books she had loved as a child, authors such as Enid Blyton and Noel Streatfield, classic stories like *Mary Poppins*, *Pollyanna*, and *Little Women*. Next there were rows of the gloriously spicy books she had devoured as an innocent but desperately curious adolescent; Judy Blume's *Forever*, Jilly Cooper's *Prudence* and finally when she was old enough, she discovered Colleen McCullough's *Thorn Birds*, Judith Krantz's *Scruples* and Shirley Conran's *Lace*. These were the stories that left her feeling sensations deep inside that she had no words for but hoped she would one day experience. Her school studies on the other hand instilled in her a lifelong love of classical literature and old hardback copies of Austen and Bronte, Fitzgerald and Waugh stood side by side with the raunchier paperback novels. The remainder of the shelving was dedicated to horticulture, books written by respected plantsmen and women, and writers like Vita Sackville West, Christopher Lloyd, and Lydia's modern-day hero

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Monty Don. Lydia whiled away many rainy hours curled up on her sofa poring over these books, smiling whenever she recalled how Rose had told her “you’re never alone when you have a book for company” and how she would drape a soft blanket around Lydia’s shoulders and put a tray of biscuits and some orange squash on the side table next to her, leaving her to read whilst she herself took a nap.

The narrow picture lined staircase to the upstairs of the cottage led to a surprisingly large bathroom with a freestanding enamel bath and overhead shower, a traditional toilet with an overhead cistern and chain pull that annoyingly often required the odd tweak from the local plumber, and a large chest for towels and toiletries. The walls were painted white, and the floor was tiled with dove grey slate. A large ladder radiator provided heat and half burnt candles were dotted on every surface.

A second double bedroom painted in soft cornflower blue was Joe’s room. The once tidy boy had developed into a messy teenager, and Lydia had ensured that storage facilities were maximised in his room, with under bed boxes and tasteful but functional wall units to house Joe’s “stuff”. A metal framed double bed, desk and chair and small wardrobe were the only items of furniture in the room, and apart a torn poster of Rhianna blu tacked to the wall, there was little evidence of male hormones inhabiting this room. Since Joe’s departure to Australia Lydia had taken to brightening the room up with little vases or jugs of wildflowers plucked from the garden, this week she had put a jam jar of yellow winter aconites on the desk by the window, and she smiled whenever she passed the room on her way to her own.

## 2 A brief encounter

By eight o'clock Lydia had showered and was dressed in some worn jeans, a thermal vest, a long sleeved tee shirt and oversized jumper. She pulled on a pair of thick socks and padded downstairs.

As she looked out of the kitchen window and noticed that the rain had turned to drizzle, Lydia chose to be optimistic. "It's brightening up Bailey," she said to the cat, crouching to stroke her. Bailey rubbed her face against Lydia's hand trying her luck for more food. "Greedy girl," Lydia chuckled and threw a couple of treats into the bowl on the floor. She stood and finished the dregs of her tea and last mouthful of buttered toast. She popped her mug and plate into the sink for washing up later. Checking the time again and grabbing her tote bag she plucked a hair elastic from a trinket bowl on the dresser and hastily tied her shoulder length auburn hair into a high ponytail, tucking strands of her long fringe behind her ear. She checked her reflection briefly in the oval mirror hanging on the wall by the front door, she was not a vain person, but was aware that at thirty seven years old she possibly required a little more than moisturiser these days to face the world. She had applied a peachy cream blusher to the apples of her cheeks, and a coat of black mascara to accentuate her green eyes. As she peered at her reflection, she pouted her full lips and slicked some tinted balm over them and decided she was good to go. Taking it down from the coat rack she put her feather gilet on, zipped it up and popped her thermal hat on. Checking she had her mobile phone, she finally left the cottage, bidding Bailey goodbye.

Lydia closed the front door behind her and pulled on her bright pink Hunter Wellington boots, which she kept outside the door upturned on a cast iron rack. The rain had stopped, but the sky was dark grey, and the wind was biting. Lydia walked along the front garden path, noticing that the first drifts of snowdrops were eagerly emerging from the soil, and that the clumps of

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white hellebores in the herbaceous borders were brightening even this dullest morning.

Lydia dragged the rickety garden gate shut and walked to her car parked a little way down the road. The car was a rather rusty and old mini, but it suited Lydia as a run around. As she opened the car door and bent to climb in, a car driving at speed roared past her, causing her heart to lurch. “Bloody moron” she said watching as the car disappeared from sight.

First stop was the village shop for the local newspaper and some sweets for Lydia’s best friend Imogen’s young children, Florence, and Ralph. Lydia had decided that she would pop in and say hello to them, knowing that Imogen’s rather aloof husband Geoff would be at the golf club.

“Morning Val!” Lydia called to the owner as she entered the shop, the bell tinkling as the door opened. Although it was only early in December the festive season in Longford was in full swing and the interior of the little shop had been brightly decorated with fairy lights, tinsel and paper garlands strung from the ceiling. Christmas card box sets and wrapping paper were displayed prominently near the cash till, and rows of chocolate filled advent calendars were crammed on shelves heaving with selection boxes. Eyeing a pile of gleaming gold chocolate coins Lydia felt a thrill of excitement. She adored Christmas and was already looking forward to the forthcoming village celebrations, the switching on of the Christmas street lights and the annual “carols and crumbs” charity bash at the village hall. She loved the colours, the sounds, and the smells of Christmas, the twinkling lights, the pine trees, the baking of mince pies and simmering mulled wine. She even loved the relentless playing of festive songs and carols on the radio and in the shops. She was not bothered about receiving gifts for herself, but she enjoyed choosing thoughtful presents for her friends. All Lydia wanted for Christmas apart from peace and goodwill to all mankind was a slice of Imogen’s rich fruit cake and a glass of champagne on

Christmas Eve. And snow, of course, she mused, how she would love there to be snow!

Lydia's daydreaming was interrupted by the sound of Val's sing song voice, "Morning Lydia love, miserable isn't it? I suppose you're still braving that allotment though?" Val enquired, rolling her eyes in disbelief as Lydia grinned and nodded.

"Ah it's brightening up, just a bit blowy" Lydia replied, "and yes I am indeed heading to the allotment, and I'm going to dig up some lovely kale and sprouts, so worth the effort". Val laughed and handed her the local newspaper. Lydia settled on some chocolate buttons and comics for the children and thanked Val as she handed her some loose change from her pocket.

"Oh, I was wondering have you seen who has moved into the big place on the edge yet?" Val said lowering her voice conspiratorially, enjoying the chance for some village gossip. The "big place on the edge" referred to a large, detached house, past the high street and heading out of the village along a lane. The lane was narrow and winding and was notoriously difficult to negotiate when meeting another vehicle. There were a few houses on this lane and one of them had been sold a few months previously. A lot of work to the property had been undertaken judging by the regular sight of builders', plumbers' and decorators' vans seen coming and going. In the last few weeks Lydia had noticed a large car on the drive and seen lights on in the house. So far it seemed that no one had met the new owner and that made it a topic of interest.

"No, I'm sorry Val, I've not met anyone yet" Lydia said shaking her head.

Val shook her head back at her in response, "No? Ah shame, well I've heard that the work's finished and whoever it is has moved in. It can't be long until they need some milk or something from here, so I reckon I must be due a visit soon, don't you?" she rubbed her hands together gleefully, "I love a

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new face in the village!” she continued, “especially one with money to boot! I mean you must have a bob or two living along there!”, she babbled.

“Well I’m sure we will find out who it is soon enough”, Lydia wished her a good day and left the shop, the bell tinkling once more as she stepped outside.

She continued the short drive to the allotments, slowing as she drove along the winding lane and briefly glanced up at the big house that was provoking such curiosity. It was impressive, she supposed, large and detached with a sweeping driveway, but somehow the house looked rather cold and Lydia shivered. Continuing her journey she followed the bend in the road and forgot about the house and its unknown occupants.

Despite the biting wind it had turned into a brighter morning. The winter sun shone weakly through the gunmetal grey clouds. Fallen leaves swirled in the wind and fell to the ground in piles on the unevenly gravelled carpark. Lydia climbed from her car and took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly, enjoying the feeling of happiness that she felt when she arrived at the allotments. She had a passion for growing fruit and vegetables, alongside flowers that she grew purely for cutting. She enjoyed the challenge of sowing a seed and watching it grow into something beautiful or delicious. Sometimes crops failed and Lydia and fellow allotment holders would stand and scratch their heads, trying to find a reason, giving each other advice and support, and sometimes a crop would grow with such vigour that recipe books had to be scoured to find ways of using the bountiful harvest. The previous year the courgettes had ballooned into marrows and Lydia had resorted to leaving baskets outside her garden gate for passers-by to help themselves to. Lydia found the whole process of sowing seeds, pricking out and planting on both calming and therapeutic, the satisfaction it gave her was immense. She also loved the little community that made the allotments such a special place. There

were ten plots in all, but several of these had been neglected and unused for several years. The other “plotters” as they affectionately referred to themselves were a varied and colourful bunch. Lydia was fond of all of them, even grizzled old Frank, a gruff weather beaten man in his late seventies, whippet thin but strong as an ox who would merely deliver a nod as a greeting or utter some words of wisdom.

“Morning Frank”, she said as she passed his plot. He looked up and nodded, barely pausing before returning to digging the claggy soil. She continued towards her own plot, stopping to chat to another couple who were heading back to the car park laden with a freshly picked harvest.

Lydia had prepared her plot for the winter by digging it over, retrieving the odd potato and leaving clods of soil to break down ready for next seasons crops to be sown and grown. This morning she intended to dig up the remaining carrots, a cabbage, and some celery. She made a mental note to cut down the raspberry canes but decided to leave it for another day as the drizzle she was trying to ignore was turning to steady rain once more.

The allotments were quiet today, and apart from Frank most people seemed to have deserted their plots and opted for a Sunday morning elsewhere, probably at home with central heating, newspapers, and lazy breakfasts Lydia mused. She hurriedly piled the gathered vegetables into her trug and decided to head to Imogen’s for a steaming mug of coffee. She was decidedly chilled now and could think of nothing better than sitting in Imogen’s toasty kitchen.

Weaving her way through the paths between the plots heading back to the carpark Lydia became aware of another presence and looked over her shoulder. There was, she saw a solitary figure. A man wearing an expensive looking long black coat, not usual allotment attire Lydia noted, was standing, feet apart, head back,

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gazing up to the sky. Beside him sat a golden Labrador head held high also, looking up at the man. The silent pair were standing amongst the neglected tangle of an unused plot. Lydia cleared her throat subtly, not wishing to interrupt the silent reverie of the man. She did not want to appear unfriendly as it was always a good sign to have somebody potentially interested taking an empty plot. The allotment sight was constantly threatened with closure by the local council if they were not in use. Swiftly the man lowered his head and looked round. Upon seeing Lydia, he immediately raised a hand in greeting, accompanied by a wide smile.

“Hi”, he said brightly and turned to face Lydia full on as she walked back towards him. The dog burst into life and with tail wagging furiously charged over to her. Lydia laughed and pulled a “friend or foe?” expression. “Chloe stop showing off right now!” the man reprimanded, and Lydia grinned as it ceased leaping and lay down at her feet.

“Impressive!” Lydia said and crouched down to pat the dog’s golden head.

“Hmm, I’m not sure about that, she’s a good girl but a bit over enthusiastic at times,” the man explained putting Chloe back on her lead. “Anyway, we are pleased to meet you, I’m Tom, Tom Manners, and this girl here is obviously Chloe. We live on Meadow Lane, I bought the house a few months ago but have only just settled in.” Lydia nodded knowingly and was amused following her earlier conversation with Val.

“Hello Tom, hello Chloe, I’m Lydia Cole. The villagers have been very curious as to who moved into the house!” Lydia held out her hand and Tom shook it firmly. She met his eyes and they both smiled. Lydia quickly appraised him; tall, perhaps in his mid-forties, he had deep blue eyes with appealing laughter lines, rather dark circles that made him look a little tired, but he had an easy smile and expressive features. His hair was salt and

pepper, thick and wavy cut short. He was decidedly attractive. Embarrassed for over staring Lydia felt shy and lost for words suddenly.

Rescuing her from her discomfort Tom continued, “I guess that’s natural in a village. I do plan to make my introductions over the next few weeks. It is very nice to meet you Lydia, do you live in the village? Do you rent a plot?”.

She nodded and pointed towards her plot. “Yes, over there, it’s obviously not looking the best right now,” she said grimacing and looking up at the sky as the rain turned heavy, “And yes I live in the High Street”.

“Great, well I’ve met a neighbour at last” said Tom. “Gosh, it’s pretty miserable now isn’t it, and you look cold, so I guess I should let you get on your way” he said pulling his own thick coat more tightly around his body.

“It is rather gloomy today, yes. Well nice to meet you Tom, and you too Chloe” Lydia turned on her heel to walk away and then on an impulse turned back, “Are you considering taking a plot?” she asked, bending once again to stroke Chloe’s ears as the dog pulled towards her on her lead.

“I think I probably already have actually.” Tom pointed to the overgrown plot next to him.

“Oh right. That’s great, welcome then.”

“Thank you” he replied. They fell silent and Lydia sensed that Tom did not want to continue with the small talk.

“Good to meet you”, she said with a smile, “see you around I’m sure”.

“Yes, and you too, goodbye Lydia” Tom said. Lydia turned and left him standing, Chloe at his feet, her tail still swishing from side to side.