

Debbie Johnson

Coming
Home
to the
Comfort
Food
Café



Debbie Johnson
Coming Home to the Comfort
Food Café: The only heart-
warming feel-good novel you need!

Аннотация

‘Full of quirky characters, friendship and humour, you will devour this engaging and heartwarming novel in one sitting’ – Sunday Express
Welcome to the cosy Comfort Food Café, where there's kindness in every cup of hot chocolate and the menu is sprinkled with love and happiness... When Zoe's best friend Kate dies of breast cancer, her whole world is turned upside down. Within hours, she goes from being the wacky neighbour who can barely keep a houseplant alive to a whole new world of responsibility when she realises she's guardian to Kate's 16-year-old daughter, Martha. Moving to the little village of Budbury in the West Country, Zoe hopes the fresh Dorset sea breeze and the gentle pace of life will help them heal. Luckily for them both, the friendly community at the Comfort Food Cafe provide listening ears, sage advice, shoulders to cry on, and some truly excellent carrot cake. And when Martha's enigmatic, absent father suddenly turns up, confusing not only Martha but Zoe too, the love and support of their new-found friends is the best present they could ask for...

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This book is for Helen Shaw – the Greatest of all the Gingers!

PART ONE

Chapter 1

Dear Zoe,

I don't know why I'm writing this – a sudden fit of the black dog, I suppose. It's one of the unexpected side effects of motherhood that nobody warns you about, the way your imagination can take hold of you like a Jack Russell terrier, swinging your mind about like a rag doll and leaving you in a crumpled heap of paranoia.

For some reason, tonight, I started worrying about what would happen to Martha if I wasn't around. Well, I say 'some reason' – I actually know exactly what the reason was. Princess Di. I was up late doing some marking, and got sucked into this documentary – ten years since she died and all that.

It was seeing those boys at the funeral that probably did it – little Wills and Harry, trying to be all brave and grown-up and just looking like little lost souls wondering where their mum was. All I could think about was wanting to give them a big hug. I'm not exactly a raving royalist, but this is nothing to do with money or class, is it? Losing your mum – a mum who loves you to bits, like Diana obviously did with her babies – is a terrible thing.

Between that and the wine and the lateness, I just ended up in a bit of a mess. You should have seen me, babe – I was just a great big pile of tear-stained mush, hugging the cushions and shaking with grief for a woman I never met, and her motherless

little boys. Weirdo.

After that, I lay awake for hours thinking about it all – and about you, and Martha, and what songs I wanted played at my funeral. I never did decide – I know it should be something dignified, but ... well, we're not that dignified are we, you and me? Never have been. I keep imagining it being something ridiculous like the Venga Boys, and everyone dancing to *Boom Boom Boom* as the coffin is wheeled out. Or maybe a bit of Pulp, so you could do *Disco 2000* with all the actions.

Anyway. In the end, I decided to get up, and write this instead. Tomorrow, I'm going to package it up with some other paperwork, and go and see a solicitor and make a will. Not cheerful, but I think it'll put my mind at rest. It's the responsible, grown-up thing to do – not my specialist subject, but it needs to be done.

The main thing, of course, is Martha. Her dad's on the other side of the world and she's never even met him. My parents are uptight control freaks. The only person who loves her and knows her as well as I do is you, Zoe. I don't know the legalities of it all, and whether you can leave someone a child in your will, like you would an antique ring or a complete set of Charles Dickens first editions. I'll have to ask those questions, I suppose.

But whatever the answers are, I know, in my heart – my squished up, Wills-and-Harry-sodden heart – that she needs to be with you. You're her second mum. I know you'd get her through it all, just like you and me got each other through our

crazy childhoods. Nothing was perfect – but because we had each other, we survived. You can do the same for her, I know you can.

Hopefully you'll never see this letter, Zoe. Hopefully, I'll be around until we're both 100, and wearing our dentures to Chippendales concerts and swigging gin in our care home. Hopefully we'll be giggling away at how much we embarrass Martha, and reminiscing about when we could remember what day of the week it was.

But ... just in case ... I wanted to write this. I wanted to tell you that I love you, and that you've been more like family to me than my own ever were. And that I need you to be there for Martha, if the worst comes to the worst. If I die in a car crash or fall out of a rollercoaster, or whatever. I know the thought will terrify you, and yes, I know that you even managed to kill that allegedly unkillable cactus we bought on holiday in Ibiza that time. I know you can't cook, and drive like a nutter, and wear odd socks, and lose your keys three times a day, and go so long between brushing your hair that you get dreadlocks.

I know all this, but I also know that where it counts, you have everything it takes to care for a child – because you'll love her as much as I could. You won't try and make her something she's not, or force her into a shape she doesn't fit, and you'll love her no matter how messy her room is. That's far more important than matching socks, honestly – so believe me when I say I know you can do this.

Anyway, I'm pretty knackered now, so I'm going to take some

Night Nurse, pretending it's absinthe, and go back to bed and hope for the best. It's Martha's class assembly tomorrow, and she's playing a Ninja Fish. Don't ask. I need to be bright eyed and bushy tailed and pretend that I enjoyed all the other kids' performances as much as hers (which is a lie all parents have to tell – in reality you're just waiting for your own magical superstar to appear).

Now, I know this is random, but a few things to mention. Her favourite food is fish finger sandwiches, squashed onto soft white bread and butter. You have to really squish the bread together, so hard you leave thumb prints.

Her favourite TV show is still *Spongebob*, but she secretly also loves *In The Night Garden*, even though she thinks it's a bit babyish. She likes dressing up as Stephanie out of *Lazy Town*, and will try and wear the pink wig to bed if you let her. Don't – it leaves her real hair in terrible tangles, and then you have to use the No More Tears, which in my experience isn't that accurate a name.

If she can't sleep, she likes to listen to a CD of those stories about talking hamsters while she drifts off. Her favourite outfit is currently her Shaun the Sheep pyjamas, which she even likes wearing in the day. I don't have a problem with that and I know you won't.

If she's upset about anything at all, try singing the theme tune to Postman Pat out loud. You have to do it with gusto, or she's not convinced. If you do that, even when she's angry she can't

help joining in at some point, and before you know it she'll be more interested in words that rhyme with 'black and white cat' than whatever's bothering her. Even though she doesn't watch the programme any more, it's like there's a folk memory in her brain that makes it soothing, no matter what else is going on.

And on that helpful note, I shall bid you farewell. Yeah, I know, I'm being nuts – but then again I always was, wasn't I? Poor Princess Di.

Don't forget – Postman Pat theme tune. Out loud, and with gusto. It cures all ills.

Love you loads,

Kate xxx

I read the letter through for what feels like the millionth time, and fold it back up into familiar squares. It's starting to tatter and fray, and I really need to do something about that. Like get it laminated maybe; anything to preserve the precious words, the precious hand-writing, the precious connection between me and my now-dead friend.

The main connection between us is just as precious. Well, more so, obviously, as she's a human being and not a piece of paper – but she's nowhere near as easy to protect. I glance at Martha, who is lying in a heap on the living room floor, covered in vomit, and wonder if I can possibly get her laminated as well. It would definitely cut down on the amount of washing I have to do.

That letter was written years ago. What feels like millennia

ago, now. Back in the days when Martha was a happy-go-lucky, ultra-lovable little girl. She used to dress up in her Stephanie wig and I used to pretend to be Sportacus, and we'd eat satsumas together and lick the juice from our fingers like we were sampling the nectar of the gods.

Now, Martha is 16, and I could marinate her in a whole bathtub of No More Tears and it wouldn't help. In fact, she'd probably just drink it, in an attempt to find a new high. Martha lives in a whole different type of Crazy Town now.

So do I. I live in a Crazy Town without Kate. Without my best friend. Without the person who kept me sane for so many years. My shoulder to cry on, my confidante, my other half. Neither of us ever got married, or even had a serious relationship – and I think that's partly because nobody could ever live up to what we had. Friends since we were six, through the good times and the bad. Joined at the hip, no matter what her parents did to try and discourage their golden child's unhealthy attachment to the scruffy-haired foster kid from the council estate they viewed as one step down from hell.

Martha groans, and I kneel by her side. I have become adept at making sure her airways are clear, and putting her in the recovery position, just in case she does a Janis Joplin on me and chokes on her own sick.

Her dyed black hair is crusted to her pale cheeks, her skin splashed with purple that probably came from some kind of blackcurrant mixer. Her nose is pierced through with a ring,

several more in her ears. Winged eyeliner that looked cool in a Tim Burton Batgirl kind of way hours earlier is now smeared beneath her eyes, and she looks like a corpse. She's wearing deliberately laddered black fishnet tights, a black denim mini-skirt now hoisted up to her bum, and a Nirvana T-shirt. There's a smiley face on the front, and on the back it says 'flower sniffin kitty pettin baby kissin corporate rock whores.'

I can see words inked on one of her arms, and squint my eyes to read them: Fuk You. I hope it's just magic marker and not a tattoo, especially as it isn't even spelled right.

Her skinny legs are still on the sofa, one of her Doc Marten boots still on, one of them half off. I'm guessing she came in, tried to sit on the couch and get ready for bed, and became overwhelmed by the industrial amounts of alcohol she probably consumed tonight. Possibly by some drugs as well – in my day it would have been ecstasy or speed. In her day, they have all kinds of fancy names that makes them sound like cute schoolgirls from Japanese anime books.

I reach out and stroke a long strand of sticky hair away from her face. Her eyes pop open, staring up at me like something from a Hammer Horror film – bright, rich brown. Not so long ago, they'd have been sparkling with humour and the sheer irrepressible joy of life. Now, they simply register that it's me hovering over her – not the person she wants it to be – and cloud with disappointment.

She closes her eyes again, and I see fat tears start to seep out

of the sides, mixing in with the eyeliner, painting a dark, dirty streak as they roll sideways.

I murmur what I hope are comforting sounds, not sure if I even believe them myself.

I think about that letter again. About those words of advice from Kate, the woman we both loved so much. Written oh-so-long ago, and now seeming oh-so-wrong. I can't do this. Martha is sinking, disappearing beneath an avalanche of grief and poor life choices, and I don't know how to save her. I don't know how to save myself.

I sit back on my heels, and start to hum the theme tune from *Postman Pat*. I don't sing it with gusto, I don't have any of that left. And besides, if there was a black and white cat in the room these days, I suspect Martha would sacrifice it to Satan.

Something needs to change. Something needs to give, before all is lost. Before I let my best friend down in a way that I will never be able to forgive myself for.

Chapter 2

I wake up the next morning with two things: a headache, and a plan. A plan to change our lives.

The headache is predictable and understandable. I'd been in bed when Martha fell through the door in the early hours of the morning. In bed, but not really asleep.

I used to be a championship level sleeper. I had an undemanding job managing a book shop, lived in a tiny studio flat across the road from Kate and Martha, earned enough money to pay my mortgage, keep me in Ben and Jerry's and set a bit aside. I avoided all stress, emotional, physical, or otherwise.

I'd cut off ties with my toxic past, and led a quiet life. Other people might have found it unambitious and boring – but not me. I'd had a lot of excitement in my early years, and was happier without it.

I thought I'd been so clever – constructing this little life for myself. Vicarious motherhood through Kate. No commitments I couldn't handle. It was very pure and simple, as All Saints might have said, and I liked it that way. I liked the fact that the most stressful thing that had happened to me for years had been my Pot Noodle container splitting and making a chicken and mushroomy mess over the kitchen counters. At 38, I'd achieved my own personal nirvana: steadiness.

As a result, me and sleep were best friends. I used to wake

up every morning feeling refreshed and with a smile on my face, looking forward to cycling to work and doing nothing more challenging than ordering in some extra paperback copies of the latest Dan Brown novel, and persuading my three customers a day to buy something by a local author.

These days, it's all changed. I've become an accidental mother, and I suck at it. I miss Kate, and I'm crap at looking after Martha. I spend most of my waking moments wishing I was asleep, and most of my sleeping moments half awake. I always have one ear open, listening for the sounds of her either coming home, or sneaking out, or setting the kitchen on fire.

It's been over six months since Kate died. Ten months since she first found the lump. I moved in part-time when Kate started chemo, full-time after she died.

Martha might think being 16 makes her an adult, and that's definitely how I felt at her age, but she's lumbered with me whether she likes it or not. And I'm lumbered with struggling through each day like a sleep-deprived zombie.

Martha is a 16-year-old girl with very definite ideas about how she wants to live her life. She'd always been what you could diplomatically call 'strong-minded', a description we saw as a positive but Kate's mum, Barbara, thought was the personality equivalent of leprosy.

But Barbara, in all honesty, has lived her entire life with a whacking great stick shoved up her arse. She was always so worried about what everyone would 'think': the neighbours, the

vicar, the headmaster, passing strangers, random people who saw us on Google earth ... everyone's opinion mattered to her, apart from ours. Apart from Kate's. What she saw as a despicable streak of evil in Martha, we saw as a good thing.

We were proud of our little rebel. 'You need a bit of attitude when you're a woman in this world,' Kate used to say, and I'd agree. We'd clink our glasses, and laugh at Martha's antics.

These days, Martha's less 'strong-minded' and more 'absolute bloody nightmare.' She's punishing herself, and punishing me, and punishing the whole damn world – and doing it mainly by the light of the silvery moon. Martha's a night owl – so these days, so am I.

She was supposed to be in by eleven last night. By midnight, I'd started the ring-round. Friends, places I thought she might be. The police woman who'd brought her home one night a month ago, and who I'd stayed in touch with. I'd even texted some of her friend's parents.

She'll be fine, I'd told myself, eyes sore and brain swollen with the familiar cocktail of anxiety and anger. No she won't, I replied, sitting up on the edge of the bed and getting that letter out again. The letter from Kate, that told me I could do this.

I'd just reached the part about not forcing her into a shape she doesn't fit when I finally heard the door open, and slam shut behind her. I heard the stomping of the boots, and the running of a tap in the kitchen, and a few F-bombs being dropped as she banged into the furniture. It's only when it went quiet that I

emerged to check on her, creeping down the stairs in my ancient Crocs and a ratty old dressing gown, still clutching Kate's letter.

She had, of course, ultimately been fine. Teenagers are both scarily fragile and amazingly resilient. I'd got her into bed, made her drink some water, and left her with a can of Diet Coke and a packet of paracetamol on the bedside table. Not the kind of mothering you read about in magazines, but the best I had to give right then.

I should have done the same for myself, I thought, as I staggered into the kitchen that morning, so tired and with such a thumping headache that I regretted the fact that I'd not been drinking vodka myself. At least then I'd have deserved to feel like shit.

The headache is normal for me now. It's my faithful companion to the dawning of each wonderful new day. The plan, though – the Plan to Change Our Lives – is new. New and drastic and, I think, completely necessary if I'm going to save Martha from herself.

It started with a dream. I must have had some residual memory of an episode of *Countryfile* or something, but in my dream, I was walking along endless coastal paths over endless cliffs. Looking out at endless sea. And feeling endlessly peaceful. That was what tipped me off that it was a dream – I've not felt that kind of peace for a very long time.

For a few moments, after I woke up, I tried to hold onto it. That way you do with nice dreams: like when you've been getting

intimate with Daniel Craig and a can of squirty cream and don't want it to end before the good bit, or when you've been flying like a bird.

This was one of those. I wanted to carry that feeling of peace into the real world. Into my day. Into my whole life, and into Martha's life. More than anything, we both needed some peace – and in her case, possibly a stint in a drying-out tank.

Things were bad, and getting worse. Worse than they'd ever been, and I have a lot of bad to compare it to. I didn't have the most idyllic of childhoods. I grew up in and out of foster homes, with parents in and out of jail, and my sanity in and out of sight. I'd been wild. I'd been crazy. I'd done a lot of the things that I now saw Martha starting to do – and for similar reasons. Because of pain, and loneliness, and anger. Because of feeling that the world doesn't give a shit about you, so why should you give a shit about it?

But when I was Martha's age, I'd had Kate. That had made all the difference. It's not an exaggeration to say that our friendship saved me. When others judged me – the shabby, smart-mouthed kid with the tough exterior, rejecting everyone she met as a pre-emptive measure to save them the bother – she didn't. I wasn't easy to like, I see that now – I was prickly and hard and wore my 'screw you' attitude with pride. Kate saw through that; she had x-ray vision. She was magic.

Now, I didn't have Kate – and neither did Martha. It was no wonder we were both flying off the rails, plunging into the

abyss, and basically making a great big mess of things. We'd both depended on Kate for so much – which was fair enough in Martha's case; slightly less so in mine.

Kate had trusted me to care for her daughter – and much as I occasionally wanted to dunk Martha's head down the toilet, could I honestly say that I would have been any different, without Kate? No, I didn't think I could.

I had to take control, and find us both that peace we needed, and do it soon. Before one of us cracked – and frankly, it could go either way. She might be the one getting the piercings and listening to the death metal, but I'm just as close to the edge. If it was just me, that wouldn't matter – but this isn't about me. It's about that precious little girl who loved Spongebob, and wore a Stephanie wig, and brought so much joy into our lives. It's about saving her.

And now, after it came to me in a dream, I think I know how I am going to at least try: we will move. We'll pack up, and leave. We'll find a place to rest and heal. A place that isn't surrounded by memories of what we've lost, or filled with ghosts, or littered with nightclubs who don't care if teenagers have fake IDs or not. A place with endless cliffs and endless sea and endless peace. A place that brings us the comfort we need, as we don't seem capable of giving it to each other.

She won't like it, I think, downing some ibuprofen and walking towards my laptop. Of course she won't. But then again, she doesn't like anything – so I have nothing to lose.

Chapter 3

I grab a bottle of water from the fridge, and as the door closes I see – for the millionth time – the photo that’s stuck up on there with a gaudy ‘I Heart Bristol’ magnet.

It’s a photo of me, and Kate, and Martha. Taken on holiday in Dorset, maybe three years before – only three years, but an alternate reality. Most of my face is covered in a giant cloud of curly red hair, as usual; Kate is in the middle, blonde and pretty and full of life, Martha snuggling into her side.

She’s using her fingers to make the classic Black Sabbath-style rock sign, but it doesn’t look rebellious – just funny. Her hair was still its natural colour – dark blonde – and her eyes sparkled with happiness. We were a strangely-shaped family, but we were a family – and now it’s my job to keep us like that. I want to feel that again: that simple sense of freedom, for Martha to rediscover the innocence and security that her mother’s death stole from her.

Dorset. It could be perfect. Not too far away in miles, but a different universe. I stagger over to the laptop, and start to investigate.

Within a few minutes, fate – or Google, as some people insist on calling it – has intervened. I search for property to let, and am immediately attracted to one result in particular. ‘Stay with us in sunny Dorset,’ it says, ‘where life is simple and you can leave your cares behind.’

Wow. That would be good. I click through, and see a pretty holiday cottage complex called The Rockery near the village of Budbury. It looks idyllic, and within minutes I'm lost in the fantasy, imagining us both there – without our cares. I'm so lost in imagining this new life that I don't even notice Martha coming into the room.

“Where the fuck is that dump?” she says, so suddenly that I jump, and knock a glass of water all over the table. I swear back, in a very mature fashion, and leap around like a loon holding the laptop in the air so it doesn't get wet.

Martha leans back against the kitchen sink, smirking, as I create a glove made of paper towels and try to mop up the mess. I briefly consider punching her in the face, as I do most mornings, but talk myself out of it.

She peels a banana and starts to eat it, looking on at my efforts like I'm some kind of performance art installation.

“Thanks for your help,” I say, once I've finally cleared the table, my fingers now coated in soggy, mushed up kitchen towel.

“You're welcome,” she replies casually, throwing the banana skin at the bin and missing. It splats onto the floor, where, given her teenaged angst and my superlative housekeeping skills, it might stay forever.

I sit back down, and squint through the sunshine at her face. It's the third week in August, and the weather is still bright and gorgeous. The kitchen faces out onto our small patio garden, and the light streams through the window in vivid golden streaks,

striping Martha like a tiger. I see that she's at least managed a shower; her face is free of last night's zombie movie make-up and her hair is hanging wet and clean over her shoulders. She's wearing an old Glastonbury hoodie that I recognise as Kate's, and that immediately softens my attitude.

I remind myself, as I seem to need to do several times a day, that she's just a child. A child missing her mother. A child I love. I was there when she was born, screaming and bloody, and I was there when her mother died; and I'm still here now – right where I need to be.

“This,” I say, pointing at the screen, “is a place called Budbury. It's in Dorset. And I thought we might ... go there.”

I let the words float out casually, but hold my breath as I wait for her to respond. There's a battle royale coming, and it's one I intend to win.

“What, like, for a holiday or something?” she asks, screwing up her face in disgust as she looks at the photos. Budbury is on the Jurassic Coast, near to the border with Devon, and is absolutely picture perfect. There's a small village with a hall and shops and even a pet cemetery; there's a few pubs and a gorgeous-looking café perched on the side of the clifftops, and there's a college just a few miles away. That was an important factor, the college.

We'd both received a letter the day before from her old school, 'regretfully' informing us that the sixth form courses she wanted to do were now full. I suspect that isn't true – they just don't want her back. I'm angry on her behalf, but kind of get it – she's

been a great big handful of trouble this year, and I've spent what feels like hours sitting across the desk from the head teacher, squirming on the naughty chair, listening to her witter on about Martha's problems.

I'm not at all surprised that they've declined to have her back. Martha's pretending not to be bothered by it, but I suspect the letter inspired last night's binge. It was proof that everything has changed – and not for the better.

She's staring at my screen now, frowning. The scenery around the village is astounding – a million light years from our admittedly cosy little corner of Bristol. Even looking at the beaches and the tiny little coves and the pathways clinging to the sides of the cliffs makes me feel better – makes me yearn to be there, in the fresh air, walking and breathing and just ... being. Maybe I'd get a dog, and learn to surf, and write beautiful poetry and drink scrumpy.

I'm guessing, from the look on Martha's face as she flicks through the slideshow, that she doesn't exactly feel the same.

"Looks like something from a horror film," she says, dismissively. "Like the Village of the Damned. I bet it's stuck in a time warp as well – they probably don't even allow gingers in because they think they have no soul. Which might be a valid point."

I self-consciously tuck a tangled strand of red curls behind my ear, and bite the inside of my lip. Here we go...

"I'm not suggesting we go there for a holiday," I say, getting

up and depositing the banana skin into the bin. I'm that nervous. "We're going there ... for a while."

It's now almost midday, and I've been up for hours, planning our new lives. Lives full of happiness and laughter and recovery – building up, moving on, going forward instead of backward. For some reason – possibly desperation – it's become a symbol of everything I think we need. This major life change is, though, news to poor Martha.

"No way. No *way!* I wouldn't even go there for the weekend, Zoe, never mind to live. And you can't make me. I'm 16, and you can't make me."

I fill the kettle. I need another coffee – I've only had seventeen so far today. I stay silent, gathering my thoughts, listening to Martha fizz and pop in the background. She's so loud I fear for the safety of my eardrums. For a moment, I fear for the safety of my laptop as well, but I realise she's just closed the lid, with a thud. Like that's the end of it, and Budbury will now fall into the sea and float out into oblivion.

She is 16. And I can't make her. This is a replay of a conversation we've had many times. It is her ultimate weapon – and one I need to let her keep, because she really doesn't have many left. If I take away her ability to harm me, she will revert fully to harming herself.

I remember myself at 16: sofa surfing at friend's houses, hiding in Kate's garage with a sleeping bag until her parents found me and kicked me out, no money, no job, no home. All I

had was my spirit – and the determination that I would escape the world I'd grown up in, and find my own way in life. If someone had taken that away from me, that hope, that belief in my own independence, I'd have been left with nothing.

Martha isn't me. She still needs me, no matter how much she refuses to acknowledge that. Inside, beneath the make-up and the piercings and the attitude, she's still a baby – still bloody and screaming – and I have to remember that.

"I know I can't make you," I reply, my face clouded in steam from the kettle, "but I can at least talk to you about it, can't I?"

"You can talk about it, but don't expect me to listen!" she yells, arms crossed over her chest in what she thinks is defiance but actually just makes her look scared and defensive. "My home is here. My friends are here. My life is here – and you're not dragging me away from it all just because you're having some kind of mid-life crisis, all right?"

I pour the water onto the coffee, splashing my hands with scalding liquid. She may have a point there. I think I'm doing this for her – but is it actually me who needs to get away? To escape from the pressures of this place, and all its memories; from a past that makes me cry and a future that makes me panic?

"Look, Martha," I say, in as quiet a voice as I can manage, "I know I can't make you do anything. And I know you don't even want to listen to me. But your mum asked me to look after you, and that's what I'm going to do."

I know immediately from the look on her face that I've said

the wrong thing. It has always made her angry, and probably sad: being left to me in a will. Being trapped here with me, without access to any of the life assurance money or the profits selling the house would bring, without the independence she thinks she wants.

“And anyway. That’s not why I’m here,” I add quickly, before she can start a rant. “I’m here because I love you. Feel free to mock, or spit in my eye, but it’s true – I love you. I’ve known you since you were a baby, and I will always love you. I know I’m not your mum, and never will be, but please don’t ever think I’m only here because a lawyer asked me to be. I’d be here anyway.”

I see tears spring into her eyes, and she angrily swipes them away. Crying is a sign of weakness to Martha, and seeing her fight against it fills me with emotion. I want to take her in my arms, and stroke her wet hair, and tell her that everything will be all right. But I know she won’t let me do that. It would push her over the edge, and she wouldn’t forgive me.

“Okay, I know that. I know you would ...” she mutters, her fingers screwing up into tight fists in front of her, as though she’s trying to keep herself calm, desperately trying to avoid using the L-word. “I know that, but I still don’t want to move away. I’ll be better. I won’t go out as much. I’ll ... I don’t know, I’ll stop puking on the living room floor. I’ll work harder. I’ll start smoking menthol ... whatever you like. But not that – I won’t go and live in the 1950s, all right?”

I bite back a bout of inappropriate laughter at that little speech.

She'll start smoking *menthol*? To hijack a phrase I'm told is popular with the kids these days, WTF? Or even WTF-ing-F? How bad have things become, that Martha sees swapping one cancer stick for another as a sign of commitment to a new lifestyle?

I suppose it is, at least, a step in the right direction. The only problem is, I'm determined that we'll be taking a lot more steps in another direction – all the way to Dorset. I've been pondering it all morning, and it's doable. Kate, straight after her diagnosis – well, straight after the bit that involved us and a bottle of Grey Goose – had gone in to see her bank manager and her solicitor.

She wasn't by any means wealthy, but she had a proper job – head of English at a high school – which came with a pension, and when she'd bought the house she'd done uncharacteristically grown-up stuff like take out shedloads of life assurance. Money, for the time being, wasn't an issue. The mortgage was sorted, there was a lump sum for Martha when she was older, and there was a chunk set aside for the next two years while Martha was still living at home with me.

After taking advice from the legal people, she'd structured things so that I managed the cash until Martha was either 18 or 21, at my discretion.

That in itself had made us both laugh, unlikely as it seems. We'd sat on the sofa, telling each other it wouldn't come to that, that the treatment would work, that she'd carry on as a boob-less wonder and we'd all be together until we were ancient, smelly

old crones.

But if it didn't ... then Martha's financial future was going to depend on 'my discretion.'

"I know it's just a legal phrase," Kate had said, grinning at me despite the grimness of the situation, "but really? You're an absolute nutter, Zoe. Remember that time you spent a whole week's worth of wages on tickets to see Fun Lovin' Criminals? Or the time you got a taxi all the way back from London because the woman sitting next to you on the train was eating a pickled egg?"

"Well, you must admit that Scooby Snacks was a classic of our time ... and I swear to God, if you'd smelled those pickled eggs, you'd have done the same ..."

"Okay. But what about when you were 19, and you decided you were going to hitch-hike round the UK trying out all the Little Chefs because you liked those cherry pancakes so much?"

"That one was a bit weird. I think I only made it as far as Bath. But ... yeah. I am a nutter, you're right. Are you sure about this? About me, and Martha, and ... my discretion?"

She'd reached out and held my hand, squeezing my fingers as though I was the one who needed reassuring, and said: "100%. I'd trust you with my life – and I trust you with Martha's."

Remembering that now, as I look at Martha – the child who has selflessly just offered to start smoking menthol to placate me – I wonder if Kate hadn't been a bit of a nutter herself. Or whether she saw something in me that I couldn't quite see in

myself.

“I think,” I say to Martha, who’d helpfully taken the first mug of coffee out of my hands and started drinking it herself, “that you need to stop smoking completely. You’re 16. You probably don’t have a raging case of the black lung just yet, so quit while you’re ahead. And as to Dorset ... well, don’t throw one of your diva fits, sweetie, but you’re not doing so well, are you?”

Martha opens her mouth to argue with me – in fact it’s usually the only thing she open her mouth for these days, other than to insert a menthol, presumably – but I hold up one hand to stop her.

“Nope! Not listening! I’m not having an argument with someone whose face I pulled out of their own vomit last night, all right? You’re not doing so well, and that’s that. Neither am I. I think we need to make some changes. We need a new world order, because this one sucks.”

I’m saved from the oncoming tirade by a knock on the door. We both stare at each other, momentarily taken aback, before we hear a familiar voice: “Coo-ee! It’s only me!”

For once in complete agreement, Martha and I do a neatly choreographed eye-roll, and sigh in mutual exasperation.

“It’s Sunday, isn’t it?” I say, glancing at my watch and seeing that it is dead on noon. Our common nemesis is nothing if not punctual.

“Yeah. Shit. We forgot. How does Sunday keep happening so often?” she replies, looking genuinely confused.

“I don’t know ... it’s like we’re trapped in some kind of hell

dimension, doomed to eternal knocks on the door and ‘coo-ees’, and ...”

“And the next line – any minute now ...”

We both pause, our heads on one side like curious budgerigars, and grin as we wait for the inevitable.

“It’s only me!” shouts Barbara again, and I can just picture her on the doorstep, faffing with her scarf and checking her cameo brooch and sniffing the air like she’s a bloodhound on the track of moral iniquity. “Don’t like to intrude,” she trills, “but I’ll just use my key ...”

Martha stares at me. I stare back.

“She’s lying,” says Martha, swigging down the last of the coffee. “She loves intruding. You should get the locks changed.”

She strides off to go and get properly dressed, and I attempt to smooth my crazy curls down into something less likely to make Barbara make the sign of the cross when she sees me.

It’s Sunday. Again. Which means that Martha gets the unrivalled joy of lunch with her grandparents – and I get a few more hours to plan our escape to the West Country.

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