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Opening Extract from...

A GIFT FROM THE COMFORT FOOD CAFÉ

Written by **Debbie Johnson**

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Chapter 1

My name is Katie Seddon. I am seven years old, and I am preparing to run away.

This is the first time, but it won't be the last.

It is Christmas Day, and I have gathered together all of the essentials, which include the following: a selection of gifts, including my mermaid Barbie, a colouring book and felt tip pens, a musical jewellery box with a wind-up dancing ballerina inside it, fluffy pink ear muffs, elf bed socks and a four-pack of custard creams wrapped in cellophane. The biscuits weren't under the tree that morning; I pinched them from the kitchen.

I look at my stash, and decide that I am ready for all that life can throw at me.

I pack my haul into my *Toy Story* backpack, and decide I will take a trip to infinity and beyond. Or at least to my grandma's house. She only lives two streets away, so it isn't exactly an intergalactic space quest.

I sit on my bed, and pause after I've zipped everything up. I wonder if my mum and dad will hear me as I sneak

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downstairs, get my raincoat, and leave – but a few seconds sitting with my head cocked to one side, listening to them scream at each other, reassures me that they won't.

I can only make out the odd word, and I've learned already not to try too hard. I won't hear anything good. It's a cacophony of shrieks and yells and thuds as they chase each other around the living room. The bangs of ashtrays being thrown and high-pitched swearing and the crash of plates are all perfectly normal to me. They're part of the soundtrack of my childhood; a reverse lullaby that keeps me awake and scared instead of sleepy and secure.

Looking back, with more complex thought processes than I possessed at seven, I know they are one of those couples who base their whole relationship on mutual contempt. On a good day, they tolerate each other. On a bad one, the only emotion in their eyes is hatred and bitterness. The overwhelming disappointment of what their lives have become.

I know now it's not uncommon – and that their conflicts were the glue that held them together. Maybe when they first met it was exciting. Maybe they thought the arguments were passionate. Maybe the first few serious rows were put down to fire and spice. Maybe they were different when they were young, and thought they were in love – but now, with my dad in a dead-end job and Mum stuck at home, it's not passion. It's fury.

At the age of seven, I don't understand any of this. I don't

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know what's going on in the big, nasty grown-up world – but I do know that I've had enough. That this is the worst Christmas ever. That they're both really, really mean when they fight. Dad is bigger and physically stronger, but Mum is like a wasp, constantly zooming in to sting him. It's horrible, and I'm leaving. Forever.

I tiptoe down the stairs and creep out of the house really quietly, although I needn't have bothered – they've reached critical mass by this stage and wouldn't pause if I did a conga through the living room wearing my flashing neon Rudolph deely-boppers. Which I am wearing, by the way – I've decided they will help me stay safe outside in the dark.

The walk to my grandma's is a bit scary. I've done it before, loads of times, but only with grown-ups. This time I am doing it alone, at night, and with nobody to hold my hand when I'm crossing the road. I'm a good girl, and do as I've been taught, waiting for the green man to come on at the traffic lights even though there are no cars at all. Mum sometimes goes when the red man is on, but she says that's all right for adults.

I knock on my grandma's door, and she opens it wearing her quilted dressing gown and tartan slippers. She lets me in without any questions at all. I realise now it's because she didn't have to ask – she knew exactly what was going on in my house, and exactly why I needed a refuge. A place to shelter from the storm of my parents' toxic relationship.

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My nan was a very kind woman, and she always smelled of Parma Violets. To this day I still find it comforting whenever they turn up in a big bag of Swizzels. Halloween can be a bittersweet experience.

She settles me down with a bowl of custard-soaked jam roly-poly that she warms up in the microwave, and makes me a mug of instant hot chocolate. She even lets me sit in the big armchair that has the button that makes the footrest go up, tucked under a blanket. I hear her on the phone, but I'm so comfy and cosy and happy I'm not remotely interested in who she's talking to. The room is lit by the twinkles of her small plastic Christmas tree, and all is well with the world.

When she comes back into the room, she's all wrinkled smiles and loveliness, and we watch an episode of *ER* together. It's an exciting one, with a big fire and lots of drama. It may even have been that early brush with Nurse Carol Hathaway that planted the seeds of my later career.

By the time my mum drags herself away from her fight, Nan has put me to bed at her house. I'm in the spare room, which used to be Mum's when she was little and still has a giant cuddly lion in it that's big enough to sit on.

I lie scrunched up beneath the duvet, warm and full, and hear them talking down below. It's one of those little terraced houses with the staircase right off the living room, so the noise carries. Mum sounds tearful and her voice is wobbling and going up and down, like your voice does

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when you're trying to keep a cry in and can't breathe properly. Nan is telling her to leave me here for the night, and to stay herself as well. Telling her to consider staying for good – to finally leave him.

'There's never going to be a happy ending here, Sandra. You've both given it your best, but enough's enough, love,' she says, and I hear how sad she sounds. Sometimes I forget that my mum is my nan's little girl as well as my mum. Weird.

I wake up the next morning with my mum in bed with me, curled around me like a soft, protective spoon. She's already awake, watching me as I sleep, gently moving my blonde hair from my face. For a moment, all is well in the world.

Then I see that her eyes are all crusted together where she'd been crying, and her face is all puffed up, and she has finger-shaped bruises on the tops of her arms like small purple paw-marks. I burrow into her, and give her a cuddle – she looks like she needs one.