

Polly Babbington  
The  
Pretty Beach  
Thing



A transformation by the sea.



# THE PRETTY BEACH THING

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POLLY BABBINGTON

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# POLLY BABBINGTON

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# PRETTY BEACH

*Welcome to the world of Pretty Beach.*

*A sweeping, sparkly blue inlet town surrounded by water,  
crisscrossed with sweet old laneways, filled with wonderful  
characters, and overlooked by a quaint old blue and white  
lighthouse.*

Lotta whisked out of the function room of the stately home, her gigantic fascinator wobbling precariously on the left side of her head. At least it looked good, and her dress wasn't too shabby, either. She couldn't stand it any longer, sitting at the table with the beautiful people and their successful lives. Successful lives perched all primly together in a circle with her plonked in the middle; her very pregnant second cousin to her left, tall Jim – the scientist who'd invented, or as he referred to it, 'discovered' a cure for a deadly disease – to her right, and Jim's wife – a successful human rights lawyer – to his right. They had been chatting a lot about their three gorgeous and smart children, all in private school. Opposite sat the equally attractive and just as accomplished siblings of her mum's other brother; Dean and his entrepreneur wife, and Matt, an investment banker with his husband, Dom. Another round table at a family gathering where Lotta was on her own. Another function where she'd turned up and had to sit amongst all the smiley, happy people living their best lives. Shiny, that's what they all were, indulging in the bling-bling of all the good things. While Lotta's shine was not quite as bright. There was no denying; Lotta's bling had faded a little bit, she was a tad dull around the edges.

Lotta had always been the spare part from the very beginning. Her mum, the one who'd not quite fitted in, the single mum hippie in a swathe of Home Counties pearls. No private school and trust fund BMW for Lotta, that was for sure. Lotta's mum didn't believe in private education or fancy



cars. Well, she did for herself, just not quite for Lotta. Lotta, apparently, had to make her own way in life.

Lotta had sat at the same version of the table many a time before. A spare part next to the successful people doing their thing. Although Lotta hadn't always been totally alone, it was just that no one had ever stuck. There had been a few, well, okay then, *two* real boyfriends or partners along the way. But overall, in the grand scheme of things, she'd been to a lot of these family functions alone. And here she was again, sitting with the smiley, successful people dressed head to toe in a charity shop fascinator and a cast-off dress.

Zippering across the foyer in between the vast function rooms of the old country manor, she almost fell on the bar on the far side, gripped its side, and smiled at the person serving drinks. 'White wine, please.' She joked, 'triple if you've got it.'

The woman, dressed in a fancy apron and starched white shirt, smiled and winked. 'I take it that means you want a large one? Tough gig in there, is it?'

'Or the bottle?' Lotta replied with a silly smile, the fascinator wobbling around beside her. Not that alcohol was going to help her. In fact, it could quite possibly make things worse. It had done before, and she didn't want to end up drowning her sorrows and singing into her hairbrush at the end of the night. That was something she'd never quite lived down.

The woman pulled a wine glass from underneath the bar. 'Nice hat, fascinator or whatever it is. Very, very nice and trust me, I've seen it all in here. Where did you get it?'

Lotta contemplated making something up, couldn't be bothered, and lowered her voice. 'Charity shop. Fiver.'

The woman's face showed a look of surprise. 'I didn't see that coming, especially with the lot you came in with. It's gorgeous. I'm going to the races next week, and I still haven't found anything. It's just what I'm looking for, but in black.'

Lotta didn't tell the woman that charity shops were fascinator and occasion event goldmines, or that she'd spent the last few years going to fancy high-end family events wearing attire found in them. The bottle-green silk-satin dress with the blouson sleeves, high neck, and bias cut was from the same place. She touched the fascinator. 'It's actually an Alice band. It's so easy, you shove it on and be done with it. No pinning or hat pins or anything. I shoved my hair up in a pleat, plonked it on top, and was good to go.'

Lotta slid onto one of only two unoccupied stools, placed her clutch bag onto the bar, pulled her Kindle from inside, and turned it on. Leaning down with her right hand, she slipped her heel from her three-inch, also from the charity shop, stilettos, did the same with the other one, and let the shoes dangle from her toes. A bargain, there was no doubt, but comfy they were not. She picked her Kindle up, navigated to one of the books she had on the go, and got lost in its words as she waited for her drink. A couple of minutes later, the woman put a glass of wine on the bar and raised her eyebrows. 'There you go, a large.'

'Lovely, thanks.' Lotta jerked her thumb over towards the open doors of the function room. 'Ahh, I needed this, thank you. Bliss. I'm just going to sit here with my book for a bit. It only came out today, and I haven't had a chance to look at it yet.'

Just as the woman was about to reply, a man came up to the bar. 'Whisky, please. Double. Loads of ice.'

The woman laughed. 'What is this? The place for doubles and large drinks.'

The man plonked himself down and stared straight ahead. As soon as his drink was put down, he grabbed it and swigged.

Lotta did the same with her wine, her fascinator wobbling right near the man's face. 'Oops, sorry.'

'Not a problem.' He looked up at the feathers coming out of Lotta's head. 'Wedding?'

'Yep.'

‘Nice.’

‘You?’

The man nodded over towards the function room on the opposite side of the lobby. ‘Christening.’

‘Right,’ Lotta replied.

‘At least it wasn’t a funeral, I suppose.’ His face didn’t really give much away. He was most definitely handsome. There was decidedly no hint of a smile.

‘I had one the day before yesterday in that very room, actually,’ Lotta noted, inclining her chin over towards the function room the man had just emerged from.

The man’s eyes flicked to the feathers dancing around beside Lotta’s head. He frowned and then looked back at her. ‘A what? Sorry.’

‘A funeral,’ Lotta clarified.

‘You had a funeral before a wedding?’

‘Yeah, weird, right? Two for one on the function room,’ Lotta joked.

The man rolled his eyes and downed his drink. ‘At least it gets it out the way, I suppose. I’m over sitting on the losers’ table at these things. I seem to spend my life going to them and having to endure the pitying looks left, right, and centre. It’s all so boring, too.’

Lotta burst out laughing, and the fascinator shook precariously. ‘Too funny. At least you’re *on* the losers’ table. People are so sorry for me that I’ve actually been promoted from there back to the centre tables. Now I get plonked between the happy people with successful lives, and I have to pretend to be both interested and interesting. Plus, yes, as you say, there are the pitying looks to contend with.’

‘There is that,’ the man reasoned.

‘There’s one consolation in being a loser,’ Lotta stated matter of factly.

‘Right. What’s that then?’

‘You get to own it. You don’t have to pretend.’ Lotta nodded over to the bar and swigged her wine. ‘I’ve been pretending all day. So boring. So bored. I’d rather just be a loser.’ Lotta made the thumb and first finger of her right hand into an L shape and held it up to her forehead. Her fascinator wobbled, and she flicked it out of the way.

‘Fair point. Not that I’m pretending. I just sit there in the middle, acting like I’m mean or sad. Actually, I combine a bit of both. Come to think of it, I *am* a bit of both, no, not sad, but definitely a bit mean on these occasions.’

Lotta chuckled, and her fascinator wobbled again and poked him in the eye. ‘Oops, sorry.’ She swirled her wine around. ‘I could try that; instead of pretending to be interesting, I could be mean and nasty. I could throw in a bit of depression too,’ she joked and screwed up her lips in contemplation. ‘I should have thought about that before. It’s quite a good strategy. I might have to give that one a go.’

‘Works for me. Plus, it means you can make a swift exit for the bar and the people beside you are actually relieved to see you go. No one wants to talk to a mean, moody, depressed wedding guest.’ He didn’t really smile much as he continued. ‘So, what have you pretended about?’

Lotta splayed her right hand in the air. ‘Umm, more or less my whole existence, really.’

‘Like what?’ There still wasn’t much of a smile, much of anything, on the handsome face.

Lotta screwed her lips to the left and flicked her eyes up briefly to the right. ‘Hmm, let me see. What have I pretended about today? I have a new, very successful boyfriend with a big fancy job in the city. I’m moving into a new flat in the best part of town, and I’m looking at a promotion.’ She drummed her fingers on her lips. ‘Oh, and I’m just about to go on holiday – a yoga and meditation health retreat to be exact. Plus, I’m not long back from New York, where I went for work, because, you know, I’m *that* important.’

The unsmiling face continued. ‘And none of that is true?’

‘Pah!’ Lotta said, downing the rest of the wine in one. ‘I’ve just been made redundant again, I’ve been served notice on my flat, and the boyfriend is but a figment of my imagination. I’ve more chance of flying to the moon than going to New York on business; I’d be lucky to get as far as Watford the way I’m going.’

‘And the holiday?’

‘Camping in Norfolk was booked with someone at work, who I don’t even like that much, but she cancelled because she got a better offer to go to Greece. So I didn’t even get to spend a long weekend in a wet field with a tent pretending I was having a good time.’

A flicker of a smile crossed the man’s face as he turned to the woman behind the bar and raised his eyebrows to order another drink. He looked back at Lotta. ‘Drink?’

Lotta raised her glass. ‘Another one of these, please.’

The man nodded. ‘I’m Jack, by the way.’

‘Lotta.’

‘Sorry, Lotta, is it?’

‘Yes, as in hotter.’ Lotta cringed. ‘I obviously don’t mean I’m hot. You know, like jotter or potter. Lotta with an ‘a’ at the end, though.’

‘Right. Just Jack from my end.’

‘Yes, I see. Just Jack.’ When the drink arrived, Lotta said thank you and took a gulp. ‘You’re not getting back to the christening?’

‘No, I’m staying here for as long as possible. The losers’ table was grim. You?’

‘Same.’

‘Can’t be doing with the pretending?’

Lotta chortled. ‘Ahh, goodness no and listening to them ramble on about what they’re doing in their lives and what they’ve just inherited. I’ve heard it many times before. Painful. Painful, boring, and grim.’

‘What, they inherited stuff from the person whose funeral it was the day before yesterday?’

Lotta nodded and rolled her eyes. ‘Yeah.’

‘A big affair, was it?’

‘You might have heard of it. The Mobile Phone Place. Remember that?’

The man screwed up his face. ‘What, from the nineties?’

‘Yep.’

‘I’ve heard of it, but I’m not that old.’

‘Right, oops, sorry.’

‘Anyway, that was my mum’s uncle. Or I should say the money initially was his. He funded it.’

‘I assume he wasn’t poor.’

‘No, and neither is his family now! They inherited a lot, yes.’

‘What about you?’ the man asked. ‘Did you get any of the windfall?’

Lotta flicked her hand dismissively. ‘No, no. I never get anything.’

‘You didn’t inherit anything at all?’

‘That’s not quite true. I did get something before. I got a house.’ Lotta frowned. ‘No, no, not a house, as such. Sort of a house.’

‘Sort of a house? What is one of those?’

Lotta ran her finger around and around the rim of her wine glass. ‘It’s a house in the back end of nowhere. No one wanted it, so they gave it to the poor relation as a gesture. Literally. I actually got it a few years ago. It’s falling down. Maybe not quite falling down, but it needs some help.’ She again flicked her hand dismissively. ‘It’s a long story where I fit in with my family. My mum’s now in Singapore. Yeah, long story.’

‘I see. The poor relation being you...’

Lotta chuckled. ‘Little do they know how appropriate that is nowadays.’

‘Well, at least you got something.’

‘I guess so. It was all quite nice too, how I got it – the keys were in a sweet blue envelope, that’s where the niceness ended, though.’ She stopped mid-sentence and trailed off for a second. ‘Sort of like something from one of my books really, if you actually sit down and think about it. Anyway.’

‘And where would this house be?’

‘Gosh, like you’d never have heard of it.’

‘Try me.’

‘Pretty Beach. A little town way down on the coast.’

The man nodded. There was a flicker of recognition on his face. ‘I do, actually.’

Lotta frowned. ‘You do?’

‘My family are from down that way, and I do business all along the coast. I’m in Newport Reef a lot which isn’t too far from Pretty Beach.’

‘I see, oh, my cousin Liv, Olivia, moved to Newport. She’s a marine biologist.’ Lotta thought about the house in Pretty Beach; she’d not been there for a while. She did know she had to pay for various things as part of its ownership. She wasn’t going to tell this man any of that. ‘So you live down on the coast?’

The man’s body language visibly tightened. ‘Now and then.’

‘And work?’

Again the man didn’t seem to want to relay too many details. ‘This and that. I run a few different businesses here and there.’

Lotta swigged her wine. He was annoying her a bit. She turned back to the bar and then back again as he continued.

‘You? What’s work look like for you?’

‘Redundant is what work looks like.’

‘What did you do, do you do?’

Lotta exhaled dramatically. Mostly she’d been in dead-end jobs for the last few years, trying to save what was left of her career in publishing. The career that had never really taken off in the first place and had halted when she’d taken a break to assist in her ex-partner’s startup. The same startup she ploughed any money she did have into. She stated her supposed job title. ‘Assistant Production Manager.’

‘And what does that do?’

‘These days, pretty much answering Facebook messages.’  
Lotta laughed.

There was just a nod.

‘My gap few years working for my ex didn’t do much for my publishing career, put it that way. Missed the boat, as it were.’

‘So, what’s the plan?’

‘Another long round of interviews for jobs with much bigger titles than they are. That’s about the bottom line of it.’

‘And the house in Pretty Beach?’

Lotta only knew that, as far as she was concerned, the thought of living in the ramshackle house was depressing. She was still planning and hoping to get back on her feet, to rent another flat, get a half-decent job and leave the house exactly as she had inherited it, falling down. ‘I don’t know. There aren’t many publishing jobs in Pretty Beach. There aren’t many jobs at all in Pretty Beach, as far as I’m aware.’

‘Ahh, I don’t know about that. It’s thriving down there since the fast train.’

Lotta didn’t want to know.

The man continued, ‘I suppose with the train you can work in London in a fancy publishing job without any drama.’

Lotta found herself nodding. ‘Yeah, possibly.’ She contemplated what he’d said and raised her eyebrows. ‘That is



a benefit, I suppose.'

'You should have a look and see what jobs there are around the area.' He seemed knowledgeable. 'You'd be surprised, the whole place is booming because of the train.'

'Okay, well, umm, thanks, Jack,' Lotta said, looking over towards the function room where her cousin Liv was waving frantically out the door, beckoning her over.

'No worries.'

'Nice meeting you.' Lotta smiled, picking up her Kindle and stuffing it in her bag. 'Thanks for the drink.'

'Yeah. Happy pretending,' he said without really looking up.

A couple of months or so later, Lotta rushed up out of a depressing concrete underpass, and looking at her watch, she started to jog. She wasn't quite sure how she'd gone completely the wrong way and was now on the brink of being late. And her feet were wet. Thank goodness she'd worn her mac and brought an umbrella. She'd been walking for ages, thinking she'd save the money on a bus fare. Big mistake. She now was not only wearing wet, sodden shoes, she was windswept and soggy. Not the look she had been going for for the interview.

Arriving at the building, that wasn't looking too hopeful, either. She stood in the rain, peering up at a tired-looking 1980s building with blue plastic guttering and a lone porthole window looking into the stairwell. She sighed as she took it and the area in; there was no denying that the calibre of places she was going to for interviews was going down.

It hadn't always been that way; when she'd got her first job in publishing, it had been in the heart of Bloomsbury, and she'd loved it. Adored it, boom boom. She'd flitted around in a sea of old books and nice cafés and cherished every minute. In the early days, in her first job, after she'd paid her rent, she'd had hardly any money, but she'd revelled in the Bloomsbury scene and rocked it to the hilt. In the morning, she'd get a takeaway coffee from an Italian deli doubled up as a bookshop, then she'd clip along to the office in an old converted Victorian four-storey terraced house and spend all day long doing things with, and about, books.

It was a few years into her career and many deli coffees later when the publishing industry took the final nail in its coffin, and to keep her job, she'd had to take a pay cut. And looking back, it had all, really, gone downhill from there. Not that she'd thought it then, because even though for a few years she'd coasted from job to job never really getting much beyond entry-level, it was then that she'd met Dan. He'd been one of the directors at the job after the Victorian terrace. She'd liked him as soon as he'd walked in with his tall, dark, and handsome looks. On top of the tall, dark, and handsome, there was charming, and most of the time, nice. Lotta had fallen hook, line, and sinker. She'd been in so deep that she'd not seen that Dan hadn't been quite as in love as she had. Or maybe she had seen it and thought that he would change. In any case, in the beginning, she'd thought he'd felt the same way as she did. And when he'd asked her to move in, she was ecstatic; he must have loved her a little bit, or so she thought.

For a few years, it had all worked out quite nicely indeed. She'd eventually been made redundant at the company where she'd met Dan, but she'd found another job in another publishing house. Well, it wasn't really in publishing, more like printing, and definitely not in Bloomsbury. But overall, it was fine, and moving in with Dan had meant a return to the deli coffees and the actual buying of books in bookshops. She'd loved her little life, even if some nights Dan hadn't ended up making it home, and she wasn't actually quite sure where he'd been. But that was okay; Dan was just a bit hard to tie down.

And when Dan had proposed that he start a business and resign from his job to be an entrepreneur, she'd gone along with it quite happily. She'd simply pushed down all the little red flags wildly waving at her that anyone calling themselves an entrepreneur was a little bit of a, well, you know what I mean. She'd trusted him that it would go well.

First of all, it had done just that. The first year had been quite amazing; Dan had rented an office in an old industrial warehouse, and he'd bought a fancy Italian coffee machine and trendy ergonomic chairs. There were Macs and air plants and workstations. It had all seemed to go so well at first; for a

good year or so at least. And then the money started to get an incy wincy bit tight. Not that that had really been too much of a problem for Lotta. Not initially, at least, and anyway, she had been more than happy to tighten her belt a notch. What did it really matter?

But as Dan's life continued on the same trajectory, hers began to change quite a bit. Would she mind not getting her hair done quite as often, ditto her nails, and would she mind not eating out? That wasn't a dealbreaker – first-world problems and all that. But while Dan still ordered his lunch from the trendy deli down the road and bought his shirts from Savile Row, Lotta was feeling the pinch and took her own lunch and didn't even think about clothes. Then one evening, with a pained but expectant look on his face, Dan had asked her if she wouldn't mind working another job. He'd said it was just to give him a bit of room to breathe so that he could totally focus on his work. He needed to dedicate all his time to his app. For Lotta, there were no more bookshop coffees and a whole lot of cleaning office blocks after hours.

Lotta's next redundancy hadn't been quite as easy to recover from. Nor had Dan's failures at being an entrepreneur. And he'd forgotten to tell her that he'd borrowed her credit card, the one she'd kept in her jewellery box for emergencies.

Lotta tried to push all the thoughts of Dan and how she'd ended up standing outside the horrid office block out of her mind. She sighed as she looked up at the huge ugly stainless steel numbers on the side by the smoked glass door. Little trails of orange rust ran away from the numbers down the wall, and the corner of an industrial black doormat with grey flecks was curled up at the corners. She pulled a long thick door handle. The hinges creaked, and the bottom of the door jarred against the rubber-backed mat.

As she walked in, it didn't get much better. Someone, by the looks of it many years ago, had attempted to make the dreary, badly-lit reception area look welcoming. A spindly palm in a dusty blue glazed pot was shoved in the corner, a water dispenser with a snake of paper cups on the side was

wedged beside a shabby table, and a lone standard lamp's shade was skew-whiff.

A woman in a washed-out once-black shirt and lanky greasy hair with a blue stripe in the front lifted her eyes lazily as Lotta got to the desk. Lotta put a happy smile on and tried to ignore the grim surroundings. 'Hi! I'm here to see Mr Brown.'

Not a single thing moved on the woman's face, not a wrinkle, or a lip, or an eyelash. She clicked her mouse and didn't say anything. Lotta waited, and the woman still didn't speak. She waited a bit more and looked to the left. 'Umm.'

The woman held her hand up, commanding Lotta to stop talking. 'I don't work for Brown Brothers. They rent the place out the back.'

'Right. Okay, thanks. Any chance you could show me the way?'

'You'll just have to wait. I ain't in charge of any of that and what goes on in there. I don't get paid to show people anything.'

Lotta wanted to climb over the desk, give the hair a good rub, and tell the rude, miserable woman it needed a wash. 'Excellent. Thanks for your help then.' She beamed, injecting as much sarcastic cheeriness into her voice as she could. She shouldn't have wasted her time. The woman couldn't have cared less whether she was sarcastic or not.

Lotta made her way across the depressing area and sat on the edge of a grubby velour chair with her soggy feet together and hands in her lap. She resisted the urge to get out her phone and scroll through social media; she'd read on a job board that some companies' recruiting criteria involved surveying the candidate in the reception area and assessing their interaction with people and their ability to focus and not be distracted. Lotta looked around at the reception; a plastic sign detailed the different companies housed in the building. She was not quite in publishing by the looks of the industries on the board. There was a suspended ceiling company, a hospital bed rental

organisation, and a double glazing firm. Below that was the company Brown Brothers Digital Media Publishing.

She smiled wryly to herself and crossed her legs. There was no way any of these firms would be viewing her from CCTV. The place couldn't even get the mat at the front door or the basic politeness skills of the receptionist right. There wouldn't be an HR team viewing her from a camera, that she knew for a fact. By the looks of the place, she'd be very surprised if there was an HR team at all.

The receptionist got up, shuffled around the desk, unwrapped a piece of chewing gum, and shoved it in her mouth. Lotta's chin dropped as she watched the woman flick the chewing gum wrapper on the floor. She felt a whir of nausea go around her stomach. How was this her life? Ending up in a place like this. Just as she was thinking about leaving, a door on the far side opened, and a good-looking man with sandy brown hair strode across the room with his hand out. 'Lotta Button?'

Lotta stood up, taking in the man's warm smile, handsome face, and neatly pressed button-down shirt. Brown Brothers Digital Media Publishing was looking up. As they walked through the door and down a corridor, the man who had now introduced himself as Mark chatted, 'Come far, have you?'

Lotta cringed inside as she heard herself telling an out-and-out lie. Yes, she'd come far; she'd boarded the tube from outside the hotel early that morning and then walked from the station. But Mark Brown didn't want or need to know that. For the purposes of the job interview, Lotta had not been served notice on her flat, nor did she not have enough money for a cab or a bus fare, and she was certainly not residing in a hotel. For the purposes of this man's recruitment strategy, she still lived in her old flat, a mere hop, skip and a jump from the location. He led her into a small boardroom-type affair with a depressing assortment of mismatched chairs and a smoked glass boardroom table attempting to be professional. It and the room failed. Miserably.

The man pulled out his chair, and after a bit of small talk, he started to reel off a set of predetermined questions. Lotta

had heard them all before, primarily because they were the first result of an internet search of what to ask a potential job candidate in an interview. In her last few years and many interviews, she'd heard the same worn-out questions over and over again. What was more depressing than the questions was the way in which they were delivered, as if the interviewer had thought them up all by themselves. As if they were really super clever. The one good thing was that Lotta was more than well-rehearsed in her answers. Give her a predetermined question on her employment history, and she could play the game, trot out the spiel with a little bit of flare, and work the room quite well. In fact, she could answer the questions in her sleep and blindfold.

Just as she was chatting about her last job, a tall attractive woman with glossy blonde hair sculpted over her right shoulder bristled importantly into the room. There was a cross between a look down her nose and a smirk as she sat down. Lotta wasn't quite sure how to determine the look; she did know she didn't like it. The blonde hair was arranged over the shoulder in a curl. The woman half-smiled, half-smirked, introduced herself as the head of Human Resources, and then listened whilst holding a piece of paper in front of her, which Lotta assumed was her CV. Lotta continued to answer the predetermined questions. She was fluid, animated, friendly, and not at all phased by the blonde woman wearing the smirk or the handsome man with the sandy hair. Why would she be? She had answered the same questions in some form or another many times before. Handsome Mark seemed to be quite impressed, and the natural banter went back and forth until Lotta became aware that the woman was giving her daggers.

The woman suddenly looked up and interrupted Lotta mid-sentence. 'Your qualifications?'

'Yes.' Lotta smiled.

'You have two degrees?'

'I do, yes.' Lotta nodded and inclined her head to the piece of paper.

‘And a master’s?’ The voice was incredulous and disbelieving at the same time.

Lotta nodded. ‘Yes, I went straight from A levels to uni, yes.’

The woman bristled. ‘Of course, we check all credentials. Our HR department is in charge of background checks, education checks, criminal checks, and personal references. We run all education and qualifications through our special software.’

Lotta stopped herself from rolling her eyes to the back of her head. The job was a glorified admin job. The building was not pleasant. The boardroom had an abundance of smoked glass, and there was a plastic air plant in the corner. She also had to stop herself from laughing; the only thing that wasn’t true on her curriculum vitae was her love of hot yoga and her interest in coffee roasting. However, her job-hunting preparation was extensive enough to mean that she could hold a conversation on both. Plus, she could more than hold her own on the authenticity of her degrees, her references, and her criminal record.

The handsome man bristled a bit and butted in. ‘All good.’ He leant forward and put his hands on the table, each of them spread out in front of them. This time the woman was giving *him* daggers. ‘So, what makes you interested in this position?’

Lotta cringed inwardly. That old chestnut. She trotted out her usual response to the ridiculous question that no one ever wanted to answer. Did these two muppets really think that anyone was gagging to work for their company? The real reason she was interested in the company: the money seemed okay, and it was someone who’d actually replied to the hundreds of things she’d applied for. Mostly, she wanted the job because she really needed the money. Wasn’t that the bottom line of why most of the planet wanted a job? Did they really think she wanted to come to work every day to sit amongst smoked glass and plastic plants? That would be a no. A huge, massive one.



She smiled her sweetest smile and produced the words they no doubt were itching to hear. ‘You seem to be a really successful company, and I’m looking to work for leaders who I can learn from and who will inspire me to bring out the best that I can be.’

The woman’s body language adjusted slightly. ‘You can certainly learn a lot from us here. We’re at the top of our game.’

Lotta doubted that *very* much, but she put on her best I’m-impressed smile. ‘Yes, it seems as if you, umm’ – she searched for the right phrase – ‘have a lot to offer.’

The woman suddenly put the paper down on the smoked glass and pushed out of her chair. ‘Right, we’ll be in touch.’

Lotta was taken by surprise, but she quickly recovered, jumped up from her chair, and watched the departing blonde head walk out the door. The man held out his hand, she shook it, and then he too left in a bumbling rush, leaving her to make her own way out. Before really computing what had just happened, she found herself walking deflatedly back through the reception area. The receptionist with the streak of blue hair didn’t look up, and as Lotta pulled the heavy door, it got stuck in the doormat, and she half-tripped out the door. ‘Thank you so much,’ she called out sarcastically towards the reception desk and then under her breath, ‘Thanks for nothing. P.S. I hate your hair.’

Ten or so minutes later, she was walking along in her still-damp shoes on her way to meet her friend for coffee before another interview that afternoon. As she stood waiting to cross the road, she opened her email to check the location of the afternoon’s meeting and saw two emails at the top. The first one informed her that her afternoon interview was now cancelled because the position had been filled, and the second was from the woman with the blonde hair she’d just left, informing her that she’d been unsuccessful in her application.

As Lotta stood by the edge of the road, a black cab zoomed around the corner splashing through a backup of water in the gutter, and as the tyre went past, it sloshed dirty, grimy

London rainwater straight over Lotta's feet. She looked down as the green man went off and closed her eyes for a brief second, trying to control the urge to cry. A good day it was not.

Lotta made her way down the narrow cobbled road not far from the bustling tourist hub of Covent Garden. She could see the old pub tucked down on the corner. The pub had seen her, her cousin Liv, and her friend Timmy many a time over the years through thick and thin and everything else in between. Its curved front, hanging baskets overloaded with trailing ivy, and rounded edges welcomed her as if it was smiling at her from its spot down at the end of the road. Lotta's feet squelched in her shoes as she arrived and heaved her way through the heavy old door into the pub's dim interior.

Despite her low mood, she couldn't help but smile as she saw her friends sitting in the corner; Liv already with a double gin and tonic and Timmy, depending on whether or not he was on a health drive, was most probably having a vodka and soda water with lots of lime. Timmy spotted Lotta first and jumped up from his seat with a little squeal. He air-kissed her to the side of her left cheek and then did the same to the right. Putting his hands on the tops of her arms, he held her away from him and squinted. 'Lotta, as in hotter! Blimey, Lott, darling, what's going on with you?' He frowned. 'Are you wet?' He looked down at her feet and the floorboards where her shoes had left little dark patches. 'And you look blooming awful! What the hell have you been doing with yourself? I'll get you a drink.'

Liv jumped up too and leant over the table. 'How was your interview earlier, Lott? Looks like you need a drink.'

Lotta sighed and patted the back of her hair. ‘The interview was diabolical, and that was putting a positive spin on it. Do I really look that bad?’

Liv nodded seriously. ‘You really do.’ She frowned, squinted her bottom eyelids up, and made a funny face. ‘Grey. That’s it. You look grey. Like the weather, only worse.’ She patted the seat beside her. ‘Here, sit down.’

Lotta pulled off her coat and hung it on a little brass hook on the wall beside the table. Under the table, she eased her shoes from her heels and wiggled her toes. She put her middle fingers into the corners of her eyebrows, then ran them to her temples and sighed. ‘I thought the interview was going okay until the woman, who was clearly the boss’s wife, stalked in. She took one look at me, and it was all downhill from there. I don’t know why, but I clearly rattled her cage for some reason.’

‘What? Why?’ Liv asked.

‘Who knows? She was firing these nasty, loaded questions across the table, and I realised there was a lot going on in the room that wasn’t about me. It was awful, really. Not that she intimidated me, but it just brought it home how low I’ve sunk.’

‘You need that like a hole in the head,’ Liv acknowledged.

‘Tell me about it.’ Lotta sighed. ‘Then she started going on about my qualifications.’

‘Nooooo!’

‘Yep, like she didn’t believe that I had two degrees.’ Lotta rolled her eyes. ‘Clearly someone with my education wouldn’t be applying for a job like that.’ Lotta contemplated for a second. ‘Come to think of it, from that point of view, she’s probably right.’

‘Blame it on Dan and the app,’ Liv remarked, taking a huge gulp of her gin and tonic.

‘I can’t blame the fact that everything in my life is a disaster on Dan and the app.’

‘Yeah, you can. He took you out of the workforce, remember? Do I need to remind you that you invested all your savings in his app? And since then you’ve had a series of unfortunate happenings; a global health situation and then the subsequent recession. Oh, and let us not forget adding a war in Europe into the mix just for good measure.’

Lotta sighed dramatically. ‘Other people seemed to have handled it okay.’

‘Other people? Like who?’

‘Like you. I haven’t seen you lose your job or your highly successful husband. And the last time I checked, you still had a house and somewhere to live. Ditto Timmy and Giles.’

Liv dismissed Lotta’s point and changed the subject, but they both knew it was somewhat true. ‘What about the house down there on the coast? Has anything happened with that?’

‘I don’t really have a clue.’

‘What’s the go-to with it down there?’

Lotta made a little grimacing face and then fibbed by omission. ‘Yeah, it’s not too bad as far as I know.’

Timmy made his way back with the drinks and butted in on the conversation. ‘That train is impressive, right? Jason in the office was telling me he went down to the coast for the weekend with his kids. Apparently, it’s door-to-door in no time, and they actually have drivers, which is always a bonus when one is talking about trains. Is that what you’re finding?’

‘It’s certainly quick from what I’ve read, but it’s eye-wateringly expensive,’ Lotta stated. She also omitted to say that because of her finances, it didn’t really matter to her whether there was a high-speed and fancy train or not.

Timmy plonked her drink on the table and sat down. ‘Lott, you look awful! Honestly, you need to do something about it. Get a grip.’

‘You’ve told me that twice,’ Lotta stated.

Timmy continued with a confused look. ‘How many interviews do you have this afternoon? You’re going to have to

do something about your face. What's going on with your hair? I can get you into my place if you like.'

Lotta laughed. Timmy and his husband, Giles, were serious about their hair, and it cost them an arm and a leg. There was no way she was in the position to go and get her hair done in the same establishment as they did. 'Thanks, I don't think I'm that bad. How to make someone feel good!'

Timmy blinked and shook his head furiously. 'Sorry, sorry, but darling, what are friends for if they can't tell you the truth?'

Liv nodded gravely. 'The truth hurts, Lott, and we've been with each other through thick and thin. Your face is grey, your hair needs help, and your aura is off, yep, I'm with Timmy on this. You used to be so...' She trailed off and thought for a second. 'Polished. What's happened to you?'

Lotta agreed. 'You're right. I'll be fine once I get another job.'

'Getting back to the house. What about looking for a job down there on the coast?' Timmy suggested.

'Pah, do you think there are many publishing jobs down that way?' Lotta shot back with a swig of her drink.

'I don't think there are many publishing jobs anywhere these days,' Liv replied. She made a funny little gesture with her hand. 'I hate to say it, but I think that ship might have, umm, sailed.'

'True, that's the problem,' Lotta acknowledged.

Liv shifted forward in her seat. 'What about that bloke you met? He said something about there being loads of opportunities down that way. Remember?'

Lotta shook her head. 'No, what bloke?'

'At Fenella's wedding.'

Lotta squeezed her eyes together and wrinkled up her nose. 'Nope, I don't remember.'

‘At the bar when you left the table! You went out to get away from everyone and ended up sitting in the lobby bar chatting to someone over a drink.’

‘Ahh, yes! Nah, that was nothing. Some grumpy bloke who was having as much of a bad time as I was. No, it was just something you say,’ Lotta replied, dismissing it with a flick of her hand.

‘I know, but didn’t he say there were more jobs than you think down on the coast?’ Liv persisted. ‘I mean, James and I are doing okay. I know my job is coastal but, well, you know what I’m trying to say.’

‘He did say there were loads of opportunities, yeah. I’m not doing that, though. He’s some random man I don’t know from Adam who was trying to give me advice. What does he even know? It’s not like I’m going to get a publishing job in the back end of nowhere.’

‘Might be worth a shot. Why would you not look for a job down there when you have a house there?’ Timmy asked. ‘Plus, Liv’s not too far away now.’

Lotta widened her eyes. ‘I suppose so.’

Timmy leant forward. ‘I think you might as well give it a go. You’ve been applying for everything anyway, you never know. Just start applying for things down that way. With Liv down there, you’ll have someone fairly nearby too.’

‘True. I don’t know,’ Lotta replied, whilst in her head, she thought that there was no way she was moving to the old house she’d inherited a few years before. She wouldn’t even consider living in Pretty Beach. As soon as she was sorted with another job, she’d rent another flat and move on from this little hiccup without a backward glance.

‘It can’t hurt to send out a few digital applications,’ Liv reasoned. ‘That’s the beauty of technology. It won’t even cost you anything.’

‘I suppose you’re both right, but honestly, it would probably be a dead end living and working down there,’ Lotta stated.

Timmy nodded. ‘You might as well just give it a shot. You never know. What was the bloke like? I mean, do you think he knew what he was talking about?’

Lotta screwed up her face. She remembered he was grumpy but good-looking. She laughed as she recalled him saying he pretended to be mean. ‘He was funny in a grumpy sort of way.’

‘Name?’

‘Jack. That’s all I know.’

‘You should do what he recommended,’ Liv urged. ‘Sometimes new is a good idea, change is brilliant, Lott. Sometimes we need to do something a little bit different. We don’t want to always be eating the same dinner, living in the same house, going to the same pub...’

That was exactly what Lotta wanted. She wanted everything to be the same. She didn’t want to have to change her life. She sighed. ‘I suppose I haven’t got anything to lose.’ She thought about the mounting minimum balance payment on her credit card and the bills that would come in before she knew it. With the email from the company that morning informing her that she’d been unsuccessful and the interview that afternoon having been filled, she was not far away from desperate for any job, let alone one in publishing. She nodded. ‘I’ll do it later, maybe.’

‘Do it. You really do have nothing to lose.’

Lotta nodded and inhaled. Little did they know how true a statement that was.

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Lotta had spent the rest of the afternoon in a Starbucks, nursing a cup of coffee and seeing how long she could eke out the complimentary water and wi-fi. She’d applied for a multitude of jobs on various digital job boards, had scoured the publishing niche on LinkedIn, and had copied and pasted the same answers to questions where the recruiter thought they were being clever but really were asking the identical replica requests as everybody else did.



By the time she'd started to head to the train station, her feet had dried out, but now the weather had cleared up, it had turned clear and, therefore, cold. By the time she'd walked the half hour to the station, she was cold, frustrated, and feeling more and more down. As she stood at the traffic lights waiting to cross into the huge old Victorian station, she thought about her day; the awful interview in the morning, the cancelled one in the afternoon, and the slew of online applications. All of it so tiring and so time-consuming; like a full-time job looking for a full-time job.

As she was hustling along in the throng of other commuters through the entrance of the station, and just as she was stepping onto the main concourse, she absent-mindedly looked into the shops on her right. An American doughnut shop full of pink signs and bright lights, a cubby-hole chemist, and another Starbucks with a couple of leather sofas. She stopped right where she was as she looked in the Starbucks window, causing a woman to bump straight into the back of her. As the woman tutted and mumbled for her to look where she was going, Lotta moved closer to the window and peered in. Dan. Right there in front of her, standing at the counter with a woman beside him. He had his arm protectively in the small of her back, and she was looking up at him and laughing. They looked so perfect, so together, it was like she was looking at them in black and white.

Lotta turned and stared into the abyss of passing hats and coats in the snaking crowd of commuters, a stream of people going by as she digested what she'd just seen. It felt funny to see Dan, to see him with someone else. She'd always thought that they'd end up together, that she'd be sitting next to him when he was old, that she would be looking up at him in Starbucks. But that hadn't happened. Nothing like it. What had happened in the Dan and Lotta story was a great big fat old failure. His entrepreneurship had failed, and so had they. As the woman turned around, Lotta realised she recognised her. The ex-partner of one of Dan's work colleagues at the job he'd had before he'd decided to be an entrepreneur. Lotta nodded, not really surprised. She didn't even know how she felt. Mostly it was just sad. Sad that it had all gone wrong. Sad that

she'd been quite as dim as she had. Sad that Dan clearly hadn't loved her as she'd thought. Sad that he'd never put his hand on the small of *her* back like that. Sad all around, really.

With the stream of people hustling beside her on the left, she watched for a bit longer as Dan and the woman sat down on the same sofa. Dan fussed with their coffees and then put his hand on the woman's leg. He'd never put his hand on Lotta's leg like that. She turned away and stepped back into the stream of head-down commuters and forced herself not to look back. Lotta Button was trying her darndest to look the other way.



On the train, Lotta looked through her social media dashboard and pressed on the stories from a distant cousin who had been at the same wedding table the few months prior. The story captioned a picture from her cousin's teenage years with the text, *I really wish I still had that Prada sleeveless jumper*. Lotta grimaced, it irritated her on so many levels; firstly, the humblebrag, secondly, the fact that her cousin had a Prada jumper when she was a teenager, and thirdly, that her cousin was bothered enough to broadcast it. If there was a fourthly, it was that it annoyed Lotta that it annoyed her.

Closing her phone in disgust, she did her utmost not to think about what she had just seen in Starbucks, and her mind wandered to the interview that morning and the woman with the hair placed over her shoulder just so. She couldn't stop thinking about it. She would now spend days going over and over what a good comeback would have been as the woman had stared daggers at her over the crappy boardroom table and asked her about the authenticity of her degrees. She squeezed her eyes together, annoyed with herself.

*Why didn't I say this? Why didn't I do that? Why didn't I say something as they left the room? Why did I not tell them to poke their stupid job?*

Lotta's mind began to spiral, the movie reel of the morning's interview going over and over. She fixated on every little detail of how it had panned out. Seeing herself sitting there as the blonde head had walked out. Wishing she'd said something intelligent and sassy and sarcastic at the same time.

*Overthinking, Lotta. Overthinking. Overthinking. Overthinking.*

As the dirty old train made its way over the tracks and the vision of Dan with the hand in the small of the woman's back catapulted back into the front and centre of her brain, Lotta gritted her teeth together and pursed her lips. She'd be damned if she was going to cry.

Lotta woke up in the cheap hotel, not that it was actually cheap; it just felt like it. It was, in actual fact, especially expensive for a basic room with horrible scratchy sheets and thin off-white towels sporting complimentary bald patches. Grim at best, with a sprinkling of misery on top just for good measure. Its dull, scuffed walls and cheap blackout curtains were not one of the places she wanted to wake up in her life ever. But there it was; Lotta's reality right there in front of her gritty, sleepy, dust-filled eyes. The reality of her current situation and the holding-it-together juggling she'd been doing for way too long in the cold light of another morning was zero fun.

She checked the time on her phone, swung her legs out of bed, and not wanting to put her feet or any part of her body on the manky carpet, shuffled around for her slippers. It was not the sort of room that came with white towelling slippers wrapped in plastic sitting neatly under a complimentary plush bathrobe tied expertly by its belt in the middle. Her slippers were unquestionably old and her own. It was the type of room where, instead of hand-milled soaps wrapped in paper by the sink and toothbrushes in cardboard boxes, industrial-sized multi-purpose body wash and conditioner were bolted to the grubby tiled walls. There were stains on the carpet, a saggy beige chair, and a built-in desk with a television screwed to the table.

Lotta sighed as she peered into the not-quite-clean bathroom mirror. The room and her situation gave her a soul-sick feeling. The same one she'd had when Dan had admitted

the app had failed. At around the same time, he had said they were a failure too. It was like her soul was not well. It did not feel nice. Squinting into the mirror, Lotta shook her head. What had happened to the Lotta she'd always known? The one who scrubbed up quite nicely. The one who could rock a cheeky Middleton blow-dry, slap on a bit of foundation, pull on a nice dress, and go, go, go. The one who buzzed along, zipping over the Albert Bridge in the morning with a coffee in her hand and an I-work-in-publishing spring in her step. Whoever was looking back at her in the stained mirror was not that same woman. This one was grey in face and dull in aura, and it had nothing to do with the London weather outside the cheap hotel.

As she pumped the multi-purpose wash onto a flannel and scrubbed it over her face and thought about the drab, cold new year, her mind suddenly flashed back to when she'd first met Dan. Oh, how divine it had been. They'd been all happy and fresh and in that new relationship glow, and he'd surprised her with a post-Christmas jaunt to the sun. She'd arrived back at her publishing job to properly start the year with a healthy radiance on her face, a jaunty zip about her, and all sorts of optimistic feels about how her life was going to pan out. The same life that had ever so slowly slid down the drain along with the real-life London rain.

She nodded as she rinsed the greying flannel under the tap and slid it over her face. *No worries, she'd be fine.* She'd stay in the grotty hotel until she'd found a new job, found a new flat, and picked up her life. People got made redundant, dumped by their partners, and evicted from their flats *all* the time. All she had to do was be strong, be brave, pull on her big knickers, put one foot in front of the other, and soldier on. Everything would look up. It had to.

Twenty minutes later, she was out of the shower, hair blasted and scooped up into a ponytail, the front curled around a brush to frame her face. An LK Bennett dress she'd found in a charity shop and hand-washed in the hotel sink didn't look half bad, her interview heels were tucked in her bag alongside her Kindle, and her phone was fully charged. Winning for a day of pounding the pavements and job-hunting ahead.

Perching on the grotty-looking rusty-red cover folded up on the end of the bed, she rechecked her hotel booking email. With only two days left, she logged onto the booking portal and entered her dates. She watched the little animated plane fly across the screen a few times and then frowned as the app informed her that not only were ninety per cent of rooms in London booked, but also that there were only two rooms in the hotel left. She wanted to cry when she saw the room rate; overnight, it seemed it had gone from just about affordable to extortionate. She couldn't believe it, and assuming it must be an error, put her phone in her pocket, grabbed her bag and the room key, and made her way down in the seen-better-days lift.

She strolled over the reception area, by far the nicest part of the hotel; the part that was front and centre in the photos on the booking app and the one in the images with the attractive, well-groomed receptionist with the beaming smile. The receptionist in situ hadn't received the memo on the beaming smile or grooming, but she was relatively friendly, so there was that. It was also a bonus that there wasn't a four-deep queue snaking away from the desk, as had been the case every other time Lotta had gone past. She walked over and started with a big smile. 'Morning. I was just on the app, and I think there must be an error with it.'

'Morning. Oh, okay.' There was a tap tapping on a keyboard. 'Nothing I can see that's wrong. What were you after?'

'I was looking at extending my stay for a week or so if I can.'

'Right. So when are you with us until?'

'Another couple of days. I wanted to extend for another week.' Lotta hoped that would be enough to see her out of her conundrum. By then, surely something would have come up.

Tap, tap, tap went the keyboard and then a look up through eyelashes and a small, weak smile. 'Nothing that I can see is wrong here, no. We only have two rooms left for next week, though.'

'Oh. So, that price is the correct price, is it?'

The woman frowned as if Lotta was asking a ridiculous question which, in light of the evidence, she probably was. 'Yes, that's right.' She raised her eyebrows. 'I suppose that's very high for this time of year.'

'It's more than double what I've paid per night so far, much more, in fact.'

'It is. Would you like me to reserve it for you?'

Lotta thought about her credit card balance, her lack of a job, her bank account, and her luckless job hunting. 'Umm, no, I think I'll have to look around for somewhere else.'

There was another tapping. 'By the looks of this, you won't have much luck anywhere in central London at the moment. In actual fact, the whole of London.'

Lotta frowned. 'I can't understand it. It's not like it's peak time, is it? There aren't any big sporting events on like Wimbledon or the Grand Prix. Is there something I don't know about?'

The woman lowered her voice to not much more than a whisper. 'It's the other guests.'

Lotta wrinkled up her nose in confusion. 'Sorry, what do you mean?'

'Sorry, nothing. It's just a lot of occupancy rates up and down the country are full at the moment.'

Lotta had no idea what she was talking about. She did know that the high price being correct wasn't what she wanted to hear. She nodded and sighed, and the woman just sort of looked at her. Lotta sighed again. 'Okay, well thanks anyway. Thanks for looking for me.'

'No worries.' The woman put her receptionist voice back on. 'Have a nice day. Hope the rain holds off for you.'

Lotta walked away with a sinking feeling. The way things were going, the weather and the impending rain really were the last of her worries.



Later that day, all the positive thoughts in the world couldn't brighten Lotta's mood as she gathered her things from the coffee shop and stepped out onto the pavement. She'd had a meeting cancelled by an old boss she'd hoped might be a lead into a new job. She'd also had another interview for another dead-end job which advertised itself as a digital publishing company but which was actually a scam to get aspiring authors to part with their hard-earned cash for a course in self-publishing. On top of those two redundant wastes of her time, the lunch with an old colleague, which she'd paid for in the hope that she might know about a job, had actually come with the news that yet another small established company was folding. Things were not looking up. The climb to the top of the career hill in front of her was steep.

Lotta scooted along the pavement on her way to meet her cousin Liv. By the time she got to the pub, she was tired, damp, and over it. Liv was sitting up at the bar chatting with the barman when Lotta arrived.

'Hey. How are you? Blimey, you need a drink by the looks of it,' Liv noted. 'Did you get caught in that downpour?'

Lotta shrugged her coat off and plonked herself down. 'No, I'm just generally bedraggled and not an actual alcoholic drink, thanks. No mid-week drinking for me at the moment.'

Liv raised her eyebrows. 'You sure?'

Lotta contemplated for a quick second. 'I have had an awful day. I'll have one if you insist.'

Liv ordered Lotta a white wine and when it arrived at the bar, Lotta took a tiny sip. 'Thank you.'

'No luck with the interviews?'

'Nothing. I'm beginning to think I will never get another job. It's soul-destroying.'

'It's a funny time of year to be job hunting,' Liv stated.



‘You’ve just got another job,’ Lotta said. ‘It doesn’t seem to have affected you.’

‘True, but marine biology is its own strange little niche. It works differently to everything and everyone else.’

‘Hmm. Publishing doesn’t seem to be working at all. That lunch with Kelly, you know, my old colleague from Hartman Porter. She’s just lost her job along with the rest of her department. She said things are looking bleak for everyone there. She’s thinking about retraining. She fancies getting a job with an airline.’

‘Oh, that doesn’t sound good.’

‘I know.’ Lotta sighed. ‘I’m going to have to find another hotel too. The one I’m in is really expensive.’

Liv put her hand on Lotta’s arm. ‘Lott, I know you don’t want to hear this, but why don’t you go down to the house? That would help you out. Just go down there for a bit or come and stay with me. I’ve offered enough times.’

‘We’ve been through this.’ Lotta sighed. ‘I’m not putting on you and James.’

‘A lot of people would give their right arm for that house in Pretty Beach.’

‘You’ve told me that. More than once.’

‘What’s stopping you?’ Liv asked, sounding exasperated.

Lotta paused for a minute. ‘I just think if I go down there I will never, ever crawl my way back, you know? It’s like a one-way street I don’t want to even enter.’

‘I think things have changed. Newport Reef is amazing. I’m loving it, and so is James. Plus, it’s so quick to get up here if I need to. It would be great for you to be down that way. We would still be near each other – it’s a few stops on the ferry or the fast train from Pretty Beach. I think you’d love it once you’d settled in. Honestly.’

‘Hmm. I don’t think the same way. Sorry, Liv.’

‘Why don’t you just try it?’ Liv reasoned.

‘I don’t know is my honest answer to that.’

‘Are you apprehensive about the house or something?’

Lotta flicked her hand in front of her in dismissal. ‘No, not at all. It’s just that my life is here. At least, I thought it was, I suppose.’

‘You mean your life with Dan was here. Do you think you might be clinging onto that?’

‘There is some of that.’ Lotta didn’t want to admit to anyone, least of all to herself, how true that was. She’d tried to bury it, shove it down as deep as she could.

‘The way I look at it, you don’t have anything to lose. You can zip up on the train if you need to. Lots of jobs are work from home some of the week nowadays, anyway. The world has changed.’

‘True.’

‘What’s the go-to with the house? When did you last go there?’

‘I don’t really know. I can’t remember when I last went. I’ve only been there really to do the legal stuff. I had the utilities set up, etcetera, and left it at that. The solicitor did most of it.’

‘Surely going down there would be better than pouring money into a hotel or short-term let, wouldn’t it?’

‘Pah! Short-term let! I couldn’t even get one if I tried. They’re like gold dust, which is how I ended up in that diabolical excuse for a hotel in the first place.’

‘True. That’s my point then...’

‘If only the legal stuff hadn’t stipulated that the house has to stay in the family, I’d just sell it, to be honest. All it’s done so far is cost me money. Money I certainly don’t have.’

Liv wasn’t going to let it go. ‘You could go down there and come up daily if you need to. Or look for a job down there or, I dunno, try and do something else. You could retrain like Kelly said she’s going to.’

‘And do what? I’m qualified for nothing. I have too many degrees and not enough of anything else. Who would have thought it would hold me back.’

‘Let’s see.’ Liv drummed her fingers on the bar. ‘What are you good at?’

*Failing*, went through Lotta’s head. ‘Hmm.’

‘What about your reading?’

Lotta screwed up her nose. ‘What about it?’

‘How about something to do with that? There are all these ways to make money online nowadays.’

‘Publishing is something to do with that. That’s my whole point.’

‘What about if you put yourself out there as a freelance beta reader or something? You read enough blimming books. Why not do it for money?’

Lotta nodded and took a sip of her wine. ‘If only. No one would pay for that.’

‘What about your social media stuff? You have loads of followers on your reading account.’

‘There’s no money in that. It’s just a hobby.’

Liv shook her head. ‘You’d be surprised.’

‘Liv, I need a *proper* job with a *proper* salary that will pay my *proper* rent. I just need to get back on the horse, and then I’ll be fine.’

Liv patted her on the arm. ‘I know, but right now, you don’t exactly have many options. Cut your losses, get on that train to Pretty Beach and be done with it. I’ll be just up the road, you won’t have to pay any rent to anyone or hotel fees or anything. It’s a no-brainer. I really think you should give it a go.’

Lotta nodded. It did make sense, she could see that. ‘I’ll think about it. I suppose you do have a point. I could do it until I got on my feet again, I guess.’ Staring at Liv, Lotta considered that perhaps she should take Liv’s advice. Liv was

the type of person who, in a life conundrum or problem, got on with the job in hand. Liv would analyse things and do practical things to figure something out; she'd clean out the inside of her kitchen cupboards or go on a long, purposeful walk until she came up with an answer. Lotta was more of a jumble-it-over-in-her-head, drink herself to oblivion and end up in the golden arches full of regret kind of person. Liv was always sensible and made good decisions. Maybe Lotta should be listening to her.

Liv raised her eyebrows. 'You could live there until something comes up and take a local job if you have to tide you over. You never know, you might actually like it. You could move down there, forget about Dan, forget about the app, and never look back.'

Lotta doubted that very much, but maybe she could give it a go. She'd see how the rest of the week went, and then she'd reevaluate. At worst, at least she now had a plan.

The end of the week had come and gone, and the only thing in Lotta's situation that had changed was the nightly hotel room tariff. She'd decided that the worst had come to the worst and that she needed to accept the reality of her situation. She'd evaluated by the dire state of her bank balance that she was no longer able to afford the hotel and so, she was, therefore, on her way to Pretty Beach. She looked at her petrol tank with her heart in her mouth. It told her that her petrol levels were dangerously low. What had happened to the Lotta who had always liked the little marker on her petrol gauge to be at least on three-quarters of a tank? Who was this woman living on the edge with a sniff of petrol left at the bottom of the gauge? The woman who had only just arrived at her destination on a wing and a prayer. Lotta knew precisely what had happened to that Lotta. His name was Dan, and his ridiculous app.

With sunshine popping in and out of thick white clouds, Lotta slowly left the coast road behind as she arrived in Pretty Beach. The boxes, rammed full of her books taking up the whole back of the car, slid around as she navigated her way through the small, narrow, and sometimes cobbled streets. High up on the cliffs, the bright white Pretty Beach lighthouse gazed down from above, and with her window open, she leaned out and could smell the salty scents of the sea gushing through the window into her car.

Once she was on the far side of the town itself, she indicated left and stopped for a second by the water, looking out over what looked like a café with a stripy beach hut at the

entrance and a lit-up lifebuoy on the front door. A harbour was bustling with activity as a gathering of small fishing boats bobbed around in the water, some with their sails tied up in the wind, their hulls a watercolour mix of pinks, blues, and sea greens. High above, pastel bunting snapped and flapped in the breeze as rigging clinked and knocked beside a gaggle of chatting fishermen in yellow oilskins huddled together by their boats. A faint far-off sound somewhere indicated a ferry horn – it floated over the sea air, bringing with it a thick salty aroma and a taste of coastal life. The squawk of a seagull harked from above, and Lotta felt hungry at the unmistakable smell of coastal fish and chips.

Lotta bristled at the cold winter air, and with her nose jutting out of the car window, she listened to the sounds of the harbour; the clanging of rigging, the creaking of wood, snippets of conversation drifting on the air, the slap of water against boat timber, the sloshing of waves, in out, in out, onto the wharf.

As she started up the car again to make her way to the house, she listened to the directions coming via her phone and followed the swerve in the road to the right until all of a sudden, she had arrived. There was the old house sitting directly in front of her. The voice coming from the speakers told her she had arrived at her destination, and she clicked the stop button on her dashboard. Putting on the brake, she gripped the steering wheel, angled her head to the right, and peered up at the house. The chimney stacks with their chimney pots were nice, the thatched roof of the neighbouring house was even nicer, and the old brick wall butted up to the pavement wasn't bad either. Things were not quite as dreadful as they had seemed when she'd driven her little car out of London with her heart in her mouth, heading away from her old life.

As she stood in the driveway peering at the old house, she looked up at the sign going over the front door.

*Pretty Beach to the Breakers.*

What did that even mean? She vaguely remembered it was something to do with surfing or waves or something like that.

There had been something about it in the blue envelope she'd been given when she'd first inherited the house. Where even were the breakers? She'd have to find out.

She looked up at the house straddling its corner plot on the road. The front of the building was original vintage Victorian brick; the facing side was painted pure brilliant white and looked over a courtyard garden where square planters of not very happy-looking shrubs rustled in the breeze. On either side of the front door, lanterns creaked back and forth in the wind, and a couple of hanging baskets had seen better days.

As Lotta stood there taking it all in, the building appeared shabby and somehow sad, as if it had been coated in decades of wind and rain and left for dead. A lightbulb in a porch light, she knew was on a timer, let off a sad little forlorn orange glow, and the old planters looked as if it had been a very long time since anyone had shown them any care. With her hands on her hips staring up at the house, all sorts went through Lotta's brain as in the distance she again heard the ferry horn, an old door knocker clanked, the wind ruffled the few remaining leaves on the shrubs, the lanterns creaked, and as she took a step towards the front steps white stones crunched underfoot.

She continued to look up at the old house, wondering at the same time what she was going to find inside. Above her, two huge chimney stacks with three little pots on top of each, punctured an overcast sky, and a door in the centre of the house, a faded, dull, sad-looking once bottle-green, didn't look too concerned whether it was going to open or not. Six sash windows, an old, wobbly tiled roof, and a side gate in the walled garden to the left. A faded blue sign on the right side of the old wall announced 'Strawberry Corner.'

Lotta stood with her hands on her hips, her head up, and squinted. It really could be a nice house for someone who had a hell of a lot more money than she did to spend on renovating it. She looked around at the quiet junction in the road with the sea in the distance. Not a car in sight, nor a person, for that matter. It was very quiet with not a lot going on, and a far cry from her buzzy London publishing life. The same life which

was stuck in the past and right at that moment was but a figment of her imagination.

She continued to stare at the house for a good few minutes and was shocked when a woman further down the road stepped off the pavement to cross over with a pram and cheerily waved her hand in greeting as she strolled by. Lotta stopped herself from turning around to look behind her and smiled, lifting her chin in greeting.

Eventually, she took the keys with their sweet little red love heart keyring from her jeans pocket, stepped up the two steps to the front door, put the key in the lock, and turned it to the right. She'd barely even seen the inside of the house in daylight. The first day she'd arrived when she'd first inherited it, she'd parked on the drive and gone in via the conservatory door, sorted out the things she'd had to address, and left the same day.

A long, dark entrance hallway with dull, red carpet greeted her. She gingerly turned a brass knob on a huge old door to the left and opened it to a sitting room devoid of anything save a deep-pile brown swirly carpet complete with a dusty layer of stains and threadbare in places. There was a huge old sash window out to the front, an inglenook fireplace with a wood-burning stove and across the middle of the high ceiling, three pathetically small plastic-layered, once-white pendant lights. Dust danced in a beam of sunlight coming in through the window, particles sparkling and shimmering in the air. A grotty, depressing cheesy smell rose from the floor, amalgamating with the stale, musty smell of age and the odour of disuse. Her movements seemed to somehow bounce and echo off the grubby old walls, and through the brown carpet underfoot, there was a soft groaning of timber floorboards as she shifted her weight.

Lotta cupped her cuff over her mouth and nose and stopped dead in her tracks in the middle of the carpet as she went towards the window. She could hear scratching. She squinted and listened. It sounded as if it was coming from the fireplace. She bent down and tried to peer into the fireplace and heard the scratching again. Grimacing that there was



clearly something in the chimney, she decided she would rather not know, raced to the door, and slammed it shut behind her. Dust flew from every orifice with the slam of the door. She coughed and pressed her cuff closer so that it covered her nose and mouth.

On the other side of the hallway, a similar room greeted her. Who knows what it might have been used for, but it wasn't pleasant. A green-blue carpet from the eighties inlaid with giant dusky pink flowers, a small plastic pendant light hanging sadly from the centre of the ceiling, another fireplace with a wood burning stove. On either side of the fireplace, over the window, and in a nook in the outer wall, dark timber shelving ran from left to right. The timber threw dark, scary shadows across the room, and the same putrid cheese smell seeped up and out from what felt like every little space in the room. High up on the wall over the fireplace, almost at the ceiling, a brass oblong reading lamp hung with its wires protruding from behind, and to the right of the window a lone, tall, beige plastic bin was placed clearly to do something about a leak.

Lotta winced and tried to imagine the room with some work and an update. She tried to envisage the floorboards with a dark stain like the ones she'd had in her flat. Her lovely, comfy, feather-filled sofa with layers of her cushions and snuggling up with a book. You had to have a lot of imagination for the room that was facing her; it was dingy and dark, but mostly it was the revolting cheesy mildew, but at the same time stale smell that infiltrated everything, that made her feel despondent. Made her want to be sick.

Walking back out and along the hallway, Lotta looked up the stairs towards the first floor, unsure what she would find. She checked the battery on her phone, and with the old murky pillar box red carpet underfoot, she made her way up the spiral staircase in the centre of the house. With her hand brushing the beautifully carved old bannister, she sighed as the treads turned and each of her steps resulted in an agonising creak. From a circular glass skylight above, light attempted to flood through dirty glass and an old light fitting with a bare lightbulb hung from the ceiling. The stairs trembled and whined as if

they were warning her not to venture any further, and as she got to the top step, the old threadbare carpet slipped underfoot; she briefly lost her footing, and grabbed onto the turned wood bannister for dear life.

The red carpet veered off to the left, and a few more steps took her up to the right; a dusky dirty mauve short pile carpet covered everything as far as the eye could see. In the main room, double-aspect windows at least flooded the dreary place with light. An en-suite bathroom made Lotta grimace, and like she had downstairs, she cupped her hand over her mouth and nose to alleviate some of the depressing smell.

She crossed the drab carpet where dirty indents showed where furniture must have once lived, as dust billowed up into the room. As had happened downstairs, the floorboards underneath the carpet groaned in protest as she made her way to the far wall, stood by the window, and looked out to where far-reaching views of the sea and the horizon met her eye. She shivered as she got closer to the window, the cold stale air washing over her and sending goosebumps up and down her arms. An amalgamation of sea greens, blues, and coastal greys looked back at her like a painting framed by the glass window panes. Lotta nodded. The rest of the place was awful, but the view; she couldn't argue with that.

She carefully made her way back down the turned staircase, picking her way over the red carpet and back through the hallway. Then through to a kitchen with an open-plan breakfast room like a Tardis with high ceilings, an alcove area, a fireplace on the far right wall, and French doors out to what looked like a rotten deck. She gazed outside where a jumble of flower pots had fallen onto their sides, and a timber parasol had blown over and landed squat on top of a table.

On the left-hand side of the kitchen, a line of French windows looked out over the neighbours' back gardens with glimpses of the sea peeking out here and there. Lotta gingerly opened a door off the kitchen, lowered her head to go under a beam, and stepped down into a utility room. Through there, she arrived at a bathroom, where a dusty old clawfoot bath sat in the corner, a pedestal sink was hanging on the wall for dear

life, and an old copper shower head dropped its water directly onto a tiled floor. Every conceivable bit of space was covered with old toiletries, dirty towels, and an assortment of cleaning materials whose contents must never have seen the light of day.

Lotta sighed, turned a tap, turned it back the other way and walked back out to the kitchen. The place was disgusting. Everything stunk of a strange putrid cheesy mould, and she'd never in her life seen as many stainless steel spotlights. But there was something about the place other than the smell, and as she stood whirling around, her eyes flicking from one thing to the next, there was one thing that Lotta Button knew for sure – the old house did have some potential. In fact, it had the potential to be stunning. She stood taking it all in. Did it also have the potential to turn around her life? That was a question no one could answer, least of all her.

Crossing the breakfast room, she stepped out into the conservatory, where a gnarly old grapevine snaked its way across the walls. Two sets of French doors sat on opposite sides. She walked across, turned a handle, and ventured out into the enclosed courtyard she'd seen from the road. The whole area was circled by tall Victorian brick walls, and what looked like some kind of fruit tree was nestled in the corner. A shed was wedged in on the top right, half-moon terracotta pots with dead plants were attached to the walls, and weeds emerged from broken old patio pavers. Pretty, like its namesake Pretty Beach, it was most definitely not.

She walked over to the other side, where a discarded, faded, plastic water collection tank lay on its side, and ivy ran wild up and over, hiding a gate tucked into the side of the far wall. Moss, dead leaves, and the odd bit of rubbish gathered in the corners of the patio, and a set of folded-up timber chairs looked ready to topple. Lotta raised her eyebrows; it was unloved, overgrown, and a mess, but there was something almost magical about the courtyard. She could hear the waves and smell the sea but not see much outside the four walls at all. Like a secret garden surrounded by the sea.

Walking back through the conservatory, she crossed over a damp, mouldy spot on the floor and opened the other set of French doors leading out into the main garden. As she stepped out to her right, a huge overgrown rosemary bush filled the air with its scent, two plastic watering cans, one orange and one green, lay on their side on the old pavers underfoot. Another green plastic water collecting tank hugged the wall of the house, and a wicker hanging basket full of weeds hung from the left. The old walled garden sloped away at the back with views to the sea, a neighbouring house sat down at the far right, and another side access gate was tucked in on the side. Patches of dead grass scattered the very overgrown lawn, and a bank of hydrangeas, some with their faded pink-brown flower heads clinging on for dear life lined the right.

At the back, a flagstone path ran through the centre of what looked like old fruit cages. Weeds, shrubs, ivy and brambles were every way she turned. She stepped back and peered up at the side elevation of the house with the wind from the sea in her hair. The old tiled roof sloped up to the right, the huge chimney stacks puncturing the skyline, French doors to the dining room looked out over the terrace area, and the lean-to conservatory perched on the left.

Next, she waded through knee-high weeds with brambles brushing her legs further to the bottom of the garden. A tiny boathouse, butted up to a tatty clad building, covered in peeling green paint and overgrown with ivy, was tucked in by the wall adjacent to double-width timber gates. Leaning precariously against the wall, an old clinker rowing boat wore a hole in its bottom, and a tall white flagpole with fraying ropes hadn't seen a flag of any sort for a very long time.

With the cold sea air wafting around the garden and her arms folded, Lotta stood for a long time just staring at the house; she wondered who might have lived there, thought about her distant family who might or might not have spent long summer days in the garden, pondered why it had fallen out of favour, and mused when it was built.

She turned around, still with her arms folded, and looked out to sea. The view was amazing, the blues, greys, and greens

seemingly endless and filling her eyeballs with their watery hues. Lotta stared out past the old, crumbling wall and had to admit, there were much worse things in life to have inherited. Maybe she would, after all, be okay.

Lotta woke up in Pretty Beach to the Breakers to the sound of the sea in the distance and the windows in the summer room rattling in the wind. Making herself a cup of tea using up the last of a tiny carton of UHT milk, she popped on her slippers and a slouchy cream beanie, grabbed a blanket, opened the glass French doors in the conservatory, and sat looking out into the distance overlooking the sea. Little pops of winter sunlight emerged from a cloudy sky landing on the ocean, making the far-off water glisten in tiny little sparkles. As she sat with her hands cupped around her tea, she could just make out Pretty Beach lighthouse in the distance. Something about it all was quite nice, she had to admit. Something about it made her relax. Pretty Beach to the Breakers wasn't all bad.

After finishing her tea and a stale crumpet, she decided she'd have to brave the bathroom. With a broken boiler and only ice-cold water at her disposal, since she'd arrived she'd avoided the bathroom as much as she could apart from running in for a quick wee and a wash of her hands. Now, though, she could no longer put off the inevitable. After pulling the lever on the old copper shower and putting her hand under the water, she winced, gave the bath a good spray and scrub, and spent what felt like ages scooting back and forth from the bathroom to the kettle on the floor in the kitchen. She'd filled and refilled the kettle, and run in and out at least ten times, when she decided that the pathetic amount of water in the bottom of the cream bath, though not much above tepid, would have to do. She would brave it. After stripping off, stepping in,

shivering, and washing her hair by way of pouring water over her head via a mug, by the time Lotta emerged from the bathtub, she was not a happy bunny.

She looked at her face in the old mirror with its worn antique frame and desilvering. What her friends had said at the pub had been correct. Her hair was a mess; the roots an inch long, the bottom needing a cut. Her usually fairly good skin looked dull, and her nails were well overdue for a manicure. Lotta laughed to herself. There weren't many trips to a nail bar in her near future. Ditto a hairdresser. That she knew without having to consult her non-existent diary.

She scraped her hair up into a ponytail, slapped on some moisturiser, and pulled on a multitude of layers of her warmest clothes. Ten or so minutes later, in a gigantic roll-neck jumper, a hat, scarf, and trainers, she was walking down the road heading for a café with a pile of books in her book bag and her Kindle fully charged and ready to go. She might be jobless, poor, and worried, but, as there always had been in Lotta's life, there were the pages of a book to save her from the reality of her day-to-day.

Not more than a few minutes later, Lotta was on the beach. Bending down, she whipped off her trainers and felt the cold sand squelch between her toes. Taking in big lungfuls of sea air, she closed her eyes; it felt almost sweet in its purity. The air was clear and somehow cut right through her lungs. So different to the dirty townie air she was used to, the one that came with over-priced cappuccinos, publishing in Bloomsbury, and walks in royal parks. The same air she'd thought she'd loved so much. As she stood looking around the coastal blues and sea greens colouring everything as far as the eye could see, she had to admit, the beach was, as the name suggested, *very* pretty.

Before she knew it, she'd walked all the way along the beach, gazing up at the lighthouse in the distance and strolled around the headland. She passed an old couple in wellies trudging along the shoreline, a dog chasing after the waves, a couple of thick-skinned surfers zipped up tightly to their necks in black wetsuits and swimming hats wading out of the sea,

and a couple sitting with a flask on a picnic rug in hats and scarves watched as three children ran with their arms wide down to the water.

Lotta walked further and further away from the main part of Pretty Beach, keeping the massive white lighthouse in her vision, stomping in and out of the sand dunes with the cold wind biting against her hat and the conundrum of what she was going to do about her finances jumbling through her head. As she pounded along, it was cool on the beach, the sun when it zapped through the clouds bright, the coastal smell clean and fresh. Eventually, the winter sun seeped through her layers of clothes, and as she strolled along, she pulled off her scarf, stuffing it in her bag with her books and slipped on her sunglasses.

Though it felt quite strange to her townie's eyes, Lotta couldn't quite get enough of the sea air, the colours, and the view. As the waves lapped onto the sand, her eyes followed a long line of seaweed, flotsam and jetsam and shells off into the distance, and slowly but surely her money worries began to slightly slip away.

She then stood with her feet in the shallows of the freezing cold water and looked out to the horizon, inhaling huge gulps of air and holding her head up to the sky. She wasn't sure if she was imagining it, but the beach seemed to be doing something to her, pulling her away from the intricacies and stresses of her old life. The sound of the waves and the fresh air almost felt as if they were speaking to her soul. Here on the beach, Dan and his app didn't seem quite as acrid. There was not much at all to listen to apart from a seaside calm; no screeching city sirens, no people bustling past shouting busily into their phones, no self-important men droning on about the ins and outs of their apps. None of that. All Lotta could hear were the rolling waves where they kissed the shoreline, a couple of lone seagulls soaring high up in the sky above her, and the wind whistling in her ears. Lotta could feel the vibrations of the tumbling waves through her body, and the blues and greens of the sea stretching out in front of her as far as the eye could see. Everything seemed strange, yet familiar at the same time.



As she strolled along, she bent down and examined things entwined with the thick green seaweed that had washed up on the beach and an array of tangled bits and pieces coming in from the sea – a pretty white shell rolling along in the tide, a tiny piece of clear sea glass catching the dull light, and a faded, weathered piece of driftwood laying still in the sand. Each special little piece of the coast tumbled and weathered and shaped by the continuous tumbling over and over by the waves. Lotta crouched down on the sand, picked up a delicate white shell, examined its ever-so-pale inner, and admiring its smooth surface and intricate detailing, placed it neatly in the little pocket of her book bag. Perhaps here, life wasn't all that bad after all.

A couple of dog walkers raised their eyebrows in greeting as they went past, and as she made her way up the beach, she stopped to read a chalkboard sign outside what looked like some kind of sailing club. The sign told her all about the intricacies of a Pretty Beach Buttie. This local delicacy was made with the best free-range eggs, locally smoked bacon, someone called Holly's bakery rolls, and Marnie's coffee. Lotta frowned, reading the notification underneath informing anyone who happened to be passing that the butties were for Locals Only. Lotta rolled her eyes. She wasn't sure she would ever be one of those. Right at that moment, despite the attractiveness of the coast, the prettiness of the beach, and the magnificence of the lighthouse, she hoped not.

Once she'd got her bearings via her phone, she made her way back towards the main road with the shops. As she passed huge old Victorian houses, their gardens backing onto the beach, their boat houses with ramps going down to the sea, and the trappings of their coastal life on show, Lotta wrinkled up her nose and examined what was passing her eyes. She'd expected a grotty, rundown backwater fishing town with not a lot going on. From the scene staring back at her, she was horribly, embarrassingly wrong. Everything, actually, seemed more than nice. And not only that; what greeted her in all its coastal glory made her silly, tiny, flat with its adjacent rumble of the train, dirty pavements, and hardly room to swing a cat, look a bit sick.

By the time Lotta had got to the main road, she was starting to like the look of Pretty Beach. She let her eyes linger on a row of shops decorated in pretty pale blues, pinks, navy and whites, and gazed up at the strings of fairy lights and pastel bunting crisscrossing from either side of the road above her head.

What she had seen so far about the little coastal town had been surprising. Everywhere she had wandered had been beautiful, quaint, and peaceful, but somehow simultaneously, in its own unique way, brimming with life. It had been the same every which way she had turned – picturesque, quiet, and charming, with a buzzy feeling going on just underneath. The walk in the fresh sea air with the windswept cliffs in the distance had allowed her to take a break from the hustle and bustle of the reality of what had been happening in her life. Even though the same thoughts and worries lingered at the back of her head, exploring the beachside town had done something she couldn't quite pinpoint to slow down all the things that were going on in her mind. Exploring Pretty Beach had opened something or, in fact, closed something possibly – something she couldn't quite put her finger on – but she knew it felt more than good. And right at that point in time, she was more than grateful for that.

The small man with his small van had been precariously perched on the side of the road outside the front of Pretty Beach to the Breakers for a few hours. Lotta had been flabbergasted at his quote to move her stuff from her storage unit when she had spoken to him on the phone, and he had been equally flabbergasted by her vast collection of books. When he'd arrived though, with a young lad in tow, and he'd opened up the back of the van, she'd swallowed; he had been correct, there were a lot more boxes of books than she'd remembered.

After letting him in and assisting in bringing in box after box, she scurried around the house shoving cardboard from one area to another and questioned whether or not the ordeal would ever come to an end. She'd had to agree with him that she had a lot of books as she helped to pile up boxes, and she rapidly acknowledged, as did he, that his estimate had been nowhere near enough for the job at hand. Both of them had quickly realised that his quote had been inadequate.

Now he was long gone, and she didn't know if things were good or bad, but she and her things were at least in. The man and his team member had set up her bed in the small alcove adjacent to the breakfast room (the only room she'd been able to clean, plus she was too scared to put her bed upstairs), and the rest of her pitiful amount of furniture and most of her belongings were in the sitting room. Her things were now making their acquaintance with the scratching noise from the chimney she still didn't know whether was a bird or a rat. She

seriously hoped it was the former. The latter made her come out in hives.

Lotta crossed the red hallway carpet, eyed where it was coming away from the grippers underneath the window, and stood outside a door to the left of the understairs cupboard. Bracing herself for a worse smell than the one that had floored her in the sitting room and/or, a scratching sound, she put her hand on the doorknob and pushed open the heavy old door.

She took a deep breath in as she looked around. On the far wall, an art deco fireplace which had seen better days slotted into a chimney breast. On either side of the chimney breast, shelves ran from floor to ceiling. A long, ugly, yellowed strip light hung precariously from the ceiling, and a discarded reading lamp lay on its side by the windowsill. Turning around, Lotta was greeted with more shelving on every wall. She couldn't believe it as the purpose of the room dawned on her – she was, in fact, in a room that looked as if it could have been a library, or at least that's what it had written all over it to her. Oh my days.

As in the breakfast room, the floor was lined with dirty orange cork tile and tucked underneath the windowsill, a gigantic Fortnum and Mason basket hinted of bygone days. To her right, old French doors led out to the side garden, and she could just about see a hint of blue sea in the distance. Lotta sniffed; it didn't smell anywhere near as bad as the sitting room had and possibly only needed a good air.

She nodded as she walked around and ran her fingers over the shelves, uprooting a healthy layer of dust that made its way into her nostrils as it billowed around the room. Coughing and spluttering, she stepped back towards the fireplace and looked up at the high ceilings, and the layers of cobwebs intricately weaved from the bookshelves at the top.

Squinting, she looked from left to right and imagined the shelves full of her books. With her hand over her mouth, she pulled heavy velvet curtains back from the windows, and light attempted to make its way through the filthy paned windows. She peered up at old faded brass wall sconces with frilly pale-blue shades and imagined being tucked up in the room in the

dead of winter, a fire roaring, little glowing lamps dotted here and there, perhaps the curtains open to the night sky and surrounded by her huge and growing collection of books. The daydream felt all sorts of nice.

Lotta felt a strange feeling as she looked around the room. It was almost as if it was talking to her somehow. She frowned at the thought and shook her head, but something was telling her that the room had her name on it and that the little walls of shelving wanted her to stay.

She walked back into the breakfast room with its sloping ceiling, old windows with their panes smudged with dirt, and a plethora of spotlights hanging in ugly rows from above. As she looked around, her eyes travelled across the full length of the room, noting every mark on the walls, every smear on every window pane, every single surface that could use a good scrubbing. In fact, she could spend a very long time doing nothing but scrubbing. Despite the chaos and the impending work looking back at her, she smiled at her new home with hope and didn't quite know what to do first; there were moving boxes everywhere, nothing was clean enough to her liking, and it was far from warm. But it was a start and somewhere, at least temporarily, for Lotta Button to call home.

Her phone pinged, and she sat on a box and read a message from her cousin Liv.

*Liv: On my way. I have old clothes, supplies, and a bottle of wine. How is it?*

*Lotta: \*#@\**

*Liv: That good? Excellent. ;)*

*Lotta: It's OK, but I'm wobbling underneath. I'm telling myself it's somewhere to call home. What am I doing here?*

*Liv: Hold tight. Liv to the rescue.*

Lotta laughed. Liv would take control, of that she was certain. Perhaps she could leave Liv to it and go and curl up somewhere with one of her books. To her, it seemed all around like a much better offer. She'd peeked into the tops of the boxes a few times as she'd lugged them around and come

across all sorts of books she'd loved and forgotten about. A book would take her away from the mess of her so-called life. A book would transport her to another world, one without any dust or cheesy smells.

An hour later, Liv was standing in the kitchen, her eyes nearly falling out of her head. 'Oh my goodness! There's so much potential!' Liv exclaimed more than once. 'I do not agree with you about it being awful! Not at all! It's fab.'

Lotta looked more than dubious. 'I did think the same at first, but I got more and more down in the dumps at the work involved. You think so? There's a lot to do, Liv.'

Liv looked up at the high ceilings. 'Err, yeah, I do think so. This is going to be lovely. It's just what you need for a fresh start.'

'Liv, there's a blooming great vine growing *inside* the house, there's something scratching in the sitting room, and every room except this one smells like old man's feet.'

Liv burst out laughing. 'You're not selling it to me like that. May I clarify how you know what an old man's feet smell like? Have you ever sniffed them, then?'

'It does, though, doesn't it?' Lotta replied, wrinkling up her nose. 'I think that smell has now penetrated into the insides of my nostrils. It's all I can smell. It's all I can think about. It's vile. Gross. You can smell it too, I can tell.'

Liv looked out to the hallway. 'It must be in the carpets. Maybe it got wet at some point. It smells like mouldy washing or something. You'll need to just pull up the carpets and get rid of them. It's as simple as that.'

Lotta's eyebrows flew to the top of her head. 'Just! Just pull up the carpets! And how am I going to manage to do that?'

Liv drummed her fingers on her top lip. 'Good point. You'll need some help, and then you'll have to take them to the dump.'

'I can't *get* them to the dump even if I knew where it was. I have a small hatchback, and I have just kissed away a large

part of what money I did have on a man with a van.'

'Hmm, what we need is a plan and a cup of tea,' Liv said as she went to her backpack by the front door and pulled out a white paper bag from the local bakery. 'I have cinnamon buns. They might help us.'

'Nothing can help me,' Lotta replied despondently. 'I'm doomed. I never should have listened to you and come down here. At first, I thought it was lovely here, but now, oh gosh, I'm wobbling again – I will not cry, but it's awful.'

Liv breezed past and looked around the kitchen. 'Tea first. Tears later. Have you not unpacked the kettle yet?'

Lotta pointed to the floor. 'It's there.'

'The kettle is on the floor. What? Why?' Liv queried.

'It's the only socket in here that works and even that one is dodgy, plus the lights flicker on and off at night. Hence why the fridge is over there,' Lotta explained, pointing to the fridge beside the breakfast room window.

'Not a problem. I'll add an electrician to my list.' Liv smiled.

Lotta sat down on one of the kitchen chairs she'd carried in from the van. 'At least I have a few bits of furniture now, I suppose. I did salvage a few things from the Dan and the app years. Not a lot, though.' She waved her hand around the kitchen and out towards the conservatory. 'This is now the sum of my life. What a sorry old mess.'

Liv dunked two teabags in and out of mugs, handed over one of the mugs to Lotta, and stood by the door to the conservatory. 'Slide two of those boxes in, and we'll sit on those. It doesn't smell out here... well, not as much.'

Lotta did as she was told and slid the boxes into the middle with her foot as Liv opened up the bag of cinnamon buns. Liv ripped down the bag's seam, releasing a delicious yeasty sweet scent of freshly baked buns and spicy cinnamon wafting around the room. Liv carefully laid the bag down on the floor between the boxes. Liv gestured to the buns. 'These will help.'

Lotta took one, bit into it, and raised her eyebrows as the just about still warm gooey cinnamon dough dissolved in her mouth, leaving a sweet sugary taste as it travelled down her throat. Her taste buds weren't disappointed. 'Well, if the worst comes to the worst, I can live on these for a few months.'

'Mmm, yes, they're lovely,' Liv replied as she looked up at the dirty, green-black mossy covering on the glass conservatory roof, which was so dirty it was difficult to see through and spread from left to right, suffocating the room below. 'That'll come up well.'

'How do you propose I'm going to get up there to clean it?' Lotta asked as she polished off a cinnamon bun and reached in the bag for another.

'Hmm. Good point. You'll need one of those jet-washing things.'

Lotta couldn't be bothered to say that her budget was limited and that she had no money for anything. The furthest her budget was going to stretch to for the conservatory roof was a scrubbing brush and a bucket. And she would be lucky if the bucket was going to be holding hot water. But Liv didn't want to hear that, and Lotta felt as if she was beginning to sound like a broken record. Liv pointed to the three small old-fashioned radiators boxed in by the window seat in the breakfast room. 'Look at that. You don't see things like that these days.'

'I know. If the things actually worked, it would be good. I've got a heating bloke coming over, I can't live here without heat.'

'No, you can't. You're right, it's freezing. These old houses are draughty too. Lovely, but draughty.'

'I'll take your draughty and raise you with dusty.'

'Shame about the floor,' Liv noted, nodding over towards the cork tile in the breakfast room.

'I've already looked under one of those tiles. It's lovely wide original floorboards underneath.'

'Well, that's a result. We'll pull that up at some point.'



Lotta nodded. In all honesty, she didn't have a clue where to start, so whatever Liv said was good for her. She had so much on her mind she didn't know what to attempt first.

Four and a half hours later, the cinnamon buns were long gone, but the cork tiles were very much still in situ. Lotta, instructed by Liv, had spent most of the time laying on her back with her head in a kitchen cupboard and a toothbrush, scrubbing for her life.

Liv stood up and brushed her hands against each other. 'Job. Well. Done. Looking good.'

Lotta heaved herself up from the floor and looked around. 'Hmm. Not bad. Whoever decided on this white kitchen, I will be eternally grateful to them. It's not quite as bad now it's had a good old-fashioned clean.'

'It's come up well. It's almost as if it hasn't really been used.'

'Unlike the rest of the house, it also doesn't smell of old men's feet, so that really is a bonus too.'

'It absolutely doesn't now,' Liv said, surveying their work. 'We've made a good job of this, Lott.'

'We have.'

'Now you'll be able to make something to eat without getting salmonella. I won't find you dead on the kitchen floor being eaten by whatever it is in the sitting room that has been scratching to get out,' Liv joked.

'Ahh, don't even joke about it! Yes, I could make a sandwich here, maybe.' Lotta pointed to the oven. 'We need to get onto that next.'

Liv held up jazz hands in yellow rubber gloves. 'At the ready.' She leaned over the worktop, grabbed her bag, and then held up a bottle of oven cleaner in front of her.

Lotta pulled a face. 'Euuh, that looks nuclear.'

Liv jerked her thumb towards the old range cooker. 'You need nuclear for that thing. It's really old, sort of nice in a way, though. Vintage.'

‘True.’ Lotta nodded in agreement as she pulled open the double-width oven. ‘This is going to take us the rest of the day.’

‘This is going to take *you* the rest of the day. I’m going to tackle in there,’ Liv replied, jerking her thumb towards the utility room and bathroom and throwing a packet of face masks in Lotta’s direction.

‘Blimey, you’ve thought of everything.’

‘We all know I’m a doer. A boring old doer.’

‘We do. I’m really very glad I have you on my side.’

‘Same here. Don’t worry, I’m logging all this in a notebook for when you pay me back.’



Lotta had sprayed and wiped the oven repeatedly and without a break for hours, so much so that the old range cooker had now been identified as a Belling according to the nameplate on its base. She was surprised at how much better it and the kitchen itself were looking and had to admit that without Liv geeing her along, she probably would have thrown in the towel much earlier in the day and climbed into bed with a book.

Pulling her rubber gloves and mask off, she walked through the kitchen to the utility room and looked around. Liv had made short work of it. The dusty Sheila Maid that had been wedged lifelessly on the old Belfast sink was now cleaned and hanging from the ceiling over the open window. The Belfast sink itself was sparkling, the old copper taps had been relieved of their layer of green, and the jumble of junk from the open shelving was long gone.

Lotta gingerly pushed open the door to the funny little bathroom with the sloping roof and wonky floor. Her hand flew to her mouth. When she’d hovered over the toilet when she’d first arrived, it had been grim. Now it had hope blasted all over its horizon.

On the windowsill, before Liv had got stuck in there, had been piles of junk, old toothpaste tubes, bottles of mouthwash from years gone by, dusty cleaning paraphernalia, two dead pot plants, old toilet rolls, and all sorts had littered almost every single space. Now, the sash window was not only up and letting in wafts of sea air, but it was also clean and sparkling. The bathtub no longer wore a stubborn brown tidemark, and the little timber vanity cupboard whose door had been hanging off was now standing up to attention. The old dusky pink filthy Venetian blind that had been at the window cutting off most of the light stood by the bath in a black rubbish sack, and goodness knows how but the pedestal sink, once hanging off the wall, was now looking less drunk and was in an upright position.

Liv was straddling the toilet with a scrubbing brush in her right hand and a mask over her nose and mouth, scrubbing the side of the toilet for all she was worth. Lotta laughed. ‘Oh my goodness, Liv! You’re a master. You *have* been busy.’

‘How well has it all come up? All that junk everywhere was hiding a little gem here, even if this is the strangest little wonky bathroom I’ve ever seen. The floor actually slopes in the opposite direction to the roof. It makes you feel sort of drunk.’

‘It’s very strange, you’re right, but wow it’s so much better now!’

‘You’re going to be fine here. Baby steps,’ Liv said, and then nodded towards the wall. ‘I reckon you should get on and paint in here. Put it top of the list for this week in between your reading, of course,’ Liv joked.

‘My reading isn’t top of the list. I wish it was. Getting a job is more important at the moment, and that is a full-time occupation on its own.’

‘Right, well after that you need to paint this. Get rid of this pink, I don’t even know what sort of pink it is, do you? Would you call it dusky? Salmon? Something like that, anyway, whatever it is, it’s vile; it could suck the life out of anything and anyone.’ She looked around. ‘By my calculations and this

small amount of wall, I think it would take you not more than a few hours to get this place a bit more presentable. At least you'd then be able to have a wee in comfort.'

'I can tell you've done this before.'

'You must remember my first flat?' Liv groaned. 'Ugh.'

Lotta nodded. 'Ahh, yes, gosh, I'd forgotten how bad it was. You'd never believe that now.'

'I haven't forgotten that! It was tiny too. You had to go sideways to go around the bed. Those were the days.'

'Ha ha, you did too. How far you've come,' Lotta said and felt her voice catching at the end. Liv was now very happily married to James, she had a lovely house in addition to the flat, and she'd just started her dream job. There hadn't been a Dan and an app in Liv's life.

Liv heard the catch in Lotta's voice. 'You'll be fine. Come on. No time for sitting around moping. We need action to get this place shipshape.'



Later that evening, they'd dragged chairs into the conservatory and had a takeaway Indian laid out on a couple of cardboard boxes. Liv tucked into the curry. 'Well, we know one thing for sure.'

'What's that?' Lotta asked as she spooned more basmati rice onto her plate.

'This curry is the best I've ever had.'

Lotta agreed enthusiastically, 'If the curry is anything to go by, I might actually do okay here.'

'You are going to do more than okay. I can feel it in my bones.' Liv nodded repeatedly. 'This house will be lovely and the making of you.'

'I'm glad *you* can! Can you feel some kind of employment for me in your bones?'

‘Yes, something is coming!’ Liv joked. She then held up a plastic cup with wine in it. ‘Cheers, Lott. Cheers to a new start. I’m proud of you for coming down here.’

‘No, cheers to you. Thank you for coming and helping me as usual. What would I do without you?’

‘No need to thank me. I think good things are going to happen to you here, Lott. Before you know it, you’re going to wonder who on earth Dan was, and you’re not going to even remember anything about his stupid app.’

Lotta banged her plastic cup on Liv’s. ‘I hope so, I really do.’

The following week, Lotta sat in a café attached to a bookshop in Newport Reef, a little coastal town a few stops up the coast on the ferry from Pretty Beach. With three rom-com books piled up on her left, a highlighter on the table, and her bag on the chair beside her, she was all set up and ready for a spot of reading. Propped up against the pepper pot, her Kindle was open at a biography of a member of the royal family, and her phone was open with her TBR app on its screen. The small but busy café was bustling with people, with every seat taken apart from the one opposite her.

The place was noisy, full of chatter, a hive of activity, and people doing their thing – a woman beside her with a pram held her hand up to the handle and rocked it back and forth in the aisle, a pensioner with a tray in his hands waited for someone to vacate a table, and a group of four teenagers laughed together as they shared toasted sandwiches and soft drinks whilst chatting across a table for two. Cosy lamps, soft lighting, the smell of freshly-brewed coffee wafting in the air, and a soft, soothing background hum of chat gave the bookshop café a homely feel. It was as if the coffee shop had been exclusively designed for the Lotta Buttons of the world to settle down with a book.

Despite the buzz going on around her, Lotta wasn't aware of too much of it; she was too immersed in her Kindle to really notice the atmosphere around her at all. With her right hand cupped around a cup of tea and her head inclined to her Kindle, she was submerged in another world. There was one thing Lotta was an expert in in life; losing herself in the pages

of a book. She could easily disappear by stepping into a novel, and her skill had succeeded in rescuing her from many a trying situation over the years.

As she read about the reality versus the fairytale of being a working member of the royal family, she lost herself in another world; one full of palaces, helicopters, and lovely-sounding afternoon tea. The next time she looked up to the bustling few tables around her, the woman with the pram now had a babbling baby in her arms, and a man was standing in front of Lotta with a cup of tea in one hand and a sandwich in the other. She looked the man up and down, not really taking in his face, and looked back to her Kindle as quickly as she could, attempting to ignore him. There was no way she wanted some random stranger sitting down in front of her and ruining her trip to the bookshop. The man tapped the top of the chair, but Lotta pretended she didn't see, willing him to move on. In her defence, the table was tiny, and her books, bag, teapot, and the menu were taking up much of it. There wasn't much room for anyone else to sit down and get comfy at all.

'Err, excuse me.' She heard a voice say, followed by a small cough.

She continued to look down, ignoring the man, but he wasn't going to give up. 'Is there anybody sitting here?' he asked with more insistence.

Lotta looked up and squinted. She didn't want him to sit down, she didn't want *anyone* to sit down. As she focused on the man properly, it dawned on her that she recognised his face. As she tried to recollect where she knew him from, by the look on his face, it was clear that he was doing the same. He narrowed his eyes and put his cup of tea down on the table.

'Wedding? Funeral, christening, stately home, wobbly hat. Green, if I remember rightly.'

Lotta nodded. 'Ahh, yes, hello again.' It was the man from the bar a few months previously when she'd been at the wedding dressed in the green dress and the matching gigantic green fascinator. It was in the days not long before those when she'd actually had to prepare to leave her flat. He towered over

the table and stared down at Lotta from a height with his dark broody eyes, slightly dishevelled dark hair, and the same face as before – the one without a smile. With his expression unreadable, his eyes flicked to his left to the woman now cradling and swaying the baby in her arms and the teenagers on the right. He picked up his tea again and went to move away as a sort of scowl crossed his face. Lotta scrambled over the table, picking up her books. ‘Sorry, there you go.’

‘Do you mind?’ he asked a tad gruffly, his voice hard.

Lotta absolutely minded. She really minded a lot. On second thoughts, maybe she didn’t. Not for him. Then again, she’d allocated two hours in the café before she met her cousins to get through a good few chapters of her book. She was already well behind her TBR pile as it was, and she was in no mood to chat to anyone. But there was something about him or about her that was telling her to make him stay. It was perhaps because her heart had taken leave of itself, climbed up onto a balance beam and had just performed a flip. ‘Of course not. Not at all,’ she replied, pretending she wasn’t bothered by responding without a whole lot of enthusiasm.

He took a step to his left and pulled out the chair. Almost as if he’d read her mind, he replied, ‘Don’t worry, I won’t keep you. You won’t need to pretend.’ There was a hint of a smile in the slightly upturned corners of his mouth.

Lotta was puzzled for a second, wondering how he’d lifted a lid off the top of her head and had a look inside. Then she remembered and laughed. ‘Oh, yes. The pretending to be mean at the wedding, that’s what you were doing.’

He sat down and looked mildly interested. ‘I meant you, actually. How did it all go in the end?’

‘What?’

‘You said you’d been given notice on your flat, you had no boyfriend, and you’d been holiday dumped by someone who got a better offer. But you were pretending to everyone none of that had happened.’ He stopped and thought for a second. ‘You got bumped for a holiday in Greece, if I remember correctly. Had you just been made redundant too?’



Lotta laughed. ‘Good memory. Let me just tell you none of the above has changed. How about you? Still making acquaintances with losers’ tables?’

The handsome face still didn’t break into a full smile, not that it really mattered; Lotta was finding it fairly difficult to tear her eyes away from the broad, solid-looking chest. She didn’t need there to be a smile in situ – the view was good enough as it was. In fact, the view was decidedly delightful. ‘I’ve successfully avoided them for a good few months now, though there is one looming at a wedding in the not-too-distant future.’

‘Excellent,’ Lotta replied, tearing her eyes away from the chest and looking back down at her Kindle.

‘I’m Jack, no doubt you don’t remember my name. You were Lotta, as in hotter, if I am not mistaken.’ A hint of amusement crossed his features before it vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

Lotta felt her face flush. ‘Yes, I am, err, Lotta like hotter. Hi again, Jack, and you have a very good memory.’

Jack flicked his hand in front of him, indicating his sandwich and cup of tea. ‘Don’t mind me. I’ll be done in a bit.’

‘No, no. It’s fine.’ *You are fine, you’re more than fine. Delicious.*

His eyes moved to her pile of books, and then he inclined his head to her Kindle. ‘You like books, by the looks of it. You’re not pretending about that?’

‘I *love* books. I’ve just found this place, and I’m a bit behind on my TBR list, so I thought I’d sit down and catch up.’

Jack looked puzzled. ‘TBR list?’

‘To be read,’ Lotta clarified.

‘I see. As I said, don’t mind me.’

Lotta was a reader it was true, and it was also true that her TBR pile was about as out of control as it had ever been,

which she did not like in any shape or form, but she was happy to put it to the side for a teeny bit to pay attention to this Jack person. He was sort of nice. *Understatement of the year*. She wasn't too upset about having to look at his chest or the dimple in his cheek. 'No, no. What are you up to today?'

Jack picked up his cup of tea. 'Work. Nothing really exciting. I've got a meeting just down the road here.' He jerked his thumb towards the window. 'I left late this morning, so I swung in here for a quick bite to eat.'

Lotta found herself strangely tongue-tied. 'Right.'

'What about you?' he asked with mild interest as if, really, he wasn't that bothered to find out her answer.

Lotta found herself staring at him for a moment, trying to think of something interesting to respond with. Her brain wasn't quite working quickly enough. She injected a cheeriness into her voice, attempting to make her day sound much, much, *much* more impressive than it actually was. 'Just a trip to the bookshop for a bit of browsing, a bit of reading, and...' She stopped mid-sentence and looked around at the table searching for something, anything to add to the end, her eyes landing on the teapot. 'Some tea, and then I'm meeting my cousin Liv and a few others. Liv lives down the road here. She works in marine biology or something like that, I'm never really sure what it actually is that she does. Anyway, she's moved down here for work.' Lotta heard herself rambling on.

'I see.' His tone didn't seem to be either impressed or interested. Was he, in fact, looking at her as if she was a little bit odd?

Lotta scrambled around for something else to say. 'The people I'm meeting are some of the same people who were at that table I was telling you about when we met before in the lobby bar.'

'The table with the happy, attractive people with the happy, attractive lives?' He cocked his head to the side and lifted his eyebrows.

'Yes, that would be the ones.'

‘And you’re willingly meeting up with them?’

Lotta felt a weird feeling inside; he’d remembered quite a bit about their conversation. Her heart hopped back on the balance beam. ‘Well, there’s a bit of a story about that. I’m not quite *willingly* meeting them, as it were. My cousin Liv lives here now, so they’re coming here. I totally don’t need to be here. It’s just to make my other second cousin Fenella feel more important.’

‘A bit of a story?’ he repeated, his voice lilting into a question at the end.

Lotta still wasn’t sure whether he was bored and humouring her while he finished his sandwich or what. Because of the sort of arrogant, grumpy-ish look on his face, a tiny part of her wanted to tell him to bog right off. The other part of her wanted to jump on his lap. Stroke something. Instead of doing that, she heard herself starting to flap. ‘It’s all about the inheritance from that funeral the day or so before the day I saw you in the bar. I apparently did get a small token amount of money.’

‘Oh, yes, the funeral you attended just before the wedding. You said you didn’t get anything in wills apart from a house a few years ago which was falling down. So you got something else too? Can’t be bad.’

Lotta thought about her mounting debt, the fact that she had no job, and her looming bills. The token money she had coming wasn’t big. It would just about keep her afloat for a bit. He was more than wrong. Everything about her life was bad. ‘Hmm.’

He picked up his sandwich again, and they were casually chatting when a blue plastic teething ring landed in the middle of the table, knocking the lid off the teapot, and Lotta’s Kindle clattered to the floor. Jack scooped the teething ring up, broke into a smile, and passed it over to the mum on the table beside them. Lotta picked her Kindle up from the floor, followed Jack’s gaze, and as she cooed at the baby, a voice came from behind her. ‘Cooeee!’

Lotta whipped her head around to see her cousin Fenella with her husband, Alex, beside her. Lotta stifled a groan at the back of her throat. ‘Oh! Hi. Fancy seeing you here!’

Fenella leant down and kissed Lotta on one cheek and then the other. As Fenella did so, Lotta was shrouded in a waft of fabulous perfume and expensive clothes. ‘Hi darling, how are you?’

‘Good, good, yes, good, thanks.’

Fenella appeared puzzled. ‘I didn’t expect to see you here yet. Is Liv here too, then? She didn’t say when I spoke to her earlier.’

‘No, she’s not. I came a bit early to do a spot of book shopping.’

Fenella beamed, took in the table, and turned her attention fully to Jack. Her eyes darted from Lotta to him and then back again. ‘And this must be the boyfriend! At last! I thought we were never going to meet him. Finally, we get to see you in the flesh!’

Jack didn’t say anything, which Fenella took as an affirmative response to her assumption. She exclaimed, ‘Hello, hello, hello! We’ve all heard *so* much about you, and I must say you’re fitting the bill *very* nicely. Very nicely, indeed.’

Lotta went cold and dead inside as Jack opened his mouth to say something. She’d lied repeatedly about her supposed boyfriend at all the recent family gatherings. It was no wonder Fenella was assuming this man was the elusive boyfriend. Fenella didn’t let Jack speak and briefly put her hand at the top of his left arm, and with her other hand, she gestured to Lotta’s other cousin Matt who was standing with a tray looking for a table with his husband, Dom. ‘Matt! Look who’s here, and look who she’s with. We finally get to meet him. And there we were thinking that he was made up! He’s not a figment of Lotta’s imagination at all! He’s really here in the flesh and blood. How hilarious! We’re all going to have to eat our words.’

Matt approached the table with raised eyebrows and a kind smile and addressed Jack. ‘Hello, nice to meet you. Nice to know you’re real,’ he joked.

Fenella gushed, ‘Remember at the wedding when we were all laughing about another one of Lotta’s imaginary boyfriends! It seems we were wrong. How funny!’

Dom, Matt’s husband, butted in, ‘See, I told you. I knew Lotta wouldn’t lie about something like this. I was right, now we know. She *so* wouldn’t lie, I did tell you all that.’

Lotta wanted the ground to swallow her whole and spit her out in Outer Mongolia. The look on Jack’s face had an air of mild amusement. He held out his hand to Fenella and spoke calmly with assurance. *Talk about handsome.* ‘Jack.’

‘Well, hello, Jack,’ Fenella purred. As she moved her hand, expensive perfume wafted across the table.

Matt with his hands full, nodded. ‘Good to meet you, at last, Jack.’

‘Same to you,’ Jack said, his face breaking into a wide smile as he, for some reason, played along and saved Lotta from the humiliation. The handsome turned to full-on gorgeous with a dimple on the side as Jack looked up at Matt.

Lotta cringed inside and felt a wave of heat crash through her body, landing on her cheeks. Not only was it now plainly obvious that she habitually lied about having a partner, she now looked like a much bigger loser than the people who sat at the same tables as Jack. Images flashed through her mind of the multitude of events where she’d fabricated her love life, indeed her very existence, with a smattering of what were ultimately out-and-out lies. She could see herself in various wedding outfits, in various ridiculous fascinators, at various high-end venues, trying to keep up the pretence of her shiny, bling-bling life. None of it anywhere near the truth of her *actual* life, where she had no job, no partner, and now no flat either. Oh, and let us not forget about money. There was no money in the equation whatsoever.

Fenella continued addressing Jack, ‘So, we’ll be seeing you at the meeting and the wedding soon, will we? Can’t wait to get to know you a bit better.’ She didn’t wait for an answer and turned to Matt. ‘When is the wedding again?’

‘The end of next month – it’s not long away now,’ Matt replied.

Fenella flicked her long, naturally blonde hair over her shoulder as she turned her full attention back to Jack, her eyebrows raised in expectation. ‘It’ll be great to get to know one of Lotta’s boyfriends again, after, well.’ She coughed. ‘The last one.’ She chuckled and sort of snorted at the same time. ‘You are going to turn up though...’ Jack went to open his mouth, but Fenella butted in, ‘Lovely! Can’t wait.’ Something then caught Fenella’s eye in the corner of the café, and she held her hands up and pointed. ‘Quick! There’s a table over there. Lovely to meet you, Jack! See you soon. We’ll have a bit more time to get properly acquainted at the wedding.’

Lotta swore repeatedly as she watched Fenella follow Matt and Dom across the café. ‘Great. Absolutely marvellous.’ She swore again. ‘I can’t believe it. Not only do I have to sit through another wedding with the beautiful people pretending about my life, I now have to invent some story about who you are and why you aren’t attending with me! Or admit that you’re another one of my failed relationships.’ She swore again repeatedly. ‘Why me? Why does this have to happen to me?’

Jack shook his head as he watched Fenella walk away. ‘She was a bit full on.’

‘Tell me about it,’ Lotta said and let out a massive fed-up sigh. ‘Here we go again. Why did they have to come in here? I mean, really? Why was she even allowed to enter a bookshop? The last time Fenella read a book was probably in school, if at all.’

Jack smiled. ‘Here we go again?’

‘Yep. Me. I’m going to have to turn up at this wedding and explain why you’re, yet again, not there.’ She stopped mid-

sentence, tutted, and shook her head. ‘And worse, I now know that they think I have imaginary boyfriends.’ She shook her head and swore. ‘Which, come to think of it, I actually do! What the actual heck has happened to my life? Who even am I?’

Jack didn’t miss a beat in his quick response. ‘I’ll attend.’

As she was picking up her eyeballs from the table, Lotta frowned. ‘What?’

‘Might be a bit of a laugh. I’ll come as your partner. Pretend partner.’ Jack deadpanned.

‘Don’t be ridiculous!’ Lotta exclaimed, but she sort of liked the idea. She sort of liked the idea of him. All grumpy and dark and muscly. Going to an event with him would most definitely work for her.

‘No skin off my nose.’ He shrugged. ‘And I’d quite enjoy proving that Fenella person wrong. She really was very irritating.’

Lotta fiddled with the edge of her Kindle cover. ‘Why would you do that?’

Jack stared at her for a few seconds as if asking himself the same question. ‘Why not? When’s the wedding?’

‘I’m not sure. I do know it’s on a Friday.’

‘A Friday wedding?’ Jack clarified.

‘Yeah, it’s trendy to do it like that these days. As if you’re sort of more casual about it when really you’re totally not. Like you’re not trying, but you actually are trying so very, very hard. Basically, it’s much cheaper.’

‘I don’t have much on, I do know that. Where is it?’

‘A country manor in Berkshire. That’s where they always are or at some big fancy hotel. Or the South of France, if they’re trying to be a bit boho, you know? Wherever it is, I’m always at the same table. Sitting there pretending.’

Jack scrolled through his phone, the corners of his mouth twitching into a smile. ‘I don’t have anything on for the

foreseeable.’

Lotta bit into her lip and looked at him with quizzical eyes. ‘You’re telling me that you’ll come to a wedding with me to suffer at the hands of my family and pretend to be my boyfriend? I don’t even know you from Adam.’

‘That’s about the nuts and bolts of it.’

‘Right. Okay. Right.’ Lotta didn’t quite know what to say as she computed what he’d said in her brain.

‘Would it be reciprocal?’ Jack asked.

*Here we go, there was some ulterior motive, most probably involving weird kinky sex,* Lotta thought. She frowned, wondering what he meant. ‘Sorry, reciprocal?’

A hint of humour showed behind Jack’s eyes. ‘I have a gala ball to go to, where I was also turning up alone. You could return the favour.’

‘Right, I see. Sorry, let me get this straight. Are you saying that you would come to the wedding with me, and I would reciprocate by attending a ball with you?’

‘I am saying that, yes, correct.’

Lotta considered for a bit and consulted the non-existent diary in her head. She stared at the broad chest for a second, she may also have flicked her eyes to the bulk in the forearms under the shirt. She’d unquestionably had worse offers. More than a few. ‘Umm. Not being funny, but why would you need a pretend date? You said you’re just mean and moody at these things, and you don’t care.’

‘Well, yeah, there is that, but firstly, it would put a few noses out of joint. Shut a few people up, and secondly...’ He sighed. ‘I’ve somehow led this American who is interested in buying something from me to believe that I’m not quite married, but seriously partnered up. Which as you know from the bar, I am not.’

‘I see. What’s he buying from you?’

Jack waved his hand. ‘Just boring business stuff.’



‘What, so he thinks you’re married?’

‘No, I haven’t clarified that, but he’s very religious and heavily into family and marriage and values, etcetera. Which is fine, of course, but he’s sort of assumed things about me.’

‘The thing is,’ Lotta stated, ‘I know nothing about you and vice versa. How would we get around that if we were supposed to be in a serious relationship?’

‘Not quite true. I know you like books and reading, and you wear ridiculously large wobbly things on your head at weddings. And you like a large glass of wine or two.’

‘Good point. Why would you not just, you know, get a real girlfriend, or a real date, though?’ Lotta swept her hand across the table. ‘Not being funny, but I’m sure you’re not short of offers.’ *Unlike me*, she added in her head.

Jack scrunched his face up and gestured dismissively with his right hand. ‘*Cannot* be assed. Not after the last disaster. Too much effort. Yeah, that’s off the table for the minute.’

‘Right. Yeah, I know how you feel.’ The image of Dan at the train station flashed in front of Lotta’s eyes along with all the heartache, tears and bothering.

Jack looked at his watch and shifted his weight in his chair to push it out. ‘Plus, it would be quite nice to be on the losers’ table with someone I might actually want to have a conversation with for once.’

‘That would be me, would it?’ Lotta asked with a strange buzzy sensation running through her veins at the thought of him wanting to have a conversation with her. ‘But what would we talk about?’

‘It can’t be worse than what’s currently on offer,’ Jack noted.

Lotta grimaced as she saw Fenella’s brother arriving in the café and waving in her direction. He pointed to Jack, widened his mouth in a circle of mock surprise, and did a thumbs-up.

‘They would grill you, that’s for sure. We’d need an initiation if we are going to do it,’ Lotta stated seriously as the

thought of Fenella clocking that Jack was not a real boyfriend went through her mind. If Jack did attend with her as a fake boyfriend and Fenella realised, Lotta would never, *ever* live it down. The thought of that happening was almost worse than having to attend the event on her own.

Jack frowned, his forehead crinkling into a question. ‘An initiation? What, like when you start a new job?’

‘Well, not quite like that. I could do a list of questions and email them to you. Keep it simple.’

There was a twitch at the side of Jack’s mouth. ‘You’ll *email* me questions, and then what?’

‘You’ll send me your answers back, and I’ll also send you my answers to the same questions. We’ll at least have a bit of a head start then. You know, if someone asks us questions or anything, if you see what I mean. I could do a quiz, maybe.’

‘What sort of questions are we talking about?’ Jack asked, staring directly into Lotta’s eyes.

Lotta reeled off a few questions, flapping her hands in front of her. ‘You know things that people in happy, stable, successful relationships know about each other; favourite food, the primary school you went to, umm, plus other stuff like, I dunno, past partners...’ She trailed off and thought for a few seconds. ‘Hobbies, yes, we’d need to know those, too.’

Jack tilted his head, a little more serious in his tone. ‘You’d need more than a few emails on my past partners.’

Lotta wasn’t at all sure what to think of that. ‘Oh, right, oh, okay.’

‘You’re correct though, you’d probably need to know about my divorce. It wasn’t pretty.’

‘And you’d need to know about my, yeah, my ex and all that happened with him. That’s quite the story.’ Lotta thought about how she’d given Dan her savings and worked two jobs so he’d been able to sink everything into his app. She thought for a second. ‘I’d just skim it, actually.’

‘Good idea, yes, I’d skim over ten years of marriage.’

‘Ten years? You must have been young.’

‘I was.’

‘Okay, then. So, will I email you the questions?’ Lotta asked, waving a hand across the air across the table.

‘Yes, why not?’ Jack nodded.

‘So, we have a sort of arrangement here, do we?’ Lotta clarified.

Jack nodded again, slowly and calmly. ‘I suppose we do, yes,’ he said quietly.

Lotta grabbed her phone and looked up with her eyebrows raised in question and started to tap out Jack’s email address as he reeled it off. ‘I’ll email you all the details about the wedding and the questions.’ She read her email address out too, and he tapped it into his phone.

‘Look forward to it.’

‘Well, thanks, thanks for helping me out,’ Lotta added as an afterthought, her eyes drawn to his.

‘Pleasure is all mine. I’ll wait for your email, Lotta, as in hotter.’

Lotta swallowed a little gulp of air at the feeling she got inside as his face cracked into a grumpy-ish smile, the corners of his mouth hinting just about at turning up. Being on the end of it felt somehow, somewhat, deliciously nice. *No worries Just Jack. No worries at all.*

It was the Friday morning after the bookshop and the meeting with her cousins, and Lotta was still in bed. She had decided that neither her bank balance, which had been draining at an alarming rate, nor the aching in her legs could take another trip to London hunting for a job. She couldn't stand the thought of yet another long day eking out beverages in endless coffee shops, searching for opportunities topped off by a journey on a busy train to get home to Pretty Beach. A day where she would no doubt end up tired, sad, and despondent. She might as well stay where she was and do that from home.

She looked up at the kitchen ceiling of the house, which had been designed, according to Liv, by someone going by the name of Rodney Brown. Whoever he was, she had no idea, but he'd got it wrong with the position of the window as far as she was concerned. Right now, camping out in the breakfast room of one of Rodney's designs wasn't too much fun. Plus, it was freezing.

She turned over, pulling the soft quilt up to her neck and stared through to the Victorian glass lean-to conservatory where the old grapevine wound up and down from the ceiling. Snuggled up under the quilt, she listened to the far-off sound of the waves which had replaced the hum of London traffic from her flat. From the safety of her quilt, she watched a gigantic spider crawl down the wall away from the vine and stop on the floor as if contemplating what to do. She wondered if it was as undecided and out of sorts in life as she was. The same as the spider, she was deliberating whether or not to walk

across the open-plan breakfast room to the kitchen and put the kettle on. The kettle still sat on the floor adjacent to the one working socket in the whole downstairs of the house. Lotta had no idea whether it was safe to even touch the socket, let alone give it the job of boiling water to a hundred degrees.

The chill of the morning air blasted against her as she tugged her tracksuit on over her pyjama bottoms, picked her thick hoodie up from the end of the bed, and pulled it over her head. Slipping her dressing gown over the top for extra warmth, she stepped her feet into her fluffy pink slippers and shuffled her way to the kettle. A few minutes later, with the hood on her dressing gown up, she was standing in the conservatory adjacent to where the old vine snaked over the door and staring out to the garden. Glimpses of the sea waved to her in the distance, and a hint of weak, hazy sun peeked through thick clouds, forcing its way through the filthy conservatory panes.

Shivering with the cold, Lotta took sips of her tea, hoping it would induce warmth and tried to ignore the icy damp smelling air. Staring around the conservatory, her eyes settled on three old-fashioned Victorian low-to-the-floor radiators. She wondered idly if there was any chance whatsoever of them working. Her eyes swung around the room, taking it all in; a round, mouldy circular stain graced the middle of the floor, there were a few cracks in the side panes, and the shabby old roof glass was so dirty it looked as if someone at some point might have painted it brown. It wasn't a nice brown, it had to be noted.

A gust of wind howled in through the door, rustling the dead leaves on the vine, and Lotta sighed. How in the name of goodness had she ended up here? Before Dan, before the app, she had been the owner of quite a nice little life. It wasn't splendiferous, no. But options? Yes, she'd had options. Hope too. Hope for the future and what it was going to bring. Now all she could think about was getting a job and not going back down into the deep dark hole of debt. Now she had to make sure that every single day she did her utmost to stay positive.

As she stood blowing air into her tea and watching the steam rise from her mug, her phone pinged with a text from her cousin Liv.

*Liv: How are you? More interviews today? Any more offers of fake dates?* Liv added the crying laughter emoticon.

Lotta laughed wryly. Even her crappy interviews for crappy jobs had run dry, but she wasn't going to let it get her down. And the fake dating thing was more or less a joke. There was no way she was going to actually bother with that. She hadn't sent the email and had almost forgotten about Jack and the coffee shop anyway. Almost.

*Lotta: None today.* She added a smiley face. *I'm spending the day here. I spoke to Timmy earlier and discussed the fake dating thing – it's a no from me. Why would I bother? I'll just have to be sick for the wedding or something.*

*Liv: I see, yeah. Maybe it's not such a good idea.*

*Lotta: No. I'm going to just hang out here today.*

*Liv: Ooh, lovely. A nice walk by the sea will do you good. The sea air is great. Ask me how I know ;) It cost me a lot of money in uni fees to be able to tell you that.*

Lotta doubted it. The air may well be nice, but Liv wasn't living her reality. Whatever way Lotta turned, it wasn't pleasant. She wasn't going to let on to Liv, though, she was going to try her best to remain upbeat. No one needed to know.

*Lotta: Yep. It'll be bracing for sure. It's cold again today.*

*Liv: Did you get the heating sorted out?*

Lotta rolled her eyes and glanced at the three radiators.

*Lotta: Not yet. Not sure if there would be much point seeing as I'm just here for a bit.*

*Liv: Isn't it cold, though???*

That was the understatement of the year. Lotta had even found herself looking up thermal vests on her phone, but she was determined she wasn't going to let it get the better of her –

not the job, not the house, not the app disaster, not Dan, nor the love of his life. None of it.

*Lotta: Not too bad.* She typed, hitting send quickly.

*Liv: I thought I might come down on Sunday.*

Lotta shook her head. There was no way she wanted anyone around, not even Liv. She needed a weekend on her own, festering with her books. Liv had done enough for her already as she had in the past, including holding her hair up whilst she'd continuously vomited when Dan had left. She wasn't going to let Liv sort this mess out too.

*Lotta: Ahh. I can't do Sunday, soz.*

*Liv: OK. No worries. Catch up next week? I'll come over and clean again.*

*Lotta: Yeah, love to.* Lotta gritted her teeth. Hopefully, by then she might have a job or a sniff of a job, and she could begin again to start looking for a flat.



Later that day, Lotta had flailed wildly from feeling optimistic that a job would come her way to looking at her credit card bill and wondering how on earth she was ever going to recover. She lifted the lid on her laptop, opened her emails, and checked her inbox. Another rejection from an interview she'd had two weeks prior. Unfortunately, the recruiter believed she was overqualified for the position, and they'd offered it to someone more junior. The rest of her inbox was more of the same, and considering the number of ads she'd replied to, depressingly quiet. She hardly had job offers coming out of her ears.

Sighing, she opened her online banking. That wasn't looking good either. With her chin on her hand, she cursed the past few years, cursed Dan, cursed her stupidity, cursed the stupid app. Why oh why had she not been more cautious? Why had she been swept away by Dan's stories? Why had she believed every word he had said?

She couldn't come up with an answer as the reality of her bank balance hit her squarely between the eyes. Even without any rent or hotel bills to pay, she was skating on thin ice. She looked around at the old walls around her and the awful line of rusty stainless steel spot lamps over her head. By the dire situation of her finances, she should be grateful she had a roof over her head at all.

For ages, she aimlessly surfed jobs online, found herself reading the Daily Mail, and spent way too long seeing that other people she'd worked with here and there over the years were living their best lives in publishing for the world to see. She wasn't living much of a life at all, let alone her best one.

Her mind went back to what Timmy and Liv had said in the pub when she'd been in the hotel in London. It then flicked to Jack in the café. There were people telling her that life wasn't all about the London publishing scene. That perhaps she should have a bit of a change. She switched back to the figure in her bank account again. With the next payment to her credit card due, she was getting dangerously close to being in the red, and her search for a job in publishing was going to have to change, and rapidly. It was no longer a case of finding a publishing job; it was a case of finding something to provide her with an income so that she could pay her bills.

After making a coffee, she sat on an overturned red plastic bucket in the conservatory and contemplated her options. There was no way she was asking anyone for help, that she knew for a fact. She already owed money to Liv. There was no way she was admitting to anyone that, again, she was up the creek without a paddle. She gazed back towards the house. She really only had one option. She needed to pull on her big-girl pants, suck it up, and get on with it. She tried to tell herself that some people would give their right arm to inherit a house, any house, let alone one on the coast. No, it wasn't a nice little flat in the fancy, west, bougie side of London as she would have liked it to be, but it meant she wasn't homeless. She didn't have a job for one of the big publishing five as she wanted, but she did have a few limited options.



She attempted to talk herself up; she could do anything she wanted, couldn't she? That's what her mum had always said, anyway. The thing was that her mum had been fuelled by family money and marijuana, mostly not a lot of the former and a whole lot of the latter.

She got her notebook out and jotted down a few things. After half an hour of making lists, doodling, and pondering later, she decided that she had no other option than to make the best of the house in Pretty Beach. With no rent to pay, she would get a temporary interim job doing anything that came her way. Whilst working, she would focus on getting back on her feet, paying off her credit card, and would coordinate her efforts on getting a job in London at a later date. It was simple enough. She would slowly but surely do a few bits on the house; she could paint a wall here and there, get an electrician in, sort the plumbing, and go from the bottom up.

By the end of the morning, she didn't have a publishing job, but she did have a tiny glimmer of hope, a bit of a loose plan, and perhaps better things on the horizon. For Lotta Button, things had been worse.

Lotta opened her laptop and navigated to the job site she'd spent a lot of time surfing over the previous few months. Changing the dropdown location box to Pretty Beach and the category to 'publishing' and hitting search, the results were not only not great, but they were also non-existent. The little speech box informed her that there were no results in the area for publishing, and there hadn't been for two years.

She expanded the location, making the job search much further afield, and hit the search button again. Still nothing. She sighed and bit her lip. Was it better to be in a grotty hotel, pounding the pavements every day looking for a relevant job, or sitting in a cold breakfast room with a sloping roof and a scratching coming from the sitting room, looking for a relevant job in this new place? She couldn't decide between the two but tried to remain positive; the Pretty Beach house might be freezing, but the daily racking up of costs on her credit card had ceased, and that had to be a plus. She might not want to be down on the coast away from the London publishing scene, but she was safe and had a (somewhat wonky) roof over her head, so that had to be a good thing.

She changed the catchment area back to Pretty Beach, lost the publishing category, and scrolled down. There was not much going on in anything at all, let alone in publishing. A job for a highly experienced mechanic who had to have at least ten years of experience. A vacancy for a landscape gardener with his or her own van. Lotta chuckled at that – she was doing well if she could keep a pot plant alive, she could never be considered for a job in landscaping. Van driving wasn't on her

list of skills either. A job at a newly established window cleaning round and a supermarket needed someone on the early morning milk shift. Lotta didn't mind what she did – she'd done all sorts when the app had been in design, but she wasn't hopeful of her chances of landscaping a garden or how good she would be at rising at 4 a.m. for the milk shift.

Feeling more than despondent, she closed the job site, navigated to groups, and found the local Pretty Beach community group. After answering the three membership questions, one of which stipulated rules about being a local and another question asking for the number of her house, Lotta was wondering whether or not she would get past the screening questions. After making a cup of tea and wandering aimlessly around the garden in the cold, she checked the group again and was surprised to see that she was in.

She scrolled down the main discussion group and started to read. All sorts went on in this place called Pretty Beach; a woman named Clemmie, a boutique cleaner, was looking for someone to help out when she went on holiday, and the Boat House wanted part-time waiting staff for events.

Lotta screwed up her nose and enlarged her screen; each of the posts had the letters L and O at the end. She wondered what that meant and continued to scroll down the list. She made a note to listen to a podcast going by the name of Where the Heck is Pretty Beach? and she read through with interest about a Bonnie event. She was not sure what the event was, but she ascertained from the long post that it took place later in the year, whereby holiday homes and vacancies at the hotel were filling fast.

Making another cup of tea and standing leaning against the kitchen worktop, Lotta was still scrolling through half an hour later. It appeared there was more to Pretty Beach than met the eye. It seemed as if Lotta had landed herself in a bona fide active community where people not only clearly knew each other well but were also nice. There was banter and jokes, offers of help, comments, and lots of engagement. She scrolled all the way back up to the top, and her chin dropped to the floor at the latest post; she blinked in surprise – a welcome

post to none other than her! Lotta clicked on the profile of a very tanned man named Peter. His picture showed him standing on a boat with metallic wraparound sunglasses tucked into thick white hair and almost orange arms and face.

*We have a new resident in our group and our little town by the sea. Let's welcome Lotta to Pretty Beach.*

Lotta couldn't believe there were already nine comments underneath the post. She wasn't sure whether or not to be horrified. Did she want people to know that she was new to the town? Did people now assume she was here on her own? She went to message Peter and ask him to delete the post. Had this orange man not heard of online security?

She reread the post and reconsidered. Fair enough, it didn't say where she was living exactly, or for that matter that she was on her own, nor did it specify her surname, but for Lotta and her townie head, it felt more than weird to be welcomed by people she didn't know to a town she knew even less. For Lotta, there were red flags popping up everywhere.

After smiling at some of the messages, she decided against messaging this Peter person. She could waste way too much time fretting about her online safety when she needed to focus on much more pressing issues; things like the fact that she didn't have an income. Or the fact that she had a towering TBR pile that was getting out of control, that there was a scary scratching in the sitting room, and then there was the other quite crucial thing about her current situation; no heat or hot water.

Scrutinising it further, it appeared that Peter was just being friendly, and so were the people who'd commented on the post. After replying with friendly but guarded messages in response, she sat down at the breakfast table and pulled over her notebook. So far, she had very few options in Pretty Beach. It was possible that she could apply for the waiting staff job at the Boat House, and though she'd never heard of boutique cleaning before, she was fairly sure her years of office cleaning at night while Dan worked on the app would put her in good stead for any kind of cleaning, boutique or not.

But with her track record in interviews and failing at securing jobs, two local vacancies weren't going to get her very far.

She scrolled through the messages again and replied to two more at the bottom. The more she thought about the jobs and the local area, the more she realised this probably wasn't the sort of place you got a fill-in job while you were waiting to go back to your buzzy little existence in London. This was the sort of place where jobs were for life. By the posts in the group, it struck her as the sort of place where you levelled some respect and didn't take a job for an interim. She sighed and contemplated what she was going to do.

With the welcome post from Peter on top of her mind, Lotta resisted her urge to start googling 'murders in small coastal towns' and checked her emails for any replies to jobs she'd applied for. Not a sausage. Her inbox though, was brimming with unimportant, inconsequential stuff that meant nothing whatsoever to her life as it was; an email from a cosmetics company whose face cream was nearly as much as a night in a hotel, an offer from an environmentally friendly cleaning company whereby she'd signed up to their newsletter years ago, so she'd been able to nab a free bottle of grapefruit kitchen spray, which when she had sprayed it made her feel sick, and an email from a cruise company offering to sail her to the Caribbean for an Easter break. And then the fourth one down, an email from Jack. What the...?

Lotta stared at the subject line for ages, remembering the bookshop. She cringed. A fake boyfriend. *Pathetic* was the word for it, if not desperate. *Pathetic and* desperate. She'd forgotten all about it, assuming that he would too. She considered deleting his email and then decided just to see what he wanted. He was rather handsome, there was that. She opened the email, and with the same odd feeling she'd had when she'd been around Jack before, she read down.

*Lotta,*

*Regarding the questions – I haven't received them yet. Just wondering if you sent them to the correct email.*

*Also, I've just re-read the invitation for the gala ball, and it's asking for any specific dietary requirements. Could you please forward me any you have?*

*Jack*

Lotta couldn't stop or understand the strange feeling in the pit of her stomach, the same one she'd realised had happened when she'd been sitting opposite Jack, and he'd pretended to Fenella that he was her boyfriend. She went over it in her head. Her mind weighed up the pros and cons of replying and seeing this thing through. She'd discussed it with Timmy, and she'd thought she wouldn't bother, but thinking twice, maybe she would go. At the end of the day, there wouldn't be any harm in going with him to the ball and pretending to be his girlfriend. If she could find a suitable dress, she'd have a nice night out at a ball for free, have a few drinks and a meal. She could easily fake being his girlfriend for a few hours and be done with it. She mentally went through a list of the questions she'd need to know if she was going to pretend that she was going out with Jack.

After racking her brains for a few minutes, she searched her conundrum and nodded. There were lots of things to consider, and seeking information on how to get to know someone was a thing. Clicking on 'Top Ten Questions to Ask to Get to Know Someone Better', Lotta scanned down the list of search results.

According to experts and especially those with doctorates in clinical psychology, getting to know someone and being at the start of a relationship was a thrill to be relished. Lotta screwed her nose up at this; as far as she was concerned at this point in her life, her book boyfriends really were better. Book boyfriends tended not to send you out to work in the evening cleaning offices, neither did they spend your money designing apps, and if she was really honest with herself, spending your money on taking out other women.

She continued reading regardless. The getting-to-know-someone game was, apparently, not just a case of talking or asking questions, rather, it was more important to engage in something known as *active listening*. Questions needed to be

thoroughly thought about, researched and premeditated. They were not to be mere questions but rather ‘thought starters’ to get deep under someone’s skin to the substance of a person’s being. Lotta rolled her eyes and continued to read the dos and don’ts and pointers on how to design a meaningful list of questions. According to more than one psychologist, the most important thing anyone must keep in mind and never, ever do was to start with the weather. Lotta hit reply on the email and started to type out her response.

*Dear Jack,*

*Thanks for your email. Apologies I didn’t get back to you earlier.*

*Regarding the questions:*

*What’s your favourite weather?*

*Is there a best friend I should know about?*

*What are your significant life events (i.e. divorce, children etc)?*

*What’s the best thing you’ve read in the last five years?*

*What foods do you like/dislike?*

*Regarding the gala ball: would it be possible for you to forward me (as an attachment to this email) the invitation so I can ascertain the dress code etc.?*

*I have no special dietary requirements. I am quite easy to please.*

*Regards,*

*Lotta Button*

Lotta had crossed out that her special dietary requirement was copious amounts of alcohol, saved the email to drafts, made herself another cup of tea, came back and then hit send. Ten minutes later, she was in the sitting room with the scratching going on beside her, rummaging through the moving boxes. She moved a box of unread books into the breakfast room, slid it across the floor to the alcove, opened

the flaps on the top of the box, and methodically, in colour order, piled up the books under the window by the bed.

Satisfied but slightly panicked by the number of books she had not yet read for the month, she stood back and looked around the room; light flooded in from the sash windows onto the now clean but still cork floor, the view out to the ocean seemed to somehow soothe and for some reason, one she couldn't quite fathom, there was something about the house that made her feel safe. Were things oddly looking up?

Perhaps it was a good thing that she'd hopped off the tracks that she thought were her life? When she'd arrived in Pretty Beach in her nearly out-of-petrol car, everything had seemed depressingly simple and depressingly clear – she was on her own, Dan was gone, she had no job, no money, and an alarming lack of options. She'd more or less trained herself not to focus on any of it, and since Dan had left, her books and reading had been her saviour. As she'd always done in life when the going had got tough, she'd closed off the world, put the blinkers on, and got lost in the pages of a book. In the early days when Dan had left, it had worked magnificently to keep her hovering just above the reality of her life.

When Dan had told her the app had failed, she'd gone to Waterstones with her credit card and spent the whole afternoon lost in the world of books. When she'd first read the email that she was being made redundant, she'd binge-read a whole nine-book series on her Kindle. When her landlord had given her notice on the flat, she'd got a box of special edition hardbacks from the top of her wardrobe, plonked herself on the sofa, and read through the night. Books and fiction, writing, and unreal worlds were the way out of her situation. The thing was that fiction didn't stop her real life from still being there. The problem was that despite what she read on the pages of a book, in her actual world, stuff was getting real; hotel bills were real, no heating was real, a lack of a job was real, scratching animals in chimneys were real, credit card balances were real.

Lotta Button might have the ability to read her way out of most things, but this time she was going to have to admit to herself that lifting the edge of the carpet, picking up a book,



and settling the carpet oh-so neatly over the top to keep out the world was more than definitely not going to work. Reading and books did not an income give.

The perfectly lined-up book pile beside her bed was, however, *so very* tempting. The bright, happy covers, the thin creamy pages of black type, the page numbers in the corners, the feel in her hands, the smell in her nose. Oh, how nice to climb back into bed with a book. To flick over the pages again and again and immerse herself into someone else's world. An afternoon of tea and words. Hours of getting lost in tea and a lovely life. Lotta forced herself to look away from her gorgeous white quilt with its delicate rose print. She forced herself not to think about how chilled she would be after she emerged from an afternoon with a book. Instead, she nodded and convinced herself that if she got on with the job in hand, by the end of the week, she would have heat, working electricity and hopefully an income.

With a positive attitude, she stabbed the on button on her laptop and again opened her emails. There was already a reply from Jack.

*Lotta,*

*Thanks for your email. Regarding the questions:*

*What is your favourite weather?*

*I don't have one. If I had to choose, it would be rain.*

*What foods do you like/dislike?*

*I like any food. I do not like vegetarians much.*

*What's the best thing you've read in the last five years?*

*I don't read.*

*Is there a best friend I should know about?*

*I don't have one of those, either.*

*What are your significant life events (i.e. divorce, children etc)?*

*I had an unfriendly divorce. The marriage itself I thought was not too bad. Clearly, I was mistaken. I have no children. I*

*have three nieces.*

*The gala ball invitation is attached to this email.*

*In addition and in light of these questions and, in particular, regarding the situation with the other guests at the ball, I am proposing that we meet a minimum of a few times beforehand to discuss the above further.*

*Jack*

Lotta read the email and realised that the same strange feeling she'd had in her stomach the first time had again made itself known. Odd. She went through the email and nodded. He was probably right. The questions were a bit lame, and it would be beneficial to both of them if they met for a coffee or a drink and ran through a few things so that they knew a little bit more about each other. She most definitely didn't want to end up at a family event and be found out that she was pretending she had a boyfriend. The thought of Fenella's face alone made a little bit of sick come up at the back of her throat.

Jack had sent an additional email with his phone number and proposed that they initially meet in Newport Reef for a drink. Lotta tapped his number into her phone and then typed out a message.

*Hi Jack. Thank you for your email. I am more than happy to meet up. I will see you on Friday at the time you mentioned in your second email. Lotta.*

Lotta closed the cover on her phone and stared out the window, all thoughts of applying for jobs gone. She was now more interested in Friday night and what she was firstly going to talk about, and secondly, going to wear. Her heart wasn't thinking about applying for jobs either; it was far too busy stepping off the balance beam, running over to the parallel bars and tumbling itself over and over in a lovely, happy whirl.

On the Friday that Jack had proposed the meeting for a drink, Lotta waited for the ferry to pull into the wharf at Newport, not in the greatest of moods. At least the sea air and the journey had cheered her up. She'd had loads of problems, starting with two long days in London at interviews for jobs that there was no way she was ever going to get. By the end of the week, she'd waited for the local electrician to come around, and though after a lot of huffing and puffing, he'd made things safe and fixed sockets, he'd told her the bad news that basically he'd patched the house up but the wiring was on its last legs. Lotta had sighed; she didn't even want to know about things like wiring, let alone have to sort it out, least of all actually pay for it.

She wrapped her coat around her against the wind coming off the sea, felt a wave of surprise as one of the ferry crew tipped his hand to his forehead to say goodbye and stomped up the road looking for the pub Jack had mentioned in his text. Every single part of her was irritated by the meeting. What was she even thinking of agreeing to see him for a drink? She could be tucked up in bed getting lost in a book. She was currently halfway through a trilogy set on the west coast of Ireland, where the protagonist had taken a summer job in an old convent, now a posh hotel owned by non-other than a mega film star who'd given up Hollywood to raise chickens and rescue dogs from the outbuildings of the fancy hotel. The protagonist was just at the point where she was about to fall in love, and Lotta couldn't wait to find out what happened next.

She never should have agreed to the stupid fake boyfriend thing in the first place. It was an absolute waste of time for someone who had no time to be dicking around. For someone without a job or career or money, it was a ridiculous thing to be even considering. She should be saving her time, energy, and breath for much more important things.

She tutted as she got to the pub, had to admit to herself that it did look rather nice, and pushed open the door after slapping a smile on her face. She walked into the bar area heaving with Friday night customers. She'd stay for one drink, call a day on the ludicrous pact she'd made with Jack, and get the next ferry out of there.

She walked around, peering behind pillars and roving her eyes over tables. After poking her head around the door into the deserted and freezing beer garden and strutting around the pub in a foul mood, she groaned to herself as she got back to the pub door. Not only had she wasted her time, she'd actually been stood up by a fake boyfriend. What the actual? What had happened to her life? She couldn't even get a fake boyfriend to turn up, let alone a real one. What had she even become? Her existence had totally reached a new low.

She flicked to the ferry timetable on her phone, tutted again at the fact that she'd just missed one back to Pretty Beach, and headed for the bar. With a large glass of wine, she was sitting with her Kindle propped up against the hand pumps well stuck into her book, when someone tapped her on the back. She turned around to see Jack looking harassed. Harassed and handsome. Goodness, was he handsome. Why hadn't she noticed how good-looking he was before? Well, she had, but that was by the by. He was so dark and moody and... just gorgeous. Lotta swore repeatedly under her breath. He *really* was rather fab. She *really* was rather in trouble.

'Ahh! So sorry. I've had a nightmare afternoon! I got caught in that traffic where the gas leak is. Did you hear about it? It was only when I realised that I was going to be late that I also realised my phone was in my jacket, which I left at home.'

Lotta couldn't have cared less where his phone was, where the gas leak was, or the location of his jacket. She was far too busy checking out everything else, wondering why she hadn't taken a much more detailed note of any of it before; the chest was magnificent, ditto the arms and then, of course, the eyes.

'I thought you'd stood me up,' she replied bluntly, whilst thinking inside that it wouldn't have been the first time she'd found herself sitting alone in a pub. Lotta swallowed, picked up her drink, and took a large gulp of her wine as he pulled the stool beside her from under the bar and sat down.

Jack raised an eyebrow and didn't really smile. 'I don't do standing people up.'

Lotta had been told. 'I see.' Inside, she wondered what was going on. What was particularly unsettling was not only that her heart was performing women's artistic gymnastics, but that she'd lost the ability to speak cohesively. It was as if she was strangely unable to put more than three words together. She was having trouble closing her mouth and keeping her chin from scraping the floor. Lotta didn't speak as Jack tried to get the attention of the barman and told her about his afternoon.

Her mind raced at nineteen to the dozen as she took him in. She went through the article on questions and how she must actively listen and appear interested. The only thing she could really think about was his chest. She racked her brain for some of the questions the article had suggested but couldn't think of a single one. She remembered the psychologist who had written the article advising that one must appear interested by way of body language. She attempted to stop gawking, shifted forward slightly on her stool, turned her head to the side, widened her eyes a touch, and engaged her best smile.

As Jack put his drink down and settled himself on the stool, Lotta injected what she thought was her best interested tone into her voice. Remembering one of the pointers in the articles she'd read informing her that people loved to talk about food, she almost singsonged a question at him, 'What's your favourite sandwich?'

‘Sorry? You want a sandwich? You should have said while I was being served.’

Lotta beamed and raised her voice a bit higher over the noisy, chattering pub and repeated her question, ‘What’s your favourite sandwich?’

Jack leant forward on his chair. ‘Sorry, come again?’

Lotta took a breath in and blinked. ‘What’s your favourite sandwich?’ She made what she thought was a face that showed she was interested and engaged in his answer.

Jack flicked his hand dismissively. ‘No idea, really.’

‘What? You have no idea what your favourite sandwich is?’

‘Not really, no. It’s not of interest to me. I have something different every time. Whatever is on offer. Cheese, I suppose, if I was pushed. Maybe ham.’

Lotta felt a little bit irritated. That was annoying. The article said to persist with topics even if the other person was a bit shy at first. Was Jack shy? She smiled again. ‘I’ll tell you mine; it’s close between a BLT and M&S prawn.’

Jack took her by surprise, veering right off course from her list of questions. ‘Is there an M&S in Pretty Beach?’

‘What? I very much doubt it.’ Lotta narrowed her eyes – was he in fact mocking her? He was. She went to ask another question, opened her mouth and shut it again.

Jack held up his drink in between them. ‘Cheers, Lotta as in hotter Button. Nice to see you again.’

Lotta picked up her glass and clinked the top of his. ‘Cheers.’ She took a huge gulp of the wine, and then realising that she’d had nothing to eat all day and certainly not an M&S prawn sandwich, she looked at the selection of crisps on the shelf by the optics. ‘I’m going to need some crisps, pork scratchings, something.’ She took her card out of the slot in the wallet of her phone.

Jack waved her hand away, signalled to the barman, asked for two packets of crisps, and after handing her one, he looked

directly into her eyes. ‘So, the gala ball and hence why I asked you if we could meet up to get to know each other a bit better.’

‘Right. Yep, go ahead.’ Lotta didn’t like the sound of his voice. It had turned businesslike, more serious. Looking at him though every single cell in her body fizzed.

‘There is a bit more to it. The guy I’m selling part of my company to, no, that’s not correct, not part of my company, more the rights to a design of mine. Well, he’s more or less a billionaire, and he’s what one would call old-fashioned. And I sort of accidentally intimated that I had a wife, no, not a wife.’ He shook his head. ‘What I mean is; he is going to assume that you’re my serious partner. He’s one of those religious fanatics.’ Jack rolled his eyes. ‘Each to their own as it were.’

Lotta shook her head. She didn’t like the sound of that *at all*. She made a funny little sound. ‘So, this is, umm, a little bit more serious than my wedding. I have to be quite good at being a fake girlfriend, or it’s going to be costly. Is that what you’re saying?’

Jack thought about her question for a second and nodded, his expression serious. ‘When you put it like that, yes. I think you need to be more than good for me to execute this well.’

Lotta swallowed at the word execute. ‘How much money are we talking about?’ she asked.

There was another pause. ‘A lot.’

‘Right. When you say a lot, do you mean like a lot or *a lot*, a lot?’

Jack stared over to the other side of the pub and blinked several times, then turned back to her, his face serious but hard to read. ‘A *lot*.’

Lotta swore. ‘Okay. Hmm.’ Lotta chewed the side of her lip. ‘So, if I stuff up, it’s not just a case of being found out for having a fake girlfriend. It’s a whole other ball game involving a lot of money, is that right? That’s what you’re telling me and why you wanted to meet in a pub.’

Jack raised his eyebrows. ‘Yeah, if you stuffed up, it would mean the deal I had been negotiating on for the best part of

two years would be down the drain.’

Lotta swallowed, and her voice came out sort of tinkly due to the adrenaline now pumping through her veins. ‘I see. So there’s quite a lot riding on this ball.’

‘Only if you attend.’

‘And if I don’t attend, what would happen then?’

‘I’ll have to make up yet another excuse as to where my partner is and why she couldn’t come.’

‘Right. Can I just clarify? How did you get yourself in the position whereby this billionaire thinks you have a partner?’

‘First of all, he just sort of assumed it. I’m not quite sure why because I never said or did anything to make him think that I had a wife at that stage. I suppose I lied by omission a few times, and then one time I met up with him, he said that I’d have to bring my wife next time and instead of correcting him, I lamely just nodded and agreed. It just sort of went on from there. He does know I’m not married to, well, to you.’

‘I see. I thought you didn’t care what people think. You told me that at the bar in the hotel.’

‘In day-to-day life, I don’t. Where there is a lot of my money involved, it’s a different ball game altogether. I very much care. This cannot fail.’

‘Oh.’ Lotta felt a funny clammy feeling behind her knees. Possibly sweat. It wasn’t pleasant.

‘Do you think you could handle it?’ Jack asked, looking her directly in the eyes.

Lotta shrugged, she cringed at stuffing up, she wasn’t sure. The only thing she knew was the strange feeling running through her veins was somehow addictively nice. ‘I’m up for a challenge.’

‘Good.’

Lotta flicked the cover on her phone open and navigated to Jack’s email. ‘I didn’t get a chance to look at the invitation.’ She pressed on the attachment and stopped herself from



gaping. This was no cobbled-together ball in a village hall. 'Oh, okay. Right. Yep, okay.'

'Problem?'

Lotta gulped. She would be needing something more than the dress currently screwed up in the bottom of one of the cardboard moving boxes in the sitting room with the scratching animal. 'It's at the ballroom at Walton Court Palace...' Lotta trailed off.

'Yep. It's a ball, so yeah, it's in the ballroom.'

'Black tie and ballgowns,' Lotta said feebly as she read the bottom of the invitation.

'Yes. Is there a problem with that?'

'No. Not at all,' Lotta replied. *Of course I have all manner of ballgowns hanging in my non-existent wardrobe to choose from in my non-existent bedroom,* she thought.

Jack drained his drink. 'Another drink, and we'll get onto the questions, shall we?'

Lotta couldn't decide if Jack was being humorous or not as she watched all her ideas of staying for one drink and getting the next ferry home slam head first straight out the pub window. 'Yep. Works for me.'

He chuckled. 'What's your favourite sport?'

Lotta couldn't think of anything worse than sport.

Jack laughed as she screwed up her face. 'What would you like to drink?'

'White wine, please. Large.'

The next morning, Lotta was sitting up in bed in the alcove of the breakfast room with the quilt tucked up under her chin, three books on the bed next to her, and her Kindle open and propped up on her knees. With a cup of tea in hand and a pile of toast and jam beside her, she was just finishing the part in the Irish trilogy where the protagonist had kissed the American movie star. Lost in a world of rain, castles, and impossibly white teeth, she finished a couple more chapters and then picked up her phone. Opening the gala ball invitation, she clicked on the link to the web page for the event. Three minutes later, she was texting Liv.

*Lotta: Morning. She added a pink love heart. Are you up?*

*Liv: Morning. It's twenty past eleven, of course I'm up!!! How was it last night?*

*Lotta: Good.*

*Liv: Good good? Or good with a but?*

Lotta sucked in air through her teeth and looked up at the ceiling for a second. There was definitely a but. She didn't tell Liv about the strange feeling running through her veins or the fact that she'd barely been able to tear her eyes away from Jack's all night. She also declined to mention the artistic gymnastics her heart had taken to with gusto.

*Lotta: So.*

She watched as the little dots from Liv's end flashed.

*Liv: Oh, dear. This doesn't sound good when you start with so.*

*Lotta: The event on my end of the bargain is a \*tiny\* bit bigger than I thought.*

*Liv: Right. Like where?*

*Lotta: Like SUPER posh. Like the dress needs to be on point.*

*Liv: Oh.*

*Lotta: I know. What am I going to do? Like I have to actually put some effort into this.*

*Liv: You need Timmy on the case.*

*Lotta: Pah! You're joking. I haven't got Timmy money.*

*Liv: True. You haven't got anything you could wear?*

*Lotta: Liv! You've seen the contents of my wardrobe now. I sold most of it on Poshmark to pay off Dan's debt. The rest of it is currently in boxes, most of which have been stored in a storage unit in the back end of Hounslow for the last I don't know how long.*

*Liv: Eeek.*

*Lotta: I know.*

*Liv: You'll find something. You always look amazing at events. You're good at dress-up, Lott.*

Lotta nodded. She was good at it, and she was good at charity shop digging for gold.

*Lotta: I hope so!*

*Liv: Anyway, how was he?*

There was no way Lotta was going to admit that Jack was gorgeous, handsome, hot, with amazing eyes, and by golly the forearms. Or that when she was near him, her veins, heart, and pretty much whole body felt as if it was on fire. Or that her heart had quickly learnt the intricacies of women's artistic gymnastics.

*Lotta: Yeah, fine.*

*Liv: Actual boyfriend material by any chance???*

*Lotta: Gosh no! No, no, no! Even if he was, there's no way I'm going down that route for a very long time. Once bitten by an app and an entrepreneur, twice shy.*

*Liv: Ahh, you never know, Lott.*

Lotta shook her head. She did know, actually. There was no way she was going down the real boyfriend road for a while, despite her heart's gymnastic routines. She'd had her fingers mightily burnt by Dan and his app and was going to cruise along on her own for a while until the essentials in her life, like a career, a stable home, and her ducks were in order and sitting happily in a nice little ordered row. There was no way she was even considering a relationship. She'd stick with her book boyfriends, thank you very much.

With an audiobook playing in her ears, Lotta had been familiarising herself with Pretty Beach by way of strolling around in and out of its backstreets. She'd gawped at all manner of houses, from little rows of cottages to Edwardian villas and everything else in between. After meandering through an area she'd learnt was known locally as 'Mermaids,' she'd climbed a winding set of stairs and taken an uphill public footpath between back gardens, where she'd found herself at the top of a meandering road which appeared as if it would take her back down to the shops. Resting her hand on her hip, an old-fashioned sign bolted to the brick wall in front of her informed her that she was on Strawberry Hill in Pretty Beach Old Town and in the distance, she could see the lighthouse looking out to sea.

As she strolled down the road and made her way to the bottom, she stopped at a row of tall

five-storey Victorian villas looming grandiosely over her. She stood by black railings and a gate leading to a tessellated path, peering at an enormous double front door. On either side of the beautiful old path, healthy-looking shrubs seemed to ripple as the wind blew their leaves. Perfectly placed beside the door, an array of pots in a jumble, planted with dancing flowers, nodded to her as if to say hello. As she went to continue, an elfin-sized woman pulled over a huge car, dashed around the front, raised her eyebrows to Lotta in greeting, and continued to help an old man get out of the car's passenger door as he spoke to her in what Lotta thought she recognised as Greek.

Not long after, Lotta found herself in the laneway and the main shops of Pretty Beach. Without her book playing in her ears, she took in the sights and sounds of the place; everything painted in pretty pastels, coordinating bunting crisscrossed above her head, huge white planters with palm trees swaying in the sea breeze.

As she arrived at a small bakery with a queue snaking out the door, she was just deciding on whether or not she could be bothered to get in line when a tiny apricot-coloured puppy attached to a woman with a pram sniffed her leg and did a tiny little wee right by her foot.

The woman squealed, ‘Ahh, Archie! So sorry. Gosh, did he get you?’

Lotta laughed and looked down. ‘No, I don’t think so.’

Just as they were both looking down, a man came out of the bakery and joined in. ‘Oi, oi, what’s happening here?’

The woman smiled. ‘Oh, hi, Pete. Archie decided he liked the look of someone, he did a little nervous wee. How embarrassing!’

Lotta laughed and looked up at the huge man with the most orange face she’d ever seen. With wraparound sunglasses perched on top of white-blond hair, the man smiled as Lotta flicked her hand in dismissal. ‘Not a problem. Even if he did get a little bit on me, I can throw them in the wash when I get home. I’m only down the road here.’

The man, who was cradling a large white bag in his right arm, wrinkled up his nose in confusion and repeated back to Lotta what she had said. ‘Only down the road here?’

Lotta nodded. ‘Yes, I’ve just...’ She went to say moved in, but she wasn’t sure if she’d moved in or was just staying for a bit, so she changed it. ‘I’m over on the other side there, right on the corner.’

The orange man’s eyebrows shot to the top of his head. ‘You’re not Lotta by any chance, are you?’

*Creepy!* Creepy orange man knew her name! What the? Before she could say anything, he’d held out his hand in

explanation. ‘Peter. Facebook.’

Just as the penny was dropping, a woman in purple tracksuit bottoms, pink sliders, and gold headphones over a beanie stopped at the commotion taking place outside the bakery. She shouted with humour in her voice and a twinkle in her eye, ‘Pete! What’s going on outside my shop? What are you doing?’

The orange man swirled his hand around at Lotta, the woman with the pram, and the dog. ‘Archie decided he quite liked the look of the new resident in Pretty Beach. He welcomed her in his own special way.’

The woman whipped her earphones from her ears as quick as a flash and squinted at Lotta. Lotta held out her hand. ‘Hi, I’m Lotta. Lotta Button.’

‘Pretty Beach to the Breakers!’ The woman beamed and gestured to another woman who was just getting out of a car at the same time. ‘Welcome, I’m Xian, and this is my daughter, Holly.’ Xian extended her hand over the top of the pram and the puppy.

‘Hello, nice to meet you,’ Lotta said with a smile and tried not to frown as the woman took a small silver flask from her pocket, put it to her lips and took a swig.

The other woman, Holly, was by Pete’s side as quick as a flash and head to toe in sparkles. ‘Lotta, is it? From the Breakers? Woohoo!’ Holly could barely contain herself. ‘Ooh, I, I mean we, have been dying to meet you. Dying!’

Lotta was taken aback. These people seemed to be genuinely pleased to meet her. She spluttered for what to say a little bit. ‘Mmm, well, here I am. Lovely to meet you all too.’

Holly was beside herself with it and sort of jigging from foot to foot on sparkly kitten heel mules. ‘So, how are you getting on so far?’ Holly asked.

‘Yes, what’s it like?’ the other woman, Xian, reiterated with concerned eyes as she took another swig from the flask. ‘Not too cold, I hope. Right on the corner there, the wind can

whip through, and with this weather we've been having, it must be chilly.'

'It's, umm, so far, so good,' Lotta replied. She wasn't going to tell them that she was freezing or that she was scared of the scratching, that she had no hot water, and she couldn't abide the snake of red carpet going up through the middle of the place. She left it that she was fine. There was no point in telling these people anyway, she wouldn't be around that long.

'You'll be okay once you get settled and you've got some hot water,' Xian said with a funny little chortle and a shrug of her shoulders.

Lotta looked back at Xian with a frown, wondering how this Xian person knew about the state of her boiler. She flicked her head in confusion and ignored it. 'Hope so.'

'Let us know if you want any help,' Pete said. 'It's how we do it around here.'

Holly slapped him on the arm and chuckled. 'Pete! She doesn't know you from Adam! As if she'd be letting you in her house.' She then turned to Lotta. 'I'm only joking. This is our very own Suntanned Pete – you're safe with him. Mostly. Just don't start talking to him about bird watching, you'll be there for days. Or boats, for that matter,' Holly joked.

Lotta chuckled. 'Okay, thanks for the tip.'

Holly continued, the diamonds in her ears glittering, 'Seriously, if you need any help just shout, either on here or on the group page. We'd love to help you out. Pretty Beach to the Breakers is needing someone like you.'

Xian added with a chuckle, 'We all help each other out down here in the sticks. It probably sounds a bit weird to you.'

The orange face creased into deep crinkles. 'Yep, we're all a bit odd here, but you might get used to us. That's, of course, if we let you stay.'

Lotta tried not to look alarmed. There was no way she was going to tell this funny little group of people that it didn't really matter to her and that she wasn't going to be staying



anyway. Because by the looks of them, they took Pretty Beach and its residents very seriously indeed.

In old jeans, an oversized shirt, a beanie, and thick socks, Lotta stood in the room she was referring to as her library room. What confronted her wasn't quite Pinterest-level library territory, but with really squinty eyes, she could just about see it. Just. She wanted it to be the sort of room where you'd walk in, settle down, pick up a book, read for a bit, and before you knew it, it had been three days. A room where you got lost in another world. A room most definitely devoid of men with apps.

Right now, it was certainly another world, and the orange cork tiles, broken light, and dirty windows weren't quite giving out the vibe she was subscribing to. Stay for three minutes and then run for the hills was more like it.

With an audiobook on her phone, she got to work, kneeling down in the dusty far corner of the room. With a knife, she jammed it under a cork tile, lifted the edge, and pulled. With a satisfying crack, the tile snapped away from the floorboards. The same thing happened with the next one and then the next, until much quicker than she had expected, she'd backed her way to the fireplace. What looked back at her as she knelt back on her heels was a dusty timber floor with wide planks and wood knots aplenty. Different shades of wood from the march of time made a pattern, and the tall skirting boards without their orange companion suddenly looked much better. Things were looking up.

Spurred on by the timber floor, the pile of orange cork, and the spoken words coming out of her phone, Lotta cracked on

until she was way past the fireplace and covered in grime and tiny pieces of cork. Just over an hour and a half from when she'd started, the small room had lost an orange cork floor and was beginning to smile.

Starting to pile the cork tiles into cardboard moving boxes, Lotta worked until they were all full and, one by one, began the process of lugging them out to the shed. With a lot of huffing, puffing and cursing as the last box went into the shed, she stood with her hands on her hips by the French doors surveying her work. It looked better, her library vision was closer, but there was still a long way to go.

After a cup of tea sitting on the upturned Fortnum and Mason's basket that had been there when she had arrived, Lotta then spent another hour on her hands and knees, cracking off glue from the floor with a knife. She then swept the whole mess up into a pile in the corner and investigated the curtains hanging sadly at the windows. What she was presented with was floor-to-ceiling light-blue dirty curtains edged with tiny faded, but once beautiful, gold tassels. As she moved each panel along the dusty old curtain rail, she coughed as years of dirt made its way into her lungs. After lugging in a stepladder she'd found in the cupboard under the stairs, the curtains were in a pile in the middle of the room, and the once-dim room was brighter.

With the aid of a few questions to her phone and the assumption that she had nothing to lose, a few hours later, the curtains had been through a cold wash twice. As Lotta dragged them outside, she took a good ten minutes grappling with an old-fashioned pulley-system washing line until, finally, the curtains were hanging up in the sea air. Standing, gazing upwards, she turned her mouth upside down and nodded to herself at the same time. Contrary to what the internet had advised, the velvet had not been crushed or ruined. The dirty, water-stained blue had disappeared to reveal a pale powdery, baby blue, and the smelly, faded gold tassels were now clean. Lotta stood analysing whether or not the curtains had shrunk, but as they sailed up high in the wind, she couldn't tell one way or the other. For a start, they would do.

The rest of the afternoon had involved more of the same; the floor had been vacuumed a multitude of times, and still, the Hoover continued to pick up dust. With the little brush attachment, she had stood on the stepladder and vacuumed every corner of the shelves until there was not a speck of dust or a cobweb to be seen anywhere, at least not by the naked eye. Each and every shelf around the room was now well on the way to being worthy of one of her books. Getting to work with a bucket and a scented spray, she repeated her route around the room spraying, wiping, scooting up and down the ladder, dragging it to the next section until she'd been around the room.

Standing back to survey her work, she was pleasantly surprised. With the doors open to the fresh air and the spray having done its job well, the room was a lot more welcoming. The once grubby dusty shelves in their faded old white paint were now ready to give her books a home. The wide planks on the floor felt comforting underfoot, and the cork tile seemed as if it had never existed at all.

A few hours later, the art deco fireplace had been washed down with more than a few buckets of water, the hearth was swept and vacuumed, and the old Fortnum's basket sat adjacent to it with a smile on its face.

Lotta was quickly running out of steam, but with one last push, she wrangled with the pulley-system washing line and heaved the curtains back inside. Then in the little utility room off the kitchen stood repeatedly pressing the steam button on the iron until she'd gone over each of the insides of the four curtains, and there was not a crease to be seen.

Precariously perched on the stepladder, she'd re-attached the curtains, realised that they had indeed shrunk a tiny bit, swept them back behind their old faded brass tiebacks, and smiled. When she'd first walked in, the curtains had appeared a murky blue with stains and dirt. She'd thought they'd been fit for nothing much other than the bin, but the washing machine and line drying out in the air had worked wonders. Lotta couldn't quite believe it. In not too long at all, the old shelved room had turned from a cork-filled, dusty, depressing

corner of the house to somewhere she couldn't wait to start loading her books.

As she walked back out into the hallway faced with the red carpet, a little smile pulled at the corners of her lips. Maybe there was hope for the rest of the house yet.

Later that night, fuelled by enthusiasm at how well the library room had turned out, Lotta spent ages pottering around in the rest of the house. Once it got dark, she'd lit some candles and enjoyed the cathartic domesticity of making a huge bowl of buttery comfort food pasta. The smell of garlic and Parmesan filled the funny old house with such a cosy, homey scent; it almost somehow made Lotta feel as if she'd lived there forever. With a glass of wine by her side, she was sitting in the conservatory on one of the breakfast chairs with the bowl of pasta on her lap when she got a text message from Jack.

*Jack: Hey, Lotta. I've just come off a business call with America. There was rather a lot of interest in you when I mentioned you would be at the ball. I think we might have to meet up again beforehand for another fake date so that we can go over any further questions. I assume you're really busy, but the more I've thought about it, the more I really don't want to mess this up. If you're going to come (no going back now), would you mind a quick coffee? Jack.*

Lotta spooned the buttery pasta into her mouth and chuckled to herself. Would she mind meeting up with him again to go over the details of their pretend outing? *Oh, tough one. She could just about manage it if she had to.* Not wanting to appear too keen, once she'd finished her pasta, topped up her wine, and was sitting back in the conservatory looking out at the stars on a deep violet-black sky with the breeze from the sea swaying the old vine beside her, she waited. Then she checked her watch to ensure it had been a full fifteen minutes since his text had arrived, took out her phone, and tapped away a response.

*Lotta: Sure. No probs.*

*Jack: How about coffee?*

*Lotta: Yes. Works for me.*

With a quick exchange of messages, a date was set, and Lotta couldn't help but smile. Although it was only a coffee and it was indeed not an actual date but a fake one, Lotta couldn't deny the fact that she was looking forward to it very much indeed. And her heart? It may have just put on a sparkly red and white leotard and taken up residence on the side of an Olympic gymnastics sprung floor.

Lotta had been sitting on a comfy sofa in a bookshop for well over an hour. Lost in a book, she'd forgotten most of her problems; she wasn't thinking about Dan or bills or the fact that she was over halfway through her life, and it was not going to plan at all. Not only was it not going to plan, it was fast on a road to nowhere. In fact, what even was the plan or the road, for that matter? Putting her book down for a second and staring into space, she watched as a woman with a double buggy, two toddlers, and a baby carrier strapped to her chest navigated her way around an awkward corner of a bookshelf. She sighed inwardly; she was certainly nowhere near the part of her life where she had assumed that she might also be navigating narrow aisles in bookshops on her way to showing her offspring the wonderful world of reading. That part of her life hadn't yet come to be.

Gathering up her books, she went to the payment area, paid and then headed to the café. Finding a quiet spot in the corner where she could lose herself for a bit longer, she sat down at a table next to two women who looked to be in their fifties and had a piece of cake in front of them and were stabbing it from either side with forks. With her Kindle in front of her, she fiddled with the teapot stirring the tea bags around and around the pot, waiting for it to brew, and before she knew it, she was tuned into the women's conversation and eagerly earwigging on what they had to say.

'How's Gaby getting on since the breakup?' She heard the woman on her immediate right ask.

The other woman let out a long exaggerated sigh. ‘Ahh, better, I suppose.’

‘You don’t expect things to go like that, do you?’

‘I know. I didn’t think I would be seeing my daughter in such a sorry old state. You live and learn, though. You pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and get on with it, is what I said to her.’

‘True, that. You do. So, has she been seeing the counsellor? You said she was booked in to see one the last time I saw you. How has that gone?’

‘Yeah, she’s been a few times now. It seems to be going well and doing her the world of good. I’m surprised she’s kept it up.’

‘Glad to hear it. Who would have thought Ben would have left her for her best friend?’

‘Tell me about it. They’d been friends for years too, as you well know.’

‘Nasty piece of work underneath it all, I guess,’ the woman opposite and to the right of Lotta stated solemnly.

‘Yep.’

‘Gaby is well rid of him, though. Plenty more fish in the sea, or so they say.’

‘I know, not that she’s thinking along those lines at the moment. I don’t think she’s too interested in any fish right now.’

Lotta smiled to herself. She knew how Gaby felt.

‘I guess not. I don’t blame her one iota. Remember when Dave left me back in the day? I never thought I’d ever be happy again. I cried every day for months.’

‘How can I forget?’

‘Now look at me.’

The other woman laughed. ‘I told Gaby that.’

‘And what did she say?’



There was a chortle. ‘She said it was different in the old days.’

‘Ha ha. Blimey! We’re not that old, are we?’

‘We must be. Anyway, she’s starting a glow-up, so that’s giving her something to think about.’

‘A what-up?’

Lotta strained and shifted quietly in her seat to get her ear closer to the conversation. ‘A glow-up. They’re all the rage.’

‘What is one of those? I’ve never heard of it in my life!’

‘It’s sort of like a transformation.’

‘Right. Meaning...’

‘Meaning a program of doing things to improve oneself.’

‘Mmm, I see. What, like self-love and stuff?’

‘Yup. She’s started eating more healthily and going to the gym. She got her hair done and had lashes put on.’

Lotta watched out of the corner of her eye as the woman gesticulated around the table. ‘She got a manicure and has been doing yoga. You know, stuff like that.’

‘Is it working?’

There was a pause. ‘Definitely. Even if it’s just because she’s actually doing something, if you see what I mean. She was feeling and looking terrible – she’d lost all interest in everything. Schlepping around in manky old tracksuit bottoms all day, not washing her hair.’ She lowered her voice. ‘Keep it to yourself, but I think there were quite a few days where she didn’t see the shower at all. Possibly even a week! Plus, she had no routine and took weeks off work. Then there was all the fast food which does you no favours at all. Basically, she’d lost all interest in herself, physically and mentally.’

‘Sounds awful.’

‘It wasn’t great. Now she’s been going out on long walks in the woods and really looking after her mental health so, yeah, things are looking up. Glowing up, I should say.’

‘I’m so glad she’s on the mend.’

Lotta looked down at her tracksuit bottoms and then at her nails. She flicked the camera on her phone so that it faced her and examined her hair, scrunched up into a ponytail and not a good one at that, and she’d not had it properly styled in a very long time. She held her nails out in front of her, they’d not seen much attention since Dan had left.

She shuddered as she looked at the reflection on her phone. It was not good. She was just like the daughter she’d just been listening about. Had she lost all interest in herself too? She’d not been as bad as not showering for a week, but she couldn’t be bothered with much other than reading. She sighed, and the image of the fake dating ball went through her head. Who was she even kidding? How could she attend a fancy event the way she was looking? She didn’t have a dress, and she was certainly in need of a zhuzh if she was going to be going anywhere involving the word ‘gala’ or ‘ball’.

She let the women’s conversation fade away and typed glow-up into the search bar on her phone, opened a few various windows and made herself acquainted with what the women at the adjacent table had been discussing.

*A Glow Up is a transformation. It can be emotional, mental, and physical, and its goal is for the better. Glow Ups can be planned or simply evolve.*

Lotta mused what she had been through since Dan had left and realised that just as the woman’s daughter, Gaby, she had let herself go. Yes, she’d scrubbed up just about well enough for the various weddings she’d been to, and she’d shown up at interviews presentable enough, but overall, things weren’t great. She’d let lots of things slide and not just her appearance, but her finances, her self-care and her interest in life. She had to admit to herself that, really, underneath it all, since Dan had left, she’d mostly just been existing. He’d left her in a sorry old state, with not a lot of enthusiasm for much else. Surviving was the order of the day, and thriving was nowhere to be seen. Plus, deep down, she was sorry for herself and had let herself slide into a hole.

Continuing to scroll through the various descriptions of glow-ups, Lotta wondered if this modern version of what was essentially an old-school makeover was what she needed in her life. As she observed the two women beside her gather their things and leave the café, she flicked open the first page of a new book, stuck in her nose, and dived head first down a well of words. And as she got lost in an old cottage just on the coast in France, the glow-up sat just at the back of her mind.



Once Lotta was back in Pretty Beach and had strolled from the ferry wharf to Pretty Beach to the Breakers, she settled down at the breakfast table with a coffee and got to work. The women in the café and the impending fake date and ball with Jack had flicked a switch. It was, in fact, time to transform her life.

She applied for three jobs via an online job board, got herself an A3 pad, and typed 'glow-up' into the search bar. Half an hour later and she'd had an initiation into transforming her life. From the power of nature to the ins and outs of lashes, to staying on top of mental health, Lotta, if nothing else, was well-informed.

With a gorgeous ink pen, she wrote at the top of a sheet of paper in calligraphic writing.

LOTTA BUTTON: The Transformation Challenge

Goals:

Feel mentally more in control

Stop analysing what happened with Dan

Improve my surroundings

Stop thinking I'm a mid-thirties failure

Develop healthy habits

Like what I see in the mirror.

Update Pretty Beach to the Breakers (maybe stay?)

Centre on my health

Improve my diet

Dedicate time to me (not just reading)

Make a financial plan

Focus on my wellness

Feel proud of my appearance

Work on improving my self-talk (avoid the Dan and app words at all costs)

Improve my mental strength

Look after my body and hair

Rock it at the ball (!)

Lotta made a cup of tea, stepped into the conservatory, pulled back the doors, and crunched over the rain-speckled terrace outside. Perched on the side of the garden wall as wisps of steam rose from the mug cupped in her hands, she thought more about her list. Flitting her eyes between gazing out over the garden and perusing the list, she slowly and rhythmically dipped Digestives in and out of the hot tea, silently mulling over her glow-up plan. She held the list out in front of her and scanned down with a look of determination. As she continued with the biscuits, she chuckled to herself and thought *stuff it*. The glow-up transformation and the diet could always start tomorrow, couldn't it?

Lotta propped her phone in the middle of the breakfast table, tapped the green icon, clicked on chats, and then pressed to start a video call with Timmy. She'd known Timmy since her early days at uni, seen him through all sorts of things, a trillion boyfriends, all sorts of ups and downs until finally, Timmy had settled down and fallen in love. Timmy was a winner in all areas of life; he was the owner of a successful career, was a great friend, had an immaculate appearance, was fit, healthy, and happy. Right now, in Lotta's life, it felt as if just about everything going on for Timmy was the opposite of her.

Just seeing his face on her phone screen made her chuckle. He was funny and gorgeous and always full of cheer. 'Hello, lovely.'

'Darling! What the heck? You're looking worse than when we met in the pub! What is going on with you?'

'Thanks, Timmy. Nothing like hearing a truth bomb from you at this time of the day.'

'Darling, you're always going to hear the truth from me. What are friends for if not that? It's the only way to be, and let me tell you, you're not looking great.'

Lotta sighed. 'Do I really look that bad?'

Timmy nodded seriously. 'Where are the slices of caramel-honey in your hair? The glowing skin of the Lotta of old. Your aura looks...' He paused for a second, 'Off.' He grimaced and screwed up his lips. 'Very, very off. Are you okay? I'm beginning to get concerned.'

Lotta resisted the urge to blurt out a diatribe of self-pity. She was *okay*, but she was pretty fed up. 'It's not the best time in my life, it has to be said. I'm attempting to stay positive.'

'What you need is one of our good old-fashioned nights out. A one-night stand, perhaps,' Timmy mused with a twinkle of humour in his eyes.

Lotta rolled her eyes. 'Yeah, no. Not on the cards, I'm afraid. Even if I had the finances for one of our nights out, I'm not up for it at the moment. I don't have the stamina. And, please, I have never had a one-night stand in my life, and I do not intend to start anything like that anytime soon. I'm off men altogether,' Lotta replied, whilst in her head thinking that wasn't quite true where Jack and the fake date were concerned.

'No time like the present. You're not getting any younger, Lott. Not long until the big forty.'

'Thanks! You do not need to remind me of that. I'm halfway through my life and going nowhere fast. I have a few years to go until forty, though! Speaking of that and the fact that you said I look awful...'

'Yep. What?'

Lotta started giggling. 'I'm partaking in a transformation.'

'About time. It's been a long time since Despicable Dan and your downhill slope since then. What is this transformation going to involve? Will my channels of contacts and vast knowledge be required?'

Lotta laughed. Timmy's job involved PR and marketing for celebrities, meaning he knew people for everything. 'Umm, they will be very much needed, yes, but I will require the budget version.'

Timmy flapped his hands around. 'I can do budget.'

Lotta chuckled. 'You can?'

'Of course!'

'Timmy, your budget is my Dior. I'm meaning supermarket budget, if that. I'm preferably after free.'

Timmy squinted through the screen. ‘We’re going to need to start with the hair.’

‘I know. I thought the same.’ Lotta put her hand up in a stop sign. ‘We’re talking DIY here, Tim. I cannot afford any sort of salon and definitely not one of your Chelsea ones.’

‘Sheesh.’ Timmy let out a low whistle. ‘It’s going to be tough.’

‘It’ll be a challenge.’

Timmy shook his head. ‘You’re going to have to learn how to do DIY flashes of honey through your hair. It’s debatable if this is going to work.’ He grimaced. ‘You’re going to go into the world of box dye. I never thought I would see the day.’ Timmy did a funny little shudder.

‘I’m sure you can come up with something.’

‘I’ll get on the case.’ Timmy looked down and then back up again and did a circular movement with his right hand in front of his face. ‘Then there’s the skin problem and then the eyelashes. Yeah. That all needs work.’

Lotta chuckled. ‘You think there’s hope for me?’

Timmy sucked air in through his teeth and made a wincing face. ‘I don’t know.’ He shook his head. ‘At least the only way is up.’

‘I guess there is that, yes.’

‘I’ll get on it. Trust me.’

‘Good, thanks.’

‘What else is happening as part of this transformation?’

Lotta patted her stomach. ‘The post-Dan break-up weight is going.’

Timmy’s eyes shot up. ‘Rightio. How are we going to do that? Have you actually joined a gym?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous! Baby steps, Tim. I’ve thought about taking up running.’

‘You! Ha ha ha. What running along with a book held up in front of your face?’

‘I know. I had a look at that thing about getting off the sofa and doing a five-mile run or something.’

‘And?’

‘I made a cup of tea and had another biscuit.’

‘Hilarious, darling. Gosh, I love you!’

‘I’m going to try and run by the sea every morning at 5 a.m.’

‘There is no way you’ll get up at that time of the morning. Get a bike, Lott. It might be a better place to start.’

‘You think?’

‘Incidental exercise is the best sort of exercise.’

‘Yep, yes, you’ve told me that before,’ Lotta acknowledged.

‘Walk everywhere. Stroll down there by the sea, that will do you a world of good, too. It’s said to be beneficial. I get it from walking next to the Thames,’ Timmy joked.

‘I will. I am. The reason I mostly want to do it is for my brain. I mean my mental health.’

‘It’s the best thing ever for that.’

‘Yes, you’ve told me that before.’

‘I know, and you’ve never listened to me. That, along with your books, and you’ll be grand. Are you feeling low again, then? Is the Despicable Dan thing getting to you?’

Lotta had been determined not to let herself slip down into the dark place she’d found herself in when Dan had first left, but she’d got close to the deep well of unhappiness that had swallowed her whole at that time. She didn’t want to admit it to anyone and wasn’t going to let it take hold of her again. ‘I’m fine at the moment, but I’ve realised I’ve got to do something. As long as I keep it in check I’ll be fine, which is why I have a list - a transformation list.’



Timmy blinked rapidly. 'Self-awareness is half the battle.'

'True.'

'Okay, darling,' Timmy said, twisting around and peering behind him. 'Look, I have to love you and leave you. I'll be back with shopping lists and video links. We're going to make you glow. You will be the belle of the ball, my darling.'

'Thank you,' Lotta replied with a laugh. 'See you later.'

'Bye.'

Lotta stood staring at the screen, thinking about her list, and nodded to herself. She wondered if Timmy would be right because, for some strange reason, being the belle of the ball was very, very important to her indeed.

Lotta, in comfy Lulu leggings, a giant oversized hoodie, thick socks, sheepskin slippers and a beanie, was standing in the conservatory with a cup of tea, staring out at the garden when the doorbell went. *At least that works*, she thought as she scurried through the house and opened the heavy, old, faded green front door. A man in a navy boiler suit, with a tool belt around his hips and work boots, was standing on the path and a chilly wind rustled through the leaves on the trees.

‘Morning, love. Ron, Pretty Beach Boilers at your service.’

Lotta smiled. ‘Morning, Ron, how are you?’

The man took in Lotta’s attire, looking her up and down. He broke into a cheeky smile and winked. ‘I’m good, but you’re looking mighty chilly. I’m here to solve all your problems, my lovely.’

Lotta played along with the banter. ‘Good to hear that. According to the Facebook group, you have extensive knowledge of the intricacies of the heating systems installed in the older houses of Pretty Beach. You are, by all accounts, actually a master of boilers.’

Ron chortled. ‘I don’t know about that, love. I do know I’ve been doing this for long enough to have come across it all over the years.’ He sucked in air through pursed lips and looked into the hallway. ‘Haven’t been here before, that I can tell you for free.’

‘Ha ha. You don’t need to tell me that, actually. Filling the bath with kettle water told me that.’

‘Brr. In this strange cold snap we’re having that would not have been fun. Right, talking of kettles...’

‘I’ll go and do the honours.’

‘Builder’s with milk, two heaped sugars, and when I say heaped, I mean it,’ Ron added a wink as he knocked his boots on the step.

Lotta smiled to herself as she opened the door fully, and Ron walked in. He peered up the spiral staircase with the red carpet. ‘Up on the first floor, is it?’

‘Yes, huge airing cupboard right in the middle there.’

‘Rightio. I’ll see what we’re dealing with.’

‘I’d do just about anything for a hot shower right now.’

Ron made a clucking sound. ‘I’m not making any promises, but I’ve never been beaten yet.’

‘I’ll make the tea at the double,’ Lotta replied, turned the other way, and made her way to the kitchen.

After rummaging around in one of the cardboard moving boxes, Lotta eventually found a little stash of sugar packets, poured four into a well-brewed mug of tea, and took it upstairs to the landing. In front of her, an old dust sheet was laid out carefully on top of the red carpet, Ron’s toolbox was propped open to the left-hand side, and Ron was down on his knees, peering up at the boiler with his bottom in the air. On hearing Lotta’s arrival with the tea and with a lot of huffing and puffing, he kneeled his way out backwards and then sat on his heels. He let out a long low whistle. ‘You could be in luck if I’ve got the parts in the back of my van. It’s not in as bad a way as I thought it might be.’ He tapped the side of the boiler. ‘I’m assuming it hasn’t actually been used that much, even though it’s fairly old.’

Lotta smiled hopefully and handed over the tea. ‘Ahh, that’s music to my ears.’

‘You inherited the house, that’s the story, isn’t it?’

Lotta nodded. ‘I did yes, but I haven’t been here at all to live before now, so it’s been empty for a fair few years now –

it was empty before that too, for a long time. I think it was rented out on and off here and there. It was a distant family member who left me his holiday home. I should clarify, *one* of his holiday homes. We're talking mega-rich here.'

'Not a bad distant family to have.' Ron chuckled and looked up at the art deco skylight. 'Funny old place. I always wondered when we'd see someone here again. It was always busy back in the day, I've been told.'

'Oh, right. I got it as a, well, a bit of an afterthought, I suppose.'

Ron clucked his teeth. 'My kind of afterthought.' He took a sip of his tea and looked up at the third floor. 'This place will be worth a fair bit these days.'

Lotta frowned, she didn't have a clue about property prices. She'd thought about the house only as a temporary stopgap to get her out of a stitch and it had to be kept in the family anyway. Not only was she not really interested, but she was also still half-thinking about getting back to publishing and renting another lovely flat in the heart of things in town. 'I wouldn't really know.'

'Yeah, yeah.' Ron nodded repeatedly. 'You're a lucky duck. It took us a while to get to Pretty Beach, but we made it in the end.'

Lotta had no idea what Ron was talking about. Continuing, he jerked his thumb up above his head and adopted a full-on Northern accent. 'Up North. We came down about nineteen years ago. We first came down here before we got married. Lovely down here then, but it was quieter than these days, of course. Not a lot of jobs then. Yeah, anyway, my wife said to me then, "Ron, if it's the last thing I do, I'm moving to the coast."'

'Ahh, nice story.'

'It wasn't easy, mind, and we'd never have been able to do it these days since the train arrived. Well, there was always a train, of course, but not a high-speed train back in our day.'

'It's changed the area much?'

‘Ahh, you know. It offers more options. You can fly up to town or Newport in the blink of an eye. But Pretty Beach itself, not really. We live to our own little beat down here. You’ll get to see it soon enough.’

‘Hmm.’

Ron looked back at the boiler, drained his mug and handed it to Lotta. ‘I’ll get my skates on with this, and with any luck, you’ll have hot water by the end of the day.’



Ron tucked a branded Pretty Beach Boilers baseball cap on his head. ‘The accounts department, that’ll be the wife, will email you the damage. LO rates of course, so that should help a little bit.’

‘Sorry, what rates?’

Ron hesitated for a second and then explained, ‘Locals Only. It’s a Pretty Beach thing.’

Lotta looked at him quizzically and repeated what he’d said back to him, ‘Locals Only?’

Clocking the question in Lotta’s voice, Ron smiled. ‘It’s like a thing. A Pretty Beach thing that goes on down here. You’ll see it everywhere now I’ve said.’

Lotta squinted her eyes, remembering the two letters she’d seen at the end of Facebook posts in the group. She then recalled the sign she’d seen on the beach. ‘Right, Locals Only, yes, sorry, my mind went blank for a sec.’

‘You’ll see it in the pubs, the bakery, it goes nuts at Christmas if you’re still here by then. Oh, and try it in the Sugar Wharf, a lovely place down over the other side. A young lass took it over a while ago. We’re talking next-level Locals Only cakes made by a Pretty Beach True Blue.’

Lotta wasn’t quite sure what Ron was going on about or even if he was speaking in the same language as her. ‘Okay, well, thanks for letting me know about that.’

Ron gestured with his phone as he stepped out onto the path. 'Then there's the Pretty Beach way.'

'Goodness, I've got a lot to learn,' she said, sliding her hands into her back pockets and raising her eyebrows, waiting for Ron to enlighten her further.

'Ahh, yep. You see, it takes a while to get used to, and it takes a while longer for them to get used to you, as it were. Took us a bit of time, anyway...being from a different part of the country and all that. At one point, I thought we'd made the wrong move.'

Lotta didn't have a clue what he was going on about. 'What's the Pretty Beach way?'

'You do things for locals, and they do stuff back. Get it?'

Lotta thought about her rented flat where she barely raised her eyebrows at her neighbours. 'Not really.'

Ron pointed up towards the boiler, and the corners of his eyes crinkled. 'The boiler. On top of LO rates I threw things in for cost seeing as you're in a pickle and all that and because you make a good cup of builder's. That's the Pretty Beach way.'

'What? Why would you do that for me?'

'Tis the way it works down 'ere. I wouldn't be caught dead charging the new resident of Pretty Beach to the Breakers for my usual rate. I'd be eaten alive, and when I say *alive*, I mean dead as a doornail by that lot down at the bakery, and Pete would have my guts for garters.'

Lotta shook her head. 'I don't think so. No one even knows I'm here.'

Ron threw his head back in laughter. 'Oh, my life! Oh heck! Ho, ho, ho. Trust me, love, everyone from the bus driver to the midwife knows you're here.'

'Really?'

'The new resident at Pretty Beach to the Breakers? You, my love, are *the* talk of the town.'

A few days later, Lotta had already been in the coffee shop for well over an hour and had put a post about it on her reading social media account before Jack arrived. She'd bought a coffee, settled down in a chair with a Kindle, and got lost in a book. Flipping over her watch, she checked the time and looked around to see him walking across the room. She pretended to herself that he wasn't tall, dark, and handsome and focused on the fact that he was here for one reason and one reason only, and that was to make sure that their fake dating pact worked. She also tried to kid herself that her heart hadn't picked up a few beats as she took in his fine form.

His face didn't crack as he walked up to the table. 'Hi.'

Lotta gazed up. He was gorgeous. She ignored it. 'Hello. How are you?'

'Good. What can I get you?'

'A tea would be lovely.'

Jack didn't say anything, spun on his heels, and she watched him as he made his way to the counter, stood in the queue, and then turned around with a tray. He put the tea down on the table, then a plate with cake, and sat down. 'So, Lotta Button, what questions have you got for me today?'

Lotta couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or humorous. Maybe a bit of both. Whatever the case, he didn't sound very friendly. As the other few times she had met him, there was a mixture of the fact that her veins were pumping nineteen to the dozen at his beauty at the same time that he irritated her a tiny

bit. She couldn't quite get her head around the conflicting emotions. She decided to ignore his gruffness and chirped, 'Today we need to learn more about each other, so I can hold a conversation with anyone at the table at the ball.'

Lotta tapped on her phone, pulled up a list, and started to scan down. With her phone clutched in her hands and a serious look on her face, she was just about to launch into the first question when Jack put his hand up. 'As in the pub. How about we just chat? I'd much prefer that.'

Lotta's pose relaxed a little bit, but she started to ramble. 'Chat? I thought this meeting was to tie up any loose ends. What about if there's a question I can't answer at the ball? What will I do then? What if I get myself into a sticky situation?'

Jack regarded Lotta soberly. 'I'm sure you'll be able to cope.' Was there a hint of amusement at the outer edges of his eyes? Was he in fact humouring her? Had her heart started to race more than when he had first sat down? It had. Definitely. One hundred per cent.

'Right.' Lotta gulped. The thing was, she had no idea what to say to this deliciously easy-on-the-eye man if it wasn't scripted. It wasn't quite as simple as it was in her books. She'd managed it at the wedding all those moons ago when she'd sat beside him at the bar, but things had changed, mostly the feeling in the pit of her stomach and her heart trotting around in leotards on balance beams.

Also, it had been a long time since she had dallied with any sort of dating, or relationship with anyone else. Not that this was a date. Of course not. There had been no one since Dan, and even when she *had* been with Dan, there hadn't been a lot of chatting going on; she'd spent most of her time buoying up his gigantic entrepreneurial ego and making sure his shirts were ironed for his very important meetings. Before she'd thought about it, she blurted out, 'You don't seem the chatting type.'

Jack didn't smile, he just stirred his tea without looking up. 'What is one of those types?'



Lotta realised she'd sounded quite rude. 'Oh, err, I don't know. I thought questions would be' – she thought for a second – 'easier.'

'Hmm. Easier? Easier than what?'

'It doesn't matter. If you want to chat, then why don't you start?' Lotta asked.

Jack pushed the plate which held a large slice of chocolate cake into the middle of the table and passed Lotta a fork. 'Here, how about we start with this?'

Lotta took the fork, slotted it into the top of the cake with the butter icing, scooped off a large helping, and popped it into her mouth. Jack's eyebrows raised. 'Going in for the kill with the icing. I like the way you roll.'

'It's the best bit.'

'Correct.'

'Is this the sort of chatting you mean?' Lotta asked as she reached over and took another piece of cake with icing. 'Learning which bit of cake is the best.'

'It's better than you asking me what my favourite colour is,' Jack stated without a smile. 'Or another one of those questions on your list.'

Lotta narrowed her eyes and put her fork down. 'I thought that was a good idea, seeing as you have a lot riding on this.' She stopped for a second. 'What are we calling this?' She waved her hands around. 'A deal. Is that what we have?' Lotta asked, hating to admit to herself that she wanted oh-so-much more than a deal.

Jack didn't appear bothered by Lotta's change in tone and continued to slice off a piece of cake. 'No idea. It doesn't really matter what we call it, does it?'

'I suppose not.'

Jack pushed the plate away and sat back in his chair. Lotta attempted not to stare at his chest and fiddled with her fork. 'I shouldn't really be eating this,' she said, looking at the cake.

‘Why not? I thought you said you didn’t have any special dietary requirements. Should I know about this as part of our fake arrangement? Do you have a health condition that’s affected by cake?’

Lotta thought about the transformation and the fact that sugar was akin to poison in some of the things she’d read. ‘Oh, nothing. I just – I’m on a bit of a health kick.’

‘I see.’ Jack’s face still didn’t give much away about what was going on in his brain.

Lotta put her fork down, wriggled in her chair and made herself more comfortable. ‘So, seeing as we are, umm, just chatting, what has been going on in your week?’

Jack turned his mouth upside down in contemplation. ‘Work. Work and more work.’ He raised his eyes up and thought for a second. ‘I’ve been on the train to Paris, that was quite nice but brief. You?’

Lotta chuckled to herself. Been to Paris! Chance would be a fine thing. She’d crawled around making friends with orange cork and had washed, ironed, and re-hung curtains that she’d thought were on their last legs and had been wearing dust from the sixties. ‘Oh, you know, this and that.’

‘How are you getting on with the house?’ Jack asked with mild interest.

Lotta made a funny little groaning sound. *I’m sleeping in a small alcove surrounded by books, there’s a scratching in the sitting room which is scaring the living daylights out of me, I’ve only just got hot water, and there is a vine growing like a triffid inside the house,* she thought in her head. *Apart from that, everything is hunky-dory.* Of course, she told him none of that whatsoever. ‘Good. A bit tricky, but mostly good on the whole.’

Jack picked up on the tone in her voice instantly. ‘Tricky? Why’s that?’

Lotta tried to make light of it. ‘Oh, you know, there’s a lot to do, and then there’s me. Some of it’s a bit hard for me to do on my own.’

‘Right. I see, yes, it must be.’

‘When we met in the hotel, I told you that the house hadn’t been lived in for years, and it had a clause on it that meant it had to be kept in the family.’

‘I remember.’ Jack nodded.

‘So, it means that it’s quite rundown. Also, the other thing I told you was my lack of funds and being made redundant has meant no income, meaning it’s just me on my tod trying to get things straight. Not that I’m complaining, just stating the facts, as it were.’

‘I can come and give you a hand if you like. I’m free at the weekend,’ Jack offered.

Lotta was taken aback, and a vertical line appeared between her brows. If she liked! She wouldn’t mind at all. Come to Mumma. ‘No, no, I’m fine.’

‘I won’t offer twice,’ Jack replied seriously.

Lotta spluttered and felt a flush rise to her cheeks. ‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude. Right, well, yes, okay then. I do have loads of things I need help with – lifting stuff mostly.’

‘Like what?’

Lotta thought about the red carpet in the middle of the house. She sighed through her nose. ‘There’s this hideous carpet running right up the centre of the place. It’s so ugly and filthy. Goodness knows who thought it would be a good idea to put a red carpet up through the middle of the staircase. It’s a winding staircase, and the carpet is huge, so it’d be a big job on my own. Yeah, so I would really like to pull that up.’ She thought about mentioning that she was terrified of the scratching in the sitting room but didn’t want to sound pathetic. ‘That’s one in a long list of things. It would be so good to get that carpet out and go from there.’

‘Carpet removal. I see,’ Jack replied as he picked up his fork and sliced off another piece of cake. ‘Not my area of expertise, but I could give it a go. Have you got a skip?’

‘A skip? No.’ Lotta flicked her hand around in front of her face. ‘No money for skips or anything like that. Not a lot of budget for anything at the moment. That will come once I get myself more sorted. Yes, I hope so, anyway. That’s if I stay, which at the moment is looking like my only option.’

Jack cleared his throat. ‘So where will this carpet be going if there isn’t a skip? Let me just add this to the ring; wet carpet is not a nice thing, and wet and mouldy carpet is worse.’

Lotta thought for a second. ‘I suppose it’ll have to go in the garage, which at the moment is already stuffed to the rafters with a load of old junk which hasn’t seen the light of day for years. Years and years. It’s another thing I need to get to the bottom of. I’ve only sort of peeked in there because I didn’t want to add another thing to deal with to my list.’

‘Sounds like you’ve got a lot on your plate,’ Jack acknowledged.

Lotta raised her eyebrows. Jack, with his fancy jumper and posh watch, didn’t know the half of it. She played it down. There was no way she was having him feel actual pity for her. ‘Ahh, not too bad, but it is sometimes a bit overwhelming.’

‘I imagine it is if you’ve got to do it on your own.’

Lotta briefly put her hands up to cover her face. ‘I’m trying to stay positive. It’s not everyone who inherits a house. It’s a roof over my head. I’m grateful, just overwhelmed at this stage.’

‘True. So it seems to me that you could do with someone coming to give you a hand with the carpet, at least. It would be a start, would it not?’

Lotta was sure that the things she would like him to give her a hand with were not the things he was thinking. ‘It would be good.’

‘Would this be considered as part of fake dating or not?’ Jack asked with a straight face.

Lotta couldn’t work out by the look on his face whether he was being serious or not. ‘Why would that need to be considered?’

‘I was just wondering where it fits in your list and all the questions.’

Lotta swatted her hand on his. ‘We don’t have to stick to that entirely.’

‘Good. So carpet removal is on. I don’t think I’ve had quite as good an offer for a long time,’ Jack said, his face cracking into a smile.

Lotta had to remind herself to breathe as she watched his face move from broody-handsome to outright gorgeous. She forced herself to let out a small little casual chuckle when in fact what she wanted to do was stand up and do a Gangnam-style dance on the table for all and sundry in the bookshop to see. Just Jack? Bring it right on.

Lotta had been frantically clearing up since more or less the moment she'd opened her eyes. As she looked around the breakfast room, conservatory, and kitchen, she felt as if it had been somewhat in vain. The vine rustled in the breeze coming in under the door, and the weeds outside in the garden now suddenly looked as if they were going to take over not just Pretty Beach to the Breakers, but the world.

She let out a long, dramatic sigh and peered at her bed in the alcove and the gigantic pile of books not far from it. At least the floor was swept, the old scrubbed breakfast table was clean, and there was something to sit on. That had to be a bonus, surely.

She swept her hand along the worktop in the kitchen and thanked her lucky stars that the kitchen was mostly white. She'd sprayed, wiped, disinfected and bleached it to within an inch of its life in preparation for grumpy Jack's visit. She ran the tap, filled the kettle, rinsed out the teapot, and then ventured out into the garden with her only pair of scissors clutched in her hand.

A few minutes later, she was back with greenery salvaged from the only thing that looked healthy from the side of the house. Filling a pottery jug she'd purchased from a charity shop with water, she plonked in the greenery and placed the jug in the middle of the breakfast table. Not too bad. Not that Jack would be looking at her efforts to pretty up the place, she was sure.

Maybe the surge of cleaning and the picking of greenery could be considered part of her glow-up list. Perhaps her activity could come under her goal of ‘improving her surroundings.’

With a weird feeling in her stomach, she walked around the house, analysing all the work there was to do. By the time she’d been upstairs, had another look at the bedrooms, stood by the sitting room doorway listening for the scratching sound, and stood on the uneven pavers on the terrace looking out at the knee-high weeds, she was not feeling very positive at all. The more she strolled around, the more she seriously regretted accepting Jack’s offer to help; he would think she was a scumbag, it was clear as day. She started to panic and took out her phone to text Liv.

*Lotta: What in the name of goodness was I thinking?*

The little dots immediately flashed back.

*Liv: ???*

*Lotta: Inviting Jack here!*

*Liv: I didn’t think you’d asked, I thought he’d offered.*

*Lotta: He did! Why did I say yes? This place is \*#@\**

*Liv: Get a grip, Lott. It’s not.*

*Lotta: You’re just saying that to make me feel better. What the \*#@\* has happened to my life?*

*Liv: You have a detached house on the coast. Stay focused.*

*Lotta: Ahhhhhhhh!!!!*

*Liv: Why are you so concerned? Where has this come from?*

Lotta felt a strange feeling in her stomach. She knew what was happening.

*Lotta: I just feel embarrassed about me and the state of my life.*

*Liv: OMG. Do you actually really like this Jack??? Duh, I’ve just realised. You’re falling for the fake boyfriend! Bingo.*

*The penny has just dropped with me.*

*Lotta: Gosh no!*

*Liv: Hmm. But you're panicking that he's coming over. Why then?*

*Lotta: I'm just feeling like a loser.*

*Liv: You won't be by the time he's arrived and helped you with that carpet.*

*Lotta: True.*

*Liv: You'll be fine. Message me later. x*

*Lotta: Okay. Will do. xxx*



Lotta stood behind the clean pale-blue velvet curtains in the study and watched Jack as he pulled his car onto the drive. Her heart beat faster as she saw him looking up at the house. She really needed to pull herself together. This grumpy, but it had to be said, absolutely breathtaking man, was here for the fake dating thing, not for the feeling currently zooming around her stomach. She had to get it in her head that Jack wasn't actually interested in her one iota. Taking a deep breath, she attempted to look casual as she opened the front door and stood on the step as he approached. 'Morning.'

'Good morning, Lotta as in hotter Button,' Jack replied, his smile for the first time soft. He looked up at Pretty Beach to the Breakers. 'You, err, undersold this somewhat. It's not quite the shack I had in mind. I had to double-check the navigation system as I thought it had delivered me to the wrong place.'

Lotta frowned as she followed his gaze up to the chimneys. 'I did?'

'You painted it in quite a different light. I didn't have this in mind when you described it.'

'Oh, okay.'



‘It’s an old beauty. The front door and the chimneys alone are worth having.’

Lotta tried to look at the house with fresh eyes and from the place that Jack was observing from. She also purposely avoided looking at his chest, jeans, watch, eyes, shirt, back of his neck, or anything about him at all. Instead, she focused on the house, and all she could see was work and money – one of the gutters on the side was hanging loose, the chimneys looked wonky, and every single place her eyes rested on in the garden looked overgrown and needing help. Lotta’s eyes widened. ‘Ahh, you think so?’

‘I know so,’ Jack said, looking towards the front door. ‘My ex loved old buildings, so I have a little bit of knowledge too.’

‘Wait until you see inside,’ Lotta replied as she pushed open the front door and the musty old red carpet greeted them. Jack stepped in, and as he stood beside Lotta, he seemed to totally disregard the hideous carpet. His head instead tilted upwards, and he looked up at the circular art deco skylight on the ceiling of the second floor. As he raised his arm to point, Lotta got a whiff of him. It was not bad. ‘Look at that!’ he exclaimed and pointed upwards to the light streaming in from the skylight.

Lotta swallowed and followed his gaze. ‘It is pretty.’

Jack appeared indifferent to the stained carpet and ran his hand along the curved wood bannister. ‘Yeah, this is lovely, too. Imagine the skill that went into creating this.’

‘I’ll show you around,’ Lotta replied as she too ran her hand along the bannister and then led him into the sitting room. She tried to ignore everything about Jack that was making her heart do somersaults as they stood just inside the sitting room door. She pointed to the chimney and grimaced. ‘There’s something in there.’ She gave a nervous chuckle. ‘I’m sort of too afraid to look. I know that sounds tragic.’

Jack strode across the sitting room, crouched down on the hearth, and looked up the chimney. ‘Looks like there’s a load of crap stuck up the top there. Something appears to have come away at the top too. It’s probably that, catching on the

brickwork in the wind. Nothing to worry about by the looks of it.'

Lotta crouched down beside him, acutely aware of how close she was to touching his arm and peered up the chimney. 'I see what you mean. I'll add getting the chimney cleaned to my list.'

Jack moved backwards, stood up and held out his hand to help her up. As she took his hand, it felt like electricity zapped up her arm and gave her heart a shock. She swallowed and let out a funny little whoosh of air as blood rushed into her head. 'Thanks.'

A few minutes later, Lotta opened the door with a flourish, and they were in the library room. 'This is going to be the place where I keep my books.' As they stepped in, the copious amounts of spray Lotta had gone through still lingered and hit them between the eyes. It was most certainly a step up from the smell of stale air, old feet, and dust she'd first encountered.

Jack turned around, took in the floor-to-ceiling shelving, the fireplace, and the French doors. Lotta started to gabble and pointed to the stepladder. 'I was up and down that thing with the vacuum.' She pointed to the curtains. 'I put those through the washing machine a few times, and they turned out lovely.'

'Good job.' He frowned. 'Where are the books?'

'Currently all over the place. I had them in a small storage unit before, you know, when, well, when my circumstances changed they had to be stored. It will be so good to have them out again.'

'What about furniture?' Jack asked.

Lotta felt embarrassed at her lack of furniture. Another thing that had gone because of Dan and his app. 'Yes, I'll be needing some of that.' She turned on her heel and led him back over the carpet to the breakfast room, glossing over her lack of furniture as she did so. At least the breakfast room looked and smelt clean as she opened the door. 'Right, a cup of tea before we get started on the carpet?' she asked airily.

‘Yep, I’d love one,’ Jack replied and walked across the breakfast room and raised his eyebrows at the conservatory. ‘Wow! What is that vine? It’s amazing!’

Lotta tilted her head to the side as she stood beside him and followed his gaze to the vine. ‘I don’t know. I suppose it might be some kind of a grape. I don’t really have a clue about stuff like that.’

‘It must be very old. It’s beautiful. That would have taken years to establish.’

Lotta followed him, opened the conservatory door and touched one of the leaves. ‘Hmm, yes, I suppose it is. I hadn’t really thought about it properly. It’s been so cold in here. Right, I’ll pop the kettle on.’

Jack turned around and followed her back into the breakfast room and looked the other way to the alcove, where her bed was almost fully surrounded by piles of books. A wrinkle appeared in the centre of his eyebrows. ‘You’re living in here, are you?’

Lotta felt embarrassment wash over her for about the fifth time since she’d opened the front door. ‘I am.’ She started to explain, ‘It was awful when I arrived and so cold. There was no way I could have been upstairs. There wasn’t any heating or hot water, and not many of the sockets worked. Plus, on my own and everything.’

Jack nodded. ‘I’ll help you. You can’t live down here.’

‘Why not? I’m quite happy here with my books,’ Lotta reasoned.

‘It doesn’t seem right.’

‘I’m fine,’ Lotta said as she poured water into the pot and took two mugs out of the cupboard.

Jack nodded towards the kitchen. ‘This is alright, though.’

‘Yes, I’m lucky here. I’ve worked on it a lot, though. It was full of crap and not very clean.’

Jack blinked a few times in appreciation. ‘It looks great now.’

‘Thanks.’

Jack peered through the utility room where the old Sheila Maid was hanging from the ceiling. ‘And what’s through there?’

‘That is my palatial bathroom until I get the ones upstairs sorted. At least everything works now,’ Lotta replied with a laugh, leading him through the utility room to the bathroom. She was actually surprised as she opened the door to the bathroom. The roof was still wonky, but it was on a whole other level to the day she’d scooted in desperate for a wee when she’d arrived from London.

Liv’s elbow grease, a lot of cleaning materials, and the few touches Lotta had added showed; the old vanity mirror shone, the bath with its copper taps was clean, and the new white towels were a lot more inviting than the day she’d bathed with the aid of kettles full of hot water. ‘The roof slopes the opposite way to the floor, it makes you feel a bit weird, trippy, but I’m getting used to it.’

Jack smiled. ‘I’ve been in worse.’

Lotta doubted that very much and turned around to lead him back to the kitchen. He followed her, and after she’d made the tea, they sat on overturned boxes in the conservatory with the vine beside them. ‘You’ve certainly got your work cut out for you,’ Jack noted. ‘But, it’s a beauty. Pretty Beach to the Breakers – a good name too.’

‘It could be lovely one day,’ Lotta replied, wondering if she would ever find out or if she would stick to the initial plan of her time in Pretty Beach being short-lived. An interim to help her out until she got herself back together.

‘Most definitely, and if you want that to happen, we’d better get this show on the road.’ Jack got up from the overturned box he was perched on, and Lotta wasn’t sure if she saw a twinkle in his eye or not. ‘You can ask me questions while I’m pulling the red carpet from a winding staircase if you like.’

Two hours and a huge amount of huffing and puffing on Lotta's side later, and the carpet on the stairs was no more. It was piled up by the open front door in a big, ugly, murky red pile with disintegrating stained underlay beside it, and a stack of splintered gripper rods wedged to its right. Lotta sat exhausted on the bottom step of the now bare stairs, and Jack jerked his thumb towards the garage. 'Next step. We get this lot in there and out of sight.'

Lotta coughed at the dust swirling around the hallway. She'd wondered if he was going to suggest a break. He'd not stopped since the moment he'd put his mug down. She'd had to stop herself from just standing and staring at his biceps as he'd made short work of pulling up the carpet. She turned up and looked at the winding staircase. The timber stairs were beautiful, there was no doubt about that, and without the gloomy red lasering her eyeballs, the skylight seemed to almost pump sunlight down into the centre of the room.

'Is there much room in there?' Jack asked as he looked over towards the garage.

Lotta shook her head. 'I've only peeked in from the side door. It's crammed full of junk, cobwebs, piles of old stuff to sort out.'

'Okay. Let's go and have a look first,' Jack suggested.

A few minutes later, after a bit of wrangling with the timber double doors at the entrance to the garage, Lotta was standing with her hands on her hips, and Jack was drumming his fingers on his top lip. 'It could certainly do with a tidy-up,' Jack noted humorously.

'And a trip to the dump or six.'

Both of them squinted into the piles of junk in front of them; an old painted dresser with open drawers spilt tools, old gardening paraphernalia lay in piles, stacks of faded newspapers looked as if they were going to topple, and a vintage leather satchel hung from the handle of an old spade. There were piles of terracotta plant pots next to timber ladders from years gone by, an old leather football, a stack of vintage tan suitcases complete with stickers noting their destinations,

and a faded plastic yellow toolbox open at the top. Light filtered through a dirty window at the back, catching the dust swirling around in the air, and on the whole of the far side, piles of furniture appeared precarious and about to fall.

Lotta pushed a pile of plastic storage boxes out of the way and edged closer to the furniture. She peered past old dining chairs to what appeared to be a sofa covered in a dust sheet. She could see a corner of velvet fabric, the same as the pale blue of the curtains in the library room. She raised her eyebrows and pointed. ‘Look there, I think that’s the same fabric as the curtains I rescued in the library room.’

Jack stepped closer, dragged a wingback chair and a side table out of the way, and pulled back the dust sheet on the sofa. A spider ran across the floor, and billows of dust engulfed them. In front of them though, through the dust, was a curved timber arm, blue velvet sofa. It looked squishy and comfy and with a good clean, more or less perfect for Lotta’s library room vision.

Jack slapped his hand on the seat. ‘Good old-fashioned British craftsmanship right there in front of our eyes.’

‘Yeah, wow, it’s lovely. Or I should say it could be lovely. It’s a bit grubby,’ Lotta replied, edging closer between piles of newspapers on the floor and looking more closely at the arms of the sofa. She pulled one of the seat cushions away from the frame and peered down the back. ‘It looks like this might come off. I could try and wash it.’

Jack stepped in to look more closely, and she caught a whiff of him. She had to steady herself on the arm and quickly moved back. He nodded. ‘Yeah, wouldn’t be too much of a drama even if they shrunk a tiny bit.’

‘Who would have thought that would be in here? Maybe I will have something to sit on in the library room with my books sooner than I thought.’

‘Are you saying that you require my services to get that sofa into the house?’ Jack deadpanned.

Lotta couldn't tell if he was being serious or not. 'No! No, no, of course not. I was just speaking out loud. You've done enough for me already. You must need to go.'

Jack's face broke into a smile. 'I was kidding. If we clear a path through here, we can get it in the house. The carpet can go in the space this leaves.'

Lotta beamed and resisted the urge to hug him. 'Thank you. That would really help me out.' As she moved towards the sofa, she shook her head as she acknowledged that wanting to hug him had nothing to do with the fact that he was helping her out and everything to do with the strange feeling buzzing in her veins when she was around him. Lotta as in hotter, had it *bad*. And what was positively alarming was the realisation that was abundantly clear to Lotta that it was only going to get worse.



An hour or so later, the velvet three-seater sofa was in the library room, its seat and back cushions had been stripped and put in the washing machine, and the inner cushions had been beaten outside. Lotta was bending over with the nozzle on the end of the vacuum, pushing it back and forth over the arms and base of the frame. She peered down at the arms, put the vacuum down, took out her phone and started searching for an upholstery cleaner. She looked up from her phone as Jack walked in with a reading lamp in his right hand, the wire trailing behind him. He held it up. 'One very old, very nice, reading accompaniment.'

'Yes, that's lovely!'

'It was in the back of the garage by an old lawnmower.' He held up the plug. 'Let's hope it works.'

Lotta stepped forward. 'Thank you.'

'Hold that thought,' Jack instructed. A few minutes later, he was back with a small timber table painted white. 'This might be of use, too.'

Lotta clapped her hands together and stopped herself from squealing. She was really going to have her very own library room. It was coming together right before her eyes. ‘Thank you! If it hadn’t been for you, I probably wouldn’t have even ventured into the garage.’

Jack didn’t smile. ‘Not a problem. It’s a treasure trove of stuff in there. Gardening tools galore too. Someone at some point obviously enjoyed getting out in the garden.’ He looked out towards the overgrown lawn. ‘It’ll come up great, I think.’

Lotta followed his gaze. ‘It couldn’t get a lot worse.’

‘True,’ Jack said as he put the table down beside the sofa. ‘You’ll be able to sit in here and read for days.’ He looked at the fireplace. ‘Once you get that sorted, you could hibernate through the winter in here.’

Lotta sighed and chuckled simultaneously. ‘Thank you so much for helping me today.’

Jack looked at his watch, and Lotta interrupted him as he went to speak, ‘Sorry, yes, you must need to go. You’ve been here for hours.’

‘I was going to say that it must be time for a cup of tea.’

‘Oh, right, yes, sorry, of course. I got a bit carried away with all this,’ Lotta replied. ‘I’m going to start bringing my books in later.’ She clapped her hands together. ‘I’m so happy. I’ll go and put the kettle on.’

Once the tea was made, Lotta brought two mugs in, handed one to Jack, and pulled the biscuit tin from under her arm. She looked around as she sipped her tea. ‘I can’t believe the difference this is going to make.’ She inclined her head towards the sofa. ‘Finding that was gold.’

Jack agreed. ‘Yeah, you need to get out of that alcove, though. That can’t be healthy.’

‘I’ve grown quite attached to it.’ Lotta chuckled.

Jack ignored her comment and flicked his eyes upwards. ‘Which one are you going to get started on first.’

‘Which bedroom?’



‘Yep.’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t even thought about it.’ Lotta took a sip of her tea and dunked in a biscuit. ‘To be honest, the plan was never really to stay here, but now...’

‘You’re more into it?’

‘I am. This house is growing on me by the day.’

Jack nodded in agreement. ‘I can see why. It’s a lot of work, but it will be worth it.’

As Lotta dipped another biscuit in her tea and looked up at him through her eyelashes, she swallowed as her heart did a double back salto. The house wasn’t the only thing growing on her by the day.

A few days after Jack had helped her with the library room, Lotta was walking along on a pink cloud hovering just above the beach with her book bag over her shoulder and her trainers hooked by their laces on her wrist. The crashing of the waves methodically sounded beside her as she took in lungfuls of air and watched lines of frothy sea foam crash onto the sand, bubble around, and then slowly disappear back towards the water.

She checked her texts and the messages in the job app as she strolled along and then opened her emails. More generic messages from HR departments telling her that her application had been viewed, but other than that on the publishing job front, it was deathly silent.

She thought about Jack as she walked along and what she was going to do about the situation. She must not get herself too involved. She must not fall any further. She read over the message he'd sent her the day after he'd helped with the carpet. He'd mentioned more stuff about the ball and had told her he'd enjoyed the day. Putting her phone back in her pocket, she mulled it over, with a fizzy feeling in her stomach as she strolled.

Stopping by the water, she stood and looked out to sea. The sun shimmered off its surface, the astonishingly white lighthouse in the distance glinted, and the sound of the ferry horn floated in the air. Maybe life wasn't all bad; she had to admit the sea air was amazing, she now had a house with heating and hot water, and she was going to a ball with a nice

man who appeared to be quite happy to help her out. The mountain in front of her was perhaps not quite as steep after all.

She sighed, closed her eyes, and lifted her chin to the sky. She was in her late-thirties in a new town where she knew no one and had a long uphill struggle to get her life back on track. She was a failure at relationships, and her career was dead as a doornail. She held the breath in her ribs for a second and grimaced, determined to be positive; she could be in a lot worse places in life. At least she had her transformation list; she would focus on that.

Mulling it all over further, about twenty minutes later, she'd taken Ron, the heating man's advice, and was heading towards somewhere called The Old Sugar Wharf. After going past a line of tiny little kiosks all painted in pastel colours and strolling by a boating club and a small ferry terminal, she stood on the pavement looking at an old wharf. It moved and swayed and creaked as the waves washed underneath, almost as if it was whispering hello to her. She shook her head to rid it of the silly thought. As she stood in the street looking down at the water swirling under the wharf, a woman came out of a side door of the building on top of it and stopped on the pavement. The woman caught her eye. 'Hello. It's lovely and warm in there, we've a few tables spare. It's certainly brisk out here!' She beamed.

'Oh, right, thanks. I'll go in.'

'It's a nice day after all that recent rain. Still cold though, and here I was thinking my daffs would be out soon.'

Lotta stared at the woman with the winning eyelashes, trying to decipher if she was really being friendly or not. It was all very strange – just like Ron and the people outside the bakery had done, the woman was chatting away as if they knew each other. Lotta had never clapped eyes on the woman before in her life. Lotta certainly didn't have daffs coming out as far as she was aware and she was barely sure what they were, let alone when they came out. She smiled and reciprocated the friendly chatter. 'I've just popped out for a spot of air.'

‘Right you are.’ The woman swung her arm around to the front door of the establishment. ‘Enjoy.’

Lotta inched forward and then stood at the entrance with her jaw nearly on the floor and her eyelids blinking slowly. This was so far from a hokey-cokey small-town café it wasn’t even funny. She gazed around in amazement at the small lobby; to her left antique oyster baskets had a new life as shelves, a low bench with a huge old pot was waiting for umbrellas, antique hooks on the right side were for coats, and a ginormous blue glass vase was stuffed with pebbles, shells, and flowers. Lotta inhaled as a jumble of scents filled the air. She could smell cake and lavender and all sorts of things from the sea. A heady mix of lovely things welcoming her and wanting her to head in, take a seat and not look up for air.

Tucking her hair over her ears and pulling her book bag from her shoulder, she grabbed the brass handle of the inner door at the same time as wiping her feet on the double-width mat and pushed open the door. She almost purred in pleasure as thick, warm air hit her from a roaring wood burner in front of her; the place was a bookworm’s dream. A cosy sofa in the corner, wingback chairs butted up to the fire, and hanging from the rafters, bunches of dried herbs as far as the eye could see. Little tables here and there were dotted with terracotta pots piled with walnuts, and tiny glass vases in the centre of tables were stuffed with sprigs of rosemary.

The café was bustling and full of life. On the right, what looked like some kind of old-fashioned tool bench snaked away towards the door going out to a deck over the water, and an old-fashioned Italian coffee machine shone under lights. Lotta whirled around and pulled her books from her bag as she took it all in; old shelving adorned with vintage fishing paraphernalia, Kilner jars full of pink and white marshmallows, faded driftwood bundles, and more herbs were tied onto the backs of chairs, and jam jars were stuffed with shells and sea glass.

A girl in a navy blue butcher’s apron and a big smile welcomed her and pointed over towards the wood burner. ‘There’s a small table down there near the doors to the deck, or

would you like a spot over there by the fire? It's been unusually cold here these past few days.'

Lotta looked at one of the wingback chairs with her name on it. Would she like to sit there? She could just about move in with her books and never look back. 'Thank you,' she replied as she made her way in and out of a few tables, along behind a sofa and squeezed into one of the wingback chairs beside the fire. Tucking her book bag into the chair, she sat down and made herself comfortable. With her Kindle on the arm of the chair and a book on her lap, a few minutes later, another staff member, her arms full of crockery, came up to the table. 'Hello. How are you?'

Lotta smiled at the quaint and eccentric little place. 'I'm good, thanks. Tea for me, please. A pot of tea for one would be lovely.'

The girl smiled. 'You've not been here before?'

Lotta shook her head. 'No, I haven't.'

'Rightio.' The girl pointed over towards the coffee machine and counter. 'Just pop over there and order at the till. When your food's ready, it will be served to you at your table.' She juggled the crockery in her arms and handed Lotta a small chalkboard. 'Something to eat? Have a look on there, and also there are some lovely sandwiches today, and soup, we always have soup.'

Lotta took the chalkboard. 'I was just after cake, actually.' Lotta would have loved to have settled in for lunch and the rest of the afternoon, if not the day, but her bank balance or lack thereof really was only going to stretch as far as tea and cake. The girl pointed over to a display cabinet where glass cloches covered cake stands and what looked like sandwiches sat behind an old-fashioned glass counter. 'We've loads of homemade cake. Just take your pick. All of them are to die for and perfect with a cup of tea by the fire. All handmade and baked right here in Pretty Beach.' She nodded to Lotta's lap. 'And enjoy your books.'

'Okay, lovely, thanks.'

‘We also have our own blends of tea.’ She gestured to behind the counter on the wall where oversized tins were labelled with the names of leaf tea. ‘Just pick what one you fancy.’

Lotta followed her gaze. ‘Wow, fab, I’ll have a look.’

‘On your way up there to the lighthouse, are you? Lovely day for it, even though it’s cold, it’s bright. We’ve had so many walkers in today.’

‘No, I, umm, I’ve just popped out for a bit of fresh air and some cake.’ She held up her book. ‘Cake and reading, and I needed to get out of the house for a bit. I’ve just had my boiler fixed, and the man who did it said this place is a bit of a local institution.’

‘Ron?’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘Boiler Ron?’

Lotta wrinkled up her forehead. This was *weird*. ‘Yes, that’s what he said his name was. Blue overalls, originally from Yorkshire, I think he said.’

‘I see. Sorry, gosh, apologies, I didn’t realise you lived here!’ She lowered her voice and looked around as she spoke. ‘You’ll be wanting Locals Only then.’

‘Ahh, right, yes.’ Lotta nodded, wondering what all the lowered voice and fuss was about. Pretty Beach was lovely, but it was getting stranger by the minute.

The girl lowered her voice further. ‘Locals Only today is fish finger sandwich, and we’re not talking frozen.’ She then smiled, turned on her heels, and disappeared behind the counter.

Lotta smiled as the girl walked away. Fish finger sandwich? Wouldn’t say no. The Locals Only thing was sort of strange and nice at the same time. She didn’t know whether or not the sea air was making her go a bit soft, but something about this Sugar Wharf was giving her all the warm and fuzzies. She could happily sit with her books and get lost for

hours, and she almost felt as if there was a friendly sort of whispering from underneath.

Just as she had finished a chapter, her phone buzzed, and when she saw who it was, so did her veins: Jack. Ooh.

*Jack: Hi Lotta. Just confirming the details for the hotel, etcetera. One of my team has sent you an email with directions. I have a full diary that day, so I will arrive to escort you from the hotel. I've been told everything is sorted – let me or my team know if there's anything you need. Jack.*

Hmm. It was quite business-like. There was a serious lack of a smiley face or a kiss. Lotta read it through about six times before responding. She couldn't deny that she was disappointed and decided to be just as formal back.

*Lotta: Thank you. I'll get back to one of your team if so.*

Fifteen minutes had gone past with her nose stuck in her book when Lotta realised she'd not ordered anything. Pushing herself up out of the chairs, she stood in front of the counter and peered at the tall cakes under the glass cloches. The girl behind the counter stopped what she was doing and looked over the glass happily. 'Hi, what can I get you?'

Lotta lowered her voice and inclined her head over the counter. 'I've been told to ask for the Locals Only. Umm, I don't want the fish finger sandwich but the cake.'

'Ahh, yes, from the fireplace there.'

'Yes.'

'No worries, it's Esme's LO lemon and elderflower. Callala cream on the side, for you?' She chuckled. 'Or are we not partaking?'

Lotta had no idea what Callala cream was, but she didn't like to say no. These people were *mega-serious* about the Locals Only thing. It didn't seem as if she was going to get a chance on whether or not she liked lemon and elderflower.

'Great, thank you.'

The girl tapped into a tablet and then held it out for Lotta's card. Lotta cringed inside, hoping it wouldn't be refused. That

would not go down well for the new girl from Pretty Beach to the Breakers. She sighed inwardly in relief as the machine beeped and, clutching her credit card in one hand and a blue and white striped numbered paddle in the other, she squeezed through the tables, plonked herself back in the chair, and before she knew it was again lost in her book, ensconced in an old convent in Ireland, a gloriously handsome movie star by her side.

As quick as a flash, a huge slice of lemon and elderflower cake and a cup of tea were on the table. The first girl who had initially chatted to her about Ron whipped the paddle away and smiled. ‘This should see you through to the afternoon. It’s homegrown elderflower from over in the lanes there. You really can’t beat it. Delicious.’

‘Ooh, thank you. I need a bit of sustenance for later.’

The girl smiled again. ‘What are you up to later?’

‘A spot of job hunting online, and then I’m tackling bathroom painting.’

‘I see. Sounds busy. Where did you say you were?’

Lotta hadn’t said where she was. She was deliberately vague in her response. ‘Over the other side there.’

The girl seemed to take the cue and didn’t ask any further questions about the whereabouts of the house. ‘Nice. Any house in Pretty Beach is nice as far as I’m concerned.’

‘Hmm,’ Lotta replied, and as the girl walked away and Lotta tucked into her cake, she thought that perhaps the girl did have a point. Pretty Beach wasn’t quite the backwater she’d first thought. As she sat there with her book wedged into her left hand and gazed around at the old building with its vintage fishing paraphernalia and bunches of herbs hanging from above, she thought about Pretty Beach to the Breakers. Perhaps she shouldn’t write it off quite as quickly. Perhaps there were reasons to alter her path from a fancy job in publishing. Perhaps a new town, a coastal house with resident scratching, a fake date, and hopefully a job might be one of the



better ideas she'd had in a long time. She could but wait and see.

Lotta had just got back from a long walk through the sand dunes, and with the remnants of salty sea air in her hair and feeling more hopeful than she had since she'd been given notice on her flat, she let herself into Pretty Beach to the Breakers. Was she in fact humming? Preposterous as the notion seemed, she actually was. Quite unbelievable, but true.

She tried not to grimace as she could still smell remnants of the damp, cheese smell, but at least the red carpet was gone. Making her way through the hallway, across the breakfast room, and into the kitchen, she stopped and looked around. For the first time since she'd arrived, she thought that it didn't look too bad. Previously, she'd been so intent on not seeing the best of the house and had been so desperate not to give anything a chance, she had been blinkered to its good points.

Now, after the mammoth cleaning extravaganza with Liv, the kitchen, at least, appeared to be somewhere she could live for a few months until she got herself back on the straight and narrow. She examined what was in front of her; a U-shape bank of white cupboards, a deep old sink, what she was now referring to as the 'antique' Belling cooker. All of it was not too bad, not great, but not awful either. She'd even unpacked some of her nice mugs, which were now hanging on hooks from the wall cabinets. A tiny little part of it almost seemed like home.

As she waited for the kettle to boil, she thought about the flat she'd had with Dan. Then, before she'd been forced to take a second job, and he had commenced on his journey as an

‘entrepreneur,’ she’d filled their kitchen with all sorts of lovely things indulging her fantasy of a kitchen in an old country cottage in Sussex. In the fantasy, there had been a fluffy chocolate dog, wellie boots by the front door, and tasteful neutral walls with pops of colour here and there. In this delightful abode in her head, cheery flowers filled every room, and old dressers were crammed full of an assortment of Bridgewater pottery. A room was filled entirely with her books – not just on shelves, but on chairs and floors and wedged into nooks and crannies all around. The same dreamy place sported wide-plank scrubbed floors, pretty artwork on the walls, and frames with pictures of her knee-deep in her lovely life. Outside the back door, pots were filled with herbs, apple trees blossomed, and an old greenhouse was filled with plants. There were multiple bathrooms big enough for chairs and books. In bedrooms, there were old fireplaces and layers of brightly coloured block-printed quilts. On outdoor timber settings weathered by time, jugs of water with mint sat beside gardening hats perched onto chairs.

That fantasy place in her head and all her lovely kitchen things, unfortunately, had not been meant to be. In the stark reality of her *actual* life, all of those silly daydreams had been put on hold when Dan had decided that the app and, in turn, their relationship, were a big old one hundred per cent fail.

Lotta tutted to herself as she looked around. What a shame she wasn’t quite in the fantasy or living the life of one of the women in her books, but trying to be grateful, she nodded that at least Pretty Beach to the Breakers was a roof over her head. With its strange scratching and even worse smell though, it wasn’t a cottage in Sussex from a magazine, that she knew for a fact.

After pouring boiling water from the kettle into the pot, she got down on her hands and knees in the breakfast room and, with a knife, started stabbing at a cork tile in the corner. As it lifted and old floor glue cracked, she pulled up a couple of tiles, sat back on her heels and stared. Right there in front of her were the wide floorboards of her dreamy Sussex abode, the same ones as the library room. Apart from a healthy layer of

dust and the odd line of glue, they weren't even in need of much help. Things could be a lot worse.

She got up and then stood in the doorway to the conservatory and eyed the old vine going over her head, the weeds blowing in the wind outside, the old clinker boats in the far corner and the shed with a piece of lattice hanging precariously from a side panel. Could this in fact be her country cottage dream? It wasn't Sussex, but it wasn't far. Was it possible to wander around the garden, a sun hat on her head, a table ready for a few friends, and perhaps the dog she'd dreamt about asleep under a tree? Yeah, as she looked out at an old plastic white garden chair and then up at the layer of green mossy gunk on top of the conservatory roof, maybe not.

With a cup of tea and two biscuits, she put all notions of Sussex out of her head, sat down at the breakfast table and opened a job website. After scouring depressing jobs promising not a lot, she was sitting with her chin in her hand, staring into space, when her phone buzzed with an unknown number.

'Hello,' Lotta said without a whole lot of enthusiasm in her tone.

'Good afternoon,' a cheery voice said from the other end. 'Is this' – there was a tapping of computer keys – 'Lotta Button?'

'Yes, it is.'

'Oh, right, hi, Lotta. My name is Anne Fisher. I'm from the Corchrane Company.'

Lotta had no clue who Anne Fisher was, but due to the enormous number of jobs she'd applied for online, she assumed it was someone regarding one of her applications. She tried to inject a happy-go-lucky tone into her voice. 'Hi, Anne.'

'Hello. Now.' There was another pause and more tapping. 'You applied for a job with us a good few months ago. In fact, it was late last year. Does that sound right to you?'

Lotta had no idea, but she pretended she knew exactly what she'd applied for at the Corchrane Company. 'Yes, of course.' She stared out towards the garden shed without a lot of hope. It would probably be another dead end, anyway.

'Yes, so the job you applied for was the assistant job in our London office dealing with website content. That job is actually no longer vacant.'

'I see.' Lotta nodded. She'd been here before. Many a time.

'Your CV and your profile on the job site was passed to me because you're fairly local, and I'm heading up our recruitment program for our latest acquisition.'

'Right.'

'Anyway, we have a couple of vacancies here at the arcade.'

The arcade? Lotta thought. She had no clue as to where the arcade was or what a job there might involve. It didn't sound as if it was in publishing. Had she in fact applied for a job in an amusement arcade or a gambling establishment? Her whole existence really had reached a new low.

'Look, it's probably not what you're looking for, but I thought it might be worth a call, I thought your details looked interesting. We're looking for someone for our conferences. It's currently going by the name of a Business Guest Experience Officer, but that's going to change now I'm in charge.'

Lotta rolled her eyes. *Here we go*, she thought. What was one of those? A fancy term for a cleaner, perhaps? She had absolutely no problem cleaning rooms. In fact, as part of Dan's entrepreneurial journey, she'd worked in some of the big city hotels on a contract cleaning job more than once, but why dress it up as a Business Guest Experience Officer? As far as she knew, there wasn't much business experience going on when one was pushing a Hoover around a bed.

She listened to Anne trundle on. 'Yes, so one of our lovely girls Grace is going on maternity leave, and Cilla, our much-

loved member of the team, is going to semi-retire. All of this means we have a space to take on someone new. I had a look through your details and thought you might suit. You updated your location on the job portal, if that's still correct?

Lotta sat up a bit straighter in her chair. 'Okay, yes, thanks. Sorry, Anne, can you just refresh my memory as to whereabouts the arcade is?'

'Of course. Seafolly Arcade, just over Newport way here. I'm sure you've heard of the Seafolly area of Pretty Beach, the old house and family are linked to the area there. At least they were in the old days. We've recently taken ownership of this place.'

'I see.' Lotta had heard of Seafolly in Pretty Beach, but she didn't know a lot more than that.

'Anyway, I'm wondering if you might like to come in for a quick chat.'

'Of course. When would you like me to come in?'

'I don't suppose you can do one afternoon this week, can you?' There was a pause and a tapping. 'In fact, I can do later on today, if that suits you at all. I know it's short notice.'

Lotta swallowed a chuckle. It wasn't as if she actually had anything going on in her life or job interviews coming out of her ears. 'I can do today, actually.'

'You're not working at the moment?' There was a slight change in the tone of Anne's voice.

'I've just finished a contract,' Lotta quickly made up.

'Okay, good. I'll email you the full job description and slot you in for this afternoon.'

Lotta nodded, thinking that she didn't really need a job description on how to use a Hoover, but tried to sound enthusiastic anyway. 'Great, thank you. I'll see you this afternoon.'

A few minutes later, Lotta found her initial application, clicked out of the app to the company website, and was perusing the opportunities on offer. As she read down, she

screwed up her lips and winced. A lot of it made her blood run cold. In one short paragraph, ‘passionate’ had been used three times. ‘Exceptional’ was also bandied around way too many times. Red flags were frantically waving at her from her computer screen. First of all, the job was asking for someone who was passionate about being a Business Guest Experience Agent. Not only that, it said that the candidate would also have a *passion* for helping people and would be *passionate* about hospitality. Then there was the other old chestnut of a ‘can-do’ attitude. Lotta had seen that trotted out on most, if not all, job vacancies she’d ever seen. And being *exceptionally passionate* about a job? Said no one ever.

*Business Guest Experience Officer*

*We are on the hunt for a passionate and experienced Business Guest Experience Agent. You will have a passionate telephone manner to aid you in the delivery of exceptional guest relations. You will have exceptional people skills, a can-do attitude and will display a passion for helping people. You’ll be passionate about customer care, and hospitality, and will possess exceptional standards.*

Lotta hadn’t liked the look of it at all. Passionate had been mentioned so many times and wasn’t even in her equation. But what she did need was a job, and down on the coast with barely a roof over her head, right now, there wasn’t a whole lot more on offer. She nodded: she had little choice but to give it a go.



After a bit of deliberation, Lotta had decided to catch the ferry to the interview. In interview attire consisting of wide-leg trousers, a silk shirt, and a blazer with a huge scarf wrapped around her neck, she walked down to the end of the road in a cold wind topped with sunshine popping through puffy clouds. She held her face up to the sun as she walked along, its weak warmth promising more pleasant weather somewhere in the distant future.

Stopping at a pedestrian crossing, a woman in a huge, black, shiny car caught her eye and waved in acknowledgement as the green man went off and Lotta crossed the road. Lotta had to stop herself from frowning, shook her head slightly, and before she knew what she was doing, smiled back in surprise and then waved back in astonishment. In her buzzy publishing city life, Lotta would always check the cars actually *stopped* at a pedestrian crossing before she even thought about stepping onto the road. Here it seemed they not only stopped, but they smiled in acknowledgement, too. Strange. Strange but somehow endearing. In actual fact, very nice. She could most definitely get used to it.

As Lotta made her way through the narrow roads of Pretty Beach towards the ferry, her mind went back to her recent rotten run of luck. If that, indeed, was what it was. Was it luck? It wasn't luck that Dan had decided she was a failure. It wasn't luck that his app hadn't worked. It wasn't luck that the publishing industry had taken a nosedive. What she did know was that all of it was an amalgamation of little things that had left her jobless and without a roof over her head. She sighed and tried to remain positive as she strolled along.

After walking down the laneway and the central area of Pretty Beach, she stood by the ferry wharf people-watching as, far off in the distance, the horn of the Pretty Beach ferry sounded. Flipping open the cover on her phone, she checked the time and just as she did, as if by magic, the ferry suddenly appeared around the headland. Chugging along, it made its way up to the wharf with the sea beneath it crashing and splashing into a swirly wash of foamy water and seaside smells. She smiled as a crew member on the back expertly threw a rope and pulled the ferry in, and a couple of seagulls swooped down and dived into the water.

After tapping her travel card on the pad, Lotta heaved her way up the stairs whilst little sparkles of sunshine glittered off the glass on a viewing tower at the top. With the ferry rocking gently back and forth, she sat down on an old timber bench seat, tucked her bag between her legs, and taking the view into consideration, decided that the array of blues, sea greens and



sludgy greys ahead of her would, for once, beat the attraction of her Kindle in her bag.

It wasn't the worst way she'd travelled to get to an interview, that was for sure. She took in a deep breath of sea air and crossed her fingers to her side. Hopefully, this interview would result in a job and some income which would see her through her interim time in this sweet little coastal town. But as experience in job hunting had shown, Lotta Button wasn't going to be holding her breath.

At the other end, after strolling off the ferry, Lotta sat down on a bench on the wharf and put the address of the arcade into the map. She'd ascertained when she'd been at home that it was a good twenty-minute walk from where she'd arrived on the ferry. She watched as a bus sailed past, checked the travel app again, and decided with time on her side that the walk would do her good. Exercise was one of the goals on her transformation list. As she bustled along, she was reminded of the day not that long before in London when a black cab had sloshed dirty, grimy city rain from the gutter over her shoes, and she'd spent the whole day in depressing places, none of which had resulted in even a sniff of a job. At least here it was not quite as grey; here she was walking along by the sea, with the wind in her hair having arrived by way of a ferry. She'd even been greeted by friendly people. Perhaps her life wasn't quite as bad after all.

Twenty-one minutes later, she was standing on a beach promenade, looking up at a crescent-shaped building. She gulped a little bit at what looked back at her. She'd been expecting an old building, yes, but she hadn't been expecting a row of beautiful five-story houses with Victorian canopies, tiny iron balconies and, in the centre, a domed faded green roof. The building was nothing short of magnificent. It shone with glints of sunshine in its bright white coat of paint and coordinating black livery.

Lotta double-checked the email to ensure she'd got the right address and headed for the public toilets adjacent to a small car park near the beach on the other side of the road. As she looked back at the arcade, she raised her eyebrows. This

was hardly the smoked glass eighties building of her last few interviews. Whatever the job was, from the outside, it didn't look too bad.

After redoing her hair into its neat French pleat, squirting on some perfume and adding a layer of additional blusher for good measure, Lotta stared back at her reflection as she washed her hands. What Timmy had said had been correct – she was off, but she hoped the well-applied make-up, the neat, classy hair, and the nicely tied bow on her charity shop blouse had scrubbed her up well enough to carry her through yet another interview.

A few minutes later, she was walking up the steps and into a lavish art deco lobby. Black and white glossy floor tiles, beautiful old brass lamps, huge lush green palms in oversized pots. A long, beautifully curved timber reception desk painted a shiny black to match the huge entrance doors. An immaculately turned-out woman stood by a couple of plush, button-backed velvet sofas and smiled.

‘Can I help you?’

Lotta nervously touched the collar of her blouse. ‘I'm here for an interview.’

She was met with a beam. ‘Okay. Yes. You'll be needing the inner lobby. I'll take you over there. What name is it, please?’ the woman asked, whipping a small tablet out of her pocket.

‘Lotta Button. I'm here to see Ms Fisher.’

‘Of course.’ She tapped the tablet and then frowned. ‘Sorry, how are we spelling your first name?’

Lotta got a whiff of the woman's exquisite perfume as she spelt out her name, and the woman smiled. ‘I bet you get asked that all the time. What a delightful name. Lotta Button. Very nice.’

Lotta had been asked the question a trillion times. ‘Yes, just a few.’

‘Ha. Follow me through here, and Anne will be with you shortly.’

Lotta followed behind as the woman clipped across the floor in sky-high heels and said a silent thank you that she'd redone her hair and touched up her make-up. As she looked around the lobby, there seemed to be an overabundant amount of well-dressed staff who actually looked happy to be at work.

In the corner, a glossy piano looked ready to be played, and a seating area with plump cushions invited a sit-down. Lotta's eyes darted from one thing to the next as they passed a row of heavy old black doors until they got to one at the end where the woman paused. She keyed a number into a keypad and the door opened with a satisfying click. The woman then pushed the door with her shoulder and held it open for Lotta to go in. 'There you go. Someone will be with you in a minute.'

Lotta had expected a grotty inner meeting room away from the opulence in the lobby, perhaps a row of cheesy plastic chairs, a low grimy table, and a vending machine. What she was presented with was nothing of the sort. In front of her, a velvet sofa the same as the ones in the lobby faced two armchairs. On a low black coffee table, a single glass vase held three enormous white lilies. A water bottle and two glasses were stacked neatly on a round tray next to a candle in a peacock-blue tin. Everything about the inner room was lovely, including the floor-to-ceiling arched window looking out onto a small courtyard and the scent in the air.

Perching on the edge of the velvet sofa, Lotta side-eyed. Was this some sort of a joke? There had clearly been a mix-up. She nodded to herself that she was obviously in the wrong place, motioned to stand up, and then changed her mind. She might as well stay and see what happened. Clearly, once someone arrived, she'd be taken around to the back of the building where the actual staff who ran the place worked. There she would begin a depressing interview where words like 'exceptional' and 'passionate' would be bandied around in the same sentence as minimum wage and 'we don't pay for food breaks.'

Feeling very uncomfortable and with her feet tightly together, legs on a slant, and hands in her lap, Lotta resisted the urge to take out her Kindle or her phone and sat staring at

the stamens in the centre of one of the lilies. When she was beginning to think that she'd been forgotten, an inner door opened, and a woman with dark hair swept into an elegant side ponytail walked in and smiled.

'Hi, Lotta. Apologies for keeping you waiting. I got stuck in an online meeting.' The woman held out her hand confidently. 'I'm Anne Fisher.'

Lotta stood up and shook Anne's hand. 'Not a problem. Lovely to meet you.'

A few minutes later, Lotta was sitting in a small office. Her hands were clammy and clasped together in her lap as Anne chatted. 'First of all, I have to apologise for the vacancy ad. I'm actually new too. Sorry, that's not right; let me explain – I've actually worked for the holding company for many years, but this part of the business is a new venture, and this place here has only been in our hands for about a year. That ad you initially replied to was actually part of the former recruitment consultancy that the previous business employed. That sounds as clear as mud.' She laughed.

Lotta nodded, not sure what this had to do with her, but she smiled anyway as Anne continued with a small flick of her eyes upwards. 'I would never use the word 'passionate' in a job ad. I mean, I love my job, but I don't think I would take it that far.' She smiled and passed Lotta a glass of water. 'I mean, in reality, how many of us can say we are passionate about our jobs? Possibly some people, but the vast majority of us I think go to work to earn a living.'

Lotta wanted to jump up from her chair, clamber over the table, and give this woman a high five. Instead, she smiled and nodded in agreement, wondering if underneath it was some sort of a test. Anne put her glass of water on the table. 'So, tell me a little bit about yourself.' She waved her hand in front of her face. 'I don't mean about your previous jobs, I got that from your CV. I mean tell me about Lotta Button. What are you all about? What do you love to do?'

Lotta was stumped for a quick second but recovered quickly. She thought she'd seen it all and heard it all in

interviews and had a job lot of predetermined answers stacked up neatly at the front of her brain. She thought she could play the game and trot out the spiel on where she'd worked and why she wanted a new job very well. Clearly, Anne wasn't quite as interested in playing the game. It seemed Anne was one step ahead of her and playing on a different field altogether.

'I, err, hmm, what am I all about?' Lotta thought about the interests she'd spent a long time thinking about for the purposes of her CV. According to that, she was fairly competent at yoga, which wasn't a complete fabrication, and she was interested in coffee roasting, but neither of them was really what she was about. In a flash decision, Lotta decided to shelve both the yoga and the coffee and plumped for what she actually loved doing, what she was really about – reading. 'Mostly, I love to read,' she heard herself saying and felt her cheeks go up into a wide smile.

Anne nodded. 'Okay, me too. What sort of books do you like?'

Again Lotta had to be quick. Would saying that she liked contemporary romance books drop her into the chick-lit arena, the name she despised? 'I like all sorts. I love a good autobiography, and I like modern romance novels.'

There was another nod. 'Modern romance?'

'Yes, contemporary romance if I have to choose, but I like anything and everything, if we're being totally honest.'

'Mmm,' Anne agreed. 'Me too. I only wish I had a little bit more time than the few books a week I'm managing to read at the moment. Oh, for a few more hours in the day.'

Lotta agreed with a nod of her head, not letting on that she had quite a bit of spare time on her hands if she wasn't up to her eyes in applying for jobs. 'A few a week is still quite a lot to most people.'

Anne raised her eyebrows. 'Oh, my TBR pile is massive! I'd be reading much more if I could keep my eyes open for a bit longer at the end of the day.'

Lotta shifted in her seat. The fact that Anne knew what a TBR pile was changed everything. ‘I know what you mean. My TBR pile is out of control, somewhat.’

Anne sighed. ‘I love a good romance.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘And for the record, can I just point something out; I do not read *chick-lit*, I read *romance*. The last time I checked, I wasn’t a baby chicken.’

Lotta burst out laughing. ‘Too funny. Me either. Grrrr, that term makes me angry. Books aimed at men running around shooting each other and saving their ex-wives from burning buildings all whilst bare-chested with a gun strapped to their backs are referred to as thrillers. The stuff I like gets categorised for chicks.’

Anne chuckled and took a sip of her water. ‘I know. Don’t even get me started.’

‘Yes, so I love reading, and I quite like homey things, really.’

Anne looked interested. ‘Like what?’

‘You know, cosy nights in with a good book, making lovely dinners, things like that. I’m a bit of a homebody.’ Lotta quickly added, ‘When I’m not at work, of course.’

‘Hmm. Totally agree.’ Anne tapped an iPad in front of her on the table. ‘So you worked in publishing for a long time.’ She looked up with a frown. ‘And then there was a bit of a change from that.’

Lotta followed Anne’s gaze to her CV on the iPad. For the first time, she decided to tell the truth about what had happened with Dan and the app. ‘My partner at the time did a start-up, and I worked there for a while.’

Anne’s eyes showed interest. ‘And what happened with that?’

Lotta tried to make what had occurred sound a whole lot better than what had actually happened. ‘It didn’t work out quite as it should have done in the end, but it was a very good experience,’ she lied. ‘I learnt a lot.’ Lotta didn’t add that she

learnt about the exhaustion that came with trying to not only work two jobs but keep a depressed partner happy.

Anne was quick with her fired-back question. ‘What did you learn?’

Lotta thought about how she’d learnt about cleaning offices until the early hours of the morning. How she’d listened to audiobooks while she’d pushed a vacuum around and poured the regulation amount of bleach down a toilet. ‘The regulations and all the backend things with apps,’ Lotta replied, adding a few things to make it sound more interesting.

Anne closed the subject fairly quickly. ‘So, what I’m really interested in is whether or not you can hold a conversation and use what you’ve got up top.’ She tapped the side of her head. ‘This job is not rocket science. We provide high-flying business people, CEOs, that sort of level with training opportunities and conferences. This role needs someone who can hold a conversation with top executives and sort out problems as and when they arrive. You need to be able to think on your feet and get things done at the same time as appearing as if you have everything under control, even when you haven’t.’

Lotta swallowed as Anne continued with a more detailed outline of the job. It wasn’t quite publishing, but as she learned more, she ascertained quickly that as jobs went, it wasn’t half bad at all. Did she think she would be able to deal with the nuances and needs of CEOs who were partaking in serious career coaching as part of their professional development, she heard Anne ask. Lotta had a little chuckle to herself as she began to answer in the affirmative. It sure beat having to wipe the bottom of an entrepreneur and the development of his app.

After the interview had gone well, Lotta had a little mooch in the town with a dress for the ball in mind. What she hadn't considered about living on the coast was the plethora of gold found lurking on every corner by way of a multitude of sweet little charity shops tucked here and there. On the hunt for things for Pretty Beach to the Breakers, she'd already been in a few shops, and in Newport Reef she was pleased to see a little pink hospice shop in the distance. Her love of a good charity shop hunt for treasure had started many moons before when she had been looking for reading material to fill her insatiable appetite for reading. Then with what had happened with Dan, it had morphed into a whole other ball game as Lotta had less money by the day. Apart from all of that, mostly Lotta Button absolutely loved the thrill of the charity shop chase.

As she pushed open the bow-fronted door to the tiny hospice charity shop, she headed straight down to the back to the books. About twenty minutes later, she had a few of her faves – an Anna Del Conte book she'd had her eye out for for a very long time, an autobiography of a tennis player that had caught her eye, and a book with a very old cover. Life for Lotta when digging for book gold had never felt so good.

On a whim, she stood looking at the shelves of homewares and, after a bit of deliberation, had a white enamel pitcher, a set of heavy silver knives and forks, a mug, and six deep blue vintage hammered highball glasses. After a bit of indecision, she added six lace-edged vintage napkins and a cashmere scarf. Just as she was about to turn around to head to the



counter, she spied a little Italian Baccarat coffee pot and added that to her stash too.

As she approached the payment counter, she tried to weigh up whether she was actually going to be able to stagger home with her finds. She also tried to ignore her dwindling bank account, but the vintage silver cutlery, the cashmere scarf, and the glasses were just too much of a good find to pass up and leave behind.

A lady with short grey-white hair secured into a perfect updo and a string of amber beads around her neck smiled as Lotta put the books and wares on the counter. ‘Good morning, my lovely. Now, what have we found here? Treasure, by the looks of it. Goodness, you have done well.’

Lotta smiled as she unfolded her cotton book bag from her handbag. ‘I certainly have. I shouldn’t really, but I’ve just moved into a new house, and I’ve not really got a lot.’ She stumbled over her words a bit as she remembered having to sell her things to pay off some debts that had accrued because of the app. ‘I’m starting again as it were.’

‘I see,’ the friendly woman replied with a nod as she turned Lotta’s items over so the price stickers were face up. ‘Moved in locally, have you?’

Lotta jerked her thumb over towards the door. ‘Just that way on the ferry. Pretty Beach.’

‘Ooh, yes, my lovely. It’s certainly pretty.’ The woman chortled at her own joke.

‘It is,’ Lotta agreed, touching the corner of one of the napkins.

The woman followed Lotta’s gaze to the edge of the napkin. ‘Ahh, yes, they came in this morning, and I put them straight out. They’re so pretty. They don’t make them like that anymore. You’ve just started out, have you? Newlywed, you say.’

Lotta cleared her throat. Newly left more like. ‘No, no. Just.’ She stopped mid-sentence. No one was interested in her story. ‘I had a bit of a time of it.’

The woman nodded. ‘I see. Divorce, was it?’

Lotta shook her head. ‘No, thank goodness, we weren’t married. Come to think of it, he never would have committed to that anyway. He said we were a “fail” as he put it.’

The woman clicked her tongue against the inside of her cheek. ‘A fail? Really! Goodness, my lovely, we hear it all in here, but that’s the first time I’ve heard a breakup referred to as a fail. That’s not very nice. Sounds like you’re well rid of him if you ask me. Nasty piece of work by the sounds of it.’

Lotta couldn’t have put it better herself. ‘I know.’

‘Well, you don’t look like a failure to me. Hang on a minute,’ she said and squeezed herself around the counter. A few seconds later, she was back, brandishing a white tablecloth in her hand. ‘This came in with those napkins, but I hadn’t put it out yet. I’ll pop it in with your goodies.’

Lotta shook her head, thinking that she’d spent enough already. ‘No, no, sorry, umm, just what I’ve got, please. How much is it?’

The woman frowned and dismissed Lotta’s concerns with a flick of her hand. She lowered her voice. ‘All good.’ And then raised it loudly. ‘That’ll be four seventy-five, please.’

Lotta pursed her lips together and raised her eyebrows. She was quick and played along as the woman deftly scooped things into Lotta’s book bag. A few minutes later, Lotta was on the pavement outside the shop making her way towards the ferry. She didn’t yet have a job, but she had been on the end of kindness just about everywhere she had been. And, on top of that, when she made herself something to eat in the funny little kitchen in Pretty Beach to the Breakers that evening, it would be by way of a very nice knife and fork. Which, at the end of the day, was a silver lining sitting quite nicely above it all as far as she was concerned.



Lotta pushed the door open as she arrived at Pretty Beach to the Breakers, flicked off her shoes and made her way to the breakfast room. She tried not to let her heart sink at the orange cork tiles and the plethora of stainless steel spotlights above her head and instead focused on the lovely breakfast table and the kitchen.

Pottering around, she put her charity shop finds on the worktop and set up her laptop on the table ready to check her emails. She made a big deal of cleaning the little Italian coffee maker until it was ready for use and then spooned fresh coffee in the top. With it sitting on the old but now sparkling, Belling cooker, she waited until it bubbled away, and the air was filled with the smell of coffee.

A few minutes later, she was texting Liv.

*Lotta: Guess what I have?*

*Liv: A job????? ;-)*

*Lotta: Ha! Not quite, but I have got news on that front too. Go me.*

*Liv: What then?*

*Lotta: A haul!!! Oh yeah!*

*Liv: Ooh, you're kidding me?*

*Lotta: Nup. Talk about treasure. You're going to die.*

*Liv: Hang on. I'll video call you. I want to actually see what you've found.*

Lotta laughed and gathered up the charity shop bag and put her wares out on the table. A few minutes later, Liv was propped up in front of her peering out with a smile from her phone screen.

‘I thought you didn’t have any money?’ Liv laughed. ‘Don’t tell me, you couldn’t resist.’

‘I don’t have any money, and you’re right, I couldn’t walk away.’ Lotta chuckled back. ‘You’re going to be mind blown by this little lot. The charity shops down here are like charity

shops used to be in the old days when I started thrifting for books all those moons ago.’

‘Ooh, what have you found? We haven’t done a charity shop haul in like forever,’ Liv asked. ‘I bet the books will be going on your Insta account too.’

‘I have found *gold*,’ Lotta replied and held up the carrier bag from the hospice shop with its logo on the front. ‘Everything was a pound.’

Liv screwed her nose up. ‘What? That’s extraordinary.’

‘Tell me about it,’ Liv replied.

‘Oh, gosh. How many books did you buy?’

‘I restrained myself because I was on the ferry.’ Lotta laughed. ‘I’m so going back with the car so I can dig for more reading gold.’

‘Oh dear. That sounds ominous.’

Lotta held up her mug. ‘This is the first purchase. Designer pottery mug. One pound. Washed and already in use.’

‘Fab! Good find there, my friend.’

Lotta turned around to the cooker and held the Italian coffee pot up in front of her screen. ‘This was also a pound. I can now make proper coffee. It sounds and smells amazing, too.’

‘Ooh, yes! What a find. The thrifting gods were looking down on you today, Lott.’

Lotta opened up the book bag and pulled out the white lace-edged napkins. ‘These look as if they have never been used. You should feel them, they’re so soft. I don’t even think you get fabric like this anymore.’

‘Lovely. Yes, they’re so pretty,’ Liv noted as Lotta held the lace edge up to her phone camera.

‘They’re for when I have my first Pretty Beach dinner party,’ Lotta joked.

Liv raised her eyebrows. ‘Oh, we’re staying in Pretty Beach now, are we? That’s new.’

‘We might be,’ Lotta joked and held up the matching tablecloth. ‘This is gorgeous and clearly spent its whole life in a cupboard. It’s never been used, and she threw it in for nothing! In fact, she just made up a price and chucked it all in my bag. Even though things were a pound, I got a deal.’

‘Gold. I love it. Absolute *gold*.’

Lotta delved into the bag and pulled out the cashmere scarf. ‘This is a beauty. Pure cashmere and also a pound, though I must have got it for much less in the end. Can you believe that?’

‘Ooh, you were on a thrifting roll. I like it!’ Liv exclaimed.

‘Yup,’ Lotta said, wrapping the scarf around her neck. ‘Same thing. It’s clearly never been used. I also got myself three lovely books. I love this one, look at what’s underneath the jacket,’ Lotta said, pulling off the dust jacket of one of the books and holding the book up to her phone.

‘Ahh, yes, that’s a nice one. Hello library room.’

Lotta then held the enamel jug up. ‘And this is going to be for the flowers I treat myself to when I finally get settled and get myself back together again.’

‘Gorgeous! Also, you’re sounding more positive. Happier. Excellent,’ Liv acknowledged.

‘I’m trying, I really am. I am putting the things on my transformation list into place. This is part of it. Doing things I love.’ Lotta replied, picking up her coffee and her phone and stepping out into the conservatory. ‘I’ve been for an interview locally, and I *really* hope I get it.’

‘Wait, what? Where did this come from? You didn’t say you had an interview. I was joking earlier. I didn’t even know you’d applied for a job down that way. Where is it?’ Liv asked enthusiastically.

‘It’s near you. So not really local as such, but not too far.’

‘What’s the company?’

‘Like a high-end training company.’

‘What? I don’t get it.’ Liv frowned.

‘It’s a development company for CEOs and suchlike. They come to attend seminars, conferences, things like that.’

‘Right. What’s the role?’ Liv wrinkled her forehead. ‘What has that got to do with publishing?’

Lotta waved her hand dismissively in front of her phone. ‘It’s not got anything to do with it. I applied for a content production thing months and months ago when I was back in town. Anyway, I’d changed my location on the job hunting app to down this way and somehow my details found their way to the recruitment department, which then trickled down to this place in Newport. So, yeah, it’s near you.’

‘But it’s not publishing, I thought you wanted to try and stay in that field.’

‘No, but it is an income, and I loved it from the moment I walked in. Everything was so nice. I mean, it is my type of place to work. It sure beats some of the diabolical places I’ve ended up in for interviews. There was a distinct lack of smoked glass and snarky women, so that was a bonus, too.’

‘Wow, you seem into it,’ Liv noted.

‘I am. It would tide me over for a bit and give me some breathing space until I can get back on my feet again. Plus, it sounds interesting. It would give me another string to my bow. Maybe it’s the change of direction I didn’t know I needed.’

‘Yes, I think that would be a good idea to get on your feet again.’

‘Yup.’

‘You could do a few bits in the house there, too. Maybe rent that out at some point in the future,’ Liv suggested.

‘Sheesh. No one would rent this in the state it’s in at the moment,’ Lotta replied. ‘At least I’m thankful that this part of it is now clean.’

‘Yeah. Thank heaven for small mercies and the fact that the kitchen scrubbed up well.’

‘I know. Tell me about it.’ Lotta looked out towards the garden. ‘I was thinking about pulling up the cork tiles in here. What do you reckon?’

Liv shook her head from side to side as she contemplated, ‘I can’t see why not. Or maybe a certain fake dating man can help with that.’

‘Yeah, no. I had a message and an email from him – it’s very much just a deal.’

‘Right. So, what was underneath the cork in there? The same as the other rooms?’

‘Better. Only the wide plank floorboards of my dreams.’

‘Do it then. It’ll be like the little Sussex cottage you’ve always dreamt about. Only not in Sussex.’

‘Hmm, yes, I think I will.’

‘Just chuck ’em in the garage and think about the headache of getting rid of the mess at a later date. Out of sight, out of mind,’ Liv advised.

‘Yeah. You know what? I think I will make it my mission.’

‘And what about the bedroom situation?’

‘No change in that,’ Lotta stated solemnly.

‘Meaning you’re still in the alcove off the breakfast room.’

‘I am. I might start on one of the bedrooms as my next job. If I can stomach it.’

‘You go, girl. I’m really proud of you.’

Lotta felt her cheeks flush. ‘Thank you.’

‘I’ll have a look at my rota and see when I can come down so I can give you a hand.’

Lotta smiled. ‘Sounds like a plan to me.’

‘It does. You sound much brighter, Lott.’

‘Thank you,’ Lotta said as she gazed out towards the garden. ‘For some reason, I am. And I’ve started doing glow-up transformation things here and there.’

‘Great! It’s the sea air down here. I did tell you that months ago.’

‘I know you did. I have to admit, I didn’t believe you at all. Not a bit, but there is something about it down here that is growing on me.’ She sighed. ‘It’ll take a lot of work though *if* I was to stay here.’

‘It’s a long way from publishing and Despicable Dan,’ Liv stated.

‘I know. I think that’s part of the attraction. I didn’t realise what a rut I was in, and now that I’m here, it’s like I can breathe again. I was so blinkered, and I had my heart set on things that were no longer there for me, if I’m honest.’

‘Yeah, I know what you mean.’

‘Up there, I was reminded of him and that blooming app every which way I turned. That’s a huge benefit of being down here – I just don’t get that.’

‘Mmm, no. Good, I’m glad to see the back of him. Even the memory of him.’

‘Down here, I have no history, really. It’s strange that that feels nice. Almost like I get a clean slate. I didn’t think about it like that before. It just felt like another place where I’d failed because of the state of it in here,’ Lotta mused.

‘I get you.’

Lotta waved her hand around. ‘So, there we go. My first successful day in a very long time, it has to be said.’

Liv chuckled and winked. ‘Lotta’s back out to play. I’m liking it.’

‘Maybe she is.’ Lotta laughed.

‘You’ve been thrifting, you’ve got new books, you showed me your haul, and you’ve been for a job interview that didn’t



depress you. And you're glowing-up. I think we can say that you're back out to play, Lott.'

Lotta chuckled. 'I hope so. I really do. It would be nice to feel like the old me again.'

Lotta was tired and had had a gutful of everything. Not that she was complaining at all, but she was most certainly pooped. Since the moment she'd arrived in Pretty Beach, she'd been on the go; cleaning ovens, traipsing up to London on the train, lugging around furniture, gawping at men with nice chests, applying to jobs she was never going to get, purchasing items for a glow-up, washing velvet curtains, going for interviews, trawling through charity shops for dresses. Trying not to think about a certain man.

After a bit of a late morning sitting up in bed with cups of tea and her latest book, she'd planned a day of absolutely nothing; no emails, hair dyes, cleaning, transformations or worrying about new jobs. She wouldn't have minded a certain man, but he wasn't on offer, so Lotta Button was having a day off.

With the kitchen most definitely Hubbard-like and ready to eat a horse, she had a quick shower, took much pleasure in not wearing a bra and decided on a stroll to the bakery for something tasty to fill the large hole in her stomach. Not really yet knowing anyone in Pretty Beach had its most distinct benefits; she could go out without having to bother at all. Her unwashed hair was sticking up all over the place courtesy of a scalp massage the night before, which according to YouTube, would help it shine. Her face was make-up free, showing her rarely-seen freckles smattering the tops of her cheeks and her oldest fleece-lined but definitely not flattering leggings were tucked into her shabby, comfy Uggs. She pulled on an oversized black fleece with a funnel neck she'd had since pre-

Dan and his app days and walked out the front door. Glowed-up she was not.

Walking along in a world of her own with an audiobook playing in her ears, she ambled through the backstreets of Pretty Beach. After winding her way around past the council building and along by the ferry wharf, the sun began to filter down in streams through the clouds warming the back of her neck. All sorts of things filed past her eyes as she listened to the story: a gelato shop with a striped awning and a pink bike with flowers growing in a basket out the front, a big sign on an old warehouse-type building informing her of Ben Chalmers Seaplanes. She smiled at that; a seaplane didn't sound half bad. She continued down a lane with rows of cottages, past a conservatory building named The Orangery, along past the Indian restaurant, which was already spilling gorgeous smells out onto the road, and made her way to the bakery.

A few minutes later, she stopped the audiobook, took out her earphones, pushed open the door to the bakers, and after taking a pint of milk from the fridge, stood in the queue for the counter with a freshly baked bread smell, buns, and pastry filling the air. She smiled to herself at the chatter going on ahead of her. Holly, the woman she had met before with her super shiny bobbed hair, wore a baker's apron over a white shirt with diamanté on the collar. Lotta knew a diamond when she saw one, and two huge ones sparkled from Holly's ears. She earwigged on Holly talking to a woman in a pretty floral dress, overhearing that Holly was just about to go off to one of her other shops located somewhere called Darling Island. Before Lotta got to the front of the queue, Holly caught Lotta's eye and smiled. Once Lotta reached the counter, Holly was around the front and beaming.

'Hello, Lotta! Nice to see you again. How are you getting on?' Holly asked.

Lotta couldn't help but beam back. It was really nice to be recognised even if she was looking the scruffiest she had in a long time. She patted her head self-consciously feeling her bird's nest hair in comparison to Holly's perfectly glossy bob.

Holly had to be simply the most sparkled-up, unlined, glittery person she'd ever laid eyes on. 'I'm doing really well, thanks.'

'I've heard you're warm now, at least.' Holly smiled.

Lotta nodded, realising that Ron's visit to Pretty Beach to the Breakers was clearly common knowledge. 'Yes. It's made quite the difference.'

Holly lowered her voice. 'Locals Only helped you out a bit, I hope.'

Lotta cottoned on right away. 'Oh, yes, and the Pretty Beach way.'

'Excellent. That's what we like to hear,' Holly replied and signalled to one of the girls behind the counter. She lowered her voice, her eyes flicking along the queue and then back to Lotta. 'LO today is vanilla. As in buns. The cinnamon was gone in a jiffy.' Holly stopped and frowned. 'Actually, there might be a few left because Lulu ended up being called away. Hold on.'

Lotta watched as Holly darted out the back and was back in a second, holding to her side a small white paper bag. 'Yep, you were in luck. There are vanilla ones in there too.' She lowered her voice. 'On the house for our new local resident, of course.'

Lotta went to protest, but registering the look on Holly's face, she changed her mind and accepted gracefully. She put her pint of milk on the counter and addressed the girl. 'Just that for me, then, thanks.'

Holly continued. 'It's lovely to see some movement in Pretty Beach to the Breakers. It's been empty more or less since the early days when we found ourselves down here in this little town,' Holly remarked. 'Such a lovely place right on the corner there, too.'

'Yes, it's got a, umm, a lot of potential.'

'Lot of work, mind,' Holly noted. 'You'll get there, though with a bit of elbow grease.'

Lotta wasn't going to say that her initial plan hadn't been to stay. She wasn't sure how well that would go down. She was certain that was not what Holly wanted to hear. 'Lots of elbow grease! And money.' She didn't add either that she didn't have a lot of money.

'I hear you.' Holly flicked her hand around at the bakery. 'Ahh, there wasn't a lot of money around when we arrived in Pretty Beach, but we've done okay for ourselves. We started off on a mattress on the floor! Those were the days.'

Lotta nodded and widened her eyes a touch. If the glittering of the diamonds not only in Holly's ears but also the rock around her neck was anything to go by, it was an understatement that Holly had done okay for herself. 'Hopefully the same will be said for me, too.'

'Well, you seem to be fitting in okay so far, and trust me, not everybody does around here.'

Lotta made a little wincing face, slightly alarmed at the fact that not a single thing on Holly's perfectly line-free face moved, and her skin was so flawless it was almost as if it was porcelain. 'Right, okay, well, I hope I fit in down here.'

Holly chortled. 'You'd know about it already if you didn't.' Holly tapped her on the elbow. 'Rightio, well sorry, but I've got to rush. Good luck with it all. It must be nice to be rid of that red carpet.'

Before Lotta had a chance to question how in the world Holly knew about the carpet, Holly was out the door before she could blink. Lotta paid for her milk, put the white paper bag in her book bag, and strolled back across the shop. Just as she was standing outside the bakery fiddling with her phone for her audiobook, she heard someone say hello from behind. She turned and to her shock, saw Jack coming the other way. The sun was behind him, the wind in his hair, his left hand in his jeans pocket, and his right hand holding his phone. As she took him in, he hadn't become any uglier since she'd been crawling around on a red carpet with her gulping every time he'd got close. Was he in fact getting more good-looking by the day?

As she stood paralysed and mesmerised for a moment, she felt as if someone was playing rom-com movie theme tunes in her head. The problem with her version of the rom-com was she'd omitted the bit where she'd spent hours since dawn in hair and make-up with someone bringing her coffee and American doughnuts. This was the real-life Lotta Button version of a rom-com, whereby her addition to the screen was bird's nest hair, a lack of underwear, real-girl freckles and quite frankly, the ugliest footwear in the world ever. As the imaginary music faded, she wanted the ground to open up and swallow her whole.

She stuttered and gaped and coughed all at the same time. 'Hi!'

'Fancy bumping into you here,' Jack deadpanned.

'Ha!' Lotta couldn't think of anything at all to say. She was too busy wishing she was properly dressed. She couldn't quite work out how her brain seemed to have forgotten how to work and why it was no longer able to communicate with her lips to turn out a coherent sentence. She lurched forward at the same time as rummaging in her book bag and then held up the white paper bag with the buns. 'Just popping out for supplies.'

Jack raised his chin a bit. 'I see.'

'What are you doing in this neck of the woods?'

'Seeing a man about a boat.' Jack's face was closed off, and Lotta wasn't quite sure how to read it.

Lotta wrinkled her lips and frowned. 'You didn't mention you have a boat.'

'I didn't?'

'No. You most definitely did not. I would remember something like that,' Lotta replied whilst inside actually wondering if she would remember. Whenever she was around Jack, she had to admit that what he said wasn't always top and front of her mind. It was definitely fair to say that whilst around him, her cognitive memory probably wasn't firing on all cylinders. Not that she really knew what her cognitive memory consisted of, but she'd read about it in a book.

Whatever it was, it was normally playing second fiddle to her thinking about things other than what was coming out of his mouth.

‘That’s because I don’t have a boat,’ Jack said, glancing at the pavement. Lotta shuddered and excruciatingly, for some reason, found herself hopping from foot to foot in a strange sort of nervous jiggle. She cringed – there was no way he hadn’t seen her grotty foot attire. Why had she thought it any kind of acceptable to be seen out in public in furry slipper boots? Not even new furry boots or clean furry boots, not that that would have been any better, but the planet’s tattiest, grubbiest boots. Ahhhh!

‘Sorry, you don’t have a boat, or you do have a boat? I’m confused,’ Lotta asked with a puzzled look on her face.

‘I don’t have a boat, no.’

Lotta held her hands up in front of her face, the paper bag going with them. ‘Right, you see this is exactly why we needed the list.’

It was Jack’s turn to be confused. ‘What list?’

‘The list of questions! If the businessman in the big business deal had asked me about the existence, or not, of a boat, I wouldn’t have known the answer. See? This is a prime example. Prime. This is precisely why we need to make sure we’ve covered all our bases.’

Jack’s face didn’t break into a smile. ‘Was there a mention of a boat on the list, then?’

‘Ahh, you’re just being difficult. You know what I mean.’ Lotta smiled, and her heart did a double back as his face softened into a grin, and he turned the handsome up by a trillion notches. As her veins buzzed, and she felt as if she might dissolve into a heap, Lotta swallowed. This was not good, not good at all. Lotta couldn’t pretend that she hadn’t fallen. And hard.

‘How’s the house?’ Jack asked.

Lotta blinked rapidly. ‘Yes, it’s looking a lot better without its central strip of red hurting my eyeballs every time I walk

in.'

'And the library?'

'The library has started to magically fill with books. I can't tell you how much it warms the cockles. I've wanted one for a very long time. I never in my wildest dreams thought it would be a reality.'

'Well, there you are then.'

'What are you up to?'

'As I said, seeing a man about a boat.'

'Are there any other things you need to tell me before the ball? You know, like boats or I don't know.' Lotta paused for a bit and flicked her eyes upwards. 'Motorbikes maybe – do you have a Harley I should know about? Or a strange hobby you've omitted to mention?'

Jack turned his lips upside down in contemplation. 'Tell you what. Why don't we discuss anything further over dinner?'

Lotta's heart's double backs had moved to the balance beam. It stopped there for a second and performed a perfect wolf turn and then waited with its arms presenting just so. It had to be a perfect ten. As before, her cognitive whatever it was did not match the performance of her heart. 'Dinner?'

'You can formulate another list of questions, and I can answer them. Or we could just, you know, talk.'

'Okay. When are you thinking?'

'What about the weekend? Are you free?'

*Oh, hang on a minute, let me check if I've got anything on,* Lotta thought sarcastically in her head as her heart performed an aerial and landed back perfectly on the beam. 'Errm, yes, I think I'm free.'

'You *think* you are or you are?'

'I am,' Lotta clarified.

'Right. I'll text you what's what, if that works for you.'



*Oh yes, Jack, yes, in-flipping-deedy, that works for me,* Lotta thought, but her response was more than casual, as if she was invited out to dinner all the time. ‘Great, see you then.’

The next day, Lotta closed the lid on her laptop and got up to make a cup of tea just after a video interview with Anne Fisher. The second video interview had gone well. As the first interview, it had progressed along the same lines, only this time, there was another woman sitting in on the chat. As it had been before, it was more of an informal discussion rather than a long list of formatted questions no one really wanted to know the answer to. Lotta had ended up chatting about her book collection, her love of both fiction and autobiographies, and that in her new house, she was working on a library-cum-study all of her own.

Part of her hadn't even quite believed it herself, but as she settled into Pretty Beach to the Breakers more, the notion of staying in the house, making it her own, and becoming a success was looking more and more attractive by the day. Who needed Chelsea and publishing anyway?

After finishing the interview, with her mug from her charity shop haul in hand, she made her way to the sitting room. As she stepped in, it smelled just as stale as it had on the first day when she'd discovered it. It also still appeared gloomy with the old lights in the centre of the room not looking any more attractive. What *had* changed though was Lotta's eye for potential. Indeed, her whole outlook on the house and Pretty Beach had altered exponentially.

Putting her mug on the top of the fireplace, she strolled over the carpet, flung back the curtains, and fiddled with the lock on the French doors. A few seconds later, fresh sea air

was blasting through the room. Tapping away on her phone, she made a list that included vacuuming the cobwebs, pulling up the carpet, taking down the curtains, disinfecting the room, getting the chimney swept, and investigating the light fittings. After that, she added the inclusion of a nice sofa and a coffee table. Narrowing her eyes, she imagined little spots in the room laden down with her books, colour-coded and alphabetically sorted into categories. The thought of it alone made her heart flutter. It seemed Lotta Button had a mission to get herself on the case and make the rest of Pretty Beach to the Breakers her own.

She opened the transformation list and scrolled down. She was starting to tick things off; walking on the beach every morning, accomplishing little things in the house, things on the job front were looking up and she'd started to look after both her diet and her skin. For Lotta there was hope. And boy was she was raring to go.



Later that day, Lotta had been to most of the charity shops in Newport Reef in search of something for the ball and had tried on somewhere in the region of twenty little black dresses. None of which had cut the mustard. Though a little black dress or a little long dress possibly would have passed, she didn't want to just pass. For the ball with Jack, even though it was a fake outing, Lotta Button wanted to wow. And so far, that wasn't happening at all.

She opened the door to the St. Evangeline's hospice shop and made her way to the back, where the long dresses were neatly lined up in a row. She flicked through with a sigh; a pretty strapless bridesmaid's dress in a pale pink, a heavily beaded wedding dress, a navy blue satin gown with jewels clinging to the zip at the back. Gathering all three, she wedged them onto the cheap hook in the tiny changing room and yanked the curtain over the gap. The blue one went on first. After stepping in and tugging the zip up to the top, she peered into the mirror; it was too big on the bust and possessed a

strange fishtail affair at the bottom that did nothing for her at all. The wedding dress was absolutely gorgeous but was clearly for a bride, not for someone going to a very posh hotel and a palace on a fake date. Finally, she stepped into the pink bridesmaid's dress and pulled it on. After struggling with a button on the back, she tugged the strapless bodice into place and stood with her head tilted to the side looking into the small, grubby mirror. It wasn't bad. It fitted her like a glove, and the iridescent sparkles on the skirt caught the light. Did it wow, though? She didn't think so, but it was a whole lot better than any of the other options she currently had on the table. After a lot of umming and ahing, she took the dress off, put her clothes back on, and decided that the dress was good enough as a backup. It wasn't a bad price but not far off hiring one, so she'd have another look at that.

After a bumpy ride back home on the ferry, and a long walk home in the rain, Lotta was ready for a night in with her books. As she got back to Pretty Beach to the Breakers in the pouring rain, she slipped off her shoes by the door, left her umbrella under the porch, and walked in. Her chin dropped to the floor at the difference that greeted her in the hallway devoid of the red carpet. It was staggering how much the red had zapped the whole place in a murky, dull dollop of out of place colour. Now the hallway was mildly welcoming. She wedged her phone between her chin and her shoulder as it buzzed with a call from Liv.

'Hiya. Just calling for a quick catch-up. How is everything with Fake Dating Man?' Liv asked.

'Do you mean Jack?'

'Ooh, are we calling him Jack now?'

Lotta felt herself blush. She was glad Liv couldn't see her face. 'Fine.'

'Fine. Is that all?'

Lotta purposely spoke about the carpet and not the fact that she was realising that the more she saw Jack, the more she liked the look of him. 'He was a great asset. Without the carpet, the house looks like a different place.'

‘Excellent! I can’t wait to see the progress. What about the library room? How are you getting on with that?’

‘Yes, that’s coming on really well. Hang on. I’ll take a picture of the sofa. Literally looks amazing, Liv.’

Lotta strolled into the library room, and even though she was the one to have lugged the sofa in there with Jack, she was shocked at the turnaround in the room. The once cork tiles that had suffocated the floor in a dirty orange were a distant memory. The windows now sparkled with the results of her efforts, and the curtains actually framed the windows and set off the view. She leant down to turn on the little lamp with its wicker lampshade beside the velvet sofa and sighed at how well the upholstery cleaner had done its job. Even if she said it herself, her library room was very, *very* nice.

Tapping the button on her phone to the speaker, she held it up, pressed and held down the red button and panned the camera around the room. Everything smiled back; the beautiful old blue sofa, the glow from the lamp, the lovely old fireplace all filled the screen. She heard Liv squeal from the speaker after she hit send. ‘Love it! It looks so different! You have your very own library room, Lott! Just what you’ve always wanted. Eat your heart out, Sussex.’

‘I know. I can’t believe it. It’s lovely, isn’t it?’

‘It really is. What a result finding that in the garage.’

‘There’s loads of stuff out there. I didn’t even want to look in there before, but there are enough bits of furniture for me to be getting on with for a while. It means one less thing to worry about. There’s no way I have the money for big ticket things like furniture until, well, until I’m a bit more sorted.’

‘It’s been the best thing ever coming down here. Look at you. I’m so proud of you.’

‘Thank you. I’m sort of proud of myself, too. Not that I would have ever thought I would say that.’

‘You should be. You had a rough old ride.’

‘I feel as if I’ve finally got away from Dan, the memory of Dan, and the bloody app,’ Lotta stated, adding a long

exaggerated sigh on the end. ‘Sorry to swear.’

‘Yep, it’s been a long time coming.’

‘I should have physically removed myself from it a long time ago. I didn’t realise how detrimental it was to be around the same area,’ Lotta said as she tapped the speaker button and put her phone back to her ear. ‘Even though I shouldn’t have been the one to have to move.’

‘Hmm.’

Lotta continued her thoughts aloud. ‘It’s not as if I really walked away from much. Nearly all my so-called friends have gone by the wayside. What about Vicky? She dropped me like a tonne of bricks. Thing is, I wasn’t clever enough to see that initially. Once I wasn’t with Dan, she slowly but surely stopped seeing me, do you remember?’

‘Do I remember? Of course I remember, how could I not? Don’t even get me started on Vicky,’ Liv said seriously. ‘If I ever bump into her, trust me, she’ll know about it.’

‘She wasn’t nice. I wish I had seen it at the time I continued to text her and call like an idiot wondering why she wasn’t picking up. Why was I quite as dim?’

‘I know. I didn’t realise in the first place, either. Although the silver lining of that is that no one needs a friend like Vicky,’ Liv stated. ‘When you look back on it, she was quite the wolf in sheep’s clothing.’

‘Yep. It’s horrible being on the end of a friend like that,’ Lotta said. ‘She really was a toxic piece of work when I look back on it.’

‘Oh yes, yes indeed. You’re well rid,’ Liv agreed.

‘Anyway, no point in dwelling on the past. I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon, if we’re still on for that?’

‘Of course. We’ll be with you as soon as James gets back. I’m not letting the fake boyfriend overtake me in helping out with the house,’ Liv joked.

‘Thank you. You’ll need wellies. We’re going to tackle the garden.’

Liv chuckled. ‘As long as you feed me, I don’t really care.’

‘I’ll hold you to that when you’re knee-deep in mud.’ Lotta chuckled.

‘I’ll be fine. We’ll get James to do all the hard stuff, ha ha.’

‘Too funny.’

‘Looking forward to it and the bottle of red wine at the end of the day.’

‘See you then, cousin.’

‘See ya.’

Lotta picked up the mug of tea she’d made whilst she’d been on the phone with Liv and walked up the stairs to the first floor. Bypassing the bedroom, which would soon be hers, she heaved herself up the tiny narrow staircase to the attic landing where in the eaves, two doors led off either side. Gingerly pushing open the door on the left, and with her mug of tea in the crook of her arm, she wasn’t anywhere near as apprehensive as she had been when she’d first arrived in the house.

Now with the heating working, a clean kitchen, a library room, and the fact that she felt more comfortable and knew a bit about what she was doing, everything about the old house felt better. Nothing was quite as daunting as it had been on the day she’d first walked in. She looked at a tall pile of vintage suitcases stashed in the corner and a huge old stripped pine wardrobe butted up to a tiny window in the roof. Stepping over various bits and pieces of paraphernalia, she ignored the layer of dust on top of one of the old leather suitcases and lifted the lid. Inside, piles of faded black and white photographs, a wedding invitation edged in gold, a stack of postcards tied with a frayed old ribbon, and a small blue teddy bear with a red love heart pinned to its ear.

Taking a sip of her tea, she stepped to her right and stood peering out the tiny window at the sea in the distance – its steel-blue tones merging with the line of the horizon. Noticing a hat box on top of the wardrobe, she wondered what was inside, moved closer, and with a creaking hinge, opened the

wardrobe door. Not sure what she was expecting, what she was greeted with was a clothes rail brimming with old clothes.

She touched the top of a tweed country-style jacket in the centre and slowly began to slide the old wooden hangers to the left – a child's white dress with embroidered pink flowers, a bright blue seventies boob tube affair looking as if it had just stepped out of Top of the Pops, an old wax jacket with cracks all the way down the front. And then she got to a long pale pink flapper-style dress with tassels, another in a darker, more salmon pink with tiny little straps to an elaborate bodice and a full skirt screwed up at the bottom and folded into a box. She flicked again to the left and coughed as dust billowed up into her face, and her hand rested on a black garment bag. Faded gold swirly writing on the top informed her of a bespoke dressmaker in Bath, and a dull gold zip ran from the top to the bottom.

Pushing the contents of the rail to the left with her left shoulder, Lotta grabbed the top of the garment bag, lifted the hanger off the rail and, surprised by the weight, nearly fell over her own feet as she attempted to remove the bag from the wardrobe. Realising the bottom was caught under a pile of shoe boxes, she removed them one by one in a cloud of dust and finally pulled the bag out.

Bemused by the garment bag's weight, she dragged it away from the wardrobe and laid it over a chair piled with old Christmas decorations. Brushing off dust, she undid a hook securing the bottom and then carefully started to undo the faded gold zip. Tugging the zip down, she peeked inside and gasped. What appeared to be black taffeta silk greeted her. As she pulled the zipper down, more and more of it appeared. Heavily creased and slightly musty, but the dust bag had clearly performed its job.

After a considerable amount of wiggling and struggling with the zip getting stuck and concerned the fabric would rip, Lotta finally carefully removed the dress from the bag. Still attached to the hanger, she muttered to herself as she attempted to hold it out in front of her, but unable to hold her



arm up due to the weight, she instead struggled to hang it up by latching it over the wardrobe door.

Lotta raised her eyebrows at what greeted her. The dress was a stunner. She had no idea how old it was and with little clue about fashion, wasn't sure of the era, but she did know it was very nice. A strapless plain black boned bodice sat atop a full taffeta silk skirt so deeply creased it looked almost like paper. Its soft sheen caught the light, and she touched a huge floppy bow attached to the back where the bodice met the skirt. In a separate bag stuffed in the bottom, Lotta pulled out two full netted petticoats, one with what appeared to be a flexible, but broken, hoop in the bottom. Standing and staring at the beautiful but excruciatingly creased dress, Lotta watched as a panel of black sequins to the top glittered in the light. If ever there was going to be an occasion in her life where a ballgown was looking at her, it was happening right there in front of her eyes.

For ages, she just continued to stand in front of the dress, sipping on her tea and wondering. Once her mug was drained, she struggled to put the garment cover back over the dress, tucked in the train, and then heaved the dress from the door out onto the landing and pulled it down the stairs behind her.

Once the dress was in the breakfast room, she again pulled it out of its bag, but this time she whipped off her clothes and stepped in. The bodice fit her like a glove, and after picking up the front and wiggling her way into the hallway, she opened the door to the understairs cupboard with a mirror on the back.

Dropping the front of the dress back down to the floorboards, she squinted into the mirror; What looked back at her was one very creased, musty, silk taffeta dress, but on top of it was a beaming smile because the dress was not only wrinkled and in need of a clean – it was also the ballgown of her dreams.



After the discovery of the dress, Lotta was on a mission to banish the drab from her existence. She was going to transform, to glow-up as if her life depended on it. It had nothing to do with the fact that she was going to dinner with Jack or, indeed, attending an event as his fake partner. That didn't matter at all. Cough.

She held her phone to her ear as she stood on the pavement outside Boots. 'Righto, thanks, Timmy. I'm armed with your lists, and I'm going in for the kill. By the time I come out of here, I'll have eyelashes, the tan that's going to give me a Mediterranean summer glow, and the stuff to make my teeth sparkle. I'll also have scrubbed skin by way of coffee grounds from Brazil.'

'Darling, you will. Do not sway from my list. It's much-researched. Anything else could be seriously detrimental to your health,' Timmy joked. 'Don't forget I do things like this for a living. Only with about a hundred times the budget.'

'Don't worry, I won't,' Lotta promised.

'I still can't convince you into considering a little injectable tweak? I'm paying. You know how it does wonders for myself and my good other half.' Timmy chuckled. 'My treat, I told you that before. I've found somewhere highly recommended down there, darling. There's a doctor down there who is very good. Honestly, you'll love it. There's nothing like it to take a few years off.'

Lotta laughed in response. 'Thank you and again no. How would it be a treat for me to have toxins stuck in my forehead? I don't know, I just don't fancy it.'

'Darling, you need to move with the times and get with the program. Literally everyone I know does it, apart from you, that is.'

'No way, thanks. I'll stick with what nature gave me for now.'

'Up to you, darling. The offer is there.'

'Okay, I've arrived. Speak to you later.'

'See you. Have fun.'

Lotta strolled through the baby section of Boots until she was standing in the aisle looking at eyelashes. She stood there with her phone out in front of her, attempting to locate the ones Timmy had recommended. She quickly calculated that there were hundreds to choose from – eyelashes were clearly a serious business. She shook her head, remembering when she used to make a huge deal of getting ready to go to work and when going out involved pamper-time, pretty hair, GHDs and all sorts. Since the failure, the little things she'd done for herself had fallen, sadly, by the wayside. It was almost as if the hundreds of little packets in front of her under the bright shop lights promising all sorts exemplified just how much she'd let herself go since Dan had told her they were over. The thought of Dan and her lack of self-care fuelled Lotta's plan for a transformation. Lotta Button was going to the ball, and she was going to *glow*.

She continued to mull over her life as she stood lost in a beautiful but overwhelming world of wispy, natural, smokey, faux mink and fluttery intense. She rippled with a shudder at eyelashes named Coco Belle, which declared long, luxe, and dramatic, none of which she felt best described her or more accurately, her current state of mind. She opened Timmy's message. How on earth he knew which eyelashes were the best, she had no idea, but she knew that if he said so, it was a go. He'd noted some worn by a celebrity which were more expensive than Lotta's bag and ran her eyes down to his best budget buy.

Pulling one of the packets from the shelf, she studied the claim on the front that promised to add a little luxe to her lashes. She was dubious at best. The one and only time she'd tried lashes was when she'd first been going out with Dan and had spent so long dabbing at her upper lashes with a pair of tweezers she'd ended up in a sticky lop-sided mess and late. With an all-natural mink effect box in her hand, which was on special and offered two pairs for the price of one, she put them in her basket along with a tube of gradual tan, vitamin C face cream, and a coffee scrub looking nothing short of scary. After having paid, she walked out of the shop, not convinced but hoping for the best.

She considered her transformation list. She wasn't sure how a tube of tan and a set of lashes was going to help her feel more mentally in control, nor was she convinced that a coffee scrub was going to help her in improving her self-talk. Nevertheless, as she made her way out of the shop, she had the distinct impression that, at long last, a shift was occurring, change was in the air, and things were on the up. For Lotta, it couldn't have come soon enough.

On the day of the meal out with Jack, Lotta, surrounded by a steamy mist, was in the tub in the tiny bathroom off the utility room with hot bubbly water up to her neck and a glass of wine on the floor beside her. Her left arm rested on the edge of the bath as she held her Kindle out in front of her – she'd hopped in her pre-going out bath and got lost in the pages of a book in an attempt to stop her nerves from turning her into a fuzzy mess. It had worked.

She was definitely in her element; the Kindle's screen glowed with a soft hue, a candle on the windowsill cast a warm light in the room, and the air was warm and cosy. Condensation ran down the mirror and the inside of the old sash window, and as bubbles floated across the surface of the water, Lotta was not in a ramshackle house in Pretty Beach, but rather, lost via her Kindle in an old Tuscan farmhouse surrounded by olive trees. As she got lost in Italian thoughts, the softness from a bath bomb filled the bath water with glitter, and the room with a vanilla scent, and the hot bubbly water warmed her to the bone. Her bathing and book-reading ritual had certainly worked to calm her nerves...so much so that she'd completely lost all track of time.

Draining her glass of wine and realising time had marched on, she suddenly sat up straight, splashing bubbly water all over the floor. As was usual when she was into a good book, she'd had no concept of the passage of time and now was close to not being ready when Jack arrived. She swore repeatedly, frantically scrubbing her face with coffee scrub,

and then lifted the shower attachment from the taps, blasted the water, and speedily washed her hair.

Wrapped in a towel and with a turban on her head, she frantically ran through to the breakfast room looking for her clothes, panicking because the plan had involved the eyelashes, the tan, all sorts. Dashing back into the wonky bathroom to get her hairbrush, she accidentally knocked over the empty glass of wine with her foot. The glass seemed to topple for a second before it crashed onto the floor and shattered across the old white floor tiles. Lotta's eyes widened in horror, and before she could stop herself, she'd stepped on shards of glass. Howling in pain as the glass sliced into her skin, blood started to run profusely over her foot. Crimson drops of blood slipped from her foot onto the white tiles as she stared down in shock at both the blood, her foot, and the remains of the wine glass, wondering what to do.

With a deep sigh, together with a wince, she plonked herself down on the toilet seat and with her ankle resting on her knee, squinted at the sole of her foot. Peering down at her heel and toes, she could see a thin but lethal shard of glass, razor blade sharp, glinting in the dim light and slicing into her skin. Grimacing, she gingerly touched it and could feel its point pressing against the flesh just below her big toe. Swearing repeatedly, she grabbed tweezers from her make-up bag, gasped, took hold of the piece of glass with the tweezers and yanked it out of her skin. With the piece of glass removed, blood began to pour out of her foot. She leant over to a pile of clean flannels piled up in a basket and slapped one over the gash. Within a few minutes, the blood was beginning to seep through the flannel, and she wasn't quite sure what to do.

Swearing under her breath as she thought about the number of splinters of glass that were on the floor, she reached up, flicked the light switch on, and squinted down at the tiles. As expected, tiny shards of glass were scattered all over the place. Hobbling up, she pulled the blood-stained flannel away from the sole of her foot, grabbed a large clean towel, wrapped it around her foot, attempting to tie it on top as best she could and then hobbled back into the kitchen to fetch a dustpan and brush. As she made her way back into the bathroom, she held

onto the wall with one hand, lifting her injured foot onto her heel as she attempted to keep the weight off her foot. Still only wrapped in a towel and with her hair in a turban, she went back into the bathroom and crawled around on the floor with the dustpan, sweeping the shards of broken glass shattered all over the floor. Once she was hopeful there were no more fragments of glass lurking, she sat back to take a breath, her fingers gripping the handle of the brush and tutted. This wasn't part of the plan. Not at all. She was meant to be chilled, relaxed, plumped, eyelash-ed and primped. Now she was so very far from that – she was stressed, in pain, she had wet hair, hardly any time to get ready, a dirty great blood-soaked towel on her foot, and she wasn't yet dressed. Marvellous.

Trying not to think about the throbbing taking place in her foot, she went back out of the bathroom, rested her towel-wrapped foot on a chair and stood on one leg in the utility room. With her teeth clenched in pain, she tugged a detangling brush through her hair and blasted it with the hairdryer until it was more or less dry. With the clock ticking and Jack's arrival getting more and more imminent, she scooped her clean hair up into a ponytail, quickly tonged the ends and sprayed the whole thing frantically with hairspray. Hobbling to get dressed, she whipped the towel from her foot, pulled on nice black jeans and a pretty top, squirted on a massive amount of perfume and then, after limping back into the bathroom, stared down at her foot, wondering what to do. It was now not only throbbing but pulsating too, it was still bleeding, and the pain when she put any weight on it was not pleasant.

Hobbling back through the house to the sitting room still piled with the removal boxes, she hunted for the one with her medical things. Pulling out a pink terry washbag, she rifled through paracetamol, antiseptic cream, cold relief tablets and all sorts. Finding a squashed box of plasters, she opened them and tipped the contents onto the top of the box to find small, narrow plasters nowhere near up to the job. She rummaged further until she came to a couple of crepe bandages still wrapped in their crinkly plastic, along with a lone alcohol swab and a packet of non-stick dressings. The back of the packet told her the dressings were highly absorbent, cushioned

and non-stick and that she should clean the wound, secure it with retention tape, whatever that was, and change the dressing daily.

A few minutes later, after wincing at the pain caused by the alcohol swab, the long slice in her foot was covered by three of the dressings in a row, she'd added a double row on top for good measure, and she'd wound the crepe bandages around and around for cushioning. A nurse she was not, and though it appeared that the wound had stopped bleeding as profusely as it had at first, and it was at least now clean, her foot was not looking too attractive. Nor was the look on her face. The eyelashes were very much still sitting in their box.

Hobbling around again, she took two paracetamols for the pain, quickly did her makeup, got her bag ready and was just thinking about having another glass of wine for medicinal purposes when the doorbell went. She took a deep breath and steadied herself on the breakfast table, and trying not to yelp in the pain coming from the sole of her foot, she wobbled her way to the front door. Keeping her weight off her bandaged foot, she breezily opened the door and smiled a cheery smile.

Jack was standing on the front step, the light pooling from the doorway casting a glow around his head. Who was this angel standing in front of her, and what was going on in the space behind her ribs? Jack's aftershave wafted in the air as Lotta was hit by just about everything about him as she stood there staring; his broad shoulders and dark hair seemed to get better by the day. Goodness was he handsome. He smelled of lovely things, and in contrast to the other times she'd seen him, there was actually a small smile on his face. Lotta beamed as she opened the door fully, smoothed her hair down and wished she'd not had the altercation with the wine glass.

Jack immediately clocked the bandage on her foot. 'Hi,' he said and then pointed down to her foot. 'What have you done? Are you okay?'

Lotta dismissed the huge bandage instantly at the same time as she felt a full-body cringe at the sight of her ridiculously bound foot. 'Oh, it's nothing. I knocked over a



wine glass earlier. So annoying. I knew it was there too. It's the wonky bathroom's fault. Never mind.'

Jack's face crumpled into a frown. 'That's a rather large bandage for something that's nothing.'

'I couldn't get it to stop bleeding, so I needed to wrap it up a bit. It'll be fine in a bit.'

'Sounds nasty.'

'Yeah, it sliced my foot,' Lotta acknowledged with a grimace and wiggled her foot. 'There was quite a bit of blood.'

'Do you think you need to get it looked at?' Jack asked, his brow lined into concern.

Lotta had not expected him to care and was pleasantly surprised. 'Gosh, no! I'm fine. Just a little mishap and a smashed glass.'

Jack continued to stare down at the bandage. 'Are you sure you still want to go out?'

'Yup.' Lotta nodded enthusiastically. 'I've been looking forward to it.' If only Jack knew quite how much. She cursed herself for knocking over the glass.

'Umm, what foot attire are you going to put on over that?'

'Good question,' Lotta replied with raised eyebrows and a quizzical expression.

'Where does it hurt?' Jack asked.

Lotta pointed to the sole of her injured foot. 'Right on the bone there under my big toe. Probably the worst point for putting weight on it.'

Jack took a few steps backwards and looked out the door towards his car on the drive. 'Look, I can simply go. This is something we can do at another time. It's not that important.'

Lotta had to stop herself from yelling. It was extremely important to her. Too important. She rued the wine, the bath, and spending too much time reading. 'No, no. I'll be fine. A nice meal and a couple of glasses of wine will do me a world of good.'

‘Did you manage to clear it up okay? I mean the glass and everything.’

Lotta cringed at the thought of the bathroom floor, the coffee grounds in the bottom of the bath, and the vision of herself in the turban and towel crawling around by the bath in pain with Jack’s arrival imminent, flashed into her mind. ‘Hmm, I did my best.’

‘Why don’t I go and have a look and make sure there’s not any glass hanging around?’ Jack suggested. ‘You don’t want to be finding more of that in your other foot tomorrow.’

‘No, honestly.’

‘Yeah, I think I will. Shattered glass goes all over the show.’

‘I think there might be some blood still in there too. I did try and wipe everything up, but I was in a rush.’ Lotta didn’t add that the reason she had been in a rush in the first place and probably the reason she had knocked over the glass was because she’d spent way too long in the bath with her nose stuck in a book. As was always the case with her.

As they moved from the step to the hallway, Lotta did her best to conceal the pain she was experiencing from her foot. Jack commented on how good the hallway looked without the red carpet and followed her through to the breakfast room. Pulling a chair out for her, he instructed her to sit down, ‘Here, you sit down, and I’ll go and sort it out.’

A few minutes later, he was back. ‘I think there are still a few bits of glass around in there. Where’s the vacuum?’

Lotta flicked her hand. ‘Honestly, you don’t have to. I’ll just sort it out tomorrow. It’s fine.’

‘It won’t take long.’

‘The vacuum’s in the cupboard under the stairs,’ she replied, watching as Jack went to get the vacuum and came back with it in his arms.

‘Spray and a cloth? Where will I find those?’

‘Under the sink,’ Lotta replied as she pulled the chair beside her out from under the table and propped her leg up to try and stop the throbbing in her foot.

About ten minutes later, Jack was back in the kitchen. ‘Right, there’s no glass in there and not a speck of blood either, but there seemed to be strange black stuff in the bottom of the bath. Anyway, I’ve cleared that up too,’ Jack noted and looked at Lotta with a frown. ‘It must have been quite the cut for that amount of blood.’

‘Yeah, it did bleed quite a lot,’ Lotta confirmed. ‘I’ll be okay, though.’

‘It went deep, did it?’

‘Yep, I just yanked out the piece of glass more or less right away, but it sort of sliced through the flesh.’

‘You’re sure you don’t need a stitch or anything?’ Jack asked with a furrowed brow and a concerned look in his eyes.

‘Nah.’ Lotta dismissed his question with a flick of her hand. ‘I’ll be fine in a couple of days.’ She changed the subject from the wine glass incident and her foot. ‘Let’s get going, shall we? We need to get this fake dating stuff sorted.’

Jack didn’t miss a beat and was having none of it. ‘That’s the last thing you need to worry about if you get an infection in your foot from a bit of glass. The fake dating stuff can wait.’

‘I won’t get an infection. All good,’ Lotta replied, standing up and attempting to do something other than hobble towards the hallway.

Jack followed her, and after she’d just about wedged her bandaged foot into a slider sandal, he helped her with a jacket. ‘As long as you’re sure.’

As Lotta felt Jack’s strong arm go around her as they made for the front door, she was sure. Oh, man, was she sure.



Half an hour or so later, after driving away from the coast, they arrived at a small row of shops in a nearby village where a tiny French restaurant was wedged between a pub and a newsagent. Lotta peered out of the window at the quaint little place. What looked back at her pleased her immensely; what appeared to be freshly painted red woodwork on paned windows, a string of pretty lights over a black door, checked red and white brasserie curtains, black shutters, and four hanging baskets loaded with trailing greenery and ferns.

Once reverse parked, Jack helped Lotta to hobble to the entrance, and as he pushed the door open, Lotta gasped as she peered in. The place was stunning, warm, cosy and inviting all at once. Aromas of garlic, wine, herbs, and food cooking drifted out of the kitchen and landed where Lotta and Jack stood waiting. The air was thick with all sorts of delicious smells, and Lotta felt her stomach rumble as she stared around at the sweet little place as candlelight flickered, filling the room with a soft glow. She didn't know where to look first as all the lovely elements of a French restaurant greeted her at every turn; tiny bistro tables covered in lovely checked tablecloths, a huge old chalkboard covered in scrawly white chalk writing, single stems of red roses displayed in ancient wine bottles and blue water glasses in the centre of the tables.

After they had been seated, the place seemed to envelop them – a low buzz of conversation emanating from each table, a muffled sound of pots clanging from the kitchen, and French music playing softly in the background. As Lotta touched the soft tablecloth and unfolded her napkin, she gazed around and took it all in and, for a second, she forgot about her nerves and the incessant throbbing in her foot. In a place as lovely as the restaurant, she could sit opposite Jack forever, bad foot or not.

The owner took their drink order and flourished a couple of well-worn menus into their hands, and Lotta couldn't hide her pleasure as she started to read.

*At Le Meilleur Brasserie, we endeavour to serve you the best in cosy French Mediterranean cooking. Sit back and make yourself comfy – you are not here to have a culinary experience; you are here to simply enjoy our food as if we*

*were welcoming you into our home. Our recipes will surprise and delight you with their home-cooked comfort. All our ingredients are either carefully selected or homegrown by our owner, Jean-Paul, and our chef, Lina. All our food is from local sources, ensuring the highest quality and freshness all through the year. Sit back and enjoy our house wine, specially chosen on trips to France and settle down for a lovely meal just as if we'd invited you to our home.*

Lotta whispered over the table, 'This looks nice. Sorry, I mean, this looks blooming amazing! Which is good because I could eat a horse.'

'It is nice. I've been here before. I had a feeling you might like it.' Jack smiled. 'I have to admit though, when I came here before, it wasn't to talk about the ins and outs of a fake partnership. I thought it would still be nice despite having to discuss that.'

Lotta nodded her head up and down in a gesture of agreement. 'It's more than nice. It's fabulous.'

Fifteen or so minutes later, they were sharing a bottle of French house wine, and there was a sharing platter of garlic bread in front of them. Lotta could hardly stop herself from scoffing the whole lot down in one. Because of the long bath, her lack of time, and the incident with the wine glass, she was so hungry her stomach had grumbled through the car journey. 'This is so, so good,' she commented as she held up a piece of garlic bread between them.

Jack agreed and joked, 'Right, so we now know that you like garlic bread. Shall I write that down?'

Lotta laughed. 'Actually, what don't you like? It would be good for me to know that for the fake ball date and for when you come to the wedding. No doubt Fenella will ask something like that when she accosts you.'

'Didn't we already answer that?' Jack asked.

The expression on Lotta's face changed, and she took another mouthful of the garlic bread before responding, 'Nope, I don't think so. Did we?'

‘It was one of the questions in your initial email, I think. What food do you dislike? Remember?’

Lotta remembered the email and the afternoon she’d spent searching for questions about how to get to know someone better. Sitting opposite Jack now in the candlelit restaurant with her heart dressed in a sparkly leotard, currently front and centre on the balance beam, it all seemed a bit ridiculous – the fake date, the questions, the ball, and the wedding, mostly because the whole of it was ironic. Because underneath her pretence and her continuation of the fake dating spiel, Lotta was becoming more and more aware that she was actually quite liking Jack. No, that wasn’t true. She was liking Jack a lot. A whole lot. Enormously. She blinked rapidly, ridding herself of the thought, and got back to the conversation at the table.

‘Oh, yes, it was in the initial email, apologies, my mistake.’ She paused for a second, recalling his answer. ‘You said you like any food. Correct?’

‘I do, yep.’ Jack heaved a sigh. ‘I like anything, and even if I don’t, I keep it quiet. Is there anything, and I mean *anything*, more irritating than a food bore? Nobody cares.’

Lotta frowned. ‘I don’t get you. What’s a food bore?’

‘You know. When a person goes on and on and on and on about the foods they can and cannot consume. Just shut up about it already.’ Jack rolled his eyes befittingly.

Lotta burst out laughing, nodded and helped herself to more garlic bread. ‘I know. When someone bores the life out of you about the fact that they can’t eat something or other. Or they’re on some fad diet, eliminating everything but things that grow in the ground. Plant-based. Or they’ve got some allergy! Most of the time it’s not even a diagnosed allergy.’

‘Tell me about it! Actually, when I was last in America for this business deal, the one to do with the ball, the guy’s wife said she was allergic to meat. You’ll get to meet her. Believe it or not, the allergy is a consequence of a tick bite.’

Lotta scrunched her nose up into a question and turned her mouth upside down as a look of confusion plastered onto her face. ‘Sorry, a what bite?’

‘A tick bite,’ Jack reiterated.

‘Never heard of it. We don’t get them here, do we?’

‘I don’t think so. Yeah, anyway it can lead to something called alpha-gal. It comes from the lone star tick over there, and it makes people allergic to red meat and other products made from mammals. It can be fatal,’ Jack deadpanned. ‘Trust me, I listened to it for nearly an hour, so I know what I’m talking about.’

Lotta roared with laughter as she exclaimed, ‘Very funny. You’re having me on!’

‘I’m not. Truly.’

Lotta shook her head over and over again in quick little movements. ‘Lone star tick? I don’t believe you, you’re taking the mickey.’

‘Honestly.’

‘You seem to be very schooled in it,’ Lotta remarked, raising both of her eyebrows in disbelief.

Jack nodded. ‘Yup, because after her bending my ear about it for the whole of the meal and telling me about the ins and outs of her meat allergy, I had no choice but to be educated in it. I know a lot about the lone star tick, it has to be said.’

‘Sounds like a fun night. Not.’ Lotta laughed.

Jack responded with a chuckle. ‘Yeah, and I’ll bet you can’t guess who’s going to be seated next to this woman at the ball.’

‘Oh, gosh. No. That would be me, would it?’

‘Yup. It would.’

‘Well, at least I won’t have to say too much about us if she goes on for hours and hours about her diet. If she talks for the whole night, it will mean that I won’t give our game away,’ Lotta noted.

‘True, good point, Lott.’

As Jack called Lotta by her nickname, she was so shocked she nearly passed out from surprise, resulting in her gripping the stem of her wine glass and taking a hefty swig. She had no idea how he had such inside information on her name or maybe it was just a coincidence, but the fact that he had called her ‘Lott’ gave her all the feels.

As she sat there opposite him, every sort of feeling swirled around her head in a lush fuzzy whirl of white butterflies. There may have been birds chirping too. She would have blushed at him calling her by her nickname if she wasn’t already flushed from the heat in the little restaurant and the pleasant bubbles that had gone partially to her head. Sitting laughing and chatting and drinking with Jack, everything was feeling decidedly delicious to Lotta Button, even with a blood-soaked, pulsating, bandaged foot making itself known to her under the table.

As she glanced at Jack, she tried to forget about her heart and the butterflies dancing around her head and reminded herself that this was just a cut-and-dry business deal. She made an effort to dislike him, trying her best to resist being charmed by his hilariously grumpy banter and his good-looking face. As he asked her another question, her pulse skipped a beat – her attempts at not feeling attracted to him were, quite frankly, pathetic. Rather, at that moment, she felt the overwhelming need to reach out, potentially even climb over the table and do something, anything, to his face. If at all possible, kiss it.

Even though in the larger scheme of things they barely knew each other, as Lotta sat bathed in the restaurant’s candlelight, she more than knew she’d fallen for Jack. She sighed inside, tutted quietly to herself and shook her head. This was really frustrating. Really bad. This wasn’t meant to have happened. This wasn’t in the fake dating plan! And now she realised as she looked into Jack’s eyes that not only had her heart started jumping on balance beams, her head wasn’t too far behind it either.



Lotta's morning had been a whirlwind of activity; she'd baked three batches of focaccia bread using the old Belling oven, and she'd made an Italian chicken stew which had been bubbling away in the slow cooker since not long after she'd got up. She'd applied two layers of Timmy's tan, and the breakfast room and kitchen had been cleaned from top to bottom. Lotta was on a roll.

The pottering around the house and the application of her cooking skills had been just what she'd needed, and as she'd worked on the bread and cleaned the kitchen, the domestic monotony had worked to soothe her mental state. Spraying and wiping and mixing, she'd analysed what she was doing with her life, what had happened since she'd arrived in Pretty Beach to the Breakers, and everything that had occurred since Dan and the app. Jack might just have made an appearance too.

By the time she'd had to go to the laneway to pick up the taffeta ballgown from the dry cleaners, a calm had descended that had been missing from her life for too long. As she inched along the laneway looking for a parking spot, she realised that she hadn't been this calm and, dare she say it, this happy since the days before it had been clear that the app was not going to be a success. She realised now that ever since the time when Dan had asked her to take on a second job, her life and her world had been enveloped in an unhappy, stressed-out fog. Now with the help of her glow-up transformation list and the fact that she was concentrating on her self-talk, her

surroundings, her diet and her health, she was starting to feel better than she had in a very long time.

After squeezing her car into a spot, she strolled along under the pastel bunting strewn across the top of the buildings, past the bakery with a queue snaking out the door, all the way to the end where a tiny dry cleaner shop decked out entirely in baby-blue was wedged in next to a homewares store. A stripy fluted Dutch canopy hung over a curved window, a shallow step up to an open door. Lotta inhaled the pleasing fragrance of fresh laundry and ironing as it wafted through the door. Stepping in, she pushed the smooth old handle to open the door further, its hinges squeaking at the same time as it hit a little shop bell above.

As she stepped in, the woman from the bakery, Holly, with her mum, Xian, beside her laden down with garments on hangers, were coming the other way.

‘Morning!’ Holly trilled, a diamond clip in the front of her glossy hair catching the light. ‘It’s just about still morning. How are you, Lotta?’

Lotta grinned in response. ‘Hi! I’m good, thanks, Holly.’

Xian, behind Holly, holding a silver sequined blazer under a plastic dry cleaners bag, smiled, pulled her headphones off her head to around her neck and flicked her eyes to the dry cleaning counter. ‘We’ve just been hearing all about your dress.’

Lotta followed Xian’s gaze to her dress, which was hanging alone on a rack, taking centre stage behind the counter. ‘Ahh, yes. Ooh, it looks as if it’s come up well. It was quite creased when I brought it in.’

Xian smiled, whipped a flask from her pocket, and took a nip. ‘It’s amazing! They don’t make them like that anymore.’

‘Ahh, you think so? Thank you.’ Lotta replied, resisting the urge to ask what was in the flask.

Holly beamed and chuckled. ‘And where are we going in a gown like that?’

‘I’m off to a very fancy ball,’ Lotta replied.

‘Ooh, how exciting.’ Holly squealed, the sparkly bracelets on her wrists jangling as she wiggled her hands in front of her.

‘I know, it is.’ Lotta nodded to the dress. ‘And looking at how that has come up, I’m going to feel amazing, too. Thank goodness. I wasn’t quite sure how it was going to turn out. And I was running out of time.’

‘A special anniversary or date or something, is it?’ Holly asked.

Lotta looked into Holly’s sparkly enquiring eyes. She didn’t want to admit that, in actual fact, it was not a real date, but a fake one. She felt a bit silly saying she was going on a fake date at her age. A fake date and arrangement that would soon be coming to an end. She also didn’t want to admit that she wasn’t meant to have fallen for the fake dater, but that she had. ‘No, no. I’m just going with a friend,’ she clarified, whilst thinking that she wanted Jack to be so much more than a friend.

‘Ahh, nice. Are you getting your hair done for the occasion?’ Holly asked with a smile. ‘A nice updo or something like that would look fabulous on you.’

Lotta didn’t want to say that getting her hair done wasn’t part of her non-existent budget for the occasion. ‘Yes, my hair will be up. All I need now is a sparkly necklace.’ Lotta laughed and touched the base of her neck.

Xian chortled and swigged from her flask. ‘I know someone in the vicinity who might be able to help with that.’

‘Really, who would that be?’ Lotta frowned.

Xian pointed to her daughter. ‘You’re looking at the walking, talking Queen of Sparkle right here in front of you. Never knowingly under-glittered.’

Lotta chuckled, noting that the few times she’d seen Holly, she’d always been doused with a liberal sprinkling of sequins and glitter. ‘Yes. I can see that, actually.’

Xian laughed and swigged the flask again letting its contents glug down her throat. ‘We’re talking professional-

level glitterati, here. You won't get a better offer in the country than a loan of a bit of sparkle from our Holly.'

'Oh, wow, when you say it like that.' Lotta chuckled.

Holly joined in with the banter. 'It's fair to say I have a few sparkly necklaces to choose from. I might just have matching earrings, bracelets and anything else you can think of too.'

'Goodness that would be so kind of you.' Lotta breathed. 'Thank you.'

'How about we pop to yours with a few of my beauties?' Holly suggested.

Lotta wasn't too keen on anyone seeing the state of Pretty Beach to the Breakers, but she decided to say yes. It wouldn't do any harm, and these lovely ladies were offering and being so kind. It would also save her a lot more brain power and searching for something to set off the dress. She loved a charity shop dig for treasure, but it was beginning to get old. 'Okay, yes, thank you.'

Xian cackled and rubbed her hands together. 'Hee hee, this is great! We've been dying to get in there and have a look at the house ever since you moved in. Killing ourselves, actually. We do like to be in the know of what is going on in this town at all times. It's been doing our heads in to be in the dark.'

Lotta laughed at Xian's honesty. 'Let me tell you now, there's not much to see.' Lotta shuddered at the thought of her bed in the alcove of the breakfast room, the dirty conservatory roof, the state of the garden and the old man's feet smell permeating from the sitting room.

Xian seemed to read Lotta's thoughts and tapped the side of her nose. 'Don't worry, we'll keep everything under our hats. All your secrets are safe with us.'

Holly looked at her watch. 'Will you be in later around six? We can pop by then if you like.'

Lotta had nothing planned except for attempting to remove the gigantic stain from the centre of the conservatory floor. 'I will indeed. I do have to warn you though, that the house has

seen better days. I haven't been able to do too much to it yet.' Lotta didn't add that a lot of the reason for that was because she wasn't sure how long she was going to actually stay in Pretty Beach. These two women didn't want to hear that, though.

'It can't be any worse than having that beautiful old place empty,' Holly replied. 'See you later. I will have all things that glitter in my possession. Prepare to be sparkled.'

Lotta nodded as the women made their way to the door. 'Yes, looking forward to it, ladies. Thank you.' Lotta smiled brightly.

'See you later,' Xian trilled, swigged her flask, and in bright pink sliders with purple socks, she shuffled past with a smile and a wink.

Lotta laughed and smiled as the pair headed out onto the laneway and she then stood by the counter waiting. A few seconds later, Jill, the owner of the dry cleaning shop, who she'd had a long conversation with about the dress, emerged from the back. 'Hello.' She gestured to the dress. 'As you can see. It's come up a blinder.'

'Yes, it has! Thank you so much,' Lotta added gratefully.

'As you know, I wasn't quite sure, but once I got going on it, I knew that it was going to scrub up okay. You can see how well it's come up,' Jill said as she took the dress from the hanging rail and started to expertly fold it into a garment bag. She looked up as she worked. 'Take it straight out of this when you get it home and hang it up, but leave the inner dust cover on it.'

'Righto. Thank you.'

'The same when you get to the hotel,' Jill instructed.

'Will do.'

Jill came around the front of the counter with the dress and hung it on a hook by the door. Lotta took her phone out ready to pay, as Jill grabbed the dongle from the counter. Lotta squinted down at the amount in the little grey window as she put her phone closer to the dongle. She looked up at Jill and

frowned. ‘Oh, I thought it said it was more than that on your website. For a dress like this, I mean.’

Jill smiled and wiggled her head from side to side. ‘You don’t want to be taking notice of websites and stuff like that.’

Lotta nodded and held her phone over the dongle until the payment cleared with a beep. Lotta realised it was the Pretty Beach thing in action again and wasn’t sure whether she was meant to say thank you, ignore it, or do what. Going with the premise that you can never be wrong if you use manners, she replied, ‘Thank you so much for, umm, the Locals thing.’

Jill whipped the machine away. ‘My pleasure. It’s what we do down here in this neck of the woods.’ She flicked her hand towards the dress. ‘And anyway, it’s my kind of work. It sure beats spending the morning pressing the same business shirts over and over again. I thoroughly enjoyed seeing that beauty come to light right in front of my eyes. You’re going to look stunning.’

‘Ahh, good, I’m glad to hear that and thank you so much. I *really* hope I do.’



**O**n the dot of six, there was a ring at the doorbell. Lotta had spent most of the afternoon on her hands and knees in the conservatory with bucket after bucket of soapy water and a scrubbing brush. She’d rubbed back and forth on the stain in the centre of the floor until her hands were raw. It hadn’t been her best afternoon, it had to be said. She would much rather have been curled up with a book, a pot of tea and her TBR pile at her side.

Scooting to the door, she pulled it open to see Holly on the step with a gigantic black holdall beside her and a large white paper bag hooked over her arm. Her mum, Xian, wearing a fluffy purple jumper and holding an iPad out in front of her, was standing on the driveway talking frantically into the screen. Holly rolled her eyes and jerked her thumb over

towards her mum, 'Don't mind her. She's doing a share deal and currently doing my head in.'

'Hello, lovely to see you. A share deal? What's that?'

Holly flicked her hand in front of her. 'Don't even ask! I have no idea how it all works. All I know is she's buying and selling stuff all the time. I also know she's very good at it according to the bank balance, so it works for me. It just gets highly irritating at times like this.'

Lotta laughed. 'Maybe I should get into it if it's good for bank balances.'

'Yep! Drives me up the wall sometimes, though. Especially when she wakes the whole house up at all hours of the morning talking to someone on the other side of the world. It is what it is.'

Lotta chuckled as she led Holly into the hallway and Holly stepped in, heaving the holdall behind her. Holly stopped in the middle of the room, plonked the bag down, gazed up at the skylight at the top of the house and then peered at the curved bannister and staircase. 'Oh, yes, yes, this is nice, just as Ron said it was. I couldn't quite envision what he meant, but now I'm here, I see it.'

Not commenting on the fact that Ron who'd fixed the boiler had spoken to Holly about Pretty Beach to the Breakers, Lotta just smiled and followed Holly's gaze. 'Yeah, the skylight is very old by the looks of it. It lets in some beautiful light in the middle of the day.' Lotta pointed to the timber stairs, 'This is where the awful carpet was. I don't know who had the idea to fit red carpet in a hallway like this, but they did. Anyway, I'm glad it's gone. The timber in the house is outstanding.'

'They're beautiful. It all is,' Holly stated. 'Just so much potential right here in front of our eyes. These old coastal places were built to last.'

Lotta nodded in agreement. 'I'll show you around in a bit. It smelt like old feet in here when I first arrived, but I think

that is slowly going the more I air the place and clean.’ Lotta shook her head. ‘Or I’m just getting used to it!’

Holly cackled and sniffed. ‘I can’t smell anything, so you must be doing something right.’

Lotta pointed to the sitting room. ‘Wait until I show you in there, you might change your tune. Okay, follow me. Cup of tea? I’ll put the kettle on.’

‘Yes, I’d love one.’ Holly held up the paper bag. ‘Have you got a freezer? I’ve bought you a stash of cinnamon buns, a special edition, actually. We’ve been trying out a new icing. Locals Only, of course.’

Lotta chuckled. ‘Do I qualify for Locals Only now I’ve been here for a while?’

‘Ahh, you do. You have to be good though or Locals Only qualification might be confiscated by the Pretty Beach powers that be.’

‘It’s all very complicated.’ Lotta smiled, and then her face wrinkled into confusion. ‘So, hang on, how come my friend Liv was able to get cinnamon buns the other week?’

‘Well, there are buns, and then there are the *other* buns.’ Holly brandished the white paper bag up in front of her. ‘These have all the special ingredients. You think you’ve tasted cinnamon buns, and then you have a LO bun. Welcome to a whole new world,’ Holly joked. ‘I’ve spent my life in the pursuit of perfection in these things.’

‘Right,’ Lotta replied, whilst inside, thinking that these Pretty Beach customs were erring on the side of odd and way more intense than she had initially thought. It was all said in a comical manner with an underlying sense of seriousness. Never a truer word said in jest.

Ten or so minutes later, Holly and Xian were sitting at the breakfast table with mugs of tea, and a plate of cinnamon buns was in the centre of the table. The black holdall was propped on a chair, and sparkly necklace and earring sets were laid out all over the table. Lotta was standing on top of a chair, straining her neck to look in the only decent mirror in the



house with one of the necklaces fastened around her neck. She pretended not to notice as Xian took a bottle out of a supermarket carrier bag and poured an amber-coloured liquor into her tea.

‘Nice, but no,’ Holly commented, looking up at Lotta on the chair. ‘Definitely a no.’

‘No?’ Lotta replied and then turned back to the mirror. She touched one of the stones on the bottom of the necklace. ‘I thought it looked quite nice, myself.’

‘With your clavicle, I know just the one,’ Holly noted, jumping off her chair and rummaging further in the bag. Xian instructed from the other side of the table, ‘The choker with the diamonds around the dark sapphires with the matching cuff bracelet. Simple but stunning. It will look amazing!’

‘Yes, Mum! Yes, I know that’s just what I was thinking!’ Holly nodded excitedly. ‘How beautiful is she going to look in that? It’s in the velvet case here.’

Xian took a sip of her tea and then poured more amber liquor from the bottle into her cup. ‘We need to see it with the dress. It will be stunning.’

Lotta took Xian’s cue, and a few minutes later, after carefully unwrapping the dress from its dust cover, she was standing in front of Holly and Xian with the choker around her neck and the diamond cuff on her wrist. Holly had clambered up to the mirror on the wall, removed it from its hook and was standing with her head to the side, holding the mirror out in front of Lotta.

Lotta couldn’t stop staring and gaping at the glittering necklace. Xian was right. It was beautiful on her neck. Somehow plain and over the top at the same time. It seemed alive as it sparkled and caught the light. She twirled this way and that in the dress and turned to the side. Lotta could tell by the mesmerising way the diamonds sparkled that they were not a high street jewellery chain purchase. ‘Thank you. Are you sure you want to let me borrow this?’ She touched the necklace. ‘It seems, umm, rather special.’

‘Of course! It’s no good sitting in my safe all day long.’ Holly laughed.

Lotta spluttered. ‘Oh gosh, it lives in your safe! What if something happens to it? There is no way I will ever be able to pay for it.’

Holly dismissed Lotta’s concern with a tap of her hand. ‘It’s insured, so no worries there. Don’t even think about it.’

Lotta put her fingers up to the choker and looked again at her reflection. The two women were right, it suited her to a tee. ‘If you’re certain. My goodness, it’s absolutely stunning!’

Xian butted in, ‘We wouldn’t be here if we weren’t certain. We do love a Pretty Beach dress from the old days, being taken out for a spin. Plus, it looks amazing on you.’

‘Ahh, thank you so much,’ Lotta said, and as she gazed in the mirror, she couldn’t quite believe what was looking back at her; Lotta Button glittering in a beautiful dress and excited about going to a ball. As she stared at the necklace, a flash of an image came into her mind of when she’d been cleaning offices all evening and had come home to find Dan in their flat playing cards with two of his so-called business associates. There had been a bottle of very expensive half-empty whisky in the middle of the coffee table and wads of notes dotted in between dirty glasses. She’d walked right into the middle of things, smelling of bleach and tiredness. Dan had waved her away with wide eyes and a tiny shooing motion with his hand that had made her feel about an inch high. Now, all this time later, with Dan just a memory, here she was far away from him and the publishing world, standing in a house by the sea in a silk ballgown and a glittering necklace. It was as if Lotta Button had grown six feet tall.

Lotta was on her way to Pretty Beach train station to pick up Timmy. After finding a parking spot not too far away, she stood on the pavement by her car and messaged him her location. Five or so minutes later, she could see Timmy hustling away from the train station, and when he saw her, he broke into a trot. As he put his bag down and flung his arms around her, Lotta got a whiff of his expensive cologne, spicy, woody, and musky all at once.

‘How are you? How’s the sore foot?’ Timmy asked, looking down at Lotta’s feet.

‘I’m good, how are you? My foot is on the mend, thank goodness.’

‘Good to hear. You’re looking a bit better already, my darling!’ Timmy exclaimed excitedly.

‘I am? Something must be working,’ Lotta joked. ‘I’ve definitely been working on my list.’

‘Getting back to the pre-app days – that’s what I like to see. Despicable Dan bites the dust. It’s taken long enough,’ Timmy bantered back, gathering his bag up. ‘What else has been happening?’

‘Did I mention I got a third interview for that job?’

‘Yes, you said the other day, and Liv mentioned it too. Well done. When is it?’

‘A few days after the ball. I really hope I get it. I don’t want to hold my breath, though,’ Lotta noted.

‘Darling, with the roll you’re on, what I’ve got in my bag, and the fact that you’re no longer mooning about Dan, I think you’re going to get it.’

As Lotta laughed, she realised that in fact, other than fleetingly here and there, she hadn’t properly thought about Dan for a while. It felt nice that the memory of him and his words about failure were maybe beginning to fade away somewhat. Dan was now not quite as front and centre of her brain as he used to be. Perhaps she’d distanced herself enough from Dan, his app and her obsession with getting a job in publishing, that she had clarity on her old world. She shook her head to dismiss her thoughts; she couldn’t really care less about the whys and wherefores – all she wanted was the new calm and happier feeling to stay situated right where it was.

Timmy, in a cloud of chatter and laughter, settled into the car, and when they got to Pretty Beach to the Breakers, he squealed from the passenger seat in delight. As quick as a flash, he was out of the car and standing on the driveway, looking past the old walls and out to the sea in the distance. ‘It’s stunning, darling! Oh em gee! I’m going to have to FaceTime Giles. I’m so annoyed he had to work today! Wah! He’ll love this place! Get ready for having houseguests once a month.’

Lotta smiled. It seemed other people got all the good vibes when they arrived at the house in stark contrast to how she’d felt when she’d first pulled up. Then she’d stifled a mixture of apprehension, sadness, and fear as she’d stood surveying the house, but now, with less tired, happier eyes, to Lotta, the house and everything to do with it and her didn’t feel quite as bad.

Timmy touched the old, faded green front door. ‘Yeah. This is *class*. You have scored, my darling! How funny that you didn’t come down here for so long!’

‘Ahh. Tim, I’m glad you think that,’ Lotta replied as she unlocked the door and gestured for Timmy to step inside.

Without the red carpet to greet them, the hallway was almost welcoming. The wide timber floor planks, thick

bannister, and spiral staircase looked back at them. The heavy old floorboards groaned under their feet as they stepped further in, where the wide bannister curved gracefully up the lovely spiral staircase. A small hallway table in the corner Lotta had rescued from the garage was topped with a sweet white lamp she'd found in a charity shop, and an oversized four-wick candle Liv had sent her as a surprise housewarming gift was tucked by its side.

Lotta pointed to the stairs. 'Remember the picture I sent you with the horrid carpet?'

Timmy's head was tilted back, looking up at the skylight right up at the top. He ignored what Lotta had just said and pointed his finger up. 'What *is* that? It is beyond stunning!'

'A hundred-year-old skylight is what I've deduced is what that is,' Lotta replied, following his gaze upwards, where the light from the skylight filtered down through the house, making a patch of brightness on the hallway floor.

Once Lotta had shown Timmy around, he was settled in, and they'd had a cup of tea, Timmy got up and came back from the hallway with a small holdall. 'Right, darling. Transformation and glow-up time. Seeing as you were more interested in reading than full-on glowing-up, let the primping begin!'

'Exciting!' Lotta exclaimed.

Timmy started to pile things onto the table in a never-ending stream of pots and tubes from the bag. 'I have powders, creams, lotions, potions, lashes, nails, and perfume. Lotterella is going to the ball! Literally.'

Lotta started to rifle through the things on the table, picking up a tube of tan. 'I thought you said I already had the best thing for sun-kissed glowing skin? I put two layers of it on the other day as a trial run.'

'Correction, you had the best *budget* thing for glowing skin,' Timmy said, snatching the tube and wiggling it. 'This, my darling, is the *crème de la crème*. You are not going to just

go to the ball or even glow at the ball, you're going to positively shine. Lotterella is going to knock them dead.'

Lotta turned the tube over and over. 'Ooh, come on then, spill the beans. What celebrity wears this? Are we talking Beckham level?'

'Pah! This, my darling, is next level. I had to barter to get it into the country.'

Lotta picked up a white plastic tub with a sparkly pink label and rose gold branding, 'Beauty collagen, what? With Bioactive Collagen Peptides and nicotinamide. What is this? Should I be scared?' Lotta joked. 'Is it even legal?'

'Hair, skin, nails. All of it.' Timmy flourished jazz hands. 'Skin regeneration, Lott. The name of the game.'

'You're too funny. How do you actually know about all this stuff?'

'You don't need to know that. All you need to know is it's marine collagen for the win. You read books, Lott, I make it my business to know how to look good... even at our age.'

'Right. I'll just do as you say.' Lotta giggled.

Timmy put a black carton with gold branding on the table in front of Lotta and patted her hand. 'Now, if I still can't convince you to let me pay for you to go to a beautician, these are salon-level nails in a box.'

Lotta looked dubious at the French pink nails in front of her. 'I'll never be able to do that.'

'Press-on tabs and go. Tried and trusted, Lott. Even you will be able to do it.'

Lotta turned the box over and read aloud, 'Get instant salon quality results and long-lasting salon nails with a high-shine gloss finish for up to ten days of wear.' Lotta looked dubious. 'I'm having all sorts of nightmares about this.'

'You'll be fine.' Timmy passed over another box, 'And then there are these – lashes which may, or may not, be worn by a certain Californian duchess.'

‘Ha ha, you are gold,’ Lotta said with a chuckle.

‘I know. I expect payment by way of whatever is cooking in the kitchen.’

‘I did your favourite. Roast chicken with garlic and three types of potatoes.’

‘Giles is going to be green he’s missed this.’ Timmy gestured around to the breakfast room. ‘All of it.’

‘I’ll do you a doggy bag to take home.’

‘Good. I’ll get bonus points for that.’

Later on that evening, Lotta had set up an old outdoor table in the conservatory, covered it with the charity shop tablecloth and dotted tea lights in old jam jars all around the room. Under cover of darkness, the thick layer of mossy grime on the conservatory roof was hidden, and the state of the paintwork wasn’t to be seen. Instead, the entire room glimmered in the little lights, and the house was full of the scent of cooking.

Lotta loaded bowls with roast potato, mash and Hasselbacks onto the centre of the table, together with a burnished chicken stuffed full of herbs and a pile of broccolini doused in garlic, lemon, and Parmesan. Timmy clapped his hands in delight, and they settled down to eat.

‘So, let’s get to the juicy bits. How did the dinner with the delicious Jack go?’ Timmy asked.

Lotta tried to make light of it with a flick of her hand and gave a little shake of her head, ‘Yeah, yeah, it was good.’

Timmy started to carve the chicken. ‘Ha! You’re doing that thing where you pretend you don’t care. You did it when Dan asked you to take a second job.’

‘I am not!’

‘You *so* are.’

‘Nope! Honestly.’

Timmy pointed the end of the carving knife across the table. ‘And that weird squinty thing you do with your eyes when you’re lying.’

‘No!’

‘Lott, I’ve already spoken to Liv about this. You might as well just admit it.’

‘It’s nothing. Just a business thing. We all know that the last thing I need is a relationship at the moment. The last one is still stinging,’ Lotta stated. ‘I have relationship PTSD.’

Timmy raised his eyebrows. ‘True. Just because Despicable Dan turned out to be a bad egg doesn’t mean you’re doomed, though.’

‘I suppose not,’ Lotta admitted. ‘But the Jack arrangement is nothing other than that – an arrangement.’ Lotta tried to keep a straight face as if she couldn’t care less. It couldn’t have been further from the truth.

Timmy pointed the carving knife again. ‘Plus, you never know when love might strike. I mean, look what happened to me. This fake dating thing could be it, Lott.’

‘No, it’s not. It’s just a business thing. Part of me wished I hadn’t got myself into it at all,’ Lotta lied. She loved being in the strange fake thing with Jack. A little part of her loved Jack.

‘Liar, pants on fire.’

Lotta giggled. ‘It’s true!’

‘Do you really think I would have got on a train, fast or not, to zhuzh you up if I didn’t believe you liked him?’

Lotta couldn’t stop laughing. ‘I don’t like him!’ In her head, Lotta added, *I think I love him. Ahh!*

‘I do not in any shape or form believe you.’

‘Let’s leave it at that.’ Lotta replied, but as Timmy placed the sliced chicken on her plate, they both knew who was correct. Lotta had fallen for Jack, and both Timmy and Liv had seen right through her from the start.



Lotta sat curled up on one end of the blue velvet sofa in the library room with a pile of books and smiled as she heard Liv and her husband coming through the front door. ‘I’m in here,’ she called out happily. Liv poked her head around the door and raised her eyebrows in amazement. ‘Blimey, Lott! Look at this place. This is a library, alright. Hashtag impressed. You’ve never looked quite as at home as you do now. Sorry, who was that bloke you used to know again? David, Daniel or something was it?’ Liv winked.

James stepped in and looked at the bookshelves loaded with books behind Lotta. ‘Hi, Lott. Wow, yes, you have been busy. A bit different to when I first saw it and we arrived in our wellies.’

Lotta jumped up from the sofa and hugged them both. ‘I know, right? I never want to see another cork tile again in my life after pulling them up from this floor, but it was worth it in the end. It’s a shame the breakfast room is wearing them too.’

‘How are you?’ James asked with a frown. ‘You look really well. What have you done differently?’

Liv chuckled, ‘She’s been glowed-up that’s what.’

James frowned. ‘What in the name of goodness does that mean? You two say some of the strangest things.’

‘It’s nothing to do with me. It’s all Timmy’s doing.’ Liv laughed. ‘He’s worked his magic remotely on Lotta, and he then came down to do some tweaks.’

‘Sorry, what is a glow-up?’ James asked. ‘I need clarification on this or on second thoughts, maybe I don’t.’

Lotta waved her hand. ‘Ahh, nothing interesting. It’s like an old-school makeover and looking out for your health, that’s all.’

Liv looked Lotta up and down. ‘James is right. It’s clearly working for you from what I can see.’

‘Thank you. I’m glowing because of a tan thing recommended by Timmy. For the ball, I also have something which is not only going to anoint me in a flawless glow, it’s going to blur me. Apparently, all the celebs use it. Blur It or something, I don’t know. I also have nails, hair dye, oils, potions, the lot.’

James chuckled and put his hand on the door handle. ‘Yeah, too much information for me. I’ll go and get the Chinese. Usual?’ he asked, looking from Liv to Lotta.

‘Yes. Don’t forget the prawn crackers,’ Liv instructed.

‘As if I would do that! I’d be on the way to getting a divorce.’

Lotta laughed. ‘You would. You have been trained well, James.’

Lotta and Liv made their way to the kitchen, and Lotta poured them both a glass of wine. Passing a glass to Liv, they walked out into the conservatory, where Liv peered up at the roof and looked down at the floor, ‘This looks better,’ she said, remarking on the lack of the huge stain in the middle of the floor.

Lotta nodded. ‘Yeah, I was on my hands and knees for hours on the stain that was there. It does look better, though.’

‘What’s next in the house?’ Liv asked, taking a sip of her wine and looking up at the mossy, dark sludge on top of the glass roof.

‘Yep, that,’ Lotta replied, following Liv’s gaze and pointing skywards.

‘You’re going to need to be careful up there if you’re going to attempt to clean that,’ Liv instructed.

‘I know.’

‘You might need a handsome, hot man to help you out with it.’ Liv started laughing.

‘I might, do you know any?’

‘Apart from my husband, there’s one I know who might also partake in a spot of fake dating,’ Liv joked.

‘Yeah, I’m not asking him again.’

‘Oh, why not? I thought you two were getting on well,’ Liv questioned. ‘The meal, the coffees and everything.’

‘We are, but it’s coming to an end soon. Once the ball is over and we’ve been to the wedding, that will be that. The fake date is just to help each other out.’

‘It doesn’t have to be, does it?’ Liv asked with a confused look on her face.

‘Yep, it was just a business deal.’ Lotta didn’t add that it was a business deal that was doing the strangest thing with her heart.

‘I see,’ Liv said with her face displaying that she wasn’t convinced. ‘I think other people may beg to differ. People like Timmy and me. Anyway, are you all ready for the ball? You’ve got the dress sorted and all your glow-up stuff ready, have you? What about the hotel?’

‘That’s all been sorted. I’ve had confirmation from Jack’s team on the arrangements. All I have to do is follow the instructions and turn up. Jack is going to meet me there as he has meetings with the Americans.’ Lotta said casually as if she wasn’t bothered.

‘Ha! You’re trying to act as if it’s nothing! I know you, Lott.’

‘Speaking of the wedding, have you heard anything about that?’ Lotta questioned, conveniently changing the subject.

‘I spoke to Fenella, and she’s all excited because she’s the bridesmaid.’

Lotta rolled her eyes. ‘No change there! She’s always the bridesmaid. Look at me, look at me.’

‘Yup.’

‘How many times has she been a bridesmaid now? It must be like twenty. She’s been the bridesmaid at every wedding I’ve ever been to.’ Lotta chuckled.

‘She threatens the brides with death if they don’t include her.’

‘Ha ha. And she’ll have chosen the dress,’ Lotta added.

Liv nodded, ‘Are we taking bets on what the dress will be like?’

‘We don’t need to take bets. I can tell you right now what it will be.’

‘True. It will be a very tight sheath to show off the fact that she’s the same size as she was when we were growing up. Plus, it will have wispy straps and a camisole top to draw attention to her extortionately expensive cosmetic surgery.’

‘Liv!’

‘Sorry.’

‘What else did she say?’ Lotta asked.

‘She enquired if you were still with Jack and if he was accompanying you to the wedding. I did have to quietly laugh to myself. If only she knew the truth.’

‘I’d never, ever live it down. Can you imagine?’

‘Nup. It would be dreadful. She’d roll around in glee,’ Liv noted.

Lotta shook her head. ‘I hope Jack doesn’t slip up.’

‘Do you think he will? You’ve had enough meetings with him now.’ Liv held her hands up into speech marks over the word ‘meetings’.

‘What is that supposed to mean?’ Lotta replied, wrinkling up her nose.

‘All I’m saying is that your meetings have been quite profuse, considering that this is a fake dating arrangement. Plus, you and he have had a lot of texting.’ Liv’s eyes were wide. ‘Timmy may have the same opinion too. And James. Just saying.’

‘No, they haven’t! Jack has a lot of money riding on this American thing. It has to be believable, or he could lose the deal.’ Lotta flicked her hand. ‘That’s all it is. We just needed to get to know each other.’

‘Right, I believe you, millions wouldn’t.’

‘What are you trying to say?’ Lotta laughed.

‘I’m trying to say that I know that you like him, and from what I’ve heard of him, the feeling is mutual from his end too. Men like him don’t do things they don’t want to do. Trust me on this one, Lott.’

‘Rubbish! And I do not like him! As I said, it’s just a deal, nothing more, nothing less.’

‘You do like him. I know that look. Also, you’re doing the squinty eye thing. Also, you are disturbingly bad at lying.’

Lotta knew that Liv could see right through her. Liv was wrong, though, she didn’t just like Jack. She’d fallen for him and hard. It was so, so, so much more than ‘like’ from her side of the table. The strangest and most surprising thing of all about the whole thing though was that since she had bumped into Jack in the bookshop, the man with the app, formerly known as Dan, couldn’t be seen for dust. And as Lotta watched the Dan tumbleweeds roll down the road, she liked the feeling very, very much.

Lotta struggled under the weight of the bags she carried, cursing the fact that she had not thought through her journey properly. She'd not considered driving to London for the ball as she'd been concerned with how much it would have cost her to park her car. Now she was struggling to drag her bag behind her at the same time as grappling to carry the huge, heavy ballgown. As she stepped off the train, she thought that she would have paid a fair amount not to have to be attempting to cross London weighed down by a huge dress and Timmy's various implements and potions to ensure she scrubbed up well. As she scurried along, she slipped on the pavement, luckily steadied herself and couldn't wait to get to her destination.

Half an hour later, she finally emerged from deep underground, sweating and with her feathers most certainly ruffled. Glowed-up was not even in the equation. Stuffed-up was more like it. Lotterella was in need of a footman and a coach. Looking over towards the traffic lights, streetlights and shopfronts looked down on her as she made her way to a pedestrian crossing and paused for breath whilst squinting down at her phone. She'd followed the instructions in the email precisely, and according to what it said, she was now, at last, a short walk from the hotel. As she dragged her suitcase behind her, weaving in between pedestrians, cars whizzed beside her, and black cabs queued up for passengers coming out of Victoria Station, she doubted this five-star Belgravia hotel used by royalty was as nearby as it stated. With the sound of sirens in her ears and the smell of diesel fumes in the

air, she prepared herself for an uncomfortable walk with her body contorted in all sorts of angles to hold the dress and drag her case.

Not long after though, she arrived at an entrance of what appeared to be a very fancy-looking hotel shaded by a line of rich black canopies, where a man dressed in red tails and a waistcoat suddenly appeared out of nowhere. In one single swift motion, he'd scooped up both the dress as well as her case and then escorted her inside the building. Lotta drew a sharp breath as she took in the art deco lobby and the tinkle from a glimmering chandelier that hung opulently over her head. It was all gorgeous; a huge display of freshly cut flowers on a round table and a lovely old fireplace contributed to the lobby's air of opulence. Lotta was taken aback and shook her head; the grubby business hotel she'd last stayed in this was not. A highly polished black and white floor, a receptionist with a friendly smile, the ticking of a grandfather clock, brass lamps with black silk shades, marble-topped beautifully carved timber, and the scent of something woodsy, earthy, and expensive pumped into the air.

After a seamless and friendly check-in, Lotta was whisked up to her room, where a footman was just leaving at the door. 'Let me know if I can assist you with anything further. Your things are unpacked,' he said, holding the door open for her.

Lotta didn't know what to think, smiled, and then gulped with her chin to the floor as she looked around. The room didn't disappoint. It was, in fact, not a room, but a two-bedroom suite. She frowned in astonishment at the luxuriousness of it all, lost as she walked around running her fingers over polished wood, her feet sinking into thick carpet. Everywhere her eyes settled, luxury waved back at her; gilded china-blue wallpaper, not one but two clawfoot baths, little chocolates on the pillows of the beds, heavy silk curtains, piles of toiletries, a platter of fruit, scalloped pelmets, two emperor beds to die for, a deep purple velvet sofa. The list went on and on as Lotta looked around, shaking her head. Jack had intimated it was a run-of-the-mill hotel. It was not – it was so nice that it had wrong-footed her entirely. She felt out of place in her charity shop blouse, with her second-hand dress hanging

up by the bed. She wanted to cry at the pure luxury of the place.

After walking around a bit more and gazing out the window at one of the royal parks, she couldn't decide whether to run a bath, lounge on the bed or open the champagne currently resting in a bucket of ice. Instead, she perched on the edge of the sofa, not wanting to mess up the cushions. Just as she was about to take out her Kindle and was thinking, possibly, about a cup of tea, her phone rang. She looked down to see Jack's name going across the top of her phone. She pressed to accept and was about to gush about the room when he cut her dead. 'Lotta,' was all he said. He did not sound happy.

'Yes?'

'I'm downstairs in the lobby. There's a problem with the room,' Jack said gruffly.

'What sort of a problem?'

Jack swore quietly. 'The sort of problem where I don't have a room or a bed. I am furious, to put it mildly.'

'What? They've double-booked or something?'

'No, *they* haven't double-booked. There is no booking in my name at all. It has never existed, according to their records or mine. I didn't even check, which I'm also fuming about.'

'How come? I'm here now.'

'I know that.'

'Right, yes, duh, of course you do.'

'Whatever the reason and whoever's fault it is, this hotel is fully-booked. I've tried to get hold of one of my team to sort out where I am staying, but there's no answer so far.'

Lotta looked at the two rooms on the other side of the suite. 'I'm in a suite.'

'I know that, too.'

'Yes, sorry, I'm saying all the stupid things. You can stay here.'



‘I don’t want you to think...’ Jack trailed off, letting his sentence hang in the air.

‘No, no, all good. It’s fine. There’s room for twenty people to stay here.’

‘What about getting ready and all that?’ Jack asked, his voice absolutely loaded with doubt.

‘Jack, there are two baths and a double shower. I think we’ll cope.’

‘Okay, I’ll sort it out down here,’ Jack said and ended the call abruptly.

With a look of thunder on his face, Jack came into the suite ten or so minutes later. ‘How hard is it to get things right?’ He snapped his mouth closed and dumped a tan leather satchel and bag onto the sofa.

Lotta swallowed. She’d thought Grumpy Jack was attractive. Angry Jack took things to a whole new level. He was so handsome, so broody, so hot. ‘You just can’t get the staff these days,’ she murmured as a sort of half-joke.

Jack did not laugh. He was clearly in no mood for jokes. Lotta had not read the room with her attempt at banter. His face didn’t crack, indeed it looked like thunder as he looked over to the open fold-back doors leading to the huge bedrooms. ‘At least there are two large beds. Sorry about this. This is a nightmare.’

Lotta’s heart was beating so quickly, it made her catch her breath. As the look on Jack’s face computed in her brain, her heart flipped over the parallel bars and then landed on the crash mat with a splat. Jack was clearly insanely annoyed about having to share a room or a suite as it actually was. This was so very clearly a fake dating business arrangement to him and *nothing* else. He was not wondering about what things may possibly go on in one of the beds. It was obvious that he was not wanting to be around Lotta. Disappointment at his attitude flooded Lotta’s body. She spluttered for something to say, ‘Yes. This place is huge. You can keep well away from me.’

He tutted and took his jacket off, putting it beside his holdall on the sofa. Lotta shuffled uneasily and patted the sofa cushions beside her, and then gestured to the rest of the room. 'It's big enough for two.'

'That's not the point!'

'We'll be fine with the bedroom doors shut,' Lotta stated.

'We'll just have to put up with it,' Jack replied gruffly.

'Okay,' Lotta replied, rather scared to speak.

'We can get ready in rotation. You can go down to the bar for a drink or, I don't know, some afternoon tea or something while I get ready, and then I'll leave you to it.'

Lotta thought about the two bathtubs and her planned pre-going out bath up to her neck in bubbles and reading her book to try and somehow calm her nerves. She nodded lamely, and a squeak came out. 'Works for me.'

'Good,' Jack almost barked. 'I've got a meeting now in the pub down the road. I'll be back to get ready in two hours. After that, it's all yours.' He swept his arm around the suite. 'So do what you like for now.' His face cracked slightly, softening at the edges. 'No smashing of wine glasses on the bathroom floor while I'm gone.'

Lotta let her face smile, but inside she felt as if she was dead as she observed Jack pick up his jacket and hurry back out the door. She'd thought somehow, maybe deep down, that he liked her. Clearly, she'd been very much barking up the wrong tree.

Everyone was looking in the car's direction. The photographers standing behind the fencing with their gigantic cameras, the small crowd of people ready for the guests of honour with anticipation all over their faces and flags in their hands, and the staff in tails assisting guests from cars. Lotta swallowed as a colossal spike of adrenaline surged through her stomach at the distance from her seated position in the car to the road moving slowly past the window. Suddenly getting herself to the pavement brimmed with calamity. She hadn't thought about this bit of the dress and how she was going to manage to elegantly get herself, and it, out of the car. An image of a front-page headline of various people ungainly flashing their underwear as they got out of cars to attend events zoomed into her head.

In a blind panic, she turned her phone towards her, away from Jack's view, and frantically searched for how to elegantly get out of a car. As she scrolled down the dos and don'ts, she was even more concerned as the list was as long as her arm. It was not for the faint of heart.

*Adjust your clothing. With your knees together and touching each other, twist slightly towards the door. Look for and accept a helping hand being offered to you. When the door opens, swing your legs out in one swift movement. Do NOT hesitate. With both feet on the ground, use your centre of gravity and the proffered hand to slowly lift you out of the vehicle.*

Lotta forced herself not to open the window and peer wildly out to see what was happening in the cars in the queue.

Craning her head to her left, she watched the car ahead of the one in front of them. The woman standing on the bottom step of the building in the top hat and tails waited for the car to stop, slowly and carefully opened the door, held out her right hand, and assisted a woman in a bright red backless dress to exit the car safely.

Lotta tried to control her breathing. This was meant to be fun and enjoyable, she hadn't thought about technicalities such as cars and arrivals. She was so hopelessly out of her depth. Right at that point, it didn't feel enjoyable, it felt nervy – here she was on a fake date with someone she could no longer pretend she hadn't fallen for hard, she was in a huge silk dress, and there were *actual* photographers outside the venue.

She swallowed and counted as she breathed in, attempting to elongate her breath, and did the same as she exhaled. She felt her ribs rise and fall as she tried not to think about spilling onto the pavement flat on her face as she got out of the car. Jack turned to look at her and smiled. 'Everything okay?'

*Is everything okay?* She thought to herself. *Actually, not really, no everything is not. I'm Cinderella without her youth, totally out of my depth and on top of all of that, this is one of the last times I'm going to see you.* Lotta slapped a beam on her face. 'Yes, fantastic, thanks. Exciting!'

'Good. You're straight with everything on the fake dating front?' Jack asked.

*It really is the only reason I'm here for him,* Lotta thought. *Our feelings are not mutual.* She nodded. 'I am. If I get stuck with anything, I'll just wing it. Don't worry about me in the slightest.'

'Hopefully, as long as nothing goes wrong here tonight, the deal will be done. It's been a very long time coming.'

'No pressure or anything then,' Lotta joked.

Jack didn't smile, and Lotta's palms felt sweaty as she inched towards the door as the car crawled to a stop. With her knees together, she had to stop herself from bolting out of the car and legging it the other way. She breathed in again,

gripped her Kindle through her clutch bag, and focused on her knees. With her eyes intent on the woman in the tails looking confidently into the window, calculating the exact timing to open the door as the car came to a halt, Lotta repeated over and over again in her head, *you can do this. You can do this. You can do this.*

She felt her legs wobbling under the layered petticoats of the huge dress as the door was swiftly opened. Then, as if by magic, a hand came in, and before she knew it, she'd swivelled her legs out of the door, and there was absolutely no going back. At the point of no return, for a long panicked minute, there was a blur of petticoat and black silk as her feet were suspended and not even close to touching the floor. Lotta closed her eyes; she was definitely going to fall. Ready for the smack onto the step in front of her and the clicks of the cameras, she felt the grip from the outstretched hand go tighter, and another one join it underneath. It deftly seemed to elevate and pull her at the same time, and before she knew it, her feet were suddenly firmly planted on the ground, the petticoats and taffeta falling back into place. By some miracle, she was upright. There was a twinkle in the woman's eyes and barely a whisper. 'You're safe.'

Lotta gulped for the hundredth time and whispered back, 'Thank you. I thought I was a goner.'

'Ahh, I've been doing this a long time. No way I was going to let you fall.' The woman winked. 'Nice dress, by the way.'

'Thank you.' Lotta smiled back as Jack appeared on her right. She took his arm and slowly, with her legs touching the fabric of the petticoats each time she put a foot in front of the other, they made their way up the red carpet to the top of the steps. There was a click, clicking from the cameras on her left, a chattering from the people waiting for the distinguished guests on her right, and a gentle squeeze on her hand from Jack. As she moved carefully up the steps, Jack's hand whispered to the small of her back. Lotta had to stop herself from shuddering in delight.

Still fizzing at how it had felt to walk up the steps with Jack, Lotta gaped at the magnificent lobby and considered her next problem; maintaining a vertical position in the gigantic dress. She'd not thought about that at all, and as someone offered her a tray with flutes of champagne, she wondered how she was going to navigate the dress, a drink, and a conversation about her fake relationship all at once. There were way too many things to concentrate on, on top of the missing heartbeats every time Jack in his tuxedo looked her way.

She took a proffered champagne flute graciously, kept her feet rooted to the floor as if she was standing on ice, and looked around at the beautiful lobby. An enormous chandelier glittered overhead, marble floor tiles glinted, and mirrored panelled walls bounced sparkly light around her head. Lotta Button felt almost, but not quite, as if she was in a dream. In the dream, she drifted across the shiny floor with her head held high and conducted a conversation with fancy pants guests with ease. In the bright starkness of her reality, there were nervous, sweaty bits in places she didn't even know sweat could be produced – together with a clamminess to her palms, there was a warm, not pleasant feeling right at the centre of the small of her back, and it felt as if something was running down the backs of her calves. She suddenly panicked and experienced a full-body cringe at the warmth under her arms, and balancing her bag and the flute of champagne whilst smiling at a grinning pudgy unknown face opposite her, she forced her arms into a strange position to aid air movement to the underarm area of the dress. Sweaty patches on black silk taffeta were not part of the dream.

A few minutes later, she was standing, smiling and nodding and trying not to say too much at all. Spoken to when addressed and keeping as close to Jack as possible was her plan of attack. Could he feel her tenseness radiating from what felt like every part of her being? Did he sense her nerves at the grandness of the event? He certainly didn't seem to be feeling it as he chatted with ease, his usual grumpiness nowhere to be seen.

Lotta looked through to the sparkling ballroom where the same art deco mirrors as in the lobby lined the walls. Round tables for ten groaned in magnificent tall floral displays, and fancy silverware. She was introduced to one person after another as what felt like a sea of people greeted Jack. She shook hands, chatted, nodded, and generally played along with a flute of champagne in her hand and a smile on her face. As her empty glass was whisked from her hand and replaced with a full one, she was more than glad when she found herself nudged up to a fancy, but old-school platter of prawn vol au vents. In an attempt to calm her nerves and fill the hole in her stomach, she stood looking animatedly into a conversation going on around her about the state of the economy and what was going on in Russia, whilst secretly piling one vol au vent after another into her mouth.

When about fifteen minutes later, her eyes had glazed over regarding the economy and Russia, she was brought back to attention with the arrival of a new couple to the circle. A gigantic man with a ruddy complexion and thick orange-blond hair, and a portly woman squeezed into a shiny red dress which appeared to be at least three sizes too small. Lotta looked at bright red lip gloss, shiny gold drop earrings down to shoulders, and a back-combed platinum beehive; forgettable this woman in the red dress was not. Jack greeted the pair enthusiastically and then brandished his hand to Lotta, introducing her with a beam. Lotta held her hand out to the woman, hiding a gulp and hoping she didn't smell of prawns.

The tanned, glossed woman drawled heartily. 'Lovely to meet y'all. I'm Brandy. All the way from good old Texas!'

Lotta shook Brandy's hand. 'Lotta.'

'Sorry, didn't catch that,' Brandy hollered.

Lotta had heard the same question regarding her name many times. Jack jumped in with a chuckling explanation. 'Lotta – as in hotter.'

Brandy joined in with the laughter. 'Ahh, I get ya! Hotter, right, I see. Too funny. An in-joke, is it? So, what's your real name?'

Lotta wanted to eye roll or facepalm or both. Instead, she smiled graciously. ‘No, it’s not a joke.’ She spoke slowly, ‘My name is Lotta.’

‘Ahh! Right then, howdy and hi there, Lotta! Can’t wait to hear a bit more about you now we finally get to meet the one who is with the delectable Jack. We thought you might be made up!’ Brandy winked and squeezed Lotta just at the top of her arm.

Lotta blinked. This was going to be an interesting night, that she knew for a fact.



Swathed in the folds of the silk taffeta dress, Lotta perched on the edge of a pink velour, scalloped back chair in the lobby of the ballroom bathroom. This was totally the kind of place where bathrooms had fancy pink shell chairs and attendants in starched uniforms were ready and waiting to assist. She stared at the navy blue rug inlaid with a creamy white intricate pattern and couldn't stop the strange taste of the prawn vol au vents in her mouth. Stuffing too many down because of her nerves had made her feel a bit sick, or maybe it was because of the adrenaline racing up and down her veins.

After sitting for a bit swallowing the prawn taste, she stood up, fluffed up her dress and, whilst standing at the sink, ran the tap, cupped cold water into her hand, and attempted to slosh water around her mouth. As quick as a flash, the attendant, who had just finished helping a guest with a button on the back of her dress, appeared with a glass of water. 'There you go,' the attendant said, holding out a glass.

'Thank you,' Lotta replied, accepting the glass and taking a swig of water. She wrinkled her nose and shook her head at the taste in her mouth.

'A frog in your throat?' the attendant inquired.

'No, I'm not sure. I think I had too many vol au vents. I can't seem to get the taste out of my mouth.' Lotta grimaced as she realised that with the fishy seafood taste still evident, her attempts to rid it with water clearly weren't working. She wished she'd resisted piling in one vol au vent after another.

‘Prawn, was it?’ the attendant questioned with a frown.

‘Yes, actually, it was.’

The attendant shook her head and sucked air in through her teeth. ‘You see, you’ve always got to be careful of a prawn if you ask me. Looks nice, tastes nice, but dangerous. A shark wrapped in prawn’s clothing.’

Lotta was mildly alarmed at the woman’s serious tone on the subject of the humble prawn. She’d stuffed the vol au vents down one after another in an attempt to ease her nerves. Now they were repeating on her, but she didn’t think there was any danger involved. ‘You have to be careful of them, do you?’

‘Oh, yes! I never trust a prawn myself. In fact, I steer well clear. You live and learn.’

Lotta gulped. ‘Yikes, I had more than a couple. Loads in fact.’

‘You’re not the only one.’ The attendant chuckled. ‘Someone else was in here earlier, feeling sick from them too. She was green, green around the gills as my old nan used to say.’

‘Oh dear, that doesn’t sound too pleasant.’

‘Ahh, I get to see it all in here. People vomiting, doing all sorts in the cubicles, stripping off items of clothing, putting items down the loo, phoning their lovers from the toilet seat. And the things you hear when you’re standing in a uniform in the corner of a bathroom. It’s like I’m invisible. I could write a book...’

‘I bet,’ Lotta replied, swigging the rest of the water and handing back the glass.

The woman pointed at Lotta’s dress. ‘Belle of the ball in that one, aren’t you? It’s stunning. I haven’t seen one like that for a long time.’

Lotta beamed. ‘Thank you so much. I do feel quite nice in it.’

‘Mark my words, you look the best I’ve seen in here for a while. You’re glowing.’

‘Ahh, too kind, thank you,’ Lotta said as she washed and then dried her hands.

‘I bet your date is thinking how lucky they are.’

Lotta rolled her eyes. She really hoped that was true, but with Jack’s attitude regarding the room, it had dawned on her that perhaps he wasn’t feeling quite the same about the situation as she was. ‘Ha ha, that’s the intention.’

‘Well, have a lovely evening and stay clear of the prawns for the rest of the night,’ the woman joked.

‘Will do!’ Lotta singsonged as the prawn taste continued to stick to the sides of her mouth and she made her way out of the bathroom.

A few minutes later, after weaving herself in and out of the linen-covered tables, Lotta was seated back next to Brandy. Brandy beamed and pointed to Lotta’s wineglass. ‘I said yes to a white wine refill for you.’

‘Thanks.’ Lotta smiled brightly whilst thinking inside that she really needed to monitor her wine intake and put herself on a water break. She didn’t need to have a fuzzy brain when she was pretending to be Jack’s partner. She had to remain focused and play the game.

Brandy shifted her weight in her chair, leaned forward, and squinted her eyes in question. ‘So, how long have you known Jack?’

Lotta blinked furiously a few times. She had to stick to her rehearsed script, but she tried to sound casual and flicked her hand around in front of her face. ‘Hmm, not long, but on and off a few years.’

‘And how did you two meet?’ Brandy asked.

The fabricated, premeditated story slid easily off Lotta’s tongue. Four easy little words that saved too much explaining. It was what she and Jack had colluded that they would say when either of them was asked. ‘We met at work.’

Brandy's eyes lit up. 'Work! Hark, yes! The penny's dropped! It's nice to finally meet you. Of course! Silly me!' Brandy brandished her hand around the table with a grin.

Lotta made a few noises, trying not to say anything concrete, wondering what had made sense to Brandy but hoping that she wouldn't ask any further questions. Brandy didn't seem to notice Lotta's vagueness and continued, 'I got chatting to Jack's friend, blast, I can't remember his name now when he came out to Texas a while back, and he was telling me all about you. Ages ago it was now. Yes, ooh, how exciting! He said that Jack liked someone in marketing, I think it was, if I'm not mistaken. It's nice to hear that he made it happen despite his apprehension about getting involved in an office romance. Not that Jack told me any of this, of course. He thinks we don't have a clue about anything. No doubt he didn't let on because of our church and everything – he probably thought we wouldn't approve.' Brandy chuckled. 'It's a bit tricky when you're the boss like Jack is too.'

Lotta's eyes darted to Jack. This hadn't been covered in their fake dating agenda. She didn't let the confusion show on her face, but she had no idea who Brandy was talking about, so she just nodded. She then widened her eyes and, unsure of what to say, she went for simple and non-committal. 'Yep.'

Brandy lowered her voice. 'Jack's friend said he was head over heels, like really in love with this woman at work, but it had never really taken off because, well, you know, workplace politics and all that. Now it has, how lovely.'

Lotta felt herself go dead inside. She was absolutely motionless as she slowly digested Brandy's words, and her world stopped turning. Her stomach plaited into a mixture of disappointment, sadness, and stupidity as she evaluated what Brandy had just told her. Her shoulders slumped as a weight slammed down on her from above. Jack liked someone else, of course, he blooming well did! Her brain raced as Brandy rattled on. Jack was in love with someone from work, and it would have been too complicated for him to have her at this event, hence why he needed someone unrelated like her. Brandy continued to chat as Lotta picked up her wineglass and

took a gulp. She snatched a look at Jack a few seats away from her, chatting to the person on his left. Handsome, so handsome. How utterly ridiculous she had been to think that someone like Jack might possibly have liked her too. The assumption she'd had because of his dinner invite and helping her with her house that he might have been feeling the same way as she did now seemed utterly ludicrous.

Things flashed in front of Lotta's eyes; the drink in the pub when Jack had arrived late, pulling up the red carpet with him in the hallway, bumping into him outside the bakery, and dinner in the French restaurant. She'd concocted all of that into a story that had meant there was something going on between them. She'd weaved all of it in and out of her brain as if it was one of her books, but in the cold light of hindsight, she could now quite clearly see that all of it was just a series of unrelated events leading to her sitting beside this Texan pretending she was Jack's partner for the night and nothing more. Lotta to Jack was just another one of his business deals. The person he really liked was someone at work.

Lotta was grateful for the interruption to the conversation when a waiter squeezed around Brandy's right side and placed a plate on the table. Brandy waved her hand left and right and looked up at the waiter. 'No, no meat for me, thanks. I did put in a special dietary requirement. I'm allergic to meat.' The waiter swiftly removed the plate, and Brandy turned back to Lotta and rolled her eyes. 'I did say I can't eat meat. I can't go anywhere near it.' She flapped her hands around in front of her a little bit. 'It all started with a tick bite.'

Lotta felt relief that the subject had moved away from her, Jack, and the person Jack was in love with. She tried to stop the mixture of disappointment and surprise from showing on her face and instead commanded herself to look interested in Brandy's tick bite story. 'Oh, dear, that doesn't sound good.'

'No, it's not good at all.' Brandy chortled and flapped her hand. 'Which is why I shovelled in those prawn vol au vents earlier. I wasn't sure how much meat was going to be on the menu, even though I'd noted my allergies, so I went for a healthy dose of the prawns.' Brandy tapped her chest a few

times and then swallowed. ‘I must say, though, those prawns do seem to be repeating on me a bit. Yes, so anyway, I got a tick bite a few years ago, and now I’m allergic to meat.’

Lotta felt the conversation drift away a little bit as she half-listened to Brandy embellishing her with further information on the lone star tick. As she sat there listening and swirling her wine around her glass, her brain spiralled with the information that Jack liked someone he worked with. Disappointment swilled around in Lotta’s stomach bitterly as Brandy continued rattling on about how she would be covered in hives if she as much as sniffed a piece of meat. Lotta nodded and indicated via a look on her face for Brandy to go on. She pretended she was highly interested in tick bites, but inside, her mind raced about Jack. It all made sense. Of course, it did. Jack hadn’t wanted to get anyone from work involved in this business deal, it would have been way too messy. He’d told her he just wanted to get the deal sorted, done and dusted and move on – Lotta was just a temporary piece in the jigsaw puzzle of his business life. It was as simple and as cut and dried as that.

Lotta was brought back to the moment when she saw Brandy’s eyes raised in a question and her face waiting for an answer, Lotta, unfortunately, hadn’t heard a single thing Brandy had said. She leant to her right with her ear leading as if she’d misheard. ‘Sorry, I missed that last bit, it’s quite noisy in here.’

‘Vacation? As I said, we’re off to Paris, then Corsica, then back to Texas via New York. Where are you guys going on vacation this year? Where is Jack taking you? I bet you’re off to somewhere nice.’

Lotta digested the question. Where was she going on holiday? Ha. That was a joke in itself. She’d be lucky if she had a weekend in a tent the way she was going. And she most definitely wouldn’t be going on holiday with Jack. No doubt, he would be going away with the person he was head over heels with. Probably Antigua or Barbados or somewhere fancy like that. Possibly the Maldives or Fiji. He would be sipping cocktails and soaking up the sun with the person he actually liked, the one he was in love with. Not the one who emailed

him fake dating questions, the same one who was seen out in public in fur-lined boots, had failed at most things in life and lived in a falling-down house.

By the time the dessert, Eton Mess, which Brandy thought was a strange affair, came to be served, Lotta had managed to successfully steer the conversation away from Jack and had kept it safely on the weather in Texas. The conversation had then naturally moved onto how Brandy was hoping to lose weight by way of a new fitness trainer going by the name of Tyson. As the conversation ebbed and flowed, inside, Lotta had felt more and more morose and had been more than relieved when the man beside Brandy had started to get involved in the chat. As the coffee arrived and the guest speaker started, Lotta sat back in her chair and took several deep breaths and glanced across the table at Jack – tall, dark, handsome, well-off if the ball was anything to go by, but most of all...in love with somebody else. She snatched another look at him and felt as if she'd been hit by a train. Here she was again – Lotta on a round table, in a secondhand dress, chatting to someone she wasn't that interested in, pretending that she was right in the centre of a bling-bling life when in fact, her life was going nowhere and fast. Lotterella really didn't want to be at the ball.



Lotta had been to the toilet again, chatted to the man on her left, and was sitting back at the table as the speeches started and post-dinner drinks had been served, when Brandy suddenly clutched the side of the table, pulling the tablecloth erratically as she did so. Lotta looked at Brandy in alarm as the tablecloth crumpled and slid, knocking over Lotta's glass of wine, just in time to see Brandy's shoulders heave. Brandy's face had turned green, and it was clear to Lotta that she was going to vomit. In one swift movement, Brandy pushed her chair back and her weight forward, lurched her head towards the floor under the table, and then stopped and closed her eyes for a second. Lotta swiped a champagne bucket from the centre of the table and shoved it under Brandy's chin just in

time for a perfectly formed spew of vomit to project out of Brandy's mouth.

With the bucket held out, Lotta watched in horror as Brandy's shoulders heaved over and over again with vomit coming out of her mouth and little bits of sick landed on Lotta's dress. Before she knew it and in a flash, a waitress was removing the bucket from Lotta's hands and replacing it with a bag under Brandy's nose.

Once the heaving and vomiting had ceased, everyone at the table fussed and shifted around, Brandy continued to sit with her head between her knees, and a waiter was dabbing at Lotta's dress with a wet cloth. When Lotta looked up again from what was going on with her dress, the man beside her had been replaced by Jack, who was looking at her and Brandy with wide, concerned eyes. 'What the hell? Are you okay?'

All Lotta could think when she looked at Jack was the fact that she was a business deal to him. All she could see was that he loved someone else. She didn't need the sight of Brandy's vomiting to make her feel sick, she already felt sick to her core at the thought of her stupid fake dating and Jack's opinion of her. 'Yes, I'm fine.' She had to stop herself from spitting out her words. She added a small smile at the end.

Jack looked over at Brandy. 'It must have been something to do with the tick bite allergy thing. Do you think? Did she eat any meat?'

Lotta couldn't have cared less whether or not Brandy had eaten a horse, all she knew was Jack loved someone else. 'No, not as far as I know. I don't think it was that.'

As the commotion beside her ceased and Brandy was led off to the bathrooms, Jack tapped Lotta on the hand. Lotta felt as if a red-hot poker had zapped her, and she stopped herself from recoiling from the touch of Jack's skin on hers. Jack squinted his eyes at her in concern. 'You've gone a bit funny. Are you sure you're okay? Do you want some help with your dress? I can call someone over. Do you need me to get you some water or something? Maybe a soft drink?'



Lotta looked down at her dress, now covered in sponge marks and dark patches from the waiter and his dabbing cloth. The dress would probably smell of vomit and be ruined. The dress was the last of her worries. She was ruined. ‘No. I’m good. Don’t worry about me. I’m okay, I hope Brandy is feeling better.’

‘Yes, hope so. Can I get you anything?’ Jack asked again.

*No, Jack. No. You can’t get me anything, nothing at all. I don’t need your help, thanks. I’m just the village idiot who thought you might like me as much as I like you, that was all.*

The rest of the evening had passed in a whirl for Lotta. A swirl of thoughts she didn't much like. There were all sorts of things going through her head; the fact that after the wedding, she wouldn't be seeing Jack again, the realisation that she'd let herself get swept up in something that wasn't actually real, the fact that she'd daydreamed about him as if he was a character in one of her books. The notion that just as when she'd met Jack at the end of the year, she was again sitting at a table surrounded by people with happy, successful lives, and she was pretending. All of it made her feel sick. Soul sick. She herself was feeling just as nauseous as Brandy had looked directly before she'd projectile vomited into a champagne bucket.

As Jack smiled, chatted, danced, and wooed everyone around him, Lotta began to feel more and more off-colour and more and more down in the dumps as she surveyed the scene from her seat at the table. Not that her morose state would have been known to anyone at the ball, because on the outside, Lotta, in her beautiful dress, glowing skin and doused in the sparkly Holly diamonds, appeared as if everything was hunky-dory in her world. When it so very much was not. Lotta Button, in actual fact, felt as if the rug had been pulled out from under her whole existence.

She listened as the music played and observed as various women swooned under Jack's attention and again felt stupidity wash over her at the thought that Jack might actually have liked her. This man was clearly at the top of his game and surrounded by people with all their ducks in a row. He could

take his pick around the room of successful women who not only looked the part but sounded it too. He did not like women who sat in bookshops with piles of books and multiple Kindles and searched charity shops for gold. How she could ever have fooled herself that he would like Lotta as in hotter whose career was a washout, who was living in a dump, and had no money and prospects whatsoever, was beyond her.

She watched as a woman, poured into a silver sequin dress, made a beeline for Jack. Lotta eyed the woman, who looked as if someone had carved her amazing figure and her perfectly curled hair and face, whose make-up seemed to have been professionally applied, and eyelashes which hadn't come from a box. She looked down at herself where the huge, silk taffeta dress was now crumpled and had the tell-tale speckles of vomit evident on the bottom. Blinking, she felt the weight of the eyelashes Timmy had so meticulously recommended and looked down at her stick-on French-manicured salon nails. She sighed and turned the skin of her blurred forearm. All of it now seemed ridiculous. She shouldn't have bothered. She shouldn't have even thought about a ballgown, or a glow-up, or a transformation and should have attended the ball exactly as she was because there was no way she could ever compete for Jack. No way on earth he would ever like her.

She sat with a smile on her face, chatting here and there until the evening headed towards an end. People began to disperse from their tables, the music slowed, and in light of how she felt inside, Lotta had done quite well to hold herself and her conversation together. She'd spoken to a business colleague of Jack's who he was in negotiation with about a new venture, and she'd chatted to the wife of someone who Jack played 'business golf' with, whatever that was.

By the time Jack had finished chatting to another gorgeous woman in another gorgeous dress, Lotta was over all of it – the dress, the fake dating, the ball and the transformation. Jack finally made his way over with a smile and stood beside the chair next to her. 'How are you getting on?' He lowered his voice and made a half-joke, 'Any fake dating hiccups?'

Lotta wanted to tell him to stick his fake dating where the sun didn't shine. Instead, she pretended. 'None at all. Don't worry, you're safe. Not long to go, and it will all be over. How about you?'

'Yes, same from my side of the bargain. I stuck to our script.'

'Excellent.' *So glad to be of service*, Lotta added sarcastically in her head.

Jack's face broke into a smile. 'You've recovered from the vomiting episode?'

'Yes, just about.'

'Okay, if you're ready to go, I am.'

'I am.' Lotta nodded, and as she lifted up the hem of her dress and followed behind him, she wished that she was actually going home. Because right at that moment, the last place she wanted to be was around Jack. The same Jack who loved someone else.



Lotta continued to berate herself as they headed to the door, and she felt the same way after the car had collected them from the entrance. Lost in her thoughts as she sat watching the lights of London go past the window, she felt down in the dumps. Once back at the hotel, she stood in the lobby in the huge dress, convinced that she not only smelt of Brandy's vomit but there was a slight whiff of prawns in the air too. If Liv had been in the vicinity, Lotta would have asked her if she stunk of prawns.

'You're very quiet.' Jack observed as they waited for the lift.

*I'm surprised you noticed*, Lotta thought, *seeing as you're actually in love with someone else*. She pressed her lips together and tried to sound cheerier with her answer than she felt. 'Am I?'

‘Yes, you are. I know what you’re thinking! You’re so glad that’s over! You’re pleased this fake date business arrangement is nearly done.’

Lotta wanted to groan. He had no idea she was thinking that she wanted the ground to swallow her up and spit her out somewhere else. He had no idea that she was thinking she really liked him. He had no idea that she was wondering what the horrible feeling in her stomach was. The feeling that was not just an ache, but was beginning to churn. ‘Not at all,’ she heard herself reply.

She wanted to shake herself. The whole thing had been a ridiculous idea in the first place, and what was worse was she’d known right at the beginning that it was a harebrained thing for a woman halfway through her life to even think about. People in their mid-thirties fake dating? Really?

Jack pushed the button for the lift again and then looked over towards the bar. ‘Fancy a quick nightcap? I hardly had a drink at dinner.’

Lotta mostly wanted to get into bed, pull the covers up over her head, wake up in the morning, and get home to Pretty Beach. She continued though with the pretence of their successful fake dating, ‘Love one.’

A few minutes later, they were seated in the fancy hotel bar with a couple of cognacs. Lotta pressed the glass to her lips and took tiny sips. Jack chatted about the dinner, but as she watched him, all she could think about was asking him about the woman from work. She listened to him telling her that he thought the Texas deal would be finalised very soon and that it had been a job well done.

As she sat on the stool gazing at him, she just didn’t want to be there at all. Didn’t want to have vomit on her dress, didn’t want to be a fake date, didn’t want to smell of prawns. Didn’t want this to be her life.

By the time Jack had finished his second cognac and Lotta had hardly touched hers, she was beginning to feel the effects of the night. Her body felt heavy, indeed her brain, too, felt heavy. All the faking, all the questions, all the lashes, all the

prawns, all the smiling, all the conversation. Everything swirled around her in a great big jumble until she suddenly started to feel very hot yet clammy and cold at the same time. She felt a wobble on the stool and gripped the edge of the bar as nausea smashed over her body like a wave. She felt her eyes close and steadied herself for a second, trying to regain her composure.

‘Lott!’ Jack said, alarmed. ‘Lott! What’s wrong?’

Lotta felt her stomach lurch and clamped her hand over her mouth. ‘Oh my goodness!’ she swore. ‘I think I’m going to be sick!’ She stopped and then blurted out drastically. ‘I *am* going to be sick! Quick!’

Jack jumped up from his stool, his face wide in alarm, his lips a grim line, and with lightning speed, he shouted over the bar. A few seconds later, he was holding a black plastic bin liner in front of Lotta’s bobbing head, her face pale as the contents of her stomach began to rise. Suddenly faint pink vomit appeared out of nowhere, landing neatly in the bottom of the bag as Lotta gripped onto it with clammy hands and heaved again. She lurched forward and closed her eyes, trying to shut out the smell of prawns and alcohol, and a dash of cognac amalgamated with the plastic stench from the bag. She felt her shoulders heave and her legs wobble as the noxious fog surrounding her made her stomach roll and lurch even further. As she finally opened her eyes and looked up from the bag, she was surrounded by a haze of black plastic and heat.

Before she knew it, vomit was making itself known again. She was oddly aware that somewhere in the background, a waiter hovered just out of sight as she felt her body move of its own free will. She felt her mind float away as she grasped onto the side of the bag, and Jack held her hair away from her face as she heaved into the bag over and over again.

Once she’d stopped retching, her tongue and throat felt both coated and dry at the same time as she tried to speak. Jack stopped her, putting his hand on her arm, his voice calm and even. ‘Where did that come from? You look terrible!’

Lotta inhaled deeply, trying to calm herself and quell the instinct to burst into tears. She didn't have the strength to answer Jack and just shrugged. Jack's voice was reassuring as he took charge. 'Have you finished?'

Lotta nodded lamely as Jack jumped into action, swiftly removing the black bin liner, grabbing a damp cloth from the hovering waiter and clamping it to Lotta's forehead. She held it gratefully and attempted to muster up a smile. 'I'm so sorry,' she murmured.

'Don't be ridiculous!' Jack snapped. 'You have nothing to be sorry about.'

Lotta shook her head left and right over and over again. 'That was awful. Oh dear, how embarrassing.'

'One minute you were fine, the next minute you were throwing up,' Jack noted.

Lotta shifted her weight and positioned herself so that she was leaning against the side of the bar and allowed the cloth to fall onto her lap. In spite of everything that had just taken place, she couldn't help but notice Jack again as he looked at her with concern. Tall, dark, and absolutely gorgeous. She felt a chill run down her spine as a result of him beside her. Then she remembered the conversation with Brandy and Jack's relationship with someone else. 'I hope that's the last of it,' she said.

'Did you drink a lot?' Jack inquired with a deep and authoritative tone.

Lotta considered Jack's question for a second before responding. She'd hardly been abstinent or sober, but over the course of the evening, she hadn't really consumed that much alcohol. After the initial champagne in the reception area, she'd mostly sipped at her wine, interspersing it with water every now and then. She knew without a doubt by the taste in her mouth that it was the prawns that had caused her to be sick. With a shudder as she remembered, Lotta realised that the woman in the bathroom, who she had dismissed at the time, had clearly been right – prawns were dangerous little devils indeed.

Once Jack had been reassured that she was okay, he helped her to the lift, and before she knew it, she was standing in the suite. Jack fussed around and then stood in front of her. ‘How do you feel now?’

‘I’m fine. I think I need to get in the shower before I go to bed. I stink.’

‘Right. Okay. Let me help you,’ Jack said and looked down at her dress. ‘Do you need some help getting out of that?’

Lotta looked at her dress and nodded. She tried to contain herself as Jack slowly undid the buttons at the back, and she said silent prayers to Timmy and anyone else who was listening that on his trip to glow her up, he’d brought with him new underwear for her to wear under the dress. Lotta stepped out of the dress, and then Jack swiftly opened the door to the bathroom, ‘Hold on. I’ll turn the shower on.’

She scooted past him as best as she could, and he closed the door behind her. She sat on the toilet seat, listening to the shower splattering onto the tiles. Relieved that the nausea had gone and feeling miraculously better, she removed her underwear and stepped into the shower. After scrubbing at her face with a flannel and washing away the smell of both her vomit and what felt like Brandy’s as well, she wrapped herself in a towel, pulled the pins from the updo in her hair and tied her hair up into a bun on top of her head.

A few minutes later, she walked back into the suite where Jack was sitting on the sofa, looking towards the bathroom door with concern in his eyes. ‘How do you feel?’

‘I’m fine now. Much better now that I’m clean, too.’

‘Right, good. Phew, I’m glad that’s over.’

Lotta couldn’t stop thinking about the fact that she’d found out that he loved someone else. It also made her feel sick to her stomach, along with the prawns. ‘Me too.’

‘So, I’ve just had a message to say that Brandy is feeling better, but it’s taken it out of her. She is blaming it on the prawns. They are calling it food poisoning.’



Lotta nodded. ‘Hmm. Oh well, I think I’m going to be okay now. I don’t think there’s anything left in me to come out. I’ll head to bed. I’m exhausted.’

Jack jumped up from the sofa. ‘Are you sure you’re going to be okay? Did you want me to check on you in the night or anything? Do you need anything else?’

‘No, no, thanks.’

‘Well, just shout if you need anything at all. Don’t mind me.’

Lotta nodded, and with a small smile, she opened the bedroom door. Jack followed her and stood by the door as she walked over towards the bed. ‘See you in the morning. As I said, let me know if you need anything. Are you sure you’re fine?’

Lotta nodded and waited until Jack had clicked the door shut and then let her head lie back against the cool of the pillow. She was sure that she was *not* fine. So, so, no not fine. Lotta Button was nowhere near fine. Not even close. Because all this had been ridiculous, and she’d let herself fall in love with someone who saw her as a business deal. Someone who was most certainly in love with someone else. And that was the worst of all.

It was the day after the ball and Lotta had woken up as if the whole vomiting episode was a dream. In fact, her stomach was grumbling so loudly she wondered if she had imagined the whole thing entirely.

As soon as she was properly awake, any thoughts of a dream quickly turned to a nightmare as she remembered the ball with a sinking feeling. She recalled not the fact that she'd excelled at fake dating, nor how amazing she'd looked in the dress, the gorgeous underwear or duchess-level lashes, nor how she'd managed to get out of the car with not just elegance but grace. None of that mattered in the slightest because all Lotta could think about was that Jack loved someone else. That Jack had a secret romance at work. Her brain reiterated over and over again the fact that he didn't like her. It stung her like a cutting slap in the face.

So, with the realisation of her stupidity and the bitterness of disappointment rattling around her body, as soon as she could, she sprinted across the room and packed her things. She threw clothes into her case willy-nilly and stuffed her ballgown into its bag as quickly as she could. When she emerged from the room, she was ready to call the fake date a day and exit the place as quickly as she could. Lotterella was ready to leave the ball.

As she had pulled open the door, she'd hoped that Jack would still be in his room with the door shut but instead, he was also dressed. Unlike her, he was sitting calmly on the sofa looking down at his phone. His head snapped up as she

emerged. ‘How are you this morning? How was the night?’ He asked.

‘Yep, I’m fine, thanks.’ Lotta said with a business-like tone to her voice as her left hand gripped the handle of her case.

Jack looked slightly confused by Lotta’s formal manner. ‘Okay, good. I’m glad you’re feeling better.’

Lotta’s stomach grumbled as she scanned Jack’s face wondering what was going on in his mind. What was he thinking? His silly little fake dating bookworm. Lotta as in hotter. She tried to keep her voice upbeat. ‘It seems as if the whole thing was a dream in a way or a nightmare...’ She trailed off, leaving her sentence hanging in the air.

Jack picked it up right away. ‘It’s strange that you feel and look better considering you were ejecting the contents of your stomach into a bin liner a mere few hours ago. Okay, let’s head down for breakfast then, shall we? Hopefully, you’ll keep it down.’

Lotta quickly shook her head. ‘No, no, umm sorry. I’ve got other plans.’

‘Oh, right, have you? Other plans? I thought we’d said we’d discuss the wedding and our game plan for that over breakfast this morning?’

‘Did we?’ Lotta pretended she’d forgotten. She hadn’t forgotten at all, indeed she’d planned her outfit to within an inch of its life; nice jeans, a crisp white shirt, neutral I-look-like-this-when-I-get-out-of-bed-makeup, tan ballet flats. However, if Jack thought she was going to prolong the agony and sit opposite him playing the fake dating game for one second longer, he had another thing coming.

‘We did,’ Jack stated.

‘Look, sorry. I have to get going,’ Lotta replied off-handedly.

‘You can’t manage a quick breakfast? You must have something pretty pressing on,’ Jack said with a frown. ‘It was all in the email, remember?’

Lotta took him in, sitting there looking all self-assured and handsome. She couldn't give a stuff about the email. She had nothing on for breakfast, but she was heading over to meet Timmy and Giles for lunch later. Before the ball had informed her of the lay of the land, she would have loved to have breakfast with Jack. Or rather the Jack who didn't like someone at work. But there was no way she was going to sit opposite him with her heart feeling as if it had got up onto the parallel bars, lost its grip and fallen into the pit in a heap. No way. Not on your Nelly. She liked him too much. She didn't want to put herself through the torture. She would simply cut her losses and run. Run for the hills. Julie Andrews had nothing on her.

'Right, okay, I thought we had a few things to go through, and we would debrief on last night. I can't tempt you with a coffee?' Jack asked.

*No, you can't tempt me with anything Jack, because Jack, I think I love you. Just like you, I have fallen head over heels. I need to get as far away from you as I possibly can. 'Really, I need to run. Sorry.'*

There was puzzlement in Jack's eyes. 'So, I'll see you for the wedding. Okay, then. Is there anything further we need to discuss? Anything that came up last night? Did you want to meet and talk about Fenella beforehand?'

There had certainly been something that had come up; the fact that he loved someone else. Lotta gripped the handle of her case even harder, her knuckles white and little pricks threatening at the corner of her eyes. She was totally going to cancel the wedding with Jack, but she'd let him know that later. She'd just message him, and that would be that. Just like his business deal, she would get this thing done and dusted. 'I'll message you.'

'Oh, okay. Well, see you then.' Jack frowned. 'If not before.'

'Yes.' Lotta injected a chirpiness into her tone, 'See you. Have a wonderful rest of your weekend. Thanks for the ball

and everything and, err, for assisting me last night. That was really good of you.'

Looking bewildered, Jack jumped up as Lotta headed to the door, 'Are you sure you're going to be okay? You don't seem quite right.'

Lotta chirped. 'I'm absolutely fine and dandy. Just busy, Jack, you know what it's like. Busy here, busy there. Busy, busy, busy! Now last night is over and done with and I didn't mess anything up for you, you can close your deal.'

There was confusion written all over Jack's face. 'Okay, well, yes, see you soon,' Jack said, holding open the door and then closing it behind her quietly, the click sounding like a gong booming at the side of her head.

Lotta strode down towards the lift with her chin held high, willing tears not to spill from the corner of her eyes as fresh disappointment zoomed around her body. She wanted to sprint down the corridor and out of the hotel as fast as she could, but her case, the dress in its bag, and her heavy heart weighed her down. As she stabbed her finger into the lift button, she didn't want to just run out of the hotel, she wanted to cry, and to let big, hot, snotty, ugly sobbing stream out of every orifice of her body. She wanted to wail and snivel and blub. But instead, she stared at the line in the centre of the lift doors and waited. Feeling like she wanted to be dead.

Once she was out on the street, she followed the steps she'd taken the day before when she'd been so excited, so nervous; now she was none of that. Lotterella had had the wind snatched out of her sails.

Ten or so minutes later, she was in a Starbucks nursing a coffee and a toasted bagel wondering if she was going to be able to keep it down. As she sat there staring into space and sipping on the coffee, she thought about the dire state of her heart and how she felt about Jack. How she'd let herself fall for him. How stupid she'd been to even accept the whole ridiculous fake dating pact in the first place. After wallowing in the comfort of self-pity for all of the bagel, and most of the coffee, she decided she would not let it get her down. If she

could recover from Dan and his app and everything that had gone on with the fallout from that, she could most definitely pick herself up from a stupid fake date.

All she needed to do was empty her heart of everything Jack related, and then she would be fine. More than fine. She would not continue down the road she'd travelled after what had happened with Dan with this latest glitch. But as she sat there pondering a bigger problem whacked her in the face; how she felt about Jack was all sorts of different from Dan. She realised that with Jack she'd merged onto a different road altogether. A road that led to a destination; somewhere called Real Love.

As she fiddled with the edge of her coffee cup, she shook her head and then slowly nodded it decisively up and down. She would not let this get her down. She would veer off the Real Love road and continue on another journey, to one where she was content to be on her own.

She was annoyed with herself that she'd let herself be swept up in nonsense. She would empty her heart of stupid sparkly leotards, balance beams, and parallel bars, and she would wash it all away. As she screwed up the paper wrapper from her bagel and drained her coffee, Lotta was not going to let Jack being in love with someone else upset her. She would get back to Pretty Beach to the Breakers, immerse herself in the Pretty Beach thing, and carve a new life for herself on her own.

As she got up from the table and gathered her things, she commanded herself to suck up the disappointment. But no matter what she tried to tell herself, there was no denying the uncomfortable ache in her stomach, which had nothing to do with prawns, was going to take a while to go away.



With the dress bag wedged over the top of her suitcase, Lotta bumped it over the cobblestones to the pub. She'd decided to play the whole thing down with Timmy, not

mention it at all, have a nice lunch, and make her excuses as soon as she could and get back on the train to Pretty Beach.

She smiled at the reassuring sight of the pub at the end of the road with its overloaded hanging baskets and propped-open front door. Yanking her bag over the step, she clattered over the floorboards through the pub's dim interior and, ascertaining that Timmy and Giles were yet to arrive, headed for a table on the far side, arranged her case and the dress and sat fiddling with a beer mat and staring into space. Glasses chinked from behind the bar, a man and a woman at a table beside her creased up in laughter, and a shout from the kitchen drifted over the pub. Regular old pub noises Lotta had listened to a million times before that now didn't seem as if they should be happening around her in her new non-regular, Jack-loves-someone-else world.

Despite her doldrums, as Timmy burst through the pub door laughing and joking, she smiled, the sight of him always brightened her up. Arriving at the table he air-kissed her on both sides of her cheeks, Giles did the same and then went to the bar.

'How was Lotterella at the ball?' Timmy joked. 'Did you have an amazing time?'

Lotta attempted to sound breezy and casual. 'Lovely, thanks,' she chirped. 'Really good.'

'Did you make any big stuff-ups?' Timmy chuckled. 'Or did you remain a fake dating master?'

Lotta considered the moment when she'd thought that she was not only a master of the fake date but also ruling the world and how it hadn't lasted long. Brandy had brought that notion crashing down by her ears, 'I didn't make any mistakes, no.' Lotta said at the same time, thinking that the whole thing had been one huge mistake. She should never have taken Jack and his ridiculous offer up in the first place.

Giles got back to the table and put a Coke in front of Lotta and a glass stuffed with slices of lime, ice, vodka and soda water on the beer mat alongside Timmy. 'How was the belle of the ball then?' Giles laughed.

‘Good, good, really fun.’ Lotta breezed back and patted the back of her head.

Timmy put his drink down and squinted across the table. ‘Err, you’re doing that thing where you pretend you don’t care. What happened?’

‘What thing?’ Lotta replied indignantly.

Timmy tutted. ‘Lott. I’m so not going to spell it out.’

‘I’m not. I had a lovely time. It was just a business thing. A pact. One half of it is now done. In all honesty, I might not even bother with the wedding bit.’

‘Now you’re doing that squinty eye lying thing. Tell us what really happened.’ Timmy huffed. ‘Something didn’t go to plan.’

Lotta shook her head, frowned, and made a funny face. ‘It was fine.’ She couldn’t stop herself from letting out a huge sigh, put her index fingers into the corners of her eyes, and then ran them underneath her eyelids. ‘I’m just tired. It was a long day in the end.’

Timmy reached across the table and put his hand on Lotta’s hand. ‘What happened? Come on.’

Lotta pursed her lips and briefly closed her eyes for a second. ‘It went just as planned, it was a fake date.’

‘But, there’s a but,’ Giles interrupted.

Lotta flicked her hand as if she didn’t care and swallowed the lump in her throat that had been there since Brandy had embellished her. ‘Brandy, the other half of the business deal from America, told me that Jack is in love with someone at work.’

‘Oh.’

‘Precisely. Oh,’ Lotta fired back with a sad look.

‘But I thought you said you didn’t like him anyway,’ Timmy stated.

‘Nup. I don’t. Correct.’



‘And I told you that I didn’t believe that. So, now I’m thinking you must be hurt. Am I right?’ Timmy asked with a serious look on his face.

Lotta tried to downplay the whole thing. Timmy had said that he thought she liked Jack. She wished it was as small as just liking him. ‘As I said before, it wasn’t anything anyway.’

‘But you did like him a bit.’ Giles noted.

‘Maybe a little bit,’ Lotta conceded, her voice weak. ‘As I said before, I’m not ready for a relationship at the moment.’ She lied whilst inside thinking that the Brandy bombshell had shattered her nice little Jack love story into a trillion pieces. She was more than ready for a love story with him.

‘I knew it. I *knew* you liked him,’ Timmy said flatly, looking genuinely sad. ‘Right, well this is pretty rubbish then, isn’t it?’

‘It is.’ Lotta heard herself replying quietly. *And stupid, so very stupid.*

‘Hmm. I suppose it’s not as if he didn’t make it clear from the start,’ Giles added. ‘Not that that will make you feel any better. Probably worse.’

‘No.’ *But I still fell in love with him anyway.* Lotta put her fingers to her temples and pressed. Just discussing it was beginning to give her a headache, and she was simply so sad about all of it. She didn’t want to think about Jack anymore. She just wanted to go home. There was at least one good thing that had come from the past few months; Lotta had somewhere to go, and Pretty Beach to the Breakers was calling her name.



Lotta gazed out the window as one after the other, the train station signs announced to her that she had arrived back in Pretty Beach. It was as if everything around her was going in slow motion. As the train pulled in and came to a complete halt, she looked over at the other side of the station, where she saw Xian from the bakery with her headphones on, standing

watching as another train approached. Xian waved her hand in recognition and smiled across the train tracks. Lotta smiled and waved back, feeling a nice fuzzy warmth at being recognised.

As she lugged her case up over the steps and inhaled the salty sea air, a funny feeling swept over her. She stopped for a second, resting her hand on the railing, and looked over towards the dot of the lighthouse in the distance. Despite the turbulence inside and the strange ache now resident in her stomach, it felt in an odd way as if she had come home. And as she slowed down her breathing and let her eyes wander, she realised what was happening. Pretty Beach right there on the pedestrian bridge of the train station was working its magic, doing its thing. The Pretty Beach thing was actually working for her, and it felt all sorts of nice.

Lotta spent the rest of the weekend in the library room surrounded by not only the shelves full of books but also piles of them on just about every surface around her. She'd pulled the old velvet curtains tightly together, brought in her quilt and lost herself in book after book, binge-reading one after the other. Interspersing reading with cups of tea, little naps, cinnamon buns from the freezer and, for a lot of the time, fighting off the urge to cry, she'd wallowed for hours and hours on end.

By the end of the weekend, she'd ordered takeaway curry, downed more than a few alcoholic drinks, pulled up the carpet in the sitting room in a fit of activity, told the whole sorry ball story in minute detail to Liv on the phone, and at the end of it all had cried herself to sleep.

Waking from the wallowing, she took the bull by the horns and decided enough was enough. She had the third interview with Anne, and she was darned if she was going to let the fact that Jack was in love with someone else ruin that too. Just Jack, as he had first called himself all those months ago, could take his love for someone else and stick it.

Lotta was wearing another high-end (via a very nice charity shop) silky blouse with wide ruched cuffs and covered buttons. Her cigarette pants skimmed her ankle in just the right place, and her fancy ballet flats from Italy (courtesy of Oxfam) were doing all the things. With her hair in a neat bun at the nape of her neck, she was just-so spritzed with perfume that her scent went before her. Lotta Button, attempting to push all thoughts of fake dating, Americans with meat allergies, and Jack out of her mind, was on her way to a third interview for a position she would actually like to work at, and despite everything, wasn't feeling too bad. Was there, in fact, a glimpse of the Lotta of old about her person? The old Lotta who had zipped around the world of publishing with a coffee and a spring in her step.

Pushing open the door to the coffee shop, she was purposely half an hour early with the intention of settling in calmly before Anne arrived. After ordering a coffee at the counter, she sat at a table by the window and looked out over the road towards the sea, mulling over the job and what it and its remuneration could do to turn around her life.

Half an hour later, right on time, Anne walked in, smiled and breezed up to the table. Lotta felt a buzz of nerves in her stomach. She wanted this job. Bad.

'Hi, how are you?' Anne asked and looked out the window and over towards the sea. 'Lovely day here on the coast, it's still chilly out there though.'

Lotta jumped up from her chair, trying not to display her nerves. 'I'm good, thanks. Yes, it's still brisk, but it's nice to see the sun.' She pointed through the window. 'Look at the colour of the sea today. It's beautiful.'

'I know, it surely is,' Anne agreed.

'What can I get you?' Lotta asked, inclining her head over towards the counter.

'I'd love a coffee, thanks.'

With the coffee ordered, Lotta was back at the table with a nervous, jumpy feeling inside. Anne had an iPad in front of her, glasses to her right, and her bag on the chair beside her. She looked up with a smile. 'Okay, I have a few further things to run through with you, if that's okay.'

'Yep.' Lotta nodded, wondering what this third interview which Anne had said in her email would be a chat, would bring.

Anne proceeded to go through various situations that might occur with a CEO and potential problems that could and did arise as part of the job. Lotta listened carefully to the scenarios and answered as honestly as she could, with Anne nodding along here and there.

After another coffee and about forty-five minutes later, Anne nodded and smiled. 'Well, I won't beat around the bush. We'd love to offer you the job.'

Lotta blinked and felt a rush of adrenaline sear through her body. She pushed down the urge to grab Anne and yell and instead calmly smiled. 'Lovely.'

'Obviously, I don't expect you to make a decision here today.' Anne nodded with a soft, kind smile.

Inside, Lotta chuckled. She didn't have too much to deliberate on whether or not she would be accepting the job. She was about ready to chop Anne's hand off. 'Okay, thank you.'

'I just want to clarify about the rota and the travelling to the London office a few times a month. That is the only thing

that's not really negotiable, and I know that is something a lot of people aren't happy to do – commuting, that is,' Anne clarified.

Lotta thought about the fast train – it was not exactly a hardship. From her side of the fence, she couldn't quite believe her luck that she was being offered a job that would necessitate her still going up to her old world. 'I'm fine with that.'

Anne flicked her hand. 'Of course, expenses are paid.'

Lotta swallowed. 'Of course.'

'And then there is the working from home to facilitate the coordination, etcetera,' Anne said, looking back up from the iPad with concern in her eyes. 'I know some people aren't that enamoured with working from home. There is the option of the office here, but with me being based in another area...' Anne trailed off.

'Not a problem.' Lotta loved being in her own company, and with her library room, she was close to having a dedicated area entirely set up for working from home.

Anne started to gather up her things. 'So, we'll get an offer to you via email, so that you can make an informed decision. Hopefully, I'll be welcoming you to the team sooner rather than later.'

Lotta nodded as Anne got up and held out her hand. 'Yes, thank you so much, Anne. I'll be in touch.'



**I**t was all Lotta could do to stop herself from sideways skipping down the road as she walked out of the coffee shop onto the pavement. Had she really just been interviewed and offered a job? Not just any old job, but quite a good job. A job with what appeared to be nice people, good opportunities, and flexibility. It seemed too good to be true.

She thought about the job more as she made her way back to the ferry. It wasn't perfect, and deep down, if she was to be

completely honest, she had a little bit of trepidation about working with high-flying career people, and it most definitely wasn't publishing. But overall, it was the best offer she'd had in a very long time. It most certainly was one up from nearly everything she'd been interviewed for since Dan had left and she'd been made redundant. And as looking after the egos of entrepreneurs went, Dan had set the bar very high. If she could manage to see him through the app, these people would, probably, be a walk in the park.

After continuous checking of her emails, Lotta was sitting on the top of the ferry on her way back to Pretty Beach with the sea air whistling past her ears when the email from Anne arrived. She sat with her head bowed to her phone, going through the attachment. Everything Anne had said was there in front of her in black and white; the flexible rotating schedule that equated to something between part and full-time, the decent salary, the benefits. It was looking more and more attractive by the second. Lotta clutched her phone to her chest and closed her eyes. Something had happened to her that was good. She wanted to stand on the front of the ferry, open her arms wide and scream as years of pressure bubbled in her veins. Years of trailing around after Dan, years of helping out with the app, years of cleaning offices in the evening and then the time after it when it had all come crashing down with a mighty bump. Years of it all taking its toll. And here she was with a light at the end of what had been a nasty, long and very murky tunnel.

She resisted the urge to type back that she would take the job whatever they were offering and instead called Liv. Liv picked up instantly.

'How was it?'

'Liv! I got it!' Lotta exclaimed and felt a lump catch at the back of her throat. 'Not only did I get offered the job, but it's also a great job.'

Liv didn't say anything for a second, speechless. 'Oh, wow, well done you! I knew you'd get it when you got asked for a third interview.'

‘Thanks, I can’t believe it!’ Lotta replied as a prick of tears landed at the outer corners of her eyes.

‘I can. You’re good, Lott.’

‘Not good enough to get a job in publishing,’ Lotta retorted sarcastically.

‘Ahh, that’s just because of circumstances. These people have obviously spotted how good you are.’

‘You think?’

‘Of course! You said there weren’t the usual ridiculous recruitment questions that are peppered all over the internet for any old one to ask. You said she was different in the first place.’

‘Yeah, that’s true, she was.’

‘There you are then. They clearly recruit for the person and the ability, not what’s on a stupid bit of paper about experience in an industry that is tied up in all sorts of old-fashioned ways.’

Lotta let out a massive sigh. ‘I can’t believe I’ve got a job down here. This is not the way I thought it was going to go.’

‘We did all try to tell you that, but you were hell-bent on looking for a publishing job in town.’

Lotta sighed. ‘I know. I know. I thought there would be nothing for me down here. I should have listened to you in the first place.’

‘There is a life outside of that bubble you were in.’ Liv laughed.

Lotta chuckled back. ‘There is. I have a job, woohoo! I can breathe again. Eat again.’

‘You do. You have a good job too, by the sounds of what you’ve told me.’

‘Yes! I could have kissed her when she said they would love to have me on board. I had to try and play it cool and pretend I was going to think about it.’

Liv chuckled. 'Good for you. I'm so proud of you, Lott. Well done.'

Lotta trilled. 'I don't even care about the Jack thing now! This is such good news!'

'Yes, yes, it is.'

'I feel like this is an opportunity.' Lotta trilled and raised her head up to the sky. 'To whoever looked down on me and made this happen, thank you!'

Liv chuckled. 'It sure beats working nights and tending to the needs of a man-child entrepreneur whose first love is an app.'

Lotta raised her eyebrows. 'Couldn't have put it better myself.'

'Well done, my beautiful Lotta. This has to be just the very start of good things. Amazing things.'



In the end, Lotta had sent an email to Jack saying that she'd changed her mind about the wedding and the fake dating. She'd made up a lame excuse about not wanting to get found out and had told him she'd decided that being truthful was more the way to go. She'd hit send with resignation and her heart pounding in her chest with the realisation that she was most probably never going to see him again. She'd been strong and brave and hard and decided that not seeing him again was the only way to go. It was the best solution all around for her little heart, no longer dressed in a sparkly leotard or balancing on a beam, to simply cut ties. But after she'd sent the email and scrolled down on the right-hand side of her laptop and reread what she'd written, the whole thing hit her at once. As she sat there staring at the screen, her face crumpled, the plait of disappointment in her stomach tightened, and the vat of tears that had been threatening to fall out of her eyes since she'd been sitting next to Brandy, did just that. There was ugly crying and then some.

When the morning of the said wedding came around, Lotta prepared herself for another long day at the table with the successful people. She'd spent as long as she could in the library room with her nose in a book and had left it to the last minute to get ready and go.

She stepped into a cornflower blue dress with full sleeves gathered to a bow at the wrist and weakly chuckled as she looked in the mirror. From the outside, just as she had set out to do for the ball, she was very much glowed-up; her eyes sparkled with lubricating drops and were perfectly framed by

the best duchess lashes, and her hair shone from an elixir in a little gold pot. Her just-so pale pink nails were hitting the right spot, and her plumped skin glistened.

As she slotted a cornflower blue Alice band complete with ginormous silk flowers and feathers protruding left, right, and centre onto her head, she thought about the rest of her life and tried to project herself into a happy future. There was no Jack, that was for sure, but she'd done a lot on the transformation list she'd written when she'd first arrived at Pretty Beach to the Breakers.

She'd slowly ticked off things on the list and glowed-up her life. And, from her mental clarity to her finances and her health and despite the Jack thing, her life had turned a corner. Her mornings now started with walking by the sea. She had secured a good job, her finances were looking up, she'd slowly but surely begun to feel part of Pretty Beach, and the house was on track. Lotta had successfully transformed just about everything in her life.

As she slid her feet into sky-high cornflower blue heels and spritzed perfume into the air to walk through, she nodded to herself. One more wedding to get through, and she would be done.

After being collected by Liv and James, Lotta sat in the back of the car listening to them discuss their holiday plans. The conversation had then moved on to Lotta's new job, how she was getting on with Pretty Beach to the Breakers and as they'd arrived early for the wedding, they'd chatted outside about how gorgeous the church was.

Liv touched the edge of one of the feathers on Lotta's huge fascinator and then ran her eyes up and down her outfit. 'Blimey, Lott, you are rocking it today. You look like the old Lotta. You're absolutely glowing.'

Lotta lowered her voice and whispered as guests filed past them on the pathway to the church. 'Do you like my designer togs? St Evangeline's,' Lotta joked.

'I do. You are a master at this. That blue on you. Cornflower, is it? Well, it's lovely. *You* are lovely. We finally

have the old Lotta back. The transformation has worked.'

Lotta smoothed down the dress. 'Thank you. I've been working on everything I can. Walking in the mornings, I'm in control of money, there is a plan for the house. Yes, it's good.'

'You're about to start an amazing job,' Liv added. 'I'm so proud of you, especially after what happened with you know who. Despicable Dan.'

Lotta nodded, not that she gave a hoot about Dan. It was Jack who had really broken her heart. She winked and chuckled at the same time. 'Who?'

'Ha ha. Too funny,' Liv replied. 'That's my girl.'

A few seconds later, they turned and watched as a car slowly crunched over the gravel, and the bridesmaids huddled out. Liv whispered. 'Camisole top sheath dress. I was right.'

'They look freezing,' Lotta noted. 'Just looking at them makes me feel cold.'

'Fenella doesn't. She's running purely on ego.'

'She is very attractive,' Lotta noted.

'I suppose so,' Liv reluctantly agreed.

Fenella was gushing as she made her way towards the church. She air-kissed Liv and James and then turned to Lotta. 'Hello, and how are we? Nice outfit, Lott!' She looked around. 'Oh, you didn't bring, sorry, what was his name, I've forgotten, not having met him many times and all that?'

Without really thinking, Lotta replied, 'Jack.'

'Yes, yes, Jack, that's right. He's not here? We've all been so looking forward to meeting him properly.'

'No, he's not.' Lotta went to make an excuse, and Fenella interrupted, putting her hand on Lotta's elbow. 'Another one has bitten the dust? Or he's sick or something, is he?' Fenella let out a snarky little chortle. 'No surprise there. Oh, well, never mind, Lott. Onwards and upwards!'

Lotta didn't know what to say, and just as she was about to open her mouth, one of the other bridesmaids called out to

Fenella to come over for a photo. Fenella smirked. ‘Toodle-oo, then, see you in there and later at the reception.’ She pointed to the right of the church door, ‘We’re waiting over there for the bridal car.’

Liv watched as Fenella walked away, ‘Grrr. She has to always say something nasty.’

Lotta nodded. ‘Oh well.’

Liv looked at her watch. ‘I suppose we’d better get ourselves inside.’

‘Yep, I suppose we should.’

As they got to the door trailing in behind other guests, Lotta was looking down at Liv’s heels in front of her when suddenly Liv stopped dead in her tracks. Liv turned around with huge wide eyes and pointed rapidly in front of her. Lotta followed Liv’s eyes and had to steady herself. First of all she thought she was seeing things. Jack was standing by the inner door to the church just in front of a glass cabinet full of religious books and statues. He was not looking bad.

Liv raised her eyebrows and kept on moving into the church as Lotta took a few steps towards Jack. She didn’t know what to say, but she did know that her heart had just put its arms into a competition leotard. Her heart sparkled and glistened as it waited to perform. Lotta just stood there in front of Jack, looking up. Jack smiled softly and whispered, ‘Lotta as in hotter. How are you?’

Lotta squeezed the inner corners of her eyes towards each other and frowned as she peered up at him. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Keeping up my end of the bargain.’

‘But, the email.’

Jack held his hand up. ‘I also spoke to Brandy.’

Lotta couldn’t quite compute what Jack was saying. She wobbled in her cornflower heels and felt her fascinator bobbing around to her right. ‘What?’ she whispered, her voice low, barely a whisper.

‘You were very odd directly after the ball and I didn’t just think it was because you’d been sick. Then I got the email. I more or less deduced that something had been said to make you, well, to make you... act as you did. So I did a bit of digging.’

‘Right.’

‘It appears I have an imaginary lover. One I work with.’  
Jack didn’t smile.

‘Imaginary?’

‘Yep.’

Lotta wasn’t quite sure what she was meant to say. She was so tired of it all. But not tired enough for her heart to present as it stepped towards the balance beam. It glittered from her chest for all of the church, the world, to see.

Jack studied her intensely for a second. ‘I realised that you might have been told that there was someone else on the scene which is incorrect.’ He pointed to the church. ‘And anyway, despite that, I always like to keep my side of a bargain. That’s the one thing you’ve already gathered about me by now, I hope.’

Lotta’s voice was tiny, barely audible. ‘By now?’

‘Yes, by now, and there’s more you need to learn.’

Lotta was simply lost for words. ‘Right, okay.’ She nodded towards his buttonhole, ‘I see you’re sorted there.’

‘I am.’

‘Okay, well thanks for keeping up your end of the bargain. I, umm, I’m grateful for that.’

‘And another thing,’ Jack whispered as he took Lotta’s hand as she stepped into the church.

Lotta felt his warm palm, and then him squeeze her hand. She looked up into his eyes. ‘Yes?’

He smiled and whispered, ‘Will there be vol au vents at the reception?’

A few weeks later, Lotta was in the library room at Pretty Beach to the Breakers surrounded by books. She'd been snuggled up on the sofa for most of the day, drinking multiple cups of tea and powering through the latest release from one of her favourite author's on her Kindle. The room was filled with sunlight from the French doors and the blue velvet curtains rustled from a breeze coming in off the sea.

Since the wedding, she'd seen Jack nearly every day; they'd been for long walks on the beach, they'd gone back to the French restaurant where he'd taken her to dinner with her injured foot, and he'd stayed over in her bed in the alcove. There'd been glasses of wine in the conservatory and other things that happened late at night.

Lotta thought about it all as she stared from the sofa out to the overgrown garden outside. How things in her life had changed. How her life had taken a turn. Lotta was in love with Jack, she was about to start a new job, and she was happier than she'd ever been. Life was so much better.

She picked up her buzzing phone and pressed to speak to Liv. 'Hello. How're things?' she said with a smile.

'Good. How are you?'

'Also good. I was just thinking that, actually. Life is good, Liv. I'm so happy.'

'It is! I'm so pleased to hear you say that.'

'Yep, you and me both.'

‘Are you all ready for the secret date this evening?’

Lotta looked at the pile of books beside her and then at her watch. She wasn’t anywhere near ready. An image of her crawling around in a towel and a turban with a bleeding foot and coffee grounds in the bottom of the bath flashed into her mind. As usual, she’d been more interested in having her nose stuck in a book than in getting ready to go out. ‘Umm, no, I’m not.’

‘Don’t tell me you’ve been reading all day.’ Liv laughed.

‘Me? Of course not. Why would you think that?’ Lotta joked.

‘You’d better get a wriggle on.’

Lotta flicked her hand, ‘Ahh. A quick shower, and I’m done. I’ve got a bit of time before the car arrives to pick me up.’

‘Ooh, it’s so romantic! I wonder where he’s taking you.’

Lotta shook her head. ‘I have no idea.’

‘Ahh. It’s going to be somewhere lovely. Have you got the underwear from the ball packed and ready to go?’ Liv asked with a chuckle at the end.

‘I do indeed.’ Lotta giggled. ‘I packed my case last night. I have a few different options to wear, seeing as I’m not sure where I’m going.’

‘What else has been happening with you?’ Liv asked.

‘Nothing but reading, getting ready for the job, doing stuff to the house and seeing a certain man. How about you?’

‘Not much here. Work has been manic. Oh, I completely forgot to tell you! I bumped into Fenella in town.’

‘Oh right. What did she have to say for herself?’

‘The usual. She couldn’t wait to talk about Jack, though. She was asking all sorts of questions about him.’

‘I hope you were appropriately vague and non-committal.’

‘I was not at all! I informed her that he’s the best thing since sliced bread and you two are so very loved up.’

‘Right.’

‘Which, may I add, is true.’

Lotta nodded. It was. ‘I can’t deny that.’

Liv chuckled and exhaled. ‘Gosh, I am so happy for you, Lott! Timmy and I were talking about it yesterday. James too. It’s like you were meant to have bumped into Jack all that time ago. Not that we saw all this coming then.’

‘Liv, come on. I hardly even know him. It’s very early days. Very early.’

‘Yeah, yeah, but you clicked. We all knew you liked him because you were doing that casual thing you do – which may I add, you’re also doing now.’

‘I clicked with him. I know that from my end.’

‘Err, I think it’s mutual. He turned up at the wedding, Lott. That was epic!’

‘It was.’ Lotta remembered how she’d felt when she’d seen him and how he’d looked in the suit.

‘Fenella’s face was even better. What a picture, ha ha!’

‘It was nice to prove her wrong for once,’ Lotta agreed. ‘And it was so nice to be at that table and not have to spend the whole time pretending. Not that I really care what the likes of Fenella think.’

‘Yeah, you’re not wrong.’

Lotta pushed herself up from the sofa. ‘Anyway, I suppose I really must tear myself away from my books and go and get in the shower.’

‘Yep, you must. Okay, send me a message when you get there. I can’t wait to see where you end up.’

‘Will do. And thanks for everything.’

‘What? Like what?’



‘I don’t know. Just for being there for me. Now I’m happier, I’ve realised I was in quite a dark place at some points.’

‘Get away with you! What are cousins for?’

‘Thank you, though.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ Liv replied dismissively.

‘Right, see you later.’

‘Cheerio.’



Lotta had cut it fine, only just being ready when the Uber driver picked her up. She’d chatted at first and then spent most of the rest of the way with her nose in her Kindle. Lost in a book, she’d not really taken any notice of where she was going, and when the car had pulled off the dual-carriageway and made its way to the country hotel, she had smiled to herself. She’d arrived at the hotel where she’d first met Jack when she’d been in the huge fascinator, and she’d escaped from the table of doom to the bar.

After checking in and receiving a message from Jack telling her he was running a bit late, she got dressed and made her way down to the bar, where she sat on the same stool and sat chatting with the barman.

As Jack arrived, she shot to her feet and hugged him hard. He felt warm and safe, his arms hard as if she had been meant to be cradled by him all her life. As he kissed her, hugged her back and took in what she was wearing, he chuckled. ‘How did you know? You’re wearing that same green dress. Did you have an inkling that we were coming here?’

Lotta shook her head. She’d thrown in the dress as an afterthought when he’d told her she might need to dress up. ‘I didn’t have a clue. It actually caught my eye and reminded me of that day when we first met.’ She gestured around at the bar. ‘It was right here, in fact.’

‘Yes. It was. It’s a funny old world.’

‘What is?’

‘How things work.’

‘How things work?’ Lotta repeated with a lump in her throat.

‘Yes.’ Jack closed his eyes for a brief second. ‘There I was, minding my own business with a whisky, and you wobbled a big green thing on your head at me, and I found it hard to look away. Then I bumped into you in the bookshop. Well and then... before I knew it I had fallen in love.’

Lotta attempted a smile, but it was tricky because there was something else going on in her body. Her heart was busy; it had pulled on its most sparkly world championship leotard and had performed its last floor routine. As she sat there looking up into Jack’s eyes, she waited for the score to come out from the judges. Lotta Button had just achieved a perfect ten.

She sat on the stool, just staring at Jack. Jack, just Jack, loved her. Is that what he was saying? She was almost humming she was so happy. As Lotta tried to get her brain to think of something to say, her mind went through everything that had happened since the last time she had been sitting in the bar.

Lotta had come far. She had been on a journey, one of transformation; she had a new job to start, a lovely house, a real partner who actually seemed to like her, and she felt better than she had in a long time. As Jack took his hand in hers, she closed her fingers around his and beamed as he squeezed. Lotta, like Jack, was most certainly one hundred per cent head over heels in love.

**Continue with the divine Lotta and handsome Jack with my new book *[The Pretty Beach Way here.](#)***

## THE PRETTY BEACH WAY

The **brand new book** from the author of **The Boat House Pretty Beach.**

**[Click here to buy.](#)**

Lotta Button is embracing the transformation that has happened in her life since she arrived in Pretty Beach. With a new job, a gorgeous new partner, and something else very nice indeed waiting for her in the wings, we head back to the best little town by the sea to see how she's faring.

As flowers bloom every which way she turns, Lotta cosies on up with her books in the library room in Pretty Beach to the Breakers, loving being happy. Everything is going swimmingly, and Lotta wallows in her good fortune until one day she comes across something she perhaps shouldn't, and a spanner is thrown in the works of Lotta's new life.

On the sidelines, looking on, we begin to wonder whether or not Lotta actually gets her happily ever after after all.

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## OH SO POLLY

Words, quilts, tea and old houses...

My words began many moons ago in a corner of England, in a tiny bedroom in an even tinier little house. There was a very distinct lack of scribbling, but rather beautifully formed writing and many, many lists recorded in pretty fabric-covered notebooks stacked up under a bed.

A few years went by, babies were born, university joined, white dresses worn, a lovely fluffy little dog, tears rolled down cheeks, house moves were made, big fat smiles up to ears, a trillion cups of tea, a decanter or six full of pink gin, many a long walk. All those little things called life neatly logged in those beautiful little books tucked up neatly under the bed.

And then, as the babies toddled off to school, as if by magic, along came an opportunity and the little stories flew out of the books, found themselves a home online, where they've been growing sweetly ever since.

I write all my books from start to finish tucked up in our lovely old Edwardian house by the sea. Surrounded by pretty bits and bobs, whimsical fabrics, umpteen stacks of books, a plethora of lovely old things, gingham linen, great big fat white sofas, and a big old helping of nostalgia. There I spend my days spinning stories and drinking rather a lot of tea.

From the days of the floral notebooks, and an old cottage locked away from my small children in a minuscule study logging onto the world wide web, I've now moved house and those stories have evolved and also found a new home.

There is now an itty-bitty team of gorgeous gals who help me with my graphics and editing. They scheme and plan from their laptops, in far-flung corners of the land, to get those words from those notebooks onto the page creating the magic of a Polly Bee book.

I really hope you enjoy getting lost in my world.

Love

Polly x

## AUTHOR

*Polly Babbington*

*In a little white Summer House at the back of the garden, under the shade of a huge old tree, Polly Babbington creates romantic feel-good stories, including The PRETTY BEACH series.*

*Polly went to college in the Garden of England and her writing career began by creating articles for magazines and publishing books online.*

*Polly loves to read in the cool of lazing in a hammock under an old fruit tree on a summertime morning or cozying up in the Winter under a quilt by the fire.*

*She lives in delightful countryside near the sea, in a sweet little village complete with a gorgeous old cricket pitch, village green with a few lovely old pubs and writes cosy romance books about women whose life you sometimes wished was yours.*

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