

DAILY FLORENCE'S

GRACE



"Exactly how bad can a midlife crisis get?"

GRACE

by Daily Florence

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CHAPTER 1

I stopped briefly to reduce the searing pain of the carpet burns on my knees before reaching my desk at the back of the call centre.

Since starting my job two weeks ago, I had already been caught twice sneaking in late.

Mr John, the office manager, regularly spied on us through the large glass windows of his office at the front of the main room. Today, however, I was in luck.

In one well-rehearsed (because I had pretty much done it every day since I'd first arrived) move, I sprung upward from the floor, slamming my bum into my seat and throwing on my headphones.

I then, very swiftly, high-fived the call button, let my fur coat drop from my shoulders by doing tiny shudder movements and sat bolt upright, with wide-eyes, staring straight ahead—success.

Mr John hadn't noticed a thing.

The ringing in my headphones faded into the background as I scanned row after row of tightly packed losers (a.k.a: phone operators) in front of me, that I had the terrible misfortune of calling my co-workers.

The thing is, with these lazy idiots, and probably lots of other lazy idiots out there, is that they all dream about achieving lazy, stupid stuff, like living in a tiny cottage or getting their hands on a non-government funded pension.

They also dream about having two point four kids—whatever that bloody means—or owning a pair of undersized dogs so they don't have to walk them too far, or owning a set of chickens so they don't have to walk to the shop, or even growing their own vegetables—as if the world doesn't have enough vegetables, chickens or ruddy dogs for that matter.

People are so lazy: I'm sure it's an epidemic.

Take this office, for example, where everything has to be in reaching distance: the printer, the pens, the bin, the out tray, the in tray, the rubbers. With every new piece of equipment to arrive, there's a guaranteed inter-office-kick-off about who should be within arm's reach of it.

I swear if management walked in with a bunch of colostomy bags the lazy sods would pull up their Burberry jumpers in unison and shout 'Already got one' with cheesy smiles and pointy fingers.

Anything for an easier life. No wonder they have stupid, easy-to-achieve dreams like that. Not me. I don't fit in this call centre at all. I've got big dreams, ones which will blow the socks off these no-good losers—when I get around to it.

The type of dreams so big that important people will make a documentary about me after I die. Like that autopsy one: The Last Hours Of, or something like that. In it there will be tons of famous people mourning my death, followed by a red herring discovery of four aspirin in my blood, which everyone will temporarily think killed me, and then Dr. Jason

Payne-James will blow everyone's minds by concluding that my death was a result of a squirrel addiction—the first recorded case ever.

Can you really die if you love squirrels too much? I should change that.

First on the agenda, I've really got to move out of my council flat; nobody's going to take me seriously in that dump. And get another face peel too. Ohh, and get a manicure at a proper salon. That'll be nice. Definitely got to do that. Hold on, maybe I should think about a pension; Gladys at fifty-five looks permanently hungry and she's got a state pension. Or maybe she's paleo? I should definitely ask her next time I see her. Whatever happens, I don't want to end up looking like her.

Sometimes I really surprise myself and today was one of those days. Normally I rise out of bed and develop narcolepsy but this morning I seemed to be firing on all four cylinders.

It was only five minutes past nine, no, wait, nine thirty-two, dammit, and I'd practically sorted my life out already.

As I listened to the continuous ringing in my earpiece, I noticed two other call operators a few rows down from me, Denise and Rodney, chomping on food.

'Two in one,' I said to myself as I reached for the end call button to do them in.

Only before I had a chance to raise the alarm to report their disgraceful behaviour in the office, a sharp voice bellowed through the earpiece.

'What?'

A customer had answered the telephone and he made me jump.

'Hello, Sir. My name's Grace and I'm calling today because I've calculated that I can save you £15,000 on your heating bill this year. Would you like to save £15,000?' I said, in a monotone voice.

My eyes darted back and forth between Denise and Rodney as I spoke. I really needed to hit targets, so it was essential that I went through with the call, however, at the same time, there was no way I was letting the lazy sods get away with it.

'£15,000? What calculator did you use?' said the customer.

I silently screamed to myself and furiously rummaged around the papers on my desk, ripping out a laminated "standard questions and appropriate answers" training card from underneath a banana skin and scanning it with laser-like precision.

Shouting, nope, death threats, nope, high-pitched screams, nope, illness, nope, no money, hang up on them, really, I must have missed that one, calculators, calculators, calculators, calculators. There was nothing. I couldn't believe it. Nobody in the history of telephone sales had ever been asked this question. What calculator did I use? Oh my God, I was going to have to wing it because I couldn't remember the last time I saw a calculator.

'Calculator. Well, Sir, I use a small calculator with buttons that are round ... square, ish, a roundy square button calc—'

'I mean, £15,000, how exactly did you arrive at that figure?'

I looked back down at my notes. '£15,000, no Sir, gosh, where on earth did you get that figure from? £1,500. That's what I can save you. Would you like to save £1,500 per year on your heating bills?'

After a few short breaths down the phone, the potential customer replied, 'I would. Just hold the phone, I have to answer the door.'

I stroked my chin. Was he doing that age-old trick where he keeps me hanging on the phone for ages and then never returns? Would Denise and Rodney run out of food whilst I was waiting for the potential customer to answer the door?

There was simply no way I could chance it; I turned my multitasking skills up a notch and slammed my finger into my manager's extension button.

'What is it, Grace?'

'Mr John, they're at it again. See. There. Denise is eating grapes and Rodney is stuffing something in his mouth. Now will you sack them?'

All I heard was a slight moan down the phone and then Mr John's line went dead.

Of all the things. I wonder if he heard me?

I could hardly walk away from the phone. The guy who founded the call centre was such a legend that he'd burnt to death on his first shift. I had a lot to live up to, meaning there was only one thing left to do. I turned my multitasking dial up to full, rose to my feet and did huge giraffe waves in the direction of Mr John's office.

Mr John stood up and looked through the enormous glass office windows in my direction, and then, using both hands whilst squat jumping, I pointed to Denise and Rodney simultaneously.

But Mr John still did nothing, he just stood there with his arms crossed.

Clearly, he didn't understand what I was saying which meant I was going to have to shout. So, with a belly-busting roar, I screamed across the office. 'They're both eating, Mr John! Sack the pair of them now!'

Before I even had so much as a chance to duck, a grape, doing the speed of a rocket ship, smashed into my eye. I screamed as the pain seared down my face. Was I blind? It was so bad that I could feel my false eyelash slipping down my cheek.

I looked up with my one good eye to see Denise waving a grape vine at me and the rest of the staff sniggering into their sleeves.

Then I did something my career advisor would call a "bad step". He says that our own bad situations are the ones which we create for ourselves. That we all have steps that lead up to the bad situations that we find ourselves in and that we are in total control of everything that happens to us. He says that we are not victims.

Honestly, my career advisor is so full of shit sometimes.

Anyway, it's probably best if I don't repeat what I screamed out so loud that the hard of hearing charity managed to hear it on the floor above, it's too rude, plus Mr John, Denise, Rodney and the dog in the ground floor pet shop are still alive, so potentially I could get

sued. I will say at that very moment in time that they deserved it. Every single last bit of it. Maybe not the dog.

Afterwards was a blur. Mr John took me into his office and proceeded to call me names like “gross” and “Miss Duct”, whilst the rest of the lazy sods stared at us through the window.

Even on the bus on the way home, people were staring at me. The pain had subsided but I was missing an eyelash so I had no choice but to travel the whole way home with one hand covering my eye.

I was glad to spot Gladys as we passed the shops though. Remembering my earlier thoughts, I tried to shout to her through one of those tiny yet ridiculously high excuses for a window but, judging by the confused look on her face, she obviously didn't recognise me flying past with only half an eye.

After sitting down, however, I almost immediately regretted shouting that out, and swiftly concluded that maybe my career advisor was onto something because everyone on the bus was gawping at me so much that I had to spend the next five minutes explaining to the bus morons what “paleo” meant so people stopped scowling at me. People are so uneducated.

At home, I used my diamante telephone in my hallway to phone my career advisor, Dennis.

‘Hello, I'd like to speak to Dennis...I don't know his second name...that's not possible. He's worked there for years...well, he's much older than me and I'm forty-nine. And he has a certain sense of been there, done that. Not the irritating kind of been there, done that, like new mothers or priests, the kind that you can really relate to. Saying that, once, when I found myself out of work due to a fish allergy, he said these five nuggets of wisdom to me, Grace, you can do better. And I take those little nuggets with me always. Oh, and I tend to forget much of what he says due to concentrating far too much on his eyebrows whe...ahh, you do, thanks...hello, Dennis, it's Grace. I've been sacked again...a grape assault...no police, I just plan on bouncing back quickly...tomorrow. Lovely, see you then.’

I then carefully pencilled my appointment with Dennis in my brand new 2019 ultimate squirrel wall calendar, which I love, and then I sat down very, very carefully on the end of my couch and stared at my surroundings.

The apartment looked different, felt different. I shouldn't be here; I'm not supposed to see the apartment in this light. I mean, I do get Saturday and Sunday off but the place felt different on a Thursday.

I noticed things I'd never seen before, like how much dust there was when the rays of sun burst through the window, like how dirty the windows were, like how I should probably stop hoarding fairy lights cause there's every chance I could get tangled up in them one day and die, like how it's probably a good thing that I don't have visitors because there was absolutely no way anyone could sit down, like how I'd forgotten what material my two

sofas, recliner and rocking chair were made out of, like exactly how beautiful all of my squirrel teddies were covering my two sofas, recliner and rocking chair. I should count them... 1, 2, 3 ... 145 ... 147 ... like how many stuffed squirrel teddies I had, like how I should probably stop filing unopened mail down the back of the recliner, although I reckon there's some space behind the couch I'm sitting on. Yes, yes, there is!

What on earth was I going to do with myself?

I decided to spend the next five minutes quietly immersing myself in my Thursday apartment, and after that I would choose to have either an early Saturday or an early Sunday. According to my diamante Elvis/squirrel clock, I lasted three minutes and four seconds—which was a personal best—before opting for an early Saturday.

My Thursataday started off with a couple of solid hours' squirrel spotting in the local park, followed by an overpriced coffee in a nearby caff, a rummage around a couple of charity shops where I found a sparkly pair of gold trousers for £2 (fools), a set of fairy lights and a very useful ship captain's eye patch, a spot of pigeon chasing on the way home, where I pretend to be running for a taxi when I see a flock of birds so that they poo on strangers, and finally, I stopped at my favourite house, the one with the blue door, and spent ten minutes inspecting the new flowers in the garden and peeking in the windows when no one was looking—they'd bought a new microwave, show-offs. What a great day.

I ended it all with one of my famous macaroni cheese dishes out of a convenient packet, topped with a questionable yet palatable block of cheese that I found at the back of my fridge, and served it with an oversized glass of red which had been interestingly named "Dog's Breath". The young lad at my local-ish garage said that my new favourite wine, Dog's Breath, is from either China or Brazil, which he assures me is a sign of quality. Which is pretty fab really, considering it only cost £1.29 for a huge bottle. Thursataday had been such an adventure that I turned in early and slept like a dead person.

* * *

The following day, I found myself in my career advisors waiting room and came to the conclusion that I hated other people more than life itself. I hated waiting for him; the waiting room was always full and he was always running late.

A burly man who smelt like sweat, beer and dogs squashed himself into the seat next to me, leaving me no option but to lean further into the less smelly woman on my left so that my fur coat wasn't touching him. To add a layer of complexity, I then had to carefully reach into my handbag, which was crumpled in my lap, with no elbow room, and spray a few blasts of my Jimmy Foo, which helped.

Despite the misery of the waiting room, I was always mildly glad to see my career advisor, Dennis. Usually I find people annoying but Dennis I could just about tolerate.

Suddenly, a set of eyebrows popped their head around the door and ushered me inside.

'Hello, Grace, how have you been?'

'Oh, you know, so, so, thanks.'

'Take a seat.'

I reviewed the seat for any signs of people dirt then sank into the chair. Dennis took a seat in front of me and studied my face.

'So, Grace, that looks sore.'

'Yes, well, a few weeks and it will—'

'Is that a skull and crossbones?'

'Oh, yes, well, the hospital had run out so I had to make do with their emergency supply of eye patches. Not ideal, you know, but as long as I keep away from the light.'

'Right, well, we've only got ten minutes so I'm glad you're okay but let's move on. So, where to start? Right, I know, how about you tell me what your plans are?'

'Plans for what?'

'Getting a job.'

'Well, I. Well, I didn't really ...'

I watched as Dennis stood up and walked over to the window and rubbed his temples. Call me Dirk but something didn't seem right; Dennis was usually much happier, nicer, more helpful. He usually came up with the plan, not me. Maybe I should have thought of a plan rather than leaving it all up to him? It's not like I ever paid him for his services. 'Sorry, Dennis, should I come back with a plan? I just thought that you could give me some money again until I get another job, like we always do.'

Dennis walked quickly back to his desk and sat down firmly.

I did everything I possibly could to ignore his eyebrows as he spoke.

'Why did you lose your job, Grace?'

'Which one?'

'This last one.'

'Because Mr John doesn't follow his own rules he set, because everyone in the office is a lazy sod, because—'

'No. You lost your job because you constantly complained about everyone in the office and then shouted something totally obscene across—'

'I was assaulted!'

'By. A. Grape.'

'And your point is?'

'You shouldn't have done any of it. Okay then, what about the ticket inspector job. Why did you lose that one?'

'Because I followed the rules?'

'No, no you didn't. You managed to give five cop cars, three police vans, two turned over articulated lorries, a minibus and a motorbike a ticket each on the M62, moments after

a major road incident. You even managed to give three ambulances who attended the scene a ticket each.'

'Well, it's not my fault I'm bad with directions. They could have at least given me a map or something.'

'Bad with directions. You started out at the Albert Docks. Okay then, so what about the fish factory job?'

'You can't blame me for that. I was allergic to the fish, what was I supposed to do?'

'You filled a dump truck and emptied them all back into the sea.'

'Yeah, but I was allergic to them. I'm pretty sure, by law, they should have made provisions for me.'

'What, by not being in the fish business?'

'I think that would have been the politically correct thing to do.'

'Then how about throwing up over the fish yard owner?'

'He smelt like fish and set off my allergy. He believed me then.'

'For the love of ... Grace, not being able to stomach the smell of fish is not an allergy.'

'That's not what Google said.'

For a moment, Dennis just sat there and stared at me. I was sure his eyebrows had grown since I last saw him but that was beside the point. I had to concentrate.

'On the bright side, I saved a lot of fish from the slaughter that day,' I said with a wry smile.

'Grace.'

'Yes eyebro ... sorry ... Dennis.'

'They were already dead.'

'Ahh.'

'Okay, Grace, last one. There are so many to choose from, so which one shall I pick? Oh yes, that's right, then whose fault was it that you got sacked as a security guard at John Lennon Airport?'

'Give me a second,' I mumbled. I twiddled my fingers and thought very carefully. I knew that Dennis wanted me to say that the security guard one was my fault but there was simply no way. I shook my head. 'Sorry, I just can't see it.'

'So, who's fault was it?'

'Either Mr B. Omb's or his parents.'

'How?'

'Well, it's hardly my fault that I returned a briefcase to a man in an easily confusable suit on a plane that suddenly took off, is it? I was just trying to help the badly dressed idiot out.'

'He hadn't even had his bag scanned. You just picked up his briefcase when he bent down to remove his shoes and took off.'

'If you've got a second name like Omb, why would you call your kid Barry, anyway? What, did they think, like, he'd only ever travel by boat?'

Dennis faceplanted the desk in front of him. He'd never done that before but I was sure he could get away with it safely with those two face bushes of his.

'Not my fault for Barry's choice of suit either, is it?'

Dennis let out a moan before sitting up and resting his face in his hands.

'Grace.'

'Yes.'

'Did you read my letter?'

'Which one?'

'All of them.'

'Yes, what were they about?'

'About how you're being evicted. Your rent hasn't been paid for the last year. What were you thinking?'

'Not paid? No way. I have. It's going out by some standing order thingy. My bank sorts it out.'

'No, it hasn't. I spoke to the Council and nothing has been paid. They said that they have been writing to you over and over again, that you won't answer the door to them and every time they phone that you say 'I've just got to answer the door' and then don't come back to the phone.'

'Ah.'

'You did that to me when I phoned. Twice.'

'You phoned me?'

'You need to speak to the bank as a matter of urgency. You're being evicted tomorrow. How don't you know this information, Grace?'

'What?'

'And the other thing, if you answered my calls you would know, if you're sacked by gross misconduct then you're not entitled to Jobseeker's Allowance. The rules have changed. I can't help you with money this time.'

'Gross ... mis ... conduct. I've heard that before. Where did I hear that?'

'That's what you were just sacked for.'

'I thought you said I was sacked for complaining too much and shouting stuff. What are you saying?'

'I'm saying that I can't help you this time.'

'But ... but ... you're my career advisor. You always help me.'

Dennis rubbed his temples again. 'Grace, I am not your careers advisor. We keep going over this. I'm your benefits officer. I work for the Government.'

'But you always help me.'

'I know, that's because I like you and I want to help you. I help you much more than I should. I'm only supposed to hand out benefits but you're in here so much over the last twenty years or so. Grace, we've been going around in circles for years. I got you that job at the call centre as a favour. You promised me you wouldn't mess it up.'

'Then help me. I need your help now and you're not helping me.'

'I can't, Grace. The rules have changed since we last spoke. You have to go find a job immediately and sort your bank out. Do you have any family? Anyone that can help?'

'No. You help. You're the only person that helps me and now you're not helping me. How can you do this?'

'Listen to me, you must find a job and keep it. You've got to stop blaming everyone else for your own problems and stick at a job.'

'But you said I could do better. How am I supposed to do better when you won't help me?'

'I meant, to do better at holding a job down.'

'What, better at holding a crappy job down? I thought you meant I was too good for those crappy jobs and that I could do better, as in I could do better. How could you?'

'Grace, we're the same age—'

'Seriously, you're forty-nine?'

'And I've been in this one job since I was sixteen and you've had more jobs than I've had hot dinners.'

I stood up and kicked the chair I was sitting on. It hurt like hell but there was no way I was letting him see how much. 'You're just like everyone else. I bet you won't help because you're too lazy just like everyone else.'

'Don't turn this into my fault, Grace. You have to take ownership of ...'

I wasn't listening to another word more from that idiot. I stomped towards the door and shouted, 'Up yours, Dennis Eyebrows!' before slamming the door and stomping past the waiting room full of sniggering degenerates.

Outside, I felt like the world was crashing down on me; I gasped for breath and gripped onto the rusty handrail outside the benefits office and wailed, 'What's happening to me?'

I'm being evicted. No job, no money. Is that ... eurgh, chewing gum on the rail? I was terrible at organising stuff too; I had that down as one of my weaknesses on my résumé. Dennis said I shouldn't put it but I insisted on being honest. And now I had no choice but to go visit the bank bitches—as if it couldn't get any worse.

* * *

A short while later and I found myself at the bank.

'Hello, Madam. How may I help you today? Are you here to pay some money in or would you like to speak to an advisor?'

The first bank bitch, with a name tag that read "happiness delivery specialist", sprang out of the shadows and pounced on me before I'd barely put two feet in the door. *Were they not busy or something?* The place looked busy. Or had they somehow known I was coming down and lain in wait? I swiftly deduced that I was really going to have to stop telling Google so much about myself but then quickly realised: obviously they would have known they'd not paid my rent so they must have been expecting me.

'You should know,' I said in a demonic murmur, followed by an icy stare from the tops of my eyes.

Nothing fazed her and she continued to smile at me at an alarming rate. I was sure if I'd have walked in and said, 'I'm here to rob the place', she'd have shown me to the cash register. That is exactly why I call them "bank bitches"—because there ain't no way they don't go home at the end of the day and slag us all off after the crap they take. Although I think that meant I could get away with anything in here.

'I'm sorry, Madam. Our only psychic "happiness delivery specialist " is off today,' she said, with a high-pitched giggle. 'You will have to give me a better clue.'

'You've not paid my rent. Who do I kill?'

'Ahh, right then, you're going to need an advisor for that. If you could just take a seat over there with the rest of our valued customers and someone will be with you in a few minutes.'

She lied. I took a seat and waited five minutes and thirty seconds with only banking material to read and no biscuits. Valued nothing.

Finally, I was ushered into a partitioned-off stall and took a seat in front of a teenager called Coco, whose badge described her as a "banking evangelist". This was never going to end well.

'So, Madam, how may I—'

'You didn't pay my rent.'

'Well, now, if you can just give me your details.'

I proceeded to give her my name and address and she typed my details into her computer.

'Now, I can see that you have a standing order set up for the Council but you haven't paid them anything for the last year.'

'That's my point.'

'Because the day before you have a standing order for five hundred pounds going out to the Californian Squirrel Reserve. Every time you pay them you don't have enough to pay your standing order to the Council.'

I took a sharp intake of breath. 'Fraud. That's fraud.'

'Oh dear, Madam. I am very sorry. So, you don't know who the Californian Squirrel Reserve are? I will have to get in touch with our fraud department and get—'

'No, I know who they are, but they were only supposed to take five pounds once. Not five hundred every month.'

'I see. Well, that complicates things ...'

And then everything went blurry. Coco's underdeveloped, teenage vocabulary began swimming around my mind with words like: 'can't help', 'you will need to phone them', 'check what you signed', 'I'm a bank bitch', 'speak to the police', 'if you signed it then it's legal', 'I'm so annoying', 'there's nothing we can do', 'please leave', 'Madam, you must go', 'I'm calling the police'.

I can't really remember what I said, or how I got across the road, but next thing I knew I found myself shaking inside a red telephone box with the receiver in hand. I searched my handbag and took out a bunch of loose change and found the number for the Californian Squirrel Reserve in my 2018 ultimate squirrel address book, which I still love, and dialled the number.

'Hello, did you say the Californian Squirrel Reserve? My name's Grace and I ... you know me ... yes, yes, that's me. How did you know ... who ... I can hold.'

I shoved more coins into the phone as I waited.

'Hello ... well, thank you, thank you very much. It's just that you were supposed to only take five pounds but you've been taking five hundred a month and I ... well, yes, I do love squirrels ... yes, yes ... really ... wow ... a whole nature reserve, just for squirrels, that's incredible ... all because of me ... it's just that the money ... a plaque, in my honour, well that's very kind ... but the money, you see, my rent ... extinction, that's terrible ... no, no we can't have that ... of course, I completely understand, it's just that ... I can visit ... it would be an honour. It's just I thought I was paying you five ... the president has ... wow ... incredible ... only that the rent ... a Nobel Peace Prize, oh my God, that would be amazing ... of course ... no totally ... absolutely, we can't let those poor squirrels down. I'm really glad I could help, it's just that I've run out of money ...'

Say whaaat? Had BT exploded? I dialled again but the line was dead. What now? I swapped my six-inch platforms for my spare set of sparkly running trainers with night lights, which I conveniently kept in my bag, and legged it up to the pee-stained phone boxes outside Lime Street Station, but there was nothing, the line was still dead.

I decided my only option was to go to the Council and tell them all about the terrible mix up, but it was already 5:15 pm and the place closed at 5:30 pm.

I arrived at the Council offices like a single streak of light—the dark winter nights had already drawn in and I worked out that if I hadn't been so unhealthy then I could have genuinely been mistaken for Flash Gordon with my light up trainers.

However, as I approached, I saw, through the large reinforced windows, that the lights were being turned off and the staff, who were wearing their coats, were making their way across the foyer to the door. I landed in a dead fly position on one of the windows and

screamed at the top of my lungs: 'Nooooooooooooo! It was the Californian Squirrel Reserve! I can prove it to you when I get my Nobel Peace Prize'.

As I slowly slid down the window, I noted that all of the staff had come to a standstill with their arms folded. Now, I know this might surprise you, but I'm no genius; even I know that folded arms are never a good sign.

* * *

Afterwards, I didn't know what to do except stagger home in a blur of disbelief. It was so bad that I walked around four sets of pigeons.

My hands shook as I rattled the keys in my front door lock, and waves of indescribable pain swept through my body as I lovingly ran both my hands along the walls of my corridor and into the front room.

I gripped my chest as I entered, realising that my squirrel teddies were about to be homeless too, their adorable little faces staring back at me in total innocence. What sort of a cruel, cruel world did we live in?

I stumbled over and stood in front of my glitter mirror and stared at myself. I looked terrible. With a toll of pure desperation steeped in every line, a torturous glaze in my eye, I raised my hands and cupped my face just as a deeply disconcerting scream, which I was sure had been festering inside me since I was a child, burst out of my mouth.

Eventually, I let my hands drop to my sides and stared at myself in silence.

After about thirty seconds though, I began to notice something ... something bubbling up and boiling over into my face ... a spark, a glimmer, a ray of hope that meant they weren't going to beat me.

Finally, I let out a smile as I realised that my entire life had been building up to this very moment. What was I thinking? I had listened to more than enough Beyoncé songs by now to know that I was a bottomless pit of fierce and I wasn't running out of that any time soon.

Nobody, and I meant nobody, was going to make me or my squirrel teddies homeless—this was war.

So that evening, I set my plans into action, devouring the entire collection of Home Alone films back to back for inspiration, and by 3 am on Saturday morning, I had barricaded my front door with one hundred and forty-eight squirrel teddies (I found another one), strapped a glitter bomb to the toilet seat, planted a stapler underneath the cushion on my couch nearest the door, put a spider in the fridge, carefully scattered some cornflakes on the floor underneath the windowsill, captured two pigeons and trapped them in the bedroom, squirted nail glue on the bathroom taps, hung my GHDs on the front door handle, and, as I couldn't find a spade, left a feather duster and a set of strict instructions with the weird guy in the flat next door.

Eventually, I fell asleep in a bolt upright position on the couch, holding a toilet brush and passionately reciting what I know to be meaningful quotes: "This is my house, I have to defend it", "Beat that you little trout sniffer" and "I made my family disappear".

The following day, it was exactly 9:05 am when they knocked on the door. I woke with a jolt, leaping from the couch and screaming, 'Keep the change, ya filthy animal!' as I tore down the hall towards the front door.

Then I switched my GHDs on—which I still feel was well remembered considering I'd just woken up—and ninja crawled very quietly into my kitchen hiding place.

'Grace, Grace, let us in. We do have a key, you know.'

'Dammit.'

Eventually, they opened the door and, almost immediately, switched off my GHDs, which they noted could have been extremely dangerous. There was four of them: three big burly men and one woman who just stood there with her arms crossed.

I just slumped onto the floor of my hall and watched as they emptied the contents of my life onto the communal walkway outside my door. As they were hurling stuff out they kept telling me things that I was doing wrong, like keeping pigeons and hoarding squirrel teddies, something about dusting too. Not that it mattered now.

Finally, I found myself rocking back and forth, buried deep amongst my squirrel teddies in the communal walkway outside. I watched with tear-stained eyes as they coldly locked the front door and walked away. I can honestly say that it was the worst day of my life.

The only upshot, if there was even possibly one, was that one of the burly men walked out of the toilet covered in glitter after being glued to the sink for ten minutes. I did laugh. But that was the only funny thing about it.

Just to make matters worse, my useless neighbour, who only came out after they'd gone, handed me my feather duster back and declared that I was probably going to need it more than him. I think he was being sarcastic so I threw a squirrel teddy in his face.

CHAPTER 2

'Grace, is that you under there?'

The first thing I felt when I woke up on the floor of the cold communal hallway was someone poking me. I pulled a squirrel teddy away from my face and saw Gladys inspecting my mascara-stained cheeks.

'Grace, what happened? Why are you out here in the dark, asleep?'

'They kicked me out.'

'The Council?'

'Yes, them.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'Well, I only found out yesterday.'

'Yesterday? They're supposed to give you six months' notice. They can't do that.'

'They did. It's just that—'

'You never read their letters, did you?'

'No.'

'Or answer their calls?'

'No.'

Gladys went very, very quiet and began further inspecting all of my belonging that were strewn all over the communal walkway.

'It was the Californian Squirrel Reserve. They've been taking all this money and I—'

'Get up, Grace,' Gladys said in a slow voice.

I threw my teddies off me and stood up straight, watching as Gladys turned her back to me and shuffled towards her apartment.

'Well, I suppose I will see you around,' I said, whilst pressing my light-up trainers into the concrete floor.

Gladys stopped and turned back to face me. 'Pick up your stuff and follow me.'

'Are you not going to—'

'No, I am bloody well not!'

It was worth a try.

Inside Gladys' apartment, I sat hanging on the edge of her couch, squeezing my bum in and doing my absolute darndest to look as comfortable as possible amidst all of my crap which I had piled high on the couch.

From the living room, I could hear the clatter of pots and pans and the boiling of water as Gladys made tea in the kitchen.

I loved it when Gladys made a cup of tea. I'm a no-nonsense tea maker: wham-bam-tea, that's how I make it. Not Gladys. Oh, no, I swear she's been trained by Buddhist monks in the art of tea making.

It arrives in a pot with a body warmer, there's sugar in a separate bowl, separate spoons for sugar and stirring, a milk jug, flowery cups with—would you believe it—saucers, and my favourite bit of all, Jaffa Cakes. It always feels good when Gladys makes a cup of tea.

As I drank my tea and chomped on Jaffa Cakes, I told Gladys all about my disastrous few days and how she came to find me asleep on the communal walkway with all my belongings.

She listened quietly and intently, reserving her right to devour Jaffa Cakes in favour of paying attention to every last word that I had to say. She was such a great listener and by the time I had finished, I was sure that my epic tale of sorrow and unfortunate circumstances had pulled on a few heartstrings.

'... and so I glitter bombed one of the guys and glued him to the bathroom taps. As for the other nine, well, I gave them all a good shouting at and hurled a couple of pigeons at them. But, well, they had the keys and I couldn't hold them off, and I'm just a small, small-ish, woman. I didn't stand a chance. In the end, I was just so tired and I didn't know what to do, I said to Gladys.

Gladys remained stoic.

'Em, Gladys, did you hear me?'

'Yes.'

'Then, well ...'

'So, let me get this straight.' Gladys sat her cup down on the small tray which was clipped to the arm of the chair. 'You've been breeding pigeons?'

'No, no, I just enlisted them to fight off the bad people. Should have stolen a cat though, now I think about it.'

'So, is the bad guy still glued to your sink?'

'No, Gladys. He escaped.'

'And who's Macaulay Pulkin? Where does he come into all of this?'

'He's just the kid who gave me all the good ideas.'

'Ahh, now I get it.' Gladys took another swig of her tea and placed it back down. 'So there are teenagers running the bank,' she said whilst rubbing her chin. 'That explains everything.'

'No, Gladys, that's not the point of the story, the point is—'

'You have nowhere to live. I get that point.'

'Oh, right.'

'And the Californian Squirrel Reserve ...'

'Yes, them. Can you believe it? There's a bunch of squirrels in California living like the Kardashians because of me.'

'But you love squirrels, right?'

'Yeah, but not all my wages ...'

'It could have been worse.'

'How, how could this be worse?'

'You know, gorillas, apes, monkeys—'

'Oh, oh, you know what, it so could be. Imagine if I had been funding a rockstar lifestyle for a bunch of gorillas, that would have been terrible. Have you seen that Planet of the Apes yet?'

'It's on my list.'

'We will so have to watch that together, Gladys. Honestly, I know I keep saying this but you will never feel the same about gorillas or apes ever again. They're so clever, like scarily clever, they are so going to evolve and take over the world one day. Did you know, if we left a bunch of monkeys with some typewriters that they would eventually be able to type up the entire collection of Harry Potter books. Rowling would be seething. We seriously need to stop them. And keep them away from typewriters.'

'Grace.'

'Yes.'

'Don't we descend from apes?'

'Do. We. What?'

'I know, let's talk about what you're going to do for work.'

'Gladys. You haven't seriously been watching that TV show again, have you? That, what's it called, "Unbelievable Animals on This Planet".'

'Once.'

I threw my hands in the air. 'Are you crazy?'

'But, Grace—'

'No, Gladys, I am telling you, you have to stop that. Saying there's like blue fish in the sea, ones that light up under water, things with eight legs. I mean, come on, the title has got to give it away.'

'Let's move on. So, what are you going to do now?'

I grabbed another Jaffa Cake and shoved it into my mouth. 'A bumeless swelter, mabeesh.'

'What did you say?'

'A hummshi ...'

'Finish what's in your mouth first.'

I chewed fast and swallowed. 'A homeless shelter, probably.'

There was a long silence before Gladys next spoke, so I grabbed a squirrel teddy and hugged it to kill the awkwardness.

'Grace, how about you stay here?'

'Really?'

'Just till you find a job.'

'That would be amazing.'

'But you have to find a job and then find somewhere else to live.'

'But where am I going to put all my squirrel teddies?'

'But you have to find a job, right?'

'Yes. But what about my squirrel teddies? Your flat is tiny. Do you have any spare cupboards?'

'We could give some—'

'No, absolutely no way.'

'Just a few.'

'No way!'

'Grace, they're piled up everywhere. How many do you have?'

'One hundred and forty-eight, no, hang on, one hundred and forty-seven. I threw my favourite one with the red bow tie at the weird guy next door. Damn, I need to get that back.'

'Could he keep it?'

'Never.'

'Okay, here's what we will do. You can sleep on the couch but you are going to need to sort through those teddies otherwise you are not going to have anywhere to sleep. Grace, honestly, I don't think I can cope with that amount of teddies around here. This flat is a tiny one bedroom and you've already filled half the front room. You need to deal with them.'

I sank backwards into my squirrels. 'A Nobel Peace Prize though, eh. Just think of all the things I can do with that.'

I don't know about you, but night time is when I feel like I come alive. It's like a wave of powerful electricity surges through my body, firing up my brain into a super-sharp thinking machine and rendering my body the most efficient, highly-organised vessel on the planet.

Not Gladys; she was asleep before Planet of the Apes was even halfway through. Not that I hold it against her, of course. It had gone 9:30 pm and she did say she went to bed at 9 pm.

So, when she finally turned in for the night, I got straight to work—right after I finished Planet of the Apes.

First on the agenda, I had to deal with the squirrel teddy issue. Gladys had spent the entire evening sporadically making it perfectly clear that my squirrels were a major issue: 'I've just tripped over one. Am I sitting on one? Is that one staring me out? I'm never going to sleep tonight. I don't care what you named them. Don't tell me'. She was very cold about the whole thing and, quite frankly, I didn't think I could take another night of her whining: I needed a plan.

Two hours later, I slammed my bum back down on the couch and admired my handy work. And it was impressive, even if I say so myself.

Overhead, I had wired in two million fairy lights and formed a web pattern across the entire front room ceiling which hung down to about halfway down the room. You had to duck to walk but Gladys was pretty short so that wasn't going to be an issue. Then I managed to dangle approximately sixty squirrels overhead and it was beautiful. I could have fitted more in but there were too many lights.

Next, I set to work strategically planting stuffed squirrel teddies in the most unobvious places, making sure that they blended in with Gladys' belongings so that she wouldn't notice them.

I got five on the mantelpiece, two of which fitted straight into her peach vases from the eighties, and three hugging a scary doll each, a load on the bottom level of her drinks trolley, three in her chequered folding shopping trolley with wheels, two underneath her rocking chair, two in her bathroom cabinet, two in her washing basket, some around the bath, one tied to the Hoover, one to the mop, one hanging off the long light switch in the bathroom, four on top of her wardrobe (thank goodness she was a heavy sleeper), forty on her bed (thank goodness she was the size of an Alsatian and had a double bed), three in her dresser drawers and then scattered the rest inside the cupboards in the kitchen. My couch bed was finally clear and I began to really look forward to sleeping like a dead person in it.

Despite the lateness of the hour, however, there was still one last squirrel teddy who I simply couldn't forget about, my favourite one of them all: the one with the red bow tie that I had thrown at my weird neighbour's face. His name was Mr Nutty McNutnut and his favourite place was next to Miss Bushy McBushbush on my couch.

I hated to think of him out there, all alone, with my weird excuse for a neighbour. I cursed myself for giving him that feather duster. I should have known not to get that layabout loser involved and now I had gone and got Mr Nutty McNutnut into a terrible situation. There was nothing for it—I was going to have to save him.

The stars and moon were out as I crept towards the weird bloke's apartment along the open communal hallway. The emergency light had gone so I used my trainers in a gentle tapping motion to light the way as I made my way through the dark. It wasn't far, only a few doors away, a ten-second walk at a fast pace, but the shadows seemed to loom as I gripped the metal railings along the edge of the walkway and heel tapped my way forward. On the other side of the railings, there was nothing but a vast blackness of night which looked poised to consume me.

I had rather expected to see Mr Nutty McNutnut sitting on the doorstep of weird guy's flat looking happy to see me, but as I approached there didn't seem to be anything in front of his door. It was difficult to see through; the moon was helping a bit but I still struggled.

Then I heard a noise, maybe a footstep, maybe a laugh. I turned to face the blackness on the other side of the railings but I couldn't see anything. Then I checked along the long concrete walkway. Left, then right. Nothing. The moon had just allowed me to make out the length of the path too, but still there remained areas of darkness which I couldn't make out.

The coast was clear though, so using my trainers in a quiet tapping motion, I lit the ground in front of weird guy's front door and scoured it with each flash of light. 'Mr Nutty McNutnut, where are you?' I whispered.

I then moonwalked in a westerly direction and began thoroughly checking underneath the long window of weird guy's apartment. About halfway down, by chance, I looked up as a flash of light went off and caught sight of something absolutely terrifying at eye level.

My body froze. It couldn't be. I tapped my right trainer on the floor and raised my foot to about shoulder, all right, boob level, just as another flash lit up the window for a few seconds, and gasped. There, dangling right before my eyes, Mr Nutty McNutnut was hanging by a noose on the inside of weird guy's apartment.

I tapped my foot again on the floor and held up my right leg. 'It's okay, Mr Nutty McNutnut,' I said. 'I will save you.'

Then I did something that I'd not done in a long while: I broke protocol and made a deathly honest promise. This was at least a level five threat to my favourite squirrel so all I can say about it is, it just felt right.

'Weird guy in flat fifty-two,' I said in my best Satan voice. 'Get ready to feel my wrath you son of a wet fart.'

With the rage of the Devil burning inside me, I, Hulk, stomped back to Gladys' apartment, only to hear, as I was halfway there, another noise which made me stand very, very still. It sounded a bit like 'eeh-eeh-oooh-oooh-eeh-eeh-aah-aah', which was very strange considering weird guy's cat usually meowed.

Only a few steps more though and the sound of 'eeh-eeh-oooh-oooh-eeh-eeh-aah-aah' rang out again, but this time very, very clearly.

Then, in what I thought I explained in a rather eloquent way when I recalled the incident to the police and the doctors at the hospital later on, the rest of the events seemed to morph into something out of a movie, you know, when the camera is up at a high angle and it swoops down along the misty corridor towards the back of my head. As it reaches me, the 'eeh-eeh-oooh-oooh-eeh-eeh-aah-aah' sound bellows down the corridor and I spin my head around to face the camera full on, my No7 Stay Perfect lips in Love Red quivering as a huge gust of wind blasts through my hair.

After that, I can't really remember what I said, but the police said they got numerous calls from concerned residents who said they'd heard someone screaming 'killer gorillas' followed by a blood-curdling wail. I literally couldn't come up with another rational explanation so I had to own that one.

The next bit I do remember though: I'd locked the fucking door.

As the gorilla in the shadows approached me along the communal hallway, I shook the door handle with all my life before catching sight of my feet and shouting 'motherfucker' at the top my lungs.

What on earth had I been thinking? Gorillas love rave lights which meant I had been a sitting duck all along. Who knew how many gorillas I had attracted in the dark by now. With no option left and at least one gorilla, for sure, hot on my tail, I took the only reasonable course of action that one can expect when you realise you're a walking gorilla beacon and about to die: I ran head first through Gladys' bedroom window.

Oddly enough, I was absolutely fine, but Gladys, on the other hand, described her ordeal as one of the top scariest moments of her life, next to being held captive for twelve hours and the brakes going on her car. I thought that was a bit excessive considering my squirrel teddies were so cute, but she did look pretty shaken at the hospital so I decided to hold onto that opinion for a later date.

Anyway, considering Gladys was so old, and despite the tumble out of bed and a touch of shock, Gladys was fine and she insisted that the doctors discharged her into my care. The doctors, being all overprotective and trying to keep people in like they usually do, refused to let her go, but after Gladys had a quiet word with them in another room, they soon changed their minds. She could be pretty scary when she wanted to be.

It was 5 am before we made it back to the apartment. Gladys wasn't able to sleep in her bedroom because of the broken window so I gave her my spot on the couch and I took the floor. I assured her she would sleep like a dead person in it after all my hard work and she seemed very relieved at the thought of that. She was also impressed with my ability to make the squirrel teddies blend into the background of her apartment, and even gave special mention to how the squirrels on the mantelpiece were practically invisible next to her bisque dolls.

I, on the other hand, took quite a while to fall asleep. Between the scary bisque dolls, the uncomfortable floor and Gladys, who I was horrified to discover slept with her eyes wide open (shudder).

* * *

Over the course of the next few weeks, I seemed to bounce from one job interview to the next. My life felt like it had cascaded into an endless reel of waiting rooms, uncomfortable skirts and stupid questions.

I mean, honestly, aside from the fact that everyone who interviewed me had practically just left school, the questions they asked were about as thought-provoking as a pebble:

What are my weaknesses? (Everyone lies about this.)

Why should we hire you? (Ditto.)

Why do you want to work here? (Pfft.)

What are your strengths? (*Sticks fingers down throat and vomits out lies*)

I hate stupid interview questions, they always land me in trouble, like, once, I got a job as a delivery driver for Tesco—because I'd basically told them everything they wanted to hear and at the same time read some book that told me that everything would just fall into place if I thought positive thoughts. So I had figured, quite rightly, that the universe would set in motion a sequence of events that would ultimately result in my turning into the Stig on my first day, so I didn't have anything to worry about.

It didn't, and I discovered, to my horror, on my first day, that reversing everywhere (because it's easier than operating the gears) was frowned upon by other motorists and the police.

My life was fine before I read that book, but now all I think about every time I have a "bad day" is that it's the universe's way of letting me know that it's already begun plotting to kill me.

I even got barred from every single Tesco in Liverpool cos of it—and in the surrounding areas. Which is a total nightmare really, because I absolutely love Tesco. They are literally the only shop on earth where the staff go 'well then, that's Christmas over with, let's get the Easter eggs out'.

And I got eight points on my licence. I didn't even own a licence.

I tell you one little-known job hunting tip that you should deffo file in your back pocket for a rainy day though: tech companies. They're so much fun that I pop in for an interview with them even when I'm not looking for a job.

Every city has them and they tend to hang out in packs, so they're easy to find. You can pretty much tell when you've wandered into a tech district because the level of graffiti in the surrounding areas begins to rise, there's a sharp increase in the number of expensive cafés that serve avocados, and everyone's dress sense, along with the average age of the public, nosedives dramatically.

In Liverpool specifically, their answer to Silicon Valley is located down at the Albert Docks where there's so many of them, you don't even need an appointment. Just pick a building, any building, wander in and I guarantee you that there will be at least five interviews taking place.

The trick is to loudly call the receptionist an 'idiot for messing up what could be potentially the best day of my life' when she/he tries to question you. Tech companies have a super-strict policy when it comes to hiring receptionists: they only employ organised, highly efficient ones who operate exceptionally well under pressure. Which is totally stupid really, because the pressure they feel when they think they've just messed up is comparable to an atom bomb exploding, and their ability to fix said issue I liken to a toilet flushing.

Before you've even had time to put the lid down, you will find yourself sitting in the waiting room enjoying free cappuccinos, accompanied by some European white truffle biscuit thingys, whale noises and filtered air conditioning that's been shipped in from the Amazon Jungle.

And the best bit of all, their interview questions are not even remotely like a pebble. In fact, their interview questions are so thought-provoking, I reckon they're akin to finding a dead horse in the frozen aisle at Tesco. They ask questions like: 'If you were a vegetable which one would you be?', none of that 'Why do you want to work here?' nonsense like the Government or your lawyers ask for reassurance.

They're so clever, too, that they can even work out if you're a perfect match for the job just by asking you 'If you were president of America, what would your first tweet be?'

Once, I got a job as CEO of a tech start-up, just by yelling out the word 'slay' when they asked me what, in my opinion, should be the first word that we teach an alien race. The guy just pointed at me from across the room and was like 'hired', and everyone began jumping up and down and cheering—me too.

Obviously, my first day was a bit awkward and I didn't last more than a month, but it was a pretty epic job title to stick on my résumé. In fact, for the first year I would say, at the very least, I landed a load of vice chairman, operational manager and chief technical officer jobs just like that one, simply by shouting out power words such as 'belieber', 'boobs' and 'feminism'. After about a year though, word got around so my executive career in Liverpool ground to a halt, which was a real disappointment to both myself and my careers advisor.

From there on in though, I ended up on a first name basis with them all and they've always been so nice to me. They let me pop in for an interview at any time, and they let me use the facilities whenever.

And that's where tech companies get even better, because attracting new staff comes down to perks, such as how big the bar is, free food and slides in the office. You see, all these tech companies use these perks to compete with each other to rake new staff in. That's because no one ever stood outside a tech company and said 'I want to work there cos they've got the best lines of code ever'. Everyone does, however, stand outside and say 'There's a bar on the roof, I don't even care if they've got a pension'.

That means, if I fancy sliding down a fireman's pole or going for a dip in a rooftop swimming pool in their fancy new offices then they let me. The only problem was, that wasn't going to help me now. They made me promise that I wouldn't actually go for a real job with them ever again if they let me do that—and I'm a woman of my word, especially when it comes to free slides—so by the third week at Gladys' apartment, I was feeling pretty desperate.

It was a Tuesday afternoon when Gladys found me crouching in front of the curtain of her new bedroom window. I pulled the curtain back slightly, took a quick peek out and then fell on the floor laughing.

'Grace. What on earth's wrong?'

'It's the, the, oh my, the weird, the, I'm dying, the cat, my ribs ...'

'Let me look.'

Gladys walked over and whipped the curtains wide open. Outside in the communal hallway, weird guy from next door, looking all flustered and struggling to grip his cat, stopped in his tracks for a moment and stared back in, before running full pelt back into his apartment.

'He's, the cat, oh my, he's no idea, it keeps running away, his face ...'

'Grace, what have you done?'

'I swapped the—'

'You didn't?'

'I did, he's chasing it, he hasn't got a clue, I can't stop laughing, like, everything hurts.'

'Grace. What the hell have you done with Fluffy? Get up now and stop messing around!'

I got up and sat on the edge of the bed, doing everything I possibly could to hold in the giggles. 'So I remembered that one of the houses a couple of streets down had an identical cat, so I swapped their name tags and the cats. He's been, like, I can't stop laughing, sorry, well, he's been chasing it for hours.'

'That is the least funny thing I have heard in a long time.'

'Yeah, but he deserves it. Every day now he's torturing me with Mr Nutty McNutnut. You've seen him. I walked past today and Mr Nutty McNutnut is wearing a flapper dress and red heels. Yesterday a wedding dress, the day before—'

'Right, you know what? I will sort this out but you have to get Fluffy back.'

'How? The guy's like a snake. Every time I set foot out this door he slithers back in his flat and disappears. He won't answer the door even.'

'Watch and learn, sunshine. Watch and learn,' Gladys said as she stomped out of the apartment.

True to her word, Gladys returned with the new cat, so I spent the next six hours returning that one, tracking down Fluffy and swapping the tags back over. It was worth it though, and that evening I snuggled into Mr Nutty McNutnut on the couch and smiled.

'Thanks, Gladys.'

'You're welcome. Now, get your coat on, we're going out.'

'Where?'

'To the pub to meet the girls.'

'Oh, I don't know, Gladys. I'm broke and I—'

'The shandies are on me. Get your coat on.'

CHAPTER 3

I stared at Agnes, Bessie and Hilda through the window of the "Ye Olde Person's Pub" on Liverpool Street, just down from the station. 'That's them,' said Gladys.

'Where?'

'There, see.'

'No. There's just purple hair everywhere. How can you tell them apart?'

'Oh, stop that and come on.'

I trudged inside behind Gladys.

'Grace, meet Agnes, Bessie and Hilda.'

The first old lady caught me unaware; she stood up and leapt in for a big bear hug before I'd even had a chance to dodge her. As she jiggled my fur coat up and down, she said, 'Grace, it's so lovely to meet you. Gladys has told us so much about you.'

'Yeah, nice to meet you too, Bessie,' I said.

She let go of me. 'Agnes, I'm Agnes, my dear.'

'Oh right, sorry.'

The next old lady did exactly the same as I was mid-dodge, aiming for behind Gladys.

'Nice to meet you, Hilda,' I said, trying to breathe for dear life.

'I'm Bessie, my lovely,' she said as she death-gripped me.

The very second she let go, I plonked my bum on a spare stool and held out my hand to the other old lady who immediately slapped it away and dived in for a hug. 'Grace, I'm so happy to finally meet you, my dear.'

'That's nice, thanks, Agnes.'

'I'm Hilda, my dear.'

'Okay, give Grace some space. We don't really have guests so we're all really excited to have you, that's all,' said Gladys.

From there on in, I sat very quietly and sipped my shandies as I listened to the intense chinwag that the old ladies were having between themselves. The chatter from everyone else in the pub seemed to fade into the background as they tuned their hearing aids in to one another and began conversing.

In the space of two hours, I'd barely got a thought or opinion in, not that I had anything to say mind, because every time I answered one of their questions they corrected me and then predicted the future outcome of my said issue that I didn't know I had yet.

About midway through, I decided to pull my squirrel pad out and write this shit down because, despite it being a long, long way off, these ladies were practically a walking manual on getting old. My notes went like this:

List of Important Things to Remember About Being Old:

-It's Tena Lady, not Tenner Lady. (Now I get it.

-Kegal exercises will stop me requiring either of the above. (Undertake immediately.)

- The neighbours really are out to get me. (Neighbour + Feather Duster = Agreed.)
- A day will inevitably come when I know more than my doctor. (Must grill present doctor.)
- People won't expect me to do things, like: save a drowning dog, remember things, look both ways, stand for any period of time, hurry up, indicate, know things, like teenagers, carry things. (People expect this?)
- Also, people won't expect me to do things, like: call them a 'cheeky fucker', steal stuff, seek revenge, lie or deliberately run them over. (Nice.)
- I will forget why I hate someone but never forget that I hate that someone. (Were these old ladies Britain's answer to the Dalai Lama?)
- Hearing aids are not really required because, if you think about it, it's everyone else's problem. (Or Sir Isaac Newton?)
- I will forget where I put things. (Like what?)
- I will forget why I walked into a room. (Shit.)
- Teenagers will all look the same. (Dammit.)
- I will distrust overly happy people. (FFS)
- There is always one dunce in the tax office who I will hate with a passion. (WTF)
- Forms get harder. (But they're already ...)
- Advice from twenty-somethings make you want to punch them in the face. (I do that alre...)
- People will talk more slowly to me. (OMG)
- I will appreciate gardens. (My life is over.)
- There will be more stupid people in the world than there used to be. (Kill me now.)
- I will write a lot of lists. (Or should I just kill Gladys and her friends?)
- Everybody is ...

I had to stop writing, I could feel a tremor forming in my fingertips, a build-up of sweat trickling down my face, my heart beating from underneath my tracksuit. Then Beryl, or maybe Sheryl, turned to me and said something which at that point I should have expected considering the line of conversation. 'So Grace, I'm so sorry to hear about your mother, that must have been so hard for you.'

The other ladies all went 'Aaah' and then collectively stared at me in anticipation of a suitable answer. I've never owned any suitable answer in my life so they weren't about to get one now.

'I ... I ... I need the toilet.' I grabbed my phone and bolted, bursting through the door of the men's and shouting, 'Put your penises away, I've made a terrible mistake' and then nonchalantly strolling to the ladies'.

I gripped the sink in the ladies' toilets and squeezed my fingers into the cold ceramic. Gladys must have bloody told them. I hated it when people said that to me: how did I feel?

It's such a stupid question to ask when you think about it. All they are really saying is 'Please relive your misery for me so I can sit there and pity your sorry ass and feel better about everything that's ever gone wrong in my life'.

I was usually such a master at throwing a curveball too, especially when my parents came into it.

I usually say, 'Oh yes, my parents, well, my mother was a full-time whore and my father a banker and they both died during an Icelandic sport event, maybe you've heard of it, called Naked Sex Parachuting?'

After that, I find people are more bothered about the current price of flights to Iceland than they are about the fact that my parents are dead. That's how much they care.

As I stood trying to calm down in the toilets, I remembered something that I knew would cheer me up. I'd found this guy on Squinder, the new dating app for squirrel lovers, last week and we'd got on famously when we had exchanged messages.

He was forty-six, loved squirrels, long walks, beach picnics, candlelit dinners, treating women nicely, buying women stuff, fine wine and had been brought up on the streets of France where he had been taken in and trained by a local gang of rouge pastry chefs from the tender age of ten. He sounded right up my street and he hadn't, so far, even asked me for any money. Which was a good job because I didn't have any.

Luckily one of the old folks were using their hearing aid as a Wi-Fi hotspot, so I piggybacked their internet and logged on. I immediately spotted a message from him:

'Hey, honey. How's your day going? I've just been polishing the Audi and now I'm sat on my balcony enjoying a glass of Châteauneuf du Pape which reminds me of you—earthy, fleshy with a hint of oak—ay. lol. How about we meet tomorrow night? I don't know, at The Smokin' Haggis Caff say, for dinner at 8 pm? My shout.

Love Tony xxx'

I replied ...

'OMG The Smokin' Haggis Caff! I so, so love that caff, they do the best all day breakfasts on this planet so I will pre-call them and make sure we can get that. Just been chillin' and polishing my Jimmy Choos today. At my grandparents' mansion now, they serve the worst crudities though so I can't wait to leave. See you tomorrow.

Love Grace xxx'

I couldn't believe it, he said he'd pay—get in! I hope I didn't sound too desperate though; it had been a long time since I'd had a good fry-up.

I rushed out of the toilet and headed straight for Gladys and her friends, eager to tell them all about my new date, when I noticed something very strange.

I slowed my pace, taking in the faces of everyone in the pub who were on their feet and staring at me in total silence: the barman, the customers, even the ladies. Everyone followed my every move until finally I came to a stop in front of the ladies' table.

I raised my arms and shouted as loud as I could so that everyone in the room could hear me. 'I am so, so sorry for ruining your night out. I'm pretty sure BT has probably exploded again. You should all phone them because I didn't use the internet at—'

'Grace.'

'Yes, Gladys.'

'It's not that, be quiet, I have something to tell you.'

'What else have I done?'

'Nothing. Listen, will you? Last week I won some money on a scratchcard.'

'Oooh, how much?'

'Don't be nosy.'

'Okay.'

'Anyway, I've won this money and, well, I'm not getting any younger and there's nothing else to spend it on so I thought I would treat you and me to a one in a lifetime trip to your most favourite place in the world that you've been dying to see and going on about since forever.'

As she spoke my lower jaw sunk down and my eyes sprang wide open. I could hear gasps ricocheting from around the room as the excitement built.

The first thing I thought was how much hearing aids had evolved in the last few years, to the point where all of the old people in the room had better hearing than dogs, and how I was now going to need to get the word out on my return home.

And the second thing I thought literally spewed out of my mouth in one continuous manic scream ...

'WALES. You're taking me to WALES. ARRLLLGHH. AND I GOT A FREE FRY-UP.'

'Grace, NO, for goodness sake, you've never said you want to go to Wales. California ... we're going to Hollywood, Grace.'

It was all too much; the excitement seemed to explode in the room and then grind into slow motion as I gripped my mouth and did a three-sixty.

All around me there were old people punching the air, old people diving off tables, old people high fiving, old people downing pints, old people crowd surfing, old people body-bopping, old people chest bumping.

I screamed out at the top of my lungs, 'YOU LYING BUNCH OF BASTARDS' to which every old person in the pub responded by slamming their bums back down on their seats and rubbing their backs.

Gladys and the ladies rushed towards me. 'Are you excited? How do you feel?'

'This is the best day of my life, ever, ever, ever,' I said, wiping away tears. 'I can pick up my Nobel Peace Prize now too. I've never been so happy. Oh, for goodness sake.'

* * *

I spent the whole of the next day getting ready for my big fry-up, I mean date, and Gladys said I looked sensational when, after my thirtieth tracksuit change, I finally leapt into the front room wearing my crushed pink velvet one with diamantes on the ass that read "Juicy Bootie". It was my finest.

'Should I bring Mr Nutty McNutnut?'

'Probably not on your first—'

'I mean, he loves squirrels, right?'

'Right, but I don't think you should—'

'I can't leave him here. Look at his little facey face.'

'You know what, just bring him, Grace, that's to—'

'I should leave him. What am I thinking? That's a stupid idea. Turning up with a squirrel, that's not sexy, right?'

Gladys sighed.

'Ohh, what do you reckon? I've been thinking of keeping it sophisticated with unicorn nails or do I do some early Halloween ones, cos I'm sure he said Halloween is his favourite party season and that he likes reading gravestones cos they make him cry.'

'Definitely unicorn on—'

'Halloween it is. I've got some cracking gun-stone grey for the mini headstones.'

'Lovely.'

'Oh, oh, what do you reckon? So do I go with the sparkly gold glitter eye shadow, or do I go for the alluring midnight black? He said that he's seen a lot of dead people in his life and, because he's a free thinker, he finds that even in death the dead look mysterious and seductive. Oh my, it's like he's a poet or something.'

'The glitter, Grace, go with the bloody—'

'You're right ...'

'Phew.'

'The midnight black looks so hot on me. I'll go with that. Oh yeah, last one, he said he's really good with his hands so, bearing that in mind, do I go with the sexy red bra that's practically impossible to get off, and has so far caused the loss of a finger to at least two of my one-night stands, or do I go with the slip-off sports bra that's so loose you literally just have to will it with your eyes and it listens.'

'Em, em ...'

'If it helps, his favourite hobby is abattoiring and he once represented Liverpool in the Winter Abattoir Olympics.'

'The loose one, go with the loose one.'

'Are you sure? It's just that I don't want it falling off on the way—'

'WEAR THE LOOSE ONE. WEAR THE BLOODY LOOSE ONE.'

'Alright, stressy, the red sexy bra it is.'

'Grace?'

'Yes.'

'Can I ask, who exactly are you going on a date with here? You know ... what's his name? Picture? Are you bringing your phone? When should I expect you back?'

'Oh right, stay safe and all that, good thinking. Let me see ... here is his profile on my phone. So, his name's SquirrelDeamon666 and he's local.'

'Grace, his real name?'

'Oh, it doesn't say but here's a picture. It's a bit blurry. That's him on the right, back five spaces and then go left sixteen. Right, him, there. Okay, that's him.'

'Let me see.' Gladys placed her giant square glasses on and brought the phone closer to her nose. 'The one in the red.'

'Yes.'

'Right then, so I hope you have a nice time. See you later.'

'Okay, so a time I will be back, shall we say 2 am before you dial 999? And 3 am before they send out the dogs?'

'Whenever is fine, just take your time.'

'We should agree a time, right?'

'No, don't worry, I'll wait up.'

'Well, what about my phone number? You don't write phone numbers down, do you remember mine?'

'That's fine, Grace. Have a nice evening now. Eastenders is on so please give me some peace.'

'What's my number?'

'I remember it, Grace. Have fun tonight.'

'A code word, should we at least agree that?'

'Programme's starting.'

'You want a piece of clothing so you can find me?'

'Can't hear you, it's started.'

'Oh, right, well, I suppose I'll just do my nails and eye shadow and be gone then.'

When I sat down in The Smokin' Haggis Caff later that night, I realised that they had pulled out all the stops for me. I sank into my window seat in my crushed velvet tracksuit and slowly ran my fingers over the tartan paper tablecloth that adorned the table in front of me just as a flicker of heat from a tea-light in the middle of the table tickled my face.

I gasped at the pre-laid cutlery and then fluttered my eyelids as I looked over yonder; the staff had thoughtfully dimmed the lights in the whole room, ensuring to blur an outpouring of love from all of the other customers in the establishment.

Suddenly, my nose twitched; a delicious hint of burning sausages had allowed itself to drift over the loved-up patrons and personally kiss my nostrils.

A local Scottish Mariachi band named "Los Mariachi Flor De Yer Bum's Oot The Windae" shuffled sideways around the room, gently caressing our ears with songs like Yesterday and Ferry Cross the Mersey; and finally I knew the cafe had done a really good job when I spotted a small child sitting next to the plug socket letting off a smoke machine at regular intervals.

I could hardly believe it; I sat back and shook my head in disbelief. It was if the stars had aligned just for me, waving their magic wand and rendering me Cinderella for the night.

What next? Would Benedict Cumberbatch float in on a bed of prosecco and chocolate and ask me to marry him?

Then something happened that I really didn't expect.

'Em, em, em. So, like, are you SexySquirrel69?' a familiar voice said to me.

I looked up only to see my weird next door neighbor standing there, holding onto an unfortunate looking squirrel teddy. 'Oh, my motherfucking balls. Are you SquirrelDeamon666?' I replied.

We both stayed perfectly still and stared at each other for a moment. My eyes kept darting between the squirrel teddy he was holding and his face. I could feel my left eye twitching as the working side of my brain whirred through all my available options. I'd already got there early and eaten poached eggs on toast, four sausages and five hash browns. I owed them at least £3.50 and I had no money to pay.

There was nothing I could do—I was going to have to date weird guy from next door.

I arrived back at Gladys' flat at exactly 8:31 pm, soaking wet through and in a foul, foul mood.

Gladys, as it turned out, was practically wetting herself laughing before I'd so much as told her what had happened. She just took one look at my face as I flung the sitting room door open, and then she screamed, 'Stay there, it's killing me! I have to go to the toilet!' and then tore out of the room with tears streaming down her face.

At least one of us was amused, because I felt it the second worst things that had ever happened to me. My disastrous date and I spent the first ten minutes in between staring out the window and randomly shouting questions to each other. It went like this:

Both stare out of window

He looks at me 'So, your grandparents are millionaires?'

I stare at him 'Of course.'

Both stare out of window

I look at him 'So, you drive an Audi?'

He stares at me 'Of course.'

Both stare out of window

He looks at me 'So, you used to be a model?'

I stare at him 'Of course.'

Both stare out of window

I look at him 'So, you're French?'

He stares at me 'Oui.'

Both stare out of window

He looks at me 'So, you're forty?'

I stare at him 'Want me to punch you?'

He stares at me 'At least I am French.'

I stare at him 'Yeah well, your squirrel looks like a loser.'

He stares at me 'Well at least my squirrel's eyes don't meet in the middle, unlike yours.'

We both stare at each other 'Let's order. Okay.'

We both click our fingers 'Waiter, we will have two of your finest breakfasts.'

He stares at me 'How is Mr Nutty McNutnut?'

I stare at him 'I just need the loo. Order me a bottle of Dog's Breath, I'll be back in a minute.'

After that, it felt like I had got struck down with instant karma, after squeezing my ass out the tiny toilet window and falling straight into a puddle the size of China in the back lane. All the way home in the pouring rain, all I could think about was how that tool was enjoying two fry-ups and me not even having one. And I'd ordered him a bottle of Dog's Breath before I'd left. That was actually really stupid.

I'd gone from floating on prosecco and chocolate with Benedict Cumberbatch to walking like John Wayne and clinging onto my waterlogged velvet tracksuit as I traipsed half a mile home. At least I had my good bra on.

CHAPTER 4

As a woman, packing a suitcase is always a problem. I can never believe it when a man goes, 'Look at mine, I've got all mine stuffed in a 10kg suitcase and it's still only half full'. Brag, brag. As if women everywhere are thinking, 'Oh, I so wish I could be like you, round of applause'.

We're not, we're actually thinking, 'Could he get any stupider?' And then it gets even better when you're on holiday together and they've only got one pair of soggy shoes and we get the chance to go, 'Wanna borrow me sandals? I've got fifty, check your bag'.

With a distinct lack of male travel companions, over the course of the following two weeks I had to, on the insistence of Gladys, whittle my travel necessities down from everything to a respectable 25kg suitcase, and it was hard. Squirrels were out, except Mr Nutty McNutnut, tracksuits were at a minimum and toiletries caused me hours of distress.

Finally, the big day arrived and Gladys and I found ourselves in the hallway of her apartment with the sun rising through the glass panel of the front door and our suitcases at the ready.

'Grace, what's that?'

'A beach ball.'

'You blew it up?'

'Preparation is everything.'

'Why didn't I think of that?'

'Gladys, what are you wearing? I can see your knees.'

'Mickey Mouse shorts.'

'You pulled your space rocket socks up to your knees though.'

'Right, but I can adapt to the weather in a matter of seconds?'

'Good thinking, Batman. Why didn't I think of that? What about your hat? Is that a—'

'I couldn't find a proper sun hat so I had to go with an Australian one with fly swatters.'

'Gladys, I love it. Why didn't I think of that?'

'Grace, how on earth did you find a proper hat though? All the charity shops were all out.'

'Oh, I got mine at the fancy dress shop. I renamed it a glitter cowboy hat after I drew glitter squirrels on it. Fancy, right?'

'Grace, I love it. Why didn't I think of that? Look at this string vest though, twenty pence, right?'

'Gladys, I love it. Why didn't I think of that? Check out my tie-dye harem pants with matching diamante tie-die boob tube. You're not going to lose me on Hollywood Boulevard with this on, right?'

'Grace, I love it. Why didn't I think of that? Are we going to rock California, or are we going to rock California?'

'Rock it!'

'Ready?'

'Ready.'

Greenland was absolutely freezing in February. I wish someone had told us beforehand. We had to play beachball in the departure lounge for four hours just to keep warm. Gladys, as it turned out, was a monstrously competitive beachball player.

Before I knew it, a mix of passengers, cabin crew, pilots and restaurant staff had all come to my rescue, as they said the thought of me losing to a tiny old person just didn't sit right with them.

This spurred an uprising of old people to seep out of the woodwork to overthrow us with the fire of a thousand fuck-ups that our generation has caused, spurring them on.

I tried pointing out that it was actually the chicken before the egg but that only resulted in one of them throwing a slipper at the back of my head, which was totally outrageous behaviour considering, but thankfully one of the aircraft marshal's leapt into action and served them up a yellow card.

Beachball eventually ended when one of the security screamed over the departures lounge in a deep voice: 'HALU, DEPARTURE LOUNGES ARE NOT PLACES THAT WE HAVE FUN IN—ESPECIALLY NOT IN GREENLAND WHERE IT IS ILLEGAL TO HAVE FUN. PUT THE BEACH BALL DOWN SLOWLY OR I WILL ARREST YOU FOR DISTURBING OUR GROUCH'.

Before we even had so much as a chance to reason, Gladys had thrown the beach ball so hard at his head that we all had to spread out like bats and spend the final hour before our flight hiding from him. Which was all right for Gladys because she could turn her hearing aid down, but being trapped in a tiny toilet cubicle with Gladys and Captain Boring, with his entire list of all the places he'd ever flown to spanning his thirty-year career, for an hour, made me want to cry.

Soon enough, the time arrived and we stepped out of departures and onto the runway, all ready to board our first-class jumbo jet.

I nudged Gladys as we made our way across the tarmac. 'Look at that beast, isn't it beautiful?'

My eyes glazed over as they consumed the glistening, sleek body of the jumbo jet, the winter sun lighting its magnificence from the winter sky behind. I could almost feel my feet being massaged and the taste of sparkling champagne swooshing around my mouth. Then I noticed something utterly incredible.

'Gladys, Gladys.'

'What?'

'Look, there are only eight other passengers and us. We've practically got the whole plane to ourselves. Can you believe it?'

Gladys scrunched her face up and looked behind us at the other passengers. 'Grace, you do realise that jumbo jet isn't for us?'

I looked over yonder, past the beautiful beast, and spotted a tiny ten-seater plane with propellers. 'Son of a b—'

'Now then, Grace, we'll have less of that. Remember the rule, no swearing in California.'

'This is Greenland. Son of a bi—'

'GRACE.'

Life-creeps—to be fair, I honestly thought I had wised up to them all, and so did Gladys. Life-creeps are basically those situations you find yourself in that creep up so slowly that you don't see them coming, despite the warning signs, and it's only afterwards that it all falls into place.

You could probably liken it to Teddy Daniels in *Shutter Island*, you know, when he's left with the ultimate choice of whether he accepts his life-creep as reality or he reverts back to pretending it never happened. Unlike Teddy, as a well-adjusted forty-nine-year-old woman, I can finally admit that I have had a lot of them over the years; Gladys too.

When they first start happening you just brush them off, you know, like Teddy did, and carry on. In your thirties, at least, it starts out with small things like adult acne, opting to wear gloves on a chilly night out, separating the whites and realising you can't handle raves anymore.

Finally, you hit your fortieth birthday and some arsewipe buys you a pair of slippers and you catch yourself loudly announcing, 'I think these babies will come in really useful'. And then afterwards you're literally like, 'fuuuuuuck I'm old'.

After forty, the life-creeps get worse. For instance, I can't even begin to tell you how many stories I've read in those real-life magazines about how some woman has gone to the doctor with constipation, only for the doctor to turn around and say, 'I think it's the menopause'. And then the woman turns around and goes, 'I am thoroughly offended that you are even suggesting that I am old at forty-five. I'll have you know that my mother had ovaries of steel when she had me at seventy-two, so guess again, chump'.

And then she gets home and finds out she was adopted.

I feel a stab to the heart every time I read it, but then again, I also feel a certain level of complacency because I am so much older and wiser now. And that's the worst trick about it: the older and wiser you get, the harder the life-creep.

We fall for them over and over again. And that is exactly what happened to me and Gladys when we arrived in California.

We were so tired when our flight landed at 8 pm, that it was only at breakfast the following morning when we realised we had fallen for the biggest one yet.

We both bit into a sausage from our fried breakfast and simultaneously locked eyes with one another over the breakfast table. It was as if the horror we both felt had touched us on such a deep level that our bodies had somehow synchronised and our minds began matrixing out our life-creep in tandem.

We both held our sausages in the air with our forks and glared at our breakfast waitress, who we immediately noticed was dressed for a festival.

'What the hell is this?' we both said to our waitress.

'Namaste,' she replied, whilst bowing. 'That is a valerian, tofu and chia sausage.'

Using our forks, we both pointed to our green scrambled eggs. 'What the hell are they?'

'Scrambled avocados fortified with maca powder.'

We both pointed to our dry beans. 'What the hell is this?'

'Himalayan rock salted chickpeas, tossed with caraway seeds and flaxseed.'

We pointed at our dry toast. 'What the hell is this?'

'Rye toast with goat butter.'

And finally, we pointed at our green coffee. 'What the hell is that?'

'Maca tea. Is everything okay with your breakfast, ladies?'

'Wonderful, thank you, Great Spirit Fire, we appreciate your help.'

After Great Spirit Fire floated away, Gladys and I both crushed our eyebrows together and gripped the edges of the table. We then began finishing each other's sentences as we pieced together the last twelve hours of our existence since we got off the plane.

Gladys started. 'Our twenty-one-year-old guide, Eric, who picked us up from the airport looked like a streak of piss and was wearing a kaftan.'

'And then he described himself not just as a tourist guide but also a life guide.'

'And then the hunched over woman on the coach who kept chanting offered us—'

'A bible to read, followed by some prayers for our higher being. Then the man sat behind her on the coach said—'

'He was going to spend the whole of his holiday in his room at the lodge so that he could find himself.'

'And then we told him that was a waste of a holiday and he should probably think about getting a life rather than worrying about finding himself, cos there was only one solution to his problem. And he said—'

'He'd pray for us too. Then as we pulled into the drive of our hotel on the edge of the Yosemite National Park, you said I thought we were staying in a hotel and I said—'

'I didn't know that large sheds were classed as a hotel. And the man and woman who had been praying for us, for the last four hours on the bus, said that they had read somewhere that there were also tepees out the back of the lodge for guests to stay in, and you said—'

'We stopped peeing on trees a long time ago. And then in reception, all of the staff turned out to welcome us by doing a conjoined yoga pose, which they then said we would all be able to achieve by the time we left, and you said—'

'There ain't no fucking chance I'm doing a human centipede, so just forget it. Which room are we in? And they all said—'

'We will pray for you both, you're staying in room five and then—'

'Our tourist guide, Eric, who said we must refer to him as Tiger Spirit, followed us in, lit a stick of incense and then tucked us both in bed and you said—'

'That was a pretty nice touch considering the long journey.'

Gladys and I both dropped our forks and scanned the breakfast room.

'Gladys.'

'Yes.'

'What was the name of this hotel?'

'I don't know, I had my hearing aid turned down. Did you hear it?'

'Yes.'

'So why are you asking me?'

'No idea.'

'So, what is it?'

'The Hardcore Mind, Body and Soul Lodge Next to The Yosemite National Park.'

'Grace, how didn't you work this out from the name?'

'Gladys, I am not psychic and this has to be the worst life-creep I've ever had. I'm literally shivering here.'

'Life-creep?'

'Yeah, life-creeps. They're those situations you find yourself in life that creep up so slowly that you don't see them coming, despite the warning signs, and it's only afterwards that it all falls into place.'

Gladys rolled her eyes. 'Right, Grace, back to the point. What are we going to do? The sausages are terrible.'

Eric swooshed past us, waving some smoking kindling. 'Ladies, welcome meeting in five. Please make your way to the back lawn where you will find our Zen garden and take a seat.'

I held the flat of my hand up to Eric as he passed. 'Eric.'

'You mean Tiger Spirit.'

'Fine. Tiger Spirit.'

'Namaste, Grace Flower.'

I took a deep breath in. 'Eric, don't even think about calling me Grace Flower again or I might have to kill you. I am just wondering though. We would like to travel into Hollywood and also visit the Californian Squirrel Reserve. Can you tell us how—'

'The Squirrel Reserve? You like squirrels?'

'I love squirrels. Here, meet Mr Nutty McNutnut.' I ripped Mr Nutty McNutnut out from my handbag and dangled him in the air.

Eric gripped his chest. 'I, well, he's certainly special, isn't he?'

'Cute, right?'

'Grace, may I call you Grace Squirrel?'

'Sounds good.'

'Grace Squirrel, may I suggest that you don't let any of the other guests or staff see Mr Nutty McNutnut?'

I stared at Mr Nutty McNutnut's cute little face. 'Why?'

'Oh, you know, they don't really ... you know ...' Eric grabbed Mr Nutty McNutnut and shoved him back into my bag as one of the other guests passed. Then he leant in and whispered, 'Grace Squirrel, please don't show him to anyone.'

I sat up straight and looked around the breakfast room with wide eyes. 'Are we surrounded by squirrel haters?'

Eric lowered his head as another guest passed. 'Namaste, Walking River Dust, see you in the Zen garden in a moment', and then turned back to face us. 'Now, the Squirrel Retreat is only a five-minute walk from here. After the meeting, I can take you there and then into Hollywood. I'm pretty sure everyone else is planning on staying here for the day and taking part in the activities, as long as you don't mind a bit of whale music.'

'I hate whale music. Lovely, though. Fancy that Gladys?'

Gladys smiled. 'Perfect. No whale music.'

'Although, ladies, you will be missing yoga and meditation if you want to leave.' Eric nudged me.

'Yes, fancy that. We shall meditate in the car in silence.'

Eric continued on his way, swooshing his burning kindling around as he made his way through the breakfast room. Just before he stepped out of the door and into the back garden, he suddenly turned right back around and ran straight for us.

Gladys and I both stared at him as he approached us at speed, clinging onto his black-framed glasses and the colour draining from his already pasty face. 'You're not into yoga, are you?' he gasped.

I whispered back. 'No.'

'Or finding yourself?'

'No.'

'Or whale music?'

'Definitely not. We accidentally booked this.'

Eric gripped his mouth. 'Ladies, listen to me, you must not let on. You both have to pretend that you are, otherwise ...'

'Otherwise what?'

'Otherwise they will spend the whole time that you are here trying to cleanse your aura and convert you to yoga.'

'That sounds bloody awful.'

'So you're not going to Hollywood to buy some green stones to rub on your face, either?'

'No. Why the hell would we do that? We're going to buy unicorn themed food and let loose. Also, we're hoping to bump into either a Kardashian or Will Smith. Which I think is totally possible, but Gladys said there's more chance of Elvis being reincarnated, so hopefully we'll bump into him too.'

'This is terrible,' Eric said. 'Just follow my lead at the meeting and I will explain everything in the car.'

CHAPTER 5

'Grace, have you ever seen anything more beautiful?'

Gladys and I both stepped out of the gratitude—oh for goodness sake, breakfast room—and onto the luscious lawn of the back garden. She was right, the Zen garden was quite possibly one of the most incredible things that I'd ever laid eyes on. Set on the edge of a cliff that overlooked the Yosemite National Park, with its craggy cliffs in the background and rolling blue skies, the Zen garden was nothing less than an enormous leaf-perfect, symmetrical maze of green bushes and plants.

A small river ran through the garden with some expertly chipped stones laid out for us to frolic over. After skipping over to one of the raised lookout points, we both sat down on a rustic white bench on the edge of the cliff. Gladys removed her Mickey Mouse shades and breathed in deeply as she took in the scenery. 'This is the life, right? If only every day was this perfect.'

'I suppose, but they don't exactly have The Smokin' Haggis Caff, do they?'

Gladys leant back. 'Oh, come on, look at this.'

'Okay, maybe you're right. I swear, almost every time I'm in there for a breakfast, I look out the caff window and there's a coffin arriving at the church. That's not really the bad part. It's just they're such a bunch of butter-fingers. The amount of times I've seen them drop one as I'm mid-chew on a piece of sausage.'

'Couldn't you just sit in a different seat?'

'Can't play spot-the-serial-killer though, can I? And Liverpool's full of them, so it's a cracking game to play over a fry-up.'

The sound of an ear-caressing chime echoed through the Yosemite. It was Eric banging an enormous brass gong on one of the other large, raised platforms across the garden.

'Come on,' Gladys said. 'Looks like they're starting.'

Much to both Gladys' and my disappointment, there were no seats on the other raised platform, meaning we had to sit in these ridiculous yoga poses on the floor. I counted ten fruit-loops in total, not including Gladys and me, who were gathered around in a circle.

To my left sat the man from the coach, Barry from London, who said he was going to spend all of his holiday in his room, finding himself. He'd gone from looking like an accountant to wearing nothing but a silk kaftan and a very loose pair of silk shorts. I covered my mouth with my hands as I watched him lecture me about sitting properly at the same time as attempting a full lotus. His chubby, thirty-five-year-old legs kept springing out from underneath him as he attempted to get his body to stay in position. I couldn't resist telling him he should probably eat more chickpeas before dishing out advice like that next time, to which I swear I heard him mutter something unholy, but when I questioned him about it he simply said, 'I will pray for you', in a very strained voice and then closed his eyes.

Next to him sat two twin sisters named Dotty and Delilah from Australia, each doing a full lotus pose with their eyes firmly closed. They were in their fifties, with long blonde hair that reached their waists and very statuesque demeanours. They were so statuesque, in fact, that despite Barry falling into them three times, they didn't so much as flinch once. I really needed to remember that for a later date.

Sat next to them was a Scottish couple, called Anna and Scotty McHappy, who were clearly newbies. Anna was wearing heels and Scotty was sat in a half lotus position with a face that said "kill me now". I instantly liked them.

Next to them were a couple of high-flying New Yorkers in their twenties called Chad and Mia. I couldn't stand them. Chad kept talking to me about the price of the dollar and some bloke he worked with called Dow Jones, non-stop. I swear he could talk without breathing.

His wife, Mia, who was clearly a professional, high-flying mother, spent the whole time chatting to a woman next to her, called Felicity, about the complications of organising and parenting. Their whole conversation seemed to be directed at all the things Felicity's eighteen-year-old son, Poet, who was sat next to her, did wrong.

Poet handled it like a pro; he just kept saying, 'Yes Mum, right Mum, in this dull-set tone whilst staring out into the garden. I quickly caught on to Poet's clever tactics and decided that I too was going to take a leaf out of his book. 'Yes Chad, right Chad, interesting, I see, I will, yes Chad.'

The final person in the group, and possibly the most annoying, was sat right in between Gladys and Poet. It was the woman we met on yesterday's coach who insisted that we call her "Spirit Butterfly". She had struck up conversation with Gladys about the anatomy of an aura, and Gladys was less than impressed.

In the end, Gladys kept continuously calling her real name, Donna, and the conversation between the pair dried up very fast. Gladys smiled like a Cheshire cat when Donna announced that she was no longer able to converse with her unless she called her by her spirit name.

It wasn't a moment too soon before the king and queen of fruit-loops, who owned the hotel, glided in. I had to double-take as they swanned towards us looking all serious and a bit related. I swear, at first glance, I thought the Krays had gone into the five-star yoga retreat business. They both wore faces of steel and matching boho outfits, which didn't help their cause one little bit.

The wife, named High Mistress Breeze, had this flyaway brown hair which literally screamed "comb me", and clearly had decided to give up pruning herself a long time ago, opting for the "au naturel" look which she coordinated perfectly with a face that had an answer for everything.

Behind her, her husband, who I thought was more of a Meerkat Heart rather than a Lion Heart, as he was named, shuffled in with his head down.

Eric bowed as they arrived and proceeded to bang the gong before anything that High Mistress Breeze said.

High Mistress Breeze stepped forward and spoke in a calm yet stern voice. 'Namaste everyone, welcome to the The Hardcore Mind, Body and Soul Lodge Next to The Yosemite National Park.'

High Mistress Breeze continued. 'I see we need to work on our sitting positions; however, Grace, I can't quite explain yours.'

Everyone looked at me. 'It's called spread-eagle,' I said, slapping my legs.

'I see, well, maybe you should follow Gladys' perfect example of a Makarasana if you're finding it difficult.'

Everyone looked at Gladys who was lying down flat on her stomach with her elbows out in front of her and her chin resting in her hands. Gladys turned to me and smirked. I couldn't bloody believe it.

Eric banged the gong again.

'Today we have a special day of yoga and meditation in the Yosemite planned, so please bring your yoga mats for comfort. Grace and Gladys, I don't see your names on the sign-up form? There are lots of different classes going on. I'm taking a session in the Yosemite but there's also butterfly catching taking place here in the Zen garden.'

'Ahh, we are ...'

Eric banged the gong and then spoke in a monotone voice. 'I am taking Grace and Gladys into Hollywood to purchase green stones. We will return later on', and then banged the gong again.

'Well then, if anyone would like green stones then please ask Eric who I am sure wouldn't mind purchasing some for you. Please check the activity book on the front desk and sign up to as many activities as you like during your stay here with us. Tomorrow night we will be holding a one-off seance, so I expect that you can all make it.'

Then High Mistress Breeze said no more. She simply bowed to everyone and made her way back across the garden with her sheepish husband scurrying behind her. As she did so, Eric very skilfully played a soothing tune, using some half-filled water bottles, as we watched them both bounce over the stream and into the lodge.

'Well, that couldn't have been any more weird,' I said, turning back to Gladys.

'You heard what she said, didn't you?' Gladys replied.

'Yes. That you shouldn't date your doppelganger like she did? Whatta weirdo.'

'Date your doppelganger? Grace, no, when did she say that? I meant the bit where she didn't say 'I hope you can make it', instead she said 'I expect that you can make it'. Does that mean we have to go to a seance?'

'I hope bloody not. What if a ghost turns up? Don't think I can handle that.'

'Oh, come on, Grace, don't be silly.' Gladys sank back into her Makarasana position and snorted. 'Yeah, right, as if the ghost of King Kong will suddenly manifest in the truth room.'

I pointed straight at Gladys and held my finger firmly to her nose. 'Gladys, Gladys, Gladys. Are you saying to me that there is the slightest possibility, or even a chance or a bigger possibility, that King Kong might just have a ghost?'

'No, Grace, I'm just saying—'

'So you are saying that, like ... that general apes or gorillas have ghosts too? Or do monkeys have ghosts? Or ... where does it end? Are you also saying that other things have ghosts too? Like, could our imaginations have ghosts? Or could some of the animals on that programme you watch have ghosts? Or are you—'

'Grace, I'm not saying that.'

'I think that's what you said though. Let me get this straight, we are—'

'Grace, let's go.'

'I really think we need to talk about this.'

Gladys stood up. 'Okay, you know what? We will go to this seance and I will prove to you that there's no such thing as ghosts, okay?'

'Fine, but if a ghost of anything turns up I will hold you fully responsible.'

'Fine.'

'You're also wrong about something else.'

'What?'

'There is no such thing as a truth room. It's called a li-ving r-oom.'

Eric George Broadbent—that was what his parents called him, not Spirit Fire as he liked being referred to.

On our way to the Squirrel Reserve, we told Eric about my mix up at the bank and he dished the gossip on the Squirrel Reserve. 'Rumour has it,' Eric said as he drove, 'that High Mistress Breeze and the Squirrel Reserve are arguing over the land. High Mistress Breeze owns the land and rented it to a man called Amos Ames, who built a Squirrel Reserve on it. Now she wants the land back though because the business is struggling, so she can extend the lodge over it, but Amos is refusing. All normal enough, but here's the weird part. Squirrels have been going missing and everyone is blaming High Mistress Breeze.'

I gripped my mouth. 'No way.'

Gladys leant towards us from the backseat. 'Do you think High Mistress Breeze is stealing the squirrels then, to drive Amos off the land?'

'Well, it looks that way,' Eric said. 'But it gets even weirder. I asked High Mistress Breeze about this and she got very upset and snapped at me. She said that she didn't want

the land back at all and was happy with them renting it for now. Then she stormed off. I've never asked her about it again. She can be pretty scary when she wants to be.'

'Stealing squirrels, that is the worst.'

'No, Grace, it gets even weirder,' Eric continued. 'Not only are squirrels going missing, but last year one of the guests did. He was a Hollywood executive who checked in for one night and then by morning had completely disappeared. The police never found him. A coincidence maybe, but now you show up saying the Squirrel Reserve had taken loads of money off you. What next?'

'Well, we are about to find out,' Gladys said, pointing to a sign for the Squirrel Reserve.

With a thick backdrop of trees and foliage surrounding us, we made our way down a thin dirt track towards the Squirrel Reserve. Halfway down, I squealed with delight as I spotted a small Californian Grey Squirrel on the path ahead. I followed the beautiful little creature as he led us to a small clearing in the woods set in front of a badly beaten wooden shack.

The cute little mite scurried up a tree stub in the middle of the clearing and sat down. Gladys and Eric hung back whilst I wasted no time in creeping up on the squirrel and making their favourite squirrel noise as I neared. 'Choochy-coo. Choochy-choochy-coo.'

Looking back, I now realise that had I not have been so wrapped up in hugging this beautiful little creature then I might have been able to notice the fact that there was strange silence hanging in the forest, or the fact that there was nobody in the Squirrel Reserve, or the fact that a couple of the bushes were moving inconsistently in the breeze. But I didn't.

And that's when it happened: four screaming bushes sprang up from the ground, to at least twenty feet in the air, and began descending towards me like a fight scene out of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Needless to say, I was the epitome of calm, so I ran and hid behind Gladys. Gladys, however, placed hands on her hips and said, 'I think someone should start telling me exactly what is going on here and, before you even think about it, I can tell when you're lying.'

All four bushes landed with a thud on the ground and then stood up with their heads hanging low and sighed; they knew full-well they were rumbled.

Once the bushes had brushed themselves down and removed the final twigs, I quickly realised that stood before me was just about the weirdest ambush team I had ever laid eyes on.

'Names and particulars. Now,' Gladys said.

'Howdy, I'm Amos,' said a pensioner at the front wearing a cowboy hat, brown leather trousers with frills and a checked shirt. 'Born and raised in Texas. I'm eighty-five, I like saving squirrels and playing hoop. I moved here seventy years ago to chase my dreams of becoming a Western film star, except no one watches Westerns.'

'Thank you, Amos. Now, how about you?' Gladys pointed to an old man at the back who was wearing a flouncy red shirt with a pair of incredibly tight, white trousers.

'I'm Miguel,' said the pensioner at the back whilst stroking his long black hair. 'I'm seventy-five, born and raised in Mexico. I love singing, dancing and everything. I moved to Hollywood about fifty years ago to chase my life-long dreams of becoming a stunt driver for big budget films except, on my first ever job, I was about to drive a car through a burning building when I realised that it was a very, very dangerous thing for a Mexican man like me to do ... so I drove away.' Miguel hung his head down. 'I never work since.'

'Thank you, Miguel. And you?' Gladys pointed to a pensioner who was stood to the right of Miguel wearing a multi-coloured shirt with a cockatoo design and khaki shorts.

'Name's Stevie Stars, I'm a—'

'Ohh, ohh, Miss, please, me, Miss.' Miguel held his hand up.

'Yes, Miguel.'

'I just wanted to say that I love saving squirrels too.'

'Well, thank you, Miguel. That's what we like to hear. Stevie Stars, please continue.'

'Right, so, did I say my name was Stevie Stars?' We all nodded. 'Right, well, okay, so I'm a game show host from a little place called Finland. I'm seventy-nine and moved here aged ten years old to host my own game show called "Bedtimes And Other Rubbish Rules" but that sank, so at eleven I started my own game show called "I'm Pretty Sure My Homework Is Making Me Stupid" but that sank, so aged thirteen I started my own game show called "My Friends' Parents Don't Give Him Chores" but that sank, and then at fourteen I started my own game show called "Dishes Do Not Need Washing Straight Away" but that sank ...'

Everybody got comfy as Stevie Stars continued.

'... but that sank too, so at eighteen I started my own game show called "I Like Asking My Parents Their Advice and Then Disagreeing with Them ..."

Miguel put the kettle on.

'... then at thirty-seven I started my own game show called "I Moved Back Home with My Parents and They're Still Just as Annoying" but that sank, then at thirty-eight ...'

I hugged a passing squirrel and Amos fired up the barbecue.

'... but that sank. Then at forty-nine I started a game show called "My Parents Are Both Dead and They Left Everything to The Zoo" but that sank, then at ...'

Eric got bitten by a squirrel and I nearly wet myself.

'... and so last year I retired from the business. I like saving squirrels now.'

'Well, thank you very much, Stevie Stars, for your detailed explanation. And how about you?' Gladys pointed to a young woman who had long black hair to her bum, a Corpse Bride dress with striped leggings on and looked in desperate need of a sunbathe.

'Hi, I'm Lucy from France. So, I'm twenty and I moved here to be in a heavy metal band so I could be an extra in a film that required a heavy metal band, but nobody has ever

accepted me.' Amos patted Lucy on the shoulders. 'It's just, like, I can never tell what they're playing so I've never been able to play the same song twice, so I ended up saving squirrels instead. But that's okay, isn't it?' Everyone nodded. 'Because I love squirrels, and being here, you know, you're all like my family, so it's okay.'

Amos stepped forward. 'And who are you?'

'I'm Grace,' I said.

Amos, Miguel, Stevie Stars and Lucy all let out a gasp and stepped back. 'You mean, Grace from Britain?'

I scrunched my nose to one side. 'No, Grace from Liverpool.'

'Oh, thank goodness.' Amos bent over and rested his hands on his knees as he sighed. 'It's just this woman called Grace has been stalking us over some money she donated. Miguel accidentally told the bank it was more than it was supposed to be and we've been hiding from her ever since because we spent it all.'

Lucy, Stevie Stars and Miguel all laughed. 'Phew, right,' they said as they wiped their brow.

'Grace?'

'Yes, Gladys.'

'Liverpool is in Britain.'

'Don't worry, Gladys. I got this. Now, Amos, that brings me to my problem. You see ... hold on ... you spent all my money?'

'Em ...'

'Miguel, how could you have done that?'

'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Grace, it's just in Mexico we don't have forms—'

'Amos, you spent it all?'

'I'm a cowboy.'

'So where's my Nobel Peace Prize?'

'How about a tour of the squirrel facilities, see what we've done with the place, right?' Amos said.

'Well, I suppose it would be nice to see what you have spent all my money on.'

One minute later, after inspecting three tyres, twenty squirrel feeding boxes, twenty pieces of rope that were fixed to trees and an abandoned car, we found ourselves stood back in front of the shack again.

'And also,' Amos said, 'we fixed the shack up.'

I inspected the cracked, grimy windows and loose wooden boards that had been nailed onto the front of it.

'We fixed the leaking roof, installed a toilet and connected the telephone.'

'I see.' I rubbed my chin for a minute and looked around the place. Everyone stood quietly as they waited for my opinion. There was nothing for it. I flung my hands in the air and shouted, 'I love it!' Everyone let out a cheer.

'Ohh, Grace, also, look what we did.' Miguel passed me some fancy black goggles and I tried them on. 'We can see the squirrels in the dark with these on.'

Amos pointed to a tree. 'And look up there.'

'Where?'

'There, in the tree. The tiny black box. We installed cameras all over the place so that we can catch whichever lickspittle is stealing the squirrels.'

A cold chill swept through the forest and my eyes widened. 'Stealing the squirrels. Eric told me. That is about the worst thing that I had ever heard.'

Amos removed his cowboy hat and rested it on his chest. 'Grace, there's been so many of our little friends that have gone. That's why we jumped out on you. Some yellow-belly has been stealing them. We think it's—'

Eric stepped forward. 'Now Amos, I'm not so sure High Mistress Breeze would do that. I spoke to her and she says she doesn't want the land.'

'Are you calling me a liar?'

'No, Amos, I'm not. It's just I'm not sure she would harm squirrels, that's—'

'Then who else could it be?'

'I don't know. I just don't think that ... I just don't think she would, that's all.'

'We should find out,' I said, stomping my foot hard into the muddy ground. 'Me and Gladys will help. We can help you on the next stake-out.'

Stevie Stars jumped up and down. 'Grace, we can do a stake-out tomorrow night if you want. You should come, all of you, it will be so much fun.'

'Gladys, shall we?'

Gladys tutted so I took that as a yes. 'Eric, what about you?'

'Fine, and I will prove it's not High Mistress Breeze. It will have to be after the seance though.'

CHAPTER 6

That afternoon and right through into the evening, Gladys, Eric and I took Hollywood by storm, meaning that by late evening we had been thrown out of the waxwork museum after a tragic mix up between Eric and James Dean, eaten so much food that we had to be forcibly removed from the Hard Rock Café for sleeping—to be fair Gladys needed a nap—, completely lost Eric for about an hour at a Lion King convention, bumped into Elvis at least fifty times—I swear he was following us—, discovered Gladys had the same size feet as Shirley Temple, and also, to our delight, discovered that Michael Jackson had been reincarnated too.

I can't even begin to tell you how much of a top-notch day it had already turned out to be, when, after a bad turn and some terrible directions from a Japanese tourist, we found ourselves stood in front of the mother-of-all-shops.

I couldn't freakin' believe it! It was the one and only shop in the whole wide world that was capable of causing my whole body to involuntary scream at the top of my lungs.

'AAAARLGH, GLADYS, IT'S MY FAVOURITE SHOP, LOOK, THEY'VE GOT A TAXIDERMY SHOP HERE TOO, IT MUST BE A GLOBAL CHAIN.'

Gladys gripped Eric's arm with one hand. 'Oh, for the love of ...'

I can honestly say that at that point in time, I didn't give a duck's arse who saw me. I flung both of my gangly arms in the air and tore inside the shop, with a trail of foam dripping from my mouth.

For all I cared, Benedict Cumberbatch could have been stood in the doorway with a box of Milk Tray; I'd have still run right past him shouting, 'Do one, Cumberbatch!'

'LOOK,' I wailed as I pointed at the products and twirled in circles. 'LOOK, ELVIS SQUIRREL, LOOK, MARILYN MONROE SQUIRREL, LOOK, DORIS DAY SQUIRREL ...'

A female shop assistant, wearing a high-neck vintage funeral dress and white gloves, slid over and tapped me on my shoulder. 'Excuse me, I would be grateful if you could keep the noise down as our other customers are finding it difficult to choose.'

'It's just, I'm so excited, this is my favourite shop ever. I have one hundred and seventy-eight squirrels from yourselves, but I've never seen Hollywood Squirrels before.'

'Well now, I don't think I have ever seen anyone this excited about taxidermy before,' the shop assistant said. 'I hope you have one of our membership cards.'

I gripped my mouth and squealed. 'Membership cards! I didn't think this day could get any better, but it's turning out to be a right knees-up.'

'Also, if you'd like to step over there, there's a live taxidermy demonstration taking place, which I think,' she nudged me, 'you might be interested in.'

I remember nothing after that.

Eric said that before either he or Gladys could so much as blink, I'd "paranormal activitied" my way through the crowd and landed at the front of the demonstration table where I'd let out a blood-curdling wail.

Then, I'd somehow produced an axe, chased all of the customers out of the shop, thrown all of the squirrels in a heap on the floor and tried setting alight to them so they could die humanely.

Basically, I had morphed into what Gladys eloquently described to two Californian police officers as 'a killer gorilla with fluctuating oestrogen levels'.

When I eventually came to, I found myself sitting on the bench outside the taxidermy shop, blubbering incoherently to two police officers who were sitting either side of me and rubbing my back to try to calm me down.

As it turned out, they loved squirrels too, so when I explained that I'd been unwittingly living with one hundred and seventy-eight dead ones for the last thirty-something years, I could see tears well up in their eyes too as the realisation of my terrible predicament sunk in.

Luckily, both police officers were female so they were literally like, 'life-creep, right?' and I was like, 'I know, right, whatta dog's dinner this is'.

Gladys just tutted.

The police officers were so nice though; they said that normally people would be arrested for attempted murder but due to the tragic circumstances surrounding the event that they would let me off.

The sour-faced crab in the black funeral dress, who it turned out was called Victoria and owned the taxidermy shop, didn't look happy about this at all. She wanted to press charges but the police were having none of it. They said that it was totally her fault because she knew all along that nobody is ever, ever that happy about taxidermy, so she should have understood the consequences of her actions.

The police also reminded her of Trump's "squirrel responsibly campaign", which he ran last year, the one that highlighted the dangers of selling dead squirrels to happy customers. Victoria said she wouldn't do it again.

It took two unicorn milkshakes, another unicorn ice cream, a unicorn beef sandwich and a terrible street cartoonist's interpretation of Gladys before I smiled again that night. Despite the dead squirrel saga, it had been the most incredible day, what with the Squirrel Reserve, hanging out with Gladys and Eric in Hollywood, and there was still more to come: hanging out with a bunch of famous people in a nightclub.

I was literally having the time of my life, so I decided there and then that I was not, under any circumstances, going to let the dead squirrel issue ruin the rest of my star-studded night. I had to forget about squirrels.

A short while later, Gladys, Eric and I all stood on the side of the road, staring intently at the neverending queue leading into one of the hottest nightclubs on Hollywood Boulevard. The sound of high-energy techno flowed from the double doors of the club, beating like waves through an endless crowd of immaculate Gucci dresses and Armani suits that lined the street.

'Well, this is terrible, let's go home,' said Eric.

I tutted. 'We can get through that, no probs.'

'Okay, let's go,' Eric said again.

'Hold it right there, Eric. You said this is where we can hang out with famous people and now you're just like, 'let's go'? What the hell is up with you?'

'Well, it's just, I never thought about it then, it's just that ...'

'Spit it out.'

'Okay, here's the thing. In Hollywood, it's really hard to get into nightclubs because they only let a certain type of person in. Which is why we are going to find it so difficult, so let's go.'

'What. Type. Of. Person?' Gladys said.

'Not us, let's go.'

Gladys gripped Eric by the kaftan. 'Tell. Us. Now.'

'Fine. They only let beautiful women in.'

Gladys gripped her string vest. 'What the hell is wrong with this?'

I stared at my legs too. 'It's not as if I only wore pink leggings by themselves and you can see everything when I bend over. I teamed them with denim hotpants.'

'Look, both of you, it's not about what you are wearing. I think you're both beautiful. It's just the way they are here.'

Gladys gripped her fists. 'Sexist, discriminating bunch of ba—'

'No swearing in California, Gladys. Listen, Eric, I don't think you quite understand who you are hanging out with right now. We are two rather sprightly British scousers and there ain't no way we're being told we're too ugly for anything. Watch and learn, sunshine.'

Gladys pressed her finger into Eric's bare chest. 'Yeah, watch and learn, sunshine, watch and learn.'

I slammed my light-up trainers into the ground as I marched to the front of the queue, with Eric and Gladys following right behind me. On reaching the front, I hurled a load of aspiring models aside and came face-to-face with four beefy bouncers, who I'm sure Ancestry.com would have agreed shared a record percentage of centimorgans with King Kong.

'Good evening, kind Sirs,' I said as I wiped away tears. 'I'm here because I have had the most awful, terrible day.'

One of the burly doormen grumbled. 'What happened?'

I hung my head low and rested one of my hands on the doorman's enormous, broad shoulders. 'It's just, just that my dog got run over this morning,' I wailed, 'and then something else terrible happened.'

'What?'

I pulled out a tissue and blew my nose. 'When my cat found out, she was so full of grief that she jumped from a tree and died. And then something else terrible happened.'

'What?'

'My fish found out the cat had died and mysteriously died in an underwater drowning.' I let out a howl and wiped more tears away. 'Oh, the pain.'

'Why are you telling us this?'

'Because, kind Sirs, gaining entry to this nightclub is the only thing that will stop me from sinking into a deep, deep depression. So please, if you can find it in your hearts, please let us in.'

I buried my face in my hands and sobbed, sure in my mind that my usual dead dog, dead cat, dead fish story, which had so far gained me entry to every club in Liverpool and two Nicki Minaj concerts, would work.

'No chance.'

I lifted my face from my hands. 'Say what?'

Five nightclubs later and my tragic tale never got us into a single place. I couldn't bloody believe it. Eventually we all flopped on a bench and I scratched my head. 'Have I—'

'No, Grace, you never lose it. This isn't your fault,' Gladys said.

'I've never been turned away, though. I've lost all my, my,' I gripped my head, 'my womanly charms.'

'Grace, it's not possible, you haven't, I—'

'No Gladys, stop it. I have to accept it. That was the last of them. It's all over.'

As Gladys and I continued to disagree about the existence of my womanly charms, we both noticed a noise coming from the other end of the bench. We looked over at Eric who was sat rocking back and forth and wailing, 'Terrible, this is so terrible.'

'Eric, what is?' Gladys said.

'First your dog, then your cat, now the fish. It's too much, I don't think I can take it.'

Gladys and I both looked at one another. 'Hold the phone,' we said. 'Eric, where are you from?'

'Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll.'

'That's a place? How do you receive post?'

'Wales, I'm from Wales.'

Gladys and I both gripped each other and stood up. 'Sweet Kris, mother of Kim, we know what's wrong.'

Eric leapt to his feet. 'What?'

'Californians aren't like us. They don't respond to all of our womanly charms, because they are too cool.'

'I don't get it.'

'So maybe all our womanly charms don't work here, but we ain't short of cool. Are we, Gladys?'

'Oh, hell no.'

Half an hour later, Gladys, Eric and I all stood outside the hottest nightclub in all of Hollywood: The Hollywood Z Club on Hollywood Boulevard.

In that jam-packed half hour, we'd been back to the waxwork museum and borrowed a waxwork. Gladys had changed into a blonde wig, a pink dress and purchased some diamonds, we'd found Michael Jackson and Elvis in a pensioners' bingo hall and invited them on a night out, found a stray dog, which was totally Gladys' idea and one, I would like to say, I was actually a little uncomfortable with, and I'd changed into a black dress with pearls. We all stomped to the front of the queue.

'And who might you lot be?' said two muscular doormen with their arms folded.

'What, little ol' me? Audrey, Audrey Hepburn, a little older but in the flesh,' I said, fluttering my eyelids. 'Meet my associate, Marilyn.'

Gladys pulled one of her long pink gloves up, held out the back of her hand towards the doormen and giggled. 'Marilyn Monroe, still alive and kicking. Lovely to meet you, boys.'

'And meet James Dean and his brother, Eric.'

The doormen squinted their eyes. 'That's a waxwork.'

'We know, but we wanted you to appreciate the likeness. Moving on, please meet Elvis and Michael.'

The doormen looked Elvis and Michael up and down, inspecting their badly sewn costumes and wonky wigs. For a moment, we thought we were busted, but then they said, 'Haven't you two aged?'

'Thankyou, thankyouverymuch.'

'Oww.'

'And meet Lassie.'

'Woof.'

And then it happened. Without a moment's hesitation, both doormen parted and the double doors of the club that stood between us and celebrity heaven swung open. We shuffled forward just as a huge plume of smoke blew in our faces. The doormen shouted, 'Have a great evening, everyone', as we stepped into the smoke.

We were in, and it was everything that we dreamed it would be. At the bar, Lassie ended up proving her weight in gold. It was so packed that we thought we might not ever get a drink, but when Lassie let out a woof, the crowd seemed to part like butter and we all slid to the front.

And that's when it all began.

'I got this,' Gladys said as she held us all back with both arms out wide.

She raised her hand and pointed at a passing bartender who was midway through hurling a Pina Colada in the air. 'I want everything on your cocktail list,' Gladys said firmly to him.

The waiter ground to a halt and held both hands to his cheeks, the Pina Colada landing on his head. 'Everything? Marilyn, are you sure?'

Gladys cocked her head to one side. 'I said everything. Boop-boop-de-doop.'

It was epic, and about an hour later and I found myself swaying next to the bar with Lassie and Elvis, who were doing their best to hold me upright, when I noticed something. I gripped Elvis. 'Wheresh Gladys?'

'Who?'

'Marilyn Monroes?'

Elvis scratched his head. 'Oh, she said something, like, hold my beer, and then disappeared.'

'Eric.'

Eric swayed back and forth. 'Yeeeessss, Audrywaudry.'

'Spreads outsh, we musst finds Marilyn's.'

Elvis and I gave each other a knowing nod and then I watched through glassy eyes as Elvis began spinning his arm in huge circles. Using his windmill, I catapulted myself towards the dancefloor, gripping tightly onto Eric and Lassie as I passed.

As momentum was carrying us through the crowd, we passed two unmistakable faces throwing shapes on the dancefloor: Dotty and Delilah from Australia, the hardcore yoga guests from our hotel. They were the absolute last people I thought would ever be in a place like this, but I had no time to contemplate it; before I knew it we'd smacked straight into a droid.

Then Lassie let out a woof, just as a flash of pink flew overhead. We all looked up and gasped—it was Gladys, twenty foot in the air, swinging on a rope swing, still dressed as Marilyn Monroe and pissed as a fart. We all screamed to her, 'Nooooo, Gladys, noooo!' and instantly regretted it.

Gladys lost her balance and fell from the skies straight onto Dotty and Delilah who were mid-robot. The whole room seemed to stop still as Eric, Lassie and I hurled people out of the way and ran over. 'Gladys, Gladys are you okay?' we all wailed, now sober as judges.

At the hospital later on, we all got in deep trouble when every single doctor in A&E dropped what they were doing, huddled around us, put their hands on their hips, and proceeded to tell us that not only was it unacceptable taking a stray dog on a night out (we all pointed at Gladys who was lying on a hospital bed), but it was also unacceptable stealing a waxwork (we all pointed at Gladys), unacceptable picking up old men in fancy dress from bingo halls (we all pointed at Gladys), unacceptable drinking every cocktail on a cocktail

menu (we all pointed at Gladys), totally unacceptable getting on a rope swing when you're blotted (we all pointed at Gladys), and thoroughly unacceptable wearing a zebra kaftan on a night out (Eric pointed at himself).

It also turned out that Californian doctors are just as whiny and overprotective as the British ones. They wanted to keep Gladys in for observation, but after a quiet word in another room, Gladys made it perfectly clear that she was perfectly fine and they had absolutely no chance.

* * *

The next evening, Gladys and I carefully lowered ourselves into our seats in the truth room and gripped our tummies.

Eventually, the rest of the guests in the hotel arrived and took a seat around a large circular table. Across from us, I spotted Dotty and Delilah. Dotty had a small plaster on her forehead and they both had their heads down. I shouted over, 'Hey, what happened to you two last night? You both disappeared after the fall. Is your head all right?'

Dotty and Delilah instantly clamped their eyes shut and began meditating. I whispered to Gladys, 'Cheeky cows, what's up with them?'

'Don't know, maybe they don't want High Mistress Breeze to know they were partying.'

'Makes sense, I suppose.'

Finally, High Mistress Breeze and her husband arrived and took a seat.

'Are we missing somebody?' High Mistress Breeze said.

'Donna,' Gladys said with a smile.

'That's strange, her name was on the sign-up form. Has anybody seen her?' Everybody shook their heads. 'Right, well I suppose we should get started, maybe she'll turn up.'

Eric lowered the lights which set Gladys and me off on a yawning spree.

High Mistress Breeze closed her eyes and spoke in a monotone voice. 'Oh great spirits of the Yosemite, we call upon you to communicate with us, use the glass on the table to spell your name, point to the letters on the paper.'

Gladys stared at the shabby, hand-drawn piece of paper on the table with a glass in the middle of it and snorted, 'Yeah, right.'

'Oh great spirits, please communicate with us.'

There was nothing.

'Please, speak to us,' High Mistress Breeze wailed.

Still nothing.

'Pretty please, with a cherry on top.'

Still nothing.

Gladys threw her hands in the air. 'I am so hungover and I seriously don't need this cra—'

Suddenly the glass shot to the letter "G" on the paper.

'That's right, speak to us, tell us what you want,' High Mistress Breeze said.

Everyone sat forward and began looking around at each other with eyes wide open. I spotted Scotty McHappy across from me, hugging himself and whimpering. I could tell, as I scanned the terrified faces sat around the table, that none of us expected it to be real.

Then the glass began to pick up speed, and we all began loudly announced the letters in unison. 'G. O. P. Z. I. L. L. A.'

I cupped my face. 'God's actually talking to us. This is a miracle.'

Scotty McHappy shouted over to me. 'No, Grace. Godzilla, as in the bloody big gorilla Godzilla.'

'ARLGH!' I leapt to my feet and gripped my mouth to stop vomit from projecting out of my mouth. 'Gorilla ghosts, this is the worst day of my life!'

Then something I didn't expect happened. High Mistress Breeze stood up and slammed her hands into the table. 'Who did this? Come on, that's not funny, who the hell is up to this?' She eyed everyone around the table.

I inhaled air at an alarming rate. 'What the hell do you mean?' I bellowed. 'You were the one who called the spirits of dead gorillas. Now we're all going to die and you're, like, who did this?'

'Yer aff yer heid! All a ya,' Scotty McHappy ran screaming out of the room, followed by his wife, Anna, who kept apologising profusely for his whimpy behaviour.

I gripped onto Gladys. 'Why, why is this happening?'

Gladys just sat there yawning. 'This is absolutely ridic ...'

High Mistress Breeze and her husband stomped out of the room and slammed the door shut, quickly followed by the rest of the guests who gripped each other and whispered to one another as they left.

Once everyone had gone, Eric turned the lights back up and sat next to the light switch with his hand over his mouth. 'I feel so ill,' he said, 'and now we've got to track down a bunch of squirrel hunters.'

I stood up. 'Eric, what the hell was that about?'

'You don't know?'

'NO.'

'Gopzilla was the guest staying here at the hotel who went missing last year. He was the Hollywood executive who checked in, slept the night and by next morning he was missing. I didn't meet him myself. Caused a huge to-do in Hollywood, it did. High Mistress Breeze has been really upset about it. It looked really bad on the business, all that gossip it caused.'

Gladys sat forward. 'Did he eat breakfast here by any chance? It wouldn't have anything to do with the sausages, would it?'

'Gopzilla.' I tutted, as I rubbed my head. 'At least it's not a gorilla ghost. Thought I was going to pass out then.'

Eric suddenly clapped his hands together. 'I don't believe it.'

'What?' Gladys and I said.

'You know what this is, don't you?'

'A nightmare?'

'Squirrels going missing, guests going missing, ghosts.'

'Hell?'

'A mystery. We are in the middle of our very own mystery. Like a Columbo murder mystery.' Eric started jumping up and down and clapping his hands. 'Ohh, ohh, we are! This is so exciting. We could be like Ghostbusters, all three of us ... a team.'

'Or Brooklyn Nine-Nine,' Gladys said as she and Eric bounced around.

'More like Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency,' I said.

Eric stopped jumping. 'We should solve the mystery. We could call it "Operation Squirrel". What do you reckon, Gladys, Grace, what do you think?'

'Or we could call it "I think I'm going to throw up",' I said, gripping my mouth.

'RUN GLADYS.'

CHAPTER 7

I hate waiting. If you think about it, our whole lives are basically one big fat wait filled with a countless number of smaller waits in between.

I would even go as far as saying that waiting serves no real purpose whatsoever. That said, somehow, some way, humanity has evolved to the point where we consider the tolerance of waiting an admirable trait, leaving the rest of us with a legion of brain-dead flakes mingling amongst us. Flakes being the British word to describe a lazy person of perfectly sound mind who needs a good kick up the arse.

Identifying said flakes can be easily achieved, not by their birth date, but by their meaningful phrases which they post on social media to weed out other like-minded flakes so they can bond over their shared laziness. For instance:

“Patience is a virtue”

“All good things come to those who wait”

“All in good time”

“One step at a time”

Honestly, you should Google it. I reckon at least thirty per cent of Google's brain power is made up of stupid quotes, just like that. Winds me right up.

Another great way to spot a flake is by their blog posts, in which they claim that their morning routine is their key to earning thousands of pounds for each video blog they publish. As if going against the laws of nature to follow their preset routine will reset the universe and you'll be living like the Queen next week. The fact is, the only thing they've ever worked out is exactly how to play on everyone's sad and get paid for it—so stop visiting their website and maybe they'd be just as average as the rest of us.

For example, they will have uploaded a video and in it claim, ‘When I wake up in the morning, I hold my mug for five minutes and stare at it and I say to myself, I am so, so grateful for this mug. My whole day just falls into place and I'm so successful because of it’.

ARLGH.

If you are not a flake, then I am sure that you will relate to the reality of my mid-life morning routine.

I rise out of bed—when I absolutely have to—and the first thing I say is 'Fuck you, menopause' as I stagger towards my medicine cabinet, just to let my menopause know that despite the fact I got no sleep and look like a wet seal, I'm about to reclaim my oestrogen levels whether Mother Nature likes it or not. Then I carefully hurl my HRT and other age-related medicines down my throat as I reach for my squirrel mug, which I hover in front of my face for a few moments, trying to decide if I'm going to wash it or risk it, and then go with the latter. About an hour later, after six coffees and some leftover pizza, I twitch into existence as I lie hunched over the arm of the couch, and then I open a single eye.

The fact of the matter is that's the best morning routine I can muster at forty-nine, and, I assure you, being grateful for that pile of turd goes against everything my DNA stands for. The problem I have with receiving stupid advice about waking up is that a morning routine is nothing but a wait with a fancy name. Therefore, when someone gives me advice on waiting, as concept flakes everywhere simply do not understand, I get very, very mad.

I often feel I should start my own anti-waiting social media page and post my own meaningful phrases, so I can weed out the rest of the normal people from humanity and we can bond over time-wasters. If I did, my practical quotes would go like this:

"It's okay if the doctor's three hours behind, but if I turn up late ..."

"All good things come to those who scurry."

"You'd get things done faster if you ... moved faster."

"From the moment we're born, we're all just waiting to die."

"Just bloody do it, for fuck's sake."

"Always pee immediately, you'll regret it later on."

"Elliot Paul, the journalist and author who died in 1958, was apparently quoted as saying 'Patience makes women beautiful in middle age'. I would like to expand on this still widely-posted quote and say, 'But now we have Botox and rights'."

"Being impatient makes people-flakes do more work, whereas being patient means they'll watch you do the work."

"Wasting time being grateful for stupid shit means you're unhappy, so do something that makes you happy rather than staring at a mug -like paintball with the neighbours, even if they don't want to play it."

"Queue jumping is a dying art."

"Impatience is progress's best friend."

"Serial killers don't procrastinate, so neither should you."

"When you're dead, everybody else is just going to carry on regardless, so keep that in mind when you're giving way to traffic."

"The more time you waste when you're young, the sadder you'll be in your nursing home."

"Buddhists are fundamentally just lazy people who've mastered avoidance—avoid Buddhists."

Feel free to quote me: Google will love you.

Needless to say, as you may have already gathered, I am not exactly the nicest person to be near when precious minutes of my life are passing me by.

'How long has it been?'

'Grace, shut up. This is bad enough without you whining about it.'

I glared at Gladys and gave it thirty seconds. 'How about now?'

'Grace, humbl blub himmm.'

I pulled a pile of foliage from my face and looked over my shoulder at Eric who was sat in the back seat of the old abandoned car in the Squirrel Reserve. 'I don't speak bush,' I said with a snarl.

Eric scrambled to pull the twigs and leaves from his face. 'I said, we just got here.'

I swung my head back around and looked out the windowless rust bucket of a car we were sat in. 'Owch!' I shouted.

'Grace, will you please shut up! What the hell is wrong with you now?'

'The twigs are digging in me. This is ridiculo—'

'Sssh.'

I lowered my voice. 'I said. This. Is. Ridiculous.'

Gladys ripped her bush costume away from her face and leant towards me. 'This was your bloody idea.'

'Yeah, so where are they?'

'What do you expect, the squirrel thieves to just turn up because we've arrived?'

'I mean, that would be convenient, woul—'

'Now that is ridiculous.'

'Both of you.' Eric shot a hand out from his bush costume and gripped the rusty seat I was sat on. Gladys and I both wheezed as we turned our body bushes around to face him. 'I have never felt so ill in my whole life,' he said, 'and yet here I am, dressed as a bush, in a Squirrel Reserve in the dead of night, in the back of a rusty old car, with you two, who won't stop arguing. May I remind you that Amos and the others are in the tops of the trees counting on us. We are supposed to be the eyes and ears on the ground. We are not. We are three very uncomfortable bushes in an abandoned car arguing.'

Gladys and I covered our angry faces back up and turned back to face the front so we could sulk quietly. Eric was right but this certainly didn't stop my brain from thinking about how much I was going to regret this in my nursing home.

Hours seemed to pass and nothing happened. Okay, so actually it was fifteen minutes but that was a record for me. As we looked out from the abandoned car and into the forest, we barely saw so much as a shake of a bush. A shimmer of moonlight highlighted the clearing in the woods, and all around us a thin, low-hanging mist swept through the black stillness of the forest floor. Occasionally, an owl would toot, causing all three of us to jolt and whimper in our badly thought out costumes.

Eventually, Gladys caved. 'Okay, I can't take any more, we need to talk, this is too boring,' she whispered.

Eric leant forward. 'Now you mention it, there is something I was going to say. We can't let on anything about what happened at the seance to Amos and everyone at the Squirrel Reserve, okay?'

'Why?' Gladys said.

'Because Columbo wouldn't, would he?'

'But it's not like Amos and everyone here are stealing the squirrels, are they?'

'But we don't know right now, do we?'

'I suppose,' said Gladys.

'Grace, what about you? Think we should keep quiet?'

'I gotta pee.'

'Can't you hold it?'

'Absolutely not, no way, not in any circumstance, forget it. I'll be really quick.'

The car door crackled and creaked as I carefully edged it open and heaved my heavily foliated body out of the car. Thankfully, coupled with my disguise and the darkness, I managed to find a spot not too far from the car.

As I was walking back, I spent more time trying to keep my costume up rather than looking where I was going, meaning my foot slipped on the muddy ground below and I crashed to the ground. My immediate thought as my body, covered in a thousand twigs, was connecting with the haggard terrain below me, was that under no circumstances was I to make a noise.

I felt a thousand pins stab me as I landed and slowly slid down a muddy path. When I did finally come to a standstill, I gripped my mouth and silently screamed in a contorted fetal position on the ground.

As I lay waiting for the pain to subside, I heard the creak of the car door and the voice of Eric approach me. 'Grace, Grace, are you okay?'

I pulled a leaf from my eye, only to see Eric in his bush costume patting an empty bush to my left.

'Eric,' I said, whilst whimpering, 'I'm here.'

'Oh thank goodness, I heard a screech and thought that you'd fallen. Are you okay?'

'I'm so sore, wait, Eric, a screech, no, I didn't make a single sound, I was really careful.'

I sat bolt upright and Eric and I both turned our bushy heads to face the abandoned car. Inside, we could see Gladys—a pair of shiny white eyes peeping out from the driver's seat looking back at us—and behind the car, approaching her driver's door, an enormous black hairy figure. We both shot our hands out from our bush costumes and pointed at the evil hairy figure that was approaching her.

Gladys saw our hands, turned to her driver's side window and let out a scream. Her high-pitched wail carried through the forest, causing a scattering of squirrels from amidst the darkness and the evil hairy figure beside her to shoot back into the darkness.

By the time Eric and I had reached the car, Gladys had removed her bush costume and we found her sat in the front seat shaking.

'Gladys, Gladys are you okay?' I said as I rubbed her back.

'No, no I am not! That scared the hell out of me.'

Amos, Miguel, Stevie and Lucy all appeared and gathered around Gladys. 'Gladys, are you okay? What was it? Did you get a good look?'

'No,' Gladys said as she got out of the car. 'Let's go.'

As Gladys began to walk away she stumbled slightly, so I ran over and gripped her by the arm to steady her. 'Gladys, please tell me you're okay. Do you need a doctor?'

Eric supported Gladys by the other arm. 'I can call a doctor for you.'

'Absolutely not!' Gladys snapped at us. 'Under no circumstances am I going back to that hospital. Don't even think about it.'

'Okay, sorry, Gladys. We're just worried about you, that's all. Let's go back.'

We said our goodbyes to the others and drove back to the lodge in complete silence. Eric pulled the mini-van up in the carpark and I turned to face Gladys who was sat in the back staring straight ahead. 'Gladys, are you okay?'

Eric and I both studied Gladys' face. The colour seemed to have drained from it, a blank expression engulfed her eyes, not helped one little bit by her enormous square glasses which were magnifying them.

'Eric, is Gladys okay?'

'I don't think so ... what shall we do?'

'A doctor?'

Gladys contorted her face. 'Don't bloody think about it.'

'Okay, sorry, just talk to us, please,' Eric said.

'Gladys, I am so sorry for getting you into this, I didn't ...'

Gladys gripped her fists together and lowered her voice. 'Someone is winding us up.'

'I'm sorry, what did you say?'

'I said, someone is winding us up, because that is not possible.' Gladys continued to stare blankly ahead but now her eyes had squinted and she began breathing heavily through her nose.

'Okay, now you're just scaring me. Just tell us,' I said.

Gladys leant towards us. 'When Amos and the others ran up to us, what did they say?'

Eric tapped his fingers together. 'Em, something about cookies.'

'No, Eric, for goodness sake.'

'Em, are you okay?' I said.

'After that?'

I rubbed my chin. 'Em, what was it? Did you get a good look?'

Eric gasped but I continued to rub my chin. 'I don't get it, tell me.'

'They knew what I saw wasn't human. Otherwise they would have said 'Did you see who it was?' not 'What was it?'. Grace, what is the one thing that scares you the most?'

I gasped and covered my mouth. 'Taxidermy.'

'No, the other thing.'

'Oh, hell no. Gorillas. Gladys, don't tell me that was a gorilla and we were out in the open with it.'

Gladys pushed her glasses up her face with one finger and locked eyes with me. 'That is exactly what I am telling you. I saw a six-foot ... Grace, where is she?'

'Say no more!' I screamed as I hurtled into the lodge, ran to my bedroom and dived into my hammock. It would be 3 am that morning before I finally fell asleep; my mind felt like it was endlessly churning with gorillas, taxidermy and valerian sausages. We'd booked the trip of a lifetime but, truth be told, as I lay shaking in my hammock that night, I realised that I was in the middle of a full-on, mid-life meltdown.

CHAPTER 8

It was at least 2 pm before I rose from my hammock the next day. Gladys was nowhere to be seen but eventually I found her sitting with Eric in the Zen garden. I rubbed my eyes as I wobbled over the river stones and made my way up to the rustic bench on the raised platform.

'I've had the worst sleep of my life,' I said as I plonked myself in between Gladys and Eric on the bench and continued to rub my eyes. 'And I'm so hungry I think I could eat a valerian sausage.' I looked out across the sunbaked Yosemite and blinked as I tried to focus my eyes. 'Valerian sausages, it's as if I've begun adapting to hell already,' I whispered. 'Are you ...' I slowly inspected Gladys. She was sat next to me on the bench with her eyes firmly shut and her hands resting on her lap. I raised my voice to a shout and leant towards her ear. 'DON'T TELL ME YOU'RE MEDITATING.'

Gladys' eyes sprang open. 'Grace, what the hell is wrong with you?'

'Wrong with me? You're the one meditating. What the hell is wrong with you? I leave you for five minutes with Captain Flakealot—'

'I can hear you.'

'Put a sock in it, Eric! And you end up meditating. And there I was thinking I was bad for contemplating a valerian sausage.'

'Actually,' Gladys said as she put her glasses back on, 'it's really relaxing.'

'Yoohoo, yoohoo,' a voice carried up from the Yosemite park below us. We looked over the cliff at a line of people who were walking along a path in the distance. Eric waved down to them.

'Are they the guests from the lodge?' I said, turning to Eric.

'Yeah, they're on a peace march.'

'I thought the lodge was quiet.' I leant forward and cupped my mouth with my hands and shouted back to them. 'Not very peaceful if you're shouting yooh—'

'Shh, Grace. What are you doing?' Eric said.

'Well it's not, is it?'

'Eric, ignore her,' Gladys said. 'She's a right grumpy gorilla when she first wakes up.'

I folded my arms. 'That is about the least funniest thing you could say to me right—'

'It's not as if you got almost attacked by some nutter in a gorilla costume, is it?' Gladys said, staring right at me.

'A gorilla costume? Where did you get that from? It looked just like a real gorilla from where I was stood.'

'Oh, come on, Grace. No way, absolutely no way! You honestly think there's a six-foot gorilla loose in the Yosemite who is eating squirrels? Or the ghost of a dead Hollywood executive haunting us?'

I gripped my tummy and stared into the distance. 'Well, when you put it like that, yes, yes I do.'

'Codswallop, Grace. Someone is winding us up, and Eric and I have decided we want to get to the bottom of this ... you know, solve the mystery.'

'I'm not sure I do. I mean, the ghost thing I could just about cope with, but the fact there's a gorilla on the loose.'

'Grace, we can do it,' Eric said. 'Think about it. If you were going to steal squirrels, what would you do with them?'

'Hug them.'

'Grace, no. If you were an evil squirrel hunter. What would you do with them?'

'Flippin' hell, the circus has sent in a squirrel-stealing gorilla!'

Gladys threw her hands in the air. 'No, Grace. Taxidermy. Victoria, the sour-faced crab you tried to axe. That's the only logical explanation for where they could be going. We think someone is stealing them to run Amos off the land.'

'But it's not High Mistress Breeze,' said Eric.

'But we don't know that right now, do we?'

Eric scrunched his mouth to one side. 'It can't be her, though. I just don't believe it.'

'But we have to be like Columbo, remember? We can't just say who it is and isn't because we like them. We have to keep an open mind, right?'

'I suppose,' Eric said with a sigh. 'But if that's the case, then you, Gladys, have to keep an open mind about ghosts and gorillas too.'

Gladys pointed her nose in the air. 'I will bloody not. There's no such—'

'If I have to, and you expect Grace to, then you have to,' Eric said.

'Fine, bloody fine.'

I gripped my head as Eric and Gladys continued to disagree about the existence of ghosts and gorillas, and breathed in deeply. Just before I felt my head about to explode, I leapt to my feet. 'This is just about the worst thing I think I've ever heard,' I said. 'I'll never sleep again.'

'Grace, there's more,' Gladys continued. 'Now Donna and her stupid aura have gone missing.'

'The annoying guest Donna?'

'Yes.'

'I mean, well, I'm okay with that if you are?'

'Well, now you mention it,' Gladys said. 'No, that's not the point, Grace. She's not been seen since breakfast yesterday. High Mistress Breeze called the police earlier and they're investigating. She seems really upset about it, especially after Gopzilla went missing last year.'

'We've already thought of a plan,' Eric said. 'You, me and Gladys all get to know the other guests and everyone at the Squirrel Reserve and work out who's behind it all. What's happening here might be connected with what's going on at the Squirrel Reserve but we

don't know right now. Since the ghost of Gopzilla only arrived yesterday, we reckon it has to be connected to someone here ... unless it was actually a ghost.' Eric winked at Gladys.

'More to the point,' Gladys continued, 'if we want to find out more about the guests, then we're going to have to take part in the activities.'

I dropped my hands to my side. 'You mean yoga?'

'Yes.'

'And peace walks?'

'Them too.'

'No way. This is too much. Why can't Eric just do it by himself?'

'Me? I can't, can I?'

'Can't you?'

'I'm the resident life coach/ tourist guide. I have to sit around here and wait for people to ask me to do stuff. Usually people come and ask me for marriage guidance or I have to direct them to oak trees that will cleanse their souls. I have to just stay here and wait. You two are literally the most fun I've had in ages. Grace, Grace ... where are you going?'

'I can't do this!' I shouted as I stomped towards the lodge. As I was midway across the stream, Gladys shouted something to me that caused me to lose my footing and slam my light-up trainers into the ankle-deep water.

'That's because she gives up on everything.'

Her voice carried through the garden, rendering my body completely frozen for a few moments. I turned back to Gladys, but she was sat on the bench with her back to me, facing the Yosemite. Of all the things to say to me, I could barely find the words to answer her. Instead, I stomped back to the lodge, in my now soggy trainers, and slammed the door to the gratitude room behind me.

Five seconds later, I tore back out of the gratitude room and into the Zen garden.

'Fine!' I screamed to Eric and Gladys, as I pointed sharply at them. 'Fine, but only because I love squirrels. Not because of anything else, so get that straight.'

* * *

I scowled as I peered over Gladys' shoulder. She was hunched over the activity book on the front desk, signing us up to everything that the Hardcore Mind, Body and Soul Lodge had to offer.

'Chanting session, tick, greenstone facial massage, tick, finding your aura, tick, night peace march, tick ...'

When Gladys had finally finished, she turned back around to face my upside-down mouth. I couldn't be sure but I could swear she was smirking. 'I know you hate this stuff,' I said. 'Ever since that gorilla turned up last night you've been so moody.'

'You mean, when the person in a gorilla costume turned—'

'Whatever. Ever since then you've been in a right mood. It's not my fault that a ghost and a gorilla showed u—'

Gladys leant towards me. 'Grace, for the love of God! THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A GHOST, AND NO GORILLA.'

I lowered my voice to a lingering gurgle. 'Then bring on the healing meditation, because I will sure as hell prove you wrong.'

Gladys used one finger to push her glasses up her nose and locked eyes with me. 'I cannot wait, Grace Squirrel, so bring it on.'

Quite frankly, I couldn't believe the cheek of Gladys, calling me a grumpy gorilla when she was a fine one to talk. All over a ghost and gorilla too, I mean, could she get any more stubborn? There was absolutely no way I was losing this one though. I was going to spend the next few days finding out everything I possibly could about the rest of the guests and prove her wrong. Situations like this, I would like to add, are exactly why squirrel pads were invented. I dug mine out of my bag, found my squirrel pen, and stomped off in the direction of the next healing meditation session.

'Wrong way, Grace.'

'I knew that, I bloody knew that!' I shouted as I doubled back and stomped towards the Zen garden.

Tuesday morning: Healing Meditation with High Mistress Breeze

Everyone in attendance except Lion Heart, High Mistress Breeze's husband. Nobody said anything. One whole hour of nothing. An hour. Who does that? Gladys didn't open her eyes once—the lengths she'd go to prove a point. I nipped off about five minutes in and then returned at the end. Pretty sure no one noticed. Must try harder.

Tuesday tea time in Gratitude Room

Everyone in attendance. Fried tofu for tea. I'm sure Gladys hated it too but she was so sly she never once gagged on it. Anna McHappy from Scotland whipped her guitar out and sang a self-written song. It was so bad that her husband, Scotty McHappy, sat next to her the whole time with one hand covering his face. Can't remember the exact words because I had my hands over my ears, but the chorus was so catchy that everyone kept joining in for a sing-a-ling. Needless to say, the noise level rose on the chorus so I heard it. It was pretty catchy though, so I couldn't help but join in the last bit. It went like this:

'Is this really my life, la, la, la, the sex is so mediocre that I get more enjoyment from doing the dishes, ohh, ohh, I've installed a wine pump in the kitchen, stopped shaving and discovered all I care about is my next prescription, la, la, la. Maybe I should invite my husband's secretary to my birthday party next month, month, month, at least he'd turn up, since they're always so busy together. Is this really my life, la, la, la.'

Once over, everyone clapped, all except me and her husband who both sat shaking our heads and looking down at the floor. I mean, honestly, white noise sounded better. I literally could not believe that, out of all of us, only me and Anna's husband had some taste in music —what were the chances.

High Mistress Breeze was very impressed with Anna's song though and spent five minutes encouraging us all to express ourselves whenever we wish. Gladys stuck her hand in the air and said she'd write a poem for everyone before she left, which made me very angry cos I know she hates poems.

Tuesday evening: Peace walk with High Mistress Breeze

Everyone in attendance. Nobody said anything. It was very dark and I was so scared. All I could think about was gorilla ghosts. I tried to link arms with Dotty and Delilah from Australia but they unlinked arms with me and ran ahead. Those two are so up to something. And they were in the Z Club. Must keep an eye on those two.

Wednesday morning: Chanting session in the Zen garden

Everyone in attendance except Lion Heart. We all sat in a circle and took turns shouting out chants which we would then all repeat twenty times so that the words sunk in and we believed them. Most fun I'd had in a long time. It went like this:

High Mistress Breeze: 'Let's begin our chanting session. On the bang of the gong, someone shout out a chant and we will repeat twenty times. It is important that we keep to the rhythm and let our energy flow. Don't stop for any reason, just keep the chanting going and our auras will gently intertwine in this beautiful circle and we will become one. Eric will guide us with his gong. I will start.'

High Mistress Breeze: 'Love is within us.'

Everyone chants: 'Love is within us. Love is within us. Love is within us ...'

Eric bangs gong.

Dotty and Delilah shout in unison: 'We are what we think we are.'

Everyone chants: 'We are what we think we are. We are what we think we are. We are what we think we are ...'

Eric bangs gong.

Me: 'Drugs are for pugs.'

Everyone chants: 'Drugs are for pugs. Drugs are for pugs. Drugs are for pugs ...'

Eric bangs gong, really hard.

Chad from New York: 'Money isn't everything.'

Everyone chants: 'Money isn't everything. Money isn't everything. Money isn't everything ...'

Eric bangs gong.

Chad's wife, Mia: 'Organising is hot.'

Everyone chants: 'Organising is hot. Organising is hot. Organising is hot ...'

Scotty McHappy: 'Should I be sorry for earning a living?'

Everyone chants: 'Should I be sorry for earning a living? Should I be sorry for earning a living? Should I be sorry for earning a living? ...'

Eric bangs gong.

Anna McHappy: 'I think I fancy the postman.'

Everyone: 'I think I fancy the postman. I think I fancy the postman. I think I fancy the postman ...'

Eric bangs gong.

Me: 'This is so much fun I could wet myself—'

Eric bangs gong, really hard, repeatedly.

Felicity cuts me off: 'Good parenting means—'

Poet cuts his mum off: 'Letting teenagers get tattoos.'

Everyone chants: 'Good parenting means letting teenagers get tattoos. Good parenting means letting teenagers get tattoos. Good parenting means letting teenagers get tattoos ...'

Eric sniggers and bangs the gong.

Barry from London: 'Finding yourself is—'

I cut him off: 'Only appropriate if you've lost a leg.'

Everyone chants: 'Finding yourself is only appropriate if you've lost a leg. Finding yourself is only ...'

Barry throws me a filthy look and shouts over everyone's chant: 'Other guests are really annoying.'

Everyone chants: 'Other guests are really annoying. Other ...'

Scotty McHappy shouts over the chanting: 'I think I fancy my secretary.'

Everyone chants: 'I think I fancy my secretary ...'

Eric bangs the gong.

Anna shouts over everyone: 'I wish her luck finding your peni—'

Eric bangs the gong repeatedly.

Felicity shouts over everyone's chants: 'I'm never having anymore—'

Poet shouts over her: 'Botox.'

Mia shouts over everyone: 'How about we organise our minds and just ...'

Someone throws a tuft of grass in Mia's mouth and I roar with laughter.

The chanting turns into one big screaming match.

I stand up and shout: 'I've lost my vibrator!'

Except for a single cricket springing past us, there was total and utter silence.

High Mistress Breeze: 'I think that some of us need to work on our inner peace. Let's call it a day.'

Gladys turns her hearing aid back up. 'What did I miss?'

And so it went on: endless healing sessions, meditating and chanting, until one evening when Gladys, myself and Eric met for an Operation Squirrel team meeting on the white rustic bench in the Zen garden. But rather than talk, we all sat silently with sullen faces, staring out across the Yosemite and contemplating what our next move would be. Donna still hadn't turned up and we were all still none the wiser.

'Don't think I can take any more,' I said.

'Oh please, we've hardly got started.'

'Gladys, I know you can't stand this—'

'Enough!' Eric butted in. 'That is enough. The pair of you, just take a break from arguing, will you?'

'Fine,' I said. 'I need a break from this though. You know, get out of here.'

'That's it!' Gladys sat bolt upright. 'We do need to get out of here. We're looking in the wrong place. What were we thinking?'

'What do you mean?'

Gladys grabbed my squirrel pad from my hands. 'Let me have a look at that thing again, Grace.'

'I've gone over everything so many times, Gladys, you're not going to—'

'That's it ... there.'

'Where?'

'Lion Heart, High Mistress Breeze's husband. Every morning he's not at any of the activities.'

Eric grabbed the squirrel pad. 'She's right, he's not there. '

'Maybe he likes to sleep in?' I said.

'Or maybe he's up to something,' Gladys said with a scowl. 'I say we follow him.'

'Fine, unless you want to go to another greenstone healing session, Gladys?'

Gladys scowled at me. 'Tomorrow morning, we're getting up early.'

'We should really buy some coffee for this.'

'I've got some maca tea?'

'Eric, put a sock in it.'

I don't know if you have tried stalking anyone recently, but it's really rather difficult, especially when you have a partially blind eighty-year-old and a kaftan-wearing flake in tow. Gladys' idea of hurrying up is holding onto her cardigan rather than putting it on, and as for Captain Flakealot, well, I honestly don't know where to start with that attention-seeking turnip.

Gladys and I peeped out from the inside window of the lodge as Lion Heart jumped into his car and drove away, meaning that the next stage of Operation Squirrel was well and truly under way.

I arm-farted the code word to Eric, who I couldn't seem to pinpoint anywhere in the foyer.

Gladys scowled at me. 'Grace, what the hell are you doing?'

'Arm farting the code word "go" to Eric.'

'How is he supposed to understand that?'

I scowled back at Gladys. 'Well, duh, how do you think the Germans communicated with each other during World War Two?'

'Grace, you're not seriously suggesting that Alan Turing decoded arm farts, are you?'

'Who's that?'

Gladys stood up and shouted over the foyer. 'Eric, hurry the bloody hell up before I kill her.'

Eric appeared and we flung the heavy double doors to the lodge open and tore towards the mini-van.

It was full-on action stations as we tore across the carpark. My feet pounded the gravel, sweat dripped from my forehead and my feet whipped up a cataclysmic cloud of dust behind me. As I arrived at the mini-van, my body slammed into the door as my hands fumbled for the handle. I reached down, secured my sweaty grip, ripped the door open and screamed, 'Get in, Gladys, go, go, go ... Gladys?' I looked back over the pebble-dash carpark, just as the dust was clearing, towards the front door that we'd just bolted from, and spotted Gladys straightening a couple of pot plants.

'You have got to be kidding me!' I wailed. I raised my voice and shouted, 'Gladys, will you please, please hurry up!'

'Coming, all right, coming ... hold your horses,' Gladys said as she shuffled towards me.

'And where the hell is Eric?'

The double doors to the lodge burst open and Eric stepped out giving Beyoncé a run for her money. He was wearing a pair of gold-rimmed shades, a gold silk kaftan with matching shorts that glistened in the sun, far too much gel in his hair, and, by the looks of it, had been overly generous with the fake tan.

'Eric!' I shouted. 'Eric, what the hell are you doing? That is just not necessary. Even James Bond didn't look that fabulous.'

Eric walked arm-in-arm with Gladys, and five minutes later we all sat in the car and clipped our seatbelts on. I turned to Eric who was adjusting his shades in the mirror. 'Well, now we've lost him, haven't we?'

Eric smiled. 'No, no we have not.'

Eric was absolutely right—Lion Heart drove slower than my epilator; however, my epilator was less painful than the five whale-sound filled hours we took trailing behind Lion Heart on our way to Hollywood.

CHAPTER 9

Eventually, we ended up on Hollywood Boulevard where we trailed Lion Heart on foot; however, Lion Heart didn't exactly look as if he was up to no good. Other than stopping briefly for a hotdog, to take a phone call and enjoy a coffee, Lion Heart was acting pretty normal.

'Maybe he's just having the morning off?' Eric said as we huddled behind a tree from a distance.

'I'm past caring,' Gladys said as she sat down on the nearest bench. She removed her mask and patted her forehead dry.

'Well, you had to get dressed up as a ninja in this heat, didn't you?' I said.

'You should have got dressed up like me.' Eric waved his feather-light, gold kaftan in Gladys' direction.

'No. No, you shouldn't. We agreed to go in disguise, but if that kaftan catches the light then passing planes could mistake you for a runway, Eric. That was a completely stupid idea. Talk about sticking out, honestly, it's like one thing after another around here.' I flattened my white ragged dress and let out a disgruntled sigh. After a few seconds, I noticed Gladys staring at me. 'What?'

'Grace, you dressed up as Wilma Flintstone.'

'Well, what else was I ... wait ... Lion Heart's moving. Oh, oh, look, he's going in there.' I read a sign that hung over the front of a tall, red-brick building that Lion Heart had just entered; the stone steps at the front were full of people walking in and out, taking pictures of themselves and huddling in groups. 'Lone Ideas Entertainment. What is that place?'

'It's one of the big six film studios. Parts of it are open to the public.'

'Wasn't Gopzilla a studio executive? Could that be his old workplace?' Gladys said.

'You know, I think it was,' said Eric.

Gladys sprung to a standing position. 'Move, let's move.'

'Oh, now you want to walk fast,' I said as I ran behind Gladys.

By the time we had all reached the marble foyer of Lone Ideas Entertainment, we couldn't see Lion Heart anywhere. We carefully studied the open floors of the building that surrounded us in a semi-circle, all the while children and jolly adults bashed into us as they pushed past.

'There!' Eric blurted out. 'There in the glass lift, stopping at the second floor.'

Sure enough, Lion Heart stepped out of the lift on the second floor and took a left. By the time we made it up to the second floor, he was gone, but there was nowhere else for him to go except into one of the boardrooms, which meant we were in luck. For the next five minutes, we all took turns to casually walk back and forth in front of the boardrooms to gather information.

We huddled back in a group to share what we had seen.

'I saw two women the first time I walked past, and I think I saw a couple of men on my way back,' I said.

'I saw a table, two large bay windows and a whiteboard,' said Eric.

'Oh for goodness sake, Eric,' Gladys said. 'I saw, I saw ...'

'Who, who did you see?'

'Amos Ames.'

Eric and I froze. 'You mean the Amos Ames from—'

'From where?' Gladys said. 'Star Wars?'

'There's two? I meant the one at the Squirrel Reserve.'

'I was being sarcastic, Grace. Of course that one, he's sat near the ...'

Suddenly, the door to the boardroom flew open and every hair on our bodies stood on end as we realised what we had done. We had stood directly in front of the door of the boardroom to talk. I kicked Eric as we slowly turned our faces the other way and shuffled towards the railings that overlooked the foyer.

'Excuse us, folks,' said one of the women as they exited the room.

Whilst covering our faces, we then watched as Lion Heart, Amos Ames and their associates took the glass lift to the foyer and exited the building.

'I couldn't get a clear look at their faces,' I said, my eyes trailing their bodies as they left.

Gladys shouted from inside the meeting room. 'Look, look at this!'

'What the hell, Gladys?' I shouted back.

Once inside though, Eric and I realised exactly what she was talking about. On the whiteboard was a hand-drawn plan of the lodge and the Squirrel Reserve, with red lines marking where the lodge will be extended—right over the Squirrel Reserve.

'Well, that's it over, isn't it?' said Gladys. 'Amos was telling the truth and High Mistress Breeze was lying. Amos must have cracked and given the land back to High Mistress Breeze.'

Eric buried his face in his hands and sat down. 'So it was High Mistress Breeze who was stealing squirrels all along. I just never thought she would do that.'

Gladys nodded through her ninja mask.

'You know what?' I said. 'I'm not taking this—all this way to see the Squirrel Reserve and she destroys it. I know she owns the land, but those poor squirrels. How could she?' I clenched my fists and stood up. 'Come on, we have someone I need to have a word with.'

'Where are we going?' Eric shouted as I bounded out of the room.

'To give High Mistress Breeze a piece of my mind. That aura of hers better watch out.'

The whole of the journey back to the lodge, my mind whirred. Destroying a Squirrel Reserve had to be one of the worst things anyone could do in my book, but as we pulled into the carpark of the lodge we noticed that the place was packed out. The front of the lodge was swarming with reporters, cameras and police. We changed out of our costumes in the

minivan, pushed our way past the crowds and made our way over to the foyer where all of the guests were sat around whispering to each other.

'What's happening?' Eric said to Felicity who was stood by the front desk.

'It's High Mistress Breeze. She's missing.'

'No way. Since when?'

'Since last night,' Poet interrupted. 'Can you believe it? She never turned up to this morning's meditation session. One of the staff called the police. It's so unlike her. They phoned Lion Heart but he said he'd not seen her since last night.'

'But we just—'

Eric butted in before I could finish my sentence. 'We can't believe it. Can we, Grace?'

I stepped back. 'No, no, that's terrible. I can't believe it.'

'Well,' said Felicity, 'the police will be questioning us all soon, so get ready. I wonder if she's—'

'Been kidnapped like the rest of them?' I said.

'Exactly. That's what everyone is wondering. The media have got a hold of it now too and it's big news. First Gopzilla, then Donna, the squirrels and now High Mistress Breeze. It's made the nationals.'

Eric led Gladys and me away by the hand into the corner of the foyer. 'See you all soon,' he shouted back before leaning in and whispering to us. 'We can't tell anyone.' Eric said. 'Grace has a stuffed squirrel and squirrels are going missing. Try explaining that.'

I held my bag close to my chest. 'Mr Nutty McNutnut. That does look bad. We can't say anything, Gladys. Imagine if they took him away from me?'

'Hang on,' Gladys said, 'so Lion Heart doesn't see his wife since last night and then we see him at a meeting in Gopzilla's workplace with Amos Ames. It's not like he looked concerned that his wife was missing. If that was the staff phoning to say that High Mistress Breeze was missing, when he took that phone call on Hollywood Boulevard, he hardly looked bothered, did he? Maybe it's not High Mistress Breeze at all, maybe it's her slimy husband who's up to no good. Maybe he's working with Amos and they've kidnapped High Mistress Breeze. We should say something to the police. This is huge.'

'How can we explain following him dressed as a gold umpa lumpa, a ninja and Wilma Flintstone. We can't. That's ridiculous,' said Eric.

'Please, Gladys, please ... we will solve the mystery ourselves. Just don't tell the police.'

* * *

After hours of questioning by the police, Eric, Gladys and I all met on the rustic bench in the Zen garden that evening. Outside the lodge, the carpark continued to swarm with reporters, all eager to gather information on High Mistress Breeze and her missing guests.

'This is crazy,' said Eric as he rubbed his forehead. 'I hope High Mistress Breeze is okay. Who would take her?'

Gladys turned to Eric. 'Or she ran away.'

'What possible reason would she have to do that?'

Gladys twiddled her fingers. 'Maybe she's done something wrong? Maybe she couldn't take the pressure? Maybe Donna was the final straw and she buckled? I don't know. We should find out though.'

'How?'

'Well, we should start with that Lone Ideas Entertainment place. That's where Lion Heart was. You know what,' Gladys said. 'I think I might just have a plan that Columbo would be proud of ...'

Ten minutes later, Gladys had refined her plan and the final part of Operation Squirrel was set in stone. 'If that doesn't do it then I don't know what will,' Gladys said as she finished pacing the floor and sat back down.

I wasn't really sure if I liked Gladys' plan one little bit, it seemed like an awful lot of work considering. But there was one thing I was absolutely sure of: now it wasn't just about saving the Squirrel Reserve—the life of Mr Nutty McNutnut was compromised and I sure as hell wasn't letting anything happen to him.

'Agreed,' said Eric. 'Oh, and when we finally work it all out, we should so do the Columbo reveal on your leaving party.'

'Leaving party?'

'Yes, the final night before a guest leaves, we all gather in the gratitude room for a party. Everyone is expected to get up and do a poem or a song or something like that to say their goodbyes.'

'Oh, I can do my poem then,' Gladys said. 'I've already been working on it. And Grace, you can play the piano.' Gladys turned to Eric. 'Her mother taught her to play the piano and she is incredi—'

'No! No, I will not. I will do the Columbo reveal. I'm not doing that.'

Eric leant in. 'I can do the Columbo reveal, why don't—'

'Don't even think about mentioning it again! You bang a gong, I will do the reveal.'

'Hello, I'm here for my interview for the job of Hollywood Executive Producer.'

'And your name?'

'Powers. Miss A. Powers.'

'I'm sorry, Madam. Are you sure you have the right place? I don't seem to have—'

'I'm sorry. Am I sure I have the right place? My whole life has been spent trying to get a job here. I finally get an interview and you tell me that you've messed up?' I raised my voice. 'You've messed up what could potentially be the best day of my life. How could you?'

'Em, em, Madam, please calm down, I'm sure there's been a mistake. Oh look, there has, please take a seat in our waiting room and someone will be with you shortly.'

I sniggered as I took a seat on a giant, squishy hand in the waiting room that I presumed had to be a couch, although no one else was sat on it. All around me sat a waiting room full of bland faces, wearing sharp suits, with chiselled haircuts and edgy smiles. It was hard to tell them apart. They were obviously local which meant I was well and truly outnumbered by a bunch of native, high-flying executives. Interviews were my thing though; I wasn't letting them put me off.

'Miss Powers, would you like to follow me?' The receptionist led me through some double doors and into a large conference room where five executives sat in a straight line. I flattened my blue crushed velvet two-piece suit, puffed out my frilly white shirt and pushed my black-framed glasses back up my face as I approached. I could practically feel the steely glares of the executives as they inspected every inch of my attire. My interview went like this:

Executives: 'Miss Powers, we don't seem to have your résumé ...'

My mind: 'Lie, lie, lie.'

Me: 'You have a truly terrible receptionist.' *Shoots receptionist a cold stare*

Receptionist: *Looks to floor*

Executives: 'Why do you want to work here?'

My mind: 'Oh shit, I thought they would ask for a power word. You've gotta lie. Remember, if you can get a job as a delivery driver with no licence then you can get one anywhere. Lie, lie, lie.'

Me: *Posh voice* 'Well, Sir, I deeply resonate with Lone Ideas Entertainment's core values, as an Oxford graduate of '99 with honours. Having been raised on films such as The Lone Cleaner, Gone with The Bins and Citizen Drain, I felt compelled to add value to the entertainment industry and join a company such as yourselves.'

My mind: 'Nice one.'

Executives: 'Our core values are what's important to us. We are delighted that you brought them up. Where are you from, Miss Powers?'

Me: 'Britain.'

Executives: *Let out a sigh* 'Ahh, that makes sense. Now, tell us, the Queen, have you met her?'

My mind: 'Lie ...'

Me: 'Funny story, actually ...' *Five minutes later* '... so it turned out that we were all related. The Queen found this so funny over afternoon tea at Buckingham Palace, when we finally met. Whatta day that was.'

Executives: *Delighted faces* 'Fascinating, absolutely fascinating.'

My mind: 'Dude, you are on fire.'

Executives: 'Now, final question, do tell us, if you could sum up yourself in one word, what would it be?'

My mind: *Straightens short, red wig* 'OMG, this is it, you were born for this, do it.'

Me: *Points finger at executives and shouts* 'SEXY.'

Executives: *Confused look*

My mind: 'No, you idiot. Remember the nightclub. You have to be cool. COOL. Think cool, for f-sake think of something COOL.'

Me: 'Nope, em, em, TERMINATOR, nope, em, SYLVESTER STALLONE, nope, em, AL PACHINO, nope, em ...'

Executives: *Confused look*

My mind: 'COOL, THINK OF SOMETHING BLOODY COOL.'

Me: 'PETER GRIFFIN?'

Executives: *Point in my direction* 'HIRED.'

My mind: 'What the flippin' fuck?'

Me: *Jumping up and down and flapping hands* 'Oh my, lovely jubbly!'

I was in.

The following day, the crap receptionist showed me to my top-notch office overlooking Hollywood Boulevard and it was magnificent. I ran my hands over the black, silky desk as I sank into my leather Ox chair with a high back. On the desk sat an exquisite red telephone, and all around me an endless array of high-tech devices for my entertainment. Aside from the ugly, hairless cat with a black tag that read "Mr Squiggles", I would say that I rather liked my surroundings, despite the black on black colour scheme which was not to my taste. Not quite The Smokin' Haggis Café, of course, but it would certainly do. I pulled out my squirrel pad and got straight to work.

Whilst I was gathering intelligence on Lone Ideas Entertainment, Gladys was tasked with infiltrating the Squirrel Reserve. Owing to the fact this whole Operation Squirrel was her wretched idea, I had rather presumed she was taking things a lot more seriously than she was, but little did I know she was about to fall at the first hurdle.

Looking back, I suppose Gladys' first issue was that she got dressed too nicely; I mean, she was supposed to be undercover. Same could be said for James Bond really. I reckon if he had turned up looking in dire need of a good wash a bit more often than he did, then he wouldn't have got himself in half the trouble. Needless to say, not wearing her string vest or Mickey Mouse shorts would have been a smart move on Gladys' part.

Unbeknownst to me, Gladys had strolled into the Squirrel Reserve looking a million dollars, and the first person she met was Amos flippin' Ames, the smoothest cowboy this side of the Yosemite.

'Howdy, Gladys. To what do we owe this pleasure?'

'Grace is spending some time in Hollywood, so I thought I would spend a little time here.' Gladys flicked her hair.

'Well now, how about I show you around?'

And that was basically it—not that I was any the wiser at that point.

That night, Gladys and I lay in our hammocks and we chatted about how our day had gone.

'I am cream-crackered,' I said as I snuggled into my hammock. 'I swear, I didn't realise that talking could be so exhausting. Talk, talk, talk ... telesales was easier than this.'

'Oh, em, yes, me too, Grace.'

'Really, what did you do all day?'

'Oh, well, you know, squirrel spotting, cleaning the reserve, the usual, manual stuff.'

'Squirrel spotting, that's my dream, oh, why couldn't I have done that? You want to swap—'

'NO.'

'All right, grumpy.'

'No, I mean, no, we can't, there's no way I could be a Hollywood executive, that's all.'

'I suppose so. So, did you find anything out yet?'

'No, I spoke to Amos for a little bit, not long, mainly helping out with the tidying up. I will try again tomorrow. How about you?'

'Nothing much, just spent the day phoning people, introducing myself, arranging lunch dates. Got a load of scripts on my desk but I don't think I can really be bothered with that.'

'How about the staff? Anything?'

'Oh, they're such a bunch of flakes, honestly, Gladys, you'd hate them. I'm not really sure anyone does any work. The girl on reception has a desk full of crystals which she says brings her inner peace, and she kept trying to read my tarot cards so I threw them back in her face. There's a sign in the main office that says "Rest and Be Grateful", and I swear my secretary is half hippy. I even caught the receptionist burning sage in the ladies' toilet which she said got rid of ghosts but I literally don't know how stupid she thinks I am.'

'What about Gopzilla. Anything on him?'

'Not really, but he definitely worked there. I asked some of the staff but they all said they had no idea. At first, I thought the receptionist was going to tell me all about him when I questioned her, but then realised she was reading my bloody tea leaves. I will break into the HR office tomorrow and find out more. Oh, did you invite Amos and everyone at the Squirrel Reserve to our leaving party?'

'Yes, and Eric invited everyone here.'

I folded my hands behind my head and rested back. 'No pressure, right? We really don't have long to work this out, do we?'

'Right, I'm sure we will though. Tomorrow's the day.'

'Bring it on.'

The following evening, as we lay in our hammocks, Gladys and I mulled over our day.

'So, how did it go at the Squirrel Reserve?'

'It was okay.'

'Okay? Gladys, what did you find out about everyone? You were supposed to be finding stuff out.'

'Well, I found out Amos accidentally ran over a squirrel on his bike when he was ten. Ever since then he's been haunted by—'

'Anything worth knowing that might help Operation Squirrel?'

'Probably not.'

'Okay, well I managed to infiltrate the HR department, although there was only one person working in there, it was pretty quiet. I told the woman I was Feng Shuing her office before taking a quick peek into the cabinets when she wasn't looking. Here's the weird thing ... all of Gopzilla's files were missing.'

'So nothing then?'

'Apart from non-stop lunch meetings, not a sausage.'

'So nothing that would help Operation Squirrel, then?'

'No, but tomorrow's the day.'

'Right, tomorrow's the day.'

The following night, as we lay in our hammocks, Gladys and I mulled over our day.

'So, how did it go at the Squirrel Reserve?'

'It was okay.'

'Okay, Gladys, what did you find out?'

'Well, I found out that Amos once got the lead role in a Western film, called Cowboys and Shop Assistants. He took me to the cinema and we watched it together. He was amazing, I can't—'

'So you found out nothing, then?'

'Well, when you put it like that.'

'Honestly, Gladys, you're going to need to try harder. Well, I found out what Gopzilla looked like.'

'And?'

'Slim. Dark hair.'

'And?'

'And that's all I got.'

'Who told you that?'

'The receptionist.'

'The receptionist? Did she actually say that she's seen him?'

'Oh yes, she said she saw him quite clearly.'

'So that's all you found out? And you're having a go at me?'

'Well, at least I tried. Watching films ... honestly, Gladys.'

'Me? And where did you have lunch today?'

'So, I had two lunches at this amazing restaurant where it's so posh that celebrities come in and spoon feed you. Oh, but I did read a whole script for one of the meetings. It was a terrible screenplay though and I didn't hold back telling Arnie I thought so too.'

'Right, tomorrow's the day, okay?'

'Definitely, tomorrow's the day.'

The following night, as we lay in our hammocks, Gladys and I mulled over our day.

'So, how did it go at the Squirrel Reserve?'

'So, so.'

'Okay. Not again, Gladys, what did you find out?'

'Something interesting.'

'Did it have anything to do with one of the other staff at the Squirrel Reserve by any chance?'

'No, but I found out that Amos Ames can play the harp.' Gladys gripped her chest. 'Grace, it was the most beautiful thing ever. The squirrels gathered and the music flowed through the—'

'So you found out nothing, then?'

'Well, when you put it like that. How about you, then?'

'I tried searching for the two women that we saw in the meeting room, you know, the ones who were with Amos and Lion Heart. After about an hour though, I realised that I didn't know what they looked like and gave up.'

'Is that it?'

'Then I spent the whole day on surveillance—'

'Surveillance in a restaurant by any chance?'

'Yes, but I did give the green light to a sixty-million-dollar film which starts production this Autumn.'

'What's it called?'

'Stuck in The Cellar. It's a suspense thriller about—'

'Don't tell me, Grace. Being stuck in a cellar. '

'How did you know? Fine. Tomorrow's the day, though, right?'

'It better be, we've only got two days left before the leaving party. We need some answers. Oh, how about Eric? Did you see him today?'

'Briefly. He's not had any luck with the rest of the guests. He says the place is just swarming with reporters. Scotty and Anna McHappy are driving him up the wall. He's been trapped into giving them marriage advice.'

The following night, as we lay in our hammocks, Gladys and I mulled over our day.

'So, how did it go at the Squirrel Reserve?'

'It was okay.'

'Okay, Gladys, please tell me you actually found something out. Tomorrow is our last day and it's the leaving party in the evening. We're not about to pull it together Columbo-style if we don't have any information.'

'Fine, I do, I do. Just give me a minute to think.'

I sat up and watched as Gladys tapped her fingers and stared at the ceiling. 'Come on then, out with it.'

'Fine, Amos—'

'Amos again? Gladys what the hell—'

'Listen, will you. Amos once ended up in hospital after a dodgy kebab and he said he thinks that ghosts are real because he saw his life flash before him.'

'Gladys, you have got to be kidding me. I know ghosts are real. That is what we have been arguing about all along, that was my point. Now you're just telling me ...'

I gripped my head as I realised. 'You've not been undertaking Operation Squirrel at all, have you? You've been off gallivanting with the enemy: Amos Ames.'

'So what ... so what if I have? He's not the enemy, anyway, he's just under suspicion, that's all.'

'So what? Gladys, I went and got a real job as a Hollywood executive because of you. This was your idea, and now you're saying ... wait, are you saying you've fallen in love with Amos or something?'

Gladys crossed her arms. 'I wouldn't exactly say that ...'

'How could you, Gladys? I've been working really hard and you've basically compromised the whole operation. He could be in on the whole thing, remember. That's what you said. What about the squirrels? They're the ones who will suffer. Mr Nutty McNutnut too—what if he's confiscated from me?'

'Oh, come on, Grace. You're taking this a bit far, don't you ...'

I flung my blanket over my head and turned away from Gladys. 'Forget it, Gladys. I will solve the mystery alone. You know, I'm starting to think maybe you were right all along. Maybe it was Amos. Maybe there isn't such a thing as—'

'That's enough. You don't know him, Grace.'

'Fine, then tomorrow's the day, isn't it?'

'Fine.'

That night I barely slept. I couldn't believe the cheek of Gladys. I'd been working my arse off to gather information and the whole time she was smooching with the enemy. There was no way I was losing this one though. Playing piano on my leaving performance was not an option; my Columbo speech was going to be epic.

CHAPTER 10

I clapped my hands twice. 'Time, please.'

A deep voice that sounded exactly like something off a movie trailer rang out over the tannoy. 'In a time, when lives were once peaceful, a danger—'

'Just give me the bloody time, will you?'

'Five o' six pm. Is there anything else I can help you with today?'

'No thanks.' I sank into my black, leather office chair and stroked Mr Squiggles. What a day it had been: lunches, lunches and more lunches. The workload around here was intense. However, for all my hard work, I'd uncovered nothing that would help Operation Squirrel, and the working day was nearly over. I stepped out of my office and looked around the main office; everyone was already gone. 'Lazy flakes,' I muttered as I made my way to the cafeteria.

As I was brewing myself a chai latte, I noticed, through the clear windows of the cafeteria, a face flash past that I instantly recognised: Donna. My mouth immediately opened and I screamed out for her as I charged out of the room, but by the time I'd made it to the hallway she was completely gone.

Was I imagining it? Maybe I'd been looking too hard? Maybe I'd drunk too many lattes and the caffeine had surged to my head. I took a seat and sipped my latte. Maybe, just maybe, I wasn't going to solve the mystery after all. I was going to have to go to our leaving party tonight, play the piano and leave a failure. Mr Nutty McNutnut would be safe when I boarded the plane tomorrow, but those poor squirrels at the reserve—I'd really let them down.

That evening, I sat glumly in the gratitude room as everyone gathered. Eric had laid on a vegan spread but, what with High Mistress Breeze still missing, the mood at the party was pretty sombre. One by one, the guests got up and began their performances, as myself, the guests at the lodge and everyone from the Squirrel Reserve watched on.

Anna McHappy kicked things off with a whistling-only song, which I was super pleased about, and I'm pretty sure her husband would have been too, except I think he'd popped to the loo and missed it.

Next up was Dotty and Delilah, who did some uncomfortable looking yoga poses. And I couldn't have been positive, because I was sulking so much, but I thought I saw them both crack a smile at the end of it.

Chad read a poem about spending more time at home rather than working, whilst Mia discussed the complexities of organising and running a household.

Felicity and Poet performed a play as a pair of mime artists, which I was sure had to mean something, but I was honestly not paying that much attention.

And finally, Barry from London got up and opened up to us all about his busy life. I held my hands over my ears for that.

I sighed as I whipped out a straw and supped on my smashed avocado. They all seemed so perfect, their lives so incredibly together, all except Anna and Scotty McHappy, that is. As I took centre stage, armed with a keyboard, I took a quick glance over in Eric's direction; even he looked perfect in his silky red kaftan, with his slim frame and wavy dark hair. He really did look like James Dean. Then something struck me.

'Come on, Grace!' Miguel shouted. 'What did you do for us? A song?'

I rubbed my head. Both sides of my brain seemed to synchronise at once. Memories came flooding back to me from our stay: titbits of gold, words that didn't make sense, small clues that kept popping into my mind. This was it ... I suddenly felt my whole life had been building up to this very moment. The problem was so obvious, everything was far too perfect. It was like a film, our whole stay, like the set on a film. I shouted out, 'I should eat more avocado.'

'Well, I'm glad you like my cooking,' Eric said.

'No, no, Eric, I've got it! To the Squirrel Reserve!' I yelled.

After a lot of grumbling, especially from Gladys, we all stood in the clearing at the Squirrel Reserve. Amos fired up the floodlights and lit the steps of the wooden hut where I stood. All around us, a thin mist wandered through the black trees in the forest. I didn't feel scared one little bit.

'Thank you for being here,' I said. 'I've had a lot of time to think about what's been happening around here, what with Gopzilla, Donna, High Mistress Breeze and the squirrels going missing. A ghost turning up and a squirrel-hunting gorilla.' I paced the floor as a sea of bewildered faces gazed back at me. 'At first, I was terrified. Gorillas really are my worst nightmare, especially gorilla ghosts, but now I realise exactly what has been going on.'

Gasps rang from the crowd as I continued. Even Gladys looked shocked.

'You see, the big thing that really got me suspicious was the fact that everyone was so perfect. So perfect in fact that I have deduced that the lodge must be a set up. Take Dotty and Delilah here, who I discovered dancing in the Hollywood Z Club.' The crowd gasped and Dotty and Delilah covered their faces. 'Completely out of character, don't you think? In fact, the only two I would say are not faking it are Anna and Scotty McHappy. Everyone else at the lodge is a bunch of fakers.'

'No we are not!' shouted Chad. 'Are you drunk, Grace?'

Mia threw her hands in the air. 'Have you lost your mind? What are you suggesting here?'

I pointed straight at Mia. 'I am suggesting that you are not who you say you are. That is what I am suggesting here.'

Felicity butted in. 'Grace, this is ridiculous.'

'Most fun I've had in ages.'

'Be quiet, Poet! Grace, that's enough, this is ridiculous. Don't you have a song or something?' Felicity said.

I slammed my foot into the wooden boards. 'This is my song and you must listen.' I scanned the crowd with a fire in my belly that rose from my stomach and shot from my eyes. I continued. 'Not that any of you may have realised, but I have spent the last few days infiltrating Lone Ideas Entertainment undercover, where I discovered a few pieces of damning evidence. Firstly, many of the staff were missing ... where could they be?'

At first, I thought they were just a bunch of crystal-loving flakes. I didn't connect the fact that you lot were too. Then I discovered none other than Donna walking in the corridor today, perfectly healthy. And then, the final piece of evidence that led me to solving the mystery was that I found out Gopzilla was slim with dark hair.' I pulled out a cigar and lit it. 'I put it to you all that you are all actors who are playing the part of guests at the lodge, and that Gopzilla and High Mistress Breeze are here with us tonight. It is you lot who are stealing squirrels to drum up publicity, as the lodge is struggling for business. How else can you explain all those reporters? You are exactly like the tech companies, writing their own articles online to get good staff. I know your tactics.'

'Told ya it wasn't ghosts,' Gladys said.

'Rubbish, Grace. So, who is Gopzilla then?' Felicity shouted over.

I pointed straight at Eric who immediately threw his hands over his mouth and wailed. 'What? As if, Grace. Why do you think it's me?'

Everybody stepped away from Eric as I continued. 'Because it is you who fits his description and there ain't no way a twenty-one-year-old should give marriage advice to anybody.'

Eric crushed his eyebrows together and stared at me. 'Says you. Grace, how could you blame me?'

'Mystery solved!' I shouted, flinging my arms in the air and sending my handbag flying to the floor. As I stood, smugly looking back at everyone, I noticed them looking down at the floor beside me. I looked down and there, lying in open view next to my handbag, was Mr Nutty McNutnut. I leant down, picked him up and casually placed him back in my bag.

'You! It was you stealing the squirrels, Grace!' Chad shouted over to me.

'Hang on, hang on—'

'Grace, what the hell have you done? You've been killing squirrels!' Felicity shouted.

'He's mine, I brought him from Britain and I didn't know he was real,' I shouted back.

'Grace, why did you do this?' Mia shouted.

Gladys stepped forward and held out her arms. 'Now hang on, I was with her when she brought—'

'I don't need your help, Gladys. Thank you very much.'

'Is that how it is, really?'

'Yes.' I raised my voice and shouted over everyone's talking. 'I can prove it was all a set up. That everyone at the lodge is a fake, that they are the staff from Lone Ideas

Entertainment pretending to be guests, that that's why the place was quiet, that Donna, Gopzilla and High Mistress Breeze going missing is all a set up too to drum up publicity. This makes a great story, right? And it was all concocted by High Mistress Breeze. Donna and Gopzilla going missing didn't draw much attention, but if High Mistress Breeze went missing, then that would be the final straw.' Everyone quietened down. 'I realised that the last place anyone would think of looking for High Mistress Breeze would be this wooden shack, which is why it's the best hiding place for her. Give me a minute.'

The crowd stood quietly as I ripped the door to the wooden shack open and searched the place in the dark. I tugged open a cupboard door and the shadow of an arm flopped out. 'There you are,' I shouted as I gripped High Mistress Breeze and dragged her out onto the porch and dropped her at my feet. 'See, High Mistress Breeze,' I said, pointing at her.

Everyone stood perfectly still as High Mistress Breeze lay at my feet, not moving a muscle. I gave her a small kick. 'Come on, jigs up, High Mistress Breeze. Get up now.'

I looked back again at the crowd and noticed a look of sheer horror sweeping over everybody's face. 'High Mistress Breeze, come on, get up,' I said as I kicked her again, this time a lot harder, but she never moved a muscle. Then I let out a scream, the likes of which Hollywood had never heard before and jumped back. 'She's dead! She's actually bloody dead! Why ... how has this happened?'

Eric ran over and checked for a pulse. 'She's dead, she really is dead. What have you done?'

I pointed at myself. 'Me? What the hell? I never did this. I, I thought she would be alive. I thought she was doing this for publicity because you told me that business had been slow.' I looked around at everyone. Gladys had her hands on her head, Dotty was phoning the police, and people were shaking their heads at me and covering their mouths. 'It wasn't me, honestly.'

Eric sprang to his feet. 'It wasn't you.'

'Excuse me?'

'I said, it wasn't you. I know exactly who it was.'

I gripped Eric by the kaftan. 'Tell us, tell us who it is then. Before the police get here and I get arrested.'

Eric lifted his hand and pointed straight at Amos. 'It was you. This is your shack and here she is. You must have known.'

The crowd parted from Amos. 'No, no, I didn't know at all. I can tell you who it was though ... it was ...', Amos lifted his hand and pointed at Lion Heart, '... him.'

The crowd then parted from Lion Heart who crossed his arms and glared in my direction.

'He folded his arms!' I shouted. 'It was him. Folded arms is never a good thing.'

Gladys stepped forward and stared at Amos. 'Amos, is this true? Did you have something to do with this?'

Amos removed his cowboy hat and rested it on his chest. 'Yes, but I never hurt her—'
'Shut up, shut up will you, you're under contract!' Lion Heart shouted.

Amos ignored Lion Heart. 'Gladys, I'm so sorry, but I never meant anyone to get hurt. I thought High Mistress Breeze was missing, not hurt. I thought it was part of the plan.'

'She's been found dead in your wooden shack, Amos. How isn't this you?' Gladys said.

'No, Gladys, it wasn't. This is a set up. You see, everyone at the Squirrel Reserve, including me, is a worker from Lone Ideas Entertainment. We were hired by Lion Heart to set up this Squirrel Reserve and run it as if it was real. I thought the same as Grace, that we were doing this to drum up business for the lodge. You know, a mystery that would make the papers and the place would get busy. Maybe they'd turn it into a film and the lodge would go down in history. Except you and Grace turned up, digging around. We were told by Lion Heart to scare you away, you know, with the person in the gorilla costume. Lion Heart had overheard Grace say she was scared of gorillas in the seance and knew you were snooping around. He wanted you gone. That's how we knew. Then you stopped by this week. The minute I saw you walk into the Squirrel Reserve, Gladys, I couldn't help myself. It's been the best week of my life. Gladys, I swear, we never hurt anyone.'

Miguel, Lucy and Stevie all gathered around Gladys. 'Honestly, it's true,' they said. 'We thought the same as Grace is saying, that this was just about making some publicity for the lodge because the business was failing. Then suddenly High Mistress Breeze goes missing. We thought that it was just part of the plan, but it had nothing to do with us.'

Lion Heart ripped Amos' hat from him and slammed it into the ground. 'You did this! You absolutely did this. I never killed anyone. So, I set this up—fine!' Lion Heart gripped his fists. 'But I never killed my wife.'

Lion Heart looked out into the dark forest and wiped his perspiring forehead. In the distance we could hear sirens wailing as they made their way towards us. 'Fine, fine. So maybe I did set this all up but I never killed my wife. You see my wife and I haven't been getting on for years. We set the yoga business up together but it's been failing from the start. The lodge was built for fifty guests at a time but we've barely held more than ten at any one time. Just over a year ago, we ended up in so much debt but she wouldn't sell up. We went over it and over it but she completely refused. Just for the land alone we could have made millions. All she cared about was making it work. Then one day, Lone Ideas Entertainment approached me, wanting to build film studios here, and offered me fifty million. I knew from our previous conversations that she wouldn't budge, no matter the price, so I came up with a plan. I encouraged her to rent the land here on the Squirrel Reserve, making out that we would stay here permanently and earn some rent from it, and then worked with Lone Ideas Entertainment to set up this fake Squirrel Reserve without her knowing. Saving squirrels was an idea she absolutely loved because it meant preserving nature and the land. Then I set about making High Mistress Breeze look bad. I thought I could drive her out. I planted guests at the lodge and then they went missing, I checked Gopzilla in so no one

would meet that guest, I spread rumours about High Mistress Breeze arguing over the land with the Squirrel Reserve and made her look like a squirrel hater by stealing squirrels so it looked like it was her. I could see this was deeply upsetting her and to be honest I really thought she would crack, especially when I pretended to bring the ghost of Gopzilla back at the seance. I thought we could drive her out, you know, she'd have enough and say 'that's it, let's go'. Once the land was sold for fifty million then I could finally divorce her and take half the money. Then she went missing. I thought it was a joke at first, maybe she'd run away, you know, she couldn't take anymore. I was actually kind of glad. But not dead. I didn't do that.'

Gladys glared at Lion Heart. 'Why didn't you just divorce her?'

'Because as the lodge stands, it's worth a lot less than Lone Ideas Entertainment were offering. If I simply just divorced her then there was every chance she would never sell to a big corporate company like that—she hates all that corporate stuff. Unless I was there, pushing her along, I know she wouldn't do it. I would have lost out on millions. Also, I was worried she would find out about ... em ...'

Gladys placed her hands on her hips. 'About Donna, you mean?'

'Yes, about her.'

'I don't believe it,' I said. 'Something has actually ... I think I might have worked something out.'

'What?'

'Donna is Gopzilla. Gopzilla is Donna. Donna is slim with dark hair. It wasn't Eric at all. Wow, that crap receptionist could actually be psychic.'

Gladys continued, 'Gopzilla only turned up for one night. High Mistress Breeze wouldn't have even met her because Lion Heart checked her in. We all presumed Gopzilla is a man because that's what Lion Heart led us to believe. It's actually Donna who works at Lone Ideas Entertainment.'

I threw my hands in the air. 'I don't believe it. That's why I couldn't find any HR files on Gopzilla, because he doesn't exist. And that's how nobody knew who Gopzilla was at the firm.'

Gladys walked over to Lion Heart and looked him up and down. 'So, about Donna, anything else you want to add?'

Lion Heart hung his head. 'Yes, yes, we fell in love when we met. She approached me with the fifty-million-pound offer. I wanted out from my marriage from the second I met her. I know I've done some bad things and I was actually pleased when I thought she'd run away, but I never laid a finger on her, I swear.'

'Well, you're a bloody fool if you think Donna is in love with you. She used the oldest trick in the book to get hold of this land and you fell for it.' A sickening voice echoed through the forest.

I felt my legs go from underneath me as High Mistress Breeze rose to a standing position. 'ZOMBIES ARE REAL, GLADYS, RUN.' I leapt off the steps and ran in the direction of the others and hid behind Chad, changed my mind and hid behind Felicity. 'She's gonna eat us!' I wailed.

High Mistress Breeze folded her arms and snarled in Lion Heart's direction. 'Thought I was dead, did you? I worked your sick little plan out the moment Eric told me about Grace's squirrel pad and how you'd been missing from all of the morning sessions. If only I'd talked about it all sooner. I never questioned the fact it could be you for a second before that. Then it fell into place—all those morning meetings. I really have been so stupid.'

I waved my trusty squirrel pad in the air and smiled.

'The ghost of Gopzilla, then Donna, the squirrels, then you'd been missing all those sessions. Then it all fell into place. You conniving low life, you. Obviously, getting you to admit you've done anything wrong was going to take some great acting, but thanks to my trusty employee, Eric, here ...'

Eric smiled.

'... we came up with a plan. And boy did it work.'

'Hold the phone,' I shouted over to Eric. 'You bloody lied all along. You sneaky, little—'

'Sorry, Grace. Sorry, Gladys. Not all along though. When I saw your squirrel pad it just started falling into place. I finally talked to High Mistress Breeze about it and that's when we put our heads together. Well, we didn't want to risk letting you in on it.'

'But how did you know I was going to blame the guests and get everyone here on my last night?' I said to Eric.

'I didn't, I thought you were going to play the piano and leave me to do the Columbo reveal. Then you got up and did it. It was brilliant.'

'Well, kind of,' I said. 'Maybe I had a few details wrong. Does this mean you actually give marriage advice?'

Miguel flung his hand up in the air from the back. 'Oh, oh, does this mean that I helped too, when I accidentally wrote the amount wrong on Grace's charity form? Grace wouldn't be here if it wasn't for me.'

Amos folded his arms. 'Well, I suppose, indirectly, Miguel. You had one job, to be fair, to set up a fake donation page and pretend to run the reserve like a charity. Then you mess it up on Grace's form, spend all the money on top of it, and then we had to try to cover it all so all of us didn't lose our jobs at Lone Ideas Entertainment. You literally work in accounts too, I'm not giving you too much credit here.'

'Accounts? Em, em, maybe I'm from HR?'

* * *

Back at the lodge, everyone gathered in the gratitude room. 'I can't thank you enough, Grace. If you hadn't shown up then I hate to think what would have happened.'

'That's all right, sorry you found out that about your husband though.'

'Fine by me. If I never see his sorry face again it will be too soon. I can't believe I never saw it. The business had been failing and when the guests and squirrels started going missing, and everyone was gossiping and blaming me, I felt so upset and ashamed. I really thought I could trust him. Yet it was him all along. If I never see his face again ...'

'That's the spirit,' I said with a smile.

I looked up to see Gladys taking a seat in the middle of the gratitude room. She pulled out a piece of paper and began to talk to everyone who had gathered around her. 'Grace, will you listen to my poem?' Gladys shouted over.

'I know you hate poems, Gladys, but I suppose I can.' I pulled up a chair and got comfy.

For the first time ever, I could see a sadness steeped in Gladys' face. I watched as she unfolded a piece of paper, all the while her hands shaking, and then began to read her poem.

'Grace I am sorry,
I never told you the truth,
You see I made mistakes that were all in my youth,
I never stepped up and that I regret,
I ran away from everything and I owe you a debt,
I've tried to be there,
To love and to care,
To make up for being shtum,
Grace, I am your mum.'

My hands dropped to my side and I tilted my head. 'Gladys, what are you talking about? I have a mum, she's dead, remember.'

Gladys wiped tears from her eyes. 'No, Grace, your real mum.'

'My real mum left me when I was five. She isn't my mum. It wasn't you, don't tell me that! You're joking, right? You're joking? I never wanted to see her again for what she did. I told you that. I TOLD YOU THAT.'

Gladys reached out her hand towards me. 'I know you told me that, but now I have to tell you before it's too late. I have tried to make up for it. I found you and I have always tried to be there for you, but it's been so hard. I knew it would upset you. First me leaving and then your foster mum dying when you were sixteen. It affected you so much and I never knew how to tell you.'

'Gladys, you can't be my mother. This just isn't happening. I've known you since I was twenty-five.'

'I found you and I have tried to be ther—'

'This whole time, everything, lies. I told you I didn't want to ever see my mum. All along it's you. No, Gladys, no ...'

Gladys stood up and walked towards me. 'I couldn't leave you, though. I could see how much you struggled to cope with it all, how much it affected you. Please forgive me, please ...'

Gladys touched my shoulder and I pulled away. 'All this time, I thought nobody wanted me, I thought there was something wrong with me, that I was cursed, that somehow some witch had put a curse on me, that anyone or anything that I touched would be destroyed, I was so angry that—'

'That's why I got so upset when you said you believed in ghosts. I brought you here to tell you, but then you start going on about ghosts and ridiculous stuff that I know isn't true. You need to know the truth, you need to face reality, I need you to know how sorry I a—'

'Stay away from me! JUST STAY AWAY FROM ME.' I ran from the room, tripping over chairs and slamming the door behind me. I could feel my world crashing down as I ran to my bedroom and dived into my hammock. A churning cycle of pain that kept running on repeat in my head as I lay rocking side to side. This had to be the worst life-creep ever to exist. This was the penultimate life-creep, the life-creep of all life-creeps. All this time, Gladys had been my mother. I really thought nobody wanted me, that somehow, I had been born with a curse hovering over my head. To know that my real mother didn't want to keep me and then go through the pain of losing my foster mother to cancer at sixteen left me feeling so angry at everything. That night had to be the worst sleep of my life; I tossed and turned until finally, at six o'clock in the morning, I woke with a jolt. Unlike most mornings, I was wide awake.

'Gladys, are you there?' I looked over to Gladys' hammock but she wasn't in it. I decided to get up and see if I could dig out a coffee from the gratitude room.

'Morning, Grace.' It was High Mistress Breeze. 'Maca Tea?'

'Any coffee?'

'No, sorry, just tea.'

'Thanks. Have you seen Gladys? She's not in her hammock.'

'She's out there on the rustic bench. Probably couldn't sleep. You know she was quite upset last night when you left. Eric spent hours comforting her.'

'Yeah, I was pretty mad. I get like that sometimes. I've calmed down a bit now.'

'You should try meditating, you know. Gladys is getting pretty good at it.'

'Em, I meditate.'

'No, you don't.'

'Okay, maybe I don't.'

High Mistress Breeze leant in towards me. 'Grace, are you okay?'

'She's my mum. She. Is. My. Mum. I can't believe it. All this time and I didn't see it. I feel so angry, she never told me.'

'But she's telling you now. And as far as I gather, she's done everything she can to help you over the years.'

'I suppose ...'

'You know, Grace. My father was never around, he never bothered with me, never once tried to contact me or be part of my life. So, I had two choices: be angry or don't be angry. And I chose not to be angry. I don't ever waste my time being angry at him, because ultimately it will be me who pays the price. Instead, I chose to be grateful.'

'Not grateful ... seriously, of all the—'

'Grace, listen. When we are angry, especially about things that even we cannot control, then we start searching for blame. We blame our parents, we blame ourselves, we blame society, we blame everyone around us. The only person this blame affects is us. We miss out on the good things in life, we miss out on moments of happiness, on opportunities to be happy. I know Gladys should have told you, but I just see a woman who has tried her whole life to set things straight with you. If she had told you sooner you may never have got to spend so much time together all these years. Your anger would have pushed her away. Am I right?'

'I suppose ...'

'And all that time you did get to spend together, as best friends, surely you must be grateful for that?'

'Well, she has been my best friend, I suppose ...'

'You can't change what has happened, neither can she. But I promise you, if you don't find something to be grateful for out of all of this mess, then you will only hurt yourself. Did you ever wonder why she brought you to this lodge, out of all the places you could have chosen to stay at?'

'I, well I thought we came here because I always wanted to see Hollywood, because of the Squirrel Retreat too. She did pick this hotel, now I think about it. I wasn't really listening at the travel agents. I was so excited, when I get like that I never listen.' I rubbed my forehead. 'You know, she was the one who said yes to it, now I think about it.'

'Exactly, Grace. It would be my guess that Gladys knew all about this place before you both even stepped foot in that travel agents. It sounds to me as if she had this planned all along. You see, this business of mine is not quite your average yoga retreat. Our sole purpose is to help troubled souls and we don't do that by simply pulling yoga poses and meditating. It's part of it but there's a lot more to it than that. I market this place to people to bring a loved one who they deeply care about and want to help.'

I felt a shiver down my spine. 'Life-creep,' I whispered.

'Didn't you wonder why Eric was so close to you both all of the time?'

'Not really.'

'Well, Eric is actually our resident life coach.'

'He's twenty-one though, seriously?'

'That he may be, but he is easily the smartest, most switched on person I have ever met. There is not a single soul he hasn't helped since he started work here at the start of summer last year. And he only learnt that because he has his own troubles. He watched his mother go through three messy divorces growing up, with no help from anybody, so at sixteen he vowed to help people work through their relationships and make the world a better place. He studied psychology and now he works here. Gladys told him all about you and her predicament when she arrived. He realised that you two needed the help most, and he has spent much of his time getting to know you both as much as he could, then working out a plan so that she can tell you with the least amount of upset, whilst supporting her through it. Gladys really thinks she might lose you and she can't cope with that. Obviously, the whole Lion Heart thing sprung up in the middle of it, but Eric said it might actually help if you were both in a situation like that so that you can work together towards a shared goal. He thought if you could overcome your fears and realise that you can deal with problems, then it might help your frame of mind and accept the truth without completely freaking out and never speaking to Gladys again. And you did do it, Grace. You did brilliantly, despite how scared you were. Obviously, all of the reasons why Gladys felt unable to tell you that she was your mother came out, but that just means that you both have something you can learn from.'

'You know, I did think that we were both really stubborn, now you mention it.'

'And you know, this has just as much to do with her as a person as it does with you. You see, many people come here thinking that the other person has the problem, when in fact it is them who needs help as well.'

'So, hang on, are you saying that the other people at the lodge are really not perfect?'

'Not perfect, are you kidding? Nobody is perfect, it's all smoke and mirrors. Dotty and Delilah are a pair of winos who constantly bicker; those two are so angry all of the time, they barely speak to anybody, let alone each other. Chad brought his wife here because her obsessive control over the house upsets him to the point he doesn't want to go home; he realised that it's actually him not being there that was the problem. And Mia was just trying to gain control of her life by organising everything. Felicity brought her son, Poet, here thinking she could change his mind about going to university, but realised that her constant nitpicking has dragged him down so much that his self-worth and motivation has really been affected. Barry from London accidentally booked this, turned up alone, thinking that sitting in his room all day meditating was the answer to making him happy, not realising that not opening up to people and working too hard was really his issue. And Anna McHappy brought her husband here thinking he was having an affair with his secretary, but realised that—'

'Oh, yeah, that chorus.'

'Yes, that chorus. That he was actually cheating on her, so she left him. We get a lot of marriage ones. Thankfully, Anna was able to whistle her way out of it.'

'And what about Gladys and me?'

'Gladys brought you here because you were so unhappy in your life, because you closed yourself off, wouldn't hold down a job, never took responsibility. She wanted to tell you that she was your mother but she knew that you would never speak to her again and was worried that your life, and your world, would fall apart even more than it already had if you found out the truth.'

'And what did she find out about herself?'

'That she is scared. That she never felt good enough, or strong enough, or worth her weight in gold. She had you fostered because she didn't think she would be able to bring you up to lead a happy life, she never believed that she had it in her. She lost her job when you were five and her life seemed to crumble around her, especially with no parents or a father for you around to help her. She never felt strong enough to tell you she was your mother either.'

I took a deep breath in and looked out to the Zen garden. 'Okay, High Mistress Breeze, I see what you're saying. I will go talk to her.'

As I made my way over to the rustic bench, I gripped my hands tightly together. The sun was rising over the Yosemite and the birds danced around the Zen garden as I made my way over the stepping stones. Gladys was sat upright on the bench, staring out onto the Yosemite, no doubt meditating again.

I tiptoed up and hovered behind her. This had to be about the most difficult thing I had ever done in my life. 'I'm sorry I got so mad at you,' I said. 'It's just that you took me by surprise. It's just that I have spent so long feeling so worthless and angry. I thought that you had left me. But, but, you know, I'm grateful, Gladys. I'm grateful that you spent all these years with me as my friend.' I wiped tears from my eyes and continued. 'If you weren't in my life then I don't know how I'd have coped. I know you must have had your reasons for leaving me, and I want you to know that you couldn't have left me with a more wonderful foster mother. I'm grateful for that too, you see, I do, I do love you, you've been the best friend/mum you could have ever been ... Gladys? Gladys, can you hear me?'

I stepped forward and gently touched Gladys' shoulder. Her head suddenly dropped down and that was about all I can really clearly remember. The rest of the events just seemed to blur into a foggy mist of screams. The next thing I knew, a huddle of distraught guests had gathered in the garden: High Mistress Breeze pounding on Gladys' chest as she tried to revive her, Eric gripping me tightly as I lay on the ground screaming, then the sound of an ambulance wailing through my ears, the paramedics telling me there was nothing more they could do, the doctors at the hospital telling me that Gladys should never have travelled anywhere with a serious heart condition such as hers, and the tears from Eric as I boarded the plane and escorted Gladys' body home.

I think it would be fair to say that my mind only really snapped into reality when I stepped off the plane and walked through arrivals. My body seemed to thud to the ground as I walked through the gate.

For the first time ever, I noticed how many happy people there really were in the world. They embraced, smiled and shook hands, they cheered when they spotted each other at a distance, held out jolly signs with colourful names written on them.

As for me, they just pushed past my numb body to reach their loved ones as I came to a standstill and looked on. I held Mr Nutty McNutnut tightly to me as the reality of my life dawned on me: no one waiting for me, nobody had missed me while I was gone, I was never going to see my best friend again and the emptiness of my life was the only thing I had really achieved in the last forty-nine years.

CHAPTER 11

Gladys' body was taken straight to the morgue and it swiftly dawned on me that I had nowhere to go. I could hardly go back to Gladys' apartment; it belonged to the Council. The only thing left for me there was a shed load of dead squirrel teddies, and I certainly didn't want them after what I found out. There was no point getting the rest of my clothes either; I could hardly carry them. I rode the bus into town and signed into a homeless shelter that night.

The next day, I dropped Gladys' keys off at the Council offices and they kindly said that they would pay for a funeral, which I was very, very grateful for. I was so grateful for the homeless shelter too. While I was there, some of the staff taught me how to use a computer and write a résumé. They even hugged me when I cried and told me everything would be okay, and they lent me some smart clothes so I could search for a job.

In the meantime, I had to let Gladys' friends know about the funeral, but I had no contact numbers for them and it wasn't as if I could return to Gladys' flat to find them. Gladys had never written any numbers down in her life, always scared that someone would break in and steal them. I really should have asked who the hell she thought would break in, steal her phone numbers and phone her friends, but I never did.

I left a note at Ye Olde Person's Pub, or the Duck and Parrot, I mean the Dog and Duck, whatever, and dropped in every night to try and find the ladies, but to no avail. On the morning of the funeral, I dressed smartly and the staff at the homeless shelter gathered around me.

'Maybe the ladies will just turn up?' one of the women said.

'I hope so. I even put up posters with a picture of Gladys and big letters saying "GLADYS IS DEAD" and the time of the funeral, all over Liverpool city center but I've heard nothing. I don't know what else I can do.'

One of the workers at the homeless shelter leant in the doorway. 'Grace, there's a man in reception sporting a pair of caterpillars on his face'

'You mean Dennis? Be right there.'

'Hello, Grace,' Dennis said. 'Now, I'm here because of Gladys. She came to see my dad, Clive, who worked in the Council offices some while ago, did you know?'

'No, I didn't. What about?'

'About you.'

'Me, are you sure?'

'Yes, absolutely. Grace, Gladys actually owned the apartment that she lived in. She used a rent-to-buy scheme that the Council put in place in 1979. I think she would have been working as a secretary back then. Grace, she left the place to you. I have a copy of the will for you and some keys. It's all yours.'

I gripped the edge of the reception desk. 'Are you kidding?'

'No, Grace. It's all yours. Sorry, I couldn't tell you any sooner. I was sworn to secrecy.'

My hands shook as I scanned the will. '1980, she wrote this in 1980. But she only found me when I was twenty-five, in 1994. How's that possible?'

'Sorry, I'm not sure. There was a handwritten note with it. Sorry, I didn't bring it, it said on it that you didn't know about the will though, or that Gladys was your mother, that we must never inform you of this, only to do so in the event that something happened to Gladys. It seems she had really been looking out for you.'

'She did, she really did.'

'I'm glad you got to know her before she died. And I'm sorry it's taken a little time to get this will to you. Are you okay?'

'I think so, I think I am.'

That afternoon, I found myself in the front seat of the church, waiting for the funeral to start. The place was packed with people I didn't know who had turned out to show their respect for Gladys. It turned out those posters I plastered around Liverpool had pulled on a few heartstrings. I still couldn't see any sign of the ladies though. I used my sleeve to rub my eyes as the music started. I couldn't believe it—Gladys' friends were not here and there was nothing else I could do.

Suddenly, the doors burst open and the ladies ran down the aisle and bear-hugged me all at once. This time I really didn't mind.

'I'm not happy she's gone,' I said as I bear-hugged the ladies back. 'I'm just so happy you're all here.'

'You know, do you know?' Agnes said.

'That she's my mother, yes. Wait ... you all knew?'

'Grace, we have known for so long. She has been dying to tell you but didn't know how. When she found out about her heart condition, then she—'

I pulled away from the ladies. 'She knew she had a heart condition?'

'Yes, my dear. That is why she took you to Hollywood, to tell you. She knew she didn't have long left. She scrimped and saved for so many years so that she could take you. Oh, we told her not to lie about winning on the lottery but she insisted she wanted to take you to a place where you'd be truly happy first. You know, one last time, in case anything bad happened.'

'But she knew and she didn't tell me. I wouldn't have gone if I'd have known.'

'Exactly. That is why she never told you. My dear, you are all she has ever talked about over the years. She loved you so much. Even when you were adopted she never left you for a moment. After your foster mother died, she thought she had lost you. She searched everywhere for you and then finally one day ...'

And then the penny dropped.

At Gladys' flat, I rattled the keys in the lock, burst through the door and began scrambling through her dresser drawers. I dragged document after document out of the drawers but I couldn't find anything. Then I remembered. In the front room, underneath one of the cabinets, there was a cupboard.

I dived into the cupboard, hurled all of the photo albums onto the floor and began to sift through them. Over and over, page by page, photo by photo, there she was: the smiling woman with the glasses. My head suddenly cleared, a rush of memories shooting into the forefront of my mind, like a clear snapshot playing out in raging colour. Outside my foster mum's house, the smiling woman with the glasses, at my school play, the smiling woman with the glasses, in the park, the smiling woman with the glasses, after piano rehearsal with my foster mother, when I looked out the window, the smiling woman with the glasses sitting on the garden wall listening in, and then the one single memory that made the tears pour from my eyes ... at my foster mother's funeral, sitting quietly at the back of the church, the woman with the glasses.

She'd never left me at all; my whole life she really had been there. She had lost me though. After my foster mother's funeral, aged sixteen, I moved out and had to fend for myself. It was only aged twenty-five did we ever meet again.

I don't remember how long I sat there crying, in between an indescribable mix of pain and happiness, but eventually the doorbell rang. I wiped my eyes and dragged myself down the hallway. I had no idea who could be calling at this time. On opening the door, I studied my weird neighbour's face. He had a bunch of flowers in one hand and a meowing cat in the other. I used the cuff of my sleeve to wipe the remaining tears away.

'Em, em, em, these are for you,' he said, fumbling with the cat and shoving the flowers in my hands. 'And I just wanted to say how much I liked Gladys. Erm, erm, so, like, I'll be going now, bye.'

Ordinarily, I would have shut the door in his face, especially after what he did to Mr Nutty McNutnut, but at that very moment in time, for the first time in my life, I really needed someone to talk to. I stepped back and opened the door really wide. 'Cup of tea?'

In the kitchen, my weird neighbour sat down and placed Fluffy down on the floor. At first, I began to boil the kettle and pull out a couple of mugs from the kitchen cupboard, then he said something that made me turn back to face him.

'You know, I really am sorry about your mum,' he said.

'My mum? How did you know she was my mum?'

'Oh, she's not your mum?'

'Well, she is my mum, but even I didn't know that.'

'Em, em, well you do look pretty similar. I just presumed.'

'We do?' I smiled. 'Oh, I suppose we do, a bit.' I suddenly remembered how Gladys made me feel when she made me a cup of tea. I pulled the teapot out and dug out the Jaffa Cakes.

That afternoon I discovered that my weird neighbour was pretty all right for a weird neighbour. His name was Tony. He didn't own an expensive car, but then again, I wasn't forty. He did agree with me that Dog's Breath was actually a pretty decent wine, and it turned out he really was French, that bit was true. And he also owned up to having a pretty terrible sense of humour, and reckoned that the date we had in the Haggis Café was a pretty epic revenge plot after what he did to Mr Nutty McNutnut. He said he'd finally met his match. I said nothing.

After making friends with my neighbour, finding a job was first on my list. I decided to do the unthinkable and forego free slides and apply at one of the tech companies, with my now glowing résumé. I removed the fact that I was terrible at organising, due to recent events, and put my recent work as a Hollywood executive down.

The receptionist was a bit shocked to see me though. 'Are you sure?' she said as I arrived.

'Absolutely,' I said back to her as I slammed my résumé on her desk.

I discovered in the interview though, that I'd actually applied for the job as a barista in one of their internal coffee shops. I didn't get that job though, which I was quite relieved about, because the first thing I thought about when they said the word "barista" was crane operators—a shiver tingled down my spine as I recalled my first day at that Tesco job. Getting barred from every coffee shop in the world would be hell.

But they were very happy to see me, especially when I told them what had happened. They were super-impressed with my box office smash, *Stuck in the Cellar*, too. And you wouldn't believe it, but it turned out that I did actually have a very specific set of skills that they could use; I thought I was just full of shit, but they said that it was clear that I could talk my way in and out of anything and that, if I used that to my advantage, it's possible that I would make a great saleswoman. I literally cried like a baby when they told me that. Who knew?

With a good job that I was absolutely not going to screw up under my belt, I started practising every morning before work and every evening, coupled with the help of a piano teacher twice a week. Everything that my foster mother had taught me on the piano came flooding back, and it wasn't long before I started applying for my dream job at the Liverpool Philharmonic Hall. After rejection after rejection, a few months down the line, they finally gave me a spot in one of their shows.

But still there was one more thing left to do—the hardest one of them all. I gripped my handbag to my chest as I knocked on the door of my favourite house, the one with the blue door and new microwave. I heard a pitter-patter of feet and then a smiling lady opened the door.

'Hello,' she said.

'Em, em, I mean, hello. Is Brian there?'

'Sure, just a second.'

I straightened my hair as I listened to her footsteps walk away. Suddenly, two small children popped their heads around the door and grinned at me. 'Hello,' I said. I stared at their perfect little faces, with floppy blonde hair and tiny hands that gripped the door. They were beautiful.

The next thing I knew the door had swung open and Brian stood in front of me. I don't know what I had expected really, but as his face dropped and a dark look swept his eyes, I just knew.

'Hello, Squirrel,' I said.

'Leave, just go the hell away,' he said, slamming the door in my face.

My body jolted as the door slammed and I looked down at the ground.

A surge of silence and emptiness squeezed the air out of me as tears welled in my eyes. It was the feeling that I was so afraid of, hitting me like a sledgehammer and taking with it the very last remnant of happiness that I had been clinging so dearly onto.

I knew exactly how he felt: I didn't blame him for one single second.

But now it was gone, the final curtain had fallen on that tiniest of parts I was playing in his life.

Before this moment I could pretend. Pretending brought me a sliver of comfort in my self-made misery—even if the only part I ever played was to peer in his windows every now and again so that I could follow his life.

But that wasn't fair to my son, was it? By only peering into the windows of his house and never letting him know the true me, I had denied my son that single shred of comfort that he deserved. The knowledge that he was, since the moment he was born, truly wanted.

This is what Gladys must have felt like. This was the terror that she must have felt when faced with losing me. This is why she did what she did. This is what the heart-wrenching rejection and pain that Gladys must have felt on the evening before she died alone on that bench felt like. That night where she wrote me a beautiful poem, where she brought me to the most perfect place on earth, where I rejected her, shouted at her, ran away from her. I left her to it, sitting on that bench all night crying. How could I have done that to my best friend in her final moments.

I spun around, gasping for air, my back to the blue front door and my thoughts screaming at me.

And then, suddenly, as involuntary as you could possibly imagine, I did something that I never thought I was capable of or understood how to do—I meditated.

I cleared my mind, grounded my feet and breathed deeply as the noise of the birds in the distance came back into focus. My mind suddenly cleared and I found myself in the zen

garden walking toward Gladys. She was sitting on the rustic bench, looking out over the Yosemite with her back to me.

As I reached her, I stepped tentatively around the bench to face her. She was sat bolt upright, her hands resting on her lap, eyes firmly shut and her face beaming with happiness as the morning sun rose over the Yosemite igniting her smile. She didn't need to say a single word to me. For once in my life, I just got it. I sat down beside her and closed my eyes. Finally, I had arrived.

After a few moments, I continued walking down the path and onto the street when I heard a patter of feet running down the path towards me.

'Wait!' shouted a woman's voice. 'Just wait.'

I turned back around. The smiling lady held her hands out. 'Just a second, Grace. Please, he just needs a minute. Let me talk to him.'

She ran back inside and I listened to some muffled voices before a slower set of feet clunked down the path and emerged from the garden. Squirrel stepped out and stared at me.

'You left me,' he said.

I fought to hold the tears back. 'I am so sorry, Squirrel. I thought it was for the best.'

'I was eight and you left me.'

'I couldn't cope, I thought I was giving you a better life, and I really hope that I did. My life has not been so great, I have messed so many things up. I just hoped that you might forgive me. Please.'

I watched as tears formed in Squirrel's eyes and he looked at me.

'Look who I have,' I said as I rummaged around my bag.

Squirrel smiled and rushed forward. 'Mr Nutty McNutnut. You still have him.'

I used my hand to wipe a tear from Squirrel's face. 'Of course,' I said. 'Did you know that he's actually a real squirrel that's been stuffed?'

Squirrel scrunched his mouth to one side. 'Yes, didn't you?'

'Honestly, no idea.'

I flattened my ballgown and stood up, searching through the floodlights as hundreds of bodies in the audience rose to applaud my performance at the Philharmonic Hall. I felt a pang of happiness as I caught sight of some familiar faces beaming back at me: Agnus, Betty, Hilda, Squirrel, his wife, both my grandchildren, Dennis Eyebrows, my weird neighbour/boyfriend Tony, Eric, High Mistress Breeze, Stevie, Miguel and Lucie all stood up to clap.

As the crowd continued to roar, I thought back to the day when I think I first met Gladys. I was little over twenty-five and had just got quite possibly the worst fake tan known to man. Anyway, I was literally turning greener by the minute. I can't quite remember what went down in the shop, but the next thing I knew someone had hurled me

from the premises and onto the pavement, where I'd landed with a thud, my carrier bag of food that I'd just been given from the food bank ripping open as it slammed into the ground.

I scrambled onto my knees to gather my shopping as it rolled all over the pavement. Then a hand came down, picking up some of my shopping and helping me up. There, in front of me, stood this smiling lady with glasses and I instantly warmed to her. Thinking back, she seemed stuck for words, lost for breath, but at the time I barely noticed amongst my confusion.

'Oh, it's everywhere, I just got it from the food bank too, and I'm completely green,' I said as I struggled to cling onto my shopping.

'That's all right, my dear, use my shopping trolley to hold your food, I will walk you home,' she said, gesturing to her black and green chequered trolley.

A snake slithered past.

As we walked down the street together, I introduced myself and Gladys chatted away to me as if she'd known me all her life. Her mothering nature kicked in almost instantly.

'Where are you staying?' Gladys said, wafting a parrot off her shoulder.

'At the homeless shelter. The Council are about to get me a place. I'm on the list.'

'You're homeless and you're getting a tan?'

'Well, this is Liverpool,' I said. 'Looking good is obviously a priority and it was only a pound.'

'Grace.'

'Yes, Gladys.'

'If you're homeless, then getting a tan isn't really a priority at all, even for a pound, is it?'

I looked down at my feet and scrunched my mouth. 'It was so cheap though, and I just got some dole money, and I just stopped to look at the goldfish in this pet shop, then I saw a squirrel, and then a tiger, and the next thing I knew I was out the back getting a tan for a pound. And then I realized they'd turned me green so I let some of the animals free to restore karma.'

A sloth riding and alpaca shot past us.

'But there's a reason it was so cheap. Now, do you have a job?'

'Not right now.'

'You know, I have a friend who works at the Council, called Clive Eyebrows.'

'That's a weird surname. Jesus Christ, is that a chicken using the zebra crossing? I know a joke about—'

'NO. DON'T. It's a penguin, anyway, Grace. Back to the point. Now, ah, yes, maybe don't call Clive that to his face. We can go see him if you want. I'm sure he would help you get a council flat.'

'Really?'

'His son works in the benefits office too, Dennis, we can go see him after and see if we can sort some money out for your new place.'

'Really? Honestly? You'd do that for me? That would be amazing.'

'You know, I know there's a flat free next to my council flat. I live in that apartment block right over there. That one, there. The one with the tiger guarding it.'

'Where?'

'Over there, you see, where that massive group of people are running away from, screaming.'

'Oh, I see. By jove, that tiger looks familiar. I feel like we've met bef—'

'You know, if you want, I could go to the Council with you and kick their arses now.'

'That would be amazing, really, would you do that?'

'Of course. Right after we shake off that hyena. Wait, where the hell has that hyena gon—'

'Wait, but I've been in so many times, they always tell me the same thing. That I have to wait a bit longer.'

Gladys gripped my shoulder. 'I might be small, Grace, but don't let that fool you for a single second.'

Outside the Council office, Gladys and I stared through the window.

'But look at that queue,' I wailed. 'We'll be here all day.'

Gladys rubbed her hands. 'Watch and learn, sunshine, watch and learn.'

I looked back out at my friends and family in the crowd and then that's when it truly dawned on me—maybe there really was such a thing as perfection. If there really was, then I was absolutely positive this had to be it. And I was going to make sure that I enjoyed every last second of it.

Then I cocked my head to one side and tapped my chin. 'Hang on,' I muttered to myself. 'Where the fuck is my Nobel Peace Prize?'

The End

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