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Opening Extract from...

Christmas at the Little Beach Bakery

Written by Jenny Colgan

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Brigadoon (1954) was written by Alan Jay Lerner (screenplay) and Alan Jay Lerner (musical) and produced by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM)

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Chapter One

This story is about one particular Christmas, but it actually starts with a very Bad Thing happening the previous spring.

It's a bit of a shame that the Bad Thing happens in the spring and we're only going to look at it for a bit, because the Cornish tidal island of Mount Polbearne in the spring is an extraordinarily beautiful place.

There is a causeway leading to the ancient settlement, which used to be connected to the mainland until the seas rose up. Now the tides cover the old cobbled road twice a day, which makes it both a very romantic and an extremely inconvenient place to live.

There are a jumble of cottages and shops alongside the harbour and beach, including Polly's Little Beach Street Bakery, to distinguish it from the original bakery. You might wonder how such a tiny village sustains two bakeries, but then you obviously haven't eaten there,

because Polly is to baking what Phil Collins is to playing the drums. Hang on, that might not be the best example.

Anyway, rest assured: she is very, very good at baking. Her sourdough bread is nutty and firm and has the chewiest of crusts; her baguettes are lighter and fluffier than air. She makes the densest, most delicious olive oil focaccia and delicate, sharp cheese scones. The scent of her baking – she tests things out in the kitchen at home in the lighthouse, then there are the big industrial ovens in the bakery itself, plus an amazing woodburner – floats across the town and brings the hungry and the curious from miles around.

As well as the bakery along the harbour, there's Andy's pub, the Red Lion, which plays fairly fast and loose with licensing laws, particularly if it's a warm evening in the beer garden, which is strung with fairy lights and scented with the sea. Andy also runs a fantastic and mind-numbingly expensive fish-and-chip shop next door, so he's a busy man. In the harbour itself, the fishing boats rattle and chime; fishing, once the backbone of Mount Polbearne, is now the second most popular job in the tiny community, after tourism.

Up the hill ramble various little cobbled streets, where the same families have been living for generations. There were fears that the community was dying out, but Polly arriving to take over the bakery, after the graphic design business she used to run failed miserably, coincided with – some people say brought about – a new influx;

there's even a posh fish restaurant now. Babies are being born and there's a sense that things are definitely on the up.

The trick now is to keep it on the up without all the lovely tumbledown houses being bought as second homes by rich people from London and Exeter who never show up during the week and who make it too expensive for local people to live there. But with one or two exceptions, the lack of reliable Wi-Fi and the constantly shifting tides have kept the place more or less cut off from invasion – as it has been for hundreds and hundreds of years – so it could be worse.

Summer in Mount Polbearne is always mobbed and busy and a bit nuts, as everyone tries to make enough money to get them through the long, cold winter. But in the spring, the tourists haven't quite started yet – or at least, there's normally a bit of a rush at Easter, when everyone turns up and hopes for the best and pretends that they aren't remotely disappointed when the wind that used to wreck ships on that treacherous stretch of southern Cornish coastline blows their candyfloss right back in their faces; that the picturesque bounce of the fishing boats that line the little harbour isn't done just to look nice in holiday videos but is actually the white-tipped waves hurling the boats about, with red-fingered fishermen mending nets or, more commonly these days, frowning at computer printouts showing shoals and movements and tallying up just how much they can take from the sea.

But once the slightly disappointed Easter holidaymakers (and the incredibly smug ones, I should say, who hang on until the second Tuesday and are rewarded with a golden day so exquisitely perfect and beautiful that they annoy their friends immeasurably for the next five years by reminiscing about it) have gone, Mount Polbearne has a short respite before the summer floods arrive: children with crabbing nets; adults dreaming of the kind of holidays they had as children, with wide golden beaches and the freedom to run around (until they realise that the causeway doesn't have any sides and the tide rushes in astonishingly fast, and what was perfectly okay for their parents to let them do in 1985 is now a bit horrifying; and, well, obviously they'll need good Wi-Fi too, something Mount Polbearne can't provide but they'll just have to make the best of it).

In April, then, Mount Polbearne takes a breath. Looking towards the mainland, you can see the trees starting to blossom out in great big garlands of pink and white. Days that start chilly and unpredictable suddenly get a darting bolt of sunlight; and the early-morning mist burns off, and the heat rises and releases that gorgeous aroma of everything growing and birds building nests and chattering to one another, and the light bright green of trees in bud and a particular buzzing, gentle loveliness that is England in early spring, at its very best.

Our story does not stay there.

But it begins there. And it should be a time of new

beginnings; of cheery emerging from winter fleeces and television and blinking into the fresh light of the morning.

Mostly, though, it has Polly Waterford's best friend, the blonde and sophisticated Kerensa, wife of Huckle's best friend, swearing wildly down the telephone.

'Stop swearing,' said Polly sensibly, rubbing her eyes. 'I can't make out a word you're saying.'

As it so often did, the connection cut out between Polbearne and the mainland, where Kerensa lived in a huge and ridiculously opulent mansion with her wunder-kind (and quite noisy) American husband Reuben.

'Who was that?' said Huckle, waiting for toast to pop up in the sunny kitchen of the lighthouse they shared, a faded grey T-shirt pulled on over his boxers. It wasn't really warm enough for just that, but Polly absolutely wasn't complaining. It was a Sunday morning, her only day off; there was salted local butter waiting to be spread, or a squeeze of Huckle's own honey, sweet orange blossom to go with the gentle morning weather.

'Kerensa,' said Polly. 'She had some very busy swearing to do.'

'That sounds like her. What about?'

Polly tried to ring her back, without success.

'Could be anything with Kerensa. Reuben's probably being a putz again.'

'Well I'd take that as a certainty,' said Huckle gravely, standing over the toaster, watching it fiercely. 'Oh, someone needs to invent a speedy toaster,' he complained.

‘A speedy toaster?’ said Polly. ‘What?’

‘Toast takes too long,’ said Huckle.

‘What on earth are you talking about?’

‘I really want some toast, and I put your sourdough in the toaster – which makes the best toast in the world by the way ...’

‘I knew there was a reason you were with me,’ said Polly.

‘... and then OMG, it just smells so good, it’s like you can’t wait, you have to eat the amazing sourdough toast straight away.’

He pressed the button, and two not-quite-toasted pieces of light golden bread popped out.

‘See?’ he said, attacking them crossly with a butter knife. The butter was still hard from the fridge and tore a hole in the soft crumb. Huckle looked down gloomily at his plate. ‘Every time. I panic and take it out too early and really regret it, and that’s my toast experience totally spoiled.’

‘Make more.’

‘It doesn’t work, I’ve tried it.’

Regardless, Huckle popped another couple of slices in.

‘The problem is, I’ll have eaten the first lot before the second lot is ready. It’s a vicious circle. Exactly the same thing will happen all over again.’

‘Maybe,’ said Polly, ‘you should just stand over the toaster with your mouth open when it’s about to pop up.’

‘Yeah, I thought of that,’ said Huckle. ‘Possibly with a

kind of butter spray gun so it's all ready to go and you don't have to hack it on in a hurry because you need to eat all the delicious toast so quickly.'

'I didn't think it was possible to meet someone more bread-obsessed than me,' said Polly. 'But – and I can't quite believe I'm saying this – I think it's possible you overthink toast.'

'If I could just invent the Speed-E-Toaster,' said Huckle, 'we'd be richer than Reuben.'

The toast popped up.

'QUICK! QUICK! QUICK!!!!'

And after that, they simply went back to bed, because Polly, being a baker, had to go to bed incredibly early every other day of the week, and Huckle, being a honey seller, didn't particularly, so their hours didn't always match up. And Polly sent a text to Kerensa saying not to worry, everything would be fine, she'd call her later, and then she turned off her phone.

This was to prove a terrible, terrible mistake.



Chapter Two

So let us be clear: none of what happened was truly Polly's fault, or Huckle's fault. It was obviously Kerensa's fault, as you'll see, and a bit Selina's, who wouldn't admit it in a million years but absolutely liked encouraging these things along (because some people are just a bit like that, aren't they? Stirrers).

But it was also a tiny bit Reuben's fault, because – and I can't stress this highly enough – even by *his* standards he was being the most unbelievable putz that day.

He had forgotten it was their wedding anniversary – their first wedding anniversary – and when Kerensa had pointed this out to him, he'd said yeah, well, he'd done a lot of that lovey-dovey stuff in the past and they were married now, so that was all kind of fine, right? Like, he'd done it and now they were all awesome, and anyway, she had a dozen handbags, right, and by the way, he had to be on a plane to San Francisco to talk to his massive IPO

base, and Kerensa had said she hadn't known that and he'd said well she should read the schedule his PA emailed her, he was leaving in two hours, and she said could she come too, having heard that San Francisco in the spring was a magnificent place to be, and he said not really, sweetie, he'd be super-busy. Then he'd kissed her goodbye and suggested that seeing as they'd had a gym put in the house, why didn't she use it?

So. You see what I mean. He didn't mean it unkindly, that's just what Reuben is like: when he's working, he kind of turns into Steve Jobs and doesn't really think about anyone but himself, which is why he's pretty much as rich as Steve Jobs, more or less. It's a big number anyway.

So Kerensa stood in the completely empty huge luxurious hallway of their massive amazing house with its own beach on the northern coast of Cornwall and wondered about crying a little bit. Then she decided to be angry instead, because this had been happening more and more often, and Reuben never seemed to see that actually she didn't really like being contacted by his PA, who was cool and American and dressed very expensively and who Kerensa was slightly intimidated by, even though nothing much intimidated her, and ever since he'd kick-started his career last year, after a near-bankruptcy, she'd barely seen him at all; he'd never been off a flight.

So she'd decided to get angry and in a frenzy called Polly, who was busy as it turned out guffing on about toast with Huckle on her only day off, and absolutely was not as

sympathetic as a friend should be in those circumstances, which Polly regretted bitterly afterwards.

So *then* Kerensa called their other friend Selina, who had been through a terrible time being widowed two years before and could still be a little emotional on occasion, and Selina, who had lived on the mainland and always had a fashionable career before she'd accidentally fallen for a fisherman, said she had a great idea: she was bored out of her mind, why didn't they go into Plymouth, go to the smartest restaurant they could find and drink the most expensive thing on the menu, then charge it to Reuben and say thanks for the lovely anniversary gift the next time she saw him?

And Kerensa liked this idea very much, so that was what they did. And what started out as lunch – and a lot, and I mean a *lot* of complaining about the men in their lives, or that had been in their lives – got a little out of hand, and they ended up meeting a bunch of other girls there on a hen night who immediately incorporated them into their gang, and they went to see a 'dance show' with those girls and I will leave it totally up to your imagination what the dance show entailed, but there was quite a lot of baby oil on display, and some very tall men with Brazilian accents, and flaming sambucas, and then Kerensa's memory gets a bit hazy after that, but when she woke up in the morning in an incredibly posh hotel she dimly recalled waltzing into brandishing a platinum credit card at some ungodly hour, she remembered enough to know

that if she could possibly have it surgically removed from her brain, she absolutely would.

He'd already left. Although there was a long black hair in the shower.

I know. I did say it was a Bad Thing.

And oh, it gets worse. Think of something slightly regrettable you've done on a night out, then multiply it by a factor of about a million.

Kerensa got home – with a sniggering, only mildly hung-over Selina, who thought the entire thing was unutterably hilarious and had been careful to drink lots of water at the same time, as she is also that kind of a friend – to discover that Polly had felt so guilty about not seeing her that Huckle had phoned Reuben and basically ordered him to go home and be nice to his wife.

So Reuben had postponed his business in SF and flown all the way back, laden with every perfume in the duty-free shop because he couldn't remember what she liked. He'd marched back in the door – where a miserable Kerensa had been throwing up all morning and crawling along the tiles writhing with hung-over guilt and misery – grabbed her in his arms and declared his undying love for her, then attempted to dramatically carry her upstairs, which he couldn't manage as he'd been on a plane all night and Kerensa was two inches taller than him and also wanted to die; but they did their best together regardless, the early April light glowing through the huge floor-to-ceiling windows in their enormous circular bedroom,

with its ridiculous/ spectacular (delete according to taste) circular bed, and after that, he promptly whisked Kerensa away everywhere he went for the next six months.



So that is the terrible thing that happened in the spring.

And if this was a film, right, we would have reached the point where the ominous music crashes in and the credits start . . .