

SUMMER AT THE CORNISH FARMHOUSE

ALSO BY LINN B. HALTON

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Linn B. Halton



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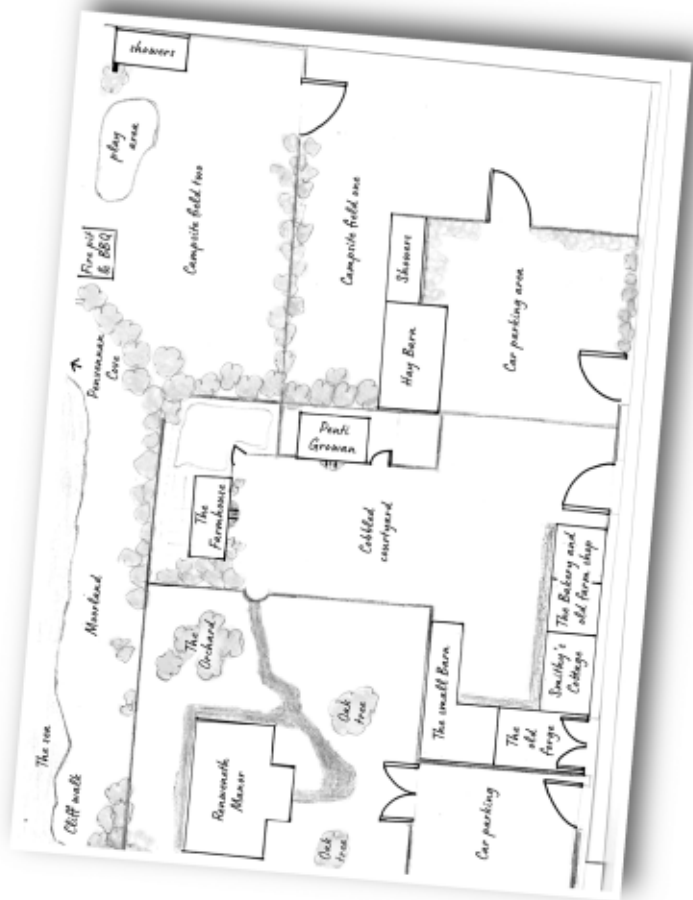


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To my fabulous four... you are my inspiration!



Renweneth Farm, Cornwall

Prologue

My hands shake as I press the call button but the moment Grandma's voice fills the room my throat closes over.

'Jess?'

My chest is so tight I begin to panic.

'Darling, what's wrong?'

'My... my world is falling apart, Grandma, and I...' With my emotions in utter turmoil, I struggle to pull myself together.

'Take your time, lovely. Try to slow down your thoughts and focus on breathing.' Her tone is soft, so gentle that it's like a hug and I find myself nodding my head even though she can't see me.

Pushing my shoulders back with a sense of determination, I clasp my hands together firmly in my lap as I stare down at the phone lying in front of me. Moments later the tight band of pain around my ribcage gradually begins to ease and I reach out for a tissue to dry my eyes. *Enough*, I silently berate myself. What's done is done, now it's about survival.

'Sorry. I just... I don't know what to do and I can't even think straight.'

As if leading me, what I hear in response is the sound of Grandma drawing in a deep, deep breath, then slowly expelling it before taking another. I follow her example for several minutes until my jaw unclenches and my shoulders relax, helping to take the pressure off my chest.

'Thank you, Grandma,' I reply, my voice barely audible.

‘Now, start at the beginning.’

‘Ben has been distant lately. No... we’ve both been distant with each other, is the truth. And yet, I don’t know how it happened... how we got to this point.’ I mutter an involuntary groan as my husband’s face flashes before my eyes. ‘Ben insisted on taking me out for dinner last night; just the two of us, something we haven’t done in quite a while. I was a little anxious but also relieved. I thought we were finally going to sit down and talk honestly to each other, like we used to do. We get so little real quality time alone together these days. And when we do the timing doesn’t seem right somehow. There’s always some little upset to spoil the atmosphere. Silly things that don’t really matter, or so I thought, can feel like invisible barriers and I was happy that he wanted to clear the air. You know, get us back on track.’

I take a moment to steel myself before I repeat those fateful words that passed his lips. As it turns out, there are some things that you can’t put right because once it’s lost, it’s gone forever. I saw the pain reflected in his eyes even before he started speaking and it was gut-wrenching.

‘He told me...’ I gulp down the lump that begins to rise in my throat. ‘Ben admitted that he’s not in love with me anymore and he said he was sorry for messing up our lives. He wants a divorce.’

‘Oh, Jess. My poor darling. I can feel your pain and my heart goes out to you.’

An icy chill begins to course through my veins. I rang Grandma because she often notices things other people don’t pick up on. She says little, but she’s a people watcher and it’s the words she chose not to say in response that tells me she’d already sensed that something was wrong.

‘How did I not see it coming?’ My voice has an edge of desperation to it.

And then Grandma lets out a sigh that emanates from deep within her and it sends a little shudder through me. ‘Because in your heart you know the truth, Jess, and you’ve probably known it for a while, but you aren’t ready to accept it.’

Suddenly, it's as if scenes from my life are flashing before my eyes in quick succession. Ben's eyes smiling down into mine and I can actually feel his love wrapping itself around me. And the birthday when I arrived home after an exhausting day at work to a trail of rose petals leading from the front door to the bathroom. Inside, there were tealights everywhere and a fragrant bubble bath awaiting. He appeared some five minutes later carrying a tray with a dish of handmade chocolates and a bottle of champagne. As he slipped into the bath to join me, my tiredness simply faded away. That was in the early days, when happiness was something I took for granted.

'It's over and there's nothing I can do about it,' I gasp as the reality continues to sink in. 'I remember Ben standing in front of the window with Lola in his arms the night she was born. He had tears in his eyes as he talked to his daughter for the first time. He still looks at her that way, Grandma. But when he looks at me his eyes haven't lit up like that for a long time now. I told him we could fix it... see a counsellor, but he said he can't change the way he feels...' I choke down a sob as my words peter out, my mind wandering.

'Jess,' Grandma's voice brings me back into the moment. 'What is your heart telling you?'

I pause and my stomach churns as the truth is almost too painful to bear. 'That it's over. It's been over for a while and I ignored my biggest fear because I knew there was no going back.'

'Then your focus must be on building the future you want for you and Lola.'

'How do I do that when my heart feels like it's been shattered into a million little pieces? My life no longer makes any sense.'

'So, you're what? Just going to fall apart?'

She's right. I have Lola to think of. I don't even know how I'm going to tell Mum and Dad. Then it occurs to me that Grandma might not be the only one who could see the cracks forming in my marriage. Now I feel foolish and angry with myself. I thought

that if I gave Ben a little space and some time, he'd sort himself out. It was just a phase he was going through, I told myself.

'No. Lola comes first, always,' I reply, meekly. Wallowing is a luxury I know I don't have.

'There you go! That's the Jess we need now; strong and determined. It's hit you hard, my love, but life goes on. It's time to build a new dream and gradually the wounds of disappointment will heal. But understand this, Jess. If, deep down inside, you'd felt there was a chance of salvaging your relationship you would have immediately leapt into action. People change over time, Ben just changed in different ways to you. It's no one's fault.'

'Our life became mundane. If only I'd...'

Grandma interrupts me. 'Don't do that to yourself, Jess. It changes nothing to think like that.'

'But when you know someone isn't happy, I mean... it wasn't your idea to move to Cornwall, was it?'

Grandma gives a little light-hearted laugh. 'Your grandad's dream was always to live near to the sea. We all know that after Cappy left the navy he settled in Gloucestershire for my sake, because that's where most of the family were living. I knew you'd all come and visit if we moved to the farm, as who doesn't love the sound of the sea?'

Grandad's nickname, which family and friends now use with great affection, harks back to when I was small. I asked Grandad Gabe what he did when he was away. He said he was the captain of a ship. I wasn't good with 'T's' and from then on he was known as Cappy.

'You made his dream come true, though.'

'Well... partly,' Grandma admits. 'There's still a lot of work to do to bring the farm and the buildings back to life. He won't rest until it's all done but then I want him to buy a boat.' Her voice lifts and I know she's smiling.

'A boat?' I repeat, thinking I might have misheard her. Cappy has never mentioned a word of that to me.

‘Once a captain, always a captain,’ she says, happiness radiating from her tone. ‘And why not? Even if he only goes mackerel fishing, he’ll be back on the water again and that’s his spiritual home.’

Now that’s true love.

‘And what’s your dream, Grandma?’

‘To see him wearing his captain’s hat again. He’ll want to take you and Lola fishing, of course. But he told me once that looking back on the land from the sea changes the way you look at life. He said that, give or take, the earth is seventy per cent water and only thirty per cent land. How amazing is that?’

No, Grandma. How humbling is that – the way you always put Cappy first.

‘And what’s your dream for the farm, Grandma?’

There’s a long pause. ‘I want it to be a comfort for him, for you all.’

An uneasy feeling descends upon me. ‘It is, and you’re happy there, too? Aren’t you?’

‘Yes,’ she instantly responds.

‘And Renweneth Manor?’ I ask, unable to stop myself.

‘Now the farmhouse is in better shape and once the farmyard outbuildings are brought back to life, the boat comes next. After that... well, we’ll see.’

‘But you love the manor house and the beautiful gardens and orchard surrounding it.’

‘It’s been standing a long time, Jess. That old house will wait its turn if it’s meant to be. The point is that this isn’t about one person’s dream but building something for the future. When life gets tough it’s all about options. The farm is just one of them, something that might... well, who knows what tomorrow will bring? But that’s the exciting bit about life, Jess. How many times do we look back on something bad that happened, only to realise that it changed our course, which turned out to be a good thing in the end.’

I fall silent, knowing there’s a message for me somewhere in

those words and feeling frustrated I can't see it right now. 'What if I make the wrong decision along the way, Grandma?'

She laughs, softly. 'No one gets it right first time, Jess. We can plan all we like, but the key to surviving the ups and downs of life is to be like a willow. Know when to bend and flex, don't let your ego make you dig in your heels for the wrong reasons.'

That makes me smile. 'I hear you.'

'Good. When you know something is right you'll feel it in your gut, Jess. There's nothing to fear in losing face, or even losing your pride, but there's a lot to fear in doing something just because you're too scared to take a risk. If you get it wrong it's a learning experience, that's all.'

As the long process of establishing a life without Ben by my side began, that conversation with Grandma was often on my mind. When, almost six months later, she died after a short and unexpected illness, I awoke from a dream one night thinking I'd heard her repeat something she'd said about the farm and Cappy. 'I want it to be a comfort for him, for you all.'

Did Grandma know she was ill when we spoke? Or did she instinctively know that her life was drawing to a close? Either way, her words stuck with me as if one day I'd understand exactly what she'd been trying to tell me.

ONE YEAR LATER

JUNE

Those Tricky Little Four-Letter Words

Buying paint, I'm discovering, can be as complex as finding love. It should be easy, shouldn't it? I mean, you meet someone, fall in love and live happily ever after. And buying emulsion to paint a wall is just a case of plucking a tin off a shelf. Except that nothing in my life has ever turned out to be straightforward and today is no different.

The next item on my list simply says *blue paint*. It's for my daughter Lola's bedroom and she told me exactly what she wanted. However, none of the pre-mixed colours on the shelves come close to her exacting description. After a lot of deliberation, I walk over to the impressive Colour Selection Zone and my heart sinks. There's a vast wall display with tiny colour charts. The blue section ranges from a mere hint of a tint that's so subtle it's hard to detect, to the darkest, densest navy. In between are hundreds, literally hundreds of nuanced shades.

I find myself sighing. As with love, I'm probably heading for another fall from grace. For an eight-year-old, Lola has an old head on her shoulders. My instructions this morning as I dropped her off at school were that it should be cornflower blue, like the flowers on the edge of the meadow we walked through last summer.

'That warm shade, Mum,' she'd added, intently. 'Not the way they looked after our picnic when the clouds were dark grey, and they made everything look cold.'

My stomach started to churn. I tried to transport myself back into the moment, picturing us sitting on a blanket, munching contentedly on sandwiches and cake. The truth was that I couldn't even remember what flowers there were around us that day. I'd been too caught up trying to make a happy memory before I broke the news that Lola's father Ben, and I, were officially divorced.

The move to Cornwall was imminent and, in a way, I'd wished the confirmation had come through after we'd left Gloucestershire. Lola knew it was coming, of course, but the reality of it felt harsh. As the sun slipped behind the gathering clouds and it started to rain, it seemed appropriate somehow. How dare the sun continue to shine when our world was about to be turned upside down? A period of mourning had begun. As we'd rushed to gather everything up and head back to the car, the questioning began.

'We're really going on our big adventure then, Mum?' Her eyes had searched mine, looking for reassurance. Was I really doing the right thing? I'd questioned myself. Lola had already been through so much since Ben moved out and I was running on empty. That didn't bode well when it came to taking on a project that was going to require a lot of energy and motivation. My nerves and emotions were frayed because, stupidly, I'd thought... hoped... that Ben would suddenly have a last-minute change of heart and beg us to stay. Or even better, come with us and start over again in a place that held so many wonderful memories for us all. A decade of family birthdays, Christmases and summer holidays gathering together to celebrate the happiest times in our lives. It was the right thing to do and I knew it.

'Yes, and it will be amazing, Lola,' I'd replied with every ounce of positivity I could muster as we bundled everything into the boot of the car. Instinctively, I'd reached out to help Lola tuck a few stray strands of hair that the breeze had whipped across her forehead, behind her ear.

'But Dad loves Cornwall as much as we do, Mum.' Lola's eyes had reflected the anxiety that she felt about leaving her dad behind.

'I know, my gorgeous girl, and it is sad, but it's important that we're all happy. Once Dad is settled in his new house he'll come and spend some time with us, you know that and Dad never breaks a promise, does he?'

'No, Mum, he doesn't, but Cappy's old farmhouse is a bit... spidery and dark.'

I'd stifled a laugh, wrinkling my forehead and putting on my serious face. 'Between us, we're going to get out the paintbrushes and make it light and bright and spider-free, don't you worry. And Cappy will be so happy to come and visit because your great-grandma Maggie would be pleased to think of the two of us living there. We all had so many wonderful family holidays, didn't we? It holds a lot of special memories, Lola, and we're about to add to them.'

The happy times were put on pause when Lola's great-grandma died and Cappy moved back to Gloucestershire to be close to my parents. Being at the farm without her by his side was simply too much for him to deal with. He struggled to pick up and make sense of the shattered pieces of his life. For a while it was a struggle just to get through each day; he looked lost and bewildered. Appointing a manager to run the camping and caravanning business kept things ticking over, but no one talked about the longer-term future.

However, we all missed a place that had become a huge part of our lives and that applied to Lola, too. She isn't a child to sulk as she has a sunny, effervescent outlook on life, but the day of our picnic was a poignant one at that time. Aside from our home in Gloucestershire, there was only one other place she felt a strong connection to and that was Cornwall. Oh, I know Ben will always be there for us, but taking Lola away from her friends and her school to make the move was still a risk. In my darkest moments I'd realised that neither of us were adjusting to

the inevitable, that three had become two in terms of living our daily lives.

Now, here we are... nearly a year has passed since we made the move and the last room of The Farmhouse is going to be a masterpiece if I can get just the right shade of blue to please my daughter. But even as I rifle through the swatches, my mind won't switch off. If only I'd put as much thought into choosing a husband as I am into decorating Lola's new bedroom, maybe we'd still be a happy family. Then it dawns on me that if I'd married someone else I wouldn't have my beautiful girl. In that split second my face lights up and as I glance around my eyes alight upon the perfect shade of sun-kissed cornflower blue.

There's a lot riding on this because Lola has been battling with separation anxiety. As daft as it sounds, every tiny detail of her new room matters. If you take a baby bird out of its nest it feels threatened, vulnerable and disorientated, so this isn't just about decorating a bedroom, it's about creating Lola's little sanctuary.

Perching cross-legged on my favourite window seat, I stare out at the sea as it extends far into the distance. The trees are thinner here and frame the scene so perfectly it could be a painting. If I think back over the many times I've sat here with Lola, the pictures that fill my head are like charting her growth. From a babe in arms to a boisterous toddler, and now we often sit here side by side, just losing ourselves in the view.

It's cathartic and a reminder of how wonderful nature is; nothing upsets the rhythm of the seasons and today it's gloriously sunny. There's hardly a cloud in the sky and it's impossible to distinguish from here where the water ends and the sky begins on the horizon.

My phone kicks into life, shattering the silence, but when I see that it's Ivy, I immediately put it on speakerphone.

'How did the paint-buying trip go?' My best friend since preschool asks.

'It was a bit of a nightmare but I'm hoping Lola will think I've nailed it.'

'Thank goodness for—' The sound of alarm bells going off in the background stops Ivy in her tracks. 'Sorry, Jess. The fire alarm is going off again,' she yells down the line. 'I'll ring you back shortly.'

Oh dear, Ivy sounds at the end of her tether. 'Speak soon!'

As we disconnect, I stand, staring at the large test square of *wildflower blue* I've just painted on the wall. I think it's pretty, but I have no idea if the vision in my head will match what Lola is picturing. When my phone kicks into life again I grab it, assuming it's Ivy, but to my delight it's Mum.

'Hi darling, just checking in. Is this weekend still on?'

'It is. The chippings are being delivered later this morning. Are you and Dad okay?'

She chuckles. 'I'm fine and Dad is... Dad. He's in his greenhouse loading up trays with plants for your new patio area as we speak.'

My smile grows exponentially. 'Aww... bless him! Going for the quickest and cheapest option to tidy the area behind The Farmhouse isn't ideal, but it will transform it.'

'Is Ben joining us?' Mum asks hesitantly. My parents don't get to see him very often now and it takes a while to adjust to that. They miss him too, which is only natural as he's been a part of our lives since I was eighteen years old and that's a little over ten years now. Following the divorce I decided to keep my married name, telling myself that it was for Lola's sake. Maybe at first there was that element of wishful thinking Ben might come back to me at some point, but now I know that isn't going to happen, I still think it was the right thing to do.

'No. Sadly he's working tomorrow. He did offer to drive down afterwards and stay overnight so he could give a hand on Sunday, but I didn't think that was fair on him.'

'Oh well, it's the thought that counts and it was good of Ben to offer.' Mum's voice is upbeat, but the extra pair of hands

would have been a boon and we both know it. Ben is an antiques furniture restorer and used to shifting heavy items of furniture around. When he let slip that he wouldn't be coming alone, I panicked and rejected his offer without even thinking.

'The good news is that Ivy has talked her lovely husband into coming.'

'We haven't seen Adam for ages,' Mum gushes, instantly perking up.

Adam is a builder and he's solid muscle. His second home is the gym and while I have no idea how much work is involved decanting twelve one-ton bags, my parents, Lola and I really do need all the help we can muster.

'Well, it certainly put a huge smile on my face when she broke the news.'

'It'll be fine, Jess,' Mum reassures me. 'Goodness, I've carted enough compost down the path to your dad's kitchen garden over the years to know anything is do-able. I might not be able to manage a wheelbarrow but with the right size buckets we'll be fine. I'll also bring a smaller one for Lola, as she won't want to be left out.'

A beeping sound emanates from my phone.

'Thanks, Mum... I have an incoming call from Ivy, so I'll love you and leave you. See you in the morning.'

'Bye, darling. Give Lola a hug from us!'

As Ivy's voice looms up, she sounds frazzled. 'Another false alarm. Seriously, Jess, if the electrician doesn't get this sorted soon we're going to lose customers and money. Each time we evacuate the café we have to offer everyone a replacement hot drink. Thank goodness we don't serve hot food yet or we'd be sunk.'

'Is the landlord still messing you round?'

'Let's just say that he rarely returns my calls or my emails and if he can't get the alarm sorted out, what chance do I have of getting his permission for me to install a new streamlined kitchen? I'm seriously considering starting to look elsewhere,

because there'll be no point renewing the lease in October if this continues.' Her sigh of exasperation is tough to hear.

Poor Ivy. She's been rushed off her feet setting up a new business and while it's in a prime spot in the centre of Stroud, in Gloucestershire, space is at a premium. She can seat sixteen people inside and, fortunately, she's allowed to put up six further tables outside when the weather allows. But it's always packed and she's constantly turning customers away. I can't help but wonder whether it's the right place to invest in though. Turning The Cake and Coffee Emporium into a full-blown café offering hot and cold lunches is a risk. It's a great idea to grow her business, but if people sit and linger over their meal rather than eating and exiting, how long will it take her to recoup the outlay for her dream catering kitchen?

'You could always write to him and send it recorded delivery. He can't ignore that, surely?'

'Hmm,' she groans disparagingly, 'if he treats all his tenants like he treats me I suspect he gets a lot of those. Anyway, ignore my moaning. Trade is brisk and I can't complain. So... the dreaded paint situation. You sounded quite confident just now.'

'I am,' I reply, smiling to myself. 'We've chosen some lovely pieces of furniture to up-cycle and she's even drawn a floor plan.'

'It's good to hear that Lola really is ready for this at last, Jess. It's wonderful news.' Ivy knows what a big deal this is for both Lola and me.

'When we move her bed out of my room and into the newly decorated one, we're going to put some voile drapes around it. She's very excited about that.'

'That's a clever idea. When she's all tucked up in her own little space she'll be comfy, cosy and, hopefully, start to let go of that anxiety. I remember calling in to see you at the old house and Lola was curled up in a ball, sobbing. My first instinct was to panic.'

It tears me apart how unsettled Lola has been since we moved to Cornwall. Sleeping in my room was supposed to be

a temporary thing, but she didn't show any interest whenever I suggested we make a start on her bedroom. Now with everything else sparkling and comfortable, the time has come. She's fine at school and has made some good friends, but when we're home alone together every little sound sets her on edge.

'I know. Thankfully, Lola's meltdowns are few and far between now. Her feelings often overwhelmed her, and all I could do was to offer to sit and hold her in my arms until she calmed down. Sometimes she simply wanted to be left alone and that scared me. She couldn't put what she was feeling into words and it was as frustrating for her, as it was for me. Ben missed all that, of course.'

Ivy sighs. 'Moving to Cornwall was a courageous move, Jess, but the right one.'

'Thanks, Ivy. I think so, too. It's a pity Lola's best friend, Daisy, lives a good ten-minute car drive away but they're like the terrible twins when they're together,' I chuckle. 'They're boisterous, they shriek a lot and it's so good to see.'

Lola is used to living on a small housing estate, within easy walking distance of the school. It's the sort of community where children are safe to play together in the cul-de-sac because the inhabitants drive slowly, expecting the unexpected like a ball appearing out of nowhere, or kids playing chase and forgetting where they are. Here, there are no friends living on her doorstep to play with unless we arrange a play date. In winter, we look out on to the inky blackness of the moor and dense swathes of trees. In the distance is the sea and when it's blowing a gale, the wind coming off the water can be scary even in the mildest of storms.

'The worst is behind you now, Jess. Keep your focus on the future.'

'Lola moving into her own bedroom is a major milestone for us and I hope she can finally relax and enjoy having her own space again.'

‘The upside is that you’ll be able to get rid of your double bed and get a decent-sized one in your room.’

‘I’ll have you know it’s very comfortable,’ I point out. ‘Besides, a king-size bed isn’t in the budget.’

‘But what if at some point in the future you want to entertain?’ Ivy teases me.

‘I think I’ve done all the entertaining I want to do for a while,’ I scoff. ‘A long while.’

‘Aww... one day you will let go of your feelings for Ben. Don’t rule out a second chance to find someone new to share your life with.’

I groan. When the man you love falls out of love with you, it’s hard to accept. It’s true to say that I’m not ready to move on but each day I am getting a little stronger in my resolve not to think about Ben, or what he’s doing. ‘Well, let’s just say that I have enough problems on my plate to keep me fully occupied for the foreseeable future. Is Adam still coming tomorrow?’

Ivy chuckles. ‘He sure is, and he’s looking forward to it. He calls it a free workout and you know him; he loves showing off his muscles.’

That’s very true, but he’s also a man you can rely upon, knowing that he’ll step up every time. He’s like the brother I never had and Lola adores him. From day one he didn’t begrudge my close friendship with Jess and now he too is regarded as a part of our extended family.

‘It’s been a while since he visited so he’ll notice the difference. And tell Adam that I’ve made a large batch of Cornish pasties for lunch. There are also some bottles of Proper Job beer in the fridge with his name on them.’

‘Jess, you make me look bad when you spoil him like that!’ Ivy quips, laughing. ‘I like to keep him on his toes, not inflate his ego. I mean, his favourite Cornish beer and homemade pasties. And what about me?’

‘I’m a mum who cooks, you’re a pro. Anyway, you’re sorted

as unlimited coffee refills are on hand and Lola and I made a batch of traditional Cornish fairings. Oh, and we can pick as many homegrown strawberries as you can eat!

‘Okay. I’ll let you off. We’ll be there bright and early. I must go, we have a queue and I need to give the girls a hand. Love you guys!’