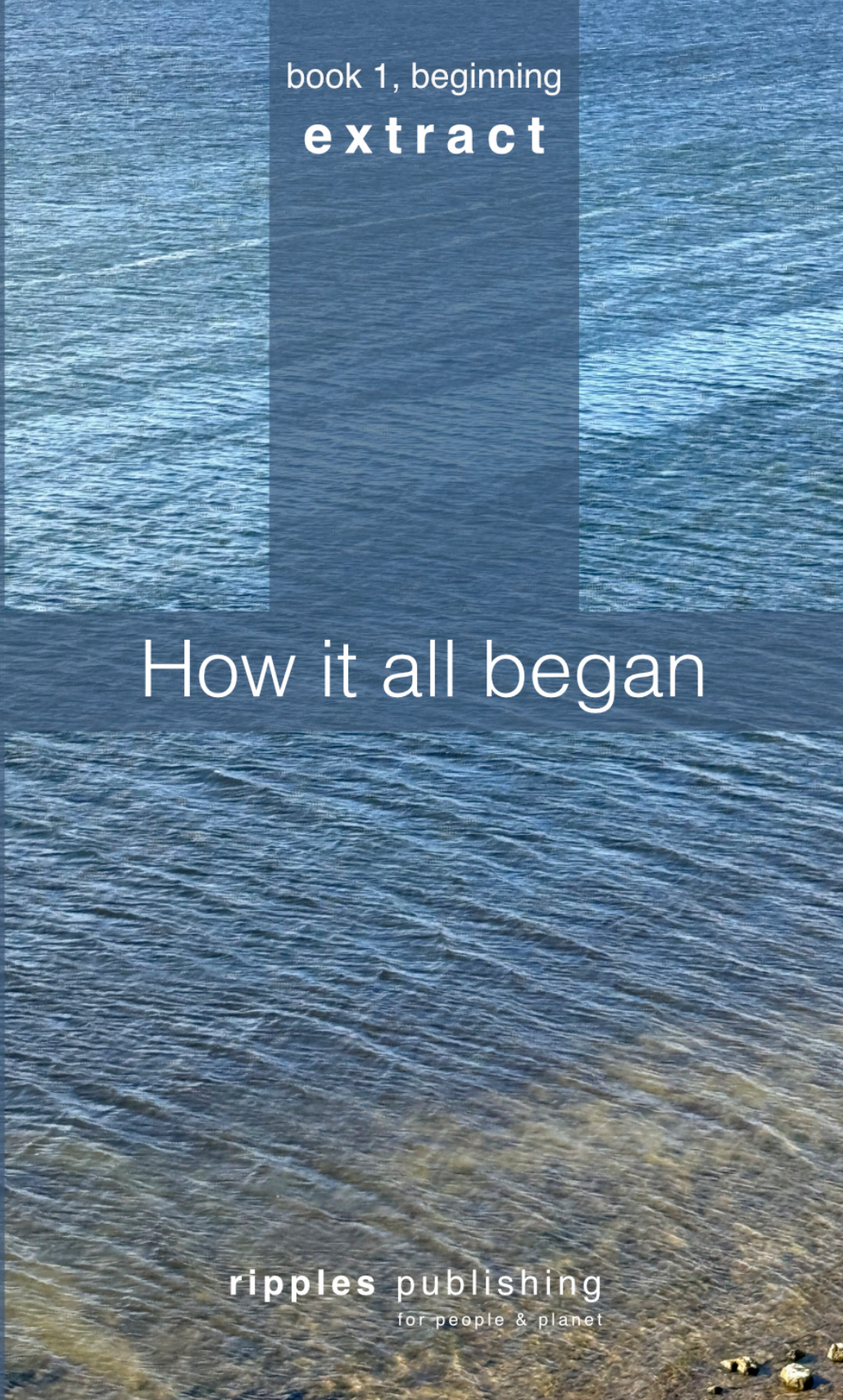
CHARLIE ALICE RAYA

book 1, beginning

extract

How it all began



easy town books

ripples publishing
for people & planet

It all began with a letter

Berlin, 2 March 2016

Dear Mr Tom Holbon,

Sometimes I wonder what I would do with a fortune like yours.

The answer is actually simple: I would set up a team of experts for an experiment which might or might not answer all the questions foremost on my mind.

Do you think your kind of fortune would be sufficient to build an experiment? Building, being one of the clues. Exploring, another.

Well, you seem to have the sort of influence to bring together all the experts required. And from what I hear, you are a programming businessman with an altruistic streak. All of which would come in handy.

So how about we set up an experiment which might turn the world upside down? In which case, we could give it a good shake.

If you are intrigued, I would be happy to present my ideas to you in person.

Sincerely,
Alice Adler

More than two weeks later

When Tom Holbon looked up from his paperwork, he was surprised to see his PR manager enter the study.

And actually for two reasons.

It was late in the afternoon, on a Friday, and usually Richard made prior appointments. At least here on Tom's estate. Back at the offices in New York, Richard came and went.

As always, Richard looked perfect. Perfect suit, perfect haircut, perfect everything. Some called him Barbie Ken. He even stood perfectly. At ease and yet with poise. Right now, three paces into the room, waiting for Tom to speak first.

Tom always wondered about the three paces. Why not two, which would bring him level with the terrace door, or five, which would get him to the centre of the room? There was no logic in three paces.

But then, Richard was a smooth talker, not someone for pace logic. And he was ambitious. Over a decade ago, he talked himself into Tom's inner circle. Tom still wasn't sure how that had happened.

Well, Richard delivered. Usually. There had been a few complaints by female employees down the years, but nothing that couldn't be handled.

Now in his forties, Richard was still unmarried. And that meant, he was available for overtime, and apparently on a Friday afternoon too.

‘Richard, what is it?’ Tom asked, clearing away the documents on his desk.

‘I called the woman from Germany.’

‘Remind me. What was that about?’

‘The woman who sent you a letter about building an experiment with your fortune.’

‘Oh, right. What’s the idea about?’

‘She wouldn’t say.’

‘Really?’ Tom raised his eyebrows. ‘She wasn’t serious, right?’

‘She will only talk to you in person. “I wrote *in person*, and I meant *in person*,” is what she said.’

‘Oh, well. She will change her mind. Give it a few days.’

‘I doubt that. “I won’t change my mind,” is what she said.’

‘Hm.’ Tom was a little puzzled. ‘Do you think there is an actual idea? Or is this just a prank?’

Richard hesitated. ‘She is stubborn, maybe arrogant but not crazy or a prankster, is what I’d say.’

‘Hm. Anything else?’

‘Nothing that can’t wait until Monday.’

That was Richard too. He never made a fuss. Especially not on a Friday. Which was a nice touch.

‘Alright. Thanks, Richard.’

When the door closed behind Richard, Tom leaned back in his chair, massaging his fingers. They didn’t hurt, not today.

The letter still seemed like a joke.

What would I do with a fortune like yours?

What a question?

And yet, he was curious. And he still smiled whenever he thought of the line: turn the world upside down to give it a good shake.

According to Richard, Alice Adler was a small-time freelancer, web design and photography. She studied business in Berlin and Bristol, and some search results indicated work for a theatre company and on a movie. But Richard wasn't sure that these entries related to the same Alice Adler.

Forty-three, born in Berlin, according to her passport details. The passport photo showed an intelligent looking person, someone with a mind of her own.

Tom didn't trust photos.

No sign of a husband, children or any social media activity.

Hm.

For a moment, Tom looked out of the French windows, down to the lake. The sun was already low.

Hm.

He opened his desk drawer, searched it and found her letter under some documents.

He read the letter again. He smiled again.

Then he crumbled the letter and threw it into his wastepaper basket.

Ten days later

MONDAY, 28 MARCH 2016
A PARTY LOFT IN NEW YORK

Jack Harris was still fuming when he ordered a G & T at the long bar. He would have a few drinks on the house. That was the least Tom Holbon owed him.

Who the fuck does Holbon think he is? A bleeding billionaire who can buy just about everything he wants? Oh, hang on. Yeah, he is the richest man on this screwed up planet, and he just tried to buy me. ME! A bloody famous actor with a BAFTA win under his still acceptable belt, from bloody old England. And I still get screwed over! What else does it take?

And then this Alice Adler … Jack couldn't make up his mind about her. Nor could Holbon, funny enough. Holbon sounded sort of puzzled when he pointed her out in the glamorous buzz of the party. Some two hundred guests. About two-thirds suits, the other third: actors, musicians, models.

'She doesn't seem like she's new to circles like ours,' Holbon remarked. 'But neither does she seem like she's used to our circles. There's some sort of curious amusement about her. Don't you think?'

DON'T I THINK? Jack nearly shouted.

But he didn't want to make a scene. Everyone knew him. Though luckily, no one here would talk to him as long as he avoided eye contact. It was some kind of unspoken agreement — *in circles likes ours*.

Finally his G & T arrived, and he gulped down half of it.

He hated parties like this: rich businessmen courting celebrities, and in some cases vice versa. It was sad, at best.

For fuck's sake, why did he keep walking into traps? Why couldn't people just leave him alone? Why couldn't they just let him be? Just be.

Jack emptied his glass and ordered another G & T. 'A triple this time,' he snapped at the waiter.

Bloody hell, he was far too sober for this.

He could still hear them chirping: 'Oh, Jack, but you have to go. The Tom Holbon wants to meet you.'

And not just his agent. No, five other people kept bugging him. Three of which, he hadn't even spoken to in years. And for what? This bullshit?

Jack frowned, suddenly distracted.

He was keeping an eye on Alice Adler. Inconspicuously, of course. More like a corner of an eye, really. And a barkeeper, further down the long bar, sneered at her. What did she order? Water?

Oh, orange juice.

Well, at least she seemed to take the sneer with humour.

Now she stepped away from the bar, orange juice in her hand, and looked around. Again. She was watching people a lot. Sometimes other guests talked to her. She smiled easily when they did. But no one stayed long.

She was dressed casually: jeans, T-shirt, long jacket, no jewellery, no noticeable make-up, her short dark hair sort of ruffled. He opted for casual too. And no tie. Never a tie. Not even for The Tom Holbon.

What the heck? What does Barbie Ken want with her?

Jack turned, leaning his back against the bar. Earlier, the Barbie Ken guy introduced him to Holbon. Now, Barbie Ken was talking to Alice Adler. And she was frowning. And now, Barbie Ken walked away. She was looking after him, kind of puzzled. What the hell?

Jack turned to the bar again, just as the barkeeper served the triple G & T. He picked it up and took a few thoughtful sips.

So far, he hadn't given Alice Adler a single thought. He was just angry. He even remembered what a famous actor told him on his first job: 'As an actor you are a prostitute. You strip for your audience, body and soul. When you are famous, you strip for the world. And as a reward, the world will own you. Every single one of them will own you!'

A fucking prostitute!

And tonight Holbon tried to buy his services, saying: 'Whatever it takes. I will, of course, reimburse all you expenses, and pay you well.'

Did Holbon really mean …?

No wonder, he got angry. Walked out on Holbon. But Barbie Ken caught up with him and explained with smugness dripping from every word: 'Mr Harris, Tom isn't all himself. He's experiencing a brief stretch of senility. It will pass. He just turned sixty-three. These things happen when people get to that age. I mean, he invited Alice Adler out of the blue. No one was more surprised than me. And now, we have to keep Tom from making a fool of himself. He can't be seen to fall for a prank. Right? Besides, if there is something to her idea, then it's better we know about it and not our competitors, right? So, we need you to get her talking.'

What a total dick!

Jack wondered how Holbon would react if he knew that his PR manager portrayed him as a dotard. *Aren't PR managers supposed to present you through some rose-coloured glasses? Do you still get screwed over even if you are the richest man on the planet?*

Hm. But what about Alice Adler? What has she walked into?

Jack frowned, remembering something else Barbie Ken told him. 'We have several people at the party who'll gather information about her idea. But you — you with your famous charm — you might have the best chances.'

Jack nearly punched Barbie Ken.

But that was the curse of being famous. You couldn't just punch someone. Least of all in public. If you did, there would be hell to pay.

Jack shook his head.

'I'm curious, Mr Harris. That's all,' Holbon said earlier.

'We have other people at the party,' Barbie Ken's voice echoed in his mind.

Other people.

What if?

No!

But …

Yes, yes … I should at least warn her.

Though, she seems like the kind of a person who can look after herself.

That's bullshit.

Yeah. I know.

He had seen it many times. People thought they could get through trouble on their own. And they failed. In the past, he needed help, but people thought he didn't. And he failed.

Jack turned around.

But Alice Adler was gone.

He scanned the loft.

Was she really gone?

Apparently.

Well, if she was gone, then there was nothing he could do.

He was simply too late.

Case closed.

Jack sighed and went looking for her.

He had been in this loft before. It was popular with the rich and famous, who rented it for their parties. This party was Tom Holbon's. Hence all the suits, and the celebrities for the suits' amusement.

Apart from the main room, with the long bar, there were several smaller rooms: for gamblers, dancers, smokers, chillers and one for minimalists.

That's where he found Alice Adler.

He couldn't help a little smile, but then he stopped, hesitating.

The room was nearly empty, just a few stools and fewer guests. The walls were grey, and the bar was the only source of light.

Alice Adler was sitting at the bar, lost in thoughts, a cocktail in front of her. A young barkeeper was working his phone, standing in the opposite corner.

Should he really talk to her?

What if she gets star-struck and starts to giggle? What if she wants to trick Holbon?

Bollocks!

Just talk to her.

Are you sure about this?

No.

And then a third thought added: You know, maybe you should have some fun with this.

Hm. Maybe some fun would be good.

Slowly, Jack walked towards the bar, pulling at his shirt. Then he took a deep breath, put a whimsical smile on his face and sat down on the barstool next to her.

She looked up.

And she stared.

She just stared at him.

That never happened.

People made a fuss, gasped, begged him for a selfie or an autograph, or they giggled. No one just stared at him with angry — no, not angry — frustrated eyes.

Oh, come on. She's probably having a miserable night too.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Well, um … I heard a few things about you …' *Dude, really? That's the best you can come up with?*

She frowned. 'What did you hear?'

'Um… Your name is Alice Adler, and you are from Berlin. You were invited to this party by Tom Holbon after you sent him a letter, proposing some kind of experiment. How am I doing so far?' he added sort of jovially, trying to regain some ease or confidence or anything that didn't make him feel like a fool.

Her frown deepened. ‘A bit too well. Who told you? And why are you talking to me?’

Why he was talking to her? No one had ever asked him that question. And frankly, her bluntness was a bit off-putting. *Better get this over with quickly.* ‘Um … You see, I got several calls from people, all telling me that Tom Holbon wants to meet, and that I had to go or come to this party.’

Her expression darkened.

‘Nobody gave me any details,’ he quickly added. ‘Look, I’m in New York for Easter, and so I agreed. Shortly after I arrived, I was introduced to Tom Holbon, and he told me about you—’ Jack stopped, suddenly realising what was coming next.

Did he have to tell her everything?

Just say it already.

Embarrassed, he continued: ‘Mr Holbon said he needed to know all about you and your idea and—’

Did he really have to spell it out?

Just say it!

‘And he implied you might open up to someone like me.’

Alice Adler gaped. Maybe she even blushed a little, but he wasn’t sure. He was sure that he was blushing.

He forced himself to continue: ‘Look, I don’t want to know anything. Just, there are others who will try to trick you into talking. So I thought I should warn you. Not that you seem like someone who needs a warning. But then we all—‘ *For fuck’s sake, stop babbling!* And he did, but he continued to talk. ‘Look, I should have punched Holbon for his impertinence, but I just walked away, drank too much, and suddenly I realised that you don’t know about the others. So—’ Jack stopped.

Alice Adler was still looking at him — but with unseeing eyes.

She was so strange. No one just looked at him, especially not with unseeing eyes.

Then she sighed. It was a little sigh, like it had travelled a great distance, and a mere echo made it all the way to this loft in New York.

And she saw him again. Of course, the frown was back, but she didn't sound snappy any more. 'That explains why other people tried to get me talking. And it explains why you are talking to me.'

This assessment seemed to conclude their conversation, and she turned to the bar again, lost in thoughts — again.

Earlier he thought talking would make him feel better. It didn't.

Or that she would thank him. She didn't.

Alice Adler puzzled him. Not in a good way.

A little annoyed, he stood up.

'You know what's funny?' she said, looking at him again.

'Funny?' he retorted.

'Yes, funny,' she replied. And for the first time, there was a smile in her eyes. Just in her eyes. But it was there, and she added: 'I think, someone like you might be good for the project.'

'What?' he burst out.

Alice Adler smiled. This time a full smile. Amused, she said: 'You think I'd ask you to be the poster boy for my project.' She raised one arm and proclaimed jestingly: 'See here: Jack Harris, the Hollywood star, and just as hot as our project.'

He didn't have a good feeling about this. Any of it.

'And you wouldn't?' he asked, undecided whether to leave or stay, stand or sit.

‘No, I wouldn’t,’ she answered, still amused. ‘Neither your looks, nor your fame, fortune or profession would play much of a role in this.’

He nearly burst out laughing. What would he be without his looks, fame, fortune or profession? Another part of him, the curious part, asked: ‘OK?’

That part also made him sit down again.

With a little smile, she said: ‘You are one of the few actors I can actually put a name to. But I haven’t seen all your movies.’

Bloody hell, I wish I knew where this is going. ‘Should I be hurt or relieved?’

‘Maybe both,’ she replied with a lopsided smile. ‘And I know little about your life. But the little I do know suggests a person who cares about the well-being of others, and who has an active mind as well as a playful instinct.’

Now it was for Jack to frown. And since his *active* mind refused to send him any input, or output for that matter, he said: ‘I’m sorry, but I don’t follow.’

‘If this project goes ahead, experts of many professions will be needed. But the project also needs people who aren’t academics. Playfulness and ease are as important as expert knowledge to make this project work.’

‘And you think I could help?’

‘I’ve seen your playfulness on screen. And I’m sort of hoping it wasn’t all acting.’

Jack only just kept himself from gaping.

On the face of it, it was a compliment. Sort of. Wasn’t it? But—‘I’m just an actor,’ he said more testily than intended. ‘And I don’t fancy being the clown for a bunch of academics.’

‘Sorry, that’s not what I mean. The playfulness I am talking about should be part of the very fabric of the project — not an entertaining sideshow. It’s about loving and enjoying life, venturing, twirling through the air, provoking, crossing lines, laughing, opposing, daring … It’s the talent to play around with ideas, questions, impossibilities; always open, never narrow-minded or fixated on existing knowledge; free to explore. Mind you, I’d hope to get other artists on board too.’

Jack felt his anger rising. An anger that ran deeper and was older than his earlier anger about Holbon’s request.

And he snapped. ‘You are decades too late. That playful, optimistic, loving life guy, you might have seen on screen, he doesn’t exist any more. If he ever existed, he’s dead!’

‘That’s a shame. And I don’t believe it.’

‘What?’ Jack exclaimed and nearly got up again.

‘I doubt you can lose playfulness. You can bury it though. But, be that as it may, if you’re not interested in a challenge, then you’re not.’

Jack was struggling with his anger and broke eye contact. *Man, what’s happening here? What’s she even saying? Playful?* He used to love that guy. But— But life pushed that guy away. That guy became a prostitute, and now the world owned him. How can you remain optimistic when, no matter what you achieved, you still got screwed over? And no matter what you did, the world was still a screwed up planet?

Earlier Jack asked Holbon: ‘What’s her idea about?’

And Holbon replied: ‘It’s about turning the world upside down to give it a good shake. I have no idea what she means. But I keep thinking about it.’

He sounded a little senile then.

Give the world a good shake. That wasn't possible, was it?

But what if it was? And what if he could find that playful guy again while doing some shaking?

When Jack looked at Alice Adler again, she seemed surprised. And that surprised him. Until he remembered that he must have looked pretty angry when he broke eye contact.

He gave her something like a quarter-smile, and then curiosity took over. 'And this project is—? What is it?'

She hesitated, probably wondering whether she could trust him, and at the same time thinking: how could you tell with an actor?

Well, how could you? So Jack added: 'I know you have no reason to trust me, but Holbon won't learn anything from me. I swear.'

She still hesitated. But then a rebellious glint appeared in her eyes, and she told him about her ideas.

'That's crazy,' he said after about an hour.

She laughed. 'I'm glad we agree on that.'

There was a pause, and Jack let the buzz of ideas wash through him while she took a sip from her second cocktail, pensively watching the barkeeper, who was drawing beer for two suits.

They had only scratched the surface, she explained earlier, and for now that was all she would tell him. But even so, her ideas struck several chords, and he felt— reckless, kind of ready for anything.

'And if the project goes ahead,' she said, resurfacing from her thoughts, 'I might need an assistant.'

‘Are you offering me a job?’ he asked, sounding far too hopeful. What the hell did he know about being an assistant?

But she said: ‘No. I was just wondering whether you could recommend someone?’

Admittedly, he was both disappointed and relieved.

A bit doubtful, he asked: ‘What kind of assistant are you looking for?’

‘Someone who has organised big projects and who can lead their own team. But not someone stiff or meticulous or a bureaucrat. What I need is reliability and someone who can admit to having made mistakes.’

‘Hm. I might know someone who knows someone.’

‘Great.’

There was a sudden gap in their conversation. And while the earlier pause had been fine, both following their own thoughts, this gap needed filling. So Jack grabbed the first question that crossed his mind. ‘What do you make of this party?’

‘The party?’ she returned amused. ‘Well, I realised that I know fewer famous people than is generally expected of an educated person.’

Jack laughed.

She seemed encouraged by this and added: ‘Some other solo-guests talked to me — always until they realised I have no valuable connection to offer.’

‘You could have played the Holbon card.’

‘I was tempted a few times.’

Jack chuckled. ‘Barbie Ken mentioned you didn’t want to send any information upfront. Did you guess they’d contact you again?’

Alice shook her head. ‘No, I was convinced I had blown it. And after the call with Barbie Ken, I poured myself a glass of wine and continued to add images to the website I was working on, all the while chanting to myself: So what? It’s my idea! I’ll find another way.’

Jack chuckled. ‘What happened then?’

‘Good Friday. Another evening, another call. Again Barbie Ken Richard. He sounded unhappy when he told me about the flight ticket to New York he had booked. Against his will by the sound of it. For Monday morning. As in today. I didn’t have plans for Easter, but a single weekend wasn’t much time to get ready. Anyway, after my arrival, Richard warned me that Tom Holbon might only have a minute for me.’

‘Prick.’

‘Yep. And I said: “Are you telling me, I came all the way from Berlin to New York for a three-minute interview?” And he answered: “If you’re lucky.”’

‘Prick,’ Jack repeated, smiling. ‘So what did Barbie Ken want from you earlier?’

‘He told me Tom Holbon is indisposed tonight, and I’m to meet him at his estate. In two days, on Wednesday morning. And Barbie Ken added: “You must have impressed Tom, or you’d be flying back home tomorrow.”’

‘Prick. And wow!’

‘Yah. And now I’m wondering whether I want to work with someone who is this impressionable.’

Jack chuckled and Alice added: ‘And then I thought: *Hurray*—I mean the most sarcastic hurray you can imagine. *Hurray, I’ll have a meeting with The Tom Holbon. And for that I had to strut*

around a party for nearly two hours, being bored out of my mind. Though, it was a bit amusing at times too.'

'I didn't see you strut.'

'You didn't? Well, then I have to change my story to: thinking about strutting but deciding against it since too many people were in the way for a proper strut.'

Jack chuckled.

Alice frowned. 'You watched me?'

'Just a little. But how did you get from a one minute interview to an invitation to Holbon's estate?'

'That's a good question. And I don't know. Earlier, I told Richard it would take hours to present the ideas. And he went all super-snob. "Hours? And you expect Mr Holbon to grant hours to someone he hardly knows anything about?" And I answered: "I hope he's curious enough to take a walk with me through the ideas. And I hope he's sensible enough to mull over the ideas before taking any decisions." Maybe that got me the invitation.'

'But aren't you worried that Holbon will just use your ideas?'

'I wasn't. Not really. Not before tonight. Actually, not even before you told me why you're here.'

'I won't tell him a thing.'

'I think I know.'

Jack grimaced. 'You'll see.'

It was a little strange, but he actually wanted her to trust him.

She nodded sort of yeah-we'll-see like.

'Just be careful when you meet Holbon.'

'If it helps, I can text you after—' She stopped, looking embarrassed. After a few seconds, she took a card from her

jacket and pushed it towards him. ‘Sorry, you can contact me if you want to know more. I’d better call it a night,’ she added and got up.

Jack was surprised that asking for his number was such a big deal for her. He got out his phone and while typing the number on her card, he said: ‘You know, now I am curious, and I’d like to know how the talk with Holbon goes.’

She watched him, obviously undecided how to react. But when her phone rang, she took an old smartphone from her jeans pocket and saved his number with a half-smile. ‘OK, I’ll send you a text after the meeting.’

But she didn’t sit down again, and when she put away her phone, it was obvious that she would be leaving.

‘How will you get to the hotel?’ Jack asked still a bit puzzled.

‘I’ll slip out of the loft and walk back. I don’t fancy another run-in with Barbie Ken Richard.’

‘I can call you a taxi.’

‘Thanks. But the hotel is close. I’ll walk.’

Jack twitched his mouth, weighing his options. But the paparazzi were bound to be waiting downstairs. ‘I can’t walk you to the hotel.’

Alice chuckled. ‘No need to. And, of course, you can’t. That would be too close to posterboying.’

Jack smiled a little. If he was to become part of this project, he needed to get used to her bluntness.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘thanks for talking to me. Our chat cheered me up — eventually.’

‘Likewise,’ Jack said and decided against offering his hand.

It was just a hunch, but something told him she would prefer not to shake hands.

With a smile, she turned and left the bar.

book 1, CHAPTERS

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Back at Tom’s

Epilogue

HOW IT ALL BEGAN is an **extract** from
book 1, beginning, and drafting a town experiment

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