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Opening extract from

Lia's Guide to Winning the Lottery

Written by

Keren David

Published by

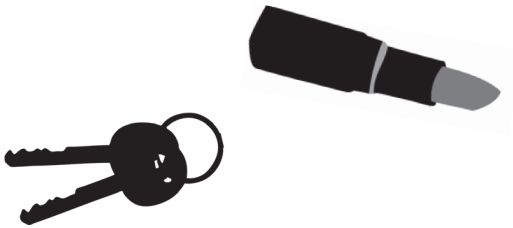
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for Alun and Deborah



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First published in Great Britain in 2011 and in the USA in 2012 by
Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 4 Torriano Mews,
Torriano Avenue, London NW5 2RZ
www.franceslincoln.com

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London EC1N 8TS.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-84780-191-3

Set in Palatino and Monoline Script MT

Printed in Croydon, Surrey, UK by CPI Bookmarque Ltd. in June 2011.

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter 1

It might be magic, it might be destiny. Or it might just prove that the universe is completely random. It doesn't matter. You're rich.

My mother kicked me out one minute after I won eight million pounds.

She didn't literally manhandle me over the threshold, she just stood there, arm pointing at the door, tears pouring down her face saying, 'Just. Get. Out. Now!' in a voice that sounded like she was taking huge gulps of vodka in between each word.

Actually, she was gargling red wine that evening. Burgundy, to match her lipstick and toenails.

It was totally random, this eviction. One of those fights that we'd been having a lot round about then. I thought they were all her fault. She seemed to think they were all mine. We'd been bickering all evening, and I was trying to stay cool and calm and totally

reasonable. But the more I laid out my case for her to hand over twenty quid, the more quivery and emotional she became. It was completely unfair.

My little sister Natasha had struck gold when the evening was young and Mum was getting ready to go out to a party, humming Beyoncé, trying on earrings and admiring herself in her Karen Millen purple satin sheath dress. All Nat had to do was tell her how great she looked and Mum plunged into her diamanté clutch bag and handed over twenty pounds.

By the time I realised I was in desperate need of cash, having over-celebrated my birthday earlier in the month, Dad had announced that he had man flu. Their party outing was cancelled and Mum was back in her jeans, sulking in front of the telly.

'You're not actually doing anything, Lia,' she said, picking at her Weight Watcher's Shepherd's-Pie-free Pie. 'Why should I give you money? You've had your allowance for this month.'

I opened my mouth wide. 'But . . . you gave Nat twenty quid. That's so unfair. . . I want to go shopping tomorrow. I need twenty quid as well.'

I did need money. I always needed money. There was a fabulous 1960s leather jacket at my favourite stall in Camden – I'd dragged Mum there on my

birthday, begged her with tears in my eyes to buy it for me, but she'd said she wasn't paying eighty pounds for someone's tatty old leftovers. I couldn't believe it – that jacket was a *bargain*. She just couldn't bear letting me make my own decisions – she'd become downright mean and controlling over the last year or so. It was probably something to do with getting old – maybe she was bitter that she was getting all dried out and wrinkly while I looked reasonably OK in a good light and with the right jacket.

Anyway, that particular jacket was my latest ploy in the battle to get the attention of Raf, gorgeous, mysterious Raf, my latest crush. I had forty pounds all saved up. If I could get another twenty pounds . . . and then hit Dad for some more the next day. . .

'Natasha needed money to go out with her friends. It was an unexpected expense. And she doesn't get as much allowance as you do. Come off it, Lia.'

'You're only giving her money because you're desperate for her to *have* friends,' I said. I knew it was a little mean to point this out – it was really tough for Natters when she fell into the grip of bullies last year – but that still was no reason to award her totally unearned and unfair bonuses.

'*Don't* be so *vile*,' said Mum.

I took a big bite of spaghetti, slurping like a Dyson to pull in all the random threads.

'Must you?' she asked, with her bulimic face on.

'Well, it's true. You think Nat needs a load of extra financial help to bribe people into being friends with her. "Come on, everyone, popcorn's on me!" Actually, it'll just make her look desperate. No offence.'

I really didn't mean to be offensive. I could have given Natasha a lot of help with school politics if anyone had listened to me. Of course, no one ever did.

Anyway, I was older than Natasha by a full eighteen months and two days. Seniority should count for something. Anything she got, I should get more.

'It's not *fair*,' I said again, totally pointlessly, I knew. Whenever I pointed out basic, obvious, total inequalities, my parents just rolled their eyes and said, 'Life's not fair, Lia. Anyone ever told you that?' Possibly the most annoying phrase ever spoken.

Mum was getting a bit red in the face, and sloshing wine into her glass. I helpfully informed her that her mascara had run. She accused me of nicking her super-expensive waterproof wand. I blinked rapidly – to disguise the evidence – and launched into a full *Oh my God, how can you accuse me of stealing,*

OMG, your own daughter defence.

'And anyway,' I finished, 'if you just increased my incredibly tiny allowance then I'd be able to buy my own.'

'Oh, change the record, Lia,' she said. 'What's wrong with you earning some money? Dad's offered you a Saturday job.'

'Oh *please*,' I said, 'I've told you. I'm not interested.'

Just because Dad couldn't think of anything better to do with his life than take over the family bakery, didn't mean I had to devote every Saturday to pushing Danish pastries. I supposed I might decide to take over one day . . . one day far, far in the future. When I was about fifty and my life was over. But not every Saturday. That was bringing the inevitable far too near.

Mum rolled her eyes. 'You have the perfect Saturday job lined up for you, but you're too lazy to take advantage. Anyway, keep the volume down. Your dad's not very well.'

'Yeah, right,' I said. 'Poor old Dad.' We both knew he didn't really have flu. He was just permanently tired from getting up early every day – baker's hours, he called them – and allergic to most of her friends. Understandably.

'Not that you care about anyone except yourself,' she said, *whoosh!* out of *nowhere.*

I played an invisible violin. I could've been on *Britain's Got Talent*. The Amazing Lia! She mimes and winds up her mother at the same time.

Mum tutted. 'You really are horrible; I don't know what's happened to you.'

My mother's decided to hate me, that's what's happened to me, I thought, but I couldn't think of a way to say it that didn't make me sound pathetic. Instead I studied *Heat*. It's incredible how rubbish you can look and still achieve celebrity status.

'Anyway, Lia, it's cheeky of you to be asking for more cash because I think it was you who nicked that tenner from my purse on Thursday. I'm not made of money, you know.'

I yawned. What a fuss about nothing. How dare she accuse me of *theft* when I fully intended to pay back that trifling sum? I needed that money. I'd run out of lip balm. It was practically a medical emergency.

There didn't seem to be any hope of extracting any cash from her padlocked purse, so I went on the counter-attack just for the hell of it.

'You're the selfish one. What's so special about this party, eh, Paula? Crushing on a random pensioner?'

I'd been experimentally calling my parents Paula and Graham recently, instead of Mum and Dad. It was working quite well, I thought. It certainly got their attention. That's possibly because their real names are Sarah and Ben.

'Don't call me Paula,' she snapped. And then she yabbered on and on, and the lottery results came on the telly. And I listened with half an ear because I had a ticket. In my school bag. I couldn't be arsed to go and find it, because I knew you never win these things.

'I've had enough,' said Paula. 'You're just taking the piss the whole time.'

'Thirty-four!' said the announcer. My bra size. Or my nana's house number, as I told the press.

'Yeah, right,' I said.

'You treat this place like you're staying at the Ritz and you've got a load of personal slaves. You treat my purse like a hole in the wall machine.'

'Number seventeen!' said the announcer. My friend Shazia's house number. It sounded right. Yes. Seventeen.

'You're foul to poor Natasha.'

'It's character-building for her,' I muttered. In the background the ball marked 23 rolled down the tube. Twenty-three. My dream age.

No more education and free as a bird.

'Other girls don't treat their parents like you do. Other girls are nice to their mothers.'

'Mmmm . . . *really?*' I asked. Forty-one rolled into place. Paula's next birthday. And she thought I didn't care.

Four numbers. Four numbers correct. That's got to be good, I thought. That's got to mean something. Maybe I'll win a couple of hundred. But I needed to check . . . find the ticket. . .

So I said, 'Look, Paula, could you shut off the chit-chat for a mo?'

That's when she started screaming. She slammed her Burgundy down on the glass coffee table – could've been a bloodbath – and shrieked, 'That's it! I've had enough! Apologise!'

I hardly noticed. I sat frozen, eyes glued to the telly, watching three little balls roll into place.

Thirteen. Raf's birthday. A personal triumph of detective work to find that out – Raf wasn't the sort for birthday celebrations. When it all became public I had to pretend that I'd chosen it because we used to live at Flat thirteen when I was a kid.

'Number eight!' Jack's birthday. September eighth. I was sure I had eight.

Seven. My lucky number ever since I joined the Brownies on my seventh birthday and decided that it was the happiest day of my life. Kind of ironic because the Brownies housed a secret terror cell that made my life hell for the next two years. They were the Pixies and they hated little Gnomes.

'You're just ignoring me! You've got no respect!' she was bellowing, while I stopped thinking about the poxy Pixies and started checking and rechecking the numbers frantically in my mind. Oh my God. Oh my *God*. Oh *my* God. Oh. . .

'Umm, Paula. . .' I said, cautiously.

By now she was yelling and pointing, telling me she'd Had Enough, Could Take No More. And I couldn't find the words to tell her what might have happened, and I couldn't stand the embarrassment if it turned out that I'd got the numbers wrong. What if I'd picked Poor Little Natasha's birthday instead of Jack's? What if I'd forgotten my own bra size?

So I said, 'Fine. All right. I'm going, I'm going.'

And I grabbed my denim jacket and pulled on my fake Uggs and picked up my school bag.

And I left home – me and my potentially golden ticket.