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'All I'm saying is, we're all going to die. Eventually, I mean. It's the only certainty. Things before then can be crappy or good – and I'm only interested in manifesting a good time. A *lovely* time, in fact. Do you know what I mean?'

As she speaks, Becca Calloway can feel scepticism oozing from her best friend Jia Li's pores. Jia Li isn't about to surrender to what she calls 'the woo-woo' – she's distinctly science over faith, the founding member of life's got-to-see-it-to-believe-it society . . . but unfortunately for her, this is about to be Woo-Woo City.

'Don't look at me like that,' Becca insists with a self-deprecating chuckle. 'I know what you're thinking when you look at me like that.'

'That no single person can bend the universe to their will with their *thoughts*?' Jia Li asks, a similar smile playing across her lipstick-covered mouth. 'That if *good vibes* were all that was necessary in life, we'd have no poverty? No cancer or car crashes or paediatric wards in hospitals? That we could simply *meditate* our way out of a bad situation? Or that you look too cute in that dress and I'm going to have to steal it from you at some point?'

Becca kicks up her left heel in a showgirl-style acknowledgement of the compliment and tells her, 'Free People. In the sale. And don't change the subject. All I mean is that, exactly

like you say, so much is out of our control. At the end of the day, all we can do is have an attitude of gratitude for what is good. And it's surely basic physics that what we focus on expands. Think *car parking space* and you'll get a car parking space. Think *Oh crap, I'm going to have a terrible day* and sure enough, bad things will happen to you. That's manifestation.'

'Becca,' Jia Li says, taking a big gulp of her Prosecco. 'That's not manifestation. That's confirmation bias. Also, I cannot believe you just said *attitude of gratitude* without a single trace of irony.'

'Oh, for crying out loud, you're impossible.' Becca tuts, shaking her head good-naturedly. 'And willingly obtuse. How do we manage to work together so harmoniously when we're so different?'

'I actually know the answer to that one,' Jia Li declares proudly, holding up a hand which she then proceeds to touch the fingers of as she lists her response. 'One, I'm the only woman you know who can match you drink for drink, which I think you appreciate the challenge of. Two, you enjoy living vicariously through my sex life, you butter-wouldn't-melt degenerate. You get your kicks listening to my exploits whilst still committing to this nun-like "I'd rather go without than do it just because" routine. And three—'

'Christ, Jia Li, why are you orating as if you're commanding the troops at Normandy?'

Jia Li doesn't miss a beat as she ignores her. 'I make you laugh. Sometimes I don't even mean to, and you still end up cackling like a witch.'

'The witch and the bitch, what a glorious twosome.'

Jia Li chuckles. Becca is apparently good at making her laugh, too. 'And to think we really are single. Who could resist?'

Becca empties a nearby bottle into their glasses and surveys the room. Everything is perfect – the salon buzzing, the nibbles and drinks free-flowing, good hair everywhere.

'Look,' Becca tells her friend, lowering her voice, wanting a conclusion to this conversation before they get underway. 'The only way I can keep believing that my person is out there is by looking out for the evidence that life is, essentially, kind to me. That life loves me enough to gift me my man any minute now. I need to keep feeding my hope, and this ceremony tonight is as good a way as any. You've got to give me that. *Please* give me that!' She shakes her fist dramatically, as if she's giving a Shakespearean speech. It's easier to self-mock her desire for the One than it is to be earnest, otherwise the longing for it could kill her.

Jia Li sucks in her cheeks, her amusement obvious. 'Can I have evidence that this thing is going to get started soon? Are we still waiting for anyone to arrive?'

Becca grabs a clipboard from behind the front desk and scans down the list of attendees. Most hair salons don't run monthly events for their clientele of business owners and glossy stay-at-home mums, local DJs and media personalities, let alone auspicious manifestation rituals to bare hearts and souls on a sticky, mid-heatwave summer solstice. But then, most hair salons aren't Trim. Trim does hair, true, but it is also the beating heart of King's Heath, the little wedge of Birmingham that Becca, Jia Li and everyone else here tonight calls home. Regular clients always turn up to support Trim's after-hours events – from still-life drawing to cocktail making, sourdough baking to

essential-oils blending – and judging from the number of ticks next to the names on Becca’s list, the turnout for tonight’s manifestation ritual isn’t going to be any different.

‘I think we’re good to go. I’m going to find Coco and invite her to get started,’ Becca pronounces. She tilts her chin towards Carlos, Trim’s co-owner, who is making his way over. ‘Carlos, pal, can you do something about the AC? We need to make sure it doesn’t click off the timer like normal otherwise we’re going to melt in this heat.’

Carlos heads out to the back room to access the salon’s temperature controls, giving Becca a thumbs up as he passes. ‘On it,’ he says, efficiently, and Becca gives him a grateful thumbs up in return.

‘Right then,’ intones Jia Li, plonking down her empty glass and clapping her hands together. ‘Let’s go and positive-mental-attitude our way out of eternal spinsterhood by dry humping some rose quartz and howling at the moon, shall we?’

‘Bloody well get in the spirit of this, or you’re out on your ear,’ Becca hisses under her breath. She’s half joking and – actually – half dead serious. ‘You can be sarky with me but don’t let the clients hear you. Put on a good show. Pretend to be into this for the morale of the group, capeesh?’

Jia Li pulls a solemn face, apparently understanding that her friend – and boss – needs her to at least *feign* maturity. Becca duly notes her efforts.

‘Capeesh,’ Jia Li echoes, and to be fair to her, she does a pretty decent job of suspending her cynicism – right up until the chanting, anyway.

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'Just let the sounds come,' instructs Coco, their pink-haired and pierced host for the evening. She has a snake tattooed from her left wrist all the way up her arm, curling around the back of her shoulders, culminating in its head over on her right bicep, which is, incidentally, chiselled like Madonna's. Becca had been totally floored by her when she'd walked in earlier, this person in full possession of themselves. She likes it. Trusts it. Wants a bit of that for herself. 'Let what is within you be drawn out instinctively, without thought,' Coco presses from her side of the 'welcome circle'. 'Inhabit your body, move out of your mind.'

Even with her eyes closed in concentration Becca knows – before the words have a chance to be spoken – exactly what Jia Li is going to say.

'I think some of us are already out of our minds,' she quips, right on cue. It generates a murmur of giggles from the more self-conscious attendees amongst the group, but Coco takes Jia Li's input with good humour.

'If you growl, you growl. If you howl, you howl,' Coco continues. 'If you moan, you moan,' she adds, as if doing so in a room of thirty fully clothed people one Wednesday evening in June is nothing out of the ordinary. Becca braces herself for Jia Li again.

‘My kind of night.’

Becca opens her eyes to shoot her evils, but instead catches Coco smiling. Jia Li must feel Becca’s gaze on her because she opens her eyes, clocking Becca’s frown. She mouths *sorry* in an approximation of sincerity and closes them again. Becca watches her sway, as has been asked of them, and then casts an eye over everyone else, too.

The group are seated atop overstuffed tasselled pillows, on the patterned rug of what is normally the waiting area of the green and gold-accented salon. They are all cross-legged, and almost all mildly embarrassed in the face of a woman who, even for Becca’s taste, talks about ‘the universe’ a *lot*. Coco comes recommended, though, through a client, and the command she has over the room is admirable, her voice a low rumble as though it’s coming from her belly, some sort of energetic frequency that permeates the group and makes them collectively surrender to her matriarchal care. It’s quite nice to let somebody else be in charge for a change.

A low hum sounds from Carlos then, and it encourages everyone else to start making their noises as well. The idea is to have their own vibrations meet the vibrations of the universe, as a way of opening the world up to hearing each individual’s desires.

‘Summer solstice – the twenty-first of June – is the longest day of the year,’ Coco tells them over the din of their chants and the buzz of the air conditioning unit. It all sounds very dramatic – as if she’s performing a monologue to the beat of human breath. Becca exhales and lets herself surrender.

'In Iceland, they believe that on this day animals can gain the power of speech. The Greeks enjoy summer solstice as the first day of the calendar. The Chinese use today to pay tribute to femininity and honour.'

The humming and chanting get louder.

'We humbly perform our rituals tonight alongside the rest of the globe to reflect the earth's abundance. Life is full, and ours for the taking. And so together, as you reopen your eyes, I welcome you, and say we are ready to manifest our deepest summertime desires into real, tangible things.'

'Amen,' says Jia Li, chirpily and silly, and everyone bursts out into giggles.

Coco nods with a wink. 'Something like that, yeah.'

It could just be Becca's imagination, but the air feels different after that. Stiller, somehow, imbued with a solemnity and gravity, everyone ready to get down to business. Coco gives out pieces of paper and pens, inviting the group to write down their intentions for the months ahead. As everyone quietly reflects and scribbles down what comes to mind, Coco walks around the room and lights several candles, reaching the centre of the circle as everyone finishes writing, placing flowers down beside a central candle and lighting that as the last one.

'When you're done,' Coco instructs, 'close your eyes again. Ruminates on your list. Breathe. Tap into your deep-rooted powers of manifestation. Call on your angels and spirit guides, the divine powers of the universe, to come to your aid.' Becca can telepathically hear Jia Li ask, *So is that, like, through an app* **Copyrighted Material** *we can use . . . ?*

She focuses. Becca imagines a swell in her belly. Her partner's hand in hers. Watching a blond-haired boy with her nose play on a beach, running into and out of the waves. She wants this. She wants this so, so much. She had enough fun for ten women in her twenties, made a big choice to start the business and opened Trim at thirty, and now, at thirty-five, she wants the next bit. Her body yearns for it. Could she freeze her eggs and take the pressure off? Maybe. Does she want to? No. She's been single for half a decade, and enough is enough. She wants the next part of her life: a proper romantic partner, the start of building her own family. This holding place is no good.

'And repeat after me,' says Coco, focusing the group. She coughs to clear her throat and begins: 'I gather in the power of this day.'

They repeat her words. 'I gather in the power of this day.'

Coco presses: 'I call in the guardians to bring in what is already mine.' That sentence is longer, and a few people stumble over the words, but they repeat it too. 'To manifest my desires in the coming harvest. I ask that this be done within the greater good.'

And then they are invited to read their lists aloud, with sincerity and significance.

'I ask for my sister to make a full recovery,' says Heidi, a local food PR who comes in for a bi-annual balayage and a blunt shoulder-length cut.

'I pray for the strength of self to finally leave him,' offers Monique, a middle-aged woman who books a root touch-up with Carlos for the last Friday of every month.

'I ask for love, in all of its forms,' says Carlos, and Becca catches his eye. She wasn't expecting that from him. He looks shyly away, a half-smile hanging in his cheeks, and Becca takes in the sight of him: all dark, clipped facial hair and tattoos on thick, tanned arms that are shown off to perfection through an *incredibly* fitted shirt. If Becca has a golden tan from her recent Majorcan vacation, Carlos is practically Tuscan leather, although it does come by way of Costa del Sunbed. He's as much of a pain in the arse as Jia Li, but they're both *her* pains in the arse. When Carlos looks up again, Becca sticks out her tongue. He crosses his eyes and sticks out his own, betraying the emotion she's just heard in his voice.

'I ask for love in all of its forms too,' says Jia Li. 'For me, and for everyone I care about.' She looks meaningfully at Becca then, her dark eyes sombre, and Becca nods in acceptance of what she's implying because Becca understands her friend is telling her: *I want you to have everything I tease you about wanting. Let us have it together.*

When it's Becca's turn, she tells the room: 'I want to be married, and pregnant.' She swallows, self-conscious about wanting something that in her younger years she would have thought was anti-feminist, too 'fifties housewife'. But sod it. It's the truth.

They collectively follow Coco in closing the ceremony by repeating: 'I affirm I am able and willing to allow these wishes to manifest and I participate in the miracle of creation with faith. So be it. And so, it is.' At the end, for comedic affect in acknowledgement of Jia Li, Coco then adds: 'Amen.'

'Amen,' repeat the group, chuckling, the tension of the previous forty minutes evaporating. They are done. They have told the universe what they want, they have let themselves hear it, feel it, acknowledge it, and now they can drink and chat and get on with their lives, their orders in the restaurant of life placed, their wishes in the hands of the gods, if such a thing really does exist as true.

It feels like magic that, not long after the ritual, the heat-wave breaks and the heavens open, giving the salon a moody, atmospheric vibe. The sky outside the huge front window is dark, rain hitting the glass, candles and incense burning inside what has become a refuge from the elements. Sadly, though, Becca does not get refuge from Jia Li's sardonic cynicism, which continues to rage on.

'I'm just saying,' Becca tells her friend, 'surely you feel different after doing everything we just did. Even the *air* changed!'

If it was possible to *blink* sarcastically then Jia Li's chocolate-coloured eyes do it.

'Clearly not.' Becca laughs, shaking her head. She catches sight of her reflection at one of the styling stations and runs a hand over her highlighted beachy waves, smooths out a kink in her eyebrow. Jia Li watches her and then does the same before launching into her counter-attack.

'All this talk of wanting to find Mr Right.' Jia Li sighs, with more drama than the conversation necessitates, as is her MO. 'I mean, what even is that? I can tell you now: whoever your Forever Man is, he's not at a bloody summer solstice manifestation party. Can we manifest you downloading the apps and swiping, or even just going to a sports pub

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instead of a spa on your day off? You know – somewhere men actually *go*?’

‘I don’t want that kind of man,’ Becca retorts.

They shift a few paces to the left so that Carlos can get to the extra booze for their guests. He does it theatrically, sighing to communicate: *Would it kill for you to give me a hand?*

‘I want somebody . . . thoughtful. The kind of man who *does* go to a spa, or a book club, or a bloody manifestation evening. What does it say about me if I’m willing to pretend I like rugby or football in order to meet my future husband? It’d hardly win me the honesty award, would it?’

‘Ever thought of competing in the Happy Hostess Awards?’ stage whispers Carlos. They ignore him again, but with smiles this time. Winding Carlos up is a pastime Jia Li and Becca share. Basically, working at Trim means full-time hairdressing and part-time piss-taking of just about everyone and everything. It’s just how they roll. You can (lovingly) join in or bugger off, is about the measure of it.

‘Sorry, did you say something, Carlos?’ Becca asks, once he’s seen to topping up everyone’s glasses and is very obviously finished. Carlos arranges his features into a bright – evidently sarcastic – grin, blinking madly.

‘I said: my favourite ladies! What are we talking about?’ He sidles up to them, his smile dazzling, his charm immediately warm.

‘You’ve missed a button,’ Becca points out, signalling playfully to the deep V-shape of his chest where precisely one button has been done in the middle and the rest left so that his

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shirt reveals dense slices of his toned torso top and bottom. 'In fact, you've missed nearly all of them,' she adds, archly.

Carlos makes his pecs dance – a strange habit left over from his Chippendales days, because yes, Carlos used to strip. That's how he paid for his hairdressing NVQ, and then later for his half of the start-up cash.

'You're ridiculous,' Becca jokes, bumping her shoulder into him. He blows her a kiss.

'And talented,' Jia Li counters. 'I wish I could do that.' She uses her forearms under her considerable boobs to make them jiggle awkwardly and, in doing so, drink sloshes over the rim of the glass and on to her hand, making the three of them peal with laughter.

'Smile!' chirrups Dana, their modelesque front of house manager cum social media queen, all long legs and smooth skin, her braided hair swooshing over one shoulder. Dana catches the moment on her DSLR, and several clicking sounds follow as Jia Li makes a show of licking her wrist and then winking to camera. Carlos grabs her and pretends to lick her too, making Jia Li shriek in disgusted delight, and Becca throws up her hands in affable despair at their performance. A few of the regulars glance over, noting with amusement that they're all being ridiculous, as usual. Becca blinks slowly as if she's above it all, then feels a tickle on her upper arm.

'Hey!' Coco says. 'I just wanted to say thank you for having me tonight. I have to get off, but it's been really great energy. This is a lovely group of people.'

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'I was just about to come find you to say the same!' Becca replies. 'We're so grateful you could come. Thank you so, so much. I know there were a few cynics here tonight, but I don't know how anyone could have sat there and not felt *something* shift inside of them. You're really good.'

'Aww,' coos Coco. Her make-up-free skin glows, and Becca thinks to herself, *I wonder what moisturiser she uses.* 'Thank you. And you know, cynicism is just fear in different clothes. Earnestness takes a certain amount of bravery, I always think.'

'Very wise.'

Coco doesn't reply, then, but rather looks at Becca as if she's assessing her, somehow, or taking in the measure of her, the cut of her jib.

'What?' Becca asks, suddenly self-conscious, reaching up to her face as though there might be remnants of something on it, or she's insecure not to have the Earth Mother glow that Coco does, even though she tries.

'I just wanted to say . . . ' Coco starts, and Becca holds her breath, waiting for the testimony and verdict of this stranger who knows her deepest desires. 'You're going to get everything you want, Becca. I see it so clearly for you. So don't worry about that. Your job is to just enjoy it, throw yourself into it. You're right on the cusp of your wildest dreams. We're talking any day now. The wait is over. He's here.'

'Thanks,' says Becca, not knowing how else to respond. Jia Li would ask for proof, evidence that what Coco's saying is true, a written report with facts and figures, dates and times, but the longer Becca stares into Coco's sparkling eyes, the

less she feels inclined to say anything at all. It's as if Coco has cast a spell for her.

'No worries.' They hug, and Becca watches her walk away, the bell above the salon door tinkling as it opens and closes. Coco opens up a small umbrella and heads off into the evening, and Becca replays the sentences they've just exchanged back in her head, mining them for more clues. *Your job is to just enjoy it, throw yourself into it.* If it's that simple, Becca thinks, she can do that. What is it one of the mugs in the staff kitchen says, the one Jia Li brought in as a joke? *Your vibe attracts your tribe.* Becca can't properly explain, but excitement brews in her belly, an anticipation of what's in store. It's almost like now that Coco's said it, that everything will be OK – it will be.

And then her phone buzzes in her hand, lighting up with a text message.

'Oh my God,' she says, looking at it.

'What?' asks Jia Li, approaching Becca with as much of a furrow as her Botoxed brow allows, craning her neck to see what's happened.

Becca shakes her head, trying to process it all. Really? It's him? Becca doesn't have the number saved to her contacts, but she immediately knows who it's from, because there's only one person it *could* be from.

It's a photo of a piece of art by one of Becca's favourite artists, which hangs in the Met. She's only been to New York once, only seen it in real life once. It's a neon sign that says: *I was so young, and you were so beautiful.* The person she stood beside when she saw it, the person she took that trip with six years ago, was Mike. Her Mike.

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‘Woah,’ Becca says out loud again, her head swimming in disbelief. People around her mill about as if everything is totally normal. But standing there, frozen, with her past in the palm of her hand, Becca doesn’t understand how anyone can talk about sage bundles and *Selling Sunset*, not when Mike-freaking-Henry has just reappeared back in her life with absolutely no warning. Jia Li squints at the screen too, and then lets out a little gasp.

The message underneath the photo says, *I couldn’t not tell you I’m thinking of you, Bec. Saw this again and had to text x.*

‘Becca? That’s not . . . ?’ asks Jia Li. When Becca replies her voice wavers in the way that people do when sense has suspended itself.

‘Yeah,’ she says. ‘I just got a text from my ex.’

‘Woah,’ replies Jia Li, succinctly. ‘As in Mike? The one who—’

‘Got away,’ Becca supplies, looking at her, trying to see if her face might have the answers she needs. ‘Kind of, anyway.’

Surely this is a sign. A sign that she already knows her Mr Right – that he’s there, in her phone? Bloody hell. It’s been *years*. And now he’s texting her? God, Coco is good.

Or no, wait.

Maybe this is a test, higher powers warning her that if she really does want to find her Mr Right, she must stop being held back by the past. She hasn’t been serious with anyone since Mike. That’s not a coincidence. Has she ever really let him go?

Becca looks up, checking that Coco actually has left for the night, that she hasn’t magically returned. Surely she’d know what to do

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Lovestruck

'Should I text back?' Becca asks Jia Li, panicked, her veins on fire with adrenaline and memories. Her cheeks are hot, her throat dry. This feels urgent, arresting, as though she has a split second to decide on her fate. 'Or not?'

Jia Li opens her mouth to answer, but before she can say anything the lights in the salon flicker and then cut out entirely.

Nobody speaks.

They are plunged into darkness.

And then there's a scream.

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She Doesn't Text Back

'Sorry!' follows the voice of Monique, the older woman who declared in the manifestation ritual earlier that she wanted to leave her husband. 'It was the shock, everyone. I didn't mean to sound so intense!'

A confused hush descends across the salon before Carlos's voice comes out of the shadows cast by the flickering candles almost burned down to their stubs: 'And now begins the murder mystery portion of the evening,' he intones, putting on a silly, vampiric voice.

There are a few polite giggles, as though folks aren't entirely sure if he's genuine or not, but almost immediately after the lights come back on in all their glory there's a second murmur of appreciation that it's a joke. Becca's eyes readjust to the accidental on-off disco right as Carlos throws up his hands in mock despair.

'My murder mystery twist has been foiled!' he cries, affectedly.

'Carlos!' squeals Becca, across the salon. 'Watch out!'

Becca sees Carlos step back, narrowly missing a tray of empty champagne flutes teetering perilously close to the

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edge on one of the styling stations. He spins on his heel just in time to steady it, flushing pink down the back of his neck at the near miss of it all.

‘Oh my God,’ he says, picking up the tray and heading towards the staff room at the back of the salon to take the glasses out of the way. ‘That could have been a disaster.’

‘Dramatic much?’ Jia Li teases him, but she follows it with a wide-eyed look of horror in Becca’s direction, a silent acknowledgement of how much of a mess it could have been, and at great expense, too – the glasses are hired, from the pub.

Jia Li sighs as they both take gulps from the last of their fizz, a preamble to delivering unpalatable truths. Becca has heard it many times before.

‘So, your ex,’ she says to Becca. ‘The one you’ve been getting over the whole time I’ve known you, ever since I started working here. He’s texted?’

‘I’m thinking it’s a sign . . .’ Becca starts, but immediately Jia Li screws up her face in protest, shaking her head furiously.

‘No,’ she insists. ‘I disagree. If anything, I think it’s a sign to ignore him. Here, give me your phone and I’ll delete and block.’

‘For real? No discussion, no considered thought, just the nuclear option?’

Jia Li shrugs as Carlos rejoins them.

‘Ooooh,’ he says. ‘I love the nuclear option!’

‘Carlos,’ Becca warns. ‘You don’t even know what we’re talking about.’

‘So tell me,’ he shoots back.

Becca takes a breath, but before she can explain Jia Li interrupts: ‘She got a text from her ex and she’s acting like it’s the

mystical summoning from the gods that she's been praying for because she's spirit-drunk on affirmations and deep breathing.'

'Oh,' says Carlos, chewing the specifics of the situation over. 'Well, a relit cigarette never tastes the same, and that's all I'll preach on rekindling old flames.'

Jia Li hoots a laugh. 'You stole that line, didn't you?' she accuses.

'Course I did.' Carlos laughs back. 'You think a man can be this handsome *and* that insightful?'

'Good point,' Jia Li replies. 'Although, you're not even that handsome, so . . .'

Carlos gives a histrionic guffaw, as if he can't believe Jia Li would be so disrespectful, but Jia Li has already noticed Becca scowling, waiting for somebody to get back to her problem.

'OK, OK. So. Obviously I've never met the man. I only know what you've told me, which is basically that it felt like you'd never get over him, because there was no big bang, just a dying whimper at the end when he moved to New York. That he left you behind because you wanted to set up the business here. So, you never really got closure?'

'Basically, yes,' says Becca.

'But you've been doing so well! When I first started working here you were really sad about him. I know the break-up had just happened and everything, but you've really turned a corner since then. I don't know. I just think getting back with your ex is like taking a shower and putting your dirty underwear back on.'

Becca scrunches up her nose. 'I'm not saying I want to get back with him—' she begins, but Jia Li cuts her off.

‘So delete and block,’ she says with a shrug. ‘I actually think it’s pretty shady behaviour to message out of the blue that way. I know he didn’t say, “Hey, you up?” but it’s like Casanova 101, isn’t it, to send a photo like that and say he’s thinking of you? What does he expect from that?’

‘Speaking as a recovering Casanova,’ Carlos offers, ‘I am inclined to agree.’

Becca looks back and forth between her friends, taking in their concerned, defiant expressions. Nobody speaks.

‘Fine,’ she sighs, their point made. She opens the message again and clicks on the icon to block his number. ‘There,’ she announces, holding up her phone. ‘The path is officially paved for forward-motion only. No going back. Message deleted; number blocked.’

‘Good girl,’ says Jia Li with a wink. ‘You won’t regret it.’

‘Or maybe you will,’ chimes in Carlos, helpfully. ‘But it’s too late now.’

The next morning the sun is as strong as ever, even after last night’s storm. Becca is twenty-five minutes into a graduated bob, snipping and chatting, chatting and snipping, sitting on a black leather stool with wheels so she can move with ease and save her heat-swollen feet. She doesn’t look up from her client Kaylee’s left-hand side, where she’s cutting into the shortest layer so it sits within the other layers instead of heavy, like a step, as she says, ‘I’m glad I deleted the text. On my way in I stopped for an iced latte at the café that’s just opened down the road—’

‘Clemants,’ interrupts Kaylee and Becca nods.

‘Clemants. Yeah! I like it there. All that light wood and those Scandinavian pastries.’

‘Oh my God, yes!’ says Kaylee as Becca moves behind her and pulls at her hair, either side, to check everything is even. It is. ‘I said to my friend Lauren when we went, I can’t believe I ever used to go and get those big sticky iced things from Starbucks. Now I’ve had that bun with the cardamom, it’s like I’ve been eating squirty cream out of a can my whole life and now I’ve finally tried proper Cornish clotted. What a difference!’

‘So good,’ agrees Becca. She’s done a great job on the hair. Carlos’s colour is a masterclass in buttery sun-kissed blonde, too. ‘Well, I was in there this morning for my coffee, and the bloke behind me started chatting to me – about nothing in particular. Just rubbish, really. But I started flirting with him. Trying to, anyway. Literally caught myself twirling my hair around my finger as I laughed at his jokes, which honestly weren’t really that funny.’

Becca looks up, sensing behind her that they are being listened to.

‘You’re a very hit-and-miss flirt,’ Carlos observes, tidying his colour tray. ‘So I’m excited to hear how this turned out . . .’

Becca rolls her eyes and Kaylee giggles.

‘No offence,’ Carlos adds, as people do when they’ve been rude but want a get-out-of-jail-free card.

‘Did you get his number?’ Kaylee asks, and Carlos stifles a snort. ‘What?’ Kaylee adds. ‘Why is that funny?’

Carlos is laughing because Becca cannot, despite her best efforts, despite her declarations of putting herself out there,

ever find the confidence to actually make the first move on a guy. This morning she knew the man in the queue was flirting too, and she went above and beyond by giggling and being coy and trying to hold on to eye contact. But then it was her turn to order, and by the time he'd ordered, her coffee had been made. So unless Becca stopped very obviously, very deliberately, and somehow struck up conversation again, there was no way for her to make it clear that the lady was for courting. So she'd walked off.

'I'm not great at sealing the deal,' Becca explains. 'For lack of a better phrase. But – in my defence – by the time I opened up here I'd realised that that is something I can work on. I can fix that. And I'm stupid if I don't because there are *loads* of men out there. I just need to get better at making it clear that, if we laugh after striking up a bit of banter in a random public place, you can totally ask for my number.'

'Or you can ask for theirs . . .' Kaylee suggests, an eyebrow raised.

Carlos laughs again. 'One step at a time,' he warns, pushing his trolley back through to the colour station by the toilet. Over his shoulder he yells, 'We call her backwards in coming forwards!'

Becca scrunches up her nose. 'You're being mean now!' she shouts after him, before lowering her voice and confiding to Kaylee: 'He's right though. In my head I want to be swept off my feet by Prince Charming, but in reality I just think nobody is ever actually interested and so I get shy and stand-offish and run away. It's pretty pathetic.'

Becca runs product through the ends of Kaylee's new hair-style, and then grabs a mirror to hold up at the back to show her what's been done.

'I LOVE it!' Kaylee squeals. 'Yes! Very *Sliding Doors* Gwyneth Paltrow, exactly like I said. God, you're so good Becca. And you, Carlos – this colour is *everything*.'

As Carlos reappears, he says, 'Chic. Very, very chic. Well done us, Bec.'

They high five as Becca helps Kaylee out of her cover gown, and then claps approvingly as she starts to snap a series of selfies.

'So it's a no on the ex,' Kaylee says once she's got the shot. She makes her way over to Dana to pay. 'But what's the plan? You've manifested it and so the One is just going to walk into Trim one day, out of the blue, and that's it? Or are you going to get brave like you say and seek him out . . . ?'

Becca considers it. 'Well, after this morning I'm thinking I should be more proactive, get some numbers, approach men and be direct. I've tried everything else.' She half wonders if the good-looking man might be at the coffee shop tomorrow morning, too. She'll have to ask Jia Li for some tips on how to be more obvious, just in case, although the inevitable self-satisfaction on Jia-Li's face doesn't bear thinking about. She's been trying to coach Becca's 'flirting' (because it is *always* said in inverted commas) for *years*.

'You know,' says Kaylee, looking at herself one last time in one of the salon's many mirrors, 'we should throw a singles' party. Get everyone we know mingling a bit. *Maybe* you'll find your man that way.'

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'Really?' says Becca, unconvinced. 'That sounds . . . vaguely pimp-like?'

'Nooooo!' insists Kaylee as she hands over her card to Dana. 'It's cute! Have you heard of a friend-of-a-friend party? A group of women all bring a single, *eligible* male friend, so that all the men there have been vetted by someone you trust. The men all know the women there are up for a flirt, the women all know the men are cool, and poof! You wait for the magic to happen!'

Dana hands Kaylee back her card and says she'll email her the receipt. 'I've been to a couple of those,' she offers to them both. 'I actually know somebody who got engaged after meeting their partner that way.'

'Really?' says Becca. 'I mean, it makes sense. God, imagine all the heartache we could save the world if we only went out with somebody who'd been vouched for. Now I'm getting used to the idea . . . Kaylee, it's genius! We could even do it here, if you want.'

Kaylee bites her lower lip. 'Nah,' she says, looking around. 'At a bar. I know some people who know some people. Leave it with me? I'll text you?'

'Absolutely,' replies Becca. 'Although, God, now I'm thinking who I could bring. If I know an eligible man, why aren't *I* dating him?'

There's a pointed cough behind them. Carlos pipes up: 'Because he's like your brother and so you forget about him?' he asks, doing his pec dance again.

Becca smiles in spite of herself and then looks Kaylee in the eye. 'I suppose I have my guests sorted,' she says, gesturing to

Carlos and his subtlety. 'Text me when you have a venue and I'll put the word out.'

'Superb,' says Kaylee. 'Oh yay! I love a summer party! This is going to be so good. We'll find you a man, too,' she adds with a suggestive smile. 'I can already think of, like, three guys who should come. I can't believe I didn't think of this before! I am ninety-eight per cent sure we can realise this manifestation sooner rather than later. By this time next week, you'll have met your guy, I swear.'

Becca goes to speak, to say something self-deprecating, but stops herself. Manifestation is all about believing it's already happening for you, and in that case, Becca thinks about what to wear when she meets the man of her dreams (or manifestations) instead.

'I've got just the outfit,' she announces, waving her client goodbye, imagining wearing her red dress with the thigh split, meeting kind eyes from across a room.

'Stop it,' Carlos tells her as he tidies her station for her.

'What?' Becca asks.

'Writing the movie of how you'll meet your person, the potential romance of it all being scripted in your head before reality even has a chance to take hold. In fact, when you do that, reality doesn't even stand a chance.' He waves his hand with a flourish, and Becca narrows her eyes.

'Shut up!' she tells him. 'I hate you!'

'No you don't,' he replies, coolly, throwing a dirty towel at her that she fails to catch.

She Doesn't Text Back

'Perfect night for a rooftop party, isn't it?' Carlos says, just over a week later. Becca grips his arm and they walk through the park. It's a beautiful summer's evening, the last week of June, and the pavement is still warm from the day as they meander up to Jia Li's so they can share a cab into town. There are people lolling about on picnic blankets, cheersing cans of G & T or lager, some topless blokes kicking a ball around, a group of teens playing hacky-sack.

'I feel weirdly nervous,' Becca admits, her tummy gurgling slightly. 'What if tonight is the night that changes my life? My future husband could be at the bar, right now, ordering a glass of wine, chatting to whoever brought him about the view. No idea that we're about to meet. Isn't that romantic?'

'Your guy is at a dating event drinking rosé by the glass?' Carlos asks. 'I don't buy it. Your guy drinks spirits, neat, end of.'

'Do you think so?' marvels Becca. 'Because if he does, I'm going to have to learn to love whisky.'

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‘You can do better than that. Sake, that’s the new “in” thing, isn’t it?’ Carlos says as they reach Jia Li’s house. ‘I’ll teach you about it sometime. I’ve got a nose for it.’

‘A nose for trouble more like,’ Becca shoots back. ‘And for the record, I didn’t say he’d be drinking rosé, I said wine in general. I think it’s very attractive to see a man with an iced white wine, condensation dripping down the stem on to his fingers . . .’

Carlos laughs. ‘Spare me. You know, I’m pretty sure the cure for your romanticism would be a good shag.’

‘I don’t want a good shag.’

‘It would be an awful state of affairs to be cured by a crap shag, but whatever floats your boat.’

‘Pervert.’

‘Prude.’

They eye each other, each refusing to be the one who laughs first. Becca can’t help it – Carlos’s face, the way he can communicate so much with the slightest quiver of an eyebrow – she purses her lips, close enough to a concession for Carlos to look victorious.

‘Sake and Trouble could be the name of my blues band, you know,’ he suggests, as if he’s really been giving it some thought. ‘Now you mention it, I could sing songs about my male prowess being a cover for a heart that’s been bruised too many times to be brave.’

Becca looks at him. ‘Carlos! Is that true?’

He looks away from her. ‘Nah,’ he decides. ‘I’m just messing.’

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'I've known you for five years and you're still a mystery to me, Mr Raverra.'

'Not all still waters run deep, love, don't worry.'

'I didn't say I was worried.'

'Your puppy-dog eyes did. You just focus on your own life and leave the rest of us to focus on ours.'

'Yes, boss.' She gives him a captain's salute. In all the time she's known him, Carlos has never had a girlfriend who has lasted more than a month or two, but there *has* been a steady enough stream of them. Becca has never been able to figure out why no one sticks.

They get to Jia Li's across the green and order a cab. The driver has his radio tuned to an old R & B station that plays classics Becca remembers from school and it makes her nostalgic and playful, and so by the time they stop to pick up Jia Li's plus one – Dave, the owner of the Fox and Hound, a pub just along the road from the salon – the collective mood is merry and bright.

'What do you reckon to all this then, Dave?' Carlos enquires once everyone is settled in. 'Are we being stitched up or what?'

Dave, a tall beanpole of a man with locks piled high on his head, looks at Jia Li. 'I bloody hope not.'

'You're not!' reassures Jia Li, reaching a hand out to Dave's knee. 'Every person there tonight is single, and every person there knows, by two degrees of separation or less, Kaylee, and you know Kaylee! I've drunk with Kaylee loads of times in the Fox!'

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'Yeah,' Dave says, his voice low. 'Funny. Not as funny as you lot, but chatty. Always has a lot to say. We always get loads of bookings after she's been in as well. I think she tags us on social.'

'Exactly. Well, imagine twenty of Kaylee. And we get twenty of you! It's going to be lovely!'

'Lovely, is it?' Becca repeats, looking at her friend with, she realises too late, incredibly wide, and thus patronising, eyes. But Jia Li *is* sounding very optimistic for a self-declared man-eater.

'Oh, stop it.' Jia Li tuts. 'I'm as capable of being excited as anyone else. I'd love to find someone to put a baby in me!'

'Just not any of us,' Carlos observes. 'By definition of the party, you both have to bring somebody you're categorically *not* interested in.'

'That's what you get for missing the boat, pal,' Jia Li says simply, and Becca braces for impact. This occasionally gets brought up – the fact that one night, many, many moons ago, something happened after hours at the salon that resulted in Jia Li calling in sick for a week and avoiding eye contact with Carlos for two more. And Carlos might be a lot of things – crass, caustically sarcastic, always improbably dressed in three too few layers – but he is, all things considered, a gentleman. And as such Becca has never fully got the details of what exactly transpired. He's never let the cat out of the bag, and Jia Li has always made it very clear it's absolutely off-limits so Becca has never directly brought it up with her, either. Becca can fill in the blanks enough to know egos got bruised, but she doesn't know if they hooked up, or

what. Carlos really did use to be a Casanova. The only trace of it having ever occurred is an occasional barb – but always from Jia Li, never from Carlos.

Carlos opens his mouth to speak and then thinks better of it.

‘Well,’ decides Becca. ‘You’re both fine specimens, and I’d put money on a line forming for each of you.’

‘No need to take the piss,’ deadpans Dave.

Carlos tuts. ‘Speak for yourself.’

Inside, Kaylee has come good on her promise of knowing people who know people: they’re in the centre of town, at a place Becca didn’t even know existed. The exterior is all shiny glass and chrome, and it’s six floors up, giving them a nice view over Birmingham, the Bullring in the distance, pub-goers spilling out on to the streets with their pints, gangs of colleagues making the most of the longer days. They get offered a flute of fizz on the way in, and as Kaylee clocks them she heads from a roped-off VIP area to say hello.

‘You came!’ she says, looking sensational in a skin-tight dress that skims her bum and heels that Becca can only think of as stripper shoes.

‘Of course!’ exclaims Becca as Kaylee kisses everyone hello on the cheek. ‘I’m so excited. This is a tremendously good idea. And what a gorgeous venue.’

‘Isn’t it? I have the same personal trainer as the owner, and I see her between sessions sometimes. First drink is on her, bar is over there for anything else, and Meghan didn’t

say as much, but if you snap a photo, please do tag it. Social media followers are a currency, after all.'

She claps her manicured hands together animatedly and then waves a hand to usher them further into the space. 'Go forth and mingle!' she exclaims. 'There aren't any rules. I was going to have a sheet where everyone puts their number on it, so people could just take what they needed if there's a spark and you want to follow up or whatever, but—'

'Yeah,' agrees Jia Li. 'You just never know.'

'Exactly,' Kaylee nods, knowingly. 'You don't. Safety first. If you like somebody, you gotta tell them, and what I've been saying to everyone is that let's not take anything personally. If you get on with someone, you can ask for their number or a social media handle, and if somebody doesn't want to give it, that's totally fine too. We all just want a nice, fun night, don't we?'

'Amen,' says Dave, already heading for the bar. 'Catch you later?' he adds in Kaylee's direction, and she nods shyly.

'I've always kind of fancied Dave, you know,' Kaylee says, quietly. Becca and Jia Li look at her. Carlos presses his hands together in a prayer-like stance, says good luck, and heads inside too.

'My work here is done, then,' says Jia Li, following the lead of the men and breaking off into the crowd. 'Since I'm the one who brought Dave, I mean. I've got it on good authority he's hung like a tractor exhaust,' she adds over her shoulder. 'Godspeed, ladies!'

Kaylee toddles back over to the VIP area too, but Becca loiters, cradling her glass and sending a cursory glance out across the thin sea of people. To make herself look somewhat less self-conscious than she feels, she silently counts how many heads are in her eyeline, hoping that should anybody look in her direction, she comes across as searching somebody out rather than taking a moment to find her sea-legs. Then she feels him – not the physicality of him, but his presence, his energy. As she inhales she gets a woody, musky hint, and the hairs prickle on the back of her neck, her body standing to full attention. *Something is about to happen.*

‘Wondering where to start?’ he asks.

Becca turns. It’s a man. A man with brown shaggy hair and a short salt-and-pepper beard cropped close to his face. Thoughtful eyes. He’s in an open-necked shirt and dress trousers, effortlessly chic, with a peek of chest hair. Becca notices his hands – huge – with long, elegant fingers laced around his champagne flute. Every part of her screams THIS IS A VERY HANDSOME MAN! And so her brain launches into ‘helpful’ mode at this information, coaching her: FOCUS! YOU ONLY GET ONE FIRST IMPRESSION! She swallows, full of anticipation, and dares to smile at him.

‘Something like that, yeah,’ she admits, remembering at the last moment to try and not just make eye contact, but to hold it flirtatiously. His eyes are wide green pools, and locking into them makes Becca’s heart beat triple time, *thud thud thud*.

I wonder if this is how Meg Ryan feels in all those movies, she marvels, sparkles of hope fluttering in her stomach. He

briefly looks at her smiling mouth, and the forwardness of it makes her blush.

'I like your earrings,' Salt and Pepper Beard says, vaguely reaching out a hand. She can't place his accent – he's not posh, but he's not local. Certainly confident. 'May I?'

'Sure.'

Becca lifts a hand up to move her hair – except it's the hand holding her drink, and he's already closer than she thought, and so they inadvertently fist bump in the air, forcing the liquid in her glass to spill all over her shoulder before the rim then hits her cheek with a muffled *thunk*.

'Ow!' Becca squeals, right as the attractive stranger leaps back, concern bleeding out over his soft, sympathetic features.

'Are you OK?' he asks, worriedly running his gaze all over her face and, just fleetingly – but not so fleetingly that Becca doesn't notice – her body. She's dripping, looking for a napkin, but there it is again: the eye contact.

'Let me get you something,' he tells her, striding purposefully over to the bar, all manly hero and all the more attractive for it, returning with a wad of paper towels.

'Here. In fact, let me take your glass and find you another drink whilst you dry off. I'm such an idiot, I'm so sorry. I'm nervous. These things . . .' He trails off, shaking his head, full of self-admonishment. So maybe he's not as confident as Becca first assumed.

'I know,' Becca replies, dabbing at herself. 'Me too. It's OK. I practically poured it over myself. If my friend Jia Li was here I'm sure she'd make a very off-colour joke about getting all wet . **Copyrighted Material**

'But you're a lady, and so will refrain?' he supplies, a twinkle in his eye.

'Exactly.' She straightens up and runs a hand over her damp neck, inadvertently provocative, she realises too late. He gives a lop-sided grin. 'Or I try to be.'

As meet-cutes go, Becca currently feels like she's in a Nancy Meyers movie.

'Don't go anywhere,' Salt and Pepper Beard instructs, and she swears he flushes as he ascertains whether she is about to do a runner. 'OK?'

'OK,' she repeats. Becca finds somewhere to deposit the wet paper towel and briefly checks her reflection in the mirror over near the toilets, feeling Salt and Pepper Beard approaching, exactly as she did five minutes ago. Her breathing shallows as she looks up just in time to see Salt and Pepper Beard make his way back over to her from the bar. He lifts up two cocktail glasses triumphantly, and there's a swelling in her lower pelvis, a somersault of *frisson*, of recognising attraction. He's broad and manly, with the kind of face that lets every feeling ripple across – the opposite of 'hard-nosed' or 'cool'. Salt and Pepper Beard is less leather jacket and more favourite soft jumper, and it's not until this exact moment that Becca understands favourite soft jumper is exactly what she needs.

All of this goes through Becca's head as she continues to watch him, before she realises she looks like a tarsier, all wide unblinking eyes and dilated pupils.

Bloody hell, babe, her brain admonishes her. Dial it back, would ya?

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‘Permission to try hitting on you, Take Two?’ Salt and Pepper Beard asks as he reaches her and hands over a fresh glass.

Becca doesn’t know how to respond and gulps her cocktail.

‘You *are* here with the friend-of-a-friend party, right?’ he clarifies. ‘Because if you’re not, I swear to God I would never be that presumptuous.’

Becca takes another sip. *He thinks you’re fit*, her brain narrates. *He thinks you’re fit! Do something!*

‘What’s a friend-of-a-friend party?’ she jokes, straight-faced, but she can’t keep up the façade because immediately Salt and Pepper Beard’s face falls as though he’s just found out Santa isn’t real. ‘Oh my God, I’m kidding,’ she says, before he can speak. ‘Sorry, you left that one wide open.’

‘Christ!’ he exclaims. ‘I mean, I still would have cracked on, like, but God! In those five seconds I was suddenly replaying everything we’ve said to one another in case I’d overstepped or been a creep!’

‘Are you a creep?’

He laughs. ‘Never on purpose!’

It feels nice to be there, then, with that man and that drink, wearing that red dress. Becca isn’t sure what to say next, but she knows she shouldn’t walk away or make an excuse to move on. She promised herself she’d show up fully tonight. She likes this man’s vibe.

‘Do you . . .’ the man starts, and Becca decides to answer in the affirmative no matter what comes out of his mouth next. ‘. . . wanna go see the view? We’re not very high up, but it’s nice out on the balcony.’